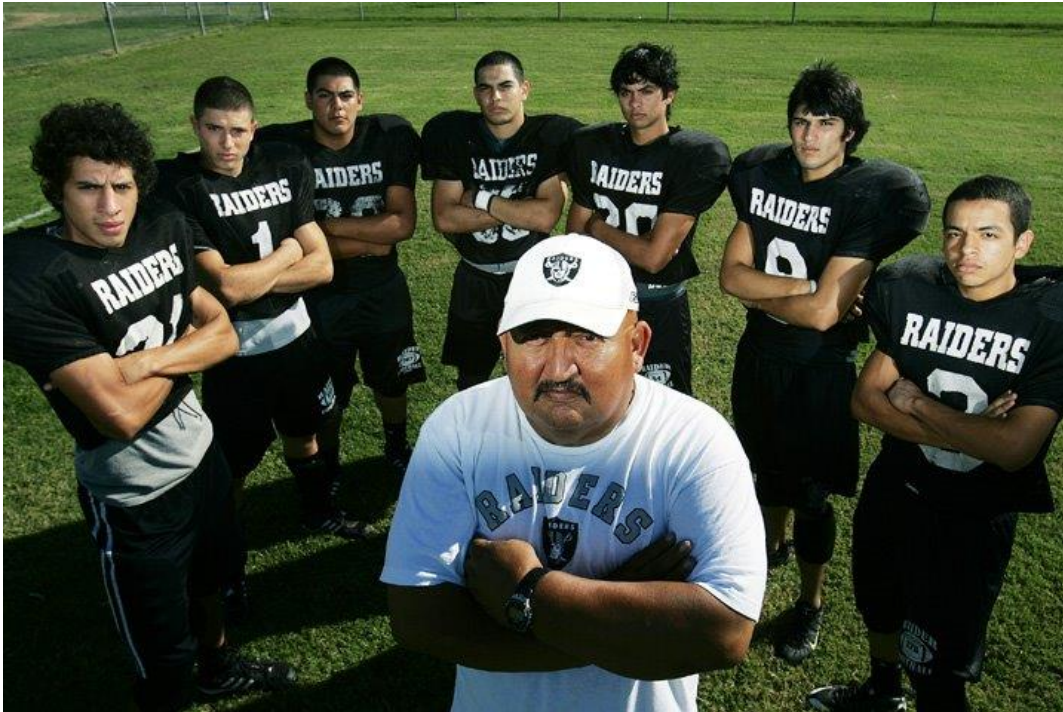




Freddy Hernandez: Breaking Down Barriers – A Hispanic Coaching Legend

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Freddy Hernandez during his time at PSJA North.

It was a nice day in Houston, and a very excited Walfredo Hernandez sat anxiously waiting to meet with the Superintendent in a school district he hoped to soon call home. Coach Hernandez had recently knocked it out of the park in the initial interview process and knew this was the last step to getting the top coaching job on campus. And he was right, the Superintendent came in offering his take on what had clearly been an impressive audition and should result in him becoming the new head coach. One problem, Walfredo, or Freddy as he is endearingly referred to, was told that they were not ready to hire one of his kind. What did that mean and why? He had done everything right and spent time at each stop preparing for this moment only to be dismissed. One might question his response, but Coach Hernandez had a great deal of respect for the man who had just passed on him. You see, Freddy was raised by a mother who made every sacrifice for him and his sister, a grandfather who always assured him he was as good as any other man, and a father who

held him to the highest standard. While he was aware of racial tensions and the divisions that existed, he had never allowed it to affect him or where he wanted to go in life. So why the respect you might ask? Coach Hernandez realized that there was a great value in honesty and, while he may not have liked the outcome, he did appreciate that the man had told him the truth. This did not change the fact that he thought it was wrong, but he was not going to allow this event to be a roadblock on his path to success. Freddy Hernandez was going to find someone who did want him and make the most of it!

As a young man, Coach Hernandez attended and played football at Corpus Christi Miller High School. At the time, CC Miller had gained notoriety as the first integrated school to win a UIL Championship and Head Coach Pete Ragus (later longtime Lubbock ISD Athletic Director '64-'86) was ready to keep things rolling for his Buccaneers. Freddy Jonas, an eventual defensive coordinator ('67-'76) and Head Coach ('77-'78) at Texas A&I, was his high

school Defensive Coordinator at CC Miller and was instrumental in planting the seeds that would become a lifetime of football and impacting lives for Freddy Hernandez. In 1963 as a junior, Freddy starred at noseguard. The Buccaneers went on another big run in a 4A Class that included eventual stars like Spring Branch's Chris Gilbert, San Antonio Lee's Linus Baer, and Brackenridge's Warren McVey. After knocking down several giants, CC Miller would go on to face Garland, the defending State Champs, in the 1963 state title game. During the week prior to the game, the CC Miller starting quarterback, Inez Perez, injured his hand but kept this a secret from virtually all his teammates and coaches. To make things worse, after a beautiful Friday afternoon, the Buccaneers awoke to a gameday full of snow and sleet, something these beach boys were not used to seeing. The circumstances and Garland's defense proved to be too much to overcome. CC Miller fell short losing to Garland 17-0. While this was not the Cinderella story they had all hoped for, Coach Hernandez and many of his teammates would later be inducted into the Hall of Honor at CC Miller High School as a result of the hard work and success they had in the fall of '63. Freddy and the Buccaneers struggled during his senior season, but New Mexico Highlands still had him at the top of their list.

Tragically, the Head Coach from Highlands, Jack Scofield, passed in an accident and John Levra took over the program. Coach Levra later went on to become the Head Football Coach at Stephen F. Austin University ('71-'74) and spent over twenty years in the NFL. Just another valuable individual being put into Freddy Hernandez' life, and yet this almost never happened. In the summer prior to his leaving for New Mexico Highlands, a coach from Texas A&I showed up at his door and almost changed everything. In this moment, Coach Hernandez credits his father for teaching him one of the greatest lessons of his life when he remembers him saying, "You gave your word, and you will honor it." When Freddy decided to officially honor his commitment, it meant what

became to be known as the "CC Brigade" would stay intact. Seven Corpus Christi Miller football players would enroll at Highlands that Fall, five of whom would stay the course and make a ton of memories together.

Some of the guys like Osuna, Sheldon, Pulido, Kelly, Valdez, and Gentry had made what became to be a very good decision to travel to Las Vegas, NM, and attend NMHU. Several All-American Honors later and after falling just short in the semifinals of both the '66 and '67 NAIA playoffs, Freddy was making a name for himself and soaking everything in from great players like Carl Garrett, eventual NFL Rookie of the Year, and Super Bowl XI winner, to guys like Lance VanZandt, who was the original creator of the Blackshirts at Nebraska. Carl Garrett arrived at NMHU after attending Fred Moore High School in Denton, TX, and he had always been the biggest and strongest guy on the team. Everything changed the afternoon these two decided to have a bench press contest as bystanders watched and Garrett almost dislocated his shoulder trying to match Freddy rep for rep. While Garrett was a superior athlete, Freddy lived in the weight room and would pass this love on to others one day.



A young Freddy Hernandez, #56 at NMHU.

In another fond memory, Freddy remembered being called out by Coach VanZandt when he said, "You must think you're pretty special!" Freddy responded with a smile knowing that, despite all the awards he and his teammates had collected, he was being

reminded to stay humble. It turned out he was special, so special in fact that he would be inducted into their Hall of Honor in 2014. More importantly, the sense of teamwork and camaraderie that was built at Highlands would stay with him throughout his coaching career, and he would continue to cherish the relationships he had built with such fine coaches and players during this time.

Freddy proposed to and married his high school sweetheart in the spring of his junior year. He traveled to Austin for the ceremony, then rode the bus back to Highlands that Monday. While he thought this might offer him a reprieve from attending Monday's practice, the coaching staff decided to postpone activities until he returned. When Freddy arrived back in town, he had to run straight onto the field. Something was off that day and shortly into practice, Freddy noticed that the local Sheriff had pulled up and began to talk to the coaching staff. Apparently, some of the guys on the team had decided to celebrate in his absence at the local icehouse and helped themselves to the freezer. It did not take long for the coaching staff to connect the dots and soon they were all told to report to the field for punishment. Freddy was dumbfounded that he would have to complete this exercise given the fact that he had been in Austin during the whole thing. Then, Coach Levra asked the question, "Would you have been with them if you weren't out of town?". Freddy knew the answer to that question and lined up with the rest of the team to pay his dues. This was one of many experiences that helped to shape the man, we would later come to know as Coach Hernandez.

After finishing his playing days at Highlands, Freddy hoped to play professional football. Fate had no such plan, and in 1968 he and his wife returned home to Corpus Christi where he started out in Nueces County as a Probation Officer. This job allowed him to take care of his growing family, but it did not take long before professional football became a reality. In 1969, another knock came on the door and Freddy was offered the opportunity to

play for a Mexican upstart called the Aztecas Dorados de Monterrey (Mexican Golden Aztecs), a team coached by Duncan McCauley and owned by Red McCombs. The team was slated to play in the Continental Football League, a league that hoped to soon rival the National Football League and American Football League. In their first and only year, Freddy and his teammates defeated the Chicago Owls in a preseason matchup, the first-ever United States-based league American football game played in Mexico. To this day, the Azteca Dorados de Monterrey is the only team from Mexico to play in a professional American football league. Despite the team's early success, the team folded. Freddy and some of his teammates were forced to find a new team and most of them finished the season with the West Texas Roughnecks.



The official jersey of the Aztecas Dorados in 1969.

Reality struck again and Freddy decided he would return home to take care of his family and now three kids. He continued to flirt with the idea of playing professionally, but he decided to pursue his teaching certificate and become a coach. Freddy had fallen short of completing enough credits while at New Mexico Highlands University, so he went back to school for another year. During the final semester, he took twenty-one hours while doubling as a construction worker to make ends meet. He remembers this as a very trying time, but one

which stayed with him lending to his revered work ethic. His work paid off and he was able to take a job as the head football coach of the local Corpus Christi Academy, a private Catholic school with some really good players. So good in fact, the team ended up advancing all the way to the State Championship where they were beaten by St. Pius. While the defeat was disappointing, the immediate taste of success in the coaching world made Freddy want more.

Coach Hernandez continued to hone his skills as a football coach and was eventually offered the opportunity to serve as the offensive line coach for Monterrey Tech, known locally as the Borregos Salvajes (Rams). This would prove to be a pivotal time for Freddy as these teams went on to win several titles and have great success. This success would later see him recognized as an inductee into their Salon de la Fama (Hall of Fame), something he is still very proud of today. Despite the success on the field, Coach Hernandez' home life was suffering, and he became estranged from his wife and family. Even worse, he was offered a new position with the Universidad de Nuevo Leon Tigres only to see his salary cut in half as inflation continued to mar the Mexican economy. Despite these unfortunate circumstances, Coach Hernandez would find a way to maintain strong relationships with his children, land on his feet again in Texas as a high school coach, and later remarry to have three additional children.

Texas has long been a hotbed for high school football, and we all know the four words should always be capitalized when said together, Texas High School Football. Being a Corpus native and knowing the opportunities that were available back home, Coach Hernandez returned to South Texas bouncing around several schools as an offensive line and linebacker's coach. Finally, he ended up at Alice High School with Bob Boyd, a man he would later lean on when determining how his own family life and coaching staffs would be structured. Coach Hernandez recalls that working with Coach Boyd was like working with John Wayne, and his wife Marihelen was always

working to involve everyone as part of their bigger football family. Coach Boyd shared that Freddy was a sparkplug, and the guy he would turn to at halftime to get the boys fired up! He remembers Coach Hernandez as always being the first to arrive and the last to leave, playing an instrumental role in the success of their teams. Freddy would eventually follow Bob Boyd to the Houston area where he spent ten years at Fort Bend Clements continuing to polish his craft. Coach Boyd would leave for the college ranks a few years into their stay at Clements, but he and Freddy continued to stay in touch and still remain close to this day. Each of these stops, along with his time at Clements, helped prepare him to make the jump into a big-time head coaching job. He was ready and so were they! Wait a minute, they weren't ready; or, were they?

Not long after being denied an opportunity for no other reason than the color of his skin, the phone rang again, and it was Denton Ryan. Coach Hernandez and his eventual lifelong friend, Bruce Gillespie, traveled up north for a visit and he was ultimately offered the opportunity to become their next head football. Another problem? Mrs. Hernandez had just started out a family business and things were really starting to click. She was not a fan of packing up the family for a big move up north, and Freddy would have to wait a little longer for a head coaching opportunity. Fortunately, Stephen F. Austin High School decided they wanted Freddy Hernandez and yes, he was going to make the most of it! Even better, a new principal was hired, someone he was very familiar with. Raul Torres came in and started to shake things up as improvements were immediately evident and Austin High was soon on a track for success. At the same time, the University of Houston saw several coaching changes and Coach Hernandez was fortunate to land a couple of these guys and bring them on board. Pure luck or pure genius? Either way, it worked out so well that he eventually would land another job in a similar position at Northbrook High School. Prior to his time at

Northbrook, Coach Hernandez played a significant role in creating the Inner-City Houston Coaches Association, a group that hosted monthly clinics for his staff and his neighboring schools. It did not go without notice that he was the only Hispanic head coach in the region, but the focus of many was predominantly on differences between White and Black. This was not to say that problems were abundant or that there were not plenty of great men from multiple backgrounds coaching in Houston, but issues did arise from time to time. During one such instance, two groups of coaches were having a “loud conversation” about their differences and Coach Hernandez happened to be in the same room. He listened to their arguments and felt no choice but to interject. Coach Hernandez stood up and said, “Hey, last time I checked I am the only Mexican in the room. So, if anyone has a problem, it should be me!” While this was a very serious statement at the time, he had appeared to lighten the mood and unify this group of men, if not for at least a moment. The issues remained, and they needed to be addressed. Freddy Hernandez could still hear his grandfather’s voice, “You can be whoever you want to be, and you are just as good as any other man”.

Coach Hernandez continued his winning ways at Northbrook High School where he was eventually reunited with Coach VanZandt. This was a huge addition to a staff that already included David O’Keefe, Keith Cripps, and Bruce Gillespie, along with many other great coaches. During this time, they tutored several athletes who would go on to play at the next level. This included the likes of Ajani Sanders who went on to star in the secondary at Notre Dame and later returned to Houston as a high school football coach. Again, success was not enough to overcome the pull of his family and many outside responsibilities. Coach Hernandez was forced to pack up his family and move back to the valley where he became the Defensive Coordinator for PSJA North.

PSJA North would eventually become a second home to Freddy, but he was still hungry

and wanted to chase the dream of being a head coach one more time. After a successful, but brief stint at Nikki Rowe High School as Defensive Coordinator, the phone started ringing again and Coach Hernandez soon became the new Head Coach Football Coach at La Joya High School. He convinced a young assistant by the name of Brian Clancy (Current Athletic Director, San Antonio ISD) to make the move with him, and the two were intent on building a contender. Four years into their stay at La Joya, Coach Hernandez received the devastating news that his daughter had been shot and killed in an apparent accident. This was a terrible loss for him and his family, as one can imagine, and Freddy decided to take a step back and become the defensive coordinator at Donna HS. Nevertheless, success continued to follow him with Donna winning the district title in his only year on staff. But football is bigger than wins and losses and while he was coaching his throwers later that year, he met Jesse. Jesse Balderas was a freshman in high school at PSJA North and had no real relationship with Coach Hernandez at the time. Jesse sat and observed the interaction between Coach Hernandez and his athletes. What really bothered Jesse was that one of the kids from Donna had beat him and he was completely convinced that the ole man had found a way to get a little more out of his guy and it made all the difference. Jesse was disappointed and tried to learn from spring competition, but he had no idea that Coach Hernandez would soon be giving those same insights and igniting that same fire in him during his next three years at PSJA North. Freddy Hernandez was announced as the PSJA North defensive coordinator the following year and created a culture described by Jesse as, “a blitz of intensity, tough love, and knowledge,” and an understanding that it was, “team, effort, and toughness,” that was needed to turn around football programs. The coaches and players at PSJA North went on to win 20 out of the next 24 games during Jesse Balderas’ last two seasons, and they eventually made it all the way to the quarterfinals at the Alamodome. Jesse went on to win a track and

field scholarship to attend Texas A&M Kingsville. The two never lost touch and Coach Hernandez is still his first call when facing tough decisions. In fact, they eventually were able to coach together at Edinburg Economedes after he graduated from college. Jesse is just one of many stories and lives touched by Coach Hernandez, but Jesse's experience stands out. Freddy Hernandez went on to make a few more coaching stops before hanging up his whistle, nonetheless, he continues to stay in touch with the coaching community and ex-players to this day. He recently lost his son and best friend, John Eric, to complications related to COVID-19 which has become his most recent obstacle to hurdle. However, as he has always seemed to do, he will bounce back up and continue to serve the athletes and coaches of South Texas.

Coach Hernandez has played cards at the same table as Bum Phillips, Darrell Royal, and Bear Bryant and built relationships with everyone from future NFL stars to those who make the biggest difference in the lives of our youth, local educators and coaches. His close friend Bruce Gillespie likes to remember that Coach Hernandez did it the right way. He remembers "6 am meetings all year long, every day", but also that they had fun and there was always an emphasis on family. In talking to Coach Hernandez, he wanted to remind others that one of the things he did best in his career was surround himself with "darn good coaches". Coach Hernandez is self-described as old-school, and his coaches used to do the drills and work the skills before they ever had the kids do them. Whatever they were called, the Raiders, the Coyotes, or the Jaguars, wherever he has been, all his kids were treated and loved the same. He always emphasized that his coaches had to care about the kids and work their tails off to make their players the best they could be while keeping in mind that the kids deserved to enjoy their experience and needed to develop a sense of pride in their school and community. Please take a moment to visit with, remember, or send a quick message to those who paved the way for

younger generations of minority coaches. They were the first to do it, and they deserve to be remembered and appreciated!



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