

The game was the last of its kind in America. It all began on an April night in 1949 in Oklahoma City's Taft Stadium with 8,000 fans present. One of the touch-down passes that evening was thrown by a Sooner halfback named Charles Sarratt, who in 1983 would be named to OU's Board of Regents.

Although no one knew it at the time, the tradition died on a windy, chilly afternoon in Oklahoma Memorial Stadium in 1982. As time ran out under overcast skies, 13,000 fans watched as quarterback Jim Rockford was sacked for a 10-yard loss.

The curtain had come down; OU's legendary Varsity-Alumni game had closed after a 34-year run.

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One reason for the game's demise was economic — the increasingly higher expense of bringing alumni players back for the game. A second was the NCAA scholarship limit which has reduced the size of varsity squads making it impossible to loan players to the Alumni, a practice begun in the first game.

But the deciding factor was the shrinking pool of available alumni talent. A number of OU players are drafted each year by the National and Canadian Football Leagues — 25 currently on NFL rosters alone — and pro teams are reluctant to risk their money players in non-league games.

The death knell was sounded by the formation of the United States Football League, whose winter-spring season overlaps OU's spring practice when the game would have been played. Eight former Sooners were tapped by the New Jersey Generals, coached by former OU Head Coach

Chuck Fairbanks. Their absence was the final blow.

"No one hates to see the end come more than the Athletic Department," says Director Wade Walker. "I'm very saddened. It was a great week for our alumni — kept our former players unified. I hope we can keep these traditions alive with our new plans."

These plans, put into effect this spring, were for an Alumni Weekend including a Thursday night stag party at which varsity seniors were "initiated" into alumni ranks, a golf tournament, and a Saturday night dinner-dance. The Varsity-Alumni game itself was replaced by a Red and White Intra-Squad game.

OU Head Coach Barry Switzer believes the intra-squad game is more

valuable to the team in terms of evaluating personnel.

"No question about it," he says. "We get to play more people. Plus working against the defenses we'll face during the season. The alums played garbage defense — all that stunting and blitzing."

Yet Switzer regrets the loss of the week when former greats and not-so-greats gathered to practice and party and reminisce.

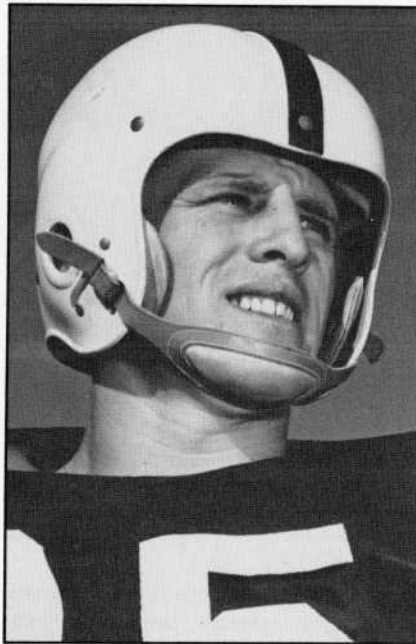
"I've always thought that was one of the most enjoyable weeks of the football program, topped only by the week we beat Texas. All the guys you've heard about come back — that great Thursday night stag party — a fun week."

The 1974 game, Switzer's first as head coach, is the one he remembers best. The game ended 10-10 when Tony DiRienzo kicked a 55-yard field goal for the Varsity. Earlier, taking pity on the old grads, Switzer had let DiRienzo cross the field to kick a 40-yarder for the Alumni. The Brazilian native was given the Wilkinson Trophy as the game's outstanding back. Afterward, Switzer laughingly threatened to have him deported.

"We won the national championship that year," Switzer recalls. "The only game we didn't win was Varsity-Alumni because I gave them Tony."

The players who stand out in Switzer's mind are Bob Harrison, All-America and UPI Lineman of the Year in 1958, who played in 25 of the spring classics, and two of the players Switzer coached.

"Greg Pruitt and Derland Moore," he adds promptly. "The pros said they couldn't play, but they came back and played anyway because they liked it."



During his 12 professional years, former OU great Tommy McDonald managed to play in all but two Varsity/Alumni games in Norman.

The Varsity/Alumni Game

Thanks for the Memories

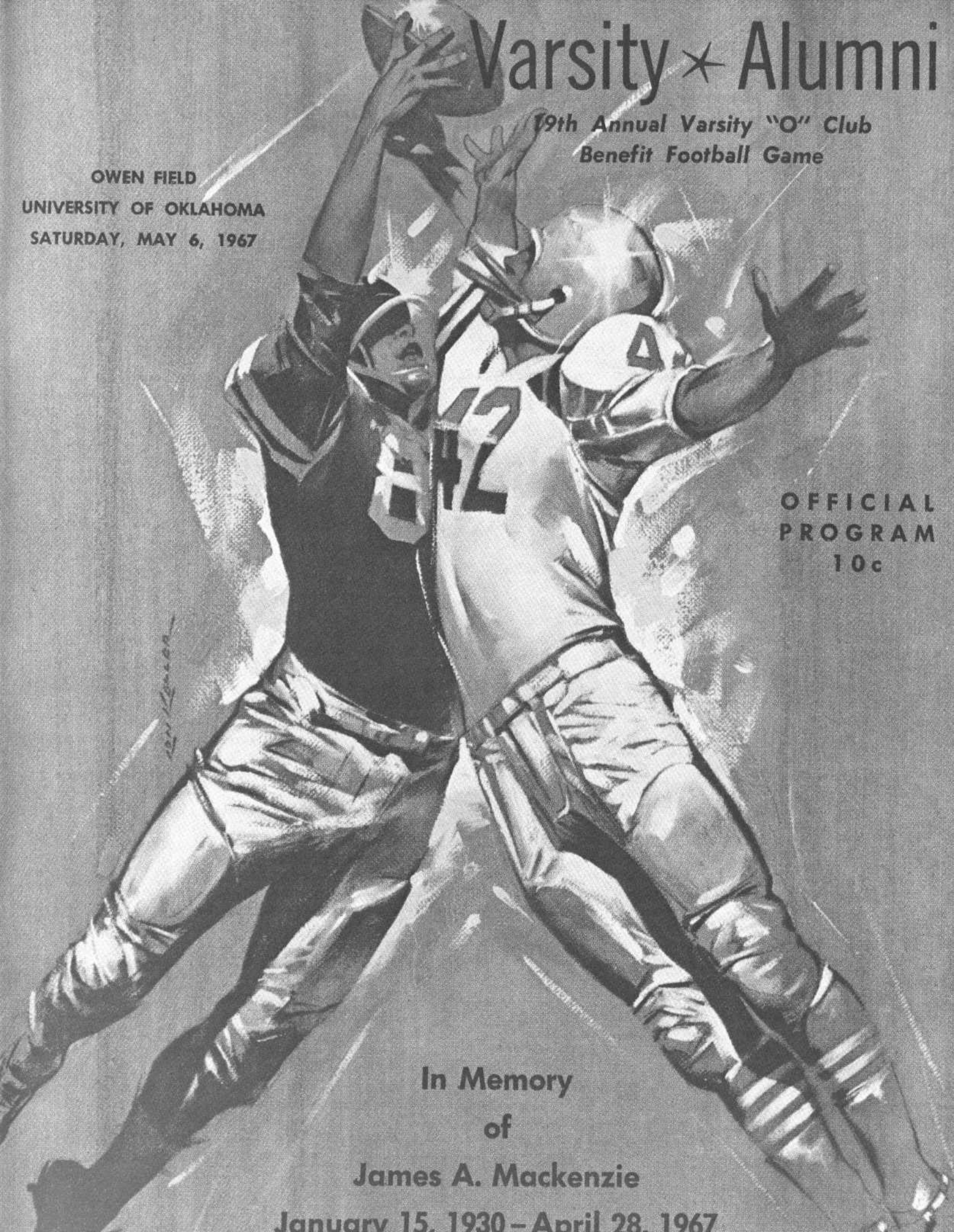
By MARY LYLE WEEKS

Varsity * Alumni

19th Annual Varsity "O" Club
Benefit Football Game

OWEN FIELD
UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
SATURDAY, MAY 6, 1967

OFFICIAL
PROGRAM
10c



In Memory
of
James A. Mackenzie
January 15, 1930 - April 28, 1967



The legendary Greg Pruitt promised the Cleveland Browns "never to get involved in anything physical" in order to join the Alumni squad as a wide receiver.

Then I remember Ron Fletcher and his white head gear." Switzer laughs. "One year I let a doctor from Clinton — friend of Ron's — middle-aged or older — I let him wear an Alumni uniform and cover a kickoff — he was thrilled. One time, Rod Pegues was returning a kickoff, and Billy Sims runs on the field — in street clothes — breaking down like he was going to tackle him."

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The game Fairbanks recalls was his first in 1966.

"We played in a torrential down-pour. It was a close game. We were just happy to win. The Alumni had a lot of good, tough, hard players."

The final score was 7-0, and the game included one bizarre play. Varsity end Ben Hart ran 29 yards on a double reverse and appeared headed for a touchdown when one Alumni defender knocked him into another. The play, however, cost the Alumni 15 yards because the first defender was not in the game. He had come off the bench to hit Hart.

Through the years some of the officiating, performed by alumni, had been questionable. More than once an Alumni goal line stand had involved 12 or even 13 players.

In 1979 when the scoreboard wouldn't work, time was kept on the field by an official. The second half was about half as long as the first and ended, conveniently, just as the Alumni tied the score 31-31. The old grads' final scoring came after they "recovered" a fumble, scored on a touchdown pass with more than 11 players, and passed for a two-point conversion on what the alumni time-keeper said was the game's final play.

"We was robbed," said Switzer, laughing, after the game.

Fairbanks also remembers the 1970 game.

"No particular plays stand out, but we had a young team and were trying to run the veer offense. That game was the first indication to me that maybe I was making a mistake trying to run it." After a shaky season start, the Sooners switched to the wishbone a week before the Texas game. Texas won 41-9, but it was the dawn of some OU glory years.

Although both the veer and the wishbone are triple-option offenses, Fairbanks explains that there is a major difference.

"The veer requires you to have the ability to be an effective passer. We found we didn't have that ability.

When we made the change (to the wishbone), our quarterback, Jack Mildren, wasn't very happy. But after he got involved in the wishbone, he did a fabulous job. It was like having a coach on the field."

Fairbanks expresses sadness that the game will no longer be played.

"This is the first time it's come to my attention that our league (the USFL) was a factor in the game's end," he says. "It's unfortunate that we've interrupted it. But we are offering a number of men the opportunity to play pro ball — and also providing other people with jobs."

Bud Wilkinson, now chairman of the board of Public Employees Benefit Services Corp. in St. Louis, was OU's head coach when the game began. He finds the demise of the game sad but not surprising.

"The whole world is a different place now than when it began," he says. "We had one-platoon football then — the pro game was not as popular — there were no agents in the athletic world.

"The value of the game was the continuity and camaraderie it provided. Tradition is difficult to develop but remains vitally important still."

Wilkinson's Varsity team victory in 1949, 14-13 in the closest win ever, was the only Varsity win until 1957. The pro-laden Alumni teams consistently outmanned collegians. Introductions for the 1952 game included four active and seven recently retired pros.

"The thing I remember about my first game," says Louisiana oilman Jimmy Harris, quarterback from 1954 to 1956, "is pure fear. I'm lined up to take my first snap and there, across from my center, is J. D. Roberts (1953 Outland Trophy winner; AP and UPI Lineman of the Year). I'll tell you, walking into the Cotton Bowl to play Texas the first time was nothing after lining up across from J.D."

Harris, who played in the game for 10 years and was an Alumni coach for 16, says the friends he has made mean the most.

"I've been fortunate to get to know the younger guys — and the older ones — through the week back on campus. We're a closely knit group.



Owens brothers, Tinker and Steve, wear Sooner red for the Alumni.

Sometimes it was a sacrifice to take a week out of your life — but we all came back because of what OU means and what it's done for us. I'm extremely proud that OU's game lasted the longest. That's because of the type alumni we have."

The player Harris thinks of first is Harrison. He also recalls an incident on the sidelines in a recent game.

"Jack Santee (former OU Regent) and I were on the sidelines. And these big guys start coming right at us. I moved fast, trying to get out of the way. Jack was behind me, and I knocked him to the ground — just decked him."

Harris also provided a sketchy explanation of the "initiation" of seniors.

"It's called Cardinal Puff. They have to pass a — well, call it a 'ritual'. If they don't, they have to pay the consequences."

Santee remembers two aspects of the game.

"What stands out," he says, "are the four games I played in — and the Thursday night stag parties." Santee, a Tulsa attorney who served as an Alumni coach for several years, says it has become increasingly difficult to field an Alumni team. "But over the

years," he adds, "it certainly has been a unique experience for all of us involved."

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The Varsity's second win, 20-13, in 1957, was followed by four more Alumni wins. But the game was changing. From 1962 to 1982, the Alumni won only twice and achieved two ties.

In 1960, the "O" Club, sponsor of the game, began dedicating the game to the Alumni team of 10 years earlier, honoring both the 1949 and 1950 teams in that first year. The first game dedicated to an individual was in 1956, honoring early Sooner coach Ben G. Owen — "Oklahoma's Grand Man of Football."

Other dedicated games were 1957 to W. J. "Bill" Cross, OU quarterback in 1904-07; 1967 to the late Jim Mackenzie, head coach who had died only six days earlier; 1969 to long-time Sports Information Director Harold Keith; 1971 in memory of the late Gomer Jones, former head coach and athletic director; 1978 in memory of the late Morris Tennenbaum, "Keeper of the Gate," who had guarded the OU dressing room door and supplied the players with chewing gum; and 1979 in memory of the late Ken Rawlinson, head trainer for many years.

Crowds reached a peak in the early 1970s when as many as 28,000 attended. The highest scoring game came in this period, a 56-40 Varsity victory in 1972. But the star of that game was Alumni quarterback Ron Fletcher with a record-setting 297 yards passing. Fletcher, who never earned a football letter at OU, was voted the Wilkinson Trophy for the game.

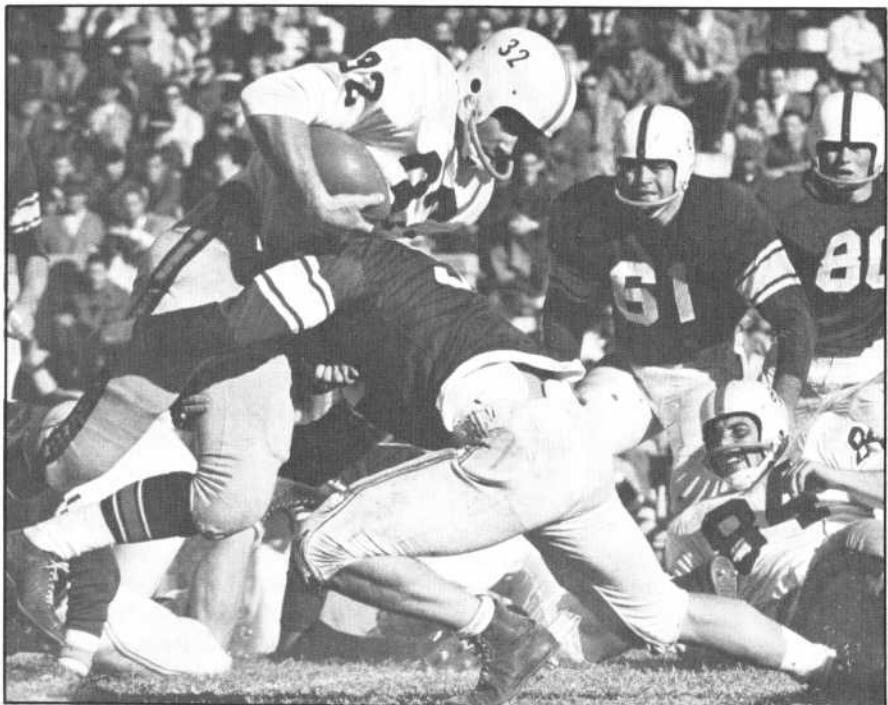
Surprisingly, one of OU's truly greats, Greg Pruitt, never won the Wilkinson Trophy. Now with the Los Angeles Raiders after nine years with the Cleveland Browns, Pruitt has returned all but one year to play in the game despite his pro status.

"I'm very disappointed the game is over," he says. "Playing in it was a dream come true. You see, as a running back, I have to wear all this armament, and I always envied the wide receivers — they don't have to wear pads. So to come back and play as a receiver was great fun."

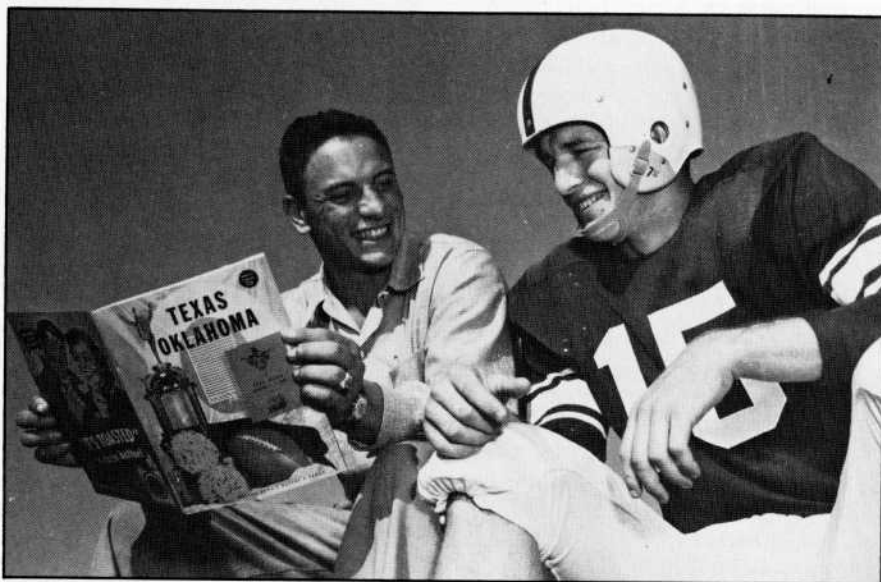
Pruitt gained permission to play by assuring the Browns he "would never get involved in anything physical."

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The most trophies won in the series were five Gomer Jones Trophies as the game's outstanding lineman by



Tackles like this made Bob Harrison a man to be feared in the annual Varsity/Alumni clash long after his college and professional days were over.



Quarterback Jimmy Harris, right, compares notes with predecessor Gene Calme.

Jim Weatherall, all as an alumnus. Close behind with four Wilkinson Trophies is Tommy McDonald, now the owner of a successful portrait studio in Pennsylvania. He is one of two players (the other is Dean Blewins) to win as both a Varsity (once) and Alumni (three times) player.

McDonald says learning that the game has been discontinued "just took the wind out of my sails.

"It was a great tradition," he continues. "Returning brought back so many memories — my experience at OU was just unbelievable. During my three years, we didn't lose a game and won two national championships. I was in the right place at the right time. I'll always appreciate those guys who blocked for me and made me look good."

During his 12 years as a pro with the Philadelphia Eagles and four other teams, McDonald missed only two Varsity-Alumni games.

"The first two years, the Eagles didn't give me any static. After that, it was a little harder to get permission to play."

The friendships and the contacts were the most important aspects of the game to Houston oilman Jackie Sandefer, a late '50s running back.

"Because of the Varsity-Alumni game, there are very few former players — from the mid-1940s right up to today — whom I haven't met," he says. "There are very few other

schools where any one person could say that."

Sandefer's first game was a bit inauspicious.

"It was my freshman year. I was back to receive a punt from the Alumni. I fumbled it — it goes into the end zone — and they score a touchdown. So I'm walking off the field — they're playing "Boomer Sooner" — only for the wrong team!"

Heisman Trophy winner Steve Owens recalls the fierce hitting.

"I was carrying the ball headed north, and Wes Skidgel hit me so hard — when I opened my eyes, I was pointed back south." Owens, who played for the Alumni after retirement from the Detroit Lions, remembers his freshman year. "Here I was, actually carrying the ball, playing against guys I had watched when I was in high school. Believe me, I felt fear."

Later, playing for the Alumni provided satisfaction for Owens. "It was nice to know that even though you're over the hill, you can still play."

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Harrison is the game's most legendary player.

"I feel honored that people said they think of me first when they think of the game," he says. Now a rancher in Stamford, Texas, he well remembers his first game as a Varsity player.

"Lining up across from all those

pros — that was something. There was Jim Weatherall — Stan West.

"West like to beat my head off. It sure helped you grow up."

Beginning as the #2 draft choice of the San Francisco 49ers, Harrison was a pro nine years, six with the 49ers, then with the Eagles and the Pittsburgh Steelers. His bonus was \$15,000, and his first contract for \$9,000.

"After I retired from the pros, the Varsity-Alumni game was the only chance I got to play again. The game made you feel good. I finally had to quit — my mind said go but my feet said no."

The player Harrison thinks of first is Pruitt.

"He didn't have to show up and play, but he always did."

Harrison came back for the first Alumni Weekend, jokingly defining his role as someone to "caddy and drink beer." But there is a note of sadness in his voice as he comments on the end of the era.

"I feel like a member of the family has passed on."

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In 1960, Oklahoma City sportswriter Volney Meece wrote his "So They Tell Me" column prior to the 12th Varsity-Alumni game, enumerating the Who's Who of OU Football who had appeared in the series: Cactus Face Duggan. Joe Golding. Dee Andros and Jack Mitchell and Darrell Royal. Junior Thomas and Leon "Mule Train" Heath. Eddie Crowder. Billy Vessels. Jack Jacobs and Jack Ging and Buck McPhail. Bob Bodenhamer and Carl Dodd. Jerry Tubbs. Clendon Thomas.

Since then there have been other names. Ralph Neely and Joe Washington and Reggie Kinlaw. Billy Sims. Tom Brahaney and Kenny King. Three Selmons. John Carroll and Bobby Warmack and Steve Zabel.

Meece concluded his column with these words:

The cast changes; the show goes on.

It goes on no longer.

After a record run, after giving players and fans hundreds of memories, after helping to create the great tradition that is OU Football, it is no more.

The show has closed.

