

*“Jim Tatum was  
a con-man,  
a dictator,  
a tyrant  
and one hell of  
a football coach.”*

Buddy Burris, All-American  
1946, 1947 and 1948

# The Forgotten Man of Oklahoma Football

# Jim Tatum

BY GARY KING



OU Western History Collections

James Moore Tatum arrived at the University of Oklahoma in 1946 and in one year had Sooner football on the path to glory.

Jim Tatum hit the OU campus in the spring of 1946 like an Oklahoma tornado and some would say that he did just as much damage. In less than one year's time he managed to win a Big Six Conference Championship, defeat North Carolina State in the Gator Bowl 34-13, alienate the University president, pay players in cash, overspend the Athletic Department budget by some \$60,000 and get the director of athletics fired. This is what is remembered about “Sunny” Jim Tatum.

What is often forgotten is that he also recruited nine (count 'em . . . *nine*) All-Americans: Wade Walker, Stan West, Darrell Royal, Jim Owens, George (Junior) Thomas, Buddy Burris (a three-time All-American), Jack Mitchell, Plato Andros and John Rapacz. These were all great players, some of the very best in OU history, but his prize recruit in this class was Bud Wilkinson, whom he brought with him as an assistant coach.

Clearly it was Bud Wilkinson who built the OU football dynasty, but he did it, in large part, with the material Tatum left him. In fact, if it were not for Tatum, Wilkinson might well have done his coaching at his alma mater, the University of Minnesota.



OU Athletics Director Jap Haskell, left, had reason to regret bringing Coach Jim Tatum, center with Assistant Coach Walter Driskell at right, to Norman to resurrect Sooner football. Tatum's freewheeling ways soon cost Haskell his job.

*This is the story of James Moore Tatum:*

**Peace and Prosperity**

In 1946 all was peace and prosperity on the home front. The war was over and veterans were flocking to college campuses to take advantage of the G. I. Bill. In the fall of 1946, the enrollment at the University of Oklahoma reached an astonishing 10,126, almost a three-fold increase from 1944.

Many of these returning vets were football players with their full eligibility ahead of them. Others, who had had their college education interrupted by the war, still had some eligibility remaining. This scenario promised a recruiting bonanza for college football coaches. These facts were not lost on OU's Board of Regents.

Dr. George L. Cross wrote in *Presidents Can't Punt* that during a meeting in 1945, one regent remarked that because of the negative publicity over *The Grapes of Wrath*, both the book and the movie, many Oklahomans actually felt a little apologetic about living in the state. What, he asked, could the University do to dispel this image and instill pride in the state?



Regent Lloyd Noble of Ardmore provided the answer. Why not hire a new football coach, (Dewey "Snorter" Luster had recently resigned citing health concerns) and build a great football team? The University of Oklahoma could recruit the best athletes from this abundant supply and field an outstanding team immediately.

The man selected to replace Luster and create the juggernaut was Jim Tatum, a big, brash, bearish Carolinian.

**Five Left Tackles**

Jim Tatum was born on July 22, 1913, in McColl, South Carolina. He was one

of nine children, he and four of his older brothers all playing left tackle.

Tatum played his college football for Carl Snavelly's North Carolina Tarheels. He was big (6'3", 230 lbs), strong and good—good enough to make a couple of All-America teams as a senior. After he graduated in 1935, he became an assistant coach at North Carolina. When Snavelly moved on to Cornell the following year, he took Tatum with him.

In 1940 Tatum returned to his alma mater to serve as an assistant to Bear Wolf. When Wolf enlisted in the Navy just before the '42 season, Tatum was promoted to head coach and led the Tarheels to a 5-2-2 season. The following season he was also in the Navy and coaching the Iowa Pre-Flight football team along with Bud Wilkinson and Don Faurot, the architect of the split-T offense.

OU's director of athletics, Jap Haskell, had known Tatum during the war and had seen his teams in action. Largely on his recommendation, Cross and the Regents decided on Tatum as their head coach.

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Within weeks of arriving at OU in January 1946, Coach Jim Tatum, seated, and his assistant, Bud Wilkinson, were drumming up fan support on a tour of 23 Oklahoma cities.

### Unusual Organizational Talent

Cross began to regret this decision almost immediately. He was much more impressed with the young, charismatic Wilkinson and would have preferred to have him as the Sooners' head coach.

Although he did not like him personally, Cross grudgingly conceded that Tatum had "unusual organizational talent." Cross later wrote, "He called on Wilkinson to do most of the actual teaching during the squad meetings. His genius appeared to lie in his ability to select personnel, players and coaches, induce them to join his team, and then effectively organize their efforts." Harold Keith, in *Forty-Seven Straight: The Wilkinson Era at Oklahoma*, quoted Don Faurot as saying, "Tatum was the best recruiter and defensive coach I've ever seen."

### A Man with a Lot of Money

Not content with just spring and fall practice, Tatum conducted summer try-outs in 1946. Estimates of how many prospective Sooners tried out for Tatum that summer run as high as 400.

That season OU ran off an 8-3 record including a 34-13 victory over North Carolina State in the Gator Bowl. Tatum had few, if any, problems on the field. His problems all concerned money. He spent so much of it he almost bankrupted the Athletics Department. "He was a man with lots of university money, which he was passing out to the married players," linebacker Merle Greathouse told Harold Keith.

Tatum matched several players with a sponsor or "sugar daddy." This gave the sponsor the right to enter the Sooner dressing room after games and visit with the player. These *sponsors* usually slipped a twenty-dollar bill into the player's pocket before they slipped out the door. They also bought clothes for players at Connolly's Men's Store in Oklahoma City. Tatum may have worked his players hard, but he also rewarded them handsomely.

### Triumphant Manner

When Cross received a report on Gator Bowl expenditures he could not account for \$6,000, which was listed only as "expenditures." It occurred to him that Tatum may have bought gifts for the players even though he had explicitly told him not to because it would be a violation of Big-Six rules. A conversation with a couple of players solved the mystery. Fifty players at \$120 each equaled \$6,000.

Cross confronted Tatum on this issue, and he admitted that he had indeed given money to the boys. Furthermore he proclaimed, in what Cross characterized as a "triumphant manner," that this was a perfectly acceptable thing to do, and he seemed to be unconcerned that these players could be declared ineligible.

In the midst of all this, Tatum resigned to become head coach at the University of Maryland. After his departure Cross probed

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deeper into the financial affairs of the Athletic Department and found a deficit in excess of \$60,000. It appeared that Athletics Director Jap Haskell did not know (or perhaps did not want to know) about Tatum's profligate spending. The Board of Regents summarily relieved Haskell of his duties. Thus, the man who first recommended Tatum be hired at OU ultimately lost his job because of him.

#### **Parasitic Monster of Open Professionalism?**

Tatum signed on to coach at the University of Maryland for a salary of \$12,000 a year, which was \$3,000 more than he was making at OU. Although, in looking back, he might have been disappointed in his two losses to Wilkinson in the 1954 and 1956 Orange Bowl games, he had plenty to celebrate at Maryland. In nine years, his Terrapins won 73 games, lost 15, tied 4, played in five bowl games and at one point, reeled off 19 straight victories. Tatum's 1953 squad was ranked number one by all the major wire services, and he was voted "Coach of the Year."

A biography of Tatum at Time.com explained, "Still, all was not roses for Tatum even at Maryland. The university was criticized for overemphasizing football. When Dr. Wilson Elkins, a Rhodes Scholar and one-time University of Texas quarterback, was named president in 1954, and set out to raise Maryland's academic standing, Tatum got itchy feet." Two years later he was back at the University of North Carolina.

The Maryland student paper, *The Diamondback*, editorialized as follows, "Tatum's tenure was an era in which an inadequate stadium became ultra-adequate and an inadequate library became more inadequate."

The North Carolina student paper was apparently not glad to see him come. *The Daily Tar Heel* called Tatum "a parasitic monster of open professionalism."

Call it revisionist history or selective memory, but for several years the Atlantic Coast Conference has conferred the James Tatum Award to "the top senior student-athlete among the league's football players." The ACC says (apparently without irony) of the award, "The Tatum Award is given annually in the memory of the late Jim Tatum, a two-time ACC Coach of the Year who coached in the fifties at both Maryland and North Carolina and believed strongly in the concept of the student-athlete."

#### **Rise to Gridiron Glory**

When Tatum left Maryland, he quipped, "I'm going back to North Carolina to die." However, he probably did not expect to die quite so soon. At 10:40 p.m. on July 23, 1959, the day following his 46<sup>th</sup> birthday, Jim Tatum died.

His physicians said that he had contracted "an overwhelming virus infection," which had spread throughout most of his body. Uremic poisoning and other complications set in and hastened his death.

Tatum did not enjoy the success at North Carolina that he had at Maryland. With the Tarheels his record was 14-15-1, with one of these losses coming to Wilkinson's legendary '56 Sooners, but his lifetime totals were 100-35-7, and in 1983 he was posthumously inducted into the National Football Foundation's College Hall of Fame.

Clearly he was, as Buddy Burris proclaimed, "one hell of a football coach," and whether OU fans like to admit it or not, he played a significant role in the Sooners' rise to gridiron glory. ■

*Gary King is a freelance writer who lives in Norman.*

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