

College Football Is Going Berserk

A game ruled by brute force needs a housecleaning.

By FURMAN BISHER

The game of football has been thumping itself on its hairy chest lately and claiming not only that it has become the national pastime but that it offers the finest example of manly hardihood remaining in this age of general flabbiness. This is poppycock. The crushed nose or cracked jawbone caused by an illegally thrown forearm, and the internal injury resulting from the "bull block" of a plastic-helmeted head represent not hardiness but the deterioration of a basically great game and of the sportsmanship of those who play it.

In college particularly—on the so-called amateur level—football appears to have gone absolutely silly on "hitting," even at the expense of clever execution. A new term, "hard-nosed," is about as common in the conversation of football savants as punting, passing and praying. A complimentary term, it implies the will and the ability to deliver—and absorb—fearsome physical punishment in the cause of gridiron victory. So far, so good.

But far too often, it seems to me, this aspect of the game has been glorified to the extent that players are being blocked and tackled not simply out of the immediate play but right out of the game—often on a stretcher.

Last November an unpleasant disturbance was set off in the section of the country I know best—the Southeast—when a linebacking specialist named Darwin Holt of the University of Alabama struck halfback Chick Graning of Georgia Tech such a devastating blow to the face that for days afterward Graning looked like Joe Louis the morning after his knockout by Rocky Marciano.

New Blocking Technique

Graning was coming downfield on the outer fringe of a punt-covering setup. The ball had already been fielded by an Alabama safety man, who had signaled for a fair catch. Holt, however, veered from his apparent course to the Alabama bench and delivered a sudden forearm blow under the face bar of Graning's helmet as Graning eased up.

By pure coincidence, I had visited the Alabama campus four days earlier and noticed Holt, wearing a sweat shirt, prancing about on the practice field among a squad otherwise dressed out in

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full gear. Paul Bryant, the head coach, explained, "He's so tough we don't let him scrimmage during the week. He's liable to hurt somebody."

Just as his coach feared, the next Saturday Holt "hurt somebody." Holt later claimed that he hadn't realized the safety man had called for a fair catch, that he had merely attempted to block Graning out of the play, and that the injury to Graning "definitely wasn't intentional."

This declaration did not, I'm afraid, alter my conviction that the blow was no accident, a conviction unwittingly supported by a statement coach Bryant had already made.

"Holt came to me after the game," Bryant had said, "and told me he had hit this Tech player. He's all broken up about it. He said he didn't know why he did it."

To be sure, football is a game of toughness. The ability to take and deliver a jarring blow in a legal manner is admirable as well as necessary. But the coach who encourages or even tolerates a player who violates the spirit of the rules is placing the future of football in jeopardy.

"I'm just as sure as I can be," coach Bobby Dodd of Georgia Tech told me recently, "that if the present trend toward brutality continues, there are going to be several more colleges out of football in a few years."

Last year 20 players—six of them in college—died as a result of football injuries or of complications directly associated with football injury. This is an increase over the number of football fatalities in recent years—14 in 1960, 18 in 1959, 17 in 1958 and 16 in 1957.

What these figures clearly indicate is that the game is getting rougher. It seems to me that the effort to knock an opponent senseless has become more and more obvious in coaching intent, and that game officials have become less vigilant in enforcing the rules intended to safeguard the athlete from serious injury.

Indoctrination in Violence

The coaches who are successful in the eyes of censorious alumni are, as a rule, hardfisted, driving, demanding commanders of campus installations run on military lines. Watching the squads work out, one can't escape the feeling that mere hard blocking and tackling aren't enough to suit some coaches. On the practice field their favorite injunction seems to be, "Knock his damned head off." The player who responds to such violent indoctrination is the cur glorified in his own kennel and by his masters.

To be sure, some coaches have become quite concerned over the rising tide of injuries in football, but few pin the blame on their own profession. A more popular target has been the players' equipment. But Clyde B. Smith, athletic director at Arizona State (Tempe) and former head coach at the University of Indiana, disputes this indictment.

"It isn't the equipment that is at fault," he says. "It is the deadly forearm blow. In their efforts to win, some coaches are permitting their players to use their arms and head as weapons."

The rules require offensive linemen to keep their hands against their chests, and

from this position a player not too careful about the rules can deliver a blow with the lower part of his arm that has much the effect of a well-thrown punch. This and the body blow with a pile-driving helmet are the main causes of the increase in football injuries. Ernie McCoy, athletic director at Penn State and chairman of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's committee on injuries, recently reported on a four-year survey conducted by his committee. One of this body's conclusions was that many coaches instruct players to use their hard plastic helmets as weapons in making blocks and tackles.

"There are too many instances in college football," McCoy said, "where tacklers seem to be under instruction to maim the ball carrier rather than merely bring him down. These same players are becoming high-school coaches, and if they try to instruct youngsters in the same manner, public pressure may well spell the end of high-school football."

A condition of alarm has already been reached on the high-school level. The National Federation of State High School Athletic Associations, disturbed by the number of deaths and injuries last season, bluntly placed the blame on foul tactics. "The Federation is going to campaign for stricter enforcement of regulations governing such things as piling on and tackling out of bounds," said Clifford B. Fagan, executive secretary of the organization. "It also intends to see a reduction in the use of the forearm and in 'bull-blocking' (butting)."

Public disgust with football violence apparently crystallizes only after brutality has reached an intolerable pitch. In 1905 and again in 1931 nationwide revulsion forced changes on the game—and it seems to be ripe for another attack of public conscience again now.

After the death of 18 players and a series of serious injuries in 1905, such a crisis was reached that President Theodore Roosevelt called in representatives of Harvard, Yale and Princeton, then the leaders of college football, and advised them that it was up to them to save the sport by the removal of all its objectionable features.

An Indictment of Foul Play

"Brutality and foul play," he said, "should receive the same summary treatment given to a man who cheats at cards."

In 1931, following the deaths of 31 players, football again was called to account for its violent conduct. At that time

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there still remained much room for improvement in the rules—the flying tackle was outlawed after the 1931 season—and in equipment. Now, however, football rules have been overhauled to place full premium on superior execution, and there is little that can be done in the way of safety measures that hasn't been done already. The burden of maintaining safe conduct and ethical behavior on the field therefore falls squarely in the lap of the coaches. It is they who must initiate reforms or bear the guilt.

Just how the new violence developed is not easily pinpointed, but there can be no doubt that it exists. Coach Ralph Jordan of Auburn recently admitted that his team was taking up "this new hell-for-leather, helmet-bursting, gang-tackling game," and added, "Since Bear Bryant came back to Alabama, it's the only kind of game which can win." And according to coach Bobby Dodd, "At Georgia Tech we're 'hitting' harder in practice now than we were in games eight or ten years ago. We've got to do it or we can't stay on the field with some of these teams. You play tough football or you get eaten alive nowadays."

By "tough," Dodd referred to a type of player as well as a manner of play. When the T formation first came back into popularity some years ago, teams were light, fast and tricky. Now, however, coaches send out their recruiters to bring in a far bigger, fiercer breed of athlete, the kind equipped to handle himself in hand-to-hand combat.

This change in players has gone along with a change in philosophy on the cam-

pus of the "influence" coaches in the country. Bud Wilkinson built his reputation at Oklahoma on speedy, hit-and-run, brush-blocking teams that were a delight to watch. A few years ago he took one of these teams to play Notre Dame while Frank Leahy still coached there.

Oklahoma lost the game by a close score but took such a physical beating from Leahy's bigger, tougher, harder-hitting team that Wilkinson went home vowing never to subject players of his to another such meat-grinding without proper physical preparation. He began bringing in the bigger, more rugged player and emphasizing the kind of conditioning required to win beachheads; and as the idea spread from Oklahoma, toughness sometimes got out of hand.

Paul Bryant, Forest Evashevski, Woody Hayes, and the late Jim Tatum began moving into national prominence about this time, and all taught hard-nosed football and demanded Marine Corps conditioning.

Trained to Be Tough

As Bryant has moved about the country, from Maryland to Kentucky to Texas A.&M. to Alabama, he has left a trail of discarded athletes who couldn't or wouldn't meet his 120 percent demands for conditioning. "Riffraff," he calls them.

Those who survive this type of physical toughening are obviously better fitted to survive the punishment of the season itself. But the fact cannot be blinked that they are also conditioned to play the kind of excessively rough football in which an increasing number of boys will

inevitably be injured—some of them fatally.

A particularly flagrant case occurred on the West Coast three years ago. Half-back Steve Bates of California was knocked out of bounds after a 15-yard gain and came to rest on his back. Films of the game show Mike McKeever of Southern California veering off his course, falling on Bates full force and landing an elbow in the face of the prostrate ball carrier. Bates's face was badly damaged, his cheekbone, nose and jaw broken.

This created such a furore that Southern California offered California an official apology. McKeever himself paid a price of sorts. The incident cost him a position on the All-America team of the Football Writers Association of America. As president of the F.W.A.A. that year, I presided at the meeting during which the selection committee took official note of the incident and deleted McKeever's name from the list of players under consideration. But of course this action was only a slap on the wrist.

There was a similar incident in the Southeastern Conference last season when an end from Mississippi State, Johnny Baker, piled onto the fallen body of Glenn Glass of Tennessee out of bounds. Glass's jaw was broken; and after Tennessee protested to Mississippi State authorities, Wade Walker, the Mississippi State coach, reprimanded Baker so severely that the player left school—although he returned a few days later at the behest of a delegation of teammates.

For every one of these more serious cases, there have undoubtedly been a hundred or more in which intentional

injury appeared to be involved but in which the results were less frightful. This trend grows more conspicuous with each season. A sporting contest that was created in the name of higher education, to furnish students relaxation from academic pressures, has grown away from its original intent and purpose and become a kind of gladiatorial contest for a few carefully recruited specialists. This condition is encouraged on many campuses where the football athletes have been isolated from the rest of the student body in dormitories of their own, like animals in a cage.

Time for a Return to Sanity

What the remedy is, how a return to sane behavior is to be brought about, I can't say. Football must be played hard, and players must be trained into good condition. But the players who have achieved this superior condition must acquit themselves on the field as sportsmen rather than bully boys. Otherwise football will surely be called to face a general public indictment.

Reformation should originate with the coaches themselves. If it does not, and soon, it must surely come from the offices of the college presidents who recognize the true value of collegiate athletics and their proper place in campus life.

In the revolution that developed after the season of 1905, Dr. Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard, made this observation: "Death and injuries are not the strongest argument against football. That cheating and brutality are profitable is the main evil." That statement is still applicable fifty-seven years later. **THE END**



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