

A football king named Cole

Former YHS football player Cole Popovich finds success as a Fresno State Bulldog

By [Joan M. Kays](#)

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A thoughtful Cole Popovich knew, as he put on his No. 62 Fresno State jersey this season, the man that had sparked his interest in football would not be in the stands for him.

His stepfather, Eli Rivas, died this summer after a lingering illness.

The expectation of the games both had hoped to share, vanished when Rivas' time ran out.

However, sometimes adversity and disappointment build character and determination.

When Popovich took the field at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum on Saturday evening, Nov. 19, he also knew he would have four special fans rooting hard for him and his teammates.

His brother Justin of Ontario, his brother-in-law, an uncle and a friend would be using his team tickets.

This personal cheering section planned to watch 16th-ranked FSU's attempt to break the 32-game winning streak that the season-long No. 1-ranked University of Southern California's gridiron forces collected during the past three years.

The only previous USC-CSUF meeting occurred in 1992, when Quarterback Trent Dilfer and team defeated the Trojans 24-7 at the Freedom Bowl.

Win or lose, Popovich, at offensive tackle, intended to play against SC with gusto, as he always does.

His mother, Mountain Area resident Linda Rivas, said that his interest in football began when his stepfather encouraged the boy at about age 11 or 12.

Linda, now widowed twice, lost Cole's father when Cole was only 3 and one-half, an early age to be without a dad.

She remarried and his stepfather, fond of football, started coaching the boy, whose siblings — a brother and a sister — are older.

She said, "Cole really started growing at about 10. He always played on the line, even in youth football, down south. We lived in Southern California then."

The family moved here. His mother continued, "In (Yosemite) high school, they wanted him to play on the varsity as a freshman, but we wanted him to be with his own age group instead."

Popovich continued to be a standout during his years at Yosemite High when he played varsity



Mountain Area resident Cole Popovich is making noise as a Bulldog lineman this year on the Fresno State football team and has both his family and the community supporting him.

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football.

"Eli was a big influence on him, and coach (Aaron) Eames," his mother said.

"Cole started lifting weights and training."

His coach also mentioned the weights. Eames said, "(Cole) is the best football player I've ever coached ... in 20 years. He's very athletic for his size. Not many kids that big are that athletic."

Coach Eames also called him "a very nice kid, good-natured."

Linda said, "Cole went to two football (summer) camps, in June, at Fresno State and met coach Pat Hill. He loves coach Hill."

Her voice showed pride. "He was the first Yosemite High School student to get a full-ride (athletic scholarship).

Popovich played in about three FSU football games in 2004 before another challenge came his way.

This obstacle was an injured shoulder, which sidelined him last season.

He underwent shoulder surgery and was allowed to "red-shirt."

New England Patriots' rookie offensive guard, Logan Mankins of Catheys Valley, played alongside Popovich. He has called him "a good player."

Hard work and he are not strangers.

"He did lots of rehab," recalled his mother.

"Pat Hill said he had very good testimony for 'the boys' (teammates) about coming back" from such an injury.

Eli Rivas had hoped to survive and watch his stepson play for another season, but cancer claimed him in August before he could realize that dream.

"That was hard for Cole," Linda said. "I didn't go to Hawaii to see the (Fresno State) game; it was too soon afterward.

"There is a new offensive line coach, from U.C.L.A., Coach Weber. Cole has great respect for him and Pat Hill."

Now a college sophomore, Popovich has been studying required subjects — electives later on — at Fresno State.

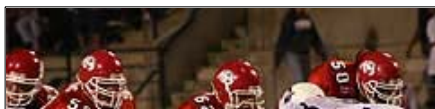
"He wants to be a coach and a history teacher," his mother said. "He likes history."

On the field a large part of the time because of the potent FSU offense, Linda commented that sometimes, at only 19, "He says he's tired and thinks he can't go on," but then he gets renewed energy.

She had praise for his coach herself.

"Pat Hill stresses getting an education. He does multiplication on a board to show (odds) about becoming a pro.

"Cole has had a lot of support from his family. He definitely wants to be a pro. Of course, I want him to," but she also said she hoped for no serious injuries as his career progresses.



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Lineman Cole Popovich, a former Yosemite High School football player, is contributing as a starter for Fresno State University.

David Richards



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