

KNUTE ROCKNE'S PRO FOOTBALL ROOTS

By Emil Klosinski

If the game of football survives a millenium, a sure bet would be that the name of Knute Rockne will endure along with it, as well.

Rockne coached Notre Dame from a four game, wartime abbreviated season in 1918, on through to his final national championship season of 1930. It was during this span of time that both Rockne and Notre Dame skyrocketed to national pro minence. Rockne had five unbeaten, untied seasons and his lifetime winning percentage of .881 ranks at the top of the list of both college and professional coaches.

Rockne played high school football for North West Division High in Chicago, but he saw little action as a third string 110 pound end. Rock said on several occasions that his love for football did not begin in high school but on the sandlots of his neighborhood in Chicago. He played end for the Logan Square Tigers. This football activity came about during the interim between finishing high school and entering Notre Dame -- a period of four years. Rockne never did get his high school diploma because he had skipped too many days of school and in order to enroll at Notre Dame, he had to take an entrance exam which he passed with flying colors. In high school, track was Knute's forte and the reason for his truancy. Instead of attending school, Rockne would be in Humboldt Park practicing the 100-yard dash or he'd take along a clothesline pole and practice vaulting fences; sometimes he would be in the basement of Cherry Place where would-be boxers practiced on punching bags, footwork and head feints.

Baseball's Rube Waddell and Mordecai "Three-Finger" Brown were Knute's heroes, but when he saw Walt Eckersall in action as the quarterback for the University of Chicago, he knew he wanted to be a quarterback and emulate the great Eckersall. Rock didn't get a chance to play quarterback with the Logan Square Tigers and had to accept playing end.

The Tigers as well as some of the other area teams had an odd assortment of equipment. Rockne's friend, Johnny Devine, said that those teams picked up the discards from the area high schools and the University of Chicago. There were slightly torn moleskin pants, jerseys with holes and patches on them and shoes that had seen their best days.

Probably the first game Rockne played in which money was involved was against arch rivals, the Avondales. Each team -- the Tigers and the Avondales -- collected a kitty from its own players, and the team winning the game would take the pot and divide it equally among its players. When Rockne joined the Barefoot Athletic Club and played, it was the first time he received money from a pool to which he did not have to contribute. The big game for the district championship pitting the Barefoot A.C. against the Hamburg Athletic Club saw Rockne's team subsidized by a Logan Square saloon keeper and also a butcher. Each player of the Barefoot team was to receive five dollars, win or lose. The saloon keeper was Irish and the butcher was a Swede, so it was fitting that both contributed a monetary incentive because Logan Square was primarily an Irish/Scandinavian neighborhood. Incidentally, five dollars in 1909 was considered a lot of money to a working stiff.

Rockne worked four years in the U.S. Post office in Chicago and saved a thousand dollars to attend the University of Illinois, but his friends, Johnny Devine and Johnny Plant, persuaded him to enroll at Notre Dame. Rockne almost immediately became a mainstay of the Irish track squad as a pole vaulter and a dash man and earned his letter, but he did not fare well in football. Shorty Longman the Notre Dame coach, was a belligerent and impatient man who at first glance made up his mind, and permitted no subsequent event or redemption to change it.

Longman placed Rockne at fullback and sent him out with the scrubs to scrimmage the regulars. Rockne, unfamiliar with the position, did nothing right. He fumbled; he completely missed the ball in trying to punt, and he was thrown for a 15 yard loss in attempting to run the ball. Longman dismissed Rock from the scrubs and sent him back to play inter-hall football.

It was in Rockne's junior year after Jack Marks replaced Longman that Knute came into his own. In 1912, Rockne became a regular end and did so well that his teammates named him captain for 1913. Jack

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Marks had an unbeaten season in 1912 and left Notre Dame for greener pastures on the strength of his success. He was replaced by Jess Harper who managed to coach Notre Dame to another undefeated season with the help of Captain Knute Rockne and a good quarterback named Gus Dorais.

In the pre-NFL days, the independents or "pros" of that era would hire a college star to play in a particular must-win game or some area championship contest. The use of college ringers was prevalent, and many a college star would play sub rosa on a Sunday afternoon using an assumed name and picking up some extra cash. Knute did just that.

Chet Grant, who spent almost a lifetime with intermittent and diverse stints at Notre Dame, was a field reporter for the South Bend Tribune in his pre-Notre Dame days. He covered everything from funerals to weddings and anything else assigned to him or come-upon by him. Sunday was Chet's day off, but on one Sunday, he decided to make the trip with the South Bend Huebners when asked to do so by his friend, John Gruber, the manager of the Huebner team. He remembered Rockne catching a pass from Kaz Boinski to set up the only score. Chet didn't know how much Rockne got paid for his afternoon of work, but he thought it was more than any of the other Huebner players had received. Chet wasn't sure but he thought the opponents were either Ft Wayne or Wabash.

One other verifiable appearance of Rockne playing as a ringer in a game for the pros while attending Notre Dame was in 1913. George Greenburg, a South Bender, was playing for a Michigan team against the Fort Wayne Friars and during the pregame warmups saw a Friar whose movements seemed familiar to him. George wanted to get a better look, so he went up close to the player and sure enough, it was Rockne.

"Rock!! What the hell are you doing here?" Greenburg asked in a surprised and loud tone of voice.

"Sheeesh ... I'm doing the same thing you are George, but try to remember -- my name is Jones ...okay?" Rockne replied.

Both Greenburg and Rockne had boxed for the same athletic club in South Bend on the preliminary cards; Greenburg was a light-heavyweight and Rockne was in a lower weight class. Boxing was not a varsity sport at Notre Dame, so no one there paid attention to boxing on the South Bend scene; Rockne nevertheless used the alias of Frank "Jab" Brown. When he boxed in the Gary-Hammond area in the summer, he was Kid Williams.

Rockne was always scraping for money. He did not enter Notre Dame on any scholarship, so any place and almost any way he could pick up a buck, he would do it. Probably the most compelling reason for Rockne playing in those pro games was fiscal urgency. His father died in 1912 and Rock felt the obligation to support the family was now his. He also worried about his mother whose health was below par at that time. Rockne made up his mind to quit school and go to work, but his oldest sister talked him out of it, and he returned to Notre Dame.

In 1913, the Muessel Brewing Company of South Bend decided that the best way to advertise was by sponsoring a football team. The Company wanted a good one to be associated with its name and felt that the mature captain-elect from Notre Dame, Knute Rockne, might just be the right man to organize and coach the team to the extent of his availability. The Company realized that his school work and Notre Dame football came first. South Bend business men, Frank Witucki and John Smogor served as the liaison men who persuaded Rockne to accept the job.

Rockne's first coaching job wasn't at Notre Dame therefore, but with a South Bend pro team. And it was with the Muessel Brewers that Rockne began developing his coaching techniques. It is not known what sort of a stipend Rockne received from the Muessel Company, but the old Muessel players in a long ago interview, speculated that Rock received anywhere from \$10 to \$25 per coaching session. Notre Dame played its first three games at home, thus Rockne was on the Muessel sidelines for the their first three Sunday afternoon games.

How did Rockne do in his first stint as a coach? Well, his Muessel pro team was undefeated and the only blemish was a tie with the South Bend Century Club. The Brewers were called the Secondary Champions and the reason for this title was the fact that the Huebner team claimed the Indiana State Championship, because The Huebners played area as well as down state teams, while the Muessels played teams within a tri-county area. Huebners did split games with the two perennial Indiana

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powerhouses, the Fort Wayne Friars and the Wabash A.A., but those two clubs had an additional loss on their records, thus the South Bend Tribune proclaimed the Huebners to be the State Champs, and rewarded the unbeaten Muessel team with the Secondary Champions title.

Rockne graduated in 1914 and became an assistant coach at ND. Although 1913 was an undefeated season for Jess Harper, he welcomed additional coaching help from Rockne. Also in 1914, Rockne had acquired a bride -- Bonnie Skiles-- and added the responsibility of coaching the Muessel Brewers and the Silver Edge Lagers that year.

The Muessel Brewing Company had a chance to acquire the Indiana State Champion Huebners team, and did, renaming it Silver Edge, after the company's other popular beer. Knute immediately accepted the additional chore of coaching the Silver Edge team along with his Muessel team, both teams representing the Muessel Brewing Company.

After finishing practice at Notre Dame, Rockne would hop into his little Overland to conduct practise sessions with both teams. Laurel Street School had a well lighted playground as did St. Stephens School which was separated from Laurel by two houses in between. One team would practice on one marked and lined field while the second team did the same on the other. Rockne took on Notre Dame sophomore sensation, halfback Stan Cofall, as an assistant and both of them alternated between the two squads, teaching whatever Rock had planned for that particular session. Rockne signed a memorandum to the effect that he would receive \$300 for the season and his assistant would get \$100. An additional \$50 expense money for each made the entire deal worth \$500.

Rockne had nothing to do with the game scheduling for his teams. Kaz Boinski, the manager and captain of the Silver Edges, and Slicie Niezgodski, the Muessel manager, did the scheduling. However, Rockne, as coach, was a spokesman for both teams and would usually reveal his game plan after summoning a reporter to watch the practice sessions. When the Silver Edges were preparing for the Fort Wayne Friar game, the Tribune covered the story thusly:

"The Silver Edge team will travel to Fort Wayne tomorrow morning to engage the Friars in a game which will go far to clear up the state independent title." Then the paper went on to say that if the Edges won, they would reschedule the Wabash A.A. team which they played earlier in a scoreless tie. The Ripmore A.C. of Chicago game would be cancelled the following Sunday to accommodate the Wabash return game. The article continued: "Knute Rockne has been giving the Silver Edge squad strenuous workouts this week including drill in some fancy plays he picked up at Yale. The Friars have been practicing an open game, but the Benders promise to go them one better with some bewildering Canadian Rugby tactics behind the line of scrimmage. The Edges are improving under Rockne's tutelage and look like the best independent bet in the state."

The background behind those rugby plays that Rockne was installing for the Friar game was that ND played Yale and lost its first game in three years. Yale, using a multiple of laterals behind the line of scrimmage, disarrayed the the Irish defense and won the game by a score of 28 to 0. In those days, there were no hash marks on the field between sidelines and the ball was placed into play wherever the player was tackled on the previous play. So, roaming from sideline to sideline, the Eli backs would lateral the ball to trailing backs and each lateral would draw defenders until there wasn't anyone left. The back who caught the last lateral found a clearing and would turn downfield for a huge gain.

As a result of that loss, Coach Harper received angry telegrams and letters from ND's alumni. What irked the alumni most was that Notre Dame was unable to score. Harper decided to install a variation of a shift he learned while playing for Amos A. Stagg. That was the beginning of the Notre Dame shift that Rock later improved and used successfully at Notre Dame during his entire coaching career. Knute Rockne instructed Stan Cofall to teach the shift to the Muessel team while Rockne gave attention to the Edges for the entire week because the Friar game had bearing on the state championship.

The Silver Edges beat the Friars 22 to 12. The Friars, not only lost the game, but they also lost a great deal of money in bets. They charged that the Silver Edge team had five Notre Dame "ringers" in its lineup. The Friars followed up on the rumor with the aid of Fort Wayne newspapermen who made a thorough investigation. They obtained the names of the five players and relayed them to the Notre Dame officials. After an investigation, on November 17, 1914, Notre Dame announced the suspension of five athletes but no names were given. If any of Notre Dame's priests read anything in the sport pages of the local papers, they surely missed reading about the Edges team and Rock coaching it. It was not until

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December that ND officials found out about Rockne's role in the affair. He was reprimanded and told to curtail his pro football activity.

With all the publicity Rock was getting as a coach of the Silver Edge team, it didn't take a genius to figure out that he was involved in recruiting the ND ringers. These were actually Notre Dame freshmen whom Rockne felt would get some good experience and would pick up a little cash. The first to "squeal the deal" were the five displaced Edges' players. Pride may have had something to do with it but the money they missed out on was the moving force. The South Bend Tribune in reporting the practice sessions of the Edges for the Friar game mentioned only one new player who played for the first time the previous week against Wabash in that tie game. He was quarterback "W. Smith." The following year, The Edges' players discovered who "Smith" was when they saw ND play. It was Jimmy Phelan who became Notre Dame's first string quarterback in 1915, '16, and '17 and the team captain in his senior year.

Rockne made a promise in 1914 to John Smogor that he would coach John's South Bend Athletic Club in 1915. At an organizational meeting held in John Smogor's office in August, Rockne said that due to circumstances beyond his control, he could not coach any team outside of his Notre Dame duties. The Athletics team was to be made up of the better players from the Muessel and Silver Edge teams. The Athletics without a coach but with Rockne's previous tutoring under their belts, were undefeated and claimed the Indiana state championship.

After a year's hiatus, Rock returned to coaching the pros. In 1916, some of the Athletics players were offered inducements to play for a downtown club composed of South Bend's business and professional community. The Jolly Fellows Club or the JFC's prevailed upon Rockne to coach their new team. Rockne was happy to see some of his players from the Muessel and Silver Edge teams on the JFC roster. Rockne's coaching appearances with JFC team in comparison with his Muessel Brewing Company stint were minimal, averaging about twice a week. No one knew what sort of financial arrangements were agreed upon between Rockne and the JFC'S.

J. Smogor, as a West side business man, was also a member of the downtown club. He was designated as team manager by the board of directors based on his previous experience with the Muessel Company teams and the South Bend A's. Immediately in the summer of 1916, Smogor began contacting his counterparts of various teams and by the end of August, he had arranged a ten game schedule with an open date near its end for a rematch with a team played previously if it meant a championship. Beginning September 17 and ending November 26, the schedule had two Illinois and two Ohio teams supposedly locked in. In those days, games were scheduled only a week or two in advance.

Rockne's 1916 JFC team won eight and lost two. One loss was embedded deeply in the memories of the JFC team members who had been interviewed during a time when they were still with us.

Rockne, whose duties at Notre Dame precluded travelling with the team, suggested that the team leave South Bend for Rockford, Illinois, on Saturday instead of departing in the wee hours of Sunday morning so that the team would be well rested. The JFC's were to play the Rockford A.A.C. team which happened to be one of the better pro teams of Illinois.

The team arrived in Rockford and checked in the hotel around supper time. Smogor gave the team some "eating" money and the 17 team members in small groups departed to get some supper. That was a mistake! All of them went out on a toot, barely making it back to the hotel in the early hours of the morning. With hangovers, stomach aches and the rest of the symptoms associated with over-imbibing, they set out for Kishwaukee Park to play their game.

Rockford won by three touchdowns and the results of the JFC's drinking were clearly visible. As a South Bend halfback made a touchdown, he dropped to his knees and vomited in the end zone. Another player, after assisting in making a tackle, ran off the field and into the locker room. He had diarrhea and crapped in his pants. Also three players were injured and were out for the rest of the game. Adding to this debacle was the fact that two players couldn't be roused from their stupor and were left behind at the hotel. When the game ended, there were exactly eleven JFC men in uniform on the field.

The United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. A draft was instituted and some men volunteered to serve in the armed forces. There was no indication that football would be abandoned and there were enough bodies to man the pro and college teams. Rockne was still the JFC coach and he

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again had an 8-2 win-loss record. The JFC's lost a tough 14 to 7 battle to Pine Village that had two ex-Purdue and three ex-Notre Dame players in the lineup, including Rock's teammate Gus Dorais.

Rockne's involvement as a football player after graduation are documented for three such stints. The celebrated and often mentioned appearances for Massillon in the Massillon vs. Canton games of 1916 and 1919. Rockne is said to have made two appearances in the two games between those Ohio teams in 1916. There are strong suggestions that in one of those two 1916 games, Rockne had a stand-in.

Cap Edwards, a Rockne teammate at Notre Dame who played end and tackle, told Chet Grant an interesting and believable story. From 1914 up to 1918 when Cap took over as CEO of his family's small manufacturing company called the Edwards Iron Works, he freelanced his services in pro football. During that period, Gus Dorais and Rockne's substitute at ND, Mal Elward also were freelancing. While the combination of Dorais to Rockne was well known to the football fan because of the 1913 Army game, the fact that Rockne's picture was never published anywhere but in the South Bend papers, left plenty room for deception. Wherever freelancing Dorais played they also expected to see Rockne. Managers of both teams were smart enough to take advantage of the situation. The fans wanted Rockne and by gosh -- in collusion -- they gave them Rockne. According to Cap, he and Mal Elward played the Rockne role many times. In fact he knew of an instant where Keith "Deacon" Jones filled in as Rockne.

Rockne always thought kindly of the pro game. When it was being attacked in earnest by the the likes of Stagg and Yost, Rockne never did join them in condemnation of the pro game, although he was badgered to do so.

What rallied the anti-pro forces into an all out battle, were two games played by undergraduates in 1921. The Carlinville-Taylorville (IL) contest saw nine Illinois University players on the Taylorville team and eight Notre Dame men on the Carlinville side. With Notre Dame quarterbacks Chet Grant, Frank Thomas and Les Logan either unavailable or unwilling to participate, Eddie Anderson, who was an end at Notre Dame, volunteered to quarter back the Carlinville team. Carlinville, with a novice quarterback at the helm, could not generate any consistent offense. The first half was scoreless. But when quarterback Charley Dressen got hurt, Taylorville's coach Grover Hoover put Joey Sternaman in and Joey managed to kick three field goals for the Taylorville victory.

The profuse betting by the entire football crazy population of both towns as well as some outside professional gamblers, drew the attention of Chicago newspapers. The story broke in late January of 1922 and officials of both Illinois and Notre Dame suspended all players involved. On top of that, word reached Notre Dame that Hunk Anderson, Heck Garvey and Ojay Larson played sub rosa in Milwaukee and they too were suspended.

It was an angry Bob Zuppke who joined the anti-pro crusade; he even wanted the pro game abolished through legislative action. Some of his suspended players were juniors including Joey Sternaman. All of Notre Dame's suspended players were seniors and only eligibility in the remaining school-year sports was affected.

Rockne, although urged to do so, did not join the crusade against the pro game, but issued a statement that he did not condone college players playing pro ball and would deal harshly with any player of his who violated the University ban.

Knute Rockne got his start in football as a sandlot pro player and his coaching start as a pro coach of South Bend teams. No one can deny that his pro football experience was instrumental in Rockne becoming perhaps the greatest coach of football of all time.

Postscript: Sources and Comment

"The Autobiography of Knute Rockne" was a posthumously published compilation of Rockne's articles which appeared in Colliers magazine. The book also included excerpts from Rockne's diary. This source touched upon most phases of Rockne's life. The South Bend Tribune was a good research tool used previously along with notes based on interviews of the old time pros who were coached by Rockne and served as material for the book, Pro Football in the Days of Rockne.

Chet Grant and Hunk Anderson, who were my father's friends and later in life became mine, were walking history books of the Rockne era at Notre Dame. Chet Grant's last connection at Notre Dame was that of

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a curator of Notre Dame Library's "International Sports and Games Collection." He retired at the age of 85 and passed away in 1986 at the age of 93.

Football scholarships at Notre Dame in the pre-Rockne coaching era were called BT, which meant bed and table. All other expenses were borne by the players. The BT wasn't a free item though, because the players had to earn it by doing assigned campus jobs. After Rockne became head coach, football players got a complete free "ride" but they still had to work on campus -- usually in the dining hall -- in order to receive that grant. This was in line with the Big Ten or Western Conference rules that Notre Dame adopted. From 1909 until Rockne's death, Notre Dame tried to become a member of the Big Ten, but the conference kept turning the Irish down.

Notre Dame was more forceful in enforcing the rules against players participating in a pro game than any of the Big Ten schools. Much hypocrisy was in evidence when word got around at one Big Ten school or another that a certain player or players played for a pro team but the school failed to follow up with an investigation.

Notre Dame was a poor man's school in the Rockne days and it took a lot of players many years to earn their degree. They would drop out in alternate years to earn enough to come back and hopefully finish. Rock as an assistant coach at ND had more than one offer per year to "moonlight" coaching a South Bend pro team. South Bend was a growing industrial city and there were more than one pro team anxious to be a winner. Rockne would usually recommend some of the active Notre Dame players so that they could earn some extra money. Coaching the pros was not prohibited by Notre Dame, only playing pro ball was.

Although Rockne did not join any of the others such as Yost, Stagg and Zuppke in denouncing pro football, he did become less tolerant of players who decided to stray for a Sunday pay check after full scholarship went into effect at Notre Dame in 1920. There is no indication that any Notre Dame player played pro ball as an undergraduate after the Taylorville vs. Carlinville episode in 1921.