

# Football Ups and Downs

By HAROLD KEITH

FOR 47 consecutive years now, the annual autumnal mania known as football has fevered University of Oklahoma students, faculty, alumni, and thousands of outsiders as well to such a sweltry pitch of excitement that until the gridiron season ends in late November, all the ice in Antarctica probably could not cool them back to normalcy.

Great holiday throngs of gay, smartly-attired people sometimes numbering more than 30,000 now move from all over Oklahoma in a single golden October afternoon to the big red-tiled Sooner stadium at Norman to see with bated breath and to cheer with shrill pealing that some times carries several miles the skillful intercollegiate version of this rough, clean sport that is so deeply rooted in the state's high schools and ward schools.

Even war hasn't killed it, probably because football as a spectacle is so much like war without entailing war's tremendous casualties. Football at the University lived through both the Spanish-

essary and beneficial part in promoting an over-all efficiency by relieving the strains of war and work."

Football made its start at Norman back in 1895, twelve years before statehood. Then the country we now know as Oklahoma was still in its frontier stage. On the west was the brash young Republican upstart known as Oklahoma Territory whose prairies had been freshly peopled by a series of runs; on the east, struggling with the splendid tragedy of its doomed tribal governments was the much older Indian Territory. Bill Doolin, the outlaw, was still robbing territory trains and banks on horseback which gives you an idea of how far back in its chrysalis the modern state of Oklahoma was tightly tucked when football was born at the three-year-old territorial university down at Norman, O. T., in the autumn of '95.

The game here was spawned in Bud Risinger's green-front barber shop on Norman's West Main street where John A.

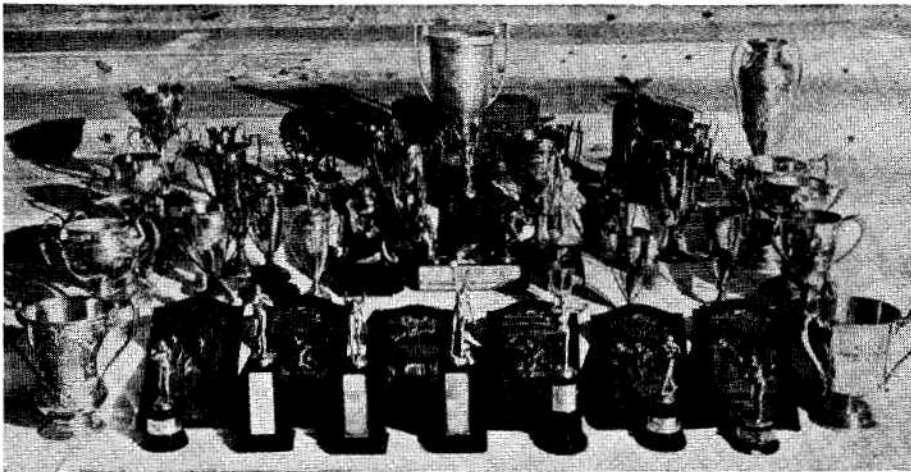
man right out on the prairie north of the present Fine Arts Building. Wearing home-made uniforms, the University boys were soundly licked, 0 to 34. Harts twisted a knee and had to retire, and before it was over, the befuddled Norman boys were borrowing the Oklahoma City subs so they'd have a full lineup. A large crowd watched the fun with mixed emotions and wondered what devilment the giddy Norman college boys would think up next.

In 1897 studious, be-spectacled Verne Parrington, a young modern language professor from Emporia, Kansas, who had played some football at Harvard, joined the Oklahoma faculty and was drafted to coach football. He met the challenge brilliantly and before Governor Charles N. Haskell booted him off the faculty in 1908 and started him towards a notable teaching career at the University of Washington and a Pulitzer prize in history, Parrington's University of Oklahoma teams of 1897, '98, '99 and 1900 won nine and tied one of the total of 12 games played those four years.

Some of the better-known players of the Parrington regime were Fred Roberts, a 190-pound farm boy from Mayfield, Kansas, who Norman old-timers declare was the greatest back ever developed at Norman; two fine tackles in rugged Joe Me kle, another hard-twisted farm lad, and Ed Barrow, a mixed-blood Indian from the Chickasha country; Jap Clapham, a plucky end who still lives at Norman; Tom Tribbey, a 230-pound young Goliath from the Pottawatomie country who had never ridden on a railroad train prior to the Texas game of 1900, C. C. Roberts, Clyde Bogle and others.

In 1901 Professor Parrington felt the press of teaching duties and passed his coaching toga on to Fred Roberts. In 1902 and 1903 Mark McMahan, a Texas player who wore a walrus mustache, took the coaching job to make expenses toward his enrolment in a law school. In 1904 the Sooner coach was Dr. Fred Ewing of Knox college.

That was the year the Sooners met the Oklahoma Aggies for the first time and won, 75 to 0. However, the score won't be remembered nearly so long as will an incident of the game during which the Sooners scored a touchdown in a creek. The game was played at old Island park in Guthrie. A harassed Aggie punter standing almost on his goal line, kicked the ball straight up in the air. The raging north wind carried it back over his head. With both teams pursuing it, the leather bounded into flood-swollen Cottonwood creek. Both teams fearlessly



TROPHIES WON BY O. U. ATHLETES

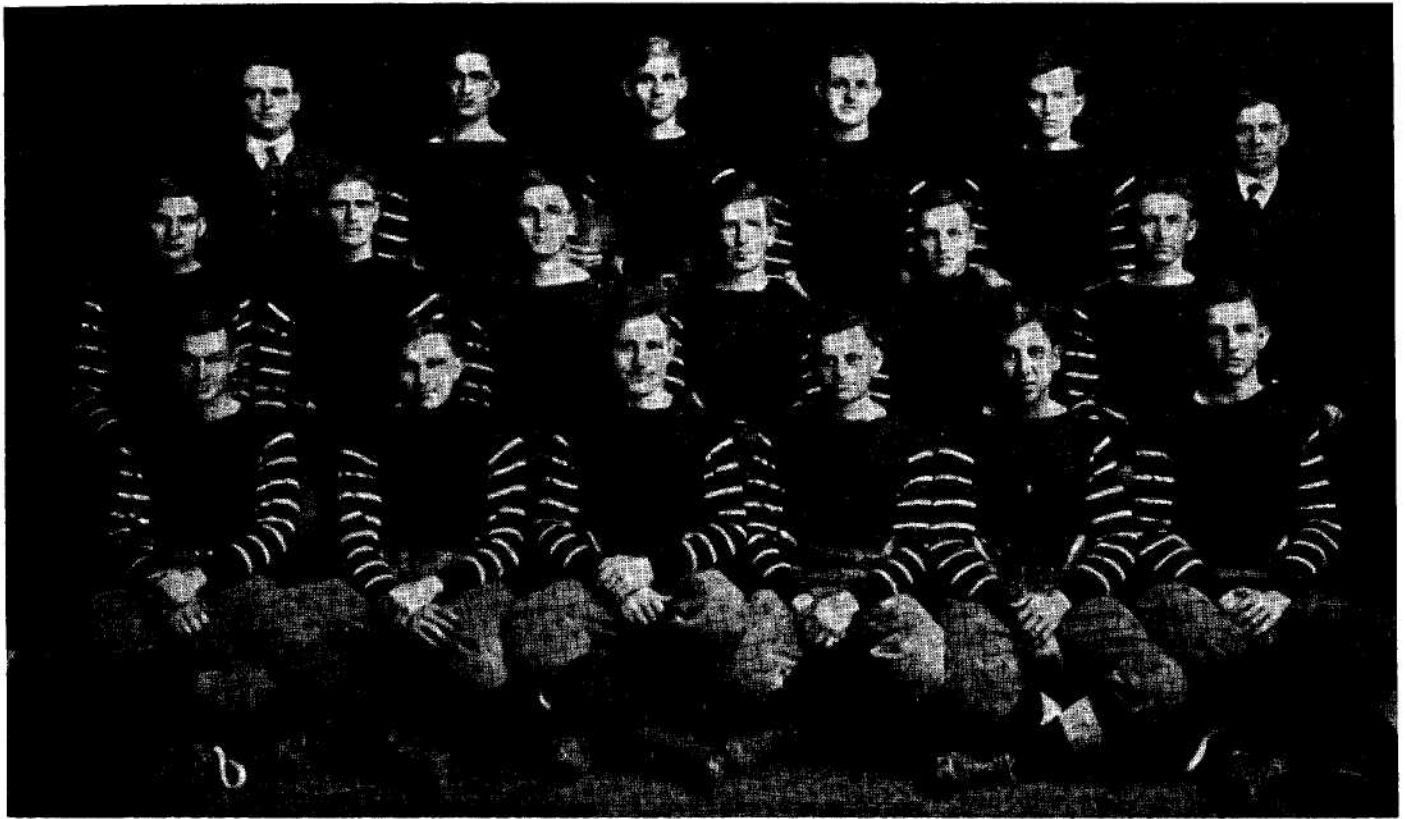
*Shown here is a small part of the trophies won through the years by the University's victorious athletes. Represented in the impressive group of shiny gold and silver awards are major and minor sports included in O. U.'s athletic program.*

American and first World Wars and probably will exist through the present all-planet struggle as well.

President Roosevelt was shooting at the reason for its necessity when he recently told his press conference: "It has been proved beyond doubt that human beings cannot sustain continued and prolonged work for very long, without obtaining a proper balance between work on the one hand and vacation and recreation on the other. Such recreation may come by participation in or attendance at various sports, motion pictures, music, the drama, picnics, et cetera. All of them have a nec-

Harts, a long-haired expression student from Winfield, Kansas, who had played the game in his home state, organized a team at the University, spiking it with Fred Perry, who drove the prancing steeds that drew the Norman fire wagon, and other non-students. There was no bothersome Big Six conference eligibility committee to plague the football set-up in those raw days.

This first University team ignominiously failed to score a point. Its only game was with the bigger, rougher and vastly more experienced Oklahoma City Town Team. The contest was played in Nor-



FOOTBALL CHAMPIONS OF 1915

*One of the several great teams outstanding in the University of Oklahoma's football history.*

splashed in after it but while Sooner Tom B. Matthews ducked an Aggie who was about to lay hands on it, Sooner Ed Cook captured it and swimming to the opposite bank, shiveringly touched it down for a score.

When the game was ten years old at Norman, the players began to look around for a permanent coach. Everybody's choice was Bennie Owen, a soft-spoken little Irishman from Arkansas City, Kansas, who played quarterback under Fielding H. Yost at Kansas in '99. The University at Norman could personally vouch for Owen's football coaching ability. In 1903 and 1904 Owen's hard-fighting Bethany Swedes from Lindsborg, Kansas had met Sooner teams at Oklahoma City and expertly administered two drubbings, 12-10 and 36-9. Owen had earlier been called to Michigan where he helped Yost develop the famous point-a-minute Michigan team built around the great Willie Heston.

In 1905 Owen was hired. The first two years owing to a reduced financial budget he came to Norman in the autumn only, returning after the football season to Arkansas City to manage his restaurant, but eventually the University Athletic Association adjusted its finances so that Owen could stay on full-time. Owen made Oklahoma a superb coach. He had to be to satisfy the "wolves" for 22 consecutive years. Since his retirement, Sooner football coaches have come and gone

almost as fast as Mexican presidential administrations after Diaz. Next to Owen, the Sooner football coach who held his job the longest was Ad Lindsey and his stint, from 1927 through 1931, lasted only five years.

At first, Owen met far more obstacles at Oklahoma than he had encountered at Bethany, due to lack of playing talent and a schedule that took his club all over the midlands. He struggled six years before defeating mighty Kansas, the scourge of the old Missouri Valley in those days, but he beat Texas 2 to 0 at Oklahoma City the first year he coached. He had financial worries, too. Trips were long and gate receipts light. To circumvent this, Owen had to book as many as three games on one trek and his small, light squads would be simply too exhausted to handle it.

For example, in 1905 Owen's squad played Kansas, the Kansas City Medics and Washburn, at Lawrence, Kansas City and Topeka during a bruising five-day trip. In 1909 the Sooners rode a chair car to St. Louis, defeating St. Louis University 11-5, then continued by rail to Dallas, Texas, where they were spanked four days later by the Texas Aggies, 0-19, and that night entrained for Austin, Texas, where two days later they were easy prey for the Longhorns, 0-30. All three games were played in six days. Now days college teams play only once a week.

But Owen eventually overcame these

handicaps. In 1908 he developed his first formidable team at Norman, a big Sooner outfit that whipped Texas 50 to 0, at Norman. Built around Willard Douglas and Ralph Campbell, greatest pair of offensive tackles in the school's history, this Sooner team romped through its ten-game schedule, losing only to Kansas. Tackles Douglas and Campbell not only smashed enemy plays on defense, but their vicious ball-carrying on Owen's "tackle around" plays was murderous. In the Texas triumph Douglas and Campbell not only scored four touchdowns but each proved his speed afoot by catching fleet Texas backs from behind after long chases to prevent Texas touchdowns.

The most convincing proof of Owen's greatness as a football coach lay in his ability to adapt his offensive style to his sketchy material. A comparison of his four greatest teams, the Sooner aggregations of 1908, 1911, 1915 and 1920 whose combined record was only one defeat in 35 games, illustrates this.

The 1908 team, built around Douglas and Campbell, the salty ball-lugging tackles, was primarily a power outfit with a large assortment of plays from the old-style mass game. It operated from both a balanced and unbalanced line with the quarterback, squatted behind center, taking the ball on nearly every play and feeding it to the other backs or to the

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big tackles rumbling laterally to right or left behind him. Since the forward pass had just come in, the team did very little passing. Its strength lay in its stout line, Ends Vernon Walling and Claude Pickard, Guards Porter English and Key Wolf, Centers Roy Campbell and Cleve Thompson and the indestructible tackles.

But in 1911 Owen came out with something new, a lightweight team built upon speed. His backfield of Hubert Ambrister, Ray Courtright, Claude Reeds and Captain Fred Capshaw averaged only 150 pounds that year but every man was rough as a corn cob and could run 100 yards in less than 11 seconds. With such swiftness of foot available, Owen junked his indirect pass through the quarterback and introduced the direct pass to the ball-carrying back, varying it with vicious cross-bucks and quick-opening plays that were the terror of the midlands. With its quarterback frequently calling his signals from the bottom of a pile-up, this team ran off and left its opposition. Although it forward passed some, it was primarily a swift-cruising, hard-hitting running team. It finished all-victorious although playing all its important games (against Missouri, Kansas and Texas) away from Norman.

Owen's all-victorious 1915 team exploited still another phase of the offense that was brand new in the old Southwest, the forward pass. Although several of its players could pass and receive, "Spot" Geyer, a stoop-shouldered fullback from Norman High School was its ace pegger and End Homer Montgomery and Quarterback Montford "Hap" Johnson its crack receivers. Although its backfield lacked the four-man versatility of the Reeds-Courtright-Ambrister-Fred Capshaw quartet of 1911, it had four halfbacks to go with Geyer and Johnson and two great linesmen in End Montgomery and Tackle Willis Hott. Its aerial wizardry was unstoppable. It averaged approximately 250 yards on forward passes alone in its major games and conquered its ten-game schedule with only two close shaves, 14-13 triumphs over both Texas and Henry Kendall on those teams' home fields.

In 1920 Owen took Oklahoma out of the Southwest conference and into the Missouri Valley league and his biggest football team of all time up to then won the Missouri Valley championship in a breeze with no defeats and only one tie against it. Whereas the 1908 team had been known for its corking line, the 1911 team for its speedy hard-running backfield and the 1915 team for its marvelous forward-passing, the versatile 1920 team seemed to combine all these elements. Its powerful line had a great quartet of ends led by Tarz Marsh, an excellent pair of

tackles in Paul Johnston and Roy Smoot, two fine guards in Erl Deacon and Bill McKinley and a swell center in Dow Hamm.

Phil White, a 190-pound triple threat who could kick as high as a chorus girl and gamely played with a shoulder out of socket, did the punting, passing and plenty of running, Roy Swatek was the dreaded blocker and line-backer, tank-like Harry Hill did the climax running and dependable Arlo Davis and Frank Ogilvie the quarterbacking. It was a team that started slowly but finished with a pitiless surge. Against Washington it trailed 3-14 yet won 24-14, it lagged behind Kansas at the half yet won 21-9.

With Owen's retirement after the 1926 season, the University went into its football dog days, chiefly because of its policy of refusing to enlist leading Oklahoma high school players who were escaping to California and other states. Ad Lindsey, who like Owen came to Norman from little Bethany college, struggled five years against this discouraging setup and finally walked out in disgust. The bars were dropped somewhat for Lewie Hardage the Vanderbilt backfield mentor who succeeded Lindsey, but when he won but 11 games in three years, the wolf pack figured he was just spinning his wheels and set up a loud yapping that fetched his scalp.

Then out of the chaos came order. A strong man was needed to revitalize football at Oklahoma and in Capt. Lawrence "Biff" Jones, whose old Army teams had given Knute Rockne's Notre Dame squads four terrific games and whose modern Louisiana State juggernauts had been the talk of the South, a strong man was secured although Jones was terribly handicapped in that he had to give one-half his time to the University R. O. T. C. unit. The gruff army man stayed at Norman only two seasons. Neither of his Sooner teams those two years were world-beaters but the public will never know what a far-reaching transformation the practical Jones wrought in the athletic department's administration, finances and methods in those two seasons. The whole football program was placed on the solid, sensible footing so necessary for success in modern times.

The rest of the story is common knowledge. In 1937 Tom Stidham, Jones' hefty, jovial Creek Indian line coach went in as head coach with diminutive Dewey "Snorter" Luster handling the backfield and Lawrence "Jap" Haskell the line. They made a great trio, winning all but two games their first season and tying Texas and Nebraska, both of whom they slightly out played.

In 1938 they hit the jackpot with a

Sooner team built around Hugh McCullough, a great triple-threater who mule-skinned the players as though he were a coach. Those were the days of what were probably the roughest Sooner defensive lines of all time, ends like Pete Smith, Waddy Young, Pop Ivy, John Shirk and Alton Coppage, the first three All-Americans. There were also Jud Bowers and Gilford "Cactus Face" Duggan, a pair of rough 225-pound tackles, Harold Lahar, a 215-pound guard who blocked himself into a berth with the Chicago Bears and the 220-pound center Mickey Parks, a modern standout at his position.

In 1939, they deserved an undefeated season, a Big Six championship and a Sugar Bowl bid and had it in the bag too, until Bob Seymour, big fullback, sustained a brain concussion in the first minute of the Missouri game. In 1941 Luster succeeded Stidham as head coach when the latter resigned to accept the Marquette job.

Meanwhile had occurred the injection of big business tactics into the game. Until 1923 Sooner teams had played before relatively thin crowds who sat in small wooden stands. Financing the sport wasn't such a problem then because the small Sooner coaching staff also doubled at physical education and was paid out of state funds. Also, the student athletic ticket was compulsory in those days and the athletic department always had a considerable cash fund to draw against after enrolment. It was Owen who envisaged dramatization of the sport into a great public spectacle. He built the 30,000 capacity concrete stadium, and supervised purchase of the spacious grounds that now surround it. Hard times prevented consummation of his dream. That came years later when, after Captain Jones had wisely built the foundation for strong modern-day teams, the Stidham-Luster-Haskell staff produced the powerful Oklahoma teams everybody had been waiting for, drawing huge crowds of 20,000 to 30,000 fans to what had been the lonely Sooner stadium. And it was a good thing they did because ever since the Bill Murray gubernatorial administration, football coaches were taken off the state payroll and the student athletic ticket was made optional. Football at Oklahoma now has to earn every penny of its own way.

Just a few days after Coach Luster's first Sooner team completed its 1941 season, the Japanese treacherously bombed Pearl Harbor, the angry United States declared war, scores of the University's finest players forsook football to enlist as fliers, sailors, soldiers, and marines and that brings the 47-year old story of football at Oklahoma up to date.