

San Francisco Football Stadiums

By John E. Spalding

Mary Kezar never carried the ball across a goal line, but she did more for San Francisco football than all the heroic halfbacks who ever packed the pigskin in the city. Miss Kezar, a spinster in her 60s and a member of a pioneer family that came to San Francisco during the Gold Rush, died in March 1922.

In her will, she left the city \$100,000 with instructions to build “a suitable memorial” to her mother Nancy H. Kezar, and uncles, Bartlett, John S. and Charles F. Doe – the latter a philanthropist who donated funds to build the Doe Library on the University of California’s Berkeley campus where football researchers still read microfilm from newspapers across the country. The city park commission accepted the bequest and began discussing the memorial, 94-year-old Charles W. Doe recalled in a 1992 interview with this writer. But commissioners felt there were too many statues in Golden Gate Park, he said, and estate executors finally agreed to allow spending the money for a stadium. The city added \$200,000 to the project that would be built on eight acres occupied by a horticultural nursery and stable at the southeast corner of the 1,017 acre park.

For 46 years, until the San Francisco 49ers moved into the expanded Candlestick Park after the 1970 season, Kezar Stadium was the site of more than 600 major football games, plus hundreds of prep contests. High schools played there until 1988, a year before the antiquated structure was torn down and replaced by a \$12 million facility with bench seating for 10,000.

In its original design, Kezar was about 25 rows high and seated 22,500 when it opened in 1925. Three years later additional rows of narrow, backless wooden benches were added to increase the capacity to 59,942. The expansion was fraught with turmoil and political maneuvering. Although few games had tested its capacity in the first three years, there was strong agitation by game promoters and some San Francisco boosters for a larger stadium. Compared to Cal and Stanford’s facilities, they argued, Kezar was second rate and would never attract the major games the city deserved.

When Kezar was first proposed, Park Commissioner William Humphrey wanted it to be an outstanding stadium, “a handsome concrete bowl, comparable in architectural beauty to some of the finest athletic arenas in the West.” Others pushed for a new stadium outside the park, including 20 acres near Eureka and 17th Streets, where they said a 150,000-seat stadium could be built with ample parking.

But with \$200,000 in city money available, park commissioners decided the need for a larger stadium was immediate. They voted for a quick expansion so they could bid on the annual Armistice Day football game between the West Coast Army and San Diego Navy. The contest and the lavish patriotic shows before the game and at halftime drew huge crowds to Cal’s Memorial Stadium every year. The game was played at Kezar in 1928, drawing nearly 50,000, but moved back to Berkeley the next year.

Architects completed the Kezar expansion plans in less than two months and received a low construction bid of \$338,350. Most opposition faded after Humphrey promised that parking would be provided nearby and that Stanyan Street would be widened. The promise was not fulfilled and spectators who drove to games had to park on streets inside Golden Gate Park or in nearby residential neighborhoods. Like many old baseball stadiums, Kezar was designed to fit the surrounding urban terrain. Its southern and eastern sides were hemmed in by adjacent streets.

Sections “A” through “I” on the south side had fewer seats than the high rise structures adjoining the park along the northern and western sides. Kezar was not viewer friendly, with only about one-third of its seats between the goal lines.

Most football stadiums are laid out in a north-south configuration from end zone to end zone, but Kezar was aligned east-to-west, which created some peculiar playing conditions. Teams based their strategy on the fact that the prevailing winds blew in from the Pacific Ocean about three miles to the west. Fans said the team was going “downhill” when the wind was at its back and headed toward the eastern goal line, and “uphill” when facing the western endzone. The low-lying winter sun shown on the back of the multi-level, 300-seat press box that protruded over the stadium’s southern rim, casting a shadow across the fans seated below. They shivered and drank copious amounts of coffee and alcohol to ward off the chill. Fans on the opposite side basked in the sun and drank equally large amounts of coffee and alcohol to celebrate being on Kezar’s warmer side.

The stadium’s alignment was chosen to keep it from intruding into park developer John McLaren’s beloved rhododendron dell. McLaren was a Scotsman who directed reclamation of much of the park’s land from sand dunes near the ocean, and who oversaw park development with an unbending will. He wanted athletic fields located on the site of an old speedway at the park’s northwest corner, a location rejected because of the climate near the

ocean and lack of a street car line. A trolley ran right past Kezar’s gates.

Kezar was a multi-use stadium. Its huge grass field was surrounded by a running track and there were large jumping pits behind each endzone. While football teams from high schools, colleges, World War II military bases, and several professional leagues were its primary users until Kezar’s useful life ended, other events were also held there. Several track meets were staged before the official dedication ceremony on May 2, 1925, which featured a two-mile match race between the great Finnish distance runners Paavo Nurmi and Willie Ratola. Nurmi had won the 1,500 and 5,000 meter races and Ratola took the 10,000 at the Olympic Games in Paris the previous summer. In the San Francisco race, Nurmi beat his countryman before a crowd estimated at between 6,000 and 8,000. Early in Kezar’s history, football was not the dominant tenant. Some newspapers referred to the facility as the “track and field stadium,” although soccer games were played there in the early days. Later Kezar was home to rugby and lacrosse, as well as motorcycle and auto races, international soccer matches, and even a heavyweight title fight

in 1955 featuring champion Rocky Marciano against Don Cockell of Britain.

Only five major football games were held at Kezar in 1925 – four hosted by the undefeated Olympic Club and the other by the touring Chicago Bears, who featured recent signee Red Grange as their box office attraction. Another three games followed in 1926, and in the season's last game, 15,000 fans saw the first all-college contest as St. Mary's beat arch rival Santa Clara in the mud, 7-0. The following season, St. Mary's, Santa Clara, St. Ignatius, and the Olympic Club all played home games there, establishing Kezar as the primary venue for San Francisco football

The gridiron game had been popular in the Pacific Coast's premier city for decades, but before Kezar opened football teams had no San Francisco stadium to call their own. Major contests were played in facilities built for baseball, whose popularity far outstripped the gridiron game in the Bay Area. The first collegiate team appeared in San Francisco on Dec. 2, 1882, when students from the University of California at Berkeley fell to the Phoenix Club, 7-4, before 150 spectators. The game was played at the old Recreation Grounds, the first enclosed baseball field in the West, built in 1868 on property bounded by Harrison, 25th, Folsom, and 26th Streets. The ballpark was best known as site for five baseball games between the famous Cincinnati Red Stockings and several local nines in 1869. Cal played five more football games there in 1883 and 1884, then stayed at home across the bay for the next eight seasons.

In March, 1892, California returned to San Francisco to meet Stanford in the inaugural "Big Game" at the Haight Street Grounds on the eastern edge of Golden Gate Park, just across Stanyan Street from the future Kezar site. Stanford won, 14-10, before a crowd of 9,500 in the first game of the West's grandest collegiate grid series. Prior to the 1892 "Big Game," California played the Olympic Club three times at Central Park, a cozy ball field at Eighth and Market streets that seated about 15,000. None of the games drew more than 3,000. Cal continued to play at Central Park and Haight Street until 1897, when its games were moved to the Recreation Grounds at Eighth and Harrison streets, a new baseball park that could handle 20,000 spectators. Two years later the "Big Game" moved to a facility at 16th and Folsom streets, and in 1902 and 1903 it was played before crowds of 20,000 in Richmond Field at Sixth Avenue and Lake Street.

In 1896, Santa Clara met St. Mary's at Central Park in what later became known as the "Little Big Game," to differentiate it from the Cal-Stanford series. The field was a muddy lake for the first encounter between the two great Catholic rivals, as Santa Clara won, 46-4. Two years later Santa Clara won by a lopsided 50-0 count. They did not meet again in football until 1922.

The San Francisco venue of choice for football eventually became Ewing Field, on Masonic Avenue near Geary Street at the foot of Lone Mountain. The facility was named for J. Cal Ewing, owner of the San Francisco Seals baseball team. He spent \$100,000 to build the new home for his Pacific Coast League club. The wooden ballpark opened on May 16, 1914, and could accommodate 18,000 for baseball. Unfortunately for Ewing, the weather at his ballpark was cold and damp. Persistent summer fog held down crowds, and the Seals abandoned it before long to return to their former home at Eighth and Harrison streets. Football fans are a hardier lot than their baseball brethren, and Ewing eventually recouped some of his investment by renting the facility for gridiron games. When his football tenants moved into Kezar, Ewing's source of revenue dried up and his ballpark was demolished.

Interest in a football stadium for San Francisco was fueled in the early 1920s by the construction of two large facilities elsewhere in the Bay Area, one south of the city on the Peninsula at Stanford, and the other across San Francisco Bay at Cal. Football crowds had outgrown 15,000-seat Stanford Field in Palo Alto and 27,000-seat California Field in Berkeley. Work began in 1919 on a \$573,000 Stanford Stadium and its 60,000 seats were filled for the 1921 "Big Game," won by

Cal, 42-7. The Golden Bears dedicated their 73,000-seat Memorial Stadium – funded by \$1 million in private subscriptions from Cal backers – on Nov. 24, 1923, when they defeated Stanford, 9-0.

Kezar's construction gave the Bay Area three large stadiums and decent homes for the five schools playing major football schedules. But, its opening was not greeted enthusiastically by officials at St. Ignatius (now known as the University of San Francisco), St. Mary's or Santa Clara. None of the three Catholic schools abandoned the familiar surroundings of Ewing Field to move into the new stadium. Only the Olympic Club – the other major player among the Bay Area teams – took to the new Golden Gate Park turf.

Founded in 1860, the Olympic Club was the city's oldest athletic club. It offered members competition in a variety of sports, including football, soccer, basketball and baseball. The club also owns an outstanding 18-hole golf course near the ocean where the U.S. Open tournament has been played. The club began playing Stanford and Cal in 1892 and stayed on their schedules for nearly 40 years until football was abandoned as a club sport in 1935. Most of its players were locals who had starred at Pacific Coast colleges, but also drew players from around the country.

The 1925 team was coached by Orin E. "Babe" Hollingbery, who never went to college but later gained national notoriety as head coach at Washington State College for 17 seasons, and as one of the founders and long-time coaches of the Shrine all-star East-West game. His 1925 Olympic eleven was one of the best in the history of the Post Street club, fashioning a 10-0-0 record that included shutout wins over both Cal and Stanford. The 1925 opener was at Ewing Field on Sept. 9, a Wednesday. The unusual mid-week game was scheduled on Admission Day, a California holiday commemorating the state's entry into the union in 1850. St. Ignatius provided the opposition but the Gray Fog was playing only its second season of major football and was no match for the more experienced club team, losing to the Olympians, 20-6. The Olympic Club's next appearance the following Sunday was the first football game played at Kezar. In the historic contest, the Post Streeters had no trouble beating the Barbarians club, 26-0. Former Stanford halfback John "Jack" Patrick put his name in the Kezar record book when he scored the first touchdown. After disposing of the Agnetians, 27-0, at Ewing, and defeating Stanford on the road, 9-0, the club returned to Kezar to defeat the Cal Aggies, 34-7.

Next came the most significant game in club history. On October 10 the Winged "O" squad crossed the bay to Berkeley to play California. The Golden Bears had not lost in five seasons dating to 1919, when they dropped the season finale to a powerful Washington squad, 7-0. Cal had opened the 1925 season with shutout trouncings of Nevada and Santa Clara and was working on an unbeaten string of 46 wins and four ties, when the Post Streeters came calling.

Forty-five thousand fans were there to see the Bears extend their remarkable streak. But this was more than just another game to Hollingbery, who had been scheming to upset the Bears for a year. He had signed up talent from around the country, including a starting backfield that was made up of four Stanford players – John "Scotch" Campbell, Norm Cleaveland, Cliff Hay, and Patrick – who had never beaten California during their undergraduate days on the Farm. Hollingbery ordered his men to play Cal coach Andy Smith's game of "kick and wait for the breaks." The plan worked perfectly. In a game which saw 30 punts soar through the Strawberry Canyon air, the Olympians shut out the Bears and scored three times on defense with a blocked kick, an intercepted pass, and a safety to win, 16-0.

The following week the Club found another tough opponent in Santa Clara. Although the Broncos were having a dismal year that resulted in only two wins in eight outings, the Olympians could only eke out a 10-6 win at Ewing. The Broncos had a demanding schedule, playing only the club and St. Mary's – a 19-7 loss – at "home" in San Francisco. The Olympians

finished the season with a pair of Kezar wins over the San Diego Marines and Multnomah A.C., and celebrated their undefeated season with a voyage to the Hawaiian Islands for a victory over the Honolulu town team.

It's unfortunate no place on the schedule was found for St. Mary's The Saints. who played the Olympic Club every other year between 1921 and 1931, had one of the Pacific Coast's best teams in 1925. Coach Edward (Slip) Madigan's Saints went 8-2-0, losing at Cal in their opener, 6-0, and 12-0 at Los Angeles to USC in their last game. They might not have lost at all, but for nagging leg injuries that kept star halfback Norman (Red) Strader running at less than full speed. Walter Camp had named Strader to the third team of his prestigious Colliers Magazine All-America squad in 1924, after seeing the redhead rush for 211 yards against Santa Clara. Even without Strader, the Saints had able backs in Jimmy Underhill and Leo Rooney and a stalwart defense led by Larry Bettencourt, one of the school's greatest linemen. Although shut out in the two losses, St. Mary's rolled up 313 points in its other eight games.

At the end of the year fans looked forward to San Francisco's first all-star game, a competition that would become a staple on the city's football menu for nearly half a century, and continues in the Bay Area to this day. Capt. E.J. "Jack" Spaulding conceived the idea, proposing that the Islam Temple of the Shrine Lodge sponsor a game between teams composed of the best players from the East and West. Games matching local teams against colleges from other parts of the country were still relatively unusual in 1925, and the idea won widespread support. Temple members put up \$10,000 to bankroll the game and pledged that any profits would go to the Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children in San Francisco.

Spaulding began lining up the West team and enlisted Indiana coach William "Navy Bill" Ingram to organize the East. Unlike later years when only college seniors stocked the lineups, the first East-West teams included players who had left college a year or more earlier. The West was led by Harold (Brick) Muller. The great end had starred on California's "Wonder Teams" in 1920-22 and was the West Coast's first All-American. Cal center Edwin (Babe) Horrell and halfback Talma (Tut) Imlay also were on the West roster along with Olympic Club stars Patrick, Cleaveland, Campbell, and Harry Shipkey. The East's lineup included All-Americans Doug Wykoff of Georgia Tech and Harold Hutchinson of Nebraska.

Fans wanted to see the region's biggest star of 1925, Stanford fullback Ernie Nevers, in the West lineup. Stanford head man Glenn (Pop) Warner had called him the greatest player he ever coached – quite a compliment since another of Warner's former players was Jim Thorpe. But, Nevers wasn't available for the December 26 contest. To cash in on his reputation, he had signed a \$50,000 contract to play with an all-star pro team put together by Florida promoters.

Even without Nevers, the Shriners' game received plenty of newspaper ink. On December 23, Muller stood on New Montgomery Street and tried to catch a football thrown from the 23rd floor of the brand new Telephone Building. Several thousand spectators jammed the street and sidewalks to watch Muller field the 320-foot toss. On the fourth attempt Muller "crouched to meet the ball and took it neatly in his arms with no more concern than if it had been a twenty-yard lob," said the San Francisco Chronicle. The East-West game drew a capacity crowd of 25,000 to Ewing Field, largest in the ballpark's history. Muller was the star, scoring on a 27-yard pass from Imlay for a 6-0 win, and the Shriners made \$25,000 for the hospital.

There was one more football game for 1925, as Red Grange and the Chicago Bears drew Kezar's largest crowd of the season at 20,000, but the fans saw the NFL club fall 14-9 to an all-star team. The Bears' visit would persuade promoters to stage a series of January games pitting professional teams against college all-stars, to create a Kezar tradition that continued for a decade.