

The Great Tide Pool

TALES OF PACIFIC GROVE, CALIFORNIA

by local award-winning author, Brad Herzog

THE SHOE GAME

November 1, 2025



As the Pacific Grove football prepares to host Carmel in the final game of the regular season, let's talk about rivalries.

Rivalry is the lifeblood of football, particularly the college game. In fact, on any given Saturday in late autumn, you can find two teams playing for one oddball trophy. This prize can be anything, really, just as long as it ends up in the winner's hands each year:

Michigan and Michigan State compete for the Paul Bunyan Trophy. Indiana faces Indiana State for the Old Brass Spittoon. Cincinnati plays Louisville for a Keg of Nails. There's a 75-pound replica of a buffalo nickel (North Dakota vs. North Dakota State), a peace pipe (Bowling Green vs. Toledo), even a pig (Minnesota vs. Iowa). They are battered, tarnished symbols of bragging rights. As a Washington State lineman said just before his team took on rival Washington for the Apple Cup four decades ago, "There are four important stages in your life. You're born, you play the Huskies, you get married and you die." And you only get a trophy for one of them.

The best of these trophies are layered with history and histrionics. When Oklahoma takes on Texas, for instance, the winner can boast temporary ownership of not only a Golden Hat, but also the Red River that borders both states. And then there's the Stanford Axe, the Cal-Stanford prize that has been pilfered and paraded countless times. In 1982, Cal won the Big Game with The Play, a last-second kickoff return through the Stanford band. To this day, each time Stanford gains possession of the Axe, the tiny plaque stating that game's score is changed to Stanford winning by a point.

It's the ultimate Golden State rivalry... unless you live in Pacific Grove, where all eyes are on the Shoe Game.

When PG and Carmel face off against each other on November 8, it will be the 78th consecutive time in which the two Monterey Peninsula rivals



compete for The Shoe. Footwear features in several college trophies – from the Bronze Boot (Wyoming vs. Colorado State) to the Dutchman’s Shoes (Union vs. Rensselaer) – but this high school prize has a history all its own.

PG lore suggests the trophy, which dates back to 1948, stems from a lone track shoe left on a muddy field after a game. In actuality, three late 1940s Carmel players decided to bronze one of their athletic director’s shoes and name it after his father, J.O. Handley, who paid for the bronzing. So the J.O. Handley Award has been pursued by thousands of shoulder-padded teenagers since the Truman Administration.

Admittedly, in recent years, PG’s rivals have dominated – last year’s 44-41 nailbiter was the 10th in a row for a Carmel program that holds a 42-33 edge in games won (with two ties). But PGHS has had its shining moments – a 39-12 triumph in 1952, a 43-6 shellacking in 1953, a 35-0 shutout in 1984, and a run between 1987 and 1989 in which PG outshined its foes by a combined score of 102-14.

Always, no matter which team has the edge, the bleachers are filled to capacity. Alumni plan reunions around the contest. The plaque surrounding the trophy base is engraved with the name of the winner. And social media is rife with triumphant players hoisting The Shoe. Monterey Herald sports reporter John Devine once put it this way: “If you talk to both sides, winning the Shoe Game means bragging rights forever. Alumni from 20 years ago still talk about playing in the Shoe Game.”

So the battle for The Shoe is about many things – rubbing shoulders with (and rooting alongside) neighbors, a group of enthusiastic athletes making memories, fierce competition, friendly camaraderie... and, perhaps most important, a community invested in itself.