



john harris

Heaven the limit for Crusaders

Somewhere along the way God pronounced, "Let there be an athletic team in my spirit," and Oral Roberts, owner and operator of his own university in Tulsa, Oklahoma, complied, assembling a basketball team which has appeared in both the NCAA and NIT post-season tournaments. But Roberts transgressed, not against the Lord, but against the NCAA, and last year his team was reprimanded for a variety of recruiting sins.

So God went looking anew and found a football team at Evangel College, a 23-year-old institution owned and run by the General Council of the Assemblies of God, located in Springfield, Missouri.

The "Crusaders" participated in football for the first time last season as members of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), an organization comparable to the NCAA's Division III, except that NAIA members are permitted to provide genuine athletic scholarships. Evangel lost its first five contests, but rebounded to win three of its last four.

The team consists exclusively of born-again Christians, but as with another

religion-related football squad — Notre Dame — the players are not necessarily members of the church with which the school is affiliated.

They're singers, though. The squad doubles as a choir, and last year following a game in St. Louis against Washington University they conducted a youth rally attended by 2,000 people.

The Crusaders' coach is Denny Duron, a 24-year-old evangelist and recording artist, who passed for 4,600 yards while leading Louisiana Tech to a 24-1 record and two NCAA Division II national championships. Although he had never coached before coming to Evangel, he was used to getting his point across. When he arrived at Louisiana Tech as a freshman he found a team that was not quite so devoted to God as himself, so he began crusading. "The first days were by no means spiritual days for the squad," he tells in Evangel's slick and big-time football brochure. "They were really a trying experience for me. I was so disgusted within myself that I'd say, 'Lord, do something for the squad and the coaching staff through your Holy Spirit,' and in

four years it got better. Forty-five to 50 (players) received salvation in those four years."

Duron has surrounded himself with a coaching staff that includes former World Football players Gary Champagne and Mike Bartik and National Football League veterans Phil Laporta of the New Orleans Saints and Paul Costa, an all-pro lineman with the Buffalo Bills.

In recruiting players the coaches contact outstanding high school performers and inquire about their religious status — born again or devoted to football alone. "They have to be born again Christians, then have athletic ability," explains David Fillmore, the school's sports information director.

Recruiting was much easier prior to this season. Last year the team was featured weekly on its own hour-long nationally syndicated television program which appeared on eight over-the-air stations and over 200 cable systems. Notre Dame is the only other school in the country whose football team's highlights are shown nationally.

The team has also benefited from the advice of a number of professional players

who come to the campus to help Duron. Included among the group are all-pros Terry Bradshaw of the Pittsburgh Steelers and Roger Carr of the Baltimore Colts, and Johnny Musso of the Chicago Bears and Pat Tilley of the St. Louis Cardinals.

So far this season the Crusaders have won three times and lost just once. Last week they upset heavily favored Missouri Western, who last year went to the Boot Hill Bowl in Dodge City, Kansas; not the Rose Bowl but the best the NAIA can do.

According to Robert Spence, Evangel's president, the football program has been instrumental in the school's 14 percent rise in enrollment, a situation that has forced school officials to turn away students for the first time.

Evangel isn't turning away football players, though. NCAA Division II teams are being gradually added to the Crusaders' schedule, and in the next three or four years the school hopes to be competing on that level.

Big time college football, a la Notre Dame, is not out of the question for the future either. Hell, at Evangel heaven's the limit.

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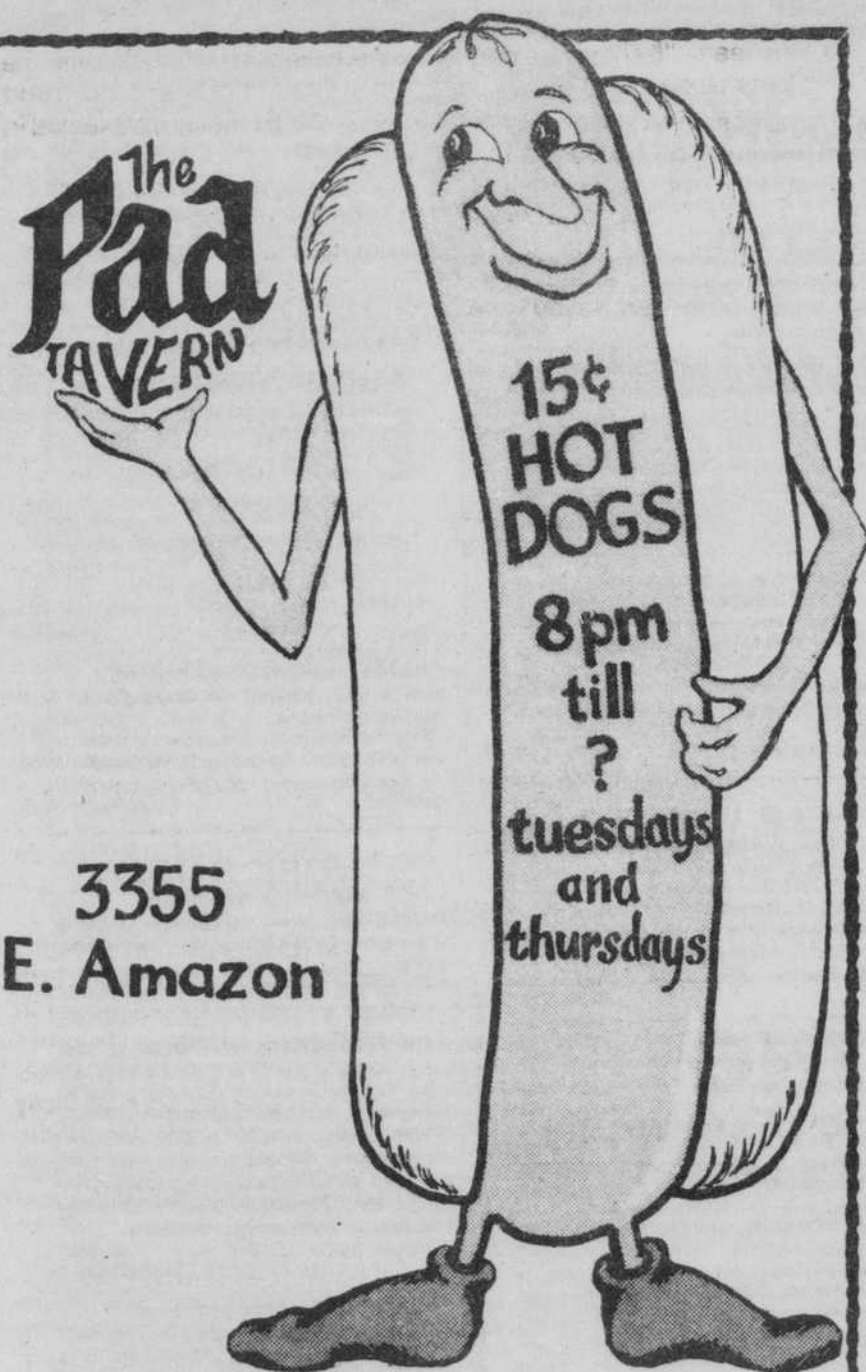
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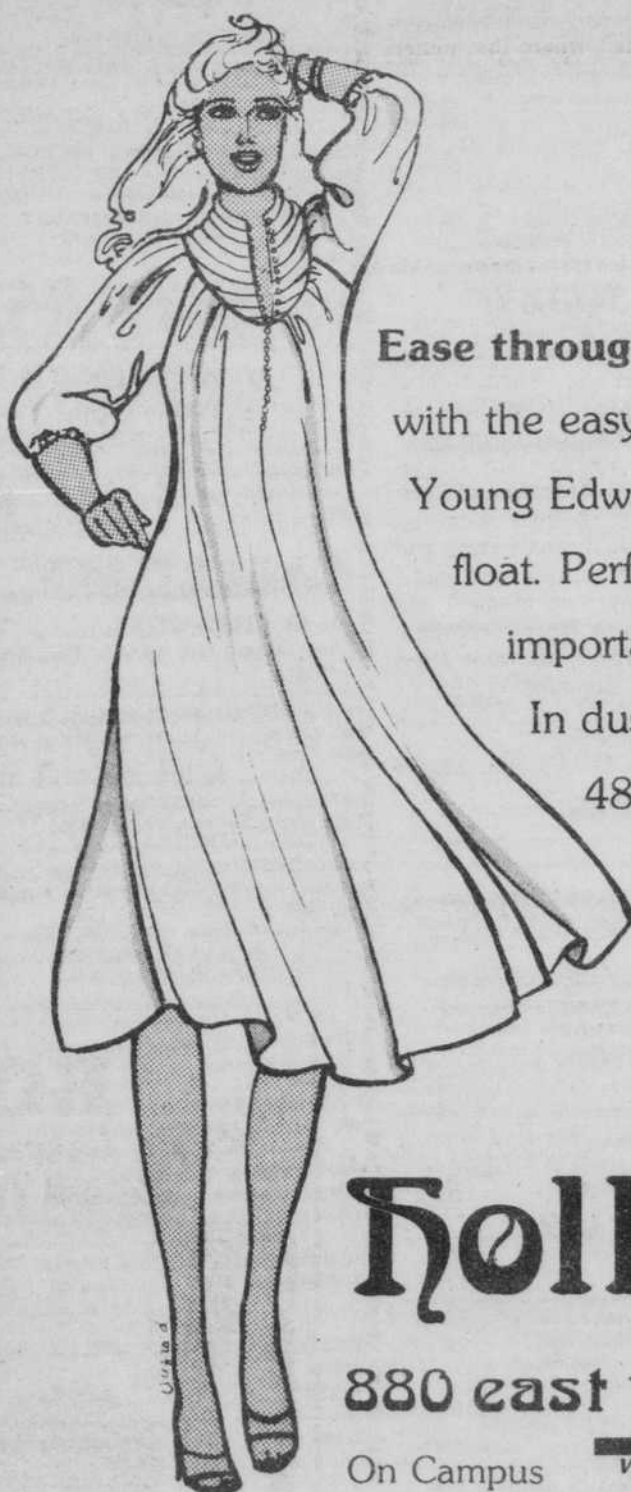
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