

New book, "Magic in the Desert," chronicles NMSU's undefeated 1960 football team

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LAS CRUCES >> There is a forgotten history of winning college football at New Mexico State.

A dedicated group of four New Mexico State alumni have spent the last three years working on a novel to bring that history back to life.

The book, 'Magic in the Desert' profiles the Aggies 1960 Sun Bowl championship team.

"It's taken a long time and there were doubters that it would ever get done, including myself," said Charley Johnson, one of the NFL bound stars from the Golden Age of Aggies football. "It took three really dedicated guys to write it and one of them died while they were working on it."

Dan Perry authored the novel, and enlisted former NMSU roommates Charlie Rogers and Frank Thayer and former sports journalist Mike Waldner. Although production of the book sped up during the past three years, Perry approached Rogers more than 10 years ago about chronicling the perfect season of the last Aggies team to play in and win a bowl game.

Unfortunately, Perry would not live to see his book published.

"He called me one day about six years ago and said, 'Charlie, I'm going to have to put this thing on the shelf,'" said Rogers, a 1963 NMSU graduate who currently lives in Albuquerque. "He said he just had his physical and he had a lump in his lung."

Perry was treated and eventually cleared, only to be diagnosed with bone cancer three years ago. He passed away in 2013.

"This was a labor of love," said Thayer, a published author and journalism and mass communications professor at NMSU. "None of us will profit from this and we don't care. It reads well and I think Dan would be proud of it. I think people will enjoy it, if you are a football fan or not."

Thayer said the writing was shared with Waldner, based on their areas of expertise.

"Mike did the lion's share of the sports content and I wrote about what campus life and the city of Las Cruces was like in 1960," Thayer said. Rogers handled everything else.

The book is currently available at magicinthedesert60.com and at Coas Books, 317 N. Main St., in downtown Las Cruces. Johnson and 21 members of the 1960 NMSU football team will sign

copies of the book from 12:15 p.m. until 2:30 p.m. Sept. 19, prior to the Aggies' home game against UTEP.

Thayer said there was a different atmosphere on the NMSU campus in 1960, when students had close friendships with future professional football players like Johnson, Pervis Atkins, Billy Ray Locklin and Bob Gaiters.

"I transferred from Texas A&M to New Mexico State in 1960, and that was when Bear Bryant was the coach at A&M. So, I just assumed that was how football was supposed to be," Thayer said. "It's amazing how normal it seemed back then."

With Johnson running the Wing T offense at quarterback, the Aggies went 11-0 in 1960 and beat Utah State for their second consecutive Sun Bowl championship.

But Perry's book also chronicles lesser known players such as Locklin, who like most of the NMSU players, came to Las Cruces for one reason — to play for coach Warren Woodson.

"Billy Ray came from a little town in Texas where he won a state championship and not one college recruiter talked to him," Rogers said. "That helped Woodson get players that they wouldn't be able to today. He seemed to go after guys like Pervis, who had completed their military commitment. They were physically more mature and more disciplined after taking orders for three or four years."

Woodson is atop the all-time football coaching list at NMSU, compiling a 63-36-3 record (62.6 percent) from 1958 through 1967. He came to Las Cruces after coaching at the University of Arizona.

"Woodson was a tremendous evaluator of talent everywhere he went," Johnson said. "That includes Arizona where they didn't fire him because he couldn't win, but because he was too stubborn."

Johnson has enjoyed his current involvement with the Aggies under head coach Doug Martin.

"He has been a great source of information for me, and advice and encouragement," said Martin, of Johnson. "He would like nothing more than to see this program succeed again. The first day I got the head coaching job, I went in the office and saw Charley Johnson's picture on the wall and I wondered where that guy is and that I had never met him. I found out he was in Las Cruces so I called him and asked to be over here and a part of this program."

Johnson lived in Houston, Texas for 30 years before returning to Las Cruces in 2000 as a NMSU chemical engineering professor.

The title of Perry's book stemmed from Atkins' speech when he was inducted into the NMSU Hall of Fame in 2010.

"There is a winning history here that gets lost because of the recent past," Martin said. "I talk about that team to our team all the time. They don't know that Charley Johnson was a two-time Sun Bowl MVP. It's encouraging to know that it's been done here so it can be done again."