

Santa Barbara DAILY SOUND

**THURSDAY,
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TODAY'S WEATHER



AM Fog,
PM Sun
HIGH: 63°

Bishop Diego athletics gets facelift

BY COLBY FRAZIER
DAILY SOUND STAFF WRITER

Cardinal red dominated the Bishop Diego High School weight room yesterday, where dozens of community members and parents joined the entire student body in celebrating a revamp and rededication of the athletic training facility.

Part of a four-year project to upgrade athletic facilities on campus, the \$112,000 facelift includes brand new equipment, flooring, mirrors and a paint job. But some things did not change.

"We especially remember today the souls of Roberto Najera, Jr., and Dane Erik Schmidt," Patrick Torrellas said during an opening prayer.

Both Bishop Diego students and football players, the two young men had been heading to a recruiting meeting at a Virginia university in 1991 when a car accident took their lives.

Their families and friends rallied to raise funds and build the Roberto Najera Jr. and Dane Erik Schmidt Memorial Weight Room the following year.

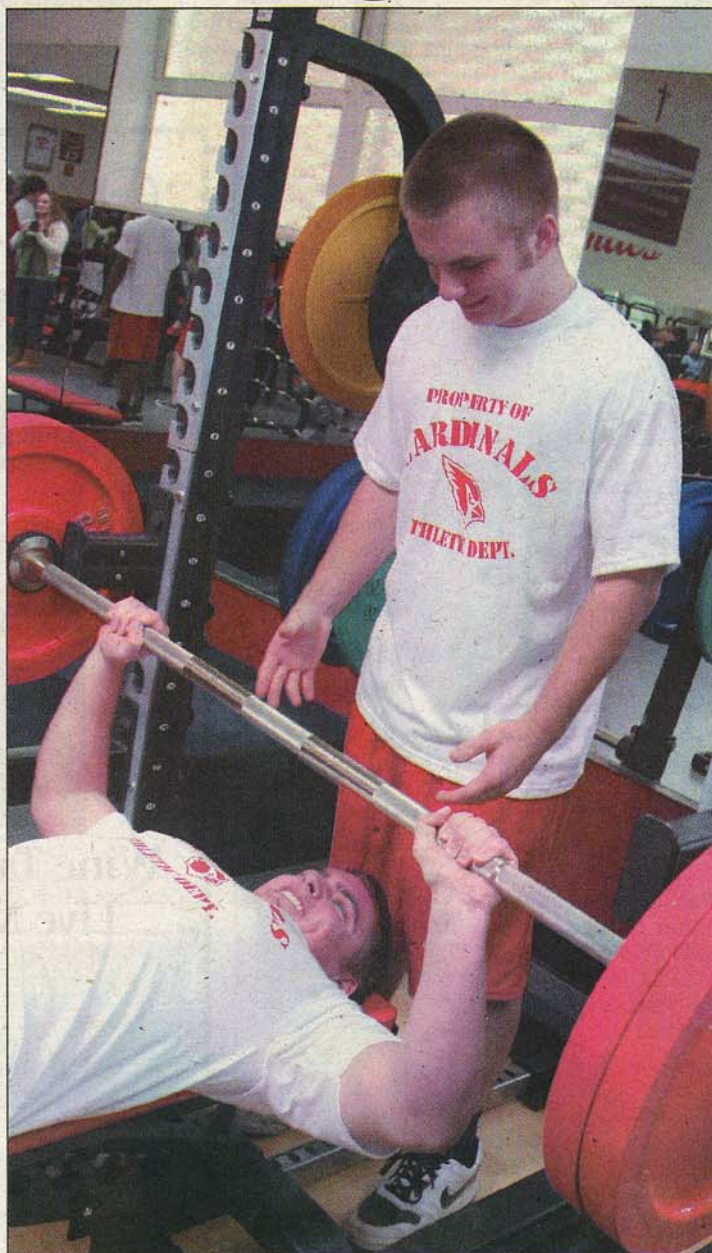
"Where they are now, they are proud of what these kids have," said Roberto Najera, Sr.

His son had been a linebacker entering his senior year at Bishop Diego when he died on the way to the University of Virginia — a college that partly attracted him because of its impressive weightlifting facilities, Najera said.

Although he has mixed feelings every time he enters the weight room and sees the plaque bearing his son's name and image, Najera said it has almost become a therapeutic experience.

"This gives us a closeness to our son," he said.

Gary Schmidt admits he feels sim-
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SANTA BARBARA DAILY SOUND / Janelle Holcombe

Bishop Garcia Diego students Aaron Skinner and Joe Yonke use the weights in the newly-remodeled weight room.

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ilar emotions when he steps into the training room and memories of his son come flooding back.

"It's difficult," he said. "He was a nut as far as lifting weights. He was one of the strongest kids at the school."

Dane played guard and tackle as a sophomore and junior and would have played alongside his younger brother during his senior year. The renovated weight facility is a fitting memorial, Schmidt said.

"It's fantastic," he said. "It had gotten worn down with age and it needed this."

A self-described sports nut, Schmidt said seeing the new training room has given him confidence about his singular goal for any Bishop Diego sports team.

"All I care about is beating Carpinteria," he said with a laugh.

A plaque in the weight room displays photos of both young men and includes a short message: "Both Dane and Rob were dedicated to their families, friends, community and faith. Their commitment to football and physical perfection drove them into the weight room six days a week. It is our hope that their memory will inspire other young men and women to seek the best in themselves, be it athletic, artistic, or academic, as Dane and Rob would have wished."

Father Tom Elewaut, principal of the high school, said the newly renovated room is helping to reconnect current students to a sense of family and tradition. Discussions about remodeling the weight room started last fall.

"We didn't have the finances for it, so I approached our anonymous benefactor and the Najera and Schmidt families," he said.

A lead gift of \$50,000 from an anonymous donor brought the project off the ground. Although it had yet to be fully funded, school administrators decided to go forward with the remodel in December.

"Over the years, it came into disrepair and it was always sort of known as the football training room," Fr. Elewaut said.

Now the room boasts equipment for all 16 sports on campus — appropriate for beginners up to the most advanced athletes.

"We feel like kids in a candy store," head varsity football coach Tom Crawford said.

In addition to 50 football players that have been using the new room four times a week, others work out after school on a daily basis. Crawford said the equipment is unsurpassed by any other high school in the county and will help coaches emphasize the importance of a strong work ethic.

"They are repeatedly told that their performance on the field is built upon their work in here," he said.



Top: Former Bishop Garcia Diego students Roberto Najera and Dane Erik Schmidt for whom the newly-renodeled weight room is dedicated. Courtesy Photo

Right: Varsity Football Coach Tom Crawford speaks at the re-dedication ceremony yesterday for Bishop Garcia Diego's newly-renodeled weight room. Daily Sound photo Janelle Holcombe

