

BASEBALL

• CONT FROM PG 13

Jaguars overcome 7-run deficit with fierce 10-run rally

SC's pitching once again did enough to win. Starter Jaden Wilcox pitched into the 5th inning, but surrendered the lead as he showed signs of fatigue.

Adrian Sanchez was ready to take the baton. The crafty reliever stemmed the threat and closed out the game.

SC's half century rivalry with the Grossmont Griffins was a twin win for Mother Nature, who forced a doubleheader following rainouts. It was a long but productive day for the hitters on both teams, each of which scored 19 runs in the doubleheader split.

The Jags looked soggy most of the way until an inspired rally turned what could have been a disastrous day into an inspiring victory in the nightcap. After losing the first game 7-3, SC fell behind 7-0 in Game Two, looking sluggish as the snails outside the stadium that were slowly heading off in a variety of directions, seemingly without purpose.

Pinch hitter Nico Vallarelli was the unexpected hero in the bottom of the 4th in a wacky turnabout when he whacked a single. He scored when a second pinch hitter, Jesus Villegas, doubled to leftfield, giving the Jaguars their first run and a pulse.

Aiden Miller, the third pinch hitter of the inning, singled to put runners on the corners. Gio Armas then scorched a double to left for another run.

After a pitching change, the Jaguars continued to feast on the exhausted Grossmont bullpen. Benji Solano singled in a pair of runs and an infield grounder by Adrian Hinojosa scored yet another.

Vallarelli came to the plate a second time as SC batted around and achieved a baseball rarity – two pinch hits in an inning. This time Vallarelli smoked a triple and cleared the bases.

Grossmont made another pitching change, but could not staunch the bleeding. Taylor greeted the new pitcher with an RBI single, followed by a Nakano walk to reload the bases.

A third Grossmont pitching change worked about as well as

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the first two. Millan singled for the second time in the inning and drove in a pair.

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SC scored three more in the 6th inning off two more Grossmont pitchers, but not enough to breathe easy. Jaguar arms were not much better the Griffins on this day. Both team's bullpens were like staggered boxers stumbling around the ring in the 15th round trying to stay on their feet.

With the score 16-12 and Grossmont roaring back with the bases loaded in the bottom of the 8th, Southwestern deployed its secret weapon.

Right hander Jonan Stepler promptly struck out two to end the threat, then breezed through the bottom of the 9th by striking out the side. His five straight Ks ended a marathon day that both teams were ready to wrap.

Q & A WITH JOHNNY JAGUAR

A ROARING SUCCESS

Southwestern's popular Mesoamerican mascot is 'the strong, silent type' and a fierce fan favorite

BY CHERI-ANN INOUYE

As a young kitten growing up on the Yucatan Peninsula, Johnny Jaguar could not imagine he would one day be the popular mascot of Southwestern College, the coolest cat on the West Coast.

"When I was a kid prowling around the jungles and climbing on the old pyramids, my Tio Goyo was the mascot for the UNAM Pumas (professional soccer team) in Mexico City," he said. "That's how I became interested in mascot. He's still got the gig. He's a legend. Maybe it's in my genes."

Juan Pablo "Juanito" Jaguar spent countless hours stalking the sidelines of Liga Mexico soccer pitches learning at the paws of his famous uncle. His big break, though, came when a highly-regarded college professor went to Mesoamerica to study Mayan culture and spotted Juanito ambling up the side of Chichen Itza. A long, strange adventure was about to unfold.

The Sun was granted an exclusive tongue-in-cheek April 1 interview with Johnny Jaguar following a Southwestern College women's tennis match. This interview was lightly edited for space and clarity.

THE SUN: Thanks for carving some time out of your busy schedule to meet with us, Johnny.

JOHNNY JAGUAR: No problema, folks. I read The Sun cover to cover every time you come out.

THE SUN: Good to know, thank you. Please tell us how it is you came to Southwestern College.

JOHNNY JAGUAR: Happy to. Crazy story. I was a juvenile jag climbing around on a pyramid back home when this Southwestern College art professor named Mark Van Stone approached like someone out of a Bob Dylan song or Indiana Jones movie. He had beef jerky, so I thought I'd make an introduction. Great guy. We hung out for a while and he drew a few sketches of me.

THE SUN: When did you see him next?

JOHNNY JAGUAR: He came back a few months later with an even bigger stash of beef jerky and a big grin on his face. He told me he'd shown the sketches to his college president, this dude named Serafin Zasueta. Serafin, you know, like an angel. Anyway, Dr. Zasueta wanted to get rid of Southwestern's old mascot, the Apache, and Dr. Van Stone suggested the jaguar. Z dug the idea and sent Dr. Van Stone back to make an offer. I pounced at the chance and signed with Southwestern College in 2000. Been here ever since.

THE SUN: Gotta say we knew we had a badass black jaguar as our mascot, but we didn't know you had a name.

JOHNNY JAGUAR: Well, yeah. Like everyone's got a name, right? But it's understandable because I'm not supposed to talk when I'm giffin'. It wrecks the illusion. There's lots of times I wanted to blurt out, hey, name's Johnny Jag! That's not mascot protocol, though, so I have to be cool and remain the strong, silent type.

THE SUN: Makes sense. What's in your mascot job description?

JOHNNY JAGUAR: I'm a little bit cheerleader, a little bit dancer. I rep our school mostly, so I have to make sure I'm looking sharp and sending out the right message. The vibe is important, dudes, so I'm also doing my best to make my homies proud.

THE SUN: What's the best part of your job?

JOHNNY JAGUAR: That's easy, bro. All the people who smile and laugh and want selfies. Sometimes I feel like, I dunno know, like, sometimes I feel I'm kind of this positive force on campus who can make people's day a little brighter. Does that sound corny?

THE SUN: No, not at all. We've seen you have that effect on people.

JOHNNY JAGUAR: Yeah, it's pretty cool. I get paid to be nice and to cheer people up.

THE SUN: Any downsides?

JOHNNY JAGUAR: Well, you know, the usual mascot stuff. Some grumpy kid pulls my tail or the time someone spilled a Juice Adventure smoothie on my foot while we were getting our pictures taken. Every once in a while I scare a baby or small kid. That's a bummer, never mean to do that.

THE SUN: Tell us, please, about your role models, those heroic mascots you look up to.

JOHNNY JAGUAR: I'm always watching YouTube video of the greats, you know, like the San Diego Chicken, the Philly Phanatic, Silver the Wonder Pony from Bonitafest, Mr. Met, Bennie the Bull. The Padres Swinging Friar is underrated. I love his work. I really admire some of the old guard, too, like Tony the Tiger and the Cuckoo for Coco Puffs bird. That guy is hilarious and a great athlete.

THE SUN: Tell us about some of your career highlights.

JOHNNY JAGUAR: Highlights. Wow, there are so many. I mean I loved being there when the women's soccer team won the league championship in the fall. So cool. The football bowl games. I remember when our cheerleaders

were national champions a few years ago. We always have great cheerleaders and they are so underrated. Opening Day after COVID was awesome. It was great to see actual people back on campus after so long. It was fun to be in your newsroom during Mardi Gras with the flying beads and everything.

THE SUN: Well you know what they say, right? What goes on in the newsroom, stays in the newsroom.

JOHNNY JAGUAR: Check. Mum's the word, amigos.

THE SUN: We know you've had offers from other schools and even the NFL. You've turned them all down. Do you ever think there will be a day you leave Southwestern?

JOHNNY JAGUAR: Oh hell no, dudes. I'm an apex predator and this is an apex gig. I mean, I'm the face of the only college in the South County and the most diverse college in America. This is such an interesting place we live in, you know, with Mexico so close by and the Pacific Rim thing going on. There are so many interesting people here from every corner of the world. I mean, yeah, maybe I'd make more scratch moving to Utah or Missouri or, I don't know, North Dakota, but why would I leave here? Plus ain't no surfing in Utah, not to mention Lolita's or MJ's.

THE SUN: True that. What advice would you give a young person, or animal or ..whatever that thinks maybe they would like to be a mascot.

JOHNNY JAGUAR: I say go for it! If you have the commitment and are willing to put in the time and energy to learn the profession, you can do it. It's not easy. I mean, you have to work up your shtick, something that fits with the culture of your community. There's studying to do, for sure, but a lot of it is intuition, that gut feeling. Great mascots make thousands of decisions at every appearance. Is this a time to be crazy like at a football game, or should I dial it back a little, like at commencement. Can't really be clownin' during "Pomp and Circumstance," verdad? Respect the profession and pay your dues. Your time will come. Have a little faith in yourself and you can be a success.

THE SUN: A roaring success.

JOHNNY JAGUAR: (groan) Dude, you had to go there.

THE SUN: Sorry, you get that a lot?

JOHNNY JAGUAR: All the time.



SELFIE SWAGGER – Johnny Jaguar poses for scores of selfies with his fans at virtually every campus event. He said he enjoys 'making people's days a little brighter.'

Photo Courtesy of SC Instagram