

OLLIE MATSON THE JUNIOR

By Ray Schmidt

Easily the best football team ever put together at the University of San Francisco was the school's undefeated 1951 outfit, with senior halfback Ollie Matson leading a host of future NFL players. A couple years ago a book came out specifically on that one season, a topic which Bernie McCarty had covered years earlier in an excellent article here in CFHS.

Whenever Matson's college football career is written of, the only period anyone covers is his senior season of 1951 – it's as if he suddenly materialized on the gridiron of Kezar Stadium with no prior notification. Even biographical articles on the sensational halfback take scant notice of his earlier football accomplishments. It should come as no surprise that I am now going to tell you a little about the pre-1951 Matson – specifically his junior year of 1950 when he compiled a notable season of accomplishments until a season-long leg injury finally shut him down.

Ollie Matson and his twin sister, Ocie, were born in Trinity, Texas on May 1, 1930, and he grew up in the Lone Star state until as a teenager he and his mother moved to San Francisco. There he soon became a football and track star at the city's Washington High. Ollie spent his first year of college at San Francisco City College, where during the 1948 football season he tallied 19 touchdowns and was named to the Junior College All-America squad. When his sophomore year rolled around in 1949 Ollie had enrolled at the University of San Francisco, where he scored seven touchdowns and averaged 5.5 yards per carry as the Dons notched a respectable 7-3-0 record. His development during the following off-season did not go unnoticed, and sportswriters were singing his praises as an All-America candidate when the 1950 season approached.

Coach Joe Kuharich – a former Notre Dame and Chicago Cardinals player – was welcoming back for 1950 a team that seemed loaded with excellent players among the 18 returning veterans. From the beginning it was clear that the Dons' offense would be built around Matson, and he would be joined in the backfield by Ed Brown – who had only been switched to quarterback the previous year when he had been the #4 punter in the nation. One of the keys to any success for USF in 1950 was going to be its line that averaged 206 pounds, and featured such future NFL players as Bob St. Clair, Gino Marchetti, Dick Stanfel, and Burl Tolar; while overall team depth was a real concern as the opener approached. Everyone knew that the Dons had better be much improved in 1950, because they faced the strongest schedule in school history.

With a few starters – including Brown – nursing injuries, San Francisco opened its 1950 season against a dangerous Tulsa outfit on the night of September 23 at Kezar Stadium in a game that local writers believed would answer a lot about the Dons' potential. With 15,015 fans on hand, Matson opened his junior season by rushing 14 times for 82 yards as USF earned a hard-fought 23-14 win over Tulsa. Ollie dazzled the fans as he used his tremendous speed (:9.6 in the 100 yards) to tally on a 63-yard touchdown pass play for the first score of the night, and then tacked on another first quarter TD on a 22-yard gallop. Yet by far the biggest impression of the night was made by Matson's bruising tackles, as he rocked Tulsa ball carriers all night from his defensive back position. On one play a Tulsa runner galloped 17 yards to the USF eight yard line, where Matson's jarring tackle knocked him back seven yards. Coach Kuharich called it “a helluva victory” for his Dons considering the many injuries.

The next weekend USF ran up against its first major test of the 1950 campaign in Stanford, an excellent team that was expected to challenge for West Coast honors. Stanford geared its defense to halt Matson, and the Indians' line then simply overpowered USF while holding Matson

to 26 yards on seven carries and allowed the Dons just 191 yards of total offense.. Three touchdowns in the first quarter settled things quickly as Stanford handed the Dons the worst defeat in their 25-year football history by a score of 55-7. San Francisco Chronicle sportswriter Bill Leiser wrote that “poor Ollie didn’t look like an All-American today,” but little noticed was the leg injury which Matson had suffered which would hamper his play the rest of the season.

For week three a very young team from the University of Nevada came into Kezar for a Sunday afternoon game, and the Dons rebounded with ten touchdowns for a crushing 66-0 romp. Matson, little Joe Scudero, and Vince Sakowski each scored two touchdowns for USF, with Ollie registering his on a 26-yard run in the first quarter and a 44-yard interception return in the third stanza. Ollie rushed for just 64 yards on eight carries, and one sportswriter mentioned that on defense his play didn’t seem normal – obviously because of his nagging leg injury.

Next up – with Kuharich complaining about a lack of continuity in the USF offense – was long-time rival St. Mary’s, which featured its own star back in the powerful John Henry Johnson and a dazzling 7-7 tie against a very good Georgia team earlier in the season. It was promoted as a matchup between the two star backfield men, but the duel never materialized as USF shut down Johnson with a net rushing figure of 13 yards and cruised to a 33-7 win over St. Mary’s before 10,007 chilly fans. Matson rushed for 89 yards on 20 carries – including a 10-yard TD run – and the writers noted that he seemed more active on defense, while quarterback Ed Brown threw a pair of scoring passes. With the team now in its best shape of the season, the Dons then tuned up for their trip to New York City with a convincing 27-0 win over San Jose State in a Friday night game at Kezar that drew 15,208 fans. Matson seemed healthy as he played 55 minutes, while rushing for 142 yards on 20 carries and scoring a pair of touchdowns.

With Kuharich moaning that the offense “still is a little sloppy,” on the following Thursday the Dons hopped an early morning TWA flight for New York where they were slated to meet a rugged Fordham team Their arrival at LaGuardia Airport in the Gotham city found a major controversy in progress over Kuharich’s comments that the Fordham team usually played a “brutal” style of football. The stories reported that the USF coach had accused Fordham players of “arm pulling,” “slugging,” and playing “dirty football” during their narrow loss to Yale – specific charges which he denied. Yet this didn’t stop Fordham’s Coach Ed Danowski from throwing a tantrum over the comments; with Danowski saying of Kuharich – “he must be crazy.”

None of the denials were going to matter though, as things only got worse between the two coaches. On the day before the game everyone was stunned when Fordham’s president – Rev. Laurence McGinley – announced that his school was severing future football relations with San Francisco; in obvious retaliation for Kuharich’s allegedly “misquoted” comments. The Dons had come to New York with the idea that a win over Fordham might elevate them into the awareness of college football’s followers around the country, while the game was also seen as a chance for Matson to impress the influential Eastern football writers in his bid for All-America honors in 1950. Throw in the controversy and the severing of relations, and both teams were worked up to a fever pitch by kickoff time at the Polo Grounds.

With only 11,000 fans on hand in the cavernous stadium, Matson and the Dons were sensational

in the first half. Early in the first quarter USF marched 64 yards in nine plays, capped off with Ollie sweeping around right end on his way to a 33-yard touchdown gallop. The Dons had two more serious scoring chances which were both turned away, but then early in the second quarter Ed Brown lofted a pass out to Matson in the right flat. The USF speedster avoided a pair of Fordham tacklers along the sideline, and then roared the rest of the way to the end zone to finish the 41-yard scoring play.

The Dons looked to be in control with a 14-0 lead at halftime, but Matson's recurring pulled hamstring was giving him trouble and the star running back would be limited to primarily blocking duties over the last two quarters of play. Meanwhile, Fordham rebounded behind the passing of quarterback Dick Doheny for a pair of touchdowns in the third quarter to knot the score at 14-all – one coming on a 91-yard play on a pass out of the end zone that was deflected into the hands of the receiver. Then a fumbled punt set up Fordham for a fourth quarter touchdown, and the Dons were sent tumbling to a heartbreaking 21-14 defeat.

An 81-yard gain on a pass play from Brown to Merrill Peacock in the waning moments had nearly pulled USF into a tie against the Rams, but the Dons' offense was hampered for the entire day by several dropped passes on perfect throws – the two lost scoring chances in the first half featuring dropped aerials. Will Connolly of the San Francisco Chronicle wrote that, 'Cross our heart, hope to die – it easily could have been 28 to 0 at the intermission" Matson had rushed for 64 yards on 14 carries despite the pulled hamstring in his left leg, which prompted Coach Danowski of Fordham to call Ollie the "best back I've seen by far this season."

The following weekend – with Kuharich worried that his team would be suffering a letdown after the disappointment in New York – the Dons jetted off to Rocky Mountain country for a matchup against a struggling University of Denver team. After a scoreless first half before just 9,738 fans in perfect November weather, Matson and halfback Roy Barni came to life after the intermission and the Dons logged 305 yards of offense through the second half. Early in the third quarter Matson's 15-yard run paced a drive of 58 yards to the Dons' first touchdown, and just six minutes later Barni dashed 71 yards to his second TD of the day. After Denver got on the scoreboard with a 71-yard TD pass play, USF roared right back in five plays. On first down Matson slashed over tackle for 18 yards, and four plays later he slipped past left tackle and "limped" 54 yards for the touchdown – no defender coming close to catching him Matson finished with 141 yards rushing on 13 carries, while Barni led the way with 162 yards on 21 carries and scored three touchdowns as the Dons picked up a 24-6 victory. After the game the Associated Press reported that Ollie was now the nation's leading rusher with 638 yards.

In their final tuneup for the Bay Area showdown against mighty California, Matson rushed for 90 yards on 22 carries and tallied a pair of touchdowns as the Dons crushed Santa Clara by a score of 27-6. USF piled up 306 rushing yards for the day, but the real story was its rugged and fast defensive line that harassed the Broncos all day – allowing only 127 yards of total offense, all via the airways. Then it was time for the big test – still important despite the disappointing losses to Stanford and Fordham – against the #4 rated and undefeated Golden Bears of Cal; said to be Coach Lynn Waldorf's best team ever. Sportswriters touted the game as a struggle between two rugged defenses – Cal led by All-America guard Les Richter and USF by the hard-hitting linebacker Burl Toler, who had been a teammate of Ollie's at City College.

Yet the approaching game was also being heralded as a showdown between two of the top running backs in the country – sophomore Johnny Olszewski of Cal and Matson of the Dons. The slightly smaller Johnny "O" had taken a slim lead over Matson in the national rushing derby, but Ollie's resume included 12 touchdowns in eight games – seven of his scores coming on plays of longer than 20 yards – and Art Rosenbaum of the San Francisco Chronicle described the

matchup as “a scrap of All-America fullbacks.” Unfortunately, Matson had suffered a knee injury against Santa Clara and was listed as “questionable” for the Cal game.

Also unfortunate was the weather in the Bay Area. By the day of the game – November 18, 1950 – the area had been pounded by several days of rain which had left the field in Cal’s Memorial Stadium a sea of mud. To make matters worse, an “unceasing downpour” continued the entire game as the “smallest crowd in modern California gridiron history – 14,000 drenched fans” suffered through a defensive game that ended in semidarkness. Cal had come into the game as a 20 1/2 point favorite, but the weather and the field succeeded in making it nearly an even bet.

The Dons got on the scoreboard first when Roy Barni broke up the sideline on an incredible 84-yard punt return for a touchdown in the second quarter. The teams were still sloshing through the mud just before halftime when USF’s George Carley was nailed by a hard tackle, and Cal guard Ray Solari scooped up the resultant fumble and lumbered 35 yards to a touchdown that knotted the count at 7-7. The Dons tried to answer quickly, and they moved the ball on one of their only real drives of the day to the Cal four yard line in the waning moments before the halftime gun sounded.

In the second half USF had no offense to speak of, as the Dons could only gain 29 yards over the last two quarters and never moved beyond their own 36 yard line. The Dons only attempted four passes all day, and one they should not have come early in the fourth quarter and was intercepted by Cal’s Dick Lem-Mon to give the Golden Bears the ball just 35 yards from paydirt. It took a laborious eight plays to cover the distance – the most surprising being Cal’s only pass attempt of the day which was completed to Johnny “O” for 12 yards. Jim Monachino then slashed into the end zone from seven yards out, and Cal escaped with a 13-7 win. Matson did play but gained only 19 yards on 10 carries, and Coach Waldorf said his Bears were “lucky to win.”

The final home game at Kezar Stadium for 1950 saw the Dons hosting a very good University of Detroit team that came in with a 6-2-1 record and was said to have a high-powered offense.

But it was USF that had the scoring punch on this day, with Ed Brown passing for three touchdowns and setting up two other scores with long completions. For the day the future Chicago Bear quarterback completed 15 of 27 for 359 yards, while the USF defense shut down the Titans all day on the way to the 35-13 win. Matson was clearly not himself again, and carried the ball just eight times for 21 yards.

The season finale saw the Dons traveling to Gilmore Stadium in Hollywood to take on Loyola of Los Angeles, which was enjoying its best team in school history behind the passing wizardry of quarterback Don Klosterman. The Lions had suffered their first loss of 1950 the previous week after blowing a 20-point lead against Santa Clara. The heavily favored Dons blasted out to a 28-13 lead by midway through the third quarter. Matson was still obviously “hobbled with injuries” and he was held to -13 yards rushing on 10 carries. But midway in the third quarter Ollie intercepted one of Klosterman’s passes and managed to cover the 33 yards to the end zone for a touchdown, and on the very next play from scrimmage Roy Giorgi of USF picked off another Klosterman aerial and raced 39 yards for the Dons second turnover TD in less than a minute. But the wheels came off for the Dons in the final quarter and a half, as three lost fumbles were all converted into Loyola touchdowns and USF went tumbling to a 40-28 defeat.

The Dons of San Francisco had finished with an apparently decent 7-4-0 record for 1950, but it had included a pair of blown leads which they should have held onto. The USF defense had been key to their success, finishing #10 nationally in Total Defense and #4 in Rushing Defense. Certainly for Ollie Matson it had been a difficult final three games when he could no longer hold off the nagging leg and knee injuries. In the final statistics Matson ended with 747 yards rushing on 146 carries and scored 13 touchdowns; dropping out of the nation's top 20 leading rushers by year end. Had Ollie not been shut down by his injuries over the last three games, and basically been able to continue his per-game rushing average instead, he would have finished with nearly 1000 yards of rushing and would have been in the nation's Top 5 ball carriers.

Ahead was a 1951 season which would be forever ballyhooed despite a severely downgraded schedule for the Dons, and by 1952 college football at San Francisco would be no more. If not for his injuries throughout the season, Ollie Matson and the Dons of 1950 would today be remembered with nearly the same veneration given the school's final gridiron team.

TULSA'S OVERACHIEVERS: 1944-46

By John Scott

Despite two losses, Coach Henry Frnka's 1944 showing at Tulsa University might have been his most impressive coaching job in his five years of heading up the school's football fortunes. Despite the loss of Clyde LeForce to the armed forces, Frnka rounded up enough young talent to lead U.S. major colleges in average yards gained from scrimmage per game - 434.7. Even Army's dream team of the same season, reckoned as just about the strongest team ever assembled in college football, was eclipsed in this department, although in fairness it must be pointed out that Army's overwhelming squad was so effective on defense that the football was often turned over to them within easy scoring range.

Exciting new talent abounded at Tulsa, which included the 200-pound fullback, Camp Wilson, who exhibited halfback speed and was used heavily as a kick returner; Perry Moss, a sharpshooting quarterback; Clyde Goodnight, an acrobatic end; and his opposite flanker, Barney White; and the return of the capable Ed Shevlosky, at halfback. Wilson excelled at returning kickoffs for long touchdowns, going 89 yards in a 51-6 romp over Southwestern, 89 versus the powerful Iowa Navy Seahawks, and 90 yards in the Orange Bowl victory over Georgia Tech. From scrimmage, he registered 573 yards on 98 attempts for a seasonal average of 5.85 per carry. Tulsa led the country in pass offense with 206.3 YPG, with Moss the catalyst with his 667 total yards based on 39 completions in 69 tries.

After four easy victories to start the 1944 season, including a 47-0 pasting of Mississippi at neutral site Memphis, Tulsa ran into two huge roadblocks in successive games at its Skelly Field. The first was with old rival Oklahoma A & M, which was undergoing a renaissance paced by its innovative coach, Jim Lookabaugh, and the sterling talents of the sensational sophomore tailback, Bob Fenimore. Lookabaugh had to depend on young civilian talent and Fenimore was certainly his gemstone. In a wild 46-40 shootout, the A & M Cowboys prevailed as the crowd was dazzled by the spectacle of 13 touchdowns. Tulsa showed an alarming weakness on pass defense which Fenimore exploited to the full, and each time the Hurricanes scored, Fenimore would resume the lead again with his flashing feet and golden arm. Moss and Wilson did more than their share in offensive fireworks but it all fell six points short.

The very next week, powerful Iowa Pre-Flight invaded Skelly Field to administer a 47-27 setback to Tulsa. Fans expected the worst and it seemed to be coming true, as the big Seahawk