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All-Americans: Knute Rockne and the No-Glitz Man Who Tended His Flame

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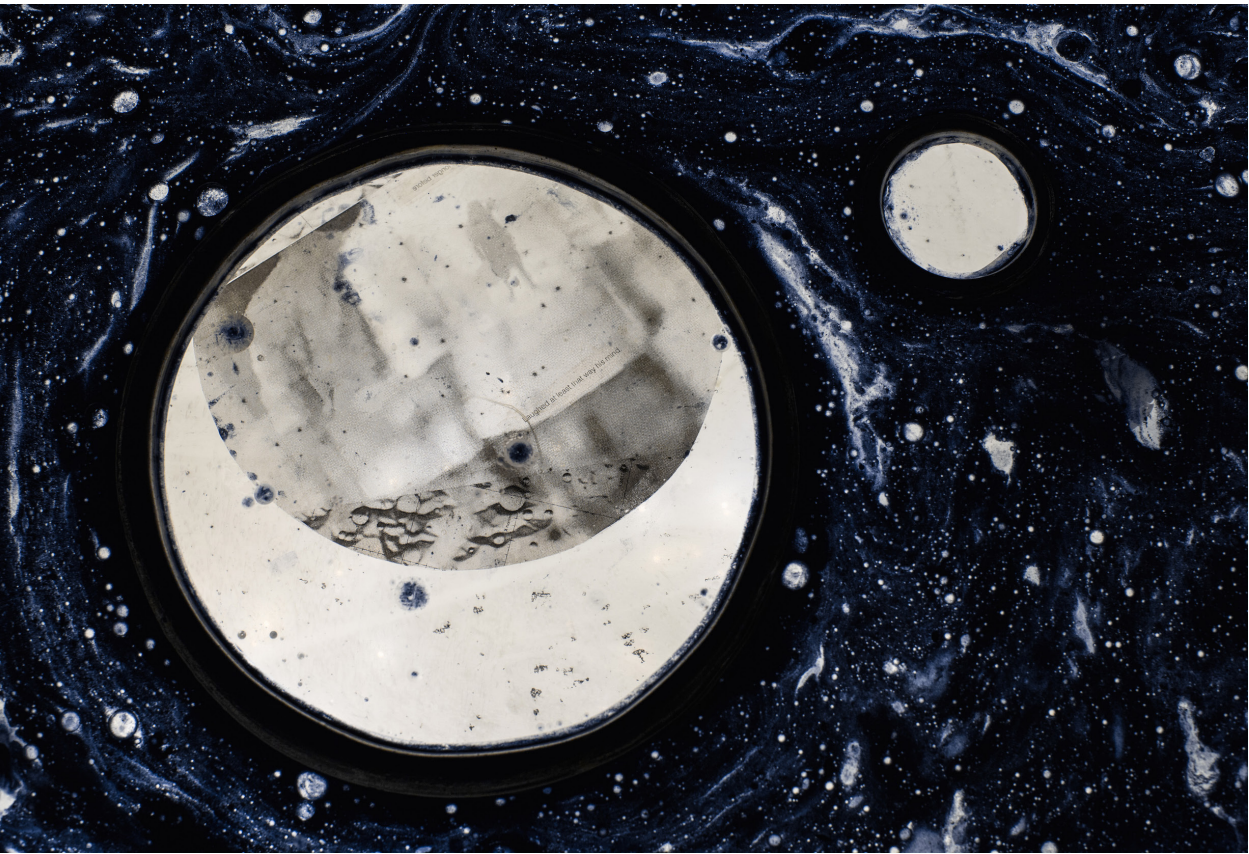
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Mobilis in Mobili Detail 4
Erin Curry

ALL-AMERICANS: KNUTE ROCKNE AND THE NO-GLITZ MAN WHO TENDED HIS FLAME

On March 31, 1931, a star fell from the sky above a remote Kansas pasture and changed the course of history. President Herbert Hoover called the plane crash a “national loss.” And perhaps more importantly to some, cowboy humorist Will Rogers called one of the fallen “a national hero.”

In 1931 most rural Kansans didn’t have electricity, let alone radios. So, although Cottonwood Falls High School began playing football in 1899, young men in the Flint Hills still proved themselves on horseback in wide-open spaces and rodeo grounds rather than on the gridiron. No local newspaper—except the metropolitan *Emporia Gazette*—had ever mentioned the name of legendary Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne until his personal effects were found scattered across the Kansas prairie on that fateful spring day. But the crash that took Rockne and his companions has as much to say about grasslands culture as the manicured fields of play that cultivate comradery among those who love the game.

Rockne’s character-building approach to football was immortalized in a no-nonsense style he passed down to an entire generation of coaches. Nearly a century before the Oakland A’s applied statistical analysis to build a winning baseball team

(*Moneyball*), Knute Rockne understood that a team was more than a sum of its parts. “The secret,” Rockne famously said, “is to work less as individuals and more as a team. As a coach, I play not my eleven best, but my best eleven.” Rockne, who had perfected the forward pass as a player in 1913, revolutionized football as a coach in the 1920s when the passing game required precise coordination of all eleven players on the field. In 1924 Rockne’s “best eleven” included Don Miller, Elmer Layden, Jim Crowley, and Harry Stuhldreher—the Four Horsemen who led the Fighting Irish to victory over an intimidating foe, the U.S. Army team, at New York’s Polo Grounds.

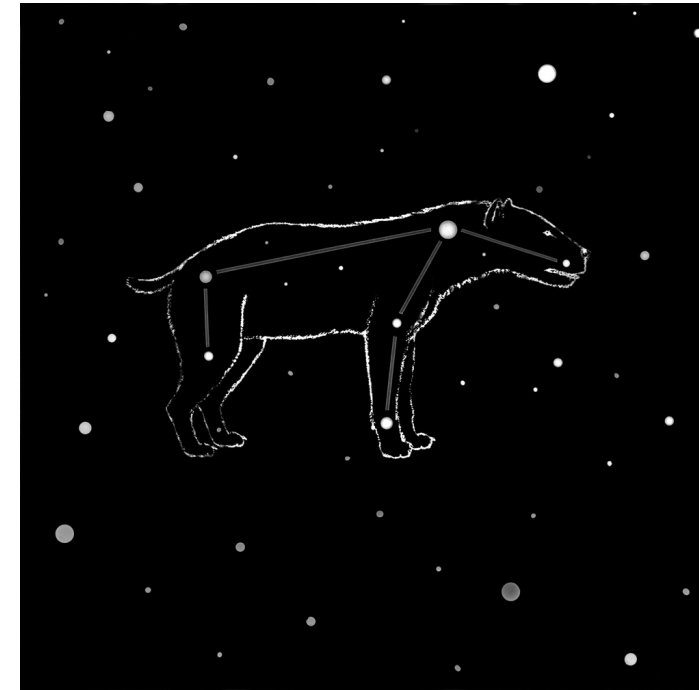
Rockne liked to say that “football made great leaders.” Over time, however, another one of Rockne’s quotes stuck: “Let’s win one for the Gipper.” The fabled quote was an inspirational reference to George “The Gipper” Gipp, the All-American rusher who was cut down by a fatal infection in his senior season at Notre Dame. If Knute Rockne’s plane had not crashed near Bazaar that fateful day in 1931, fresh-faced actor Ronald Reagan would have been robbed of his role as George Gipp in the 1940 biopic *Knute Rockne: All American*. “If Ronald Reagan had played bad guys in the movies who fixed football games, instead

of playing them, he would never have been elected Governor, let alone President,” political advisor Frank Mankiewicz once said. “But he played heroes, and that’s powerful as hell.” Were it not for Rockne’s untimely death, Reagan would have been denied both national acclaim and the campaign slogan that carried him to the White House.

But Rockne’s philosophy and the Notre Dame spirit transcended both pop culture and politics. “Courage means being afraid to do something, but still doing it,” he said. By that measure Easter Heathman led a remarkably courageous life.

As a young man Heathman worked in the aircraft industry before serving his country in the Philippines and Korea. But like many Kansans, Heathman possessed the quintessential Kansas traits of quiet competence and self-deprecation. Heathman eschewed celebrity and portrayed himself as “just an old farmer.” But he had lessons to impart and, as Rockne knew, not all leaders wear flashy smiles and fancy suits.

When he was thirteen, Easter was shelling corn at his Chase County farm and heard the din of what he thought were racing cars. It was Rockne’s plane plunging from the sky before burying



Cephalogale Constellation
Genevieve Waller

itself in a nearby pasture. Heathman, his brothers, and their dad reached the site before the authorities could remove the unidentified remains.

Although Heathman, a different brand of horseman, had never heard of Knute Rockne before the crash, he would

remember that day—the sights, the sounds, the smell of gas—for the rest of his life.

In 1948 he returned to Chase County to practice the arts of farming and water witching. But in the 1970s his life entered a whole new chapter—one with its roots in his childhood. It was then that this self-

deprecating Kansan gave his first of more than one thousand tours of the crash site. As he led visitors to the limestone and granite memorial to the man called “The Rock,” Heathman was careful to recognize all eight men—famous and not famous—who died that day.

By the time Heathman passed away in early 2008, he had carried the Rockne banner of humility, courage, and teamwork for nearly eighty years. And this unassuming Kansan had earned the respect of sports fans and legends alike who met him on their pilgrimages to the Chase County site where their coaching idol fell from the sky. In 2006 Notre Dame presented Heathman with an honorary monogram, a distinction he shares with Ronald Reagan. In a comment on ESPN’s account of Heathman’s life and death, an anonymous fan summed up the impact of this modest Kansan:

People of considerable accomplishment with lots of flashy items on their resumes and CVs living in relative luxury in the glitz of the modern world were universally mesmerized by this simple and unassuming country gentleman who spent almost every day of his ninety years just off a lonely road in the middle of nowhere. I was lucky to have known him.

According to Superman, growing up in Kansas is “about as American as it gets.” On a fateful day in 1931, a boy who knew nothing about football took his first step toward becoming a man, a soldier, and a leader. And by demonstrating his best Kansas traits, Chase County native Easter Heathman joined Knute Rockne among the ranks of All-Americans.

Christy Davis, Executive Director of Symphony in the Flint Hills, is a fifth-generation Kansan who is passionate about the history, landscape, and culture of her home state.



*On today's walk I found the moon Titan
turned pink just before Saturn-rise
Mike Miller*