Field Day: From birth to death

By Gordon R. Haff

For many years, a dominant feature in the life of an average MIT student has been an event called Field Day. Always a freshmen-sophomore battle, the Field Day competition had meanings which are not immediately obvious to a student of today. For the greater part of the history of this school, inter-class warfare was a significant feature of day-to-day life.

Field Day replaced an 1880's donnybrook known as the Cane Rush, which in conjunction with a freshmen-sophomore football game formed the central event of this competition. In this event, the freshmen started with the possession of a four-foot stick with a knob on each end. The sophomores then attempted to gain possession of the cane at the end of 15 minutes. A pistol was fired to end the mayhem. Preventing this main rush, there were also individual Cane Rushes in three weight categories in which single participants from each class tried to win the cane. Perhaps some idea of the importance attached to this event can be gathered from these excerpts from The Tech coverage of the Cane Rush a few days after the event. The issue starts by writing of great length about the freshmen-sophomore football game. An article must be written on the Cane Rush follows. Finally, the following is written about the main rush:

"The main rush was much the same as in former years. The freshmen were given possession of the cane and Sophomores attempted to attach their formation about it by flying wedges. The skirmishing lasted 15 minutes and in usual fashion of the former fighting began with a general signal to cease the struggle. When order held the cane were finally secured, it was found that the Sophomores had won the rush with 19 hands. The Sophomore freshman were given possession of the cane. At having but eleven hands on the cane."

"Mr. Moore of the freshman class was locally injured in the rush. He was taken to Boston City Hospital shortly after being taken there.

It was noted in the following issue that Harold W. Sherrill had also been seriously injured with hemorrhages of both eyes. Shortly thereafter, President Johnson called a special meeting to discuss the future of the Cane Rush. In this same very confused meeting, intercollegiate football was also disbanded by a vote of 19-11.

The next fall, the first Field Day was held. It consisted of three freshmen-sophomore competitions — a football game, a tug-of-war, and a relay race. This format would basically remain the same until 1927. The important thing to realize especially if one is trying to analyze the demise of Field Day in its latter years is that Field Day was not an individual event. It was part of an inter-class rivalry which was a major part of the life of an undergraduate.

The entire Field Day weekend was an important event. Classes were dismissed on Friday and re-convening of both the Freshmen and sophomore class officers was a common occurrence. Celebrations which evolved into street fights centered on either side of the river. The revelers frequently ended up clashing with the local police and the street car service the following Saturday.

Starting in 1923, an annual pre-Field Day event called the Sophomore Banquet was held. Sophomore Banquets were adopted to disrupt. In 1926, these events reached a peak. The Sophomores banned their way into the Sophomore- pro-war meeting with a battering ram and tear gas bombs. They then proceeded to run up traffic all the way to Harvard Square when the two classes combined to make a student union up the street on their way to crash a movie house singing Technology was informed of the whole thing. The police finally broke up the crowd after the students forcibly removed a subway car during a ride between Harvard Square and Park St.

For reasons which were not made clear, the Boston Post ran an editorial the next day which implied that Tech men were the same caliber as hoodlums.

The next year, in an effort to direct the two classes' aggression toward each other rather than the rest of the city, the Field Day Committee instituted an event called the Glove Fight. According to the October 24, 1927 The Tech "It is hoped by the Field Day Committee that this type of contest will eliminate all chances of concerted mob action and thus diminishing the chances for serious injury of any of the contestants. In no type of fight is expected to be more safe in this respect than a free-for-all at night, although there will be plenty of opportunity for action."

In conjunction with this change, the Sophomore banquet, the traditional cause of the pre-Field Day riots, was banned. In this event, the two classes lined up on each side of the field. Each freshman was then given a white glove and each sophomore a red glove. The contest was then started. Whichever class was able to tape their clothes on to keep from being stripped. The Sophomores in this match wore two of their leaders were "batterymen". The contest was then stopped."

In an earlier issue of The Tech, F. Thomas Bond '18 had an interpretative picture of the up-coming Field Day. He started by saying "Gone is the 'hazing' and the inter-class fights which had always reached their culminating point in the Glove Fight. Gone are the fights, the water fights, the dominating; what is left seems to be only a series of athletic contests held for no purpose and accomplishing no goal! However, he went on to say that the freshmen must now form an expert de corps in other ways and that sophomores unable to enjoy the 'benefits of laziness' must now enjoy the benefits of group action. As Field Day was dying, if indeed it was not already dead and merely going through the motions. In 1927, the Athletic Association discontinued it because of the growing number of injuries to various parties. This was part of an effort to institute All-Sports day, a day of home sporting events which still exists today.

The following year, Field Day was reinstated by the Beaver Kay Society, an East Campus honorary group which dropped it out for another ten years. However, it was clear throughout the sixties that the old Field Day was gone forever. Gabler races replaced the athletic events of old and student interest waned. InComm discussed its future at meetings and more meetings as the decade progressed.

The event got lost in the political issues of the day. The political activities considered it a petty and stupid. An issue which would have gotten banner headlines the decade before, a discussion of the future of Field Day, took second place to drudgery. Mike O'Connor's arrest after a week's sentence in the Student Center.

When the sophomore class voted to boycott the event in 1968, it was a decision which probably surprised very few. Jack Berry, Assistant Director of Athletics, recalls that the only reason the event had kept going that long was that a few people year had been enthusiastic about keeping it alive. Thus when it finally died, The Tech's editors called it an unfortunate decision, the freshman class officers were displeased, but most of the student body just didn't care any longer.