

Knute Rockne Biography

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Biography

Knute Rockne (1888-1931), a genius in the sport of football, became an American folk hero and left his stamp of greatness on the entire sport.

Knute Rockne was born on March 4, 1888, in Voss, Norway. In 1891 his father came to America to exhibit his carriage-building art at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and 18 months later he sent for his family. Swiftly absorbed in the Chicago melting pot, Knute played football and baseball (and had his nose permanently flattened by a carelessly swung bat). In high school he also ran on the track team and pole-vaulted.

Lacking the finances to enroll at the University of Illinois, Rockne worked in a post office for four years. For exercise he ran or vaulted. Two foot-racing buddies begged him to matriculate at Notre Dame University; he reluctantly joined them. Before he impressed athletic coaches with his physical prowess, Rockne dazzled professors with his brilliant mind. (He graduated *summa cum laude*.) His roommate was Gus Dorais, quarterback on the Notre Dame football team. In 1913 the two experimented with forward-passing techniques, a stratagem that was legal but little used.

That autumn top-ranking West Point invited little-known Notre Dame to fill a schedule opening: the result stunned the football world. Dorais passed to Rockne for the first touchdown; Notre Dame took the game. The forward-passing show revolutionized football.

After graduation Knute married Bonnie Skiles. Notre Dame named him assistant football coach, head track coach, and chemistry professor. By 1918 he was head football coach; a season later he had his first unbeaten team. As a strategist, Rockne was imaginative and inventive. With his Notre Dame team, he became the top-ranking coach in the history of intercollegiate football, with a winning average of .897. He produced five unbeaten and united teams. But it was Rockne's witty, dynamic personality that dominated every gathering. He was not only a spellbinding orator but a funny one as well.

Rockne had not even approached his peak when he died in a plane crash on March 31, 1931. The nation mourned. The President of the United States sent condolences to his widow; so did the king of Norway. Knute's death was front-page news in every paper in America, and editorials lavished praise on the immigrant boy who had become one of America's best-loved figures.