

Magic in the Desert: Perfect '60 Aggies have SoCal ties



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By Mike Waldner

John McKay, still the greatest USC football coach of them all, knew how to provide perspective.

After the 51-0 wipeout at the hands of Notre Dame in 1966, he told his players, “There are 750 million people in China who don’t even know this game was played.”

It is of little solace to USC for flopping against Stanford and UCLA for struggling against BYU, but there were 17,210 fans in Las Cruces, N.M., who could not have cared less about the Trojans and Bruins. Those fans were mesmerized by a wild game of their own in which New Mexico State University, as the old line goes, snatched defeat from the jaws of victory and lost 50-47 in overtime to UTEP.

And why, pray tell, was the South Bay correspondent in the New Mexico desert over the weekend?

Truth be told, it was not to see Nick Usher, the UTEP defensive end from Serra High. That was a bonus.

The trip was in some ways a journey into the distant past. Back when dinosaurs roamed the earth, I completed my undergraduate studies at NMSU, home of the Aggies. Not the Lobos. Please, never the Lobos.

Beyond visiting old friends and haunts, the trip was about helping launch “Magic in the Desert,” a book about NMSU football over the years built around the undefeated 1960 Aggies.

The headliners of that team were Pervis Atkins, Bob Gaiters and Charley Johnson.

Atkins and Gaiters would become longtime Ladera Heights residents. Atkins played for the Rams when they were a Los Angeles team. He was the all-purpose All-American halfback in 1960. All tailback Gaiters did was lead the nation in rushing and scoring.

Johnson, the star quarterback, played 15 seasons in the NFL, at the same time earning a doctorate in chemical engineering. He returned to NMSU and joined the engineering faculty.

“Magic in the Desert” was the brainchild of Dan Perry, one of my undergraduate roommates. When he died two years ago, NMSU journalism professor emeritus Dr. Frank Thayer, another old roommate, decided to lateral the assignment to me, which is how I became the ghostwriter of the book.

The why was to honor an old friend and help fund a scholarship in his name. Other than pre-printing and printing costs, there was no overhead, which will maximize the revenue stream to the scholarship.

The target audience, quite obviously, is in New Mexico. This will not prevent football fans elsewhere from checking out the [MagicintheDesert60.com website](http://MagicintheDesert60.com).

One of the fun parts of the weekend was watching Charlie Rogers, another NMSU grad, in action. Along with supervising the website and printing, he is selling the book, sometimes out of the trunk of his car.

Rogers is an Albuquerque resident who once upon a time worked for Warner Bros. in Burbank, And don't laugh about selling the book out of the trunk of his car. That's how Phil Knight started Nike.

The game provided a reminder that there is college football beyond the Power Five Conferences. A crowd much, much smaller than those at the Coliseum and Rose Bowl can be and was just as energized.

It was impossible to ignore the clanging of cowbells by the Aggie faithful, both because of the noise and the memory of former Lakers coach Phil Jackson complaining about cowbells when the Lakers played at Sacramento.

One of the activities during the extended weekend was a boosters lunch with NMSU coach Doug Martin, who took over a depressed program in 2013 with only 68 players on scholarship.

The loss Saturday extended the nation's longest losing streak to 13 games as he builds on a foundation with sophomores and freshmen. The assignment he accepted with his eyes wide open has been frustrating as well as tough. The last two losses have been by a total of five points.

“We're gonna lose in Aggie fashion,” a long-suffering fan said as UTEP rallied behind off-the-bench Ryan Metz, a freshman former third-string quarterback, after trailing 44-30 with 4:07 remaining.

Usher, a 6-foot-3, 231-pound two-year letterman junior, played a solid game, providing evidence Serra had talent beyond USC multi-position star Adoree Jackson.

Martin talked about the task at hand, no doubt telling boosters what he tells players.

“It’s like wrestling a gorilla,” he said. “You don’t stop when you want to. You stop when the gorilla wants to.”

USC’s Steve Sarkisian should have borrowed the quote at halftime of his game. UCLA’s Jim Mora must have received the message via a Coaches Assn. tweet.

Clearing out the mini-notebook

South Bay Seahawks: Former Serra and USC star Kris Richard has been promoted from defensive backfield coach to defensive coordinator of the Seattle Seahawks. Carson High grad David Canales, a former El Camino College assistant coach, has been promoted from assistant quarterback and offensive quality control coach to wide receiver coach of the Seahawks. His assistant WR coach is Peninsula High’s Nate Carroll. Chad Morton, a former South Torrance and USC star, is assistant special teams coach in Seattle.

Scouting report: Much has been written and said about the inability of USC to replace departed-to-the-NFL defensive tackle Leonard Williams. The Trojans also miss the steady play up front of J.R. Tavai, the former Mira Costa High star.

Bottom line: The Dodgers brass should have sent Joc Pederson out to work on his approach at the plate months ago. Had they done that, he might have come back better prepared for the postseason.

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