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For Love of the Game

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For Love of the Game

How did an American president save college football?

If you think football is violent today, it's like Parcheesi compared to how it was played after the Civil War. The sport was originally so savage that a rule was needed to prevent players from embedding nails in their shoes. Without helmets or pads, players in tight formations smashed into each other like freight trains. The notorious "wedge" allowed the offense to get a running start before reaching the line of scrimmage, resulting not just in "three yards and a cloud of dust," but also in serious injuries. During the 1905 season alone, college football claimed 18 players' lives and seriously injured an additional 149 athletes.

More than one observer linked the organized violence of football to that of war. This is no surprise. College football became popular among the children of Civil War heroes seeking a socially acceptable way to demonstrate their strength and courage. The gridiron became an ersatz battleground.

Our most imperial president, Theodore Roosevelt, loved football and war -- to him they were of a piece. As Michael Mandelbaum notes in *The Meaning of Sports*, football was the ideal sport for a republic aching to become an empire. TR thought football encouraged the development of the martial virtues young men needed to become good warriors. The gridiron was the nursery of the battlefield, and success at battle was "the supreme and necessary test of men and nations." When Roosevelt went out to recruit his Rough Riders to join him at the start of the Spanish-American War, he specifically targeted men who had played football. The summit of San Juan Hill was just a goal line with greater stakes.

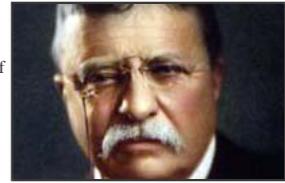
But history is the gristmill of irony. It is paradoxical that Theodore Roosevelt -- the commander in chief who glorified war yet won the Nobel Peace Prize -- would be the president who sought to reform the game he loved. Yet something had to be done to make football safer. The sport was generating considerable concern, and some muckrakers were calling for its abolition.

Thus in October 1905, TR called to the White House some of college football's leading proponents, and he urged them to address the public's concerns. Either reform the sport and save it, or watch it go the way of bear-baiting. The collegiate crowd heeded Roosevelt's advice. Within months numerous colleges endorsed major changes in the rules that would make football safer. Before long, the forward pass was legal, more men were lining up on the line of scrimmage, spearing was prohibited, and more referees were supervising the games.

In 1905 there was another prominent champion of football reform. He was the president of Princeton University and his name was Woodrow Wilson. A few years later, he and Theodore Roosevelt would contend against each other in the bitterly fought election of 1912. But for now, on the issue of collegiate football, they saw eye-to-eye.

Both Roosevelt and Wilson were progressives. They were determined to reform college football at a time when there was interest in reforming much else in American life -- everything from meat-packing plants to environmental policy to civil service. So the next time you go to a Lakers game and have a hotdog, thank TR and his generation for saving our "football Saturday."

(Question from Ashley Holloway, junior accounting major, Grand Valley State)



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