

**James Farrell Oral History Interview –JFK 1, 5/11/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** James Farrell

**Interviewer:** Bud Collins

**Date of Interview:** May 11, 1964

**Place of Interview:** Boston, Massachusetts

**Length:** 8 pages

**Biographical Note**

Farrell was in charge of athletic gear at Harvard University's Dillon Field House. In the interview Farrell discusses outfitting the Kennedy boys for sports, their athletic ability, and some personal stories about the Kennedy family, among other issues.

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**Suggested Citation**

James Farrell, recorded interview by Bud Collins, May 11, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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## James Farrell – JFK #1

### Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. playing football and rugby at Harvard University
2	Outfitting the Kennedy boys for sports from the Dillon Field House
2	John F. Kennedy's [JFK] athletic abilities
3	Touch football and the Kennedy Family
4	Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. injury during football scrimmage
5	Unique wedding gift Farrell sent to JFK and the response it received
5	Discussing the Kennedy boys with Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.
6	JFK expressing brotherly interest in Edward M. Kennedy's life at Harvard University
6	Indication of JFK wanting to become President
7	The special relationship between Farrell and the Kennedy boys

Oral History Interview

With

James Farrell

May 11, 1964

Boston, Massachusetts

By Bud Collins

For the John F. Kennedy Library

COLLINS: Jim, you go back to all the Kennedy boys. Could you tell us just about the first ones you met and something about these fellows?

FARRELL: Well, it started with Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] as a football player. When he came upon the scene, he wasn't what we would call a real athletic build. In other words, he was what we would call soft and built himself up into a pretty good athlete from just real honest-to-God hard work. He stayed out there longer than the other boys, after the other boys had got through, helping to make himself a football player. He was on the squad for four years, freshman and three solid years, and played rugby. He loved to play rugby. In those days, and it still is, an informal sport, but it was a spring sport. And right after football practice, we had pre-football practice in those days, he couldn't get out to the rugby field quick enough. Rugby is also a rough, tough game where you play with nothing but shorts and a shirt and a pair of shoes and no protection of any kind. You can really get beat up playing it.

[-1-]

COLLINS: Jim, you saw all the Kennedy boys come in there. What was your relationship with them as they came to the school? You outfitted them, did you?

FARRELL: Yes, the minute any boy goes out for athletics, regardless of Kennedys or any other boy, they have to come to Dillon Field House to the supply room counter to be outfitted to take part in any sport. All sports the same with the exception, of course, of crew and basketball that were up in the gym. But any outdoor sport, baseball, lacrosse, soccer, all those kinds of sports, they had to get outfitted from my counter in Dillon Field House. And all four Kennedy boys were among the thousands of boys that got outfitted through my department at Harvard. We started with Joe, then we came along to Jack [John F. Kennedy]. He played on the freshman squad for one season; he got outfitted the same as all the rest of the boys. Then, of course, along came Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy], and he was there during the war years. Even while Bobby was around during the war years, a little fellow named Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] used to come up to the counter with him. I think he was in Dexter School or something at that time. He'd visit with Bobby, and he'd go out and fool around with touch football and so forth. Then, of course, later on along came Teddy. I'm always proud of the fact that Teddy turned out so well. He turned out to be a good athlete and now has turned out to be, as far as I'm concerned, our greatest junior Senator.

COLLINS: Jim, we know that Jack only played one year of football and that he became a swimmer after that. But he did come down to visit you from time to time, I understand.

FARRELL: Oh, yes, when Jack arrived upon the scene, he didn't look much like an athlete. He was a big, tall stringbean. You could blow him over with a good breath. He also at times, of course, came down and played touch football, threw the ball around, got out there with Torby [Torbert H. Macdonald] and Ben [Benjamin A. Smith, II] and all the group to play touch football. Even at that time his little brother, Bobby, was out there with him. Of course,

[-2-]

after he left us, he went up to the gym and made the swimming team. He couldn't help that anyway because he did a lot of swimming down at Hyannis during the summer. It came natural to him because he did a lot of swimming. But as far as his football ability was concerned, he didn't have very much physique to be able to play that particular game. He tried; he tried, but the game, as far as I was concerned, was a little on the tough side for a fellow of Jack's build.

COLLINS: Touch football became quite a tradition with the Kennedy, didn't it?

FARRELL: It sure did.

COLLINS: They could play it in a rough manner, I guess, for a so-called touch game.

FARRELL: Well, they played it the same as they played everything else. They played everything for all it was worth. They bumped each other, and as I understand it, although I never saw it, they even bumped the girls when they played down in Hyannis Port. If the girls wanted to play touch, then they had to play it the same way. As far as I'm concerned, I would say the Kennedy family are the ones that started and made this touch football so popular, especially around Harvard, because they really played it for all it was worth.

COLLINS: How would you characterize them as football players? You seem to think Teddy was probably the best football player of the group.

FARRELL: Oh, yes. As far as I'm concerned, there's no question about it. Teddy developed into the best football player. Of course, the game was played a little different in Teddy's time from Joe's time. In Joe's time they were supposed to play sixty minutes of football, and by the time it came up to Teddy, why, there was the two platoon and so forth. It became specialist, and Teddy became a specialist in catching a pass. He loved to catch passes.

[-3-]

That's where your touch football practice comes in to the thing. They threw the ball around so much, and with all that practice, Teddy became quite an expert at catching passes.

COLLINS: Did the boys give any indication that they would go into politics after they were through with college? Was that...

FARRELL: Well, at that particular time...Of course, I wouldn't know what their intentions were after they got out of school. All I know is what they did when they were knocking around, around the field house and around the grounds there. They never talked, as near as I could see, about their future ambitions because all they were interested in was sports when they were down with me. That's all we knew, and that's we talked about, to be honest with you. Actually their enjoyments in life and pleasures in life and athletics in life was all I knew about them at that time when they were around the field.

COLLINS: Jim, you said once before that Joe seemed to play the game with his face; he would put his head in the way if he had to to make a block or a tackle; he was fearless even though his ability wasn't as great as some of the other players. Do you remember any incidents of him or the Kennedys' being hurt while playing?

FARRELL: Yes, in Joe's junior year he was playing in the last scrimmage of spring practice. He was playing end. Towards the end of that scrimmage he broke his collarbone. And that was kind of rough because that stopped him from being able to play one of his favorite sports, rugby, that

particular spring because of his broken collarbone. Other than that, why, I don't know. Of course, there were a lot of bumps and bruises, but I don't know of any one of the Kennedy boys being seriously hurt.

COLLINS: By the time Jack came along you were beginning to get used to the fact that there would always be another Kennedy coming along.

[-4-]

FARRELL: I looked forward to them. I looked forward to them and loved to see them. I had a wonderful association over a good period of years with the Kennedy boys.

COLLINS: Jim, you sent a rather unusual present to Jack's wedding. Would you tell us about that?

FARRELL: I was very honored and pleased to receive an invitation to Jack's wedding. I wasn't able to go. My wife replied that we wouldn't be able to go because it was to take place the first Saturday of the season. But previously to that, I sent him a wedding present consisting of a football, knowing that they would have some time to kill, his roommates and so forth. Maybe they'd be able to play a little tag while they were waiting for the wedding to take place. And I know that he was happy with it, receiving it, because in talking with Torby and Ben Smith at a football game previously, I asked how did the wedding go, and they said it was terrific. And to top it off, he said, "Boy, that football! That was the greatest wedding present that anybody every received."

COLLINS: Jim, did the father, Joseph Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], visit you and talk to you about his sons and their progress? Was he interested in athletics?

FARRELL: Oh, yes. Yes, he visited the field. One particular time, Bobby's last Yale game in New Haven, after the game was over, why, the father came into the locker building and spoke to me and Bobby and so forth. At the time he said to me he wondered if Bobby was any bother to me. And I told him yes, that Bobby was of more bother to me than all my money. And so Mr. Kennedy got quite a kick out of that. But he was very much interested in the success of his boys, especially in athletics. He, as I understand it, was an athlete himself in Harvard before my time. He was quite a baseball player. That was before my time so I don't know anything about the father's ability, but I do know that he played baseball at Harvard previous to me.

[-5-]



COLLINS: What are your memories of Jack after he finished his Harvard career and after he was out of the service? He came back to see you often, didn't he, Jim?

FARRELL: Well, I wouldn't say that he came to see me directly, but he did come back at different times to watch and see how Teddy was getting along, and different times he'd leave messages with me for me to forward to Ted because in those days Harvard's football practices were closed. Nobody was entitled to go in. And even Jack, as Senator, wouldn't break the rules. Therefore, if he had any messages he wanted to give Ted, he'd leave the message with me and I would give Ted the message after the practice was over. That just goes to show you what a fellow he was; he didn't break any rules even if he was in a position that he could.

COLLINS: He would discuss the teams with you. Did he still maintain an attachment and intensity?

FARRELL: Oh, he has a lot of interest in it and a great deal of interest in it, of course, because at that time Teddy was playing. As far as I was concerned, the Kennedy's were a close knit family. They were interested in each other and how each other was doing. And I thought that was terrific because I've had a close knit family myself all along the line. All my brothers, we were all close knitted. And the Kennedy family reminded me of my family; they were so close knitted.

COLLINS: Was there any indication before he was actually elected President....Did you hear of anything or know anything that Jack thought he might become President or wanted to become President?

FARRELL: Yes, there was an incident where Timmy Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.] has his boy visiting Harvard in which I was talking with the boy. The boy was very much interested in Notre Dame, talking Notre Dame, and I was somewhat surprised, his father being quite a Harvard athlete, that he should be so much interested in Notre Dame. And in talking

[-6-]

with the boy, the boy told me about an incident, and the father said so at the same time, where they were playing, as usual, tag football, down at Washington, and after they got through playing, they were a little tired out...

COLLINS: This is the Kennedys who were playing tag football?

FARRELL: This is the Kennedys and Reardon, Teddy's father, Timmy's father and the young Reardon. After they got tired out and they were all through....Apparently they were playing around with young Reardon's

ball, and he asked Jack to sign it. So Jack put down “NP.” And young Reardon, that was Notre Dame minded at the time, said, “No, no. Not NP. ND, Notre Dame.” And Jack said, “Oh, no. Oh, no. NP, Next President.”

COLLINS: When he was still a senator?

FARRELL: When he was still a senator.

COLLINS: Now, he sent you a copy of the book that he wrote, Why England Slept. You were one of the first people at Harvard to get this book, and you felt honored by it. Why do you think you were so close to Jack and the other Kennedys?

FARRELL: Well, you see, you couldn't help it because the average boy coming to Harvard and taking part in sports, especially sports where there is contact, gets bumped and bruised. Over a period of years, especially on the football field, I was out there when they'd get hurt; I was out there when they were moaning and they were groaning. People in the stands don't realize what actually goes on on that football field. So when you get down close to it, I was closer to the individual boy than the coaches, or even the doctors, because I was right on top of them when they got hurt. I was there before the doctor got there, and I helped them off the field with the doctor. Therefore, I just couldn't help being close to them. They went out to play the game, and I individually fit their helmet; I fitted their shoulder

[-7-]

pads; I fitted their hip and kidney pads. And I helped put their clothes on them properly so they wouldn't get hurt because you're apt to get hurt playing football and get bruised and bumped. Being so close to them and giving them such individual attention, I just couldn't help but be close to them.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-8-]

James Farrell Oral History Transcript – JFK #1  
Name List

**K**

Kennedy, Edward M. 2, 3, 4, 6  
Kennedy, John F. 2, 4, 5, 6, 7  
Kennedy, Joseph P., Jr. 1, 2, 3, 4  
Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr. 5  
Kennedy, Robert F. 2, 5

**M**

Macdonald, Torbert H. 2, 5

**R**

Reardon, Timothy J., Jr. 6, 7

**S**

Smith, Benjamin A., II 2, 5