A Coach for All Seasons

The name Lawrence "Jap" Haskell is a prominent one in OU athletic history. It appears frequently among the cold facts and figures of record books, alongside laconic entries of scores and percentages. To a person unfamiliar with OU sports tradition the records can show only a few impersonal data about Jap Haskell, data which disclose a fine college athlete, a successful coach and athletic director. What record books don't reveal is the kind of a man he was, for there are no statistics which can measure a man's humor or his integrity or his determination. The young men he influenced, the friends he made, and the memories he left are more important, more significant than all of Jap Haskell's many victories or any of his records.

In 1963, nine months before his death, Jap Haskell was honored by the University at the annual O Club banquet. A Salute to Excellence Citation and plaque were presented to him. Addressed to The Master of the Squeeze Bunt, the citation praised Haskell for teaching young athletes the lasting values of desire, discipline, excruciating effort and always following the coach's instructions. To present the award to him was a former Sooner infielder who had played for Haskell and who had become a good friend. His name was Eph Monroe, a Clinton attorney and president of the OU Board of Regents. During his extemporaneous talk in which he recalled playing for Haskell, Monroe succeeded through a few stories in picturing Haskell the man as he was as a coach — tough, demanding, highly competitive, warm, incisively humorous. In a letter to sports publicity director Harold Keith, written before Haskell's death, Monroe reminisced again about his college coach, repeating some of the stories he had told that night:

"Frankly, Harold, it's not easy to describe the true Haskell, because I have never been able to understand how he could make you want to give a little bit more than you were capable of giving. On the field he was not subtle, he was not kind, neither was he mean, nor did he get your best by asking for it. I believe his own toughness, his own fierce pride made you want to give, and you knew that he demanded a little blood if necessary. One time Jap told me he didn't like to play against a good loser, because, he said, 'If I do beat him, I want to know that he's bleeding inside like I would if he beat me.' This, maybe, is the real Haskell. At any rate, he was a great leader, an intensive competitor, and a fine human being. There are some wonderful stories about Jap. I wish I had time to write all I can recall, but I'll give you a few of my favorites.
"In the summer of 1935, Jap was calling a tournament at Seminole in which several of his boys were playing, but on different teams. One day Jay Thomas, OU first baseman playing for Seminole, was batting and Jap was the plate umpire. On the first pitch, the ball appeared to be a little high, but Jap loudly and clearly called it a strike. Thomas, with a look of utter amazement, turned and berated Haskell for a full minute. The next pitch appeared to be in the same place, and Haskell called it a strike. At this point, Thomas turned to Jap and said, 'I told you you were blind—that pitch was exactly in the same place as the first one.' To which Haskell replied, 'Was it sure enough?' Replied Thomas, 'It certainly was.' Haskell then raised his right arm in great defiance and screamed 'Strike Two!' I need not tell you it remained just that...

"Another time, after Delmar Steinbock had made a bonehead play and after we had retired the side, Jap yelled to Stiney, 'Steinbock, what in the world were you doing?' Stiney started a retort, 'Jap, I thought—' and he got no further, as Jap said, 'Steinbock, every time you think you weaken this club, and it's weak enough already...'.

"Jap thought the worst thing a pitcher could do was to hang a curve. I'll always remember his advice to his pitchers, 'If you hang a curve ball up high again, run like hell and back up third.' To Dillard Jackson I once heard Jap say, 'Wheyhead, you'd be a great pitcher if you could get your curve over, but about the time it gets half-way across the plate, somebody knocks the hell out of it.'

"In remembering Jap, a whole covey of his aphorisms always comes to mind, sayings which summed up his baseball philosophy:

- There's a slide at the end of every steal.
- Get your legs in shape and your arm'll take care of itself.
- If that hitter digs in with men on, stick the ball in his ear.
- On attempted double plays, take that pivot man out if you have to chase him to the dugout.
- When running bases, the basepath is yours. If it's blocked, cut your way in.
- A good hitter can hit a buckshot with baling wire.
- If we win by one run, I won it. If we lose by a run, I lost it. If you can catch a ball, you can bunt it.

"One of the best Haskell stories occurred when we were playing a four-game series against Nebraska in 1938 at Lincoln, and I believe we were ahead two games to one with the last game to be played on Monday. We were staying at the Cornhusker Hotel, and on Saturday evening, Jap had scouted around and found a non-sectarian church. He called us together that evening for a squad meeting and announced we would all be expected to attend church the next morning. We were to meet in the lobby at 10. It is my opinion that Jap thought he needed a little outside help as his pitching hadn't been too good. He called us together that evening for a squad meeting and announced we would all be expected to attend church the next morning. We were to meet in the lobby at 10. It is my opinion that Jap thought he needed a little outside help as his pitching hadn't been too good. The next morning everybody showed up except Dillard Jackson and Jap. Dillard put him off for some reason, and Jap told him, 'Wheyhead, you'd better get ready and go to church with us, because you're going to pitch tomorrow and it's going to take more than your curve to get us by.' Jackson made some excuse and about 10 or 11 of us piled into two cars with me driving the lead car and Jap sitting in the front seat with me. He began to direct me toward the church but with no success, and about every 30 seconds he would say, 'Where is that danged church? I know it's around here somewhere. I saw it last night.' After about 30 minutes he had me pull over. He got out, peered in all directions and murmured, 'Where is that danged church? I saw the danged thing last night.' We looked for it some more before finally in exasperation Jap made the classic remark: 'Where do you suppose that danged church is? We've looked all over hell for it.'

"On the next afternoon Jap handed Jackson the ball and said, 'Wheyhead, you are in for nine innings. The quicker you get them out, the quicker we go home, but if it takes all day, you're going to pitch it all.' The truth is, we did play most of the day, and as I remember, it was 15-9 for us. I am sure, in my own mind, that Jap felt the failure to find the church was an omen that surely had something to do with Nebraska's getting nine runs.

"The last paragraph in my talk the night we honored Jap was the only part I wrote out. I wanted to get down on paper how I felt about Jap Haskell. I said, 'No person has had a greater influence on the spirit and pride of the athletic endeavors at the University than Lawrence 'Jap' Haskell. His greatness, his indomitable spirit, his love of athletics and athletes should not be forgotten. His great contribution to hard, tough, but fair play, has made, and will continue to make him a legend on the campus of the University of Oklahoma.'"