

# Laredo Morning Times



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## Band of Brothers

For 45 minutes in late December, head coach Pete Solis and the Nixon basketball team had a talk.

After a game in which the Mustangs squandered a halftime lead at home against a ranked team, the conversation focused on coming together as one and living up to the mantra that's on their jerseys, t-shirts, gym bags and Twitter account: Brotherhood.

"We talked from the heart, and when you do that everybody is going to listen," Solis said. "Sometimes as a coach you want to know the best motivational speech, but that night I just talked from the heart. That talk was the difference in the season."

Nixon hasn't lost a game since and has been rolling through the District 29-5A schedule. They sit just one game away from clinching the playoffs one year after missing them altogether.

As a teenager, sometimes it's hard to think about the team before thinking about yourself, but that's just what is expected out of every teammate.

"We sacrifice for each other," senior guard and team captain Joey Varela said. "It's just an amazing experience to be a part of this team. Whatever we need, we're here and we'll always have each other's back. We're a family."

Nixon has exploded offensively since that talk following the loss at home to Sharyland. In the last nine games, the Mustangs have scored at least 77 points in all but two games and Varela is third in the state in 3-pointers made with 106. As a team, they're fourth in the state with 256 triples.

"The brotherhood is just that you play for the person to the right and to the left of you," senior forward Joey Leal said. "It's just a bunch of guys that come together as one and we get close enough to consider ourselves brothers because of the love and everything we've been through."

Varela and Leal are part of a core of players that have felt the high of glory and the agony of defeat in their time at Nixon. Varela and the Mustangs made a run to regionals two years ago but missed out on the playoffs last year.

When the pressure was on last Friday from a talented Somerset team, Hector Castillo came up with key blocks and Oscar Pena came in off the bench and made four 3-pointers to shift the momentum back to Nixon.

Leal said it's the team's togetherness that has Nixon undefeated in district play and playing better every time they take the court.

"It's hard to put into words," he said. "I've made so many friendships through this basketball ride. People that I would never have talked to that are my best friends. It's just a bunch of dudes who love the game and brought us all together. It's pretty awesome."

At the heart of the team is Solis who has been the man in charge since the 2007-08 season and has seen it all.

He said while basketball is huge part of the lives of team right now, it's just a small part of what he hopes will help them grow into successful young men.

"We can win the district title this year. We have won district titles in the past. We went to regionals two years ago and to me we still haven't won anything," Solis said. "The game of life and 10 years from now, are they going to be the best dads and hardest workers? If they can become that, we've won championships not only in basketball, but in life."

Successful programs might not always have the most talent or biggest players, but they have excellent head coaches.

The same can be said about the brotherhood that Solis has built, but Leal and the rest of the team see him as a father figure as well as a coach.

"He's the father of the brotherhood, and without him this program wouldn't be as successful as it is," Leal said. "It's all thanks to (coach Solis). He's a second father away from home and he's helped us get in touch with everything. We all love him and we all love each other. That's the brotherhood."