

### **The Role of SIDs in College Football**

The University of Michigan sports information office currently consists of eight full-time staff members, two full-time interns, and ten student assistants to handle 25 sports teams. Before Fielding H. Yost arrived in Ann Arbor in 1901, there was no media relations department much less a single PR staffer to promote the university's athletics. Since the inception of the sports publicity agent in the early 1900s, the fundamental job responsibilities and goals remain the same but how these responsibilities get accomplished differ from today's modern press agents. Sports information directors (SIDs) in the first half of the twentieth century played a particularly important role in the popularity and development of college football.

One could argue that Walter Camp, the founding father of football, was the first part-time publicity man for college football, as he needed to promote the sport in order to foster the acceptance and spread of the game. In addition to creating the rules and scoring system, Camp came up with the concept of All-America. *Collier's Weekly* later "showcased the All-American team as an annual feature" and it became the "highest accolade to be won in college football" (Oriard, 47). In addition, he wrote numerous books including *Football Facts and Figures*, which glorified football and helped stave off those individuals opposed to football in its early – and more brutal – days (Watterson). As Professor Bacon discussed in class, the men credited as one of the key influencers on the game were known for their ability to schmooze with university presidents and a half hour later could hold a team meeting with tough college student athletes. Camp wrote about the efforts he made to establish football in the 1880s, saying he "undertook, the then extremely unpleasant task of begging for space in daily papers, weekly periodicals, and magazines in which to exploit the advantages of the

sport” (Oriard, 50). Camp’s ability to effectively communicate via the written word as well as verbally helped to accelerate the spread of the game.

In the early 1900s, it was the coach who had to promote his team if he wanted any media coverage. Coaches like A.A. Stagg at Chicago and Fielding H. Yost at Michigan initially acted as the team’s publicist, speaking to crowds at events and reporters about his team. Similar to Walter Camp, Yost wrote a book entitled *Football for Player and Spectator* and gave copies of his book to reporters for review (Marrs). In addition, Yost wrote a variety of articles for newspaper, “some of them ghost written” (Marrs, 159). When Yost learned that an announcement naming the conference commissioner was imminent, he sent a letter to the Ohio State University’s athletic director, asking for copies of the press release so that he could distribute the release to the Detroit media (Marrs).

Yost later hired Philip C. Pack in 1925 to act as a part-time press agent for the athletic department (Perry). Yost charged Pack with two sizable projects during his tenure at Michigan. First, Pack “helped publicize the opening of the field house and gathered testimonial materials about Yost for the dedication” (Marrs, 170). Pack then focused on publicizing the fundraising drive for the football stadium construction. In addition to these two major projects, Pack’s job included many of the responsibilities held by the modern SID including creating game programs, writing press releases, and managing the press box (Marrs). Michigan named Pack to its first SID post, but the Wolverines were not the first to create the position.

Alma College athletic director W.C. Bleamaster thought his athletics deserved more publicity than his team received so he asked Homer Dunham to come on board as the “school’s official athletic news correspondent” and gave Dunham a scholarship for the

position (Marrs, 125). Dunham initially began as part-time help in 1912, but eventually became a full-time staffer before retiring 50 years later, tabbed as the first college athletic publicist (Marrs). Most of the part-time publicity agents hired by a variety of coaches in the 1910s and early 1920s were either students or recent graduates and usually were an editor for his school's publication (Marrs).

Full-time help started making an appearance by 1925 when six Big Ten schools had someone in that position, and "all but one took the step before the end of the 1930s" (Marrs, 150). Mike Tobin became, arguably, the first full-time athletic publicist when Major Griffith appointed him to the position in 1922 (Marrs). Many view Tobin as a pioneer and innovator in sports public relations because of the many firsts he committed, including the first to bring a typewriter to the press box, first to tabulate statistics and make them available to reporters by the end of the game, first to serve refreshments to media, first to install a direct phone line from the field to the press box, and the first to hire a supporting staff (Marrs). For all these firsts, Marrs argues that "Tobin was the model of the modern athletic publicist" and Tobin's innovations are present in every press box across the country today (Marrs, 198).

As time passed, sports information directors became more specialized. Jack Townsley, who is the stepson of former Michigan SID Les Etter, said, "During the summer and fall, it was all football. In late fall and winter, it was basketball. In those days, hoops weren't as important as it is now. It was played in Yost Field House and hockey was less significant" (Townsley). Today, SIDs at larger universities each handle one to three sports with every sport covered by a member of the media relations staff.

Notre Dame's head coach Knute Rockne craved recognition by the press, particularly media from the East Coast. As a result, Rockne befriended sportswriters and tried to

manipulate the press “by giving them blocks of tickets and arranging for them to speak at postseason banquets and to referee Notre Dame games” (Oriard, 128-9). He coached his student publicity agents, the first of which started in 1920, with the goal of grabbing the attention of the New York media and ultimately a national presence. When many college football coaches were wary of radio, Rockne saw the publicity value of radio broadcasts and eagerly agreed to broadcast the Penn State-Notre Dame game when WGN asked him in 1926 (Smith).

In addition to coaches hiring press agents to raise awareness of their programs, the surge in the popularity of sports journalism boosted the profile of college football. Historians frequently reference the 1890s and into the early 1900s as the golden age of print because advances in technology reduced costs and allowed anyone to purchase a newspaper (Oriard). Other than university students, faculty, and alumni, college football started out as just a blip on the radar. In fact, college football’s popularity only started growing when football filled the void left in newspapers during the horse racing and baseball off-seasons (Oriard). Today, articles covering college football draw in readers, but that was not the case in the early days when reporters had to glamorize the sport in order to create an audience (Oriard). By 1929, a survey found that “one in four readers bought the newspaper for the sports section,” while later surveys revealed that about seventy-five percent of male readers after World War II read the sports section (Oriard, 25).

Not every university employed a sports information director in the first half of the twentieth century, but those that hired an SID in the early days influenced the evolution of

the field. Not only did these pioneers mold the SID career, but also the development and commercialization of college athletics.

ND coach Knute Rockne hired Arch Ward in 1920 as his first publicity agent with the title of official news correspondent. Rockne created the position because he “was dissatisfied with his inability to assure the quality or content of the correspondent-generated news that was appearing in the press” (Marrs, 85). As a part-time publicity agent, Ward also attended classes at Notre Dame under a scholarship covered by Rockne. Ward’s biggest impact on college athletics happened once he left Notre Dame to write for the *Chicago Tribune*. Previously, sports publicists grew frustrated with the American College Public Relations Association (ACPRA) because its annual meetings occurred in the middle of basketball season. In 1954, Ward invited college sports publicity agents who belonged to ACPRA to meet in Chicago during the summer and attend the College All-Stars game that Ward created (Marrs). The group founded the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) organization three years later, which created the concept of Academic All-America in the following decade. Ward referred to Notre Dame as the ‘Fighting Irish’ in his reports for the *South Bend Tribune*, but the moniker did not catch on until his successor, Francis Wallace, popularized it.

Wallace learned early on from Rockne the importance of the New York media and his responsibilities as a part-time student publicity agent geared toward the goal of reaching New York. Rockne once explained to Wallace: “New York is the heart of the matter. That’s the big time. When they start noticing us there, everybody else will fall in line” (Sperber, 145). During his time at Notre Dame, Wallace used ‘Fighting Irish’ in his dispatches and took it with him to New York after he graduated in 1923 (Sperber). He used the nickname to refer to

Notre Dame in his first job with the *New York Post* and then brought it with him to the *New York Daily News* (Sperber). The mass audience of the *Daily News* created greater acceptance among other media and the public for the ‘Fighting Irish’ moniker and the nickname eventually stuck (Sperber).

Before Rockne hired Joe Petritz as Notre Dame’s first full-time publicity man, he brought George Strickler on board. The book *No Cheering in the Press Box* argues that Grantland Rice’s lead on the Four Horsemen is the most famous in sportswriting history. Rice can thank Strickler for commenting to reporters during intermission on how the Notre Dame backfield was playing just like the Four Horsemen, which are “the personifications of the biblical apocalypse – the plagues of war, famine, pestilence and death – visited by Notre Dame upon its foes” (Marrs, 149). Strickler brought even more attention to the Notre Dame program by getting a picture of the four players on horseback holding footballs to mimic the Four Horsemen image (Holtzman). The picture sold well across the country, reprinted in hundreds of newspapers to become an “artifact of folklore” (Marrs, 149). Strickler went on to serve as assistant to the NFL commissioner and later became the league’s first public relations director (Holtzman). He then left the league to work for the Green Bay Packers as the assistant general manager and public relations director (Holtzman). Not only did Strickler influence how the country saw Notre Dame and college football, but he also played an important role working in the professional leagues.

Tobin, the first full-time SID in the country, “charted everything [Red] Grange did and began establishing uniformity in football record keeping” (Marrs, 194). Not only did Tobin work to build up the 1924 Michigan-Illinois game at the new Memorial Stadium, but he also put his star running back in the national public agenda. Grange may be the first

example of an SID promoting his star athlete for public recognition, but he certainly was not the last. One study “found that Heisman voters and SIDs feel overwhelmingly that publicity is essential for candidates to be known and thus eligible, even though specific promotional publicity campaigns may or may not be decisive” (Marrs, 37). In 1984, a publicist at Southern Methodist University named Lester Jordan wrote over 100,000 words about Doak Walker, one of his football players, in addition to scheduling hundreds of interviews for him (Marrs). The effort paid off with “a color cover on Life magazine and the Heisman Trophy” (Marrs, 272). SIDs continue these promotions of individual star players today to raise awareness among voters for the Heisman Trophy, All-America honors, and more.

Sports information directors in the first half of the twentieth century played a particularly important role in the popularity and development of college football. Their counterparts in the latter part of the twentieth century still follow the basic fundamentals set forth by pioneers like Mike Tobin, but the manner in which they do so has changed. When Larry Kimball of Syracuse University retired after 38 years as an SID there he said, “I like to use two words to discuss sports information then and now, if you will, and the words are what and how. The what we do, I think, still remains somewhat the same today...in that we are basically in the communication business, but the how is drastically different – how do we communicate” (Marrs, 294).

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