

Book Reviews

Umphlett, Wiley Lee. *Creating the Big Game: John W. Heisman and the Invention of American Football*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992. Pp. xiv. 269. Notes, photograph, appendix, bibliography. index. \$49.95.

The Heisman Trophy is presented annually to the “best” college football player of the year while John Heisman remains little known. Wiley Umphlett’s *Creating the Big Game* will help to resurrect Heisman from the mists of history, but the volume has a somewhat presumptuous subtitle: “John Heisman and the Invention of American Football.” Heisman was a successful coach with a winning record of over 70 percent. However, he certainly had little to do with the invention of American football. He was, though, one of a number of big-time professional football coaches who promoted themselves and the dominant college game from the 1890s to the 1920s. He was especially successful in coaching three Southern teams: Auburn, Clemson, and Georgia Tech. Even then, it took Heisman over a dozen years at Georgia Tech to win a Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association championship. His return to the North to coach Penn and to the Southwest with Rice diminished his coaching record. He never had a losing season until his 36th and last coaching campaign.

Umphlett claims that Heisman “did more to refine the football coach’s public image than any other individual of his day” (p. 247). If this is so, it seems strange that he is not remembered like some other coaches of his day—Walter Camp (who was head coach at Yale several times, contrary to Umphlett’s claim); Fielding H. Yost of Michigan; Amos Alonzo Stagg of Chicago; “Pop” Warner of Carlisle, Pitt, and Stanford; Gil Dobie of Washington, Navy, and Cornell; or Knute Rockne of Notre Dame. Heisman may not be in the league with Stagg, Warner, or Rockne, but he does deserve a biography if for no other reason than the Heisman trophy was named after him, following his 1929 appointment as athletic director of the Downtown Athletic Club in New York City. In addition, he was among a growing list of well-paid coaches hired by colleges to win football games. In the process, the colleges further professionalized and commercialized a game that had become “big-time” prior to the dominance of professional coaches.

What, according to Wiley Umphlett of the University of West Florida Sociology Department, did Heisman contribute to the game of football?

- As a coach, he was an “uncompromising autocrat” (p. xiii).
- He was “one of the first to ‘scout’ an opponent” (p. 51) (though East schools scouted before Heisman attended Brown).
- He invented the hidden ball play in 1895.

- He introduced the backfield “jump shift” to gain an offensive advantage and to draw the opponents off-side.
- His team defeated Cumberland 220–0 to set a scoring record that still exists.
- His team defeated two teams, Wake Forest and Furman, on the same day in 1917.
- He twice presided over the Football Coaches Association.
- His 190 victories, by Umphlett’s updated calculations, ranks Heisman 85 victories ahead of Rockne but behind “Bear” Bryant by 133, Stagg by 124, and Warner by 123.
- Heisman was “the foremost proponent of the forward pass, a lone voice at first . . .” (p. xiii).

Umphlett’s contention that Heisman was a “lone voice” for the legalization of the forward pass is not proven effectively. Using no primary sources, except for Heisman’s own statements written in the late 1920s Umphlett concludes that Heisman was the leading proponent for this important change in the modernization of football. While Heisman may have been an early advocate of the forward pass, he was not witness to “the first use of the forward pass,” that Heisman believed occurred in the 1895 North Carolina—Georgia game. Walter Camp more likely made the first forward pass in a Yale game with Princeton, the first championship Thanksgiving Day game in 1876. In that game the official did not know if Camp made a lateral or an illegal forward pass just as he was being tackled, so the referee agreed to flip a coin. Yale won the toss, and the resulting touchdown and extra point following the pass was allowed, giving Yale the victory. It was probably not unusual for a ball to be thrown forward in the period before its legalization in 1906, and Heisman was certainly not the first to witness it. Whether Heisman was the first to advocate the forward pass legalization is not proven with any degree of authority. Umphlett claims that Heisman began campaigning actively for the forward pass in 1903 when he began writing directly to Camp. But Umphlett does not peruse the Heisman correspondence in the Camp Papers to verify Heisman’s avowal (p. 89). Heisman claimed later that Camp did not reply to him, but it was highly unusual for Camp not to reply to the hundreds of people who wrote him. The forward pass material is illustrative of the lack of intense archival searches that likely would have made a sounder book. There is no evidence that Umphlett himself visited the archives of Oberlin, Butchel (University of Akron), Auburn, Clemson, Georgia Tech, Penn. Washington and Jefferson, or Rice—the institutions at which Heisman coached.

The lack of in-depth archival research of university presidential papers, governing board materials, athletic department correspondence, and student newspapers leaves the reader asking for more meat on the body of Heisman. We know almost nothing of Heisman’s dealing with college administrators or governing boards. We know little about student or general public reactions to

Heisman's public tirades against game officials. We know nothing about Heisman's attitude toward scheduling opponents or why the coach was generally undefeated against teams during the first half of the schedule, and only mediocre late in the season. We know little of his training methods and nothing of his recruiting methods. We have little evidence from anyone other than Heisman of his attitude toward athletes as students, only an unsubstantiated statement that "Heisman always placed academics far ahead of athletics" (p. 38). And we know very little about Heisman's family life, including his two marriages. It was unfortunate for Umphlett that the family did not open up Heisman's personal papers, a likely source for fleshing out the coach's life.

The style of writing and accuracy should be noted. The volume is basically an easy read, but there is a somewhat annoying repetitiveness of chapter subtitling in three areas: "Heisman and the [year] Season"; "The National Scene [year]"; and "The National Game [year]." It might have been more appropriate to weave the three areas together, leaving out material that did not touch the development of Heisman and football. There appear to be few factual errors. Several could be noted, however. The Harvard Stadium, built in 1903, did not seat close to 60,000, but less than 40,000 (p. 72). Fielding H. Yost came to Michigan from Stanford, not Kansas (p. 74). Percy Haughton was not the first to hire assistants to coach specific positions (p. 99). It was done at Harvard before Haughton. Donating privately for college athletic facilities was a common funding source in the East well before Atlanta businessman John Grant donated \$50,000 for a stadium at Georgia Tech in 1913 (p. 131). Paul Robeson attended Rutgers, not Princeton, in the 1910s (p. 134). Freshman athletes had been used in football dating back to the first Rutgers-Princeton game of 1869 and were not used for the first time during World War I (p. 148).

In *Creating the Big Game*, Wiley Umphlett has a tendency to idealize the past. The author is caught between his dedicatory praise of American football pioneers whose "vision and commitment" brought forth big-time football and his distaste for the professionalized atmosphere they brought with them. As Heisman chased the dollar, moving from one position to the next until he received a \$9,000, five-year contract at Rice, he typified the commercial aspect of college sport. He was no more mercenary than Knute Rockne, who broke contracts with Iowa and Columbia to remain at Notre Dame for \$10,000 annually. But Heisman's eight coaching positions, changing jobs on the average of every four years, does not show commitment. Yet it may contribute to what Umphlett ends his volume on, the "decadent condition of intercollegiate athletics today" (pp. 250-251). If it is decadent, a question should be raised: Did Heisman himself contribute his due share?