

Four Horsemen Help Notre Dame and Knute Rockne Enjoy Ride To First National Championship

The 1924 Notre Dame football team will always be known best for New York Herald Tribune sportswriter Grantland Rice's account of the Notre Dame vs. Army game played October 18 at the Polo Grounds in New York:

"Outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again.

"In dramatic lore they are known as famine, pestilence, destruction, and death. These are only aliases. Their real names are Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley, and Layden. They formed the crest of the South Bend cyclone before which another fighting Army team was swept over the precipice at the Polo Grounds this afternoon as 55,000 spectators peered down on the bewildering panorama spread out on the green plain below."

Quarterback Harry Stuhldreher, fullback Elmer Layden, and halfbacks Jim Crowley and Don Miller were the cornerstone of a team considered one of the best in college football history.

The Fighting Irish won the Army game 13-7, as the Four Horsemen played magnificently. Miller rushed for 148 yards, Crowley for 102 and Layden for 60, while Stuhldreher orchestrated the offense masterfully from the quarterback position. It was the third victory of the season for the Irish, it came against a foe considered the toughest on the schedule, and it spurred the Irish on to a perfect 10-0 season and the school's first recognized national championship.

Rice's account led to near-mythic status for the Irish backfield, but the Seven Mules, who did the blocking, and the Shock Troops, who were perhaps the best second string in the game, played indispensable roles, too. Each week in 1924, seventh-year Notre Dame coach Knute Rockne started his second stringers, his Shock Troops.

When Rockne felt his Shock Troops had done their job, he brought in the Four Horsemen and the Seven Mules, a group so good "that the Holy Ghost couldn't have broken into that lineup," said Harry O'Boyle, a kicker and reserve halfback on the Shock Troops. Center Adam Walsh was the heart of the Seven Mules, a group that also included ends Ed Hunsinger and Chuck Collins, tackles Rip Miller and Joe Bach, and guards Noble Kizer and John Wiebel. Walsh characterized the win over Army with a late interception—which he made with two broken hands.

The combination of the Shock Troops, the Seven Mules, and the Four Horsemen worked 10 times in 10 tries in 1924 against a national schedule that took the Irish to New York, Princeton, N.J., Madison, Wis., Soldier Field in Chicago, and Pittsburgh during the regular season while giving them only four home games. In addition, at the end of the season, Rockne was able to convince the University administration to permit the football team to travel to California to play Stanford in the Rose Bowl, where the Irish clinched the Helms Athletic Foundation's national championship with a 27-10 victory.

In the Rose Bowl—Notre Dame's only bowl appearance until the team began making regular bowl trips with the 1970 Cotton Bowl—the Irish were faced with stopping an undefeated, once-tied Stanford team that included legendary coach Pop Warner and quarterback Ernie Nevers. Rockne was concerned his players might not be ready physically for the heat of the West Coast, so he arranged for a slow, cross-country train trip that included stops in Louisiana, Texas and Arizona so players would have time to adjust to warmer, more demanding weather.

It worked, as Elmer Layden scored Notre Dame's first touchdown on a three-yard run and returned interceptions of Nevers' passes 78 and 70 yards for two more touchdowns. The Irish took advantage of eight Stanford turnovers and made a critical goal-line stand in the fourth quarter to come up with the 17-point win.

"That would always be my favorite team," Rockne once said. "I think I sensed that the backfield was a product of destiny. At times they caused me a certain amount of pain and exasperation, but mainly they brought me great joy."

— Willie Shearer

1924 — 10-0-0

► On the gridiron fields of football fame,
Ride the four great horsemen of Notre Dame,
From Princeton East to Nebraska West
They have charged through the lines of the country's best
"They shall not pass," the Army cried,
But nothing could stop the horsemen's ride
On to victory and immortal fame
Still rise the four great horsemen of Notre Dame.

— *Pittsburgh Gazette Times*

► "There's a kick in Notre Dame; not alone in Notre Dame football, but in every effort, every endeavor, every activity that its men undertake. It is a training camp for more than famous backfields, mighty captains, invincible Horsemen. There's where the kick is — in the knowledge that America's acclaimed champions of the gridiron are the representatives of an ideal that works, and will work for all time to come, like a strong leaven in our national soul — the ideal of manliness, sportsmanship, chivalry, of friendly rivalry and inspiring competition."

— Charles Phillips

► "Sing a song of Notre Dame,
Shout their praises wide.
Tell of Crowley's sturdy might,
Sing of Layden's stride.
Spread the news
of Miller's speed,
Speak of Walsh's game,
Fighters of the bulldog breed,
Here's to Notre Dame."

— Ford C. Frick

