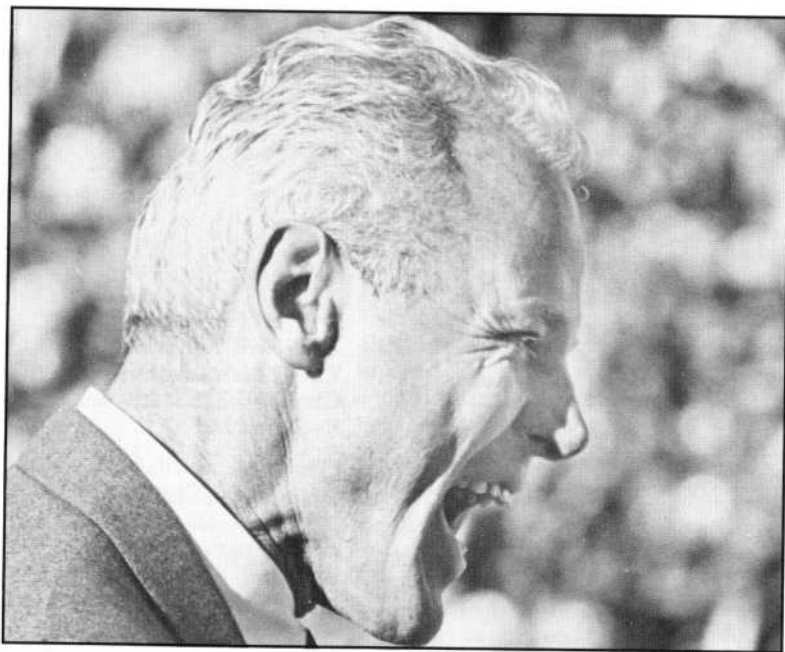


THE SOONERS OF '56

a glimpse at a new book
on the Wilkinson era at Oklahoma

By HAROLD KEITH

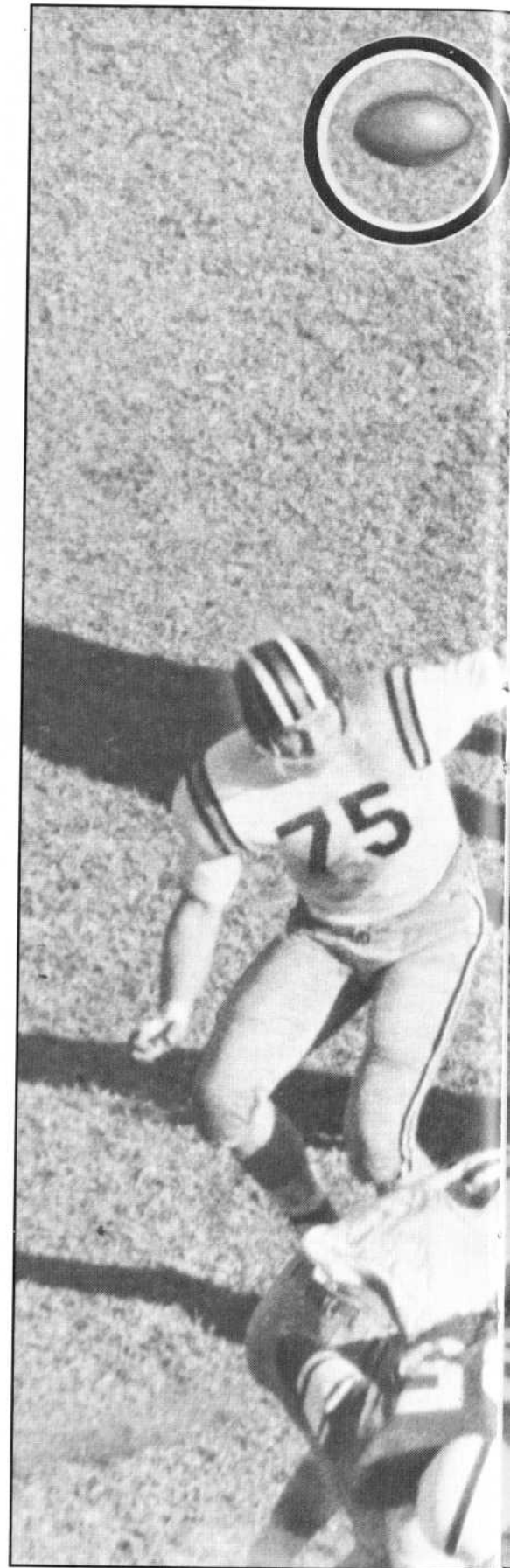


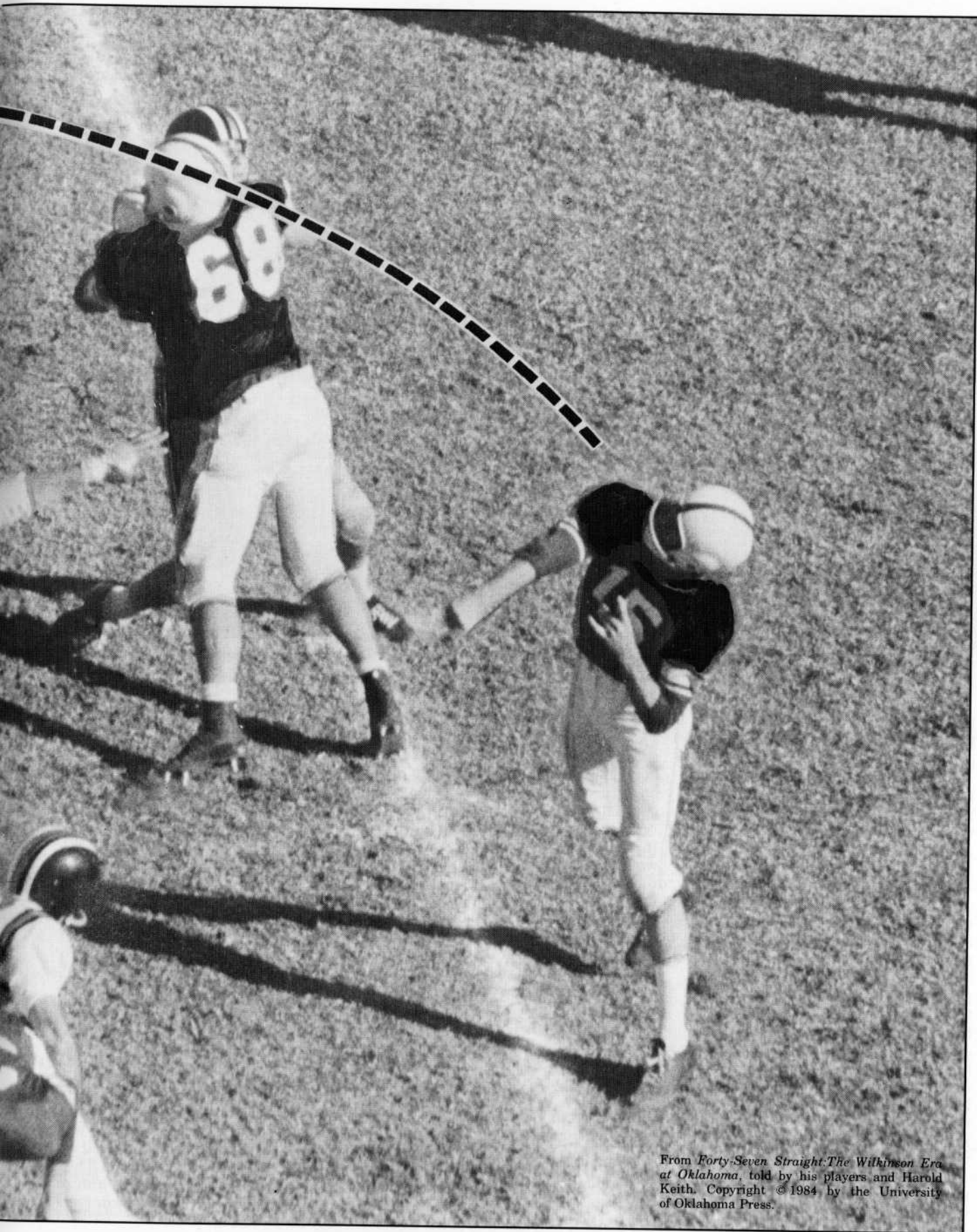
Slimmed by summer running and dieting, Oklahoma's defending national champions scrimmaged on the second morning of fall practice as they began drills for the opening game of 1956 against Coach Jim Tatum's North Carolina Tar Heels at Norman. Tatum had switched from Maryland back to Carolina, where he had coached in 1942.

Led by co-captains Jerry Tubbs and Ed Gray, the Sooners reported for duty nearly six pounds lighter per man than they had been in spring practice. Oklahoma kept most of its 1955 talent and drew a fair number of sophomores besides.

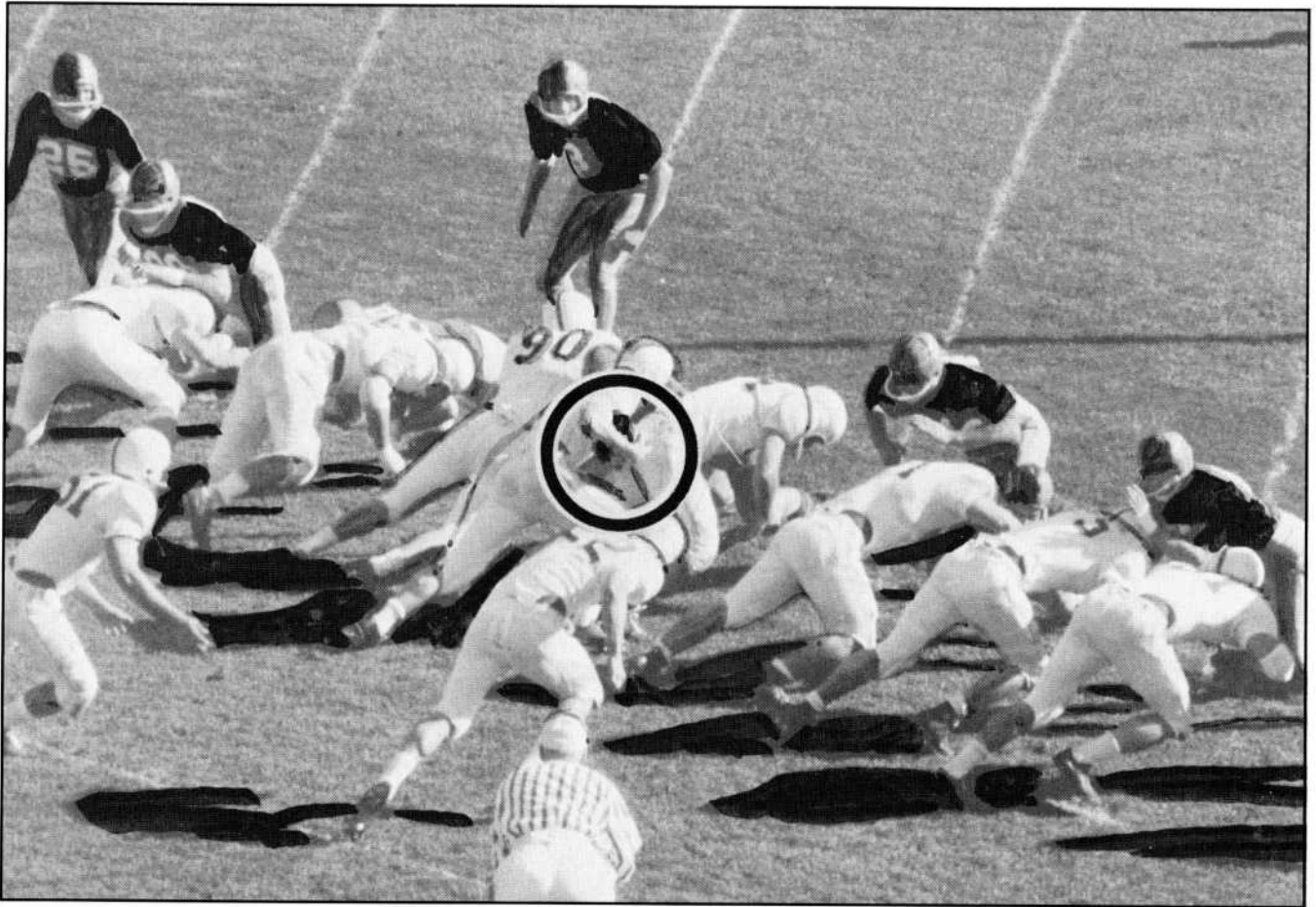
"I hope everybody tries as hard this year as last," Wilkinson said. "Last year we had great effort. We went after everybody

Newspaper retouchers of the '50s made certain that Sooner faithful didn't lose sight of their heroes or the ball in photos of big moments such as this long pass from Jimmy Harris to Don Stiller against Missouri.





From *Forty-Seven Straight: The Wilkinson Era at Oklahoma*, told by his players and Harold Keith. Copyright © 1984 by the University of Oklahoma Press.



The Oklahoma alternate line charges to block the way for quarterback Jay O'Neal's touchdown against Notre Dame in 1956.

hard. However, very few people try as hard to stay good as they do to get good."

The Sooners assimilated that challenge just as they did their daily training routine. They were awakened in three waves, at 5:30, 5:40, and 5:50 a.m. Clad in pajamas and jeans and yawning, they walked across the street to the stadium and drank a juice consisting of two parts of frozen grape to one of lime. Trainer Ken Rawlinson said that concoction stayed down better than anything else.

Scheduled early to avoid the 90-degree heat, the morning workout lasted from 6:30 to 8:30, after which the Sooners showered and trooped back to Jeff dining room for breakfast, a two-hour nap, and group instruction meetings with various coaches in the fieldhouse. After lunch was served, with sherbet for dessert, came the afternoon nap, more meetings, and the afternoon workout from 4 to 6.

Midway in both morning and afternoon practices all activity was halted while student managers distributed cartons of frosted orange quarters that

had lain all night in the deep freeze. The hot players went for those. There was no water on the field. If it was dusty, an astringent was brought out, and practice halted while the players gargled.

After dinner the men had free time. If the night was hot, they sometimes went to a movie theater and dozed in the air conditioning. There was an inflexible rule that they must be in bed with the lights out at 10:30 p.m., but the coaches made no bed check. They didn't have to. "We disciplined ourselves," says guard Buddy Oujesky. "A strong closeness existed among us."

Would Oklahoma fast-break again in 1956, the press asked Wilkinson. "Very probably," Bud replied. "It's a system that succeeds because it creates a tempo the defense isn't accustomed to. To combat it, the defense must learn to use fewer defenses and call them faster. Any time you can play a game at your own tempo, it's to your advantage."

As the Burris brothers had proved, farm work was excellent for developing football players. One of the sopho-

mores that fall was Bob Harrison of Stamford, Texas, whose father lived in town but farmed 1,000 acres, chiefly row crops like cotton and maize. Harrison drove a tractor, chopped cotton and pulled bolls. Stamford always had a good team.

"During my last three years they finished 14-1, 12-1, and 9-1. After they got rid of me, they won 35 straight," Harrison chuckles.

The sophomore who got kidded the most was swarthy little Jefferson Davis Sandefer III of Breckenridge, Texas. "Lots of yes, sirs, in a name like that," he remembers. "Always had a lot of nicknames," he went on. "Don't want to repeat some of them."

The Sooners called him Jakie. His dad was J. D. Sandefer Jr., a wealthy Breckenridge oil operator. The only trouble with that was the Sooners never let Jakie forget it. The first thing he did as a sophomore was sprain his ankle. "They said I fell off my purse and hurt it," he recalls. They made a great show of urging him to persuade his father "to buy the university so we can all pass."

“Clendon would be going full speed after the first two steps. He was easy to hand off to. I always knew exactly where he'd be . . . Tommy's strong point was enthusiasm. He was a bit of a showman, and the people loved it. He was smart, and he could hit.”

Young Sandefer took all the well-meant jesting in stride. Usually he just grinned and went along with the gag. Occasionally he would originate some of it. Like the recession. Everyone was talking about it. “If it doesn't slacken off, I'm gonna have to let my old man go,” he told the team. He was highly respected by the Oklahoma players.

Brewster Hobby, a freshman from Midwest City, had his mind set on becoming a major-league baseball player. With his father he was planning a visit to a professional club when Wilkinson and Sam Lyle, Bud's assistant, showed up at the Hobby residence to have breakfast with the family.

“Bud sold me, strongly and sincerely, on the importance of getting a good education,” Hobby recalls. “He said I could play baseball at OU, and I did.”

Hobby recalls his first contact with Port Robertson.¹ “When he walked up behind you and cleared his throat, a gentle little scratchy sound, you knew you were in trouble,” says Hobby.

When Hobby missed a week of classes while recuperating in an Oklahoma City hospital after surgery for removal of a calcium deposit, he forgot to get a dismissal slip from the surgeon. Robertson made him go back to Oklahoma City for the slip. When you missed a week of classes, you had to give Port a reason.

The 1956 backfield had one change. Robert Burris had graduated at right half. Clendon Thomas, who had played left half for the alternates, was moved into Burris' spot. “At first it was awkward trying to run and throw going to my left,” Thomas says. “Also learning the corner position on defense. But it got a little easier with each game.”

Thomas and Tommy McDonald made a great pair of halfbacks. Let's let quarterback Jimmy Harris describe each. “Clendon ran with a long stride. He'd be going full speed after

the first two steps. He kept his head up and hit the open hole as well as anybody I ever saw. He was easy to hand off to. I always knew exactly where he'd be. He was a fine defensive back too.

“Tommy's strong point was enthusiasm. He had more desire than anybody I ever saw. He was a bit of a showman, and the people loved it. He could jump and catch the ball, and he could throw it. He was smart, and he could hit. He could have played defensive back with the pros. He was an excellent player.”

After the Orange Bowl game Pricer again had surgery on both knees and then rejoined the team. He is believed to have submitted to more knee operations — seven — than any other Sooner player in history. His powers of recuperation were remarkable.

Joe Rector, a Muskogee sophomore, learned right off about Wilkinson's meticulous preparation for each game. “He was so organized,” Rector remembers, “that we'd play the game back and forth 10 times before the actual kickoff. Once it started, we could have played it blindfolded. This gave us lots of confidence. I always knew exactly what I was supposed to do on every situation. It was automatic.”

The North Carolina opener was notable because the Sooners were aiming for a new record of 31 straight victories, tying that of Bud's 1948-50 teams. How many schools have had coaches who twice directed their teams to 31-game winning skeins?

Oklahoma's problem was casualties at left halfback (McDonald, hyper-extended knee; Jackie Sandefer, ankle twist). Otherwise the Sooners were ready.

Tatum's Tar Heels, like nearly every opponent Oklahoma met, came after the Sooners hard. But the Sooners quickly put the game away. Billy Pricer's 78-yard quick kick set up the first touchdown. Clendon Thomas' deft handling of an intercepted pass, which he lateraled to McDonald for 40

more yards, introduced the second. With only 44 seconds left in the first half, Jimmy Harris saw McDonald streaking for the end zone with the Tar Heels in hot pursuit. Like a smooth roper whose hemp flows freely through the loop, Harris shot the pass in a long beeline, and McDonald snared it. Pricer kicked goal. Wilkinson used 59 players. Oklahoma won 36-0.

In the most unusual double injury in Sooner football history, both tackle Wayne Greenlee and guard Ken Northcutt broke small bones in their legs and were lost for the season. Both were hurt in the first half while playing side by side in the Sooner starting line. Each broke his leg about three inches above the ankle. They shared a room at the University infirmary. The scheduling of the operations put an end to the parallel. Both couldn't be operated on simultaneously. They tossed a coin. Northcutt won the flip. He decided to go second so that Doctors Don O'Donoghue, the surgeon, and Mike Willard, team physician, could “practice on Greenlee and be ready for me.” That's the way it was done.

Wilkinson played his starters only 18 minutes during the 66-0 romp over Kansas State at Norman, but the Sooner seconds and thirds performed so impressively that they got most of the praise dished out by the Wildcats when reporters interviewed them after the game. Center Kerry Clifford praised the Sooner middle guards, “especially that 70 (Dick Gwinn).” The entire Kansas State squad acclaimed the Sooner hustle.

A classic illustration of the burning Sooner hustle was contributed by Tommy McDonald while the starters were on the field. Once when McDonald was roughly upended across the sideline and lost his shoe, he left it lying on the turf and, hurrying back to the huddle, worked his fake into the line while wearing only the sock on his left foot.

The Texas-Oklahoma series had reached an odd milestone. Although

¹OU freshman coach and academic counselor.

“The rampaging citizens from up country did everything with a tremendous display of energy. They ran furiously, blocked and tackled like they were angry with the universe. They passed, and yes, even fumbled, in a high-handed manner.” — Blackie Sherrod, Fort Worth Press

Longhorn outfits had thrashed Sooner clubs 30 times while losing 18 and tying two, Oklahoma teams coached by Wilkinson held a 7-2 margin over the Orange, and all Oklahoma gloried in it.

“When we flew into Fort Worth the day before the game,” recalls Billy Pricer, Sooner fullback, “we were kidding and cutting up. Bud called off our Friday practice. Then he called a team meeting. To our surprise, he was quiet, subdued, resigned to defeat.

“You haven’t practiced at all well this week,” he said. “but then it’s no disgrace to be beaten by a team as strong as Texas. Even when they beat you tomorrow, remember, you’re still Oklahoma. So be sure to hold your heads up high.”

“That got us to thinking,” said Pricer. “We had a team meeting and voted not to go to the movie that night. Instead, we chose to stay in our hotel and study our game assignments. But at breakfast next morning, the coach was still gloomy. During our pregame meal he let us have it again. ‘Keep your heads high,’ he told us. ‘It’s no disgrace to get beat by as strong a team as Texas.’ By that time we weren’t about to let Texas beat us. We had too much pride, speed, and togetherness.”

In the Sooner dressing room before the game, the Oklahoma squad was suited, ready to play. But Wilkinson hadn’t come in to lead them out. It was almost kickoff time, and the tension was as thick as low country fog.

Ed Gray, lying on the floor, raised up on one elbow. “Wish the old man would come on in and tell us that bird story¹ so we can go out and kick the hell out of ‘em,” he growled. The Sooners roared. That crack by their co-captain loosened them up beautifully for the fray.

The Sooners showed their enthusiasm from the opening kickoff.

¹Before the 1955 Texas game, Wilkinson had used his story about “The Boy Who Took the Bird to the Wise Old Man” to motivate the team, the moral being that if the Sooners willed it strongly enough, they could win. They did so, 20-0.

Tommy McDonald ran it back 54 yards to the Texas 44. Oklahoma scored in seven plays. Clendon Thomas knifed across from 2 yards out, riding the shirrtails of blockers John Bell, Emerson, Krisher and Tubbs.

Coach Ed Price and his staff had Texas ready to play. Once Texas rushed so hard on a pass that Oklahoma lost 29 yards. Then Harris called a fooler. Pricer backed up a step, faking a quick kick. He swung his leg but instead of booting the ball handed it off behind him to Thomas on a Statue of Liberty play. Picking up downfield support by Tubbs and Oujesky, Thomas ran 44 yards to the Texas 20. Two minutes later McDonald zipped between two tacklers to score.

Just before the half Jimmy Harris rocked back on his heel and sent the ball winging on a long cross-country ride that suggested a squadron of wild geese cruising in regal splendor toward some distant feeding ground. Down on the Texas 20, McDonald leaped for it, speared it on his fingertips and, helped by Bell’s block and also Oujesky’s, raced across the goal with only 27 seconds left on the clock. Elated, McDonald turned around, ran back up the gridiron, and grinning joyfully, jumped astride Harris, yoking his legs around the quarterback’s middle and his arms around Harris’ neck.

“McDonald’s enthusiasm, . . . the obvious thrill he got out of doing something well, certainly was impressive,” wrote Homer Norton, former Texas Aggie coach who covered the game for the *Houston Post*. Norton’s 1939 Texas Aggies had won the national championship. Anything he wrote about football was read with attention.

Oklahoma’s starters began the last half by driving 80 yards from kickoff to score. Thomas took it over with an 8-yard shot. McDonald helped with an incredible catch of a Harris pass while lying almost on his side.

Blackie Sherrod, *Fort Worth Press* sports editor, described the game as follows: “The rampaging citizens from up country did everything with a tremendous display of energy. They ran

furiously, blocked and tackled like they were angry with the universe. They passed, and yes, even fumbled, in a high-handed manner.”

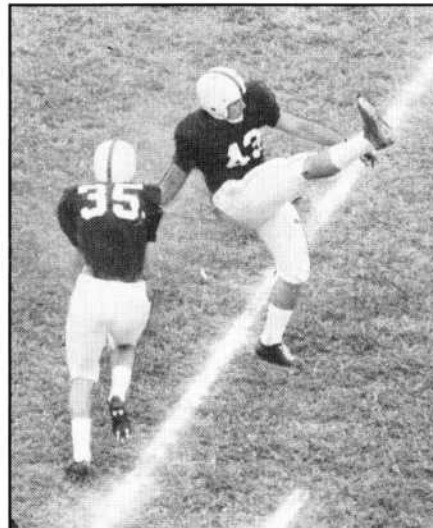
Once in the last half, the Sooners came out in a Swinging Gate formation, in which all their linemen were strung out 15 yards to the right of Tubbs with Thomas stationed behind them. Tubbs, the center, got over the ball. Harris, Pricer and McDonald lined up in tandem behind him. With Tubbs blocking, Harris ran down the left sideline to the Texas 39. There he lateraled to Pricer who ran 10 yards farther. The Sooners soon scored.

“They are an exceptionally interesting club to watch,” Homer Norton wrote of this maneuver. “They used everything in the book . . . I was impressed with their ability to come up with a surprise play when they needed big yardage for a first down . . . Oklahoma has now put the pressure back on the defense . . . Bud Wilkinson has done an outstanding job. I sincerely believe that he is the smoothest and cleverest coach in football today.” Final score was 45-0.

In the Kansas game Oklahoma yielded two touchdowns while winning 34-12. Those Jayhawker touchdowns were the first scored against Gomer Jones’ defense in eight straight regular season games.

The most astonished person in the stadium was probably Buddy Oujesky, Sooner guard. “Some Jayhawker ‘chinned’ me when I rushed through trying to block a punt,” Oujesky remembers. “I was knocked colder than a wedge. When I came to on the bench and saw that ‘12’ under ‘Kansas’ on the scoreboard, I couldn’t understand it. I got scared. I jumped up and started to go back into the game, but Gomer wouldn’t let me.”

The Sooners started well. Clendon Thomas ran back the kickoff 40 yards and six plays later scored on the hand-off. With McDonald holding, Harris kicked goal. Then the militant mood of the Jayhawkers asserted itself. Homer Floyd, their speedy fullback, ran the kickoff back 36 yards to



One sportswriter credited the Sooners with using "everything in the book" in whipping Texas 45-0 in 1956. Here fullback Billy Pricer fakes a quick kick and hands off to Clendon Thomas, who ran 44 yards to the 20. Tommy McDonald scored.

McDonald, last Sooner tackler. Tommy nailed him, but Kansas drove 45 yards to score. Dennit Morris got a hand on their extra-point try. Oklahoma led 7-6.

Then the Sooners scored three times. McDonald used a block by Pricer to skirt the strong side for 12 yards and the first one. After Bob Harrison, Dennit Morris and Doyle Jennings stopped Kansas runs, forcing a punt, the alternates trekked 61 yards to pay dirt, Bob Timberlake making a diving catch of David Baker's pass to score. Baker kicked goal.

The starters came in and scored on a dash by McDonald, and Oklahoma led 27-6 at the half and apparently was cruising. With the Notre Dame game next on the slate, there seemed no purpose in trying to annihilate one's northern neighbor. But Oklahoma won the last half only 7 to 6. Kansas fought magnificently.

After the game," Tommy McDonald remembers, "the Kansas fans swarmed the field like they'd beaten us."

"We had our feelings hurt," remembers Pricer. "Bud and Gomer were busy cheering us up. We didn't think anybody could even score on us, let alone score 12."

Oklahoma destroyed Notre Dame 40-0 at South Bend, the first time the Irish had been shut out in 47 straight games going back to Michigan State in 1951. The Sooner defense held the Irish rushing to 1.9 net yards a play; intercepted four passes, two of them for touchdowns; blocked an Irish punt; and held Paul Hornung, the big Irish quarterback who later won the Heis-

man Trophy, to a total of 7 yards rushing in 13 carries, knocking the ball loose from him three times. The game was broadcast to millions on national television. The South Bend crowd of 60,128 constituted an all-time record.

"We were all emotional and tight," remembers quarterback Jimmy Harris. "We wore our game faces. Although they'd been beaten by Michigan State, all we heard was how tough Notre Dame would be at South Bend.

"Jay O'Neal and Dale Sherrod and I went into Bud's room for a quarterback meeting," Harris went on. "Bud had a funny little fighting grin on his face that we'd never seen before. 'Just relax,' he told us. 'We're going to kick the hell out of these guys.'" The quarterbacks stared at him in awe.

Harris remembers that against the Irish the Sooners used for the first time a new formation with the left end widened and the right half flankered. "This was new to Oklahoma," Harris points out. "We could option either way. This opened us up, got us out around the ends, gave us a lot of versatility for the type of team we were — lean, quick, superfast." In this game the Sooners abandoned their fast break, staying mainly with the double flankers, who needed time to return to the huddle after each play.

The Sooners came out first for their calisthenics. "Notre Dame's squad appeared, ran through the Sooner circle, then came back through it again, stopped, and started taking their calisthenics, growling like dogs," recalls Billy Pricer. Wilkinson moved the Sooners off a little and soon sent them to the dressing room. The after-

noon was bright and sunny, 64 degrees at kickoff. A slight east wind was blowing.

The Sooners got off to a great start, marching 69 yards in 10 plays to score. Oklahoma's blockers cut McDonald around right end for 18. Then they broke Thomas around the opposite flank for 9 more. Harris kept moving Oklahoma with ground plays until they reached the Irish 14. Then he rolled out to his right and hit John Bell with a running pass for the first touchdown. "Jimmy was a fine thrower," recalls Clendon Thomas. "He was more accurate than Billy Wade."

On Notre Dame's first scrimmage play Hornung, 205-pound Notre Dame quarterback, swung the Sooner left flank at full speed. Jerry Tubbs, Sooner center, flashed in fast from his linebacker post and hit Hornung a solid crack, flattening him and driving him back deep into his own backfield.

"Tubbs was the nicest guy in the world until he put on his helmet," remembers Clendon Thomas.

"We had an X-stunt on for the play," recalls Buddy Oujesky, Sooner guard. "I slanted to the inside. Notre Dame's right guard and right tackle both went for me. This left Tubbs an open avenue. I'd grown up wanting to go to Notre Dame. I'm sure my size didn't impress them, so I was delighted to be a small part of beating them." The only Catholic on the Oklahoma team, Oujesky would have no difficulty making the All-America Catholic team.

¹Billy Wade, former Vanderbilt star, was a prime passer for the Chicago Bears and the Los Angeles Rams.

Wilkinson sent in the alternates. David Baker quick-kicked 60 yards to give Oklahoma field position. On fourth down from their 22, Notre Dame tried a punt by Dean Studor. A faulty snapback made him kick late. Steve Jennings blocked the ball. Bob Timberlake caught it in midair and ran to the Irish 3. Two plays later Jay O'Neal scored on a quarterback sneak behind blocks by Bob Harrison, Steve Jennings and Doyle Jennings. Carl Dodd kicked goal. Oklahoma led 13-0 at the first quarter.

Early in the second quarter the Sooner starters entered and wheeled 64 yards to the end zone in eight plays. Jimmy Harris' 17-yard pass to McDonald to the Irish 18 was the long gainer. Thomas hit very fast on the handoff and was scarcely touched after his blockers burst the Irish line. Thomas still remembers Krisher's block. "As we ran up to the scrimmage line, Bill widened out to within a foot of Tom Emerson, our right tackle. His Notre Dame opponent widened out with him. When the ball was snapped, Bill drove straight through his man. The hole was so wide that after Tubbs came across to get their linebacker all I had to do was run."

Just before the half ended, Morse of Notre Dame, tried a forward pass. Rushed by Pricer, he threw hurriedly. McDonald snatched the ball from an Irish receiver's hands and, using open field blocks by Pricer, Emerson and Thomas, ran the interception back 55 yards to score. When Harris kicked goal, Oklahoma led 26-0 at intermission.

Boyd Gunning, OU alumni secretary, related an amusing sidelight to that play at a later alumni breakfast in Chicago. A big Irish roofer, weighing about 260 pounds and wearing a little green derby over one eye, was making himself obnoxious in the stadium. When on an Irish punt McDonald signaled for a fair catch, this big guy stood and yelled, "Chicken! Chicken!"

Later, when little Tommy picked off Morse's pass and, hitting the ground in high leaps, ran 55 yards to a touchdown, an Oklahoma woman who was wearing a white dress, and sitting four rows down from Green Derby stood and faced him.

"Sir," she said, "that's chicken, southern style!"

Notre Dame came back hard in the last half, driving from kickoff to the Sooner 35 before McDonald intercepted a Hornung pass. Here Oklahoma drove 83 yards to a

touchdown. Tubbs, Krisher and Oujesky blocked Harris over on a sneak.

Early in the fourth period Thomas intercepted Hornung's pass and ran down the right sideline 36 yards to another touchdown, with John Bell taking out the one tackler who might have stopped the play. Pricer remembers, "I hit Hornung just as he released the ball. I rolled over on one knee. I heard the crowd roaring, and I thought Hornung had completed the pass. I looked up and here came a wave of green jerseys chasing Thomas, who had the ball."

Bell, who had fielded a pass to score Oklahoma's first touchdown and had thrown a smashing block to set up the last one, was living proof that you don't have to have exceptional ability to be a good football player. His hustle and aggressiveness were the talk of the Oklahoma squad. They called him everything from "Mad John" to "Herman the German." "He's the tireddest and hustlingest guy out there," said tackle Tom Emerson. "He and Tommy McDonald set the pace." "A full-speed guy. Can't do it any other way," laughed assistant coach Sam Lyle. "He hits like a horse and a half," said Tommy McDonald, who played behind Bell on defense.

A quiet, droll, mature fellow, Bell could sit down with you and talk about crops, farm parity, or politics. He subscribed to five magazines. He could sleep like a log with the radio or television turned on full blast. Although he was the most immaculate dresser on the squad, in a football game he tried to undress every opponent he tackled.

The Sooners were lighthearted, almost festive and gay, on the night before the Colorado game as they watched a Bud Wilkinson Quaker Oats commercial on national television while having dinner in a Denver hotel. In the commercial Wilkinson was holding a small boy on his lap.

"I don't like Quaker Oats. It's sissy food," fussed the boy. Bud said, "If it's sissy food, then I have 60 sissies who eat it every morning as part of their training schedule."

Next morning the Sooners were having their pregame breakfast. Harris, McDonald and Pricer were sitting together. Wilkinson and Gomer were dining at a small table in a corner. There was no oatmeal anywhere.

Harris asked the waitress to go to Wilkinson's table and ask "the white-

haired gentleman" when his boys could have their oatmeal. She approached the two coaches just as Gomer was picking up his cup of hot coffee.

"Your boys want to know when they can have their oatmeal," the waitress told Bud.

Gomer, strangling with mirth, began spitting his coffee all over Wilkinson. "Bud always blamed me afterward, but I had nothing to do with it," Pricer insists. "I was too busy eating. When there's food around I don't talk. I eat."

That afternoon Oklahoma kicked off before a sellout crowd of 46,563 that packed Colorado's new stadium at mile-high Folsom Field. The mercury stood at 27 degrees, and it was tooth-chilling cold. Business manager Ken Farris remembers that he had purchased 36 sets of long-underwear for the Sooners to wear beneath their uniforms. The sky was overcast. Although it had snowed five inches, the Colorado people had done a thorough job of cleaning the field. The footing was excellent, considering the circumstances.

After Ward Dowler, the Buff quarterback, punted out on the Oklahoma 10, the Sooners tried a quick kick, but Colorado was ready for it. John Wooten, their guard, blocked it, and John Bayuk, their fullback, had only to field the bounding ball in the end zone for a touchdown. The sellout crowd stood and roared its pleasure.

After the Sooner alternates came in and fought evenly with the Buffs, Wilkinson sent his starters back into the game, and they scored when quarterback Jimmy Harris drilled a forward pass down the middle to McDonald, who caught the ball on the run and sped across the goal. The 6,240 Oklahomans who had traveled nearly 700 miles, mostly by auto, part of it through a blizzard, cheered, but the Sooners missed the conversion. Colorado led 7-6.

Then came a tragic play. Late in the first quarter Colorado quick-kicked. McDonald ran back and swept up the ball. "I had a bad cold," McDonald says today, "but I didn't tell anybody because I wanted to play so badly. I kept asking Ken Rawlinson for throat lozenges to suck on. I looked around and saw that Colorado was all spread out. Picking a path, I ran the punt back 75 yards to a touchdown when Billy Pricer, our fullback, rolled the last Colorado tackler with a beautiful downfield block.

"In the end zone I turned around

and saw a red flag lying on the grass back up the field. To myself I said, 'Who in God's world could pull a red flag out of his pocket under circumstances like these? If he only knew how sore my throat was, how hard it had been to sprint 75 yards in that altitude, and how difficult it was for me to breathe, he would never have dropped that flag.'

Colorado's ground game tore Oklahoma to shreds in the second quarter. Jimmy Harris postponed touchdowns by tackling Dove and later halfback Howard Cook in the Sooner secondary. Dove double-reversed for a touchdown. Later, on a pitchout off Coach Ward's T-formation, Stransky crossed the goal standing with only 36 seconds left in the half.

McDonald shot through to block Stransky's conversion. This proved to be an important play. However, the Sooners trailed 19-6 and appeared doomed to defeat.

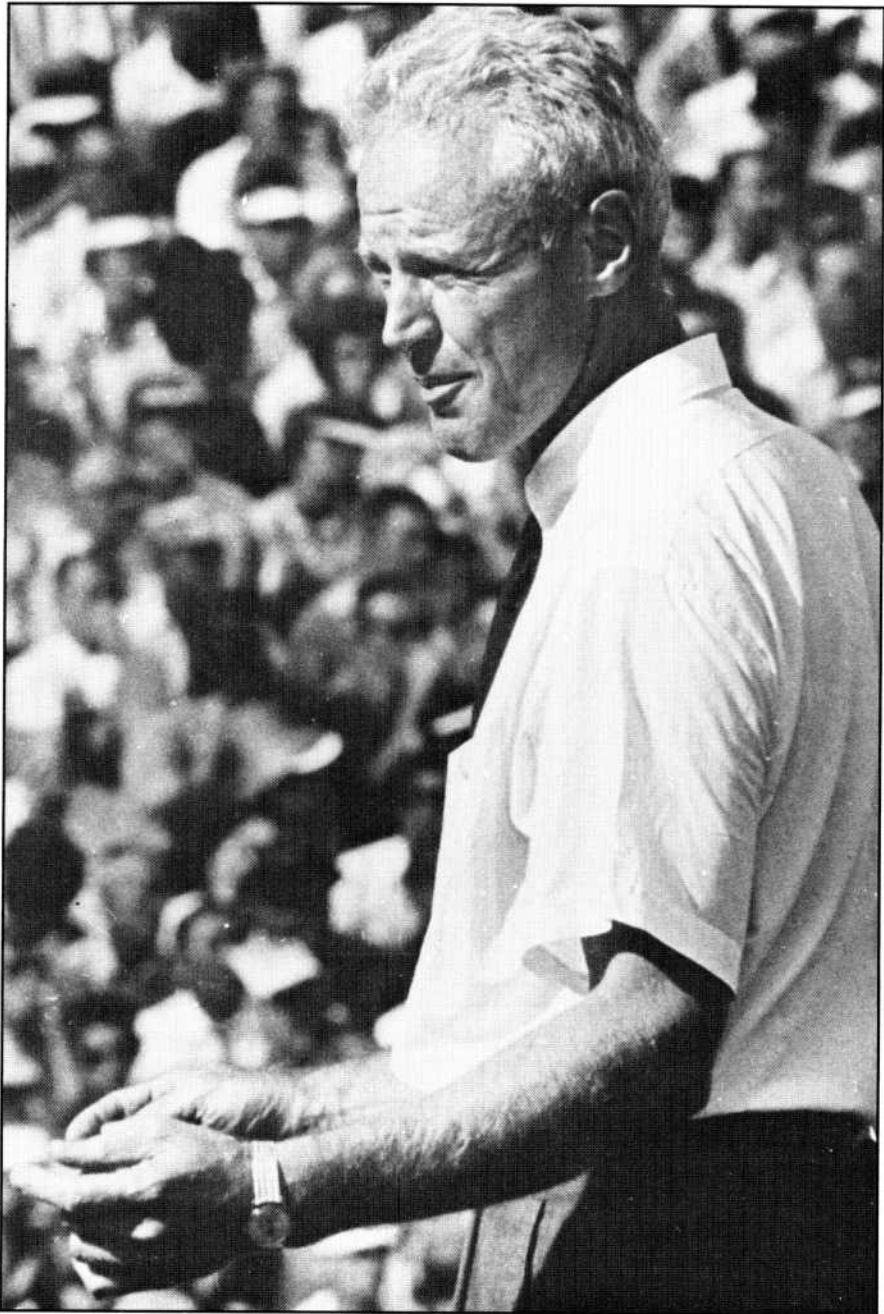
In the Sooner dressing room at the half, Wilkinson hadn't come in. "Everybody was getting antsy," Joe Rector recalls. "Then Jerry Tubbs yelled 'Sit down!' and we all sat down. Nobody panicked. Finally Bud walked in. His face was white.

"Men, take off those OU jerseys," he told us. "You don't deserve to wear the colors that the people who played ahead of you wore while building that fine Oklahoma tradition." He'd warned us all week that we weren't practicing well after the Notre Dame victory."

President Cross, who frequently visited the Sooners' halftime sessions recalls that Wilkinson, gradually becoming calmer, told his team to put the first half out of their minds and start a new ball game when play resumed. They were not to try to catch up. The second half would be a new game that they were capable of winning by three touchdowns if they put their minds to it. He finished his commentary with the remark, "Here's one man who thinks you can still win."

"He left the dressing room to let us think about it," remembers Buddy Oujesky. "Our senior leaders took over." Tubbs and Ed Gray, the captains, arose. "Okay," they said, "let's go out and get it done."

"And when our guys decided they could do it, we went down on the field," Clendon Thomas remembers. "I don't mean to sound cocky but we knew we could do anything we wanted to do. Nobody could beat us. Nobody could handle us. Get out of our way!"



As always in shirt and tie, Wilkinson watches intently from the sidelines.

The battle's turning point came on only the fourth play of the last half. Colorado had kicked off over the Oklahoma goal. Oklahoma had the ball on its own 28, fourth down, 2 to go. Quarterback Jimmy Harris decided to gamble, going for the first down. "Let's block," Harris warned his huddle. "This might be the ball game."

Clendon Thomas got it on a slashing 3-yard buck behind blockers Bill Krisher, Tom Emerson and John Bell. "I knew that Clendon could hit the hole and cut fast," Harris explains his choice. "He was big and fast and easy to hand off to. He and Bob Herndon

were the best I ever played with at taking a handoff at full speed."

With the line blocking magnificently, the Sooner drive lengthened. McDonald's 11-yard burst with a pitchout put them over the center stripe. McDonald's 22-yard cutback earned a first down on the Colorado 15. Soon the Sooners were on the Buffalo 6, fourth down and 1 to go.

Tubbs, Sooner center, brought word back that Colorado was loaded in a goal-line defense. Harris called the option run or pass. McDonald threw to Thomas in the end zone for the touchdown.



Quarterback Jimmy Harris with the ball and center Jerry Tubbs running interference were a familiar sight to fans of the 1955 and 1956 national champions.

"Jimmy pitched it to me," McDonald remembers. "The Colorado players were in my face. Clendon was so wide open. I said to myself, 'Okay, boys, come and get me. Here goes the ball.' I was elated. Nobody was within 3 yards of Clendon!" Harris kicked goal. Now the Buffalo lead had been cut to 19-13.

"I was never so tired in my life," remembers Jerry Tubbs. "A winning tradition gives you so much pride. You reach down and get a little bit more." Clendon Thomas added, "That pride was started by the guys 'way back. Then it rubbed off on us. We played to win. None of us wanted to be on the team that ended the winning streak."

In the third period Harris skipped back 18 yards with Dowler's punt. The Sooner line began blocking with purpose and savagery. From the Buffalo 11, Harris pitched the ball to McDonald running wide to the right. Tommy faked a pass and with a surge of speed dove past a tackler into the

end zone. That tied the game, 19-19.

On the extra point Tubbs snapped the ball perfectly to the kneeling McDonald. The Sooner line protected stoutly. Tommy fielded the ball and set it up. Harris booted it squarely between the posts to give Oklahoma a 20-19 lead.

Billy Pricer said, "Dennit Morris was hurt, and I had to play three quarters. And after our third touchdown I had to kick off. Bud had told me, 'If you're tired, tell us and we'll get somebody else in.' I walked to the sideline. 'Coach,' I said, 'I'm pooped.'"

"Bud grinned. He reached over and patted me on the rump. 'Go ahead and kick off and go down and get the tackle,' he said. Damn! That pat on the rump lifted me sky-high. I did kick off and go down and get the tackle. I could have played another full quarter."

The fourth period began. Tubbs and Pricer contained the Buff attack with smashing linebacking. Harris rolled

to his left and spied Thomas running laterally across the end zone. Harris hit Thomas in the corner with a perfect pass good for 16 yards and the game-clinching touchdown. Harris kicked goal. Oklahoma 27, Colorado 19.

"That Colorado crowd was a wild one," remembers Doyle Jennings. "They kept shelling us with snowballs and coke-bottle tops. We were glad we wore helmets. Colorado had cleaned the snow off the field good, but after the game the field was so snowy from those snowballs that it looked like fresh snow had fallen."

After the game Wilkinson had high praise for Ward's Coloradans. He said, "Their offense is by far the most potent we have encountered this season. They are a sound, poised, courageous team." The Buffaloes proved it that season by finishing 8-2 and defeating Clemson in the Orange Bowl.

At Ames, Iowa, the weather was good and the field dry, and the Sooners laced the Cardinal and Gold 44-0. Oklahoma started the fracas by twice crisscrossing its halfbacks with pleasing results. First Harris pitched to McDonald, who ran wide to the right then handed off to Thomas coming back wide to the left to the Cyclone 22. Five plays later McDonald bucked it over.

Three minutes later Harris reversed the strategy. This time he pitched to Thomas going wide to his left. Thomas handed off to McDonald coming back wide to the right. Tom Emerson blocked the end, and Jerry Tubbs flattened the defensive halfback so neatly that Tommy ran the distance without being touched. Oklahoma led 13-0.

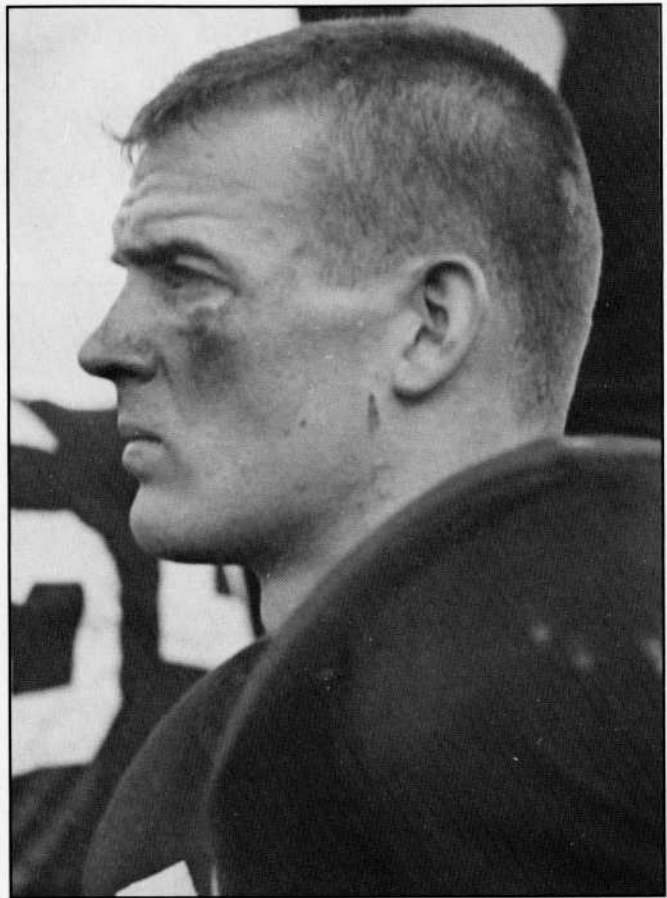
With only 28 seconds left in the half, the Sooner starters came into possession on the Iowa State 45. It didn't seem possible to score in such a short time. But Harris somehow fitted four plays into 26 seconds. On the first, his screen pass was slapped down by Chuck Latting of the Cyclones. Then Harris passed to Don Stiller for 14 yards, and Stiller rolled across the sideline to stop the clock. Harris pitched to McDonald who skirted the Cyclone left flank for 15 more and was tackled out of bounds with only eight seconds left.

On the fourth and final play Harris flicked a pass to Stiller for 16 yards and a touchdown with McDonald blocking out an opponent on the goal.

Joe Rector, sophomore right end, was the surprised recipient of a battlefield promotion that left him un-



Line coach Gomer Jones hugs tackle Ed Gray following the 1956 Sooners' 40-0 triumph over Notre Dame at South Bend.



Senior right end John Bell earned nicknames like "Mad John" and "Herman the German" for his aggressive style.

nerved. "I was playing behind John Bell and Timberlake," recalls the rookie from Muskogee, "It was my first road trip, and I thought I was going to sit on the bench and watch the whole ball game. But in the last three minutes Bell was ejected by the officials, and Timberlake sprained an ankle, and before I knew it I was in there, and I wasn't ready.

"I played lousy. Going down on a punt, I ran into Tubbs, fell, and lay there, resting. I thought of something Vince Lombardi once said, 'Fatigue makes cowards of us all.' It was a great lesson for me. After that I always heeded Bud's insistence that everybody should be ready mentally."

As the last half started, Tubbs made a play that sparkled like a new silver dollar. Iowa State had reached the Sooner 30 after completing a pass. Quarterback Charley Martin tried another. Tubbs intercepted it and headed up the field. He ran the first 15 yards like a fullback, bowling over two tacklers. Then he adopted the tactics of a halfback, outstripping all his pursuers, cutting away from one tack-

ler on the 10 and diving into the end zone to evade the last one. The play illustrated the great determination with which the rangy Sooner pivot played.

Stung by a curious AP poll that dropped them into second place in the nation, though they drew 92 first-place votes to 58 for top-rated Tennessee, the red-jerseyed Sooners were in an exasperated mood when they spread across the field to receive the opening kickoff against Missouri. It was the first time in six weeks that Oklahoma had been forced up at home.

Oklahoma promptly fumbled that opening kickoff back to the Tigers on the Sooner 30. However, Billy Pricer and Jerry Tubbs wrecked the Tiger plays. Ed Gray rushed the passer so hard that he threw wildly. On fourth down Missouri went for it, but John Bell rocketed through and tackled quarterback Jimmy Hunter for a 13-yard loss, giving the Sooners possession on their own 43.

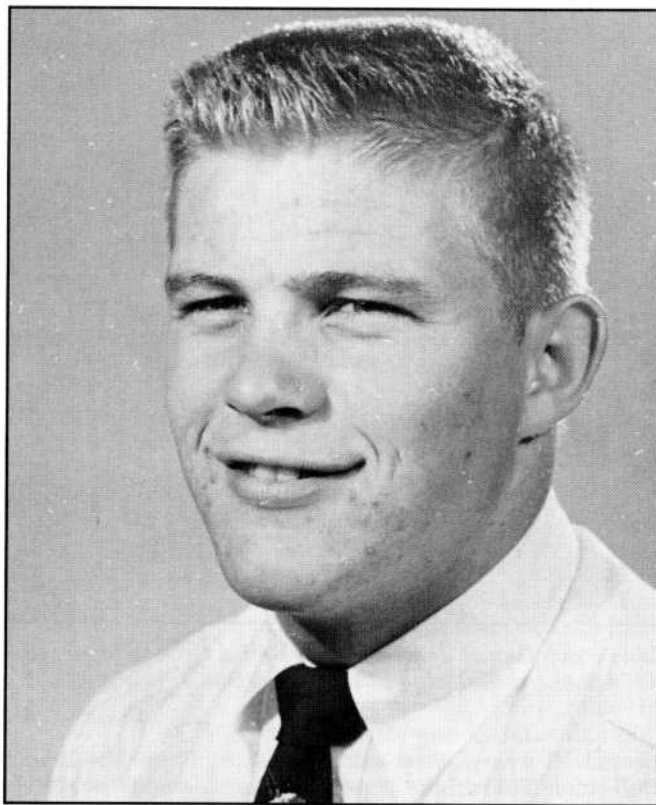
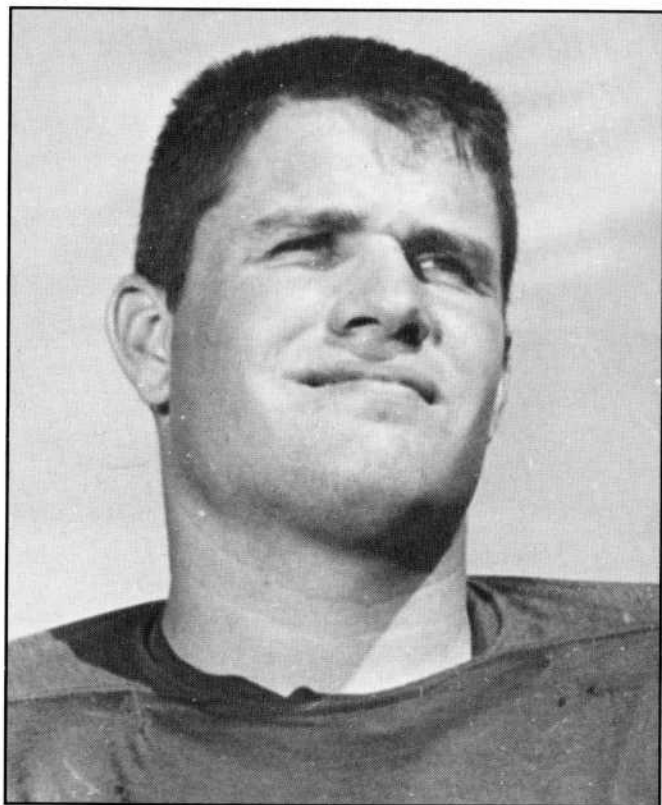
Then the game went down its logical groove. Wanting the victory badly and

restoration of their leadership in the national polls, the Sooners struck off touchdown after touchdown. As so often happened, they did it largely with defense. Four times they intercepted Tiger forward passes (McDonald 2, Harris 1, Coyle 1), and each time these led to touchdowns.

Once Missouri came storming back with a 36-yard run by Hank Kuhlmann around the Sooner left flank. Kuhlmann seemed loose for a touchdown until McDonald sprinted across and knocked him over the sideline, turning him a complete flip. When only 12 seconds remained in the first half and the Sooners had the ball on the Missouri 41, Harris, as usual, laughed off the odds and spiraled a long touchdown pass to Don Stiller to beat the gun. At that point of the campaign Harris' seasonal record was 20 completions in 28 throws for .714 percent, though many of his pegs were running throws delivered while going to his left.

Early in the second half the stadium public-address man announced that, back East, Tennessee had beaten Mis-

“Gilmour Dobie had coached University of Washington teams that won 39 straight games, the all-time national record. The Sooners had tied it with their Nebraska victory. Could they break it in the last game of the season?”



Destined to play major roles on future teams were several sophomores of '56, such as All-America center Bob Harrison, left, outstanding lineman in the nation as a senior, who co-captained the '58 Sooners with right end Joe Rector, right.

Mississippi 27-7. Goaded by the information, the Sooners turned it on and scored five more touchdowns, though Wilkinson used five full teams.

The final score, 67-14, distressed Wilkinson. "I've been thinking all night about the size of the score," he told me Sunday morning. "We were all fired up. You can't ask your boys to turn it off." An unusual coach, Wilkinson spent all day molding those slick Sooner powerhouses and then worried all night because they had done so brilliantly what he had taught them to do.

McDonald had another dashing day. Although he played less than half the battle, he rushed 136 net yards, averaging 12.3 a carry, and twice trod just inside the white chalk of the sideline for thrilling 58- and 23-yard touchdowns. He also pegged a

touchdown pass to Thomas, intercepted two Missouri passes, and prevented a Tiger touchdown when he capsized Kuhlmann with the sideline tackle.

Concluding Wilkinson's first decade as head coach undefeated in conference play, the Sooners subdued Nebraska 54-6 at Norman, rushing 506 net yards and passing 150. With Tennessee extended a bit while conquering Kentucky 20-7, Oklahoma pulled further ahead in the AP and UP polls to determine the national champion.

With 1:43 left in the half, Oklahoma fans had the thrilling situation they so enjoyed, Jimmy Harris versus the stadium time clock. Could Jimmy take the Sooners across the goal, 43 yards away, in 1:43? Jimmy did it so quickly that he punched out the stadium timepiece with one blow. Rocking

back on his heel, he fired the ball down the fairway to McDonald, who made a leaping grab and scored. Bud suited 55 men and played them all.

New goals awaited Oklahoma every week they played, yet the biggest of all confronted the Sooners at Stillwater. Gilmour Dobie, like Wilkinson a former Minnesota quarterback, had coached University of Washington teams that from 1908 through half of 1914 won 39 straight games, the all-time national record, Stone Age or modern, in college football. The Sooners had tied it with their Nebraska victory. Could they break it in the last game of the season?

Ineligible for bowl play,¹ the Sooners closed their year against Oklahoma A&M at Stillwater. A few

¹The Big Eight contract with the Orange Bowl prohibited consecutive appearances.

days before that game Vernon Snell, long-time sports editor of the *Oklahoma City Times*, asked Sooner seniors how they felt about their final tilt against the Aggies.

Pride came into Jerry Tubbs' face when the question came to him. "I only hope I'm able in life to be in an organization with as much unity and spirit as this team. I'm taking away so much more than I can ever repay," he said.

Byron Searcy, Oklahoma's rangy part-Indian tackle, who scaled a slim 203 and wore a burr haircut, likened the Oklahoma team's flaming spirit to a biblical passage in Matthew: "And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain." "It's that second effort you learn at Norman that's so important," he said. "In high school I think I made a real good first effort. But at Oklahoma it's the second effort they're most interested in. They go on the theory that everybody will make a good first effort."

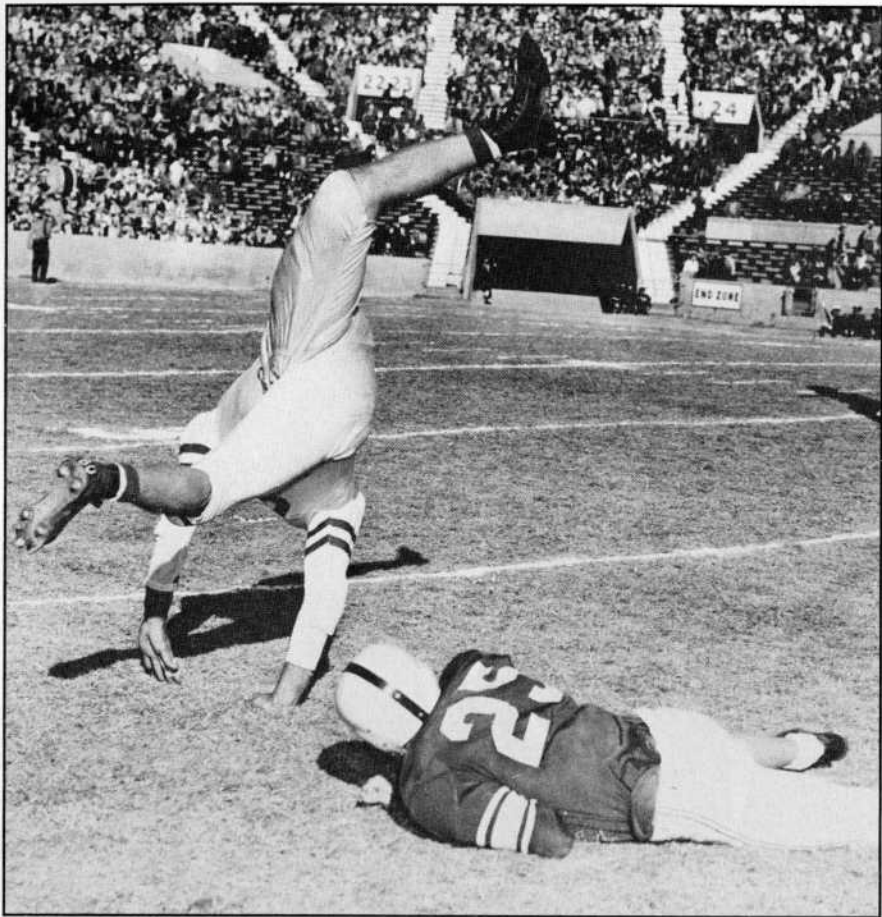
Tom Emerson, the 6-foot, 4-inch tackle from Wilson, a serious, studious zoology major, grew taut for a moment when reminded that the Aggie game was the last of his life for the Sooners. "I truly hate to see it come," Emerson said slowly. "Somehow I foresee emptiness after it's over. These years have passed by so fast. It's a shame we couldn't bow out at home."

But the Sooners didn't bow out badly at Stillwater. They drove the opening kickoff back to a touchdown. Fullback Billy Pricer burst through, cut back, and ran 37 yards to score. The Aggies tried a pass, but Jay O'Neal leaped for it, scooped it off his shoestrings, and ran 63 yards down the sideline for another touchdown.

In the final moments Wilkinson inserted an all-senior team that marched 77 yards to the Aggie 2-yard mark. Ed Gray, the tackle and co-captain, faced Harris in the huddle with a challenging grin. "I've never scored," he said. "It's my time."

Adjustments were made, and Harris called the play. Gray and Clendon Thomas traded positions, Gray going to right half and Thomas into the line. "If you think I didn't block for him after all those times he'd blocked for me, you're crazy," Thomas said later. McDonald leaped into one of the guard spots.

"On Gray's play, I was the center," says Billy Pricer. "The ball was snapped. Old Beaky came over the top. He was carrying the ball like a girl, with both points exposed, front to back. His whole arm was wrapped around the



On offense All-America halfback Tommy McDonald could do it all—run, pass, catch and throw blocks like this one which upended Nebraska's Clarence Cook.



'56 freshman halfback Brewster Hobby had decided to skip college to try for a professional baseball career until Wilkinson sold him on getting an education.



Jerry Tubbs, the Walter Camp Award outstanding player in the nation, and Edmon Gray, co-captains of Oklahoma's 1956 national champions, receive the Grantland Rice Award. At right are Wilkinson and Look magazine sports editor Tim Cohane.

center of the ball. After he scored, he wouldn't give the ball to the referee. On the sideline Wilkinson was laughing his head off."

"You've been playing me at the wrong position for four years," Gray told Bud when the coach sent in another unit. The Sooner seniors wanted Bill Harris, senior end from Ardmore, to try the extra point, but somebody erred on the snap, and Bill didn't have a chance to get the ball off the ground. But he was in there with his group at the end. Final score, 53-0.

Thus the Sooners won their third national championship in six years under Wilkinson. They measured Tennessee 104 first-team votes to 48 in the AP poll and outdid the Vols 26-5 in firsts in the UP coaches poll. Wilkinson's career record with Oklahoma

was 90 wins, seven defeats, and three ties in regular season play for .927 percent. His bowl record was 4-1.

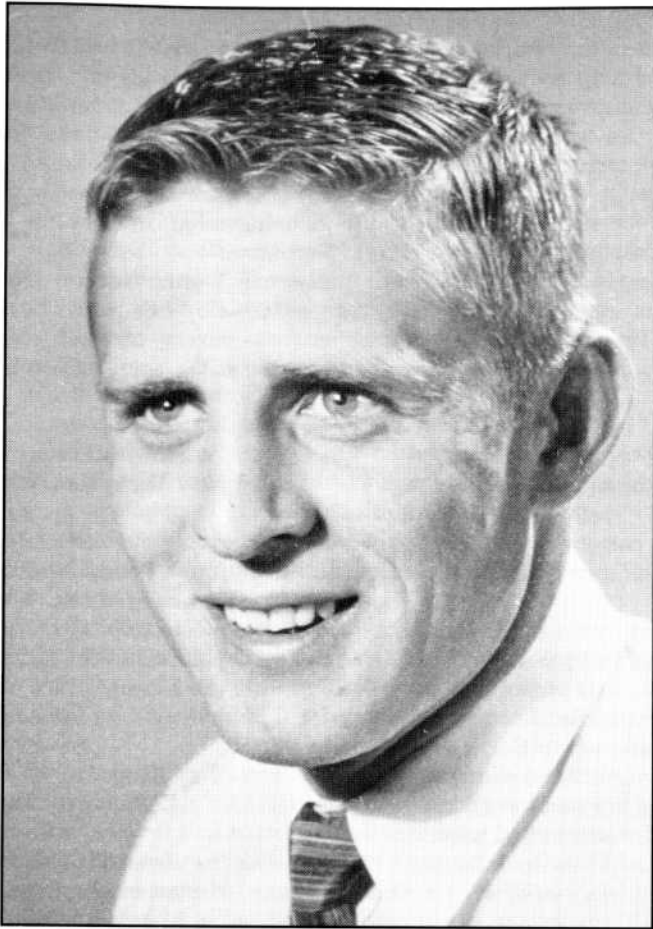
Oklahoma's statistical feats in 1956 were almost endless. In offense, the Sooners led the country in total yards with 481.7 net a game, in rushing with 391 a game (national record), and in scoring with 46.6 points a game. They were second in kickoff returns with 24.5 yards average per runback; second in own fumbles lost with 32; third in most yards penalized, 76.3 a game; and ninth in punt-return defense, holding opponents to 6 yards each runback. They averaged scoring seven touchdowns a game, garnering a total of 70 in the 10 contests.

The Sooners submitted their finest national defensive showing of all time.

They placed second in team defense with 193.8 yards a game yielded, second in pass interceptions with 26 or 423 yards, fourth in interception avoidance yielding only five interceptions in 100 throws, fifth in punting with 40.7 yards averaged, eighth in rushing defense with 138.3 yards yielded, and eleventh in pass defense with 55.5 yards yielded a game.

Clendon Thomas led the nation in scoring with 18 touchdowns and 108 points; McDonald was second with 17 and 102. McDonald placed fourth in interception returns with six for 136 yards. Pricer punted 11 times for an average of 48.6, but the Sooners didn't kick enough to qualify him for the national minimum. Only one other man in the country had a better average.

Oklahoma won the foremost-player



Tommy McDonald finished second in Heisman Trophy balloting when he and teammate Jerry Tubbs split the vote.




prize of the times when the nation's coaches voted center Jerry Tubbs the Walter Camp Award as the outstanding player in the nation. No interior lineman had ever won it before. McDonald won the Robert W. Maxwell Memorial Award and also the *Sporting News* Award. McDonald and Tubbs knocked each other out of the balloting for the Heisman Trophy, Tommy finishing second, Tubbs fourth. Four Sooner players were selected on All-America first teams: Tubbs, Krisher, McDonald and Gray.

McDonald's admiration for Tubbs still runs high today. "He was a coach's dream," the halfback praised, "smart, great competitor, great attitude, great agility, excellent speed. He'd do anything the coaches asked. He was just plain old Jerry. He wasn't cocky. He was everything that typified an Oklahoma player — humble, compassionate, unselfish, ready to lay his life on the line for that football team. We all liked him so well that we wanted him to be our captain.

Later he and I spent a week together with the College All-Stars, and he was everybody's choice there for captain."

Wilkinson's football lettermen were then graduating at a 90.6 percent pace, with his powerful 1949 team having graduated every one of its nineteen senior lettermen, his 1951 team having graduated all seven of its seniors, and his 1954 team having graduated 12 of 13. The 13th man on that squad, Tom Carroll, lifted his outfit to a perfect rating three years later when he took two degrees simultaneously, one in petroleum engineering, the other in geological engineering.

Of his 1956 team Wilkinson said in his alumni letter, "I hope Gomer and I will be coaching for a fair number of years, but I doubt if we will ever be associated with a group of seniors, or a squad, with a finer balance of personalities or a more wholesome attitude towards the game than those who played for Oklahoma in 1956. These are the basic reasons why our team has played well." 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: No one knows more about the Wilkinson era in Oklahoma football history than Harold Keith, sports information director from 1930 to 1969, who witnessed all 178 of the games Bud coached at OU. The author of a number of award-winning books, including the definitive work on the first 25 years of Sooner football, Oklahoma Kickoff, Keith personally interviewed 61 former players and others who had a role in the Wilkinson story in the preparation of this book.

Forty-Seven Straight: The Wilkinson Era at Oklahoma, 384 pages with 94 illustrations, is available in bookstores or from the University of Oklahoma Press, Attention: Marketing Department, 1005 Asp Avenue, Norman, OK 73019. \$19.95