

“Bully” Kept His Life on Track

When Owen Hewett was born with cerebral palsy in the 1930s, standard practice was institutionalization.

His parents rejected that idea and set their son on the path to a full and rewarding life.



Robert Taylor

Owen Hewett, left, counts among his good friends Freckles, at his feet, and former teammate J.D. Martin. Hewett served as team manager for OU track and field during the same time Martin was named a three-time All American in pole vault.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Owen Hewett has done what he wanted to do. And that is no small accomplishment.

The 1960 University of Oklahoma alumnus has enjoyed a highly successful career in finance and computer programming. In many ways, he has become the chief ambassador for OU track and field. And he has beaten every odd, every negative stereotype and knocked down almost every barrier that a person born with cerebral palsy can face.

“I’m not going to kid you and say that I didn’t know I had cerebral palsy, but it didn’t bother me,” says Hewett, who delivers stories with a sly, practiced humor. “A doctor once told me, ‘It’s obvious it didn’t affect your intellect . . . unless you were destined to be Einstein.’”

continued

He was destined for many things. One of them was being born within easy reach of perhaps the leading expert in cerebral palsy during the late 1930s.

"I regretted until recently that I wasn't 'Sooner Born,' " says Hewett, who was "Sooner Bred" by OU alumni parents Merritt and Elva Trueblood Hewett. Merritt's work as a leading expert in asphalt with American Oil Co. had led them to the East Coast. "Divine providence put me in Baltimore—and Dr. Phelps was in Baltimore."

Winthrop Phelps was considered the first specialist to design a systematic approach for treating children with cerebral palsy. At the time, many children with the condition were being institu-



Owen Hewett, far right, threw a surprise anniversary party at a Baltimore hotel for OU alumni Merritt and Elva Hewett, at left, the parents who refused to let their son's cerebral palsy keep him from enjoying life to the fullest.

"I am a thoroughbred, but luckily I am not a horse, because they didn't shoot me."

tionalized; Phelps admonished parents to quit overprotecting their kids and promoted activity and independence.

When Hewett's parents met Phelps, their nearly two-year-old son was having trouble even walking. Phelps sent them home with a series of groundbreaking, practical therapies. Hewett learned to walk straight by sliding his feet on skis between the slats of a wooden floor. His parents took him everywhere. He learned to swim, to write cursive, to play ping-pong and do most things that other children his age were doing.

"I blended in," Hewett says, noting he was mainstreamed in public schools at a time when there were no other children with handicaps in sight. He was a Cub Scout in fourth grade when someone told him for the first time that he could not do what everyone else did. His principal decided that Hewett should be sent to a special education school. His parents enlisted the help of other Scouting families, and the principal caved to their combined pressure.

But success was not a given. When Hewett announced that he wanted to play Little League baseball, his parents knew that he would not be able to perform like his friends. They could have refused—yet, they did not.

"They allowed me to fail. I needed to learn that part of it," he says philosophically.

Though he could not run bases, Hewett could spin wheels.

On Phelps' recommendation, his parents found a hand-me-down bicycle that was then bolted onto a platform to make a stationary exercise bike.

"When I was 12 or 13, I wanted to ride the bicycle. Dr. Phelps said, 'You can do whatever you want.'" The bike lacked training wheels, so Hewett's father and a group of neighborhood children held the bike upright and ran alongside until he could balance on his own.

By ninth grade, Hewett had found a new balance between his abilities and desires. A teacher kindly informed Hewett that he would never become student council president; instead, he turned his attention toward athletics and became manager of his high school sports teams. Hewett developed a statistical matrix that still is being used by his alma mater.

OU sports played their own role in Hewett's youth. During school breaks, the Hewett family returned to Norman to visit his aunt, Lois Walker, a longtime staffer in the OU College of Pharmacy. They attended OU football games and usually squeezed in a visit with legendary track and field coach John Jacobs, who had led Hewett's father and two uncles on the varsity team.

"I am a thoroughbred," Hewett quips of his family's OU track lineage, which traces back to 1924. "But luckily I am not a horse, because they didn't shoot me."

Owen M. Hewett
Locker Room
Field Cross Country

In the summer of 1956, he followed that lineage straight back to Norman as a freshman. A surprise awaited him.

“Unbeknownst to me, John Jacobs knew about me through my parents and my aunt, who was in his bridge group. They had designated me manager for the track team. I thought I had died and gone to heaven.”

Jacobs looked after Hewett, even taking him on weekend fishing outings. He nicknamed the freshman “Bullet,” which he later shortened to “Bully,” a handle that has stuck with Hewett even today.

“I didn’t know what it meant. I didn’t care, because you had

arrived if Coach had a nickname for you,” Hewett says.

Hewett thrived at OU, becoming the University’s longest-serving track manager and lettering in the sport. He was thrilled to share meals at Jefferson House and developed lifelong friendships with some of the nation’s finest athletes. Once again, he was part of the crowd.

“Owen didn’t want anyone feeling sorry for him—he just wanted to do everything on his own and prove to everyone that he could do it,” says former OU Associate Director of Athletics Leon Cross, an All-American football co-captain under Bud Wilkinson. *continued*



Robert Taylor

From left, former OU Associate Director of Athletics Leon Cross, Hewett and Martin bask in the updated amenities of the John Jacobs Track and Field Complex, a far cry from when Hewett managed the track team during the late 1950s.

"If I was slowing them down walking to class, they would just say, 'Come on, Owen. Walk faster!'" Hewett recalls with a laugh. His determination to master the bicycle years earlier paid off, as Hewett rode everywhere on campus.

Hewett also thrived in the classroom. Thanks to Dr. Phelps, he had learned to type and to speed write, a form of shorthand that served him well as a math major. But during his sophomore year, he had difficulties with integral calculus. His parents paid for a "human engineering" test that revealed Hewett's strengths and weaknesses. The test showed that Hewett had career potential in investments and accounting. He took the advice seriously, enrolling in OU business courses and later undertaking an MBA at the University of North Carolina.

Two degrees in hand, Hewett was dismayed to realize work was scarce in his native Baltimore. The trained entrepreneur resorted to interviewing for a job with the Social Security Administration and ranked first on the placement exam. A job offer should have been pending, but a Social Security supervisor asked Hewett to decline the job due to his "disability."

"They didn't see me—they just saw that I had cerebral palsy."

Soon after, a bureaucratic review at the Department of Motor Vehicles stripped Hewett of his driver's license. His parents fought to get it reinstated and won, but the one-two punch of unemployment and dependence formed a low point in Hewett's life.

After nine unemployed months, he was put in touch with the Maryland State Commission for Handicapped People. They offered a job lead in the Applied Physics Lab at Johns Hopkins University. Hewett soon was learning to become an associate mathematician for missile defense system planning.

"The Applied Physics Lab gave me a chance, just like the track coaches at OU," he says.

By the mid-1960s, Hewett had become interested in exploring the stock market. A family friend pointed him toward the University of Chicago. Hewett used his vacation to visit the Center for Research in Security Prices and signed on as an associate analyst. The center's groundbreaking work evaluated the market from 1926 to 1966 and tracked every stock traded on the New York Stock Exchange to calculate rates of return.

Hewett had an idea. Working with a team of MIT consultants, he found a way to link the stock market data to bank trust departments. Hewett developed a brand-new process to help clients understand their investment portfolios and plan for the future.

Such an idea is commonplace today, he concedes. "But none of this existed at the time."

The concept was adopted by the First National Bank of Chicago, which had the seventh-largest trust department in the nation. Eventually, the MIT consultants took Hewett's system to each of the other "top seven" banks, and Hewett became as-

Owen M. Hewett Men's Locker Room Track & Field / Cross Country



Hewett, left, and Cross pose at the entrance to the men's locker room in the OU track and field complex. Friends surprised Hewett by naming the locker room in his honor.

sistant vice president of the Bank of Chicago trust department.

A few years later, he applied the same ideas to "mini-computers" in San Antonio, Texas. His computer career led to developing leak-detection systems for nuclear energy plants in Europe, management information systems for real estate appraisers and, eventually, to a new contract business that outsourced computer hardware repair. That effort became known as MCM and now serves more than 2,000 companies worldwide. Today, Hewett is MCM's retired chief financial officer.

"But I have another business, and that is the Spike Club," he says.

All through his years far from Oklahoma, Hewett stayed close to teammate J.D. Martin, who had become OU's head track and field coach. Hewett helped recruit 14 long-distance runners from Chicago, including several All Americans. In the years after Martin's retirement, Hewett helped OU locate new coaching talent.

"Owen is incredibly passionate and committed to working exhaustively to improve the experience for our student-athletes in any way he can," says current OU Track and Field Coach

Martin Smith, who has led OU to both Big 12 outdoor and indoor titles in just five years. “Owen doesn’t let any of his challenges play a role in what he’s trying to accomplish. He has an incredible sense of humility, and he is relentless—he just finds a way to get things done.”

Among those things is organizing track and field alumni into a force with which to be reckoned. Since its establishment in 2007, more than 100 track alumni have joined the Spike Club. While their membership dues help pay for scholarships, Spike Club members also have hosted OU’s first banquet to honor track and field student-athletes and raised more than \$200,000 for future projects.

“Owen had a vision to develop a successful booster club, and he got people organized. He doesn’t ask anyone to do anything he wouldn’t do himself,” says OU Vice President for Intercollegiate Athletic Programs and Director of Athletics Joe Castiglione.

The Spike Club currently is establishing a “legacy” that includes a mural of championship OU track and field athletes, record boards, 30-foot banners and restoring the track and field archives.

The legacy gift will highlight OU’s John Jacobs Track and Field Complex, which received a major overhaul in 2004. The venue is now considered one of the best outdoor facilities in the nation. Hewett’s friends and classmates made sure he was part of the package.

“They went behind my back and named the locker room for me,” he says proudly. “Even though people say, ‘You’ve done a lot for the track program,’ they’ve done a lot for me. John Jacobs and (Assistant Coach) Bill Carroll gave me the opportunity to participate in the athletic program. In a small way, I can repay them. That’s my passion.”

“Owen loves the University of Oklahoma and Sooner Track and Field more than anyone I know,” says Coach Smith’s wife, Renee, who works closely with Hewett and the Spike Club. “He is tireless in his efforts to help make the track and field program the best it can be and to preserve the legacy of those who have come before us. I can’t think of a more loyal friend to this school than Owen Hewett.”

Such loyalty gets noticed. In 1990, OU established the Owen Hewett Award to recognize achievement in academics and athletics. It is the highest honor a track and field athlete can receive.



Robert Taylor

Hewett, center, chats with current OU Track and Field Coach Martin Smith and Smith’s wife, Renee, who works closely with Hewett through the Spike Club.

“Coach Bud Wilkinson taught that the most important thing in success is not the will to win, but the will to prepare,” says Leon Cross. “Dedication and hard work are the main ingredients in the will to prepare, and Owen is a classic example of those ingredients. Owen has accomplished so much because he possesses the same qualities as our great Sooner athletes and coaches—he is a champion in every way.”

Hewett has found another way to keep championing OU even after he is gone. His estate will provide for three endowed professorships: one in neurological research, another in chemical engineering to honor his father, and a third in history to recognize his mother’s choice of study at OU.

Hewett hopes to chronicle his own history in a biography appropriately titled *Bully*. The book will tell how a young boy born with cerebral palsy accomplished what so many said was impossible.

“I feel that if I can help one person to do what I’ve done, then it’s worth it. Parents of children like me need to know it can be done,” he says.

“It’s a tribute to my parents that I’ve done so well,” Hewett says with a smile. “I did it because my parents said I could.”

(Editor’s note: Track and Field fans interested in joining OU’s Spike Club can contact Owen Hewett at owenh@mcm-service.com.)

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