
PROLOGUE

Bud Wilkinson gives us one more trip down Memory Lane.

My desk is covered with clippings from across the country concerning the February 9 death of University of Oklahoma coaching legend Charles B. "Bud" Wilkinson. In Oklahoma, at least, the media coverage went on for days—extraordinary considering that more than 30 years have elapsed since Bud coached a Sooner team, nearly that long since he even lived in the state. But the memories he left are no respecters of time.

Strangely, this display of admiration and affection is not about football. Football was the vehicle for Wilkinson's claim to fame, but the vehicle was driven by the character and style of the man and by his ability to instill pride in a state still struggling with its *Grapes of Wrath* image.

Veteran sportswriter Bill Connors of the *Tulsa World*, said it best: "Winning streaks and championships are not what come to mind when I think of Bud Wilkinson. It was his presence. He was the Cary Grant of his profession. He did not merely exude class; he *was* class. . . ."

"With an illegally handsome profile and tall, graceful body, he looked like a movie star. He spoke like a poet. He had a soft, lotion-smooth voice that captivated audiences of all ages. When rivals met him, they did not know whether to ask for his autograph or the name of his tailor."

Connors recalls that even the great Bear Bryant was awed by Wilkinson's mystique.

"Before Oklahoma's 1963 Orange Bowl game with Alabama, Bryant learned President Kennedy planned to attend the game. Bryant did not want to be sartorially upstaged by Wilkinson, who, he said, 'always looks like he just stepped out of a barber shop.' He added, 'I don't want to look like a field hand in front of the

President of the United States.'"

Bryant dispatched Connors to ask Wilkinson what he planned to wear the day of the game. "Relishing Bryant's curiosity, Wilkinson said, 'Tell him I won't tell him.' Bryant wore a long-sleeve shirt, a good-luck sweater, a new sport coat and hat and 'nearly died from the (afternoon) heat; Bud looked cool and great in a short-sleeve shirt.'"

Everyone from the Wilkinson era has a favorite story. Allan Saxe, a political science professor at the University of Texas at Arlington, writing in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, remembers a lifetime of hero worship.

"As a graduate student at OU, I was . . . a tutor for some of the team players," Saxe reports. "Imagine me, a nerdy little student sitting down to help some of these big bruisers who at the time were the best footballers in the nation. But my biggest thrill came when one morning Bud Wilkinson telephoned me at home to thank me for helping one player in particular. . . ."

"I later met Wilkinson at a few University activities, and he remembered me and singled me out for attention. I can remember this as if it happened yesterday, although it occurred in 1962."

A Norman boy now business editor of *The Washington Post*, Doug Feaver reviewed—for the uninitiated inside the Beltway—Wilkinson's record of 145-29-4, three national championships, 14 Big Eight titles, the 47-game winning streak that still is the NCAA record.

"Few people can lay claim to the unquestioning awe bordering on adoration that Wilkinson engendered in us Okies in the 1950s, when his University of Oklahoma football teams were unbeatable," Feaver says. "He would walk into a crowded room and it would get silent, as if some enormous presence had suddenly enveloped us."

Billy Vessels, OU's first Heisman

Trophy winner, always intended to attend Oklahoma A&M until he met Wilkinson. "After that, there was no doubt where I was going," Vessels says. "He was that impressive. Just unbelievable."

Most descriptions of the coach move from his charisma to his intellect—the man who read classical literature, played the organ for relaxation and sang in the church choir, the English major who almost became a professor but spent his life teaching anyway.

"He instilled the work ethic in everybody that played for him or coached under him," 1955-56 OU quarterback Jimmy Harris told *The Daily Oklahoman*. "He taught you to be a great football player, but he also taught you to be a great player in the real world, in business and in living."

All-American halfback Clendon Thomas remembers Wilkinson delivering his recruiting pitch in the front room of the Thomas home, "making commitments to me and to my mother and father, and he kept every one of those commitments."

But Wilkinson was also a ferocious competitor on the field and on the recruiting trail. He made mistakes. During Wilkinson's 17-year tenure, OU twice was placed on NCAA probation for improper aid to players. And finally his timing, always a strong point as a coach, was his undoing.

In 1964, he left OU to run as a Republican for the U.S. Senate, losing a close one in the high tide that swamped Barry Goldwater. Wilkinson went on to other pursuits in business, broadcasting, even briefly pro football—but the golden days were over.

We will never know what might have been had he chosen another year to run for office or had he elected to stay at OU. It really doesn't matter. What Bud Wilkinson was and what he did for Oklahoma was more than enough.

—CJB