

Cal Poly Football: A Cornerstone of Student Achievement



Figure 1: Cal Poly Football Team from the 1927 El Rodeo

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By

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Picture if you will, a Saturday night Cal Poly football game. The marching band blares “Ride High, You Mustangs”, our fight song, as the team scores the winning touchdown and the crowd around you goes absolutely wild. Spanos Stadium seems almost electric as the team carries our school to victory. This specific moment brings a unique energy to the school, and has been a tradition at Cal Poly every fall since the early 1900s.

The American football tradition is widely celebrated as a keystone of American culture, and is almost inseparable from the institution of the American university. Being so universally supported in America, it is natural that it would be a major focus among college students. In this paper, I will argue that athletic organizations on campus help to create a sense of campus pride among students and contribute to the overall student experience. The paper will encompass the history of the American football tradition and its social impacts on those involved, as well as the history of the Cal Poly athletics program and how Cal Poly fits into the institution of modern college football. This paper will explain how the athletic programs at Cal Poly increase student morale and some of the reasons why college football is held in such high esteem by both students and fans alike. To gauge student response, I will look at past student publications such as *The Polygram* and *Mustang Daily* and will focus on their reaction to athletics. John Madden, Cal Poly alumnus and world renowned football coach and broadcaster said himself, "Competitive athletics is the common thread that generates pride for students, alumni, faculty and the community alike.”¹

There are countless books and articles written about the American university and the role

¹ Donovan Aird, “John Madden may be Cal Poly's most famous alumnus,” *The Tribune*, July 3rd, 2009.

football played in the development thereof. *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy* by John Sayle Watterson broadly analyzes early American college football and describes how it influenced -and was influenced by- various universities at the time. Watterson also analyses some of the controversies that the institution of college football underwent during its formative years in the early 20th century.² The documentary “\$chooled: The Price of College Sports” provides a critical analysis of the current NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) regulations and provides a modern look at both student and public response to big name football programs. Along with other works on collegiate athletics, we can establish a picture of the early and modern American university football programs through an analysis of several different schools and the social structures created within them.³ These works examine several college football programs which I will compare to Cal Poly to show how we are both similar to and different from the programs described. The information presented in these works is certainly applicable to Cal Poly’s relationship with our athletics program despite our rather unique academic nature when compared to other schools.

To the best of my knowledge, the history and development of the Cal Poly Athletics program has not yet been specifically researched as a paper or senior project. I have come across many materials that show the history of and public response to the football program, which will provide more than enough support for my claim. The college football tradition is nearly universal among American colleges and universities, and I have no doubt that it is one of the many benchmarks we can utilize to compare Cal Poly to different schools and track our individual progress.

The American Football Tradition

² John Sayle Watterson. *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP, 2000.

³ *\$chooled: The Price of College Sports*. Directed by Ross Finkel, Trevor Martin, and Johnathan Paley, Strand Releasing and Makuhari Media, 2013.

The American college football tradition can be traced back to 1852, when Harvard and Yale held rowing competitions as a friendly rivalry⁴. Their competition evolved in 1875 when Harvard introduced an American version of Rugby, which we now know as football. The annual game between them grew to become quite a spectacle, and the influence of these ivy league schools helped the sport quickly spread to other universities across the country.

So why is college football so popular? According to Brandon Lilly of The Guardian, we see college football players as “hometown heroes”, people we can relate to. He writes that viewers identify more with college football than professional because they do not “have to deal with the uncomfortable fact that he or she is hanging on the outcome of games played by strangers who will make more money in a year than he or she will make in a lifetime.”⁵ We can sometimes revere professional athletes as almost god-like, whereas college athletes are perceived as normal students at most universities. As I will explain later, some universities revere their athletes almost as celebrities, but they are seen as average students at Cal Poly and other similar schools. This is an almost romanticized idea of small town America, which inspires Americans everywhere to relate to the student athletes.

According to the documentary “\$chooled: The Price of College Sports”, football provides a steady income for the university which makes a good deal of money from fans willing to spend on merchandise. Colleges generate a large profit by selling clothing, advertisements, and anything with their team’s logo on it. This profit is maximized as NCAA regulations state that student-athletes must remain amateur, meaning that the university cannot share the profits by paying the athletes.⁶

⁴Watterson, page 9.

⁵ Brandon Lilly, “College Football Explained,” *The Guardian*, October 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2012/oct/10/college-football-explained-ncaa>, accessed March 2nd, 2017.

⁶ *\$chooled*.

Social Impacts of Athletics

Athletic programs help the students get involved in the university and make them feel like they are a part of something bigger than themselves. Young people are constantly searching for ways to fit in, and football provides an outlet for them to do just that.

Bonnie Barber and Jaquelynne Eccles published a study on high school students' participation in various extracurricular activities, and I believe that the principles expressed in the findings can be extended to the college level. The study found that a sense of identity and the development of friend groups are associated with the organizations which the students engage in⁷. In his article, Jon Langford writes that athletics provides "a feeling of tribal-like belonging and identity that [college students] will carry proudly for the rest of their lives."⁸ This sentiment is what beckons alumni to come back for homecoming games and what helps create an almost nationalistic allegiance to one's alma mater.

The aforementioned study claimed that participation in team sports and general school involvement decreases the chances of students skipping school and using hard drugs. It found that these students are also more likely to enjoy school, have a higher GPA, and attend a full time university. Though it found that student athletes were on average more likely to drink alcohol than other social groups, they were still associated with increased academic achievement.⁹ Even though these are high school-specific qualifiers, it shows that participation in athletics produces generally better students.

⁷ Barber, Bonnie L. and Eccles, Jaquelynne S. "Student Council, Volunteering, Basketball, or Marching Band: What Kind of Extracurricular Involvement Matters?" *Journal of Adolescent Research* 14, no. 1 (1999): 32.

⁸ Jon Langford, "America's Big Business of College Football? It's a Foreign Concept for Brits," *Anglophenia*, March 2014. <http://www.bbcamerica.com/anglophenia/2014/03/americas-big-business-college-football-alien-concept-brits>, accessed March 2nd, 2017.

⁹ Barber and Eccles, 33-35.

Participation even matters to those students who are not directly involved with the athletics programs. An article in the *Polytechnic Journal* from 1939 rallies for support of their football team, proclaiming that they are representative not only of the school but of the student body as a whole¹⁰. It calls attention to the fact that even though we may not be nationally ranked, it is still crucial to support our peers who are representing the school in positive ways. Even as far back as 1939, they understood that the fans motivate the athletes and help drive them towards success.

It is widely regarded that participation in athletics augments the academic experience and helps create a clear campus identity. Athletics are a major factor in generating a sense of campus pride and increasing student morale. As stated in the 2016-2017 *Cal Poly Student Athlete Handbook*, “Active involvement in the Cal Poly community is the cornerstone of a rewarding collegiate experience.”¹¹

Cal Poly Football

The first record of the Cal Poly athletics program becoming an official part of the school can be found in the Athletics Association Minutes from their first meeting on November 9th, 1903. The fact that these minutes were taken just over a month after the first classes were held in October 1903 clearly shows that the students at the time held athletics in high regard.

Later in the minutes ledger, the early students drafted their constitution and bylaws. The preamble established the association to exist “for mutual improvement physically; for the cultivation of regular habits of living; and for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of

¹⁰ “Sports.” *Polytechnic Journal*, 22 September 1939, 4.

¹¹ “The Mustang Way,” *Cal Poly Student Athlete Handbook*, 2016, http://www.gopoly.com/inside_athletics/student_services/CalPolyStudentAthleteHandbook.pdf, accessed March 2017

ourselves and nature's laws.”¹² This is evidence that even then, the students saw a connection between athletics and a fulfilling education. The students put enough value in athletics and physical achievement to establish this group and organize sports on campus as soon as they could.

In their first year, the Athletics Association raised money through dues and donations, and invested that money in equipment and uniforms for various groups including the football, baseball, and women's basketball teams. Initially, the California Polytechnic School's football team played mostly high schools and junior colleges. On March 3rd, 1903, we participated in (and won) our first baseball game against Paso Robles High School¹³. Around this time, the football team was reportedly doing well in internal practice games but could not secure any matches with other schools. There was no official season in 1918 due to the influenza epidemic, and again no season in 1929 because of the Polio outbreak. By the 1940s, the Mustangs gradually moved into playing the freshman teams at larger universities, and finally to playing varsity teams at other universities.

Due to WWII drafts, there was no official football season in 1943 and 44 either, as too many students were being enlisted and sent to war.¹⁴ The campus was being used by the Naval Flight Preparatory School at the time, so a high student turnaround is to be expected. It is nearly impossible to run a program when the students are constantly being shipped out, as it is simply impossible to sustain. There was no season then and during disease outbreaks both because of internal instability and the fact that other schools, which they would normally play, were suffering from similar hindrances. The students continued to participate in athletics, but largely

¹² Athletic Association Minutes: 1903-1904, 9 November 1903, Sports Info: Football, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

¹³ “Athletics.” *Polytechnic Journal*, January 1906, 12-13.

¹⁴ All-Time Football Record. UA Football Season Summary and CCAA Standings. Sports Info: Football. Cal Poly University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

amongst themselves and other military teams instead of playing other schools.¹⁵ Their tenacity to continue participating in athletics even in the heat of war exemplifies their dedication to sports and physical exercise.

Since then, the football program continued to grow slowly yet steadily as the years progressed, becoming increasingly successful on the field. However, this gradual success would be shattered on the evening of October 29th, 1960. Disaster struck as an airplane carrying the Mustangs home from an away game in Toledo crashed soon after takeoff. While the Red Cross did what they could,¹⁶ sixteen mustangs, the student manager, and a member of the Mustang Booster club perished.¹⁷ What makes this incident particularly heart-wrenching is that these young men died while on a mission from their university. They lost their lives while participating in something bigger than themselves—something most would find valiant.

This tragedy sent shockwaves through the school as well as the nation. Administration held a candlelight vigil on the following Monday as the whole student body was in mourning. President McPhee even considered cutting the football program simply to ensure the safety of the players. Changes in aviation policies were instated by the Federal Aviation Administration to prevent anything like this from happening again.¹⁸

¹⁵ “Sports,” *Mustang Roundup*, March 1943, 8-9.

¹⁶ “Red Cross Plays Major Role after Toledo Crash,” *El Mustang*, November 22, 1960.

¹⁷ “Tragic Flight: The 1960 Football Team Plane Crash,” *Kennedy Library*, <http://lib.calpoly.edu/search-and-find/collections-and-archives/university-archives/timeline/1960-crash/>, accessed March 5th, 2017.

¹⁸ “The 1961 Season and the Legacy of the Crash,” *Kennedy Library*, <http://lib.calpoly.edu/search-and-find/collections-and-archives/university-archives/timeline/1960-crash/>, Accessed March 5th, 2017.



Figure 2: Madden c.1958

A member of the team two years earlier and still a student the time of the crash was John Madden, who may be one of Cal Poly's most famous alumni. He was a relatively average football player at Cal Poly in the 1957 and 1958 seasons and played on the baseball team in 1958. After earning his Master's Degree in Education in 1961, he went on to be drafted to play professionally for the Philadelphia Eagles. However, a knee injury during his rookie camp ended his playing career almost before it began. Though he couldn't play, he went on to become one of the most famous coaches and broadcasters in the National Football League. An article in the *Mustang Daily* from 1970 praises his achievements, he earned this accolade less than decade after his graduation from Poly¹⁹.

Madden sponsored a golf tournament and raffle at Cal Poly for eleven years beginning in 1983 to raise money for the athletics department, but it was discontinued as the profit margins were getting smaller and smaller, among other controversies.²⁰ Madden pulled out of the tournament in 1994 due to some reports of the raffle being rigged by the head football coach so that a specific man won the grand prize— a trip to Hawaii. Madden became seemingly estranged from Cal Poly over time as his high expectations of the football program were not met by the administration's support. He believed that Cal Poly had the potential to be the best team in California, but it had not grown significantly since he had observed in the 1980s.²¹ He has since made a great impact in the world of football through his coaching and involvement in sports

¹⁹ Richard Boschetti, "A Different Breed of Coach," *Mustang Daily*, October 30, 1970.

²⁰ Tim Vincent, "Poly Athletics Fund-Raising: No Madden, No Problem," *Mustang Daily*, April 18, 1994.

²¹ Aird, *The Tribune*.

broadcasting.²²

The Mustangs had their first taste of national fame when they won the NCAA Division II National Championship on December 13th, 1980, defeating Eastern Illinois 21-13. In fact, the game ball signed by all the team members is still on display in the lobby of Mott Gym. Head coach Joe Harper was named the NCAA Division II Coach of the Year in response.²³ This win brought national attention to Cal Poly and was arguably the highest point in our team's history. This win shows that our football team has potential to accomplish great things.

However, the value of these accomplishments was under scrutiny in the early 1990s when the university wrestled with the decision of either raising our athletics program from Division II to Division I or cutting many of the athletics programs completely. Among the programs set to be cut were football, wrestling, baseball, volleyball, tennis and swimming. According to the NCAA website, their division system began in 1973 to "align like-minded campuses in the areas of philosophy, competition and opportunity."²⁴ Essentially, they help to create fair matches for each school. The impetus behind the debate was that many schools moved out of Division II, leaving Poly with few viable opponents. Moving down to Division III was not an option because Poly was too big a school and would unfairly dominate. If upgraded to Division I, all sports would be moved up and a \$43/year increase in student fees for four years would be imposed to cover the costs²⁵. Ultimately, students voted to move up to Division I which was made official in 1994. Even though we did indeed choose to increase our athletics program, the fact that cutting the football program was even considered begs the question of how important the football program is to our administration. The students saw the influence that athletic programs can have

²² Elmer Ramos, "Poly Football Program Special to Madden," *Mustang Daily*, May 4, 1987.

²³ "Harper Named NCAA Division II Coach of the Year," *Cal Poly Report*, January 5, 1981.

²⁴ NCAA, "Our Three Divisions," <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/media-center/ncaa-101/our-three-divisions>, accessed March 15th, 2017.

²⁵ "\$43 IRS Athletic Referendum" *Mustang Daily* Nov 1991, Accessed February 17, 2017.

on student morale and campus pride, and decided that it was too important to simply give up.

Though football has been a significant aspect of the student experience at Cal Poly, many students see our school as more of a “soccer campus” than a football one, largely due to the Cal Poly vs. University of California, Santa Barbara game which attracts large crowds annually and brings a good deal of attention to the soccer program. In his History 303 paper, Vidal Aguilera argued that our reputation as a soccer school has been growing in the recent past and that it can essentially be traced back to fan support.²⁶ While the UCSB game is important to many students today, the tradition only officially began in 2012 according to the list of Cal Poly athletics traditions.²⁷ Though our soccer teams may seem prominent, our football teams have played each other on and off since 1921— nearly 90 years before this rivalry was even established.²⁸ Even though we may be transitioning into a predominantly soccer-oriented school, we have traditionally been a football campus.

Student Support

There is a trend within each iteration of the El Rodeo annual yearbook where Athletics is given a section unto itself, held in such esteem as other sections including Faculty, Students, and Student Organizations. Within this section, it is common to see that the football program gets a few pages to itself describing the players and outlining the entire season, every game, every score and usually including several pictures. The El Rodeo in 1928 referred to all other sports as “minor sports” such as tennis, golf, swimming, etc., which regularly only get a few sentences and perhaps a picture or two each.²⁹ The allocation of space within the El Rodeo shows that the

²⁶ Vidal Aguilera, “Cal Poly’s Campus Soccer Image. “Paper for HIST 303, March 14th, 2016.

²⁷ “The Blue-Green Rivalry,” *Inside Athletics: History and Traditions*, http://www.gopoly.com/fan_zone/traditions/index, Accessed March 2nd, 2017.

²⁸ All-Time Football Record. UA Football Season Summary and CCAA Standings. Sports Info: Football. Cal Poly University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

²⁹ El Rodeo 1928. California Polytechnic State University, Cal Poly University Archives.

yearbook editors and the administration which oversaw the book's completion wanted to emphasize our football program over other athletics programs offered at the time. Football may not have truly been as crucial to the students as the *El Rodeo* portrays, but the fact that there was such good record keeping for football when describing each season compared to the other sports with little record of achievement exhibits the university's focus on football.

In most editions of the *Mustang News*, the *Mustang Daily*, the *Polytechnic Journal*, and other student publications, there is consistently a section updating the reader on the latest sports news. These sections generally praise the various athletic programs for their achievements and progress, and typically include a calendar of upcoming athletic events. Many editions also include enthusiastic invitations to upcoming games and athletic events in hopes of keeping attendance up.³⁰ Since these newspapers are traditionally student run and their target audience is their fellow students, it is safe to assume that athletics have been important to students for a very long time. Similarly, informational pamphlets promoting the school's course work known as "circulars of information" span as far back as 1903, and show the administration flaunting how nice our athletic programs are and how modern our equipment is alongside the courses offered and active clubs on campus.³¹

Administrative Support

When compared to the schools with larger football programs such as USC or Ohio State, Cal Poly puts significantly less time and money into its football program. In "\$chooled", a scene is depicted where UCLA running back Johnathan Franklin was received by his peers essentially as a celebrity. They were taking pictures with him, having him sign autographs, and all knew

³⁰ "Football: Come One, Come All" *The Polygram*, 22 September 1920, 1.

³¹ "Athletics," *Circular of Information*, 1903-1904.

him by name even though he likely did not know any of theirs.³² This celebrity-like role puts a good deal of pressure on the athlete to perform as an athlete before he performs as a student. Since our school's football program is significantly smaller, we allow our student athletes to focus more on school than on their athletic obligations.

The current administration encourages participation in athletics by offering student athletes at Cal Poly priority registration. This means that they can register for classes before the general student body to ensure that they can make a schedule with enough time available for them to participate in athletics. The easier registration process helps the student athletes pursue their academic aspirations while still participating in university athletics. This program ensures their inclusion in athletics along with getting the classes they need to graduate in a timely manner.

The university also encourages and rewards the student athletes by supplying the Athletic Academic Advising program. The program serves "to assist student athletes in achieving their academic and personal goals."³³ They offer several services from registration assistance to tutoring in order to ensure the success of our student athletes. This helps the student athletes excel in school despite their commitment to athletics and the hectic schedules which sometimes go along with them.

"Schooled" also outlines the rigorous day of UCLA football players: waking up to work out at 5:30am, then class, meetings, and tutoring until around 10:00pm when they go home to do homework.³⁴ This schedule is typical for many athletes at big name universities, and would naturally push many students burn out relatively quickly. The fact that Cal Poly puts less pressure on our student athletes shows respect for their wellbeing, which can be difficult to find at universities with larger athletics programs.

³² *Schooled*.

³³ "Student Services", http://www.gopoly.com/inside_athletics/student_services/index, accessed March 15th, 2017.

³⁴ *Schooled*.

The documentary analyzes the definition of the phrase “student athlete”, where they are supposedly students first and athletes second. However, many of the big football schools will draft high school players and have them contracted to play football for the university. Since they were admitted primarily to play football, the students are expected to put in more effort athletically than academically.³⁵ This is yet another reason why Cal Poly is unique, the fact that our football program is not as grand as other schools’ puts less pressure on our athletes, if only on an institutional level. They may still feel pressure to prioritize athletics due to their love of the game or to peer pressure, but they will not be as stressed as students at big name schools whose contracts are contingent upon their extracurricular performance.

Football has been a key component of our school almost since its inception in 1901. Athletic programs help contribute to a sense of campus pride and individual identity through a shared sense of purpose. One’s academic career is enhanced by the participation in an athletics program, and ours has grown steadily since our school was founded. Though we may not have the most outstanding football program, it helps our student athletes to be students first and athletes second. Ultimately, the football program is an irreplaceable part of campus life and will remain so for years to come.

³⁵ *Schooled.*

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Appendix A

Figure 1: *El Rodeo* 1928. California Polytechnic State University. P.54.

Figure 2: “Images of John Madden at Cal Poly.” *The Cal Poly Forums*.

http://calpolymustangs.yuku.com/topic/3330/images-of-john-madden-at-cal-poly#.WMo-3hIrI_V, accessed March 14, 2017.