

Yardage machine from Texas Mines

By Mark Purcell

In the late 1930's, Texas Mines (now Texas-El Paso) of the Border Conference featured a star back named Ken Heineman, who symbolized the place held by Southwest Region colleges on the cutting edge of offensive football. The available player statistics of the time reflect the technical superiority of what tailbacks like Sammy Baugh, Davey O'Brien, and Jack Robbins of Arkansas were doing within the big Southwest Conference, and such lesser known figures as Heineman, Eddie Miller of New Mexico A&M, and Foster Watkins of West Texas State were doing outside the SWC.

The pro and all-star game coaches knew what was going on in the Southwest, and hungered for these flashy players. But at the same time this offensive ferment was never adequately reflected in the national sports press, which was dominantly Northern and oriented towards a different style of game and back. The admired mid-30's backs were tough-guy tailbacks like Jay Berwanger of Chicago (1935 Heisman) and Clint Frank (1937 Heisman), who were basically hard-running backs able to move in and play effective line-backer when the other team had the ball.

By contrast, the 30's Southwest stars were much superior to Berwanger or Frank at passing. On defense their sophistication at the passing game meant their proper use was not upfront stopping the run, but as deep secondary, killing off the passing game. The Northern press found all this a little sissified, and O'Brien's 1938 Heisman selection, really the payoff for being on a national championship team at TCU, is the only media recognition of what was going on in the Southwest at this time. Backs like Heineman and Miller never even made the AP Little All-America first teams in years (1937-38) when they should have been automatic choices.

However, in late October of 1937, the El Paso fans of Texas Mines football must have felt comfortable enough. In an era when ties were more acceptable to everybody than they are today, Texas Mines had so far gone 2-1-2, finishing off the four roughest games on their schedule. All this had been accomplished with a rookie tailback (weight of 150 pounds) named Ken Heineman. Ken was a local boy who had aroused such high hopes out of high school that only practical economics kept him off the train to Los Angeles and USC, where he would have played on the 1938-39 Rose Bowl teams. When Ken stayed home and went to Texas Mines, the school promptly booked a shootout between him and Eddie Miller of New Mexico A&M as the season opener for 1937. The A&M game was the first of two shootouts (1937-38) between the two most valuable backs in the Border Conference, and this early-season booking for Heineman's first college game was a tactical error that produced Texas Mines only 1937 loss.

The most obvious factor in the A&M game was high winds which controlled,

when they did not neutralize, passing and punting. Texas Mines threw five interceptions to A&M's one, and the turnover factor was the key to a close 14-0 loss for Mines. Heineman had been baptized into college ball by facing in Miller, probably the most effective opponent back he would meet in his next three college years.

The following week against New Mexico Military Institute, Ken got to open up and fired three TD passes in a 19-3 win. Then came the first of the many close-score pressure games he would play at Texas Mines the next three years, in a faceoff with a good West Texas State team. West Texas, with a good sophomore passer in Flippin' Foster Watkins, after three quarters had not yet attempted a pass, as the West Texas coach chose to play a controlled game, and Mines led 13-7. Unhandcuffed, Watkins then led one unsuccessful drive inside the Mines' 10, made a 29 yard punt return to start a second drive, and kicked the extra point to put West Texas ahead 14-13. There was practically no time left, when West Texas lost a fumble on their 38. Heineman then threw deep, and got what the passer wants in this situation, an interference penalty that took the ball to the West Texas 5, from where they kicked the short field goal for a 16-14 win.

Next up was New Mexico U. (4-4-1), a middling conference rival building up to good 1938-39 seasons, and it was a game where Texas Mines had a yardage advantage they could not cash in. The best New Mexico back, Big Bill Dwyer, made a key interception and neutralized much of Mines' yardage by his kicking, which included a 74-yard punt to the Mines' 1 yard line. Both teams traded one TD pass apiece for a 7-7 tie.

Santa Barbara State (5-2-2) finished off the rough part of Mines' schedule with another bad-weather game. This time the trouble wasn't winds but fog, the penalty for playing a night game out on the Coast. Santa Barbara had a serious rushing offense built around Howie Yeager (100 plus yards for the game) and seems from game reports to have dominated the offensive play. Mines stayed even on the scoreboard with a lineman's 4-yard TD run with a captured fumble, plus the first of Heineman's four career TD kick returns. The rest of the game was a holding operation against Santa Barbara's rushing attack to save the 13-13 tie.

With a midseason record of 2-1-2, Texas Mines was looking at five more probable wins on the rest of the schedule. The team was maturing, and so were its two top players, Heineman, and the best of the linemen, Riley Matheson, a future Pro Hall of Famer. By modern standards, Mines scoring was a little unbalanced: one TD by a lineman on a turnover and 7 more, all generated by Heineman, as he passed for five TD's and scored twice himself.

But a more balanced offense was on the way. The next game was with Colorado State-Greeley, which was a second-level team from a Conference, the Rockies, which was on a par with the Border Conference. Against Greeley, Mines meshed their rushing (154 yards) and their passing (187 yards) for the first time in 1937. Heineman, running for one TD, only had to take personal responsibility for 7 of the team's points in a 20-0 win. He was still the core offensive player but the Greeley game stats show that the great Texas Mines offensive show (anything over 300 yards a game against a respectable foe was top 10 stuff in this era) was now on the road.

Back in the conference, the Texas Mines passing attack exploded. In the first half of the season Ken had been averaging a satisfactory 5 of 15 passing per game, but against poor Arizona State-Flagstaff he completed 14 passes in 17 attempts for 336 yards and 3 TD's on the way to a 53-13 win. From scrimmage Heineman had a 47-yard TD run and the second of his kick return TD's, this time 93 yards on a kickoff, as Flagstaff State was the victim of his Harmon-Grange game.

Arizona State-Tempe by record (0-8-1) seemed a hapless pigeon, but was in fact a team just two years away from dominating the Border Conference. Heineman completed 20 of 44 passes for 284 yards, but Tempe knew something about cutting off the deep pass, and yielded only one TD pass as Texas Mines won by the respectable score of 19-0.

By now the word was out and the team stats suggest the two final foes (Sul Ross and St Edward's) had everybody but the coach back in the deep secondary when Texas Mines had the ball. The win over Sul Ross (34-0) was a track meet for Ken on the ground, with 194 rush yards minimum to compensate for only completing two passes for 62 yards and one TD. The 34-7 win over St Edward's was the same kind of relaxed, rushing-controlled win. (Keep this in mind when we review Ken's overall 1937 passing stats.) It was the end of a win-filled (7-1-2) season and the Texas Mines team had a couple years to look forward to, before Heineman graduated.

Now we get to the statistical news part of this article. After the five predictable 1937 late-season Texas Mines wins were all wrapped up, and it came time to total out the results, it turned out that sophomore Ken Heineman had had one of the mind-blowing statistical years of 1930's college football. Heineman came in second in NCAA rushing (if you call him a major college back), first in passing yards and incomparably first in total offense, whether yards alone or yards-per-game average (the modern criterion) is used. He is also a probable interception leader (on defense) based on incomplete 1937 game reports. He scored 3 TD's on kick returns, and in a recent letter Ken stressed that he thought this was one of the strongest parts of his game.

The actual 1937 Heineman yardage figures, which I have just tried to put into some perspective, can be found in a postseason wrapup story in the 11-29-37 El Paso Times. Heineman's season totals were: 128 carries for 827 yards and 7 TD's; completed 75 passes in 165 attempts for 1282 yards and 10 TD's; total offense of 2109 yards or 210.9 yards per game. He also had 3 TD's on kick returns, all of which were made in separate games and not against one hapless opponent. Unfortunately, neither the Times nor the Texas Mines SID people kept track consistently of Ken's defensive interceptions and kick return yardage, but the incomplete game reports get him up to 7 interceptions (96 yards on 5 of them), which is a tie with the best figure I have elsewhere for 1937 in my records.

A great tailback, like a great postwar quarterback, galvanizes his team's overall offense and fellow players. Ken's best receiver, Boyd Arnold, had at least 19 receptions for an estimated 400 plus yards and 4 TD's, and Texas Mines had 1-2 more possible 200-yard men among the receivers. On incomplete team rushing (7 games) and passing (8 games) totals, the team total offense was averaging just under the magic 300 yard number. Either Mines or Texas Tech, for which we have full season figures (289.2 avg), was the best regional Southwest-area offense in 1937.

But that only brings us up to the really hard question. Was Texas Mines a

major college in 1937? Probably because of Heineman's presence, Mines toughened their schedule his next two years (1938-39) and officially it was a major school by 1940. In 1937 certainly, and 1938-39 probably, the NCAA seems to have drawn the "major" line just above Mines and so kept Ken's statistical exploits (he was comparably as good 1938-39) out of the official "major" record books.

The NCAA case for keeping Heineman's rush-pass yards out of the major-college category was more reasonable in 1937 than 1938-39 when Mines played a stronger schedule, and Heineman still had some comparable stats, but not as out of this world as his 1937 figures. But for obvious political reasons the NCAA office had trouble telling schools in other areas that there were simply more bluechippers in places like Ohio, California and Texas, and hence likely to be more major-level teams in those areas, even if the national media didn't recognize some of them by name. Whatever, there can be no question that statistically Ken Heineman of Texas Mines and Whizzer White of Colorado U., between them, wrapped up all the college player statistics for 1937.

My major research source was primarily the El Paso Times of 1937-39 inclusive, obtained with the assistance of the interlibrary service of the Peoria Main Library.

Meeting

The College Football Historical Society is interested in hosting a mini-convention of members and guests, to be held next summer in the Chicago area. Current plans are to hold the convention on either Saturday July 22 or Saturday July 29, 1989.

The convention would last from approximately 10AM to 4PM, in order to allow the many members who live within a 39 hour drive of Chicago to leave and return home on the same day. There would be NO cost to the members who attend, other than their transportation, and the day's events would include activities such as member presentations, football films, lunch and, hopefully, one or two ex-college heroes to regale us with tales of epic grid-iron feats.

In order to proceed with our plans for this big event, we need an idea as to how many members believe that they would be planning to attend, and if there is any preference between the two dates mentioned above. This is NOT a definite committment on your part. Further details concerning the mini-convention will be announced in the May issue of the Journal. So, if you think there is a good chance you would be interested in participating in a Saturday of football fun at the CFHS Convention, PLEASE drop a note to:

Ray Schmidt 24 Rockbluff Way Lockport, Ill. 60441. Do it today. Only with member participation can the Society continue toward its goals.

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** The Historical Society has members representing 26 states. The leaders are California with 11 members, Pennsylvania-8, Illinois-6 and Ohio-5.

** John Cechini of the College of Pacific (coached by A.A. Stagg) played 16 consecutive 60 minute games until he suffered a shoulder injury in the 1935 California game (a 39-0 loss) and had to leave the game briefly.