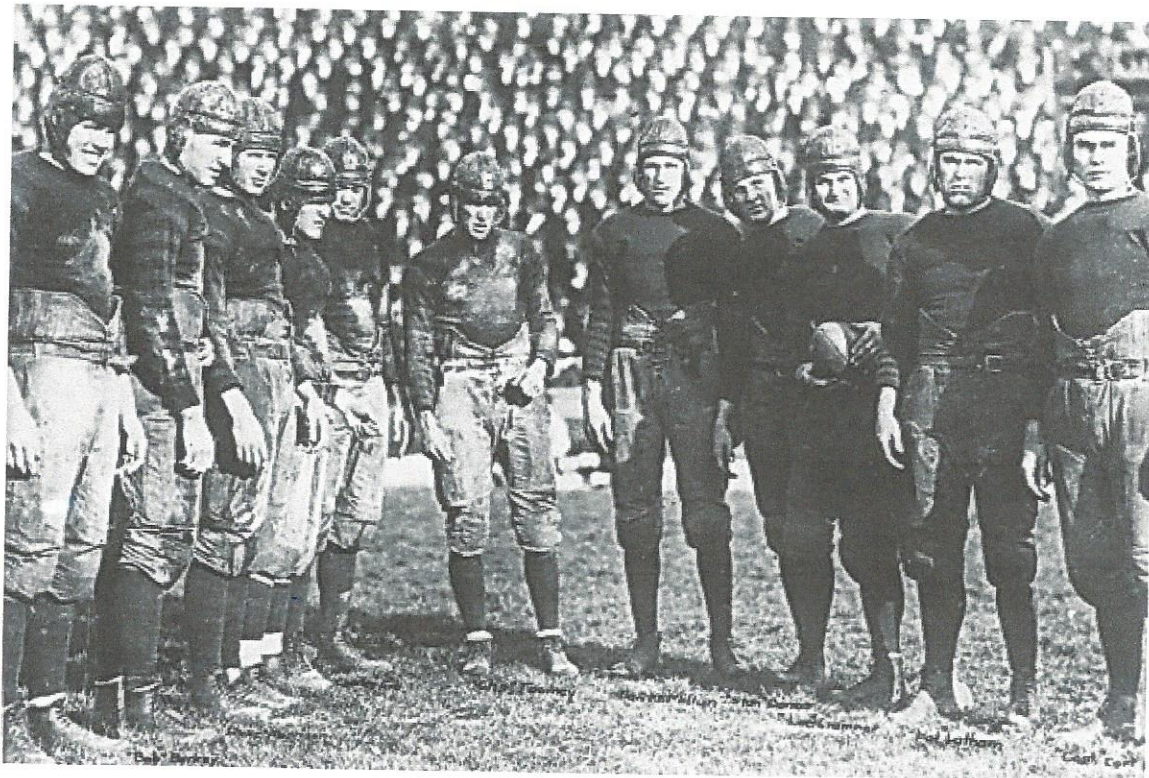


1920 College Football National Championship



Pictured above is California's 1920 "Wonder Team" at the Rose Bowl. 9-0 Cal outscored opponents 510-14, and they shocked the nation by trouncing previously unbeaten and untied Ohio State in the Rose Bowl 28-0, leaving them the consensus choice as 1920 mythical national champion (MNC).

Here is how the "major selectors" listed in the NCAA Records Book, all selecting long after the fact, see the 1920 college football national championship (omitting [math/computer ratings](#), which neither I nor anyone else recognize as constituting titles):

9-0 California: [Helms](#), [CFB Researchers](#), [National Championship Foundation](#)

6-0-1 Princeton: [Parke Davis](#) (tie)

9-0 Notre Dame: [Parke Davis](#) (tie)

California 1920

I've been summarizing teams East-to-West in previous national championship articles, but this time I am going to start with the juggernaut out West. California had only been playing football for 5 years prior to this season. Like most of the schools in their state, they gave up football after the 1905 season and played rugby instead 1906-1914. Their rugby coach, James Schaeffer, traveled the country talking to football coaches and learning the game prior to the Fall of 1915, then coached his old rugby team to an 8-5 record in the school's first season playing football again. He then convinced one of the coaches he had talked to prior to the season, Andy Smith, to come out West and take over.

Andy Smith (pictured) had been a consensus All American fullback on Penn's [1904](#) mythical national championship team. He started his Hall of Fame coaching career at his alma mater, going 30-10-3 1909-1912, and followed that up with a 12-6-3 record at Purdue 1913-1915. His first 2 teams at Cal were mediocre, 11-9-2 1916-1917, but they improved to 13-4-1 1918-1919. This season they broke all the way through for a dominating 9-0, and they would not lose again until 1925, a 50 game unbeaten streak that included 4 ties. That is the 3rd longest unbeaten streak in major/FBS college football history, and the longest since WWI. The 5 straight unbeaten teams 1920-1924 were known as the "Wonder Teams."

Unfortunately, Andy Smith died of pneumonia after the 1925 season, ending his life and career all too early. He went 74-16-7 in 10 years at Cal, winning 5 conference titles and as many as 4 mythical national championships (at least 1 organization selects them as a champion in each season 1920-1923). Overall he was 116-32-13, #27 in all-time FBS coaching win percentage.

Andy Smith's most prudent hire at Cal was assistant coach Nibs Price, who had been the coach of an unusually talented team at San Diego High School. Price's best San Diego players followed him to Cal, and they formed the backbone of the Wonder Teams. Price succeeded Smith as head coach at Cal, going 27-17-3 1926-1930, and he was also Cal's basketball coach 1924-1954, going 449-294.

California's Season

As I stated in opening this article, Cal went 9-0 and crushed their opponents by a total score of 510-14. In 1960, the Helms Athletic Foundation named this team the greatest of all time. But although they won every game by more than a touchdown, they did have one close call-- a 17-7 win at Oregon State (2-2-2) that was not decided until the closing minutes.

This was their only road game in the regular season. It was tied 7-7 until midway through the 4th quarter, when Cal drove to the OSU 10 and kicked a 15 yard field goal to go up 10-7. With 2 minutes left, OSU fumbled a punt at their own 5 yard line, and Cal scored the insurance touchdown on 4th down to make the 17-7 final score. But while this game was close until the end, Cal dominated throughout, outgaining OSU 191 yards to 47, and most of the 47 came on one trick play that earned Oregon State their touchdown.

Cal's toughest game was supposed to be a home date against unbeaten Washington State the next week, but it was a laugher, WSU fumbling early and often, and Cal romping 49-0. WSU finished 5-1, including a big 21-20 win at Missouri Valley power Nebraska in their finale. That win would have likely put WSU into the bottom of a national AP top 25 had there been one in 1920, making them the only "rated" team Cal played during the regular season.

The rest of Cal's season was as uncompetitive as the WSU game, highlighted by a 127-0 win over St. Mary's.

The Tournament of Roses Game

The 1921 Tournament of Roses game drew tremendous interest, especially on the part of Cal grads, and ticket requests more than doubled the capacity crowd of 42,000 that attended the game. As such, this game was the impetus for the subsequent construction of the actual Rose Bowl stadium we know today. 7-0 Ohio State was a heavy favorite in newspapers East of the Rockies, but they were only 8-5 favorites with bookies, thanks to massive betting on 8-0 Cal by seemingly everyone who saw them play, from San Diego to Spokane. So while Cal's 28-0 whipping of Ohio State shocked most of the country, it was little surprise to the Left Coasters who doubled their money that day.

Cal outgained Ohio State in rushing and passing yards, and earned 18 first downs to OSU's 10. OSU's one bright spot was that they were penalized but once, while Cal was penalized often.

Pesky Sprott scored a touchdown to cap Cal's opening drive, and Ohio State's answering drive ended with a lost fumble at the Cal 8 yard line. In the 2nd quarter, Brick Muller surprised Ohio State with a long touchdown pass to Brodie Stephens that traveled 53 yards in the air. OSU's consensus All American quarterback, Pete Stinchcomb, had let Stephens go by after 30 yards, and when asked why after the game, he said, "Frankly, I didn't think anybody could throw the ball that far."

Pesky Sprott added his 2nd touchdown the same quarter, making it 21-0 and all but over at halftime. Sprott finished with 20 carries for 90 yards and 2 touchdowns, outperforming OSU star Stinchcomb.

Utterly embarrassed, the Big Ten subsequently banned its teams from playing in bowl games. That ban would be lifted 26 years later for an annual slot in the Rose Bowl, but it would not be until 1975 that a Big 10 team could play in any bowl game other than the Rose Bowl.

California vs. Harvard vs. Princeton

Here are the significant games for our first 3 contenders in 1920. I'll discuss Notre Dame afterward. The opponent rankings come from my [1920 top 25](#), which is based on a hypothetical post-bowl AP poll (within logical reason of course). Click on the links in the table headers to see California, Harvard, or Princeton's full schedule at the College Football Data Warehouse.

California 9-0			Harvard 8-0-1			Princeton 6-0-1		
Washington State (5-1)	49-0	#23	Holy Cross (5-3)	3-0	#22	Maryland (7-2)	35-0	(#26-38)
Rose Bowl Ohio State (7-1)	28-0	#4	Centre (8-2)	31-14	#12	Navy (6-2)	14-0	#17
			Virginia (5-2-2)	24-0	(#26-38)	West Virginia (5-4-1)	10-3	Unranked
			Princeton (6-0-1)	14-14	#3	at Harvard (8-0-1)	14-14	#2
			Brown (6-3)	27-0	(#26-38)	Yale (5-3)	20-0	#16
			at Yale (5-3)	9-0	#16			

Against teams that would have fallen outside a top 38, California defeated 7 by an average score of 62-2, Harvard defeated 3 by an average of 33-0, and Princeton defeated 3 by an average of 20-3.

Cal's schedule may look thinner than the schedules played by Harvard and Princeton, but note that Cal was the only one of the 3 teams to have defeated a *highly* ranked team, trouncing Ohio State 28-0-- and OSU would probably have been rated #1 in an AP poll going into that game. Cal also gave Washington State their only loss, and even more impressively, 49-0. And while both Harvard and Princeton had a game in which they beat a lesser

opponent by a touchdown or less, no one came within a touchdown of Cal.

But the real issue is that neither Harvard nor Princeton defeated a top 10 caliber team, so I see no reason for either to share the mythical national championship with Cal. The vast performance difference between Cal and the other 2 is just icing on the cake.

Cal is an easy choice for 1920 MNC, so let's talk about whether Harvard or Princeton should be considered 1920's "champion of the East."