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BY SHARI LOPATIN
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Tough Love

JIM RATTAY GAVE UP THE GLITZ AND GLORY OF HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL FAME TO HELP AN UNDERSERVED SCHOOL. THE RESULT: A FOOTBALL INTERVENTION.

JIM RATTAY'S BASEBALL CAP SHADOWS HALF HIS FACE, INCLUDING A PATCHED EYE, MIRRORING THE HARD LIFE he once knew. His yell, announcing free food, echoes through the noisy gym, and sweaty boys pile into a cluttered office to devour peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

These underprivileged teenagers are the next lives Rattay will try to change.

Rattay, 60, is the head football coach at Cesar Chavez High School in Laveen. Since he started a year ago, this slight-figured man with a heart of steel has become a beacon of hope for many students.

He has already turned a losing 3-7 record into a winning 7-3 record that culminated with the 2008 regional championship title. He coaches using former National Football League players on his staff and, within the past year, has helped several students earn college athletic scholarships.

But sitting in an empty classroom with a whistle hanging from his neck, Rattay recalls his tragic childhood, which gives him "street cred" among many of the kids he's helping today.

Left as an infant at an orphanage in Buffalo, New York, Rattay was an unplanned pregnancy right after high school in the late 1940s. His dad, kicked out of college for fathering a child, was originally on a baseball scholarship at University of Notre Dame and in training for the Cleveland Indians.

Rattay's parents married and returned to the orphanage within the year for their son. The young family moved around a lot and eventually wound up in a government housing project in downtown Cleveland. But his mother fell ill while she was pregnant with the couple's fifth child and died along with her unborn baby. Rattay was 6 years old at the time.

"I remember going to Mom's wake and seeing her in the casket," he says. "And shortly thereafter, my dad took us for a drive."

They drove to a forested area where Rattay, his two brothers and his sister played together for a while.

"And then he gathered all four of us and he told us, 'I'm sorry, I can't keep you and work at the same time, so I'm putting you into an orphanage,'" Rattay recalls. He wound up in a strict Catholic orphanage in Cleveland with 500 other kids. The nuns told him he'd amount to nothing.

Rattay spent seven years in that orphanage before transferring to a foster home during his eighth-grade year. Then at 17, he ran away. "I just got sick and tired of getting beat up," he says.

But through the anger he found a release, and his destiny. Rattay recalls Mr. Joe, the orphanage football coach who let the third-grader wear a helmet and follow him around during practice. That, he says, is where his love for football began.

"Sports saved my life," he says. "I wouldn't have graduated high school if it

"With winning, he's taught them to be humble. We've taught them it's not about color. It's about being good to each other."

— BILL PATTERSON, ASSISTANT COACH



Rattay works with assistant coaches Ed Saldana (center) and Bill Patterson (right) at Cesar Chavez High School.

weren't for football. It was the only thing I went to school for. It was the only thing meaningful in my life. It was the only thing that made sense to me."

Rattay earned his four-year degree in speech at the College of Wooster in Ohio, where he also played football. (His patched eye was the painful result of an errant pitch while playing baseball with friends in college.) At 21, he took his first post-college job as a speech instructor at Lake Catholic High School in Cleveland. That's where he coached his first football team as a volunteer freshman assistant.

"I fell in love with coaching football. I wanted to be such a good coach, I drove all my bad vices out that first year," says Rattay, who drank and smoked.

Today, Rattay's office oozes love. Plaques from former teams he coached adorn the walls. A block of wood carved with the words "Coach Rattay" rests on a filing cabinet against a corner wall. He has been married to his wife, Marcia, for 37 years, and one of their four children, Tim, is a free-agent quarterback in the NFL. His photo is pinned to Rattay's bulletin board.

Since he accepted his first high-school coaching job in Phoenix in 1986, Rattay has won several state championships: Mesa High took two state championships, Desert Vista took one, and Phoenix Christian took two

titles, all following Rattay's no-nonsense leadership.

In 2008, Cesar Chavez High School Principal Scott Gayman realized Rattay's potential for his school. That's when the coach accepted Gayman's offer and switched from Phoenix Christian, a well-funded private school, to Cesar Chavez, an underprivileged school. Gayman says most of his students are minorities: 68 percent are Hispanic and 19 percent are African-American.

"Jim is multi-talented, and bringing a coach with his caliber would provide an identity we wanted," Gayman says. "We want to transform our school into a college-going school."

Since Rattay started, the freshman football team's retention rate has almost doubled from 26 to 45 kids, ensuring these students remain in school. He has taught many students what it feels like to succeed with confidence and pride, not just win.

"Right now, we've got six kids who have signed college scholarships, and that's a big thing," says Bill Patterson, an assistant football coach at Cesar Chavez who's coached with Rattay since 1994.

One of them is Kirk Washington, 18. Both of his parents died while he was in high school. Despite those tragedies, he's leaving in August to attend Jamestown College in North Dakota on an athletic scholarship. He says it was Rattay who led the way.

"I didn't think I was good enough [to play in college] or that anyone would come out here to look at me," Washington says. But after the season ended, Rattay talked to him and others about how he could help them go to college. "That really got me thinking, 'Oh, maybe I could go to a four-year college,'" Washington says.

Rattay expects the same productivity from his Cesar Chavez athletes as he did from those at previous schools. Assistant coach Patterson says, "With winning, he's taught them to be humble. We've taught them it's not about color. It's about being good to each other."

At Cesar Chavez, Rattay helped build a state-of-the-art weight room using fundraising and donations. He and his coaches require all players to attend study hall once a week and only allow them to arrive late to practice with a note from a teacher or librarian.

"These kids know I care. They know I'm not just here to try to win football games, to use them," Rattay says. "I think the kids see there's something special going on, and they want to be a part of it."

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