

IN MEMORIAM: 1924-2012

Longhorn **LEGEND**

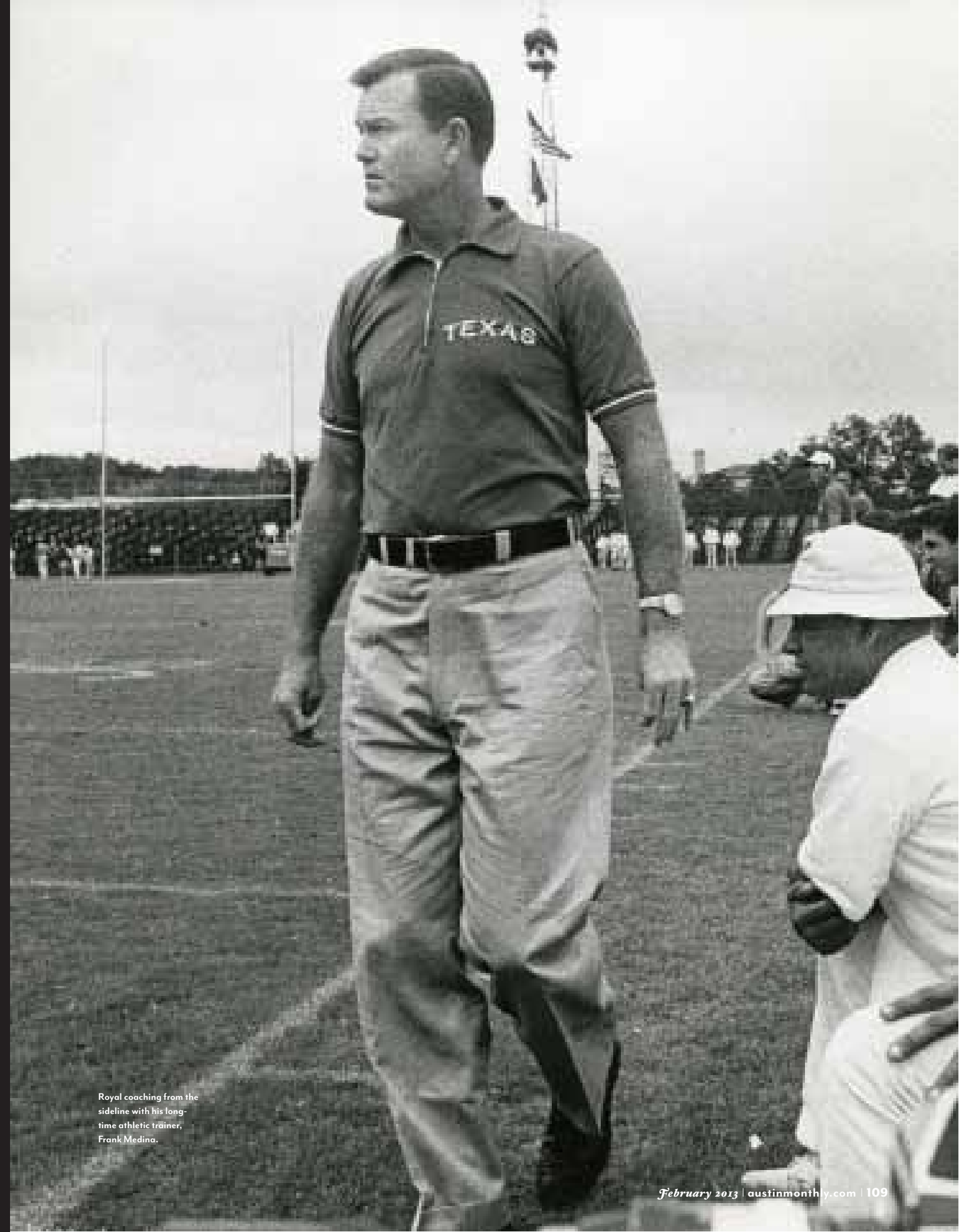


The life, influence and coaching acumen of

DARRELL K ROYAL

BY JOHN T. DAVIS

PHOTO COURTESY ROYAL FAMILY ARCHIVES.



Royal coaching from the sideline with his long-time athletic trainer, Frank Medina.

COACH WOULD HAVE APPROVED.

On a chilly day about a week and a half before last Thanksgiving, the sky was layered over with a scrim of thin gray clouds. Patches of blue occasionally surfaced in the sky. The north wind had a serrated, frosty edge that had folks reaching for long-neglected coats and scarves that smelled faintly of moth-balls and cedar closets. The choppy surface of Lady Bird Lake looked like a slab of black slate. Football weather. 🍂 A little more than a week later, on Thanksgiving Day, the University of Texas Longhorns—the team Darrell K Royal had turned into a national pigskin powerhouse—were due to play the TCU Horned Frogs at the Darrell K Royal–Texas Memorial Stadium, a colossal structure that would have made Ozymandias gape in awe. The game promised to be a head-knocking throwback to the glory days of the old Southwest Conference, when Royal and his Longhorns strapped it on 'em every Saturday. 🍂 Coach would have approved. 🍂 Inside the Frank Erwin Center, some 1,800 people gathered to honor the memory of the iconic Longhorn football coach, who died on Nov. 7 at age 88 from complications of cardiovascular disease after a long battle with Alzheimer's. Most of the people assembled were just plain fans and friends. Some were super “Orangebloods,” the über-boosters, rich and politically connected, who sometimes seem to regard the UT football program as a personal fiefdom. Gov. Rick Perry (an Aggie, no less), Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott were all in attendance. Willie Nelson flew in from Hawaii to sing “Healing Hands of Time” for his old friend. Even old coaching rivals like Arkansas’ Frank Broyles and OU’s Barry Switzer showed up to pay respects.

REMEMBERING ROYAL

STUDDERED HERE AND THERE IN THE CROWD—MANY EASY to distinguish by their outsized frames—were upwards of 200 of Royal's ex-players, the men who were molded in the crucible of his program and personality. There was Heisman winner Earl Campbell, with a silvery patriarch's beard, stoi-

cally bearing the crippling legacy of all the hits in college and the pros. There was former quarterback James Street, still looking lithe and nimble enough to suit up in his No. 16 jersey. He had been the recipient of the most famous play Royal ever called, Right 53 Veer on fourth down, a deep pass play that set the Longhorns up to nip Arkansas 15-14 in the waning minutes of 1969's “Game of the Century.” (As Street prepared to go in, he asked, “Are you sure, Coach?” “Damn right,” Royal replied.)

Across the way was Johnnie Johnson, once a tongue-tied, shy recruit from LaGrange. When he first met the coach, Royal took him aside and kindly told him that in the future he should shake hands firmly when introduced and look folks in the eye. It was a life lesson Johnson never forgot. “He was a man of character, and he talked about character to all the people he came in contact with,” Johnson says.

Another giveaway to the players in the audience: Against the dark hues of somber garb flashed bits of color—the gold, orange and white “T-rings” that Royal had designed. They were awarded only to lettermen that went on to graduate. According to the recently published *DKR: The Royal Scrapbook* by Jenna Hays McEachern (see “Tragedy and Triumph,” page 113), “In 1957 ... Royal became the first coach in NCAA history to hire a full-time academic counselor, or ‘brain coach’ ... During the Royal years, 80 percent of football lettermen earned their degrees.”

UT President Bill Powers spoke of Royal's determination: “From insisting that our colors are not just orange and white, but *burnt* orange and white, to putting the Longhorn silhouette on our helmets, he was the real creator of the Longhorn brand that defines our institution around the world today.”

Coach would have approved—or would he?

“I know Coach would think this is a little bit over the top,” admits Longhorn coach Mack Brown of the memorial. “He'd say, ‘It's foolish that our staff is over here when we've got TCU



Opposite page: Royal by the UT stadium in 2006. Above: Royal with his family; his children Mack, David and Marian circa 1961.



coming up. How dumb is that—that you're not working?”

(Royal's ghost may have had a point: UT got beat by the Horned Frogs 20-13 on Thanksgiving night.)

Before the service, the mezzanine level was lit up with examples of “Royalisms,” famous nuggets of wisdom that he had cranked out with lifelong regularity. A few of his gems: “Luck never jumped on anybody sitting in the shade;” “He runs faster than small-town gossip;” and, most famously, “We're gonna dance with who brung us.”

These quips survive as part of Royal's legacy, as does his name on the stadium, a life-size statue on campus and amazing statistics over the course of a 20-year career as UT coach: two decades without a losing season; three national championships; 16 bowl appearances (8-7-1); 11 Southwest Conference championships won or shared; a .774 win record; victory over Texas A&M 17 out of 20 games; co-creator of the wishbone offense that revolutionized offensive play. And those numbers don't even take into account the All-American quarterback honors he earned leading the Oklahoma Sooners to an undefeated season in 1949.

A MAN OF MANY FACES

TO UT UNDERGRADS TODAY, MANY OF WHOSE PARENTS were growing up when Royal hung up his coach's whistle in 1976, DKR might have been the sum of just that—an impersonal set of stats set in agate type, a name chiseled above a stadium arch, a cold statue of bronze. But that's not the way it worked out. Besides the boys he helped mold into men on and off the field in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, Royal left an indelible imprint on the present-day University of Texas.

“[Royal showed] you can be successful in this life and do it with character and integrity,” Powers says. “And that is such a lesson for these students. When he came out on the field, the

student section would cheer. They knew who he was. Even though he wasn't of their era, they know about Coach.”

Besides his defining role as a coach, Royal was also a husband—he married his wife, Edith, in 1944—and a father of three, who mourned the untimely death of two of his children, Marian and David, both of whom died in motor accidents nine years apart.

His surviving son, Mack, 65, who works at Texas Health and Human Services Commission in Austin, has fond memories of his upbringing. Though Mack says Royal rarely attended “dad” functions like school events, he and his siblings had Memorial Stadium as their personal clubhouse. “We felt like we were part of the team,” he says. “He tried his best to entertain us; he sang all the time. But when he was at home, he was on the telephone most of the time, and we knew we had to be quiet. But I remember a pretty happy childhood, really.”

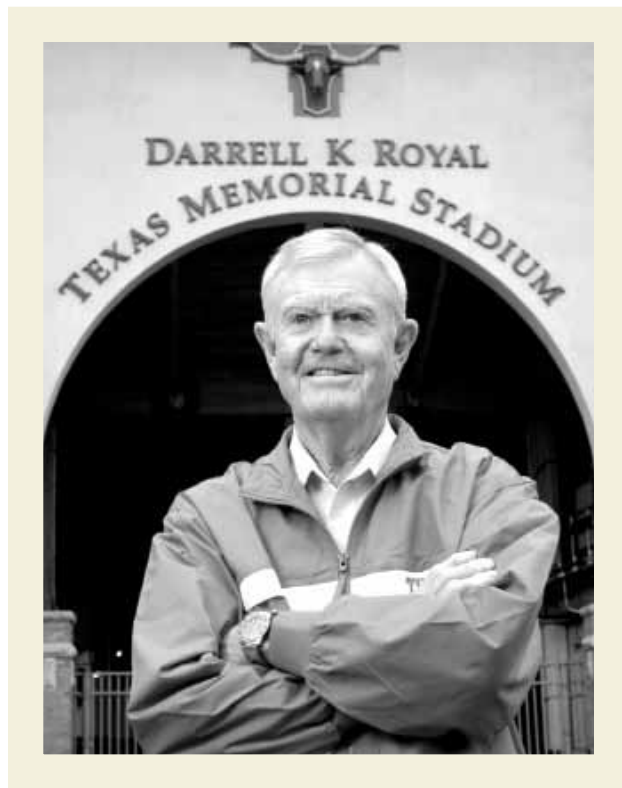
While his father was traditional, he was also adaptable. “He had very definite ideas about hair length,” Mack says. “We grew up in the '60s, and he was kind of slow to come into the '60s as we knew it. We just wanted to have our own identities.”

Royal wore many faces beyond his public one. He was an avid golfer, who often played with Masters champion Ben Crenshaw, as well as a devoted music fan whose late-night “pickin' parties” became the stuff of legend. He also had a five-decade friendship with Willie Nelson that helped define both men.

But it's possible that the one face he saw in the mirror every morning was of a motherless boy from Hollis, Okla., born in 1924, whose childhood was spent mired in the wastes of the Depression. His mother, Katy Elizabeth, died when he was just four months old; the “K” in his name is in her memory. His father, Burley, took the family west as part of the Dust Bowl migration. As a 14-year-old boy, Darrell worked at manual labor before hitchhiking back to Oklahoma and suiting up for the high school Hollis Tigers. He saw self-improvement as his way out of the Depression's trap. Picking fruit for pennies in the hot San Joaquin Valley sun will do that.

PHOTO COURTESY UT ATHLETIC CLUB.

PHOTOS COURTESY ROYAL FAMILY ARCHIVES.



Writing in *Sports Illustrated* shortly after Royal's passing, CAMPBELL offered his own assessment: "I've lost a father figure, one of the best friends I've ever had in my life and the man who taught me how to be a man."

"His will to improve was legendary," writes McEachern. And wife Edith adds, "He was a poor boy, and he was so lonely ... I think that drove him harder than a lot of the others. He wanted so much more than he ever had in Hollis."

Darrell and Edith hopped around the country, even up to Canada to coach the Edmonton Eskimos of the CFL and at short-lived college coaching jobs before an offer to run the football program at Texas arrived in 1956. It seemed random, but Royal had a goal to coach at a school with a "the" in front of the name—a prestigious state university, in other words.

The Longhorns were in dreadful disarray when he arrived—they had gone 1-9 the preceding year—and the coach had to establish himself. At the memorial service, one of Royal's former players told of the boyish-looking, 32-year-old new hire encountering a couple of Longhorns in the locker room. They asked him what his position on the depth chart was. "Well," Royal deadpanned, "they have me down as the new head coach, and I sure hope I can make the team."



BUILDING A LEGACY

BY THE TIME HE WON HIS FIRST NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP in 1963, anonymity was the least of Royal's problems. Any coach of UT was always a default celebrity in Texas, but Royal's championship—the first in UT history—made him an overnight star across the nation.

Gary Cartwright, who along with Bud Shrake and their editor Blackie Sherrod set the bar for sports writing at the *Dallas Times Herald* and *The Dallas Morning News*, actually hid Royal out during the hoopla. "Darrell called just after he had been named Coach of the Year and said, 'Listen, guys, I need to hide out from the media. Could I stay at your apartment?'" he says. "Here we were sports writers, hiding out the Coach of the Year from other sports writers!"

"We'd go out at night and we decided that, as part of his disguise, we'd call him 'Delbert,'" Cartwright adds. "And for the rest of our lives, that's how we referred to him. He liked both of us for some reason."

When, in 1968, Royal and his offensive backs coach Emory Bellard pioneered the complex, devastating offensive formation called the wishbone, enlisting a triple option with three backs, it just added to the DKR legend. Ironically, the wishbone violated Royal's most cherished coaching precepts: emphasize the kicking game, control field position and make the opponent throw the ball. The famously conservative coach suddenly had the sexiest offensive system in college football.

Mack adds an interesting embellishment to the tale: "His older brother Don coached high school football in Oklahoma, and he wrote Dad one day. He said, 'Darrell, I've been trying to make this formation work with my kids, but they're just too young. See what you can make of it.' And that was the beginning of the wishbone. You don't hear that story, but he said that's the way it happened. You just can't fight the legend."

Rather than keep the innovation a strictly burnt orange property, Royal helped rivals Bear Bryant and Chuck Fairbanks install the wishbone at Alabama and OU, an act of generosity almost unimaginable today. Bryant later insisted that Royal's formation saved his career at Alabama. But not every colleague was regarded with such generosity. Royal did not like Fairbanks' successor, Barry Switzer. "He thought coaches like Switzer were ruining college football," Cartwright says.

Things came to a head in the weeks before the 1976 Texas-Oklahoma game. Royal was convinced OU had been spying on Texas practices for years, and he publicly called out Switzer before the game. "Those sorry bastards," he told

a reporter (after he thought their interview had concluded). "I don't trust them on anything." On game day, when Royal entered the stadium, the entire

From the top: Edith and Royal, hanging with pals Willie Nelson and Earl Campbell.

PHOTOS BY RICK HENSON

crimson-clad Sooner half of the Cotton Bowl thundered, "Sorry bastard! Sorry bastard!" Worse yet, the game ended in a tie. (Years later, OU's defensive coordinator and Switzer himself admitted that the spying accusations were true, though Switzer later recanted that claim.)

By then, Royal was ready to move on. He'd won his championships, and he didn't like the increasingly corporate direction of college football. A 1972 tell-all by an ex-player named Gary Shaw called *Meat On the Hoof* painted Royal as an aloof martinet who tyrannized his players. It caused a sensation at the time, but the book never defined DKR's legacy.

More profound and impactful to that legacy, though, was his long-deferred embrace of African-American players. To no one's credit, Royal's 1969 Longhorns were the last all-white team to win a national championship. (Julius Whittier, Texas's first black letterman, was on the squad but ineligible to play that year. He started in 1970. Roosevelt Leaks, Campbell, Vince Young and many other gifted players followed in his footsteps.)

Some critics said Texas' lily-white squads mirrored Royal's racism. But that was rubbish. As a boy in Depression-era California, he'd known the sting of being branded an Okie—as demeaning a term as "n--ger" in those days. But other forces were at play. "He wasn't a racist in any way," Cartwright says. "Also, he wanted to win, and he knew the black players were the best athletes available. But he couldn't make the move at Texas. Talking about the Orangebloods, he said, 'They would have run me out of the state.'"

Writing in *Sports Illustrated* shortly after Royal's passing, Campbell offered his own assessment: "I've lost a father figure, one of the best friends I've ever had in my life and the man who taught me how to be a man."

By 1976, the political pressure and changing nature of the game had taken their toll on Royal. He retired after Texas beat Arkansas on Dec. 4, 1976 at the age of 52. He stayed on as athletic director until 1980 and later served as a special assistant to the president for academic affairs, but his heart wasn't really in it. Summing up his role, he said, "I've agreed not to give any advice unless I'm asked. And they've agreed not to ask."

Royal's name was added to the Memorial Stadium facade in 1996. But it took Brown, who became head coach in 1998, to restore Royal himself to the epicenter of Longhorn consciousness. "When I got here, I thought you needed to go back and give respect to the coaches who built this place," Brown says. It was important to the university, and it was personal for Brown. "I lost my dad and my granddad four months before I got to Texas," he says. "One of the reasons I came was that it gave me a chance to get closer to [Royal] when I needed an older male role model in my life. I live with his thoughts and philosophy each and every day."

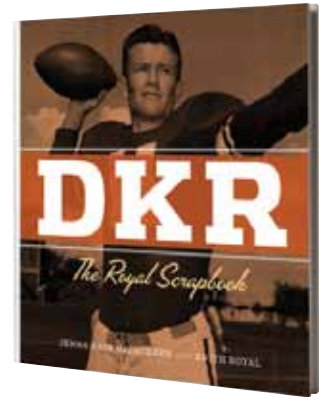
Brown picked his own way to honor his predecessor. The Saturday following Royal's death, in the game against Iowa State, Brown—a devotee of the shotgun as a rule—made sure the first offensive play the Longhorns ran was Royal's signature wishbone formation. Texas won the game.

Coach would have approved. ■

BOOK PHOTO COURTESY: UT PRESS.

TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH

Jenna Hays McEachern, along with Darrell K Royal's wife, Edith, is the author of recently published *DKR: The Royal Scrapbook*. The wife of former Longhorn quarterback Randy McEachern, Jenna has written or edited other books about the Longhorns. But this volume, she says, was a labor of love.



What was the inspiration for the book? Edith and I have been friends since I was 19. She knew I had written a couple of books, and one day she brought these folders to me full of letters children had written to Coach Royal. Some of them were precious and clever. They drew pictures of Bevo. Wonderful letters. Edith said, "I don't know what we're going to do with these, but I wanted you to have them." That by itself wasn't substantive enough for a book. Leading up to his 85th birthday, we started collecting letters from players and friends, but that still kind of wasn't enough for a book. But I realized I was tired of kids saying to me, "Who's Darrell Royal?" It killed me that there was this generation of kids who had no idea who this great man was.

How did you want to present Royal? Edith and Darrell's life has been something out of a movie, from the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches to the height of fame—and horrible tragedy—and they have touched so many peoples' lives with their authenticity and genuine capacity. I really wanted to put that on paper. Nobody needed another detailed historical biography of Coach Royal's life. We came up with the fact that it needed to look like a scrapbook.

The toughest point of the book from Edith's perspective must have been talking about the deaths of her two children and the strain that put on their marriage. True? I think so, but I also think she has been so generous with those facts in the event because they might help somebody else.

Coach Royal suffered from Alzheimer's in his last years. Did he provide any input into the book? We started on this about three and a half years ago. Edith and I both thought it would be great for Coach Royal to look at some of these scrapbooks. He'd identify some pictures and tell me funny anecdotes about this or that coach. He didn't really have direct input, but I heard wonderful stories hanging around their house. It seems to me that the last six months of his life were a pretty rapid descent. But he knew that Edith and I were working a lot together, and he knew there was going to be a book.

He and Edith were married for 68 years. What was their secret? First of all, they were crazy about one another. They met when they were in high school. Edith giggles and says, "He wasn't the first boyfriend I ever had," but Coach Royal always said, "She was the only girl I ever cared for." They're both genuine people. I think they were pretty out there with their emotions. There had to be a lot of forgiveness. And she gave him a lot of freedom to be the face of Texas football. They had a great respect for one another.

What has been the biggest payoff from the book? What has pleased me most is when his players have thanked me for writing the book, or when his players say, "You nailed it." That's what I had prayed for. I wanted Edith and his players to be honored by the book. —J. T. DAVIS