



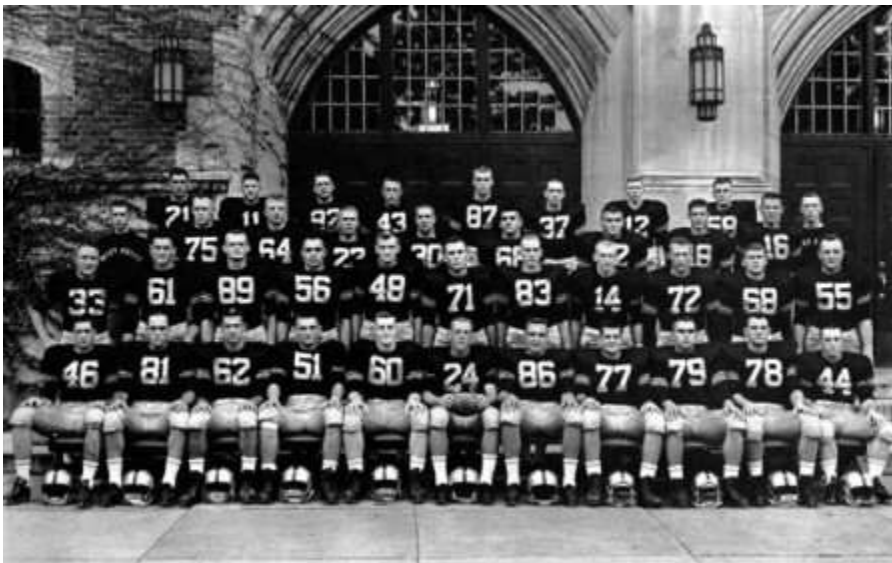
ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATES USMA

HOME OF THE LONG GRAY LINE

ASSEMBLY » November / December 2003 » Football Magic

FOOTBALL MAGIC

BY BILL MOGAN '62: A PLEBE IN THE GOOD OLE DAYS
OF ARMY'S UNDEFEATED 1958 FOOTBALL SEASON



The 1958 Army football team.

Some squad leaders took every occasion to bombard their plebes with verbal abuse or threats of long hours doing useless tasks, but Jules Weisler, my first regular-year squad leader, educated us on Army football. A solid man with slightly graying temples, he was intimidating that first night during Reorganization Week. I was a new plebe in Company M-2, and I braced in his room before supper formation.

Departing Minnesota had been a series of tradeoffs for me. My friends warned me that I'd never see good football away from the Big Ten. Braced up in Weisler's room that first night, he asked me, "What do you know about the Army football team, Mr. Mogan?"

The role these men played in the 1958 Army football season shaped my whole attitude toward the Military Academy.

"Not much, Sir," was all I could manage.

Weisler looked me directly in the eyes and asked, "Mr. Mogan, do you know who Mr. Bagdonas is?"

"No, Sir." That was the truth.

He closed to inches in front of me and said, "For your information, Smackhead, last year in the Colgate game, Mr. Bagdonas charged from his position as defensive tackle and took out two offensive linemen across from him. Then he knocked down a linebacker, took the ball away from their quarterback, and ran 20 yards for a touchdown."

At that point, a newspaper hovering over a desk on the far side of the room dropped, revealing the meanest human form I'd seen up to that moment in my life. The face fleetingly reminded me of a bestial comic book character, the Heap, but he was smiling and quickly demonstrated speech capability.

"Yeah, . . . and I didn't even break my stride!"

"What do you think of that, Mr. Mogan?" asked Weisler.

I groped for a comment, but Weisler continued, "That means Army is going to have a great season this year. You better be able to give me a personal, eyeball report on each and every game. Got that?"

"Yes, Sir!" It was crisp and final, but Weisler wasn't finished.

"When you arrive for Monday morning calls, just start your football report. Don't wait to be invited. Got it?"

Bagdonas was a great guy and the first member of the Army football team I'd met. I soon came into contact with more of Coach Red Blaik's team. Bill Carpenter, Leroy Green, and others breezed past me as I braced against the halls of Company M-2's barracks, the 48th, 49th, and 50th Divisions. In my 48th division, L-2 had some rooms, and I soon became familiar with Bob Anderson's usually smiling face. The role these men played in the 1958 Army football season shaped my whole attitude toward the Military Academy.

One day our intramural track team was running to Shea Stadium when we were stopped by the varsity football team, jogging to their practice field across the Plain from the Commandant's house. Many of the cadets from my company were in that thundering herd. Bill Carpenter, Al Vanderbush, and Leroy Green

stood out. I noticed Anderson, an All-American halfback with an unusual running style. He floated over the ground, only lightly planting his feet and never pushing his lower legs out in front of him, minimizing the time his knees might be extended. Brigade Commander and Football Captain Pete Dawkins, the King of the Beasts during our first months, was in the group. There were more I recognized from M-2 but lacked names to put with the faces.

Stern Don Usry, the tight end from L-2 who lived downstairs from us, nodded **as he jogged past. The team's cleats clattered away from us, but we remained** in place as stone-faced Blaik and his coaching staff jogged past. On days when I had no intramurals, Weisler urged me to the practice field to see the Army team drill. Near the close of practice, Coach Blaik stood behind his quarterback, Joe Caldwell, and watched his offense snap through play after play. One day, canvas curtains were drawn fully around the practice field, and the MPs kept us out. The following Saturday, I took a seat in Michie Stadium, eager to see the final pre-season event, a full contact scrimmage with Syracuse.

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The University of Minnesota games I knew had featured big linemen, but the Orangemen seemed to have some of the largest guys ever to walk onto a college football field. They towered over our guys, outweighing the Army line by 20–50 pounds per man. Even Ed Bagdonas seemed slight compared to his Syracuse counterpart. I sat directly behind the bench and observed Coach **Blaik's focus as the scrimmage unfolded. He was almost expressionless but** active with his coaches and players as the white-clad Syracuse team pushed our team up and down the field all afternoon. As the sun set over Michie Stadium, I was concerned that our Army players were too small to play against the likes of Syracuse and the other teams listed on our schedule, but Blaik seemed strangely upbeat when he departed.

Designated as an usher for the opener, I wore a white belt and gloves with my dress gray uniform for the sometimes-wet South Carolina game. The play action was far different from what I had observed against Syracuse. Our linemen were still seriously outweighed, but they took off like greased lightning at the snap of the ball. Bagdonas and his compatriots in the trenches were popping the South Carolina line before the visitors were fully off of their stances. As an usher, I was free to roam up and down the aisles and tried to **remain as close to the front railings as possible. Coach Blaik's face was more** animated than during the Syracuse scrimmage. He had a slight grin and seemed more excited. Army was passing, running, and moving the ball very well. Midway through the first quarter, it dawned on me that end Bill Carpenter stood alone on the field as the team huddled. His isolation continued, sometimes on the right, sometimes to the left, but he never joined the huddle. It was soon clear to all that day that Coach Blaik and the Army team were making football history. The lonely end formation, as it was later termed by **sports writers, confused South Carolina's defense. Carpenter dashed to precise** spots to grab passes without any apparent guidance from the huddle. South Carolina had to react, so they committed their secondary to cover Carpenter on **every play. That's when the magic revealed itself.**

It was soon clear to all that day that Coach Blaik and the Army team were making football history.



Coach Red Blaik

Coach Blaik had perfected tactics and teamwork suited to the skills he found and nurtured in his individual players. Anderson, a great All-American runner, was passing the ball from fast, sweeping options. When Andy ran, he covered ground like the shadow of a fast bird flying over the stadium. Dawkins also ran and passed. Tight end Don Usry caught passes as much as the lonely end, while fullback Harry Walters chugged convincingly forward whenever he got the ball. **Coach Blaik's versatile offense caused total mystification on South Carolina's side of the line of scrimmage. GEN MacArthur himself couldn't have achieved greater offensive surprise.** At the end of the day, Army stood victorious, 45-8, and the magical 1958 season was underway.

Cadets and visitors were effusive regarding the brilliance of Blaik's genius and the team's execution. One visitor walking nearby exclaimed, "Options work when you have smart players. Army may be the only team in the country with athletes smart enough to run that offense."

Plebes were given an immediate fallout until Monday morning. I reported to Weisler's room at 0545 hours Monday morning and began a loud, verbal report on the game: "Sir, the Football Report! On Saturday last, Army beat . . ." From a bed in the far alcove came the orders, "Stifle that noise, Mogan. If we want a football report in the future, we'll ask you for it."

That was my first and last football report, but as the season unfolded, the mastery of Red Blaik's lonely end, and the execution by the smallest team to make the top five in college football, was inspiring. Each weekend the team demonstrated new heights of performance as Army beat bigger, stronger, faster teams. Rather than running up his own personal rushing numbers, Bob Anderson demonstrated his commitment every time he threw on the option plays and chose to do what was best for the team.

Results on the field were devastating. I was looking forward to each and every Saturday's game. Clearly, Coach Blaik had studied the capabilities of each

player and designed tactics built upon each one's individual skills. The resulting field versatility completely surprised Army's opponents.

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Walters and Dawkins were injured in a convincing win over Virginia. The following week, Army came off the field in Pittsburgh with a 14–14 tie. Cadet chatter kept hope alive for an undefeated season by beating Rice in Texas. The 1958 season would then be the best season since the war years. Football enthusiasm pervaded every level of the Academy. The entire first class was tagged to take a train to Texas for the Rice game. Just before departure, it was announced from the mess hall poop deck that a telecast of the Rice game would be shown on the massive screen in South Auditorium. Response from the Corps was thunderous.

The cavernous room that was South Aud was filled with cadets, dates, faculty, **officers' wives, and a few teenaged dependents. I arrived early and found a seat near the left front of the beautiful, sloping auditorium.** Army and Rice grappled to a 7–7 tie until the final minutes of the fourth quarter. With 54 seconds to go, Army got the ball at our own goal line. Quarterback Caldwell launched a long pass that arched beautifully over a sea of faces in the Rice stadium, toward my end of the TV screen. The camera panned left, blurring faces in the stadium as it followed the long, spiral pass through its trajectory. Dawkins came into view in the lower left corner of the giant screen, looking back over his left shoulder and sprinting toward the goal line. As he reached back for the falling ball, a determined Rice defender charged toward him. **The ball fell toward Dawkins' raised hands. I held my breath as the defender reached out for Dawkins . . .** then the screen went blank and the sound died.

Screams and moans of frustration echoed throughout the auditorium that now was filled with standing fans. Those around me seemed resigned to the fact that we would not hear the outcome of the game for hours. But after seven confused minutes, a door at the rear of the auditorium burst open, and a captain ran into the auditorium. He began shouting, and the auditorium **quieted. He'd telephoned a Texas friend who said that Dawkins caught the ball,** knocked down the Rice defender, and dashed across the goal line. Army won,

[R]umor had it that Saint Peter (Dawkins) had fed the entire first class with a single box of crackers on the long train ride home from Texas.

14-7. A monolithic cheer erupted that sounded like a cannon firing in the auditorium. We plebes were immediately given another fallout. The following week, rumor had it that Saint Peter (Dawkins) had fed the entire first class with a single box of crackers on the long train ride home from Texas.

Now it was time for the Corps trip to Philadelphia for the Army-Navy game.

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The days leading up to the game were filled with academics, athletics, and watching football practice. Finally, team departure day arrived. An M48 tank escorted the team bus to Thayer Gate, and I joined a large melee of cadets who jogged beside the tank, cheering, and singing football songs. Cadet cheerleaders led a rousing pep rally as the buses stopped, with open windows, **just across from the Hotel Thayer. "On, Brave Old Army Team" and "Sons of Slum and Gravy" echoed off the hotel walls and surrounding hills** as we bid the team an emotional goodbye. Coach Blaik stepped to the bus door and waved for silence. He offered thanks from the team for the sendoff and for our great support throughout the season. The team looked forward to seeing us in Philadelphia and **said, "We'll beat Navy." I followed the bus with my eyes** as it passed through the gate and on through Highland Falls. My uniform suddenly chafed. The books under my arm felt heavy. I turned to jog back to my math class.

Our chartered train ride to Philadelphia was a late-night affair. Around midnight, we marched down the hill toward the train station. The prospect of the coming night in Philly after the game more than made up for the discomfort of sleeping on seats, floors, or luggage racks. The train jerked to a stop on a rail siding adjacent to Municipal Stadium at 0410 hours. We stirred but slept on until 0700. The morning of Saturday, 29 Nov 1958, was sunny, clear, and cool, and our train was just far enough away from the stadium that we could see little of the forming crowd. With long overcoat capes buttoned back over our shoulders, we gathered into massed company formations. Getting closer to the stadium, we discovered hoards of strangers cheering us outside a fence. Finally, we moved through a tunnel and emerged into the massive stadium to the cheers and applause of more than 100,000 fans. It was overwhelming. After months of living life as a plebe, the lowest form of human life, it was miraculous to just be part of something that big.

When the teams entered, I was a little surprised to see our team in white

I knew I'd
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from Coach
Blaik. He had
never spoken
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life.

jerseys. An early Army fumble was run through the Army line for a fast Navy touchdown that quieted our side of the stadium. Somewhere Navy had found a 180-pound runt by the name of Joe Bellino, who enjoyed running along carrying defenders on his back. Fortunately, we started generating magic after **Bellino's early running demonstration.**

During the second half of the game, I yelled myself hoarse. The Army line delivered magnificent violence on the Navy team. The element of surprise as well as Army teamwork wore Navy down. At the end of the day, Anderson, Dawkins, Carpenter, Usry, and company secured their just win, 22-6.

As the traditional Army post-game cheer boomed out from the Corps, I mulled over the individual players and their roles in what had played out that day and over the entire season. It occurred to me that while we had superb individual players, they had lived the vision of a team. Coach Blaik motivated each of them to support the other on that team with every fiber of their being. Each had a profile of skills, but no one was perfect. Every obstacle was overcome by selfless teamwork. Watching the buses and cars pass as I strode along the sidewalk, **I knew I'd learned something from Coach Blaik. He had never spoken directly to me, but his knowledge of teamwork was a lesson I'd carry through life.**

The floors of the Ben Franklin were jammed with hospitality suites that evening. Army organizations, clusters of grads, West Point societies, and parents of cadets had suites as gathering places for friends and their cadet sons. That night, I felt pride in just being a cadet. I recalled that first night in **Weisler's room when I met strongman Ed Bagdonas.** The energy level generated that season carried me through the rest of my cadet career and through the decades since first seeing the Army team and their taciturn coach jogging to practice. The 1958 Army football team embodied the highest fulfillment of the word "teamwork." **As life pits my body and soul, I enjoy being in the company of classmates who shared the magical 1958 season. It's always great to be among the best of men again. ■**

Bill Mogan is retired and writing a book about the Class of '62 tentatively entitled Corps Value. He lives with his wife and bulldog in Rochester, MN.

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