

# The Nocona Cowboy

By Ray Schmidt

As the 1939 season dawned on the football horizon the fortunes of the Univ. of Texas seemingly had only one way to go. For the previous four seasons the Longhorns had finished tied for, or in sole possession of, last place in the Southwest Conference.

Prior to the 1937 season Texas had brought in the legendary Dana X. Bible as Head Coach after his eight years at Nebraska. Bible was an old hand around the SWC, having coached for twelve years at Texas A&M, but even he couldn't work miracles overnight. For 1939 it didn't appear Texas was yet ready to start a move back to respectability, when the Longhorns were made pre-season picks to share the cellar with Baylor.

But Bible knew that he had a chance to sneak up on some people with his young team. For 1939 Bible had a flock of talented sophomores such as Noble Doss, Ray Mayes, Pete Layden and Jack Crain, to go along with a sprinkling of veterans returning, led by star back Gilly Davis.

Of the four sophomore backs the most unlikely college star seemed to be Jack Crain. He had played at a small West Texas high school in Nocona, and being only 5'7" and 150 pounds, he was not heavily recruited. In his senior year (1937) Crain had tallied 258 points in an eleven game season to lead Nocona to a Class B regional title, but the best he got from the U. of Texas was an offer of a one year "trial" scholarship.

Crain had received a much more substantial offer from Stanford and was leaning in that direction when his family intervened. He had two uncles, Clem and Harry Pinson, who had played for Coach Bible at Texas A&M and they were obvious big supporters of Dana X., even if it meant their nephew would be going to play for the hated Longhorns. When his father told Jack that he should go to a college near where he planned to live in later life, the Longhorns had another running back. By the start of the 1939 season Crain stood 5'8" weighed 165 pounds, with deceptive strength.

Texas opened the 1939 season by hosting Florida, and Pete Layden at fullback was the only sophomore starter in the backfield. After a scoreless first quarter that saw Florida threaten twice, Bible sent in an almost all-soph lineup for Texas at the start of the second period. The first time the Texas sophs got the ball in the period they started from deep in their own end. At the Texas 29 Crain, at halfback, took a quick shovel pass and raced down the sidelines for a 42 yard gain. Then Wild Horse" Mayes swept left end for fifteen yards, and two plays later Jack Crain went around right end, shook off two tacklers and dove into the end-zone for his first college TD. But he missed the EAT and it was 6-0.

Early in the fourth period Texas tacked on another TD on a blocked punt recovered in the end-zone and the rest of the quarter was a Jack Crain "show". In short order Crain intercepted a pass, and on the next play raced 59 yards for an apparent TD only to have it called back. Later he broke off runs of 27 and 17 yards before intercepting another pass at the end of the game. Crain had seemingly been everywhere in the 12-0 Texas win.

The next week the Young Longhorns traveled to Big Ten country to meet Wisconsin and they were decided underdogs. After a scoreless first half Gilly Davis intercepted a pass in the third quarter and returned it to Wisconsin's 25, and Texas then staged a drive that ended with Davis running for the 3 yard TD. Not long after and "Cowboy" Jack Crain swept around right end and raced 37 yards for a TD that capped off the eventual 17-7 win for the Longhorns. The victory by Texas was considered a "stunning upset", although in retrospect it wasn't, since Wisconsin ended up the year at 1-6-1. That same day Oklahoma blasted Northwestern 23-0 in another alleged "shocking upset", and the Dallas papers trumpeted that these two games proved that the "Southwest has caught up with, if not passed the Middle West."

While the first two wins were nice for Texas fans, the game that established Jack Crain as an unquestioned break-away star was the annual battle with Oklahoma. The Sooners had opened the season with a brutal 7-7 tie against SMU and they were expected to slap down the young sophs. After struggling thru a scoreless first period, Oklahoma had staged a pair of drives behind the running and passing of their star halfback Beryl Clark, to set up a field goal and a TD for a 10-0 lead at half. Early in the fourth period Bill Jennings of Oklahoma passed to Clark out in the flat and the speedy Sooner galloped 33 yards for another TD and a 17-0 lead. The Texas sophs looked finished.

On their next possession Texas was muddling along at their own 32 when Jack Crain took a handoff coming around on the reverse. It was strictly a foot-race around end as Crain sped 68 yards for the TD. Then after a Sooner punt Texas started from their own 28 and on a routine lateral play Crain broke over left tackle, dodged "half a dozen would-be tacklers", and raced 72 yards for another TD to narrow the margin to 17-12. The Sooners came back for a final score to cap their 24-12 win but the SWC had a new glamour boy to go along with the likes of A&M's John Kimbrough.

In the SWC opener the next week Texas hosted Arkansas, which was led by their star triple-threat back, Kay Eakin, who was on his way to leading the nation in passing for 1939, in addition to finishing number three nationally in Total Offense. On their first possession Arkansas staged a long drive, as Eakin completed one pass for 28 yards and then blasted up the middle for 22 more yards. From the Texas 8 a quick pitch went to Eakin "who started to the right, reversed his field, sidestepped several would be tacklers" and ran for the TD and a 6-0 lead.

A short time later Arkansas kicked the ball away and "Crain staged one of the wierdest runs ever seen in Memorial Stadium. Scooping up a quick kick, which had gone over his head, and on his own seven, he started slowly, ran hard, dodged, shook off tacklers and back tracked several times before he was finally hauled down on the Arkansas seven", after a run of 86 yards! Three plays later and R.B. Patrick scored the TD and Crain's PAT made it 7-6.

Late in the third period Eakin's brilliant running had led Arkansas on a drive of 65 yards, capped off by his TD for a 13-7 lead, and that's how it

stood with less than a minute to go in the game. Texas had the ball at their own 39, when Crain "fought his way thru the Razorback line, twisted and squirmed thru several tacklers, was practically stopped several times but finally broke loose and out-ran the secondary" for the 61 yard TD. He then kicked the FAT to give Texas the 14-13 win and the fans mobbed Crain.

Jack Crain's brilliant runs had the media calling him everything from the "Nocona Nugget" to the "Red Grange of Texas". The Longhorns then took on a Rice team which had just suffered a major upset loss to little Sam Houston Teachers College by a 9-8 score. Crain broke long runs of 40 and 30 yards, and then took off on an 80 yard TD run which was an "amazing dash from scrimmage, in which virtually every member of the Rice team hit him but could not hold him." Paced by Gilly Davis' two TD's and Crain's nearly 150 yards rushing Texas took a relatively easy 26-12 win.

Then came two tough weeks for the Longhorns as they took on SMU and Baylor. Coach Matty Bell of SMU said before the game that "I'd bet anything I had Red Grange was never the runner this boy Crain is." Well, Matty was known for giving his opponents great build-ups, and his Mustangs, possibly one of the best three-loss teams in history, grabbed a 10-0 win. The next week a good Baylor team used a rainy day and a muddy field to hold Crain to only eleven yards rushing as they bombed the Longhorns 20-0.

Then came the battle with Texas Christian that the papers said "must go down as the father of all

thrillers." TCU would finish 1939 as the number one TEAM passing attack in the nation, and they were paced by their own great sophomore back, Kyle Gillespie, who was playing with a knee injury.

On the second play from scrimmage for Texas, Gilly Davis lateralled to Crain who cut inside right end and dashed 66 yards for the TD and a 7-0 lead. A few minutes later TCU recovered a Davis fumble at the Texas 21 and on their second play Gillespie had sprinted around end on an 11 yard TD run to make it 7-6. Then early in the second period Texas fumbled again, and TCU staged a ten-play 80 yard drive, almost solely on Gillespie's running and passing, ending with his 6 yard TD run to make it 13-7. Texas came back late in the period as Crain quickly ripped off 18 yards around end, followed by Davis passing to Nelson Puett for 31 yards to the TCU 4. Davis then capped the drive by flipping a 4 yard TD pass to Crain to make it 14-13 Texas at half.

Early in the third period, with TCU deep in their own territory, Kyle Gillespie swept end and, injured knee and all, outran even Jack Crain on his way to the TD for a 19-14 TCU lead. Later in the period Texas twice drove inside the TCU 5 yard line only to be turned away and so it was still 19-14 with six minutes left in the game. Then, "as dusk engulfed the muddy field", Gilly Davis faked a handoff and swept down the sidelines on a 64 yard TD dash to give Texas the lead back. TSU had to intentionally take two safeties, but then staged a nice drive to the Texas 15 before Davis inter-

cepted a pass with just twenty seconds left to seal the 25-19 victory for the Longhorns. The Texas papers compared the game to the legendary 1935 SMU-TCU contest for sheer excitement.

On Thanksgiving Day the young Longhorns were totally outclassed by the national champions from Texas A&M by a score of 20-0, and so the very exciting season ended with Texas sporting a deceiving 5-4 record.

In the post-season of 1939 numerous honors and words of praise accrued to Jack Crain. One writer called him "perhaps the finest climax runner in conference history", while Coach Dana Bible said Crain "had the finest change of direction you ever saw. He could come right up to a tackler, change direction and not get off balance." Coach Bell of SMU said that Crain "makes knots with blazing speed and a dazzling change of pace and how he can side-step!" The Dallas Morning News called him "the finest broken field runner to bob up in the conference in years; a constant threat on offense and a sure tackler on defense."

Jack Crain, the sophomore from Nocona, was voted to the 1939 First Team backfield of the SWC, by both the Associated Press and the Dallas Morning News. In an amazing accomplishment for a sophomore, he was also named a Third Team back on the AP's All-American squad. He had tallied eight TD's on average plays of 50 yards, along with finishing as the leading rusher in the SWC and number ten nationally on 610 yards in 92 carries.

With Crain and all his other great sophomores due back for the seasons of 1940 and 1941, Dana Bible anticipated the return of Texas to the SWC penthouse. But that's another story for another time.