

*When Oberlin Was King of the Gridiron: The Heisman Years.* By Nat Brandt. (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2001. xii, 230 pp. Paper, \$18.00, ISBN 0-87338-684-1.)

It was an all-too-familiar story of the 90's: Ohio's college football powerhouse regularly trounced a series greater or lesser teams from throughout the region, but each year the team and a certain controversial coach named John were never quite able to win the big game against Michigan. Whereas most of the scarlet and gray faithful at this point will roll their eyes and say they have heard it all before, chances are actually likely that they have not. The '90s were the 1890s, the John was John Heisman, and the Ohio football powerhouse was Oberlin College. In a well-researched book steeped in the flavor of college life in the 1890s, Nat Brandt tells the unlikely story of how Oberlin College went from a school where football was forbidden to one of the strongest teams in the nation.

Oberlin in the late 1800s still took its Christian education mission very seriously, and the faculty at first refused to allow students to play anything other than intramural baseball. However, with the growing influence of the physical education and "Muscular Christianity" movements of the time, as well as the persistent entreaties of Oberlin students, the administration finally relented in the early 1890s. They allowed the students a team and limited intercollegiate play, and Oberlin played to a 2-2 record over their first two years. What followed, however, was a startling transformation into a football juggernaut. The primary agent of that transformation was John Heisman.

Brandt argues that Heisman—yes, THAT Heisman—revolutionized American football more than any other early figure besides Walter Camp. His fundamental innovations included displaying downs and yards on the scoreboard, the use of both guards as blockers for the runner, drawing up a pre-set series of plays to start a game, sending signals in from the sideline, the long count, snapping the ball directly to the quarterback, and even the use of the word "hike." As a player-coach at Oberlin (and for a year at Buchtel College in Akron), Heisman created winning teams through a combination of innovation, hard training, and a gruff, authoritarian style ("Better to have died a small boy," he intoned to his recruits each year, "than to fumble this football"[65]). However, despite (or because of) his imperious manner, Heisman molded Oberlin into a team that regularly took on and defeated teams such as Illinois, The University of Chicago, and Ohio State. Oberlin's dominance within the state was such that they actually defeated Ohio State twice in 1892, by the lopsided scores of 40-0 and 50-0. The second defeat was so humiliating that to this day the Buckeye Athletic Department refuses to recognize this game in their records. Indeed, Oberlin's record in the 1890s is even more impressive when one considers other disputed scores listed as losses, including games against Michigan and Penn State (in the later case, Walter Camp overruled an official's decision by telegram after the game was over, awarding the win to the Nittany Lions).

Nevertheless, Oberlin's heyday as a football power was short-lived. In a revelation never discussed by Heisman or mentioned in any Heisman biography, Brandt produces evidence from Oberlin newspapers showing that Heisman eloped with a student from Oberlin's academy after the Penn State game. For reasons that are still unclear, the marriage was apparently annulled and Heisman never returned to Oberlin. While the team continued to post respectable seasons periodically (including victories over Ohio State as late as 1921), Heisman's departure also marked Oberlin's departure from the ranks of football's powerhouses. Now a perennial dweller at the bottom of the North Coast Athletic Conference's rankings, Oberlin has long since returned to its early renown as a premiere liberal arts college, its extraordinary football heritage largely forgotten by all but a few college football history mavens.

Although the story of Oberlin's brief day in the football sun is interesting in itself, it is made warmer by the author's dotting treatment of the subject. Nat Brandt, a former editor of both the *New York Times* and *American Heritage* magazine, writes with obvious affection for the college and its past glories. His gentle sentimentality is never maudlin, though, and actually enhances the charm of the book. Neither does his bias stand in the way of sound historical research of the subject. Brandt uses ample primary sources from Oberlin, Michigan, and Ohio State archives, as well as the full range of secondary sources available for this relatively arcane topic. He also includes several solid chapters putting Oberlin's experience into the larger contexts of the origins of American football, the American physical education and "Muscular Christianity" movements, and the deeply-rooted struggle between academic and athletic achievement at American colleges and universities. If there is a weakness, it is probably in Brandt's almost play-by-play description of numerous football games. Although these can be tedious at times, not everyone will be put off by them. Indeed—in an era when football conversation often dwells on the issues of salary negotiations, NCAA investigations, draft picks, and steroid use—some might welcome the rare glimpse at a sport in its infancy that these game accounts provide. Brandt certainly does not argue that the 1890s were some sort of halcyon days of gentlemanly competition. To the contrary, he points out numerous examples of chicanery, including corrupt officiating, violently unsportsmanlike conduct on the field, and the use of illegal players (including Heisman himself). Nevertheless, it was also a time when football was still evolving and off-the-cuff, when teams agreed right before the game how long they would play, when brand-new plays were created by accident, when "the game itself was just a sport played for the fun of it" (175). For these insights and others, *When Oberlin Was King of the Gridiron* should be required reading for any serious fan of the college game.

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