

Wherever the Spartans Take Us

By Karin McKie



Andy Chiggeri didn't play on a team in high school or college, but he believes that sports are part of the university experience. "Athletics are a banner that enhances the image of San José State and the value of my diploma," he says. He's been to more than 500 football games, so to him, "autumn is Spartans, and Saturday is game day." He's not alone. Many alumni arrange their schedules and travel budgets to accommodate their sports fandom.

With a full brown mustache Chiggeri, '64 BA, '66 MA, History, looks like actor Jack Warden and wears a Spartan windbreaker while watching the men's basketball team play the Utah State Aggies. The nippy February air is scented with burnt popcorn and punctuated by squeaking sneakers, while Vanilla Ice advises, "Stop. Collaborate and listen," via the DJ. Inside Walt McPherson Court, all eyes are focused on the agile cheerleaders, brass-heavy pep band, toothy Sammy Spartan and the energetic white-suited players under the fluorescents of SJSU's Event Center.

Chiggeri is joined by fellow fan Marty Selznick, '74 Geography, also sporting a Spartan jacket and blue cap. On his smart phone, Selznick shows that he is the cover photo on the SJSU Alumni Association's Facebook page. He stumps for the Spartan Foundation's Scholarship Fund Drive, and says, "We raise the money, but we get something out of it, too. We get social and entertainment experiences, so we wrap our lives around the games."

The late Gary Graul, '69 Social Science, didn't miss a Spartan football game, home or away, from 1981 to 2012. He centered his vacations around the games, and visited about 25 states. Graul turned each sports sojourn into an excuse to visit far-flung family, friends and former SJSU classmates in a variety of urban and rural locations, sometimes spending eight or nine days in a region. "Utah is my favorite state," he said. "It has such gorgeous national parks." Chiggeri's brother was killed in the Korean War, so visiting the various monuments to fallen soldiers around the nation's capital during the Military Bowl trip was poignant for him.

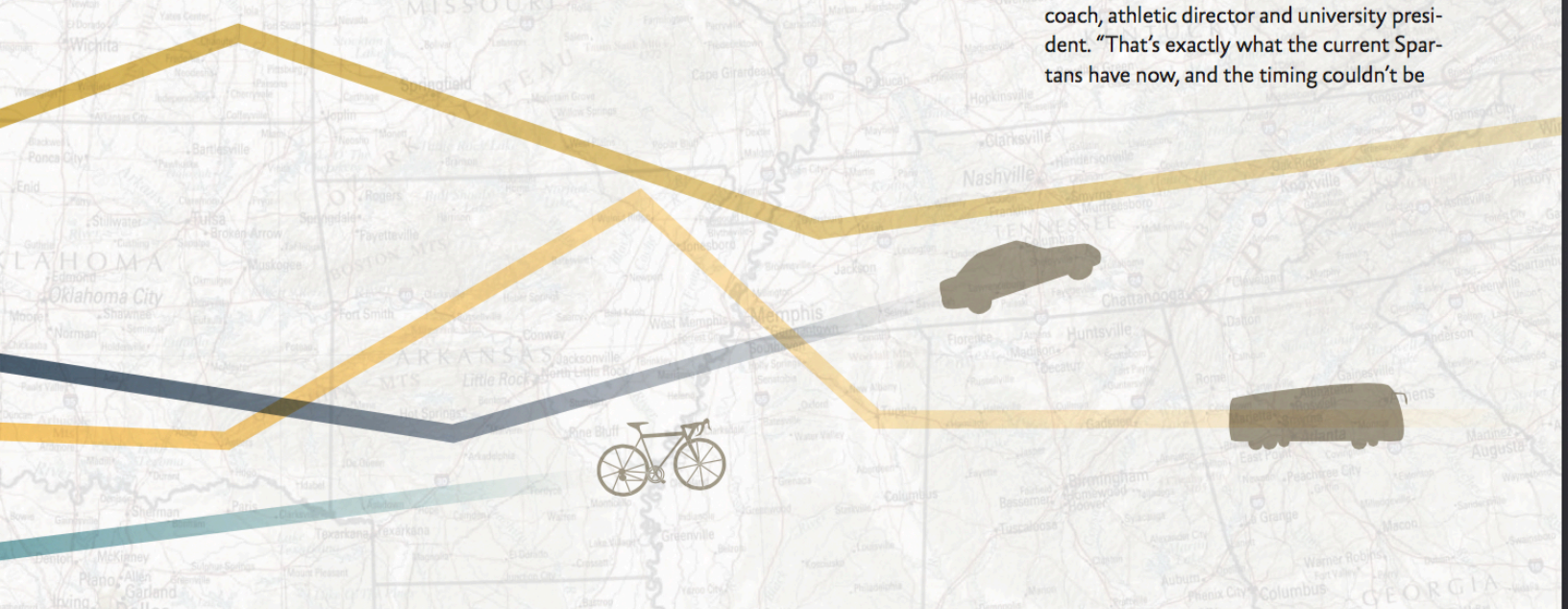
Graul also enjoyed the camaraderie and the time to chat and harken back to previous

glories because, he said, the past was very important to him. He was appreciative of the Alumni Association-sponsored tailgate parties, which are especially meaningful "for fans who take the trouble to travel," he said.

Chiggeri went to the New Mexico Bowl game in 2006, during "one of the worst snow storms in decades. The Denver airport was shut down. There were no flights from the Bay Area. I had to drive to Modesto to catch what looked like a crop duster to Las Vegas, then on to Albuquerque. I arrived at 4 a.m. on game day with no luggage."

Despite the travel hiccups, Chiggeri and a dedicated group of supporters continue to go the distance, literally and figuratively, for their Spartans. "All that hassle was worth it," he adds. "Because we won."

Patrick Walsh, '69 Advertising, saw his first Spartan football game in 1967 and has been hooked ever since. "I enjoy everything about a game," he says. "Attending practices and talking to everyone from fellow fans to coaches, athletics department staff and players' parents." Walsh believes that three positions ensure school sports success: head coach, athletic director and university president. "That's exactly what the current Spartans have now, and the timing couldn't be





better as SJSU enters the Mountain West Conference and renews old rivalries, like Fresno. I can't thank President Qayoumi enough for making this happen. The Spartans are back, and it's all right there in front of us."

The new conference participation begins July 1, which gives Ghiggeri time to change the personalized license plates on his Corvette from "SJSWAC" to "SJS MWC" and perhaps to winterize the vehicle to attend the games in locations like Colorado, Nevada and Wyoming. There will be more cold-weather trips in this conference, Hawaii notwithstanding.

This group of Spartans is enthusiastic for the conference shift as another opportunity to continue to promote SJSU to audiences in other states. Ghiggeri and Selznick are well-versed in the university's history. They know that SJSU has been the granddaddy of the CSU system since its founding in 1857, and recall that the San José Municipal Stadium was originally a Work Projects Administration project. At the Hardwood Club, they also point out the architectural drawings for additions to Spartan Stadium's north end zone, perfect for the "pageantry of the game," as Ghiggeri says. The Dick Vermeil Spartan Football Complex and Bill Walsh Legacy Center will be named for the two SJSU alumni and Super Bowl-winning coaches.

"We've got beautiful facilities for games and tailgating," Ghiggeri says. "This is a perfect, pretty campus for an urban area. Since we're

in a city, SJSU goes up, instead of out, and anything that's ugly we cover with ivy."

Younger supporters are proud as well. Robb Silverstein, '12 Public Relations, attends most basketball and all football games, including the Military Bowl. "Once I became an SJSU student, I felt so much pride in our athletics. I'm also proud of being a graduate," he says. "That combination has made me a big fan." His favorite Spartan sports experience was in 2011, when SJSU pulled an upset at the Las Vegas Western Athletic Conference tournament, beating Idaho 74-68.

This dedicated support of San José State athletics, this "shared experience, this common language," as Selznick calls it, draws fans to all the places where the Spartans play. He and Ghiggeri have been to 38 states each, and remember a particularly good experience in Omaha, Nebraska, for the College World Series in 2000, a place where, Selznick says, "folks knew how to talk sports." Across the country, the pair has encountered friendly local fans who share recommendations for favorite places from restaurants to museums.

Spartan fans are also united in some dislikes, primarily of a certain color: red, the team tint of archrivals Fresno State and Stanford, among others. They'll travel to those games, but always curtail their use of crimson. Ghiggeri doesn't even use red to decorate during the holidays, saying, "even my Christmas tree is blue and gold."

Steve Gossett, '68 Civil Engineering, had a Spartan-hued winter break as well. He left San José at 6 a.m. on Christmas Day to fly to the Military Bowl game in Washington, D.C. A season ticket holder since 1967 and leader of the Spartan Foundation from 1987-88, Gossett has led some fan tours and admits that sometimes coordinating large travel groups has its challenges. In 2010, he flew with a group of 20 to New Orleans, took the train to Tuscaloosa for the Alabama game, then to Chicago and rode the bus to Madison for the Wisconsin game, and finally flew back home. He took a group of 65 to Los Angeles in 2011, and 50 people to D.C. last year for the Navy game. "Sometimes it's frustrating to keep 'herding the cats,'" Gossett says. "But I enjoy the social aspects, and I have made many wonderful friends. And, as the saying goes, 'You have to be somewhere.'"

Ghiggeri agrees. "Our job is to be fans, wherever that takes us."

Gary Graul was interviewed for this story shortly before his death on March 23. Our friend and dedicated fan will be missed.—Ed

playing away | to how many states did our Spartans travel this season?



How far have you traveled for your Spartans?
Share your stories at wsqeditor@sjsu.edu.