

# LAVENDER AND

Those “Mysterious Ministers from Middletown”: The First Century of Athletics at Wesleyan.

Interest in athletics grew slowly at American colleges and universities, waxing in a particular sport and then waning. In the 19th century, struggling athletes at Wesleyan slogged through a field that often resembled a mud pit. Beginning in the 1880s, however, the rise of athletics as spectator events that evoked impassioned support (and money) from alumni assured that intercollegiate contests would rise out of the mud to become the staple of college life that they are today.

In the early years after Wesleyan’s founding in 1831, there were no organized sports. In fact, college athletics as such did not exist in the United States. Wesleyan was small, and often struggled to make ends meet. Frank W. Nicolson, who edited the 1938 book, *Athletics at Wesleyan*, waggishly reported that the earliest students relied on “walking to get the mail” for their regular exercise. Needless to say, students—and everyone—walked a lot in those days. In antebellum America one of the most popular sports was pedestrianism, or professional racewalking. Nevertheless, Wesleyan’s first student organization was not a walking club, but the Missionary Lyceum, a club organized by early students who felt called to missionary work.

Intercollegiate athletics in America date to the 1850s, and they followed a slightly earlier British model. American college men (and they were nearly all men) had been involved in informal sporting activities for several years. The first organized intercollegiate competition was the 1852 regatta between Harvard and Yale, held at Lake Winnepesaukee in central New Hampshire. Crew—or rowing or boating, as it was usually called in those days—was the earliest and most popular intercollegiate sport before the Gilded Age. Amazing num-

bers of spectators turned out for regattas, particularly in the early 1870s. During the Victorian era, in both England and America, muscular Christianity—or the idea that a good, masculine Christian should take care of the health of his body as well as his soul—was a popular approach to life, particularly among the middle and upper classes. In this world view, sports could be a moral force. The YMCA, which was founded in England in 1844 and had spread to the United States by 1851, was an expression of the tenets of muscular Christianity. The end of the Civil War in 1865 signaled a rise in popular interest in sports, both for the urban, privileged classes and in the academy.

Wesleyan students of the 1850s through 1870s participated in rowing, track, baseball, and football. Each of these sports began informally, usually as recreational competitions among classes, before developing into organized, intercollegiate events. For the most part, administrative and coaching duties fell to the students.

There were no formal coaches or trainers, and

university financial support was modest at best. Throughout the history of sports at Wesleyan, informal or intramural sports have coexisted with formal, intercollegiate athletic competition.

Wesleyan’s first intercollegiate sport was baseball. The Agallian Base Ball Club was formed in 1865 by Charles L. Bonnell (Class of 1868), Walter A. Chadwick (Class of 1869), and Stephen Henry Olin (Class of 1866). That’s the same Stephen Henry Olin who was the son of Wesleyan’s second president, a chair of the Board of Trustees, and the namesake of Olin Library. The club was named by Classics Professor James Van Benschoten in honor of Agalles, who may have invented a game similar to baseball in ancient Greece. (Van Benny, as he was affectionately known, was an ancestor of Wesleyan’s current chair of the Board of Trustees, Jim Dresser ’63.) The Agallians played against a mix of local, professional, semiprofessional, college, and school teams. They played first against the Charter Oak Club of Hartford and then, in the first intercollegiate baseball game for both teams, against Yale. Sad to say, Yale won handily:

39 to 13. Contrary to most sources, the Agallian Club was not Wesleyan’s very first ball club. That distinction belongs to the short-lived and apparently misnamed Invincible Base Ball Club, which appears in an early Wesleyan scorebook under the date of 1862. The Wesleyan University Base Ball Club succeeded the Agallians in 1869.

Principles of muscular Christianity are evident in the very first issue of the *College Argus*, published on June 11, 1868. Some Methodist leaders had objected to students’ participation in baseball or any athletic com-

# MINISTERS

BY SUZY TARABA ’77



[Left] Football programs from the glory years after World War II. [Above] Wesleyan’s first basketball team, 1902.







petition, because they felt it led to gambling and corruption. The *Argus* countered with a paean to the “moderation and manliness” of the Wesleyan players. Later in the same issue, there is a call for reorganizing a boating club since, “As students we do not exercise enough.”

Stephen Henry Olin and his cronies were among the first to use Wesleyan’s original gymnasium. One alumnus of the 1870s reminisced that it was “a plain, frame structure, with swinging rings, horizontal and parallel bars, a few pulley weights, Indian clubs, and dumbbells ... There were no dressing rooms, no baths.” This modest structure was in active use for 30 years.

One of the characteristics of early athletics at Wesleyan is that only one sport achieved prominence at a time, at least in an intercollegiate setting. After a short heyday, baseball gave way to rowing. Wesleyan’s first regatta took place in 1871. Following the common pattern, rowing had actually begun more than a decade earlier, in the fall of 1858, as an informal activity. The first boat was bought at this time. By 1861, there were seven boats and seven boat clubs. Each class had its own crew and competed against the others. Boating apparently disappeared at Wesleyan between 1865 and its revival in 1871. Everyone was busy playing baseball, it seems. Elsewhere, rowing was an enormously popular sport in this period, and it required an official organization, the Rowing Association of America, founded in 1870.

The Wesleyan Boat Club was organized in the fall of 1872. By the next June, the University’s first boathouse was built, at a cost of \$1,000. This was an exciting period for the Wes rowers. In 1872, the Wesleyan freshmen won the regatta on the Connecticut River at Springfield, beating Amherst, the Sheffield Scientific School, Harvard, Brown, and Yale. They recorded the best time ever made thus far in a freshman race. In 1873, the Wes oarsmen may have placed second in the intercollegiate regatta. Opinions of the participants differed as to the order of arrival and whether Harvard might have been guilty of a foul. Wesleyan men definitely won second place at the Lake Saratoga regatta in 1874. Captain John H. Eustis, Class of 1874, won the seven-mile footrace that was part of the overall competition. After Eustis graduated, the 19th-century Wesleyan crew never again excelled at the same level. In part because of the expenses involved, student interest in crew waned. The boathouse was torn down in 1880. It wasn’t until 1964 that crew again became an intercollegiate sport at Wesleyan.

As rowing declined, baseball came back into vogue in 1877. Football was a popular game, although at Wesleyan, it was not yet played in an intercollegiate arena. And track, an offshoot of the races that were part of boating regattas, began to grow.

In the second era of athletics at Wesleyan, the focus turned to building teams that would compete in intercollegiate matches. By the 1880s, college sports were an important part of the academy, and they drew interest from not just the students, but faculty, administration, members of the surrounding community, and, most especially, alumni. In this period, something became more important than merely playing the game. That something was winning. All of these supporters began to understand that a winning team could be a source of pride and the basis for goodwill and financial backing for the school.

Occasionally, the emphasis on winning went wrong. Some prominent colleges and universities employed ringers, or paid athletes who were not part of the college community, to help achieve their goals. Wesleyan was not immune from this temptation. As documented in the minutes of the faculty meeting of November 23, 1866, the faculty “voted that the President be requested to investigate, with a view to the administration of discipline, under what circumstances and by whose action a person not a member of the College was put on the College Team in a football game.” While the details of exactly what transpired are scanty, a faculty committee was appointed to better police potential violations of sportsmanship.

By the early 1880s, as Wesleyan participated and achieved prominence in more sports, the pallid lavender of the school banners became a problem. There had been some dissatisfaction with the color since the days of the regattas, when, as one alumnus later wrote, “for lavender flags wet by a shower resembled little else than limp dish rags.” The new college colors, cardinal red and black, were adopted in a general college meeting on October 10, 1884. They made their first official appearance in a banner used at the Wes-Penn game in New York in the fall of 1885. Of the color change, Wesley Woodruff, Class of 1887, wrote: “Secure the proper artery-red cardinal and put it against black, and you have something which, associated with a big athletic event, gives a large-sized thrill and calls on one’s vocal machinery to cry approval.”

The very first intercollegiate football game was held on November 6, 1869, between Rutgers and Princeton. The

game was really more like soccer or rugby. In the 1870s and 1880s, college football teams were run almost exclusively by students. But as football grew both more brutal and more popular, college faculty and administrators intervened, forming committees to organize the playing schedules and oversee the games. The actual direction of play remained in the hands of the students. At Wesleyan, informal football games flourished from the 1850s to the 1870s, but it wasn’t until 1881 that there was a formal team prepared for intercollegiate play. Not everyone on campus thought that the rise in football’s popularity was an entirely good thing. At one of the home games played by this team, President John W. Beach appeared on the field, tucked the ball under his arm, and took it back with him to his office on the second floor of North College. He objected to the game being played on Wednesday afternoon instead of Saturday.

## WESLEYAN WAS ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE NATIONAL COLLEGIATE ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION, OR NCAA. WESLEYAN ALSO WAS A LEADER IN CALLING FOR REFORMS TO EASE THE BRUTALITY OF FOOTBALL.

Early Wesleyan football players competed regularly against much larger schools, and sometimes won. To this day, Wesleyan remains undefeated by the University of Michigan, as a result of our 1883 win over the Wolverines. In 1884, Wesleyan was admitted to the “Big League,” or Intercollegiate Foot Ball Association, with partners Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania. Wesleyan resigned from this organization in 1893, a time when we were no longer competitive with these much larger, better-funded institutions. Woodrow Wilson, who taught history and political economy at Wesleyan from 1888 to 1890, was a great supporter of the team and functioned as one of its faculty advisers. Alumni of the time remembered with amusement how Wilson rushed up and down the side of the field, waving his umbrella and shouting encouragement.

The economics of athletics in this period was uneven, at best. Despite the somewhat enhanced university support for athletics, teams still struggled for resources. At Wesleyan’s training table in the 1880s, the university paid

the extra charge so that the players could have “rare meat.” In 1889 Wesleyan’s football team had to supply a referee at its own expense. The 1890s were the era of enormously popular games played on Thanksgiving in New York City. Wesleyan’s portion of the proceeds from the 1892 game came to over \$1,000.

Walter Camp, the legendary Yale coach, came up from New Haven regularly for informal coaching of the Wesleyan football team. Camp is still recognized as the man who almost single-handedly turned college football into a national obsession. Wesmen practiced against Yale, as well as meeting the Elis in official competition. For the size and financial resources of our school, Wesleyan was disproportionately prominent among great football institutions between 1883 and 1900. Several factors were involved: Wesleyan’s early participation in the sport, coaching by and practice with Yale, and, last but not least, the physical size,

strength, and courage of the men on the Wesleyan teams. By 1900, at Wesleyan and elsewhere, football became such an important source of public relations and power for colleges that its oversight shifted from being a faculty responsibility to the administration, particularly the Board of Trustees, and the alumni.

On October 3, 1906, a Wesleyan player, Sammy Moore, Class of 1908, may have thrown the first completed overhand spiral forward pass in intercollegiate competition. Irv Van Tassell, Class of 1910, caught the pass. Like many firsts, Wesleyan’s is not the only claim to this distinction. The game was against Yale. Unfortunately, that legendary pass didn’t save the Wesleyan team from defeat. Yale won, 21 to 0. But the pass was definitely noticed. Mrs. Walter Camp, who was reportedly as knowledgeable about football as was her husband, saw the completion. Even though the pass was completed by the team opposing Yale—Wesleyan, that is—Mrs. Camp is said to have been so excited that she jumped up and down on the sidelines. In the same year, Wesleyan was one of the founders



of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, or NCAA. Wesleyan also was a leader in calling for reforms to ease the brutality of the sport.

Andrus Field, the oldest continuously used college football field in the country, was the site of many of these football games. Wesleyan's first intercollegiate football game was played on the field in 1881, against the Massachusetts Aggies (now the University of Massachusetts). In 1897, renovations and enhancements of the field were funded by John Andrus, Class of 1862. Nevertheless, the field remained problematic. As one alumnus wrote, "Even at its dedication, the surface water could not easily find the drains, and in the wet season which followed, the diamond and track were not fit until the middle of May. Football was played, but often in inches of mud and pools of water."

Also in the mid-1890s, Wesleyan's athletic facilities were improved exponentially with the construction of Fayerweather Gymnasium. The push for Fayerweather

## COMPETITIVE SPORTS FOR WOMEN, ESPECIALLY BASEBALL AND BASKETBALL, WERE GAINING POPULARITY IN THE 1890S.

came primarily from alumni. They convinced President Bradford Raymond, who was not especially popular, that he could secure his legacy through a new gymnasium. Raymond listened, and, when industrialist Daniel Fayerweather left generous sums of money to several academic institutions, Wesleyan used its gift as seed money for the new gym.

Of course, football was not the only popular sport in this period. Baseball made a resurgence. At the invitation of Amos Alonzo Stagg, the coach at the University of Chicago, a Wesleyan team played two exhibition games at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In the mid-1900s, Wesleyan's baseball team included two African American players. Initially, they were fully accepted team members, until an incident of discrimination occurred at Princeton. The Tigers refused to play against a team that included black students. The Wesleyan team finessed the situation by claiming that one student was Armenian and the other was the bat boy. The game went on. Not long after that, these two excellent players left the team. The exact

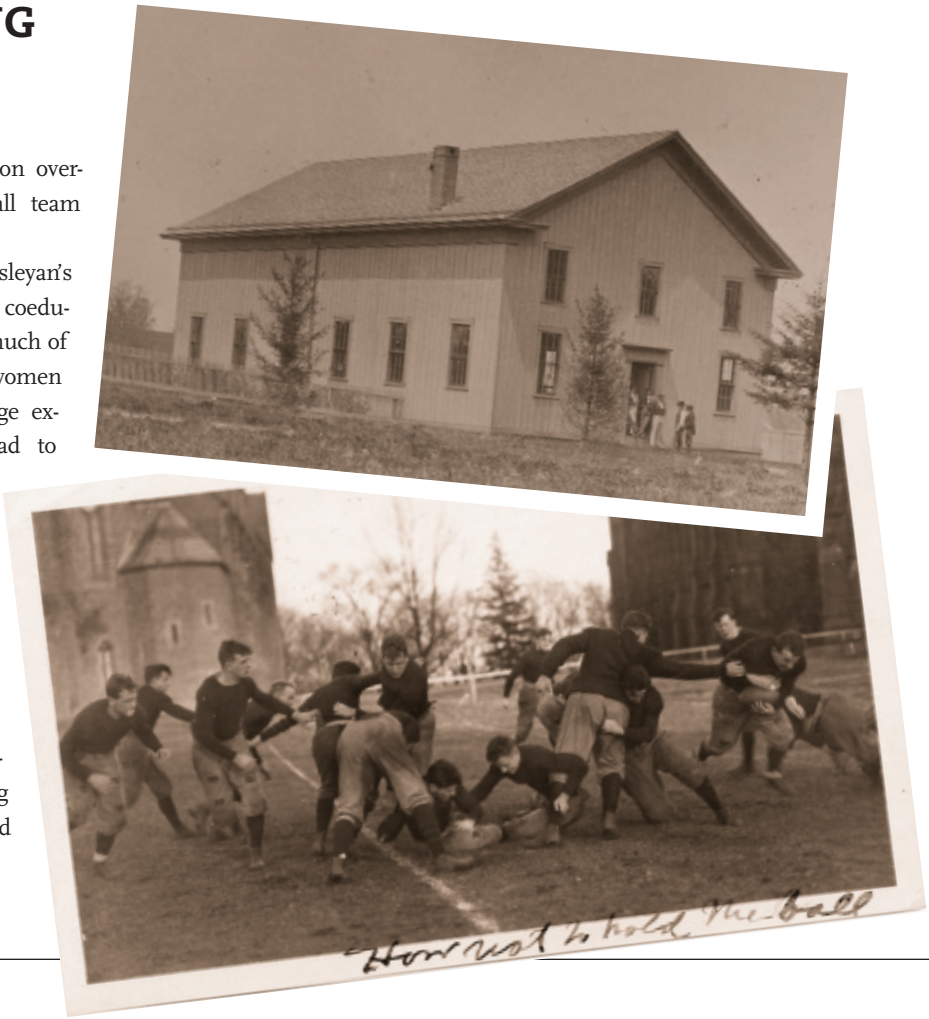
circumstances aren't entirely clear, but an alumnus of the time wrote that a college vote had been taken to remove them from the team.

Other sports became popular as well. Tennis was played on the university's "back lawn." Wesleyan students boxed in the old gym. Track, now a sport distinct from the foot-races that had been part of early regattas, rose in popularity beginning in 1891–92. Wesleyan's first intercollegiate track meet was in 1896, and it included bicycling. In track's early years as a separate sport, most of the team's expenses were met by individual subscriptions from members of the college body or townspeople. Fencing came on the scene at the turn of the century. And basketball, invented in 1891–92 by James Naismith, just up the Connecticut River in Springfield, Mass., took hold. Like so many other sports, basketball was first played by Wesleyan students in informal contests on campus. The Wesleyan student body initially voted against establishing an official basketball

feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, among others, founded a female athletic club in Providence, R.I., and wrote about the importance of physical activity for women. The Weswomen may well have had their own team.

By the third period of Wesleyan athletics, from the 1910s through the end of the 1940s, a wide array of competitive sports was an established part of college life, at Wesleyan and elsewhere. Beginning with World War I, strong connections were forged between athletics and the military. The idea that sports, especially football, would produce the successful businessmen of tomorrow was widely held. Building on the more generalized ideals of muscular Christianity, athletics became viewed as a training ground for leadership and teamwork, in addition to personal growth. Sports and recreation became a central part of the curriculum of public schools.

At Wesleyan, track, football, baseball, and basketball continued to thrive. Many athletic contests, at Wesleyan and elsewhere, drew large crowds of spectators. Games began to produce significant revenue, as urban alumni, who were used to paying to get in to city athletic events,



helped to support their *alma mater* by buying tickets. With the athletic programs in the four major sports on relatively firm footing, other teams were added. By 1927, Wesleyan boasted intercollegiate teams in soccer, cross country, swimming, track, baseball, tennis, football, basketball, and golf. Wrestling was added in 1930.

As the college grew and more sports were added, it was time for an expansion of Fayerweather Gymnasium. Henry Bacon, the architect of the Lincoln Memorial and numerous Wesleyan buildings, designed the addition, which housed Wesleyan's first swimming pool. By the mid-1930s, even with the addition, Fayerweather was no longer adequate for Wesleyan's athletic needs. The Cage, officially the Alumni Athletic Building, was built next to it in 1939. True to its name, it was funded largely by alumni contributions—another concrete reminder of the alumni's active participation in all aspects of athletic boosterism.

As in the 1880s, when lavender gave way to the more robust red and black, Wesleyan's nickname got an overhaul in the 1930s. Although generally known as "the Methodists" or sometimes "the Ministers," most Wesleyan students of the first third of the 20th century no longer identified strongly with the Methodist Church. After a long period of decline in the connection between Wesleyan and one of its original founding organizations (the other was the leader-

ship of Middletown), all official ties between the university and the Methodist church were severed in 1937. Wesleyan had become far more religiously diverse. Even though the majority of students were still Protestants, many were not Methodists, and, of course, there were Catholic and Jewish students and a few others on campus as well. After a particularly galling article in a Rochester, N.Y., newspaper in 1932 referred to "the mysterious ministers from Middletown," it was clearly time for a change! There had been a brief period around 1915 when students attempted to have a live bear cub and then a monkey—irreverently dubbed John Wesley, Jr.—as the mascot, but those efforts were short-lived. A particularly striking image from the 1925 inaugural issue of the college literary magazine, *The Cardinal*, offered inspiration and a dramatic red-and-black image. In 1932, the cardinal became Wesleyan's official mascot.

During the course of this period, professional coaches and trainers took the place of student, non-athletic faculty, and alumni leadership in athletics. Programs were better funded, and it was no longer a constant struggle for student athletes to save money—or find a personal benefactor—for needed equipment. Gone for good were the days of the old gym, with its lack of dressing rooms and showers. Student interest in all forms of athletics, both intercollegiate and intramural, was high. In 1938, a reported 90 percent of the student body participated in some form of sports.

But the glory days were still ahead. Immediately after World War II, Wesleyan's football team was most decidedly on top of its game. Coached by Norm Daniels, "Danny" to his men, the Wesmen enjoyed a phenomenal 23-game winning streak. Undefeated from Nov. 7, 1942, when they trounced Trinity, until a loss to Bowdoin at the beginning of the 1949 season, the football team was an enormous source of pride during this period. Because of the war, the varsity football program had been suspended from 1943 through 1945. Its revival, along with the unparalleled winning streak, put Wesleyan's team at the center of an exciting surge in school spirit and accomplishment.

Athletics continue to be an important part of life at Wesleyan today. While a few students may still get most of their exercise walking to class, many more participate in intramural and intercollegiate sports, and they work out at the greatly expanded Freeman Athletic Center. Alumni, of course, continue to support athletics in formal ways, such as the Athletics Advisory Council and the Cardinal Club, and in many informal ways. The strength of today's Wesleyan athletes is rooted in the first century of sports on campus.

*Suzy Taraba '77 is Wesleyan's university archivist and Head of Special Collections. A version of this article was presented at the Shasha Seminar for Human Concerns on Oct. 27, 2006. Images courtesy of the Wesleyan University Archives.*