

## The Big Game

THE LARGEST CROWD TO WITNESS AN AMERICAN FOOTBALL GAME OF ANY TYPE, INCLUDING PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL AND THE LARGEST CROWD EVER TO SEE A HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL GAME

120,000 IN-PERSON SPECTATORS  
SOLDIER FIELD, CHICAGO  
NOVEMBER 27, 1937

### THE CASE FOR LEO V. AUSTIN

They are impressive events, modern football games with stadiums packed with fans. The fans' energy and excitement adds an element of its own to the experience of the game. The size of today's crowds for well-attended college or professional football games is limited only by stadium capacity, which, depending on where the game is held, is generally in the range of 50,000 to 80,000 fans. Typical examples of modern "big crowd" games are the 2005 Orange Bowl, where the University of Southern California beat Oklahoma University 55 to 19 at Dolphin Stadium in Miami, with a capacity crowd of 77,912 in attendance, or the 2005 Super Bowl, held at the ALLTEL stadium in Jacksonville, Florida, where the New England Patriots beat the Philadelphia Eagles by a score of 24 to 21 before a stadium capacity crowd of 78,125.

### 1937 Leo Team



The largest crowd ever to witness an NFL game "in person" was the crowd that attended the "American Bowl" game between the Dallas Cowboys and the Houston Oilers, on August 15, 1994 in Mexico City. The crowd at that game was an astronomical 112,336

in number. These games are the product of the modern world, including technology, travel, and promotion. Television, radio, newspapers and other forms of media promote the games on a national, if not a world-wide scale. Modern travel has “shrunk the world” to the extent that, for most Americans, traveling a “few thousand” miles to see something they really want to see, is hardly out of the question.

Against that background it would probably come as a surprise to most people that the most highly attended “American” football game in history was conducted well before most of the forms of modern media we are used to viewing on a day-to-day basis were in place. The game was played well before the methods of travel we take for granted developed to where they had done their current job of allowing most people to travel where they want to go with relative ease. The game was a neighborhood affair, a city feud. The game was the 1937 Chicago City High School Championship game between a Public High School on the city's West Side, and a Catholic High School from the city's South Side, the *"Kelly Bowl"*, between *Austin High School and Leo High School*, *attendance 120,000*.

### 1937 Austin Team



For a football game, the attendance at the “Leo-Austin” game was incredible. For a high school game the attendance is beyond modern comprehension. That kind of fan attendance at an athletic competition did not happen by chance. There were, as you would expect, a series of factors that came together to generate the enormous interest in, and attendance at, the game. As it worked out this game took place at the right time, in the right place, with the right teams and the right drama to create an event of historic proportions.

In 1937 Chicago, high school football was the sport for game attendance. The games benefited from Chicago newspaper coverage which regularly included coverage of high school football as a front-page item, including headlines, with articles that carried well

into the following pages. College football still received more press coverage than high school games, as is the case today, and a college football stadium building boom which had begun in the 1920's was helping to increase college attendance, but high school game attendance still predominated. Each type of institution could attract substantial crowds and games with attendance in excess of 40,000 were commonplace for the right high schools and colleges. The most well-attended games in the nation however were the high school championship games between the Public and Catholic schools in the cities of Chicago and Philadelphia, along with games in other cities themed toward raising funds for charitable causes. As it worked out the Leo-Austin game was both a high school game and one with a charitable theme.

### 1937 Leo Football Team

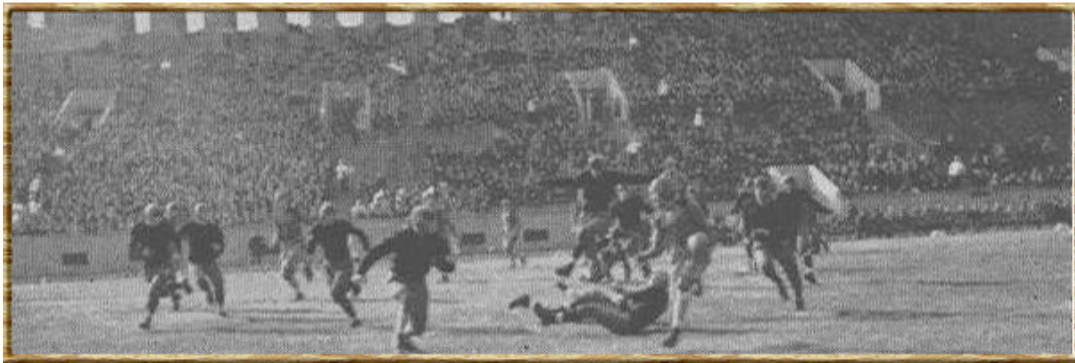


Professional football at that time was a fledgling business whose game attendance was nowhere near the attendance of local high school or college contests. Attendance at the NFL Championship game did not reach 50,000 until 1946, and the league never regularly broke the 50,000 mark at its championship games until 1951. Only 15,870 fans attended the 1937 NFL championship game between the Chicago Bears and the Washington Redskins at Chicago's Wrigley Field. The Pros couldn't expect to compete with high school or college football games with the "right stuff". Chicago's 1937 game had this "stuff" and that "stuff" began with the hall which housed the contest, Chicago's Soldier Field, circa 1937.

Construction of Soldier Field, the stadium on Chicago's lakefront, began in 1922. The plan was the product of an architectural competition to design a 100,000-seat stadium. The result was a mammoth structure, built on a tract of over 7 acres of land, land that originated as landfill from Lake Michigan. The stadium was built as an amphitheatre and modeled after the Parthenon. It was built in neoclassical style with large "Doric" colonnades, which rise on each side of the stadium. A true amphitheatre, the stadium was not just built for football or sporting events, but for all types of events involving the public and requiring a large stadium. The building had exterior dimensions of 678 feet by 1,184 feet and interior dimensions "the infield area" of 300 feet by 887 feet.

From its opening in 1924 the stadium accommodated large crowds. The stadium's very first event was an athletic competition among police officers, which was reported to have drawn 90,000 spectators. From then on, crowds in excess of 100,000 were commonplace, and at events where attendee occupancy was not limited to the stands but included the use of the infield, the stadium showed exactly how much of a behemoth it could be by accommodating crowds of no fewer than 150,000. The largest crowd ever recorded to have used the facility was a crowd of 260,000 for the 1954 Marian Year Tribute held by the Catholic Church (a religious event to honor and venerate the Virgin Mary during a year dedicated for that purpose by the Church). That 260,000 figure includes, however, approximately 100,000 people who gathered outside the stadium to hear the service through loudspeakers. Soldier Field underwent several renovations since 1954 that have been designed to, among other purposes, create a more intimate experience for the attendees. One effect of these renovations has been to reduce the audience capacity of the stadium.

### Leo vs. Austin 1937 Soldier Field



The particular event which resulted in the big game was Chicago's "Kelly Bowl", (the name of which changed in later years to the "Prep Bowl") an annual interleague game between the teams which won the Chicago Public League football championship and the Chicago Catholic League championship. The game decided, at a minimum, which league, school, and team (let alone religious group) could claim the rights to the Chicago City Championship. The game was a charity event, held to fund the City's "Christmas Fund", a fund intended to furnish clothes for needy children.

Mayor Edward J. Kelly, whose name the game bore, was Mayor of Chicago from 1933 to 1944. The first of the Kelly Bowl games had been held only three seasons before, in 1934. The game was promoted, in part, by "flooding" the City with tickets. At this point we are still researching, but our current information is that the tickets were sold by City workers to business owners, particularly to tavern owners. The exact "sales pitch" is not known, (we're working on it) but it is known that the business owners would then make the tickets available to their patrons, generally for no charge. This system would provide a large group of people holding tickets to the event.

Mayor Kelly was a strong "New Deal" Democrat, and a Catholic, but a product of the Chicago Public Schools. He presided over the City during the years of the "Great

Depression” and his tenure as mayor was marked with problems with organized crime, gambling and scandal. (His tenure ended, however, not over scandal, but over his integrationist views in a City which was in the midst of a great migration of African-Americans from the South.) Nonetheless, newspaper reports from 1937 indicate that enough of the funds raised from the game made it back to reporting parties that local newspapers from the time report that somewhere between \$100,000 to \$105,000 was raised for charity from the 1937 game. These vigorous ticket sales helped set the stage for the large game attendance.

### Four Members of the 1937 Leo Team



Today Chicago refers to itself as “a city of neighborhoods”. To the extent the statement is true today; it was infinitely more true in the 1930’s. People occupied themselves with items of local interest at a time when there was not yet television or many other forms of media to compete for people’s attention. Transportation outside a neighborhood required far more effort than it does today. Most families did not own an automobile, and travel outside the immediate area of one’s home was normally accomplished by walking or by streetcar. Travel for greater distances was normally done by train, and for a select few by air. The difficulties of travel naturally lead people to focus their attention on the events in their own city and, in particular, in their own neighborhood. Austin High School was a school on Chicago’s West Side, a substantial distance (by 1937 standards) from the South Side location of Leo. The resulting neighborhood rivalry alone would add an element of interest to the game, much as the South Side versus North Side, Sox versus Cubs, rivalry adds a spark to Chicago baseball today.

More important than distance alone, however, was the fact that in 1937 Chicago the geography reflected the way the social, ethnic and religious mix in the city had “fallen out”. Austin High School drew from an area of Chicago that had a considerable ethnic mix, a white ethnic mix, but a mix. The neighborhood was populated in large part by individuals of German, Scandinavian, Irish, Italian and Greek heritage. The neighborhood also included a substantial population of people not generally considered to be the “ethnics” in Chicago, that is individuals whose American heritage extended back more than one or two generations and who were members of the myriad of traditional Protestant Churches in the neighborhood. These churches included Baptist, Christian,

Congregational, Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian and Unitarian churches. The resulting neighborhood mix was ultimately reflected in Austin High School having a student body that was diverse (by 1937 Chicago standards) in both heritage and religious affiliations. Religion was a particularly important identifier of who one was in 1937.

Leo High School was located in a section of Chicago's South Side that was a continuation of the settlement path of a large group of Irish immigrants who began arriving in the city in the 1860's. At the time of the "Big Game" the immediate area where Leo was located was predominantly Irish and Catholic. Other ethnic groups lived in the area, including Germans, Swedes, and to a lesser extent, Polish and Italians, but none were represented in as large of numbers as the Irish. (The neighborhood's Irish heritage was clearly displayed in later years (the 1950's) when the neighborhood hosted its own St. Patrick's Day parade.) The school drew, however, from an area larger than its immediate neighborhood. This area was generally within a five-mile radius of the school. This area included people with a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, but the Leo students were those who were interested in attending a Catholic school. In the Case of Leo High School this meant predominantly people of Irish or German heritage. There were very few non-Catholics in Leo High School in 1937.

At both Austin and Leo High Schools the "ethnic" students were primarily the descendants of recent immigrants whose parents or grandparents made the trip across the Atlantic, but there were also small numbers of direct immigrants in the mix. Parish life would have dominated the social lives of the Leo fans, as it did the lives of all recent Catholic immigrants. There was a major lack of comprehension of the Catholics and their ties to their parishes among the more established groups, particularly among the Protestants, and there was an equal lack of comprehension of the "publics" who attended the Public Schools on the part of the Catholics.

In the "Kelly Bowl", the Leo players would represent the Catholic population of Chicago, as did the teams from the Catholic schools which had played in the Bowl game in prior years. The Austin players, even to some degree the Catholic players, would represent the non-Catholic population in Chicago. The importance of religion in Chicago was enormous. Ten years before, Mayor William Hale Thompson ("Big Bill Thompson") had made an issue of the Catholicism of his election opponent, William Dever. Thompson openly asserted Dever would cause city government to be dominated by the Pope. The issue was one which still had to be seriously addressed as late as 1960, when John F. Kennedy ran for president. The impact of religious affiliation as a divisive issue carried through the decades after the game. Today the emotional force generated by the issue pales when compared to how much people of Chicago cared about religious affiliation in 1937. The religious rivalry represented by the game would have generated a tremendous part of the interest in the game.

## 1937-38 Leo Team



Finally (you thought we'd never get here) there were teams and a game. The excitement of seeing a top quality athletic competition between the two teams is what ultimately brought the fans to the game. The contest itself was somewhat one-sided, but not so much so as to cause Leo fans to lose hope before the final quarter. Austin High School entered the Kelly Bowl after coming off an undefeated record in Public League Play. Leo High entered the game having suffered only one loss. Each team was powered by an all-star running back who had thrilled crowds and whose heroics boded a bright future in college or professional play.

Bill De Correvont was the star for Austin and came into the game having scored thirty-three touchdowns up to that point in the season. John Galvin, the Leo star, had led his team through a perfect string of victories after an initial loss in its first regular season game. John Galvin may not have been playing at his full capacity in the game, as the 1938 Leo High School yearbook which reviews the game, (available for viewing on our website) discusses the fine play by John Galvin despite being "severely handicapped with a dislocated shoulder". Whether this injury affected the outcome of the game is mere conjecture. Newspaper accounts also refer to De Correvont as having an injured leg going into the game.

The game itself was overwhelmingly a running contest. There was a scoreless first quarter during which it looked as if Leo would control the game. Austin, however, settled down and scored two touchdowns in the second quarter. Austin failed to convert for the extra point after the second touchdown and the first half ended with Austin leading 13-0. At the opening of the second half, Leo displayed renewed ability to move the ball; however Leo's offense ultimately bogged down and Austin repeated its first half performance of two touchdowns, one in each of the third and fourth quarters, with a point after added in the fourth quarter for good measure, for a 26-0 finish.

Austin's win set the stage for their team to travel to Jackson, Tennessee, to face the Southern United States High School Champions. Austin won that game 13-0 and was

thereby able to claim the (then) title of U.S. National High School Football Champions (see the football section of the Austin High School 1938 yearbook available for viewing on our website).

Austin's win made it three out of four Kelly Bowl's for the Public League to that date, with the Catholic's having only one tie game to show in their favor for their Kelly Bowl efforts. Leo would be able to console itself in the future when, after one additional loss in the Kelly Bowl in 1940, it went on to win the game in 1941 and 1942 initiating the more evenly divided series of games between the two leagues which followed through the 1950's. (The Catholic League began to dominate the game in the 1960's through the early 1980's, but the contests have had more evenly matched outcomes in recent years, as the best Catholic and Public League teams opt out of the Prep Bowl to pursue their State level playoff opportunities, both Leagues having joined the Illinois State High School Association in the late 1970's.)

By the time of the Leo-Austin game, Soldier Field had already hosted a considerable number of large football games including the 1926 Army-Navy game with an estimated 110,000 attendees and a crowd in the area of 120,000 for the 1927 Notre Dame-University of Southern California game. An apparently equally large crowd attended the game between Notre Dame and Navy held in Soldier Field in 1928. The crowd at the Notre Dame games rivaled the Leo-Austin game and some sources attempt to use the turnout at these games as authority for claiming these games as the largest crowds ever to attend an American football game. An authoritative source (the Chief of the Department which handled Soldier Field events at the time of the Leo-Austin game) was quoted in the Chicago Tribune's report of the game, however, as stating that the Leo-Austin game had the largest crowd ever to attend a game at Soldier Field. Even if we concede that the above games were held nine and more years before the Leo-Austin game, a distance in time which could have affected the memory, we assert that it was more likely the crowd at a high school game would include children and others who would readily accept being packed into the stands, isles and elsewhere in the stadium. In addition, contemporaneous sources discussing the attendance at the Leo-Austin game do not refer to the earlier games as its rival for attendance despite the history which was being made, or at least the bragging rights which were at stake. Most authoritative sources on Soldier Field don't refer to the earlier games as being the largest games ever held at Soldier Field and refer instead to the Leo-Austin game as holding that mark.

As for the mechanics of how Soldier field accommodated over 120,000 fans at one game, at the time of the 1937 game the stadium had 76,000 permanent bleacher seats and was built to accommodate an additional 30,000 temporary bleacher seats for large crowds. The additional bleacher seats were not in use for the Leo-Austin game, instead, to accommodate the overflow crowd, adults and children were packed into the stands, the isles and in lines approximately seven people deep which ran around the entire upper perimeter of the stadium, according to the Chicago Tribune of Sunday, November 28, 1937. The overall effect was to expand the capacity of the stadium immensely. Subsequent functions held at Soldier Field, such as the crowd of 160,000 which used the facility for the Marian Year Tribute (although that event included use of the infield) show

that the Leo-Austin game was well within the crowd-holding capacity of Soldier Field.

Leo Alumni still include in large part the Irish Catholics and others who populated the school at the time of the 1937 game and for years thereafter. The Alumni today are however a more diverse group, reflecting the change in the neighborhood around the school to one which is predominantly African American, and reflecting changes in the areas from which the school draws its students. For Leo Alumni of all generations and graduates from both Catholic and Public League Schools, involvement in the game with the largest fan attendance in history is part of the proud and storied history of Leo High School, Austin High School and the Chicago Catholic and Public Leagues. This history is made daily at Leo High School and other schools and greatly assisted through Alumni action in support of the schools. We hope you have enjoyed our "Big Game" history. Your comments, feedbacks, suggestions, editing and/or other help is hereby solicited. You can contact us through our e-mail or our blog. If we use your editing in a noticeable way, we will post your name as a contributor for a period of not less than 1 year.

-Thomas W. Lynch '73 with the assistance of and on behalf of  
Leo High School and The Leo High School Alumni Association 08/21/07

NOTE: The sources below document the story told by this article, particularly in that they substantiate the most important assertions made in the article. Additional sources for statements less important to the theme of the article or which duplicate authoritative sources cited here are available and can be provided upon request.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Official Website of the FedEx Orange Bowl, [www.orangebowl.org](http://www.orangebowl.org)

NFL Internet Network "Superbowl Recaps", [www.superbowl.com](http://www.superbowl.com)

Official Website of the National Football League, [www.nfl.com](http://www.nfl.com)

The Chicago Tribune, November 28, 1937

The Southtown Economist, November 28, 1937

Encyclopedia of Chicago, See the Kelly-Nash Machine Entry at  
[www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org)

Encyclopedia of Chicago, See the Machine Politics Entry at  
[www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org)

King Football, Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazines, The Weekly & The Daily Press by Michael Orradi, 2001 The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London

NFL Championship Games Results 1933 to 1969, <http://sportingchronicle.com>

Stadiums of the NFL, "From the Past to the Future", [www.stadiumsofnfl.com](http://www.stadiumsofnfl.com)

Time Magazine, [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,820257,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,820257,00.html),  
Sept. 20, 1954

Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, Soldier Field,  
[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soldier\\_Field](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soldier_Field)  
Encyclopedia of Chicago, See the Soldier Field Entry at  
[www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org)

The University of Illinois at Chicago, "Political History of Bridgeport",  
[www.uic.edu/orgs/LockZero/index.html](http://www.uic.edu/orgs/LockZero/index.html)

Roosevelt University On-Line, [www.roosevelt.edu/chicagohistory/mod3-chap1.htm](http://www.roosevelt.edu/chicagohistory/mod3-chap1.htm)

The Leo High School Yearbook, 1938

The Austin High School Yearbook, Sports Section, Football, 1938

The Chicago Tribune, "Schools of Hard Knocks", by Barry Temkin,  
[www.chicagotribune.com/sports/football/chi-fic-hardknocks,1,3056434.story?coll=chi-news-hed&ctrack=1&cset=true](http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/football/chi-fic-hardknocks,1,3056434.story?coll=chi-news-hed&ctrack=1&cset=true)

Encyclopedia of Chicago, See the Football Entry at  
[www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org)

And Other Sources



Copyright 2005 - 2006 - 2007 LeoHSAumniAssoc.com  
In Cooperation with Leo Catholic High School. All Rights Reserved.