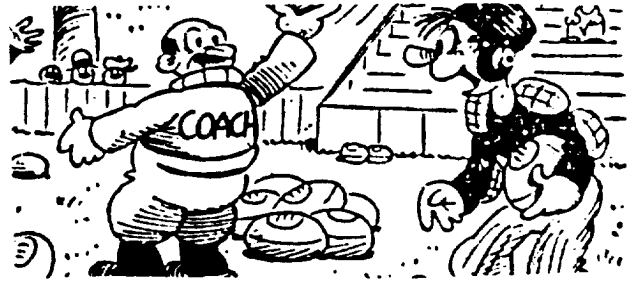

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MAJOR JOHN GRIFFITH

By Ray Schmidt

The history of intercollegiate athletics, of which football is a large part, seldom gives recognition to the athletic administrators who struggle to keep the colleges on an even keel.

Today, virtually every intercollegiate conference is headed up by an administrative official, usually called a commissioner, who is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the athletic conference; while also overseeing the member schools' conformance to NCAA regulations. But at one time such a position did not exist and it was every man (school) for themselves, with the often predictable results that, among other things, included illegal recruiting and academic fraud.

With the ending of World War I, intercollegiate athletics, and football in particular, were poised for the start of a new era of popularity and prosperity. But the academic and athletic factions of the university communities had been carrying on a long-running feud over the scope and role of sports, football especially, in the educational process of America's collegiate youth. Fueling this controversy was the fact that varsity athletes had long been offered various illegal incentives during the recruiting process; and then once on campus, were usually treated and cared for in a manner not extended to the average college student. These long-running situations had created much of the stimulus for the study of intercollegiate athletics by the Carnegie Foundation, which started in the mid 1920s.

With the on-going Carnegie study common knowledge (after all, the investigators were visiting the schools and conducting interviews and reviews of university records), the Big Ten Conference proved to be one of the first collegiate groups in a position to issue some preemptive damage control before the final report was released. In 1922 the conference had hired Major John L. Griffith to serve as its first full-time athletic commissioner, and in Griffith, the Big Ten had a man who would prove to be one of the most capable athletic administrators of all-time before his career came to a close in the 1940s. Yet today, he is totally forgotten by sport historians.

Griffith was born in Mount Carroll, Illinois on August 20, 1877, and he eventually graduated from Mount Carroll High School in 1893, and from the Warren (Ill.) Academy in 1898. Griffith then attended Beloit College in Wisconsin, just across the border from Illinois, where he participated on the varsity teams in football, baseball, basketball, and track. After graduating in the summer of 1902, Griffith accepted the position as athletic director at Yankton College in South Dakota, where he served until 1905. Transferring to Morningside College in Iowa that year, Griffith became the school's athletic director while also coaching all sports, until he moved up to the larger Drake University in Des Moines in 1908.

At Drake, Griffith was again installed as the athletic director, while also coaching all sports. He

also served as the dean of men for two years and was the acting president of the university for one. While at Drake, in April 1910 Griffith organized the first of the annual outdoor track meets that eventually became known, and famous, as the Drake Relays.

With America's entry into World War I, Griffith joined the army and was initially stationed at Camp Dodge where he was made the division athletic officer in charge of the recreational activities of the base's 30,000 men. After later stops at several other camps, in January 1919 Griffith was moved to Washington D.C. and placed in charge of the physical education training for the entire U.S. Army, while also being promoted from the rank of captain to major.

After leaving the army in 1919, Griffith accepted a position at the University of Illinois as a teacher in the physical education department, while also working on the staff of athletic director George Huff. While a member of the staff at Illinois, Griffith founded and served as editor of a publication entitled "Athletic Journal", which offered articles aimed at the coaching profession.

In early 1922, with the approaching drumbeat of the Carnegie Report still on the distant horizon, and while the number of varsity sports continued to grow, the presidents and athletic directors of the Big Ten believed there was a definite need for a paid, full-time commissioner of athletics. From the beginning of the search, Griffith was one of the leading candidates. The only other serious candidate brought in for an interview was Elmer Berry of the Springfield (Mass.) Training School. But Berry owned a home and property in New England, while he also had plans in progress for the opening of a summer camp in Vermont, and so was not really interested in the job.

Major Griffith on the other hand was very interested, and certainly had the background and experience for the job. The salary offered by the Big Ten was a problem at first, and Griffith sent the search committee, headed up by L.W. St John of Ohio State and Fielding Yost of Michigan, a detailed letter in which he illustrated that he would be taking a financial loss by accepting the job and moving to Chicago. Huff also was not happy at the prospect of

losing such a valuable athletic administrator, and a most likely candidate to be his successor as AD. at Illinois, and so he was exerting pressure on Griffith to remain in Champaign. Eventually the conference came around and raised its salary offer, and on July 26, 1922, St John sent Griffith a telegram informing him that he had been fully approved as the Big Ten's first commissioner.

At first Griffith just rented desks for himself and a secretary in a Michigan Avenue office building in Chicago at a cost of \$75 per month. Eventually these conditions would prove to be too spartan, and so he would move to better facilities. Immediately upon assuming the job, the Big Ten's new commissioner immersed himself in every possible organizational aspect involved in operating conference athletics. This included issuing a regular and continuous flow of memos, letters, and reports to the conference's athletic directors; something that would continue throughout his days as the commissioner. And from his first day in office, Griffith's

correspondence was that of an athletic official who believed that intercollegiate sports should be operated legitimately and in a real spirit of sportsmanship.

In August 1922, in response to a letter from a New York man, Griffith wrote that, "the evils which threaten our inter-collegiate athletics are gambling, professionalism, distrust . . . and a willingness to violate the rules." He went on to say that "the coach who sings hymns of hate to his men about other coaches and other teams is a menace to the game." But Griffith was also a staunch defender of intercollegiate athletics' place in the life of the university community, and so he had little respect for the position of those academics who sought to eliminate or curtail varsity sports: "Most of the educators who would curtail the development of athletics . . . believe that the function of education is solely to develop intellectualism."

Early on Griffith took up the campaign to curb the various recruiting excesses and violations that were taking place in the conference, along with efforts to remove the various schools' alumni from the entire process. In May 1925, he sent out a general letter to approximately 10,000 high school principals, outlining the Big Ten Conference's recruiting rules.

By September 1926, Griffith had been given a preliminary look at the developing Carnegie Report, as a result of his professional friendship with Howard J. Savage of the Foundation. So Griffith knew what the basic indictments of collegiate sports, and the Big Ten in particular, would be when the report was finally issued in October 1929. After its release, Griffith wrote to the conference A.D.'s and expressed his belief that the Carnegie investigators had started their work in the first place with "a premise prejudicial to intercollegiate athletics", and that they had been overly influenced by the universities in the East.

But Griffith also recognized the Big Ten's problems, as he extracted and emphasized those indictments in the report to the conference's athletic directors. And well he had to, as the building slush fund scandal, with football again at its core, was about to explode at the University of Iowa. In May 1931, in the aftermath of the Carnegie Report, Griffith wrote to his good friend, Ohio State's L.W. St John, and expressed in words the age-old battle between athletic administrators and those members of the coaching fraternity who constantly seek to beat the rules: "If we are to have perfect intercollegiate athletics we will have to get rid of the coaches who will justify their recruiting and subsidizing activities on the grounds that others are doing it. Our job is that of trying to improve human conduct in relation to our athletic activities."

In the 1930s, Griffith's growing stature and respect in athletic circles continued to grow, and he served a term as president of the NCAA. Also, as a member of the NCAA Track Committee and chairman of the Track Rules Committee, he was always active in that sport, while he also served on the American Olympic committee. In the mid-1930s, Griffith also played a major role in resolving the long-running dispute between the NCAA and the Amateur Athletic Union over the control of collegiate athletes seeking a place on the Olympic team. In 1943 Griffith was runner-up in the voting by the Football Writers Association for college football's "Man of the Year" award, which was captured by Amos Alonzo Stagg from College of the Pacific.

With the advent of World War II, Griffith played an instrumental role in continuing most of the Big Ten's varsity sports throughout the conflict, despite the loss of most of the front-line athletes to the military. When the Big Ten held its annual meeting in 1944 at Chicago's Sherman House Hotel, Griffith, having served 22 years as commissioner, was offered a five-year renewal of his contract by the universities on December 7. But the Major would never be able to accept it, as he passed away that evening in the hotel at the age of 67. Major John L. Griffith left behind a long and notable record as one of the most prominent athletic officials of all-time.