

Stagg's Lines

By Jack Clary

Amos Alonzo Stagg has rightly been called the "Father of American Football" because of the myriad innovations he introduced to the game as it broke free from its English influences late in the 19th century. Consider that much of what we take for granted every Sunday afternoon -- T-formation quarterbacks, pitchouts, onside kicks, direct center snaps, numbered jerseys, men in motion -- are just a few of more than two dozen innovations with which he has been credited.

For those out there who also are basketball zealots, did you know that he worked with Dr. James Naismith to invent and develop that game when both were members of the faculty at the School of Christain Workers (now Springfield College) in Massachusetts? In fact, Stagg scored the only point for his team in the first formal game ever played, a battle between students (5) and faculty (1).

But judging from an article which was carried in newspapers throught the nation in 1924, he certainly was not a friend of professional sports, particularly football.

He branded those who would support professional football -- and that was pro football as it existed in its most rudimentary form back then -- as being cahoots "with the forces which are destuctive of the interests of interscholastic and intercollegiate football."

To him, the "ennobling spirit" of the sport was to be found only at the amateur level, and it was that element more than any other, that obviously caused him to take his shot at the pro game.

His embrace of football as a game went no further than that played at the high school and college level; and it is ironic that he could not foresee a time when the pros would raise the game and the way it was played to even greater standards. In hindsight, it was one of the few times in Stagg's life where his foresight and inventiveness failed him, probably because he was blinded by his own obsession to the "purity" of the game and his devout loyalty to college football.

When Stagg wrote that public letter, college football was growing by leaps and bounds, with plans for huge stadiums beginning to appear on drawing boards throughout the country to handle the game's blossoming popularity.

Contrast that to professional football in 1924. The NFL was only a few years from its founding meeting at that Hupmobile dealership in Canton, Ohio. Many teams still played games on bare, rock-strewn fields in mill towns and working areas in large cities, and often before sparse crowds. Certainly there was no correlation between the game of that era and what we have seen for the past three or four decades.

There were some definite ironies that were present when Stagg wrote that letter. One of his teammates at Yale was Pudge Heffelfinger, an All-America lineman who pro football helped to honor this past year during its 100th anniverary, as the first player ever to sign a professional contract. Stagg was probably aware of that fact nearly 70 years ago, just as he was ruefully aware that many of the participants in the pro game in 1924, including some from his own University of Chicago team, were collegians who had played the day before and then hid behind pseudonyms to make some extra money on Sunday.

That was an affront to Stagg who always was a zealot for amateurism in all forms. He was an honest broker, too, because he excoriated those who transgressed on the game's amateur principles, and the list of those sins is no different than what affect's today's college game. He jealously guarded the college game as his own, as witness his enthusiasm for the sport that enabled him to remain as a coach when he was nearly 100 years old.

Ironically, within less than two decades of that 1924 missive, the University of Chicago's team was extinct, a victim to the eggheadism that looked down on sports as a necessary entity to the overall development of young collegians. Stagg had moved on, at age 70, to coach at the College of Pacific (now University of Pacific) where he was chosen Coach of the Year in 1943 at age 79.

Nonetheless, Stagg's pronouncements on the game and how it should be played carried great weight at that time and his motives were always geared to the best interests of the game as he saw it. And some of what Stagg had to say, particularly as regards gambling and unsavory influences of those who had some influence over the game sounds, as if it had been spoken just yesterday.

But you just can't help but wonder what Stagg would say if he saw professional football today, though before he died in 1965 at age 102, he had seen what television was doing to spread its popularity and how it was helping to make it the nation's most popular sport.

In this one instance, pro football must be thankful that it persevered without the advice of that grand old man whose legacy was his fertile mind that produced the ideas which have made the game so great.

(An Associated Press dispatch of November 1, 1924 that was printed in the Baltimore Sun)

STAGG BRANDS PRO FOOTBALL AS MENACE TO COLLEGE GAME

Chicago Coach Addresses Letter to 'Friends' Asking Them to Refrain from Encouraging Professional Sport And to Preserve Amateurism.

(By The Associated Press)

Chicago, Nov. 1 -- Branding professional football as a "menace" working for the destruction of the college game, Amos Alonzo Stagg, 62-year old director of athletics at the University of Chicago, tonight addressed a letter "to all friends of college football," urging them to refrain from in any manner encouraging the professional sport.

Stagg, whose reputation for the development of amateur athletics has made him a national figure, declared that to "patronize Sunday professional football is to cooperate with the forces which are destructive of the interscholastic and intercollegiate football and to add to the heavy burden of the schools and colleges in preserving it and its ennobling worth."

Amateur Football Best Sport

Declaring that football, when played with the amateur spirit, possessed more elements for the development of character and manhood than any other sport, Coach Stagg said that "if you believe in preserving interscholastic and intercollegiate football for the upbuilding of the present and future generations of clean, healthy, right-minded and patriotic citizens, you will not lend your assistance to any of the forces helping to destroy it.

"There is nothing a bunch of gamblers will not do for their own purpose, and quite often they carry along with them the support of a group of well-meaning citizens," the veteran coach wrote. The statement follows:

"It seems like a matter of little consequence for one to attend the Sunday professional football games -- nothing more than attending any Sunday event -- but it has a deeper meaning than you realize, possibly a vital meaning to college football. Intercollegiate football will live only so long as it contributes to the well-being of the students; that is while the influences of the game are predominately on the side of amateur principles, right ideals, proper standards and wholesome conditions.

Sunday Games a Menace

"For years the colleges have been waging a bitter warfare against the insidious forces of the gambling public and alumni and against overzealous and short-sighted friends, inside and out, and also not infrequently against crooked coaches and managers who have been anxious to win at any cost, and victory has not been completely won. And now along comes another serious menace possibly greater than all others, viz, Sunday professional football."