

FRESNO STATE SECRET

By James Mark Purcell

In the late 1930s Fresno State had been evolving into a near major player in the college football world; in fact, the 1940 San Francisco Chronicle's sports editor, Bill Leiser, thought they'd made it. Leiser wrote an editorial proposing a realignment of the Pacific Coast Conference (now the PAC-10), which would drop two of its schools and admit up to four new ones from a list that included Fresno State, San Jose State, St Mary's, and Santa Clara.

At Fresno State, Coach Jim (Rabbit) Bradshaw, a former star back on the Coast, had been using an offense with a very effective run-oriented double wing formation. This offense called for the ball-handling fullback to handle the same function on halfback reverses as the handoff quarterback in the T-formation. There was a dash of the single wing, in that one of the halves did the passing, not the fullback as in the orthodox Warner double wing.

Between 1938 and 1940, Fresno's core players were Jack Mulley at end (an Associated Press Little All-America in 1939 and 1940); Peterson the ball-handling fullback: and when he was healthy, Ernie Poore, the best running back and probably the best passer. These three Fresno State teams compiled records of 7-3,10-1, and 8-2-1. Probably because of the recurrent injuries that Poore suffered from late season 1939 onward, the peak season proved to be 1939. Unfortunately, that was also the peak year for San Jose State, which went 13-0-0, and inflicted the only loss suffered by Fresno State, and was, as the Chronicle editor recognized, a PCC-level football power.

All the late 1930s Fresno teams were competitive in terms of statistical yardage with anyone on the Coast. In 1940 Fresno still had a good statistical record, but on defense not offense; and in 1941 Fresno endured a mediocre 4-3-2 season without resolving its team-offense problems. Coach Bradshaw finally resolved the issue by switching to what seems to have been a straight single-wing tailback operation, while recruiting a star sophomore back to operate it. This new Fresno State back had been a standout playing junior college football for Los Angeles City College in 1941, and his name was Jackie Fellows. Coach Bradshaw covered his recruiting bet by also bringing in end Rex Schroder from LA City College, where he had been credited with 18 touchdown pass receptions in 1941, all from Fellows.

Fresno State had had excellent backs in the past (Frenchy Bordagaray in 1930, Poore, and some of the double wing fullbacks) but had never had somebody who could throw the ball like Fellows, who was about to have one of the great years in 1942 college football. The 1942 Fresno line averaged 204 pounds, then major in size, and since Fresno had the running backs, including Fellows, this meant the team could, and did, whipsaw foes who overplayed them on either the pass or the run. At wingback Fresno had a fast running back named Jack Kelley, and at fullback was Mickey Masini, who had been the 1941 team's star offensive player. In 1942 Masini would become primarily a blocking back. The key pass receiver for 1942 was Jim Molich at end, though like all expert forward passers, Fellows threw to everyone: and at least nine Fresno receivers wound up the season with at least one touchdown catch.

In looking at the schedule for a wartime season like 1942, it was often unpredictable as to where the good opponent players might be lurking; some service team from the swamps of the South might turn out to have an All-America tailback and some all-NFL linemen. Fresno State's major foes for 1942 turned out to be March Field, College of Pacific, San Francisco, San Jose State, and Loyola (Los Angeles). Generally the serious opposition was in the second half of the Fresno schedule, and in the early games nobody could handle Bradshaw's new offense.

The 1942 season opened on September 26 with a 51-0 win over Whittier, but Fresno rushed for just 128 team yards, while completing 16 of 26 passes for 174 yards, while the defense was intercepting four Whittier passes. But Bradshaw didn't like that low rushing total, and so he realigned the backs, moving Louie Futrell to single wing left halfback from where he could run the big-back off-tackle play; while Fellows (just 165 pounds) was shifted to quarterback Fellows would still do the passing, while also remaining the team's star runner.

These moves accomplished the team and player goals; as Fresno State racked up between 225 and 470 yards rushing in five of its next nine games. In each of the first seven games Fellows passed for over 100 yards, except in the 80-0 romp over Fort Ord when, presumably, he was benched early. The second game of the season then produced a 53-6 win over Occidental: as Futrell rewarded the coach's realignment with 113 yards rushing and one touchdown on just eight carries, while Molich not only caught three passes for 77 yards, all for touchdowns, but also ran 19 yards for a fourth touchdown.

Week three brought another breather, a 66-0 win over San Diego State, and Jack Kelley was the main-man ball carrier with 108 yards and one touchdown on just seven carries. Futrell rushed for 45 yards, while also catching two passes for 24 yards and a touchdown, but had to leave the game with a knee injury, the first serious injury report for 1942 Fresno State, but not the last.

Next up was a matchup with the service team from March Field, the first opponent that didn't collapse after the first or second quarter. The airmen held Fellows to just 11 of 25 passing for 109 yards, but Jackie still ran for one touchdown and passed for two more, as he continued to pile up his TDR's figure for the year (touchdowns responsible from scrimmage). An 80-0 win over Fort Ord was obviously only a practice session for Fresno, as the Bulldogs extended their record to 5-0-0, to set up the second half of the season where the opposition would start fighting back.

After an easy first half of the season, the official team yardage as reported by the Fresno Bee, had Fresno State averaging 463.6 yards of total offense per game (2318 yards). Kelley (32 carries for 353 yards - 10.8 per carry) at wingback was the most dangerous running threat, and Molich with 14 receptions was the most effective pass catcher. In five games Fellows had already produced 20 touchdowns; running for seven TD's while also tossing 13 scoring aerials.

Fresno State opened the second half of the season against College of Pacific, which was coached by the venerable, legendary and very foxy Amos Alonzo Stagg. The media falsely inclined to treat Stagg as being in semi-retirement since his move from Chicago and the Big 10 back in 1933. But in fact, Stagg on the Coast developed a reputation for being able, with inferior personnel, to defend and neutralize superior opponent offenses, and also to steal an upset win now and then, even from the PCC. In 1942, outgunned, Stagg seems to have done something technical on defense that curtailed both Fresno's rushing and its murderous deep scoring passes that Fellows had been throwing. As a team, Fresno gained 125 yards rushing and completed 11 of 25 passes for 169 yards, but could manage only two touchdowns, and so barely escaped with a 13-0 win.

Week seven of the campaign brought a matchup against Nevada, which featured the Nagurski-type player of early post-war pro football in the form of Marion Motley, who was playing his senior year, according to the Fresno Bee, as a big single wing left halfback. Fresno was held to

just 87 yards rushing, but Nevada was helpless when the ball was put up in the air. Fresno piled up nearly 300 yards and four touchdowns passing, with the TD's and most of the yardage generated by Mr Fellows.

By this time the Fresno State Bulldogs were making a national impact, and the following week's Associated Press poll of major-level teams ranked Fresno in the 18th spot. There is no sign of any 1942 objections by the NCAA office to this major-level ranking at the time, though we'll see an implicit one coming up later.

At this point in the schedule, with very bad timing, Fresno State made a team error that proved to be fatal to their future recognition in the official major-college records for 1942; they lost a game. The curmudgeon responsible was San Francisco (6-4), in a game played on Armistice Day (Nov 11), to attract a holiday crowd to the event. USF turned out to be Fresno's key 1942 matchup, and Coach Bradshaw of the Bulldogs should have done anything possible to shift the Nevada game, which had been played only four days previously.

Ordinarily USF was just the number three Bay-Area Catholic football power in these pre-war years, but in 1942 there is the general perception that the Dons had caught up with, if not St Mary's, then certainly Santa Clara, to whom USF blew a close game. San Francisco in 1942 had a very good offense, definitely in Fresno's league, but the hometown Fresno Bee still expected a win for the Bulldogs. Early in the game, Fresno led 13-0 after two predictable touchdown passes by Fellows to Masini, good for 16 and 30 yards. (Jackie did not score as many rushing TD's against the stronger opposition in the second half of the season.) But the tide began to change after a freak play, a deflected pass that turned into an interception and a USF touchdown. USF then scored again, and was only down 13-12 at halftime.

In the second half, USF's key runner Neill Sheridan went 72 yards from scrimmage for the go-ahead touchdown, with Fellows letting the other Bulldog defensive secondary backs chase him, according to the account of the Fresno Bee writer. Bradshaw then immediately pulled Fellows, who had a reported leg injury by this time. When Fellows was returned to the game, probably to get a legitimate passer back into the game for Fresno, Bill Russo of USF scored on a 31-yard run, literally running over Jackie on the way to USF's fourth TD. Besides Jackie's mysterious leg injury, Fresno also suffered two key linemen injuries that apparently prevented their adjusting defensively to the USF ground attack. The Fresno Bee thought that the disastrous 33-13 loss to USF had knocked Fresno State out of the Sun Bowl game.

In any previous year, the following week's 6-0 win over San Jose State would have been considered a key game of the season. But in fact, the & estimated that Fresno played the whole game technically under wraps, and squeaked out the narrow win after gaining only 215 total team yards by getting the usual Fellows TD pass. For 1942 Fresno had scheduled an extra game against Loyola of Los Angeles, a mere three days after playing San Jose. In no previous year would Fresno have treated San Jose as just a semi-warmup game for another opponent.

Loyola appears to have conceded the run to the Bulldogs, in order to deal with Fellows' passing, but, like USF, the Lions gave up two early touchdown passes despite this strategy. But Loyola did not have USF's formidable offense, and so wound up a bad 27-6 loser. As it turned out, despite an impressive 9-1-0 record for the season by the Bulldogs, the possible invitation to the Sun Bowl game was negated by the San Francisco loss, and so it was the end of the prewar football era for Fresno State. By the fall of 1943 the school had temporarily dropped football.

For the 1942 season Fresno State had scored 362 points (36.2 per game), the best total and average on the Coast. Their player and team yardage totals are more important and much rarer

to find. The team totals show 209.6 yards per game rushing and 155.1 yards passing, for a total offense figure of 364.7 yards per game. This total offense figure places Fresno State between Ohio State (397.5) and Missouri (356.6); the official 1942 fourth and fifth place total offense teams. As we shall see, the bureaucratic decision by the NCAA office in 1942 to snub Fresno State statistically, was only taken after some apparent hesitation.

Jackie Fellows officially rushed for 599 yards for the season, which missed the list of top ten major school ball carriers by about 100 yards. He also completed 82 of 195 passes for 1314 yards and 23 touchdowns: which would make Fellows tied for fifth in completions, third in passing yards, and apparently first in TD passes, since Paul Govenali of Columbia was accredited as the NCAA leader with 19 in nine games Jackie's total offense figure of 1913 yards places him second in the majors to Frank Sinkwich of Georgia, both in yards and average. Depending on whether you favor pure yardage or scoring, Jackie was the first or second most productive college player of 1942. But none of this was reflected in any postseason honors, major or minor, probably for the usual reason; Fellows was just a sophomore.

1942 Fresno State

Whittier	51-0
Occidental	53-6
San Diego State	66-0
March Field	20-0
Fort Ord	80-0
College of Pacific	13-0
Nevada	33-0
San Francisco	13-33
San Jose State	6-0
Loyola (Los Angeles)	27-6

(9-1-0)

We're now ready for the non-statistical question: was Fresno State a major level team in 1942? We have already heard, favorably, from the 1940 San Francisco Chronicle and from the Nov 13, 1942 AP poll. But the NCAA office was emitting mixed signals in 1942. It gave no public reaction to the AP poll's ranking, which had stipulated the Bulldogs as a major-level team. The post-season NCAA wireservice statistics report that was mailed out, stated correctly that Fresno was the high-scoring team on the Coast, so by implication a major college. But the NCAA then omitted both Fresno's team yardage figures and Fellows' personal yardage accomplishments from its post-season statistical reports. This article is the first

appearance of Fresno State's 1942 stats since they were originally published in the Bee of that year. So was Fresno a legit major? My judgement call is to give their schedule five major foes out of the 10, sufficient for the time to be considered a major school schedule.

Whatever; the war destroyed football at Fresno State thereafter, as the military drafted all the healthy star players. Fellows is reported to have reappeared in 1946 at Southern California, where the Trojans apparently had no idea what to do with a 165-pound, passing quarterback. Fellows did not letter at USC, and there is no record of him playing professional football. But some idea of just how good Jackie Fellows was in 1942 can be obtained from a West Coast official of that time. He was quoted in the Fresno Bee as saying that he had seen all the top teams and players of 1942 on the Coast, and that he considered the top three offensive players of that season to be Bob Waterfield, Fellows, and Alyn Beals.

On Nov. 21, 1940, Jackie Hunt of Marshall scored four touchdowns in a 67-0 win over West Virginia Wesleyan. The Associated Press reported that Hunt's four TD's had brought his total for the season to 27, setting a "new all-time college record" for touchdowns in a single season. It was stated that the old record of 26 TD's had been set in 1920 by James Leech of Virginia Military. BOTH of these claims were WRONG. The all-time college record had actually been set in 1926, when Mayes McLain of the Haskell Institute tallied 38 TD'S against a predominantly major schedule of opponents; certainly one that was much tougher than anything Marshall was playing. When Barry Sanders scored 39 TD's in 1988, he broke McLain's record, nobody else's.