They fought on, and on, and on, and on.

As a darkly clouded afternoon became a chilly night in Pasadena Monday, the USC football team fought Penn State for a Rose Bowl championship that seemed continually out of reach.

The Trojans fought through breathtaking Nittany Lions scores, limb-twisting Nittany Lions tackles, and a two-touchdown deficit with less than a dozen minutes remaining in the game.

They fought through deafening noise from thousands of white-clad Penn State fans, a brutal ankle injury to their most explosive player, and yellow penalty flags that constantly fluttered at their feet.

They fought with jabs from a kid quarterback, roundhouses from acrobatic receivers and knockdowns by giant linemen.

They fought and fought and then, in their final breaths they hit Penn State with a force that USC football lore will remember forever.

Sam Darnold tossed a 27-yard touchdown pass to Deontay Burnett with one minute 20 seconds remaining to tie the score. Moments later, Leon McQuay III intercepted a lofted pass from Penn State's Trace McSorley.

Then, with the stunned Trojans nation holding its collective breath, Matt Boermeester sent them into full scream by kicking a 46-yard field goal as time ran out to give USC a 52-49 victory in arguably their greatest Rose Bowl victory ever.

“If that’s not the definition of ‘Fight On,’ I don’t know what is,” said Coach Clay Helton, barking out the Trojan slogan as he stood red-faced amid the postgame madness.

Even before the ball sailed through the uprights, the confident Boermeester turned his back and began running toward the far end of the field. Soon he was followed by sprinting, dancing teammates who were quickly engulfed in hugs and confetti.

“It still doesn’t feel like we won,” said nose tackle Stevie Tu’i Kokolovatu, the game’s defensive MVP. “This was the scariest, then the craziest.”

This was enough to bring a 6-foot-9, 360-pound man to his knees, as Trojans
If we’re not back, I don’t know who is,” said Willie McGinest, a former Trojans great who was walking the sidelines. “Being without all our scholarships, being undermanned for so many years, then to finish like this, it’s very special.”

They finished by winning their record 25th Rose Bowl, the most victories by any college team in any bowl. They finished by winning a game featuring the highest combined score in Rose Bowl history, with Darnold throwing the most touchdown passes — five — in Rose Bowl history while the freshman also finished with a Rose Bowl record 473 total yards.

But the Trojans very nearly didn’t finish anything. Like the kid said, before crazy, there was scary.

USC led 27-21 at halftime but then was stunned by a 79-yard touchdown run by Penn State’s Saquon Barkley in which he broke six tackles. That was followed moments later by a tipped pass that Penn State receiver Chris Godwin turned into a 72-yard touchdown pass.

There’s more. On the next Trojan possession, a Penn State interception led to a three-yard McSorley run that gave the Nittany Lions a 42-27 lead. That’s 21 unanswered Penn State points in less than three minutes, and the Trojans seemed done.

Except for, you know, all that “Conquest” business.

“I don’t know if it was the man upstairs, I don’t know what it was,” Banner said. “But I’m not going to call it a miracle, because we earned everything we got, we earned getting here, we earned winning the game, we earned this.”

They earned it with a soaring sideline catch by JuJu Smith-Schuster, diving grabs by Burnett, and third-down backfield tackle by Michael Hutchings, and a renewed urgency after star Adoree’ Jackson hobbled off the field in the third quarter with a right ankle injury.

“I hugged him and I said, ‘We’re going to win this game for you,’” safety Chris Hawkins said.

In the end, who would have thought the game would actually be won by a junior-college transfer who had not made a kick for USC until this season, who had not made a game-winning kick all season, and had missed two kicks earlier in the game?

Boermeester, that’s who.

“I wasn’t too concerned with the distance,” Boermeester said. “Wherever it was at, I was kicking it.”

Translated? “We have dudes on this team who have ice-cold water in their veins,” Hawkins said.

The ball punched through the goal posts, through the chilly night air, and accompanied by a cardinal-clad crowd whose roar will be remembered through history, a new USC football era has begun.

“It’s like the ripple in the pond,” Banner said. “You know when you drop the rock and the ripple starts? We are that rock.”

Goodness, what a splash.

tackle Zach Banner watched the field goal, fell to the wet grass and dissolved in tears.

“I’m on the ground and feeling feelings that I don’t know how to describe,” he said. “I cried my ass off.”

This also brought several players to the front of the Trojans band, where they directed the fight song with both the sword and the Rose Bowl trophy while teammates surrounded them with eyes wide with disbelief.

“It’s unreal, it feels fake right now,” receiver De’Quan Hampton said. “It feels like a dream.”

The reality is that with this win, USC emerged from eight years in the probation-cluttered wilderness to become a force in college football again. A Trojans team that began this season with a 1-3 record and Helton on the coaching hot seat has finished with nine consecutive victories and an aura that few other teams can match.

There are probably only two teams that would be favored against USC if they played next week, and both of them, Clemson and Alabama, are playing for the national championship.

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