

Of Football and Frontiers: The Meaning of Bronko Nagurski

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Americans, like other Western peoples, feel an uneasy, increasing sense of insecurity in the modern world, where they seem more and more to be the puppets of great economic forces which are beyond anyone's power to control. In this predicament, they turn with relief to anyone who, in any field, appears to stand out conspicuously beyond his fellows. They feel the world needs giants—as perhaps it does; and when they find one, they pretend to themselves that he is taller than in fact he is.

—Bruce Bliven, "Worshipping the American Hero," 1932¹

On a cold November day in Chicago in 1943, an aging football player named Bronko Nagurski took to the field against the Chicago Bears' arch rivals, the Chicago Cardinals. Nagurski had been the Bears' premier running back from 1930 through 1937. Responding to a player shortage caused by the war, he agreed to end his six-year retirement and to play one last season as a tackle for his old team. In the final game of that season, the Bears faced a must-win situation against the Cardinals to obtain a playoff berth. With the Bears behind by 10 points at the beginning of the fourth quarter, Nagurski suddenly trotted onto the field and assumed his old stance as fullback. The crowd came to its feet, sensing something extraordinary was about to happen. "What a great spot for a legend to be in," novelist William Goldman wrote, "coming back after so many years, one quarter to play, the title on the line, and ten points behind . . ." Nagurski was handed the ball and crashed four yards through the Cardinal line. The next play he took the ball again and lumbered for eight yards. Play after play, he was given the ball, picking up five yards, six yards, eight yards, until he reached the goal line. Then Nagurski took the ball and disappeared into a tangle of players, finally stumbling out of the pile and into the end zone. "The old man flies at them and they parted like water," Goldman continued, "and he was through and the rest of the game was nothing, the Bears slaughter them behind the Bronko . . ."

1. Bruce Bliven, "Worshipping the American Hero," in Fred Ringel, ed. *America: As Americans See It*, (New York: The Literary Guild, 1932), 129.

Led by Nagurski, the Bears won the game, 24–21, and with it, the division championship. Afterwards, he was proclaimed the hero of the game, but shrugged off the attention of reporters with a Will Rogers quote: “All I know is what I read in the papers.” But the real meaning of Bronko Nagurski was revealed after the game: he returned to his hometown in International Falls, Minnesota, to take care of his farm before the upcoming championship game.²

“More stories, authentic and apocryphal,” observed a writer for *Collier’s* magazine in 1943, “have been written about Bronko Nagurski than anyone ever associated with football.”³ If anyone was born to play football, it was Nagurski. He was blessed with great size, awesome physical power, speed, and, as one of his coaches observed, the instinct to know “everything that was going on the field.” During Nagurski’s years with the University of Minnesota (1927–29) and Chicago Bears (1930–37, 1943), few of his contemporaries received his level of praise or legendary status. Red Grange, one of the pioneers of the National Football League, in 1988 still regarded him as the “greatest all-time player he had ever seen.”⁴ Similarly, George Halas, long-time coach and Chicago Bears owner, still considered him the “greatest full-back of all time” even by the standards of the late 1970s.⁵ Steve Owen, coach of the New York Giants, once said that Nagurski was the “only man who ran his own interference.”⁶ He remains the only college player to ever be named to the All-American team at two positions, but as sportswriter Grantland Rice observed, he “could have been an All-American at any position.”⁷ In later years, he was recognized in the College Football Hall of Fame and became a charter member of the Professional Football Hall of Fame in 1963. The significance of Bronko Nagurski lies deeper than his popularity as a professional athlete. What made Nagurski special among his more famous contemporaries—Babe Ruth, Red Grange, Joe Louis, Jack Dempsey, Bobby Jones, and Babe Didrickson—was the mythology that surrounded his life and the meaning it gave to the lives of people who made him their hero.

Nagurski came of age in the twenties, a time regarded by historians as “the age of sports.” Frederick Lewis Allen, the author of *Only Yesterday*, observed that sports at that time had “become an obsession” and that “a hero of the stadium could rise in the consulship of Calvin Coolidge.” He lamented that “more Americans could identify Knute Rockne as the Notre Dame coach

2. William Goldman, *Magic*, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976). 52. International Falls *Daily Journal*, December, 1943, n.d. Clipping in Bronko Nagurski Scrapbook in personal possession of Tony Nagurski. Roselle, Illinois. Hereafter cited as Bronko Nagurski Scrapbook.

3. Stanley Frank, “Bronko Bucks Again,” *Collier’s*, 4 (December 11, 1943): 34.

4. *Sports Collectors Digest*, July 22, 1988, 151.

5. Flyleaf inscription by George Halas in his book *Halas by Halas*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979) in personal possession of Tony Nagurski.

6. Frank, “Bronko Bucks Again,” 34.

7. Stanley Frank, “The Incredible Bronko,” *True Magazine* (November, 1953): 58.

than could tell who was the presiding officer of the United States Senate.”⁸ Historians see this upsurge in spectator sports between the wars as a reflection of a major shift in American culture after World War I. Robert Sklar, in his introduction to *The Plastic Age: 1917–1930*, described the change as a rejection of the old genteel, middle-class values that had brought about America’s entry into the horror of World War I. This rejection was logical in the face of expanding urbanization and the development of new forms of industrial production that created consumer products on a wide scale. Advertising—the creation of images to sell the new products along with using credit to purchase beyond immediate means—helped form this new culture. Cars, radios, electric household items, cosmetics, stylish clothing, aspirin, motion pictures, and popular magazines homogenized American daily life. Education, literature, politics, and the arts, all fell under the influence of machine culture. But aspirin culture and mass production also had its dark side: rigid standardization, expanding bureaucracies, dehumanization by assembly lines, and cultural pressures to conform to one’s social class. The Machine Age of the twenties became distinguished as a life of interchangeable parts.⁹

To escape the pressures of the machine culture, Americans turned to spectator sports. In his study, “The Emergence of Consumer Culture and the Transformation of Physical Culture,” Mark Dyreson argued that “sports became an opiate . . . an arena in which the masses could turn their eyes away, if only briefly, from the grim political and economic realities of the modern age.” Historian Roderick Nash, in *The Nervous Age*, took particular interest in the American passion for sports figures and theorized that although most Americans lived in an crowded urban setting, “a large part of their values remained rooted in the frontier, farm, and village.” Since the pioneer stage had passed, Americans developed a substitute—the cult of the hero. Nash categorized this new character as one who “provided living testimony of the power of courage, strength and honor and the efficacy of the self-reliant, rugged individual who seemed on the verge of becoming as irrelevant as the covered wagon.” He saw the playing field of sport as a “surrogate frontier; the athletic hero . . . the twentieth century pathfinder or pioneer.” Taken a step further, since one could not physically participate in the violent activity of football or boxing, one could at least derive some degree of natural purification by witnessing raw, natural power in action.¹⁰

Bronko Nagurski was tailor-made to fit this American image of the heroic frontier man, possessing exceptional strength and virtues associated

8. Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen Twenties* (Harper and Brothers, 1931), 206–211.

9. Robert Sklar, ed. *The Plastic Age: 1917–1930* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), p. 2–14.

10. Mark Dyreson, “The Emergence of Consumer Culture and the Transformation of Physical Culture: American Sport in the 1920s,” *The Journal of Sport History*, 16 (Winter 1989): 269; “Roderick Nash,” *The Nervous Generation: American Thought 1917–1930* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1970), 126–129. See also Paul Carter, *The Twenties in America* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1968).

with untamed nature. Blessed with awesome natural abilities and personal modesty, he fulfilled the role so well that as his athletic career progressed, his mythology grew to a level unprecedented in modern sports history.

Bronislau Nagurski was born just north of the Minnesota border in Rainy River, Ontario, on November 3, 1908. In 1912, his Ukrainian immigrant parents, Michael and Michelina Nagurski, crossed the border to International Falls, Minnesota, population 500. The small town fit well within the definition of a frontier community: it was isolated by its far northern location; surrounded by forests and the Rainy Lake chain; and had a wild reputation because of the rough characters associated with its main industry, logging. After first working in a saw mill, Michael Nagurski built a grocery store and later purchased a farm to provide dairy products for his business. His oldest son, called Bronko (a nickname for Bronislau) spent most of his time working on the farm or delivering groceries, spending his free time hunting and fishing in the town's wild surroundings.¹¹

In the tradition of the 1920s hero, Bronko Nagurski was "discovered" by Clarence "Doc" Spears, the legendary coach of the University of Minnesota. According to the Nagurski legend, Spears was searching for a young player he heard about who lived in Minnesota's rugged north woods. As he drove along the rutted dirt roads, he came upon a young man pushing a plow without the aid of a horse. When he stopped to ask directions, the young man picked up the plow and quietly pointed. Spears had found his player. The story is good fiction, but the fact that it persists, reveals that Nagurski was no ordinary man. Nagurski's natural athletic talents were evident in high school in International Falls. Nagurski's football ability, however, had little effect on his hometown team's success. In the three years he played there, the team never won a game. Nagurski's first moment as a hero came in a game in which he scored the first touchdown ever against a northern Minnesota team. Nagurski was lauded as the "backbone of the Falls team, and the outstanding star of the game," even though they lost 20-7.¹² To keep in shape between seasons, he worked on his father's farm and walked four miles home after school. Just before his senior year, he transferred to the larger town of Bemidji so "I could have a better chance to gain recognition from colleges . . ."¹³ Irritated at the loss, the International Falls football coach had Nagurski declared ineligible to play his senior year. Instead, he played basketball and attracted the attention of a physician who had attended the University of Minnesota. The physician set up an appointment with the Minnesota coach, and Nagurski was recruited to play for the Golden Gophers in 1926.¹⁴

11. Stephanie Nagurski, "A Minihistory of the Nagurski Family," in Stephanie Nagurski, ed. *History of Koochiching County* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1983), 209.

12. Unidentified clipping in Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

13. Jim Bankes, "Bronko Nagurski." *Sports Collectors Digest* (August 19, 1988): 158.

14. *Duluth News-Tribune and Herald*, June 16, 1985.

Nagurski's talents became obvious as he spent his freshman year waiting to become eligible for varsity play the next year. In spring training he was already "causing Coach Spears to sit up and take notice."¹⁵ By summer of 1927, his entry at the varsity level was being anticipated by a Minneapolis newspaper: "The Gopher Coach has a corking young tackle coming up from the freshman squad in the person of Bronko Nagurski, a 200-pounder from International Falls, who raised havoc with the varsity daily scrimmage sessions last fall."¹⁶

Nagurski wanted to play fullback, but Spears used him as end, then tackle. The less glamorous position kept him out of the public spotlight only briefly. In the middle of his sophomore season, Minnesota faced a highly favored Notre Dame team coached by Knute Rockne. Trailing 7-0 in the fourth quarter, Nagurski smashed through the Notre Dame line to block a punt and recover the subsequent fumble, enabling Minnesota to come away with a 7-7 tie, a major upset. Media attention focused on Nagurski: "The Bronko is a player whose limit of ability one can hardly imagine . . . he is the most physically powerful player who has ever tried for a Minnesota team . . . he is the fastest man of his weight Minnesota has had in 10 years . . . he has the perfect fighting temperament."¹⁷

Nagurski's celebrity was assured when he was moved to fullback the following year. After his debut at the new position, the *St. Paul Dispatch* reported that "his blocking is cruelly beautiful and so is his plunging [running]."¹⁸ After a victory over Purdue, he was proclaimed "the New Idol of Gopher Fans."¹⁹ In subsequent games he was described as playing like a "superman" who "was ever an All-American if ever a player rated this distinction."²⁰ After viewing one game, a reporter called his performance the "greatest all-around exhibition of playing that I have seen in 25 years covering football."²¹ As Nagurski's fame spread, sportswriters sought to understand his powerful style even when he wasn't carrying the ball. *St. Paul* sportswriter Dick Cullum, wrote:

It is doubtful that a greater interfering back than Nagurski has ever played football. He not only leads the play at terrific speed and keeps his feet as he brushes over man after man but he has the perfect sense in picking the men to be hit to make the play go.

As a defensive back he does more than stop the play of the moment. He discourages the ball carriers with the viciousness of his

15. Unidentified clipping in Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *St. Paul Dispatch*, September 28, 1929

19. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Minneapolis Tribune*, December 2, 1928.

tackling It is physically impossible for them to withstand the rough contacts upon which the Bronko thrives.

Indeed, he pulverizes them whether he has the ball or they have.²²

Raw, natural power was his hallmark. By the end of his senior year, Nagurski's football exploits had taken on the mythological tone that would follow him throughout his career. When a sportswriter covering a game against Indiana witnessed a Nagurski smash through the opponent's defensive line for a six-yard gain, he wrote, "Observers said this smack by the Minnesota fullback was one of the hardest blows a human being ever struck against a line of opponents. Players actually flew into the air as the Bronko crashed in like a charge of dynamite touched off under a log jam."²³ One reporter covering a Minnesota-Wisconsin game played in Wisconsin wrote:

Big Nagurski jumped over line for touchdown, and he came down near St. Paul. Wisconsin will take it up with the rules committee so that he has to stay in the state he is playing in on his plunges.²⁴

Some sportswriters believed his awesome gridiron skills could only be explained by looking beyond civilization. In 1929, sports columnist Don McLaughlin cited an account carried in an eastern paper in which

Nagurski was found roaming in the northwoods, wholly uncivilized and depending on his two hands and his trusty club to provide food and clothing. According to the story, he was roped, tied, and brought to the University here to turn his barbaric impulses loose on Minnesota gridiron foes. Before each game he is supposed to dine exclusively on red, raw meat. The result of all this being that he plays a fierce game of football as has never before been known.²⁵

Paralleling the descriptions of awesome power were those of invincibility. After a game against Iowa in 1928, Nagurski broke a vertebra in his back but kept it to himself until the game was nearly over. "But Bronko kept on knocking down one Iowa attack after another with brute strength and determination as well as leading the Gopher interference in a brilliant manner,"²⁶ a reporter noted. The next game, he switched to tackle and played in a steel brace to support his injured back. Despite the agony from his injury, Nagurski played through the rest of the season, including a game against Wisconsin that he regarded as the best of his college career. Wearing a steel

22. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Gary Post-Tribune*, October 27, 1928.

brace and playing in great pain, he scored the winning touchdown while “carrying six men on his back.” When later asked about the game, he recalled that he did “remember carrying a few boys into the end zone.”²⁷ The 1928 season had a larger impact: it made the fullback a folk hero. Upon his return to Minneapolis after singlehandedly dismantling Northwestern, “he was taken over” by the state. “There has never been a month since, in any year,” a writer later recalled, “in which you have not been able to read of him in one St. Paul or Minneapolis paper, and in all the dailies and weeklies of the state . . .”²⁸

Stories of Nagurski’s mythical strength appeared off the field as well. In 1928, a Minnesota newspaper reported that while working in a construction crew in International Falls, his job was heaving bags of cement. After finding the bags not very heavy, he “had his helper transferred to another job so he could do two men’s work for wages and a half.”²⁹ When asked to enter a civic football punting contest at the University, Nagurski destroyed the ball with his first kick. “They should have banned him,” a reporter covering the event wryly noted, “but they didn’t.”³⁰

Nagurski capped his career at Minnesota by being named as All-American at two positions, tackle and fullback, despite the fact that he played tackle for only 28 minutes his senior year. During his three-year tenure as a Gopher, Minnesota lost only four games by a total of five points. His final game as a collegian was the East-West All-Star game in 1930. The opposing coach, Percy Locey claimed his west team lost because Nagurski hit two would-be tacklers so hard on his first attempt that they were “goofy” the rest of the half.³¹ Nagurski was unanimously elected captain of the team, but as the *Minneapolis Star* reported, in his characteristic fashion, “he wouldn’t tell anyone.”³²

His modesty, as much as his athletic prowess, elevated him to heroic quality. In the character of the modest frontiersman, he tried to deny his superhuman accomplishments—a quality that he shared with another Minnesotan who had achieved fame within the same timespan: aviator Charles Lindbergh. At a time when heroes such as Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey were showing their human qualities by accepting large sums of money, overeating, drinking, and sexual promiscuousness, Lindbergh and Nagurski were achieving hero status by doing the opposite—by denying the trappings of fame. The comparison between was not lost on reporters:

27. Jim Bankes, “Bronko Nagurski,” *Sports Collectors Digest* (August 19, 1988): 160.

28. Norman Katov, “Bronko the Great,” *Sport Magazine* 15 (November 1954): 55.

29. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Minneapolis Star*, January 15, 1930.

The Bronk is as modest and self-effacing as Lindbergh himself. His speech is soft, almost a drawl. He can become enthusiastic over football, the game, but any mention of himself and he is reticence himself.

Bronko is actually embarrassed at the attention his football exploits have brought upon him . . . Telephone calls, the bane of every celebrity's existence, have forced him to spend as little time as possible at his fraternity house.³³

In a state with a large small town and agrarian population predominated by northern Europeans, rural traditions of modesty and austerity still prevailed. Nagurski's shy demeanor was also carried onto the field. John McGovern, a Minnesota newspaper columnist, once observed that before a game against Michigan, Spears gave an impassioned pep talk to his players before finally addressing Nagurski: "And you, Nagurski, have you got the stuff to go out there and fight it out with these fellows? Will you stay in there? Can we rely on you?" Nagurski's reply was quintessential Minnesotan: "You bet."³⁴ On the field he never expressed open anger or hostility.

Nagurski's humbleness was especially heroic when seen in the context of a sport which by its very nature, emphasized aggression and violence. According to David Reisman and Revel Denny, in their study of the ethnic diffusion of college football, football's violence was rationalized with rules and organized strategy to keep in tune with Americans' simultaneous fear and enjoyment of violence. Because of its academic association, college football became the epitome of rationally channeled violence. In the same way, boxing moved out of the back rooms of smoke-filled saloons and reached new heights of popularity. Both sports were urban but differed in audience, boxing appealing more to the blue-collar crowd, while college football appealed more to the middle class.³⁵

Natural power was a chief characteristic of the twenties sports hero. In sport, or so the public still perceived, one could achieve great success simply through sheer natural talent. Fortunes could be made without long, arduous years of technical training or succumbing to the regiments of bureaucracies. Fans preferred Babe Ruth's ability to blast the ball out of the ballpark to the "scientific baseball" of Ty Cobb, and the savagery of Jack Dempsey over the "technical" skills of Gene Tunney. Bronko Nagurski was really an archetype of the twenties' athlete with raw natural talent who exercised controlled violence.³⁶

33. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

34. *Ibid.*

35. See David Riesman and Revel Denny, "Football in America: A Study in Cultural Diffusion," *American Quarterly* 3 (1951) in John W. Loy and Gerald Kenyon, ed. *Sports, Culture, and Society* (London: Maximilian Company, 1969), 315-316.

36. Benjamin Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 132.



Bronko Nagurski's college yearbook picture. Dapper yet powerful, this was the image of the perfect off-the-field player to Minnesota Gopher fans. *Courtesy of Tony Nagurski*

Newspaper and publicity photographs at the time reinforce Nagurski's image of a clean-cut sportsman. Nagurski had a rugged, square-jawed handsomeness which made him naturally photogenic. Aside from the standard football and letter sweater poses, one image stands out. The photo appears in the Minnesota 1929 homecoming program and is a full-page spread showing an immaculately dressed Nagurski. More than any other, this photo captures the public perception of him as the quintessential football hero—untamed physical power controlled by civilized education.

Sportswriters in the 1920s competed with one another to provide their newfound hero with an appropriate nickname. He was referred to at various times as Nag, the Big Fellow, the Big Nag, the Battering Bronko, the Viking Volcano, the Durable Dane, and the Pulverizing Pole. The ethnic nicknames are significant. Robert Sklar observed that a twenties' social trend was to reject forced "Anglo-Saxon" values associated with World War I and renew old ethnic ties. For second-generation ethnic groups, sports heroes affirmed and symbolized success within the American system.³⁷ Reisman and Denny observed that the twenties marked a distinctive ethnic shift in the game with the entry of second-generation immigrants who were actively recruited by coaches. Nagurski epitomized this new generation: he was actively recruited and effectively translated his athletic ability into career advancement.³⁸ As Nagurski's star rose, Minnesota Polish and Ukrainian groups staked a claim to his fame. In an address before a Polish Commercial Club banquet in St. Paul in 1928, Doc Spears said it was the "fire and imagination of the Slav that made Nagurski a great football player."³⁹ Nagurski himself was somewhat sensitive about being identified as a Pole. When first asked to attend a

37. Sklar, *The Plastic Age*, 14.

38. Reisman and Denny, "Football in America," 317.

39. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

banquet in his honor by Spears. he reportedly refused saying "I'm no Pole. I'm Ukrainian." Spears persuaded him to change his mind, saying it was important not to disappoint them since they "were doing this in a fine spirit, and you won't disappoint them." Nagurski relented and received an engraved platinum watch.⁴⁰

Similarly, some Minnesota communities sought to identify with him. To them he possessed qualities they deemed important to a hero—the physical triumph, humbleness, and affiliation with a small frontier hometown reaffirmed their own experiences. When the towns of Bemidji and Fargo tried to claim him as one of their own because of the time he spent there, International Falls quickly responded saying: "Neither Bemidji nor Fargo can claim Nagurski. He is the son of Mike Nagurski of this city . . ." ⁴¹ To consolidate their claim, 125 people from International Falls made the long trip down to the Twin Cities to attend the 1929 homecoming game and honor their native son with a banquet. The event was covered by several Minneapolis and St. Paul papers, who underscored his rural, small-town connection.

The state as a whole also jumped on the Nagurski bandwagon. One writer later said:

. . . if you are not within the boundaries, it is all right to mention Jim Thorpe. But speak softly, Mister, when you start up with any Minnesotan about this Big Fellow because this boy is a part of the state, like Paul Bunyan and the iron mines and the fish the tourist office promises are waiting to jump into your boat.⁴²

One Minneapolis sportswriter added: "Who shall embody the spirit of virtue triumphant? Our Bronko, of course. For all his agility and muscular horse power, he is a nice young feller with a pleasant voice and an engaging smile."⁴³ At the end of his final season he was greeted with a broadside in Twin Cities newspapers endorsing him as "A Minnesotan to be proud of" and given the blessing of carrying "with him, wherever he is, the hopes and wishes of all the people of the North Star county."⁴⁴ Nagurski affirmed the image that Minnesota sought to broadcast: a state that maintained its virility and purity because it had neither abandoned its rural heritage nor lost its northwoods frontier. In Minnesota, immigrants like Nagurski could achieve success and equality, as they had on the frontier in the previous century.

The legend of Bronko Nagurski was already established when he joined the Chicago Bears of the National Football League in 1930. Founded in 1920, the league originally consisted of Eastern and Midwestern cities with teams made up of blue-collar workers who earned additional cash as players.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. Katov, "Bronko the Great," 52.

43. *Minneapolis Star*, Oct. 25, 1937.

44. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

College football aficionados saw the league as inferior—until University of Illinois star Red Grange jumped the college ranks after being persuaded by the coach of the Chicago Bears, George Halas, to join his team in 1925. In the eight weeks between December 2, 1925, and January 31, 1926, the Bears and their new star played 18 games throughout the country, drawing crowds as large as 73,000—this at a time when 5,000 fans was an extraordinary number. The tour was important for two reasons: it established professional football as a viable sport and underscored the need for popular heroes.⁴⁵

Halas witnessed Nagurski's famous 1928 Northwestern game and hoped to add Bronko's reputation and skills alongside those of Red Grange. After the East-West game in 1930, he approached Nagurski. After some initial hesitation brought on by numerous offers for endorsements, he decided that since "football was fun, and someone wanted to pay him to have fun," then he'd do it.⁴⁶ In March, he signed a contract with Halas for \$5,000 a year, making him, after Grange, one of the league's highest paid players. Because of the problems the league began to encounter in the Depression, this was a remarkable transaction for Halas.⁴⁷ The risk was worth it. Halas recalled that he had never seen anyone like Nagurski:

He was six feet two inches and he weighed two hundred thirty-four pounds, and it was all—literally all—muscle, skin and bone. He didn't have an ounce of fat on him. A lot of men have passed in front of me but none with a build like that man.⁴⁸

A Chicago paper affirmed his northwoods image by remarking, "no one outside Minnesota could get that big in 21 years."⁴⁹ By today's standards, he would be regarded as average and even in those days there were players bigger in size, but not in stature.

Nagurski quickly established his reputation as a pro. Red Grange recalled their first game together in which

it was a punt situation and my assignment was to block big Cal [Hubbard of Green Bay]. Nagurski was behind me, that last man between the rushers and the punter. Hubbard whispered to me to let him through so he could see just how tough Nagurski really was. So, I let him through. Now Cal weighed about 265 pounds and was

45. Richard Wittingham, "Year of the Ghost," in Richard Wittingham, ed., *The Fireside Book of Pro Football* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1989), 291–300. A player's reputation in college and its advertising value played a key role for selection into the NFL. See Henry March, *Pro Football—Its "Ups" and "Downs"* (Albany, N.Y.: J. B. Lyon Company, 1934), 146–147.

46. Taped radio interview with Nagurski, Los Angeles, 1944, in personal possession of Tony Nagurski.

47. Halas, *Halas by Halas*, 146ff.

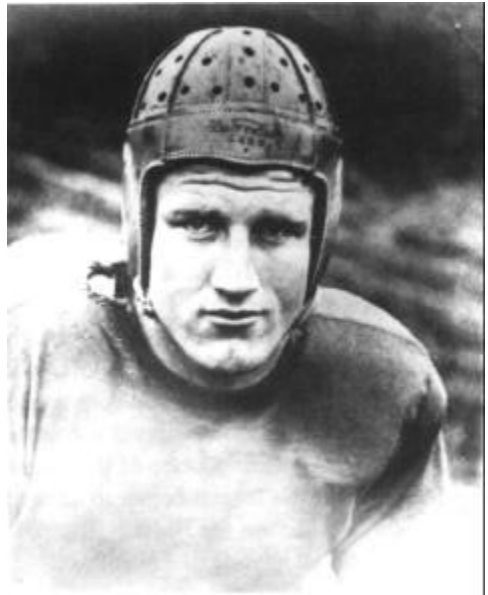
48. Mark Pachter, *Champions of American Sport* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1981), 269.

49. Unidentified clipping in Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

one of the toughest men who ever played the game. He hit Nagurski and bounced off like he'd run into a stone wall.⁵⁰

Between 1930 and 1934, the pros witnessed Nagurski in his prime. Halas described his running style as the "perfect form for a line buckler":

He ran so low to the ground that his back was parallel to it. The thing that made him invincible was a trick that nobody ever has been able to copy. At the moment of contact with a tackler, Bronko dipped his shoulder while running at full speed and brought it up with a terrific impact, like an uppercut. It made no difference how much momentum the tackler had or how much he weighed. Bronko's counterblock with his shoulder bounced the tackler off him like rain hitting a roof.⁵¹



Bronko Nagurski as a Chicago Bear. A gentle face that inspired fear among opponents. *Courtesy of Tony Nagurski*

Red Grange recalled that there was "something strange" about tackling Nagurski. "When you hit him it was almost like getting an electric shock. If you hit him above the ankles, you were likely to get killed."⁵² Benny Friedman, a player for the New York Giants vividly recalled trying an encounter with Nagurski in 1933:

. . . Bronko split the middle of the line on the 22 and broke into the open with only me between him and the goal. There were 50,000 people in the stands, but Bronko was such a frightening sight that my first impulse was to run away. I think I would've done it too, if it hadn't been for a four foot fence around the field that hemmed me in. I had no place to go but toward Bronko. It

50. Arthur Daley interview with Red Grange, Bronko Nagurski Collection, Pro Football Hall of Fame, Canton, Ohio; Bunkes, "Bronko Nagurski," 160.

51. Frank, "The Incredible Bronko, 118.

52. Daley interview with Red Grange.

was like ordering a switchman to stop a locomotive with his bare hands.⁵³

Jim Thorpe, a legendary player in his own right, once refereed a game in which Nagurski played and questioned his very spirit: “the man simply isn’t human . . . how can any man knock down and spin so many opposing giants on their ears is a mystery to me.”⁵⁴ One reporter expressed it best by comparing him to President Roosevelt after the landslide 1936 election: “When he hits the line, 46 states give way.”⁵⁵

To stop Nagurski, opposing coaches developed special strategies. Steve Owens, the coach of the New York Giants, described Bronko as so rugged a player that he

ordered the Giants to simply avoid tackling him head on. What I did was to assign two men to cover him. and three on certain plays. They were to throw themselves in front of him, blockwise. in hopes of tripping him or knocking him off stride. so that the rest could fall on him like a wolf pack. The Bronko still gained yardage even when two or three tacklers got hold.⁵⁶

Halas recalled an incident in 1934 in which Dick Richards, the owner of the Detroit Lions, found Halas and Nagurski eating dinner and offered Nagurski \$10,000 to get the “hell out of the league” and “stop ruining” his players. Richards actually wrote the check, but just to be on the safe side. Halas quickly tore it up.⁵⁷ But the only real way to stop him, according to Owens, was to “shoot him when he came out of the locker room.”⁵⁸

Nagurski averaged over 4.6 yards each carry as a professional, although the official statistics do not reflect the first two years of his career. In the 1930s, professional rosters consisted of only 18 players, and since they had to play both offense and defense, stars were used sparingly to avoid injury. As a result, Nagurski carried the ball only about 10 to 12 times a game. Along with his running and blocking, Nagurski was also a capable passer. This skill enabled the Bears to create the “unstoppable play” which consisted of Nagurski taking a hand-off and running straight into the bunched line, then suddenly stopping and arcing the ball over to a waiting receiver. After Nagurski used this play to win the controversial championship game in 1939,

53. Frank, “The Incredible Bronko,” 59.

54. Unidentified clipping in Nagurski Scrapbook, November 21, 1936.

55. *New York World Telegram*, November 7, 1936.

56. Quotation from Steve Owen, *My Kind of Football*, 1933, in Nagurski Collection, Pro Football Hall of Fame.

57. Frank, “The Incredible Bronko,” 120.

58. *Ibid.*



Nagurski as a frontier hero. Nagurski was often portrayed in the context of “wild west” imagery. In this photo, he warily straight-arms a Native American in full tribal costume. *Courtesy of Kevin Nagurski*

the league enacted a rule change which created the modern game of football.⁵⁹

Powered by Nagurski, the Bears won the championship in 1933 and went undefeated in 1934, only to lose the championship to the New York Giants in the famous “sneaker” game.⁶⁰ Nagurski’s exploits and skills provided daily copy for sportswriters in Chicago and for the Bears’ opponents. *The Chicago American* called him the “one man thundering herd”⁶¹ while another paper felt what the “M-5 tank is to fast moving ground warfare, was what Bronko was to football.”⁶² The *St. Paul Daily News* referred to him as a

59. The 1932 championship game between the Bears and the Portsmouth Spartans (later the Detroit Lions) is regarded as the strangest on record. A howling Chicago blizzard a week before the game forced the game into the indoor Chicago Stadium. Dirt covered the floor as a result of a rodeo and circus that had just left town. Because of the stadium’s size, the field length was shortened to 80 yards, and field goals were prohibited. The game remained scoreless until the final quarter, when Nagurski executed his famous jump pass to Red Grange for a touchdown. Portsmouth complained bitterly that the pass was illegal because, under 1932 rules, all passes had to be thrown from at least five yards behind the line of scrimmage. Their appeals were dismissed and the Bears won 9–0. The controversy resulted in a meeting of the rules committee and culminated in sweeping changes: passes were to be allowed from anywhere behind the goal line, the goal posts were moved forward, hashmarks were added for ball placement, and the format for the first official playoff games was determined. *Bear Facts*, 3 (March 1992), p.10.

60. The game was played on a frozen field, and, at halftime, the Giants replaced their cletes with sneakers and returned to win the game 30–13. At the Bears’ request, it was replayed two weeks later in Los Angeles. The Bears vindicated themselves 21–0. *Los Angeles Herald-Express*, January 28, 1935.

61. *Chicago American*, October 30, 1936.

62. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

“human battering ram.”⁶³ Photographic images portray him as a gentle giant. One shows him in a Gulliver pose being tackled by a group of midgets. Similarly, another captures him carrying two Hollywood starlets on his shoulders. Others reinforce his frontier image: one shows him in full football equipment, wrestling a steer, while another poses him aside a Native American in full tribal costume.

As descriptions of his superhuman prowess spread, Nagurski became the center of folktales circulated by fellow players and the national media. “Any mention of Nagurski,” a writer for the *Saturday Evening Post* observed in 1936, “invokes a dozen tales.”⁶⁴ He was reported to have once tackled a Model T parked on the sidelines and it had to be towed away to get another fender. On another occasion he allegedly tackled a police horse. The next day it went to the boneyard. In 1936, two members of the Pittsburgh Steelers attempted to stop Nagurski and received broken shoulders and a concussion, respectively. As the train left Chicago after the game, it lurched and the players yelled “run for your lives, it’s Nagurski!” Perhaps the most famous legend, one that was even related by columnist George Will in 1990, allegedly took place in Chicago in 1933 against Portsmouth. Penalized for holding, Nagurski showed rare emotion and demanded to have the next handout. Charged with determination, he smashed through the line with such force that his momentum carried him into the wall of Wrigley Field, knocking the fullback unconscious and cracking the wall at the same time. When he recovered, he was supposed to have said, “Boy, that last guy hit me pretty hard.” The legends have a common denominator—natural power personified.⁶⁵

Despite his stardom, Halas offered Nagurski less money in 1931 since he “could not ignore the present county-wide financial depression.” When Nagurski balked, Halas persuaded him to sign, saying that “in the 12 years I have had anything to do with promoting football, this is the first year it was necessary to backwater. . . .” It was important to Halas not to lose his star, so he added, “I will guarantee you an increase for the following year; or if you so desire, we can sign you up for a two-year contract calling for an increase the following year.”⁶⁶ When his salary did not return to its 1930 level, Nagurski decided to supplement his football salary by wrestling professionally, something many of his fellow players were doing. Nagurski was enticed by lucrative promises from promoters who hoped that Nagurski’s “color and

63. *St. Paul Daily News*, January 30, 1935.

64. George Dunscomb, “\$6,000 for a Touchdown!” *Saturday Evening Post* (December 19, 1936): 45.

65. Halas, *Halas by Halas*, 176; John Wiebusch, “Bronko Nagurski: The Living Legend,” *Pro!* 6 (November 4, 1973): 5b; George Will, “That Last Guy Hit Me Hard,” *Newsweek* (December 31, 1990): 72. The legends in one version or another appear in virtually all Nagurski profiles published after 1943.

66. George Halas to Bronko Nagurski, July 20, 1931, and July 31, 1931. Personal Collection of Tony Nagurski, Roselle, Illinois. To increase revenues, Halas took his team barnstorming after the season was over on a circuit through Texas and California. Similarly, in 1934, he arranged an annual exhibition game between the NFL champion and team composed of college all-stars to answer lingering accusations by college football supporters that professional football players were lazy and inferior. *Des Moines Register*, March 1, 1935; *Chicago Tribune*, July 8, 1934.

showmanship would boom wrestling throughout the nation, and bring it out of its doldrums.”⁶⁷ Tony Stecher, Nagurski’s new wrestling agent, remarked: “I’ve been waiting years for a man who can really catch the popular fancy. Nagurski is the man.”⁶⁸ Using Nagurski’s fame proved to be a good strategy for promoters. (Professional wrestling in the 1930s was treated as a legitimate sport by newspapers.) Hoping to get close-up views of the fabled player, crowds flocked to the matches. After a match in Minneapolis, *The Minneapolis Star* reported that “sell out buildings are not unusual for him He has done that often, but he reached the peak last night when even standing room wasn’t available.”⁶⁹ Another reporter noted that “they cheer Nagurski vociferously every place he shows in fact as soon as he finishes a match in one city, the promoters want to know if he can have him back for the next program.”⁷⁰ At a 1937 Los Angeles match. he drew over 35,000 spectators.” In 1937, he became the world wrestling champion and appeared in *Ripley’s Believe it or Not* as the king of two sports.

Writers covering Nagurski’s wrestling career focused on his physical power, casting exaggerated images of a beast. often with a Wild West tone. One reporter described him as a “wild steer” who “grasped the ropes and butted opponents.”⁷² Another remarked that he “has been browsing in the bunch grass for the last three months, alone and part from the Grade A beef. . . . He has been roped, branded and turned loose with the great herd of bellowing neck twisters who roam the range”⁷³ Sometimes he was portrayed as a primitive man. After winning the world championship in 1937, a reporter recorded that after Tony Stecher congratulated him on his win. Nagurski replied: “That’s fine. but when do we eat?”⁷⁴ The *Minneapolis Journal* reported after a match in 1934 in Los Angeles, that

Hollywood went gaga over the Bronk’s physical contour. and those eagle-eyed directors saw in the old Nag a sure starter for the film futurity. But Bronk turned his back on the stuttering tintypes. The lure of the Garbos, Harlows, and Dresslers fell on deaf ears.

‘They ain’t going to make a Clark Gable outa me.’ grunted the Bronko as he let fly with his hind legs and kicked the proffered movie contracts back on top of the producers’ desks. ‘I’m going back to Minneapolis and throw a guy through a window.’⁷⁵

67. *Minneapolis Journal*, June 30, 1937.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Minneapolis Star*, January 29, 1938.

70. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

71. *Los Angeles Examiner*, August 11, 1937.

72. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 1937.

75. *Minneapolis Journal*, February 2, 1934.

The exaggerated images of Nagurski as a wild beast or primitive man, both on the football field and in the wrestling ring, reflected the American myth of the supremacy of the natural man. What caused the sudden growth of this myth in the 1930s? Much of the reason lay in the Depression itself. Historian Robert Sklar observed that, in the Depression, “Americans discovered their history and folklore all over again, hunting out the myths and memories that mattered most.” Faced with the grim realities revealed by the Depression—the inherent problems of the cities and factories, exploitation, and loss of moral value—Americans had to face the fact that they were no longer a rural pioneering culture, which could renew itself with fresh soil and new wilderness. Industrialism and urbanism were the new American environment. Even the most ardent critic of rural village values, Sinclair Lewis, reversed his position. In 1920, his book *Main Street* bitterly criticized the provincialism of his home town of Sauk Centre, Minnesota. The book was an astonishing best seller. Ten years later, he published *Dodsworth*, which said in essence that the Midwestern values of home and hearth which were nourished in small rural towns were not so bad after all. Many urban Americans took it to heart. The migration to cities in the 1920s reversed itself in the 1930s so that by 1935 there were more people than ever in the nation’s history living on farms, rural communities and in surrogate country villages—suburbs.”⁷⁶

By the 1930s the urban football fans and sportswriters of Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Omaha, and Kansas City did not see Nagurski as Minnesotans did earlier—as an affirmation of the values that they believed still characterized the state. They saw him in more nostalgic terms, representative of a last thread of American life, quickly being ground away by the clank and whirl of the Machine Age. While the urban dwellers who flocked to see Nagurski’s expositions both as a football player and wrestler could never hope to emulate his natural strength, they could appreciate it as a spectator. But what they could hope to imitate were the values that kept natural forces in balance—the pure values that represented the virtues of a frontier age nourished by the wilderness: family, faith, loyalty and appreciation of the land, and love of sport for its own sake. This “frontier pattern of thought,” as Roderick Nash described it, was reflected in the popular novels and literature of the time. “Their plots and protagonists operated according to time-honored standards of competition, loyalty and rugged individualism . . . The total effect was a comforting reaffirmation of the old American faith.” Nash attributed this popular feeling as rooted in the belief, as echoed by Frederick Jackson Turner, that “wilderness conditions were thought to underlie and sustain cherished American values” and that the passing of the frontier posed a threat to the vitality responsible for the special democratic character of American institutions. Without this close contact with

76. Sklar, *The Plastic Age*, 23; “Farm Population and Migration to and from Farms,” *Monthly Labor Review*, 41 (August 1935): 358–359.

wilderness, America was becoming over-overcivilized, endangering the existence of the institutions borne of the frontier. Out of this fear, Americans sought to preserve the benefits of wilderness through state and national parks, camping, city parks, and the ruralism of the suburbs. They could also live vicariously through heroes who personified these ideals. The popular heroes of the twenties and thirties—Western heroes such as Tom Mix, Buck Jones, Hoot Gibson, along with those in real life such as Charles Lindbergh and Bronko Nagurski—were seen as having superior physical and moral stature because of their association with the American frontier.⁷⁷

Exaggerations of Nagurski's physical prowess provided sportswriters with good copy, but his personal virtues based on his association with frontier America made him a hero to the national sports audience. At the same time as newspapers and magazines reported and embellished his sports exploits, they carried stories that focused on his qualities of sportsmanship. Unlike many of his contemporaries—Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, Red Grange—who had succumbed to the trappings of fame in their personal lives by yielding to the temptations of cashing in on their notoriety through movies, endorsements and personal vice, Nagurski adhered to what the public perceived as true sportsmanship—motivated not by money, but by the sheer love of the game. "Critics marvel at the spirit he displays in every game," a sportswriter observed in 1936, "the answer is the Big Nag loves football above all else, and it is his desire to give his best every time he goes on the field."⁷⁸ As sportswriter Dick Cullum wrote in 1942, he was "no mere mountain of coordinated muscle" but "one of the most genuinely admired athletes of his day, no more because of prowess, than because of character." He added that "he never did a mean thing" or "took an unfair advantage . . . he played to win, but never played to beat the other fellow or the other team."⁷⁹ At a Touchdown Club banquet in Nagurski's honor in Washington, D.C., in 1937, columnist Shirley Povich reported that he "squirmed uncomfortably in his chair," then got up and made "excuses for his speechmaking—and then—he drew down the house!"⁸⁰ It was the underlying virtue of humbleness in the face of fame that truly endeared him to both the press and fans alike. The key to understanding Nagurski was best expressed by teammate Red Grange: "He was a big gentle giant, sort of a county kind of guy and he never wanted to be anything else."⁸¹

Yet it was this country virtue that fans embraced. A reporter for the *Philadelphia Daily News* said it best in 1937: "Nagurski was something new in champions," he wrote, "a champion of life and family and home and decency as well as of the mat. It is so unusual [that] I point it out with

77. Nash, *The Nervous Age*, 80–82ff; John William Ward, "The Meaning of Lindbergh's Flight," *American Quarterly*, 1 (Spring, 1958), passive.

78. *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 11, 1942.

79. *Minneapolis Daily News*, May 27, 1942.

80. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

81. Daley interview with Grange.

emphasis.”⁸² The public was fascinated by the fact that Nagurski never moved to Chicago, choosing instead to return to International Falls at the end of each football season. They relished stories of him building a log cabin on a peninsula on Rainy Lake as a retreat. They soaked up tales of a banquet for him in International Falls that “served moose meat” at the Elks Hall with the stipulation that it “be as informal as possible because Bronko hates a lot of fuss.”⁸³ When Nagurski listed his hobbies as “fishing and taking apart a boat motor” and said he was suspicious of two-dollar bills, it only proved that despite his enormous talents, he was an ordinary guy.⁸⁴ Perhaps the one thing that reinforced his role as a representative of small-town values came in 1936 when he announced his engagement after a five-year courtship—not to a starlet or sophisticate as boxing champion Gene Tunney had—but to his hometown sweetheart, Eileen Kane, the daughter of an International Falls postmaster. The story and accompanying photograph of the couple appeared in major papers across the country, including *The Des Moines Register*, *The Detroit News*, *The Chicago American*, and the *Minneapolis Journal*. *The Duluth Herald* placed the announcement on its front page and gave it equal ranking to another major story—the abdication of England’s King Edward.” When his first child, Bronko Junior, was born the following year, that story was widely carried by national newspapers and appeared on the front page of the *Minneapolis Journal*.⁸⁶

Even if his fans could forgive his entry into wrestling—it was seen as a way of making ends meet as many others were doing during the Depression—George Halas could not. Halas became particularly concerned when Nagurski’s wrestling career began to overlap the football season. After 1934, Nagurski was frequently absent from practices during the football season because of a wrestling schedule that called for him to fly back just in time for the next game. The following year, Halas urged Nagurski to give up wrestling because of fear that it would exaggerate hip and calf injuries he had sustained and kept him out of most of the 1935 season.⁸⁷ By 1937, Nagurski hesitated to return to football because of his injuries. He changed his mind at the last minute when Halas offered the fullback “a salary that tops by several thousand dollars any ever paid a pro footballer before.”⁸⁸ Halas expressed relief in a telegram to Nagurski: I was glad to hear that you very much wanted to play football . . . Really, Bronk, after two years of indifferent football due to infection and disability, you owe it to yourself as well as the Club to play one more year.”⁸⁹ But by the end of the season, Halas had had

82. *Philadelphia Daily News*, clipping in Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

83. Unidentified clipping. Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Duluth Herald*, December 4, 1936.

86. *Minneapolis Journal*, December 26, 1937.

87. Halas to Nagurski, July 11, 1935, and March 11, 1936. Private collection of Tony Nagurski.

88. *Los Angeles Daily News*, August 5, 1937.

89. Halas to Nagurski, July 2, 1937. Private collection of Tony Nagurski.

enough. When Nagurski failed to show up for practice the week before the Championship game with Green Bay, he sent Bronko a reprimanding telegram: "As you know, this game Sunday is for the championship and we must have you here Thursday without fail . . . you must be here for practice otherwise entire season ruined because of terrible mental effect on players . . . you owe this to your teammates and Chicago fans and cannot let them down now."⁹⁰ Nagurski made the practice, but the Bears lost the championship game.

The following year, Nagurski asked for a major salary increase.⁹¹ Halas refused and issued an ultimatum: choose between football or wrestling.⁹² Nagurski announced his decision to retire from football "I'm 29 years old," he told a reporter. "getting too old for the game. I have about every injury that comes from football and I find I do not recuperate as rapidly as I did when I was younger."⁹³ Then he reaffirmed what his fans believed: he wanted to dedicate more time to his family and return to farming. He would still wrestle but told the press: "I positively refuse to go through with the backbreaking schedules that have been forced on other champions. I'll wrestle twice a week, but no more. That's one argument I've got to win."⁹⁴ Chicago lamented the loss of their star. *The Chicago Tribune* reported that the departure of the "mighty Bronko has left an unmistakable mark on the team. In other years, whenever they got in a jam, they could always let Bronko do it . . . they haven't reconciled themselves to the fact that they must win without Bronko from now on."⁹⁵

Four years later he announced his retirement from wrestling after one last benefit match in Minneapolis: "I'm all through," he told a reporter, "if I don't quit now, I may wind up a cripple. Money doesn't mean that much to me,"⁹⁶ Nagurski dedicated himself to full-time farming. Pictures of him feeding cattle and throwing hay ran in national newspapers occasionally, keeping his agrarian image alive. *The Minneapolis Journal* reported in 1942 that he had "no hired hands, 30 head of cattle, 1,000 poultry" and "does all the work himself." "I'm not going to give myself the chance to soften up," he told the same reporter, then put in 60 tons of hay on his 240-acre farm.⁹⁷

90. Halas to Nagurski, November 3, 1937. Private collection of Tony Nagurski.

91. He wanted \$6,000. Bankes, "Bronko Nagurski," 162. This would have amounted to a \$1,000 increase over that of his first year's salary. He received \$5,000 his first year, \$4,500 his second, \$3,700 from 1934 to 1936, \$5,000 in 1937. Contracts in private collection of Tony Nagurski.

92. *Chicago Daily News*, August 21, 1939.

93. *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, May 2, 1938.

94. Unidentified clipping, Nagurski Scrapbook, n.d.

95. *Chicago Tribune*, November 1, 1938. Sportswriters and fans hoped Nagurski would return to the Bears. A *Minneapolis Star* reporter lamented that football was Bronko's greatest love and couldn't "understand why Halas couldn't have made a slight exception in Nagurski's case." As late as 1940, the *Chicago Daily News* still continued reporting hopeful meetings between Nagurski and Halas: the "annual Halas-Nagurski conference staged every summer since the Bronko left... It was held with the same outcome... nothing serious yet." *Minneapolis Star*, August 14, 1939; *Chicago Daily News*, July 13, 1940.

96. *New York World Telegram*, June 5, 1942.

97. *Minneapolis Journal*, July 1942.

But the following year Nagurski received a letter from Ralph Brizzolara, secretary of the Bears, which opened with the words: "You may be surprised at this letter. Nevertheless it may be of interest to both of us."⁹⁸ The letter implored Nagurski to come out of retirement and play one more year with the Bears, who were suffering from a World War II manpower shortage.

Nagurski agreed to return on two conditions: if he could be allowed to come late after the harvest was in and after reassurances that he would only have to play tackle (he had doubts about his ability to be effective at his old position).

At the age of 35, Nagurski was once again a headliner. Newspaper headlines proclaimed "The Return of the Old Hero," renewing fading memories of the old star.⁹⁹ To deflect criticism that his return was a publicity stunt, a Chicago reporter wrote: "the Bears have signed him for inspirational purposes and to help coach the youngsters . . . but the fact is the rough-hewn Minnesota farmer is going to play a lot of tackle for the Bears this fall."¹⁰⁰

Nagurski's storied comeback sealed his legendary status. He played tackle until the final game of the season. On November 28, after falling behind the Chicago Cardinals 21-4 in the final game needed to win the Western Division championship, Nagurski was sent in as fullback late in the game. He returned to his old form, gaining 84 yards on 16 carries, singlehandedly crushing the Cardinals in the 24-1 Bear victory. He returned as fullback for the championship game against the Washington Redskins on December 19. With the game stalled in a 7-7 tie, Nagurski led a drive downfield, then scored the touchdown that put the Bears ahead for good. It was his last play as a professional. Bears quarterback Sid Luckman, whose passing engineered the 41-21 rout, was the official star of the game, but the sentimental hero was Nagurski. Coach Hunk Anderson said: "the old timer's mere presence, not to mention his powerful play, instilled confidence in the players that a thousand pep talks couldn't have effected."¹⁰¹ And Nagurski? After the game, he kept in character: "Well, I'm retiring again, it's not a game for a 35-year-old, and I can't listen to George Halas songs all my life."¹⁰² Like the Roman general Cincinnatus, he returned to his farm after his duties were done.

At the end of the 1943 season, *Collier's* magazine writer Stanley Frank made the first comparison of Nagurski to Paul Bunyan, the folk legend.¹⁰³ At the same time, there appeared in popular periodicals a series of publicity photographs of a macinaw-clad Nagurski carrying and chopping lumber with his two sons in the woods near International Falls. The Bunyanesque series was carried by Associated Press and appeared in national newspapers.

98. Ralph Brizzolara to Nagurski, July 23, 1943. Private collection of Tony Nagurski.

99. *Chicago Tribune*, October 10, 1943.

100. Unidentified clipping, 1943, Nagurski Collection, Pro Football Hall of Fame.

101. *Chicago Tribune*, December 26, 1943.

102. *Ibid.*

103. Frank, "Bronko Bucks Again," 34.



Nagurski as Paul Bunyan. Photos such as this help Permanently cast Nagurski as the larger-than-life northwoods folk hero. *Courtesy of Tony Nagurski*

Virtually all magazines, books and newspapers from that point on made some reference to him as a legendary northwoods folk hero. Magazine and newspaper profiles of this era generally followed the same pattern. After citing the usual legends and gridiron deeds, they made cursory references to wrestling and then highlighted his life in his rural hometown, his wife and six children, and his relation to nature. Norman Katov's biography in *Sport* magazine was a prime example:

The Big Fellow isn't one to force talk, but here, on his dock, sitting sprawled on the boards, he said, ". . . sometimes I like early morning when the sun is coming up. Sometimes I like it other times, but this is the place for me. Here on the lake. I can't live anywhere else. I got to wake up with the sound of the water. Except for school and pro ball and wrestling, I never went anywhere. Oh, across the lake for hunting. Yes, I go hunting, I get my deer. I get my birds."¹⁰⁴

After his final year with the Bears, Nagurski joined the backfield coaching staff at UCLA. When the entire coaching staff left at the end of the year after a dismal season, he returned to International Falls where he spent the rest of his life divorcing himself from his legend. He resumed farming, returned to wrestling, and occasionally supplemented his income with refereeing wrestling matches. In 1957, he sold his farm, but continued to wrestle within driving distance of International Falls. In 1958, at the age of 50, he finally retired from wrestling. Two years later, he purchased a gas station and operated it with the help of his sons until 1968. Nagurski seldom granted interviews, and his wife and family were particularly adept at screening him from curiosity seekers. When he did make a public appearance, it was usually connected with football. He attended the inaugural ceremonies of the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1963 (he was a unanimous choice as a charter member), and he sometimes attended Chicago Bear reunions. His trophies, all-time All-America teams distinctions, and Minnesota citizen awards were stored away in closets. What trophies were on display were used to hang keys or clothing. He never talked about his exploits to his children, and they grew up not really knowing the extent of his fame.¹⁰⁵

Yet even far removed from the mat and field, his legend persisted. It was said if Nagurski screwed on your gas cap, you would need a pipewrench to get it off. Another story told how he once accidentally sat on a fishing tackle box while guiding a fishing group and flattened it. When he offered to pay, the owner refused, preferring to hang it on his wall as a "box flattened by Nagurski."¹⁰⁶ Nagurski's efforts to shirk his fame created a paradox. The more he sought to lead an ordinary life, the more he was venerated. Minnesotans saw Nagurski as a state icon, a model of the human qualities that the state represented. In 1978, he was presented the Minnesotan of the Year award by the Minnesota Broadcasters' Association. When first notified of the honor, he turned it down after hearing that previous recipients included Vice Presidents Walter Mondale and Hubert Humphrey. "I don't belong with that

104. Katov, "Bronko the Great," 52-53.

105. Taped author interview with Kevin and Janice Nagurski, July 18, 1991, International Falls, Minnesota; interview with Tony Nagurski, July 14, 1992, St. Cloud, Minnesota.

106. Author interview with Jack Murray, International Falls, Minnesota, July 17, 1991.

bunch of big shots," he said, "I'm just a plain old football player." After being persuaded to accept the award, Nagurski was praised by Mondale: "Despite all the fame, he remembered who he was—a good citizen, a good family man, humble, responsible, a decent person."¹⁰⁷ When Nagurski died in 1990 at the age of 81, Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich, said he "represented the best of Minnesota."¹⁰⁸ But former Minnesota Vikings coach Bud Grant expressed the state's feeling best when he noted that Nagurski "transcended the sport of football entirely because of his nature He represented the people of the state well. He was a great image maker."¹⁰⁹

What is the meaning of Bronko Nagurski? In many ways he was a perfect embodiment of the new style of celebrity that emerged in the twenties and thirties. In 1944, literature critic Leo Lowenthal, charted the changes that took place in biographical articles in popular magazines between 1901 and 1941. In the first decades of the century, biographies tended to focus on scientists, statesmen, and captains of industry—all characterized as self-made successes. The purpose of these biographies, which Lowenthal called "idols of production," served an instructional purpose—you, too, can make it if you try hard enough. By the 1920s, he noted a distinct shift to what he called the "idols of consumption": stories of professional athletes and entertainers. The new stars all shared similar stories—they grew up in comparable oblivion, suffered personal hardship—until their great talents were discovered. Their success was not based on what they have achieved through perseverance but what happens to them. Lowenthal concluded that since the notables of the twenties and thirties were characterized by their unique talents, the only way Americans were able to relate to them was through similar personal characteristics—as fellow consumers. In this way, Americans could never emulate Nagurski's unique talents, but they could identify with the ideals he represented: importance of family, small town loyalty, and love of nature.¹¹⁰

Minnesotans saw him as a reaffirmation of the characteristics that exemplified the state. But what did Bronko Nagurski represent to sports audiences nationwide? The answer lies in understanding the needs of the audience and writers who created and then sustained his legend. Roger Rollin, a popular culture scholar, argues that "the mass media cannot make a celebrity a hero." That power, he points out, is reserved for the individuals within the mass audience. Numerous celebrities are paraded before the mass audience only to be rejected. "For reasons that are seldom conscious, and are ultimately personal" the mass audience will choose a hero. To achieve this status, a celebrity must symbolize and reinforce a nation's beliefs and attitudes. Only after a hero is chosen by the mass audience, do the famous, in turn, meet the

107. *The New York Times*, February 16, 1978.

108. Len Levine, "Bronko Remembered," *University of Minnesota Sportsnews* 1 (February 1990): 1.

109. *The Daily Journal*, International Falls, Minnesota, January 8, 1990.

110. Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture and Society*, (Palo Alto, California: Pacific Books, 1961): 125–126.

needs of the mass media—a business proposition. Rollin observes that once a hero becomes part of commercial culture, facts become unimportant and fantasy increases. “Whatever gratifies,” he points out, “is what counts.” What becomes important to the “celebrity struck” is that “they become able, consciously or unconsciously, to ‘project’ qualities which they believe themselves to possess upon the celebrity figure and . . . ‘introject’ qualities they associate with the celebrity into their own psychological personalities.” But real-life heroes have a drawback. Since they are human, they have human fallibilities—they can act contrarily to the public’s perception. Once this happens, the mass audience is suddenly called to the error of its own ways and idols fall from grace. Fictional characters, on the other hand, do not fall prey to the fragile nature of life unless they are directed to by their authors. Thus, Bronko Nagurski was fictionalized by American sportswriters for football and wrestling fans in the fleeting hope that the ideals he represented—that of the frontiersman of superior physical and moral virtue made pure through his association with the land—would never be lost. His mythology served a need to legitimate the growth of two American sports predicated on violence—football and wrestling—by associating it with the American wilderness. The casting of Nagurski in the role as a frontier hero could thereby appeal to sports fans, both rural and urban, through his reaffirmation of America’s uncomplicated beginnings; a product not of the city but of the farm, not of schools or technical training, but of individual freedom and talent borne of nature.¹¹¹

The 1984 Super Bowl in Tampa Bay was Nagurski’s last public appearance and served as a eulogy to his legend. A few days before the game, he gave a rare press conference to a standing-room-only crowd of reporters. He sat before them, his joints gnarled with arthritis, propped up with a cane. He replied in classic Nagurski style to their questions. Why’d you come? “To make a little money, maybe if they’re not looking, I can keep the coin after I flip it.” Was it true that he was discovered when Doc Spears saw him plowing without horses? “No, not really. I met the coach in Bemidji and he offered me a scholarship, but saw me with a plow? Saw me plow into the line, but that’s about it.” Did he crack the wall at Wrigley Field? “I can’t say for sure. I did hit the wall. They had a five-yard end zone . . . in one corner because it was a baseball park . . . I fell into the baseball dugout afterward. All that is true, but I never did check the wall for a crack.” On wrestling: “I didn’t like it. It was a sport where you worked every night and traveled a lot. We were getting out of the Depression . . . it was a way to make a living.” Were the matches rigged? Nagurski laughed, “Sometimes they were and sometimes they weren’t.” Asked about how fast he was in 1933, “fast enough.” About his size: “big enough.” But the most significant question

111. Roger Rollin, “The Lone Ranger and Lenny Skutnik: The Hero as Popular Culture” in Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick, *The Hero in Transition* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983): 18 *passim*.

came at the end: How does it feel to be a legend? “I just take it or leave it,” he said, “It doesn’t do anything for me.”¹¹²

At the end of the press conference, the reporters broke two precedents—they gave him a standing ovation, then crowded around for an autograph.¹¹³

112. Taped recording of Bronko Nagurski press conference, Tampa, Florida, January 19, 1984, Tony Nagurski Collection.

113. *Minneapolis star and Tribune*, January 20, 1984.