

Sideline Slant

By Harold Keith

WHAT does a football game look like from the players' bench?

Tired of eight years' monotonous watching from the press box, I rode the Sooner bench in the Oklahoma-Kansas State game at Manhattan, Kans., last October 30 to find out.

Don't get me wrong about the top of the stadium and the press box. It's the best spot from which to watch the play. You can't beat the general view, the spacing from the sides, the plain sight of every man, and of the chalk lines that let you accurately see and measure each kick, run and pass.

But for once I wanted to see more than just that. I wanted to see what the players and coaches did, and hear what they said, close up.

So I squatted down, on the east side of the field, among the twenty Sooner players who would not start. They were facing into the sun and therefore wearing eye shades. Black daubs of lampblack gleamed dully from under their eyes to better neutralize the glare of the sun. Each wore a long red bench coat.

You get closer to your team, on the bench. There loyalty to school, coach and fellow players runs hot and throbbing as a diatherm charge. You feel the shock of blocks and tackles, the impact of punts off your instep, and the fine spirit of cooperation and help flowing out from the Oklahoma players on the bench to the Oklahoma players on the gridiron. There is no jealousy. Everybody pulls for the fellow out there on the field.

It's a warm Indian summer day. The playing stubble glistens bronze and green in the sunlight. As you sit on a pile of blankets on the ground peering up at the cross-section of faces along the bench above you, jaws bobbing almost in unison as they chew gum, all eyes intently following the play like spectators following the ball back and forth at a tennis match, you wish Harold Tacker, the University photographer, were there with his speed graphic. What a swell angle there for a feature shot!

The game begins. Jack Baer, the likeable kid from Shawnee (he seems far too youthful to be a senior) who has hung



FOOTBALL PLAYERS AND COACHES ARE ONLY PART OF A SPECTACLE TO THE STADIUM FANS—THE CROWD MISSES THE CLOSEUP DRAMA DESCRIBED HERE BY HAROLD KEITH

on to become a star and be cheered by the same fans who used to razz him when he did something wrong as a sophomore and junior, is in there, a steel braced helmet guarding his mending cheek bone, broken in the Rice game. It's Baer's first game in a month but he doesn't flinch. On the second play he quick-kicks 60 yards over the Kansas State safety's head. The Wildcats boot back and then Baer sparks the Sooners goalward, befuddling the enemy with a mixed attack of passes, spinners and reverses while the Sooners on the bench nod approvingly as they chew gum.

A roar from the Kansas State crowd. Speer, Kansas State halfback, intercepts Baer's pass and brings it down the left sideline almost to midfield before Baer himself knocks him off the playing field and almost into your lap with a corking block. Looks like Baer has got all his stuff back. A game kid.

On the next play you get a chuckle out of Mickey Parks, Oklahoma's 220-pound center. He smashes a little Kansas State back to the grass with a solid tackle. As the back gets up, he jabs his elbow twice into Mickey's vast stomach. Parks, chewing gum nonchalantly, pushes him back sharply with both hands just to let him know he's there, all of it happening right in front of an official who ignores it completely. Mickey is a veteran. He's played

a lot of football in his time and knows just how far to go.

Tom Stidham, the big Sooner head coach, wearing a blue serge suit and a soft gray hat that shades his eyes, strides over to the water can (the Sooners bring 60 gallons of Norman water with them) and probes in a long pasteboard box for a paper cup. His fingers are too clumsy and Philbert, tiny Sooner student manager, has to find one for him.

Woody Huddleston, the dependable Indian back who didn't play against Kansas because of an injury, sits next to Stidham on the bench. A half-spent cigarette droops from the coach's fingers as he talks out of the corner of his mouth, and Huddleston nods understandingly, storing up the information for use when he goes in.

The game goes on. The action is pretty even. The Sooners are wheeling well but the Kansas State guards, especially that tough little Cardarelli, keep breaking through to spoil the Sooner running. "Snorter" Luster, the Sooner backfield coach, who operates the field phone on the bench that is connected with another phone run by "Jap" Haskell, line coach, and "Speck" Moore, end coach, on top of the Wildcat stadium where the view is far plainer, checks up.

"Those guards have been playing in our backfield," he reports and Stidham sends in half a dozen men, among them

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Jiggs Walker, the 5-foot 7-inch Arkansas Equalizer. Then Wes Fry, Wildcat coach, sends in Elmer "One Man Gang" Hackney, the 190-pound Kansas State fullback who carried the ball 11 of 13 times during the 72-yard touchdown march against Missouri, and Stidham counters by rushing in Al Corrotto, the 165-pound Fort Smith Assassin. Corrotto makes a difference. You can tell it at once. He's a doer and a talker too. His snappy chatter keeps the team's morale blazing. His favorite victim is Gilford "Cactus Face" Duggan, 215-pound Sooner tackle. Corrotto never lets him rest but ribs him constantly. Although Duggan has been making some swell stops, Corrotto leans down and leers in Duggan's face during every Kansas State time out.

"Come on, you big baboon!" he growls, "You haven't made a tackle since you left high school!" and Duggan's eyes flash fire.

What a sweet close-up of action you get from the bench! Howard Cleveland, Kansas State's best back, tries a sweep but Pete Smith, Oklahoma's great left end, wipes out the Wildcat interference and Al Corrotto cuts Cleveland's legs out from under him with a tackle so jarring that Cleveland's helmet rolls on the grass. Corrotto retrieves the helmet, lifts Cleveland to his feet, brushes the helmet off on his white sleeve and proffers it to Cleveland with an impudent grin. How that Corrotto loves to bust a ball-carrier.

Baer is out of the game now, his face dripping as he talks earnestly to Stidham on the bench. The other Sooners let out a yell of delight when Jiggs Walker submarines beneath the Kansas State line and twice fires torpedoes that sink the huge S. S. Hackney on the line of scrimmage. Ted Owen, the Sooner trainer, sponges Baer's face off with a wet towel. No scoring yet and the half nearly over.

Little things you remember during a Kansas State huddle—the flash of sunshine off Waddy Young's headgear as Young rests on one knee, the dark gap that denotes missing teeth in Fred Ball's mouth (Ball carefully parks his gold bridgework in his locker before each game), Jiggs Walker relaxing on hands and knees in the grass, his stern mug always turned defiantly towards the foe.

Watch that fellow Pete Smith go! He's in every play, jamming them in when they go inside, stacking them up when they run his end, and dragging them down from behind when they go the other direction. When Kansas State goes to our 24-yard line on their most serious drive of the half, Pete stops them by tackling the ball from Cleveland's arms and falling on it!

You wonder, then, if you've ever seen defensive end play as good as this. You

wish the old-timers could see it. Would they think Pete greater than Vernon Walling, Glenn Clark, Homer Montgomery or Roy LeCrone? Would they think him as good as Tarz Marsh?

You can plainly see the respect the Kansas State players have for Pete. When he nails them they grin good-naturedly at him and slap him on the back as though it were an honor to be thrown for a loss by him. In the pile-ups, he's the first Sooner they help up. He's the players' choice. No doubt about it.

Four minutes of the half left. Nothing exciting can happen in that short time—but wait! Here come the Sooners with a rally! Huddleston, a careful runner who never cuts back blindly but sticks to his blockers until the opening is there and then roars through runs to the Oklahoma 42. Baer is in there now. As usual, he is throwing strikes. He pitches to Huddleston who runs up to the Kansas State 40. He shoots one to Ivy, another to Huddleston and Kansas State barely stops the drive on fourth down on their 30-yard line as the half ends. Close.

Between halves you try to dope out the game as you wrestle the mob for an icy Coca Cola. Nothing to nothing. Tom was right when he told the Oklahoma players before the game that Kansas State liked to run. They never throw a forward pass. They've looked good running—almost as good as Rice did—but you wonder if all that constant running won't take something out of them for the second half? Also, how about that big, strong Sooner line, that Ad Lindsey says is the best in the Big Six, Nebraska's included? It looks more rugged than Kansas State's. It has better reserves. Maybe it will take that Kansas State line by the throat this second half and throttle it. If it does, watch "Snorter's" little pony backs go!

The second half kickoff curves off Krueger's toe down to the Oklahoma six-yard line where Otis Rogers gathers it in. You have had no warning that football history will be made on the runback, that a 19-year old record will be broken. It looks like any other kickoff. Rogers breaks straight up the field but all his white-jerseyed Sooner teammates have cut to the left and are blocking like fury. Then Rogers veers sharply to the left and you realize Tom's pet play, the one he's been telling the boys they're going to score on some day if they keep blocking, is on.

But you still don't get excited. Because it's been on before yet never goes all the way. Not even when the Sooners put it on against Rice and Webber Merrell brought it back 63 yards with the last Rice man flat on his stomach under him, did it go all the way. Nothing like that can happen to the Sooners. It just isn't in the cards. You read about other teams doing it but—

Then your jaw drops, your eyes pop

out and you find yourself jumping up and down, gasping and breathless. Rogers is loose! He's five yards ahead of the mob! He's tuckered a bit and his stride seems labored, but he's still loose! Nobody gains on him! Nobody's near him! Since the play went down the opposite sideline, Rogers had been hidden from you behind the mass of players but now you see him plainly! He's away! If he can keep from stumbling or somebody doesn't shoot him through the eye with a Winchester from the Kansas State stadium, it's a touchdown from kickoff! By a Sooner!

He's over! He's made it! The thing you thought could never happen to a Sooner football team, has happened! Right in front of your eyes!

The Oklahoma players have leaped off the bench and shouting joyously, are yanking up Mike Ahearn's blue grass and hurling handfuls of it into the air. They even toss up whatever sideline paraphernalia they can get hold of. There goes a headgear, a blanket, half a dozen towels.

In the Kansas State stands, the hush is tragic. So gay and noisy a few seconds before, the Manhattan Homecoming Day throng is stricken and stunned. That run has taken all the starch out of them. It has taken a lot out of Fry's team, too.

Stidham, on his feet, shows no jubilation or emotion. Rather he's all deadly concentration. His eye isn't on Rogers. It's on those four striped shirts. He's watching the officials like a hawk, wondering if they are going to call that one back. But the play stands! It goes into the records!

Tony Krueger, the fighting Kansas tackle, tears in to block Baer's kick for point but that 6-0 lead looms big!

In another fifteen minutes it'll be bigger because those big Sooner linesmen are really going to work now. No team this year has scored through the Oklahoma line. It held Tulsa on the three and seven-yard lines, it hurled Rice back from the Oklahoma seven-yard line back to the 34, it never let Kansas get closer than the 25 and it held Nebraska, conquerors of Minnesota, outside its 40-yard stripe all afternoon!

Today it's an offensive line, as well. It charges fiercely, digging the desperate Kansas State forwards out of the grass—and lifting them, grimy and clawing, out of the path of the Oklahoma ball-carriers. With Baer mixing in a well-thrown pass, the ball goes down to the one-yard line and Baer splits off his left tackle to score after a 46-yard march. Hugh McCullough tries to kick goal, but the ball curves foul. 12-0.

The sun is slanting now, and the Sooners on the bench pull their visors lower. Duggan's leg buckles under him but almost before he goes down, Stidham has J. R. Manley, the big Hollis boy, warming up. Manley goes in and Duggan comes

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out. The game goes on. It doesn't wait on anybody.

Down in front of the Sooner bench Ted Owen, the busy Sooner trainer, has skinned big Duggan's pants down to his knees and is working on that leg. "It's just a Charles," he reassures everybody.

There are six minutes of play left when a Kansas State player drives his knee into Baer's back after a tackle. It looks accidental, but Baer is hurt. Instantly Stidham is on his feet like a wounded bull, roaring a protest to the officials. The officials have seen the foul too, and they step off 15 yards against Kansas State.

You get a new insight into Stidham there. He sees what is going on. He's not a placid coach, not by a jug full. He's not a referee baiter either but when something does go wrong out there, the planks on the bench under him just get too hot. He wants a square deal and he's not afraid to demand it. He's the fighting coach of a fighting team.

Out on the shadow-bathed field, the Oklahoma team reflects his fighting spirit. With the Sooner line wooling the Kansas Staters, Oklahoma goes down to the goal and "Red" McCarty, whose parenthesis legs must seem like smoke to the Kansas Staters sweeps his right end for a touch-down, making a fool out of big Hackney on the goal line. But the play is called back because an Oklahoma guard pulled out too fast, leaving only six men on the scrimmage line.

"Mr. Referee, you're just delaying it one play," Game Captain Tom Short grins at the official, "We're gonna get it anyhow!" and his prophesy bears fruit when McCullough's deft pass discloses "Pop" Ivy, so gangling he looks like he's on stilts, standing all alone in the end zone. Mac goals and now it's 19-0.

Afterwards you follow the Sooners and Wildcats up the cinder walk from the stadium to the Kansas gym. The players are friendly now and everywhere you see white jerseys paired off with purple ones, talking about the game. That's what you like about football too. It teaches you how to lose gracefully as well as win gracefully. Although the sun is nearly down now, it glints goldenly in the tops of the maples on the Manhattan campus, the red leaves kindling like flame, the green leaves blending brightly.

But you can't enjoy those leaves when you've just seen an Oklahoma team make a 94-yard touchdown run from kickoff. You can see red leaves any autumn, but it's been 19 autumns since "Slick" Bass brought back that Arkansas kickoff 70 yards to a touchdown on old Boyd field, 23 years since "Hap" Johnson returned the opening kickoff of the Texas game 75 yards to a touchdown.

You wonder if you'll ever see Oklahoma make another.