

Preps pack'em in: Estimated 50,000 watch football rivals play at Kezar in 1928

By Carl Steward - STAFF WRITER

ON THANKSGIVING Day in 1928, 18 years before the San Francisco 49ers would play their first game in the city, a whopping crowd estimated at more than 50,000 flooded into Golden Gate Park to watch a football game at glistening new Kezar Stadium.

Some other pro teams playing, perhaps? Nope. College teams like Cal and Stanford? Nope. The extraordinary mass of humanity, which showed up at 10:30 a.m. no less, assembled excitedly to watch archrivals Lowell and Polytechnic High Schools do battle for the city championship for the third straight year.

Lowell won 8-6, but the most noteworthy aspect of the game was the size of the crowd. Seventy-five years later, the gathering still stands as the largest crowd ever to see a high school football game in Northern California, even if the actual attendance assessment has been disputed.

"There's a possibility that it was exaggerated," said longtime California prep historian Nelson Tennis of Sacramento, who has done extensive research on the Lowell-Poly rivalry. "But those two schools did have a tremendous rivalry and drew huge crowds every year. Even if that 1928 crowd wasn't 50,000, there's not much doubt it was the largest ever in the north."

Three different San Francisco newspapers all delivered the 50,000 estimate in their game reports the following day, and as the Chronicle's Prescott Sullivan described, "the vast crowd filled all but the end sections of the Kezar Bowl." That would seem to suggest that the crowd guess was reasonably accurate, since at Kezar's official dedication in September 1928 capacity was listed as just shy of 60,000.

Several factors appear to have contributed to the extraordinarily large turnout, even for Lowell and Poly, which had been football rivals dating back into the 1800s. First, it was a beautiful November holiday.

Second, the rivalry had been building to a crescendo. A 1926 Kezar crowd of 15,000 for the Lowell-Poly game swelled to 30,000 in 1927. The 1928 game not only was for the city championship, a third school -- Galileo -- stood to gain a share of the title with a Poly victory.

Furthermore, a college game pitting Santa Clara and St. Mary's followed, although the crowd for that game paled in comparison to the prep clash. There is no question that the kids were the marquee event.

The two schools were little more than a mile apart in those days. They competed fiercely in a variety of activities, but football was the No. 1 grudge match. And the entire city paid attention.

"Remember, there was no pro football," said Tennis. "And Kezar was in fact built for the high schools."

Philanthropist Mary Kezar donated funds for the stadium for San Francisco high school teams in honor of her late husband, and the city matched it, providing a forum so grand it became the stage for many world-class sporting events and home for the fledgling 49ers two decades later.

The game that year between Poly and Lowell was a dandy. Victorious Lowell scored just a minute into the game on a 60-yard halfback option pass from team captain and game star Lee Valianos to Gil Dowd. The Cardinals added a second-quarter safety for an 8-0 and let their defense take over. Poly's only score came on a 50-yard fumble return in the third quarter.

Perhaps the game's most unusual quirk was that the quarterbacks for each team were brothers. Senior Bernard Wiesinger was under center for Poly, while sophomore Warren Wiesinger quarterbacked Lowell.

"Where they lived they had a choice of which school they could attend," explained Christie Wiesinger of Walnut Creek and wife of Bernard, who died in 1989. "Even though they loved each other very much, they were rivals as brothers and they were both good football players, too. Warren (who died in 1995) didn't want to be in Barney's shadow."

Ms. Wiesinger, interestingly, went to Lowell even though her husband, to whom she was married 56 years, was a Poly grad. And Bernard Wiesinger went on to play at USF while younger brother Warren played at Santa Clara, she maintains the two brothers never talked about the '28 prep classic.

"They were very private men and didn't brag about what they'd done," she said.

Lowell and Poly played every year on Thanksgiving Day until the 1950s, when they surrendered the date to the city championship game. That's still played at Kezar, albeit a significantly smaller venue today.