

The Orange County Register October 27, 1994	
Edition: MORNING Section: SPORTS Page: D01 Copyright 1994 The Orange County Register Record Number: OCR575689	

NO WALK IN THE PARK

COLLEGE FOOTBALL: Non-scholarship players put in a lot of work for so little reward.

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The Orange County Register

Dateline: Los Angeles, CA

During a drill for the USC defense a couple of years ago, scout team member Tony Gnau held off Willie McGinest long enough for a running back to sweep around the end and make a long gain for a touchdown.

"I didn't block McGinest as much as I just got in his way," recalled Gnau, about 50 pounds lighter than the former USC star defensive end.

So how was Gnau rewarded for his demonstration of pluck and nerve?

"A coach hollered out, 'Run the play again,' " Gnau said. "This time, McGinest just pulverized me."

Such is the lot of that lowest form of life in major-college football _ the non-scholarship players, best known as "walk-ons."

They hardly ever play on Saturdays. Their role is to serve as practice cannon fodder for the recruited, scholarship athletes who comprise most of the squad and for whom the yearly tuition at USC of about \$21,000 is waived.

"They're like a volunteer army, in a way," said Tim Prukop, the USC assistant coach who is closest to the Trojans walk-ons. "They do it because they like to play football, even though they know there's very little likelihood they'll ever get into a game.

"Their role is to help the regular players get ready for games, make them better. We move them around to different positions depending on where we need them."

Gnau, who has played on offense and defense and as a snapper in practice for the quarterbacks and kickers, knew what was in store when he temporarily impeded McGinest that afternoon two years ago.

"The coaches want Willie to make a hit on that play," Gnau said of the eventual first-round draft choice of the NFL's New England Patriots. "They don't want him kept out. They want to have him tackle me. That's what I'm there for."

Gnau, a 5-10, 200-pound senior from a Chicago suburb, has been there for that purpose _ and has the bruises to prove it _ since reporting to his first practice session with the Trojans in 1991.

When he and about 15 other current USC walk-ons _ among them tailback Jess Holguin, fullback George Felactu and wide receiver Benji DeBord _ report for practice, they know they must leave their egos at the entrance to Howard Jones Field.

"We like walk-ons, but they have to be realistic about why they're doing it," Coach John Robinson said.

"They have to know the chances they'll play in a game are very small, at best maybe on special teams. I've run guys off when they come in and ask to try out. Even some I've told can practice every day have gotten angry after a couple of weeks when they find out they're not gonna do any more than what they're doing."

But always there is hope.

For example, USC can blow out a team, as it did Cal, 61-0, Saturday at the Coliseum.

In the final quarter, several players who had never appeared in a game saw action _ "everybody with a red jersey I could see," Robinson said.

Gnau got into last season's Washington State game at the Coliseum _ in the final moments of a game the Trojans won, 34-3.

"I snapped for our last punt," Gnau said, "and then I went down and assisted on the tackle of the return guy."

He made his second game appearance Saturday, tackling Cal's Na'il Benjamin for no gain after USC's final punt.

One of the new faces in the Cal game was Holguin, the tailback who had scored that touchdown in practice two years ago behind Gnau's "block" of McGinest.

This time, Holguin scored one for real. With 31 seconds left, he raced seven yards around right end for the Trojans' final touchdown.

Though hit short of the goal line, he stretched both hands and the ball across the line as he fell. Wolfgang Von Aspe, another walk-on, threw the block that sprung Holguin loose.

"This is the biggest moment of my life," Holguin, a 5-8, 175-pound junior from Walnut, said after the game. "Even if I never get into another game, this makes it all worth it."

The identity of the last USC walk-on to score a touchdown was unavailable in school records.

Holguin is the first USC walk-on to score since J.J. Dudum kicked four extra points in 1991 filling in for injured scholarship kicker Cole Ford.

Redshirt sophomore Jeff Diltz, a backup tight end for the Trojans, walked on as a freshman two years ago.

Last year, after he had added considerable weight and strength, Diltz was awarded a scholarship by Robinson. In Saturday's game against Cal, he scored the first TD of his USC career, on an 11-yard pass from third-string quarterback Matt Koffler.

"I know the fact I'm 6-5, 245, helps," Diltz said. "In that sense I'm probably not a typical walk-on. But coach Robinson and his son (tight ends coach David Robinson) really encouraged me."

And then there's the story of Gordon Adams, practically an icon among USC walk-ons.

He went from being a 1976 walk-on with little chance to play to starting quarterback on scholarship in 1980.

"A story like that gives us all hope," said Felactu, a 5-9, 230-pound junior walk-on fullback from Rancho Palos Verdes.

In weight-lifting drills before the season, Felactu bench-pressed 405 pounds, third highest on the team, behind starting offensive linemen Norberto Garrido and Tony Boselli.

Felactu, whose career highlight is a tackle of Notre Dame fullback Ray Zellars on a kick return last year in South Bend, has this fantasy about a way the Trojans could best use his powerful upper body.

"If we're fourth and 1 at the goal line, just give me the ball and I'll score," he said.

Another Felactu fantasy has to do with maintaining his strength the way Garrido and Boselli do.

They and the other scholarship players are able to stay better nourished than the walk-ons because they can eat the steaks, prime rib and pasta provided at the post-practice training table.

Walk-ons? Well, there's always Burger King across the street from campus.

"Sometimes that gets us angry," Felactu said. "We're out there getting beat up and after practice you'd like to have a nice meal. But they don't let you."

An NCAA rule prohibits it, according to Pac-10 official Dean Diltz, no relation to the USC player.

"It's an economic thing," Diltz said.

So is travel.

"A team can take only 60 players on the road to a Pac-10 game, so that limits the chance a walk-on can make a road game in the conference," Diltz said.

It's a different policy for road games against traditional conference rivals _ for example USC-UCLA _ and all nonconference games, where revenues are potentially higher because of television.

In general, walk-ons could have played college football at schools below NCAA Division I, but chose to come to USC for other reasons.

Gnau, majoring in broadcasting, is a budding sportscaster who does baseball play-by-play and a pre-game football show for KSCR, the student station.

When the Trojans played Stanford in Palo Alto two weeks ago, Gnau was there _ not in uniform, but to call the game for KSCR, his first play-by-play experience for football.

Felactu will have his degree in business by spring and might forgo his final year of football eligibility to get an early start on his career.

Holguin preceded USC scholarship player Scott Fields as the starting tailback for the traditionally powerful football program at Bishop Amat High in La Puente.

"Army, which runs the wishbone, wanted him to go there, but he didn't want to commit to all those years in the military after school," said Holguin's father, Jess, Sr., a transportation sales executive. "He always wanted to go to USC and we believe in supporting our kids. Nobody was more thrilled than we were the other night when he scored that touchdown."

DeBord, in a way, has the best of both worlds. Like most of the other USC players, he is on scholarship. His is an academic one, which he is using to major in electrical engineering.

DeBord's academic talent aside, he understands the credo of the walk-on, the stoicism in the face of constant pounding that suggests more guts than brains:

"Regardless of how hard anyone hits you, you never want to let them know you're hurt," he said.