

CHAPTER VII

INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETICS

Shortly after Grandfather became principal of Wausau High School, football, which had recently won a place in college campuses, began to be taken up by many high schools. The game was esteemed by many parents to be brutal and dangerous. Grandfather, however, believed it good physical and moral training and persuaded the Board of Education to allow him to hire an assistant who on the side would coach a football team.

Only those students were allowed to play whose parents gave written permits. Most of the larger boys produced the permits and practice started. One boy, very eager to play, could not get a permit and for a couple of weeks felt very sorry for himself. One day, all excited, he rushed in with a permit, reading as follows: "I did not want Victor to play football - his father says he may. I did not want to write this permit, his father said I must. So here it is. His Mother."

This was, to be sure, unusual, but then Grandfather was used to odd missives from parents. Note this one, for example, brought to him one day by two husky but mild-mannered lads. "Please excuse Allen and John, they had to stay home to help their father butcher their mother." After Grandfather recovered from his first shock, he concluded "their mother" was meant for signature.

So Victor's permit was accepted and Victor rushed out on the field to make up for lost time. Seeing a boy running with the ball, he swung his leg out to see what would happen. It went between the other boy's legs and and was broken! Victor's mother had a reputation for being more than commonly efficient in expression and what she was likely to say to Grandfather

would probably be a plenty. Having sent Victor to his home with a doctor accompanying him, Grandfather and the coach waited until after supper and then called to offer condolences. Mrs. M----- came to the door with a cheerful smile. "I am very sorry," said Grandfather, "that Victor broke his leg." "Oh, I am so relieved," said Mrs. M-----, "I was sure it would be his neck." Rarely a season passed without a broken bone, but parents were heroic.

Just one more story. A large Irish lad, Pat Sullivan, running by himself, fell and broke his leg. Now Pat's mother had been opposed to Pat's playing. When Pat returned to school, Grandfather inquired: "Pat, what did your mother say to you?" "As soon as I came out from under the anesthetic," Pat replied, "my mother leaned over me and said: 'Pat, me boy, does ye want to play any more football?' 'Yes, mother,' I replied, 'I want to play in the Thanksgiving game.' 'That's right, me boy,' she said, 'If ye was ready to quit now, I'd disown you.'"

Of all the high school sports Grandfather liked track and field events best, for in these an individual who is good can be a star whether his team is good or not.

First there was a local meet, then an Interscholastic at Appleton, conducted by Lawrence University for Northern Wisconsin, then a State Interscholastic at Madison, conducted by the Principal's Association. One year in the local meet the boys arranged for a comic event - a walking race between an over-tall, very thin lad named Beebee and a very unathletic looking lad, Breitzkreutz, who looked as if he would follow his brother's footsteps, who had shriveled up until he had to be wheeled in a chair. Beebee won and the school had a grand laugh.

Next year the school wished the race repeated, but Breitzkreutz, who looked quite improved physically, insisted on entering the mile race. Again

the school laughed, for the school had a mile runner, Brummond, a fine looking lad of whom much was expected. The race was a surprise - Brummond did his utmost, but Breitzkreutz won - the time seemed incredible. It seems that Breitzkreutz, who lived something more than a mile from school, peeved at being the goat in the walking match, had run to school every morning all winter. Last year he was the joke of the school; this year he was the hero. He won the mile event at Appleton and also in Madison, setting a new State Interscholastic record.

The following year was Breitzkreutz's climax. At Madison a cup had been given to be the possession of the school which won it three times. The largest school of the state, West Division Milwaukee, had won it twice. They correctly figured that they could win for the third and final time if their captain, who held the state half mile record, could win this event. The only disturbing factor was that Breitzkreutz was entered for the event; but Breitzkreutz would run the mile race earlier, and the Milwaukee half miler was kept out of all other events.

The race was perhaps the prettiest and most exciting Grandfather ever saw. West Division's final possession of the long contested cup was at stake in the final race of the day. Breitzkreutz and the Milwaukee runner quickly pulled away from the crowd and as they approached the last turn, simultaneously started to sprint and absolutely neck and neck came down the home stretch with the bleachers shouting as only high school rooters can shout. As they approached the tape, Breitzkreutz threw himself through the air and was awarded the race - he had set new state records in mile and half mile.

Later in the summer a National Interscholastic meet was held in connection with the Pan-American exposition in Buffalo. Breitzkreutz went

all by himself and without coach or attendant won the mile - probably could also have won the half mile but entered the five mile instead and was beaten by an Indian.

He had a successful career as a half-miler in University of Wisconsin and became coach of University of Southern California, and thereby hangs another tale. Shortly after Breitkreutz graduated from high school, a Polish lad, Stanislaus Burek, entered high school from "Behind the Creek" wearing a red flannel shirt and preceded by reputation for fistic performance on the playground.

Every pupil was expected to appear in the main assembly hall before the entire school once each year. The elocution teacher, in a fit of aberration rather than from a sense of humor, coached Stanislaus to speak a tender little ditty starting "I loved a little girl." At the very announcement of Stanislaus' name, the school laughed and as he strode to the platform in his red shirt with an awkward swing to his shoulders, the school roared the louder. Stanislaus faced the crowd, stood on one foot, then on the other, smooched his red sleeve across his nose and waited for an opening. At last the school quieted to listen, but when Stanislaus fairly roared out "I loved a little girl" the school fairly went into hysterics.

Grandfather, who was in the back of the hall (a student conducting the meeting) saw that it was impossible to control the laughter - as a matter of fact, he had never seen anything so funny before and joined in the laughter. During the laughter Stanislaus would shift from one foot to the other, smooch one sleeve and then the other across his nose, and whenever a pause came, he roared out another line, each more romantic and more side-splitting than the one before. When he finished, some pupils had fallen out of their seats and were lying on their backs in the aisle overcome with laughter.

The elocution teacher's star number in all her Chautauqua programs thereafter was an imitation of Stanislaus' declamation about the little girl, but although she was a good mimic, she never did justice to the original performance. Grandfather never again expects to see anything so funny as that.

In the course of time Stanislaus dressed like other pupils, became a fairly good speaker and an all-round athlete. Breitzkreutz saw in Burek some unusual material and persuaded him to go to the University of Southern California, where he became an all-round star in debate, track, baseball and football and was toasted by the papers as the best all-round Pacific Coast athlete of his day. Meanwhile, he had made a good student record and had learned to wear dress clothes and a high hat.

After graduation Stanislaus returned to Wausau to visit his parents "Behind the Creek". They urged him to stay - he had been away a long time, he should stay with them for a while. His return to the red shirt was even more rapid than his rise and ere long he had found his life job - delivering mail Behind the Creek.

One interesting feature of Interscholastic Athletics was the uncertainty of performance. Under the inspiration of the moment, an athlete might do something quite beyond his apparent possibilities. To illustrate - one year at the Madison meet, just as the preliminaries of the shot put were concluded, a lad came running up all excited. He had missed his train, had ridden from the little town, Evansville, on a freight train and ran up from the station. The trials were over, but the lad pleaded so earnestly to be allowed to put the shot just once that the judge finally said - "We cannot wait for you to put on spiked shoes, but if you want to just toss off your coat, we will give you one try." Stimulated by the joy of his one chance,

he put the shot out to a new state record, but never before nor afterwards was he ever known to make any such record.

One more illustration. At the Appleton meet a cup was to be held permanently by the school winning three times. Wausau High School had twice won. So also had two other schools. This year would be the final test. Grandfather engaged for teacher and coach, a star track athlete and good student, Schule, from the University of Wisconsin. While teaching with us he had competed in the Midwest A. A. U. meets, equalling a world's record in the high hurdles in the indoor meet and winning four gold and two silver medals in the outdoor meet, and the following summer won high hurdles in the Olympic meet held at the St. Louis World's Fair. He was good in almost every line of track and field and the boys watched him with open mouths as he trained for his own meets, but he could not win the co-operation of the boys.

The season's training for the Appleton meet was wrecked; yet there was good material - perhaps without training the boys could win - but that seemed not likely. As the meet neared a close, the school was one point short. If a third place could be won in the low hurdles, the cup was won. Had anyone qualified? Yes, Roscoe Young by some chance was in the final. He had never done anything of note - could he by chance win a third place and the coveted one point?

The fate of the long-coveted cup hung on his performance. At the crack of the gun off went Roscoe, running the low hurdles as Schule had run them when he trained himself. Extending his lead at every hurdle he finished first by a good margin and set a new Appleton record. Was he a good hurdler? Yes, once in his life he was, and if sometime you visit the Wausau High School, you will see the ancient cup his brilliant feat won

that day. But although he built himself low hurdles and trained faithfully for some time, he never again approached that performance.

The Madison meet was in charge of the Wisconsin Interscholastic Association, which was composed of high school principals and managed by a committee of three principals elected at an annual association. One year all members of the committee refused re-election, and responsibility was wished on three men who knew so little about the association that they did not refuse. Of these three unathletic members, Grandfather was one.

On surveying the new job, why the wiser ones refused became apparent. The association was bankrupt and stronger schools did not obey the eligibility rules which all schools were supposed to have enforced in all interscholastic contests of the year in order to compete at Madison. The Athletic Department of the University of Wisconsin was threatening to refuse cooperation and wished to take over the meet. This was not acceptable to the principals as the University had little interest in maintaining scholastic eligibility rules in high school athletics and wished to use the meet to attract students with athletic ability to the University.

Should the committee resign or fight it out? Grandfather urged the latter. Increase the revenue through better advertising of the meet, cut expenses, throw out of the meet the worst offender against the eligibility rules, and if the University refuses cooperation, run the meet ourselves, was his program. The other two agreed and Marinette High School was notified that unless it could disprove charges filed against it for violating eligibility rules in the football season, no representative of the school would be allowed to compete.

The school, however, brought its full quota of athletes to Madison - a hearing was held on the charges, which were clearly proved

true. Pressure, however, was brought on the committee from many sources to admonish the school but let it compete. Grandfather was for drastic action. The school had violated the rules in spite of warnings and should be dropped. He convinced the other two members, and the school was ruled out.

When the Marinette coach, a big bruiser who had been a football star, came roaring down to see whom he should devour and demanded of the committee "which one of you did this?" Grandfather replied: "I did." Perhaps in view of the militant attitude of the coach, this was courageous - at any rate it was unwise, for thereafter all actions of the committee were credited solely to Grandfather, and he was supposed to have run personally the association for seven years.

There was too much truth in this charge for Grandfather to deny it successfully. It was seven years of the hardest and most thankless work Grandfather ever did. No school ever thanked the committee for a favorable decision - that was accepted as their dues. Any school receiving an unfavorable decision denounced the committee in its local paper. Once when a Milwaukee school was disciplined, every day for a week Grandfather rated headlines on the front page of the city papers.

At the Madison meet the committee ~~contro~~lled eligibility and finances - the University by invitation of the committee judged the events. One year, apparently to force a surrender of the meet to the University, the Athletic Department scheduled its track team and all its officials out of town on the traditional day for the interscholastic meet. At Grandfather's suggestion, the committee called the University's bluff and appointed Grandfather field manager in charge of all events.

As a matter of fact, the University management had been unsatisfactory. Track events dragged on until supper time and some field events

were not completed until long after all track events were over. Besides, some of the student judges had been severely criticised by principals watching field events as unfair in their decisions. The committee's protests on these matters had received no attention.

For referee, Rev. Brigham, of huge stature, a former athlete and college coach, was chosen. A time schedule for all events was issued to all principals with a warning that every event would be run on the minute. Trials for all field events were run in two sections at different times, so that a boy could compete in more than one event without delaying programs.

The first gun went off at the moment scheduled. The last gun was shot at the strike of five for the final relay, every field event having previously been completed and reported and there were no protests of unfair decisions by the judges. A demonstration had been made. The committee did not need the University. It could run its own meet. Next year the University was pleased to cooperate and operate the time schedule, and the field trial system inaugurated by the committee.

Finally one school appealed from the decision of the committee to the annual meeting of the Association and made an inflammatory attack on the committee. To this attack, while a detailed reply could have been made, Grandfather only said: "I have often wondered whether you principals really want a committee to run the high school athletics of the state. To these charges I will only say the committee did what it considered fair, and if they had the matter to do over again, would do the same thing. Do you really want a committee to run your athletics? I await your vote with interest."

With only two dissenting votes, the whole association of more than 100 principals extended a vote of thanks to the committee for their efficient management. That settled matters. After one uneventful year, when not a school peeped at the Czar-like rule of the committee, Grandfather insisted on retiring from the Committee. When Grandfather left there was a surplus of \$2,000 in the association treasury, every school was obeying the rules and the University was cooperating with plans formulated by the committee.