

# Like Father, Like Son

By Jim Campbell

(Reprinted by permission of the author)

**H**istory is littered with sons of famous men who tried unsuccessfully to live up to the expectations their fathers, the public, or they themselves placed upon them. Many of those sons would tell you that having a famous father was no advantage, if not a distinct disadvantage.

Amos Alonzo Stagg Jr. is not one of them. He learned from his father—Amos Alonzo Stagg Sr., “the Grand Old Man of Football”—not only about the sport, but about life. Young Stagg, as Amos Jr. was called, and is still called to distinguish him from his illustrious father, developed his own code early in life, and still practices it. It is doubtful if a more active, alert, and energetic nonagenarian lives in the United States today. Stagg and his wife, Arvilla, still watch upwards of 50 football games a season, and Stagg still “charts” (a form of scouting) the games they watch.

Stagg, born in 1899, his father's seventh season as the head coach and professor of physical education at the recently organized University of Chicago, came under his father's influence early on. Stagg Sr. was involved in the Olympic movement at the turn of the century and was about to embark on a voyage to Paris. He wrote the following letter to his 14-month-old son. The younger Stagg still keeps the

## Like Father, Like Son

*While Stella Stagg's husband and son were producing an undefeated team at Susquehanna in 1951, she scouted opponents from the press box.*

letter on his person. Ninety-three years later, the advice is still good. Advice any father would do well to give to his son, and any son would do well to heed.

June 23, 1900

To my son, Amos Alonzo Stagg Jr.,

You are only a little fellow now, a trifle over 14 months old, but I have loved you so dearly since you came that it has been on my mind to write you a letter in the event of my being taken away at anytime before I have a chance to tell you many things which you need to know.

Your father wants his boy first of all to love, protect, and care for his mother, giving to her the same measure of love and devotion which she has given to you.

Second, your father wants his boy to be sincere, honest, and upright. Be your true self always. Hate dishonesty and trickery no matter how big and how great the thing desired may be.

Third, your father wants you to have a proper independence of thought. Think matters out for yourself always where it relates to your own conduct and act honestly.

Fourth, your father wants you to be an American in democracy. Treat everybody with courtesy and as your equal, until he proves his unworthiness to be so treated. The man and the soul are what count—not wealth, not family, not appearance.

Fifth, your father wants you to abhor evil. No curiosity, no imagination, no conversation, no story, no reading which suggests impurity of life is worthy of your thought and attention and I beg you never yield for an instant, but turn your thought to something good and hopeful.

Sixth, train yourself to be master of yourself, of your thought and imagination and temper and passion and appetite and of your body. Hold all absolutely under your will. Allow no thought or imagination, nor passion, nor appetite to injure your mind or body. Your father has never used intoxicating liquors, nor tobacco, nor profane language. He wants his boy to be like him in this regard.

Seventh, your father wants his boy enthusiastic and earnest in all his interests, his sports, his studies, his work; and he wants him always to keep an active, actual participation in each so long as he lives. It is my judgment that one's life is most healthy and most successful when lived out on such a basis.

Eighth, your father wants his son to love God as He is revealed to him; which after all will be the revelation of all that I have said and left unsaid of good to you, my precious boy.

Affectionately,  
Your father

by Caspar Whitney.

Stagg felt his voice was not strong enough for the pulpit, so he elected "to serve youth" by coaching. He enrolled at the International Young Men's Christian Association School in Springfield, MA. The YMCA movement was a vital force in the country at the time among college men. The school is now Springfield College. It was at Springfield that Stagg began his coaching career. A contemporary of his was James A. Naismith. It is unlikely that Stagg, as is sometimes stated, helped Naismith invent basketball in 1891, although Stagg played in the first, historical game. Stagg's legendary accomplishments need not be embellished with the linkage to basketball's invention.

Stagg Sr. rose from humble beginnings in West Orange, NJ, where he was born in 1862. He dreamed of going to Yale, and by scrimping and saving, and nearly starving himself, he managed to enroll at the famed university in the 1880s. Most noted as a baseball pitcher, he was once offered \$4,200 a season by the New York Nationals (forerunner to the Giants). This was at a time when the average worker's annual wage was \$600. Stagg turned down the offer, sticking to a lifelong principle of deploring professional sports.

Stagg Sr. did not try football at Yale until his senior season when he became a starting end on the Bulldog eleven. As a graduate divinity student, he made the first ever All-America team, picked not by Walter Camp, as is often reported, but

Stagg Sr.'s theology professor from Yale, Dr. William Rainey Harper, had been named president of a new Baptist college founded in Chicago with funding from philanthropist John D. Rockefeller. The school would become famous as the University of Chicago, and Stagg had as much as any one person to do with that worldwide recognition.

Stagg's first football season at Chicago (1892) was highlighted by a 0-0 tie with Northwestern. The following spring, it could be argued, was highlighted by his introduction to a vivacious 17-year-old coed, Stella Robinson. A year later the coach and coed were wed and began a 70-year relationship that can only be described as inspirational.

On April 11, 1899, Coach and Mrs. Stagg welcomed their first child, Amos Alonzo Jr.

As a youngster, young Lonnie, as he was sometimes called, grew up under the positive influence of both parents. Another son, Paul, would join Lonnie in 1909. Lonnie became a fine all-around athlete. Naturally, he matriculated at the University of Chicago, where he played football (as quarterback) and would become a Big Ten tennis champion.

Perhaps no finer example of how the Staggs approached athletics and life

## Like Father Like Son

exists than an incident from the 1922 Chicago-Princeton game.

Late in the game, Chicago was ahead 18-14, but a daring fake punt gave Princeton momentum and the go-ahead score. As the Tigers were scoring the lead touchdown, the Maroons were heard to say, "It's not over."

Mixing passes with runs, Chicago was perched one yard from the Princeton goal line. Time for one last play.

Rules of the day, and up until 1945, prevented "coaching from the sideline." However, there were ways around the rules, and Stagg had one at his disposal. His son, the quarterback.

Rules would not have allowed, say, a guard to bring a play in and relay it to the quarterback. A substitute could not communicate with a teammate for at least one play. But as a quarterback, young Stagg could have reported in to the referee as a sub and simply called the play his father desired.

As it was, the Staggs, senior and junior, watched from the sidelines as the Maroons mounted one last-ditch assault at the Princeton goal.

Fullback John Thomas whaled into the Princeton line. He was met near

the goal and stopped short. Princeton victory!

Stagg was questioned why he hadn't used the legal "loophole" to send a more imaginative and unsuspected play into the game. He matter-of-factly stated, "The rules committee (to which he was appointed a life member when it was founded in 1904) deprecates the use of substitutes to convey information."

The subject was never discussed further.

After graduation, young Stagg stayed on at Chicago to assist his father with the football team, and earn a master's degree.

Following 12 years as an assistant, Stagg Jr. was ready to try his wings as a head coach. Susquehanna University, a tiny Lutheran school in Selinsgrove, PA, beckoned. Stagg was named professor of physical education and *the* athletic coach. In those days, especially at smaller schools, one man usually served as head coach of all sports. If he were lucky, he might have an assistant in football.

Young Stagg's first year at Susquehanna, 1935, drew a considerable amount of attention. The focus was the third week of the season when Lonnie's Crusaders were matched up with the Greyhounds of Moravian. Paul Stagg was, by this time, coaching at Moravian, and the brothers would oppose each other from across the field. By now, Stagg Sr. was "retired" by the University of Chicago. but was coaching at the College of the Pacific in Stockton, CA. Just which team would "The Grand Old Man of Football" be rooting for? He never said, but one has to think that he was pleased when Lonnie's and Paul's charges battled to a 0-0 tie.

Coaching football, not to mention other sports, was no easy task at Susquehanna. It was the smallest of Pennsylvania's 74 football-playing colleges.

Stagg Jr. had his ups and downs over the years, winning over stronger, more traditional rivals such as City College of New York (14-6 in 1939) and losing to Rutgers (9-0 in 1937).

The highlight of young Stagg's early tenure at Susquehanna was an undefeated team in 1940. The only blemish on an eight-game slate was a 0-0 tie with arch rival Juniata. The Crusaders met and conquered Buffalo, American, Swarthmore, CCNY, Allegheny, Moravian and Hartwick.

Wartime interrupted football at Susquehanna, but Stagg was too valuable a man and too well-versed to remain idle "for the duration." He assisted head coaches Johnny Sitarsky and Woody Ludwig at Bucknell, located in Lewisburg, just 12 miles from Selinsgrove.

During the summers at Susquehanna, Stagg worked on a second master's degree at Columbia. Having earned that, he was working on a Ph.D. at the Ivy League university. During the war, Susquehanna was home to an Air Corps cadet program. The president of SU insisted that Stagg was needed to run phys. ed. classes year 'round for the would-be aviators. Further summer study was out. Having the value of higher education instilled in him by his parents, Stagg Jr. always regretted not earning a doctorate.

After World War II, football resumed at Susquehanna with young Stagg again at the helm. The Crusaders posted a 3-3-0 record in 1946.

In 1947, something happened that would change the course of football history at Susquehanna—if not a future ruling by the NCAA.

## Like Father, Like Son

Amos Alonzo Stagg Sr., age 85, was invited by his son, Amos Alonzo Jr., to become co-head coach at SU. Stagg Sr. had finished a stint at COP, where he earned national Coach of the Year honors in 1933, when he took the Tigers to a 7-2-0 record—losing only to Rose Bowl champion Southern California. 6-0. when two COP touchdowns were called back, and service powerhouse March Field.

The arrangement of the Staggs at Susquehanna was for the father and son team to be equals in coaching status. The elder Stagg took the offense and Junior took the defense. In addition, Stella, wife of Stagg Sr., would scout upcoming Crusaders' opponents. A.A. Sr. would say of her, "She is the best scout I ever worked with." Her scouting report on Dickinson included this nugget: "Their left defensive halfback comes up quickly on pass plays. We can throw beyond him." When the Crusaders took on the Red Devils, SU did score on a pass over the left DHB's head.

Even with such a storied mentor as Amos Alonzo Stagg Sr. to co-direct the team. SU continued to have a roller coaster ride. 4-1-2 in 1947, 2-6-0 in 1948, 1-7-0 in 1949. But things were coming together. In 1950, the Staggs co-produced a 4-2-1 mark.

Then in 1951, the small church-related college experienced its first undefeated *and* untied team—6-0-0. The Orange & Maroon took the measure of Johns Hopkins, Wagner, National Aggies, Juniata, Haverford and Ursinus.

The presence of Stagg Sr. was pretty heady stuff for a sleepy river town of 3,500. Edward R. Murrow brought a CBS-TV film crew to town to do a segment on the network's *See It Now* show. During the filming, Murrow asked Stagg Sr., "Do you think you'll ever make a good coach out of him (indicating the nearby Stagg Jr.)?"

With a full measure of fatherly pride, Stagg Sr. answered Murrow, "He's already a good coach." Sr. could have added that his son was also a fine gentleman.

The Staggs were together one more season, 1952. It was a 4-3-0 year. After that, Stella was too ill to make the trip in from Stockton each fall, but Stagg Sr. continued to coach until he was 98 at Stockton Junior College.

Young Stagg continued as head coach until 1955. He would stay at SU as athletic director and tennis coach until 1961. He would then relocate in Chicago and do extremely well in the investments field. Later, he retired to Ft. Lauderdale, FL. where he and Arvilla still reside.

As Paul "Bear" Bryant was approaching Stagg Sr.'s mark as the winningest coach in college football, a move to have the NCAA officially recognize the 21 victories of the elder Stagg at Susquehanna as co-coach got underway. Stagg Jr. wrote a lengthy and eloquent letter to NCAA director Walter Byers, but to no avail. The unique father-son, co-head coaching arrangement was too far removed for the NCAA to take action, despite a hue and cry from columnists and writers seeking fairness.

The Staggs, Junior and Mrs., still spend summers at the family cottage on Lake Michigan. Twice they've returned to Selinsgrove and Susquehanna in recent years. In

1988, Stagg Day was held. The coach was honored at halftime of a football game, but more importantly, he was presented with an honorary doctorate. The university honored itself as much as Dr. Stagg with the degree presentation.

Two years later, the Staggs again returned to Susquehanna. This time to take part in the ceremonies honoring the 1940 undefeated team. The respect and affection for "the coach" were evident in the faces and eyes of "his boys." Almost to a man, they remarked that "the coach was like a second father to me. There wasn't a thing I couldn't talk to him about."

Perhaps now would be as good a time as any to pass the mantle of "The Grand Old Man of Football" on to the 94-year-old Amos Alonzo Stagg Jr.

---

*Jim Campbell is director of athletic development at Bucknell University.*