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Fire Eater! Editor

Sooner Born: The South & Football

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It is difficult for many in Europe to comprehend how much Southerners love their college football. And by football, I do not refer to soccer, but to "American football". So here I present a brief introduction to this peculiarly Southern madness. (In America, there is the important distinction between professional football and college football. College football generally carries more regional identification than professional football.)

"It is just a game, yes. But it was the game that taught me who I was and whence I came."

When I was a boy (long, long, ago), I would sit and watch my grandpa and my daddy as they crowded round the TV to watch the University of Oklahoma Sooners do battle. Now, neither my granddaddy nor my daddy graduated from the University of Oklahoma (in Norman, Oklahoma), but that issue was never up for consideration. It was Oklahoma. The Sooners. Grandpa was born in the old Indian Territory (southeast Oklahoma) as was Grandma, who was born into the Choctaw Nation at the turn of the century.

Now, I didn't know it at the time, but there were some teams against which the Sooners played which were more despicable than others. Nebraska, chiefly. In my home, the annual Oklahoma vs. Nebraska game usually took place around the American holiday of Thanksgiving, which also happened to be the time of year that my daddy and I celebrated our birthdays, for we shared the day. So the Oklahoma vs. Nebraska game was infused with the smell of Thanksgiving food and birthday cake. I came to appreciate the game day as more important than any other holiday (holidays existed, seemingly, to act as backdrops for Oklahoma football games).

I didn't learn until later in life that part of the whole mystique of Oklahoma Sooner football was politically oriented. Midwesterners like Nebraskans seemed not to like Okies at all, looking down upon them with the distaste one reserves for uninvited guests. Conversely, Okies did not care for yankees either. Although the annual Oklahoma vs. Texas game, for example, was a celebrated rivalry, if Texas won it was never as bad as Nebraska winning (or Kansas, for that matter).

You may think I'm kidding. I'm not.

I remember one time, when the Oklahoma vs. Nebraska game was to take place, some Okies and Nebraskans got together to rent out the local VFW hall, installed a bartender and a big projection screen, and got down to a serious football match over margaritas and seegars. My girlfriend, sitting next to me and my daddy, was astonished at the ill will between the two groups of football fans. The enmity was palpable. Now this was the year that Elvis Peacock, the great running back for the Oklahoma Sooners, won the game on a trick play, with the Sooners losing at the time. I remember the father and son sitting behind us. They were from Nebraska, and had spent the entire game bad mouthing the Sooners. Suddenly, that Okie magic struck again and Nebraska lost in the last minute or so of the game. The father and son Cornhuskers behind us took it badly, their faces pale with shock. (Nebraskans hate losing to Okies as much as Okies hate losing to them.)

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We, on the other hand, let out a few Rebel yells. And Rebel yells they were, for I came to see that we Okies really didn't like yankees much at all. To this day, whenever I watch football, I cheer on the Southern teams and, without exception, consider yankee teams (Notre Dame, Ohio State, Penn State, and the rest) almost subhuman.

Grin.

So, early on, I was raised to view yankee teams as The Other. And this thinking had its roots in something far more serious than a game. It had for its backdrop the War. Yes, that War. And its aftermath. To my granddaddy, Okie football was on the same plane as politics. Grandpa was a "yellow dog Democrat", a hardcore Southern Democrat who would "vote for a yellow dog if he ran on the Democratic ticket". Nowadays, the political parties seem confused about their identities, but back then, if you were Southern you voted the "straight Democratic ticket", for Republicans were the party of Lincoln, and Southerners like my granddaddy had not forgotten how much their families had lost to the yankee carpetbaggers who had run them out of Mississippi and up into the Indian Territory (Arkansas and Oklahoma).

Naturally, Oklahoma football became a focus for expressing political ideology in a world where that kind of expression held danger for Southerners. Ironically, the South dominated college football. As I write, the Associated Press lists the top 25 college football teams in America. Half of them are Southern even though the South comprises only a few of the states in America. Of the top five, three are Southern teams.

Equally ironic was the fact that Oklahoma became one of the first college football teams to integrate black players, and Oklahoma went on to boast of many a fine black Sooner (Billy

Sims comes to mind). Prentice Gautt was the first black player for Oklahoma. In the 1950s, Oklahoma was a football powerhouse, and its coach, Bud Wilkinson, revered as a football genius. Wilkinson brought Gautt on board just two years after the "Brown vs. Board of Education" decision by the Supreme Court. Gautt still holds the Oklahoma school record of 15.7 yards rushing per carry. Overt racism was still practiced then in both the South and elsewhere. But the Sooners stood by their man. Where restaurants forbade Gautt from dining, the Sooners packed up and went elsewhere. Teammates.

Okie football was more than just football. It was a direct connection to another time and place. Kith and kin, as Dr Michael Hill would say. Okie football was about rising from the ashes of defeat. Okie football was about magic ("Sooner magic" is a well known term to most college football fans, no matter from where they hail). But above all, Sooner football was about the South. It was about the little, dirt-poor towns of Aardmore, McAlester, Quinton, Kinta, Bug Tussle. It was mixed up with legends of Choctaw warriors and Indian fighters, gun fights on Main Street, and even religion, since most of my Okie kin were staunch Christians, nay Pentecostals. (I remember one Okie fan who used to shout out "Thank you, Jesus!" whenever the Sooners scored a touchdown.)

And though I was raised in California, where grandpa came in the 1940s to look for work, it simply never occurred to me that I was anything other than an Okie. Thus does Southern blood run, even through history's twisting turns and through something as mundane as football. My best friend lived down the street and he was from Texas. That was just the way it was. California, apparently, had little effect on those Southerners who migrated to it.

Lo, these many years later and I still watch Oklahoma football exactly the way my granddaddy and daddy watched it. With a cold beer, loud cursing against those damnyankees, and an occasional bruise where I happen to jump up too quickly. My wife knows enough now to cancel all major obligations whenever a Sooner game threatens on the horizon. She also closes the front door, so the yankees outside cant hear me threatening their unborn children.

It is just a game, yes. But it was the game that taught me who I was and whence I came.

Sooner born, Sooner die.