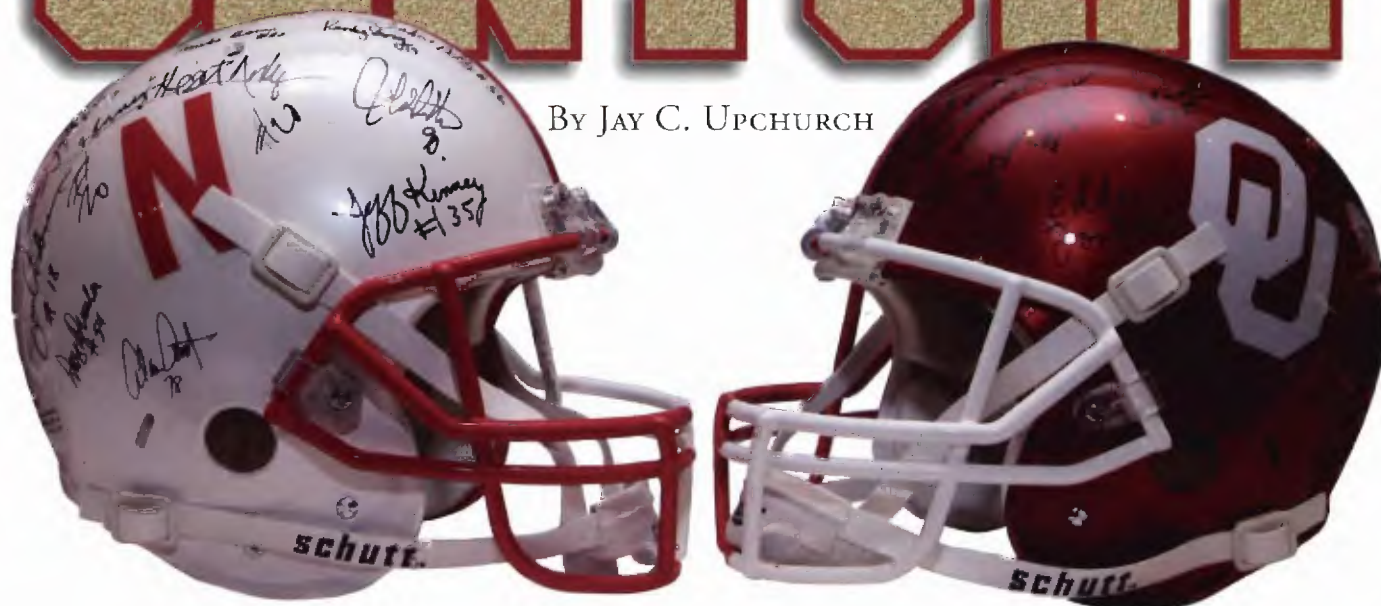


Nearly four decades ago,
two of the best football teams ever to play the game
lined up and went full tilt while millions watched.
The memories are still vivid and celebrated
—even by the team that came up short.

THE GAME OF THE CENTURY

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH



Huddled in a corner of the Switzer Center's Legends Lobby, four old friends immerse themselves in the evening's nostalgia. Their spirited conversation bounces back and forth between topics before finally landing on the subject that has reunited them again almost 40 years after they were first drawn together.

Just outside the center, the Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium big screen is playing highlights of the epic 1971 football clash between Nebraska and Oklahoma, forever after known as "The Game of the Century." It was a battle pitting major rivals, steeped in tradition and respect, and featuring a who's who of All-Big Eight standouts, All-Americans and future College Hall of Famers.

It was a game that lived up to the massive media hype and national expectations, becoming an instant classic even before Jeff Kinney plunged head-long into the end zone to give top-ranked Nebraska a 35-31 lead over the No. 2 Sooners in the final moments.

"You never get tired of talking about being a part of something so special," says Kinney, the former Nebraska running back whose short touchdown run provided the winning margin that Thanksgiving

continued



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ABOVE: During the 2008 OU-Nebraska halftime, members of the two schools' 1971 Game of the Century teams gathered for a group photo. Front row, from left, are Nebraska running back Johnny Rodgers, OU offensive coordinator Barry Switzer, Husker head coach Tom Osborne, and Sooner head coach Chuck Fairbanks. Sooner players, second row, from left, are Joe Wylie, Tim Welch, Dave Robertson, and Gary Young.

AT RIGHT: Former player Gary Young, at left, shares a laugh with Sooner coaching staff veterans Don Jimerson, Gene Hochevar (back to camera), Barry Switzer and Billy Michaels.



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Robert Taylor

Tuck a football under his arm and former Nebraska running back Johnny Rodgers, right, might be showing OU Vice President for Athletics Joe Castiglione his Heisman Trophy pose. Rodgers' gridiron heroics in the classic 1971 game with OU were recalled at the teams' reunion with much more enthusiasm by Sooner players and fans than on that November day when they occurred.



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1971 Huskers and Sooners got together in the Barry Switzer Center before the 2008 OU-Nebraska game for dinner, old war stories and helmet signing. At halftime the following day, each member, including Joe Wylie, right, was introduced and congratulated by President David Boren.

Day some 37 years earlier.

"That game was special for a lot of reasons, and tonight is the perfect illustration of the mutual respect involved on both sides."

With that, Kinney rejoins former teammate Johnny Rodgers and legendary OU figures Barry Switzer and Greg Pruitt as they continue to exchange favorite stories, both past and present.

This famous foursome was among more than 60 former players and coaches who returned to Norman the weekend of November 1 for a reunion honoring participants from that memorable game. The idea for the celebration was hatched originally by OU athletics director Joe Castiglione and the late Jack Mildren, the '71 Sooner quarterback who died this past May after a long battle with cancer.

"When you think of this game, you think of these programs and the respect the rival schools always had for each

another. It's unique," says Castiglione, who expressed regret that Mildren was noticeably absent from the special event.

"I can't explain why you don't see it more often. When you see the respect between these two programs, it makes even more sense to use this opportunity to celebrate it."

With the 2008 versions of Oklahoma and Nebraska set to meet the following day—in a not-so-classic game won by the Sooners 62-28—this night belonged to the old-timers, including Switzer and former Nebraska coach



Noticeable by his absence was the late Jack Mildren, the gallant yet losing quarterback whose memories of the Game of the Century convinced OU's Joe Castiglione that a reunion of the two teams was in order. Honoring Mildren, from left, were Castiglione; OU Regent Max Weitzenhoffer; President Boren; Mildren's mother, Mary Glynne Mildren; his daughter, Leigh Mildren Woody; and his son, Drew Mildren.

Tom Osborne, both 71, and 75-year-old former Sooner skipper Chuck Fairbanks.

"It's special getting the chance to be a part of this evening because this truly was a special game," says Switzer, who was offensive coordinator on Fairbanks' staff at the time. "It was a game that captured the imagination of football fans everywhere. Ask any fan old enough to remember this game, and they will have a special memory to share."

"Irresistible Oklahoma meets Immovable Nebraska." That is how *Sports Illustrated* described the pending battle between the Sooners and Cornhuskers on its cover dated November 22, 1971.

Three days later, more than 55 million national television viewers—at the time, the largest ever to see a college football game—tuned in to witness one of the most compelling games in the history of the sport.

After trailing 14-3 early, thanks in part to a 72-yard punt return by Rodgers, the Sooners rallied behind Mildren's running and passing to take a 17-14 edge at the half. But the Cornhuskers stormed back in front 28-17 heading to the final quarter.

"It was one of those back-and-forth games where you felt the last team with the ball was going to probably win it. And it just so happened when the clock struck zero, we were behind," explains Pruitt, a two-time All-American running back who still ranks eighth on OU's all-time rushing list.

The Sooners took their final lead, 31-28, with just over seven minutes remaining, which gave the visitors more than enough time to produce the game-winning 74-yard scoring drive.

For defending national champion Nebraska, it was the gratifying culmination of another incredible season that would conclude with a second straight championship. For Oklahoma,

it was a bittersweet moment that ended its title hopes, but helped re-establish the Sooners as a key player on the national stage.

"We won the national championship that day. Those were the two best teams in the country, without a doubt," says Rodgers, whose team still had to beat Alabama (38-6) in the Orange Bowl to officially claim the big prize.

"To be a part of a game that has stood the test of time and is still being talked about as one of the greatest games ever played—that's pretty special."


Oklahoma managed to shelve the disappointment of its loss to Nebraska long enough to trounce Auburn in the Sugar Bowl a few weeks later. And over the years, so many fond recollections of the "Game of the Century" have eased the sting for that group of Sooners.

"We never thought we would lose that game. But on that particular day, it turned out Nebraska played a little better than we did," says Pruitt. "I guess you could say the memories from the game itself are a little bittersweet, but just being here with these guys and being part of something so special is fantastic."

Through his conversations with Mildren and other players and coaches, Castiglione came to realize the uniqueness surrounding the spirited rivalry and that particular 1971 game.

"On the scoreboard, Nebraska won, but most people who were there or who wrote about it didn't talk about Oklahoma losing. They talked about the greatness of the game," says Castiglione.

That conversation is alive and well all these years later. On this special evening of smiles, warm embraces and mutual respect, the participants are more than happy to be a part of it.

"You don't ever like to lose any game, but with time, you forget the bad feelings of being on the wrong side, especially in a game as special as this one," adds former OU running back Joe Wylie. "We are all fortunate to have been part of something that is still being talked about and debated after so many years. I don't know who coined the title 'Game of the Century,' but this one has to rank up there with the best." 

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