

Hold That Tiger: Huey Long and Louisiana State University Football, 1928-35

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When Huey Pierce Long was elected governor of Louisiana in 1928, he assumed control over one of the poorest states in America. The onset of the Great Depression the following year exacerbated the endemic poverty that had plagued the states since the Civil War. Louisianans had long been accustomed to illiteracy and want, and had little reason to be proud of their state or region. In 1925, Louisiana had a scant 324 miles of paved roads, and it ranked next to last nationally in adult literacy. Historian T. Harry Williams asserts that Louisianans, like most southerners, generally believed the "the South was poor, and in certain areas, such as education, southerners simply had to be content with second or third best." In his campaign speeches, Long reminded his constituents of their poverty and promised them a better life if he could only "dry the tears of those who still weep" over their seeming hopelessness. As governor, Long attacked big business, provided free textbooks to every schoolchild in the state, paved thousands of miles of roads, and built bridges and public buildings.

Louisiana State University was an special beneficiary of Long's largesse, and the institution made huge strides as a result of the dramatic increase in state appropriations. Long well understood that the beautiful new buildings that he constructed on the Baton Rouge campus served as a beacon of state pride and added to the aura of success and prosperity that informed his political appeal. Long also understood that a winning football program would serve his political needs far better than an upgraded academic program, and was easier to achieve. The symbolic significance of football in southern culture thus made the LSU football an attractive target for Long's personal ambitions.

Huey Long's hyperactive attempts to control the football program at LSU have become a part of Louisiana folklore. He assumed the role of honorary coach on Saturdays, giving locker room pep talks, diagramming plays, and generally interfering with the coaching staff. Long exuberantly brought water, towels, and ice-packs to his young heroes as he prowled the sidelines. He even turned a spare bedroom in the governor's mansion into a makeshift infirmary for injured players. Incredibly, Long approached a referee during halftime of the 1930 LSU-Arkansas game and announced, "As governor, I protest your calls. I don't mind you penalizing LSU, but penalize us in midfield. Don't do it when we get down to the goal line." the referee apparently heeded the remonstrances of a man notorious for exacting harsh vengeance upon his enemies, for there were no penalties called on LSU during the second half. Long's antics were part his crude but successful cultivation of popular support, but they also reveal his shrewd creation of a progressive image.

This paper links Huey Long's interest in the LSU football program with his larger vision of southern social and economic progress. Long sought to lift Louisiana out of its economic despair by attacking illiteracy and fostering economic growth. The visible improvements wrought by his public works program would provide jobs and improve the state's infrastructure, and would also inculcate a sense of pride among its citizens. Similarly, Long hoped to add to the psychic well-being of Louisianans by creating a modern, attractive state university with a winning football team. A successful football program would bring attention to a much-improved state university, and create a rallying point around which proud Louisianans could unite. Each victory for the LSU Tigers was in a very real sense a victory for the long-suffering people of Louisiana. The Tigers became the embodiment of Louisiana's struggle to attain parity with wealthier northern states, and most progressive southerners believed that football victories would help to reverse the negative image of the state and region. Huey Long's deep personal involvement in the LSU football program was thus intimately connected with his progressive vision and his desire to shape a modern, prosperous Louisiana.