

“The Time Machine”
The Rule Change that Changed the Game
Article #15

By the time you read Article #15 of “The Time Machine,” the high school football season may be over. I want to share this football story with you before we move on to the stories buried in the basketball “Scrapbooks.”

But first we have some unfinished business from Article #14, “Undefeated WHS FB Teams.” Recall that there were seven WHS football teams that were undefeated during an eight-decade stretch, from 1900-1980. Of those seven teams, only five had unblemished records (no ties). I asked for feedback from anyone who had an opinion as to which team(s) might be considered the best of the best, and why. Four teams received votes. Here they are, in chronological order, and why they deserve to be considered among the best of the best:

-1910 6-0 record. No opponent was even able to score against them.

-1942 6-0 record. The first half of back-to-back undefeated seasons.

-1943 8-0 record. The second half of back-to-back undefeated seasons. The longest WHS winning streak ever. In fact, their first game of the 1944 season was also a win, extending the streak to 15 games before finally being stopped by Long Prairie.

-1961 8-0-1 record. In this era, unlike that of the other teams, there were conferences to which teams belonged, but there were no classes based on school enrollment, and no playoffs. However, during the season sportswriter Art Johlfs would publish his statewide rankings based on criteria and metrics he had developed. His top 25 list would appear throughout the football season in the Minneapolis Tribune. At the end of the 1961 season Wadena was ranked 5th in the entire state. Period!

Any of the four teams listed above can make a strong argument for their team being the best of the best. It’s difficult to compare teams or players from different eras. Rule changes from one era to the next are one example of why it is so challenging. However, there is one common denominator that remains constant. It never changes whether you played in 1900 or 1980. The ultimate goal of all competitive events is to win. In my opinion, based on this belief, the 1942 and 1943 teams edge out the very worthy teams from 1910 and 1961.

Thanks to all who cast their ballots. Now let’s move forward by going backwards in our “Time Machine,” to 1924. All aboard!

The game of football was invented in the late 1800’s. Wadena’s first season was in the fall of 1903. Certainly, there were numerous rule changes that led up to WHS’s inaugural season. I don’t know what changes were made then, but I did document many rule changes that were made from the 1900’s through the 1940’s.

Some rule changes are minor while others are not. In basketball, for instance, players eventually were mandated by rule to keep their jerseys tucked in. Boring stuff, as that rule change would have no impact on the outcome of any game. Effective the 1937-38 basketball season there was perhaps the biggest rule change ever, at that time. No longer did there have to be a jump ball at center court after each made basket. This rule change was intended to make the game faster paced. Eventually a 3-point line was added to open up the game. Finally, a shot clock has been working its way into the game of high school basketball. Those three rule changes substantially changed the game of basketball.

From the first days of football, through 1924, there was no huddle allowed in between plays. After one play was completed the offense and defense would hurry to the line of scrimmage and the quarterback would call the

next play verbally or by hand signals. With few, if any, subs this fast pace required highly conditioned athletes to make for a successful team.

I was quite surprised when I learned this fact. A no-huddle offense from start to finish. The “two-minute drill” for an entire game. What prompted the rule change that would now allow the offense to huddle or not to huddle, that is the question. As documented in the NY Times the first “huddle system” was created by college coach McCracken and adopted in 1924 after he discovered that Penn was scouting and decoding Lafayette’s hand signals. I guess the reason for the rule change makes sense. I find its impact on the game, in one way, would be the opposite impact as eliminating the center jump, in basketball. The basketball rule change would speed up the game, whereas the use of the “huddle” option would definitely slow down the pace of play. Of course, the offense could still use the old “no-huddle” option anytime they chose.

Significant rule changes are almost always controversial. I want to share some commentary found in the WPJ, October 1925 edition. WHS defeated Osakis 25-0. Here is the unknown author’s assessment, and prediction, of the new huddle system:

“The old-time system of signal calling is gone; the deliberateness of play is irksome and unless the rules committee choose to revise backwards the popularity of the game is seriously threatened.”

Author unknown, WPJ
October 15, 1925

Think of the popularity of the NFL, college, and high school football! I hope Mr. “unknown author” kept his day job.

Moving on to the team pictures below. Take note of the 14 players on the 1911 WHS football team. They look lean and lanky. They were probably strong, fast, and had great stamina. To be successful in a no-huddle game, probably playing both ways, one needs those physical characteristics. No room on that roster for 250-lb linemen.

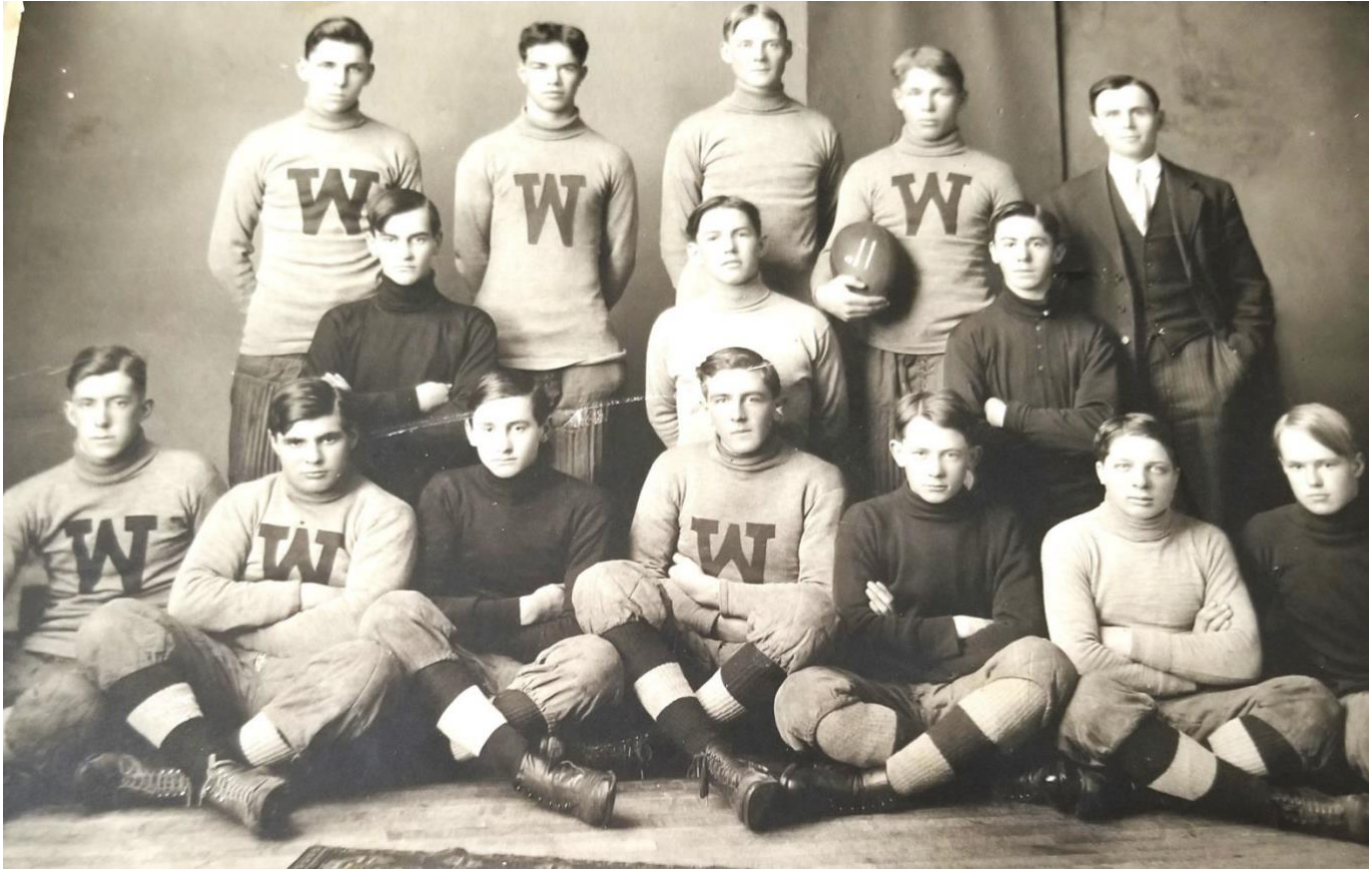
The 1936 team looks different. Looks like some of their roster includes bigger athletes. The huddle system had been in place for over 10 years. There are twenty-five, or so, players wearing varsity jerseys. I think I can spot a few players that might not have been able to play in 1911.

The rule change that changed the game!

Jebb Willis
jebbwillis1955@gmail.com

1911 WHS Football Team

Fourteen players playing 11-man football in a no-huddle format.



1936 WHS Football Team

Twenty-five players playing 11-man football in a huddle and/or no-huddle format.

