

**Knute Rockne All-American**

**A Musical**

**Book by Buddy Farmer**

**Music by Michael Mahler**

**Lyrics by David H. Bell & Michael Mahler**

**Directed & Choreographed by David H. Bell**

**Music Director Valerie Maze**

**At The Theatre at the Center**

**1040 Ridge Road**

**Munster, IN**

**Call 219-836-3255, tickets \$36 - \$40**

**Wednesdays & Thursdays at 2 pm**

**Thursdays at 7:30 pm**

**Fridays at 8 pm**

**Saturdays at 2:30 & 8 pm**

**Sundays at 2:30 & 6 pm**

**Running time is 2 hours, 15 minutes with intermission**

**Through May 11, 2008**

**Slick, polished and tuneful world premiere musical celebrates legendary Notre Dame football coach—*Knute Rockne***

There was great anticipation for *Knute Rockne, All-American* with **Buddy Farmer** writing the book, veteran director/choreographer **David H. Bell** and composer **Michael Mahler** on board. I am happy to report that all the hype was justified. *Knute Rockne*, the musical, is a major theatrical achievement. Seldom will you see a more polished, sophisticated new musical. After only seven previews and a few weeks of rehearsal, one can't expect too much. But this refreshingly original musical is tight, quickly paced and expertly staged.



Stef Tovar, Dennis Kelly, Kate Fry



It tells the story of **Knute Rockne** (1888-1931), the Norwegian immigrant raised in Chicago who attended Notre Dame University becoming its football coach. **Rockne** was a colorful character, part motivator and part promoter who put both college football and Notre Dame on the map as he coached from 1918 thru 1930. **Rockne** was a man with a profound drive, determination and passion for life. More than merely a bio-musical, *Knute Rockne* is a microcosm of America during the Golden Age of Jazz and America's pursuit of good times in the 1920's.

Based on **Buddy Farmer's** mini-series, *Knute Rockne* was a challenge to stage until lyricist and director/choreographer, **David H. Bell**, came up with a point-of-view into **Rockne's** story. He framed the musical around a train ride after a lost game to USC near the end of **Rockne's** career. That became the way in through flashback as **Rockne** questions what price he has paid for his dedication to football and Notre Dame University. What did he lose along his path to fame? **Farmer, Bell** and **Mahler** honestly told not only **Rockne's** story but **George Gipp's** too.

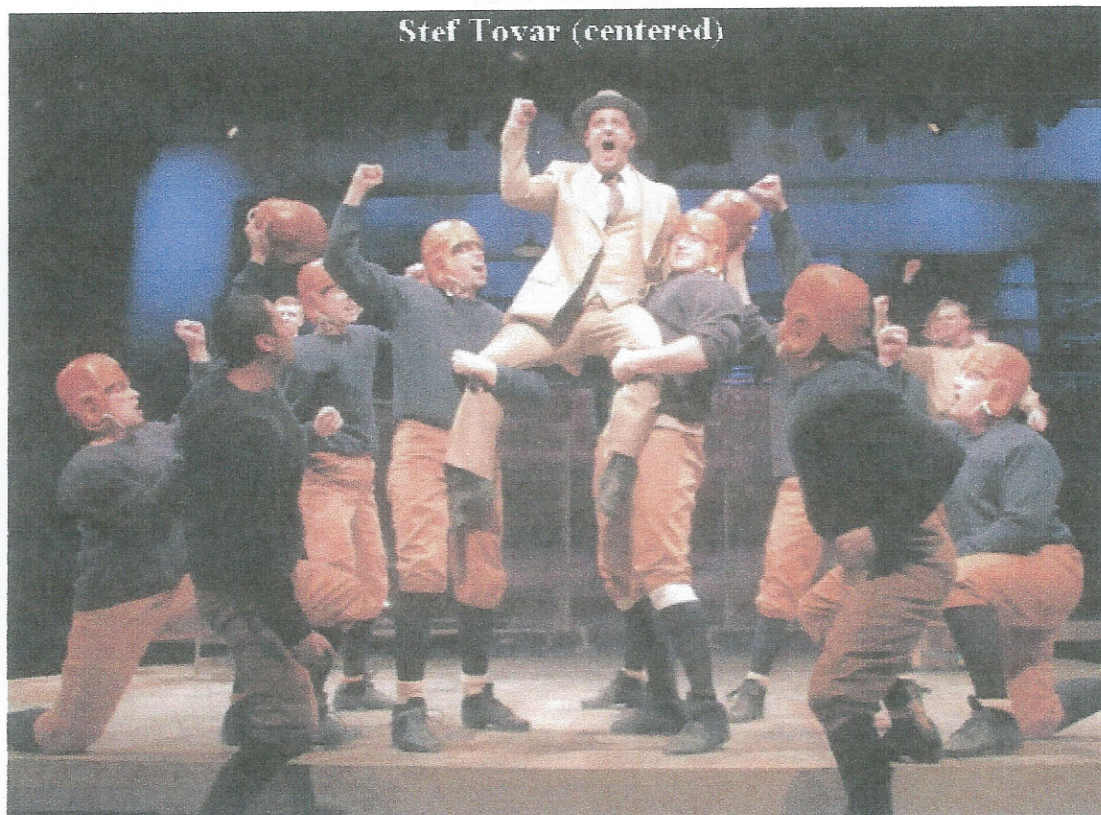
Brandon Dahlquist & Stef Tovar





Of course, this is also the story of the emergence of college football and the legacy of Notre Dame University. The show contains an excellent mixture of musical styles including ragtime rhythms, wild jazz, marches with haunting ballads and stirring anthems. **Michael Mahler's** score is first class with hum-able melodies and emotionally ringing music. There is, of course, rah-rah pep band feel and the required Notre Dame anthems. **Mahler** and **Bell's** lyrics are story specific yet universal.

The most impressive production element (among many outstanding elements) is **David H. Bell's** complex and ambitious staging. From the early "Under The Golden Dome," the story jets forward in a sweeping panorama of action that covers major story elements with panache. We see energetic movement, football formations and intense dancing to the harmonies of **Mahler's** score. **Bell** is a genius at telling a story through show shoppers that present as amazingly fresh. Much of **Rockne** is sung through with **Stef Tovar**, as **Knute Rockne**, singing and acting in a tour de force performance. **Tovar** has the rugged look with a quiet charismatic command to be credible as the famed football coach. The fabulous **Kate Fry** sings her heart out as **Bonnie Rockne**, **Knute's** wife. **Fry** lands the hauntingly beautiful "If There Had Been Roses" (the show's best tune) deftly. **Fry** and **Tovar** enchant us with their courtship duet "I Never Saw It Coming."



"The Fighting Irish" song has **Knute** and his players ready for football. Once **George Gipp** (**Brandon Dahlquist**, all bravado and rich voiced) joins the team in 1919, the players sing the ode to college football with the haunting anthem "There's Something in the Game." That song still lingers in my head. Act one covers much ground through high energy movement spawned from the ten terrific songs. We see **Rockne** desperately trying to save the hard drinking, gambling, womanizing football star, **George Gipp**, from self destruction. We see Jimmy the Goat (**Ron Rains**) and Thelma (**Starr Busby**) produce wild jazz tunes in their speak-easy where **Gipp** goes to party. **Bell's** staging to **Mahler's** score works best through several up-tempo songs. "The Shift" is a fabulous tap-jazzy number marvelously danced and ingeniously staged. **Rockne** got the idea for his Four Horseman 'shift' of his backfield from the swift synchronized movement of the dancers in that song. **Bell's** choreography was breath-taking.

This manic show celebrates **George Gipp's** All-American Award in a rousing march to open act two. We are moved by **Gipp's** dying song "Confession" nicely sung by **Brandon Dahlquist** that feeds the legendary



“Win-one for the Gipper” quote. **Dennis Kelly**, as Rockne’s father and Father Walsh, demonstrates his excellent voice and his comic aplomb. **Geoff Rice** leads an ensemble of talented dancers and singers including **Starr Busby**, as Thelma, who leads the jazz tunes with rhythmic spice.

*Knute Rockne, All American* is a completely new and refreshingly original musical that moves with precision, dances up a storm as it tells a truthful story of an American legend. It does so with high energy, little sentimentality to a toe-tapping score. I was amazed how theatrical a production **David H. Bell** mounted given the subject matter. Who could imagine that a bio-musical about a football coach would present as such a fine song-and-dance show? This entertaining show has loads of heart as it plays to our love of college football. It celebrates America. And it sure plays tribute to **Rockne** and his cherished Notre Dame. As musical theatre, *Rockne* wins our hearts with its sophistication, verve and theatricality. See this show before it goes to **Broadway**.

**Highly Recommended**

**Tom Williams**

[Tom99@chicagocritic.com](mailto:Tom99@chicagocritic.com) for comments

Talk Theatre in Chicago podcast

Date Reviewed: April 10, 2008

[Jeff Recommended](#)

Running time is 2 hours, 15 minutes with intermission

Through May 14, 2008

Sharp, polished and fun! will premiere next week celebrates legendary Notre Dame football coach—Knute Rockne

This was great anticipation for Knute Rockne: All American with Buddy Farmer writing the book, and top Broadway choreographer David H. Bell and composer Malcolm Marmorino. I was happy to see that all of the hype was justified. Knute Rockne, the subject, is a major theatrical achievement. So often will you see a more polished, sophisticated new musical after only seven previews and a few weeks of rehearsal, you can't expect too much. But this refreshingly original musical is tight, quickly paced and expertly staged.