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THE 1949 RICE OWLS

By Ray Schmidt

This summer we are approaching the final season for one of the greatest and most storied of all football conferences in the college game's long and colorful past. As historians of college football it is important for us to not forget the many outstanding players, teams and games of the Southwest Conference, whose echoes from the past still need to be heard, and those tales kept alive.

One of the many teams that dazzled for a time in Southwest Conference football, yet is generally overlooked today because it was not considered as one of the "glamor" teams, is the 1949 squad of Rice University.

The Owls came into the 1949 season, their tenth campaign in the 27 year reign of Coach Jess Neely at the Houston school, with an experienced lineup that featured nearly all seniors and with designs on the SWC title. Rice had last won the league championship in the 1937 season, behind players such as Ollie Cordell and Ernie Lain, although the 1946 team had posted an outstanding 9-2-0 record along with a win over Tennessee in the Orange Bowl.

For 1949 Coach Neely was looking to future-pro quarterback Tobin Rote to open up the aerial attack in compliment to the usual fine running game of the Owls. Rice featured a solid line from end-to-end, with tackles Ralph Murphy and Bill Wyman considered the best tandem in the SWC, along with the outstanding Joe Watson at center and linebacker. The Illustrated Football Annual correspondent noted that "it is a squad which should have done better the past two seasons and which may catch on fire and finish with a championship bang.

In weeks one and three of the 1949 season Rice blasted Clemson 33-7 and New Mexico 55-0, but the in-between game brought the always pesky Tigers of Louisiana State at Baton Rouge. LSU had knocked off the Owls in the past four seasons, but Rice was heavily favored as they took the field on a rainy and foggy night in the Bayou

The game was just five minutes old when halfback Gordon Wyatt of Rice broke through right tackle, cut across the field and raced 71 yards to a touchdown for a 7-0 lead. In the second quarter LSU twice gave away fumbles inside their own ten yard line, but Rice could not capitalize on either chance in the miserable weather conditions.

In the third quarter LSU finally mounted a short march of 45 yards to a score that knotted things at 7-7. Then in the final stanza, with bad field position, the Owls lost a fumble at their 16 yard line and just three plays later LSU had it in the end-zone for the TD and a 14-7 upset win.

In week four Rice took on two-time defending SWC champion Southern Methodist, featuring Kyle Rote and Doak Walker, and it was one of the many wild-and-wooly battles of the conferences history. SMU jumped into an early 14-0 lead, but Rote started Rice on the comeback trail with a scoring pass to end James "Froggy" Williams. In the third quarter the Owls tied it at 14, and then took the lead on another scoring strike from Rote to Williams. Rice extended the lead to a pair of touchdowns, when Speedy Roberts picked off a Walker pass and returned it 80 yards to the score. The offensive fireworks continued, but the Owls managed to hold that lead for an eventual 41-27 win.

The following weekend Rice traveled down to Austin for what turned out to be another cliff-hanger against the Texas Longhorns. In the first half Texas built up a 9-0 lead as Rice was pushed all over the field, and allowed only one first down before intermission. The Longhorns moved inside the Owls' 20 yard line on five occasions in the first two periods, only to come away scoreless each time.

Early in the third quarter the one-sided struggle continued, as Texas marched 62 yards to another TD to up the lead to 15-0. But here the Owls finally got untracked, and came right back with a drive of their own that stayed completely on the ground until Sonny Wyatt plunged one yard to the touchdown. Just minutes later Joe Watson intercepted a pass in Longhorn territory, but Rice was turned away at the one yard line. But now Texas had to punt from its end zone, and the hurried kick produced only a punt of 15 yards. On the following play Vernon Glass rifled a TD strike to Billy Burkhalter to pull Rice to within 15-14.

Now in the fourth quarter, Texas staged a long drive that was halted at the Rice 12, and the Owls then began their own march of 78 yards in the waning minutes of the game. With less than a minute to play Glass found Burkhalter with a pass to the Texas 10, and then Williams booted a 17-yard field goal with 10 seconds remaining, to give the Owls a dramatic 17-15 win that writer Bill Rives of the Dallas Morning News called "one of the wildest football games ever played at Memorial Stadium" in Austin

After these two harrowing escapes, Rice then handled Texas Tech 28-0 as Bobby Lantrip rushed for 142 yards on 19 carries and scored a pair of touchdowns. Next up was Arkansas, and the Owls took the opening kickoff and proceeded to march 83 yards in nine plays, with Rote connecting with Williams on a 10-yard scoring aerial. In the third quarter Glass passed nine yards to Williams for another score, as the Owls prevailed 14-0.

Rice then improved its record to 7-1 with a 13-0 win over Texas A&M. Burkhalter ran for the first TD in the opening period, and then just before halftime Watson recovered a fumble at the Aggie 41. Behind a pair of big pass completions tossed by Rote, the Owls moved quickly to another score with Burkhalter

blasting four yards to paydirt.

The Owls next traveled to Fort Worth for a late-November matchup against dangerous Texas Christian. It was like two different games, as Rice piled up a 20-0 lead at halftime, and then had to hold on for dear life to outlast TCU in the waning seconds. In the opening four minutes of play Rice marched 59 yards in eight plays, paced by a 31-yard pass from Rote to Williams, and Burkhalter slashed the last six yards to the end-zone for a 7-0 lead.

Early in the second quarter Rice moved to another score on a drive of 52 yards, with Burkhalter dashing 12 yards to the TD. Then less than a minute later John Kelly of the Owls intercepted a pass from Lindy Berry, and followed an armada of Rice blockers for the 48 yards to the end-zone and a 20-0 lead.

Late in the third quarter the TCU offense finally started to come to life, and a six-yard TD pass by Berry made it 20-7. Just three plays later a Rice punt was blocked, and Wayne Rogers of TCU scooped up the loose ball and stumbled 16 yards to the end-zone to make it 20-14.

With the Rice offense bottled up, TCU staged a late fourth quarter march to the Owls' two yard line. With 90 seconds to play Berry slipped in for an apparent TD, only to have it nullified by a motion penalty. Then on the next play Berry lofted a pass into the end-zone, but the TCU receiver came down with the ball beyond the end-line. A minute later TCU mounted one last try, but Rex Proctor of Rice made an interception at the goal line and the Owls narrowly escaped with a 20-14 win.

After surviving this latest struggle, it seemed almost an afterthought the following Saturday as Rice slipped past Baylor 21-7 to clinch sole possession of the SWC title. Gordon Wyatt of the Owls ran for 117 yards to win the conference

rushing crown with a total of 704 yards, as he edged out Bob Smith of Texas A&M by ten yards. Baylor marched 64 yards to a score on the first possession of the game, but then Rice took over. Burkhalter, Lantrip and Williams scored TD's for the Owls.

The reward for Rice posting the first undefeated and untied SWC record since Texas A&M in 1939, was a trip to the Cotton Bowl and a date with Charley Justice and North Carolina. The Tar Heels were coming in with a record of 7-3 and were the champions of the Southern Conference. The Owls caused a flap in Dallas even before the game, as Jess Neely kept them at home in Houston to avoid the pre-game distractions, and only brought his squad to the big city the night before the kickoff.

After a scoreless first quarter, Rice got on the board when Rote lobbed a little pass out in the right flat to Burkhalter, and the little speedster outran everyone to a 47-yard TD and a 7-0 lead. Then on their next possession, the Owls stayed on the ground and pounded out another scoring drive with Lantrip

bolting up the middle for the final three yards to paydirt.

Midway in the third quarter Rice put the game out of reach with a drive of 77 yards in six plays, with Rote rifling a TD-strike to Williams good for 17 yards and a 21-0 lead. Burkhalter then swept around left end for 12 yards and another touchdown, which was more than enough to hold off North Carolina's late rush and give the Owls a 27-13 win. Charley Justice had a disappointing day for the Tar Heels as he rushed for only 59 yards, while connecting on just seven passes for 63 yards.

In post-season honors the Dallas Morning News selected James Williams, Ralph Murphy, Joe Watson, and Gerald Weatherly of Rice to the First Team of its All-SWC squad. In other awards, Williams was named a consensus All-America, while Watson also received his share of All-America mention. Watson shared the Houston Post's SWC Most Valuable Player award for 1949 with Adrian Burke of Baylor. Williams would later be elected to the College Football Hall of Fame in 1965. Coach Jess Neely has also been installed into the College Hall.

Rice finished up the 1949 season with an overall record of 10-1-0, and a final national ranking of #5 in the Associated Press Poll. The Owls out-scored their opposition that season by a total of 276-97 with a diversified offense. Writer Harry Gage of the Dallas Morning News described the Owls as a team of "unfathomed power and glaring polish". They should always be remembered among the greats in Southwest Conference football history.