

How Cal Poly Athletics Maintained Success on the Chopping Block

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In April of 1990, Cal Poly's President Warren J. Baker and a handful of administrators decided that due to the athletics program's \$95,000 deficit during the 1988-89 fiscal year, a task force would be put together to help determine the future of sports at Cal Poly by a November 1990 deadline.¹ President Baker would ultimately make the final decision when it came to the future of athletics, but he wanted input from members of the Cal Poly community. The task force was comprised of Mustang Booster members, executive directors of organizations such as the Cal Poly Foundation and university relations, administrators, and members of ASI.² This task force then came up with four possible plans. By the November 1990 deadline they had determined that there should be either four or nine sports cut from Cal Poly's athletic program in order to save money and stay in the black during the upcoming fiscal years. The four sports that were proposed to be cut in the thirteen-sport plan were the baseball, softball, men's swim, and gymnastics teams.³ The other five sports that were on the chopping block for the eight-team plan were football, women's swim, men's tennis, women's tennis, and wrestling.⁴

These cuts were proposed just months after the very successful 1989 Cal Poly baseball season, where the Mustangs won the Division II College World Series in Montgomery, Alabama. This referendum was proposed as a way to move the remaining sports, for the most part, to Division I, one of the suggestions made by the task force when it was originally formed. Baker would still have the final word when it came to making a decision, but he would also look for guidance from the 21-member committee, "established in April to determine the future of

¹ Jason Foster, "Status report gives future options for Cal Poly sports," *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), 23 April 1990, accessed 23 January 2017, <https://goo.gl/UQY5MR>

² Foster, "Status report."

³ Neil Pascale, "Athletic program will be cut to 8 or 13 sports," *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), 8 November 1990, accessed 23 January 2017, <https://goo.gl/EE0oaB>

⁴ Pascale, "Athletic program will be cut."

athletics at Cal Poly.”⁵ This paper will examine that task force and the decisions they ultimately made regarding the future of Cal Poly athletics. I will look at all the sports involved, but I will take a more in-depth look at the Mustangs baseball program, from their rise to national champions to their fall onto the chopping block, and how they ultimately survived and later thrived.

This budget crisis was not only felt at Cal Poly, but at college campuses all across the country. There was a serious economic recession throughout the United States from 1990 to 1992, “the largest since that of the early 1980s.”⁶ It was an unsure time, and colleges and universities like Cal Poly had to figure out how to survive financially in this period of uncertainty. While there was this economic crisis going on nationally there was also a budget crisis happening in California which led to Governor Pete Wilson and others planning to cut state spending by at least 15.5 percent.⁷ Schools all over California were at risk of devastating budget cuts. As the *Oxnard Press-Courier* reported in 1992, “State schools superintendent Bill Honing told the conference committee that the multibillion-dollar shortage could cripple the state’s 1,000-plus school districts.”⁸

I am arguing that the importance of athletics at Cal Poly and the success of the Mustangs baseball team aided the survival of athletic programs that other schools were not able to avoid. This argument is important and unique because many students at Cal Poly today may be unaware that this school was not always the home of Division I athletics that they are able to see today. Cal Poly currently has a reputation for their consistently successful baseball program with eleven

⁵ Pascale, “Athletic program will be cut.”

⁶ “1990-92: Early 1990s Recession,” *The Regents of the University of California*, 3 March 2011, accessed 5 February 2017, <https://goo.gl/1OICTT>

⁷ “Budget’s hit lists readied,” *The Press-Courier* (Oxnard), 10 June 1992, accessed 5 February 2017, <https://goo.gl/LOKR2d>

⁸ “Budget’s hit lists,” *The Press-Courier* (Oxnard), 10 June 1992, accessed 5 February 2017, <https://goo.gl/LOKR2d>

non-losing seasons in the last fourteen years under Coach Larry Lee.⁹ I think it is important to show where success stems from. The baseball program did not just become great overnight, it took decades of hard work to build up that reputation and get the program to where it is today.

Historiography

In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a recession in the United States that coincided with California's budget crisis in the early '90s. The crisis was felt all around the country and colleges were one of the many places affected by financial troubles. Jordan Bass, Claire Schaeperkoetter, and Kyle Bunds, in their educational report on university and athletic department funding, discuss the NCAA Division I athletic funding crisis. Despite the perceptions that NCAA Division I schools have all the money in the world for the school and their athletes, the report says that athletic departments in Division I have the most budgetary funding issues.¹⁰ Some of these funding issues came from Title IX and the fact that universities were trying to increase their revenue from athletics while also making sure they complied with Title IX. Title IX was instituted in the early 1970s as an amendment to protect students and student athletes from exclusion based on sex in educational programs and other places where there is federal financial assistance. In an overview put out by the United States Department of Justice, Title IX was described as being created in order to, "avoid the use of federal money to support sex discrimination in education programs and to provide individual citizens effective protection against those practices."¹¹ In order to make sure that no one is discriminated against

⁹ "Cal Poly Baseball Coaching Staff," *Cal Poly Mustangs Baseball*, accessed 5 February 2017, <https://goo.gl/WLn08O>

¹⁰ Jordan Bass, Kyle Bunds, and Claire Schaeperkoetter, *The 'Front Porch': Examining the Increasing Interconnection of University and Athletic Department Funding* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publications, 2015), pg. 25.

¹¹ "Overview of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972," The United States Department of Justice, last modified 7 August 2015, accessed 1 March 2017, <https://goo.gl/gUjb2G>

based on their sex university athletic programs have to be set up in a way that equally benefits both men's and women's sports. In *Front Porch* the authors highlight some financial problems that stem from the compliance with Title IX, "...football often serves as the primary revenue-generating sport in NCAA Division I athletics, it also often creates large amounts of consternation as athletic department officials delicately try to balance the budget and adhere to NCAA bylaws and legislation in regard to Title IX."¹² Although Cal Poly did not move from Division II to Division I until 1994, the school still faced financial issues similar to the issues schools in Division I did.

Cal Poly was also looking to grow as a university and one aspect of that was a possible move to Division I. The volleyball and wrestling teams were already in Division I at the time of the budget crisis, but the other fifteen sports were at Division II. The task force originally came up with four options for the structuring of the athletic program in April when they started which included plans to

"remain at the present 17-sport program with 15 sports at Division II and volleyball and wrestling at Division I; scale down to a 12-sport Division II format without football or 13 sports with football; offer a 12-sport Division I program without football or 13 sports with football at Division II; or reduce to an eight-sport Division II format."¹³

With Cal Poly Athletics trying to cut their spending and overcome their \$95,000 deficit, and also to move up in the collegiate hierarchy with Division I standing, the task force and other administrators had their work cut out for them.

¹² Bass, Bunds, and Schaeperkoetter, *The 'Front Porch,'* pg. 26.

¹³ Jason Foster, "Status report."

With Division I standing came more costs, the amount of scholarships that Cal Poly would have to provide would be around 200 and would require the sports to bring in more revenue to be able to keep the department in the black. In *Front Porch* football was referred to as a revenue-generating sport, but at Cal Poly the team was not bringing in all that much revenue. One of the large factors in the \$95,000 deficit was the football team, *Mustang Daily* writer Neil Pascale explained this condition, “two away games at Fresno State and Boise State that netted Poly \$46,000 per season were cut in 1985-86 due to Poly’s inability to compete with these Division I schools.”¹⁴ There were many issues with football scheduling and making it so that Cal Poly could actually make a profit on their few games a year was becoming impossible. In a *Mustang Daily* article that dilemma with football was explained further, “...a number of schools that played Cal Poly on a regular basis have either dropped out of Division II or now need guarantees of a fixed amount of money to travel to San Luis Obispo.”¹⁵ Football was not the only problem Cal Poly had, but it was one of the problems because of the connotation that it should bring in all that revenue that other sports were not capable of bringing in. Although football was a big cost that did not always bring in many profits and other schools had decided to just do away with it altogether, it was also viewed by many as a source of pride for the school despite the team’s record or the attendance at the games. What made Poly look good on the outside was not always the best decision for the school, but it was taken into consideration when it came down to planning, even by the highest level administration.

Students’ Knowledge and Perceptions Concerning Athletics

During the time of the athletic department’s budget crisis in 1990, a study was created by a few Cal Poly business marketing students as their senior project to gauge how the student body

¹⁴ Pascale, “Athletic program will be cut.”

¹⁵ Pascale, “Athletic program will be cut.”

felt about a possible change in the makeup of Cal Poly athletics. In the study the idea of raising each students' tuition by a few dollars each year was brought up as a possible solution. In *Front Porch* tuition fees were brought up as common places where schools can get money for athletics: "...a limited number of Division I athletic departments generate enough revenue to fully cover their expenses. Departments often rely heavily on student fees and tuition reallocations to operate."¹⁶ This was not always a popular decision, especially if the students did not really care about athletics at their school. The study conducted at Cal Poly, entitled "Market Research of Students Knowledge and Perceptions Concerning Athletics at Cal Poly," found in one of the surveys that "63% of students surveyed supported a \$4 hike in tuition to support existing Division II teams," and that "46% of the students sampled supported a \$12 raise in tuition if Cal Poly's athletic program was to vault to Division I status."¹⁷ These were fairly surprising results considering the fact that revenue was not coming into Cal Poly athletics and there was a general lack of interest in athletics among the student body.

In the study conducted by business marketing students Neal Berryman, Janise De Voe, Bill Marcus, and Ann Nebiker, three independent surveys were created that looked at "...the student body's current perception of the athletic department to opinions on possible tuition increases in support of athletics to student priorities concerning options available to the athletic department."¹⁸ Cal Poly had definitely had some success over the years with various sports in their athletic programs, but sports were not the school's main focus. In the *Mustang Daily* article titled "Study sees students' view of Poly sports: Finds many are uninterested in athletic program," the conductors of the study, "interviewed 388 students, 225 of whom were male, and

¹⁶ Bass, Bunds, and Schaeperkoetter, *The 'Front Porch,'* pg. 28.

¹⁷ Chris Soderquist, "Study sees students' view of Poly sports: Finds many are uninterested in athletic program," *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), 21 May 1990, accessed 23 January 2017, <https://goo.gl/11DRHw>

¹⁸ Soderquist, "Study."

showed that Cal Poly students, generally, are not very interested or knowledgeable with regard to athletics on campus.”¹⁹ Many students were generally unaware of Cal Poly sports with a large number of students not attending any Cal Poly sporting event within the last twelve months. This did not mean that the students would rather not have any sports at their school, which was shown with a majority of the students supporting a four-dollar increase in tuition to keep the athletics program where it was in regards to size and Division II standing. Students may not have been attending games or events, but many found athletics to be a source of pride for the school: “59% of students sampled, when asked what the effects of changing to a Division I athletic program would be, agreed that school pride and support of athletes would increase.”²⁰ In the students’ eyes pride stemmed from success and one athletic program that had seen some success in the years leading up to the creation of the task force was the Mustangs baseball team.

Baseball’s Success

In 1989 the Cal Poly baseball team captured the title of first place in the California Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA). After the regular season, the team advanced on to the regionals winning the tournament and moving on to the Division II College World Series which they then won.²¹ The Mustangs baseball program had remained consistent throughout the years and had recently taken a more competitive approach in 1970 when Coach Augie Garrido was hired and the team started switching up their schedule to match up with teams who had great baseball reputations. Coach Steve McFarland joined the Mustangs as the head coach in 1983 after playing there in 1971 and 1972 and assisting successful Coach Berdy Harr for several

¹⁹ Soderquist, “Study.”

²⁰ Soderquist, “Study.”

²¹ Bobby Rowell, “Cal Poly Mustangs: National Champions!!” 1989, Box 01, Folder 04, “Cal Poly Baseball Media Guides and Misc.” Eric Burdick’s Collection, Cal Poly Athletics Communications Office, San Luis Obispo, CA.

seasons.²² The baseball team had seen success before under different coaches, but their 1989 season really proved that the Mustangs were contenders and they could handle something like a move to Division I. Despite the Division II World Series title, the higher national rankings, and the playoff runs in the years following the 1989 season, the baseball team was somehow one of those teams put on the chopping block for both the thirteen- and eight-sport plans.

Cal Poly baseball returned from their extremely successful 1989 season with some strong players who had won it all and would attempt to do it all again in 1990. Among those returners were infielders Bill Daly, Matt Drake, Pat Kirby, and catcher Doug Noce. All were highlighted in the 1990 media guide as projected leaders on the field. The media guide gave an outlook for the upcoming season which said,

“Heading up the list of returners are 1989 All-Western Region selections Doug Noce (catcher, Sr.) and first baseman Pat Kirby (Sr.). Noce finished the ’89 season with a .301 batting average, while appearing behind the plate in 56 of the Mustangs’ 63 games. Kirby’s 76 hits and .333 batting average were tops on the squad last season.”²³

The leadership of those returners, who had been to the championship before, knew what it took to get there and were willing to work even harder to make it again. The Mustangs finished their historic 1989 season with a record of thirty-eight wins and twenty-five losses.²⁴ Unfortunately, the team lost some of their strongest pitchers after the 1989 season; Bobby Ryan, a member of the 1989 NCAA Division II Baseball Championships All-Tournament Team and Greg Paxton, a

²² “McFarland named new Poly coach” 23 September 1983, Box 13, Folder 01, “Baseball Players and Coach Files,” Special Collections and University Archives, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, CA.

²³ Bobby Rowell, “1990 Mustang Baseball Media Guide,” 1990, Box 01, Folder 05, “Baseball 1989-1991 Memorabilia,” Doug Noce’s Collection, Office of Doug Noce, Santa Maria, CA.

²⁴ Rowell, “1990 Mustang Baseball Media Guide.”

member of the Converse and American Baseball Coaches Association 1989 NCAA Division II All-American third team.²⁵ Even with the loss of these key players, the Mustangs were able to finish the 1990 season with a record of twenty-eight wins and twenty-six losses, just narrowly missing the regional playoffs.²⁶ Although the Mustangs were not able to immediately return to the post season following their championship, the team continued to prove themselves as a worthy and deserving figure in Cal Poly athletics.

The reasons for picking the teams to be cut were not always clear and caused a lot of confusion among the members of the baseball, softball, men's swim, and gymnastics teams. The gymnastics team took to the *Mustang Daily* to voice their side of the story following the publication of the article entitled, "Athletic program will be cut to 8 or 13 sports." In a letter to the editor, the gymnastics team submitted a piece that discussed their feelings about the decision to move to a thirteen or eight-sport plan. Former Poly gymnasts wrote about not only how that decision affected their team, but how it would affect the other teams like baseball as well: "baseball, gymnastics and swimming fundraise for the majority of their financial support. From what we have seen, the four sports that are to be dropped are not the ones that cause financial burden."²⁷

The gymnastics team was not the only person or organization to speak out against the task force's decision. One of the students that conducted the "Market Research of Students Knowledge and Perceptions Concerning Athletics at Cal Poly" study for a senior project, Bill

²⁵ Bobby Rowell, "Converse and American Baseball Coaches Association 1989 NCAA Division II All America Teams," 1989, Box 01, Folder 02, "Baseball 1989-1991 Memorabilia," Doug Noce's Collection, Office of Doug Noce, Santa Maria, CA.

²⁶ "Baseball loses last game, playoff hopes at UC Riverside," *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), 16 May 1988, accessed 12 February 2017, <https://goo.gl/jpx6dI>

²⁷ Former Gymnastics Team, "Team discusses athletic changes," *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), 15 November 1990, accessed 1 March 2017, <https://goo.gl/E6IzVW>

Marcus, voiced his concern over the decision submitted by the task force in a piece he submitted to the *Mustang Daily*. Marcus felt that the task force and the administration did not take every factor into account when it came to making a decision, especially since the senior project he worked on was requested by the ASI Board of Directors. Based on the research Marcus and his classmates conducted, Marcus suggested another way to solve the budget crisis:

“...Cal Poly not cut any teams, but maintain a 17 sport Division II program, increase the amount of student fees that goes to athletics, upgrade current facilities, increase the number of coaching positions, hire a full-time promotions coordinator, implement a marketing strategy, investigate the possibility of a non-scholarship football program, and address the management issues.”²⁸

To the school the largest issue was financial, \$95,000 was a large deficit and in order to do some of the things that Marcus or other people suggested, the school would have to pay for that with no real guarantee that they would eventually make a profit.

Task Force Resolution

The task force, formed in 1990, merely suggested a plan for the future of Cal Poly athletics, Baker still had the final say when it came to the ultimate decision. Members of the task force came from a wide variety of places including Mustang Boosters, Cal Poly Foundation, University Relations, Academic Senate, and many other organizations with ties to Cal Poly. A November 1991 referendum was put on the table to call a vote on whether or not Cal Poly would move from Division II to Division I. The school was having a hard time staying afloat financially and a move to Division I would not just cost more to cover the scholarships, but the

²⁸ Bill Marcus, “Cooperation can save athletics,” *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), 14 November 1990, accessed 1 March 2017, <https://goo.gl/wfWQEk>.

facilities would also require some spending. Several Cal Poly coaches and other members of the community voiced their concern about facilities in an article in the *Mustang Daily* titled “Poly must deal with facility crisis.” In the article, coaches presented the reality that “if the school votes to move to the Division I level in the November referendum, Cal Poly will have to improve its facilities.”²⁹ An improvement of facilities could lead to an improvement in athletics which could result in bringing in revenue, but this would all be a risk the school had to decide it was willing to take. The Instructionally Related Activities athletic fee referendum was put to a student vote in November of 1991 and passed, with over 10,000 students voting to take a fee increase in order to keep athletics and move forward with plans to move to Division I.³⁰ Despite doubts and worries from members of Cal Poly’s athletic community, the referendum passed and the Mustangs were on their way to becoming a Division I school. Doubts surrounding the students’ interest in Cal Poly athletics were put to rest, at least in that moment. A representative of the Athletic Department wrote to the *Mustang Daily* to thank the student body for their support, stating,

“Cal Poly students took it upon themselves to save an athletic program rich in tradition. A tradition filled with 36 national championships and countless victories. However, the biggest victory came from the students in the largest election in the state of California. Ten thousand students voted, 66 percent of the student body, and the majority kept the dream alive.”³¹

²⁹ Gregg Mansfield, “Poly must deal with facility crisis,” *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), 7 October 1991, accessed 1 March 2017, <https://goo.gl/FwH4dO>.

³⁰ Debbie Aberle and Christy Rinaura, “Coaches, alumni express relief after vote,” *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), 25 November 1991, accessed 1 March 2017, <https://goo.gl/Cd97vW>.

³¹ Dale Hanover, “Athlete will not forget support,” *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo), 26 November 1991, accessed 1 March 2017, <https://goo.gl/STlILl>.

Today we see the results of that referendum when we attend a sporting event or walk by one of the school's athletic facilities, but Cal Poly is not done yet; they continue to work on expanding and bettering the athletics program.

Conclusion

Students today might look at Cal Poly athletics and think nothing of it. It is not as widely known or profitable when compared to Big 10 or SEC schools but athletics are a part of our campus identity. To think that one vote could have changed this school before most of the students here were even born is very difficult to imagine especially when considering the sports that we might have never seen at Cal Poly. If baseball had been cut in 1991 we would have never seen the team move to Division I, we would not have Baggett Stadium, and we would not have watched the very successful 2014 team host the regional playoffs that May. Although the attitude of the student body at the time towards athletics was not overtly positive, students could not picture themselves at a school without sports. They were not all frequent attendants at sporting events and the teams did not always have great, winning seasons, but athletics can provide a sense of pride that you cannot get from any other part of the university. Since the referendum Cal Poly has been attempting to live up to the expectations of students, boosters, athletes, and the university community with new improvements to athletic facilities being proposed fairly often. Cal Poly has come a long way from 1990 when the future was very uncertain. Now we can see the future plans for teams and athletic venues and we can watch former Mustangs take their talents to professional teams, making all the work behind the scenes in the athletic department worthwhile.

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