

(Football is king in small town Oklahoma. Some seasons stand out more than others. In Heavener, Oklahoma, population 2,500, the season of 1960 is one that still lives in the folklore of that small town...)

When Wolves Ruled Eastern Oklahoma by Ray Gaskin

September, 1960. Dwight Eisenhower was President of the United States, and gas was twenty cents a gallon. *Gunsmoke* was the number one TV show and the T&M Pharmacy was at its old location on the west side of downtown, facing the railroad tracks and the depot. The last batch of war babies was playing high school football. There were about 45 of us on the team, and the competition for starting positions was fierce.

When driver Farris Haynes steered the Heavener Wolves' team bus out of the school parking lot for a 65 mile trek to Vian, there were a bunch of jittery kids on board, including some seniors who had bad memories of the previous season. The Wolves had ended '59 on a downer, capping a four game losing streak with a lopsided defeat at Poteau (our arch rival). Nobody could have guessed that over the next ten weeks the Wolves would steamroll through opponents like a KCS locomotive.

Head coach Bob Collins was entering his second year at Heavener, and he knew there were a lot of people around town who thought he'd never measure up to his predecessor, Carl Twidwell. I played 8th grade football for Coach Twidwell and really looked up to him, but I liked Coach Collins, too. He called his players "men". When you're 15 years old and an adult calls you a man, it feels pretty cool at the time, even if you realize 40 years later he didn't really mean it.

One thing Collins knew for sure – he wasn't going to go down in flames trying to emulate Twidwell. Collins had junked the T-formation used effectively by the previous coach and installed a double wing. Then he added another twist: moving his best blocking end, Jerry West, to tackle and splitting a receiver wide. Only the pros and a few college teams were deploying split ends in those days. In fact, the position was commonly referred to as "the lonesome end".

The Wolves had speed and depth in the backfield. The offensive line was smallish but very quick. It was an ideal situation for the double wing, a formation that could spring either wingback on sweeps or reverses, and with a wide receiver, the Wolves versatile and elusive quarterback, Jerry Johnston, could throw deep.

Just how sure Collins was that these elements would turn the Wolves into a winner, nobody knows. The coach was a private man. He had no close friends in town. He lived in a small white frame house across the street from the high school, and when he wasn't in the classroom, or at the gym combing through game films with assistant coach Quentis Hamilton, or directing football practice, he pretty much stayed home with his wife and five year old son, Bobby.

Whatever the factors, they came together successfully and produced a Purple and Gold scoring machine that rivaled any team Heavener ever had. Against Vian, Jerry Johnston ran and passed and handed off to Tony Gregory, Buddy Westmoreland, and Mickey Wynn. He threw a bomb to a gangly 14-year old freshman wide receiver, John Titsworth (who later starred at the University of Oklahoma). Up front, the offensive line

of West, Jimmy Scrivner, Don Bentley, Larry Wisdom, Bob Babcock, and Homer Jones blocked crisply and effectively against an out-manned Vian squad.

By the second quarter, Collins was subbing in backups. The Wolves' number two offense was nicknamed the "Go Team". Johnny Council, Jimmy Gore, Johnny Newcomer (the fastest player on the squad), and your trusty author comprised a backfield that liked to boast that the only time the Wolves first team defense got a good run for its money was in practice when they scrimmaged the "Go Team." The bus ride home from Vian seemed a lot shorter than the one going up, but nobody made much noise. Coach Collins wasn't into hoopla. It was fun getting up on Saturday morning, opening the sports page of *The Daily Oklahoman* and *The Tulsa World* and seeing the score: Heavener 54, Vian 14.

When the Wolves went out the next three weeks, and walloped Muldrow 54-0, and Panama 54-0, and Eufaula 54-8, there was some speculation that Heavener might be good enough to score 54 points any time they wanted. Against Panama, Coach Collins told punter Buddy Westmoreland to kick the ball back to the hapless Razorbacks on first down. The game was so one sided it wasn't even fun.

Finally, Spiro dispelled the 54-point theory in game five when they held the Wolves to a 28-6 win. Then came Broken Bow, an old Heavener nemesis. Coach Collins chewed us out at halftime because he thought we weren't trying very hard. Jerry Johnston threw me the longest, highest-arching pass that I had ever seen. It bounced off my shoulder pads and fell incomplete. I claimed I lost it in the lights. Coach Collins glared at me when I came off the field. It wouldn't be the last time that happened. We won the game anyway, 42-6.

In week seven, Heavener hosted the Wilburton Diggers, a pre-season favorite to contend for the district title on the strength of a lightning fast backfield led by Mickey Williams. The Wolves were finally supposed to get some serious competition. One of their offensive backs was deaf. Some of our defensive guys talked about trying to trick him into some motion penalties by jumping around right before the snap. As it turned out, the secret weapon wasn't needed. Wilburton's defense couldn't stop anything, and Mickey Williams missed the game with an injury. The Wolves romped, 78-14. It was one of the worst defeats in Wilburton history.

Next, Heavener traveled to Hartshorne and with a great defensive effort shut out the bruising running back, Donnie Sarton, and the Minors, 12-0. In the ninth game, another road contest, Heavener contained Stigler's great halfback, Richard "King" Cole and held on for a 14-6 victory in the closest game of the year. *The Daily Oklahoman* rated it one of the top matchups in the state. Somehow we all knew we'd see the Panthers again. The playoffs were coming up soon, and we were in different conferences.

To cap off a perfect 10-0 season, Heavener had to beat Poteau. The Pirates had started the season with a lot of hype. A new running back named Kenny Curtis transferred to Poteau from Ada. He was supposed to be hot stuff, but as the season wore on, Curtis fizzled out. Heavener trounced Poteau 78-20, and could have scored a hundred if Coach Collins had let us. The third and fourth string played a lot in the second half. If there was any consolation to Sherman Floyd's Pirates, their 20 points were more than any other team had scored on the Heavener defense all year. I can still see Kenny Curtis showing off his Ada Cougars letter jacket. He had some kind of injury and didn't suit up, which was lucky for him.

In ten games, the Wolves had averaged 47 points a contest. The defense had turned in three shutouts and held four other opponents to only a touchdown apiece. Heavener was the top ranked team in eastern Oklahoma. By then, we thought we could beat the Oklahoma Sooners. I heard *Allegiance*, the school fight song, so many times that season that I would wake up in the middle of the night and hear it ringing in my ears.

There were plenty of reasons to believe the Wolves would roll through the state playoffs with the same kind of ease, but, some bad luck was going to get in the way, and that's a story for another time...