



Saturday's hero

There wasn't a lot for school kids to do on Saturday afternoons in small-town Oklahoma in the late '40s and early '50s—still isn't as far as I know. But when fall came, something magical occurred. They called it Sooner football, and we were all invited to share this new excitement and take pride in a phenomenon that finally was sweeping away the lingering Dust Bowl image.

Except for those lucky enough to have seats in Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, ours was an audio rather than a visual happening. This was pre-TV, so I never saw my personal hero, Billy Vessels, play football. But I heard him play—experiencing his exploits with most Oklahomans through the wonder of radio.

Those long-ago memories suddenly seemed not-so-long ago on November 17, 2001, when word reached the campus that Vessels had died at his Coral Gables, Florida, home at the age of 70. We had known he was ill, of course, but this was the fastest, toughest Sooner of them all. Surely . . . And age 70? Could that be possible?

Billy Vessels could do anything—run, pass, receive, return kickoffs and punts—and in crucial situations, play defense. Although he didn't break into the starting lineup at left halfback until the third game of his sophomore year in 1950 and sat out most of his junior year with his leg in a cast, his career stats were amazing. In *The Sooners*, sportswriter Jim Weeks records that in 24 games, Vessels rushed for 2,085 yards, scored a school record-tying 35 touchdowns, set the record with 210 total points, passed for 327 yards, gained 391 in receptions, returned kickoffs for 528 yards and punts for 221, and had 39 yards on pass interceptions.

In victory, he was magnificent—the classic duel of sophomore sensations, for instance, when Vessels completely eclipsed Nebraska's Bobby Reynolds in a 49-35 Sooner triumph. Even in defeat at storied

Notre Dame in 1952, he so dazzled the sports world with his 17-carry, 195-yard and three-touchdown performance that later that month he became OU's first Heisman Trophy winner.

When Vessels won the Heisman, OU sports information director Harold Keith had to tell him what the award meant. But later, in accepting the trophy in New York City, he knew whom to credit: his teammates, of course, but specifically his "two coaches"—Bud Wilkinson, who had shown him how to make the most of his God-given talents and convinced him that no individual is more important than the team; and Kitty Shanklin Rountree, the Oklahoma City doctor's wife who virtually adopted him, pushed him to get an education, taught him good manners and how to conduct himself in public, all the things that most young people learn at home.

Before OU, Billy Vessels, from the age of 14, was raised by a town—the good people of Cleveland, Oklahoma, where he remained when his family moved to Oklahoma City. In Cleveland he became a high school star, dated Susie, his future wife, and considered going to Oklahoma A&M. But then he met Wilkinson, and his fate was sealed.

Post-Heisman, he had an injury-shortened professional career before heeding Wilkinson's earlier advice to walk away when football was no longer fun. He and Susie established a home for their three children in south Florida, and as a top executive with major development and construction firms, Vessels became a principal player in Miami's business and civic affairs. In 1982 a *Sooner Magazine* writer accompanied him throughout two days' activities and came away awestruck by the high regard in which his friends and colleagues held this transplanted Oklahoman.

Vessels campaigned the southern states for John F. Kennedy, went to Israel with



Stuart Symington to meet Golda Meir, regularly lunched with Bob Griese and played golf with Don Shula—and always seemed a little amazed by it all. A respected Florida horse breeder, Vessels subsequently headed both state and national racing commissions. In the '70s and '80s when Sooner fans regularly went bowling in Miami, their official host was a beaming Billy Vessels, resplendent in his Orange Bowl Advisory Board jacket.

His love for Oklahoma never wavered. He couldn't go too long without his OU fix; through frequent visits and more frequent phone calls, he stayed connected. The return of his beloved Sooners to the national championship at the 2001 Orange Bowl was a great moment in his life. He was too ill to attend in person, but the following day assistant head coach Mike Stoops arrived at the Vessels home to watch the game tape with the man whose sensational performances had sparked OU to its first national championship a half-century earlier.

Gridiron superstars over many years have sent devoted fans clamoring for tickets and kept them glued to radios and televisions, but none shone brighter than the cocky kid from Pawnee County whom his pals called Curly. Billy Vessels was a Sooner original; he will be missed. —CJB