

BOOK REVIEW: Jim Sumner.

Heart of a Lion:

The Wild and Woolly Life of Bobby Layne,

by Bob St. John. Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1991. \$19.95

Bobby Layne was a successful and popular quarterback at a time when the National Football League began to rival major league baseball for fan allegiance. His best years were with the Detroit Lions, a team he led to the NFL title in 1952 and 1953. A member of the NFL Hall of Fame, he passed for over 26,000 yards, and threw 196 touchdown passes, a league record at the time of his retirement after the 1962 season. He was also the prototypical Texan -- a charismatic leader who played hard, gambled hard, and partied hard -- "danced every dance," in the Lone Star vernacular.

Bob St. John is a Dallas sportswriter and the author of eleven books, many on Texas sports themes. He has produced a well-written and generally useful biography of an important player and personality. St. John keeps the ratio between player and personality about 50-50. The purely football portions of the book focus more on Layne's leadership qualities than game by game minutiae. Hard core football fans may be disappointed at the relative absence of detailed game descriptions. At barely 200 pages, St. John was certainly not pressed for space. Although Heart of a Lion has no footnotes or bibliography, St. John apparently relied on contemporary newspapers, interviews, and Layne's published biography, Always on Sunday.

I have a couple of complaints with Heart of a Lion. St. John has come up with what can only be described as a jumbled chronology. Most of the first half of the book is concerned with Layne's glory days in the NFL with Detroit and Pittsburgh. Then midway through the book St. John goes back to Layne's troubled childhood (his father died young and his mother dumped Layne off with her sister-in-law), college career, and early NFL days. He then finishes with Layne's post-NFL days. Throughout the text, the reader gets so many flashbacks and jumps forward, it's hard to keep track of where you are.

St. John is also remarkably uncritical. He makes it quite clear that he admired Layne very much. He relates one instance where Layne's wife provides answers to a college exam and another where Layne blatantly cheats some Arkansas fishermen out of a \$20,000 bet. St. John presents these and other episodes as examples of Layne's charming personality. Other observers might come up with a more negative interpretation. St. John gives us a book full of good-hearted Layne-picking-up-the-tab-at-the-bar stories, passing lightly over the fact that Layne basically drank himself to death before he was sixty.

Heart of a Lion will certainly interest fans of Layne and the glory days of the NFL in the 1950s and 1960s. Given its modest length and the author's uncritical assessment, however, the definitive Bobby Layne biography remains to be written.