

Published February 20th, 2019

Playing Division I football

By Jon Kingdon



Robbie Rowell Photos Gint Federas



Nick Henderson



Sam Walker



Ethan Fischler



Peter Stehr



Ryan Regan



John Torchio

It's not unusual to see football players from Lamorinda schools play Division I football and in a few special cases go on to play professional football, such as Norm Van Brocklin (Acalanes), Drew Bennett and Ken Dorsey (Miramonte) and Giorgio Tavecchio (Campolindo).

However, this past year, there was an inordinate number of football players from the area that were on Division I rosters. Cal Berkeley had four players (Robbie Rowell-QB-Acalanes, Nick Henderson-LB-Acalanes, Sam Walker-LB-Miramonte and Ryan Regan-WR-Campolindo), Wisconsin (John Torchio-S-Campolindo), Syracuse (Ethan Fischler-WR-Miramonte) and Boston College (Peter Stehr-RB-Miramonte) all had one player from Lamorinda. These players were offered the opportunity to play Division I football as either a preferred walk-on (guaranteed a spot on the team's roster) or on a regular walk-on basis (having to earn a roster spot).

There is a substantial difference between playing Division I football and Divisions II and III football. The top players in the nation play at the Division I level and it features the biggest and fastest players who are recruited and offered full scholarships to attend these schools and play football. Whether offered a scholarship or choosing to walk-on for these teams, players deal with various issues that come into play in opting to participate at this level though it often comes down to a love of football and a desire to compete.

Stehr, who was not recruited by Boston College, took matters into his own hands: "I was recruited to lower level football programs but I wanted to try and play at a Division I school. When visiting Boston College, I went to the football office and showed my film to Brian White, the running backs coach, and he invited me to walk-on to the team."

Fischler had a coach that recommended him to the offensive coordinator at Syracuse and soon after "they offered me the opportunity to walk-on. I could have played at some other schools but I saw the chance to play at Syracuse as a challenge for myself and it was too good of a place to say no to."

Though recruited by Ivy League and other East Coast schools, Rowell accepted the challenge to play at California: "When Cal offered me a preferred walk-on, I accepted their offer. I liked the coaches along with the great facilities and I also like being so close to home."

Family also contributed to Henderson's decision to attend California: "My brother, Tommy, plays baseball at Cal and it's great to be close to him. I knew I wanted to continue playing football and I really love the Bay Area."

For Torchio, whose father played football at California, the decision to play at Wisconsin was influenced by the fact that his sister, Katharine, plays on their soccer

team: "She was a factor in my decision but I just really liked the atmosphere there. It was a hard choice between Cal and Wisconsin but my father's attitude was 'Whatever makes you happy.' It's an opportunity to live in a new area as I will eventually return to the Bay Area after college."

As anticipated by all, it was a major transition from high school to college football:

"In high school, I outweighed three of my linemen," said Rowell. "At Cal, I've had a lot of passes batted down by the defensive linemen. I've gone from being 'the guy' in high school to where I began as the fifth string quarterback. Unlike high school, I don't see wide open receivers anymore. I have to put the ball in the right spot. I usually saw the same cover-four defense in high school. At Cal I've seen 25 different looks on defense. Running the scout team, I improved a lot practicing against our defense which was one of the best in the country."

Henderson, who suffered a knee injury early in the season, played enough to appreciate the talent on the team: "The biggest adjustment for me was how big, fast and athletic the offensive linemen were, not to mention the speed of the running backs and the wide receivers." Henderson did acknowledge the treatment he received after his injury: "We have a great medical staff and they took care of all of my needs."

Stehr also had to adjust from being the star at Miramonte: "I went from being a starter on both offense and defense to becoming a scout team player, grinding out any reps I could get. The talent on the team is great, but it also has made me a better player."

Fischler agreed that "there is a real adjustment to playing at this level. Everything is a lot faster. The speed of the game was the biggest change for me."

Besides the physical effort expended, the mental demands placed on the players are far greater at the college level. Fischler said it was a real challenge initially: "The playbook was a big jump from high school. We run a no-huddle offense and the plays were sent in via hand signals from the sidelines. It was very difficult to know what to do and it took everyone a lot of practice to get it down."

The playbook was far more extensive for Rowell as a quarterback: "Our playbook is a couple of inches thick. I've gone from learning four protections to 28. It requires lot of learning and memorizing. It's still a work in progress. It's like learning to speak Spanish and then being thrown into the middle of Mexico City."

The time demands on a Division I football player are extensive. There are weight room workouts, position meetings and practice. The NCAA has rules that limit the amount of time a player is permitted to work out, attend meetings and practice with the team to 20 hours a week. This does not include any work that the players do on their own.

Even though the college season has ended, the demands on the players don't end there, says Fischler: "I still do weight room work in the morning five days a week and one day we run in the morning. This is all done prior to classes. I am working hard on getting bigger and stronger so that I can hold my own physically along with always working on my receiving skills."

Rowell saw great empathy from the upperclassmen for the freshmen. "All of them were really good guys and helpful. Jay Flores (senior QB) took me under his wing and helped me to adjust to college football."

Henderson, Fischler and Stehr all appreciated how accepting and encouraging the upperclassmen were for them and how they were always available for help.

With all of the demands made by the football team, academics are certainly not overlooked. Says Rowell: "They do a good job here of keeping you on top of academics. They provide any help that you would need. Everyone has four hours a week of mandatory tutoring and we take it very seriously. I was very fortunate to come from Acalanes where a lot of classes really prepared me for all of the writing required in my college classes. Many of the players were caught off guard by all of the writing that is required."

Henderson quickly learned the need for time management: "You definitely can't waste time. I get up at 5 a.m. but will find some time for myself to balance the football and academic demands."

"Initially, the academic demands were a lot more than in high school," said Fischler. "Miramonte did a great job in prepping me for college and I got used to it as the semester progressed."

Boston College would have their meetings and practice in the morning prior to the players' classes, which worked well for Stehr:

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"When done with football in the morning, I would have the rest of the day focusing on school and studying. It's a lot more work and time than high school but Miramonte really prepared me for balancing school and football."

As redshirt (non-playing) freshmen, the players were allowed to travel with the team to their school's bowl game, which for all was a very positive experience. California played in the Cheez-It Bowl in Phoenix, Syracuse played in the Camping World Bowl in Orlando, Wisconsin played Miami in the Pin Stripe Bowl in New York City and Boston College played Boise State in Dallas, though that game was canceled in the first quarter due to lightning.

On Christmas day, the California players went to the Salvation Army Center. "The whole week was a great

experience," says Rowell. "Going through the entire game experience with the team, getting a lot of gear and handing out food on Christmas day was great." It was Henderson's first time in Arizona and he particularly appreciated "all the work we did helping to feed the people on Christmas morning."

Stehr also spent his Christmas with the team in Dallas and enjoyed it on many levels despite the game being canceled: "There were lots of team events and it was a real bonding experience and it was great when the coaches and families went to Mass together."

Henderson, who anticipates majoring in economics or business, appreciates the environment at Cal: "It's a great community. Everybody loves everybody when you're an athlete or a student."

Rowell found the team to be really supportive: "I love the guys on the team. They were all very welcoming to me. There was not a lot of attitude or ego with the players."

Fischler was not fazed by the weather at Syracuse and, in fact, welcomed the change from the Bay Area: "It's been fun, actually. I like the different lifestyle and the opportunity to experience something new."?

Stehr also took very well to the change in lifestyle at Boston College: "It's a whole different culture. It's one for all and all for one. The Catholic Jesuit mindset is instilled into our schooling. The teachers are invested in the students' lives. I love the city but the weather was a big change and I got a lot of winter gear."

Even after leaving Lamorinda, players still maintain their connections. "I talk with Stehr all the time," says Fischler, "and I still keep up with what is going on at Miramonte through my sister, Ava."

Rowell likes the fact that there are players and other students from Acalanes, Campolindo and Miramonte: "It's good to have Lamorinda guys here and it helped with the transition to the campus."

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