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THREE AND OUT

**RICH RODRIGUEZ
AND THE
MICHIGAN
WOLVERINES**

IN THE CRUCIBLE OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL



JOHN U. BACON

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||||| 1 LEADERS AND BEST

This is a story that could happen only in America.

When you travel abroad you quickly realize it is impossible to explain why a university would own the largest stadium in the country. It is, literally, a foreign concept, one as original as the U.S. Constitution.

Indeed, it was Thomas Jefferson who drafted the Northwest Ordinance, providing for the funding of public schools and universities in the states that now constitute most of the Big Ten. “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” The idea is so central to Michigan’s mission—even its very existence—it is engraved on the façade of its central building, Angell Hall.

If Ken Burns is right that the national parks are “America’s best idea,” our state universities—another uniquely American concept—might be a close second. The United States has spawned more colleges and graduates per capita than any other country in the world and created college towns rising out of cornfields, another American phenomenon.

Ann Arbor’s founders, in an effort to attract settlers and make money on their real estate venture, first bid for the state capital—and lost to Lansing. Then they bid for the state penitentiary—and lost to Jackson. Finally, they bid for the state university—and won, the best bronze medal ever awarded a brand-new town.

But as the university grew, Ann Arbor experienced problems common to all college towns. Put thousands of healthy young men in one place with

little adult supervision, and all that testosterone has to go somewhere—which explains why the game of football was born and raised not in the city or the country but on college campuses.

Football was already so popular at Harvard by 1860 that the school's president felt compelled to ban it for being too violent. That, of course, only piqued the young men's desire to play it. When Rutgers played the College of New Jersey—now called Princeton—on November 6, 1869, the game was a little different from the one Michigan and Connecticut would play in 2010. In the 1869 version, each team had twenty-five men who played the entire game and, because they hadn't yet conceived the forward pass, engaged in a glorified melee.

Rutgers actually won 6–4, marking the first time Rutgers was the nation's top-ranked team—and the last. When Princeton beat Rutgers in the rematch a week later, Rutgers's brief moment at the summit was over.

The college boys that day could not have imagined that their wide-ranging scrum would become one of their nation's most popular spectator sports—a billion-dollar American obsession worthy of stadiums holding over one hundred thousand people, with luxury boxes that would start at \$55,000 per season. But that's exactly what they set in motion that day. They also started something the students, the alumni, and the reporters would love—and the university presidents would hate just as much.

Just two years after that first game, Andrew Dickson White—who had left his post as a history and English professor at the University of Michigan to become Cornell's first president—received a request from a group of students to take the train to Cleveland to play football against Western Reserve (now Case Western). He famously replied that he would not permit thirty men to travel two hundred miles just to “agitate . . . a pig's bladder full of wind!”

But he was fighting a losing battle. Ten years later, in 1879, a group of Michigan students traveled to Racine, Wisconsin, to play the first football game on the far side of the Alleghenies—or “the West,” as they called it then. The Wolverines won 1–0, starting a tradition that, 131 years later, would be described by athletic director and former regent Dave Brandon as the most prominent feature of Michigan's “brand.”

The college presidents responded to this relationship like fathers of debutantes who find their pristine daughters falling for hooligans. It was not simply a Hatfield marrying a McCoy. It was a *Vanderbilt* marrying a McCoy.

If they could have annulled the marriage, they would have. But, conceding the impossibility of preventing this ungodly union of academics and athletics, Purdue president James H. Smart wrote to the presidents of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Northwestern, Chicago, and Michigan, inviting them to meet on January 11, 1895, in a wood-paneled room at the Palmer House in Chicago. If they were going to have to put up with this shotgun marriage, they at least wanted to put down some ground rules.

They started with the premise that they, the presidents, should have complete authority over all sports played in their universities' names, and then created rules ensuring that everyone on the field was a bona fide student and an amateur athlete—issues schools still struggle with today.

This was a “radical departure from the prevailing norm,” former Big Ten commissioner Tug Wilson wrote, and he was right. The Big Ten was the first major organization of its kind, predating high school associations, other college conferences, and even the NCAA itself. Soon the rest of the country’s colleges and high schools followed suit, forming their own leagues based on the Big Ten model.

The American marriage of academics and athletics—something no other country in the world would even consider—had been officially consummated.

It’s been a rocky relationship, to say the least, and presidents to this day chafe at having to work with the unruly beast down the street. But it’s lasted over a century, and even a trial separation seems out of the question.

Of the seven schools that day that created what would become the Big Ten, one would emerge as the conference’s crown jewel. But if the Big Ten penned its Magna Carta at the Palmer House in 1895, the Wolverines would wait three more years to craft their constitution. They needed inspiration, and they found it in the Big Ten’s first rivalry.

When John D. Rockefeller decided to bankroll a university to open in 1892, he called it the University of Chicago and hired Yale’s William Rainey Harper to become the school’s first president. Neither Rockefeller nor Harper was stupid. They knew the fastest way to put their new school on the map was to make a splash in the sensation sweeping the nation: college football, thereby becoming one of the first schools to leverage the game to enhance its academic reputation.

One of President Harper’s first hires was his former Yale Hebrew student Amos Alonzo Stagg, a man trained by Walter Camp, the father of football and the author of its first rule book. The investment in Stagg

quickly paid off when he turned the Chicago Maroons into a regional power, strong enough after just four seasons to join the nascent Big Ten.

Three years later, on November 24, 1898, in front of twelve thousand fans at Chicago's Marshall Field, the undefeated Wolverines took on the 9–1–1 Maroons to see who could claim their first Big Ten title. Late in the game, Michigan's little-used Charles "Chuck" Widman broke loose for a 65-yard touchdown, followed by Neil Snow's crucial two-point conversion—just enough for a 12–11 victory and the first of Michigan's forty-two conference crowns.

"My spirits were so uplifted that I was clear off the earth," said Michigan music student Louis Elbel. The surprising finish started a song in his head. Some accounts have him finishing the melody by the time he got to his brother's house, others on the train back to Ann Arbor. Either way, Elbel worked with amazing efficiency—perhaps because he seems to have lifted the renowned melody of "The Victors" from "The Spirit of Liberty," which his friend George Rosenberg had copyrighted seven months earlier.

But no one questions that the powerful lyrics are all Elbel's. A year later John Philip Sousa performed the song in Ann Arbor and reportedly declared it "the greatest college fight song ever written."

One overlooked aspect of "The Victors" separates it from all others. Most school songs urge their teams to make a great effort in the hopes of winning. "On, Wisconsin!" ask the Badgers to "fight on for her fame . . . We'll win this game." "The Buckeye Battle Cry" exhorts the "men of the Scarlet and Gray . . . We've got to win this game today."

"The Victors," in contrast, celebrates a contest already won.

*Hail! to the victors valiant
Hail! to the conqu'ring heroes
Hail! Hail! to Michigan
The leaders and best!*

*Hail! to the victors valiant
Hail! to the conqu'ring heroes
Hail! Hail! to Michigan,
The champions of the West!*

There is no wiggle room in those words. No hoping, no wishing—just a clear-as-day declaration that the Michigan Wolverines are "the leaders and best," and everyone else will simply have to deal with it.

Of all the trappings of Michigan's vaunted tradition, the first is something you cannot see or touch. It's just a song. But more than the marching band, big house, or banner, "The Victors" established the most important element of Michigan's identity—confidence—which served as the North Star for all that followed.

He wasn't raised in Michigan, he didn't play there or even take a single class in Ann Arbor, but no one did more to shape Michigan's reputation for excellence—and arrogance—than Fielding H. Yost.

The son of a Confederate veteran, Yost was born in Fairview, West Virginia, in 1871, about five minutes from Rodriguez's future home. He earned two degrees from the state's flagship university in Morgantown before embarking on his coaching career. After one-year stints at Ohio Wesleyan, Nebraska, Kansas, and Stanford, by December 1900 Fielding Yost was out of a job yet again, because no one had the wealth or the will to hire a full-time football coach.

Michigan's first athletic director, Charles Baird, wrote to Yost: "Our people are greatly roused up over the defeats of the past two years," which was an interesting comment for a school that had just gone 7–2–1 and 8–2, establishing another Michigan tradition: high expectations and the impatience that comes with them.

Baird assured Yost that "a great effort will be made" and backed up his promise with a \$2,300 salary for just three months' work, far more than a full professor made. Yost snatched up the offer.

Yost had never been to Ann Arbor until the day he showed up to start his new job. He pronounced his adopted team "Meeshegan," which legendary broadcaster Bob Ufer mimicked so often ESPN has picked up the habit.

The day Yost arrived, he grabbed his bags and literally ran from the station up State Street to the campus. When he got there, a reporter asked him how the Wolverines would do that season. Yost hadn't yet seen a single player, but that didn't stop him from predicting, "Michigan isn't going to lose a game."

Then he delivered for fifty-six consecutive contests, going undefeated in 1901, 1902, 1903, and 1904, winning national titles every year—the first team other than Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Penn to win even one—while beating opponents by scores like 119–0, 128–0, and 130–0, that last one against West Virginia, his beloved alma mater.

According to Yost's biographer John Behee, "No other coach and no other football team ever so dominated their era as Fielding H. Yost and the Michigan teams for 1901–05." And no other coach ever will.

But all was not well with this new game. Incredibly, in 1905 alone, eighteen college students died on football fields.

President Theodore Roosevelt called the coaches and presidents of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton to the White House that year to urge reforms to save the sport. This meeting gave birth to the Intercollegiate Athletic Association, which we now call the NCAA.

Yost's best counter to the many critics of football, however, might be his greatest gift to the game: In an era when football was considered a social ill run by renegade coaches, Yost argued that, when properly coached, football developed valuable qualities in students that the classroom could not. The belief that football builds character has been repeated so often it is now a hoary cliché, but when Yost espoused it, it was a fresh, even radical idea.

But that wasn't enough for James B. Angell, Michigan's longest-serving and most important president. He took office in 1871—eight years before Michigan's first football game—and served until 1909, charting a course for Michigan that the university still follows and other schools adopted. A Brown University alum, Angell's vision for Michigan was to create a university that could provide "an uncommon education for the common man."

He was thrilled to see the sons and daughters of farmers and factory workers becoming philosophers, but he couldn't stand the game of football they loved so much. Having seen firsthand the hysteria the sport created on campus, Angell wrote his fellow Big Ten presidents during that momentous 1905 season with great concern: "The absorbing interest and excitement of the students—not to speak of the public—in the preparation for the intercollegiate games make a damaging invasion into the proper work of the university for the first ten or twelve weeks of the academic year. This is not true of the players alone, but of the main body of students, who think and talk of little else but the game."

Sound familiar?

If the University of Chicago's new president saw football's unparalleled ability to market a private school to the public, Michigan's failed to see its value in pitching his public school to the taxpayers, who picked up over 90 percent of the budget until the 1960s, missing the point that for many Michiganders, there were few other reasons to support the state school.

Football, then and now, serves as the front porch for most schools, the one place on campus where everyone feels welcome.

As Notre Dame coach Frank Leahy said, “A school without football is in danger of deteriorating into a medieval study hall.” To which Bear Bryant added, “It’s kind of hard to rally around a math class.” Football matters.

Angell didn’t get this, but what really rankled him were the reporters and students who valued these “men of brawn rather than the men of brains,” and he warned his peers that, with so much money “handled for such purpose, the temptations for misuse are not wanting.”

Current college presidents know exactly what Angell was talking about.

Yost didn’t care. The minute he became Michigan’s third athletic director, in 1921, he was on a mission to construct the very best athletic complex in the nation—and because Baird had set up the athletic department to keep its profits, Yost had the means to do so. “We’ve got the first field house ever built on a campus,” former athletic director Don Canham told me. “We’ve got the first intramural building. We’ve got the largest stadium in the country. That was no accident. That was Fielding Yost.”

That demand had been boosted by Yost himself by winning titles and popularizing the forward pass in 1925 and 1926 with his famed “Benny-to-Bennie” passing combination: Benny Friedman tossing to Bennie Oosterbaan. The forward pass had been legalized in the wake of the NCAA reforms of 1905 to spread the players out and reduce collisions, but two decades later it was still used primarily as a desperation measure. Yost and his stars demonstrated it could be used as an effective, controlled tactic on any down from almost anywhere on the field.

Friedman took the weapon to the embryonic NFL, where he set a record of eleven touchdown passes in 1927. New York Giants owner Tim Mara took note and bought Friedman’s entire Detroit franchise just to get the quarterback. Friedman made Mara look smart when he shattered his own record with twenty touchdown passes in 1929. The NFL inducted Friedman posthumously to the Hall of Fame in 2005, along with Dan Marino and Steve Young, for expanding the forward pass that made those later careers possible.

Yost contributed more to Michigan’s tradition than victories, buildings, and innovations. When he officially retired in 1941, his admirers put on a tribute in his eponymous Field House, broadcast on NBC radio and titled “A Toast to Yost from Coast to Coast” (which was also the title of a popular song).

After the speeches, Yost said, “My heart is so full at this moment and I am so overcome by the rush of memories that I fear I could say little more. But do let me reiterate . . . the Spirit of Michigan. It is based upon a deathless loyalty to Michigan and all her ways; an enthusiasm that makes it second nature for Michigan Men to spread the gospel of their university to the world’s distant outposts; a conviction that nowhere is there a better university, in any way, than this Michigan of ours.”

Whether you call it confidence or arrogance, Yost had it and spread it.

Michigan hit pay dirt again when it hired another innovative outsider, Fritz Crisler. In 1938, after Crisler’s sixth season at Princeton, Michigan invited him to name his price—and he did, asking for complete autonomy over the team (he knew Yost had all but sabotaged his first two successors), the position of athletic director (effective when Yost stepped down), and more money than any football coach had ever made: \$15,000 a year. “I thought my terms were so far out of line,” Crisler confessed, “that they would be unacceptable.” But Michigan called his bluff, met his terms, and got a legend in the bargain.

During Fritz Crisler’s tenure as Michigan’s athletic director, from 1942 to 1968, the Wolverines won eighteen national titles, in everything from baseball to ice hockey to men’s tennis—plus two in football.

But it was as a football coach that Crisler made his greatest impact.

In 1945, thanks to the war, Crisler had to fill his roster with a bunch of seventeen-year-olds—no match for Michigan’s fifth opponent, the loaded Army squad, which was undefeated, ranked number one, and featured “Mr. Inside,” Doc Blanchard, and “Mr. Outside,” Glenn Davis, who would both win the Heisman Trophy.

Desperate, Crisler combed the rules looking for a loophole, and he found one in the substitution section. Before the war, players could enter or leave a game only once each quarter, but in anticipation of the player shortages World War II would create, in 1941 the NCAA started allowing players to come and go “at any time.” Eureka.

“Those three little words changed the game,” Crisler said. He divided his team into “offensive” and “defensive” units, creating the sport’s first specialists.

“It was no ingenuity on my part,” Crisler claimed. “When the other fellow has a thousand dollars and you have a dime, it’s time to gamble.”

The seventy thousand fans packed into Yankee Stadium were stunned

to see Crisler substitute freely—and even more shocked to see Michigan hold Army scoreless in the first quarter and trail only 14–7 in the third before the far more powerful Cadets settled matters, 28–7.

Afterward, it was not Army's victory—which was expected—but Crisler's strategy—which wasn't—that had people talking. Two years later, 1947, the press dubbed Michigan's offense the "Mad Magicians" for their Globetrotter-like ball handling in the backfield. On a single play, as many as seven players might touch the ball. "For Michigan's specialists," a *Time* magazine cover said, "poise, fury, finesse, utter abandon."

Crisler's invention helped Michigan win national titles in 1947 and 1948. The platoon system—the most revolutionary innovation since Benny-to-Bennie unleashed the passing game—caught on fast and also necessitated aggressive, year-round recruiting, something Crisler himself loathed.

But no one ever questioned Crisler's loyalty to Michigan.

"Tradition is something you can't borrow," he said. "You cannot go down and buy it at the corner store, but it's there to sustain you when you need it the most. I have watched countless Michigan football coaches, countless Michigan players call upon it time and time again. There is nothing like it, I hope it never dies."

Converts, of course, make the most fervent believers.

Crisler's successor as Michigan's athletic director, Don Canham, confessed, "I was not a popular choice to succeed Crisler. I think the average Michigan alumnus was saying something to the effect of, 'Who the hell is this track coach to take Fritz Crisler's place?'" The reason was simple: Canham's hiring marked the first split between the positions of football coach and athletic director since 1921.

But it worked exceedingly well. Canham modernized Michigan's marketing methods so dramatically that *Sports Illustrated*'s Frank Deford felt compelled to write a major feature on him in 1975—the same year Canham started Michigan Stadium's string of 100,000-plus crowds—which resulted in summer workshops to teach athletic directors nationwide how to emulate Michigan's success. Soon, every school was marketing their teams the Michigan way.

If Canham's marketing methods received too much attention, his hiring skills received too little. He had the uncanny ability to pluck talented young coaches from the collegiate minor leagues. This savvy approach increased the candidates' devotion to Michigan and decreased the amount of money Canham had to pay to get them there.

Nonetheless, when Canham hired Schembechler, Michigan fans asked, BO WHO?

Canham realized that Schembechler's current employer, Miami University, could have thrown more money at Schembechler. But, he said, "they couldn't compete with Yost's hole in the ground or with the prestige of Michigan."

Canham knew he was offering something special, and so did Schembechler. Although Schembechler made an ill-advised crack during an early speech about changing the team's funny-looking helmets (he maintained it was a joke, though others aren't so certain), he quickly received the help of Canham, Bob Ufer, and his predecessor, Bump Elliott. He learned Michigan's gospel and how to preach it.

When Schembechler and his assistants arrived in Ann Arbor, they had to dress in the second-floor locker room of Yost Field House, sit in rusty folding chairs, and hang their clothes on nails in the wall. "My coaches were complaining, 'We had better stuff at Miami,'" Schembechler said. "I said, 'No, we didn't. See this chair? *Fielding Yost* sat in this chair. See this spike? *Fielding Yost* hung his hat on this spike. And you're telling me we had better stuff at Miami?! No, men, we didn't. We have *tradition* here, *Michigan* tradition, and *that's* something no one else has!'"

Schembechler never introduced any eye-popping innovations like the forward pass or the platoon system. But he did plenty to advance Michigan's reputation for excellence, winning thirteen Big Ten titles in twenty-one years while running a famously clean program.

When Canham stepped down as athletic director in 1988, it marked the end of an era of unequaled steadiness and strength—sixty-seven years led by only three athletic directors, each one a leader in the field.

But after Schembechler succeeded his boss as athletic director—partly to ensure he could name the next football coach—it took him less than two years to realize that the new president, James Duderstadt, was intent on diminishing the AD position, and he quit.

"It didn't change until Bo left," Canham told me, "and then it changed almost overnight."

Those changes soon threatened the very foundation of Michigan athletics—and reverberated straight through the Rodriguez era.

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