Football Ups and Downs

By HAROLD KEITH

For 47 consecutive years now, the annual autumnal mania known as football has fevered University of Oklahoma students, faculty, alumni, and thousands of outsiders as well to such a sweltering pitch of excitement that until the gridiron season ends in late November, all the ice in Antarktica probably could not cool them back to normalacy.

Great holiday throngs of gay, smartly-attired people sometimes numbering more than 30,000 now move from all over Oklahoma in a single golden October afternoon to the big red-tiled Sooner stadium at Norman to see with bated breath and to cheer with shrill pealing that some boys were borrowing the Oklahoma City home-made uniforms, the University boys present Fine Arts Building. Wearing American and first World Wars and probably will exist through the present all-planet struggle as well.

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TROPHIES WON BY O. U. ATHLETES

Shown here is a small part of the trophies won through the years by the University's victorious athletes. Represented in the impressive group of shiny gold and silver awards are major and minor sports included in O. U.'s athletic program.

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splashed in after it but while Sooner Tom B. Matthews ducked an Aggie who was about to lay hands on it, Sooner Ed Cook captured it and swimming to the opposite bank, shiveringly touched it down for a score.

When the game was ten years old at Norman, the players began to look around for a permanent coach. Everybody's choice was Bennie Owen, a soft-spoken little Irishman from Arkansas City, Kansas, who played quarterback under Fielding H. Yost at Kansas in '99. The University at Norman could personally vouch for Owen's football coaching ability. In 1903 and 1904 Owen's hard-fighting Bethany Swedes from Lindsborg, Kansas had met Sooner teams at Oklahoma City and expertly administered two drubbings, 12-10 and 36-9. Owen had earlier been called to Michigan where he helped Yost develop the famous point-a-minute Michigan team built around the great Willie Heston.

In 1905 Owen was hired. The first two years owing to a reduced financial budget he came to Norman in the autumn only, returning after the football season to Arkansas City to manage his restaurant, but eventually the University Athletic Association adjusted its finances so that Owen could stay on full-time. Owen made Oklahoma a superb coach. He had to be to satisfy the "wolves" for 22 consecutive years. Since his retirement, Sooner football coaches have come and gone almost as fast as Mexican presidential administrations after Diaz. Next to Owen, the Sooner football coach who held his job the longest was Ad Lindsey and his stint, from 1927 through 1931, lasted only five years.

At first, Owen met far more obstacles at Oklahoma than he had encountered at Bethany, due to lack of playing talent and a schedule that took his club all over the midlands. He struggled six years before defeating mighty Kansas, the scourge of the old Missouri Valley in those days, but he beat Texas 2 to 0 at Oklahoma City the first year he coached. He had financial worries, too. Trips were long and gate receipts light. To circumvent this, Owen had to book as many as three games on one trek and his small, light squads would be simply too exhausted to handle it.

For example, in 1905 Owen's squad played Kansas, the Kansas City Medics and Washburn, at Lawrence, Kansas City and Topeka during a bruising five-day trip. In 1909 the Sooners rode a chair car to St. Louis, defeating St. Louis University 11-5, then continued by rail to Dallas, Texas, where they were spanked four days later by the Texas Aggies, 0-19, and that night entrained for Austin, Texas, where two days later they were easy prey for the Longhorns, 0-30. All three games were played in six days. Now days college teams play only once a week.

But Owen eventually overcame these handicaps. In 1908 he developed his first formidable team at Norman, a big Sooner outfit that whipped Texas 50 to 0, at Norman. Built around Willard Douglas and Ralph Campbell, greatest pair of offensive tackles in the school's history, this Sooner team romped through its ten-game schedule, losing only to Kansas. Tackles Douglas and Campbell not only smashed enemy plays on defense, but their vicious ball-carrying on Owen's "tackle around" plays was murderous. In the Texas triumph Douglas and Campbell not only scored four touchdowns but each proved his speed aloft by catching flier Texas backs from behind after long chases to prevent Texas touchdowns.

The most convincing proof of Owen's greatness as a football coach lay in his ability to adapt his offensive style to his sketchy material. A comparison of his four greatest teams, the Sooner aggregations of 1908, 1911, 1915 and 1920 whose combined record was only one defeat in 35 games, illustrates this.

The 1908 team, built around Douglas and Campbell, the salty ball-lugging tackles, was primarily a power outfit with a large assortment of plays from the old-style mass game. It operated from both a balanced and unbalanced line with the quarterback, squatted behind center, taking the ball on nearly every play and feeding it to the other backs or to the

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big tackles rumbling laterally to right or left behind him. Since the forward pass had just come in, the team did very little passing. Its strength lay in its stout line, Ends Vernon Walling and Claude Pickard, Guards Porter English and Key Wolf, Centers Roy Campbell and Cleve Thompson and the indestructable tackles.

But in 1911 Owen came out with something new, a lightweight team built upon speed. His backfield of Hubert Ambrister, Ray Courtright, Claude Reed and Captain Fred Capshaw averaged only 150 pounds that year but every man was rough as a corn cob and could run 100 yards in less than 11 seconds. With such swiftness of foot available, Owen junked his indirect pass through the quarterback and introduced the direct pass to the ball-carrying back, varying it with vicious cross-bucks and quick-opening plays that were the terror of the midlands. With its quarterback frequently calling his signals from the bottom of a pile-up, the team ran off and left its opposition. Although it forward passed some, it was primarily a swift-cruising, hard-hitting running team. It finished all-victorious although playing all its important games (against Missouri, Kansas and Texas) away from Norman.

Owen's all-victorious 1915 team exploited still another phase of the offense that was brand new in the old Southwest, the forward pass. Although several of its players could pass and receive, "Spot" Geyer, a stoop-shouldered fullback from Norman High School was its ace pegger and End Homer Montgomery and Quarterback Montford "Hap" Johnson its crack receivers. Although its backfield lacked the four-man versatility of the Reeds-Courtright-Ambrister-Fred Capshaw quartet of 1911, it had four halfbacks to go with Geyer and Johnson and two great linemen in End Montgomery and Tackle Willis Hott. Its aerial wizardry was unstoppable. It averaged approximately 250 yards on forward passes alone in its major games and conquered its ten-game schedule with only two close shaves, 14-13 triumphs over both Texas and Henry Kendall on those teams' home fields.

In 1920 Owen took Oklahoma out of the Southwest conference and into the Missouri Valley league and his biggest football team of all time up to then won the Missouri Valley championship in a breeze with no defeats and only one tie against it. Whereas the 1908 team had been known for its corking line, the 1911 team for its speedy hard-running backfield and the 1915 team for maraudous forward-passing, the versatile 1920 team seemed to combine all these elements. Its powerful line had a great quartet of ends led by Tarz Marsh, an excellent pair of tackles in Paul Johnston and Roy Smoot, two fine guards in Earl Deacon and Bill McKinley and a swell center in Dow Hamrn.

Phil White, a 190-pound triple threat who could kick as high as a chorus girl and gamely played with a shoulder out of socket, did the punting, passing and plenty of running. Roy Swatcek was the dreaded blocker and line-backer, tank-like Harry Hill did the elixam running and dependable Arlo Davis and Frank Ogilvie the quarterbacking. It was a team that started slowly but finished with a pitless surge. Against Washington it trailed 3-14 yet won 24-14, it lagged behind Kansas at the half yet won 21-9.

With Owen's retirement after the 1926 season, the University went into its football dog days, chiefly because of its policy of refusing to enlist leading Oklahoma high school players who were escaping to California and other states. Ad Lindsey, who like Owen came to Norman from little Bethany college, struggled five years against this discouraging setup and finally walked out in disgust. The bars were dropped somewhat for Lewie Hardage the Vanderbilt backfield mentor who succeeded Lindsey, but when he won but 11 games in three years, the wolf pack figured he was just spinning his wheels and set up a loud yapping that fetched his scalp.

Then out of the chaos came order. A strong man was needed to revitalize football at Oklahoma and in Capt. Lawrence "Biff" Jones, whose old Army teams had given Knute Rockne's Notre Dame squads four terrific games and whose modern Louisiana State juggernauts had been the talk of the South, a strong man was secured although Jones was terribly handicapped in that he had to give one-half his time to the University R. O. T. C. unit. The gruff army man stayed at Norman only two seasons. Neither of his Sooners teams those two years were world-beaters but the public will never know what a far-reaching transformation the practical Jones wrought in the athletic department's administration, finances and methods in those two seasons. The whole football program was placed on the solid, sensible footing so necessary for success in modern times.

The rest of the story is common knowledge. In 1937 Tom Stidham, Jones' hefty, jovial Creek Indian line coach went in as head coach with diminutive Dewey "Snorter" Luster handling the backfield and Lawrence "Jap" Haskell the line. They made a great trio, winning all but two games their first season and tying Texas and Nebraska, both of whom they slightly out played.

In 1938 they hit the jackpot with a Sooner team built around Hugh McCullough, a great triple-threater who made the players as though he were a coach. Those were the days of what were probably the roughest Sooner defensive lines of all time, ends like Pete Smith, Waddy Young, Pop Ivy, John Shirk and Alton Coppage, the first three All-Americans. There were also Bud Bowers and Gilford "Gactus Face" Duggan, a pair of rough 225-pound tackles, Harold Lahar, a 215-pound guard who blocked intimate into a berth with the Chicago Bears and the 220-pound center Mickey Parks, a modern standout at his position.

In 1939, they deserved an undefeated season, a Big Six championship and a Sugar Bowl bid and had it in the bag too, until Bob Seymour, big fullback, sustained a brain concussion in the first minute of the Missouri game. In 1941 Luster succeeded Stidham as head coach when the latter resigned to accept the Marquette job.

Meanwhile had occurred the injection of big business tactics into the game. Until 1923 Sooner teams had played before relatively thin crowds who sat in small wooden stands. Financing the sport wasn't such a problem then because the small Sooner coaching staff also doubled at physical education and was paid out of state funds. Also, the student athletic ticket was compulsory in those days and the athletic department always had a considerable cash fund to draw against after enrollment. It was Owen who envisaged dramatization of the sport into a great public spectacle. He built the 30,000 capacity concrete stadium, and supervised purchase of the spacious grounds that now surround it. Hard times prevented consummation of his dream. That came years later when, after Captain Jones had wisely built the foundation for strong modern-day teams, the Stidham-Luster-Haskell staff produced the powerful Oklahoma teams everybody had been waiting for, drawing huge crowds of 20,000 to 30,000 fans to what had been the lonely Sooner stadium.

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