



COACH 'Z': A LEGEND FOR THE AGES

By Joe Davidson | Sacramento Bee | September 26, 2008

The prep sporting world - and education in general - lost a golden leader today.

Tom Zunino, affectionately known as "Z" after a snarling and storied football coaching career at Vacaville High School, died after a lengthy battle with cancer. He was 71.

Zunino was as loyal to his program and driven to succeed as he was stout and sturdy. He was the epitome of a football coach, a throw back in every sense: Hard boiled, gritty and a believer that fundamentals, a running game and defense produces a winner. He was also a charmer deep down, a favorite for players who years after competing for him would stop by his coaching office or his home for a visit.

Zunino steered the Bulldogs for 37 years, and he was the athletic director for 35. He was the head coach from 1961 to 1997, and his teams posted 26 winning seasons, 14 conference championships and 215 victories.

Vacaville's field was named after him several years ago, and he cracked, "I thought you had to be great to get that sort of honor." My good friends Matt Mills and Tim Roe would often say that a big part of the appeal to watching a Bulldogs game over the years was to catch "Z" in action.

Zunino was dusted off and coaxed out of retirement by Vacaville coach Mike Papadopoulos earlier this decade, and "Z's" defense was paramount in beating Elk Grove in the 2007 City Championship, thus paving the way to the team's first Sac-Joaquin Section Division I championship and a 13-1 season.

After that City title triumph against the 12-0 Thundering Herd, Bulldogs players hailed "Z" as the X-factor for their success. Typical old coach, rubbing his sore back, he downplayed it, telling me, "Ahhh, these kids. They're the real winners."

No, coach. In the end, you were the ultimate winner.