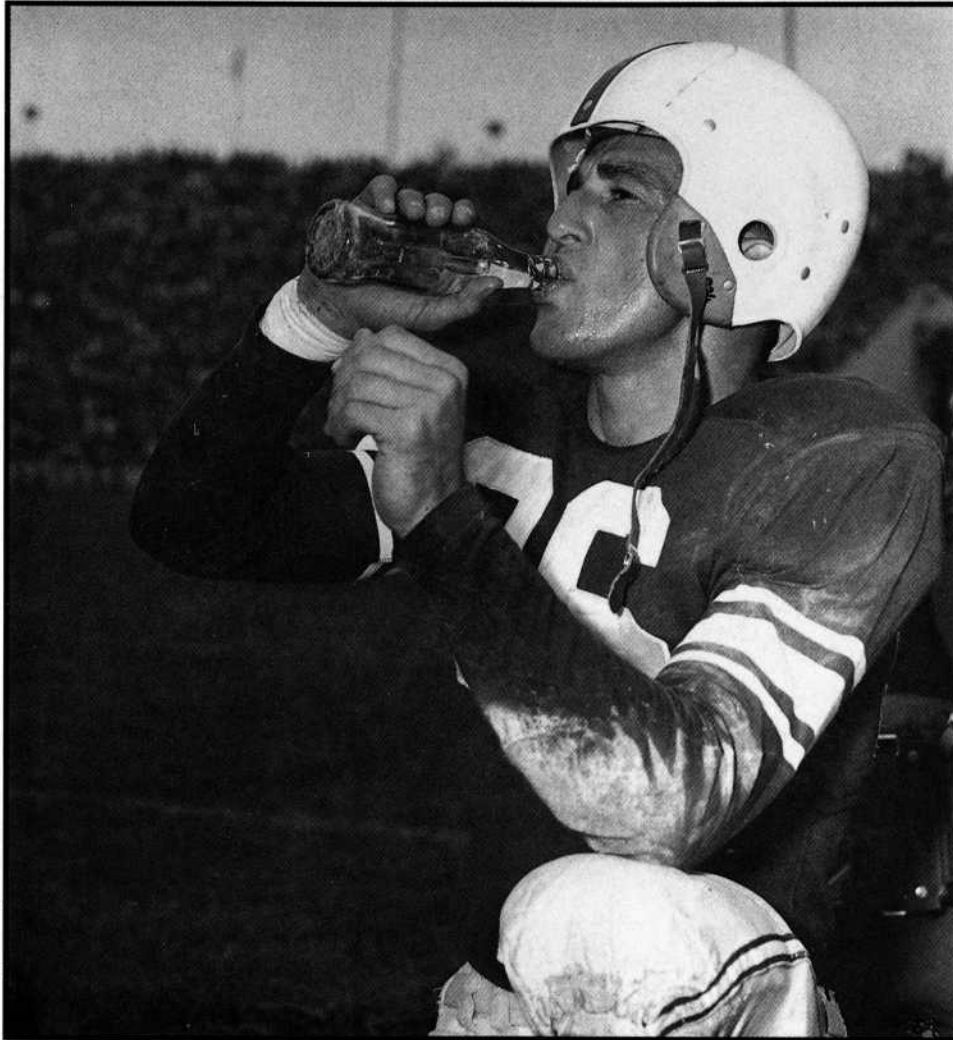


IF GENERAL JACK HAD FOUGHT FOR TEXAS . . .



Courtesy: OU Sports Information

If a world war hadn't intervened, Oklahoma would have missed the first of its great modern-era quarterbacks.

It's a scary thought for the Sooner faithful: OU's first All-American quarterback came *that* close to spending his career at the University of Texas—and at one time, this same fellow also desperately wanted to play for Kansas. But life, like footballs, takes funny bounces. Jack Mitchell came back from World War II, tried out for the Sooners and spent his playing days in Norman, first for Jim Tatum and then Bud Wilkinson. And gridiron history was altered.

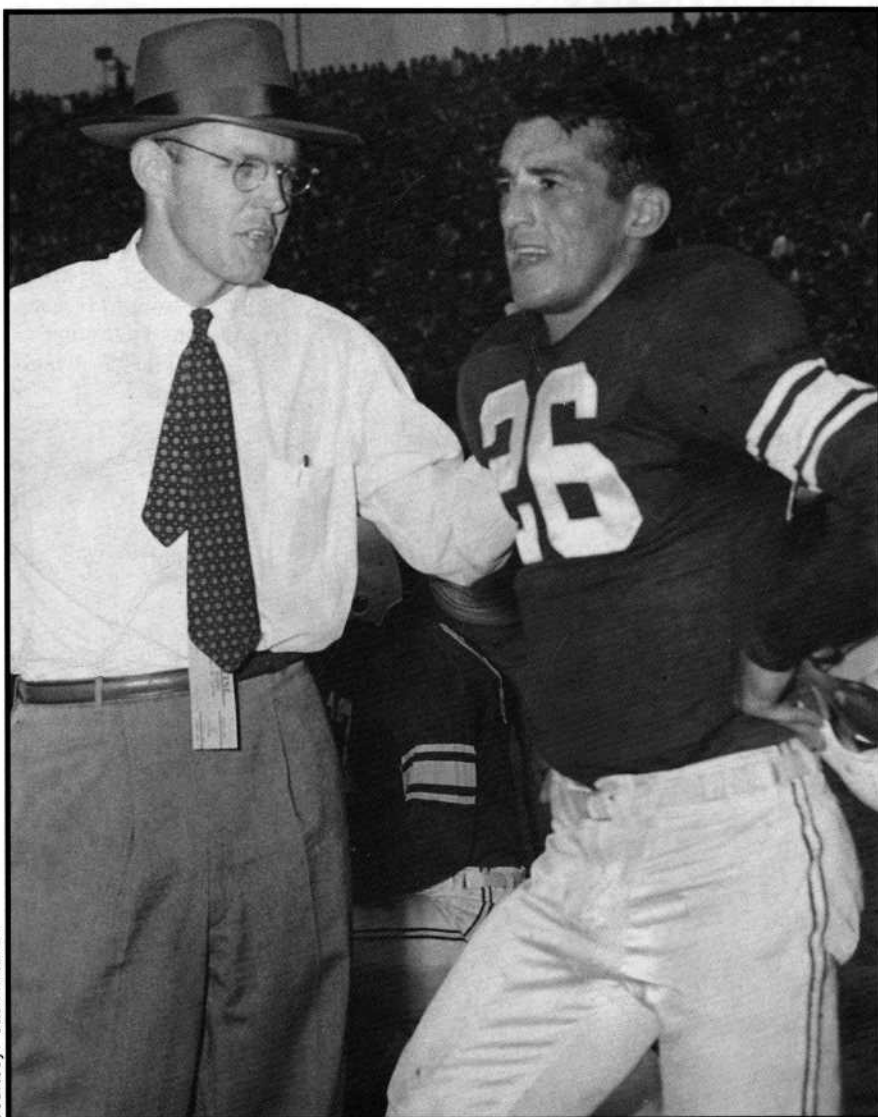
In his one year at OU—1946—Tatum, the fantastic recruiter, laid the cornerstone for a football dynasty. Wilkinson, the brilliant tactician, completed the job. Mitchell starred for both, the first of the great Sooner quarterbacks, names like Eddie Crowder, Jimmy Harris, Jack Mildren,

Steve Davis, Thomas Lott, J. C. Watts, Jamelle Holieway and Cale Gundy.

During Mitchell's OU career—1946-47-48—the Sooners established an efficient recruiting network that attracted a flood of blue-chip players to the campus, won the school's first two bowl games, began to dominate their conference, turned the Texas series around, gained national prominence and laid the groundwork for a first national championship in 1950. Would the Sooners have scaled the heights if Mitchell had gone to KU or stayed at UT? Fortunately, no one will ever know.

Now 70 and living with his wife Peggy in a rambling, ranch-style home in Wellington, Kansas, Mitchell is the

by Edgar L. Frost



Courtesy: Jack Mitchell

Jack Mitchell (at right with Coach Bud Wilkinson in 1948), who made the team as a halfback, knew nothing about the Sooners' new split-T offense and thought he was being miscast as its quarterback. Wilkinson prevailed, however, and General Jack learned the system well enough to lead the Big Red's rushing attack.

picture of health. At 170-175, he is near his playing weight of 45 years ago, and he still pivots gracefully when demonstrating an old play. Peggy, an attractive blonde from Phoenix, is Mitchell's second wife. His first wife, Jeanne, died in 1989. The Mitchells divide their time between a home in Sun City, near Phoenix, and Wellington, where he moved in 1968 after trading coaching for newspapering. Jack and Peggy's home is relaxed, decorated with football memorabilia, artwork and plants, with a pool and some ponies in the back for Mitchell's four grandchildren.

His business card reads "President and Chairman of the Board of Mitchell Publications, Inc." and advertises a company dealing in newspapers, cable TV, printing, insurance,

oil properties and drilling. How involved is he in the company's daily affairs? Mitchell laughs. "As little as possible." Mitchell's son Jackson, who lives next door, is the driving force at the newspaper, the *Wellington Daily News*. Another son, Jud, lives across town and runs the cable TV part of the family business.

Although Mitchell looks like defenders never laid a hand on him as a player, of course they did—as in the 1947 Nebraska game in Lincoln, for instance. Cornhusker tackle Carl Samuelson hit Mitchell in the mouth with a forearm. According to Harold Keith's account in *Forty-Seven Straight*, the incident left Mitchell's teeth protruding through his lower lip and required 32 stitches at halftime. The gritty Sooner signal caller returned to action in the second half, and OU prevailed 14-13.

So what is all this about KU and Texas? Mitchell was a Kansas boy, a tailback out of Arkansas City who dreamed of playing in Lawrence until reality set in—Kansas basically did not offer football scholarships at the time. KU basketball coach Phog Allen was interested but only grudgingly said Mitchell could also try football, and financial aid would be negligible. Coach Dana X. Bible at Texas, by contrast, offered Mitchell a full ride and great football facilities. In one semester on the UT freshman squad, he started at tailback and began to demonstrate his particular wizardry as a punt returner.

But the year was 1942. As the war intensified, Bible put the whole team in the Army reserve. Mitchell was activated and sent to Fort Leavenworth for basic training. He never returned to UT. After the war, he followed scores of veterans to Tatum's tryout camp in

Norman. Mitchell made the team, so he stayed. He liked Tatum, and Norman was closer to Ark City. Besides, he adds, laughing, "Bobby Layne had two more years of eligibility at Texas. I would have sat on the bench if I had gone back there."

As things turned out, Texas, with Layne directing traffic, whipped the Sooners both of those years. The second defeat, 34-14 in 1947, was the infamous "Sisco" contest, named for the referee whose bad calls many felt cost OU the game. Today Mitchell admits, "They were probably better than we were and should have won it—but we didn't really get a very fair shake."

Despite only one success in three tries against the 'Horns, Mitchell recalls the series as special. The game was always

the season highlight. "They knew it, and we knew it," Mitchell says. "They'd win their conference, and we'd win ours, and we'd play each other to see who was better." By 1948, Mitchell's senior year, the Sooners were better, prevailing 20-14 to start a 9-1 run in the series before Mitchell's OU teammate Darrell Royal resurrected the Texas program.

Mitchell made the 1946 team as a halfback, but Bud Wilkinson wanted him to play quarterback. Mitchell told Tatum's young offensive coordinator, "I'm not a passer—I like to run with the ball." The man whom John Cronley of *The Daily Oklahoman* later dubbed "General Jack," for his ability to march the team down the field, thought he was being miscast. Wilkinson insisted that, in the Sooner split-T formation, Mitchell would run with the ball. "I didn't know anything about the split-T," he recalls. "Nobody did, except Tatum, Bud and Don Faurot at Missouri." Mitchell, the running quarterback, learned the system well enough to lead the Big Red's rushing attack in 1947, carrying the ball 125 times for 573 yards and 8 TDs.

Part of the learning process came in the 1946 opener against Army at West Point. The game, which OU lost 7-21, nevertheless earned Oklahoma a large measure of respect for a gritty showing against the two-time defending national champion Cadets, who had won 19 straight games. Mitchell staunchly contends, "We were the best team on the field." Far from being bitter about the outcome, Mitchell remembers the game most clearly for an amusing incident involving the emotional Tatum.

Talk was running high in the state that OU would be embarrassed by a powerhouse like Army, but Tatum, in his first game as the Sooner head coach, was determined that such would not be the case. He devised a simple plan for stopping Army's famed backfield duo of "Doc" Blanchard and Glenn Davis. (Tatum had no way of knowing that an injury would sideline Blanchard.)

In Tatum's scheme, Mitchell and Dave Wallace, who normally shared time at quarterback on offense and safety on defense, would play only on offense. Whenever Army got the ball, the Sooner QB would be replaced on defense by Norman McNabb, a lineman. And, indeed, giving up a safety to gain a lineman gave Army fits.

For weeks before the game, Tatum took Wallace and Mitchell to the stadium each day after practice and alternated them sitting on the bench with McNabb, Tatum beside them with a phone in his hand talking to Wilkinson in the press box. Tatum admonished the players to keep their helmets at the ready, between their legs, as they sat on the bench. Meticulous in his rehearsal of details, he made the two signal callers go over and over his instructions—one would come out and in would trot McNabb.

But the day of the game, Mitchell recalls, "Tatum was a wild man!"—checking by phone with Wilkinson after each play, even losing track of the downs, while McNabb sat

poised on the bench nearby. OU had the ball on the first series but soon had to punt to Army. Tatum was so frantic that he didn't even see McNabb. For his part, McNabb, who stammered a bit, was rendered near-speechless by the moment.

Racing up and down the sideline, Tatum handed the phone to a confused McNabb, without noticing who he was, and roared, "McNabb! Where's McNabb? Oh, God, we left McNabb at home!" McNabb still could not speak. Finally, other players pointed out McNabb to the flustered head man, whose reaction was to shout at his player, "What are you doing holding the phone, McNabb?"

Mitchell, All-American and bowl game MVP, can reflect that he has done it all in his career ... but when the chroniclers of the sport mention his name, one subject will always come up—those magical punt returns.

Mitchell cannot tell his version of the story—as he does whenever old timers gather—without springing up to imitate the pacing Tatum, for whom he obviously had a warm regard.

The game was historically significant. It was the first time an OU football team had flown to a game, as President Emeritus George Cross relates in his book *Presidents Can't Punt*. The game was attended by President Harry S. Truman. The Sooners gained tremendous national exposure and, by outrushing, outkicking and making more first downs than the defending champions, some very positive press nationwide. The Eastern press sat up and took notice—no, it stood up and cheered. Despite the loss, OU had arrived in the big time.

Mitchell, the All-American and bowl game MVP, can reflect that he has done it all in his career, from his first head coaching post at Blackwell High School to being head man at Kansas—which always had been his ambition. In other stops along the way, Mitchell was head coach at Wichita University (now Wichita State) and Arkansas, coaching in the Southwest Conference against Bear Bryant when Bryant was at Texas A&M. He recommended Frank Broyles as his successor at Arkansas, recruited and coached Barry Switzer at Arkansas and Gayle Sayers at Kansas. He can tell stories all day long—and will if asked. Yes, Mitchell has done it all, but when the chroniclers of the sport mention his name, one subject will always come up—those magical punt returns.

To one who sat in the stands as a 9-year-old, as this writer did, watching Mitchell execute crisscrosses with Royal and set NCAA records in the process, those are special memories. Mitchell still holds the Division 1-A record for punt returns: highest average gain per return, career: (min. 1.2 per game) 23.6 yards, 1946-48 (39 for 922). Nobody ever has

equaled that record. Not Joe Washington or Johnny Rodgers. Not Raghieb "Rocket" Ismail. Not anybody. And Mitchell doesn't think anyone ever will.

"Not because I was so good," he downplays, "but because the game has evolved." Mitchell explains that Wilkinson was indoctrinated in the importance of the kicking game by Bernie Bierman at Minnesota. Wilkinson put tremendous emphasis on kicking—and on returning kicks properly. "You just can't return a punt today," Mitchell says, "but you could then, and we worked on it every day."

Wilkinson stressed the importance of catching the ball in the air, insisting that the ball hitting the ground resulted in "hidden yardage," meaning it rolled to the advantage of the kicking team. Mitchell liked to catch kicks and worked endlessly in practice with Charlie Sarratt and Royal doing the kicking.

"I couldn't get to all of them on the fly," Mitchell admits, "but I got very good at telling which way they were going to bounce. If the ball goes end over end, you can't tell, but with a spiral you can tell if you study the nose of the ball and the angle of descent. If the nose is aimed straight down, the ball will bounce straight up, and I knew that instinctively."

Mitchell's success was more than nose angles. "For those days, I was just naturally a good runner," he says. "I was a good center fielder. The minute a guy's foot hit the ball, I could tell which way to run after it, so I got a good jump on the ball. Faster guys rely more on their speed, but I had to start as soon as it was kicked."

Besides setting one national record, Mitchell tied Rodgers of Nebraska for another, each having seven career TD punt returns. (Mitchell had an eighth—against

Nebraska—that was called back on a penalty.) Mitchell laughingly admits predicting that his yards-per-return record would *never* be broken, then quickly states his reasons:

* Today's linemen are as fast as backs were in his day;

* College teams have abandoned kicking from a tight formation in favor of spread formations that allow for better coverage; and

* Modern kickers are into hang time while formerly kickers stood close to the line and produced line drives that outdistanced their coverage.

Mitchell's buddy Royal holds the OU record for the longest punt return in school history, a 96-yarder in 1948 against Kansas State. But it was Mitchell who caught the punt; the

two then crisscrossed, with Mitchell handing the ball off to Royal, who took it the distance on a perfectly executed play. The artistry still provides golden memories for a number of older OU fans.


Mitchell still loves the game and watches it on his large-screen TV or in person. He and Peggy have season tickets at both OU and Kansas, and Mitchell sees football cronies who pass through the Phoenix area. He talks to Royal occasionally on the phone but hasn't seen him in quite a while. ("He never leaves Austin, and I don't ever go there.") He hasn't met Sooner boss Gary Gibbs but thinks he has done a good job under difficult circumstances.

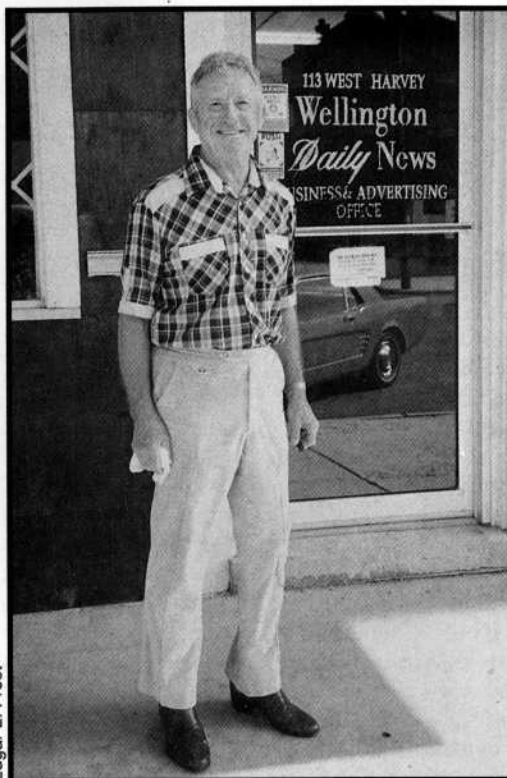
Not a typical old-timer, Mitchell likes the modern game with one major exception. He thinks artificial turf was "the biggest mistake ever made." His favorite playing field was at Oklahoma A&M, now Oklahoma State. "You know, with it being an agricultural school, they knew how to grow grass. That Bermuda was so thick our cleats could hardly reach any dirt. They had the best field in the nation." Mitchell no doubt welcomes OU's decision to return to natural grass in 1994.

Mitchell credits Harold Keith, OU sports information director emeritus, for making him an All-American by seizing upon his exploits in the 1948 Missouri game at Norman, a 41-7 Sooner win that was 7-7 at half time. In the third quarter, OU exploded for four TDs in just over 11 minutes, with Mitchell scoring two of them, one a 34-yard rushing play, the other a 74-yard punt return, a patented Mitchell trip.

The nationally spotlighted upset win, OU's sixth win in a row, was witnessed by 38,500—the largest crowd ever to see a football game in Oklahoma to that

time—and resulted in a bid to the 1949 Sugar Bowl. In New Orleans the Sooners defeated North Carolina 14-6 with Mitchell outshining the Tarheels' All-American back, "Choo-Choo" Charlie Justice, to be named MVP. OU was off and running.

A few years ago, *The Sporting News* singled out the greatest sports dynasties in history, 12 in all. Only two were college football aggregates, Notre Dame from 1941 to 1949 and OU from 1948 to 1957. General Jack led the OU team that started that glorious run—and he could just as well have done it all for Texas. But football is a game of funny bounces, and Jack Mitchell always did know what to do with a bouncing football. 



Edgar L. Frost

Jack Mitchell left coaching for newspapering in Wellington, Kansas, adding cable TV, printing, insurance and oil interests to the company, now run largely by his two sons, Jackson and Jud.