

Gekas, George. *Gipper: The Life and Times of George Gipp*. South Bend, Indiana: And Books, 1987. Pp. x, 219. Foreword, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$8.95 (paper).

Gipper is a disappointing attempt at a “warts-and-all” biography of University of Notre Dame football legend, George Gipp. One of eight children, Gipp was born and raised in Calumet, a copper mining town in Michigan’s upper peninsula. He was a talented athlete who excelled at baseball, football and billiards. He also had a passion for gambling. A poor student, he did not graduate with his class. Yet, somehow, he entered the University of Notre Dame in 1916. (The author was unable to discover how Gipp managed this feat.)

Gipp originally attended Notre Dame to play baseball, but Coach Knute Rockne saw him working out on a practice field and recruited him for the football team. As a freshman, Gipp won notoriety by drop-kicking a 62 yard field goal. After a mediocre sophomore season, he starred as a junior and senior. A triple-threat player who could kick, run and throw, he led Notre Dame to undefeated seasons in 1919 and 1920. He helped to popularize the forward pass, won football acclaim for his coach and university, and became the first Notre Dame player to earn All-America honors in 1920. Only a few weeks after his final game, Gipp died at the age of 25 from a strep throat infection. Allegedly, on his death-bed, he said: “sometime, Rock, when the team’s up against it, when things are going wrong and the breaks are beating the boys—tell them to go in there with all they’ve got and win one for the Gipper.” (p. 201).

Two themes emerge from this mistake-marred monograph. First, Gipp was not the wholesome hero portrayed by Ronald Reagan in the film “Knute Rockne—All American.” In reality, Gipp was selfish, irresponsible and disloyal. He sometimes skipped practices, took himself out of games, and once tried to leave Notre Dame to play football for the University of Detroit. Disinterested in learning, he often cut classes and received sub-standard grades. He was expelled for his poor academic performance, but irate fans and alumni persuaded the administration and faculty to give him another chance. He also wagered hundreds of dollars on Notre Dame football games. In fact, the biography claims, a desire to win big bets may have enhanced Gipp’s gridiron performances. Knute Rockne also is treated roughly in *Gipper*. Rockne allowed Gipp to set his own rules, pressured professors to give the athlete special treatment, and tolerated his gambling. And, despite the legend, Rockne probably never inspired a Notre Dame victory over Army in 1928 with a “win one for the Gipper” speech.

Second, the author sees Gipp and Notre Dame as the harbingers of the professionalization of college athletics. Today, George Gekas argues, college sports is a business influenced by alumni, the media and gamblers. The main concern of college athletics, especially football, is to make money. "Gipp was at the forefront of this change. He was a 'professional' who excelled at his craft. It didn't matter that he didn't care much for the books. His role at Notre Dame was important in the change from athletic pastime to a sports business." (p. 199).

Unfortunately, these interesting themes go undocumented. Most of the author's generalizations lack evidence. Quotations are used without attribution and there are no notes. The scanty bibliography lists sources without including the place and date of publication or the publisher.

Gipper is also difficult to read. The author quotes at length from contemporary newspaper accounts (pp. 149-159). Run-on quotes are interrupted only occasionally by paraphrasing and analysis. Gekas devotes too much attention to practices and scrimmages and relates games in agonizing detail. Despite the book's subtitle, we don't learn much about Gipp's life and times.

Throughout the biography, Gekas displays a fascination for gambling. He writes glowingly of Gipp's prowess in games of chance. He also informs readers that he was a close associate of Angelo Stappas, one of Gipp's gambling friends. In fact, "Uncle Angie" introduced the author to gambling and taught him "to never excel at a sport until the stakes were high." Gekas notes with pride that he "later used this philosophy during his years in the Army, when he won big pots while bowling." After the war, the author and "Uncle Angie" opened a restaurant in Tucson that featured gambling in the back room. Uncle Angie's recollections "of how he and Gipp loved the life of a gambler" were the inspiration for the biography (pp. 207-208). Paul Hornung, once banned from professional football for betting on games, contributes a curious foreword to the book. After summarizing Gipp's gridiron achievements, he remarks upon his "equally notable" off-the-field activities. "What other player was able to gamble openly and place bets on his team while he participated in games?" Gipp, Hornung continues, was "ahead of his time. His ability transcended the football field" (pp. vii-viii). Additional testimonials from Alex Karras, Denny McClain and Pete Rose would not have been out of place in this book.

Finally, numerous proofreading errors detract from the content of the biography. Non-sentences and non sequiturs abound. Transitions are abrupt between paragraphs and chapters. Commas are misplaced and misused. Sentences begin without a capital letter. There are several typing errors. Entire paragraphs are repeated or misplaced. Words and sentences are repeated or dropped. Apostrophes are not always used to indicate the possessive tense. Quotation marks are omitted. One sentence, by no means an isolated example, demonstrates the quality of the editing. "Big, traditional rivalries like Notre Dame-Army. Harvard-Yale attracted October, the Cincinnati Reds beat the Chicago White Sox five games to three in The 1919 World Series." (*sic*, p. 160).

In sum, *Gipper* is marred by tedious writing, careless editing and a lack of documentation. It puts the lie to the old adage that it is better to publish a bad

book than no book at all. This slap-dash biography is an embarrassment to the author, publisher, and the field of sports studies.

Nichols College

Thomas G. Smith