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Darrell Should Win As Often

Compared to the Longhorns' coach, Gil Steinke of Texas A&I is true royalty

Edwin Shrake

Cold rain blew through the football stadium where about 12,000 people crouched under umbrellas and makeshift shelters on a miserable Saturday night in Kingsville, Texas. It was one of those sudden storms that hit the Gulf coast. In the afternoon it may be white and still and sweaty hot, and by evening you can't see across the street through wind-driven rain that rips limbs off trees and makes ponds in the grain fields.

For 12,000 people to gather at Javelina Stadium in Kingsville on such a night is comparable to 500,000 heading for the Cotton Bowl in Dallas to watch a football game during a Texas typhoon. What drew them out, helped by the rather light calendar of public events in Kingsville on a Saturday night, was the fact that the local university,

Texas A&I, has a team that has won 22 straight games, was the NAIA national champion last year and is currently No. 1 in the nation in the small-college rankings, ahead of North Dakota, Boise State, Grambling and the rest.

In the 12th row of the student section in Javelina Stadium, at the 20-yard line, a man sat wrapped in a hooded poncho, rain pouring from his brow onto a hand that covered his cigarette. Beside him was a younger man in a blue cap and blue plastic jacket. They squinted at ink blotches on a clipboard.

"Tell that son of a buck to move his tail fast when he sees that guy start out of the backfield," said the man in the hood. The other jumped up, trotted down the concrete steps through the crowd, leaped over the fence, sloshed through water on the track and began to speak to A&I coaches and players near the bench. Then the man in the hood had another thought: "The son of a buck ought to get right in his face." He rushed down the steps in the rain and ran to the sideline, waving his arms and shouting, his cigarette stuck to his chin in a mush of wet paper and tobacco.

In Kingsville everybody knew who the man in the hood was, and nobody paid his behavior much attention. At other stadiums around the Southwest and as far off as Honolulu and Mexico City, curious spectators have been heard to ask, "Who is that strange person who keeps sending his friend down to talk to the coach and then goes

down and talks to the coach himself?" The strange person's wife has heard people ask that. She laughs when she tells about it, because the strange person, her husband, is Gil Steinke, the Texas A&I coach.

A visitor wandered into Javelina Stadium on a hot, clear afternoon in the middle of the week and inquired where he might find Coach Steinke. "You wouldn't believe it if I told you," said a Mexican in a straw hat. Steinke wasn't in his office. On his desk beside pictures of his wife, two sons and daughter stood several metal sculptures of javelinas—wild pigs that range from South America up to the country around the Texas A&I campus, where one pig is said to have snacked on the leg of a former A&I president—and there were drawings and paintings of javelinas on the walls, along with photographs of Steinke's championship teams. Texas A&I has won the NAIA national football championship four times in all, three times in the past six years, and the Lone Star Conference eight of the last 16.

In a few minutes Steinke walked into the office, flapping his hands as if shaking off irksome fluids. "Shoo, that stuff stinks," he said. Steinke is about 6 feet tall, in his middle 50s, parts his hair in the center and still weighs 171 pounds, which is what he weighed when he was a star running back at Texas A&I and a starting defensive back for the Philadelphia Eagles' 1948 NFL championship team. "Lordy, it gets in your eyes and nose," he said.

Steinke sat down rather gently and thrust a couple of yellow patent leather loafers onto the top of the desk. "It's the damn old mold," he said. "This humid climate." What Steinke had been doing was scrubbing the ladies' rest rooms in the stadium with Clorox. "I don't like for ladies to come to our games and have to go to a room that's not clean," he said.

He sprang up and moved around the office, emptying ashtrays, looking for things that might have gotten out of place. Steinke is a natural mover and fixer who eats and sleeps lightly, and as the Javelinas' winning streak increases he is inclined to become even more fidgety. Two years ago the Javelinas went 2-8, the worst record in Steinke's 22 years as their head coach and only his second losing season. Last year they were picked seventh in their conference and instead finished unbeaten at 13-0, including the NAIA playoffs. Two hours before the national championship game against Henderson State of Arkansas, Steinke was up in the stands at Javelina Stadium sweeping the seats with a broom.

The King's Inn is a sea-food restaurant in an old white wooden building on the shore of Baffin Bay, some 20 miles from the town of Kingsville. Steinke sat at the head of the table waiting for his coaching staff to arrive for an enormous dinner of fish, shrimp, crab, scallops, oysters, fried onion rings and fresh tomatoes and cucumbers. The only coach left from the

disastrous year of 1973 is Fred Jonas, the defensive coordinator. After reflecting upon that 2-8 record, Steinke hired a whole new staff.

"Maybe I didn't really want to coach in 1973," Steinke said. "I couldn't concentrate. I was surrounded by philosophers who had different ideas from mine, and I put off making difficult decisions." During that time Steinke had pain in his lower back that prevented him from sitting. If he had to fly somewhere on a long trip, his wife Mary would drive to the airport in Corpus Christi, 35 miles away, while Steinke lay on the backseat. Once the plane was in the air, Steinke would stand, helping to serve the drinks and meals and clear the trays. He would sit down again just before landing. After going through several doctors, Steinke decided his pain was from some form of toxemia. He changed his diet along with his coaching staff in 1974, and much of the pain went away. He also put in a new style of offense, the veer, and a sophomore quarterback, Richard Ritchie, and Texas A&I has not lost a game since. "I guess you could say we owe most of our turnaround to Richard," Steinke said. "He's smart, he makes quick judgments, he can throw the ball. Lordy, he takes some licks. He's a tough little rascal, thank heaven. I don't know what we'd do without him."

Steinke also mentally dismissed several of the 1973 players he felt were easing along on the scholarship ride. "I don't have much

patience with a kid who wants to argue with our rules and won't put out all he can," he said. "College was one of the greatest experiences of my life. Soon as I finished, I wished I could have started all over again. I loved every bit of it."

But when Steinke was through as a player at A&I he went into the Navy, became a gunnery officer, served 33 consecutive months at sea in World War II and was torpedoed on the U.S.S. Canberrain the Pacific. The blast burned off his eyebrows. Steinke was released from the Navy in Boston and joined the Philadelphia Eagles without returning home. In 1946 he led the Eagles in interceptions, and had the best punt return average in the NFL. "They used to talk about how fast I was when I was a pro," Steinke said. "But, heck, I was 27 years old by then. They should have seen me when I was 21. I tell my black kids now that they might not believe it, but there used to be a time when white kids were fast."

The following year he broke his leg. Still recuperating in 1948, he worked as assistant coach at Trinity in San Antonio until the Eagles asked him to return with four games remaining in the season. Steinke practiced on a Saturday and started at defensive halfback the following day and on through the championship game. He signed a contract for \$1.00, figuring he would be paid whatever he was worth. The Eagles gave him a little gold football with his name on it. The next summer at training camp, he broke

his neck. He never did get paid any more on that \$1.00 contract.

"I used to say I'd play football just for the love of it, and that's what I wound up doing," he said. "I got robbed, but it ain't that big a deal. My life went on anyhow. I had my share of glory as a player and I coached at some big schools before I came back to A&I. So I haven't needed the ego kick of the big-school coaching life. I'm happy down here out of the way."

In the white mansion with the red tile roof and the cannon on the lawn at Santa Gertrudis, the headquarters ranch for the Delaware-size area that makes up the famous King Ranch, there was a party on Friday night before A&I's 50th anniversary homecoming game. The mansion is a couple of miles from the A&I campus. A few miles farther down the road, on King Ranch property, is the biggest gas-separating plant in the world. Texas A&I is the only university in the country that offers an accredited four-year degree in natural gas engineering. The result is a large number of students from Iran, Egypt, Venezuela, Thailand, Oman and other oil-producing nations. But foreign students seldom play college football. Instead of using natural gas engineering as a recruiting inducement, Steinke talks to high school athletes in what he considers his territory—from Houston and San Antonio south to the border—about the phenomenal number of pro football players Texas A&I produces. There are nine A&I exes playing in the NFL this year. Six of them were

first-round draft choices—Randy Johnson, Gene Upshaw, Jim Hill, Eldridge Small, Ernest Price and Don Hardeman.

"We tell the kids if they go to one of those big schools they might get lost," Steinke said, standing beside the fountain in the courtyard inside the mansion. "But if they come with us, they can do a lot of playing and get noticed right away. I'm not afraid to go head to head with the big schools after a boy. But if the big school is Oklahoma, we don't usually bother. Oklahoma snatched a couple of boys right out of our hands this year. We don't have many scholarships or a big recruiting staff, so we cull out our prospects pretty quick. We can't waste time on a hot dog who's telling us one thing and other schools something else."

On the afternoon of the homecoming game, the stadium lawnmower broke down and a norther blew in with rain and wind. Steinke prowled Javelina Stadium, fretting over details from toilet paper to the welfare of the trainers (two of A&I's student athletic trainers are women), to the high wet grass that would take away A&I's advantage in speed. The rain also would cut the crowd to less than the 17,500 capacity, but at least Steinke and Assistant Coach Gene Walkoviak would have it easier finding a place to sit in the stands. In Honolulu this year when A&I beat the University of Hawaii 43-9 in front of 33,000 at the opening of Aloha Stadium, Steinke didn't have a ticket for the stands and had to persuade an usher to let

him sit in an aisle. In the huge stadium in Monterrey, Mexico last season, Steinke sat in a nearly empty section across the field from his team's bench. When his mind was struck by a dazzling piece of advice for the Javelinas, he rushed down the steps and discovered a locked gate and a moat between him and his players.

Defensive Coordinator Jonas sits in the press box with piles of computer-printed information. He is hooked up to the sideline with the usual earphone and mouthpiece gear. Steinke takes nothing with him into the stands except for Walkoviak to do some of the consulting and much of the message carrying.

"I started sitting in the stands last season," Steinke said, watching a waterfall of rain flowing down a stadium exit. "The sideline is the worst possible place to watch a game. You can't tell what the devil is going on from the sideline. I try to sit about 12 rows up where it's high enough that I can see and low enough so it's not too far to run down to the field. At home I ask a student to save me a couple of seats on the aisle. I sit at about the 20 so I can stay away from the band, and I sit on the student side so I can stay away from the alumni.

"Since I don't know what play we've called, I watch half the field and Gene watches the other half. In the stands I get a feeling for how the game is going without getting messed up with too many specifics. I could use a telephone like Fred

does, but then I'd be involved in a lot of conversation that's mostly just confusing. The way I see it, successful coaches are not the guys who make all the right decisions, they're the guys who make less wrong decisions than the losers. In the stands I'll get an idea, but by the time I can go all the way to the bench the situation has changed and my idea is probably useless. That keeps me from overreacting."

Steinke peered at the rain and went into the equipment room to dig out his hooded poncho and white tennis shoes. "Angelo State has got some real monsters," he said. "They're liable to bury our poor skinny little boys in this mud. Lord help us nobody on our side gets drowned."

Texas A&I won the game on two touchdown passes by Ritchie and a defense that took the ball away from Angelo State at several critical moments. The next two weeks the Javelinas beat Tarleton State 28-0 and Sam Houston State 43-7 to remain at the top of the Lone Star Conference and the national NAIA rankings. As a wealthy alumnus said at the homecoming dance at the Elks Club in Kingsville, "I used to sit on the bench in college and watch old Gil run up and down the field. He had the ball in his arm then. Now he's maybe got a clipboard and a cigarette. But nobody ever could catch him."