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Another Samoan quarterback superstar emerges

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

I rarely write about the same league twice within a year, and I've never written about the same league in successive months, but this story was too incredible to pass up. As I wrote in January, Polynesian quarterbacks are fairly rare in college football — but the ones so far have been top-notch. During the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championship game, sports fans witnessed the rise of Tuanigamanuolepola "Tua" Tagovailoa, the newest member of that elite group.

Asian sports fans (and Oregon Duck fans) know all about Marcus Mariota. In 2014, the Samoan sensation led the Ducks to a 12-1 regular season with a performance that won him the Heisman Trophy with the second-highest voting percentage ever. Mariota brought Oregon to the brink of a national championship, losing to Ohio State 20-42 in the first-ever College Football Playoff national championship game.

Instead of being the nationally known face of his top-ranked team, Tagovailoa was a virtually unknown freshman backup who had rarely seen the field for the University of Alabama's Crimson Tide. But Tua emerged from anonymity to orchestrate a dramatic comeback victory on the nation's highest collegiate stage, becoming the first Samoan quarterback to lead his team to a national championship.

Obscured at Alabama, the 19-year-old quarterback was well-known back home. At Honolulu's Saint Louis High School (also Mariota's alma mater), Tagovailoa set the state record for career passing



yards, throwing for 8,158 yards, eclipsing the record set by another API quarterback, Tommy Chang. Tagovailoa threw 84 touchdowns and ran for 27 more, finishing with a 24-5 career record as a starter and leading Saint Louis High to its fourth state championship during his senior year.

Such tremendous success made Tagovailoa a hot commodity for a lot of great colleges, but he chose Alabama, becoming their first-ever Hawai'ian football prospect. Where others saw the obvious differences between his home state and Alabama, Tua saw only similarities. "We go to church every Sunday. People are treated like family there just like here ... you want to be somewhere that feels like home and that's what Alabama feels like," he said.

As a freshman, Tua faced an uncertain

path to a starting role. Ahead of him on the depth chart was sophomore Jalen Hurts, who'd led Alabama to a national title game the season before. In that game, Alabama lost to Clemson, 31-35, on a dramatic last-second touchdown. And Hurts had a weak game, completing just 13 of 31 passes for 131 yards and running 10 times for 63 yards.

Still, Alabama coach Nick Saban named Hurts as his starter for the season, saying that Tua would get some playing time. True to his word, Saban started Hurts in every game, only allowing his backup from Hawai'i to take the field when Alabama was comfortably ahead.

And then came the national championship game against the Georgia Bulldogs.

Georgia dominated the first half, taking

AMAZING ARM. Alabama Crimson Tide quarterback Tuanigamanuolepola "Tua" Tagovailoa (#13) runs the ball during the second half of the National Collegiate Athletic Association football playoff championship game against the Georgia Bulldogs in Atlanta. With the Tide down by 13 points at halftime, Tagovailoa led his teammates to an overtime victory to take home the College Football Playoff national championship. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

a 13-0 lead while smothering Alabama's offense. Since Hurts was mainly a running quarterback without a strong arm, the Bulldogs crowded the line of scrimmage and eliminated Alabama's running game. Hurts completed only three passes for 21 yards, and Alabama punted four times on five first-half drives.

Rather than risk a repeat of last year's final game, coach Saban unleashed his secret weapon, Tagovailoa, to start the second half. Suddenly, Georgia had to cover deep threats, giving Alabama room to run and throw, while trying to watch an equally slippery runner at quarterback.

On their second drive of the half, Tua marched the team 56 yards for a touchdown, accounting for the team's entire offensive production. The drive culminated in a rifle shot over the middle from Tua to a slanting Henry Ruggs III in the back of the end zone. The Tide were now within six points.

Georgia struck back immediately, scoring on an 80-yard touchdown pass to Mecole Hardman three plays later. On Alabama's next drive, Tua made an ill-advised pass attempt, and Georgia's Deandre Baker snatched it for an interception.

Ahead by 13 and ready to score, Georgia looked ready to salt the game away. Instead, they gave the ball back on the next

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Voyage to Vietnam: Celebrating the Tết Festival was created by Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose, and is part of the Freeman Foundation Asian Culture Exhibit Series, funded by The Freeman Foundation and administered by Association of Children's Museums.

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