

November 7, 2013

# Fresno State Loves Its Bulldogs, but So Does a Gang

By MALIA WOLLAN

FRESNO, Calif. — Bulldogs can be seen snarling from flagpoles, from baseball caps, from T-shirts and from tattoos — one man has the dog's face inked across his torso, its behind across his back. Young men on street corners bark at passing patrol officers. They call their children "little dogs" or "bull puppies." Police raids find their targets asleep beneath red blankets emblazoned with the dog.

Fresno and the surrounding region have long been overrun by Bulldogs. And where the violent pack goes, trouble follows.

The Fresno State Bulldogs college football team is exceedingly popular here in the country's fruit and vegetable epicenter, where more than a million acres of cropland stretch to the horizon. "From Sacramento to L.A., there is nothing except agriculture and Fresno State football," said Kenny Wiggins, a former Fresno State lineman who plays in the N.F.L. for the San Diego Chargers. "We were the only show in town; everyone, and I mean everyone, goes to the games."

The team's logo is a cartoon bulldog, a muscled beast with sharp teeth, a spiked collar and floppy ears. But the bulldog is no longer just a college sports mascot. It has been appropriated by members of a savage street gang who call themselves the Bulldogs.

The gang started in a prison and quickly earned a reputation as unusually vicious, even in the bloody world of California gangs. At their height, in 2006, the Bulldogs were responsible for 70 percent of the city's shootings, the police said. Three of four inmates in the county jail are Bulldogs.

"They grew and grew and grew until there were Bulldogs everywhere you looked," Jerry Dyer, Fresno's police chief, said.

The mascot now plays a double role as football icon and gang symbol. Confusion have fatal consequences. In 2011, Stephen Maciel, a father of four who the police gang affiliation, was shot and killed by a Bulldogs gang member in a liquor store.



MORE IN CC  
ARTICLES)

**Winnin  
North I**  
[Read More](#)

---

Maciel was wearing a red Fresno State shirt.

The gang's embrace of the bulldog logo has put university administrators in an excruciatingly awkward position amid a gang crisis that has claimed hundreds of lives. The situation has vexed them, even as sales of Fresno State apparel and merchandise increased tenfold since the gang took hold in the city. The university has considered dropping the logo, and has approached law enforcement officials for guidance.

The issue is trickier than ever this season, with the football team 8-0 and ranked in the top 20 nationally. An adage here says the city's cultural season starts with the first kickoff. And it is true: the Bulldogs are ascendant. Discussion of recent games is heard up and down the radio dial. Billboards feature the top players, including quarterback Derek Carr, a contender for the Heisman Trophy.

The police, meanwhile, have made cracking down on the Bulldogs gang a top priority, with some success. But the Bulldogs are still dangerous enough to have cost the lives of Maciel and others.

"If you love sports, you want to be all geared up in the team's colors," said Maciel's widow, Marisol Aguirre. "But I don't wear any of it anymore, and I don't let my kids wear it. It's too dangerous."

### **Pulling for the Underdog**

Some 220 miles north of Los Angeles and 200 miles south of San Francisco, Fresno is close to the geographic center of a state known at times for a bitter rivalry between north and south. Tensions arise over everything from water rights to disputes between Los Angeles Dodgers fans and San Francisco Giants fans.

But the bloodiest divide might be between two gangs, the Sureños and the Norteños, who for decades have engaged in one of the most protracted, guerrilla-style wars in state history.

The Sureños — Spanish for southerners — wear blue and originated in and are connected with Southern California. The Norteños, or northerners, wear red and have come to dominate northern parts of the state, though both gangs have spread throughout the United States. Law enforcement officials believe that the dividing line between territories claimed by the Norteños and the Sureños lies less than 80 miles south of here.

Nearly every Latino gang of note in the state is affiliated with either the Sureños or the Norteños. Except the Bulldogs.

Law enforcement officials now consider the Bulldogs to be the country's largest independent

street gang. The police have verified some 6,000 Bulldogs gang members here, but there are as many as 24,000 more, according to the Fresno County district attorney's office.

Why the Bulldogs gang became independent remains unclear. What prison officials do know is that in 1984 a war broke out at San Quentin State Prison between a gang based in Fresno called F14 and Nuestra Familia, a Mexican-American gang started in the 1960s.

Nuestra Familia is headquartered inside the state's prisons, from where it controls the street-level Norteños. The Fresno gang members had been working for Nuestra Familia, moving drugs up and down the state and, when ordered, fighting and killing Nuestra Familia rivals.

"We were the grunts doing all the work and catching all the time," said Marcelino Garcia, 21, a Bulldogs gang member who joined the ranks at age 12 and was tutored in the gang's ways by older men who were at San Quentin in 1984 during what many Bulldogs now call the Separation.

In 1985, Fresno State fielded a football team that became the stuff of local legend. It was the only N.C.A.A. Division I-A team to be undefeated that year at 11-0-1. Led by a player known as Stephen Baker the touchdown maker, the squad was one of the highest-scoring teams in N.C.A.A. history. Football was popular in Fresno, but the team's success created a particularly frenzied fan base with a heightened sense of pride in the Bulldogs and the stretch of agricultural land they called home.

"That was our shining moment here in Fresno," said Eric Cervantes, a detective with the Fresno County sheriff's office. "That was our best football team ever. The whole town went crazy."

Among those rabid fans were members of this nascent, newly independent gang, who for more than a year had been tossing around potential names and identities for themselves. They considered the Fresno City Players, the Midnight Cruisers and the Sinners, but nothing seemed to stick, said Natividad Mendoza, 42, a former Bulldogs gang member who was incarcerated 16 times from 1985 to 2003.

"The Bulldogs started as a name that everyone could identify with," Mendoza said. "In Fresno, football is huge. The Bulldogs are like an N.F.L. team. They were a real prideful team, the scrappiest in the N.C.A.A. They would go up against anyone any time and play their hearts out."

The gang respected, and identified with, those aggressive, underdog qualities in the team.

**'Our Team'**

By 1986, prison officials acknowledged the presence of a distinguishable new gang in prisons across the state. Members called themselves the Bulldogs. They wore red Fresno State T-shirts, hats and jerseys, and boldly tattooed the bulldog mascot with its sharp-toothed snarl and spiked collar on their heads, backs, chests, necks and faces.

“We would watch the football games in prison,” said Mendoza, who left the gang in 2003 and now runs a Christian gang prevention program in Phoenix. “Other gangs would bet on the other teams, but the Bulldogs always bet on the Bulldogs. They were our team.”

The gang members eschewed the top-down hierarchy of Nuestra Familia and other established gangs, preferring instead a looser structure with fewer leaders and fewer rules. On the streets, any of them could sell drugs, fight or work as pimps as they pleased. In prison they refused to make alliances with other gangs.

“They’ll fight everybody, Norteños, Sureños, blacks, Asians, whites, anybody,” said Cervantes, an expert on the gang through his work with the county’s Multi-Agency Gang Enforcement Consortium, or Magec.

As Bulldogs were released from prison, the gang grew to dominate street-level crime here. It took over prostitution and drug sales, stole cars and burglarized houses and businesses. Members identified one another and intimidated enemies by barking like angry dogs.

By 2006, the gang was responsible for 70 percent of all shootings here, the police said. In this city of nearly 506,000 people, some 60 percent of the 52 murders that year were gang-related, and most of them pointed to Bulldogs.

As they multiplied, so too did their enemies.

In 2003, while visiting her parents in Atwater, Calif., about 70 miles north of here, Lyndsay Hawthorne, a Fresno State sophomore, went running in her Bulldogs T-shirt. She was trailed by a car full of Sureños who shot at her, shouting that her shirt was not welcome in their town. The bullets missed Hawthorne, sending sparks off the pavement around her.

“It was very scary,” said her father, Richard, who was a commander with the Atwater Police Department at the time. “I took that shirt away from her.”

To grow its numbers, the Bulldogs gang recruited around elementary schools and high schools. In the early 1990s, the gang presence was so big among youth that city schools banned Fresno State Bulldogs clothing on school property. The ban was soon extended to Georgetown Hoyas apparel, which also features a bulldog.

“It is unfortunate because we work hard to create a college-going culture in our schools, but we just cannot have students wearing this stuff; it causes too many problems,” said Tim Liles, the principal at Sunnyside High School in Fresno. Schools here eventually had to ban all attire featuring professional and college sports logos.

Unsettled by the sudden rise of thousands of violent gang members wearing their university’s apparel, officials at California State University, Fresno, requested a meeting with law enforcement officials in 2007. They were considering changing the logo and wanted advice.

“There was considerable discussion at that time about whether or not they should change the logo or the mascot away from being a bulldog because of the fact that we had this Bulldog gang in Fresno that had become notorious,” Dyer, the police chief, said. “My advice was absolutely not. Do not touch the logo. How dare these gang members think they can hijack the mascot from our university? If you change it, the gang wins.”

The gang is certainly not the first criminal enterprise to usurp the symbol of a sports team. The F.B.I. keeps a list of dozens of gangs and the sports logos they have commandeered. For example, the Crips often wear Dallas Cowboys gear, and the Bloods opt for Chicago Bulls gear.

“We find gangs using sports teams’ logos and clothing as gang identification to be very common,” said Whitney Malkin, a spokeswoman for the F.B.I. “Most gangs choose to use sports paraphernalia with the same color schemes as their gang or paraphernalia of teams that originate from the area that they operate in.”

Still, the situation here is different in that a homegrown gang has so thoroughly expropriated the logo of the region’s university.

Just how the gang’s enthusiasm for all things Fresno State Bulldogs has affected sales and licensing of the merchandise is difficult to determine. The university declined to comment on the gang situation or to facilitate access to coaches, players and any information about licensing. But many college athletic programs depend on money generated by apparel sales. In 2012, the market for licensed college merchandise was [estimated at \\$4.62 billion](#), according to the Collegiate Licensing Company, the largest trademark licensing agency in the country.

Despite the potential dangers brought on by wearing Bulldogs apparel, it would appear the gang might have been a boon for sales. Last year, Fresno State ranked 69th on the licensing company’s list of the top 75 universities by royalties raised through merchandise sales. A [2008 article](#) in The Collegian, Fresno State’s student paper, cited a tenfold increase in licensing royalties between 2000 and 2008, the same years the number of Bulldogs gang members rose sharply.

“I would guess a lot of the sales of Bulldogs merchandise comes from the gang buying stuff,” said Nick Lopez, a 2010 Fresno State graduate and football season-ticket holder. “Normal fans will buy more gear when the team is good, but the gang does not care if the team is good or bad — they’ll buy it anyway.”

Lopez often feels people assume he is a gang member when he wears his Fresno State shirts, he said. He has been tempted to carry around his diploma to prove which type of Bulldog he is.

In addition to licensed Bulldogs apparel, it is not uncommon to see unlicensed Bulldogs gear for sale in liquor stores and discount grocery stores here.

“Retailers in this city will put Fresno State and a bulldog on whatever red thing they can find and try to sell it whether it is licensed or unlicensed,” said Al Smith, president and chief executive of the Fresno Chamber of Commerce. “People cannot know if they’re selling to sports fans or gang members; if someone comes in with a 20-dollar bill and wants the hat, you’re not going to frisk him first. You’re going to give him the hat.”

## **A Persistent Presence**

By 2006, gang members were walking around downtown on sweltering summer days without shirts, flaunting their bulldog tattoos. The city had reached its boiling point, and no one was quite sure what to do about it.

On July 31 that year, while on a routine traffic stop, a Fresno motorcycle officer was shot point blank by a Bulldogs gang member. The officer spent 31 days in an intensive care unit and nearly died. Within months, the police department started Operation Bulldog, adopting a zero-tolerance policy toward the gang.

If a gang member was involved in a crime, the investigation became a top priority. “The gang stole the mascot from our university, which prevented the kids in our schools from being able to support the team by wearing the uniform,” Dyer, the police chief, said. “We wanted the Bulldog gang to know that we as a community were tired of their reign.”

Within a year, Operation Bulldog had yielded 1,908 arrests, filling jails and nearby prisons with Bulldogs. Certain neighborhoods became almost nightly battlegrounds between the police and the gang. Gang members phoned in death threats to officers and the chief.

Operation Bulldog ended in 2010, after more than 12,000 arrests. The crackdown forced some of the gang members out of Fresno, and law enforcement officials here now regularly get calls from Wyoming, Montana, Oregon and other states reporting the arrest of people with Fresno State mascot tattoos. Several members of the county’s gang task force travel regularly to serve

as expert witnesses at criminal trials for displaced Bulldogs.

These days, Bulldogs are responsible for about 30 percent of all of the city's shootings, a 40 percent drop from seven years ago. Still, evidence of the gang is everywhere.

There are now about 30 subgroups of Bulldogs. On two recent nights patrolling the streets, Magec officers encountered more than a dozen people they believed to be Bulldogs. In one apartment they arrested a known Bulldog who went by the gang name Droopy. They found him in violation of his parole with methamphetamine, a gun under the bed and Fresno State recruiting posters taped to the wall.

About 75 percent of the inmates in the Fresno County jail are Bulldogs gang members.

Still, "there are a lot of people in this community that have bulldogs tattooed on their neck or face or arms who are not Bulldog gang members any longer," the police chief said. "I go to church with people who have bulldogs tattooed on them."

### **'Biggest Fans'**

While the Fresno State athletics department declined to comment, former players like Wiggins spoke freely about their football days and the parallel worlds of the Bulldogs — one on the field, the other on the street.

"They were our biggest fans," Wiggins said. "I remember walking through the mall in Fresno one day after a game and seeing this scary looking guy with a huge bulldog tattoo on his head and face. He came right up to me and said, 'Hey, you're Kenny Wiggins, great tackle last night!'"

Despite the violence on the streets, on game days Bulldog Stadium seems to be a sanctuary, a safe zone. Everybody wears Fresno State Bulldogs gear. There have been no reports of gang-related fights at football games, the police said. "At games everybody is pulling for the Fresno State Bulldogs, even the Bulldog gang members," Dyer said. "No one is there to fight."

"I never really had an issue with the gang; they were big football fans," said David Carr, who attended Fresno State and was the No. 1 pick in [the 2002 N.F.L. draft](#).

David Carr, Derek's brother, remembers climbing a fence and sneaking onto the field at Fresno State's stadium. In high school he was recruited as a quarterback by Fresno's head coach then, Pat Hill. "Coach Hill thought there were enough football players in the Central Valley to compete with any team," Carr, 34, said. "He wanted the entire valley to be all about Bulldog football. He called it painting the Valley red."

The gang had a similar aim; they too wanted to see Central Valley residents in Fresno State red, puffed up with Bulldog pride and ready to crush rivals. Like the football coach, the gang scoured schools looking for young talent.

It was in the summer after sixth grade that Garcia, now 21, joined the gang. Violence at home and bullying at school made him an easy recruit. After being beaten by a half-dozen older gang members for two minutes (a process the gang calls jumping in), Garcia was told, “Welcome to the family.”

He started wearing Fresno State Bulldogs T-shirts. He watched football games with the gang, fought alongside members and barked with them. “If I didn’t have a place to stay, they would find me a place to stay,” he said. “If someone messed with me, I’d call them and that person would get hurt.”

With Garcia’s gang affiliation and the paw print tattoo on his forearm came a sense of pride and protection. “The way I see it, I’m a Bulldog, I’m from Fresno, everywhere I walk here in the Central Valley is mine,” he said.

But it also brings with it the prospect of violence. At times, he said, he has wanted to leave the gang, but he finds it impossible to extricate himself from the sticky Bulldogs web, extending as it does into multiple generations of families and across whole neighborhoods. “I’m 21, I’ve lost nine friends already, five of them who I personally saw die,” he said.

A few days before a home football game against Boise State, Garcia was shot in the leg in a fight with another gang. Rather than go to a hospital, where he would be reported to the police, Garcia opted for the underground network of services provided by the Bulldogs. A former Army medic and gang associate removed the bullet in Garcia’s calf.

At the game, thousands gathered hours beforehand to grill food, drink beer and toss footballs in the lingering Central Valley summer heat. The smell of fertilizer, livestock and dust mingled with smoke. Many in the capacity crowd, particularly the white fans, said they felt no threat from the gang and were comfortable wearing Bulldogs apparel. But about half of Fresno County’s population is Latino, and because the Bulldogs gang is nearly all Mexican-American, the risk is more palpable for many Latinos here.

Hector Munoz, 33, proudly wore his red Bulldogs shirt while tailgating with friends outside the stadium. He graduated from Fresno State in 2006 and works as a correctional officer in a state prison. An attendee at all home games, Munoz said he sometimes saw Bulldogs gang members he recognized from work out on parole and at the games.



“As a Hispanic male, I cannot go to Disneyland or to a Giants game in San Francisco wearing this shirt or people will mistake me for a gang member,” Munoz said. “Only in Fresno do I feel safe wearing this shirt; this is Bulldog territory.”