

## A special season, a special game ball

1970 Cotton Bowl football was a cherished keepsake for Fred Steinmark.

By Kevin Robbins AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF Saturday, December 31, 2005

One man threw the ball, and another man caught it. That man kept it until he gave it to an older man, who gave it to someone younger, who kept it for the rest of his life, which ended very soon. The last time anyone saw the ball — held it, studied it, considered it — was one decade ago.

Seasons cycle. Coaches retire. Players get married, make livings, raise families and achieve fame, and, meanwhile, a muddy football field mends in the north of Texas.

Those who were there that day forget certain details, until they think hard, pause for a second and say, *Sure. Of course. Now I remember exactly how it happened on the last play of the 1970 Cotton Bowl.*

And this is what comes back:

Less than a minute to go.

Notre Dame, pushing. Joe Theismann, the quarterback. Dewey Poskon, the Irish tight end. Poskon, in a stance to Theismann's right.

Texas defensive back Tom Campbell, wearing No. 84. Campbell, a coach's son, crouched like a sniper on his own 33.

More than 73,000 were in attendance that afternoon, including a junior Longhorn safety roaming the sideline on crutches: Fred Steinmark, a 166-pound terrier from Colorado.

The game-day weather was acceptable: sun here, clouds there, damp air, temperatures in the 40s. The rain-soaked field was so wet that helicopters tried to dry it that morning with their prop wash; they failed. It was a lovely day in Dallas to win the national championship of college football.

Texas was 10-0 when it brought its wishbone to the 34-year-old Cotton Bowl Classic. The Irish were a more modest 8-1-1.

But the fact that the gold-hatted lads of South Bend, Ind., had even traveled to Texas, representing a school that had been declining bowl invitations since the Four Horsemen galloped away with the Rose Bowl trophy of 1925, pulsed a hot current through New Year's Day. Every bootleg, counter and plunge coursed with charged anticipation.

The score was 21-17 when Theismann drifted to his left, Poskon sprinted to the

right, Campbell reacted, and Steinmark watched because that was all he could do less than a month after his left leg was removed at the hip.

Now, Steinmark is buried in the shade of the Rocky Mountain range.

Theismann resides in Tennessee after a career in the NFL. Poskon is in Indiana.

Campbell lives in Austin still.

No one is how he was on Jan. 1, 1970. Nothing is.

Except the ball.

Thirty-six years later, the ball is just as it was the last time the Longhorns were the undefeated national champions of college football.

### **The clinching play**

Fifty million CBS television viewers heard Cotton Bowl broadcaster Lindsey Nelson announce, "Thirty-eight seconds left."

Down on the field, Theismann bent over his center, who held in his right hand a pebble-grained Wilson ball.

No one knew at the time the journey the ball would make, from Theismann's palm to a box that was stored for three decades in a basement. But everyone — the Irish, the Longhorns, the fans in their varsity sweaters and boots that climbed to their knees — knew that everything at that moment rested on one thing: the ball.

The game ball. Destiny prescribed that the ball used that afternoon would become a symbol for what one team achieved in the 1969 season.

When Texas won, the ball represented its 500th victory, the 10-point victory over No. 8 Oklahoma in October, the sweep of the old Southwest Conference, the Game of the Century at Arkansas, the practices in Austin, the hours players spent with their run-heavy playbooks, the grit it took for Steinmark to haul his hurting body into the dressing room before the Cotton Bowl to let his teammates know that nothing could keep him from the biggest contest of the year.

The ball meant all that and more. The essential, coveted and fiercely protected prize of the sport, one ball would be there when everything else was gone. And so Theismann took the snap.

He rotated the ball until his fingers found the white raised seams.

On the play before, he had found Poskon in a soft pocket inside six converging Texas defenders, including Campbell. That completion was good for a Notre Dame first down.

Now, after a Notre Dame timeout and with the formation reversed, Poskon darted inside the defensive end. He tore downfield.

A Texas linebacker clung to the Irish tight end for a few frenzied steps. Then Poskon, a 6-foot-4-inch senior from Pittsburgh, planted to angle back toward the Notre Dame bench. He shook the linebacker at the Texas 25-yard line, which is where he found himself in the company of no one wearing Texas orange.

He raised his right hand.

At the beginning of the play, the Longhorns' Campbell had turned on the balls of his feet a full eight yards in front of the Notre Dame receiver. Texas played a 4-4-3 zone defense, a formation devoted in part to the disruption of those short passes that mowed away yardage in devastating clumps. Campbell let the linebackers worry about the little ones. At the Cotton Bowl, he wanted only to keep the Irish receiver between himself and the ball.

Theismann rolled.

Poskon hooked.

Campbell backpedaled to his own 16.

With his shoulders facing the left side of the field, Theismann pumped to a receiver riding an evaporating seam between a Texas cornerback and the safety. He tucked the ball after the fake and reached the Texas 48, where he spun.

There was Poskon. Nine yards beyond: Campbell.

The ball left the quarterback's hand.

"Theismann fires," Nelson barked.

The ball rode the air like a zephyr. Theismann remembers believing it was a good pass, "except that it got away from me just a hair."

From Poskon: "Everything slowed down. I saw the ball. It just took off. It sailed." The ball seemed to glide forever, reaching an apex but never a descent. Poskon watched it soar over his hands without so much as nicking his fingertip. He never saw what happened next.

"The roar of the crowd told you something," Poskon recalls.

On television, Nelson blurted the word that sprung a million Longhorn fans from their sofas.

"Intercepted!"

### **Tribute to Freddie**

The ball struck Campbell between the white 8 and the 4 on his orange jersey. Campbell gathered his weight and equalized his momentum. Then instinct engaged. Instead of falling on the ball, which his father, defensive coach Mike Campbell, wanted him to do, Campbell ran. He leveled a Notre Dame receiver and fell when Poskon desperately corralled his feet.

Campbell rose with the ball.

He held it as players, coaches and the Texas band collapsed on him along the bench. He held it as Texas quarterback James Street emptied the game clock. He held it all the way up the Cotton Bowl tunnel and into the team dressing room, where Texas Head Coach Darrell Royal approached his stall.

"It sounded like a question, but it wasn't," Campbell recalls. "He said, 'Is that for Freddie?' "

Campbell still wonders what happened to the ball that was on the field when the game ended — the official game ball or, as it were, the ball that was in the game when the game ceased to be a game. But the whereabouts of the ball that mattered were sealed that afternoon, when Steinmark's surprise visit defined the 1969 Texas season.

Steinmark amazed his doctors in Houston and awed Texas football fans from Lubbock to Laredo by making the trip to Dallas and witnessing the national championship coronation with his teammates. When Texas scored the winning touchdown with 1:18 left, Royal searched the sideline for one player to embrace.

He buried his face in Steinmark's dark hair.

Texas won 20 games the two years the 5-10 Steinmark started in the defensive backfield for Royal. Steinmark collected seven interceptions, including a team-leading five as a sophomore, and returned 38 punts. He called defensive formations in 1969, when the only game he missed was the one against Notre Dame.

Steinmark signaled his last play in the famous Dec. 6 triumph against No. 2 Arkansas; the soreness he felt in his leg sent him to the doctor, who found

cancer in his femur. The amputation took place six days after the Longhorns left Fayetteville, Ark., as the No. 1 team in the land.

In the dressing room Jan. 1, Campbell gave the ball to his coach, who gave it to the player who represented what it meant to be a title team in 1969.

"It was unanimous by everybody on the squad," Royal says.

Wearing muddied and bloodied uniforms or on crutches, the Longhorns were fighters. They fought at Arkansas, and they fought the Irish, and they fought through the loss of Steinmark, who fought a fight of his own. And there they were, at the top of the tunnel at the Cotton Bowl, saying very little as the game ball went to No. 28, who never played a down that day.

"I get chills now thinking about it," Street says.

The ball went home to Austin with Steinmark, who died June 6, 1971. He was 22 years old.

His service at the Church of the Risen Christ in Denver drew so many mourners that funeral officials believed it to be the largest in Colorado history.

A year later, before the Longhorns' game against Miami, the scoreboard at Texas Memorial Stadium was dedicated in Steinmark's name.

After their son's death, letters arrived by the sackful at Gloria and Fred Steinmark's ranch house in Aurora, near Denver. Someone sent a gold crucifix. A friend gave the family a tree in their son's memory. It was a native spruce, which the family planted after Steinmark died.

It's out there growing in the yard, his mother says by telephone on a December morning when she's been thinking a great deal about her son.

"Oh, my," Gloria Steinmark remarks. "It's huge. It's higher than the roof."

In the garage is her son's 1971 Corvette. It's orange, naturally, and the license plate bears the letters "UT." Downstairs is a bunch of boxes. That's where all the letters are. Steinmark's jerseys are there, too. With the rings and the watches and the trophies and the ball.

### **Cherished keepsake**

The ball came home with Steinmark's grieving father, who journeyed to Austin to collect his son's belongings.

The Steinmarks displayed the ball for many years. It rested on a shelf with other artifacts from a celebrated but abbreviated career in schoolboy football.

Fred Steinmark never talked a great deal about the ball, his family says. But they knew it was among his favorite keepsakes. It came from a game that he played in his heart, and it was his as much as it was anyone else's. Was it strategy and risk that pushed the Longhorns to beat the Irish at the Cotton Bowl? Or did seeing Steinmark hobble down the tunnel have something more to do with it?

Thirty-six years is such a long time. Who knows what motivated — captivated — the Longhorns that day in 1970. But now, as Texas prepares to play USC for its first consensus national championship since Campbell ran from the field holding the ball that Steinmark kept until his death, every player on the roster knows the story of Fred Steinmark. They passed his photograph, a dark-eyed boy of the West charging forever onto his home field in Austin, as they left the dressing room at Royal-Memorial Stadium to complete a perfect 12-0 season on their way to the Rose Bowl.

### **A breath of the past**

But what of his ball?

On a recent afternoon, one of Steinmark's sisters drove the short distance to her mother's house in Aurora.

The sister goes by the name of P.K. Stevinson. P.K., short for PaulaKay, was curious about the ball, which had been packed away in her mother's basement for 10 years.

Call back in an hour, Stevinson said.

An hour later, she answered the phone.

"I just now opened the box.

"It's facing me here.

"I'm 51," Stevinson said, "and it gave me chills."

She read the words on the ball in her hands at the house where it has been since her brother was buried under a sandstone memorial tinted with a shade of orange. "Wilson Official TD Intercollegiate," she recited. "Game ball to Freddie Steinmark/Cotton Bowl/Texas 21 Notre Dame 17/January 1, 1970." She described the laces, still flecked with mud.

"It's still got the dirt and everything."

And?

"Yes," Stevinson replied.

"There's air in it."

Sealed inside: something from that day at the Cotton Bowl, where the Longhorns conquered college football.

If it weren't what it was, if it didn't mean what it did, the ball might be just another ball. An ordinary ball, the kind a boy from Colorado might toss around till dark, when the sun finally slipped behind the mountains. If it hadn't been where it had.

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### **A perfect season**

Sept. 20 at California 17-0

Sept. 27 Texas Tech 49-7

Oct. 4 Navy 56-17

Oct. 11 OU (in Dallas) 27-17

Oct. 25 Rice 31-0

Nov. 1 at SMU 45-14

Nov. 8 Baylor 56-14

Nov. 15 TCU 69-7

Nov. 27 at Texas A&M 49-12

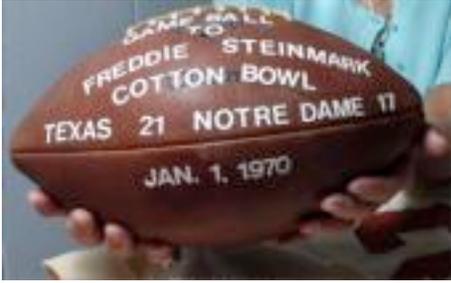
Dec. 6 at Arkansas 15-14

Jan. 1 Notre Dame (Cotton Bowl) 21-17



Joshua Lawton FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

The game ball from the 1970 Cotton Bowl stays in Gloria Steinmark's Aurora, Colo., basement, along with boxes of other memories of her son Fred's University of Texas football career. Cancer took Fred Steinmark's left leg just days after the team's triumph over No. 2 Arkansas, yet he made sure to be on the sidelines in Dallas on Jan. 1, willing his teammates to victory.



Joshua Lawton FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN  
Gloria Steinmark holds the game ball from the 1970 Cotton Bowl where the University of Texas last won a national championship.