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Growing up at Marshall

Helping revive the football program after tragedy struck was a life-changing experience.

John Wagner / Toledo Blade

Sam Botek Jr. knew playing football at Marshall University would be tough. But he never knew his trials would include learning how to avoid being stamped by a buffalo. "I'm the captain of the kickoff team, and I'm giving signals to the unit," Botek said. "(Referee) Keno (Hatfield) walked up and said, 'You better get your team off the field.' "I looked up and I saw this buffalo -- no kidding, a buffalo -- running towards us. I told the guys, 'Trust me on this: Everyone just run for the sidelines.' Everyone scattered, and some of the guys even ran to the other team's sidelines."

It seems Marco, the Thundering Herd's live buffalo mascot, had broken loose from his handlers and rumbled onto the field. While that might have been the craziest situation Botek and his teammates had to overcome during the 1971 season, it was far from the most difficult.

That season was the first for the Marshall program following a 1970 plane crash that killed 75 players, coaches, administrators and boosters associated with the team.

That season, and the "Young Thundering Herd" that replaced the lost team, are featured in the current movie "We Are Marshall." The movie stars Matthew McConaughey in the role of Jack Lengyel, the coach who rebuilt the program the next season.

After the crash, there was debate as to whether the program should be rebuilt, but on St. Patrick's Day of 1971, Lengyel was hired from the College of Wooster as the team's new coach. Soon after, Lengyel came to Toledo to recruit Botek, an all-city performer as a St. Francis



Frank Masi/Special to The Detroit News

Matthew McConaughey plays coach Jack Lengyel in the movie about the resurrection of the Marshall football program, "We Are Marshall."

senior playing for coach Dick Mattingly.

"I only knew what I read in the newspaper and what I saw on television," Botek said of the tragedy.

"I had never heard of Marshall much. It was tragic, but after a few weeks, life went on and I didn't think about it because it didn't touch me."

The NCAA offered Lengyel one recruiting plum that no other college coach could offer a high school senior -- the chance to play immediately. At that time, freshmen were not allowed to participate until after they had spent one year on a college campus.

The team was so young, its nickname was changed to the Young Thundering Herd.

"I had offers from (Toledo), (Bowling Green) and Michigan State, but I always wanted a full ride," Botek said. "When that was offered (by Marshall), I thought it was wonderful. It was a no-brainer. I wanted to be a part of it.

"It was a unique scenario, to be a freshman and starting. As I thought about it, I realized this type of situation would never come up again. I thought it would be unique to be a part of building up something from the ashes. And it was the greatest experience of my life."

Botek can say that now. He also admits that summer and fall drills were difficult for the freshman-dominated squad.

"It was very strenuous and very stressful," Botek said. "The coaches would move you around. I went there as a halfback, and two weeks into drills the coaches said, 'Tomorrow you're moving to tight end. Learn the plays tonight.' "

Now 35 years removed from the experience, Botek said he eagerly would do it again.

"Through all the stress, agony, uncertainty and fear that we went through, being a part of making it a success has made me a better person," he said. "When I have problems in my life, I think about those days and I plant my feet."