



VACAVILLE COACHING LEGEND ZUNINO DIES AT 71

By Paul Farmer | Daily Republic | September 26, 2008

VACAVILLE - The man known simply as 'Z' and the architect of one of Northern California's most successful high school football programs has died.

Tom Zunino, who coached at Vacaville High for 37 years and was an athletic director nearly as long, passed away at his home early Friday morning after a long battle with cancer. He was 71.

'Everybody knew this day was coming, but it's tough,' said Rich Penaluna, who was on Zunino's first Vacaville team in 1961 and later coached under him for nearly 20 years.

It's kind of weird around here (at Vacaville High) today,' said Ed Santopadre, a player under Zunino in the 1970s who later coached the Bulldogs and is now an assistant principal at the school. 'Everybody's kind of going through the motions.'

Zunino finished with a 215-145-12 career record, making him one of the winningest coaches ever in the Sac-Joaquin Section, compared to the 102-126-22 of his 15 predecessors. He inherited a program that hadn't captured a league title since 1949 and had won only two in its history.

That all changed under Zunino, though not right away. After two straight losing seasons, his 1963 team went 6-3 and his 1964 squad tied for the Delta League title, the first of four league championships that decade and nine in his tenure.

'Vacaville football before that time had been kind of hit and miss,' Penaluna said. 'They never seemed to have any continuity. The first few years we weren't all that great, but with the next group of kids, he started winning championships. The rest, as they say, is history.'

While Zunino was helping to build the Bulldogs football program, he was also instrumental in the formation of the Monticello Empire League, of which Vacaville's been a member since its founding in 1976, and in making the school an all-around athletic power.

'The guy's responsible for getting things done,' said Fred Jones, who replaced Zunino as both football coach and boys athletic director. 'He'd always find a way to get things done. He never gave up on anything. . . . He had great insight, a great mind for business -- the business of working with kids.'

'His name's more than over (Tom Zunino) stadium,' Santopadre said. 'It's a tribute to him in how we do things, not just in sports, but throughout the whole school.'

Zunino was also highly respected among his coaching peers, many of whom called the school to offer their condolences, according to Santopadre.

When told of Zunino's passing, former Fairfield coach Jim Sykes fondly recalled the titanic clashes the two teams held annually.

'Vacaville had some really good teams,' Sykes said in a phone interview from his home in Arizona. 'I know that Tom really respected us and we really respected him. He'd come up to me after a game and say, 'I knew you were going to call that play. I told my kids you would, and you did it.' '

Zunino stepped down as head coach after the 1997 season, the same year as Sykes at Fairfield, but was never far from the Vacaville program. He'd help the team at practices and stalk the sidelines during games, later coming back to serve as defensive coordinator for the 2006 Sac-Joaquin Section Division I champions coached by son-in-law Mike Papadopoulos.

Though facing modern 'spread' offenses, Zunino was still sharp enough to find a counter.

'He had a certain set of guidelines he went by,' Jones said. 'He applied those rules to what modern offenses were.'

A lasting tribute to Zunino is the continued success of the team after his retirement, including 10 straight winning seasons, six MEL titles and nine section playoff appearances.

'He put us on the map and we were able to stay there because we learned from him how to do things,' Santopadre said.

When asked if Zunino had changed much over the years, Penaluna said, 'Not very damn much. He was consistent in his attitude, consistent in his work ethic, consistent in keeping people around him happy and going all the time.'

Added Santopadre, 'He bled black and orange.'

A service for Zunino will be held at St. Joseph Catholic Church on Oct. 4 at 11 a.m.