



## VALLEJO STANDOUT ZUNINO DIES

Administrator, Coach, legendary figure in Vaca high sports

**BY TIM ROE: VACAVILLE REPORTER for VALLEJO TIMES HERALD**

In Vacaville, "the family" lost the patriarch. In Vallejo, one of the leaders of one of the town's most legendary teams is lost.

Tom Zunino, hailed by many as the greatest football coach ever at Vacaville High and the architect of much of what exists on the local sports scene, died early Friday morning at his Vacaville home. He was 71.

As an athlete growing up in Vallejo, Zunino quarterbacked the undefeated 1954 Vallejo High football team and was later a two-sport star at Vallejo Junior College. In 2006, Zunino was inducted into the Vallejo Sports Hall of Fame.

As a coach of the Vacaville Bulldogs, Zunino won 215 games in 37 seasons as the top 'Dog, including nine league titles. His 1973 team won the Capital City Championship, defeating Christian Brothers 12-0.

Zunino, born Jan. 19, 1937, said his later successes were patterned after what he learned growing up in Vallejo.

The '54 team is still fondly remembered as a prep powerhouse, with Zunino at the controls of coach Bob Patterson's unbalanced short-punt offense. Along with Patterson, Zunino was well-taught by a slew of Hall of Fame coaches that included Sid Rich, Bill Posedel, Dick Biama, Dave Thomas and Ted Gebhardt.

The '54 team featured a backfield with two future NFL players - Dick Bass and Bob Coronado - and Zunino often joked, though it was sometimes true, that he only had to throw the ball about four times a game.

The Apaches were so dominant that, as the story goes, fans would show up after halftime and never see the team's first string.

"We'd score so fast we didn't play too much," Zunino told the Times-Herald in 2006, leading up to the Hall of Fame ceremony that year. "It was great. We had a bunch of guys we grew up with. We played baseball together, spent summers together, we played in summer recreation leagues together. And when we got to high school, we knew each other. It was a family-oriented team. We just had a ball."

Growing up, Zunino said his supporters included his father, Lanch, aunts and uncles and the parents of Vallejoan and Cal great Vic Bottari. A star in baseball and football, Zunino had opportunities in professional sports, but, as a 23-year-old, took the physical education degree he'd earned at Sacramento State to Vacaville High.

There, "Z" was much more than wins and losses. He led a groundswell of local support that helped build the Vacaville stadium that now bears his name.

"I don't think they make them like that anymore," said Fred Jones, Vacaville's boys athletic director and one of Zunino's best friends. "He loved Vacaville. He came here in 1960, and he never left. He stood for integrity ... and a concept of community pride. Those people who were willing to work for the community of Vacaville ... he had great respect for them and would do anything to help them."

"I think the biggest thing he did in Vacaville was foster a family atmosphere, which is such a part of what we are," said Ed Santopadre, a Vacaville assistant principal, former Bulldog head football coach and former player under Zunino. "My best friends are the guys I coach with, and that's what he created ... that family that we all feel. I think that's the secret to the success of the Vacaville program."

The success of the Bulldogs was nothing short of amazing. Zunino's teams had 26 winning seasons in his 37 varsity campaigns, and Zunino finished with a .597 winning percentage (215-145-12).

The Bulldogs also reached the 1985 Sac-Joaquin Section title game before losing to Cordova, 17-7. That team held the school record for wins in a season at 11 until 2006, when Vacaville went 13-1 and won the section crown.

Zunino had come out of retirement to help coach the defense on that team. In fact, he never really left the sideline, and was a staple there as late as last year.

"It's been an honor for me to even work with him," said current head coach Mike Papadopoulos, who led the 2006 team and is also Zunino's son-in-law. "And I certainly couldn't ask for any better in-laws. They're probably the classiest people I know. He's just done so much for so many people. He's got a heart of gold, and much of it was done quietly."

Married to his wife, Bernie, Zunino became Vacaville's varsity coach in 1961, even though he had been recalled by the U.S. Air Force and had to report daily before returning to coach football.

Zunino also worked with Larry Nelson to begin the Bulldogs' wrestling program, and took stints as a basketball, baseball, track and golf coach when needs arose.

The coach-administrator later became an athletic director, and spearheaded a Bulldog program that won Monticello Empire League school of the year awards 14 times, including 10 straight years from 1982-91.

"Coach Zunino is a legend in this community and he leaves a great legacy," said Superintendent John Aycock.

Along the way, Zunino became perhaps the most recognizable figure in the city.

"I'm not sure there's anyone more well-known in Vacaville. And the reason is he's helped so many people, and helped their kids, and helped their grandkids," Santopadre said. "When we moved here, he helped my family get a residence. My father is still alive, and he's a great man, but 'Z' has really been a second father to me, that other guy. If I still want advice or help, I go to him."

Zunino became a father figure to many, even after he was diagnosed with cancer last spring.

"Not too long ago, after he had found out he was really sick, there was a former player who 'Z' heard about who was down on his luck," Santopadre said. "He was asking around to see if he could get him a job ... and here he had just gotten the worst news of his life."

It wasn't just the down-trodden who were impacted. Vacaville graduate Thomas Williams, who now plays for the Jacksonville Jaguars, had a lengthy conversation with Zunino recently.

"He had a tremendous impact on many, many, many, many people," said Jones, Vacaville's boys AD. "He had a tremendous impact on the lives of so many young men in this community."

"He was a great mentor, an extremely passionate individual who always stood up for what was right. He built his life on respect for people, respect for hard work, and respect for the family. Family to him was always much bigger than the individual family."

Beside his induction as an individual to the Vallejo Sports Hall of Fame, Zunino is a member several Halls: Sacramento State, Solano College, the California Athletic Directors and Vallejo again, as a member of the 1954 Vallejo football team.

Zunino is survived by Bernie, his wife of 48 years; son, Mark; daughter, Karen and son-in-law Mike Papadopoulos; and two grandchildren.

Funeral arrangements are pending.