



*Sophomore medics Jeff Hirsch, Alan Hollingsworth and Richard Katz in 1973.*

## The Class that Redefined “GRIDIRON”

*Is there life after medical school? Most medical students think not. Survival is often a case of venting frustrations in foolishness, applying the salve of humor to the ache of otherwise intolerable pressures. Case in point: the classic gridiron films produced by the legendary Class of '75*

By Alan B. Hollingsworth, M.D.

The odds are strong that if your doctor went to medical school at the University of Oklahoma, he was party to a phenomenon known as the Gridiron. Very likely, he was in attendance all four years of medical school and might have returned for more as an intern or resident.

When most Sooner fans hear the word "gridiron," they immediately begin to smell oranges and think of national championships. But for those who have graduated, or currently are attending, the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine, the word means a year-end celebration, rowdy to the point of rendering fraternity parties pale by comparison. In 1972, damages to the Skirvin Hotel resulting from the Gridiron caused the event to be banished to the State Fairgrounds, where it was housed in a building more appropriately designed for livestock.

*"What? Not our benevolent, balding Dr. Jones . . . our family doctor for the past 10 years . . . the man who delivered our three children . . . the wonderful healer who kept Grandma alive through double pneumonia . . ."*

The fairgrounds really turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It was possible for the Coors truck to back right up to the chow line, and no one ever had to turn off the spigot at the side of the truck. When the truck was empty, the party was just beginning. There would be the faculty spoof skits, the recitation of "The Bengal Tiger" story by the chairman of gynecology/obstetrics — then, of course, the strippers.

*"Now hold it right there! Our Dr. Jones may have tipped a few in his day, maybe even went to a party once a year to celebrate the end of another year of school . . . but strippers? No way. Not the man who discovered the rare cause of my backache when the big city specialists couldn't figure it out. Doctors aren't what they used to be, mind you, so I wouldn't put that sort of behavior past them. But no strippers for our beloved Dr. Jones. Nosirree!"*

Then women's liberation came along, and with the rise in female medical students from only a few to a large

portion of the class . . . well, naturally male strippers had to be added to the program.

*"That does it! I've read enough. George, phone Dr. Jones and ask him to call in a prescription for my nerve tonic."*

*"Yes, dear."*

*"Oh, and George . . ."*

*"Yes, dear?"*

*"While you're on the phone with Dr. Jones, will you ask him if he ever . . . well, just ask him if I'm right in believin' a doctor would never . . . Just tell him there'll be no strippers in this town. Over my dead body!"*

The origins of the Gridiron remain somewhat shrouded in mystery. But what evolved was a year-end faculty roast, where many of the professors were scalded in absentia, while a still surprising number joined the students each year in the (unofficial) festivities. Through 1971, live skits had been the medium of revenge. Thereafter, Gridiron would be revolutionized by that medical school class which celebrated its 10-year reunion in June — the Class of '75. (No strippers scheduled at the reunion, but Gridiron film at 10:00, again at 11:00, and at 12:00.)

\* \* \*

It was a motley crew of "H's" through "Ls" that was tossed by the alphabet into Module #216 of the Basic Sciences Building as 16 freshmen medical students at the OU Health Sciences Center in 1971 — hippies and hicks, Yankees and Okies, Jew, gentile,

*EDITOR'S NOTE: In the November 1984 issue of the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine's alumni magazine, Vital Signs, a story by editor Richard Greene on the multi-talented Dr. Jeffrey Hirsch, made reference to the gridiron films which played a role in the good doctor's development as a filmmaker. Protesting inadequate coverage of a tale worth telling in full, fellow '75er Alan Hollingsworth offers his own version on behalf of his colleagues in medical spoofery who gathered in June to celebrate the 10th anniversary of their liberation from medical school.*

Oriental, female and the first wheelchair-bound student in the school's recent history. Yet the differences served ironically as a bonding agent as the students worked together, helping each to achieve that trophy four years away — the coveted M.D.

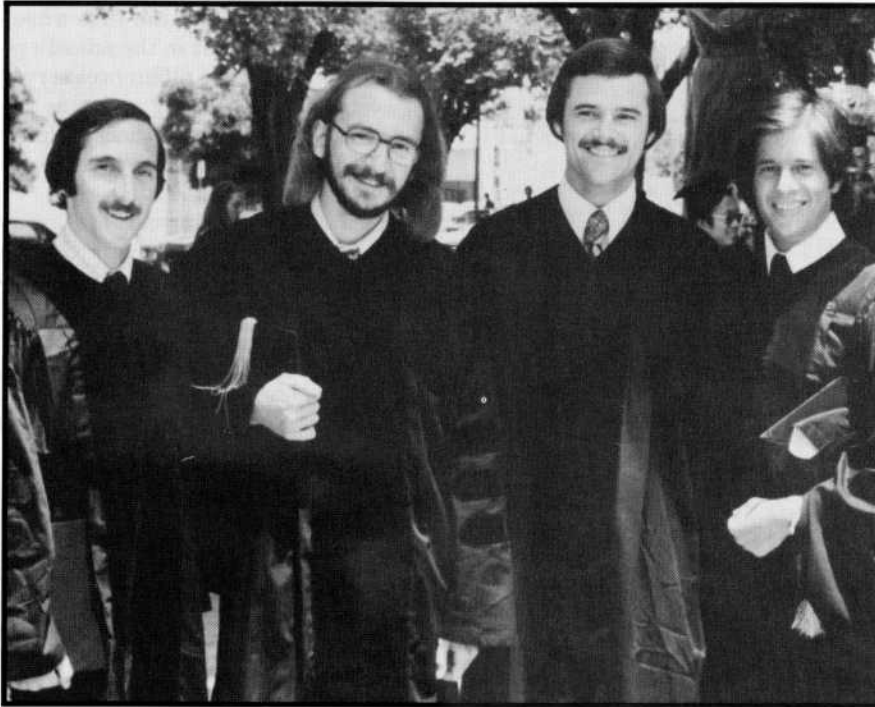
Early in that first year, the legendary psychiatry professor, Dr. Gordon Deckert, explained in his classic histrionic style the psychodynamics of Gridiron and that the motivation for each class skit would be to poke fun, or even offer twisted adulation, of various professors and the medical education process in general.

The Basic Sciences Building was new and had recently established what was then a state-of-the-art system of videotape education. The idea for producing the freshman skit as a videotaped presentation came from the student whose name later would become synonymous with Gridiron — Jeffrey Hirsch. As a motivating force and technical producer, Hirsch's contribution was unparalleled, and without him the degenerating Gridiron (which was losing professor attendance each year) would never have shed its bawdy reputation and emerged as the film festival it is today (albeit still accompanied by liquid refreshments).

The creative force behind the "new Gridiron" was Module #216 in its entirety, along with some additional classmates. Names like Katz and Kaltenberger, Karasek and Kendrick, Holland and Hall, Hoffman and Holliman, Laughlin, Lau, Lange, and lastly, Hollingsworth and Hirsch created what now seems to be an amateur production, but what then brought a landmark standing ovation from the 1972 Gridiron crowd, along with the demand for an unofficial "Oscar" acceptance speech from Jeff Hirsch.

After Hirsch had thanked his module and other contributors, the senior student who emceed that evening approached the microphone and commented: "It is Gridiron tradition to 'boo' the freshman skit to the point it has to be stopped. But what can we say now? You have all seen it for yourselves. Congratulations to Jeff Hirsch and the Class of '75!"

Thunderous applause accompanied



*Gridiron rivalries forgotten, Jeff Hirsch, left, David Karasek, Alan Hollingsworth and Richard Katz reunite to receive their coveted M.D.s in June 1975.*

Hirsch to the shoulders of his classmates. Needless to say, Gridiron had been redefined.

Plans for Gridiron '73 began the next day. Hirsch deemed it would be bigger and better. As the sophomore year began, all the medical students scrambled to different modules downstairs — all except Module #216, which migrated en masse to Module #116, united both in academic efforts and the creation of Gridiron '73.

When more students from #216 were promoted with Honors out of the freshman year than would have been expected, the stage was set for future academic rivalry within the group — and from the outside, “clique” accusations emerged.

Creation of the next Gridiron videotape was started immediately, with most of the same contributors as before. My own contribution sprang from a background in amateur filmmaking acquired as undergraduate president of the Sigma Chi fraternity at OU. At one time my “then-locally-famous Rush Films” were being circulated to Sigma Chi chapters across the country, followed by a national workshop lecture in filmmaking techniques.

Hirsch also had a background as filmmaker, which he has continued to this day, as chronicled last year in “The Jeff Hirsch Story” in the OU medical alumni magazine *Vital Signs*. It was natural that our back-to-back seating in the module led to a friendship which would include side-by-side filmmaking.

As one of the segments in our sophomore Gridiron, I suggested to Hirsch that a standard 8mm camera be used (in those pre-VCR days, even sound films for home movies were not generally available) to film Walter Cronkite directly off the TV screen. Then a newsreel was concocted showing the sophomore year in medical school by splicing in a montage of old movies. The film was transferred to videotape with my own moderately-fair Cronkite imitation giving a narrative of the “news items” in a voice-over lip synchronization with Cronkite’s visual image.

Projected onto the giant screen at Gridiron '73, the Cronkite newsreel was one of the highlights that brought the medical school crowd to another standing ovation. Some of the more “involved” students from other classes (with blood ethanol levels probably ex-

ceeding 0.2) even asked how the sophomores had managed to get Walter Cronkite to narrate the newsreel.

When Hirsch was elevated to the stage once again for his “Oscar” speech, he made his first major production error — he forgot the thank “all the little people,” i.e. Module #116 and others, which had served as a virtual factory of Gridiron creativity. Some members of the “Gridiron Circle” were infuriated, vowing not to help with Gridiron '74, just to see where that would leave Hirsch.

Then came the fatal blow to the wavering friendships. Naively, the “Gridiron Circle” tried to stay intact through the third-year rotations on the various clinical services. Now, however, instead of studying together to help with written, objective exams, the group was competing among itself under a very subjective grading system of Honors — Pass — Fail. By the spring of that academic year, the group was barely speaking to each other, with only Hirsch thinking of the approaching Gridiron.

In spite of the controversy, Hirsch managed to conduct a classmate choir in a fine rendition of the “Hallelujah Chorus” (new lyrics, of course), with a strong vocal by Bill Caldwell. Then he handed me the recording: “We need a film.” With animation, trick photography and a challenging editing task, I fashioned 37 scenes into a 2½-minute sequence to fit the musical score (rather than the ordinarily opposite approach).

As the opening sequence for Gridiron '74, the resulting film brought the crowd to its feet in wild applause. It would be another banner year for Hirsch — or would it?

In the following sequence, dialogue dragged, acoustics were poor in the fairgrounds “building,” and the crowd began to boo — yes, BOO! The vicious cycle that had always happened to the films tried by *other* classes began to snare Hirsch’s production. The booing so obscured further dialogue that there was never a chance for redemption. The audience drowned out the remainder of the videotape with drunken jeers.

It was certainly the lowest point in Hirsch’s illustrious Gridiron career. After such lofty accolades in the past,



he might well have felt worse than Moses coming down from the mountain, after previously parting the Red Sea, only to find the nation of Israel in drunken debauchery.

That night I approached the dejected Hirsch and said: "The acoustics are killing Gridiron. Remember, this crowd has had a Coors truck for an appetizer. If one line of dialogue is missed, the booing begins, and the film is ruined. The answer is simple, Jeff. Next year, we'll pull off our grande finale Gridiron with a *silent film* — a Charlie Chaplin take-off. Music, of course, but no dialogue. An old-fashioned silent film where acoustics won't make any difference." Hirsch nodded but would have agreed to anything at that point.

By the end of the senior year, Module #116 had disintegrated, and all emphasis was on specialty choices and internships. There was not much interest or concern for the production of Gridiron '75. When the dust settled, only two were left, back-to-back, side-by-side, Hollingsworth and Hirsch.

With Hirsch brilliant in his portrayal of Charlie Chaplin, while I directed and filmed, our joint storyline evolved into the double entendre "A Tramp Through Medical School." Only a few classmates remained to help out as actors (Totoro, Browne); Steve Gilliland added his annual electronics expertise; and some good-natured professors (Drs. Mock, Marshall, Merrill and Nichols) were willing to catch a pie-in-the-eye. Charlie shuffled through four years of medical school, handling the challenges with the innocent vulnerability of Chaplin himself.

After the shoot, the post-production efforts included countless rolls of film, writing and filming the silent screen subtitles by sticking white plastic letters to a black background, then condensing it all into a meaningful plot. Special effects were no easy feat either. One sequence, lasting only seconds, involved an animated skeleton that had to be positioned and filmed over a hundred times.

Unless one were present, it is impossible to describe the electricity — no, the lightning — that struck the crowd of 500 medical students and faculty the night of the premier — the night that the gold standard for all future

Gridiron films was established.

"The Jeff Hirsch Story" correctly relates the audience reaction to the film: "... Those who were at that Gridiron in May 1975 say the audience stood and cheered for several minutes. Jeff was hoisted into the air by his classmates . . . but he probably could have managed levitation on his own." The story fails to mention the additional fact that a persistent chant arose from the audience: "Hirsch . . . Hirsch . . . Hirsch . . ."

#### EPILOGUE:

The film went on to be shown for countless other affairs, both at the Health Sciences Center and in private screenings. For a time, every incoming class of freshmen medical students at the University of Oklahoma viewed the film. (Perhaps they still do.) It was even featured one Saturday after the Surgical Grand Rounds Conference, and a video copy remains on file in the department of surgery library.

Had Hirsch and I anticipated the numerous public reruns throughout the years, we doubtless would have censored areas a bit sensitive for mixed company, especially the lay public.

After completing residencies, the Hollingsworth-Hirsch team reunited to create "A Tramp Through Residency" with Hirsch returning to the role he made famous through imitation. Feeling that I never had received proper credit for either of the films, Hirsch placed my name under so many credit headings in the sequel as to be comical.

However, the real comedy came when the baggy pants, derby hat and twitching moustache were resurrected to the delight of everyone. Those present the night of the Interns and Residents Day Banquet were a far different audience that the fairgrounds crowd five years earlier, yet they seemed to agree that the sequel quite possibly equaled the original, as evidenced by their standing, cheering ovation which continued long after Hirsch and I stood together to acknowledge the appreciation of our final joint effort.

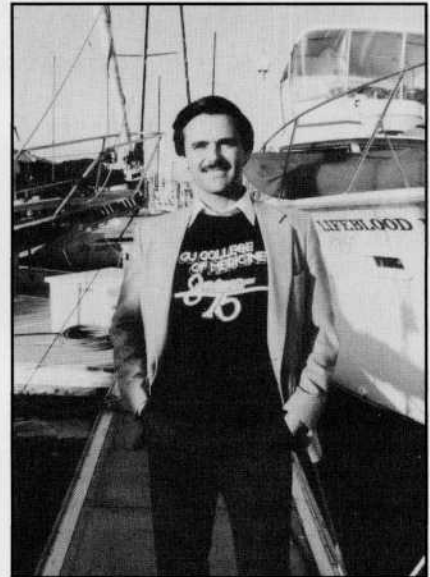
"Honey, I couldn't get Dr. Jones on the phone. His nurse says he's out of town. Off to his medical

school 10-year class reunion." "That's okay dear. After reading the rest of this article, my faith in doctors has been restored. Of course, I was never really worried about our Dr. Jones."

"His nurse said he had no business leaving town while things are so busy right now, what with the Baker triplets on the way and the hospital full up. She says all he could talk about was gettin' to that reunion so he could see some sort of old movie . . . I think she called it a Gridiron film."

"George, you better check the cupboards to see if any of my nerve tonic is handy . . . I feel a spell comin' on."

THE END



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Alan Hollingsworth received his B.A. with distinction from the University of Oklahoma in 1971, accompanied by honors such as Phi Beta Kappa, Top Ten Senior Men, President's Leadership Class, etc. After achieving similar distinction at the OU College of Medicine, he completed a surgical internship and residencies at the OU Health Sciences Center and U.C.L.A. Dr. Hollingsworth practices general surgery in Marina del Rey, California, while pursuing a second career at the typewriter under the pseudonym of Alan Hollbeck. He presently is marketing a first novel, *Prognosis: Guarded*, a National Writers Club award winner. [7]