

Steve Owen

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I remember Steve Owen as a very big man. Of course, I was just a kid tagging along with my father to a Giants practice at the Polo Grounds and I was surrounded by big men – men who liked to leave a dent when they shook your hand.



However, my memory is corroborated by a 1943 press photo with the caption, “The Biggest Man in Football.”

The Biggest Man in Football

He's Steve Owen, 290 pound coach of the colorful New York Giants. Stout Steve's teams have won two World's Championships and six Eastern titles during his twelve year coaching regime. Owen was one of the National League's greatest All-time tackle in the five season he performed with the Polo Grounds club. Steve completed his college gridiron career at Phillips in 1921. He was born in Enid, Oklahoma.”

Steve would continue to coach the Giants for ten more years, until the day a United Press photographer snapped a shot of a very dejected man with the caption “Owen Takes A Last Look – Coach Steve Owen takes a last look through the clubhouse window as the players to the their places on the field getting ready for their game against the Detroit Lions December 13th. It will be Owen's last game.” (12/15/53)



There is a lot of football history, and a wealth of memorabilia, in Steve Owen's years as a player and later head coach for the New York Giants. Owen appeared on the cover of numerous Giants home programs before World War II and was in advertisements, press photos and magazine articles. He was included in the first three Diamond matchbook football sets (1933 – 1935), but it wasn't until 1952 that he got his own football card – a large and small version put out by Bowman. After his induction into the Hall of Fame in 1966 he was part of many of the Hall of Fame card sets, and in 2002 Upper Deck inserted five cards with his autograph into their Legendary Cuts packs.



1934



1952



2002

But what about Steve Owen before, after, and apart from the Giants? Is there a story to tell? Is there memorabilia of interest for the collector? What might be found from Steve's childhood living along the Kansas Oklahoma border where his parents had staked their claim in what was then called "The Cherokee Strip"? According to the website of the Homestead National Monument of America (US Park Service), Steve's mother was "the area's first schoolmarm," and it was on this frontier that his parents met, married, and raised their three sons, Steve, Paul, and Bill. There is one family photo of the three brothers.

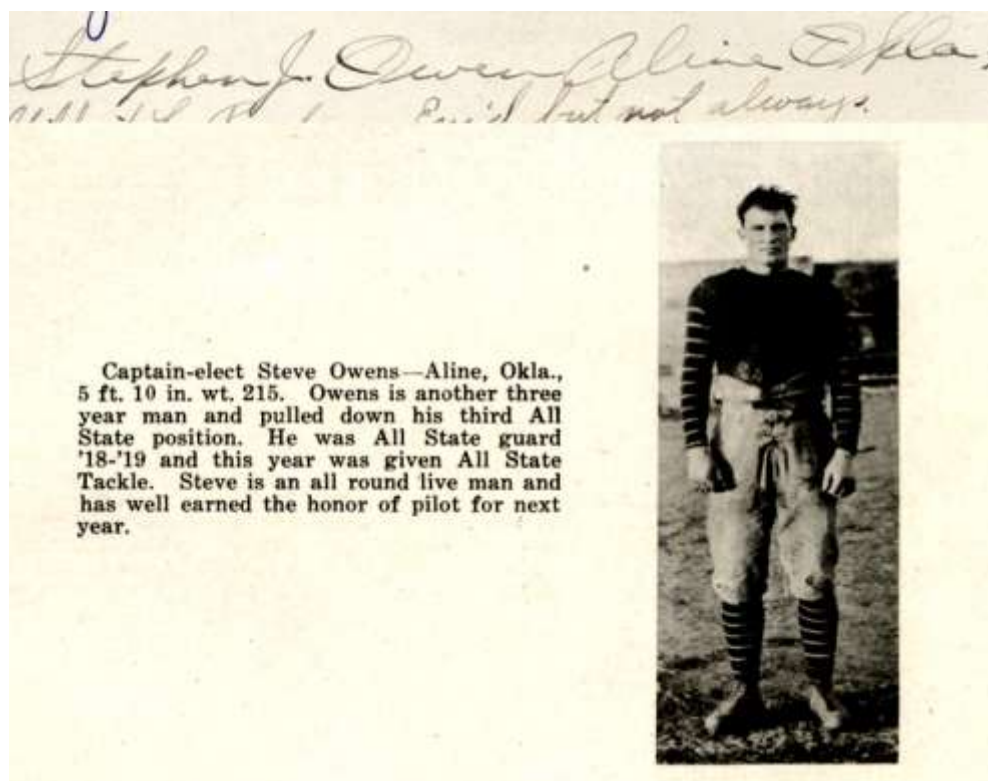


Most of Steve's biographical information is scattered throughout his book, "My Kind of Football," published in 1952. Steve's mother sent him to live with a sister in Aline, Oklahoma, to go to high school. There Steve played on a basketball team, which won the state tournament held at Phillips University in Enid. There is no team photo in the archives of Aline High School, but if one exists it would no doubt be the earliest sports related item for him.

(Photo: Bill, Steve and Paul Owen; photo courtesy Gary Carlson, Paul's grandson)

Steve worked summers in the oil fields, and planned to head to Texas after his high school graduation, but, when the war broke out in 1917 his mother convinced him he should enlist in the Student Army Training Corps at Phillips so he could use his education to serve as an officer. According to a profile of Steve written by Frank Graham for Sport Magazine in December 1947, Steve said he was “lying under a tree watching the football squad when Johnny Maulbetsch spotted me. ‘You’re big enough to play,’ he said, ‘Why don’t you come out for the team?’ I couldn’t think of any good reason why I shouldn’t, so I did.”

Maulbetsch, an All-American at Michigan, had an eye for athletic talent, or at least for size. The 1921 Phillips yearbook says Steve “pulled down his third All State position. He was All State guard ‘18-’19 and this year was given All State Tackle.” Steve was captain-elect for the 1921 season. The 1921 yearbook that was auctioned on eBay was a great find, for not only did it have a picture of Steve in the football section, it included his autograph on a “Memories-Autographs” page. There may be earlier examples, but this one is his full name and home town.



Captain-elect Steve Owens—Aline, Okla., 5 ft. 10 in. wt. 215. Owens is another three year man and pulled down his third All State position. He was All State guard '18-'19 and this year was given All State Tackle. Steve is an all round live man and has well earned the honor of pilot for next year.

After World War I ended the Student Army Training Corps was dissolved and Steve enrolled as a regular student. In addition to football he played baseball, boxed, and wrestled – although these other sports are not covered in the yearbook and it’s not clear if they were official teams of the college. In wrestling Steve certainly wandered off the campus, taking on professional matches in Kansas under the name of Jack O’Brien. It would be great to track down a hand-bill or program from one of his wrestling appearances.

Steve wasn't quite done with college when his eligibility ran out, so Tubby McIntyre, who had followed Maulbetsch as coach, invited Steve to help as his line coach. Probably the earliest picture of Steve as a coach is in the 1924 Phillips yearbook, where he sits unmistakably in the back row. But coaching would have to wait because, in fact, Steve had already started his career in pro-football.



Back in the early 1920s there was a lot of post-season barnstorming by the professional teams, and in January 1922, Jim Thorpe led the Toledo Maroons into Oklahoma to play a team of all-star collegians. They played in Tulsa on a Saturday and Oklahoma City on a Sunday. The famous story is that Thorpe leveled Steve on a block because Steve thought Thorpe was too old and too tired to do much damage. As a result of those games, Steve was offered a contract to play with Toledo in 1923, but the desire to finish college and the offer of the job as line coach kept him at Phillips.

That would not be the case in 1924 when Steve signed to play with the Kansas City Cowboys. And it was the Cowboys who brought him to New York.

The Toledo club folded after the 1923 season, and Steve thought that shut the door for him with the NFL. Then a former college teammate, Dutch Strauss, got Steve a job with LeRoy Andrews, promoter of the Kansas City team. In August 1924, Steve and Dutch drove a Chevrolet Coup 350 miles in three days from Oklahoma to Kansas City where Steve began his pro career for \$50 per game.

The Kansas City team played most of their games on the road - Andrews could not afford the guarantee which a home team provided visitors. They got as far east as Philadelphia in 1924, and in 1925 made it to New York City to play the fledgling Giants. In between the 1924 and 1925 seasons Steve took a job as a school principal in Binger, Oklahoma. The previous principal had been stabbed by one of the students, but Steve had a knack for managing roughnecks and used a little coaching psychology to build loyalty and instill discipline. He escaped without a scratch.

The line-up:

NEW YORK (9). KANSAS CITY (3).
 Jappe (Syracuse)...L.E..Webber (Kan. St.)
 Milstead (Yale)...L.T...Owens (Phillips)
 Carney (Navy)...L.G...Andrew (Kan. S.)
 Alexander (Syr.)...C....Mintun (Racine)
 Tomlin (Syracuse)...R.G...Howard (Marlet.)
 Parnell (Colgate)...R.T..Thompson (Lomb.)
 Bomar (Vander.)...R.E..Munn (Kan. City)
 Hendrian (Pitts.)...Q.B...Bloodgood (Neb.)
 Haines (Penn S.)...L.H..White (Oklahoma)
 Benkert (Rutgers) R.H..Guyon (Ga. Tech.)
 McBride (Syr.)...F.B....C. Hill (Baker)

SCORE BY PERIODS.

New York6	0	3	0-9
Kansas City0	3	0	0-3

Touchdown—Haines. Goals from field—Bloodgood, Hendrian (drop kicks).

Substitutions—New York: Rooney (Colorado School of Mines) for Haines, Reynolds (Georgia) for Bomar, Williams (Lafayette) for Tomlin, Lomar for Reynolds, Moran (Centre) for Hendrian. Kansas City: H. Hill (Oklahoma) for White, Bristow (Oklahoma) for Guyon, Rehnquist (Bethany) for Andrew, Milam (Phillips) for Webber, Guyon for Milam, White for C. Hill, Webber for Munn.

When the Kansas City Cowboys came to New York in 1925 they promoted their game with the Giants by riding up Broadway on horseback complete with sombreros, chaps, boots and spurs. In the game Steve lined up at left tackle opposite Century Milstead; both men played 60 minutes. The Giants won 9-3.

Kansas City ended the 1925 season playing the Cleveland Bulldogs in Hartford, Connecticut. After that game, George Mulligan, owner of the Waterbury Blues football team, invited Steve to play on a team

to oppose the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame in a series of games. They played four games on four successive Sundays, and based on his aggressive play Steve was signed for a post season tour to Florida with the New York Giants.

The Giants played at least three games in Florida after the 1925 season: Jan. 1, 1926 against the Coral Gables Collegians at Palm Beach, January 9 against the Jacksonville All-Stars at Fairfield Stadium, and January 16, again against the Coral Gables Collegians. Some Giants may have then headed out to California for more football, but Steve headed back to Enid, Oklahoma. When he got home he learned that the Giants had bought him from Kansas City for \$500.

Occasionally a program from those early postseason tours with Thorpe or Grange or Nevers comes up for auction, but they are rare and expensive. The postseason play brought professional football to parts of the country that had never seen the game, and players often joined with former rivals to create an "all-star" team to draw the crowds. After Steve played the full 1926 season with New York, newspapers in Tulsa, Oklahoma, reported he signed on with Jim Kendrick's Buffalo Rangers for the final game in a series of three contests with the Hominy Indians. After the 1927 season he signed on with C. C. Pyle to play 8 games in California on a team headlined by Red Grange.

The exploits of the 1927 Giants are well documented and the team won the NFL championship. Red Grange and C. C. Pyle had come back into the NFL fold after losing a bundle with their AFL adventure in 1926, and after the 1927 postseason games in California, Pyle was looking for the next great sports promotion – a cross country marathon run, the famous Bunion Derby. Steve Owen would be part of this adventure going east from Los Angeles to New York starting March 4, 1928 and heading west from NY to LA March 31, 1929.

Officials of the Race
C. C. PYLE, Director General
HAROLD E. "RED" GRANGE, Assistant Director General
ARTHUR DUFFY, Referee
(And one of America's greatest sprinters)
HUGO QUIST, Physical Director
(Director of Paavo Nurmi's American tour)

ASSISTANT REFEREES AND PATROL JUDGES

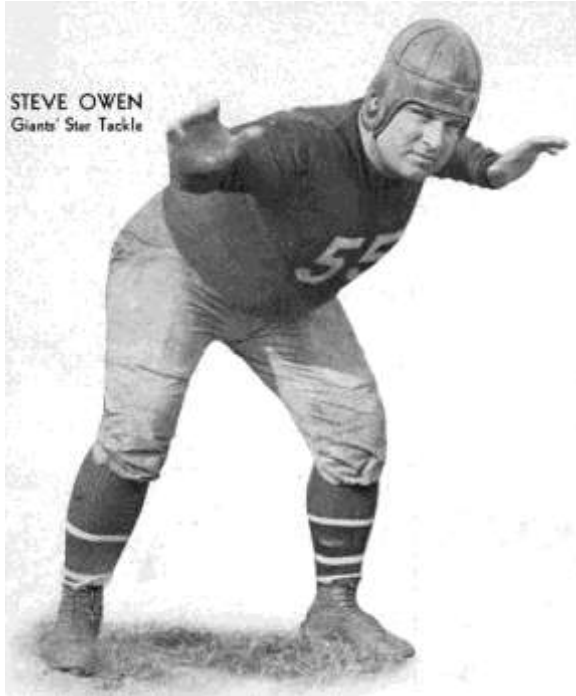
"Steve" Owens.....	Phillips University, Oklahoma
"Roy" Baker.....	University of Southern California
Sam Stein.....	University of Pennsylvania
Ray Flaherty.....	Gonzaga University
Ted Buckley.....	Washington University
Cy Williams.....	University of Florida

Auditor—G. C. OAKLEY

All specially invited guests will be carried by the new type Twin Coach Parlor Car, of the California Parlor Car Tours Company of Los Angeles.

Steve wrote: "The cross-country derby was a great experience for me. I got to be a starter.. It showed me what the human body could stand in athletics. I had the pleasure of rooming with Red Grange on the marathons." Programs from these two epic events come up for auction with some regularity and can be bought for under \$100. In the 1928 event Red Grange gets second billing to Pyle as the "Assistant Director General." Steve is at the top of the list of Assistant Referees and Patrol Judges – Ray Flaherty is on there as well. In 1929 Grange is no longer involved and Steve is listed as Referee, although Geoff Williams in his book "C. C. Pyle's Amazing Foot Race," described Steve as the Sheriff to enforce Pyle's rules and Flaherty as his Deputy

Flaherty would be Steve's deputy for a more serious duty in 1933 when Steve was called away from training camp in Pompton Lakes, NJ, by the fatal illness of his first wife, Florence, who was in Boston. The Giants played two preseason games with Flaherty filling in as coach – on September 9 against an All-Long Island eleven at Freeport, NY and on September 13 against the Staten Island Stapes, now no longer in the NFL and with Ken Strong playing for the Giants against his former teammates.



Newspapers reported that Steve would return to the team in time for a September 17 game against Paterson, after which the team would travel to Pittsburg to open the NFL season against the Pirates on Sept. 20.

Researchers have put together a very thorough picture of Steve's career both as a player and coach in the NFL from 1924 to 1953. Many place the spotlight most brightly on the 1934 Championship Game against the Bears, better known as the Sneakers Game because the Giants won the game after donning basketball shoes for the second half to get better traction on the frozen field. Steve would also guide the Giants to a total of 8 Eastern championships and 2 NFL titles, but in 1952 and 1953 the team had only 10 wins against 14 losses, and the writing was on the wall.

After the 1953 season Steve did some scouting work for the Giants and then joined the coaching staff at Baylor University. The Baylor Football Media Guide for 1955 said: Steve Owen joins the Baylor staff this fall on a seasonal basis, as a football assistant, with particular attention to defense... Steve also was here last spring to help with spring training and to help conduct Coach Sauer's annual free spring clinic for high school coaches, and demonstrated his famed "umbrella" defense at that time...(Steve's) latest football stint before joining Baylor was to coach the 1955 College All Star Game.

After some very one sided wins by the pros in the annual All Star Game in Chicago, Arch Ward of the Chicago Tribune decided to hire NFL coaches to prepare the college players. In 1955 he hired Curly Lambeau as head coach for the collegians and Lambeau hired Steve and Hunk Anderson to guide the defense.



L. to R.: Charley Grier, Assistant Coach; Hugh Devore, Head Coach; Steve Owen, Assistant Coach; and Frank Killee, Assistant Coach.

Steve would not stay in the college ranks long. For the 1956 and 1957 seasons he was an assistant coach for the Philadelphia Eagles and then headed north to Canada to take over as head coach of the Toronto Argonauts in 1959, the Calgary Stampeders in 1960, and the Saskatchewan Roughriders in 1961 and 1962. Steve took the Roughriders from winning just one game in 1960 to the playoffs in 1962 and was named the Canadian Football League Coach of the Year.

Bad health began to plague Steve. He suffered a heart attack in 1962 and resigned from his Canadian coaching duties at the end of that season. However, he took another head coaching job for the 1963, this time with the Syracuse Stormers of the United Football League, a minor league that operated from 1961 to 1964. Playing teams like the Wheeling Ironmen, the Toledo Tornadoes, the Cleveland Bulldogs, the Indianapolis Warriors, and the Grand Rapids Blazers, the Stormers won none and lost 12, a very anticlimatic end to Steve's coaching career.

After that, according to Arthur Dailey, Steve showed up at the Giants office in New York City. He asked Jack Mara, "Do you think you could find a job for a broken down old coach?" "I know we can," said Mara, "we can always make room for another scout." And so, said Dailey in a May 18, 1964 column, "it was only fitting that stout Steve should have been a member of the Giant organization when he died yesterday."



Dailey ended his column: "It is quite possible that no professional coach ever inspired more love, devotion, and admiration among his players than did Steve. The only counterpart was Knute Rockne at Notre Dame. A might stout fella was Owen. The Giants and all professional football owe him much for his contributions."

*"My beer is RHEINGOLD
— the DRY beer!"*
says STEVE OWEN



PHOTOGRAPH BY HARRIS PRATTSON

1. "Pro football is a tough grind," says Steve Owen, manager of the N. Y. Giants. "So a time-out is always welcome. But there's one kind of time-out especially I'm all for..."



2. "And that's time out for Steve Owen to have a glass of Rheingold—the DRY beer! I like that Rheingold dryness. It lets the clean, clear, real-beer flavor come through."



*It's beer as beer
should taste!*
DRY tells you **WHY!**

Rheingold is light but hearty—not bitter, not sweet. Its quality of DRYNESS lets the clean, clear, real-beer flavor come through.

Also, notice Rheingold's pale, crystal-clear color. This paleness and sparkling clarity is another symbol of the superior quality brewers strive for.

If you can't always get Rheingold, remember... until our postwar expansion is finished, to increase the quantity, we'd have to decrease the quality. And that we will NEVER do. Rheingold will always be beer as beer should taste.

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