

## Layden legacy revived in new book

By Don Doxsie | Friday, February 13, 2009

Like the three men with whom he forever would become linked, Elmer Layden came from relatively humble beginnings.

His father, Tom, was a traveling salesman with the John F. Kelly wholesale grocery company in Davenport. Layden began playing football on the strip of grass that divides Kirkwood Boulevard before his family moved to a modest house on Brady Street on the edge of what now is Palmer College of Chiropractic. He was a good football player at Davenport High School, although he probably better was known as a sprinter on the track team.

He ultimately became the undersized fullback in perhaps the most famous backfield in history, joining Harry Stuhldreher, Jim Crowley and Don Miller to form the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame.

The story of the Four Horsemen has been revived by author Jim Lefebvre in a recently published book, "Loyal Sons: The Story of the Four Horsemen and Notre Dame Football's 1924 Champions." Lefebvre will host a gathering at Pat McGuire's in Davenport on Tuesday at 6:30 p.m., at which he will sign copies of the book and undoubtedly spend hours chatting with people who want to hear more about the Four Horsemen and the Quad-Cities' connection to the group.

Lefebvre, a veteran journalist who lives in the Twin Cities, traces his fascination with the Four Horsemen to his childhood in Green Bay, Wis., where he lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same schools that spawned Crowley.

His two daughters also attended Notre Dame, and he ended up spending a lot of time on the campus, learning more about the lore and legend of the Fighting Irish. Several years ago, he tried to buy a book about the Four Horsemen and found that no one had written one.

"At that point, I think a light bulb went on," Lefebvre said. "Five years later I had written my first book."

He traveled the country, speaking to relatives of every starter — all seniors — on the fabled 1924 Notre Dame team, including the Horsemen and the "Seven Mules," the linemen who blocked for them.

"What I found across the board was that most of the players on that team came from middle class, working-class families," Lefebvre said.

Stuhldreher's father also was a wholesale grocer, in Massillon, Ohio. Miller's father worked for the Defiance (Ohio) Machine Works. Crowley's father died of tuberculosis when he was a young boy.

None of them — Layden included — were projected to be stars when they arrived at Notre Dame. A couple of the Seven Mules didn't even play on the Notre Dame freshman team. They played intramural football in their first year on campus.

Layden was very homesick in his first two years on campus. He almost left Notre Dame several times and once completed the paperwork to transfer to Wisconsin, where his girlfriend was enrolled.

"He did make it home a few times," Lefebvre said. "He'd kind of brood for a few days. His dad never made him come back. He'd let him think about it for a few days, and Elmer eventually would go back on his own."

The homesickness ended late in his sophomore season when coach Knute Rockne moved Layden from backup halfback to starting fullback, grouping him for the first time with Crowley, Miller and Stuhldreher.

Layden hardly was a prototypical fullback — he only weighed 165 pounds — but the combination clicked.

"I believe something almost magical happened when the four of them began playing together," Lefebvre said. "They had such complementary skills, tremendous timing, speed, teamwork. It made them almost unstoppable at times."

They didn't become nationally famous until they defeated Army early in their senior year. That's the day Grantland Rice wrote the famous lead paragraph that everyone knows: "Outlined against a blue gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again ..."

The nickname caught on immediately, and they became a phenomenon when a publicity photo of the four men astride horses made its way around the country in the ensuing months.

They capped their career by defeating Stanford in the Rose Bowl with Layden scoring three touchdowns, two on interception returns of 78 and 63 yards.

Their fame didn't end there. Amazingly, all 11 senior starters on that team were employed as college coaches the following fall. Crowley made his mark as the head coach at Fordham, where one of his protégés was a guard named Vince Lombardi. Stuhldreher served as the head coach at Villanova and Wisconsin. Miller was an assistant at Georgia Tech before becoming a federal court judge.

Layden was the head coach at Loras (then known as Columbia) and Duquesne before becoming Notre Dame's head man in 1933. He quit in 1940 to become the first commissioner of the National Football League. The commissioner of the rival All-American Football Conference was Crowley.

No matter where they went and what they did, the four men never lost touch with one another. There were frequent reunions through the years.

"All of them were very successful on their own," Lefebvre said. "But I don't think anything was stronger than the bond the four of them had."

### **If you go**

**What:** Jim Lefebvre book signing

**When:** 6:30 p.m. Tuesday

**Where:** Pat McGuire's Irish American Grill, 3333 N. Harrison, Davenport

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