

The Harvard - Princeton Football Rivalry

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The history of Harvard/Princeton (or Princeton/Harvard) football goes back 136 years to 1877, when the schools played each other twice – each winning once and losing once.

The rivalry continued, discontinuously, with the teams meeting annually from 1877 until 1884; again in 86-89, 95-96, but not from 1897 through 1910 – a gap of 14 years; then regularly, except for the war years of 1917-18,...until 1926.

I might never have known about what happened in 1926, and we probably wouldn't all be gathered here today, except for the fact that just about a year ago, in the process of cataloging the contents of this place, I stumbled upon some papers of Langdon Parker Marvin, a loyal son of Harvard, a key roleplayer in Harvard alumni circles, an avid football fan, a New York City attorney who had once been a law partner of FDR, and the husband of Mary Eliot Vaughan, the great-great granddaughter of Benjamin Vaughan, for whom this house was built, and who, along with six generations of his descendants, have referred to this place as “the Homestead.” My story today is drawn primarily from Langdon Marvin's papers preserved in the Vaughan Homestead's collection.

Under football coach Bill Roper (who had first coached at Princeton in 1906-08 and again in 1910-11) the Tigers enjoyed an undefeated season in 1922, its first since 1893. That undefeated team received many messages of congratulation – none more welcome or more widely reported than a telegram to Princeton's President John Grier Hibben from Langdon Parker Marvin, then President of the Associated Harvard Clubs of America. That message from Langdon is the starting point of my narrative for this occasion, and it's a pretty fair sample of the respect that Langdon held for his own alma mater, for Princeton, for the tradition of athletic rivalry between the two schools, and for the ideals of good sportsmanship.

In his telegram, Langdon congratulated Princeton “on her splendid victories,” which included, of course, a victory (10 to 3) over Harvard. He went on to express his hope that “the relations between Princeton and Harvard continue close...and on the most friendly and sportsmanlike basis.”

Sounds like all milk and cookies and kumbaya, doesn't it?

President Hibben responded on the following day with a gracious letter to Langdon, reporting that the receipt of his telegram during Princeton's victory celebration engendered “enthusiastic acclaim and three rousing cheers were given for Harvard.” He went on to say that “You have blazed the way for re-establishing the old time and traditional relations of sympathetic and friendly feeling between Harvard and Princeton” – a suggestion that those relations might have frayed a bit in recent times.

On the same day as President Hibben's letter, the Daily *Princetonian* also voiced its appreciation for “Harvard's message, tendered so graciously by Mr. Marvin.” The same editorial, however, refers to “whatever difficulties have arisen in the past” and expressed the hope that these would now be “consigned to the past for burial,” and that the future would be marked by “the closest, and cleanest, and most sportsmanlike relations between us.”

The *Princetonian* went on to say that “We have confidently awaited just such a message from Harvard, giving no credence or consideration to irresponsible rumors that have lately permeated the press.”

What were those irresponsible rumors? I don't know, but microfilms of New York newspapers of the time would probably tell that story.

What I do know from later correspondence between Langdon Marvin and officials at both Harvard and Princeton is that at about this same time Princeton had been asking for guarantees from Harvard regarding the scheduling of an annual football game between the two schools – something that was already a de facto reality. Harvard was reluctant, and the reason seems to have been a policy handed down from its President, Abbott Lawrence Lowell. Lowell (apparently not an avid fan of intercollegiate sports in general, or of football in particular) felt that football was “a rough and strenuous game” -- perhaps an unseemly pursuit for gentlemen of Harvard quality, and that it was particularly inappropriate for scholars to be away from their studies for travel to and from games away from Cambridge.

In a *New York Times* article of January 18, 1922 (headlined “LOWELL QUESTIONS VALUE OF FOOTBALL” he had stated that football “has tended to give excessive importance to college athletic contests...,” noting that “public interest in the sport as a spectacle has become general over the country, and has increased markedly since the war.” Pursuing the same theme a bit further, he declared that “the necessity to maintain...a public spectacle attended by thousands of spectators every Saturday throughout the autumn is certainly not clear.” (He would not have been amused by our gathering here today.

His presidential prejudices evidently carried enough weight so that Harvard’s Athletic Committee decreed that no more than a single “away” game would be permitted in any football season. Since Harvard already had a long-standing commitment for a season-ending gridiron meeting with Yale (which involved an away game in alternate years) it did not want to commit the one remaining opportunity for an away game to Princeton...or to any other single school. Harvard would be happy to have Princeton on its schedule, but could not – or would not – guarantee an alternation of venues.

Getting back to our chronology –

On January 22, 1922, Langdon wrote to President Hibben, saying that he hoped his congratulatory telegram on Princeton’s unbeaten football season “has served even in a small way to do away with the resentment aroused by the altogether unwarranted words of Worthington.”

Who was “Worthington,” and what, where, when and to whom were his unwarranted words? I don’t know. But it seems that something had definitely been festering beneath the surface of this intercollegiate relationship.

Fast forward to 1924, and we have an October 21 letter from Harvard Dean Malcolm Greenough asking Langdon (who was scheduled to address Princeton alumni on the eve of that year’s Harvard/Princeton football game) “to give to the Princeton men the most cordial greetings of the Harvard football team and of the Harvard undergraduates.”

Langdon needed no such prompting, for the notes prepared for his talk clearly indicate that he had planned to do all that, and more – stressing the unique opportunity and responsibility that Princeton, Harvard and Yale had

to exemplify standards of sportsmanship for the benefit of other (presumably lesser) colleges.

Fast forward again to November of 1926 when, on the very day of the Harvard/Princeton football game, the *Lampoon*, Harvard's humor periodical, contained cartoons, poems and satirical articles poking fun at everything Princetonian including the school's location "in the mosquito infested meadows" just beyond "the last monotonous stretch of rough scrub pine."

The Princeton team may not have been particularly motivated by the *Lampoon's* odd sense of humor but the record shows that they won that day, 12-0. It must have been a rough one because, nearly a week later, the Harvard *Crimson* reported that five of Harvard's players were still under doctors' care. The *New York Times*, on November 9, reported a feeling among Harvard undergraduates that Princeton "used offensive and defensive tactics which were at times unnecessarily rough,"

Harvard's response to the *Lampoon's* Princeton-bashing edition was both immediate and visceral. A letter from Harvard alumnus J. Couper Lord, published in the *New York Sun* on November 8, deplored the "vituperative vindictive and utterly humorless issue of the 'LAMPOON'" which would never have been tolerated in his days at Harvard (23 years previous). He suggested that the *Lampoon* should be abolished "if it cannot write as it used to write in a friendly, pleasant, humorous vein rather than exploit through its pages the ill-bred and humorless invective of the present editors." (Ironically, his undergraduate "good old days" days in Cambridge seem to have coincided with the earlier 14-year gap in football relations between the two schools.)

Langdon Marvin, writing on that same date, November 8, to Harvard's Dean Chester Greenough, expressed the view that the *Lampoon* editors should be "severely disciplined." He acknowledged that Harvard's administration was properly reluctant to interfere with freedom of expression on the part of student publications, but hoped that the Student Council would take appropriate action to punish their undergraduate peers.

Langdon had evidently sent his customary congratulatory telegram to Princeton's President Hibben immediately after the November 3 game. A response from Hibben acknowledged that

telegram and graciously said that “the Harvard team played an excellent game and we had to contest desperately every inch of ground.”

In a follow-up letter to Hibben, Langdon apologized for the *Lampoon*'s treatment of Princeton. “Princeton was Harvard's guest and should have been treated with every courtesy and cordial hospitality.” He went on to say that the *Lampoon*'s “jibes and insults” were “the act of a very few irresponsible boys” which “bring shame to Harvard.”

In a statement by Harvard's Committee on Relations with the Alumni, undated but obviously issued in early November of 1926, that august body declared that it “rejects and deplotes the *Lampoon*'s treatment of Princeton, which has brought discredit on Harvard and is resented by the alumni.”

On November 9 President Hibben wrote to Langdon, thanking him for his letter and wishing “that someone from Cambridge might have written in the vein of your letter.” He reported that Professor Kennedy (Princeton's Director of Athletics) had telegraphed his counterpart at Harvard, William Bingham, asking for his repudiation of the “studied attack on Princeton on the part of the Harvard *Lampoon*,” and that Bingham had responded with a telegram stating that he was not responsible for editorial comments in Harvard publications, and he “gives no statement of regret for the *Lampoon*'s statements.” Hibben fears that this will make Princeton men “throughout the country, feel deeply hurt by the *Lampoon*'s attack.”

Also on November 9, Thomas Slocum, President of the Harvard Club of New York City, wrote to Langdon regarding “the *Lampoon* incident.” He chose “not to dignify this undergraduate mistake by looking on it as a Harvard matter.” “We all regret it and should take every opportunity to so state to our Princeton friends.” He indicated that he had not written to his Princetonian counterpart (Walter E. Hope, Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Treasury and President of the Princeton Club of New York City) to apologize, nor did he expect to receive an apology from Hope “for the action of Princeton's cohort in tearing down and carrying away the goal posts after the game.” He reflected, wryly, that “the goal posts had been of very little use to us – in fact, we could have played the game without them.”

In yet another letter of November 9, Harvard's Dean Greenough wrote to Langdon to report that “President Lowell has sent a written apology to

President Hibben” and that Lowell “will see the President of the *Lampoon* tomorrow.”

This tempest in a teapot over the editorial poor taste of Harvard’s humor magazine might have been calmed by the messages from Harvard’s various official and unofficial apologists – had it not been for the fact that, close on the heels of the *Lampoon*’s insults, Princeton’s Athletic Director had received official notification of a new Harvard athletic policy which had actually been established, but not communicated, several months previously. Harvard was officially rejecting Princeton’s requests for an exchange of alternating “home and away” football games. Henceforth games with Princeton, and any other school, except Yale, would be scheduled on a year by year basis and repeated at “appropriate intervals.”

That, it seems, was unacceptable to Princeton. Princeton’s response was immediate, but was not communicated directly to Harvard. Rather, it was couched in a press release. Harvard and Princeton partisans alike received the news by way of the *New York Times*, whose headline (front page; above the fold) on November 11, 1926 declared “Princeton Severs Ties with Harvard After Long Discord.” The severance may have been triggered by disagreements over football, but it apparently extended to all athletic competition between the two schools.”

The *New York Sun*, on the same day, also carried the story of the severed athletic relationship, and reported that Harvard was “surprised” and “stunned” not only by Princeton’s action, but by the fact that it the action had been announced in a press release rather than in direct contact with Harvard.

The *NY Herald Tribune*, of course, also covered the story, mentioning, in passing, a previous football rift between Harvard and Princeton, lasting from 1880 to 1895, but did not go into details regarding the cause of that estrangement.

I could bore you to death (but I won’t) with a detailed account of correspondence, in the months and years that followed, between Langdon Marvin and anyone in the Harvard or Princeton camps who might be willing to help foster an athletic reconciliation between the two schools, which were at an impasse in the absence of a policy change by Harvard’s Athletic Committee. Among the creative solutions offered by one of Langdon’s

correspondents was the idea of fielding two Harvard varsity football teams, each of which would be entitled to play one away game per season. That would allow one team to play Yale in New Haven while the other traveled to Princeton.

Harvard's Athletic Director, William Bingham, added a bit of fuel to the fire of ill will by alluding to (though not personally making nor specifically attributing) charges of "dirty football" in the 1926 game, and by reporting his coaches' opinion that "Princeton could be beaten in only one kind of football and they [i.e., the Harvard coaches] would not teach it." He laid much of the blame for this on Princeton's coach Roper whose football methods may have been dirty, or ungentlemanly, or simply unbeatable, depending upon whose opinion was to be accepted.

In a letter of January 18, 1928, Bingham stated that "no athletic contest is worth while unless it is productive of trust and good sportsmanship, and the Harvard-Princeton games of the last four years were productive of neither of these qualities." In the same letter Bingham stated that he had attempted to arrange opportunities, in crew racing and golf, to have both Harvard and Princeton teams invited by third parties, and that Princeton had responded in each case that it "did not care to meet Harvard in any competition."

So it was that two world-class universities continued squabbling with one another like toddlers in a sandbox for eight years before their football teams met again on the playing field. Each of the two factions certainly had reason enough to blame the other for what had gone wrong, and to insist that the other should make amends before normal relations could be restored. (Does that bring to mind any recent political circumstances in Congress or in our State Legislature?)

The archival evidence here at the Vaughan Homestead offers little clue as to the role played by Langdon Marvin in nudging either or both parties toward eventually fruitful negotiations. We do know, however, that he was doggedly pursuing a reconciliation at every opportunity amid his regular contacts with officials and alumni of both schools.

There were two events of some significance that took place during the latter years of the estrangement and probably contributed significantly to the reestablishment of what has continued to this very day. The third and final tenure of Princeton's controversial coach Roper came to an end, as did the

tenure of Abbot Lawrence Lowell as President of Harvard. It may be more than coincidental that the first Harvard-Princeton game to be played after the long estrangement took place in the fall of 1934 – in the first football season following Lowell’s retirement.

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That’s the story as I’ve gleaned it from the records here. I suspect that different perspectives might be found in researching the archives at Harvard, at Princeton, among the personal papers of university officials if they have been preserved, and perhaps even among any journals or diaries of the young men who were members of the football teams that did or didn’t play against one another from the mid-1920s to the mid ‘30s. I find the story to be a rather intriguing one, and one that offers interesting insights regarding how little it can take to precipitate conflict between institutions (even governments) whose maturity ought to transcend such pettiness, and how difficult it can be to repair the damage once it has occurred.

So let’s all resolve to leave here as friends, no matter what the outcome of today’s game may be, and let’s plan to get together again in fellowship before eight years have elapsed.



Roman Wilson grabs Quinn Epperly's pass in the Harvard end zone in the final seconds of the Third Overtime period.

Final score: Princeton 51 - Harvard 48.