

The Way It Is or May Be

The Sooners will be better than in 1966, and it's too bad that the Big Eight is too

It's unfortunate for sportswriters that football isn't as predictable as those free elections in South Vietnam. It would make some of their preseason estimates less embarrassing in December, though it would also make the game certainly less interesting. There are just too many factors involved—some intangible, others inexplicable—which combine to make one team click, another clank. In assessing the potential of the 1967 Sooners, one is confronted with a tangle of pluses, minuses, and maybes which are difficult to unravel with any certainty.

In the plus column are new coach Chuck Fairbanks (see pages 4-7) and his staff. Another asset is the offensive backfield, all back from last year, with some strong, swift sophomores backing it up. The linebacking is in pretty good shape, and Mike Vachon's toe has returned. Also, the defensive secondary, second best in the country last year, is two-thirds intact.

In the gray area is the offensive line, which wasn't too terrorizing last year and must be rebuilt for this campaign. The defensive line is also problematical though it appears as good or better than the 1966 line, because of the experience accumulated by a few returning starters, the most prominent being Granville Liggins, who, because of his first two injury-plagued seasons, must be considered a question mark himself. Another key aspect of the game, punting, must be resolved. Tom Stidham, a 43-yard punter, is gone and must be replaced. And another Ben Hart must be discovered.

The most conspicuous minus is the

Big Eight Conference. It is stronger than it has ever been. Dan Devine of Missouri remarked recently to a touring klatch of sportswriters that a member of their profession had picked Missouri for fifth. He didn't take issue with the prediction, he simply pointed out that a fifth-place club in the league this year would be a good one. Explain that to alumni though, he added.

Dan is right. Five teams have a shot at the title. Colorado, Nebraska, Missouri, Oklahoma, and OSU could each win the championship, and if the victor takes all seven games it will be a shock. The conference has even better balance than last year when the first five teams had winning records and the fifth place team, Oklahoma at 4-3, would have finished 7-0 and first except for two 3-point losses to Colorado and Missouri and a 1-point defeat by OSU. This year should be as close, with most games decided by a touchdown or less among the top contenders. Even Kansas, Iowa State, and Kansas State will be improved and, don't laugh, capable of deciding who wins the thing. The Kansas clubs have new coaches, who with Fairbanks make three the number of first-year men.

Oklahoma's non-conference schedule will be easier than last year. Maryland and Washington State are not as strong as Oregon and that Indiana school we played last year. Texas will be tougher, however, and the Sooners will likely enter the Big Eight schedule at 2-1. They have a break in playing Colorado, who must be tagged as the favorite for obvious reasons, in Norman for Homecoming, but they must

travel to Lincoln to face Nebraska, who will probably remember last year. Oh well, it could be worse—it could be Alabama.

Missouri, another roughie, has to be encountered on its home field, and though the Tigers are not explosive, they are punishing and consistent. OSU, under that old sophisticate Phil Cutchin, will have to come to Norman this year in a game that could mean more than simply a year of statewide belittling to the loser. OU should win against the lower three clubs; two of them play in Norman, and only Kansas State has to be played away from home.

OU can finish anywhere from 4-6 to 8-2 this year; remember that last year could have easily been 5-5, as well as 9-1. A 7-3 would be a most happy record, considering all the weaknesses that the team has right now, and another 6-4 would not indicate a mediocre team. Much depends on injuries, for OU lacks depth, distressingly so, in the line. To contend, the Sooners, who must rely on speed more than muscle, must avoid those errors like fumbles, interceptions, and they must have a sound kicking game, one of the most important assets a line-weak team can have.

Finally, those things for which there are no figures or statistics are working in OU's favor. The players have the necessary spirit and character winning requires. They believe they are a good team, they believe in their coaches, and these delicate qualities are essential if a club goes anywhere. Like south in January.

Offensive Backs

Barry Switzer, who moves from coaching the offensive line to become coach of the offense, finds himself with a pleasant situation: an experienced, talented backfield. Junior Eddie Hinton, the wingback, "is probably the best athlete on the team," says Switzer. He is certainly a brilliant runner and receiver; during two-a-days he was tried at split end. He's now back at wing, and the offense will insert a few more plays to take advantage of his elusiveness; he can break any ball game open. The new punting rule, which doesn't allow the interior offensive

linemen to leave the line of scrimmage until



Eddie Hinton

the ball is kicked, will make him even more of a runback threat, and his 29.1 yard punt return average of 1966 was among the best in the nation. Gary Harper, another junior, at fullback will run a bit more this year, Switzer says, though the fullback in the Oklahoma I is chiefly a blocker. He will encounter sibling rivalry from his brother Mike, who was redshirted last year. At tailback is Ron Shotts, a savvy senior who should have a very good year. At quarter, of course, is Warmack (see pages 8-11). The alternate backfield has Jim Burgar at quarter, Steve Owens at tailback, a Harper and Rick Baldrige at full, and San Toi DeBose

at wing. Only Bugar is a junior, the rest sophs. Switzer will sleep better than any of the other coaches.

Pass Defense



Bob Stephenson

Everything is pretty well set in the secondary. Steve Barrett and Bob Stephenson at safety and cornerback, are veterans, and Bruce Stensrud, a sophomore, is looking good at the other corner. Billy Gray, frosh coach in '66, has a lot to work with.

Offensive Line



Bob Kalsu (center)

Attend a practice and you will undoubtedly hear the beseeching roar of Buck Nystrom, in his first year at OU and saddled with the most challenging assignment on the staff. He must develop an offensive line. If anyone can,



Sept. 1 offensive line: (l-r) Killingsworth, Kalsu, Butts, Craig, Lancaster, Bigby, Meacham.

Nystrom can. After two weeks of practice, a few experiments were still in the works. Randy Meacham, tight end last year, is being tried at weak side tackle. Steve Zabel, a junior college split end, is working at tight end with Bo Denton; Byron Bigby, a tackle last year, is at guard; soph Ken Mendenhall, a center in high school, is at guard, and a fullback named Bill Elfstrom, is at guard. These will be the boys who will have to make it go, along with two proven regulars, Bob Craig at center, and Bob Kalsu, a fine tackle and with Meacham the largest man on the squad at around 220. Wes Butts is an experienced interior lineman who has seen action and shows talent. A red-shirt, Ed Lancaster at guard, could play a lot. Pray a lot for the offensive line, and send Nystrom throat lozenges—he'll have to roar a lot this fall.

Kicking

Vachon will kickoff and kick PAT's and field goals. He had nine of the latter last year for a school record. The punter is who knows? Maybe Zabel, who was pretty good at NMMI, maybe Donny Wheeler, maybe kid named Armstrong or Rickey. We could do without the maybes.

Linebackers, Receivers

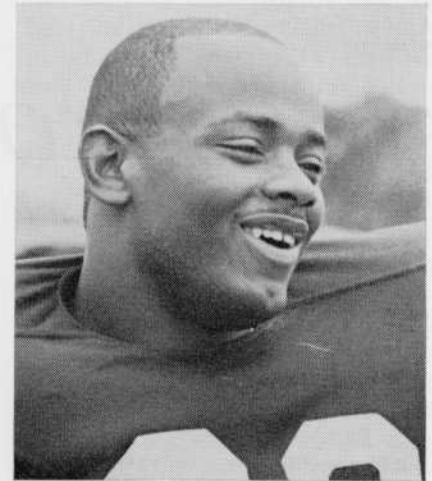


Don Pfrimmer

Don Pfrimmer attacks with the fatalism of a Kamikaze pilot, and he's going to be a delight to watch at linebacker. A transfer who has only this year of eligibility, the newcomer will add zest and skill. He is ably assisted by Rick Goodwin and Harry Hettmannsperger, who last year led the team in tackles. Monster is the key to the defense, and Jimmy Linn or Don Nelson must come through. Bill Michael, another new coach,

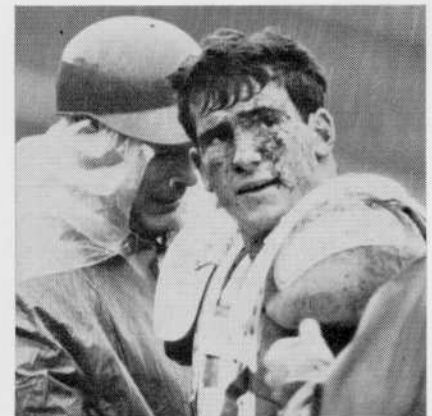
like Nystrom, has a demanding job in his debut. Galen Hall coaches the receivers. Joe Killingsworth has looked good at split end. He's tall and runs well after the catch. Denton and Zabel are also 6-3 or over and good receivers. Johnny Barr and Bob Brown, who weighs 149 and fortunately is fast, are also trying their hands at split end.

Defensive Line



Granville Liggins

Assistant head coach Pat James thinks his defensive line will be better than last year's. It's anchored by the redoubtable Liggins, and it has John Koller, another senior, at defensive end. Koller is good. The tackles are sound with Dick Paaso and John Titsworth back for another season. Available at any of the interior positions is senior Larry Crutchmer. Jim Files looks set at the other end. James knows what he's talking about, and he thinks opponents will have trouble running against his young men.



Ron Shotts

Summary

Great backfield, sound place-kicking, good secondary, better than average linebackers, pretty good defensive line, unproven receivers, questionable offensive line, unknown punting game. Better non-conference schedule, tough conference. With a little luck, we've got a winner. With a little more, a contender; with quite a lot, a bowl. END