
PROLOGUE

If you think football is just a kids' game, you didn't attend the University of Oklahoma.

Often over the past decade, as OU football fortunes slipped from crisis to crisis, I have turned to the late, great sports historian Harold Keith for some perspective and a much-needed attitude adjustment. Take his account in *Oklahoma Kickoff*, for instance, of the birth of Sooner football.

It seems that those roughhewn scions of the Oklahoma frontier had been idly kicking an old-fashioned Spalding football around the campus for a couple of years when in 1895 John A. Harts arrived as student and teacher of elocution. Word circulated that Harts previously had played some serious college football, and soon he was organizer, star and coach of a real team.

Harts recruited his squad in Bud Risinger's Main Street barber shop, and when he came up two men short on the eve of the first game with an Oklahoma City team, he pressed into service Risinger and Fred Perry, who drove the city's water sprinkling wagon. Neither happened to be OU students, but no one seemed to mind. In fact, when the outmanned college boys began to drop from exhaustion and physical abuse, Oklahoma City loaned the University several of its substitutes rather than discontinue the game.

In losing 34-0, the Crimson and Cream failed to score a point or make a first down. Keith writes, "Oldtimers say the only difference between this event and Custer's Massacre, which had occurred only 19 years earlier, was that in the football game there were survivors from both sides. . . ."

"Shortly afterward, Jack Harts left school to prospect for gold in the Arctic, never dreaming that he had started at Norman an autumnal mania that would fetch crowds of 30,000 back to the campus on a single afternoon, help fuse the alumni into an intimate and

permanent union, become the torment of the university's presidents and the hobby of its Boards of Regents."

Certainly Harts would have been amazed at football's place in Sooner hearts circa 1920—where Keith's book ends—and absolutely stunned at its ascendancy in the eras of Wilkinson and Switzer. Sooners of more recent vintage are even more stunned and saddened by OU football's rapid decline under Gibbs, Schnellenberger and the newly departed John Blake.

Like it or not, football has played a large part in forming the image of the University of Oklahoma—for those who study, teach and work here, for alumni, for the public. Even in the Boren era. Even with academic accomplishments and recognition at an all-time high. Even with record-breaking private support making possible quantum leaps in program and facility upgrades. Even with an undeniably first-rate teaching and research faculty onboard and the most highly qualified student body in institutional history. Even with everything else going great, we still yearn for success on Owen Field.

Those who rightly shudder at the "football school" tag might consider the operative words in Keith's description of the "autumnal mania". . . that helps "fuse the alumni into an intimate and permanent union." This connection is particularly important for our out-of-state brethren. While relying largely on University publications for institutional news, they can share athletic triumphs and tragedies weekly on sports pages and television screens, at alumni watch parties or when Sooner teams visit their areas of the country.

If this feeling of unity, of connectivity, began and ended with football, it would be difficult to justify the time, trouble and expense—but that is not the case.

Football should be a source of entertainment and pride—and anything that builds Sooner pride manifests itself throughout the institution.

We could fill this magazine with the names of academic supporters who are also big-time football fans. In the interest of time and paper, consider just a couple of recent examples:

An East Coast kid named Michael Price came to OU because he loved football, but when he made his fortune on Wall Street, he didn't spend millions on athletics—he endowed the College of Business. No more devoted Sooner football fan exists than Broadway producer Max Weitzenhoffer—but his philanthropic dollars enrich the University's Museum of Art and endow the Musical Theatre Program. And both men can be found in business and fine arts classrooms every semester, sharing their expertise with OU students.

As *Sooner Magazine* goes to press, the University of Oklahoma has hired a very promising new football coach, Bob Stoops, formerly defensive coordinator at the University of Florida. In the midst of the media frenzy and runaway talk-radio speculation of the past 10 days, OU Athletic Director Joe Castiglione personally conducted the national search with discretion and a professionalism that justifies the hype that accompanied his own high-profile hiring in July. He probably didn't have time to read Harold Keith—but he already knew about high expectations. He did his homework, consulted the experts, formed his own opinions, made his selection and negotiated the deal. You might say he earned his salary the old fashioned way.

Of course, this time around OU had to depend on a professional. Bud Risinger's barber shop is long gone—and I don't think we have elocution teachers anymore. —CJB