



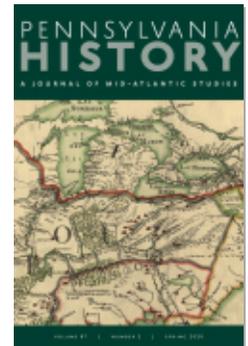
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*Glenn Killinger, All American: Penn State's World War I
Sports Hero* by Todd M. Mealy (review)

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Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies, Volume 87, Number
2, Spring 2020, pp. 438-442 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press



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hegemony of the Delaware Valley and the florescence of diverse free black settlements following First Emancipation are precisely the criteria needed to define the regional histories for which Berlin urged.

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NOTE

1. Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review* 85, no. 1 (1980): 44–78.

Todd M. Mealy. *Glenn Killinger, All American: Penn State's World War I Sports Hero*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2018. 266 pp. Index. Paper, \$35.00.

William Glenn Killinger was a famous athlete during World War I and the postwar period. Outstanding sportswriters praised him. Grantland Rice called him "one of the greatest running quarterbacks" and predicted for him a bright future in sports. Glenn Scobey "Pop" Warner and John Heisman compared him favorably to Jim Thorpe, America's greatest multisports athlete. One Philadelphia sportswriter called him "the greatest running back in the history of the game" (10). In this study of Killinger and the times in which he lived, Todd Mealy reminds readers of his achievements.

William Glenn Killinger was born on September 13, 1898. His paternal great-grandfather emigrated from Germany to the United States in the early nineteenth century and settled as a farmer in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania. Nothing is known about his great-grandmother. His father eventually owned a hardware store in Harrisburg. His mother, Florence Wilson, was the daughter of Henry Harrison Wilson, a veteran of the Civil War. She was known as an "impressing woman" (18) who forbade her youngest child to box and to serve in the armed forces. His brother Earl, five years older and a good athlete, exerted the most influence on the young boy as Glenn Killinger grew up in Harrisburg's multi-ethnic Allison Hill neighborhood. As a student in the city's Technical High School, he, at

five feet, six inches and 140 pounds showed little potential for stardom in football. Although he liked to play basketball, tennis, golf, and handball, football was his favorite game.

Killinger seemed to be aimless after graduating from high school. Mealy explains that he had no desire to follow up on his “Industrial Career” studies” (50). Secretly, however, he wanted to follow his hometown hero Shorty Miller, a Walter Camp third-team quarterback at the Pennsylvania State College. During a gap year, while playing on local baseball and basketball teams, he earned and borrowed sufficient funds to become the first in his family to attend college. In the fall of 1917 Killinger became a metallurgy major, “one of the most respected and rigorous programs” (59). He joined Phi Alpha Sigma, a social fraternity that provided him a room, after putting him through three weeks of disgusting hazing. During his years at Penn State, most of his grades were Cs and Ds; nevertheless, coaches permitted him to play three sports in each of his last three years. It is likely that he would be declared ineligible today. Of course, he wanted to play freshman football. As he watched the “big and burley” players scrimmage, he decided to forego freshman football. Instead, he became a supporter (66–67). Never without a sport to play, a two-inch-taller and twenty-pounds-heavier Killinger became a “contributing force at guard” (71) on the freshman basketball team. One of the observers was head football coach Dick Harlow, who invited Killinger to come out for spring football practice, which he did, though he left early to play baseball.

The entrance of the United States into World War I influenced college sports in several ways. Some schools canceled their football seasons, even though government officials urged them to play. Many players went off to war, which depleted their schools’ teams. Coach Harlow’s decision to join the exodus left Killinger wondering about Penn State’s sports. College president Edwin Earl Sparks relieved his anxiety by appointing Hugo Bezdek as Harlow’s successor. Mealy includes a brief biographical sketch of the Prague-born immigrant (82–86). Killinger was pleased with Bezdek as coach because he knew that he was a winner. When the government called nine Penn State starting football players to machine-gun camp in Georgia, Bezdek inserted Killinger at halfback.

Initially, Killinger was elated. When the next game was canceled because of the Spanish influenza epidemic, he considered himself “the most disappointed player on the squad” (95–96). Later in the season, playing quarterback against Lehigh, Killinger emerged as a star. Mealy reports that he

called the plays (which quarterbacks seldom do today), threw passes, kicked, returned kicks, carried the ball, and captained the defensive secondary. After the 1918 football season, Killinger moved on to play basketball and baseball with Bezdek as his coach. As time passed, the two bonded. Killinger later recalled that he was “Bezdek’s baby” (108).

The end of the war on November 11, 1918, meant that there would be increased competition for positions on Penn State’s sports teams. Mealy is at his best in describing Killinger’s prowess as a Penn State athlete during 1919, 1920, and 1921. Despite the return of seasoned veterans such as Bob Higgins, Charley Way, and others, he won starting positions in football, basketball, and baseball. He played against small Pennsylvania schools including Lebanon Valley, Gettysburg, Ursinus, Muhlenberg, and Swarthmore but also contemporary Ivy League powerhouses such as Penn, Dartmouth, Cornell, Harvard, and the traditional Thanksgiving game with Pittsburgh. Penn State players traveled by train to play intersectional games against Georgia Tech, Nebraska, and Washington. On the way to Seattle, the team stopped at a reservation where the players explained football to the Native Americans. Between 1919 and 1921 Penn State was undefeated. It was the best team in the East and might have been the national champion if there had been playoffs in those days. It was for his stellar play during the 1920 and 1921 seasons that Killinger received accolades from well-known sportswriters. Mealy’s exciting narrations of those seasons and Killinger’s role in them make for excellent reading.

After graduating from Penn State on January 31, 1922, Killinger became a professional athlete. He had debts to pay to those who had helped him with his college expenses. Bezdek, who had managed the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team, was his agent. When Killinger was trying out with the Yankees, “Babe” Ruth called to manager Miller Huggins “that kid [Killinger] is the best third baseman in camp” (206). Despite Ruth’s endorsement, the Yankees sent Killinger to their Newark farm team. During the next few years, Killinger played for several other minor-league teams. Professional football did not go any better. Injuries led to his release by the New York Giants and the Philadelphia Quakers. Coaching football at Dickinson College and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute also was disappointing. Discouraged about his situation, Killinger enrolled in a master’s degree program in physical education at Columbia University.

No doubt, this helped him to obtain a position at West Chester State College in 1934. There he found a home where he “etched his name within

the pantheon of great college coaches” (216). During the next twenty-three seasons his teams recorded 147 wins and 41 losses, won five Pennsylvania Athletic Conference championships, played in four bowl games, and came in second for the small college Lambert Trophy, awarded to the best team in the East. His baseball teams also earned enviable records and became known as “one of the best small college ball clubs in the country” (217). He retired from coaching football in 1960 to concentrate on his duties as dean of men. During World War II he received several government assignments including coaching the North Carolina Pre-Flight School’s football and baseball teams. Some sports fans who do not remember Killinger’s exploits as an athlete know him better as a coach (216).

Late in his life, Killinger again received recognition. West Chester students dedicated their 1968 yearbook to him. In the same year, a new building was named the “W. Glenn Killinger Men’s Residence Hall” in his honor (225). In 1979 the school established the “Killinger Football Scholarship Foundation.” Additional honors came from outside West Chester. He was inducted into the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame in 1963, into the baseball Coaches Hall of Fame in 1970, and one year later into the College Football Hall of Fame for his “record-breaking senior year at Penn State” (226).

Although Mealy presents a detailed account of Killinger’s career in sports, he provides very little information about his private life. Mealy reveals that he married Wilda Evans Holtzworth on August 25, 1922, that she was a dietician, was headstrong, had a “bubbly personality,” loved sports, and had “the spirit of deepest loyalty” (209). Then, she practically disappears from the narrative until he mentions that she died in 2001. His son Billy, born on November 11, 1927, receives significantly more attention from Mealy, observing that Killinger was devoted to him. When Killinger traveled, he took Billy with him. Later, he sent Billy to The Hill School in Pottstown and to Lafayette College in Easton where Billy became an All-American third baseman. After Billy married and the couple had two children, Billy also disappears until Mealy mentions his death (11, 213–14). Although readers might be fascinated by Mealy’s account of his subject’s public life, they might like to know more about the private Glenn Killinger. Perhaps the sign of a good book is that it leaves readers wanting more.

A biography of Glenn Killinger is not all that Mealy wants to write. He intends to include the culture of Killinger’s time. Except for the changes related to the role of sports in America, such as the hero worship of the times, rule changes in football and the reasons for them, and the construction of

new stadiums, he does not present the culture effectively. He does little more than mention Prohibition and does slightly more with the receipt of bombs sent through the mail to government officials. He ignores completely the economic and political corruption that was prevalent during the Harding administration in the 1920s. Furthermore, he does not describe the movement that gave women the right to vote and other freedoms. Perhaps he should have concentrated solely on his biography.

Killinger's last years were not happy ones. He and his wife moved to an assisted living facility. His wife had been blind for many years. When he too lost his sight, he lost also his will to live. He died on July 25, 1988.

This, the first published biography of Killinger, was well written and thoroughly researched. Mealy conducted interviews with family members and former players. He searched for material in personal papers, newspaper articles, academic theses and dissertations, as well as in articles and books, carefully citing them in endnotes. His lengthy index is inclusive. Illustrations of Killinger at various stages of his life, with his wife and son, his teammates, and Coach Bezdek with the first Nittany Lion enhance the narrative. John Ford, one of Killinger's former baseball players, warned Mealy that his book "better be good because if it's not, the old man will jump out of his grave and let you know about it" (227). Killinger will not have to do that because this is a good book.

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