

PRESERVING PAST GLORIES



OU Western History Collections

**Searching through 8,000
reels of game film, stacks
of old photographs,
interviews and memorabilia,
an indefatigable team
of videographers has
produced a DVD treasure
for Sooner fans who just
cannot get enough
OU football.**

By JAY C. UPCHURCH

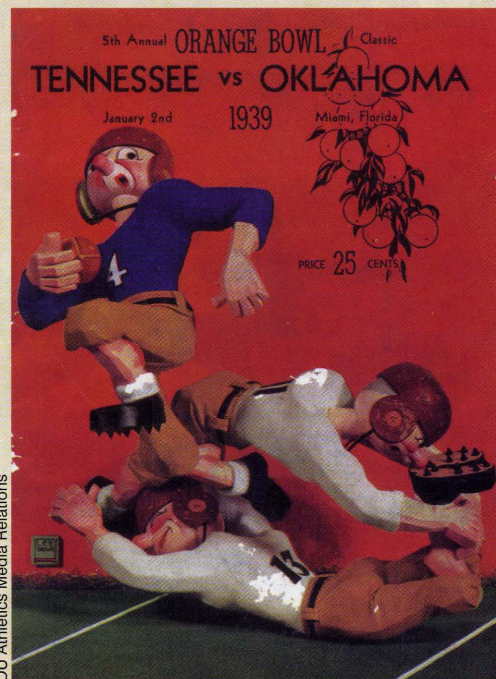
Turtleneck jerseys woven from wool, crimson in color with cream-striped sleeves and a hand-stitched "O" adorning the chest. High-top leather shoes scuffed and well worn with serrated bottoms, topped with bright socks pulled high and neatly tucked under thick knee-length flannel trousers complete with sewn-in protective padding.

A sprawling patch of prairie marked with flags and lined with pedestrians curious to see what all the fuss is about as the two sides feuded over that unusual piece of pigskin.

Images of a more primitive game played more than a century ago, etched in time, hidden away and somewhat forgotten. The beginning, if you will, rarely evoked except by the most curious of seekers.

Football has been a part of the University of Oklahoma basically since the day the school was founded in Indian Territory in 1890. Initially played recreationally, it soon was established as a bona fide competitive sport. Over the years, the two have become so intertwined, it is almost impossible to mention Oklahoma without bringing up football.

When sports historians debate the greatest and most tradition-rich collegiate football programs, a prominent place in the



LEFT: OU football in the 1890s often featured games played on open fields flanked by fans in horse-drawn carriages.

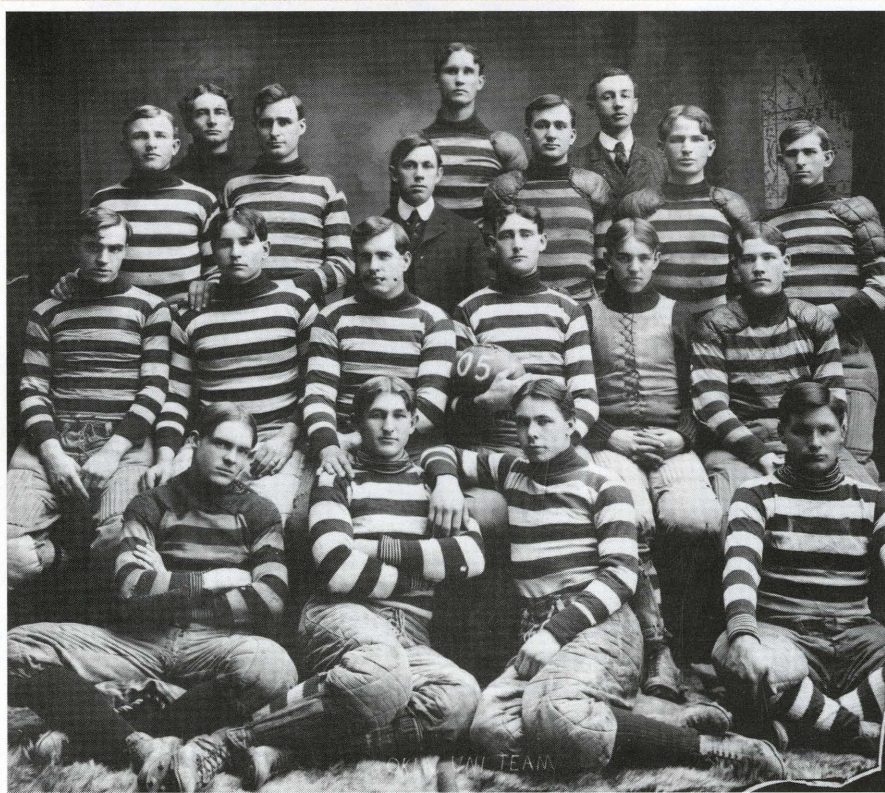
ABOVE: Coach Tom Stidham's 1938 Sooners recorded nine shutouts en route to a perfect 10-0 regular season record that earned the program its first postseason bowl game.

“There are so many interesting aspects of the film, especially where Bennie Owen is concerned. The more we dug, the more we found on those great old teams.”



Robert Taylor

ABOVE: SoonerVision executive director Brandon Meier’s crew spent 2,000 hours logging and cataloging more than 8,000 reels of archived game film. **BELOW:** In 1905, Bennie Owen’s first season as coach, the team known as the “Boomers” went 7-2 and recorded the program’s first win over Texas.



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discussion is always reserved for OU and its Sooners.

That very history—filled with pagantry, championships, All-Americans, colorful characters and more than 800 victories—inspired University officials to launch a comprehensive documentary project detailing the “official” story of Oklahoma football. “The History of Oklahoma Football, Part I, The Birth of a Champion,” was released on DVD as the first in a four-part series this past October and has been well received by fans and critics alike.

The 90-minute piece chronicles Oklahoma football from its raw beginnings in 1895 through the 1946 season and the birth of the modern era of the college game. Writer and producer Brandon Meier, along with his SoonerVision crew, brought the film to life with rare interviews and never-before-seen footage of OU games from several different decades.

“Working on a project like this is a



Robert Taylor

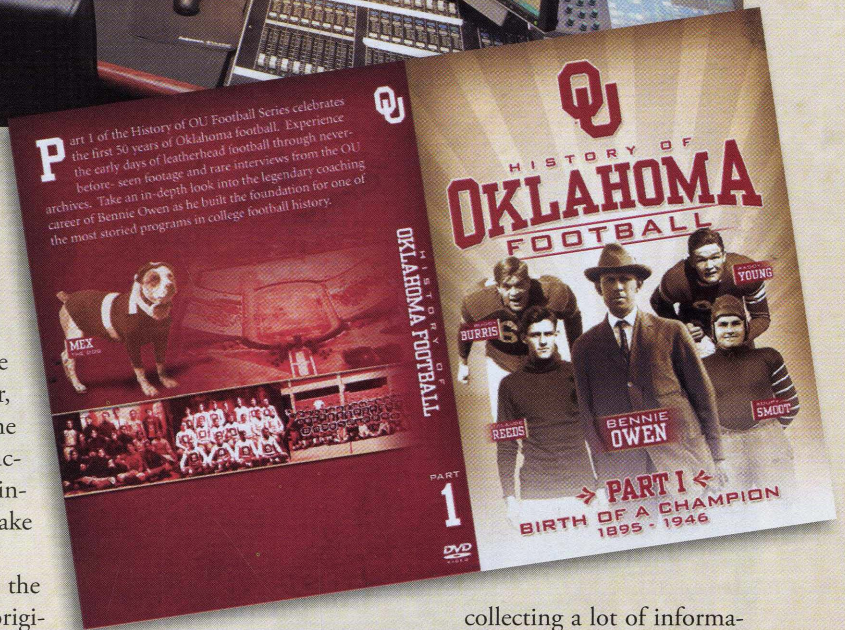
The SoonerVision staff was put to the test with 1,500 hours of post-production studio time required for the 90-minute documentary, “Birth of a Champion,” chronicling the first 50 years of OU football.

big challenge because you want to be as historically accurate as possible but entertaining at the same time,” says Meier, whose production team scoured over 8,000 reels of game film and spent countless hours in the pre- and post-production stages. “It’s a great story with all kinds of elements involved, and something you really put your heart into to make sure it’s something the University can be proud of.”

“Birth of a Champion” provides an in-depth look at the founders of the program and captures the essence of the original Sooner spirit with more than 400 vintage photographs and dozens of stories, both legendary and not so legendary. Former OU running back Spencer Tillman helps transport the viewer seamlessly through time with his insightful narration.

The biggest portion of the first documentary focuses on Hall of Fame coach Bennie Owen, who took over the program in 1905 and expedited its evolution with his innovative approach to the game. While helping pioneer the forward pass, Owen led the Roughriders—who took the name Sooners in 1908—to their first victory over Texas in 1905 and the program’s first undefeated full season in 1911.

“There are so many interesting aspects of the film, especially where Bennie Owen is concerned. The more we dug, the more we found on those great old teams,” says Meier, executive director for OU’s video production entity, SoonerVision. “It was a little like piecing together a big puzzle. The research included

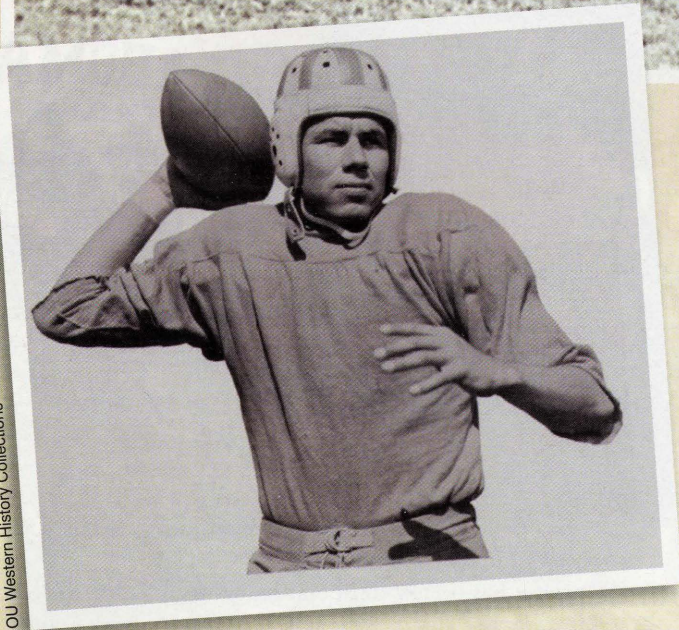
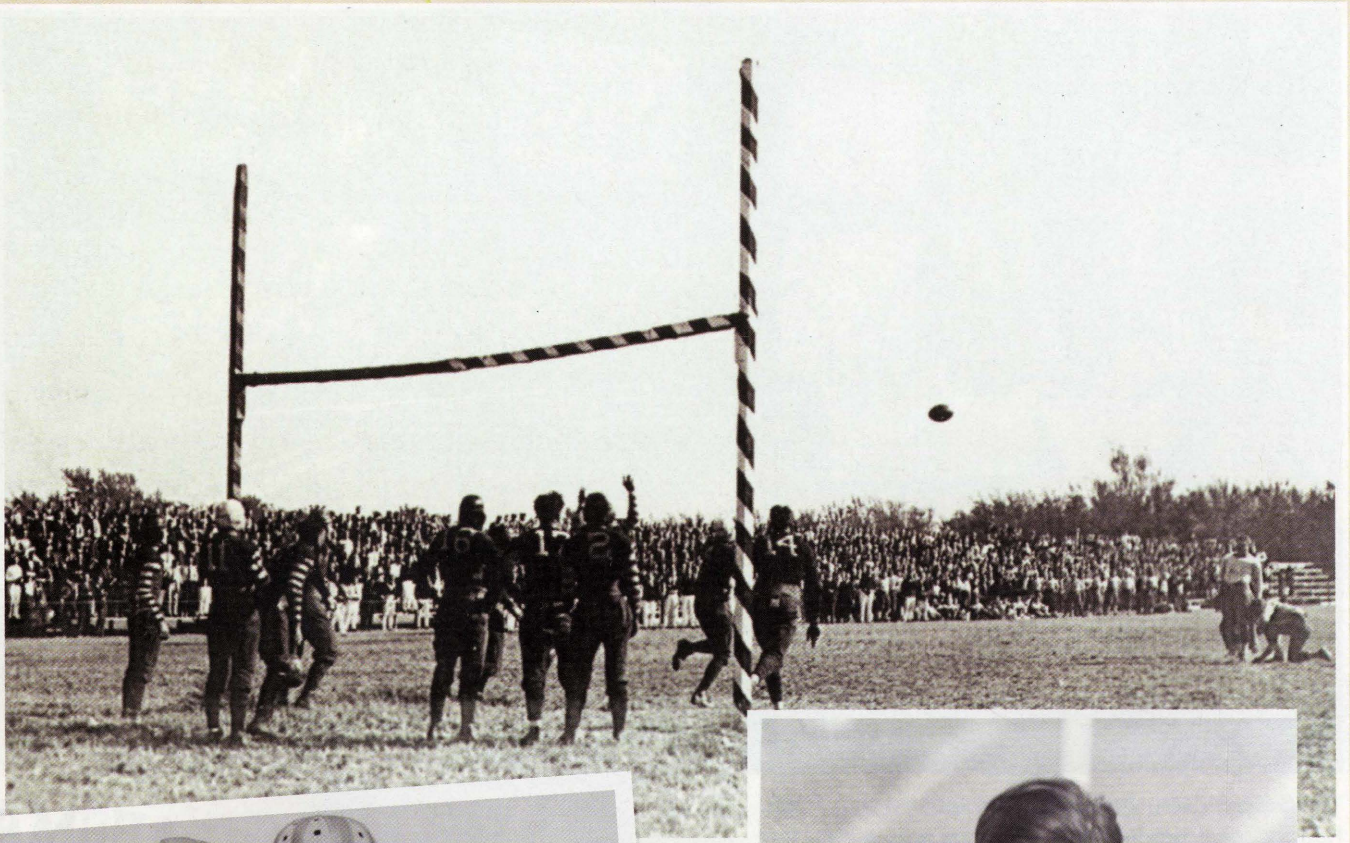


collecting a lot of information from various sources, along with interviews and film and photos.”

The project has been a collaboration between SoonerVision, the OU Athletics Media Relations Department and Sooner Sports Properties, each providing their expertise to help bring all viable elements together.

“It was a joint effort, but Brandon’s group deserves a great deal of the credit for the wonderful job they did,” says Kenny Mossman, senior associate athletics director and head of sports communications. “I feel a key to the success of the project is the fact Brandon understands the passion for Oklahoma football. He used that element to his advantage, and I think you see it in the film.”

Ironically, Meier was born and raised in Nebraska. He grew up a Cornhuskers fan and received his degree from the University of Nebraska. Making the transition from loyal Husker follower to



TOP: An October 21, 1921, game at Norman's Boyd Field featured a matchup between Oklahoma and Washington University of St. Louis. The Sooners won 28-13.

ABOVE: The versatility Indian Jack Jacobs brought to the program helped the Sooners go 18-8-1 during his three seasons from 1939-41.

RIGHT: All-America end Roland "Waddy" Young played an instrumental role in leading the 1938 Sooners to their first bowl appearance, an Orange Bowl game vs. Tennessee.



devoted Sooner filmmaker would seem like a stretch. But Meier is a college football fan first, and his experience with the OU-Nebraska rivalry undoubtedly worked in his favor.

“Like Nebraska, football is a big part of the identity here in Oklahoma. I already appreciated the tradition at OU, and once we got fully involved in the project, it really makes you appreciate college football even more, especially how it relates to Norman and the University as a whole,” says Meier, who came to OU in 2007 after working several seasons with the Houston Rockets organization in the NBA.

Over the last few years, OU had been approached by various companies wanting to produce a documentary on the football program and its history. But it was not until Meier pitched an idea for a similar project to Mossman that all the elements fell in place. In turn, Mossman took the plan to athletics director Joe Castiglione. Eventually, Sooner Sports Property got on board with national distributor Waxworks



TOP LEFT: Dewey “Snorter” Luster, a four-year letterman from 1917-20, went on to become OU’s head coach.

TOP RIGHT: The program’s first mascot, Mex the Dog, was a staple at OU football games from 1915 to 1928. When Mex died in 1928, OU closed for his funeral.

LEFT: In the earliest days, OU football practice was an informal affair.



Inc., and the wheels were set in motion.

“The timing was finally right, and now we had the ability to put it together right here on campus,” says Mossman. “The fact that this is being done by OU people for OU people makes all the difference in the world. It’s much more personal.”

Meier points to former OU student Jacob Potter for the devoted effort he put into the project. Potter, who served as associate producer, spent every day over a three-month period last spring looking for old photographs and other pieces to the puzzle.

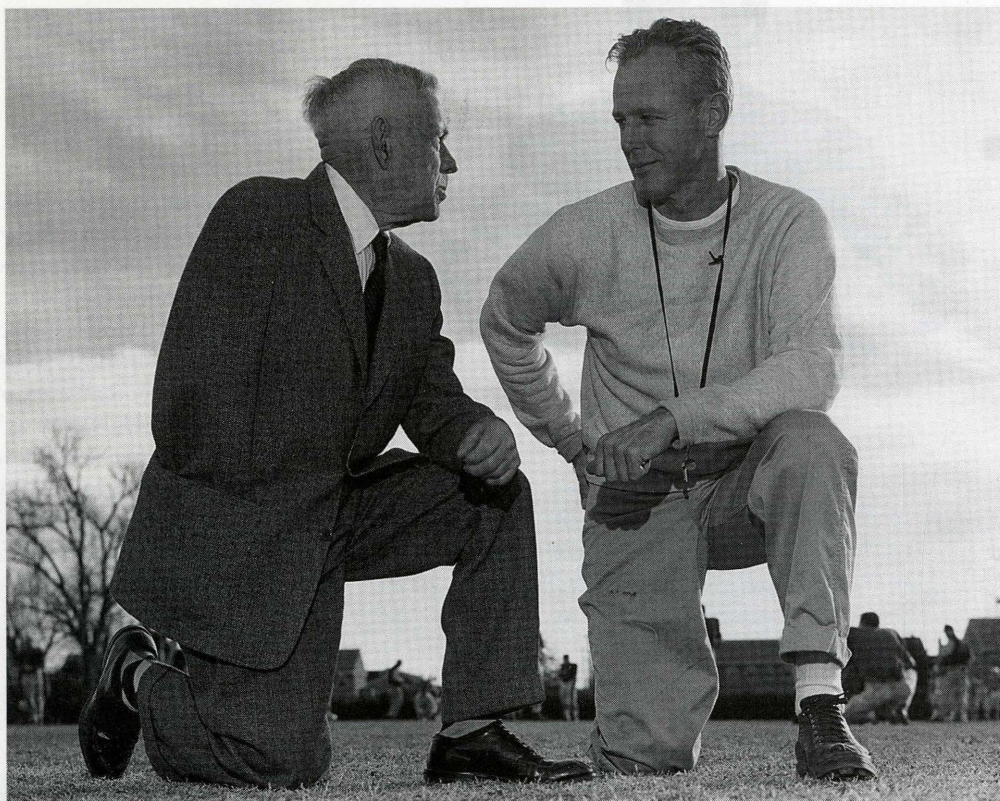
“It was definitely a collective effort by a lot of people, like the folks at the Western History Collections on campus and sports information departments at a handful of other schools who helped with old pictures and information,” says Meier.

One of the key elements to the project—the old game films—almost did not make the cut. The entire collection had been shipped out of state a few years ago so it could be transferred to an upgraded format and never was returned. But after some serious digging and a few phone calls, treasure was found and eventually recovered.

“There was a gentleman in Pennsylvania who was supposed to transfer the film and get it back to the University a while back. But for whatever reason, that never happened,” says Meier. “When we finally tracked it down, it was stuffed into old pizza boxes that were piled up in his garage. Getting those films back obviously was instrumental to our project’s success.”

The game film used in the documentary includes footage from the 1920s, ’30s and ’40s. There are even some vintage color clips that are a rare treat for even the most avid Sooner football fan. An interview with former OU player and legendary Texas coach Darrell Royal is another highlight, along with some insight from the late Dale Arbuckle, whose Sooner career spanned several generations as both player and coach.

“Birth of a Champion” premiered at the Warren Theater in Moore on October 11 and has since generated a very positive



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Legendary Sooner coach Bennie Owen, left, was a frequent visitor at football practice during Bud Wilkinson’s 17 seasons at the OU helm. Wilkinson ranks second on the Sooners’ all-time victory list with 145, while Owen’s teams won 122 times from 1905-26.

public response. Currently, the high-definition DVD sells for \$19.99 and can be found at most local video outlets.

“We distributed more than 10,000 initial units into the marketplace and had great response from our SoonerSports.com sales,” says Castiglione. “We are looking forward to building on the foundation ‘Birth of a Champion’ has laid for our upcoming DVDs as a part of a series that really brings our fans closer to OU football and its rich history.”

Work is already underway on the three remaining parts of the series, the second of which is scheduled for release in September 2011. It will examine the Bud Wilkinson era, when the Sooners truly stepped onto center stage at a national level.

The final two films—covering the Barry Switzer era and the Bob Stoops era, respectively—also will have September releases in 2012 and 2013.

“To do the project justice, you have to give all four of those great coaches their due,” says Meier, referring to Owen, Wilkinson, Switzer and Stoops. “And then there is so much more in and around those respective eras that are important to the tradition as well. We are excited about the challenge of telling those stories and bringing the fans that much closer to the program’s history.”

Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator and writes freelance OU sports articles for Sooner Magazine.