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George Diaz

COMMENTARY

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Bigotry that once raged in Florida gave way Saturday to a breezy, accommodating afternoon.

A football team that wasn't welcome here 51 years ago feasted at a Hawaiian luau Friday night, then partook of a plentiful buffet of chicken, burgers and pasta Saturday afternoon at Bright House Networks Stadium.

Two teams showed up representing the University of Buffalo this weekend: The one that played the University of Central Florida Knights Saturday night. And the one that never got a chance to play.

That team — 34 strong among players, coaches and staff — gathered underneath a tent outside Bright House Networks Stadium to commemorate a road trip that took five decades to complete.

"We are so appreciative of this," said Gerry Gergley, a member of that team from 1958. "It's unbelievable. You don't know how happy they are."

Not so way back then. The Bulls had earned their first bowl bid in school history after accepting an invitation to play in Orlando's Tangerine Bowl against Florida State in 1958. But the Bulls never crossed our borders: The Orlando High School Athletic Association, which operated the Tangerine Bowl Stadium, would not allow the team's two black players, Willie Evans and Mike Wilson, to play. The South was still resistant to integration, and Orlando was no different.

So the team voted to stay home.

The journey for every player on that team would lead to different directions. Gergley stuck around for a bit. He ended up as Buffalo's wrestling coach, and an assistant football coach, between 1965 and 1970.

Then the school dropped football, and he started looking for a job. He sent 100 inquiries before hearing about this school that was opening up down south: Florida Technological University.



"I got on a plane and flew here," Gergley said. "I was hired as the head wrestling coach and assistant professor, making \$5,650."

Now 70, Gergley reflects on the past and the present with a unique perspective: He is a man of two worlds. A Buffalo grad who came to Florida and become one of the most honored coaches in University of Central Florida history. (The school was originally named FTU.)

"I gave my life to this place," he said. "I came here when I was 20. We worked hard for this place, a lot of effort a lot of promotion. I feel proud when I come back on campus now."

And UCF has much reason to be proud of him.

Gergley started the wrestling program in 1970. Meets were staged at a hanger in a high school. "When the toilet backed up there'd be poop all over the mat," he said.

Despite the ratty conditions, Gergley compiled a 108-42 career record and produced five All-Americans. His teams ranked among the nation's top-10 five times.

After the wrestling program was discontinued in 1985, he started the men's golf program in 1979 and coached that as well for two years, leading it to a Sunshine State Conference Championship.

He then became the school's first strength coach in 1983. He was inducted to the UCFAA Hall of Fame in 1993.

Now retired, he lives in Central Florida half of the year.

"To bring us back after we were discriminated against, this is so special," Gergley said. "I was fullback for Willie back then. I did a lot of blocking. I played cornerback, too. I got my first facemask at UB in 1958. Just look at my nose."

Gergley wasn't the only one reminiscing.

Evans doesn't see anything particularly courageous about what happened. He means no disrespect.

"We have gotten together Friday night at homecoming weekends to have a beer — it's more like ginger ale now — to wish each other well," Evans said. "We have a few laughs and go on our way. And we've done that for 50 years. And in all of that time not once has the Tangerine Bowl come up for discussion. Never. Not that we didn't avoid it, it just didn't linger."

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