

# Acalanes coach Isaac leading team his way and hasn't lost yet



First-year Acalanes coach Joel Isaac and his 11-0 team play Cardinal Newman in the NCS Division I semifinals. Jose Carlos Fajardo / staff



Image



**By Nathan Canilao**

[ncanilao@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:ncanilao@bayareanewsgroup.com)

LAFAYETTE — Joel Isaac cuts a striking figure on the Acalanes sideline.

The first-year coach watches games from behind dark black reflective sunglasses — even under the stadium lights — his hood pulled over a baseball cap while wearing a

black long sleeve with the Acalanes logo over his heart.

He moves with an easy swagger, weaving through the chaos of the game without saying much. Isaac carries himself with the kind of curated aura that his players often joke about, the type of confidence that pulls attention without a word.

That presence has made Isaac an unmistakable focal point at the Lafayette school, especially after he stepped into the job under contentious circumstances that pushed out longtime coach Floyd Burnsed.

But Isaac never lived his life by public approval.

Isaac has been questioned more times than he can count. He was doubted as an athlete growing up in Vallejo. His friends called him crazy when he quit his job as a financial analyst to pursue a career in coaching. Some in the Acalanes community were skeptical that he could handle being a head coach after years as an assistant.

But 11 games into his tenure, with Acalanes undefeated and preparing for a North Coast Section Division I semifinal matchup at North Bay powerhouse Cardinal Newman on Friday, Isaac considers the doubters as background noise.

The results, and the belief he carries quietly but unapologetically, are speaking loudly enough for him.

“I understand that people have agendas,” Isaac told the Bay Area News Group this week. “But I’m not in the business of changing people’s minds. So, I’m going to be who I am, and people can feel how they want to feel, but I know that my heart’s in the right place. I take care of my people when I’m in my charge. I can sleep well at night because I’m leaving people better than when I found them.”

On a rainy Monday night practice, Isaac huddles his team after a hard day of work. The players gather around the 5-foot-10 coach as he preaches about why the Dons must practice with maximum effort as nothing, not even a single rep, is guaranteed going forward.

That message isn’t something he picked up recently.

It traces back to when he was raised by a single mother in Vallejo who worked long hours and expected her son to match that commitment with his school work and his ambitions.

As a Filipino American kid who was often overlooked, he grew up absorbing his mother's lessons about discipline and dedication — values that he now preaches in every huddle and team meeting.

Coaching wasn't the career path Isaac initially chose, but he always had a passion for giving back to his community. Isaac got a job as a financial analyst after graduating from UC Irvine, but the pull of becoming a coach never loosened its grip. He walked away from a promising career, betting on himself in a field where nothing was guaranteed.

"My friends told me I was crazy. And I told them that they were probably right," Isaac said.

After a stint as the assistant head coach at his alma mater St. Patrick-St. Vincent, Isaac eventually landed as an assistant coach at Acalanes in 2016, but briefly left to coach perennial Sac-Joaquin contender Vanden a few years ago.

He helped lead Vanden to a state title in 2021 as the team's offensive coordinator and won the Fairfield school another section championship a year later. He came to Acalanes two years ago as the offensive coordinator under Burnsed and engineered an offense that won the Dons a state championship in 2023 and an NCS Division III title last season.

But the way he became Acalanes' head coach couldn't have been more chaotic.

In March, the school parted ways with Burnsed, who is in his late 70s, and elevated Isaac to head coach — a move that sprung some varying opinions in the Acalanes community.

According to reports, Burnsed said he was asked to step down after he and principal Eric Shawn disagreed on Isaac's role on the coaching staff. Isaac reportedly took a coordinator position at Monte Vista in the offseason, but was promoted to Acalanes' head coach hours after Burnsed left the program.

While Burnsed said he never had a problem with Isaac, the situation raised questions about the Acalanes program entering the season.

Isaac, though, believes the drama was blown out of proportion.

“Regardless of what’s been printed, the fact is the community never felt a type of way about me,” Isaac said. “I know that people that put stuff in the paper felt that way, but at large, the community has supported me being here since Day 1.

“I keep my head down, I wear my hood and glasses and a hat and I just stay in my lane.”

While Burnsed’s run at Acalanes was historic — the Dons came within a two-point conversion of returning to a state final last season — Isaac knew he had to put his own stamp on the program right away. That meant overhauling a culture that, according to him, lacked a sense of urgency on the defensive end.

Isaac said he didn’t feel pressure as a first-year coach to replicate the success of the last two seasons because he believed he elevated Acalanes to becoming a Bay Area powerhouse once he returned to the staff in 2023.

“If you look at the timeline, you can point out the reason we were successful,” Isaac said. “We have some talented guys, but we’re not just relying on talent anymore. We put a heavy emphasis on coaching. We get guys in the right places, we teach them the right technique and put them in positions to be successful.”

Most importantly, Isaac has gotten the buy-in from his players. This year’s team has not only had to deal with the coaching drama, but also dealt with tragedy when Acalanes football player Amin Noroozi, who would have been a senior this fall, died in a swimming accident last spring at Stinson Beach.

“We’ve had plenty of team meetings throughout the year where we’ve just talked about why we’re doing this,” senior defensive end Deonte Littlejohn said.

“We have to be together, and coach Joel, well, he preaches that if you’re selfish, you’re wrong.”

Senior quarterback Tyler Winkles praised Isaac for elevating the team's focus, saying, "I think the practices are a lot more organized. I think our coaches have been on top of that."

The semifinal on Friday will match Isaac against a coach who has been to the top. Cardinal Newman's first-year coach Frank McManus arrived at the Santa Rosa school with a national championship resume, having led powerhouse Mater Dei-Santa Ana to No. 1 in the state and a mythical national title in 2023 before being let go for undisclosed reasons in spring 2024.

Isaac knows on paper that their profiles couldn't be further apart. But the outside comparisons, the questions about his qualifications and his background, are exactly the kind of noise he's trained to tune out his entire life.

"It's about controlling what we can control," Isaac said. "Coach McManus is a great coach and he's had a historic career so far. I can't control that he has some athletes that may not have grown up there. All we can control is that we're ready for the task, right?"

"We have to put them in a position to be successful. ... A resume doesn't make a play. A star next to someone's name doesn't make a play. Coaches put players in position to be successful and players make plays. And so that's what we're focused on."

[< PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

Article 81 of 160

[NEXT ARTICLE >](#)