HOME TEAM

For faculty who went to Yale, the Game is a chance to reconnect



YuLin Zhen, Photography Editor

BY JAEHA JANG
STAFF REPORTER

This weekend, history professor Jay Gitlin '71 MUS '74 GRD '02 will be "socializing with people more than ever before."

According to Gitlin, he has been receiving emails all week from former students who are returning to New Haven for The Game, and he has dinners and tailgates planned with his classmates throughout the weekend. While The Game was "all part of a social calendar" during his undergraduate years too, Gitlin said it is now a "quintessential opportunity" to reconnect with friends and former students.

Six faculty members who graduated from Yale College told the News about what it's like to return to the annual Yale-Harvard game.

"I'm older, and I have a lot of students and former students, and I'll be very busy talking to everybody," Gitlin said in a phone interview. "I think it's a wonderful opportunity to root and cheer for something larger than yourself. It's one of those occasions where you can wave your Yale flag and say, 'Yay, go blue,' you know?"

Economics professor Joseph Altonji '75 said he tailgates every year with his closest classmates, including his first-year roommates. The Game and alumni reunions are the "two big events" in which classmates can reconnect, he added.

Global affairs professor Ted Wittenstein '04 LAW '12 also wrote in an email to the News that his Yale College class continues to host a tailgate at The Game.

"I suspect that this family-friendly gathering with our children is a bit different than the Yale student experience," he added. "We look forward to joining the Yale fans in reminding our Harvard colleagues about 'School on Monday.'"

He and one of his undergraduate roommates plan to spend Friday night together with their families and head to the Yale Bowl together on Saturday morning, Wittenstein wrote.

Wittenstein added that some of his best memories from The Game come from his time with Alyssa Greenwald '03, his girlfriend in college and now his wife of 17 years.

According to Gitlin, football games were often places for dates. Yalies would pick up women from Smith, Mount Holyoke or Vassar from the bus station, go to a football game, have dinner in a residential college and go to a dance together, he said.

"You asked different people out to the games, and, of course, the most serious dates, you saved for the Princeton game or the Harvard game," Gitlin said.

Now, going to The Game is a "good excuse to cuddle up" with his wife, he added.

Andrew Sherman '71 GRD '75, who said he was the head manager of the football team during his senior year of college and is now a senior research scientist in the computer science department, said that as an alumnus, he sees The Game less as a competitive athletic contest and more as a social event.

"Now I see it simply as an opportunity to tailgate with friends and so forth, and whether or not we actually win The Game is somewhat less important than it was back then," he said.

According to film and media studies professor Charles Musser '73 GRD '00, The Game is also a good opportunity to reconnect with faculty counterparts from Cambridge. He has brought his Harvard colleagues to Yale for The Game, and he sometimes visits Harvard, too, Musser said.

"The Game is sort of like its own special place, outside of normal collaborations between academics that we all depend upon," Musser said in a phone interview. "It's like Christmas or something. It's like this separate moment. That's part of the sort of ironic or mocking part of it, right? We pretend to have a rivalry when, in fact, that's not really what is going on."

Musser added that he sees the rivalry between Yale and Harvard as an "ironic gesture" towards universities in the Midwest and the South, which more strongly embody the American passion for college football. While The Game is a serious tradition, he said, he thinks it's "kind of a mock rivalry" because Yale and Harvard are closely intertwined.

Yale School of Drama professor Katherine Profeta '91 DRA '09 said the first time she attended The Game was after she submitted her application to Yale. Staying at her first-year friend's common room, she said, she attended many "crazy" social events, including the "best dance party I had ever been to in my life" hosted by the LGBT Co-op at Dwight Chapel.

"It's a super valuable tradition, almost for ways you can't even explain, just because traditions are things you know have repeated for years and years and years and you can come back to," she said. "It creates just a ritual, something that people can gather around. Lots of things change, but this seems to be pretty reliable."

Profeta said she may attend The Game this weekend to help Stand Up for Yale, an alumni group which she co-founded, gather signatures for a letter in defense of academic freedom.

According to Profeta, returning to The Game as a faculty member "makes me feel old, perhaps, but I really kind of love it nonetheless."

Another difference, Altonji, the economics professor, added: Personally knowing members of the football team was an experience unique to his undergraduate years.

The character of Tom Buchanan from The Great Gatsby played football for Yale.

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From locker room to end zone, Pitsenberger sets the tone

BY LIZA KAUFMAN
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Since taking the field at the Yale Bowl in his freshman season, Team 152 captain Josh Pitsenberger '26 has been an asset to the Bulldogs' offense.

"He will be remembered as one of the best backs in Ivy history and at Yale of all time," wide receiver Mason Shipp '25 said in an interview. "As a leader, he'll be remembered as somebody who always had your back, always knew what the team needed to find a way to ignite us, and then as somebody who's always very reliable on and off the field as a person."

Pitsenberger wasted no time making his mark at both Yale and in the Ivy League. In the 2022 campaign his freshman year, he played in all 10 games, tallying 667 rushing yards and seven touchdowns — impressive numbers for a first year.

His breakout came early. In his second game donning Yale blue, he rushed for 93 yards and three touchdowns against Cornell. His standout moment came in the penultimate game of the season, when he ran for 108 yards against Princeton and one touchdown, contributing to Yale's 24-20 victory over the Tigers at the Bowl.

Pitsenberger's freshman season garnered him major conference accolades, including Ivy League rookie of the year, four Ivy League rookie of the week selections, first team all-Ivy and Yale's Charles Loftus Award, which is presented to the most valuable player of the first-year class.

Nationally, he was named as a finalist for the Jerry Rice Award, a prestigious award that recognizes the Division I football first year of the year, and named to an all-America team of Football Championship Subdivision first years.

Pitsenberger's sophomore season was defined by resilience. Despite missing two games due to injury, he still finished with 448 rushing yards and eight touchdowns, tied for second-most in the Ivy League. His walk-off touchdown in double overtime against Princeton, part of a 131-yard, three-touchdown performance, cemented his reputation as a clutch player.

His junior season was no different. Pitsenberger continued to lead the Elis' offense, accumulating a team-high 796 yards on 147 attempts and scoring seven touchdowns. He recorded at least 70 rushing yards in six of nine games, with multi-game touchdowns against Cornell, Princeton and Harvard. As in his other seasons, his best statistics came against Princeton, running a season-high 159 yards and tallying three touchdowns.

In the 140th playing of The Game in Cambridge, Pitsenberger tallied two touchdowns that were crucial to Yale's 34-29 defeat of the Crimson. His 11-yard second-quarter rushing touchdown gave the Bulldogs a 14-7 lead, while his fourth-quarter receiving touchdown became one of the greatest plays of The Game. Quarterback Grant Jordan '24.5 sent a spiral to Pitsenberger, who pivoted and faked out the Crimson's defense to score a 39-yard touchdown that widened Yale's lead to 31-15.

At last November's team banquet, Pitsenberger was voted captain of Team 152 by his teammates.

"He has earned the respect of his teammates through his play, hard work, and commitment to Yale Football on and off the field. I can't wait to get to work with him on building our team," head coach Tony Reno said at the banquet, according to a Yale Athletics news release.

This season as captain, Pitsenberger has led Team 152 both on and off the field, delivering his best performance yet: 1,095 yards on 217 carries, 12 touchdowns and seven games with over 100 yards.

He was named Ivy League offensive player of the week twice in a two-week span after standout performances against Penn and Brown.

"He's averaging 120 yards a game," ESPN football analyst and Yale football alumnus Jack Ford '72 said in a phone interview. "It's not that he runs for 180 against one team and 60 against somebody else."

Ford highlighted Pitsenberger's consistency and praised Pitsenberger's toughness.

"The one thing I think he's best at is that the first hit never brings him down," Ford said. "He delivers the blows rather than taking the blows, and I think that's why he's been able to stay healthy."

As a defensive player, Ford noted the significance of Pitsenberger's 62-yard touchdown against Brown on Yale's opening play.

"If on the first play, somebody busts one on you for 60 yards for a touchdown, and you knew going into it as a defensive game plan that you had to stop him, it really puts you back on your heels for the rest of the game," Ford said. "Your one singular plan was to stop No. 7 and the first time he touches the ball, he takes it to the house for 67 yards."

"He demoralizes defenses because they think they've got him, and they never do," Ford added.

With last week's 34th career touchdown in the Bulldogs' 13-10 taming of the Tigers, Pitsenberger tied John Pagliaro '78 for second all-time in Yale history. He also became the first Eli to rush for over 1,000 yards in a season since Zane Dudek's '21 1,133 yards in 2017.

But Pitsenberger's impact goes far beyond his yardage. His leadership and consistency, teammates say, define him as much as his explosiveness on the field.

Teammate Nick Conforti '26 called him "the most consistent worker and performer you will ever find, dependable and willing to do whatever it takes under any circumstances," Conforti wrote in a text message.

Having watched Pitsenberger from the start, Shipp echoed Conforti's sentiment.

"His level of care and his level of commitment is a really special thing about him. He carries himself with a lot of passion. He's a very hard worker. He's the hardest worker on the field. He's an outstanding leader," Shipp said. "He really really, really loves success and winning, and he's going to be the hardest worker out there to help the team get there."

Though soft-spoken off the field, Pitsenberger's leadership on the turf speaks volumes, something hard for those who only see him off the field to see.

"He's calm, he seems very cool and collected, but he's very tenacious," Shipp said. "He wants to get after people on the field. He wants to run through your face. He's a running back. So that tenacity is something that if you don't play football, you don't get a chance to see it."

Ford emphasized how rare it is for Yale's captain to also be the team's star player.

"Captains at Yale are not always your stars," Ford said. "If the team is going to vote you the captain, you are clearly a leader. And if that guy happens to be your best player, that's just a marvelous recipe for success, and I think that's what you're seeing play out on the field this year."

The 141st playing of The Game at the Bowl will be Pitsenberger's final appearance as a Bulldog against Harvard. But whether or not he ends the day with a ring, his place in Yale football history is already secure: a workhorse, a captain and a player whose legacy will sit alongside the program's all-time greats.

The first Yale-Harvard football game was played in 1875.

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