The old American way: college football changes

Ben Schwartzwalder: coach or sociologist?

By NICK MARTIN

"Nobody wants to talk about football anymore. Some young kid I never saw before came into my office today. I told him that I didn't talk to Communists, draft dodgers, flag burners or people trying to destroy our country. He assured me he was none of those things, so I sat down and talked to him."

The man making that statement, in a Sports Illustrated interview, was Ben Schwartzwalder, head football coach at the University of Syracuse, a man who had fought his way through a world war and hundreds of gridiron battles without a trace of fear, a man now striking out blindly at something he wouldn't or couldn't understand.

Scwartzwalder had built a dynasty at Syracuse, riding the wide shoulders and piledriving legs of black superbacks like Jimmy Brown, the late Ernie Davis, Jim Nance, and Floyd Little to major bowl championships. But that was in the past, and in 1970, the latest black superstud, Al Newton, and seven of the eight other blacks on the Orangemen squad had been suspended from the team for the season, while Ben Schwartzwalder stood there wondering why this was happening

Black walkout

The team's black players had walked out on spring practice in protest over Syracuse's failure to hire a black assistant coach. One was hired, but then Schwartzwalder suspended eight of his nine blacks, who immediately filed charges of racial discrimination with the Human Rights Commission. The administration tried to have them reinstated, but then, under heavy pressure from the alumni, officially suspended them for the year.

Schwartzwalder, watching what was left of his team get clobbered by Kansas, while police helicopters flew overhead and armed guards patrolled the stadium after threats of violence by campus radicals, said sadly, "I'm not supposed to be a football coach, I'm supposed to be a sociologist or something. I don't know what's happening anymore."

Football as life

Something is heppening in college football, something that men like Ben Schwartzwalder cannot understand. For to them, football is not a game but a life, an endless circle of practices and game plans, chalk talks and recruiting trips, game films and alumni dinners, revolving constantly, turning inexorably to the whole raison d'etre of their being, the roaring ecstasy of an autumn Saturday.

As players they were taught that they existed for the team, the school, the coach. Now, as coaches themselves, they expect their every word to be obeyed as law, just as they performed unquestioningly for their Knute Rocknes, Bud Wilkinsons, and Dana X. Bibles.

They applaud men like Marine Corps General Lewis W. Walt, who said at the January convention of the American Football Coaches Association, "There is a lot of psychology to making a good marine — the same as making a good football player. We want to determine his strong points and weak points. At the same time we want to find out what he is really made of. Many of them have never developed self-discipline or experienced group discipline. They lack pride and self confidence. These are as essential in the making of a marine as in the making of a football player."

And that's the way it's been for a hundred years: unquestioning loyalty for the greater glory of coach and school. Until a handful of players began to say no.

Trouble and relevancy

Frank Champi was just another ordinary quarterback at Harvard when he ran on the field to run the offense in the 1968 Harvard-Yale game, with his team trailing 29-13 with two minutes to go in college football's most famous traditional rivalry. When he left the field on the shoulders of the crowd, it was 29-29, and Champi had passed for two touchdowns and two two-point conversions. Yet in 1969, Champi walked away from football, saying it was no longer relevant.

Fred Abbott was a highly-sought after high school prospect who finally elected to go to the University of Florida. As a sophomore this year he was expected to move straight into the middle linebacker slot on the Gator squad, but instead he quit football, charging the coaches were trying to turn him into a machine.

Racial trouble has erupted at a number of schools. At California, Indiana, Idaho State, San Jose State, and Washington, blacks were dropped from the team after protesting conditions. At Wyoming, the team plummetted from a 6-0 record to four straight losses after the team's blacks were cut for asking to wear black armbands in the 1969 game with mormon Brigham Young University.

College athletes, like other college students, are changing. At some schools, wise coaches recognize the changes, and ease up on their authoritarian rule. At some schools, particularly in the east, there is no coaching opposition to long hair or participation in campus politics:

But these men are still in the minority. At Ohio State. Woody Hayes still sends his Buckeyes into battle by showing them the most violent movie he can find and reading them the philosophy of his hero, General William Westmoreland. At Texas, the Longhorns' first black player, Julius Whittier, told a local newspaper that he had more in common with the campus radicals than with his white teammates. Texas fans waited for coach Darrell Royal to pounce, but he didn't have to; "His mammy jumped all over him," said Royal.

It is such men who refuse to see what is happening, and when it does happen, as it did to Ben Schwartzwalder, they are completely bewildered by the events taking place.

Not that there are many players of this sort, for just as campus radicals do not represent entire student bodies, neither do these athletic rebels represent their teammates, most of whom fit perfectly their coaches' conception of the football player.

Changing context

But the reaction to the college football system is growing, and it will continue to grow as long as coaches refuse to bend, to achieve a compromise with the players who just cannot accept their iron discipline and unquestioning dedication.

Yet college football, and the reaction to it, has extended far beyond the coaches and players, to whom it never really belonged in the first place. It is fast becoming the target of campus radicals, who object to the emphasis placed upon and the money spent on football.

It costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to feed, equip, and house a college team. They play in huge stadia, and travel all over the United States, further adding to expenses. Yet the expense is far surpassed by the revenue brought in at the gate, and it is here that college football shows its true face.

Played for money

For most small colleges, football is basically still a game, as it is in Canada. But in the major colleges, it is not played for the students or some grand old tradition; it is played for money. For in the major colleges, football does not belong to the coach, or his players, or even to the student body; it belongs to the alumni, to the city, to its state, or in a few schools like Army or Notre Dame, to the nation.

Yale University has 8,000 students; the Yale Bowl seats 70,000. Tulane has 8,000 students; Tulane Stadium holds 81,000. Auburn has 15,000 students; its stadium seats 61,000. Notre Dame has 7,200 students; its stadium holds 59,000. UCLA has 28,000 students; the Coliseum has 100,000 seats. Rare is the major school, no matter what its enrolment, whose stadium would not dwarf anything the CFL could offer. And rarer still is the major school which charges under $6 a ticket.

College football in the United States, particularly in the south and midwest, is a way of life. When the Mississippi Rebels take the field, they are not playing for their fellow students, but for the state of Mississippi. Millions of citizens who have never gone to college live and die every Saturday with their favourite team.

It is this vast commercialization that is causing the growing protest. The athlete feels that he is but a hired hand instead of a student, and the student body resents the 'free rides' these athletes are given in the interests of making money for the school.

Football not at fault

It is this commercialization and depersonalization of the athlete which is protested, and not the game itself. For football, as it was meant to be played, is a tremendously exciting game. It is violent, but people are violent, and football is a release for our violence.

It is graceful, with a flowing movement that at times is almost poetic, — Gale Sayers in an open field, an artist in his own landscape.

It does, as it claims, teach teamwork and sportsmanship, responsibility and discipline.

This is what football is for, to instill values in its players, to entertain college students on a crisp autumn Saturday. College football in the U.S. if far too big and popular a spectacle to return to that ideal, and thus there will inevitably be more trouble. The coaches can alleviate the conflict by recognizing that their players are human beings, but it will not stop the trouble entirely.

For major college football has lost its purity in its pursuit of the dollar, and there will be more Ben Schwartzwalders standing bewildered as their players turn their backs on the sport or head for the small colleges, where football is still a game and the athlete still a student with all the feelings and desires of a human being.

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