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Campo volleyball coaches Vuong and Chen - a tough pair to beat

By Jon Kingdon



David Chen and John Vuong Photo Jon Kingdon

When David Chen came to Campolindo as a coach of the boys' volleyball team, John Vuong was already a coach for the Cougars. When Vuong saw Chen working with the JV boys' team, his first thought was "this is a pretty good player." As Vuong related: "When I asked who this was, I was told that he had already graduated and I thought they meant high school and they said, 'No. College.'"

It was 2008 when Chen, who grew up in Moraga and graduated from Campolindo and UC Davis, began coaching at Campolindo. "When I arrived here it was in the spring and I knew that I wanted to help out with the team so the JV coach told me to come by his practice and they were just starting tryouts," Chen said. "John thought I was a transfer student, pointed at me and said, 'You need to be over here,' and that's how our paths first crossed."

Chen's first year with the team did not portend great success for his time with the Cougars. "Our first year was a sobering experience," Chen said. "Our record was 5-17 and one of those wins was off a disqualification by College Park who had played an ineligible player."

It was at that point when Chen and Vuong came together, coaching the boys' and girls' teams. "At that point, we just said, 'Let's coach,' and we've been together ever since. John and I were learning about each other's styles and realized that our philosophies and visions were very similar," Chen said. "The program had gone through so much turmoil and changes that were frustrating. Luckily, John had the vision and said that in a few years, these kids are going to be very good."

That prognostication proved to be a major understatement. From that point until last season, the Chen-Vuong coached boys' team had a composite record of 385-89, 100-13 in league play and 35-7 in the

playoffs and the Vuong-Chen girls' teams, starting in 2012 has a composite record of 250-84, 103-2 in league play and 33-15 in the playoffs. The composite record for both teams is 635-173 for a winning percentage of 79% along with NCS and NorCal championship and coach of the year awards.

It was a match made in heaven. "If either of us has to miss a practice, we feel confident with the other leading either the boys' or girls' teams," Vuong said. "It's one of those rare relationships in that everything we do and think in volleyball is alike."

Volleyball was Chen's only sport growing up. "I was a libero in high school and on the club team at UC Davis," Chen said. "I had a great experience there and in my junior year, we went to the nationals and won that year."

After a gap year and attending graduate school in Los Angeles, Chen, besides being a physical therapist, wanted to also be a high school volleyball coach. "It was 2004 and I had no idea how to get into it," Chen said. "So, I opened the phone book and began calling high schools and the only school that called me back was Taft High School and I ran with it until I moved back to the Bay Area in 2008."

Vuong, who grew up in Pasadena, was initially a basketball and soccer player but soon volleyball was his exclusive sport. "I was a setter though I had 'mad hops' back in the day," Vuong said. "When I went to Notre Dame de Namur College as a bio-chemistry major, they did not have a men's volleyball team so I helped out with the women's team and then went on to coach at Notre Dame Belmont High School. I just wanted to continue coaching."

Living on the peninsula and coaching at Belmont, Vuong's teams went against Campolindo a number of times. In 2005 Vuong and his family moved to Moraga and he became the girls JV coach in 2006, then

coaching the boys 2008 alongside Chen.

"After that I saw how David interacted with the boys' team, I asked [him] to take over the boys' team and I was then able to go back to coaching the girls' team," Vuong said.

Though Chen is listed as the boys' head coach and Vuong as the girls' head coach, with each listed as the other's assistant, Chen makes it clear that the titles don't matter to each of them. "The only reason we're listed as the boys' and girls' head coaches is so that we will get our stipend from the district but we're co-coaches," Chen said. "I definitely wouldn't be here without John."

From the first season when they were coaching together, Chen and Vuong won over the team. "We have a philosophy and a vision and part of it was having the kids prove their credibility because they had many years of coaching turnover," Chen said. "I was just another face and the kids wanted to know what we were going to offer them as the new coaches. It was a matter of gaining their trust and setting the team with our vision."

From the start, Chen took away a great deal from coaching with Vuong. "John had a really specific vision on how to run a team," Chen said. "He can identify exactly what needs to be done to maximize the improvement potential in our players. It's in his type of stability and guidance that's really helped me along to be where I am today. Whenever I get stuck and I can't figure something out, John's always the first one I turn to. I feel like we fill in different roles. John and I have similar demeanors and goals. If one of us is mad, the other one can play that other side as the peacemaker. That's why we get along and coach so well together without really having to speak about it."

For Vuong, it's a matter of the sum being greater than the whole of its parts. "David has more of a technical responsibility," Vuong said. "I will ask him what we should do for a practice, and he will come up with a drill and how to do things. I'm more overseeing the program and I delegate more of the technical responsibility to David so we don't do the same thing twice. It's a matter of dividing and conquer. That's the way that we complement and adapt to our inputs."

Character of the players on the boys' and girls' team is as important as ability, if not more so to Chen and Vuong. "We share the idea of team players and how their personality and attitude is primary to us," Vuong said. "If you don't have a good attitude along with poor body language, we're not going to have you on our team. It's a team sport so we want the players to play as a team and not as individuals."

Not surprisingly, the relationship between Chen and Vuong is as close off the court. "David has spent a lot of time with my kids since they were babies (now at Syracuse and USC) and has been like an uncle to them," Vuong said. "David's sister, mother and niece always hang out with me and my family. We always have something going on with each other."

Not to be overlooked is John's wife, Theresa. "Theresa has been an important part of John's life," Chen said. "She is behind the scenes but has been integral in allowing our coaching partnership to happen year after year."

In the end, what is their secret to success? According to Vuong, it comes down to two components. "First, you have athletes. No matter how great a coach you are, if you don't have that component, it's going to be a challenge. Secondly you need to have a system and discipline with players that believe in it. We tell the parents that we invest in our players because it's people that makes a team great. The key is for the players to follow our rules by being disciplined and using their skills because at the end of the day, it's them who are performing. It takes two to tango."

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