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## Acalanes Flag Football team finishes 2nd in North Coast Section

By Jon Kingdon



The Acalanes Flag Football team celebrates after defeating College Park to win the DAL and move on to the NCS tournament. Photo provided

Despite starting from scratch, the high school flag football season turned out to be surprisingly successful for the players, the coaches, and the team's supporters. Many of the teams were richly stocked with players and then there were teams like Acalanes that had a roster of 17 players, yet finished the season with a 13-5 record, winning the Diablo Athletic League championship over College Park 6-0, and finishing second in the North Coast Sectional championship game, losing to Clayton Valley 12-6 in overtime.

Initially it was a battle just to get a head coach for the team. When Victor Silva stepped up, he called a number of people like Mike Ivankovich, Joe Escobar, Steve Seidler, Erin Wong, and Tom Shoeinhair and asked them to just give him the time that they could, and they all served as assistant coaches. "They all had other team responsibilities and I could not have done it without them," Silva said. "My goal was to make sure that everyone was happy, and I just had a fantastic time."

The work of the staff was not lost on senior co-captain Jenna Steele. "It was a very extensive coaching staff that all had their own areas of expertise which allowed us to split up and do multiple drills at the same time, working within our individual positions," Steele said. "So, having all of them together really presented us with a wider picture of what we could learn and allowed us to go more in depth at each position."

Ivankovich, a longtime coach and first-time flag football coach spoke glowingly of the character of the girls on the team. "Having only 17 players was not quite enough for practice and games," said Ivankovich. "To make it to the NCS championship game, competing against large Division I schools, was an amazing accomplishment for such a small group of kids who had never been coached in football and were there because they wanted to be, and it was one of the best coaching experiences of my life."

Silva shared that sentiment: "If you would have told me after our first practice that we were going to make it to the NCS championship game, I would still be laughing."

The roster included 11 seniors led by Steele who jumped at the opportunity to join the team. "I was really excited to hear that Acalanes was starting a flag football team," Steele said. "My dad is a really big football fan, so I grew up watching football games. Five of the girls on our team this year were on my powderpuff team last year, but we were all really new to the sport and at that point, I definitely had not thought that we would have gotten as far in the playoffs as we did because it was a little rough at first."

Despite the lack of experience with football, most of the girls brought were athletes that were able to carry those skills over to the football field. "Our players are exceptional people that are very smart, and they absorbed everything," Ivankovich said. "There was a compounding effect of their acquisition of knowledge and understanding about football because they were able to handle more than one idea at a time, facilitated by their knowledge of defense acquired from playing basketball, lacrosse and soccer. Our girls made up for any lack of experience with just this incredible commitment and dedication to each other and the team and bringing such a high athletic IQ and just their overall intelligence."

Thus, the players were able to pick things up quickly. "We had to learn how to break down and pull flags, how to throw and catch the football and all of the super basic skills," Steele said. "By the end of the season, we're running our routes and making crazy catches. Our defense was very solid, and we learned how to read the quarterback's eyes and make interceptions. We also watched game film which our parents would shoot to see where we made mistakes and that was also very helpful."

As in many sports, the defense was ahead of the offense. "Our defense came together from the very beginning," Ivankovich said. "We had a good plan on defense but in the end, the plan is only as good as the players, and it was there from the very beginning. We only had three touchdowns scored on us three times all season along with three shutouts."

The defense was led by senior linebackers Steele, Ella Thomson, and Alana Brinkman. "The girls always struck me as so mature, and they were tough as hell in the way that they would play through things," Ivankovich said. "It's impossible for football to not be physical and our girls were physically and mentally

tough."

The coaches also went the extra mile: "Mike and Joe watched a ton of film on our opponents so in every game, we knew what the other team was going to do on offense and that is another reason why our defense was so good," Silva said.

It took a while for the offense to catch up to the defense, but it all came together soon enough. "We really pushed hard to improve our offense and installing the option really helped us become more dynamic," Ivankovich said. "We used two quarterbacks, seniors Addie Martin and Zoya Acuna who split time most of the season, but all the girls improved a lot on offense throughout the season. Kelly Todhunter, who played running back, was an explosive athlete who was a catalyst for a lot of things on our offense."

The co-captains of the team were Steele and Addie Martin. "It was basically the entire team, but Jenna was our key spokesperson," Ivankovich said. "She would take over the pregame coin toss, correct the officials and even yell at the man on the sidelines handling the down box if he was doing it wrong. She was a brilliant leader and someone who could multitask and be aware of what's going on everywhere on the field."

Steele shared the credit with her teammates: "We had a really good dynamic and we all got really close in such a short amount of time. I knew I was going to have fun because I was doing it with my friends, but I did not realize how much fun I would have just playing the game. Captaining a team of a sport that no one had played before, I had to learn how to involve everyone even though we were at all different stages of learning to play, and we all had very different personalities. I've played other sports that became so competitive that it was no longer fun but in playing flag football, I always genuinely enjoyed myself and I really loved the game."

There were several highlights during the season. "My favorite part of the season had to be our victory over Northgate in the Diablo Athletic League semifinals after having lost to them on our senior night and then defeating College Park in the championship game," Steele said. "It was a really rewarding moment because we really didn't think we were going to get there."

For Silva, it was how the team came together and making it to the championship game. "The girls all had different personalities but when the games started, we were one," Silva said. "The quality and the character of the girls that was the reason for our success. After the loss to Clayton Valley in overtime, some of the girls were crying but I didn't cry until I got home."

Ivankovich had a wide range of emotions after the final game. "I've never coached a team like this," Ivankovich said. "When people don't hold anything back and they make a total commitment into something with an unknown outcome, the risk is you may not get what you want. We got almost everything that we wanted to get out of it but after making it that far and coming up short, it's painful. I've been coaching for 30 years now so I know that you don't often get to have this kind of opportunity. I've never coached a team like this. The number of things we taught them was unprecedented for us and it's only matched by the heartache of not being able to coach our 11 seniors again. It was a lot to digest and accept."

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