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The Opening Kickoff: The Tumultuous Birth of a Football Nation

By Dave Revsine. Published in 2014 by Lyons Press, Guilford, CT. (304 pages).

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The current landscape of college athletics, particularly football, is assumed by many to be going off the rails and if it continues down this path, will ruin college athletics. The corporatization of higher education can be tied to a decrease in public funding for universities, forcing many to leverage football and athletics to increase prestige and donor support for the school. In *The Opening Kickoff*, Revsine provides a thorough analysis of the beginnings of college football in the United States. The roots of college football are grounded in an early pursuit of the extrinsic benefits the sport provided to the university.

The long-legged Aussie, Pat O'Day, serves as the reader's guide; Revsine shapes the creation of college football around the life of the early football legend at the University of Wisconsin. O'Day became an early folk hero for college football, mesmerizing the masses with his strong leg which landed him with records for punting and dropkicking. The former rugby player immigrated to the United States to join his brother who was coaching crew at Wisconsin. The author's use of O'Day as a foundational pillar in the book made for an easy process to understand the narrative of college football development. The structure of the book consists of eighteen chapters each addressing a unique component of college football, covering the development of the sport, the economic benefits provided by football, and the health of football players.

The Opening Kickoff is grounded in historical references based on primary sources, adding to the authenticity of the narrative provided in the book. The use of quotes from critical players in the creation of college football and the football nation make the book easy and enjoyable to read. The book flowed smoothly, allowing for the content to be easily understood by the reader. While the primary focus of this book is the creation of the sport of football, the game started on college campuses, further cementing the connection between football and the academy.

The book provides many useful examples relating to the development of a football nation. It is especially relevant to reflect on the history of football in the United States to further understand how we as a society have evolved in our relationship to the sport. A society must learn from its past in order to evolve and advance. Revsine provides a means for those in the United States to reflect on the roots of arguably the nation's favorite pastime. The increasing

revenue and television viewership of the NFL and college football provide an indication of its place in the culture of the United States.

Why do players wear helmets and what would have happened if southern universities outlawed football after the death of a player at the University of Georgia? It would be hard to imagine the football powerhouses residing at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and the University of Chicago, but if southern states had outlawed football, it easily could have become a reality. Early in the 20th century, football was referred to as “Death Ball” within the media in large part because of the 19 deaths that occurred in 1905. Many people were outraged with the toll of this violence, but instead of banning football, those involved in its administration worked to improve safety. The book describes the social movement that led to players wearing helmets and improving the safety of the game. The book described the unique social attraction to the sport of football, affirming its role in American culture.

College athletics has been criticized for the amount of travel endured by student-athletes, impacting the amount of time they miss from class. A quote from the book presented this as a concern of university presidents during the early development of college football. Former president of Cornell, Andrew White, stated that he “wouldn’t allow a group of 30 young men to travel 300 miles to chase a bag of wind around” (pg. 28). The quote was telling of the concern that football was impeding the academic mission of the university. The book provides an overview of the issues college football faced, especially the desire by university officials to have teams travel across the country in order to spread a school’s reputation through the sport. For example, the book chronicles the cross country trip of the University of Wisconsin football team took to play Stanford. Wisconsin had to play a game on their way back to Madison to cover their expenses, but the school benefited from the trip due to an increase in prestige. In fact, the excursion ultimately led to the creation of the Rose Bowl. The book takes the reader back to beginnings of college football and its quest to grow the game into a national sport.

The Opening Kickoff provides an avenue to understanding the importance of football to universities, initiated as a means to increase revenue for the school and increase social prestige amongst alumni. University presidents saw football as a way to gain notoriety and mold young men into leaders. Former Harvard University President Charles William Eliot commented on the public’s interest in football; “it’s easy to collect money at the gates and on public grounds convenient to New York and other cities...it’s easy to spend in a wasteful and inefficient manner” (pg. 121). The same could be said about college football today with many universities utilizing football in the same manner as discussed by university presidents in the 1890’s. Today, many athletics administrators refer to football and athletics as the “front porch” of the university.

Revsine aided in the understanding of the roots of football and how it is reflected upon in society today. The book would be an asset to a sport history or general sport management courses as a supplemental text. The reader does not need a foundation in understanding football because the author crafted the book in a manner which can be understood by the novice or expert. It is evident the author invested a great deal of time in researching this book, providing quotes and insight to a very intriguing subject. *The Opening Kickoff* could be a tool for the sporting culture today due to its depiction of college football in society and higher education.