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The Four Horsemen

By Knute K. Rockne



Knute Rockne, Notre Dame's coach and mentor of the famous four

A SLEEPY-EYED lad, who looked as though he were built to be a tester in an alarm-clock factory, loafed about backfield in the Notre Dame freshman line-up for practice. With him in the backfield, his companion halfback, was a youngster who appeared to be half puzzled by everything going on. Between them was a smaller and wirier boy with a sharp, handsome face and a clear, commanding voice. These assets seemed the best the youngster had, for in his first plays during that practice game he made as many mistakes as he called signals—and he called a lot. As a rule, rookie quarterbacks do.

It was not an inspiring practice to watch. Even the likely-looking youngster at fullback, who could run like a streak, ran quite as often into the hands of tackles as through slits in the line. After watching this backfield performance for an entire quarter, I shook my head.

"Not so hot," I thought—especially when the entire four were smeared by a clumsy but willing scrub tackle who weighed about as much as the entire quartet and pounded through like an ice wagon to block a kick.

"Not so hot," I repeated, preparing to exercise the virtue of patience and wait optimistically for the season's developments. This freshman bunch could be whipped into a combination of average players. Not much more.

That was all the dream I had of them that day. And it didn't come true.

Three years later this trio, with another, took the field to the cheers of fifty thousand people at the Polo Grounds and dazzled into defeat the strongest Army eleven ever sent against anybody. The next morning Grantland Rice rose to lyric heights in celebrating their speed, rhythm and precision, winding up a litany of hallelujahs by proclaiming them "The Four Horsemen." Whereupon an enterprising young gentleman in South Bend perched the returned victors of the backfield on four borrowed nags and sold the resultant photographs to the tune of a small fortune.

These accidents will happen in the

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best of all possible worlds. Indeed, the football epic of the Four Horsemen is the story of an accident. How it came to pass that four young men so eminently qualified by temperament, physique and instinctive pacing to complement one another perfectly and thus produce the best coördinated and most picturesque backfield in the recent history of football—how that came about is one of the inscrutable achievements of coincidence, of which I know nothing save that it's a rather satisfying mouthful of words.

Harry Stuhldreher, the quarterback, hailed from Massillon, Ohio; Don Miller, halfback, came from Defiance, Ohio; Jimmy Crowley, the other halfback, hailed from Green Bay, Wisconsin, and Elmer Layden, the dashing, slashing fullback, had his home in Davenport, Iowa. The four did not play as backfield in their freshman year—remember, I had seen them in practice and survived the experience.

A Quartet of Colts

These men and the others of the freshman squad in 1921 were soundly beaten by such teams as Lake Forest Academy and the Michigan State freshmen. Stuhldreher, of the lot, had the most promise. He sounded like a leader on the field. He was a good and fearless blocker and as he gained in football knowledge he showed signs of smartness in emergencies. Layden had speed—he could run a hundred-yard dash in under ten seconds at a track meet. But speed and some kicking ability seemed to be all his football wares. Jimmy Crowley was only less humorous in play than in appearance. He looked dull and always resembled a lad about to get out of or into bed. He showed very little as a freshman—certainly none of the nimble wit that made him as celebrated for repartee as for broken-field running. Don Miller traveled, that first year, on the reputation and recommendation of his brother, "Red" Miller, the great Notre Dame halfback who made such havoc when his team beat Michigan in 1909. "Red" had sung the praises of another Miller, Jerry, who made a fine high-school record, but couldn't add to his poundage of one hundred and

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thirty-five and, unfortunately, grew quite deaf and so was disqualified for the tough going of big-league football. Don, an also-ran in his freshman year, surprised me when he came out for spring practice and with his fleetness and daring sized up as a halfback to cheer the heart of any coach.

In the fall of 1922, Notre Dame had lost all its veteran backs except Castner at fullback and Thomas at quarterback—one of those decimations by graduation that give coaches gray hair or, as in my case, remove what little hair they have.

This 1922 squad, the first on which the Four Horsemen got their chance, romped through its preliminary games against Kalamazoo, St. Louis, Purdue and De-Pauw. With the first big game looming, against Georgia Tech, Stuhldreher was promoted to alternate as quarterback with Thomas; Crowley and Layden were assigned to alternate as left halfbacks, while Castner, the veteran, remained at fullback and Don Miller received the right halfback berth. Crowley only won his place by a surprising performance against Purdue, when the sleepy one astonished Purdue a great deal and me a great deal more with the liveliest exhibition of cutting, jumping, side-stepping, change of pace and determined ball-toting that I had seen in many a day.

The Georgia Tech game of 1922 found the Four Horsemen ready to demonstrate. The experienced Castner guided them through their green patches, but practice had displayed their unusual gift for synchronization. They showed it against Georgia Tech for the first time and were largely instrumental in turning in a 13-3 victory.

Yet in that same game Stuhldreher, who had appeared most promising of the bunch, made the biggest mistake of his career—one that stamped him still an apprentice quarterback. When our team reached the five-yard line Stuhldreher passed on second down over the goal line for a touchback, and it became Tech's ball on our twenty-yard line.

Never again did Stuhldreher make a tactical error while running the team as quarterback. I have in mind the uproar that followed his spectacular or what seemed to be a spectacular error during the Tournament of Roses game against Stanford on New Year's Day in 1925.

Looking Under the Surface

Notre Dame was ahead, yet Stuhldreher passed straight into the hands of a

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Stanford player. The fact is that Stuhldreher had hurt his foot, badly. We didn't know until the game was over that he had broken a bone and was suffering agony throughout the game.



Even this circumstance, of course, could not excuse passing on second down with his team leading.

But Hunsinger, our right end, had told Stuhldreher in a huddle that the Stanford halfback who should be covering him, Hunsinger, did not follow him deep into the scoring zone on Notre Dame's offensive plays. Knowing this, Stuhldreher opened up on second down and called for a forward pass from himself to Hunsinger.

Sure enough, on the play, Hunsinger got clear away from the Stanford halfback, who failed to follow him deep enough. He was clear in the open, ready to race for a touchdown on receipt of the ball. A forty-five-yard pass would have done the trick, and a forty-five-yard pass straight to the target was easy enough for Stuhldreher. But not this time. As the plucky little quarterback squared himself to shoot, bringing down the foot with the broken bone to take his stance, excruciating pain shot through him, so that instead of his usual vigorous throw the ball sailed a feeble twenty yards.

Correct Strategy

Yet Stuhldreher's tactics were sound—for so good a ball thrower. For even if Hunsinger had failed to catch the ball and it had been intercepted, a forty-five-yard pass would have been as useful as a punt. If Hunsinger had caught it, it was a sure touchdown. The worst thing that could have happened would have been an incompleting pass, which would have cost us a down. As the play took place on third down, an incompleting pass would not have hurt because Layden was there to kick the ball on the next play. And Layden was a kicker!



Stuhldreher was really a master of sound quarterback play. He could read through another team's strategy without a key to the code. Against Army in 1924 Stuhldreher found their ends were smashing in close, with the result that he sent Crowley and Miller circling the ends. In the very next game, against Princeton, he found the tackle and end on each side were very wide, so he confined his tactics all day to sharp thrusts by Layden through the thinned-out line, and cut-backs by Crowley and Miller. In the game following that, against Georgia Tech, he made gains back to our weak side, because Georgia Tech had overshifted to our strong side, thus leaving the weak side unguarded. And in the game

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“Individually, at first, they were just four compact youths, no better than football’s average. Presently, by circumstance and not design, they came together behind a tigerish line. Within a season they became famous—the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame—Layden, the rapier; Stuhldreher, the quarterback who seemed to be psychic; Crowley, who fled through a broken field like water between brook stones; Miller, the daring. They amazed even their own coach”

against Wisconsin, fairly strong that year, Stuhldreher repeatedly found a gap between tackle and end that netted neat gains. To prove conclusively his versatility, when Nebraska’s line in the next game was exceedingly tough before a fast, plowing backfield, Stuhldreher wasted little time or strength on line drives. He opened up a passing attack and completed ten before the final

whistle, the score being 34 to 7.

This diversity of attack caused a well-known football writer to wonder what the Four Horsemen could do with a kicking game. As if in direct response they put one on in their last appearance for Notre Dame in that Tournament of Roses game against Stanford. The entire team had wilted in the heat. The boys were unable to move. They had to rely on Layden’s punting, not their usual game. Layden, however, got off a pair of punts of around eighty yards which were quite useful. Stanford lost the game despite its hard, smashing play and Pop Warner was disappointed, making much of the fact that Stanford had made more first downs than Notre Dame.

To this comment, Crowley, as spontaneous spokesman for the Four Horsemen, pointed out that the score was 27 to 10, adding: “Next year in the major leagues they aren’t going to count runs that come over the plate. They’ll just count the men left on bases.” Pop Warner, like the grand old sport he is, admitted Crowley had the laugh and that the only pay-off in football was the ball over the line and not down close to it.

The Comedy Relief

Crowley was always quick at a comeback. After one big Eastern game an official who had penalized Notre Dame all afternoon to the neglect of the Eastern team, which he rarely looked at, met Crowley, and they trudged side by side into the dressing-room. The official said to Crowley:

“You were lucky to win today.”

“Yes, Cyclops,” said Crowley. “After watching you officiate you don’t even begin to know how lucky we were.”

Crowley was the gagman of the outfit, but not at first. You never saw a more serious bunch of football players than the Four Horsemen before they had really made good, or a gayer group afterward.

One afternoon Crowley came from vacation into my office. This was after fame had perched on his sloping shoulders.

“Ran into a grand high-school player in Green Bay, Coach,” he said.

“Good, is he?” I asked.

“Awful good,” he said.

“You really mean that, Jim?” I said.

“He’s awful good,” said Crowley.

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"You mean—as good as you?" I asked.

"Well," said Jim, edging toward the door. "Perhaps not that—but awful good."

He vanished.

The official début of Crowley and his other Horsemen as big-leaguers was actually against Carnegie Tech. Castner, the veteran fullback who had been their bellwether in the early games, was so seriously injured in the game against Butler—a broken hip in a flying fall—that he was out for the season.

I moved Layden from left halfback, where he had been alternating with Crowley, to fullback. These boys surprised the football fans of Pittsburgh with their perfect timing as they functioned for the first time as a unit backfield. Layden amazed me by his terrific speed as fullback. He adopted a straight line drive that made him one of the most unusual fullbacks in football. He pierced a line through sheer speed—cutting it like a knife, although each man in the opposing line outweighed him by twenty pounds.

Proving Their Mettle

They won. This victory, however, didn't thrill me as much as the defeat they suffered the very next game—against Nebraska. The Cornhuskers had one of the heaviest teams in their history—and they are known for very active left. They pushed the relatively little Four Horsemen team all over the field. At the half the score was 14-0, and it would have been another touchdown if the lightweight boys from South Bend hadn't held the Nebraska heavies on their one-yard line for four straight downs. They emerged from that battering a sadly crumpled team.

But they came out fighting mad for the second half, whacked across a touchdown in the third quarter, and carried the ball to Nebraska's one-yard line toward the end of the final period. Stuhldreher called for a pass, and Layden spurred ahead to a corner of the field, where he was all set to receive and down the ball for six more points. But Stuhldreher, the alert, this time was not alert enough. Weller, the huge 250-pound Nebraska tackle, crashed through the line and smeared the 150-pound Notre Dame quarterback.

Our college alumni in Lincoln had a banquet ready for the Four Horsemen team that night. But Crowley, who came through the drumming bruised and bandaged, put it this way:

"We need a thermometer more than a feed." They went to bed to nurse their sore spots.

The Four Horsemen once were blamed for a breach of football etiquette in which they were nowise involved. This was against Wisconsin in 1924. We had the game well in hand, so in the second half the Horsemen were taken out and sent to the showers. In the final two minutes of play a substitute Notre Dame halfback went in for Crowley and strutted his stuff by running for a touchdown. As he crossed the line for the score he thumbed his nose at a Wisconsin player pursuing him. He was instantly yanked from the game. Many thought Crowley had made the vulgar

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gesture—but that was never Crowley's idea of wit.

His style of thought and good-humored balance of character was of the sterling stuff that wears better in adversity than in success. Against Princeton he and his three playmates were at their best. But Crowley faltered once. He had taken the ball, skirted Princeton's shock troops and began one of the rhythmic runs of the Four Horsemen. Slagle of Princeton ripped up the field to meet him. Crowley veered and Slagle nailed him from behind.

In the dressing-room between halves sleepy-eyed Jim Crowley was apologetic.

"I made a mistake," he said. "I didn't know Slagle was that fast. I should have cut back."

"That wasn't the mistake you made," I said. "That wasn't it."

"Yes, it was," he said. "I admit it. A mistake."

"No," I said. "Slagle didn't know who you were. If you had shown him those New York clippings you've been saving, telling how good you were, he wouldn't have dared come near you."

Crowley laughed louder than anybody at this. Perhaps he knew what all the team knew, that the Four Horsemen—great though they were—received a measure of praise that they should have shared with the stalwart linesmen—whom we called the Seven Mules.

This caused a few timely prods from some of the Mules. Adam Walsh, our center—a tower of strength for the Horsemen to play behind—watched them try unsuccessfully to get started on one of their famous runs against Lombard, with a second-string line to screen them. There was nothing doing, so I shot in Walsh and the other six Mules.

"What seems to be the matter, boys?" said Walsh, as he took the ball to snap back for the first scrimmage. "It seems you need a little help."

This banter helped to check the rising tide of self-esteem which only the rarest of young athletes can stem in the face of wholesale flattery. One of the Horsemen suffered just a trifle from swelled head. It was cured in short order. This particular Horseman stalked in to the squad manager and asked for a clean pair of stockings and a new belt. The manager said: "O. K., but turn in your old ones."

"What for?" said the Horseman.

Rip Miller, one of the Seven Mules, standing within earshot among five of the other six, rebuked the manager:

"What do you mean," he said, "talking that way? Don't you know who this is? This is one of the Four Horsemen."

"No-o?" said the manager, in mock awe.

"Ye-es," said Rip in more mock awe.

As the Horseman walked away, confused, manager and players stood staring, while the players nudged one another, murmuring reverently:

"He's one of the Four Horsemen."

The lad was cured. Next morning he went forthwith to the manager and said his old stockings and belt would do.

The Great Mr. Garbisch

Those Horsemen were pretty good themselves at concerted kidding. Against

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Army in 1924 they had been warned in practice of the prowess of Garbisch, the great Army All-America center. When they met him he punctuated some of their attempts to get away. They found a neat way to irritate Garbisch. On subsequent plays, when the drive was against him, and he was smeared, one Horseman would politely inquire of another so that Garbisch, picking himself up from the ground, could overhear:

"Is that the great Mr. Garbisch?"

To which another would solemnly reply:

"Yes, that's the great Mr. Garbisch."

When on another smash the All-America center was floored, Crowley would ask of Miller in amazement:

"You don't mean to say that's the great Mr. Garbisch?"

And Miller would retort: "If the number's correct it's none other than Mr. Garbisch in person."

It didn't help Garbisch's game much.

Quick to block and banter opponents, the Horsemen, through their most articulate member, did not spare themselves when they failed. I tried to make Jimmy Crowley a triple-threat man. He could pass and run in great shape, but his kicking was good for just about forty yards. This was, perhaps, due to an unusual fault. He would take three steps with the ball—and that made his kicking dangerous as he held the ball too long and there was risk of the defense breaking through and blocking it. He practiced for weeks to kick almost simultaneously with receipt of the ball. So when Layden became slightly injured in the Princeton game Crowley was assigned to do the punting. On the first try, his old bad habit returned subconsciously and he took three steps. A fast-charging Princeton tackle broke through and blocked the kick, which rolled over our goal line for a safety and two points for the Tigers.

After the game was over a teammate chided Crowley:

"I see you're a triple-threat man, this year."

"Yes," snapped Crowley. "Trip, stumble or fumble."

Just One of the Boys

While this joshing on the part of their squad-mates lasted, the Horsemen took the best means to offset it by joining in the chorus. On the only day in a great season that they weren't able to shine—against Northwestern at Soldiers' Field, Chicago—they expected razzing. Northwestern was an inspired team, while the Four Horsemen were off key, off color, stale and plainly unable to get anywhere. We won from Northwestern but only after a heart-catching, nip-and-tuck game.

On the train returning to South Bend a gentleman who had gazed upon the rye when it was golden barged into the car containing the squad. The conductor requested his ticket. The drunk brushed him aside.

"Where are you going?" the conductor demanded. "New York, Toledo or Cleveland?"

"I don't know," sighed the inebriate.

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"I guess I'm not going anywhere."

Jimmy Crowley turned to his teammates and remarked, "Must be one of the Four Horsemen."

Layden, a quiet member of the quartet, was their star on defense. His ability to intercept passes was uncanny, and it never had more value than in our Tournament of Roses game with Stanford on New Year's Day, 1925. Pop Warner—greatest originator of smart plays—had a forward pass play that enabled him to win a tie for the Coast championship even without the help of Nevers, his All-America fullback, who had been injured most of the season. Nevers was in the line-up against us—and what a game he played! Twice after Stanford had advanced to about our thirty-yard line they called for this dangerous pass out into the flat zone, and both times Layden, jumping high in the air, tipped and caught the ball and ran for touchdowns.

Each of these Horsemen shone individually on his day. As Layden's was against Stanford, so Miller's was against Princeton. Miller was the most dangerous of the quartet at right half, once in the open field. His long runs for touchdowns were a feature during his three years of play. But he was a much better defensive player than he has been given credit for being.

In this Princeton game of 1923 Miller had just gone off right tackle for what looked like a good gain when he fumbled the ball, which went rolling along the ground. Quick as a flash a Princeton back, trained in the alert Bill Roper way of stooping at full speed and picking up a loose ball, scooped it up. The next thing we saw was this Princeton halfback with two interferers in front, speeding down the field. The goal line was seventy-five yards away—and no one between the runners and that goal line but Don Miller.

Wasting no time after his boner, Miller had recovered poise and was racing across field to cut off the Princeton men. The stands were in an uproar. It seemed impossible that Miller could overtake them or, if he could, that he could offer much resistance against three men.

Pressing his speed he ran in front and to one side of the two interferers, crowding them toward the sideline. He feinted in and out to slow up the Princeton cavalcade, and did this so calculatingly that by the time they were within twenty yards or so of the Notre Dame goal line our fastest end, Clem Grove, had had time to rush up and tackle the ball carrier from behind. The touchdown was not scored, and so Miller redeemed his fumble by as heady a piece of work as any I have ever seen.

Crowley, the sleepy-looking wit, was the nerviest back I've known. He would throw himself anywhere. Also, since I'm using superlatives where they belong, he was the greatest interferer for his weight I have ever seen, and a particularly effective ball carrier on the critical third down.

No Alibis Needed

Examine their records closely and you'll find the Four Horsemen stand

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unique as a continuing combination in the backfield. They lost but two games out of thirty—both of these to the heavier Nebraska team—in 1922 and 1923. In the 1923 game their speed was seriously handicapped by the condition of the field. Nebraska had just built a new stadium, and had been unable to grow grass on the gridiron. The clay field was hard-baked, so, to prevent unnecessary bruises to the players, this field had been plowed to make it soft. A well-meant procedure, but it applied four-wheel brakes to the Horsemen.

But these lads of the colorful cavalry of Notre Dame need no alibi. The record's good enough. And the same is true of their scholastic records. They retain their interest in football while attaining success in business. All are coaching the game. Stuhldreher, the quarterback, coaches Villanova University; Don Miller, the Ohio State backfield; Jimmy Crowley, Michigan State College, and Layden, between spells at the practice of law in Pittsburgh, coaches Duquesne University. While Adam Walsh, headman of the Seven Mules that bore the brunt for the charge of the light brigade of the Four Horsemen, is an engineer and coaches the Yale line.

This quartet of backs, destined to be immortal in football, caused me labor, sometimes caused me pain, but mostly brought great joy, not only to their coach but to the spectators. Only their fame was a bit embarrassing. At their heyday I was hounded by newsmen and sob-sisters trying to get collective and individual interviews, genealogies and prophecies with, by and for them. One determined lady pursued them for pieces to appear in an obscure journal—by mail, telegraph, telephone and on foot. Finally, she caught up with Crowley.

"Who on earth is she?" he was asked.

"Oh," he said, blandly, "she's the third Horsewoman."

And biblical students of the Apocalypse will recall that the third horseman personified pestilence.

An accident of Blasco Ibañez's best selling popularity inspired their name; by accident they were brought together. But it was no accident that made them collectively and individually fine players. That was design and hard work. The Four Horsemen have the right to e with the gridiron great.



Each an outstanding star in his own right; collectively the greatest backfield ever assembled, Notre Dame's famed Four Horsemen, who rode roughshod over America's gridiron-elect. Below, left to right, are Miller, Stuhldreher, Crowley and Layden