Branch Rickey, College Football Coach
By John Hanners

In a baseball career that spanned half a century, Branch Rickey invented the minor league farm system and developed the open try-out camp and spring training. As general manager of three National League baseball clubs (St. Louis, 1917-42; Brooklyn, 1942-50; Pittsburgh, 1950-59) he popularized the batting helmet, the batting cage and the pitching machine. A shrewd innovator and motivator, a "fashioner of tools, human and mechanical," he best is remembered today for bringing the major league's first black player, Jackie Robinson, to the Brooklyn Dodgers forty years ago this season. Rickey (1881-1965) remains an almost mythic figure and his place in baseball history is secure.

But many are unaware that Rickey began his professional coaching career in football, not baseball. As head coach at Methodist-related Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, during the 1904 and 1905 football seasons, Rickey exhibited the managerial and personal traits for which he would become famous in baseball. His two-year record was a modest 8-13 and the 1905 season proved particularly disastrous.

Rickey's tenure at Allegheny coincided with the most controversial period in American football history. The college game bore little resemblance to the sport we know today. A touchdown or a field goal counted five points. Legal tactics included biting, scratching, punching, and holding opponents. Players wore no helmets, but some used a crude nose guard held in place with the teeth. The forward pass was illegal. Many athletes enjoyed unlimited eligibility, switched teams in mid-season and received whatever sums of money a college was willing to give. It was a brutal and corrupt game, but Rickey stood for fair play and honesty. In the end he was defeated, not so much by his talent and effort, but by the nature of the game itself.

Wesley Branch Rickey graduated in 1904 from Ohio Wesleyan University, where he starred in three sports. He spent the summer

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1 David Quentin Voigt, American Baseball (Norman, 1970), 2:163.
after graduation playing minor league baseball in Texas. That fall, Allegheny hired him to coach football and to teach English and Shakespeare in the college’s preparatory school. His coaching salary was $700.2

Rickey assembled the Allegheny team in early September, ten days before classes began, and set up training headquarters at the Hotel Carmen in the popular resort town of Conneaut Lake, Pennsylvania. Only seventeen players reported and Rickey felt “handicapped in practice.” He joined the team scrimmages himself, alternately practicing and coaching with the offense and defense.3 His players lacked “weight and muscle,” so Rickey concentrated on building a team with “speed and strategy,” 4 and introduced what was an innovative football training regimen for the period.

By starting early (four weeks before the Allegheny squad normally began practice) and by separating the team from the rest of the student body, Rickey instituted a bonding technique that worked successfully with the 1930s “Gas House Gang” St. Louis Cardinals and the 1940s Brooklyn Dodgers baseball clubs.

A typical practice day began with a half-hour of rowing contests across Conneaut Lake. The team then spent two hours punting, tackling and “running signals.” After lunch players swam and frolicked on the resort beach. That was followed by two hours of fundamentals, and, after supper, the unseasonably cool evenings were filled with long chalkboard sessions,5 a later Rickey trademark in organized baseball, where he “used a blackboard to inspire, and sometimes bore, players with chalk talks on tactics and strategy.” 6

When school opened for classes, Rickey went about the campus soliciting money from students to run his football program. He gave an impassioned speech in the new Ford Memorial Chapel which, according to contemporary sources, compelled the students to “cough up $250.” 7

After being banned by an 1896 faculty vote, Allegheny football only

3 Arthur Mann, Branch Rickey: American in Action (Boston, 1957), 38.
4 The Campus (Allegheny College student newspaper), Sept. 29, 1904. Special Collections, Pelletier Library, Allegheny College, Meadville, Pa.
5 Campus, Sept. 29, 1904.
6 Voigt, 2:160.
7 1905 Kaldron (Allegheny College student yearbook), 208. Special Collections, Pelletier Library.
recently had been revived and feelings ran high on the Methodist campus for and against the sport. During a fall faculty reception, Rickey recalled later, he used the word "fight" in an animated conversation with William H. Crawford, Allegheny's president, about the upcoming season. The "sudden chill that blanketed the gathering," notes Rickey biographer Arthur Mann, "indicated that such a word simply wasn't used at Allegheny College."  

On September 24, 1904, Rickey's team defeated the Warren, Pennsylvania, Athletic Club 5-0 on a muddy field. "Despite the unfavorable conditions," reported a local newspaper, "Allegheny play under Coach N. Brouche [sic] Rickey was snappy and the men showed themselves full of grit and exceedingly scrappy."  

In the second game of the season they were trounced by Penn State 50-0. The day after, Rickey organized a Ford Chapel rally and delivered a speech—part sermon, part exhortation—that foreshadowed the fiery oratory that became his hallmark:

> Some of the men [he said] are fit subjects for the hospital. We don't want your sympathy. We want your support. Encourage the players by your presence on the football field. Come and watch them practice. Root, sing, do anything to help our team. If you're loyal, you'll root; if you're not loyal, you had better go back to the farm and go to work.

No one went back to the farm. The students, according to the student newspaper, "cheered heartily" for coach Rickey and "displayed an interest in college athletics heretofore unknown."  

Led by halfback Alfred Evans, an imported "ringer" from Ohio Wesleyan, and quarter-back L. O. "Davey" Davenport, who could "steer a foot-ball team down the gridiron like cannibals through a missionary camp" and who maintained the "solemn dignity of a funeral director," Rickey's team won five and lost five. Rickey's defeats were staggering and opponents outscored his team 268-67. In addition to the Penn State debacle, Allegheny lost to Western Reserve 35-0, Syracuse 69-0 and Westminster 76-0. Alle-

8 Mann, 38.
9 Meadville Tribune-Republican, Sept. 26, 1904.
10 Campus, Oct. 12, 1904. Rickey always felt that his fervid approach worked for him in football but limited his effectiveness as a field manager in baseball. "My fault as a manager," he once was quoted as saying (Mann, 135), "was due to my apparent zeal. . . . I think I was a corking football coach, because there you talked all week for the game on the following Saturday. . . . But you couldn't keep men [in baseball] at high gear. . . . playing practically every day."
11 Campus, Oct. 12, 1904.
12 1905 Kaldron, 33.
gheny avenged the Westminster loss 6-5 at the end of the season in a
game officials called because of darkness. This decision became neces-
sary when the game's only football was punted into a crowd of
Allegheny students and not recovered.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite the disappointing season, Rickey emerged as a popular
figure on the Allegheny campus. Student speakers in chapel rallies ex-
tolled his "manliness" and "fairness." "Every scrub and player," noted
the student newspaper, "is a staunch friend of coach Rickey, and all
know that he has done his best, although his troubles have been
numerous." \textsuperscript{14} The college literary magazine published anonymous
poems celebrating Rickey's exploits, including "After the Game," a
poem whose humor revealed the brutal nature of the game:

\begin{quote}
Gently gather up my fragments,
Here a finger, there a thumb,
And my nose is somewhere yonder—
That last scrimmage jarred me some!

And I fear my right ear's missing
Also pieces of my spine,
On the fifteen yard line yonder,
Lies an arm that looks like mine.

I know my skull is fractured,
Thirteen ribs are much the same,
But such trifles do not matter
If you only win the game!\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

At the season-ending team banquet, President Crawford and several
student speakers praised Rickey's efforts to build a strong football
program. The student newspaper noted that "in all speeches the desire
to have Coach Rickey with us another year was strongly evidenced." \textsuperscript{16}

Rickey played minor league baseball again in 1905, and put in a
brief one-game appearance with the major league St. Louis Browns.\textsuperscript{17}
When he returned to Allegheny in the fall, he discovered that his

\textsuperscript{13} Campus, Nov. 23, 1904.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Allegheny Literary Monthly 9 (Dec. 1904): 96.
\textsuperscript{16} Campus, Dec. 7, 1904.
\textsuperscript{17} Mann, 39-40; Hy Turkin and S. C. Thompson, The Official Encyclopedia of
Branch Rickey's 1904 Allegheny College football team. Rickey is in the rear, fourth from the right. (Courtesy of the Lawrence Lee Pelletier Library, Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania.)
$700 coaching contract excluded his ten-day camp at Conneaut Lake. An angry Rickey, later nicknamed "El Cheapo" because of his notorious contract negotiations with baseball players, demanded that President Crawford increase his salary. The frugal administrator refused.\textsuperscript{18} It was an ominous sign.

Despite his professional baseball commitments, Rickey had spent a busy summer recruiting players. He built a power team for the 1905 season, enrolling five men, including Marvin Orestus Bridges from Cornersville, Tennessee, as "Special" students, that is, non-degree students enrolled solely to play football.\textsuperscript{19} This team roster listed twenty-eight players, eleven more than the 1904 squad. Six men weighed more than 200 pounds.\textsuperscript{20}

But Marvin Bridges, a bruising 215-pound fullback and the team's outstanding player, bolted the squad in October and joined Allegheny's archrival, powerhouse Washington and Jefferson College.

The Bridges affair is worth a closer look because it provides a glimpse into the early twentieth century clash between the amateur "muscular Christianity" approach to sport advocated by Rickey and the rise of sports professionalism and what one Allegheny student editorial labeled the "maddening desire on the part of fans for victory."\textsuperscript{21}

According to contemporary reports, Rickey, who refused to play or watch Sunday baseball games and was also later nicknamed "The Mahatma" for his honesty and integrity, balked at giving extra payments to any of his players.\textsuperscript{22} But Bridges, recruited and befriended by Rickey, was dissatisfied with the amount of "aid" he received from Allegheny. On October 29, 1905, Bridges met with a Washington and Jefferson tackle named James. He had traveled north to Meadville to offer Bridges, according to the fullback, a "chance to better" himself. Over dinner at a downtown hotel, James promised Bridges "greater inducements" than Allegheny offered.\textsuperscript{23}

Later that evening, word reached the Allegheny campus that Bridges and James were sitting in the Meadville depot awaiting the next train to Pittsburgh. Rickey dispatched W. P. Sturtevant, the team manager, to demand Bridges's return. Sturtevant informed Bridges that Rickey "had always been square" with Bridges, but he had failed "to be

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Tribune-Republican}, Sept. 15, 1905.
\item\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Campus}, Dec. 5, 1905.
\item\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Tribune-Republican}, Sept. 21, 1905.
\item\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Allegheny Literary Monthly} 10 (Nov. 1905): 24.
\item\textsuperscript{22} "Bridges Deserts His College Team," \textit{Tribune-Republican}, Oct. 30, 1905.
\item\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Tribune-Republican}, Oct. 30, 1905.
\end{itemize}
square" with Rickey. Bridges replied that it was nothing personal, simply a matter of Washington and Jefferson offering him a "better deal." By now a crowd of local college supporters had gathered in the train station and only the fact that it was Sunday, the local newspaper reported, kept a riot from breaking out. Bridges jumped aboard the southbound train and was never seen in Meadville again.24

The Bridges incident exemplifies the period's football abuses. With unlimited eligibility, a train schedule in one pocket and a nose guard in the other, athletic nomads like Bridges stretched the traditional student-athlete concept. Rickey, having recruited these men and having assumed responsibility for keeping Allegheny football clean, was caught in a dilemma. Baseball future in doubt, and about to marry,25 he lost interest in coaching after Bridges's departure. He called no more chapel rallies, gave out no newspaper interviews and, interestingly enough, held no more practice sessions. The team played desultorily and finished the season with three wins and eight losses.

Post-season letters from alumni poured into the college praising Rickey's efforts but deploring the state of the game.26 Football's "crushing forces of might," wrote John A. Gibson, superintendent of schools at Butler, Pennsylvania, produced men who would "craft [and] crush with relentless fury" American society, business, politics, and religion. "Foot ball," he continued "is out of harmony with Christian civilization. . . . I can't imagine Jesus of Nazareth umpiring a foot ball game." 27 The Reverend R. S. Borland noted that he approved and admired "foot ball as play. . . . But brutal, savage, indecent, murderous scrimmages are not play." 28 Writer Charles Bayard Mitchell thought the game should be called "head ball, for the head is used more than the feet." 29 President Crawford held a series of weekly prayer meet-

24 Ibid.
25 Mann, 41-42.
26 During the 1905 season alone, eighteen college football players were killed and 159 were gravely injured. Richard Whittingham, Saturday Afternoon: College Football and the Men Who Made the Day (New York, 1985), 24. Columbia, Stanford, California and several other colleges dropped the sport altogether.
28 Ibid., 29.
29 Ibid. In late Dec. 1905, Allegheny President Crawford addressed the New York City "General Convention of Colleges and Universities Active in Athletics," the first in a series of meetings that resulted in the founding of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). Crawford, noting that one player (possibly the notorious Bridges) spent seven years playing college football and had announced his intention to play two or three more, stated, "Our duty is clear. We must banish commercialism and professional-
ings that discussed "The Ethical Side of Football." 10

Rickey apparently had had enough. In December 1905, he re-signed. 11 The stirring speeches and fund raising of 1904 were swept away in 1905 by the conditions of the sport itself. Through it all, Rickey maintained his popularity among students and team members. He never commented publicly on the Bridges episode, nor mentioned the bitter campus debate over football. Manager Sturtevant lamented the loss of Rickey, commenting that the next Allegheny coach had better "be willing to work as hard as Coach Rickey. . . . He must, like 'Rick,' be a 'good fellow' and a man who thoroughly understands his business." 12

During the next few months, various college football rules committees, in a sweeping series of reforms, legalized the forward pass, set first down at four tries to gain 10 yards, outlawed hurdling, the "flying wedge" and other dangerous play, and more importantly, limited varsity players to three years of eligibility and demanded that they be full-time students. Rules for playing the modern game were established then, but the debate over commercialism and professionalism continues.

Rickey went on to serve briefly in 1906 as athletic director and coach at his alma mater Ohio Wesleyan, earned in 1911 a law degree from the University of Michigan and began his steady ascension to the Baseball Hall of Fame. After 1906 he never again associated himself with football. His competitive nature, his creative genius and his love of the sport found a more comfortable outlet in the already established game of organized baseball. "Football," he wrote shortly before his death, "must not become our national game. Professionally it will grow, and someday it may even command the public's allegiance as much as baseball does, but it will never replace baseball as our national game." 13

On October 12, 1962, fifty-seven years after leaving Allegheny, Rickey returned to the campus to dedicate the Robertson Athletic Field. 34 The field, still used for intercollegiate football contests, was

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30 *Campus*, Dec. 12, 1905.
31 *Campus*, Dec. 5, 1905.
32 Ibid.
named for Andrew Wells Robertson (1880-1965), chairman of the board of Westinghouse Electric Corporation from 1929 to 1951, wealthy Pittsburgh philanthropist and civic leader. At age 25, he had been the guard on Rickey's ill-fated 1905 football team.