

Boivin: Phoenix College football offers hope

AFTER A DECADE OF HEARTBREAK, PHOENIX COLLEGE FOOTBALL LOOKING TO
RISE FROM THE ASHES.

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Heartache is not uncommon for this program in recent years, one that has become known by some as Last Chance U, one that deals with the challenges often faced by inner-city schools.

Tough times

Established in 1920, Phoenix College has a proud history of athletic success. From the 1950s to early '70s, football coach [Shanty Hogan](#) guided his teams to a national title and three bowl games and placed more than 200 players into four-year programs. Softball coach Heinz Mueller, who has won eight national titles, was inducted into the Arizona Community College Athletic Conference Hall of Fame on Thursday.

But the last decade has been a tough one for football, with losses on and off the field. In 2012, head coach Land Jacobsen was murdered, the victim of a robbery attempt in his home.

In the summer, White, an offensive lineman who recently had turned his life around – posting all A's last spring after being suspended from the team because of academics – was found dead in his apartment by friends. The cause of death is unknown.

“And one of my good friends who was a receiver here (last year) got arrested and is in jail right now. He robbed an ATM,” said sophomore Jaeren Burch, a wide receiver out of Gilbert Perry High School. “It sucks not seeing players come back, but at the same time you’ve got to move forward.”

Since Cozzetto was hired in January 2015 and Pflugrad three months later, they estimate they have seen approximately 100 players come and go, half who quit and half who were cut.

They were determined to change the culture when they arrived, and that meant no tolerance for poor choices, poor attendance or poor work ethic. Being kicked off the team didn't sit well and some threatened Cozzetto. After filing restraining orders, he moved the desk in his office so his back was no longer visible through an open door. A few months later, he moved the office he shares with Pflugrad and assistant Herb Pierce to a more secure room.

Cozzetto takes it in stride, knowing his job comes with challenges. It has been an eye-opener for Pierce, who worked with Cozzetto at Washington.

PHOENIX COLLEGE: [Brown takes advantage of 2nd chance](http://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/college/2015/01/14/phoenix-college-guard-takes-advantage-nd-chance/21788499/)
(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/college/2015/01/14/phoenix-college-guard-takes-advantage-nd-chance/21788499/>)



Phoenix College sophomore Jaeren Burch on the football team's situation: "You've got to move forward."

(Photo: Phoenix College)

“I was shocked at what these kids have been through,” he said. “Kids that are homeless, kids that have to deal with all kinds of things.

“One of them recently had a bad practice and I tore into him. He started crying. His brother had got murdered in Chicago about a month ago and he couldn’t afford to go back to the funeral.”

Hope

The potential to help players’ futures is what fuels these three, whose shifts on campus typically last 13 hours. They carpool together every day.

“We have staff meetings in the HOV lane,” Pflugrad said.

They are not only measuring success by the team’s 5-2 record and early season victory over powerhouse Mesa Community College – Mesa returned the favor last weekend – but by the growth of players off the field and the progress of players from last season.

Londell Lee is one of the top receivers at Tennessee Martin. Defensive back Alex Jean Charles and linebacker Makana Fraser are at Texas El Paso. Nick Duckworth, who played at Notre Dame Prep and Ventura Community College before landing at Phoenix College, is a quarterback at Western Oregon.

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The coaching staff is a big reason Spencer Lewis, a 6-foot-5, 270-pound offensive lineman from Mesa Red Mountain, came here.

He fractured his tibia late in his senior season and bigger schools backed off recruiting him. He still received offers, including one from Division I Northern Colorado, but a visit there left him feeling it wasn’t the right fit.

A conversation with Howard Mudd, a former NFL offensive lineman and longtime coach, encouraged him to respond to Cozzetto’s courtship at Phoenix College.

“It was easily the best choice now looking back because they’re such great coaches,” Lewis said. “They are so connected and have so much experience and knowledge.”

“Our whole marketing tool is to be part of the journey,” Pflugrad said. “We’re a stop on the journey.”



The Phoenix College football practice field has a goal post the team made out of PVC pipe to save money.

(Photo: Tom Tingle/azcentral sports)

Second chance

That could be the case for Pflugrad, too. For these coaches, Phoenix College is also Last Chance U.

Pflugrad was on an impressive career path. The former wide receiver from Portland State spent 27 years as a college assistant, including six at ASU under Bruce Snyder.

He got his break in 2010 when he was named head coach at Montana and in two seasons, the Grizzlies went 18-7. In 2011, the team won the Big Sky Championship and Pflugrad was a semifinalist for the Eddie Robinson Award as the nation's top Football Championship Subdivision coach.

An abrupt and unexplained firing along with athletic director Jim O'Day came in March 2012, at a time when the university was under scrutiny for a series of sexual assaults – captured in Jon Krakauer's book "Missoula" – including several involving football players.

Pflugrad, who had known one of the accused, quarterback Jordan Johnson, for a while, took heat for describing him as a person of "tremendous moral fiber." Johnson was later acquitted. Running back Beau Donaldson pleaded guilty to sexual intercourse without consent and is serving time in prison.

MORE FROM BOVIN: [Philanthropy part of Paul Goldschmidt 2.0](http://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/mlb/diamondbacks/2016/10/04/paul-goldschmidt-philanthropy-diamondbacks-charity/91555028/)
(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/mlb/diamondbacks/2016/10/04/paul-goldschmidt-philanthropy-diamondbacks-charity/91555028/>)

A significant amount of support for Pflugrad followed the dismissal. University President Royce C. Engstrom, who let him go, wrote a recommendation letter that Pflugard could use for job interviews. It said the firing "was not the result of any specific impropriety or improper conduct by him. Because of a difficult situation and some unfortunate circumstances at the University, I made the decision that the program needed to go in an alternate direction."

Even an independent investigation by Montana Chief Justice Diane Barz did not point the finger at Pflugrad and said the university overall "did not have guidelines and procedures requiring reporting of information on the nature received."

Pflugrad was crushed by the firing,

He understood the nature of the business is for the head coach to be a fall guy and that matters of sexual assault often trigger an understandable overcautious response. But because the investigation found no wrong-doing, he was left feeling a bit of victim, too, especially after watching other coaches around the country dealing with similar issues keep their jobs.

He is grateful for the opportunity at Phoenix College. But he is ready for another chance, too, and the past year has included an interview for an assistant coaching position at a Pac-12 school and for a head coaching job at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Mont.



Former Red Mountain standout Spencer Lewis could have gone somewhere else, but chose to play at Phoenix College.

(Photo: Phoenix College)

One of Cozzetto's objectives is to help Pflugrad move on.

"He's one of the sharpest offensive minds in the country," he said. "He deserves it."

Feeling grateful

For Cozzetto, this job is a second chance, too.

His accomplished 34-year coaching career includes stops in the NFL and at ASU, where he helped develop quarterback Jake Plummer and some of the program's top offensive linemen.

He was Steve Sarkisian's line coach and run game coordinator at Washington in 2013 when he started feeling light-headed at a meeting. A CT scan resulted in a diagnosis of vertigo. He was coaching 24 hours later.

He never felt quite right the next few months, slowed by tiredness and a periodic escalating heart rate. While visiting his wife, Debbie, in Eugene, Ore., the following February, he suddenly didn't recognize her.

They rushed him to the hospital, where he was given a scary diagnosis: an aneurysm on his aorta.

MORE BOIVIN: Reality show chronicles Mike Bercovici's NFL journey
(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/heat-index/2016/10/01/boivin-reality-show-chronicles-mike-bercovicis-nfl-journey/91397578/>)

"'You have about 12 hours to live,' they told me," Cozzetto said.

A new valve was put in and he returned to work six months later.

"We got a second chance," he said.

His next job was with the Boston franchise of the Fall Experimental Football League. Its short life prompted a suggestion by Debbie that he apply for the Phoenix College opening.

And here he is.

"This place isn't just (Last Chance U) for the players," Pierce said. "Dan, Robin, and myself are truly grateful for the opportunity to be here to work to salvage our careers. But more importantly to really impact kids that need more help and direction than kids they have coached at any other level."

Embracing the opportunity

Cozzetto has assembled quite the staff. Although it's Cozzetto, Pflugrad and Pierce usually huddled up in the office, they are joined on the field by defensive coordinator Todd Williamson, a former head coach at Phoenix St. Mary's High who also provided academic support at ASU; former Sun Devils wide receiver Kerry Taylor; and former University of Washington defensive end Everrette Thompson.

And former NFL lineman Mark Garalczyk, who isn't only the defensive line coach but a "professional begger," Cozzetto said. He visits stores about to throw away food and gathers bagels and peanut butter so players have something to eat during the day.

"If we didn't do that, there would be a good couple dozen kids that wouldn't eat," Pierce said.

They are not only coaches but launderers, fundraisers, marketers and academic advisers. Pierce runs regular reports to make sure players are maintaining the necessary credits and grades.

And they aren't too proud to help the cause. Cozzetto and Pflugrad admit to "dumpster diving" at ASU when they heard the school was disposing of some old equipment.

Keeping their football field in shape is a challenge. The school's grounds staff does the best it can but sharing it with two high schools and the Phoenix College soccer team can be a challenge. They call the numerous lumps of crabgrass "IEDs."

They embraced their challenges. They have put up signs around the stadium that playfully say, "Welcome to the Dust Bowl. Warning: Air Quality Alert. Elevation: 1086 feet. Be alert for potholes and patches of crabgrass. Knees and ankles at risk."

Visiting teams that wear white to games often leave wearing brown.

For all the challenges, they love what they do, which is why they are concerned about the future of the football program. Maricopa Priorities, an initiative that takes an in-depth look at issues within the Maricopa Community College District, is currently performing a comprehensive review of all athletics programs in the district. Concern is growing that football could be cut.

BOVIN: [Charles Barkley's last-minute assist to help Craig Sager](http://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/heat-index/2016/09/01/charles-barkleys-last-minute-assist-help-craig-sager/89720068/)
(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/heat-index/2016/09/01/charles-barkleys-last-minute-assist-help-craig-sager/89720068/>)

It's impressive how much Phoenix College has managed to accomplish considering the district's financial struggles. Gov. [Doug Ducey](#) has eliminated all state funding for community colleges.

That's bad news for a state that has a limited amount of college football options outside the three Division I schools: ASU, Arizona and Northern Arizona. Outside of Division II Arizona Christian, there are no other choices beyond the junior college level.



Keeping the Phoenix College football team's field in shape is not easy. The school shares it with two high school teams and a soccer team.

(Photo: Tom Tingle/azcentral sports)



Coach Cozzetto takes equipment for his Phoenix College team at an ASU garbage dump.

(Photo: Dan Cozzetto)

Bad news for a school that does so much.

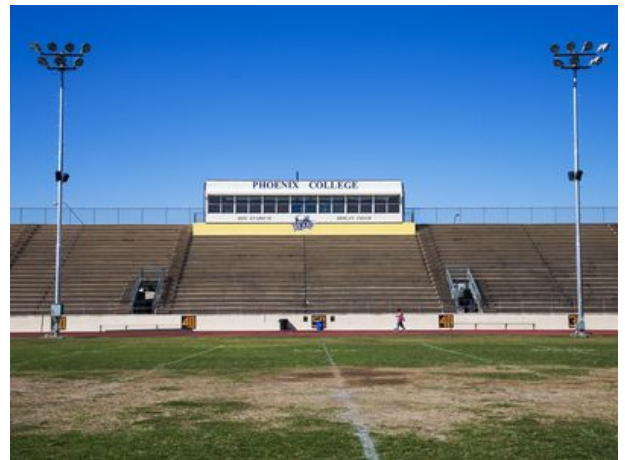
"I saw these kids when he first got here as a group of whipped dogs that nobody respected," Pierce said, "and now we have a group that will go out and compete with anybody and truly believe in themselves, not just on the football field but in life."

"I feel like Phoenix College deserves these coaches," Ezell said. "We really do things to do the best of our ability, to celebrate academic success, our athletics success and to develop student athletes as a whole."

Phoenix College football is about far more than, well, football.

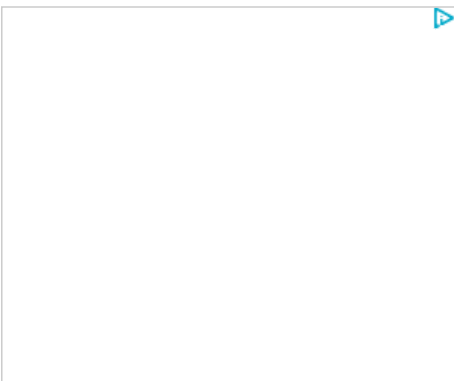
"We want to be a Phoenix school," Pflugrad said. "We want to be the program that rises from the ashes."

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"We want to be a Phoenix school," Phoenix College associate coach Robin Pflugrad said. "We want to be the program that rises from the ashes."

(Photo: Tom Tingle/azcentral sports)



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