

Bernard is coaching at its finest

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There's something about coaching that corresponds with greatness. Perhaps it is the selfless act of passing wisdom along, or the guidance aspect of teaching a young student how to improve his skills. At BearTerritory, we've come across a number of coaches over the years, but nobody defines coaching as well as Arizona long-snapping coach **Ben Bernard**, who has made a direct impact in the lives of numerous student-athletes, including one current and one future Golden Bear.

The first trait you'll notice about Bernard is that he has unbelievable passion for the game – the type of passion that is nearly indescribable. When we first spoke with Bernard and requested an interview about his long-snapping coaching techniques during our visit to Arizona, he agreed on one condition; that we had to hold during the practice. Certainly, we understood what holding meant – we've watched thousands of football games over the years, and he wasn't asking us to grab a jersey during a blocking assignment. He wanted us to set-up 7 yards back and receive a snap from his guys so that we understood first-hand what it is like.

While we knew that the ball gets back there pretty quick, we were clueless about how difficult and how dedicated you have to be to become a proficient snapper. We also had no idea about the sounds of long-snapping, with the ball leaving the grass and the laces humming from being spun so fast.

Just catching the ball is a completely different story. Though some fans will forever underestimate long-snapping, there is little difference from the exhilaration of trying to hit a 100 MPH fastball and standing back 7 yards and trying to catch a lightning bolt.

Of course, Bernard knows that, which is why he put the challenge out there. He's one of the ultimate teachers that way, knowing that if you want to write a story on him and his players, you better get out there and take part in it. There's just no other way to understand it, or learn it.

Long-snapping has always been one of the most underrated parts of football – at every single level. But it is the initiation of nearly all special teams plays (with the exception of the kickoff), and it plays a key part of whether teams win or lose the overall game. Long-snapping is a job done by the selfless with numerous players beginning the process after volunteering to do it.

But there is no greater volunteer than Bernard. He was asked by current North Canyon head coach **Brian Cole** in the late 80's if he would coach the offensive line on a Pop Warner team that Coach Cole was about to take over. That meant teaching the long-snapping too – something Bernard knew nothing about at that time.

"Early on, it was a significant amount of trial and error," Bernard said. "There were a lot of things we just had to figure out from a technique stand point. However, the one aspect of long-snapping that we knew we had to establish was dedication and repetition. It is just like anything else in life, the more you practice the better you are going to get at it."

"That's been true for every player I've ever had. They'll tell you that they weren't good at it at first, and frankly, that's the truth."

He was right.

"When I first started doing it, I was awful," said Cal junior long-snapper [Nick Sundberg](#), now regarded as the No. 1 long-snapper in the country.

"My high school coach told me if I kept at it and kept at it, someday I'd play in the NFL," said **Joe Maese**, who started snapping as a high school sophomore under Bernard, and was the first of his understudies to reach the NFL. "I was always like, 'whatever.'"

"The first time I snapped I was terrible," future Cal long-snapper [Matt Rios](#), another Bernard prodigy said. "It really isn't easy."

That's exactly how every long-snapper who is just beginning their career feels, but with the altruistic approach of Coach Bernard, combined with a lot of personal hard work and dedication by the athletes, over a short period of time, he's helped push over a dozen high school football prospects without any recruiting fanfare to colleges across the country. His first ever prodigy, **Jason Asbury**, who played on that Pop Warner team, went on to earn a scholarship at San Diego State. Maese, his third long-snapping student, started at Phoenix Community College before accepting a full ride at New Mexico. Maese was regarded as the top long-snapper in the country as a senior, and snapped 5 years in the NFL. Additional players who developed under Bernard are **Matt Hayward** (USC), **Jason Perkins** (Arizona State), **John Warren** (Tulsa), **Jonathan Weeks** (Baylor), and the aforementioned Sundberg.

"Last year alone, we had six guys snapping across college football," Bernard said, with college jerseys of his former players in his office at home, including ones from Cal and USC. "It's pretty cool to sit there on Saturdays and watch the games. Joe (Maese) just missed the cut with Tennessee, but he's right there. Nick will likely be another guy that makes the NFL."

"It isn't easy making it in the league, because there are only 30 jobs. You know, most positions have quite a bit more than that. But long-snappers will snap for years at the same job, so the openings in the NFL just don't pop up. And the competition is tough – new guys are always coming along trying to beat you out."

Perhaps the quality that stands out the most about Bernard – beyond the wisdom he passes on to his students – is the fact that Bernard has taught all his former long-snappers without ever charging a coaching fee. He has a day-to-day job like many of us that he does, and for over 15 years, spent his afternoons with Coach Cole at Cortez high and North Canyon high coaching football. Before this season, Bernard finally stopped the high school coaching. However, after practices, plus over the course of the entire off-season, his long-snappers continue to come in for workouts, drills, and snaps.

Bernard is the definition of self-sacrificing in today's game. His effort, which pulls him away from his own family for numerous hours, is done to help others. And helping them is really not the right word. He has changed the lives of so many young men.

"He's the most giving person I have ever met," said **Stacie Sundberg**, Nick's mother. "What he does for those boys is just amazing. He teaches them the importance of hard-work, of an education, and about being a leader. And he does it in a way where he never yells, or asks anything other than their time, focus, and effort."

"Those boys all know that long-snapping is a silent position, and that he is demanding about dedication. The best story I have about what he taught Nick was shortly after my son graduated high school, we went on a river-rafting trip to Colorado. Nick had only long-snapped for about a year and half, but he was so involved and so dedicated to it that whenever we had a stop, he'd be out there long-snapping. Coach Bernard told him before the trip that he has to snap every day. So he'd mark off the yards and then stretch out. He'd target a rock, and just start snapping."

"One of the guys on the trip was kind of the macho type, and he went up and said, 'I can catch you'. It wasn't but two snaps and Nick broke his finger."

"In the beginning it was tough because I was so bad," Nick explained. "When I started working with Coach Bernard, [Jonathan Weeks](#), who is the long snapper at Baylor now, was just about to finish up his high school career. I used to work out with him and saw how well he would snap the ball. I wanted to be as good as him."

"Being a good long snapper takes dedication, it's as simple as that. **Matt Rios** has a full scholarship here to Cal and yet he's still out there six days a week working with Coach Bernard. Whenever I'm in town I would call coach up and we'll be out there the next day snapping. Last week, the (Arizona State) game ended at like 11 and we were all out there with Coach Bernard the next day snapping."

Like Sundberg, Weeks will be finishing up his degree early, and plans to snap all winter with Coach Bernard to improve his shot of playing in the NFL. Sundberg might leave Cal after this season, due to the fact that he'll already have his degree and numerous NFL teams would like to give him a shot at the job. He'll likely head back to Arizona to work with Bernard too.

"He's the one who got me into this," Sundberg stated, when asked about Coach Bernard. "He tried to instill hard work and dedication in my head. There was a coaching change my senior year and that's when he came in as the offensive line coach."

"One of the first things he did was ask the team who was the long-snapper? I came up and said, 'Well I guess that would be me.' He responded by asking, 'What you do mean I guess?' Before my senior season began we sat down and had a talk. He basically told me that if he was going to work with me that there would be no half-assing involved. We worked out four days a week and snapped five days a week."

Rios, who has trained longer than just about anyone under Bernard, might be the best of Bernard's long-snappers. He's incredibly quick and accurate, and his devotion to the position is undeniable.

"Ben has been the best thing that's happened to a lot of kids," **Shannon Oughton**, Rios mother stated. "He's tough on them – he demands that they are there every day snapping. He doesn't take any slack from them, and he holds them all accountable. But what he's done is incredible."

Bernard not only cares deeply about his players, but he wants them to understand the dedication it takes to accomplish being complete individuals. While the instinctive goal for players is to be great on the football field, Bernard has also paved the way for players to develop academic goals. He has a strict policy about maintaining a 3.0 GPA, and if you don't, the training stops.

A lot of the young players that he's taken on are from single parented families. The chance at going to college, and simply being able to afford it, was slim.

"There's no way we could have ever afforded college, especially a place like Cal," Oughton said.

"Ben has a way about him that kids just look instinctively to him," **Stacie Sundberg** said. "I certainly didn't want Nick to play football. I was one of those mom's that worried about him playing a rough sport. So he didn't play until high school. And when he started talking about long-snapping, I had no idea what he was talking about."

"But now, even his grandmother knows all about it. She would have never wanted anything to do with the game, but she loves to watch Nick. It has just changed our lives."

Bernard's impact is immeasurable on the lives of his former players and their respective families. Nearly every young man he's taken on has not only graduated college, but done so rapidly. He's instilled a hard-working, competitive, and no-nonsense approach in all of them, with a bridge from player to player. Not only have his

players had success in the classroom, but they have risen to become some of the best long-snappers in the country.

At Cal specifically, Bernard's pupils will have passed a torch in a way, going from North Canyon to Cal. Sundberg has followed Rios' career closely, and Matt has always looked up to Nick as both a person and a long-snapper. For the Bears, there couldn't be a better situation. Not only can Nick impart what it is like being a student-athlete in Berkeley, but he can also pass on what he has learned about the game. Rios can continue the tradition.

That's the greatest reward for Bernard – the teaching and the legacy. He realized after stepping away from his duties at North Canyon recently how many students have gone on to play college football and earn degrees. There are numerous coaches around the game who coach full squad's for years that probably don't add up to the number players he has helped guide in to college football - a statement that is pretty incredible when you think about.

In fact, Rios' siblings are already snapping, and Sundberg's nephew is doing the same after seeing him play. Perhaps the greatest compliment is that a number of players have already offered to teach Bernard's son how to snap.

"That means a lot to me," Coach Bernard said, denoting that he's already pretty good at it. "Just the fact that they'd do that, to help him, that's very powerful."

A.W Prince is the senior writer and publisher of [BearTerritory](#). He pens numerous recruiting features, including "The Weekly Spin", on some of the most talented and highly sought after student-athletes in the country. Along with his recruiting work, Prince has photographed a number of future Div. 1 student-athletes for exclusive Rivals photo segments and Videography's.

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