



Sprint Football

The little big league that's one of football's best-kept secrets



The players may be small, but in the Collegiate Sprint Football League, hard-hitting football is business as usual

By Jake Lemkowitz

At the sound of the snap, the strongside linebacker pedals backwards, adjusts, and knocks the receiver's block off in the flats with a blazing burst of speed. He isn't Lawrence Taylor circa 1986, he just happens to weigh the same amount as a running back. And that means he's playing Sprint Football, one of the most intense yet obscure sports in college athletics.

Eight weeks a year under the Friday night lights, The Collegiate Sprint Football League (CSFL) plays a brand of lightweight smash-mouth pigskin that has the same rules as Division I, with one major difference: you must weigh less than 172 pounds. The league itself is as small as its players, and is made up of just five schools: Army, Navy, Penn, Cornell and Princeton. The play is fast and the hits come hard, because there's no real size differential among the positions. "If you watch it," says Terry Cullen, head coach of Cornell Sprint Football, "it looks like it's been turned up a speed."

The Eastern Lightweight Football League was created in 1934, by a group who felt that football players were getting too much larger than average students. One hundred fifty pounds was what the average student weighed back then, so you had to be 150 or less to play. The idea was a product of its time. One of lightweight football's founding fathers, Penn President Thomas Sovereign Gates, emphatically defined the league as, "Football For All!" It's the kind of

populist sloganeering that probably fit nicely in a jerky depression-era newsreel, sandwiched between a report on bread lines and the New Deal.

So they stripped away the bigger players, which eliminated the big-name stars, which diminished the media attention and the crowds and all the trappings that went along with them. The Eastern Lightweight Football League had only set out to organize games with a weight limit, but in effect they had boiled down the college sport to its purest element: students playing football for the sake of playing football.

Fast-forward 72 years. Lightweight Football's name has been changed to Sprint, and the weight limit has been raised 22 pounds. Army and Cornell are preparing to play a game that will determine the 2006 CSFL title. Even though both teams will go in undefeated, Cornell is the underdog on this Friday in October. Army and Navy typically dominate the league, which is no surprise. The main focus of the Ivies is academics, and the main focus of the military schools is training students to defend the country; only one of these two things translates well into athletic ability. But this season has proved that on any given Friday, it's anyone's game. Three weeks ago in Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell defeated Navy 16-10. Now the Big Red are looking to complete a rare undefeated season. There are no cheerleaders or pyrotechnics when Army takes the field, and the crowd is modest.

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"[Fans] want people who can bench-press a car and run a 4.5 40," says ex-Sprint Commissioner Michael Cross, now the Executive Associate Director of Athletics at Princeton. "I think Sprint is a good spectator sport, but it isn't offered for entertainment purposes." Cross's successor, Stephen Erber, agrees. "This is for the students," he says.

Sprint is a chance for student athletes who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to compete and be a part of a team at the college level. For many, it's the first chance they've ever had to even put on pads. "Probably a third of the team is playing [organized] football for the first time," says Cornell head coach Terry Cullen. "We've got defensive linemen who are ex-wrestlers. A lot of wide receivers are ex-track and field. They couldn't play football before because they were too small."

But if you think that Sprint Football is some kind of club sport, well, just don't let that 170-pound lineman hear you say that. Though these

of play has always reflected the times. In the past there were more people in the backfield, but now most teams operate completely out of the shotgun with four or five wideouts. But down big in the second half, Army switches it up to a wishbone formation. They drive the length of the field, before being stopped by Cornell's defense at the goal line. The Black Knights leave their starters in for the duration, but Big Red holds on to come out on top, 28-7. The MVP of the game is a senior named Jason Zittel. Listed as a linebacker, Zittel scored all of Cornell's 13 first-half points by returning a fumble, kicking the extra point and then kicking two field goals. The Cornell Sprint alumni pour out onto the field and congratulate the players one by one.

The victory at West Point clinches the 2006 CSFL title for Cornell. There are no playoffs, so the Championship is decided on points. It's the first time since 1986 that Big Red have brought home the Bob Cullen trophy, which is especially sweet for coach Terry Cullen, whose father the trophy commemorates. Sprint's family tree may be smaller than heavyweight football's, but its roots go just as deep into American history, and legacies are common.



A player weighs in, circa 1970. Sprint Football's weight limit back then was 159 pounds

guys may be smaller, their intensity and desire to win is just as hulking as their super-sized counterparts. And in a league this small and with this much history, the rivalries are intense. Putting five schools in a football league together is like throwing five cats in a box and shaking it. Army and Navy go up against one another like their lives depended on it in the annual Pride Bowl. Penn, Cornell and Princeton have all good-naturedly disdained one another for over a century. And when the service academies go up against the Ivies, the ensuing under-172-pound culture war can make for some good games. Case in point: Cornell vs. Army.

Over 50 former Cornell Sprint Football alumni have made the trip in the hope that they will finally see Army get a taste of their own medicine. The Black Knights have beaten Big Red for the past 19 consecutive years, but Cornell jumps out to a 13-point lead. Sprint Football's style

These kinds of connections are valuable to Sprint Football, since recruiting is strictly off limits. There's no letter writing and no scouting, so each school fields its squad from returning members and incoming freshmen. This means that the teams are 100% walk-on, and the result is that the average Sprint Football player is an athlete who is a student first. "It's a sport where people do meaningful things post-college," says ex-Sprint Commissioner Michael Cross. Notable Sprint alumni include President Jimmy Carter and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Academically, Sprint teams are consistently at the top of the pile at every school where the sport is played.

Despite its appeal, Sprint Football has long remained stuck in its five-team Northeast niche. "It was really stunning how many people contacted me about starting Sprint teams at their schools," says Michael Cross. "There's no lack of desire for the sport to be played. But it requires goal posts, equipment, chain gangs, clock operators, coaching. A game of football needs significant and intense coordination. A well-executed play doesn't just happen. You don't see pick-up tackle football games."

Title IX and geographic limitations have also made it difficult for new teams to join the league, but very soon, the Collegiate Sprint Football League will be expanding for the first time in over 40 seasons. Mansfield, a Pennsylvania college that recently dropped its heavyweight football program for financial reasons, plans on adding a Sprint Football team sometime in the next two years. "Football benefits the whole student body," explains current Sprint Commissioner Steve Erber. "Students rally around it."

This season, Sprint Football will prove for the 73rd time that it is the nature of the sport, not offensive coordinators in press boxes, headsets in helmets or television broadcast deals, that draws people to college football. For these lightweight players and their fans, less is more. 🏈