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Jets QB visits Mount Sinai

BY JOE WERKMEISTER | SPORTS EDITOR

It didn't take long for Mark Sanchez to reach full celebrity status in New York.

"I got recognized a little bit at school, but it's a whole different world out here," said Sanchez, the fifth overall pick by the New York Jets out of USC. "That's part of playing in the Big Apple."

After starring on the West Coast during high school and college, Sanchez migrated to New York when the Jets traded up in the draft to take him. Sanchez, who had never been to Long Island before, was the headline attraction Monday during the first day of the weeklong Devlin Football Camp at Mount Sinai High School, started by Jets tight-end coach Mike Devlin. Less than a week after Sanchez signed a contract worth upwards of \$50 million, the Jets' future quarterback was mixing it up with nearly 300 local kids ranging from second to eighth grade, signing autographs and offering words of wisdom.

"I remember being in their position, going to camps like this over the summer, whether it was basketball, football or baseball," Sanchez said.

As a kid, Sanchez grew up idolizing Carson Palmer, the quarterback of the Cincinnati Bengals, who was the first overall pick in 2003. Sanchez played his first two years of high school at the same school as Palmer and then followed him at USC. Sanchez even spent time as the water boy for Palmer as a kid.

"Growing up, he was the man," Sanchez said. "I loved watching him and we're still very close. He's given me a lot of advice."

On this day, though, it was Sanchez offering the advice.

Before the camp Sanchez and five other rookies for the Jets spoke briefly to the kids about the importance of working hard on and off the field.

"We're living an absolute dream life," Sanchez told the group. "It blows us away that we're pinching ourselves every day."

But he noted that wouldn't be possible without the work they'd put in at school.

Defensive end Zach Potter attended Nebraska, lineman Matt Kroul attended Iowa, lineman Tavita Thompson attended Oregon State, center Michael Parenton attended Tulane and tight end J'Nathan Bullock attended Cleveland State.

Sanchez said while their message is basic stuff, he knows it means more to kids hearing it from them as opposed to their parents.

"Even if it's not the particular camp you're at, find something you love and pursue it while being a good person and good student," he said.

Sanchez and the Jets have been plenty busy the last few weeks with Organized Team Activities and the first mandatory mini-camp last week.

"I've been going pretty much since the Rose Bowl," Sanchez said. "And before that I had a whole season. It's a long rookie year. We have about three more weeks left at the facility and then I'm going to take a little vacation."

Mount Sinai football coach Vinnie Ammirato and Port Jefferson assistant coach Jeff Koutsantanou served as the directors of the camp. A portion of the proceeds from camp fees were going to the Friends of Karen charity, which supports children with life-threatening illnesses.

Former Mount Sinai quarterback Sean Kelly was one of the coaches for the camp. Now a quarterback at MIT, Kelly is vying for the starting job when he returns to school for his sophomore season.

Kelly, who's also a Jets fan, said he'd been part of summer football camps since age 6 and is now on the other side, teaching what he's learned.

"You would learn a ton of stuff," he said, recalling his football camp days, "and then you would go into the season with a little bit of an edge."

As a freshman last season, Kelly completed his first pass on a two-point conversion to his former teammate at Mount Sinai, Stephen Yablonski.

"I was told to run it but I saw Yabo open so I threw it," he said.

Kelly starts practice Aug. 19.

The Jets will also host a high school camp at Port Jefferson High School June 22-23 that's modeled after an NFL mini-camp.



PETER BLASL PHOTO
New York Jets quarterback Mark Sanchez signs an autograph for Jefferson Koutsantanou Monday at the Devlin Football Camp at Mount Sinai High School.