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From the Annals: Leonard Riley on Football

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From the annals

Leonard Riley on Football

While celebrating his presidency's 10th anniversary at the local First Baptist Church, on March 1, 1916, McMinnville College President Leonard Riley delivered the following judgment on football:

"When I was a lad in the country school there was one game which we played from morning until night, season in and season out.... That game was football played in the old-fashioned way when kicking the ball was the main part of the game, and the running involved developed both muscle and lungs. The following year the change was made to the modern method of playing the game. I went out with the rest of the boys and practised (sic) the new methods, and then I said to them: 'Boys, you'll have to excuse me; I think too much of my face, my limbs and my life to run the risk of having them ruined in any such game as that.'

"What I have seen of the game since that time has but strengthened my conviction that the modern game of football has no more place in a Christian institution, or a civilized country, than has bull baiting and prize fighting. One of the first recommendations I made to the Board of Trustees of McMinnville College was that the game of football as then played should be prohibited. It was unanimously adopted; and Professor Northup, who has been with the College for more than a quarter of a century, insists that few, if any, of the

actions of the Board of Trustees during this decade, have done any more for the improvement of the moral tone of the institution than has the elimination of this game with its spirit of rowdyism and brutality. In this respect I have seen another of my ideals of College life in such a way that neither the Trustees nor the Faculty would for one minute consider a reinstatement of the game in McMinnville College."

One "modern method" that distressed Riley was gang tackling, eliminated by rule changes demanded in 1906 by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. As Roosevelt's reforms took hold, the game's image was bolstered. Its revitalized boosters included McMinnville College's male students, who regularly lobbied to reinstate football. Their wish was granted in an announcement at chapel on Jan. 10, 1922. This welcome word was superseded that day by even better news in the announcement of Mrs. Linfield's bequest and the name change for the college.

Given the timing of its reinstatement, the opponents of football, including Riley, may have focused as much on its cost as its morality. Still, in Riley's defense, Roosevelt's reforms did eliminate much "rowdyism and brutality" from the game.

— Marvin Henberg

(Editor's Note: This vignette is a glimpse back through 150 years of history as Linfield approaches its sesquicentennial in 2008. Marvin Henberg, professor of philosophy, is writing an illustrated history titled "Inspired Pragmatism: An Illustrated History of Linfield College." Barbara Seidman, dean of faculty, is editing the text and will write an afterword for the book. The book will be available this fall.)



1922 football team (Rob Reynolds photo reproduction)