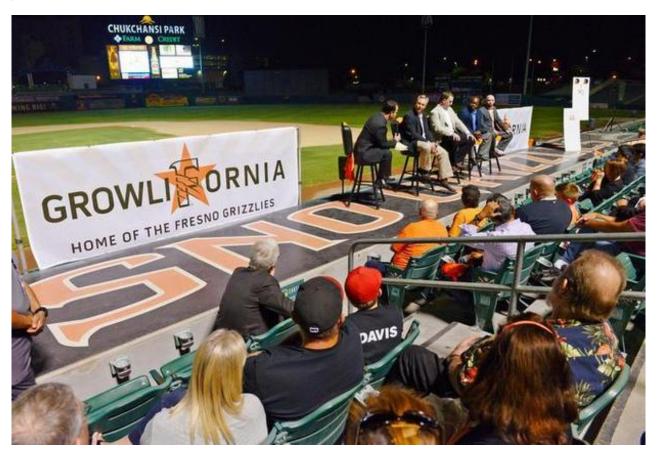


Warszawski: Giants-Grizzlies breakup was biggest Valley sports story of 2014

By Marek Warszawski



Goodbye Giants, hello ... Astros? Members of the Houston Astros front office came to Chukchansi Park to conduct a Q & A with Fresno Grizzlies fans in October after the Triple-A team changed its affiliation. CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE |Buy Photo

Before we move ahead, it's time to look back.

The year 2014 was an interesting one for central San Joaquin Valley sports as off-the-field developments concerning the Fresno Grizzlies and Fresno State's athletic hierarchy eclipsed anything that took place on the field. And the year's most celebrated local athlete did not compete on two legs but four hooves.

So without further delay, I present the top 10 local sports stories for 2014. All picks are mine, so you know whom to credit (or blame).

1. Giants' Fresno ties unravel

It began with a San Francisco Chronicle newspaper report, and the whispers only grew louder as baseball season wore on: After 17 years, the Fresno Grizzlies were in serious jeopardy of losing their prized Triple-A affiliation with the Giants.

When the news became official Sept. 18 – despite Mayor Ashley Swearengin's last-ditch pitch to Giants officials – the

reaction was a mix of anger and confusion. Giants fans were mad; some even declared they'd quit going to games. Some folks thought the entire franchise, furry mascot Parker included, was moving to Sacramento. Through it all, Chukchansi Park hosted public viewing parties as the Giants brought home a third World Series championship.

The Grizzlies are still the Grizzlies. Only now the players are employees of the Houston Astros. With no natural fan base to draw from, team officials are switching to a Fresno-centric marketing push that wasn't possible with the Giants so close-by. (Although they still plan to give out replica World Series rings.) Plus there's a hope Houston's highly rated farm system could produce winning baseball in downtown Fresno. We'll find out in 2015.

2. California Chrome a shining star

Every once in a while, a racehorse comes along that captivates an entire nation. In 2014, that horse was California Chrome. Bred and raised at Harris Farms outside Coalinga, the chestnut colt with generous streaks of white on his face and legs became an international celebrity with scintillating wins at the Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes. Bidding to become the first Triple Crown winner since 1978, he finished fourth in the 1½-mile Belmont Stakes after being stepped on at the starting gate.

But it was more than victories that inspired millions of "Chromies." The colt's people-friendly personality vaulted his popularity, as did his humble breeding and decidedly non-blueblood owners Perry Martin of Yuba City and Steve Coburn of Topaz Lake, Nevada. It felt like the entire states of California and Nevada adopted him as their own. After the city of Fresno declared Oct. 11 "California Chrome Day," he went on to finish third at the Breeders' Cup Classic.

3. New chief for Fresno State sports

Meet the new boss. Nothing like the old boss. On Aug. 12, Thomas Boeh's nine-year tenure as Fresno State athletic director ended as he was "reassigned" to another position within the university. Three months later (Nov. 21), president Joseph Castro brought aboard Oregon's No. 2 guy, Jim Bartko, as Boeh's replacement.

While Boeh should be hailed for helping cleanse Fresno State's reputation following a rocky period of NCAA violations and Title IX turmoil, fundraising and developing interpersonal relationships were not strengths. Bartko was hired for those primary reasons, along with the close ties to Nike he developed during 25 years in Eugene, Ore. To keep pace with the escalating costs of college sports, the Bulldogs will need every dime Bartko can muster. And hopefully Phil Knight will kick in some slick uniforms.

4. Raiders eyepatch fits Derek Carr

Fresno State's favorite son didn't have to go far to start his pro career. While Derek Carr and most draft pundits believed he'd be a first-round pick in the May 8-10 NFL Draft, he lasted until the fourth selection of the second round (No. 36 overall) before the Raiders called his name. (Davante Adams, Carr's leading receiver with the Bulldogs, went 17 picks later to the Packers.)

It turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The 23-year-old impressed from the first day of training camp and beat out veteran Matt Schaub for the starting job, becoming the first rookie quarterback in franchise history to start the season opener. The Raiders may be 3-12 entering their final game, but that hasn't stopped Carr from leading all rookies in completions (330), passing yards (3,112) and touchdowns (20) while throwing the fewest interceptions (11) of any rookie in NFL history with at least 500 attempts. Oakland is Carr's team now.

5. National spotlight shines on Mendota

Thanks to reporter Andy Boogaard, Bee readers already knew about the inspiring story that is the Mendota High football team. Now the rest of the country does, too, thanks to a powerful and well-received ESPN SportsCenter Featured special. Headed by producer Scott Harves, a film crew spent six months filming in the tiny Valley farming town before the program initially aired Feb. 16.

The 60-minute documentary showed how Mendota's players, most from impoverished backgrounds, spent their mornings laboring in corn and cantaloupe fields before attending football practice in the afternoon. It highlighted the motivational power of coach Robert "Beto" Mejia and the talents of star tailback Edgar Segura, who now attends Mt. San Antonio Junior College. Unfortunately, the news wasn't all positive. In October, Mejia was arrested on three counts of insurance fraud. He pleaded not guilty and has been placed on administrative leave by the school. The charges are pending.

6. Tim DeRuyter signs on dotted line

The biggest Bulldogs football story of 2014 didn't take place during the season. Nope. It occurred April 24 when Fresno State announced third-year coach Tim DeRuyter had signed a five-year contract extension through 2018. The deal includes a \$1.4 million base salary that increases by \$50,000 every year, plus performance bonuses and a buyout clause that protects the university's pocket book if the 51-year-old takes another job before the deal is up. Hard as that is to imagine following the Hawaii Bowl.

7. Fresno Unified's big night

Take a bow, Fresno Unified. March 8 was your night. For the first time in the school district's 100-year history, two Fresno Unified teams battled for the Central Section championship in boys basketball. And not just one title. After Fresno knocked off top-seeded Roosevelt 62-61 for the Division III crown at Selland Arena, Edison ended Bullard's three-year reign in Division I by dethroning the Knights 58-41. It was a day Fresno Unified supporters won't soon forget.

8. Reversal of fortune for Bulldogs

Talk about a surprising turnaround. At one moment, the Fresno State men's basketball team was 1-7 in MW play. Then came a surprising five-game win streak and an 8-2 run, led by senior swingman Tyler Johnson, to finish a respectable 9-9 in conference. But the Bulldogs weren't done. Following a second-round MW tournament exit, they were invited to a postseason tournament for the first time since 2007 and made it to the best-of-3 College Basketball Invitational finals to end the season with 21 wins under coach Rodney Terry.

9. Soccer fans go World Cup loco

For a month-long stretch that culminated July 13 with Germany's 1-0 victory over Argentina in the World Cup final, it seemed like everyone was a soccer nut. Bars and restaurants throughout Fresno and Clovis were packed for every game — not just those involving the United States and Mexico. Brazil serving as host country seemed to make things even more festive. It'll be another four years till soccer interest peaks like this again, but each time the swell gets higher.

10. Clovis wrestling reign continues

Another year, another round of Central Section and CIF State championships for the region's most dominant high school program. That's now seven consecutive Valley titles and four state titles for coach Steve Tirapelle's powerhouse. The Cougars were led by heavyweight Nick Nevills, a three-time state individual champion who now grapples for NCAA powerhouse Penn State, and then-freshman Justin Mejia, the state champ at 106 pounds. Judging by early season results, Clovis has no plans to see either streak end in 2015.

Also considered: Jose Ramirez's rapid ring rise; Fresno State women reach seventh straight NCAA tournament; Edison football's section title run; Clovis Rodeo turns 100; Fresno Pacific's NCAA Division II plans delayed; local buzz over MLB amateur draft; California drought curtails area fishing/boating.

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