

[This story found in the SI Vault and originally appeared in the Nov. 2, 1970 issue of *Sports Illustrated*; as is used by permission.]

They Don't Play No Mullets Down There

Small-college football has its own big time, like Arkansas (State) and Texas (A&I). As for tiny Wittenberg, it only asks: Who are those Buckeyes?

Pat Putnam

All right, football fans, let's knock off the chatter about Ohio State and Notre Dame—yeah, and about Texas—and let's wander out into small-college territory, to places like Wittenberg and Westminster, to North Dakota State and Texas A&I and Tampa. If you have never been there to see that game played, you have tasted the frosting but neglected the cake. And don't let all that small talk fool you. Nobody ever said a diamond wasn't worth looking at unless it weighed 10 karats. There are splendid little gems around that have never had the exposure of television.

You've heard of Jim Plunkett, Archie Manning, Rex Kern? Go down to Abilene, Texas sometime and catch Jim Lindsey, the nation's alltime total-offense leader. Not small college, not big college—all college. Plunkett may be offense champion of the bigs, but Lindsey is a God-fearing riverboat gambler, and you don't find that kind everywhere. That is, he is a reverent man in a reverent school—Abilene Christian—but he tends to forget the Sermon on the Mount when he goes into battle. Like Saturday night, as he passed for three touchdowns against the percentage players of Arkansas State, the AP's very top small school, No. 1 in the NCAA College Division.

Well, forget the polls and rankings for a moment. First come on into a small school and wander around a bit, sniff the air, linger with the people.

Texas A&I is an uncut beauty found far south of Abilene. It is in Kingsville, near the Gulf Coast, and on its flat campus there is a working oil well. The town counts 31,000 citizens, plus almost as many palm, mesquite, banana and orange trees. This jewel of a school has been a maxi-power in the mini NAIA since winning its first national championship in 1959. It has won so many games since then (94) that Coach Gil Steinke is starting to worry that his Javelinas are becoming something of a bore.

"You're never really happy when you win all the time," says Steinke. "You appreciate it more when it's something different. You get a bit more picky-ish about how you win."

Steinke watched glumly as his defending NAIA champions opened with a sluggish 23-0 victory over Trinity. Unimpressed, Dennis B. Ford, dean of the School of Business Administration, leveled on some players in one of his classes. "What's wrong with you guys," he said, "you looked sloppy. If you keep playing like that you won't win it all again this season." One player was Karl Douglas, who passed for 305 yards and three touchdowns in last year's 32-7 victory over Concordia in the NAIA championship game. Douglas had to struggle to keep from leveling back.

With Douglas sidelined temporarily with an injured finger, Texas A&I beat Stephen F. Austin 14-13, and then things, with the help of a little glue and a rubber band, began to perk up. Douglas' problem was that he couldn't straighten the last joint of his index finger, which meant he couldn't take a snap from center. Steinke solved that by gluing a rubber band to the fingernail and then stretching the band back over the wrist. After that the Javelinas beat East Texas State 43-28—they were trailing 21-0 when Douglas finally got into the game—and then Sul Ross State 27-0. Came last Saturday and a 38-21 loss to Angelo State and Steinke didn't have to worry any longer about the team pumping, pumping victories. "Like I always said," mused Co-Captain Jim Brown, "the Lone Star Conference is plenty tough. We don't play no mullets."

There is a formula for winning in small-college football, and Steinke follows it faithfully. For one thing you recruit from the smaller, less-successful high schools. "You go to a school that won the state championship and, shoot, there'll be 10 million scouts running around and only two or three players good enough for college," says Steinke. Instead, Steinke spends his time searching for the one good athlete on a team with an 0-10 or 1-9 record.

And, as many small-college coaches have discovered, it doesn't take that many good athletes to be outstanding. Success follows the coach who finds enough top athletes to play quarterback, wide receiver and defensive back and enough average players to fill in the gaps.

"And you have to be lucky," said Steinke. "You get the right bounce and that's it. I always wait for it."

Take the case of Karl Douglas, who is in the process of wiping out all of Randy Johnson's records at Texas A&I. Both Houston and Oklahoma State, which travel by plane, were after the 6'2", 210-pound Douglas. So were the top black colleges. As a recruiting contest, it wasn't hard to pick an underdog: Texas A&I travels by bus.

"But Houston came to me," Douglas reflects, "and said: Can you catch? I said yes. They said: Are you fast? I said yes. They said: Can you play defensive back? And I said yes, but I'm a quarterback. They said they'd evaluate that when I got there. I said I wasn't going. Then Oklahoma State came to my house and said they just recruited by talent, not by position. By that time I had heard that so much I helped them out the door. I just wanted a chance. And if the only chance I got was in small-college football, then that was what I'd take."

So while Douglas may be pretty big, Texas A&I is pretty small, although all small-college football is not played by little colleges. Southern Illinois plays small-college football but has an enrollment of 21,000. And major college football is not played only by large schools. Dartmouth, with an enrollment of only 3,000, plays in the NCAA University Division, even as Michigan and Ohio State—and is just as undefeated.

All this is slightly less complicated than it might seem to be. In the NCAA the strength of a team's schedule determines its classification. To be considered major, a school must play most of its games against major schools. Any team that is not major is placed in a college division. The NCAA has two of these, I and II, and again the distinction depends upon strength of schedule. Then there is the NAIA—mini-mini, if you like—and it has two divisions as well.

The real fun comes in the weekly polls. Before last Saturday's games Tampa was No. 1 in the UPI NCAA college poll, Arkansas State No. 1 in the AP poll, Texas A&I was No. 1 in the NAIA Division I ratings and Westminster of Pennsylvania was No. 1 in Division II. Which makes four times as many people who are ranked No. 2 unhappy. Like North Dakota State. Like Montana.

But none of this bothers Wittenberg, a delightfully small Lutheran school located less than a mile from downtown Springfield, Ohio—and 45 miles west of Ohio State—which has become accustomed to going unbeaten and often un-ranked in the top five. When you are 126 years old and have won 109 of your last 133 games you do not need a poll to confirm that you are good. The 109th victory came last Saturday, 21-14 over Baldwin-Wallace, making it six straight for Wittenberg this year and just about wrapping up another Ohio Conference championship, which is not bad for a school with just 2,542 students.

Just as the fans at Texas A&I have come to expect victory, so have the people at Wittenberg. Last year—Dave Maurer's first as head coach—the team went 11-0 and won its eighth conference championship in the last 13 years. And Wittenberg is not a mini-football factory. Scholarships go only to students who need the help.

"Our winning shouldn't shock anyone," said Maurer, a former quarterback star at Denison. "In a small school they want to win just as much as at a big one. And football is the same game, big or small school."

But there certainly is a difference.

"Sure," said Maurer. "Kids can have a lot of fun here, and that sometimes gets lost in big-time football."

It does not get lost at Westminster College—the one in New Wilmington, Pa.—another of the little-little giants. Westminster is now five games into what could be Dr. Harold E. Burry's fifth unbeaten season. On Saturday Westminster beat Heidelberg 40-20, with Quarterback Dave Bierback throwing three touchdown passes to Roger Price and then running five yards for one of his own. Besides Bierback and Price, there are 1,548 kids in the student body, a group barely outnumbering the redshirts in the SEC.

At the other end of the small-college spectrum are powers like Tampa, Hawaii and Drake, which are moving toward major college status at full bore and beating almost everybody en route.

Now 4-1 after losing to UC Santa Barbara 22-20 Saturday, the Hawaiian Rainbows have upped their scholarship quota from 33 in 1968 to 55 this year and expect to raise that to 75 by 1972. "Of course, we have no delusions of grandeur," says Dick Fishback, the university's sports information director. "We'll have to get to the 100-scholarships-and-over bracket in order to compete evenly with some of our future opponents."

Meanwhile unbeaten Tampa got some national limelight two weeks ago when it rocked Miami 31-14. Last Saturday Tampa ran its current streak to six by beating Xavier 33-10. "If people want big-time football then that's what we'll give them," said Coach Fran Curci. "But they'll have to start filling the stands."

With only 65 scholarships to work with, Curci's job has not been easy; the SEC had a limit of 125. Says Curci: "Coaching, I tell you, is tough as hell."

He might find it even tougher if he played Tennessee State, leader among predominantly black schools. This was not always true. Seven years ago Tennessee State's president, W. S. Davis, decided he was less than happy with the school's recent record of 1-7-1. He fired the coaching staff and hired John Merritt. "It's no secret that football has collapsed around here," said Davis then. "My goal is to reestablish football excellence."

President Davis got all he wished for and more. Under Merritt the Tigers (backed by an enrollment of only 4,500) have won two mythical national black championships. Despite many handicaps, Merritt has built what he freely admits is a football factory.

A burly, flamboyant man, leaning heavily toward flashy rings, wide ties on colored shirts and dark glasses over an *El Producto* cigar, Merritt currently lists 14 of his former players on professional rosters. But, he says, things are getting tougher. He points out that not only are many black athletes going to predominantly white schools, integration is costing many black high school coaches their jobs. When schools integrate, he says, whites are chosen as head coaches, and they in turn point their black stars toward white schools. He also turns a jaundiced eye toward his own school's stiff academic requirements.

"We've got to play schools that have athletes who couldn't get into our place," he says. "I had two great kids coming here, but they couldn't make it academically. Now they're the starting tackles at a Big Ten School."

Despite the handicaps, Merritt has succeeded with a recruiting technique that borrows from both the hard and the soft sell. "I drive a Cadillac but not simply because I can afford it or because I like it," he says. "I drive it because it is important to present a good appearance. A boy who lives on a dirt floor is bound to be impressed by a man who drives a Cadillac and dresses well. But I never give a boy a false promise. I tell it like it is."

Most of Merritt's players come from families with incomes of less than \$4,000 a year, and Merritt knows well the uses of adversity. "It's the old story about the rabbit. A boy is chasing a rabbit, and they pass a squirrel in a tree. 'Are you gonna make it?' the squirrel asks the rabbit. 'Man,' says the rabbit, 'I got to make it.' It's that way with Negroes."

And Tennessee State is making it. After beating Florida A&M 21-10 Saturday the Tigers are now 6-0, and a third national championship is within sight.

As the mini-giants are bound to do every so often, two of them, Arkansas State and Abilene Christian—with its ace quarterback, Jim Lindsey—met head-on Saturday. It may have lacked the prestige of Texas vs. Arkansas, but not much else was missing.

Abilene Christian is associated with the Church of Christ. There is a ban on smoking, drinking and dancing—and there go a lot of fine football prospects. Each day the 3,000 students spend 25 minutes in chapel, praying and meditating. Coed skirts are allowed to go no higher than four inches above the knee.

You could search a long time before finding a less likely place to produce the nation's college offensive leader. But there he is: Jim Lindsey, a 5'11", 185-pound towhead once rejected by Baylor because they thought he was too slow. "I went around to a lot of big schools," he said, "and I saw all the drinking and smoking going on in the dorms. Well, first off, I figured it wasn't going to help make a great football team. And I just didn't want to get with that whole animal image. I'm a member of the Church of Christ. I like to go to church every time the doors open. I feel God gave me all that I have. I feel grateful for what happens to me."

Through five victories and a loss going into Saturday's game what had happened to Lindsey in 1970 were 117 completions in 213 passes, 1,635 yards and 16 touchdowns. Through four seasons so far, he has passed for 7,863 yards.

"One thing that has helped me," says Lindsey, "is reading the Bible. I like to read about Christ. They spat on Him, beat on Him, but He still kept his cool. Guys call me dirty names, tell me they are going to break me in two. If I worry about it, I'm not going to be worth a darn."

At breakfast on Saturday morning Bill Davidson, the Arkansas State offensive coach, thought about facing Lindsey, and then he thought about the injustice of the rules of the Church of Christ. "They can't drink, they can't smoke, they can't dance," he said. "Why did they stop there? Why didn't they put in a rule against quarterbacks?"

But Davidson smiled. He knew that Bennie Ellender, the low-keyed intellectual who teaches football at Arkansas State, would be going into the game with some potent commandments of his own. A percentage man all the way, Ellender is a professor who analyzes every variable and then plays the most pat hand. He has none of the usual qualms about being voted No. 1. "In fact, I kind of like the idea," he says.

Arkansas State is a terrible basic team—big and slow and very strong. Its long rushing gain this season is 30 yards. Ellender likes to run his fullback, Calvin Harrell, 40 times a game. It's slug, slug and slug, and so far not one of State's first six opponents have out-slugged the Indians. And they are highly annoyed by any lack of recognition, especially from within the state.

"All this state knows is Razorbacks," said Guard Bill Phillips.

"Shoot," said Harrell. "They'll hear about us in Alaska before they hear about us in Arkansas."

"Yeah, we'd sure love to play those Razorbacks," said Defensive Tackle Chris Millwee. "As far as most people are concerned, we're ugly stepsisters."

And so, angry as usual, Arkansas State took it out on Abilene Christian 28-23 as Lindsey ran out of miracles. Still, he completed 33 of 63 for 414 yards and three touchdowns, all of them scoring throws to Ronnie Vinson. Harrell played with a limp, but well enough to run 27 times for 106 yards and one touchdown. And his ramming runs bunched Abilene Christian's defense enough to turn the rest of the attack loose. And that's how Ohio State got to be No. 1 while playing with the big boys.

