
A Genius for Football: Coach Warren Woodson

Walter Hines

Over the forty-three football seasons of 1968 to 2010, New Mexico State had a dismal record of 144-333-2, with no bowl appearances and only four winning seasons – the best was 7-5 in 2002 under Tony Samuel. In contrast, from 1958 to 1967 under Coach Warren Woodson, NMSU won 63 games, lost 36, and had a glorious undefeated season. Woodson's Aggies had seven winning seasons and appeared in and won two Sun Bowl games. They had four national rushing champions, the only first-team All American in NMSU history, a future All Pro NFL quarterback, and more than a dozen pro players in all.

Yet, in 1967, at age 65 and against his wishes, Woodson was 'retired' by the NMSU administration headed by Roger Corbett. To this day, older Aggie fans call it *The Curse of Warren Woodson*, and they may be right. The same fans and many of his players proclaim Woodson a football genius, and based on the record and the influence he had on thousands of young men, that is hard to dispute.

A genius is a person with exceptional natural intellect, manifested by creative thought and original work. Such persons display strong individuality and imagination, and are highly innovative. Geniuses are believed to have much less latent inhibition than most persons. This allows them to ignore "unimportant stimuli" and focus on critical and interesting problems and tasks. Such descriptions fit Coach Warren Woodson to a "T." One might say to a "Wing T" (Sorry, please read on).

As a devout and bright Christian man, one might expect Warren Woodson to have heeded the Biblical passage, "For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise." Not true in Woodson's case. Those who did not truly understand football or disliked his leadership style just got in the way of his football program -- they were "unimportant stimuli." Such people included certain college administrators, fair weather boosters, and sports writers.

Like Bill Parcells, Woodson had little patience for what he considered silly questions or Monday morning

quarterbacking. While this trait would lead him into trouble on more than one occasion, he was steadfast and confident in his actions. Some would say to a fault. But he mostly got away with it. Why? Probably because he was right more often than not, and because his players revered him. Of course, it didn't hurt that he won an amazing number of football games, and especially those that counted. Notably, Woodson's successes came at schools that lacked the money and resources available to many larger universities and many of his competitors.

When Woodson retired from coaching at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas in 1973, his record at 4-year colleges was 203-95-14, with 70 more wins as a junior college and high school coach. At the time, it was a record unmatched among American college football coaches, including the legendary Paul 'Bear' Bryant. Using his powerful Wing T attack, Woodson took teams to nine bowl games, winning six. He coached players who won national collegiate rushing titles nine times, and his teams led the nation in total offense in several years.

Warren Brooks Woodson was born in 1903 in Ft. Worth to an itinerant Baptist minister and a deeply religious mother. An only child, he had an upbringing steeped in Church, hard work, scholarship, and athletics. Woodson went to high school in Ft. Worth where he played basketball, football, and tennis. A severely injured shoulder prevented him from playing football at Baylor where he matriculated in 1920. Instead, he played on the basketball team and took up tennis seriously. He became one of the top players in Texas. A good student, he immersed himself in study, graduating from Baylor in 1924 with a dual degree in Bible and History.

Determined to be a coach, Woodson enrolled at Springfield College in Massachusetts. Springfield had a national reputation for teaching and scholarship in physical education, physical therapy, physiology of exercise, and overall wellness (and later sports medicine and biomechanics). Springfield had close ties with the YMCA and served as a training ground for future YMCA executives. The college prepared many fine future

coaches. Springfield's first football coach was none other than Amos Alonzo Stagg. Alumni included Dr. James Naismith and William G. Morgan, inventors of basketball and volleyball.

Woodson was no doubt very proud to be in such company. In later years, given his staunch Christian beliefs, he may have been less proud of two younger alumni – hard-drinking Hawaiian celebrity Don Ho, who attended Springfield for one year, and Dr. Tom Waddell, 1968 Olympic decathlete and founder of the Gay Games.

Springfield honed Woodson's intellect, provided confidence in his ability to lead young men into manhood, and reinforced his faith in Christian values -- three traits that would guide his coaching career and life in general.

After graduation from Springfield in 1926, Woodson returned to Texas and accepted a job at Texarkana Junior College, where he coached from 1927 until 1934. There Woodson coached football and three other sports -- track, basketball, and baseball. In his spare time, he also coached football, track, and basketball at nearby Texarkana High School. His football teams at Texarkana JC won 58 games, losing only a few.

While at Texarkana, Woodson met his future wife Muriel who was a student at the time. They were married in December 1928 by Woodson's minister father. Muriel was a very competitive basketball player and a scratch golfer who often played with Byron Nelson and Ben Hogan at the Texarkana Country Club. This relationship and their shared Christian beliefs led to Warren being best man in Nelson's wedding to Louise in 1934.



Warren Woodson

In 1935, Woodson accepted the job as head football coach at Conway Teachers College (now Central Arkansas). In six seasons from 1935 to 1940, his Bears went 40-8-3 and won four conference championships. To this day, Central Arkansas touts Woodson as the "Father of Bear Football."

Woodson's 1936 and 1937 teams were each undefeated at 8-0. The 1937 squad was invited to Conway's first ever postseason game against Fresno State at the Charity Bowl played before 5,000 fans in Gilmore Stadium in Los Angeles. Also known as the Little All-American Bowl, the game was a fund raiser for

the Under Privileged Children's Milk Fund, an important cause in those Depression days. The game went back and forth with several tie scores, good passing and tough running. The Bulldogs were the last to score, and because of a missed extra point by the Bears, scored an exciting 27-26 victory.

At Conway, as at Texarkana, Woodson was a very busy, multi-sport coach. His basketball teams had a 114-40 record over seven years, won five conference titles, and qualified for several trips to the National AAU Tournament. His track teams also won two conference titles.

The record is unclear as to when Woodson began tinkering with the T formation, though it was probably during the late '30s at Conway. Until then, the single wing had dominated college and professional football. With long snaps to the tailback (sometimes called the quarterback), typically five yards behind the line of scrimmage, the single wing was a running offense with limited opportunity for effective faking. As the second back from the wing, the 'quarterback' was primarily a blocking back. The wingback was also mostly a blocker, or an occasional runner on reverses.

The T was the first offense where the quarterback took the snap from under center, with the option to hand off or drop back to pass. The T became viable in 1933 when passing was legalized from anywhere behind the line of scrimmage. Previously, the passer had to be five yards behind the scrimmage line. In the mid '30s, Knute Rockne's Notre Dame team took advantage and introduced a crude, though effective, T formation passing game. With the quarterback under center, T offenses became unpredictable and deceptive. Running backs could receive the ball and hit any number of designated "holes" near the point of handoff.

The center was a better blocker because his head was up at the snap. Offensive plays developed much faster and closer to the line than with the single wing. The quarterback could fake handoffs from a point near the line of scrimmage. This led to "option" plays which placed great pressure on the defense. Far fewer double-team blocks were required because the back hit the hole so fast. And, the back could choose a different hole than originally planned due to single-blocking across the line. Running backs could be less versatile than single-wing tailbacks who had to run, pass, and block – and sometimes quick kick.

The arrival of Clark Shaughnessy at Stanford (who previously used the T at the University of Chicago in the late 1930s) was a watershed event in college football. In 1940, Shaughnessy's T offense led Stanford to a 10-0 season and a victory in the Rose Bowl over heavily favored Nebraska. A few weeks later, George Halas' Chicago Bears employed the T to destroy the Washington Redskins 73-0 in the NFL championship game. The stage was set for the T formation to sweep college and pro football.

A smart man like Warren Woodson knew good football when he saw it. He liked the T, but wanted to add his own flair and deception, to give his smaller college teams an advantage over the big boys. Woodson's invention was called the Wing T, and it was designed to use the threat of the pass, team speed and misdirection to take advantage of the defense. It was still a rushing offense, but could rely on the pass if necessary – a now proven way to prevent the defense from stacking against the run.

Woodson's Wing T moved one of the backs (wingback) a few yards wide of the end. There the wingback was a better receiver, but also in ideal position for blocking on sweeps, taking hand offs on reverses, or for wide sweeps run off motion to the opposite side. Woodson's early version employed two tight ends to provide power blocking. Later schemes, popularized by David Nelson's Delaware Wing T, replaced one tight end with a wide receiver lined up 4-5 yards wide of the tackle.

In 1941, Woodson was offered and accepted the head coaching job at Hardin Simmons University in Abilene. He replaced "the Mighty Dutchman" Frank Kimbrough who, having led the Cowboys to a 9-0 record in 1940, moved on to Baylor. Woodson installed the Wing T at HSU and his first team finished the season 7-3-1, good for fourth in the Border Conference.

With recruits pouring in, Woodson's program was now ready to compete with much larger colleges, including those in the Southwest Conference. In 1942 the Cowboys went undefeated at 8-0-1, and won the Border Conference title. Football experts were shocked with the record, which featured wins over Baylor and SMU, and a tie with powerful Texas Tech. HSU finished 24th in the final AP football poll. In the process, they led the nation in rushing offense and had the top rusher in single season history in Rudolph 'Doc' Mobley.

Although glorious, the 1942 season would lead to

problems. By years end, the Cowboys were depleted by players leaving for military enlistment. Even so, Hardin Simmons received an invitation to the Sun Bowl in El Paso. It proved to be a classic game replete with fanfare and patriotism.



Military Band at 1943 Sun Bowl

HSU was matched against the undefeated 2nd Air Force Superbombers, a powerful team with many former collegiate and professional players now serving in World War II. The Superbombers may have been the best football team west of the Mississippi. Their record in 1942 had no losses, and only one blemish, a tie with Washington State. They won the Pacific Army title with a victory over March Field.

Unfortunately for HSU, Coach Woodson had been called to active duty with the Navy before the game. The 1943 Sun Bowl was dubbed the "Win for Woodson" Bowl by HSU. The Cowboys coach for the Sun Bowl was assistant Clark Jarnagin. At 28, Jarnagin was the youngest man ever to coach in a postseason bowl game. The Sun Bowl lived up to its name. The weather was extremely sunny and hot.



1943 Sun Bowl Program

The attendance at Kidd Field was at capacity, 16,000. The game was the only bowl in 1943 that featured two undefeated teams.

The Cowboys were led by freshman fullback Camp Wilson and 'Doc' Mobley at halfback. They swarmed over the Bombers in the second quarter and led 7-0 after Wilson scored over left

tackle. Outplayed, the Bombers trailed through three quarters, but used their bulk and strength to wear down the Cowboys and come from behind. At the final gun, the Bombers had scored a battering 13-7 victory.

All proceeds from the game went to WW II relief funds. Woodson read about the game from afar, no doubt agonizing over his inability to be in El Paso and call the plays.

In late 1942, at age 39, Woodson had been commissioned as a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy. He served as a senior physical training officer for three years, primarily in Texas and the Gulf Coast states. The Hardin Simmons football program was canceled during WW II from 1943-45. But, Woodson's military contacts and experience proved valuable in his ability to recruit veterans for his future teams. These veterans were stronger, heavier and more mature than typical college freshman. They were instrumental to Woodson's success at Hardin Simmons in the mid-to- late '40s and later at Arizona in the mid '50s.

Woodson returned to Hardin Simmons in 1946 with new recruits, more ideas, and even more confidence in his ability to lead. He was feted at a Kiwanis Club luncheon in Abilene. Woodson said that returning to football after the War was "like a revival." He was not specific about prospects for the season, but did say he had 55 players, all but seven of whom were veterans.

Following Woodson's talk, a Kiwanis member and Methodist layman, Nib Shaw, rose and spoke in a complaining tone. To a hushed audience, Shaw said Woodson had stolen many Methodist boys to play at a Baptist college, Hardin Simmons. Now, his alma mater, Methodist McMurry College was suffering. Moreover, Woodson had supposedly promised to not pay any recruit more than \$200 a month, with a \$1,000 bonus at season's end. Other coaches at McMurry and Abilene Christian had lived up to the promise, but not Woodson. For awhile, those at the luncheon were silent, thinking Shaw was serious. They looked at a scowling Woodson, who suddenly chuckled. The pent up tension exploded in laughter, and Woodson joined in.

Actually, there was more truth to the payoff banter than anyone cared to admit. Virtually every school across the country was into paying players, especially veterans. The post WW II "football monster," most obvious at Oklahoma and other 'football factories' anxious to gain national recognition, had been born.

Woodson's 1946 Cowboy team went on a tear, finishing the regular season undefeated at 11-0. They capped the year with a 20-0 shutout of Denver in the first Alamo Bowl in San Antonio. 'Doc' Mobley, now a mature man after his military service, was the national leader in rushing yet again.

How good a coach was Warren Woodson at Hardin Simmons? In an article in October 1997 by Al Pickett of the Abilene Reporter-News, legendary Texas high school football coach Gordon Wood gave testimony: "Warren Woodson may be the best offensive coach... ever..." said Wood.

Wood and Coach Al Milch explained how Woodson's Wing T differed from the one Darrell Royal later made famous at Texas. "He changed the game with the cross-block," said Milch, who played for and coached with Woodson at HSU. "There would be a cross between the tackle and the guard." We would fake it on the other side, too, so the defense didn't know which way the back was going. In 1942 we beat both SMU and Baylor because they didn't know how to handle the cross-block." "He was a motivator," Milch said. "I've never seen anyone with the ideas he had for games."

Hardin Simmons finished 8-3 in 1947, second in the Border Conference. Halfback Wilton Davis led the nation in rushing with 1,173 yards, the third time in a row an HSU back won the title. The Cowboys were sixth in the nation in total offense and fifth in rushing offense. They went bowling yet again, this time against San Diego State in the Harbor Bowl in San Diego where they crushed the Aztecs, 55-0.

Throughout the 1940s, Warren and Muriel continued to play tennis, often together. They won several age group doubles titles in Texas tournaments. Woodson was reported to have annually challenged the best Cowboys' tennis player, winning often in singles matches.

Woodson believed in a healthy, balanced diet – he ate large portions of fresh fruits and vegetables long before such things became popular on TV and the internet. He urged his players to eat healthy foods and to avoid smoke and drink. Woodson also extolled Christian values. It was all part of Woodson's football program and the discipline he believed necessary to win.

Woodson's 1948 team had a 4-2-2 regular season record, finishing only fifth in the Border Conference. Wilton Davis was fifth in the nation in rushing with 889 yards. Quarterback Johnny Ford was eighth in the

nation in passing. The Cowboys also had Bob Machesney, all-Conference end who finished third in the nation in receiving. Woodson's passing offense was taking hold. The more balanced running and passing attack would be the hallmark of his future coaching years at Arizona and New Mexico State.

Despite the 'down year' in 1948, HSU played in three bowl games. The Cowboys featured six sets of brothers, all military veterans. For this group of veterans, Woodson's ambitious postseason scheduling was not a problem. They packed into a converted WW II Army transport plane, and flew from Abilene to the Grape Bowl in Lodi, California, on December 4. On December 18 they flew to the Shrine Bowl in Little Rock, Arkansas. Finally, HSU flew to the Camellia Bowl in Lafayette, Louisiana on December 30.

"He was very receptive to the bowls, and so was the team," recalled 80-year old ex-wingback Paul Petty in 2008. "Actually, we would have liked to have played in another one, I think. "There was a row of seats on each side of the plane, with nothing in the middle," said Petty. "It wasn't too comfortable."

The Cowboys opened their postseason with a 35-35 tie against Pacific at the Grape Bowl. Hardin-Simmons led 21-0 but had to rally to tie after losing the lead to Pacific, which was led by future Dallas Cowboys quarterback Eddie LeBaron. Two weeks later, HSU beat Ouachita 40-12 in the Shrine Bowl at Little Rock, and then topped Wichita 49-



HSU stars Ford and McChesney

12 in the Camellia Bowl at Lafayette. Petty played a full 60 minutes in both of those games and had an interception return for a score against Ouachita.

The multiple bowl games had never had been done before. A year later, the NCAA passed a rule limiting college teams to one bowl appearance per year.

With the pool of veterans diminishing and big money being spent by competitors, Woodson's Cowboy teams

in 1949-51 were not as successful, finishing 6-4-1, 5-5, and 6-6, respectively. They did manage third and second place finishes in the Border Conference in 1949 and 1951.

After the 1951 season, the University of Arizona called to offer Woodson the head coaching job in Tucson. Apparently, HSU's consistent wins over Arizona and Arizona State persuaded Arizona that he was the man for the job. And Woodson liked the prospects of a better funded program. However, he realized that he would effectively be giving up recruiting in talent-rich Texas. This would prove to be a factor that was difficult to overcome. He would also be giving up a level of control of the program. At HSU he had been largely his own boss, surrounded by friends and supportive boosters. At Arizona he would be stepping into unknown territory.

Woodson would spend five years in Tucson. At 26-22-2, his teams were not as successful as at HSU, but there were some highlights. In 1953, in front of a statewide television audience, the Wildcats defeated arch-rival Arizona State 34-0 -- the first of three straight wins over the Sun Devils. The Wildcats would sweep New Mexico all five years of Woodson's tenure. And the Wing T continued to produce records. In his first start for Woodson, halfback Art Lupino (aka the "Cactus Comet") gained 228 yards on six carries and scored 32 points. Lupino went on to win national rushing titles in 1954 and 1955, and led the nation in all purpose yards, scoring, and kick returns in 1954.

At Arizona, Woodson once again focused on recruitment of military veterans. His 1952 squad included only four non-veterans. Many of the veterans had served in the Korean War, were married, and had young children. Woodson also reached out to New Mexico's few premier players. He recruited quarterback Skip Corley from Las Cruces in 1952. In 1955, he landed the 'all everything' athlete Sal Gonzales from Anthony Gadsden and a talented quarterback, Lionel Romero, from St. Mary's in Albuquerque.

In the early and mid '50s, NCAA recruiting rules were lax, as were rules on scholarships and 'spending money.' It is unclear whether Coach Woodson's 'cash drawer' was a new thing at Arizona or whether it had started at HSU -- probably the latter. Several on his early '50s team at Arizona said that Woodson dispersed small amounts to players, but only at his discretion and for what he deemed to be worthy reasons. The veteran players got larger amounts because of their needs for family support.



Coach Woodson

The money was provided by the Tucson Town Cats boosters.

Such goings on were common at the larger football playing schools at the time. And Woodson felt no qualms about needing to compete with such schools on an equal footing. In the mid '50s, a scandal involving large under-the-table payments to athletes at USC, UCLA, California, and Washington made the headlines.

Star halfback Jon Arnett of USC was one of the players receiving large payments. He was suspended for half the season in 1956. Arnett had been the favorite to win the Heisman Trophy, but instead the award went to Paul Hornung of 2-9 Notre Dame. Given the Golden Boy's later 'transgressions' and the hidden dealings at Notre Dame, it was ironic.

Woodson's relationship with the Town Cats and the Arizona administration gradually soured as his teams struggled to win games against the bigger-name opponents now on the UA schedule. Booster advice and criticism was met with biting rejoinders by Woodson. In 1956 when Arizona lost to Arizona State 20-0 and Colorado 38-7 (both fine squads), the situation deteriorated. Woodson was relieved as head coach and reassigned to "other duties." He cooled his heels in 1957 awaiting another opportunity.

In 1958, that opportunity came with an offer to coach at New Mexico A&M (soon to be New Mexico State). Woodson accepted with the knowledge that he would be in full charge, negotiating a deal that included the job of athletic director. New Mexico State, which had a good football record before the War, was woeful afterwards. The Aggies were a combined 29-85-1 over the 1946-57 period with many humiliating drubbings by Border Conference teams. That was about to change.

Woodson installed his Wing T and beefed up the defense. The Aggies, while lacking in talent and depth, made a credible showing in 1958. They lost close games to New Mexico, Arizona State, West Texas, and Hardin Simmons, but defeated UTEP for the first time since 1946. The Aggies completed the year at 4-6.

Most importantly, Woodson was recruiting good players, the best of which was quarterback Charley Johnson. Johnson had played football previously at

Schreiner Institute in Texas, but had not yet made a name as a quarterback. He soon would. Biding his time learning the Wing T, he took a few lumps as the Aggies quarterback in 1958. But the clever Johnson would lead the Aggies to glory in 1959 and 1960.

The previous coach at NMSU, Tony Cavallo, had developed recruiting inroads in Pennsylvania. Woodson took advantage and enlarged upon that pipeline. Players like Pete Smolanovich, Lou Zivkovich (later of Playgirl centerfold fame), Don Yanessa, and David Thompson showed up in Las Cruces. Other Woodson players included the bruising Kelly brothers, Joe and Bob from Carlsbad, and a number of small, though fast linemen from New Mexico and Texas like Floyd Strickland, Carl Covington, Jimmy Campbell, Allan Sepkowitz, and J.W. Witt. Morris Hodgson, running back from Texarkana by way of Long Beach State, was switched to linebacker by Woodson. Hodgson and Woodson did not get along at all initially due to the position change, but later, Hodgson became a Woodson favorite and stayed on at NMSU as a coach and assistant AD.

Sal Gonzales followed Woodson to NMSU from Arizona. Bruising lineman Billie Ray Locklin, previously recruited from Texas, was on the squad along with the rugged end E. A. Sims and future Cowboys and Rams kicker, Danny Villanueva.

Along with Charley Johnson, Woodson's other coup was signing the talented halfback tandem of Bob Gaiters and Pervis Atkins from Santa Ana JC in California. Alum Harry Skinner had noticed Gaiters at a game and called Woodson with a recommendation. Gaiters agreed to come for a visit and brought along his pal, Atkins. Woodson liked what he saw and offered scholarships to both. Bob and Pervis spent four uneasy nights amongst the sounds and smells of the farm animals on the NMSU campus wondering what they'd gotten into. But they stuck it out and made history. Atkins would lead the nation in rushing in 1959, with Gaiters winning the scoring and rushing titles in 1960.

While Woodson did not preach religion to his players, he made it a point to promote Christian values and suggest that they should attend church. When Atkins joined the squad, Woodson asked if he had a church in mind to attend in Las Cruces. Atkins said no, not yet. Woodson said in that case, Pervis should join him, Muriel, and daughter Dawn at his Baptist church. The next Sunday, the four entered church together. This was

the late '50s and it was unusual to see a black person in a predominantly white church. But despite a few fleeting glances, the congregation welcomed him and the Woodsons.

Woodson continued to innovate with the Wing T, adding pulling and new cross blocking schemes for the running game. He insisted on passing at least 20 times a game, with a minimum of seven passes in the first quarter. A devastating running play, run off a pass fake, involved Charley Johnson raising the ball quickly over his head to freeze the defense, then handing off on a draw to Gaiters.

Atkins was a great receiver and a threat to score off the wingback reverse, sometimes run with fake pulls in the other direction to make the defense think it was yet another power sweep. Johnson ran the option pitch smoothly, but added a maneuver where he ran laterally toward the pitch spot, only to jump and throw a short pass across the middle to either E.A. Sims or Bob Kelly. The bread and butter play was either the power sweep with Gaiters led by the fullback and pulling linemen, or the off tackle plunge often run at an angle to take advantage of the cross block.

The 1959 team finished the season at 8-3 with a Sun Bowl victory over North Texas State and future AFL star Abner Haynes. The Aggie defense was spectacular in that game, causing eight North Texas fumbles, six recovered by NMSU.

Earlier that year, the Aggies beat UNM for the first time in 19 years, with Atkins scoring on a long run on the first Aggie offensive play -- a wingback reverse. They lost a close game to their other arch rival Texas Western and another to Arizona State. Both losses would be avenged in 1960. Playing at both wingback and tailback, Pervis Atkins led the nation in rushing and all purpose yardage. For good measure, he kicked off and played a mean defensive back.

With the 28-8 Sun Bowl victory resounding, and with many experienced seniors returning, it was obvious that Woodson's team was loaded and ready for a banner season in 1960.

NMSU opened the season in Las Cruces against the University of Mexico Pumas, a team they played the previous year in Mexico City. The Pumas were game but unable to match the Aggies size and speed. Gaiters and Atkins broke many long runs and accounted for three touchdowns. Johnson hit Bob Kelly with two touchdown

passes and the Aggie defense, featuring hard-hitting Bob Jackson and Bob Langford as linebackers, had their way. The game ended with a 41-0 Aggie victory.

The next week, the Aggies were in Oklahoma to take on a strong Tulsa team. The Aggies exploded offensively, and led in the second quarter 19-0 before Tulsa scored to make it 19-7 at the half. NMSU finished the game with a flurry. Gaiters scored four touchdowns and Johnson passed for another in a 38-18 victory. Tulsa coach Bobby Dobbs was wowed by the Aggies offense. He called Atkins the best football player in America.

Trinity University was the next opponent. They lost to the Aggies 45-0. It was another offensive show, but the defense, which had been superb all year, came up big again. Kelly, Langford and Strickland tackled the Trinity quarterback in the end zone three times for safeties.

The Aggies picked up a fourth consecutive win (seventh counting the last three in 1959) with a 34-0 drubbing of I-25 rival New Mexico.



Atkins and Sims against UNM

The game was played at brand new University Stadium in Albuquerque before an all-time New Mexico record crowd of 27,000. Johnson threw touchdown passes to Sims and Atkins. Atkins scored on a 67-yard punt return and a two-yard dive. The 210-lb Gaiters bulled over several Lobo defenders on a 71-yard touchdown run.

Over the next two weeks, the Aggies defeated McMurry College and Wichita State by scores of 47-17 and 40-8, respectively. After the Wichita game, Shockers coach Hank Foldberg warned Woodson that his team

would get even next year. Woodson replied, "Why, of course Henry. Of course. That's what football is all about."

It was now mid October, and Woodson's team was no longer a secret. Sports Illustrated sent Roy Terrell to write a story and report on the NMSU-Arizona State game set for Tempe on October 29, 1960. The November 7 story, entitled "The Team the Pros Watch" had a fine summary of the heroics by Atkins, Johnson, Gaiters, and Kelly. Terrell delved into Woodson's personality, saying he was called "an ornery old moss-backed so-and-so, even by his friends. His enemies prefer not to discuss him at all." Terrell went on to say that "Woodson fits no one's conception of a coach. Now 57, he is a man of average height and weight, his brown hair is thinning and turning gray at the temples. He speaks in a soft, high-pitched, drawling voice. He wears glasses and dresses in neat, conservative clothes. He does not drink or smoke or use profanity (I don't know how a man can sound that mean without cussin' one of his players once said)."

ASU and NMSU traded long scoring drives in the first half, which ended with the score tied at 14-14. Tension built for what proved to be an unbelievable second half. A 20-yard field goal gave the Sun Devils the lead 17-14 early in the third quarter. After an Aggie drive stalled, ASU promptly drove for what seemed to be the winning touchdown in the early part of the fourth quarter. ASU led 24-14. However, on the ensuing kickoff the speedy Atkins returned the ball 98 yards for an Aggie score.



Atkins on 98-Yd Kickoff Return

After an exchange of fumbles, one by NMSU at their 17-yard line, the second by ASU at the NMSU two-yard line, the brilliant Atkins struck again. He took a hand off and raced 71 yards before being pulled down deep in Sun Devil territory. Johnson then hit Kelly for two diving catches, the second for a score. A final ASU drive ended with an interception by Bob Langford and the Aggies ran out the clock for a 27-24 victory. Atkins was named AP Back of the Week, recognition that would lead to first-team All American honors by season's end.

NMSU remained undefeated in the following weeks

with 35-15 and 40-3 wins over West Texas State and Hardin Simmons. Gaiters led the way in these games with five touchdowns. Johnson passed for four more touchdowns, and Atkins returned a punt 70 yards for another. Again, the unheralded defense played well. Hodgson returned an interception 32 yards for a touchdown in the HSU game.

NMSU's final game of the regular season was in Las Cruces against arch rival Texas Western and future pro quarterback John Furman. Gaiters and Jackson teamed to overcome an early Miner lead with tough running, and Sims scored what proved to be the winning touchdown on a 14-yard pass from Johnson. Gaiters added an insurance score and the Aggies hung on for a 27-15 victory. The win extended NMSU's winning streak to 13-games. And it gave the Aggies their first undefeated regular season since 1923.

After a flirtation with a Sugar Bowl invitation the Aggies settled for a second straight Sun Bowl appearance against a tough Utah State squad. The Utags finished 9-1 and won the Skyline Conference championship. They featured future College Football Hall of Famers -- Coach John Ralston and the great tackle Merlin Olsen. The game got regional television coverage, a rarity in those days. On a beautiful New Years Day 1961 at sold out Kidd Field in El Paso, Utah State struck first to take a 7-0 lead in the first quarter. NMSU answered early in the second quarter to make the score 7-7. Utah State used a bruising running game to regain the lead at halftime, 13-7.

In the third quarter, NMSU's Gaiters showed why he was the national leader in scoring and rushing. On a last second option pitch from Johnson, Gaiters ran through and over several tacklers, and scored from the Utah State 32-yard line. It gave the Aggies their first lead of the game, 14-13. A Johnson pass to Sims finally secured the game for NMSU, 20-13. A last ditch Utah State drive died in NMSU territory with two minutes left. Johnson, who completed 18 of 26 passes for 190 yards and two scores, was named Sun Bowl MVP for the second straight year.

The 1960 Aggies finished the season 11-0 and were ranked 17th in the final national college polls. Seven members of the starting offensive team would go on to play professional football. Johnson would set many passing records for the St. Louis Cardinals, make All Pro, and be inducted into the Denver Broncos Ring of Honor. Atkins and Gaiters played in the College All Star

game in Chicago. Atkins would sign and play for the Los Angeles Rams and Gaiters would be Rookie of the Year with the NY Giants in 1961. Woodson was named Small College Coach of the Year.

While Woodson's 1960 Aggie team was his best, the



QB Charley Johnson

records continued to accumulate in the years following. James 'Preacher' Pilot won the national rushing title as an Aggie tailback in 1961 and 1962, the fourth year in a row that a Woodson-coached player won that title.

Woodson's Aggie teams went 38-27-1 in the years

1961-67. But the 1962 and 1963 teams had losing records, hampered by NCAA sanctions imposed in 1961 for alleged

admission irregularities and financial assistance to players. According to Dr. Simon Kropp's book, *That All May Learn* (p. 369), "Glee f ul chortling came



Gaiters and Atkins

from Albuquerque where it was said that Pervis Atkins and other Negro athletes, unable to meet the University of New Mexico's academic requirements were "lured" to NMSU."

President Corbett denied the charges having to do with enrollment and academics. But NMSU's appeals came to naught. The Aggies were placed on three-year probation and not allowed to compete in NCAA championships or invitational events, and banned from television broadcasts. Given the demise of the Border

Conference and the formation of the Western Athletic Conference (with no invitation forthcoming for NMSU), these were not harsh sanctions. However, they no doubt hurt recruiting and scheduling in the early and mid-'60s. The entire probation affair, and the implication that Atkins was somehow given special treatment and 'passed through' NMSU academically is shrouded in mystery to this day. Atkins graduated from NMSU and went on to a very successful career in the film and entertainment business in California. In April 2009 he was selected for induction into the National Football Foundation College Hall of Fame.

There are those that swear that the Aggies' "dear friends" at UNM were involved behind the scenes in complaining to the NCAA about NMSU admission policies. The long-time Registrar at NMSU, Era Rentfrow was considered beyond reproach by all who knew her. Certainly, the issue of modest amounts of financial aid to players at a small school like NMSU was not enough to elicit probation. Virtually every football-playing school in America was into it. NCAA regulations were lax and largely overlooked except in the most egregious of circumstances (e.g., the Jon Arnett affair at USC).

During the last three years of Woodson's tenure at NMSU, from 1965-67, the Aggies had recovered from probation and were winning football games -- a sparkling 22-7-1 record. Halfback Jim Bohl was among the leading rushers in the nation in 1965 and 1966, and quarterback Sal Olivas led a fine passing attack during the same period. Olivas would play in the North-South All Star game and go on to play pro football.

In what would be Woodson's last game as head coach in 1967, NMSU clobbered the Lobos 54-7 in Albuquerque. The game led to bitter feelings at UNM when Woodson had local Rio Grande High graduate Al Gonzales kick a field goal with the game already more than over at 51-7. Lobo Coach Bill Weeks, who would be fired after the defeat, was incensed. Woodson calmly reasoned that he just wanted Gonzales to get a little attention in front of his local friends and family. In other words, revenge was sweet for the Lobos role in urging NCAA sanctions against NMSU in 1961.

Although the record is unclear, the controversial UNM game probably brought things to a boil in Las Cruces. Woodson and NMSU Vice President Bill O'Donnell had disagreed on several issues over the years, leading to bad blood between the two. Woodson

wasn't shy in confronting O'Donnell about his flaws and management style. O'Donnell and President Roger Corbett conferred with the regents and others about asking Woodson to retire. After all, they could say he was 65 years old -- technically the retirement age for faculty and staff at NMSU. But Woodson was still vigorous, committed to football and NMSU, and did not have retirement in his plans. And he was still ornery.

The situation stewed for a few weeks before Woodson reluctantly agreed to step down in December 1967. Morris Hodgson, an assistant coach on a recruiting trip to California remembers a phone call. Woodson said, "Morris come on home". Morris replied, "But coach, I'm not through recruiting out here". Woodson replied, "Yes you are, Morris. We've been fired".

There was lots of grumbling in Las Cruces, and most was pro-Woodson. His top assistant was Jim Wood, All American end at Oklahoma State in 1958. Woodson brought Wood to NMSU from his coaching position in junior college in California, along with Wood's star halfback Jim Bohl. Lou Henson, hired by Woodson in 1966 as basketball coach after a great run at Las Cruces High and Hardin Simmons, took over as athletic director. While neither Henson nor Wood was publicly accused of undermining Woodson, some said that "it proved very handy" to have both around when the decision was made to force Woodson's retirement.

President Corbett announced that he was "deeply pleased that he (Woodson) will be available to our new staff as a consultant" and that Warren Woodson "has lifted NMSU from small college to major college status." Never one for political correctness, Woodson released a statement stating that Corbett had "seen fit to retire me as both coach and athletic director" and that "I am at the peak of my coaching career today" and "am looking for a football coaching job right now."

Woodson was quickly hired as athletic director at Trinity University in San Antonio. After watching for several years, he took over as football coach. In his first year, 1972, Trinity went 8-2 and won the Southland Conference title. In his last year Woodson's Trinity team

had a fine record of 8-3. Despite the success, interest and support for Trinity football was waning. San Antonio fans were more interested in traveling to Austin to watch Texas or to the many local high school games. The Trinity Board of Trustees voted unanimously to de-emphasize athletics. No scholarships would be offered in football after 1972 other than those already awarded. It was a melancholy time for Woodson who saw the end in sight.

In an October 2, 1972 article in Sports Illustrated, Joe Jares quoted Woodson. "It is up to me to carry on as well as I can. This is all new to me. I'm interested in learning how it will turn out." In the mean time, Woodson did what he loved most, doodling with plays on pieces of paper and losing himself in the world of football played between chalked lines.

Jares said that a Trinity fan had walked into Woodson's office one day and found him talking to his quarterback, Charlie Bump. "Hi, Charlie," said the fan. "How's it going?" "Fine," said Bump. "What do you mean, fine?" growled Woodson. "We lost a football game Saturday night." "Well, everything's fine but football." "What else is there but football?" asked Woodson.

In his retirement years, he wrote a book, *Victory Offense: The Complete Football Coaching Manual*. Upcoming coaches would do well to find and study this rare book.

Woodson was inducted into the National Football Foundation College Hall of Fame in 1989. He died in 1998 a few days before his 95th birthday. College

football lost a great innovator, motivator, and a fabulous football coach. We may never see his like again.

Heaven knows, we Aggie fans miss you Coach. If you're up there looking down, please call off ***The Curse***. NMSU football would really appreciate your help.



Woodson at Aggie Memorial Stadium