

HOG HEAVEN: HOW TINY MONTANA HEBREW UNIVERSITY WON THE NATIONAL TITLE

By Mark S. Cohen

I've been asked to write about my career as a college football player at M.H.U. That's Montana Hebrew University -- the only Jewish land grant college in the United States, and the home of the Fightin' Kosher Hogs.

In my first year our team was awful; we lost every game. None of us were big enough to play college football. I weighed only one hundred thirty-eight pounds, and I was a linebacker!

Not that we didn't have some great athletes. Our quarterback, Yitzak Shamir Bernstein, had a hell of an arm. He'd been a grenade thrower in the Israeli army, and he had the quickest release I've ever seen.

Then there was Buzz Solomon. Buzz was our kicker and fastest receiver, but he only caught about one out of every two balls thrown in his direction. Which isn't bad when you consider Buzz only had eight fingers; he'd lost the other two while performing a circumcision on a grizzly bear as part of an independent study project.

We had a great coach, too. The coach was an ordained rabbi also had a Ph.D. in livestock management. In fact, he almost won the Nobel Prize in pork production for his work in developing a hog that would be kosher at birth.

After that horrible first year, the coach put the entire team on a special diet and strength program. We each had to eat two dozen bagels a day, plus complete a strenuous weightlifting program. The results were undeniable; by the time my sophomore year rolled around I was up to one hundred and forty-three pounds.

Despite the hard work, we only won one game in my sophomore year. We beat Northern Idaho Moslem University by default because someone had mistakenly scheduled our game against them during the holy month of Ramadan.

We were pretty despondent after winning only one game in two years, but the coach never gave up hope. He knew it would all come together if we could just focus a bit more on recruiting.

One day I noticed the coach transfixed by an article in National Geographic. The article was about a tribe in Samoa which considered its members to be Descendants of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The article said the average male tribe member stood six-nine and weighed three hundred pounds.

It just so happened that the coach had an old rabbi friend in Samoa that he knew from their football days together at Alabama Hasidic College. So he called his friend and asked whether the members of this tribe played football and whether they spoke english.

The coach's friend was familiar with the tribe and told the coach they loved football, but didn't speak a word of english, except what they learned watching Mister Ed re-runs on cable T.V.

One month later the first samoans arrived at N.H.U. I couldn't believe how big these guys were; I had to look straight up just to make eye contact with them.

At first we had some problems because of the language barrier, but the coach soon implemented what he dubbed the "bongo drum" offense. This was a secret code he devised which enable him to call the plays from the sideline using a big kettle drum he had borrowed from the marching band.

I couldn't believe what a difference those samoans made. We won all eleven

games in my junior year, including wins over V.M.I. -- Vermont Mormon Institute -- and Cal. Poly Buddhist, which had been the NCAA Division XIV runner up the previous year.

After my junior year I became good friends with a lot of the samoans including one guy known only as "the Moose." His real name was Mooassistaipu or something like that. Anyhow, I asked the Moose whether there was something special in his tribe's diet which made his people so big. He said the secret was "cream cheese."

Well, that summer all I did was eat cream cheese and pump iron with the Moose. That's all the whole team did. By the start of my senior year I weighed two hundred pounds and looked like a short, white, hairy Samoan.

Because of our success the previous season, the NCAA said we could no longer compete in Division XIV; from now on we'd have to compete as a Division I school.

At first, we had a tough time finding Division I teams to play us; most of the college football powerhouses were afraid to for fear of being accused of having an easy schedule. Out of all the Division I teams, the University of Nebraska was the only school willing to take us on.

Las Vegas had us as twenty to one underdogs, but we beat the Cornhuskers seven to six when their two-point conversion attempt failed. After that, all the major conferences were begging us to join them. Finally, we joined the Conference of Christians and Jews, and we won the conference title. We went undefeated and beat some pretty good teams, including Brigham Young, Holy Cross, Southern Methodist, Texas Christian, and Oral Roberts.

At the end of the season we were ranked 25th in the national polls, but the only other undefeated Division I team was Notre Dame, and that's how we were selected to

meet the Fighting Irish for the national championship.

We knew the task ahead was tough. Notre dame was ranked number one and had a proud football tradition. And Notre Dame had the fastest player in college football -- a man so fast he was nicknamed "the Rocket."

None of the experts thought we stood a chance, but when the big day came we won the coin toss and elected to receive. One our very first play from scrimmage Yitzak let loose with a long bomb to Buzz. I didn't think Buzz would catch it, but he leaped up at the last minute and hauled it in with his eight good fingers. We were ahead by seven.

Then it was our turn to kick to Notre Dame. Each of us trembled at the thought of the Rocket catching the ball and racing past us for a touchdown. Unfortunately, Buzz lost his balance and kicked the ball straight to the Rocket.

The Rocket caught the ball and ran straight at me. The next thing I knew he was flying past me like -- a rocket. I took off after him, but didn't think I had a prayer of catching him until one of the samoans came up behind me and gave me a big push. That provided me the acceleration I needed to catch the Rocket; I grabbed his jersey, and that slowed him down enough for the Moose to clobber him from the other side. The Rocket dropped the ball, spun around a few times, and fell to the ground. The Moose recovered the fumble and scampered into the end zone for an easy touchdown.

I guess the rest is history. The Rocket never played another down and ended up selling used cars in South Bend, Indiana. We won the game and the national title. The Moose was drafted in the first round by the New York Giants. It was a wonderful year.