

Preface

Rockne.

There was a time in America, in the first third of the 20th century, when the name was a household word. It meant excellence in athletics, true enough, but it meant something more—an effervescent joy for living, a quick wit and an eager grin. An optimistic view of life, seeing the best in the next fellow, and moving forward. Always moving forward.

Knute Kenneth Rockne lived an extraordinary life, growing from an immigrant child to scale the heights of fame in a nation bursting with innovation, excitement, and advancements. He marveled at the technology of the Columbian World Exposition in his new hometown of Chicago. From there, he discovered the unbridled joy of competition through organized sports, first track and field and then football.

To Rockne, sports were always a means to an end, not an end in themselves. They were a way of testing one's self, and of measuring self-improvement, discipline, and dedication. They offered an opportunity to work in cooperation with others, honoring their strengths, while competing against opponents, and valuing the challenge they presented. A student of the ancient cultures, he subscribed to the Greeks' athletic ideal—the harmony of mind and body, the melding of the physical and spiritual,

and the view of physical fitness as a civic duty, a contribution to the fabric of the larger society. The Greeks valued fluid motion over sheer muscle, often performed exercise to music, and found artistic style in athletics—all themes that resonated with Rockne.

It wasn't enough to feel and understand this ideal. It had to be shared, it had to be taught to others. And so we find Rockne the adventurer, continually walking through fear or doubt, to meet new people, places, and experiences. It was said of Rockne by fellow Scandinavian and poet Carl Sandburg, "The pure Norse strain made it inevitable for Rockne to push outward whenever he was conscious of a limit." A 22-year-old Protestant without a high school diploma heading off to the Catholic stronghold, the University of Notre Dame? It was just another challenge for Rockne. He mirrored the indomitable spirit of Father Edward Sorin, who in 1842 viewed a desolate spot in rural northern Indiana and proclaimed he would there build a great university. Rockne, who eventually converted to Catholicism, did more to animate millions of Catholic immigrants to a sense of pride and possibility, it could be argued, than anyone of his era.

As a football coach, Rockne's success was unprecedented. He posted a winning percentage that has stood atop college football for decades. He helped usher in a new game, one that rewarded quickness, precision, and deception over brute force and "mass play." But he didn't claim to have invented anything. He always gave credit to his college coach, Jesse Harper, who he said brought the game from Amos Alonzo Stagg at the University of Chicago, who in turn brought it from its true origins, under Walter Camp at Yale. What Rockne did was perfect the process, and market the result. His relationships with the newspapermen, his willingness to take his team from coast to coast, his writings and coaching schools all helped create a near-mythic connection to fans and friends everywhere.

Rockne squeezed as much life out of every 24 hours as was humanly possible. When illness laid him low, he said, "I'm not built for an invalid's routine. If you clip the wild duck's wings, he pines away and dies. I, too, must fly until I fall."

Here is the story of how he did it.

1

Saying Goodbye

Holy Saturday, April 4, 1931 dawned breezy and overcast in South Bend, Indiana. About a mile east of downtown, in a growing neighborhood of handsome homes, a classic looking Tudor house on East Wayne Street seemed to have a mountain of flowers growing on its west wall. A pair of uniformed officers stood sentinel as day broke. Inside, in the comfortable sitting room framed by rich woodwork, a coffin held the remains of the home's owner, Knute Kenneth Rockne. The day before, in a chilly, drizzling rain on Good Friday, thousands of people streamed past the home, walking slowly but steadily while admiring the many hundreds of floral arrangements piled alongside the house, their ribbons floating in a gentle breeze. Every few minutes, two or three or more people would exit a vehicle, approach the house, and enter. Friends, players Rockne had played alongside and coached in his 21 football seasons at the University of Notre Dame, members of the sporting world. In the sitting room, four Notre Dame men stood straight as soldiers behind the casket, an honor guard of silent respect.

Elsewhere about the room, standing nearly as still, were men like Hunk Anderson, the coach's assistant and confidante, and Adam Walsh,

strapping captain of the 1924 national football champions. They greeted visitors mostly with a firm handshake and a solemn gaze, the lump in their throats too great to allow words to pass. Strong men, big men, wanting to cry, but holding back tears. Their feelings for this man who was their mentor, their idol, and their friend remained held inside as they quietly greeted well-wishers. The room, like the yard outside, was overfilled with floral wreaths. On the wall, overlooking the closed casket, was a beautiful oil portrait of the coach, who had turned 43 exactly one month earlier. Now, four days after his death in a plane crash amid the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas, he was back in the comfortable home he shared with his wife Bonnie and their four children. They had lived there just a little more than a year, the perfect refuge from the many demands on his schedule.

For the Rocknes, the past four days had unfolded like a bizarre dream, one which had no ending. The two oldest sons, Bill, 14, and Knute Jr., 11, had just missed seeing their father. Their train back from spring vacation in Florida to Kansas City, where they attended the Pembroke School, was delayed, and their father departed on what became his final flight. On Wednesday, they boarded a train in Kansas City, which carried their father's casket, accompanied by Dr. Mike Nigro, the coach's long-time friend from his days as an undergraduate at Notre Dame, and Coach H.H. Francis, the boys' athletic director at Pembroke. Throughout the journey, some of Rockne's friends stood alongside the gray metallic box, holding the casket as the train rocked along. Doc Nigro had not left his friend's body since it had been brought from the crash site near Bazaar, Kansas to the funeral home in nearby Cottonwood Falls. The traveling party increased in size when four men from South Bend joined it—assistant coaches Hunk Anderson and Jack Chevigny; Father Michael Mulcaire, vice president of Notre Dame and chairman of the faculty athletic board; and Howard "Cap" Edwards, long one of Rockne's closest associates.

The train continued on the Santa Fe route, reaching a large, respectful crowd in Chicago on Wednesday evening. The body was transferred to a New York Central train leaving for South Bend at 9:15 p.m. At Michigan City and Gary, as was the case with every station since leaving Kansas, crowds jammed the platform trying to get a glimpse of the casket. In South Bend, a crowd gathered at the Union station shortly after 10:00 p.m., an hour before the train was due. In minutes, hundreds packed the

waiting room; parking spots had been filled for blocks in every direction. So many times over the past two decades, crowds similar to this had filled one or the other of South Bend's stations, waiting eagerly to greet and cheer a Notre Dame football team returning from another glorious victory or, in a few cases, a valiant attempt in defeat. This time, the growing mass of humanity was different. Any talking was done in hushed tones. A tension permeated the crowd. Notre Dame students, especially, bore faces filled with sadness, having little to say to one another, still in shock.

Just after 11 p.m., a railway employee announced the approach of the train from Chicago. The murmuring of voices stopped, and the throng in the interior of the station pushed toward the corridor leading to the track stairways. But only a small group was permitted on the platform. They included Mayor W. R. Hinkle and city council members; Frank Hering, president of the Notre Dame Alumni Association; A. R. Erskine, president of the Studebaker Corporation and chairman of the Notre Dame board of lay trustees; Adam Walsh; Frank Coughlin; and the Reverend Charles L. O'Donnell, C.S.C., president of the university. As the train eased to a stop, Father O'Donnell stepped forward to the baggage car and gazed in silence at the casket carrying Notre Dame's beloved coach. Scores of Notre Dame football men and other students formed a cordon around the car as the casket was lowered and placed in a hearse, headed for the McGann Funeral Home on North Michigan Street. The crowd of friends, neighbors, intimate associates, and adoring fans had a hard time believing what they were seeing. Even as the casket was carried from the train, their focus was on a man they thought would live forever just as they had always known him—active, animated, with a mind always looking forward, always on the move.

The next evening, Thursday, April 2, another train from Chicago carried the other major players in this drama. Bonnie Rockne and her two younger children, Mary Jeanne and Jack, had traveled from Miami, where Knute had left them just a few days earlier. There, Mrs. Martha Rockne, the coach's mother, and three of his sisters, all residents of Chicago, joined them. They traveled to South Bend accompanied by Father John O'Hara, long-time university official and friend of the coach, who had been such an integral part of that triumphant 1924 year. Arriving in South Bend, the group went directly to the Rockne home on East Wayne.

For three days, tributes flowed from around the world of athletics, politics, and business—by telegram, statements to the press, and editorials in newspapers. Said Cornell football coach Gil Dobbie, “With his passing, football loses its most powerful advocate.” Chick Meehan, president of the American Football Coaches Association of whom Rockne was a charter member, noted, “Knut Rockne was the finest character and greatest leader football ever knew.” And Stanford’s Glenn “Pop” Warner, who had matched wits with Rockne in the 1925 Rose Bowl classic added, “He will be greatly missed everywhere.” Northwestern’s Dick Hanley, another coaching comrade, summed up Rockne’s impact on the sport. “Knut Rockne’s death is the greatest loss athletics ever has suffered. Rockne took football to the public...Rockne and the spirit of Rockne popularized the sport. Teams which opposed Notre Dame’s great eleven of 1929 observed that spirit of Rockne, whose boys, when their tutor was unable to direct them personally on account of illness, went out and fought to their limit to show their affection and loyalty for their great leader. We learned to know Rockne personally and to appreciate the spirit of fair play, magnanimity, and generosity of sportsmanship which typified him.”

King Haakon of Norway cabled the Norwegian consul, Olaf Bernts, in Chicago, delegating him to attend services as the official representative of the crown of Norway. It was said the king had planned to bestow the symbol of Norwegian Knighthood on the coach in the coming months. Studebaker’s Erskine, who had only recently made Rockne his company’s vice president for sales promotion, hailed the coach as “a great citizen who brought fame to South Bend...but at least we have the inspiration of his work and his example.” Indiana Governor Harry Leslie said, “The name of Knut Rockne is synonymous with clean sportsmanship and virile manhood.” Ring Lardner, who went from a simple boyhood in nearby Niles, Michigan to fame as a New York writer, said, “The whole country will miss him.” The humblest of citizens joined the chorus of those grieving. A railroad switchman, who in his own small way idolized the Rock of Notre Dame, sent his heartfelt tribute scrawled in pencil. At churches in South Bend and across the nation, young and old prayed for the repose of Rockne’s soul.

On Friday afternoon, Bonnie Rockne walked over the slopes of Highland Cemetery, selecting the exact plot where her husband would be

buried. Accompanying her were Knute's mother; Jesse Harper, Rockne's coach at Notre Dame from 1913; George Keogan, the university's basketball coach; and Dr. Nigro, always available for wise counsel and support. Headed to South Bend from all points on the compass were classmates and former players of Rockne's, along with many of the leaders of athletics. "It is a gloomy homecoming for hundreds of former players and coaches who have come here to tender tribute to their old master," one report noted. "The lighter thought is missing in conversation and old friends who have not seen each other for years exchange glances in silence." Members of Notre Dame's class of 1914—Rockne's class—were chosen to serve as an honor guard. Close friends Joe Byrne and Walter Clements. Johnny Plant, a fellow trackman from Chicago who had been so instrumental in convincing Rockne to attend Notre Dame, and fellow football standouts Al Feeney, Ray Eichenlaub, Freeman Fitzgerald, Mal Elward, Ralph Lathrop, Fred Gushurst, and Bunny Larkin. And of course, Rockne's great friend and passing mate, Gus Dorais.

They and so many others came to pay their respects, visiting East Wayne Street on Good Friday. Coach Harper, and Jimmy Phelan, Charlie Bachman, and Skip Madigan, now nationally famous coaches themselves. Norman Barry, known in Chicago for coaching championship teams in high school and pro ball while launching a successful law career. Roger Kiley, Eddie Anderson, Chet Wynne, Art Parisien, Paul Castner—all heroes of former years, back to honor the coach who taught them how to be men. And also arriving were the four backs whom Rockne called, of all his stars, the closest to his heart—Jim Crowley, Elmer Layden, Harry Stuhldreher, and Don Miller, the famous Four Horsemen. The more recent stars, Frank Carideo, Marchy Schwartz, Moon Mullins, and many others took turns standing silent vigil over the coffin in two-hour shifts.

Some 140 men were named honorary pallbearers. These included Rockne's friend Tom Hickey, his next-door neighbor for several years on St. Vincent Street, and several other South Bend residents, among them O. A. Clark, Mike Calnon, Paul Hoffman, George Hull, and Bernard Voll. There were fellow coaches who came from all points on the map, much the way Rockne had ventured out to meet them in their locations. The list included Howard Jones of Southern Cal, Wally Steffen of Carnegie Tech, Bill Alexander of Georgia Tech, Paul Schissler of Oregon State College,

D. X. Bible of Nebraska. Jesse Harper and Doc Meanwell, of course, along with Major John Griffith, commissioner of the Big Ten. Other dignitaries included New York Mayor Jimmy Walker. A team of newspaper men, including Warren Brown, Jimmy Corcoran, Harvey Woodruff, and Frank Wallace. The “old guard” men, Warren Cartier and Frank Hering. And long-time friends Jay Wyatt, Leo Ward, and Byron Kanaley.

Bonnie Rockne, it was reported, “deeply wounded and crushed by the tragedy, came home bravely and faced the task of laying her famous husband to rest, with striking courage. Her only desires were for simplicity and to do the things ‘Rock’ would have liked. He was a national figure, but she brushed aside all suggestions of an elaborate ceremony. She wanted him at home, his boys with him, and then to take him to his grave with quiet dignity. It was a contrast in restfulness compared with his own rushing, busy life.” Shortly after noon on Holy Saturday, lines of automobiles picked up the out-of-town guests from South Bend hotels and ferried them to East Wayne Street. There, the greatest collection of Notre Dame football stars ever assembled milled about, sprinkled with representatives of numerous other universities and communities that had hosted Rockne in his extensive travels, and several of the newspapermen who so enjoyed his repartee.

The clouds had broken and sunlight illuminated the tremendous display of flowers alongside the Rockne home. The air now felt soft, with the harshness of winter gone. Life in the trees and in the soil was poised to bloom. On a day of such terrible sadness, the promise of new life seemed to envelop the scene. Inside the Rockne home, Bonnie Rockne led her four children into the sitting room to bid their father farewell. She stroked the sides of the casket and kissed the crucifix fastened to the top. Billy, Knute Jr., Jeanne, and Jackie did the same. Outside, the honorary pallbearers began to form in ranks six deep along the sidewalk. The whispering died away, until the only sounds were the scuffing of someone’s shoes, or the rustling of branches in the young birch trees in the Rockne’s yard. At the appointed moment, the door of the Rockne home swung open, and six leading members of the 1930 national championship Fighting Irish—Frank Carideo, Marchy Schwartz, Moon Mullins, Marty Brill, Tom Conley, and Tommy Yarr—all fighting back tears, respectfully carried the coffin of their late coach, draped in the blue and gold of a Notre Dame

football blanket. They lovingly transported it down the steps, along the sidewalk, and into a waiting hearse. A moment later, Bonnie Rockne came from the home, aided by Jack Chevigny and Doc Nigro. She trembled, the black mourning veil only partially hiding her tears. Then, sensing the great crowd gathered, she straightened up, and walked swiftly to the waiting car.

In minutes, the afternoon sun glistened like a long, shiny ribbon on the tops of more than 100 automobiles that rolled in a procession toward the Notre Dame campus. More than a mile long, the line of cars stretched behind an escort of sputtering motorcycles, carrying South Bend city police in blue and Indiana State Police in olive. Tens of thousands of onlookers, many local but many others who had traveled to South Bend for the historic occasion, lined the route. Shops, businesses, and offices in South Bend and Mishawaka were closed to allow citizens to view the proceedings. With the new football stadium, Rockne's home for just one season, visible just off to the east, the procession rolled up Notre Dame Avenue, with its twin flanks of trees pointing the way to the center of campus. A bell in the single spire of Sacred Heart Church tolled as the cortege approached. The cars swept past the golden-domed Main Building and swung in front of Sacred Heart. At the end of the procession of vehicles, the hearse bearing Rockne pulled up, and again his pallbearers swung into action. The tolling bell and the voices of radio announcers quietly describing the scene were the only sounds as Rockne's casket was carried into the church.

At the door of the church, Bishop John Francis Noll, leader of the Fort Wayne diocese, and Father Michael Mulcaire, vice president of the university, met the casket, while the Moreau Choir filled the church with the sounds of *Miserere*, 50 voices "swelling and receding with all the cadences of an organ." With room for only 1,400 in the church, several thousand mourners gathered outside. Loudspeakers set up on the porch of the Administration Building carried the sounds of the chants and the voices of the services to the crowd. And as the Columbia Broadcasting Company had obtained permission to transmit the services, the final goodbye was broadcast around the world.

There would be no funeral Mass; a ritual not celebrated by the Catholic Church on Holy Saturday. The highlight of the service would be the

sermon presented by university president Father O'Donnell. He began by reciting Psalm 133 and a line of scripture that says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." His voice trembled with emotion at times, clearly shaken by the loss of his friend. Among his words:

In this holy week of Christ's passion and death there has occurred a tragic event which accounts for our presence here today. Knute Rockne is dead. And who was he? Ask the President of the United States, who dispatched a personal message of tribute to his memory and comfort to his bereaved family. Ask the King of Norway, who sends a special delegation as his personal representative to this solemn service. Ask the several State legislatures, now sitting, that have passed resolutions of sympathy and condolence. Ask the university senates, the civic bodies and societies without number; ask the bishops, the clergy, the religious orders, that have sent assurances of sympathy and prayers; ask the thousands of newspaper men, whose labor of love in his memory has stirred a reading public of 125,000,000 Americans; ask men and women from every walk of life; ask the children, the boys of America, ask any and all of these, who was this man whose death has struck the nation with dismay and has everywhere bowed heads in grief?

Was he perhaps a martyr who died for some great cause, a patriot who laid down his life for his country, a statesman, a soldier, an admiral of the fleet, some heaven-born artist, an inventor, a captain of industry or finance? No, he was Knute Rockne, director of athletics and football coach at Notre Dame. He was a man of the people, a husband and father, a citizen of South Bend, Indiana. Yet, had he been any one of these personages that have been mentioned, the tributes of admiration and affection, which he has received, could not be more universal or more sincere.

How is this fact to be accounted for? What was the secret of his irresistible appeal to all sorts and conditions of men? Who shall pluck out the heart of his mystery and lay bare the inner source of the power he had? When we say simply, he was

a great American, we shall go far towards satisfying many, for all of us recognize and love the attributes of the true American character. When we say that he was an inspirer of young men in the direction of high ideals that were conspicuously exemplified in his own life, we have covered much that unquestionably was true of him. When we link his name with the intrinsic chivalry and romance of a great college game, which he, perhaps, more than any other one man, has made finer and cleaner in itself and larger in its popular appeal, here, too, we touch upon a vital point....

I think, supremely he loved his neighbor, his fellow man, with a genuine, deep love. In an age that has stamped itself as the era of the 'go-getter'—a horrible word for what is all too often a ruthless thing—he was a 'go-giver'....

It is fitting he should be brought here to his beloved Notre Dame and that his body should rest a little while in this church where the light of Faith broke upon his happy soul, where the waters of Baptism were poured on his brow, where he made his first confession, received his first Holy Communion, and was confirmed by the same consecrated hand that today is raised in blessing above his coffin. He might have gone to any university in the land and been gladly received and forever cherished there. But he chose Our Lady's school, Notre Dame. He honored her in his life as a student, he honored her in the monogram he earned and wore, he honored her in the principles he inculcated and the ideals he set up in the lives of the young men under his care. He was her own true son.

O'Donnell's voice cracked with emotion, and his words slowed, as if he didn't want to finish. But the final blessing came. "Eternal rest grant upon him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May his souls and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen."

Two hours before dusk set upon the area, the procession started again, headed to Highland Cemetery. The line of cars stretched longer than before, with thousands on the sidewalks straining for a look at the

cortege. For blocks, hundreds of cars were parked, their passengers flocking through the cemetery toward the Council Oak. There, centuries before, the great meetings of LaSalle and Tonti with the Potawatomi took place; the Jesuits Allouez and Marquette also likely engaged in councils at this spot. Now, just a stone's throw away, a modern-day explorer was about to be laid to rest. An area was roped off from the eager crowds, and a great wall of floral tributes adorned the spot. Large Notre Dame monograms of gold and blue blooms provided a colorful background. Workers from the Chicago Post Office sent a special display, remembering Rockne's years as an employee there. As the six young men brought the casket to its final resting spot, dozens of other friends, former players, and coaches gathered around the grave. Bonnie followed the casket, supported by Jack Chevigny and Dr. Nigro as she stood at the edge of the grave. Nearby were his mother, all four of his sisters, and closest friends.

Father O'Donnell stepped to the edge of the grave, sprinkled the casket with holy water, and spoke the final prayers, with murmured responses from those assembled. In just a few minutes the simple service was finished. Bonnie turned from the grave, just as an airplane roared overhead, outlined against the approaching dusk. The bronze casket was slowly lowered into the ground, as the crowd turned to leave. But two men looked down into the grave, until the casket finally rested in place. Jack Cannon and John Law, two of the greatest of Rockne's men, would stay, watching, maybe still not believing it all was real, till the last moment. Two of the toughest men on the gridiron it had been Rockne's privilege to coach. And now, both stood there, tears streaming down their faces. They still couldn't believe it. Knute Rockne was gone.