

# Of Independence And Inspiration: 1990-99

By Mark Honbo

Summarizing the Aggie football chronicles of the years 1990 through 1999 could generously fill several volumes. It is, after all, a decade beginning with a conference title won on a now-illegal gadget play, and ending with a story of courage that literally inspired millions of fans nationwide.

The 1990 season opened with a 400-yard passing game by Jeff Bridewell, making him the first quarterback to surpass that milestone since Ken O'Brien. Later in the year, running back Shola Adeyemo broke loose for 203 rushing yards against Chico State, becoming the first 200-yard rusher since the Truman administration.

Ah, but that crazy play.

The word "fumblerooskie" probably doesn't appear in the dictionary and certainly will not pass the average spell-check. Yet for most Aggie football fans, it represents the singular memory of the 1990 season.

With his team trailing 7-6 in the final minutes of the first half against Sonoma State, linebacker Bob Kincade picked off a John Spear pass, returning it to the Sonoma 13-yard line. On the ensuing Aggie possession, Bridewell faked the snap from Kevin Hogan, leaving the ball by his center's feet.

The Cossack defense, believing the play was a sweep to the left side, neglected to notice that offensive guard Billy Mills had nonchalantly taken the ball around the right side and into the end zone. That score gave UC Davis a 12-7 lead in the game, clinching both the victory and the program's 20th straight conference championship.

Little did the Aggie faithful know that the championship would serve as the end of an era for the UC Davis football program. Sonoma State, under the

tutelage of former Aggie Frank Scalercio (who won the team's Jerry Norris Award a decade earlier), captured the Northern California Athletic Conference title the following season, ending the streak of league banners.

Injuries also took their toll on the 1991 squad, claiming among others defensive lineman Mike Shepard, who one year before had captured Academic All-America honors and the school's W.P. Lindley Award as outstanding scholar-athlete

However, Shepard still managed to garner headlines in his senior year, as the 1991 team's senior class featured no fewer than four players who went on to medical school. Shepard recently completed a fellowship under Dr. James Andrews. So while he might not have gotten a chance to play alongside pro athletes, Dr. Shepard has done his best to heal them.

Linebacker Bob Kincade, another of the eventual M.D.'s on that team, shared team MVP honors and captured an Academic All-America award and the school's Lindley Award. After the Aggies' home finale, Kincade took the baton and directed a few numbers for the Cal Aggie Marching Band-uh. A longtime Davis resident who had attended games at Toomey Field as a youngster, Kincade quite literally ended his career on a personal note.

In 1992, UC Davis retooled its offensive scheme, switching to a one-back, spread offense. As a result, the Aggies reclaimed the NCAC title in their last year as a member, ended Sacramento State's brief winning streak in the Causeway Classic and returned to the NCAA postseason. The outstanding season served as a fitting farewell to head coach Bob Foster, who announced his retirement shortly after the season.

The new system also showcased the talents of two outstanding players: junior quarterback Khari Jones and junior running back Preston Jackson. Both players began a two-year assault on the school record book, setting 27

single-game, season and career marks - many of which still stood through the 2003 season.

The one-two punch of Jones and Jackson thrived behind one of the all-time great Aggie offensive lines in 1993, a group consisting of center Bob Shults, guards Bret Kwarta and Matt Eckman, and tackles Jeff Brooks and Gregg Ames. When adding to the mix the size and speed of junior tight end Aaron Bennetts, the multifaceted skills of Mike Ichiyama, and the offensive wizardry of first-year head coach Bob Biggs, it's hardly a surprise that UC Davis amassed a school-record 510 yards per game in total offense. The '93 squad captured the league title in the newly formed American West Conference, despite being the only Division II member.

The AWC evolved into a full-fledged D-I conference the following year, forcing UC Davis to become an independent program for the first time since 1924. But the team without a league would not be a team without excitement, and the 1994 season provided Aggie fans with their share of memorable moments. In that year, UC Davis recorded one of its greatest wins, as running back Rusty Stivers' fourth-quarter touchdown against the Hornets capped a comeback from a 24-14 halftime deficit. A week later, however, UC Davis suffered one of its most heartbreaking losses when Cal Poly quarterback Mike Fisher engineered a second-half comeback that erased a 24-0 Aggie lead at halftime. Fisher's two-point conversion with 12 seconds remaining gave the Mustangs a 32-31 win.

In the end, it was 5-foot-5 all-purpose back Mike Ichiyama who provided the 1994 season with its biggest highlight. With two games remaining on the schedule, starting running back Stivers went down with injury. Ichiyama switched from his usual role as a slot receiver to the lone back. In the Aggies' ninth game, a cold rain turned Toomey Field into nothing short of a swamp, forcing the offense into run mode. As a result, Ichiyama carried the ball 42



1996 Mark Grieb

times for a whopping 309 yards, shattering Preston Jackson's 1993 mark of 243.

The performance earned Ichiyama a clip on ESPN's SportsCenter as part of that show's college football roundup. Never mind that anchor Keith Olbermann mispronounced his name - the real question was how long it would be before another UC Davis running back broke the triple-century mark. After all, it was the soggy conditions that allowed Ichiyama to pile up 300 yards, right? No one would hit that mark for a long while, right?

Wrong.

One week later, this time in sunny and clear conditions, Ichiyama did it again. He broke loose for 305 yards against San Francisco State. Two games. More than 300 yards in each. Even Ichiyama's hero, the great Barry Sanders, never had back-to-back 300-yard rushing games. In fact, Ichiyama was the second of only four running backs in college football history to achieve such a feat. The next one? Some guy named Ricky Williams, who did it as part of his Heisman Trophy-winning season in 1998.

The 1994 season also saw the beginning of a new trend for the UC Davis football program. The first six opponents of the year were, in order, Pacific, Cal St.

Northridge, Saint Mary's, Southern Utah, Sacramento State and Cal Poly - all Division I programs. In fact, the I-A-member Tigers faced the University of Nebraska just one week after hosting the Aggies.

Division II football programs on the West coast were disappearing one by one. Even Sonoma State, which had too recently snapped the Aggie streak of consecutive conference titles, would retire its gridiron within the next few years. By the end of the 1990s, the D-II programs in the state of California were Humboldt State and UC Davis.

While the Aggies had always done battle with D-I opponents - longtime rivals Sacramento State and Cal Poly had made the jump years before - the mid-90s ushered in an era of tougher schedules. UC Davis rose to the occasion. In 1995, the Aggies opened the year with three Division II foes, then finished with seven straight D-I games. The first of those seven came against the University of Montana, ranked fifth nationally at the time. After taking a glance at the eventual I-AA champion's season results, one can fairly argue that the Grizzlies' most formidable opponent in their title run wore the familiar Yale blue and gold.

UC Davis swept its final three games that year, securing yet another in a long streak of winning seasons. Running

back Jermaine Rucker rushed for 462 yards and 10 touchdowns in that three-game stretch. Junior quarterback Mark Grieb finished among the national leaders in passing and total offense.

The Aggies' increasingly difficult schedule resulted in a dramatic playoff run during the 1996 season. UC Davis swept all four of its D-II opponents, but went 2-4 against its six D-I foes. A 49-7 shellacking of Sonoma and a 26-19 victory over Southern Utah allowed the Aggies to creep back into the playoff picture. Rucker had done his part in the regular season finale, compiling 177 yards and three touchdowns against the Thunderbirds.

The Aggies entered the postseason as the No. 4 seed in the West Region. Their first opponent was Texas A&M-Kingsville, ranked No. 1 in Division II. At this point in its history, UC Davis had never won a playoff game on the road. Furthermore, no top-ranked team had lost in the first round since 1989, when the playoff was an eight-team bracket.

Not long after Mark Grieb's second touchdown pass gave his team a 10-point lead, Javelina running back Reg Durden scored on a 22-yard run midway through the fourth quarter, cutting the lead to 17-14. TAMUK took possession again with 4:24, but the Aggie defense came through on a fourth-down conversion attempt with 3:00 remaining, ending the threat and securing the win. UC Davis returned home to beat Central Oklahoma, 26-7, then lost to emerging D-II power Carson-Newman in a 29-26 battle.

Grieb, who had just begun to find his legs near the end of the 1995 season, assembled an outstanding senior year. He threw for a school-record 3,320 yards and 25 touchdowns, and finished as a finalist for the Harlon Hill Trophy. Rucker became just the third Aggie to surpass 1,000 yards rushing in a season. Defensive end Josh Anstey swept All-America honors from the Associated Press, the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) and Football Gazette magazine.

The NCAA added an overtime rule to college football in 1997, and UC Davis employed it to great effect in the 44th Causeway Classic to the delight - or horror - of 15,650 fans at Sacramento State's Fred Anderson Field.

In the first overtime, it appeared the Aggies may have given away the game when they fumbled their possession. But safety Jeremy Veasey prolonged the outing when he blocked the Hornets' subsequent field goal attempt. For the second overtime, Sacramento State started with the ball. A.J. Bernhardt hit Carlos Smith on a 25-yard pass in the first play of the drive. UC Davis answered with an eight-yard strike from Kevin Daft to tight end Wes Terrell.

Daft struck for his fourth touchdown of the game in the third overtime, hitting Francis Montes from 25 yards out. The junior quarterback then found Jordan Bugarske for the ensuing two-point conversion - required after two overtimes - to put the icing on one of the most exciting games in school history.

Before its fans could return to normal heart rate, UC Davis did it again a week later. This time, the Aggies took an extra frame to beat Clarion (Pa.). Running back Gerald Burgin rushed for 202 yards and five touchdowns in the win.

But another tough schedule - this time one that included Division I-A Idaho - landed UC Davis in a lower playoff seed. And whereas the 1996 season saw the Aggies advance in the postseason by virtue of an upset of a Lone Star Conference member, the 1997 NCAA playoff run required two. Daft went for 413 passing yards and five scores to lead his team to a 37-33 upset over the Javelinas, then he fired four more touchdowns in a 50-33 win against top-seeded Angelo State.

Alas, the Aggie season again game to an end in the national semifinals, this time in a 27-25 loss to New Haven. It was the second straight year that UC Davis had not only lost in the semis, but in a battle that came down to the game's final play.

Despite the loss, the playoff run established two things. Quarterback Kevin Daft had set three NCAA postseason records against the Chargers, completing 43 of 64 for 468 yards. But perhaps more importantly, UC Davis had reestablished its name as a preeminent Division II football power. After all, two upsets of top-seeded teams and two straight semifinal berths would make it tough for the NCAA committee to overlook the gold helmets in the future.

And so, all eyes turned to the Aggie program during the 1998 season. UC Davis entered the season at No. 2 on preseason rankings by The Sporting News and Street & Smith's. Josh Anstey, a 1996 All-American who sat out most of previous year due to injury, was back. So was Francis Montes, who the year before had become the first Aggie to surpass 1,000 yards receiving. Gerald Burgin's name had changed (to G.P. Muhammad), but not his crafty skills that recorded more than 1,300 yards rushing in 1996.

The entire 1998 roster resembles a who's who of UC Davis football greats, including Joe Caviglia, Charley Enos, Robby Flannery, Greg Gatto, Artemus Jones, Troy Larkin, Nate Nelson, John Shoemaker, Kris Spraker, R.J. Starr and Wes Terrell. J.T. O'Sullivan, currently a member of the New Orleans Saints, was a freshman that year. In all, it may be the single most decorated rosters in program history.

As expected, the Aggies stormed through the regular season, compiling a 10-1 record against an increasingly tough schedule. The only loss was a one-point setback against New Haven, the previous year's national runner-up.

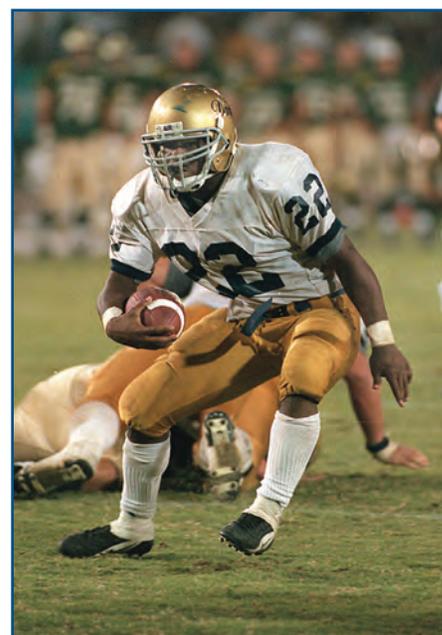
In addition to a 35-17 win over Sacramento State, UC Davis enjoyed a gripping win over Grand Valley State. Billed in the preseason as one of the nation top D-II games, the battle lived up to its promise. The Lakers recovered from a 33-10 deficit, scoring a touchdown in the game's final play to cut the lead to 40-38. With no time remaining, Kris Spraker's pressure on

highly touted GVSU quarterback Jeff Fox forced an incomplete pass on what would have been the game-tying two-point conversion.

In the end, however, Texas A&M-Kingsville exorcised the demons of two previous playoff upsets at the hand of UC Davis. Quarterback Terrance Bennett threw for two touchdowns and run for another as the Javelinas piled up 580 yards of offense in a 54-21 win at Toomey Field.

As one of seven All-Americans on the 1998 squad, Daft etched his name in the record books in virtually every passing category. The following spring, the eventual Super Bowl-champion Tennessee Titans selected him in the fifth round. Daft was the first Aggie player drafted since the San Francisco 49ers called Jeff Bridewell's name in the last round of the 1991 draft.

UC Davis football again made the national spotlight during the 1999 season, but the bulk of attention arrived not for the program's third straight playoff berth or second consecutive 10-win season. Nor was it only for Jim Sochor, who joined Ken O'Brien with his induction into the College Football Hall of Fame. Nor was it for cornerback Joe Caviglia, tackle Troy Larkin or receiver John Shoemaker, each of whom



1997 GP Muhammad



Joe Caviglia 1997 vs Sac State

signed professional football contacts at the end of the year.

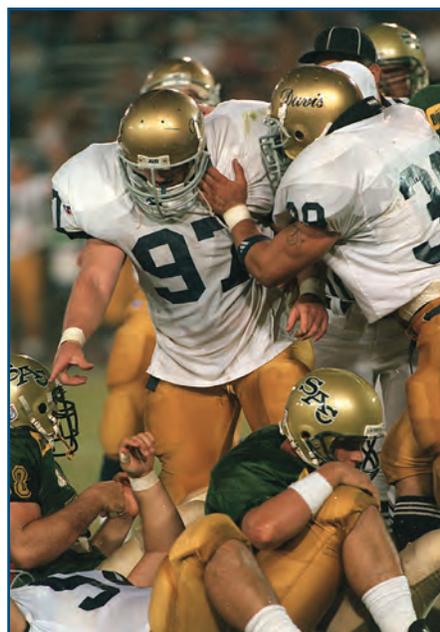
This time, the national attention fell upon a soft-spoken reserve running back from La Cañada, Calif. Sam Paneno had appeared in eight games as a redshirt freshman in 1998. The bulk of his action had come in a home game against Western Oregon, when he rushed for 107 yards on just 15 carries - more than half of his career numbers up to that point.

On September 11, the second game of the 1999 season, Paneno earned his career start at running back. Coincidentally, the opponent was Western Oregon. He responded to the call by rushing for a career-high 114 yards and a pair of touchdowns.

On the first play of overtime, Paneno dislocated his right knee. He received treatment at a Salem, Ore. hospital, and later, at the UC Davis Medical Center. But the injury had disrupted the blood flow to the lower leg and foot. Paneno underwent emergency surgery, and blood flow was restored. However, complications arose from the initial injury and after further procedures, a team of UCDMC orthopedic surgeons deemed it necessary to amputate the lower portion of his right leg. The amputation surgery was performed on

September 20, nine days after the game at WOU.

Support for Paneno came from all parts of the country. The host of the NCAA D-II Championships in Montgomery, Ala., created a website for fans to offer prayers and words of encouragement. Hundreds of sentiments flooded the website, including those from fellow collegiate players who only the name UC Davis from national rankings and past playoff results.



1997 Greg Gatto

Paneno paid his first visit to his teammates the following week after the surgery. Wrote Brandon Frink of the Davis Enterprise, he “delivered himself to practice wearing a wheelchair and a smile.” His positive attitude despite his ordeal proved to be an inspiration for all. Paneno displayed strength where someone else may have shown despair. He felt gratitude to his family, faith and friends, but never felt self-pity. And while ESPN had arrived on campus on September 20 to report on an athlete’s tragedy, CBS Sports, Sports Illustrated and even People magazine later paid visits to UC Davis to report on an athlete’s courage. Ever the active person, Paneno was later fitted with two different prosthetic legs - one for “everyday” use and the other allowing him to resume to such pastimes as running, surfing, even rock-climbing.

The UC Davis football team retired his No. 25 jersey the following year. Miami Dolphins’ lineman Trace Armstrong was so touched by seeing Paneno’s story as part of the CBS halftime report on Thanksgiving Day, that he invited him to attend the Raiders-Dolphins game as a guest of the team. In 2001, Paneno was formally honored by the NCAA when he was named co-winner of the inaugural Inspiration Award, bestowed upon a former student-athlete who has displayed “perseverance, dedication and determination” to overcome a life-altering event.



Greg Alley Punts 1997 vs Sac State

## All Decade Teams: 1990s

### Offense

Running Back - Preston Jackson (1991-93)  
 Quarterback - Kevin Daft (1995-98)  
 Tackle - T.J. Brown (1994-96)  
 Tackle - Troy Larkin (1996-99) & Bob Fenton (1990-92)  
 Guard - Bret Kwarta (1991-93)  
 Guard - Jay Suesens (1997-2000)  
 Center - Bob Shults (1992-93)  
 Tight End - Wes Terrell (1995-98)  
 Wide Receiver - Josh Weinstock (1989-92)  
 Wide Receiver - Mike Ichiyama (1991-94)  
 Wide Receiver - John Shoemaker (1996-99)

### Defense

End - Brian Anderson (1989-92)  
 End - Josh Anstey (1994-98)  
 Tackle - Mike Shepard (1989-91)  
 Tackle - Robby Flannery (1997-2000)  
 Middle Linebacker - Jason Hairston (1992-94)  
 Weakside Linebacker - Joseph Castagnola (1995-97)  
 Strongside Linebacker - Jeff Brunswig (1994-96)  
 Cornerback - Dyrell Foster (1990, 92-94)  
 Cornerback - Joe Caviglia (1996-99)  
 Free Safety - Colin Hardesty (1994-96)  
 Strong Safety - Morice Mabry (1990-92)

### Specialists

Punter - Chris Humes (1989-92)  
 & Greg Alley (1997-2000)  
 Kicker - Rafael Fernandez (1989-93)  
 Return Specialist - Artemus Jones (1996-99)  
 & Mike Ichiyama (1991-94)

Note: Fred Arp, longtime Assistant Coach and head of the Grid Club compiled this team.

He relied on voting by coaches and others close to Aggie Football.