

The Life Story of the Greatest Football Coach

*Jack Fullen Reviews
Biography by Rockne's
Friend from Bellaire*

KNUTE ROCKNE by Francis Wallace.
Doubleday & Co., 1960. Pp. 288, \$3.95.



Francis Wallace

FRANCIS WALLACE was born in Bellaire and lives there now after years in New York as newspaperman and magazine writer. He is the author of fifteen books, ten of them with football backgrounds, of which the best known is *Kid Gallahad*.

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THE HUMAN meteor which was Knute Rockne flashes across the skies again in a biography which recaptures his image in all the pathos (and bathos) of the

career of this greatest of all football coaches. Rockne's tragic death in an airplane crash in 1931 brought condolences from presidents and kings and shocked 125 million hero-worshipping Americans.

This account is written with a blend of sensitivity and brutal frankness by Francis Wallace who, in Atomic Age parlance, confesses to be "a camera in the tail of the Rockne comet." Well known football writer Wallace, Notre Dame's first full-time publicity man (by Rockne's appointment), hated him sometimes and loved him much during their long and intimate association. Yet, all in all, this book is a reverential treatment of a Norwegian immigrant who was more bewildered than arrogant about his glory. Rockne, as Wallace puts it, "was always running away from his fame and ahead of his applause." And no wonder he received both—in thirteen years as head coach at Notre Dame he put together a string of 105 victories against only 12 defeats and 5 ties.

Walter Eckersall unwittingly put young Rockne on his dream boat when as a lad young Knute saw the great Chicago immortal play in high school. From then on Rockne entered any contest with his Logan Square playmates with roughneck zeal in a milieu where fist and brawn and wit were the tools of status. Only five feet, eight inches tall, spindly and with a nose mashed by a baseball bat, young Ka-nute, as his family called him, wound up playing professional football against the great Jim Thorpe.

His father was a machinist, a solid man and a disciplinarian. His mother roped Ka-nute and his two sisters together as they came off the boat from Europe. Underprivilege was his, but not of the imagination. College waited for years while Rockne worked as a mail dispatcher until he had saved \$1,000. He ran while he worked and read when he rested—and avidly—the hardest books he could find. He had no high school diploma when he applied at Notre Dame but passed a tough entrance examination creditably. He turned out to be a star student in pharmacy, headed for medicine. But the M.D. never came; instead, it was N.D. all the way, first as assistant coach and then as head coach and athletic director. He built the stadium and gave impetus to the fighting spirit that was and is Notre Dame. "Nobody smiled on the campus the week following the first loss in twenty games." A Lutheran and a Mason, he finally joined the Catholic church when he saw "what mass and a spiritual attitude did for my teams."

Everything Rockne read and observed and touched was grist for his grind. Rockne was "a football complex, a bundle of instincts and conscious states governed by the urge to turn out football players and football teams." Wallace might have added "and to win, win, win." Rockne hated to lose, even an argument. He was a perfectionist, hungry for competition. He would take on his closest friends (especially Wallace) as verbal sparring partners. He mingled "chips of scorn with barbs of humor" for friends and foes alike. He never had any disciplinary problems with his players, they were "happy to stay even" for his scorn was always a monumental set-back. One player, who

had the temerity to talk back and reacted with hurt pride for weeks, finally begged to be put into the line-up. "I'm saving you for the junior prom," said Rock, but he put him in. Everybody called him "Rock." Butch Niemiec, a star player, recalls, "You had to, he was so intimate."

Wallace remarks that Rock could handle Khrushchev. "He could out talk, out think, out fight, out stare, out shout, out act and, if necessary, out finagle him. He could best him, brush him off and send him home reasonably happy about things."

Gipp Passed

Once, when the immortal Gipp was declared ineligible by the faculty—whom Rockne always distrusted—the coach persuaded President Cavanaugh "to give him a test right now without any preparation. He'll pass it." The good father did and Gipp did.

As a student, Rockne played the flute, acted in plays. Later he captivated audiences from coast to coast with his speech making. Westbrook Pegler termed him "a battered old oil can, giving off champagne," and Grantland Rice declared he was the only man who dared to follow the matchless orator, Jimmy Walker, to the speaker's platform.

Wallace believes that Rockne had no "grand design" for success; he ad libbed day by day, doing a matchless job with rare intuition. He could be "ruthless and cruel in the heat of battle and in calmer moments even petty." Yet man after man whom he coached and with whom he worked has nothing but generous and reverent memories of him. (There is a saying that we are all more loved for our imperfections than for our perfections.)

You will find lots of "schmaltz" in the

book, for football coaches and their followers can cry quicker than laugh and cheer over the game. Alumnus Wallace does all right by his Alma Mater, too. Because of its many insights into the university, the book could be called "Notre Dame and Knute Rockne" or vice versa. The immortal Gipp, the Four Horsemen and the "Big Ones" are all there.

Wallace leaves it to Father O'Donnell, poet president of the institution, to sum

up the great Knute in his funeral memorial service of thirty years ago. "Knute Rockne is dead. And who was Knute Rockne? Ask the president of the United States who sent a personal message of tribute; ask the King of Norway who has sent a special delegation; ask 125 million Americans and the boys of our country. Knute Rockne was not so much a 'go-getter' as a 'go-giver.' He cast away to keep, and he lost his life to find it."

Salute

To Martha Kinney Cooper
Founder of The Ohioana Library

Now let men speak of this atomic age
with awe, or fear, or pride—or with all three . . .

There is a force that moulds our destiny
and keeps the record on the printed page;
and lights or darkens all the world's mad stage;
and is as match to fuse through history:
the garnered words that are as mystery
of bread and wine for dreamer or for sage.

And one who houses these explosive seeds
will bring to blossom flowers of verity,
where freemen pray and write and read in peace.
Salute! Compiler of Ohio's deeds
and dreams, who had the love and wit to see
that only cherished words bring men release.

—Annette Patton Cornell

From Five Poems for Martha by Mrs. Cornell, a Cincinnati poet. A Talaria book (1960) with a drawing by Caroline Williams. The five poems are all addressed to Martha Kinney Cooper. "Salute" was first published in the *Cincinnati Times Star*.