

HIGH SCHOOL

Desert Vista football father-son coaching duo teach each other a few things along the way

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Coaching high school football was a family affair at Desert Vista High School in Ahwatukee this season, with the junior varsity program coached by a father-son duo.

Chris Crowl, who has been coaching JV football at Desert Vista for 28 years and also heads the physical education department, was joined by his son, James Crowl, a Desert Vista graduate and his former player at the school.

For the Crowls, coaching side by side added a new dynamic to their lives, transforming not only their relationship but also their perspective on the game of football.

“Originally I thought that I wouldn’t want to do this long term,” James said. “But now after coaching, it’s really quite amazing because I realize that it’s become such a passion of mine. A big part of that is just seeing my dad have fun with it and how much enjoyment it brings to him.”

James Crowl attends Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, but arranged his schedule this fall so he could coach with his dad in Phoenix.

“He really wanted to come down and coach with me, so what he did was he set up his classes so he could take online classes this fall in order to be able to come out and coach with us,” Chris Crowl said. “James got a chance starting in the summer to come and start working with our football program.”

As a fitness and wellness major at NAU, James has gained extensive knowledge in coaching.

Chris coached James on the Thunder’s JV team several years back, and they eventually talked about the possibility of someday coaching together.

“We joked about it for a while when he was in high school and his first year of college, but then for it to actually come to fruition was unreal,” Chris said. “I didn't have a picture of what it could really be like simply because I just didn't think it was gonna happen.

“Then all he did to try to maneuver his classes, his internship, and do everything that he could to try to make this work, man. It's going to be something I remember for the rest of my life.”

Chris Crowl recalled how coaches influenced him when he was younger. He eventually received a scholarship to Mesa Community College, where he started as a student manager, and later attended Arizona State University.

“Coaching was my way to give back to those guys who made a big difference in my life,” Chris said. “I credit them with a lot of the success I've had.”

James said he has a defined role coaching with his father.

“I help out with the quarterbacks and the receivers while helping with calling the offense with my dad,” James said. “We're a tandem. He worked primarily with the offensive linemen and running backs and I'm more the receivers and quarterbacks kind of guy. Obviously he's the head guy and I follow his lead, but I also help out by calling the offensive play calls.”

James, who graduated from Desert Vista in 2020, said he has developed his own coaching style and ideas, but says he's continuing to learn.

“I didn't realize it as much as a player, but now that I'm coaching with him, you really begin to realize how amazing of a coach he is,” James said. “I saw it countless times throughout the season through the different games we were in and how he handled big-time situations.”

Coaching together has helped strengthen their relationship, as they spent more time together refining game plans and talking about how to help their players succeed.

Drawing inspiration from his father, James has made an effort to work with certain players in order to make the most out of their strengths.

“We found that one of our players specifically, he was a really good receiver who thrived most when he went up and attacked the ball,” James said. “When I saw this, I told the coaching staff and they trusted me, so we ran those types of plays for him.

Chris added, “He said, 'Hey dad, we need to run this play,' and sure enough, it not only gave us a first down, but it ended up giving us a touchdown. He asked us to throw basically a deep pass to him. And sure enough, the kid who made the play helped us change the momentum of the game, driving the ball down and scoring.”

Together, their dynamic is a special blend, with Chris bringing profound coaching knowledge and James offering a relatable connection with the kids having graduated from the school not too long ago.

“What he has brought has been just kind of a shot of fresh air,” Chris said. “He sees the social media side of kids and is able to interact with them and speak their language. For somebody who's been coaching a long time, I didn't grow up around that, but James did. An older guy has learned some new tricks and it's been really refreshing.”

James added, ““What I was doing was I got to know the kids and their strengths. I really tried to develop relationships with them, not only on the field, but in life. This led to the kids feeling comfortable to share their ideas and thoughts.”

The JV program feeds players into the Varsity program, which has struggled the past few years. Both the JV and Varsity teams had losing records this season but James hopes to help “reawaken the sleeping giant” that once was a top 6A program.

“A big passion and a big goal for us is just to get Desert Vista back on the map and get us going again,” James said. “What I grew up knowing and what my dad has been a part of for so long is winning. But most importantly, we want to help build a great football program, not only one that is good on the field, but also creates good young men.”

Chris added, ““Our record may not reflect it, but I know that what we've done with this group has really helped them move forward in the right direction and that's all that matters.”