



THE DEAN OF PNEUMONIA DOWNS

By HAROLD KEITH

“If you could have broken into a pert walk that last 100 yards, you’d have won,” he once scolded a distance runner who did not sprint at the end of a race. “Don’t drown within a foot of the bank.”

I always liked his interpretation of the shot put: “The idea in the shot put is not to stand too close to your instrument after you follow through.”

“George ran on a swattered dinner. He climbed the rope in the last 100 yards,” was his explanation of why George McCormick, his champion half-miler, once lost a race because he ran too soon after a big meal.

He even saw humor in certain defeat. In 1948 his cross-country team faced trouble in a dual meet from John Teakel, Oklahoma A & M’s crack runner. His bulletin to his squad posted on the locker room wall before the meet at Stillwater said, “The visiting coach gets his choice, so I have asked Teakel to look back at us over his right shoulder this year, instead of over his left as he has for the past two years.”

The disseminator of all this jockstrap jocularities was John Jacobs, my track and cross-country coach at the University of Oklahoma in the late 1920s. His teams never had a warm place to train in winter. They practiced on an unheated indoor layout beneath the east wing of the football stadium, where water from the melting snow leaked down from the seats above onto the tiny dirt track, muddying it. Jacobs named this frigid facility “Pneumonia Downs” and never was a running radius pseudonymed more aptly.

“Only kids raised on cornbread and bean soup can stand it under there. The bottle babies won’t last,” he predicted. Despite that, four of his Oklahoma teams that trained there won Missouri Valley and Big Six conference indoor championships, and nine others placed second against opponents drilled in steam-heated comfort.

It has been more than a quarter century since Jacobs relinquished the job that his jesting made immortal. His era at Oklahoma spanned the sport’s Pleistocene period, when collegians ran on horse tracks and touched hands in relay races, to its modern epoch characterized by adoption of foreign techniques and the emergence of the

American black as a superb sprinter-jumper-hurdler.

“Pleasure and fun should be the chief aim in track,” Jacobs believed. “Most track athletes are overcoached. I’d lots rather have my men in good mental condition than worrying too much about form. Some of the best men I ever had forgot everything I’d told them the minute the gun was fired.”

A plain, humble fellow known for his scrupulous honesty and his dry humor, Jacobs coached and quipped his way through 46 seasons with the Sooners. His homespun coaching tenets, delivered in the salty twang of the Southwesterner, not only bore the stamp of truth but made entertainment out of what often is drudgery in track and field. His boys still remember them and chuckle.

In 1962 Preston Bagley, Oklahoma sprinter, dashed off a 3.7 (almost a straight A) academic average. “You gotta be eligible before you run, all right,” Jacobs teased the boy, “but you don’t have to be that damn eligible.”

When a newsman in 1943 informed Jacobs that he had been named honorary referee of the Texas Relays, the coach frowned. “An honorary referee is like an honorary pallbearer,” he muttered. “Too old to carry the casket.” Voted into the Helms Foundation Coaching Hall of Fame in 1957, he deadpanned, “They must give these things on longevity.”

He solved many coaching problems with amusing ingenuity. Dee Givens, a blond freshman sprinter, developed the bad habit of coasting when he neared the finish of a 100-yard dash. Jacobs cured him of this by making him break two strings in practice, the second posted five yards beyond the race’s normal finish. Learning to go hard through that second string, Givens won Big Seven conference championships at 60 yards indoors and 100 yards outdoors.

Jacobs also cured Robert Van Dee, a discus thrower, from pegging all line drives by taking Van Dee out on the Sooner golf course and making him arch the discus over an oak tree. Van Dee repaid him by winning the 1955 conference diadem.

The coach was similarly shrewd at handling bird dogs. In 1951 his young

pointer chewed dead quail too roughly while retrieving. Jacobs broke him of the habit in his front yard by having him fetch an old track shoe containing both heel and toe spikes. The dog quickly developed a soft mouth. The coach enjoyed training young boys and young dogs and exercised enormous patience with both.

Jacobs even coached a girl to a national championship. Her name was Caroline McDermott, the daughter of Hugh McDermott, Oklahoma’s basketball coach. When pretty, blonde Caroline began training, the stadium fence became festooned with boys. “You gotta keep your mind off those boys or you’ll tear up all my hurdles,” Jacobs cautioned her. “Darned hurdles cost \$26 each.”

Neither boys nor anything else deterred Caroline, a fiery competitor who soon mastered every facet of Jacobs’ hurdling form. In 1952 she won the National AAU Junior Women’s 80-meters low hurdles championship at Waterbury, Connecticut, and without brushing a single barrier.

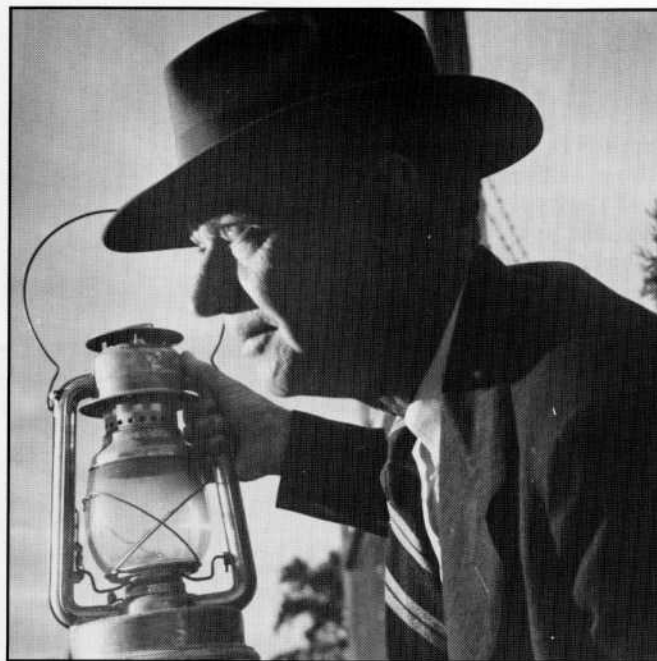
Lanky and laconic, Jacobs wore blue serge suits, black shoes and a soft gray hat. He smoked cigarettes messily, holding them between his thumb and forefinger and flaring his remaining fingers widely to brush off the ash. He loved candy and usually carried it in his pockets. After their freshman years, his track boys all called him “Jake.”

Like a country doctor who would take on anything from barber’s itch to the hoof and mouth disease, Jacobs liked to coach odd events. In 1948 the hop-step-and-jump (known today as the triple jump) was virtually unknown in this country. Jacobs began studying it. Two of his boys, John Gough and Hobo Gilstrap, placed one-two at the Kansas Relays. Next week, Oklahoma placed one-two-four at the Drake Relays with Bill Weaver joining Gough and Gilstrap on the victor’s stand. Weaver, a drama major, later changed his name to Dennis Weaver and won a television Emmy with his portrayal of Chester, the deputy in “Gunsmoke.”

Perhaps the truest test of track coaching is the decathlon, a 10-event grind. J. W. Mashburn, Jacobs’ big 400-meter runner, became scholasti-



Clowning for the camera, Jacobs, left, pays farmer Kirk Lawrence to sic his dogs on a "lazy" crosscountry team.



Jacobs waits patiently by lantern light for his cross-country team which is not yet in from an afternoon run.

cally ineligible. The only event open to Mashburn that spring was the Kansas Relays decathlon. In two months, Jacobs taught Mashburn so well the intricate form for the jumps, weights, hurdles, dashes and distance race that Mashburn won the decathlon at Lawrence, an upset. Earlier, in 1928, Jacobs had recast Tom Churchill, a big man prominent in football and basketball, into a decathlete who placed fifth in the Olympics at Stockholm.

Track scholarships did not exist then. The coach brought boys to the University by finding part-time jobs for them downtown or on the campus. Much of what Jacobs found was noted for its diverting variety.

Ansel Young worked nights at the railway express office and had to be awakened in mid-afternoon to throw the javelin in home meets. Parker Shelby, three-time Drake Relays high jump champion, served as an attendant to the mentally ill at the state hospital on East Main street. Floyd Lochner, whom Jacobs developed into a national collegiate two-mile champion, brought a jersey cow to the campus, arose before dawn to milk her and peddled her product to a customer route. Glen Dawson, who later became an Olympic steeplechaser, sold socks for a mail order house.

Like most track coaches then, Jacobs also tutored cross-country, an autumnal sport in which six-man teams ran a five-mile race that drew only a pittance of spectators. Despite the sport's virtual anonymity, Jacobs' drollery invigorated it. Before the 1952 dual with Colorado's distance team, Jacobs announced, "I'm makin' Colorado carry the heaviest jersey numbers." Chuckling, he assigned them numbers 203-208 while burdening his own team with only two-digit numerals, 30 through 35.

William Howard Taft was president when Jacobs enrolled at Oklahoma and set University records in the high jump, broad jump, high hurdles and low hurdles besides running the first 440-yard leg on the all-victorious Sooner mile relay. In 1915, he married Daphne Dodson, a music major from Mangum. They had two sons, John Jr. and Bill. After graduation from OU, Jacobs coached football at Sherman, Texas High School.

"I didn't know nothin' about nothin'," he later revealed. "A former Texas player who owned a coal yard helped me. I'd go see him in the evening, and he'd take eleven chunks of coal and show me some plays.

"I also taught algebra, but I could just teach it to page 75, then they'd

have to get another teacher to finish the course." Oklahoma rescued him from that dilemma by appointing him track coach.

He didn't need to juggle chunks of anthracite to know how to organize a track program. His Sooner indoor teams of 1927, 1928 and 1929 won conference championships. His 1924-1929 teams swept 19 consecutive dual meets.

He resorted to strategy to preserve that skein. Nebraska, which had never lost an outdoor dual under its coach, Henry "Indian" Schulte, invaded Norman in 1928 in a special railroad pullman car before a crowd of 4,000. Each team had two crack high hurdlers in a race in which only three places were scored. Jacobs also entered Tom Churchill, his hefty Olympic decathlete, in the event. "Be sure to jump all the hurdles, even if you don't get in till dark," Jacobs instructed Churchill.

In the race, so many hurdles were knocked down that it sounded like sticks clashing in an ice hockey brawl. An Oklahoman was disqualified. A Nebraskan stumbled and fell. The grinning Churchill, finishing 20 yards behind the winner, safely high-jumped all the fences and placed third. Oklahoma won the meet by 2½ points.

The coach's flinty sense of integrity was illustrated during a wartime indoor dual meet with Kansas at Pneumonia Downs. The result went down to the final mile relay, which Oklahoma won when Jon Sharp, its anchor, dived beneath the string to pass the Kansas anchor. Coach Bill Easton of Kansas protested to Jacobs that the Kansas man's feet had crossed the finish line ahead of Sharp's feet, which would have given the race to Kansas. Jacobs hadn't seen the finish clearly. The cheering crowd blocked his view.

Jacobs assembled the judges and explained the rule. The judges reversed their decision and declared Kansas the winner of the relay and the meet.

Jacobs bounced back briskly from defeat. The most disastrous meet in Oklahoma's track history was probably the 1951 Big Seven conference indoor event at Kansas City. Hurdler Jim Smith pulled a muscle. Halfmiler George McCormick lamed an arch. Quanah Cox and Jerry Meader were running one-two in the 440 when they collided and fell. The Sooner mile relayists were comfortably ahead when Charles Coleman, Big Seven outdoor 440 champion, pulled a muscle and, hopping painfully, disgustingly hurled his baton far up the track. Instead of contending for the championship, Oklahoma fell to fifth. Climaxing all the misfortune, when Jacobs returned to the hotel, somebody had stolen his hat.

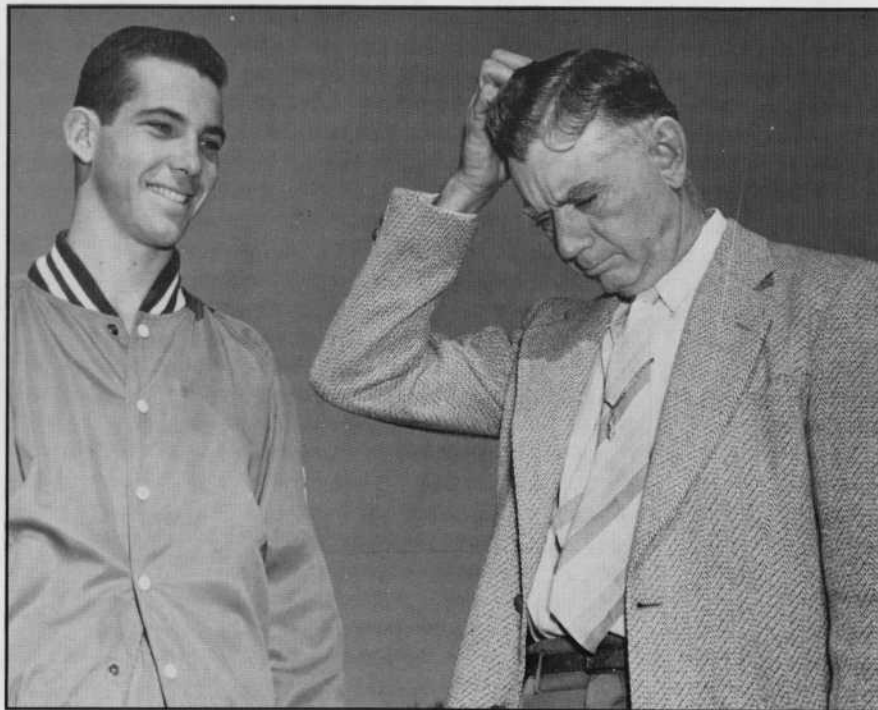
But in the Texas Relays four weeks later, the Sooners roared back, winning four of the seven university division relays, the 440, 880, two-mile and sprint medley. Even without Coleman, they lacked only inches taking the mile relay as well, and sweeping an unprecedented five. Jacobs gave all the credit to the new gray felt hat that he had purchased to replace the one stolen at Kansas City.

"This is sure some hat," he chuckled. "If anything, this is a faster hat than the old one."

He once extricated the University from an embarrassing situation involving Jim Thorpe, the nationally prominent Indian athlete from Prague, Oklahoma, who had won the 1912 Olympic decathlon. While visit-



Jake enjoys reading the Nebraska newspapers' account of his Sooners' tie with the University of Nebraska, considered an upset when the meet was in Lincoln.



What to do when you have your son on the team? John Jacobs, right, scratches his head over this familiar problem with son Bill, a Big Eight half-mile champion.

ing his old Sac and Fox stomping ground, Thorpe innocently told a young reporter from nearby Shawnee, Oklahoma, "I'd like to be athletic director at the University of Oklahoma. It would be nice to be back among my own people."

The reporter splashed Thorpe's statement on the press wires. Widely played in state newspapers, it embarrassed the University and Dale Arbuckle, acting athletic director, not to mention Lawrence "Jap" Haskell, the athletic director on leave with the Navy. Jacobs got everybody off the hook. Joseph A. Brandt had just resigned as president of the University, and the regents hadn't had time to name his successor.

"We've got two athletic directors, but we don't have a president," Jacobs said. "Let's make old Jim president of the University." His witticism was relayed to the press. After the laughter died away, the Thorpe-for-director boom had passed to the Happy Hunting Grounds.

The coach's pleasantries touched females of all ages. When two-year-old

Wanda Sue Farris, daughter of the Oklahoma athletic business manager, proudly showed him her pigtails, he asked, "Can you shut your eyes with your hair twisted that tight?"

Jacobs' favorite in the late 1930s was Oliver, a blind student. The coach got Oliver a job as student trainer for the track team and took him to the varsity baseball games, explaining each pitch and swing of the bat. Jacobs didn't coddle Oliver as did everybody else, and the blind lad enjoyed the rough treatment.

When Oliver entered the track dressing room, he walked with his hands up, feeling his way. "Get your dukes up higher! I'm going to beat the hell out of you," the coach would call out, challengingly. And Oliver would chuckle, "That's old Jake."

In his early years of coaching, his relay teams traveled to meets in a rented Buick, which the coach drove far too fast. As they crossed Ohio on their way back east, they encountered a heavy rain storm. The surrounding fields were sodden. Suddenly the car, making seventy, zoomed over a hill, and the athletes in it froze in horror. Ahead of them, the highway made a sudden 90-degree right turn. Everybody knew they were traveling too fast to negotiate it.

Jacobs didn't try to negotiate the

curve. A new service station had been built just off the turn. It lay upon a lot on which blue grass had been sewn in an immaculate lawn. Jacobs steered the Buick through the filling station, through the lawn and to the rear of the lot where the car stopped, all four wheels deeply mired. The Buick lay 50 feet beyond the gasoline pump.

His lawn ruined, the proprietor stormed out of the filling station, but Jacobs was ready for him. The coach stuck his head out of the driver's window.

"Fill her up!" he called. Everybody, even the owner of the filling station, laughed.

Jacobs' chief communication with his squads was by a series of handwritten bulletins, exuding wisdom and advice, which he dashed off in pencil on ruled sheets of yellow paper and thumb-tacked to the locker room door. Not many of his troops smoked. Although he preferred this, the coach privately tolerated the practice and enjoyed teasing the guilty as his bulletin of February 15, 1949, showed.

"DEAR FELLOW SMOKERS. I have some stuff at home that will take the cigarette stain off your fingers at one swipe, and nobody will know that you smoked during training. The boys say that it works marvelously. if you want it, sign here." The coach had



Jacobs gives his 1933 OU sprinters some practice with the starting gun.



Jacobs always left them laughing. Above, in 1951, he breaks up his audience of high jumper Dick Jones, left, and OU's South African broad jumper Neville Price.

signed the names of the three worse offenders.

When his team packed for the Texas Relays three weeks later, he scribbled, "We are going south for the next one. Change to long spikes and short underwear."

Some of his best verbal darts helped lessen bitter disappointment. When polevaulter J. D. Martin, using the old-style pole, barely missed a moon shot of 15-10 for a new world's indoor record, Jacobs pulled a long breath and shook his head disconsolately.

"That's a hell of a long ways to fall," he muttered.

In the summer of 1953, the coach seemed weary and older. Without telling anyone in the athletic department, he went to an Oklahoma City hospital for a prostate operation. "There comes a time in every man's life where he has to have his valves ground and his oil changed," he later explained.

Informed before the operation that they were giving him a spinal anesthetic, he insisted on ether. They laughed and told him that ether was obsolete. The doctor who administered the anesthetic said, "You probably don't remember me, but I went out for the shot put under you in 1924."

"Well, my Lord!" Jacobs exploded. "I knew I'd get into something like this. Ended up by gettin' operated on by a damn shot-putter."

When I drove to Oklahoma City to visit him, he seemed depressed. "They created man all wrong," he declared. "After 60, he's not worth a damn. That ought to be the end of it. Man oughta leave his carcass on a tree, just like the bugs do, and die quick, like the bugs. There oughtn't to be any mourning."

But he rallied and even saw humor in his plight. When several of his athletes called on him, Jacobs was dining intravenously from a tube attached to two overhead bottles, one filled with a clear liquid, the other with brown.

The coach looked at a nurse standing nearby. "Is that Ethyl or regular you're givin' me?" he inquired.

On his last day at the hospital, he was cheerful and irascible again. A nurse brought him a small tumbler of castor oil to drink. "My Lord!" yelled



The Sooner football crowd honors the veteran track and crosscountry coach during a halftime presentation by the marching band and the student card section.

the coach, who hated all kinds of hypodermic injections. "Ain't you gonna give me that in a needle?"

Although Jake enjoyed food, he didn't set a perfect example to his squad. On track trips, he started every meal with dessert, and he usually ate alone at the counter. When he walked into a certain restaurant in Arkansas City, Kansas, where the Sooners usually lunched during their automobile trips to Kansas City, the proprietor without a word would bring him a piece of lemon pie.

While he wanted his athletes to have plenty, he disliked extravagant ordering. At Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1940 Jack Jacobs, Creek Indian tailback of the Oklahoma football team who also threw the javelin, ordered two large tumblers of orange juice with his breakfast.

"Why don't you order a whole bushel, and we'll help you squeeze 'em?" the coach suggested pleasantly.

Jacobs liked wild game cooked but refused to eat roast squirrel. "I don't eat nothin' that barks," he explained.

Worried about her oldest son in World War II, Jake's wife became mentally unstable and was taken to the state hospital at Norman. Although the son survived the war, Mrs. Jacobs' condition steadily worsened. On the morning of a dual outdoor meet with Oklahoma A&M at Norman, our daughter, Kitty, telephoned Jacobs, inviting him to dinner that night.

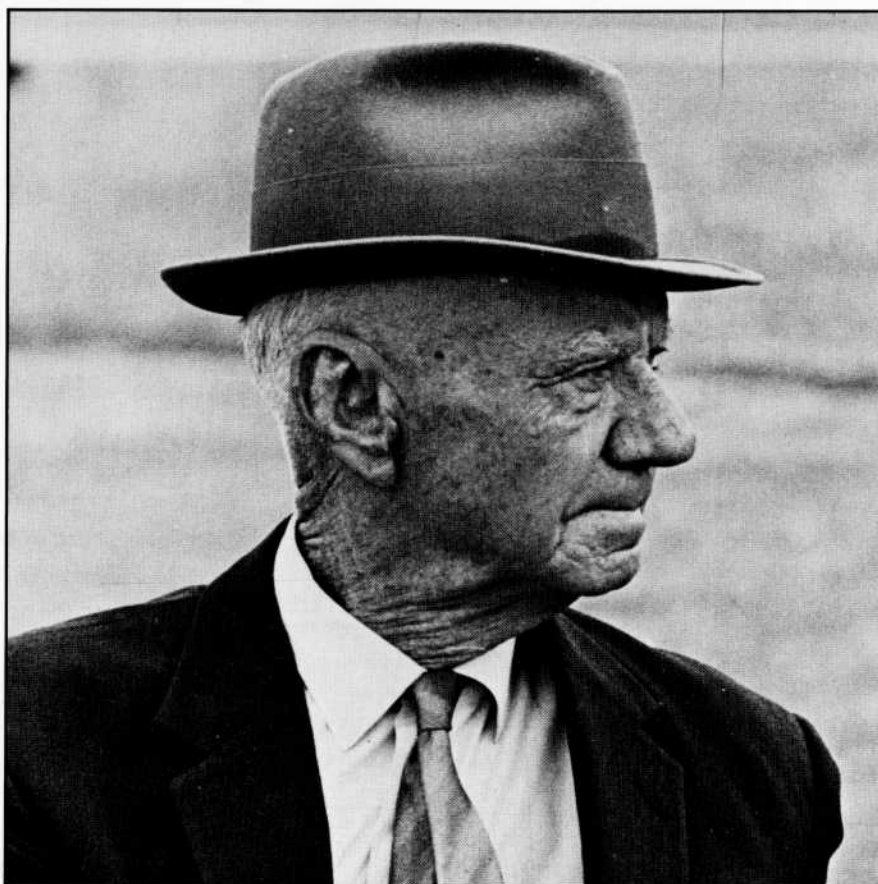
He declined, explaining that the next day was Mother's Day, and he planned to bring his wife home that night from the hospital. He had engaged an elderly woman to prepare a nice meal. I can still see him cutting the roses that grew in their yard and placing them in bowls of fresh water throughout the house. Although she gradually ceased to recognize him, he called on her faithfully at the hospital, taking fresh flowers.

He never lost his pungency of expression. It was the only way he knew how to speak. "They hulled him out like a pecan," he described a friend's cancer operation. He explained another friend's heart attack as follows: "Fred shot at too many quail that kept on going." To a shoe shine boy who accosted him on the streets of Arkansas City, he protested, "Why, my Lord, son! I just got 'em shined a week ago last Saturday."

At an Oklahoma alumni meeting, somebody was trying to splice a broken football film. "I used to be able to put a belt on a wheat binder if that will help you any," Jacobs volunteered out of the darkness.

Or this account of one of his own quail hunts: "I made several magnificent shots. Then a single got up in front of me and flew directly away from me. I missed him three times. If I'd had a slingshot, I'd got him sure."

Of a friend's change in temperance habits, Jacobs commented, "John's got



When head coach J. D. Martin was confined to his home by an appendectomy in 1967, the 74-year-old Jacobs guided OU to victory over arch rival Oklahoma State.

a new hobby now — roses. It used to be Four Roses.”

The years sped. The old era of track and field was dying. New techniques revolutionized the sport. The Russian high jumper Valery Brumel set a world record by sprinting to the bar and converting his 9.8-second 100-yard speed into an unparalleled upper thrust. The new fiber-glass vaulting pole, whippy as a fly rod, added almost 1½ feet to most records and demanded a new procedure. Foreign coaches honed their distance runners with excruciating twice-daily workouts in which hill running was stressed and more than 100 miles per week covered. Track had become international in scope. But Jacobs’ indoor teams still trained at Pneumonia Downs.

At Oklahoma, Jacobs recruited foreign athletes, too, and admitted frankly that he learned more from them than from anybody. “They had to sell me on things like alternate running, weight-lifting and concrete run-

ways, but I’m sold. I’m just learning how little I know.”

He foresaw the four-minute mile long before Roger Bannister ever ran it. “It will come like the cotton gin and the light bulb,” he maintained. Breaking the psychological logjam was the chief impediment, he believed. “It’s like the first time you dive off the high board. First you stand on it, looking down at the water and working up your nerve. After the first dive, you never worry again.”

In 1958, at age 65, Jacobs switched jobs with his assistant, Bill Carroll. His chief function was coaching freshmen, and he enjoyed it. Blacks had won their sports emancipation and began to dot his freshman squads.

In May 1961 his wife died. The coach hired a housekeeper and continued life at his home on Emelyn Avenue. He visited a lot with his sons and their families. He enjoyed his grand children. “I’m countin’ my birthdays backwards now,” he cracked hoarsely. “I got

up to 77 last year. Had another birthday yesterday — I was 76. Soon I’ll be back in the school house.”

The Jacobs home in southeast Norman was a six-room one-story frame house painted tan. The decor was Southwestern-Piscatorial. Heads of the largest fish hooked by the coach that year decorated the fence in the back yard. (“Sometimes a man needs a little evidence.”)

When my wife and I called on him in those later years, he came walking around the house barefoot. He had just gotten in from fishing. He pointed proudly to his lawn, level as the top of a billiard table. “Prettiest damn lawn in town,” he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

We moved through the entry hall. In the kitchen two casting rods with dangling red lures leaned against a wall in a corner. A white flower nodded from a vase. Jacobs pointed to it proudly. “Prettiest damn gladiola in town,” he declared positively, and it may well have been.

We walked past a rear bedroom. He apologized for the disheveled sheets on the bed. “Had a guest last night,” he explained. “This morning he asked me, ‘Can I make my bed?’ I said, ‘Hell no! I’m gonna send them sheets to the laundry after you slept on ‘em!’ ”

He ushered us into his living room, dropped into a chair and lit a cigarette with a kitchen match he scratched off the seat of his pants. He leaned back, squinting to avoid the smoke. The room was a combination of mid-Victorian and Jacobsesque with its small ornate tables and a love seat of patterned brown upholstery. Most of his necessities — cigarettes, magazines, piles of letters enclosed by rubber bands, packages of candy — were neatly piled around what he called his “Old Folks Arm Chair.”

Let’s leave him in that chair, eyes squinting, cigarette bobbing between his lips. From a nearby wall the inscription on the copper plate of a 14-inch walnut plaque presented him upon his retirement by Big Eight conference track coaches bore an enduring record of what he lived by and believed in.

“To John Jacobs,” read the plaque. “A spirited but friendly and always honorable opponent.”

