

Island HAWAIIANS HOLD SPECIAL PLACE IN BRONCO FOOTBALL LORE Warriors

By Bob Evancho

hirty years ago Chester Grey, a freshman running back on the Boise State football team, stood on the Bronco Stadium field and gazed at the dark, wintry sky in amazement. "It was late November 1971 during practice; we were preparing for the Camellia Bowl," the Hawaii native recalls. "We were all bundled up because of the cold. We had just run a play, and all of a sudden this white stuff started coming out of the sky."

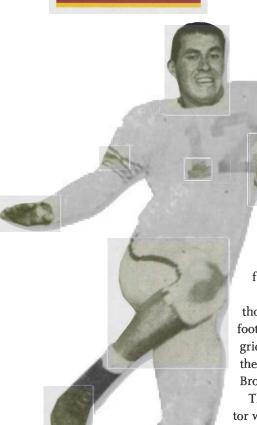
A newcomer to the mainland, Grey (BS, secondary education, '75) was mesmerized by the falling snow. "I looked up

and little flakes started floating through my face mask. I remember how neat I thought it was and how soft they felt on my face. I just stared at the sky, lost in the moment."

From a few yards away, head coach Tony Knap and some of his assistants watched in amusement. The 18-year-old Grey's one-with-nature experience lasted but a few seconds as Knap's voice pierced through the cold afternoon air. "Hey, Chester!" the coach yelled,



Carleton Ching in 1974.



ALOHA

Herb Halliwell in 1958.

trying not to laugh.
"Get back to the
huddle! We've got
plays to run!"
It wasn't the first

time the coach had witnessed one of his Hawaiian players reacting to his first snowfall.

It's called the Hawaii pipeline. Even those vaguely familiar with Boise State football lore are aware of the influx of gridiron talent that used to arrive from the Hawaiian Islands to play for the Broncos.

The late Peter Kim, a Hawaiian educator with Idaho ties, began the connection in the 1950s, sending hopeful young islanders to faraway Idaho and what was

then Boise Junior College — a place most of them had never seen — to play for a head coach many of them had never met. Fortunately for them, that coach happened to be Lyle Smith, or, beginning in 1968, Tony Knap.

The pipeline that once gushed a steady stream of football talent through the late '50s and into the '60s slowed to a trickle by the end of the '70s and has all but dried up today. But the legacy of the nearly 100 former student-athletes from Hawaii who ventured stateside to play Bronco football remains.

Thanks to Kim and his fondness for Idaho, the BJC football program was able to corner the market on the islands' high-school football talent pool for nearly two decades.

A star athlete for the College of Idaho in the late 1920s, Kim remained in the Treasure Valley for a number of years after he graduated from the Caldwell school, teaching and working in the area's high school coaching ranks. Meanwhile, Smith had taken over as BJC football coach in 1947 and began building one of the top junior-college programs in the United States. During Smith's early years at BJC, Kim returned to Hawaii to teach and coach, but before he departed, he approached the BJC coach about the possibility of recruiting Hawaiian football players for the Broncos, a

proposition to which Smith agreed.

Back on his home turf, Kim became the Treasure Valley's top salesman, telling high school football players with college aspirations about the great opportunities that were available at his alma mater and Boise Junior College—the up-and-coming two-year school 20 miles down the road. Among the athletes who took Kim's advice was George Tavares, who first matriculated at what is now Albertson College of Idaho in the early 1950s. In 1952 Tavares, now 70, transferred to BJC and became the first Hawaiian to play for the Broncos.

"When Pete returned to Hawaii he kept a soft spot in his heart for the Boise valley," says the legendary Smith. "For several years he sent Hawaiian players to both BJC and C of I."

A sales pitch by Kim and a letter from Smith to a prospect and his coach often did the trick. Since most of the Hawaiians with college football potential had never been to the mainland and college recruiters were not flocking to the islands, Smith's offer was enticing indeed. "Once those connection got started, the pipeline pretty much became self-perpetuating," says the 85-year-old Smith.

The infusion of Hawaiian student-athletes only made Smith's JC powerhouse that much more powerful. By 1967, Smith's last season as coach and BJC's final year in the junior-college ranks, approximately 50 Hawaiians — including All-Americans George Naukana, Herb Halliwell, Frank Kaaa, Milt Kanehe, Harry Keohola and Don Neves — played for the Broncos, and 15 of them were on the roster of BJC's undefeated 1958 national junior college championship team.

"The Hawaiian players had a tremendous impact on our success," says Smith. "They were outstanding competitors with a strong work ethic."

And when Knap took over in 1968, the tradition continued with more than 40 young islanders joining the program during his tenure.

"I inherited quite a few Hawaiian players from Lyle, and those players helped us recruit more of them," says the former coach from his home in Walla Walla, Wash. "Those kids helped form the backbone of the whole program. My perception was that they loved the school and they loved the city of Boise.

"They had a unique connection with each other. They would eat, sing, fight together. They were fun to be around, not only for the coaches, but also for the other players. There always seemed to be laughter when the Hawaiian players were around."

Because long-distance telecommunications, television and commercial air travel were just beginning to have their profound effect on society, Hawaii, by and large, was still perceived by many Americans — including college football recruiters — as some sort of exotic locale with uncultivated natives living in grass huts. While most college football programs didn't give much thought to the availability of standout football players from the islands, the Broncos were able to avail themselves of those talents for a number of years before the larger schools began to horn in.

According to Boise insurance company owner Len Chow, who joined the Bronco program after he graduated from Honolulu's St. Louis High in 1958, word of mouth was perhaps the school's best recruiting tool. The pipeline was primed by Tavares' arrival in 1952, and by the mid-1950s it was yielding a steady flow of Hawaiian athletes who told their fellow islanders about the little school in Boise that played kick-butt football. "Kids from Hawaii would go off and play at BJC and come back and tell other kids," says Chow, 61. "One of the reasons I ended up in Boise is because I had a couple of buddies [from Hawaii] who were already on the team. It was just a chain reaction."

Many of the Hawaiian recruits saw a scholarship to play college football as their ticket off the islands and, in some cases, a chance to escape their confined, hardscrabble existence. "A lot of them led ghetto lives; they saw going to BJC as an opportunity to go elsewhere and better themselves," says Chow, a backup guard on the 1958 national JC championship team.

Some, like Grey, a coach at Borah High, Chow and Tavares, who lives in Caldwell, fell for the charms of the Northwest and remained in the Boise area. Others moved elsewhere on the continent. Many returned to the islands and became teachers, coaches, businessmen, firemen. Three achieved success in professional football: David Hughes, a former player with the Seattle Seahawks,

Adam Rita, a coach and executive in the Canadian Football League, and Kimo von Oelhoffen, currently a defensive lineman with the Pittsburgh Steelers.



felt just the same.

Forty-eight hours before the University of Hawaii hosts Boise State, there is a reunion of ex-Broncos who returned to Hawaii. Their ages range from late 40s to mid-60s. The venerable Smith is here with his wife, Eleanor, for a reunion with his former players. The 86-year-old Knap isn't here, but his presence is

The ex-Broncos as this gathering came to Boise a lifetime ago — most of them as 17- and 18-year-olds who had never been off the islands. Almost all of them arrived in Idaho sight unseen to play football, to get a college education, to see the world.

Honolulu teacher Jacob Hoopai (BA, education, '71) calls his experience in Boise "the greatest time in my life." A guard and tackle from 1967-70, the 53-year-old was named the Broncos' most inspirational player his sophomore and senior seasons. What initially impressed him most, he says, was the Broncos' winning tradition. "We thought it would be great to play on an outstanding team like BJC. And in the long run, it was one of the best decisions I ever made."

At a November reunion prior to the Hawaii game former BJC coach Lyle Smith, right, visited with former players Abe Kealoha, top, and Willie Crozier, bottom.







