

Sooner Nation

A boy from Oklahoma became a football legend in two countries, but never forgot his start in the Sooner State.

INDIAN JACK JACOBS WAS NOT YOUR TYPICAL OKIE FROM MUSKOGEE. THE FORMER SOONER QUARTERBACK AND KICKER RESIDES IN THE OKLAHOMA HALL OF FAME AND STILL HOLDS PASSING AND PUNTING RECORDS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA SET NEARLY 80 YEARS AGO. In the NFL, he had one of the greatest games a Green Bay Packer could wish for. He then transformed pro football in Canada and was in the first class inducted into the CFL Hall of Fame. But despite all that, “Indian” Jack Jacobs remains relatively unknown.

Jacobs, a member of the Creek Nation, was born in Holdenville, Okla., in 1919 during a time when signs in storefronts read, “No dogs or Indians allowed.” He did not speak a word of English until he was nine years old when his father decided it was time he went to school.

Growing up he was regaled with tales of Jim Thorpe, another Native American boy from Oklahoma, who had become an Olympic champion. Jacobs soon excelled at every game he played, and, like Thorpe, he wanted to be a college football star. In 1929, he followed Notre Dame’s undefeated football team and declared to his family, “Someday I’m going to play for Knute Rockne.”

Before he turned 14, Central High School in Muskogee, 90 miles north of Holdenville, began recruiting him. With mixed emotions, Jacobs moved away from his mother and in 1935 helped Muskogee win the state title. But it was at a cost.

“When he left he began speaking English all the time,” says his daughter Linda, “but forgot the Creek he knew, and when his mother was dying he no longer could talk to her.”

In 1937 Jacobs was named outstanding high school player

on Oklahoma’s All-State football team. At the time historian Ray Soldan wrote, “This 185-pound Indian boy stood out like a piece of radium in a deep, dark tunnel.”

When Rockne died Jacobs turned his attention elsewhere and chose OU, partly because coach Tom Stidham was one-sixteenth Creek and could speak their shared native language with Jack’s dad. Putting Jacobs’ arrival into perspective, J. Brent Clark, author of *Sooner Century: 100 Glorious Years of Oklahoma Football*, says, “When Jack Jacobs walked onto the Oklahoma campus in 1938, he was considered to be the greatest athlete Oklahoma had ever recruited.”

Among the Sooner records Jacobs still holds is punting an incredible 18 times in a 1941 upset of undefeated and eighth-ranked Santa Clara. The game, played in a torrential rainstorm, turned in the fourth quarter, when faced with 2nd-and-7 at their own 18-yard line the Sooners decided to punt, hoping for a Santa Clara turnover. Jacobs’ 76-yard beauty died near the Santa Clara goal line, completely dispiriting the Broncs, who did indeed fumble the slippery pigskin. The 16-6 victory was the Sooners’ first against a top ten team.

Among Jacobs’ admirers that day was a young Darrell Royal, who had hitchhiked 170 miles from tiny Hollis, Okla., to Norman to see the Sooners play. When he got to the game he was mesmerized.

“I just remember watching Jack Jacobs kick,” he later said.

“The way he held the ball, the measured steps, the swing of his leg. I was glued to him. And he kicked the living hell out of the ball.” At Jacobs’ funeral in 1974, at the age of 54 after his fourth heart attack, Royal told Jacobs’ sister Anna, “Your brother was the greatest football player I ever saw.”

After graduating from OU, Jacobs was drafted by the

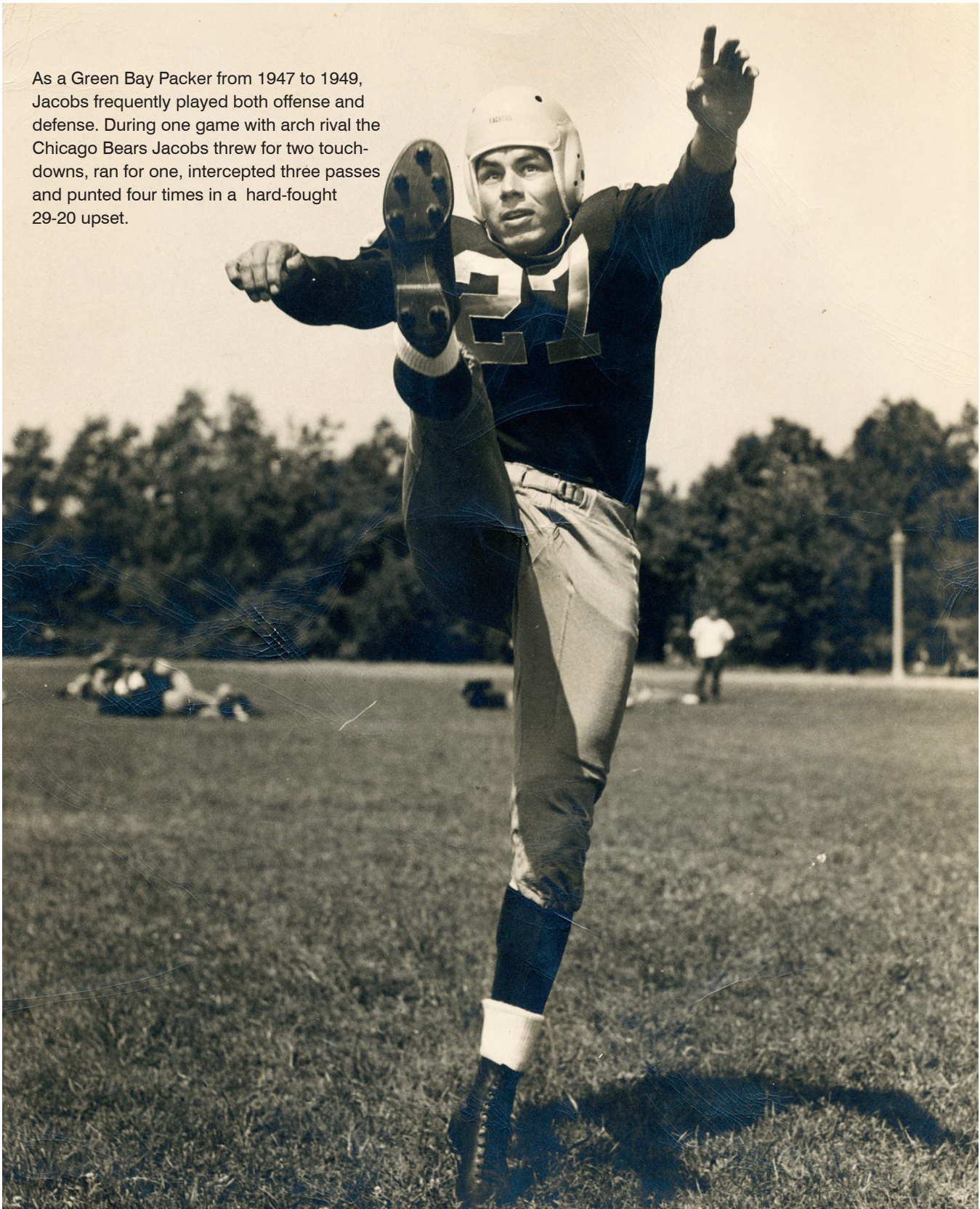


At 14, Jacobs was persuaded to leave his hometown of Holdenville to play football for Muskogee High School, which, with Jacobs’ help, won the state title in 1935.

“Indian” Jack Jacobs

BY RICH PODOLSKY

As a Green Bay Packer from 1947 to 1949, Jacobs frequently played both offense and defense. During one game with arch rival the Chicago Bears Jacobs threw for two touchdowns, ran for one, intercepted three passes and punted four times in a hard-fought 29-20 upset.





A young Darrell Royal once hitchhiked 170 miles from Hollis, Okla., to Norman to watch Jack Jacobs play. Royal, a former Sooner quarterback and defensive back, and longtime football coach for the University of Texas, later told Jacobs' sister Anna, "Your brother was the greatest football player I ever saw."

Cleveland Rams in 1942. As the U.S. involvement in World War II grew, he joined another organization — the U.S. Army Air Force. Stationed in Santa Ana, Calif., Jacobs found himself on the same base with Yankee slugger Joe DiMaggio. The two loaned their considerable athleticism to the Seventh Army Air Force baseball team to boost morale of American troops. The team went 20-0.

Upon return after the war Jacobs was traded to the Washington Redskins to back up the great Sammy Baugh, who was entrenched at quarterback. Before the 1947 season Jacobs was again traded, this time to coach Curly Lambeau and the Green Bay Packers, who were looking to juice up the offense after a dreadful '46 season. In the season opener against the NFL champion Chicago Bears, Jacobs completely outplayed Bears' quarterback Sid Luckman.

The result was one of the greatest games a Green Bay Packer ever played. On the field all 60 minutes, he threw for two touchdowns, ran for one, and intercepted three passes, while punting four times in a shocking 29-20 upset. "Simply put, 'Indian' Jack Jacobs was one of the most gifted athletes in

Packer history," wrote the late Packer historian Lee Rummel.

But by mid-season the Packers lost a few tough ones and Lambeau switched quarterbacks. After two more losing seasons in Green Bay, Lambeau retired and Jacobs jumped at the chance when the Winnipeg Blue Bombers offered him more money and a chance to throw the football. At age 30 it was a new beginning for Jack.

"Jacobs' impact on Winnipeg was incredible," says Blue Bomber historian Steve Daniel. "All you need to examine is the club's win-loss record. Pre-Jacobs, in 1948 and '49, they were 5-and-21, including an 0-7 record on the road in 1949. With Jacobs from 1950 to '52, the team was 30-13-1, including a 16-6 record on the road, and he took them to the Grey Cup in '50 and '53."

Demand for tickets in Winnipeg became extraordinary and soon the city decided to build a bigger stadium. When the new Winnipeg Stadium opened in 1953, the press quickly dubbed it, "*The House That Jack Built.*" Jacobs had become beloved by fans and teammates alike.

"Jack was an institution in Winnipeg," says Nick Miller,



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who played for the Blue Bombers in '53. "With a 50-inch chest and a 32-inch waist he wore clothes like a model and he strode the field like a king. We referred to him affectionately, and with respect, as 'Indian' Jack. He was the ultimate professional. Jack not only raised the level of football in Winnipeg but the entire CFL. He was a god in Winnipeg. On a 90-degree day in July, 2,000 fans would come out to watch him practice."

Perhaps the most famous teammate Jacobs had in Winnipeg was Bud Grant, the future Minnesota Vikings coach. Grant was a three-sport athlete who played professional baseball in Minnesota, and was on the NBA champion Minneapolis Lakers in 1950, spurning pro football temporarily. Now 90, Grant still has tremendous recall when asked about his former quarterback.

"Jack was vocal. He was a fiery leader," Grant says, "and a great, great defensive back. As competitors go, he was at the top of the list. He didn't give any quarter."

But Jacobs was also not all sunshine and smiles. "Jack was a volatile guy," Grant continues. "He was his own worst enemy at times. He didn't get along with a lot of people. He didn't get along with (head coach George) Trafton, who was a rah-rah type. Jack put in his own plays and ran the offense. When Trafton got fired, that was fine with Jack."

Gerry James, who played a decade in Winnipeg and in both the '53 Grey Cup game and the '54 Stanley Cup finals for Toronto, was Jacobs' most reliable running back.

"Jack Jacobs was the greatest quarterback Winnipeg ever had," James says. "Nobody ever saw someone throw the ball



Manitoba Sports Hall of Fame and Museum Inc.

Teammates called Jacobs "the greatest quarterback Winnipeg ever had." When he joined the Blue Bombers in 1950, he not only raised the level of football in Winnipeg, but the entire Canadian league. In 1951, Jacobs became the first professional football quarterback to throw for over 3,000 yards in a season.

like that before. He was hardheaded and a perfectionist at practice. If someone wasn't paying attention, he'd fire a pass and hit that guy in the back of his head. From then on we all wore helmets to practice."

In 1954 Winnipeg hired Allie Sherman as their head coach. Sherman, who went on to coach the New York Giants, didn't care for Jacobs changing his plays. Jacobs, who was 35, soon found a seat on the bench. "Jack was too much for him,"



Jacobs was named an All-American his senior year. A versatile player, he averaged 47.84 yards per kick for OU in 1940. In 1941, he completed a record eight out of eight passes against Kansas and set a Sooner record for punting 18 times, including a 76-yarder that helped OU upset eighth-ranked Santa Clara, 16-6.


says Nick Miller. “Sherman couldn’t handle him and wanted his own man at quarterback. He put Jack on the bench and later released him. It was a huge mistake.”

After that season, Jacobs accepted an offer to be a player-coach for the London, Ontario Lords. Assistant coaching jobs followed with Montreal, Hamilton and Edmonton, before finally leaving pro football for a sales job with Owens-Illinois, the world’s leading manufacturer of glass container products, where — not surprisingly — he won sales awards and was loved by his clients.

Before his playing days ended, he found time to return to his roots. Bill Todd was a rookie quarterback backing up Jacobs in Winnipeg. They hardly said two words to each other all season and Todd was totally surprised to receive a phone

call from Jack upon its conclusion.

“He asked me if I wanted to drive with him [1,000 miles] from Winnipeg to Oklahoma,” Todd remembers, “because he was invited to play in the Sooners’ alumni game. At his former fraternity house [Kappa Alpha] they had a wall-sized photo of him kicking that 76-yard punt in the Santa Clara game. Everywhere we went he was like a god.”

And to many who saw “Indian” Jack Jacobs play that day, he was a god returning home to be loved by the people who had first cheered him on the path to greatness. 

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