



Walter Camp: Football and the Modern Man

Julie Des Jardins

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Americans are obsessed with football, yet they know little about the man who shaped the game to make it uniquely technical, physical, and 'man-making' at once. Walter Camp, the "Father of American Football," was the foremost authority on American athletics and arguably the greatest amateur American athlete of his time.

In *Walter Camp: Football and the Modern Man*, Julie Des Jardins chronicles the life of the clock company executive and self-made athlete who remade football and redefined the ideal man. As a student at Yale University, Camp was a varsity letterman who led the earliest efforts to codify the rules and organization of football-including the line of scrimmage and "downs"-to make it distinct from English rugby. He also invented the All-America Football Team and wrote some of the first football fiction, guides, and sports page coverage, making him the foremost popularizer of the game. Within a decade American football was an obsession on college campuses of the Northeast. By the turn of the century, it was a bona fide national pastime.

Since the Civil War, college men of good breeding had not a physical skirmish to harden them. They had grown soft, Americans feared, both in body and attitude. Camp saw football as the antidote to the degeneration of these young men. When massive numbers of college football players enlisted to fight in World War I, Camp held them up as proof that football turned men effective and courageous. His influence over the game, however, was not always viewed as beneficial. Under his watch, dozens of college and high school players were killed or maimed on the gridiron. President Theodore Roosevelt urged him to reform football to prevent administrators from banning it, but Camp was ambivalent about removing the very physicality that made the game man-making in his eyes. The criticism targeted at him over the aggressiveness of football still haunts the game today.

In this fast-paced biography, Julie Des Jardins shows how the "gentleman athlete" was as much the arbiter of football as he was the arbiter of modern manhood. Though eventually football took on meanings that Camp never intended, his impact on the professional and college game is simply unsurpassed.

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