

HARVARD'S GREATEST ?

By G. W. Axelson

(Editor's Note – The following article originally appeared in an Eastern newspaper of 1913.)

Looking for the greatest football player at Harvard is attended with as much difficulty as picking the most beautiful woman—there are too many of them, and then the point of view might differ. Harvard, being one of the first American colleges to worship at the shrine of the pigskin, it naturally held the bulge on many other schools in the development of gridiron stars. So we find back in 1875, practically the first year of football at Harvard, C.H. Leeds kicking goals against Yale, and the rules gave him a choice between a punt and a drop kick.

History does not tell a great deal about Trafford, wonderful goal kicker back in 1889, or of Charles Brewer, several years later, of Mason, '79, or of Bill Lewis and Parker, famous linemen in their days; or of Sears, when the game was still young; or of Cushing, as far back as 1877, or of Stillman, Felton, Bill Reid, Al Ristine, Dudley Dean, or Charlie Daly, the latter that marvelous quarter back who afterward was the sensation at West Point. Nor could be overlooked Charlie Brinkley when the Crimson greats are under discussion, the same Brinkley who is playing a sensational game today. Mentioning these players only touches the "high spots" in Harvard football: Pages could be written of the rest who fought and bled for old Harvard.

In the list have been terrific line plungers, fleet backs, and sensational kickers. Each has been given a niche of his own in Harvard's gridiron hall of fame. But in sizing them all up there still remains one whom Harvard graduates and students regard with the greatest veneration, not so much for his actual individual performances, although he was one of the best, but for those sterling qualities which go to make up a tactician, a Hannibal of the gridiron, one whose real object in life was to develop a team that could and did beat Yale—Arthur V. Cumnock, captain of the team of 1890.

It was in the days of fierce rivalry, when the gridiron battles between Harvard and Yale were fought out on neutral grounds. Cumnock played end on the Harvard eleven in 1889, the year that Yale won, 6 to 0, and Princeton routed the Crimson, 39 to 15. The Princeton game came first, and Cumnock learned a lot about Harvard's weakness in that contest. On the morning of the Yale game Cumnock got the players together and impressed upon their minds that all that Harvard should try to do would be to hold the sons of Eli. The Crimson held Yale to one touchdown, which was almost as good as a victory.

The next year (1890) Cumnock took charge of the Crimson. He permitted no one to interfere with his plans. For ten weeks he spent his time trying to convince his more or less skeptical team mates that Yale could be beaten. On the morning of the game the odds were 10 to 1 in favor of Yale, with no takers. The battle was staged at Springfield, Mass., and fifteen minutes after the start the supporters of both teams knew that it would be no ordinary contest.

Fierceness does not express it. Man after man was carried to the sidelines, the hospital material being drawn about equally from each side. Harvard claimed that Yale started the rough work and the Eli made counter charges. At any rate, it was a tremendous conflict. On the Yale eleven were such men as Pudge Heffelfinger and Lee McClung. Harvard, among others, had the two Traffords, Upton, Lake and Hollowell—and Cumnock.

Such tackling as Cumnock did that day probably has never been equaled. He played a star offensive game, but on the defensive he was a terror. Lee McClung would come around the end with the giant Heffelfinger interfering, and the records read: "Cumnock tackles both and brings them down." Certainly some feat, and with the close the Crimson waved triumphant by the score of 12 to 6. That was one of the greatest games in Harvard's history, and the sons of John Harvard are pretty well agreed that the team was captained by the greatest Harvard player of all time.

Cumnock graduated from Harvard in 1891 and then went into the cotton mill business, and for several years he has been treasurer of one of the largest corporations in New England.

(Editor's Note: Arthur Cumnock of Harvard was named an end in 1889 on the first All-America team ever selected by Caspar Whitney and Walter Camp.)

Just months before the release of the 1929 Carnegie Report that documented many of the abuses taking place in college football, as part of the overemphasis of the sport, the prominent coach, John Heisman, wrote to Coach Curly Byrd of Maryland and proposed the holding of a national playoff tournament for college football. Heisman's proposal called for dividing the country into four sections, and then selecting the best team from each. The four collegiate teams would then meet in a single-elimination tournament to determine the national collegiate champion, the season being extended just two weeks after the close of the regular season.