

SPANNING THE NATIONS

Coach: Locker Room Folk Hero, Champion of Faith, Family and Football

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Knute Rockne. Vince Lombardi, “Bear” Bryant, “Papa Bear” Halas. and a handful more coaches have become locker-room folk heroes. The anecdotes, tales, bromides, and jokes that surround these football bossmen comprise a rich oral tradition neglected by folklorists and historians.

Stories about coaches stretch back into the mists of the earliest college and professional games. Much football folklore, in fact, centers around the head coach, especially his inspirational speeches to spur the team on to victory. Notre Dame’s Knute Rockne made these rousing speeches famous with his emotional appeal “to win one for the gipper.” Earlier, Harvard University’s Percy Houghton had earned a reputation for inspiring the Crimson. According to one traditional tale, he wanted to dramatize his intense desire to defeat Yale. So in the middle of his dispeptic description of Yale, the trainer handed him a bull dog, a relative of the Eli’s mascot, which Houghton then strangled and flung into a corner.

The lore that surrounds professional coaches more often concerns their tough discipline, their supernatural powers, and their dedication to winning. The greatest number of these tales circulate about Vince Lombardi, coach of the Green Bay Packers. One typical story goes: “A football player died and went to heaven. He noticed a team of angels scrimmaging while a short fellow stood on the sidelines and yelled at them, so he asked St. Peter, “Who’s that? “Oh, that’s God. He thinks he’s Vince Lombardi.”

Tales abound in the locker room about the coach rivaling Oral Roberts or any other healer with his ability to wipe away bruises, knit together bones, and exorcise pain. The medical skills are summed-up in George Allen’s rule: “If you can walk, you can play.”

What kind of behavior do coaches require? Essentially coaches place the heaviest emphasis on traditional values - hard work, discipline, winning, and pride, rather than fun, participation, and self-awareness of the body. The coach demands exactly those characteristics that have made him a folk hero. He shouts repeatedly about the three essentials in a player’s life - faith, family, and football. Players, and a few coaches,

recognize that the order is often reversed during the season, but team prayers, military displays, and the national anthem keep the faith, and many curfews and restrictions are reduced for married players, so that family receives a tip of the hat. Thus the locker room folk hero, the coach, epitomizes the American traditional creed expressed succinctly as faith, family, and profession-in this case, football. “Win One for the Gipper,” rallies the players to affirm the national culture.

This paper considers the coach as a folk hero and a model for success. It results from research begun in the summer, 1978 at at National Endowment for Humanities summer seminar for college teachers at Indiana University.