The Conference Without A Contender

By PAUL BURKA

We devoted virtually all of last Saturday to scurrying around the country in search of a contender for the Southwest Conference football championship. Our travels took us first to Rice Stadium, thence to College Station, and when it was all over we began to have qualms about the fate of the Southwest Conference's Cotton Bowl representative.

In a nutshell, it looks bleak.

NEVER HAVE WE SEEN a championship more carefully avoided by would-be contenders. We've now watched six of the eight teams in the SWC battle futilely, and all we learned is that SMU is better than Rice, which is equal to Texas which is much better than SMU, only it isn't.

Usually by mid-November every conference has a team in the so-called driver's seat. Not so the SWC, which is filled with back seat drivers.

All this helps to explain why Rice, winless entering November, is still very much alive and in fact could climb reluctantly into the front seat Saturday. If Rice defeats Arkansas and continues this startling new trend, and if Texas loses one against Baylor, TCU, or the Aggies, the Owls get to see Dallas on New Year's Day after all teams. We say this with tongue-in-cheek, however. The Owls would be the worst major bowl team in history, insofar as their record would be concerned, with only a 5-3-2 mark.

THE BIG PROBLEM IS beating Arkansas. Although the Hogs tried to escape the inevitable last Saturday night, they nevertheless stumbled past A&M, 17-7. We were hardly impressed with this Arkansas team, mainly because they failed to make the big play.

BUT THERE WAS NO DOUBT that the team we saw in College Station couldn't have been the team that murdered TCU, 42-14. Perhaps Arkansas realized they were getting dangerously close to winning the SWC, especially after Texas' miserable performance Saturday afternoon in Austin and a trip to Dallas seemed an awful reality.

However, the Hogs reckoned without the Aggies. Try as they did in the first quarter, the Pirkers could only fall behind 7-0, and then Frank Broyles, perhaps learning that Dallas wasn't infested with the Plague after all, marshalled his forces for the remaining forty minutes.

On the other side of the line of scrimmage, we watched a typical Aggie team. The Aggies always die hard, but they always die.

If Arkansas was doing little to distinguish itself, Rice was hardly overwhelming Texas Tech. While we never seriously considered that Tech might win, there was always the galling possibility of a 0-0 tie. And Rice's offensive might was quite absent Saturday, but since the Owls were doubtless looking back to Texas and ahead to Arkansas, this is excusable.

MIGHT BE POINTED OUT that a tie Saturday won't do. In order to remain alive in the SWC, the Owls must finally win one. And judging by the Tech performance, even a tie could be difficult, unless Arkansas starts worrying about going to the Cotton Bowl again.

While A&M, Arkansas, and Rice fought to avoid becoming recognized contenders, SMU and Texas tried to keep the other one unbeaten in conference play, Texas kept giving SMU the ball, and SMU, in a charitable we-don't-want-it-either helplessness, gave it right back.

Texas also tried the time-tested Rice method of giving the Ponies the ball in enemy territory.

They fumbled on their own 34, but SMU, as usual, could gain only ten yards.

UNFORTUNATELY RICE GAVE the Mustangs the ball on the Owl ten. It seemed that from the opening kickoff Texas was looking to make Number One, we don't want anything. And then SMU would counter with "Well, everyone knows we don't deserve to win."

Sometime during the second quarter Duke Carlisle took a punt on the four yard line, retreated into the end zone to give SMU a fair chance, and when the Ponies disdained the potential safety, Carlisle taught them a lesson and ran 50 yards. That set up the only touchdown of the game.

Later, facing both fourth down and three from the Texas 37 and the horrible possibility that they might actually win, SMU punted with seven minutes left. It was their last chance.

TCU and Baylor tried a different approach. Instead of no offense, they tried no defense, and Baylor won—it had less.

THE FINAL SCORE WAS TCU 28, Baylor 26, and TCU came from behind in the fourth quarter to win. Then, realizing what they had done, they immediately let Baylor return to its familiar field position deep in TCU territory, but even in the SWC there is some distinction between good and bad, or bad and worse, and the Frogs held.

In a year when it seems no one is good enough to win the Conference, only Baylor, Texas Tech, and Texas A&M are out of the running. All the others are tottering on the brink.

Who will win, or more properly, who won't lose? THE BIG WINNER WILL BE the visiting team in the Cotton Bowl, but otherwise the situation is cloudy. Texas is living on borrowed time—their good fortune can't last forever—and they suffered a key loss when Ernie Koy went out for the season.

If Texas falls, then the winner of the Rice-Arkansas game goes to the Cotton Bowl, unless Rice wins, in which case the winner of the Rice-TCU game goes to the Cotton Bowl, unless ... It begins to look as though everybody may be mathematically eliminated by Thanksgiving.

By the way, the Cotton Bowl isn't in Texas, it's in Shreveport, La. It is the annual football game played between the two Southern end teams of the Southwest Conference. It is sponsored by the Southwest Conference and is played in the cotton bowl stadium in Shreveport.