



Bill Mease

**“Still a Winner
After All These Years”**

By MARY LYLE WEEKS

It was a brilliant November afternoon in a small Indiana town. A record crowd had jammed into the stadium to watch the legendary home team play a relative newcomer to the elite rank of college football powers. The year was 1952, and the game has been described as one of the greatest ever played.

At the final gun, the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame had defeated the visiting Sooners of Oklahoma, 27-21.

But even in defeat, the Sooners had reached a milestone in this first meeting with Notre Dame. Not only had the team solidified its reputation in big time football, but its star running back had put on a dazzling performance, carrying the ball 17 times, gaining 195 yards and scoring the team's three touchdowns. Later that month the nation's sportswriters and broadcasters would award college football's highest honor, the Heisman Trophy, to this 21-year-old halfback from Cleveland, Oklahoma.

The young man's name was Billy Vessels.

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Southeast Bank N. A. stands on Biscayne Avenue in downtown Miami. The executive dining rooms on the 17th floor offer spectacular views of the skyline and Biscayne Bay. On a hot, muggy July day, a number of business and civic leaders have gathered for lunch.

They comprise the South Florida Coordinating Council, a group formed to articulate its interests and concerns to state leaders. They represent three counties — Dade (Miami area), Broward (Fort Lauderdale) and Palm Beach (the Palm Beaches/Boca Raton). Included are a bank official, a utility executive, a department store administrator, a Chamber of Commerce representative, and a successful businessman in a dark, pinstriped suit. He is vice president for marketing and sales for Frank J. Rooney, Inc., a general contracting firm that will do \$500 million in construction in 1982.

This is Billy Vessels today, moving among the power brokers with as much ease and confidence as once he evaded would-be tacklers on Owen Field.

Vessels readily admits with "an

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unequivocal no!" that he never expected to be among the notables in a large and important city, but he clearly belongs. His opinions are sought, his comments received with respect.

Civic leader William H. Allen Jr., president of Pan American Banks, Inc., says, "no one in this community has a higher standing than Billy.

"There are people with more money and titles. Those who crave recognition. Billy's style is to work behind the scenes. If I want something done in Miami, I go to him. He has the highest integrity, great leadership ability and a magnetic personality. He creates value wherever he goes."

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The luncheon is only one stop in Vessels' busy day, which begins in his comfortable Coral Gables home adjacent to the Riveria County Club. Breakfast is a banana eaten in the kitchen with his wife Suzanne, called Suzie, and a handsome black Labrador retriever, Barron de Santa Maria.

"Billy calls Barron, 'son,'" Suzie confides. "He'll say, 'Son, don't do that.' Now, when the children call home, they'll ask, 'How's our brother?'"

The Vesselses, who began dating at Cleveland High School, have three children. Jane, 27, is a writer for *National Geographic*. Chase, 24, was graduated last summer from Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. Lance, 21, is a junior English major at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

Minutes later, driving to Rooney's Coral Gables office, Vessels recalls a time when he received almost as much publicity as when he won the Heisman.

"It started December 17, 1968, and it meant 83 hours without sleep."

Vessels was assistant to President

Frank Mackle Jr., of Deltona Corporation, a major Florida developer. Mackle's niece Barbara, the daughter of his brother, Robert Mackle, was kidnapped and held for ransom. As the family's representative, Vessels made the money drop.

"It was scary," he says slowly, remembering, "because there was a life on the line. It was tough — wondering where she was, if she was alive. I can't praise the FBI enough — their work, their perseverance. Southeast Bank was the key. They put the money together in such a short period — saved us maybe 12, maybe 24 hours. Critical hours, because I'm convinced he had left her for dead."

When the ransom was dropped, the kidnapper was caught. Directions he gave authorities led them to Barbara Mackle. They found her buried alive in a box in Georgia.

In Vessels' billfold is a remembrance of those 83 hours. On a creased, battered piece of paper are typed the words: *Received of Southeast Bank \$500,000* — the receipt Vessels signed for the ransom money.

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In his office, Vessels returns phone calls. One is an effort to set up a meeting with Swiss investors planning a building in Miami. His job is to make contact with potential customers to get Rooney on their bid lists.

"We believe once we get on the list, we can get their business," Vessels says. "We think that highly of ourselves." Rooney bids on no projects of less than \$10 million. Vessels joined the firm June 1, and Rooney President Jim Tucker says, "We are delighted Billy chose us."

"We've known Billy for years," Tucker continues. "He has all the qualities we want — a reputation as a fine gentleman, dynamic personality, maturity, absolute honesty and integrity. He maintains contact with old



Vessels, visiting "Coach" on the sidelines, remembered Wilkinson's advice when he quit professional football: "When it ceases to be fun, don't play."

customers, finds new ones and represents us in civic and professional activities. He's on our top management team, and we think he's wonderful."

Vessels' next stop is Pan American Bank to see Allen's new offices.

"Billy is a renaissance man," Allen maintains. "A searcher for knowledge, with more street-smarts than anyone I know. A unique individual. Few people could talk to the president of this nation *and* to a stevedore, but Billy can."

After lunch, Vessels drives to the Miami Jai Alai Fronton to see a \$1.2 million improvement project. He is in his sixth year on Florida's Pari-Mutuel Commission, which regulates horse and dog racing and Jai Alai, an extremely fast Basque court game popular in Florida. Vessels tours the new club area financed by a capital improvement program administered by the commission.

Now Vessels heads north on I-95 to Rooney headquarters in Fort Lauderdale. As he drives, he expresses concern for growing divisions in the nation.

"We're getting all these conflicts — young vs. old, whites vs. blacks, and haves vs. have-nots. That last one is a

big problem — the gap is widening."

When John F. Kennedy ran for president, Vessels took a leave of absence to assist Senator George Smathers in working 13 southern states for Kennedy.

"George Smathers is a great man," Vessels says. "Wonderful to work with. Another brilliant man I was fortunate to know is Stuart Symington, who should have been president. I traveled with him on occasion, and in '73 went to Israel with him and met Golda Meir. I'll never forget that."

Today, he believes, the man best qualified to be president is George Bush.

"He's neither to the right nor the left," Vessels explains. "A brilliant man — loves people. It will be criminal if he's never president."

Vessels himself never has considered public office.

"I'm too opinionated," he says with a grin.

The atmosphere in the Rooney offices is euphoric. Rooney has won the contract to construct the Central Services Facility for Dade County. The bid of \$15.7 million was low by less than two percent. Vessels smiles with satisfaction.

"With the Federal Courthouse

we're building, and the Convention Center, that gives us \$95 million in construction in a three-block area in downtown."

The final stop of the day is to be Calder Race Course. As he drives through Broward County, Vessels recalls his playing days at OU.

"I grew up thinking I would go to Oklahoma State," he says. "Bob Kurland (the nation's first seven-foot basketball player) and Bob Fenimore (the All-America football player) were my idols — still are. Then my sophomore year, Bob Breeden (Cleveland newspaper publisher) started taking me to OU games. I started thinking about the University."

The deciding factor for Vessels was the OU coach, Bud Wilkinson.

"I came for Visitor's Day — sat on the sidelines. One of the greatest games ever, with Missouri — Bill Stearns broadcast it. Missouri was highly favored, and OU won 41-7. A big occasion. The next morning I spent with Bud — going over movies — talking. After that, there was no doubt where I was going. He was that impressive. Just unbelievable."

Vessels says, in matter-of-fact tones that do not conceal deep feelings, "Attending the University and



Vessels, right, with daughter Jane, took a leave to work in John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign.

playing for Coach had the most influence on my life.”

His life was unusual before he came to OU. When he was 14, his family moved to Oklahoma City. He stayed in Cleveland. One reason was a trouble-prone older brother; Vessels didn't want to live around him. The other reason was simply that he didn't want to leave Cleveland.

“Billy was raised by a town,” Suzie says. “He washed cars — did odd jobs — the town paid his bills. You have to understand — this little town of Cleveland was a wonderful place, a special place.”

Early in his OU career, Vessels was rumored to be a rowdy. After a sensational sophomore year, more rumors claimed what is often said of successful athletes — that he thought he was the whole team. If he did, he learned that was not so. In the Texas game in his junior year, he got hit on the knee. He was out for the season.

“A nightmare,” he says with a grimace. “The low point in my life. You think you really matter and then . . .” His voice trails off, and he smiles. “So a freshman — Buddy Leake — takes my place — scores four touchdowns in one game. You think you can't be replaced, and a week later, you're forgotten.”

Vessels keeps a poem as a reminder. It advises:

*Take a bucket and fill it with water,
Stick your hand in it, up to the wrist,*

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George Valcaroe

*Billy and Suzy walk from their home
to the nearby Riveria Country Club.*

*Pull it out, and the hole that remains
Is a measure of how much you'll be
missed.*

A strong influence on Vessels was an Oklahoma City couple, Dr. Charles R. and Kitty Shanklin Roun-

tree. Vessels was counselor to their son, Charley, at a Minnesota camp the summer before his freshman year.

“That's how we got away from Oklahoma State,” he says with a laugh. “Coach got me this job way back in the woods, and they couldn't find me. Anyway, Kitty Rountree believed in the University first — football second. That's when I began developing my love for the University, and I am so appreciative of what it did for me.

“The Rountrees gave me stability just by being around me. Kitty taught me good manners. How to conduct myself in public. Things most people would learn at home. Once, she wouldn't let me go out with the sister of Jean Walker (wife of OU Athletic Director Wade Walker), who was good-looking. Said I had to study instead. One spring, I had a case of the shorts and applied for a Lew Wentz loan. Kitty was on the board and turned me down, saying, ‘That is not the intent of the foundation.’”

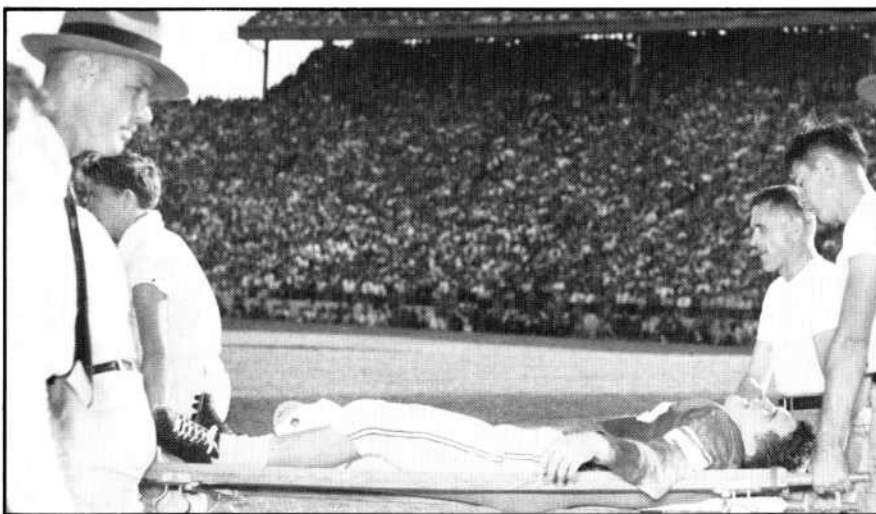
Vessels says he got out of sports until 1972 when he went on the Orange Bowl Advisory Board. Now he has mixed feelings about college sports fund raising.

“You hate to see — like at OU — people who supported you for years moved out of their seats because now you have to pay a premium. But the combination of Title 9 (women's sports funding) and inflation means you have to ride that fund raising roller coaster. I think it will hurt in the long run.”

Vessels, who was sought by at least seven colleges, believes recruiting is 80 percent of success, adding, “I don't see great alarms in college football today. Couple of years ago, I thought it was pretty close (to problems), but now everybody has tried to clean up their act.”

He believes the biggest problem in football is little league.

“If I had a son coming on now, I don't think I'd let him play little league — the way they're coaching young players. I'd start him at about 12 (the age Vessels started) because it's so intensified. You burn out unless you're a very, very gifted athlete and know you're going to play in college and go on to pro ball. The little league is where I see the most danger.



A worried Wilkinson watches his star halfback being carried off the field at the 1951 OU-Texas game with an injury that would cost Vessels his junior year. Billy still remembers the incident as the low point in his life.

"One thing Coach Wilkinson always said on first day of practice every year, 'Remember, when it ceases to be fun, don't play.' We had more fun in practice than most people did in a game. It was great playing for him — I'm so indebted to him."

Although the 1950 team won the national championship, OU's first, Vessels believes the 1952 team was the best he played on.

"We had Buck (McPhail) — Eddie (Crowder) — Tom Catlin — three of the best ever. And Jim Davis, a very good friend of mine. He played tackle, and I played right behind him. He did so much for me and was hardly ever mentioned. A great person."

Vessels says he would not have won the Heisman had he gone to Oklahoma State.

"No." He shakes his head. "Because I wouldn't have played with all those guys — Claude Arnold and Dick Ellis — Tommy Gray and Wade. Fine people — great athletes. I wouldn't have played Texas or Notre Dame. But the main thing is all those guys who made me look good." He grins. "Someone once asked, 'Aren't you sorry you didn't go to Oklahoma State?'" Vessels' answer? "I laughed."

Vessels played in 1953 with the Edmonton Eskimos and was named outstanding player in Canada. In 1954 he entered the Army and was Army Player of the Year. He signed in 1956 with the Baltimore Colts for a bonus "parsimonious by today's standards" and played only one year. A teammate was Don Shula, now coach of the Miami Dolphins and a golf partner of Vessels, who says that Shula is "the only genuine celebrity in Miami." Vessels left pro ball because he remembered Bud Wilkinson's advice.

"I just didn't enjoy it anymore," he says simply. "I knew halfway through the season — this isn't for me."

He wonders about today's pros — strike threats and increasing money demands.

"I feel like — well, a guy gave me an axiom when I started playing golf." He turns the car toward Calder. "Never let the money be more important than the game.' But the money is all-powerful now. I think it's ludi-

crous. If I were playing, maybe I would support it, but I'm not. I don't like it at all."

At Calder, Vessels goes to the paddock to meet his friend, Kenny Noe Jr., president and general manager of the course. Noe is a substitute steward, so Vessels watches the last three races from the stewards' box high above the track. He and Noe discuss various horses. Vessels is considered somewhat of an expert on horse breeding and once was in the business. After the last race, Vessels and Noe go to a lower level of the grandstand to the Turf Club.

Obviously this is a gathering place for the cosmopolitan and affluent.

Here too, the Cleveland, Oklahoma, native clearly belongs.

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The next afternoon, Vessels meets two friends for golf at exclusive Indian Creek Country Club. Located on a man-made island in the bay, its single bridge is guarded. Only residents, club members and guests may enter. Homes here are in the \$1 million range, and one recently sold for \$3 million.

Friendly criticism and quick praise during the round evidence the warmth and camaraderie between Vessels and his friends — Dr. Wayne Martin, a surgeon, and Dr. James F. Gallagher, an obstetrician/gynecologist.

Gallagher is eager to discuss Vessels.

"He's one of the outstanding achievers and personalities — extremely well thought of. Really bright — fun to be around. Moves so easily in so many different circles. He's one of the most fascinating human beings I have ever encountered. A beautiful person."

Martin speaks of Vessels' loyalty to his friends.

"I was being sued for malpractice (he was found innocent) and was really upset. Billy came by every night, without fail. I really didn't want to see him at first — I was going through things, locating material for my defense. But he'd come, stay about 15 minutes. Just to let me know he cared and knew what I was going through." Martin nods slowly. "I can't say enough about Billy. It makes me

feel good just to be around him."

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On a July night, Billy and Suzie relax in their small den. Atop a TV set in the corner sits the bronze Heisman Trophy.

"I didn't know what it meant when Harold Keith (former OU sports information director) told me I'd won. It wasn't until I was in New York the next week that I realized its impact.

"It's a shame only one lineman has won. Some were good enough. Hugh Green from Pittsburgh. Greg Roberts (OU 1978 Outland Trophy winner) — Greg was that good. I'd like to see them upgrade the Outland to a comparable level."

Vessels reminisces about his days at OU. "I got interested in art when I began buying Indian prints in the Oklahoma Memorial Union Book Store. Last summer, Suzie and I went to France to visit Monet's home (Claude Monet, impressionist painter). He's one of our favorites. That's what I'd like to own — a Monet." He grins. "That and a ranch up in the Osage country in Oklahoma."

He recalls an early decision.

"It's been my policy since I was 10. I decided I would associate with people smarter than I am. You learn so much, and they are so interesting."

Would he change things if he could live over his 51 years?

"Nothing," he says without hesitation. "Not one thing."

He looks at the Heisman, the reminder of the football days. Wilkinson, still called "Coach" and never "Bud." The friends. The heartbreak of the lost junior year and the Notre Dame defeat. All the remarkable performances and victories, culminating at a podium in a New York City ballroom.

"What the Heisman did," he says slowly, "was to give me opportunities. It was up to me to take advantage of them."

He has done that. He has achieved status and success and along the way, — probably more important to him — he has made hundreds, maybe thousands, of friends. He received the Heisman Trophy because even in a losing effort, he was a winner.

Thirty years later, Billy Vessels is still a winner. 