

City of Champions: An American Story of Leather Helmets, Iron Wills and the High School Kids from Jersey Who Won It All

Hank Gola

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In 1939, a team from Garfield, New Jersey, traveled to Miami for the high school football championship. The event drew wide attention. The upstart Garfield Boilermakers came from an immigrant-heavy northern city to face the perennial powerhouse Stingarees. The game remains legendary in Garfield, and veteran sportswriter Hank Gola tells the bigger story in *City of Champions*, a thoroughly researched and thoroughly engrossing work.

In 1939, sports were wildly different, with years lost to the Great Depression and going for a field goal being regarded as a radical decision. Here, game-by-game accounts of Garfield's 1937, 1938, and 1939 seasons come alongside the backstories of key players and coaches. Though the Boilermakers are the stars of the book, Miami's team is covered in nearly the same depth. Gola deploys an impressive mix of interviews, news reports, and archival work to piece his story together. Game recaps retain an immediacy. Numerous photographs add extra details, as do useful appendices featuring rosters, box scores, and lists of player honors.

Some of the book's best material has little to do with football: Gola tells other stories about the towns and era that provide important context. He tells the harrowing story of immigrants on their way to Garfield aboard the *Athenia*, a British liner sunk by a Nazi torpedo the year of the championship. Another chapter explains the level of racial segregation in 1930s Miami, detailing incidents of African American stars from northern teams being unable to join their teammates in high-profile games. Near the end, Gola follows the players into World War II, telling some powerful individual stories—most notably, of a Jewish player's quick thinking saving him from a concentration camp.

These details flesh out the story while truly grounding *City of Champions* in its time and place. This is an excellent piece of sports writing, made even stronger by how it treats its characters.

JEFF FLEISCHER (November/December 2018)

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