ForeWord Reviews

SPORTS & RECREATION

Oklahoma's Carlisle Indian School Immortals
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Not long after the Civil War, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was established at an abandoned Army post in Pennsylvania to provide a largely technical education to young American Indians. The initial student body was male, largely populated by the sons of Lakota chiefs. “Boys had little economic value when confined to reservations because they could not longer hunt buffalo or make war,” Benjey writes.

Started as an experiment in 1879 to educate Indians and prepare them for assimilation into American culture, Carlisle soon became renowned for its football teams. Although Carlisle was not a college, it competed with collegiate teams. In 1896, Carlisle played and lost to lofty opponents—the “Big Four” (Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Pennsylvania State University)—but still posted a 4-4 season. And this was just the start. By 1907 Carlisle had won against both Penn State and Harvard. The football program, which author Tom Benjey recounts with each season’s highlights, including details about players and politics alike, ended when the vaunted Carlisle Indian School closed in 1918.

Glenn Scobey “Pop” Warner became Carlisle’s coach in 1899. This young man, who would become legendary, was paid $1,200 plus expenses for the season. According to Benjey, “the football world would be forever changed when ‘The Old Fox’ took the coaching reins.” Except for a few seasons, Warner coached from 1899 through 1914, with spectacular results.

During this era, “over a quarter century before Indians were granted citizenship and allowed to vote,” some opposing players, coaches, and spectators made derogatory remarks about the Carlisle players. But it wasn’t long before the players’ athleticism and pigskin prowess brought them respect. The much-celebrated Jim Thorpe was just one illustrious Indian player. Altogether five Carlisle Indians, plus Coach Warner, were inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame. These players and many others went on to play professional football or coach the game.

Reports by sports writers presented conflicted accounts of the Indians. Sprinkled throughout the book are cartoons from newspapers featuring Indians wearing headbands with feathers and charging onto the field carrying tomahawks.

Benjey writes that an extraordinary number of Carlisle football players not only excelled in school, both on and off the field, but went on to achieve success afterwards. Extensive research and attention to detail is evident in his book. A thorough index, detailed bibliography, and appendices make this a fine resource for libraries.

Benjey is the author of *Keep A-goin’: The Life of Lone Star Dietz*, and *Doctors, Lawyers, Indian Chiefs*.

Penny Hastings