

{ JACK MILDREN 1949-2008 }

Huskers express respect for Mildren

BY BILL HAISTEN
World Sports Writer

When news of Jack Mildren's death reached Nebraska, expressions of respect emanated from his former Cornhusker rivals.

In the 1971 "Game of the Century" in Norman, Mildren rushed for 130 yards and passed for 137 (on only five completions) as the No. 2-ranked Sooners were beaten 35-31 by the top-ranked Huskers. Ne-

braska went on to capture its first national championship.

Mildren, who rushed for two touchdowns and passed for two more against a great Nebraska defense, died on Thursday of stomach cancer.

"I knew Jack was sick because I interviewed him for my book," said Johnny Rodgers, the former Nebraska wingback who scored on a 72-yard punt return in the 1971 Oklahoma game. "He was a tremen-

dous player and a great man. He was one of the first great option quarterbacks in the country, and we knew he could beat you in so many different ways. In 1971, he killed us with the pass and did absolutely everything he could to beat us."

With Mildren at quarterback, the '71 Sooners rolled for 467 total yards against Nebraska.

"I just remember what a classy guy Jack Mildren was," said Larry Jacobson, who was an All-Ameri-

can defensive tackle for Nebraska in 1971.

When time expired on the 1971 Nebraska-OU game, "I remember (Mildren) coming over and shaking every hand he could on our team," Jacobson said. "That says a lot about him, and, I think, explains why he went on to do so many good things in life."

In 1971, Tom Osborne was Nebraska's offensive coordinator. In 1973-97, he was Nebraska's head

coach. He now is Nebraska's athletic director, and on Friday he remembered Mildren.

"I have always respected Oklahoma football, and it's because of leaders like Jack Mildren," Osborne said. "I want his family and the Oklahoma athletic family to know that they will be in our thoughts and prayers this weekend."

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REMEMBERING MILDREN

Members of the University of Oklahoma football family offered their sympathies to the Mildren family on Friday and also offered their thoughts on Jack Mildren's life:

"Of course, Jack was the father of the wishbone. He helped create the greatest rushing machine in college football. He was a runner, a passer and a great leader. We recruited a lot of superstars out of the state of Texas, and Jack was the first one."

Former OU coach Barry Switzer

"Jack was a role model for every young man who wears the Sooner uniform. He was gifted both athletically and intellectually, yet was defined by his toughness and fortitude. After graduation, he achieved his goals while remaining loyal to his family and serving others. I don't know how any man could aspire for much more. We will miss him tremendously."

Sooner coach Bob Stoops

"Jack was the epitome of a college recruit as a great athlete in football and track and an extraordinary student. It was clear he was a great leader. At the time, he was recognized as

the top athlete in the state of Texas. He made it acceptable for all other great Texas high school players to come to OU. They figured if it was good enough for Jack Mildren, it was good enough for others."

Chuck Fairbanks,
Mildren's coach at OU

"On most offenses, the toughest guy is the fullback or a lineman, but on our team, I think the toughest guy was Jack. He would do anything to make a play. Jack demanded that you and everyone else approach the game the same way."

"There has been a tradition at OU that you are a great football player on the field and a gentleman off the field. That's what Jack represented."

Former Sooner halfback
Greg Pruitt (1970-72)

"I always viewed Jack as sort of a swashbuckler — that daring guy swinging from the ship. He was the kind of guy you'd want to be in a foxhole with. He fought to the end, and he approached everything in his life that way."

Former Sooner halfback
Joe Washington (1972-75)

JACK:

Switzer says Mildren was "the guy who could do it all."

FROM B1

He is survived by his wife Janis and three children.

"I was shocked when I heard (about Mildren's death), but I knew he had an uphill battle," said Greg Pruitt, a Sooner All-American halfback in 1971. "I know he had no regrets. God doesn't make mistakes. We had him for a while. Maybe God was ready to have him now."

Said Steve Davis, who quarterbacked the Sooners in 1973-75: "Jack lived a grand life. A full life. He touched people's lives and he made a difference."

Mike Treps, who in 1971 was OU's sports information director and a reporter for Oklahoma City's NBC television affiliate, says Mildren "changed what Oklahoma football was all about."

"Jack was a tremendous athlete and a tremendous leader, on and off the field,"

said Treps, who is better known for having lent his voice to Sooner radio broadcasts for 24 seasons (1973-76, 1979-98). "His mastery of the wishbone led to a great period for OU football. He was an articulate, thoughtful man and a great football player."

After completing his OU career and playing for three seasons in the National Football League, Mildren was involved in the oil business and various business endeavors. He and his brother Richard, an Oklahoma City attorney and former OU defensive back, became involved in Democratic Party politics.

In 1990, Jack Mildren won a six-way race for the Democratic lieutenant governor nomination and defeated Edmond businesswoman Terry Neese in the general election.

In recent years, Mildren was a vice chairman for Arvest Bank and a sports-talk radio host in Oklahoma City. He was on the air as recently as Wednesday.

When he signed with OU in 1968, out of Abilene (Texas) Cooper High School, Mildren was the top-rated quarterback recruit in the nation. At that time, Mildren's grand-

State Senate honors Mildren

The Oklahoma Senate on Friday honored Jack Mildren, passing Senate Resolution 105, as Lt. Gov. Jari Askins, a friend of the Mildrens, presided over the upper chamber. "Jack Mildren was more concerned with right and wrong than partisan politics," the resolution said.

A former University of Oklahoma quarterback and state lieutenant governor, Mildren died on Thursday. Askins said that while much has been said about

Mildren's athletic ability, he also was an extremely intelligent man and an Academic All-American. From the University of Oklahoma, Mildren received a degree in business administration.

"Jack Mildren will be forever remembered for his achievements in athletics, business and public service and for his warm smile, his leadership and his integrity," the resolution said.

From staff reports

mother resided in Tulsa.

In advance of the 1970 Texas game, during Mildren's junior season, Switzer convinced then-head coach Chuck Fairbanks that the Sooners would function at a higher level if they switched from the veer offense to the wishbone triple-option attack.

OU had four losses in 1968 and again in 1969, and in 1970 there was a September home loss to Oregon State. The Sooner coaches were under pressure to win. Switzer be-

lieved the wishbone would save their jobs.

In 1971, the Sooners rolled for 5,196 rushing yards (472.4 per game), averaging 7.9 yards per play and 7.1 per rush attempt.

"We had the speed and the athletes," Switzer said. "The key was Mildren — the guy who could do it all."

World staff writer Randy Krehbiel contributed to this story.

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TRAMEL:

Switzer got Mildren to leave Texas.

FROM B1

excluding thing — he was the best.

Davis has devoted plenty of film study to the subject. He was a freshman during Mildren's senior season. Coaches of the freshman squad urged Davis to watch everything Mildren did. Davis said he watched more film of Mildren than Mildren probably watched.

"We watched that film time and time again, so I emulated what Jack did," Davis said.

Of course, a fellow could get an inferiority complex watching Mildren and that sort of happened when Mildren was on stage for a 1971 "Game of the Century" against Nebraska.

"I'm sitting up there in the stands watching it and I remember the impression that I had," Davis said. "Even though I was the starting quarterback on the freshman team, I realized that

there was a big, wide gap from being up in the stands to where Jack was playing in the Game of the Century right there. I said, 'Boy, I've got to get a whole lot better.' He was an inspiration for all of us."

People might be surprised at all the things Mildren inspired, like gubernatorial loyalty and the book/movie/TV series "Friday Night Lights."

Sports Illustrated, in a story about the 1971 OU-Texas game, wrote that Mildren "had been a disappointment" in his first season and a half as the Sooners' quarterback. An Oklahoma City resident defended Mildren in a letter to SI and referred to the quarterback as an "unconditional hero." The author of the letter was Governor David Hall.

How did Mildren inspire "Friday Night Lights?"

In an 2004 interview with ESPN.com, "Friday Night Lights" author H.G. "Buzz" Bissinger said, "When I was about 13 years old, there was a cover story in Sports Illustrated (Sept. 9, 1968) about a high school quarterback named Jack Mildren, and he played at Abilene Co-

per High School in Abilene, Texas.

"I read that story word for word and was enthralled and amazed. He was like the Elvis Presley (or Marilyn Monroe) of the town. He was playing in front of 15,000, his name was on church marquees, and movie marquees all over town. I just said, 'My God! I think I am jealous. I mean, what is it like to be that young and that famous? It sort of stayed with me and stayed with me.'"

Barry Switzer, then an OU assistant coach, hit a jackpot by sweet-talking Mildren into crossing the Red River. Switzer said he flew to Abilene every Wednesday (and stayed until Friday) during recruiting "season." Mildren often told a favorite story about Switzer stopping his car on a busy Abilene street so he could step out and demonstrate technique.

During the 1970 season, Mildren was matched with the offense he was born to run. OU switched to the bone during an open date before a game against defending national champ Texas. The Sooners were crushed in that game, but they averaged an NCAA-

record 472.4 rushing yards with Mildren at the helm in 1971. A juggernaut was born.

"The national championships that we won in 1974 and 1975, it started that week in 1970 when they switched to the wishbone, because that changed the way things were," Davis said.

Davis called Mildren a "true champion" who paid the price for running a "pure" version of the wishbone. Said Davis, "(Opponents) were trying to figure out how to stop the ball from getting pitched and Jack was constantly getting badgered and hit. It was a slugfest in those days."

In a 1971 preview of an Alabama-Nebraska bowl game, Sports Illustrated wrote that Bama wishbone quarterback Terry Davis "simply is not Jack Mildren." Davis shouldn't feel too badly about the slight. Davis will tell you nobody else measures up to Mildren, either.

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