

Book Review of *Coach for a Nation: The Life and Times of Knute Rockne*

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Coach for a Nation: The Life and Times of Knute Rockne by Jim Lefebvre (2013), Great Day Press, pp. 503.

I was stunned by this book. I never knew the full history of Knute Rockne even though I graduated from Notre Dame, was a nephew of Dr. Mike Nigro, a roommate of Knute as a student. I was a regular visitor to Bonnie Rockne's home when my uncle visited for a game. I heard story after story at Rockne's home and with the Rockne children when they visited my uncle in Kansas City and other places. This book tells an amazing story – a story not just about a great football coach, but the details of the extent to which he impacted college life and sports life beyond that of the game of football itself.

The book is an amazing picture of America from the 1900s to 1931 when Knute died at age 43. He played left end from 1910 – 1913; he was assistant coach and head coach from 1923 through 1930. The significant events of the world described chronologically as Rockne's story is told. This adds not only the national but international flavor to the story. Not at all inappropriate as one reads of the impact of Rockne on American and international life.

This may surprise you, but one has to remember that there was no electrono-celluloid communication technology. Newspapers were very limited and news was always local rather than national. But somehow as Western Union and radio communications became available, newspapers picked up on whatever was of interest. And the small Catholic school in northern Indiana was doing things on the football field which startled and enchanted anyone interested in sports. Football became not just a sport, but part of academic life to instill qualities of earnest competition and intelligence and success. Every college and group of men were putting together football teams and playing. Bigger schools, of course, had the bigger players. But there were no rules and regulations of any significance and the field was wide open to play whoever wanted to play you. The thrill of winning according to a winning team became a national fixation. Ivy league founders of football reveled in press coverage even when the sophisticated skill elements of Notre Dame surpassed them. Even though simple jealousies and flagrant anti-Catholicism reared their ugly heads, Notre Dame became the headline and idol of the country. Circumstances of the depression and war made Notre Dame a pleasant interest and an escape.

Opinion

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