Rise and Fall of Football at Lewis College, 1947-1956

By Robert Prater
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Lewis College, of Lockport, Illinois, was a typical small college representative of the post-World War II era when even the smallest institutions with miniscule budgets were fielding football teams. For a ten-year period, from 1947 to 1956, the small Catholic school garnered a 42-34-3 record, won four out of six league titles it competed for, and captured a bowl game. But like most of its counterparts from that era the school by the mid-1950s found that it could not afford to sustain football and dropped the sport. The school is presently called Lewis University (now in Romeoville, Illinois, due to boundary shifts), has an NCAA Division II program, but no football team, and serves a student body of 5,800 students. The Lewis College football story is a modest one, but at its level the school achieved considerable glory and acclaim for its football teams.

1947-1949: Lewis College was founded as a high school in 1932 and expanded its program in 1934 to become the Lewis Holy Name School of Aeronautics. Gradually adding college-level programs, the school emerged as a combined junior college-high school after World War II. The school was supported by the Chicago Archdiocese, which monthly sent a five-figure subsidy to Lewis through its Catholic Salvage Bureau.

As the Lewis College of Science and Technology, the institution fielded its first football team in the fall of 1947. The school had only 187 students (all male), and built a team of 26 players, called the “Redmen.” Coach Henry M. Fallon described the team as “light and inexperienced,” surprisingly light and inexperienced by present day standards. Only one player weighed more than 200 pounds; the average was 161 pounds, and most of the players probably had not played high school ball. Home games were played on the Lockport High School field.

The first year was not a good one, as the team lost all seven of its games, some by embarrassing scores, for example to Mission House College of Plymouth, Wisconsin, 40-6, and to Wisconsin Extension of Milwaukee, 31-6. The season ended on November 14, at home, with a loss to Aurora College by a respectable score of 13-7. Typical of the era, Lewis threw a season-ending banquet for the players, in which the Lewis President, Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, in his speech gave the best words that he could, “To be a good loser is as important as having a winning team.”

For the 1948 season, Lewis College hired a brilliant coach, Ray “Scooter” McLean, a former Chicago Bear, and he produced in their second season a spectacular turnaround for the team, now called the “Flyers.” The reason for the turnaround stemmed from the fact that Chicago area high school football players had a year to learn that Lewis had a team and that Lewis was undoubtedly extending its extensive scholarship program (which affected half the students) to the football team. While it is unknown how extensive the football scholarships were in 1948, in the early 1950s (where there are records) every member of the team received a full scholarship of 1,000 dollars. McLean had some 60 students out of 155 in the student body come out for football that year, and he whittled the numbers down to a squad of 38, all local players. Chicago Public League powerhouse, Austin, provided 12 players, and Catholic powers St. Elizabeth and St. Philip each provided four players. Only four players were holdovers from the previous season, but one was a star running back, Joe DuSell. McLean reported more beef, saying that his line averaged over 190 pounds, notably 235 pound Norm Beaton and 210 pound Rocco Tarsitano. Home games were played on the Lockport Athletic Field.
Lewis joined the newly formed Badger-Illini League for 1948, and competed against both junior and four-year colleges. The school’s first game was on September 25 in Lisle, Illinois, and the school garnered the first win in its program, a 54-0 shellacking of St. Procopius. Subsequent victories were recorded over Northwestern College of Watertown, Wisconsin, 27-7, Concordia of River Forest, Illinois, 40-0, and Wisconsin Tech, 27-0, but late in the season the team suffered two setbacks, with losses to Dubuque University, 27-7, and Mission House, 18-13. On November 13, Lewis ended its season at home with a victory over Aurora College, 31-6. The school tied Northwestern College for the 1948 league title with a sparkling 6-2 record.

Lewis College in 1949 was at its all-time low in enrollment, a mere 110 students. It is amazing that McLean could build a winning team from that base, but he did, spectacularly so. Home games were now played at the Lewis Stadium which fronted the campus along Route 66. The school opened the season at home on September 16 with a victory over LaSalle-Peru, 28-8, and the following week also at home smashed Morgan Park Junior College, 54-0. On October 1, in the team’s first away game, in a key match-up against Northwestern College, Lewis won 21-7. Returning home, the school had a huge win in its match with Concordia College, crushing them, 44-0.

The season wound up with three away victories over Wisconsin Tech, 30-0, Great Lakes, 53-0, Aurora College, 47-0, and a home victory over Mission House, 33-0. Lewis outscored its opponents that season, 310-15. Lewis was hoping to be invited to the Little Rose Bowl game for junior colleges in Pasadena on Christmas Day, but instead got an invitation for the Texas Rose Bowl against Tyler College, in Tyler, Texas, for December 10. Lewis had to turn down the invitation because the game conflicted with its final exam schedule. The school thus settled for its first undisputed league championship and first undefeated season with a hefty 8-0 record for 1949.

1950-1953: Lewis College entered the 1950 season by becoming a four-year liberal arts college, which meant changes for its football program. Lewis, at only 140 students, moved to a tougher conference of all four-year schools, the Midland Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, where its opponents were much bigger schools and had full varsity rosters. Its conference opponents were St. Norbert, St. Ambrose, and St. Joseph (the fifth conference member, Loras College, Lewis would not meet). But McLean hoped at best for a .500 record, but noted that there would be 25 returning lettermen.

Lewis began its 1950 season at home with a loss, to Wisconsin State Teachers College of Platteville, 12-7. Several promising drives were nullified by offside penalties. The following week, the Flyers won their first game of the season, defeating Great Lakes Naval Station, 31-14, followed by a victory over McKendree College, of Lebanon, Illinois, 20-0. The first league opponent was St. Norbert, of West de Pere, Wisconsin, which Lewis thoroughly thrashed, 42-7. After a win over North Michigan College, 33-6, the Flyers lost to their second league opponent, St. Ambrose, of Davenport, Iowa, 28-20. The homecoming game on November 18 was highly successful, as Joe DuSell paced Lewis to a 27-12 win
over league opponent St. Joseph of Rensselaer, Indiana, with three spectacular touchdown runs, of 78, 88, and 35 yards. Lewis placed third in the Midland Conference with a 4-4 record, as McLean had hoped.

McLean resigned in May of 1951 to become the Green Bay Packers backfield coach and eventually head coach (in 1958), and the school hired another ex-Chicago Bear, Bernie Masterson, as the new coach. The school was up to 163 students at this point, five of them girls as the school went coed. Masterson had lost star half back Joe DuSell to tuberculosis, but reported for the coming season 17 seniors (who made up part of Lewis College’s first senior class).

Lewis launched its 1951 season with a win over Wisconsin State Teachers College, 19-0, followed by a win over conference opponent, St. Ambrose, 32-20. On October 13, the school experienced a setback at home to Great Lakes, 21-0, the first game to be played by Lewis in the 10,000-seat Memorial Stadium in nearby Joliet. In most years, Lewis subsequently would split its home games between Lewis Stadium and Memorial Stadium. Lewis closed out the month with an away victory over St. Norbert, 14-12, on October 22.

Lewis celebrated homecoming on November 3 with a victory against Northern Michigan of Marquette, 32-6 at Lewis Stadium. The homecoming festivities had become elaborate by this time, with a parade of floats winding through Lockport and Joliet, bonfires, pep rallies, and a snake dance. The final regular game of the season was an away victory over conference opponent, St. Joseph, nailing down the league title with a 31-14 victory. Lewis College placed seven players on the Midland Conference all-star team, notably four players on the number one offensive platoon—tackle Norm Beaton (the first Lewis football player to play in the NFL), guard Joe Farinella, and backs Chico Marigliano and Bill Stratton.

Lewis College had ended the regular season with a 6-1 record, but its achievement was valued enough by the American Legion post in Bloomington to invite the school to play in the fifth annual Corn Bowl. On November 22, on a cold, rainy Thanksgiving Day, at Bloomington, Illinois, Lewis College capped its season with a victory over William Jewell of Liberty, Missouri, 21-12, before a crowd of only 2,000, the nasty weather keeping the numbers well below the expected 6,000. Lewis jazzed up its entrance by helicoptering into the stadium Lewis president Rear Adm. Herbert J. Grassie, his wife, and two cheerleaders. The Corn Bowl title represented the apex of the Lewis College football program, but small college football, the kind represented by Lewis, was definitely beginning to decline. Newspaper reports on small colleges dropping football because of costs were becoming more common. A New York Times item at the end of the 1951 season noted that 32 small colleges had dropped football the previous year.

Masterson left the program to work in the Catholic Youth Organization, but Lewis College found a worthy successor in James “Red” McCarthy, a University of Illinois product who played pro ball in the All-American Conference. School enrollment in the fall of 1952 had become a bit more respectable, with 242 students, all but 26 being boys. McCarthy picked as his assistant, Gordon Gillespie, who had come to the school the previous year to coach basketball. Gillespie subsequently for many years coached baseball, basketball, and football at Joliet Catholic High, and coached basketball and baseball at Lewis, and baseball at St. Francis University in Joliet. The school regularly had spring practice in which they included potential high school recruits. Grassie in his May 1952 report to Bishop Sheil, noted, “Interest in the Lewis College team among high school graduates in the Chicago area has been higher than ever before and a large number (75) of high school graduates turned out for the Lewis College practice.”

Lewis in the 1952 season played all its home games at Memorial Stadium in a not-so-great season. It began propitiously enough with a home win against Northern State Teachers College (future Northern Illinois) in DeKalb, beating them 12-7. The following week, the team was beaten by Loras College in
Dubuque, Iowa, 21-7, but bounced back on October 4 with a win at home against Mankato State Teachers College of Minnesota, 30-7. The team then went through four straight defeats, before closing its dismal season with a 14-14 tie with Midland Conference opponent, St. Joseph, in a home game. One of its losses was to Arkansas State, 42-0, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, the school’s first intersectional game. The team ended up with a 2-5-1 record.

Lewis College saw an increase in its enrollment in the fall of 1953, for a total of around 266 students, about 50 being girls. The 1953 season began to look as though it would be special on September 16, when the Flyers in their opening game upset the Northern Teachers College Huskies (later to become Northern Illinois), 12-6, before 1,500 fans at Memorial Stadium. The team was sparked by the power running of fullback Angelo DiVinere and half backs Mike Miriani and Ed Novak, both touchdowns coming on runs. Two weeks later in a home game at Lewis Stadium the school tied league foe Loras College, 7-7.

Following an away win over Mankato State, 20-0, and a blow-out loss to Quincy College, 40-13, the team returned home to Lewis Stadium on October 18, where Lewis beat St. Norbert in a league tilt, 14-7. A homecoming game at Memorial Stadium hosting Arkansas State saw Lewis lose, 34-0, before only 900 fans (which probably looked smaller among the 9,100 other empty seats). A Lewis Stadium game against St. Ambrose on November 11 had the Flyers winning their second league contest, 33-14.

On November 15, in Rensselaer, Indiana, the Flyers won the 1953 conference championship, defeating St. Joseph’s, 33-28. The champions were paced by Angelo DiVinere who caught two touchdown passes from quarterback Lou Polka, and ran in two touchdowns, a 35-yard run and spectacular 92-yard run in the fourth quarter for the winning score. The team closed the season with a 5-2-1 record. DiVinere was selected for the second All-Catholic All-American team.

1954-1956: The Midland Conference was dissolved after the 1953 season, and for the 1954 season Lewis had to play an independent schedule. Lewis had at this time around 340 students, some 300 of them boys. On October 3, at Lewis Stadium, the Flyers easily defeated St. Ambrose, 46-7, scoring 20 points in the second quarter and 26 points in the third quarter. Then on October 7, Lewis traveled to Macomb, Illinois, where they faced Western Illinois State, and were upset by the home team, 7-6, before
5,000 fans. Things went a little better the next two games. On October 17, Lewis traveled to Dubuque, Iowa, to smash Loras College 53-7, handing the team its worst defeat since 1927.

On November 6, St. Mary’s of Winona, Minnesota, came to the Lewis College campus to play the Flyers in its homecoming game, and got creamed 52-7. The Chicago Tribune, in its extensive story on the game made a point of mentioning the Chicago high schools that the Lewis players came from, noting that Tom Walsh and Bob Rose came out of Mt. Carmel, Herm Barichello from Weber High, Mike Mariana from St. Philip, Lou Polka from St. Patrick, Don Blerant from St. Ignatius, and Griff MacDonald and Tom Beck both from Sullivan. All except Sullivan High were members of the Catholic League. The paper also noted that 18 of the 31 players on St. Mary’s also came from Chicago schools. Lewis College closed its season against Navy Pier Illini in a home game, with an easy 41-13 win. Mariani scored three touchdowns, and Polka went 41 yards for the longest scoring run. Lewis finished the 1954 season with a not so shabby 6-2 record.

The Chicago Tribune columnist Dave Condon, in early fall of 1955 noted that there was “dwindling interest” in small college football teams, and noted such factors as television, a greater interest in the pro game, and the “high gear publicity campaigns of the major college athletic departments.” He asked his readers to support small college football by attending a game, and published a schedule of Chicago-area matchups, and two Lewis games were listed.

The 1955 season saw an enrollment at the school of 360 full-time students. The team had 16 returning lettermen and Coach McCarthy expressed high hopes for the coming season. Lewis opened with a victory at Memorial Stadium over Iowa Wesleyan of Mount Pleasant, Iowa, 27-0. The rest of September was followed by two losses, to Arkansas State, 41-6, and St. Ambrose, 14-8. A high point of the season was the homecoming game at Lewis Stadium on October 22, when the Flyers defeated St. Norbert, 29-14, sparked by 14 second quarter points that overcame an early St. Norbert lead. The points came from two long drives, 80 yards in 10 plays and 68 in eight plays.

Lewis College faced Hillsdale College for its final game of the season, an away game in Hillsdale, Michigan. The school faced the nation’s leading scorer for small colleges, running back Nate Clark, who scored three touchdowns in leading undefeated Hillsdale to a 27-13 final season win. Lewis ended its season at 3-4-1, at a time that the small college game was struggling.

Enrollment at Lewis College rose to 400 full time students in the fall of 1956, up 10 percent from the previous year, but the fortunes of the football team were going down. Lewis opened its season on September 19 in an away game against Western Illinois State, where it faced a devastating aerial attack from Ron Little, who completed 15 of 22 passes, including a 47-yard touchdown pass, to pace Western to a 34-12 victory. Five more successive losses were experienced at the hands of St. Ambrose, Loras College, Great Lakes Training Station, Missouri Valley, and St. Norbert.

Lewis finally scraped by with a win at home on October 26 against Illinois Normal University, 14-13, the two touchdowns the last in the history of the school’s football program. The first came after an interception on Normal’s 33-yard line, and a few downs later with Lewis on the five-yard line, quarterback Tom Beck ran in for the score. The second touchdown came with Beck rifling a 36-yard pass to Tom Walsh in the end zone. Lewis closed its dismal season on November 10 in a home game against Hillsdale College, which had a 24-game victory streak and was the “nation’s leading scoring small college eleven,” with its star running back Nate Clark. Lewis did not win, but achieved something of a “moral victory,” keeping the score close, a 12-0 loss, ending the 1956 season at 1-7.
Lewis Terminates Football

The Chicago Archdiocese had become concerned with the expense of the Lewis football program. The school was highly dependent on subsidies, $2,000 a month from co-founder and benefactor Frank J. Lewis and $16,000 a month from the archdiocese, and given those financial realities its football program appeared to be an unseemly extravagance. The football budget in 1954 had reached an apex of $57,900 and despite some cost trimming during the next two years it was still a hefty $45,700.

The college justified the scholarships based on its mission of helping poor Catholic boys. President Brig. Gen. Paul X. English, noting that Lewis was providing half the student body with scholarships, told Samuel Cardinal Stritch in 1955, "It is my understanding that the main object of Lewis College is to provide an education for deserving Catholic youths who in no way could get a Catholic college education except by help."

Maybe so, but the money drain on the Archdiocese was considerable, and in November of 1956 it told the college that the football program was going to be terminated. The stated reasons were: "that it costs $50,000 a year, the team following is very poor on the part of the public, and that it has limited public relations value."

In December, the Lewis Board of Directors formally gave President English the word, stating in its letter that, "the primary reason for this move, as with so many of the other small colleges in the country in recent years, was the tremendous drain that football expenditures placed on our limited financial resources." A January 2, 1957 press release, written by English publically announced the dropping of football, noted the economic drain of the sport and said the team attracted only 1,500 spectators a game and was "unable to compete with other Chicago area teams for a fan base."

There was another story behind the press release. Not explained was that $28,300 of the $45,700 budget went to full football scholarships for every member of the team. Lewis College had always kept knowledge of its football scholarships close to its vest, as such scholarships in small colleges tended to be frowned upon in the early 1950s. In an internal report, the school footnoted its scholarship expenditures with a comment, "Football scholarships are not separated in our records from other scholarships. It was agreed that athletics should not be shown separately in our records." Also, English in a letter to the archdiocese explained that he did not want to mention in the press release that existing football players' scholarships would continue because he, "did not feel it advisable to admit that we are giving 'athletic scholarships.'" The reported 1,500 home attendance numbers were dubious, as a subsequent interview with ex-coach McCarthy had him admitting that home games seldom drew more than 800-900 fans.

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The school's legacy in football should be remembered on a positive note, and Gordon Gillespie, the legendary high school and college coach in Illinois, fondly supplied it, "We had some outstanding football coaches and a terrific small college program. It was a winning program; we won four league championships and the Corn Bowl. The losses in the later years were in part due to the high caliber of competition we faced, such as Arkansas State. At the time we had lights in the stadium that was out in front of the campus, and it was a wonderful thing to come out and watch the game under the lights. It was wonderful for the school and wonderful for the area."