

*“Boomer,” “Sooner” and the “Schooner”
raced onto the field and
into the hearts
of OU fans.*

Doc's Ponies



BY TORI LEE BROWN

Some say they may have cost OU a chance at the national championship during the 1985 Orange Bowl game by running onto the field without the officials' permission, negating a fourth quarter field goal and reversing the game's momentum. In 1993 they gave a certain Ruf/Nek Queen the run-away ride of her life. Still, it is difficult to imagine ever playing an OU home football game without them.

The now-famous white Shetland ponies, “Boomer” and “Sooner,” race onto Owen Field pulling the Sooner Schooner before the first kickoff, after each OU score and to celebrate victories. Some fans assume that the mascots have been present since the beginning of University history. The ponies and schooner, however, have only been a Sooner tradition for the last 33 years, thanks to the effort of a persistent 92-year-

old family physician from Sapulpa, M. S. "Doc" Bartlett.

Bartlett formulated his idea for a new OU mascot in 1953, before entering the Army Medical Corps and serving in Korea. At the time, the University's spirit leader was an Indian dancer named "Little Red." But sensitivity to human rights issues of that time removed Little Red from the field.

"I felt as though our mascot should some way or other . . . epitomize the spirit and mood in which Oklahoma was settled," Bartlett recalls.

He was unable to pursue his goal while in service but immediately resumed his efforts after completing his tour of duty in 1955.

"It seemed to me that since our teams bear the title 'Sooners,' a suitable mascot around the 'Sooner' theme should be developed by loyal sons and daughters of the University," Bartlett said in an October 1997 interview.

Bartlett's older brother Charley, who had played football at OU before being drafted into the final months of World War II, introduced Docto Gomer Jones, then the Sooner football coach and athletic director. Doc Bartlett presented his idea to Jones, who was so enthusiastic that he took it straight to other University officials.

Bartlett brought a model of the ponies and schooner to the campus and asked the administrators to "see what you think about driving them out on the field to celebrate scores." He recalls that Jones' voice was so "strong and insistent that they listened to me. My brother was so taken up by the idea, that we went up to Kansas and bought two white Shetland ponies and had a little wagon made."

The purchase was made without knowing whether the ponies would ever be adopted by OU. But, in 1964, the adoption was approved, and Boomer, Sooner and the Sooner Schooner ran onto the field that season.

During Bartlett's pony campaign, he also had become administrator of the Bartlett Memorial Hospital in Sapulpa. He and his brother Edward, whom Doc describes as "the



When Boomer and Sooner race onto Owen Field pulling the Sooner Schooner, it is time to play Oklahoma football.

millionaire in the family," bought and dedicated the hospital in memory of their parents.

Still, Bartlett's mascot project was not yet concluded. OU could not find anyone to manage the ponies, so Bartlett turned to the band for assistance—and even had a sorority show interest in caring for them. Finally, Coach Jones mentioned the prospect to the Ruf/Neks.

That spirit group jumped at the chance to boost sagging membership; this would be an incentive for students to seek service in the Ruf/Nek society. "They are in complete charge (of the ponies) when we unload them in Norman," Bartlett says. "When we reload them, they become Gary's responsibility."

Gary Sividon is the trainer and caretaker of the ponies. He feeds and washes the prized mascots and provides medical care and transportation. He takes them to home games in Norman and back to a 10-acre farm approximately seven miles west of Sapulpa off Highway 33.

Sividon recently was married to Donna, a horse lover herself, who has chosen to take on the responsibility of caring for the ponies. She says it is like caring for children and refers to them as her babies.

The ponies share the farm—aptly named "Boomer and Sooner Acres"—with Chico, Boomer's brother, who is on standby in case something were to happen to Boomer or Sooner. Also living with them is old Sooner (Sooner III), now 22, who is retired and enjoying the simple life.

On a bright, sunny October afternoon, this reporter visited the farm for

a pony-to-person interview.

At first, Boomer and Sooner appeared reluctant to approach me; instead they went as far away as possible, perhaps to check out my credentials. But Chico, whose trainers refer to him as "the hippie" because of his long mane, neighed loudly, as though willing to comment.

Chico, while proud of his penmates, misses them when they are away. And, though he wishes nothing but the best for Boomer and Sooner, he is prepared to carry on the OU mascot tradition if needed.

About this time, old Sooner pushed young Sooner forward. With a boost of confidence, he sniffed my hand and allowed me to pet his white nose. He soon was joined by Boomer, who nudged me from behind, urging me to walk. The two accompanied me on a tour of their home.

The grass was just long enough to chew, and there were troughs full of all the oats and water a pony could want. The ponies indicated their favorite dirt pile by rolling in it simultaneously. A brown metal barn shelters the ponies from the weather and provides shade, and there is plenty of room to romp.

On game days, their own personal beauticians, the Sividons, thoroughly bathe them. Often they are taken to a local car wash and sprayed down from a safe distance. Only the finest facilities for these guys.

Then they are groomed and trimmed. Occasionally, Gary Sividon gives them hoof-acures, painting their hooves red to match their OU harnesses.

This pre-game ritual complete, they are loaded into their own personal trailer with "OU Sooner Schooner, Boomer and Sooner, University of Oklahoma mascot" emblazoned on the side. The entourage travels 130 miles along the Turner Turnpike and I-35 from Sapulpa to Norman for every OU home football game. The ponies have even attended some away and bowl games.

After they return from a game, Boomer and Sooner run straight for the pasture to roll in the dirt. They love being reunited with Chico and old Sooner.

"When they get home, they get turned out and graze—just eat, be merry, roll in the mud," Sividon says. "This is the side that people don't see, before they're made up. This is how they really are at home."

When the ponies are not at the games, they can be seen at schools that are staging mock land runs and also in parades throughout the state. Over the last three decades, they have developed loyal fans who write to them from as far away as Japan and Australia.

Bartlett often teases his colleagues by telling them "if they'll look back in history, they'll find that Boomer and Sooner beat me through Sapulpa High School." Maybe the ponies have not been around quite that long, but they definitely have run onto the field enough times to know exactly what they are supposed to do. Sividon stresses that any bloopers that may have occurred over the years were mostly due to an inexperienced driver.

"We're not claiming they've got a Ph.D., but they've at least got a bachelor of arts," Bartlett says in the ponies' defense.

The current mascots are Boomer IV and Sooner IV, although Bartlett and Sividon say many people believe that they are the original ponies, both of which died long ago.

Donna Sividon wrote a history on the ponies and found that the original pair served until 1968, when Sooner broke his neck jumping a fence. The original Boomer died in 1969 after being struck by lightning. Boomer II and Sooner II served until 1980 when they were 20 and 22 and retired to pasture. Boomer III died of natural causes in 1993.

Bartlett says that the current Boomer and Sooner, who are 9 years old, are "gonna wear out their knees and ankles one of these days and have to be replaced.

"We may even have to put Gary here in place of Boomer. I'm too slow to play Sooner, so we'll have to find someone else," Bartlett laughs.

The ponies are funded by the Doc and Buzz Foundation, a not-for-profit

organization formed by Bartlett and his brother Charley, known as "Buzz," who also resided in Sapulpa before his death in 1989.

The brothers' original contribution has been invested, with the earnings helping buy food and other items for the ponies, including transportation.



M. S. "Doc" Bartlett, right, who fought for the adoption of the two white ponies and the scaled-down Conestoga wagon as mascots for the OU football team, entrusts care of the Boomer and Sooner to Gary Sividon, left, who brings them to Norman for each home game.

Bartlett says that past OU Regents have expressed a willingness to supplement them if necessary, but for now the foundation and Bartlett Hospital of Sapulpa are mainly responsible for their support.

New Schooner Debuts

Boomer and Sooner will be pulling a new, updated version of the Sooner Schooner this fall. Painted a more authentic crimson and cream instead of the former red and white, the miniature prairie wagon is lighter and more durable than the 34-year-old original, which retires to permanent display at the Oklahoma Memorial Union.

Doc does not appear too worried about the welfare of the mascots he has nurtured into an OU tradition. He says he has new men wanting to join the foundation. "They don't want to lose the ponies that are true mascots."

And he is pretty certain the world will not run out of white ponies; but if that were to happen, he says he would get red ponies and put white harnesses on them.

The sex of the ponies is always male. "We still want the male to dominate our world. It looks as though we're losing ground, though," says Bartlett with a good-natured wink.

Bartlett offers clues to tell the ponies apart. When they are running onto the football field straight at you, the one on your left is Boomer, the one on your right is Sooner. Also, Boomer is a true albino with pinkish blue eyes, while Sooner is brown eyed.

Bartlett has not been able to attend games in Norman for quite some time. He says he is saving his energy for when he gets old. "I'm only 92, ya know."

But although he is not in Norman, his office in Sapulpa is surrounded by Sooner memorabilia—everything from pictures of the football team and the ponies to a football signed by the entire team. He also has letters from various alumni and supporters covering every inch of the walls. This is a man who always has been a true OU fan.

"I personally want us to stand behind our coach to improve our team," Bartlett says. "Even in our worst years, there've been a heck of a lot more good men come out of OU than there ever were bad men."

Bartlett speaks fondly of his last three decades with the ponies. But his fondest memories have been seeing the children's reactions.

"The thing that was most wonderful to me was to see the fathers and mothers bringing their little tots down at the north end of the stadium where the ponies were standing, and the little ones couldn't wait to reach out and pet the noses of the ponies. That was the biggest thrill of their lives. It was just a joy to watch them little rascals."