

Pigskin progressivism

By [George F. Will](#), Published: September 7, 2012

With two extravagant entertainments under way, it is instructive to note the connection between the presidential election and the college football season: Barack Obama represents progressivism, a doctrine whose many blemishes on American life include universities as football factories, which progressivism helped to create.

Higher education embraced athletics in the first half of the 19th century, when most colleges were denominational and most instruction was considered mental and moral preparation for a small minority — clergy and other professionals. Physical education had nothing to do with spectator sports entertaining people from outside the campus community. Rather, it was

The collective activity of team sports came after a great collective exertion, the Civil War, and two great social changes, urbanization and industrialization. This story is told well in [“The Rise of Gridiron University: Higher Education’s Uneasy Alliance with Big-Time Football,”](#) by Brian M. Ingrassia, a Middle Tennessee State University historian.

Intercollegiate football began when Rutgers played Princeton in 1869, four years after Appomattox. In 1878, one of Princeton’s two undergraduate student managers was Thomas — he was called Tommy — Woodrow Wilson. For the rest of the 19th century, football appealed as a venue for valor for collegians whose fathers’ venues had been battlefields. Stephen Crane, author of the Civil War novel [“The Red Badge of Courage”](#) (1895) — the badge was a wound — said: “Of course, I have never been in a battle, but I believe that I got my sense of the rage of conflict on the football field.”

Harvard philosopher William James then spoke of society finding new sources of discipline and inspiration in “the moral equivalent of war.” Society found football, which like war required the subordination of the

individual, and which would relieve the supposed monotony of workers enmeshed in mass production.

College football became a national phenomenon because it supposedly served the values of progressivism, in two ways. It exemplified specialization, expertise and scientific management. And it would reconcile the public to the transformation of universities, especially public universities, into something progressivism desired but the public found alien. Replicating industrialism's division of labor, universities introduced the fragmentation of the old curriculum of moral instruction into increasingly specialized and arcane disciplines. These included the recently founded social sciences — economics, sociology, political science — that were supposed to supply progressive governments with the expertise to manage the complexities of the modern economy and the simplicities of the uninstructed masses.

Football taught the progressive virtue of subordinating the individual to the collectivity. Inevitably, this led to the cult of one individual, the coach. Today, in almost every state, at least one public university football coach is paid more than the governor.

As universities multiplied, football fueled the competition for prestige and other scarce resources. Shortly after it was founded, the University of Chicago hired as football coach the nation's first tenured professor of physical culture and athletics, Amos Alonzo Stagg, who had played at Yale for Walter Camp, an early shaper of the rules and structure of intercollegiate football. Camp also was president of the New Haven Clock Co. Clocks were emblematic of modernity — workers punching time clocks, time-and-motion efficiency studies. Camp saw football as basic training for the managerial elites demanded by corporations.

Progressives saw football as training managers for the modern regulatory state. Ingrassia says that a Yale professor, the social Darwinist William Graham Sumner (who was Camp's brother-in-law), produced one academic acolyte who thought the "English race" was establishing hegemony because it played the "sturdiest" sports.

Reinforced concrete and other advancements in construction were put to use building huge stadiums to bring the public onto campuses that, to many, seemed increasingly unintelligible. Ingrassia says "Harvard Stadium

was the prototype” for dozens of early 20th-century stadiums. In 1914, the inaugural game in the Yale Bowl drew 70,055 spectators. The Alabama, Louisiana State and Southern California football programs are the children of Harvard’s, Yale’s and Princeton’s.

“It’s kind of hard,” said Alabama’s Bear Bryant, “to rally ’round a math class.” And today college football is said to give vast, fragmented universities a sense of community through shared ritual. In this year’s first “game of the century,” Alabama’s student-athletes played those from Michigan in Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Tex., which is 605 miles and 1,191 miles from Tuscaloosa and Ann Arbor, respectively.