



10-2006

Marooned!

Jeff Rasley

Butler University, jrasley@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rasley, Jeff. "Marooned!" *Chicago Magazine*, October 2006. Available from: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/309

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

This article was originally published in *Chicago Magazine* at <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/October-2006/Marooned/>

Marooned!

by Jeff Rasley
October 2006



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO VARSITY FOOTBALL TEAM 1975

KNEELING: (L. TO R.) CO-CAPTAINS LEVY, KOVACS.
FIRST ROW: CERMAK, MINSAREN, CONWAY, CHRISTEN, O'SHAUGHNESSY, LASSITER, HERZOG, ARNOLD, RIVER.
SECOND ROW: HEAD COACH HASS, McNAMARA, KIRSCHENHEIMER, SPILLER, SCHULTZ, LINDNER, RAMIREZ, TROYER, RASLEY, MANNING.
THIRD ROW: ASST. COACH TERPKE, HARDMAN, BOONE, ROBINSON, O'BRIEN, DUNN, RUBESCH, VAIL, COOK, ASST. COACH HODGES.
FOURTH ROW: STUD. ASST. THATCHER, WILLIAMS, JOHNSON, WENDEL, WHITE, TWEED, STWORA, KARLUN, ASST. COACH MORGAN.
TOP ROW: GIBLIN, DANL, WILEY, DEXTER, SHAPIRO, VAN BUITENEN, LEVIN.

During halftime of a 1975 Bears game, CBS-TV aired a segment on the difficulties of resurrecting a football team at the University of Chicago. The piece focused on that year's squad-for which I played defensive back, among other positions-and included a clip from our ill-fated November 8th game against the Loras College (Dubuque, Iowa) Duhawks. We were ahead until the final minute, when our center hiked the ball over our punter and into our end zone, where a Duhawk pounced on it for a touchdown.

The final clip showed me hanging my head and wiping away anguished tears in our locker room. It was the penultimate game of the final season of coach Wally Hass's (and my) career at Chicago. That game was as close as the team had come to victory in the two seasons I'd played for the Chicago Maroons, and to lose was a crushing disappointment.

Bears founder and owner George Halas was a guest in the broadcast booth when the segment ran. When he saw me crying in the locker room, I remember him remarking: "That's what college football is all about. Looks like it's back at the University of Chicago."

Well, in a way.

It's true that by the 1970s, the school had once again cobbled together a varsity football program after a 30-year hiatus, but my ragtag, Vietnam-era teammates were nowhere close to approaching the current team's Division III champ status, much less the glory days of that legendary coach Amos Alonzo Stagg, whose players were the original Monsters of the Midway. At one time the winningest coach in collegiate football history, Stagg led the Maroons to four undefeated seasons between 1892 and 1932, and snagged seven Big Ten Conference titles.



When Stagg retired in 1932, however, the team hadn't won a championship since 1924, and the young president Robert Maynard Hutchins reportedly summed up his opinion of collegiate sports with the quip, "Whenever the urge to exercise comes upon me, I lie down for a while, and it passes." Hutchins abolished varsity football after the 1939 season, and the sport remained non grata on campus until 1956, when a new athletic director arrived. Wally Hass ostensibly retired from coaching football when he left Carleton College to join the University of Chicago's faculty, but he came to Chicago with a secret agenda: to restore football as a varsity sport at the U. of C.

Hass was no fool, and had no intention of returning to the Big Ten or Division I. He started small, by adding a football class. The faculty senate responded with a resolution opposing the return of football-ever-as a varsity sport. Hass bided his time, however, and by 1962 he had organized a club team that played high schools, other clubs, and college junior-varsity teams. Meanwhile, on-campus hostility to the return of football in any form mounted and, in 1963, some 200 students held a sit-down strike in the middle of Stagg Field, delaying the game and resulting in four arrests.

But Hass pursued his dream undeterred. By the late sixties, a counterrevolutionary movement had coalesced among those more interested in football than rebellion and, armed with 1,100 signatures, students presented the faculty senate with a petition advocating the reinstatement of varsity football; the senate approved it, as did the administration and the trustees. Football returned to the University of Chicago as a Division III varsity sport in 1969, the same year student demonstrators occupied the Administration Building, resulting in mass expulsions.

In the first varsity football game played by Chicago in 30 years, Hass led the Maroons to a 14-0 victory over Marquette University. In their rejoicing, jubilant fans tore down the goalposts.

That game marked a propitious beginning, but between that first effort in 1969 and 1975, when Hass retired-what I'm coining the Restoration Era of football at the U. of C.-the Maroons compiled a heartbreaking record of nine wins and 40 losses. It was during this inauspicious but historic time that I joined the team, in 1974.

I'd grown up imagining the football games of the Roaring Twenties, when my maternal grandfather played professional football and owned a team. Family lore has it he played against the Bears' Halas. Given that legacy, it was with a heavy heart that I quit football after high-school tryouts because I could not tolerate what my 14-year-old mind believed to be the coaching staff's fascistic and brutal attitude.

Wally Hass was different. He was an idealist and loved using the term "scholar-athlete" when talking about sports at the U. of C. He rarely raised his voice in anger, despite the teeth-grindingly poor execution of his teams. We knew he was on the edge when he'd raise his clipboard as if to hurl it to the ground, but he'd restrain himself, sigh, and call the next play.

Before I donned a helmet for spring practice in 1974, I received assurance from Hass that players would not be punished for missing practices for academic reasons. Sure, I was willing to hustle a few hours each week, but I would not have considered playing if it had required the normal college football regimen. I even employed the tactic of scheduling classes to conflict with practice. Each Tuesday and Thursday during the '74 season, while my colleagues sweated and grunted through daily tackling and blocking drills, I practiced the more sublime exercise of translating Plato's Symposium in James Redfield's Attic Greek class.

Some of my teammates shared this lukewarm interest in practicing and came only when moved. Rarely, it seemed, did 22 members of the team show up as scheduled, so team scrimmages were jerry-rigged affairs with ghost players, like neighborhood sandlot games. The coaching staff was jerry-rigged, too. There was assistant Jesse Vail, who had previously coached a prison team. During "skull sessions," I remember him offering inspirational wisdom such as, "The Russians will never defeat the U.S., because they don't play football!"

Despite their long and only occasionally washed hair, mustaches, and beards, the guys with whom I played the 1974 and 1975 seasons were an extraordinary crew. Paul Mankowski, a classics major who hosted a WHPK 88.5 FM radio show called The Baroque Masters, ended up on the team as the result of a lost bet. But he stuck it out, even breaking his leg during Hass's last game as a coach. Paul later became a Jesuit priest and ministered in the Calcutta slums. Let no one say we weren't tough.

Like Paul and me, many of our teammates hadn't played prior to the U. of C. Too small to play high-school football, Tony Miksanek was five feet six and a 135-pound varsity wrestler (or, at

least, that's how he was listed in our game programs; we often inflated our weights so the opposing team wouldn't know how scrawny we really were). But Tony was our second-string nose tackle. The coaches' strategic thinking was that Tony could slip between the legs of offensive linemen-or, better yet, they might trip over him.

Then there was Hans Van Buitenen, whose father was a renowned Sanskrit scholar. Hans was six feet three and weighed 295 pounds, but he was so gentle the coaches tore their hair out trying to motivate "Little Hans" to hit an opponent. Our one real ace in the hole was Nick Arnold, the district-leading ground-gainer his senior year of high school in Missouri and our MVP for the 1975 season. But Nick lost interest in the Maroons-and school-after that year and moved to France.

Each player had his own motives, and some were quite bizarre, like a teammate who told me tackling drills were good therapy for his Oedipal complex because he really wanted to kill his father. But most of us, cynical as we were about authority and the use of organized violence in the Vietnam years, were inspired by Coach Hass's dream to resurrect a tradition.

Hass believed that if we would just keep taking the field each week, no matter how many times we lost, the team would eventually become a respectable Division III contender. With the phoenix as our mascot, winning teams would eventually rise from the ashes of our many defeats.

But our performance sorely tested Hass's theory. There was the time Steve "Amtrack" Stwora, our hard-driving fullback, lowered his head and ran over a referee, who exited the field on a stretcher. I remember Jimmy Smith getting blocked so hard by a Grinnell player he went airborne and landed out of bounds on the players' bench. Whenever the offense fumbled or screwed up, our center, Tom Schultz, would hurl his helmet at our bench as he came off the field. We lost the ball so often, players on the sideline would part like the Red Sea to clear a path for Schultzie's helmet to come flying through.

In '74, with Maroon living-legend Jay Berwanger-first-ever Heisman Trophy winner-in the stands, we lost a homecoming game to Oberlin 69 to 0. Our greatest accomplishment of that game was when their kicker missed the final point-after, denying the visitors a perfect 70. I was credited with the longest gain for the Maroons; I fell on the ball during a kickoff return and earned a 15-yard penalty when an Oberlin player speared me while I was down.

Our growing pains were ripe fodder for comedy; even the idea of a football team at the University of Chicago seemed to inspire twitters. In 1961, when the Restoration Era was still a twinkle in Hass's eye, The Second City staged its now-infamous skit "Football Comes to the University of Chicago," which included a bit about a squeamish quarterback reluctant to place his hands under the center's hindquarters to receive an oblong spheroid.

And at the end of the 1974 season, in which we had lost every game (the same year they called us "the worst team in college ball"), People magazine offered to fly the Maroons out to the Rose

Bowl to play Cal Tech, whose team claimed to have a higher average IQ than weight. Since I worked for the athletic department at that time, Coach Hass called me in to his office to talk it over. Though I was for it, Hass ended up refusing on the grounds that it would do irreparable psychological harm to his players to participate in “The Toilet Bowl.” He didn’t relent when the magazine offered to change the name to “The Brain Bowl.”

In those years, fan support was marginal; unless the visiting team bused in onlookers, a large crowd for our games was 200. As the weather turned colder, our small but loyal group of fans would huddle in the exposed aluminum stands, lashed by lake winds and sleet, with thermoses of hot chocolate laced with peppermint schnapps. Our most loyal supporter, Bernie DelGiorno, who has missed only one home game since the first in 1969, remembers sharing an umbrella with linebacker Pat Spurgeon’s girlfriend during a particularly miserable rain-soaked game. By the end, they were the only fans still there.

Satire and irony seemed inescapable. In 1971 a refrigerator was crowned homecoming queen, and a line of utility vehicles from the physical plant led the homecoming parade for several years. An anonymous steam calliope player occasionally appeared and piped away during games. The Kazoo Marching Band with “the largest kazoo in the Western world,” nicknamed Big Ed after U. of C. president Ed Levi, took the field at halftime. A group of about eight college musicians, the Lower Brass Conspiracy, served as the functional equivalent of a pep band. With neighboring kids and fans in tow, when not too frozen or inebriated from schnapps, the group would hit the field to perform Brownian Motion, whereby all would run about chaotically, thereby illustrating random movement.

One cheer all the fans knew and yelled out on the rare occasion there was a play to cheer about went like this:

“Themistocles, Thucydides, the Peloponnesian War,
“X-squared, Y-squared, H₂SO₄,
“What for, who for, who ya gonna yell for?
“Chicago! Chicago! Chicago!”

It was a bittersweet experience, playing during the Restoration Era of Maroon football. There was a kind of heroism, like Hector preparing to fight Achilles, in taking the field and losing week after week.

Times have changed. At a Maroon practice I attended a couple of years ago, there were at least 60 players running crisply and efficiently through drills, letting out bellows of effort and roars of team spirit. The uniforms were the same as ours of 30 years ago, but the players looked different— not just bigger and faster, but with short hair, kids who were clean-cut and listened respectfully to their coaches and captains.

These days at home games, hundreds of enthusiastic fans pack the stands of renovated Stagg Field. At the end of each game, the players gather midfield and sing, “Wave the flag of old Chicago, / Maroon the color grand,” just the way the team did back in the glory days of Stagg and the Big Ten. My teammates wouldn’t have known the words to the song and would have considered such a sentimental display very uncool. Now, it’s beautiful.

When today’s Maroon players gather for their homecomings 30 years from now, they’ll relive thrills, including winning the University Athletic Association championship three times since 1998. For Restoration Era Maroon players, our recollections may be a bit different, but they’re all we’ve got. According to Dave Hilbert, the university’s assistant athletic director for sports information, most books and records of the ’70s teams have been lost.

Our memories will have to suffice. And one of the most vivid is that Coach Hass was one of the nicest human beings I have ever known. We did win the game following that ill-fated Duhawks face-off, the final game Hass coached and my last as a player, by once again beating Marquette. It was Hass’s 100th victory as a college coach. And, once again, the fans tore down a goalpost.