

Gerry Mann

By Mark Purcell

The Dallas Morning News, in a 1926 early-season article, named TCU as its preseason SWC championship pick. The 1925 champ, Texas A&M, returned its key back, the great Joel Hunt, and its key lineman, tackle Ox Dietrich, but the resident experts must have decided graduation losses like that of Mule Wilson, had brought the Aggies back to the pack.

In fact, SMU with a tremendous 1926 season from its star junior tailback and passer, Gerry Mann, dominated the SWC offensively, defensively, and in the won-loss totals. This did not make for the same dull style of season sometimes caused by an over-ridingly dominant team. SMU's four major games (Missouri, Texas A&M, Texas, TCU) were struggles decided by four points or less. In the final game SMU met an unbeaten foe in TCU, and earlier, against Texas, SMU was down 17-7 after three quarters, and only pulled it out via a real Frank Merriwell play by Mann.

Mann's potential as an all-round back, but in particular as a passer, seems to have been the wild card missed by the preseason experts. Around his new star tailback, Coach Ray Morrison in 1926 packaged an offense that had Cortemeglia as the inside runner, a sophomore with the marvelous player-name of Redman Hume as wingback and team punter, and the end "Dog" Dawson as the key long-pass receiver. Mann was the basic punt and kickoff returner and did much of the placement kicking, though Hume unquestionably had the strongest kicker's leg of the team and was also safe and reliable on pass defense, the usual coaching fear in the days of two-way play about putting a sophomore on the varsity.

SMU opened in the traditional 1920's way, with a couple of easy games before they began playing the big boys. In these two games (42-0 over North Texas State and 48-0 over Trinity), Mann passed for four TD's and good yardage (131 yards against Trinity), as in general the SMU offense, both

rushing and passing, got itself grooved as a big-play, large-yardage club.

Game Three against Centenary, was played against a small school which has no recognition now except for oldtime football experts. In fact, without ever getting the invitation to join the SWC they badly wanted, Centenary teams of 1927-34 under Coach Homer Norton badly tormented whatever SWC teams they scheduled. Centenary had defended SMU down to only a 3-0 lead until Gerry Mann's 50-yard punt return for a TD broke the game open. He led SMU in rushing and completed 10 of 23 passes for 173 yards and one TD, with Dawson (5 catches for 112 yards) as his main receiver. Mann also participated in a real playground play when he received a kickoff and lateral-ed it to star punter Redman Hume, who promptly kicked the ball over the oncoming opponents, and it rolled nearly to the end-zone to put Centenary in poor field position. Early season was fun and games for SMU in 1926.

Next was the major intersectional non-conference affair with Missouri, a school that with Nebraska dominated the old Big Six in the twenties. Missouri was one of the schools, like SMU, with a real passing tradition, and in this game Stuber passed 13 of 18 for 165 yards and one TD for the Tigers. Missouri and SMU neutralized each other's running games and also did a fair job of defending each other's passing; Missouri having three defensive interceptions, SMU had four. SMU's conference season was only a week away, but they still seem to have gone all out against Missouri in order to get the 7-7 tie on a TD pass to Dawson. If SMU was at its best with Missouri, the resulting tie puts a strong limit on how high we can rate SMU as a 1926 national power, no matter how artistically fine a season they had. Missouri (5-1-2) was a worthy foe, but not in all likelihood a top 10 team nationally for 1926.

SMU opened big in the SWC with the second of three legendary shootouts (1925-27) with Dana Bible's Texas A&M and their star tailback, Joel Hunt. Texas A&M came in primed and unbeaten (4-0) for the game the Dallas News thought would make or break their season. Their star, Hunt, was the Doak Walker of 1920's football.

On the field A&M's defense controlled SMU and in effect took a pretty good SMU running attack out of the game. By contrast, the SMU defense, for the first and last time in 1926, lost control of the enemy offense, as A&M ran up 228 yards on the ground alone; while Hunt completed 13 of 33 passes for 159 yards and one TD, and rushed for over 70 yards. But SMU came up with five interceptions and this served to neutralize all that A&M yardage and held them down to one team TD. Meanwhile, Mann hit Wade for a 22-yard SMU TD, and also kicked a chipshot 8-yard field goal. When A&M looked up at the scoreboard at the end of the game, all they had to show for all those yards was a 9-7 loss, and this game set up the climactic third A&M-SMU championship showdown in 1927.

The next week, against Texas, SMU didn't seem to be doing anything wrong but at the end of the third quarter it was Texas 17 SMU 7. In the last 15 minutes SMU put it together; the offense made one TD and on defense Mann availed himself of a fatal opponent error, a fumble in the open field deep in Texas territory. Gerry swooped in, got the ball, and ran 25 yards into

the end zone. That was the ball-game, 21-17. The by now expected four defensive interceptions helped bail SMU out. Mann, passing deep, had only 5 completions in 18 attempts, but once again over 100 yards passing, as part of SMU's 312 total yards, and one TD plus he also ran for a TD.

After wins over Rice (20-0) and Baylor (31-3), that were mainly important as a chance to let the subs share the burden with the varsity, SMU faced off against the preseason conference favorite, TCU. Primed for the traditional Thanksgiving Day finale with SMU, which remained an uproarious part of Texas football into the late forties, TCU came in unbeaten though with two ties in its previous games.

TCU's 1926 game plan seems, sensibly, to have been to target SMU passing, meaning Mann and Dawson. On the field Mann went only 5 of 22 for 91 yards passing and one TD, and his pet receiver Dawson only had 2 catches for 50 yards and one TD. But TCU accomplished this at some sacrifice to their upfront defense as SMU ran all over the field, racking up 397 yards on the ground. Redman Hume ran for 160 yards on 30 carries on his own. But overall, strategically, the TCU defensive game plan worked, as an inferior TCU offense matched SMU with two TD's. Cortemeglia saved a 14-13 win for SMU by blocking one of the TCU extra points. Mann personally finished what should have been, but wasn't, a consensus 1926 All-America year by rushing 38 times for 126 yards and one TD, plus passing for the other score.

Gerry Mann should have spent the winter being interviewed and congratulated on All-America honors, a consensus choice like Herb Joesting of Minnesota. But he ran into the voting politics of twenties' football, which disfavored SWC star backs, even the legendary Hunt of Texas A&M. However, in Texas Mann was not ignored as he became a regional legend. For the next generation, after he left SMU, everytime a SWC-area prep coach or local reporter wanted to say something nice about the latest hotshot passer in Texas, the word would go out, that this kid is "better then" or "just as good as" Gerry Mann. He was the "pre-Baugh" Baugh, and so for a single generation (1925-34) a legend in Texas football.

Historically, the key statistics for 1926 SMU are Mann's individual stats, but overall the team was pretty good. Since my research source, the 1926 Dallas Morning News, failed to play-by-play the first game (North Texas), all figures below, except scoring, cover only 8 of the 9 team games, and were developed from the play-by-play reports in the Morning News. In those 8 games, SMU averaged 210.4 yards minimum rushing and 144.2 passing (59 complete in 149 attempts for 1154 yards) for a total offense average of 354.6, good for the era. But as we'll see, it is that 144.2 passing average which is so historically significant, when we remember this was in 1926.

The main scrimmage rushers were Mann with 123 carries for 479 yards minimum and 4 TD's; Cortemeglia with 74-327 yards and 2 TD's; Hume with 89-395 yards and 2 TD's. Mann's personal pass stats were 42 completions in 114 attempts for 843 yards minimum, for a figure of 1322 minimum total-offense yards in the 8 available games. For the season (9 games) Mann threw 11 TD passes, in addition to scoring 6 TD's, 12 PAT's and a field goal for a total of 51 points. Dawson was unquestionably the favorite receiver with 21 catches for 468 yards and 3 TD's, but three different men (Dawson-Wade-Love) averaged over 20 yards apiece in receptions. On defense SMU inter-

cepted 27 passes, led by Dawson and Wade with 5 each, and Hume with 4. Mann returned 23 punts with one TD (yardage available on 20 returns totals 229 yards for an average of 11.4), plus 5 kickoff returns for 88 yards.

In the period of 1926-31 a team probably needed over 400 yards a game to be considered the leading NCAA offense. In 1926 Minnesota averaged over 100 yards more than SMU, however, we can probably leave SMU as the 1926 regional yardage leader. Their scoring average (25.4) is well ahead of what else is available in the Southwest.

It is the passing figures that still have impact today, whether we discuss Mann's individual or his team's overall totals. The basic passing revolution in the NCAA is treated historically as occurring in 1935 in SMU's home region. Both Arkansas (Jack Robbins) and TCU (Sammy Baugh) blew away the 1,000 passing yard barrier, and more importantly, established the statistical rule that the lead NCAA major-college passer was likely to have more-yards seasonally than the lead rusher. SMU's 1926 passing average for 8 games (144.2 yards) is in the same ballpark with what the believed-to-be first revolutionary passing teams in the NCAA did in 1935-39.

In the same way. Mann's total offense as a pass-oriented tailback (1322 minimum yards in 8 games for a 165.2 average) compares with what the NCAA guides supply us about mid and late-30's total offense leaders. To sum up: what is striking about Gerry Mann and SMU in 1926 is not the total number of yards they made, but how they did it; their integration of the pass with the run. They look like a late 1930's Southwest team because, stylistically, they were.

For some people the explanation for Mann's statistics is simply that tailbacks actually threw the ball more in the twenties than in the thirties. I can't go along with that until we come up with a lot more people like Mann from the twenties, who would fit in statistically with what Baugh and Robbins got the other colleges doing after 1935. I still think that Baugh and Robbins actually produced the technical revolution that passers like Gerry Mann only anticipated.

As memorable as 1926 Southwest football was, it only served as a lead-in to the real Golden Year of 1920's Texas football, the season of 1927.

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In 1909 Kansas, locked in a scoreless struggle with Nebraska, ran a fake line plunge while their brilliant halfback Tommy Johnson shot around end and raced 40 yards to the apparent TD. But the fake had fooled not only Nebraska but the referee, who had blown the play over. Under the rules the ball had to come back. It was still scoreless with just two minutes left in the game when Nebraska boomed a long punt that Tommy Johnson scooped up at his 30. "His stride was shifted, his speed checked, his pace changed, but on he sped twisting away from the crimson athletes." As Tommy Johnson dashed into the end zone for the TD it gave Kansas a 6-0 win, and "Valley grid-iron history tells of no greater run."