

SPORTS



COLLEGES > #1 IRISH WIN, PUNCH TITLE-GAME TICKET > C7

(1) Notre Dame 22	(3) Georgia 42	(5) Oregon 48	(9) Texas A&M 59	(13) South Carolina 27
USC 13	Georgia Tech 10	(16) Oregon State 24	Missouri 29	(12) Clemson 17
(2) Alabama 49	(4) Ohio State 26	(6) Florida 37	(11) Stanford 35	(14) Oklahoma (OT) 51
Auburn 0	(20) Michigan 21	(10) Florida State 26	(15) UCLA 17	(22) Oklahoma State 48

Lopez Island is clinging to its past and trying to lurch forward — a homeland for pioneers, profiteers and an inspiring eight-man football team called the Lobos.

Island of dreams



Lopez seniors Jalse Poole, left, and Bill Solomon walk with their teammates to greet Clallam Bay players after the Lobos' 52-16 victory. The revival of football on Lopez Island has brought together a small community resistant to change.

STORY BY JAYSON JENKS

PHOTOS BY BETTINA HANSEN
Seattle Times staff

LOPEZ ISLAND — The worker at the front of the ferry line is angry. He thinks I tried to hit him with my car. I promise I didn't, but now he's calling over one of his co-workers and they're staring at me and he's calling me an idiot.

I'm on my way to Lopez Island. Or that's where I'm trying to go. I've never been on a ferry before and didn't know to stop at the bottom of the ramp. In reality, that's probably the perfect start to this trip — one that will lead me to a strange, small, isolated place with a football team that wins 68-12 to start the year, loses 58-18 to end it and is led by a coach who doesn't care either way.

I'm going to Lopez knowing three things: The football program was reborn a decade ago after lying dormant for 50 years. The team's coach is a "blessing," a "godsend" and an "angel." And even people who've spent most of their lives there struggle to put the place into words.

"Lopez is more an experience," one islander tells me, "that words can't describe."

Near the front of the ferry line, I see a man wearing a Bellevue football sweatshirt. We start talking, and I

See > LOPEZ, C10



Lopez coaches gather with their 24-player team at halftime. The team went without football for 50 years, though no one can agree on why.



THE SEATTLE TIMES

SEAHAWKS LOOK TO END ROAD STRUGGLES

FIGHTING A TREND

Seahawks in Miami, trying for second win away from home

BY DANNY O'NEIL
Seattle Times staff reporter

The homestretch starts on the road.

That is not only a description of the Seahawks' upcoming schedule, but the key to their playoff ambitions.

Seattle's season may not depend entirely on the outcome of Sunday's game at Miami, but it is precisely the kind of game the Seahawks must win if they're going to play into the New Year.

"If we're going to turn our fortunes for the season, we're going to have to play better on the road," coach Pete Carroll said. "We're still paying for it from the first half of the season."

Seattle lost four of its five road games in the first two months of the season, committing more than twice as many turnovers on the road

See > SEAHAWKS, C5

INSIDE Harbaugh taking a big gamble if he picks QB Kaepernick > C4

SARK MUST TAKE THE NEXT STEP BEFORE HIS TEAM CAN



Jerry Brewer
Times staff columnist

Hope, Steve Sarkisian often says, is a flimsy feeling akin to going to a liquor store and buying lottery tickets.

Belief, the coach says, is the sturdier tenet that his Washington football team attained while outlasting the turbulence of a trying regular season.

And ambiguity, I say, is what envelops everyone else when trying to make sense of the hope-defying, belief-acquiring, mystifying Huskies in Sarkisian's fourth year.

Sarkisian just survived another up-and-down campaign and finished the regular season with a 7-5 record for the second straight year. If the Huskies win their bowl game, they will earn an eight-victory year for the first time under Sark. If they lose

See > BREWER, C8



In this section > **UW BASKETBALL:** Wilcox's career-high 28 wasted in 73-55 loss to Colorado State > c9

< **H.S. FOOTBALL:** No. 1 Skyline rallies from 14-0 deficit to beat No. 2 Camas in state 4A semis, 51-28 > c12

SIDELINE CHATTER > c2 | **BACKTALK:** Readers' letters > c2 | **OUTDOORS:** Holiday gift guide > c3 | **UW FOOTBALL:** Now what? > c8

Island of dreams

LOPEZ ISLAND No one is sure why football disappeared. Some say there weren't enough players. Others say there wasn't enough money.

< Lopez

FROM C1

FOOTBALL TEAM HELPS BIND COMMUNITY

Island lurches forward while clinging to its past

learn his grandson plays for the Wolverines, Sports Illustrated's second-ranked team. He retired and moved to Lopez a few years back. Occasionally, in the fall, he watches the Lobos on Saturday after seeing his grandson play earlier in the week.

"It's the funniest thing," he says. "Eight-man football. It's something to see. It's just strange. You've never seen football like it. It's very Lopez."

I drive onto the ferry. I have no idea what's waiting for me on the other side, but I know what I'm looking for.

What does football have to do with this place?

A coach's incubator

Larry Berg towers over his players in Lopez's cramped locker room before the second game of the season. A musty smell fills the air. There aren't enough benches, so some of the team's 24 players crowd in back.

"Seniors, this is for you," Berg says without raising his voice. "You younger guys are playing for the seniors. Because this goes by fast. It really does. This game, and every game this season, is for the seniors. Get it?"

In unison, his players thunder back, "Got it!"

This is Berg's incubator. He takes boys and molds them with subtle nudges more than loud yelling. He is a compass, not a GPS. He will help you get to where you want to go, but he won't tell you



Head coach Larry Berg resembles Jay Buhner.

the direct way. "He's the best man I know," says Keldon Jardine, a quarterback who graduated last year.

Deanna Brant has one son playing for Berg and will soon have another.

"They're learning more life lessons from him than they probably will the rest of their lives," she says.

Stephanie Fowler, who works at the school, calls Berg an angel. "He inspires you to be a better person," she says, "and I don't care how old you are."

With his shaved head and goatee, Berg looks like former Mariners outfielder Jay Buhner, only taller. At 6 feet 7, 250 pounds, Berg is a commanding presence but speaks softly.

He spent 15 years as a P.E. teacher and coach at Charles Wright Academy in Tacoma. He even helped the Tarriers reach the Class 1A state championship game one year. But after deciding the city wasn't where he wanted to raise his two children, he resigned.

Some folks thought he was



BETTINA HANSEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Coach Larry Berg talks to his players in a locker room that's a bit cramped even for one of the state's smallest football teams.



BETTINA HANSEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Conor Dye, left, and Vinny Kramer put on their helmets before taking the field against Clallam Bay.

nuts. Others wished they had his guts. Then, while looking through the paper, he saw Lopez had an open P.E. position. He had never visited and already had three job offers.

"But something sparked in my heart," he says. "I couldn't sleep that night."

That's how Berg ended up here, on the hard-packed field affectionately called the Rock, as Lopez's coach.

Players walk up and thank

coaches after practices. At school, Fowler said she's never seen a student mouth off to Berg, but that respect reaches a different level on the football field. Players respond to Berg and his two volunteer assistants in one of three ways, even after getting scolded: Yes, Coach. Thanks, Coach. Got it, Coach.

"I think if coach Berg wasn't coaching football at Lopez," says former player Jason Smith, "he wouldn't be doing what he's

meant to do."

And yet, the irony is that Berg didn't come to coach football. There almost wasn't football at all.

Remnants of what once was

Jack Giard is standing next to his car at the bottom of the ferry landing. He has spent nearly all his life on Lopez since moving here in 1950. Today, he's my tour guide.

It doesn't take long for Lopez to

reveal its beauty. Lonely beaches and waterfront cliffs offset rolling pastures and berry farms. Jack winds through town and passes MacKaye Harbor. The skeletons of old docks jut over the water. Once, Giard says, hundreds of boats and fishermen filled the harbor. Now all that's left is a fishing ghost town.

"What you're seeing now," he says, "are the remnants of what

Continued on next page >



BETTINA HANSEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

A small crowd occupies folding chairs and bleachers for a game at Lopez. The hard-packed field is affectionately called "The Rock."

Island of dreams

LOPEZ ISLAND The football program straddles the two islands. On the sidelines are rich and poor; liberal and conservative and even occasionally the school-board members who voted against football.



Forrest Roberts, left, and TJ Riggins, right, kill time in a school hallway before a game. Their opponent, Callam Bay, arrived late because a ferry was delayed.

< Continued from previous page

once was."

He continues the tour, taking me by a big patch of land at the bottom of rolling hills.

"This used to be a dairy farm," he says. "The largest on the island."

"What is it now?" I ask. "Just land owned by a millionaire who doesn't really do much with it. He does let people come and pick hay off it, though."

When Giard came to Lopez, the island had about 500 residents. Many were fisher, farmed or logged. Most were poor, or at least lived modestly. Today, the population hovers around 2,500.

Jack worries Lopez will become the next Martha's Vineyard instead of a place for families and Average Joes. More well-to-do couples and retirees have moved in. Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen has property there. Allen put his private 292-acre island up for sale in 2011 because, his realtor said, he "much preferred Lopez."

Jack takes me to the Soda Fountain for lunch. It's a staple of Lopez, but even it has changed and moved in recent years. A few islanders sit at the counter and talk. One of them is Delores Foss, a 1966 graduate of Lopez High. Jack tells her I'm writing about Berg and the football team.

"If you knock someone down, he makes you help them back up," she says. "I know Brad and Ali Giard and I take a seat and order sandwiches. Jack played on the old Lopez teams in the 1950s, when it was six-man football and a woman coached. He says he has never spent more than a year away from the island, and he loves it here.

But there's also an undercurrent that bothers Jack. Some on the island are reluctant to embrace growth and change. Jack once ran for county commissioner to usher in what he calls "controlled growth." He lost, but the issue is something we keep circling back to:

Can Lopez change and still preserve its past?

Football lost and found

Brad Smith and two accomplices, Bart Fowler and Darryl Davidson, hatched a plan in 2002 to restart a football program at Lopez, which had gone nearly 50 years without one after its six-man team disbanded in the 1960s.

No one is sure why football disappeared. Some say there weren't enough players. Others say there wasn't enough money.

Whatever the case, Lopez offered only soccer in the fall, and that didn't do much for Brad's two sons. The three men and their wives researched costs and football injuries, equipment and eight-man rules, and stuffed it all into packets and presentations Brad gave to the school board and at community meetings.

The debate dragged on for more than six months and became personal. People who opposed football because they thought it would kill soccer com-



Dwight Lewis, who doesn't have children, adopted the football team. His hat sales helped raised \$30,000 for the booster club.

About Lopez Island

Where: In the San Juans, Lopez Island is the first stop on the ferry from Anacortes.

Population: About 2,200 year-round residents.

Recreation: Lopez is popular for bicycle riders because it is flatter than other islands in the San Juans.

High school football team: The Lobos were 6-4 this season. They compete in eight-man football in the Northwest 1B Conference.

Two different islands

When Brad and Ali Smith moved to Lopez 15 years ago, Ali used to ask, "Can we go back to America?" Doors and cars go unlocked. Employees sometimes forget to lock the school. Cell service is so poor, landlines are still prominent. In fact, when Lopez looked into adding a cell tower, protesters laid in the street.

"This is the weirdest place," says Aaron Dye, owner of the Red Apple Market. "In times of need and when people are hurting, it's the nicest place in the world. But if you do anything against the grain, man, people can be—

I don't know if vicious is the right word, but they'll sure let their feelings be known. If there's any change here, people get up in arms about it."

In the winter, the market and gas stations are closed by 7 p.m. There is no bowling alley, no movie theater and no fast-food chains. The school serves produce grown right next to the building at lunches, and hamburgers are made from local organic beef.

"What's that movie about a small town that is in black and

white and then it finally gets color?" Lopez superintendent Bill Evans said, referring to "Pleasantville," about a 1950s town. "It feels like that sometimes."

Change started in the '60s when Interstate 5 opened and travel became easier for people in Seattle. Lopez's secret got out. Those with deep interest in the outdoors or a slow lifestyle viewed Lopez as a gem only recently unearthed.

The dynamics shifted. The pioneer families with deep ties to the island were joined by a group with more liberal views. Conservative islanders dryly call them hippies. And many of those newcomers want to preserve the island just as they found it.

"A close-down-the-ferry mentality," said longtime resident Barbara Pickering.

Or, as Berg said one day after practice, "It's like you have a gold mine but don't want to share any gold."

The shift created two different islands: the Lopez clinging to its past and the Lopez trying to lurch forward.

The football program straddles the two sides. On the sidelines are rich and poor, liberal and conservative and even, occasionally, the school-board members who voted against football.

"Football is bridging the gap between the old Lopez and the new Lopez," says islander Deanna Brant. "The old being the farmers, the fishermen—all the old families. Then you have the people here now. There's been a gap between those groups because a lot of the newer people are wealthy retirees or families moving from other places."

"And it's something that definitely needed to happen. I just wish the season was longer."

Building the spirit of Lopes

On my first day on Lopez, Jack Giard, the old-time football player, told me about the time Lopez built a basketball

gym. Until then, students shot baskets outside on a hoop attached to the school. There was no basketball team.

If kids practiced enough, Jack says, they learned to adjust their shot for the wind.

The community sensed the school needed a gym, and Lopez built a Quonset hut. Students put in the plywood floor during shop class. Parents and community members volunteered their time when they could. And in 1955 the little gym with barely enough room for fans was finished.

One longtime islander calls the story "the spirit of Lopez."

The next morning, I drive to the high school and watch volunteers get the school's first press box ready. It's 8:30 in the morning on Saturday. Seven islanders are already hammering and drilling.

It's not a press box in the traditional sense. It's actually an old semitrailer that local businessman Dwight Lewis poured thousands of dollars into. The inside is finished for storage. A roofed video bay for filming sits on top.

Jay Brant, whose son is on the team, is testing speakers for the public-address system. Dirk Ellings had a son play for Berg and volunteered his morning to work on the electrical wiring.

Pacing and stammering instructions to the volunteers is Lewis, the mastermind behind the plan and the island's biggest character. The 69-year-old owner of an excavation company doesn't have children of his own, but fell in love with the team at the end of the 2011 season.

He once tried to run sprints with the players, only to fall and hurt himself so badly he was limping around the next week. On this day, he's wearing a blue jumpsuit and red Lopez hat—one of the very hats he harassed islanders into buying while raising \$30,000 for the booster club.

Off to the side, Aaron Dye, the market owner and a volunteer assistant coach, looks on and smiles.

"This is what Lopez is all about," he says. "To me, it's the most phenomenal thing. When this thing's done, it's going to be phenomenal and it's going to have our character in it and it's going to be what we're all about."

Eventually, the press box will bear the school's logo and be set in concrete, permanently. But now, at the first home game of the year, it's nothing more than a fixed-up trailer with a ladder.

When I think about Lopez, both the place and the football program, I keep coming back to this moment. There's a good chance the press box will last for years—far longer than some of the folks working on it will stay on the island.

And there's a good chance that one day, many years from now, someone will ask about that press box and instead hear about the once-dead football team a community brought back to life piece by piece.



Coach Larry Berg walks the sideline with volunteer assistant Aaron Dye, owner of a local market.

Jayson Jenks: 206-464-8277 or jjenks@seattletimes.com