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# Old Ironhead: A Brief Biographical Portrait of an American Sporting Hero

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Conventional wisdom held by some is that the study of history is simply the study of the lives of great men and women. Surely, there can be little denial that in many ways the biographies of America's sporting heroes and heroines are important threads in the fabric of American sport and physical education history. On such biography is that one pertinent to Roy William Johnson, classic example of American Horatio Algerism, disciple of Fielding Yost and, perhaps most importantly, architect of institutional sport and physical education in the American Southwest with particular application to The University of New Mexico.

An investigation into the life of Roy Johnson is a journey into aspects of the history of intercollegiate athletics at the University of Michigan, an analysis of a "doughboy's" role in the trench warfare and poison gas atmospheres of World War I battlefields and, even more appropriately, a survey of the growth and development of sport and physical education in the American Southwest and The University of New Mexico during the exciting, depressing, and crisis years of the 1920's, the 1930's and the 1940's, respectively.

Roy Johnson, affectionately and exasperatingly known by friend and adversary alike as "Old Ironhead," was born of Swedish immigrant parents in 1892 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He became an all-around high school athlete of recognized excellence during the 1907-1912 era, who somehow found the time and energies from his play and studies to provide fundamental support to a widowed mother and older sister. Johnson matriculated at the University of Michigan in the autumn of 1915, at which time he embarked on a college career distinguished by its versatility and achievement. A better than average student, Roy Johnson was a two time varsity letter winner in Wolverine football, playing at tackle on the Fielding Yost-coached elevens of 1916 and 1919. Johnson was a stalwart member of the Maize and Blue track and field squad, setting several records in the quartermile event and leading the Michigan mile relay team to victory in the 1917 edition of the prestigious Drake Relays. Johnson, a baseball player of exciting promise to professional scouts during his high school days, played a substitute first basemen's role on the Michigan nine, behind the incomparable George Sisler, later a claimant to the title "baseball history's finest first baseman." But it was in the then popular but long since defunct sporting phenomenon known as the Collegiate Physical Efficiency Competitions. that Johnson represented his

university with the most unique distinction. In 1916 he defeated Boose of Yale in the finals of the light heavyweight division of the National Intercollegiate Championships.

Roy Johnson's college days were interrupted by World War I. He was a member of one of the first American Expeditionary Force groups to arrive in France. From September 1917 until the War's conclusion in the autumn of 1918, and for a rehabilitation period of 10 months in French hospitals, Johnson remained in France. An enviable record of service to his country was documented by a battlefield commission and General John J. Pershing's personally conferred unit citation for "bravery in action."

Johnson returned to Michigan in the autumn of 1919 and graduated in the spring of 1920. Beset by continuing eye discomfort resulting from the effects of phosgene gassing on the Western Front, and fearful that he had contracted the dreaded tuberculosis, Johnson was drawn towards considering the healthful living environments of the dry and sunny southwestern United States. Partly the result of a personal endorsement from Yost, Johnson secured a position as the sole athletic coach and physical educator at the youthful but emerging University of New Mexico. From 1920 until his retirement in 1957, Johnson applied himself with zealous application towards helping to mould and organize the sport and exercise ethic of New Mexicans in particular and Southwesterners in general. Known as "Old Ironhead" because of his unyielding stance on application of principle and for his gruff, unbending and sometimes aloof bearing, Johnson's career at New Mexico was documented by uniqueness. In 1929 Johnson became the first football coach in America to use the airplane to fly his team to an intersectional game. In the early 1930's Johnson's experience with night football play and subsequent concern over the color of the football led to the introduction of the white pigskin for games played under arc lights. Together with J. F. "Pop" McKale of the University of Arizona, Johnson formed the Border Conference in 1931, ancient forerunner of today's Western Athletic Conference.

Roy W. Johnson's career can appropriately be called colorful, filled with historical "firsts" and, above all, documented by the words *integrity* and *spirit*, moving a Westerner of prominence to state on the occasion of the Ironhead's retirement:

I have heard many fine things about you  
and to tell the truth I have heard no one  
say a derogatory remark. Honor to your name!



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