TRADITION

"Should've known your love was a game"
WE DON'T TALK ANYMORE CHARLIE PUTH FT. SELENA GOMEZ

Football made Yale a household name

BY LUCY BENJAMIN
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In the late 19th century, football helped establish Yale's national reputation. A century later, the historic sporting rivalry between Yale and the school up north continues to unite generations of students, alumni and faculty for one November weekend.

As Yale prepares to face Harvard in the 142nd iteration of The Game, the occasion offers a look into how the rivalry has evolved — from an expression of national athletic dominance to a much-anticipated gathering of students and alumni.

In the late 19th century, Yalies helped establish the rules of modern American football while building a reputation that extended far beyond New Haven. More than 150 years after the first Yale-Harvard contest, The Game remains one of the University's most enduring traditions, even as the role of football in campus life has changed dramatically.

"People don't realize what a huge deal Yale football was," history professor Jay Gitlin '71 MUS '74 GRD '02 said in a phone interview.

The rivalry dates back to Saturday, Nov. 13, 1875, when Yale and Harvard faced off at Hamilton Park in New Haven. The inaugural matchup ended in a 4-0 Harvard victory.

In the decades that followed, Yale became instrumental in transforming the sport into its modern form. Walter Camp, class of 1880, who is often regarded as the "father of American football," introduced innovations including the line of scrimmage, the system of downs and the 11-player formation.

Yale's success on the field was equally significant. The Bulldogs became a national powerhouse, accumulating the most national championships of any school in the history of the NCAA.

Gitlin explained that football's rise in the aftermath of the Civil War coincided with a period when Americans were seeking new forms of national identity.

"It was a divided nation, and it needed healing, and there are two things that provided a kind of healing for the nation," he said. "One was football, invented at Yale."

Beyond providing Americans with a shared cultural experience, Gitlin said the sport accorded with the emergence of recognizable national brands in the United States.

While expanding railroad networks helped make brands such as Jell-O and Nabisco famous across the country, Gitlin said, "Yale football became so famous that Yale became a brand name."

He compared the University's emerging identity to the branding strategies of major companies, noting that Yale has developed its own recognizable symbols, including its distinctive "Y" letter, Handsome Dan mascot and school colors.

"The Y is a logo, and the bulldog becomes a trademark character," Gitlin added.

Gitlin extended the comparison to the University's musical traditions, likening Cole Porter's 1913 Yale fight song, "Bulldog," to an advertising jingle.

Together, these symbols helped make the University a household name to Americans who had never even set foot in New Haven, he said, as "everyone knew Yale."

Yet Yale football was not simply a source of national recognition. Over time, it also became central to the University's social structure.

Gitlin recalled that when he was an undergraduate in the late 1960s, students regularly attended football games throughout the season, often because they personally knew players on the team. He said he was roommates with Harry Klebanoff '71, the team's kicker.

The games also were the highlights of the students' social calendars, particularly before Yale College became coeducational in 1969.

Students invited dates from nearby women's colleges, like Smith, to attend football games on Saturday afternoons. Following the games, the students and their dates dined in the residential colleges and then attended dances featuring live bands, according to Gitlin.

"You wanted to ask somebody you really liked to the Harvard game," Gitlin said. "It was sort of the unofficial structure of the social calendar."

This period also produced one of the rivalry's most memorable contests. In 1968, during Gitlin's sophomore year, Harvard mounted a dramatic late comeback at its home stadium to tie Yale 29-29, prompting the Harvard Crimson to publish a now-famous headline, "Harvard Beats Yale 29-29."

Gitlin, who said he attended the game with his parents, recalled encountering jubilant Harvard fans during the drive back to New Haven.

"It was a tie, but it felt so bad, because we were leading, and then they tied it in the last couple of minutes," Gitlin recalled.

Today, Gitlin said he observes a different relationship between Yale students and football. He said he fondly remembers attending every game throughout the season during his time as a student, but that today many undergraduates only show up for the annual Harvard matchup.

Though the typical Yale student only shows up to root for the Bulldogs on one November Saturday, the rivalry game is the culmination of the season's hard work for the players themselves.

Former wide receiver Mason Shipp '26 described the atmosphere surrounding Yale-Harvard as an opportunity to experience the excitement and intensity typically associated with much larger college football programs.

"It's what every kid dreams of. It's a really exciting thing to run out to an entire bowl that is super-filled and loud as hell where you can't really hear much," Shipp said in a phone interview with the News. "I love that."

Shipp said the matchup distinguishes Yale and Harvard from other Ivy League programs, as it brings together alumni, students and other fans in a way that few other conference games can replicate.

"You get a chance to compete in this historic rivalry and play big time football on a big stage doing something that means a lot to people and brings back a whole community," Shipp added.

Although Yale no longer occupies the position of national football dominance it once held, the program continues to reach new milestones.

Shipp, who was actively involved on the Ivy League Student Athlete Advisory Committee, led and penned the student-driven proposal to reverse the conference's longstanding restrictions on football postseason participation.

In 2025, Yale made history as the first team to play in the postseason after earning the conference's first-ever automatic bid to the NCAA Division 1 Football Championship Subdivision playoffs.

The Bulldogs crushed the previously undefeated Crimson 45-28 at the Bowl to earn a share of the Ivy League championship and clinch the conference's first automatic FCS playoff berth.

The Bulldogs then went on to defeat Youngstown State 43-42 in a historic first-round comeback, securing the Ivy League's first FCS playoff victory. The significance of carrying on that history is also felt by current players.

"It's truly an honor to be part of a game with so much history and tradition," Yale safety Brady Carson '29 wrote in an email to the News. "One of the most special parts is seeing all the alumni come back and knowing that we get to carry on the legacy they left behind."

Carson emphasized that players approach the Harvard game with the same preparation and intensity as any other, though more attention is paid to the matchup. Still, he said the contest's history lends it a significance that extends beyond the final score.

"To play even a small part in that legacy means the world to me," Carson wrote. "We put so much time and effort into representing this school, and it's special knowing that this game connects generations of Yale football players."

For alumni, The Game is an opportunity to reconnect with former classmates and teammates. Shipp, who plans to attend his first Yale-Harvard game as an alumnus on Saturday, said he sees the rivalry as both a celebration of Yale's football traditions and a glimpse of the Ivy League's broader potential.

"With the right amount of work, and with the right amount of investment, you can imagine this is the potential for what the conference could look like every week," Shipp said.

Kickoff for the 142nd edition of The Game is at 3:30 p.m. on Saturday at Fenway Park.

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McInnis, Lewis predict Yale five-peat

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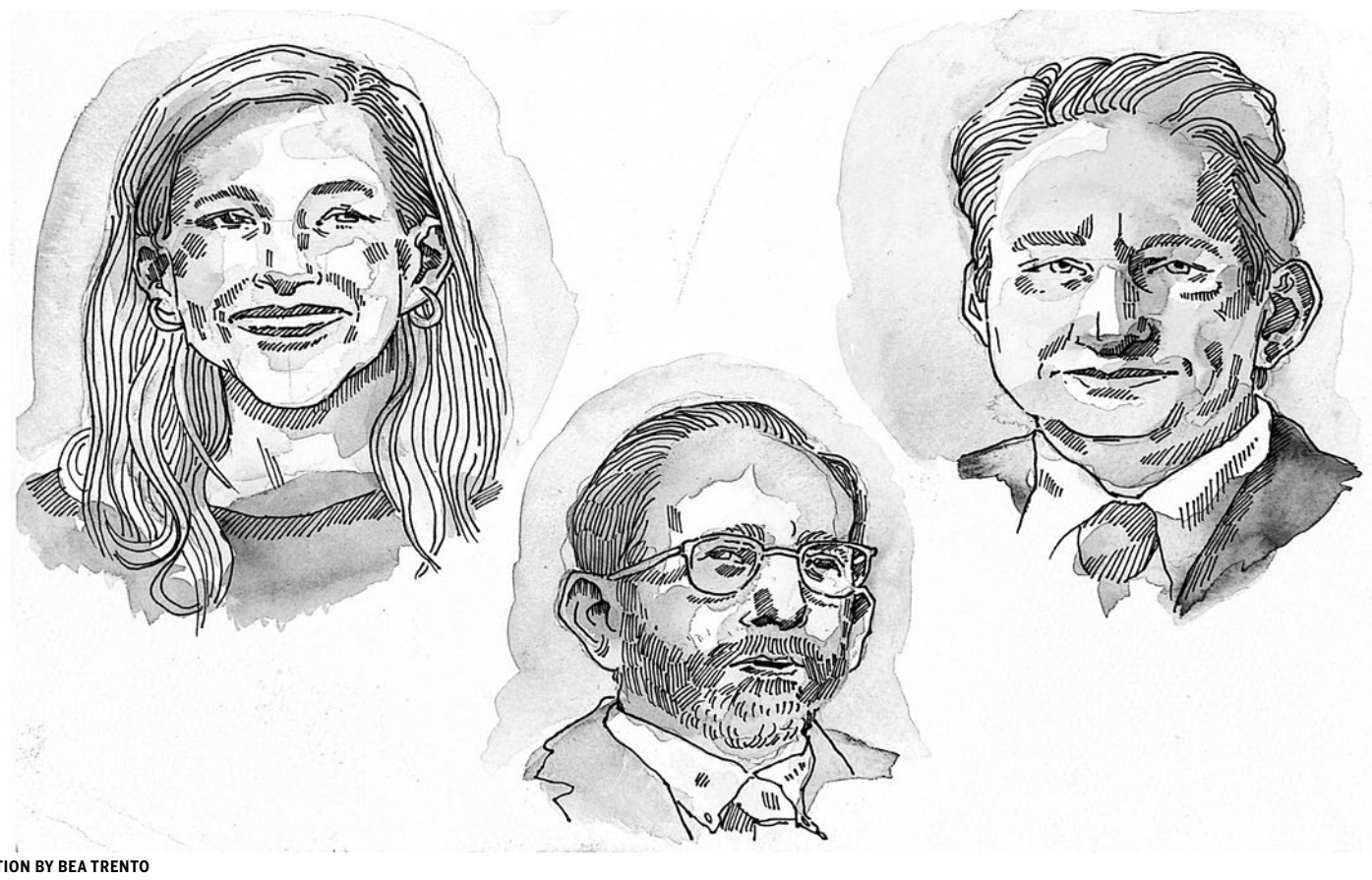

ILLUSTRATION BY BEA TRENTO

University President Maurie McInnis and Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis, who plan to head north with their families, said they expect Yale to win The Game. Lewis said he is excited to see the Harvard College dean and praised Yale's gameday performers.

Days before joining the hordes of Yalies flocking to Boston for The Game, University President Maurie McInnis and Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis predicted that Yale will beat Harvard for the fifth year in a row.

The Bulldogs have been eliminated from playoff contention, while Harvard, which sits first in the conference, is guaranteed a share of the Ivy League title. Lewis said on Wednesday that he thinks the Bulldogs will win 28-17. On Monday, when asked who she thinks is going to win the Yale-Harvard match, McInnis said, "Well, of course Yale is."

McInnis, who will attend the game for her third year as president, said she first watched the annual contest as a graduate student. Lewis said he has been attending The Game for about a decade, though he was not a football fan growing up.

Both administrators said they plan to attend the game with family. McInnis plans to head up to Cambridge on Friday with her husband, who she said regularly attends football games with her. Lewis said his wife and children, as well as a couple of his children's friends, will join him at The Game.

When asked what his favorite Yale-Harvard tradition was, Lewis commended the cheerleading team and the band.

"I really like the cheerleaders. The cheerleaders are getting better and better," Lewis said. "The band is at the top of its game now, they've got new uniforms that look great."

Lewis also said that he looks forward to seeing Harvard College Dean David Deming at the game, praising the leadership and scholarship of the "thoughtful economist." He said that the University hosting the game usually hosts a pre-game reception, where he expects to see his Harvard counterpart.

"His studies about social class and how to diversify leadership in universities are really quite important," Lewis said, adding that he plans to teach work by Deming on the subject in his DeVane Lecture series, which is titled Purposes of College Education.

McInnis says she usually runs into Harvard President Alan Garber at The Game, but said she does not know if they have specific plans to meet.

She described Garber as a "collegial leader who listens and works collaboratively."

"I don't know much about his leadership at Harvard," she said. "I know about him as a fellow president and work with him on a lot of issues, and he's a great person to work with." Lewis said Yale can learn a lot from its peer schools' academic approaches.

"We always take a good look at what our peers are doing, for example, when we're working on a new engineering core curriculum, and we took a look at Princeton and Harvard two years ago, and they were very welcoming and showed us around," Lewis said.

When asked about what she thinks Yale could learn from Harvard, McInnis said she does not comment on other universities.

The first Yale-Harvard football game was played on Nov. 13, 1875.

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