Book Review: â€˜The Real All Americans â€¦â€™

by John Wilkins - CNS

"The Real All Americans: The Team That Changed a Game, a People, a Nation" by Sally Jenkins; Doubleday; 343 pages; $25.

Football wasn't always the most misnamed sport in America. Early on, the feet had a lot more to do with the game. Kicking a field goal was worth five points, the most of any play. A touchdown counted for two.

TEAM AMERICA - More than just a sports story, Sally Jenkins' 'Real' racks up the points. CNS Photo.

This was more than 100 years ago, before there was a professional league, when the game was a bloody and sometimes fatal test of manhood at the nation's top colleges. It wasn't unusual for a game back then to end in a scoreless tie. A 6-0 victory was a rout. Injuries and even death - 21 players died in the 1904 season alone - awaited the participants.

Change came from an unlikely source: the Carlisle boarding school for Indians in the farm country of Pennsylvania. Smaller than the teams they faced from schools like Harvard and Yale, Carlisle had to rely on deception and speed.

"Before Carlisle, football was a dull and brutal game, wedges of men pushing around in the mud," Sally Jenkins writes in the preface of this frequently fascinating book. "The Indians found new ways to win, and in the process transformed the game into the thrilling high-speed chase it became."

Jenkins is a Washington Post reporter and co-author with Lance Armstrong of the best-seller "It's Not About the Bike." Here, she has pulled together a story that feels both familiar and new, polishing nuggets of information (the book has more than 600 footnotes) into gems of context and understanding.

The result is more than just a sports story. Even if the subtitle is overblown - changed the nation? - the book

digs effectively at the roots of a game that is almost solely an American preoccupation. (To most of the rest of the world, "football" is the sport Americans call soccer.)

Along the way, it offers insight into some famous figures from history - Jim Thorpe, Pop Warner, Teddy Roosevelt - and wrestles with one of the nation's most intractable problems, racism.

On a certain level, it's hard to go wrong with this cast of characters. The central figure is Col. Richard Henry Pratt, a Civil War hero on the Union side who twice had horses shot from under him. After the war, he was sent to Indian Territory to help subdue the natives and move them to reservations. He chafed at the unfairness of it, and an idea was born: What the Indians needed to succeed was a little education.

On Nov. 1, 1879, Pratt opened the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Enrollment was 147 students ranging in age from 6 to 25. Most of them were the children of tribal leaders.

"I believe in immersing the Indians in our civilization, and when we get them under, holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked," Pratt said.

In the beginning, that meant haircuts and new clothes and marching. But before long, the boys turned to football. The sport had emerged as the frontier was vanishing. Cars were replacing horses. Electricity was spreading.

"America experienced a collective fear that mechanization could result in male atrophy," Jenkins writes. "Increasingly, Gilded Age young men turned to sport as an antidote for pervasive cultural weakening. If football was a game of excesses, its enthusiasts considered it well worth it. Violence and moral edginess were its chief attractions, because it toughened the sons of the rich and prepared them to wield authority."

For the Carlisle players, it was a way to earn respect from a white society that usually reduced them to stereotypes. Opposing crowds often greeted them with war whoops. After Princeton defeated Carlisle 22-6 in 1896, a newspaper reporter sniffed, "The race with a civilization and a history won the day."

When Carlisle played Yale later that same year and lost only because of a bad decision by a referee, the tiny school found itself in the national spotlight. For the next 15 years or so, it remained there.

It wasn't just that the team won; it was the way it won. Most teams considered passing plays too risky, but not Carlisle. Glenn "Pop" Warner installed a high-octane offense that kept opponents guessing all the time.

On Oct. 26, 1907, Carlisle went to Penn, which was undefeated and ranked fourth in the country. On the second play of the game, the Carlisle quarterback threw a 40-yard pass to a wide receiver in full stride.

"There are three or four signal moments in the evolution of football, and this was one of them," Jenkins writes in a particularly illuminating passage. "Imagine the excitement of the crowd that day - and the confusion of the defenders - if all they had ever seen was a dense-packed, scrum-like game. The play must have felt like an electric charge."

Carlisle won, 26-6, and then, for the first time ever, beat Harvard. They were the talk of the football world, drawing large crowds wherever they played. Jenkins is at her best re-creating the thrill of the games and the pride Carlisle took in its victories.

Inevitably, though, there was a backlash, and Jenkins documents the hypocrisy. Carlisle was celebrated as "plucky" when it lost; when it won, it was accused of using ringers.

By 1912, Carlisle, with a student population of just 1,000, was arguably the best team in the country. With Warner as coach and Thorpe as star (fresh from winning gold medals in track at the Olympics in Stockholm), the team romped through its schedule, playing what The New York Times called "the most perfect brand of football ever seen in America."

Near the end of the season, Carlisle met Army, whose stars included a future general (and president) named Dwight Eisenhower. The game was pregnant with meaning: Indians and soldiers had done battle before.

"I shouldn't have to prepare you for this game," Warner told his players. "Just go to your rooms and read your history books."

Not much went right after that, and Jenkins makes the eventual collapse - the football team was done by 1915, the school a few years later - sadly understandable.

Sports was a way for the Carlisle players to win acceptance in the wider society, "a triumph," Jenkins writes, "amid so many other crushing kinds of defeat."

Not a happy ending, but a real one.

- John Wilkens