

Who is College Football's "King of the Nineties"?

By **E. Lee North**

[Warning to viewers: if you do not like statistics, skip the first few paragraphs!]

By "king of the Nineties," we are referring to the 1890s and 1990s... so let's consult the record books, noting that some of the schools with top records in the 1990s either did not play in the 1890s (e.g., Florida did not start football til 1906; Miami, 1926; Florida State, 1947; St. Johns--MN, 1910) or did not play over half of the ten years of the 1890s decade (e.g., Marshall University and Mount Union).

As longtime students of football may know, the Ivy League was the gridiron leader for most of the sport's early years, so it is no surprise to find that Yale was No. 1 in the 1890s with a record of 114 wins and only eight losses, to go with five ties, for a 93.4 winning percentage. Right behind the Eli were Princeton (107-8-2, 93.0 pct), Harvard (103-12-2, 89.6 pct), and Penn (121-15-3, 88.9).

Thus the entire top four were Ivy Leaguers... what about Notre Dame, you ask? Well, the Fighting Irish hadn't found Knute Rockne yet, and their record for the 1890s was 29-12-4 (70.1 pct), giving them 16th

place. Michigan? The Wolverines were among the leaders, with a 70-20-3 record (77.8), good for 8th...

But guess who comes in at No. 5? In the 1890s decade W & J posted 65 wins against ten losses and eight ties, or 86.7 pct. No. 6 is also a surprise, University of Buffalo -- 17 wins, four losses, and five ties (81.0). Next is Stanford at 30-9-7 (77.9), then the aforementioned Michigan at 8, Texas 20-6-0 (76.9) at No. 9, and (wow!) Oberlin 44-14-4 (75.9) to finish our top 10.

Rounding out our 1890s top 20 are VMI, Kansas, Bates, Navy, Wisconsin, Notre Dame, Oregon, Grove City, North Dakota, and Vanderbilt.

W & J a Deserving No. 5 in 1890s

So little Washington and Jefferson College, averaging less than five hundred students a year, was FIFTH in the 1890s, ahead of such grid powers as Notre Dame, Pitt, West Virginia, Michigan... but, one might ask, was that not accomplished against "minor-league" opposition? Well, not exactly -- W & J beat Pitt (then Western U of Pennsylvania) five times in five meetings (1890-94); West Virginia (five of five), and played Penn State, Duquesne, Penn, Lafayette, Princeton, and Cincinnati, all much larger schools.

OK, what does all that have to do with the Nineteen-nineties? Back to

the record book...Our early No. 1, Yale, tallied 46 wins and 54 losses in the latter decade (46 pct); Princeton did better (59-40-1, 60 pct), while Harvard was 44-56-1(44 pct) and Penn tallied 57-42-0 (57 pct). W & J easily overtook them with a 86-19-0 record, or 82 pct.

More importantly, the Presidents' overall winning percentage for both '90s decades becomes 83.9 pct. Yale's overall percentage is 72; Penn's, 76; Harvard, 68.3; Princeton, 78.

Nebraska, Notre Dame, Texas et al

So W & J overtook the four teams which had ranked ahead of them, but what about other powerhouses such as Nebraska, Notre Dame, Stanford, Texas, USC...?? Nebraska went an amazing 109-16-1 in the 1990s, but in the 1890s the Cornhuskers were a modest 42-25-4, so their overall pct. reckons at 78.6. Notre Dame, as noted earlier, won 29 and lost 12 (with four ties) in the 1890s; in the 1990s, the Irish went 69-37-1, thus their overall pct is 64.2. Stanford's total for the two decades is 94-68-10, or 58 pct. Texas? 96-47-2 (67 pct). USC's two-decade total is 85-61-7, or just 57.8 pct. Penn State was 139-47-5 (74.7). Ohio State posted a 120-69-7 record (63.5). Oklahoma was 70-52-3 (57.4). Wyoming, with a fine 1990s, posts an overall 81-50-2 record (61.8).

Some other teams with top 1990s records did not play the necessary years of the 1890s decade to qualify -- Montana, for instance, with a 95-31-0 (74.2 pct) record for the 1990s, did not start football til 1897. St. John's of Minnesota had a sensational 1990s run, won the Stagg Bowl in 2003, and claims the best record all-time in Division III, but did not play football in the 1890s, starting in 1910. Mount Union, the terror of Division III in recent years, played only half of the 1890s decade (going 10-11). Pittsburg State in Kansas (Div. II), had a sensational 1990s record of 103 wins and 18 losses (85.1) but played no football til 1910. Grove City, one of the leaders in the 1890s, fell back in the 1990s, finishing with an overall 85-70-3 mark (54.8).

Winningest Wittenberg

The small college with the most wins in football history is Wittenberg of Ohio (over 650 at this writing). The Tigers won national championships in 1962, '64, '69, '73, and '75. Their record for the 1990s was 86-17-1; but for the 1890s, it was 27-28-2, for an overall Nineties 113-45-3 (71.5 pct). Another fine football program is Augustana Ill., which posted a 71-23-0 mark in the 1990s, but only played two years in the 1890s. University of Colorado posts an interesting record -- 126-

56-4, or a 69.2 winning pct. -- but forfeited all 11 games in 1997; their record would have been well over 70 pct otherwise. Many schools experienced this forfeit problem, because of using illegal players.

Rensselaer (RPI), was 73-21-2 in the 1990s, but 7-33-4 in 1890s for overall 80-54-6 or 59.7 pct; Ithaca, with an 80-28-0 record in the 1990s (won the NCAA title in 1991), did not play in the 1890s.

We have NOT included a few of the leaders from the 1890s because they had losing records in the 1990s -- Buffalo, VMI, and Vanderbilt are examples.

King of the Nineties, Final Reckoning

So, re-establishing our "King of the Nineties" with the combined two-decade totals... here they are:

No. 1 - W & J (83.9 pct); 2- Nebraska, 78.6; 3- Princeton, 78.0; 4-Tennessee, 77.6; 5- Penn, 76; 6- Penn State, 74.7; 7- Yale, 72; 8- Wittenberg, 71.5; 9- Williams, 70.7; 10- Colorado, 69.2; 11- Union (NY), 69.0; 12- Villanova, 68.4; 13- Harvard, 68.3; 14- North Carolina, 67.7; 15- U. Washington, 67.4; 16- Texas, 67.0; 17- Washington- Mo., 66.7; 18- Kansas, 66.4; 19-Auburn, 65.2; 20- Alabama, 64.4; 21- Notre Dame, 64.2; 22- Syracuse, 64.1; 23 (tie) - Ohio State, Wyoming, 63.5; 25- Georgia, 62.9; 26- Cornell, 61.1.

Note that the following schools fall below 60 pct: Stanford, 58.0; U. USC., 57.8; Oklahoma, 57.4; West Virginia, 57.0; California, 56.0; LSU, 50.1; and Boston College, 50.0.

Had enough statistics? Let's move on to flesh and blood and exciting football...

More about Washington and Jefferson College

It's a small college located in Washington, Pa., about 30 miles sw of Pittsburgh. While current enrollment (2004) is about 1300 students, through the years of its football greatness described herein, average enrollment was about 500. But W & J has managed a school spirit the equal of much larger institutions. Co-eds were not admitted until 1970, the first graduating class with girls being 1974. Currently, some 48 pct of the enrollment is female.

The full story of W & J's remarkable first century of football is presented in "**BATTLING THE INDIANS, PANTHERS, AND NITTANY LIONS:** a 100-Year History of W & J Football": Daring Press, Canton, OH 1991. Pat Harmon, curator of the National College Football Hall of Fame, wrote, "I've seen a lot of volumes about a school's hundred years, and this is the best, the most complete." Copies are available at the College's Book Store.

Football began at W & J in 1890. For whatever reason, this small college would always present a tough, Pennsylvania-type football aggregation. But a young fellow matriculated to W & J in 1902 who would move the college to the heights of the football world.

Robert Martin Murphy not only attended and graduated from the College, he so loved W & J that as a student he beat the bushes to find recruits -- not just athletes -- to keep the school solvent. Frankly, W & J needed students so badly that they were often in danger of closing their doors. Murphy used his spare time, as student solicitor and then graduate manager starting in 1906, to convince other men and boys to come to W & J.

The position of graduate manager in those days was akin to "athletic director" today. He somehow convinced great players and coaches to come to W & J -- Pete Henry, Coach Bob Folwell, the great players of the Folwell and Rose Bowl eras... He even saved the football program in 1910 when it was about to be shut down for lack of funds. He proposed a one-dollar student levy and then sold it to the student body.

As "athletic director," Murphy scheduled games with the best teams in the country-- Pitt, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Penn, Notre Dame, Army, Navy, Penn, Penn State,

Syracuse... To do battle, he somehow encouraged super players and coaches to come to little Washington, Pa.--his coaches still read like a Who's Who from the Hall of Fame -- Earl "Greasy" Neal, John W. Heisman, Andy Kerr, Sol Metzger, Dave Morrow, and (imho) the greatest of all, Bob Folwell. His recruits Pete Henry and Bill Amos served as coaches later on, and Henry was athletic director for many years.

Bob Murphy went beyond the expected throughout his career -- somehow he had Forbes Field snowplowed one year before a big Pitt game. Other times, to get the team away from distraction, he had them transported to the beautiful, spacious 365-acre estate of his in-laws, the Wylies in Canton Township, a few miles outside Washington. The Wylies hosted this "secret hideaway" several times, e.g.; before big Pitt games and the Rose Bowl.

When the team was invited to the Rose Bowl, did Bob Murphy sit back and gloat like a modern-day CEO to wallow in publicity and credits? Murphy mortgaged his house to take his family to California and not charge the cost to the W & J program.

Unfortunately Bob Murphy developed pernicious anemia and died in 1925, at the age of 48. He

left a loving family of widow Marion and youngsters James B. Wylie Murphy and Helen Margaret Murphy (Donnan).... Helen married Dave Donnan (W & J Class of 1938), they had two children -- Bob Donnan and Marion Donnan Mahoney, who have perpetuated the tale of grandfather Murphy, mainly thru Bob's website.

Dr. Dave Scarborough, ex-VP of Student Affairs at W & J, summed up Murphy's contributions to his alma mater in his "Intercollegiate Athletics at Washington and Jefferson College: A Tradition." -- Pittsburgh: Univ of Pittsburgh Thesis, 1979.

Scarborough wrote "[Murphy] was the architect of W & J football prominence... he gave heart, mind, and physical powers to the best interests of his alma mater for almost two decades... one tribute he might have appreciated above all others was presented to W & J at half-time of the 1925 Pitt game. The Athletic Council of University of Pittsburgh said...

"His gallant sportsmanship, unfailing courtesy, and Christian ideals of conduct set a new and higher standard of college-athletic relationship in this community, and won the love and respect of all who value courage, loyalty, industry, and truth."

Murphy's tradition has been nurtured by W & J presidents through the years. It was earlier that Rev. Dr. James D. Moffat (1881-1914), introduced this new game of "foot-ball" at the college in 1890; Presidents such as Dr. Howard J. Burnett (1970-1999) and Dr. Brian Mitchell (1999-2004) kept it moving. [In 2010, Dr. Tori Haring-Smith and Head Coach Mike Sirianni continue the tradition.]

Bob Murphy's W & J football tradition lives on... for the Washington Pa. Observer-Reporter, this aging ex-sports editor/alumnus recently picked his "greatest games" (but many would disagree -- and do let us know).

W & J's Ten Greatest Games

1/ *The Rose Bowl of 1922, W & J 0, U. California 0.* Of course, this will always be the lowest score in RB history, but a record was also set by the Presidents, playing only eleven men the entire game. Cal was such a powerhouse (they never lost from 1919 through 1923) that some Eastern teams refused to play in the Bowl.

2/ *W & J 9 Harvard 10 (1914)* Harvard was a national powerhouse, ranked No. 1 -- supposed to be a warmup for them.

3/ *W & J 13 Yale 6 (1914)* Yale was the second member of The Big Three of the day (with Princeton the third),

this probably W & J's biggest win to that date.

4/ *W & J 17 Penn State 0 (1913)*
And this the biggest win to THAT date.

5/ *W & J 6 Pitt 7 (1919)* The famous "Pitt won't play if Pete Henry plays" game. Most concede that had All-American Henry played, W & J would have won.

6/ *W & J 20 Rowan 18 (1992 Div. III playoffs; winner to go to the Stagg Bowl).* Windchill must have been below zero, wind gusts over 50 mph at times. Chris Babirad shoved the Profs' deprecations down their throats with a 70-yard game-winning td run. [Poetic justice personified, as Rowan's players had said Babirad was overrated.]

7/ *W & J 14 Lafayette 13 (1922),* at a packed Polo Grounds in NY -- picture on cover of W & J's 100-yr history).

8/ *W & J 0 Notre Dame 3 (1917),* probably the biggest game ever at College Field, with over 10 thousand fans crowding around the field).

9/ *W & J 23 Allegheny 17 (Overtime) -- (1987 Div. III playoffs) --* Allegheny's Media Guide called it the greatest playoff game ever; it was played in snow and below-zero wind chill).

10/ *W & J's first Stagg Bowl contest, at Bradenton, FL, in 1992.* W & J lost to Wisconsin-LaCrosse in a close contest, 16-12, as a potentially game-winning pass dropped off the receiver's fingertips.

10B/ *W & J 35 John Carroll 30 (1971),* Dan Kasperik and Rich Pocock led the Presidents in a hard-fought win, perhaps the Red and Black's tops from the hard-time nineteen forties to the eighties).

11/ *W & J 34, WUP (Pitt) 0, Nov. 1, 1890* (W & J's first game ever).

12/ *W & J 72, WVU 0, Nov. 28, 1891* (WVU's first game ever).

[Just had to add those three to our top "ten."]

Man, that's tough! There are a hundred other games that could be included, including two wins in three games at Syracuse!

Top Players and Coaches to Play at College Field

1/ *Wilbur F. "Pete" Henry, Hall of Fame (an entire chapter about Henry in the W & J hundred-year history).*

2/ *Jim Thorpe, Oct. 5, 1912...* W & J held him and his Carlisle Indians to a scoreless tie at College Field, though "the greatest athlete in the world" led the nation that year with 198 points.

3/ *Coach Robert Folwell*, W & J Coach, 1912-15 (36-5-3 against some of the best teams in the nation).

4/ *Coach John W. Heisman*, coached Oberlin in a game at College Field in 1894 (scoreless tie) and coached W & J in 1923 (7-1-1). THE Trophy is named for him.

5/ *Coach Earle "Greasy" Neal*, coached at W & J in 1921 and '22, led W & J to Rose Bowl. He's the only man in the baseball and football players' halls of fame and the college and pro coach's halls of fame.

6/ *Deacon Dan Towler*, W & J RB, 1946-49, among nation's scoring leaders, went on to all-pro career with Los Angeles Rams.

7/ *John Luckhardt*, W & J's winningest coach, 137-37-2, compiled 1982-1996.

8/ Coach Woody Hayes, coached Denison when his team played at W & J in 1947. Later coach at Ohio State for many years, he's in Hall of Fame.

9/ *Hal "Swede" Erickson*, RB for great W & J teams of 1919-22, perhaps most underrated of all W & J players.

10/ *Chris Babirad*, W & J RB 1989-92, one of national scoring leaders

in senior year, helped W & J get to the Stagg Bowl.

Note 1: Knute Rockne was with the Notre Dame team that played at W & J in 1917, but as an assistant coach. George Gipp was on that team too, but was injured and did not play.

Note 2: Of course, there were many other grid stalwarts W & J played against, such as with WVU, Pitt, and Syracuse, but some of them never played in Washington, Pa.

REFERENCES: The bible for historical college football data from 1869 to the 1940s is Deke Houlgate's "**THE FOOTBALL THESAURUS: 77 Years on the American Gridiron**": Nash-U-Nal Publishing Co., Los Angeles, 1946.

The W & J century history of football cited earlier also provided information used herein. Also, much of this data was gathered from the internet, particularly the works of Chris Stassen, Don Hansen, James Howell, and the "College Football Data Warehouse."

This reporter also went to the websites of many of the colleges. In some cases, there were ambiguities, and we are sure there will be some complaints of missing or misinterpreted data.