

Jailhouse Jock

In prison, the only successful escape is often through sports

Los Angeles Herald Examiner, July 23, 1989

SAN LUIS OBISPO – This is not the fantasy stuff of “The Longest Yard.”

Behind the walls of the state prison here is a world of cells, not celluloid. And the celebrities who pass through are not the likes of Burt Reynolds, Eddie Albert and Michael Conrad, nor even Sonny Sixkiller, Ray Nitschke and Joe Kapp, but rather Bill Harris, Huey Newton and Charles “Tex” Watson.

The California Men’s Colony.

4Sounds like a summer camp for weary yuppies, but in reality it is a concrete landscape bound by barbed wire, where no door opens until another door closes. Beyond the walls, the sprawling hills are as unreachable as the sky.

CMC is what is called a Level 3 prison — a 28-year-old medium-security penitentiary where 2,400 cells house about 3,500 long-term convicts, more than 1,000 of them serving life sentences.

The guys playing ball in the yard at CMC’s West Facility are not good ol’ boys who got a little rowdy one night and now are yukking it up behind bars because of a minor misunderstanding with the law. They are felons who landed here because somewhere, some time, they took something they shouldn’t have. Some took money, some took drugs, some took lives. Some took all three.

For about half of the inmates here, sports are a retreat from the regimented monotony that has ruled their lives for years and will rule them for uncounted years to come. Between chow time and lockdowns, between assigned menial jobs and mandatory roll calls, between infrequent family visits and even less frequent parole hearings, the prisoners shoot baskets or lift weights or hit balls while they wait for the day society decides they are safe enough to rejoin it.

ONCE A California Angels prospect, Al Rodriguez is now a prisoner of glove.

The major leagues seemed a reachable dream for Rodriguez as he played baseball at Roosevelt High and Los Angeles City College. He was playing semi-pro ball in Montebello back in ’70 when the Angels decided to send him to their minor league team in Idaho Falls.

“I never played in Idaho Falls,” Rodriguez recalled last week. “It was a short season for me. I was set to go in March, but I injured my arm.”

His high hopes dashed, Rodriguez took up a high wire act, working as a lineman for Southern California Edison for nine years. He was 30 years old when he was convicted of murder.

”It was drug related,” he said. “First degree.”

Rodriguez has spent eight years in the prison system since then, six of them at San Luis Obispo, and gray creeps across his temples, but he's still active in baseball as a player-manager.

"I've been playing shortstop the last four years and pitching," he said during a break in the maintenance shop where he works. "This year I played second base."

The West Facility is divided into four housing units, each with its own baseball and softball diamonds, outdoor weight pile and track. In the facility's intramural sports program, each housing unit is represented by a team: the A Quad Aces, the B Quad Braves, the C Quad Cougars and the D Quad Dodgers. D Quad is usually a runner-up to the others in sports, for it houses inmates on medications or with psychiatric conditions.

In baseball, the teams play a 12-game schedule, then have a three-team playoff for the title.

"We're the C Quad Cougars," Rodriguez said. "We've been champs four years in a row and we're on the verge of taking our fifth straight."

Rodriguez said he doesn't clutter his mind with a lot of what-ifs. But when he takes off the jeans and the chammy shirt that are regulation wear here and slips into his uniform and glove, for a few minutes at least he is not imprisoned.

"Baseball to me is my way of doing time," said Rodriguez. "Most of the punishment here is boredom. Baseball occupies our time and takes our minds off where we are."

"Baseball is an escape from this place. When I'm playing, I'm not here. I don't care about the keys or what's going on."

DICK FENSKE is one of the folks who does worry about the keys and what is going on. He walks into CMC each day voluntarily. He started working for the prison in the late '60s as a coach and now oversees the sports program as the community resource manager.

"Prison sports is and should be seen as an integral part of the control of the institution," Fenske said during a tour of the facility. "It is a way to vent hostilities and let off steam and it is a way to teach post-prison skills."

Fenske doesn't mean that he's trying to crank out professional athletes; a prisoner like Ron Flores, whose prison-honed skills earned him a place as an outfielder for the Detroit Tigers, is the exception, not the rule. But he does think learning a social skill such as softball or volleyball can help ease a prisoner's return to society, and that exposure to sports can perk an interest in academic skills by some who never were reached by schools.

In the facility's central gym, Fenske pointed to a row of stationary bikes. While inmates pedal their way through aerobic workouts, they can watch videos of scenic routes through locales such as Maui or the Grand Tetons — places many of the inner-city refugees have never even heard about, much less seen.

"They'd say, 'Tetons? Hey, where's the Tetons?'" said Fenske. "Some of these guys don't know 25 miles from the barrio. So we got a big map and put it up there and they started looking for the different places."

Fenske points to Frederick Nelson, a convict who serves as the head umpire in baseball and softball. “When I came here, I couldn’t read,” said Nelson. He found he had to learn quickly, because inmates have a tendency to play lawyer on close calls, and an umpire better be able to read a rule book being waved in his face.

“It taught me how to read and control my temper,” Nelson said.

Inmates give the sports programs and facilities at San Luis Obispo top grades. “This is the best,” said Larry Purifoy, who bounced around the state penal system before landing here in April. “They spent their money on this place. This is the best as far as equipment.”

Prisoners can choose from activities including track and field, basketball, baseball, slo-pitch and fast-pitch softball, handball, powerlifting and soccer.

The level of competition ranges from pick-up tag football games to organized leagues in softball, basketball, baseball and soccer. About half the inmates engage in some sort of sports activity, and many who don’t play bet cigarettes against each other on the outcome.

The inmates can also compete against inmates from other prisons nationally and statewide in sports such as powerlifting and track and field. In these “postal meets,” results are recorded at each prison and then mailed to a central collection site, where the results are tabulated, compared and returned in a few months.

About three years ago boxing was phased out of the prison’s program for a variety of reasons: fear of spreading AIDS and the belief that the sport increases violence among them. “We were taking guys who like to fight,” Fenske said, “and teaching them how to do it even better.”

Fenske said rather than being a drain on prison resources, sports make the facility more cost efficient. Statewide the average upkeep of a prisoner costs \$19,600 annually, but in San Luis Obispo that cost is just \$14,000, Fenske said. Part of that is because the program activities help minimize internal tensions.

In the movie “The Longest Yard,” inmates played football against a semi-pro team of guards, but that’s a Hollywood fantasy. Football is not a practical prison sport because of cost and injury factors, Fenske said, and pitting inmates against guards is a no-win proposition.

The reason is that inmates may perceive a guard’s professional conduct as being a reflection of game-generated grudges. “A guard has nothing to win playing against an inmate,” he said.

Fenske said some prisoners have come in from other institutions and complained that CMC gives trophies, rather than soft drinks or cigarettes, to its tournament winners. Those same inmates, he said, usually end up displaying their trophies prominently in their rooms.

“Some of these people have never won anything in their lives,” said Fenske. “If you give them cigarettes, they smoke them and then they’re gone and forgotten. But they can point to a trophy in their room and say they won that. It’s symbolic of something.”

But trophies aren’t all the inmates get out of sports. Purifoy, 35, rode a spiral of crime into prison — “I started out with petty theft and ended up with guns and burglary,” he said — and now he ponders what kind of life he’ll be able to build when he gets out in February.

Last year he won a 5-mile race in the July 4th track meet at Soledad. This year he won the mile and was on the winning mile-relay team at San Luis Obispo. “Running relaxes me and relieves me of the tension,” he said. “I can get out of my mind the problems I’m having. And the best part is finishing: afterwards, I’m relaxed.”

WILKS JACKSON recalls the day in East L.A. that put him behind bars indefinitely.

“I was a hoodlum,” he said.

The year was 1973. The way he tells it, he and a cousin shot some games of pool at a local hall, had a few drinks, and decided they wanted some cash.

“We left and burglarized a house,” he said. In the house, however, were a man and a woman, or, as Jackson calls them, a male victim and a female victim.

Jackson said he slapped the woman around in the living room, demanding money. “But there was nothing in there,” he said.

The two beat it out of there, leaving the man lying in a pool of blood. The cousins continued to burglarize houses in the neighborhood and were eventually picked up.

“The male victim died months later,” said Jackson, who was convicted in 1974 of first-degree murder and burglary.

This is Jackson’s second tour of duty at CMC, sandwiched around a stay in Folsom. The scene at Folsom was rife with racial tensions that led to frequent lockdowns — periods in which activities are suspended and prisoners are confined to their cells — as battles raged among such groups as the Aryan Brotherhood, the Mexican Mafia and the Black Guerilla Front.

“They have all that racial tension down here,” Jackson said. “You and I could be talking up there and afterward when I went back to my people they would say, ‘Why you talking to him?’ Down here we can talk without that happening. This is supposed to be neutral ground.”

It was at Folsom that Jackson first attempted basketball, a game he never tried in the streets or gym class.

“I always thought it was a stupid game, throwing a ball up at a basket,” Jackson said. “When I first started, I was always messing up. They had two sides: One side was for the guys who could play and the other side was for the hackers. People told me to play on that side or sit down. It hurt me when they said that.”

Jackson kept playing, though. He watched the game on TV, drawing inspiration from the likes of Isiah Thomas, Magic Johnson and Mark Jackson, trying to learn from their moves.

After he returned to CMC, Jackson kept playing. The organized league plays in the fall and winter, but there is a summer B League for players who are new to the game. Jackson coached his B team at to 12-0 season record in 1985, capturing the title with a victory in the playoffs.

“A victory is the sweetest thing a person can have, or want,” Jackson said. “That’s what I got that day. They made me the Coach of the Year.”

The most famous inmate Jackson ever played against was former Dallas Cowboy Thomas “Hollywood” Henderson. Henderson found even pickup games at the prison rough — Fenske

said the former pro and con was knocked unconscious by a 145-pound inmate during a flag football game and had to be taken out by ambulance — and didn't appreciate being shown up by a 5-6 squirt like Jackson on the basketball court.

"He and I got into it," said Jackson. "He was going up for a shot and I blocked him from behind. The ball hit against the side of his head. He didn't like that at all — but I saved two points."

Now the one-time far-court hacker is a 33-year-old starting point guard for the prison championship Baker Quad Braves.

"Sometimes the gym be packed," he said, "and you can hear them calling 'Shorty Jack.' Shorty Jack — that's what they call me in here. They know what I can do."

RONALD HAYWARD doesn't need to tell a visitor he used to be in a biker gang; the tattoos that envelop his massive upper body say it eloquently enough.

Nor is the fact that he's serving a life sentence for second-degree murder an eyebrow-raiser; that's generally why people are in here.

That he is a Teamster with eight grandchildren, or that he used to play Little League and be a Boy Scout and swim at the YMCA in Pasadena — well, those are the fact of a life a little beyond his reach for the foreseeable future. As he puts it, "I'm a lifer without a (release) date."

What Hayward does have in his solid grasp is iron — pounds and pounds of the stuff. Most any day he can be found inside the facility's central gym, training for powerlifting or instructing other lifters.

Now 46, Hayward started lifting five years ago in prison. "Most people lifting weights to begin with do it to get big and intimidating," Hayward said. "When I first started, I wanted to be big and scare people. When it became a sport, the whole thing changed."

Knowing squat about anatomy and muscle groups, he approached Fenske with a question about training.

"I asked him, 'What can I do for my back arms,' " Hayward said. "He said, 'What?' and I said, 'My back arms.' He said, 'I don't know what you're talking about; I don't know what "back arms" are.' "

Hayward consulted an exercise chart on the wall and learned the term for which he was searching: triceps. His appetite to learn whetted, he borrowed a copy of "Gray's Anatomy" from Fenske, and later had his family send him a copy for his own.

"I was never much of a reader before, but now I read about anatomy and kinesiology," said Hayward. "I've been a mechanic all my life. I can look in an engine and see how everything's working. So I decided, 'My body's the most important thing; I want to know how it works.' "

In some ways, the sports program at CMC is unique within the state's penal system. As the state prisons became more overcrowded in the mid-'80s, inmates at San Luis Obispo protested that double-bunking constituted cruel and unusual punishment.

After several surprise visits, the courts ruled that double-bunking was not cruel and unusual as long as human services were maintained. Since those services included the sports

and recreational programs, the ruling meant that the facility's gymnasium could not be used to house the population overflow.

So while sports programs at other overcrowded prisons are disrupted by frequent lockdowns and gyms being used for housing, programs at CMC go on uninterrupted.

In each of the four quads is a weight pile where inmates can lift under the open sun. But the really serious equipment — the squat racks and the lifting platforms — are inside the spacious hangar-style gymnasium.

“The iron piles in every quad are always full, except D Quad, but this is our ‘Rolls-Royce’ lifting area,” Hayward said.

Despite suffering a stroke three years ago that still has his bench press below par, Hayward is a two-time 220-pound national prisons masters champion. He won in the 40-44 age group in 1987, won in the 45-49 group last year, and will try to defend his title in next month's postal meet. He holds state prison records with a 615-pound squat and a 655-pound deadlift.

Powerlifting is a sport that requires a commitment to time. Improvements are made incrementally and can't be rushed. In a sense, lifting gives a measurable structure to the open-ended span of time life-timers must serve in prison.

“You don't think of it that way,” said Hayward, “but it does do that psychologically.”

Hayward figures that when he gets out he can go back to working on the docks or maybe work as a strength coach. He knows there's no going back, no changing the past, no undoing things that he's done, but in powerlifting he's found a new attitude and a sense of commitment.

“Drugs – that was part of my past,” said Hayward. “That's something I don't even want to think about now.

“When my family visits, they can see videos of our meets. They can see you're doing something with your time. It's not just, ‘Dad's in jail.’ ”