

## Cal Western: football & fun

By [Don Norcross](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER  
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/ Photo courtesy of Cal Western Football  
Reunion

A photo of the 1969 Cal Western University football team, coached by Marv Braden. Cal Western eventually became USIU.

The school was called Cal Western University. Its nickname? Westerners.

Or as they were sometimes called, Cal Wee Wee.

“USC, we were not,” said Marv Braden, the university’s head football coach from 1969 to ’72.



Some 40-plus years ago, the school was located on a bluff above the [Pacific Ocean](#), where Point Loma Nazarene University sits today. Later, Cal Western would become U.S. International University and move its campus to Scripps Ranch.

This weekend, men in their 60s and 70s who played and coached at Cal Western/USIU have converged upon [San Diego](#) for a reunion of the 1966-72 teams.

About 85-90 have gathered, some from as far away as New England, [Florida](#) and [Costa Rica](#).

As men will do when rekindling memories over 18 holes of golf, libations and food, tales will be told. Some even factual.

Jokes 60-year-old [Jerry Robinson](#), a one-time cornerback under Braden, “If we would have had this discussion 35 years ago, I would have been very humble. Today, for people who don’t know better, I had a couple All-American seasons.”

As Braden and players recall, Cal Western’s teams formed a melting pot. The program, which played at the NAIA level, often would not be a player’s first choice. But when things didn’t pan out at a major university, they often settled at the Point Loma campus. Bounce backs, they’re called today.

By Braden’s memory, the team didn’t offer scholarships, but could reward money based on need.

“We tried to recruit destitute geniuses,” said Braden, 72, who later coached 24 years in the [NFL](#), including a five-year stint with the Chargers.

Braden did have one recruiting advantage: the campus. The school created a brochure that showed a wide-angle picture capturing the gym, Greek theater, football field and Pacific Ocean.

When Robinson was recruited out of a dusty [Arizona](#) town, a teammate looked at the brochure and said, “I think that’s where God lives.”

Braden’s teams were good, posting a 25-14-1 record. A factor in the program’s success: quality instruction. Braden coached on two Super Bowl champions.

Dante Scarnecchia's next season at New England will be his 29th as an NFL assistant. Jim Anderson has coached the Cincinnati Bengals' running backs 26 years. The late Lew Erber coached for the Raiders. All trace their roots to Cal Western.

Robinson, who lives in La Mesa and is the executive director of a nonprofit, said Braden was one of the most influential men in his life, teaching responsibility and instilling confidence.

"Mostly," said Robinson, "it comes from that tough love."

Robinson remembered a time when he didn't carry out an assignment and Braden let him know in no uncertain terms. In short, Robinson didn't want to disappoint his coach.

"If they ask you to cut your hand off and throw it on the pile, with some coaches you ask, 'Why would I do that?'" said Robinson. "Other coaches you would say, 'How high would I cut it?' Coach Braden was a how-high guy."

There were characters on the teams. Jeff Baker, a talented wide receiver who has been in San Diego real estate for 30 years, recalls linebacker Terry Hatcher. Hatcher, said Baker, would catch bees, put them in his mouth outside the cafeteria, then open his mouth in front of women.

Mike George, now the principal at Serra Mesa's Taft Middle School, fondly recalls kicker Dale Curtis.

Despite losing part of his left arm in a car accident, Curtis did not shy away from contact.

Said George, "He was not afraid to go down and use that little flipper to clothesline somebody."

On a trip to [Hawaii](#), George and another player were late boarding the plane and told to immediately sit down — in first class.

"We were entitled to all the privileges of first class," said George, "and we took advantage of them."

Exiting the plane in [Honolulu](#), Braden asked George how they scored first-class seats while he was sitting in the back with the school president.

"We couldn't answer him," George said, "because we were hammered."

While he coached for four NFL teams, Braden said, "I never had four years I enjoyed more or had players who meant more to me than those young men.

"They had a camaraderie that left them with a brotherhood reflected by nearly 40 years later, they want to get together for a reunion."