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Former Cal Punter Kick-starts Cougar Special Team Success

By Robin Schoettler Fox and Sheryl Cardiff



Giorgio Tavecchio, former Cougar soccer standout turned star football place kicker, walked away from college soccer scholarship opportunities for a longer shot -- a chance to play Cal football as a recruited freshman walk-on. Invited to practice just three days before the start of the season, Tavecchio quickly earned a starter position, kicking-off the Golden Bears' season opener against Michigan

Jimmy Adranly was first. A 2007 Campolindo High School grad, Adranly is now a two-sport Chapman University athlete - soccer goalie and football punter. Then came Giorgio Tavecchio, high school soccer standout turned Cougar football place kicker and this season's Cal football Cinderella story. Now it's Jackson Rice, a current Campo senior slated to punt in January's U.S. Army All-American Bowl and headed to Oregon on a football scholarship.

That's three in three seasons. What's up with Campo's special teams?

"Past years, we just sort of survived the kicking game," says Campolindo's varsity football coach, Kevin Macy.

Enter Lafayette-resident Mike Ahr, former Cal starting punter circa 1979-82, and a Campo specialist coach since 2006.

"I used to play at Cal," Ahr recalls telling Macy when first offering help. "I know something about punting."

Ask Ahr about Tavecchio and Rice, and he talks about talent, dedication, perseverance and personal sacrifice. Each player's -- not his own. Ahr isn't looking for limelight.

It's Macy, a 29-year football coach veteran, the last 13 at Campo, who sees the bigger picture. A position coach like Ahr? Macy's never had one before.

"Talk about a luxury," says Macy. "And he's a pure volunteer."

A long-time local youth sports coach (Lafayette Little League, LMYA soccer, MOL flag football), Ahr says that one problem with coaching younger kids is that not everyone on the team seems to care about what you're teaching them.

"I wanted to see what it was like in high school," says Ahr.

It's an old adage -- kickers are born, not made. A player has to have natural leg strength.

"It starts with God-given talent," says Chris Sailer, a former UCLA All-American kicker whose national punter and place kicker camps and competitions help elite players like Rice garner college scout and U.S. Army All American Bowl attention.

Execution becomes a mental game for these specialized players, boiling down to games spent on the sidelines, at the ready to run onto the field at a moment's notice to do the one thing they do, and then do that thing well. Every time. There's not the same brute force, sprinter speed or reflex agility other positions require. Nor is it about do-overs. Place kicking and punting? Consistency is everything.

"There's no other position like it," says Sailer.

Having a high school position coach with Division I kicking experience is rare, says Sailer, and can be an early advantage.

Rice, a 3rd generation punter, has genetics and football passion on his side. He says Ahr has helped his mental game the most: "Having a coach that was able to kick in college, he knows what's going on in my head during the games. He tells me, you have a lot of talent, calm down, take your time. Just basics. Focus on the ball. His words are simple, but they work."

A local businessman, Ahr offers players practice-time flexibility that helps recruiting, particularly when re-tooling soccer standouts with club soccer fall commitments.

Always, Ahr keeps an eye out for new talent. Initially focused on varsity, Ahr now works with freshman and JV kickers, too. He talks kicking positions up with other Campo athletes and watches out for middle school player potential.

"He's already got a wave of kids coming up," says Macy.

The result? Campo kickers are increasingly specialty players. Even Rice dropped off the linebacker roster this past season to focus on punting and avoid injury that might sideline his college football career.

"Mike's turned (our kicking) into a polished part of the game," says Macy. "It's become a weapon for us."

Macy says Ahr is a symbol for Campo players of what's achievable. Before Cal's walk-on invitation came through, Ahr advised Tavecchio to keep working hard and stay ready, just in case. Never give up.

"He held my hand, got me through the process and encouraged me," says Tavecchio.

And why not? Ahr had already lived his own Cinderella story, a tale not unlike Tavecchio's.

A recruited Cal walk-on, Ahr beat out the 1979 freshman scholarship punter and played first-string for four years.

"I was nobody," says Ahr, a Novato High graduate who played other high school football positions in addition to punter.

Kicking a ball long and straight? It was something he'd taught himself out of neighborhood street-ball necessity.

"I had to learn to kick straight because we had a very narrow street and neighbors got mad if the ball hit their house or broke off tree limbs," says Ahr.

Like Tavecchio's plans for the Emerald Bowl at AT&T Park, Ahr played as a freshman in the 1979 Garden State Bowl. January's U.S. Army All-American Bowl, held in San Antonio's Alamodome, takes Rice to a bowl game even younger.

Forget coach to player. What is Ahr's advice, kicker to kicker, for these players as each approaches a first bowl game? It's basically what he's been saying since the first day he worked with them on the Campo field -- focus is key:

"Stay focused on your job, your own little world that's about 5 feet in diameter, and just ignore the crowd and the whole media hype."



It's official -- Campo punter Jackson Rice is headed for San Antonio's Alamodome to play in the NBC-televised U.S. Army All-American Bowl on January 3, 2009 (12 noon, CST), the first Lamorinda player chosen in this elite East vs. West All-Star contest's 9-game history. Students, faculty and other Cougar football fans cheered as Jackson received his jersey from local Army personnel in a mid-December

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