

# Book Reviews

Cross, George Lynn. *Presidents Can't Punt: The OU Football Tradition*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977. Pp. xv, + 384. Index, illustrations. \$9.95

A half-century ago the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching published its three year study on *American College Athletics* and stated that college presidents and faculties have "the responsibility to bring athletics into a sincere relation to the intellectual life of the college. . . ." (p. xxi) George L. Cross, president of Oklahoma University (1943-1968) and author of *President's Can't Punt*, might publicly agree. When President Cross once failed to firmly recommend policy to his Board of Regents regarding the place of athletics in the University, he realized that:

a university president cannot punt, cannot pass problems to someone else. He must run with the ball and try not to fumble it (p. 48).

Though Cross states it, there is strong evidence within his book that college presidents have much less control over intercollegiate athletics, especially football, than Cross or critics have implied or claimed. President Cross is a recent example of a century-long phenomenon in which an educational leader never strayed far from the will of his boss, the Board of Regents, when athletic policy or decisions were being discussed.

While the educational historian or sport historian would most likely be interested in various influences on the development of sport in the college, *Presidents Can't Punt* is designed to capture a wider reading audience than those interested in institutional history. Cross has striven to tell a story with which Oklahomans and football fans can relate. Wins and losses, mostly wins, dominate the pages, and coaches, especially Bud Wilkinson (145 wins, 29 losses, 4 ties), dominate those wins. Yet, the volume is significant for the insight which can be gained into the political machinations of a university involved in big-time athletics.

The theme which Cross tries to carry through this work is that as president of Oklahoma University his leadership helped create a viable football team which helped give prestige to the University and pride to all

Oklahomans who had a negative “Grapes of Wrath” image resulting from the 1930’s Depression. His evidence, though, indicates that the other power groups, such as the Board of Regents and the Touchdown Club, gave far more direction to a winning football team than did the president. The president, in fact, often gives up the ball by sometimes punting, occasionally fumbling, at times being intercepted, or periodically having a play called which was not of his own choosing. He is too often playing defense and unable to score. He still wins most of his games, but not always in the manner he deems best for his institution.

The president is often caught in a struggle between what is best for his educational institution and what is best for the football team. In the struggle the Oklahoma University faculty is mentioned only once—the Board of Regents is continuously involved. It is obvious that the president must make peace with his boss, the Regents, if he is to retain his position. With political expediency foremost, and political savvy ever present, Cross shows how he survived the questions of: the possibility of telecasting of Oklahoma football games by the Oklahoma Democratic Party; the distribution of football tickets to state legislators; the granting of the football concessions under political pressure; the problem of skirting NCAA rules to allow post-season football game for the benefit of the United States Olympic fund for Cold War purposes; the overturning of the Board of Regents’ ruling on the banning of freshman cars from the campus through pressure from coach Wilkinson; the reoccurring probationary status for Oklahoma University by the NCAA for cash gifts to athletes, holiday junkets, and betting on games; the removal of athletic control from outside the University to within the University; and the choosing of coaches by the Regents.

The relationship of the Board of Regents to the head football coach indicates that football at Oklahoma was one of the post-World War II forces which dominated the University. When Bud Wilkinson won the 1948 Conference championship and the post-season Sugar Bowl game, the Board of Regents gave him a five year contract raising his salary to \$15,000, granted him a separate appointment as athletic director, and made him a professor of physical education. They found that in so doing, Wilkinson’s salary was above that of the president of the University. The Regents immediately went into executive session and raised Cross’ salary to \$16,000. Wilkinson, three years later, resigned to go into private business, but the president talked him out of it. A decade following, his second resignation was accepted when he decided to run for the United States Senate in 1963. His successor was the long time assistant under Wilkinson, Gomer Jones. By this time President Cross was out of favor with a number of the Regents, and so they essentially by-passed Cross in making their selection of Jones. By doing this, Coach Jones became the

only employee of the University to hold a contract signed by the president of the Board of Regents. Jones resigned under Touchdown Club pressure after one year in which he only won three games. Cross recounts how Oklahoma then attempted to sign Darrell Royal of the University of Texas for six years at \$32,000 at a time when Cross had reliable information that Royal was making about \$50,000 yearly at Texas. Royal declined the offer, and Jim Mackenzie was chosen. After one year Mackenzie died of a heart attack. President Cross then appointed assistant coach Chuck Fairbanks as head coach. How would the President dare to do this without first approaching the Regents? Easy, Cross had already announced his retirement, and he feared no reprisal from the concerned Regents.

President Cross never comes to grips with one important question that had plagued college educators for a century: Are college athletics educational? It is obvious that Cross, as a former grant-in-aid football player from South Dakota, would be sympathetic with football on the college campus. He raises the question whether “athletic extravaganzas are relevant to the over-all mission of a university,” whether it is necessary to have “entertainment reminiscent of the ancient Roman games scheduled periodically in the coliseums for the amusement of the masses.” But, he rationalizes, “a university should be a place where a student has the opportunity to develop to the fullest extent any potential—mental, physical, or both—that he or she may possess’ (p. 274). Cross, like nearly all college administrators through the years, realizes that athletics are outside the regular educational program for they are controlled differently and funded separately from educational programs. The stadia constructed were built with amusement, or gate receipt, funds. No general educational monies were expended upon scholarships for athletes or for the payment of coaches. Even the president recommended a prayer before each game when to do that in the classroom would be certain to raise questions of separation of church and state. Cross never answers the question of athletics being educational, but as President Emeritus he concludes his book looking forward to future Oklahoma football with his own football prayer: “Go Big Red.”

George Cross has written a valuable book for better understanding the administration of college football, but it will not win a prize for literature. The former botany teacher has used a chronological structure based upon the individual football seasons, and this has prevented logical discussion of topics outside of the success or failure of a given year. For a book that must appeal to Oklahoma football fans, this structure was likely necessary. There are relatively few obvious errors of fact, though one is led to believe that all-American selections were begun in 1898 rather than a decade earlier, and he confuses at one point Duke University with North Carolina.

One might finally note that Cross was the college president who once remarked, while impatiently making a budgetary presentation before a group of sleepy Oklahoma state legislators, that “I would like to build a university of which the football team can be proud” (p. 145). Though Cross was pointing out the irony of his futile attempt to convince legislators to provide added appropriations for his institution, there is some truth to his statement, for it is likely that more effort has been exerted and a greater degree of excellence has been reached in college football than in most of academia. As for the University of Oklahoma, Cross was probably correct when he said that “a winning team had done a great deal more for the state of Oklahoma than for the university” (p. 145). President Cross has helped us to understand why this has been true.

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