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Pacific showcases local niche with game at Kamehameha

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PACIFIC UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS

Pacific running back and former Saint Louis player Kamana Pimental rushed against Dubuque last week. The Boxers logo was redesigned for Saturday's game.

The University of Hawaii plays Arizona in Tucson on Saturday, but that hardly means an absence of college football here this weekend.

Tiny but audacious Pacific University will travel 2,575 miles from its Forest Grove, Ore., campus to play a “home” game against Occidental College of California at 5 p.m. at Kamehameha Schools’ Kunuiakea Stadium.

What is being trumpeted as the first NCAA Division III football game ever played in the state has the potential of being a marketing master stroke for the innovative school.

The game and its satellite events, including a Thursday golf tournament, Friday reception, a Saturday pregame party and, yes, even its annual board of trustees meeting, are calculated to underline and expand the brand of a school that has quietly but steadily carved a niche here.

Gov. David Ige and Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell have proclaimed it “Pacific University (Ore.) Week.”

Seventeen percent of Pacific’s undergraduate enrollment is from Hawaii and the school claims more than 1,500 engaged alumni here.

Twenty six members of the Boxers’ football team come from Hawaii, making it, what Pacific likes to say, “the second-highest number of players from Hawaii in the country (after) the University of Hawaii.”

Opening a full-time office in Honolulu was one thing, but moving a game here is another level of commitment for the school that has an undergraduate enrollment of less than 2,000 but, clearly, no ceiling on dreams.

The game is the brainchild of football coach Keith Buckley, who said he came up with the vision on a recruiting trip here in 2009. At the time he was just trying to get football off the ground again at a school that had been without the sport since dropping it following the 1991 season.

Buckley got such a good reception from recruits here, the eventual payback being a 2014 Northwest Conference championship, that the idea grew. “It took a long time to kind of cook in the oven, so to speak,” Buckley said.

But as it did he pitched the plan to athletic director Ken Schumann, who, perhaps remarkably, did not laugh in his face or shoo him off campus. “We joke around a little bit, but he wasn’t kidding about this one,” Schumann said. “It was an opportunity to showcase our school and our (athletic) program,” he said.

Together they went to work on a plan three years in the implementing. Along the way they lined up Outrigger Hotels and Hawaiian Airlines as “partners” in the venture and offered Occidental the first opportunity to jump on board.

The Tigers were targeted because their coaching staff includes Doug Semones, former Kahuku High head coach and UH assistant, and Darnell Arceneaux, a past Saint Louis

School star and head coach, and a roster that often has a sprinkling of Hawaii players. Oxy didn't have to be asked twice.

After experiencing 7.5-hour bus rides to Spokane, Wash., to play conference foe Whitworth College, the Hawaii-bred players are looking forward to the trip home. "We've been talking about it since last spring," said Pacific tailback Kamana Pimental, a Saint Louis graduate. "I'm absolutely stoked to come back home and play."

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