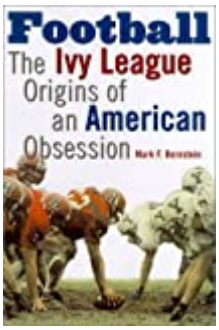
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Mark F. Bernstein. *Football: The Ivy League Origins of an American Obsession.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. xiii + 336 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3627-9.

Reviewed by Clifford Putney (Bentley College)

Published on H-SHGAPE (July, 2002)

In his engaging book about Ivy League football from its inception to the present, Mark Bernstein provides readers with the most comprehensive treatment of his subject currently in existence. It is a subject about which contemporary football fans are apt to know little. Unless they are Ivy League affiliates, their exposure to Ivy League football probably comes mainly from watching *The Simpsons*, whose Harvard-educated creators delight in portraying Homer Simpson's boss, the evil Mr. Burns, as a die-hard Yale fan. Dressed in a raccoon coat and clutching an antique megaphone in his skeletal hand, Mr. Burns cheers for Yale and in the process conveys an image of Ivy League football as quaintly elitist. But this image, though prevalent, is inaccurate, contends Bernstein, at least with regard to Ivy League football as it was played in the past. Today an Ivy League game may attract a couple thousand students and alumni. But tens of thousands of spectators, many of them working-class, often showed up for an Ivy League game in the 1920s, when teams from the Big Three (Harvard, Yale and Princeton) enjoyed the type of media attention currently lavished on teams from the Big Ten.

The Ivy League schools (the Big Three plus U-Penn, Dartmouth, Brown, Cornell and Columbia) did not merely dominate in football competition; they also, in Bernstein's words, "created American football" (p. ix). American football differs significantly from world football, which Americans call soccer. Played informally on Ivy League campuses beginning in the 1820s, American football initially resembled soccer, and the first intercollegiate football game, which was played by Princeton and Rutgers in 1869, was essentially a soccer match. But soccer-style football did not appeal to Harvard students. They preferred rugby-style football, and they managed in 1876 to persuade their chief athletic competitors, Yale and Princeton, to adopt rugby-style football as well. The rugby style of football played by the Big Three in the late 1870s did not long remain sacrosanct, however, thanks in large part to Yale's long-time coach, Walter Camp, whom the legendary John Heisman viewed as the father of American football. In the 1880s, Camp invented many of the practices that characterize modern-day football, including painting lines on the field (productive of the term "gridiron") and replacing rugby's free-for-all scrummage with the more formalized scrimmage. In a scrummage, everyone battles for control of the ball, but in a scrimmage the center passes the ball to the "quarterback" (a term invented by Camp). "More than any other innovation in the game's history," writes Bernstein, "the line of scrimmage defined American football and turned it away from rugby" (p. 18).

Bernstein does a thorough job of explaining how Ivy

League figures such as Camp created a distinctly American form of football in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, leadership of college football shifted from the Ivy League in the East to big state schools in the Midwest, West and South. Ivy League schools continued, however, to enjoy the reputation of being national football powerhouses as late as the 1930s. In 1935, a sportswriter named Alan Gould coined the term "Ivy League." Ten years later, the Ivy League came into existence as an official athletic entity. By agreeing to compete primarily amongst themselves in their own exclusive football league, the Ivy League schools conceded that they were no longer in a position to compete effectively against the big state schools. Some of the Ivies, most notably Harvard, had the funds to support a big-time football team. But, after World War II, Harvard and the other Ivies chose to de-emphasize football because they wanted to focus on academics, and because they wanted to branch out into new athletic areas such as women's sports.

In showing how the Ivies went from inventing football to de-emphasizing it, Bernstein draws extensively on student newspapers, alumni magazines, and other important primary sources. From these sources, he extracts many interesting nuggets of information, including such facts as that Harvard set up the first football scoreboard in 1893, Yale produced the first college marching band in 1899, and U-Penn played the first publicly televised game of football in 1938. Other interesting football "firsts" are sprinkled liberally throughout Bernstein's book, but their presence does not mean that the book is a mere collection of Ivy League football trivia, since Bernstein endeavors to explain how economic, social and cultural factors led to the rise and decline of Ivy League football. By linking trends within Ivy League football to larger trends within American society, Bernstein gives his book a scholarly quality that is markedly absent from most books about football. Scholarly books about baseball abound, but scholarly books about football are comparatively rare, perhaps because sedentary academic writers can identify more readily with stationary calculating pitchers than with peripatetic muscle-bound linebackers.

Given the rarity of academic books about football, Bernstein's scholarly treatise ought to be welcomed by sports historians, even though it contains a number of imperfections. Chief among these is its omission of various non-Ivy League individuals who contributed to the birth of American football. YMCA leaders, for example, are not mentioned in Bernstein's book, despite the fact that they were largely successful in refuting the religious objections to sports that retarded the development of football in its early years. YMCA leaders not only asserted that sports could be religious by strengthening social reformers, they also founded important athletic training schools such as Springfield College. Its graduates included early football coaches such as Amos Alonzo Stagg, who in 1892 began coaching football at the University of Chicago, where he invented the huddle, the tackling dummy, the numbered uniform, and the lighted playing field.

While Bernstein does refer to Stagg, he downplays the coach's connection to the University of Chicago. Instead of identifying Stagg as a Springfield College graduate and Chicago's most legendary football coach, Bernstein concentrates on the fact that Stagg was a Yale Divinity School drop-out. This allows Bernstein to place Stagg, one of the most important figures in football history, within the pantheon of Ivy League football greats. But it is questionable whether Stagg belongs in that pantheon, and Bernstein's placement of him there as a Yalie unfairly inflates the football credentials of the Big Three. Those schools, incidentally, are described by Bernstein as "the three oldest and most prominent colleges in the country," despite the fact that William and Mary is older than both Yale and Princeton (p. 134).

Bernstein is wrong to exaggerate the importance of the Ivies in certain aspects, but he is right about their having collectively done more than anybody else to create American football. He also deserves praise for advancing his argument with jargon-free prose, and for filling his book with interesting football stories. His stories are interesting primarily because they involve interesting people, namely eccentric coaches, sarcastic sportswriters, African-American football pioneers, ardent fans such as Theodore Roosevelt, college presidents who disapproved of football, and players destined for greatness in fields other than football. This last group is particularly interesting because it includes some unlikely athletes. The adipose Teddy Kennedy, for example, was once an Ivy League football player, as was the writer Jack Kerouac, the artist Frederic Remington, and the actor Tommy Lee Jones.

In addition to writing stories about football people, Bernstein writes stories about football novels, fatal injuries, bizarre mascots, momentous games, and college fight songs. Impressed by this wide array of Ivy League football lore, a Philadelphia reader of Bernstein's book wrote enthusiastically that it had given him "enough tidbits to keep up a lively conversation at holiday cock-

tail parties" (amazon.com). Other readers will likely say the same thing about Bernstein's book, provided that the parties they attend are in places like Cambridge, Massachusetts, and not in Big Ten football territory.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape

Citation: Clifford Putney. Review of Bernstein, Mark F., *Football: The Ivy League Origins of an American Obsession.* H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. July, 2002.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6541