

## **Brockport Football: The Bob Boozer Years:**

### **A case study of the G.I. Bill's impact on The College at Brockport**

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1947. A world recovering from the ravages of World War II. The aftermath of the Second World War changed the face of the world. Historians often look at the major issues: the launch of the Cold War, globalization of the world's economy, a devastated Europe, etc, but the impact of World War II reached far deeper than these major global issues. World War II changed the face of American education as well. After the surrender of Japan, millions of G.I.s returned home looking for a fresh start. The G.I. Bill gave these men free tuition and a stipend if they wanted a college education. Thus, over two million veterans began seeking an education, flooding the nation's universities. Many of these young men wanted the full college experience, including athletics. One sport dominated college life: football. For a case study of this demand, one needs to look no further than one small school in Western New York: Brockport.

The College at Brockport in 1947 was known as the Brockport State Teachers College. The SUNY system was still going through the state legislature (in response to G.I.s), and was a year from its inception. Brockport was undergoing rapid change, reflected by the soon-to-be SUNY system at the state level. The arrival of the World War II veterans marked this change as imminent; the school needed to adapt to the needs of the veterans in order to keep the student body satisfied. With the creation of SUNY and even before it, Brockport was a health and physical education school. Thus, many of the students that came had an interest in athletics. The veterans that came to Brockport also were interested in athletics, and many wanted to play football. This demand was met after hard work by the students themselves to raise the funds for a team. With donated equipment and only one assistant, Bob Boozer led 158 men into the College at Brockport football team's first season.

Important to note, is the existence of a Brockport football team that formed in the 1890s. This team played irregularly until 1916, when it disbanded. However, this team was not separate from the local high school team, and its opponents were primarily local high schools. This normal school team played on and off from the period of the 1890s to 1916. Little evidence

exists as to the exploits of this team, primarily due to a lack of record keeping.<sup>1</sup> Due to the inconsistent fielding of a team, the lack of collegiate level play, and the lack of information available about this team, the remainder of this paper excludes the exploits of this team. The focus shall be on the team reformed in 1947, since this team fielded a roster every year since then, plays at the collegiate level, and is the actual formation of the current team playing at the College at Brockport. Additionally, the team during the normal school years had no significance in regards to the increase in the number of college students following World War II.

The G.I. Bill did not just affect Brockport, but affected the nation as a whole. The number of students in colleges skyrocketed following the end of World War II. During the 1939-40 school year, the number of college students at American universities stood at 1,494,203. By the 1949-50 school year, this number jumped to 2,659,021. Faculty members at colleges and universities during the same time rose from 146,924 to 246,722. Despite the near doubling in size of students and faculty, the number of collegiate institutions only increased from 1,708 to 1,851 during this time.<sup>2</sup> One hundred and forty three universities is a moderate increase for a ten-year period, but it pales in comparison to the growth of the number of students and faculty at institutions. Essentially, the new universities did not take in all the new students. Previously existing institutions, such as Brockport, needed to accommodate the swell.

Federal grants were enabling veterans to attend college. Indeed, the 1940s saw an astronomical growth in the awarding of grants to go to college. In 1940, the amount of federal grant dollars spent on colleges stood at \$1,368,000. By 1948, that amount increased to \$84,977,000.<sup>3</sup> This money went to a variety of individuals, as all types of Americans served during World War II. Veterans typically looked for schools that fit their interests. Known as a health and physical education school, Brockport would receive that primary distinction with the creation of the SUNY system in 1948. Thus, veterans who returned home to Western New York who were athletically inclined looked to Brockport to become physical education teachers (students at Brockport came from other areas as well, but the majority of students lived locally, or at least not too far away, similar to the current geographic makeup of the school). What Brockport saw from this student influx, was a large number of students interested in athletics.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Wayne Dedman. *Cherishing This Heritage*. New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1969. 196. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Sweeting, "The College at Brockport, 1938-1948: Ten Years of Change" College Archives, The College at Brockport, 1992. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

These students wanted the full college experience, including playing on sports teams. Thus, the demand for the re-creation of the football team swelled.

Students did many things to help get the football team going. The primary blockade to getting a team started was finances. It takes money to start a football team, money that did not exist in the budget at the time, so students did fundraisers. One tactic of the students was they had a giant piggy bank that could hold close to a gallon of coins and they would have that in the hallway. When students walked by, they would drop a few cents in. This money became part of the team's finances when it started in 1947.<sup>4</sup> The demand also spawned a vote in March of 1947 to create a blanket tax of \$5 semester for the athletic council.<sup>5</sup> This money created the necessary funds for Athletic programs to grow at Brockport, including the football team.

Although some money was available for the team, the team still had to rely on donations to get started. These donations were in the form of uniforms. The team's first uniforms came from donations from Mohawk C.C. and Champlain C.C., two colleges that had discontinued their football programs. The team purchased used game pants from the University of Rochester, and that is how the first team was equipped.<sup>6</sup> The college appointed new staff member, Bob Boozer to be the football team's first coach. Coach Boozer took over the team and led it all the way through the 1950s, until retiring from coaching following the 1959 season. The legacy his tenure would leave on the College at Brockport lasts through to today.

The Athletic Department in the 40s and 50s ran very differently than it does today. This is important to consider when looking at the records and success rate of the football team during this time. Dr. Tuttle, the head of the athletic department at the time, measured success differently. He preached to his faculty that their first priority was teaching and coaching was second. As Coach Boozer said, "coaching was just something you did afterward."<sup>7</sup> Dr. Tuttle specifically applied this to Coach Boozer by not allowing him to recruit. "I do not want anyone to ever say that we are out looking for football players,"<sup>8</sup> is what Boozer remembers being told by Tuttle. Today, even at the division three level, Brockport recruits students because they can play football. This was not the case at that time. Boozer offers the story of a time when he

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<sup>4</sup> Bob Boozer, interview by Dan Carpenter, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2000. Accessed through Brockport College Archives.

<sup>5</sup> George Barry. "Association casts ballots to decide fate of Athletics." *The Stylus*. April 1, 1947. p5. Found through Carpenter's paper.

<sup>6</sup> Boozer, Carpenter Interview.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Bob Boozer, interview by Bruce Leslie, 349 South Main St, Brockport, NY, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1999.

received a phone call from a high school coach about a player who was interested in going to either Brockport or Michigan State. The coach told Boozer they played nights if he wanted to see the “big old defensive tackle” play. Tuttle forbid Boozer from going to see the player play, and thus the player went to Michigan State.<sup>9</sup> Boozer was also restricted in that he was not allowed to cut players; Tuttle’s philosophy was that everyone who wanted to play should play. This led to the first team in 1947 having 158 players.<sup>10</sup>

The popular support for the creation of a team along with not allowing cuts caused the 158-man team. Coach Boozer knew these restrictions when he accepted the job, and had no problem with them, or he says he would not have taken the job. What he did not anticipate was the lack of a proper assistant staff.<sup>11</sup> With those 158 men, Boozer only had one paid assistant, along with one graduate assistant. This created a problem. As Boozer said, “What do you do with 13 quarterbacks whom you’ve never seen play? And nobody on the staff has seen them play and how do you sort them out when you have about two weeks to get ready for a football game?”<sup>12</sup> Boozer believes if he could have cut his team down to 50 or 33 players (“33 would be logical for a 2-man staff”<sup>13</sup>), they may have had more success. Many of the close games were winnable. Boozer does sometimes look back on his team and wish he had fought those restrictions at the time in order to improve the team’s record.<sup>14</sup> The team’s record during Boozer’s tenure was 22-52-7, with one winning season (1957).<sup>15</sup> Despite his regrets about how the team looks in the program, he looks back and remembers that everyone had a good time, and his players still stayed in touch with him right up until his death. So while he had a good experience, he felt he should have done better.<sup>16</sup> Although his win-loss record may not have been phenomenal, the impact he had on his players and school was. His players still remember him fondly and tell nostalgic tales of their playing days with him.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Boozer, Carpenter Interview.

<sup>10</sup> Boozer, Leslie Interview.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “SUNY Brockport Football Results 1947-1988”, College Archives RG 11/19/3 (Football 1947-84 drawer, Football results 1947-88 file), The College at Brockport.

<sup>16</sup> Boozer, Leslie Interview.

<sup>17</sup> Alumni of 1957, Interview by Bruce Leslie, *The College at Brockport*, recording obtained through email correspondence with Bruce Leslie.

The team's first season in 1947 was a winless one. The team only played in three games, and lost all of them. Their first ever game was at Hartwick and the team lost in a shutout, 27-0;<sup>18</sup> an expected result for a team in its first game ever, exacerbated by the aforementioned troubles Boozer faced with limited staff and surplus players. However, for the second game of the season, Brockport traveled to Sampson College. This was a good opportunity for Brockport to secure its first win, as the team from Sampson was in its first year as well.<sup>19</sup> It was not to be however, as the Brockport team lost a close one, 6-7. Close losses like that are what led Coach Boozer to feel as though there was always a black cloud of bad luck hovering over Brockport throughout much of its football team's history, putting them on the wrong side of the close games.<sup>20</sup> However, the final game of the 1947 season was not an example of that black cloud. The Brockport Golden Eagles returned home to take on Mansfield, only to be defeated in a lopsided 48-0 contest. Thus, the Brockport football team ended their first season 0-3 and outscored 82-6. Still, there was that close one with Sampson.<sup>21</sup>

Brockport would not wait too long next year for its first win. After a season opening shutout loss at Hartwick, 30-0, the Brockport football team won their home opener of 1948 by hosting and defeating Lycoming 12-6. The next game was at Cortland. Cortland and Brockport had developed quite a rivalry, as they were the two physical education schools created by SUNY. There was competition to be better than the other was, both athletically and academically as they competed for the same jobs. Alumni from the 1960s and former Brockport football player Gary Skoog recalls "always getting up to play Cortland".<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, the Cortland Red Dragons would claim the first football victory in this bitter rivalry, defeating Brockport 19-6. In fact, it would be eleven years before Brockport football would claim a victory over Cortland. The loss to Cortland dropped the team to 1-2 on the season, and in the final three games, Brockport failed to score a single point. They lost to Alliance University at home by 28, then at Edinboro by 7, and finished off 1948 by losing to Sampson at home by 20.<sup>23</sup>

The 1949 season saw Brockport lose another shutout, this time at powerhouse Alfred by a score of 26-0. This put the Brockport football team's point total through its first two seasons

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<sup>18</sup> "SUNY Brockport Football Results 1947-1988".

<sup>19</sup> "Brockport State Teachers College vs. Sampson College" a program, College Archives RG 11/19/3 (Football 1947-1984 drawer, Football results 1947-88 folder), The College at Brockport, 1947.

<sup>20</sup> Boozer, Leslie Interview.

<sup>21</sup> "SUNY Brockport Football Results 1947-1988"

<sup>22</sup> Gary Skoog, Interview by Bruce Leslie, Brockport, New York, April 2, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> "SUNY Brockport Football Results 1947-1988".

(plus one game) at 24 points in 10 games, or just 2.4 points a game. However, Brockport would manage to turn things around offensively in its next two games. The Brockport team next traveled to Hobart, where it managed to score more points than it had in any game before that combined. The Golden Eagles dominated Hobart by a score of 30-6! In their next game Brockport had a fine offensive output once again with 23 points, but their opponent, the University of Rochester had an even finer output, with 46 points. After scoring 53 points in two games, The Golden Eagles would go scoreless in their next three games. However, only one of those games was a loss for the Eagles. The first of the stretch, played at Lycoming, resulted in a 6-0 loss for Brockport. The next two games though, were scoreless draws played against Edinboro at home, and at Hartwick. This scoreless, but close stretch of games likely serve in the memory of Coach Boozer when he thinks of that black cloud that hung over Brockport. Brockport finished off the 40s with a loss to rival Cortland, 6-27.<sup>24</sup>

Brockport football kicked off the 1950s with back-to-back 2-4 seasons. The offense found an identity, getting past the scoreless games of the past. The only time Brockport failed to score a point was the season opener in 1950 at tough Alfred, where Brockport lost 33-0. The rest of 1950 saw close victories over Mansfield at home 13-12, and Hartwick at home 6-0, fine retribution for the loss and tie of years past to them. Nonetheless, that black cloud would strike, as Brockport also suffered a close loss at Ithaca, 14-18. Brockport would suffer defeats at the hands of Clarion (6-22) and Edinboro (14-42) as well, both those contests held on the road. 1951 saw Brockport deliver a fine shutout win in the home opener over Ithaca 19-0, this following a close loss to a good Alfred team 6-13. Brockport would follow the Ithaca win up with three straight losses, first at Mansfield 7-14, then to Clarion 20-25, and finally to rival Cortland 13-35. The team would finish that year with another home win however, avenging the previous year's blowout loss to Edinboro with a convincing win themselves, 27-7.<sup>25</sup>

The team regressed over the next two forgettable seasons, going winless and scoring a mere 36 points while allowing the opposition to compile an astonishing 338 points over ten games. Had the restrictions of Tuttle's athletic program not been in place, and Boozer been able to recruit players, the team could have avoided these poor seasons, but since the restrictions were in place, the program suffered by. The team went 0-3-1 in 1952, the tie coming in a scoreless

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

game at Ithaca, and suffering crushing defeats at the hands of tough Alfred (6-52), Clarion (6-26), and Cortland (6-52). 1953 was no better, with the team going 0-6. The only close contest was a 4-12 loss to Ithaca at home. The rest of the season were losses by a wide margins to Alfred (0-39), Southern Connecticut (0-18), Clarion (7-51), Cortland (0-62), and Edinboro (7-33).<sup>26</sup>

During the next two years, Brockport saw some increased success for its football team. Brockport still was no match for the powerhouse squad from Alfred, losing the 1954 season opener on road, 26-0. Things would quickly turn around, as Brockport won its next two games, both on the road, by beating the University of Buffalo 19-6 (UB would not join the ranks of Division One until decades later), and Edinboro 21-12. Prospects began to look good for Brockport's first winning season as they climbed to 2-1. The black cloud still lingered however, as the next two contests came to draws, the games played against Rival Cortland at home (12-12), and Ithaca on the road (0-0). At 2-1-2, Brockport needed just one more win to secure its first winning season. It would not come at Southern Connecticut, with Brockport losing 14-26 and falling to 2-2-2.<sup>27</sup> Brockport appeared set to secure that winning season against Clarion at home the next week, up 28-27 with time ticking away in regulation and Clarion still far from the end zone. However, on the last play Clarion's kicker managed to hit a 48-yard field goal as time expired and thus foiled Brockport's hopes for a winning season, as the 28-30 loss set them back to 2-3-2.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this heartbreaking season lingered in the minds of the players next year, as the team was not as successful in 1955, going 2-5 including four major shutout losses to tough Alfred by 50, University of Buffalo and Southern Connecticut by 26, and rival Cortland by 32. The other loss came in a 27-7 drubbing at the hands of Clarion. Brockport did salvage the year somewhat however, by picking up a pair of victories. One victory came at the expense of Edinboro 19-6, the other, Ithaca by a score of 21-6.<sup>29</sup>

1956 saw the most promising start to a season that Brockport football had ever seen. Brockport started its eight-game schedule with four straight wins! Brockport kicked off the season trouncing Montclair at home with a 32-7 victory. Next they traveled to Mansfield and earned a hard fought 14-0 victory. Brockport returned home to battle Clarion, earning a close

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Boozer, Leslie interview.

<sup>29</sup> "SUNY Brockport Football Results 1947-1988".

12-7 victory. Brockport finished off the stretch by traveling to Edinboro and beating the Fighting Scots 21-13.<sup>30</sup> At 4-0, Brockport had secured a non-losing season, seemingly set themselves up for a winning season at last, and seemed on its way to great things, or so the players thought. Players from the time admittedly were excited and expecting great things, but the coaches, Bob Boozer and his assistant Cliff Wilson, knew the hardest part of their schedule that year lay in the second half of the season. A player remembers Cliff Wilson putting his arm around him and saying “stay tough kid, its going to be rough from here on out.”<sup>31</sup> And it was. Brockport would only manage seven points the rest of the season on the way to four straight devastating losses. Rival Cortland dominated Brockport at home, 45-0. The next week Brockport traveled to Ithaca unsuccessfully, losing 7-19. Brockport then traveled to Southern Connecticut, only to be defeated 51-0.<sup>32</sup> At 4-3, Brockport returned home to take on an Alfred team that was undefeated that year, and all of the 1955 season as well.<sup>33</sup> Brockport was no match for the powerhouse, falling 27-0, dooming them to finish 4-4 after the fast start.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike the 1954 season when Brockport came within one win of a winning season, the team did not follow up 1956 with a down year. 1957 would be far from a down year for the Golden Eagles. Again, Brockport came out of the gates strong. They started the season traveling to Montclair and pulling out a victory, 20-7. They then returned home to take on Mansfield, and shut them out with a 26-0 victory. After their 2-0 start, Brockport was set to take on Slippery Rock.<sup>35</sup> Coach Boozer wanted to win this game immensely. Slippery Rock was Boozer’s alma mater. Unfortunately, about one third of the team got the flu that week. Slippery Rock got the flu the next, but by then it was too late. Brockport fell to Slippery Rock 12-2.<sup>36</sup> The next week Brockport traveled to hated Cortland, and battled them to a 0-0 tie. Boozer was proud of his players’ performance that day, as his linemen played the whole game, both offensively and defensively, and never gave in. Boozer does look back with a little regret on himself however, wondering if he had substituted more, might they have won the game?<sup>37</sup> Brockport then returned home to take on Ithaca, emerging victorious in a tight contest, 19-13.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Alumni of 1957.

<sup>32</sup> “SUNY Brockport Football Results 1947-1988.”

<sup>33</sup> Bruce Leslie and Gary Ostrower, “On the snowy road to a winning tradition”, *The Stylus*, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> “SUNY Brockport Football Results 1947-1988”.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Boozer, Leslie Interview.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

The next week featured another home contest, but this time a defeat for Brockport, losing to Lock Haven 27-7. This left Brockport with a 3-2-1 record, poised to claim their first winning season with just one game left, so long as they did not lose. One obstacle remained though, in the form of Alfred.<sup>38</sup>

Alfred had not suffered a losing season in many years. In fact, in 1957 they held the Lambert Cup and had been undefeated for two years. This year was a different story though. Coach Yunevich of the Alfred Purple Saxons had lost many starters from the previous year. Their record heading into this contest was 2-3-1, and they needed to win to avoid their first losing season in a long time; Brockport needed to avoid a loss to secure their first winning season ever.<sup>39</sup> Brockport and Alfred played in a blizzard in Alfred. Players remember Alfred's deep purple jerseys and note that they appeared as ghosts out there in the snow.<sup>40</sup> The game was truly a battle. The sub-freezing wintery conditions "made running the ball hazardous, passing the ball psychotic, and tackling an opponent while skidding on the slippery field an adventure."<sup>41</sup> Although both teams had a few scoring chances, neither team was able to punch the ball in. In the fourth quarter, the Eagles made a goal line stand to prevent the Saxons from scoring and probably winning. The Eagles drove 94-yards and seemed poised to claim a victory when they fumbled on the five-yard line, seemingly dooming the game to a tie with time running out. As time ticked away on what was to be the final play of the game, Alfred thought they could pull off a miracle to avoid their first losing season in 17 years. The Saxon quarterback Kehoe tried to brave the conditions and dropped back to pass in his own end zone. Kehoe met with Eagle defenders, who knocked the ball out of his hands. All-American tackle Leo Torre fell on the ball outside the back of the end zone securing a safety and two points for Brockport as time expired! In thrilling fashion, Brockport dethroned Alfred in a 2-0 victory to secure their first winning season.<sup>42</sup>

Boozar would not see another winning season in his final two years. The team went 3-4 in 1958, with victories at Lock Haven (6-0), versus Clarion (20-12), and a follow up of last year's close victory with a drubbing of Alfred at home 40-14. Brockport suffered losses at the hands of Mansfield on the road (6-7), Ithaca at home (8-22), Southern Connecticut on the road

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<sup>38</sup> "SUNY Brockport Football Results 1947-1988".

<sup>39</sup> Leslie and Ostrower, "On the snowy road to a winning tradition".

<sup>40</sup> Alumni of 1957.

<sup>41</sup> Leslie and Ostrower, "On the snowy road to a winning tradition".

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

(0-35), and Cortland at home (6-20). Boozer's final year as coach came in 1959, where the Eagles were an unspectacular 1-5-1. The lone victory was significant however, as for the first time Brockport beat their big rival Cortland on the road, 19-6. Coach Boozer then retired from coaching and turned the program over to his assistant Cliff Wilson. Wilson would not experience much success record wise, going just 3-26 in his four-year tenure as coach.<sup>43</sup> However, Wilson did write a book with Michigan State head Coach Duff Daugherty entitled *First and Ten*, designed to instruct the game of football. The book gave tips on how to teach effectively the ins and outs of the game of football, though it had nothing to do with the Brockport team.

Bob Boozer left a legacy still felt on campus today. Brockport named the football field after him, "Bob Boozer Field". At Homecoming 2010, Brockport renamed the whole facility "Eunice Kennedy Shriver Stadium" in honor of her work when Brockport hosted the Special Olympics in the 1970s. The field however is still referred to as "Bob Boozer Field", and always will be remembered as such. Brockport even named the school mascot after Bob Boozer! Boozer's full name is Robert Ellsworth Boozer. His middle name became the namesake of the Eagle mascot, Ellsworth. The Golden Eagle became the school mascot when it won a vote in 1947, with Mustangs coming in second. The name Ellsworth for the mascot came later, when a Korean veteran named Bob Bloxsom designed the Eagle similar to how he looks today, and dubbed him Ellsworth. Boozer recalls this in his interview, but cannot recall who made the decision to dub the eagle Ellsworth. "It just grew out of something," he says.<sup>44</sup> Boozer was a beloved coach and professor whose impact and legacy clearly reached far beyond the football field, and meant much more than wins and losses.

Bob Boozer's Golden Eagle football team is the same team that takes the field today. The modern Golden Eagle football team got its start with Bob Boozer's 158 boys that took the field in 1947. Then as now, it was a major part of campus. The first official homecoming occurred in 1948. In 1956, the Stylus dubbed the football game the highlight of the day's festivities.<sup>45</sup> Today still, students and locals alike pack the stadium for homecoming, as well as other home football contests. Indeed, even though the stands may not always be full, no other

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<sup>43</sup> "SUNY Brockport Football Results 1947-1988".

<sup>44</sup> Boozer, Leslie Interview.

<sup>45</sup> Beth Ramsperger, "History of Homecoming 1948-2003", (College Archives, The College at Brockport, 2004), part II.

sport draws a larger crowd, the closest rival perhaps being the hockey team. The G.I.s demand for a football team back in 1947 clearly rings throughout the campus today, affecting the lives of current students and alumni alike.

The Brockport football team serves as a shining example of how global and national events impact a small college in ways that are small on a global or national scale, but very significant on a small, local scale. The end of World War II brought about the G.I. bill. The G.I. bill created an influx of veterans wanting to go to college. A large number of veterans enrolled at Brockport State Teachers College and demanded a football team. That football team still exists today, and its impact on this college is profound. From the name of the mascot to the homecoming parade, World War II sure had a major impact on the college at Brockport.

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