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## West tells how sports thread communities

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“The Boys From Corbin: America’s Greatest Little Sports Town,” by Gary P. West. Morley, MO: Acclaim Press, 2013. 318 pages, \$24.95.

“Unofficially, Corbin’s first football team took the field in 1916,” Gary P. West explains in “Those Early Years,” the first chapter in his wonderful new book, “The Boys From Corbin: America’s Greatest Little Sports Town.”

“Then called the Railroaders, it took seven more years before the team began to play a schedule of any significance,” he continues. “It would be difficult to imagine a more depressing start for a football team that was destined to become one of the most legendary programs in the history of Kentucky athletics. That first game was at Pineville, in nearby Bell County, and the Corbin team not only lost 142-0, but one of its players, William Cadle, died as the result of an injury during the game. It was probably good that the team only had a three game schedule.”

“The Boys From Corbin” is exceptionally well researched and infinitely engaging. I am originally from a small town in Tennessee, so I could relate to West’s prose perhaps better than some. There were times I felt he was describing where I grew up in a haunting, yet surprisingly accurate manner. I especially appreciated the pictures and other illustrations liberally scattered throughout the book; these served to bring his subject matter to life in a way that would have not been possible otherwise.

The book is comprised of nine chapters, each of which I found difficult to put down once I started reading West’s distinctively entertaining descriptions of the people, places and events that form the basis for this wonderful testament to a bygone era. I was hooked from the very beginning. In addition to preserving an invaluable account of the athletic accomplishments of a local community over the course of four decades, West also manages to present a slice of Americana that is quickly slipping away. This is captured most poignantly by the extensive interviews included throughout the book. Although many of the principal characters that populate the book are obviously no longer with us; West manages to integrate firsthand accounts with published quotes from people talking about the events he describes so eloquently. The result is a treasure trove of memories through which some readers can re-live the past while others are provided vicarious insights into what our culture was once like in Kentucky.

Honestly, I found the entire book extremely engaging. For someone who knew virtually nothing about Kentucky athletics, I was initially somewhat skeptical of the decision to ask me to review this particular book. But that is one of the amazing qualities of West's literary style. He provides everything you need to know to understand the relevance of the stories he tells. He approaches his subject matter from a variety of levels. By the time you reach the end of a chapter, you know not only the historical details – you also feel you have an in-depth and personal understanding of how the events described affected the people involved. You not only know what they accomplished, you come away from the experience feeling that you know what it must have been like for them at the time.

Case in point: I knew nothing about the Bird family before reading this book. By the time I finished the first eight chapters, however, I felt like they were members of my family. West's writing style is that good. He pulls you into the story in a way that few writers can. Witness the following from Chapter Eight, "The Last of the Bird Brothers," which outlines Rodger Bird's impact on football at the University of Kentucky during the early 1960s: "It didn't take long for the boy from Corbin to make the most sensational debut in Wildcat history in the season opener against Virginia Tech on Stroll Field," West observes. "Standing in his own end zone waiting to receive the opening kick-off, Rodger Bird was prepared to touch the ball for the first time in his varsity career. Bird gathered the ball in at the eight yard line, All-SEC tackle Herschel Turner threw a big block at the 30, and then Bobby Kosid landed another, and Rodger was gone. The play took all of 14 seconds for the Corbin Comet to race 92 yards for a touchdown."

After attending Western Kentucky University, West earned a degree in journalism from the University of Kentucky in 1967. His career has included a stint as editor of the nation's largest civilian enterprise military newspaper at Fort Bragg, N.C., as well as copywriter for State Farm's office of corporate advertising. No stranger to WKU sports fans, West served as executive director of the Hilltopper Athletic Foundation and provided color commentary for Wes Strader on the Hilltopper Basketball Network for several years. More recently, he served as executive director of the Bowling Green Area Convention and Visitors Bureau for 13 years before retiring in 2006 to devote more time to his writing interests. His previous books include "King Kelley Coleman: Kentucky's Greatest Basketball Legend," "Eating Your Way Across Kentucky" and "101 Must Places to Visit in Kentucky Before You Die." He also co-authored "Kentucky Colonels of the American Basketball Association: The Real Story of a Team Left Behind." A native of Elizabethtown, he and his wife Deborah currently reside in Bowling Green.

West's volume is more than just a good read; it is a window into a time when our priorities, for better or worse, were perhaps more clearly defined than they are now. I was particularly struck by how sports served to unite communities during trying times. As much as anything else, West reminds us of what we've lost as time inevitably moves forward. I highly recommend "The Boys From Corbin." Pick up a copy at your local bookstore; you won't be disappointed.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.