Winning the West

Crimson football finds redemption in California.

The 1949 season was a disaster. In a quixotic bid to restore Harvard football to national prominence, director of athletics William Bingham scheduled an opening game against Stanford in Palo Alto. The result—a 44-0 drubbing that put a half-dozen Crimson players out of commission—was widely seen as giving Ivy League football a bad name.

“What little prestige Harvard football may have enjoyed in these western precincts evaporated in the blast furnace of the Stanford performance,” reported The Boston Globe. “The Crimson’s West Coast alumni cringed as the rout developed… Otherwise it was a nice, sunny day, with 38,000 on hand.”

“We played football like we had been chloroformed,” one Harvard player told the Globe.

The traumatic defeat was a prelude to the worst season (1-8) in Crimson football annals. A return engagement with Stanford was scratched, and a 1-7 season in 1950 led to an agonizing reappraisal of the entire athletics program. For 63 years, no Harvard football team would venture further west than Ithaca, New York.

That stretch finally ended this fall, when head coach Tim Murphy’s squad opened the season at the University of San Diego, an institution chartered in, yes, 1949. Game day was sun-soaked, with 4,256 on hand at Torero Stadium. About half of those in the stands were rooting for Harvard—and not cringing. After a slow start, the Crimson offense warmed to its work, scoring 21 fourth-quarter points in what ended as a 42-20 rout.

Making his first start at quarterback was Conner Hempel, a six-foot-three, 210-pound junior from Union, Kentucky. Hempel spent the 2012 season backing up Colton Chapple ’13, who set a single-season record for passing touchdowns and was the Ivy League’s Offensive Player of the Year. Picking up where Chapple left off, Hempel threw four scoring passes against San Diego, completing 25 of 34 pass attempts for 345 yards. He ran the offense with poise, read the field well, and was not intercepted or sacked.

Hempel’s first touchdown pass came less than two minutes into the second half. It was caught by Andrew Fischer, a fleet sophomore receiver from Diamond Bar, California. The others—all in the final period—went to sophomore tight end Ben Braunecker, to senior wide receiver Ricky Zorn, and again to Fischer, who finished off a 30-yard play with a weaving, tackle-breaking sprint down the sideline.

Defensive end Zach Hodges had begun the scoring with a 33-yard fumble return in the opening quarter. Sophomore back Paul Stanton Jr. added an 11-yard touchdown in the second period, and Harvard led 14-13 at halftime. Hodges made another big defensive play in the third period, when San Diego back Joe Ferguson tried to go up-and-over at the Harvard goal line. Linebacker and team captain Josh Boyd knocked the ball loose, and Hodges fell on it.

Until Hempel came along, no Crimson passer had thrown for four touchdowns in his debut as a starter. He’d have had a fifth, tying the Harvard record, if his receiver hadn’t lost the ball at the goal line after a 52-yard gain.

The Crimson and the Toreros first met at the Stadium a year ago, when Harvard also scored 21 fourth-quarter points to pull out a 28-13 decision. No western team had previously set foot on Stadium turf.

Harvard is now 3-1 against the West. Three decades before the Stanford debacle, coach Robert Fisher’s unbeaten Crimson eleven edged Oregon, 7-6, in the 1920 Rose Bowl game.

A week after Hempel’s virtually flawless performance in San Diego, Brown came to the Stadium for a night game, and Hempel was shown to be, after all, only human. Midway through the first period he lofted a pass that a Bruin defender picked off near the goal line. Brown then drove for a touchdown, got the ball back with an onside kick, and scored again late in the quarter. With a 13-0 lead, the visitors seemed set to build on it.

But with Hempel as ringmaster, Harvard turned the game around in the second quarter, scoring 28 unanswered points before halftime and stopping the Brown attack cold. With 13 more points in the second half, the Crimson broke the 40-point plateau for the second straight running, commencing the Ivy League season.
Quarterback sack.

Hodges

Norman Hayes made the other interception return was a brilliant feat of broken-field running through heavy traffic. Hodges, a fiery competitor, was also credited with three tackles-for-loss and a quarterback sack.

Ringmaster Hempel accounted for 318 yards of total offense and two of Harvard's five touchdowns, completing 16 of 22 passes for 296 yards and running the ball 11 times on designed and improvised plays.

“I saw a better Hempel today than I did on film of the San Diego game,” Brown coach Phil Estes said after the game. “He’s a hell of a quarterback, with great feet. Give him time and he can make plays.” Time will tell, but Hempel may run better than any Crimson quarterback since Ryan Fitzpatrick ’05, now of the Tennessee Titans, whose old number (14) he wears. Like Fitzpatrick, Hempel can throw the ball, and like Fitzpatrick he brings a steadying presence to the huddle. “Conner never gets too high, and he never gets too low,” says coach Murphy. “His leadership style is very well received by the coaching staff and his teammates.”

With the speedy Spooney—who carried the ball in the Brown game. Cornerback Jaron Wilson dove into the end zone, vaulting over Bruin halfback Andrew Coke, to finish off a 51-yard interception return in the Brown game. Cornerback Brian Owusu (6, at right) had thrown a crushing block on Coke just in front of the goal line.

with a resounding 41-23 victory.

“The biggest thing we’re doing is playing really hard,” coach Murphy would say later. And making some really big plays.

Harvard’s 41 points came on a one-yard sweep by Hempel, two rushing touchdowns by Stanton, a 51-yard interception return by defensive back Jaron Wilson, a spectacular 63-yard pass play from Hempel to Zorn, and two field goals and five points after by ultra-reliable placekicker David Mothander.

Brown had started the season with a 45-7 victory over Georgetown, with tailback John Spooner, the Ivy titlist in the 100- and 200-meter dash, scoring three times. Employing a three-man rush for much of the game, the Crimson defense had to hustle to contain the speedy Spooner—who carried 17 times for 110 yards and two touchdowns—while keeping pressure on Pat Donnelly, the Bruin quarterback. He threw for 165 yards and a touchdown, but was intercepted three times by Crimson defenders.

Safety Jaron Wilson’s second-period interception return was a brilliant feat of broken-field running through heavy traffic. End Zach Hodges and cornerback Norman Hayes made the other interceptions. Hodges, a fiery competitor, was also credited with three tackles-for-loss and a quarterback sack.

Ringmaster Hempel accounted for 318 yards of total offense and two of Harvard’s

Roundball

Quarterbacks

The art of playing point guard

Within the fast-moving controlled chaos of a basketball game, the players nonetheless enact definite roles. The number-five player is the center, perhaps the tallest and most prominent athlete (think Bill Russell, L.L.D. ‘07, Yao Ming). NBA fives patrol the baseline and the paint under the basket, rebounding, blocking shots, and often scoring dunks and layups. The power forward or four can score heavily from short or midrange positions and is strong enough to defend against other “bigs” (tall players, a.k.a. “trees”) down low—i.e., near the hoop. Kevin Garnett and Tim Duncan are fours. The small forward or three (Larry Bird, Julius Erving) is a versatile athlete who can handle the ball, spring a variety of offensive attacks, and often draws fouls, pouring in points from the free-throw line. The two or shooting guard, like Michael Jordan or Kobe Bryant, may be the team’s ace outside shooter and scorer; twos can also handle the ball well or drive to the net.

Then there is the choreographer who directs basketball’s quintet: the number one or point guard (Magic Johnson, John Stockton), normally the team’s best dribbler, ball handler, and passer, as well as its shortest member. The one runs the offense and defense on the floor, as an extension of the head coach,” as Brandyn Curry ’13 (‘14) puts it. Doing this is “about control,” adds Siyani

Tidbits. For the record, Harvard has now won 13 consecutive home openers, is 8-0 in Stadium night games, and has taken 12 of the last 14 contests with Brown.

Adios, Toreros: The San Diego victory completed a two-game home-and-home series. Putting a West Coast team on the football schedule was in part a response to changing demographics: more Harvard alumni now live in California than in Massachusetts, and Southern California has become an important catchment area for recruits in many varsity sports....USD is the defending co-champion of the 12-team Pioneer Football League, which has members on both coasts. The PFL and the Ivies are the only NCAA Division I conferences that still bar athletic scholar-ships.

Papering the house: The Brown game was designated as “Harvard Night,” with free admission for anyone with a Harvard ID. The attendance was 17,256—more than double the average for an afternoon game, but well short of the night-game high of 21,704, set in 2010.

Friendly rivalry: Preseason polls favored Penn to repeat as Ivy champion, with Harvard and Brown as runners-up...Over the past six seasons, Penn and Harvard have each won the Ivy title three times. This year’s showdown comes on November 16, at Harvard Stadium.