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From Player to Coach

By Lou Fancher



David Ortega (on the right) Photo: Mark Teufel

400-page rule book. Steeped in tradition, it's intended to keep student athletes on amateur status. Like history, its laws and guidelines are subject to interpretation and influenced by the surrounding culture. It's Ortega's job to keep players, parents and coaches from making mistakes. "I want to help the next person to have the same experience I had," he says.

As if a full time job and a near spotless attendance record at Cal football games (he's missed only four since 1985) isn't enough, Ortega coaches youth sports in Lamorinda and Walnut Creek. Another list begins: baseball, basketball, soccer, and, expectedly, football. "I'm a little bit old school," Ortega says, "but I like to keep them interested - make it fun and challenging." Although Lamorinda is unlike the southern California projects where he learned to play ball, he sees mostly similarities: "The kids are just looking for the same thing: for guidance and someone to love them and to help them be better at their craft." Like Cal's college athletes, who he believes "work their tails off," Ortega's players want only to improve. He teaches them to know the game first, then to listen, practice, and repeat.

The academic approach and driving energy of a top tier athlete came from Cal, but the support of his wife, Teresa, and his three children he receives as a gift. He credits his wife with working "a lot harder than I do," and partly, coaches in order to have more time with his kids. Ortega, once recognized for knocking people down and intercepting passes, today spends his days doing the opposite; building kids up and handing off vital lessons as a teacher on the field.

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Once a star linebacker for Cal, with team records for interceptions and tackles in one season, David Ortega now works as a compliance director for Cal Athletics. His shoulder pads have long been retired, but the insatiable appetite for hard work and hard play he brought to the game is everywhere in his life.

From an airport in the Midwest, Ortega talked about football and his good fortune. Becoming an athlete, his path was peppered with amazing coaches. Asked to name a favorite, he struggles to limit the list: Greg Pedrola, his junior midget coach in L. A.; Rod Marinelli, Kent Baer, and Bruce Snyder at Cal. He tries to slide a few other names forward, then laughs. These coaches taught him to read the plays, to anticipate the action, to become strong in body and in character.

After his glory days at Cal, Ortega signed with the L.A. Rams, but was waived just before the first game. He played in the World League of American Football, and then moved into athletic administration. "The transition from athlete to the rest of your life - it's never easy," he says. "Luckily, I went to Cal, where they take academics seriously. And I love history, which was my major."

The jump from history to compliance director might seem like a stretch, until you hear Ortega explain it. Compliance is governed by a