COLLEGE FOOTBALL

War and the Roses for Oregon State

Jack Yoshihara might not make it to the big game, but it won't be because he isn't allowed to be there, as was the case in 1942.
By Chris Foster

November 22, 2008

Jack Yoshihara, a Japanese American and a sophomore reserve on Oregon State's football team, was practicing in mid-December 1941, just as he had throughout the season.

There was anticipation, with the Beavers preparing to play second-ranked Duke in their first trip to the Rose Bowl game. There was also fear, with the country still reeling from the attack on Pearl Harbor only a week or so earlier.

"I will never forget that day," said George Zellick, a teammate of Yoshihara's. "It was late afternoon. It was drizzling. We noticed two men coming onto the field. They were very well-dressed, wearing overcoats and hats. You could tell they were different people. They met with the coach and, the next thing we knew, Jack left with them. It was the first indication that Jack had a problem."

The Beavers went to the Rose Bowl, which had been moved to Durham, N.C., because of the war, and upset Duke. They traveled without Yoshihara, who was not allowed to go to the game, left school and was soon sent to a civilian assembly center in Portland.

Oregon State and Duke players went to war after the game. Yoshihara went to the Minidoka internment camp in Idaho.

In June, Yoshihara was among the Oregon State students of Japanese ancestry, interned during World War II, who were given honorary degrees by the university. After receiving his diploma, Yoshihara was asked to hold up his 1942 Rose Bowl ring, given to him 1985, bringing cheers from the crowd at Reser Stadium.

University President Edward Ray stepped to the microphone and said, "It seems to me, given the setting we're in today, it is only appropriate that we give Jack another Rose Bowl."

Rose Bowl, 2009

This season's Oregon State team is trying to honor that IOU. The Beavers need only to win their final two games to get to the Rose Bowl for the first time since the 1965 game.
From his condominium in Edmonds, Wash., the 87-year old Yoshihara, who retired 27 years ago from running his refrigerator and air conditioning store in Portland, keeps a close eye on Oregon State football.

"We have a good team," Yoshihara said. "We just have to keep winning big."

Even if the Beavers do, Yoshihara said he was unlikely to go to the Rose Bowl. He attends homecoming every year, but health issues, which forced him to give up ocean fishing three years ago, "would make it very hard to drive that far to go to the game."

Besides, Yoshihara's Rose Bowl is in the past.

"We knew the world was changing," Yoshihara said about his sophomore year at Oregon State. "We just didn't know how much it was going to change. But I was an athlete. I didn't worry about politics."

A young American

Yoshihara has a firm grasp on his heritage.

"My mother wasn't exactly a 'Picture Bride,' but she came to this country and married a man who turned out to not to be very good," Yoshihara said. "She went back to Japan and I was born three months later. We came back in 1924, when I was 3. She said we were on the last ship before they stopped allowing Japanese to emigrate to America."

Natusuno Yoshihara settled in Portland, remarried and ran a restaurant with her new husband. Her son assimilated into American boyhood.

Yoshihara went to Oregon State as a football player and wrestler.

"I played a lot on the scout team," he said. "I remember one game I was in. Washington had scored and Coach stuck me in there, saying 'We have to block that kick.' I rushed in and jumped so high the ball went under me and they got the point. If I would have just stood there, it would have hit me."

Zellick remembers Yoshihara differently.

"Jack was a really good athlete," said Zellick, who now lives in Lewiston, Mont. "He was fast and tough. He's just being modest."

The Beavers started 2-2 in 1941, then didn't give up a point the next four games. They wrapped up their first Pacific Coast Conference title and the Rose Bowl berth by beating Oregon, 12-7, on Nov. 29.

"Everyone was real happy the week after the game," Yoshihara said. "All my friends wanted me to get them tickets."

That changed on the next Sunday morning.

Clouds of war
Zellick was at his fraternity house when news of the Japanese attack first came in.

"We all made a mad dash down into the study, where there were maps," Zellick said. "We wanted to see how close Pearl Harbor was to the West Coast."

Yoshihara was having breakfast at home with his parents when they heard the news.

"I thought, 'What more can happen?'" he said.

Yoshihara learned the answer. Not long after Pearl Harbor, he was told by university officials that he would not be allowed to go to the Rose Bowl, as Japanese Americans on the West Coast were not permitted to travel more than 35 miles from their homes.

Teammate James Busch told the New Orleans Times-Picayune in 2005, "Nobody felt that Jack was a subversive threat. He was an American. My heritage was German. Nobody discriminated against me."

The Beavers traveled to Durham and shocked the Blue Devils, whose quarterback was future Oregon State and UCLA coach Tommy Prothro, 20-16. In Corvallis, Yoshihara listened to the game on radio, "holding my breath most of the time."

The world did the same.

"Our innocence was gone," Zellick said.

The Oregon State and Duke players went off to war, though the game seemed to follow them.

During the Battle of the Bulge, Stan Czech, a tackle for that Beavers team, was sharing food and coffee with another soldier in a foxhole. After a few minutes of conversation, he realized it was Wallace Wade, the Duke coach.

Charlie Haynes, Duke's backup quarterback, and Frank Parker, an Oregon State tackle, became platoon leaders in different companies. During the Arno Valley campaign in Italy, Parker came across a severely wounded Haynes and carried him to a farmhouse, where medics saved his life.

Zellick joined the Marines, and led his platoon onto the beach during the Okinawa invasion. He didn't see Yoshihara again until a reunion of 1942 Rose Bowl team "years later."

"I was so happy to see him," Zellick said. "We swapped some stories. But he didn't talk a lot about what he'd been through."

The war years

Yoshihara had a different American experience. He was denied enlistment because he was born in Japan. He had left school early in 1942, and going back to Oregon State was out of the question.

"Several other Japanese students tried, but they were discouraged by the school," Yoshihara said. "They were told they were welcome, but they might run into problems in the community."

He does not wallow in his experience, yet in discussing the time stark facts come out.
He was sent to a Portland assembly center in the spring of 1942, where officials had put plywood in the ground at the Pacific International Livestock Exposition. It housed nearly 4,000 people.

"We were all kids, so we did athletics, tennis, judo, baseball," said Yoshihara, who was then 21.

But, Yoshihara added, "The wood floors were really dirty and the big mistake we made was hosing them down. All the animal manure underneath came though the floors."

The next fall, Yoshihara and his parents were sent to Minidoka, where it dipped to minus-21 degrees in the winter and hit 104 during the summer.

"They just had barracks, with wood siding and a tar roof," Yoshihara said. "We could see the dust come through the walls when the wind blew. And it always blew.

"The young people made the best of it. The older ones didn't know what to think."

Yoshihara said his parents were "sick about it," as they had to walk way from their restaurant.

Yoshihara played sports and, in time, qualified for a day pass that allowed him to leave the camp to work.

He worked on farms and drove a truck, delivering packages and goods, though he was forbidden from going west of Arlington in northeastern Oregon.

Always, he felt under suspicion.

"The food was so bad in camp, Army food, and those of us who had passes could eat outside," Yoshihara said. "But we didn't dare. If you sat down in a restaurant, everyone there would stare you down."

The postwar years

Yoshihara and his parents spent the duration of the war in the camp. Life afterward was different, yet the same.

His parents opened a new restaurant. Yoshihara went back to school for a time, attending Multnomah College in Portland.

He never played organized football again and gravitated to the refrigerator and air-conditioning business. He and his first wife, Elsie, were friends as children and were married for 50 years, raising two children. After Elsie died, he married another childhood friend, Mary, in 2000.

Yoshihara has attended a few reunions of the Rose Bowl team and was included when the group was put into the Oregon State Hall of Fame in 1985. That's when he received the ring from the '42 game.

"The whole team was very sad about what happened to him," Zellick said. "It sobered everyone up when he was not allowed to go to the Rose Bowl. He was a real nice person and a good friend. That war was a difficult thing and strange things happened."
Yoshihara prefers not to dwell on the strange things.

Asked about the day the FBI agents came, he states in a flat, stern voice, "Yeah, that happened."

Asked about another day, at another football field, emotion comes through.

Said Yoshihara: "That day, when the president told my story and asked me to show my ring, I had tears."

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