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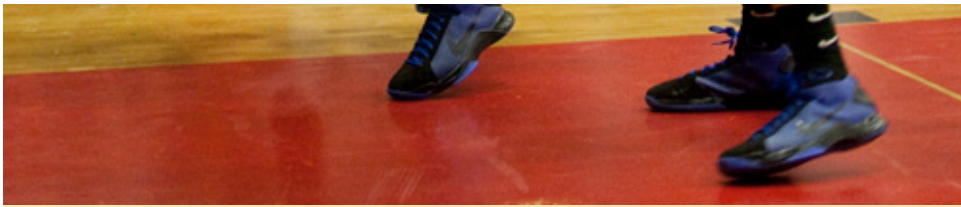
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Kellen Ito - Campo's New Varsity Blocking Force

By Conrad Bassett





Kellen Ito in action on January 30 Photo Doug Kohen

It feels a little like Kellen Ito, Campolindo's 6'5" starting center, came out of nowhere. Currently a junior, Ito didn't play Cougar basketball his freshman year. And he wasn't one of the four sophomores who played varsity last year, or even the fifth sophomore who moved up from junior varsity for last year's NCS playoffs.

Yet Ito leads the Cougars in several statistical categories including rebounds and blocks as well as having the second highest average per game. His 63 blocked shots (to-date) is one of the highest in the Bay Area and one of the reasons Campolindo's competitors sometimes have second thoughts about taking the ball inside.

So how did Kellen go from off the court to center court? He didn't. He's been honing basketball skills by playing on Asian basketball league courts, where his long-time team, the East Bay Rising Suns, competes. Others Kellen has competed with on the East Bay Rising Suns are starters at high schools like Albany and Head-Royce.

The Rising Suns are a newer generation of the same teams Kellen's father, Rick Ito, once played on. Teams that taught the elder Ito basketball fundamentals that took him from Berkeley high football player to a spot on the Cal State - Hayward (now Cal State - East Bay) basketball team, and such follow-on opportunities as overseas and San Francisco Pro-Am league play. Even now, Rick Ito plays in an adult off-shoot of the Rising Suns while also coaching and serving as the Rising Suns' current president.

Asian leagues have been around for decades, some as early as the 1930s, says Rick Ito. They're leagues known for grade-based play even through high school, and a focus on fundamentals. Many comprise teams that compete among local Asian churches, though there are also all-star travel leagues and tournaments.

One goal of Asian leagues, says Rick Ito, is to help prepare Asian players for high school ball, noting that he believes that 95% of the Asian players on current varsity teams played in the Asian leagues at some point. It's a statistic hard to verify but there's an impressive list of names and schools on www.risingsuns.net.

Teaching basketball fundamentals, says Ito, is only one of the reasons Asian leagues exist.

"The real focus is building cultural community, having fun together," says Rick Ito.

Rick Ito is just half of Kellen's genetic predisposition to basketball. There's also Kathy Halpin Ito, Kellen's mother, a top basketball player at both Livermore High School and at Cal State Hayward, who became an All-American in a second sport (track) at CSUH.

Transitioning to varsity, says Kellen, has been a lesson in responsibility.

"The biggest change... is how hard I have to work because much more is expected at this level by the coaches, the fans, and my teammates," says Kellen.

Campo head coach Matt Watson says he's been pleased with Kellen's play this year, noting that Kellen "is deceptively quick-- he does not look that quick but can beat you to the basket."

Against Maria Carillo High early in the season, Kellen had 22 points, nine rebounds and three blocks and held his own against the Pumas' 6'7" Justin Herold who is averaging 22 points and 15 rebounds per game. Against Las Lomas, Kellen dropped in 17 points on 8 of 9 shooting, had nine rebounds and sent five Knight shots back to where they started.

In the 90-87 four-overtime win over Dublin on February 12, Kellen corralled 14 rebounds, including nine offensive ones that he passed back out to other Cougars. He held the Dublin center, who eventually fouled out, to two points.

"Kellen is a double-double type of player which is very difficult for a first year varsity player," says Watson.

As for waiting to join Campo's basketball program until his sophomore year, Kellen said he'd been playing year-round basketball for nearly seven years at that point, and had begun to burn out. The time off reignited his interest in the sport. Says Kellen, "It allowed me to put (things) in perspective and realize how much I love basketball."

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