

# Football and its Importance at Cal Poly

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## **Abstract**

This research looks at the Cal Poly football program and its influence at the university. It looks at Cal Poly and other California State schools similar. While touching on the entire history of the Cal Poly football program, it will hone in on the post World War II era. This time period is significant due to the race to expand higher education. Decision makers at these institutions at the time saw athletics as a key to expanding their respective universities. Students and administration are primary characters in this paper. By looking at student run publications and administration publications, this paper will look at their attitudes when speaking about football. Looking at them gives the reader a sense of how football at Cal Poly affected the people on campus in a good way. Hard work, loyalty, sacrifice, and pride are major themes of the history of Cal Poly football. Admissions and financial advancements have been made due to football. The importance of the Cal Poly football program and the schools expansion shaped it into the proud university it is today.

## **Key Terms**

- College Football
- Madden, John
- Hughes, Roy
- El Rodeo
- Mustang Daily
- Cal State

## **Introduction**

Football in America is a nationwide tradition that is a major part of the country's culture. From the National Football League to youth leagues, football has had impact on a numerous amount of people. A college campus is a great place where you can see the significance and influence football has on people involved with the school. California State University football institutions are on different levels compared to programs like Ohio State and the University of Alabama to say the least. Disregarding the schools in the Pac-12, college football programs on the Pacific Coast are downplayed but still significant to their respective universities and students. This paper will look at the history of Cal Poly's football program and how its progression over the years generated a new prideful community on campus.

This paper will review publications such as *The Mustang Daily*, *The Cal Poly Journal*, the Cal Poly student handbook, the *El Rodeo*, and others to analyze student reactions to certain football events. By examining these publications, this will give a better understanding of the morale on campus and the administrators' view on the sport as well. These publications over the years will show how a small-scale football program like Cal Poly's still have a positive impact on the university. Cal Poly's sports programs get lost in the limelight due to the academic dominance but, at the end of the day sports and academics worked together to generate growth at Cal Poly.

This paper will mainly focus on the institution from World War II to the present day. This time period was crucial to football and its involvement in California State Universities. With a lot of the population coming back home after the war, the Cal State colleges, as they were known then, were growing at an outstanding rate. Many of these emerging colleges in California and elsewhere embraced these opportunities to extend their missions and become integral to the

changing political, social, and economic contexts of postwar American society.<sup>1</sup> Athletics were a big part of the expansion of these universities and their respective presidents, students, and alumni knew that. As San Diego State officials declared, “The effect [of athletics] on the morale, spirit, and loyalty of students, alumni, and other members of the school and community must be recognized.”<sup>2</sup> The race to compete in intercollegiate athletics consumed college and university officials increasingly in the decades following World War II.<sup>3</sup> Looking at Cal Poly in particular we will see many of the same tendencies carried out by the school and its students to enlarge football at Cal Poly. The statewide movement to enhance football at these California state public schools was crucial to their development. Cal Poly benefited greatly from football and it helped them compete with their rival schools. Football helped Cal Poly become a more complete school that benefited educational expansion.

### **Historiography**

Much has been written on the history of college football on campus. John Watterson’s book *College football: History, spectacle, controversy* is a great source that helps with the understanding of the history of college football. Watterson looks at the ups and downs of the sport. The book focuses on the main trends that have shaped college football into what it is today, including, social and economical transcendence that evolved the way universities worked together with athletics.<sup>4</sup> Watterson’s book *College football: History, spectacle, controversy*

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<sup>1</sup> Marc A. Vanoverbeke, ““Out of the Quietness, a Clamor: 'We Want Football!'” The California State Colleges, Educational Opportunity, and Athletics.” *History Of Education Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2013): p. 431.

<sup>2</sup> Darryl Nelson, “A history of San Diego State College football from 1921 to 1968” (PhD dissertation, San Diego State University, 1969). p. 10

<sup>3</sup> John S. Watterson, *College football: History, spectacle, controversy*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 219.

<sup>4</sup> Watterson, *College football: History, spectacle, controversy*, p. 446.

provides a great overview to college football. The book describes events throughout the history of college football that directly affect Cal Poly. Watterson's work will be a great source that can be used to compare events and findings to Cal Poly's History.

Nelson's dissertation "A history of San Diego State College football from 1921 to 1968" will give a close comparison to the Cal Poly. San Diego State being a West Coast school with a smaller football program will provide great information on the subject. Nelson's dissertation covers a span of years that are very important to the rise of football on campuses resembling Cal Poly. Nelson's dissertation provides insight on the "boom" years of the program and also the struggles the war brought upon the football program.<sup>5</sup> Cal Poly and San Diego State were very similar in these years. Both were striving for educational expansion and saw football as one of the keys to growth.

Marc VanOverbeke's article, "'Out of the Quietness, a Clamor: 'We Want Football!'" The California State Colleges, Educational Opportunity, and Athletics" shows the effort put in by alumni and students to fight for football programs at their California State Universities. VanOverbeke writes, "They argued that big-time football would increase the college's reputation and allow the institution to better meet the needs of greater numbers of students as it continued its progress toward being a comprehensive institution."<sup>6</sup> I believe VanOverbeke's argument is valid. A big football program adds a new dynamic to a school that intrigues possible enrollees and others already on campus. The power football has on college campuses is hard to explain but, undeniable. Academics, morale and cohesiveness between students and administration are all boosted due to football.

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<sup>5</sup> Nelson, "A history of San Diego State College football," p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> VanOverbeke, "'Out of the Quietness,'" p. 431.

The history of Cal Poly's football program and its influence on the school is important for many reasons. Outside of the university, Cal Poly is not really known for being a "sports school" leading to a lack of historical work analyzing the football program. Football is more than just a sport at Cal Poly and the evidence found and used in this paper will demonstrate that. By using student journals, campus publishes, and examples from similar West Coast universities I will prove the positive influence the Cal Poly football program has on the school as a whole.

### **College Football Tradition**

College football today is a worldwide commodity. Much of the sense of pride, unity, and entertainment on college campuses can be traced back to athletics. Football as a tradition is a major part of these traits at a school. American football's birth was on the college campus and for as long as it has been around it proves its importance. For over a century football has been a part of the college student life. Kenneth Jost states,

Princeton and Rutgers played the first intercollegiate "football" game on Nov. 6, 1869, fielding 25-member teams in a kicking and butting game akin to modern soccer. Harvard and Yale initiated their famous rivalry six years later in 1875; a year later, they formed a conference with Princeton and Columbia that over the next two decades adopted Harvard's preference for rugby-style running rules with Yale's insistence on 11-member teams.<sup>7</sup>

Yale and Harvard's extreme rivalry in rowing competitions back in 1852 sparked the creation of an Americanized version of rugby (football).<sup>8</sup> College football started primarily on the East Coast and did not take long for the sport to proliferate across the nation. As football started to

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Jost, "Background,(College Football)(American Football History)," *CQ Researcher* 21, no. 41 (2011): p. 985.

<sup>8</sup> Watterson, *College football: History, spectacle, controversy*, p. 9.

skyrocket on these campuses students and administration were to soon create the tradition that took over the nation by 1920's.

With football being on the upswing, students turned their attention to these athletes. Their hard work, dedication, teamwork and strength when faced with adversity gave the school a sense of pride. In many cases it gave the school an identity. A schools football tradition can depict what a universities about. Rallies, tailgates, and crowded stadiums give examples of school pride. The overall school experience is advanced due to football. VanOverbeke says it best in his article "Out of the Quietness, a Clamor: "We Want Football!" when speaking on tradition, ...while the athletes were on the fields honing these skills, other students were in the stands cheering them on, writing about them in the campus newspapers, and marching along the sidelines in their band uniforms. They too were participating in an athletic tradition that, while new for some of the state colleges, built loyalty among students and highlighted a shared culture of hard work, sacrifice, and teamwork.<sup>9</sup>

Tradition should not be overlooked when talking about the importance of football at Cal Poly. Being able to unite a school from administration down is something we all can appreciate and could be a main selling point for possible incoming students.

### **History of Football at Cal Poly**

In 1901, Cal Poly was established and by 1915 the school started its first legitimate football season. In the first decade you can see an active involvement by decision makers to build the football program. They were even putting in a decent amount of money to promote the rise of football at the school. The Cal Poly Athletic Association was making rapid strides to

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<sup>9</sup> VanOverbeke, "Out of the Quietness," p. 438.

enhance athletics at the school. The Athletic Association would double in size to over seventy members in 1906.<sup>10</sup> With the urge to expand the football program they spent “nearly one hundred dollars” on brand new uniforms for the football team.<sup>11</sup> The school was very interested in the expansion of the school and athletics were a clear sign of growth. The investment to the football team showed a sign of visual improvement.

In the years following Cal Poly’s first official season, football was on the rise at universities all over the nation. One of the earliest documented games was an intercollegiate game between upper classmen and lower classmen. Hundreds of people were in attendance to watch one of the hardest fought games of the season. People in attendance paid a small admissions fee to pay the possible medical bills for the players.<sup>12</sup> At such a young stage of the sport it was impressive to see the support given by people involved with Cal Poly. The roaring twenties were relevant to football as well. The 1920’s were a time of great social change. Society was thriving on new ideas, freedom, and prosperity. With the nation on the upswing, football went through a time of overachievement. With the school infatuated by the next big thing, football captivated the school. The *El Rodeo* even called other sports that were not football “minor” sports.<sup>13</sup> Football was the craze at Cal Poly in the 1920’s that would continue in the decades to come.

Cal Poly started off by playing local high school teams at the start. Like many starting programs Cal Poly had its struggles but gradually grew. By the 1940’s the transitioned from high schools to playing universities. This was a gigantic step for the football program but throughout

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<sup>10</sup> “Athletics,” *Polytechnic Journal*, January 1906, 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> “Athletics,” (1906) 13.

<sup>12</sup> “Athletics,” *Polytechnic Journal*, June 1916, 46-47.

<sup>13</sup> *El Rodeo* 1928, California Polytechnic State University.



the 1940s – 1950s the war depleted the program. In fact, in 1943 and 1944 the military draft made it so there wasn't an official football team at Cal Poly.<sup>14</sup> Students still participated in sports at this time but would have to wait for a few years to get the schools team back. The world was in a fray that directly affected the football program. The major setback set up an exciting comeback. By 1950, Cal Poly's football program was put back on the map with the hire of Coach Roy Hughes. In the midst of the Cold War the war was still on the minds of the coach and the players. In his first years he was on the brink of losing many of his players to a possible draft. Hughes was going along with the idea that no news was good news when speaking of military service and Mustang football players but prepared for the worst at the same time.<sup>15</sup> Luckily Hughes and his team were able to stay together because he was able to generate the team's first undefeated season. Hughes brought prominence to Cal Poly football as the program's head coach from 1950 to 1961. In 1953, the Mustangs were undefeated and untied. The team led the nation in division II scoring.<sup>16</sup> The success the football team had created excitement across the school that soon generated to the first intramural football team at Cal Poly.<sup>17</sup> The success on and off the football field was sustained for the years to come.

In 1960, a horrendous accident involving the football team devastated the entire school. On the way back home from Toledo, the team plane crashed. Sixteen players and two others

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<sup>14</sup> 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, May, 1955.

<sup>15</sup> *El Mustang*, August 25, 1950.

<sup>16</sup> *Cal Poly Report*, October 29, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> *El Mustang*, September 22, 1950.

associated with the program passed in this disaster.<sup>18</sup> Although very traumatizing, the incident in 1960 was a serious moment in the history of Cal Poly. President McPhee and the rest of the school was so heartbroken, he nearly cancelled the rest of the season.<sup>19</sup> The tragic event will never be forgotten at our university. The memory will live on and in 2006 Cal Poly honored the 1960 football team by building a beautiful memorial right outside of the football stadium.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most famous people affiliated with the Cal Poly football program is John Madden. John Madden was an average player when he played in the late 1950's but his achievements after leaving Cal Poly are outstanding. Former NFL player for the Eagles, Super Bowl-winning head coach for the Raiders, and a beloved sports broadcaster towards the end of his career,<sup>21</sup> John Madden might be the face of the Cal Poly football program. He gives many players and students hope for what life could be after Cal Poly. John Madden brought excitement to the school and an idol the program could use as a role model.

Looking at the second half of the century, Cal Poly had an abundance of football success. An undefeated National Championship season in 1980 generated some buzz around the nation that brought up the conversation to move up to Division I. In a student article in the *Mustang Daily* on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1981 the championship team was still being recognized. The article looks at

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<sup>18</sup> "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 February 28, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> "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 February 28, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> "Cal Poly Honors 1960 Football Team," *Public Affairs Office, California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo*, September 27, 2006, [http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/pao\\_pr/592](http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/pao_pr/592), accessed February 28, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Boschetti, "A Different Breed of Coach," *Mustang Daily*, October 30, 1970.

the top achievements of the year, with the main focus being the Division II National Championship.<sup>22</sup> Honing in on the big achievement of the football program reiterates how excited people were for the football program. The team proved it could be successful and dominate at the Division II level.

It would take over a decade after that undefeated season to move up to Division I. It was made official in 1994 after much controversy due to finances. At the end of the debate a vote took place that ended up in favor to move up a division. Having a vote in favor to keep the football program and move them into a higher quality division depicted the desire for elite athletics at Cal Poly. Cal Poly without a football program would make them a lesser university. Football brings an element that can separate a school that lacks a football program. Over the history it is apparent how important football is at Cal Poly. It generated excitement, a proud community, loyalty, and eventful entertainment.

### **Comparing and Contrasting Cal State Universities**

Public schools similar to Cal Poly all along the Pacific coast were going through many of the same successes and adversities. After World War II universities like San Francisco State, San Jose State, San Diego State, and Sacramento State were on a mission to expand their institutions as much as possible. The intrigue in athletics and higher education were seen as cohesive elements to success. Marc VanOverbeke when looking at these Cal State Universities at this time says,

The historiography on higher education in the postwar years is strong and admirably captures, among other themes, the remarkable growth of higher education in the United States and the consequent expansion of educational

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<sup>22</sup> “Remembering the Year,” *Mustang Daily*, June 5, 1981.

opportunity. There also is a growing and compelling body of research on athletics and higher education.<sup>23</sup>

The urge to expand during these years was common for Cal Poly and other Cal State Universities. The decisions made by these universities show how important football was to the school and their development.

The prominent role for college football reflected a fascination of athletics in the mid twentieth century. In the 1950's San Diego State College (later SDSU) was open when speaking about the interest in sports. The SDSU president recognized this when saying, "The public interest in sports is great."<sup>24</sup> SDSU officials saw the growth of their football program as a way to draw in the community.<sup>25</sup> Bringing in the community and creating a fan base, the school saw a way to reap the profits of it. Local newspapers, radio stations, and eventually television networks could work with the university to benefit as well.<sup>26</sup> SDSU, like Cal Poly, knew the importance of football and its involvement at the school.

Sacramento State arrived a little later. The school was established in 1947. Just a few years into the school's existence students were already pounding the table for football. Being a new university the expansion of athletics weren't the first priority but still was on the minds of everyone at the school. In the 1950's the Sacramento State students were concerned about athletics at their school. The lack of a strong athletics program students feared they would limit their educational expansion. The students ended up taking action. They went to President Guy West's office with a petition signed by over six hundred students demanding for the addition of a football program at their school. Their action didn't stop there. They continued to fight and

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<sup>23</sup> VanOverbeke, "Out of the Quietness" p. 432.

<sup>24</sup> Nelson, "A history of San Diego State College football," p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> Nelson, "A history of San Diego State College football," p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> Watterson, *College football: History, spectacle, controversy*, p. 266-267.

proved so by accepting a role of selling tickets to ensure the program will be financially viable.<sup>27</sup> The students wanted a source school loyalty and pride that gave their school recognition, similar to the students at Cal Poly. Their petition was similar to Cal Poly's vote to retain football at the school. It shows how important football was to the school and the students who fund the school.

Football was not viable for all Cal State schools. San Francisco State University had its ups and downs that ultimately ended to its demise. The school's football team had its last winning season in 1973. They were not showing signs of improvement and other factors ended up leading to the end of the football program at SFSU in 1995. An article from the *Oakland Post* states, "By eliminating football and adding tennis, the number of female athletes would be within five percent of the total female population on campus and would even out the ratio of male and female athletes."<sup>28</sup> University President Robert A. Corrigan said, "We are taking this step with great regret, and only after a thorough examination of our options."<sup>29</sup> Like Cal Poly they were faced with the decision to keep or cut the football program due to Title IX rules. Title IX makes it so that the gender makeup of the university's athletic program must be "substantially proportionate" to that of the university's under-graduate enrollment.<sup>30</sup> With a higher number of female students SFSU was forced to cut the program. It was an action the school didn't want to take but were left with no other choice. Getting rid of a football program on campus gets rid of an element most competing schools have. Cal Poly on the other hand did everything it could to keep the football program even if it was not the easiest thing to do. Football's importance at Cal Poly is evident over these expansion years. Keeping the football program when it was not the

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<sup>27</sup> VanOverbeke, "Out of the Quietness," p. 435.

<sup>28</sup> "SFSU Drops Football," *Oakland Post*, Mar 15, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> "SFSU Drops Football."

<sup>30</sup> Claire Darnell, and Jeffery Petersen, "Eliminating Sports for Title IX Compliance," *The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 82, no. 2, (2011), p. 9.

most lucrative decision, hints at its importance. Football at Cal Poly is needed and fought for by many.

### **Football and Student Relation**

Student involvement with football at Cal Poly is a key to understanding the sports importance at Cal Poly. College football means so much, in so many different ways, to so many people. For students, football gives a welcome diversion from classrooms and libraries.<sup>31</sup> Football means a lot to the students and it is easy to see it in all students run publications. Publications like the *Mustang Daily*, *Poly Journal* and *El Rodeo* constantly prove how much students admire the sport. An article in 1939, asks for readers to come support their fellow students on the football team. The student writes, "They [the football players] are representative not only of the school but of the student body as a whole."<sup>32</sup> This section in the journal is interesting because it shows the connection students feel with the players on the team. Football gave this particular student a sense connection to the school.

A study was created in 1990 by a few business marketing students at Cal Poly. This study took a survey asking students how much they would be willing to add to their tuition if any to help circulate money through Cal Poly athletics. The survey found that 63 percent of students were willing to add four dollars to their tuition to support existing Division II teams. Another 46 percent were willing to increase twelve dollars to their tuition to make the jump to Division I.<sup>33</sup> During this time many thought students were uninterested in Cal Poly athletics but this study proves otherwise. Funding for athletics is always an issue when it comes to athletics. Students are willing to pay even more out of their own pockets to help athletics thrive at Cal Poly. In

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<sup>31</sup> Jost, "Background," p. 990.

<sup>32</sup> "Sports," *Polytechnic Journal*, 22 September 1939, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Chris Soderquist, "Study sees students' view of Poly sports: Finds many are uninterested in athletic program," *Mustang Daily*, 21 May 1990.

many different ways students showed how important it is to have superior athletics at their school. Whether if it was writing about it in school publications or creating studies to fight for the program. Students did what they could to show pride and loyalty to the Cal Poly football team.

Kate Ryan, a former Cal Poly student, wrote her 2014 senior project, “Creating Consistency: The Strengthening of Cal Poly Football’s Brand to Improve Its Fan Base” on how to brand the program in a way that was more lucrative for the school and exciting for the students. She states, “Football programs with strong brands develop brand loyalty and therefore dedicated fans.”<sup>34</sup> She suggests five key ways to brand the football program that would enhance it greatly. Her first idea is to create an identity. Something the fans can emotionally get behind that creates loyalty. Second, she suggests branding across social media. By doing this Cal Poly would be able to connect with numerous people that they usually don’t get to. Kate’s third key is to build a relationship between the football team and the Greek community at Cal Poly. Having a relationship with such a big group can be an asset for the program, creating a bigger following. Developing a better bond with stakeholders is her fourth idea. Without good support from stakeholders football would cease to exist. Her last claim suggests that the Athletic Department should work together with the Alumni Association to brand the football team.<sup>35</sup> Football gives a sense of loyalty and belonging for many people, which is really important. Kate Ryan’s contribution to the study of improving the football program at Cal Poly shows how much students want the program to stick around and succeed. Football’s importance at Cal Poly was seen in the efforts by the students to keep the program alive at the low points.

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<sup>34</sup> Kate Ryan, “Creating Consistency: The Strengthening of Cal Poly Football’s Brand to Improve Its Fan Base,” (Senior project, Cal Poly, March 2014), p. 1

<sup>35</sup> Ryan, “Creating Consistency,” p.14

## **Football and Administration Relation**

Administration and the Public Affairs Office show constant support to Cal Poly football. When making it to their first Division I playoff game in 2005, Public Affairs put together a huge bash in support of the team.

...With their team not only competing for the first time ever in the NCAA Division I-AA playoffs, but winning their first post-season game last Saturday, Cal Poly football fans have something to celebrate. And celebrate they will this week with a midday pep rally on campus Thursday and a Poly Playoff Bash on Saturday at the Downtown Brewing Company in San Luis Obispo. Mustang fans are encouraged to wear green and gold and cheer on the football team at a pep rally Thursday beginning 11 a.m. at the University Union on campus. The rally will move indoors to the main gym at the Rec Center if it is raining. The Cal Poly Band, stunt and dance teams, Musty the mascot and the Mustang Maniacs will provide entertainment.<sup>36</sup>

The Cal Poly administration preached the importance of student involvement in sport activities. Being involved in the Cal Poly community and athletics is one of the best ways to get the most out of a student's collegiate experience.<sup>37</sup> The administration knew the importance of the football program as well. Going back to the early 1900's the administration wrote about how great our athletic facilities were and how great Cal Poly athletics were.<sup>38</sup> Even in 1920, administration was

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<sup>36</sup> "Football Frenzy Firing Up This Week at Cal Poly," Public Affairs Office, *California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo*, November 29, 2005, [http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/pao\\_pr/973](http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/pao_pr/973), Accessed February 28, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> "The Mustang Way," Cal Poly Student Athlete Handbook, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> "Athletics," Cal Poly Circular of Information, 1903-1904.



sending enthusiastic invitations to support the football team.<sup>39</sup> The support was obvious but the school benefited in ways many can't see so blatantly.

The choice to vault into Division I helped more than just the football program. Admissions records after the decision to become a Division I program in 1994 increased rapidly. In 1998, Cal Poly processed 18,963 applications, the most applicants recorded in school history at the time.<sup>40</sup> Was the "Doug Flutie Effect," where success in high-visibility sports like football makes the university seem more attractive to all students, true at Cal Poly? Although it wasn't one player, the move to Division I might have had the same effect. The growing football program was intriguing to possible enrollees and the admission records show that.

### **Conclusion**

Football is a part of Cal Poly's identity that students, alumni, and administration represent. The football program went through much adversity but from the help of the students and administration it continues to thrive. Even if the team is not winning the team produces a sense of pride and loyalty that everyone can be a part of. The football team and students alike share a sense of hard work, effort, teamwork, and sacrifice that gives the school an identity. These traits are only some of the things the Cal Poly football program provides that other schools lacking a football team cannot. Football has been around for over a century at Cal Poly because it is simply too important to give up.

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<sup>39</sup> "Football: Come One, Come All," *The Polygram*, 22 September 1920.

<sup>40</sup> *Poly View*, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Fall 1998.

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