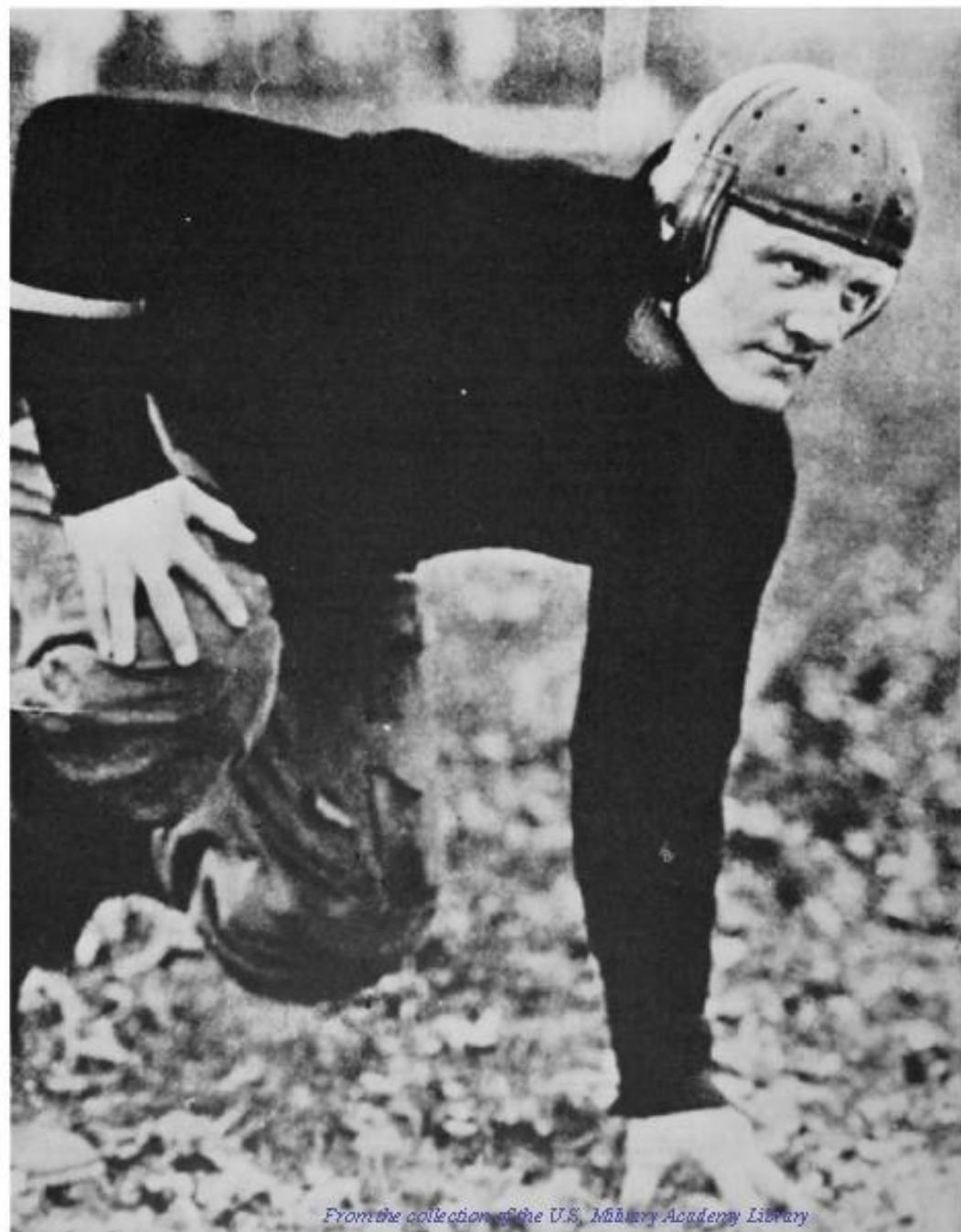


# WEST POINT'S ALL-TIME ALL-AMERICAN:

by REDMOND F. KERNAN



*From the collection of the U.S. Military Academy Library*

ASSEMBLY

**AUTHOR'S COMMENT:** The preparation of the article on Elmer Oliphant was made possible by helpful information and grateful assistance from Tom Hansen, Assistant Executive Director of the NCAA and from members of the original Class of 1918 (Aug 1917): William McC. Chapman, H.B. Ely, L.B. Griffith, L. McC. Jones, William O. Reeder, and R.H. Hallstead; and of the Class of 1919 (June 1918): E.W. Gruhn and P. Agnew; and, of course, from Ollie himself and his wife Bobbie.

Ollie in 1951



# Elmer Quillen Oliphant

**I**N commemoration of the 100th year of college football in 1969 the All-Time All-American Team was selected by the Football Writers Association of America. Awards were presented at a banquet in New York sponsored by the Chevrolet Division of General Motors under the auspices of the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

The honorary "team" was made up of two college elevens, one from the 1869 to 1919 era and the other from 1919 to 1969.

West Point was honored by the selection on the Early All-Time Team of its great football hero, Elmer Quillen Oliphant, universally and affectionately known as "Ollie." He is, and was in 1969, the only surviving member of that team. General Motors also honored him by establishing an Elmer Q. Oliphant Scholarship.

Ollie entered West Point in 1914 as a member of the Class of 1918. Prior to entering West Point Ollie graduated from Purdue University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering. He was required to repeat his

second year in mathematics at the Academy probably due to his involvement in athletics, and became a member of the Class of 1919. These classes graduated in August 1917 and June 1918 respectively and were subsequently known by their graduation dates.

Ollie was born in the town of Linton, Indiana. He started his athletic career in Washington High School. There he displayed his unusual ability in football and other sports. At the state athletic meet he broke the state record in the mile, won the half mile and was second in the 220 yard hurdles. He spent his summers working in the nearby coal mines getting up at 4 a.m. to fire boilers to take the men below. Upon graduating from high school he entered Purdue and worked at as many as seven jobs to pay his way. There were then no athletic scholarships available. It was said that he took athletics apart at Purdue, winning his letter in four major sports and twelve letters in all. He was named the greatest athlete ever in Purdue history.

At West Point he was the first cadet in history to win A's in four separate sports, football, baseball, basketball and track. In hockey he won the highest award, a monogram. A new design had to be authorized to represent the four A's and a gold star and three gold stripes were added to his A, the only one of its kind.

The other three members of the backfield selected with Ollie on the Early All-Time Team were Walter Eckersall of Chicago University (1903-06) as quarterback, Jim Thorpe of Carlisle Indians (1907-08, 1911-12) and Willie Heston, Michigan (1901-04).

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brigadier General Redmond F. Kernan was a classmate of Elmer Oliphant in the original Class of 1918. He served in France as an artilleryman after World War I, as a Tac at USMA, and as an instructor in the New York National Guard. He resigned in 1922 to study law at Fordham and practiced in New York City. In World War II he served as Commanding General of the 27th Division Artillery in combat in the Pacific. After World War II he retired in California and was admitted to the California Bar in 1946. He is also a member of the bar of federal courts in New York and California and of the United States Supreme Court. He lives with his wife Marguerite in Atherton, California, near their four children and eight grandchildren.*



Ollie in Track—220 yard Hurdles.  
Record—Patton '09—25 4/5 seconds.  
New Record—Oliphant '18—25 seconds.

MARCH 1973

*From the collection of the Elmer Quillen Oliphant Scholarship*



Football

Basketball



In his statement on the Early All-Time Team the sportswriter for the *New York Times* states:

"In every instance, these are legendary figures. Their names are bywords to football fans of all ages. With few exceptions, each still stands as the most famous player in the history of his school—some of the most devastating men to don football pads.

"Eckersall, one of the greatest field goal kickers, was the inevitable choice as quarterback... As a field leader he had few, if any, superiors. He was dangerous with his speed in running the ball, and outstanding on defense.

"Jim Thorpe is generally rated the greatest back college football has ever known. Winner of the decathlon and pentathlon in the 1912 Olympics, Thorpe was the perfect player... In 1950 Thorpe was picked in the Associated Press Poll as the greatest athlete of the first half of the 20th Century.

"Heston, Michigan's All American from 1901-04 was

the shining light of the Wolverines teams that went unbeaten in his four years, defeating 43 opponents and tied only once. His career total of 72 touchdowns is the all time high in college football's first century, though he played before the introduction of the forward pass.

"Oliphant was selected twice as All-American, 1916-17. He was a fast, powerful runner who hit with tremendous impact. He was a superb athlete..."

The accounts of Ollie's exploits on the athletic fields during his West Point days are recorded in the reports of the Association of Graduates, the HOWITZERS and press articles of his time, but while profuse in their eloquent praise of his prowess and deeds they fall short of adequately reflecting the greatness of his achievements as they appeared to his fellow cadets and other spectators of the events.

A football teammate and classmate (now in California) makes this comment:

Getting off ferry at Garrison on way to New York for 1916 Army-Navy Game at Polo Grounds. Team came back smiling. The Class of Apr '17 and Aug '17 never saw a Navy victory in football or baseball during their days at West Point. Left to right (front row only): McEwen Apr '17, (?) Nov '18, Oliphant June '18, Chapman Aug '17, Rundell June '18, Timberlake Aug '17.



From the collection of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point



"Those were the days when the referee didn't blow the whistle until the man with the ball was down flat and couldn't move any more, like a wrestler being pinned to the mat. Remember how all men except possibly the safety man, would pile on top of the man with the ball. We've seen them all piled on Ollie, and then see that rugged Ollie come churning out of the prostrate pile on the side of the opponent's goal and head for a touchdown. And, if there was one man between Ollie and the goal line—God help him. . . .

"When dressing or undressing before and after practice or games Ollie would never sit down but would bend over instead. I asked him about it and he said it was part of his training discipline to build up his endurance and stamina. . . . And if the squad was celebrating a victory Ollie would not take any refreshments but was piping the end of training so he could have an ice cream soda. . . . Ollie was a credit to West Point and the Army as a cadet and as a soldier too—a dedicated leader and West Pointer. . . . I surely did admire him."

A classmate in Virginia writes:

"My remembrance of Ollie is going down the field with several fellows hanging on to him but not slowing him down perceptibly. He would go yards and yards that way and sometimes the whole length of the field to make a touchdown."

And from another in Texas:

"I shall never forget the newspaper cartoon of Ollie charging for a touchdown with one Middie on his head, several on one leg, and several more lying motionless on the trail behind him."

And from New York:

"I can vividly remember Ollie going through the line dragging three tacklers as it usually took a fourth tackler to stop him."

The above comments of classmates illustrate the impression that Ollie's exploits in football left in the minds of the spectators who witnessed them. Another recollection was the ever recurring apprehension that he would not be able to get up when he was uncovered from the bottom of the pile but he would always come up showing no signs of the punishment he had taken with a big smile of satisfaction and ready for the next play. It was truly a joy to watch him.

Among individual records of Ollie at West Point still standing after 55 years are: most points scored in one game, 45; and in one season, 125; touchdowns scored in one game, 6.

One of his best remembered runs was in the 1916 Navy game when he caught the opening kick off near his own goal line and ran it to near the Navy 5 yard line. He then took it over for a touchdown in the first minute of play. In that year Army had an ex- (Continued on page 32)



Ollie wearing his special "A."

# Elmer Quillen Oliphant

Continued from page 5

ceptionally fine team winning all of their nine games and beating Notre Dame 30 to 10.

The following year, 1917, Army won seven games but lost one to Notre Dame 7 to 2. An article written about that game tells the story of the meeting, between George Gipp, still considered Notre Dame's greatest player, and Ollie. Knute Rockne was a chemistry professor at Notre Dame but also was helping as assistant football coach under Jesse Harper, head coach of Notre Dame. The article relates:

"Ollie was never better than on that day when playing for the last time against Notre Dame; he waged an incredible one-man onslaught against the rugged Irish Line. Ollie took on the Notre Damers singlehanded in the closing minutes of the game and almost beat them. . .

"In that first game he ever played against Army Gipp was superb. But his efforts were dimmed, as were those of everyone else, by Oliphant's spectacular show."

There wasn't any aspect of football in which Ollie did not excel, running, passing, blocking, kicking field goals, punting and defense. He was unquestionably one of the greatest ever in all around play. In his time the same players played the entire game both offense and defense. Substitutions were made only when required and Ollie never seemed to require it.

In the early 1950s Ollie was elected to the National Football Hall of Fame. He was also chosen for the Helms Athletic Foundation Hall of Fame and was chosen as the best amateur athlete the State of Indiana ever produced. Knute Rockne, the all time great of coaching, chose him for his All Time All American team.

Ollie's ability in other sports was comparable to his football prowess. In his yearling year 1915-16 he not only led the Army basketball team in scoring but scored more than twice as many points as the next highest scorer on the team although five other regulars played more games than he did. In his final year he played on the hockey team and had to give up basketball to do so. He was an outstanding hockey player. At that time hockey was not a major sport at the Academy and the highest award given was a monogram which Ollie received.

In baseball the story of Ollie again marked his great all around athletic ability. In his plebe year he was the catcher on the 1915 team which was probably one of the top college teams in the country and certainly one of Army's best ever. They won 18 games out of 21 played and two of the three lost were by just one run.

After winning the first six games the next opponent was Seton Hall College, which invariably had an excellent team. Army was playing in its usual style and

32

received, one that he greatly treasured, was his selection by Knute Rockne to his All Time All American Team.

Another great thrill Ollie experienced was when he went to Annapolis to see a Navy-Purdue Game ten or more years after he graduated from West Point. Someone found out he was there and passed the word. The entire Regiment of Middies stood up and gave him a rousing Four "N" Yell. That was a wonderful tribute from the Middies who, it was reported, had burned him in effigy before the 1916 Game and had never won a victory in any sport over Army while he was a cadet.

the ninth inning opened with the score of 8 to 3 in Army's favor. But Seton Hall scored five runs in the ninth inning tying the score. Quoting from the 1916 HOWITZER:

"Seton's joy was short-lived. Oliphant smashed the first ball pitched for his second home run of the day and ended the suspense." It was typical of Ollie's performance no matter what the sport was.

A classmate of Ollie's developed into another excellent catcher and Ollie played in the outfield where his speed, range and throwing arm were utilized to great advantage and his batting power was still retained. His batting average in 1917 was .424 and in 1918, .421—averages rarely equalled today.

Ollie's A in track was awarded in his plebe year when he broke the Academy record in the 220 yard hurdles which was then held by George Patton of the Class of 1909 and later of World War II fame. The race was run on grass in those days and with no heel spikes. Ollie cut 4/5 of a second off Patton's record. Considering Ollie's short stature it was a truly remarkable feat.

The story of Ollie's training for the race is an illustration of the determination and drive that was behind all of his athletic successes. Marty Maher who later gained national renown in the moving picture of West Point, "The Long Gray Line" coached Ollie in preparation for the race. He would come up from Highland Falls in the early hours before reveille and he and Ollie would get out two hurdles Marty had hidden in the basement to practice on. Ollie was required to take more strides between hurdles than other competitors who were taller than he was. He practiced alternating one leg then the other over the hurdles, which was then unheard of, and to lengthen his strides. In those early morning hours he developed the speed and ability to clear the hurdles in the record time which still stands for the conditions then prevailing.

In his first class year Ollie was a Cadet Captain commanding D Company. He showed the same dedication and ideals toward cadet military life and discipline as he did in all of his athletic activities. In his Class HOWITZER among the many other honors and awards he received it is mentioned that he was captain of both the football and baseball teams, light heavyweight boxing champion, class athletic representative and Superintendent of



The story of Ollie's athletic success at West Point would be incomplete without a tribute to the wonderful group of athletes who were his teammates and who contributed so much to his achievements. This was especially true in football. Their names are too many to be listed here but suffice it to say that on the Army teams of those days were many great players. Some of them were All American selections and some later admitted to the Football Hall of Fame.

Ollie and his wife, Bobbie, are now living in a lovely home in New Canaan, Connecticut, and will celebrate 55 years of very happy married life on June 12th next having been married at West Point on his graduation day in 1918.

Sunday School. Quoting from his write up, it is said:

"As a soldier, Ollie puts duty above all. True to himself throughout, and true to all our traditions, he has performed his duties in a man's way."

As a cadet Captain Ollie was very much interested in the problems and welfare of members of his Company and in his HOWITZER is this comment:

"Many a plebe was set straight by a heart to heart talk from Ollie. . . Congenial and likable, it is a pleasure to come into contact with him."

The HOWITZER reference to his being Superintendent of Sunday School, which was for instruction of the children who lived on the Post, was significant in that it was a prelude to the dominant interest of his later years, that of his charitable and religious activities for which he became so well known.

Ollie remained in the service for about four and one half years after graduation during most of which he was stationed at West Point as an instructor in physical and athletic activities. The curtailment of the military services which followed World War I made prospects for active and constructive service and advancement extremely problematical. The War Department being forced to reduce the services encouraged separations. Ollie decided to cast his lot with the many who were leaving the service and go into civil life.

While considering what field of civilian activity he would enter he spent a couple of years as Director of Athletics at Union College in Schenectady, New York, and finally decided to enter the field of life insurance with Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, the world's largest. There he remained for over thirty years in active service until his retirement, becoming an executive and Supervisor of the Group Insurance Division for the New York Area. In his work he found great satisfaction as he devoted his efforts and activities to the welfare of the workers in American industries and providing them peace of mind and security which they had not known before.

The files of Metropolitan Life are replete with commendations and praise of his work in the successful development and growth of its group insurance. On the occasion of his twentieth anniversary with the Company at a dinner in his honor the speakers reviewed his business accomplishments, his work in various charities and his great contributions to the success of the U.S. War Bond drives in World War II. An extract from a press release on that occasion stated:

"Yet in spite of all his glorious past and the attendant deference paid to such an outstanding figure in the world of sports, Ollie remains unassuming, unspoiled and generous to a fault. In vigorous health and spirits, he is a hard worker, puts in long hours and operates with the enthusiasm of a man 20 years his junior."

One of the many honors that Ollie has

ASSEMBLY