

# First Legal Forward Pass and Baraboo Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

You don't have to be a Monday morning quarterback to understand this article. All you need to know is that in football the ball is occasionally passed through the air to a teammate. What you may not know is that the first legal forward pass in football was thrown by a Baraboo man. The circumstances of that action are the reason for this story.

His name, Bradbury Robinson, is not exactly a household word today, but at one time he playfully suggested that the only famous people to come out of Baraboo besides himself were the Ringlings. He overlooked Belle Case LaFollette, and perhaps others, but the point is well taken. He was a famous athlete on a famous team in his day.

Take yourself back to 1903. Young Robinson's English Mother, Amelia Lee Robinson, had moved with her parents to Baraboo when Brad was five. Now he has enrolled at Madison and is out for football, playing with the Badgers. They had a 6-3-1 record that year, with an 87-0 win over Beloit. After thrashing a bully, Robinson had been dismissed from the team.

In 1905, despite invitations to return to the Badgers, the 200 pound youth enrolled in St. Louis University as a pre-med student. Transferring with

him was Badger Asst. Coach Eddie Coachems. Both had shown avid interest in the possibility of using the forward pass in football. Though outlawed, it was finally allowed in 1906 by the IAAUS, predecessor to the NCAA. Many coaches opposed it,

## First Forward Pass

Not coach Coachems or Robinson, however. Using the abilities of Jack Schneider, the first legal forward pass was thrown on September 5, 1906 in a game with Carroll College (Waukesha). Actually, Schneider failed to receive the first pass, and, under the rules of the day, the ball then passed to the opponents no matter what the down.

On a later play, however, Schneider made a successful reception of a 20 yard pass and went on to make a touchdown. Robinson was the first triple threat player, running, passing, and kicking for St. Louis. His longest pass was a 67 yarder against Kansas. Overall St Louis record: 11-0.

It should be noted that the ball then was fat and nearly totally round, hard to hold and throw. Coach Eddie Coachems early on urged redesign of the clumsily shaped ball. It was in the 1920's before the ball began to assume its slimmer proportions of today. Uniforms were primitive under modern standards, some parts invented by the player himself

There had been forward passes in other games on a few occasions in the past, usually ruled illegal by the referee. Adoption of the new rule allowed teams all over the country to employ the pass that year, but the St Louis-Carroll game was played unusually early in the season, Sept. 5, 1906, so it claims the honor of being the first legal pass. It is said that Robinson and Schneider pushed the coach to use the pass.

*Bradley  
Robinson*



**Brad Robinson left, and suited up, right**

**Below, Brad is last man on the right,  
With Jack Schneider ahead of him.**



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 Baraboo, WI 53913


Dear Dr. Dewel:

I found your recent article about Bradbury Robinson very interesting. I can provide some information about his life in Baraboo because he was the son of B. N. Robinson Sr., who was the Baraboo City Marshal from 1903 to 1904. The Marshal's office was the predecessor of our police department.

Bradbury Robinson Sr. was born in Lowell Massachusetts in 1842 and served in the Civil War as a Union Army Sergeant in Company C of the 6th Massachusetts Infantry. In 1862 he moved west to Missouri where he worked for several railroads including as a Conductor for the Missouri Pacific Railroad and later as a Baggage Agent for the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad. He married Amelia Isabella Lee at her parent's farm in Merrimack, Wisconsin in June of 1881. When he retired from the railroads in 1887 he returned to Baraboo with Amelia and their children, Bradbury Jr., Jennie, and Nellie.

The younger Bradbury, who was three years old when the family moved to Baraboo, grew up on the Robinsons' small farm on Eighth Street across from the Fairgrounds. He attended Baraboo schools and graduated from High School in 1902, which explains his absence from the 1904 championship team photo. He was a University of Wisconsin pre-med student from 1903 to 1904, and then attended medical school at St. Louis University.

I've enclosed a photograph of B.N. Robinson Sr. taken in his Grand Army of the Republic uniform at the courthouse square. The photo is from the collection at the Sauk County Historical Society.

Sincerely yours,

  
 Crai 9 sen  
 CHIEF OF POLICE

### Dangerous Game

One reason for the change was the necessity to make football less dangerous. The previous season had seen 18 deaths and countless injuries, so President Theodore Roosevelt intervened, calling together representatives of some 69 schools. Robinson himself had been carried unconscious off the field against Iowa. His longest pass was a 67 yarder against Kansas.

I have a clipping in which Harvard University, on January 16 of 1905, unanimously voted to ban football "as a menace to the morals as well as the bodies of the players." until the evils of the game were corrected. Harvard no doubt participated in the conference in which the rules were changed.

The article describes football of that day as "an apology for a rough and tumble fight". How the forward pass made the game less violent was not explained, though there were many changes in other rules also. Harvard said it was looking for "a decent clean pleasurable contest"

### Baraboo Connection

We don't know a great deal about the youthful days of Robinson in Baraboo. He is not pictured in a photo of the 1904 Baraboo High School championship team, nor is he listed as missing from the photograph. Having been born in 1884, he perhaps had already graduated.

It is interesting that he was born the same year the Ringlings started out as a circus. As we noted above, he jokingly said he and the Ringlings were the only famous people to come out of Baraboo. Known as Robbie in his youth, the family had lived in St. Louis before

the move to Baraboo in about 1889. His father was a railroad man.

Football is not Robinson's only claim to significance. Obtaining his medical degree in 1908, he practiced medicine for two years at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. His son, Bradbury Junior, played for the Minnesota Gophers from 1931 to 1933, as well as forward on their basketball team. His mother, Bradbury's first wife, died four years after the marriage and subsequent birth of the son.

Robinson served in WWI as an infantry captain on active duty at the front just before the Armistice. By his second wife, a French lady, he had seven children including one son. He served as a surgeon until 1926 on the staff of Surgeon General Cummings.

He returned to civilian life in St. Louis Michigan in 1926, where he not only practiced medicine but served as mayor. While there he was among the first to warn of the dangers of D.D.T.

Robinson is among the many Baraboo and Sauk County persons who have served significant lives elsewhere. Space here is limited, but there is more material on him and the forward pass on the internet, under simply his name and Wikipedia, the source of some of the material in this column.