

BOWLED OVER: MARQUETTE AND THE 1937 COTTON BOWL

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BACKGROUND

In December of 1960, the sun set on the Marquette University football team; a miserable program who only had 3 wins that year, they were a symbol of what MU football would later become: a joke. “Undeclared Since 1960” is the phrase commonly used to refer to them by those who remember they were around at all. Why is it that they went down so hard? Were they ever any good? To understand how the team was in this position to begin with, I thought it would be wise to take a look at their peak: the 1937 Cotton Bowl. Through doing this, I would be able to see why they were good, what changed, and how they fell. In the process, I hoped to put a bit of shine back on the oft-disrespected squad.

The Marquette Golden Avalanche, as they used to be called, were founded in 1892, and by 1936, were in the midst of one of their best seasons (Wittliff). Led by halfback Ray Buivid and College Hall of Fame Coach Frank Murray, the Avs found themselves 16th in the country and facing off against the Texas Christian Horned Frogs on January 1st, 1937 (Nguyen). The Frogs had a crack squad of their own, including Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback Sammy Baugh and coach/ CFB Hall of Famer Dutch Meyer (TCU Skiff). Unfortunately, TCU’s talent proved too great for MU to overcome, and this bowl would be the last that the Avalanche even came close to winning. Frank Murray would leave the team after this game, and they continued to slip further and further from this point. From 1955-1958, the team went on a nearly 3 year winless streak, before finally finishing 3-6 in 1960 (Wittliff). The football team was too much of a financial strain for the university, and there were other programs Marquette would rather focus on growing (Basch).

The reason I became interested in this project was because I had been looking at the Cotton Bowl’s history one night, and I was surprised to find that Marquette competed in the first game in the bowl’s history. Since we’re primarily a basketball school and I’ve never heard anyone speak positively of the team, I thought that it would be nice to show that Marquette hasn’t always been just basketball. As for how college football itself is doing right now, it’s arguably at its most popular, but also extremely volatile. There are a lot of changes being made, from teams shifting conferences, jumping up to the FBS level, and the NIL and Transfer Portal coming into their own. In a time that can be confusing or upsetting, I thought that it’d good to take a look at a historical example of how a team can have a historic peak and still fade.



ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

The first thing I did to start my research was see what archival photos and videos Marquette had from the 1936 Avalanche season. Through these efforts and the help of MU’s Archives Department, I was able to find not only photos, but video of the Avalanche’s wins over Mississippi, Michigan State, and Wisconsin from that year.

TCU’s archival department was just as helpful as Marquette’s; I was able to obtain digital copies of the TCU Skiff Newspaper which covered the 1937 Cotton Bowl Classic. This coverage contains interviews with the players, including stars Sammy Baugh and Ray Buivid, which was enlightening as to attitudes around the game from the time.

TCU was also able to point me toward the Cotton Bowl Organization, who additionally provided high quality photos and a scan of the game program. It was through them that I got in contact with the Dallas Park system, which allowed me to plan my trip to the Cotton Bowl Stadium.

On the advice of Jim Buivid, I visited the Port Washington Historical Society, which had a wealth of information about MU star Ray Buivid and his exploits for both Port Washington High and Marquette. There were many photographs and articles that I hadn’t seen in Marquette’s archives, which the PWHHS was gracious enough to let me scan and use for the documentary.

PLAYERS

One of my earliest efforts on this project was to try and contact the relatives of famous players, for both Marquette and TCU. Early efforts included searches into the families of the Guepe brothers and Sammy Baugh, but ultimately these turned up nothing. However, I was thankfully able to get into contact with Ray Buivid’s nephew Jim.

Jim did not know his uncle exceptionally well, but he was still a major help to me in making this documentary. He was able to point me towards the Port Washington Historical Society, which he had donated some artifacts to in the past. He additionally put me into contact with Jack Rooney, who was also doing a project involving Ray that was getting him inducted into the Port Washington Athletics Hall of Fame. Jack additionally recommended the historical society, of which he was once a member, and put me into contact with Dawn St. George, who scheduled a time for me to come down and browse the archives.



QUAD PARK

Thanks to Marquette High School Athletics Director Bob Herman, I was able to make my last filming stop at Quad Park, home of Marquette University’s former football stadium. Passing by, it more closely resembles the high school track and soccer field it is now than the grand stadium it used to be. There are echoes throughout the grounds, however, whether that be the former staircase entrance, hidden behind some trees, or the remains of the old bleachers, buried into the hill next to the field. As Bob shared with me, Quad Park was actually home to quite a few prestigious track squads in addition to the accomplishments of our football team. The stadium is an important part of Marquette athletic history, and it was great to be able to film there and compare the archival footage I have to now.



THANKS TO:

Katie Blank- MU Archives
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Brandon Nguyen- CFB Hall of Fame Archives
Dinesh Sabu- Faculty Advisor
Mary Saffell- TCU Archives
Dawn St. George- Port Washington Historical Society
Jack Rooney- Port Washington Athletics Enthusiast
Michael Wittliff- MU Athletics

COLLEGE FOOTBALL HALL OF FAME

The first trip that I took for this documentary was to Atlanta, in order to visit the College Football Hall of Fame. Enshrined in the Hall is former Marquette Football coach Frank Murray; I hoped that by visiting the hall and seeing his exhibit, I could showcase one of the most prestigious contributors to MU’s football program, who of course helped the team to the 1937 Cotton Bowl.

My visit was set up by museum archivist Brandon Nguyen, who was gracious enough to give me a tour of the facilities, and provide an interview for the documentary. We started off by looking at Coach Murray’s biography in the museum, which was displayed on a touch screen stand designed to look like a football. This stand also featured TCU Coach Dutch Meyer and quarterback Sammy Baugh, so I obtained footage of them as well.

In the main entrance of the CFB Hall hangs the helmet of every active team playing college football today. Of course, Marquette, like many schools who have dropped the sport, is no longer there. However, directly to the left of the helmets is a mural of several players from the past, which prominently features Sammy Baugh. To me, this was one of the most striking parts of the museum, as it showcases a real “what could have been” moment for Marquette’s program, had the school found a way to continue the program past 1960.

Brandon and I had our conversation in a back storage room, in front of the Paul Bunyan’s Axe Trophy given to the winner of Wisconsin-Minnesota in their annual rivalry game. In the interview, I asked Brandon what he knew about the Marquette program before I reached out, what stuck out to him, and whether this seemed like an exciting matchup on paper for the first Cotton Bowl. To him, this would have been a quite exciting game indeed. Sammy Baugh and Ray Buivid were both Heisman candidates, and both teams had won nearly every game in the season leading up to this bowl (Nguyen). In fact, Marquette was one upset vs. Duquesne away from being invited to the Rose Bowl (Nguyen). Unfortunately, in the game itself, TCU proved to be too much for Marquette to handle, and the Frogs easily bested the Avalanche.

One thing that Brandon shared with me which I didn’t know previously was that Coach Murray was an early user of the telephone in order to enhance the team practices. Reportedly, he would watch plays from above, and then phone down feedback to the field (Nguyen). This speaks to Marquette’s place as an early innovator within college football, and leads one to wonder what they might’ve been able to accomplish had the program kept on going. Truly, Brandon had a wealth of knowledge about the sport and Marquette program, and I truly appreciate him taking the time to help out with this project.

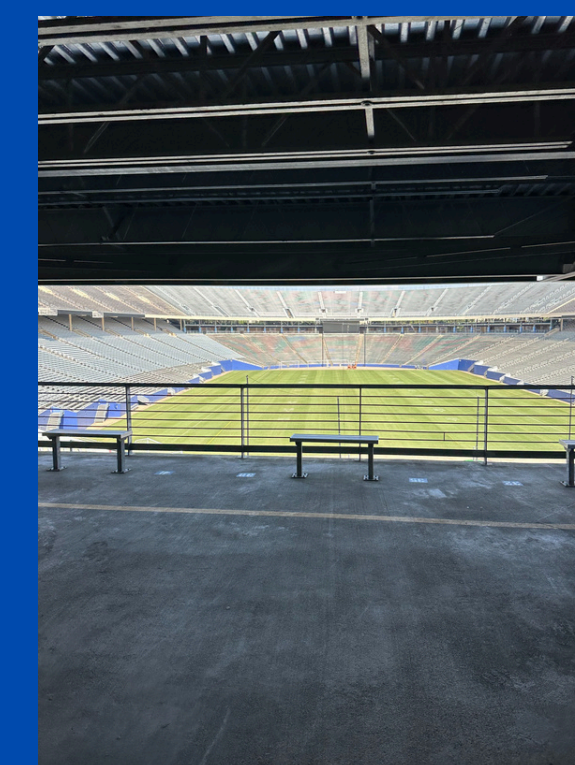


COTTON BOWL STADIUM

The second trip I took was to the Cotton Bowl Stadium in Dallas, Texas. Though the game is no longer held there, being played instead at the Cowboy’s AT&T Stadium, I thought it’d make the most sense to go to where the game actually happened, and see how much it had changed since 1937.

Funnily enough, this summer actually marks the most extensive period of renovation in the Cotton Bowl’s history. As Assistant General Manager Dee Hirsch explained to me, there are big plans to expand the old concourse and make it easier to get around the bowl, a project which was last undertaken in the 1990s but was being done on a much larger scale now. The whole outside of the stadium was surrounded by construction vehicles when I arrived, but inside, things had not seemingly changed much. It was fairly peaceful on the grass field, with only a lone steamroller parked at the end zone on my right. Per Dee, the main football game held at the stadium these days is the Red River Rivalry between Oklahoma and Texas, but the stadium is also home to a new women’s soccer team (Hirsch). Given the size of the stadium itself, it was not hard to imagine screaming fans in the stands. But as I panned across the empty bleachers, I was struck by how serene everything appeared. The Cotton Bowl itself is quite beautiful, a shining relic of a bygone era, now changing just like the college football programs that played within it.

In our interview, Dee echoed the same sentiment which Brandon had at the CFB Hall: on paper, this was a really great matchup between two powerhouse teams. Dee also shared that like Marquette, the significance of the Cotton Bowl game has shifted over the years. While there was a time when it was in decline, and some outcry over the location being moved, the Cotton Bowl will play a big role in the college football season this year, with the introduction of the 12-team playoff (Hirsch). Despite all the changes over the years to the game and the stadium, the history persists and continues to be written.



GOING FORWARD

Before I put together the final edit of the documentary, I’d like to be able to film a bit inside the Annex Bar & Grill on campus, as it is perhaps the largest display of Marquette memorabilia that I’ve seen. Additionally, Michael Wittliff in MU Athletics provided me with a wealth of statistics and further contacts which I will explore. In the meantime, I’ve been working on an initial trailer edit which I hope to finish soon, and I plan on taking an independent study in the Spring 2025 semester to complete the documentary.

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