THE MAKING OF MEN

CARLSBAD HIGH SCHOOL COACH THADD MACNEAL USES A LIFETIME OF FOOTBALL RELATIONSHIPS TO HELP HIS PLAYERS TAKE THEIR GAME TO THE NEXT LEVEL.

WRITTEN BY WENDY HINMAN

"COACH MAC IS SINGLEHANDEDLY THE REASON I GOT THE OPPORTUNITY TO PLAY AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL. I LEARNED SO MUCH ABOUT FOOTBALL AND BEING A MAN DURING MY SHORT TIME AT CARLSBAD. HE IS A LEADER OF MEN AND A GREAT HUMAN."

—ZACK MARSHALL

photo by Mabel Wallin

For all of football's ground and pound, smash-mouthed collisions, its culture is really all about relationships. Football has a network where you give before you take. Carlsbad High School Football Coach Thadd MacNeal 's stats are in the triple digits helping his players get college scholarships in 16 years at Carlsbad. But the groundwork, the relationship building, was laid way before his team lines up between the hashmarks.

"When someone says a scout is coming to a game, they really mean an assistant coach," MacNeal says. He has been meeting these coaches as friends from his time as an assistant coach at Capo Valley and Los Alamitos high schools, and as head coach at Lakewood High School. He got his Lakewood players 25 scholarships in the five years he was there. When he came home to Carlsbad, the gears for success were already turning. MacNeal was a CHS 1989 grad playing football under Rick Brown.

"Coach Mac was instrumental in helping me get college scholarships [offers]," says Tanner Wrisley. He was a CHS QB and the first to get a leg up from MacNeal in his Carlsbad era. "He's very well connected. College recruiters know he's putting his student athletes in front of a number of other colleges and I think that really helps put the pressure on schools to offer in a way that you might not get with most high school coaches." In Wrisley's senior year, Harvard and Yale were duking it out for him.

"I was at the Rose Bowl on Saturday," MacNeal says during our interview in October. One of his former players, Jalen Saint Paul, was playing for UCLA. And he'd been to Austin, Texas, the Saturday before. Even though he is a friend of Steve Sarkisian, head coach at the University of Texas, he was not sartorially supporting Burnt Orange Nation, but all red for Ohio State as he cheered on former Lancer QB-turned-Buckeye Julian Sayin.

"Coach Mac has meant a lot to me and my development, as a quarterback and as a person," Sayin says. "He believed in me early, pushed me every day and taught me how to prepare, lead and compete the right way. I wouldn't be in the position I'm in today without him." And what a position he is in! Coach Mac was at last year's Heisman Trophy ceremony when Sayin was in the running as a freshman.

Over at the Big House at the University of Michigan, Zack Marshall says, "Coach Mac is singlehandedly the reason I got the opportunity to play at the highest level. I learned so much about football and being a man during my short time at Carlsbad. He is a leader of men and a great human." Marshall is a TE, not the RB or the DE, and #83 if you're looking for him among the three Marshalls on Michigan's roster this year.

MacNeal has five criteria that have to be solid for him to promote his players to college recruiters: 1.Talent to showcase. 2. Academic rigor "to handle going to college." 3. Standing out on film in weight, speed, knee bend, production and play-making ability. 4. Part of a winning team. "We have to win to showcase." 5. Connections with coaches.

"I have a lot of phone numbers," MacNeal says of his contacts. Some of those assistant coaches who were scouting recruits when MacNeal was at Los Al or Lakewood are now head coaches. For Coach Mac, success is not just another winning season at Carlsbad; it's matchmaking his players with the right college coaches.

"His reputation in the recruiting world is one that shows so much love to his players," Marshall says. "And he always gives his players the best opportunity to be successful." MacNeal has eight Lancer alum currently playing in the Power 4 Conferences (ACC, SEC, Big 12, Big 10): Marshall (Michigan), Sayin (Ohio State), Saint Paul (UCLA), Nathan Allen (Arizona), Rocky Cummings (Texas), Kai Jacobwitz (Duke), Jude McLellan (Cal) and Luke Ferrelli (Ole Miss).

MacNeal is just as proud of his players in other conferences. Wrisley, who played in the Ivy League Conference, says, "He helped me get into Harvard, which not only set me up for my collegiate sports career, but my life beyond sports." MacNeal speaks glowingly of Mason Walsh and Thomas McCormick, who play for UC Davis. "They're not starters, but are on special teams. They give tremendous effort. It's how you make your mark." And how your hopes shape next season.

From a parent's perspective, Eve Marshall, Zack's mom, says of MacNeal, "Coach Mac is a man of integrity. He will always tell you the truth about your athlete, never lead you down a path of wasted time or money, and he genuinely cares about every athlete he works with. His word is his bond. He is truly one of the most honorable men I've ever met."

MacNeal coached his own boys at CHS with the same enthusiasm he gives other players. "Total blessing coaching my boys. Having that daily time with them was incredible. Seeing them grow and experience success and failure was great for their development as people." Both were on Open Division Championship teams (2022 and 2025) for Carlsbad. Marcus was a LB/RB at UCLA and Eli is a freshman QB at Cornell.

MacNeal is married to his high school sweetheart, Kelly. "She is the rock in my career and an incredible mother to our kids." They also have a daughter who went to music school in England. The family is glad to be back home in Carlsbad.

And returning to Carlsbad, it just wouldn't be the same without That Pizza Place (TPP). During MacNeal's own football time at CHS, wins and losses were celebrated or deconstructed over TPP pizza. Opening in 1978, TPP was the place for 40 years. When Mike Pfankuch and his family retired from the business during Covid, Carlsbad was happy for them but sad to lose a local mainstay.

Troy Guerra, John Chavez, Chris Chiarappa and MacNeal, childhood friends and high school teammates, reopened TPP after Covid. This gives MacNeal a place to cheer on and support his players; when he can't get to the Rose Bowl or Ohio State's Horseshoe, there are watch parties at TPP. "National attention brings people together," he says.

Business leader Zig Ziglar once said of the power of networking, "You can have everything in life you want if you will just help enough other people get what they want." Coach Mac is doing that for Carlsbad all day, every day and sometimes twice on Saturdays.



a


b



c d e

a) Julian Sayin graduated from being a Lancer leader to a Heisman-nominated Ohio State Buckeye. **b)** Tanner Wrisley was the first to be given a Coach Mac leg up in his Carlsbad era; football took Wrisley to an Ivy League Championship and Harvard degree. **c)** Eli MacNeal plays for the Cornell Big Red. **d)** The MacNeal family at the center of Swede Krcmar Field (from left): Eli, Kelly, Marcus, Coach Mac, Abigail and son-in-law Jamie. **e)** Zack Marshall charging yards as a Michigan Wolverine (photos courtesy of Thadd MacNeal).