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MARC RASMUSSEN

Book Excerpt

Six: A Football Coach's Journey to a National Record

At one time in South Dakota and elsewhere on the northern plains, spectators at high school football games watched the gridiron rivalry from cars they had parked around the field, turning their headlights on if play extended into the dusk. The popularity of six-man high school football in the 1940s and 1950s made autumn a time of exciting competition and the local team a rallying point for the entire community.

Six: A Football Coach's Journey to a National Record, *published in 2011 by the South Dakota State Historical Society Press, tells the story of six-man football in Claremont, a small town in northeastern South Dakota where, like other small towns in the region, the pool of players was insufficient to field the standard eleven-man team. Author Marc Rasmussen focuses on the Claremont Honkers and their coach, Willis ("Bill") Welsh (1903–1980), who started a six-man team at the high school in 1947 and by 1953 had racked up a national record of sixty-one consecutive victories. Welsh's career as a high-school football coach remains equaled. As mentor, coach, and teacher, he influenced the lives of many young people across the state, but his best-known legacy is the record of the Claremont Honkers and their domination of six-man football in South Dakota, North Dakota, and Minnesota.*

Presented here is the introduction to Six, *which immerses readers in the excitement of the Honkers' big game against the Pirates of Hankinson, North Dakota, on Armistice Day in 1948.*

Game Day, 1948

The wind blew cold through the broken cornstalks near the city limits, creating a dry rustling sound all too familiar to the residents of Claremont. This music of late fall was clear evidence that winter lurked right around the corner. It had been a good year for the farmers, and the

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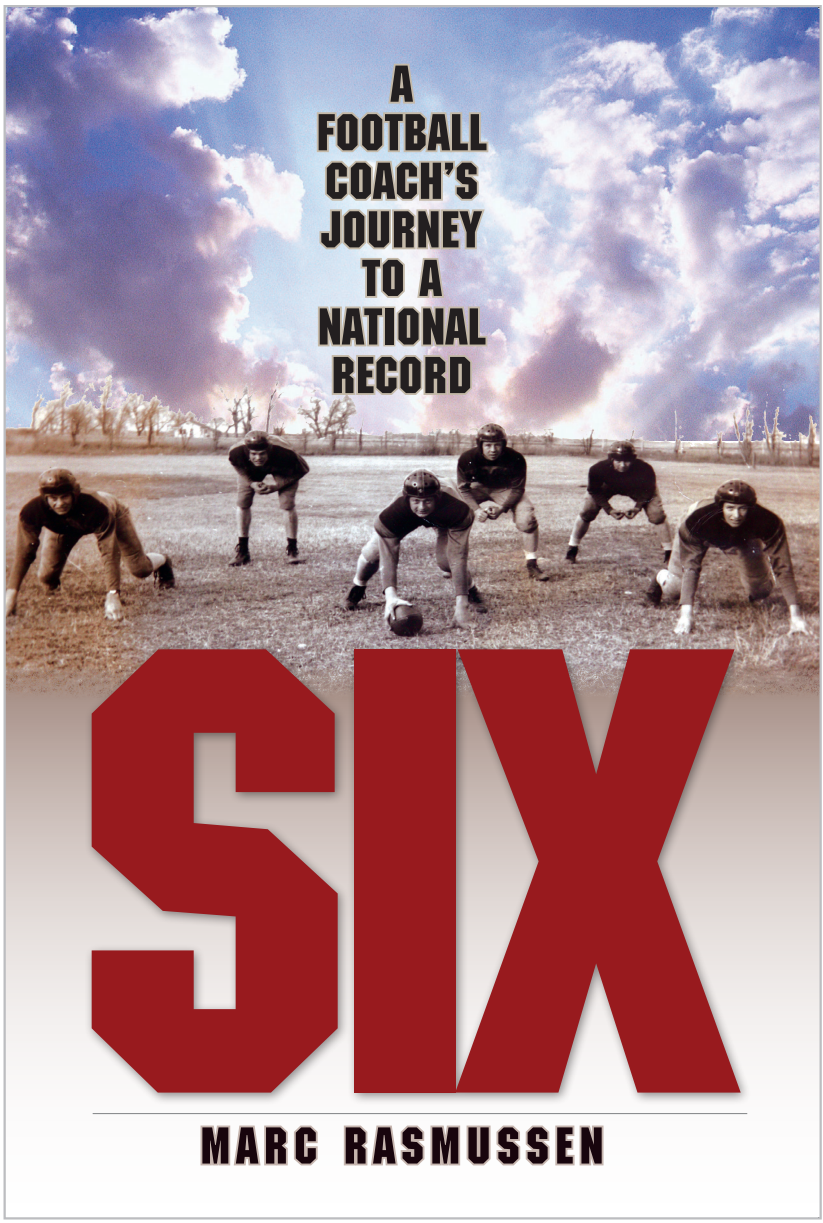

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harvest nestled safely in the bins, leaving the stubble to capture winter moisture for the benefit of next year's crop. The strong wind dislodged tumbleweeds from the fence lines and sent them on a frantic journey across the open fields to find a new resting place. High overhead, thousands of migrating ducks and geese swept south in tight "V" formations. Instinct told them that they had overstayed their welcome in this harsh land and that they should resume their long journey. Their distant calls taunted the wingless ones below, who were unable to escape the oncoming storm.

Clouds rolled in from the south and west, but as the temperature dropped, the wind direction changed. Frosty air descended from Canada on a collision course with moist air from the Gulf of Mexico creating perfect conditions for snow. South Dakota represented the eternal battlefield between these two weather masses, and the effect was often spectacular and sometimes deadly. The prospect of winter weather on 11 November 1948 did not make headlines in this part of the world, but it was not a popular development for fans of football on this important day.

The students walking to school felt the frigid breeze, and those without hats or scarves pulled their collars up around their ears as a defense against the chill. The school bell rang to signal the start of classes, and excitement filled the hallways as the forty students of Claremont High School shuffled into their homerooms. Extra color was evident throughout the school as most of the teenagers wore Claremont colors to express their support for their beloved Honkers football squad, and one inspired soul arrived early to scrawl "GO HONKERS" in big flowing letters on all the chalkboards.

The teachers met in the lounge just prior to the first class and moaned about how little the students would accomplish this day. One teacher suggested that a pop quiz would get their minds into learning, but her peers helped her understand her error. They knew that, even with the best of intentions, the children could not focus on anything but the upcoming game with mighty Hankinson, a team of athletes touted by the North Dakota press as the finest in both Dakotas.

Coach Willis ("Bill") Welsh, wearing his ever-present suit and tie, arrived early to make sure all the preparations for the upcoming game

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were complete. He walked through the halls amidst hails of "Good luck this afternoon, Coach" and "Knock 'em dead, Coach." His upright posture and composed demeanor gave a sense of calm to those who watched him pass. Welsh had a reassuring presence, and rarely did he need to raise his voice to the students to achieve complete attention. Willis Welsh, or Bill, as most people knew him, was intent on the completion of his tasks this morning, and his pace quickened as he saw the clock on the wall. He had a history class to teach, and the coach was never late.

Welsh had much to do in his roles of teacher and coach, and with a limited staff, he often deputized the townsfolk to help stage athletic events. He coordinated many volunteers anytime a big event took place, and today was a big event indeed. The coach discovered years before the importance of involving the community in building a successful sports program, and their participation in the staging of the game not only helped the school, but also inspired the students. He took the short walk to the football field located a block from the school and saw his miniature army of helpers already at work. Everyone was eager for the upcoming contest because this game really meant something; the teams were playing for what Welsh had dubbed the "Mythical Three-State Football Championship."

The talents of Bill Welsh were many, but one of his finest was an ability to promote athletic events. He always looked for interesting angles to boost attendance and had proven his ability to generate support from the fans. The revenue stream from ticket sales and donations from local boosters had already made possible a brand-new gym, just completed, adjacent to the Claremont High School. The 1948 Armistice Day game would be part of a larger celebration that included the formal opening of the new facility. The Claremont Gym Association had been formed at Welsh's urging during the summer of 1947, and as an example of the community's support, within a single week, the association acquired funding to construct the facility from ninety-seven farmers and local residents, some giving as much as five hundred dollars. Not satisfied with just funding the gym's construction, Welsh planned to cover ongoing expenses by operating a roller rink on the gym floor two nights a week; he even coordinated skating lessons for those interested. He

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Bill Welsh grew up in Aberdeen and coached at several South Dakota high schools in the course of his career. He is pictured here during his time at Webster.

planned to get various waltz records and work with his daughter Jane to create dance steps to the music. Later, because of this effort, the girls of Claremont created the first dance/skating team in the area, and they would perform to "Cruising Down the River" by Russ Morgan for the halftime entertainment at home basketball games.

The coach paused for a moment as he gazed at the gym and reflected on what this project meant to the community. Like an old-fashioned barn-raising, the construction of the facility brought together the local population. The gym featured a forty-two by seventy-six foot playing surface and was equipped with two lavatories, two locker rooms, a

stage, and an annex in which a fully functional kitchen provided concessions during basketball games. Nearly twice the size of the old floor in the Legion Hall, the court seemed huge to the players, who were used to the old surface where the top of both keys actually touched the center circle on the floor.

Welsh shook his head when he recalled their first attempt to prepare the new floor for basketball. The builders chose to glue Masonite tiles directly to the concrete underlying the floor. It made sense on paper, but the amateur engineers of Claremont were unable to get the tiles to remain secured to the concrete. Lest the tiles come off in the midst of an important game, the builders came up with Plan B. The solution was to create a faux playing surface over the concrete with a framework of two-by-fours covered with plywood, to which they glued and nailed the tiles. It satisfied all who competed in the gym. The seating had also been dramatically improved. In the Legion Hall, less than seventy-five spectators could view a game, but in the new gym, as many as twelve hundred fans could cram in to see the Honkers play. The 1948 Armistice Day football game was part of a two-day long carnival to celebrate the gym's official opening. After the Honkers had taken on Hankinson, the townspeople would convene in the gym for a celebratory dinner, at which Mylo Jackson, head coach of the Aberdeen Central Golden Eagles, would be the featured speaker.

In assessing the potential crowd for the game versus Hankinson, Welsh knew attendance would not be a problem. Automobiles and pickup trucks already surrounded the playing field, parked in a rectangle just a few feet outside the grid lines. Some industrious entrepreneurs even backed a one-ton flatbed truck up to the field to provide a platform for those willing to pay an extra quarter for an improved vantage point. The uninitiated might imagine a drive-in movie was on the schedule, or perhaps a parking lot had spontaneously appeared, for the sight of so many empty cars neatly surrounding a bare field seemed odd. Eager fans seeking a good seat for the upcoming game had parked their cars the previous day or earlier that morning. Prior to floodlights and dedicated bleachers being commonplace in high-school stadiums, cars served multiple functions. They offered shelter from the cold, a place to sit when bleacher seats were limited, and a source of light

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as the days grew shorter; the headlights making it possible to finish late-running contests. The cars also created some interesting endings to plays that took the athletes out of bounds. Now and then, players slid under a big old Chevy rather than plow into one of the huge fenders, bumpers, or running boards, and occasionally, the marks of cleats were seen on a car's hood as a youngster took the high road over the paint job to dissipate his momentum.

Welsh proceeded across the field to speak with the man busily outlining the dimensions of the playing field with white chalk lines. The coach reminded him to bring some black coal dust that afternoon so that the lines would not disappear under a white blanket of snow. The volunteers carried a nervous energy about them. Over the past two seasons, the community had become as much a part of the team as the players, and each person helping to prepare for the game had sympathetic butterflies in the stomach for their young athletes. These extended team members each played a role in making the event special, whether taking tickets, running the concession stand, or directing traffic. Each volunteer earned his own nickname, provided by Welsh, to match his job. For instance, he called the ticket taker, "Scalper," and the man who marked the field, "Lineman."

This game would be Welsh's second Armistice Day contest as head of the Claremont Honkers athletic programs. In the first, the year before, the Honkers defeated a tough team from Montrose (twenty-five miles west of Sioux Falls) by a score of 40 to 24. Montrose had come to Claremont with a ten-game winning streak and with limited respect for the upstart team from northeastern South Dakota that lacked even a full season of six-man football in its short history. Featuring Bill Griffith, an unstoppable 220-pound fullback, Montrose had found it hard to take seriously a group of athletes wearing sweatshirts with numbers painted on them rather than the proper jerseys enjoyed by wealthier school districts.

The handbills, written by Welsh, advertised the game as a championship contest: "Montrose boasts one of the finest teams in South Dakota being undefeated and untied at present in one of South Dakota's toughest conferences. Claremont has a great record, winning seven straight without defeat and winner of undisputed championship of the

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North Central Conference. See these two undefeated 6-man teams battle for the Mythical 6-Man Championship (of South Dakota)." Even though Claremont had won all of its games preceding this contest, the Montrose team was supremely confident, and Claremont's homemade jerseys helped lull them into a state of complacency. When the final gun sounded, however, performance had won out over dress as the Montrose team fell hard to this group of ragamuffins, giving the Honkers the first of many unofficial state championships.

Despite their convincing victory and their undefeated season, there was some controversy to the Honkers' claim over the championship; the six-man team from Selby had also gone undefeated during the 1947 season. Selby's team and fans crowed about being a co-champion because of their record, and their claims made the newspapers. Welsh, being the consummate promoter, recognized the opportunity in this situation and called Herb Bjella, the Selby coach, and invited the Lions to play the Honkers early in the 1948 season. The result removed all doubt about the previous year's championship, with Claremont defeating Selby by a score of 68 to 14. It was Selby's first loss in two years, and the game was one of many stiff challenges that Welsh accepted during the course of what would become a seven-year, sixty-one game, national-record-setting winning streak.

Due to the Honkers' success in their first season, Claremont's residents purchased new uniforms, assuring that the Honkers not only played like winners but looked the part as well. In fact, the success of the Honker program created some logistical problems for Welsh. After a game, Welsh received the proceeds from ticket and concession sales to deposit in the bank the next day or the following Monday if a game fell on a weekend. Given the large gate receipts the Honkers were earning by the end of their second season, Welsh became concerned about attracting a thief looking for an easy score and came up with a novel solution to counter the risk. He had four individuals count the money after the game back at the school. Each of the counters would prepare a moneybag, but only one of the bags would actually contain the money. The four people would then take the bags to the coach's house using different routes. Once the coach had the proceeds, he would wrap them in butcher paper, mark the package as hamburger, and put it into

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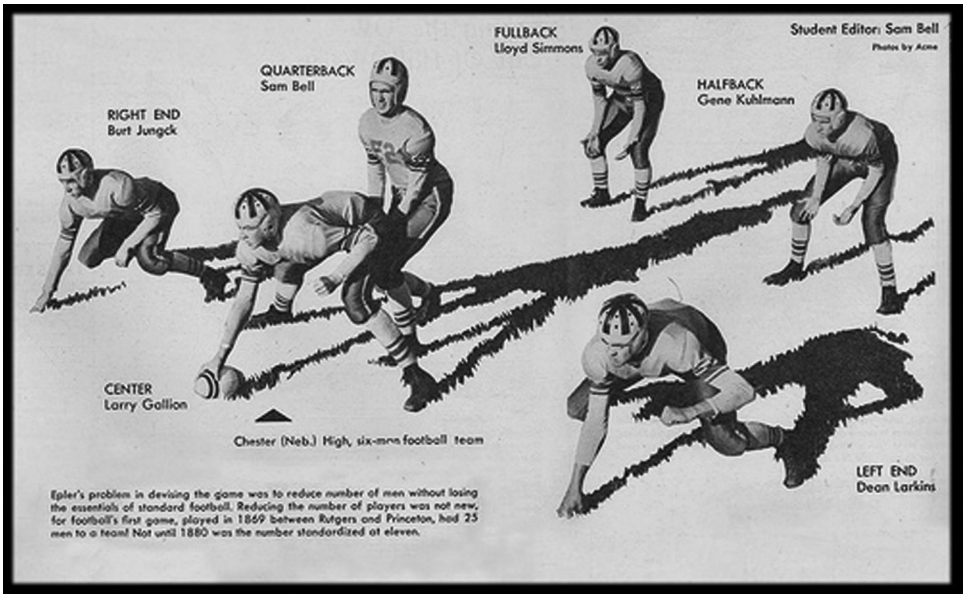
the freezer. After a particularly big game, he was not even comfortable with that routine and decided to stuff it into a turkey thawing in the refrigerator to throw off even the most cunning thief. Ultimately, the owner of the local bank agreed to pick up the funds after games, which proved a huge relief to the coach and his family.

Today's game, on 11 November 1948, was also destined to attain big proceeds. The opposition from Hankinson had dominated the six-man game in North Dakota for the past six years, and the team had a large fan following. Coached by Arch Earnest, Hankinson had recorded an amazing forty-one wins, two losses, and two ties, and had won thirty-seven of the past thirty-eight games. The only loss came at the hands of the team from West Fargo, North Dakota, by a score of 12 to 8. Coach Welsh indicated, in one of his handbills advertising the game, that this six-man team had the best record in the country over that period. The Claremont faithful were all aware of the challenge facing their team. The Honkers carried their own streak into the game, however, having



This program from Beatrice High School in Chester, Nebraska, shows the six-man football lineup devised and promoted for small-town teams by Stephen Epler in the 1930s.

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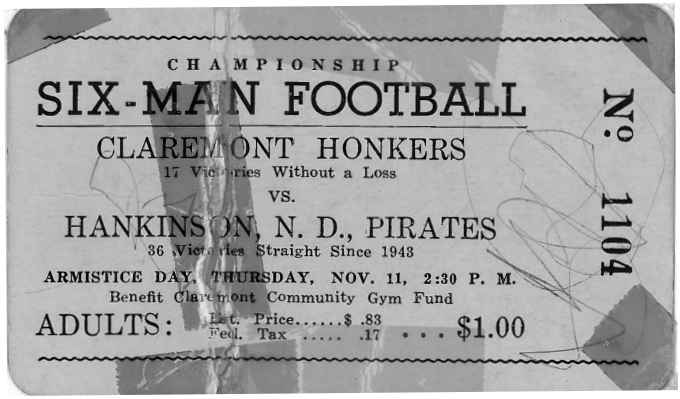

Welsh was a promoter as well as a coach, having volunteers print formal tickets for his "championship football" games. This ticket is from the Claremont-Hankinson duel.

won each of its first seventeen games since it started playing six-man football in the fall of 1947. Earlier in the 1948 season, Claremont had also traveled to Browns Valley, Minnesota, where the Honkers had decisively defeated, by a score of 65 to 41, a team considered by many to be the best six-man team in Minnesota. Browns Valley, from the Little Six Conference, had brought an undefeated record into that game, having scored an average of fifty-five points per contest. They used power and size, rather than speed, to grind out wins. The two 190-pound Reed brothers carried the success of the team on their backs and accounted for most of Browns Valley's scoring. The game was as physical as any the Honkers had played to that date, and the victorious Claremont players nursed some real bruises on the long trip home that night.

By defeating Browns Valley, Welsh claimed his first unofficial South Dakota-Minnesota championship, and he now used this achievement to hype the contest against Hankinson. He understood that the build-up would produce an exciting and well-attended event. Welsh employed a small ritual when he won a big away game. He went to the school when the team returned to town and fired his shotgun into the air to signal to townsfolk that the mighty Honkers had returned victorious. After the Browns Valley win, signaled by two shots from an old

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double-barrel twelve-gauge shotgun, excited residents of Claremont, looking to hear the details, quickly joined him at the school. In his unassuming way, he gave credit to everyone but himself, adding to the local enthusiasm for his team. While Welsh was not one to toot his own horn, his capable guidance had been just what this group of athletes needed to put them on the map. The win over Browns Valley, followed quickly by one over the undefeated squad from Faith (which the local press billed as the best team in western South Dakota, and who had traveled two hundred fifty miles for the game), set the stage for the 1948 season-ending game with Hankinson for bragging rights in the upper Midwest region.

As the reputation of the Honkers spread, more and more spectators from outside Claremont had started to come to the games. Attendance had grown by the week. Such was the Honkers' draw that the much larger Groton High School had invited the Honkers to play Faith in front of Groton's homecoming crowd. Groton competed in the eleven-man variety of the sport against much larger schools, but the organizers of the Tigers' annual Jungle Day celebrations understood what a goldmine the Honkers represented in terms of attendance. It was a brilliant strategy. The Honkers faithful, along with the Groton spectators and visitors, produced a large crowd in spite of the poor weather that day.

The contest against Hankinson at the end of the Honkers' second season represented an opportunity for Claremont to cement its program as the premier six-man team in the three-state region. It would prove beyond a doubt that the Claremont Honkers were worthy of their number-one ranking in South Dakota. This season had already seen an offensive explosion unlike any enjoyed by a six-man football team in the game's short history, including a seventy-seven-point performance against the Faith Longhorns, and six other scores of sixty-plus. Faith had held its opposition scoreless in the seven games preceding the 1948 contest with Claremont, but the scoreless streak ended just twenty-one seconds into the game. A handoff to Claremont's Donnie Gibbs resulted in a fifty-yard touchdown run, the first of six he scored that day. If the Honkers scored against Hankinson in a similar manner, they had a chance to set a national six-man single-season scor-

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The Claremont Honkers six-man squad is pictured here during the 1948 season.

ing record, a fact no one on the team was aware of at the time. Had they been aware, Welsh may have changed his substitution practices in earlier games to assure his team a place in football history before the final contest of the season. As in most Honkers' games, the first team only played part of the contest, with the seconds getting significant playing time, making Gibbs's scoring rate that day even more impressive.

As dawn broke on the morning of the Hankinson-Claremont game, the locals met for coffee in Claremont's tiny business district, which many did on a daily basis, providing folks with a chance to socialize with neighbors separated by miles of tilled fields. Conversations buzzed with the words Honkers and football. The laughter and energy from the assembled group spilled out into the street and carried to pedestrians making their way downtown. It enticed more than the normal number of people to join the party. The fans loved their Honkers; for the small price of admission, they received great entertainment.

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Back at the school that day, true to the teachers' predictions, limited learning occurred. Lunch, loud and raucous, got out of hand, and Welsh reminded the students to act like ladies and gentlemen. The scheduled time for kickoff was 2:30 p.m. and excitement reached a crescendo as the final bell approached. At 1:00 p.m., fans began to congregate at the field, and the sound of cars starting and idling cut through the cold wind. In the days before emissions restrictions, the aroma of over-ripe exhaust blew across the field, making a few eyes water downwind. The booster club arrived early to brew coffee and heat apple cider and cocoa to keep the fans warm. A few of the old-timers stuffed flasks into their bib overalls to season their coffee with their favorite flavors. A little Old Grand-Dad bourbon in a hot cup of Maxwell House helped keep the cold at bay and complemented the unfiltered, hand-rolled cigarettes seemingly affixed to their bottom lips.

The bus from Hankinson arrived at 1:00 p.m., and the Honker fans showed a little concern when the North Dakota champions exited the bus and strutted into the visitor's locker room in the new Claremont gym. Their swagger had an intimidating effect on those who watched intently from the windows of the high school. Fans from Hankinson had followed the bus on its eighty-mile journey with bright royal-blue-and-white banners proudly flying in the wind. The Pirates' fans expected to witness nothing short of a coronation of their team as the champions of the region, and they happily shared their enthusiasm with those in earshot.

More than fourteen hundred people lived in Hankinson in the 1940s, and at least half of them made the trip to Claremont. The roughly two-hundred fifty residents of Claremont would certainly attend the game, and a good-sized cadre of fans from the surrounding area would join them at the spectacle. An entourage from Dickinson, North Dakota, had also crossed the border, and they added energy to the crowd as well. An *Aberdeen American News* reporter attending the crowd estimated that the crowd numbered close to two thousand spectators. The ticket takers were amazed as proceeds from sales swelled to over one thousand dollars, an outstanding total for a small-town athletic event. A half-hour before kickoff, a bus from nearby Oakes, North Dakota, arrived carrying the pre-game entertainment. It was the last in-

gredient in this well-planned event, and Welsh's army of volunteers could breathe easy and enjoy the game about to unfold.

The Honkers team assembled in the gym just after 1:00 P.M. Welsh appreciated the field of psychology and realized how excitement could affect young minds before a big event. He had learned many years before how to focus his players' attention on the task ahead and how to get their blood boiling in anticipation of the game. Welsh, a wonderful storyteller, drew the athletes' young heads out of the present and transported them to a place where David defeated Goliath on a routine basis. When he finished his stories, his players would be coursing with adrenaline and prepared to defeat all comers. Welsh used his vocal inflections as an instrument, and he chose his words carefully to gain the most emotional impact. His strong baritone voice came across clear and direct, and he spoke without hesitation, sounding more like a Shakespearian actor than a football coach. His athletes listened intently, noiseless, absorbing each word and living the images Welsh brought to life with his stories.

In the locker rooms of the new gym that day, the experienced coach told one of his favorite stories, which involved a young man raised on an Indian reservation in Oklahoma in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The young man was called Bright Path in his native language. His parents sent him and his brother to an Indian boarding school when both were young. The siblings were extremely close and did everything together. Not long after his ninth birthday, Bright Path's brother took ill and died suddenly of pneumonia, devastating the young survivor who found himself struggling to find any joy in his life. He begged to come home, but his parents would not allow it. Life became more unbearable when his mother died two years later while giving birth to another child. The young man ran away from school and wandered aimlessly, finally returning home to his father.

Encouraged to go back to school, Bright Path chose to attend the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where he met a coach named Glenn ("Pop") Warner, who would ultimately be inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame for his accomplishments. In Bright Path's first year at Carlisle, the young man's father died of gangrene, leaving him an orphan. He was truly a lost soul, but just when it

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seemed darkest for him, he found his Indian name to be his guide. The young man discovered that his "bright path" was athletics and that he had a real talent for sports. One day, as he walked past some athletes preparing for a track meet, he watched them train for the high jump and asked if he could give it a try. Amidst snickers from those practicing, he lined up for his first jump. Wearing his street clothes and with no prior experience, he cleared the bar, beating the best of the group assembled. The spectators grew quiet, having gotten their first glimpse of an athlete who was to become a legend.

The Honkers' coach then related to his team that Bright Path's English name was Jim Thorpe, and that this legendary young man, who had faced the hardest challenges life could throw at him, found sports to be his salvation. Thorpe also played football, and took his team to a national collegiate championship, and during the course of his career, he earned two All-American Awards. Following such success, Thorpe tried out for the 1912 Olympic team, and in a stunning performance, won two gold medals and placed in two other events. After the Olympics, he became a professional baseball, football, and basketball player. From poor and painful beginnings, this young American Indian boy persevered to become the toast of the athletic world, a path that any one of the Honkers in that room had the potential to follow, Welsh assured them.

Welsh's young players took in every word, and by the time he finished his mini-biography of Jim Thorpe, the players hungered for their own chance at immortality. A mere game stood between them and the ability to accomplish something they had not dreamed of when they first touched a football two short years earlier. The twenty players, representing every male student in the high school, quickly dressed in their dark blue jerseys with red shoulders, white pants, and nice new helmets. Once dressed, they gathered for the pre-game chalk talk where Welsh went over the Xs and Os one more time. The huddle had grown by this time to include a group of excited but well-behaved grade- and middle-school boys, whom the coach allowed to listen in as long as they remained quiet. This junior assemblage of future stars is a fairly common sight at modern high-school athletic events, but Welsh had added the practice at a time when few other schools allowed such

an indulgence, reasoning that in a tiny town he must reach deep into the student population to develop future players and what better way than by giving them exposure before they even began to compete. Welsh had actually decided to implement this practice when he took the position at Claremont. As a way of accepting and recovering from the death of his five-year-old son Jean, who had been hit by a car and died in 1943, Welsh sought comfort in helping to mold young minds.

The chalk talk ended, Welsh completed the preparations, and the team gathered for its grand entrance. Each player had his own way of getting ready, but Mickey Vickers used the most unusual method. Before every game, he took a moment to throw up any lunch that he had enjoyed that day, and today was no exception. Vickers returned from the bathroom wiping his mouth and joking about how this event might keep the Hankinson blockers from getting too close to him. Then the Honkers, led by their three best players, Donnie Gibbs, Neil Cain, and Vickers, sprinted the one block to the site of the contest and, making a quick lap around the field, stopped in front of the crowd to fire them up. The crowd clapped and cheered as the team began their warm-ups, with the captains leading the team through a series of calisthenics. For the seniors, it was the last football game of their high-school careers, in which none had experienced a loss. Warming up on that bitter cold day, the boys determined to end their careers with that status intact.

The Claremont crowd chattered excitedly, discussing strategy and basking in the fanfare. The hometown fans had come a long way since witnessing the first six-man football game of their lives just the previous season. Claremont residents understood baseball; the town's team had won the 1938 State Amateur Baseball championship. Early in the 1930s, the high school had also fielded a short-lived eleven-man football team, but during the first season of six-man football in 1947, the game had seemed so foreign to the players and the crowd that Welsh's father, his wife, and even his young daughter had to walk up and down the sidelines during the game, explaining the rules and answering questions.

The fans watched as the Honkers completed their exercises and the starting offensive team lined up against the seconds and began running through plays. Quarterback Neil Cain had started all the school's six-

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man football games. Donnie Gibbs lined up at fullback, with Mickey Vickers at halfback. Between them, the two young men had accounted for a large percentage of the record-setting number of touchdowns the Honkers had piled up during the past two years. At center stood big Willie Hollister, a mountain of a young man who opened holes in the defense and moved the pile forward. Bob Stanley and Lyle Cutler played the two ends. This core group of players had been life-long friends.

Gibbs, tall and handsome, had an infectious smile but was generally a quiet star, who self-deprecatingly kept his sporting accomplishments quiet, particularly when around strangers. Mickey Vickers was another exceptional athlete who excelled in football and baseball, probably acquiring some of his baseball-playing father's athletic genes. His father was one of three Vickers who propelled Claremont's amateur baseball team to the South Dakota championship in 1938 over a vaunted Aberdeen squad. Smaller than the others, but extremely quick, Mickey Vickers was more outgoing than his best friend Gibbs and was clearly the leader of the team. Vickers's good looks contributed to his having a steady girlfriend, Ramona Daly, throughout his high-school years. Neil Cain shared more character traits with Vickers than with Gibbs, and his classmates held him in high regard. On the field, Cain moved the offense as a general moves his troops, directing the play from his quarterback position. Vickers was the secondary scoring option and an accomplice to the well-crafted plays spun out by Welsh's offensive scheme, while Gibbs carried the scoring burden on his capable shoulders. Many years later, Vickers described his role on the team as being there to block for Gibbs, nothing more; even so, he enjoyed plenty of glory and responsibility for the wins. Willie Hollister, at center, provided the muscle in the middle, and his ability to block so effectively made possible many of the team's accomplishments.

Six-man football was a wide-open game designed for multiple scoring options, but with the strength of Claremont's running game, passing was just a minor part of the offense. Despite the run-first tendencies of Welsh's schemes, the Honkers scored heavily; even the two ends played scoring roles through the myriad end-around and reverse plays in the coach's playbook. Hollister even joined in the scoring occasion-

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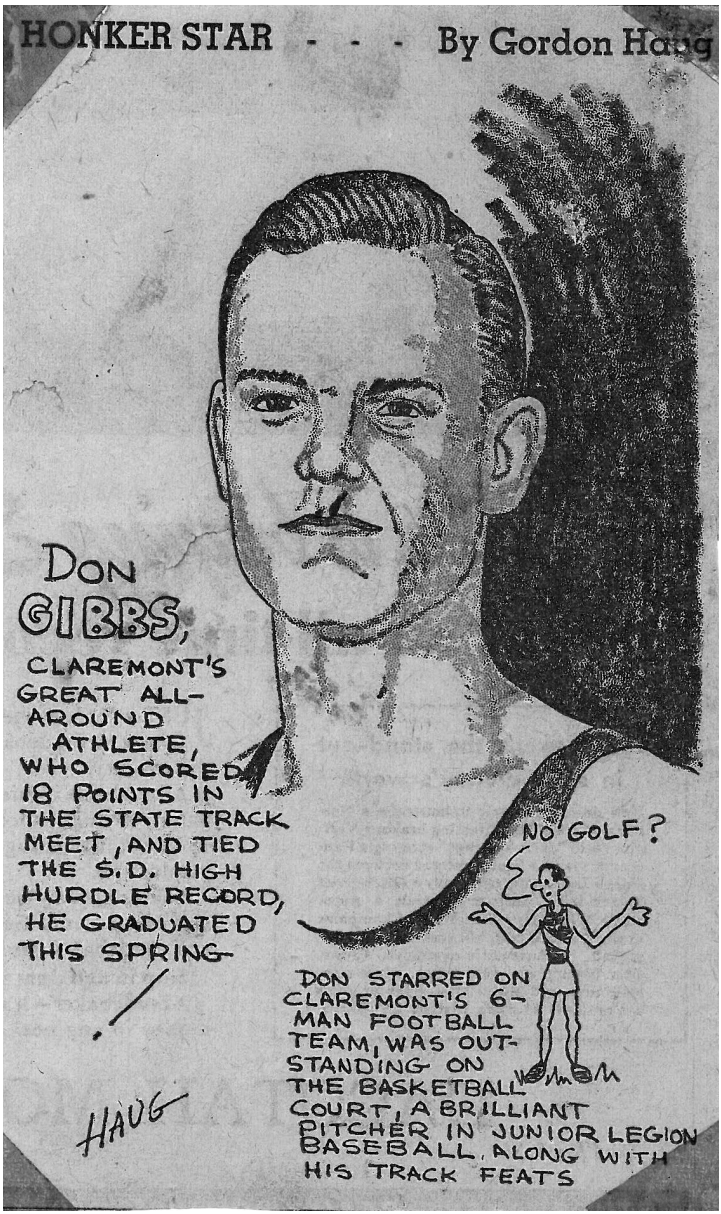

Don Gibbs, one of the stars of the Claremont Honkers football team, excelled at numerous sports during his high school years. An unknown newspaper carried this feature.

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ally. In six-man football, the center could score just like everyone else, and he sometimes took a short pass from the quarterback or the pitch back from one of the ends in a flea-flicker play.

One play Welsh designed for Hollister always seemed to produce good yardage. In the modern six-man game, the center snaps the ball to the quarterback with both facing forward, but all through Welsh's tenure at Claremont, the rules allowed for teams to snap the ball with the two players standing backside to backside. Using the back-to-back technique helped mask the intentions of the offensive players and provided a better platform for trickery. In the play designed for Hollister, Gibbs and Vickers crowded right in around Cain. When Hollister snapped the ball to Cain, the quarterback immediately placed the ball on the ground, and the three backs all ran in different directions, taking the attention of the defensive players with them. In the meantime, Hollister took a step back, picked up the ball, and started running downfield untouched by the defense. He rarely made it more than twenty yards before being tackled, but it nearly always produced a first down for the team and even an occasional touchdown.

On this cold Armistice Day, the crowd overflowed the seats and hung from any vantage point available, including a lucky few who found seats on top of the concession stand near the forty-yard line. As the temperature continued to drop, the fans huddled close in the stands or sat sheltered behind the big windows of the cars and trucks parked around the field. The youngsters stayed low at the front of the crowd, careful not to block the view of the grownups. Most sat cross-legged near the sidelines, taking in the spectacle and dreaming of the time when it would be their turn on the playing field. At halftime, they would erupt from their places, grab the loose footballs, and, as the teams huddled in the end zones, play catch in the hopes that the massive crowd was watching them.

The cheerleaders, dressed in coats, earmuffs, scarves, and mittens, began to warm up for the game, their muffled clapping swallowed in the midst of the crowd's excitement. The girls did not enjoy this cold weather, but they relied on their enthusiasm and routines to keep warm. The cheering squad had come a long way since the previous year when they had relied on Welsh's signals for when to cheer. None of the

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girls had seen a game of football before the 1947 season, and without the coach's guidance, they had not known when and for what to applaud. Understanding that he had to help stage the whole spectacle, Welsh would turn around when a big play occurred and signal the girls to execute a particular cheer that matched the situation.

The homemade goal posts stood sentinel in the end zones, each with a cross bar made of painted two-by-fours that sagged a bit in the middle. None of the spectators minded because they had come to see touchdowns, not field goals, and, in fact, the Honkers rarely chose a drop kick (the technique used in six-man) for the extra point; they excelled in running the ball in for the point after touchdown. The cheerleaders wrapped the goal posts in colored crepe paper, adding to an otherwise bland field made brown by the season. Before the game, the Drum and Bugle Corps from Oakes, North Dakota, performed with all the pomp and circumstance of a college game. They ended their performance with the national anthem, and the referees called the captains to the center of the field for the coin toss.

The umpire tossed the coin high into the air, where it caught the wind and landed behind the captains. The crowd clapped in approval when he signaled that Claremont had won the toss and elected to receive the ball. The Hankinson Pirates chose to have the wind at their back, thinking it would be a factor before the game ended. The teams took their places on the field, and the Pirates prepared for the kickoff. Coming in with such an excellent record of their own, the Hankinson players stood confidently as the referee prepared to blow his whistle, the prospect of defeat not entering their minds. The snow, which had held off to that point, began to fall. The Pirates' kicking team lined up, and because of the stiff breeze, one of the Hankinson players held the ball for the kicker. The referee's whistle signaled the start of play, and the wind carried the kickoff into Honkers' territory. On the first play from scrimmage, Gibbs took a pitch from Cain and immediately demonstrated what a six-foot two-inch athlete, weighing 190 pounds, who ran one of the fastest one-hundred-yard dashes in the state, could do. Heading right down the center of the field, Gibbs raced fifty yards for a touchdown, bypassing almost every Hankinson player with little difficulty along the way. Not used to such an imposing figure, the

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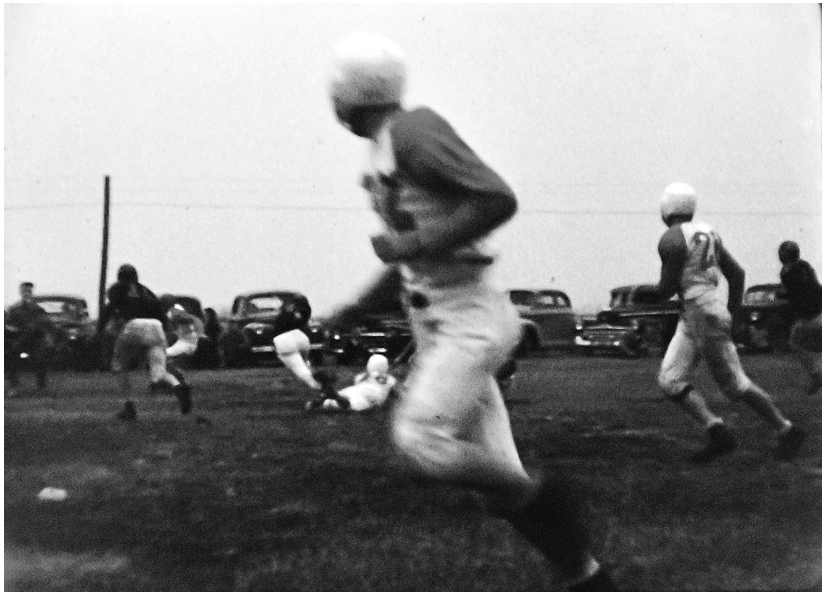
defenders could not get an angle on him to make the tackle. As Gibbs crossed the goal line, he turned to see the look of confusion on the faces of the defenders, and he smiled as if enjoying a private joke, knowing the visitors from North Dakota were in for a long afternoon.

The large contingent of fans from Hankinson watched in disbelief as the Honkers repeatedly fooled their defense with perfect execution and team speed. The North Dakotans were far too used to seeing their boys dominate anyone they opposed. Claremont's speed also wreaked havoc on the powerful Hankinson offense as the Honkers stuffed their runs and hounded their receivers, keeping the Pirates out of the end zone the entire game. The Pirates had one genuine scoring opportunity in the whole game, but fumbled the ball on the Honkers' one-yard line. By halftime, Claremont led 34 to 0. Gibbs had scored five touchdowns, and the Hankinson players who did find themselves in position to tackle him found out one of the reasons for his success. Gibbs preferred to deal out a bigger blow to his tackler than he received. Where



Cars provided seating and lighting at small-town football games. Here, cars ring the field at a game between the Claremont Honkers and the Hecla Rockets in 1950.

lesser players may have gone down or run out of bounds, Gibbs instead angled towards the tackler and initiated contact. Given his size and speed, some defenders tended to hang back rather than try to wrap him up, resulting in even more touchdowns. As time ticked off the clock, it appeared that the only thing that could stop the Honkers was halftime. However, an unexpected whistle paused the game just before halftime, alerting the teams to the fact that Lineman needed to reline the field with coal dust, as the snow had made it impossible to see white chalk on the ground.

For the second half, Welsh sent out his "B" team. The damage had been done in the first two quarters, and the second half resulted in only one additional touchdown. When the final gun sounded, the dispirited Hankinson Pirates, tired of watching the back of the Honkers' helmets as they crossed the goal line ahead of them, had succumbed 40 to 0. The school colors of the Hankinson athletes seemed to have faded; their vivid blue and white appeared more black and blue, both figuratively and literally, as the muddy field left its mark, clinging hard to the Hankinson uniforms.

As soon as the game ended, Welsh trotted across the field to thank each Hankinson player individually for their effort, and he warmly embraced the hand of the Hankinson coach, telling him how much he appreciated their participation. Welsh always kept the game in perspective in order to model the best in sportsmanship for his players. Throughout his coaching career, he was the finest host and the most gracious winner an opposing coach could ask for, and he exhibited the same traits when he faced a rare loss. He taught his players that doing the right thing won out no matter what the final score read. As the Hankinson players boarded the bus for their return to North Dakota, the Claremont fans matched their coach's ideals and gave the visitors an ovation. Turning from the departing bus, Claremont fans walked to the school, where the Armistice Day festivities and homecoming carnival got under way, with Merve's Swingsters, a local dance band, playing late into the evening.

With this victory, the Honkers earned the unofficial status of best six-man team in the Dakotas and Minnesota, and they did not relinquish these bragging rights until the end of 1953. With these forty

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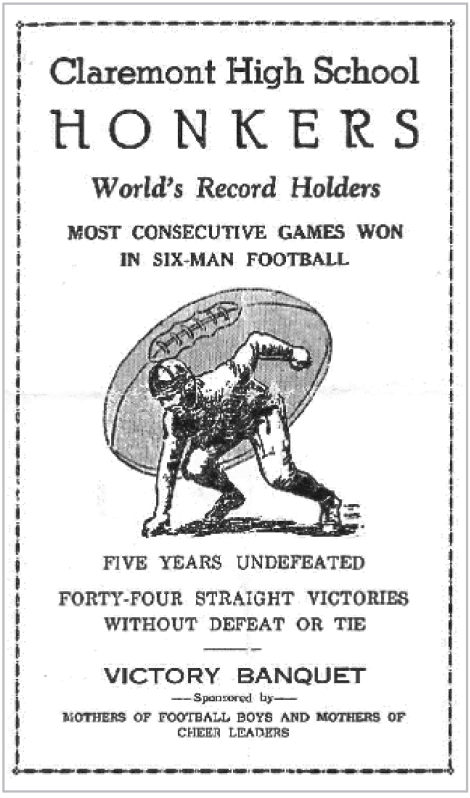
points added to their totals from previous games, the 1948 Honkers set a national record by scoring 608 points over a ten-game season. A team from New York beat their record in 1950, but the Honkers' feat remains one of the greatest single-season scoring performances in the history of the sport.

The 1948 victory over Hankinson accounted for just one day in the history of a team that carried the national banner for the sport of six-man football for a seven-year period from 1947 to 1953. Claremont High School, with a student population that never exceeded forty, dominat-



The Honkers still had two undefeated seasons ahead of them at the time they celebrated their forty-four-game winning streak with a victory banquet in 1951.

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ed the South Dakota sports scene and established a national record by winning sixty-one consecutive six-man football games. Their first win had come against the nearby Hecla Rockets in the fall of 1947, and their first loss would come nearly seven years later to the same Hecla squad. Even after the loss, the Honkers won an additional game that year, all the games the following year, and even the 1955 version of the team went undefeated. Their record over an eight-year period was seventy-eight wins and one loss for a winning percentage of 98.7 percent. Claremont's football team came from nowhere to dominate the sports pages on a local, state, and regional basis. The talented group of young men who made up the early teams contributed to the team's quick ascension, but they would not have achieved their success were it not for the addition of a certain coach.

The story of the Claremont Honkers six-man football team has almost been lost. The high school closed in 1970, a victim of the demise of small farms and resulting population outflow to more urban areas that has afflicted much of South Dakota. All that remains of the school is a small brick archway erected as a monument to its past triumphs, with the name of each of the 451 students who attended Claremont High displayed on a plaque inlaid on the side. Standing sentinel atop the monument are the original school bell and a metal sculpture of a Canadian Honker situated on a steel I-beam with the words "Public School" cut out of it. In a vault at the bottom is a time capsule with instructions that it not be opened until 2070, the hundredth anniversary of the school's closure. Where the gym once stood only the concrete that lay under the playing surface remains. Two badly bent basketball goals with ripped nets stand forlornly. Leading to the archway is the same cracked sidewalk that bore the footsteps of all Claremont's students on their daily walk into the school.

The young men involved in the national-record winning streak have little left but this monument, personal memories, faded newspaper clippings, and a few grainy sixteen millimeter films to remind them of their remarkable accomplishments. The first athletes who participated in the heyday of Claremont sports are now approaching eighty years of age. Time has taken a toll on their memories, and some have passed away leaving no consolidated history of the glory days. Their story and

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This monument, topped with a "honker," or Canada goose, marks the site of Claremont High School, which closed in 1970.

that of their coach, Bill Welsh, provide a glimpse into small-town high-school sports at a time when such activities dominated South Dakota. Welsh's coaching prowess and his life exhibit the best of sport, of working with young men and women, and of overcoming the trials and tribulations of life, shining the spotlight on six-man football in the state and nation.

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On the covers: In this issue, Joe P. Kirby writes about Frederick Henry Morse, an artist who served time in the South Dakota Penitentiary and went on to paint the portraits of several prominent Sioux Falls residents such as former United States Senator Richard F. Pettigrew (front).