RIVALS!

The Ten Greatest American Sports Rivalries of the 20th Century

Richard O. Davies
On the cover: Boston Red Sox catcher Jason Varitek and New York Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez exchange pleasantries during a game at Fenway Park on July 24, 2004. This tiff began when Rodriguez was hit on the arm by pitcher Bronson Arroyo and it quickly escalated into a full-scale brawl that saw both dugouts empty. Varitek and Rodriguez both were given four game suspensions for their actions.
For Sharon
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Preface

This book examines what I consider the ten greatest sports rivalries of the past century or more. Sports constitute an important part of American popular culture, and big games and big matches between top teams and athletes add to the excitement and pleasure of millions of American sports fans. I have chosen ten rivalries that illuminate and highlight some of the great moments of American sports from the late 19th century to the present. None of my selections will be a surprise because they have been identified many times and in numerous places. Although many contemporary sports fans are emotionally involved in the fates of their special teams, and become especially focused during rivalry week, I have learned from teaching sports history to many bright college students that they have little understanding of the underlying events and traditions that have made prominent sports rivalries so compelling. This book is intended to provide that historical dimension, hopefully without slighting events that resonate in recent memory.

There are no great secrets as to what constitutes a good rivalry. Both participants must win their share of the contests, and competitive fires must burn brightly. Big upsets and unusual plays – such as the improvised multilateral game-winning miracle by California that concluded with the ball carrier plowing through the Stanford Band on the final play of the Big Game in 1982 – add to the richness of rivalry mythology. Great team rivalries are built by skilled athletes and leading coaches who face off, season after season, in high-pressure games, creating vivid traditions that flourish with the passing years.

Rivalries between individual athletes, however, are much shorter and several special factors must coalesce for a significant personal rivalry to take shape. Sometimes they emerge when a young challenger rises to take on a seasoned veteran who has been at the top of his or her sport, and
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has a large bag of tricks to draw upon to hold off the upstart. Compelling individual rivalries also benefit from the contrasts in personalities and a fierce determination on the part of both athletes to prevail. Rivalries between individuals normally last for only a few years, which is what makes the rivalry between two of the best women tennis players of all time so fascinating. It began in 1973, and when their string of 80 tournament matches had run its course in 1988, Martina Navratilova held a scant 43–37 edge on Chris Evert. Each woman claimed 18 Grand Slam singles titles. The sharp contrast in personalities and playing styles added to the drama. No wonder journalist Bud Palmer called it the “Rivalry of the Century.”

The competition between two of the world’s greatest golfers, Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus, lasted for a decade. Like Navratilova and Evert, they competed with everything they could muster, but nonetheless remained cordial despite the intense competition. Palmer’s exuberant style and blue-collar upbringing attracted new fans to golf and gave the game unprecedented popularity. When a new player on the tour who was ten years Palmer’s junior burst onto the scene with his cerebral and artfully calibrated approach to the game, the contrast made for an instant rivalry that saw millions of fans take sides in this spirited competition that played out at several major tournaments.

Cordiality is a word that cannot be applied to the malevolence that pervaded the four year war between boxers Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali. Neither man liked the other and made no effort to hide that fact. Their raw personal feelings were on full display during their three high-stakes matches. The intensity of these bouts and the courage both men exhibited produced the greatest individual rivalry in boxing history. Thanks to the emerging satellite communications technology, millions of fight fans around the world were able to watch.

In contrast to these individual match-ups, team rivalries can last for long periods of time. The seven team rivalries described here have existed for many decades, five for more than a century. During these long rivalries, both pairs of teams have had their many ups and downs, but are all sparked by the presence of great athletes, legendary coaches or managers, high-profile team owners, and large contingents of fans passionate about their team.

The great majority of America’s most identifiable rivalries exist in college football. Tradition is an essential ingredient, and the 135 year history of the Yale–Harvard rivalry is filled with great stories of the days of yore. These two great universities played their first “foot-ball match”
in 1875 and they are still going at it. This series produced more than just a timeless football rivalry; the Bulldogs and Crimson essentially created the template for college football. Well into the 1900s, their game was often a showdown that carried national title implications. For almost 50 years, the pervasive influence of Yale’s Walter Camp was evident, first as a star player, then as the formulator of the essential rules of the game, and ultimately as a master strategist, teacher, and publicist. Contemporary Americans pay little attention to this storied Ivy League rivalry because it no longer influences national rankings and bowl games, but for nearly a half-century these two giants of East Coast football often vied for the national championship. Yale claims 15 national titles, Harvard eight. To understand the history of the rivalry is to appreciate the rich heritage of college football.

The other college football rivalry I’ve selected became a major autumn sporting event in the 1920s and remains so today. The outcome of the Ohio State–Michigan game has been crucial to determining the Big Ten champion, obtaining major bowl invitations, and, on several occasions, to deciding a national championship. The series has been marked by the presence of an endless parade of All-Americans, eight Heisman Trophy winners, and a host of famous coaches. The series began in 1897, became a major attraction after the First World War, and ever since the 1930s has been played in late November before enormous crowds in two of the biggest stadiums in college football. The ritual and excitement stirred by this Big Game convey the deep and powerful emotions evoked by major college football.

College basketball rivalries generally do not create the same high level of emotional involvement as football. Longer schedules and postseason tournaments mean that two games, and sometimes three, are played between the same two teams. This frequency of games tends to dissipate somewhat the intensity of the rivalry. The autumn football contest is infused with much greater pageantry and media interest than basketball games between the same schools. The one college basketball rivalry that defies these generalizations is, of course, North Carolina–Duke. A convergence of several factors in the years after the Second World War helped produce college basketball’s undisputed greatest rivalry. Since that time, both teams have routinely enjoyed lofty national rankings and have figured prominently in many a National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament. The Tar Heels boast of five NCAA championships, the Blue Devils three. The intensity of the rivalry became white hot during the 1950s and remains so today.
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Surprisingly, the National Football League has only one enduring rivalry. The Green Bay Packers and the Chicago Bears first met in 1921 and have played each year since 1923. As the 2009 season began, the Bears held a ten game edge in this special rivalry between teams representing an enormous metropolis and a small blue-collar town, home to several meatpacking and paper processing plants. It is a very special rivalry that gives us valuable insight into the history of what has become the most dominant professional sport in contemporary America. Because of constant changes in leagues, conference affiliations, club ownership, and franchise locations, most professional football rivalries take shape and flourish for a few years when two teams are in the hunt for championships, but then fade when personnel and coaching changes undercut the dynamics that are so essential to the making of a lasting rivalry. Frequent player movement from one team to another has further eroded the potential for enduring NFL rivalries.

Professional basketball has seen several leagues and innumerable franchises come and go since the Second World War, thereby short-circuiting the potential for lasting rivalries. That is what makes the rivalry between the Boston Celtics and the Los Angeles Lakers so significant. The host cities are located on two oceans some 2,600 air miles distant, which puts to rest the generalization that proximity is a major factor in creating lasting rivalries. Their rivalry has featured great players, great coaches, great fans, and many a compelling championship series. Together these two teams have won half of all National Basketball Association championships and they have squared off in the finals on 11 separate occasions.

The two baseball rivalries I’ve selected (Giants–Dodgers and Red Sox–Yankees) are those that most experts routinely identify as the best. Both are deeply connected to the early history of professional baseball. The Giants and Dodgers have been playing since the early years of the National League, and their cumulative record as of the start of the 2009 season stood at a virtual dead heat (Giants 1,160, Dodgers 1,139). This rivalry began on the East Coast and did not miss a beat when the two teams moved to California for the 1958 season. It has sparked many a classic game, played by some of baseball’s greatest players and managed by such legendary characters as John J. McGraw, Wilbert Robinson, Leo Durocher, and Tommy Lasorda. The Red Sox have a long way to go to catch up with the Yankees in head-to-head games (Yankees 1,126, Red Sox 940), but the location of these two pre-eminent teams in the northeastern corridor has produced a delightful co-mingling of their extremely loyal
fans, who are important components in the cultural mix that keeps this rivalry at the top of the national sports consciousness.

Ever since Red Sox owner Harry Frazee sold superstar Babe Ruth to the Yankees after the 1919 season, the rivalry took on a special quality. What eventually was called the “Curse of the Bambino” might have helped some disconsolate Red Sox fans explain away the spate of Yankee American League pennants (39) and World Series titles (26) while their team could claim only four pennants between 1920 and 2004. In that year, the Red Sox finally exorcised the “Curse” in dramatic fashion, overcoming a 3–0 Yankee margin in the American League Championship Series and then rolling to a 4–0 romp over the St Louis Cardinals to capture their first World Series title since 1918.

In picking the “ten greatest” rivalries, I had little trouble except for deciding which compelling college football rivalries had to be excluded. Whenever a friend or colleague learned of my project, I was immediately asked whether or not I was going to include their alma mater. Every college or university that plays football, it seems, has a special rival, sometimes more than one. Because I live in Reno and teach at the University of Nevada, I have been asked many times how I could dare exclude the relatively brief UNLV–Nevada rivalry that has been the source of considerable ill will, replete with bitter political overtones and marked by general down-and-dirty acrimony. The same can probably be said for most great in-state rivalries where proximity and local issues are embroiled in the deep emotions that become attached to an athletic contest: Indiana–Purdue, Arizona–Arizona State, Stanford–California, Florida–Florida State, Iowa–Iowa State, Oregon–Oregon State, Idaho–Boise State, Virginia–Virginia Tech, Brigham Young–Utah, Mississippi State–Ole Miss, and Texas–Texas A&M are among many such notable rivalries. There are also great football rivalries that are conducted across contiguous state lines, such as Oklahoma–Texas, Colorado–Nebraska, Tennessee–Kentucky, Florida–Georgia, and Ohio State–Michigan. And, as I have learned from impassioned friends, the rivalries between such small colleges as Williams–Amherst and DePauw–Wabash can generate their own very special brand of alumni enthusiasm.

One of my personal favorite football rivalries is that between my alma mater, the University of Missouri, and neighboring Kansas University. This rivalry is one of the nation’s oldest, having begun in 1891, and has had its share of great games and memorable upsets, not to mention some very nasty moments, perhaps because its roots are embedded in the violence
of the border warfare conducted across state lines between the slavery
and anti-slavery guerrilla gangs before the Civil War. The two schools
cannot even agree on the overall head-to-head record due to a forfeit of
a crucial game in 1960 that saw the Jayhawks upset the undefeated Tigers
23–7 in Columbia and ruin hopes for their only national championship.
An ineligible Kansas player produced a forfeit, but only long after the
season had ended. Official Kansas records still defiantly show that game
as a victory, but so do Missouri’s. So the series stands either 55–53–9
in favor of the Jayhawks or tied at 54–54–9 if you accept the Tigers’
version of history. Evoking memories of Border Ruffians, Quantrill’s Raiders,
and Bleeding Kansas, this heated rivalry was long appropriately called
the “Border War.” However, in 2005 a sanitized new appellation was
imposed by a corporate banking sponsor, which insisted it be changed
to the more politically correct “Border Showdown.” Former KU coach
Don Fambrough was appalled by the change: “It’s a goddam war and
they started it!” he fumed.

The Auburn–Alabama rivalry was the most difficult to exclude. It is a
game played by two great state universities located just 100 miles apart
in the heart of a state obsessed with football. To be in Tuscaloosa, as
I have been, during game week is an unforgettable experience. I ultimately
selected Ohio State–Michigan because the Tigers–Crimson Tide series
was interrupted by a 40 year hiatus. After the 1907 game ended in a 6–6
tie and resulted in an unseemly brawl involving players and spectators,
university officials called off the 1908 game. Various disagreements and
downright cantankerousness prevented the game from being played again
until 1948. Even then, university officials opted to do so only after the
Alabama state legislature passed a resolution urging resumption of play,
with the unofficial message being that budget appropriations might be
imperiled.

Many people have identified the “Civil War” between the military
academies at West Point and Annapolis as one of the most important
football rivalries. No doubt it is. “Although Army–Navy does not decide
national championships anymore,” John Feinstein writes, “it is played by
teams who try to crush each other for three hours, then stand at attention
together when the game is over. It is the tradition and the uniqueness
of the scene inside the stadium that makes the rivalry unique. After all,
it is the only college football game played each year that is attended by
the entire student body of both schools.” This celebrated series has
been closely contested, with Navy holding a narrow 53–49 margin (with
seven ties) at the end of 2008. Many a future military leader played in these games, including two giants of the Second World War: West Point halfback General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Annapolis fullback Admiral William “Bull” Halsey.

Notre Dame has developed several traditional games – Michigan, Purdue, Southern California, Navy – but none reaches the highest level. Navy and Notre Dame have played each year since 1927, but on the eve of the 2009 season, the record was a lopsided 71–10–1 in favor of the Irish. It might be a traditional game, but it is not much of a rivalry. USC and Notre Dame began their series in 1926, making it football’s greatest intersectional rivalry. Despite many a memorable game, the overall intensity has been diluted because it has no conference affiliation. I am certain that most Trojan fans would, if given the choice, prefer to beat cross-town UCLA than the Irish.

I am certain that many fans will disagree with some of my selections, and I know that some dissent is inevitable because of the emotions that great rivalries evoke. Be that as it may, the reader will have to agree that the underlying narratives of the ten rivalries I have selected provide a colorful prism through which to examine and appreciate the important role that rivalries have played in making sports an integral part of our everyday lives.
Many friends, colleagues, and students contributed to this book. Senior Editor Peter Coveney of Wiley-Blackwell Publishing has been supportive from the inception of the project and I have benefitted from his guidance and learned from his vast experience in the world of academic publishing. Editorial Assistant Galen Smith has taken care of myriad details during the final stages of production and her efforts kept me on track and helped me avoid pitfalls. Officials at several universities were helpful on specific rivalries: Stephen Conn of Yale University, Matt Bowers of University of North Carolina, and Thomas Harkins of Duke University. I appreciate very much the research assistance provided by graduate students Katherine Robinson, Kimberly Esse, and Lindsay Martin. Jayme Hoy read various drafts and provided important research assistance. Dr Tom Bittker, MD, provided perspective on Ohio State–Michigan derived from his role as a former student sports editor of the Michigan Daily. Dee Kille (University of Nevada), Joe Amato (Southwest Minnesota State), and Charles Alexander (Ohio University) responded generously to my requests for assistance. I am especially indebted to long-time friend Frank Mitchell (University of Southern California), who not only made many helpful suggestions that improved the narrative, but also provided welcome words of encouragement at critical times during the writing process. If errors remain, they are my responsibility. I am fortunate to be a member of a Department of History where the words collegiality and professionalism have special resonance. I gratefully acknowledge the encouragement and support of my colleagues. Several years ago, two special friends established the John and Marie Noble Endowment for Historical Research at the University of Nevada. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support their Endowment provided for this book.
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This book was completed during my 50th year as a member of the professoriate. I cannot think of a better career choice that I could have made. During that half-century I have benefitted from the many courtesies extended to me by students, faculty colleagues, and administrators. To those many individuals who have helped me along the way, I can only say a heartfelt “Thank you!” This book is dedicated to Sharon, whose life with me began during our courtship days watching our Missouri Tigers battle the Kansas Jayhawks on field and court in one of the greatest and most enduring of all college sports rivalries.

Richard O. Davies
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Fight Fiercely
Harvard and Yale Create the First Great Football Rivalry

**Gentlemen, you are now going to play football against Harvard.**
**Never again in your life will you do anything as important.** (Yale Coach Tad Jones, November 1923)

When he arrived on the Harvard campus in the fall of 1876, 18-year-old Theodore Roosevelt would have given most anything to become a member of the football team. But he was still a gangly youngster whose physical development had been slowed by childhood illnesses. The vigorous and robust man – cowboy, military hero, and outdoorsman – that Americans would admire as their 26th president had yet to emerge. Slender and awkward, slow afoot, and afflicted with severe myopia that required eyeglasses, young Roosevelt was definitely not football material. That November, however, he accompanied classmates to New Haven to cheer on the Crimson in the second football game ever played against Yale. What he witnessed was a hard-fought game, resembling English rugby, that was dominated by the Blues. Keenly disappointed by the loss, he wrote his parents, “I am sorry to say we were beaten, principally because our opponents played very foul.”

Perhaps memories of that game – when the Yale men “played very foul” – were in the back of his mind in 1905, when he summoned the football coaches from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton – college football’s indisputable “Big Three” at the time – to the White House to discuss the issue of excessive violence that had contributed to innumerable injuries and several deaths. Roosevelt had often contemplated the issue of unsportsmanlike behavior by football players and the high number of serious injuries. Even though the dangerous “flying wedge” formation had been made illegal in 1894 after just two years of mayhem, the “mass momentum” strategies that had become popular during football’s formative
years remained in vogue. Players competed in a crude game where slugging, biting, kicking, and other forms of raw violence were commonplace and helmets and protective padding were not commonly worn. Newspaper accounts of college games often included a “hospital report.” It was no surprise that many college administrators and faculty advocated abolishing the game. In 1893, President Grover Cleveland banned the game at the two military academies due to excessive numbers of injuries that kept cadets and midshipmen from drill and class.

The more Roosevelt learned about the game, however, the more conflicted he seemed. He was, after all, among the enthusiastic advocates of “muscular Christianity,” a set of religious and social teachings that sought to create future male leaders by emphasizing programs that would test their courage, build physical strength, and develop high moral character. As one of the movement’s prominent early proponents, Henry Ward Beecher, put it, “Give to the young men in our cities the means to physical vigor and health, separated from the temptations of vice.”

Roosevelt believed a vigorous life was important in developing young men for future leadership roles. As a frail teenager, he had “built his body” with a stout regimen of weightlifting, calisthenics, boxing, and long hikes in the outdoors. That experience led him in 1902 to publish an article entitled “The American Boy” in which he urged parents to emphasize both the physical and moral development of their youngsters by providing opportunities for exercise and the playing of games in which they would be challenged physically and psychologically. “Now, the chances are he won’t be much of a man unless he is a good deal of a boy. He must not be a coward or a weakling, a bully, a shirk, or a prig. He must work hard and play hard. He must be clean-minded and clean-lived, and able to hold his own under all circumstances and against all comers.” With an eye to the development of America’s future soldiers, statesmen, and business executives, he wrote, “A boy needs both physical and moral courage,” that would prepare him for the challenges of adulthood when he would be “in the arena.” What better way to accomplish this than on the football field? “In short, in life, as in a foot-ball game, the fundamental principle is, Hit the line hard; don’t foul and don’t shirk, but hit the line hard.”

A persistent myth grew out of that October White House meeting in 1905, to which President Roosevelt summoned, among others, William Reid and Walter Camp, the head football men from Harvard and Yale. It was widely perceived – and the myth has endured in some quarters – that Roosevelt threatened to abolish football unless ways were found to
reduce the number of serious injuries. That widely held view, however, could not have been further from the truth. Rather, Roosevelt was fearful that unless substantial reforms were introduced to reduce violent mass momentum play, college administrators and faculty would ban the game from their campuses. TR knew that prominent university faculty members were advocating abolition, including the distinguished University of Chicago professor Shailer Mathews, who had condemned the game as “a social obsession – this boy-killing, man-mutilating, education-prostituting, gladiatorial sport.” For years, Roosevelt had fretted that the president of his own alma mater, Charles Eliot, would succeed in his campaign to convince the Board of Overseers to abolish football. Having learned of many instances of unsportsmanlike tactics, Roosevelt wanted to save the good by getting rid of the bad – in this case, by eliminating the foul play of the “muckers.”

Two broken noses during that pivotal season helped focus the president’s attention. The first belonged to his son Theodore, Jr, who, at a mere 150 pounds, had bravely held his position at the center of the Harvard junior varsity line against a larger and stronger Yale team in a very physical contest. In return for his courageous play “Teedie” received a powerful blow to the face that required reconstructive nose surgery. Harvard rooters felt that the Bulldogs had singled out the president’s son for special treatment, but standard strategy at the time was to concentrate powerful attacks upon the weakest spot along the opponent’s line. At 150 pounds, the president’s son seemed an inviting target. In November, during what had already become known simply as “The Game,” Yale’s James Quill flew through the air and smacked Harvard freshman Francis Burr in the face with a vicious forearm just as he was about to catch a punt. Most of the 43,000 fans who witnessed this blow in the open field were shocked as a torrent of blood spurted in the air from a shattered nose. The ensuing media coverage was heavy.

These events led to a major national conference in December at which representatives of more than 100 universities discussed the problems that threatened college football. The eventual result was a series of rules changes and administrative reforms that promised to reduce Saturday afternoon mayhem. Among the innovations announced was legalization of the forward pass (with several limiting conditions that would slowly be eliminated over the next two decades), and changes in blocking and tackling rules designed to encourage the use of deceptive running plays that moved the game away from pushing and shoving (and slugging) in the middle
4 Fight Fiercely: Harvard–Yale

of the line. Behind Roosevelt’s involvement in this effort, there undoubtedly remained lingering memories of his undergraduate days when Yale played “foul.”

Yale and the Invention of Football

Up to this point, Yale had dominated college football. The Blues also enjoyed a lopsided 23–4 advantage in the annual contest with Harvard. This was a depressing statistic that good Harvard men could not abide. The Harvard–Yale football rivalry had grown naturally: the two universities had viewed each other as academic rivals for two centuries. Harvard was founded in 1636 to prepare ministers for the Massachusetts theocracy that the Bay Colony’s early settlers envisioned, but doctrinal disputes within the New England faithful led to the creation of Yale in 1701 with a mission to educate Congregational ministers who would not be influenced by the unsettling “liberal” tendencies critics believed were being taught at Harvard. It was only fitting that these two educational rivals would meet in the first known intercollegiate athletic contest in August of 1852. This historic event, however, was not football, but rather a crew race held on Lake Winnipesaukee in New Hampshire. The Harvard eight-oar shell defeated two Yale crews, with presidential candidate Franklin Pierce among the spectators.

Nineteenth-century college students engaged in many hazing and interclass competitions that were often violent. One of these activities included kicking and running with an inflated ball. Despite the bruises and bloodletting, these activities grew in popularity, and by the early 1870s Harvard students had taken to playing an informal game not much different from today’s rugby. Yale students, however, favored a different game that was akin to today’s soccer, in which the ball could be kicked, but not carried. Yale students created an informal association to play teams from Princeton, Rutgers, and Columbia, and for several years they invited Harvard to join in the competition. Disputes over acceptable rules precluded such an event. Harvard, exhibiting certitude (Yale students called it arrogance) that its rules were superior, insisted that Yale adopt its rules. Consequently, Harvard’s first intercollegiate games played under the “Boston Rules” – that featured running with the ball and tackling – were with McGill and Tufts. Eventually the Yale students agreed to meet on Harvard’s terms (a concession duly interpreted as a victory in Cambridge)
and on November 13, 1875, the two teams squared off at Hamilton Park in New Haven. An estimated crowd of 2,000 curious onlookers watched the Yale team, outfitted in blue shirts, attempting to adapt their play to unfamiliar rules. Wearing crimson shirts and brown knee breeches, the Harvard team dominated by a lopsided 4–0 score. The points were scored when a drop-kick after a touchdown went through the uprights (touchdowns during the early years did not register points, but merely permitted a team the opportunity to kick a one point goal) and three field goals that also counted for one point.

This initial game, informal and experimental as it was, nonetheless was a pivotal moment in the history of American sports. Observers from the several colleges that had initially opted for a free-flowing soccer-style format now decided that the more physical Harvard game was preferable. The following year, teams from Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia formed the Intercollegiate Football Association, and a major American sports institution was born.

Harvard students probably regretted their determination to require any contest be played by their rules because the Blues quickly adjusted and put together a juggernaut that became the preeminent college football program in America for the next three decades. Yale’s domination of a game devised on the Harvard campus was virtually complete. Central to this remarkable period was Walter Camp. He grew up near the Yale campus and enrolled in the fall of 1876 at a time when Yale men were still smarting from their initial loss to Harvard. An all-round athlete, Camp became a big man on campus, pitching for the baseball team, rowing in the Yale shell, and running the hurdles on the track. He earned a position on the football team as a halfback and, at a time before eligibility limits were imposed, played for six years (four as an undergraduate and two as a medical student). He remained directly involved in Yale football until 1909 and, more than any other individual, exerted enormous influence not only upon Yale football, but also upon the structure of the game itself.

Camp’s informal title of “Father of American Football” is not overstated. During this 34-year period, Yale won 95 percent of its games, losing only 14 times. After his playing days ended, Camp served as an advisor to the elected team captains who actually ran practices and supervised the team during games. Camp was the driving force behind Yale’s domination of the game, and he also provided a formal structure to a complex game with his concisely written rules. A Harvard professor close to the game at the time is quoted by college football’s leading historian, Ronald A.
Fight Fiercely: Harvard-Yale

Smith, as saying: “I knew him as a master of football, whose advice – if the Yale captain would listen to it – meant inevitable defeat to the college I loved best.”

Elected team captain for his junior year, Camp became heavily involved in the annual negotiations with other representatives of the Big Three – from Princeton and Harvard – over the rapidly evolving rules by which the game was being played. Within a short period of time he emerged as a veritable czar of football rules and dominated this important endeavor until pushed aside in 1906 by a new generation of football coaches. In 1880, for reasons that remain unclear, he convinced the others to reduce the number of players from 15 to 11 and in that same year persuaded other schools to adopt a radical reform that would set American football apart from similar games.

Under existing rules, the ball was put in play by a “scrum” in which the ball was tossed into a melee of players who struggled to gain possession and then attempted to advance it toward the goal. The resulting helter-skelter nature of the game offended Camp’s sense of order and discipline, and he proposed that a team should gain possession after a kickoff, punt, or recovered fumble, and that each play would begin with the ball being put in play by a player positioned on the line of “scrimmage.” Initially, a lineman would tap the ball with his foot backward to a “quarterback,” but within a few years the snap of the ball between the legs was introduced. When the 1881 game between Yale and Princeton curiously deteriorated into each team holding the ball for each half by simply downing it after the snap (both teams believing that by earning a 0–0 tie they would win the mythical national championship), Camp introduced the “down and distance” concept; to retain possession of the ball, the team was required to gain five yards in three “fairs” (attempts to advance the ball, soon to be called “downs”). The “down and distance” concept required that the field be lined, thus prompting an observer to suggest that the field of play looked like a “gridiron.”

Camp’s influence was also seen in making the scoring system more accurately reflect the nature of the new game. Initially the game emphasized scoring by kicking the ball through the uprights, but in 1883 his reformed scoring system was implemented, which awarded four points for advancing the ball across the goal line, with a safety counting two points, and a goal kicked after a touchdown two points. A goal kicked from the field (today’s field goal) was credited with five points but the number of points subsequently was reduced to three over the next 20 years.
By the mid-1880s, Camp’s leadership had produced a set of rules that established the foundation for today’s American game of football, a game substantially different from the English games of soccer and rugby. The result was a much more controlled, less spontaneous, game than rugby or soccer. Spectators responded enthusiastically, and crowds upwards of 20,000 for “big games” became commonplace.

As early as 1879, Camp had introduced into the Yale system the running of interference (blocking) for the ball carrier, and, with the establishment of a line of “scrimmage,” Camp began scripting offensive plays. Calling of signals soon followed. Camp assigned each offensive player a specific task on every play, with all 11 men expected to perform them in synchronized fashion – the correlation with the emerging assembly-line manufacturing system was not missed by sharp observers. Camp’s changes fundamentally shaped the structure of the game, producing in effect a replication of innovations taking place in American industry in which organization, cooperation, specialization, and integration of many workers into the steady flow of the manufacturing process were being implemented in accordance with the ideas of manufacturing efficiency guru Frederick Winslow Taylor. In his public lectures and writings on football, Camp was given to using such business-like terms as “scientific football,” “strategy and tactics,” and “scientific planning.” His objective was to create a game in which spontaneity and chance were reduced while emphasis was placed upon discipline and organized patterns of play. His game inevitably made the head coach central to the organization and strategies employed by a team, somewhat analogous to the duties of a corporate executive. It is not surprising that Camp’s day job was as a manager of a New Haven clock factory (he had discovered medicine was not his calling) and that he often referred to the “work” that constituted the playing of Yale football. It was his ability to organize, plan, and implement his concepts that enabled Yale to operate one of the most efficient and successful football machines in the history of the game. Under Camp, college football became a metaphor for the emerging American industrial system of large factories and complex distribution systems.

When Camp pushed through the legalization of tackling below the waist in 1888, he did so with the specific intent of reducing the ability of ball carriers to evade tackles in open field, thereby encouraging the use of hard-hitting plays directed into the middle of the line. This led to intense hand-to-hand combat along the line of scrimmage. The ball carrier might be pushed through the line or even tossed over it by teammates.
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In order to gain the necessary five yards, conventional strategy dictated the use of brute force at the point of attack in the line, and the game became one in which players often interlocked arms to provide protection for the ball carrier. This was the heyday of brutal “mass momentum” football, and Yale was its most accomplished practitioner.

Thanks to Camp’s attention to detail, the annual game with Harvard became a one-sided affair, with the Blues winning consecutive games from 1880 until Harvard finally broke the tide with a 12–6 victory in 1890. In that memorable game, Harvard double-teamed Yale’s great lineman “Pudge” Heffelfinger on every play. The game was marked by ferocious play at the line of scrimmage. Yale’s 6’3”, 210 pound behemoth was so exhausted at game’s end that he had to be helped from the field of battle. Heffelfinger later said, “We went out there and murdered one another for 60 minutes. . . . The slaughter had been so fierce that it was a wonder any of us came out alive.” Harvard’s long-suffering fans thus thrilled to their team’s first undefeated 11–0 record, which more than a half-century later prompted the Helms Foundation to formally award the Crimson the 1890 national championship.

Over the next three years, Harvard went into The Game with impressive winning records – twice undefeated – only to lose in hard-fought, close games. Adding to the frustration of Harvard supporters was the fact that the Crimson failed to score a single point against the Blues during that span. Spearheading the Yale team was a diminutive fireball, 140 pound Frank Hinkey. He and his teammates were the beneficiaries of Walter Camp’s heavy emphasis on physical conditioning, and they blocked, tackled, and ran with intensity and proficiency. Hinkey was a quiet, reserved loner off the field, known to his teammates as “Silent Frank,” but when on the gridiron he became a fiery cauldron of hostility. He asked for and gave no quarter. As one sportswriter observed of Hinkey, “When he tackled ’em, they stayed tackled,” and “when he hit ’em on his blocking assignments, they stayed hit.” Walter Camp’s 1892 team, led by Frank Hinkey, was probably his best. That year, Yale enjoyed a season of superlatives, as the Bulldogs went undefeated, untied, and unscored against, overwhelming opponents by a combined score of 435–0.

Even Harvard’s surprise unveiling of football’s most fearsome play in 1892 could not prevent domination by Hinkey and the powerful Yale Eleven. The famous (or infamous) flying wedge play was designed by businessman and Harvard booster Lorin Deland, whose interest in military history had led to a fascination with Napoleon’s strategy of concentrating
force upon a single point of the enemy’s defense. Deland devised a play that capitalized on a rule, then current, that permitted the kickoff team to tap the ball backward and take possession. Harvard practiced the play in secret throughout the fall, saving it to surprise Yale. With the score tied 0–0 as the second half began, Harvard faked a kick-off, and the kicker tapped the ball backward as two groups of linemen, starting 20 yards behind the fake kicker, began running at full speed to form a V-shaped formation, not unlike a flock of geese. The ball was tossed backwards to a running back as the wedge slammed into an isolated Yale defender. The play, which sparked enormous comment, only gained 20 yards because, as game reports indicated, a determined Frank Hinkey brought down the runner. The flying wedge failed to turn the tide of the lopsided series in Harvard’s favor, as Yale went on to win the game 6–0, but its sheer brutal nature overshadowed the game’s outcome. “What a grand play!” a New York Times writer exclaimed. “A half-ton of bone and muscle coming into collision with a man weighing 160 or 170 pounds!” The following season, most teams ran their own variation of the flying wedge, often beginning with the linemen starting their charge from several yards behind the line of scrimmage with the ball carrier surrounded by his teammates’ human wedge.

Mayhem on the Gridiron: Football Imperiled

The flying wedge symbolized to the growing band of football critics the brutality of the game. Even the most ardent advocate of mass momentum play, Walter Camp, had to agree and the play was eliminated after just two seasons when he inserted a new rule for the 1894 season that required seven linemen to be set within a yard of the line of scrimmage before the snap. This negated the opportunity for blockers to pick up steam before reaching the line of scrimmage. That same year, the rules committee also made illegal the wearing of special belts outfitted with handles that running backs could grasp to be pulled forward by stout blockers.

The abolition of the flying wedge, however, failed to deter the growing level of violence that had come to characterize the Yale–Harvard game. That November, The Game was once again played at Hampden Field in Springfield, Massachusetts, a railroad center that provided a convenient destination for fans of both teams. Twenty-five thousand spectators,
many waving crimson or blue pennants, braved bitter weather to witness what became known as the “Springfield Massacre.” After the teams swapped touchdowns, the game deteriorated into little more than a semi-organized brawl. A Harvard lineman jabbed his finger into the eye of Frank Butterworth, producing blood and obscuring his vision. In retaliation, Frank Hinkey reportedly jumped on the back of downed Harvard punt returner Edgar Wrightington, knees first, breaking a collarbone. The game official, Alex Moffat, was unable to keep the game under even a modicum of control, and injuries piled up on both sides as Yale played cautiously in the final minutes, protecting a 12–4 lead. The score of the game, however, was not the biggest story of the day, but rather the slugfest that unfolded. At one point, Yale tackle Fred Murphy struck Bob Hallowell after a play had ended, producing a bloody broken nose. The Crimson thereupon piled on the perpetrator, who was carried unconscious off the field on a stretcher and dumped unceremoniously along the sidelines. Other players were assisted off the field, wobbling from blows they had received to their unprotected heads. Several players were ejected and the “hospital list” after the game revealed the carnage: Harvard had lost three players to broken bones – Charlie Brewer’s leg, Wrightington’s collar bone, and Hallowell’s nose – while Yale had several men sent to the hospital for concussions, including Murphy who remained in a coma for several hours, to the point that false rumors floated around town that he had died.

Recriminations flew, insults were swapped, and newspapers published sensational accounts of the brutality of the game with an emphasis on unsportsmanlike play by both sides. Harvard officials demanded that Yale apologize for Hinkey’s illegal hit, but received no satisfaction, and Crimson fans took out their frustrations in letters-to-the-editor regarding referee Alex Moffat’s perceived incompetence. There was another casualty of the “Bloodbath of Hampden Field” – the administrations at both schools decided that the time had come to let emotions cool. It was agreed that all athletic contests between the schools be suspended and that The Game would not resume until two seasons had passed.

The “Springfield Massacre” gave Harvard President Charles Eliot renewed incentive to pursue his campaign to abolish football. Denouncing the game as “unfit for colleges and schools,” he fumed that football had become “a spectacle more brutalizing than prize fighting, cock fighting or bull fighting” because it “sets up the wrong kind of hero – the man who uses his strength brutally, with a reckless disregard both of