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A Look at IWU Sports During World War II

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Sept. 5, 1995

Contact: Bob Aaron, 309/556-3181**Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine****A Look at IWU Sports During World War II**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--What was it like trying to field sports teams at Illinois Wesleyan University during World War II?

"Fielding teams really wasn't as difficult as everybody thought, because of the cadets," recalled Robert T. Fleming, a 1945 IWU graduate, captain of the 1944 baseball team, and a Bloomington-Normal attorney. "And we had some people come to school because of its outstanding baseball reputation."

The cadets Fleming referred to were Navy aviation cadets, part of the V-5 training program, who swelled IWU's enrollment during the war years and played on the football, basketball, and other teams. By 1943, only 112 of IWU's 436 students were male.

IWU was among 60 campuses nationwide to continue playing football, basketball, and baseball during World War II.

Life on the IWU gridiron, hard wood, and diamond during World War II is recounted in the Fall, 1995, edition of *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine* in an article, "IWU Athletics Mirrored National Trend During War Years" by Stew Salowitz, IWU's director of news services and a 1976 IWU graduate. The piece is part of a two-article package in the magazine about IWU and World War II, marking the 50th anniversary of the end of the great conflict. Salowitz's article is attached to this news release.

President Franklin Roosevelt saw sports as a morale builder during the war. FDR wrote Major League Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis: "I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going. There will be fewer people unemployed and everybody will work longer hours and harder than ever before. And that means they ought to have a chance for recreation and for taking their minds off their work even more than before."

IWU's sports teams experienced several problems during the war: pooling gasoline rationing cards to fuel transportation for away games and coaching turnovers--Fleming had four baseball coaches in four years and the football team

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had different coaches in 1941, 1942, and 1943.

From 1942-44, IWU's football team won 9, lost 12, and tied one game. The basketball team from 1941-45 won 20 games and lost 55.

Lost classmates--not lost games--were a difficulty for IWU students during the war.

"One day," Fleming said, "you're in a pledge class of the Sigma Chi fraternity, polishing furniture at the house with another guy. Then two weeks later, you hear about that guy being in a plane crash at the beginning of training. That was the tough thing about being in school at that time."

IWU, founded in 1850, has a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. The university's endowment is valued at more than \$100 million. A \$25 million Center for Natural Science Learning and Research opened Aug. 28. A \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 164 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition. *101 of the Best Values in America's Colleges and Universities* calls IWU "undoubtedly one of the finest small colleges in the country," adding, "Illinois Wesleyan has surged to national prominence on the basis of its reputation as a school with a rock-solid academic program."