



The Baer Facts

By Harold Keith

Graying, plump, falsetto-voiced Jack Baer, the Handy-Andy of the University of Oklahoma athletic staff, doesn't like Navy bands.

In his World War II days, Baer was manager-catcher for the Bunker Hill, Indiana, Naval Air Station baseball team. During a game with the Iowa Pre-Flight Seahawks, he charged out onto the field to protest a bad decision. Not only did he lose the argument, but the tuba players in the Seahawk band gave him the Bronx cheer besides.

Still irked, Baer later came to bat. The same umpire called a doubtful strike. While Baer protested heatedly, the Seahawk pitcher fast-pitched him for another called strike, and the bass horns tauntingly emitted more snoring boos. Baer then bounded out to the pitcher. As he walked glowering to the bench, the Seahawk band mischievously struck up the tune, "You must have been a beautiful baby, 'cause, baby, look at you now!"

Well, let's look at him now. It will have to be a panoramic look if it includes all the departments in which this bright, breezy, happy-go-lucky fellow has served the Sooners. No man on the OU staff has been more versatile or useful than the guy with the girlish voice.

Baer coached OU baseball for 23 seasons. His Sooner clubs won six conference championships, placed second seven times, third four times and in 1951 swept the national collegiate championship in four straight games. After that feat, Baer was voted the first College Baseball Coach of the Year and was given a new Ford car by Sooner alumni.

In addition, he served OU football as assistant coach, kicking coach, freshman coach and "B" team coach. He also shot movies of OU games, drove a bus, wrapped ankles and in 1942 put in a stint as interim OU business manager on football trips while Bill Cross, the incumbent, was recovering from an illness.

On that occasion, the boys still tell about the time Baer chartered a Dallas streetcar to rush the Sooner football squad to the Cotton Bowl for a Friday afternoon workout. It was wartime, and no taxicabs were available. Until Baer thought of the trolley, it looked like the Sooners might have to practice in the Melrose Hotel lobby.

For nearly two decades he has been OU's athletic equipment manager. "Football is a dirty business," he characterizes that job. "If you don't believe me, come over some day and watch us do the laundry."

This spring, after 44 years on the Sooner staff, Baer retired.

"I don't feel 70, but I guess I am," he laughs. "Being around all these kids and coaches keeps a guy young." How does he spend his time today? "Playing some golf and working around the house. You know, 'honey do' work. 'Honey, do this' and 'Honey, do that.'"

Baer was born at Shawnee and lived his whole life there until he came to OU. His father, Herman Baer, was a railroad conductor on the Rock Island and as a young man had played semi-

**After 44 years
as the OU athletic
department's
Jack-of-all-trades,
the eternal
freshman
hangs 'em up.**

pro baseball with Rogers Hornsby. The boy Jack grew up in the world of sports.

A bat boy for the old Shawnee professional team of the Western Association, he knew how to make the job pay off. Shawnee's baseball park was a big one with the left field fence a monstrous 400 feet from home plate. That didn't stop Ab Wright, Shawnee's big outfielder and former Oklahoma A&M star. In batting practice before games, Wright slugged fungo after fungo over that far-away left field wall. Baer's job was to stay behind the fence and shag the balls Ab belted.

"I'd shag 'em, keeping one for every one I threw back," Baer recalls. "At the close of the season I had a No.3 washtub full of baseballs. Finally, I traded them and seven dollars to boot for an old 1926 stripdown Ford car. It had no license tag, so I just drove it

on dirt roads at the edge of town."

At Shawnee High, Baer lettered in football, baseball and basketball. In baseball, he both pitched and caught the Wolves to the 1934 Oklahoma prep championship. He also played on a Shawnee football team that was all-victorious and unscored on. His coach was Ray "Freight Train" LeCrone, former OU fullback, so it was natural that Baer gravitated towards OU. Lawrence "Jap" Haskell, OU baseball and football line coach, recruited him.

At OU, he pledged Kappa Sigma social fraternity and was elected president of the OU freshman class, a phenomenon he attributes to the custom among OU fraternities of alternating the honor. Baer says it was Kappa Sigma's year. He doesn't recall presiding at a single conclave.

Baer liked football because it came first in the fall and drew the biggest crowds. When he first enrolled at OU in 1934, Bennie Owen was still athletic director and Lewie Hardage the football coach. That all changed dramatically when Regent Lloyd Noble persuaded Capt. Lawrence "Biff" Jones, the famous Army coach, to take the Oklahoma job. Jones hired Tom Stidham, former Haskell Indian tackle, as his line coach.

As a rookie wingback breaking in with Jones' Sooners in 1936, Baer first learned humility. Before the Texas game, Jones designed a play where the wingback was supposed to block the Texas end, then drop back, take a lateral from "Bo" Hawes, retreat 15 more yards and peg a long forward pass. Baer fielded the lateral but backed up so fast that he tripped and fell down 12 yards behind the scrimmage stripe.

"That so-and-so is just like a politician," some leather-lunged fan yelled. "You can't tell which side he's on."

As a senior in 1937, Baer became Oklahoma's starting tailback and signal chirper. Stidham had succeeded Jones as head coach when Jones was summoned to the Army Command and General Staff school at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Oklahoma lost its opener 7-19 to Tulsa but not because of Baer. Jack snapped a forward pass to Woody Huddleston to introduce the lone Sooner touchdown and lofted a long punt out of bounds on the Tulsa 8. He prevented a Tulsa touchdown when he



Blocking back Al Corrotto, left, clears the way for "Double Nothing," Jack Baer.

tackled Morris White so savagely that he jarred the ball loose from the Golden Hurricane phenom and recovered it on the Sooner 3. Although he stood only 5-10½ and weighed only 170, Baer was tough as a picnic egg.

The next week, Oklahoma upset a strong Rice team 6-0 at Norman. The Sooners' 56-yard touchdown drive culminated when the blond Baer drilled a 14-yard pass to Pete Smith, Oklahoma's All-America end, who fielded the ball neatly as he trotted through a vacuum in the end zone.

But the Sooners paid dearly for the victory when Baer fractured his cheek bone. Ted Owen, Sooner trainer, devised a single-bar brace to protect the break, but Baer missed the next three games, 7-7 against Texas, 0-0 against Nebraska and 3-6 to Kansas. He wore

his brace the rest of the season.

Back in action against Kansas State at Manhattan, Baer toed a 50-yard punt out on the Wildcat 8 and spun through the line for a touchdown as Oklahoma won 19-0. He forgot all about his wounded cheek.

He dominated the following Iowa State game, too, which Stidham's Sooners annexed 33-7. Picking off a forward pass thrown by Cyclone ace Everett Kischer, Baer ran it back 65 yards to a touchdown although he was chased every foot of the distance by an Iowa State back. As Baer and the Iowan stood panting in the end zone, Baer's pal, blocking back Al Corrotto, came rumbling up.

"Brother, you'd better turn in your suit," Corrotto told the Cyclone. "If you can't catch that guy, you haven't any

business playing football. He's the slowest guy on our team."

When Stidham's Sooners edged Missouri 7-0 at Columbia, the Sooner touchdown was Baer all the way. With the game almost ended, he intercepted a pass by Ewing and dodged back to the Tiger 24. He shot a pass to Hugh McCullough for 10 then went the rest of the distance in four bucks, boring across the goal with only 40 seconds left to play.

Although he had played only six games, he was the unanimous choice for All-Big Six Conference quarterback and made honorable mention on the Associated Press All-America. He ranked second in the nation in percentage of forward passes completed.

His jersey number while playing OU football was 00. He had asked for that number, which he says first belonged to Skeet Berry, Shawnee High's great running back. Baer took a lot of kidding about that digit.

"They called me 'Double Nothin,'" he laughs. "They said that it represented my total intelligence."

Baer played his college baseball under canny "Jap" Haskell, and no better outfielder ever shadowed the grinning dandelions of Haskell Park.

"Jack Baer walked, stole second, stole third, and then stole home and the ball game, all in one gay, carefree cloud of dust," wrote Otis Wile, the Oklahoma A&M sports publicist, while covering a 1938 Sooner-Aggie game at Stillwater for the *Daily Oklahoman*. In baseball, Baer could do it all.

After Baer's collegiate career, Haskell, who was also a Boston Red Sox scout, recommended his star, and the Red Hose signed him. Later Baer moved to the Boston Braves. As a farm hand, he played with Little Rock of the Southern Association and with Hartford and Scranton of the Eastern League.

His most trying apprenticeship occurred during his career with Clarksdale, Mississippi, of the Cotton States League, which players called the "Citronella League" because of the insect menace there.

"The cockroaches were so big that they could have worn saddles," Baer remembers. "The air was so full of bugs that you could hear them hit the ball when the pitcher threw it. The

coaches met the players at first and third with a towel so they could wipe the hummers out of their eyes. We all wore paper inside our socks as protection against the hungry Mississippi mosquitoes."

Then came World War II. His portliness didn't keep him out of competitive sports during his four years in the Navy, even at age 30. An eternal freshman who had never quite grown up, Baer put in his busiest tour of duty at Bunker Hill Naval Air Station, where he served as head trainer, kicking coach, defensive halfback, second team tailback and did the punting and field goal kicking. It was his first football in seven years, and he stuck throughout the season, too.

At Gainesville, Georgia, Naval Air Station, the 205-pound Baer played his first basketball in nine years and without giving up cigars went 20 games at guard, averaging nine points per contest. In one game he covered Ralph Hamilton, Indiana University's great scorer. "I held him to 21 points," chuckles Baer.

Basketball reduced him from 205 to 190 pounds. Struck by an opponent's elbow, Baer had a wisdom tooth broken off and his jawbone cracked. For 15 days he was unable to talk or eat.

"I'd finally found a way to reduce," he says.

After World War II, Baer returned to OU to become Haskell's assistant baseball coach. He also shot movies of all OU football games.

When Haskell retired, Baer was named OU's varsity baseball coach. He had played every position on the field and could coach them all. He was known for his confidence in his starting pitcher. Even when enemy baserunners were merrily circling the sacks, Baer often made his starting hurler go the route—as he did when Oklahoma was facing a strong Nebraska team at Haskell Park.

Mac Sanders, Oklahoma's veteran larboard flinger, fanned the first two Cornhusker batsmen. Then he had to duck like a man dodging snowballs as Nebraska combed him for five runs on four slashing hits that included a homer by Ray Novak and a double by Jim Cederdahl.

But with his weird intuition, Baer blithely left Sanders on the mound to face the music. Sanders finally got

them out, but Nebraska led commandingly 5-0. It looked like a good spot in which to season some of the less experienced twirlers.

But when the second inning began, a familiar figure strolled out of the Sooner dugout to the mound. Sanders. But he didn't pitch like the same guy. He brilliantly cut Nebraska off without a hit thereafter, although Baer finally lifted him in the sixth when he became wild, George Loving finishing the long game, which Oklahoma rallied to win 13 to 6.

That became the Sooner pattern all season. In the 1951 NCAA tournament at Omaha, Baer's shrewd deployment of his pitchers was a big factor in Oklahoma's sweep of the big meet in four consecutive games. Jack Shirley and Jim Waldrip, the top Sooner moundsmen, pitched complete games against Ohio State and Springfield (Massachusetts) College. The next opponent was Southern California, which Baer regarded as the best team in the tournament.

Professional scouts had told Baer that the Sooners couldn't defeat the Trojans unless he started Shirley on the mound, as Jim Weeks revealed recently in a *Norman Transcript* interview with Baer. But Baer refused to use Shirley with only two days rest.

"Baer chose Floyd Murphy, whom he says was the only other pitcher on his staff," wrote Weeks. "Murphy threw only 88 pitches in the upset over the Trojans."

Baer discovered in this game that the Trojan catcher used head signs instead of hand signals to call for pitches. He would glance at first base if he wanted a curve, to third for a fast ball and down at his feet for a change of pace. Baer had used the same tokens in his professional career.

"I couldn't believe my eyes," Baer told Weeks. "I told our players that if the Trojans were going to throw a breaking pitch, I'd yell something from the dugout. It didn't matter what I yelled. We hit them all over the place."

After he became OU's coach, Baer spent most of his summers, until he was 46 years old, as manager-catcher for semi-pro clubs at Hobart, Clinton, Elk City and even as far north as Valentine, Nebraska, and Mitchell, South Dakota. Usually he took some of his Sooner players with him.

In the summer of 1952, the year after his Sooners swept the NCAA, Baer was piloting and catching for Hobart. The opponent that day was Shepherd Field.

"Look at that pitcher!" Baer told shortstop Lewis "Babe" Eubanks, one of his Sooner players, as they watched the Shepherd Field hurler warming up before the game. "He's got the best curve I ever saw."

The Shepherd Field twirler was a big fellow. His curve ball broke off like chain lightning.

"Old Baer is cagey," laughed Bob Stevenson, another Sooner player allied that summer with Hobart. "I'll bet he drops himself to eighth or ninth in our batting order."

But Baer boldly hit third. On his first trip to the plate, he doubled off the left field fence. On his second appearance, he struck out. Then he flied out. When he came up in the last of the ninth, Hobart still hadn't scored, trailing 0-1, but had Sterling Jones on first with one out.

Baer singled to left, Jones flitting to third. Then Baer, 35 years old and weighing 210 pounds, ordered a double steal and broke for second in what his players called his "stationary run." In the ensuing action, Jones scooted for the plate and during a close play there, the Shepherd catcher dropped the ball. When everybody looked up, Baer, grinning, was perched on third. Amid the confusion, he had stolen that bag, too.

That steal won the game. The next Hobart hitter flied out, but Baer came down from third easily to score the winning run. The episode illustrated his audacity, quick thinking and spunk.

Strangers who visited Sooner baseball practice in Baer's day and heard Jack muleskinning the Sooners in that gravelly soprano of his, tabbed him as one of the players and wondered what he was doing on the premises in a position of authority.

Actually, Baer was a fine coach who controlled young athletes well. His sense of humor and his placid disposition were always evident. His ability to deflate quickly and amusingly without leaving any resentment some cocky youngster who wasn't keeping his mind upon his work made him a skillful handler of college ball players.

He got along well with everybody—except tuba players in Navy bands. ☞