

[Necessity is the mother of teamwork](#)

- [Chip Johnson](#)

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When the McClymonds High School football team took the field against Jefferson High School in Daly City on Friday night, for the first time in three years, the varsity team didn't have to wait for the junior varsity squad to hand over knee pads, thigh pads and helmets.

"Yeah, the fans were a little confused watching our players stop and swap out equipment," said Alonzo Carter, the team's head coach.

The West Oakland high school, which fields one of the top-ranked teams in virtually every Bay Area high school football poll, has suffered from a lack of resources like other schools in the city's financially strapped school district.

Someone once told Carter, "You've got a Mercedes-Benz (football) program operating on a Volkswagen budget," he said, repeating the line.

You better believe it. The team, known as the Warriors, features three high school All-Americans and has high hopes of sending at least 10 players to NCAA Division I universities next year. There isn't a more athletically talented team in the region.

But when parents, fans and community supporters heard that it didn't have enough helmets to go around, they decided to do something about it.

"When I found out that the team was sharing helmets, my first reaction was to get Josh his own," said Brenda Frazier, whose son Josh Richman is an All-American linebacker. But Josh told her he didn't want his own helmet because it was more important to be like everyone else on the team, and most of his teammates didn't have that option.

"My kids shared -- and I don't want to be nasty -- butt pads and girdle pads," said Carter. "We weren't looking for a handout; we're just stating the facts."

The effort started with a couple of parents who launched a fundraising effort on the team's behalf. Marilyn Earle, whose son Ralston is a first-year player, was able to raise enough money to purchase about 15 new

helmets before the start of the season. They cost about \$130 a piece, she said.

Earle's effort brought more equipment, but still not enough to equip a team of nearly 80 players. The team still needed gear for about 30 players, Carter said.

That's when Oakland developer Michael Baines, a pretty fair wide receiver in his glory days, stepped in. Baines said it "hurt his heart" knowing the team would have to play its games wearing practice pants and sharing helmets.

"What I saw at a practice two weeks ago was really terrible, these guys didn't even have game day pants," Baines said last week.

Almost without thinking, Baines pledged to raise enough money to at least get each player his own helmet.

"I did it because I saw myself as a kid, growing up one of 11 children in Hunters Point. I saw the pain in the face of a single mom 'cause I know she is counting on football to take him away from all of this," he said.

But when the emotion and nostalgia wore off, Baines had a moment of panic.

"How the hell am I going to come up with \$10,000?" he asked himself. "What did you just do?"

What he did was get on the phone and contact local businesspeople, West Oakland City Councilwoman Nancy Nadel and anybody else he could think of.

Baines told the tale to the owner of several fast-food restaurants in town, and the guy gave him a check on the spot. It went the same way with just about everyone who heard the story.

Nadel contacted the owners of several local businesses and relayed the story of the Warriors football team.

Even though she is not a football person, Nadel rallied support for the team. She contacted the Aegis company, a local development firm that owns several parcels of land in West Oakland and has a relationship with the high school. The company immediately cut a check for \$5,000, said Melissa Buss, a company spokeswoman.

The fundraising effort has brought in more than \$15,000 to the football program since it began. A steady stream of players walked into Carter's office Friday afternoon to collect new thigh and knee pads and belts to go with the orange and black game jerseys.

Some of the money will be used to pay for a trip to Los Angeles next week, where the team will take on Dorsey High School. And in the team's effort to play more talented teams, the following week Los Angeles powerhouse Crenshaw High School will visit McClymonds.

Life will be better with each player having his own equipment. But sharing helmets, knee pads and the rest with your teammate, whether he's a high school All-American or a freshman struggling to hone his skills, says something about team unity and the sense of community these young men share.

No matter what else you might think about McClymonds and its efforts to improve academic performance, when the best player on the team willingly gives his gear -- and his support to the guy behind him in the depth chart, well folks, that's a hard team to beat.

"It's nice to have your own equipment, but I've shared leg pads, butt pads and helmets with JV players ever since I've been on this team," said Derrick Hill, a 280-pound All-American defensive tackle.

"We share everything except the mouthpiece," he said.

Chip Johnson's column appears on Mondays and Fridays. E-mail him at chjohnson@schronicle.com.