

1. The Early Years

Bert Bell was born in his family's center city Philadelphia home on February 25, 1893, with a silver spoon in his mouth and a soon-to-be hatred for his given baptismal name, de Benneville.

The younger of two sons of John C. Bell and Fleurette de Benneville Myers, Bell once said that 90 percent of his friends never knew him by the name that he detested—a name bestowed on him in honor of his mother's ancestors, who were members of one of the wealthiest, most influential families in the Philadelphia area.

Bert Bell grew up “amid such turn of the century wealth and power that it took John O'Hara more than a dozen books to completely describe it,” wrote Phil Musick in *PRO!* magazine. “He had a nanny when he was 2, a pony when he was 6, a tux when he was 12, and a Marmon roadster when he was 17.”

“If I can lick the name of de Benneville, I can handle anything,” Bell's son Bert Jr. recalls his father frequently saying. Bert Bell wanted nothing to do with high society even though he enjoyed all the frills of such a privileged lifestyle. He was known to engage in fisticuffs with anyone who taunted him about his name.

“If you don't think I had to fight many times to get people to call me ‘Bert,’ then I must have dreamed of all those schoolyard battles,” Bell often said.

“Although he came from a proper conservative Republican family, Bert walked with a swagger as a kid and found a way in high school to talk out of the side of his mouth,” his son Upton remembers. “He didn't want to talk like all those proper jut-jawed, society people. He decided that everything he was going to do was in some ways completely different from the way they acted.”

Bert Bell's maternal grandfather, Leonard Myers, was a Civil War veteran and a member of Congress who participated in one of the “Great Debates in American History,” during which he strongly endorsed Secretary of State

William Seward's purchase of Alaska in 1867. Myers argued successfully that "if we did not acquire Alaska, it would be transferred to Great Britain." A prominent Philadelphia-area attorney, he was an intimate friend of U.S. presidents Abraham Lincoln and James A. Garfield. He lived in Attleboro, Pennsylvania, a town north of Philadelphia now known as Langhorne, where he died in 1905.

Bell's mother, Fleurette de Benneville Keim Myers, was the daughter of Leonard Myers and Hetty de Benneville Keim. A lineal descendant of Nicholas Keim (who migrated to the present city of Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1698) and a descendant of the de Bennevides of Colonial times, Fleurette grew up in the old Myers mansion in a section called Branchtown on York Road near La Salle University's campus in northwest Philadelphia. She and John C. Bell were married there in 1890. Fleurette became a noted bridge player. She died in 1916, about two years after the mansion was razed.

Adjacent to the mansion, at the corner of Green Lane, was the de Benneville Cemetery, where some 135 descendants of Dr. George de Benneville—including Leonard Myers—were buried. Dr. de Benneville, who died in 1793, was a distinguished physician and preacher who ministered to soldiers during the Revolutionary War. He acquired the 20-acre plantation and cemetery for his family in 1758, about 12 years after it was built on land owned by Thomas Nedro, a bitter Tory, who fled to England before the Revolution—never to return. According to legend, the remains of two British officers who were killed in the Battle of Germantown, Brigadier General Agnew and Lieutenant Colonel Bird, were also buried there.

Bert Bell's father, John C. Bell, was the first great end on the University of Pennsylvania's football team. He played from 1882 to 1884 and starred in the Quakers' first win over Harvard when he was a senior. A well-respected lawyer, he was district attorney of Philadelphia from 1903 to 1907 and Pennsylvania attorney general from 1911 until 1915. In the latter capacity, John C. Bell served under Governor John K. Tener, a former pitcher for Cap Anson's Chicago White Stockings who later became president of the National Baseball League.

During this time, John C. Bell became a Penn trustee for life, chairman of its powerful Athletic Association, and a member of the Intercollegiate Football Rules Committee, where he was next in seniority to Walter Camp. It was as a member of this committee that John C. Bell helped in the effort to rescue college football by forming the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1906 for the specific purpose of establishing safe football rules. President Theodore Roosevelt had warned the colleges that unless they accomplished this, he would have the sport abolished by an act

of Congress. John C. Bell, who had been featured on the cover of the 1898 *Spalding Guide*, a popular national football publication, died in 1935.

“Probably no two men in America contributed to the constructive science of the game than Messrs. Bell and Camp,” wrote Philadelphia sportswriter D. L. Reeves in 1919. “For years they were the leading figures in the annual conventions of the football rules committee. Both possessed and still retain a sound fundamental knowledge of the balance requisites of the sport and each was a forceful, fearless fighter for his convictions and each was fortified by a dominating personality. The rules ever will carry the imprint, knowledge, originality and resource of these two men.”

John C. Bell was once asked where his young son, de Benneville, would attend college. “He’ll go to Penn or he’ll go to Hell!” he bellowed.

Bert’s brother, John C. Jr., who was born in 1892, enjoyed outstanding careers in the worlds of tennis and politics. He reached the national doubles finals as one of the top-ten-ranked players in the nation five times between 1926 and 1936. He was elected Pennsylvania’s lieutenant governor in 1942. Five years later, he served as the commonwealth’s governor for 19 days—the shortest term in history—when Governor Edward Martin was elected to the U.S. Senate. In 1950, John C. Bell Jr. was appointed Pennsylvania Supreme Court justice and was elected to that position for a 21-year term in 1951. In 1961, he became chief justice of the court. John C. Bell Jr., who frequently assisted his brother as legal counsel during Bert’s tenure as NFL commissioner, died in 1975, three years after he retired.

Bert Bell’s earliest recollection of football was being taken to Penn games in 1899, when he was six years old, and learning to kick a football while serving unofficially as a little mascot on the sidelines. He was “arrayed in gridiron togs, head gear, trousers, cleated shoes, red sweater on which was a blue varsity ‘P’ as large as the sweater itself, with football tucked under his arm in charging position or trying to drop kick in which skill he is so expert today,” wrote Reeves in 1916.

Bell grew up in posh surroundings at a home where he was born at 334 South 24th Street, just below Delancey Street, in Center City Philadelphia and about a mile east of Penn’s campus located on the other side of the Schuylkill River. He first started playing football with boyhood friends in a nearby city square at 24th and Pine Streets. For practice, he would tackle the family butlers. “Watch out for little de Benneville,” his mother would warn the servants. “He’ll throw you for a loss if you’re not careful.”

Later, the Bell family moved to another spectacular three-story residence a few blocks away at 229 South 22nd Street, above Locust Street, near Rittenhouse Square.

Former Columbia football coach Lou Little, who was one of Bell's teammates and his closest friend at Penn, once shared his memories of Bell's boyhood homes, which also included a summer residence at Radnor on Philadelphia's Main Line that had 11 acres and a beautiful lake.

"For a fellow like me," Little told W. C. Heinz of *The Saturday Evening Post*, "that beautiful city home with the servants and everything was like walking into a hotel. And that summer home was like walking into a country club."

As a youngster, Bert Bell attended the most prestigious of schools—Episcopal Academy, the Delancey School, and The Haverford School, where he had the unique distinction of being captain of the football, basketball, and baseball teams in his senior year. He attended Episcopal Academy from September 1904 until he transferred to the Delancey School, in Center City Philadelphia, in June 1909.

Bell entered The Haverford School in 1911 as a 5-foot-6½-inch 139 pounder. He was far from being a model student, studying just hard enough to get by, retain his athletic eligibility, and get elected president of the executive committee of the Athletic Association in his senior year. But he also participated in a number of nonathletic extracurricular activities at Haverford, including the Dramatic Club, where he served as head usher, and recording secretary of the YMCA, which organized Bible study. He was elected class secretary for a year before graduating in 1914.

Under "Class Landmarks" in the school yearbook, Bell was listed as the "Best Kidder" and "Most Sarcastic" and was the subject of this profile:

Bert Bell is another famous athlete. Who has not seen or heard of Bert? Hero of countless football, baseball and basketball battles. Bert has the rather unique honor of being captain of three teams—football, baseball, and basketball. Seldom is any one man honored to this extent. Bert, besides being one of the best athletes in the history of the School, is very popular, and a fellow anyone might be proud to name as a classmate.

DeWitt Clinton, who graduated from The Haverford School two years ahead of Bell, once told Heinz, "I remember he was very much looked up to, even then. He had the qualities of leadership. He seemed so much more mature than the rest of us, and he used to swagger a little and talk out of the side of his mouth and try to shock us with the stories he told. I remember one day at breakfast he told us his father would give him \$50 if he'd have his nose that had been broken in a game, re-broken and reset. To the rest of us, that seemed like a lot of money then."

“The nose got straightened out in the next game,” Bell told Heinz. “Besides, I didn’t have to do that for 50 bucks. My father and mother gave me anything I ever asked for, and I was a pretty good asker.”

Years later, when Upton Bell was a student at Malvern Prep, he ran into a guy who knew his dad at Episcopal and Haverford. “Your father was so much older than the rest of the kids,” he told me. “He would swagger around school—we thought he was a college student—and athletically he seemed so much more mature than the other kids. We never knew what to believe.”

During his days at The Haverford School, Bell began dating a longtime childhood friend, Theodora Lillie, a young lady three years his junior who lived near the intersection of Buck Lane and Panmure Road in Haverford—not far from the Bell family’s summer home. The two teenagers shared an interest in sports—both were excellent golfers—and Bert took her to her first football game, featuring the Quakers, of course, at Franklin Field. Each youngster also owned an automobile, a rarity in those days.

“They were great buddies,” recalls Theodora’s daughter, Jean Wheeler Parsons, who lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. “He was her first boyfriend. She thought he was sweet and a lovely fellow. They probably dated for quite a few years. I don’t think they were sweethearts the way people are now. It’s a different world. They were boyfriend and girlfriend, but in those days it was not a passionate situation like it might be today. I think they were certainly very close.”

Although a number of his buddies at The Haverford School expressed the opinion that Bert Bell could have made the major leagues as a baseball player—he led the team with a .510 batting average as a senior—his true love was on the gridiron.

In the fall of 1914, a headline in the *Philadelphia North American* proclaimed, “BERT BELL ENTERS U. OF P.” For the Quakers, football would never be the same, especially since he would somehow end up playing *five* seasons for the Red and Blue, four of them on the varsity.