The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Darrell K Royal, professor and football coach, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
General Faculty and Faculty Council

IN MEMORIAM
DARRELL K ROYAL

There is no such thing as defeat except when it comes from within. As long as a person doesn’t admit he is defeated, he is not defeated. ... He’s just a little behind and isn’t through fighting.

Darrell K Royal

In a state where the sport of football is revered and whose flagship university maintains its most intense (and cherished) rivalry with the flagship university of the state just to the north across the Red River, it is perhaps ironic that one of the most enduring legacies established at The University of Texas was built on the football field by a native Oklahoman, Darrell K Royal. Few names associated with The University of Texas and its distinguished history are as recognized or respected as his.

Darrell K Royal’s profession was that of teacher—and his subject was the sport of American football. In an interview published in 2005, he said of himself and his coaches, “Damn right, we were teachers. I was teaching, and I gave a test in front of 70,000 people every Saturday. We were teaching the game of football. I would like to think that we taught it in an ethical way. I would like to think that we taught it in a sportsmanlike manner. I would like to think that we taught it to win. Important to win.”

Royal was hired to be the head coach of The University of Texas football program in December 1956 in the wake of the worst season, 1-9, in the program’s history. Twenty seasons later, Coach Royal’s résumé at UT Austin would include three national championships; eleven Southwest Conference championships; a 167-47-5 record, making Royal the most successful football coach in Southwest Conference history; an 8-7-1 bowl record; eight top-five national finishes; and eleven top-ten national finishes. He never experienced a losing season as a collegiate or professional head coach.

Coach Royal’s roots were humble and significant. He was born on July 6, 1924, in Hollis, Oklahoma, the youngest of the six children of Burley Ray Royal, a native of Montague County, Texas, and his first wife, Katy Elizabeth Harmon, who died of cancer when Darrell was four months old. (His middle name — K — honors her.) A small county seat tucked in the southwest corner of the state, Hollis lies just four miles from Oklahoma’s border with the Texas Panhandle and six from its Red River border with Texas. The region knew economic hardship even when Darrell was yet a toddler, and by the time he reached the upper grades, Hollis was near the epicenter of perhaps the greatest ecological and social catastrophe in American history—the Dust Bowl. The man whose name is now inscribed on one of the largest athletic stadiums in the country and who will be forever associated with the highest echelon of Texas football learned the game playing with his three older brothers in a way that was as hardscrabble as the red dirt of Harmon County’s exhausted cotton fields. They tooted, threw, and kicked a ball fashioned from a wadded-up Clabber Girl baking powder can wrapped tightly in tape—the only equipment the boys’ family or any of their friends’ families could afford.

Struggling to provide for his family, Burley Royal decided in the spring of 1940 to load his Whippet sedan and homemade trailer and join the historic exodus of Oklahomans to California. Burley, his second wife, and
Darrell set out for the rich loam of the San Joaquin Valley and the small city of Porterville, where Darrell’s stepbrother owned a property. Once there, Darrell felt the sting of being labeled an “Okie” and the humiliation of the type of work that was available there for those to whom the unwanted appellation was given. That humiliation and the ongoing friction he felt with his stepmother, combined with the news that school rules dividing players by weight made him ineligible for the varsity football squad, spurred the teenager to leave behind his few months of work as a fruit picker, construction worker, wheelbarrow pusher, and fig painter and make a harrowing journey hitching rides back to Hollis. Once safely back home, Darrell started high school, living primarily with his Grandma Harmon and, at times, the assistant coach of the football team. He worked a number of odd jobs to support himself and soon became a three-sport star at Hollis High School. He also met Edith Marie Thomason, a girl from the nearby town of Gould, who in a few years would become his wife.

Like most young people of his generation, World War II shaped the course of Darrell K Royal’s future. After graduating from Hollis High School in 1943, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Forces. Once he completed basic training and gunnery school, he and Edith were married in Oklahoma City on July 26, 1944, and on July 19, 1945, they welcomed their first child, daughter Marian K Royal, into the world. An emergency appendectomy prevented Royal from shipping out with his squadron to Guam, and he never saw overseas duty. He did, though, earn a spot on the storied Third Air Force football team during the week his daughter was born, and the recent high-school graduate starred on a squad that included several former collegiate all-Americans.

Royal’s success with the Third Air Force team drew the attention of colleges across the country, but he waited patiently for an offer from the University of Oklahoma (OU). He matriculated at OU in the spring of 1946 and earned a starting position as a defensive back that fall. He would play his final three seasons under the guidance of cerebral head coach Bud Wilkinson, a towering figure in college athletics who would go on to win three national championships with the Sooners, in 1950, 1955, and 1956, and orchestrate OU’s record-setting 47-game winning streak from 1953 to 1957. Though undersized, Royal established himself during his four seasons in crimson and cream as a triple-threat, excelling as a back on defense and as quarterback and halfback on offense, and as a punter and punt returner on special teams. A son, Sammy Mack Royal, was born to Edith and Darrell in 1947. Royal was named all-American and all-conference during his senior season, 1949, and he still holds the school record at OU for career interceptions. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration and Management in 1950 from OU.

Always sure of his intentions, Royal knew that when his playing days with the Sooners were over, he wanted to move directly into coaching rather than embark on a career as a professional player. In February 1950, he signed a contract with the City of El Reno (Oklahoma) to be the head football coach at El Reno High School, but a month later he was offered a position coaching the freshman backfield at North Carolina State University, and El Reno released him from his contract. Thus began a series of moves that would earn him a reputation as “the peripatetic Darrell Royal.” After a year at North Carolina State University, Royal coached the varsity offensive backfield at the University of Tulsa for a year, then moved to Mississippi State College to do the same. A third child, David Royal, was born to Edith and Darrell in 1952. In 1953, the young OU graduate decided to make the unlikely move to the professional ranks, coaching the Edmonton Eskimos of the Canadian Football League. Following a very successful season with the Eskimos, Mississippi State College called again, offering Royal the head coach position. Edmonton reluctantly released him from his contract, and Royal stepped into the head coaching ranks with the Bulldogs for the 1954 and 1955 seasons. Then, in 1956, Royal received yet another offer—from the University of Washington—and he could not resist the lure of being head coach at a flagship state university.

Royal coached the University of Washington Huskies for one season—and then came the offer from The University of Texas. “I’ve always been a dreamer, even as a little kid,” Coach Royal explained in 1973, and I’ve always daydreamed in positive ways—about kicking a ball 90 yards, or running faster than I could ever run, or getting coaching jobs that I could never really have a chance to get. And I’d always daydreamed about coaching at the University of Texas. No, I never did any daydreaming about coaching at the University of Oklahoma. The only one I ever daydreamed about was the University of Texas. I don’t know what caused that, except we lived just five miles from the border of Texas and we always competed against Texas schools, without much success.…
Well known is the story of how the peripatetic coach made a presentation at the Texas High School Coaches Association coaching school in San Antonio in 1955 and on the drive back to Starkville convinced Edith that they should detour through Austin. In Austin, Royal made a point to drive to the Forty Acres, deliberately compassing the perimeters of Texas Memorial Stadium. Two years later, the thirty-two-year-old head coach and his University of Washington defensive assistant Mike Campbell—a relationship that had begun when Royal was head coach at Mississippi State College and Campbell was head coach at a high school in Vicksburg, and that would flourish over the next two decades at Texas—dug into the task of rebuilding the Longhorn football program.

Success came relatively quickly. The 1957 campaign ended with a 6-3-1 record and a trip to the Sugar Bowl, where the Longhorns lost to Ole Miss. 1959 saw a 9-2 record, tie for the Southwest Conference crown, and #4 ranking in the AP and UPI polls. Late in the 1961 season, the Longhorns briefly achieved a #1 ranking in the national polls before a heartbreaking 0-6 loss to unranked conference foe TCU; the season ended with a Cotton Bowl victory over Ole Miss and a 10-1 record. Then in 1963, the Longhorns finished the regular season 10-0 and defeated #2 Navy and its Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback, Roger Staubach, 28-6 in the Cotton Bowl to earn The University of Texas a #1 ranking in the national polls and thus its first national championship.

Coach Royal once said, “Climbing is a thrill; maintaining is a bitch.” The only blemish of the 1964 season, which culminated in a 21-17 win over Alabama in the Orange Bowl, was a mid-season one-point loss to #8 Arkansas. Three mediocre—but winning—seasons followed. Then the 1968 season began auspiciously—a tie with #11 Houston, followed by a loss to unranked Texas Tech—but the Longhorns reeled off nine straight wins after that, including a 36-13 victory over #8 Tennessee in the Cotton Bowl. They would not lose again until January 1, 1971.

In 1969, the Longhorns roared to an undefeated regular season, which culminated in what was dubbed “The Game of the Century,” a nationally televised 15-14 victory over #2 Arkansas in Fayetteville. The fate of the game turned on a now immortalized fourth-quarter, fourth-down pass from quarterback James Street to tight end Randy Peschel that gained forty-three yards. The play—Right 53 Veer Pass—was called by Coach Royal to the surprise of everyone, including his coaches and players. Following the game, President Richard M. Nixon presented Coach Royal a plaque in the locker room proclaiming the Longhorns national champions. The team finished the season with a 21-17 victory over #9 Notre Dame in the Cotton Bowl and a #1 ranking in the national polls.

The next year, 1970, the Longhorns rolled to an undefeated regular season once again and received a #1 ranking and the national championship from the “coaches poll,” which was conducted before the bowl games by United Press International. A 24-11 loss to #6 Notre Dame in the Cotton Bowl broke the Longhorns’ historic 30-game winning streak and pushed them to #3 in the final “writers poll,” conducted after the bowl games by the Associated Press, and so they shared their 1970 national championship with the Nebraska Cornhuskers, who finished #1 in the AP poll.

Winning seasons followed in the early 1970s, including a 10-1 campaign in 1972 that ended with a 17-13 victory over #4 Alabama in the Cotton Bowl—but Coach Royal’s work did not always bring him the happiness he expected from it. In his words, “it got so that winning wasn’t exciting and losing became intolerable.” Collegiate athletics changed dramatically during the twenty seasons Royal coached at Texas, both for better and for worse. The University’s athletics facilities, which Coach Royal and his staff were surprised to find woefully outdated and inadequate when they arrived in Austin in 1956, were replaced or expanded dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s, to both praise and public outcry from constituencies across the University community. In particular, the expansion of Texas Memorial Stadium and creation of Bellmont Hall during the championship 1969 season sparked the infamous “Battle of Waller Creek”—with students of all political stripes protesting the removal of towering cypress trees and live oaks from the soon-to-be-redirected creek bed, and the chairman of The University of Texas System Board of Regents, Frank Erwin, on hand to order the University’s police officers to remove forcibly those who had climbed the trees in protest. The Longhorn football team achieved racial integration during Royal’s tenure, though not without sharp criticism by some that that achievement had happened much too slowly. Scholarship limits were implemented and Title IX ushered in a new era of equity and fairness, but it also introduced a new and more complex economic landscape for intercollegiate athletics. As
the financial stakes involved in intercollegiate athletics rose higher and higher, recruiting became ever more intense, as did the temptation felt by coaches and administrators throughout the sport to bend or break rules in pursuit of championships. Scrutiny of athletics—always high—became even more intense in this period of social unrest and turmoil on college campuses. In 1972, a book written by a disgruntled former UT Austin player, Gary Shaw, titled Meat on the Hoof, was deeply hurtful to Coach Royal; he refuted publicly many of its accusations. Friction with Regent Erwin never entirely went away (when Erwin was chairman of the Board in the mid 1960s, during those mediocre seasons between national championships, he had urged his fellow Board members to fire Coach Royal). And, of course, impetuous fans of Longhorn football were—as they still become today—incensed when the team experienced droughts during which a national championship was not in the cards. Most significant to Darrell and Edith, though, was the death of daughter Marian, who in 1973 died from injuries she had sustained when a UT Austin shuttle bus collided with her car.

At the end of a 5-5-1 season in 1976—his only non-winning season at UT—Coach Royal shocked the sports world by stepping down as head coach. He was fifty-two years old.

During his time as head football coach, Royal’s service to the University extended beyond the playing field. In 1962, University president Joseph Royall Smiley named him director of athletics. On February 1, 1964, UT System chancellor Harry Huntt Ransom made Coach Royal a member of the University faculty, granting him a full professorship without assignment to a specific department. (His appointment was listed internally with the College of Education’s Department of Physical Instruction, today named the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education). Royal served as director of athletics until December 31, 1979, staying on in that role after stepping down as head football coach. (When the University founded varsity athletics programs for women in the mid-1970s after Title IX became law, it created a separate athletics department for women, with Donna Lopiano serving as the first director of athletics for women.) Upon stepping down as director of Intercollegiate Athletics for Men, Royal was appointed special assistant to the president by University president Peter T. Flawn. The coach retained the professorship and position of special assistant to the president for the rest of his life.

Among the many honors and accolades Coach Royal received in his lifetime are The University of Texas Distinguished Service Award (2006), Honorary Lifetime Member of the Texas Exes (the first coach and first non-alumnus to be so honored), and induction into the Longhorn Hall of Honor (1976). In 1996, the UT System Board of Regents voted to honor Coach Royal by renaming the facility that had been an aging, 60,136-seat concrete stadium when the young head coach from Mississippi and his wife circled it in their car forty-one years earlier. Today, Darrell K Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium seats 100,119 spectators and incorporates within its perimeter a number of important administrative and academic facilities that are used throughout the year.

Darrell K Royal passed away in Austin on November 7, 2012. Survivors include his wife, Edith, and son, Mack. Son David died in a motorcycle accident in 1982. In his final years, Coach Royal suffered from dementia. Through the Darrell K Royal Research Fund for Alzheimer’s Disease, he and Edith endeavored to help promote research and care for those suffering from it.

Coach Royal’s legacy at the University extends far beyond the football field and the wins and losses his teams accumulated there. The University of Texas at Austin aspires to its constitutional mandate to be a university of the first class, and the football program is an important component of those aspirations. Directly affecting student life, alumni relations, fundraising, branding, and the reputation of the University and its values, the football program is intricately woven into the fabric of the University community. As Coach Royal’s Texas Longhorns were nearing the completion of their first national championship season, Texas journalist Dan Jenkins published a long-form piece in the November 11, 1963, issue of Sports Illustrated, titled “The Disciples of St. Darrell on a Wild Weekend.” It chronicled a unique experience that Jenkins had planned for two of his childhood friends, Joe Coffman and former standout UT Austin basketball player Cecil Morgan, and their wives, Mary Sue and Pat. Here are the opening paragraphs:

On Friday morning, October 11, a bright, warm Texas day, Elbert Joseph Coffman woke up with a squirrel in his stomach. In his good life as a football fan there had never been a weekend quite like this one. In the next 55 hours he was going to see three college games and one pro game, and the excitement of it, the bigness of the games, made him nervous. Nervous
but delighted. Football to Joe Coffman, and thousands of other Texans, is as essential as air conditioning. It is what a Texan grows up with, feeds on, worships, follows, plays and, very often, dies with. Joe Coffman, 32, married, father of two boys, businessman, University of Texas graduate, football enthusiast, was either going to live a lot this weekend or die a little.

The first game—SMU against Navy—would be played that evening in the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, just 35 miles away from Joe Coffman’s home in Fort Worth. The next day he would go back to the stadium to see the biggest one of them all, Oklahoma, ranked first in the country, against Texas, ranked second. He would drive to Waco (90 miles south) Saturday night to watch Baylor against Arkansas. And on Sunday he would return to the Cotton Bowl to see the NFL’s Dallas Cowboys play the Detroit Lions.

Of course, Coach Royal’s Texas Longhorns defeated the Oklahoma Sooners handily that day and then secured the national championship six weeks later with a dramatic 15-13 victory over Texas A&M University in College Station. Throughout Jenkins’ account of that weekend, which saw the four Texas home teams win in four remarkable upsets, Joe Coffman repeatedly made statements such as these to his fellow disciples: “Have to win, boys. Too much character. We got too much character to lose that game,” and “We’re gonna warp ’em. Guarantee you St. Darrell’s gonna drown ’em. Too much character. I don’t care who they got.” Football is deeply important to Texans, and thus it has always been deeply important to The University of Texas. While much of the teaching and research that is integral to the mission of the University is carried out far from the public eye, Longhorn football is the most public of ways that the University demonstrates to Texans and the world its unwavering commitment to excellence. Darrell K Royal instilled unprecedented excellence in the football program at The University of Texas. A native Oklahoman—whose character was forged by hardscrabble experience and guided by intelligence, supreme confidence, and an undiminished desire to win—made Texas and its flagship university a better place.

Facts and quotations found in this memorial resolution have been gleaned from the following sources:

Board of Regents minutes. The University of Texas System. Meetings archive. Website.


“TexasSports.com: Official Site of Texas Athletics.” The University of Texas at Austin. Website.

This memorial resolution was prepared by David W. Dettmer, correspondence coordinator in the Office of the President.

Distributed to the Office of the President on June 20, 2013, and posted under “Memorials” at http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.