

CECIL “CECE” GRIGG

1891 –1968 Football Player and Coach

Inducted Texas Sports Hall of Fame 1962

By Bill Whitmore

Courtesy of the Texas Sports Hall of Fame

Cecil Grigg was one of the best all-around athletes in the state's history.

Swift and sure-footed, with great balance, he was a splendid performer in football and baseball. In addition to his prowess on the field of action, he was an excellent coach. And he served many seasons as a baseball umpire in the Texas League and the Southern Association.

Grigg had an amazingly long career that included identification with his alma mater, Austin College of Sherman, as a player and coach ... a period as a teammate on the world title pro club Canton Bulldogs with the great Jim Thorpe ... and 34 years service as a coach in Houston for the Rice Institute Owls (changed to Rice University in 1960) of the Southwest Conference.

Close students of the SWC respond “Jess Neely,” if asked who was the most successful long-time coach at Rice. It is a proper answer, for Neely earned acclaim as head man of the Owls from 1940 through 1966. It is also noteworthy that Cecil Grigg was Neely's backfield coach all 27 seasons, and preceded that era with six years as a top aide with Jimmy Kitts. So it was that from 1934 through 1961, “Cece” Grigg was the ONLY man to serve for ALL six Rice teams that won or tied for SWC grid titles (1934, 1937, 1946, 1949, 1953, 1957) and for EVERY one of the seven Owl teams to play in major bowl games.

Grigg began to taper off from the time-consuming, pressure grind of SWC ball in the mid-sixties, when he headed a Rice Lightweight team. This was a group of non-athletic scholarship students who played an entertaining brand of football.

Cece died in September, 1968. He had lived the good life – and was grateful.

Late in his life, he told his wife “I'm the luckiest person in the world, because I got to make my living the way I wanted to, by doing what I enjoyed the most – playing and coaching sports.”

That ‘way of life’ began soon after the turn of the century when Cece (pronounced “seese”) was barely in his teens. This future great Texas athlete had been born in Tennessee on February 15, 1892, but it was a mere technicality that prevented his being a native Texan. His father was a contractor, and moved his wife and infant son to Sherman, in North Texas, only a few months after Cecil was born. Three more boys were born in Texas to the family Grigg.

While still in grammar school in Sherman, his first ‘coach’ was a lady! A favorite teacher who was a sports enthusiast, Mrs. Evorie Dillingham, as playground supervisor at recess admired the speed and prowess of the young Grigg lad. She took him to the high school and convinced the coach the grammar school kid could help him immediately. And he became an instant success competing with the older boys.

In fact, by the time Cece was a high school senior – in those days when eligibility rules were more lax than now – he was playing some games for Austin College in Sherman, including one when they gave the then-new Rice Institute its worst defeat ever, 81-0, in 1912.

It took Grigg several years to finish Austin College because of two interruptions, a transfer for a season to Dallas University and two years duty – including overseas in France – as a first lieutenant engineer for the U.S. Army in World War I. Back from wartime military duty, he was graduated in 1919, and soon began a long and spectacular career in pro football and baseball, playing, umpiring and coaching.

In 1920, Charlie Moran was Texas A&M grid coach in the fall and a major league umpire in spring and summer. The great Indian athlete Jim Thorpe was a major leaguer with John McGraw's New York Giants in his off-season from star of the famed Canton Bulldogs in Ohio in a pro football league, forerunner to the National Football League.

Moran urged Thorpe to sign the swift Texan, and Grigg played quarterback with Thorpe at Canton for four years, with three world pro titles of 1920, 1922, and 1923. He had another pro title year in the early NFL days with the New York Giants for Coach Steve Owen in 1927 before he retired from pro football.

While with Canton, the Bulldog backfield was composed of Thorpe, Pete Calac, Joe Guyon, and Grigg – who was so

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darkly tanned from summer baseball in the Texas and Southern leagues that the group often was called the "All Indian" backfield!

Cece often said, "No denying it, Thorpe was simply the greatest player who ever put on a uniform." He also strongly endorsed Bill Wallace of Rice (in both the Texas Sports Hall of Fame and National Football Hall of Fame) as the best player he ever coached, but placed the lad of a generation later, in the 1950's, Dick Maegle, right up there with Wallace. Maegle joined Grigg and Wallace in the Texas Sports Hall of Fame in 1980.

Cecil Grigg, also known as the "Gray Eagle" for a resemblance to a contemporary great Texas athlete of his era, Tris Speaker, who had that nickname originally, tutored three sets of "touchdown twins" at Rice – Bill Wallace and John McCauley, plus Ernie Lain and Olie Cordill of the late thirties under Kitts, then two All-Americans for the Owls under Neely in Dick Maegle and Kosse Johnson.

Grigg was the perennial "behind the scenes" skilled aide for most of his career at Rice, but he did serve six years as head grid coach and athletic director for alma mater Austin College from 1928 to 1934. He said "I got the job at Rice because I gave Jimmy Kitts his first set of plays when he became coach at Athens High while I was at Austin College, and Jimmy never forgot me. We became close friends and I joined him at Rice Institute in 1934."

During his tenure with the Owls, he also coached some baseball and track, he was talented and respected at whatever task he performed. Cece no doubt would have been a success as a college head coach, and was strongly considered for that role at S.M.U. in the 1930's, but he preferred to be in the background as an assistant.

Cecil Burkett Grigg had an action-packed 76 years, and truly was an athlete and coach to be remembered.