Saturday's hero

There wasn't a lot for school kids to do on Saturday afternoons in small-town Oklahoma in the late '40s and early '50s—still isn't as far as I know. But when fall came, something magical occurred. They called it Sooner football, and we were all invited to share this new excitement and take pride in a phenomenon that finally was sweeping away the lingering Dust Bowl image.

Except for those lucky enough to have seats in Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, ours was an audio rather than a visual happening. This was pre-TV, so I never saw my personal hero, Billy Vessels, play football. But I heard him play—experiencing his exploits with most Oklahomans through the wonder of radio.

Those long-ago memories suddenly seemed not-so-long ago on November 17, 2001, when word reached the campus that Vessels had died at his Coral Gables, Florida, home at the age of 70. We had known he was ill, of course, but this was the fastest, toughest Sooner of them all. Surely... And age 70? Could that be possible?

Billy Vessels could do anything—run, pass, receive, return kickoffs and punts—and in crucial situations, play defense. Although he didn't break into the starting lineup at left halfback until the third game of his sophomore year in 1950 and sat out most of his junior year with his leg injury-shortened professional career before heeding Wilkinson's earlier advice to walk away when football was no longer fun, he and Susie, his wife, and considered going to Oklahoma State.

When football was no longer fun. He and Susie established a home for their three children in south Florida, and as a top executive with major development and construction firms, Vessels became a principal player in Miami's business and civic affairs. In 1982 a Sooner M magazine writer accompanied him throughout two days' activities and came away awestruck by the high regard in which his friends and colleagues held this transplanted Oklahoman.

Vessels campaigned the southern states for John F. Kennedy, went to Israel with Stuart Symington to meet Golda Meir, regularly lunched with Bob Griese and played golf with D on Shula—and always seemed a little amazed by it all. A respected Florida horse breeder, Vessels subsequently headed both state and national racing commissions. In the '70s and '80s when Sooner fans regularly went bowling in Miami, their official host was a beaming Billy Vessels, resplendent in his Orange Bowl Advisory Board jacket.

His love for Oklahoma never wavered. He couldn't go too long without his OU fix; through frequent visits and more frequent phonecalls, he stayed connected. The return of his beloved Sooners to the national championship at the 2001 Orange Bowl was a great moment in his life. He was too ill to attend in person, but the following day assistant head coach Mike Stoops arrived at the Vessels home to fix; through frequent visits and more frequent phonecalls, he stayed connected. The return of his beloved Sooners to the national championship at the 2001 Orange Bowl was a great moment in his life. He was too ill to attend in person, but the following day assistant head coach Mike Stoops arrived at the Vessels home to watch the game tape with the man whose sensational performances had sparked OU to its first national championship a half-century earlier.

Gridiron superstars over many years have sent devoted fans clamoring for tickets and kept them glued to radios and televisions, but none shone brighter than the cocky kid from Pawnee County whom his pals called Curly. Billy Vessels was a Sooner original; he will be missed. — CJB