



December 18, 2014

The Value of Ivy League Football – Part 1

As a Yale football player, you always want to honor and play well for the people who came before you...You're in a brotherhood and you play football for something that's bigger than yourself."—*Deon Randall*, Yale '15, first-team All-Ivy wide receiver and captain of the 2014 Elis

The 2014 Ivy League football game of the year? That's a no-brainer. Saturday, Nov. 22, Harvard Stadium. Yale-Harvard, played for the 131st time, with the title on the line. Along with a sellout crowd of 31,062, ESPN GameDay is in the ancient house, only the second time Corso and Co. have visited an Ivy venue. The contest between the offensive juggernaut Elis and all-but-impregnable Crimson is even better than the buildup, with Harvard scoring the winning touchdown with 55 seconds left on a 35-yard pass from quarterback **Conner Hempel** to wide receiver **Andrew Fischer**. A **Scott Peters** interception seals a 31-24 win, a championship and a third perfect season for coach **Tim Murphy**. Cut and dried, right?

Wait—let's think out of the box a little. Maybe the 2014 Ivy football game of the year was played at the Yale Bowl on Saturday, Sept. 27. An enthralled crowd of 34,142 sees the Elis outlast Football Bowl Subdivision foe Army 49-43 in overtime. In one of the epic performances in Yale history (which, let's face it, takes in a lot of yardage), running back **Tyler Varga** (the eventual Asa S. Bushnell Cup winner as Ivy Offensive Player of the Year) scores five touchdowns, including the game-winner on a three-yard plunge in the extra period. A jolt of electricity goes through press boxes from Hanover to Philadelphia. On this day, we are all Ivy Leaguers.

Too pat? Too obvious? O.K., here's one that on the surface seems crazy, because only 3,933 are on hand to witness it at Schoellkopf Field in Ithaca. The same Saturday that Harvard and Yale joust for the title in Cambridge, Penn and Cornell, both 1-5 in the league, play primarily for pride. Their traditional season-ender also marks the end of an era: It's the final game for Quakers coach **Al**

Bagnoli after 23 seasons. With wide receiver **Spencer Kulcsar** (who would be named to the All-Ivy first team) nabbing 10 receptions and scoring three touchdowns, Penn rallies for a seesaw 34-26 victory—the venerated Bagnoli's 111th league win, second all time only to the 135 of Yale's **Carmen Cozza** from 1965-96. The nine-time Ivy-winning coach gets the traditional Gatorade bath in what might be at once the year's most chilling and heartwarming moment.

Or...do we want to reward the triumph of hope over experience? Saturday, Nov. 15, Robert Kraft Field at the northern tip of Manhattan: 5,734 fans get their money's worth. Trying to snap a 19-game winless streak, Columbia rides the inspired play of quarterback **Trevor McDonagh** (17-for-29 passing for 183 yards and a touchdown) and workhorse back **Cameron Molina** (118 yards and two touchdowns, plus five receptions for 56 yards) to a 27-23 fourth-quarter lead. But the Lions are tamed by a 63-yard touchdown run by Big Red back **Luke Hagy** and lose, 30-27. Still, you would be hard-pressed to find a game that symbolizes the never-say-die spirit of Ivy play more than this one. You might have a half-dozen other possibilities—and you wouldn't be wrong. The 2014 season was filled with the elements that make Ivy football fun, fan-friendly and almost surreally unpredictable. On any Saturday you could marvel at the brilliance of Dartmouth's quarterback **Dalyn Williams**, receiver-returner **Ryan McManus**, and linebacker **Will McNamara**; the pulverizing power of a Harvard offensive line (maybe the best in Ivy history) anchored by center **Nick Easton**; and the season-long consistency of, among others, Brown linebacker **Xavier Russo** and Princeton linebacker **Mike Zeuli**. The Tigers star shared the Bushnell Cup as the League's Co-Defensive Player of the Year with Crimson defensive end **Zack Hodges**, a repeat winner. Let's also tip our helmet to Cornell defensive back **Nick Gesualdo**, the Ivy Rookie of the Year—already a good one. For most players, though, participation often would have to be its own reward. Take **Marcus Fuller**. On Nov. 8 at Brown Stadium the doughty Bears' senior quarterback went 27-for-39 through the air, with two touchdowns, the second pulling his team to within three points of Yale with 3:33 left. Though his team lost, 45-42, Fuller's performance should not be overlooked.

So how to make sure that Ivy football gets its proper due? I have been watching Ivy games since 1958, two years after the League's formation. This season, as I went around the league covering games for a weekly online report for *Harvard Magazine*, I worried about an activity seemingly in decline: intimate crowds, shrinking media coverage, a reduced footprint in an FBS-obsessed nation. How do we stay relevant, confer the proper recognition and maintain interest, to say nothing of balance?

The attention, justifiable and welcome, paid to Yale-Harvard nationally (and it was the day's most meaningful game) was a boost at a time when most of college football was fixated on the new, four-team FBS playoff. How do we build on that, especially at a time when the sport itself is under assault? I asked people around the Ivies—current and past players, coaches, administrators, alums, all fervent football fans—to tell me what we still have going for us.

**“The oldest football in the country is Ivy League football.”—*Lisa Carnoy*, Columbia ’89;
U.S.Trust division executive for the Northeast and Metro New York markets**

To add to what Lisa Carnoy says: In an early triumph of branding, the Ivy League teams also quickly nailed down the best uniform colors!

And those uniforms have not changed. In an era when conferences change makeup for the almighty TV dollar and sunder beloved rivalries, the Ancient Eight, as we are known, is going nowhere. We personify stability.

“We are eight schools that have maintained a set of rules that work for those schools,” says **George Pyne**, All-Ivy offensive lineman at Brown in 1987 and ’88 and former President of IMG Worldwide’s global sports and entertainment business. (Not incidentally, Pyne was the first inductee at the National Football Foundation’s newly formed Leadership Hall of Fame.)

“The Ivy League will never lose its values,” he adds. “Sometimes the values may be in vogue and sometimes the values might be out of vogue, but the league stands true to what it believes in—which makes it special.” That means that the experience of attending an Ivy football game is reassuringly consistent. “If I had to describe it to an outsider, I would say this: The games matter, people cheer, it’s very competitive,” says Pyne. “And that’s just fine.”

The group of close-knit, close-by and like-minded schools enjoys a comfortable and natural fit.

“We know each other very well and that makes it a family matter,” says Harvard economics professor **Jerry R. Green**, who was the university’s Provost from 1992-94.

Nobody else has our tradition. We might want to make even more of it. This year the Yale Bowl and Princeton Stadium each celebrated its 100th anniversary. Next year Brown has the centennial of its 1916 Rose Bowl team. We’re only five years from the 150th anniversary of the first college game—Princeton vs. Rutgers on Nov. 6, 1869—and the centennial of Harvard’s 1920 Rose Bowl appearance. When the time comes, attention must be paid.

“The whole league just reeks of tradition and history,” says **Al Bagnoli**, who is segueing to Director of Special Projects in Penn’s athletic department. “We set so many of the parameters and rules of collegiate football. So the first thing that strikes you is, God, we’ve been playing Cornell for 122 years! Plus, the stadiums: Harvard Stadium, Yale Bowl, Franklin Field, the crescent at Cornell...”

Luke Tasker grew up in a big-time football family. His dad, Steve, was a seven-time Pro Bowl special teamer for the Buffalo Bills. Now Luke, a first-team All-Ivy wide receiver for the Big Red in 2012, is catching passes for the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the Canadian Football League. Still, his gridiron days by Cayuga’s waters are as meaningful as any other.

“There were good athletes in the League,” he says. As his career proceeded, he became aware of the past. “You don’t want it to sound like it’s an old thing or a dead thing, but you can’t overlook how interesting the tradition is in Ivy League football,” Tasker says. “In four years you make two road trips to every Ivy League school. Each has a unique feel about its stadium and campus. Apart from football, there are those schools’ impact on the history of the country. You feel like you’re part of a storied tradition and you’re just the next step. That was always kind of neat to me.”

Quinn Epperly came to Princeton from Knoxville, Tenn., where the SEC rules. He admits he knew very little of Tiger history—which he is now part of, having this year concluded a career that includes having been the 2013 Ivy Offensive Player of the Year. During his time at Old Nassau, “each year we’d hear people speak of tradition,” Epperly recalls. “The passing of [1951 Heisman winner] **Dick Kazmaier** during my junior year—I think that really kind of put things in perspective... You got a real picture of Princeton football—an idea what it means to put on a Princeton jersey and how special that really is.”

Matt Koran is another who came to the league from outside—in his case, Joliet, Ill., which is Big Ten country. Now an All-Ivy linebacker and Harvard’s captain-elect for 2015, he’s a convert.

“The tradition and history of Ivy football is rich and something that all of us players are aware of,” he says. “The fields that we play on serve as constant reminders of this. When walking around the stadiums, we look around and see numerous historical engravings and dedications that date back to the late 1800s. This helps us in remembering that the game is bigger than ourselves, and that although players and coaches may change, the tradition and history of Ivy League football will always remain.”

http://www.ivyleaguesports.com/information/authentic_ivy/2014-15/The_Value_of_Ivy_League_Football_--_Part_1