

The Undefeated Falcons of '58

College football has changed in the decades that have passed since the Falcons of the United States Air Force Academy fought their way to a 10-game undefeated season in 1958 (9-0-1). The season's capstone was an epic stalemate in the 1959 Cotton Bowl Classic, a scoreless tie against the TCU Horned Frogs, champions of the vaunted Southwestern Conference.

Perhaps because it was scoreless and because 60 years have passed, memories of that game have faded. So, too, has the legendary 'Cinderella story' of that Falcon team. In the pages that follow, articles gleaned from newspaper archives provide a remembrance and historic context of that glorious football season.

In 1958, the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) was entering its fourth year of operations; not a single cadet had graduated, and the entire Cadet Wing numbered 1,145 when it moved from WWII era barracks at Lowry AFB to its brand-new campus in August of that year¹. The new site, all aluminum and glass set against the Rampart Range of the Rocky Mountains, was a sight to behold, but there was no football stadium. Falcon Stadium did not open until 1962, and, as they had in their first 2 seasons, these Falcons played home games at various stadiums along the front range.

Their cumulative record after those first 2 seasons was 9-8-2 (*not including the 1955 season, when the first-year Falcons played other freshman teams, posting a 4-4 record*). They had no conference affiliation but played against respectable teams. Their inaugural season in 1956 (6-2-1)² opened with 6 consecutive victories. They were invited to appear in Pasadena's "Junior Rose Bowl", but the Pentagon had nixed that opportunity³. The 1957 season (3-6-1)⁴ opened against UCLA in LA's Memorial Coliseum, and featured contests against five mountain state schools, including future conference rivals Colorado State and Wyoming, No Air Force team had yet played a game against Army or Navy!

A new Coach, Ben Martin, took the reins of a football program entering its 3rd year as a varsity sport. Martin was only 37 years old at the time and had coached a total of 8 years. A 1946 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, he had served as an assistant at Annapolis for 6 years before becoming head coach for Virginia. After only 2 years at Virginia (6-13-1), Martin got the job he'd wanted when Buck Shaw, USAFA's varsity coach in its first 2 seasons, returned to coaching professional football. As a military academy graduate, Coach Martin had a deep appreciation for the vicissitudes of Cadet Life, and he made sure to inject some fun into practice routines (*See "For Falcons, Practice is Fun", Dallas Morning News, Dec 1, 1958*).

Not unlike Academy teams in the current era, the '58 Falcons were small compared to their opponents. None of them had been recruited only for their athletic abilities, and not one of them was contemplating a career as a professional football player. Unlike the current era, several of the Falcons played both ways. Quarterback Rich Mayo, a sophomore (3rd classman, in AFA terminology) also played safety on defense. There were only 37 Cadets on the travelling squad, and, as might be expected in a three-year-old program, the players were relatively young, with only seven seniors (1st classmen) on the starting units.

So, the small young team that had won only 3 games in the prior season and lost their head coach to the professional ranks began the 1958 season with modest expectations. The opening of the new campus in August had garnered national attention and no small amount of controversy as some members of congress balked at the funding. In an article published in the *Boston American* (Aug 29, 1958. P.29) concerning the new facilities remarked about plans for a future football stadium, "a comparatively small one seating 15 or 20 thousand because tremendous football crowds are not immediately discernible in this sparsely settled region."

Hopes were surely higher within the cadet wing as they settled into their new home, and higher still within the football team that was warming up to their new coach. Coach Martin planned a balanced attack, with plenty of passing. His experience with the Falcons began with spring practice in April, 1958, while the Academy was still located at Lowry AFB in Denver. What was about to unfold that fall was unanticipated and unimaginable.

In the following pages readers will find how the story of this most fantastic season of college football played out, as chronicled in newsprint of the era. In this collection, articles from the local newspapers (Denver and Colorado Springs) were not available.