

College Sports

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL: A THUNDERING HERD OF ONE

Unruly mascot a part of Marshall team's plane crash story

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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 stampeded by a buffalo.

"I'm the captain of the kickoff team, and I'm giving signals to the unit," Botek said.

"[Toledo native] Keno [Hatfield, the game referee] 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."



Toledoan Sam Botek Jr. reflects on his 1971 season at Marshall, the year after the 1970 team perished in an airplane crash. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

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

"We had a picture of the game in Sports Illustrated, and we were on the national news," Schaetzke said. "All around the country it was a huge thing. And we quickly realized that no one was cheering for us.

"In fact, some of us thought, 'Should we win?' But it was a rivalry, and we knew we had to win. But everyone was cheering against us."

Schaetzke had a big game, carrying the ball 15 times for 87 yards and a touchdown while completing 13 of 23 passes for 109 yards in the Eagles' 29-6 win.

"I remember talking to [Marshall quarterback] Reggie Oliver after the game," Schaetzke said. "I walked over, congratulated him and shook his hand. Would I have done that normally? Maybe. But maybe not."

Marshall's first home contest following the crash was played the following Saturday, Sept. 25, in front of a record crowd at Fairfield Stadium. And more than just home fans were there to watch the new team play - the country seemed to support the team.

"Before we went on the field, the coaches said, 'Quiet down, because someone wants to talk to you,'" Botek said. "Then who came over the loudspeakers? Richard Nixon, the president of the United States.

"He told us that the nation was behind us, and that we should do our best. Can you imagine that? A freshman in college, and the president of the United States is talking to you before you play a football game."

Marshall scored on the final play of that contest to claim a 15-13 victory over Xavier, an emotional victory that left fans weeping in the stands long after the game had ended.

It was back to reality the following week as Miami (Ohio) hammered the Young Thundering Herd 66-6. There were other bumps along the road, to be sure.

"We were playing seniors from other teams - guys like Chuck Ealey and the undefeated Rockets," Botek said. "It was a challenge physically and mentally, but it was a challenge emotionally, too."

The Young Thundering Herd finished the season with a 2-9 record, also posting a Homecoming victory over Bowling Green. But the success of that 1971 team was measured in more than just victories.

"It was a success, in our hearts, that we won one game, let alone two," Botek said. "We won when we put the uniforms on and walked onto the field for that first game.

"We had at least put it back together. It wasn't perfect, but we had made it happen."

Botek spent two more seasons as a member of the Marshall program before an injury ended his football career. Botek graduated from Marshall in 1975, then returned to Toledo to work for his family's business, Metropolitan Distributing Company, where he serves as company president.

While Botek now is 35 years removed from the experience, he said he would eagerly 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. I think it gave me

strength, to let me know I could go through things."

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