

Quirk, James P., *Minnesota Football: The Golden Years, 1932-1941*, Privately published, 1984. 317 pp., Appendix, notes, references, charts, \$12 (paper).

When Bernie Berman was recruiting for his Gopher football team he would get into his car and drive the back roads of rural Minnesota looking for young men plowing the fields of the family farm. When he spotted one he stopped the car, got out and asked for directions to Minneapolis. If the young man pointed to the horizon in the direction of the city, Berman would get back into his car and drive away. But if the young man lifted the plow and pointed in the direction of Minneapolis, Berman knew he had found what he was seeking.

1. About the factual veracity of many of the data in this book I have consulted with Dr. Ferenc Zold. As an eminent fencer, sport official, and noted sport historian, who was acquainted with many of the characters mentioned in the book, he possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of Hungarian and international sport.

Growing up in Minnesota in the Fifties I heard this tale about the legendary Minnesota Gopher football coach innumerable times. This story, and so much else about Berman and the Golden Gophers, had already passed into the fabric of Minnesota folklore. In this history of Minnesota football written for the 50th Anniversary of the 1934 National Championship Team, James Quirk has captured the essence of Bernie Berman and the remarkable achievements of Berman's teams in the pre-World War II era. These were indeed the Golden Years, not only for the remarkable won-lost record of these teams that won five national championships in eight years, but also because it was the time when Minnesota became "the Golden Gophers," as the 1934 team was the first to wear the all gold uniforms.

Quirk tells the story of Bernie Berman and recounts the seasons of the Golden Gophers from 1932 to 1941. Unlike many college football histories written for friends and alumni this one offers much more than a simple recounting of the glory—the All-Americans, the big games, the great plays. Quirk begins with a brief reminder that pre-war football was considerably different than the game of the Eighties, and clearly explains the differences in rules, style of play, the athlete and his recruitment. He also introduces us to Bernie Berman with a brief biographical sketch and his pre-Minnesota coaching experience highlighted by the great success as head coach of Tulane. Quirk builds a convincing case that Berman was "the greatest football coach of his times, and certainly one of the greatest in the history of the sport." (p. 33) He was an "innovative offensive coach" whose teams were perhaps best remembered for their "crashing defense." (p. 32) But Quirk is not writing mere hagiography. The blemishes are not hidden as Berman's problems with interpersonal relations are explored. The result is an illuminating portrait of a complex legendary figure, who could never compliment a player to his face.

Following these introductory chapters Quirk launches into the history of Gopher football season-by-season, game-by-game, highlight-by-highlight. He does a remarkably good job of recounting the games and keeping them from all sounding alike and running together. His focus is on the great players, the achievements and the frustrations. The narrative of each season is well spiced with anecdotal material including the near tragic fire in Montana, the St. Paul nuns who encouraged their students to pray for a Notre Dame victory over the Gophers, and Butch Larson's "goosing" of the stern head coach.

Along the way Quirk continues to track the evolution of the rules and the game. He calls 1934 the greatest season in University of Minnesota football. He recounts the difficulties and humiliations faced by Minnesota's Black players who were put on the "injured list" when the Gophers played Southern teams. He analyzes strategy and looks at the controversies, and the book culminates with the 1941 national championship season and the deeds of Bruce Smith, the only Gopher to win the Heisman Trophy.

This book is not without its weaknesses. On occasion Quirk goes off on tangents of dubious value, and at times slips into a "preachy" style especially when extolling the virtues of Berman as coach. But these irritations are few and

far between, and do not otherwise detract from what is a solid piece of college football history. This should be of interest to a much larger audience than that for which it was written, including those interested in sport history well beyond the boundaries of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota.

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