

Lamorinda flag football still in the growth stage

By Jon Kingdon



Miramontes Chance Newby and Campolindo's Neta-Li Lustig Photos Mark Bell



Miramonte runner Jessica Chapman and Campolindo's defenders Lane Massa, left and Neta-Li Lustig (2)

There has been a great jump in the number of girls participating in the second year of flag football, though not so much in Lamorinda. With most schools having junior varsity teams this year for the first time, only Campolindo has been able to field such a team along with their varsity.

"We were on the edge as to whether or not we could have a JV team but I'm glad we did because those players are getting more experience," Coach Joe Waldo

said. "Soccer, volleyball, and lacrosse suck up a lot of bandwidth, so having a JV and varsity team at every school - it's not happening," Acalanes Co-Head Coach Mike Ivankovich said. "We should do our best to preserve the quality of the game and competition, and not confuse participation with what has been a truly great experience for the girls." **ACALANES**

After a very successful season last year, Acalanes lost 15 of the

18 girls on the roster to graduation. "We have a lot of girls that haven't played before but many of our underclassmen have stepped up and are playing great," Co-Head Coach Joe Escobar said. "We scheduled difficult teams in the beginning of the season and lost three close games, but we have been getting better every week and that's been our goal."

The Dons have gone from a team that was 80% seniors to a team that's almost 80% freshman. "For the freshmen, they had a lot to learn and they're going against 17- and 18-year-olds and they've done a great job," Co-Head Coach Mike Ivankovich said. "We have 18 girls on the roster and that's barely enough, but with so many new players, it's been great for them and great for us."

Senior quarterback Hana Chelemedos, junior Maya Shoenhair, and sophomores Sydney Clark, Ines Coyne, and Romi Avrahami have been key players on offense. "Hana has great poise, and she's making great decisions in running the offense," Ivankovich said. "Maya was all-league last year and has been great since we moved her to the slot position, and Ines has scored five touchdowns. It's a process teaching the players how to run and space our pass routes, come back to the football and we're still not there so we're struggling on offense."

The team's defense has been the strength of the team. "We spend a lot of time teaching flag pulling with different drills and a basic technique which is almost like a handshake grip with both hands but can change depending on the situation," Ivankovich said. "Ines and Leila Hamedi have been outstanding pulling the flag and Av-



Campolindo quarterback Isabelle Maher



Miramonte's Julia Quinn Ferguson

ery Dement has a lot of interceptions. Freshmen June Natal and Isabelle Agnost, and sophomore Malory DeCredico have been our main rushers and we've been working hard on our technique."

"We're excited about the rest of the season and the future if we can retain our girls for the seasons to come," Ivankovich said. "It's still fun every day and it's still quite different from tackle football where it can feel like a real grind at times. The girls really make it interesting because they're really smart and clever and are able to figure things out on their own."

MIRAMONTE

After only one-win last season, Miramonte has five wins midway through the season. Head Coach Jennifer Lezcano has a young team with nine freshmen and sophomores. "At sports night in the spring, we had a really good turnout of freshmen inquiring about flag football along with a lot of our returning players who encouraged others to come out for the team," Lezcano said. "We have a great group that really clicks and that's made a huge difference because they all really want to support one another and with Kevin Newby, we have a committed assistant coach whose extra guidance has been huge for everyone."

"For a number of our players, it's a whole new sport where football was a foreign concept," Newby said. "Winning some early games has really helped a lot. We have some rigor in our practices and the kids are learning the basic skills on running routes, pulling the flags, and understanding our different defenses. The players are having a lot of fun, though they can be hard on themselves, but they're sharing in their successes and supporting each other, particularly the freshmen, when they get down."

The offense is led by quarterback Penelope Hagan and Chance Newby, Lucy Daoust, Katelyn Soe, and Julie Quinn Ferguson. "Penelope has been a great player," Newby said. "She is very sharp and understands the game. Chance has great hands and is good over the middle and really reliable on third downs. Lucy has been great on the deep routes and Katelyn is getting more comfortable catching passes out of the backfield. Julie may be the best athlete on the team as a halfback and free safety, making a lot of catches and tackles."

The defense has shown improvement as the year has progressed. "We've added some defensive plays and have a variety of blitzes and that's part of the education that's been fun," Newby said. "Riyana Habarakada, Harriet Olson, and Anaia Singh have been very effective with their speed and quickness."

"Ultimately, our goal is to give the players reasons to come back by making it fun out there," Newby said. "We will run them hard, and they will sweat a lot, but they do enjoy coming to practice and enjoy the vibe of what the team has been built around. We

had nothing to lose from where we were last year so we're having fun surprising people."

CAMPOLINDO

With a 3-3 record in league play, Campolindo has shown improvement over last season. "Last year we were a heavy freshman team and this year we're a heavy sophomore team," assistant coach Joe Waldo said. "A number of the players returned from last season, and we've got some freshman that can really play. We started them on our JV team this season and we've been bringing them up here and there, getting experience on the varsity and we're seeing a lot more interest with the younger kids."

Second year QB, sophomore Isabelle Maher has completed 58.6% of her passes with 20 touchdowns. "Isabelle is seeing things better and has gotten stronger," Waldo said. "She is moving better on the field and maintaining her composure when under pressure."

The leading rushers besides Maher, are Lucy Ross (27-132), Jasia Hlanski (32-99), and Lane Massa (13-44). The leading receivers are Jeevan Dhaliwal (42-209-11TD's) and Avery Bruno (22-221-3 TD's). "Jeevan is playing really

well," Waldo said. "She is strong and very tough in the middle and Avery, who is new to the team, has learned quickly. Freshman Mia Durden has scored three touchdowns and is exciting to watch."

The defense --still a work in progress -- is led by Lucy Ross, Lane Massa, and Natalie Lustig. "Lucy is our main blitzer and really goes after it and has three sacks this year, and Lane is very tough in the middle, knowing where the ball is and adjusting to it, leading the team with 95 tackles (flag pulls) followed by Natalie with 44 tackles."

"Our defense has been solid and on offense our receivers have really improved," Head Coach Lisa Waldo said. "Their hands have gotten a lot softer when catching the ball and that's been exciting to see because last year, they struggled a lot catching the ball. On defense we've gotten a lot better at breaking down, squaring up and pulling the flag. As coaches we feel a lot more comfortable with the team and we knew where our weaknesses were. To correct that, we brought on staff to build on what we knew we had and we're stronger and in better shape."

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