

Sunrise Services with Port Robertson

# Behind the Scenes

BY EDGAR L. FROST

Bud and Gomer built a dynasty  
—and then there was Port,  
the man whose take-no-prisoners discipline  
gave them athletes prepared to win.

If Bud Wilkinson created a monster—and he did—Port Robertson shares the blame. The reference is to Barry Switzer's observation that Bud created the monster of nearly impossible expectations for endless victories, and Barry just fed it. What usually escapes notice is that Robertson helped both coaches accomplish their goals and then some. Robertson's role has remained in obscurity because that's the way he preferred it, but he was one of the key figures in placing the Sooners squarely on the stage of big-time football, where they remain today. And football wasn't even Robertson's main job.

Beginning in 1947, Port's chief title was head wrestling coach at OU, where the sport was "dead and buried" in the words of Sooner sports publicist Harold Keith. There were no scholarships for wrestling, and Oklahoma had not had a winning season since 1936. Port quickly reversed that trend, with his team finishing fifth at the NCAA tournament in 1947 and improving rapidly thereafter. The Sooners were national champions in 1951 and 1952 and finished second in 1953. During those three seasons Robertson's teams went 6-0 in duals against Oklahoma State and 25-0 overall, winning three Big Seven titles. OU was back on the mat.

Port, meanwhile, was simultaneously wearing another hat as head freshman football coach for Wilkinson's Sooners. Freshmen

were not eligible for the varsity, so they practiced separately, under the tutelage of Robertson, who let them know what was expected: hard work, fundamentals, conditioning—and one more thing. Academics. Bud and Port were of one mind there. They felt that if a player couldn't take care of classwork, he probably couldn't make it in his sport. And Port became the enforcer of academic discipline.

Gradually, Robertson took over the work of several men. He established study halls for athletes—mandatory during an athlete's first semester, and for anyone not maintaining a C average or better. Port took roll and paid surprise visits to see who might be missing—a major offense. Cutting class or study hall earned an early morning appointment with Port at the football stadium to run the stairs, clear up to row 72. Robertson was there with his stopwatch and prescribed how many trips up and down those stairs and how rapidly they had to be completed, often leaving the guilty parties navigating on rubbery legs and throwing up. If the trips up the stairs were not done in the stipulated time, they didn't count. Port did not mind meeting the miscreants there at 5:30 or so in the morning. It was not a happy experience, but the athletes learned.

Soon, Port was the academic counselor for all male athletes in all sports, a task he administered for close to 40 years, until his retirement in 1985. He was in charge of study halls, finding tu-

tors, making sure athletes took courses toward useful degrees—“If you say PE, it better mean petroleum engineering.” Port also kept a sharp eye on the athletes’ cafeteria, ran the “O” Club (now the Varsity O Association), and required athletes to bring him frequent reports from their professors. Absences or poor performance meant a dreaded note from him: “See me immediately, PGR.” The initials stood for Port Glen Robertson. An invitation to an office visit was to be avoided if possible.

Olympic gold medal gymnast Bart Conner says, “Perhaps my best accomplishment at OU was not ever getting called into Port’s office.”

The way Port ran freshman football practices was to see, as he put it, “who wants to come back tomorrow.” Not everyone did, but those who did became the players who fashioned winning streaks of 31 and 47 games under Wilkinson and Gomer Jones, Bud’s extremely valuable line coach. Under Port, the footballers learned to apply themselves, to focus and to put out supreme effort. When they got to varsity as sophomores, they were ready. They were still heady young athletes, and some were rambunctious, but Port let them know who was boss, and nobody would challenge him, for good reason.

He was rock hard, with a crushing grip and a massive chest. He had grown up doing farm work, had been an outstanding athlete in high school and college, and had gone ashore at Normandy. He had played football and wrestled, and he knew the moves. He brooked no foolishness, and the athletes knew it. He was both feared and respected.

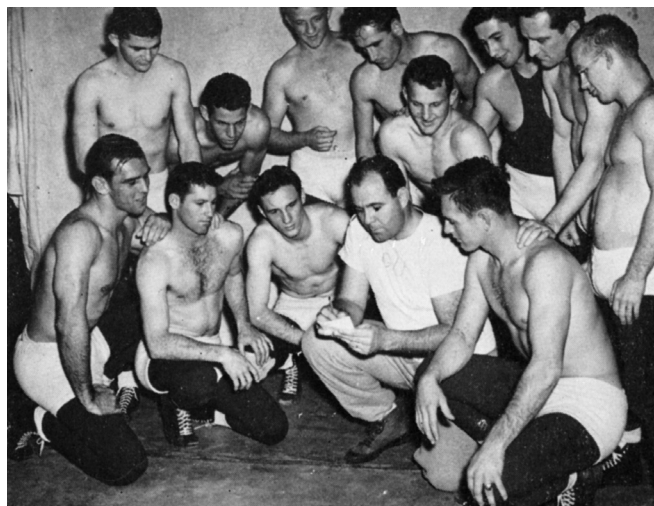
Former Sooner wrestler and wrestling coach Stan Abel said, “He was the most hated man when you were a freshman, but the first one you came back to see when you had graduated.”

“Thank God he was there,” said former OU quarterback and assistant football coach Jay O’Neal, “because most guys needed straightening out. He kept more guys from flunking out than anyone.”

Eventually the fear that struck freshman athletes turned into love for the iron-willed coach. He “strongly encouraged” them to take “real” classes and to take ROTC and later serve their country as officers in the military services. His encouragement included jabbing a finger painfully into one’s chest, calling one a “peahead,” and giving one “the look.” Everyone knew he could back the look up physically if necessary, and most decided not to challenge him.



Robertson’s preseason conditioning was brutal, but his wrestlers, being led by their coach in 1952, always believed that they were in better shape than their opponents and had the psychological as well as physical advantage.



Port Robertson finally had his wrestlers on scholarship in 1950, when they went 6-3-0 and set the stage for the 1951 NCAA title, Port’s first of three.

On a personal level, he was there when needed. He loaned athletes money when they needed it and often was not repaid. He was there when personal crises arose. He found them summer jobs, was there when a new baby came or when a player needed a place to stay or to find a deal on a car. Whatever was needed, he provided.

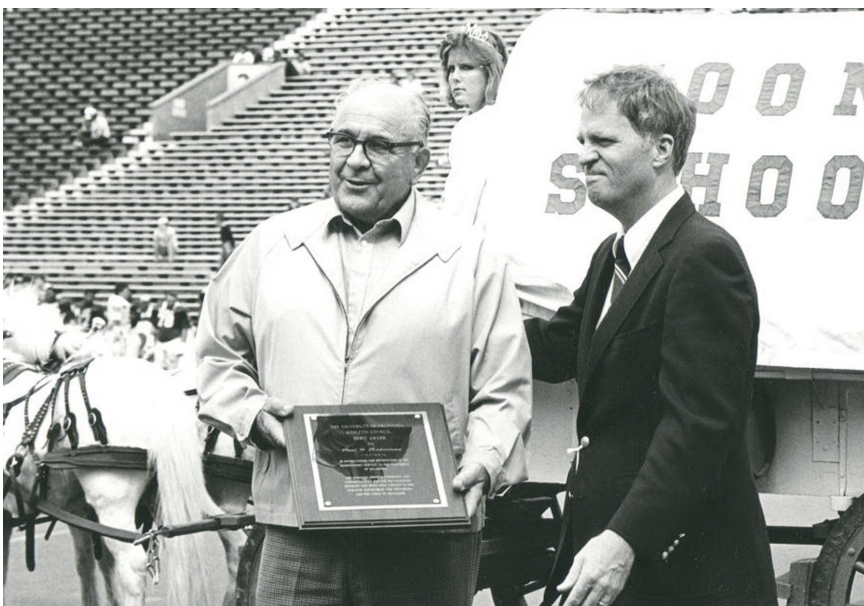
Bud Wilkinson and Gomer Jones led Oklahoma football to unparalleled heights in the 1950s, compiling incredible winning streaks and earning three national championships in the decade. Port’s contributions were acknowledged as indispensable

by Bud, causing his son Jay Wilkinson, an All-American at Duke, to say, “Port Robertson was critically important to the success of my dad’s program. Port and Gomer worked closely with him to provide a magnificent leadership team.”

While shaping the freshman football squads into future varsity stars, Port guided his fiercely aggressive wrestling aggregates to three NCAA titles. Tutoring such stellar grapplers as Danny Hodge, Tommy Evans, Dick Delgado, Stan Abel, Wayne Baughman and others, Port insisted on attacking and pinning. “You can pin a man you can’t beat,” he harped. His philosophy was to go all-out all the time, no retreating allowed. The same went in football, and no athlete coached by Port was going to find himself out-conditioned by an opponent.



A bronze plaque in the lobby of McCasland Field House enumerates the life accomplishments of the amazing Port G. Robertson, 1914-2003: OU wrestling coach, 1947-62, and freshman football coach, 1952-61.



The OU Athletic Council gave Port Robertson its highest honor, the Merit Award, here presented to the coach by Ted Roberts, right, at the 1985 spring game.

Robertson turned freshmen into men, and not just physically. “No player on Oklahoma’s first, second or third football eleven flunked a single hour during the fall semester 1955-56,” wrote Harold Keith in the 1956 press guide. “Bud gives full credit to Port Robertson, Oklahoma’s wrestling coach, freshman football coach, and Varsity “O” club sponsor, who also has

the responsibility of organizing the daily study groups among athletes and rides close scholastic herd on the freshmen, many of whom come poorly prepared from the high schools.”

Port coached wrestling 14 years, 1947-59 and 1962, when then-coach Tommy Evans was called back into military service. But his influence looms much larger. His wrestling teams came from nowhere to national championships at OU, and his 1960 Olympic team that wasn’t expected to do anything brought home three gold medals.

When Bud and Gomer were turning the college football world upside down, it was Port who was building the foundation by molding the freshmen into future stars on the varsity. When Barry Switzer was busy feeding the monster, Port was still around, keeping tabs on the players’ grades.

Ken Mendenhall, a 1969 All-American center for Chuck Fairbanks, recently related a typical Port story. Before two-a-days his senior year, Mendenhall was married and living in an apartment. He was lolling on the sofa, watching TV, when Port suddenly came in and grabbed Mendenhall by the ear. What the lead blocker for Heisman Trophy winner Steve Owens hadn’t realized was that Port’s daughter ran the apartment complex, and Port was helping her. When he saw Mendenhall’s wife carrying the garbage out while the powerful lineman lay on the couch, Port followed her back in and let Ken know that next time he would take the ear off.

“I loved him,” said Mendenhall, “but I couldn’t get away from him.”

That’s how it was. None of the athletes could. But they all loved him, and a great deal of Oklahoma’s athletic success came from Port G. Robertson, who died at the age of 88 in 2003.

*Edgar L. Frost, '61 ba, '67 ma, is the author of the new biography, Port Robertson: Behind the Scenes of Sooner Sports, published by the Oklahoma Heritage Association and available on its web site, [www.oklahomaheritage.com](http://www.oklahomaheritage.com) for \$22.95 or by calling 1-888-501-2059.*