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## Matai Bell - from Cougar to Cadet

By Jon Kingdon



Matai Bell Photo Gint Federas

Campolindo head football coach Kevin Macy claims that the success of his program down through the years was "to have kids that did not look like football players but played tough." However, when Antioch native, Matai Bell, (6'4" 320) who has been attending school in Moraga since junior high school, began to play football at Campolindo, Macy was happy to go against form, welcoming Bell, who also brought the requisite toughness.

Commuting back and forth from Antioch imbued Bell with a sense of discipline. When he began attending Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School, the wakeup calls for the Bell family began at the crack of dawn. "My mom would take me and my sisters to our schools in Moraga," Bell said. "With my school starting at 7:30, we would have to get up around 4:30 each morning."

Sports were an essential part of Bell's adolescence having played football, baseball, basketball, soccer, and track though he opted to focus on football and track (shot and discus) when he began high school. Campolindo proved to be very welcoming to Bell from day one. "I could not have asked for a better experience going into my freshman year," Bell said. "The seniors told us that we may have fun playing freshman football but once you play for Coach Macy, it's going to be different. Coach Macy would share stories with us about all the Campo alumni and how they had won the NCS championships. In my sophomore year, he told me how big I could be in the future for the offensive line."

Macy appreciated how special it was to have a player like Bell on the team. "Matai was always big, and we don't usually find players like that," Macy said. "He is very personable, athletic and a good student. He will probably play guard at West Point since they are primarily a running team, but he has the skills to play tackle at the next level. He even ran for a touchdown this year against Miramonte, high stepping his way in the end zone."

. Under the tutelage of offensive line coach Bill Leavy, Bell would quickly develop and by his senior year, he would be named to the first team for the following groups: All-Bay Area, West Coast Prep, Chronicle All-Metro and the Bay Area News Group. Bell was also ranked the No. 2 ranked offensive lineman by West Coast Preps. "Bill was hard on us, but he taught us the game by always focusing on the little things. He would know if a play was off immediately. We would hear him yelling at and correcting us from the sidelines."

After Leavy retired, his son Brian replaced him for Bell's senior year. "Brian really focused on getting us in shape over the summer. He really wanted us to pound the ball," Bell said. "Overall, I went through a lot, and I had a truly great experience playing for the Cougars."

It was more than just football for Bell at Campolindo. Bell was part of the group that started the Black Student Union his freshman year and was a leader of that group as well. Not surprisingly, Kevin Macy was his favorite teacher (math), but the rest of the staff ran a close second. "I loved just about all of the teachers at Campolindo," Bell said. "They took me in, and they knew when I was struggling and when I needed help to get to the next level."

As difficult as things were for everyone with the coronavirus, Bell learned to take things in stride. "After losing the last year and a half, I learned to enjoy the little things. Things were harder for me since I lived so far away so I learned to take everything with a grain of salt and to appreciate how fast things can be taken away from you."

Attending West Point has been a long-held dream for Bell. With grandparents from both sides of his family along with several other relatives having been part of the military, Bell wanted to follow in their footsteps. After taking an unofficial visit to West Point, all doubt was removed from his mind. "Once I saw how beautiful the campus was, hearing all the stories about the history of the Academy, seeing the bond between the cadets walking around and saluting each other, I just knew that this was the place I wanted to be. I have always watched the Army-Navy games and to actually have the opportunity to eventually play in that game, it was a no-brainer for me."

The application process was far more extensive than at other schools having to submit a medical form and taking a fitness test twice. Bell will be attending the West Point Prep School so he will not be using up a year of football eligibility but will be playing for the prep team against teams like the Naval Academy Prep Team.

"Attending the West Point Prep School is done to facilitate the academic success of these cadets," said Gene McIntyre, the Senior Associate Athletic Director for Recruiting at West Point. "This one-year program will ensure that Matai and the others will have the foundation to be successful at the academy."

According to Alex Lane, a football trainer at West Point, the players do not receive any special treatment. "They will go through what the other cadets have to go through - learning how to be a soldier, taking accountability and learning military bearing. Life as a cadet is nothing like their senior year in high school."

Along with the academic demands, there are physical demands that must be met by all the cadets when they show up on July 12. "Primarily, I'm preparing for all these miles I'm going to have to run when I get there," Bell said. "They already know that the big guys are not going to be able to run the times required for all the cadets, but I am still preparing myself to do the best that I can."

Bell, who will be majoring in International Business, understands that going from California to upstate New York will be a new experience. "I'm excited and a little scared since I've only lived in California," Bell said. "It's going to be totally different environment but I'm excited to see new things."

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