

Who Really Did It?

by Emil Klosinski

As time marches on and the years roll by, events of the past are sometimes distorted, or embellished or completely altered. Revisionists want history to fit the script they set for the for events of the past; others, whose only desire is to perpetuate a certain legend or a legendary figure, rely solely on a dimmed memory. Voids are filled with imagination resulting in a different version of a memorable event.

The exploits of one legendary figure are sometimes transferred unto another. In recent months, there have been stories about Jim Thorpe and how he put on a drop-kicking show. As the story goes, Jim took two footballs to mid-field and drop-kicked the ball over the goal each way. The event happened but it wasn't Thorpe who did it. It was George Gipp. Yes, one might speculate that it could have been coincidental that both greats did put on the same exhibition, but no one can give the date, the game site or the teams involved when Thorpe was supposed to have performed that drop-kicking stunt. And there was a Chicago version attributing that exploit to Paddy Driscoll who was still alive and nipped it in the bud. Since no one can verify as to when Thorpe did it, then it is only fair to cite sources for the Gipp version.

Francis Wallace wrote about it in one of his many books on Notre Dame. Pat Chelland who wrote Gipp's biography entitled, "One for the Gipper" mentioned it in that book. Probably the best authenticating person would be the one involved in the incident albeit indirectly. The game was Notre Dame vs. Army at West Point on October 30, 1920. Both Army and Notre Dame were involved in pre-game warm-ups and Russell "Red" Reeder an Army lineman and drop-kicker began practicing his kicks from the 5 yard line. When he made two in a row then he'd move on to the ten and on in 5 yard increments until he reached the forty. There he began missing them...they were short and when Red put a lot of foot into the kicks, they'd go wide. After about six misses, Reeder retired to the sidelines. In the meantime, Gipp was tossing leisurely passes to Roger Kiley and Carberry, but was also turning his head and keeping an eye on Reeder kicking. When Reeder finished, Gipp stopped his activity and with the help of a teammate, took 4 balls to the 50 yard line. Nonchalantly, Gipp kicked two directly over the center of the crossbar one way and turned around and kicked the other two over the opposite goal post. Those who were aware of what was going on, applauded vigorously; those who were unaware of that exhibition were bewildered by the applause.

That was the story Russell "Red" Reeder, the man involved told some years ago at a College Hall of Fame induction banquet in New York, when the Hall of Fame was still located at Rutgers University in New Jersey. But Hunk Anderson supplied the background for that incident. Again Army had another powerhouse and Notre Dame was undefeated. This game now had become the highlight of the collegiate football season to the New Yorkers in the sportswriting field. Much had been written about the impending duel between each team's All-America backfield candidate and the consensus was that Army's Walter French would outshine Notre Dame's George Gipp.

Notre Dame left South Bend during the pre-dawn hours on Thursday morning and the New York Central train arrived in New York City in early evening. There was a change into a Pullman car for the journey to West Point and during respite, Gipp managed to get hold of 3 New York newspapers. The sport page of each paper predicted that French would have no problem outdueling Gipp. George passed the articles to Hunk who was seated besides him and in tones of subdued anger said, "We'll see about that. I'm going to have to show them on Saturday, right Hunk?" Gipp had extreme confidence in his ability in anything he tried, be it football, baseball or pool, yet he wasn't an obnoxious loud-mouth. His reply was usually on the field of play with a display such as the drop-kicking incident.

In the game, Walter French of the Army was all they said he was, but Gipp was better. French ran back a Gipp punt for a 60 yard touchdown and made some good gains. But with Notre Dame behind, Gipp put on a spectacular performance and the Irish won 27-17. For the record, here's what Gipp did: he completed 5 of 8 forward passes for 123 yards and 3 touchdowns, carried the ball 16 times for 152 yards,

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 1 (1992)

returned punts and kickoffs for 112 yards; on defense he made 5 solo tackles, intercepted one pass and knocked down two others in his zone.

And what did Red Reeder say about Gipp's performance during the game? "Yeah, he conceded, "Gipp was brilliant, but I still can't get over him kicking those balls over the goal posts from the 50 yard line."

Gipp often duplicated what he had done at West Point in drop-kicking. According to teammates Hunk Anderson and Pete Bahan, prior to regular practice Gipp would stand on the 50 yard line and boot the ball not only over the goal posts, but over the Cartier Field fence as well, a distance of at least 80 yards. In a situation where there was no harassment from charging linemen, he had the time for concentration and flawless technique.

Gipp as a freshman kicked a field goal that is among the longest of all time. Notre Dame played Western Michigan and the score was tied with only 3 minutes left. Notre Dame had the ball on its own 38 yard line an a lot of yardage to go on 4th down. Quarterback Thomas called for a punt and Gipp went back to kick. But instead of punting he drop-kicked a game winning field goal which was credited as a 62 yarder. Apparently in those days, kicks were counted from the line of scrimmage and not the spot from which the kick was made. If one added the spot from which the kick was made, at least an additional 7 to 10 yards could be assumed.

So this is the story about Gipp's drop-kicking expertise, but he was truly an all-around superstar.