



RANDALL BENTON Sacramento Bee file

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'THE BIGGEST GAME IN SACRAMENTO'

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The Holy Bowl endures because it matters.

It's too strong to fade, too special to ignore. Rivalries come and go at the high school level, especially in football. The Holy Bowl rivalry between parochial schools Christian Brothers and Jesuit turns 50 this week, give or take a few years for every implausible reason, and the same theme resonates: only one team will have its prayers answered.

Kickoff is Saturday night at famed Hughes Stadium, where

50th Holy Bowl features talent and huge crowds

the competition will extend from the field, to the rooting sections — who has the better chants, the better body paint? — to the alums who squeezed into 40-year-old letterman jackets. It's the must-have game for each side, and there is no middle ground here. You're either all in for CB blue or for Jesuit red.

Or, as the webpage put together by Jesuit chronicling the series puts it, "It's easily the most important day in the life of any football player and student of either school."

Pretty much.

Players from both schools know each other beyond jersey



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highlights
from the

2019 Holy Bowl thriller.

and helmet recognition. Many attended the same elementary schools, played on some of the same youth teams, or against each other. Some are second- or third-generation Holy Bowl attendees.

"I started going to the Holy Bowl when I was 6, when my dad (Todd) took me," CB quarterback Jake Elorduy said. "I

dreamed of being the quarterback for Christian Brothers, playing in front of a Holy Bowl crowd like that. My uncles (Danny and Jeff) played in this game. My dad played in it. It's a family thing.

"And everyone on campus excited. I get asked twice during every class, 'You excited? The hype is there.'"

The hype is real.

Jesuit quarterback Preston Vukovich is pals with Elorduy though Elorduy owes him one. CB won a 30-27 thriller in 2018 and fans flooded the field at Hughes. Jesuit got payback in the spring version of the Holy Bowl — deemed Holy Bowl 49.5 since fans and students were not allowed due to COVID concerns — and won it 34-28 on a last-minute touchdown.

SEE BOWL,

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BOWL

"It's a great community game for all of Sacramento in general," Jesuit coach Marlon Blanton said. "Big crowds, great games. It's what football is all about."

Or as Jesuit athletic administrator Phil Nuxol once said, "Both sides can all meet on the gridiron on Saturday and at church on Sunday."

CB coach Larry Morla has lived this game, first as a player in the 2000s and now as a coach, including this in his first year as head man. He won't sleep much until Sunday morning, CB jersey under his pillow.

"This is my ninth Holy Bowl, and I'm excited," Morla said with a laugh. "It's the biggest crowd for any high school event in Northern California. It's always the biggest game in Sacramento. It is the big thing."

And now some rivalry sizzle to throw to the fire from Morla, "I have good friends on the Jesuit coaching staff, guys I played against in the Holy Bowl. We talk 51 weeks of the year. On that 52nd week, we talk crap: rivalry week!"

It's perfectly fitting that the two men tasked with slowing things down Saturday night are also friends, but in opposing colors. They are the defensive coordinators, Asa Jackson, the CB alum coaching the Falcons D, and Isaiah Frey, the Jesuit alum leading the Marauders stoppers. Both had big Holy Bowl moments and never slowed down, reaching the NFL.

'THIS THING ALMOST NEVER HAPPENED'

For all the moments and memories the Holy Bowl has offered, the most surprising aspect might be this: the series almost never got off the ground.

The concern shared by principals at both schools in the late 1960s was that a rivalry football game might take a life of its own, that it might be taken too seriously by players, coaches and fans, and that ill-will will come of all of it.

Quite the contrary. It's become the region's most stable rivalry, crossing into new generations. It has outlasted the McClatchy and Sacramento series, which started in 1938 but ended a few years ago. The great CB-Cordova rivalry of the 1980s is for memory only. Same with Grant-Nevada Union of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Not this one. "It boggles me that this thing almost never happened," Dick Sperbeck told The Bee years ago. "The Holy Bowl became such a cool thing, a status thing."

Sperbeck was the CB coach in the 1960s and 70s and a driving force to get this series started. He died in 2017, but not after watching his son, Marshall Sperbeck play quarterback in the game for CB and his grandson, Thomas, for Jesuit. When Thomas dazzled at quarterback for Jesuit in the 2012 game, won by Jesuit 28-23, a relieved first-year coach Blanton said, "Thank God for Thomas Sperbeck!"

The Holy Bowl has been played in searing heat or the mud. There have been upsets, scoring fests and 0-0 ties. For decades, it was played at the end of the season but has for a

stretch been an early season contest.

HOLY STOPS AND STARTS

The first Holy Bowl was at American River College in 1969, when 93-year-old Christian Brothers met 6-year-old Jesuit for the first time. Players raced out onto the field through a tunnel of torches before kickoff, and it struck a match to ignite the region's most beloved series. CB won 20-13 in front of 8,000 behind touchdowns from Dennis Bertacchi and Danny Galvez.

For math majors bristling, "this isn't the 50th then!" Well, we hear you. But it really is.

The series was not played in 1977 and '78 because it conflicted with the newly created Sac-Joquin Section playoffs. Ken O'Brien was a strapping star-in-the-making quarterback at Jesuit in 1977 who became a Pro Bowl passer with the New York Jets. His biggest football regret? Not playing in a Holy Bowl.

The pandemic wasn't going to stall this thing, either, hence, the spring 49.5 Holy Bowl title.

The first big upset was in 1970, when upstart Jesuit stunned top-ranked and unbeaten CB 8-7 before nearly 10,000 at ARC. After Joe Ratermann dove in from the 1 for CB to pull to within 7-6 in the closing seconds, first-year Jesuit coach Ben Sanchez called for speedy backup quarterback Dano McGinn, who in his only snap of the game, ran in the 2-point conversion.

The Bee's Ben Bodding reported then that Father Edward E. Callahann told his coach in a semi-jovial mood immediately afterward, "If you would have

gone for the kick and the tie, I would have fired you!"

That Holy Bowl also offered the first shot across the bow, from Sperbeck, the CB coach then, who said glumly in defeat, "Not making any excuses but this was an anticlimax game for us. We got what we wanted last week when we beat Kennedy for the Metro League championship. This game didn't mean as much."

Admitted Sperbeck years later, "I'm not a good liar."

MORNING MASS, CHICKENS ON THE FIELD AND MOCK FUNERALS

The Holy Bowl played 50 years ago, in 1971, featured the first rout of the series. CB won 40-7 as hobbled tailback Mark Gabrielli rushed for 177 yards and four scores before 8,500 at ARC.

Said Sperbeck afterward to The Bee's Bodding, "We weren't sure of Gabe's status until we went to morning Mass. I saw our team doctor at the service. I got the clearance for Gabe to play. We go to Mass every game day as a team, and it really paid off this time."

How serious? Before the 1971 game, Jesuit students placed two live chickens on the CB side of the field as the Falcons finished stretching (how chickens got smuggled into the venue remains a mystery). CB fans in turn performed a mock funeral for Jesuit, complete with a coffin and pallbearers.

The Holy Bowl nearly died when it wasn't played in 1977 and '78, the concern that both programs would have to decide whether or not to face off or compete in playoff games. Both found a way



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