



The Rise of Gridiron University: Higher Education's Uneasy Alliance with Big-Time Football (Cultureamerica)

Brian M. Ingrassia

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The quarterback sends his wide receiver deep. The crowd gasps as he launches the ball. And when he hits his man, the team's fans roar with approval—especially those with the deep pockets. Make no mistake; college football is big business, played with one eye on the score, the other on the bottom line. But was this always the case?

Brian M. Ingrassia here offers the most incisive account to date of the origins of college football, tracing the sport's evolution from a gentlemen's pastime to a multi-million dollar enterprise that made athletics a permanent fixture on our nation's campuses and cemented college football's place in American culture. He takes readers back to the late 1800s to tell how schools embraced the sport as a way to get the public interested in higher learning—and then how football's immediate popularity overwhelmed campuses and helped create the beast we know today.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Ingrassia proves that the academy did not initially resist the inclusion of athletics; rather, progressive reformers and professors embraced football as a way to make the ivory tower less elitist. With its emphasis on disciplined teamwork and spectatorship, football was seen as a "middlebrow" way to make the university more accessible to the general public. What it really did was make athletics a permanent fixture on campus with its own set of professional experts, bureaucracies, and ostentatious cathedrals.

Ingrassia examines the early football programs at universities like Michigan, Stanford, Ohio State, and others, then puts those histories in the context of Progressive Era culture, including insights from coaches like Georgia Tech's John Heisman and Notre Dame's Knute Rockne. He describes how reforms emerged out of incidents such as Teddy Roosevelt's son being injured on the field and a section of grandstands collapsing at the University of Chicago. He also touches on some of the problems facing current day college football and shows us that we haven't come far from those initial arguments more than a century ago.

The Rise of Gridiron University shows us where and how it all began, highlighting college football's essential role in shaping the modern university—and by extension American intellectual culture. It should have wide appeal among students of American studies and sports history, as well as fans of college football curious to learn how their game became a cultural force in a matter of a few decades.

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