It’s gotten to the point that everyone has a favorite Colin Kaepernick ’10 (management) story.

This is only natural.

Since late November, when the former Wolf Pack quarterback made his first NFL start for the San Francisco 49ers, and then continuing for the next 10 weeks, culminating with an appearance in the Super Bowl on Feb. 3, Kaepernick’s rapid rise into the frontal lobe of the national sporting consciousness has become one of the NFL’s most compelling storylines.

In an email, the award-winning columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Scott Ostler, says that in his more than two decades of covering Bay Area sports, Kaepernick’s ascension ranks among the top stories he’s seen.

“Colin is top three, maybe No. 1,” Ostler writes in the email. “I’d have to sit down and give it thought, but it’s a big, big event and story.”

At the beginning of the season, though, who would’ve scripted it?

Here was a second-year quarterback from a school that ran a quirky offense called the “Pistol.” Although he had an arm like a howitzer, he threw a little funny, like a relief pitcher in baseball, with a sort of sidearm delivery.

Sure, when Kaepernick ran with the ball he could be extremely graceful, moving faster than a deer making a late-night dash across Interstate 80.

But no one quite expected what transpired during the last two months of 2012 and the first five weeks of 2013.

If you delve deep enough into Colin Kaepernick’s time at the University of Nevada, Reno, though, you spot several clues that are keys in understanding that Kaepernick’s success wasn’t just the byproduct of luck or a fluke. His rise combines so many variables—athleti-
cism, intelligence, drive, competitiveness.

Talk to enough people who knew the 25-year-old Kaepernick at the University, and it becomes clear that in many ways, Kaepernick was destined to land where he did this season.

John Bender '10 doesn’t know the number exactly. But it was a lot.

“Colin and I were both business management majors, and we easily took 50 percent of our classes together,” Bender recalls recently during a phone conversation from his business office in Calgary, Canada.

Bender was a four-year starter at offensive tackle for the Wolf Pack from 2007-2010. Both Bender and Kaepernick graduated with degrees in business in December 2010.

Bender can easily recall the great plays Kaepernick made during their time together as Wolf Pack teammates, or the times when Kaepernick’s natural leadership abilities would bubble to the surface with the searing heat of a hot springs, the times when Kaepernick would blurt, somewhat uncharacteristically, things like, “If you don’t believe we’re going to win, then ... stay in the locker room!”

“When it’s needed, Colin can speak in a stern voice,” says Bender, who remembers meeting a “tall, skinny, lanky” Kaepernick when both were redshirt freshmen in 2006. “He was a lead-by-example kind of guy, but when he’d tell guys to stay in the locker room if they didn’t think we could win, you could tell things like that were really important to him.”

One of the best examples of what Bender calls this “humble yet hungry” nature of Kaepernick occurred in a class the players shared.

Bender and Kaepernick were part of a team project in international marketing that required a 60-page paper. Bender did what he could to help further the writing and research, and by 7 p.m. on a Thursday he sent what he had put together to Kaepernick via email.

“It was just an awfully tough assignment,” Bender says. “We’re busy guys. We have, in addition to our full class loads, things like weights at 6 a.m. the next morning to worry about as well. It takes a lot to hack out a 60-page paper. It can take forever.”

Kaepernick’s response to Bender’s email?

Don’t worry, I’ve got this.

“I get an email at 4:45 a.m. the next morning and Colin’s finished the entire paper, 60 pages, everything,” Bender says, with the kind of wonder one usually uses to describe Kaepernick sprinting off the edge for a long touchdown run. “And, as always, he was the first guy in the weight room for weights at 6 a.m. that morning.”

Then Bender remembers something more, the extra effort, the element of a young man’s constant quest for perfection, which seems to occur with every Colin Kaepernick story.

“And the best part,” Bender says with a hearty chuckle, “and the best part was ... we got an ‘A’ on it.”
Chris Ault ’69, ’73M.Ed. will never forget the Friday night before this year’s Super Bowl in New Orleans.

The 28-year Wolf Pack football coach had announced on Dec. 28 he was stepping down. As Kaepernick’s star began to gather even more momentum, hurling through the sporting heavens like it would never stop, so, too, did Ault’s national profile increase.

As Ault fielded the dozens of media inquiries, obliging all of the requests that asked about all things Colin and all things Pistol, his mind often wandered to his former quarterback. He wondered, after “being hit with all of this so hard and fast for 10 weeks,” if Kaepernick had changed at all.

Ault found out for himself during a Kaepernick family gathering in New Orleans. For a half hour, the two of them, coach and quarterback, teacher and student, relived old times.

“Nothing had changed,” Ault says. “Kap was just Kap, still the same. He was smiling, he was happy, he was treating all the people around him the way he always does—like you, not him, were the most important person in the room. That’s what has always been a constant with Kap, his ability to constantly compliment everybody … but himself.”

Ault was surprised by the deep well of emotion he felt as he watched the Super Bowl two days later. Past conversations with Kaepernick swirled through his mind as the game unfolded. There were the many times when Ault would challenge Kaepernick, sometimes so sternly he fully expected the young quarterback to wilt instantly, like a candle caught in the flame of a bellowing blowtorch.

“Kap never flinched,” Ault says. “I kept thinking about that. No matter how much pressure we put on him, he would never flinch during our practices or our games. He would just smile and go get after it. I would get upset with him, and Kap would just smile and go and make it better.”

Ault’s constant challenges of a young man who reveled in being challenged had helped lay the emotional foundation of what the coach was witnessing in person in New Orleans.

“Watching Kap play that Super Bowl game was very inspirational for me,” he says. “You’re cheering and you’re watching the action, but the emotions inside were deeper than deep. Watching Kap … watching him representing not just himself, but the University of Nevada … I remember thinking during that game, ‘I’m looking at everything that is good about our University and our football program.’”

—Former Wolf Pack coach Chris Ault ’69, ’73M.Ed.

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Like any big sister, Alyx Sacks ’11 cares a great deal about her younger brother.

Their is a close bond, as Alyx and Philip are the offspring of a football family. Football families move frequently, and organize their memories according to geography rather than the permanence of decades of living in one place.

Their father, former Wolf Pack assistant coach Barry Sacks, has held posts throughout the Far West, stretching from the Bay Area to Oregon to Colorado to Idaho. When the family moved to Reno in 2002, Barry and his wife, Teresa, promised Alyx and Philip three things: a house, a dog and their word that both children would graduate from the same high school.

That was why Alyx watched intently on a summer afternoon as several of her father’s players, including some who would go on to play in the NFL, such as Virgil Green ’10 (criminal justice), Ezra Butler ’07 (speech communications), Kevin Basped and Kaepernick, were gathered to play pickup basketball on the Sacks’ backyard court in northwest Reno.

Sacks, 24, who went on to play four years of soccer for the Wolf Pack, graduated with honors with degrees in journalism and sociology and today is a reporter for KRNAV News in Reno, says the level of play was impressive.

“When they were the four of them brought him into the game like he was just one of the boys,” Sacks says. “I always thought that was pretty neat. Colin and his friends, they were just great with my little brother, and that made a good impression with me, too.”

As Sacks got to know Kaepernick, she quickly realized that the intangibles that her father often mentioned about the quarterback (“My Dad has always said, ‘Colin’s intensity is like no other’)” as well as his personal attributes, which includes a surprisingly sweet and unassuming nature, made him very memorable.

“I don’t know how else to put it,” Sacks says, “but he’s had to have known he was destined for bigger things. Because in college, Colin handled himself so well. I’ve never seen him stoop to a lower level. I’ve never seen him brush anyone off. He just doesn’t do anything like that.”

Sacks admits that the jump from knowing Kaepernick as a fellow Wolf Pack student-athlete to today, where he is a prominent figure firmly planted on the national sporting stage, has been “a little unreal.”

During their time as Wolf Pack athletes, Sacks and Kaepernick had a relationship that was very much brother-sister, as Kaepernick spent a great deal of time with Barry Sacks and his family. Alyx and Colin would often good-naturedly tease the other about their latest athletic accomplishments.

So it wasn’t surprising that Sacks gladly placed her journalistic objectivity to the side on Super Bowl Sunday. She wore a Kap 49ers jersey. She skipped on a 49ers hat. She invited her friends to her home. They made “way too much food” and even created special desserts.

“Football-shaped desserts,” says Sacks, who
TOP LEFT: The Kraft Fight Hunger Bowl Rally in San Francisco in 2011 was attended by more than 15,000 Pack fans. TOP RIGHT: Wolf Pack offensive lineman John Bender ’10, quarterback Colin Kaepernick ’10 and linebacker Kevin Grimes ’10 receive medallions from College of Business Dean Greg Mosier and Associate Dean Kambiz Raffiee following the players’ graduation in December 2010. MIDDLE: Kaepernick volunteers at the Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco before the Kraft Fight Hunger Bowl. RIGHT: Kaepernick poses for a promotional photo during the 2010 season. BOTTOM LEFT: Kaepernick led the Wolf Pack to a 34–31 victory over then-third ranked Boise State on Nov. 26, 2010. BOTTOM: Kaepernick delivered a positive message to members of the Boys & Girls Club of Truckee Meadows during a recent surprise visit. BOTTOM FAR RIGHT: Colin is joined by his parents Rick and Teresa Kaepernick on Senior Night in 2010.

has been an athlete her entire life, “are something I never do. I was prepping for game day in a way I’d never done before. We had a blast.”

Of all the things Alyx Sacks has always associated with Colin Kaepernick, she is asked about the one thing that isn’t all that obvious—until she thinks about it.

“You’re right,” she says. “Colin is always smiling. Always smiling. Even when he’s being Kap, and being sort of bashful, he’s still always laughing at the same time, sort of like he’s thinking … ‘Ohhhh-kkkay.’ And then he breaks out in that huge smile of his that always seems to brighten up a room.”

It’s been a major jump from Reno to San Francisco for Colin Kaepernick. Incredible? Yes.

Improbable? Well … no.

“Not surprising,” John Bender says. “Not surprising at all if you know Colin.”

“The thing that I always loved and respected about Kap was, no matter where we were, and how we had played, I knew his focus and attention on always getting better was paramount on his mind,” Ault adds. “I saw that here at Nevada, and we’re seeing it with the 49ers. To be seven yards away from being a Super Bowl champion … I know will be motivating for him.”

Ault is reminded that less than 48 hours after the 49ers’ 34–31 Super Bowl loss to the Ravens, Kaepernick had flown to Atlanta and was already in training for the 2013 regular season.

“Now that’s Kap in a nutshell, isn’t it?” Ault says. Then he adds, with a laugh: “I’m just surprised Kap didn’t find a way to get to Atlanta to start training the very next day.”