

The Library of America • Story of the Week
From *The Top of His Game: The Best Sportswriting of W. C. Heinz*,
Bill Littlefield, ed. (The Library of America, 2015), pages 224–37.

Originally published in *True* (November 1958).
Copyright © 1958 by W. C. Heinz. Used by permission of Gayl Heinz. All rights reserved.

The Ghost of the Gridiron

Red Grange Could Carry the Ball

W. C. HEINZ



WHEN I WAS TEN YEARS OLD I paid ten cents to see Red Grange run with a football. That was the year when, one afternoon a week, after school was out for the day, they used to show us movies in the auditorium, and we would all troop up there clutching our dimes, nickels, or pennies in our fists.

The movies were, I suppose, carefully selected for their educational value. They must have shown us, as the weeks went by, films of the Everglades, of Yosemite, of the Gettysburg battlefield, of Washington, D.C., but I remember only the one about Grange.

I remember, in fact, only one shot. Grange, the football cradled in one arm, started down the field toward us. As we sat there in the dim, flickering light of the movie projector, he grew larger and larger. I can still see the rows and rows of us, with our thin little necks and bony heads, all looking up at the screen and Grange, enormous now, rushing right at us, and I shall never forget it. That was thirty-three years ago.

“I haven’t any idea what film that might have been,” Grange was saying now. “My last year at Illinois was all confusion. I had no privacy. Newsreel men were staying at the fraternity house for two or three days at a time.”

He paused. The thought of it seemed to bring pain to his face, even at this late date.

Are you receiving Story of the Week each week?

Sign up now at storyoftheweek.loa.org to receive our weekly alert
so you won't miss a single story!

“I wasn’t able to study or anything,” he said. “I thought, and I still do, that they built me up out of all proportion.”

Red Grange was the most sensational, the most publicized, and, possibly, the most gifted football player and greatest broken field runner of all time. In high school, at Wheaton, Illinois, he averaged five touchdowns a game. In twenty games for the University of Illinois, he scored thirty-one touchdowns and ran for 3,637 yards, or, as it was translated at the time, two miles and 117 yards. His name and his pseudonyms—The Galloping Ghost and The Wheaton Iceman—became household words, and what he was may have been summarized best by Paul Sann in his book *The Lawless Decade*.

“Red Grange, No. 77, made Jack Dempsey move over,” Sann wrote. “He put college football ahead of boxing as the Golden Age picked up momentum. He also made the ball yards obsolete; they couldn’t handle the crowds. He made people buy more radios: how could you wait until Sunday morning to find out what deeds Red Grange had performed on Saturday? He was ‘The Galloping Ghost’ and he made the sports historians torture their portables without mercy.”

Grange is now fifty-five years old, his reddish brown hair marked with gray, but he was one with Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Bobby Jones, and Bill Tilden.

“I could carry a football well,” Grange was saying now, “but I’ve met hundreds of people who could do their thing better than I. I mean engineers, and writers, scientists, doctors—whatever.

“I can’t take much credit for what I did, running with a football, because I don’t know what I did. Nobody ever taught me, and I can’t teach anybody. You can teach a man how to block or tackle or kick or pass. The ability to run with a ball is something you have or you haven’t. If you can’t explain it, how can you take credit for it?”

This was last year, and we were sitting in a restaurant in Syracuse, New York. Grange was in town to do a telecast with Lindsey Nelson of the Syracuse–Penn State game. He lives now in Miami, Florida, coming out of there on weekends during the football season to handle telecasts of college games on Saturdays and the Chicago Bears’ games

on Sundays. He approaches this job as he has approached every job, with honesty and dedication, and, as could be expected, he is good at it. As befits a man who put the pro game on the map and made the whole nation football conscious, he has been making fans out of people who never followed the game before. Never, perhaps, has any one man done more for the game. And it, of course, has been good to him.

“Football did everything for me,” he was saying now, “but what people don’t understand is that it hasn’t been my whole life. When I was a freshman at Illinois, I wasn’t even going to go out for football. My fraternity brothers made me do it.”

He was three times All-American. Once the Illinois students carried him two miles on their backs. A football jersey, with the number 77 that he made famous and that was retired after him, is enshrined at Champaign. His fellow students wanted him to run for Congress. A senator from Illinois led him into the White House to shake hands with Calvin Coolidge. Here, in its entirety, is what was said.

“Howdy,” Coolidge said. “Where do you live?”

“In Wheaton, Illinois,” Grange said.

“Well, young man,” Coolidge said, “I wish you luck.”

Grange had his luck, but it was coming to him because he did more to popularize professional football than any other player before or since. In his first three years out of school he grossed almost \$1,000,000 from football, motion pictures, vaudeville appearances, and endorsements, and he could afford to turn down a Florida real-estate firm that wanted to pay him \$120,000 a year. Seven years ago the Associated Press, in selecting an All-Time All-American team in conjunction with the National Football Hall of Fame, polled one hundred leading sportswriters and Grange received more votes than any other player.

“They talk about the runs I made,” he was saying, “but I can’t tell you one thing I did on any run. That’s the truth. During the Depression, though, I took a licking. Finally I got into the insurance business. I almost starved to death for three years, but I never once tried to use my football reputation. I never once opened a University of Illinois

yearbook and knowingly called on an alumnus. I think I was as good an insurance man as there was in Chicago. On the football field I had ten other men blocking for me, but I'm more proud of what I did in the insurance business, because I did it alone."

Recently I went down to Miami and visited Grange in the white colonial duplex house where he lives with his wife. They met eighteen years ago on a plane, flying between Chicago and Omaha, on which she was a stewardess, and they were married the following year.

"Without sounding like an amateur psychologist," I said, "I believe you derive more satisfaction from what you did in the insurance business, not only because you did it alone, but also because you know how you did it, and, if you had to, you could do it again. You could never find any security in what you did when you ran with a football because it was inspirational and creative, rather than calculated."

"Yes," Grange said, "you could call it that. The sportswriters used to try to explain it, and they used to ask me. I couldn't tell them anything."

I have read what many of those sportswriters wrote, and they had as much trouble trying to corner Grange on paper as his opponents had trying to tackle him on the field.

Grange had blinding speed, amazing lateral mobility, an exceptional change of pace, and a powerful straight-arm. He moved with high knee action, but seemed to glide, rather than run, and he was a master at using his blockers. What made him great, however, was his instinctive ability to size up a field and plot a run the way a great general can map not only a battle but a whole campaign.

"The sportswriters wrote that I had peripheral vision," Grange was saying. "I didn't even know what the word meant. I had to look it up. They asked me about my change of pace, and I didn't even know that I ran at different speeds. I had a crossover step, but I couldn't spin. Some ball carriers can spin but if I ever tried that, I would have broken a leg."

Harold Edward Grange was born on June 13, 1903, in Forksville, Pennsylvania, the third of four children. His mother died when he was five, and his sister Norma died in her teens. The other sister, Mildred, lives in Binghamton, New York. His brother, Garland, two and a half

years younger than Red, was a 165-pound freshman end at Illinois and was later with the Chicago Bears and is now a credit manager for a Florida department store chain. Their father died at the age of eighty-six.

“My father,” Grange said, “was the foreman of three lumber camps near Forksville, and if you had known him, you’d know why I could never get a swelled head. He stood six one and weighed two hundred ten pounds, and he was quick as a cat. He had three hundred men under him and he had to be able to lick any one of them. One day he had a fight that lasted four hours.”

Grange’s father, after the death of his wife, moved to Wheaton, Illinois, where he had relatives. Then he sent the two girls back to Pennsylvania to live with their maternal grandparents. With his sons, he moved into a five-room apartment over a store where they took turns cooking and keeping house.

“Can you recall,” I said, “the first time you ever ran with a football?”

“I think it started,” Grange said, “with a game we used to play without a football. Ten or twelve of us would line up in the street, along one curb. One guy would be in the middle of the road and the rest of us would run across the street to the curb on the other side. When the kid in the middle of the street tackled one of the runners, the one who was tackled had to stay in the middle of the street with the tackler. Finally, all of us, except one last runner, would be in the middle of the street. We only had about thirty yards to maneuver in and dodge the tackler. I got to be pretty good at that. Then somebody got a football and we played games with it on vacant lots.”

In high school Grange won sixteen letters in football, basketball, track, and baseball. In track he competed in the 100- and 220-yard dashes, low and high hurdles, broad jump and high jump, and often won all six events. In his sophomore year on the football team, he scored fifteen touchdowns, in his junior year thirty-six—eight in one game—and in his senior year twenty-three. Once he was kicked in the head and was incoherent for forty-eight hours.

“I went to Illinois,” he was saying, “because some of my friends from Wheaton went there and all the kids in the state wanted to play football for Bob Zuppke and because there weren’t any athletic scholarships in those days and that was the cheapest place for me to go to. In May of my senior year in high school I was there for the Interscholastic track meet, and I just got through broad jumping when Zup came over. He said, ‘Is your name Grainche?’ That’s the way he always pronounced my name. I said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘Where are you going to college?’ I said, ‘I don’t know.’ He put his arm around my shoulders and he said, ‘I hope here. You may have a chance to make the team here.’ That was the greatest moment I’d known.”

That September, Grange arrived at Champaign with a battered secondhand trunk, one suit, a couple of pairs of trousers, and a sweater. He had been working for four summers on an ice wagon in Wheaton and saving some money, and his one luxury now that he was entering college was to pledge Zeta Phi fraternity.

“One day,” he was saying, “they lined us pledges up in the living room of the fraternity house. I had wanted to go out for basketball and track—I thought there would be too much competition in football—but they started to point to each one of us and tell us what to go out for: ‘You go out for cheerleader.’ ‘You go out for football manager.’ ‘You go out for the band.’ When they came to me, they said, ‘You go out for football.’

“That afternoon I went over to the gym. I looked out the window at the football practice field and they had about three hundred freshman candidates out there. I went back to the house and I said to one of the seniors, ‘I can’t go out for football. I’ll never make that team.’

“So he lined me up near the wall, with my head down, and he hit me with this paddle. I could show you the dent in that wall where my head took a piece of plaster out—this big.”

With the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, he made a circle the size of a half dollar.

“Do you remember the name of that senior?” I said.

“Johnny Hawks,” Grange said. “He was from Goshen, Indiana, and I see him now and then. I say to him, ‘Damn you. If it wasn’t for you, I’d never have gone out for football.’ He gets a great boot out of that.”

“So what happened when you went out the next day?”

“We had all these athletes from Chicago I’d been reading about. What chance did I have, from a little farm town and a high school with three hundred students? I think they cut about forty that first night, but I happened to win the wind sprints and that got them at least to know my name.”

It was a great freshman team. On it with Grange was Earl Britton, who blocked for Grange and did the kicking throughout their college careers, and Moon Baker and Frank Wickhorst, who transferred to Northwestern and Annapolis, respectively, where they both made All-American. After one week of practice, the freshman team played the varsity and were barely nosed out, 21–19, as Grange scored two touchdowns, one on a sixty-yard punt return. From then on, the freshmen trimmed the varsity regularly and Zupke began to give most of his time to the freshmen.

“That number 77,” I said to Grange, “became the most famous number in football. Do you remember when you first got it?”

“It was just handed to me in my sophomore year,” he said. “I guess anybody who has a number and does well with it gets a little superstitious about it, and I guess that began against Nebraska in my first varsity game.”

That game started Grange to national fame. This was 1923, and the previous year Nebraska had beaten Notre Dame and they were to beat “The Four Horsemen” later this same season. In the first quarter Grange sprinted thirty-five yards for a touchdown. In the second quarter he ran sixty yards for another. In the third period he scored again on a twelve-yard burst, and Illinois won, 24–7. The next day, over Walter Eckersall’s story in the *Chicago Tribune*, the headline said “Grange Sprints to Fame.”

From the Nebraska game, Illinois went on to an undefeated season. Against Butler, Grange scored twice. Against Iowa, he scored the only

touchdown as Illinois won, 9–6. In the first quarter against Northwestern, he intercepted a pass and ran ninety yards to score the first of his three touchdowns. He made the only touchdown in the game with the University of Chicago and the only one in the Ohio State game, this time on a thirty-four-yard run.

“All Grange can do is run,” Fielding Yost, the coach at Michigan, was quoted as saying.

“All Galli-Curci can do is sing,” Zuppke said.

Grange had his greatest day in his first game against Michigan during his junior year. On that day Michigan came to the dedication of the new \$1,700,000 Illinois Memorial Stadium. The Wolverines had been undefeated in twenty games and for months the nation’s football fans had been waiting for this meeting. There were sixty-seven thousand spectators in the stands, then the largest crowd ever to see a football game in the Midwest.

Michigan kicked off. Grange was standing on his goal line, with Wally McIlwain, whom Zuppke was to call “the greatest open field blocker of all time,” on his right, Harry Hall, the Illinois quarterback, on his left, and Earl Britton in front of him. Michigan attempted to aim the kickoff to McIlwain, but as the ball descended, Grange moved over under it.

“I’ve got it,” he said to McIlwain.

He caught it on the 5-yard line. McIlwain turned and took out the first Michigan man to get near him. Britton cut down the next one, and Grange started under way. He ran to his left, reversed his field to avoid one would-be tackler, and, then, cutting back again to the left, ran diagonally across the field through the oncoming Michigan players. At the Michigan 40-yard line he was in the open and on the 20-yard line, Tod Rockwell, the Michigan safety man, made a futile dive for him. Grange scored standing up. Michigan never recovered.

In less than twelve minutes, Grange scored three more touchdowns on runs of sixty-seven, fifty-six, and forty-four yards. Zuppke took him out to rest him. In the third period, he re-entered the game, and circled right end for fifteen yards and another touchdown. In the final

quarter, he threw a pass for another score. Illinois won, 39–14. Against a powerful, seasoned, and favored team, Grange had handled the ball twenty-one times, gained 402 yards running, scored five touchdowns, and collaborated, as a passer, in a sixth.

“This was,” Coach Amos Alonzo Stagg, the famous Chicago mentor, later wrote, “the most spectacular singlehanded performance ever made in a major game.”

“Did Zuppke tell you that you should have scored another touchdown?” I asked Grange.

“That’s right,” Grange said. “After the fourth touchdown we called a time-out, and when Matt Bullock, our trainer, came with the water, I said to him, ‘I’m dog tired. You’d better tell Zup to get me out of here.’ When I got to the bench Zup said to me, ‘You should have had five touchdowns. You didn’t cut right on one play.’ Nobody could get a swelled head around him.”

“And you don’t recall,” I said, “one feint or cut that you made during any one of those runs?”

“I don’t remember one thing I ever did on any run I made. I just remember one vision from that Michigan game. On that opening kick-off runback, as I got downfield I saw that the only man still in front of me was the safety man, Tod Rockwell. I remember thinking then, ‘I’d better get by this guy, because after coming all this way, I’ll sure look like a bum if he tackles me.’ I can’t tell you, though, how I did get by him.”

When Grange started his senior year, Illinois had lost seven regulars by graduation and Harry Hall, its quarterback, who had a broken collarbone. Zuppke shifted Grange to quarterback. Illinois lost to Nebraska, Iowa, and Michigan and barely beat Butler before they came to Franklin Field in Philadelphia on October 31, 1925, to play Pennsylvania.

The previous year Penn had been considered the champion of the East. They had now beaten Brown, Yale, and Chicago, among others. Although Grange’s exploits in the Midwest had been widely reported in Eastern papers, most of the sixty-five thousand spectators and the

Eastern sportswriters—Grantland Rice, Damon Runyon, and Ford Frick among them—came to be convinced.

It had rained and snowed for twenty-four hours, with only straw covering the field. At the kickoff, the players stood in mud. On the third play of the game, the first time he carried the ball, Grange went fifty-five yards for his first touchdown. On the next kickoff he ran fifty-five yards again, to the Penn 25-yard line, and Illinois worked it over the goal line from there. In the second period, Grange twisted twelve yards for another score and in the third period he ran twenty yards to a touchdown. Illinois won, 24–2, with Grange carrying the ball 363 yards, and scoring three touchdowns and setting up another one, in thirty-six rushes.

Two days later when the train carrying the Illinois team arrived in Champaign, there were twenty thousand students, faculty members, and townspeople waiting at the station. Grange tried to sneak out of the last car but he was recognized and carried two miles to his fraternity house.

“Do you remember your feelings during those two miles?” I asked him.

“I remember that I was embarrassed,” he said. “You wish people would understand that it takes eleven men to make a football team. Unless they’ve played it, I guess they’ll never understand it, but I’ve never been impressed by individual performances in football, my own or anyone else’s.”

“Do you remember the last touchdown you scored in college?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t,” he said. “It must have been against Ohio State. I can’t tell you the score. I can’t tell you the score of more than three or four games I ever played in.”

I looked it up. Grange’s last college appearance, against Ohio State, attracted 85,500 spectators at Columbus. He was held to 153 yards on the ground but threw one touchdown pass as Illinois won, 14–9. The following afternoon, in the Morrison Hotel in Chicago, he signed with Charles C. (Cash and Carry) Pyle to play professional football with the Chicago Bears, starting immediately, and he quit college. Twenty-five

years later, however, he was elected to the University of Illinois Board of Trustees for a six-year term.

“I had a half year to finish when I quit,” he said. “I had this chance to make a lot of money and I couldn’t figure where having a sheepskin would pull any more people into football games.”

“How were your marks in college?”

“I was an average student. I got B’s and C’s. I flunked one course, economics, and I made that up in the summer at Wheaton College. I’d leave the ice wagon at eleven o’clock in the morning and come back to it at one o’clock. There was so much written about my job on the ice wagon, and so many pictures of me lugging ice, that people thought it was a publicity stunt. It wasn’t. I did it for eight summers, starting at five o’clock every morning, for two reasons. The pay was good—\$37.50 a week—and I needed money. I didn’t even have any decent clothes until my junior year. Also, it kept me in shape. After carrying those blocks of ice up and down stairs six days a week, my legs were always in shape when the football season started. Too many football players have to play their legs into shape in the first four or five games.”

Grange played professional football from 1925 through the 1934 season, first with the Bears, then with the New York Yankees in a rival pro league that Pyle and he started, and then back with the Bears again. He was immobilized during the 1928 season with arm and knee injuries, and after that he was never able to cut sharply while carrying the ball. He did, however, score 162 touchdowns as a professional and kicked 86 conversion points, for a total of 1,058 points.

What the statistics do not show, however, is what Grange, more than any other player, did to focus public attention and approval on the professional game. In 1925, when he signed with the Bears, professional football attracted little notice on the sports pages and few paying customers. There was so little interest that the National Professional Football League did not even hold a championship playoff at the end of the season.

In ten days after he left college Grange played five games as a pro and changed all that. After only three practice sessions with the Bears,

he made his pro debut against the Chicago Cardinals on Thanksgiving Day, November 26. The game ended 0–0 but thirty-six thousand people crowded into Wrigley Field to see Grange. Three days later, on a Sunday, twenty-eight thousand defied a snowstorm to watch him perform at the same field. On the next Wednesday, freezing weather in St. Louis held the attendance down to eight thousand but on Saturday forty thousand Philadelphians watched him in the rain at Shibe Park. The next day the Bears played in the Polo Grounds against the New York Giants.

It had been raining for almost a week, and, although advance sales were almost unknown in pro football in those days, the Giants sold almost sixty thousand before Sunday dawned. It turned out to be a beautiful day. Cautious fans who had not bought seats in advance stormed the ticket booths. Thousands of people were turned away but 73,651 crammed into the park. Grange did not score but the Bears won, 19–7.

That was the beginning of professional football's rise to its present popularity. At the end of those first ten days, Grange picked up a check for \$50,000. He got another \$50,000 when the season ended a month later.

“Can you remember,” I asked him now, “the last time you ever carried a football?”

“It was in a game against the Giants in Gilmore Stadium in Hollywood in January of 1935. It was the last period, and we had a safe lead and I was sitting on the bench. George Halas said to me, ‘Would you like to go in, Red?’ I said, ‘No, thanks.’ Everybody knew this was my last year. He said, ‘Go ahead. Why don’t you run it just once more?’

“So I went in, and we lined up and they called a play for me. As soon as I got the ball and started to go I knew that they had it framed with the Giants to let me run. The line just opened up for me and I went through and started down the field. The farther I ran, the heavier my legs got and the farther those goal posts seemed to move away. I was thinking, ‘When I make that end zone, I’m going to take off these shoes and shoulder pads for the last time.’ With that something hit me from

behind and down I went on about the 10-yard line. It was Cecil Irvin, a 230-pound tackle. He was so slow that, I guess, they never bothered to let him in on the plan. But when he caught me from behind, I knew I was finished.”

Grange, who is five feet eleven and three-quarter inches, weighed 180 in college and 185 in his last game with the Bears. Now he weighs 200. On December 15, 1951, he suffered a heart attack. This motivated him to give up his insurance business and to move to Florida, where he and his wife own, in addition to their own home in Miami, land in Orlando and Melbourne and property at Indian Lake.

“Red,” I said, “I’ll bet there are some men still around whose greatest claim to fame is that they played football with you or against you. I imagine there are guys whose proudest boast is that they once tackled you. Have you ever run into a guy who thought he knew everything about football and didn’t know he was talking with Red Grange?”

“Yes,” he said. “Once about fifteen years ago, on my way home from work, I dropped into a tavern in Chicago for a beer. Two guys next to me and the bartender were arguing about Bronko Nagurski and Carl Brumbaugh. On the Bears, of course, I played in the backfield with both of them. One guy doesn’t like Nagurski and he’s talking against him. I happen to think Nagurski was the greatest football player I ever saw, and a wonderful guy. This fellow who is knocking him says to me, ‘Do you know anything about football? Did you ever see Nagurski play?’ I said, ‘Yes, and I think he was great.’ The guy gets mad and says, ‘What was so great about him? What do you know about it?’ I could see it was time to leave, but the guy kept at me. He said, ‘Now wait a minute. What makes you think you know something about it? Who are you, anyway?’ I reached into my wallet and took out my business card and handed it to him and started for the door. When I got to the door, I looked back at him. You should have seen his face.”

Mrs. Grange, who had been listening to our talk, left the room and came back with a small, gold-plated medal that Grange had won in the broad jump at the Interscholastic track meet on the day when he first met Zuppke.

“A friend of mine just sent that to me,” Grange said. “He wrote: ‘You gave me this away back in 1921. I thought you might want it.’ Just the other day I got a letter from a man in the Midwest who told me that his son just found a gold football inscribed, ‘University of Illinois, 1924’ with the initials H. G. on it. I was the only H. G. on that squad so it must have been mine. I guess I gave it to somebody and he lost it. I wrote the man back and said, ‘If your son would like it, I’d be happy to have him keep it.’”

Mrs. Grange said, “We have a friend who can’t understand why Red doesn’t keep his souvenirs. He has his trophies in another friend’s storage locker in Chicago. The clipping books are nailed up in a box in the garage here and Red hasn’t looked at them in years.”

“I don’t like to look back,” Grange said. “You have to look ahead.”

I remembered that night when we ate in the restaurant in Syracuse. As we stood in line to get our hats and coats, Grange nudged me and showed me his hat check. In the middle of the yellow cardboard disk was the number 77.

“Has this ever happened to you before?” I said.

“Never,” he said, “as far as I know.”

We walked out into the cold night air. A few flakes of snow were falling.

“That jersey with the 77 on it that’s preserved at Illinois,” I said, “is that your last game jersey?”

“I don’t know,” Grange said. “It was probably a new jersey.”

“Do you have any piece of equipment that you wore on the football field?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t have anything.”

The traffic light changed, and we started across the street. “I don’t even have an I-sweater,” he said.

We walked about three paces.

“You know,” Grange said, “I’d kind of like to have an I-sweater now.”