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Learning to Win

Sports, Education,
and Social Change
in Twentieth-Century
North Carolina

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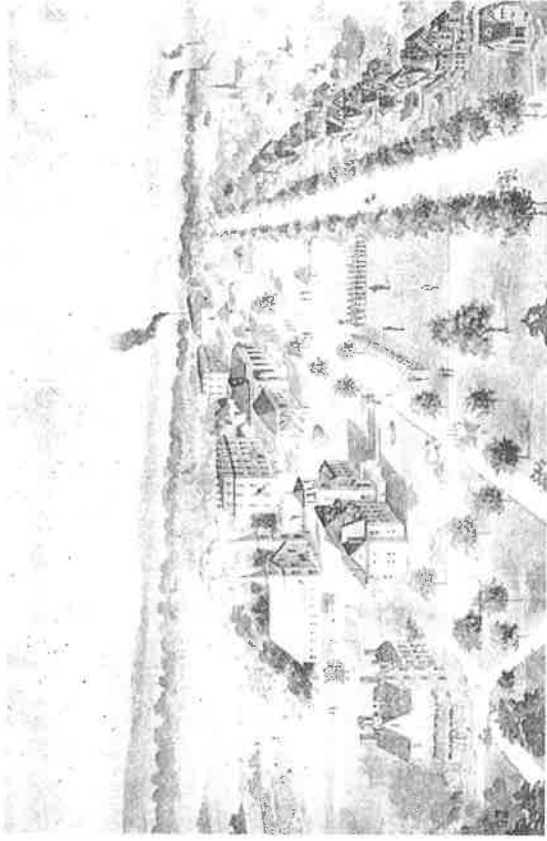
The Fire of Rivalry

Men's College Athletics, 1880–1901

In the spring of 1891 the student magazine at a small African American college in Salisbury, North Carolina, set in type a curious complaint. “I don’t know by whose authority, but the base ball grounds given to us by the President through the consent of the Faculty, has been trespassed upon by some person or persons taking it upon themselves to plough it up,” the author fumed. “Turnips are good things in their places; the same is true of the other members of the vegetable kingdom; but nobody will say that their proper place is on a base ball field in a college where young men are during the months of April and May.”¹

With this circumspect and yet insistent plea, students at Livingstone College defended their right to play sports while at school. At Livingstone in the spring of 1891, someone had apparently concluded that the direct benefits of vegetable cultivation outweighed any advantage to be gained from hitting, throwing, or chasing small, white balls. The students’ protest cast the dispute as a conflict in authority, arguing that college president J. C. Price had specifically designated the piece of ground as an athletic field and implying that the instigator of “this false step in agricultural pursuits” disagreed with that decision. But beneath the issue of who controlled school property ran the implication that the action also voiced a broader protest, declaring that Livingstone’s students should not take time from their studies for the frivolity of games. The complaint’s anonymous author certainly suspected some such message was intended, observing, “It’s rather strange to me that out of fifty acres of land, the base ball diamond should be the best acre on which to grow turnips, cabbage, water melons etc.”²

Livingstone College records do not reveal whether the students carried out a threat to retrieve their field by means of “a mighty big turnip pulling.” Still, their cause was on the rise. Like basketball, football, and other “modern” sports that took shape in the last half of the nineteenth century, baseball was far more than just a game. The sport retained a rural air—its grassy field, the absence of a



Livingstone College in 1910. While sports met with initial resistance at the school, they soon became an established institution. Note the baseball field at left. From *An Appeal for the Girls' New Building*; photograph courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

clock. But its play was governed less by custom or tradition than by a set of written rules applicable across social and geographical divides. It also called for a blend of precise action, team coordination, and increasingly elaborate strategy that tied it tightly to the rhythms and demands of the new society beginning to emerge within North Carolina's borders. The Livingstone dispute thus augured a wholesale transformation in the way North Carolinians approached their daily lives, one that would raise athletic contests to unprecedented significance in educational affairs.³

Before the Civil War, most North Carolinians lived in largely self-sufficient isolation between the mountains that rose at one end of the state and the treacherous coastline that lay along the other. A small number of planters and a few middle-class professionals dominated the realms of commerce and state government, and the bulk of the state's residents, its small-scale farmers and enslaved African Americans, focused on agricultural production and on small communities of family and friends. Plantations operated as worlds unto themselves. Family farmers pursued seasonal rounds of planting and harvest punctuated by occasional community gatherings and by worship in small religious congregations. Even the inhabitants of the hundreds of trading towns scattered throughout the state kept largely to themselves. In Charlotte, with an ante-

bellum population that barely topped 2,000 inhabitants, connections to the wider world could seem so insignificant that a resident would later recall, "Mail was not of much importance, as few expected to get any."⁴

After the cataclysm of the Civil War, however, North Carolinians were pulled with alarming speed into a very different world. The hills and rushing streams that rolled through the middle portion of the state had been unsuited to plantation agriculture, but they proved ideal for water-powered industry. As regional boosters began to preach the gospel of the New South, eager entrepreneurs began building dozens of "manufactories"—mostly textile mills—throughout the Piedmont region. As production grew and railroad-building spread, towns that had once been little more than crossroads and trading posts began to hum with commerce, becoming home to dry goods stores, pharmacies, railroad depots, livery stables, cotton warehouses, wagon-building establishments, grocers, tailors, booksellers, gun merchants, and a whole host of other businesses. North Carolinians who had once tended plows or homes found themselves divining the intricate mechanisms of textile looms, elbowing through packs of strangers on newly laid city streets, or standing behind store counters, ringing up cash sales, keeping an eye on competitors' prices, and placing orders for whatever goods had lately come into fashion.⁵

Such wrenching change nurtured both great hope and great concern. The havoc the Civil War had wreaked on the state's old social order held out new opportunities for citizens once at the margins of state life—newly freed African Americans and whites who lacked the benefits of family wealth or position. The expansion of voting rights gave many residents a new voice in state affairs. But the resulting scramble to reshape state society also fostered deep anxiety. As growing numbers of state residents ventured into the heady realms of commerce, and as the deferential politics of the antebellum era gave way to a more energetically contested democracy, metaphors of competition gained new prominence, particularly among the members of the state's expanding middle class, which was coming to dominate public affairs. Proclaimed in newspaper editorials, in college lecture halls, and in political speeches, these visions wove tightly into public discourse, depicting a world that frequently seemed to mirror the Darwinian struggles that were capturing the imagination of many of the nation's social thinkers.

"This is a practical age, one in which each individual or corporation is striving to outstrip every other in the attainment of the supremacy; whether in the accumulation of property, the winning of fame, the monopolizing of industries or the aggrandizement of public patronage," African American political activist Annie Blackwell cautioned a Charlotte Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) audience in 1897. "Every one is pushing ahead trying to be

foremost in the race." An alumnus of white Davidson College echoed these words in the school's student magazine, warning students that "to win success amid these conditions involves not alone resolute purpose and unrelenting effort, but a keen eye to the economy of time and energy, that not an hour be lost or ill-employed—not an impulse of energy be misapplied or wasted." Livingstone College alumnus William Fonvielle veered into near-apocalyptic prose as he urged the school's new graduates to gird themselves for the challenges that lay ahead. "A great battle is raging out here," he wrote. "If you come out prepared—if you are competent, there is plenty of room. If you are not prepared, it is very doubtful whether or not you can find a place on which to stand. The lists of incompetents are already crowded; and every month, every day, yea, every hour records the undoing of some one, some incompetent borne to the rear; forced to the wall; unhorsed, unmitred, unfrocked; beaten down by a stronger antagonist—suffocated by the great army of the unprepared."⁶

In the midst of such wide-ranging transformations, North Carolina's male collegians made their first forays into organized athletics. Sports caught the spirit of the new age. The contests on the field seemed to mirror the competitive conditions prevailing in the society at large, and the discipline, self-assertion and reasoned strategy that sports were credited with teaching meshed neatly with the qualities required for business and political success. But newly popular athletic games would also become a focus for debate. The economic, political, and cultural struggles that marked the last decades of the nineteenth century reached to the very heart of North Carolina society, disputing the direction of economic growth, the contours of manhood and womanhood, the lessons of history, and the meanings of race. Athletics, which would become so closely tied to male identity, would throw many of these issues into relief, as the often bitter struggles over athletic programs mirrored the national rise of a new vision of manly prowess and played into the state's increasingly polarized racial politics. The young men who loped across the state's fields and gridirons were thus engaged in larger cultural endeavors, with stakes far higher than the final score.

As North Carolinians labored to remake themselves in a new image, the task took on especial urgency in North Carolina colleges, which were charged with the daunting work of preparing the state's youth to take their places in a changing world. Before the Civil War the University of North Carolina and the state's handful of denominational schools had catered largely to the sons of the southern slaveholding elite. Secure in the assumption that such privilege would assure their future, many of that era's students had taken their studies lightly, spending the bulk of their time developing rhetorical skills, forging social con-

nections, devising ingenious pranks, and defending personal honor. But after the war, the number of colleges and the stakes for success grew rapidly. New institutions sprang up around the state, among them church-funded schools for African Americans, newly ambitious women's colleges, and state-sponsored institutions for agriculture and teacher training. Within the walls of all these schools, a new generation of faculty members focused on teaching a wide range of students the skills required to negotiate the era's new opportunities.⁷

Both faculty and students approached their labors with a sense of mission, working to build what many called a New South. Frequently attributing the South's military defeat to its lack of industrial might, North Carolinians at established institutions labored to remake themselves along more modern lines, seeking to "keep step with the century in its march of knowledge, invention and discovery." At newer schools, women and African Americans seized on higher learning not simply as a means toward regional prosperity but also as a way to carve out spaces for themselves within North Carolina society. "In no way can the real manhood of the Race be more forcibly demonstrated than in the realm of the intellect," Livingstone president Joseph Price argued in 1893, echoing the faith so many African Americans were placing in education as an avenue toward racial advancement. "For in the intellect is discerned the chief mark of difference between human beings and the lower order of animals. In fact, it is the intellect that exalts and dignifies the animal in human beings. It ennobles every phase of human life."⁸

The energy that North Carolina's educators poured into their tasks showed particularly clearly in the efforts of John Franklin Crowell, who became president of Trinity College in 1887. The Pennsylvania-born educator had come to North Carolina while still in his twenties, determined to remake southern higher education in the image of northeastern schools, most notably his alma mater, Yale. He threw himself into the work with a vengeance. When he arrived, Trinity College was a rural, Methodist school with limited enrollment, focused largely on producing candidates for the ministry. Crowell entertained far grander visions. He raised money to consolidate and expand the library. He encouraged scientific research, hired new faculty members with specialized training, and helped shift the curriculum away from textbook recitations, emphasizing instead lectures and experiments. He fought for the faculty's right to express political opinions without fear of censure. Perhaps most significantly, he engineered a move from the Randolph County countryside into the growing town of Durham and secured the assistance of some of the region's prominent industrialists, most notably tobacco magnate Washington Duke, for whom the school would eventually be renamed.⁹

The students arriving at college gates throughout the state were equally determined. Colleges were inundated with requests for admittance, frequently

from young people with exceedingly modest backgrounds. At Livingstone College, W. F. Fonvielle recounted, "a young man, possessing more zeal than money, called upon the President one night, and when he had left off speaking it was made known that he lived where the tides ebb and flow, and that he had walked two hundred fifty-five miles of the two hundred ninety. It is needless to say that this young man had nothing, save himself and a great desire to drink from the fountain of knowledge, to recommend him. He had but one shirt. . . . For a time this young man went to school in the daytime and at night washed his clothes and dried them by the heat of the stove."¹⁰

Walter Lingle, who entered Davidson College in the fall of 1888, recounted a similar experience. Presbyterian-funded Davidson, founded in 1836, was far from an imposing institution. Although the school's buildings boasted neoclassical facades, they had no electricity, no running water, and no indoor plumbing. The dormitory had no furniture; the classrooms, no desks. The adjoining town had no paved roads, although Lingle recalled that town leaders "took a great step forward, in my student days, in making a sidewalk on the west side of Main Street, by laying two planks, about a foot wide, in parallel lines for several hundred yards." But Lingle, a farmer's son who had recently lost his father, counted himself highly fortunate to be at school and was determined to succeed. His classmates were similarly situated. "Many of them were from the country and had very little money and less polish, but they meant business."¹¹

Students such as Fonvielle and Lingle approached their educations with a mixture of excitement and trepidation, anticipating the rewards that lay ahead but concerned about their chances for success in an increasingly competitive world. As well as imbibing the new curriculum their professors offered, students sought to shape their character to meet the challenges they expected to confront. Just as their northeastern counterparts had responded to the demands of a complex, commerce-based world by focusing on hard work and sober self-control, North Carolinians filled their student writings with odes to Victorian-tinged character development. A banner at Livingstone College encouraged students to be "Prudent, Resolute, Industrious, Courteous, Economical." At schools throughout the state, students exhorted one another to work harder, to be more punctual, to develop greater discipline, to read more widely, and to study the lives of successful individuals. The world they planned to enter was nothing like the one their parents knew, and they saw their education not as a rite of passage but as a crucial period of transformation.¹²

"Life at college is intense," wrote a Davidson College student in 1897. "Influences here are perhaps stronger than anywhere else." A year later a young woman at Greensboro's Normal and Industrial College urged her fellow scholars to take full advantage of the opportunities the institution offered. "There is probably no other period in our lives during which our lives and our characters

receive a more decided impetus for good or bad," she wrote, warning that "if we are content to drift with the tide through these years, we will find ourselves helpless to battle with the great waves of after life." Horace Williams, who had arrived at the University of North Carolina from the small, rural community of Holly Ridge, marked the break even more sharply, writing in his autobiography that "entering the University of North Carolina was a birthday for me."¹³

Such transformations ranged well beyond intellectual development. As students worked to shape themselves to a new way of life, their writings frequently touched on physical well-being, advocating efforts to fit body as well as mind to new demands. An 1896 article in the *Davidson Monthly* that bore the economically apt title "Marginal Hours" argued for the value of physical exertion by placing it squarely within a worldview that focused on rational calculation and long-term planning. The essay began with a typically alarming portrait of the world, stating that "competition is growing thicker and fiercer, contesting every step, the standards of efficiency are daily becoming more severely exacting, and the significance of superior training is being more sharply emphasized." Within these Darwinian conditions, the author argued, success depended on taking extraordinary measures, on putting every waking moment to productive use, even though "there are some who will say that if the price of success involves the application of definite planning and purpose to even one's spare or 'free' time, then it is too much to expect, and they refuse to accept the conditions." Rather than suggest that a young person's extra time be put to extra work, the author recommended that spare moments be spent exercising: "Knowing that continuous hard study tends steadily to overthrow the equilibrium between mind and body unless the body also is exercised continuously the student cannot do better than devote his marginal time to a compensating development of the body."¹⁴

In the antebellum era, student athletic efforts had been linked to rebellion. The most popular endeavor at many schools was "bandy" or "shimmy," a contact sport that involved few rules and frequent injuries, and whose exuberantly chaotic violence represented, in the words of one Chapel Hill graduate, a "ceaseless, tremendous, vigorous kick by the entire student body against every regulation of the Faculty." Postwar athletics would at times serve similar purposes, as young men found the joy of movement and the rushing emotion of competitive games a welcome alternative to increasing academic demands. But this new generation of athletics would be cast in far more serious terms, as supporters began to turn the pleasures of physical activity to more productive ends, describing organized sports as useful outlets for youthful energies and beginning to link the traits of character developed on the playing field to those they sought to nurture in other college endeavors.¹⁵

"A sound mind plus a sound body equals a good man," a Livingstone student

wrote in the fall of 1890. "Let everyone heed this. To cultivate the mental and neglect physical training hazards our possibilities for future usefulness." Horace Williams, writing from his lofty position as chairman of the University of North Carolina philosophy department, waxed even more enthusiastic, arguing in 1893 that "athletics is as necessary to the success of an institution and as legitimate a part of our life as my own department." He then continued:

I wish you could see the transformation that has taken place in the life of our students since the introduction of athletics three years ago. Then the picture was this: In the afternoon boys gather slowly in a room. First jokes, then cigarettes, then cards, then dirtier jokes. Supper, more cigarettes, more jokes. Nine o'clock p.m.—the boy's blood is up, nothing but wine and women will suffice. . . . Now the picture is this: About four p.m., boys begin to gather on the field. Lazy play and guying, good play and applause. Tons of fresh air taken in, muscles strained, mind refreshed and quickened, then a bath, then supper, then the boy feels at peace with himself and the world, his blood is cool, his head clear, his muscles are weary. Nine p.m., and his eyes are so heavy that he can't stand it; he tumbles into bed and sleeps the child's sleep. . . . Next morning in the class room, there is a man to lecture to. He braces everything about him. Pile on the work; he smiles. No burden makes him sick. His heart is stout.¹⁶

A year later, when the university inaugurated an *Alumni Quarterly* designed to keep its growing numbers of alumni interested in school activities, athletics received even more fulsome praise. In one article no less a figure than President George Tayloe Winston compared the existing program to the unchecked energies of earlier years, contrasting the discipline of athletics with the older era of schoolboy pranks. "Animal exuberance abounds, but overflows into new and healthful channels of energy," Winston wrote.

No power has been repressed. The energy that formerly spent itself in riotous living, nocturnal revels or vociferous rowdyism is now happily and enthusiastically and healthfully employed on the athletic grounds. The college Hercules of to-day scorns to carry off city gates or to lug bullocks into third-story recitation rooms. His glory is on the ball ground; his prowess is in manly conflict with his peers; his preparation is in carefully regulated diet, in self-sworn abstinence from late hours, lust and liquor, and in daily drinking deep drafts of pure air into lungs expanding responsive to manly exercise and enthusiasm. His physical exuberance is not slept off, nor eaten off, nor drunk off. It is worked down, and converted into healthful energy. He weighs himself on the athletic scales, goes on the ball-grounds and in ninety minutes

works off from two to eight pounds of vice, idleness and corruption commonly known as fat.

The article concluded with a statement that echoed Horace Williams's enthusiasm, asserting, "It would be dishonest not to say that the greatest force in the life of the University to-day contributing to sobriety, manliness, healthfulness and morality generally is athletics."¹⁷

Students at North Carolina schools pursued a variety of activities. They played baseball, ran track, and even tried their hands at the brand-new game of basketball, invented in 1891. But these efforts were overshadowed by the game that would become indelibly linked with colleges around the country: the recently created sport of football. The first football rules had been hammered out among Ivy League schools during the 1870s. The new game spread quickly throughout the country, and by the 1890s dozens of schools were taking part. The first southern game was played in 1877, and a decade later, in 1888, Trinity College met the University of North Carolina in a game described as the first example of "scientific" football in the state ("scientific" meant the game was played according to official rules). African American colleges picked up the trend as well. In the winter of 1892, a year and a half after Livingstone students defended their right to a baseball field, a Livingstone football team played Charlotte-based Biddle University in the nation's first football game between black schools.¹⁸

During the 1890s football would ascend from such modest beginnings to a major campus event—and a major source of strife. The 1890s would prove a decade of extraordinary conflict in North Carolina—and throughout the nation—as a wide range of Americans struggled for control over social and economic changes that were refashioning the country in innumerable ways. Such conflicts would reverberate to the deepest levels of North Carolina society, engaging, among other issues, what it meant to be a man. Football, with its blend of strategy and force, would become a potent symbol for the debates that resulted. Even as the sport's advocates lauded "animal exuberance" and "manly conflict," dedicated critics cast it as a "source of evil" and an unruly "craze." But by the end of the decade, as one group of North Carolinians emerged triumphant from the state's political fray, football, too, would have vanquished its opponents, becoming a celebrated model for a new kind of manhood and firmly establishing a long-term influence over state and national culture.¹⁹

As football spread into North Carolina, its proponents touted not only its physical benefits but also the way it shaped the character of its participants.



One of the University of North Carolina's first football teams, 1890s. Note the nose guards and makeshift, somewhat tattered uniforms. Courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

Yale's Walter Camp, a football pioneer and clock manufacturing executive, eloquently described the way that football encouraged "team work, strategy and tactics," later claiming that the sport had "come to be recognized as the best school for instilling into the young man those attributes which business desires and demands." Southern supporters seized on such language, using metaphors that combined traits of character with those of industrial production. John Franklin Crowell saw football as a "new educational force." University of North Carolina professor (and future president) F. P. Venable went even farther. "No half-way work will answer," he wrote in 1894. "A player must bring out every power, must develop to the utmost every faculty, must learn thorough self-control, must work for the team and not for himself, must make himself part of a perfectly working machine, must be full of nerve and pluck and strategy."²⁰

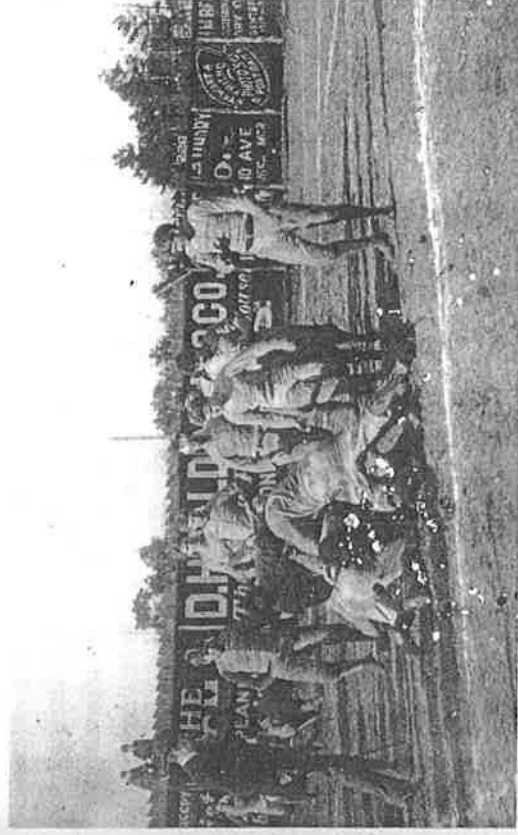
The demands of athletics, Venable contended a few years later, could prove even more significant than classroom work, particularly for graduates who chose careers in the expanding realms of commerce: "To the average college graduate, who finds his life-work in the busy mart, the facts, so painfully gathered in his college days, are soon lost in a haze of forgetfulness, but the power of sharp analysis, of logical thought, of concentration of mind, in fact of

general mental control and self-mastery is never lost until old age dims all faculties; and these are the gifts which make him successful and useful.”²¹

This new sporting zeal, however, represented more than a growing interest in self-discipline and efficient use of time. It also focused on the supposedly exalting power of intense competition, particularly in matches between schools. In the view of Horace Williams, it was precisely such heated encounters, where honor and reputation were at stake, that inspired young men to draw forth their greatest efforts and achieve their most splendid results. “Just as you cannot educate a boy at home, but must throw him into competition with boys from other homes, so the athlete needs the fire of rivalry with another spirit to win him to his fullest powers,” Williams wrote. The crowds that began to attend intercollegiate matches and the excitement that the contests generated on many campuses testified to the popularity of this new vision of school sports.²²

Still, even as students picked school colors and eager spectators began their pilgrimages to college football fields, these new activities sparked considerable conflict, illuminating several of the cleavages that marked North Carolina’s emerging society. While young educators such as Horace Williams and John Franklin Crowell linked school sports with the vigorous spirit required to approach late-nineteenth-century challenges, other North Carolinians were more skeptical—often with good reason. Even as the greater effort and emotion invested in heated competition offered the possibility of greater rewards, they also held greater dangers. Athletics has always had the power to call forth strong emotions, giving the clash of rivals an attraction that often seems to transcend rationality. College sports in the 1890s were thus enticing and foreboding, suggesting forces that could easily get out of hand. The fire of rivalry might spur students on to better efforts. But it might also jump its confines, threatening the fragile order in the world that lay beyond the field. In the midst of one of the most turbulent decades in state and national history, many North Carolinians worried that students would lose sense of who they were, would be swept by a tide of emotion beyond the cherished edge of rational control.

While many critics painted a still-familiar portrait of college sports as unproductive distractions from the real goals of education, suggesting that institutions engage in “battles of brains instead of useless trials of muscle” and noting that young men could be “taught to play football at a much less price than \$300 a year,” a key element of the nineteenth-century sports debate focused on broader issues of self-control. Football’s sudden popularity was frequently referred to as a “craze,” suggesting a movement out of kilter. Although writing with tongue in cheek, Davidson students caught both the energy and the flavor of irrationality in the game’s rapid spread, remarking, “We fear ere long it in company with its devotees, will be thrust back into the dark regions of oblivion



A scene from the first Alabama-Auburn football contest, 1892. Limited padding and often chaotic play made early football a dangerous endeavor. Courtesy of Duke University Archives.

with no sound issuing forth save the sad and bitter wail, ‘What fools we mortals be, who were so strangely led astray by the foot-ball craze.’”²³

The realities of nineteenth-century athletics lent such concerns considerable credence. Even as supporters of athletics lauded qualities such as discipline, teamwork, and character building, the raw violence that infused many sports often made such words ring hollow. Walter Lingle, who eventually became president of Davidson College, described intramural football at his school in words that said little about the game’s educational potential. “The forward pass had not yet been introduced,” Lingle wrote in his memoirs. “A player could run on a fumbled ball if he was lucky enough to get it. There was no referee with a whistle to blow a signal to down the ball. The player who had the ball could crawl with it after he had been tackled, and the whole opposing team would pile on him until he cried, ‘Down!’ If he did not have enough breath left in him to give that signal it was just too bad.”²⁴

Football’s advocates spent much of the late nineteenth century constructing bulwarks of “scientific” rules, trying to erect a structure that encouraged the intensity of conflict while keeping it within accepted bounds. Their efforts, however, did not necessarily reduce violence. Success in football rested on forceful forward motion, and students of the game eventually reasoned that the most foolproof way to move down the field was to form a solid mass of players around the man holding the ball—a formation known as the flying wedge—and

batter through an equally massed defense. The frequent injuries and periodic deaths produced by such a strategy only heightened criticisms of the sport. And even the most careful planning seems to have provided only a partial shield against the powerful emotions football games called forth. In developments that proved much more disturbing than a few afternoons of missed classwork, the fire of rivalry threatened to escape the carefully drawn lines around the field and enter a society already fraught with emotions far more troubling than Frank Venable's nerve and pluck.²⁵

Descriptions of early games suggest that organizers sometimes struggled to maintain strict bounds around the contests, preventing the conflict from spilling beyond the field. The accounts of college contests that began to appear in North Carolina newspapers typically mentioned good feelings after games, suggesting that despite the intensity of the actions on the ground, the players were engaged in the common endeavor of preparing themselves and their opponents for future leadership. A newspaper account of Trinity's 1888 victory over the University of North Carolina described the game in such fraternal terms: "The very finest of feeling prevailed between the two teams . . . and at the close of the game the University gave three cheers for Trinity, which were returned with a will." Such glowing words, however, could mask the intensity of emotion that sports inspired. John Franklin Crowell later recalled that the game in question sparked an event that failed to reach newspaper readers: an argument between two of the players that ended with a challenge to a duel. The two players had already chosen seconds and were about to set a time for their encounter when Crowell intervened, attempting to redraw the boundary between the contest and the world outside by explaining "that I believed that in the intensity of football playing such misunderstanding were perfectly natural; as a rule, however, no insulting intent inhered in things said or done on the field of contest."²⁶

The presence of alcohol at games contributed to concerns about disorder. Drinking quickly became an institution both on and off the field, and in a region where the hotly contested politics of temperance underlined larger concerns about modern self-control, such indulgence became a thorny issue. "In behalf of all lovers of pure athletics, we wish to enter an urgent protest against the custom of using intoxicants on the foot-ball field," the *Davidson College Magazine* reported in 1899. "In two of the games played this year, whiskey was openly administered to players when they were hurt or winded. To do this, in the presence of ladies, and under the authority of the management of the team is certainly degrading, and tends to arouse public sentiment against the game. It is a sad thing to see young men use intoxicants, but to see them openly encouraged in doing so is shameful."²⁷

Spectator actions, often under alcoholic inspiration, provoked even greater concerns. Sports-related riots did not become as much of an institution in North Carolina as they did in some northern cities, where football games regularly sent hordes of students rampaging through city streets. Still, the possibility of violence remained quite real. Walter Lingle described one such outbreak when a group of Davidson students turned out to watch a black baseball team from nearby Concord play a black team from the town of Davidson on the college field. "The game went beautifully for a while, but unfortunately a Negro spectator from Concord got in front of a hot-tempered student from the town of Davidson," Lingle recalled.

The student ordered him to get out of his line of vision. As he didn't move promptly the student cut him with a riding whip. He got out of the way and said nothing, but another Negro took it up and used some abusive language to the student and made as if he was ready to fight. The student drew his pistol. The Negro ducked into the crowd with the student right after him with drawn pistol. He did have sense enough not to shoot into the crowd. As the Negro emerged from the crowd he was right under the window where I sat, with the student a few paces behind. When the student was immediately under my window he fired at the Negro, who was running in the direction of the Richardson athletic field.²⁸

Back on the field, Lingle continued, "pandemonium reigned supreme. Some students got hold of the baseball bats and were swinging them right and left. The field was soon cleared and nobody was really hurt. Later the Concord team sent a friendly Davidson Negro to the students asking if they might have their bats and sweaters. The request was speedily granted and the incident was closed. But it might have been terrible, and all on account of a hot temper."²⁹

The uncertain dynamics of emotion and restraint made college football a precarious undertaking in the late nineteenth century, circumstances reflected in the varying support North Carolina institutions offered varsity teams. Despite the objections of some faculty, including President Kemp Plummer Battle (who called the sport "an incitement to drinking and rowdiness"), the University of North Carolina played regularly after 1888. Although the faculty of Davidson College held out against student pleas for intercollegiate games until 1898, after that the school competed on a regular basis. By the mid-1890s, however, several schools had taken a different path, choosing to stop the sport entirely. Shortly after the 1892 Livingstone-Biddle contest, Biddle faculty banned football from the school. Wake Forest College eliminated the game in 1895. And in a par-

ticularly dramatic confrontation, one that highlighted a growing split between diverging views of manly character within the state, Trinity College's Methodist trustees ordered ardent football supporter John Franklin Crowell to purge the game from his program.³⁰

In Crowell's mind, football had undergirded all his efforts to transform Trinity into a thriving, modern institution. In his memoirs he described football in glowing terms, speaking of its "value in developing prowess, preventing softness of life in student communities, and sustaining prolonged self-sacrifice for team practice and team efficiency," as well as the sport's encouragement of "virility, self-control and daring courage." Football enthusiasts did run certain risks, he admitted, describing the "danger of exaggerating the athletic over the intellectual, of substituting a physical for a mental enthusiasm." He remained, however, firmly convinced that football had played a major role in the goal that he and his white peers pursued with such zeal: training young white southern men to meet the challenges of raising their region from the wreckage of the Civil War into the modern, industrial world. Football's "tendency to excesses," Crowell later explained, paled "when set over against the one great asset of the larger, more virile, and victorious sense of young manhood as the dominant note in the Southern youth's new outlook upon life."³¹

Trinity College trustees were less sanguine about the sport's significance. The many transformations Crowell worked upon the college produced considerable concern among trustees, who still viewed the world around them according to older visions of moral order, and who defined manhood not by physical dominance but by a superior capacity for reason and self-control. Throughout the first part of the nineteenth century, this religion-tinged vision of self-development had dominated college instruction and middle-class ideals, calling on young men to build character by mastering themselves through individual battles with vices such as anger or dissipation. Within this worldview, athletic metaphors had invoked the foot races or wrestling matches described in the Bible, contests that were generally viewed in terms of obstacles to spiritual growth rather than strife with human opponents. An Atlanta minister who addressed Davidson College's Philanthropic and Eumean societies in 1892 offered a typical example of this older worldview. Casting his character-building exhortations in a mix of military and athletic images, the Reverend Dr. Strickler promised each of his listeners that "every difficulty overcome will be a captured gun for his ornament in the battle of life" and advised them that "conflict with difficulty is the only means of developing our power. Difficulty is the gymnasium in which real men are developed."³²

The rise of intercollegiate sports marked a sharp shift in these visions of athletic contests, moving the ground from individual development to competi-



Two Trinity College football players pose manfully for the camera, 1890s. Courtesy of Duke University Archives.

tive rivalry and placing a new emphasis on physical accomplishment. Throughout the South, religious leaders frequently condemned both developments. Emory College president Warren Candler, joining in laments that regional development gave southerners no "time to be anything more than money-making or business machines," questioned the "materialistic psychology" reflected in concerns over winning or losing athletic contests. Other critiques plumbed even deeper, casting the dispute in terms of fundamental questions about human nature. Where John Franklin Crowell saw in football a "virile and victorious sense of young manhood," religiously minded critics frequently denounced the sport in terms of an age-old spiritual war with the animalistic temptations of the flesh, linking it with "mere animal currents" and "the lower impulses of the physical man."³³

At Trinity the struggle over these competing visions of manhood came to a head in the early 1890s. Although trustees were uneasy about the secular turn apparent in many of Crowell's reforms, football became the dominant symbol of the dispute. In 1892 North Carolina Methodists' Western Conference informed Trinity's trustees that football was "a source of evil, and of no little evil, and ought to be stopped." Crowell ignored the warning and pressed on with his program, mounting a staunch defense of the virtues of athletic competition. In the fall of 1893, however, the trustees presented Crowell with a stark rebuke and demanded that football at Trinity stop immediately. Crowell resigned shortly afterward, becoming perhaps the first college president in U.S. history to lose his job over a football dispute. Trinity would not resume the sport until the 1920s.³⁴

Like the Livingstone College turnip planter, however, Trinity trustees sought to stem a rising tide. The forceful physicality that staunch Methodists denounced in terms of "animal currents" and "lower impulses" met with far greater favor elsewhere in state and national society, particularly among a rising generation of young white men. For members of the nation's Anglo-Saxon elite, who saw themselves as the rightful leaders of U.S. society, the democratic tumult of the late nineteenth century had sparked an alarming spate of self-recrimination. As European immigrants and freed African Americans began to acquire political and economic power, Anglo-Saxon leaders worried about losing their influence over American society. Such concerns frequently surfaced in condemnations of young men's physical condition. The circumstances of modern life, particularly the many hours men had begun to spend at study or at an expanding range of professional desk jobs, often became the culprit of this scenario, inspiring alarmist terms such as "nervous," "hysterical," "soft-muscled," "paste-complexioned," "over-refinement," and even "womanized."³⁵

The solution these worried young Anglo-Saxons seized involved indulging precisely those impulses that Victorian propriety had condemned, the "primitive" energies of physical force. "In a perfectly peaceful and commercial civilization such as ours there is always a danger of laying too little stress upon the more virile virtues—upon the virtues which go to make up a race of statesmen and soldiers, of pioneers and explorers," Theodore Roosevelt, the nation's most prominent exponent of this new vision of manhood, wrote in 1893. "These," he continued, "are the very qualities which are fostered by vigorous, manly out-of-door sports, such as mountaineering, big-game hunting, riding, shooting, rowing, football and kindred games." Like most of his contemporaries, Roosevelt drew on the newly popular philosophy of Social Darwinism, which cast human history in terms of competition not between individuals but between entire races, and he targeted his exhortations to develop virile virtues, including his advocacy of college football, specifically at Anglo-Saxon men.³⁶

The intense emotion that football brought out in its defenders suggests the high stakes they held in the version of manhood that the game was seen to foster. As well as dismissing the sport's "tendency to excesses," some football supporters proved willing to accept even the violent deaths that had become a not-uncommon aspect of the game. In 1897, for example, a young man named Von Gammon died from injuries received in a contest between the University of Georgia and the University of Virginia, becoming one of more than a dozen young men killed playing the sport during its early years. Still, a resulting movement to ban college football met with stiff resistance, including from Von Gammon's mother. Invoking the symbolic significance that football was coming to hold for masculine development, Rosalind Burns Gammon urged the Georgia governor not to sign a bill banning the sport, arguing that her son would want the game to continue, because of his support for "all manly sports, without which he deemed the highest type of manhood impossible." Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. put the matter more directly, claiming that football deaths were "a price well paid for the breeding of a race fit for headship and command."³⁷

The risks that football's supporters were willing to run hinted at the depth of concerns about their place in a changing society. Such concerns were indeed palpable throughout North Carolina, as young white men pursued their own vision of racial redemption. They had lived much of their lives in the shadow of a lost war and in the economic wreckage it had produced throughout the region. Painful memories of the devastation suffered by their parents' generation intensified their determination both to raise their region from poverty and to reestablish control over their state. As industrial development became the watchword of a reconstituted white elite, spurred on by the rapid growth of a textile industry that would soon become the largest in the world, this new

generation shaped a political vision that offered a formidable blend of industrialism and paternalism, with little room for doubt that a small corps of white men should lead the state's affairs.³⁸

Daniel Augustus Tompkins, one of the state's dominant postwar industrialists, offered in his many speeches and writings a particularly striking vision of the masterful white man, articulating the policy that would become the creed not only of an industrial elite but of the state's Democratic Party. He advocated strict controls on voting, arguing that "platitudes about equality and natural rights do not alter race prejudices and laws of nature." He strenuously opposed legislative attempts to raise manufacturing wages or reduce the textile industry's twelve-hour working day, arguing that mill owners were far more qualified than outsiders or workers themselves to judge the need for spare time and the appropriate level of pay. He had particularly harsh words for the reformers who questioned the conditions of textile mill employment, singling out in particular "well-meaning, tender-hearted women, most of whom are living on incomes and have little knowledge of practical life."³⁹

In contrast to such supposedly feminine sentiments Tompkins offered a stirring assessment of male competitive strife, presenting not simply an unruly melee of Darwinian clashes but a system dominated by assertive, successful, and unquestionably white men. "In a business man's every-day life he sees this law of the survival of the fittest at work, thinning out the ranks of his competitors, introducing new material," he announced in an 1890s speech that used such business metaphors to argue for the extension of "practical good sense and Anglo-Saxon superiority" to the Philippine Islands.

And it would be the silliest kind of sentimentalism for the successful man of affairs to sit down and lament his past success and cease his efforts to widen his avenues of trade, because he may have been the indirect means of pushing to the wall some other business man, forcing him to assign or to go into bankruptcy, leaving his wife and children dependent on charity. Yet the like happens every day. Competition, the very essence of business life, puts down some and elevates others. The fittest survive. It must be so, else there is no life, no progress. Whatever the socialist and other sentimentalists may think, the survival of the fittest is, has been, and will always be the law of progress in national affairs, in business, and in all other walks of life.⁴⁰

The confidence that rang in Tompkins's rhetoric, however, belied the struggle required to impose such a vision on his own state, in terms both of social status and of race. The melee that had erupted on the Davidson baseball field highlighted the tensions that ran through a society in great flux, where assertions of privilege were frequently met with sharp resistance. When a black man

stepped in front of a white student at the game, the student did not ask him to move, he "ordered" him. The man, no longer willing to defer, did not immediately obey. When the student pressed the conflict by employing his riding whip, a highly charged symbol of domination, another African American stepped into the fray, uncowed by the young man's efforts to assert his own superiority. That incident was quickly settled, but there were more to come.⁴¹

An especially serious challenge to elite white privilege arose in the fall of 1894, sparked by a broad range of concerns about the industrializing path that D. A. Tompkins and his fellow Democrats had charted since "redeeming" the state from Reconstruction almost twenty years before. The aftermath of war, along with the growing vicissitudes of market agriculture, had wreaked havoc on the state's small, independent farmers—growth in the Tar Heel textile industry was fueled in part by the labor of a rising tide of refugees from agricultural disaster. By the 1890s, farmers' discontents had coalesced in a new political organization, the People's Party, which sought to shift public policy away from industry in favor of agriculture. In 1894 the surging Populists struck a Fusion alliance with the state's Republicans, who drew much of their support from African Americans. The resulting campaign wrested control of the state legislature from the ruling Democrats. Victorious legislators subsequently reversed a range of Democratic policies that had favored commercial interests over small-scale agriculture and curbed voter influence over many state affairs. Two years later the alliance won an even more dramatic victory, seizing more than three-quarters of the seats in the state legislature and placing a Republican, Daniel Russell, in the governor's mansion.⁴²

In response to the 1896 defeat, a rising generation of young Democrats seized control of their stumbling party's affairs and began to shape a new strategy that responded to the vision of white manhood coalescing around vigorous sport and other "manly" activities. Along with adopting a newly aggressive tone in action and rhetoric, the Democrats promoted striking images of manliness and race, seeking to draw white Populists back to the Democratic fold. Even as the United States went to war in Cuba, a conflict that would be widely publicized as proof of revived Anglo-Saxon prowess, North Carolina Democrats urged the state's white men to stand up to African Americans, calling for "a white man's government." In speeches, leaflets, editorials, and political cartoons, party leaders combined old prejudices with the new philosophy of Social Darwinism to portray African Americans as apes, as "human devils," and—most significantly—as beasts who harbored uncontrolled desires to rape white women. A vote for the Democrats, they assured prospective voters, was an assertion of white manhood, a way to protect vulnerable wives and daughters from African Americans' evil designs. Such rhetoric, combined with a statewide campaign of

physical intimidation, returned the Democrats to power in 1898 and helped solidify that victory in 1900.⁴³

Those late-century elections would prove a watershed in state history, bringing the conflicts that had raged over the direction of state development to a decisive end. The victorious Democrats passed a disfranchisement amendment that effectively eliminated African Americans and many poorer whites from politics, leaving control of North Carolina affairs firmly in the hands of the state's industrial leaders. A series of Jim Crow laws further stigmatized black residents, pressing them to the margins of public life. Images of rapacious African Americans, vulnerable white women, and protective white men would dominate public life for decades, in North Carolina and around the South, stifling a wide range of efforts to alter the political and social status quo. The Democrats' grip on state power would go virtually unchallenged for more than half a century.⁴⁴

For many of the party's young supporters, the 1898 success marked the kind of redemption offered by Theodore Roosevelt's much-celebrated charge up San Juan Hill, which had been widely cast as the defining moment of the Spanish American War. "The management of our political affairs has recently been rescued from the hands of a set of political demagogues who have disgraced the commonwealth and lowered it in the estimation of our sister states," one Davidson student rejoiced following the 1898 election. In journals such as the *Davidson College Magazine*, articles lamenting the state of political and social affairs soon began to give way to confident discussions of the policies that the victorious Democrats should enact.⁴⁵

Any lessons that young North Carolinians might have learned from football probably had little effect on either the triumph over Spanish forces or the conduct of Democratic politics. Despite the numerous discussions surrounding the sport, the number of intercollegiate football games played by North Carolina schools before 1898 was relatively small. At the same time, as subsequent generations of athletic coaches would learn, ambitious rhetoric about the power of sports to shape participants' actions and ambitions did not necessarily translate to the players on the field. But even if football had limited influence on the political and military victories obtained through forceful action in the late nineteenth century, assessments of such triumphs helped to legitimize competitive athletics as a meaningful part of a young man's life preparation. In his widely read autobiographical writings, Theodore Roosevelt used his own successes as proof of the power of physical activity and urged a new generation of young men to prepare to "hit the line hard." Davidson professor W. J. Martin

drew similar links when he exhorted Davidson students to join the school football team in the fall of 1899. "Yes it takes a *man*, but it *makes* men," he wrote. "Many a soldier that charged up that memorable hill at Santiago had been developed in courage, manhood and *nerve* on the football fields of our American Colleges."⁴⁶

The political arrangements that crystallized at the end of the nineteenth century would profoundly shape athletic competition within the state. As North Carolina's modernizers pursued their industrializing course and the state became more thoroughly enmeshed in market economics, the connections football supporters had drawn between the demands of sports and those of life would only strengthen. At the same time, the state's exclusionary politics meant that different groups of North Carolinians would experience such connections in very different ways.

For young white college men, who looked forward to careers directing the state's political and economic affairs, athletics increasingly seemed to mirror the world in which they lived—the heated rush of political campaigns, the strategies of business endeavors, the mastery linked with power. With young women watching admiringly from the sidelines and with African Americans banished from the field of play, such athletic rituals would come to seem a confirmation of the existing social order, and discussions about plays, about players, and about the fortunes of one team or another would shade into larger debates over how and by what kind of men the state's affairs should be run. These sporting endeavors also assumed the mantle of regional revival, riding a rising tide of Confederate nostalgia that brushed aside memories of Civil War defeat and celebrated Confederate gallantry, courage, and determination. The pageantry of athletic contests lent itself well to such sentiments. Football games were frequently awash with Confederate symbolism, as officials and spectators alike asserted both racial and regional manhood by flying Confederate flags, singing Confederate songs, and punctuating the action on the field with well-practiced rebel yells.⁴⁷

Outside these charmed arenas, in women's institutions, in working-class communities, and among African Americans, sports would take on other meanings. Competitive athletics, with its close symbolic ties to political and economic institutions, would offer a field in which many North Carolinians could develop skills and express emotions that they could only rarely indulge in the world beyond such games. A wide range of state citizens would seize these opportunities, further expanding the hold athletics was gaining on the heart of state society. In women's colleges, at black high schools, and in textile mill

villages, North Carolinians would develop sporting institutions that offered myriad insights into alternate dreams, expectations, and debates, linking participants and spectators to the worlds from which they were excluded. At times such athletic pleasures would become a simple distraction, a momentary escape from the burdens of a workday world. But they would also nurture efforts to transform that world.

The promise athletics held as a way to challenge North Carolina's reconfigured social order first surfaced in the state's African American institutions, where leaders cautiously began to formulate an athletic philosophy. Athletics developed slowly at black schools for reasons that illuminated a number of the financial and political challenges African American educators faced as the century neared its end. Many of the state's black residents had made remarkable progress since Emancipation, and by the 1890s they were well on their way to establishing a thriving middle class, carving out economic niches as doctors, lawyers, ministers, teachers, business operators, and home owners. But African Americans' foothold in state society remained tenuous. The majority of the state's black residents were still extremely poor; black institutions suffered from chronic financial difficulties; and the racial stereotypes that populated popular culture and political rhetoric meant that black leaders still devoted considerable effort to establishing racial respectability. All these factors helped shape the experiences of black college students, down to the games they played.⁴⁸

The meager finances and enormous needs of struggling black colleges meant that black students were required to devote much of their physical exertion to their schools' upkeep, whether through growing crops, laying bricks for new buildings, or doing the school's laundry. Free time was often limited, and even accounts of boisterous student behavior revolved around work. "The most unpopular industries at Livingstone have always been woodcutting and whitewashing," William Fonvielle wrote in his memoir of college life. "I have never known a student of the thousands I have met, who did not profess to having a horror for the whitewash brush. . . . Many a young minister and would-be physician—leaders of people—can testify that he has been knocked into a barrel of whitewash more than once."⁴⁹

Lack of funds frequently hampered the development of extracurricular activities. In 1902, for example, early efforts to establish football at Raleigh's Shaw University were brought to a sudden halt when two members of the school's fledgling squad ignored warnings to be careful and kicked a football through a dormitory window. Contemplating the destruction, school vice-president N. F. Roberts became so enraged that he seized the offending pigskin and cut it into shreds. Only several weeks later, when Roberts relented and bought the financially strapped students another ball, did the sport resume at Shaw. The chal-

lenges and hardships African Americans faced could indeed seem to leave little room for play, as was suggested both by the agricultural assault on the Livingstone baseball field and by Booker T. Washington in his autobiographical *Up from Slavery*. "I have never seen a game of football," Washington declared. "I was asked not long ago to tell something about the sports and pastimes that I engaged in during my youth. Until that question was asked it had never occurred to me that there was no period of my life that was devoted to play. From the time that I can remember anything, almost every day of my life has been occupied in some kind of labor."⁵⁰

Still, Washington himself felt the allure of athletics, concluding his description with the wistful declaration, "I think I would now be a more useful man if I had had time for sports." Many of the values that athletics claimed to teach—discipline, reasoned strategy, self-control—had in fact become cherished goals at African American institutions. Despite meager funding, black colleges were also more than able to pursue activities that mattered to them; lack of funds was not the same as lack of resources. In Livingstone's first decades, for example, some faculty believed so strongly in their task that they took jobs for little or no pay and made ends meet as best they could. Students made similar efforts, from washing out a single shirt each night to going hungry when they ran short of funds. The same energy would go into athletics.⁵¹

At North Carolina's black colleges, most early athletic efforts involved baseball. Baseball's rules had first been set down in New York in 1845, and the sport spread rapidly across the South after the Civil War, becoming especially popular among African Americans. Early in the 1890s Livingstone and Biddle began a series of Easter Monday baseball games, which students remembered with great fondness. "Everyone was smiling, happy and wearing their best clothes," Livingstone graduate W. F. Fonvielle noted of the contests, cheerfully recalling that "some how Livingstone always beat Biddle at the game in those days." Biddle's school colors—blue and gold for truthfulness and loyalty—were unveiled on Easter Monday in 1895. "Baseball seems to be the craze at present," the *Living Stone* reported in 1892. "Every-body that can lift a pound now hurls a ball viciously through the air. The excited pitchers 'holler' 'How is that,' even in their dreams." In 1901 Livingstone student George W. Bowles offered an ode to school athletics, using standard sporting language to argue that "athletics are essential in our colleges and higher institutions of learning," and that "we are able to use our mental attainments in proportion to our physical abilities." He also noted proudly that "we hope to have a very strong Base Ball nine this year."⁵²

Football, however, was another matter. Throughout the 1890s, even as football became a powerful symbol of manhood at white colleges, African Ameri-

can schools showed considerably more reluctance to engage in the sport. The Livingstone-Biddle match had seemed a promising start. Players at Livingstone had chipped in to buy a football, affixed temporary cleats to their regular shoes, and padded old clothes for practice clashes. Livingstone's female students had sewed the uniforms. Similar preparations no doubt took place at Biddle. Despite a raging snowstorm that kept the audience down, obscured the field's lines, and created some controversy regarding scoring, the game was called a great success. Although Biddle triumphed 4-0, Livingstone's students graciously accepted the defeat. "The game between Biddle University and Livingstone College was played and very much enjoyed Tuesday, December 27th," the *Living Stone* magazine reported. "Our boys played well, as did the Biddle boys. It was a great game."⁵³ Students were also eager to schedule a rematch. "What's the matter with a football game on Thanksgiving Day?" a Livingstone student columnist asked in the fall of 1893. But none was played. No black college in North Carolina competed in another intercollegiate football contest for almost a decade, and Biddle would not play again until 1908. Throughout the country only a handful of black schools played even one football game before the turn of the century.⁵⁴

This reluctance to engage in the increasingly popular sport highlights the uncertain position African Americans held in North Carolina society, where football offered large risks and only minimal rewards. Educators at African American schools, most of which were church sponsored, no doubt shared widespread concerns about the spiritual implications of intense physical endeavor as well as the violence football involved. Livingstone's earliest football efforts had been brought to a temporary halt after one player received a "paralytic stroke" in an intramural game, and the decision of Biddle faculty to ban football after the Biddle-Livingstone contest was in part influenced by parents' complaints about the sport's brutality. But these educators also faced dilemmas particular to African Americans.⁵⁵

The young white men who embraced a newly assertive vision of manhood were reaching for a lost mastery, girding themselves for what many saw as a Darwinian struggle to reassert control over a state that seemed to be slipping from their grasp. African American leaders, for whom Social Darwinist thinking portended little but catastrophe, were less concerned with dominance than with respectability. "Nations are no longer governed by races, but by ideas," Joseph Price optimistically declared. In particular, North Carolina's African Americans focused on asserting their claims to the rights of citizenship they had so recently attained and on defending themselves against a range of ongoing efforts to confine African Americans to the lower rungs of southern society. Administrators at many colleges were especially troubled by the growing popu-

larity of a movement termed "industrial education," which held that African American schools should adopt modest goals, abandoning most academic work and focusing on training black youth in the trades that would prepare them for what many whites saw as their "proper" positions at the bottom of the southern economy.⁵⁶

Challenging presumptions of black inferiority was a daunting task, one that involved not only combating long-established stereotypes about black character and ability but refuting new theories of civilization that relegated African Americans to the lowest levels of cultural development. The effective racial rhetoric employed by North Carolina Democrats had drawn strength not only from white uncertainty about the future but also from a growing racial cast in U.S. culture. Throughout the country, blackface minstrel shows portrayed the antics of comical, contented slaves even as pseudo-scientific scholars such as Harvard's Nathan Shaler argued that release from the "civilizing" influence of plantation life had sent black Americans spiraling toward a previously savage state.⁵⁷

Most of this rhetoric was grounded in assumptions about African Americans' physical nature. From minstrel show portrayals of foolish, dancing slaves to stump speech images of rapacious black rapists, popular images of blacks centered on physicality. Whether drawing on centuries-old theological distinctions between body and spirit, on recently popularized theories of human evolution, or on accounts of racial progress from "savagery" to "civilization," such depictions cast African Americans as closer to the instinctive physicality of animals than to the higher mental and moral capabilities ascribed to whites. At times the link was subtle, as when a *News and Observer* reporter described a Republican Party member as an "old negro with a long goatee and eyes like a lemur." But it was often more direct, as when the editor of Sampson County's *Caucasian* invoked Nathan Shaler's theories to argue of "the negro" that "his animal nature so preponderates over his intellectual and moral nature, that in the age of puberty, when the animal nature develops, that the moral and intellectual qualities are clouded by the animal instinct and not only cease to develop but really retrograde."⁵⁸

African American educators were well aware of efforts to deny African Americans their full humanity by describing "savage" behavior or "animal" instincts. "For two hundred and fifty years," Joseph Price told an audience in 1890, "the white man of the South saw only the animal, or mechanical side of the Negro. . . . The man was overshadowed and concealed by the debasing appetites and destructive and avaricious passions of the animal." Many working-class African Americans sought to mark their freedom through exuberant physical display, through parades and fancy dress, and even through physical assertion,

as when the black baseball fan challenged the Davidson student. In contrast, most middle-class black leaders adopted a strategy of respectability, determined to buttress their claims to citizenship through strict adherence to the sober, restrained ideals that constituted Victorian visions of civilized behavior. The fit of rage that led Shaw's N. F. Roberts to shred his students' football may well have stemmed less from concern about the damage it had done than from anger at their conspicuous lapse of self-control. Black leaders labored mightily to spread their gospel among African Americans at large. "Colored men, you have no money to throw away on circuses, minstrels, balls, frolics, whisky, and other nonsense," the *Star of Zion* told its readers in a typical appeal. "You have children that should be well educated, and wives whom you should make comfortable by purchasing homes. . . . You have a poll-tax that every manly Negro ought to pay. Prosperity and happiness awaits every colored family that is industrious, frugal and preserving."⁵⁹

Such endeavors lent themselves far more neatly to the older metaphors of moral contest with an abstract foe—the biblical images of spiritually centered foot races and wrestling matches—than to the heated clash of football competition. A contributor to the *Star of Zion* caught this spirit in an 1897 contribution. "Thus far the Negro has done well, he has answered all questions," the contributor wrote with a confidence that contrasted sharply with the anxious tone of the Democrats' racist rhetoric.

His destiny is to make his race the equal of the best race in history and to be distinct only as to color. To-day is the Negro's; there is nothing prior to emancipation but stripes, curses and despair. "It is high time to awake" and, putting on the whole armor of civilization, do battle with thrift and intelligence for the second emancipation; emancipation from hatred and scorn and prejudice. The first emancipation was a jubilee of liberty and blood; but the second, grander and better and differently achieved, shall be an everlasting jubilee of liberty, of peace and of the united American people.⁶⁰

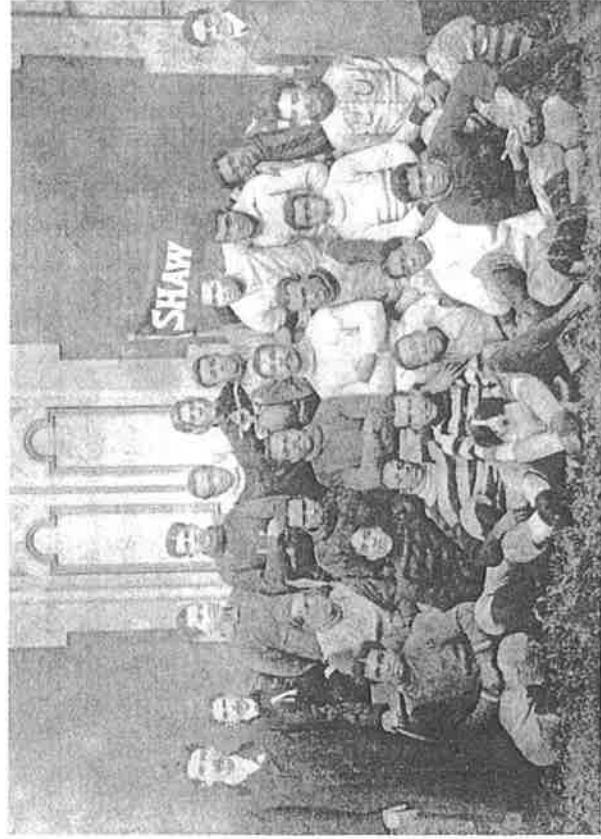
The mix of discipline and supposedly primal force that had proved so captivating to white men around the country thus held far less appeal for African American leaders or for the white administrators who guided many of the state's black schools during their early years. University of North Carolina president George Winston might proudly announce that "animal exuberance" abounded at his school. Administrators at African American schools, aware of the images such language would invoke in many readers' minds, would probably not have described their students in that way, preferring, as had Joseph Price, to demonstrate "the manhood of the Race" through intellectual development. The era's "scientists" of race remained divided on the question of whether

blacks held physical advantages over whites, and African American athletes had not yet gained the renown that would prompt widespread twentieth-century speculation about the "natural" sources of black athletic skill. But as long as football was closely associated with animal exuberance or, in the words of Southern Methodists, "the lower impulses of the physical man," it remained a risky endeavor for black institutions.⁶¹

A brief article published in the *New York Times* in 1897 summed up in its five sentences all that black educators had to fear from college football. The article, which appeared on the front page, described a game between Tennessee's Knoxville College and an independent black team called John Singleton's Tigers. "NEGROES RIOT AT FOOTBALL," the headline ran, and the article continued: "The first football game ever played by Negroes in Tennessee took place here this afternoon between local teams. The game was not finished on account of the fatal wounding of Fred Staples and the serious injury of half a dozen other players. A riot concluded the game, when several drunken white men attacked the players because they could not make a touchdown. Hasty summons of the police prevented murder. A dozen chickens were offered as the prize, but the birds were stolen during the game."⁶²

Although this contest took place in neighboring Tennessee, the account would have been unpleasantly familiar to many of North Carolina's African Americans. The facts of the game were alarming enough. In a period of rising racial tension, a sporting event had provoked a riot that seriously injured several young black men. (Fred Staples apparently managed to live for several years after his "fatal wounding.") The newspaper account added insult to those injuries. It portrayed not black accomplishment, but mayhem. Although whites had apparently begun the altercation, the headline read, "NEGROES RIOT." The black players' apparent inability to reach the end zone made them seem less than competent, and the report of chicken stealing invoked the thousands of condescending minstrel show skits that focused on the supposed black propensity for that particular activity. The article also made clear what a risky public effort football could be. An individual game could be a model of scientific efficiency. It could also degenerate into a test of brute force. Most games contained elements of both, leaving interpretation open to frequently unsympathetic beholders.⁶³

Still, as football gained in prestige and respectability, it also offered some tantalizing possibilities for racial advance. The football-related image that would become an icon of American culture—the level playing field—held particular metaphorical power. When white North Carolinians invoked that image, it generally carried the same restrictions as other aspects of southern public life:



Shaw University football team, 1905. Most of North Carolina's black colleges, including Shaw, began to field football teams in the early 1900s. Courtesy of the University Archives, Shaw University.

the field might be level, but only whites could play. Viewed more broadly, however, it invoked the philosophy that would guide the efforts of generations of black North Carolina leaders, the idea that given a fair chance, African Americans would demonstrate convincingly that they had the same abilities and deserved the same rights as their white counterparts. African Americans would seek to make this point anywhere they could, from military service to medical research to the world of literature. But athletics, which drew a growing measure of public attention, would become a particularly charged arena for such endeavors.⁶⁴

The interest black North Carolinians had begun to take in the broader meanings of athletic achievement was suggested in a lengthy description of a game between Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania published in the Charlotte-based *AME Zion Quarterly Review* in 1900. The article focused on W. H. Lewis, the nation's first black All-American football player, who had become a part-time director of the Harvard football squad. Lewis was a man of numerous accomplishments—in addition to his athletic honors and coaching skills he had become a successful lawyer and writer. But it was football that put him in the news. The *Quarterly Review's* assessment, which touched on discipline and publicity, on calculated strategy, and on racial recognition, marked the long

road North Carolinians had traveled since Livingstone's anonymous agrarian had made a last stand for the concrete virtues of cabbages and turnips. It also pointed toward some of the meanings sports would carry into the future.

"The betting was ten to seven in favor of Pennsylvania," the *Quarterly Review* explained. "And yet with a weak and crippled team Harvard was overwhelmingly victorious. And why? because W. H. Lewis, the colored coach had studied the methods of the Pennsylvania system and mastered them. He devised a system of defense which completely blocked Pennsylvania's team and made it almost impossible for them to score." The article went on to probe the meanings of Lewis's feat, noting, "The civilized world holds in high respect the trained and successful athlete. The best of the colleges of the world encourage athletics as a means of strengthening and adding to the health of students and of stimulating their mental powers at the same time." It then concluded with a prediction about the wider effects of his accomplishments. "The proud Anglo-Saxon admits that his superior has not appeared on the athletic field. . . . Our race is proud of him because in all his success he stands for us, and the higher he goes in the physical field of athletics or the mental field of law or literature, he must necessarily open the way for others, and lift us all up at the same time."⁶⁵