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 putting, passing and praying. A complimentary term, it implies 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 Granning of Georgia Tech such a devastating blow to his plastic-helmeted head that the Georgia Tech man died as a result of football injuries or of complications directly associated with football injury. This is an indictment of the rules 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 their 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.”

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 1931, following the deaths of 31 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...
SPEAKING OUT

there still remained much room for im-

provement 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 al-

ready. The burden of maintaining safe

conduct and ethical behavior on the field

dependence falls squarely in the lap of the

coaches. It is they who must initiate re-

forms 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-

ing 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 prac-
tice 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, how-

ever, coaches send out their recruiters to

bring in a far bigger, fiercer breed of

athlete, the kind equipped to handle him-

self in hand-to-hand combat.

This change in players has gone along

with a change in philosophy on the cam-
puses of the “influence” coaches in the

country. Bud Wilkinson built his reputa-
tion 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
braving in the bigger, more rugged
player and emphasizing the kind of con-
ditioning required to win beachheads;
and as the idea spread from Oklahoma,
toughness sometimes got out of hand.

Paul Bryant, Forrest Evashkevich, Woody
Hayes, and the late Jim Tatum began
moving into national prominence about
this time, and all taught hard-nosed foot-
ball and demanded Marine Corps con-
ditioning.

Trained to Be Tough

As Bryant has moved about the coun-
try, 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 de-
mands for conditioning. “Riffraff,” he
calls them.

Those who survive this type of physical
conditioning 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
invariably 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
cause, falling on Bates full force and
landing an elbow in the face of the pro-
strate ball carrier. Bates’s face was badly
damaged, his cheekbone, nose and jaw
broken.

This created such a furore that South-
ern California offered California an offi-
cial 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. 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 con-
sideration. 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 Mis-
sissippi 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 aca-
demic pressures, has grown away from
its original intent and purpose and be-
come a kind of gladiatorial contest for a
few carefully recruited specialists.

This condition is encouraged on many cam-
puses 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
acquire themselves on the field as sports-
men 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. Elliot,
president of Harvard, made this obser-
vation: “Death and injuries are not the
strongest argument against football. That
cheating and brutality are profitable is the
main evil.” That statement is still appli-
cable fifty-seven years later. THE END

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