

High school history done right

By Paul Waggoner

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Books on local history topics too easily wander, or lack focus, or just come across as amateurish.

It is thus a true delight that all these stereotypes are broken by the newly released “Huddle Up Hutch: A History of Salthawk Football 1902-2016”.

I for one was never big on Salthawk football as a Hutchinson High student. I could count on my ears the number of games I attended back in the 1970s. But author, history teacher, and former coach (1979-1983), Steve Miller was able to win me over with this book.

Miller provides a year-by-year (sometimes game-by-game) summary of HHS’s fortune on the gridiron. This depth of coverage is perfectly balanced with a real eye for interesting detail and fascinating sidebars. The author truly has a heart :

For one, he gives special attention to multi-generational Salthawk football families. He highlights the Carey’s, the Fee’s, the Foy’s and the Bernard’s as varying examples of family excellence on the football field.

Further, the book provides profiles of “background” persons like sportscaster Rusty Hilst, film crewman John Brown, and our longest serving Assistant coach, Scott Yantes.

Miller’s book, at 400 pages, is about as complete a history as anyone could wish for. He spent literally years doing research and it definitely pays off.

You learn not only the details to Coach Randy Dreilings (1997-2013) long run of winning seasons and championships but also of coach Norval Neve’s (1942-1946) likewise impressive run.

Further, I learned HHS actually had five players make it to the National Football League. Both Solomon Butler and Johnny Armstrong did it in the 1920s, and Sean James played for Minnesota and Chicago in the 1990s. Currently, of course, we have both Geneo Grissom and Ben Heeney from our town playing in the NFL.

Coach Miller brings out some interesting social context for football. He notes how some Kansas high schools refused to play the Salthawks in the 1910s because we had 2 African-American players, Sol Butler and Clarence Phillips.

But I have never heard anyone talk (until this book) how the Kansas Junior college conference had a formal rule “banning” all blacks from playing Junior college football from 1920 until about 1940. The Hutchinson News (November 11, 1937) is Miller’s source in explaining why multiple black Hutch High standouts played for small 4 year schools rather than for Hutch Juco or any other 2-year Kansas school.

Other items of significance, like the birth of nighttime football (in 1929) and the advent of the Kansas High School Athletic Association (KHSAA) 1-A to 6-A classification system, are likewise explained.

Steve Miller did an earlier volume on Buhler High football in 2010 (Touchdowns and Tackles: A History of Buhler Football 1916-2010) which was very well received.

But this new HHS effort is getting even better reviews. In my interview with him, Miller relayed multiple anecdotes of HHS alumni, players, or family members being deeply touched by seeing our past history come alive.

Steve and his wife Rosemary sell the book direct at their website huddlephutch.com. Locally, Bookends bookstore and the HHS Booster club are also selling it as well.

The book is not cheap, but for the wealth of information, statistics, photos and color the \$59 selling price is very reasonable. In an interview, Miller said many parents are buying the book as a birthday or Christmas present for their HHS alumni children.

High school sports are a part of our culture and a book that celebrates that with thoughtfulness and style is a true winner.

If there was ever a “play-off” between books examining the history of their local team, I can guarantee you Steve Millers work on Hutchinson football would be the state champ.

May his success be matched by further success of this years, and all future, Hutchinson High School football teams!

Paul Waggoner is a Hutchinson resident and business owner. E