

Electrifying Soph

By Bernie McCarty

It was a golden Autumn day in 1952 when the electrifying speed of Billy Vessels stunned a national television audience, end Notre Dame, and earned the brilliant Oklahoma halfback the Heisman Trophy. The Sooners lost to the Irish that day, but millions of TV viewers recalled only the image of Vessels blazing around the flanks, leaving slow-footed Notre Dame defenders gasping in his wake, and soundly applauded the Heisman voters for choosing Vessels at the conclusion of the campaign.

Vessels was more than an exciting runner. He was an all-around performer of enormous skill, and toiled on defense when needed in an era ruled by two-platoon football.

Ever the champion of the oppressed and underprivileged and overlooked, this writer wishes to discuss Billy Vessels the sophomore who was perhaps even more effective, considering the record, than he was in his senior season. Yet Vessels received no All-America recognition in 1950. Oklahoma compiled a 10-0 record and was ranked No. 1 in the nation at the end of the 1950 season, then lost 13-7 to the Vito Parilli-inspired Wildcats of Kentucky in the Sugar Bowl. Oklahoma "slipped" to 8-2 in 1951 when Vessels was sidelined much of the year with an injury. The 1952 Sooners were 8-1-1.

It is important to note here the difference between the 1950 Oklahoma club of soph Vessels and the more celebrated Sooner outfits of 1955-1956. Those Oklahoma teams of the mid-fifties played nobody. The 1950 Sooners challenged a potent schedule of opponents loaded with scintillating superstars.

Vessels was generally considered to be at his best against Oklahoma's three strongest foes of 1950, Texas (9-1 record), Texas A&M (6-4) and Nebraska (6-2-1). His astounding late-season performance against Nebraska was touted by the media as his finest effort, but All-America teams were chosen by then. The other two contests involved stunning last-minute rallies in which Vessels played heroic roles. Vessels was equally potent against Colorado (5-4-1) and Kansas (6-4). Considering what happened, the letter game may have been his best 1950 performance. He decided the outcome offensively and defensively.

What makes researching Oklahoma in 1950 so interesting, as compared to the dull 1955-1956 Sooner clubs, is that every game listed above involved some sort of rally.

Vessels was hardly the whole show for Oklahoma in 1950. His backfield mates included Claude Arnold, one of the more underrated quarterbacks the game has known, All-America fullback Leon (Mule Train) Heath, and All-America defensive back Buddy Jones. The powerful unit up front included All-Americans Frank Anderson and Jim Weatherall.

Oklahoma launched the 1950 season by rapping weak Boston College 28-0. Vessels didn't start here, but got in long enough to hurl an 18-yard TD pass.

Texas A&M was next. The Aggies had a tremendous fullback with a name easy to forget, Bob Smith, who reeled off a 50-yard TD run against Oklahoma, and would later run wild on national TV against Georgia in the Presidential Cup Game. The contest was deadlocked 14-14 at halftime. Vessels burst 26 yards for a TD in the third period to give the Sooners a 21-14 lead. The Aggies thundered to two touchdowns, then Vessels dashed 32 yards with a pass from Arnold

to pull the Sooners within one point, 28-27 with 3:36 to go. Arnold's passing then carried Oklahoma 69 yards to the tinning TD. The big gainer was a 30-yard toss to Vessels, and Heath blasted four yards around end for the clinching TD end a 34-28 victory with 37 seconds left. This was Heath's best performance of the season. Besides the winner, he scored on a 25-yard run and 50-yard pass from Arnold. But Vessels was there with the most crucial plays when it counted.

There was no question, after two games, that Oklahoma coach Bud Wilkinson knew who his clutch performer was. An all-around Oklahoma high school athlete who won three first places in the 1948 state prep track meet, Vessels had proved he was something special as a gridder.

Vessels tallied both touchdowns as the Sooners upset Texas 14-13 at Dallas. The Texas lineup contained several of the most famous players in Longhorn history: fullback Byron Townsend, all-time safety Bobby Dillon, and All-America linemen Lewis McFadin and Don Menasco.

The Associated Press reported, "Billy Vessels, keyman in the lacerating ground game of the Oklahomans, dashed around right end for a touchdown and Jim Weatherall, the Texan who plays tackle for the Sooners, kicked the extra point that threw a crowd of 75,968 into pandemonium. At game's end, mad Oklahomans swarmed onto the field and uprooted the goal posts. Wooden posts had been erected for the special benefit of Oklahoma, which is accustomed to tearing them down in its conference."

Heath ripped 29 yards to the two to set up Vessels' first score. Dillon returned a pass theft 55 yards to give the Steers a 13-7 advantage, and Vessels streaked 11 yards for the winning TD with 3:46 showing on the scoreboard clock. Stanley Woodward, writing in Sports Stars magazine, described the clincher. "The play was a naked reverse against one of the toughest defensive teams in the nation. Billy had no blockers to clear the way. Yet with nothing but his skill and power to rely on, he eluded the end, knocked the linebacker flat because there wasn't room to dodge him, then used the full circle twist to clear the halfback and scored."

Weak Kansas State was brushed aside 58-0. Vessels scored one TD and set up another with a long punt return. Iowa State was the next foe, a strong club despite its 3-6-1 record. Vessels scored twice in the 20-7 Oklahoma triumph.

Colorado, featuring Zack Jordan, mighty Merwin Hodel and Woody Shelton in the backfield, jumped off to a 6-0 lead. Vessels retaliated by racing 46 yards with a pitchout for one TD, passing eight yards for another tally, and the Sooners went ahead to stay, 13-6, enroute to a hard-earned 27-18 victory. Vessels contributed 120 yards rushing in just 12 carries, caught three passes for 33 yards, and returned an interception 29 yards. Arnold also had a great day, carrying 24 times for 132 yards and completing six of 10 passes.

Kansas and its two star halfbacks, Charlie Hoag and Wade Stinson, were ready for the Sooners. Oklahoma couldn't find the handle on the ball and Kansas was ready to register the shocker of the year after leading 13-0 in the third period. The Sooners rallied to knot the count 13-13 in the final stanza, but it was still anybody's ball game until Vessels fielded a pass from Arnold, twice staged cutbacks to elude tacklers, and ran 51 yards to paydirt. That play finally broke the game open and Oklahoma won 33-13. Hoag wasn't around at the finish. Working on defense, Vessels dumped Hoag for a six-yard loss on one play, then literally knocked Hoag out of the game by flattening the Kansas halfback while he was attempting to pass. Vessels gained 93 yards in

11 rushes, and snared three passes for 90 yards. Heath snorted for 140 yards in 25 carries, and Arnold connected on nine of 15 passes for 200 yards and four TD's.

Missouri (4-5-1) was dispatched 47-7. Vessels netted two TD's before retiring early with the rest of the regulars. That left Nebraska as the last Sooner roadblock to an undisputed Big 7 Conference crown.

The great Husker All-American halfback Bobby Reynolds was incredible in the first half, scoring all the points as Nebraska battled Oklahoma to a 21-21 draw. "But the rugged Sooner line solved Reynolds' magic in the second half and in the end it was the Sooner sophomore ace, Billy Vessels, who stole the show by scoring three touchdowns and passing for a fourth," reported A.P.

Vessels had tied the match with a seven-yard run just before Intermission. In the third quarter he zipped fine yards to the endzone. "Then the unstoppable Vessels rounded out the period by breaking loose on the top thriller of the day, a 69-yard scoring run on which he twice zig-zagged the width of the field." And in the fourth stanza he pitched a 24-yard TD aerial after setting up the play with a 30-yard scamper. The final count in the wild affair favored Oklahoma 49-35. Vessels' remarkable stats totalled 302 yards in 21 plays, including 18 rushes for 208 yards. Arnold and Heath also sizzled.

Oklahoma collected its 31st consecutive win, and tuned up for the Sugar Bowl, by routing Oklahoma State (4-6-1) 41-14. Vessels scored his 15th TD of the season while gaining 120 yards in 18 carries. Heath rushed for 126 yards, and Arnold flipped four TD passes. Sitting in the crowd jotting notes was Kentucky coach Paul (Bear) Bryant.

Oklahoma's rash of fumbilitis, and Parilli's generalship, produced the Sugar Bowl upset. The Sooners out-downed Kentucky 18-7. The Wildcats led 13-0 at halftime and Oklahoma completely dominated in the final two periods, but failed to score until the fourth quarter when Vessels tossed a 17-yard TD pass. The Bear had prepared a brilliant game plan. But the fact is the Sooners self-destructed.

Despite the disappointing finish, Vessels' reputation was well-established. His 1950 stats certainly were interesting enough to warrant All-America consideration. Vessels rushed 135 times for 870 yards, a 6.4 average. He caught 11 passes for 229 yards, setting a Sooner record of 20.8 yards per reception. And he hurled several important scoring aerials on his few passing assignments. At nearly 190 pounds, Vessels was also an accomplished blocker, even as a soph, and a hard-hitting defender.

prior to the 1952 season Stanley Woodward forecast the Heisman Trophy winner by rating Vessels the "perfect halfback," even though Vessels had missed most of the 1951 campaign. Woodward's assessment was based on Vessels' 1950 soph performance.