Sigh: Sophs Try But Owls Die

When that One Great Scorer
Comes to write against your name,
He writes—not that you won or lost—
But how you played the game.

—Grantland Rice, 1926

Nonsense.

—Paul Burka, 1962

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The scoreboard clocks at Rice Stadium's north and south ends exhibited their usual unanimity when the Owls huddled late in the first quarter. There were 24 seconds to go before the Owls and Penn State switched ends of the field, the clocks said, and on either scoreboard you could find a punt situation in the making. Fourth down, they said, and long yardage.

So the Owls dropped back Gene Fleming to punt, and punt he did, in the final second of the period.

And in that one play the story of the game could have been told, just as it could have been told by other somnolent mistakes. For had the Owls delayed one more second, they would have been punting with the wind, instead of against it, and stood a chance to pick up ten yards on the punt.

And now, doubtless possessing the finest winless football team in the country, Rice University and Jess Neely can wonder whether the Owls will ever jell. Morale can't hold up forever, and despite two superb efforts against great football teams, Rice has only a tie to show for it. A loss to Oregon this week would be a fatal blow to the Spirit in '62, which is gradually wiping out the memory of the leaghiest Owls who lost four games in inimitable fashion last year.

Yet, in looking back, Rice proved that its LSU performance was no fluke, and that it could play on even terms with any team in the nation. It is also worthy of note that LSU vindicated itself by heading Georgia Tech in Atlanta, where there was no Baton Rouge to help out.

Yet the Owls have a fine defensive line. Yes, McReynolds is firmly established as a quarterback, and a good one at that. And yes, the Owls have their best backfield speed in years, plus a new desire. But no, the Owls will not win the Southwest Conference.

There are three legitimate reasons for such a statement: poor offensive blocking, a porous pass defense, and Arkansas.

The Owls have gained the rather uninspiring total of 79 yards rushing in two games. The backs have proved they can run, sometimes on pass receptions, and sometimes merely by reaching the line of scrimmage when the opposition had several linemen strategically placed in the Owl backfield.

We said it last week and we'll say it again: no team which relies primarily on passing can win the Southwest Conference.

To that base we'll add a dash of Arkansas's new complex of TCU, then for seasoning the fact that Rice plays Arkansas in Fayetteville. The result is that favorite Oriental dish of the SWC, Wu Pig Suey.

But more than the poor running game, more than the desire, and more than the inevitable date with the South, another thing which stands out in our minds about this football season is not one of the "new" features of this Rice team, but an old one.

About the time the Owls lost two beautiful touchdown opportunities late in the first half, we began to feel the reality that we'd seen all this before. After a fifteen yard penalty, after turning a 227 yard gain into a 42 yard loss and earning a scoring threat we were sure. And when the last drive failed, the memory was only too clear:

Rice, unfortunately, has a built-in capacity to lose.

We can remember, throughout our four years at Rice, so many games that the Owls lost although they gave "great efforts."

A 16-13 loss to Georgia Tech when the Yellowjackets never crossed the Owl goal line and went for more than 30 minutes without a first down... a 3-0 loss to Arkansas in the last minute... an oh, so sad loss to Baylor with six injured linemen holding the Bears three times inside the Owl one yard line before finally yielding the touchdown and the championship in the last two minutes... these were all gallingly fought games, but they were all losses.

Never in our four years at Rice have the Owls won a game they didn't deserve to win. Never have the Owls been "outplayed but not outscored."

Oftentimes they've been both outplayed and outscored; often they've been neither. But the mark of a great team is one that can push all over the field and still win.

Although we like to see a team with desire, one that will fight to the finish, we like to win even more. Furthermore, we're not at all sure that desire and victory are alternatives; certainly, even for Rice, they should be compatible.

Somewhere, these "almost" victories are beginning to be Rice's trademark, and just saying that Rice could play on even terms with any team in the nation isn't enough. They have to bear some of these teams. Coming close is still losing.

What the Owls need is a team that combines desire with the knockout punch. That's what Texas had last year; that's what the Owls came within 23 yards of having Saturday. But there you are again, still short...

Moral victories, after four years, are hollow indeed.—P. B.