

100 YEARS

# SOONER CENTURY

No collegiate football program in the country, with the possible exception of Notre Dame, can lay claim to a richer tradition of football excellence than the University of Oklahoma. In keeping with OU's decades of football dominance, it was inevitable that as a part of Sooner football's centennial celebration, a carefully written, pictorial history of Oklahoma football would appear. J. Brent Clark, a 1971 honors graduate of OU and a 1975 graduate of the OU College of Law, had won the 1994 Oklahoma Book Award in non-fiction for his first book, *3rd Down and Forever*. Clark was commissioned by the University of Oklahoma Foundation Inc. to research and write a comprehensive history of Sooner football, chronicling all 100 years of gridiron exploits. The Touchdown Club of Oklahoma and The Daily Oklahoman provided additional financial support. The result of this multi-year project is *Sooner Century: 100 Glorious Years of Oklahoma Football*, excerpts from which are offered here by author Clark as his tribute to those Big Red stalwarts who have brought so much excitement to sports fans everywhere. —EDITOR



## 100 Glorious Years of Oklahoma Football

by J. Brent Clark

The auctioneer raised his aged wooden gavel over his head and slammed it down on the Formica table top with authority. "Sold to bidder number 55!" he barked. With that, the distinctive old Town Tavern football scoreboards that had hung, seemingly forever, above the heads of the great, the near great and merely mortal, in Campus Corner's venerable meeting place, had found a new owner. On this day, the Town Tavern was closing its doors forever. Later in the evening, long after the last bidder and curiosity seeker had wandered away from the corner of Boyd and Asp, an old Town Tavern counterman, his face lined with deep creases,

sat down one last time in a corner booth and gazed up at the scoreboards.

The ancient plywood panels began reflecting Sooner football game scores in 1947, the year the Sooner legend, Bud Wilkinson, took over the reigns of the Sooner program. The old counterman lit up a Camel and, as smoke curled overhead, reflected back over the years of Oklahoma football glory. He had witnessed a few of the truly great games personally. Others had taken place long before he had peeled his first potato at the Tavern. He had, however, heard Norman natives talk about how football had arrived on the OU campus.



## Let's Get Up a Football Team!

The old style game, a kind of controlled chaos, is what young V. L. Parrington had observed while at Harvard, and that is the game he introduced to a few brave souls in Norman, Oklahoma, in the fall of 1897. Actually, the first football team representing the University of Oklahoma was organized in September 1895 by a handsome, confident lad with compelling gray eyes. His name was John A. Harts. Fancying himself an athlete and with more than a smattering of bravado, Harts had played football on a college team in Winfield, Kansas, and as a school boy growing up north of Wichita. Harts undoubtedly was aware from newspaper accounts that the first organized football game in Oklahoma Territory had taken place a year before, in November 1894, between Oklahoma High School (later Oklahoma City Central High) and a rowdy group of townies billing themselves as the "Terrors." The Terrors had taken a terrible beating in that game.

In any event, when Harts' fellow students brought out an old Spalding football on a golden fall afternoon in Norman, they discovered Jack Harts

the athlete. It came as no surprise, then, that the long-haired, brazen young man thereafter declared from his seat in Bud Risinger's barber shop, "Let's get up a football team!"

Harts became the team's first captain and coach. Few of the students attending the University in the fall of 1895 had ever seen a football game,



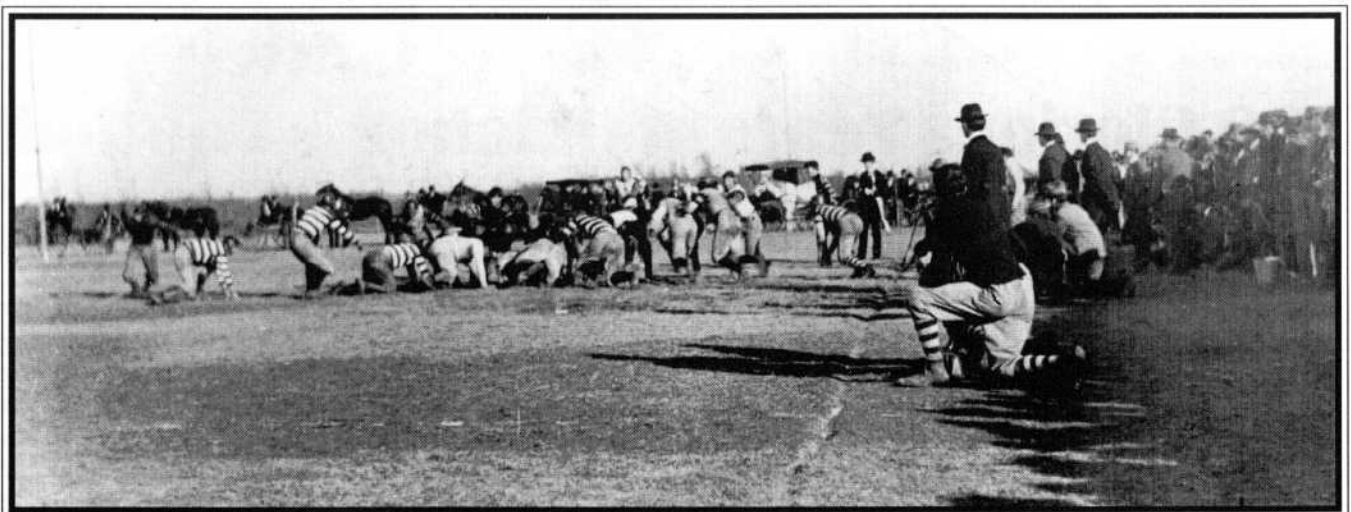
since the Oklahoma Territory had only a mere handful of high schools. Of the 148 students registered at the University that fall, 121 were taking high school work. The game of football was a curiosity only, but the glib tongue of Jack Harts ensured a representative attendance at the one and only University game of the 1895 season.

Harts himself, in an over-abun-

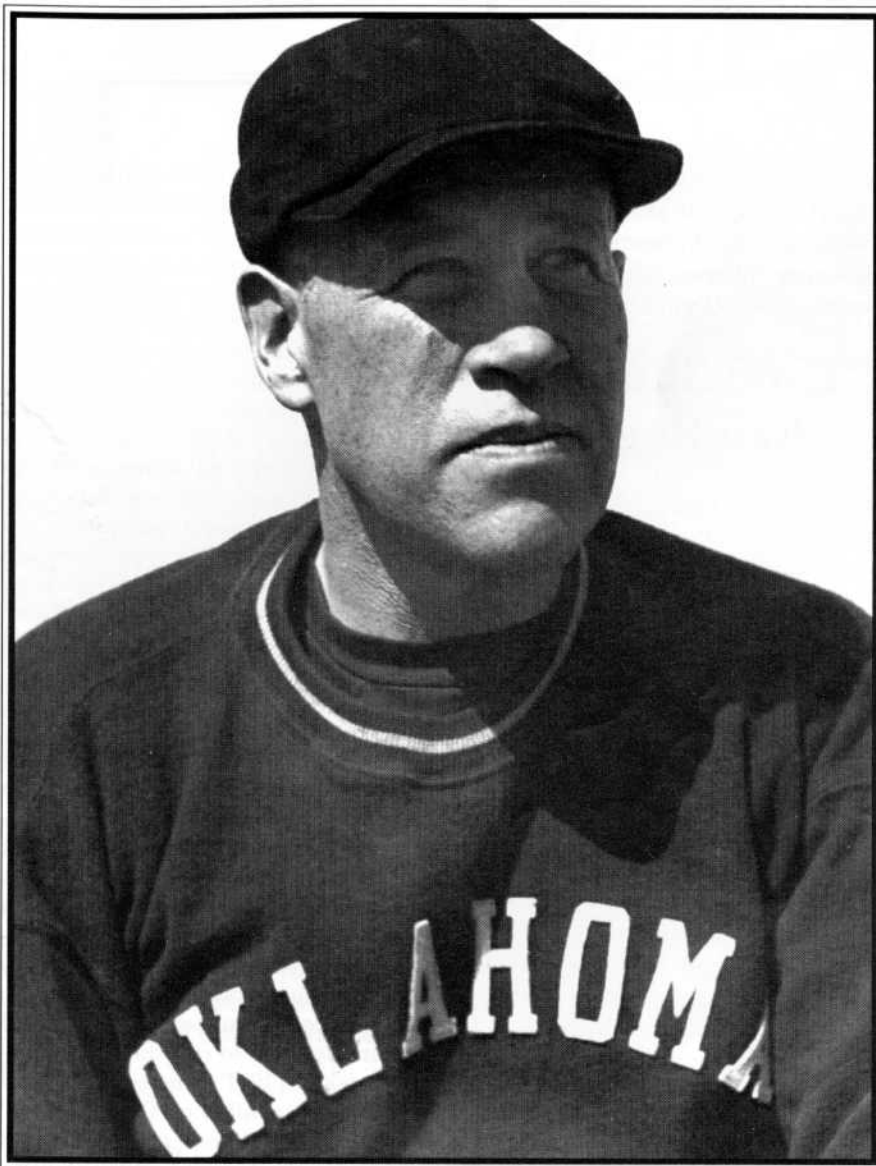
dance of enthusiasm, had suffered a knee injury in practice and could only hobble along on the sidelines, yelling instructions and encouragement. A North-South gridiron had been laid out on a field of low prairie grass just north of the lone University building. Today the site is slightly north and west of Holmberg Hall. A single strand of wire fence was strung around the playing rectangle. Team members Joe Merkle and Jap Clapham volunteered teams of horses to haul wagonfuls of dirt to fill the field's buffalo wallows.

On the eve of the contest, Harts discovered he was still two players short of a full team. At the last minute, the resourceful Harts enlisted the barber, Bud Risinger, and Fred Perry, a 26-year-old married man who drove Norman's street sprinkling wagon. Risinger and Perry, representative of Oklahoma pioneers, could not resist Harts' exhortations and leapt into the fray. Neither, of course, was enrolled in the University.

The opponent was from Oklahoma City and was composed of high school students, a few students from the Methodist College there and a couple of town toughs. Most importantly, the varsity team had played a prior game or two. The visitors drubbed Harts' valiant men, 34-0. The University's first football team, in its first game,



*OU football was in its fifth season, and the varsity had a four-year win streak on the line when coach Vernon L. Parrington's 1899 aggregation met defeat at the hands of the Arkansas City (Kansas) Town Team.*



West Point graduate Lawrence "Biff" Jones brought a hard-nosed, military approach to coaching the Sooners from 1935-36. He left with a 9-6-3 record.

neither scored a point nor made a first down. The disconsolate University players trudged back to Risinger's barber shop where they washed up, dressed their wounds and discussed the merits and demerits of football. "I went out home and climbed in bed," Clapham remembered. "I was too sore to do the chores, but I sure slept good. I was feeling kind of blue, but I had liked the rough physical contact."

The old counterman found a heavy ceramic coffee mug and brewed himself a cup of coffee before settling down again in the corner booth. He had his own painful recollections of

the 1930s. Work was hard to find in those days. He counted himself lucky to find steady work on Norman's bustling Campus Corner. His musings carried him back to the year 1935. A new football coach had arrived in Norman, he recalled.

## Biff Jones Arrives

Lawrence "Biff" Jones had attended West Point, graduating in 1917. Jones was a blunt-spoken, hard-nosed military man. He had coached Army foot-

ball from 1926-1929. As the head coach of Louisiana State in Baton Rouge, he had refused a request by the "Kingfish," Governor Huey P. Long, to address Jones' Bayou Tigers at half time of a football game. Thereafter, Jones became available to coach the Sooners.

Gene Corotto, a sophomore-to-be in the spring of 1935, recalls Jones' arrival on campus. "We'd already had one spring practice under Lewie Hardage. When Biff Jones arrived, we had another one."

Reflective of Jones' no-nonsense approach, instructions to the players were typewritten and distributed. New wooden lockers replaced coat hooks in the dressing room. Jones looked out for his players. In exchange, he demanded discipline and respect.

"Most of the boys were scared of the guy," Corotto recalls, referring to the 6-foot, 3-inch coach. "When he hollered at you, you didn't jump once, you jumped three times."

While there was renewed interest in the fortunes of Sooner football, inhabitants of Oklahoma were struggling to cope with the effects of the Dust Bowl. "We'd practice in dust storms so thick, you couldn't see the sun. By the end of practice, we were covered in thick dust," Corotto recalls.

Conditioning and toughness were the hallmarks of Jones-coached squads. Popular offensive formations of the day were the single-wing and the double-wing. End sweeps by fleet halfbacks complemented punishing dives by fullbacks. The quarterback received the ball from center some four yards deep, then turned his shoulders toward the line of scrimmage to conceal the ball and induce deception. The Sooners featured outstanding tackles in J. W. "Dub" Wheeler and Ralph Brown. Backs Nick Robertson and Bill Breedon would join them in earning all-conference honors.

The season opened with blankings of two opponents, Colorado, 3-0, and New Mexico, 25-0. Then came the annual showdown in Dallas. With the smallest crowd ever on hand at Fair Park Stadium for the annual meeting,

16,000, the Sooners fell 12-7. Jones' squad played fiercely all season long, shutting out five of its nine opponents. The Sooners' six wins were the most since 1920. The general feeling among Oklahomans was that Biff Jones would be able to produce victories in very satisfying numbers in the days to come.

The Town Tavern was a regular meeting place for all kinds of people after the trauma of World War II. The OU campus was bursting at the seams with new students seeking a diploma

to validate their endless optimism. By the fall of 1947, the year the first Town Tavern scoreboard went up, a regular customer, Charles "Bud" Wilkinson, had become OU's new football coach.

## The Wilkinson Era Begins

The casual observer might conclude that a brilliant sun shone continuously on Bud Wilkinson from the day

he emerged from a low-slung Hudson automobile onto the OU campus in the winter of 1946. Such was not the case. In fact, Bud knew better than anyone of the necessity to win football games at Oklahoma. He set about to do just that. He insisted upon perfection, according to his players. He had an acute eye for detail, which was reflected in everything—even his wardrobe. On game days, he paced the sidelines in a gray flannel suit, white oxford cloth button down shirt, a red necktie and gray fedora. His message was clear. To play at Oklahoma, one must be serious-minded, disciplined and prepared.

One of Bud's first tasks was to engage a line coach. He had been favorably impressed by the coach at Nebraska, a young Ohio State product named Gomer Jones. Gomer was a husky, bespectacled fellow, purposeful yet given to broad smiles. He fit Bud's vision for success perfectly. "Dutch" Fehring was held over from the '46 staff. Four other men, including Bill Jennings, completed the staff.

Most fortunately, Bud and his coaches could count on a field general second to none to run the breathtaking, risky Split-T formation. He had earned the moniker of "General Jack" Mitchell. Thirty-one of Bud's top 33 players were war veterans. Among the youngest was a kid from Hollis, Oklahoma, named Darrell Royal. Royal had grown up eagerly awaiting the Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts of OU games.

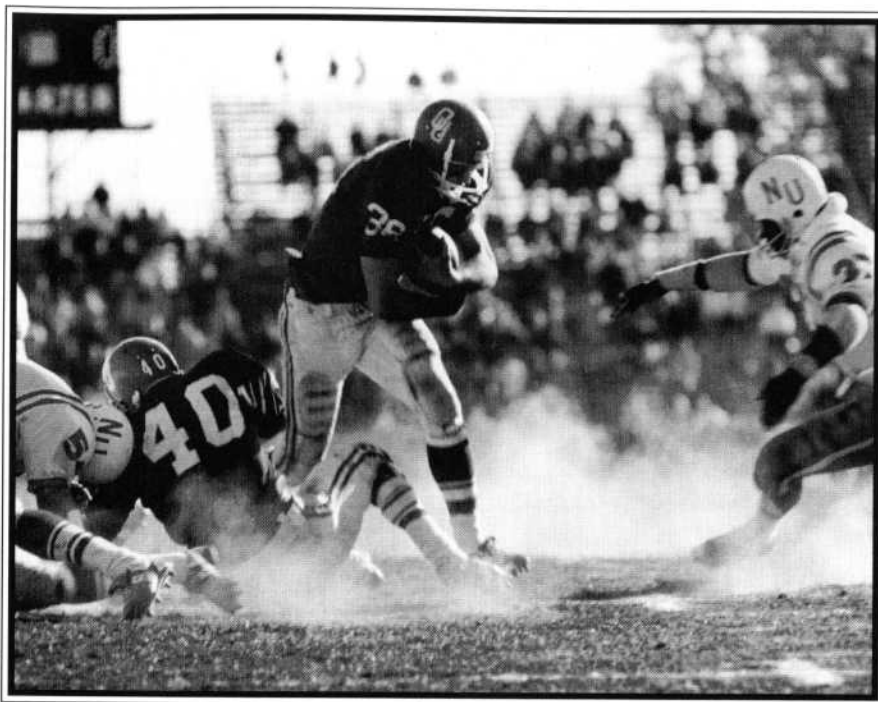
"I'd put a radio on our front porch and have me a solo game in our front yard," Royal recalls. "The play-by-play wasn't so important, but that 'Boomer Sooner' played by the Oklahoma marching band sure was. It lifted me right out of my socks."

By the late 1960s, the old counterman at the Town Tavern thought he had seen it all. Now, however, as he gazed over the scoreboards, he stopped to reflect upon the scores of 1969. A young Sooner football player who had grown up in Miami, Oklahoma, had found the Town Tavern a comfortable place to rest that fall, and



OU Sports Information

The first man hired in 1947 by OU's new head coach Bud Wilkinson, right, was line coach Gomer Jones, left. Together until Wilkinson's resignation in 1963, Bud and Gomer formed the best coaching team in college football.



*OU's second Heisman Trophy winner, the indestructible Steve Owens, was the only bright spot in an otherwise disappointing 6-4 season in 1969.*

he had been a very busy young man, indeed. For his labors, he secured collegiate football's highest individual honor.

## Owens and the Heisman

Steve Owens sat in the stands at Super Bowl XXVIII in Atlanta, Georgia, when he was recognized by a stranger, who urged his young son to ask for an autograph from the 1969 Heisman Trophy winner. "The kid didn't know Steve Owens," Owens recalled. "But he knew the Heisman."

Winning the Heisman means membership in one of sport's grandest fraternities. The day Owens went to New York City to receive his award, he was told, "Your life's never going to be the same." The observation proved accurate, from the autographs to being dubbed "Harry Heisman" as a Detroit Lion rookie to the personal relationships with fellow winners like Roger Staubach and O.J. Simpson. But those are not the faces Owens sees when he

looks at one of the planet's most famous pieces of hardware.

"I see the faces of my teammates," said Owens. "That's why it means so much to me. I think of Mike Harper and Steve Zabel and Jack Mildren. I think of Chuck Fairbanks and Barry Switzer and all the guys." It's safe to assume they often think of him.

Owens did not lead Oklahoma to a national championship, and his Heisman-winning year was one of the more disappointing seasons in Sooner history, a 6-4 record and no bowl game. But Owens won more than the Heisman with his sterling performance in 1969. He won a reprieve for a coaching staff that included Chuck Fairbanks, Barry Switzer, Larry Lacewell and Galen Hall.

Owens already had been announced as the Heisman winner when the Sooners played Oklahoma State at Stillwater on November 29. However, OU was 5-4, and a loss to the Cowboys would not bode well for Fairbanks and his staff. The previous three times the Sooners had ended a season with a loss to their Bedlam Series rival—1945, 1965 and 1966—had been the final game for OU's head coach.

"To save our coaching staff, we really needed to win that game," Owens said.

The Sooners won it, 28-27, thanks to a failed 2-point conversion by OSU in the final 1:15 and a yeoman effort by their Heisman-winning tailback. Owens carried the ball an incredible 55 times that day, an NCAA record, and gained 261 yards. In the third quarter alone, Owens carried 20 times, still an NCAA record for one period, and gained 97 yards.

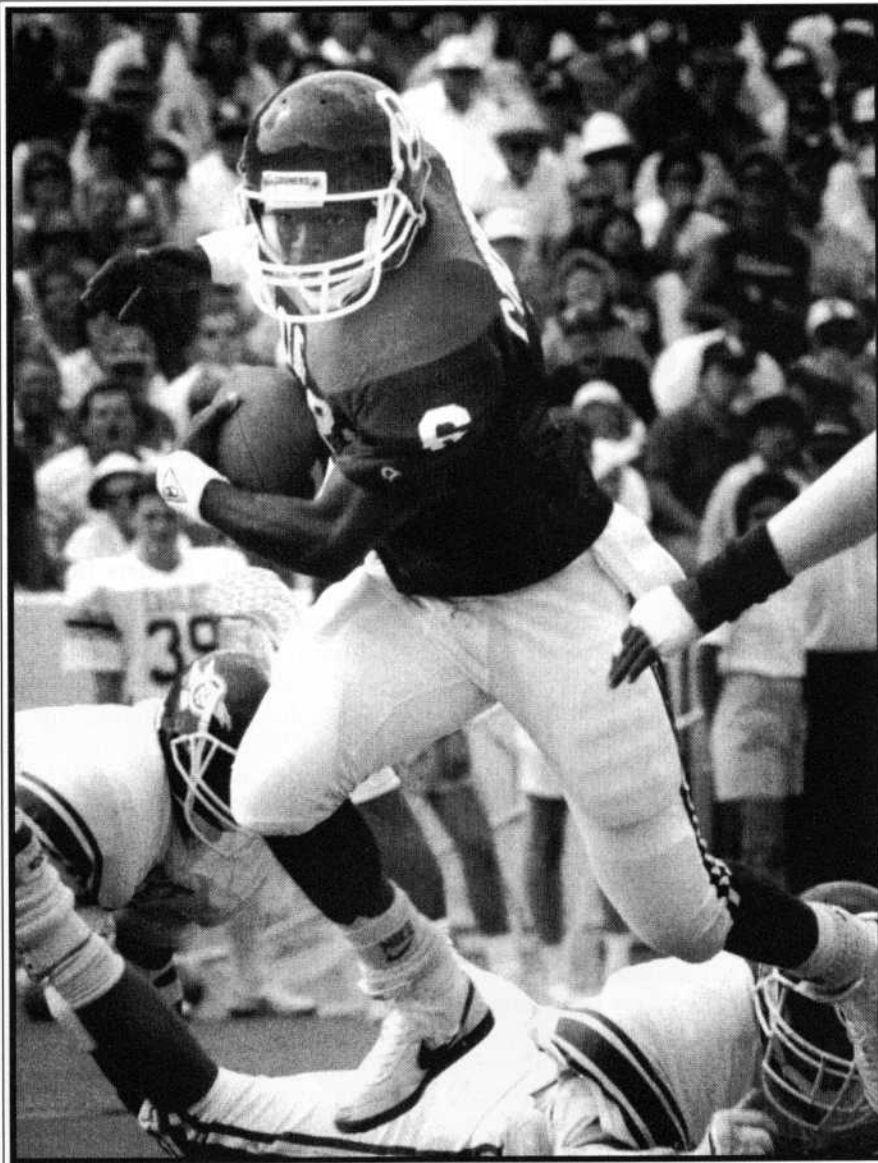
During that excruciating third quarter, when the Sooners turned a 21-14 deficit into a 28-21 lead with 13:56 left in the game, Owens was exhausted. In the quarter, he had carried seven straight plays during one stretch and six straight during another. He asked Mildren, OU's sophomore quarterback, to call time-out. From the press box, Switzer, then the offensive coordinator, barked over the headset, wanting to know who called time-out. Mildren told Switzer that Owens was tired.

"Well, I'll tell you what," Switzer says he told Mildren. "You go inform that big stud he ain't supposed to get tired. Tell him to saddle up... because we're not going to a bowl, so he can rest 'til spring."

Owens didn't hold a grudge. After a successful six-year career with the Lions, Owens returned to Norman. "The day I retired, I told my wife, 'call the moving van,'" he said. "We're going back to Oklahoma.' I've enjoyed this University and this city so much. Playing here meant so much to me."

Darkness was descending on Campus Corner. The old counterman poured himself a half cup of coffee from the Town Tavern's huge old Bunn-O-Matic. He had nearly completed his sentimental journey, savoring tiny fragments of Oklahoma's rich football tradition. By 1987, the last days of the Tavern loomed ahead, but my, what a splendid team Barry Switzer was fielding over at Memorial Stadium.

*continued*



The Daily Oklahoman

*Like a plot from some old movie, redshirt freshman quarterback Charles Thompson stepped into the enormous hole left by the injury to Jamelle Holieway, leading the 1987 Sooners to their first all-victorious regular season since 1974.*

## “You Will Shock the Nation”

In 1987, the Sooners were simply dominant. They had five Associated Press All-Americans—tight end Keith Jackson, defensive end Darrell Reed, linebacker Dante Jones, safety Rickey Dixon and offensive lineman Mark Hutson. None of their first nine opponents came within 19 points. OU walloped Texas by 35 points for the second straight year, 44-9. The Sooners scored at least 59 points on four opponents.

However, on November 7 against Oklahoma State, the magnificent Jamelle Holieway suffered a career-shattering knee injury. Ripping an anterior cruciate ligament in the open field, he hobbled into the arms of OSU head coach Pat Jones. The Sooners' chances now rode on the slender shoulders of redshirt freshman Charles Thompson from Lawton, whose speed and quickness surpassed Holieway's. The Sooners struggled against OSU, winning 29-10 only after fourth-quarter interceptions by Troy Johnson and Dixon were returned for touchdowns, and against Missouri, winning 17-13 with Scott Garl's fourth-quarter interception holding off the Tigers.

On November 21 at Lincoln, OU and Nebraska staged Game of the Century II. The Huskers were No. 1, the Sooners No. 2, and both were 10-0. Oklahoma appeared vulnerable without Holieway, and for once it was Nebraska that was brash, with linebacker Broderick Thomas promising victory. Switzer pointed out that the Huskers had scored only three offensive touchdowns in three years against OU. Privately, he told Thompson, “You will shock the nation.” Thompson and the Sooners did.

OU outgained Nebraska 444-235 in total yards and dominated the game. Fumbles handicapped the Sooners in the first half, but Dixon's interception set up Anthony Stafford's 11-yard touchdown run that forged a 7-7 tie in the third quarter. Patrick Collins raced 65 yards for a touchdown with 1:39 left in the third, and R. D. Lashar nailed a clinching field goal with 7:40 remaining. Collins, backup fullback Rotnei Anderson and Thompson all rushed for more than 100 yards, and OU had accomplished its first perfect regular season since 1974.

It was time to go now. The old counterman shuffled over to the coat rack and gently lifted his jacket. How is it, he wondered, that Oklahoma football had managed to play such an important part in his life? Perhaps, he thought, there was always hope for a few moments of shared glory whenever the Sooners of Oklahoma took the field. Whatever it was, it had made him feel warm inside to have witnessed so much of Oklahoma's football glory, and for that, he was grateful. The old counterman turned off the lights, locked the door and headed down Asp street toward home, whistling a tune vaguely resembling “The Orange Bowl March.”

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Sooner Century: 100 Glorious Years of Oklahoma Football is currently available in bookstores and by mail order from Quality Sports Publications at \$39.50 by calling toll free, 1-800-464-1116. 