

Jesuit's state title recalls 1960's season to remember

By Marty Mulé

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More than a half century after it was played, in a game — really a season — filled with memories they've relived all their adult lives, there's one everyone remembers vividly: the lights coming back on after a 15-minute blackout, and the sold-out crowd rubbing their eyes at the sight of someone ferociously guarding the ball by sitting on it.

"I was making sure no one tried to move it," then-Jesuit center Larry Ecuyer remembered. "We were just starting to get into gear. The way things were going at that point, we needed every extra inch we could get."

On a cold night and on a muddy field in Lake Charles, Jesuit won the 1960 state football championship in a game filled with derring-do and tenacity, pulling off a comeback for the ages, 21-20 over LaGrange on the Gators' home field.

That Blue Jays team, guided by a true prep phenom, tailback Pat Screen in the Jesuit single-wing offense, set the bar high for the ones that came afterward. It took 54 years, but the skein, if that's what it could be called, was finally broken three weeks ago when the Jays defeated Curtis 17-14.

Any school can go decades without state championships. They're not easy to come by. But in a 27-year period between 1933 and 1960, Jesuit won six titles — one approximately every six years. Then, the Jays went five decades without any.

In the long interim, five other New Orleans Catholic schools have racked up eight state titles. Holy Cross (one), Rummel (two), St. Augustine (three), Brother Martin (one) and Archbishop Shaw (one) have all hoisted title banners, while Jesuit, a prominent New Orleans school with greater resources than most, went through a drought for so long that the team members are now at or nearing retirement.

“It has been a long time,” said Dr. Robert Weiss, a wingback on Jesuit’s 1960 team. “Part of it, I guess, is there are a lot more schools now. Rummel and Shaw didn’t exist back then, and St. Aug wasn’t a part of the league then.

“Also, they don’t just give those trophies away. There are more kids at more places getting more great coaching, and are turning out terrific athletes. You see them everywhere, at all these schools.”

In its time and place, the 1960 Blue Jays were more than exceptional, too.

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In a private passing of the torch, some of the old Blue Jays congratulated the new champions, with hopes — like all alums — of more. And more.

They also relived their own war stories. Included in the gathering were Ecuyer, a retired military officer; Percy Viosca, a tackle on the storied team who went on to a career in electrical engineering; Dr. Weiss; Dr. Buddy Morris, end; businessman; reserve quarterback Frank Faulstich; and attorney and former Sugar Bowl president Conrad Meyer, an end.

Five of the Jays’ starting 11, meaning almost half in the era when athletes played both offense and defense, played major college football, a pretty hefty number for the time: Ecuyer at Southern Mississippi; Meyer at Tulane; and Viosca, Screen (later the mayor of Baton Rouge), and end Ken Vairin all at LSU.

They were all quick to defend the teams that followed them, pointing out that Jesuit was twice the state runner-up, losing to Holy Cross 14-6 in 1963 and falling 13-7 to St. Augustine in 1978, a game that was so big it drew 42,000 and became the catalyst for the Superdome Classic in which all prep football championships are now decided in the Dome.

So Jesuit football didn’t exactly fall off a cliff.

Still, the 1960 Jays were a bellwether for the school — perhaps the city, too.

Consider: That regular season, Jesuit played three teams ranked in Louisiana’s top five. In their second game, the Jays beat No. 1-ranked Istrouma 33-7. Three weeks later they

defeated No. 5-ranked St. Aloysius by the same 33-7 score; then they beat No. 3-ranked De La Salle 46-0.

Those formidable foes fell by a cumulative 112-14.

Jesuit's only loss (19-7) came after a storm-warning day's delay, to Pensacola, the No. 1 team in Florida.

In the 10 games of the regular season, Jesuit's average margin of victory was 27 points, outscoring its opponents a cumulative 301-33.

A major part of the success was a rock-ribbed defense that gave up an average of just 85 yards rushing for the year. Part of it was Screen, a sensational athlete who ran through defenses like strikes of lightning. He scored 146 points himself, while guiding Jesuit to 2,671 rushing yards and 823 yards passing.

Injured in one game, he was held out the following week against Holy Cross — except when the Jays weren't moving, when coach Ken Tarzetti put in Screen as a receiver. Backup quarterback Don Adams hit Screen with a pass, and he broke free for a touchdown. A couple of series later, the same thing happened. In for two plays, Screen scored two touchdowns.

There's one more jarring fact about those Blue Jays. In those days during the state playoffs, there was no formula or any evening out of game sites for fairness as today. A coin flip decided who would play at home and who had to travel. Jesuit lost all three coin flips and had to travel throughout the playoffs. The Jays beat Byrd 19-13 in Shreveport, hometown opponent Warren Easton 12-0 at City Park, and for the Triple-A state championship LaGrange in Lake Charles 21-20.

That last one was one to remember, and it has been — for a very long time.

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Talk about a punch in the face. Coach Doug Hamley's Gators, 10-1 and considered a slight favorite at home, took the fight to the Blue Jays from the opening whistle.

Before a jammed crowd of 7,500 on the brisk evening, on its second possession, LaGrange took the lead on a 42-yard pass play from All-State quarterback Richard Guillory to C.G. Babin.

Guillory's PAT attempt was wide, which would become a huge factor.

There was no more scoring in the half, but LaGrange was so dominating the margin seemed larger. When the game reached intermission, Jesuit had 27 total yards and one first down to the Gators' 232 yards and nine first downs.

In the locker room, Tarzetti exhorted his troops to pick themselves off the mat, telling them as bad as things were in the first half, they were still only six points down, easily within distance of taking command.

"I really thought we were going to run them out the stadium in the second half," Faulstich said. "We were really fired up."

Didn't happen. When the Jays took the field again, they got more of the same. A fumble gave LaGrange the ball on the Jays 37 and led to a touchdown, making the score 13-0.

As bad as things seemed at that point, it was as if a switch went off. Screen started moving the Jays before another roadblock: The lights malfunctioned. When power was returned, the crowd spotted Ecuyer squatting on the ball at midfield. "I wasn't leaving it," he said. The crowd got its chuckle, but then Jesuit got down to business.

In short order, Screen scored from the 2-yard line. In a huge play, as it turned out, Screen hit Weiss for the conversion to cut the deficit to 13-7.

In those days PATs counted for one point no matter how they were achieved, and Jesuit always ran or passed for its conversions because (1) the Jays didn't have a good kicker, and (2) Tarzetti was confident his team could make the necessary 3 yards almost every play.

Next time Jesuit got the ball, fullback Walt McCoy ran a punt back 45 yards, and a tacked-on penalty put the ball at the LaGrange 10. Four plays later, Screen rolled into the end zone from the 1, then he ran across the extra point. Now, Jesuit had the lead.

Guillory put the Gators in front again at 20-14 with a 34-yard touchdown pass to James Bryan with 6:13 to go.

Sixty yards away from victory or defeat, Screen ignited a drive in which he accounted for 28 yards rushing and 23 passing, and scrambled in from 3 yards out after being

hemmed in at the line. There was 1:30 to play when Screen ran in the PAT, the point that separated champion and runner-up. The final score was 21-20.

For the game, Screen ran for 71 yards, LaGrange's Bryan had 96; Screen passed for 150 yards, Guillory had 190. But there was no question Screen was the difference, running what became a heated second-half offense, with him scoring three touchdowns and having a hand in every point Jesuit scored.

"This was a hard one to lose," Hamley said afterward. "We contained Screen at times, but he's tough."

He was, but so was the entire Jesuit unit, as the stats from the point in which LaGrange scored its second touchdown indicate. From that point on, the Jays racked up 177 yards and 13 first downs to LaGrange's 56 yards and three first downs.

"It really was something to remember, the game and the season," Meyer said.

More than that, it was a legacy.