

WALTER E. McCORNACK

NORTHWESTERN'S CELEBRITY COACH

By Robert Pruter

(Note: Wallie McCornack was a long forgotten football coach from the first decade of the last century, when in 1995 his name was briefly resurrected to the public after Coach Gary Barnett produced a 10-2 record at Northwestern University; the school's best mark since the 10-1-4 record achieved by the school way back in 1903 when McCornack was the coach. In this second and final installment dealing with McCornack's career, we resume with Northwestern's 1904 season)

1904 and 1905 Seasons

The 1904 season was less successful for McCornack, who achieved an 8-2-0 record. The school began the season with a more reasonable practice game schedule of three games, beating up on Ft. Sheridan, Northwestern College, and North Division High in shortened scrimmages. Moving into the "regular" season, Northwestern managed to assert overwhelming superiority against the small colleges—similar to McCornack's achievements in his first season at Dartmouth—beating Lombard, 55-0, Beloit, 34-0, DePauw, 45-0, and hapless Oshkosh Normal, 97-0. Against three Western Conference opponents, on the other hand, Northwestern could not keep up with the big boys, The school lost to University of Chicago, 32-0, and to the University of Minnesota, 17-0, while barely edging past the University of Illinois 12-6.

Financially, the 1904 season was terrific for Northwestern. The Minnesota game, for example, was played at a larger stadium, the University of Chicago's Marshall Field, drawing 10,000 fans. At the end of the season the program ended in the black by some \$27,000, after more than 140,000 fans spent more than \$500,000 to attend Northwestern football games.

In 1905, the same pattern of wins and losses prevailed, where Northwestern achieved the expected wins in the practice games against high schools and those colleges with high school level-programs, and in the regular season beat up on small colleges. The first practice game against North Division High was a disaster though, as the Purple's first string had to fight desperately for a 11-0 win. The team did not sound like a typical McCornack coached aggregation, the Tribune reporting, "the Northwestern players were criticized on account of a looseness of the formations and lack of quickness and precision on the part of the back in getting into the plays." The paper explained that part of the problem was McCornack's introduction of a new "leap frog" action that the players had not yet mastered, where before the snap the backs would make quick leaps forward or sideways to deceive the opposing team as to the true direction of the attack

Football coaches early in the century had no qualms about running up the score and did not consider the practice as being unsportsmanlike conduct. In an Inter-Ocean report on Northwestern's preparation for a practice game against St. Viateur College, one of those weaker institutions whose program was on the high school level, it said "Coach McCornack is working his men hard and hopes to pile up a large score against St. Viateur's college Saturday." Northwestern half succeeded, piling up 41 points to 0 against their hapless opponents. The reporter said, "McComack sent in his strongest team and gave them instructions to run up a big score." However, no doubt disappointing their coach, the Purple committed many costly fumbles that kept the score down.

The practice games indicated that Northwestern was going to experience a long season

McCornack complained, "I've got a bunch of men weighing little more than the average high school teams, and outside of the first eleven practically no men with football experience." He predicted his team was too disadvantaged to win any of the big contests, and so it was. McCornack achieved a 8-2-1 record in 1905, but his two defeats were against the only two Western Conference schools he faced, University of Chicago (32-0) and University of Minnesota (72-6). The tie, unbelievably, was a 0-0 failure against Colonels of Kentucky University (now Transylvania).

This was the last season of McCornack's contract, and in mid-October at a mass meeting in honor of the team he announced that 1905 would be his last year working as a professional coach. In mid-November, Collier's magazine began the first of a four-part series by Edward S. Jordan on corrupt football practices in the Big Nine, called "Buying Football Victories." The first part was devoted to the programs of Chicago, Northwestern, and Illinois, the other three parts were devoted to Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan.

The caption under a photo of the Northwestern manager, F. O. Smith, asserted that he "followed athletic methods that he knows are wrong," and had both Smith and McCornack agreeing with the statement that "the campaign for men carried on by the friends of universities has made a grafter of every athlete of ability in the West." Jordan's story goes on to explain how Northwestern lost recruiting battles to the University of Chicago for the services of two local high school phenoms, Leo DeTray and Walter Steffen, both of North Division High. Certain Northwestern alumni supposedly played a role in offering inducements to these athletes.

The Collier's article also claimed that for each season that proved successful, Northwestern's Athletic Association paid McCornack \$500 above his annual salary. The article quotes McCornack as saying, "success is what the universities want. In the West today that depends upon underground methods, many secret resources, and faculty ignorance." The school's newspaper, the Northwestern, reported on Collier's muckraking article in its November 8, 1905 issue, in a surprisingly dispassionate voice, merely stating how Smith and McCornack were described. The following week the Northwestern ran an article in which Smith and McCornack denied the charges in the Collier's story.

The program at Northwestern had clearly grown during the three years under McCornack. The 1905 season saw the opening of a new stadium at Central Street able to seat 13,000 fans. The receipts at the end of the season were again in the black, and clearly, football was growing at Northwestern under McCornack's tenure. There was no reason to suspect the end of football was near at hand at Northwestern.

Northwestern Drops Football

During the first five years of the new century, there was a growing sentiment across the nation that the game of football was becoming too brutal. Newspapers, notably the Chicago Tribune, would annually produce reports on the number of deaths and injuries suffered on high school and colleges gridirons. At this time, in reaction to this annual carnage, such institutions as Stanford and Columbia dropped the sport. Northwestern dropped the sport as well—in the form of a five-year suspension—but not because of its supposed brutality.

What immediately precipitated the suspension was a financial problem in the football program. It came to the attention of the university's Board of Trustees that the Athletic Association of the University, which ran the program, had racked up an indebtedness to some 40 to 50 persons of \$12,336.23. The Trustees recognized that although the university was not legally responsible for the debts of the Athletic Association—which consisted of five faculty, five alumni, and five

students—it was morally responsible for paying off the debts. In exchange, the Athletic Association surrendered all its property and equipment.

While this seemed on its face a peculiar reason to drop the sport, a number of later papers written on the subject (student term papers) in the university archives all point to a growing sentiment by certain segments of the Northwestern University against the rising tide of commercialism. The Collier's series, "Buying Football Victories," clearly had an impact, describing how the commercial pressures to win at football was corrupting the leading Midwest universities, and clearly the Methodist leaders at Northwestern wanted to see their institution get out of the muck.

An Alumni News letter in December of 1906 stated this clearly, "Intercollegiate football was discontinued by act of the Trustees last year, not because they thought football too brutal a game, but because of the commercial spirit and practice that had become attached to it." Another university publication, Syllabus, reported in 1908 that football was dropped by the Trustees, "not because we were losing, nor because they believed with some critics of the game that football was essentially brutal; but because of the spirit of professionalism that has been creeping into the game of late, and because of the tendency toward commercialism." Clearly, the commercial growth that McCornack brought to the football program through his wins fed the sentiment to end the program.

In "Buying Football Victories," Collier's, despite the negative tone it took against Northwestern, in every case favorably quoted McCornack, who clearly found the whole enterprise of competing against other Big Nine schools for athletes unsavory. That the alumni, through the Athletic Association, had an inordinate degree of influence and control in the football program, and may have paid athletes to attend Northwestern, was clearly a concern with McCornack (given his railing against "underground methods" and "secret resources"). Early on in his tenure at Northwestern he had made clear his intention to leave for a career in law. But one wonders had McCornack been able to recruit successfully and build teams that could take Northwestern to the next level by beating the universities of Chicago and Minnesota, would he have chosen to renew his contract remained as a coach?

After Football

McCornack had prepared himself to be a lawyer and his intent to leave coaching was obviously a genuine one. After receiving his law degree from Northwestern Law School in 1899 he was admitted to practice by the Illinois Supreme Court the following year. Probably not long after he left Northwestern McCornack entered private practice in partnership with Edward J. Stevens, and later with Langworthy, Stevens & McKeag. In 1913 he joined the Chicago Bar Association. McCornack also worked in the office of Clarence Darrow, and then built a long career working as an examiner for the Interstate Commerce Commission.

McCornack died June 30, 1939, and the first line in the Chicago Daily News obit was "Chicago attorney and at one time assistant to the late Clarence Darrow." The only mention of his football exploits—at the bottom of the second paragraph—was a dry factual statement, "He gained fame as a football star in college and later served as football coach, at [Dartmouth and Northwestern]." The more lengthy obit in the Chicago Bar Association publication devoted several paragraphs to McCornack's football career, asserting that "he was a keen psychologist and had the ability to analyze situations rapidly, and these qualities stood him in good stead in the court room as well as on the gridiron."

McCornack was a product of the earliest days of football in the Midwest, from an era before the

Wallie McCornack's College Coaching Career Record

1901 Dartmouth (10-1-0)

Oct. 2,	New Hampshire	51-0
Oct. 5,	Trinity	23-0
Oct. 9,	Boston College	45-0
Oct. 12,	Tufts	22-0
Oct. 19,	Williams	6-2
Oct. 26,	Bowdoin	35-6
Nov. 2,	Wesleyan	29-12
Nov. 9,	Vermont	22-0
Nov. 16,	Harvard	12-27
Nov. 23,	St. Paul's	24-0
Nov. 27,	Brown	22-0

1904 Northwestern (8-2-0)

*Sept 24,	Ft. Sheridan	17-0
*Oct 1,	Northwestern (Naperville)	34-0
*Oct 5,	North Division HS	18-0
Oct 8,	Lombard	55-0
Oct 15,	Beloit	34-0
Oct 22,	University of Chicago	0-32
Oct 29,	DePauw	45-0
Nov 5,	Oshkosh Normal	97-0
Nov 12,	University of Illinois	12-6
Nov 19,	University of Minnesota	0-17

1902 Dartmouth (6-2-1)

Oct. 4,	Vermont	11-0
Oct. 8,	Massachusetts Aggies	0-0
Oct. 11,	Tufts	29-0
Oct. 18,	Williams	18-0
Oct. 25,	Amherst	6-12
Nov. 1,	Wesleyan	12-5
Nov. 8,	Springfield Training	11-0
Nov. 15,	Harvard	6-16
Nov. 23,	Brown	12-6

1905 Northwestern (8-2-1)

*Sept 21,	Evanston HS	32-0
*Sept 23,	North Division HS	11-0
*Sept 30	St Viateur	41-0
Oct 7,	Wabash	5-0
Oct 14,	Beloit	18-2
Oct 21,	Transylvania	0-0
Oct 28,	University of Chicago	0-32
Nov 4,	Marquette	30-5
Nov 11,	Ohio Northern	34-0
Nov 18,	Michigan Aggies	37-11
Nov 25,	University of Minnesota	6-72

1903 Northwestern (10-1-4)

*Sept 19,	Marshall Field House	0-0
*Sept 19,	North Division	17-5
*Sept 22,	Ft. Sheridan	28-0
*Sept 23,	Englewood	35-0
*Sept 26,	Northwestern (Naperville)	22-6
*Sept 30,	Alumni	5-0
Oct 3,	Lombard College	22-0
*Oct 7,	Chicago Dental College	18-11
Oct 10,	Washington (St. Louis)	23-0
Oct 17,	University of Chicago	0-0
Oct 21,	Cincinnati	35-0
Oct 30,	University of Illinois	12-11
Nov 7,	Purdue	cancelled
Nov 14,	Notre Dame	0-0
Nov 21,	Wisconsin	6-6
Nov 26,	Carlisle	0-35

*Practice games.



The college football season of 2000 brought with it a few significant historical milestones as follows: on September 2 Tennessee narrowly defeated Southern Mississippi 19-16 for career win 700 in Vols history; on September 16 Yale trounced Dayton 42-6 to become the first college in history to notch 800 career wins; and on September 30 Michigan edged past Wisconsin by a score of 13-10 to become the second school to reach the all-time mark of 800 wins. In an individual accomplishment of impressive proportions, Ben Matthews of Bethel intercepted five passes in a 14-13 win over Gustavus College on September 24, to tie the NCAA all-division record shared by eight players.

advent of professional coaches. Each of his university coaching jobs were with institutions he had earlier attended, which suggests that he thought of himself more in terms of being an alumni coach than a professional coach. Football may have been more a game than a profession to McCornack. He certainly did see his coaching experience as a short stage in his life.

As a coach, McCornack was a success at every institution he had ever been with, and ended up with a 42-10-6 career record in the universities. That is not too shabby. He appeared from contemporary reports to have developed teams that emphasized speed and open end runs, as opposed to the prevalent approach line-bucking, where players ground out yardage in close formations on the line.

While McCornack was able to take Dartmouth and Northwestern to heights they had never been before, in the East he could not beat the Yales or Harvards, and in the West he could not beat the Chicagos and the Minnesotas. He could not get his programs over the hump to the highest competitive level, and the difficulty may have been that his institutions simply did not attract the best football players. McCornack's coaching career at the university level lasted only five years and covered 58 games, which is not much to enter a definitive assessment as a coach. But McCornack was a winner wherever he went, where he exhibited the highest coaching skills, and by most contemporary assessments he achieved the utmost with what he had.

(Note: The author would like to thank Patrick Quinn, Archivist of the Northwestern University Archives, for directing me towards some of my most useful sources; and Sarah Hartwell, Reading Room Supervisor, Rauner Special Collections, Dartmouth University, for providing me the needed answers to allow me to complete this paper.)
