

Squirmin' Herman and the Whizz Kids

By Bernie McCarty

Squirmin' Herman Wedemeyer, the hula-hipped hurricane from Hawaii, contributed a remarkable chapter to the lore of West Coast football in 1945 when he sparked St. Mary's undernourished teenagers to a successful season and a trip to the Sugar Bowl.

Affectionately dubbed the "Whizz Kids" by West Coast fans who adopted the team, the Gaels were impossibly small in 1945, physically and in numbers. There weren't enough gridders to form a bonafide second unit. And the average age of the team was 18,

Street and Smith's football annual thought so little of St. Mary's prospects for 1945 that it didn't even bother to preview the club. At least Bill Leiser, writing the West Coast preview for Illustrated Football Annual, warned that if Wedemeyer returned in time ".....the big Pacific football surprise of '45 may come from the campus at Moraga."

World War II had ended, but the caliber of football on the coast was still below peacetime standards. This fact can't detract from the accomplishments of the Gaels who had no business beating anybody in 1945. The woeful club of the previous year did not come close to scoring a triumph.

Wedemeyer was the "old man" on the team. He had starred at St. Mary's, as a freshman tailback in 1943, spent a year in Navy pre-flight training and the Merchant Marine, and returned in time to suit up for the 1945 campaign. At 173 pounds Wedemeyer was also one of the bigger players on the team. St. Mary's other particular standouts were halfback Charles "Spike" Cordeiro and quarterback Dennis O'Connor. They barely tipped the scales over 150 pounds.

The one thing the Gaels did not lack was speed. Coach Jimmy Phelan created an intricate, wide-open attack employing speed, passing and multiple laterals. Wedemeyer made it all work in such heroic and spectacular fashion that young grid fans of today tend to disbelieve his feats.

Famed sportswriter Grantland Rice tabbed Wedemeyer the nation's finest all-around athlete. But it was in football warfare that Wedemeyer earned a unique niche in the history of American sports.

The All-America Board of Football, announcing its 1945 selections, said of Wedemeyer: "Out on the West Coast, Herman Wedemeyer of little St. Mary's (student body, 167) has received more endorsements than the best looking, baby-kissing politician who ever ran for office. To watch this sophomore

wonder wiggle, squirm, tackle, punt, pass, block and THINK, and inspire his shaveless teammates to repeated victory over heavier, older and more experienced rivals, provokes amazement and extravagant praise. Statistics and technical skill cannot be discounted but it's the utter nonchalance and wizardry of Wedemeyer that keeps customers jumping up and down.

"Win, lose or tie, the youngster is a born leader and doer; the harder they hit him, the cooler and quicker he bounces from the ground to the huddle. If this versatile artist isn't one of the truly great backs of the decade, at least he is the best solo "entertainer" this writer has seen since the day Red Grange galloped over Pennsylvania. Be it noted that Red was supported by a squad of rugged veterans; Wedemeyer's helpers include nine beardless freshmen."

For the stats buff, Wedemeyer ranked third in the nation in total offense with 1428 yards in eight games. He connected on 59 of 103 passes for 1040 yards. Wedemeyer's aerial gain was second best for the year, and his average gain per completion, 10.10, wasn't far off the national record. He placed fourth in punting with a 40.13 average, and tied for the national lead in interceptions with nine.

The one area where stats conceal the truth concerns Wedemeyer the ball carrier. A brilliant runner, he netted only 388 yards in 96 attempts, a 4.14 average. He tallied nine touchdowns, however. The next year Wedemeyer wasn't as effective in the air. Rival defenses were stronger and better prepared for his passes and laterals. So Wedemeyer excelled on the ground, reeling off 625 yards in eight games for a 6.01 average.

The Gaels split in their four "big" games of 1945, upsetting California and Pacific Coast Conference champion Southern California, were upset in turn by UCLA in the final regular-season contest, and tumbled 33-13 against mighty Oklahoma A&M in what may have been the most sensational of all Sugar Bowl struggles.

Wedemeyer, Cordeiro and Co. sizzled in the pushover contests; 26-0 over Stockton Army, 39-0 over Nevada, 61-0 over College of Pacific, 58-0 over McClellan Field, and 32-6 over Fresno State.

Nevada wasn't all that weak, much bigger than the Gaels with several individual standouts. Wedemeyer and the freshman Cordeiro ran wild in front of 60,000 spectators at San Francisco's Kezar Stadium, St. Mary's pulled off one of the most spectacular plays of the year in the game, a 77-yard pass and double lateral from Wedemeyer to end Ed Ryan to O'Connor to Cordeiro. Wedemeyer flipped to Cordeiro for another touchdown and scored himself on a 16-yard scamper. Cordeiro tallied three touchdowns.

The tilt against weak College of the Pacific was noteworthy for two reasons, Amos Alonza Stagg was the Pacific coach, and three Hawaiians starred for St. Mary's. Wedemeyer did his thing, passing for three touchdowns and scoring a fourth, Cordeiro, from Honolulu like Wedemeyer, scored twice on sweeps. And the third Hawaiian, Harold Van Giesen, added a touchdown before Phelan yanked them all out at halftime.

Now for the important games.

St. Mary's served notice it would emerge as the best team on the coast by shocking California 20-13 on opening day. Cal scored first and the fans sat back, expecting a rout. Wedemeyer hurled a 46-yard touchdown pass to Paul Crowe, kicked the extra point, and suddenly the Gaels were in front 7-6. O'Connor set up the next tally before half-time by intercepting a pass, and Wedemeyer ran 11 yards to the end-zone. O'Connor intercepted another pass in the third quarter, and the Gaels scored in one play, Wedemeyer hurling long to O'Connor to cover the 67 yards to paydirt. A feature of the game was Wedemeyer's 40-yard punt out of bounds at the half-inch line.

The highlight of the season was the 26-0 trouncing of USC Nov. 3. Wedemeyer set up the first touchdown by combining with O'Connor on a 51-yard aerial strike to the one, and he went over on the next play. Before it was over Wedemeyer scored again and booted two conversions.

This flowing use of adjectives is supplied by the Associated Press in its game report: "An aggressive, speedy St. Mary's Gaels football team -- uncorking every trick in the book and a master playmaker in Hawaiian Herman Wedemeyer -- romped over, around and through the befuddled behemoths of Southern California to score a 26-to-0 victory which left 80,000 spectators blinking in amazement. The Gaels' razzle-dazzle performance was the most brilliant seen in the Coliseum since Stanford's 1940 eleven, star-

ring Frankie Albert, appeared here. Ably assisted by another Hawaiian hula-hipper, Chalres (Spike) Cordeiro, Wedemeyer ran and passed the Gaels into position for three scores."

Quarterback Ernie Case, a recently returned war veteran, was most responsible for handing the Gaels their first loss, 13-7 Nov. 18 before 87,000 at the Los Angeles Coliseum. The Gaels scored first after recovering a fumble at the Bruin 13. Wedemeyer ran 11 yards, then two yards for the touchdown and added the extra point. St. Mary's failed to score again in the first period after the day's most exciting play, Wedemeyer passed 45 yards to end Ed Schultz who

promptly fumbled the ball. O'Connor was on the spot to grab the loose pigskin and run 20 more yards to the UCLA five. Case passed for both Bruin touchdowns, the final score coming late in the fourth quarter.

St. Mary's was still ranked the 1945 king on the Pacific Coast because both USC and California defeated UCLA.

The Sugar Bowl throng of 75,000 was the largest ever to see a football game in the south up to that time. The unbeaten Aggie Cowboys were heavy favorites and deserved to be. Halfback Bob Fenimore still ranks today as the best gridder in the school's history, and he was surrounded by a powerful supporting cast. St. Mary's had no chance of moving the ball on the ground, and to make matters worse, Cordeiro was weak from a bout with influenza. Wedemeyer was limited to 29 yards in seven rushes, but hit nine of 18 passes for 155 yards.

Wedemeyer took a lateral, passed 47 yards to O'Connor for a touchdown, and kicked the conversion for a quick 7-0 lead. Fenimore carried the Aggies to a 14-7 advantage in the second period. And St. Mary's came right back with a 44-yard scoring play when Wedemeyer dashed 24 yards then lateralled to guard Carl DeSalvo who rambled the rest of the distance. That closed the gap to 14-13 at intermission. It was still only 20-13 at the end of three quarters, but the Gaels simply pooped out at the finish.

Hal Middlesworth, Daily Oklahoman sports editor, provides the final comments on St. Mary's wonderful 1945 season:

"The hard-hitting Oklahoma Aggies beat the most amazing football team in America by crushing the inspired Galloping Gaels of St. Mary's College, 33-13, in the 12th annual Sugar Bowl classic. It was the most lop-sided beating ever given a team in the Sugar Bowl and yet even this fact is paradoxical, for the undersized young Gaels fought and clawed all the way to the wire before the Aggies were able to completely subdue them. It was a battle billed as a personal engagement between two All-America halfbacks and the principals, Bob Fenimore of the Aggies and Herman Wedemeyer of St. Mary's lived up to everything expected of them,

"Squirmin" Herman, the 175-pound Hawaiian wiggler, was the most sensational performer of a sensational team which does everything with a flourish. On one play, for instance, Wedemeyer passed to end Ed Ryan, who lateralled to O'Connor, who lateralled to tackle Ed Beasley -- all of which was good for 33 yards."

The rest of Wedemeyer's college career was anticlimactic. He may have been even better in 1946, but received only second and third-team All-America recognition. The Gaels, expected to romp again, never quite jelled. The enemy was tougher, and Wedemeyer missed Cordeiro who was called to active military duty. Still, St. Mary's compiled a 6-2 record before being humbled by Georgia Tech 41-19 in the Oil Bowl. Highlights of the season were victories over Nevada (13-12) and Washington (24-20). Nevada was a truly powerful outfit featuring many future pro stars. During the season Wedemeyer reeled of touchdown runs of 70 yards against California and 73 yards against Santa Clara.

It was a 33-2 win over Fordham, however, which may represent the greatest single performance of Wedemeyer's career. The East Coast finally got to see his gridiron magic in full bloom. Playing half the game, Wedemeyer fired 84, 46 and 43-yard scoring passes. And on one incredible play he accepted a punt and booted the ball right back to Fordham's six-yard line.