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**Tiny Maxwell and the Crisis of 1905: The Making of a
Gridiron Myth**

In October 1905, so the story goes, Teddy Roosevelt saw the photo of the bloody face of Robert “Tiny” Maxwell, a Swarthmore player injured in a game with Penn. He became so

enraged that he issued an ultimatum that if the colleges did not reform college football, he would abolish it. For nearly forty years or longer, sportswriters and scholars perpetuated this story. A number of prominent scholars such as David Riesman and Frederick Rudolph repeated it, and an often-reprinted article, "Football's Ugly Decades," by John Hammond Moore, incorporated it. The Maxwell Society, formed by sportswriters and athletic officials to honor Bob Maxwell, picked up the story and made it more credible.

Unfortunately for a good story, Roosevelt neither saw the photo nor issued an edict. Though the president intervened briefly in college football, he had no authority to abolish football nor did he want to eliminate a game that he valued as manly and educational. Several writers and scholars have made exhaustive searches for the "smoking gun," the photo of Bob Maxwell's battered face, but none have found anything resembling it. Where did the story originate and why has it endured so long? Though the events supposedly occurred in 1905, the story appeared in the second edition of Frank Menke's *Encyclopedia of Sports* published in 1944 (the first edition had appeared in 1941). In this expanded volume, Menke evidently used anonymous contributors in various sports. After Menke's death in 1954, the encyclopedia continued to be published in the 1960s and 1970s which embedded the Maxwell-Roosevelt story more deeply in the collective memory. As a result, it became the official account of the 1905 crisis enshrined in Jack Falla's history of the NCAA and at the College Football Hall of Fame.

The credibility of the story was not simply due to the reputation of Theodore Roosevelt, but also to the genial Bob "Tiny" Maxwell. One of the largest players of his era at 6' 4" and 245 pounds, Tiny played for two years at Swarthmore before leaving without graduating to play professionally. After a stint in medical school, he went to work as a reporter and sportswriter, becoming sports editor of the *Philadelphia Evening Ledger* in 1916. While writing for Philadelphia newspapers, he also refereed in college games, showing much of the same agility he had as a player (at the time he weighed nearly one hundred pounds more).

Another reason for the story of the phantom photo and Roosevelt's reaction is that Tiny did not live long enough to give his account of the notorious Penn-Swarthmore game of 1905.

Returning with some friends from a summer outing on June 30, 1922, Maxwell saw a car stalled in his lane and swerved into the path of an oncoming truck. Pinned beneath the wreckage, he was taken to a nearby hospital where he died of pneumonia several days later. Stories about the colorful Maxwell kept his memory alive culminating in the tallest tale of all - the phantom newspaper photo of his battered face that inspired Teddy Roosevelt to trigger a revolution in college football.

Do I know as an absolute certainty that Teddy Roosevelt never saw a photo of Bob Maxwell's battered face? I do not. Indeed many of the elements of the Maxwell-Roosevelt myth actually occurred. Maxwell suffered a broken nose in a particularly brutal encounter between Penn and Swarthmore on October 7, 1905. Two days later, Teddy Roosevelt held a meeting of gridiron representatives from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Though he lectured the football experts, he never issued an edict threatening to ban football or, from all evidence, mentioned the Maxwell injury. Actually the meeting had been planned for several weeks, and Roosevelt normally did not wield the big stick when attempting to mediate in sensitive situations. Besides, the president who had sons playing football at the college and secondary level wanted to preserve rather than to extinguish the game.

But the story itself had the elements of a best seller-outsized characters, giant stakes, and violent encounters. A friendly and unassuming Goliath of the gridiron is badly beaten by a cunning enemy using brute force and unfair tactics. Then a Galahad in the form of Theodore Roosevelt comes to the rescue. In so doing, he revolutionizes a crude and brutal game turning it into a sleek and exciting twentieth-century spectacle. No wonder this became the foundation myth of modern college football.

In 2001, however, we seem not to have freed ourselves from the Maxwell-Roosevelt yam. This story or its variations of it still exist. I challenge sports historians to scan the reference sections of their college libraries where they will probably find the later editions of the *Encyclopedia of Sport*. There in the section on football, they will find the Teddy Roosevelt-Tiny Maxwell story, virtually unchanged from 1944. I suspect that this story will remain alive well into the twenty-first century.



Bob Barnett & Steven Riess