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Miller: Love, sweat and tears all part of a coach's life

By JEFF MILLER 2013-08-28 00:08:30



It's one kid missing his mouthpiece and another his dead father.

It's convincing all of them to keep their spirits lifted up and some of them their pants pulled up.

It's being a counselor, a diplomat, a dictator and sometimes something much less complicated than all that. It's just being there.

"You don't show up at practice, blow a whistle and make them run," Buena Park coach Anthony White says. "It's so much more than that. This job consumes your life. It consumes you."

The remarkable thing isn't that someone does this, that he wakes up every morning at 5:30; gobbles down a bowl of cereal and grabs a Pop-Tart; kisses his wife on the lips and his first born on the cheek before heading out the door; opens the locker room by 6:30 a.m. and the weight room 15 minutes later for Zero Period lifting; teaches young minds about old times, four hours of topics like the American Revolution and the Great Depression; feels his stomach rumble because that Pop-Tart never left the passenger seat; meets with one vice principal and then a second, all the while spitting on these tiny fires – one kid needs a medical release, another skipped Fifth Period on Friday, a third forgot to get his parent's signature again – tiny fires but not insignificant ones; spends 45 minutes updating his team's stats online; gathers his players for a meeting outlining the week ahead; and then, finally, after walking out to the practice field with the booster club president who had just one question about the game program but needed five other answers, too, coaches football for $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours.

All in exchange for day-to-day glory too small to measure and – at public schools throughout Orange County – per-hour compensation too depressing to calculate.

No, the remarkable thing isn't that someone does this. The remarkable thing is that so many someones do this.

Morning after morning. Fall after fall. Year after year.

If you have no interest in coaching high school football, don't worry. There are plenty of others already on the job.

"I couldn't do it if I didn't love it," says Dave White, the head coach at Edison since 1986. "I wake up every day excited about it. I tell people all the time, 'The day I'm not loving it, I'm done.' There's a lot of it that's not fun. But there's nothing better than coaching kids."

Because of this – the army of willing hands, the wealth of coaching expertise and the depth of desire to teach other people's children – high school football around here never has been bigger or better than it is today.

But understand this much, too: The sport will swell even bigger, become even better – it simply has to, in fact – because of what's ahead. Namely, tomorrow.

Despite the risks and declining participation among kids because of too many bruised brains, even though

former NFL players are saying they don't want their sons following Daddy into this blood sport, football's popularity stands strong.

We, here in Orange County, are proof.

"The game's here to stay," Mater Dei coach Bruce Rollinson says. "I think everyone has woken up to the fact that we have to teach correct technique. We have to continue educating everyone. I can deal with the parents. I can deal with the winning and the losing. But I can't deal with the boys getting hurt. I hate it."

You don't get your arms around Orange County high school football, around 81 schools playing at every speed and level imaginable, the games growing so popular that live TV coverage continues to increase while other news organizations – like this one, for example – stream hours of video and tweet relentless updates.

The beast, like it or not, takes you in its grip.

But you still need some perspective. So you give yourself a chance by doing what you've done here, narrowing your focus to one man, the head coach, taking measure of this monster through a single pair of eyes.

They are the leaders, after all, the ones who call the shots all week and the plays on Friday night. But, no matter how far the game has come, today's coaches are still doing the same thing they've been doing around here since the 1950s, following in the footsteps of Clare Van Hoorebeke.

"It has to start with Clare," Bill Cunerty says. "Everybody – and I mean everybody in Southern California – chased Clare and what he did."

Coaching at Anaheim High from 1950-72, Van Hoorebeke pioneered the idea of film study, often driving after games to Hollywood because it was the only place to get the film developed.

He introduced sideline headphones, coaching specialists and the use of lower-level assistants to scout an upcoming opponent's most recent game.

Van Hoorebeke walked the sidelines in a faded letterman's jacket and puffed cigars, his players learning to project the length of practice by how many smokes Coach had stuffed into his shirt pocket.

Early in his career, Cunerty, a noted quarterback coach who has been involved in the county's football scene for decades, asked to visit a practice so he could observe Van Hoorebeke. The tour began in "The Blue Room," where Anaheim's coaches game-planned every week.

"The stuff they were doing was pretty impressive," Cunerty says now. "The Blue Room' was famous. I knew it was blue, and I'm color blind."

Football was simpler then and so was coaching it. Van Hoorebeke, for instance, never was wired with a microphone by NFL Films for a special on high school rivalries and then had to worry when he arrived to comfort an injured player and that player, squirming in agony, continually screamed obscenities into the hot mic.

That happened a few years ago to Rollinson, whose Mater Dei program has become so popular with live television and other mediums that assistant coaches are routinely assigned to star players to help expedite interviews after games.

"We have kids cooling and waiting in the locker room," Rollinson says. "They want to get home and go to the dance, and we can't get other kids off the field. It's still football. It's still 48 minutes. It's still the fundamentals. What's different now is the media exposure."

The attention, of course, can be good and bad. And it's only going to get better and worse with the evolution of something that would have spun Van Hoorebeke's tattered ball cap around – social media.

Already, play-by-play is being tweeted, and that's play-by-play of spring passing league games. Coaches are finding themselves Googling terms like Instagram and setting up Twitter accounts simply to keep up with their own players.

"You wouldn't teach a Spanish class speaking French," Buena Park's White, 32, says. "I can't teach players if I don't speak their language. I'm trying to learn new rap songs, new lingo. I'm trying to relate to where they're at."

How powerful is social media? Powerful enough to influence a game's outcome. Last fall, Mater Dei announced its Thanksgiving Day practice on Facebook. Nearly 150 former players showed up to support a team readying for a playoff matchup against No. 1-seeded St. Bonaventure.

The next night, in a heavy fog at Ventura High, the Monarchs won resoundingly, 21-0. It was all over the Internet.

"I believe that the practice the day before really stimulated that team," Rollinson says. "We had an edge going into that football game because of what was created by social media."

The undeniable health and glowing prognosis of high school football here comes at a time when some people are debating when, precisely, the NFL will do the inevitable and commit suicide. Too dangerous, too many concussions, too much litigation.

Everything trickles down in sports, from the pros to the colleges to the high schools. The training, the hitting, the expanding. Mater Dei's offensive line this season will average nearly 290 pounds.

So, as easily as the brain of a San Diego Charger can be concussed so, too, can the brain of an Edison Charger.

It has been seven years now since Hunter White took a few staggering steps toward the sideline, wobbled and then wilted. By the time Dave White reached the fallen player, he was more Hunter's father than the boy's coach.

Just two weeks earlier, White had read a story out of Northern California where a coach watched his son die on the field.

"I was freaking out for a minute or two," White says today. "I was thinking, 'Oh, my God, is he going to die right in front of me?' My heart was pumping."

Hunter eventually regained his feet and resumed playing, all the way through a notable career at Boise State.

Recent surveys suggest fewer children – perhaps as high as 10 percent fewer – are playing youth football because of the danger. Still, USA Football, the sport's national governing body, estimates 3 million kids will play nationwide.

The California Interscholastic Federation has instituted a protocol for dealing with potential concussions. The Orange County Football Officials Association recently sent an email to schools explaining that eliminating helmet-to-helmet hits will be a point of emphasis entering this season.

Still, the CIF says more than 100,000 California kids will play football. One of them will be Garrett White, Hunter's younger brother and the youngest son of Dave White. Garrett is a sophomore wide receiver/defensive back at Edison.

"I wouldn't do anything differently and I know my sons wouldn't," Dave White says. "The helmet used to be for protection. Now, it's a weapon. It's getting scarier. It is a concern, but if you love the game..."

No, football isn't going anywhere. But the same can't be said of football players, who, because of relaxed rules on transferring, are shopping for opportunities.

Or is it the players who are being shopped? Parents, many of whom already have invested in private coaches and personal nutritionists, are now looking for the most unobstructed path from prep Friday nights to college Saturday afternoons.

Just doing their duty, right? Being good parents? Giving their child the best chance to succeed? All true, but also true is the fact that, at some point, that child will have to face genuine competition and the parents, probably, a reality just as genuine.

"I had a dad, as recently as the last six months, walk in the door," Rollinson says. "He looked right at me and said, 'I want to introduce you to the next Matt Barkley.' And the boy walked in. I mean, I felt the heat come up the back of my neck.

"I said, 'First of all, sir, you're not going to like what comes out of my mouth right now. But don't ever disrespect a great player like Matt Barkley. Ever. And No. 2, how can you do that to your son, sir?"

Counselor, diplomat, dictator. Sometimes, all at once. Rollinson hasn't seen that father since and has no idea where the next Matt Barkley ended up.

In the future, the transferring will continue, perhaps to the point where Orange County ends up with a couple super leagues, schools stocked with the best talent, and a bunch of lesser programs still playing old school prep football.

Only one thing is definite: There will be coaches ready to do the work.

"When young guys ask me about becoming coaches, I always ask them, 'Do you love it? Are you dedicated enough to put in the time at roughly 10 cents an hour?" Cunerty says. "If someone gives you the moniker 'Coach,' first of all, it's a great honor. But, secondly, it comes with a great deal of responsibility. All coaches need to remember that."

Back at Buena Park, Anthony White has gathered his Coyotes, each player on one knee, with a hand resting on the shoulder of a teammate. Together, they recite the school's alma mater, just like White has them do after weight-lifting sessions and games and anything that assembles them as one.

Practice is over, and it's 5:30 p.m., exactly 12 hours after the coach had been awakened by the alarm on his cell phone. Soon, he'll return to his wife, San, and 8-month-old son, Anthony II, plant kisses on them both and start the process all over again.

White is entering his fourth season. His teams have gone 20-11. When he held his first team meeting in the spring of 2010, 12 players showed up. Today, the program numbers 139.

"There's nothing that can compare to seeing your kids graduating or going to college or playing on TV," White says. "There's nothing better than that, their success."

As he heads back toward the locker room, White is stopped by one of the Coyotes. There's a problem. The kid who was supposed to be Buena Park's kicker this season won't be able to play because of a torn knee ligament.

But the issue isn't the lack of a kicker; it's the lack of a kicking tee. The injured kid put the school's only tee in his locker, and no one's sure when he'll be around again.

"Well," White says, "I guess we'll have to break it open."

And just that simply, another tiny fire goes out. Another decision made, another dime earned.

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