



2015

### Red Grange: Marketing A Myth

Cameron Leberecht

*Illinois Wesleyan University*, [cleberec@iwu.edu](mailto:cleberec@iwu.edu)

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#### **Recommended Citation**

Leberecht, Cameron (2015) "Red Grange: Marketing A Myth," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol16/iss1/5>

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## Red Grange: Marketing A Myth

### Abstract

This article examines the legendary Red Grange, one of the most famous football players in American history. Taking the stance that Grange's wild success and notoriety was more a result of excellent marketing and advertising strategy than actual football talent, particularly in the professional game, this article argues that Grange owes more of his fame to clever marketing and a sly agent than athletic talent. Including in-depth examinations of Grange's statistics, career, and a critical look at secondary sources, this paper will expose the marketing machinery that turned a collegiate football player into an American legend.

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr. Michael Young, who helped me meld my passion for sports with my passion for history.

The Wheaton Iceman. The Galloping Ghost. These were the monikers of Harold “Red” Grange, a man considered to be among the best football players of all time. A collegiate and professional football player, Grange’s rapid rise from small-town farmboy to nationally celebrated star is one of the most intriguing success stories in sports history. In less than five years, an underweight high school graduate became the most recognized professional football star in the nation, drawing crowds by the thousands and launching professional football into the national spotlight. However, Grange’s ascendance was propelled by more than just his athletic talents; it was greatly aided by a marketing campaign considered grandiose even by the standards of the 1920s. Following his departure from the University of Illinois, Grange became more than just a football star. He endorsed a variety of products ranging from sweaters to soft drinks, featured in national newspapers almost daily, and starred in several films over the course of his career.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Grange’s reputation far exceeds his success on the field, largely due to the attention he received from both local and national media. It is important to note that although Grange is not the only player affected by athletic marketing in such a way, he was the first football player to be so profoundly affected. I believe that Grange’s burgeoning fame and transition to the professional game provide a perfect example of the power of American sports marketing, which transformed a rural Illinois boy into the Galloping Ghost of NFL legend. However, biased chroniclers and frequent publicity stunts mar the history of Grange’s ascendance to NFL hero, calling into question the workings of the marketing machinery that brought Grange to fame.

Harold Grange was born in 1903 in Forksville, Pennsylvania, and later moved to Wheaton, Illinois where he spent most of his childhood. Athletically gifted, Grange won sixteen varsity letters at Wheaton High School, along with multiple state track titles and a football championship. Grange credited much of his physical success to his summer job as an iceman, which required lifting fifty and one-hundred pound bags of ice for more than eight hours a day.<sup>2</sup> In 1921, after entertaining appeals from a number of nearby universities, Grange decided to play football at the University of Illinois. Red quickly found success at Illinois, making a name for himself as early as his freshman year. Often referred to as the Wheaton Iceman by both local and national media, a name picked up prior to his junior season, Grange began to enter the national spotlight in his sophomore and junior years, but for more than just his football talents.<sup>3</sup> The Wheaton Iceman moniker was “the result of a publicity stunt,” says Grange, “the idea of a college football star doubling as a hard-working iceman seemed to catch the public’s fancy.”<sup>4</sup>

Grange had assumed the role of national sports darling before the start of his junior season, but his third year campaign solidified this position. This was the

result of Grange's performance against Michigan in October of 1924, in which he scored four touchdowns in twelve minutes.<sup>5</sup> Grange's notoriety reached new heights, and in 1925 the *New York Times* released attendance figures for the 1924-25 season: 371,000 spectators purchased tickets to watch Grange play during his junior season, almost double the number that witnessed Red's success in his previous seasons.<sup>6</sup> George Halas, Grange's future coach in the NFL, took note of Grange's talent and fame early in his college career, writing in his autobiography, "In Wheaton...housewives spend next week's grocery allowance to buy a fancy dressing-gown in which to open the door to admit Red, with a 50-pound, 30-cent chunk of ice perched on a shoulder."<sup>7</sup> Halas, a businessman first and foremost, knew that with Grange's combination of athletic talent and existing fame, he must do everything in his power to sign Red to a contract with the Chicago Bears.

Some of the most famous anecdotal accounts of Red Grange's feats originate from Grange's and Halas's autobiographies, *The Red Grange Story* and *Halas by Halas*, respectively. While these personal accounts are extremely useful when analyzing and exploring Red Grange's transformation from small-town footballer to national sports hero, it is important to note that both are deeply flawed, limiting the credibility of the information they provide. To begin with, neither Halas nor Grange wrote their own autobiographies. *The Red Grange Story* was actually written by Ira Morton, a syndicated newspaper columnist hired by publisher G.P. Putnam's Sons, and compiled from Grange's memories nearly twenty years after his retirement from football. It is also important to note that Grange's autobiography was a part of the Putnam Sports Series, which, according to John Carroll, "targeted young readers and tended to promote athletes as role models."<sup>8</sup> It is highly likely that the target audience of the book influenced its content, resulting in the omission of some information that could prove important to understanding Grange's career. Similarly, Halas's autobiography was co-written as well. Because it is impossible to separate Grange's words from Morton's, and difficult to validate the accuracy of the text, *The Red Grange Story* cannot serve as the definitive history of the life of Red Grange.

These problems are further exacerbated by the fact that both *Halas by Halas* and *The Red Grange Story* were published while Grange and Halas were still leading active careers. At the time of *Halas by Halas*'s publication, in 1971, Halas held a role as the owner and operations manager of the Chicago Bears. When Grange's autobiography was published (1953), Grange maintained an active role in the NFL as an announcer and worked as an insurance broker on the side.<sup>9</sup> As highly regarded figures in the sporting world and active businessmen, Grange and his former coach had reputations to maintain, possibly resulting in the omission of some important events that could tarnish their public image. This flaw is aggravated by a number of discrepancies between Grange's account and

contemporary newspaper articles, such as Grange's father's view of his early departure from college. A 1925 *New York Times* article ran the headline "Red Grange's Father Opposes Pro Game," a claim that Grange dismissed as "a lot of hogwash."<sup>10&11</sup> These frequent contradictions make it difficult to discern truth from rumor, putting the credibility of both Grange's autobiography and the dissenting newspaper articles in question.

Grange's professional contract and the infamous barnstorming tour of 1925, also referred to as "The Grange Tour," were both masterminded by Champaign theatre magnate C.C. "Cash and Carry" Pyle, who also served as Grange's manager.<sup>12</sup> Although Grange was fond of Pyle, the national media "pictured [him] as a notorious money-hungry promoter who ruthlessly exploited and used [Grange] to further his own ambitions," likely the source of the infamous "Cash and Carry" tag.<sup>13</sup> In this case, historians agree with contemporary media. "After dropping out of Ohio State University, Pyle went west, where he became involved in an astounding variety of money-making schemes, promotions, con games, and business ventures," writes Carroll.<sup>14</sup> The only person who seemed to think C.C. Pyle was an honest man is Grange himself, leading to the possibility that Red was either protecting his own reputation or was simply another of Pyle's unwitting victims. Pyle was more than just Red Grange's manager; he was a promoter as well. After signing a two-year deal with Grange, Pyle quickly agreed to a deal with George Halas of the Chicago Bears on Grange's behalf. Grange's contract was enormous by contemporary standards, as it was reported Grange received approximately \$30,000 for his first game with the Bears.<sup>15</sup> In a few short weeks, Grange, the first player to leave college early to pursue a professional football career, was earning about \$16,000 per game.<sup>16</sup> In the same year, the New York Giants franchise was sold for between \$500-2500 (the exact figure for which the franchise was acquired is unclear).<sup>17</sup> Pyle turned out to be a marketing ace, launching Grange's fame to new heights through clever and sometimes shady advertising schemes.

In 1925, Pyle made a series of phone calls that were sure to net himself and Grange even more money than could be earned playing football and would guarantee a further increase in Grange's visibility. In November, shortly after signing with the Bears, C.C. "Cash and Carry" Pyle invited promoters and marketers to contact Grange as a sponsor for their products. A *New York Times* article describes the scene at a New York City hotel where Grange and Pyle were staying: "When Grange arrived here today there were so many promoters awaiting him...that the crowd looked like a reception committee for the Prince of Wales. There were offers to appear in movies, to write for newspaper syndicates and to do this and that."<sup>18</sup> According to Grange, he earned about \$25,000 in return for endorsing a variety of products, such as sweaters, dolls, shoes, and a soft

drink. On top of this large sum, Pyle and Grange teased reporters with a fake \$300,000 check, supposedly the results of a movie deal. Grange labeled this “just another one of Pyle’s wild publicity stunts,” reporting that the movie deal was worth far less.<sup>19</sup> However, many newspapers, such as the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, took Pyle’s tantalizing bait, incorrectly reporting that Grange’s movie deal was worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.<sup>20</sup> Grange and the media’s accounts fail to agree yet again, calling the accuracy of both primary sources into question.

I am forced to wonder whether Grange’s account is correct and the paper simply took Pyle’s “publicity stunt” as truth, or whether contemporary sources reported it correctly and Grange had backtracked in his autobiography nearly thirty years later. After all, Grange was reported to have been a lavish spender, even after the end of his playing career. Red was known to have a fondness for fast cars, expensive alcohol, and high fashion. “I spent money like it was going out of circulation, until I learned better,” Grange explained in an interview long after the publication of his autobiography.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the publisher of Grange’s autobiography had pointedly requested that Grange refrain from discussing his lackadaisical approach to personal finance in their book, given his portrayal as a role model for young athletes.

Grange was earning nearly \$16,000 per game as a result of his play and thousands of dollars each week from selling his name. The highest paid player before Grange entered the NFL reportedly earned only \$500 per game.<sup>22</sup> The level of fame Red achieved as a professional player was incredible, seeing as how just years before professional footballers had played under assumed names to protect their identities. According to Keith McClellan, a member of the Professional Football Researchers Association, “The two most common reasons for using an assumed name were employer or parental opposition to Sunday football.”<sup>23</sup> Prior to Grange’s signing with the Chicago Bears, players frequently attempted to conceal their identities. Yet, after his junior year in college, Grange’s name was his most valuable asset, earning him tens of thousands every year in endorsement contracts, marketing deals, and acting gigs. Grange had approached the national spotlight with his athletic talent and football achievement, but his label as an American sports hero was the result of an extensive and overwhelming marketing campaign. As a 1934 *New York Times* article succinctly stated, Grange was “the most widely advertised player in the history of college football.”<sup>24</sup> That fame only increased upon his entrance to the NFL and his embarkation on “The Grange Tour” with George Halas and the Chicago Bears.

In 1925, Pyle proposed that Halas and the Bears travel to Florida with Grange in tow, before embarking on a ten game tour up and down the West Coast. Halas was smitten with the idea since both he and Pyle saw the potential for

massive profit. The two agreed upon a fifty-fifty split of all profits and that Halas would pay all costs as long as Red Grange played in every game.<sup>25</sup> While signing the contract, Halas was entertaining thoughts of making the financially struggling Bears a profitable franchise; Pyle, in contrast, was thinking of nothing but fame and money, having already agreed to pay Grange \$100,000 for his services.<sup>26</sup> The team departed first to Florida, winning all four of their games before traveling by train to the West Coast, where they stopped first in Los Angeles. Pyle promoted "The Grange Game" ceaselessly, culminating in a publicity stunt in which Bears players threw footballs worth \$25 to a frothing crowd of 6,000 spectators from the roof of their thirteen story hotel. Pyle's efforts proved worthwhile, however, as an estimated 75,000 spectators showed up to watch Grange play, the largest crowd ever to attend a pro football game at the time.<sup>27</sup> The Barnstorming tour was a stunning success: "Red Grange had drawn people. Gate receipts almost trebled" writes Halas in his autobiography, numbers which are likely inflated.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the Bears had achieved their first major profit--\$14,675.01.<sup>29</sup> Grange's presence on the Barnstorming Tour had brought much needed money to the floundering Bears franchise, and further boosted Grange's fame as well.

Although Grange's fame was sparked by his excellent college football career, his notoriety grew by leaps and bounds as a result of an overwhelming media presence. One of the places Grange became especially popular was the theatre. Red's film career began in 1926 with the film *One Minute to Play*, in which Grange played young college footballer Red Wade, a clear reference to the Illinois star. A silent film, *One Minute to Play* was described by Grange as "a rah-rah college story," and its appeal lay in Grange's appearance in his natural element, the football field.<sup>30</sup> Grange's presence brought people to more than just the theatres; he brought crowds to Hollywood as well. To avoid paying the large amount of extras needed for several scenes in the movie, Pyle and the producer advertised the scene as a real football game, with Grange involved. "The results of Pyle's brainstorm were unbelievable," writes Grange. "Fifteen thousand die-hard football fans turned out," bedecked in winter clothing on a ninety degree day in order to simulate a chilly Midwestern football game, the setting of the film.<sup>31</sup> *One Minute to Play* was billed as both a financial and critical success, and Grange was praised as "an attractive screen personality" by film critics at the time.<sup>32</sup> Of course, it is likely that Grange's film drew great crowds solely because his name stood at the top of the playbill, rather than his "attractive screen personality." However, Grange's most successful contribution towards fame was not his acting career.

While Grange's acting career served as an extremely successful form of self-promotion, the marketing tool most responsible for his national fame was found elsewhere in the theater. It is estimated that in 1924, the year before

Grange's professional debut, approximately sixty million Americans attended movie theatres each week.<sup>33</sup> Although *One Minute to Play* and Grange's other films did not sell nearly sixty million tickets, Grange was nevertheless seen by millions of moviegoers weekly, a result of his presence in the newsreels that played prior to each feature film. After the advent of the newsreel in 1911, sports became an increasingly popular subject, and "accounted for more than 20 percent of the newsreel footage by the late 1920s," the heyday of Grange's professional career.<sup>34</sup> Halas describes seeing Grange in a newsreel in his autobiography, writing "there they were, the new national heroes, in action. And week after week the figure who wriggled and squirmed and slid and darted across the screen was the handsome Red Grange."<sup>35</sup> Grange's pre-show presence in theatres across America contributed greatly to his status as a football hero and sports icon, bringing news of the "Galloping Ghost" to millions outside of the Midwest. If Red had earned the title of "hero" from seasoned professional football coach George Halas, one can only imagine the impression his play left on enamored viewers across the country. Thanks to a massively successfully marketing campaign, Red Grange was viewed as a hero by millions that had never seen him play a football game.

*Red Grange and the Rise of Modern Football*, by John M. Carroll, is typically thought of as the most comprehensive secondary source regarding Red Grange's personal life and football career. While full of contemporary anecdotal evidence, useful sound bites, and jaw-dropping statistics, Carroll's book fails to delve deeply into certain facets of Grange's personal life that may have seriously influenced his perception as a national sports hero. This may be because, as Martin Crotty postulates, "Carroll is too close to the Grange mythology to be able to question and critique it."<sup>36</sup> Carroll's focus on Grange's athletic feats and mind-boggling statistics betray the fact that he is a fan of the Galloping Ghost, and Carroll appears wary of harming his reputation as one of the greatest football players ever to play the game. *Red Grange and the Rise of Modern Football* functions almost exclusively as a biography, as Carroll rarely attempts to leave the safety of concrete facts in order to examine the greater historical narratives surrounding Grange's football career. Keith McClellan notices a similar flaw in Carroll's work, pointing out that "our understanding of the role of the media in creating sports celebrities would benefit from more analysis."<sup>37</sup> Carroll's history of Grange's life and career, a part of the Illinois University Press series "Sport and Society," is useful, interesting, and informative, but suffers from a clear bias, among other notable flaws.

By the time of his death, Grange had compiled a number of notable football awards and earned a reputation as one of the best football players ever to play the game. Although his statistics and professional performances do not



support this reputation, his fame does. Even after he retired in 1935, “the sports media routinely referred to Red Grange as a football hero,” writes John Carroll.<sup>38</sup> However, this national fame, media reputation, and hero status did not result entirely from his athletic talents. They resulted primarily from a brilliant marketing campaign, masterminded by Bears coach George Halas, Red’s agent C.C. Pyle, and Red himself. Grange’s frequent self-promotion, his regular appearances in theatres and newspapers, and his later jobs as coach and announcer all contributed to his mythical status as American football hero. Unfortunately, the extent to which the American marketing machine of the 1920s contributed to the Galloping Ghost’s fame is impossible to determine, distorted by conflicting histories and retracted statements, all of which hamper our ability to discern the difference between truth and deliberately engineered publicity stunt. However, it is certain that the massive athletic marketing campaign behind Grange played an integral role in his transformation from college athlete to professional superstar.

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## Notes

1. Ira Morton, *The Red Grange Story: The Autobiography of Red Grange as Told to Ira Morton* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1953), 103.
2. Ibid., 27.
3. Ibid., 21-27.
4. Ibid., 28.
5. Ibid., 49.
6. "738,555 Persons Have Seen Grange Make Football History," *New York Times*, Nov 25, 1925. Accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.
7. George Halas, Gwen Morgan, and Arthur Veysey, *Halas by Halas*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1979), 99.
8. John M. Carroll, *Red Grange and the Rise of Modern Football*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 86.
9. Morton, *The Red Grange Story*, 167-170.
10. "Red Grange's Father Opposes Pro Game," *New York Times*, Nov 17, 1925. Accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.
11. Morton, *The Red Grange Story*, 94.
12. *The NFL's Official Encyclopedic History of Professional Football*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1977), s.v. "Roots of Pro Football," 21.
13. Morton, *The Red Grange Story*, 94.
14. Carroll, *Rise of Modern Football*, 83.
15. "Grange Will Play for Chicago Bears," *New York Times*, Nov 23, 1925. Accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.
16. "Red Grange Gets \$82,000 in Eleven Days; \$16,000 a Game Is His Average as a Pro," *New York Times*, Dec 7, 1925. Accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.
17. *NFL's Official Encyclopedic History*, 21.
18. "Grange Will Play for Chicago Bears," *New York Times*.
19. Morton, *The Red Grange Story*, 102.
20. "Grange to Get \$300,000 For Movie: O.K. On Dolls, Fags, Etc.," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec 8, 1925. Accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.
21. Qtd. in Carroll, *Rise of Modern Football*, 128.
22. Ibid., 107.
23. Keith McClellan, *The Sunday Game: At the Dawn of Professional Football*, (Akron, OH: The University of Akron Press, 1998), 31.
24. "Grange Is Ready to Quit Gridiron," *New York Times*, Dec 5, 1934. Accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

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25. Halas, Morgan, and Veysey, *Halas by Halas*, 105.
  26. Ibid., 115.
  27. Carroll, *Rise of Modern Football*, 124.
  28. Halas, Morgan, and Veysey, *Halas by Halas*, 115.
  29. Ibid., 116.
  30. Morton, *The Red Grange Story*, 124.
  31. Ibid., 126.
  32. Qtd. in Carroll, *Rise of Modern Football*, 131.
  33. Ibid., 69.
  34. Ibid.
  35. Halas, Morgan, and Veysey, *Halas by Halas*, 99.
  36. Martin Crotty, review of *Red Grange and the Rise of Modern Football*, by John M. Carroll, *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 19, no. 1 (July 2000): 44.
  37. Keith McClellan, review of *Red Grange and the Rise of Modern Football*, by John M. Carroll, *Indiana Magazine of History* 96, no. 2 (June 2000): 200.
  38. Carroll, *Rise of Modern Football*, 211.