

The Blue Ghosts

By Ray Schmidt

As the decade of the Roaring Twenties neared its end, the football picture on the West Coast was marked by considerable "political" turmoil. The majority of the media coverage had always been dominated by the powerful teams of the Pacific Coast Conference, such as Southern California, Stanford, California and Washington. Along with this monopoly of newspaper coverage went an almost automatic berth in the prestigious Rose Bowl classic for the Conference champion.

But by the late Twenties a number of Catholic schools up and down the Coast had begun to field some powerful squads. Included in their ranks were Santa Clara, Gonzaga, San Francisco, St Mary's and Loyola of Los Angeles. While not organized in a formal conference they usually played nearly a round-robin schedule, and gladly accepted whatever match-ups that the powerful Pacific Coast Conference teams would care to risk. With the approach of the 1929 season one of these small schools had finally assembled a team considered to be a serious challenger for the precious berth in the Rose Bowl. These were the Gaels from little St Mary's, a Christian Brothers school of about 600 students that was located in the Oakland area, and led by the innovative coach Edward "Slip" Madigan.

In 1928 St Mary's had compiled a 5-4-0 record while Madigan tutored an excellent crop of sophomores. As 1929's pre-season practice went on, everyone knew the Gaels were loaded with "a squad that many believe will enable St Mary's to make its debut as a genuine contender for national honors. The Gaels have everything ... and for the first time they have a schedule that cannot help but give them a good claim to the national title if completed without defeat." Devotees of the Pacific Coast Conference tended to accuse Madigan of overselling his team's merits and suggested that a team like California would bring the upstart Gaels to earth when they met.

St Mary's had an extremely big, fast line which was led by tackle George Ackerman, while Harry Ebding, considered an All-Coast talent, held down one of the end positions. But St Mary's real strong suit for 1929 was in the offensive backfield where "some say the Gael ball packing department is to be the strongest on the Coast." These were Madigan's "Four Blue Ghosts of the Moraga Valley."

The Blue Ghost backfield of St Mary's featured the great pass receiver and blocker Butch Simas at quarterback, power runner Cal Pitchford at fullback, "the elusive" Dick Boyle at right half and Fred "Stud" Stennett at left half. It was Stennett, a strapping 200 pounder, who was slated to be the star of the Gael backfield as he was an outstanding punter, a good runner and an excellent passer. Many observers felt that in Stennett, "the triple-threat ace", the Gaels had "the best back on the Coast" for 1929. Others thought that Dick Boyle was an even better back. St Mary's also had a second team of "pony" backs nearly the equal of the Blue Ghosts. This backfield included Bob Barrett at fullback, Bob Patterson at quarterback, and speedy sophomores Bud Toscani and Red Schefflin at the halfback spots.

St Mary's of 1929 played a diversified offense that utilized both a strong running attack and passing. The Gaels would easily run out of the standard "X" or "Y" formations, in addition to frequently using the "T". They also used several variations of backfield shifts including something new for 1929 called the "centrifugal shift", which was actually the linemen shifting positions. Madigan's style of attack from the wingback formations called for the deep backs to be placed six-to-eight yards behind the line, which was quite a run after taking the snap and placed a premium on blocking, but the Gaels had the horses for it in 1929.

For the opener on September 29, St Mary's took on West Coast Army at Kezar Stadium, and the game was only three minutes old when Fred Stennett whipped a pass to Boyle and the speedster dashed in for the 30-yard TD. A few minutes later Stennett pegged a bullet pass to Harry Ebding for another 30-yard TD. To start the second quarter Madigan removed almost his entire first team "in an apparent attempt to keep its strength guarded from California's Golden Bears." Despite playing only about half the game, Dick Boyle was the star for the Gaels as, "scorning a helmet, the Vallejo flash showed a fast pair of feet and a stout heart in running back punts and circling the ends." After the 28-0 win Madigan said that "the folks ain't seen nothin yet ... against California is the day we shoot the works."

The second week of the season the Gaels went to Berkely to face off against the Golden Bears of Cal, in what was by far the biggest game on the St Mary's schedule, and the contest was rated as a "toss-up". A throng of 70,000 turned out, and in the first quarter they watched Cal pound down the field until a fumble stopped the drive on St Mary's 19 yard line. From this point on the Gaels forced the issue and dominated the play. In the second quarter Stennett completed a pass to McCaffrey for an 18 yard gain to the California 18, but on a fourth down play Lee Rice of the Bears made a sensational play to knock down a Stennett pass in the end-zone.

Then in the third period the Gaels continued to pressure Cal. Dick Boyle, who was the leading rusher for the day and returned punts like a demon, led the Gaels on a drive to the Cal 9 yard line as the quarter ended. On fourth down at the 8 Stennett's pass was again knocked down in the end-zone. The Golden Bears advanced out to their 16 yard line, but Benny Lom fumbled and Stennett recovered it on the Cal 22, and here came the Gaels again. On the first play Stennett completed a pass to McCaffrey for 19 yards to the 3 yard line. Four straight times Stennett blasted into the line, but the inspired Cal defense stopped every thrust and took the ball back on their own 1 yard line. Lom immediately punted it well out of danger and the teams struggled the balance of the quarter to finish up the 0-0 tie.

St Mary's had totally dominated every aspect of the game statistically and, despite the frustrating tie, the "sensational exhibition" by Madigan's "thrill-a-minute" team caused the papers to immediately begin open speculation about various post-season game opportunities, including the specter of a possible Rose Bowl berth. Since 1926 St Mary's had followed all rules of the Pacific Coast Conference, and so with three games against Conference teams in 1929, it was felt that if the Gaels could navigate the season unbeaten "they would deserve to be ranked as leaders on the Coast."

After a week layoff St Mary's hosted Gonzaga, which was hailed in many corners as the best team in the Northwest. The Bulldogs fought St Mary's to a standstill in a scoreless first half, but in the third quarter Stennett led a march downfield, and capped it off by whipping a 10-yard TD pass to Boyle. In the last quarter Gonzaga was buried under "an avalanche of St Mary's touchdowns", as Red Schefflin passed and ran wild to lead the Gaels to three

more scores to cap off the 32-0 win. The San Francisco Chronicle opinioned that "as a Pasadena Rose Bowl possibility, St Mary's now seems to be closer than ever to the appointment as the West's representative."

Next up was an expected breather with the Gray Fog of St Ignatius College (later renamed San Francisco), and in the words of the Chronicle writer: "But for a big break the football public today might be discussing one of the season's greatest upsets." Instead of the anticipated rout, 10,000 fans watched the Gray Fog's big halfback, Bob Kleckner, play "what might be termed inspired football ... as the Ignatians gave the season's greatest display of sheer fight, and until the final gun they were always bidding not for a tie, but for victory itself. They more than held their own ... and during most of the game actually outplayed the Gaels." The St Mary's offense never threatened to score in the entire game, but in the third quarter George Ackerman, the big tackle, intercepted a Kleckner pass and rambled 60 yards for the only TD of the game to let the Gaels escape with a 6-0 win.

With Butch Simas back from an injury, the Blue Ghost backfield was intact again as St Mary's took on the powerful Olympic Club team. The "Winged O's" had a great backfield of former college stars featuring Mort Kaer, Mayes McLain and Leo Rooney, but the Gaels put on a spectacular show and were totally dominating play despite holding only a 3-0 lead after three quarters. Then Stennett intercepted a pass at the O.C. 35 yard line, and on the next

play Bob Barrett blasted up the middle on a 35-yard TD run. With little more than a minute left to play Stennett tossed a pass to Dick Boyle, who eluded the first wave of tacklers and then raced down the sideline to a 35-yard TD to finish the 17-0 win that "definitely established St Mary's as one of the Far West's great football teams."

While everyone was raving about the great triple-threat play of Stennett and his running mate Boyle against the Olympics, the Gaels prepared for their annual "Little Big Game" against Santa Clara. This title was a media creation to reflect the game's secondary importance to the annual Cal-Stanford "Big Game", but in 1929 St Mary's declared that their game was every bit as important as the battle between the Conference rivals. Santa Clara, led by Coach Clipper Smith who was a former teammate of Slip Madigan at Notre Dame, was a decided underdog however, the Broncs were fired up for the contest. It was commonly felt that the Gaels were facing what might be their toughest game of 1929, but St Mary's was counting on its powerful line and they expected that the "celebrated Blue Ghost backfield will run the Santa Clara defense ragged."

Kezar Stadium hosted 35,000 fans for the game, and they watched Santa Clara suffer a major blow in the first period when their Star back, Chris Machado,

was lost with an injury. Then late in the second quarter Guido Simoni punted very short and St Mary's started a drive at the Broncs 36 yard line, which moved downfield to the 1 yard line only to be stopped as time ran out in the half. Santa Clara turned away a third period threat with an interception at their own 15, and so it was still a scoreless struggle moving into the fourth quarter.

All during the game Dick Boyle had been a marked man, so Madigan inserted sophomore Bud Toscani for the final quarter. Shortly afterwards St Mary's was on their own 39 yard line, and Stennett dropped back and heaved a long pass downfield. "Toscani caught the ball while high in the air and he galloped over the goal line" for a 61-yard TD and a 6-0 lead. "Toscani's catch was a thing of beauty, a brilliant catch ... and his run sent thrills up and down the spines of the spectators." Then Santa Clara, on its only scoring threat of the game, marched 55 yards downfield but lost the ball on downs at St Mary's 25 yard line, and the Gaels escaped another squeeaker.

Then it was down to the Los Angeles Coliseum to tackle UCLA of the hated Pacific Coast Conference. St Mary's had made a good impression playing USC in 1928, and their 1929 reputation preceded them to the City of Angels. Braven Dyer, a Los Angeles Times football writer, was expansive in his praise of the Blue Ghosts, and of Stennett he wrote: "I have seldom seen a better football player ... He runs like nobody's business, punts splendidly and can pass with the best of 'em. If ever a player resembled Morley Drury (ex-USC) in practically every respect it is this fellow Stennett." Dyer correctly identified the main mission of Madigan and the Gaels when he wrote that "the Gaels are desirous of making a large impression here today because there is talk of an intersectional game featuring them in these parts." UCLA was not expected to do much, but Dyer wrote: "There is plenty of color to Madigan's club. Regardless of what the Bruins do you'll be missing one of the gridiron treats of the year if you fail to take in tomorrow's performance of the Galloping Gaels. They rate."

The game was scoreless as Madigan sent the Blue Ghosts in for the second period, and quickly the Gaels staged a 60-yard drive behind the running of Boyle, Stennett and Pitchford, with Boyle dashing around left end for a 10 yard TD run. After an exchange of punts, the Gaels opened up their offense and Stennett started "to throw forward passes all over the place." A long pass to Harry Ebding was good for a 32-yard TD and a 12-0 lead. Just before the half ended Stennett launched a 40-yard pass to Boyle, who made a sensational leaping catch at the UCLA 5, but the Gaels failed to score on this chance. Madigan's second team played most of the last two quarters and tacked on a pair of TD's to round off the 24-0 win. The following week St Mary's kept most of their offensive tricks under cover, and still managed to bury Nevada by a 54-0 count. The big stars of the day were Toscani with three TD's, Boyle with a 45-yard TD on an interception and Schefflin with a 70-yard TD dash.

The Gaels now seemed to have several options for a post-season game. One story declared that "St Mary's is almost certain to play a post-season intersectional game in Kezar on December 21 provided the Saints are not selected to represent the West in the Pasadena Rose Bowl." Louis Lefevre, the St Mary's A.D., announced that the Gaels had received an invitation to a post-season game in the Los Angeles Coliseum, but added that St Mary's "would rather play in San Francisco ... unless we play in the Rose Bowl."

Then two days after the Nevada game the San Francisco Chronicle blared the

headlines: "Gaels In Line For Pasadena Grid Contest". The story said that "if the Saints continue their unbeaten record ... it is hard to figure how they can be counted out". The likely Rose Bowl matchup was said to be St Mary's and Notre Dame! A few days later Knute Rockne issued a statement that Notre Dame was not going to play in any post-season game. What a glorious matchup that would have been, since Notre Dame has rarely risked its reputation against other Catholic schools since Rockne arrived.

Thanksgiving brought the season finale with a strong Oregon team, minus its star back Johnny Kitzmiller. George Ackerman blocked an early punt and Ebding recovered it in the end-zone for the opening TD. Shortly after, Stennett launched a long pass to Ebding that was good for a 50-yard TD, and after a nice drive Stennett scored his first TD of the season to give the Gaels a 19-0 lead after the first quarter. But in the final quarter an Oregon TD by Al Browne, broke St Mary's scoreless streak and the final score read 31-6.

Immediately after finishing their regular schedule with an 8-0-1 record, heavy campaigning began to place St Mary's in the Rose Bowl. But it appeared that the Gaels had no chance. Hal Reynolds of the Pasadena committee declared that any action contemplated in selecting a West Coast representative would be reviewed with the Pacific Coast Conference officials. While Reynolds made no direct statement, he suggested that "he didn't believe they should go outside the Coast Conference" for the Western selection. Harry Smith, the Chronicle's Sports Editor, wrote that "the Rose Bowl management is anxious to keep step with the conference and do much as that organization desires." After California withdrew itself from consideration, it came down to USC and St Mary's; and after all was said and done, the Rose Bowl berth went to USC. St Mary's then rejected any other post-season game possibilities.

As far as individual players went, Dick Boyle had been the leading scorer with seven TD's, while Ebding, Schefflin and Toscani scored four each. Fred Stennett, considered "one of the best forward passers in the West", threw seven TD passes for the year. George Ackerman, the tackle who "was practically impregnable on defense", was named a First Team All-America by the All-America Board and by INS. Fred Stennett and Dick Boyle, who had "made themselves two of the most feared backs on the Coast", received All-America recognition also. Stennett was named a Second Team halfback by United Press, while Boyle was named Third Team halfback by the NEA Service.

The Chronicle stated that the Gaels "justly rank as one of the leading college football aggregations in the United States. It is hard to understand how such schools as Stanford and USC can further legitimately refuse to schedule games with St Mary's." The Los Angeles Times said that "the Gaels fairly ooze color and to pass up a chance to see them in action is to miss a real treat"; and the Gaels were rated #4 nationally in the Erskine Award ratings. After the season Coach "Slip" Madigan summed up his feelings about the Blue Ghosts, when he called them "the best backfield that ever stepped on a football field!"