

Jeremayah Blin

UW 1020

“Why did The George Washington University discontinue its football program in 1966?”

Introduction:

Deciding upon building a sense of community without a college football team represented an unprecedented measure in 1960s America. For the first time after the Second World War, the George Washington University opted to discontinue the football team in 1965. However, the latter did not occur without controversy until the inter-collegiate football team came to a definitive end two years later, in 1967. While students supported by faculty pressured then University President Elliott to enforce reforms aimed at the university's structure, ongoing protests throughout the country further shed light on the urge to reshape institutional policy. My research focuses on the extent of the influence the university received from external events, as well as on the parties affected by the removal of the football team. Therefore, this paper raises the question of the discontinuation of the team and its impact on the GW campus community to this day. This paper explains GW's reasons for discontinuing the football program and the events leading up to the final decision. Strong reliance on primary sources including the student publication *The Hatchet* along the *Cherry Tree* yearbook allows thorough insight on the issue at the time as well as student and faculty reactions. The second part of this essay analyzes the reactions of diverse actors involved in the Trustees' decision to finally conclude in the last part on the impact of the event, both on Black football players and the college community then and now.

The first announcement of the football team possibly “leaving the scene”¹ emerged in *The Hatchet* student publication on May 11th 1965. The article illustrates the sparked tension between the Trustees’ Special Committee on Athletics and the Student Council induced by the faculty’s consideration to discontinue the football program. The main argument of those opposing the students relied solely on a survey revealing “Only five per cent of the full time, and zero per cent of the part-time students recorded that inter-collegiate football had been a ‘very important’ consideration”², among the belief students were mostly attracted to the university due to its prestigious academics and advantageous location. Not only did the importance of football to students represent a major cause for debate, but it also strongly contributed to explore beyond the financial issues of the matter, revealing the thoroughness of this paper. However, the motion failed with 14 opposed and 1 in favor. Nevertheless, a dilemma surfaced between the fear of dismantling all athletics college programs around campus, and the costly maintenance of the football team.

In the history of a standing football team, the Colonials lost more games than brought back victories, with 208 wins for 241 defeats. The investment in the sport appeared less profitable with an estimated \$250,000 to \$300,000 loss a year³, and the team’s only slim chances of survival resulted in coach Jim Camp’s resignation in December 1966. The dramatic tone published through the 1967, January 3rd *Hatchet* issue titled its editorial article “Football is

¹ Student publications - Hatchet - history, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, *GW Hatchet Records*, Office files 1965-1967

² Student publications - Hatchet - history, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, *GW Hatchet Records*, Office files 1965-1967

³ Student publications - Hatchet - history, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, *GW Hatchet Records*, Office files 1965-1967

dead”⁴. The connotation of the title reveals a loss of hope among the student body to convince the Board to vote in favor of investing in the football program. However, the majority of students around campus did not grant enough importance to this cause to express an upset reaction. In addition to the problematic financial aspect, simultaneous conflicts such as “rising academic standards, competition from other area schools and professional teams”⁵ and an overall disregard for the team from the GW community contributed to the underlying Board of Trustees’ choice towards its removal. In a 1967 interview with President Elliott, *The Hatchet* reveals the institution's concern for the lack of space around campus with full-time students registering at a growing pace. Regarding academics, the concerned laid in the football team’s belonging in “the lower half of the freshman class”⁶ which with their practice schedule incorporated with classes, would compromise their academic success at GW.

Basketball embodied the attempt for recovery from the football program and stood as a potential shift in investment for the university. The decision did not appear predictable partly due to the fact that basketball more or less sustained itself financially. A revealed eight-million-dollar investment in a campus facility to play the sport had been addressed in the aforementioned publication. As a result, the inter-collegiate sport appeared more convenient for facilities and cost-efficiency to the university, while also more supported by students. In 1967, it seemed definitive the Board of Trustees was looking to shift from its initial measure to build a college

⁴ Student publications - Hatchet - history, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, *GW Hatchet Records*, Office files 1965-1967

⁵ Student publications - Hatchet - history, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, *GW Hatchet Records*, Office files 1965-1967

⁶ Student publications - Hatchet - history, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, *GW Hatchet Records*, Office files 1965-1967

spirit within football. Robin F. Bachin's article about "Gender and Athletics at the University of Chicago"⁷ almost half a century prior to the aforementioned era, elaborates on colleges' purpose to establish their own football team. The University of Chicago's President desired to create a college spirit in order to attract more applicants to their institutions. This phenomenon can draw a parallel to GW's intentions to establish a football team in the first place, and be confirmed through the importance finances played in the discontinuation of the football team. However, the 1965 University Senate student resentment towards the first proposition to abolish football did not grow weaker as the finalization of President Elliott's presentation to the Board did not go unnoticed either⁸. Nevertheless, the university's intentions during the Progressive era did not comply with the factors attracting students to GW. As previously mentioned during the first attempt of the Council to dismantle the football program, GW students were more abundantly attracted to prestigious academics and the institution's advantageous location than its football program.

GW students successfully achieving to turn down the Trustees' Special Committee on Athletics' proposition in 1965 would not reproduce the same gesture in 1967. While the campus student newspaper held an undeniably favorable position for the Colonials' remaining in 1965 "There is no reason why the entire school (students and faculty) can't get out and support this team to a SC championship and, while exhibiting internal school interest, attract outside support

⁷ Robin F. Bachin, "Courage, Endurance and Quickness of Decision: Gender and Athletics at the University of Chicago, 1890-1920", (Rethinking History, 2001), 93-116

⁸ Student publications - Hatchet - history, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, *GW Hatchet Records*, Office files 1965-05-11

for our team and collect a good deal of “cash” at the same time. Other schools have done it, so why can’t GW?”, the following **May 1965 *Hatchet* issue underlines a strong division** among students regarding the “termination”⁹ of the football program. The “Letter to the Editor” category within the publication presents two contrasting views. The one in favor of the abolition of the football team supports GW’s capacity to focus on other sports and other levels of athletics. On the other hand, the pro-football team writer denounces the faculty’s loss of faith in football and encourages the Board to invest in the program. As a result, the decision not only shocked the GW community, but also profoundly divided students.

Even though *The Hatchet*’s first publication of **1967** encompassed President Elliott’s formal views towards the decision of dismantling the football program, the former head of the university did not wish to express his personal sentiments regarding the issue “I don’t believe it is my job to make a decision”¹⁰. Conducting research in his personal communications records oriented towards athletics produced an unsuccessful outcome, as the only communication available focused on later university matters, urging Elliott to approve administrative reforms, thus irrelevant to the topic of this paper.

After reflecting on the motives for the abolition of the inter-collegiate football program at the George Washington University officially in 1967 and observing the diverse reactions sparked among different bodies of the institution, this last part focuses on the impact left from the Board

⁹ Student publications - Hatchet - history, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, *GW Hatchet Records*, Office files 1965-1967

¹⁰ Student publications - Hatchet - history, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, *GW Hatchet Records*, Office files 1965-1967

of Trustees' decision. The effect engendered by the Board's decision ultimately resulted in a direct impact for GW's football players. During the 1960s, a decade of national reforms and protests shaping new policy, integration embodied a crucial aspect of the institution's progress for Civil Rights. GW's key location pressured the university, such as with the march to Washington in 1963 to integrate athletics. National trends spreading throughout the institution at the heart of the capital resulted in GW's need to adopt an ethical approach, as a school playing the Southern Conference and bridging the gap with the appointment of Norman Neverson in 1963, the first Black football player on scholarship at GW¹¹. Not only did Norman Neverson represent the logical connection between the team's tournament, but also facilitated the overall integration process in a deeply segregated institution. As a result, an imminent point regarding whether the discontinuation of the football program would have impacted Black students on scholarship directly and possibly slowed down integration among campus boundaries, as the event occurred only five years after Norman Neverson's acceptance and underlining GW's status as the last integrated school in the District of Columbia raises relevant questions. Despite the search for scholarship information among Black athletes and football players, the latter was not disclosed and the only surfacing records related to the topic led to Gary Lyle. Classmen of 1966, Gary Lyle was an outstandingly popular football player among the team who pursued a professional football career following his time at GW. However, his graduation date did not include the official announcement of the Board, thus he escaped the impact of the event. In addition, no archive material allowed to discover his scholarship details, creating a general gap in

¹¹ Schapiro, D. (2019) "First black recipient of athletic scholarship reminisces on his time at GW"

<https://www.gwhatchet.com/2019/02/25/first-black-recipient-of-athletic-scholarship-reminisces-on-his-time-at-gw/>

the status of Black football players post 1967. Nevertheless, a plausible assumption can be drawn that they resumed their ordinary academic college life, with a potential compensational grant from the university until graduation. This option solely represents an outcome where the university would avoid a public scandal for reasons such as being accused of neglecting the integration process, or admitting to lower acceptance criteria for athletes in the case where former football players would be dismissed following the program's discontinuation.

Suggestions for the creation of a club football team emerged the following year in 1968, yet without much success. A *Hatchet* issue of the time reveals inconsideration and disregard from GW students towards club football. Therefore, the students' reaction redefines the impact on the community the discontinuation of the football team sought to have in 1967. The then campus community simply did not grant as much importance to football, but also to athletics overall. The structure of *The Hatchet* articles mainly composed of intellectual matters over the 1960s decade supports the aforementioned assumption. This revelation thus contradicts the emphasized and dramatized announcements of *The Hatchet* as the decision did not generate tremendous contestation at the time.

Looking at this event from a secondary perspective, the impact of the 1967 decision evolved through the decades from then coach Jim Camp revealing GW college spirit reached a peak in November 1965¹², to this day with only a minority of students attending basketball games. Today, the George Washington University holds the reputation of not possessing college spirit because of the school being situated in the capital of the United States, the student population is very independent and athletics to this day still do not rally us. Even though 1965

¹² Student publications - Hatchet - history, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, *GW Hatchet Records*, Office files 1965-11-16

data showcased low attendance to football games, the idea of belonging to a school is partly forged and engraved into athletics, notably football. As a result, with only a weak emphasis on basketball, the Colonials absence created a void into the current college community.

In conclusion, the discontinuation of the GW football program in 1967 did not immediately impact the college community due to the student majority's neutral reaction, but rather created a void preventing the current GW community from assimilating to other American colleges rallying their students around football games and tailgate. However, GW followed in American University's footsteps, as the institution discontinued its football program in 1941¹³. Looking at the event through different lenses allowed to shape a global perspective of the research material, in order to present an accurate representation of events, reactions and impacts in the 1960s and now. Even though archival material did not allow to bridge all gaps, notably due to the lack of scholarly works on defunct college football teams, rational assumptions and testimonies enabled to produce a conclusive answer for this topic.

¹³ Retrieved from: <https://aueagles.com/sports/2019/8/15/fan-central-history.aspx>