

Trainer Bobby Brown

"He was the best hot-patch man in the business."
-Hogan Wharton, Guard, Houston Oilers (1960-63)

By Kevin Carroll

If any person has a finger on the pulse of a football team, it's the trainer. Healer, friend, and confidant to all, a trainer is better situated to know the players as people than are the coaches. Not only does he witness a player's exhilaration in victory and anguish in defeat, but also shares in the locker room camaraderie so unique to team sports. He has an exclusive view of a player's most private moments.

When a player is injured, it's the trainer who observes first-hand how he reacts to pain. He's there when a 23-year-old confronts the realization that this injury might keep him from fulfilling his athletic dreams. During agonizing days and sometimes weeks of rehabilitation, the trainer witnesses the individual's struggle to do what came so effortlessly before perhaps something as simple as raising an arm or bending a knee.

It's the trainer who keeps company with the aging veteran as he sits in the whirlpool hoping that the water's jet-stream might invigorate reflexes that have dulled with the passage of time. At times, it's as if a trainer is peering into an athlete's soul.

One of the finest trainers ever to tape an ankle was Bobby Brown, the first trainer of the Houston Oilers. Awarded a scholarship to apprentice as an athletic trainer at the University of Houston, Brown was a student-trainer for its football team in the late 1940s. The sole support of his ailing mother, Brown's scholarship and various odd jobs weren't enough to pay the family's bills and keep him in school. In the spring of 1949 Brown wrote to the Buffalo Bills of the All-American Football Conference (AAFC). That summer the 20-year-old dropped out of college and headed for Buffalo to work as the team's assistant trainer, earning \$300 a month. He sent every paycheck to his mother. By collecting a dollar from each Buffalo player for shining his game shoes and performing other personal chores, Brown survived on \$33 a week.

The AAFC folded after the 1949 season and most of Buffalo's players were absorbed by the NFL's New York Yanks. Brown also caught on with the Yanks and for the next two years served as an assistant under several trainers, the most notable being Gus Mauch, the longtime Yankee baseball trainer.

In 1952 Brown accepted the head trainer's job with the Ottawa Roughriders of the Canadian Football League.

At this time the profession of athletic training in the United States was in its infancy, but it was in the Dark Ages in Canada. In his book, Two Yellows and A Blue, Brown described the situation as he found it:

"I asked to see the medical supplies. The club president pulled a shoe box off a shelf. It contained one bottle of three percent iodine and six rolls of black friction tape.

'What is this for?' I asked, holding up a roll of tape.

'To tape the ankles,' he told me.

'You tape ankles with this?' I asked in amazement.

"We put it outside the socks,' he said.

'I'm a trainer, not an electrician,' I told him. I introduced the Canadian League to white adhesive tape."

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That year Brown spent \$3,000 developing a first-class training room for Ottawa. In need of a raise, Brown took the head trainer's job with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers in 1953. Unhappy with the boisterous antics of Winnipeg coach George Trafton, Brown returned to Houston after the season to become the head trainer for the city's public school system.

When the Houston Oilers were organized Brown wrote owner Bud Adams about becoming the team's trainer. Adams replied in a cordial letter that the position would be filled after a head coach was named.

In late February of 1960 a mutual friend arranged a meeting between Brown and Houston's newly named coach, Lou Rymkus. The meeting went well and Rymkus offered Brown the job.

In his 11 seasons as the Oilers' trainer, Brown saved the lives of two players on the field. The first incident occurred on November 13, 1960 at the Los Angeles Coliseum. Oiler linebacker Phil Perlo laid a tremendous tackle on Charger tight end Howard Clarke just as he caught a pass. On the play, however, Clark's knee struck Perlo in the head and the linebacker dropped limply to the ground.

Sensing the situation's urgency, Brown rushed onto the field. Slowly easing Perlo's helmet off without moving his head, Brown and others strapped Perlo to a stretcher. At the hospital the diagnosis was a fractured first cervical vertebrae, an injury that even the smallest error in handling and transporting could have left Perlo a quadraplegic. Although Perlo never played football again, he suffered no paralysis and lived an active life until his death in 1993.

The second life-threatening incident occurred in 1963 at Denver. Bronco defensive back Goose Gonsoulin was hit in the head by a knee while tackling Billy Cannon. The shock of the blow caused Gonsoulin to swallow his tongue, blocking his air supply and risking suffocation.

Brown, who made a practice of keeping surgical scissors and tongue forceps on a shoelace attached to his belt, was ready when Denver tackle Bud McFadin yelled for help. Brown relates the harrowing experience in his book:

"I showed McFadin where to squeeze the nerve points on each side of the jaw to force the mouth open a crack...The convulsion that causes a person to swallow the tongue has the effect of kind of reversing the muscles and the jaw is locked tight.

Anyway, McFadin got the mouth open a crack, and I inserted an oral screw, a hard rubber apparatus that you literally screw into the mouth to open it...

After getting the oral screw in his mouth, I was able to get the forceps into the throat and pull the tongue up.

Gonsoulin passed out, but the doctors checked him on the field and his vital signs were strong."

Gonsoulin awakened later in a hospital bed. He continued to play football until his retirement in 1968.

"Bobby was very dedicated to his profession," states ex-Oilers' guard Hogan Wharton. "He was always trying to learn."

Wharton's assessment is verified by the fact that Brown, wanting to increase his knowledge of the human body, often accompanied Houston orthopedic surgeon, T.O. Shindler, into the operating room. Over a 15-year period Brown scrubbed with Shindler for 396 operations.

While Brown had compassion for Oiler players, he was never sympathetic. "If you guys want sympathy," advised the feisty trainer, "look in the dictionary. You'll find it there between sweat and syphilis!"

During a workout just weeks before the Oilers opened camp in 1960, former 49er and Oiler hopeful George Shirkey injured a knee. Several days later the injured tackle paid Bobby Brown a visit. After examining the knee Brown informed Shirkey, "We'll take care of that knee. You've severe cartilage damage. Our team doctor will operate on it.

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But, I'm going to tell you something, big boy," Brown warned. "You don't know me and I don't know you. But the rehab is going to come faster than you ever dreamed possible. If you're willing to take a chance on me, I'm willing to take a chance on you."

Shirkey consented to the operation. He'd chance the rehab.

The operation was performed a week before the camp's July 14 opening date; rehab began during training camp. Every day Brown would awaken Shirkey before the other players and drive him across town to Rice Stadium.

"I'd run steps until Bobby said stop," Shirkey recalls. "Then he'd take me back to the University of Houston where I'd watch the team practice, learn my assignments, and do whatever Bobby would allow."

After the Oilers' morning practice, Shirkey was again driven to Rice to run more steps. This routine was repeated in the afternoon which gave Shirkey six workouts a day during rehabilitation.

"I ran the steps at Rice Stadium so often and for so long that I thought I'd throw up if I ever saw another flight of stairs after that summer," laments the ex-tackle.

In a testimony to his own determination and to Brown's expertise as a trainer, Shirkey's knee was 100 percent when he returned to action in late August. George Shirkey would go on to be a mainstay at defensive tackle for the Oilers during their AFL Championship 1960 and 1961 seasons.

Brown would serve as the Oilers' head trainer through the 1970 season. He later served in the same capacity for the professional Houston Aeros hockey team. Brown died of cancer in the early 1980s.

Former linebacker Dennit Morris states, "Bobby was probably the one true friend of every player who came through camp."

Remembering the small, wiry trainer, George Shirkey emotionally recalls, "Bobby Brown was more than a trainer. He was one of us. He was a peach!"