

The Gridiron Crisis of 1905: Was It Really a Crisis?

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In 1944, Frank Menke's *Encyclopedia of Sports* presented one of the most memorable stories in sport history. In his chapter on football, Menke would assert that President Theodore Roosevelt threatened to shut down college football in the fall of 1905. Teddy Roosevelt was shocked, he declared, when he saw a newspaper photo of a Swarthmore football player, Bob Maxwell, with his face bloodied in a brutal game with Penn.

Of course, today we are used to TV commentators spinning their own versions of events, and many regard the scenarios and depictions of JFK, Knute Rockne, and Babe Ruth as highly questionable. But for dictionaries and encyclopedias, scholars and the public expect a higher standard. And when these works play fast and loose with the truth, as in Menke's *Encyclopedia*, they do far more damage than do newspapers, magazines, or movies. The Maxwell myth, or more accurately the injury crisis of 1905, is an example of how combining truth and fiction can create a powerful story line, even though it is palpably false.

Where did the story go wrong? As Menke's encyclopedia asserted, Roosevelt did play a leading role in that turbulent season. Two days after Maxwell's injury, the president held a White House Conference attended by delegates from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Unfortunately for a good story, the president had called the meeting *several weeks before* the fierce encounter between Penn and Swarthmore. Even if Roosevelt had seen the bloody face of Tiny Maxwell, Swarthmore's refrigerator-sized guard, he said nothing about it to the six pigskin potentates; at least, he left no record of it. And even if he had wanted to do so, he could have not have shut down football, except at West Point and Annapolis.¹

And what of the deaths and injuries that Menke attributed to college football? Here the encyclopedia got the story partially right. By the end of the 1905 season, a crisis had erupted over gridiron deaths and injuries. On December 3, for example, the *Cincinnati*



“The Grim Reaper Smiles on the Goal Posts.” Fanning anti-football sentiment, the Cincinnati *Commercial Tribune*, in December 1905, claimed that 25 players had died on the gridiron or from injuries suffered on it. In fact, only three college players died—though Harold Moore’s death in the Union-NYU game on November 25 led to the two meetings brought about by Chancellor Harold MacCracken, the formation of the ICAA (predecessor of the NCAA), and new rules governing the game and its role in the colleges. *Courtesy Library of Congress*

Commercial Tribune showed an image of the grim reaper balanced on the crossbars dramatizing the “ghastly total of 25 killed and 168 seriously injured in football.”²

For the next two months, the foes of football debated whether to suspend football or just deemphasize it. These debates brought about benchmark rules changes. The ten-yard rule, the neutral zone, stricter measures against unfair play, and most importantly the forward pass all emerged from these debates. Menke and his contributors naturally spotlighted these changes. In so doing, however, they left readers with the impression that college football had in a historical microsecond overcome its crude and violent past—and that Theodore Roosevelt, prompted by Bob Maxwell, was responsible.³

Let us suppose that the editors of the *Encyclopedia* put the cart before the horse, or, for the sake of drama, overlooked the facts of the crisis. A former sports reporter like Menke could have known the colorful Tiny Maxwell, for Maxwell had become sports-writer in Chicago and Philadelphia. Conceivably Menke recalled the genial giant’s account of his rendezvous with destiny. Or possibly, the members of the Maxwell Club, founded in 1937 and made up of sports writers and college athletic officials, contributed to the chapter. Is it not possible that they would overlook or ignore the fact that only three college players were killed out of eighteen? Or that the most important injuries came near the end of the season six weeks after the president had hosted the six football experts from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton?⁴

In truth, the key injury occurred in 1905, not in Philadelphia but in New York—and it involved lesser-known players and teams. New York University was playing Union College on November 21 in Manhattan. NYU was moving the ball by mass plays and tandem formations. That meant they were going in motion before the start of the play and were pushing and pulling the ball carrier toward the goal. Harold Moore, Union’s

right halfback, who was desperate to halt NYU's potent offense, tried to tackle the ball carrier around the shoulders. His unprotected head apparently struck the knee of another Union player who had jumped into the gaggle of bodies. When Moore failed to get to his feet, a Union alumnus offered the use of his car and with the team doctor took Moore to Fordham hospital, less than ten minutes away. Given the lack of cat scans and other modern technology, Moore had little chance of surviving. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage at 6:40 PM.⁵

Chancellor Henry MacCracken of NYU immediately telegraphed President Charles Eliot of Harvard, football's most relentless critic. He asked him to call a caucus of colleges to reform the rules. Neither MacCracken nor Eliot trusted the old rules committee, for it was dominated by Walter Camp of Yale and other alumni advisors and coaches from big-time eastern colleges. But Eliot refused to preside over reform of the rules. He believed that football itself was the problem and the game was beyond repair. Instead, MacCracken and the NYU faculty called their own conference to meet in early December. That first New York conference led to a second, larger meeting later in December that became the forerunner of the NCAA.⁶

In December, presidents and faculty in all parts of the country got into the act. So did coaches and athletic advisors. Though deaths and injuries provided the impetus, these reformers had many agendas piggybacked on the gridiron crisis. Harvard's Bill Reid had in October formed an alumni committee to draw up rules changes. In his diary, Reid recorded that he was worried about President Eliot's perennial distaste for football as well as opposition by various faculties. He had also learned that Harvard's arch enemy Walter Camp, the Yale football potentate, planned to introduce his own reforms. In order to beat Camp and head off Eliot, Reid kept the old committee from holding a meeting to consider rules changes. When he began his own rules crusade, Reid showed little genuine interest in reform. Most of all, he seems to have wanted new "Harvard" rules that would enable him to beat Yale.⁷

In New York, President Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia abolished football immediately after the end of the season. The ax fell while the students were at home for the Thanksgiving break. Calling football an "academic nuisance," Butler refused to budge—in spite of student rallies, alumni protests, and the distinct possibility of reforms in the rules. In a speech given in December, his counterpart at NYU, Chancellor MacCracken, likened the old football committee to the "grand dukes" of Czarist Russia; he charged that they had resisted the attempts of reformers and even the President of the United States to clean up the game. Newspapers reprinted the statement of the dean of the divinity school at the University of Chicago, who called football "a social obsession—a boy killing, education-prostituting, gladiatorial sport." No wonder the pro-football Professor Edmund Dexter of Illinois, whose earlier surveys claimed to show that deaths and injuries were all but negligible, termed the 1905 outburst "newspaper football."⁸

In the Midwest, protest also erupted. At the University of Chicago, the faculty openly defied their ailing president, William Harper, as well as domineering coach and Director of Physical Culture Amos Alonzo Stagg. They refused to allow students to play football unless "the moral and physical evils" were remedied. At Wisconsin, a commit-

tee pilloried the faculty representatives of the Western Conference (Big Nine, later Big Ten) for doing so little to reform the college game. And the leader of football opposition at Wisconsin, historian Frederick Jackson Turner, prevailed on President James Angell of Michigan to hold a reform conference in Chicago early in January 1906. In a nutshell, Turner and a few of his allies hoped to persuade the faculty delegates to suspend football for a period of two years.⁹

On the West Coast, the presidents of the two big-time football schools—David Starr Jordan of Stanford and Benjamin Ide Wheeler of California—seized the opportunity to sever their ties with the eastern football cartel. At the last moment, Jordan called off the trip of political scientist Max Farrand, who was about to set off for the second conference in New York. Both Jordan and Wheeler believed that their own gridiron rivalry had become too intense, occupying the attention of students for months and overshadowing the academic mission of their universities. Eventually the two institutions, the eight-hundred-pound gorillas of coastal athletics, replaced football with rugby. Put simply, the problem of injuries and deaths merely provided the springboard for this change. Neither school had suffered a death or serious injury, and rugby would surely not prove a sedate substitute. Yet their changes would endure for more than a decade.¹⁰

That death and injuries do not explain the opposition becomes clearer when we examine the years that followed the “crisis” of 1905 (see Table I). After reforms in 1906, the number of overall fatalities dropped significantly. In spite of the reduction in deaths at all levels, the number of casualties in the college game remained at three. Curiously, those three deaths occurring at obscure colleges failed to cause a murmur. But in 1908 and 1909, the number of college casualties suddenly shot up to eight and then to ten. On October 31, 1909, an Army cadet, Eugene Byrne, died from a concussion following a game against Harvard at West Point. Occurring near Manhattan, the nation’s newspaper capital, Byrne’s death abruptly reawakened public concern. Two weeks later, a University of Virginia halfback, Archer Christian, also died from a concussion sustained in

Table I: Deaths and Serious Injuries, 1905-16

	<u>Deaths</u>		<u>Serious Injuries</u>	
	All Levels	College	All Levels	College
1905	18	3	159	88
1906	11	3	104	54
1907	11	2	98	51
1908	13	6	84	33
1909	26	10	69	38
1910	14	5	40	17
1911	14	3	56	36
1912	10*	0*	26	17
1913	14	3	56	36
1914	12	2	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>
1915	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>
1916	16	3	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>

* plus one injury later resulting in death

Figures from New York Times and Chicago Tribune

a game at Georgetown. As a result, school systems in Washington, DC, St. Louis, and New York suspended football, and Georgetown abolished the game. Virginia and North Carolina called off their annual Thanksgiving rivalry.¹¹

Unlike the crisis of 1905, the criticism that followed that season showed that the participants wanted mainly to solve the injury crisis and preserve the college game. At the ICAA conference in December 1909, the remaining members of the old reform committee, such as Walter Camp, were bitterly attacked. The critics were looking for scapegoats. They wanted to fix responsibility for injuries so that football could be purged of dangers left unsolved by the new rules. Conspicuously missing in 1909-10, however, were the meetings of faculty and dissident presidents intent on de-emphasizing or abolishing football. The only exceptions were the Jesuit schools, led by Georgetown, and the Kansas Board of Regents, before whom newspaperman William Allen White mounted a vigorous attack on football; other than that, the injury crisis was exactly that—a crisis over injuries. This upheaval, which did concern almost exclusively deaths and injuries, was totally overlooked by the *Encyclopedia of Sports* and by a generation of sport historians. It did not fit into the myth of modern football's origins spun by the the *Encyclopedia of Sports* or by the founders of the Maxwell Society.¹²

What does this tell us about the 1905 crisis? Simply this: The varying agendas may be attributed to many factors, including the reform efforts common to the Progressive Era. In the early 1900s the country experienced one of its most intense periods of self-criticism and political unrest. Earnest reformers attempted to eliminate corruption and inefficiency, reintroduce democratic practices, and improve the standards of safety. Thus in 1906, Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act, the medical and gastronomical version of the new football rules. As in politics, college athletics had its version of muck-raking journalists, who like journalists Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens burrowed into the unethical activities of win-at-all-cost coaches and alumni. Newspapers exaggerated the gravity of deaths and injuries in 1905 because the lack of safety standards for unprotected groups like women and young people made for good, or at least sensational, copy.¹³

Was this crisis of 1905, then, a death and injury crisis? At the level of popular consciousness, the overall number of deaths and injuries did suggest that football had become both brutal and dangerous. Indeed, gridiron brutality such as Jim Quill's assault on Francis Burr in the Harvard-Yale game made it appear that college football had spun out of control. Theodore Roosevelt's brief intervention in football politics strength-



In 1905 Bob "Tiny" Maxwell (see arrow) anchored one of the largest and heaviest lines in the country at tiny Swarthmore College. In a game against Penn in 1905, Maxwell was double- and triple-teamed, leading to the legend that his injuries inspired the reforms of 1905-06. *Courtesy Maxwell Society*

ened various groups discontented with the hand that big-time football had dealt them. The college faculties, which had lost control of athletics to students and alumni, had compelling reasons to de-emphasize football. The public outrage at deaths and injuries allowed the faculties to confine athletics, and especially football, to bona fide students in college settings under faculty-imposed requirements.



John McCutcheon of the *Chicago Tribune* produced a cartoon in 1905 showing a young man being carried off the field as society matrons look on and cheering continued for the University of Chicago. McCutcheon who entitled the scene "The Educational Influence of College Football" reflected the growing list of critics which saw college football as increasingly dangerous to life and limb as well as injurious to the educational mission of higher education. *Courtesy University of Chicago Special Collections*

Once the faculties had enacted their reforms, however, they found less reason to piggyback on the far more serious injury crisis of 1909 (see Table II). As for the colleges where the presidents and reformers made the most of the 1905 hysteria—Harvard, Wisconsin, Stanford, and California—they and their faculties would play a far less prominent role, or no role at all, in the later crisis. This strongly suggests that the crisis of 1905 had served simply as a springboard for those who wanted to redirect college sports. Concern with death and injury played second fiddle.¹⁴

In popular history, the injury crisis of 1905 operated for many years much like the Abner Doubleday myth in baseball. In other words, it formed a heroic version of football's entry into the modern world. Bob "Tiny" Maxwell, the stammering behemoth of the Swarthmore gridiron, provided the perfect metaphor for the transition from the old to the new. Here was a big-hearted giant, a small-college stalwart, an underdog bloodied by brutal opponents. Moreover, he was avenged when an American president glimpsed the bloodstains from a broken nose in a Sunday newspaper. Whereas baseball could only find a relatively obscure Civil War general, Abner Doubleday, college football had ready-made an American president and folk hero. Teddy Roosevelt, himself a sportsman writ large, descended briefly from the Olympian affairs of state to make lightning crackle with a wave of his hand. In so doing, he sent the colleges scurrying to reinvent the rules of a sullied game. Or so the myth would lead us to believe.

I fear that the upheaval of 1905 will always be associated with deaths and injuries. That association will persist because such stories form the journalistic account of football as played at all levels. How remarkable that a medical noncrisis, or at most a collegiate minicrisis, could be the springboard for assaults by so many disenchanting groups. Putting it as simply as possible, college football has never seen more a remarkable season-not due so much to the deaths and injuries but rather to the way in which the facts were presented to the public. And, for that matter, to the way they were later embroidered in the Teddy Roosevelt myth invented by Frank Menke's sports encyclopedia. As the Abner Doubleday-Cooperstown yarn has demonstrated, such archetypal myths are extremely hard to shake.

But I believe that we can now start to understand what exactly happened in that pivotal year, 1905—or, more accurately, what did not happen. Put simply, it was not a medical crisis in which a large number of college players were killed. Neither was it a crisis set off by a photo of a Swarthmore College player's bloody face. And, finally this

Table II: Newspaper Reports on Causes of Death in College Football

	1905	1906	1906	1908	1909	Total	
Body blows	4	3	3	3	5	18	22.5%
Spinal injuries	4	0	2	3	5	14	17.5%
Concussions	6	3	2	3	6	20	25.0%
Blood poisoning	2	2	0	1	2	7	8.8%
Other	2	3	5	3	8	21	26.2%
Total	18	11	12	13	26	80	

Figures from New York Times and Chicago Tribune

was *not* a national political crisis in which Teddy Roosevelt threatened to shut down college football.

No, the events in the fall of 1905 point to a crisis of public confidence fanned by newspaper headlines and exploited by groups that disliked the existing gridiron system.

1. Frank G. Menke, ed., *Encyclopedia of Sports*, 2d ed. (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1944), 294; John Sayle Watterson, *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 69, 411. Menke's first edition in 1939, which was considerably less extensive, did not mention the Maxwell story. It appears that he had help in compiling the second edition, but co-editors and contributors do not appear.
2. Cincinnati *Commercial Tribune*, 3 Dec. 1905. The article listed all of the casualties—including the trainer of the Northwestern team, who drowned at preseason practice in Wisconsin.
3. Menke, *Encyclopedia of Sports*, 294. Menke included nothing about the New York conferences in December or the joining of the two rules committees in January 1906.
4. *New York Times*, 10 Oct. 1905; Ronald Smith, ed., *Big-Time Football at Harvard: The Diary of Bill Reid* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 193-96.
5. *New York Times*, 26 Nov. 1905; *Triangle* (New York University), 28 Nov. 1905.
6. *Triangle*, 28 Nov. 1905, 5 Dec. 1905, 16 Jan. 1906; Charles Eliot to Henry MacCracken, 15 Dec. 1905, Charles Eliot Papers, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MS; *New York Times*, 12 Dec. 1905.
7. Smith, *Big-Time Football*, 265-66.
8. Edmund Dexter, "Newspaper Football," *Popular Science Magazine* (March 1906): 56-59.
9. Watterson, *College Football*, 86-91.
10. Roberta J. Park, "From Football to Rugby—and Back, 1906-1919: The Stanford University Response to the 'Football Crisis of 1905,'" *Journal of Sport History* 11 (1984): 5-40.
11. *New York Times*, 31 Oct. 1909, 14, 19, and 20 Nov. 1909, 9 Dec. 1909; *Washington Post*, 16 and 19 Nov. 1909; *Nation*, 18 Nov. 1909; Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, 20 Nov. 1909.
12. "Football, 1910," Georgetown University Archives, Washington, DC; William Johnson, *William Allen White* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), 216; C.R. Griffin notes, University of Kansas Archives, Lawrence; E. Jay Jernigan, *William Allen White* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 12-15, 19-20, 30; *The Kansan* (University of Kansas), 5, 8, 9, 10, and 19 Apr. 1910; Clifford S. Griffin, *The University of Kansas, A History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974), 657. Students at Kansas met to protest plans to introduce rugby. "Minutes of the Meeting of the Athletic Board," 6 Feb. 1906, Griffin notes; William Allen White to Frank H. Strong, 14 Apr. 1910, Walter Johnson, ed., *Selected Letters of William Allen White, 1899-1943* (New York: Henry Holt, 1943), 109.
13. Henry Beach Needham, "The College Athlete." Part I, "How Commercialism is Making Him Professional," (June 1905), 115-28. Part II, "His Amateur Code: Its Evasion and Administration,," (July 1905), 260-73, *McClure's Magazine*; Edward S. Jordan, "Buying Football Victories [Part I]," *Collier's Weekly*, 11 Nov. 1905, 19-20, 23; Edward Jordan, "Buying Football Victories [Part II]," *Collier's Weekly*, 28 Nov. 1905, 22-23. Needham met with Roosevelt in July 1905 and may have fueled his brief crusade against the brutality and unsportsmanlike play in football; Jordan, who wrote about football in the midwestern Big Nine, was a recent graduate of Wisconsin.
14. *Boston Sunday Globe*, 26 Nov. 1905; *New York Herald*, 26 Nov. 1905; Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 197-98; Smith, *Big-Time Football*, 316-18.