

Michigan-Chicago 1905: The First Greatest Game of the Century

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Sports fans and experts have endlessly debated which college football game was the most outstanding of the century. There are many contenders, including the 35-13 upset victory by Notre Dame over Army in 1913 employing the forward pass; the 0-0 tie between #1 ranked Pittsburgh and #3 Fordham with its "Seven Blocks of Granite" in 1937; Columbia's shocking 21-20 victory over Army in 1947 ending a thirty-two game unbeaten streak; the 10-10 tie between #1 Notre Dame and #2 Michigan State in 1966; or the exciting 35-31 triumph by #1 Nebraska over #2 Oklahoma on Thanksgiving Day 1971. While we may never settle this debate, perhaps best left to devotees of sports bars, there can be no doubt that the first "game of the century" occurred in 1905 when Michigan's "Point a Minute" team took on the University of Chicago Maroons, the original "Monsters of the Midway," for the championship of the West.

The 1905 Michigan at Chicago Thanksgiving game was a demonstration of the development of American intercollegiate football—the strengths and weaknesses of the game were on display this gray, cold November 30 day. The game was one of significance for football followers, for it "decided" something deemed crucial—the mythical "championship" of the West. More importantly, the two well-trained teams, coached by men whose university compensation surpassed virtually everyone on their respective campuses, were harbingers of the twentieth century rise of the intercollegiate player and coach which would prove of enormous significance for American higher education. The game presented the legendary Michigan team of Fielding Yost which had not been defeated for over four seasons against an undefeated Chicago team led by All-American quarterback Walter Eckersall. Yost had been unbeaten at Michigan ever since he arrived in 1901. Chicago had been disappointed for four years in its late season clashes with its chief rival, and Chicago supporters judged a football season successful only if Michigan were defeated.¹

The meeting of the two teams elicited the greatest volume of interest manifested in a single game west of Philadelphia to that time and this development, which could be termed the rise of the spectator (especially those fans who

1. Yost's teams had played 55 games, scored 2,746 points to 40 for their opponents (Chicago had scored 12 of the opposition points) or an average of 49.8 points per game to .7 points for opponents. Michigan seldom played more than three major opponents each season. *Chicago Journal*, November 27, 1905. For a complete discussion of the history of football at the University of Chicago, see Robin D. Lester, "The Rise, Decline, and Fall of Football at the University of Chicago, 1890-1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1974). On Yost, see "Yost, Fielding H.," *DAB*.

were not part of the learning community), would join the rise of the player and coach as the most significant factors in intercollegiate athletic history. One estimate was that only 20 per cent who wanted tickets could obtain them. The University of Chicago had enlarged the stands to accommodate about 27,000 spectators. Requests for 50,000 seats reached the Midway ten days before the contest, and orders continued to flood the athletic offices. Michigan ran short of tickets, for 3,000 of their followers were to entrain from Ann Arbor and join another 3,000 Chicago residents in the west stand reserved entirely for Michigan backers.²

Chicago fans, some 2,000 of whom were fresh from a football journey to Madison to see the Maroons defeat Wisconsin, clamored for the Marshall Field tickets. The rapidity of the ticket sales was phenomenal. Chicagoans bought their seats at the rate of one every two and one-half seconds at one source, and Ann Arbor fans bought theirs almost as rapidly. Widespread scalping resulted as the shortage of tickets became acute. "The ticket scalping industry on the Michigan-Chicago game is a record-breaker for a sporting event in Chicago," one newspaper asserted. The chief culprits were University students who had been allowed special consideration—prime location and early purchase. A Chicago alderman angrily introduced a non-scalping resolution and Mayor Dunne, addressing himself to public safety, dramatically ordered police to arrest all scalpers, including students. The Palmer House ticket agent was arrested and made an example—his defense was that he bought them from needy students. John McCutcheon, the *Chicago Tribune's* popular cartoonist, showed spectators literally putting hopeful spectators to the gun over ticket prices, with "student grafters" serving as suppliers.³

President William Rainey Harper knew how to use such a widely heralded event. It was a time to sow the seeds of interest in wealthy Loop businessmen, and it was a time for those who had invested their treasure in the school to reap the rewards of a choice spectator position. Some, such as a wealthy clothier, demanded the best, and showed impatience when the best was not delivered. "Mr. Henry C. Lytton, my father, having donated quite liberally to the University, feels rather keenly the fact that he is not entitled to any consideration, all of which is due to the management of this sale of seats for the games," wrote George Lytton. Superb tickets from Harper's office were in the return mail. The

2. *Chicago Daily News*, *Chicago Examiner*, *Chicago Post*, *University of Michigan Daily*, November 22, 1905; *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Chronicle*, *Chicago Journal*, November 23, 1905; *Chicago American*, November 28, 1905.

3. The Wisconsin trip by the Chicago followers, in four special trains, insured a new attendance record at the Wisconsin football arena: 10,000 were present. *Chicago Post*, *Chicago Chronicle*, October 20, 1905; *Chicago Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, October 22, 1905. The Loop sales point sold 1,500 tickets in one hour. Buyers were limited to four tickets each, *Chicago Journal*, November 23, 1905. The Michigan figure was 2,500 tickets sold in two hours, or one every 2.88 seconds. *Chicago Record-Herald*, November 22, 1905; *Chicago Journal*, November 23, 1905; *Chicago Record-Herald* and *Chicago Journal*, November 23, 1905; *Chicago Record-Herald*, November 24, 1905; *Chicago Tribune*, November 25, 1905. Even the elevator boys in the Marquette Building were said to be peddling the precious tickets at inflated prices. George Lytton to Harper, November 21, 1905, University Presidents Papers, University of Chicago Archives, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL (hereafter cited as UPP), Athletics II Folder.

McCutcheon's cartoon appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, November 29, 1905.

University's patrons expected to have a front row seat when Stagg's players were in action. Football was the chief event which caused such spectatorial concern among these people—they would hardly manifest such waspishness over a public lecture by a faculty luminary. A well-known patroness wrote Harper her thanks for tickets to the game and said, "We considered ourselves your guests."⁴

President Harper's growing disability did not dampen his own enthusiasm for the game of football. He was in bed with the illness which would take his life within two months, but he made plans to view the game from his son Paul's room in the north facade of Hitchcock Hall, across 57th Street from Marshall Field. Further, Harper managed to give orders in great detail regarding arrangements for ticket-selling, building and grounds guards, seating conditions, and ushering.⁵

Coach Stagg prepared his gridiron warriors for the battle inside a specially constructed "stockade" some twelve feet in height, where he conducted secret nocturnal practices by electric lights. The one building which afforded a view into this field was patrolled by a corps of watchmen.⁶

Thanksgiving Day 1905 was cold (about ten degrees above zero) and a light snow fell intermittently throughout the game. Michigan was favored by bettors at two to one over Chicago, and it was estimated that \$50,000 had been wagered. Speculators received twenty dollars per ticket by game time and a University student was arrested for trying to peddle his tickets at the inflated price. The stands were sprinkled with partisans for two hours before the kick-off and the cheering sections of the two schools broke out new taunts and songs for the occasion. The maize and blue stands of Michigan yelled a prediction that "There'll be a hot time in Ann Arbor tonight," and the Chicago section answered across the frozen field, "Maroon, Maroon, Maroon . . . show the Michiganders how Chicago goes."⁷

The contest was viewed by nearly 27,000 people, among whom was Walter Camp, creator of the "All-American" player idea, who made the journey to see the western championship. Interlopers viewed the game from the windows of the Home for Incurables across 56th Street and from the temporary stands on the roofs of the houses across Ellis Avenue, for which privileges some had paid handsomely. The largest gathering of students without tickets was gaping from the student rooms of Hitchcock Hall across 57th Street. Women were allowed into the men's rooms for the occasion and "jolly" room parties proceeded

4. George Lytton to Harper, November 21, 1905, UPP, Athletics II Folder; H. P. Chandler (Harper's Secretary) to George Lytton, November 22, 1905, UPP, Athletics II Folder. Lytton wrote a thank you note of little grace, for after admitting "from what I learn I must be fortunate indeed," he added, "However, it seems difficult to realize that I was not able to obtain seats a little lower down (my wife being fearful of being as high up as the 20th row." Anita Blaine to Harper, December 6, 1905, UPP, Box 8, Folder 21. Mrs. Blaine, daughter-in-law of James G. Blaine, made frequent and large contributions, of which Emmons Blaine Hall for the School of Education was the most significant. Thomas W. Goodspeed, *The Story of the University of Chicago, 1890-1925* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), pp. 121, 245, 160.

5. *Chicago Record-Herald*, November 30, 1905; Harper to R. M. Chitwood, November 23, 1905, Harper to Wallace Heckman, November 24, 1905, Harper to Stagg, November 24, 1905, UPP, Athletics II Folder.

6. *Chicago Journal*, November 23, 1905.

7. *Chicago Chronicle*, *Chicago Interocean*, *Chicago Examiner*, November 30, 1905; *Chicago Tribune*, December 1, 1905.

during the game. President Harper was too ill to get up to his son's Hitchcock room, but Paul described the game by telephone to his father who "listened with great eagerness and enthusiasm throughout the entire game."⁸

The event offered two important developments which represented a kind of democratizing of the game. The game was described primarily as an athletic and not a social event by Chicago newspapers, and women attended in large numbers and showed their enthusiasm in much the same manner as their male escorts. Chicago society was again out in force, but they had to be content with regular grandstand seats as the elitist front boxes of previous years had given way to the more democratic and profitable tiered seating. Women "fought for tickets and points of advantage around the field" as they emulated the male spectators, and the newspapers made heavy photographic use of their presence. One writer described a Michigan coed as "a demure young woman" with "progressive ideas," whose

escort was the proprietor of a silver flask. The woman carried it in her muff. Every little while, feeling chilly, she would touch her muff lightly to her lips. Then with ingenuousness written all over her pretty face, she would hand the muff to her escort. He, too, would apply it to his countenance.⁹

The game was superlatively played. Both teams were trained and coached to a fine precision; it soon became apparent they were nearly equal that afternoon. These well-meshed groups of young men were significant of the demise of free ranging individuality and creativity on the gridiron. Such successful teams as these were due to the subjugation of such expression to the group purpose. It is striking how often Yost's team was termed a "machine" by himself and by others; it was described as a wondrous "machine" by one football expert and Yost referred to it as, "my . . . beautiful machine." The nature of this leisure activity changed mightily when aggregations of student-athletes became "machines" of athlete-students. The demise of the swift-dealing individualists and the rise of the machine in American intercollegiate football was sealed with the *Chicago Tribune's* announcement after the game that Stagg had "out-machined" Yost's eleven. The match was so closely played by the two machines that only a human error of judgment could afford a break in the impasse.¹⁰

In the first half the game evolved into a punting duel between Eckersall of Chicago, who punted 12 times, and John Garrels of Michigan, who punted 10 times. The Maroons crossed midfield three times, Michigan but once. At

8. *Chicago Record-Herald*, December 2, 1905; *Chicago Post*, December 4, 1905; *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Record-Herald*, *Chicago Chronicle*, December 1, 1905; *Chicago Examiner*, December 1, 1905.

9. *Chicago Chronicle*, *Chicago Examiner*, *Chicago Tribune*, December 1, 1905; the description of the coed is in *Chicago Examiner*, December 1, 1905.

10. *Chicago Chronicle*, November 26, 1905; *Chicago Tribune*, November 23, 1905. Cf. *Chicago Record-Herald*, November 26, 1905; *Chicago Tribune*, December 1, 1905. Later coaches in American colleges would take away the thinking function of the quarterback by thinking for him on the field, to allow him to "concentrate" better, or more precisely, to function in a more predictable machine-like manner. By the mid-twentieth century, a not untypical Ohio coach would order his minions *not* to think on the field. Oral interview, Donald M. Scott, July 12, 1971. It is difficult to make worthy comparisons of the historical quality of play represented on Marshall Field that day, but the modern student of the game has to be impressed by two aspects of the play: Chicago ran ninety-eight plays from scrimmage, and Eckersall's twenty-one punts averaged over forty-two yards. *Chicago Record-Herald*, December 1, 1905.

halftime both coaches endeavored to talk their teams into victory. Stagg's effort was especially impressive for the bedridden Harper sent the team a message that they "must win this game." He had become so agitated by the scoreless game that he dispatched his nurse for the day, language professor Elizabeth Wallace, to the locker room to deliver the message to Stagg. Stagg recalled giving the message to the men and "pleading with them to win for the dying president's sake."¹¹

Early in the third quarter a Michigan punt and Chicago penalty pinned the Maroons inside their ten. When Eckersall tried to punt he evaded a fearsome rush and ran for a first down to the twenty-two yard line. After three more first downs, the drive stalled and Chicago had to punt again. The punt carried over the end line where it was caught by Dennison Clark who attempted the one flash of rugged individualism that afternoon. He pluckily tried to advance with it but was hit hard after crossing the goal line by Art Badenoch and then was brought back inside his own end zone by Mark Catlin for a safety which turned out to be the only score of the game. The contest would continue on as a fierce defensive struggle, Michigan punting nine times, Chicago ten in the second half. The Wolverines only gained 128 yards in the game to Chicago's 139.¹²

The victory over mighty Michigan brought about the highest level of campus and public enthusiasm ever experienced over intercollegiate football at the University of Chicago. An impromptu parade of 2,500 Chicago students and alumni led by the University band formed immediately after the game. They marched to President Harper's house and sang the "Alma Mater" followed by nine "rahs" for him and cries for a speech. Harper was too ill to make an appearance; his eldest son, Samuel, read a statement of thanks from his father. Bonfires flickered against the grey gothic of the campus with the early sunset. The celebrations were extemporaneous, fragmented, and continuous the first night. During the next day, students scurried about the campus and Hyde Park searching for firewood. By late afternoon a wood pile "as large as a house" stood north of Ryerson Hall awaiting its torching. Class attendance was limited to the "grinds" as students continued to celebrate and fete the victorious warriors in their midst. That night, the woodpile, containing representative bits of many Hyde Park garden fences and out-houses, glorified the Chicago football players. The bonfire was accompanied by "a nightshirt parade and war dance."¹³

The official celebration of the University's famous football industry was held by University officials on the Monday night following the victory. Virtually

11. Tom Perrin, *Football: A College History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 1987), pp. 51-52; Stagg, *Touchdown!*, pp. 252-253. Ms. Wallace gave a vivid account of the incident, but remembered that despite running all the way she did not get to the field until after the team was back on the field, *The Unending Journey* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1952), p. 99.

12. *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Chronicle*, *Chicago Post*, *Chicago Daily News*, *Chicago Examiner*, *Chicago American*, *New York Daily Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Press*, December 1, 1905; cf. Stagg, *Touchdown!*, pp. 244-245, and Walter Eckersall, "My Twenty-Five Years of Football," *Liberty* 3 (November 6, 1926); 67. The rules then allowed the tackler to "carry" the ball carrier during the tackle.

13. *Chicago Examiner*, December 1, 1905; *Chicago Interocean*, December 2, 1905; *Chicago Record-Herald*, December 2, 1905.

every part of the University constituency was represented in the planning, the program, and the audience at the "Monster Football Mass Meeting" in Mandell Hall. The alumni club of the city of Chicago asked their members to gather fifteen minutes early in their alumni room, Hutchinson Tower, to ensure that they made a unified, dramatic appearance. Not inappropriately, all alumni were instructed, "Bring Your Rattle!" Amid the many and diverse speakers were a steady parade of graduates who had played football in the "olden days"—some ten years previously.¹⁴

This binge at the Midway was an important corporate activity. The University was established after the abolition of compulsory chapel in most American academic communities and at the time the elective system was gaining wide acceptance. The secularization of the campuses combined with the new elective systems left many institutions without a means of corporate focus and cohesion. Intercollegiate athletics, and especially football, helped the schools to reclaim their constituencies.¹⁵

The football victory over Michigan increased the University's sense of community. The University gave testimony to its common faith at the game's end when they sang a "Doxology" written by a Chicago halfback who had lost the sight of an eye in the battle. The song announced a Chicago gridiron paradise and was sung to a tune of Baptist utopia, "Beulah Land":

We have reached the day of turkey and wine,
And we have been winners every time,
Here stand undimmed one happy day,
For all our foes have passed away.¹⁶

The Michigan postscript to the game was provided by the life and death of the young halfback Denny Clark. The blame placed on the unfortunate Clark was widespread and pointed. "It may be said, and said truthfully," one newspaper intoned, "that Clark of Michigan defeated his own eleven." Other newspapers termed it "the wretched blunder" and a "lapse of brain work"; Walter Camp was quoted as describing the play as a "rank blunder." Clark left the Michigan team quarters after the game and was missing for a time. His despondency was so great that suicide was mentioned as a possibility; Clark was quoted as moaning, "o, (sic) this is horrible . . . I shall kill myself because I am in disgrace."¹⁷

14. Invitation and Announcement Card, Chicago Alumni Club, Stagg Scrapbooks, 46:91, Stagg Papers, University of Chicago Archives; *Chicago Tribune*, December 4, 1905; *Chicago Chronicle* and *Chicago Inter-ocean*, December 5, 1905.

15. *University Record* I, no. 42 (January 15, 1897): 526. On the place of compulsory chapel at Chicago and in American institutions, see Thomas Wakefield Goodspeed, *A History of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916) pp. 449-450, and Frederick W. Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), pp. 75-77. See Richard J. Storr, *Harper's University*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) p. 231, for an irreverent description of an early chapel service.

16. *Chicago Tribune*, December 2, 1905.

17. *Chicago American*, December 1, 1905. Also see, *Chicago Chronicle*, *Chicago Record-Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, December 1, 1905. The second group of quotations appear in *Chicago American* and *Chicago Tribune*, December 3, 1905. One cartoon depicted a dejected Clark, head bowed, and hand to face, walking off the field after the game. An arrogant fan pounded his back with the line, "Never mind, Clark; it took Michigan to beat Michigan," Stagg Scrapbooks, 46:99. Clark's behavior after the game was described in *Chicago Daily News*, December 1, 1905, and *Chicago Tribune*, December 12, 1905.

Michigan coach Fielding Yost, in a nationally syndicated article in 1925, remembered the incident and noted that a year previously he had met the middle-aged Clark in Portland, Oregon. Clark recalled his error constantly during their reunion and Yost tried to set him at ease. Yost concluded that “only Dennis still feels the pain of it.” The pain ended for William Dennison Clark seven years later: he shot himself through the heart. A suicide note to his wife reportedly hoped that his “final play” would be of some benefit in atoning for his error at Marshall Field.¹⁸

18. *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, December 4, 1925. *Portland Oregonian* and *Detroit News*, June 2, 1932. Three children also survived.