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FOOTBALL'S LAST IRON MEN

1934, Yale vs. Princeton, and One Stunning Upset

NORMAN L. MACHT

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln & London

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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Eleven Iron Men
The 1934 Yale coaching staff
Yale assistant coach Earle "Greasy" Neale
Larry Kelley pursued by defenders
1934 Yale football team
Fortieth Iron Men reunion
Sixtieth reunion

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The basics of college football today are the same as they were seventy-seven years ago: running, passing, kicking, blocking, and tackling.

In other ways, the game is significantly different. In 1934 every man played both offense and defense. Substitutions were limited. Sixty-minute men were common. Students weighing 160 or 170 pounds, clad in thinly padded uniforms and pliable leather helmets, played for the fun and glory, not the NFL scouts. The game belonged to the men on the field. Quarterbacks called all their own plays with no help from the sidelines.

That's the way it was when Yale and Princeton met in the most unforgettable battle in one of college football's oldest rivalries. The threads that came together on that warm November afternoon in 1934 began as long as a dozen years earlier.

To tell their stories in their own words, the author had the pleasure and privilege of visiting nine of the Yale starters: Bob Train, Clare Curtin, Ben Grosscup, Stan Fuller, Larry Kelley, Kim Whitehead, Jimmy DeAngelis, Meredith Scott, and Jerry Roscoe. I also visited assistant business manager Lou Walker and scout Bob Hall and corresponded with second-string end John Hersey.

Princetonians interviewed included Gil Lea, Ben Delaney, Hugh MacMillan, and the widow of Pepper Constable.

Other sources included several New York newspapers, the *Chicago Tribune*, *New Haven Register*, *Trenton Evening Times*, Yale and Princeton athletic department archives, student newspapers, and alumni publications.

Thanks to football historian Jim Campbell for his assistance and to Ed Edmonds and George Rugg for their research at the Joyce Sports Research Collection at the Hesburgh Libraries of the University of Notre Dame.

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Introduction

For the first time since Wall Street laid an egg in 1929, Palmer Stadium in Princeton would be filled for the Yale-Princeton game on Saturday, November 17, 1934. Standing room behind the end zones would raise the capacity to fifty-three thousand. The popular one-dollar end-zone seats had long been sold out. Students were deluged with telegrams from dads: "Get four good tickets to Yale game." The rumored scalpers' price in New York was $25 for the $3.50 reserved and $2.20 general admission. The split of the gate receipts would give both schools their biggest payday of the year: $79,370.

The worst of the Depression seemed to be behind the nation. For the first time in five years, the economy had grown. Industrial production was up 10 percent. Aided by the alphabet soup of New Deal programs, unemployment had fallen from near 25 percent to under 15. More families could now afford an occasional standing rib roast at twenty-one cents a pound. After a three-year slide, the stock market was in the middle of a bull run that had begun in mid-1933.

Railroad workers had been busy for two days erecting signs to direct the special trains from Philadelphia, New York, and New Haven. Specials from New York left every few minutes from Penn Station between 9 a.m. and 12:15 p.m.; the round-trip fare was $1.50. The New Haven Railroad scheduled a special train of parlor cars, coaches, and dining cars leaving New Haven at 8:55 a.m., arriving at 12:15 p.m., and departing shortly after the game for $6.95 round trip. Luncheon was $1, and a special dinner on the way home was $1.25. By noon the siding adjacent to the campus would resemble the switching yards in Chicago.

Additional state troopers had been arriving since Friday to

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handle the anticipated traffic. A network of ropes stretched across parking fields to control the thousands of automobiles.

Among the Ivy colleges, the weekend of a home game against a traditional rival was the social event of the fall season. For the young ladies of the Seven Sisters universities, an invitation to a football weekend elevated their social status among envious friends and roommates. It also set off a week of dizzying preparation: what to wear, which hairstyle to choose, how to deal with nervous, inexperienced (or smooth, experienced) beaus and boyfriends. Untold numbers of virgins would be undone and marriages proposed—some accepted, some rejected, some forgotten or regretted in the morning.

The game itself was of little importance; all the girls needed to know was when to cheer. Their anticipation centered on the fraternity parties, the black-tie proms, the overnight stays at volunteer chaperones' homes (there were no sororities on the all-male campuses), the tell-all sharing of intimate details of their adventures on their return to Wellesley or Smith or Vassar or wherever on Sunday.

They were up before dawn Saturday to catch trains that would take them to Princeton Junction by noon. Then there was a short ride on the two-car "Toonerville Trolley," which ran between the station and the school's railyard—twelve minutes to rearrange bouncing hairdos, repair makeup, rehearse smiles for the boys they hoped would be waiting to greet them.

Typical November weather—light snow and cold, fifty-mile-an-hour winds—had forced both teams indoors for practice during the week. But Saturday dawned unusually clear and warm. This was not the November Thomas Hood had in mind when he wrote these lines:

> No sun—no moon!
> No morn—no noon—

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No dawn—no dusk—no proper time of day.
No warmth, no cheerfulness, no healthful ease,
No comfortable feel in any member—
No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees,
No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds!—
November!

By noon the temperature was climbing into the sixties.

The Yale first-stringers and jayvees had departed New Haven at 10 a.m. Friday for the 130-mile ride to Princeton. While the jayvees handed the Princeton jayvees their first defeat, 6–0, at University Field, the varsity went through a light workout at Palmer. They spent the night at the Stacy-Trenton Hotel in Trenton.

Princeton head coach Fritz Crisler took his team six miles away to Lawrenceville Prep School to get away from the Friday night rallies and social ramble.

Princeton was riding a 15-game unbeaten streak extending over two years and three days. Yale was 3-3 and at least a 2-to-1 underdog. But that didn't matter. This was Yale-Princeton, a rivalry begun in 1873 and since 1876 interrupted only in 1917–18, when both schools had cancelled their college schedules. No alcohol was allowed in Palmer, unlike at the flowing Bowl of Yale. No rules are 100 percent enforceable, but the noise and excitement of this day would not have to be augmented by hip flasks.

The festive atmosphere was reminiscent of better times. There was noise and laughter and men and women decked out in their finest autumn outfits. Early arrivals provided an unaccustomed large crowd of spectators at a freshman soccer game between the two schools, won by Princeton, 4–2. The aroma of grilled hot dogs and hamburgers filled the air. The lawns were filled with picnic basket parties, the equivalent of today's tailgate parties. A pair of undergrads were stopped when they tried to smuggle eleven cats dyed orange into the stadium and turn them loose.

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An hour before the 2:00 p.m. kickoff, an unbroken stream of ticket holders began filling the concrete stadium. They didn't know that they were about to witness a feat that would never again be seen on a major college football field.

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1 | In the Beginning

The embryo that grew to become American collegiate football was conceived on November 6, 1869, in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Its parents were Princeton and Rutgers. It bore little resemblance to its later mature form. The birth was reported in a brief back-page squib in the *New York Tribune* two days later: "Twenty-five of the students of Rutgers College played the same number of Princeton College a game of foot-ball on Saturday. After an exciting contest of one hour the Rutgers were declared the winners, the score standing 6 [goals] to 4."

The rules had been drawn up by Princeton captain William S. Gummers. The ball could not be carried or passed. It could be advanced only by kicking or batting it with the hand or head or body. No tripping or holding, no tackling or collaring was allowed.

More than anything else, the game resembled two human walls colliding. The players wore no helmets or special uniforms. There were literally no holds barred once they were all down in a heap.

Other East Coast schools began experimenting with the game. In 1872 a group of Yale students invited a team from Columbia with two years' experience to come to New Haven on November 16. The account of Yale's first football game was given prominent display on the front page of the *New York Times* the next day. It's worth reproducing almost in full because it's the best description available of an early game, and it seems to mark a genetic trail for Yale football two generations later. The game still resembled soccer more than today's football. There were fourteen men on a side. About four hundred persons, mostly students, were present.

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The match game of foot-ball, which Yale challenged Columbia to play, came off this afternoon at Hamilton Park. The Columbia men arrived, some of them on this morning's boat, and some of them on the eleven o'clock train. They were a splendid-looking set of men, in good spirits, and so confident of winning that their backers bet on them freely and even offered odds as great as five to two. The game was to be played with a rubber ball, best five goals out of nine, and in case of darkness coming on, the side ahead at that time was to be declared the winner. Game was to be called at 2 1/2 [2:30] p.m., but with the usual unavoidable delay, it did not really begin until about 2 3/4 [2:45]. As the men stood at their positions before the ball was canted for the first time, the difference between them was very noticeable. Columbia's champions were large, heavy, and solid, while the Yale men were small and seemed chosen more for activity and speed. They were, too, differently arranged. Columbia had two men near the goal posts, and the others were scattered carelessly about the field, but the Yale men were placed with almost mathematical precision. At the goal posts were the two "keepers," and on their right and left two side men. At a considerable distance from and in front of the goal were the middle-men, eight in number, and arranged like a crescent, with its horns resting on either side of the field. In the centre of the crescent were the six "rushers," who were to follow the ball wherever it went, and who, as they were to do the hard fighting, were the heaviest men on the Yale side. Two "pea-nutters," who were to keep ahead of the ball and when it came near the goal to drive it over, completed the number. To look at the men and the disposition of them, it seemed as though Columbia would play the hardest and most energetic game, and that if Yale beat it could only be by force of strategy. Platt opened the game for Yale by a rousing cant which carried it over half the field. Then the Columbia men got it, and with a

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rush carried it ahead, and on, until it seemed as though by force of weight and numbers they would carry it straight through the goal. And they did get it clear up to the posts, but here one of the keepers made a very pretty stop and sent it to one of the middle-men. He passed it to a second and he to a third, who kicked it, not down but across the field where stood another ready to receive it and carry it still further.

"All was done so quietly that before the Columbia men really perceived it, the ball had been kicked not through, but around them, and the goal was won by Yale in fifteen minutes."

Yale scored two more goals before darkness fell for a 3–0 victory.

Yale and Princeton met for the first time the following year. A few years later the following unsigned account of that game appeared in an athletic history of Princeton:

At last arrangements were completed for the Yale game. The Princeton men had been training by running a half hour a day in the gym and by frequent practice in kicking. On November 14 the twenty Princetonians went to New Haven on the night boat and nearly froze. The next day at two o'clock they were on the field ready to play the first football game between Yale and Princeton. Yale won the toss and gave Princeton the ball which Moffet bucked [ran into the line] and the game started.

During the first half Princeton was roughly handled. Yale played a bucking, rushing game which years later was developed into interference. This surprised and confused the visitors whose policy was to follow the ball closely and neglect their Yale opponents. Yale probably would have won, but luckily two men tried to kick the ball at the same time. Each toe hit it squarely and the ball burst. It was fully a half hour before another could be secured, and during this delay Princetonians gathered together and decided to try the rushing game. With

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> this added time to talk it over, they came back to outcharge Yale, scoring the winning points before dark.

(In January 1934 the remains of the ball, which had been stuffed, not inflated, were donated to Princeton by George M. Gumm, the Yale man of the pair who had kicked it. "We kicked it at the same time," Gumm recalled, "and the ball rose into the air about twenty feet and fell with the stuffing kicked out of it.")

After a lapse of two years, the two schools again began their annual meetings. By 1880 the number of players on each side had settled to eleven. They wore canvas shirts laced up the front and canvas knickers. Thin leather helmets began to appear.

The University of Chicago was among the first to use football to publicize and promote the school. President William Rainey Harper hired Yale star Amos Alonzo Stagg to field a team that would bring recognition to the new campus in 1892. Stagg succeeded. After his first year he had seventeen consecutive winning seasons. In 1894 the Chicagoans traveled to California and played a pair of games against Stanford. They played nineteen games that year, winning eleven. Stagg remained for forty years, compiling a .671 winning percentage.

Football was dominated by the old-line colleges of the East until the 1920s, when Chicago and Princeton split two games, and Knute Rockne brought his midwestern heroes from Notre Dame to New York to play Army. During that good-times decade crowds of eighty thousand were not uncommon in stadiums like the Yale Bowl. Newspapers devoted gridiron-sized space to the sport each week. In 1923, when Yale routed Princeton, 27–0, the *New York Times* gave it enough ink to print the collected works of Charles Dickens.

Big games produced big payoffs for the participants. Fielding a winning team was seen as a way to bankroll all the money-losing teams in the athletic department and to coax more gener-

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ous contributions from alumni, which gave them (or empowered them to exercise) a louder voice in the hiring and firing of coaches and recruiting of star high school and prep school players. The use of financial and other inducements became widespread. Yale fullback Stan Fuller said that in 1929 he was offered a free ride at Ohio State and alumni would see that he had spending money. If you couldn't make the grade academically, colleges would pay your way at a prep school until you met the entrance requirements. It was said that Columbia, for example, was subsidizing athletes in every prep school in the Northeast. Professional coaches were fast replacing schools' former football heroes or other alumni coaching in part-time, sometimes volunteer, capacities. The athletic tail began to wag the academic body.

In 1929 the Carnegie Foundation blasted the subsidizing and recruiting of athletes.

The financial fountain ran dry—temporarily—with the Depression. Crowds dwindled. At some schools athletic receipts fell by half from the palmy days of 1927–28. Schedules were cut back, ticket prices reduced. Some sports were eliminated. In 1932 the new president of Washington & Jefferson recommended abandoning big-time football, which was now costing the school $40,000 a year in free tuition, room and board, and books for the student athletes. But the financial problems of most universities also had the effect of increasing the pressure to field winning teams.

The Carnegie report had divided the colleges into three groups: those who went into the open market and bid high for talent; those who used more subtle inducements while maintaining a facade of dignity; and those who rejected recruiting inducements and risked mediocre teams and declining gate receipts.

Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were in the last category. In turning down petitions from undergrads to approve postseason games like the Rose Bowl, the Princeton Athletic Associa-

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tion cited its agreement with Yale to ban such appearances and explained its position: "Back of this principle is a definite philosophy of the administration of college sports. This philosophy is based on the premise that athletics, if properly conducted, are an integral part of a well-rounded college training. They are beneficial as long as they occupy a normal and natural place in the whole college educational program. When they tend to usurp more than their rightful share of interest and attention, they become harmful and should be restricted."

The river of tradition still flowed through the ranks of some alumni. A letter from the class of 1913 backed up the administration: football was, after all, just a sport; no reason to overturn tradition. Playing old rivals each year ought to be enough excitement for anybody.

2 | The Rules

In order to appreciate the events and achievements described in this narrative, it is essential to understand the rules of football then in effect. Like baseball, the sport has changed little enough for someone sitting in Palmer Stadium in November 1934 to awaken after a seventy-five-year nap and still understand what was going on in the latest Super Bowl. It has also changed so much that a twenty-first-century fan, whisked back in time to that day in Princeton, would wonder why they did the things they did the way they did them.

The most striking thing a visitor from the future would notice is the lack of substitutes. Nobody seemed to leave the game, even when the ball changed hands. Actually a coach could send in an entirely new team at any time—and Fritz Crisler often did. But any players who came out could not go back in until the next quarter. (Until 1932 they couldn't go back in until the next

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half.) That slowed the in-and-out traffic considerably. It meant that a man had to be strong on both offense and defense just to make the team. Each player had strengths and weaknesses, but the specialist was unknown. If a team had no dependable kicker who could handle the other responsibilities of a back, it usually ran a play for the point after touchdown. Either way, it counted for only one point.

It was not unusual for one or two or even seven or eight men to play the entire sixty minutes. In 1926 Brown had played Yale and Dartmouth on successive Saturdays using only the same eleven men in both games.

A less visible but equally significant difference was this: the game belonged to the players. The quarterback called all the plays. He was the field commander. He could see the general staff sitting on the bench, but there could be no communication between them—no intercom, no sending in plays via messenger subs, no surreptitious nods or crossed arms or other signaling gestures, no conferring during a time-out. A violation drew a 5-yard penalty. In his first game as a coach at Yale, against Columbia, Greasy Neale suspected that the Lions' coach, Lou Little, was giving illegal signs from the bench through a coach wearing white gloves, but he couldn't prove it. Greasy Neale and Fritz Crisler could design all the trick plays they wanted, but it was up to the quarterback to decide when to use them. This put a tremendous burden on the quarterback and the coach who had to prepare him. It was Greasy Neale's responsibility at Yale, and we'll see how he carried it out.

A man taken out at the end of a quarter could not go back in until after one play had been run in the next quarter to avoid his being sent back in with instructions. No substitute at any time was allowed to speak until after one play had been run, and officials watched the players in the huddles. The penalty was 5 yards.

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At about the same time that Babe Ruth began the revolution that changed baseball strategy from one base at a time to the circuit clout, the forward pass had begun to open up football from 3 yards and a cloud of dust to the spectacular aerial attack. As far back as 1920 Greasy Neale's Marietta College team had once completed nine consecutive passes in a game. The ball, which in its earliest unmeasured conception had resembled a pumpkin, had gradually become slimmer, like a dieting chorus girl, and was now down to 21 1/4 inches around the middle. This new weapon confused defenses and threatened to turn every game into the equivalent of baseball's slugfests. William "Pop" Corbin, a Yale hero of the old days, said the game had become more like basketball. College football's viewers with alarm had persuaded the rules committee to take steps to curb the "wild passing game." A rule was passed that made it a crime to throw more than one incomplete pass within a set of downs. The penalty was 5 yards for each offense. Even harsher, throwing an incomplete pass into the end zone resulted in a touchback. The defense got the ball on its own 20.

By 1934 Fritz Crisler was a member of the rules committee. The rule makers now believed that the defense had caught up with the offense, and they eased the passing restrictions. Eased, not eliminated. They revoked the 5-yard penalty that had been in effect for all incomplete passes after the first in a series of downs except in the end zone. The first incomplete pass thrown into the end zone no longer resulted in a touchback. But an incomplete pass in the end zone on fourth down still turned the ball over to the defense on its 20.

Yale head coach Ducky Pond agreed with Corbin. He thought the passing restrictions should be retained "to prevent teams from throwing passes wildly."

In any case, the passer had to be at least 5 yards behind the line of scrimmage.

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The touchback rule was changed in 1934. If a kick receiver downed the ball or was tackled in the end zone, the ball came out to the 20. Previously it had been scored as a safety.

To placate the game's detractors and make it safer, new rules banned airborne blocks, flying tackles, and the flying wedge, a popular juggernaut for razing defenders on kickoff returns. The defense could no longer strike an opponent on the head, neck, or face. Defensive linemen could no longer use their hands except in a straight, stiff-arm position. The ball was dead if any part of the carrier other than the hands or feet touched the ground.

The goal posts had been moved back 10 yards behind the goal line for safety reasons. That would reduce the number of field goals. Fritz Crisler favored lowering the crossbar and widening the posts to encourage more field goal attempts. But it didn't happen.

Another change in 1934 turned the quick kick into a potent weapon that has since disappeared. Previously the ball had to be dropped and kicked before it touched the ground. This made it almost impossible to punt with any accuracy, and the play was seldom used. Now the kicker or another player could hold it until it was kicked. As it was explained to the coaches, a quarterback could fake a spinner into the line or a pass, for instance, and let the punter kick it right out of the quarterback's hands. If the punter took the snap directly from the center, he could now hold the ball until he kicked it.

All of these rule changes were gone over during pre-season blackboard sessions.

In 1934 the college game was still trying to maintain an aura of sportsmanship and fair play as a gentleman's game. At a session to explain the new rules, a coach asked, "Is the quarterback while calling signals permitted to change the tone of his voice, quicken it or slow up?" The answer: "It is left to the discretion of the officials to decide what the intent is. If it is intended to draw the defense offside, such action will be ruled illegal."

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