

By Larry Isch – Today Magazine, Winter 2003

As then College of the Ozarks student body president in 1965, it fell upon Jim Lewis to make the announcement to the students that the college was dropping its football program after the 1965 season.

“There was just stunned silence,” said Lewis, who also played on the football team. “People were just speechless; they were crushed. It was one of the most difficult things I had to do as president.”

With that formal announcement, which Lewis made during a convocation service in Munger Chapel, the final chapter was written in Ozarks’ proud, under-budgeted and over-achieving football program.

It was a program that had once played the University of Arkansas on a regular basis; a program that had produced some of the best players and coaches in the history of the old Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference (AIC); a program that many considered, in regard to enrollment and size of the school, one of the best small college teams in the region.

The earliest records of football at the college date back to the early 1900s when the school was known as Arkansas Cumberland College. Despite some ultra-successful seasons in the early 1930s, the program was discontinued after the 1935 season because of budgetary reasons. Following an 11-year hiatus, the program was brought back in 1946. The 1950s was a golden era of Mountaineer football as the program showcased some of the top talent in the region and annually battled for the AIC championship.

However, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the program began to feel the effects of dwindling budgets and enrollment. Administrators, fighting to keep the college afloat during difficult financial times, decided to discontinue the program after the 1965 season.

Now, some 38 autumns since footballs filled the air on campus, it’s almost hard to imagine what a football fall Saturday at Ozarks was like.

“There was really nothing like a Saturday of a home game on campus,” said Fritz Ehren, a standout running back for the Mountaineers in the early 1950s who also served as an assistant coach and later president of the university. “There was a lot of excitement, not only on campus, but throughout the town. It was something pretty special.”

The Early Years

Though records of a football program at Ozarks date back to as early as 1902, the college began playing a serious intercollegiate schedule in 1923.

Throughout the 1920s, Ozarks fielded a solid football program that recorded several eye-catching victories, including a 48-0 win over Harding in 1924 and a victory on the road against Bowling Green, Ky., in 1925.

When Hurie Field was constructed in 1929 in the northeast corner of the campus, it was one of the finest football fields in the region. The field was built with a \$25,000 donation to the college by Fred I. Eldridge of New York City on the provision that the field be named in honor of Dr. Wiley Lin.

Students provided most of the manual labor, and Marie MacLean donated the steel grandstand. With the governor of Arkansas, Harvey Parnell, on hand to dedicate the field, Hendrix ruined the inaugural game at Hurie Field with a 6-0 victory over Ozarks on Nov. 8, 1929.

Among the many coaches Ozarks had in the 1920s was a young George Cole, who would go on to state fame as a coach and later athletic director at the University of Arkansas. But the Ozarks football program reached unprecedented heights in the early 1930s when Edgar O. "Silent" Brown took over the reins of the program.

Brown had coached at Arkansas Tech for 11 years prior to taking over the Ozarks program in 1933. He promptly guided the Mountaineers to three consecutive 6-2-1 seasons. Ironically, all three ties came against Tech — 7-7 in 1933 and 0-0 in both 1934 and 1935. Ozarks played Arkansas to within 13-0 in 1934 in Fort Smith. The Razorbacks refused to play games in Clarksville, so the two teams met in either Fayetteville or Fort Smith each year.

Dr. Ernest King, a retired physician from Russellville, grew up in Clarksville watching the Ozarks teams of the 1930s, including the dominant teams of 1934 and 1935 when the Mountaineers went a combined 12-4-2 and outscored their opponents 357-102.

"Ozarks had a very good team and they would give the University of Arkansas a good battle each year," said King. "When Coach Brown came here, our program just went up a couple of notches. We had some really hard-nosed players that were as good as any in the state."

When Ozarks dropped intercollegiate football after the 1935 season and placed a renewed emphasis on intramurals, including touch football, it was the first college in the state to drop the sport. But within two years, five other colleges had dropped their intercollegiate football teams as well, many citing the high cost of fielding a football program.

"I remember there being quite a bit of disappointment about not having football," said King, who entered Ozarks in the fall of 1936 and still serves on the university's Board of Trustees. "My father was on the Board of Trustees and Dr. Hurie was a good friend of the family, so I could understand the reasoning. Football was just too expensive. They didn't drop it because they wanted to, but because they had to. It was either that or close the doors to the college."

With no football at Ozarks, several players transferred to other colleges, many becoming stars, such as James Ahlf, an all-stater for Ozarks in 1935 who was named the state's best player for the 1936 season while starring for Arkansas State Teachers College (now University of Central Arkansas.) Coach Brown was chosen to head the new intramural program at Ozarks. He died in 1937 at the age of 54 following a stroke.

The Golden Era

When President Hurie decided in the spring of 1946 to bring intercollegiate football back to Ozarks, he solicited the help of businesses and townfolks in Clarksville, and the efforts raised approximately \$10,000 to buy equipment and get Hurie Field back into playing shape.

The man hired to lead the program was Frank Koon, a former standout tackle at Henderson State University. The tough-but-fair Koon, who had stormed the beaches of Okinawa as a Marine, earned instant respect from his new players, many of whom were also World War II veterans just off the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific.

Frank Cole, a hard-nosed fullback from Brinkley, Ark., who had been recruited by the likes of Notre Dame, Alabama, Tennessee and Texas coming out of high school, ended up at Auburn after an 18-month stint in the military.

The 1935 Ozarks team went 6-2-1 and tied for the conference championship with Arkansas Tech. The college dropped football because of financial reasons following the 1935 season. Football was brought back to Ozarks in 1946.

But he left Auburn after just two days of practice when he was told he couldn't bring his wife to the university.

"I'd been separated from her for 18 months and I wasn't about to be separated from her for any longer," said Cole, a retired pharmacist living in Jonesboro, Ark. "When I got back to Arkansas, Coach Koon called me about playing for Ozarks. I liked the fact that Ozarks had a pharmacy school, so that's where I went."

As a 20-year-old freshman, Cole was one of the youngest players on the 1946 team. Most of the players were in their mid to late-20s, veterans of World War II. Cole remembers a player named Chigger Minor who went through a sobering routine after every game.

"We would lay him down and help pull shrapnel from his back after games," Cole said. "We had several players who had received Purple Hearts during the war."

The task of putting together a football program in a short time led to some interesting developments for Ozarks in the first few weeks of the 1946 season. The Mountaineers were unable to scrimmage until a week before their opening game at Hendrix because most of their equipment, including helmets and shoulder pads, had not arrived. Ozarks had to borrow cleats from Clarksville High and wore gold jerseys borrowed from Arkansas Tech during the game with Hendrix, which the Mountaineers lost 14-0.

Football was so new to the campus community that the college newspaper, The Mountain Eagle, ran an article early in the fall explaining the rules of the game and the positions on the field.

Though 1946 was the first year football was back on campus after more than a decade, the quality was better than one might expect. Many of the older players had played college ball before the war, including David Scarborough, who had kicked the winning field goal for the University of Arkansas against Detroit in the early 1940s before going off to war.

“We had a pretty good team with some very good players, but the problem was so did everyone else,” Cole said. “All these older veterans were going to college and playing football. It made for some good football.”

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ozarks football began to make strides toward respectability. The 1951 season was a breakout season as a speedy halfback from Booneville, Ark., named Fritz Ehren, a hard-running freshman fullback from Clarksville named Lonnie Qualls and a core group of players from the small Arkansas hamlets of Hartford and Lake Village led the Mountaineers to a 5-3-1 season and their first ever victory over arch-rival Arkansas Tech, 34-26.

“Hartford and Lake Village had played for the state high school championship a few years earlier and Ozarks had connections with both of those coaches,” Ehren said. “We got probably eight or nine players from that game and they were all good football players. That’s when we started winning.”

Despite having the smallest enrollment of just about any football- playing college in the region, Ozarks went on to have winning seasons from 1951-1954, including a second-place finish in the AIC in 1953. Operating out of the old Single-Wing offense, the Mountaineers had the AIC’s Back of the Year for three straight seasons, starting with Fritz Ehren in 1952, Qualls in 1953 and Robert Ehren in 1954.

While Ozarks mainly succeeded with over-achieving players that other colleges passed on, the Mountaineers had their share of players who could have played anywhere. Fritz Ehren, who set an AIC single-season rushing and scoring record before being drafted by the NFL’s Los Angeles Rams, had been highly recruited coming out of Booneville. After a stint in the armed forces, he chose to attend Ozarks. Qualls also was recruited by several colleges after a standout career at Clarksville High. He chose to stay and play for his hometown college.

“George Cole once said to me that Arkansas really missed out when they didn’t recruit Lonnie or me,” said Fritz Ehren. “He said many times that we were two players out of the AIC who could have played at Arkansas.”

There were others as well. Tackle Ray Basinger, the 1953 AIC Lineman of the Year, had been offered a scholarship by Arkansas and Tulane. Guard Jerry Wagoner was a standout on the great Booneville teams of the early 1950s and was offered scholarships by Arkansas as well as by a first-year head coach at Texas A&M by the name of Paul “Bear” Bryant.

The solid 215-pound Basinger was a standout from Hartford who had accepted a scholarship from Tulane. But he left Tulane when coaches there insisted he have surgery on an injured knee. Under then assistant coach Frank Ingram, Basinger rehabilitated his knee without surgery and went on to an outstanding career at Ozarks. In his final two seasons at Ozarks in 1952-53, he averaged playing 58 minutes (out of a possible 60 minutes) a game.

“Leaving Tulane and ending up at Ozarks was one of the best things that ever happened to me,” said Basinger, a retired high school football coach in Amarillo, Texas. “We had a close-knit group of players who had good work habits and just enjoyed playing the game. Coach Koon and Coach Ingram were great coaches who got the best out of us.”

While Ozarks football provided many memorable games and plays through the 1940s, 50s and early 60s, one play that is etched in the minds of many fans and players in that era involved Ozarks running back Robert Ehren in a 1954 game against East Central State out of Ada, Okla. As Ehren was running the ball

around end, an ECS player knocked it out of his hands. The ball flew up and Ehren, still running, caught it behind his back and kept running toward the Mountaineers' goal line.

"I remember running down the field, carrying the ball behind my back and wondering what the heck I should do," Robert Ehren recalled. "I didn't want to stop, so I kept running. One of the Ada players caught me and grabbed it out of my hands just before I scored. People still ask me about that play."

After Koon compiled an impressive 20-10-3 record from 1951-54, larger schools came courting his coaching services. He took the job as head coach and athletic director at State Teachers College in Conway, where he went on to win two AIC championships for the Bears over the next decade.

Frank Ingram, who had been Koon's assistant since 1946, was promoted to head coach at Ozarks in 1955. Ingram had been a quarterback for Ozarks in the early 1930s.

One of the biggest games of the 1955 season for Ingram and the Mountaineers was a Nov. 12 home showdown with State Teachers College, led by the former Ozarks head coach Koon. Ingram held the game in such high esteem that he closed practice during the week leading into the game, turning away not only the university president, Dr. Winslow Drummond, but even his own wife, Marie Ingram, who had come to practice to deliver a notebook of plays that Ingram had left at home.

"He really wanted to win that one," Marie Ingram said of her late husband. "I knew he was serious when he wouldn't let either me or the president into practice. I think that was a chance to prove himself to his former boss."

Under the veil of secrecy, Ingram installed a new offense that helped Ozarks whip the Bears 32-18, one of the highlights of Ingram's 4-4 inaugural campaign. The game with State Teachers College was marred by a bench-clearing brawl that is still talked about around Clarksville.

"That was as big a fight as I've ever seen in a football game," said Fritz Ehren, who was an assistant coach to Ingram. "It seems like every player from both sides as well as some fans were involved. As fast as we'd break them up, two more would get back into it."

With Ingram installing a Split-T offense made famous by Bobby Dodds at Georgia Tech, Ozarks put together one of the finest rushing programs in the country in the mid-1950s. Led by shifty halfback Bob Hurley, bruising fullback James Woolsey and a senior-laden line, Ozarks was among the top rushing teams in the nation in 1957 on its way to compiling a 7-1-1 record and a second-place finish in the AIC.

"We had some good players who liked to get after it," said Hurley, who lives in Clarksville. "We weren't real big, but we had a tough, quick line and we just played hard football. I know I played every quarter of every game in my career and that was the mentality we had. We didn't want to leave the field. If the coach took us out, we felt like he was punishing us."

The 1957 team would be the last of the winning seasons for Ozarks. After losing 14 lettermen and most of their starters from the 1957 team, Ozarks struggled to a 3-5 record in 1958. Little did Mountaineer fans realize that a three-win season would be the best Ozarks would fare for the next seven seasons.

The Difficult Years

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the football program at Ozarks was spiraling downward. The college itself was in financial trouble and had lost its accreditation. At a time when other colleges and universities were pumping money into their football programs in the form of more scholarships, more assistant coaches and more recruiting dollars, Ozarks was just hanging on.

The Mountaineers went winless from 1959 to 1961. The low point was the 1960 season when Ozarks was outscored 312-16 on its way to 0-9 record. In 1961, the Mountaineers were 0-8 and their winless streak had reached 27 games.

In 1962, Ozarks looked to a former standout to bring its football program back. Qualls, who had coached Clarksville High to an undefeated season in 1961, was named the head coach in 1962. He brought back Wagoner to be an assistant coach in 1963.

Qualls' stint at Ozarks started well as the Mountaineers defeated Southwestern State 19-8 in the season-opener of the 1962 season to break the 27-game winless streak. But that would be one of the few highlights of the season as Ozarks fell to 1-7 on the year.

The next season in 1963, Ozarks defeated Harding 14-7 as small college All-American running back Phil Collins rushed for 224 yards. It was Ozarks' first AIC victory since 1958.

"It was pretty frustrating because we were losing a lot, but I think most of us enjoyed playing and felt like we could help turn the program around," said Collins, a retired high school football coach who is living in Russellville. "Even though we didn't win a lot, it was a wonderful experience. I really enjoyed my years here at the college and playing football. Winning wasn't everything."

The Mountaineers also tied two other teams and were competitive in most of their other games in 1963.

"I think we were beginning to turn things around," Qualls said. "It was still a difficult time and we didn't win a lot of games, but we were in just about every game we played. We really felt optimistic that we could get back to winning."

But the gap between the other colleges and Ozarks continued to widen.

"It was difficult to look across the field and see other teams with five or six assistant coaches when we had one," said Wagoner. "Things like that made a big difference. When you have five assistant coaches, you can get five times more accomplished during practice. Also you can recruit a lot more. I remember Coach Qualls and I would end practice early on Fridays so that we could go recruit high school games. He'd have the southern part of the state and I'd have the northern half. It was a lot of ground to cover for two coaches."

Though competitive in most games, Ozarks went 0-8 in both 1964 and 1965. Gene Carson, who started four seasons at Ozarks as a 160-pound linebacker, epitomized the Mountaineer players of the early 1960s, hard-nosed and determined, but often out-sized and out-talented.

"We played people tough, but we just didn't have enough hosses," said Carson, who is retired and living in Branch, Ark. "Teams just had more players who were bigger and faster. We played with a lot of heart and desire, but it just wasn't enough."

University administrators and Board members had been talking about dropping football for several years. The ax came in 1965 when it was announced the college would drop a program that had operated with a \$20,000 deficit during the 1965 season.

“I don’t think it really surprised most of us because we could see it coming,” said Qualls, who went on to stay at the college to teach and coach other sports until his retirement in 1995. “I really felt we could have been successful, but we would have had to put more money into the program and the money wasn’t there.”

Ozarks wasn’t the only university to discover the never- ceasing financial burden of having football. According to the NCAA, no less than 161 four-year colleges have dropped football for good since 1950. Ozarks now competes in six men’s and five women’s sports in the non-athletic scholarship NCAA Division III. Fritz Ehren, who served as president at Ozarks in the 1980s, said there was talk of bringing the program back in the 1970s and 1980s.

“I know we looked at it when I was president and there was just no way to afford it,” Ehren said. “I think with the way intercollegiate athletics has evolved, Ozarks made the right decision about football and about its athletic program.”

Top Seasons 1934

6-2-1

Head Coach: E.O. Brown

University of Arkansas.....L, 13-0
Arkansas College.....W, 21-0
Ouachita.....W, 7-0
Monticello.....W, 45-0
Hendrix.....W, 53-0
Ada (Okla.) Teachers.....W, 7-0
Henderson.....L, 6-0
Tahlequah (Okla.) Teachers.....W, 21-0
Arkansas Tech.....T, 0-0

1953

*5-2-1

Head Coach: Frank Koon

Southern State.....W, 24-7
Austin College.....L, 21-0
Hendrix.....W, 49-0
Henderson State.....W, 37-7
East Central State.....W, 28-20
Arkansas A&M.....L, 19-7
Arkansas State Teachers.....W, 14-13
Arkansas Tech.....T, 13-13

1957

*7-1-1

Head Coach: Frank Ingram

Arkansas A&M.....L, 32-0

Ouachita Baptist.....W, 26-0

ArkansasStateTeachers.....W,19-13

Henderson State.....W, 13-0

Central College (Mo.).....W, 60-0

Ouachita Baptist.....W, 40-6

Hendrix College.....W, 19-6

ArkansasStateTeachers.....W,21-13

Henderson State.....T, 0-0

* Finished second in the AIC

F. Koon

1946 3-6

1947 3-6-1

1948 3-7

1949 3-6-1

1950 3-8

1951 5-3-1

1952 5-2-1

1953 5-2-1

1954 5-3

F. Ingram

1955 4-4

1956 3-4-3

1957 7-1-1

1958 3-5

1959 0-9-1

1960 0-9

D. Jones

1961 0-8

L. Qualls

1962 1-7

1963 1-6-2

1964 0-8

1965 0-8

Ray Basinger, Tackle (1949-53)

Basinger did not start during the season-opening kickoff of his freshman year, but he seldom left the field after that. The quick, 6-foot-2, 215-pound tackle was a force on both sides of the ball and the player Fritz Ehren and Lonnie Qualls called the best lineman to ever play at Ozarks. Recruited by major colleges such as Tulane and Arkansas, Basinger overcame a nagging knee injury to become a four-year starter and earn AIC Lineman of the Year in 1953.

Fritz Ehren, Back (1948-52)

At 6-1, 185 pounds, Ehren combined good size and blazing speed to become one of the top backs in the history of the AIC. The Booneville, Ark., native set an AIC record in total yards (1,173) and rushing yards (5.83 yards a carry) as the 1952 AIC Back of the Year. Ehren, whose No. 41 was retired following his senior season, was drafted by and had a tryout with the L.A. Rams. He had a long and distinguished career in education, including a stint as president of Ozarks.

Lloyd Goodwin, Guard (1932-35)

The Clarksville native was a standout lineman and team captain for Mountaineer teams of 1934 and 1935 that went a combined 12-4-2 and outscored their opponents 357-102. Also a great boxer, the 6-foot, 205-pound Goodwin led a defense that pitched 12 shutouts in 1934-35. Legendary Alabama football coach Frank Thomas once called Goodwin the “best guard in the South.” Goodwin, nicknamed “Goody”, played a half a season of pro ball with the Chicago Cardinals in 1936 before stomach ulcers sent him home. He died tragically in February of 1937 at the age of 23 after catching pneumonia while performing flood duty with the National Guard.

Lonnie Qualls, Back (1951-54)

One of the best all-around athletes in the history of the college, the Clarksville native’s best sport was football where he was a four-time All-AIC first-team selection. The 5-8, 175-pound Qualls combined amazing quickness, toughness and balance to rush for 2,106 yards in his career. He was the 1953 AIC Back of the Year after leading Ozarks to a 5-2-1 record and a second-place finish in the AIC. He would go on to spend 33 years as a coach and teacher at Ozarks.

Bob Hurley, Back (1955-58)

The 175-pound Clarksville native was a regular as a halfback on the All-AIC teams from 1955-58. Also an outstanding punter, Hurley was one of the top rushers in the AIC in both 1956 and 1957, totaling 1,405 yards over the two seasons before an injury-riddled senior season slowed him down. Teaming with hard-running fullback James Woolsey, Hurley helped the Mountaineers establish one of the top ground games in the nation during their 7-1-1 1957 campaign in which they averaged 275 rushing yards a game.

Arch Pearson, Back (1925-28)

A 170-pound fullback, nicknamed “Puss” for his grit and toughness, Pearson was one of the top all-around athletes at Ozarks in the 1920s, also excelling in baseball and basketball. The Paris, Ark., native was captain of the 1927 football team and helped lead the 1928 team to a record of 4-3-1, including victories over Louisiana Tech and State Teachers College. The caption in the 1929 Ozarks yearbook summed up his competitive spirit: “His limbs were cast in manly mold, For hardy sports or contest bold.”

Jerry Wagoner, Guard (1954-57)

Shunning recruiting efforts by Arkansas and Texas A&M, Wagoner came to Ozarks where he was a three-time All-AIC lineman, helping pave the way for one of the conference’s top-rushing programs in the mid-1950s. The 195-

pound Booneville, Ark., native was a four-year starter and earned first-team All-AIC honors as a sophomore and second-team honors as a junior and senior. As a senior, Wagoner led an offensive line that helped Ozarks rush for 275 yards a game.

Robert Ehren, Back (1949, 1952-54)

The younger brother of Ozarks standout Fritz Ehren, Robert made a name of his own as a fleet-footed, 185-pound halfback for the Mountaineers in the early 1950s. Picking up where his brother left off, Ehren shredded AIC defenses in the fall of 1954 on his way to earning AIC Back of the Year honors. He had 231 rushing yards against Ouachita, 187 against Arkansas Tech, 174 against Henderson State, 205 against State Teachers College (UCA) and 207 against Arkansas A&M (UAM).