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Note: Over the course of the 2020 calendar year, the Office of the President received requests to review the honorific naming of Fielding H. Yost on the Yost Ice Arena. Pursuant to the published process for historical name reviews on university buildings, the President’s Advisory Committee on University History has reviewed the matter and conveyed to President Mark S. Schlissel a preliminary summary recommendation and historical analysis. This document is the preliminary summary recommendation and should be read in tandem with the historical analysis.

Pursuant to its process, the President’s Advisory Committee on University History is inviting interested U-M community members to submit feedback through June 7, 2021. Each feedback submission will be reviewed, and an overall summary of the community feedback will be shared with the president as part of the Committee’s final recommendation.
Report on the Fielding H. Yost Name on the Yost Ice Arena

President’s Advisory Committee on University History

Preliminary Summary Recommendation

Process:

Over the course of the calendar year 2020 the University President’s Office received requests for a review of the name Fielding H. Yost on the Yost Ice Arena. Following University procedures these requests were forwarded to the President’s Advisory Committee on University History for a preliminary review. The Committee recommended a full-scale review of the issue and, with permission of President Schlissel, conducted that review. One of these requests argued as follows:

The University of Michigan made a decision to name Yost Field House after Fielding Yost in 1923. Even at that time, Yost's racist beliefs were known; Yost's racist policies were enacted. In naming the Field House after Yost, the University chose to place one man’s contributions to football and to athletics above the profoundly deep and negative impact he had on people of color. When the University renamed Yost Field House to Yost Ice Arena in 1973, this University chose again to place one man’s contribution to football and athletics above humanity. Even as recently as 2017, this University named the ice rink after Red Berenson but chose to leave the arena named Yost Ice Arena. If this University decides to not rescind and remove Yost's name from Michigan's Ice Arena per my request made in 2020, I hope this University understands that it is, once again, choosing to place one man’s contributions to football and to athletics above humanity. I ask my alma mater to please not make the same choice again. It has been 97 years since the Field House was named. It has been 47 years since it was renamed. It has already been a long time. It is past time for us to tell the truth, to right a wrong. We can and should still be proud of our football and athletic program. We can and should still be proud of many of our traditions and our legacy. We can do all that and more without Fielding Yost's name on Michigan's Ice Arena. We should never stop striving to be better and to do better. Or, to quote Michigan's current football coach, "Better today than yesterday. Better tomorrow than today." Above all else, University of Michigan is an academic institution "focused on creating brighter futures (U- M website)." We, who are privileged to be members of this community, should be up-standers and not bystanders. We should be truth seekers and truth speakers, NOW and ALWAYS.

The President's Advisory Committee on University History is a group of historically oriented faculty and staff who work in a variety of disciplines across the campus. In
2016 President Schlissel asked us to consider whether and how questions about the appropriateness of named spaces on the campus might be discussed and in response we developed the set of principles that were promulgated in January of 2017. Those principles reflect the belief that we are all wedded to the University’s past with all that is uplifting and troubling within it and that we must understand and remember it. However, the principles also reflect that historical memory and historical commemoration are not the same thing. The naming of a building after a person goes beyond the simple acknowledgement of that person’s role in the University’s history. In the absence of a financial naming gift, University namings are called “honorific” for a reason. This is a major way that the University honors and commemorates a person. Questioning the decision to commemorate someone with a building name does not change or erase our history. It reconsiders a previous decision to commemorate someone in that history. For this reason, the Committee welcomes such requests for review from the University community and takes them seriously.

We post this Preliminary Summary Recommendation and the historical analysis in an attempt to collect feedback during an unusual year on the campus. Our process provides for this noting that “Where relevant and after appropriate consultation with the President, a broader, community outreach may be invited.” We will summarize responses both quantitatively and substantively and that summary will form a part of our final recommendation and report on this issue to President Schlissel. According to policy, the President has the authority to accept, reject, or modify any Committee recommendation for action. Any proposed name changes are subject to the ultimate authority of the Regents, as explicated in the Policy for Naming Facilities, Spaces and Streets as most recently updated in January 2020.

Summary of the Case:

This section summarizes a rigorous historical analysis and should be read in tandem with that analysis.

Fielding H. Yost was appointed Michigan’s football coach in 1901 and served in that position for 25 seasons, 1901-1923 and 1925-1926. In 1921 he assumed further responsibilities as athletic director. He was a very successful coach, leading the team to famous victories and seasons. For a time he was probably the best known figure on the Michigan campus both locally and nationally. Upon becoming athletic director, in cooperation with the Board in Control of university athletics he launched a major building program of facilities that would improve opportunities for both male and female athletes on the campus. The first product of this program was the Field House. Based in part on a campaign launched by the *Michigan Daily* the Regents voted to name the Field House after him in 1923. Shortly thereafter, he began the lobbying and approval process for a new football stadium which was opened in 1927 as our now familiar...
Michigan Stadium. He continued as athletic director until 1941 and died in Ann Arbor in 1946.

Our historical analysis that is posted with this summary pays full attention to Fielding Yost’s accomplishments, but also reviews his record of upholding the so-called “gentleman’s agreement” to keep football for whites only and, in particular to accede to the racist demands of southern schools that integrated teams bench their Black players in inter-sectional games. The most controversial action in his career in these respects was the benching of star football player Willis Ward in response to the racist demand of Georgia Tech that he do so in a game played in Michigan Stadium in 1934. While we acknowledge that Yost had both successes and failures in his career, our historical analysis suggests to us that the benching of Ward was not an aberration but rather epitomized a long series of actions that worked against the integration of sports on campus. The administration of the University as a whole failed to intervene in most of Yost’s decision-making and failed themselves to uphold the goal of racial equality elsewhere on campus. However, in the area of athletic events and policies Yost clearly reigned supreme and so must take responsibility for all failures there just as he has received the credit for his success until now.

We believe that the historical analysis we present reveals the following:

That during the time that Yost was coach and athletic director not a single Black student athlete lettered on the football team except the outstanding Willis Ward who joined the team from Detroit in 1931 and earned his first "M" in 1932.

That throughout the years 1901 through 1932 Yost upheld the so-called “gentleman’s agreement” to keep football for “whites only” and endorsed the view that football was an Anglo Saxon sport at a time when that identification carried powerful racial messages.

That this racial segregation of football was going on at a time when both the State of Michigan and the University of Michigan were formally committed to complete racial equality and when racial attitudes on campus were changing thanks to the efforts of Black students and parents and their few white allies.

That well-intentioned University alumni and some Regents were well aware that a “color line” was being maintained in Michigan football and worked to recruit the outstanding scholar and athlete, Willis Ward, to break that color line.

That the decision to schedule a game with Georgia Tech was undertaken by Yost in full knowledge of the racist demands to bench Ward – by then a nationally known leader of the Michigan team -- that would follow and at a time when the tide of public opinion was shifting against northern universities acceding to racist southern demands. His absolute refusal to answer questions about the benching of Ward for many months after the game was scheduled is clear evidence that he was aware of what the decision required.

That the benching severely damaged many undergraduate students, including, first, Ward himself who experienced the immediate indignity of the action and felt it
undermined his competitive spirit in other areas. But other damaged students included the members of the football team (which happened to include Ward friend and future President Gerald Ford) who were outraged and demoralized by the decision, and the student leaders of the protests against the benching who were shamefully expelled later based in part on an on-campus investigation by Pinkerton detectives who were hired by Yost and paid for by athletic department funds.

That in the wake of the benching controversy Yost revealed a complete failure to take responsibility for what happened, choosing instead to blame those who protested the decision. In a letter a few days after the game, he gave a literary sigh of relief that there had been no disruptions of the game by “the colored organization and local radical students,” and opined, “the colored race must be in a bad situation judging from the number of national organizations that are organized to insure [sic.] racial equality or no racial discrimination.

Principles Applied and Preliminary Recommendation:

Our principles and process reflect that change in a duly authorized honorific name of a building or portion of a building on the campus should be unusual, but that such change is certainly possible in light of information unavailable or underutilized at the time the name was chosen or since. We have written before that the names on our buildings constitute a “moral map” of our institution and should enshrine the values that we uphold. En route to our recommendations we have we have reflected on our research and our commission and responsibilities as well as the principles to which we direct the attention of those who ask us to consider a named University space. In this matter the following principles were particularly salient to our preliminary recommendation:

The Principle of Pedagogy: “As an institution of learning our naming process and outcome should always be an opportunity for learning, about our past, about path breaking contributions by our faculty, the distinguished lives of alumni, extraordinary acts of generosity, or important contributions to administrative leadership.”

In essence, what lesson does this name teach today?

The Principle of Historical and Institutional Context: “It is easy to blame those in the past for lacking the knowledge, wisdom and values that we seem to possess. Keeping in mind that we will likely suffer the same fate at the hands of those who come after us, it behooves us to understand that it is impossible to hold someone accountable for failing to share our contemporary ideas and values. Instead, the question must be what ideas, values, and actions were possible in a particular historical context.”

In essence, were there those at the time who questioned the actions we describe?
The Principle of Contemporary Effect: “Honorifics given at one time can have significantly different effects on community members at another and these too are worthy of consideration.”

In essence, does this name carry a different valence today than it did when it was selected in 1923?

We have investigated the content of Fielding Yost’s work, the trajectory of his life and career, his role as football coach and athletic director, and the most recent findings of historians on the history of his period. We received research help from archival staff at the Bentley Historical Library and conducted lengthy discussions of these issues in the committee.

Based on the findings of our historical analysis and reflection on our principles, we recommend unanimously that the name of Fielding H. Yost be removed from the Yost Ice Arena. Further, we recommend that all existing accounts of his career on campus include the information about his role in the benching of Willis Ward. We believe it fair that memorials to his accomplishments – as a coach, and the leader of the effort to build Michigan Stadium, etc. be maintained, but with the above information included. We furthermore recommend that more detailed biographical information about Willis Ward be made available to the campus generally and in the Willis Ward Lounge in the Michigan Union.

When the Regents declared in 1870 that the University was open to “any person who possesses the requisite literary and moral qualifications,” they meant to remove all barriers to admission based on non-academic background factors and so set a very high aspiration for the institution. The University has not always met this aspiration, but in our time, it has firmly and decisively rejected in principle the racist value system of Yost’s time. Part of this rejection must include historical reckoning. This is hard and controversial work. But without this reckoning the path forward is obscured.

Some who read this report will wonder if we are “blaming” Yost for simply being a “man of his time.” We reject this view because our historical analysis reveals that Yost – and others at the University in his day – had choices to make and evidence from their own times indicating the right ones. In those very dark days in American racial history outlined here there were men and women in the state of Michigan, on the campus of the University of Michigan, among Black students and parents, among white allies, among undergraduate football players and protest leaders who refused to uphold the racist decisions and institutions managed by the “men of their time.”