The Invincible Earle

Shortly after the turn to the century, a young man from Enid enrolled in the University and the sports history of the institution has not been the same since. The Sooner Magazine’s special assignments reporter visited him in Hollywood during the summer and...

By ROBERT TALLEY, '55

You may be an ardent Sooner who has followed University sports with a keen evaluative eye, and yet you may have missed one of the greatest athletic stories this school has ever seen. You may not have heard...

In the hectic hell-for-leather days after the turn of the century a lanky undersized boy from Enid achieved a record that has no parallel. Earle Radcliffe, '09ba, '12ma, better known to sports writers of those years as the Invincible Earle, in one day competed in three different winning varsity events. He holds eleven "O" letters in five sports and may well be the only man in the annals of Oklahoma ever to play varsity football while teaching on the faculty!

When old-timers settle back to recall past days and the men who made them great they naturally talk first of Earle. In the long view of O. U.'s history when all-around prowess, determination, spirit come to mind, Radcliffe sticks out like an oak in a cotton field—a modest, unassuming, devoted wildcat.

To discuss Earle Radcliffe on paper like this seems rather strange since I have known him for some years. I was a glassy-eyed copyboy on the Hollywood California Citizen-News in 1947 when a gruff news editor hauled me by the shoulder over to the copy desk, a horseshoe-shaped affair where headlines of happiness and heartbreak pour out for the readers six days a week.

"Want you to meet Earle Radcliffe," he grumbled.

Earle looked up, a grey-haired man, brown yet clinging to his temples, tall, slim, sixty, in good shape. He rose and smiled.

To a young copyboy shoved into a den of gnarled news hawks, Radcliffe was a friendly oasis in a desert of frenzy. What he thought of me when I rather shyly and formally said "How do you do" I don't know. But I knew there was a man I would like.

Time passed and Radcliffe in his quiet way became better known to me, a ready smile, a pleasant wit. He was helpful to a copyboy hoping for reporter and later was glad to help a sometimes fumbling cub to be recognized as a full-fledged reporter.
As one comes to notice differences in others, I began to see them in Radcliffe. I noticed in his mail there was always a Daily Oklahoman and that he spoke often of Oklahoma and was ribbed good-naturedly about his Okie ancestry. The Senator, as he was called (he was the paper's unofficial elder statesman), rooted quickly for the Sooners when football talk came around during less frantic hours after deadline.

I knew little more about him besides these facts and some private information one learns of co-workers. Oh, I'd heard he had played some football but he talked little of it. So when we discussed his life last summer in the paper's employee lounge, I was amazed. For you see, even though I had known him for seven years I, too, had not heard . . .

His is the success story of a boy-agile, quick-growing to become a mature athlete, cheered as a hero, but unaffected in the face of too many crowds and too much publicity; later to be an adventurrous reporter and editor in a fiery era now calmed as foaming water in a rapids quiets upon offering itself to a lake.

Earle was born in December, 1888, of school-teacher parents, James Vincent and Florence Radcliffe, in the small town of Rosalie, Kansas. After a childhood spent in various little communities, where his father alternately taught and worked as a wheat buyer, Earle at nine moved with his parents to Enid, in new Oklahoma. There he spent his years before college. And there in his first year of high school he drew a deep breath, closed his eyes, and vaulted headlong into athletics. He showed promise then of skills that would red-letter the name of Earle Radcliffe into the sports history of the University.

His beginning track meet marked one of the few failures in his life. Earle was to run the 100-yard dash in his first meet. The track was smooth and the lines were well laid out. Fine for everybody but the young boy from Enid. The starting gun boomed and the runners were off. Seeing a chance to gain position, Radcliffe crossed lanes—he hadn't been told not to and he had never run with anything as fancy as lanes before. When he veered unexpectedly he ran smack into another boy and dived for the cinders, tumbling out of an almost sure win. Later in the day, however, he made up for the mistake by winning the pole vault event, a skill he'd picked up by yanking himself over a five-foot fence with an old hoe handle. By graduation time he had captured both the baseball and track teams (he later would add three other sports to his conquests) and had been THE outstanding athlete. Even a better testimonial to the boy shows in his being elected president of both his junior and senior classes. He was ready for college now.

Upon arriving at O. U., he made up his mind there was one sport he wouldn't try—football. For an athlete who had done as well as Radcliffe had in high school to adopt cliff's heart would quicken as ghosts came alive again.

Let's follow him through that startling college career.

In his freshman spring of 1906 after sitting out football as a bad bet, Radcliffe turned to his real love—baseball, winning first base immediately on the varsity team. (He had started playing the game in the second grade with a paddle and a rubber ball.) When track time came he quickly broke the southwestern pole vault record in an intercollegiate meet including Texas, Rice, Baylor, the Aggies and O. U. That semester he entered the track meet that would determine the best athlete at O. U., and he romped off with 19 points—three firsts, one second and one third—to win the coveted Winan's Medal.

At this point Radcliffe pushed back in his chair, stretched and commented on the medal in his characteristic simplicity. "I wasn't paying any attention—I didn't even know I had won it. Th next year I knew I was in the competition, so I went out for it. Then I got 25 points."

As a sophomore, Earle felt the boiling blood that runs through football players. One group called the Sooners and another naming themselves the Boomers—scrubs—decided to stage a rip-roaring football game. Radcliffe explained his participation:

"They were short-handed, needed every man they could get—and they picked me up (all 138 pounds). After the game got going I decided I liked it and surprisingly I didn't get killed."

Not only did he live through it, but when the game was over records show that one Earle Radcliffe—playing for the Boomers—had made a wild and brilliant 45-yard dash around the Sooners' end to score one of the only two touchdowns the scrubs made. That they were beaten (22-12) matters little; it is important because it was the first game ever played between Boomers and Sooners and Radcliffe was a hero of the game—the undersized skinny boy who had never cared for football.

Spring, 1907, was a big time for the young athlete. To his previous triumphs he added basketball, playing guard, and tennis, which he'd tried during the summers. (He was to go on to win the Oklahoma City Municipal Singles Championship twice in later years.) His skill at baseball brought him an offer to play professionally with an Oklahoma City team, but he turned it down for fear of losing his amateur standing.

This year also saw the unusual circumstances that found a fired-up Radcliffe compete in one day in three varsity sports. By noon he had won the singles in a tennis

THE INVINCIBLE EARLE

... Eleven Letters in Five Sports

such an attitude toward the game was almost unheard of. Says Radcliffe today—pointing out that with a bucket of water in each hand he wouldn't have weighed much over 138 pounds—"I had always thought football too rough for me. I wasn't the slightest bit interested."

His mind was to change, however, because within three years sports writers were calling him "one of the greatest football players and the most versatile athlete who ever entered a contest under Oklahoma colors."

As Radcliffe talked over coffee I suddenly noticed him losing his easy, relaxed attitude. He pushed his cup away, pulled up closer to the table and was relating his story at an unfamilar machine-gun clip with an intenseness I had never seen in him. I realized then that on the paper, working as he had with years and years of headlines, Earle had been only mildly interested in what went on ("News," another man had said one morning, "comes and goes . . .") but remembering the glory days with the game fast and the opponents rough, Rad-
In taking his second Winan's Medal, Earle racked up the awesome record of five firsts in five events for 25 points: 100- and 200-yard dashes, 220 low hurdles, broad jump and pole vault. As versatile as a shoplifter with a gunny sack, but every event was not to be so easy.

The Sooners had traveled to Pawhuska to play an Indian team and the Indian rooters were taking it to heart—betting everything they owned, could borrow or filch on their red brothers' ability. Concerned for their investments—to state it mildly—they paraded up and down in front of the hotel where the team was staying. They shouted threats and tried, it appeared, to put a heavy dose of evil eye on the boys.

As Radcliffe describes it now, "The next day we beat them and we hurried back to the hotel, and, boy, we stayed inside." An uneasy night passed and at four in the morning the team got out of town. Those Indians were scalping mad.

Another time after a game some kids stoned the Sooners players as they rode back from the field, but no one was hurt. "There was a lot of rivalry in those days," Radcliffe commented modestly.

At the close of that semester he had won four varsity letters, a full season for a boy who was also elected editor-in-chief of the Mistletoe yearbook and who was serving on the Athletic Council as well as studying rigidly for an economics-sociology degree.

The year 1907-08 stacks up well, too. Football had flooded, if not his life, at least the Fall, and he played in every game. Mainly quarterbacking. He picked up a letter in football, but to his disappointment baseball that spring was disallowed because several players had dropped in classwork. He recouped the lost satisfaction by breaking his own Southwestern Conference pole vault record in an intercollegiate meet in Austin, Texas: 10 feet, 10 inches, touching the clouds in those days.

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