

THE OLYMPICS GAME

By Ray Schmidt

With the city of Los Angeles preparing to host the 1932 Olympic Games, there was considerable interest on the part of event organizers for the staging of a "demonstration sport," which was an option allowed to the host country. Casting about for a sport which could be expected to provide an interesting show and draw a sizeable crowd of ticket-buying fans, the organizers soon decided upon an exhibition game of college football. Such an event had been held in 1893 at Chicago's Columbian Exposition when West Point had played the Chicago Athletic Club.

With the gigantic Los Angeles Coliseum available the organizers sought the most colorful intersectional foes they could imagine, and they soon decided upon a game between the University of Southern California – coming off a mythical national championship season in 1931 – and the still glamorous and tradition-laden Yale football team. But there was a problem with this scheme, as Yale was amongst the elite Eastern schools advocating football reforms in response to various abuses of over-emphasis and commercialism that had been documented in the 1929 Carnegie Report – which included long-distance intersectional games.

Seeking to avoid any embarrassing publicity their proposal might cause, the Olympic organizing committee dispatched the prestigious coach of USC, Howard Jones, to travel secretly across country to Yale with the proposal in January 1931. Jones carried a letter from William M. Garland – the president of the Olympic committee – to Yale's president, Dr. James Rowland Angell. The letter – which Angell labeled as "strictly confidential" – formally tendered the invitation for the game, surrounded by ample amounts of verbiage intended to assure Yale of the committee's noble intentions.

Very aware of the contradictions to the concerns of college football reformers, Garland wrote: "In approaching this plan our Committee has endeavored to consider the position of the universities as of primary consideration and to formulate a plan ... constructive from a university standpoint.... The great game of our colleges, American Football, a game that would be strictly in line with the amateur principles of Olympism.... Our reasons for thinking of Yale need no explanation." Here was a dilemma the Yale administration didn't need.

As one of the sport's traditional political leaders – and a signer of the President's Agreement of the Big Three which decried such intersectional events – it was difficult to imagine how Yale could rationalize sending its football team across the country for an exhibition game which clearly had heavy overtones of the commercialism that many people believed to be one of the college game's fundamental problems. Yet this was the Depression, and Yale's football revenues had already been hit hard by attendance declines, and the money from an Olympic appearance would help greatly in supporting the school's many athletic teams. After considerable internal debate, President Angell reluctantly declined Garland's invitation to the 1932 Olympics.

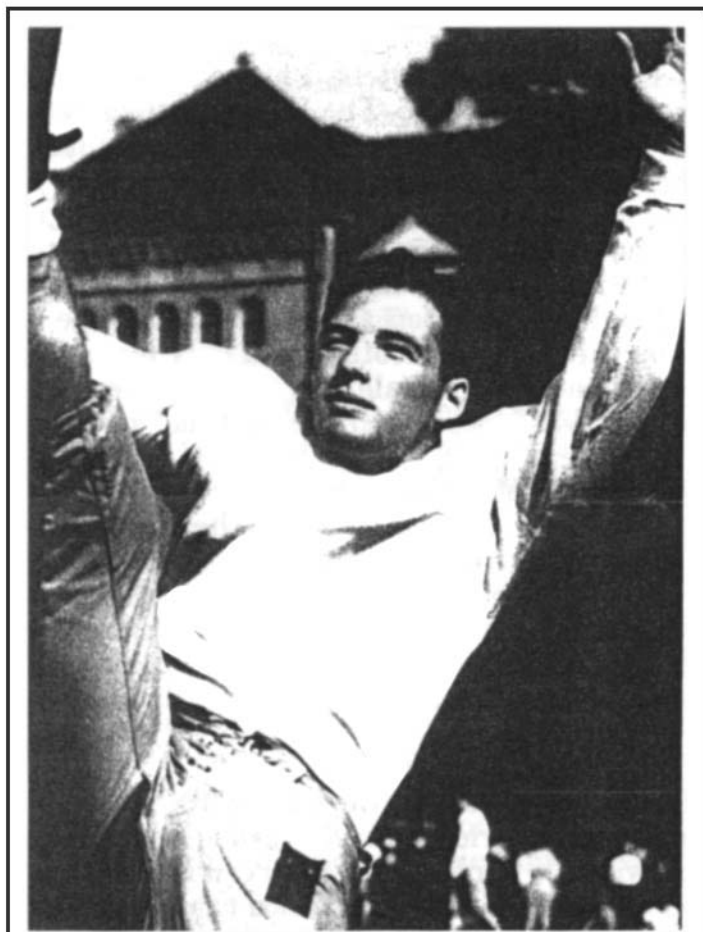
The Olympic organizers were determined that football should be their demonstration sport, and if they could not lure a prestigious Eastern Big Three school then they would settle for the next best thing – an all-star game between a team of Big Three players and a squad of the Pacific Coast's own "Big Three;" USC, Stanford, and California. The players would have to be seniors who had graduated in June 1932, but there would be sufficient numbers available – including such excellent players as Albie Booth (Yale), Erny Pinckert and Gaius Shaver (USC), Eddie Mays and Jack Crickard (Harvard), George Watkins (Cal.), and Rudy Rintala (Stanford).

With the game scheduled for the evening of August 8, 1932, the two all-star squads reported for

practice three weeks beforehand. Greeting the players for the West team was its coaching staff of Howard Jones, Glenn Warner, and "Navy" Bill Ingram of Cal; while the East All-Stars were headed up by T.A.D. Jones, Mal Stevens, Eskie Clark, and Adam Walsh. Initially the two teams practiced daily on adjoining fields – separated by a row of tall hedges – and it was claimed that no scouting of the neighboring opposition was going on. There must have been some doubts about that though, as the West team soon moved its camp to a Los Angeles high school field.

Preparation of the teams progressed satisfactorily with no real injuries to speak of, until the game's promoters received a set-back with the announcement that Pinckert, Johnny Baker (USC), and Booth had all jumped their teams in order to accept well paying movie jobs in nearby

Hollywood. Yet both coaching staffs still expected to display open offensive attacks with running and passing from "solid, substantial formations." There would also be some rules changes adopted for the game; including the use of unlimited substitutions, and the so-called "dead man" rule which said that a ball carrier was "down" the moment his knee touched the ground.



Gaius Shaver

By 1932 the widely held opinion was that college football's balance of competitive power had shifted away from the East, and that the best football was now being played by teams in the Midwest, Far West, and South. The brand of football being played by the Big Three Ivy schools in particular was no longer felt to be a serious factor on the national scene. Many sportswriters were thus touting the Olympics game as a chance for the Ivies to regain some of their tarnished gridiron reputation and the East squad was said to be taking the game more seriously during training camp. Dick Hyland of the Los Angeles Examiner wrote that "the Western boys have just begun to tumble to the fact that if they lose this football game, West Coast football will look very funny indeed."

On the night of the game promoters were surprised to see approximately 60,000 fans

flock to the Los Angeles Coliseum for the Olympics "demonstration" game. The starting lineup for the West team was comprised of six USC players, three from Stanford, and two from California; while the East squad opened with four from Harvard, seven from Yale, and none from Princeton. From almost the outset the West took command of the game on both sides of the ball, allowing the East just one first down in the opening quarter. The running game quickly became the preferred offensive strategy as neither team could manage much of a passing attack.

Late in the first quarter the West finally got moving after receiving a punt. With Shaver and Watkins leading the ground attack, the West pounded the ball to the East 14 yard line where a fumble recovery by guard Ed Rotan (Yale) ended the march. Getting the ball right back at its

25 yard line after a quick kick, the West started off again. Shaver gained 36 yards on a pair of bursts up the middle, and the former Trojan fullback then swept outside for a gallop of 30 yards before being dragged down by Bernard White (Harvard) of the East. This chance soon ended when Watkins was knocked down at the five yard line on a fourth down carry on the last play of the first period.

Both teams substituted freely in the second quarter and there was not much excitement until just before halftime. Then the West partially blocked a punt and took over on offense at the East 43 yard line. With Rintala and Ed Kirwan (Cal.) doing most of the ball-carrying, the West drove down to the East four yard line before stopped when Rintala was dumped for no gain on a fourth down carry. Then, on the last play of the second quarter, Tommy "Lefty" Taylor (Yale) of the East connected with a long pass to Crickard, who was just barely caught 20 yards from paydirt

In the third quarter the two teams returned to the defensive slugfest. The lone threat of the stanza came when Shaver returned a punt 25 yards to the East 26. The USC star then did the heavy work on the short drive that ended when he was brought down at the two yard line on a fourth down carry from the four.

All the scoring finally came in the fourth quarter, and it started early. The East team had at last mounted a drive, as the Ivies moved the ball to the West 32 yard line. Rotan attempted a field goal from the 39 yard line but his kick had no height or direction, as it veered off to the left. Shaver and another West player tried to pick up the bouncing football, but only managed to fumble it ahead into the end zone where guard Burton Strange (Yale) fell on the loose pigskin for an East touchdown. Mays' try for the extra point was blocked and the East had a 6-0 lead.

With about five minutes left to play the West finally got rolling again from its own 35 yard line, and with Shaver handling most of the carries the West All-Stars marched to the East 23 in ten plays. The former USC star then swept around end for 19 yards more down to the four yard line, and he then hit the line three more times and was able to move the ball to just inches from the goal line. Shaver then blasted over right tackle on fourth down and into the end zone for the touchdown on the fifteenth play of the drive. Ed Kirwan followed with the extra point kick to give the West a 7-6 lead with three minutes left to play, and that's how it stood when the final gun sounded over the Olympics football game of 1932.

The West held an edge with 281 yards of rushing offense to 192 by the East, while also leading in first downs, 15-6. Shaver was the game's leading ball carrier with 145 yards on 16 attempts, while Eddie Mays of Harvard led the East attack with 100 yards gained in 10 carries. Mark Kelly of the LA Examiner wrote that, "out of the shadows of his graduate seclusion came the stalking figure of Gus Shaver to once again perform the role of All-American and win a football game."

The Olympics game had certainly been a commercial success, but there were definitely mixed reactions to the quality of play in the mid-summer exhibition game. Jean Bosquet of the Los Angeles Times wrote that, "It remained for a spectacle listed on the program as 'American Football' to provide the Tenth Olympiad with its greatest thrill to date. Chances are the game will become an international pastime before the memory of this night game dies away." A bit less enthusiastic was the noted writer Braven Dyer of the same newspaper, who noted that, "What started out to be a very ordinary football game became a thrilling battle in the closing quarter."

Yet other writers were not nearly as enthusiastic in their outlooks on the game. Kelly of the Examiner wrote that, "It was a spotty, splotchy game, marred by loose handling of the ball in the pinches, by lack of co-ordination between the hastily recruited stars, yet characterized by stubborn fight and bulldog tenacity." Don Roberts of the Los Angeles Record commented that,

"Nothing of great interest for the football fan, except that the West aggregation used plays and formations by Howard Jones and performed with an amount of unskillfulness equal to that of the Eastern play." Roberts added that "football is distinctly a seasonal dish," and that the game "couldn't rouse the old excitement among the fans."

An unsigned item in the Times declared that, "The rest of the world was frankly bored with American football last night for the first three quarters of the game." The reporter went on to note that most of the foreign Olympic athletes who were seated in a special section "appeared to be more or less bored with the proceedings." Ultimately, the 1933 Spalding Football Guide would give the game just a short one paragraph mention along with the team rosters.

Despite the mixed reaction generated by the 1932 Olympics football game, the affair did play an instrumental role in the future of American football. Noticing the large crowd drawn to the mid-summer exhibition game in Los Angeles, promoters organized a similar game at the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago and were overwhelmed by the public's outpouring for the matchup at Soldier Field. These two successful commercial events motivated Arch Ward of the Chicago Tribune to organize the long-running College All-Star Game series beginning in the summer of 1934, which ultimately proved to be one of the most important factors in the growth of professional football in the United States.