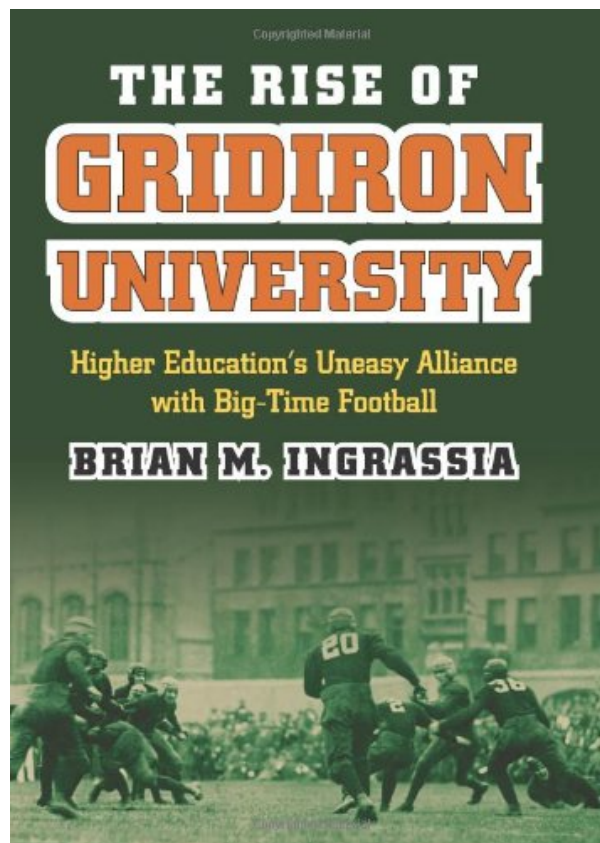


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WITH BIG-TIME FOOTBALL  
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# THE RISE OF **GRIDIRON** **UNIVERSITY**

Higher Education's Uneasy Alliance  
with Big-Time Football

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## Review

"A must-read for those interested in the rise of big-time college football."—Great Plains Quarterly

## About the Author

Brian M. Ingrassia is visiting assistant professor of history at Middle Tennessee State University.

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The quarterback sends his wide receiver deep. The crowd gasps as he launches the ball. And when he hits his man, the team's fans roar with approval—especially those with the deep pockets. Make no mistake; college football is big business, played with one eye on the score, the other on the bottom line. But was this always the case?

Brian M. Ingrassia here offers the most incisive account to date of the origins of college football, tracing the sport's evolution from a gentlemen's pastime to a multi-million dollar enterprise that made athletics a permanent fixture on our nation's campuses and cemented college football's place in American culture. He takes readers back to the late 1800s to tell how schools embraced the sport as a way to get the public interested in higher learning—and then how football's immediate popularity overwhelmed campuses and helped create the beast we know today.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Ingrassia proves that the academy did not initially resist the inclusion of athletics; rather, progressive reformers and professors embraced football as a way to make the ivory tower less elitist. With its emphasis on disciplined teamwork and spectatorship, football was seen as a "middlebrow" way to make the university more accessible to the general public. What it really did was make athletics a permanent fixture on campus with its own set of professional experts, bureaucracies, and ostentatious cathedrals.

Ingrassia examines the early football programs at universities like Michigan, Stanford, Ohio State, and others, then puts those histories in the context of Progressive Era culture, including insights from coaches like Georgia Tech's John Heisman and Notre Dame's Knute Rockne. He describes how reforms emerged out of incidents such as Teddy Roosevelt's son being injured on the field and a section of grandstands collapsing at the University of Chicago. He also touches on some of the problems facing current day college football and shows us that we haven't come far from those initial arguments more than a century ago.

The Rise of Gridiron University shows us where and how it all began, highlighting college football's essential role in shaping the modern university—and by extension American intellectual culture. It should have wide appeal among students of American studies and sports history, as well as fans of college football curious to learn how their game became a cultural force in a matter of a few decades.

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#### Review

"A must-read for those interested in the rise of big-time college football."—Great Plains Quarterly

#### About the Author

Brian M. Ingrassia is visiting assistant professor of history at Middle Tennessee State University.

#### Most helpful customer reviews

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

great sport history

By david l. poremba

Most people in the United States know exactly where they will be and what exactly they will be doing on any given Saturday afternoon (and sometimes that same evening), from late August through the following January. They will be watching a college football game, either on television or at the stadium. In both locations will be school colors, mascots, cups, souvenirs and other assorted paraphernalia. It represents ritual and it is beyond ritual. But was it always so?

For the dedicated college football fanatic who decides to explore the origins of his or her chosen team, histories abound, both on the general level and on the university team level with photographs galore and not much depth or context of the historical time period.

The Rise of Gridiron University is one of the most in depth account of the origins of college football. Ingrassia traces the evolution of the sport from its beginnings as an imitation of English rugby in the late 1800's to the multi-million dollar industry it is today. First brought on campus in order to induce interest in the public mind for higher education, football rather overwhelmed the campus and became an integral part of both campus and non-campus life. The author discusses changes in American society, including sport and higher education from the 1820's forward; the rise of cities and industries; the debate about sport during the Progressive Era; and the scandals, deaths, injuries and reforms surrounding college sports.

This book is very well researched; an interesting and insightful account of a popular sport, it sometimes drags a bit. Still, a worthwhile, informative read.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

A Consumer Blitz Sacks Elite Institutions

By John K Laub

Early last week, I finished reading "The Rise of Gridiron University: Higher Education's Uneasy Alliance with Big-Time Football" by Brian M. Ingrassia. I really enjoyed this book: It is, however, more intellectual and cultural history than a gridiron narrative of distinction. And is much more academically erudite than relaxed beach perusing. Ingrassia illuminates the paradox between higher education's scholarly mission to harvest knowledge and produce civic leaders and a consumer-driven capitalistic culture that yielded much-needed revenue for large institutions.

While the Western Frontier closed during the Gilded Age, progressive and reform-minded Americans fancied a new definition of manhood in an industrial society, growing in urban communities with an influx of immigrants. Numerous intellectuals embraced Social Darwinism as an ideological anchor for their focus on improving young American men: And according to several campus kingpins, the gridiron provided the perfect training ground for athletic prowess and competitiveness.

Coaches quickly promoted their impact on constructing young boys into men and wrote (and sold) books to cement importance of discipline and athletic training. As revenue rolled into athletic departments, football gurus became highly paid professionals and national celebrities. On some campuses, the pigskin programs

became sovereign islands of power and cultural influence as massive stadiums were built to sell tickets to a demanding public willing to spend their hard-earned currency on tickets. Several campus leaders thought that football provided a bridge--and marketing tool--between the elite professors and upper-class students who lived in isolated campus estates and the general public in the surrounding communities. Of course, dissenting professors opposed the autonomous athletic branches and its new celebrity coaches as well as the influence and corruption of cash on campus. However, the dissenters could not overcome the avalanche of wealth or drown out the rise of authoritative coaches.

As the Western world embraced nationalism and militarism at the turn of the 20th century, elite universities sought to produce men ready for the battlefield and the gridiron would toughen the boys of the upper class. Also, racists disseminated the doctrine that football verified racial superiority of whites, and Social Darwinists elucidated the creed of supremacy of ethnic groups and nations. Football symbolized American prominence and propels a new generation of adults to distinction.

Ingrassia's insightful and informative work illustrates the didactic between elite institutions of higher learning and a market economy embracing mass-cultural entertainment. He also illuminates the dangers of authoritarian rule in a capitalistic society and its ability to overrun any opposition to its profit-making goals. Gridiron University belongs among the finest recent books examining the history of college football: *The Real All-Americans*, *Bowled Over* and *The Big Scrum*.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Award winner

By Daniel A Nathan

*The Rise of Gridiron University* won the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) monograph book award. Congratulations, Professor Ingrassia.

[See all 5 customer reviews...](#)

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