

Respect for the Spartans

By John C. Hibner

Having attended San Jose State College in the late Forties, I've been a long-time fan of the school's football Spartans. Despite having many excellent teams over the years, San Jose State had always been considered as "minor league" because of their inability to consistently stand up to the Pacific Coast giants from neighboring Stanford and California Universities.

The Spartans first played the California Bears in 1899, and a very brief description of the game is in Brick Morsels "California Football History": "In spite of the very muddy field, the Varsity rolled up a 44-0 score against the State Normal School."

Stanford first played the Spartans in 1900 and Fielding H. Yost was the Indians' coach and Stanford won easily 35-0. It was there that Yost discovered Willie Heston, who was a halfback on the San Jose team, and convinced the star running back to follow him to Michigan.

The Spartans didn't play Cal again until 1953, and were then defeated 34-14. But the Spartans finally defeated the Bears on Oct 15, 1966: 24-0 at Berkeley. Stanford ran up eleven straight victories over San Jose before they finally lost. On Nov 13, 1954 the Spartans won 19-14.

Going into the 1981 season, San Jose State coach Jack Elway was starting his third season, and the Spartans got off to a bad start in losing the opener to Nevada-Las Vegas 16-6, but bounced back to defeat Santa Clara

41-7. Next were the Stanford Cardinal, with a 33-4-1 lead in the series.

Playing before a crowd of 67,888 at Stanford Stadium, San Jose scored first as they moved 86 yards in 9 plays with Mervyn Fernandez taking an end-around for 35 yards into the end zone. Then tight end Tracy Franz increased the Spartans' lead by catching a 14 yard TD pass from Steve Clarkson and the score was 14-0. But Stanford came back with a drive of 75 yards ending with Rob Moore running 24 yards for the TD and it was 14-6 at half.

In the second half interceptions of two Elway passes led to a pair of Spartan scores within a span of 1:49. Ken Thomas picked off the first pass at the Cardinal 8 yard line. Two plays later Tim Kearse caught a 7-yard TD pass from Clarkson; 21-6. Then defensive end Bob Overly, who was responsible for sacking Elway four times, picked off another pass at the Cardinal 23. The Spartans struck quickly as Kearse scampered 20 yards around right end for the TD. The Spartans had been led by a defense, which tied a school record with five interceptions, and sacked Stanford's great quarterback John Elway seven times in posting the 28-6 victory.

Next came the California Bears who were favored by 6 points on a warm September afternoon at Memorial Stadium in Berkely. The Spartans, bruised and battered, got on the scoreboard first when Mike Berg kicked a 19-yard field goal. The score was set-up when San Jose safety Glenn McClaren recovered a fumble at the Cal 21.

California took the lead in the second period after intercepting a pass at the SJS 35, when on the next play, John Torchio threw to Wright in the end zone and the Bears led 7-3. The lead changed hands again in the third period. Steve Clarkson drove the Spartans 79 yards in 12 plays, and the score came when he threw a swing pass to fullback Gerald Willhite who sidestepped a Cal player and ran nine yards into the end zone for the TD and a 10-7 lead. Cal came right back after an interception, when Torchio threw a screen to Carl Montgomery, who ran 56 yards through the SJS secondary and the Bears led 14-10.

But San Jose, with two touchdowns by Willhite on pass plays of 16 and 45 yards from Clarkson, moved back ahead 24-14 and things were looking up. That is, until Cal came right back to tie the score on Montgomery's nine yard TD run and Pratt's 43 yard field goal.

Late in the fourth quarter the San Jose defense, led by Bob Overly and Steve McEnroe, stopped the Bears on their own 26. Cal kicker Mike Ahr's attempted punt was blocked and the ball was recovered by Bob Grant of the Spartans. Willhite carried the ball three times, and on fourth down in came place-kicker Mike Berg and the pressure was on. Berg stepped up and kicked the winning field goal on an 18-yard chip shot and the Spartans had won the game 27-24. This marked the first time that a football team from San Jose State had defeated Stanford and California in the same season, and brought many smiles to members of the alumni!

The Spartans went on to post a regular season record of 9-2-0 and were undefeated in the Pacific Coast Athletic Association. However, the season ended on a sour note in the first California Bowl on Dec. 19 when Tony Lee of Toledo kicked a 41-yard field goal to defeat San Jose State 27-25. But it was a season that brought with it respect for the Spartan football program and joy to the many Spartan fans. It won't soon be forgotten.

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