

# A field of fond memories

BY NED HICKSON  
Siuslaw News

It was particularly cold and wet when the Vikings received the opening kick-off against Waldport in October of 1950. The completion of the Hans Petersen Memorial Field was still a year away, leaving one more season to play out on the hard, clay surface of what was then Siuslaw Football Field (and what is now Safeway).

What little grass had been present between the hash marks at the beginning of the season had long since disappeared, ripped up from the ground by metal cleats before being washed away by the steady, late-October rains. What remained was a pock-marked rectangle of mire over which players slipped and scrambled in hopes of advancing toward the end zone—one hard-fought yard at a time.

Bud Miles remembers jogging back to the huddle with teammate Richard Swigert, both juniors in 1950.

“When we got there, we all leaned in together—then realized someone was missing,” recalls Miles. “We stood up and looked around, then saw Leon [Coit] laying face-down in a puddle of water.”

Coit had landed head first against the clay, knocking himself unconscious.

“We all ran over,” Swigert finishes, “and pulled him up. He was all right after a while. On that hard surface, guys were always breaking fingers, arms, or getting knocked out. It was just part of the game.”

Face guards, shoulder pads, hip pads, mouth pieces, knee protectors and chin straps were not.

“Our freshman year, we got a strip of leather for a helmet, and two pieces of molded leather for shoulder pads,” laughs Miles. “I tell you—we couldn’t wait for that new field!”

“It was probably the worst playing conditions you could have,” adds Swigert, who stops himself in mid-sentence to amend his statement. “Except for Waldport’s field. I think they had it worse than we did—at least during high tide.”

Both men, now in their late 60s, break out laughing.

“Sometimes, our games in Waldport ended in two quarters instead of four,” Miles manages between chuckles. “One time, we were playing in that much water,” he says, and gestures to his knees. “Fortunately, we were already ahead 27-0, so they gave us the win.”

As part of the Coast League in the 1950s, Siuslaw’s rivals included Newport, Reedsport, Toledo, Taft, Willamette and Mapleton.

“Mapleton whipped our butts my freshman year,” recalls Miles, who played right tackle for the Viks. “My senior year, we finally made up for it and beat them 52-12.”

“I’ll never forget that game — or that year.”

Fifty years later, it’s a sentiment that most Viking fans would agree with.

The field’s beginnings stem back to 1948, when, on one September day, 82-year-old Hans Petersen was tragically struck by a car while crossing a street in downtown Portland.

Known throughout Florence, Petersen was a local businessman whose love for children made him an endearing figure within the community. There are stories told of how he provided space in his construction company building for kids to display their animals during the annual county fair — and of his often-heard wish for a community playing field that families could enjoy.

It was that wish that members of the Hans M. Petersen Memorial Committee set out

to grant on his behalf. After settling on the idea of building a stadium, the committee, chaired by Edward Niespo, approached the Seaman family about a hilly piece of land on the edge of the city covered with pine, rhododendrons and huckleberries.

The site’s ownership was shared by brothers W.A. Seaman and A.E. Seaman, along with W.A. Seaman’s wife, Olive, of Coos Bay.

A deed was soon drawn up, transferring ownership of the

only a legacy for Hans Petersen, but a tradition for Viking fans in the decades ahead.

The mention of grass in conjunction with the new field was something that didn’t escape the notice of Miles and Swigert, who, along with their fathers, were among those working on the field that winter and spring.

## OVER 1,000 ATTEND GAME, DEDICATION

“...Edward Niespo told the history of the field and how the work was accomplished through united community effort for community enjoyment. It was then officially turned over to Homer F. Severy, school board chairman, who made the acceptance and briefly sketched a history of Hans Petersen, the man.”

—Siuslaw Oar  
October 12, 1951

land to the Petersen committee for a token \$10 — just enough to cover legal fees involved in the transaction.

By January of 1951, the new field was taking shape as residents and local businesses donated time and materials, working together to build grandstands and complete the turf that would become not

“My dad had a Model-A pick-up with a drag on it,” recalls Miles, who spent many evenings standing on the drag as his father drove around the field to help level the newly-packed dirt. “I stood on that thing and watched the stadium come together nail by nail. Everyone pitched in to help.”

Swigert’s father, who owned a local saw mill, donated lumber for the grandstands and sent work crews down to the site to work on the project.

“After work and on the weekends, all the dads came down and helped work on the grandstands,” says Swigert. “It was a real community effort from start to finish. That’s part of what made it special.”

“We couldn’t wait to play on it.”

On Oct. 5, 1951, the wait was finally over.

Though the Vikings played twice on the new field before its official dedication, nothing compared to the October night, when over 1,000 fans packed the newly constructed bleachers to watch the Vikings play long-time rival Reedsport.

That evening, Siuslaw fans heard the unmistakable sound of cleats marching over cement as the Vikings made their first official approach to Hans Petersen Field.

The hill that was once covered with salal and huckleberries was now level, plush with grass and gleaming beneath 180 kilowatts of lights beaming down from atop 90-ft

poles. With bleachers measuring 240 feet long and capable of seating 1,200 fans, the new athletic field was one of the largest on the coast.

“I felt like we were playing at Autzen Stadium, it was that much of a step up,” recalls Swigert.

Miles still shakes his head in whimsy as he remembers coming out onto the field that night. “Our chests were swelled up like big balloons,” he says. “I remember standing

there, looking at all the lights, and thinking, ‘Wow.’”

The following week, the event made the front page of the Siuslaw Oar (now the Siuslaw News).

Even though Reedsport went on to win the game 42-12 that night, what mattered most was that the seeds of Viking tradition had been planted at Hans Petersen Memorial Field — where it continued to grow for a half century.



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