

ONLINE
For coverage of the Warriors' game against the Chicago Bulls, go to

SFCHRONICLE.COM/SPORTS

INSIDE
Five questions facing the Giants and the A's as spring training nears.

PAGE B2

SFCHRONICLE.COM • SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2025 • SECTION B

SPORTS // SCOTT OSTLER

Former Cal, NFL great Nickerson helps his Oakland players expand their palette in life

By **Scott Ostler**, Sports Columnist



Football players from Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland visit the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for the "Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture" exhibit on Jan. 30.

Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

Hardy Nickerson, the former Cal and NFL linebacking great, now coaches the football team at Bishop O'Dowd-Oakland.

One recent evening, Nickerson took a group of his players on a field trip. They visited the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where the coach introduced his kids to an old friend.

That friend is Ernie Barnes, a famed artist who died in 2009 at age 70, but lives on in his paintings. Barnes was a football player, too, an offensive lineman in the old American Football League back in the '60s. His teammates called Ernie “The Big Rembrandt.” Three years ago, Barnes’ painting of a wild night at a Southern juke joint, “Sugar Shack,” sold at auction for \$15.3 million.

Three of Barnes’ paintings hang in a current MOMA exhibit on sports, a multimedia extravaganza taking up the entire seventh floor — “Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture,” through Feb. 18.



Bishop O’Dowd High School football player Ambrose Carroll watches “Caryatid (Pacquiao),” a 2022 silent single-channel video by Paul Pfeiffer, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

If Robin Williams' character in "Dead Poets Society" can inspire his high school students to open their minds by exposing them to poetry written by deceased poets, why can't a football coach do the same kind of thing?

Nickerson said his high school coach at Verbum Dei in Los Angeles, Lalo Mendoza, would cram the players into his station wagon for non-football field trips.

"He took us to a play," Nickerson said. "We were all looking around. 'Are you *sure* this is where you wanted to bring us, coach?'"

Now Nickerson's players are looking around. They seem enthusiastic, heads on swivels.

Bringing the boys to an art museum is not conventional football coaching, but Nickerson charts his own path. He came from Compton to star for Cal and coach Joe Kapp in '83-86. While playing in the NFL (16 seasons, a spot on the '90s All-Decade team), he returned to Cal in offseasons to earn his sociology degree, then got a master's.



Bishop O'Dowd head coach Hardy Nickerson gathers his players around "Fumble in the Line," a 1990 painting by former AFL player Ernie Barnes.

Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

Early in his NFL career, Nickerson put his job on the line by taking a lead role in an NFL Players Association lawsuit. That forced the league to accept free agency. Under new rules, in one season Nickerson's mid-career salary jumped from \$268,000 to \$1.7 million. That bit of insurrection entitled Nickerson to membership in the unofficial Bay Area Troublemakers' Club, along with folks like Harry Edwards, Curt Flood, Bill Russell, Phil Woolpert and Colin Kaepernick.

Upon retiring from the NFL, Nickerson went into coaching, and has kind of worked his way backward — an assistant in the NFL, then in college ball, now a high school head coach.

On that recent evening at SFMOMA, Nickerson smiles as he herds a half-dozen of his players, some parents, and four of his coaches into the elevator.

“I’m like a kid in a candy store,” Nickerson says. “Just being in a position to expose the kids to cultural stuff, things that have been an inspiration to me and could be inspirational to them. Showing them you can be a well-rounded student-athlete, you can know about art, you can know about things outside of sports.”



Ambrose Carroll and the football team from Bishop O’Dowd High School visit the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for its “Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture” exhibit on Jan. 30.

Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

Nickerson is eager to introduce his kids to Ernie Barnes, who was inspired by mentors, and who inspired Nickerson. Barnes was raised in South Carolina in the Jim Crow era and was introduced to art by an attorney who employed Ernie’s mother as a housecleaner.

After football, Barnes rose to artistic fame and prominence in the '70s and '80s. His paintings, distinctive for their elongated figures caught in moments of intense action, are celebrations of joy and movement. His work found universal acceptance, resonating with special power in the Black community. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar said Barnes' paintings give him "a surge of pride and communal dignity."

In 1993, Nickerson's Sausalito-based agent, Steve Baker, introduced him to Barnes, and they struck up an immediate friendship. Nickerson commissioned Barnes to paint a worship service at the church Nickerson attended growing up, in South Central L.A.

"Ernie went to the church, met the pastor, probably even met my mother," Nickerson said with a smile. "He created a piece, 'Friendly Friendship Baptist Church,' that's just amazing. He was an inspiration to my daughter, Haleigh, who is a professional artist. She kind of followed his style."

Nickerson and the group stop before a Barnes painting of heroically muscled football players in a frantic, chaotic scramble for a loose ball. It is so far from a traditional sports painting that it surely stirs the imaginations of Nickerson's players.



The football team from Bishop O'Dowd High School plays foosball at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's "Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture" exhibit.

Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

The group disperses to wander the exhibit. A few of them join a lively game of foosball on a 22-player table. Nickerson and a couple of players engage in a spirited game of ping-pong on a bizarre four-way table with a water pond in the middle instead of a net. What are the rules? Hey, it's your game, make 'em up.

If the coach hopes to expand the consciousness of his players, he has brought them to the right place. Every piece in the exhibit is thought-provoking and unconventional. Some of the works are amusing, some amazing, some disturbing. This is sports outside of any box.

Museums can be inspirational. When Barnes was a college art student in North Carolina, he visited a newly integrated art museum. He asked a docent where he

might find works by Black artists. The docent explained, “Your people do not express themselves in that manner.”

That’s the kind of boundary that Nickerson wants his players to get beyond. They seem to get the message.

“It’s amazing that (Barnes) was an athlete and also an artist,” says quarterback Matteo Tarantino. “It really shows there’s more to a person behind their athletic talent. It’s really great to see that.”



Head coach Hardy Nickerson takes a selfie with his Bishop O’Dowd team before heading into the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for its “Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture” exhibit on Jan. 30.

Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

The 24/7 demands of pro and college coaching got to Nickerson in 2018. His body broke down and he took a year off to recuperate. He dropped 40 pounds on a

mostly vegetarian diet. Now, at 59, he says his players are surprised when he keeps up with them in conditioning drills: “Coach can *run!*”

Once Nickerson recovered his health, “Some friends said, ‘Hey, man, let’s have some fun, let’s just go coach.’ It’s just a fun thing for us to do, to be able to give back something to these kids.”

Last season the Dragons were 10-3, losing in the North Coast Section Division 2 championship game. Five of Nickerson’s assistants are former Cal players, including Hardy’s son Hardy Jr. Three are former NFL stars — Hardy Jr., Doug Brien (former 49ers kicker) and JJ Stokes (former 49ers wide receiver).

The switch from pro and college coaching to high school was a decided upgrade for Nickerson. He gets to coach more than football.

“I’m always talking to the kids about life, life lessons,” Nickerson says. “Coming here is getting them away from the field, the weight room, talking football.”

In a Barnes painting (not in the exhibit) titled “Each One, Teach One,” a high school teacher delivers an inspiring lesson to four highly energized male students.

That could just as well be Nickerson and his players.

Defensive lineman Heamasi Latu says, “Truly, I’m just blessed and grateful for this adventure we had today.”

Not a trip or a visit — an adventure. *Carpe museum.*

Reach Scott Ostler: sostler@sfchronicle.com; X: [@scottostler](https://twitter.com/scottostler)

Feb 8, 2025



Scott Ostler

SPORTS COLUMNIST

Scott Ostler has been a sports columnist at the San Francisco Chronicle since 1991. He has covered five Olympics for The Chronicle, as well as one soccer World Cup and numerous World Series, Super Bowls and NBA Finals.

Though he started in sports and is there now, Scott took a couple of side trips into the real world for The Chronicle. For three years he wrote a daily around-town column, and for one year, while still in sports, he wrote a weekly humorous commentary column.

He has authored several books and written for many national publications. Scott has been voted California Sportswriter of the Year 13 times, including six times while at The Chronicle. He moved to the Bay Area from Southern California, where he worked for the Los Angeles Times, the National Sports Daily and the Long Beach Press-Telegram.