

# Ex-Huskies lineman Michael Kneip, 25, uses lessons learned from 'Coach Pete' at perennial power Bellevue High



By Christian Caple (/author/christian-caple/) 2h ago



SEATTLE — The “Winner’s Manual,” Michael Kneip said, required several revisions.

On the first pass, it felt too much like Chris Petersen, his second college coach. The second time through, it read a little too much like Butch Goncharoff, his high school coach. The third, too much like Steve Sarkisian, his first college coach.

These are men Kneip admires, men whom he credits for influencing, in their own ways, his values as a person and competitor. But if Kneip was to truly sell the Bellevue High School hiring committee on the idea of picking a 24-year-old (he's since turned 25, for the record) to lead its powerhouse football program, he had no choice but to draft his own version of what winning should look like, borrowing elements from his coaching mentors — and from his job in business development for Amazon Web Services — while putting forth a vision tailored to his own style and beliefs.

“I think it took me six tries to get it down to what I wanted it to be,” Kneip told *The Athletic*. “It’s more about what football can create for you as a person more than what it is as a player. I think that’s one thing I took from ‘Coach Pete’ — the more you’re aligned outside of football, the more it will help you in football, as well. It ended up being pretty authentic at the end to who I thought I was.”

An identity that now includes the title of head coach at his prep alma mater. And his other alma mater is well-represented on his first-year staff.

Kneip, a Washington Huskies offensive lineman from 2012-16, was hired as Bellevue’s coach on April 20. One of his first phone calls was to former UW running back Deontae Cooper, who immediately agreed to join Kneip’s staff as associate head coach and running backs coach; two other former Huskies, offensive lineman Ross Dolbec and linebacker Scott Lawyer, have joined as assistants, too.

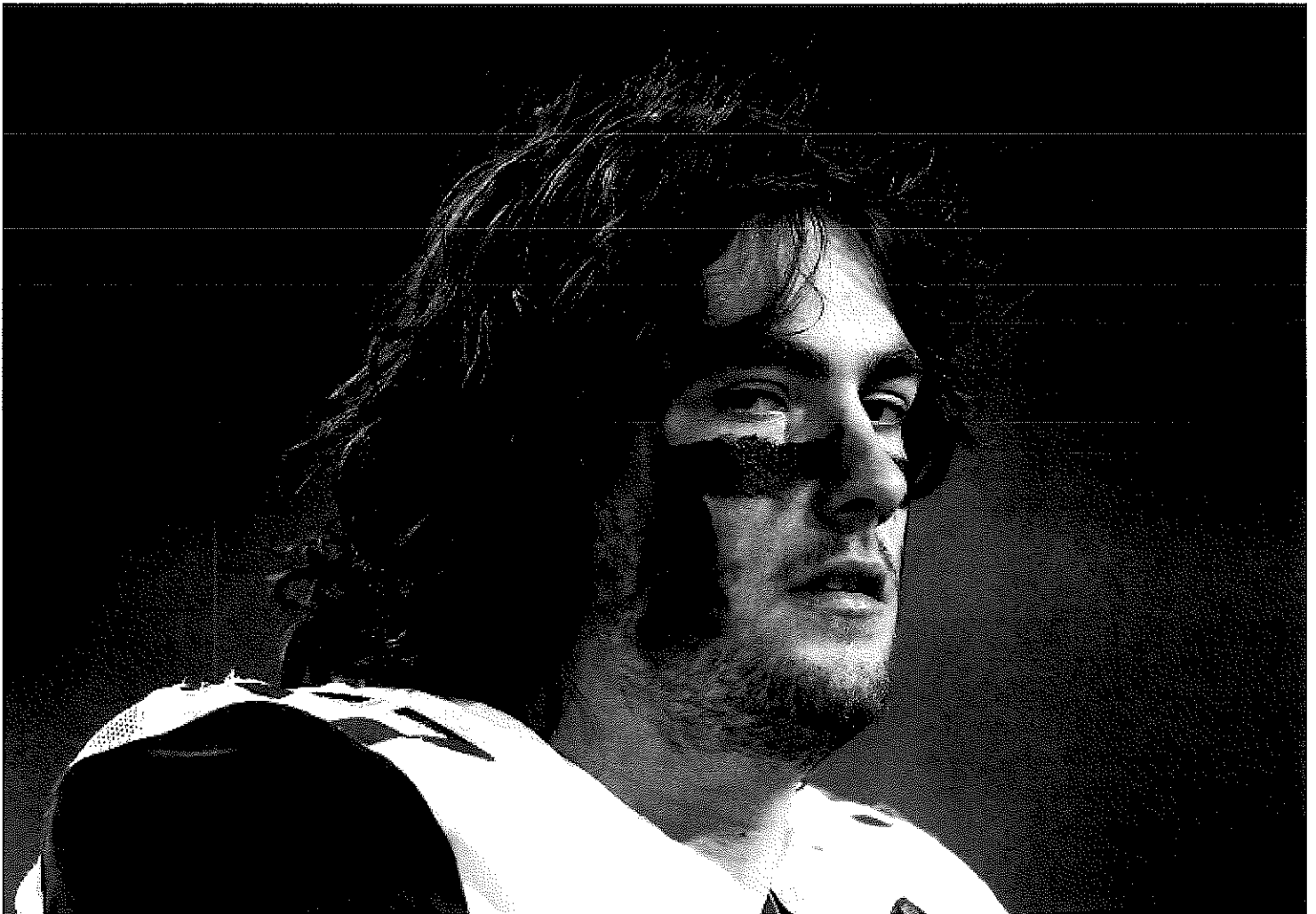
That makes sense. Kneip will put his own spin on Bellevue’s program, but his time at UW — coupled with his Bellevue heritage — provided the philosophical foundation needed to land the job. And, he hopes, to excel at it.

Regardless of any other qualification, Kneip had this on the competition: Bellevue will not find a coach who loves Bellevue more than Kneip. He helped the Wolverines win four consecutive state titles, from 2008-11, and was an all-state offensive lineman as a senior. His younger brother, A.J., now a walk-on at Washington, was a part of two state title teams, and

two others that lost to Sammamish Eastside Catholic in the state championship game. Their twin sisters, Cadie and Jessica, attended Bellevue before going on to track careers at nearby Northwest University. Their parents, Sharon and Neal, still make their home in Bellevue.

Kneip says his experience as a Bellevue football player — beginning as a second-grader in the Wolverine Junior Football program — helped make him who he is today. He didn't grow up dreaming of playing in college or the NFL. He dreamed of playing for Bellevue, like so many others who grew up in the youth program, learning the principles of the Wing-T offense long before they ever stepped foot on the high-school campus.

“Bellevue football was a great outlet for me,” he said. “I was never the smartest kid, never the most athletic kid, but it didn't matter. ... All my best friends came from Bellevue football, too. I can name about six guys off the top of my head who would do anything for me, and I would do the same for them.”



Kneip began his Washington career as a preferred walk-on. He played offensive line for the Huskies from 2012-16.  
(Photo: Mark J. Rebilas / USA TODAY Sports)

Of course, Bellevue finds itself in a different place than when Kneip starred there, despite its relative success last season. After multiple investigations revealed several rules violations over a multi-year period —illegal recruiting and players using falsified addresses among them — the KingCo Conference in June 2016 placed Bellevue on a four-year postseason ban, in addition to several other sanctions. Goncharoff, the coach who led Bellevue to 11 state titles in 15 seasons, was removed from his job, along with longtime assistant Pat Jones.

The postseason ban later was reduced to two years, and in September 2017, the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA) voted to lift it altogether, though Bellevue still was required to vacate two state championships and a second-place state finish from 2012-14. After a one-year playoff hiatus, Bellevue returned to the postseason in 2017 under second-year coach Mark Landes, a former Goncharoff assistant, and advanced to the state semifinals before losing to O'Dea.

Kneip, who remains a staunch supporter of Goncharoff, said he didn't pay much attention to the investigations. "I don't know what's true or not, still," he said.

"At least 20 of the seniors I played with, I played from second grade until my senior year, and I don't know how many other schools can say that," Kneip said. "I think people have accepted it and moved on. There's not much we can do about it."

Goncharoff, now the coach at nearby Cedar Park Christian, did not return messages seeking comment for this story.

Kneip spent the 2017 season as a volunteer assistant for the Wolverines, working with the offensive line, though he wasn't planning to return in 2018. Then Landes stepped down as coach in March, citing increased responsibilities at his day job (<https://www.bellevureporter.com/sports/bellevue-high-school-head-football-coach-resigns/>), the Bellevue Reporter said.

At first, Kneip simply wondered whom Bellevue might hire. Then he started receiving text messages from players, asking him to apply.

"I'm like, no," Kneip said. "I don't have any coaching experience. There's no way I could get this. There's going to be tons of good people applying."

More texts rolled in. More players encouraged him to go for it. He asked Bellevue's athletic director, John Hill, if it would be worth applying.

"Honestly," Hill told *The Athletic*, "I felt like anybody, if they were willing or wanting to apply for the position, should absolutely go for it."

Why not, Kneip figured. He submitted his application a few days before the deadline. He was selected for an initial phone screen. He was selected for another phone screen. Then they asked him to come in for an in-person interview, before what Kneip describes as a "huge panel, with a bunch of types of personas and characters in there."

From there, he leaned on his real-world experience; he studied communication and sales at UW, and worked several internships in the business world before getting hired at Amazon the same month the Huskies faced Alabama in the 2016 College Football Playoff.

Armed with his "Winner's Manual" — not unlike the one Petersen distributed to Kneip and his teammates upon arriving at UW — Kneip approached the meeting as if he were making a business pitch.

"I explained my vision, how I wanted to run the program, why I wanted to run it this way," Kneip said. "Being young, there are a ton of advantages. I know what it's like to be a player there. I was playing there seven years ago."

Bellevue football would be more involved in the community, he told them. The coaches, he said, would be more available as mentors, more involved in players' lives. And they would teach more than just football, borrowing from Petersen's "Built For Life" philosophy.

The committee was impressed. Hill, who coached Kneip as a thrower on Bellevue's track and field team, appreciated his enthusiasm. And it didn't hurt that Kneip planned to use the same offense — run, run, run — that had taken the Wolverines to such astounding heights under Goncharoff.

"Obviously, he's pretty young for being a high school head coach," Hill said, "but at the other end of it is, he has surrounded himself with really good people. He's coming from something he really grew up with and believes in. He's doing just fine, and everybody's been pretty happy with the culture that's being built from his leadership."

There were several qualified candidates among the applicant pool, Hill said, but it “probably wasn’t as deep as you’d think,” for obvious reasons.

“It’s a challenging place to work,” Hill said. “I don’t think there’s any reason to hide from that fact, just based on the recent history that the school has gone through.”

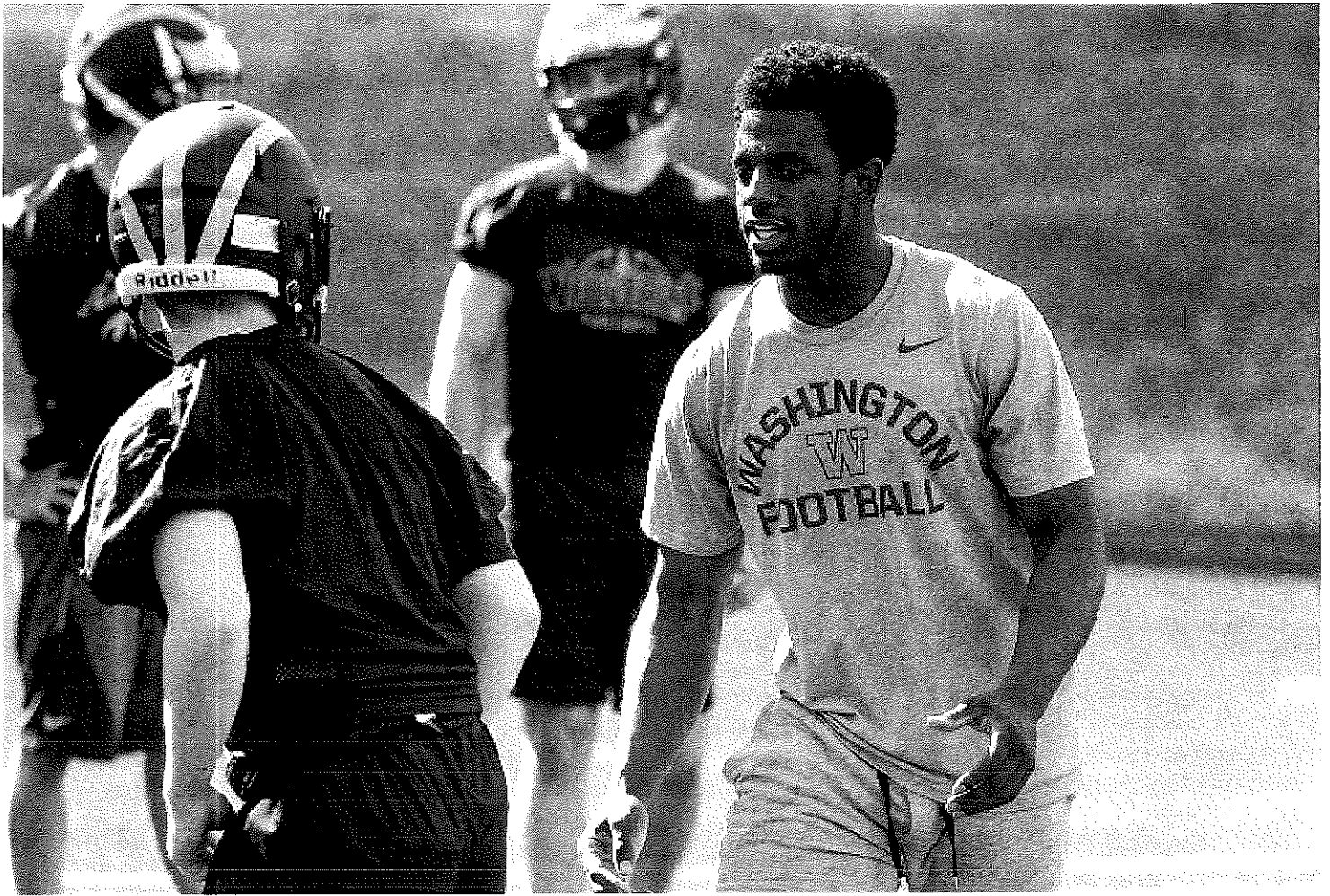
Kneip says he wouldn’t have been in position to land the job if not for what he learned at Bellevue during his time as a player.

“I know for a fact that a 24-, 25-year-old is not getting a job at a marquee school if it wasn’t for what (the previous coaches) taught me,” Kneip said. “There were people way more qualified than me who applied. But what they know is what I learned there.”

Another thing that Hill appreciates about Kneip: He knows what he doesn’t know, and he has filled his coaching staff with a blend of expertise and youthful energy. He’s also trying to cultivate an atmosphere of positivity and optimism.

So it makes sense that Cooper is on staff. The former UW running back gave the NFL a shot after his grad-transfer season at San Jose State in 2016, but he knew his injury history — three torn ACLs — would make that a near-impossibility. He did a couple of workouts with the Oakland Raiders that didn’t yield anything, then decided to move back to Seattle to begin his non-football career.

Cooper studied communication and American ethnic studies as an undergrad at UW, then completed his master’s in intercollegiate athletics leadership. But he wound up doing something completely different: Cooper works as a project engineer at Schuchart, a construction company in downtown Seattle. He’s back at UW as a student, this time for his certificate in construction management. He never thought he would coach high school football.



Cooper was a teammate of Kneip's with the Huskies and didn't hesitate when he was asked to be a Bellevue assistant. (Photo: Courtesy of Dale Echigoshima)

But when Kneip called, “I said yes, without a doubt,” Cooper said. “I didn’t even second-guess it. I’m glad I did.”

Kneip quickly hired a full staff, including offensive (Kyle Martin) and defensive (Garrett Cook) coordinators with significant experience at the high school level. In addition to Cooper, Lawyer and Dolbec, Kneip also hired two former Washington State players, Bennett Bontemps and Jeff Waldner, among other position coaches.

“It’s a really cool blend of experienced guys, and then guys who are fresh out of college who are very detailed at a certain position,” Kneip said.

The staff sat down in the offseason and put together its practice plans. With Kneip working full-time at Amazon, practices are at 5 p.m., rather than immediately after school. That makes for a long day, Kneip said — his work day starts at around 5:30 a.m. during the season

— and he realizes his youth is part of what allows him to pull it off.

In the beginning, it was just Kneip and Cooper at Bellevue's 6 a.m. offseason weight-lifting sessions. Their first lift was with 14 kids. By the end of the summer, there were 45.

Numbers remain an issue across the Bellevue School District, Hill said, adding that no school in the district currently fields a junior-varsity team (Bellevue does have a freshman team). Even Bellevue's youth program is having trouble filling out its rosters; in the past, he said, a certain age group might field two teams, but now struggles just to field one.

"Looking at fall 2015, compared to fall 2018, we're probably down about 60-70 students in the football program," Hill said.

But the Wolverines are winning. Despite playing with their backup quarterback, Bellevue is off to a 4-0 start. And while Kneip might have his own style and beliefs, at least some things haven't changed: In their last game, a 38-35 victory over Camas, the Wolverines did not attempt a single pass.

Sharon Kneip still remembers the promise she made to her oldest son.

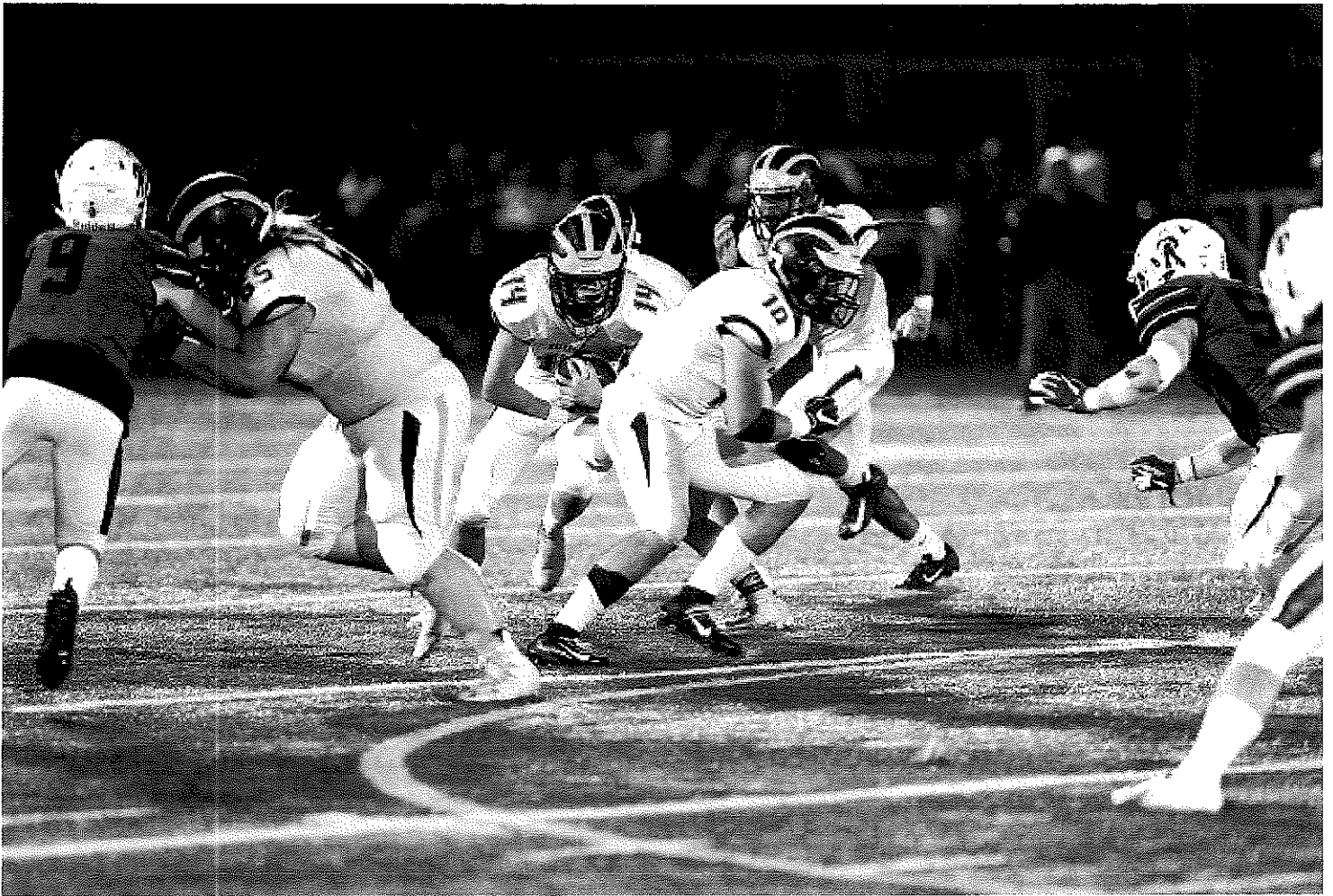
Michael was jaundiced as a newborn, a fairly common condition of the liver that causes a baby's skin to take on a yellow hue. It often clears up after a couple of weeks, but in order to take Michael home from the hospital, Sharon had to agree to a number of healing measures. One of the doctor's recommendations was to expose Michael to sunlight through a window, which can help lower bilirubin levels in the blood and return the skin to a normal color.

At the time, the Kneips lived in the Kirkland neighborhood of Houghton, across Lake Washington from the UW campus. Michael's father was an All-American track star at UW in the mid-1980s. His grandfather played football for the Huskies. Sharon could see Husky Stadium out the window, and couldn't help but envision a similar future for her own son.

"I would stand with that little baby in my arms," Sharon said, "and point to the stadium and say, 'Someday, I promise you, you will play there.'"

She was right. But it wasn't easy.





Using the same Wing-T offense Bellevue ran when he was a player there, Kneip has the Wolverines off to a 4-0 start. (Photo: Courtesy of Dale Echigoshima)

Kneip was an excellent high school offensive lineman in a powerhouse program, but he wasn't highly recruited. He heard from a few different schools, but scholarship offers were scant, and a couple were even rescinded.

"In my mind, I was under-recruited — I wasn't big enough, wasn't fast enough," Kneip said. "I developed really late. I didn't have the best GPA."

He had talked to Washington offensive line coach Dan Cozzetto, but hadn't heard from Sarkisian — until Goncharoff texted him one day to say that Sarkisian likely would be calling soon.

In the back of his mind, Kneip always had wanted to go to UW, scholarship or not; some of the best advice he ever received, he said, was to go to school in a city where he could see himself living, and that is a box UW certainly checked.

So when Sarkisian called him later that afternoon to offer him a spot as a preferred walk-on, he didn't hesitate.

"I'm coming," Kneip told him, on the spot.

Sharon remembers it as a "red-letter day."

"It was just really cool. How else can you explain it?" Sharon said. "That word 'pride' just drives me crazy, but you're so incredibly happy that a dream has come true for your child because that doesn't happen all the time."

He was a redshirt freshman in 2013 when Sarkisian left for USC and UW hired Petersen to replace him. Kneip loved the hire; Petersen and his staff had actually recruited Kneip some at Boise State, and a former Bellevue teammate, Marcus Henry, had tried to persuade Kneip to play there.

Petersen's philosophies resonated with Kneip immediately.

"I was dying for the 'Built For Life,'" Kneip said. "I bought fully into it right away. My grades went up after he came there."

He got involved in the community, too. Kneip and good friend Jeff Lindquist teamed up with the non-profit Uplifting Athletes to organize "Lift for Life," a conditioning-themed event that raised money for pediatric multiple sclerosis research.

"I wouldn't have done that without his 'Built for Life' concept," he said.

Maybe not that project, specifically, but Kneip does have philanthropy in his bones. He doesn't come from a wealthy family. Like many others, Kneip's mother, a real estate agent, and his father, a handyman, fell on difficult financial times during the recession. And yet when the holidays came, Kneip's mother could only think: "I have a family. What about these parents that don't have what we have?"

That's how the Families Helping Families Thanksgiving food drive was born. Since its inception in 2008, Sharon estimates the food drive has served about 30,000 meals. The event, entering its 11th year, requires between 300-500 volunteers and donors to pull off, Sharon said.

“We are totally, 100 percent non-profit, grassroots,” Sharon said. “Just a bunch of moms, dads, kids that get together and procure and procure, and (the families) get a big basket and a turkey. And now Maggiano’s (a local Italian restaurant) comes in and does a big meal, donates it, and Jimmy Johns does a big lunch for those who can’t come to the dinner.”

Michael tries to carry that spirit of selflessness with him.

“I forget sometimes, but it’s the biggest truth in life that I’ve learned from a young age — the more good you do in the world, the better things come to you,” he said. “Not just money and trophies and gifts, but in family and friendships and whatever it may be.

“The older I get, the more I realize money and material things are valuable, but friendships and family are invaluable. Families stay together. You really learn who your true friends are. It taught me money doesn’t matter. As long as you have your family, you’ll be totally fine.”

He wants Bellevue’s football team to give back, too. In June, they teamed with Bellevue’s cheerleaders to prepare more than 1,300 peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches to donate to Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission. Kneip also has them involved in campus beautification efforts.

“They’ve done some pretty cool things over the summertime and toward the end of the school year last year,” Hill said. “I don’t think that has any chance to not continue.”

There are parts of Kneip’s new job that probably won’t feel totally normal for a while, such as talking to college coaches who visit Bellevue to recruit players. Many of those coaches — Petersen’s UW staff, Jonathan Smith at Oregon State, Justin Wilcox at California, some old Steve Sarkisian assistants at USC — Kneip got to know through his own recruiting process and playing days. And that wasn’t that long ago.

Having Kneip and Cooper so involved at Bellevue could be a benefit to UW, which has recruited a number of Wolverines players over the years; counting walk-ons, the Huskies’ roster currently lists seven players who attended the school.

“I’ve had that in the past, where some of the former players go be head coaches or assistants. It’s awesome,” Petersen said. “The reason why I like it so much is because they know us. That’s, like, a coach that (will tell you), ‘This guy’s gonna fit you, or this guy’s not gonna fit you.’ That’s why I like it the best. We cut through the BS.

“It’s like a coach you have a longtime history with – I’ve had coaches go, ‘This is not your guy.’ Awesome. That helps me as much as telling me that *is* my guy. It all comes down to really knowing you, and your ex-players know you better than anybody.”

Kneip also knows Bellevue. In many ways, that’s what got him hired.

“I don’t think there could be a better guy for the job and what they’re trying to get done,” Cooper said. “He just knows what they’re supposed to look like. He cares about it. It’s in his heart.”

*(Top photo courtesy of Dale Echigoshima)*

### What did you think of this story?



MEH



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AWESOME

**Christian Caple** (</author/christian-caple/>) writes about Washington Huskies football for The Athletic. He previously covered UW football and men's basketball for four years at The (Tacoma) News Tribune, and has also covered Washington State for the Spokesman-Review. He is a native of Longview, Washington. Follow Christian on Twitter [@ChristianCaple](https://twitter.com/ChristianCaple) (<https://twitter.com/ChristianCaple>).



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