

# SUCCESS AT RIO LINDA

*Editor's Note:* I did a clinic for Coach Dillon last year. I promised the team if they could turn things around, we would write their success story in the journal. The team and coaches worked very hard and remained faithful to their goals. The fruits of their labor were many. The Rio Linda success story is presented to inspire and motivate all others especially those teams who are in a similar situation.



Rio Linda football had the biggest turn-around of the season!



Coach Shepard spotting All-League Tackle Darrin Shieur on a 505 Dead Lift at a BFS Clinic!

**By Don Dillon, Head FB Coach**  
Rio Linda High School, California

In 1982 I was the offensive line coach at Cordova High School. We were 12 and 1, losing our last game in the section championship. Cordova High School is one of the top football programs in the state of California. Across town was the high school that represented the other side of football in the Sacramento area. Rio Linda High School was looking for a new football coach after two seasons without a win and one of the longest losing streaks in the state (23 games). Since the school opened 23 years ago, the football program has never won our football championship.

The school is located in the tiny rural community of Rio Linda, just 20 minutes north of downtown Sacramento.

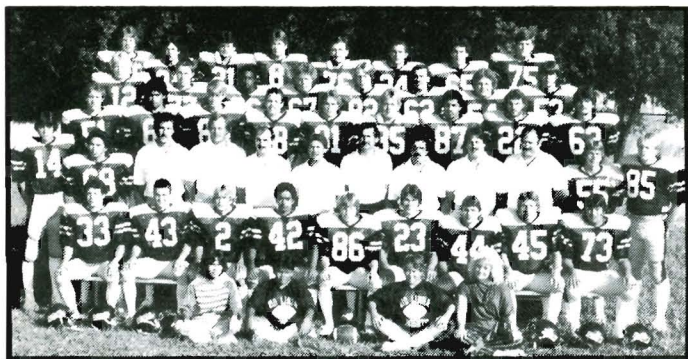
The school administration and booster club are well known for being active in support of the athletic program. They had just finished a five year project on the football stadium, making it one of our best facilities in the area.

When I accepted the job, I could not believe the state of the football program. I found it ironic that the community had worked so hard to build a beautiful stadium to house a terrible team. We were everybody's "Homecoming game."

All of the better athletes on campus wanted to stay in the other programs which were having success. The basketball team won their league last year and played in the Northern California Championship Tournament in Oakland three years ago. The students, the faculty and the community just put up with football until basketball season arrived.

As long as I live, I will always have the utmost respect for the young men and assistant coaches who took on the challenge that first year. They literally had to withstand ridicule. I knew early on that I needed every athlete in the school, and I needed them as strong as they could be. To get them out for football and work toward those strength goals, I needed to develop some quick pride in the football program. This was done by raising money, going to the principal and booster club and showing them that everything about "Rio Linda Knight" football must be first class. Whether I was or not, I had to get the students, the faculty, and community to believe that I was a first class coach and would not settle for less. I tripled the size of the coaching staff to nine on the varsity and four on the junior varsity by bringing in community members and former college players from the local university. They were committed and willing to split the coaching stipends. I made up for the lower pay by providing them with everything they needed from practice and game day clothing to all their expenses to clinics. No staff in the area was better outfitted from hats, jackets, sweaters, sweats, shorts, etc. Instead of two people coming out to practice wearing whatever each day, there was a staff hitting the field properly dressed in the school colors. The players were also given first class practice gear and nothing was to be worn on the field in practice or on game day which was not in our school colors, black and gold, and okayed by me. We dressed and acted with pride and each player knew that his position coach had goals and a job to do.

We sold enough ads to the local merchants to print a 40-page game day program. With the extra money from the program, we bought player-of-the-week sweaters and our now annual "Knight Football Award" which is a gold letterman's jacket. I got the local Lions Club to put on our post season banquet which has been a sell-out since. We had a poster done with the team picture and action shots and had one in every merchant's window. We started using N.F.L. leather footballs, and players were addressed by their first name and coaches were always addressed as "coach." Everything I could think of to make the players and coaches develop some early pride and start feeling good about themselves was put into effect. I said right up front, "Men, if you don't feel like a winner, you won't do



Rio Linda High School 1984



Coach Shepard with this year's Player of the Year Award Winner, Bobby Rogers.

**"The Work Goes On,  
The Cause Endures,  
The Hope Still Lives and  
The Dream Shall Never Die."**

*Anonymous, England 1800's*

what it takes to be one!"

My next challenge was to demand commitment and discipline. I had to wait until I had them believing football was becoming something special at Rio Linda. I got the players and the coaches to understand that in a situation in which we had at Rio Linda, there were two kinds of people. Those who like to jump onto the "Band Wagon" and those who like to build it. I had them believing that when the "Band Wagon" was done, it was going to be something special, and they would be surprised by who and how many would want to jump on board. Players in the past few years were disrespectful and uncommitted. They did not understand that winning and work are one in the same. I instituted my Lake Tahoe Nevada philosophy. It is simply based on the concept that the more you bet, the more it hurts to lose. Rio Linda football players were not used to betting with large amounts. There was no off season weight training or summer program. Missing practice to go hunting was also common. Losing was not a problem for them because they had only made a two

dollar bet. I made the players and the coaches accountable. I would not accept "I can't" from a coach or player. We were all asked to look inside for answers rather than make excuses or blame others. In effect, we each made a commitment to take pride in our contribution to the team. I worked the players and coaches very hard. I wanted them to believe they were capable of doing things mentally and physically which were far beyond their original personal expectations.

Our third game during my first season at Rio Linda was lost 8 to 7 after leading the first three and one half quarters. I knew we were on our way when the entire team cried all the way home on the bus. We were no longer making two dollar bets. The weekly pressure kept building, our losing streak was up to 28 games. Our win came the eighth game of the season. Our tailback had 228 yards and made prep of the week. We finally made the sports page for positive reasons. The players finally had the bet pay off. I was so happy for them.

By now, the booster club had filled the weight room with most of my requests. The players had the hardware and the will to work and carry our momentum into next season. All we needed was the proper direction in the weight room. I scheduled Dr. Shepard to put on a "Bigger, Faster, Stronger Clinic." I knew how to motivate the players with regard to football, but I wanted to be assured of the same intensity in the off season in the weight room. The Clinic was fantastic. I opened it up to all of the athletes on campus and made sure I invited the basketball and baseball players.

Dr. Shepard covered everything. It was a coaching clinic for me and my coaches. When it was over, the players saw the weights as tools which they now know how to use. The Munchi concept Dr. Shepard talked about was outstanding. It is so important for us all to understand that large goals only come by setting and meeting many little ones. Many myths were dealt with about weight training. I now have a weight room full of basketball and baseball players, soon to be football players. Proper technique and safety were well covered and that made me more confident. Dr. Shepard demonstrated quickness drills which I also incorporated into our program. The dead lift phase at the end astonished the kids. They had no idea how strong some of our players were already. The clinic springboarded us into spring and summer. Football players were beginning to look like football players. Other students and faculty members would comment to me on how big so and so was getting. You could see their confidence developing. Soon, I was approached by a couple of basketball players. The foundation was set for a total attitude change about football at Rio Linda High.

This past season, the only negative marks on our record were a tie to the previous year's co-champion, a loss to this year's champion, and a down-to-the-wire 14 to 10 loss which kept us from making the playoffs. Our tailback made offensive player of the year in our league and our quarterback, right guard, right tackle, and flanker made first team all league on offense. On defense, we had a first team defensive tackle and second team members were our strong safety and outside linebacker. We were acknowledged by the major area newspaper as the biggest turn-around of the season. Next year, we hope to not only be winners, but champions!