

Swift as the wind

By Bernie McCarty

Swift as the wind, the fastest football player of his era. Murder on sweeps; a big, slashing brute on bursts up the middle; and in the open field, when he couldn't run away from defenders or bowl them over with his strength, he exhibited the moves of a frightened hummingbird.

A downright vicious tackler, peerless against the pass, he must also rank with the finest defenders ever to play the game.

Ollie Matson, University of San Francisco fullback, 1949-1952, had all these skills and in this writer's opinion was the premier college gridder of the decade of the Fifties.

And no athlete, not even during the hero-worshipping Twenties, was more idolized by his teammates and schoolmates. When Matson graduated USF quit football.

Over 35 years ago I was in the stands to watch a track meet between service clubs. I remember one event as if it happened yesterday. Four or five normal sized sprinters and one giant positioned themselves in the starting blocks for the 100-yard dash. Matson, the giant, pulled straightaway from the pack. I knew about Matson because even then I was a dedicated observer of college football. Few other people in the stands knew about Matson, however. His collegiate career was shrouded in mystery.

Matson played on the "wrong" team and on the "wrong" days, Friday and Sunday. Aside from his 1951 statistical performance, and sparse All-America recognition, the football audience was not aware of Matson's awesome feats. USF received literally no attention from the national press.

The San Francisco Dons were a powerhouse during Matson's reign, when he was healthy. Helping Matson frolic on the gridiron were such notables as Dick Stanfel, Gino Marchetti, Burl Toler and Bob St. Clair up front, and quarterback Ed Brown. The only thing the Dons lacked was depth. The unbeaten 1951 club was seriously considered for a bowl bid, and dropped for two reasons. Not enough name recognition, and racism still ruled in the South. The Dons would never agree to leave Matson home.

At 6-3 and 203 pounds, Matson was a big back for his time. He controlled his weight carefully -- no extra pounds to carry when he made his big final kick, in football and track. Matson was a 9.6 sprinter while still in high school, and because of his strength lost no speed while wearing full football gear. Also, because of his strength and endurance, his best event in track was 400 meters. At age 19 he placed second in the 1948 Olympic trials. Matson won a bronze medal in the 400 and a silver medal with the 4x400 relay team at the

1952 Olympics.

Perhaps the most inspiring tribute concerning Matson the complete football player was authored by San Francisco Examiner sports editor Curley Grieve following USF's 26-7 victory over neighborhood rival Santa Clara at Kezar Stadium. It was the final home game of the 1951 campaign for the Dons, and nobody knew at the time USF would never again field a major college football team. Grieve wrote:

"Ollie Matson delivered his final college performance before the home folks today -- and what an exclamation point he put at the end! In the final minute and on his last chance, he struck for 54 yards and a touchdown. It was a story-book finish and a smash climax to an exhibition of fantastic running and hound-dog defense. It was, in fact, his signature -- written to wind up a glorious three year Kezar career and certainly an All-American job today.

"It was Ollie today who spelled the difference in a spectacular conflict. He was the rapier and broadsword that pierced and slashed the Bronco line to pieces, and he guarded the ace Bronco pass receiver, Gern Nagler, with a Warden's caution. A crowd of 32,685, sitting in the warm sun, turned out to watch Matson in his local valedictory. His smashes and glides and swiftness afoot kept them hypnotized for the full sixty minutes."

Grieve described Matson's last scoring dash and the flood of emotion that followed. "He sliced through left guard, cut sharply to his left, shook off reaching hands and then flew in the typical Matson manner. Toler, rushing into the end zone, grabbed Matson and kissed him. Exactly sixty seconds later students rushed onto the field, lifted Ollie to their shoulders and marched him through the tunnel."

The casual grid fan, glancing at USF's 1951 schedule, tended to relegate the Dons to "minor league" status. The fact is San Francisco's roster of opponents was tougher than the schedule faced by Dick Kazmaier, Princeton's Heisman Trophy winner. Matson was already a legend in the San Francisco Bay area prior to 1951. This essay will concentrate on 1951 in order to present a comprehensive review of Matson's best overall season. Quotes inserted below are by Bill Mulligan of the San Francisco Examiner who covered USF for most of the year.

In its first four contests the Dons trounced San Jose State twice, 39-2 and 42-7, turned back Idaho 26-7, and defeated the Camp Pendleton Marines 26-0. Matson piled up a lot of yards and his most exciting TD gallops covered 64, 54 and 46 yards. Such opponents, however, could hardly be expected to turn on the national media. But one wonders why USF had to play San Jose twice, and the Marines. It appears people were avoiding the Dons. Certainly if I were a college scout I would inform USC and UCLA and California to stay away from a team with the likes of Gino Marchetti and Burl Toler and Ollie Matson.

Now for the truth about these "weak" clubs. San Jose State, despite its 2-7-1 record, lost only 26-13 to Coast Conference champ Stanford, upset potent College of the Pacific 7-0, and tied Santa Clara 7-7. Too bad SJS had to play San Francisco twice early in the season. San Jose, probably the weakest foe Matson & Co. faced in 1951, would have beaten most of Dick Kazmaier's rivals. In the second SJS tilt Matson scored three TD's and rushed for 195 yards in 25 carries. "Additionally, Ollie broke up Spartan aerial tosses, put bone crushing tackles on ball carriers and led interference for the other USF backs."

Matson's greatest 1951 effort had to be against Camp Pendleton in a game which completely escaped the national press. The Marines, paced by all-pro receiver Cloyce Box, had whipped Southern California 27-17 the week before. The Trojans termed the embarrassing upset a "practice game" and refuse to list the contest as part of their 1951 record. Asked later in the season if a particular opponent was the strongest his team had faced, Matson replied, "No sir. Those Camp Pendleton boys were tougher, plenty tough, and plenty smart. We learned something of the triicks of football in that game."

Brown and the leading USF receivers were forced to sit out the tilt with injuries. Pendleton had only Matson to worry about and set its entire defense to stop him. Matson "scampered, bulled, dodged and sprinted" for 130 yards and two TD's in 19 carries. If any reader to this point believes Matson was purely a speed-demon, let it be known here he ran 54 yards off guard for a TD, and on a 14-yard scoring burst around end ripped through three tacklers. Also, Matson made "numerous saves on pass defense." Pendleton gained only 34 yards through the air, even with Cloyce Box in the lineup.

Matson's "greatest" 1951 performance, as far as the national football audience was concerned, was staged Oct. 20 against Fordham's Rams. Because the contest was played in New York it received nationwide publicity, and Eastern grid writers got a chance to see Matson in action. It was on the basis of this one game, plus his record-breaking season statistics, that Matson was awarded All-America status -- mostly as a defensive back. Fordham (5-4), featuring a sensational passing attack propelled by Roger Franz, was no push-over. Nor could Fordham be rated an Eastern power, though the Rams scored impressive wins over Dartmouth, Boston College and Missouri. If the Dons had played and beaten a more publicized Eastern "power", USF might have made the top five in the final wire service polls, and Matson would have made everybody's All-America team.

San Francisco defeated Fordham 32-26 in a barnburner. Matson scored three TD's, but was "held" to 11.8 yards in 29 carries. "The Fordham defense was tough and only Matson could dent the Bastions consistently." It was the other things he did that wowed the Eastern writing fraternity. Twice Matson fumbled kickoffs, then blazed 94 and 90 yards to paydirt. In addition, "Ollie was tackling all over the sward and knocking down many of Roger Franz' myriad passes."

San Diego Navy replaced another Eastern club, St. Bonaventure, on USF's schedule Oct. 27. Southern Cal had rebounded after its loss to Camp Pendleton and the next week thrashed San Diego Navy 41-7. The Trojans count this game as part of their "official" 1951 record. The Dons trimmed the Sailors 26-7 "San Diego Naval Training Station had a fleet of fast destroyers in action against San Francisco tonight, but they were unable to sink the great Matson liner." Matson rushed 29 times for 249 yards. And, as usual, "Ollie also made tackles all over the field and broke up at least 10 Navy pass attempts, some of them apparently certain scores."

The 26-7 triumph over Santa Clara baa been mentioned. Matson rushed for 229 yards in 31 attempts, and all three of his TD's were right up the middle, two on short bursts and the 54-yarder. He had another dash of 47 yards and returned 1 punt 65 yards. Here was another opponent with a mediocre record (3-7). But Santa Clara's ledger included decisions over Arkansas and Marquette. And Marquette lost only 20-14 to unbeaten Michigan State.

After Camp Pendleton, College of Pacific (6-4) was USF's strongest opponent in 1951. The up-and-down Tigers had a great trio of backs, Eddie Macon, Tom

McCormick and Art Liebscher, an end named Ken Buck, and defeated Oregon 34-6, Marquette 39-27, Clemson 21-7, and Loyola of L.A. 41-28. The latter score is important in relation to the Dons. COP had no defense for Matson, or Brown's passes, and suffered a shocking 47-14 setback. Matson rushed for 175 yards, his longest gallop a 67-yarder to the endzone.

The Dons completed an unbeaten season by clipping Loyola of Los Angeles and Don Klosterman 20-2 in the Rose Bowl Sunday, Nov. 25. Loyola had lost a high-scoring affair to College of Pacific. This was a different type of game. Loyola was ready for Matson and utilized what amounted to an eight-man line anchored by tackle Ernie Cheatham. Matson still crashed for 112 yards and two tallies. It marked the ninth consecutive game in which Matson outrushed his opponent's entire ground attack, Klosterman, who set a batch of season and career passing records, completed 24 of 47 aerials for 211 yards. It was all short stuff, however, under USF's coverage, and his tosses failed to produce a single touchdown.

Now for some statistical stuff. Matson ran for 1566 yards in 245 carries and scored 21 touchdowns, top 1951 standards in both categories. He set two national season records, averaging 174 yards and 27.2 carries per game. And Matson established a career rushing record of 3,166 yards. He also intercepted five passes in 1951, and his average playing time was 51½ minutes.

Grieve interviewed USF coach Joe Kuharich for a 1951 Sporting News article. Kuharich commented, "You should listen to the team reaction when it reviews game pictures. When Ollie starts out, there's a buzz that gradually reaches a climax -- like a motorboat picking up speed with a loud zoom at the end. He's the best all-around football player I've ever seen or coached. Just consider his tremendous talents. No one can match his speed. Yet his power is as sharp as any plunging fullback. He is not Mr. Outside or Mr. Inside. He is Mr. All-sides and Mr. Everywhere. To this add his blocking, his pass protection and terrific defensive work and you have something that's never been duplicated in a generation. And he does everything with the same ease and grace of a Joe DiMaggio. Those little things -- he has them. Like in tackling. He has a whip-lash action just before contact that bruises ball carriers. When he runs, it's not that jerky rabbit run. It's like a deer -- with grace. He glides instead of darts."

Matson teammate Joe Scudero said, "... there isn't a man on the team who wouldn't go from here to China to put on a block to help him. They just don't come any better. They can't."