

CALTECH: PHI BETA FOOTBALL

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In the smog-sodden gloom of a late November afternoon last fall, the football team of the California Institute of Technology took it on the chin from Harvey Mudd College of Pomona by a score of 39-0. No one was too surprised at the result. Caltech had won only one game all season, and—in its league—Harvey Mudd was reputed to have a strong team. There were, however, some other things about this game that were quite unique to college football.

The game was originally scheduled for Friday night, November 22, in the Rose Bowl. Although Caltech had booked the Bowl many months ahead for this game, a local high school found itself unexpectedly in the finals of a regional tournament to be decided the same night. Considerable pressure was exerted on Caltech to give up the Rose Bowl to the high school, but the Caltech athletic department was adamant. "Our seniors," said one of the coaches, "want to play their last game in the Rose Bowl . . . God knows, at least they deserve *that*."

As it turned out, no football was played on that Friday night, anywhere. The President of the United States was assassinated that day.

Caltech rescheduled its game with Harvey Mudd for the following Tuesday afternoon, and it was played in almost complete secrecy. This was nothing new for Caltech teams, however. Almost everything in the way of intercollegiate athletics at Caltech is done in secrecy.

Running an intercollegiate athletic program at a school like Caltech poses some strange and wonderful problems. For example, there was a considerable crisis on the football practice field late in the season last year when a halfback lost a contact lens during scrimmage.

Contact lenses are a continuing and exacerbating problem in Caltech football. An uncommon number of Caltech players wear glasses since they spend an uncommon amount of time poring over books—admittedly an unusual avocation among the average run of college football players. Since no one

has ever figured out how to play football while wearing a pair of glasses, the Caltech players have had to fall back on contact lenses, which persist in popping out at embarrassing moments. It has happened more than once during a game, and time has to be called while the players get down on their hands and knees and grope about the turf looking for the tiny piece of optical glass.

Perhaps a certain degree of melancholia can justifiably be permitted the Caltech football coach—particularly in view of his previous life in another world. His name is Bert LaBrucherie, and in 1946 the football team he was coaching at the University of California at Los Angeles completed an unbeaten season against topflight opposition and was selected to play in the Rose Bowl. On New Year's Day of 1947, Mr. LaBrucherie made a grievous error in judgment; he lost to the University of Illinois 45-14. Obviously, the alumni and the university administration could not put up with this sort of nonsense, and the following year they suggested to Coach LaBrucherie that his resignation would be gratefully accepted.

Coach LaBrucherie was understandably disenchanted with the coaching profession after this episode and he said the hell with it and sold automobiles for six months. He was approached by several big-name schools, but they were far away from his Los Angeles home, and he didn't want to leave California. Then, about the time he was discovering that a career in the automobile business wasn't going to satisfy his creative juices, he received, and accepted, a coaching offer close to home—from the California Institute of Technology.

Caltech has never been noted for its athletic program, although it does offer considerable assets in such other areas as science and engineering. There are those who consider it the finest school of its kind in the nation—better, even, than MIT. It has nurtured nine Nobel laureates and is probably the most difficult school in the country for an undergraduate to get into. Its list of accomplishments in the scien-

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tific field are even longer than Ohio State's conquests in football.

Caltech does, however, insist on policies that are likely to give any red-blooded American coach pause. It doesn't, for example, offer any athletic scholarships, doesn't own a stadium, doesn't permit recruiting of athletes, offers no scholastic concessions to athletes, and demands with sticky insistence that athletes not only attend all their classes and labs but also keep their grades up in competition with some of the most profound young brains in the United States.

This puts certain restrictions on the activities of a football coach. Since athletes can't be proselytized and athletic prowess is of negligible importance in considering applications, Coach LaBrucherie has to work with the student body list handed him on registration day. It's enough to reduce any self-respecting football coach to tears. Inevitably, the list is replete with nearsighted 135-pounders.

Every year spawns new hope, however, that in this batch of intelligentsia may be an incipient All-American (or even, for God's sake, an All-Conference), and Coach LaBrucherie and his boss, Athletic Director Hal Musselman, scour the list and cull those who have indicated any sort of athletic tendencies—from carrying bats in Little League to running to the corner grocery.

Armed with these prospects (e.g., Schmitz, Siegfried, Iona, Ohio, 5' 9", 138 lbs, lettered in paddle tennis, jv in Indian wrestling), Coach LaBrucherie sets out on his recruiting program. His recruiting area consists of the college campus, his recruiting funds of a possible cup of coffee for the prospect paid out of his own pocket, and his recruiting arguments the healthy character-building benefits of intercollegiate athletics plus an opportunity to represent dear old Caltech before Linus Pauling, God, and the world.

Considering the intellectual attainments of the boys to whom these arguments are being presented, they understandably often turn out to be less than convincing. School spirit is a sometimes thing at Caltech. It is whispered that there are those who have attended Caltech clear through graduate school without ever getting around to seeing a football game.

As a result, Coach LaBrucherie has had to grapple with a whole new set of recruiting problems. "At UCLA," he recalls with pardonable nostalgia, "it was a privilege to be invited out for the team. Here I have to try and talk them into it."

"Nobody is ever cut from one of our athletic

squads," interposed Mr. Musselman. "Nobody."

The problem, one gathers, is to get them to come out, and the athletic department's competition for the time and attention of athletically inclined students comes from remarkable directions.

Usually the excuse given is, "I haven't time to practice. It takes all my time to keep my grades up enough just to stay in school."

The rationality of this argument sometimes obscures its lack of validity. Caltech is tough, but it's not *that* tough for all of the students who could compete in sports. Sometimes academics is used as an excuse for more exotic reasons for not turning out for intercollegiate sports — such things, for example, as the disinclination to get beat, with deadly consistency; or a greater athletic loyalty to a dormitory team.

"When a man wins a varsity letter," observed Coach LaBrucherie moodily, "he's no longer eligible for intramural competition in that sport. So some of our boys who could make varsity teams are pretty careful to avoid making a letter."

A few years back, LaBrucherie spotted a 200-pound six-footer playing quarterback in one of the intramural games. To Coach LaBrucherie, he looked like Red Grange, Tom Harmon, and Sammy Baugh all rolled into one. He floated pass after pass 30 to 40 yards downfield, hitting his receivers with remarkable accuracy. At the time, Caltech had had to give up passing in its intercollegiate games because a frightful number of passes were being intercepted.

Eagerly LaBrucherie approached the boy and told him, "A fellow your size who throws a pass like that should be playing football."

"I *am* playing," said the boy, surprised at the coach's lack of perception. "I'm the quarterback for Dabney House."

"No," said LaBrucherie, "I mean for the *college* team."

The boy allowed as how he hadn't thought about that, and for a week LaBrucherie worked on him with every verbal trick he'd learned in a decade of big-time college coaching. At the same time, the dorm leaders were working to protect their investment. In the end, LaBrucherie lost, and the 200-pounder continued to throw his passes for the dorm team.

After fifteen years of this sort of thing, La Brucherie has become more or less accustomed to it. Not entirely; just more or less. There are compensations. Nobody, except the coaches and players who care *very* much, gives much of a damn whether Caltech

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wins or loses. No students are hanging LaBrucherie in effigy, even after the team loses 25 in a row as it did over a span of several recent years. No alumni are bringing pressure on the school administration to fire him and bring in a winner. No sports writers second-guess him. And no enemy scouts try to spy on his practice sessions. Actually, the coach would be delighted if someone—anyone at all—would be enough interested to come out and watch football practice.

Few enough people turn out for the games, which makes for one of the more remarkable anachronisms in college football today. Caltech's football home is the Rose Bowl. The Rose Bowl is a Pasadena municipal stadium and Caltech, as a Pasadena resident, is entitled to rent it. Four Friday nights a season, the Caltech team takes its lumps in this massive concrete bowl, filled almost entirely with cavernous shadows and sepulchral silence. The capacity of the Rose Bowl is 100,000; Caltech games draw somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 people, depending on the enthusiasm of the student body of the visiting team.

Superficially, it would seem that working with great intellects would be a welcome draught of cold water to a thirsty football coach, but there have been many introspective moments when LaBrucherie would gladly have traded the accumulated IQ of his entire team for one mean, muscular, thick-headed, revved-up linebacker.

It's a modest triumph for Coach LaBrucherie to diagram the most complex play for his men and see instant understanding instead of the vacuous bafflement of the typical Phys. Ed. major who is being frantically tutored so he can maintain a passing grade in bait casting and folk dancing. But, with LaBrucherie, the frustration comes with the execution rather than the comprehension.

"Sure these Caltech kids learn their assignments faster," points out the coach, "but that doesn't help much if they don't have the physical equipment or ability to execute them. A little experience might help, too."

Athletic experience is hard to come by among undergraduates at Caltech. About 95 per cent never competed in any varsity sport in high school, and half of the students didn't even go to a high school athletic contest as a *spectator*.

Competing in varsity sports at Caltech means a considerable sacrifice in both time and money to the student. Until recently, football candidates had to give up summer jobs and then pay their own room-and-board in order to report to school two

weeks early to go out for the football team. The athletic department has at least been able to wangle room-and-board for these boys.

Getting the kids to turn out for the team, however, is only the first step in the peculiar series of problems faced by coaches at Caltech. Always, they have to compete with the classroom, and at Caltech all disputes are resolved in favor of the classroom.

Several years ago, Caltech had an All-Conference tackle, a strapping youngster whose mere presence on the field could change the glaze over the eyes of the coaching staff to a gleam of hope of better things to come. This boy had a five o'clock class three days a week, so he made football practice only half the time. No one ever suggested dropping him from the team and, God knows, no one suggested he drop the five o'clock class, either. There was also a sprint man on the track team recently who kept falling asleep in his starting chocks. It turned out that for weeks he had been getting up at 3 o'clock each morning to study so he could spare the time to work out with the track squad.

A lot of apocryphal stories that are repeated gleefully and periodically in sports columns have understandably grown up around Caltech's athletic program. The coaching staff, accustomed to them by now, takes the wisecracks in reasonably good humor.

A typical story is the one about the physics major who was playing tackle on the football team. He figured out during a game that if he changed his angle of attack on an opposing linebacker he could pick off two opponents instead of one. This he did, and Caltech won a smashing triumph, proving that in the long run brains will win out over brawn.

The story isn't true, and, even if it were, Coach LaBrucherie wouldn't buy the moral for a minute.

"My players," he says, "probably have the highest IQ average of any team in the country. Judging by our record, this proves plainly that football is more than a game of brains."

"Sure, we'd like to see larger crowds at our games," says Mr. Musselman. "What athletic department wouldn't? Larger crowds and more enthusiasm would help these kids who take the time and make the effort to come out for a varsity team at Caltech. But one thing is sure: Our athletes don't turn out for a team because they want to show off for their girls or get a write-up in the newspaper. They come out just because they want to play."

Which, come to think of it, might not be a bad idea for U.S. football factories which masquerade under the title of universities.