

# When the game teaches you about life

Three Las Vegas Valley high school football teams are learning firsthand what it takes to overcome adversity



Leila Navidi

Clark High's Phillip Murray bows his head after Rancho High School scored a touchdown at the end of its game against Clark on Friday. Rancho won, 21-20.

By [Ron Kantowski](#)

Wed, Sep 10, 2008 (2 a.m.)

There's an old African proverb that states, "Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors."

If that's the case, Sir Francis Drake and Popeye must have played high school football. (That also would explain how Popeye got those massive forearms.)

On Friday I volunteered to cover the Rancho vs. Clark game for the Sun's Internet site, for three reasons. First, both schools were around when I got here in 1987, so I knew how to get there without directions from MapQuest. Second, both are inner-city schools, the sort of schools — and kids — for which I've always carried a torch. Third, both schools have experienced adversity, and people admire other people who overcome adversity.

Especially 16- and 17-year-old people who wear shoulder pads on warm Friday nights.

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Two years ago, football players at Rancho High practiced in a public park after their old football stadium was leveled to build a new high school and, eventually, a football stadium. The Rams practiced kicking field goals and extra points through a makeshift goal post made of PVC pipe. They shared the park with soccer players and semipro baseball players

and moms and their kids — and homeless men, who sometimes would drink from their water bottles.

Back in the day, Rancho won three consecutive state championships. But it has won none since 1988. For three years, it did not even play a home game.

Rancho has a new coach and new players, most of whom have never shared a water bottle with a guy sleeping under a cottonwood tree. But when the Rams got the ball back against Clark, trailing by a touchdown with 1:45 to play, the first thought I had was of watching Rancho run a power sweep as a woman walked a poodle and a dachshund in the vicinity of the 35-yard line of its makeshift practice field.

But darned if the Rams didn't march right down the field and score the winning touchdown and 2-point conversion with just 15 seconds left to play.

The shirtless guy with a nasty scar down the middle of his back, who was sitting on a picnic table as the Rams practiced power sweeps among poodles and dachshunds, wouldn't have believed it.

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Poor Clark.

How did Clark lose that game?

The Chargers have 17 seniors on this year's team, most of whom remember at least the latter part of an epic 42-game losing streak that finally ended last year, when the Chargers won three — three! — games.

That losing streak was terrible, but hardly tragic. Tragic was the drive-by shooting this summer that resulted in Chris Luscombe, Clark's best player two years ago, losing his life.

Many of this year's Chargers lined up alongside Luscombe and they are keeping his memory alive by wearing a No. 54 decal — his number — on the back of their helmets.

I was standing on the sideline when Clark took the lead against Rancho with two fourth-quarter touchdowns. Just about every kid wearing black was jumping up and down. But there was too much time. It's not that Clark expected to lose. It just did. Again.

Clark coach Don Willis isn't an amateur psychologist, but sometimes he has to play one at practice.

"We don't dwell on things like that," he said of the 42-game losing streak. "We don't want to dwell on Friday night."

But sometimes you do dwell. Sometimes, you can't help it.

Especially when the other team has the ball and there's still 1:45 to play.

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At least there will be another game for the Chargers, another chance to be football heroes.

While the Clark kids were suffering a devastating defeat, across town LaQuan Phillips, a Green Valley High linebacker, was suffering a devastating injury. He left the field on a gurney, paralyzed from the neck down. On Sunday, he had surgery to remove the pressure on his spinal cord. It went well. On Monday, Phillips could move his fingers, move his toes.

Doctors are cautious but optimistic he will continue to improve.

Phillips was injured in the second quarter. At halftime Matt Gerber, the Green Valley coach, didn't know what to tell his players. As a coach, he could tell them how to stop Centennial's running game, or make an adjustment to pick up a blitz. But this was something different.

So he just told his players the truth — that LaQuan was injured and it appeared serious. Kids are funny that way. They can deal with the truth more easily than with somebody protecting them from it.

Sometimes, in football as in life, it's not just about winning or losing.

Sometimes, it's about becoming a better sailor.

**Discussion: 2 comments so far...**

By [marie11191959](#)

9/10/08 at 8:30 a.m.

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Hi Ron! Geez I wish I knew you were at that game. We (all of Chris's family and friends) were at that game to cheer the Chargers on. It was touching to see the guys wearing the #54 decal on their helmets. It still doesn't cease to amaze me how many lives Christopher has touched. And you, you do a good job keeping his memory alive. Again, thank you for keeping the hope alive with these guys.

By [Ron Kantowski](#) (Staff)

9/10/08 at 11:15 a.m.

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Marie: I was the old guy with the knobby knees standing on the sidelines, trying to get out of the way when the players ran power sweeps.

Seriously, sorry I missed you, too. Take care and be strong -- I know you will.

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