



# Buffalo 'Tales



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## **“Coach George Van Buren: The Founding Father of UNK Sports”**

By  
*Jordan Kuck*

In 2005 the University of Nebraska at Kearney celebrated its centennial anniversary. Over the years UNK athletics has become a model of consistency, racking up, just in recent years, over a dozen all-sports conference championship titles, including the ongoing streak of eleven consecutive years. Just last year a number of teams won conference championships, including: football, men’s basketball, wrestling, men’s tennis, and women’s volleyball—who went on to become the NCAA Div. II National Runners-Up. With all of the contemporary athletic accomplishments and the recent celebration of the university’s centennial anniversary, it is an appropriate time to look back at the “founding father” of sports at this university: Coach George Van Buren.

Coach George Van Buren arrived at the Normal in time for the beginning of the fall semester in 1910. A former three-sport star and recent graduate of Cornell College in Iowa, Van Buren was hired to teach physical education and to breathe new life into the school’s struggling sports program. Still wet behind the ears, as they say, Van Buren arrived in Kearney full of youthful optimism and determination. Assessing the situation, which must have looked dire since only one of the sports teams up to the time of his arrival had ever had a winning record, Van Buren decided that the best he could do was instill a good-natured competitive spirit into the program. And to show that he was serious about this he immediately began putting



*Coach George Van Buren in 1911*

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### Director's Report

Trails & Rails Museum volunteers and staff have been very busy with special events. The October Chili Feed/pumpkin pie and garage sale fundraiser brought in just under \$1000 for the building fund. The 19th Annual Christmas Tree Walk will be held Sat. Dec. 2 thru Sun. Dec. 10 from 1-5 pm with extended hours on Friday Dec. 8th from 1-7 pm. \*\*\*Members Only Night will be Friday, Dec. 1st from 6-8 p.m.\*\*\*

The Historical Society hopes to spread the word to preserve the beautiful fountain/flower garden in Harmon Park. The Kearney City Park and Rec. Dept. is considering a plan that will replace the fountain and garden with a parking lot for the new Activity Center being built. We encourage everyone to share their fond memories of the area with us. Share your stories by either e-mailing [bchs@bchs.us](mailto:bchs@bchs.us) with the subject line "Save the Fountain!" or mail us your recollections to BCHS, PO Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.

I would like to take a moment to let you know how grateful we are for the support we receive from the community. Recently the Dobytown Kiwanis offered to scrape and paint the Boyd House and the Church building for free; Sherwin Williams cut us a deal on paint for those two buildings; a Kearney Keno grant covered the cost of the paint; Pepco has offered to help exterminate our buildings for free; Ron and Dennis Larsen donated fence for our new property; Trenton Snow surveyed our new property for free; and Dr. Ellis volunteers a lot of his time to edit these Buffalo Tales. This list is not complete. We have numerous volunteers that spend time helping us in a wide variety of ways. The Buffalo County Historical Society and Trails & Rails Museum would not be able to operate correctly without all of their help and compassion.

Please help me thank them!

I wish you a relaxing holiday season and hope to talk to you each soon!

Sincerely,

Jennifer Murrish  
Executive Director

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together a tougher schedule for the school's teams. Prior to his arrival the majority of games were played against local high schools or town teams.

Though Van Buren's influence was felt in all sports, without a doubt he made his largest impact on the football program. Arriving in September, he did not have much time to prepare for the 1910 season, but he still managed to coach the team to the school's best finish, outscoring opponents that season 100 to 69. But it was not just his on the field demeanor that so influenced the boys. Wanting to bring the team together, Coach Van Buren initiated a number of events that became an annual tradition. For example, he started the yearly event of handing out "K's" for the new lettermen sweaters and he put together the school's first ever annual football banquet, which was an instant hit. Another event that his players especially liked was an annual dinner held at Coach Van Buren's house. In 1913 the team was treated to roasted duck.

Due to all of these aforementioned qualities and events, football under Coach Van Buren became a success. During the rest of his tenure he never had a losing season, and in 1911 his team even competed for the recently joined Nebraska Collegiate Athletic Association championship. In just a couple of years Coach Van Buren managed to take the football program from struggling mightily against local high school competition to consecutive winning seasons against other Nebraska collegiate teams, and even a few teams outside Nebraska, as the school began taking its first out of state trips to Denver, Cheyenne, and Sioux Falls. And as this success would suggest, Coach Van Buren also fostered a number of stand-out players. Among the school's first All-State players were Russell "Red" Burford, Robert "Bob" Randolph, and multi-sport athlete, Earl "Irish" Carrig. Randolph went on to captain Northwestern University's football team in 1917 and was reported to be one of the best tackles in the nation.

In regards to baseball, the situation was a bit different for Coach Van Buren because baseball had been fairly successful prior to his arrival. But, although it was not a dramatic turnaround like football, Van Buren still managed to make a noticeable impact. The best example of this is the 1911 baseball team, which won Normal's first ever championship. Van Buren was equally adept at coaching baseball, it seems, as that season he had to manipulate his lineup a number of times to accommodate for injuries to his starting and back-up catchers.

Coach Van Buren must have also been a bit of a politician, given that he was able to convince the school to build its first gymnasium to amend for the lack of a basketball-indoor sports facility. In 1911, the men of Nor-



*Coach Van Buren with his 1911 Western Conference Championship Baseball Team*

mal, under the guidance of Coach Van Buren, built a new gymnasium just east of what was then the central heating plant (where Martin Hall sits today). "The Barn," as it became lovingly called, was a wooden building sixty by eighty feet with eighteen foot studding and twenty eight foot gables. It housed a basketball court, a practice baseball field, and a seventy-five yard cinder running track. With adequate facilities in hand, Van Buren also progressed the basketball program along nicely and coached the boys to a number of successful seasons, including the 1913 campaign when the Antelopes won the Western Conference championship.

In deciding to accept the position at Normal, which originally had a nearly all-female student body, Coach Van Buren realized that he would also assume the duties of encouraging women to participate in sports. Besides intramural sports like tennis and track, the women were also encouraged to try out for the competitive basketball team. Playing against high school and collegiate competition, Coach Van Buren tried his best to promote the women's game. Besides scheduling double-headers alongside the men, Van Buren also tried to make the games more intriguing by allowing the women to, every now and then, play by the men's rules, a decision that must have been quite progressive for its time as originally the men's rules were thought to be too aggressive and unladylike.

Track is another sport that Van Buren influenced at the Normal. In 1911 the track program made its successful debut. But after just a couple

of seasons the program was cut due to a lack of funds. Even here, though, Coach Van Buren still managed to leave a legacy in that he started an annual high school track meet that is the historical pre-cursor to the UNK invitational that still flourishes today.

Surprisingly, in 1914 Coach Van Buren left Kearney for good. It is unclear why he decided to leave Kearney. He may have been upset that the athletic budget was cut, eliminating track and his beloved baseball team as collegiate sports. An April 9, 1914 issue of the student newspaper, *The Antelope*, reported that Van Buren had been granted a much deserved two month leave of absence to return to his farm in Missouri. But by the beginning of the next school year Van Buren had still not returned, for yet unknown reasons, and all the paper had to say was that they wished "the man without a peer," as they called him, well in raising champion chickens and melons.

After reading this essay it may surprise you, I hope, to know that Van Buren has yet to be honored for his devotion and work by being inducted into the UNK Athletic Hall of Fame. Though his tenure was short, Van Buren surely has to be considered one of the most influential and successful coaches in this university's 100 year history. Not only was his impact felt during his time at Kearney, as he led the football, basketball and base-



*Coach Van Buren with the 1912 Womens Basketball Team*

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Dr Mark R. Ellis, Editor

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\*We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

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ball men to some of the most successful seasons in the first quarter century of athletics at the school, but his impact may have been even more noticeable after his departure. Following Van Buren's retirement from Normal, the sports program began a severe downward slide that did not stop for nearly a decade, though the effects of WWI certainly had something to do with that as well. In conclusion, we can only hope that sometime in the near future this injustice will be remedied and George Van Buren will be recognized for what he was—the founding father of UNK sports.

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