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Acknowledgments

The research and writing of this book have taken me from New England to California, as well as from Illinois to Georgia to Tennessee, over the course of the last decade. A number of individuals and institutions have guided or assisted me along the way, and I would like to take the opportunity to thank some of them here.

This project began at the University of Illinois, where Kathryn Oberdeck was an excellent mentor. Kathy’s copious intellect and challenging questions helped make this a much more interesting book. Adrian Burgos, Bruce Levine, and Mark Micale read an early draft of the manuscript and gave crucial feedback. I particularly thank Chip Burkhardt for introducing me to the fascinating character of David Starr Jordan. Jim Barrett, Clare Crowston, Kristin Hoganson, Craig Koslofsky, Leslie Reagan, and Carol Symes also read portions of the project and offered comments, as did Will Cooley, Rebecca McNulty, Mike Rosenow, Jason Kozlowski, Greg Goodale, and Amanda Brian. My colleagues at Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta—a school with its own intriguing football story—provided a congenial and stimulating environment in which to finish the book. My fellow lecturers, including Robin Conner, Larry Grubbs, Scott Matthews, Mike O’Connor, Karen Phoenix, Mary Rolinson, and Walter Ward, helped make GSU a good place to work. Larry Youngs was kind enough to go above and beyond the call of duty by taking time out of his busy schedule to read the entire manuscript and provide helpful comments and encouragement. I also benefitted from feedback and advice from GSU colleagues Rob Baker, Isa Blumi, Michelle Brattain, Dennis Gainty, Cliff Kuhn, Joe Perry, David Sehat, and Kate Wilson. Most recently, the history department at Middle Tennessee State University has provided office space as well as a warm welcome to Murfreesboro.

The Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan funded this project through a Mark C. Stevens Travel Grant, which allowed me to spend an extended period of time combing the Bentley’s well-managed collections in Ann Arbor. Throughout the early stages of the project, the University of Illinois history department provided
substantial funding for travel, research, and writing. I particularly thank Fred Hoxie and Vernon Burton for their assistance in helping me secure productive time for reflection at key points in the process.

A number of scholars have contributed their insights over the years. In particular, Murray Sperber and an anonymous reviewer carefully read and critiqued the entire manuscript before it went to press. Alan Lessoff, editor of *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, provided thoughtful and incisive critiques on a related piece. At conferences and in correspondence, Victoria Bissell Brown, Steve Bullock, Court Carney, Daniel J. Clark, Elliott Gorn, Tim Lacy, Thomas Laqueur, Adam R. Nelson, Michael Oriard, Jeanne Petit, and David K. Robinson provided insights, critiques, and encouragement. While I may not have been able to take all of their advice into account—or to resolve all of their questions—I believe that the book is a better project for their input.

Staffers at a number of university libraries aided this project by making their collections accessible. I especially thank Karen Jania and the rest of the staff at the Bentley Historical Library in Ann Arbor, Polly Armstrong and Margaret Kimball at Stanford, and Michelle Gachette and Barbara Maloney at Harvard. David McCartney (Iowa), Brad Cook (Indiana), and Mary Stuart and Chris Prom (Illinois) were also very helpful. A host of other librarians and archivists, too numerous to name here, were instrumental in helping me gather the research, images, and permissions. The production team at the University Press of Kansas has been stellar, and I particularly thank editor Ranjit Arab for all of his efforts, as well as his consummate professionalism and his enthusiasm for the project.

On my journeys to archives and conferences, several friends graciously shared their homes. I especially thank Linsey Griffith and Ken Doughman in Columbus, Ohio; Josh Carter in Alexandria, Virginia; Jared and Edit Hansen in San Francisco; Zina Lewis in Iowa City; Marshal Cooley in Omaha; and Paul Ruth and Debbie Hughes in Lafayette, Indiana. Paul, who is not a historian but is a sports fan with a keenly analytical mind, helped me to rethink the motivations of stadium builders. I also thank Vivian Schatz of Mountain View, California; Neile Rissmiller of Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Kirk Buggy of Somerville, Massachusetts. All three allowed me to lodge with them for extended
research trips and listened to my musings; Vivian was kind enough to show me around the Bay Area and share her own recollections of the region’s fascinating history. My cousin and fellow bibliophile, Donald Barclay, hosted me for a weekend at UC-Merced and enthusiastically discussed the project. While at Illinois, I was fortunate to spend time with a fun and smart bunch of people who made my time in Champaign-Urbana memorable. They include Jason Hansen; Cris Scarboro and Jill Baer; Mike and Kate Pedrotty; Paul Ruth and Debbie Hughes; Steve Hageman and Kerry Wynn; Dave Hageman and Beth Savage; Jamie Warren and Melissa Salrin; Will Cooley and Melissa Kath; Greg and Miha Wood; Andrew Cannon and Rosanna Yeh. From Illinois to points as distant as Nacogdoches and Macon. Jason Tebbe (along with Lori Perez) and Matt Jennings (and Susan and the boys) have proven to be wonderful friends and interlocutors; for their camaraderie I am especially thankful. And although Nicole Pasquarello came into my life just as I was wrapping up this project, she has kept me inspired at times when inspiration was not always easy to come by.

To a certain extent, any scholarly work transcends the words on the page and reflects the story of the person who has written it. My undergraduate mentor, Junius Rodriguez at Eureka College in central Illinois, was the first person to teach me the historian’s craft; I hope that at least some of his efforts are evident in this book. But even before college, the experience of growing up in a working-class family fostered a distinct perspective on the relationship between institutions of academic life and the people located outside the metaphorical college walls. My parents, Mario (Marty) and Betty Ingrassia, provided years of love, support, and encouragement. Along with my older brother, Mark, they introduced me to libraries and the world of ideas at a young age. For these things, I am truly grateful.
The Leland Stanford Junior University opened near Palo Alto, California, on October 1, 1891. Under a clear blue sky about 5,000 dignitaries, reporters, and local residents gathered at an event the San Francisco Chronicle noted for its tastefulness. Leland and Jane Stanford, who endowed the university named in memory of their son, had been enriched by the railroad’s westward march, and the senator donated nearly $20 million and his roughly 8,000-acre stock-breeding farm to the project. To lead the enterprise, the Stanfords tapped an ambitious young administrator named David Starr Jordan, an ichthyologist who had studied with Harvard naturalist Louis Aggasiz and served as president of Indiana University since 1885. Jordan envisioned a great university at the Mission-style sandstone quadrangle then rising amidst the redwoods and coast oaks. Adhering to high academic standards, this university would support serious researchers—not just teachers—in a vast array of subjects. Although it would be coeducational, gender divisions would also permeate Stanford: “strong men” would make the university great and inspire male students, while women studying there (said Leland Stanford) could learn to be “mothers of a future generation.” Quoting Aggasiz, Jordan assured the assembly that the funding of many fields of knowledge would benefit society more greatly than all the money spent to improve the masses.¹

Despite this lofty rhetoric, some grumbled about the upstart university. One observer saw that it would rival the University of California, located on the other side of the Bay. The Stanfords, said such critics, might have done more good by donating their millions to the state university in Berkeley.² This complaint foreshadowed an athletic rivalry that blossomed the following spring in the city. On March 19, 1892, Stanford and Cal played their first football match at San Francisco’s Haight Street baseball grounds, near Golden Gate Park. Hundreds of students, both men and women, along with professors and their families, joined the sizeable crowd. Berkeley’s sophomores “secured a circus wagon and filled it to overflowing.” Bookmakers set the
Opening ceremony, Leland Stanford Junior University, October 1891. David Starr Jordan is visible underneath the parasol, to the right. Courtesy of Stanford University Archives.
odds at 5 to 3 in favor of the blue and gold, but the cardinal-outfitted team from Palo Alto defied the odds and surprised the estimated 6,000 spectators by winning, 14–10. Stanford’s opening ceremony the previous autumn was big news, but Stanford’s victory was perhaps even bigger, and it prompted a major celebration. Afterward, students from both schools convened at the Bush Street Theater near Market Street. Several “pretty maids clad in tights” danced on stage and blew kisses, to the young men’s delight. The San Francisco Chronicle reported that the noise was like “a couple of dozen steam calliopes all playing at once and out of tune”: “How did they yell and stamp and whistle and abuse their din-creating instruments, the fish-horns, the bazoos, the devil’s fiddles and the wooden rattles. They owned the theater, having bought it for the night, and they enjoyed their fill of harmless fun.”

These two very different events, Stanford’s 1891 opening convocation and the 1892 football game, were sides of the same coin. One celebrated research carried out by professional scholars in academic disciplines at dignified campuses and appreciated by a serious public. The other featured a strenuous, popular game that amused a motley crowd. Each event represented essential, if seemingly contradictory, characteristics of America’s emerging, industrial-era universities. These institutions, centers of a specialized modern intellectual culture, were based in an industrial society with a booming economy and an increasingly diverse population that embraced popular culture while constructing new hierarchies of class, race, and gender. In this milieu, much academic knowledge was socially useful, but it was not nearly as accessible or as visible as commercial spectacle. Athletics, especially the prototypical big-time sport of football, filled this cultural gap by making universities appear meaningful to the public. If Jordan’s speech at the beginning of the academic year outlined modern universities’ academic orientation, the raucous scene in San Francisco during the spring term indicated a significant way that many universities would interact with the public for generations to come.

This book argues that intercollegiate football was maintained and reformed in the early 1900s because many university professors and administrators, as well as writers and politicians, saw it as a cultural ritual that, besides training young men in the strenuous ways of modern life, would publicize universities and disseminate prevailing ideas
about the body and social order. In other words, they saw college sport as a type of middlebrow culture, a popular activity intended to make highbrow intellectual culture legible, or palatable, to the public. It would help to disseminate academic lessons or ideals to the American people. In reality, though, these turn-of-the-century academics actually just institutionalized athletics as a university-sponsored lowbrow cultural ritual with its own permanent place on college campuses. Sport thus became a centerpiece of the modern university. In making this argument, I also seek to shed light on America’s Progressive Era, the late 1800s and early 1900s period when reformers tried to solve or alleviate the problems of a rapidly growing, urban-industrial society. Football reform and the concurrent rise of an academic ivory tower represented Progressive Era tensions between order and disorder, as well as Americans’ love-hate relationship with chance, or risk. The game of football itself represented these tensions, as did the contours of the universities that embraced and reformed the sport. While Americans flocked to the gridiron, or football field, universities created a gridiron of research carried out in interconnected disciplines and departments. Football-sponsoring universities wanted to craft scientific scholarship that turned a blind eye to the commercial marketplace, yet still benefit from the risks of the market through semicommercial sport. As we will see, although many academics initially embraced properly regulated football at the turn of the century, many started to question this stance after World War I. In the post-progressive, interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s, the stereotypical ivory tower intellectual—alienated from the public and critical of popular sport—was essentially born.

It is important to note that while sport does not necessarily have to educate, nor must it attract paying spectators, both impulses have long been present in college football. This uneasy coexistence of pedagogy and market forces has led to a tension between reality and ideals, the seemingly paradoxical performance of a moneymaking cultural ritual by supposedly amateur students. This book analyzes football—rather than another game, such as basketball—because it was the prototypical big-time college sport: the lucrative, if not always profitable, spectacle that has dominated campus culture and the public’s perception of many American universities since the early 1900s. Indeed, the origins
of the term *big-time* help us understand college sport’s cultural meanings. At the turn of the century, the same time when college football emerged, diverse crowds flocked to entertaining vaudeville variety shows. The companies that sponsored these popular events were dubbed either big-time or small-time, depending on how far they traveled, the size of the cities or theaters where they performed, and the numbers of tickets they sold. Like the most famous vaudeville outfits, big-time football programs, by definition, attracted the most media attention, drew the largest number of paying spectators, and charged the highest ticket prices. Turn-of-the-century educators and scholars were both skeptical and optimistic about this cultural ritual, fearing that while football could injure players’ bodies, minds, and morals, with the proper reforms it might actually strengthen students and benefit the crowd of spectators. But once football became a spectacle offered to paying spectators, its meanings—and the meanings of the university—moved beyond academic control. Like vaudeville performances or circus troupes, both of which attracted diverse crowds, football did not necessarily carry the meanings its most articulate proponents proclaimed. While sport might teach students and spectators a type of mental, moral, or physical discipline useful in modern society, it could also be an entertaining spectacle with nonacademic meanings.

By setting intellectual history and sport history side by side, this book engages a key question of American history: What role do universities play in American culture, and what is the place of academic knowledge in a democratic society? I contend that institutions of higher education and research do not (and should not) constitute a so-called ivory tower hermetically sealed from outside influences. The lessons and spaces of the academy, which are incredibly relevant to the public, need to be accessible to the people they claim to serve. Yet it is folly to believe, as did some progressives, that a semiprofessional athletic spectacle such as intercollegiate football is an adequate form of public engagement.

We can see that some academics in the turn-of-the-century Progressive Era theorized ways that sport could make universities publicly relevant and visible, yet they merely created reforms that cemented football as a popular spectacle located uneasily between the academy and the public. This book, echoing historians who cite the anthropological
theory of Clifford Geertz when examining college football as a cultural ritual, goes one step further to show how that ritual serves as a lens through which we can better analyze modern higher education. It also helps to illuminate the complicated relationship between modern American intellectuals and the public. Like Geertz, who famously accompanied his field-study subjects in Bali as they ran from a police raid on an illegal cockfight, we should run with the scholars and educators who were trying to understand the meanings of college sport at the same time they were forming and adopting their own social and academic roles. By doing so, we can see that intercollegiate sport did not just originate as a popular appendage of the academy. Rather, it was the cultural cornerstone of the ivory tower, a popular ritual present at the creation of America’s research universities. However, unlike those who defend big-time college athletics because of its central importance to major institutions of higher education, I offer this argument as a way to analyze critically the history of sport and its place within the ivory tower—not as a basis for sports advocacy. Indeed, this book more closely supports those scholars, such as Murray Sperber, who critique sport as a “circus” that diverts attention from higher education. Taking this stance into consideration, though, it is ironic that Woodrow Wilson, who was then president of Princeton University, lamented in 1909 that academic “sideshows”—such as football—had “swallowed up the circus” of university life. This book shows that progressives such as Wilson unintentionally initiated a process by which the football field, for many Americans, became the academic circus’s central ring, while the classrooms and laboratories became the sideshows.

Upon close examination, it becomes apparent that the rise of big-time athletics was merely one symptom of a vast, nineteenth-century transformation in American higher education and intellectual culture. Before the Civil War, most colleges were local or regional institutions serving a small, usually elite student body. The curriculum, based in Christian morality, was designed to instill mental, moral, and physical discipline, so that male students could avoid the dangerous undercurrents of the capitalist market economy’s murky waters. In this context, antebellum educators proclaimed the benefits of supervised physical training, yet decried team sports as potentially commercial. But both education and ideals of physical culture changed during the Civil War,
when the federal government crafted legislation creating universities oriented around practical studies useful for building an industrial society. Shortly after the war, intercollegiate football competition began, with Rutgers and Princeton playing the first match in 1869. After 1880, Yale student Walter Camp (the so-called father of American football) reshaped the game in the image of an urban-industrial society. At the same time, universities were similarly retooling higher education. Aspiring American scholars traveled to Europe for academic training, and many returned with a new orientation. The typical industrial-era professor was not a teacher of discipline who taught students’ bodies and morals. He was a teacher in an academic discipline who taught students one field of knowledge.12

The modern academy, based at campuses located in places such as Chicago, Palo Alto, or New Haven, consisted of disciplines—“communities of discourse” or “epistemic communities”—that were geographically expansive, yet largely abstract, aggregations of like-minded investigators. The expansion of disciplines and the development of autonomous departments represented the emergence of a fragmented, modern intellectual culture. For a scholar to compete successfully in this world and prove that he (for most professors at this time were male) was not a confidence man or trickster, he had to prove the ability to advance knowledge and craft scholarship aimed at academic, not popular, audiences. This process maximized the chances of creating accurate scholarship, but it also minimized the chance that knowledge would be accessible to people outside a particular discipline. Fields of study thus became narrower even as the number of scholars and the range of institutions sponsoring research grew. These changes in modern higher education represented a pragmatic mindset. Echoing the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection, which claimed that species emerged from a struggle for existence among large populations with great genetic diversity, pragmatists posited that truth was created by groups of intellectuals collaboratively testing a range of competing ideas. Many academic laborers had to be engaged in the process of making knowledge, and this process was facilitated by the growing number of universities and the increasing ease with which scholars could travel and communicate with one another. Intellectuals soon formed networks of academic disciplines based in autonomous departments. Some even saw sport as a way
to unify fragmented campuses while protecting students’ fragile nervous systems from the excessive rigors of education.\(^{13}\)

In this modern intellectual landscape, universities—often seen as places of “manly”\(^{14}\) striving—competed intensely for students, resources, and academic experts. Football became a public display of universities’ relative strength and competitiveness, and it came to rival the commercial pastimes of professional baseball, the circus, world’s fairs, and urban amusement parks.\(^{15}\) Unlike other forms of popular culture, however, football was tied to institutions of higher learning that were seeking to produce useful ideas for an industrial society and train students in a wide variety of fields. At least in theory, said some Progressive Era psychologists and social scientists, football could teach young men physical, moral, mental, and social discipline; it might even offer instructive lessons to spectators. But soon, even football’s proponents started to question the utility of college sport, especially because of its vast, seemingly unchecked popularity. Their analyses put a new spin on pre–Civil War concerns about physical culture, while also embodying debates or concerns about physiology and social organization. In turn, these intellectuals helped shape turn-of-the-century reforms—including athletic conferences, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), professional coaches, and athletic departments—designed to protect, preserve, and oversee sport.

Yet ironically, at the same time scholars were creating reforms that would make the cultural ritual of sport safe for the academy, they were also crafting professional safeguards that would protect them from a disorderly society that embraced football. These academic reforms, which insulated scholars from potentially corrupting or damaging market forces, also had the unintended consequence of isolating professors from mainstream culture. In common parlance, America’s universities and researchers were building an academic ivory tower. Of course, some early 1900s intellectuals still sought to create publicly relevant scholarship, but they were not always successful. Indeed, the stature of most of the academics employing popular media to reach the public in the early 1900s paled in comparison to the visibility of the football spectacle.\(^{16}\) While academics still produced knowledge that was relevant to society, they had created structures of knowledge production largely inaccessible to most members of that society.
Football, though, was culturally accessible, and it was becoming more popular than ever. The game’s appeal grew tremendously in the post–World War I “Golden Age of Sport,” when Americans embraced bodily display and used their rising discretionary income and new media technologies to consume commodities of athletic celebrity. Coaches exploited this consumer desire by placing one foot in academic culture while grounding the other firmly in popular culture. They benefited from the orderly stability of the university while also prospering from the economic and cultural risks and rewards inherent in the consumer marketplace. College football’s paradoxical nature as a ritual located between the academy and commercial culture became manifested most concretely in campus stadiums, which, like the coaching profession, were a way for universities to maintain control—or at least the pretense of control—over athletics. Like the cultural marketplace it embodied, the football stadium was a liminal space, a ritual zone where meaning was malleable and represented a tension between structure and “anti-structure”—between rationality and irrationality. Campus arenas, though, neither ensured academic control over the spectacle nor cemented football as middlebrow culture. They were merely university-controlled spaces for popular culture. Indeed, it was in the 1920s, when stadiums were popping up on campuses all over the country, that academics started questioning sport. Their critiques showed that their understandings of universities’ public roles had changed. It was also apparent that some academics, in an attempt to reach out to the public sphere from which they had become isolated, had embraced new, or post-progressive, ideas about the appropriate form of middlebrow culture.

Concrete stadiums were a logical outgrowth of football’s early 1900s popularity, reform, and institutionalization. By the 1920s, sport was a big business in America’s universities, a business that nonetheless maintained an aura of respectability because it was supervised by trained experts who regularly proclaimed that sport was pedagogical in nature and pure in conduct. Big-time athletics represented modern universities’ flawed attempt to maintain a connection to the public in an era of intellectual fragmentation and isolation. In the spaces of athletic spectacle and consumerism, the lines between academic and colloquial blurred. Many universities both bought and sold the tainted
apple peddled by the serpent of popular culture, thus inviting the American people to engage in an awkward yet entertaining dance with academic institutions that, in many cases, only partially fulfilled the public roles they asserted. Scholars, administrators, coaches, and public critics can make any number of claims about the meaning of the spectacle occurring inside the stadium gates, as they have since the 1890s. But, ultimately, universities surrendered athletic control to spectators at the point of purchase, when ticket sales turned campus facilities into popular culture venues. Without a doubt, meaning is created in the arena, but that meaning does not necessarily reflect academic aims. Indeed, it is possible that Progressive Era reforms merely set in stone early 1900s ideas about football as an activity endorsing militarism and nationalism, as well as racial or gender hierarchies.

The intertwined history of football and the ivory tower is a distinctly American story that is nonetheless also immersed within global currents. The overseas origins of gymnastics, collegiate team sports, and much academic scholarship show the significance of transnational influences on American history. Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognize that big-time intercollegiate athletics is a phenomenon unique to a specific nation, resulting from a peculiar higher educational structure rooted in America’s political orientation and historical context. Since at least 1819, when Chief Justice John Marshall ruled in Dartmouth College v. Woodward that private corporations (including colleges) were not subject to state takeover or intervention, the United States has had a hybrid system of higher education. In this system a multitude of public and private institutions spread out over a large, expanding nation have existed side by side and competed with one another, with relatively little regulation or coordination by the federal government. In the late 1800s, when strenuous sport became popular throughout much of the globe, American colleges embraced football as a way to model this competitive spirit. The turn-of-the-century fascination with the muscular body, combined with America’s democratic ethos that education should be widely accessible, provided a social terrain in which college sport thrived. Although Progressive Era reformers looked to Europe (or European empires) for inspiration, the rules and programs they ultimately adopted were fundamentally national in scope. Football reform was a consciously American project
intended to strengthen the nation’s male bodies and preserve social hierarchy while at the same time attempting to protect universities from corruption and counteract the realities of modern intellectual culture.

The story of football reform is a national one, but we must also acknowledge regional variations in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Football was born and first became popular in the elite colleges of the Northeast, but it soon spread to other areas with their own distinct characteristics or outlooks. Universities in the Midwest, California, and post-Reconstruction New South provided the terrain where many scholars trained in the East or in Europe competed for academic jobs, and they were also the places where athletics became an autonomous and permanent part of the university system. At the turn of the century, when football had become popular virtually everywhere in America, the United States was still solidifying its identity and consolidating separate regions into its national structure. Progressive Era struggles over football’s meanings and forms resulted in the flattening of local differences, a process unavoidable when reformers attempted to shape national solutions for a large number of institutions located in diverse geographic contexts. After all, reformers were trying to create order by regulating chance, and they did so by making the policies of a wide variety of institutions conform to an acceptable common denominator. Although the most enduring reforms were national, several regional reforms—such as the Big Ten athletic conference in the Midwest and rugby reform on the West Coast—garnered varying degrees of success. To tell this regionally diverse story, this book draws upon published primary sources as well as archival sources at a number of major universities that invented both big-time football and modern academic research.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 investigates changes in American society, intellect, higher education, and sport from the 1820s to the 1890s, especially the shift from small colleges and gymnastics in the antebellum era to large universities and competitive team sports in the late 1800s. It also explores the meaning of higher education in relation to America’s shifting political economy, especially the rise of industry and cities. The second chapter examines how football grew in popularity during the 1890s, sparking debate about sport’s place within Progressive Era universities. Scandals, in-
juries, and deaths prompted both critics and supporters to ask if the
game was appropriate for colleges. Such debates resulted in major re-
forms, including the forward pass and the formation of the National
Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Chapters 3 (psychology) and 4
(social science) explore the intellectual basis of Progressive Era football
reforms, while juxtaposing shifts in academic culture against football’s
emergence. Academic psychologists, who were then creating a frag-
mented academic terrain of specialized disciplines, saw football as a
way to strengthen students’ minds and bodies. If properly regulated,
athletics could teach mental or physical discipline without damaging
the nerves. At the same time, some social scientists—who would soon
contribute to the progressive movement for permanent tenure and aca-
demic freedom— theorized sport’s effects upon modern morals. They
hoped to improve football by eliminating the crass professionalism
that seemed to limit its educational potential. One way they did so was
by proposing a national corps of coaches who would be respectable
professionals, not undisciplined, trickster journeymen.

The fifth chapter investigates the coaches and athletic directors who
turned sport into an autonomous university department tied to com-
mercial culture. Fighting popular perceptions of physical culture as a
field for confidence men, they dubiously promoted themselves as
teachers who used spectator sport to instruct players, students, and
spectators in the ways of physical, mental, and moral discipline. Chap-
ter 6 examines how concrete stadiums, built on many campuses in the
early 1900s, confirmed college sport’s place as a permanent university
activity that exploited consumerist desires, not necessarily pedagogical
needs. Although alumni and athletic boosters commonly claimed foot-
ball’s educational and military importance, they built huge stadiums
through fundraising campaigns that promised donors choice seats. The
seventh chapter unearths the story of post–World War I football crit-
cics, especially intellectuals who had second thoughts about college
football and the progressive-pragmatist universities created at the turn
of the century. Some college leaders in the 1920s and 1930s hoped to
abolish football and replace the fragmented curriculum with the liberal
arts and Great Books. Others, many of whom were affiliated with the
American Association of University Professors (AAUP), wanted to mute
football commercialism. Both groups had limited influence, though, be-
cause big-time sport had become a permanent part of higher education by this time. Largely alienated from the public, moreover, many academics had lost social cachet and thus were no longer able to implement sweeping changes in athletic policy.

By analyzing the history of big-time intercollegiate athletics in light of its cultural, social, and institutional contexts, we can start to unravel the complicated historical relationship between academic intellectuals and the American public. Leading universities embraced strenuous sport, a seemingly irrational, nonacademic activity, because it seemed to provide a useful service for increasingly specialized higher education institutions. Athletics, by exploiting popular culture for quasi-academic ends, filled a void between the academy and the public sphere. As a cultural ritual easily enjoyed by the general public, intercollegiate football was one part of the academy consistently significant to the crowd located outside the university walls. Sport thus enabled academic institutions to appear culturally relevant to nonacademic constituencies at the same time academic life itself became sealed off within departments and disciplines. In turn, college sport began to emulate university structures, and the experts who orchestrated it claimed academic space by purporting to teach discipline to athletes, students, and the public. Yet the meanings of athletics were not limited to those crafted by professors or coaches. Rather, spectators and sportswriters crafted their own sets of meanings. Unlike the clearly pedagogical field of physical education, intercollegiate sport was a commercial spectacle that primarily fulfilled cultural and institutional, not educational, roles. Ultimately, reforms implemented in the Progressive Era cemented big-time football as just one more distinct university department with its own unique standards—standards that often owed more to lowbrow, popular culture than to highbrow, intellectual culture. They helped turn the academic circus inside out, relegating Woodrow Wilson’s intellectual main tent to the fringes while bringing the athletic sideshow into the center ring. A cultural cornerstone of the ivory tower, big-time college football was a popular diversion that allowed America’s institutions of higher education to maintain public visibility at the same time they invented an esoteric modern intellectual culture not easily consumed by the American public.