

Football rookies of the year

Seniors learn that it is never too late to pick up a new sport



Gene Ang | El Estoque

ROOKIE Senior Akhil Raju runs in a football practice on Nov 6. Raju was among a few seniors chose to join the team this year.

by **Christine Chang** and
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Hunched over a rumpled sheet of paper during first period, senior Kevin Nguyen traces his finger over the cluster of chicken scratches and crudely drawn shapes as if cramming desperately for a test. But that sheet of paper has nothing to do with the government. It's a sheet of formational diagrams that Nguyen keeps in his binder as his guide to understanding the game of football.

Many would argue that football's complexities, with its numerous game plans, earn it a reputation as one of the most strategically detailed sports. Nguyen is one of the few players willing to take on football for the first time as a senior. Since all seniors are automatically placed on the varsity team, new players face a steep learning curve as they master the many tactics involved in football.

"A lot of it is building up technique. It's hard being compared to guys who've been playing since sixth grade," Nguyen said.

All through his first three years of high school, Nguyen felt that his small physique would not add to his value on the

football team. With intense weight training throughout his sophomore and junior years, Nguyen gained 30 pounds and finally felt confident enough to join the team.

But the mechanics of football aren't just about being buff and brawny. Senior Akhil Raju realized in his first year of football this season. The game comes with the mental effort of logically mapping out field plays and formations. Having run cross country for his first three years of high school, Raju finds this to be the major difference between the two sports.

"In cross country, you just run," Raju said. "But in football, the game is very intellectual because you have to learn a lot of plays."

Years of experience built up throughout the seasons give four-year players on the team a boost. But Raju took on football for the first time this year not because he was a believer of newbie's luck.

"I knew if I didn't join it would stay in the back of my head, like, 'What if I had joined the football team?' Because I know I won't have that chance in college," Raju said.

From an instructor's standpoint, Coach Jeff Mueller acknowledges the often overwhelming challenge seniors face as first-time varsity players. Mueller says that half

a season may pass before the new players really understand the intricacies of the game and are thoroughly qualified to play. For many of the beginners that means putting in extra time to catch up on fundamentals that veterans have honed over the course of four years.

"It's physically demanding especially for [a new player] because their body isn't used to the pounding over 14 weeks," Mueller said. "Then there's the mental aspect of it. You have to think the whole time you're playing this if-then statements."

Thus Mueller imparts more merit on those who join football as freshmen and sophomores, continuing the sport throughout their high school career.

"I'd really like to have everybody for all four years so they can contribute the whole time," Mueller said. "If I've got enough kids, I'm not going to [allow new seniors to join] since football is a huge commitment. Some kids don't understand. They think they can just come out to practice and play."

Nonetheless, football still attracts senior newcomers who are up for taking on a grueling season of punts, tackles, and touchdowns.