
Book Reviews



BO McMILLIN DURING 1942 INDIANA-MINNESOTA
FOOTBALL GAME

Courtesy Indiana University Archives, Bloomington.

Bo McMillin: Man and Legend. By Charles W. Akers and John W. Carter. (Louisville, Ky.: Sulgrave Press, 1989. Pp. xiii, 170. Illustrations, index. \$17.50.)

Alvin Nugent “Bo” McMillin seemed like the real thing. During a time when journalists were trying to manufacture heroes for a hero-hungry public, Bo McMillin appeared to be the genuine article. In 1921, before Bo was even out of college, Ralph Delahaye Paine, a popular author of adolescent adventure and sports stories, wrote *First Down Kentucky*, a story based on the exploits of Bo McMillin. It was an inspirational novel in which its hero, Bowman McMurray (Bo McMillin), is wounded when a German torpedo hits his ship during the Great War, still manages to save his shipmates, recovers from his serious injuries, and returns to America to lead his small Kentucky college to thrilling gridiron victories—all very stirring stuff for young minds. That same year, the real

Bo, who had only served in the United States Naval Reserves during the war, went Paine one better. On October 29, 1921, before forty-five thousand spectators in Harvard's stadium, Bo scored the only touchdown in Centre College's 6 to 0 upset of Harvard College, thus ending a Crimson winning streak that stretched back to 1916. Reminiscing on the game fifty years later, the *New York Times* judged Centre's victory "football's upset of the century."

Charles W. Akers's and John W. Carter's *Bo McMillin* attempts to separate man and legend—a difficult task considering that Bo consciously nursed and then tried to live his own legend. As if their biographical assignment were not difficult enough, Akers and Carter consider several other weighty issues. They maintain that McMillin's life "offers a major illustration of the complex way in which football became an integrated component of American society" (pp. xii-xiii). "Beyond the internal history of football," they assert, "the life of this unique man raises and illuminates some of the perennial questions about the place of sport in American society: the influence of coaches over their players, athletics as a tool of colleges in attracting students and raising endowments, the connection between sport and religion, society's need for heroes, and the symbiotic relationship of the press to the athletic programs of schools" (p. xiii). This is a great deal of ground to cover in a slim volume, but it is to the authors' credit that they at least attempt to link McMillin's life to the larger issues that swirled around him.

Bo's playing career is covered in the first third of the book and is an interesting story. Here especially Akers and Carter do a fine job of separating fact from fancy. In Bo's history of himself his life was a parable: a poverty-plagued, wild, criminal boyhood redeemed by the saving graces of football. In fact, Bo was not as poor as he often indicated; nor was he as bad. But football was important to him from the time he was an adolescent to the day he died. After a very successful high school career in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1917 at the age of twenty-two he enrolled at Centre College. A small Presbyterian school, Centre prided itself on its fine academic program and its distinguished alumni. Perhaps Bo was interested in becoming one of the latter, but he was certainly not interested in the benefits of the former. Bo's total lack of interest in academics, however, did not seem to bother either Centre's administration or faculty. President William A. Ganfield consciously used football to raise Centre's enrollment and endowment. For the next five years, then, Centre and Bo used each other to achieve their different but not mutually exclusive ends.

It was at Centre that the essential Bo became evident; he became a classic hypocrite. As Akers and Carter note, "the rigors of his boyhood had deeply embedded another strain in his character, revealed in his urging others to study while neglecting his own

classes, in his remaining an inveterate gambler while eschewing other vices. . ." (p. 50). Bo, who had spent several summers working on the Chautauqua circuit, spoke with great passion about loyalty, duty, and sacrifice. But he did not live those ideas. Rather, he was always in search of the next, best deal. He probably would have left Centre before the famous Harvard game if a professional team would have offered him enough money. And as a coach he jumped from one school to the next—from Centenary College to Geneva College to Kansas State Agricultural College to Indiana University and finally to Detroit and Philadelphia in the professional ranks.

Throughout *Bo McMillin* Akers and Carter show Bo's strengths as well as his weaknesses, his successes as well as his failures. But the authors do not fall under Bo's legendary charm. The end result is a satisfying short biography. Particularly noteworthy is their treatment of Bo's years as a player at Centre College and as a coach at Indiana University. Although the book has no footnotes or bibliography, it appears to be based on interviews, newspapers and magazine articles, and college and university archival records. Finally, *Bo McMillin* is thoughtfully written.

RANDY ROBERTS, associate professor of history, Purdue University, West Lafayette, has written biographies of Jack Dempsey and Jack Johnson as well as an overview of sports in America since 1945.

Germans in the New World: Essays in the History of Immigration.

By Frederick C. Luebke. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990. Pp. xxii, 198. Notes, index. \$24.95.)

Frederick C. Luebke's latest contribution to the field of German-American and immigration history is a collection of ten essays exploring aspects of immigration historiography and German immigration to America and Brazil. Luebke offers several reasons historians have until recently neglected German immigration, including the vagueness of the label "German," the size and diversity of this population, and the cultural amnesia brought on by two world wars. His essays suggest that not only historians but also German-Americans themselves encountered these problems.

The essays cover three major themes: polarization and conflict in Brazil, assimilation and conflict in the United States, and immigration historiography. The three Brazilian essays examine the history of Germans in that country and the extreme repression they suffered during World War I, adding comparisons to the situation in the United States. The "Teuto-Brazilians" remained an isolated minority, a domestic wartime target for the host society. In Brazil the nightmare of the war included the total prohibition of any publication, instruction, or public usage of the German language.