

# GOPHERS GROUND ILLINI

By Dick Parker

In 1936 the Associated Press began conducting an annual media poll to select college football's national championship team. For the seasons before 1936 we have several rating systems that originated in the mid-1920s and 1930s, and many of them did a certain amount of retroactive rankings for seasons prior to their founding. For the 1923 season, Coach Bob Zuppke's eleventh squad at Illinois has been anointed the country's top college team by the rating systems of the Helms Athletic Foundation, Parke Davis, and William Board. Interestingly, the 1923 rankings of Deke Houlgate placed California as the country's top team; while Yale and Cornell in the East, each with an unblemished record, received no title mention.

The Illinois team of 1923 was led by sophomore halfback sensation Harold "Red" Grange, along with strong supporting backfield mates Earl Britton and Wally McIlwain, as well as Captain Jim McMillen at guard. Red, from Wheaton, Illinois (he was born in Forksville, Pa.), got off to an auspicious varsity start as he scored three times in a 24-7 win over a good Nebraska team which, four games later, handed Knute Rockne's Notre Dame squad its only loss of the season. With solid line play and excellent blocking from McIlwain and Britton, Grange scored nine more touchdowns in his team's following seven victories, to complete the perfect season.

Grange's ball carrying wizardry totally captured the sports world's attention as few performers had done before or since. With All-America recognition being all but unanimous from the selecting bodies of the day, the University of Michigan's school newspaper,

The Michigan Daily, didn't regard Red's extraordinary season as deserving of any better than its Second Team. Such disparagement would not be forgotten when the conference foes were to meet the following year.

Expectations for Illinois' 1924 campaign were understandably high indeed, with the return of Grange and 18 other letter winners. The schedule began with a squeaker win (9-6) over Nebraska at Lincoln, followed by a 40-0 "tune-up" win over Butler in the first game played at Illinois new Memorial Stadium. Next up was the game, about which some college football history buffs have probably become a bit weary of reading continuous retellings, impressive though it was. Suffice it to observe that Illinois beat a favored Michigan team 39-14 with the "Galloping Ghost" scoring five times and gaining 402 yards in the onslaught, thus certifying his legend. Michigan had not lost since its Homecoming game against Ohio State in 1921, and its 1924 captain, Herb Steger, had never played in a losing game going back to his prep days at Oak Park, Illinois.

Following the carnage of the Michigan game, Illinois notched two one-sided shutout wins before venturing to Chicago to play Coach A. A. Stagg's very able Maroons. In a very physical contest that tested the Illini totally, they salvaged a hard-fought 21-21 tie, with Grange scoring three times. This game is on the books as one of the top three games in Red's fabled college career. The third big game would come in 1925 against Pennsylvania, which gave college football's eastern establishment the validation it sought for Red's remarkable skills. The 1924 Chicago-Illinois game also produced a notable footnote in Maroon grid history. One of the three Chicago players to score a TD in the Illinois game was fullback Austin McCarty, who also averaged about five yards per carry that day against the Illini defense. His yeoman performance earned the former Hyde Park High (Chicago) star the lifelong title of Austin "Five-Yards" McCarty.

Following the physical pounding in the Chicago encounter, Illinois had to travel to Minnesota for the dedication game of the Gophers' new Memorial Stadium. Minnesota had not been impressive up to this point in 1924, having defeated two non-conference teams to start the season, followed by a 7-7 tie with Wisconsin, 13-0 losses to Iowa and Michigan, and then another 7-7 deadlock with Iowa State. But Minnesota coach Bill Spaulding (who would realize greater success and admiration at UCLA between 1925 and 1938), was in his third and final season and he had his team ready for favored Illinois.

On November 15, 1924 in Minneapolis, a previously little known grid hero emerged with a Grange-like performance of his own for Minnesota against the Illini. His name was Clarence Schutte (pronounced "Shootee"). He had come to Minnesota from his native South Dakota and played basketball as well as football, was on the track team, and while no bigger than 5'10" and 168 pounds; was tough enough to be the school's heavyweight boxing champ. A rough and formidable competitor for sure!

On Schutte's record-setting day against Illinois in 1924, he scored all three touchdowns for the Gophers and rushed for 282 yards on 32 carries - a single game best that held up until October 1995 when Chris Darkins totaled 294 yards against Purdue. Schutte was given the tag of "The

Man Who Stopped Grange”, and since he played the entire contest, certainly contributed much to the stifling Minnesota defense.

Grange scored the game’s first touchdown, but following that the Gophers dominated play and went on to win 20-7. In fairness, the Gophers’ line, led by towering captain and tackle Ted Cox, along with center Conrad Cooper (later to serve with distinction in the nation’s space program), were the quickest forces to take Grange out of his game. This was literal as well as actual, since Red had to leave the game for good after a third period shoulder injury, and up to that point his efforts were dramatically being stymied by the keyed-up Gophers. When contacted at his Florida retirement home in later years, Red was to say, “it has been quite awhile and I don’t remember many of the details except that Minnesota beat the hell out of us.” The loss to Minnesota cost Illinois a likely conference championship in 1924, but also an opportunity to play the Ernie Nevers-led Stanford team in the 1925 Rose Bowl That role was eventually filled by Notre Dame and its also-legendary “Four Horsemen” in a 27-10 win.

Clarence Schutte, upon leaving Minnesota, went on to take over the coaching reins at Santa Barbara High School in California. His coaching record became one of the most respected in high school annals, compiling 173 victories, 45 losses and 12 ties. One of his finest players was baseball’s future Hall of Famer, Eddie Mathews, who was very gracious in agreeing to talk on the telephone this past Fall. I asked Eddie for his recollections about playing football for Coach Schutte, and he was quick to respond that his old coach was a tough guy, but also a fair guy. Eddie added that Coach Schutte, who passed away in 1970 at the age of 69, played a major role in shaping his attitudes about sports, competition and life altogether. It was a fond remembrance, and one I was personally grateful to hear first hand from the former Santa Barbara and Milwaukee Braves star athlete.