

THE BIG ONE MAY HAVE GOTTEN AWAY,
BUT THE 2003 SOONERS BROUGHT HOME
INDIVIDUAL TROPHIES BY THE BASKETFUL.

Hauling in the Hardware

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

If football seasons were graded by the amount of hardware each team collects, Oklahoma still would be celebrating one of the most lucrative hauls in its illustrious history. In terms of awards, the 2003 campaign was everything a program dreams about.

Well, almost.

The Sooners were second to none when it came to garnering acclaim for individual performances, landing an unprecedented six players on the Football Writers Association of America's All-America Team. Led by quarterback Jason White and receiver Mark Clayton, the Big 12's best passing tandem, Oklahoma also was represented by cornerback Derrick Strait,



linebacker Teddy Lehman, defensive tackle Tommie Harris and punt return specialist Antonio Perkins.

And that was just for starters. Oklahoma head coach Bob Stoops also was honored as the Bobby Dodd Coach of the Year recipient. In addition, by the time all of the prestigious national prizes were divvied up, Oklahoma's players had brought home no less than seven, including the game's most coveted statue—the Heisman Trophy.

White, a fifth-year senior playing only his first full season on two rebuilt knees, produced a regular-season performance that led the Sooners to a perfect 12-0 mark. His efforts, which included 40 touchdown passes and only six interceptions, prompted OU offensive coordinator Chuck Long to say, "Jason is such a terrific story, maybe one of the best ever in college football."

Even a sub-par effort during a stunning loss to Kansas State in the Big 12 title game could not keep White from joining Billy Vessels, Steve Owens and Billy Sims as Oklahoma's only Heisman winners. The announcement came on December 13, just two days after White also claimed the Davey O'Brien National Quarterback Award. Then began a deluge of major awards tagged with a Norman address.

Before the holiday season was over and the Sooners began preparations for the Sugar Bowl and a shot at the national championship in New Orleans, Lehman had raked in the Butkus Award, honoring the top linebacker in the country, as well as the Bednarik Trophy.

Harris joined the elite company of former Sooner standouts Lee Roy Selmon (1975) and Tony Casillas (1985) in winning the Lombardi Award, while Strait kept the harvest rich by picking up both the Jim Thorpe Award and the Bronko Nagurski Trophy.

"It was a solid season, a good season," says OU coach Bob Stoops, looking back at the way things unfolded. "To win 12 football games and be the only undefeated team during the regular season is a fine accomplishment. And then to see so many of our players recognized for their efforts with major awards was another great achievement. Those are rewards for lots of hard work.

"But on the other hand, it's very disappointing to finish the way we did with losses in the Big 12 Championship Game and against Louisiana State in the Sugar Bowl. Our goal is to put ourselves in those types of situations. The bottom line is we were good enough to go 12-0, but not good enough to go 14-0. It certainly wasn't from a lack of effort."

After marching through its regular-season slate, producing impressive wins over Alabama, UCLA, Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma State and Texas Tech, the top-ranked Sooners were showered with praise. Stoops' crew looked unbeatable, thanks to near-flawless play from White and a dominating defensive unit.

It was written more than once and by more than one media outlet that the 2003 Sooners were worthy of consid-

2003 Individual Player Awards added to the Sooner trophy case include (from left, opposite page): The Heisman Trophy, presented by the Downtown Athletic Club of New York, photo courtesy of OU Athletics Media Relations; The Chuck Bednarik Award, photo courtesy of the Robert W. Maxwell Memorial Football Club; The Butkus Award, photo courtesy of the Downtown Athletic Club of Orlando; The Bronko Nagurski Trophy, photo courtesy of the Charlotte Touchdown Club; The Lombardi Award, photo courtesy of The Rotary Lombardi Award; The Davey O'Brien Award, photo courtesy the Davey O'Brien Foundation; The Jim Thorpe Award, photo courtesy of the Jim Thorpe Association. The 2003 Bobby Dodd Coach of the Year Award and its recipient are pictured on Page 19.



eration as one of the best teams in Division I history. Two games stood between Oklahoma and a place alongside the all-time greats.

"It hurts a lot, but we don't have anybody to look at but ourselves," says Clayton, who established seven new school receiving records during the season. "For whatever reason, we just didn't get it done in these last two games. We had it all right at our fingertips and let it get away.

"It's great to earn all of the individual honors we did. But when you come up short of your ultimate goal as a team, those types of things don't mean quite as much. I'm sure we'd trade them all for a national championship."

History most certainly will record the fall of 2003 as both memorable and haunting for Oklahoma. As much as it was a season of great rewards and accomplishment, it also will be remembered by many as the one that got away.

INDIVIDUAL AWARDS

The Heisman Story

Jason White began the 2003 season amidst a swirling cloud of uncertainty that questioned not only his physical status, but also his ability to handle the mental challenges of returning from a second career-threatening knee injury. He was the one unknown factor on a team many believed could win the national title.

One major publication wrote: "If Oklahoma can get decent play out of the quarterback position without a whole lot of mistakes, its defense has the talent to win a national championship this season."

White turned a deaf ear to the skeptics and turned in one of the greatest regular-season quarterback performances in OU history, throwing for more than 3,800 yards and a school-record 40 touchdowns. His presence proved to be an inspiration for the Sooner offense, which led the nation with a 45-point scoring average.

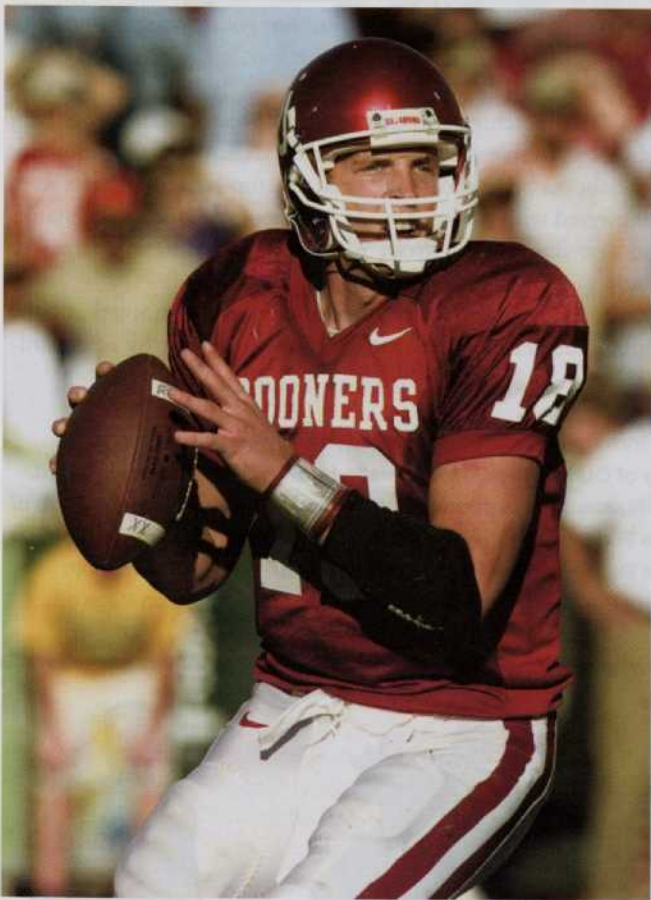
"(Jason's) emergence as a great, great football player is the story of college football," says OU coach Bob Stoops.

White tested his skills as a pocket passer and proved a major force in guiding the Sooners to 12 consecutive wins and a spot in the conference championship game. Along the way, the Tuttle, Oklahoma, native became the Big 12 Offensive Player of the Year and a consensus All-American.

Although White struggled during OU's 35-7 loss to Kansas State in the Big 12 title game, Heisman Trophy voters were impressed enough with his numbers and leadership to give him the nod. White is the fourth Sooner to earn the Heisman Trophy, which is awarded annually to the nation's top player, and the first to receive the Davey O'Brien Award since it was reserved for college football's outstanding quarterback in 1981. White's quarterbacks coach, Chuck Long, who played for Iowa, won the award in 1985, while Sooner running back Billy Sims took home the second-ever Davey O'Brien trophy in 1978.

"I just wanted the chance to play with my teammates and contribute. Going through all of the injuries and rehab, you never would have thought that you'd get a Heisman out of the deal," smiles White, who successfully petitioned the NCAA Clearing House for a sixth collegiate season next fall. "It's a great feeling, a great honor."

White's 2003 comeback story was capped off in April when he was named the recipient of the Jim Thorpe Rehabili-



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In his first full season at quarterback after two season-ending knee surgeries, Jason White transformed himself from scrambler to pocket passer, throwing for more than 3,800 yards and a school record 40 touchdowns, while leading his team to 12 consecutive regular season victories.



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OU's Jason White would have been the comeback story of the year without winning the Heisman Trophy, above, but with that designation, he reached legendary status. Then the record-smashing Sooner added the Davey O'Brien Award and the Jim Thorpe Rehabilitation Courage Award.

tation Courage Award, which annually honors individuals who have displayed courage and determination while overcoming the physical and mental challenges of disabilities caused by injury or illness.

Butkus and Bednarik

Teddy Lehman spent his first two seasons at Oklahoma playing in the shadows of All-America linebackers Torrance Marshall and Rocky Calmus. During that time, he watched, listened and learned.

As it turned out, Lehman was a good student. After a fine junior campaign in 2002, he returned to help lead a Sooner defense that closed the regular season ranked No. 1 in the country in total defense, second in passing efficiency defense and third in scoring defense.

Lehman, who led the team in tackles for the second straight season, was selected as the Big 12 Conference Defensive Player of the Year by the league's coaches. He also earned the Chuck Bednarik Trophy, as the nation's top defensive player, and capped his career by being named the Butkus Award recipient, presented to the top linebacker in the country.

"It has always been a goal of mine to win (the Butkus), and I'm just really excited now that it's become a reality," says Lehman, who was also a finalist for the award in 2002. "I knew at the beginning of the season if I did the things I needed to do, I'd have a chance of winning it."

Oklahoma's other Butkus winners are Brian Bosworth, the only two-time winner in 1985 and 1986, and Calmus in 2001.



Courtesy Downtown Athletic Club of Orlando



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At top, Teddy Lehman receives congratulations and the Butkus Award from John L. "Chip" Landon, president and award committee chair of the sponsoring Downtown Athletic Club of Orlando Inc.—while above, a Fresno State Bulldog ball carrier prepares to receive a classic Lehman wipe-out hit from No. 11.

Strait Shooter

At 5-foot-11 and 195 pounds, Derrick Strait is not an imposing figure on the football field, at least from a physical standpoint. He is not the fastest defensive back, and he is not the strongest.

But simply put, Strait is the best. He more than proved that during a senior season that saw him consistently shut down opposing receivers.

Not only did the four-year starting cornerback record 80 tackles—the third-best total on the country's No. 1 defense—he set OU career records for passes broken up, career starts and interception return yards. He had just three interceptions for 2003, but that was because most teams opted not to throw in his direction.

Strait always saved his best work for big situations, such as Oklahoma's 65-13 victory over Texas on October 11. In that game, Strait finished with 11 tackles, three pass breakups, a pair of fumble recoveries and an interception.

"Derrick has all of the tools, the smarts and the instincts it takes to be a great secondary player," says former OU co-



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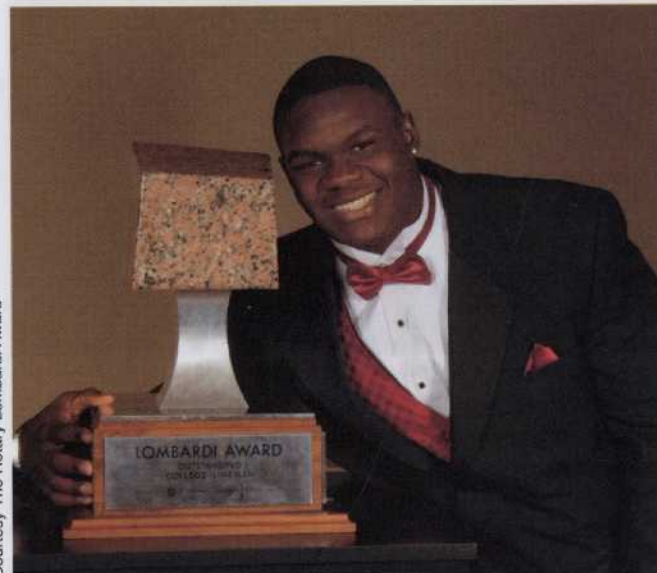
Defensive back Derrick Strait brought home both the Jim Thorpe Award as the nation's top defensive back and the Bronko Nagurski Trophy as the nation's best defensive player.

defensive coordinator Mike Stoops. "He is as good a coverage corner as you'll find in college football."

Evidently, the masses agreed.

Besides earning the Bronko Nagurski Trophy, as the best defensive player in the nation, Strait became the third Sooner to receive the Jim Thorpe Award, presented to the nation's top defensive back. Only Roy Williams (2001) and Rickey Dixon (1987) had achieved that feat wearing crimson and cream.

"I'm very proud of those accomplishments and to be recognized in that sort of way," Strait says. "Ultimately, it all comes back to my teammates and the coaching staff. I'm surrounded by great players, and I've been put in a great situation by my coaches to make the plays and do my job."



Courtesy The Rotary Lombardi Award

Mr. Lombardi

Tommie Harris' overall numbers do not reveal the profound impact he has on every game. But make no mistake, the stalwart 6-3, 289-pound defensive lineman is a disrupting force from the moment he steps onto the field.

Since becoming the first freshman defensive lineman in 14 years to start a season-opener for the Sooners in 2000, Harris has been a staple in the defensive lineup. During each of his three collegiate seasons, he drew double-team blocking that allowed OU's stable of linebackers to feast on opposing runners and quarterbacks.

Harris, who earned All-America honors despite battling injuries as a sophomore, recorded 37 tackles as a junior on the top-ranked defensive unit in the country. His five sacks were part of a team-record 46 in 2003, and his 16 quarterback pressures ranked second on the squad.

"He is one of the great leaders of this team and contributed a lot to the success of this season. He epitomizes the hard work and discipline that this award is all about, and there is no one more deserving in the nation than Tommie Harris," says Bob Stoops.

Selected as a finalist for the Nagurski, Bednarik and the Lombardi awards, Harris "settled" for the Lombardi, which is awarded annually to the top interior lineman—offense or defense—whose performance and overall character best exemplifies the discipline of legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi.

"It's great, just being put on the same stage as a Tony Casillas and Lee Roy Selmon. Those guys are Sooner greats, and having my name mentioned at the same time as theirs is an unbelievable feeling," says Harris. "It's like a dream come true, a goal come true."



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The nation's top defensive lineman, Tommy Harris (opposite page) dons tux with Sooner crimson accents to receive the Lombardi Award from the Rotary Club of Houston, given for hits such as the one at left about to be delivered on Alabama quarterback Brodie Croyle.



Lisa Hall/OU Athletics Media Relations



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Bob Stoops, left, with George Morris, president of the Bobby Dodd Coach of the Year Foundation, topped off the Sooners' 2003 trophy collection by becoming the first Oklahoma coach to be honored as "coach of a team enjoying a successful season while stressing the importance of academic excellence and sense of duty to return something to the community."

Top Notch Coach

The honors were not limited to OU's talented roster of players, as head coach Bob Stoops was recognized for his efforts in leading the Sooners to another successful season both on and off the field. In February, the 43-year-old Stoops was named the Bobby Dodd Coach of the Year Award winner.

"Coach Stoops has an outstanding reputation, and we respect his leadership on the field, as well as the many accomplishments of his team in the classroom and in life," says George Morris, president of the Bobby Dodd Coach of the Year Foundation. "All of us associated with the (foundation) are thrilled at the selection of Coach Stoops for this prestigious honor."

During his five seasons at Oklahoma, Stoops has guided the Sooners to a 55-11 record that includes two Big 12 Conference titles, three bowl victories and the 2000 national championship.

His .833 winning percentage ranks second in school history behind Barry Switzer (.837).

Stoops' Sooners opened the 2003 campaign with 12 straight victories before finishing with tough losses to Kansas State in the Big 12 title game and to Louisiana State in the Nokia Sugar Bowl, which decided the BCS national championship.

Along with a winning record, Morris indicated that scholarship, leadership and integrity are the main criteria for the Dodd award. Stoops was the unanimous choice, as decided by a vote of previous winners and a blue-ribbon panel of high-profile individuals in college football.

Jay C. Upchurch's OU sports articles are featured regularly in Sooner Magazine. He is also editor of Sooners Illustrated and Oklahoma Golf Association publications.