

SPERBER, MURRAY. *Shake Down The Thunder: The Creation of Notre Dame Football*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1993. Pp. xiii+634. Notes, index, illustrations, bibliography. \$25.00 cb. Reissued in soft cover with updated preface. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. \$24.95 pb.

Much of the book-format literature on college football since World War II has been in the form of institutional histories, and few, if any, of these extended much beyond season-by-season treatments of a school's gridiron past. A notable exception to this view was Robin Lester's excellent work, *Stagg's University*, published in 1995.

Two years before Lester's book, Professor Murray Sperber of Indiana University set out to produce a history of Notre Dame football that was not filled with "the minutiae of the contests," but rather was to be a tale of "the rise of big-time college sport" (p. xix) at the Catholic university in South Bend.

Well, in *Shake Down The Thunder* Sperber nevertheless still managed to give us far too many meaningless game scores and on-the-field details, tells us such trivia as that Notre Dame used eighty-two players in a 1938 win over a mediocre Kansas team (p. 456), and even shares the opinions of an assistant coach's wife about the win over USC in 1939 (p. 462). Mix in the author's usual rambling style of writing, and it takes him 501 pages of text just to reach 1941. So even though this is a very good book, a serious rival to *Stagg's University* it is not.

Having said that, it is important to note that *Shake Down The Thunder* clearly is the best researched and most comprehensive history of Notre Dame football for the years prior to 1941—with nearly three hundred pages predictably being given over to the reign of Knute Rockne as the school's revered gridiron leader. To his credit, Sperber spent the time and energy necessary to extensively study the manuscript collections at Notre Dame—something that no previous Notre Dame or Rockne historian had been willing to do—and his work in *Shake Down The Thunder* basically overshadows all of the many earlier attempts at telling the Rockne story. Yet it all just seems a bit too much, although casual college football historians will no doubt find a good deal of new information.

Sperber's overall mission—as indicated in the book's sub-title—was to examine the creation and growth of Notre Dame football into one of the intercollegiate game's institutional icons. And so, the author picks up the school's football story in 1887 and proceeds to follow it through a complex tangle of frequent struggles between the administration and athletic department personnel (read that as "Rockne"), as Notre Dame sought to establish a balance between "its athletic prominence and its academic aspirations" (p. xii). Sperber writes, "By 1900, Notre Dame's culture of athleticism was in place" (p. 14), yet it is not until Rockne becomes head football coach in 1918 that the race for the top begins in earnest.

In the years before World War I, Notre Dame football was basically regarded as small-time. Yet this did not stop the school from applying for admission to the Western Conference (now the Big Ten) by the late 1890s and again in 1908, but on both occasions Notre

Dame was denied admission. At the time, the Rev. Thomas Crumley of Notre Dame described the battles for conference admission as "theological rather than athletic" (p. 18), a charge which would again be made by the school's president, the Rev. Matthew Walsh, in 1923 (p. 140).

Attempts by Notre Dame to join the Western Conference were again rebuffed in 1913 and 1926, both incidents apparently motivated again by an anti-Catholic bias according to school officials and Rockne. In fact, after awhile it seems that whenever there was any disagreement between Rockne and Fielding Yost of Michigan and/or Amos Alonzo Stagg of Chicago, Sperber rolls out charges that anti-Catholic sentiments or professional jealousies were the motivating factors. Even allowing for the religious bias that prevailed against Catholics in much of America at the time, this soon becomes tedious reading and gives no recognition to the fact that Rockne's illegal recruiting efforts during the 1920s—no secret amongst college football insiders—or his continued challenges to the game's playing rules with his shift formations, might have had some influence upon athletic officials at other universities.

Otherwise, Sperber does an extremely thorough job of digging into the inner workings of Notre Dame football during the Rockne era. Notable is Sperber's coverage of Rockne's ongoing efforts to avoid scheduling other Catholic universities—a practice launched by Jesse Harper after 1913. Rockne wanted no part of sharing the gridiron spotlight in the eyes of the country's growing Catholic population, and he believed that Notre Dame had nothing to gain by winning games against other parochial schools, all which sought to emulate Notre Dame's success.

Other aspects of Rockne's reign which Sperber examines include the coach's relationship with various sportswriters, his attitudes toward the reform movement aimed at college football, his careful construction of a national coaching network of ex-Notre Dame men, and Rockne's inclination for entertaining offers—and even signing contracts—to coach at other universities.

After Rockne's tragic passing in early 1931, the head coach position at Notre Dame was turned over to Heartley "Hunk" Anderson, and there probably never was a man in the history of sports with less of a chance at succeeding in the shadow of a legend. Sperber does such an effective job of describing the tumultuous three years of Hunk's tenure that we almost feel sorry for the acerbic Anderson. Elmer Layden, a member of Notre Dame's legendary Four Horsemen backfield of the 1920s, is appointed to head up the Fighting Irish program in 1934, and for a time the diplomatic coach actually has the alumni believing that the second coming may be at hand for Notre Dame football. But ultimately he also falls from favor when national championships are not forthcoming by 1940—the year Sperber defines as the end of the Rockne era.

In 1941 Notre Dame hired Frank Leahy—a former Irish player—away from Boston College, to assume the mantle of head football coach. Sperber describes this act as the defining line "between the past and the future of Notre Dame football" (p. 498), and thus the end of the creation period for the school's big-time gridiron business. Personally, I believe that Leahy's tenure, which lasted eventually through 1953, was very much also a part of Notre Dame's transformation into its modern-day image. Leahy was able to restore the previous glitter of success that had been missing since Rockne—when some were

beginning to question if it might ever be—and he established the foundations that would always insure that Notre Dame had the potential to maintain that success.

Throughout *Shake Down The Thunder* (now reissued by Indiana University Press), Sperber makes it clear that he is not fooled by the mythology that has risen up around Rockne, and ultimately he also conveys his great respect for the fine academic reputation Notre Dame has forged for itself. All in all, *Shake Down The Thunder* is a good piece of work on college football history, and one that belongs in the library of any collegiate sport historian.

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