

Faculty Views

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Why Yale Football Matters

By Jay Gitlin

1. You get to cheer for Yale. At least one day a year—more often if you know how nice it is to enjoy a beautiful fall day at the Bowl—you can be utterly partisan. You have a team (a really good team) to support, songs to sing, colors to dress in, a real live lovable bulldog, and friends to share the experience. Tangibles and intangibles, objects of your affection and an opportunity to be unabashedly subjective: cheer, scream, be a fan. Drop your guard and surrender your cool to the heat of the game with all its drama—you'll need the heat, by the way: Dress warmly. What's that? You have some political misgivings about utter partisanship? Hey. Yale has the best songs. We have a cute—yet pugnacious—mascot. What does Harvard have? A Puritan? Harvard truly sucks. Woof!
2. You have a place to go and a time to gather—now as undergraduates—and even more to the point—after you graduate. The Game provides a spatial and temporal focus—never more important than now in an age of episodic socializing organized around cell phones (but bring those cell phones—you'll need them in what promises to be a tumultuous wave of humanity.) As the words from “Bright College Years” remind us: “the shortest, gladdest years of life; how swiftly are ye gliding by!” I ain't kidding—and seniors will tell you—before you know it, your friends will be scattering, getting married—and, by the way, be there at all those important milestones—friendship acquires layers of meaning over time, and there's no substitute for actually sharing those times together. But where will you meet on less formal occasions? The Yale Bowl: central place, central time. You'll see everyone there: friends from your college, friends from other classes, even old professors. (wait—I don't like the sound of that—make that favorite professors.) The Game is a grand excuse for the coming together of Bulldog Nation, and it's wonderfully intergenerational.
3. Football is a team sport; football games are grand collaborations. Maybe you need to be reminded that being part of the group, being collegial, is an important skill, a valuable asset in any workplace, and a necessary counterweight in a world laden with self-defining activities, self-promoting applications, and the isolating pressures of LSATs and MCATs. I love having students in my seminars who are team-sport athletes or performers in ensembles. They have a sense of group endeavor; they bring social cohesion to the class—and that helps create an environment that promotes discussion and intellectual exchange. Fun, like learning, flourishes in a social context. Follow the flow of the defensive line, hold your breath when it's third and long, and laugh at the antics of the one and only Yale Precision Marching Band. It's a spectacle—and you're part of it.
4. The Yale-Harvard game—it's old school. Isn't that part of why you wanted to come here? Yeah, yeah—great faculty, incredible opportunities, wonderful students, unbelievable library. It's Yale, you nimrod. It's a four-letter word for status and cachet. And that cachet comes, in part, from history and tradition.

And I'll let you in on a secret. Yale may have been founded in 1701, but it became a national brand name from 1880 to 1920 when every high-school student in the country hung a Yale pennant on their wall and read books about Frank Merriwell and Dink Stover. Yale became a national brand name at precisely the same time that modern advertising emerged in the United States and other brand names such as Jell-O and Quaker Oats first acquired commercial clout.

And what was it that provided this amplification of the Yale name? How did this venerable institution become so instantly recognizable? Football, my friends. We invented the modern game of college football. Well, you and I didn't. Walter Camp did. That's right. It started here. As my former student, Steve Barrows '02 noted in his senior essay, "The Packaging Power of the Pigskin: Football at Yale and the Evolution of the Ivy League, 1872 to 1954," Camp's innovations included the scrimmage rule, the point-scoring scale, and having eleven players on a side. He publicized the game by writing twenty novels and an endless stream of articles in newspapers and magazines. He even coined the phrase and invented the concept of the All-American team in 1889—a great "promotional gimmick," in Steve's words. Yalies became football missionaries, establishing programs throughout the Midwest and coaching teams at Army and Navy, Dartmouth and Penn, Auburn and Southern California.

We even pioneered corruption in the form of so-called "tramp" athletes or ringers. The 1904 Yale captain, James Hogan, received free tuition, room and board, a ten-day vacation to Cuba, and "the exclusive commission to handle the products of the American Tobacco Company on the Yale campus." (See Benjamin Rader, *American Sports*, 137—what, you thought I could write this without having a footnote?) Yale-Princeton games were played on Thanksgiving Day in New York City and merited front-page coverage in the *New York World*. College football became big news and big business. The Yale bulldog became our trade character, the "Y" our trademark. Yale was America's first college football dynasty. From 1872 to 1909, Yale outscored its opponents 9,814 to 545.

So bundle up, cheer for your team, be part of the crowd and be proud of your history. Yale rules—literally and figuratively—and Harvard—well, you know—sucks.

GO BLUE.

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