

Chapter One “Football Day”

As Thanksgiving Eve, 1893, turned to Thanksgiving Day, Billy Edwards prepared to leave his post and head home. He made one last pass through his palatial workplace, the elegant bar at New York’s exclusive Hoffman House hotel, briefly reflecting on what had been one of the busier and more remarkable nights of his career as the famous establishment’s bouncer.

He walked past the gorgeous carved mahogany bar, momentarily pondering his reflection in the massive mirrors that lined the walls, mirrors that were said to be the largest in the nation. Standing less than 5'5", the forty-eight-year-old Edwards was an impeccably dressed and strikingly handsome man. He fit in perfectly with the Hoffman House’s high-end clientele. Despite his advancing age, he had a perfect physique. An Englishman by birth, he had once been the lightweight boxing champion of America—an indefatigable fighter, who, twenty-two years earlier, had gone a remarkable ninety-five rounds in a championship match.

On his way out the door, Edwards paused beside an out-of-towner transfixed in front of the bar’s most famous attraction. It was a massive painting, the scandalous “Nymphs and Satyr,” the work of celebrated Frenchman William-Adolphe Bouguereau. The man stood before the twelve-foot-high canvas, mouth slightly agape, staring longingly at the four frolicking naked women at the centerpiece of the work. As the tourist absentmindedly attempted to light a cigarette, Edwards quipped, “Say, young fellow, don’t light your nose,” and walked out onto Broadway.

Edwards was immediately struck by the almost overwhelming din, standing in stark contrast to the more dignified scene inside the Hoffman House. Even at this late hour, the streets were jammed with people—many of them collegians, wearing huge overcoats and fashionable yellow shoes and carrying canes wrapped in either blue or orange ribbons. College cheers rang through the air, the “rah, rah” of Yale answered by the “sis boom bah” of Princeton.

Edwards quickly got lost in the crowd. It was probably for the best. Though he was certainly more than capable of defending himself, the former boxer felt a little trepidation in the early hours of this Thursday morning. At a time when the average American made less than ten dollars per week, he was carrying roughly fifty thousand. It was the day of the biggest sporting event of the year, the annual championship football game, and Edwards was New York City’s best-known bookie.

Intercollegiate football was still in its infancy, less than a quarter of a century removed from its humble beginnings—an 1869 match between Princeton and Rutgers. The early games were sparsely attended and had a collegial feel. A visiting team might roll into town on game day, stroll around with its hosts—perhaps play some billiards—and then head off to the field for the contest, the result of which was a veritable afterthought. When the game ended, the two teams often dined together, sharing toasts and laughter. Within a decade, though, the games became a more serious matter. Princeton, Yale, Harvard, and Columbia formed a football association in the mid-1870s and began crowning an annual champion. The tenor changed. The emphasis on camaraderie was replaced by an emphasis on winning. Students rallied around the team as an expression of loyalty to their school. Its fortunes helped determine the university’s reputation.

The championship game was moved to New York City in 1880, though, in the first few years, it remained largely a curiosity. That first big-city game was played in front of just 5,000 fans, netting each school the modest sum of \$320.42. A little more than a decade later, the crowd had increased by a factor of ten, while the gate receipts had grown by a staggering 5,600 percent. Near riots broke out on the day the reserved tickets went on sale, and students resold them for more than five times their face value. Football had become a big business. That business was driven largely by the social elite. One of the year’s most-anticipated social events, the championship game was a place for high-society New Yorkers to see and be seen. It was an age when conspicuous displays of wealth were becoming more and more acceptable, and the Thanksgiving game was the

perfect time to show off, as the Vanderbilts and the Whitneys used the contest as a convenient excuse to spend and celebrate. Their activities were breathlessly described in New York's powerful and ubiquitous newspapers, which spread the gospel of the event to the masses.

"No one who does not live in New York can understand how completely it colors and lays its hold upon that city," famed journalist Richard Harding Davis wrote in 1893 of the Thanksgiving Day game. "[I]t, in short, became 'the thing to do,' and the significance of that day which once centred in New England around a grateful family offering thanks for blessing received and a fruitful harvest now centres in Harlem about twenty-two very dirty and very earnest young men who are trying to force a leather ball over a whitewashed line."

The *New York Herald* echoed that thought. "No longer is the day one of thanksgiving to the Giver of all good. The kicker now is king and the people bow down to him." The rival *New York Times* opined of the day, "It is not what the Puritans made it, and while the traditional name cannot be easily displaced . . . it has plainly lost its old meaning. Suggestions of a new designation would be timely, but football day will not do."

Game day morning was a gloomy one—windy and cloudy with an occasional misty drizzle. It did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm. Those without tickets set out early. For most, the destination was the so-called "Deadhead Hill," also known as "Coogan's Bluff," after real estate owner James J. Coogan. The bluff rose abruptly over Manhattan Field and, in past years, had given spectators like them a free, albeit distant, view of the game: The earlier the arrival, the better the seat. They piled on the Sixth and Ninth Avenue elevated railroads and made their way up to 155th Street.

The aristocrats headed to the game far more luxuriously. They met at the most exclusive hotels—the Plaza, the Fifth Avenue Hotel, and the aforementioned Hoffman House. There, they boarded carriages, many of which had been reserved up to a year in advance. As many as twenty men and women piled atop the largest ones, known as "Tally-hos," six horses pulling the elaborately decorated coaches northward. Depending on the allegiance of the occupants, cloths of either orange or blue draped all four sides of the carriages. Similarly-hued ribbons lined the spokes.

The riders were decked out from head to toe in college colors, massive blue or orange chrysanthemums pinned to their clothing. They waved flags; they screamed; they sang. They jumped up and down, bouncing the coaches as they went, good-naturedly taunting any carriage they encountered that was covered in rival colors. As the procession moved along, the city's occupants jammed the streets to watch, often standing three or four deep. Houses all along the way were covered with bunting and flags. It was a joyous celebration, and the riders enjoyed every minute of it. They were in no great hurry. The journey was part of the fun, and, besides, they had a spot reserved at the game. The carriages would be pulled right up to the field.

Meanwhile, the train passengers arrived in Harlem, greeted by a bit of a surprise. Coogan had rented his land to a speculator, who, for the staggering sum of \$2,000, had exclusive domain over the bluff for the day. He had cordoned it off and was charging fifty cents a head to get inside the ropes. Some gladly paid, while those who couldn't made their way up higher to the newly constructed viaduct, which loomed over the bluff, even farther away from the field.

As game time grew closer, the trains began to overflow. Passengers hung from the steel gates between the cars as the conductors attempted to maintain some semblance of order. The vehicles creaked slowly and agonizingly along, finally reaching the terminus as the relieved employees cried, "One Hundred and Fifty-Fifth Street! All Out!" In the final hour or so before the game, trains arrived every two minutes, with each pouring upwards of five hundred rooters into the chaotic scene.

As the fans surged through the doorway of the station, they were greeted by sheer pandemonium. The street was teeming with men, women, children, and horses. One fan carried a frightened poodle, its fur dyed a faint Princeton orange. All around them, hawkers sold every manner of souvenir—banners, flags, ribbons, buttons,

and horns. The air was a cacophony fueled by every noisemaker imaginable—from drums and cymbals to human vocal chords.

When the spectators finally made their way inside Manhattan Field, they were awed by what they saw. “It was exactly as though you were in a pit or in the mouth of a monster crater lined to its edges with human beings,” a *New York Sun* reporter observed. “It would be worth coming to Manhattan Field on Thanksgiving Day even if one had to turn around and go out and away before a single play was made.”

The field was ringed by a four-foot fence. Just beyond it was a mass of humanity, all standing, with a poor, albeit comparatively cheap, view of the playing surface. Behind them the grandstands rose majestically, jammed to the gills. On the north end of the field, the stands had been divided into more luxurious covered boxes, the domain of some members of the aristocratic set. Below them were the carriages and Tally-hos, their occupants on the roofs, dining on scrumptious meals of chicken, cranberry sauce, and mince pies—while washing it all down with champagne. Some dignitaries, including New York mayor Thomas Gilroy, mingled in a clubhouse on the east side of the field. The bluff and viaduct dwellers loomed in the distance. There were people as far as the eye could see—a crowd estimated at 50,000.

As kickoff neared, the weather steadily improved. The sun peeked through the clouds and temperatures climbed into the upper forties. In the standing-room areas, fans jostled for position. On the bridge near the viaduct, men fought each other to look through a narrow hole in the boarding. The reward? A view of part of a single goalpost. This was deemed worth fighting for. An enterprising group of fans on the field broke down a portion of the fencing and quickly constructed a makeshift platform, thus obstructing the view of those standing behind them. Understandably, this didn't go over so well, and another group knocked the legs out from under the structure, sending the men sprawling to the grass. Just when it seemed a fight might break out, the crowd erupted in an earsplitting roar. The players had taken the field.

The Princeton men charged out from their dressing quarters with great enthusiasm. One player, David Balliet, was so excited that he did cartwheels as he ran out with his teammates. Three other Tigers performed a pre-orchestrated dance of sorts, which ended with the trio all burying their noses in the grass, as if savoring its fine aroma. They were decided underdogs in the game. Not only had they not defeated the powerful Elis since 1889, they hadn't even managed to score a point against them in that span—dropping the three games by a combined tally of 63–0. They weren't the only ones who had struggled with Yale, though. The Elis had won a remarkable thirty-seven games in a row. In that span, they had outscored their opponents by an amazing total of 1,285 to 6. The Yale men came out in a more sedate and businesslike manner. Not surprisingly, they conveyed an air of great confidence. The public shared that sentiment. The bets that Billy Edwards had taken at the Hoffman House all week favored Yale by odds of better than two to one.

The players emerged for warm-ups in their full uniforms. On top they wore snugly fitting canvas jackets that laced up the front—similar to the so-called “smocks” introduced in 1877 by Tiger halfback Ledu Smock. Below that they sported canvas pants that went down to the knees, where they met the players' socks. Over the socks, some players wore shin guards made of cork and covered with leather or canvas, a piece of equipment that had been introduced earlier in that very same year. Padding under the uniforms, made of layered cotton or wool, had become more prominent in recent seasons, though it was by no means universal. Players donned whatever amount they felt comfortable with. Many of the men wore rubber nose guards, which were held in place by a rubber band that was strapped around the back of the head. It was a device that had been introduced by the cartwheeling Balliet three years earlier when he played for Lehigh, and subsequently refined by Edgar Allan Poe, former Tiger captain and grand-nephew of the famous poet.

The most distinctive feature of the players, though, was their hair. Though a few gridiron men had begun to wear headgear, it would not come into widespread use for several years. Instead, footballers grew their hair long, in the belief that their flowing locks would provide the padding necessary to protect them. “That of ‘Phil’ King of Princeton has been envied by every football player in the country,” the *New York Times* had written that

morning of the Tiger quarterback's hair style. "His golden locks resemble a huge chrysanthemum; they cover his eyes and ears, and he claims that he can butt a stone wall without the least fear of fracturing his skull or causing a concussion of the brain."

King was more than just a newspaper scribe's modern-day Samson, though. He was also Princeton's best player. "If the Tigers down old Eli to-day, King will be in the thickest of the fray," the *Times* wrote of Princeton's 5'7", 159-pound star. "That chrysanthemum head will be seen everywhere, tackling, interfering, punting, and making runs toward the blue goal. A fair-minded lover of the game, who has had years of experience, said last night that King is the superior of any football player in the country."

In the days before radio and television, football fans, the majority of whom never got to see the players in action, counted almost entirely on the opinions of newspaper men to help them understand and appreciate the game. And the papers were up to the task, painting prose pictures of dramatic action and larger-than-life heroes. The *New York Sun*, which sent seventeen reporters to the game and would devote roughly 20 percent of the next day's paper to its coverage, didn't disappoint. It conveyed the mammoth task that faced King and his teammates. "They were all there," the *Sun* reported of the Elis team, "the giants, Hickok and Stillman; Hinkey, the silent captain, whose visage scarred and seamed told of deeds of daring on many field; Butterworth, the full back, upon whom Yale counted so much; Thorne, swathed in bandages and wearing a nose mask. . . ." On and on it went, building the drama.

And the truth was, it was dramatic. The anticipation was so great that as Princeton prepared to kick off to Yale, a remarkable hush came over the throng. They had waited for this for so long, talked about it so much, and now, it was finally here. The tension was almost too much to bear.

Almost immediately, it became apparent that the powerful Elis were in for a battle. The first handful of possessions saw only minimal gains for both sides. It was a time when the forward pass was still illegal, meaning there were only two ways to move the ball—running it and kicking it. Teams had three downs to make five yards, but if their field position was poor, they often chose to punt on first or second down. The reasoning was simple. Fumbles were commonplace, and the penalty for many of the rules infractions was a loss of the ball at the spot of the foul. Coupled with a scoring system that gave more value to a field goal than a touchdown, the decision to run a play close to your own goal line was a risky one.

As the first half moved along, it was the Tigers who were getting the better of the battle, ripping off several long runs. They had discovered two weak points in the Yale line—the tackle spots manned by Fred Murphy and Anson Beard. They capitalized by using one of the game's newest and most brutal innovations—the flying wedge, in which a mass of players would start well behind the line of scrimmage in a V formation, timing their arrival at the line with the snap of the ball and concentrating the impact on one unfortunate opponent. The ball carrier would then run through the vacated spot. As football historian Parke Davis remarked many years later, "the impact was such that the objective point usually remembered it for years."

Indeed, injuries became part of the story of the game. About midway through the first half, Princeton's J. R. Blake, racing with his head down on a dead run in an attempt to scoop up a punt, was leveled by Yale captain Frank Hinkey. Hinkey got the worst of the collision. "The shock," the *Sun* reported, "was enough to break the neck of a bull." Yale's star lay dazed on the field as blood cascaded out from his head and his right ear. Almost instantly, a medical brigade from the Yale sideline ran onto the field. One man carried a bag of instruments, another had a satchel full of medicines. Others sprinted out with water and sponges. After briefly laying on the turf in a daze, Hinkey staggered to his feet. He could barely walk and shook his head from side to side as he was helped to the sidelines. The doctors feverishly went to work on him. Under the rules of the day, they had five minutes to get him back on the field. If Hinkey was replaced by a substitute, he would not be allowed to return to the game at any point. Most in the crowd assumed the medical effort would be in vain. And yet, a few minutes later, Hinkey reappeared. His head was wrapped tightly in a bandage, which had been covered in plaster in an effort to stem the flow of blood from his ear, the lobe of which had been torn away from

his head. His neck and jersey were covered in crimson stains. At the sight of their star, the Yale fans erupted with cheers and chanted, “Hinkey! Hinkey! Hinkey!” while the 157-pound dynamo made his way back toward his teammates. A man of few words, he gathered the Yale players around him and said simply, “Come, boys, let us get to work.”

But it was the Tigers who seized the momentum. After an exchange of several kicks and fumbles, a short Yale punt gave Princeton the ball at their opponent’s 25-yard line. A series of runs by halfbacks William Ward and Frank Morse, aimed at Murphy and Beard, gave Princeton a first down at the Yale four-yard line. The Tigers’ supporters were in a frenzy. A small group near the goal line began to chant, “Four, four, four yards more!” Soon, the yell spread throughout the stadium. The seemingly invincible Elis were in serious trouble. Two straight runs by Ward netted a shade more than three yards. The Tigers had one last chance, from a bit more than two feet away. The sound of 50,000 screaming voices was nearly deafening. The snap went to King, who lateraled it to Ward. His teammates, in a completely legal maneuver, grouped behind him and pushed him over the goal line.

The celebration was instantaneous and ear piercing—a roar that began close to the field and quickly spread up to the bluff and the viaduct. Princeton orange was everywhere, with fans waving their flags and banners in sheer jubilation. On the sidelines, the substitutes turned somersaults while the coaches broke into massive grins and vigorously shook one another’s hands. The four-point touchdown was followed by the equivalent of the modern extra point—a two-point goal kicked by King.

While pandemonium reigned in Harlem, 75 miles away in New Haven, the mood was one of shock. A local telephone company had erected a special scoreboard outside its offices. The results of each play were wired in from Manhattan. When he received them, the device’s operator maneuvered puppets that had been suspended on a wire rigged between two goalposts to provide a visual summary of the action. Hundreds had gathered there to witness this modern marvel, and, “when the Princeton puppet juggled the ball behind the Yale goal, dead silence prevailed.”

Though Princeton was unable to score again, the second half played out largely like the first. The Tigers had the only real scoring threats. Twice they drove deep into Yale territory, only to lose the ball on downs. Later, they missed a short attempt at a goal from the field—the modern equivalent of a field goal, which, had it been dropkicked through, would have given the Tigers five points.

While Princeton had blown several opportunities to put the game away, Yale was unable to take advantage of the miscues. The Tigers held the field-position advantage for most of the half, forcing the Elis to punt early on several possessions. When Yale did try to move the ball, it met fierce resistance from the strong Princeton line, “and the Yale team fell back baffled and chagrined.” On top of that, the Elis repeatedly shot themselves in the foot with a series of penalties and fumbles that hindered their progress.

The game was stopped numerous times in the second half in order to treat the growing list of wounded. After a wedge play that sent a Princeton back into the Yale line for two yards, Balliet remained on the turf, as blood “poured in a torrent down the neck and chest of the big Princeton centre.” It was an injury highly reminiscent of the one that Hinkey had suffered in the first half, and, like Hinkey, after a few minutes of treatment, Balliet was able to continue. “[T]he game went on as though torn ears were a necessary adjunct,” observed the *Sun*. Darkness began to descend on the field. It became difficult for the fans to make out the players. For those on Coogan’s Bluff and the viaduct, the game at this point was nothing more than a rumor. Though time still remained on the clock, the referee, former Harvard captain W. A. Brooks, decided to call the contest due to darkness. Yale had lost a football game for the first time in more than three years.

Instantly, the Princeton fans descended on the field and mobbed their Tiger heroes—many of them plowing into distraught Yale players as they went. The Tigers would celebrate with their rooters that night, but at this moment, they wanted to be with one another. They hustled through the throng to their dressing room. With fans

pounding on the doors and windows of the facility, the men whooped and hollered among themselves. Then, after being urged to do so by a coach, the naked, bloody, sweaty, and mud-caked players sang the school's doxology.

"This may strike some as a very sacrilegious performance," Davis observed later. "But the spirit in which it was done has a great deal to do with the question, and anyone who has seen a defeated team lying on the benches of their dressing room, sobbing like schoolgirls, can understand how great and how serious is the joy of victory to the men who conquer."

The team was driven to its headquarters at the Murray Hill Hotel, where the celebration went long into the night. The Princeton players were modest and gracious in victory. "It wasn't an afternoon tea by a long shot," said right guard Knox Taylor, "but it's all the better to think over because the Yale men did play so well." As for the Elis, the battered Hinkey "preserved his reputation for wisdom by saying, 'I have nothing to say.'" Broadway was jammed with delirious Princeton fans, waving flags and twirling their hats on their canes, all while screaming Tiger yells. By early evening the sidewalk was so clogged with revelers that they spilled out onto the street, making it impossible for carriages to pass. Many celebrants descended upon the area's theaters, disrupting the shows with their shouts and catcalls. By the end of the evening, the 30th Street jail was populated with between forty-five and fifty fans, most of them booked for disturbing the peace. Interestingly enough, the majority of the fans were not students—a telling gauge of the widespread nature of the game's impact. In New Jersey, the few Princeton students who remained on campus during the Thanksgiving break made a racket of their own—ringing the college bell for four straight hours. As the townspeople joined in the celebration, exuberant students paraded to the homes of school professors and administrators demanding speeches. The academics cooperated. "Gentlemen," said one, "I congratulate you that Yale is nowhere and Princeton is everywhere."

Back at the Hoffman House, bookie Billy Edwards had plenty of work to do that night, collecting betting slips from the victorious Princeton fans and passing along their winnings. In all, an estimated \$100,000 changed hands, with the biggest losses coming from Wall Street, where several Yale men lost thousands in bets with colleagues at the New York Stock Exchange.

In all, rules and technology aside, it was a day that felt much more like a modern college game than like that first intercollegiate contest between Rutgers and Princeton. What had begun as an informal, gentlemanly pursuit between students of rival universities was well on its way to becoming a thrilling nationwide spectacle.