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Sanjay Lal - From playing at Miramonte to coaching in the NFL

By Jon Kingdon



Sanjay Lal while coaching with the Dallas Cowboys. Photo provided

There are many ways to make it to the National Football League as a coach. The straight line is to be born here, learn the game here, play through high school and college and look for any opportunity you can find to get your foot in the door and take it from there.

For Sanjay Lal, a 1987 graduate of Miramonte High School, from the start of his life, playing football and eventually becoming a coach in the NFL, a straight line it wasn't: "I was born in London and my father (Vern) was working for Electronic Data Systems (EDS) which was a company owned by Ross Perot. He worked in the world division so our family would have to move to countries like Kuwait, Iran, and Mexico. As me and my sister and brother got older, he decided that we needed to get to the United States and settle down and we ended in Plano, Texas which was the headquarters for EDS. It was there where I was introduced to football as a seventh grader and ever since then I have been in love with the game."

Having lived in so many different countries has provided Lal with a perspective, seeing people more as individuals than as members of a particular group: "I would say that it made me have a clearer outlook that people are just people. You cannot label a race or a religion as they are this way, or they act that way because it is simply not true. In Kuwait, the majority of the population is Muslim, and they were very nice and gracious people so to take the crazy section of any religion, it's not right to portray the religion that way. It gave me a broader view of things. When it was pointed out to me that I am the only Indian coach in the NFL, I have never thought about that, so I'm wired a little differently that way."

As a rule, Lal would attend the American schools in the various countries his family was living in, which he found to be "a nurturing, friendly and welcoming type of environment." It was a far greater adjustment to attend a public high school in Plano, Texas as the new kid, Lal said: "It was all the typical stuff with the bullying. I learned that you either get stronger or you let it crumble you. I got stronger, but it was a cultural shock."

His sport growing up overseas was primarily soccer, "which I never liked." It was when he got to Texas that he quickly discovered a love of football: "My family did not even know what football was until I started playing it. We would play all the time. I started reading about all the players and just loved it. That I could catch really helped me with my teammates."

After making one final move to Orinda and Miramonte High School, Lal, then a sophomore, had another cultural adjustment: "I came to love Texas. Although the football cultures were far different from Plano to Miramonte, I really enjoyed playing at Miramonte because we passed the ball a lot more, which was fun since I got to catch a lot more balls."

What also made it more of a positive experience was his coach, Floyd Burnsed, now the head coach at Acalanes: "Floyd was a player's coach. I can only say good things about him. When he talked, we listened. He was a very fair coach and he wanted the best for our team and was willing to do anything for us."

Besides the football program, the classes at Miramonte laid a foundation for Lal: "The academics were excellent and the teachers were some of the best I ever had though at the time, I probably didn't appreciate them because they really made us work and it set me up really well for the academics at college."

As a wide receiver, one thing Lal did not lack for was confidence. After graduating from Miramonte, he chose to walk-on at UCLA where Troy Aikman was the team's quarterback: "I always saw myself playing major college football," Lal said. "I just knew that I could catch, and I loved the game and I felt everything else would come." After two years at UCLA, which included a victory in the 1989 Cotton Bowl, Lal transferred to the University of Washington and was on the team that won the national championship in 1990, graduating with a business degree.

Lal had tryouts with some NFL teams and even played in NFL Europe but injuries led him down a different path: "I was working at a promotions job for Budweiser which was a nighttime job and began coaching the

wide receivers and passing game at Miramonte for six years, five of which we won the NCS."

Lal worked with a number of top players such as Peter French who went on to play at San Jose State but it was one play by Phil Wagner, who is now a doctor, that ultimately led him to become a full-time coach: "I taught Phil how to run the post corner pattern and he ran it perfectly in the next game, scoring a touchdown. He then ran over to me and gave me a hug and said, 'That's all you, Coach.' I had never felt anything like that and I got chills."

After a short period at Los Medanos and Saint Mary's (which dropped the program soon after he was hired), it was Jeff Tedford, the head coach at UC Berkeley that gave Lal his first exposure to Division I football: "Jeff offered me a volunteer position which got my foot in the door and I was then hired as an analyst for two years," Lal said. "Lane Kiffin, the Raiders head coach, was looking for a quality control coach and Jeff recommended me for that position and I worked there from 2007-2011. I owe everything to Jeff because without him, none of these other events would have happened. I'm forever in his debt."

It was then on to the New York Jets (2012-2014), the Buffalo Bills (2015-2016), the Indianapolis Colts (2017), the Dallas Cowboys (2018-2019) and now with the Seattle Seahawks (2020).

Lal and his family could write their own travelogue, a project they will pass on as it's Lal's hope that Seattle will be their last move for a while: "I met my wife in Seattle and her parents still live here. My wife and daughters have been traveling with me to the various cities because we did not want to do the split family thing. (Seattle head coach) Pete Carroll always stayed in contact with me and this is a program that is not going anywhere, at least until Pete chooses to retire so it should give us a chance for stability."

Having worked with so many teams, Lal has been exposed to many of the top coaches in college and the NFL and has taken something from just about all of them.

Even though he worked with so many great football minds, it was watching 'Dancing With The Stars' that provided the foundation for his coaching philosophy, Lal said: "I'm a firm believer in muscle memory and in watching Dancing With the Stars and seeing how they would practice for four hours a day on their footwork, hitting the mark at the right time, I said to myself, that's just like football. It's choreography for my receivers. We practice it so many times they don't have to count their steps. Great scheme plays don't work if the routes don't look right. Playing a game on Sunday is like a Broadway show. We're all on the grand stage. That's what our games are. The whole world is watching."

With only a 16 game season, the NFL does not have the luxury to reduce the number of games played during the season the way baseball, basketball and hockey have done without taking an even greater financial hit, forfeiting the TV revenue that has become even more essential due to the coronavirus significantly reducing the number of fans that will be allowed in the stadiums.

The Seahawks, like every NFL team, are taking every precaution to avoid any outbreaks, Lal says: "We are getting tested every day. Even on off days, we have to come in and get tested. When we come to the facility, we first check in at a temporary trailer. We do the Q-tip swab test, and everyone is wearing a contact tracer bracelet. The bracelet will flash red when you get within six feet of someone and it will track everyone who you were in contact with and for how long. We're wearing masks the whole time, and everything is documented."

Yet it all comes back to Lamorinda for Lal: "My mom still lives in Orinda as does my sister and my brother lives in Lafayette. I like to get back to Lamorinda to visit my family but the COVID thing has messed that up. I think it's beautiful there and I own a piece of land in Briones where I will ultimately build a home."

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

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