

Rice 1934: the rise of the SWC

By Mark Purcell

In 1934 Rice won the championship of the Southwest Conference. In past years this would have been no big deal nationally. The pre-war SWC was outside the big money arena of college football, then made up solely of teams and stadia in the Ivy-Northeast, the two service teams (Army-Navy), the Big Ten, Notre Dame and some California teams.

One SWC school, SMU, occasionally played visiting-team games with dominant major teams like Notre Dame, Army and Nebraska. The consensus greatest SWC player of the twenties, Joel Hunt (Texas A&M 1925-27), was never seen in a northern stadium until he appeared with the West team in the Shrine Bowl. The SWC suffered from a talent drain which led to star Texan players being recruited out of state to majors like Army, Purdue and Notre Dame, and big-name conference coaches also tended to move north.

But in 1934 the SWC lost it's general appearance of being feisty losers when SMU and the other three top conference teams (TCU, Texas and Rice) all scheduled big-name Northern majors and whipped them: TCU 9 Santa Clara 7; Texas 7 Notre Dame 6; SMU 26 Fordham 14. Rice, as we shall see, whipped Purdue 14-0. Readers new to pre-war football may need the special mention that in this period wins over the big Catholic independents like Fordham and Santa Clara were major victories, played usually before big-city crowds in New York and San Francisco. In 1934 Rice played 8-9 major games and five foes with a legit claim on being top 25 in 1934. Along with the conference uprising, the end result was that Rice's championship gives them a plus rating with old team ratings, recognition which previous SWC champions did not always receive.

A good 1932 Rice team (7-3) had been caught by an exams cheating scandal which led to suspensions, a bad 3-8 year in 1933, and of course, the disappearance of the losing coach. The new coach, Jimmie Kitts, was an innovator who inherited the suspended 1933 players. The big deal here was that these included his two stars, Bill Wallace at halfback and John McCauley at fullback. There was a contemporary impression that, with Sammy Baugh at TCU and Bobby Wilson at SMU, Wallace and McCauley were the top backs in the SWC. Whatever, they delivered a championship in what was then, and long remained, the most competitive conference in the nation.

Kitts accomplished two goals. He did some technical things with his offensive formations which enabled him to get proper use out of both his star backs. Secondly, Rice became a terrific turnover team. Wallace has the most punt return yards of any back in my 1934 files, though of course part of this traces to Rice's playing what was then a long schedule of 11 games. The team overall had 27 interceptions (incomplete figure for game 9), which may have been the NCAA leading figure.

Even more importantly, the defense became a scoring threat, notably so in close major games. The defense produced three interception TD's, a mid-air fumble recovery TD, a punt return TD, a TD on a deflected punt and an extra defensive TD described in my account of the big-news win over Purdue.

Significantly, Rice's one 1934 loss occurred in a game where the foe (TCU) refused to give away any TD's to the Rice defense.

Rice opened Sept 22 with a 13-0 win over Loyola of New Orleans which was symptomatic of the crowd pleasing way this team would score it's points. Wallace, who had a big 131 yards rushing game, breezed 60 yards for the offensive TD. The turnover TD occurred when the defensive line deflected a Loyola punt sideways into the open field. McCauley, who as the team full-back probably also played linebacker, alertly scooped it up and went 45 yards for the TD.

A strong LSU (7-2-2) next tied Rice 9-9, holding the Rice offense to 127 net yards and not letting the Rice defense kill them on turnovers. Rice's statistical star, Bill Wallace, was shut down except for 61 yards on punt returns and 30 yards on interceptions. The halfback Friedman's 30 yard run with a lateral gave Rice it's one TD and the tie.

Next came the big Purdue game which would make or break Rice's national reputation for the year. Since it's unbeaten 1929 year with Pest Welch, Purdue had been a dominant Big 10 power. Rice's visit to Lafayette only drew a crowd of 12,000 and you get the feeling they came into town regarded as a breather opponent. Purdue went into action with the alibi that one of it's star backs (Purvis) was out; in fact, Purvis' sub, Johnny Drake played creditably, and by graduation had some claims to being Purdue's best all-time runner to that time.

Rice was up for the game and outgained Purdue slightly, 248 to 227 net yards. Both teams relied on two star running backs: Purdue's Carter and Drake against Wallace and McCauley. Wallace at 17 carries for 89 yards (est) and McCauley at 17 for 69 outrushed Carter at 17-65 and Drake at 11-55. But there was no scoring for three quarters, mostly because the passing attacks were shut down, both teams winding up with three interceptions apiece.

Finally in the fourth quarter the Rice offense delivered it's crowd-pleasing TD. Wallace hit McCauley from the Rice 45 with a short outlet pass. By stiff-arming, breaking tackles and changing pace John turned the play into something. He wound up in the end-zone and with a 7-0 lead and the smell of a major upset win, the Rice defense took over and controlled the final period. The Owls recovered a Drake fumble, blocked a Purdue punt and McCauley intercepted a pass. When Purdue tried, late in the game, to pass from their own end-zone, Frank Steen knocked the ball out of the passer's arm and then recovered the fumble for a TD and Rice went on the wireservices as a 14-0 winner. Outside of Texas' 7-6 upset of Notre Dame, the Rice defeat of Purdue was the intersectional win of 1934 for the SWC.

Rice had to get back up the next week for their first major conference matchup with SMU. With weak offensive yardage (107 rushing, 0 passing), the Owl's defense compensated as usual, with it's three interceptions and Wallace's 36 yard punt return, as Rice emerged with a 9-0 win.

Game six with Texas (8-2-1) was another exciting contest. In the fourth quarter Texas put it's injured senior star, Bohn Hilliard, into the game just to kick a field goal for a 9-7 lead. But Wallace came through a la Purdue. This time the TD pass, to Witt, went 76 yards and was his second of the game. Texas then threw a desperation pass which was intercepted by Rice's Fouke, who scampered 35 yards for the score and the 20-9 win for the Owls. This was the decisive SWC game, though Rice had five more to play.

Games five (Creighton) and seven (Texas A&I) were two breathers on the

schedule. Creighton of the Missouri Valley Conference would have presented problems some years, but in 1934 had tremendous problems trying to pass against what seems to have been Kitts' innovative secondary defense. Rice intercepted ten passes in the game, one for a TD and the eight for which I have yardage total 155 yards in return runs. Texas A&I (6-1-1) was a very good small college team playing out of it's league both literally and metaphorically. Kitts pulled the varsity after they built up a quick early lead and the final score, 27-0, was a creditable one to A&I.

Game eight was a 7-0 win over Arkansas. Wallace went 34 yards on one of his punt returns to give the team field position on the foe's 36 yard line. The payoff on the subsequent drive was, again, Bill's pass of 9 yards to McCauley. Games nine and eleven were comparatively easy 25-6 and 32-0 wins over second division SWC teams, Texas A&M and Baylor. John McCauley had a big game against Baylor with 101 yards rushing, passed for one TD and scored two himself.

The big disappointment in terms of national recognition was the 7-2 loss in game ten to a good TCU team that went through an 8-4 season. Rice had 254 net yards, 147 passing, enough to produce a TD but it didn't. The key team stat was TCU's refusal to throw any interceptions to the Rice secondary, though Wallace still managed 90 turnover yards on his six punt returns.

The TCU loss, despite creditable Rice team yardage, suggests one technical oddity about this Rice team. Their star inside runner, McCauley, was later described by an All-American center (Mike Basrak of Duquesne) as easily the hardest line smasher he had ever faced; and Basrak played the Pitt teams of Jock Sutherland. Despite having McCauley, Kitts' teams on offense always seem to have had to struggle for points when they got down close, and this seems to have caught up with them playing TCU. Whatever, Rice of 1934 (9-1-1) contributed mightily to bringing SWC football into the major leagues. 1935 Rice, with both Wallace and McCauley as returning seniors, was the preseason favorite in the SWC. But both stars were injured in some of the games and Rice fell behind both SMU and TCU, going "only" 8-3. In 1934 and 1935 the

SWC was a very tough league.

Team Stats: These are all previously unpublished and are compiled from 1934 newspaper research. Rice as a team had 1820 rushing yards in 11 games. They threw 48 pass completions for 805 yards (est) and 9 TD's, producing an estimated 2625 yards on total offense. This is a per game average of 238.6 yards total offense, not bad for a 1934 major playing nine tough games, but still over 100 yards below what the best major 1934 offenses were doing. (There is an unchecked claim that one 1934 semi-major team averaged over 400 yards per game). On turnover yards, as previously mentioned, the team's 27 defensive interceptions (one game's totals incomplete) may have led the NCAA and Bill Wallace's 35 punt returns for an estimated 597 yards (game 3 incomplete) are the best I have seen for 1934.

Wallace, the outside runner, had 111 carries for 543 yards and 4 TD's, which was good for 1934, but not top ten in my files, and Bill played more games than most 1934 backs. As a passer he threw 19 completions for 415 yards and 7 TD's, several of them on key plays. His total offense becomes 958 yards, likely a top ten NCAA figure and his total of 11 TD's from scrimmage is excellent. Both these categories are important for ranking star backs in the tailback era. He caught 4 passes for 80 yards and two TD's, and intercepted 4 for 61 yards.

McCauley, running inside, had 120 carries for 466 yards, a 3.88 average, all fine for a 1934 fullback, except he scored only two rushing TD's. What was wrong with Kitts' goal-line offense? McCauley caught 8 passes for 139 yards and 3 TD's, two of them on key plays. He intercepted 4 passes for 59 yards, which statistically ignores a 50 yard TD with a mid-air fumble which he recovered.

Both backs competed with each other for All-American attention, and may have damaged each other's chances, though both had legit claims. Wallace was probably regarded-at the time as the best regional back of 1934.