

M Is for Michigan Football: Celebrating the Tradition of Michigan Football

Greg Nelson

<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=1016205>

The University of Michigan Press, 2009.

Q&A with Greg Nelson, author of *M Is for Michigan Football: Celebrating the Tradition of Michigan Football*



M Is for Michigan Football explores 26 of the many traditions and highlights of the University of Michigan football program, the winningest in all of college football. The book features eye-popping photos, historical details and trivia about myriad Wolverine football traditions in alphabetical order—from beloved Coach Bo Schembechler (B), the annual border war with Ohio State (the Game) (G), Michigan’s 11 national championships (N), to zero—the number of losses suffered by the 1901 Wolverines in their undefeated, untied, and unscored-upon season (Z).

Greg Nelson, who was born in Jackson, Michigan and currently resides in Florida, is a Michigan fan and college football enthusiast who has been writing professionally for more than 25 years.

University of Michigan Press: What gave you the idea to write an A-Z book on UM football history?

Greg Nelson: Like any book, the idea originates from a love for your subject and I have been a huge Michigan fan and college football enthusiast my entire life. Growing up in Jackson and living just a short drive from Ann Arbor for the better part of 40 years, I had the pleasure of watching Michigan football every fall weekend. When you’re a kid growing up amidst the winningest program in college football history, it’s easy to generate enthusiasm. That was especially true for me as my interest in football was really starting to develop at the same time that Bo Schembechler was beginning his amazingly successful run as the Wolverine’s head coach.

Although I currently live in the Orlando area, today’s expansive media allows me to continue following the Wolverines and that interest has trickled down to my children. It was their enthusiasm that really pushed me to create this book. It was a unique opportunity to me to share that common interest while providing some fun history and insight into the program.

Of course, when you are dealing with a program that has had the success of Michigan and a school that has such an avid and enthusiastic fan base, it was evident that this was a book that had to be geared to the entire Wolverine populace and not just children. So while we maintained the initial A to Z format, we brought in additional content to appeal to every University of Michigan fan – and really any college football fan – regardless of age or university affiliation.

UMP: What is your favorite letter of the bunch and why?

GN: That’s a great question and I’m not sure I can narrow it down to just one.

I think all Michigan fans will enjoy the information provided for each of the 26 letters. But if I were to pick one – or in my case – two letters, I’d have to say letters Z and F. Both of these letters provide a unique historical perspective into the Michigan football program and both offer exceptional photographs that were obtained through the University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library.

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Letter Z represents ZERO which stands for the number of losses suffered by the 1901 Wolverines team. What makes that team so special, however, is that not only did those Wolverines finish a perfect undefeated season, but the defense allowed zero points. In fact, during that one incredible season, Michigan outscored its opposition by a whopping 550-0! The team went on to play Stanford in the very first Rose Bowl and didn't skip a beat. Michigan jumped out to a 49-0 lead before Stanford requested that the game be called after three quarters. In fact, it was such a lopsided victory for Michigan that the Rose Bowl was not played again for 15 years!

What's really intriguing to me about the letter Z is the photo that depicts Michigan's team riding in the now traditional Rose Bowl Parade. Unlike today's extravagant floats heavily laden with fresh roses, the Wolverines are shown riding high in a wooden carriage or wagon.

The letter F represents a similarly intriguing historical photo of former President of the United States, Gerald Ford. While most fans recognize Ford's past as a Wolverine, I don't believe he truly receives the accolades he deserves as a gridiron hero. An All American selection at UM, Ford anchored Michigan's teams on both sides of the ball, as a center and linebacker. He also helped lead the Wolverines to not one, but two undefeated seasons and two national championships!

UMP: What do you consider to be the most hotly debated question about Michigan football history?

GN: While many questions can be debated throughout the history of Michigan football, the question that merits the most discussion is the same question that is on the minds of almost every team's fans... who is the best quarterback?

This is a question that can be debated almost annually. Who should be leading the team? But it's also a question that can be looked at over time. What is it that makes one quarterback "better" than another? Is it the number of touchdown passes? Is it leadership qualities? Is it wins and losses? Everyone has an opinion.

Michigan has been blessed with a long list of great quarterbacks, many who have gone on to stellar careers in the National Football League. But who was the best quarterback at Michigan? Was it Tom Brady? Brian Griese? Rick Leach? Elvis Grbac? Todd Collins? Or was it a quarterback from an earlier era such as Pete Elliott or Benny Friedman?

Quarterback is a question that has been debated for as long as there has been football. And it's a question that will continue to be debated forever. It's also a question on our list in the book, and we'd like to hear the opinions of all Michigan fans, young and old. So log on to our online survey and let us know what you think.

UMP: Tell us about the online discussion questions and how they work.

GN: *M is for Michigan Football* is more than an educational tribute to the Wolverines storied history. It is meant to provide special memories for fans, allowing them an opportunity to look back to particular

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plays and moments in time...for example, watching Desmond Howard's now-famous Heisman pose in the end zone.

With that in mind, we've also incorporated a series of questions designed to encourage fan interaction. In today's modern media world, fans from around the nation and around the globe can interact, share opinions and debate various questions via blogs and a wide variety of social media outlets. Other than politics, there may be no other subject that lends itself open to opinion and debate more perfectly than sports. So we've come up with 10 questions that we'd like to see debated among Michigan football fans.

We've focused these debates not around the entire history of the program, but rather the last 40 years – starting with the Bo Schembechler coaching era in Ann Arbor. For each debate question, we've also provided several possible alternatives to start the discussion. We've only provided a handful of possibilities, so there are definitely a number of other options that will be brought up for debate.

Remember, these are designed to be fun discussions. There are no right or wrong answers, just opinions. And every Michigan fan has an opinion or a special memory that we'd like to hear about.

You can register your own opinion online at www.press.umich.edu/survey/football.html

The results will be compiled and we'll let all Michigan fans help determine the ultimate choice among each debate question.

UMP: What letter would you most like to see added to the Michigan football alphabet? That is, what accomplishment would you most like to see them achieve?

GN: In the book, the letter W stands for Winged helmet. But like any fan, I'd like to see that W continue to represent exactly what it has represented more than anything else – Wins! There are so many great traditions associated with Michigan football but none greater than the tradition of winning.

There is great pride in having the most wins in college football history. It's a pride that is evident among Michigan fans every football Saturday as they fill Michigan Stadium and show their true colors of Maize and Blue.

Wins are what keeps the fans coming back in record numbers year after year after year. Wins are what every Michigan fan expects. And with a winning tradition that dates back more than a century, W for Wins is the one thing I believe every fan yearns for every season.