A Lesson In History: The Ghost Of The Past

By PAUL BURKA

Football games are not won by strengths; they are lost by weaknesses. A great left end can’t stop a trap play through a weak left tackle. Football is not like basketball, where an all-America center can compensate for a string-along guard, nor is it like baseball, where one Sandy Koufax can atone for all the hitting sins of his teammates simply by shutting out the opponents ad infinitum (apologies to die-hard Cardinal fans).

IN FOOTBALL, no true weaknesses are allowed. It is the one team game where any failure can be exploited mercilessly. Only when two teams have solidified their shortcomings does football truly become a game of strength versus strength. In college football, rarely occurs; hence, each game becomes a guessing contest of strength versus weakness.

While weaknesses are not exactly overrunning the House of Neely, neither are they so scarce that anyone is making hotel reservations in Dallas for New Year’s Day. Owl problems, while not so numerous as last year, are serious enough to keep Rice from finishing much above .500 in 1963.

THE TROUBLES begin with a history lesson, on a clear, sunny November day in 1958. Tied 7-7 with Army, the nation’s number one football team, Rice was watched helplessly while All-American Pete Dawkins went 57 yards with the touchdown pass that crushed a fine Owl team.

Since that day the Owls have had less aerial protection than the Cuban invasion. Pass defense—the total absence of it—has been the major cause of Owl failures since King Hill & Co. last took a Rice team to the Cotton Bowl in 1957.

The second year-in, year-out weakness of the Owls is lack of team speed. With the present emphasis at Arkansas and Texas on speed, the Owls simply are outmatched in this department.

The third failure comes in the kicking game. Although potentially quite strong in recent years, Owl punting and kickoff performances have been below par, and the coverage on both is still worse.

STILL ALL too vivid in the memory is the punt Tommy Ford hauled in on his own 36 in October.

All of a sudden, there were nothing but white uniforms to be seen, and 55 yards later, Texas was first and goal on the Rice nine. One play later Rice was behind, 14-7. Fortunately, that story had a happy ending.

But perhaps most flagrant error which can be laid at the Owl doorstep came from the all-American lips of Scott Appleton, Texas tackle, who said, “Rice didn’t hit as hard as most of the teams we played.”

RICE BACKS have an alarming propensity to fall backwards. Owl lines are out of sync.

Have you ever seen an Arkansas back fall backwards?

On the brighter side, the Owls are blessed with magnificent fullback strength, good ends, a terror tandem at linebacker, and solid ballplayers everywhere.

John Sylvester, Jerry Kelley, and George Parry are part of a never-ending list of fine Owl ends, annually mass-produced by Red Bale. Parry has been shifted to wingback, an interesting gamble, which could pay off big dividends if tailbacks Gene Walker and Gene Fleming get any blocking. Even in intrasquad games, the Owl line has had trouble carrying out assignments on runs by the tailback, and under game conditions last year, poor Fleming was victimized time and again by hordes of purging tacklers, somehow neglected by Rice linemen.

THE OFFENSE is very diversified, directed by Walt McReynolds in an imaginative fashion. Mac can run adequately, having healed completely from a bum ankle suffered last season, and has more passes in his repertoire than Richard Burton.

Paul Piper and Russell, Wayt are possibly the best fullback duo in the entire nation, offensively and defensively. This is far and away the most solid position on the team.

CENTER LACKS depth, but anytime Malcolm Walker plays there, the position is solid. The giant Walker goes on forever in all directions, standing 6’-4”, weighing 245, and using every pound to spread devastation.

If the Owls have troubles, they exist at guard and tackle. Proven depth is not available at either post, although most of the candidates have experience. John Mims is a stalwart at tackle, as is Johnny Nichols at guard, but otherwise the Owls must plug in veteran performers who couldn’t quite do the job last year.

IF RICHARD Bowe, Larry Stewart, Jim Vining, Archie Peterson, and Wayne Bertsch come through, and they very well could, it could be .

But on the other hand deeper troubles remain. Individual performers are good, but as a whole, proof that the Owls can play pass defense is lacking. So is proof that punt coverage will be better, that team speed will be improved.

KICKOFFS will be handled by Jimmy Cochran, graduate from the lightweight team, who consistently booms the ball into green pastures around the goal line. This should save the Owls 15-20 yards per kickoff. One October night Darrell Royal would have settled for one yard. It does make a difference.

Thus, the Owls must measure up not individually, but collectively. And as such, pitting Owl strength versus opposition weakness, how do they look?

The teams which will give Rice the most trouble are Baylor, Penn State, and Arkansas. All three clubs are quick; the latter two have diversified offenses; and Baylor throws the ball well enough to give the Owl secondary traumas.

ON THE OTHER hand, TCU, Texas A&M, and SMU should prove relatively easy marks for the Blue. Even though the Horned Frogs are a fine team, they—like the others—are not equipped to exploit Owl weaknesses.

Tech and Stanford are relatively easy marks. That leaves LSU and Texas.

WITH THOSE two teams, both arch-rivals of the Owls, we reach the final—and perhaps the most critical—weakness of Rice football.

There’s no way to predict how these two games will turn out. The Owls-will be “up” for both, but so will their opponents; LSU is getting a little tired of following national championships because of Owl upsets, and Texas memories are not very short.

BUT THE OWLS have a fatal Tragic Flaw of looking ahead to the big ones, and consequently letting down for the remainder of the schedule. It is no coincidence that Rice’s best years in football followed losses—not victories—against LSU. The Owls then had other games to prepare for.

But if the Owls bounce back to whip Penn State after an LSU defeat, watch for a steady upturn in Rice football fortunes and morale. And if they win them both . . .