

ALL AMERICAN INSANITY
(Originally published October 1962)

Over the past fifteen years we have hoped, in company with a few other unsophomoric minds, that with the development of professional football to its pinnacle of popularity and excellence there would be a gradual but natural decline in the emphasis on football at colleges and high schools to a point where sanity might prevail. Such a state already exists in the case of baseball where, as a result of longstanding professional competence, spectator enthusiasm and interest in the college and high school game have diminished to where the sport at these levels occupies the healthy place in extracurricular activity it merits: i.e. it is played primarily for the benefit and enjoyment of the students who participate.

So far, no such thing has happened to football in this area. If anything, emphasis on football and its associated hysterias (we now have squadrons of cheerleaders, battalions of baton twirlers and dancing girls) seems to be increasing—and evidently with the tacit approval of those advanced thinkers who direct our educational systems. It is discouraging enough to see this still happening in our colleges and to observe the steady growth of "big-time" football in our high schools, but it becomes disheartening, and a bit disgraceful, to witness it now blossoming in our elementary schools.

What brings all this to mind is that a son of ours, at the advanced age of thirteen who is interested in sports of all kinds, recently "went out for football" at one of our junior high schools—(whatever the terminology employed, this still means the 7th and 8th grades of elementary school). Our objection is not about organized and supervised football for 7th and 8th graders, but about the fact that in late August, some nine or ten days before the start of school itself, candidates for football were instructed to report for practice and told daily appearances were mandatory on penalty of being eliminated from the team.

There is no earthly reason why any grammar school, high school or college should assign enough importance to football or any other extracurricular activity such that it demands an extended period of "spring training" or a "summer camp" period of required practice. If, as professional educators may hold, this is an American heritage and part of our educational system, then football should take its turn and begin at the same time as other educational classes.

From considerable personal experience we know that young people derive equal benefit and pleasure in the competitions of equally matched team play, no matter what the degree of proficiency. This abnormal insistence and emphasis on the part of adults, who

should know better, on the production of athletic perfection in youngsters between the ages of 12 and 21 is ridiculous when viewed dispassionately. A team of 14-year-olds cannot possibly attain the competence of a team of 18-year-olds; a student body of 300 cannot hope to compete athletically against a student body of 3,000. The most technically perfect football team that any local high school could field would be run off the gridiron by an ordinary Auburn varsity. A superb Tech or Georgia eleven would be humiliated consistently by the Green Bay Packers. The point of our argument is this: games between teams where talent is equally available and that begin practice at the same time, preferably at the start of school, or even one or two weeks after the start of school, are just as interesting to the participants and their loyal-spectator supporters as are games between teams who have been forced to spend a half or more of a school year perfecting their limitations and ineptitudes.

There is no valid excuse for a school to schedule its first football game before the last week in September or the first in October. This is particularly true in our southern states where prolonged hot weather is the rule, and where the dangers of physical exhaustion and heat prostration are real ones. A regular schedule of six to eight games between schools located within a sensible radius of distance should be enough to satisfy a rabid fan or coach and could be completed easily within the months of October and November.

The great All-American insanity of believing that if something is good, twice as much is better, and that three, four or more times as much is better still, is a fallacy fostered by childish thinking. In their unwillingness to give up the dazzle of modern frillery, our public educators seem determined to avoid any return to basic book learning and discipline and seem satisfied to continue to produce mediocrity, immaturity, permanent adolescence and generations of happy adult imbeciles. They seem blinded to the fact that their own systems are suffering from the results of thirty years of this type of education now.

At a time when public, tax-supported education is under the strong glare of critical scrutiny (and deservedly so), all efforts should be directed toward improving the content and instruction in the basic and fundamental courses in our local schools. We think of fundamentals in terms only of English, mathematics, sciences, foreign languages, government and history—and that ALL of these, with minor variation, should be required study throughout ALL the years of pre-college education. There is very little justification for the hodgepodge of pap masquerading as education in our preparatory schools; and we feel strongly that there is little place for "electives" at a high school level, since few adolescents (not to mention college freshmen) have minds developed enough to choose what they should and need to study.

In such times as these when we cannot, or will not pay adequate salaries to devoted and qualified teachers, nor make the teaching profession rewarding enough to attract and hold capable individuals, it seems the height of folly for publicly supported institutions to be able to afford the large professional coaching staffs, the time and all the extra expenditure that go with the participation in colorful "big-time" sports.

We are all for physical fitness, for supervised and required athletics and for competitive athletics, both extra- and intramural, as part of the desirable associated activity of the regular school year. However, if after-school spring training and pre-school summer training are to be the order of the day, then we suggest that it would be more profitable for our educators to insist that the whole student bodies, along with themselves and the coaches, report for one hour of English grammar and composition practice each afternoon beginning in mid-summer. Anyone who fails to show up for practice automatically becomes ineligible for baton twirling and will have all of his Mad Comics confiscated.