

A year After The HEISMAN

Interview by Val Pippis, '71journ

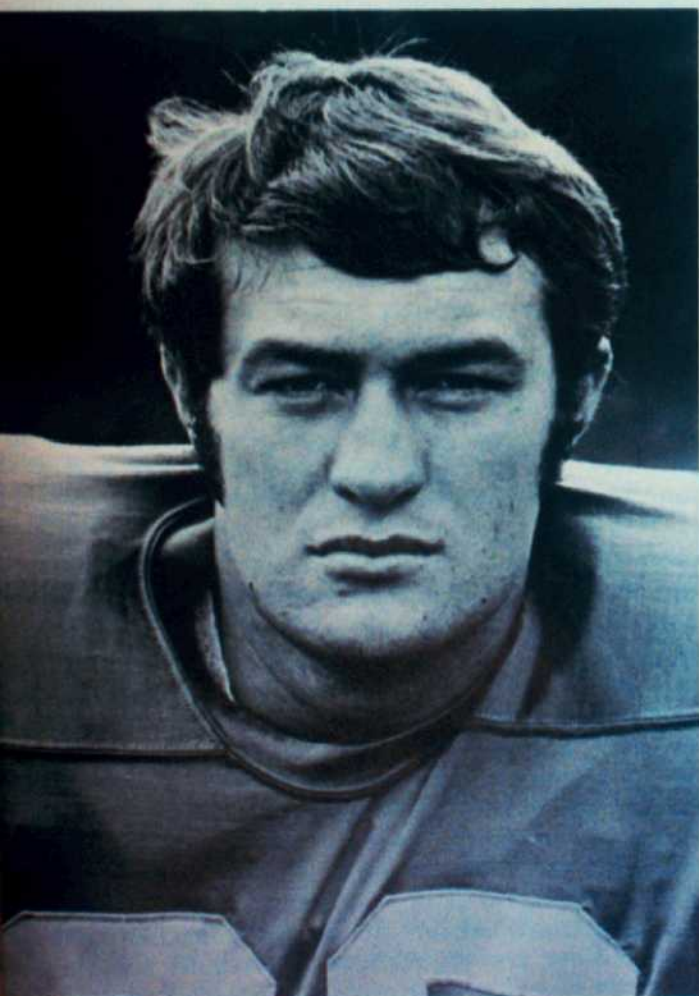
Wearing his old number—36—Steve Owens returned to action with the Detroit Lions late in the season after suffering a shoulder injury during exhibition season. He looked like the Owens of old, powering through for crucial yardage, breaking in for two touchdowns in the Rams game when starter Mel Farr left with his own shoulder injury. In that game Owens shared honors with quarterback Greg Landry and chances looked bright for a Super Bowl spot for the Lions. Then in the sectional playoffs after Christmas the Lions, three point favorites, lost to the Dallas Cowboys.

For Owens the season was not the best of rookie years. Neither was it the worst, however, for despite his injury and the fact he played little, his time on the field proved that the Heisman Trophy winner still is a star.

Sooner—Did you feel you had any other choice when the season was over than going into the pros?

Owens—I feel that I had a choice—I could either go on and finish school or I could go on and play pro football. But I didn't think about it very much because the one thing I had always wanted to do was play professional football. This was one of my great goals, and I looked forward to it very much. I did have other choices. I had job opportunities; I could have finished school, and there were other possibilities. But I chose to play professional ball because that's what I really wanted.

A lot of players who dream of playing professional football become physically disabled or something else happens so they can't play. The pros are not the end goal of every college player. We all go to school, and we learn a profession. So a college foot-



ball player has an education, and he can go on and do just about anything he wants.

I think football players are expanding so much now that even if they go into professional football, after they have played four or five years they usually go into some other type of business and do very well. Professional football now is very business oriented, and football players are much smarter and handle money much better than they did in years past.

Sooner—How much pressure is on a college star when he gets into the pros, and especially in your case as the Heisman Trophy winner? Were you expected to excel faster than the other rookies?

Owens—There is a lot of pressure on a player coming into the pros for the first year. In my case winning the Heisman there was added pressure because I was the number one draft choice of the Detroit Lions. Heisman Trophy winners have a history of not doing well in the pros. I had a terrific amount of pressure put on me to make the team and to do well. When I won the Heisman, I knew I would have to face these problems.

As far as excelling faster than other rookies, I think if you are picked as the number one draft choice, you are expected to fit right in and do very well. They wouldn't pick you if they didn't think you could do the job right away.

When I first came to training camp in Detroit in August, I felt a tremendous amount of pressure to do really well because I was expected to do so. I had quite a bit of harrassment from the older football players—the so-called veterans—because I was the Heisman Trophy winner and the number one draft. There were many nights when I had to get up and stand in the chair and sing "Boomer Sooner" and other such songs. But this is the type pressure they put on you in your rookie year. I guess the veterans tend to forget that they were rookies once too.

Sooner—Can you draw a comparison in the closeness of a college team as opposed to a pro team?

Owens—The professional teams are not as close as college football teams. There are a lot of reasons for this. There is the age difference. You come into professional ball, and you are playing with people who are much older than you. There is quite a variation on the Detroit Lions. I believe our oldest player is 35, and our youngest player is probably 21 or 22.

In college you are playing with guys whose age is not more than two or three years away from yours. You are living together all the time at OU in a dormitory, and you are doing the same things—going to class, practicing. In the pros the player has his family. Players live in all different parts of the city, and they are not together as much as college players are.

The Lions are considered a very close team in pro football, and the players get along very well, but we aren't as close as a college team. In college you don't get paid for what you're doing. In the pros it's a business.

Sooner—Did you find it very difficult when you went into the pros to find the right person to help you with your dealings?

Owens—I found it very hard for me personally. When I came out of OU, I picked a company to handle

all of my business ventures. This worked fine for a while, but there were some problems that came up and some things that happened that I didn't particularly care for but which weren't their fault.

I was very lucky after that because I then found a very honest and sincere person to handle all my affairs before I was really hurt.

This is a very big problem, dealing with agencies and people to handle you when you come out of college and into the pros. First you have to find the person that will do the best job for you, a person you can trust who will be honest with you because there are a lot of things I didn't understand in the contracts. This is a problem with a lot of athletes today, but I think they are finally beginning to overcome this. It's a very important decision when you pick just the right people to handle your affairs. I have talked to a number of other rookies that made the same mistakes I did. They rushed into the decision of picking an agent when they really didn't know the facts. Many of them were on the edge of getting into trouble before they got out. I'm sure this is going to continue to happen with a lot of other athletes in all sports. I'm sure there are people in the colleges and universities who could help. In fact, I know that at the University of Arkansas the athletic department has one man handle all their athletes.

The important thing is to pick a person with a good reputation. I have a man by the name of Jack Mills, an OU graduate, who handles Jim Files, Steve Zabel, Bobby Anderson and a number of other players who have done very well. You have to find someone who has been in the situation. They have to know

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what's going on with professional contracts. The general managers of pro clubs are very hard to deal with unless you have a person who knows what he is doing. The colleges could supply someone if that person was really experienced in dealing with professional teams and professional contracts. I think it would be fine if the colleges could do that. Then the athlete would know he could trust the person he was dealing with.

Sooner—What has the season been like with the Lions? How are the rookies treated off the field?

Owens—The season has been satisfactory because we were in the running to win our division.

The Lions are in probably the strongest division in pro football—it's called the "Black and Blue League." I got hurt in exhibition season. I was having a good season and earned a starting position on the Lions when I had a severe shoulder separation which required surgery.

Being a rookie is a one-shot deal—you're only a rookie for one year. Rookies are treated like freshmen coming into a university. Nobody really pays any attention to you unless you get out and play really good football. If you do that, you are accepted very quickly.

Rookies have a number of things they have to do. They have to put on a rookies' show for the veterans, and they have to carry the veterans' shoulder pads into the dressing rooms. They have to sing every night before supper, sing at noon, sing at breakfast. There are a lot of things that rookies have to do, and they aren't treated too kindly. It's supposed to be a fun type thing. We don't think it is fun at the time, but it is just one of those things that is done.

Sooner—Do you still hear from people in Oklahoma?

Owens—Barbara and I have heard from so many people in Oklahoma since we've been here, it has really been amazing. When I was hurt, I received many letters and telegrams and cards and flowers from back in Oklahoma. It amazed me that people were keeping up with my progress in professional football.

I have always had a very warm feeling for all the people in Oklahoma, and the way they supported me all through college. Now in the pros this really makes me feel good.

In college I was playing for a great school, and I was exposed to the fans all the time. Detroit is 1,500 miles away, and it's pretty tough to get the same kind of exposure back home. But I feel I have just as many fans in Oklahoma as I had before because they are the type of fans that remember football players. From all the cards and letters I have received from Oklahoma I know they remember me.

The fans in Detroit are good in that they support the Lions. We have had a sell out nearly every game. Even the exhibition season was sold out. I think they are like most fans—when you are winning they are with you, and when you are losing they are with you, but they can't stand for you to lose so they are not as fired up.

Sooner—What about the press treatment of football players in college and in the pros?

Owens—Professional football is a business, and you have your job to do. If you don't do that job, then you receive much more criticism than you did when you didn't do your job in college. The press gets on you more. In the pros the press can pick you apart as a player whereas in college if you did badly, it was the whole team that got the criticism instead of the individual player.

Many of the writers here in Detroit, for instance, talk about a player's personal life as well. I think this is wrong. I don't like people to talk about my personal life. If I tell them something about my personal life, that is fine. But as far as people coming and digging about little things that I do, that is not going

to make me a better football player. It might make a little twist to an article, but that's all.

Your personal life is personal. What you do when you come home is your business. If a person wants to talk about his personal life, he can do that if he wants to. It's his decision. Writers here in Detroit do get involved in some of the players' personal lives, how they spend their money, whether they made bad investments, things like that. Well, when I do something in the business world or outside of football, I don't care for someone else to know about it. It is my business what happens, and that is it. I don't mind people knowing what I do, but I just don't

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like to go out and talk about it. It is my business and nobody else's. People shouldn't get involved in other people's personal lives unless they're invited.

In college I don't think the writers got as much involved in my personal life as they do now. They didn't come out and ask how much money I was going to make and things like that. If a college player wants to talk about things like that, that's his choice. I don't like to.

Sooner—What kind of pressure is there on the high school senior being recruited for college football?

Owens—When I was being recruited out of high school, there was quite a bit of pressure on me. There were so many schools involved in this, and I was very young—a high school senior who really didn't know much about the outside world. My whole life was tied up in my high school. All of these different college scouts and college coaches came and recruited me. I had a heck of a time making up my mind where to go at first. Everybody was telling me a different story about his school. There were coaches who came out to my basketball practice. Coaches were in my home all the time. They were calling on the telephone and took a lot of time away from my studies and everything else. So there was a tremendous amount of pressure on me, but I can say that it was the type pressure that I enjoyed in a way because it was nice to know that coaches were interested in me. The only really bad part was the fact that it kept me away from school quite a bit, and I had a hard time making up some of the thing that I missed.

I really feel there is too much pressure on high school seniors. I don't think seniors coming out of high school really are able to take this pressure. They are really gullible, and they tend to believe almost everything these people tell them. There is so much time and money spent on them that they hate to say no

to people. I know this was true in my case. I couldn't say no. People would say, "Are you coming to the University of Missouri?" I would say, "Well, I'm thinking about it." I wouldn't give them a definite yes or no. I would say I was thinking about it when I knew that deep down I wouldn't go. They were spending a lot of money and time on me, and I felt I had an obligation to them. A high school senior really doesn't have an obligation because those people are doing that recruiting on their own. But they spent so much time with me and were spending money taking me out to eat and all kinds of things, so it really did put too much pressure on me. I think this is getting

recruiting is tough in high school

18 out of hand in college football these days. The athletic department expenditures are going up so much every year because they are spending more and more money on recruiting. Of course, there are NCAA rules that they have to abide by, but still there are schools that offer all kinds of things—cars, wardrobes, money every month. While I was being recruited, I had car offers, money offers, all kinds of offers to go to different schools. I can truly say, however, that the University of Oklahoma didn't offer me anything monetary. I think this was one of the reasons I came here because everybody seemed so honest. They weren't just trying to buy football players; they were trying to give you something they thought was good for you—a college education and a chance to play on a good football team.

I do think that all the college officials, the athletic directors, the coaches and everybody involved in the athletic programs in colleges are beginning to worry about recruiting and money spent on recruiting because they go over their budgets every year. Something has to be done about it or the athletic departments are going to go broke.

Of course you have donations from the alumni and other supporters, but costs are rising every day. There are new playing surfaces like Tartan Turf, which is very expensive. Equipment costs are going up. Everything is going up, and the athletic departments can only make so much money from tickets and television games.

There is talk about doing away with scholarships at the universities. I don't think this can or will be done. In my case, I would not have been able to attend college if it had not been for the athletic scholarship. This would be a very big injustice to the football players or prospective football players who would want to come to college and play if they couldn't get a scholarship. I think the football teams would be hurt because not too many players are going to

come out on their own and play if they are not at least going to get a scholarship.

Since I have been in football I know of a few schools that have dropped college football because of the rising costs, schools like the University of Denver and some smaller schools that just couldn't support the cost of playing. They were losing money every year. It's just like a company that keeps losing money and losing money; they finally have to go out of business. This is the way some college football teams have been doing. I don't think this will be a big trend, however. I think there will always be college football because it is such a fantastic sport and a good spectator sport.

I think college football benefits the school. It brings a pride—a state pride, a school pride. There are always going to be people who watch and support football and the other sports—basketball, baseball, tennis, track, wrestling.

In almost every game I played at Owen Field the stands were filled, so I think that gives you some idea of how people support college football.

Oklahoma has a very good wrestling program; we were very good last year in basketball; our tennis is very good. People like to associate with winners, and as long as a team is winning and doing well, any team, there are going to be a lot more people coming out to watch them.

In today's world you can truly say that football is America's favorite sport. Since it is a very rugged game, it represents the way our nation was created. I don't think football should get more attention just because it's football, though. Any good athlete or team that does well should be supported. But there's always action in football whereas maybe in baseball it is a little bit slower, and in basketball, though it is just as quick, there is not as much contact. Football is a contact sport, and it is exciting; there is always something happening. I think this is why people identify with football so much.

At OU there have been a lot of great football teams. Records have been set; there has been a lot of publicity, and the fans put football up as number one. But you can't forget that the tennis team has won the last five Big Eight championships. The track team does very well too. Part of the problem is that football is the only sport that can draw a really large crowd. In basketball 3,000 or 4,000 is about the most you can get into our field house. You can't get too many more on a track field. So, sure, there are going to be more people coming to watch a football game. But I don't think you can put football over the other sports. They are all very important to the athletic program at the University.

Sooner—How does it affect a team when the fans are down on the job they're doing?

Owens—This is something the fans have nothing to say about. They are there to watch the game. They don't understand all the time and effort that has gone into preparing certain plays. I know that when players and coaches receive criticism through the papers and through the fans, it has to hurt you. I can take myself as an example. Last year we were losing, and I was carrying the ball a lot. People were saying, "Don't give

the ball to Steve. He's carrying the ball too much." Well, people didn't understand that this was our game philosophy. They didn't say those things back in 1967 when Ron Shotts and I were carrying the ball almost every other play. They weren't saying it when we went to the Orange Bowl. They weren't saying it the next year when I was carrying the ball so much and we had a winning season and went to the Bluebonnet Bowl. Even my senior year we had a winning season, but we lost some big ball games. I was carrying the ball a lot, and there were things said in the paper that didn't make me feel real good.

People don't seem to understand that guys going out there don't intend to do anything wrong. Coaches don't intend to lose. They don't want to lose. And I think when they hear these fans saying things, booing a player or booing a coach, it bothers them—the players and the coaches. I've heard of instances of people throwing things at the coaches on the sidelines. To me this is very childish. Psychologically I wanted to play even harder when I heard people talking about me. People should realize that nobody wants to do anything bad; nobody wants to go out there and make mistakes; nobody wants to throw incomplete passes or fumble the ball. No coach wants to lose. But we aren't perfect, and sometimes things just don't work out.

Sooner—What kind of relationship is there between a player and a coach, and is there open favoritism for the star player?

Owens—I don't think the coaches give their advice to just one guy. Any athlete with an open mind would never have been turned away by a coach when I was at OU. If they had gone in with questions or had wanted advice, the coaches would have given them the same advice they gave me and done the same things for them.

It has to be a two-way deal. It is always what each individual wants to give of himself. I know our coaches were willing to give everything they had to the athletes. That wasn't always the case with the athletes, though.

I can truly say I learned quite a bit from our coaching staff at OU besides the game of football. I became very good friends with most of them off the field. I knew their families personally, and I think I learned much more, or just as much, off the field as I did on. I learned how to act as a person off the field.

I came from a small town and didn't know how to act in a lot of situations. By talking to Coach Fairbanks and the other coaches on the staff, I learned how to handle myself in public. They taught us things that apply not only on the football field but to life off the field, how to be tough. I won't say they worked with our minds, but they made us think a lot more than we would have if they had just said that this is the way it is. They opened questions up to us through all the meetings and the time we spent with them.

I have gone to a lot of the banquets along with a lot of the coaches, and we developed more than just a professional relationship. We became very good friends, played golf together and things like this, which I think is very important. I respect them not only for being coaches but for being men about it.

*respect for
a coach
who's a man*