TIME TUNNEL

By Archie Prescott

Stepping down out of the mist of the tunnel I find myself standing in a grove of trees that is
basking in a warm mid-afternoon sunlight. A short distance away I see a large bowl-shaped
stadium that is quickly being surrounded by parked cars and people.

After taking my place in one of the lines in front of the ticket windows, I grab a passing
newsboy and buy the day’s paper. Scanning the front page stories I see why I’m here. The
Trojans of Southern California are here to challenge Stanford for supremacy in the Pacific Coast
Conference. We’re in Palo Alto, California on October 15, 1927.

After I find my seat inside the stadium I pore over the newspaper articles about the approaching
game. USC is coming into the showdown as a slight favorite, inspired in part by Stanford’s
shocking defeat at the hands of St. Mary’s two weeks before. But this is the game that really
matters in the battle for control of West Coast football Stanford had taken control in 1924 with
the hiring of Glenn (Pop) Warner, and Southern Cal had signalled its intentions of getting
serious about football when it hired Howard Jones in 1925.

Jones had set about building a powerhouse football program at USC but he had been frustrated
by Warner in 1925 and 1926. Stanford’s mythical national champions of 1926 had barely held off
the Trojans by a score of 13-12 and so the physical and psychological balance of power in the
Pacific Coast Conference still rested with the Cardinals in Palo Alto. But now in 1927 some San
Francisco sportswriters were suggesting that the Stanford program under Warner had
experienced too much success and that the Cardinals were becoming complacent. Jones believed
that his Trojans were finally ready to take control of West Coast football.

Southern Cal comes out firing in the first quarter, as Morley Drury slashes the defensive line
to shreds on a drive that is finally checked at the Stanford 15 yard line. The Cardinals push back
to their 27 yard line, but on the next play Frank Wilton breaks through tackle and fumbles
the ball. Alertly, Russ Saunders of USC scoops up the loose pigskin and gallops 31 yards to the
end zone for the touchdown to give the Trojans a 7-0 lead after Drury adds the PAT.

Stanford fights right back though, and the Cardinals piece together a dazzling march of 52
yards to the USC 11 yard line. Then Biff Hoffman, Stanford’s tailback, drops back behind great
blocking and lofts a pass into the end zone toward Preston, but the receiver cannot hang onto
the ball and possession turns over to the Trojans at the 20. The game now settles into a slugfest
as both teams take turns pounding the ball up the field but neither can get on the scoreboard.

Late in the second quarter Stanford starts from its 10 yard line after a punt, and on the first play
Bob Sims rambles for a 16-yard gain On the next play, Hoffman fires the ball deep downfield and
connects with Wilton who is in the clear at the USC 37, and the Cardinal speedster easily eludes
Saunders and covers the rest of the distance to wrap up the 74-yard touchdown play. Hoffman
adds the extra point, and a few minutes later the teams go to halftime deadlocked at 7-7.

The two teams come out to resume their all-out gridiron war in the second half, and after just
a few minutes of play Drury booms a punt from near midfield that carries into the Stanford end
zone for an apparent touchback But as the teams are moving out to the vicinity of the 20 yard
line one of the officials comes running in, indicating that a penalty had been called on the play.
A Stanford player was flagged for holding at the nine yard line, and the official rules that the
infraction took place BEFORE the ball crossed the goal line. According to the rules in place, USC
is awarded the football at the spot of the penalty – Stanford’s nine yard line – with a first down. The stadium quakes from the boos and catcalls of the Stanford faithful; maddened by the head linesman’s incredible call which has been made with so much on the line.

After Drury dives over left guard for a gain of two, on the next play the Trojan star circles around right end and scoots seven yards to paydirt for a USC touchdown. Again Stanford stadium rocks with the indignant screams of the hometown fans. On the extra point attempt, Dick Hyland of the Cardinals breaks through and blocks Drury’s kick, and so USC leads it 13-7.

The struggle resumes between the two outstanding teams; Stanford ripping off yardage on reverses and trap plays; USC’s line continuing to open holes for Drury’s slashing runs – but the defenses keep coming up with stops. It’s now the fourth quarter and Stanford is desperately taking to the airways, but Drury is playing like a man possessed on both sides of the ball and he intercepts two of Hoffman’s pass attempts in Trojan territory. There are just four minutes left to play when Stanford starts from its 30 yard line after Wilton returns a punt 25 yards. The Cardinals are moved back five yards on a delay penalty, and then Hoffman launches a pass downfield. A pair of USC defenders bat the ball away but into the arms of Stanford tackle Roland Sellman, who proceeds to rumble 45 yards before he is finally dragged down at the Trojan 31 yard line.

After Hoffman connects on a quick pass for eight yards, Warner sends in an unknown sophomore named Herb Fleishhacker at fullback. The pile-driving sophomore plows into the USC line on six straight carries and moves the football to the Trojans’ three yard line where it is third down. The USC line is bracing for another blast up the middle by Fleishhacker, but instead the hulking fullback moves to his left and basically pushes the left-handed pass to teammate Louis Vincenti in the end zone for the Stanford touchdown with just 20 seconds remaining on the scoreboard clock.

Pandemonium engulfs the massive bowl as the two teams scramble to line up for the extra point kick that can give Stanford the incredible win. In the confusion on Stanford’s sideline, the normal holder, “Spud” Lewis, cannot get onto the field in time and so Fleishhacker kneels down to take the snap. But inexperience rises up and stuns the Cardinals, as the sophomore mishandles the ball and the kick by Mike Murphy is blocked by the USC linemen. It’s still 13-13. Time left for just the kickoff, and Lloyd Thomas of the Trojans grabs the bounding ball and downs it without attempting a return as the final gun sounds on the incredible struggle.

A short time later I’m standing back in the grove of trees and watching the crowd of over 60,000 straggle out of the massive stadium–everyone limp and exhausted from the emotion of the dramatic game they have just witnessed. I could tell them that nearly a century later this game will still be considered amongst the greatest battles in Pacific Coast history. I could also tell them that despite the tie, Stanford’s failure to grab the victory has tilted the balance of Pacific Coast power toward USC. The Trojans will seize control of West Coast football in 1928, and they will never again fail to defeat Warner’s Stanford teams until he leaves for Temple in 1933. With a last look at the beautiful stadium basking in the sunlight, I turn and head back up the tunnel.