

History lesson: Unbeaten Overfelt knows all about 1998

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Twenty years after program's only CCS football title, East San Jose school striving to duplicate feat

Overfelt High School football head coach Carlo Maningo talks to his players before the team's game against Gunderson in San Jose, Calif., on Friday, Sept. 28, 2018. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News Group)

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SAN JOSE — Overfelt's football team is embracing history, welcoming the past with open arms. It understands that 1998 is a talking point — the elephant in the room, as one player described it — as the undefeated Royals win game after game.

Back in the spring, coach Carlo Maningo gathered his players in the East San Jose school's gymnasium and pointed to the banner, the one that honors the program's most accomplished team.

"I told them it's going to take a lot of sacrifice, a lot of hard work to hang one of those up here," Maningo said. "The kids bought into it. When they see it and that it's been done here at Overfelt, they feel like we're the group that can do it."

Twenty years ago, a team led by stars like running back Larry Morris and 24-year-old wiz-kid coach Joe Cattolico won the school's only Central Coast Section football championship, a dream season culminated by a victory over Wilcox in the final.

This year's team — a talented bunch that includes Morris' son Laron and standouts like quarterback Ulysses Reyes and running back Ulyses Alvarado — has similar dreams.

"Every great team chases something," said Maningo, a 1995 Overfelt graduate whose younger brother, Joseph, played on the championship team. "We're chasing that '98 team."

The team from two decades ago set the achievement bar toward the heavens. It finished tied for second in the Blossom Valley Athletic League's top division — the Mount Hamilton — and then beat Santa Clara 35-7 and Serra 34-30 to reach the CCS Division II final.

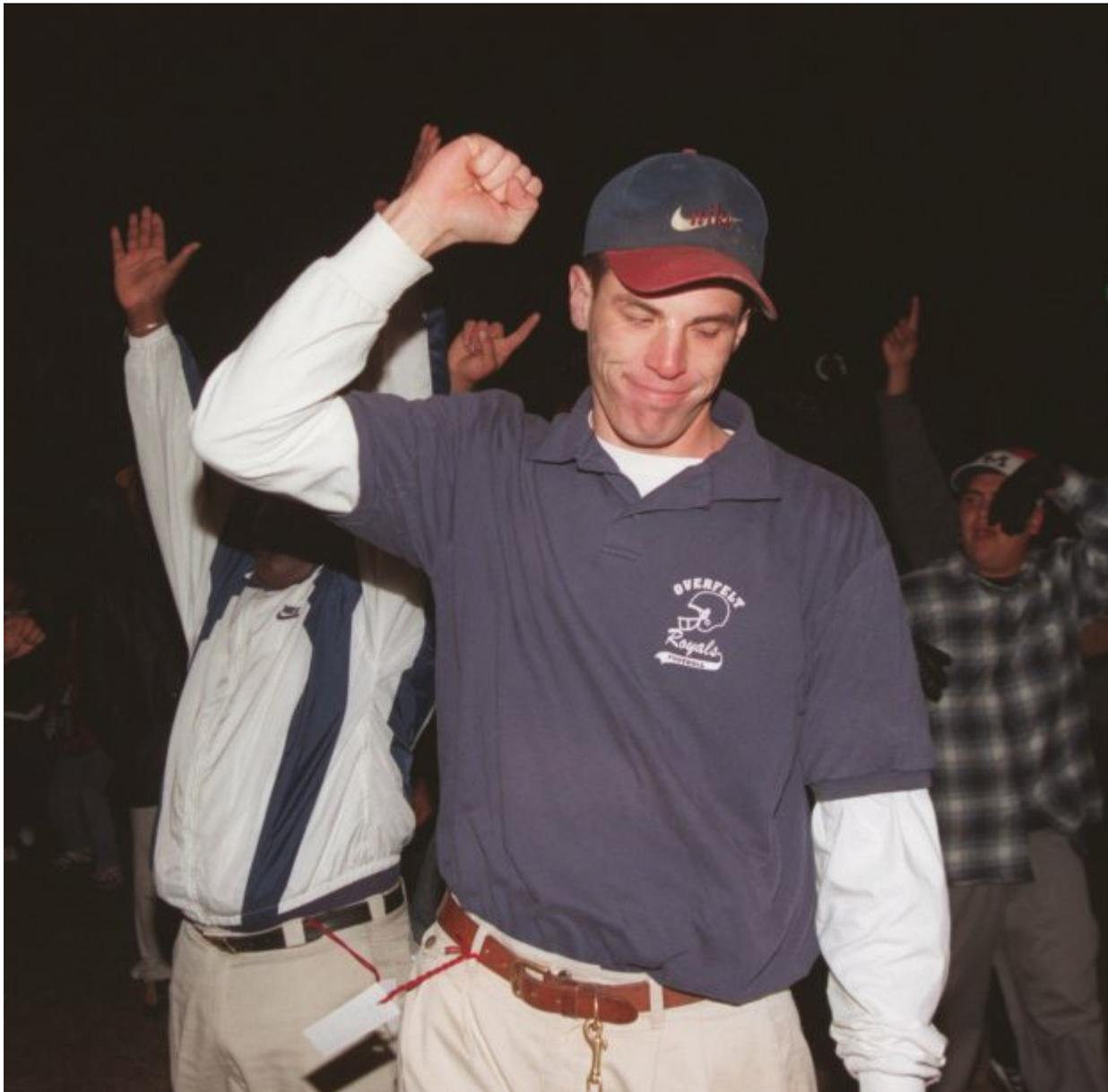
With Morris overcoming body cramps that sidelined him through the third quarter, Overfelt scored two fourth-quarter touchdowns to topple Wilcox 28-14 on Dec. 5, 1998, a stunning turnaround for a program that went 1-9 two years earlier.

Overfelt finished 11-2 in 1998, its second of three seasons under Cattolico. It has not come close to reaching that level of success since then.

This season is the first since 2003 that Overfelt has not played in the lowest of the BVAL's three divisions. The Royals are 5-0 overall and 2-0 in the middle division, the Santa Teresa, heading into their game Friday night at Branham.

Last week, on homecoming, Overfelt crushed Gunderson 50-0. A week earlier, the Royals defeated Silver Creek 32-14.

"I feel like the work we've put in is paying off," lineman Gilbert Bustamante said. "We're a young team that's hungry."



Overfelt coach Joe Cattolico, 24, celebrates his team's 28-14 win over Wilcox in the CCS Division II final on Dec. 5, 1998 at Cupertino High. Richard Wisdom/staff file photo

Before Maningo took over at Overfelt five years ago, he called Joe Cattolico for his thoughts. Cattolico, son of former Los Gatos coach Butch Cattolico, left for Independence after the 1999 season and now is a longtime fixture in the Sacramento area, currently the head coach at Sheldon.

“It’s awesome that they’re undefeated,” Cattolico said Tuesday. “I know Carlo. He does a great job. And I know some of the other guys who are coaching there. It’s kind of a neat deal that they have some kids with family connections to some of the kids who were on our team.”

Cattolico remembered that his players shared a camaraderie that began even before they arrived at Overfelt.

“At the risk of sounding overly nostalgic,” he said, “we were really representative of something we don’t see a lot of anymore, which is a group of kids who grew up together and live in the same neighborhood and all go to the neighborhood high school and win the section. One of the things that sticks with me is that school had a lot of tradition and a lot of pride and a lot of staff members and family who had been there for a long time.”

On the field, the '98 team stuck together and did what it took to reach the mountaintop.

Maningo has brought a structure to Overfelt that is similar to Cattolico’s, exhorting hard work, accountability and a team-first mentality as the hallmarks for success.

“This seed was planted five years ago when we got here,” Maningo said. “It was just about an attitude adjustment, the way the kids looked at hard work. The alumni come back, guys who played for me three years ago. They say, ‘Man, Coach, your team is balling out.’ I say, ‘No, this was planted during your years. You guys set the example of coming to work.’”

For this season’s team, the hard work started long before the first practice. Maningo put the players through a summer boot camp at FNS Training Center in Santa Clara, toughening and conditioning them for the challenges ahead.

He and his players believe those long hours have made a difference in the team’s tightest games, tilting the scoreboard in the Royals’ favor.

“That locked us in for the season,” Alvarado said. “We were just used to a lot of work and a lot of blood, sweat and tears, all that pain. Now we come to the football field, we feel like we know what the pain is like, and we know how to deal with it.”

If all great seasons need a lift off, Overfelt certainly got one in its opener.

The Royals weren’t given much of a chance when they traveled to Piedmont Hills, a longtime presence in the BVAL’s top division, but returned home with a 28-27 victory after a botched snap on a late field-goal attempt clinched the outcome.

“That really boosted the team morale,” receiver Alan Plascencia said. “It opened some eyes — and it opened our eyes — how special this season could be for us.”

The results aren't the only thing special about this season.

For Tristan Maningo, a junior fullback and linebacker, it's an opportunity to play for his dad and follow in the family's footsteps.

Before each home game, Tristan walks in the gym and looks at the championship banner.

"It really inspires me personally to want to experience the stuff that they have," Tristan said. "Our coaching staff and we always say, 'Take it day by day, game by game.' That's really important for us, to not get too big-headed, to really be humble about our wins and the work we put in."



Overfelt High alum Larry Morris and son ,Laron Morris (26), stand on the field after the football team's 50-0 win over Gunderson in San Jose, Calif., on Friday, Sept. 28, 2018. Larry Morris was a star running back on the school's 1998 CCS championship team. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News Group)

For Laron Morris and his dad, the season is a family affair every Friday.

Twenty years ago, Larry Morris paced the sideline in the third quarter of the CCS final, praying that the cramping that kept him off the field would subside. He went on to score the decisive touchdown, finishing with 100 rushing yards.

Now, Laron runs the ball for Overfelt. He had 117 yards and two touchdowns in 15 carries on homecoming.

“He’s been telling me all about it since I was young,” Laron said. “Telling me about his friends, how he used to push cars to work out every day. I feel like if my dad can achieve it, we can achieve it.”

The ultimate goal is still in the distance, not quite in focus, but the picture is less hazy than it has been for some time.

“It’s a special group,” Carlo Maningo said. “They’re really close. On a weekend, I can have 30 guys at my house. Instead of out in the streets hanging out, they’re at my house because my son plays on the team. They like being around each other.”