

Volume 3

Number 135

The Flying Wedge

Lead: On the last Saturday before Thanksgiving 1892 at Hampton Park in Springfield, Massachusetts, 21,500 fans watched the annual Harvard-Yale football game. After a scoreless first half, the Harvard team surprised its opponents with one of the most spectacular and controversial plays in football history. The "flying wedge" was born.

Tag: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: As it emerged in the late 19th century, the new American sport of football combined features of

English rugby and soccer. Gradually, under the leadership of Walter Chauncey Camp who coached the Yale team from 1888 through 1892, the game adopted many of its distinguishing rules. Yet, from the beginning, football had a reputation for rough, even brutal competition. This was defended by many, including future President Theodore Roosevelt who wrote Camp in March, 1895 that he would not change the game's brutality. Football produced leaders and leaders can't be efficient unless they are manly. To him, rough football produced masculine vigor.

Despite this attitude, early attempts were made to make the sport safer. Rubber cleated shoes and padded

leather uniforms were developed. The Princeton quarterback in 1893 took to wearing a flak jacket with a steel plate to protect his ribs. In 1890 Lorin F. Deland, a Boston businessman, watched his first football game. He had never played, but was fascinated by the similarities between football strategy and military maneuvers. He was a student of the tactics of Napoleon Bonaparte and was convinced that if teams could imitate the French general by concentrating force, committing a large number of players against a weak section of the opponent's line, they could score spectacularly. Deland's writings became the principle inspiration for the "flying wedge."

During that game in 1892 most of the Harvard team was arranged in two lines at 45 degree angles, shaped like a "V" from the ball toward the sidelines. The ball was put in play and given to Art Brewer who stepped inside the wedge now moving straight toward Yale's Alex Wallis. The lone Eli lineman never had a chance. Three quarters of a ton of mass momentum blew through the Yale line. That was just the beginning.

Eventually, unified momentum plays such as the flying wedge caused so many injuries that they had to be outlawed. In 1905 alone, 22 players were killed playing college football. Calls for reform brought a reduction in the brutal tactics and eventually the

establishment of the NCAA, the National Collegiate Athletic Association but the memory of the almost unstoppable flying wedge lingers around football today, a vivid reminder of the sport's vigorous adolescence.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Hill, Dean. *Football Through the Years*. New York, NY: Gridiron Publishing Company, 1940.

McCallum, John Dennis. *Ivy League Football Since 1872*. New York, NY: Stein and Day Publishing, 1977.

Porter, David L., ed. *Biographical Dictionary of American Sports*. New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1987.

McQuilken, Scott A. and Ronald A. Smith, "The Rise and Fall of the Flying Wedge: Football's Most Controversial Play, *Journal of Sport History* 20 (1, 1993): 57-64.

Copyright by Dan Roberts Enterprises, Inc.