

New Mexico State football great Pervis Atkins has died



[Jason Groves](#)

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LAS CRUCES — A week before New Mexico State plays in a football bowl game for the first time since 1960, one of the great players in program history has died.

The Sun-News has learned that College Football Hall of Famer and 1960 First-team All-American Pervis Atkins died Thursday night. Atkins was born in Ruston, Louisiana and died at the age of 82.

"Today, Pat Hill, who was the athletic secretary, told a lot of his teammates and friends that he had passed," said former Aggie lineman Don Yannessa, who played at NMSU from 1959-1962. "We are just heartbroken. He succeeded in a tremendous amount of ways and it was just my privilege to be a part of it."

Former NMSU athletic secretary Pat Hill-Yandell notified former players and friends on Friday that Atkins had died overnight. Hill-Yandell later confirmed to the Sun-News that Atkins' died in Los Angeles, per his twin children Gayle and Greg. Atkins was living in California, where he had suffered from dementia for several years.

He is survived by his four children, as well as second wife, Sheila Shorter. Services are scheduled for 1 p.m., on Dec. 28 at the North Hollywood Baptist Church (11210 Otsego St, North Hollywood, CA 91601), per the Atkins family.



New Mexico State Athletics Director Mario Moccia said the university is working to find a way to honor Atkins when the Aggies play Utah State in the Dec. 29 Nova Home Loans Arizona Bowl in Tucson, Arizona.

"I was a student at NMSU when Pervis Atkins played football here," said NMSU Chancellor Garrey Carruthers in a statement. "He was a tremendous running back and exciting to watch. Pervis also played a key role on some legendary Aggie teams. He wore number 27, which was retired after he left, and he allowed me to share the number when I became NMSU's 27th President. We send prayers to his family during this difficult time."

Yanessa said he last saw Atkins at his College Football Hall of Fame induction ceremony in South Bend, Indiana in 2010. He had also spoken to him personally at Yanessa's New Mexico State Sports Hall of Fame induction in 2006 and again in 2009 when the Aggies' 1960 unbeaten Sun Bowl championship team was inducted into the New Mexico State Sports Hall of Fame.

"There wasn't a lot to do, so we spent a lot of time in the dorms talking about things," Yannessa said. "We were close while we were at New Mexico State. He was not only a great athlete but a smart guy and a good human being. In 1960, we don't go undefeated without Pervis Atkins."

Atkins played alongside Charley Johnson and Bob Gaiters in the same offensive backfield. He played on both of NMSU's Sun Bowl championship teams in 1959 and 1960, capping a perfect season in 1960 with a 20-13 victory over Utah State.

Atkins was drafted in the third round of the NFL Draft by the Los Angeles Rams in 1961. He also played for the Washington Redskins and Oakland Raiders throughout a pro career that spanned five seasons. His post-football career was spent in Hollywood, where he appeared in several films, including *The Longest Yard* in 1974.

Atkins served his country in the U.S. Marine Corps before playing junior college football with future NMSU teammate Bob Gaiters at Santa Ana Junior College. When former Aggies coach Warren Woodson recruited Gaiters to Las Cruces, they teamed up to form a lethal combination.

The 1960 Sun Bowl was the last time the Aggies appeared in a postseason football game before their matchup next weekend in Tucson.

"We all know how beloved he was and what a tremendous player he was," Aggies head coach Doug Martin said. "I only met his family once, but our team, our coaches and our players send thoughts and prayers to his family and we will certainly be remembering him when we play in our bowl game."

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