

MONTANA ROCKIES FOOTBALL

By Ed Gilleran Jr

Unless you closely scrutinize line scores in your October-November Sunday newspapers, you'd never know that there is an entire world of wonderful college football outside of that played by the headline teams in the Associated Press Top Twenty and the major conferences.

Tucked away in somewhat remote towns like Northfield, Minnesota (pop 12,482) and Rexburg, Idaho (pop 11,599), and in scores of other towns, some so small you'd have to search for them in your Rand McNally Atlas, there are college football teams that have been playing exciting football since the days of leather helmets, hightop cleated shoes, heavy sweaters, and weighty moleskin pants. The colleges have names like St Olaf and Concordia; Siena and St Ambrose; Mount Union and Findley. One of them is 89-year-old Carroll College in Helena, Montana.

Generally the players at Carroll College don't have athletic scholarships, don't live in athletic dorms or eat at training tables, or have to worry about overzealous alumni and agents. Many are walk-ons. Most were very good high school players, although a bit too small for the NCAA Division I and II football schools. When their football playing days are over, they are over.

The Fighting Saints, as the Carroll College gridgers are called, play their games in 2,000-seat Vigilante Stadium, where Helena High and Capital High also play their games. In 1999, Carroll will move into its own on-campus, 4,000-seat stadium, which will be situated just east of Carroll's beautifully equipped physical education center. Situated 11 miles east of the towering peaks of the Continental Divide, the stadium is being funded largely by in-kind gifts from companies involved in the construction, and by thousands of alumni, Helena businesses and individuals. The new football-soccer field will join the school's new \$2.5 million, fully equipped, television station and broadcast arts teaching facility which are now also under construction.

Carroll College which was founded in 1909, and situated on high ground overlooking the city of Helena with its population of about 25,000; is a largely undiscovered gem of an institution that has twice been recognized and highly rated by the magazine U.S. News & World Report in its annual rating of U.S. colleges and universities. There are 1,500 undergraduates. Most of the young men and women have their sights set on moving on to careers in medicine, nursing, law, or the business of state government; as Helena is Montana's state capital.

Carroll achieved its greatest stature in football in 1988 when the Saints won 10 of 11 games and finished third in the NAIA national rankings. Not to be overlooked is the 1931 team that was unbeaten, untied and unscored upon in six games. This was the last year that the college was known as Mt. St. Charles, and the team was crowned champions of the Montana Collegiate Conference. Two of the teams that were defeated that year were the big college teams from the University of Montana and Montana State College.

In the early days, when the Carroll gridmen were known as the "Hilltoppers" of Mt. St. Charles College, the small school played against teams from Gonzaga, North Dakota, Washington State and Brigham Young. Today, Carroll is a member of the Frontier Conference, organized in 1935, which they joined in 1938. The purpose of the Frontier Conference is to encourage and promote athletic competition among the five member colleges, with the conference motto, "The best in academics and athletics". Members compete for conference championships in men's football and wrestling, as well as men's and women's basketball, volleyball and swimming. The four colleges besides Carroll in the conference are Montana Tech from Butte; Montana State University-Northern at Havre; Rocky Mountain College at Billings; and Western Montana College at Dillon.

Carroll's head football coach for the last 26 years has been one of the most easily recognized individuals in Helena, Bob Petrino. He has compiled an impressive 158-72-1 record, and his Saints have won or tied for 16 Frontier Conference championships, along with playing in the NAIA Division II playoffs six times. The 1986 playoff team was 9-1, and in 1987 the Saints were 9-2 and reached the NAIA Division II quarterfinals. In 1988 the team was 10-1 and again reached the NAIA/II quarterfinals, before notching a 9-2 record in 1989 and becoming the first team to participate in the Division II playoffs in five straight seasons. In 1990 the team won a sixth straight conference title. "I'd be hard pressed to pick one of those teams as my best", says Petrino. "I'll always be very proud of what all those boys accomplished."

In 1974 Petrino was chosen Frontier Conference Coach of the Year, and then gained the honor again in 1976. Bob's voice rings with a deep resonance that commands the players' respect without demanding it. On the field he is a model of control, calm and concentration. However, now and then he feels it his duty to point out the deficiencies of one of the people in a striped shirt. "I'm also very proud of what so many of these young men have accomplished after graduation", says Petrino. Many hold respected positions in Montana government, business, professional, and education fields. Bob's brother Mike, who is the Assistant Coach at Carroll, says that "Bob is actually an educator who also happens to be a big-league football coach who is operating in a small spotlight." Mike adds, "I think Carroll has one of the best college football programs in Montana. He's put Carroll on the gridiron map. He's a great motivator who makes overachievers out of good, but not great athletes. And he makes the kids realize there's a life after football and they had better have a good game plan for it."

Petrino, who spent many years as a small town high school all-sports coach, student counselor, and teacher of several core subjects, smiles when asked how many of his Carroll players have made Academic All-America. "Oh, only about a dozen". In 1997, 14 Saints were named to the Academic All-Frontier Conference roster, and four of those were named as 1997 NAIA Football All-America Scholar Athletes. In recognition of his consistent winning record, Petrino has been inducted into the NAIA National Coaches Hall of Fame, and has been selected Frontier Conference Coach of the Year on 12 occasions.

Two of Bob's sons are on the coaching staff at the University of Louisville (Conference USA); Bobby, who threw 31 career touchdown passes for the Saints in 1979-82, is Head Coach John Smith's Offensive Coordinator; while Paul, who is Louisville's Wide Receivers coach, threw for 47 scores in his Carroll career and holds school records in six offensive categories. In coaching, Carroll earns more with less. Where major college football teams have a defensive and offensive coordinator, with numerous assistant coaches, Coach Petrino has just four. Mike Petrino, his brother, is the Offensive Coordinator and also tutors the receivers: Rick Wells has been the Defensive Coordinator for 14 years, and Steve Jones is the Defensive Line Coach.

Carroll College can boast of 10 First Team NAIA All-America players over the years: and two Kodak All-Americans, Paul Petrino (1988) and Suitoa Keleti (1989). One player, Bryan Hilborn, who is now a chiropractic physician in Helena, kicked 77 extra points and 18 field goals (one of 47 yards) during the 1992-93 seasons. Bryan reflects: "Coach Petrino has a way of challenging his athletes and inspiring them to rise to the challenge. Sometimes Coach made it seem like a life-and-death situation on the field. But today, I and several of my teammates who have earned doctorates attribute a large part of our success to Coach's stiff challenges."

In 1998 Carroll College will kick off its 87th football season, and one of the games will be against Rocky Mountain College of Billings. The 250-mile bus trip to Rocky Mountain passes through matchless mountain scenery, alongside spectacular rivers; and, into Billings, which is in the rugged embrace of the ages-old 400-foot high sandstone cliffs called the Rimrocks. Other Frontier Conference trips include traveling to Montana Tech, located in Butte, the legendary city of the "Copper Kings"; to Montana State-Northern, at Havre, which is surrounded by the "Badlands" archeological and geologic wonders; and to Western Montana College at Dillon, located in one of the state's largest cattle and hay-producing regions, with fantastic views of some of Montana's highest mountains, which Lewis and Clark called the Bitterroots.

So, come September when the leaves and the punts come tumbling down, when the breezes are cool and the ref's whistle is shrill, and the cleats are digging in; remember that's the season that's best of all in the Frontier Conference under the big sky of Montana.

PLEASE READ THIS IMPORTANT NOTICE

When we took the May issue of the CFHS Journal to the printer a few months back, we were stunned when told that the basic copy costs of the publication had been increased 27.7% effective immediately. When added to other print cost increases which we have absorbed in recent years, and with the anticipation of more increases in the future, it becomes obvious that we have no choice but to increase the annual subscription/dues cost of the College Football Historical Society. Recently your editor watched the dues of other sport historical groups that I belong to, get raised by amounts of 50% in one case and 66% in another; both amounts that I consider extremely excessive. Reluctantly, I must announce that effective immediately, the subscription/dues cost for the College Football Historical Society is being increased to \$15 per year. This is an increase of just three dollars per year, or 25%, and is only the second dues increase we have had in 11 years. We ask your understanding of the need for this change.

CFHS member Andy Kozar, of the University of Tennessee, has compiled a professional-style INDEX of the first 10 years of the College Football Historical Society Journals. This booklet provides indexing references for all the articles, schools, players and coaches who have been written about in CFHS in the first 41 issues published since 1987. This monumental work is a MAJOR contribution to the documented history of college football; and is an ESSENTIAL guide for any football historian looking for published CFHS materials. Until the copies run out, this 46-page booklet is available for a cost of \$6 (postpaid). Check or Money Order to:

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