



Dan Coughlin: What's in a name? If only we could ask the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame

Dan Coughlin | The Chronicle-Telegram

Sportswriter Jim Lefebvre became obsessed with the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame after he asked a clerk in the Notre Dame bookstore for a book about them and the clerk could find only a picture.

“You don’t have any information on them?” he asked.

The clerk searched around and came up with a second picture. One of the players was misidentified.

Lefebvre was not a Notre Dame guy but he sent two daughters there. He had roots in Wisconsin and Minnesota. He worked for newspapers in Madison and Green Bay, Wisconsin. And now, rather late in life for that sort of thing, he became a Notre Dame historian.

He just finished his book, “Loyal Sons — The Story of The Four Horsemen and Notre Dame’s 1924 Champions,” which might be the most compelling tome about Notre Dame football I’ve ever read. Besides culling information from 30 books, 26 newspapers and five periodicals, he interviewed the relatives of all 11 starters and several subs on the 1924 National Championship team.

“All the relatives were glad somebody finally was telling their story,” Lefebvre said.

Let’s begin with the name. Sportswriter Grantland Rice was credited with naming Notre Dame’s backfield “The Four Horsemen” in his story of the Army-Notre Dame game in the Polo Grounds on Oct. 18, 1924.

“Outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again,” Rice wrote. “In dramatic lore they are known as Famine, Pestilence, Destruction and Death. These are only aliases. Their real names are Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley and Layden.”

That’s called the “lead”— one of the most famous “leads” in sportswriting history — and Rice did not necessarily come up with it himself. At halftime a group in the press box marveled about Notre Dame’s dominance. They included Rice, Damon Runyon, Paul Gallico and Frank Wallace, a veritable who’s who of American sportswriters. In the second quarter alone Notre Dame’s backfield piled up eight first downs. Army had none.

“Yeah, just like the Four Horsemen,” remarked George Strickler, a Notre Dame student who was Notre Dame’s publicity man. Strickler also covered the game for the student newspaper and the South Bend paper.

Strickler was speaking to nobody in particular, but the comment probably lit a bulb in Rice's brain. Wednesday night of that week Strickler and several players had watched the Rudolph Valentino movie, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," at the campus movie house.

The next day Strickler was stunned to read Rice's story on page one of the New York Herald Tribune and his publicity juices surged through his veins. He sent a telegram to his father in South Bend asking him to corral four horses for a photo shoot as soon as they returned to school. The picture of the four players on the backs of four local nags of uncertain pedigree added to their fame. The wire services sent the picture around the world.

There are those who complain that Rice's story exaggerated the exploits of Notre Dame, which beat Army that day by a narrow score of 13-7.

"The game was different then," said author Lefebvre. "It was a defensive game, a game of field position. Did you know that kickoffs were from the 50 yard line? Teams often punted on first down. Teams that gave up a touchdown sometimes did not want to get the ball back. They had the option of kicking off to the team that just scored. Kicking off and stopping them was the fastest way to gain field position."

The score was deceiving. Army's touchdown came on a 20-yard drive. Notre Dame had several long drives, including a 71-yard drive that ended on downs at the Army nine yard line.

That was quite a day in college football, by the way. That same day Red Grange of Illinois scored four touchdowns against Michigan in the first quarter. He returned the opening kickoff 95 yards and had scoring runs of 55, 45 and 35 yards. And that weekend the Galloping Ghost played second banana to Notre Dame.

All 11 starters graduated from Notre Dame the next spring and immediately got jobs as college coaches, two as major college head coaches and the other nine as assistants.

Some moved on. Don Miller became a lawyer, District Attorney and later bankruptcy judge in Cleveland. Elmer Layden and Jim Crowley became pro football commissioners. Harry Stuhldreher became vice-president of U. S. Steel. Tackle Adam Walsh coached the Cleveland Rams to the NFL championship in 1945.

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