

Bud Wilkinson

Charles Burnham “Bud” Wilkinson was an American football player, coach, broadcaster and politician.

Chapter 1 – 1:08

Introduction

Announcer: Charles Burnham “Bud” Wilkinson served as the head football coach at the University of Oklahoma from 1947 to 1963, compiling a record of 145-29-4. His Oklahoma Sooners won three national championships (1950, 1955, and 1956) and 14 conference titles. Between 1953 and 1957, Wilkinson’s Oklahoma squads won 47 straight games, a record that still stands at the highest level of college football. Following World War II, Jim Tatum, the new head coach at the University of Oklahoma, persuaded Wilkinson to join his staff in 1946. After one season in Norman, Tatum left the Sooners for the University of Maryland. The 31-year-old Wilkinson was named head football coach and athletic director of the Sooners. Listen in on this interview with the son of Coach Wilkinson, Jay Wilkinson, as he talks about major games and the home life of the Wilkinsons. This interview is made possible by funders who believe in preserving Oklahoma’s legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 5:03

Intro to the Wilkinsons

John Erling: Today’s date is February 9, 2012. State your full name, your date of birth and your present age, please.

Jay Wilkinson: Jay Wilkinson, J-a-y, Jay G. Wilkinson. I was born April 11, 1942 and I’m 69 years old. I’ll be 70 in April.

JE: J-a-y is your legal full name.

JW: It is. My Christian name was James Glen Wilkinson. I was named after my maternal grandfather and when I ran for the United States Congress in 1970, we decided to legally

change my name to J-a-y G. because I had been called Jay and was known by people in Norman and in that district by my first name.

JE: And your father did the same thing.

JW: He did the same thing and we lost both races, so you might say that maybe it wasn't necessary.

JE: And when I say that he legally changed it to "Bud".

JW: That's right.

JE: Tell us where we're recording this interview today.

JW: Well, we're recording the interview in our home in Nichols Hills, Oklahoma.

JE: And where were you born?

JW: I was born in Grinnell, Iowa. That was the home that my mother, uh, she was born and raised there. It was during the war when my dad was stationed at Iowa Preflight.

JE: You have a brother?

JW: Yes, I have an older brother, Pat, who is 16 months older than I. Pat attended Stanford University and then spent seven years at Johns Hopkins. He's a renowned ophthalmologist.

JE: Your mother's name, maiden name, and where she was from.

JW: My mom was Mary Marjorie Shiflett. She was born and raised in Grinnell, Iowa. Spent her first two years in college at Carlton College in Minnesota and then she transferred to the University of Minnesota where she met my dad.

JE: What kind of person was your mother?

JW: She was very warm, very caring, very thoughtful. My dad traveled an awful lot when Pat and I were growing up. He was out recruiting and conducting Coach of the Year clinics and traveling for the university and lecturing overseas and so our mom was really the one who took care of the household, obviously, did the cooking and the cleaning. She was a very warm person to all of my friends. I'm amazed that today they and many of the players that played for my dad remember her with great affection because of the way she treated them when we were growing up.

JE: Your father's full name.

JW: My dad's full name was Charles Burnham Wilkinson.

JE: And he was known as "Bud."

JW: That's correct.

JE: And how did "Bud" come about?

JW: It just evolved at an early age—a nickname. I honestly cannot recollect exactly who first started calling them that, but it was a name that stayed with him from a very young age.

JE: What was his birth date and where was he born?

JW: He was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on April 23, 1916.

JE: Where did he grow up in Minnesota?

JW: Well, he grew up in the southern part of Minnesota—in Minneapolis. He attended Shaddock Military School.

JE: And I'm gonna get into that.

JW: Mmm.

JE: There's so many Scandinavians up there. Are they, your father of a Scandinavian descent?

JW: Yes, his mother's family are Scandinavian descent from Sweden and his father was more, I would say, just traditionally the French and the English makeup.

JE: And what was his father's name?

JW: His father's name was Charles Patton Wilkinson.

JE: That would be your grandfather, of course. And then what did he do for a living?

JW: He ran the Wilkinson Finance Company which was a mortgage company in Minneapolis.

JE: And then he was married to...

JW: He was married to Edith Wilkinson, my dad's mother. She died tragically when he was just seven years old. They had been in a train crash going from Minneapolis to Annandale, Minnesota, and many of the doctors believed that her death was related to some of those injuries that she sustained at that time. So, it was obviously a very difficult period of time for my father and for his older brother, Bill. His father C.P. did remarry when my dad was 12 years old.

JE: What was her name?

JW: Her name was Ethel, and Ethel was a wonderful, kind, thoughtful lady that my dad always felt very close to.

JE: This was one of his most painful moments of his life when his mother died, wouldn't that be true?

JW: Oh, absolutely.

JE: Did he refer to that or talk about it occasionally?

JW: Well, when I wrote my first book, we had talked about it beforehand...

JE: And that book's name is?

JW: *Bud Wilkinson: An Intimate Portrait of an American Legend*. I think in the context we talked far more about the help that he received from not only his father, but his Aunt Florence and his Uncle Al who lived in one house next door to his father and then to the adjacent side was his Grandmother Wilkinson, so he had a strong support group from the immediate family.

JE: Could we trace the athleticism back then to his father, your grandfather? Is there any trace in there at all?

JW: Well, I would say from looking at the pictures, even more so to his mother because they did have that Swedish large makeup, physically. It's always fifty-fifty (chuckle), but I think that those genes that my dad inherited in large part came from his mother.

JE: But were there stories about athletes preceding him?

JW: No, not that I was ever aware of.

Chapter 3 – 6:47

Father Bud

JE: Before we move on to talk more about your father, let's talk about you a bit more. Early remembrances of the family and your father—what would be some of the very first that you can remember?

JW: Well, from the time I can remember being aware of my dad's position at the university. It seemed that he was always famous. Whenever we'd walk through a restaurant or a clothing store or at the airport, I'd always be hearing people referring to him, "There goes Bud," whispering. Our household was really no different than any of my other classmates. Pat and I were treated the exact same way, but the only difference was he was famous, because they began winning almost from the very time he became the head football coach. I certainly remember many personal events when my dad would wrestle with my brother Pat and me on the bedside. Later as we grew older, of course, we played gin rummy, shoot basketball together, but it was a very solid home relationship and both he and my mom were very warm, caring people.

JE: Would he have time for bedtime stories and that type of thing?

JW: Well, he would, and I remember in my first book talking about stories he told Pat and me. They were Happy Beaver stories and of course that, I think, was part of his makeup in Minnesota. Happy Beaver was an outgoing person who always did the right thing, and there was another character called Bossy Beaver. (Chuckles) Of course, Bossy Beaver was the antithesis and you necessarily didn't want to model your conduct after him. Dad would just make up various stories with these two characters, but he was a great storyteller.

JE: Remember when a ball of any sort—football, basketball, baseball was introduced?

JW: We threw the baseball and football as I think most of my other classmates and their parents did, but when he was around we always had the opportunity to be involved in exercise although he never did push my brother and me to be engaged in sports, so we never did feel any pressure at all that we had to measure up to OU football players.

JE: When you sat around the family dinner table, would he talk games, sports, at that time or would it be something other than that?

JW: Well, when I was younger, I don't recollect our talking much about the football games, but as we grew up when we had dinner together, we talked about a variety of issues ranging

from international issues to religion to politics, so it was much beyond just recounting what was happening with the football program itself.

JE: You went to elementary school in Norman.

JW: At McKinley grade school.

JE: And then was there a middle school?

JW: Yes, it was Norman Junior High School. During those years it was 7th through 9th grades, so three years.

JE: And then on to high school.

JW: Yes, Norman High School.

JE: We'll come back to visit your experience there in a moment. The family was of faith? What denomination and all would they have attended?

JW: My dad was raised Episcopalian. Shaddock Military School was an Episcopal school. My mom was raised a Congregationalist. I was baptized in that church, but from the time we moved to Norman we were members of Saint John's Episcopal Church.

JE: That was important. Was there church attendance regularly and that type of thing?

JW: Yes, there was and, uh, thought it was very important for my father and my mother from the time we were younger we were always in Sunday School and it was an important part of my growing up in Norman.

JE: As young boys, did you and Pat get to sit on the bench with the football team?

JW: We did not. Dad never felt that that was appropriate and he never thought that we should be given any special privileges. We were able to come down toward the end of the game. Usually at that time OU had put the game away and although on some occasions I still remember being down on the sideline in 1951 when OU came back with a marvelous victory over Texas A&M, 34 to 28, when Jim Weatherall missed an extra point with about two minutes to go and it was just pandemonium. The only time that Dad relented on that policy was the Oklahoma/Texas football game. We were permitted to ride down with the freshmen on the bus and then Dad allowed his players who wanted to remain in Dallas for the evening to just let off a little steam, he let them stay down there as long as they could drive back and be at the team meeting that next Sunday evening. And it took my brother Pat and me a long time to wonder why in the world would these athletes want to stay down in Dallas when they could fly back on the airplane? They'd have to drive back in the car. Well, we learned later, you know, why they were doing it. (Chuckles) That was the only trip that we were able to participate in.

JE: How would your father discipline you? Was he stern in his discipline? What form of discipline would he apply?

JW: I think that he generally by his own personality laid out certain themes and principles that he expected, but it was not harsh and no profanity, no loud words at all. For example, if

we were expected to cut the shrubbery and we hadn't done it, Pat and I could remember what he would do would be he wouldn't say a word to us. He would just get on his work clothes and go out and start cutting it himself. (Chuckles) And, of course, we'd run out and say, Oh, my gosh, this is our job. We were filled with guilt, but he wouldn't say a word and I think that was the way we were raised and he—think had the same type of philosophy with his football players. You knew what was expected. So, as long as there were no misunderstandings, no ambiguity—and it's probably a little bit tougher for Pat and me because we knew the standards that were expected of his football players and we never wanted to disappoint either my mom or my dad. We had our good share of fun but I don't remember our ever getting into any serious trouble.

JE: When did you begin to excel in football, I suppose. I don't know. Did you excel in other sports?

JW: Well, I think I played quite well in basketball through junior high and high school. One of my greatest thrills was when our high school basketball team my junior year won the state championship. I think I was probably a better basketball player in junior high and was just as interested in basketball as football—also ran track and won some of the conference hurdling and sprints, but basically it was football and basketball that were the two sports that really I was involved in and we had great success both through junior high and in high school in both basketball and football.

JE: And Pat, too, excelled, did he in as many sports as you did?

JW: He didn't play basketball as long as I did, but he did football. Unfortunately for Pat, he had five surgeries on both shoulders and both knees—one knee twice—from football injuries that were sustained over a five-year period, so he finally dropped out of football after his freshman year at Stanford. We've kidded about it but I think it was probably one of the reasons he was motivated to become a surgeon. Today he is a great eye surgeon.

Chapter 4 – 5:36

1960 State Championship

JE: Let me take you back to your senior year at Norman High School, 1960. A state championship was being played against Northwest Classen.

JW: That's correct.

JE: And there was a very controversial play...

JW: There was.

JE: And our friend Jim Loftis has reminded me to talk about this.

JW: (Chuckles)

JE: Tell us about that story.

JW: Well, Jim Loftis was sitting on the other side as a Northwest Classen boy, but we ended losing the game 16 to 14. I've told people repeatedly, John, that the fact that we fumbled the ball and lost the ball five times on fumbles, I think, was indicative of our inability to really perform as well as we wanted to that evening, but there was a very controversial play and it was in the third quarter when Northwest Classen's quarterback Mike Miller went back to throw a pass and he threw it out to the side to their fullback Walt Lawson and the ball dropped right in front of our bench. There remains debate about whether whistles were blown, but I remember vividly going back, turning my back and talking to Steve Anderson, one of our defensive backs, saying, Let's worry about—be prepared for a pass on the third down the next play and all of a sudden I heard a big roar. I heard a big roar because fans were screaming and I turned around and I'm watching—I didn't know it was Walt Lawson at the time—but I saw one of their players crossing the goal line and neither Northwest Classen nor Norman High School have any of this on film because people who are taking film of the game always stopped after the play's over, as you know. So, everybody on both sides was walking back after the pass hit the ground because everybody just thought it was an incomplete pass. What happened was, the official who was out in that part of the field said to their fullback Walt Lawson, "Pick up the ball, Walt. It was a lateral pass, so you can pick it up. It's a live ball." So Walt went back, picked it up, scooted down about 60 yards, and the irony was that the official was Gordon Dupree who coincidentally happened to be the uncle of Mike Miller. (Chuckles) So there was a lot of speculation and our assistant coach Ray Littlejohn, who played ball for my dad, was so outraged after the game that he actually broke down one of those thick wooden doors into the locker room because he was so angered. I think more people talk about that game today than any other game. I think I've met every person that attended the game. I think Taft Stadium seats 12,000 people. But I was fortunate, John, to win the outstanding player of the All State Game in 1960 that was played in Taft Stadium since our high school state championship game, I never think of the All State Game. I think of our loss to Northwest Classen.

JE: Yeah. Now, you were quarterback on that team.

JW: I was, and Mike Miller was the other quarterback. We were ranked number one and they were ranked number two in the state and then Mike went on and had a great career at Oklahoma State University. He was their starting quarterback.

JE: Was your father in attendance at this game?

JW: He was. It was one of the few games that Dad was able to see me play in high school and he was, and I wouldn't watch the game—I didn't watch the game for ten years, but then I finally did and I was surprised that I felt that we had played better than I thought we

had and I felt proud of my performance. But anytime you're gonna turn the ball over five times—of course, Northwest Classen turned it over a few times, too, 'because I know I had intercepted two of Miller's passes and I'm sure we had a fumble or two as well.

JE: Because you played on defense as well.

JW: Yeah, back in those days, John, everybody played both offense and defense. Yeah, most of us did.

JE: Do you remember anything that your father said after the game?

JW: Well, what I remember—my brother Pat we've always kidded for having a hot temper. He had come back from Stanford just to see the game and I still remember when the game was over, I was walking off the field and he came running up to me and put his arm around me and I was crying—I just felt horrible. We go into the locker room and I'm getting my tape cut off my ankles and I'm starting to be interviewed by some of the sportswriters, and my brother's standing there and he's hollering and screaming a lot of profanity (Chuckles) and so he had to be exited out of the locker room. They had to excuse him. But my dad came in and it was a 180-degree turn around, you know, Dad was always so soft-spoken and quiet and he was obviously very complimentary of the team, so he was very affirming and very supportive, and he was disappointed. He was also there for our state championship basketball game when we defeated El Reno the year before, and he and Charlie Coe and Mom and Liz Coe were right behind our bench. Jinx Simmons the El Reno coach later, with tongue in cheek, said it wasn't fair, ya know, for Bud to be right behind our bench. It gave us an advantage.

JE: (Chuckles) Who was the coach of your Norman High?

JW: Uh, well, Gene Carrado was our head football coach and Chet Ryan was our head basketball coach. Two marvelous coaches.

JE: I wonder how the football coach felt in coaching the son of this famous OU coach.

JW: Well, Gene Carrado himself had been a starter for the University of Oklahoma in the late '30s. He and his brother both did. He had a distinguished career and he had coached over at Arkansas, he had coached at Tulsa. We were very fortunate. Buddy Brothers was the head football coach who later went to Texas Tech, and Coach Brothers coached, I think, at Tulsa at one point in time my sophomore year when my brother was a senior, and Coach Carrado came in my junior year, so he was our coach my junior and senior year and we really liked and respected him. He was an outstanding coach and he never treated me—none of my coaches ever treated me any differently than any of the other players on the team. The Wilkinson connection was really immaterial.

Chapter 5 – 8:51**Duke University**

JE: So you graduate in 1960 then, don't you?

JW: Correct.

JE: From Norman High School.

JW: Mmm hmm.

JE: So then obviously you go to OU and play for your father, don't you?

JW: Well, that would be the logical thing to do but, John, you gotta remember when Dad became head coach at OU, I was just five years old and it was not until Halloween my senior year in high school that they lost their first conference football game. Can you believe that? And so those remarkable records and three national championships and win streaks of 31, 47 games in a row—I witnessed all of that as a kid growing up and the players, of course, were my heroes. They still are to this day. But my mom and dad had conditioned both my brother Pat and me that we should go away to a college. He knew and she knew that he had an iconic status, not only here in the state but nationally, and that it would be difficult for us to establish our own image if we were not separated somewhat. And it really was the hardest decision I ever made because I wanted to play for him and I wanted to be part of the tradition. As it turned out, it was a great experience for me at Duke. I liked that as well.

JE: That had to be emotionally difficult for you to leave Norman to go to Duke. Everything was new and different.

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: That had to be tough.

JW: A lot of tears. My dad and mom—we wrote regularly and probably talked on the telephone once a week, but it was a very difficult transition not unlike, probably, any young kid going away to college or to the military or to get a job, but the only thing that was different was my home life and this athletic environment in which I had been raised.

JE: But you did have a good time at Duke. The first time you touched the ball in the first game you played at Duke, what happened?

JW: Well, I was very fortunate. I actually scored a touchdown. I remember we were playing up in Richmond and I caught the ball and weaved left and we had a good line of blockers who did an exceedingly well job of giving me protection, and it was coincidental, but it was the first time I'd touched the ball in college.

JE: You ran how many yards for a touchdown?

JW: Sixty-three yards.

JE: Yeah. So you were big man on campus right off, weren't you?

JW: Well, it was odd. People, certainly I think on campus and the athletes, knew of my father's reputation and they had great respect for him. Our quarterback Walt Rappel later told me the story that the football players were all waiting to see me and other freshmen athletes come onboard and they particularly wanted to know who I was because there was some notoriety, the fact that I was going to be on campus. Walt Rappel told the group of football players around him, "Well, we'll recognize him because we'll see Coach Murray," the head football coach, "pulling his trunk behind him." (Chuckles)

JE: (Chuckles)

JW: And, of course, it was not that way at all. But I was the starting quarterback at Duke my freshman year. We had a relatively good 4-1 record. Duke had a different philosophy than my father. In Norman Junior High and Norman High School, I was the option quarterback and I had been trained to do that very well, and Coach Bill Murray had a different philosophy where the quarterback would drop back and throw the ball quite a bit more across the field, kind of like the pros do today, and I didn't really have a strong arm—I was not adept to doing that. I could throw the ball quite well running on an option pass, and that meant that I actually—my sophomore year was on the seventh team as quarterback when I went back as a sophomore. So when you say "big man on campus", I'm not sure—who knows? I probably wouldn't have played that year had it not been for an injury of one of our great players, Ed Chestnut, who was a great receiver. He had a season-ending knee injury the week before our opening game and I asked Coach Murray if I could try out as a flanker and I think I had enough speed and quickness to earn that job. As it turned out, I had a marvelous year—had another long touchdown punt return of 82 yards. I caught several long passes so it was a great year, but I was very fortunate because had it not been for the injury of this great athlete, I never would have played that year.

JE: But then you went on—you did play quarterback for them, didn't you?

JW: Actually I did not.

JE: Oh.

JW: I was converted to a running back...

JE: Okay.

JW: My junior and senior year and as you just said, we played both ways back then, but as an option quarterback, of course, you're gonna run the ball a lot if you're not pitching it to someone, but as a running back, that gave me an opportunity to excel both as a runner and then as a receiver. So it worked out quite well. I was very fortunate.

JE: Yes. You were named First Team All American by several publications, the Atlantic Coast Conference Football Player of the Year in '63. Every time you touched the ball it was for an average of eight and half yards, so you were making an impression.

JW: Well, I didn't know that last statistic, but I felt very fortunate, very grateful to make the First Team All American teams that senior year and I was also very grateful that when I went to Duke, they really had a great tradition of winning. We won the Atlantic Coast Conference three of the four years I was there and came very close to winning it a fourth time. So, it was a very nice experience. I think anytime you make All American, without trying to sound too modest, you have to give credit to your teammates, or I think you should give credit to your teammates, because there are a lot of people helping, as you well know, anytime you're executing any kind of play, and I had some great teammates helping me.

JE: Were you recruited or could you have gone on to the pros and why didn't you?

JW: I think I would have been a first-round draft pick had I chose to go into the pros. I played in the East-West game and I played in the Hula Bowl game and then the football coaches All American game that next summer and played, I think, quite well against a lot of players that went on to play, and so many of them became all-pro. At that time, John, there was not at all the financial rewards in professional football that there are today. If you're a first-round draft pick today, you'd be crazy not to play, but I didn't think that money was a factor. I didn't have a burning desire to prove that I could make it in the pros and I don't mean to sound too cocky here, but I did have the self-confidence that I could play. My dad never encouraged me or any of his other players to participate in pro ball. He thought that football was a learning experience that prepared you for the future, and then I was also caught up in wanting to go to theological school and I picked the Episcopal theological school. I think it was because of that strong desire to get on with my life and go on to graduate school that I decided to not choose the route of professional football.

JE: How tall are you?

JW: I was 6'1/2". I might be 6' right now.

JE: How tall was your father?

JW: Dad was 6'3" and I always felt looked much taller because he had such a presence and his wavy white hair, but he was 6'3".

JE: So, Episcopal theology school. What did you do out of school? Did you go into ministry? Did you go into business? What happened?

JW: Well, I was ordained in the Episcopal church. I worked part-time at Saint John's Episcopal Church in Norman, but my full-time job was Executive Assistant to Governor Dewey Bartlett. I had an opportunity to travel with the governor and to represent him on a number of boards and commissions. I think I was caught up at that time in what I'd call the Kennedy idealism. I felt that I had perhaps a stronger calling being involved in maybe government and social work trying to help others, so that's pretty much where I gravitated. I had an opportunity to work in the White House staff. I reported to Bob Haldeman. I was one of four people after the president was elected in 1969.

JE: President Nixon we're talking about?

JW: Yes, President Richard Nixon, and then I returned to Oklahoma in 1970 to run for the Fourth Congressional District against Tom Steed. I picked a tough year to run and I also picked a tough district because I was running as a Republican but there were only ten percent registered Republicans and ninety percent registered Democrats, so we knew if we made any mistake we probably wouldn't win it. It was a close race but regretfully we lost.

JE: That was 1970.

JW: Correct.

JE: So then you go into business, you become an author, a speaker...

JW: Yes. I did spend one year continuing to work part-time at Saint John's and I worked for the Justice Department with the Human Relations Service here in Oklahoma City and I, among other things, set up a street academy program to help kids that were having trouble in regular school. Then it was at that time I had two younger daughters and I felt that I really didn't have any financial resources and I thought I probably maybe needed to go into the business world and for the last 37 years I had been in executive management of three large financial services companies.

JE: Children—you mentioned two daughters.

JW: I have four children. I had been married ten years to Betty Dixon who is from Oklahoma City and we have two daughters—Kirsten, who lives in Oklahoma City, and Holly in New Canaan, Connecticut—but Betty and I were divorced after ten years of marriage. I was single for three and then married Rita Davis, and Rita and I have been married for 35 years. We have a son, P.J., who is 32, and lives in Seattle, and our baby Julie's 25 and she lives in New York City.

Chapter 6 – 9:20

University of Minnesota

JE: So about your father, and again we go back how he grew up in Minnesota. He went to the military academy. How did that come about? Why a military academy?

JW: His father C.P. had just remarried Ethel. I think that was really part of the influence as well, but I know that Shaddock had a great reputation academically, so both my dad's older brother Bill and my father were sent to Faribault, Minnesota, which is sixty miles south. My dad talked frequently about how painful these experiences were about leaving home and a lot of tears.

JE: Again, the home was where?

JW: Home was in Minneapolis.

JE: Yeah.

JW: And he wanted to be at home, but he was very gifted both academically and athletically and he achieved high honors in both areas in football, basketball, ice hockey and baseball, and then he won two academic awards at Shaddock, so it was really a good growth foundation for him.

JE: Then he graduates and goes to the University of Minnesota.

JW: That's correct, and he excelled again in both sports—what's of interest, I believe, is that Dad not only coached three national championship teams, but he played on three national championship football teams at the University of Minnesota between 1934 and 1936. He also academically was awarded the Big Ten medal for the person who displayed the highest achievement in both athletics and academics.

JE: He played for Bernie Bierman of the University of Minnesota.

JW: He did.

JE: Golden Gophers.

JW: That's correct, and I think Bernie Bierman was his mentor and he learned so much from him as a coach, such things as conditioning, just the basic fundamentals of discipline in practice and how you really discipline the players and the football team. He had great respect for Coach Bierman.

JE: In 1937 he led the college all-stars in a pretty important game.

JW: He did, and Sammy Baugh, the great TCU player, was the quarterback of that group and they did defeat the professional team. That was the first time that had happened. But he enjoyed that experience playing in that game.

JE: They played the Green Bay Packers in Chicago in August of 1937.

JW: Mmm hmm.

JE: Then he also played hockey.

JW: He did. He'd grown up playing hockey in Minneapolis. He loved it. He finally gravitated to being the goal guard as he called it, the goalie today, and he kiddingly would say he didn't have the speed to play. I'm not sure that was true because being goalie, of course, is very important. He started for the University of Minnesota hockey team for a couple of years and that was a sport that he had a great interest in as well.

JE: See, I grew up in North Dakota and Grand Forks and Minnesota—my relatives were there, so I understood the hockey thing. The Minnesota Golden Gophers were hated by us in North Dakota.

JW: (Chuckles)

JE: But that was much later, from the thirties. I am certain there was a rivalry that went way back...

JW: I'm sure. (Chuckles)

JE: To that as well. So, at this point while he's playing hockey at the University of Minnesota, he meets someone special.

JW: Yes, he met my mother. The University of Minnesota was playing Carlton College on their campus. A rumor had floated around the Minnesota hockey team that there was a beautiful Indian princess on campus, so after the game, the team assembled in the sorority house where this Indian princess allegedly lived and it was my mom who was the Indian princess, which she was not, no Indian blood, but she was obviously very attractive, and she was coming down the stairs for a date with another man and she saw ten or twelve of the Minnesota hockey players standing around just looking at her, which she was very embarrassed obviously, but that was their first meeting. Then Dad called her later and she decided to transfer to the University of Minnesota her junior year.

JE: If she looked like an Indian princess, what was her ethnic background?

JW: Basically I would say European, the French, English lineage. She had dark hair and high cheekbones, great features of a beautiful young lady. And how long did that marriage last?

JE: They were married 37 years. That was a very difficult part of all of our lives because they were considered the consummate couple. They literally lit up a room whenever they entered it. They had somewhat of a majestic stature and both of them were very kind and outgoing people in addition to having the appearance that was attractive, so there was a genuine nature. When they divorced, I think that it was part of the fact that they had changed. Dad was continuing to travel quite a bit. By that time he'd lost for the United States Senate and he actually met a younger lady whose name was Donna O'Donohue, who had gone to the Michigan State University, and was an Assistant Secretary of State for the State of Michigan. He, I think, was very impressed with her, with her intellectual capacity, and I think my mom and dad had just drawn gradually apart, but it was a very, very difficult adjustment for both of them and for my brother and me. It was just, uh, so unexpected and it's one of those things looking back that I must say it's one of those few things I think I understand, but I'm not sure I understand.

JE: How old were you when that happened?

JW: I was probably around fifty, maybe the mid-forties.

JE: So it had to come as a shock?

JW: Yes, it was a shock.

JE: And can you imagine the community who saw this couple constantly and the talk that went on about...

JW: Right, I think...

JE: Could not believe it.

JW: You know, there was great shock in the community as well. Very true.

JE: But then he remarried. And what was her name?

JW: Her name was Donna O'Donohue, and they were married approximately 17 years, and I think most of those years were really very solid, very positive years. I think that my dad really was satisfied with his life during those years. He was still very much engaged. He was the head of the U.S. Gymnast Federation when our men won the Olympic gold and our women won the silver, and he was engaged with the St. Louis football Cardinals for a year and a half, and representing still a number of the presidents of the United States.

JE: You say seventeen years. She was married to him until his death.

JW: That is correct. Mmm hmm.

JE: But then to show his athletic prowess at the University of Minnesota, he also played golf.

JW: He did. He was a starter on the golf team.

JE: And he was captain, I believe, of the golf team.

JW: He was captain as well, that's true.

JE: I don't know, did you as an athlete yourself, had you come to a point where, you know, he was so adept at various sports that I know I can't match him or I'm trying to match him or did you just not think about that?

JW: I didn't think about that, but I can assure you that I did think about being matched or compared to his University of Oklahoma football players because growing up, when you're in grade school and then going through junior high and high school, there's a big difference between your physical ability and people that are in college and so I remember talking to my dad about that, you know, would I ever gain that degree of athleticism and he was always very encouraging and very supportive. He clearly, I think, with both my brother and me, continued to reinforce the fact that we were playing quite well and he was pleased of that, but there was never any pressure or any feeling that you had to do this to satisfy him or to gain his respect. It was much more the honest encouragement and the honest support. I've always felt very grateful for the fact that I did seem to be born with a degree of athletic talent. I think I'd also learned from my dad the price that you have to pay to be a competitive athlete. It was a process. I think through junior high and high school we had great success, but we had to do it the right way and I think his encouragement and support were extremely helpful.

JE: To be coached by your high school coach and then come home to a family. Yes, he wasn't trying to tell you things other than as a coach, but you came home to an environment that continued off the field of athleticism.

JW: Well, that's true. It really—we didn't really talk too much about what was going on with the Oklahoma season, but because I was a quarterback my dad would spend time with

me as he did with his starting quarterbacks where he would try to visualize actual game situations. My dad's philosophy back then and still today, I believe this, I'm pretty old fashioned, was that there's an advantage for the quarterback to be calling the signals rather than having them called in from the sideline, because when you're in competition you have a different feel of the game, so Dad felt if he could replicate during the week certain game conditions and he might say, "if you're the starting quarterback, John, okay, we've got the ball, we're on our 28 yard line, it's first and ten, what are you going to call?" You blurt out, "twenty-eight." He might say, "Okay, that's second and seven." And then it's third and four. He would do that with me and you'd get an understanding of what he wanted called and I could go into more specificity with you, but this was an extremely helpful thing to me as a player.

JE: Yeah. Would you sit at a table and have a gridiron on a piece of paper?

JW: Yeah, on a piece of eight by eleven paper where he would be taking notes, but it would be, as I just recollected it, that he would be just calling out what the game situation was and then he'd be taking notes.

JE: Wow, that's great support as you came home.

JW: Well, it really is. (Chuckles) Very helpful.

Chapter 7 – 3:17

World War II

JE: From the University of Minnesota, then he goes on to get his master's at Syracuse University?

JW: Yes.

JE: Becomes assistant football coach at the same time there at Syracuse.

JW: Yes, he did.

JE: Then he's back at the University of Minnesota as assistant coach?

JW: Yes, he did that as well. His father always wanted him to go into business with him with the Wilkinson Finance Company, the mortgage business, and dad just didn't feel comfortable in a sit-down job. He really loved coaching, so that was a tug of war between him and his father.

JE: Because that business was very lucrative for his father.

JW: Yes, it was.

JE: I mean, they would probably be at last upper middle class or higher, perhaps, as a result of that, yeah, offered that style of living.

JW: Yes, I remember well—it was actually a hotel, what we might call condominium today, in which my grandfather and grandmother lived and it was very, very nice and comfortable. So, yes, they were clearly upper class.

JE: So we have 1943.

JW: Mmm hmm.

JE: Then he has to give up his athletic work and he then serves the military.

JW: Well, yes, although there was a transition. He actually joined the navy in 1942. He was transferred to the Iowa Preflight, Iowa City, and it was there that they trained naval officers in becoming pilots, but they also needed to root out those people that they didn't think had the physical ability to actually fly in combat and to fly airplanes under heavy distress. It was there that Dad met Don Faurot, the former head football coach at the University of Missouri, who he competed with for many years, but Coach Faurot is generally given credit for introducing the Split-T offensive formation. Before that, most people ran the single wing, which as you know is a different philosophy. Dad, I think, most people give credit to having perfected the Split-T here at the University of Oklahoma. Then as you said, John, after I think they folded Iowa Preflight up in 1943 and then my dad was deployed to the USS Enterprise aircraft carrier and he served in combat. He was at both Iwo Jima and Okinawa. It was quite a very challenging experience for him.

JE: Did he ever talk about some of those stories?

JW: Well, he did, and one particular occasion—he was a hangar officer who was responsible for the aircraft coming up on the flight deck before they actually took off. Of course, the Enterprise was the most decorated aircraft carrier in the entire fleet, the miles that it pursued, but they were constantly being barraged by the kamikaze pilots. And on one occasion, Dad talked about an attack where a plane came down and exploded and six of the sailors were killed and had he not been standing behind a steel beam he would have been killed himself. I've reflected about that many times in my life because he was such an influence to my brother Pat and me and you replay what it would have been like, you know, if he hadn't survived the war. That, I think, was a learning experience for him as well. He was always a realist about life. He had also lived through the Depression and he felt that we were here as human beings to be challenged and to try to overcome those challenges whatever they were, and I think it gave him a very strong conviction about so many of his own values and his philosophy.

Chapter 8 – 11:49**Coach Wilkinson**

JE: Then he's out of the service; the war comes to an end.

JW: Mmm hmm.

JE: And I believe 1946 he was urged to come to Oklahoma as an assistant.

JW: That's correct, and he had met Jim Tatum who had been a coach as well. He was not at Iowa Preflight, he was at a different base.

JE: So they met in the military?

JW: Yes, they did.

JE: Tatum and your father.

JW: Yes. Dad initially, when the war ended was transferred to Pensacola, Florida, and that's where he was officially honorably discharged and that's when he joined Jim Tatum up in Norman and there are many stories that I'm sure you're aware of. Part of the condition for Jim Tatum becoming the head coach was the necessity of having my dad come as an assistant coach too, that Dad had made a favorable impression on the decision makers.

JE: I have interviewed for this website Ann Noble Brown, who is the daughter of Lloyd Noble, and she talked about the fact that her father was a big fan of your father's and very instrumental, I don't know if in bringing him from Minnesota, but he definitely was instrumental in promoting him to head football coach. Do you know any of that?

JW: Well, yes I do and I, or course, just have great respect for Ann Noble Brown herself, a lovely lady, but she and I have also talked about this that, of course, her father was the Chair of the Board and at that time had a great say over the decisions that were being made. I think much has been written about the fact that when Jim Tatum decided to leave OU to go to Maryland, I think many people including Mr. Noble were very pleased and they were very elated that my dad would be in a position to become head coach, and with Mr. Noble's strong support, I think it made it very easy for my dad. They maintained a very healthy relationship. Dad had enormous respect for Sam Noble. It was a tragedy, I think, that he died at such a young age.

JE: Yeah.

JW: But he gave back so much to the state and to so many people.

JE: And elsewhere in this website you can actually hear Lloyd Noble in a speech that he made, and then Lloyd Noble was a fan of football...

JW: Yes.

JE: And in his business he would buy out a section of the stands and bring his employees to the games.

JW: That's very true. It was important at the time. It's interesting, I think, to look back at what it took to gain the support of the influential business community to support the athletic program, and Mr. Noble and many people in the Touchdown Club—there's been much written about it—but they played an incredibly important role and many of them did the same thing as Mr. Noble, being sure that the fans were in the stands and raising money to help with the scholarships of the athletes.

JE: At 31 years old, your father becomes head football coach at OU, would be considered of the youngest coaches in the country?

JW: Well, I think so and I'm always amazed looking back at that, of course, he looks so young. When I met Coach Stoops when he came here, I remember telling my brother Pat, "Gosh, Coach Stoops is so young" (chuckles) and I think he was older than 31. I can't remember exactly how old he was. But when I look back at the pictures of my dad as you well know, John, many of his athletes had served in combat and so they might have been, you know, 23, 24, 25, so Dad was maybe only five or six years older, but he developed, I think, a great respect and a closeness with these players and he was very fortunate that Coach Jim Tatum brought in so many gifted athletes. I do give Coach Tatum high praise for being the person that was probably far more instrumental than my dad in bringing in that first group of players.

JE: He's head coach from '47 to '63.

JW: Yes.

JE: Compiled a record of 147 wins, 29 losses and four ties, and you probably can do this yourself. The Sooners won three national championships in 1950, '55 and '56; 14 conference titles between '53 and '57, his Oklahoma squad won 47 straight games, a record that still stands at the highest level of college football.

JW: Mmm hmm. Right.

JE: And his teams also won 12 consecutive seasons between '47 and '58, isn't that true?

JW: Without ever losing a conference game, yes.

JE: Yes. And he didn't suffer his first conference loss until 1959 which came against Nebraska.

JW: Yeah, that's true, John, and what I've always remembered was when he became head football coach I was just five years old and as you just said, they never lost a conference game until my senior year in high school when they were defeated by the University of Nebraska.

JE: So let's go back to your early remembrances of OU football. You were seven years old when the Sooners won the Sugar Bowl in 1949. Do you have a recollection of that? I do, because—I didn't know much about him, but Choo Choo Justice, who was the great tailback for the University of North Carolina, had a marvelous reputation and that was a game in which Merle Greathouse intercepted a pass and returned it 82 yards, I believe,

and Oklahoma won 14 to 6. I was just a youngster but I do remember the impact of that game and how much it meant to my father.

JE: Then it was in 1950 that they won the national title and you were eight years old.

JW: Yes, that would be true.

JE: You have any recollection of winning the national title?

JW: I know that they played LSU in the Sugar Bowl in 1950 and they won 35 to nothing and then the year that they were national champions, which I think might have been '50 or '51, they were defeated in the Sugar Bowl by Coach Bear Bryant's team 13 to 7. So I get a little confused on, you know, the national championship and those two ballgames.

JE: Okay. But you're eight years old and you attended those games?

JW: No, did not attend either of those games.

JE: There's a point in here as your father was just getting started that Minnesota tried to hire their alum.

JW: Yes, I think that there were many occasions where other schools were reaching out during my dad's whole career at the University of Oklahoma and I know that he seriously considered it, but he felt he had a great foundation laid at the university and he never ever felt that it was something that was going to motivate him to leave.

JE: Yeah—1952, Sooners beat Texas to start a six-game winning streak. Billy Vessels, one of the names, and you were ten years old.

JW: I remember that game. I was actually in the Sooner Theatre and I would go out and ask the lady, the ticket person, what the score for the game was and OU went ahead 28 to nothing and won 49 to 28 and I just couldn't believe that we were scoring so many points, but that was the great Eddie Crowder, Buck McPhail, Billy Vessels group of players.

JE: And that game would have been played in Dallas.

JW: Yes.

JE: Why weren't you at the game?

JW: At that age, my dad never wanted—actually it wasn't just children, my brother and me—but he didn't permit any of the wives to travel with the team either. It was just simply that I think he didn't feel that I was of the age that I should be in attendance.

JE: Then in '53 the Sooners began the 47-game winning streak and you were 11 years old.

JW: Mm hmm. I was at that game and I remember vividly—my brother Pat was there as well—that's when Gene Callame was the quarterback—we won 19 to 14 and held on at the end. But you are correct, that was the beginning of the great winning streak.

JE: From your ages between 11 and 15 years old, that was a sweet spot for your father, for your family, for the Sooner nation?

JW: Well, it really was, John, because as you well know, it encompassed a five-year period.

It was between as you just said '53 and '57. It was a very exciting time. There were some very challenging games, but we certainly got used to winning.

JE: But then the Sooners did lose to Notre Dame seven to nothing, Owen Field, November 16, 1957.

JW: Yes.

JE: Was that tough to have that loss or was the attitude, you know, eventually it had to happen?

JW: Well, I think both are true, but I think probably the first was the immediate reaction and I was in the stands and I probably have talked to just about everybody that was there as well. I think it was a disappointment because people were so used to winning and Oklahoma was the two-touchdown favorite, so I think people were very surprised. I still remember sitting in the stands in disbelief when the game was over as did the other 60,000-plus people and then Bruce Drake, who was the stadium announcer, said, you know, we've had some great times with this team, let's give them a big hand, and everybody stood up and just gave a standing ovation and, of course, there were a lot of tears and, uh, people were very sad. It's interesting they stopped the 47-game winning streak, but also on the front end they were the last team to defeat Oklahoma in 1953. The second game of the season was against the University of Pittsburg and Oklahoma tied Pittsburg that year. Then the third game was the one we just talked about, the University of Texas and that is what started the streak. But Notre Dame was on both ends in 1953 and 1957 having defeated the Sooners.

JE: This goes on a year, the next year they're undefeated. At home did your father talk about it or would he leave it outside? What was he saying during those years?

JW: Well, he pretty much left it outside. He was very competitive and one of the things that he did—on Thursday evenings all of the assistant coaches would come over to our home and it was called “old fashioned night.” They would fix old fashioned.

JE: What's that?

JW: That's a bourbon drink. It's a cocktail. You'd have a plant or a leaf that you'd kind of grind into it and then you'd have a little sugar. This is strange to say, but I don't know that I've ever had an old fashioned, but for some reason that's what they did that evening and that's what they called it. Old fashioned night. Dad thought that was a way for them to relax and to maybe in a very low-key atmosphere enjoy the stress of what had been going on and they were making decisions about what their attack was going to be for that particular game, and there might have been some disagreements, but he felt that it played a key role in their morale and their attitude. And I remember with great joy reflecting on those times because just a lot of laughter and fun stories. Dad played the chord organ. He would play it before he would leave whether it was a home game or an

away game, and I'm not sure why other than a way for him to relax. After a football game, he'd usually had a very difficult time sleeping. He always said he slept very well the night before the game because he felt very confident that he had prepared the team as well as they could be prepared, but the night after the game he would wake up at three or four in the morning and he would always drive over to the training room and just go into the heating room, then Ken Rawlinson would frequently find him asleep on the training table. That was just a way for him to relax and to get over just that huge emotion of a game.

JE: His 1955 team, I believe, was considered to be one of the greatest teams in college football history.

JW: Well, it was, and as you know, most of those players also played on the '56 team, so the '55 and '56 teams, those were the fellas and, of course, the '54 team was great (chuckles). Those guys, the '55 and '56 team guys, they never lost a game and I guess it would be the '56 seniors. Looking back, it was an extraordinary group of players and, of course, they were playing both ways, which I think my dad always thought was an advantage for him because I think he knew he was a great teacher and a great motivator and conditioning was so important in those days. Certainly, the Sooners have had other great teams, the National Championship teams of Coach Switzer and Coach Stoops, but at their time, this group of players in '55 and '56 were just extraordinary.

Chapter 9 – 2:13

Coach - 1957

Announcer: What you are about to hear is Coach Bud Wilkinson in a 1957 interview prior to the opening season game with the University of Pittsburg Panthers. Going into that season, the Sooners were carrying a 40-game win streak. Little did Coach Wilkinson know the streak would come to end at 47 wins when Notre Dame would defeat the Sooners seven to nothing at Owen Field. The Sooners won the remainder of their games in 1957 and finished with a 48-21 victory against Duke in the Orange Bowl to post a 10 to 1 record.

Interviewer: I know it's awful early in the football season, even before a game to find out how the OU football team looks, but what is the outlook this season?

BW: Well, we'll certainly find out certainly after our first game. We lost a large number of very fine football players by graduation. Our team has worked very hard in practice and, uh, we're simply waiting for the game to find out what kind of a team we're going to have.

Interviewer: I know you have one real problem leaving for Pittsburg and I know that you're leaving a bit earlier than you do for normal games. I wondered if you'd tell us about that.

BW: Well, school is not in session so we won't be missing any classes. The flight to Pittsburg is around four hours and then the Pittsburg airport is about 20 to 30 miles from downtown Pittsburg and the hotel we'll be at is on the other side of Pittsburg, so all in all, there's about a seven-hour travel time involved going from Norman to Oklahoma City and then to the Pittsburg airport (chuckles) and on in, so we feel that we have to get it out of the way a day ahead of normal particular since we aren't missing any school by doing so.

Interviewer: Hood is always, of course, a fine football team and I know they will be again this year. Do you expect about the same type of football from Coach John Michelosen?

BW: Well, you never know in a first game what a team will do, but Pittsburg is a very large, very tough, strong physical team and I'm sure they'll utilize their physical abilities to the fullest possible extent. They're a very fine football club.

Interviewer: Bud, what are some of the problems that you face this year trying to replace lost ballplayers?

BW: Well, the same thing that you always face. It's one of the nice things about college athletics that you only see men at their very best. In professional athletics, you see them sort of go over the hill, but in college football at least they're getting better all of the time and we start with a new group and try to bring them along to be as capable as men who played last year.

Chapter 10 – 6:40

Football Coaches

JE: Your dad is one of four OU coaches to win over 100 games.

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: And they would be Barry Switzer, Bob Stoops...

JW: Vinnie Owen. Coach Owen.

JE: And then your father.

JW: Uh huh.

JE: Coaches would actually come to Norman, wouldn't they, to learn coaching from your father?

JW: Well, they did and that was, of course, very special for my brother Pat and me, because the great coaches from all around the country like Coach Bear Bryant or Woody Hayes from Ohio State or Duffy Daugherty, Michigan State, Darrell Royal from Texas, just you could go on and on, but they would come to our family home to try to understand how they were doing things at Oklahoma. That was very special.

JE: And he was very willing to tell as much as he could?

JW: Yeah, that's one of the things that has always interested me about the coaching profession. It's somewhat of an anomaly when you compare it to the business world because at the Coach of the Year clinics that my dad and Duffy Daugherty held for so many years, that was an atmosphere where coaches would get up and lecture and they would just really impart their whole philosophy—offense, defense, kicking, organization—because I think they knew that in the final analysis, you were going to win based on your ability to organize and to attract key players. In the business world I later found, you know, it's more filled with non-compete agreements and confidentiality clauses. So, it's an interesting profession and it especially is when you know that your best friend, if you're defeating him three or four years, he's going to lose his job, so it's interesting that there was that sharing of information.

JE: And you could be in and around them and listen to their conversation. You were 13, 14?

JW: I did. I was very fortunate, yes, and I learned at a very young age that each of these coaches had different personalities, they had different characteristics, different temperaments, but there was one common denominator that made them all the same. I realized that they each had a burning desire to win and an ability to transmit that energy to others. You could actually feel the electricity in the room when they talked. They were all different, but by golly they really wanted to win. My dad was that way. You know, my dad came across as a—which he was—very soft spoken, professorial-type of a teacher, but boy he was a great competitor.

JE: Would you also say, perhaps, there was a shyness to him? He was shy?

JW: I suspect that's fair because I've used the word aloof many times and I think Dad tried to maintain a degree of privacy, but if you were led into the group, his inner group, he was so friendly and so enjoyable. He was always friendly, but if you were taken in then he was much more outgoing.

JE: You referenced Woody Hayes. There's a cute story about Woody.

JW: Well, yes, and it's a story in which Coach Hayes came to Norman. It was during their spring football practice. He learned on that visit that my older brother Pat was the co-valedictorian of his high school class. Well, Coach Hayes had a deep reverence and a respect for education, as you know, so the first thing he did when he returned to his home in Columbus, Ohio, was to go into his son Steve's room to demand, "Why can't you make straight A's in school like Coach Wilkinson's oldest son Pat," to which his oldest son Steve replied, "Dad, I'll start making straight A's in school when you win 47 straight games in a row."

JE: (Chuckles)

JW: His son Steve's a good guy. He's a judge up in Columbus, Ohio, and that's a story that he's always enjoyed telling.

JE: Your father was regarded in some circles as a professional pessimist. He would kind of downplay the team.

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: He was never one to say, “We can win.” You were 13 years old, I believe, and you were prompted to say a comment about that.

JW: I’m not sure I remember that particular comment, but I always thought that was one of Dad’s great strengths and I know that it was one of the reasons that they were able to maintain so much consistency as a team, because his players were taught by him that any team could defeat them on any given Saturday. He believed that and he was able to impart that belief to his players, but I can’t remember what I might have said at age 13.

JE: Well, I will quote you...

JW: Okay. (Chuckles)

JE: As saying, “He will never say we will win and one of these years, we will lose.”

JW: (Laughter)

JE: (Chuckles) That’s you.

JW: I’d say, John, I can’t remember when I said that, but I trust you that it’s in some publication somewhere.

JE: (Chuckles) In 1959, OU’s quarterback was David Baker.

JW: Yes.

JE: And he was not attending classes regularly. Can you pick up on that story?

JW: Well, yeah. David, of course, was such a great gifted player at OU and enjoyed a very good professional football career as a defensive back for the 49ers, but when David was not attending class—those were certain rules and expectations that my father demanded of his players and so David was—I don’t know if they used the word “suspended,” but he was not permitted to go to the Orange Bowl game to play in that as a result of his not attending class.

JE: That was a huge stand for your father to take.

JW: Well, it was, but I don’t think it was in any way certainly surprising. I think Dad always employed what I would call a “good cop, bad cop” philosophy. Port Robertson, the great wrestling coach at OU, was really the disciplinarian and if any player got out of line, it would not be uncommon for Port to knock on their door at six a.m. and take them over to Owen Field where they’d have to run stadium steps until they were just violently ill. Believe me, people shied away from Port and Port disciplined those who were not going to class. I can’t quite remember specifically the details of David Baker’s situation other than it was, it was a real disappointment to everybody, but not at all surprising with what my dad expected of his players.

JE: So then he had to select another quarterback.

JW: He did. That was Bob Cornell. Bobby Boyd was the quarterback on the alternate team. Of course, Bobby enjoyed a great career with the Baltimore Colts. But Dad thought it might provide greater continuity for Bobby to stay with his team so that you didn't have both units with a new player. Bob Cornell was a great quarterback and yet this was the first time he was placed into a starting quarterback position. I think Oklahoma excelled in that game against Syracuse. (*indiscernible name*) Scott had a great game, but I was so proud of Bob Cornell because he performed admirably.

JE: And the fact that your dad took that stand and still defeated Syracuse 21 to 9, I'm sure even the coaching staff was a little upset for the fact that he had taken the quarterback.

JW: Yeah, I'm not sure. Again, I don't think it would have been a surprise to anybody on the coaching staff. Dad, as you well know, always believed that the players were there first to get an education and that football was a training period, so I don't think there was anything more than disappointment that they had to come to that decision.

Chapter 11 – 6:28

Media & Prediction

JE: You were in high school when much of the success was happening. How was it affecting you? help

JW: Well, I think you cannot help be conditioned to a very positive attitude and to be reinforced with all the positive qualities that make up a championship team, I think it becomes second nature and I think you learn it just as you learn lessons from your parents. Both Pat and I felt we were very fortunate growing up in Norman because it was a great community and other than the fact that our dad was famous, we weren't really treated any differently than anyone else, but the fact that they were winning I learned later was so much more unusual than I thought it was at the time.

JE: Mm hmm.

JW: Because at the time, this is just what was happening, so you just more or less expected it. Of course, I had enormous respect for the tradition and the players and for my dad and his coaches and the administration. It was something that you became part of and became part of your being. But it was a great experience.

JE: Could the family eat out at a restaurant without being interrupted or asked for autographs?

JW: Not really. That happened so frequently and one of the things that irritated my dad—he never would show it visibly, but people would come up and say, “Bud, I bet you don't

remember me.” And then they’d pause. (Chuckles) And of course he’d say, “Well sure I remember you, but I can’t quite pull it up.” Those were unfortunate instances, but Dad was always very gracious when people would come up. I’m amazed today at how many people tell me stories that I’d never heard when they were younger or how he treated them when they came into a room. There was just such great respect. Somebody told me just this past month, and it really choked me up a bit, because *To Kill A Mockingbird* always just choked me up a lot, the great Gregory Peck movie, and I remember toward the end of that movie when Gregory Peck’s going out of the courtroom and the African-American community is up on top with the little daughter of his, one of the black preachers says, “Stand up, Scout, your daddy is about to pass.” And this person told me that when Dad came into the Skirvin Hotel, the same thing happened and I’d never heard that story before. It was very touching to us.

JE: Wow.

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: And that was just a month ago that story was related to you.

JW: Yeah, right, and I’d never heard it, so that’s why, you know, it’s kind of emotional to me.

JE: Yeah. I believe when you were in high school, Bob Barry was doing the play-by-play of your games?

JW: He was, and Bob also called that state championship game that we talked about earlier.

JE: I have interviewed Bob Barry on this website. Your father liked Bob and is it true that your father recommended that Bob be the play-by-play announcer for the Sooners?

JW: Dad did recommend him and Bob goes a little bit further. He felt he had a great advantage because Dad had heard him calling high school games. I had a great opportunity to visit with Bob this past year before he died and always our family felt a great closeness to him and his family. I never did remember my dad saying that the reason he selected Bob was because he had called our high school games, but I know that Bob Barry always felt that that made an enormous difference.

JE: Well, he must have heard him on the radio.

JW: He did. He heard—it was a great advantage. But, Bob always gave him credit for that reason. I don’t remember asking Dad, but I’m sure it had an influence.

JE: Yeah. Bob talked about your father inviting the national media to the house; the writers, even like Howard Cosell and some of these people. Do you have recollection of anybody?

JW: Oh, yeah, those are fond memories. In addition to a group of friends that would come over after every game, the media was always there. John Cromley, (*indiscernible name*), who wrote for *The Oklahoman*, (*indiscernible name*) had an expression I always remembered that I loved. Of course, they would be having cocktails after the game

and (*indiscernible name*) said, “We were in an environment where your Dad would talk to us about the game and we would look like the experts that we weren’t.” (Chuckles) (*indiscernible name*) was humble enough to say that, but in those days—I feel it’s changed a little bit today, but my dad had a real trust with the media, both the TV media and the journalists. I remember a story that when Oklahoma played Army in 1961 up at the Yankee Stadium and they designed that trick play where Jimmy Carpenter took the snap and pitched it out to Mike McClellan because they knew that Army had a tendency to huddle late, my dad told Curt Gowdy and Jim Simpson, who were calling the game. One of them were walking with Roone Arledge, who later became the head of ABC Sports, and as they were walking in New York City before the game, Dad had told them not to be sleeping, to be ready for this trick play, and Roone Arledge couldn’t believe—he said, “How in the world would he tell you that?” Curt looked at him and said, “Because he trusts me. He knows he can trust me.” Which is true, but that trust is earned and I think Dad had a wonderful relationship with the media and I always considered all of those people great friends.

JE: I believe in 1961, the Sooners were losing the beginning of the season.

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: They had gone 0 and 5.

JW: Right.

JE: Duke was winning.

JW: We were.

JE: And so then on television, he flatly stated that the Sooners would win the remainder of their games.

JW: Mm hmm. And everybody was just totally shocked and surprised. It was so unusual for my dad who, as you pointed out earlier, was known for being a pessimist and known for trying to keep people’s expectations down a bit, but in this instance he made a judgment call. I think he actually really believed it because he knew the team was better than their record of 0 and 5, but it was quite a courageous call because they had of those five teams, three really very, very tough opponents at Missouri, Army and at Nebraska. Kansas State and Oklahoma State were pretty good then, too. So, it was a courageous call, but it was the right call and I think it accomplished his purpose which I think was to give his players maybe a little bit more confidence and that he really believed in them.

JE: They did win those games.

JW: They did win them, which was just extraordinary. Many coaches have said that they felt that that year was perhaps my dad’s greatest coaching performance even compared to those great winning streaks because he had to deal with such great diversity, and they were able to pull it off.

Chapter 12 – 2:14**President Kennedy**

JE: That was in '61.

JW: Yes.

JE: Between '61 and '64, he was honored by President Kennedy. He didn't have to leave OU to do this, but he served on the President's Council for Physical Fitness.

JW: Yes.

JE: We'll get into your book a little bit here, but he wrote to you about this.

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: He wasn't sure if he wanted to even accept that assignment.

JW: Well, initially, they wanted him to quit his job and come on full-time. He realized pretty quickly that he couldn't do that, I mean he didn't want to do it. In negotiations with the President's people, he was able to work out an alternative that President Cross at OU approved whereby he could retain his position as the head coach at Oklahoma but he could also become the head of the President's Council for Physical Fitness. This made it, obviously, a little more difficult for him. I think he was overextended. He had to give a lot of time in Washington, D.C. and he knew that he might fail. This was a new program. He didn't have any statutory authority with this council to direct and tell people you're going to do this. You had to just come in and motivate school districts. But he did an extraordinary job. I think this is one of his great accomplishments heading this up and I think many historians believe that there's been no administration that's done more to improve the health of our students than during the Kennedy administration.

JE: He met with President Kennedy.

JW: Yeah, they were very close as he was with Bobby Kennedy. The Kennedys, I think, had an affinity for football and for athletics. They hit it off immediately and my dad had very easy access to the President. Whenever he wanted to come in, it could be done within three, four days which is very difficult to do. It was then just as it is today.

JE: At that time, apparently, political affiliation didn't matter because the Kennedys were Democrat and your father was a Republican.

JW: Well, that's true and it did not matter at the time. I'm not sure that it came up at all, but I doubt that it did because I know that they were encouraging my dad to come on.

JE: The program, I think, actually began under President Eisenhower. He had a dream for that.

JW: Right.

JE: Either he didn't follow through on it or try to make it big until the—President Kennedy came along.

JW: Yeah, that's technically correct what you've just said. And it was President Kennedy that revitalized it.

Chapter 13 – 6:03

U.S. Senate Race

JE: Continuing in the vein of politics, in 1964 he did run for the United States Senate and he ran against Fred Harris. By all odds, everybody would think that this man would win it.

JW: True and, of course, looking back he picked an extraordinarily difficult year to run because that's when Lyndon Johnson had his landslide victory over Barry Goldwater. Dad was just caught in the situation that there were not enough crossover voters who were going to vote for Lyndon Johnson, the Democrat President, who would switch their affiliation and then vote for a Republican candidate for Senate. Johnson carried the state by well over 100,000 votes and Dad lost by I think less than 20,000, so it was a really tough experience. I was with him both the night before and then, of course, the night of the election. We went to bed knowing that it'd be close, but he in his deepest thoughts could not conceive that over half of the citizens of Oklahoma would vote against him, but they did. It was a tough time, but he handled adversity, I thought, always every bit as well or maybe better than the great successes in his life. He had great dignity and grace, humility, and interestingly enough, when he lost in November, that January he was in the broadcast booth with Jim Simpson doing the telecast for the Orange Bowl, and that was Texas against Alabama, two of his best friends, Bear Bryant and Darrell Royal, and so that became a 20-year television career for my dad.

JE: This may seem like an odd question, but I was thinking he had to be down when he lost that race.

JW: Oh, he was.

JE: Would he ever get depressed?

JW: He was very human and, yes, he would, and I have always felt that two greatest disappointments in his life was first, the loss of his mother when he was young at age seven, and then I think the race for the U.S. Senate. And I know this from having lost the race for the U.S. Congress. That's not as big a seat, but it's hurtful to lose a race he thought he would win and could win and he didn't, so he had to deal with that.

JE: You were very active and you knocked on doors for him, didn't you?

JW: I sure did, and it was interesting. It was a learning experience for me because growing up here I had nothing but admiration and respect for my father, but when I campaigned down in Little Dixie, for example, I'd have people actually when they knew who I was, slam doors in my face or utter profanities to my face. I was, I guess, at that age very naïve. It was an incredible learning experience for me.

JE: Little Dixie. That would be very heavy Democratic area.

JW: Yes, sir.

JE: In the Southeast corner of our state. So here comes a Republican to their door—

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: And that's why they slammed the door. It wasn't that you were a Wilkinson, obviously.

JW: No.

JE: It was that you represented the R's, right?

JW: That's exactly right. (Chuckles) Very well said.

JE: His message, I've learned, was about a balanced budget, deficit reduction, a strong national defense, decentralization of government powers, much of the same themes that are talked about today as we have a primary for a Republican Presidential field right now.

JW: It's really uncanny. I think about this all the time because as I go back and reflect on my dad's foundation of his principles, it's ironic that it's true that these seem to be the same issues that are being debated today.

JE: Did he have difficulty just talking to the voter? I don't know if he was given to small talk.

JW: Well, Henry Bellmon always felt that Dad was a better person perhaps in business and in coaching than he was as a political candidate because the governor and senator said that he didn't really feel Dad was ever as comfortable with political crowds. I defer to Governor Bellmon's beliefs on this subject because he, of course, was such a grand political person, but at the time, I was not aware of this. Looking back, I would agree that I don't think Dad probably was as folksy, maybe, as some of the natural political candidates.

JE: Well, Fred Harris was a folksy sort of guy.

JW: Oh, he sure was. I mean, he was a consummate politician, campaigner, very bright. He was a formidable candidate and they ran a great campaign. They took advantage of what they needed to do to win.

JE: Walt Helmerich, who was the finance chair, I think, for your father's campaign said in another interview that your dad didn't seem to want to talk football when he was on the stump, but he wanted to talk about the issues that we've talked about and Walt would say, "Why don't you just talk about football, talk about this boy who came from Ardmore," or whatever, and he couldn't get him to do that.

JW: Well, that's true. I think that was part of the challenge that he had, and he also had a

challenge that a lot of the so-called country club people, maybe a little more affluent, when Dad would come into town, they'd want to take him to the country club and kind of push him over to one side rather than perhaps having him downtown going up and down shaking hands with people. I think looking back on his campaign, that was a detriment as well. I'm not sure he was handled as effectively as maybe he could or should have been.

JE: You know, I've thought about Steve Largent, who was a great athlete at Tulsa University and for Seattle on a professional level, ran for governor and was defeated.

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: Jack Mildren was quarterback.

JW: Right.

JE: And also was defeated.

JW: That's right.

JE: I don't believe either one of them had the aura or the stature your father had when he was in his prime, so I don't know if they took solace in the fact that here's a guy who could have been king...

JW: Mm hmm. (Chuckles)

JE: Also was defeated.

JW: Right.

JE: And so it's kind of an interesting study of these athletes who were just bigger than Dallas, I would say, but they still lost.

JW: Well, that's very true, and I'm sure it helped both Steve and Jack to reflect on my father, but my belief is that timing in political races is really very, very important, and the economic circumstances, the international circumstances, they have so much to do with the outcome of an election. I think you're always hoping that you time things right, but I don't think Dad did time that as well.

Chapter 14 – 6:51

Media-Pros-Death

JE: So then in 1965 he becomes a broadcaster with ABC. It's interesting. He was just a natural at that as well, wasn't he?

JE: Well, he was. He was such a great communicator first of all and I think the average football fan knows and understands football, but a lot of other people tune in and they really don't know all the basic details of the game. I think he was able to put technical football terminology into layman's language so that anybody whether you're a male or a

female or you're a grandparent or you're in grade school, if you could gain perhaps a little bit better easy understanding of what was going on.

JE: Right, but then his mannerism, his looks and all that, it was just he was made for TV from the very beginning. As a matter of fact, I do believe that he was the first coach to have a coach's program called The Bud Wilkinson Show.

JW: Yeah, he was very innovative and very creative and he was very natural in a television studio. He always felt very comfortable with the camera, and he used to tell me you just look in the camera and you think that's your best friend; you're just sitting there talking to them. I remember the challenges that some of the producers—people like Chuck Howard who were responsible at that time for the ABC Sports—and Chuck told me that he had a difficult time having Dad be critical of a player or a coach, and that wasn't my dad's tendency. He had a real hard time doing that, so he might be calling in on Bud's earphone saying, "Go ahead and tell 'em this guy did a dumb thing" and Bud would say it a little more tactfully.

JE: And who were the play-by-play on his (*indiscernible phrase*) there at the time?

JW: He was probably most known for working with Chris Schenkel. He worked with Chris and then he worked with Jim Simpson for a number of years. He worked with Keith Jackson for a number of years and Bill Fleming, so he worked with the top guys in that industry.

JE: Yeah. Inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1969.

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: And then time goes on and he gets back into coaching again.

JW: That was unusual because he had been offered many, many jobs, and I remember when people like Lamar Hunt and other owners would come into our home trying to encourage my dad to leave college sports for the NFL game, and he never wanted to do that, but circumstances were different at this time. My mom and dad had gone through a divorce. The company that my dad was involved in was in some way stymied by some government regulations and decisions that were made during the Jimmy Carter administration, and Billy Bidwell, the owner, unexpectedly reached out to Dad. I think it was a confluence of circumstances in his life that changed his normal way of looking at things. He thought it would be a fun thing to do and he really did enjoy it, even though he only lasted a year and a half. He was terminated by Bidwell because Bidwell chose to direct that Dad should be playing a quarterback instead of the starting quarterback that Dad was putting in the game and my dad felt philosophically that was his responsibility, so in principle he didn't do it, then he was fired by Bill Bidwell.

JE: Bill Bidwell was the owner, of course, of the St. Louis Cardinals.

JW: Yes.

JE: And then the record was nine wins and twenty losses, so that had to be tough for him.

How did he view his overall experience working with the professional players?

JW: Well, he really liked it. I think they would give him high marks—Dan Dierdorf, Jimmy Hart and others. He had great rapport and great respect with these players. They were not as talented and gifted, but they still played pretty darn well when you go back and look at some of the close games. My belief is that under normal circumstances in the professional league, it takes time to build a team. I think Dad, had he stayed, he absolutely would have won, but because of the series of circumstances that we just addressed, I'm not sure that he had the time horizon to make it happen, but he really enjoyed it. He always believed that as long as he was doing his very best, which he did, then he felt very comfortable. And I think those of us in the family as we've talked about it, he was a very competitive person, but he seemed to handle it better than we did.

JE: He stayed on and lived in St. Louis then, didn't he?

JW: He did, yes. He was very much accepted into the greater St. Louis community. They treated him with great respect. He enjoyed living there the latter stages of his life.

JE: Was he in business after the Cardinals in St. Louis?

JW: He actually was not. By that time, he was pretty much retired although he did remain in the speaking industry giving speeches throughout the country. Then he also headed up the U.S. Gymnast Federation, and so he was involved in a number of things, representing a number of the United States presidents on various boards and commissions.

JE: And then he died in 1994.

JW: Yes, he did.

JE: He was 77 years old and that was in St. Louis. What was it that brought him to his death?

JW: Well, he had a congestive heart problem, and he had that probably eight years before he died. My brother Pat, who is a physician, did say that that's about the normal life expectancy once you develop a congestive heart problem. Toward the very end, his last two years, he began to suffer a series of minor strokes. That was very difficult for us because he lost most of his eyesight. He was not probably legally blind, but he couldn't see well. He couldn't read. He was an avid reader. So, it was obviously challenging to see this deeply healthy, robust, handsome, energetic person have to go through the malady of aging, but he handled it like he did everything else, very gracefully. Never complained. To the very end he remained the same person he always was in life.

JE: You were there with him to the end?

JW: Yes, I was. My brother Pat and I both came up—it was there during the latter years frequently—but during the last couple of weeks of his life, we were up there and I remember going home maybe for five days before he died just to try to get a little rest and my brother Pat had left a day or two before and he told me he didn't think we'd see our dad alive again, and then I did go up probably the two days that he was living and

just spent time with him and was with him when he passed. I remember I just had a lot of feelings racing through my mind just watching him. The dying process in that instance in many respects is very peaceful because you just start breathing a little slower and slower and slower and then you just stop and, of course, I was just...you know, thinking of all the wonderful things.

JE: Yeah. And you know, as we look at it in this day and age, 77 is young.

JW: Oh, very young. Yeah. Again, the fact that he was so healthy and robust and I think the genes in his family—I think his dad actually died when he was 73 of cancer. I'm not sure which type, but dad really took very seriously the importance of physical education, keeping himself alert, sharp both physically and mentally and spiritually, so, yes, it was way too young for him to die, you know, in the late 70's. That's—that's too young.

Chapter 15 – 10:15

Letters to His Son

JE: And you have, of course, many, many memories, but you have these wonderful letters that your father wrote. Here we are in 2012 in February and not too long ago you released the book, *Bud's Wilkinson's Letters to His Sons* that you saved. Bill Cosby has a word on here—"A timeless guide for all of us." He wrote these letters—he was a profuse writer.

JW: Well, he was. He was very eloquent, very articulate, very prolific in the letters, and I mention in this book that I lost far more letters than I kept. There's no rhyme or reason why certain letters were kept and others were lost or discarded. My brother Pat lost all of his letters too. But the reader can certainly understand that he took a great deal of time to support and encourage and provide guidance and love for his son who was homesick and lonesome and adjusting to a new phase of life.

JE: And he was so detailed in his writing. It was amazing. We were talking about the presidential appointments, "I have a problem which is surprising and difficult. Yesterday a man named Ted Reardon called me from the White House." That wasn't his first part of that letter winning habit.

JW: (Laughs)

JE: He was several pages into this before he finally brought that up.

JW: It might seem unusual but that is very much him. And you're absolutely correct—that's a major, major appointment from the president and he doesn't bring it up until he's asked me several questions.

- JE:** He was so nurturing. “We received your grades from Duke. Truly proud. You should be too. Keep up the good work. We’ll talk to you soon. Love always, Dad.” Would these letters come once a week or...
- JW:** I think the normal routine would be—and sometimes you can see in some of the periods in ’62, they were more frequent than even once a week—but I would say once a week was a natural flow of the letters. And I was writing him. In many of the letters you’ll see he’ll begin the letter by saying, “We received your fine letter today.” My brother Pat and I were corresponding back and forth with him and with my mother as well.
- JE:** In a letter of February ’61, “thirst for knowledge”, he said “Don’t be concerned about your football. The reason you practice is to improve, to learn to execute better.” Why was he writing that?
- JW:** Well, because of my concern about both academics and athletics at Duke. (Chuckles) He was just giving me a pep talk, I think, about what it took to be successful in both areas.
- JE:** But here he is giving you some detail information. He says, “When you come up on defense, don’t even think about playing off the blockers. Come up so fast with so much determination to get the ball that your speed and your aggressiveness will carry you through or pass the blockers. Try this and see how it works.”
- JW:** Yeah, and that’s true. That’s a very good point. Believe me, there are other references on football. I’d say more of our discussion about football had to do with the intangibles about character and heart and about the will to win and about being honest and truthful with your teammates, subordinating your ego for the team—those kinds of themes.
- JE:** Of course, this book has his letters, but you have your comments. You said, “Dad understood the importance of the brand.”
- JW:** Well, I think he recognized early on that if the University of Oklahoma football team was successful, that brand in itself would be very meaningful to the university and it would carry over not only to the football program, but to all sports and to the academic community as well. I think it’s a true statement that the Sooner success—and I think it’s been just absolutely extraordinary that it was maintained and continued through both Coach Switzer and Coach Stoops—but I think what he recognized many, many years ago has happened, that there is that brand identification of what it means to be a Sooner because of the consistence of success.
- JE:** You’re writing in the book that at halftime at the Colorado game in Boulder in 1956—tell us what he told the players.
- JW:** Well, I was not there, but basically they had just come off a 40 to nothing victory over Notre Dame in South Bend and they were behind 19 to 6 at halftime. So they were in great jeopardy. Playing up in Boulder, they had great athletes that year. Dad, allegedly, when he went into the locker room told the players that he was very displeased with

their effort and he said, “You’ve got to remember all the people who came before you to make this tradition what it was and I don’t think you’re really living up to their standards, so you might just want to take off your red and white jerseys because you’re not living up to their ideals.” And then he left the locker room and didn’t come back until maybe three or four minutes before they went out. He and I have talked about this. He said to them, “There are 60,000 people out there in the Folsom Field Stadium and there’s not one of them that thinks you can win. There’s only one person that does and that’s me.” So taking them, you know, from the low to the high—and then they went out and defeated Colorado 27 to 19. I think he had an uncanny ability to know when and what to say. A lot of the players used to say before games he was well known for inspiring and motivating the players. I can’t remember who told me this, but several of them—when you’re a sophomore, you’re ready to literally run through a brick wall because you’re so fired up; when you’re a junior you’re still motivated and fired up but maybe you’ve heard it a little bit; and then when you’re a senior, you’re just watching the sophomores to see how they’re reacting because you’re going to get so ready to go. It was my mom who told me—I never did ask my dad this—but she said in Norman before home games on Friday, he would drive out into the country and he had a special place where he would park up on a hill. There aren’t a lot of hills in the Norman area as we know. But he would look down and he would at that time just contemplate his motivational message that he was going to give the team. He always knew that was so very important. And you can’t say the same thing. You have to come up with different ways. And so “take off your red and white jerseys because you’re not living up to the standards of the guys that made that,”—that’s a powerful statement.

- JE:** Yeah. As much attention we’re giving your father in these letters, I think you referenced earlier your mother too would write letters.
- JW:** Oh, yes, I think she wrote just as frequently as my dad did. I don’t remember her letters being as long but certainly very caring. Another thing that I think is so unusual about these letters of my dad is it shows his depth of knowledge, how he was at ease in discussing anything beyond football. He’s quoting people like the poet William Wordsworth and the Harvard University president, William James the philosopher, and Shakespeare, Douglas MacArthur, and Lincoln, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and what I found astounding was that he wasn’t just quoting them, he was using them to make a very relevant point. He had just this uncanny diverse depth of knowledge. He was really a bright guy.
- JE:** Well, he was then obviously doing continuing education because it wasn’t just what he’d learned at the University of Minnesota...
- JW:** Oh, no, that’s a great point, John. He bought a series of books that I do reference in the book and I know that he studied—these were the classics, and I know that he studied

them and wrote notes, so he was a continuous learner.

JE: Yeah. He would join you in reading. You were reading Preface to Philosophy.

JW: Yes.

JE: And he would read along with you.

JW: Well, he did, and then he would not only do that, he would write me in a letter and maybe quote William James. In this instance the quote meaning that if a young person kept busy every day, became diligent and really worked at something, that he would someday wake up and be a very confident and successful person—he would have learned the judgment that would be needed to be successful.

JE: There's a letter here—the first losing season for your father. You felt you should go home and actually be with him.

JW: Yeah, I felt a degree of guilt. I couldn't have played that year as a freshman, but I think I had a great opportunity to contribute to his program because I think I naturally played the quarterback position well because I had been trained to do it. And I felt a degree of guilt and I wanted to help him. J. D. Roberts, the great Outland trophy winner from the University of Oklahoma, who also coached with my dad at the time that Duke had defeated Navy where J. D. was an assistant coach, it was following that game that I went up to him on the playing field at Duke and told him that I was really concerned and thought maybe I should go back to OU. J. D. gave me a real quick but stern, no, you made the right decision, you should be here, Coach Wilkinson is going to do very well whether he's winning or losing, and he was right. My dad could handle it very easily. J. D. was very helpful to me at that time.

JE: Because you could have chosen to stay. I believe your brother Pat pretty much said, "No, you must leave."

JW: Right.

JE: But then I think your father left it up to staff and all...

JW: Yes.

JE: And yourself to make that decision.

JW: He made it a little tougher on me because I think that the other assistant coaches persuaded him that I really did have the athletic ability to help the team. So you're correct. Dad did say to me, "I don't think you should stay here, but if you choose to do so, I will let you do that." It was not that I had any real interest in Duke University, it just so happened that their associate athletic director Carl James called me. I was actually on a recruiting trip to West Pointe. He said "Why don't you just stop by." When I went on campus, I was so impressed with the beauty and the academic excellence, and they recruited me differently than other schools. They actually introduced me to the Chairman of the History Department and the Dean of Men and there was much more of

a focus on the academic side. Then at that time Duke played a big-time football schedule. They always played a Big 10 opponent, a Pack 10 opponent, and the naval academies were quite good then, and Duke had a great reputation as a power house, which they were at the time. After the experience, I thought well, you know, this is far enough away I can be on my own. I had been conditioned, I think, for so many years believing I was going to go away. I think I felt, gosh, they've done so well without me, if they start losing I might be a distraction.

JE: Was his handwriting easy to read? Was it good handwriting?

JW: Yeah, his penmanship—I do show one image at the beginning of the book so the reader can see—but he wrote much better than I do today. And one of the things we debated was whether to actually show his letters in the written word because the penmanship is so good, but we decided not to. I think it's easier to read the print when it's typed than it is the letter itself. But that was something we debated.

Chapter 16 – 6:50

A Father's Love

JE: Is there a favorite one or two that you'd direct me to?

JW: I could direct you probably to four or five. I have been asked the question many times what was the most important thing your dad said to you in the letter, and I really had to reflect on that a lot because there are so many good messages in this book that he is imparting to me, but it was in the first letters the line when he said to me, "Remember, I will always believe in you no matter what." That was such unconditional love. Then he went on and said some other good things. "I was intrigued that Coach Mike Krzyzewski in his eloquent forward to the book really zoned in on that too in his own words.

JE: I think that—what anybody could draw from this book, whether you may be a marginal football fan or not is the nurturing that your father did. It wouldn't make any difference if you were playing football or not; if you had been at a military academy or wherever. He would have been sending these letters. It had nothing to do with football, it was that you were his son, and so all fathers can take something from this to say, well, that's a great role model on how much he nurtured and how much he expressed his love for you.

JW: I totally agree with you. It's interesting that I am playing football at Duke during four of the six years and he's still coaching at Oklahoma during four of the six years. But you're absolutely correct. It's not a book about football. It's much more about a parent-child relationship and imparting very positive messages of encouragement that make a huge

difference in a person's self esteem and confidence.

JE: It would be interesting to know how long it would take him to write a letter because he was a very busy person and writing today in 2012 a letter is unheard of almost.

JW: Well, it is (Chuckles), that's very true. Many of these letters are on airplanes when he's traveling to Coach of the Year clinics, this and that, whatever. But I again agree, I think it's remarkable that he would take the time. I do think he had a gift. He could communicate very easily, so I think he didn't look at it as a chore, but he did take the time, which is interesting, because it did take time to sit down and write the letters.

JE: And the papers he would write on? Some good stationery, some not so good stationery? How would they come?

JW: I would say three different things. If he were writing at his desk, it would be on the University of Oklahoma letterhead. If he were writing from home, where there were many, it would be on his and my mom's letterhead, and if he were writing when he was traveling, (Chuckles) it would be a hodge-podge of American Airlines or Eastern Airlines or some hotel stationery. There's a huge variety of letterheads.

JE: What does the last letter..

JW: The very last one that's in the book? It was one when I was in graduate school and I was saying goodbye to my mother and father who were living in Washington, D.C. at the time. It was a particularly sad occasion. He wrote back and said, "When you left today, I knew exactly how you felt and I felt precisely the same way. Any leaving of the physical presence of those we love is a shock momentarily. There is a poem Mizpah which states this reality well, although I don't have my reference books with me, but your grandmother has it framed hanging on her bedroom wall a line from the poem, which as its theme says, 'Only a thin veil hangs between the pathways where we are.'" And then he said, "This is true, for I feel you are always with me and I hope you know how I am always with you." Again, that was a good indicator of some of the beliefs he imparted to me.

JE: There's a very long letter here on politics and professions.

JW: That might be the longest, but he goes into extraordinary detail and I think very accurate detail about what a person has to prepare for if they're choosing to be a person that wants to enter a political life. I thought it was a brilliant discourse. At that time I was torn with my specific career, whether it would be the ministry or whether it would be a role in politics or in business, whatever. I think it's an intriguing letter filled with just marvelous insight.

JE: Analyzing any job, the points he believes are essential. He has that included as well.

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: And you wrote to him, I suspect, because it wasn't easy to get on the phone and call when you were in school.

JW: Yeah, it's hard to envision. I mean, it's not been that many years, but we didn't have

telephones in our room. You had to go out to a payphone and those were usually long lines. You had to stand around. Certainly, no Internet. In spite of that, we probably talked on the phone I'm guessing probably not more than once a week but maybe trying to once a week, maybe every other week. The telephone communication was important. I remember Dad kidding about how expensive it was (Chuckles), and maybe that's another reason he felt that communication through letters was important.

JE: And then he was writing to Pat as well.

JW: Yes, he was. Pat's mentioned a great deal in these letters in my book which meant there was constant communication going on between both my dad and my mom and both sons.

JE: What kind of salary was he making at the University of Oklahoma?

JW: I believe in 1963 when he retired, his salary was \$25,000 a year. Someone has corrected me that it might have been \$32,000. I think he even says maybe \$25,000 in one of the letters. But it is extraordinary to contrast the salaries today of coaches compared to what they were at that time and, of course, I think it's because of the media, because of television and because of all of the revenue that's coming in. I never felt, and I don't think he ever felt, that we were wealthy. We lived well, but we certainly didn't enjoy great wealth.

JE: As you had such a great role model as a father, you, then, were able to take that to become a father to your children.

JW: Mm hmm.

JE: As you spoke to your children, must have been hearing your father in your brain talking to them through you.

JW: Well, I hope so and I think so. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, I just think there's been a lot of research that's been done on the importance of parents. I think we all know that if you're raised in a hostile environment where literally you're being hurt that somehow you learn that behavior. Not always, but there's a tendency to do it. I think I was very fortunate, very blessed to have had the environment that Pat and I had from both our mother and father, but I believe that his philosophy is indelibly (Chuckles) in my head because of my watching him, observing him. Another thing that's been so enriching for me just in the last four weeks with this book have been the number of, not letters, but emails that I've received from people that I'm reconnecting with who recite to me the same things that I have felt about these letters, how much my father meant to them personally. Probably more of them were football players but some of them are people in other walks of life, so that's very rewarding obviously.

JE: And elsewhere on our website you'll find the link to be able to purchase this book Bud Wilkinson's Letters to His Sons.

Chapter 17 – 7:05**Advice from Jay & Bud**

JE: Then, in summary, his strongest qualities as a father.

JW: Well, I believe the encouragement and the love. I think I later learned that not only then but even today maybe with the masculine gender, it's not as common for fathers to be able to express and convey the fact that "I love you, Jay. I really am so proud of you and the person that you've become." I think that is mostly the takeaway for me that it is so important for not just a parent, but for any person in any position of authority, whether you're a school teacher or a counselor or an instructor, a police officer or if you're in business, that conveying very positive, affectionate beliefs and confidence in others really does make a difference in their confidence and their self esteem. An example also of what I'd call life's lessons are just the themes that run through the book. As I mentioned earlier, he was a realist. He knew that it's a tough old world we live in and to learn what is required and what it takes to be competitive and be successful and to do it the right way. I remember in one of the letters, he defined the qualities of a man, you know, what are the qualities of a man? Well, many people would think maybe it's some gridiron gladiator or somebody who goes up and beats on people. No, he said, the qualities of a man are character, kindness and thoughtfulness, and an unselfish attitude of service to others. Those types of lessons, I think, really are important. The importance of preparation, of how much you must prepare to make something happen successfully, and to have determination, to have conviction and faith, the importance of values—there are so many themes that run through this. I've said to others it's not a football book, but it's certainly easy for me to understand from reading the letters why he was so successful, because he's just so consistent in everything he said. And I know what he said to Pat and me was very similar to what he said to his players. It was just that we were fortunate to be his biological children.

JE: So the same qualities had to have made him a great football coach as well.

JW: No doubt.

JE: He might have been a good minister, too.

JW: Well, I think he would. One of his favorite stories was that Jim Tatum, who brought him to Oklahoma—Jim told him many years ago, probably in the late '40s, if he weren't a coach, he thought he'd be a minister. And the reason why was because he felt there weren't as many competent good ministers around. He said, "If I have to go into business, there are

a lot of good businessmen up there. If I'm not going to coach, I think I can be a minister." Now, that might sound like a putdown to the ministerial profession and I don't mean to do that. That's Jim Tatum. But, yeah, Dad would have been successful whether it was a minister, businessman, whatever.

JE: We asked about advice for students who are listening to this about life, about sports, about family—your advice to them.

JW: Well, I think it would be to surround yourself with people who you feel have the same beliefs and the values and the convictions that you do. My dad used to say, and he used to like to say, and I think this is true, that in life you're really competing most against yourself than you are against other people. And that's an interesting reflection, because in a similar tact, Dad used to tell me Abraham Lincoln said you can only be as happy as you make up your mind to be—kind of a similar thought process. I think for younger people, it is a very competitive world that we're in and I think it's important to try to determine what you think you want to do with your life and to prepare for it. It's very important to, in whatever we're doing—and Dad stressed this repeatedly that service to others is really key and there's so many different ways you can make contributions to others. That's an important feature if you're thinking more about yourself than you are the value of those around you that you miss something, and I think that's a key ingredient in this book. And then I think to say to them, and my dad also imparted this, take time to enjoy life and have some fun. He absolutely believed that was important and he encouraged his players, and he enjoyed life in letting down and relaxing and getting a new grip on life. He thought it was re-energizing yourself. And so I would say to younger people, work hard, prepare well, but also enjoy life, smell the roses, and hopefully choose a profession where you feel you can give back to others.

JE: As I reflect and the listener reflects on this interview, here's a man who was so enormously talented academically, athletically, and was very, very successful, but yet in life he had disappointments as well, so the measure of the man is how he both handled the disappointments and the highs in his life.

JW: I absolutely agree because, as we both know, life is tough enough. It's not ever going to be an easy slide. There are disappointments, there are heartaches, there are tragedies throughout life, setbacks, ambiguities, contradictions, and when those things occur, you have to either decide that you're going to muster up the courage and the grace to go through it or to withdraw. And I believe that he beyond a shadow demonstrated that and he always felt—and I believe—that if you really are trying to make a difference, if you're trying to do your best and to help people, then don't take it too seriously. He used to say it isn't winning or losing that has lasting value or importance. Now that didn't mean to him the final outcome of the scoreboard was not important, but he felt that if you had the

right values, winning would take care of itself.

JE: And maybe your book, *Letters to His Son*, will encourage people to actually write a letter and not just send an email.

JW: Well, I surely hope so. I really do. I think that that's one of the takeaways and people have asked me did I do as well with my four children as my dad did to me, and I have to honestly say, well, no, but I've done my best to communicate and I communicate far more frequently in email, but I've been astounded at—not lots and lots—but already within three to four weeks, maybe five or six emails with people telling me that now they're going to write their grandchild or this person. And so, yes, I surely hope that's a takeaway.

JE: Your likeness to him is there. We look at your face and your smile and your mannerism. You did inherit that from your father.

JW: Well, I think so. I think I have a lot of his mannerisms and I always consider that a compliment. He retained more hair on the top of his head than I do, and I think that that's an advantage (Chuckles), you know, to have some hair on the top of your head, but I consider it a compliment because he was such a handsome, outgoing guy.

JE: Right. Well, I want to thank you, Jay, for this time we've spent. It's been very interesting, very revealing about yourself, about your father, and the encouragement to write letters to our sons and daughters as well. Thank you for this time.

JW: Well, thank you, John. It's an honor and a privilege. Thank you.

JE: You bet.

Chapter 18 – 0:29

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.