

# James Pursell, 103; Trojan Won 3 Letters in Football

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Times Staff Writer

When he was 11, he helped his homesteader father guide a mule-drawn covered wagon on the family's eight-day, 190-mile move south from rural Tulare to Gardena.

A decade later, he weighed a strapping 160 pounds, wore a leather helmet, sported a crimson and gold jersey labeled No 37 and was a guard on the USC football team.

He was on the Trojan bench during the first Rose Bowl game (USC 14, Penn State 3) on Jan. 2, 1923, and that fall played in the first game ever staged in the spanking-new Coliseum (USC 23, Pomona 7).

James Pursell, who was USC's oldest surviving football letterman, died Jan. 25 in Laguna Woods. He was 103 and had lived in his Leisure World apartment for almost four decades.

The scrawny youth from the Central Valley had served in the Marines during World War I, narrowly missing shipping out to Europe and worked in construction jobs before he could afford the \$58 tuition for his first semester at USC.

He weighed only 130 as a freshman, but Trojan Coach Elmer "Gloomy Gus" Henderson was impressed enough by his grit to give him a seat at the



*'That probably saved my life.'*

**James Pursell**, of the USC coach's putting the 130-pound player at the training table

training table, with all the free food he could eat.

"That probably saved my life," Pursell told The Times in 2000.

Bulked up by 30 pounds, but still half the size of today's 300-pound college and pro guards, Pursell lettered for three seasons. The Trojans stacked up 10-1, 10-1 and 6-2 records, or 26 wins in 30 games, for 1921, '22 and '23.

After Pursell's graduation in 1924, he earned his own nick-

name — "Coach" — as a high school football and track guru for 35 years. He worked successively at Jefferson High School, Beverly Hills High and University High in West Los Angeles.

"I set a record for losing when I coached Jefferson High in 1927, '28, '29," he recalled for the Riverside Press-Enterprise in 2000. "Lost 17 in a row. Then I moved to Beverly Hills in 1930 . . . and we went undefeated — won the league. When I moved to University High, I went winless again."

But he excelled as a track coach, especially at University High, where he coached Olympic champion sprinter Mel Patton and hurdler Craig Dixon and won the Los Angeles city track and field championship.

Pursell drove his car and golfed until he turned 100 and later contented himself with navigating in a wheelchair. He survived a shattered esophagus and bacterial meningitis and had eye problems, but continued to watch his beloved Trojans on television. Last fall, he attended their home game rout of Hawaii in person.

The doughty old Trojan outlived his eight siblings and his wife, Gwendolyn, who died in 1989.

He is survived by his daughter, Helen Wilson; son, James Jr.; five grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren.



USC

**JAMES PURSELL**

*After college, he found some success as a high school football coach. He also coached a sprinter at University High who won an Olympic gold.*