
Book Reviews

The Greatest Basketball Story Ever Told: The Milan Miracle, Then and Now. By Greg Guffey. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. Pp. xv, 205. Illustrations. Clothbound, \$24.95; paperbound, \$12.95.)

My first encounter with Hoosier Hysteria took place over a quarter of a century ago in March of 1969. While driving from Nashville, Tennessee, to Muncie for a job interview, I stopped off at a small Indiana diner about 10:00 p.m. The place was packed and abuzz with conversation about “sexuals” (or at least so I first thought. Hmm. Maybe Indiana is more hip than its reputation suggests). It soon became clear that basketball “sectionals” had all in their grasp. I could not help but overhear the joyous recapitulations of the evening’s contests. What amazed me most, though, was the deep sense of history imbedded in the basketball talk. The citizens of Seymour or Greensburg or wherever I was did not just discuss that evening’s games. They noted that Jimmy’s jump shot was just like the one his uncle had made back in ’58; a mere round ball seemed to provide the thread that bound past and present generations.

Greg Guffey would have felt right at home in that little diner. I suspect the fact that he is a 1991 graduate of Notre Dame or that



MILAN TEAM WITH TROPHY: FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, KEN WENDELMAN, GENE WHITE, BOB ENGLE, ROGER SCHRODER, RAY CRAFT, BOB PLUMP, RON TRUITT

he is currently assistant director of communications in the Indiana House of Representatives is less important to him than the fact that he is a devoted fan of Indiana high school basketball. This book is a hymn of praise to Hoosier Hysteria, as Guffey retells the story of one small school's basketball state championship in 1954. Milan's triumph over mighty Muncie Central is the stuff of mythology, as Guffey tirelessly reminds us. Indeed, the first half of the work basically covers old material, deeply familiar to anyone interested in Indiana basketball.

The second half of the account plows new ground, as Guffey offers a kind of "where are they now" view of Milan coach Marvin Wood and most of his players. The author concludes that although they are "a group of folk heroes who come into the spotlight once a year, . . . they don't live for that spotlight" (p. 203). In fact, they have all "achieved individual success in the post-championship years" (p. 203). In other words, there are no crashing failures looking back, Rabbit Angstrom-like to high school glory. "The Greatest Basketball Game Ever Played" remains important but not defining for its participants.

This is a warm, fuzzy as opposed to a cold, analytical work. Guffey writes in a pleasant, if somewhat repetitious, "golly gee" journalistic style. He wants to tell a happy story rather than peel back layers of the meaning of "sport as text" in a postmodern world. Sports historians interested in such analysis will not find it here, except for a few obvious connections between sport and civic reli-



MILAN FANS AT THE 1954 STATE FINALS

gion. Members of the general public, however, will discover a very good read and thank Indiana University Press for taking "a chance" on a nonscholarly book (p. ix).

TONY EDMONDS is professor of history at Ball State University, Muncie. He is the author of a biography of prizefighter Joe Louis and is currently co-writing a history of Ball State.

Shake Down the Thunder: The Creation of Notre Dame Football.

By Murray Sperber. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993. Pp. xxii, 634. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00.)

Under the Tarnished Dome: How Notre Dame Betrayed Its Ideals for Football Glory. By Don Yaeger and Douglas S. Looney. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993. Pp. 299. Illustrations. \$23.00.)

Notre Dame, as Don Yaeger and Douglas S. Looney remind their readers, is many things. It is a distinguished university partially supported by an endowment in excess of \$600 million and generous alumni and friends. The formula for synthetic rubber was discovered there, and today researchers at Notre Dame are working on ways to control the spread of disease and searching for the secrets to the origins of the universe. But beyond the economic and academic successes of the administration and faculty, Notre Dame is a state of mind. Traditions, not boom boxes, echo around the campus. Notre Dame is Knute Rockne, the Four Horsemen, Win One for the Gipper, and Frank Leahy's five national championships and four consecutive undefeated seasons. "Notre Dame," write Yaeger and Looney, "presents itself as all that is good and great about college football. It is an image of winning without breaking—or even bending—the rules . . . It is an image of winning without becoming a football factory, without forfeiting its academic soul. But even more than symbolizing all that is wonderful about football, Notre Dame stands for the very best in American higher education" (p. 73). The thesis of Yaeger and Looney's *Under the Tarnished Dome* is that by placing Coach Lou Holtz at the head of its football program, Notre Dame has become a Miami of the Rustbelt, cashing in its proud tradition for mere victories.

One trouble with Yaeger and Looney's account of Notre Dame's fall from grace is that the descent is measured from a false elevation. To understand Holtz, one has to know the history, not the mythology, of Notre Dame football. Holtz's career at Notre Dame makes no sense without a firm grounding in the reality of Knute Rockne. Fortunately, Murray Sperber's *Shake Down the Thunder* presents a well-researched and even-handed discussion of the Rockne era. Reading *Shake Down the Thunder*, one begins to understand Rockne as he really lived, before Hollywood, Ronald Reagan, and a team of hagiographers reinvented his life.