

A San Diego Football Flashback: UCSD's 1968 Pigskin Experiment

Harvard and Yale have had football teams since 1875; Stanford and Cal, since 1892. Why not the University of California, San Diego?

It's not as if no one tried. But the rise and fall of UCSD Triton intercollegiate football was so quick it practically went unnoticed in 1968 San Diego, except when the cheerleaders chanted "UCSD" at the first game.

Walt Hackett, hired away from his position as Chargers defensive coordinator, was the head coach of the brand-new football team that year at UCSD. He recruited the school's debut team and held two-a-day summer practices at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot. Triton home games were played on a field adjacent to Old Miramar Road.

In that one-and-only season, the mostly freshmen Tritons lost seven straight to the varsity teams of La Verne College (41-6), Loyola University (34-14), Cal Western University (34-7), Cal Tech (34-31), Nevada Southern University (27-6) and St. Mary's College (27-13). UCSD even allowed Cal Tech to break a four-year losing streak. The Evening Tribune concluded, "The best thing about UC San Diego's first football season is that it's over."

Worse, after the season, players complained about not earning academic credit toward a physical education major. On top of that, the rest of the student body voted 3 to 1 against allowing financial grants for athletes—not even if they were privately funded. Not even if every dollar for the jocks got matched with dollars for students who weren't athletes.

Most of the football players transferred long before that spring vote.

Those remaining staged a protest and threatened to boycott the 1969 season. Their boycott became a moot point: In the shadow of Vietnam, no one noticed when football was dropped due to lack of participation.

Tom Ham, then a celebrated local restaurateur and leader of UCSD's honorary alumni, wrote that UCSD's future relationship with San Diego was at stake and that "big-time" sports on the campus was the ticket. On the other side of the argument was Tom Shepard, today's well-known San Diego political consultant, who was a student leader back then. He argued that "establishment of even a limited program of aid [to athletes] severely threatens the present academic and social climate at UCSD."

The football apathy was established years before by UCSD. As far back as 1956, academic icon Roger Revelle was quoted as saying that even the idea of a UCSD football team was "unlikely"—and if it happened, "I hope it would never win a game."