

Chicago Lights Up Football World

by Robert Pruter

Chicago's famed 1893 World's Columbian Exposition was held in a splendid "White City" of alabaster-coated neo-classical design buildings displaying all the best of late 19th century civilization, art, industry, and science. The city put on its best face for six months from May 1 to October 30, 1893, to thrill visitors from around the world. At night fairgoers were awed by the sight of this "White City," with its buildings set along Venetian-style canals and practically glowing whiteness under the blaze of tens of thousands of incandescent lights and giant searchlights. To fairgoers the Chicago World's Fair had ushered in the age of electricity, not only in the outdoor illumination, but also in the myriad new electric gadgets and machinery on display in the exhibits. Not only that, but a series of football games played from August through October – two of them involving collegiate schools, West Point and Northwestern – made use of electric illumination, pointing to a future era of night games.

The Chicago World's Fair, as did most world fairs of the day, also included a variety of sideshow events beyond the famous exhibition halls. The famous mile-long Midway Plaisance, with its foreign and exotic exhibits, carnival rides, games, and shows, provided more plebeian fare for fairgoers, as did a schedule of athletic and entertainment events. Most of these events took place in the Live-Stock Pavilion, a 15,000-seat double-deck arena that sat to the rear of and in-between the Mechanics and the Agricultural buildings. The Stock Pavilion, as it was usually called in the press, was 400-feet in length, which provided plenty of room for mass gymnastics events, of which there were several, and games of such team sports as football, soccer, and lacrosse. All during the World's Fair, the Stock Pavilion, between its live-stock exhibitions, presented to the public a rich array of entertainment and sporting events.

On May 31, the Pavilion served as host of a mass calisthenics exhibition of German-American children members of the Turners, and on August 12, the Bohemian-Americans gave Sokol exhibitions of mass calisthenics and exercises on the gymnastics apparatus. Much of July and August at the Pavilion was taken up with the British Army's "military tournament," which included "maneuvers and army field sports." From mid-August until the Fair closed a couple of months later, the Pavilion was given over to team sports events, notably a rash of football games, but also Gaelic football (between a New York and a Chicago club), lacrosse (between an Iroquois team and a Pottawatomie team), and an association football (soccer) match (between two Chicago clubs). During this period the Stock Pavilion hosted five football games, all of which were played at night under lights. Four pitted the Chicago Athletic Association (CAA) against West Point, the Detroit Athletic Club, the New York Athletic Club, and the Denver Athletic Club; and one pitted Northwestern University against the Denver Athletic Club.

The Chicago Athletic Association had been organized in 1890, and in 1892 it formed a football team. The team was built around veterans of the University Club football team. Chicago during the late 1880s and early 1890s did not have a first-rate college football team around which its citizenry could rally for an annual Thanksgiving Day contest. New York had made annual contests between top collegiate teams on Thanksgiving Day a huge society event and a spectacle that transcended the mere football experience. The University of Illinois and Northwestern were still some years away from football respectability, and the University of Chicago would not have its first football team until 1892. Chicago society therefore needed a team to represent the city in annual Thanksgiving Day games, and from 1888 to 1891 they created the University Club team and had it compete against either Michigan or Cornell each year. The University Club team was made up of recent college graduates, whose families were from

Chicago but who were products of Eastern football programs.

The 1892 CAA football team not only took over the role of the University Club team, it built an ambitious program of playing a season-long schedule of university and club teams. That team included at least eight names from the 1891 University Club team, and added the great Yale star Pudge Heffelfinger to the line-up. The 1893 version of the team that would play West Point included Heffelfinger and at least five veterans of the University team. The team also included half-back Laurie Bliss, who had been Yale's captain the previous year. This game thus pitted a much older and more veteran team of men against a team of boys, many whom were freshmen. The West Point program was exceedingly young also; its first year of football being 1890, and then for only one game with Navy.

The West Point cadets arrived in Chicago around August 15, a battalion strong of 290 men in four companies. This included the West Point band and the football team. On August 25, during

the day the cadets took in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. In the evening the ladies of the Woman's Building hosted a reception for the cadets in the building. The West Point band sat in the balcony and played martial tunes during the welcoming ceremonies, and then a dance was held. The following day the game was played.



A view of the Chicago Fair

The game began at 8:45 PM, and, according to the Chicago Times before 8,000 fans. The Chicago World's Fair awed visitors with its electric lighting of the "white city," and the football game was likewise intended to demonstrate the modern era of electric

illumination. However, night games with artificial lighting were in the raw experimental stage. Fair officials stretched a string of lights across the field and placed searchlights at each end of the Pavilion. The Chicago Times reporter disparaged the result, saying, "The lights were not bright enough for effective playing and when kicked in the air the ball could scarcely be seen."

Artificial lighting for arena contests had been tried experimentally even before Thomas Edison's invention of the incandescent lamp in 1879. Baseball produced several attempts with electric lighting, one as early as 1880. Australian Football lays a claim back to 1879, when three games were played under "primitive arc lights," and rugby makes a claim for 1878, when a couple of games were played under "Gramme's Lights." Nonetheless, this early use of incandescent lights was groundbreaking and followed less than a year after the 1892 game between Mansfield and Wyoming Seminary in Pennsylvania, which is generally considered to be the first outdoor college football game played under lights.

The West Point cadets had no chance in their contest against the powerful Chicago Athletic team, but lost the game by a surprisingly close score of 14-0. The score was partially kept low as the game consisted of only 40 minutes, compared with the then-standard 90-minute game. The

Chicago Times pointed out the disparity in the teams, "Chicago has among them men who are veterans of many a hard won victory in college and since they graduated. The West Point team was picked up from the ranks, and many of them played last year for the first time in their lives." In September Bliss would be hired by West Point to coach its team.

The CAA-West Point contest provided sufficient impetus to build a whole schedule of games at the fair. A few days after the game, Lawrence Heyworth, a manager of a photographic concessionaire at the fair, obtained a concession from fair officials to present a regular series of football and other team contests at the Stock Pavilion. He initially scheduled the Cleveland Athletic Club to meet the CAA, but that fell through. However, he did succeed in presenting a series of four night-time football games, three starring the CAA. All the games were of 40-minutes duration. The Chicago club was successful in all three games – defeating the Detroit AC 16 to 0 (on September 9), the New York AC 6 to 0 (on September 18), and the Denver AC 6 to 0 (on October 3). Tickets for each game cost the public 50 cents, of which Heyworth took 25 percent.

The game between Northwestern University and the Denver Athletic Club took place on October 4, a day after the Denver club lost to the CAA. The Denver club, coached by former Yale player Josh Hartwell, was typically made up of ex-college players one to two years out of school. The game was scheduled at 8:30 PM, but the Northwestern team arrived late, forcing a 9:00 starting time. The Northwestern boys were heavily outweighed by the Denver team, who in the first half scored two touchdowns, then worth 4 points a piece. The 8-0 score held through the second half, as neither side scored. The Chicago Tribune scribe noted that the Northwestern team outplayed the Denver team in the second half. Regarding the lighting of the game, the Inter Ocean reporter said that the "lights were arranged better," giving the spectators better visibility than the previous night when "poor light" had made it difficult for spectators to distinguish the players.

The Northwestern-Denver tilt was the last football game played at the Pavilion. The CAA in early October announced it would no longer participate in Pavilion games, which killed an upcoming game with the Allegheny Athletic Club. The CAA contended that it was getting too small a share of the proceeds, given that it was "composed of star ex-collegians, who are, many of them, known from one end of the country to the other, and when they turn out to play, even against a team of unknown quality, as the West Pointers certainly were, are sure to draw a big crowd." The club felt it was being exploited to allow "other people to fill their pockets," meaning of course, the promoter Lawrence Heyworth.

One wonders how truly successful these games were. While the Chicago Times at the time of the West Point game reported a crowd of 8,000, it reported a total of only 2,500 spectators in its October 8 edition, along with totals of 3,000 for the Detroit AC game and 4,000 for the NYAC game. The Chicago Tribune reported only 200 spectators appeared for the rain-delayed CAA-Denver AC game, and the Inter Ocean commented that the audience for the Northwestern-Denver AC game the following night was "fewer in number" than at the CAA-Denver game.

Army football records do not list the CAA-West Point game for 1893, while Northwestern University rightly lists its World's Fair game in its records. Apparently, Army considers the contest to be of an exhibition nature. Certainly, during the season of 1893 the West Point team never gave the game any cognizance, but in retrospect the game probably should be counted in the record as the concept of exhibition games was not fully developed at this time. The newspapers of the day considered the game just a regular football game, albeit a bit early in the season. While neither of the college-club games of the fair was anything more than a minor contest, they deserve some note for pioneering football under electric lights.