



Leading with Resilience: Building a Program in the COVID-19 Era

By Cirilo Ojeda

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My football story begins at Ingrando Park in Houston, TX where my Dad, Cirilo M. Ojeda, Sr., was coaching youth football for the Magnolia Park Sharks before I was born. That's where I learned about believing in myself, trusting my teammates, taking pride in our team, and playing with Corazón. I've been told from a very young age that my Dad and Uncle Victor had a dream to coach high school football and they could live their dream through me.

In 2005, I graduated from the University of Houston and was volunteering with my Dad coaching youth football. It was at that point that my wife, Angela, made a very convincing plea/demand that if I was going to coach football, then I should make it a career and there was no looking back. I started in junior high, moved my way up to high school coaching and teaching at my Alma Mater, and quickly earned an opportunity to be an Offensive Coordinator.

Fifteen years later with 33 Head Football Coach Applications, 13 Panel Interviews, 6 Finalist Interviews and 1 Offer, I earned my first opportunity to realize my goal and dream to be the Head Football Coach at Sharpstown High School. It was just the beginning for my family. We changed from blue and white to green and gold and were ready to start working. I was on campus four days the week before spring break, and we started maxing out the players to start an off-season. Then within a blink of an eye, it all came to a screeching halt. We were told to take everything with us just in case we didn't come back from spring break so we could work from home. There was no amount of experience or preparation for a global pandemic available for what was to come to build a new

program. Established programs had a system for communication, call logs, and relationships already in place to keep going, but we had to figure out a way to virtually field a team, install all 3 phases, and teach the principles of the program.

Every great program has a quality vision, mission, and goals. The plan was to establish this to the few student athletes that were just introduced to their new Head Coach. The key was utilizing the relationships established with the existing coaching staff. When we left campus indefinitely, we soon found ourselves on a very extended spring break where students were not acclimated to being logged in to their single sign on to check e-mails, check Microsoft Teams chat messages, check group messages, and having no established SportsYou or accurate contact list. It was a blank slate and an opportunity to really find out who truly wanted to build the foundation of the program. We quickly recognized our leaders, and we slowly grew over the summer from 8 football players to about 29. We tried doing things virtually with HUDL installation videos that were recorded in my driveway and virtual team meetings to cover character development and the new offense and defense. We made the best of the situation and ensured that, if and when the call was made to return, we would have a team and we were ready to compete.

September 8, 2020 became the start date where being a Head Football Coach felt real and will forever be a date to remember. Paperwork, participation, and preparation became the focus, and it all started to come together with lots of COVID-19 protocols and procedures. We knew the season was going to happen, but it was

hanging on by a thread with looming potential outbreaks, shutdowns, and forfeits. Protocols were above everything else, and we soon realized that the 2020 season was about safely playing football in the middle of a pandemic which meant winning and losing was a byproduct of being allowed in the locker room and on the field. Leadership with buy-in and some luck allowed us to play our whole season without having to skip a game because of strict protocols and a great job by our opponents. The dust settled on the 2020 COVID season and we made it through every game, broke the previous losing streak of 21 games, improved as a program, and were able to lay the foundation for the future.

The spring of 2021 has been a restart to off-season, we have been focused on finding our student athletes within our enrollment, and we are up to 42 football players who want to participate and be part of our growth. This group, along with our incoming freshmen, could be something special in the making. In a little over a year, we have been able to fundraise close to \$40,000, and it shows the investment from our community, stakeholders, family, and friends. We will unveil new uniforms in 2021 and be able to purchase much needed equipment for the players and program. We are working hard, and our student athletes are believing in what we do. Principal Daniel DeLeon and our wonderful faculty and staff have been very supportive to help us build a high performing program. The future is bright at Sharpstown High School and we are only getting started. Go Apollos!!! #BTR



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To be continued...