

Once-struggling Latino kids get their game together with football

Five boys turned around their grades and their vision of the future through a local youth outreach called La Esperanza. Now they're following through on their love of football by joining the San Clemente High School freshman team.

By Fred Swegles, OC Register

The football program at San Clemente High School was in for a surprise when five Latino students – incoming freshmen – walked up together and said they'd like to play.

"You don't really ever see a group of Hispanic kids from San Clemente come together and actually come out for football," said Oscar Montecinos, one of the coaches of the school freshman team. "They came out as a group. There are groups of friends (among football players). But in a minority group, that's odd to see."



San Clemente High School's Mauro Gutierrez, Ernesto Carrasco, Gerardo Gomez, Francisco Romero and Raul Hurtado, from left, are part of the freshman football team.



Photos: Paul Bersebach, OC Register

But "these kids can play and their IQ is pretty high," Montecinos said. It wasn't just coincidence that the five went as a group. They are products of a San Clemente youth club called La Esperanza, which in Spanish means "hope."

Rose Velasquez, a community organizer with OC Human Relations, started the club in November 2009 as an outreach for Latino students who attend middle school and live near San Clemente's Las Palmas Elementary School in a neighborhood that is under a gang injunction.

"We went door to door ... trying to meet with parents to try to figure out what some of the issues and concerns of the Las Palmas neighborhood were," Velasquez said. "One of the things that came up was a tutoring program and that kids didn't have any activities. I noticed that the middle-school kids were just hanging out. We started a tutoring program."

As a volunteer, Velasquez began working Saturdays to teach a curriculum called Skills for Success, focusing on identity issues, self-esteem and setting goals. "One of the things they said was that they wanted to be football players," Velasquez said. "Because it's seen more as a Caucasian sport, not a Hispanic sport, and because their grades were so low, they didn't think that would ever happen. A couple of them would even laugh at me when I said, 'Envision yourself in a couple of years and you will be able to play football.'"

She discussed identity with the kids – what it means to be Mexican and what it means to be American. "None of these kids felt that they were American. I had a real problem with that," Velasquez said. "That's when I really had to intervene and work with the kids. They all went from F's, a bunch of tardiness and absences, and they went to no tardies, no absences and they raised their grades. Now we're looking at these kids with A's."

Ernesto Carrasco, who plays defensive nose guard, said, "They gave us some time and they gave us a place to study." Gerardo Gomez, an offensive left tackle, said: "I changed the people I used to hang out with, and my grades. It helped me a lot." Velasquez said the group is on the right path. "From Day 1, my promise was to see each one of them graduate high school and go to college," she said.

Maria Romero, mother of Francisco Romero, an offensive left guard, said in Spanish that she, her husband, Bonifacio, and their six children feel united as a family. "We are happy that he is playing American football," she said. "My other kids are in boxing and are keeping busy. We are thankful to Rose. When it started, I went to the meetings but I never thought all this would happen. I am proud of him." Montecinos said the five players are contributing to the team and he believes they eventually will play at the varsity level.

"I can relate to them because I grew up in San Clemente, born and raised," said Montecinos, a 1998 SCHS graduate. "I kind of have the same background ... immigrant parents not speaking English. So it's very inspiring to see that happening. They're all good students. They're great kids."

Velasquez said Mission Hospital, San Clemente Collaborative, the City Council and the schools have been supportive and that Finish Strong MMA, a local mixed martial arts gym, is providing a tutoring site as well as MMA training. "But in order to participate, they have to have good grades ... or at least they see that they are trying," Velasquez said.

Instructor Joe Calavitta said the gym has started a nonprofit, Fighters for the World, to combine mentoring, tutoring, help with self-esteem and conditioning for football. La Esperanza also aims to provide scholarships to families who can't afford fees for after-school activities "so these kids have something to do (other) than join the gang," Velasquez said. "I have upcoming freshmen next year that I've also been working with that are going to try out for the soccer team and football as well," she said.