A modest proposal to

Bring Back the Single Wing

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In November of 1976, Harvard was playing Brown in Cambridge when suddenly a murmur rippled through the crowd. The Harvard offense had lined up behind the ball in a strange formation most people in the stadium had never seen before. The quarterback was not crouched behind the center but idled off to one side, seemingly as unconcerned about the ensuing events as if he were waiting for a bus. Two other backs stood shoulder-to-shoulder almost four yards behind the line. Another back disappeared somewhere beyond the end. Rubbing their eyes in disbelief, a few older spectators in the crowd tottered to their feet and cheered vigorously as the Harvard tailback received a direct snap from the center and charged off-tackle for a five-yard gain.

The sight unfolding that afternoon would have been familiar to generations of Princeton fans. It was the Single Wing, once college football's most powerful and prevalent formation. But after World War II, the Single Wing gradually fell out of favor and was abandoned by most teams. Only Princeton and a few others continued idiosyncratically to flourish with the formation that, in the 1950s and 1960s, produced three undefeated teams and an unmatched record of successful and exciting football.

Then, in the watershed year of 1969, when coeducation came to Princeton, the Single Wing left. Now, a decade later, our living memories of the Single Wing, like those of the Great War, are dying off with the generation that witnessed it. (Upon rolling to quick first down against a bewildered Brown team that afternoon in 1976, Harvard coach Joe Restic abruptly re-appeared the formation after a single, tantalizing glimpse.)

But were we too quick to turn our backs on the Single Wing? Have the reduced circumstances of this new era given it a new efficacy that, like woodburning stoves, only needs to be rediscovered? Certainly the record shows that the Single Wing once worked and worked well for Princeton. And, compared to the now-mechanical and uninteresting T formation, the Single Wing was a spectator's delight, rewarding the close observer with a satisfying and pleasurable football experience.

Coaches, of course, consider the idea of returning to the Single Wing about as practical as bringing back the flying wedge. Anyone who dared show up at a coaches' convention nowadays advocating the Single Wing might as well wear a Norfolk jacket and knickers. He would be thought of as a harmless eccentric, obviously ill-equipped to deal with anything more modern than a flip-chart.

Yet despite almost overwhelmingly negative peer pressure, a few coaches have chosen to prove that the Single Wing is something other than a historical curiosity. Denison University, which happens to be President Bowen's alma mater, and Colorado College have both successfully used the Single Wing in recent years. On the secondary school level, Ken Keuffel '46 has coached the Single Wing at Lawrenceville for 17 years and keeps in close contact with other pockets of true believers at New Dorp H.S. on Staten Island and at Matawan (N.J.) H.S. The small but determined fraternity of Single Wing coaches functions rather like a persecuted minority group: all they need is a secret handshake.

The fear of being sneered at as an oddball has prevented many coaches from thinking rationally about the Single Wing. Yet these same coaches, while hooting at the Single Wing on the one hand, have snuggled up to it on the other. What, after all, are the Delaware Wing-T and the Dallas Cowboy Shotgun formations other than gussied-up Single Wings? But I am getting ahead of myself.

Let us examine the record at Princeton. How have we fared in our experiment with the T formation? In the last decade of the Single Wing, 1959-68, Princeton won 67 football games and lost 28 for an average of .705. In the first 10 years of the T formation, Princeton won 34 games, lost 42, and tied 4 for an average of .450. (The pleasant success of the 1979 team, incidentally, is a fluctuation that should not blind us to the long-term trend.) More disturbing is the record against Yale. In the last 10 seasons before the T usurped the Single Wing, Princeton was 6-4 with Yale; in the dismal decade since, Princeton has been 0-10. In fact, Princeton has never beaten Yale with the T.

What about attendance? In the last year of the Single Wing, 1968, Princeton drew a total of 123,000 to five home games. In the 1978 home season, also five games, Princeton drew a pitiful 65,000. Lest it be argued that the decline in attendance is a widespread phenomenon, it is worth noting that this fall's
Harvard-Yale game drew 72,000, more for one game than in Princeton’s entire 1978 home season. If attendance is ultimately the bottom line, there is a compelling economic argument here for a restoration of the Single Wing.

What about the arguments frequently made against returning to the Single Wing? They are well-known, and I shall deal with them one at a time:

1. You can’t recruit for the Single Wing. There are two parts to this argument. The first says that it is simply too difficult to find the Single Wing’s pivotal player: a tailback who is both a strong runner and a strong passer. Most quarterbacks, it is pointed out, are either good runners or good passers but rarely both. The T formation divides these functions between quarterback and halfback.

But the point here is to look at the record. Over the years, from Kazmaier to Landeck, Princeton has been able to recruit extraordinary athletes. Indeed, the Single Wing gives them a place to showcase their talents. Furthermore, the T formation itself has been changing in precisely this direction, with the option-oriented Wishbone and Veer defenses requiring quarterbacks who can both run and pass.

Another argument sometimes made against the Single Wing is that the best high school quarterbacks want to play on a T formation team so they can continue on to the professional leagues. My answer here is a question: How many Princeton T formation quarterbacks are currently playing for the pros?

2. You can’t come from behind with the Single Wing. This is related to the corollary argument, You can’t upset a superior team with the Single Wing. The rationale here is that the strength (and weakness) of the Single Wing is its ability to apply maximum power to the smallest obstacle. The so-called “student body sweeps” of the past would place a phalanx of blockers in front of the ball carrier, as opposed to the “brush-blocking” techniques of the T. In contrast, the T formation, with its flankers and split ends, places maximum pressure on the largest area.

My answer again is to look at the record. Over the last decade, Princeton has defeated few superior teams with the T and, indeed, has struggled with inferior teams. And isn’t it a debate about the argument to say that the T is better at coming from behind? In the Single Wing, one might counter, Princeton was rarely behind to begin with.

3. You can’t pass well from the Single Wing. On the face of it, this is a persuasive point. Most of Princeton’s passing records have been set in the era of the T formation. A T quarterback can spread wide receivers all over the field but still keep a running threat possible with a single back stationed behind him. Back in the 1963 season, Princeton’s leading pass receiver under the Single Wing was Jack Singer. He made five catches all year for a total of 54 yards, fewer than some receivers pick up in a single half these days.

Only a churlish critic of the T would note that the more passes you throw, the more interceptions are made against you. And despite Princeton’s filling the air with footballs in the last 10 years, all of its passing-for-touchdown records are held by Single Wing tailbacks. For that matter, guess who holds the single-season record for highest percentage of passes completed? Ron Beible? Steve Reynolds? No, it is Dick Kazmaier.

4. The Single Wing is unimaginative. This is the cruellest cut of all. Proponents of the T point out that the Single Wing is crippled by its slow-developing plays. It takes a split-second longer for the ball carrier to get to the line of scrimmage; blockers have to hold their blocks much longer. Moreover, this is accomplished with little deception: the ball is visible not only to the opposing defense but to everyone in the stands. A T quarterback, on the other hand, can choose from several options: he can dive straight into the line, he can move in either direction to the side, or he can drop back — all in the time it takes the ball to be hiked to a Single Wing tailback.

But why, then, is it that the Dallas Cowboys go into a modified Single Wing when they need points quickly? (Too embarrassed to call it what it is — a Single Wing with a balanced line — Tom Landry has dreamed up the potent-sounding “Shotgun” label, thereby saving face at coaches’ conventions.) Now, consider the opposite. What does a pro team do if it needs short yardage? It goes into the I formation, itself a revamped and disguised Single Wing variation. Cosmo Iacavazzi, for one, used to make those goal-line plunges out of a Single Wing version of the I formation. “I thought our coaches were tremendously imaginative,” Iacavazzi said recently. “We used a minimum of a hundred plays and ran from lots of different sets: the box formation, the I, the straight Single Wing, the flanker, an off-set, and a motion series.”

5. Modern defenses are too sophisticated for the Single Wing. The shifting equilibrium between offense and defense is one of the elements that has made college football interesting over the years. Typically, a coach will develop a new wrinkle that gives the offense an edge for a few years, but the defense usually catches up. Just as the 5-2 defense derailed the straight T, the roving linebacker stopped the Wing T. Now the newest, most aggressive defenses are catching up with the Wishbone. At a time when defensive tackles are bigger than ever and as fast as linebackers, even in the Ivy League, no team can afford to rely on sheer power.

Yet that is precisely the reason why the Single Wing could work. It is so old that it’s new. Even when teams were relatively familiar with the Single Wing, a Princeton coach could count on winning a game or two a year just by virtue of the fact that the baffled opposition would not have time to prepare for the mischief cooked up in Princeton. I cite here the best authority, Charlie Caldwell: "We see the T week after week in a variety of forms," he once pointed out, "but in most cases we are the only Single Wing club our opponents face in a nine-game season. A T team that has been battling T rivals for a month or so has to give up at least several days of practice to its preparation for a solid Single Wing, if its members, particu-
larly inside linemen, are not to be completely confused by the power and trap-designs of the Single Wing.” With the Ivy League as evenly balanced as it is now, that edge could be the difference between first place and fourth.

There is, interestingly, a historical precedent for just such a strategy. The original T formation had been tried and rejected as a failure by the end of the 1930s. Instead, the Pop Warner double wing, the Notre Dame box, and the powerful Single Wing developed by Fritz Crisler at Princeton dominated college play. “There are no longer any distinctive systems in football,” announced Michigan’s former coach Fielding H. “Hurry Up” Yost in 1940. “They’ve become

(Sadly, he never repeated the extraordinary success of his 1940 season and died forgotten in 1970 at the age of 78.)

Caldwell himself experimented with the T in his first season as Princeton’s head coach. But that was the wartime year of 1945 and, under the circumstances, he reasoned, “It was necessary to temporize and the staff decided to string along with the T for one season.”

The next year Caldwell returned to the Single Wing, which he had refined into an exceptionally deceptive offense. After Princeton’s dramatic, last-minute victory over Pennsylvania that year at Franklin Field (the winning field goal was kicked by Caldwell’s Lawrenceville disciple, Ken Keuffel), an awed Philadelphia newspaper observed that “seldom in the second half did Princeton

convinced that coaches like Warner and Crisler would have been able to meld into their power attacks some of the refinements and trickery usually associated with the modern T. There is no reason to think that he or Dick Colman would not do the same thing today.

Then there is the question of aesthetic appeal. To some, this may seem purely sentimental, but it is nonetheless real. A well-honed Single Wing is a thing of beauty. It is old-fashioned, certainly, but marvelously fascinating in both complexity and inventiveness. Beholding an operating Single Wing is like watching one of the old hot-metal Mengenthaler typesetters: it is all whirling gears and spinning flywheels and odd clanks and toots but, at the end, it spits out a perfectly formed line of type. Watching a T, on the other hand, has all the fun of watching a computer display terminal: it is silent, sinister, and soulless; it reveals not its secrets.

The columnist Jeffrey Hart, a Dartmouth man not inclined to think favorably of Princeton, once wrote about his feeling of awe at watching the intricacy of the Single Wing. It was plainly difficult, he said, but “one sensed that the demands could be met because Princeton was Princeton, and not only the players and the coach but the entire institution — students, administrators, janitors — expected things to be done in proper form in Palmer Stadium.”

Will the Restoration ever come? It is frankly hard to imagine that the adherents of the T will capitulate totally, even faced with the evidence of the comparative 10-year records. At best, we might hope for small gains — perhaps next season Princeton could phase in the old Single-Wing off-tackle play — offering it up just once a game (as the now coed Triangle Club still revives the all-male kickline once in every show, partly for old time’s sake, but more for its devastating effect). The following year perhaps Princeton could reintroduce the wedge. Later on it could work in the buck lateral and spinner series, a few plays at a time, just enough to keep the opposition off-balance.

Perhaps Allerdice and Flippin and Lacavazzi and Landack could come by for practice and show how it’s done, thereby saving the coaches much time-consuming research in dusty football museums. I even have a copy of the bible of this movement. Charlie Caldwell’s wonderful book, Modern Single Wing Football (Lippincott, 1951), and I will gladly loan it out to any coach who wishes to prove the truth of its title. □