

UConn vs. Yale 1965: The Huskies' First-Ever Win Over Yale

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On September 25, 1965, the UConn football team defeated Yale 13-6 at the Yale Bowl.

The victory marked a significant milestone in New England college football for several reasons. It was the first time that a University of Connecticut football team defeated Yale. The Bulldogs had won the school's 16 previous engagements, the first of which took place in 1948. Every meeting had taken place in the Yale Bowl to accommodate the widespread interest in the game across the Nutmeg State. After every previous encounter, UConn's band played "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" when the Huskies inevitably fell short.

Nearly 35,000 fans attended the 1965 edition, which was par for the course in the rivalry game. Over the years, a vibrant tailgating scene emerged at Yale-UConn matchups. Unfortunately, the pregame was often more compelling than the football game itself.

In its early years, this was a one-sided rivalry in two different respects: Yale always won, and the game meant so much more to Connecticut.

"It was very important to us. Because Yale was Yale and UConn was UConn. Yale is the upper echelon and UConn is just farmers from upper Connecticut," said linebacker Vic Radzevich, a soon-to-be All-East football selection who played a major role in the Huskies' victory that afternoon.

“Yale was always at the top of our agenda. How are we going to get by these guys? It was always looked forward to,” said Henry Pulasek, a guard and linebacker on the 1965 team.

“You couldn't help but think about what Yale's history and tradition was when compared to UConn. Yale just had so much more that it had accomplished,” said Carmen Ammirato, a sophomore defensive back on the UConn Huskies that afternoon.



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Beyond its significance in Storrs, UConn's victory over Yale had a larger meaning in the state of Connecticut.

Never before had the Elis lost to a team hailing from the Nutmeg State. In a streak dating back to 1875, Yale was 86-0 against opponents from Connecticut. No other school had a comparable streak of success against in-state opponents.

In addition to UConn, Yale's victims included Trinity, Coast Guard Academy, Loomis Institute (now Loomis Chaffee), and various military teams during the two World Wars. The most frequent subject of a Yale football beating was Wesleyan, often in cartoonish fashion. Between 1875

and 1905, Yale won all 37 meetings between the esteemed institutions. The combined scores of these 37 games was a whopping 1856-9. In some years, Yale's 11 would pound on Wesleyan's 11 as many as three times.

The worst such beating took place on October 15, 1887, when Yale beat Wesleyan 106-0. This came one week after a 38-0 trouncing and three weeks before a 68-4 shellacking. One must commend the courage and character of the Wesleyan football team that ventured to the Yale Bowl to take on a team that had just defeated them 106-0. There must have been more than a few nervous moments on the train ride down.

Beyond its meaning in Connecticut, UConn's victory signaled a further evolution in New England college football. Yale had been the region's top collegiate program for most of the previous ninety years. Yale and the Ivy League's preeminence over the region's college football was clearly coming to an end. In later years, UConn would become an aspiring football power, which would lead to a more than two-decade pause in the rivalry with Yale.

Now, when the schools play, it is FBS Connecticut that has so much more to lose than FCS Yale.

The coaches of the two squads that afternoon were strikingly similar. UConn's Rick Forzano and Yale's Carmen "Carm" Cozza were both young coaches who were new to their programs. Forzano was a second-year head coach, looking to improve on a surprisingly strong 4-4-1 rookie campaign. Cozza was in his first year in New Haven, taking over a program where expectations were always sky high.

Both Forzano and Cozza came from immigrant Italian families in Ohio. They both began their coaching careers in Ohio as well. After two seasons as head coaches, their records were nearly identical. Forzano was 7-10-1 while Cozza was 7-11. As it turned out, Forzano's stay in Connecticut proved short-lived, while Cozza would remain in the state for the rest of his life.

Forzano grew up in Akron, Ohio and played high school football until a detached retina brought his playing days to an end. He attended Kent

State and started coaching high school football while still a student. Initially, he established himself as a respected high school coach in the Akron area before becoming an assistant at the College of Wooster. From there, he moved on to Kent State, where he met an offensive lineman named Lou Holtz, who became his most successful protégé. Forzano made a name for himself as an assistant coach at the Naval Academy, where he recruited and served as the backfield coach for fellow Ohioan Roger Staubach, who won the Heisman Trophy in 1963.

Forzano took over in Storrs in 1964, replacing longtime coach Bob Ingalls, who had guided the Huskies to three consecutive losing seasons after leading them to five consecutive winning campaigns. From day one, Forzano presented himself as a taskmaster. He was business-like with the press but a battering ram in practice.

“[Forzano] was a tough coach. Back in those days, Bear Bryant was the ideal coach and Rick kind of went with that ideal,” Pulasek said.

“[Forzano] was a pretty tough individual. Small in stature, but he really was demanding,” Ammirato said of Forzano.

Forzano's preseason practices started at five in the morning. In 1964, 125 men tried out for his team. Forty made it to opening day. That team improved to 4-4-1 and finished third in the Yankee Conference. During 1965 preseason workouts, three starters quit the UConn team.

“They tried to make us lean, mean, and tough. They worked our butts off. It was quite a challenging experience,” Pulasek said.

“[Forzano] was a hammer. He used to get himself up on the tower. He'd be looking at you on the other side of the field and you missed a block or something, and I'd hear this high-pitched ‘Radzevich,’” Radzevich said.

“He wanted to have linemen that were the size of full backs so that they would be quick and agile. We played against some pretty big guys that didn't care how quick or agile you were. They beat you up,” Pulasek said.

“He knew he didn't have the greatest talent on the team,” Ammirato said of UConn's roster, which was smaller in number and stature than most of their

opponents. In an era when platooning had become the norm, UConn still had several players who started both ways.

Forzano brought a fantastic coaching staff with him that included Holtz and Sam Rutigliano, who went on to coach the Cleveland Browns.

“Holtz had the same mentality as Forzano. Nice guy and all that stuff, but you really had to work for him,” said Radzevich, who babysat future UConn coach Skip Holtz and his sister Luanne on several occasions.

“Rutigliano was very outgoing, very engaging. He always greeted you with a strong handshake and a big smile. He kept us thinking about smaller things, the details of the game that a defensive back had to deal with,” said Ammirato, who worked primarily with Rutigliano that season.

“We had a lot of good coaches, but we just didn't have the recruiting power to bring in a lot of the good players that other schools did,” Pulasek said. UConn recruited primarily from Connecticut and the surrounding states. By contrast, Yale recruited players from across the country.

“We used to have an award called the tiger tail. If you played well in practice, you got a tiger tail on your locker. [Forzano] chewed my ass up and down about everything I did one day and I was all screwed up. But then I got in the locker room and there was a tiger tail on my locker,” Radzevich said.



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Forzano proclaimed his optimism about the 1965 team, citing their speed and willingness to hit as positives while noting his concerns about their size, depth, and lack of experience. The head coach expressed confidence in quarterback Dave Whaley, a junior from New Castle, Delaware, and expected the team to throw the ball at least half of the time. Whaley combined speed, acumen as a rollout passer, and a big arm. Teammates regarded him as a locker room leader.

Joining Whaley in the backfield in 1965 were Gary Blackney, Bob Quist, and co-captain John Billingslea. Hailing from Meriden, Billingslea was the clear standout of the bunch, starting at flanker on offense and safety on defense. Reporters for several Connecticut newspapers called them UConn's "Pony" backfield because of their small size. None of Connecticut's backfield starters weighed more than 175 pounds.

Their offensive and defensive fronts weren't much bigger, averaging just under 200 pounds.

Connecticut's other captain was the anchor of their offensive and defensive lines, Gerry McWeeny. Forzano told the New London Day that

McWeeny “hit like a 230-pounder” despite his listed weight of 198 pounds.

“Billingslea was a little more vocal. Gerry was more of a physical presence at defensive tackle,” Ammirato said. Billingslea later earned his law degree and went on to a career as a television actor and Hollywood voiceover man.

Connecticut’s defense, which proved to be the team’s cornerstone, included several other standouts. Defensive end Joe Hassett and linebacker Vic Radzevich were both team leaders and steady performers.

Defensive back Gene Campbell, a senior from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, delivered big hits and made opportunistic plays in the secondary.

“Gene Campbell was not a very big defensive back, but he was quick. He definitely had instincts for interceptions and was a very solid tackler. He really was that next line of defense,” said Ammirato.

An hour southwest in New Haven, Carm Cozza was figuring out the future of Yale football.

Cozza was born on June 10, 1930, to an Italian immigrant family in Parma, Ohio, a rapidly growing blue-collar suburb just south of Cleveland. He earned an athletics scholarship to Miami, where he starred on both the baseball and football teams.

Cozza played quarterback at Miami for head coaches Woody Hayes and Ara Parseghian, both of whom would go on to legendary coaching careers elsewhere. College teammates of Cozza included future Michigan coaching legend Bo Schembechler and John Pont, who would later serve as Cozza’s boss.

The kid from Parma had been better on the diamond than on the gridiron. He played minor league baseball in the Chicago White Sox and Cleveland Indians organizations before returning to Oxford, Ohio as a graduate assistant for Parseghian. Cozza would serve as a full-fledged assistant for Pont at Miami from 1956 until 1962.

Miami was a power in the Mid-American Conference during Cozza's entire tenure in Oxford, Ohio. The [now Redhawks] never had a losing season during Cozza's time as a player or assistant coach. They won six conference titles, appeared in three bowl games, and never finished worse than third in their conference. In 1963, Cozza followed Pont to Yale, a much more urban environment than the college town of Oxford, Ohio.

Pont, Cozza, and company took to it well. After a disappointing two-win 1962 campaign, Yale bounced back with 6-3 and 6-2-1 marks in 1963 and 1964. Pont left New Haven as abruptly as he arrived, bringing most of his assistants with him to Indiana University, whom he would lead to their most recent Big Ten title (1967) and Rose Bowl appearance.

Cozza applied for the vacant Yale job, competing against such esteemed interviewees as soon-to-be Penn State coach Joe Paterno and former Oklahoma University head coach Bud Wilkerson. Yale athletic director Delaney Kiphuth liked what he saw of Cozza, whose focus on football as character-building mirrored Kiphuth's vision for the program. Cozza had an offer in hand from the University of New Hampshire, but Kiphuth asked him to hold off for 24 hours before accepting. By the next day, Kiphuth offered Cozza the Yale job, which he accepted immediately.

Cozza would be the only returning coach on Yale's staff. He brought in a cadre of coaches and former players from Miami, many of whom stayed in New Haven for decades.

"Honest and straightforward, unadorned in his language and with no part of the anxious smoothie in his makeup, the former Pont assistant is likely to get 100% effort from staff and players without having to ask for it," the Hartford Courant's Bill Lee wrote of Yale's incoming coach.

Entering 1965, Yale was in a rebuilding mode. The Elis lost a multi-year starting quarterback and four multi-year starting offensive linemen from the previous year.

Cozza had a quarterback controversy on his hands as well. He decided to go with junior Pete Doherty from West Hartford, a dropback passer who looked to be a long-term starter. Waiting in the wings was senior Tone Grant, whose skills lay more in the running game.

Yale had several quick halfbacks and an overpowering fullback from New Britain named Don Barrows. Their offensive line had little experience but plenty of size, averaging better than 240 pounds per man. Their large but inexperienced line proved to be a liability all season.

The Bulldogs' strengths were on defense. They boasted a strong defensive core, including junior defensive lineman Glenn Greenberg (Baseball Hall of Famer Hank Greenberg's son), senior linebacker and captain Dave Laidley, and standout sophomore linebacker Rod Watson.

"If a boy has a good day in practice, I come back here at night and have to break up fights among my coaches. The offense says 'we'll take that boy,'" Cozza said of his 1965 team. "Then, the defense jumps up and says, 'oh no you don't. The defense needs him more than you do.'"

Yale was favored in the September 25th contest, but not heavily. Both clubs were picked as middle of the pack in their leagues by the New England football press. Las Vegas favored the Bulldogs by six, which may have been a bit much.

More often than not, Connecticut had been hanging tough against Yale in recent meetings.

Yale won 11-8 in 1960, 18-14 in 1962, and 3-0 in 1963.

In the 1964 game, Yale led 7-6 with 10 minutes remaining, but the Bulldogs offense wore out the Huskies defense and pushed in two fourth-quarter touchdowns for a 21-6 victory.

The final score of the '64 game may have contributed to the line on the 1965 game. Connecticut's poor performance in a preseason scrimmage at Brown may have been a contributing factor as well.

The Hartford Courant noted that UConn was likely not showing all of their cards in the scrimmage, running only a basic offense and defense. Forzano told reporters that he was disappointed in his team's hitting during the scrimmage. He promised reporters that the Huskies would be much improved by the time of their opener. Little did the paper know that UConn's performance in Providence involved a little bit of gamesmanship.

“In August, we had to go over to Brown to play. We were issued high-cut football shoes instead of the low-cut which we might have for gameday. We didn't think anything of it. We found out later that they had inserted a sole that had weight to it of about a pound. Part of their reasoning was that they wanted us to look sluggish, look a little slower,” Ammirato said. The UConn staff knew full well that Yale would have a heavy scouting presence for the scrimmage at Brown, an Ivy League member, including Cozza himself.

When it came to information and disinformation, the Providence ruse was not all that Forzano had up his short sleeves. UConn's coaches followed the New Haven newspapers closely for any tidbits on Yale's offseason preparations.

“After the spring practices, there were some pictures in one of the New Haven newspapers. The coaches looked at them and saw that Yale was set up in the I-Formation,” Ammirato said, a then-new offensive scheme which Yale had not used in previous seasons. Historically, Yale had run a Split-T offense.

Forzano learned from colleagues in Ohio that several Yale coaches attended a coaching clinic held at Miami (Ohio) that summer focused on the I-Formation.

“All preseason, we practiced against the I formation,” Ammirato said.

The New Haven Register surveyed 33 Connecticut sportswriters and broadcasters for their pick on the game. Eighteen favored Yale while 15 picked UConn, including Bill Newell of the Hartford Courant, then the dean of Connecticut sports writers.

"This is something of a powder keg for a new Yale Coach to be sitting on, particularly since Connecticut sends uniformly good teams into the Bowl and has come close enough on several occasions to give the Eli coach nervous prostrations," wrote Bill Lee of the Hartford Courant, who picked Yale.

A Willimantic-based group of UConn supporters who called themselves the “25th of September Committee” posted “Beat Yale” signs across upper

Connecticut. They mailed leaflets that said "Beat Yale" to thousands of eastern and central Connecticut homeowners, encouraging citizens to head to the Yale Bowl to support their state university. Yale responded by plastering the leaflets all over their locker room as motivation

Many restaurants advertised post-game meals targeting UConn fans returning from the game. The South Meriden House offered a weekend dinner special consisting of Yankee Pot Roast and "all the fixins'" with Lowenbrau on tap. The Milldale Manor advertised its Saturday night "New York Floor Show" with lobster, chicken, and steak specials. The Arturo Colony Restaurant in Wallingford featured contemporary music by the Tony Dino quartet with jackets required for men and slacks prohibited for women.

The Connecticut team headed to New Haven a day early. On Friday, the players visited the veterans hospital in West Haven in the morning before heading to the Yale Bowl for an afternoon walk through where Sam Rutigliano encouraged players to eat a piece of grass from the field.

When kickoff came at 2 p.m. Saturday, the game proved to be a physical, evenly matched defensive slog. Yale mustered just seven first downs all afternoon. Connecticut had 10.

UConn was clearly the aggressor. The Huskies employed a variety of offensive formations--splitting both ends, flooding receivers on either side of the field, and configuring the backs into unusual packages. The Huskies threw on running downs and ran on passing downs.

On defense, the Huskies kept eight men in the box and blitzed frequently, preventing Yale from exercising all of the flexibilities possible in the I-Formation offense.

"Hit them early and they won't be as comfortable coming through that hole. That was true and that seemed to work," Ammirato said of the defensive game plan. "Our defense did a heck of a job to contain them. To be able to hold them to six points was pretty significant," he continued.

"It was tough to get any yardage at all. We were pretty well set as far as stopping them, and they stopped us too," Pulasek said.

Neither team could move the ball on the ground. Yale held a 53 to 38 advantage in yards in a battle of modest rushing attacks.

UConn's defense swarmed Yale rushers all afternoon, bottling up their speedy runners and keeping them between the tackles. Gerry McWeeny was the stalwart up front for Connecticut, either making the tackles himself or setting up his strong linebacking corps to deliver the blows. On the other side of the ball, Yale defensive lineman Glenn Greenberg kept standing up his UConn blockers, enabling Eli linebackers to hunt down UConn's running backs.

Though hardly the stuff of passing legend, UConn held a decided advantage in the air. Dave Whaley succeeded enough in the rollout passing game to keep Yale honest and stretch the field. Whaley went 10 for 27 for 114 yards. Yale's Pete Doherty managed just 66 passing yards on an 8 for 19 afternoon.

UConn's advantage at moving the ball was minimized by its penalty troubles. The Huskies committed 10 penalties for 81 yards while the Bulldogs committed just five for 25 yards.

UConn broke the ice late in the first half. Whaley completed a 32-yard pass to Billingslea, which brought the Huskies down to the Yale 27-yard line. Three plays later, quarterback/place kicker Whaley booted a 40-yard field goal to give UConn a 3-0 advantage going into the half.

Neither side mustered anything close to a drive for most of the third quarter. With four minutes remaining, Yale recovered a Dave Whaley fumble on Connecticut's 23-yard line. The subsequent drive went backwards, and Yale's Dan Begel missed a 45-yard field goal attempt. During the first half, Begel missed from 50 yards.

Yale's Bob Brundage opened the fourth quarter by intercepting a Whaley pass on Yale's 25-yard line and returning it to midfield. The Bulldogs put together a sustained drive that culminated in a one-yard Jim Kovacs touchdown plunge, giving Yale a 6-3 lead. The Bulldogs' kicking problems continued to plague them as kicker Begel missed the extra point.

With just over six minutes remaining, Yale fumbled deep in its own territory. Connecticut defensive end Joe Hassett recovered the ball on the 21-yard line. The Huskies drove down to Yale's three-yard line, where Whaley hit a 22-yard field goal, his second of the day.

To prepare for the game, Whaley relied on some advice he got from San Francisco 49ers kicker Tommy Davis. The Niners had practiced in Storrs in preparation for a game against the Giants. Davis encouraged Whaley not to over practice kicking in the days before a game. When a kicker boots too many balls in practice, the muscle next to the shin bone goes numb, minimizing the kicker's accuracy and power, Davis explained. Whaley did not attempt one field goal in pregame warmups.

Tied at six with less than five minutes remaining, Yale played for the win, as any Carm Cozza team would for the next three decades.

On a second down and four, Yale's Pete Doherty dropped back to pass from his own 35-yard line. A cadre of Connecticut defenders rushed Doherty, who lofted the ball toward a running back in the flat. Connecticut corner Gene Campbell snatched the ball out of the air and raced toward the endzone for a touchdown.

"I remember congratulating Gene after he intercepted the pass. If it wasn't for him, we would have lost the game," Radzevich said. After Whaley's extra point, Connecticut led 13-6 and that score held.

As the clock expired, Forzano's players carried him off the field on their shoulders, all the way down the tunnel, and into the showers, where they gave the entire coaching staff impromptu, fully-clothed showers. Cozza had walked across the field to congratulate Forzano but finally caught up with the winning coach for a handshake and congratulations at the post-game press conference. Yale AD Kiphuth came to UConn's dressing room to congratulate the visitors as well.

UConn's players gave the game ball to athletic director and former football coach JJ Christiansen, who had been at the school for 34 years.

"I remember Sam Rutigliano in the locker room afterwards saying that he's going to celebrate in every bar going from New Haven up to UConn,"

Pulasek said. The players remember campus being empty when they got back to Storrs, as all of their classmates had gone in to town to celebrate the victory.

“We had to rest up to be ready to get chewed out while watching the game videos the next day,” Radzevich said.

Bill Newell described UConn’s victory as “workmanlike.”

“I’ve seen several more fired-up UConn teams in the Bowl, some of them too emotionally aroused for their own good. This team gave a distinct impression that it was well aware of its own chances to leave the Bowl on the winning end of the score,” Newell wrote.

On Sunday morning, September 26th, 1965, nobody would have guessed that Forzano was the coach in his last season in Connecticut.

Papers across the state spoke of Cozza’s job being in jeopardy. After the game, the Yale coach said his biggest concern was “picking up the pieces, especially at the quarterback position. All but one of the teams we must now face could be even tougher than Connecticut.”

The next morning, Cozza awoke to find a sign on his lawn that read ““Coach, there’s a train at four o’clock heading out of New Haven. Be under it.””

He received piles of hate mail from Yale fans and alums in the coming weeks, a striking amount of which blamed the loss on his Italian heritage.

Talk of Cozza getting fired only got louder as the autumn unfolded.

The Connecticut loss presaged a difficult 1965 season. Yale continued to play strong defense but got little rolling on offense. The team’s offensive line struggled to get a push up front all year. Cozza stuck with Doherty the rest of the way, who ended up having a solid career as a Yale starting quarterback. In 1966, he finished second in the Ivy League in passing efficiency.

Yale finished 3-6 overall and fifth in the Ivy League in 1965. A difficult season culminated in a pair of losses in rivalry games. Princeton blew out Yale 31-6 at Palmer Stadium. In "The Game," Harvard came into the Yale Bowl and shut out the Elis, 13-0.

Cozza followed up the 3-6 1965 campaign with a 4-5 season in 1966. The leeway that Kiphuth gave Cozza panned out eventually.

By 1967, Cozza's first recruiting class, which included future Green Bay Packers quarterback Brian Dowling and Dallas Cowboys running back Calvin Hill (the father of Grant Hill), had taken charge. The Bulldogs won Ivy League titles in 1967, 1968, and 1969.

Cozza went on to become the winningest coach in the history of the Ivy League. He was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2002. Cozza won 10 Ivy League titles, including nine in a 14-year stretch between 1967 and 1981. He coached a number of players who went on to esteemed NFL careers including Calvin Hill, Dick Jauron, and Gary Fencik.

Even after Cozza's retirement in 1996, he remained one of the faces of Yale football, helping raise funds for the revitalization of the Yale Bowl and serving as a commentator on Bulldogs football games. He died in 2018 in New Haven, which had by then been his home for 55 years.

The Yale win seemed to have derailed the 1965 UConn season before it really got going. After making history, the Huskies never got back on track. UConn played stellar defense but had little experience on offense. The Huskies struggled to move the ball all season, averaging fewer than 200 yards of total offense per game as they finished 3-6.

"We just didn't have the steam by the end of the season," Pulasek said.

Soon after the 1965 season, Forzano left Storrs for a position with the NFL's St. Louis Cardinals. He later served as head coach for the Naval Academy and then the Detroit Lions. Neither tenure proved particularly successful. He left football in 1976 to become a manufacturer's sales representative.

Yale and UConn continued to play annually through 1998. Over time, the ascendant UConn football program closed the gap significantly in the rivalry. Yale now leads the overall series 32-18. In 2021, UConn and Yale played for the first time in a generation as the Huskies pulled out a 21-15 victory. The teams have not played since and have no scheduled matchups in the foreseeable future.

“Now that we've got the stadium in East Hartford, I think that we should have a home and home rivalry,” Pulasek said.

“It's going to put more pressure on UConn,” Ammirato said of a potential renewal of the rivalry. “It's a game that UConn has to win or should win. Losing it would be a step backward. For Yale, I'm not sure what they really gain from playing us.”