

College Sports

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Marshall: Just starting from scratch Movie enacts lives, events of new players

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The basis for the movie *We Are Marshall* is a disaster that remains the worst sports-related airplane crash in American history.

The Marshall University football team had a Nov. 14, 1970 contest at East Carolina University, which is located in Greenville, N.C. Instead of taking a bus to the game, the Thundering Herd chartered a Southern Airways DC-9 jet.

After losing the afternoon game to the Pirates, the team made the return trip to Tri-State Airport in Kenova, W.Va., on a

rainy, foggy night.

But the charter flight never landed safely.

Instead the plane struck a tree, which caused it to cut through other trees, creating a swath that measured 95 feet wide and 279 feet long. The jet then crashed in a hollow more than 4,000 feet short of the runway.



Matthew McConaughey portrays coach Jack Lengyel in the movie 'We Are Marshall'. Lengyel was hired from the College of Wooster to coach the 1971 Herd after the 1970 team died in a plane crash.
(WARNER BROS.)

All 75 people aboard the DC-9 were killed either by the impact or the resulting fire, which was so hot it melted most of the plane's fuselage.

"That day my wife, who was a freshman cheerleader at Toledo, happened to be with me at Morehead State," said Toledoan Dave Schaetzke, who played football at the school, located in nearby Morehead, Ky. "When we heard about the crash on the radio, we just looked at each other -- and then we drove to Huntington.

"We thought there was no way it had happened. But Morehead and Marshall are so close, they are next-door neighbors."

The university decided to rebuild the football team the following season. But the roster was extremely young: 43 members of the previous year's freshman team were joined by a number of first-year freshmen whom the NCAA ruled would be allowed to play in their first college season.

Toledo native Sam Botek was among those freshmen who came to play for the team which would be known as the "Young Thundering Herd."

"When we got down there, we didn't know nothing about nothing [regarding the crash]," Botek said. "They took the four surviving team members, who weren't on the plane, and they had a long talk with us. They told us what happened, and what we needed to do as a team.

"The four had witnessed friends die, and it hit home to us what we were into. It was helpful, because they witnessed the crash first-hand. Each week we learned more and more what this meant to the community."

Botek said that lesson became clearer when the Young Thundering Herd flew back from a late-season road contest.

"It was rainy and foggy, and the plane was bouncing so much my young life passed before my eyes," he said. "The weather was so bad, we were diverted to Charleston [W. Va]. We landed there with no trouble, but there were no buses so we had to wait. Then we had the long drive home, so we didn't get home until two or three in the morning.

"When we got back to the dorm, there were students and townspeople there by the thousands. And we had no idea why they were there.

"They told us, 'We heard that the plane didn't land, and we were afraid you had crashed.' They came out just to see for themselves that we were all right."

The *We Are Marshall* movie examines both the crash and the rebirth of the football program with the Young Thundering Herd of 1971.

The movie is the second look at the tragedy on film; the first was a 2003 public television documentary entitled *Ashes To Glory*.