



PHOTO COURTESY RSCCD COMMUNICATIONS

Santiago Charter Middle School students participating in Santiago Canyon College's dual enrollment program

INNOVATION

PROGRAM LETS MIDDLE SCHOOLERS COMPLETE THEIR FIRST COLLEGE CLASS

Getting a jump-start on higher education

By Jenelyn Russo
contributing writer

In an innovative effort to expand early access to higher education, Santiago Canyon College has partnered with Santiago Charter Middle School in Orange to offer dual enrollment opportunities to the school's seventh and eighth graders. Through the Santiago Canyon College Early College Program, students have the opportunity to earn free transferable college credits and get a head start on their academic journeys.

The decision to establish this program at the middle school stemmed from a fortunate combination of timing and opportunity. Two years ago, Santiago Charter administrators Ashley Pedroza and Lauren Salloum attended a dual enrollment professional development program for high school educators.

With a statewide goal to increase the number of high school graduates with 12+ dual enrollment units by 15% by 2030, Pedroza and Salloum thought, why not offer this opportunity to middle school students?

"As Orange County's first charter school 30 years ago ... we are consistent-

ly looking at opportunities for students that differentiate our program from other programs," said Pedroza, the middle school's principal.

Now, nearly two years later, Santiago Charter's and SCC's collaboration just saw the program's first 64-student cohort complete its first college course, a counseling class with a focus on academic and career success, educational planning and college career exploration.

Leading up to the launch, SCC and Santiago Charter collaborated to design a program and a support system that would ensure the 12- and 13-year-old students have the tools they need to

succeed. Starting with accessibility, the Santiago Canyon College Early College Program is open to all Santiago Charter students who are committed and interested in a new experience.

"Dual enrollment is not meant to be exclusive to our highest achievers," Pedroza said. "(It) is an opportunity to inspire and create confidence in students that they are capable of being successful in a college course."

Students apply for the dual enrollment cohort through an essay submission, a teacher's recommendation and an interview. Out of Santiago Charter's 1,200

CHARTER » PAGE 5

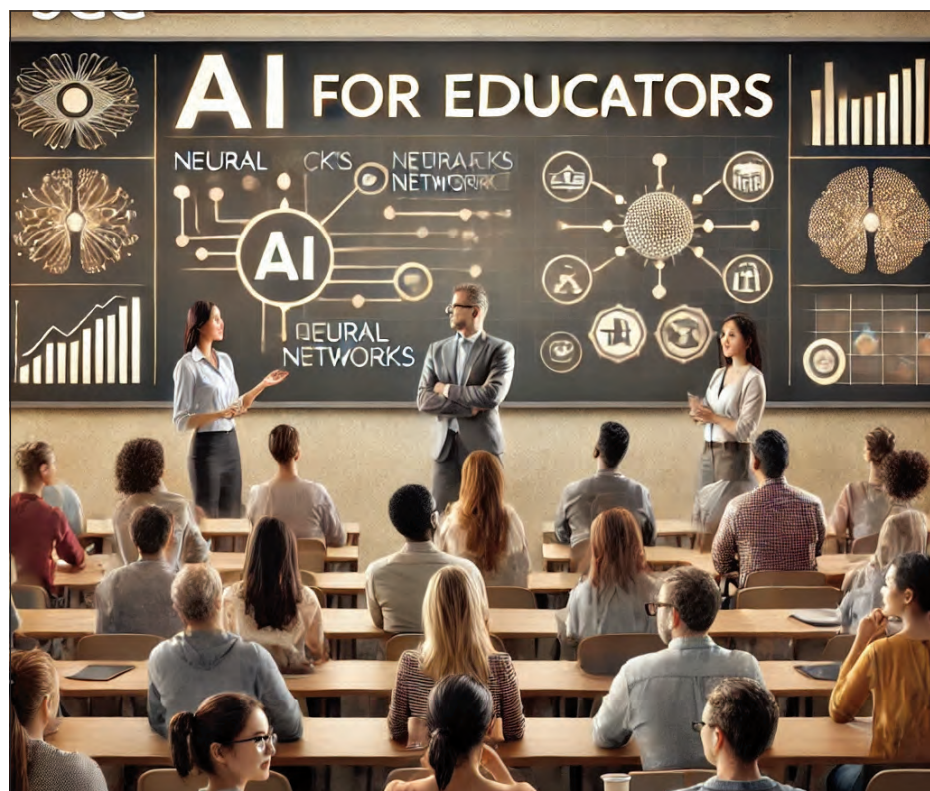


PHOTO COURTESY RSCCD COMMUNICATIONS

An AI image highlights the utility of educator training.

TECHNOLOGY

Faculty training to use AI tools in the classroom

Enhancing curriculum design and learning

By Lou Ponsi
contributing writer

When artificial intelligence, commonly known as AI, burst onto the scene, Santiago Canyon College professor Scott James saw the innovation as "the most powerful accessibility tool" he had ever seen.

Today, as the distance education coordinator at SCC, James has been drawing on his AI proficiency to help position SCC as an innovator and leader in the area of distance learning.

The longtime educator developed and is teaching a course titled "AI for Educators," which will guide educators on an exploration of AI and its "transformative impact on teaching and learning."

Designed for working professionals, the three-unit course runs for eight

weeks, from June 16 to Aug. 10.

The course is an online, asynchronous course, James said, meaning students don't need to be online at the same time to do assignments and access materials.

Instead, students access SCC's running management system, Canvas, and take the class from wherever and whenever it is convenient.

Educators enrolled in the course will build a solid foundation on AI as an educator's tool, James said.

Participants will be introduced to AI concepts and terminologies while exploring a variety of AI tools designed to enhance classroom management, curriculum design, personalized learning and assessment, the professor said.

"I created the AI class really to help

TRAINING » PAGE 5

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PRESIDENT'S SPEECH

Graduates, you are the prototype of a new era



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Dr. Jeannie Kim, president of Santiago Canyon College

100% dependent on others for care. Our days are filled with both beauty and battle, and yet every day Nathaniel teaches me that strength is quiet, presence is power, and love is far greater than anything we can measure.

And just a few weeks ago I sat in the audience of another graduation for my 25-year-old daughter, Elise, who earned her master's degree in school counseling from NYU. As she crossed the stage I was flooded with memories of scraped knees and whispered fears, of school projects and hard conversations about life and relationships. But we also celebrated the small everyday moments that slowly shape a human soul. Watching her become the kind of woman who will help others find their way through academics and life, that was a full circle moment for me because raising children and inspiring students isn't about control. It's about cultivating something sacred, the ability to imagine, to care, to question, to dream, to rise, no matter what this world or life throws at you.

To the parents, families and supporters

So let me take a moment to speak directly to you, the parents, the grandparents, the siblings, the mentors, the chosen families sitting in the crowd holding back tears or beaming with pride.

This day belongs to you, too. You were there through the late-night doubts, the financial sacrifices, the emotional breakdowns, the red-eyed drives, and the whispered, "You've got this."

Whether you were cheering from the sidelines or silently praying from the room next door, you helped raise not just graduates but compassionate, resilient, powerful human beings. You didn't just nurture minds, you nurtured their futures. And for that, I thank you.

Standing at the edge of change

Class of 2025, you are stepping into a world defined by change, rapid, relentless, and remarkable.

Artificial intelligence is already shaping the world you're walking into. It can write code, compose music, diagnose

disease, and yes, even write a decent essay. But what it can't do is dream. It can't care. It can't imagine a better world and then build it.

That's where you come in. Because while the future may be built with algorithms, it will be led by humans. Humans with empathy, with vision, with heart. Humans who have the courage to ask, "Just because we can, should we?"

Where you're headed next

I won't pretend the road ahead will be easy.

Some of you will launch startups, some will continue or return to jobs, some will transfer to four-year universities, join nonprofits, raise children, or change fields entirely.

Many of you will reinvent yourselves again and again, and that's okay.

But wherever you go and whatever you do, I want you to remember this: You already know how to adapt. You already know how to overcome. You already know how to lead, because you've done it here.

Today as you walk across the stage you carry more than a degree. You carry the spirit of a builder. You are not waiting for the world to invite you in. You're shaping it, daring to imagine what's possible and boldly creating the future you want to live in.

So, here's my advice

First, stay uncomfortable. That's where growth lives. Growth doesn't happen in the comfort zones. It happens when you stretch beyond what you thought you were capable of.

Second, be both dreamer and doer. Don't wait for perfect plans. Just start. The world needs your vision, but it needs your action as well. Dreams without motion stay locked in our minds but when you begin, even imperfectly, courageously, and without all the answers, you turn ideas into impact. And if you fail, let failure teach you. You don't need a flawless roadmap to move you forward. You need belief, initiative, and the willingness to figure it out as you go.

Three, keep learning. The diploma is just the beginning. In a world that's

changing faster than ever, your willingness to keep learning will be your greatest advantage.

Number four, use technology but don't lose yourself in it. We are living in a time of breathtaking innovation. Where artificial intelligence, automation, and digital tools can amplify what we create, how we solve problems, and the speed at which we move. But with that power comes responsibility. Technology should serve your purpose, not replace your presence.

And lastly, most of all, have integrity and be kind. It's the most underrated form of leadership in the world. In a world that often rewards ambition, speed, and visibility, never underestimate the quiet power of character. Integrity means doing what's right, even when no one is watching. It means choosing honesty over convenience, values over shortcuts, and consistency over applause. It's the anchor that keeps you grounded when success tempts you to drift. And kindness, real intentional kindness, is not a weakness. It is a strength with open hands. It's listening when it's easier to talk, lifting others up when you're still climbing yourself, and treating every person with dignity, no matter their title or their role. Kindness disarms. It builds trust. It opens doors that credentials alone cannot. So, lead with your heart as much as your mind. The world doesn't just need brilliance, it needs goodness, and you are capable of both.

You are not the future — You are the now

The world won't be transformed by the smartest machines. It will be transformed by the bravest humans, people like you, who have faced challenge with grit, led with heart, and stood firm in the moments of doubt.

So go boldly forward, live with purpose, lead with empathy, dream without apology, and never forget, you are the authors of a future we cannot yet imagine, but desperately need.

Take flight and continue to soar as only an SCC Hawk can.

Congratulations, Class of 2025! The world is not waiting for you, it is depending on you.



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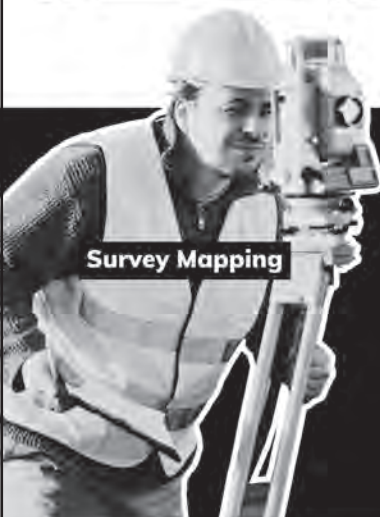
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GRADUATION

CHEERS TO THE CLASS OF 2025

SANTIAGO CANYON COLLEGE BY THE NUMBERS

SCC honored its graduating Class of 2025 during the commencement June 5 at Fred Kelly Stadium on the campus of El Modena High School. Graduates are transferring to institutions across the University of California and California State University systems as well as private institutions including Chapman, USC and Yale.

Graduates: **1,400**
Age of graduates: **17-77**

Degrees and certificates conferred: **3,600**
Military veteran graduates: **17**

Unique class highlights:
Pairs of twins: **4**

Pairs of siblings: **11**
Sets of parents graduating with their children: **2**



Photos by Alan Wendell, Contributing Photographer Thursday, June 5, 2025

- Jennifer Fernandez Galindo stands in line awaiting her graduation from Santiago Canyon College.
- Graduates help each other prepare for the Commencement Ceremony.
- SCC President Jeannie Kim, left, congratulates a graduating student.
- Daisy Tong addresses the crowd during the ceremony.
- A graduate waves to the crowd as she walks to receive her diploma.
- Rancho Santiago Community College District Chancellor Marvin Martinez greets graduates and guests.
- Two graduates await their turn to receive their diplomas.
- Zain Shah, the 2025 class valedictorian, right, receives his diploma from RSCCD Chancellor Marvin Martinez.
- President Jeannie Kim, center, joins a group of continuing education graduates for a photo.
- A 2025 Santiago Canyon College graduate shows off her diploma at sunset during the commencement ceremony.
- A proud moment as Francisco Vazquez receives a diploma on behalf of his son, who was accepted to 10 universities despite incarceration.
- Graduates celebrate by traditionally turning their tassels from right to left.

PAWS FOR STRESS RELIEF

Therapy animals help students unwind during finals week

RSCCD Communications

Santiago Canyon College continued its finals-week tradition of Paws for Stress Relief on May 28, welcoming therapy animals to campus to help students de-stress and recharge.

Paws for Stress Relief began at SCC in 2012 as a collaboration between SCC Psychological Services and Paws for Healing, a nonprofit organization affiliated with Pet Partners. The event features trained and certified therapy animals, including dogs, rabbits and guinea pigs. This year's event featured dogs and a parrot.

"I've always enjoyed animals—my dad used to call our house the 'Campitelli Zoo,'" said Melissa Campitelli, lead clinical psychologist with Psychological Services at Santiago Canyon College. "I grew up with lots of pets and later asked myself how I could combine my love of animals with my professional work."

Campitelli found inspiration in higher education models. "I read that Harvard was incorporating animal therapy during finals week, and I knew this was something we could bring to our students," she said.

"Animal therapy is well-supported by the medical field, and it plays a meaningful role in promoting academic success and performance," Campitelli said.

Research has shown that petting animals can reduce cortisol levels, improve mood, and support overall well-being.

"Your immune system is compromised when you're stressed," Campitelli said. "Finals week is a stressful time for students and even for faculty and staff. Events like this give the entire campus community a chance to pause and reset."



PHOTOS COURTESY RSCCD COMMUNICATIONS

The SCC Psychological Services tent on campus hosted the therapy dogs in partnership with Paws for Healing.



Santiago Canyon College students interact with a therapy dog during the Paws for Stress Relief event.



Students took advantage of the opportunity to relax and decompress during finals week.

FACILITIES

Student Government, Student Life develop renovated student lounge

RSCCD Communications

Santiago Canyon College has opened a newly renovated student lounge, offering students a dedicated space to relax, connect and recharge between classes. The project was a joint effort between the Associated Student Government and SCC Student Life.

The renovation fulfills a long-standing goal to transform Room T-107 into

a fully functional lounge tailored to meet the needs of SCC's diverse student body. The project began in spring 2024, following recommendations from the 2023-24 ASG.

Student feedback played a key role throughout the planning process. ASG gathered input from peers and worked with Student Life to define the lounge's features, select vendors and finalize the layout and furnishings.

Renovations to Room T-107 include two large worktables for studying and

games, two oversized couches, a recreational area with a ping-pong table and a staff workstation for checking out games, DVDs and other materials. The space now includes three charging stations for cellphones, laptops and tablets.

The design was developed in partnership with Culver-Newlin, with furnishings selected for durability, ergonomics and ease of maintenance in educational settings. The room has a modular layout that can be reconfigured for student

events and serves as a space to showcase student artwork and campus announcements.

The project was fully funded through the capital outlay account of the student activity fee. ASG provided both the funding and direction in response to student input.

"That space was created for students, for students alone, and it represents everything the college stands for: connection, inclusivity, equity, safe space and care," said ASG President Flo Cudal.



PHOTO COURTESY RSCCD COMMUNICATIONS

The newly renovated lounge in Room T-107 features modern, modular furniture and space for student collaboration, study and relaxation. The updated student lounge includes seating areas, tables, and student recognition displays, creating a welcoming space for the SCC community.

SPORTS

New softball coach focuses on confidence and team building

Simon believes players learn life lessons

By Nicole Gregory
contributing writer

Spring 2026 may seem like a long way off, but the new Santiago Canyon College softball coach is already recruiting for his 2026 Hawks team. Louis Simon is a resident of Irvine and grew up mostly in Southern California, playing baseball and football in college until a broken leg took him out of the game. He became the head softball coach at Beckman High School, where his team won three division titles, and four years ago founded a summer collegiate softball league that boasts 10 competitive teams organized by his nonprofit Game Ready Enterprises.

Now, Simon is applying his skills to building a strong SCC softball team.

His coaching approach is to help athletes be their best, mentally and physically. “What’s great about softball or any sport is that you have an opportunity to use the tools of the sport to help you grow,” Simon said.

He urges players to think about their goals and define why they want to play the game. “I love to pose questions to help them think a little bit,” he said. “If they understand what they’re doing and why, it’s going to have a lot more clarity for them to take the steps forward to improve what they’re trying to do, whether it’s in the classroom or in the field.”

Another part of his coaching philosophy is to encourage players not to fear failure. “If you’re afraid to fail, how are you going to succeed without taking that risk?” he said. “And that’s the good thing about the sport of softball and baseball. They call it a game of failure, but I say you don’t succeed until you fail. I encourage failure — that means you’re trying. If you’re not even trying, you won’t know what you’re capable of. So why not give it a shot while you’re young?”

Simon spent years in the entertainment industry where he worked as a professional stuntman. When his daughter showed interest in playing softball at age 8, Simon began to coach her and helped her train as she grew older.

“She loved the competitive aspect of the game,” he said. “From my baseball background, I got into training with her and tried to teach her the right technique of things.” She played center field in college softball and recently graduated from University of Central Florida.

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, many young people, including Simon’s daughter, suffered from the isolation. “Some athletes were going through some pretty severe depression and difficult times mentally during that period of time,” he said. “I had a few college coaches who had athletes going through that here in Southern California.”

Several of them approached him with an idea. “They said, ‘Lou, can you create



PHOTO COURTESY RSCCD COMMUNICATIONS

Louis Simon has been named head coach of the Santiago Canyon College softball team. Simon brings experienced coaching to the Hawks, including a successful stint at Beckman High School.

a college softball summer league where these girls feel positive again, strong again through their skills? We need something like that.’”

Without thinking too much about it, Simon agreed.

The result was that he founded Game Ready Enterprises with the stated purpose of helping to build mental health along with sports skill, to develop community leadership and provide career guidance for college-age girls.

The League, as it is called, has grown each summer and has been a successful and fulfilling venture. So when Simon was asked to coach the Santiago Canyon

College softball team — which is part of the Orange Empire Conference — it seemed like a natural next step. “It is one of the toughest and most challenging conferences at least in California, if not in the U.S.,” he said.

He was already familiar with SCC’s field, campus and the college’s good reputation. “I knew it very well,” he said. “Everything really lined up. It was perfect timing. My heart was in it from that moment. I’ve seen all the good it can do for these kids by showing them someone cares for them. And it’s about life strength as opposed to everything being about the game. So it was a good balance

for me to say, ‘Hey, I’d love to be a part of this program, and this is what I bring to the table.’”

Simon will continue to recruit players until the fall when they begin to train as a team in preparation for the next season, which begins in May 2026.

Although he can take about 20 players, reaching that number is not Simon’s priority in recruiting. He looks for character traits such as a willingness to learn and playing for the team. “To me, that goes a long way because it builds character, it builds the chemistry, it builds a bond with the sisterhood on our team and absolute respect,” Simon said.

Charter

FROM PAGE 1

students, more than 300 picked up applications. The 64 selected last fall are a highly motivated group that represents a true cross-section of the student body, including six different home languages, students with disabilities and all academic levels.

Before starting the SCC course in February, students spent two months with Santiago Charter teacher and dual enrollment coordinator Joan Ekdale learning college-level success strategies, including taking a field trip to SCC to receive their student ID cards.

SCC professors teach on the middle school campus with Ekdale present in the classroom, where she serves as both a support resource and a liaison between professors, students and families. She also holds office hours to provide additional guidance.

“Program partnerships like the one we have work because of the collaborative nature of our agreement,” said SCC Professor of Counseling Dora Elena Escobar, who taught Santiago Charter’s inaugural cohort.

The program offers age-appropriate courses that meet UC and CSU General Education requirements. After completing the counseling course this past



PHOTO COURTESY RSCCD COMMUNICATIONS

The SCC dual enrollment initiative introduces middle schoolers to college-level coursework and encourages early academic engagement, aiming to build confidence and readiness for higher education through collaborative, hands-on learning experiences.

spring, students will take online summer classes in either geography, Spanish or American Sign Language, followed by an in-person History of Cinema course in the fall. The initiative is fully funded by the California College Promise Grant and other grant sources, covering tuition and

textbooks at no cost to families.

One aspect of the program is that regardless of which high school Santiago Charter cohort students attend, Ekdale will continue to support and track their online course progress through graduation. Students who start the program in

seventh grade can earn up to 15 college credits before entering high school and potentially complete an associate’s degree by the time they graduate. As a Title I school, this opportunity can be transformative for students and their families.

“We have many students who are first-generation college students, and these are students who, for the first time, are really seeing themselves as someone who is destined to go to college,” Ekdale said.

The completion of the middle school’s first semester with SCC saw some scheduling challenges, but overall, tremendous success with all 64 students passing the class. Half of the cohort will move on to high school, and applications will open next fall for a new cohort to be formed.

“By starting dual enrollment now, I am creating a path for success so that I will be happy with what I choose to do, where I go and how I live the rest of my life,” said recent Santiago Charter eighth grade graduate Madison Resch.

Pedroza and her team hope that SCMS’s successful partnership with SCC serves as a model for others to follow and inspires similar efforts across the state.

“Dual enrollment is a great way for me to challenge myself, prepare for college and explore different career paths early on,” said Santiago Charter rising eighth grader Jonathan Vazquez. “I’m excited about the opportunities it brings and the impact it will have on my future.”

Training

FROM PAGE 1

teachers wrap their heads around how students are using it,” James said. “And how they can use it to support their classroom design, and some strategies for how to mitigate any sort of inappropriate use of AI in the classroom, and ethics of AI, as well.”

James, who has spent much of his career teaching educational technology and instructional design, was an alternate media specialist in Disabled Students Program & Services when he witnessed the profound impact of technology in helping students excel, despite their disabilities.

Inspired by the benefits of technology to his students with special needs, James went on to earn a master’s de-

gree in learning theory and educational technology and continues to strengthen his expertise in the area.

Students in James’ AI for Educators class will learn to design and use AI tools to create detailed lesson plans and assignments based on the curriculum outline of their classes.

James will have his students create personalized chatbots, which are programs that simulate human conversations, usually through voice- or text-based interactions.

Chatbots guide users through processes and can personalize experiences.

James’ resume includes creating chatbots for AI 4 Learning, an open education initiative through Axim Collaborative, a joint endeavor of Harvard and MIT focused on enhancing Generative AI training for faculty at community colleges and other educational institutions.

The collaborative is designed to pro-

vide educators with the skills to effectively integrate AI tools into their teaching and learning environments.

“He is quite a remarkable leader in the field of AI at Santiago Canyon College,” said SCC faculty member Patty Sanchez, coordinator for Workforce Preparation and Vocational ESL in Continuing Education at SCC.

Sanchez piloted the modules that guided faculty in designing chatbots to support student learning and shared her knowledge with faculty in the ESL Department and Career Education in Continuing Education.

James’ course culminates in a capstone project in which students will showcase their ability to synthesize AI tools, curriculum design and ethical principles to enhance student success and equity in the classroom.

“Our faculty are very excited to use this technology to advance student learning,” Sanchez said.



PHOTO COURTESY RSCCD COMMUNICATIONS

Santiago Canyon College professor and distance learning coordinator Scott James

SPORTS

Women's flag football comes to Santiago Canyon College

Nationally recognized coach leading team

By **Larry Urish**
contributing writer

For clear-cut proof that Santiago Canyon College is committed to bolstering its athletic department while empowering its student-athletes and increasing community engagement, look no further than its new flag football team, kicking off its inaugural season this spring. SCC has hired Kristen Sherman, a nationally recognized coach who's already established a winning flag football team from the ground up.

Orange Lutheran High School's flag football coach since the program began in the fall of 2023, Sherman headed a squad that last year won the CIF Southern Section's Division I championship, with a record of 23-2. At one point, the squad was honored as the top team in the country by high school sports-information source MaxPreps. For her success, Sherman was named CIF Southern Section Division I's Coach of the Year and the OC Register's All-County Coach of the Year.

Boasting some 7.8 million participants in 2024, according to global data platform Statista, flag football has undergone a surge in popularity since the early 2000s. The sport will make its Olympic debut in the 2028 Los Angeles Summer Games, and it has been featured in the NFL's annual Pro Bowl.

Here's what bodes well for SCC's future squad: The team representing the AFC in the inaugural NFL Flag High School Girls Showcase during the 2025 Pro Bowl was coached by none other than Sherman. This speaks volumes about her wide-ranging reputation as a proven winner and leader of student-athletes.

"The great thing about flag football is that it's so accessible, especially at the lower levels," Sherman said. "You don't need a background in the sport to start, and it doesn't require a lot of gear: just a mouthguard and cleats. ... For so many girls and women, football has been something that they've watched men do for so long, and they've frankly been denied opportunities to do it themselves. It's been great to watch girls learn the game. Seeing their confidence grow as they figure it out is pretty cool."

SCC's squad will compete in the Orange Empire Conference. OEC schools that are either competing in, or are interested in supporting flag football include,



PHOTO COURTESY OF KRISTEN SHERMAN
Kristen Sherman leads her team during a flag football game at Orange Lutheran High School. Sherman, who coached the Lancers to a CIF Division 1 championship, brings her championship experience to Santiago Canyon College as the school launches its first-ever women's flag football program.

among others, Irvine Valley, Saddleback, Cypress, Golden West, Orange Coast and Santa Ana colleges, said Nicho DellaValle, SCC assistant director of Athletics and Sports Information. "We found that flag football is a great opportunity to increase female-athlete engagement, while increasing community involvement," he said. "It's a growing sport, and we want to be on the forefront of this growth."

Top leaders at SCC are excited about Sherman heading the new squad. "For lack of a better term, Kristen Sherman is a stud," DellaValle said. "She really understands what it takes to lead a very competitive and successful program. Her knowledge of flag football is impressive, and she really gets the best out of every student she works with."

However, every first-year endeavor can have its challenges, DellaValle admits. "Starting a program from the ground up involves learning about the flag football environment and fine-tuning our recruit-

ing tactics and the way we support the team," he said. "Every sport has certain needs, so we need to identify those and figure out ways to support that unique cohort of student-athletes."

Starting out, Sherman expects her experience at SCC to be similar to her first year at the high school level. "I'm thankful that I was able to start the program at Orange Lutheran since it gave me some insight into what it's like to begin from the ground up. I'm excited for the challenge of working with older girls. Starting out at SCC will involve playing fundamentally sound football, then building on that in terms of complexity."

While a flag football team may be new to SCC, the sport has already been part of the SCC environment, thanks to the Vince Ferragamo Flag Football League, a coed youth organization starting its second season this fall. Headed by former NFL quarterback Ferragamo, the league is run by retired NFL players in conjunc-

tion with SCC's Community Education Program. Practices and games take place on SCC fields.

"Vince is on our board of trustees, and this is where our flag football conversation began," DellaValle said. "His league has been a successful community engagement effort, and it's one of the reasons why we added women's flag football to our arsenal of sports."

Sherman and DellaValle agree that the success of SCC flag football extends beyond wins and losses. "It's important to create a sense of community and family, giving the girls a place to belong and making sure they're productive students at the college," Sherman said.

"Wins are great, but it's not all about that," DellaValle said. "It's about providing a great atmosphere for the student-athletes, then trying to make their experience better and better as we continue down this path."



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