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Asian-American triumph and tragedy in college football

By Mike Street

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This season has been a roller-coaster ride for Asian-American college football fans. Ken Niumatalolo, the first Samoan coach ever in Division I football, rebounded from a disappointing year to lead Navy to a record-setting season. But an injury derailed another epic year by Tua Tagovailoa, Alabama's fantastically talented Asian-American quarterback. Both stories show sports at its best and most frustrating, while underscoring the huge strides made by Asian-American athletes in recent years.

Samoan-American Niumatalolo has been shattering barriers since 2007, when he was named the head coach of the Navy Midshipmen football team. Now the winningest coach in Navy history, he has led the team to a 98-59 record in 12 seasons, 10 of them winning seasons that featured bowl game appearances.

In 2011, his first losing season, the team finished 5-7 — not a terrible performance, and at least they beat rival Army. But last season was truly dismal, as the team staggered to a 3-10 record, suddenly unable to win, especially against rival Army, who beat them for the third straight year.

Niumatalolo made some tough choices before this season, from hiring nutritionists to letting go of his defensive coordinator. Most importantly, however, he committed to making Malcolm Perry his starting quarterback. "I told Malcolm, 'We're giving you the keys; it's your team,'" Niumatalolo explained about the change.

Always a good runner, Perry received special coaching on his passing. The skill and confidence derived from Niumatalolo's decision paid massive dividends this year, as Perry has blossomed into one of the most dynamic forces on the field.

A true double threat in Navy's triple-option offense, Perry set Navy single-season records for running yards and total yards, part of the team's best rushing season ever. He also set the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) record for rushing by a quarterback, with 2,017 yards on 295 carries, a mind-blowing 6.8 yards per carry. With his



AP Photo/Julio Cortez

arm, he threw for 1,084 yards and seven touchdowns, an effective complement to his explosive running ability.

This combination earned him Offensive Player of the Year honors from both the Eastern College Athletic Conference and American Athletic Conference. Niumatalolo was awarded Coach of the Year from both conferences, thanks to Navy's amazing 10-2 regular season, a huge turnaround from last year.

Both Niumatalolo and Perry were essential against the Kansas State Wildcats in the AutoZone Liberty Bowl. The nail-biting outcome hinged on two great calls by Niumatalolo and another dominant performance by Perry, who ran for 213 yards on 28 carries, throwing for 57 yards and one touchdown.

But Niumatalolo's strategy really made the difference. With Navy trailing early 3-7 inside the Wildcats' 30-yard line, the coach unexpectedly called on his quarterback's arm. Perry threw to Hawaiian slotback Keoni-Kordell Makekau in double coverage for a 27-yard touchdown that gave Navy a three-point lead.



AP Photo/Vashta Hunt

ROLLER-COASTER SEASONS. This season has been a roller-coaster ride for Asian-American college football fans. Ken Niumatalolo (left photo), the first Samoan coach ever in Division I football, rebounded from a disappointing year to lead Navy to a record-setting season. But an injury derailed another epic year by Tua Tagovailoa (right photo), Alabama's fantastically talented Asian-American quarterback.

The teams continued to battle throughout the second half until Niumatalolo's second crucial call. With time winding down and the score tied 17-17, Navy faced a fourth-and-three on the Wildcats' 46-yard line. With everyone expecting Perry to take the ball for a short gain, Niumatalolo made another great play call.

Perry took the handoff and pitched it to his fullback, C.J. Williams, who pulled back and looped a perfect deep pass to wide receiver Chance Warren. Warren was tackled on the five-yard line, then kicker Bijan Nichols stepped in to nail the game-winning chip shot. It was a true team effort from Niumatalolo and his star quarterback.

As good as Perry has been, his career has paled against that of Tagovailoa, Alabama's star Samoan quarterback. As a 19-year-old freshman, Tua entered the second half of the 2018 National Championship game against Georgia with his team down 0-13. Tua engineered an incredible overtime comeback victory to give Alabama the championship.

Last season, Tua was named the starter as a sophomore, and he responded with a phenomenal year. He completed 69 percent of his passes for 3,966 yards while scoring 43 touchdowns against just six interceptions. Oklahoma's Kyler Murray, at the helm of a more pass-oriented offense, edged Tua for the Heisman that year. Even worse, Alabama was unable to repeat as champions, falling 16-44 in the National Championship against the same Clemson team they'd defeated the year before.

Energized and ready to regain the national title, Tua started 2019 with six straight wins, throwing 27 touchdowns and just two interceptions and leading the FBS with a 95.6 quarterback rating. Then, in his seventh game, he sustained what seemed to be a season-ending ankle injury.

Instead, he underwent a radical surgery that allowed him to return just two weeks later, against top-ranked Louisiana State University. Alabama lost narrowly, 41-46 though Tua had an incredible game on his recently repaired ankle, throwing for 418 yards and four touchdowns with one interception.

A disappointed Alabama looked to rebound in its next game against the unranked Mississippi State Bulldogs. The team quickly gained a 35-7 advantage, with Tua engineering touchdowns on each of the team's first five drives. Despite the lead, Alabama coach Nick Saban left Tua to finish the final drive of the first half.

It would prove to be a fateful decision for both Alabama and Tua. On a pass play, the Bulldog defense sacked for a loss, dislocating Tua's hip, a painful injury that knocked him out for the season and possibly threaten his career.

After the injury, Saban said Tua was the only Alabama player who'd been projected to be a top 15 NFL draft pick. Many were saying he could be the first overall pick, but such a significant injury has changed that completely. Tua is expected to announce on January 6 whether he will enter the draft or return to Alabama for his final year of eligibility, to prove his health and perhaps win another national championship.

Whether, and where, Tua sets foot on the gridiron again, it will be a testament to his courage and resilience. For inspiration, he doesn't need to look any further than Niumatalolo and his star quarterback, who bounced back from a terrible year to have a season for the ages.

The fact that Asian-American sports fans have so much to pay attention to shows how far Asian-American athletes have come in college football, where it's no longer unusual to see Samoans behind center or in the front office. We've got a lot to look forward to in 2020 and beyond.

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