

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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That's correct. That's correct. I was probably the first Samoan that played in the Rose Bowl; I'm not sure of that. When you're raised in Hawaii, I mean, ethnically, I am of Samoan mix. Culturally, I am of Hawaiiiana. When I'm raised with people here, they would have an influence on the way you look at things in life. And I knew that go up there, don't shame your surname, don't shame yourself, and don't shame the state that you're from. And that was the driving force for all of us who were up there.

Before Marcus Mariota, there was Bob Apisa, a Samoan recruited from Hawaii, who also made history on the football field nearly half a century ago. Bob Apisa, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Bob Apisa was the first all-American college football player of Samoan ancestry whose achievements helped open the door for Polynesian players like Heisman Trophy winner Marcus Mariot. Apisa's athleticism made him a college football star, and led him to a long career as a stuntman in Hollywood's film industry. However, Apisa's early years were a struggle. When he moved to Hawaii at the age of seven, he couldn't understand a word of English.

Where were you born?

Leslie, I was born in Fagatogo, American Samoa. And that's adjacent to Pago Pago, American Samoa. That's the capital of American Samoa.

But you didn't stay there, obviously.

Fortunately for me and my family—well, there were eleven siblings. I mean, I had ten siblings, rather. I was the eleventh. There eight boys, three girls. And my dad was in the military at the time; he knew that the only way to improve our lot in life was to bring us from Samoa to Hawaii, so that we can get into or be engrained with proper uh, education. I remember sixty-three years ago when I left American Samoa in 1952. And I remember pulling out of that port, and we never seen electricity; I'd never seen it. I lived in a house that was lit up by kerosene lanterns. And I never spoke English, could not understand a word of English. And as we left Samoa, two and a half weeks later, we were pulling in at Honolulu Harbor. And the landscape of the land was just lit up, and I was on deck, and I asked my brother, George—his name was Siosi. In Samoan, that's George. And I said, Siosi, [SAMOAN LANGUAGE]. Meaning, there must be hundreds of, you know, kerosene lanterns out there lighting this place up. And he looked at me; he said, Papu. Papu is Bob in Samoan. He said, Papu, [SAMOAN LANGUAGE]. Meaning, Those are not kerosene lanterns; that's electricity. I had never seen a switch. We never had an inside toilet; we had outhouses. So, the confirmation of just bringing this whole new world was there. And the reaffirmation of that was the effort that we had to go out and strike it on our own. My mom and my father went up to as high as eighth grade in Samoa. They didn't have high schools. And that was one of the reasons why my dad brought us here.

What was the hardest thing for you? I can't imagine. The culture, the language; what was the hardest thing?

Well, the hardest thing was cognitive skills, social etiquettes; things of that nature. I remember sitting in the classroom at Pearl Harbor Kai Elementary, and when the teacher would gather the kids around, and she would read us a book, like, See Tom run; run, run, run. See Jane hop; hop, hop. And kids would laugh. And they would laugh, and that was my clue to laugh along with them, so I would feel like I'm one of them.

But you didn't know why.

But I didn't know why I was laughing. I didn't know why I was laughing.

No special language lessons, or tutoring; nothing like that?

No; this was strictly through osmosis or just by being around the vicinity of being around English-speaking military dependents. Because I was brought up with military dependents at Pearl Harbor Kai Elementary. But I had teachers that helped me. I remember arriving in November, and starting school late. Because it started in September, and arriving, and then I had to re-acclimate myself. Then I got hurt. We were playing cowboys and Indians; I got shot in my left eye with a slingshot, and bled for quite some time. So, I missed more school. And as a result, I was set back a grade to repeat that same grade in order for me to get on. But I took that as an onus that I had some making up to do, but it was incumbent on me to make the move and make the motivation to move ahead.

Where did your family live, and what was it like growing up with ten siblings?

It was a very disciplinarian upbringing. My dad, I think in my lifetime, because he was a man of few words, but he'll give you that look, and you'll know exactly what he meant. But he was very soft-spoken. My mom was the general foreman; she ran the shop. So, she was very dedicated as a mother. She attended and made sure that we went to school. She took us there, and picked us up. You know, she was all-giving and all-supportive.

So, at the time, what public school did you go to?

I came out of Pearl Harbor Kai. I entered Aliamanu Intermediate when it first opened up. This, I think, was 1960. And I remember going to Aliamanu the very first day it opened up, and the Salt Lake City was just nothing but a salt lake and marshland.

It really was a salt lake then.

There were no buildings. There were no buildings; just that school there. But from there, I had to go on to ninth grade. They did not have a ninth grade; it was just up to eighth grade. And I had left the eighth grade, so I was going to the ninth grade. And what my brother Bill and I did—I mean, Bill was the catalyst in bringing me to the old Interscholastic League of Honolulu.

ILH.

ILH. And that was the premier competition. And I think because he felt slighted—I didn't know any better, but he felt slighted that all the friends that we were playing around with when we were little kids all went to private schools. And he felt slighted.

The immigrants got left behind.

But the immigrants were left behind. And so, we concocted a story based on Bill's theory that if we had a district exception from someone, that we can play at Farrington. Because Farrington was in the ILH. So, we asked my uncle, Reverend McMoore—that's the Scotch part of my family, to use his residence address over at Republican Street in Kalihi. And he said, Yeah, by all means. So, that's how we ended up at Farrington.

Bob Apisa says he didn't play organized football until he entered the ninth grade at Farrington High School. He was a natural at that, and other sports as well.

You did things like you were playing a doubleheader in baseball, and the coach ran you over to the Punahou relays, and you took two events there, and you came back and you played your second baseball game.

Yes; that's very true. This is my senior year, and it was the spring of my senior year. And I had fiddled around with the track team so I can work out and do my sprints, and just starting out, because I knew as a running back, I needed speed. But he needed a shot-putter, and he knew that in my sophomore year, I tinkered around with shot-putting, and it was only about, you know, two feet or three feet and a lot of rolls after that. But I didn't know how to acquire the skills. So, we were playing Roosevelt at Moiliili Field, and he went up to my coach, Dick Kitamura, and he said, Dick, may I borrow Bob uh, in between the games? He said, Fine. I went up there.

And are you still wearing your baseball shoes?

I was wearing my baseball gear.

I took off my baseball top and put on a FHS tee-shirt or shirt, tank top, and I wore my baseball pants and my baseball leggings, and I borrowed a pair of tennis shoes. And these were the best shot-putters from all over the State. And they were all kinda [SNICKERS], you know, laughing and giggling.

How did that make you feel? Did that make you feel like—

Well, you know, I was laughing, myself. [CHUCKLE] But anyway, I said, Well, you know, I'm gonna do the best I can. My first throw, I said to myself, All I want to do is get some height on it. And I pumped it back, and I let go, and all I heard was the crowd going, Wow! Because I had just broken the State record that was there for eight and a half years later. I mean, previous. And I'm walking around like I knew what I was doing, but I was looking for the first dog poop that I may have stood on before I came into the ring. But, you know, my second and third throws, I mean, ba-boom, little dribbles here and there. But the damage was done. I had won the shotput, I had set the State record for the shotput of fifty-six, three and three-quarters, and I broke—the gentleman's name, I think it was Souza that was from Waialua in 1956. So, I told the coach, I've got a second game, so put on my uniform, and went back to play the second game of the doubleheader.

How'd you do in the doubleheader?

I hit a homerun.

It was a good night; a very good night.

It was a good night.

Bob Apisa's athletic achievements at Farrington caught the attention of dozens of college football recruiters. He chose Michigan State University, where he became part of a national championship team known for pioneering racial

integration, and for having four future Hall of Fame players, all African American. And he earned a spot in Rose Bowl lore.

I was. You know, when you're raised in Hawaii, I mean, ethnically, I am of Samoan mix. Culturally, I am of Hawaiiana. When I'm raised with people here, they would have an influence on the way you look at things in life. And I knew that go up there, don't shame your surname, don't shame yourself, and don't shame the state that you're from. And that was the driving force for all of us who were up there. You know, Dick Kenney and Charley Wedemeyer, when we were playing, we were ranked number one in the country. We would go to Ann Arbor to play University of Michigan or go down to Columbus and play Ohio State, or go down to South Bend to play Notre Dame; the top schools in the country. And we would look at each other, just before we'd go out on the field, we'd look at each other. We'd do this. Meaning, when we get together, we say, Don't make ... you know what.

A.

A; of yourself. Because that's how local boys related; don't make A. So, we look at each other, and we knew. We were in tune.

And at the same time, Michigan State had an unusual makeup of its starters. I read that there were eleven African American starters, which was really unusual at the time, and you had far more players on the team. And then, there was you, who became the first all-American player of Samoan ancestry.

Yeah; yeah.

What a team.

Oh, it was a great team. You know, at that time in 1964, we had just legislated civil rights. In 1965, there was the Civil Rights Voting Act.

And that's when you were a sophomore.

When I was a sophomore. And I looked at Bubba Smith, and Bubba Smith would look at George Webster, and George Webster would look at Dick Kenney. And we would look at each other ... people of color. We said, You mean, we can actually vote for the first time? And so, there was a lot of history in that, that we had to encumber along the way. But the fact is, you look at things, and you learn from those experiences, and having African Americans who were great athletes. Being from the islands, again, you know, we had this mantra that you're there to represent your people, you go out there and kick okole.

Here we are at the granddaddy of all the bowl games, the Rose Bowl, in—

So, forty-nine years before Marcus Mariotta helped to win the Rose Bowl, you were playing the Rose Bowl.

That's correct. That's correct. I was probably the first Samoan that played in the Rose Bowl; I'm not sure of that.

Bob Apisa, the fullback ...

In 1966, I was a sophomore. And we were ranked number one in the country, undefeated, and we played UCLA, who we had beaten in the first game of the year. We were behind by fourteen to twelve, and I had scored a touchdown, and we went for a two-point conversion instead of having Dick kick a field goal or a point after. So, that made a difference. So, when we scored the second touchdown, we had to make up two points. And I was given that opportunity, and it's been in lore, the Rose Bowl lore throughout the years that I was stopped by the one-yard line by Bob Stiles.

Apisa the fullback, and Bob is caught a yard short ...

And Bob ... I think he was a hundred seventy-pounds or two twenty-five. But he just threw himself at you; right?

Well, he was knocked out in the process. But the fact of the matter is, he did the job. And that's the important thing. You know, you only had about four major bowls back in those days. And the Rose Bowl was the granddaddy of them all. That was The Big One. And that's what I wanted to aspire to play in when I left Farrington, to go to a conference that would give me a shot at playing in the granddaddy of them all.

Ten months after that close loss in the Rose Bowl, on November 19, 1966, Bob Apisa played a part in history, taking the field in a matchup dubbed The Game of the Century. It was the first ever live TV sports broadcast in Hawaii.

I played in that game. And what happened was, prior to that game, throughout that week, people were just so jazzed up about the Game of the Century. We were both undefeated.

Okay. This was Michigan State, and ...

Notre Dame. And Notre Dame at that time had one minority on their team. Just one. They had maybe twenty-seven in the entire enrollment, in South Bend. And that made them change and incorporate more people. But the fact that we were playing ... I had a scroll with about three thousand names sent to me from my high school wishing us luck from Farrington. You know, those are cherished moments. And I remember when Dick Kenney and Charley and I got together, I said, You know, this is big-time, guys. I mean, I'm a kid from Samoa, Palama Housing to Kalihi Valley, and we're playing big-time. People are gonna be seeing us live and direct. And that game, I think it was Governor Burns at that time, I believe it was, along with the Legislature, and they petitioned the FCC, the Federal Communications Commission, to see if they can see it live and

direct. So, they got permission from them, and on the morning of November 19, 1966, there was a little satellite revolving around Sydney, Australia. The satellite was called Lani Bird. And they had that satellite beam the signal from Sydney, Australia, ricochet that signal across to Honolulu. And for the first time, you know, six hours earlier, people from Hawaii turned on their TVs, whether it's an RCA, whether it's the Zenith or Motorola, one of those brands, with two rabbit ears.

Small screen.

And with tin foil at the end of it, and with a small screen.

No cable television back then.

No cable TV. And they turned it on, they saw the splotchy black and white figures, and they finally saw the game, the first live telecast in the history of Hawaii. That's one of the proudest moments of my life. I know I speak on behalf of my departed brothers, Dick Kenney and Charley Wedemeyer. That made us so proud. If there's anything that we're proudest of is that we helped facilitate this state into the 20th Century, as far as telecommunications is concerned.

After all the hype, The Game of the Century ended in a tie. Injuries sidelined Bob Apisa for much of his senior year at Michigan State. Still, he was chosen in the ninth round of the NFL draft by the late legendary coach, Vince Lombardi, who was then general manager of the Green Bay Packers.

That was a great honor for me, Leslie, because when you're drafted by the world champions—they were just coming out of their second Super Bowl championship. And I was hoping to get onto an expansion team like the Miami Dolphins at that time, or Cincinnati Bengals. But lo and behold, I could hear vividly well Pete Roselle, the commissioner, announcing my name over the PA, and I can hear them saying, you know, Drafted in the ninth round, from Michigan State, bla-bla-bla-bla. And I can hear there's cheering. And my heart sank in a way, because I wanted to go to a lesser team in developing. And here I am, I'm drafted by Green Bay, by Vince Lombardi. So, you know, people would see that trophy named after him on every Super Bowl, and eighty percent of the country probably don't know who this man is. I was honored to be drafted by him. I shook hands with him, I talked to him, I negotiated my contract with him. And that's quite an honor. The fact of the matter is, you know, to have that opportunity, to have just the experience of someone who is so iconic in football folklore. And when I see that, and I'm tracing myself back to 1952 when that young man who stood on that boat, who could not speak a word of English, and to where I am today, those are some of the moments that I'm most proudest of

You know, your career with the Green Bay Packers was fairly short, because I think you had serious knee damage; didn't you?

Yes, I did. I signed a two-year contract with them. I lasted a year; they paid my year off. And I knew I was, you know, damaged goods to pursue an NFL career,

because I paid that price during my collegiate career. But since, I've had prosthesis; I had three hip replacements, two on my right and one on my left, and a left knee replaced, so I walk with a shuffle and a distinct gait, and a gimp and a limp.

And other than that, you feel good?

Other than that, everything else is working.

You're okay.

Being a fullback, always working to move the ball forward, Bob Apisa didn't look back after the end of his football career. He went on to a thirty-three-year career as a stuntman and sometime actor, following a chance encounter with a Hawaii Five-O casting director.

I sat there, and there was this silver-haired guy with a beard, and he kept looking at me. And I'm saying, Well, maybe I owe him money or something.

So, he finally came over. And he says, I'm Bob Busch, I'm the casting director for Hawaii Five-O. The original Five-O. And he says, You're Bob Apisa? I says, Yes. And he says, Have you ever done pictures before? And I says, The only pictures I've ever dealt with are Kodak cameras and stuff like that. But he says, No. So he said, I'm giving you a card. Why don't you give me a call tomorrow. And I had a few days before I went back to Flint. And so, I called him on a lark, and he said, Why don't you come in, I'd like to see you. So, I went down to the studio over by Diamond Head.

Were you excited?

No, I wasn't excited. I didn't know what why he wanted me to come in. Because I wasn't involved with filming, I did not know what filming was. Once again, this was a first-timer. And as I'm walking in through the door, I noticed that there were about three big guys like me. And as I'm walking through the door, Jack Lord exits his office, and he's looking right at me. He says, Oh, you're the guy I'm looking for. I turned behind, and I'm wondering if he's talking to the guy behind me, but there was nobody there. And then, Bob Busch came out and made the introduction. And so, Jack Lord said, Can you come tomorrow and do a little scene with us? I said, Wow, this thing is happening so quick. I mean, twenty-four hours later, I'm asked to come in another twenty-four hours later to do a jail scene with some people, some guys. And so, I said, Yeah, fine. You know, I didn't mind doing that just to kill time and get a day's pay. And he said something; the dialog between him and James MacArthur, Danno at that time. So, Steve McGarrett was saying this to Danno, and then it didn't make sense. So, Jack looks at me; he said, Bob, when I say this, just say, No, I didn't do it, or something to that effect. I don't quite remember. And so, when he said this, then I said, No, I didn't do it. I was immediately Taft-Hartleyed into Screen Actors Guild.

Forty-eight hours later, no experience as an extra or anything, I went from Point A to Point Z.

Well, you were comfortable with yourself; right?

I was comfortable with myself, because, you know, I thought it was a new adventure, and I said, Ah, why not. You know. And a week later, just before I left, or a couple days later before I left the following week, they asked me if I could take jeep and squib it and drive it. I said, Hey, it's no big thing. And had bullet holes. I mean, squibbed it and came right up to the camera, and that was no big thing. And that's how my stunt career started. I've done train falls, I've done horse falls, I've done horse stampedes, motorcycles, car chases, falling off of four-story buildings into water. You know, it's all timing. But if you're an athlete and you have the innate skills to adjust, to make your adjustment. Before I go on a set and they ask me to do something, I'll turn 'em down too.

So, this is 2015, and you are how old? Seventy?

I just turned uh, the milestone of seven, zero.

So, it's a new stage of your life. What's it like? I mean, you're now officially retired.

Yeah.

I mean, that's another kind of career, because you have to figure out how to spend your time, what relationships to keep, and which to invest time in, and where to go.

Well, I have a great relationship with AARP. No, I'm just kidding you. I find time to do things. I can wake up and read the paper, and I go and work out, and I come back and have lunch with friends. Or the wife and I can just get up and go.

Bob Apisa lives in Southern California. At the time of our conversation in 2015, he was producing a project dear to his heart, a documentary about the Michigan Spartans' two-year run as national champions, and the team's groundbreaking impact on racial integration in college football. Thank you, Bob Apisa, for sharing your story with us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org. To download free podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, go to the Apple iTunes Store or visit PBSHawaii.org.

People always point out that Bob Apisa came first. He was the first Samoan to really make a dent in the national scene. So, you were the Marcus Mariota of your time.

Marcus Mariota is a gentleman that when I looked at the way he carries himself, I'm proud of him. He represents America. He represents the cross-section of all ethnicity; all ethnicity. And he carries himself with humility, which is from here.

[END]