

## Coach Brings NFL experience to El Molino High

May 27, 2005

The playing part ended for Michael Roan on national television, on a warm September Sunday night in Buffalo, New York, when a blindside collision with a Tennessee Titan teammate broke his leg and ripped apart his knee.

Five years later, in the sleepy Russian River town of Forestville, there is a buzz on campus as Roan conducts his first spring practice as head football coach of El Molino High School.

"I guess not many NFL guys coach high school," said Roan, whose three-week spring session ends Thursday. "I always said I'd go back where I remember it being the most fun."

Roan, who replaced departed coach Tony Saiz in January, enters the Sonoma County League ranks as one of the most accomplished athletes to coach in the Redwood Empire.

In high school in Iowa, he led his basketball team to the 1989 state championship and was named first-team all-state in both football and basketball. He became a four-year starter at tight end for the University of Wisconsin, where he was voted all-Big Ten his last two years, and was a key factor in Wisconsin's 1994 Rose Bowl victory over UCLA.

He was selected by the Houston Oilers (which moved to Tennessee in 1997) in the fourth round of the 1995 NFL draft and played six gritty seasons in the league, averaging 9 yards per reception, before finally conceding, in 2001, that his knee was not going to come all the way back.

"I'd had various surgeries and shoulder scopes, and I had a bulging disc in my neck," he said. "But my knees were golden until that one play."

Roan's unlikely emergence in the west county came about when he and his wife, Amber, an East Bay native, discovered the area while looking for a house with acreage. He is student-teaching at El Molino, and earlier this month completed his social studies credential coursework at the University of San Francisco.

"I'll tell you one thing," said Larry Brown, Roan's football coach at City High School in Iowa City. "Michael is probably the only first-year teacher out there that's a millionaire."

Roan played for several highly regarded coaches, including Barry Alvarez and Bill Callahan at Wisconsin, and Jeff Fisher with Houston/Tennessee, yet he singles out Brown and his City basketball coach Tim Linder as laying the foundation for his El Molino approach.

"Coach Brown placed importance on doing everything the right way, not only on the

field but around school and around town," he said. "Coach Linder was a players' coach, and he taught me how to compete. I still think of him today as a friend and leader."

Brown and Linder are now retired from coaching, but their memories of Roan as a developing 6-3, 220-pound teenage star are clear.

"When the ball got into Michael's hands inside, you got out of the way," Linder said.

"He raised our standard," Brown said. "Plus, he had a mean streak."

"When the game was over," Linder said, "it took him a long, long while to come back down to earth."

One thing Roan probably will not do at El Molino is use the movie "Hoosiers" as a motivational tool.

"Michael's junior year, we were on our way to Dubuque," Linder said. "It was a two-hour

trip, so I decided we'd watch 'Hoosiers' on the bus. We got to the game, and we got drilled, absolutely hammered."

After high school, Roan says, football became increasingly less a game and more a business. Even after he established himself in the NFL, the pressure to prove himself was unrelenting.

"When every single play in training camp, every year for six weeks, is being filmed and scrutinized, that will wear you out," he said. "During the season, the superstars could practice to get ready for the games, but for guys like me, every practice was just as intense as a game."

Still, he said, seeing his name flash across the ticker tape during the NFL draft remains one of the highlights of his life.

"Growing up, I'd watched all these guys play, and I couldn't imagine competing at that level," he said. "It all seemed so unreal to me."

One of his fondest memories is catching a game-winning touchdown pass in 1999 in the rain at Jacksonville, with the clock ticking down, to help sustain the Titans' run to the Super Bowl. Several weeks later, however, in the regular-season finale at Pittsburgh, things turned bittersweet. Roan hauled in a 24-yard touchdown pass, but on an ensuing kickoff, in the middle of a wedge, his head was snapped back.

"The next day at practice," he said, "a doctor comes running on the field telling me to stop. He had just read the MRI. A neck injury I'd already had, got worse. I missed the whole playoffs and Super Bowl."

Throughout his career, Roan squared off against some of the all-time great defensive ends, including Reggie White and Bruce Smith, yet he considers his toughest NFL opponent Jeff Lageman of the Jacksonville Jaguars.

"The superstar guys would look at you and decide you weren't always worth their best effort," said Roan. "Lageman would hit you

with everything he had, every play, all day long. He was so fundamentally sound. He was the player you wanted to be."

For a group of young men in Forestville, the player they want to be will be on their sideline on Friday nights this fall, trying to do things the right way, just like back in Iowa City.

-by Ted Gross

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