

SFUSD Phys Ed teacher, Scout leader, coach and professional basketball ref may be retired, but heâ??s still getting people out to exercise

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Searching for a way to stay in touch with friends after retirement, Ralph Pujolar and his college roommate started a walking group. They called it the Aloha Walkers, he said, â??because my wife was born and raised in Honolulu, and I was always saying â??Alohaâ?? when greeting someone.â?•

The idea caught on. People heard about it through word-of-mouth; others joined after spotting the group on one of its monthly walks.

Organizing a senior group dedicated to exercise was a natural for Pujolar, who has spent his life playing, teaching and coaching sports. â??I was hyper-focused on sports from the time I could run,â?• he said.



Ralph â??Buzzâ?• Pujolar, right, and his wife, Andrea, ran into Warriors President Rick Welts at the Chase Center in 2019. (All photos courtesy of the Pujolars.)

Pujolar, now 77, taught physical education in the San Francisco United School District for most of his 31-year career, and eventually became a dean of students. He coached inter-scholastic sports after school, played basketball in recreation leagues, and became a professional basketball referee for 40 years, working high school and college games.

Pujolar sees his involvement in sports as a type of â??service to others through community engagement.â?• The Boy Scout code was instilled in him as a young member and through his father, a

scoutmaster.

All his friends were in the Boy Scouts and as a fireman, his father had time to be scoutmaster. A back injury pushed the elder Pujolar into early retirement, which gave him even more time for the Scouts. Pujolarâ??s mother was a Cub Scout den mother. â??We picked our parents well,â?• he said.

A popular Dad

Even outside of Scout meetings, the Pujolar home was a magnet for his friends. â??Our dad was everybodyâ??s favorite, even friends who had great dads thought of our dad fondly,â?• said Pujolar, who goes by â??Buzz.â?• â??Our garage door was almost always open to neighbors who came to hang out or borrow a tool from his extensive workshop in the basement.â?•

Eager to earn Scout merit badges, Pujolar participated in rowing, canoeing and swimming in Camp Royanah in Cazadero near the Russian River. He also played soccer, basketball and baseball in the San Francisco Catholic Youth Organization, where his father was his coach.

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Ralph Pujolar, whose father was a Boy scoutmaster at a ceremony in 2020 where his grandson, Xander, 16 at the time, received his Eagle Scout badge.

So, it wasnâ??t a stretch when he gravitated to physical education when he entered the University of San Francisco in 1967. He majored in history and minored in physical education, which at the time wasnâ??t offered as a major.

Pujolar had always thought heâ??d follow the family tradition and become a fireman. But by 1968, he was a married graduate with an infant daughter and needed a job right away. â??The school district was hiring like crazy, so I applied,â?• he said.

He began teaching physical education in 1968, and then on for the next 35 years. The first 31 were spent at Burbank and Hoover middle schools and McAteer High School. He ended his career with a four-year stint as dean of students at Raoul Wallenberg High School.

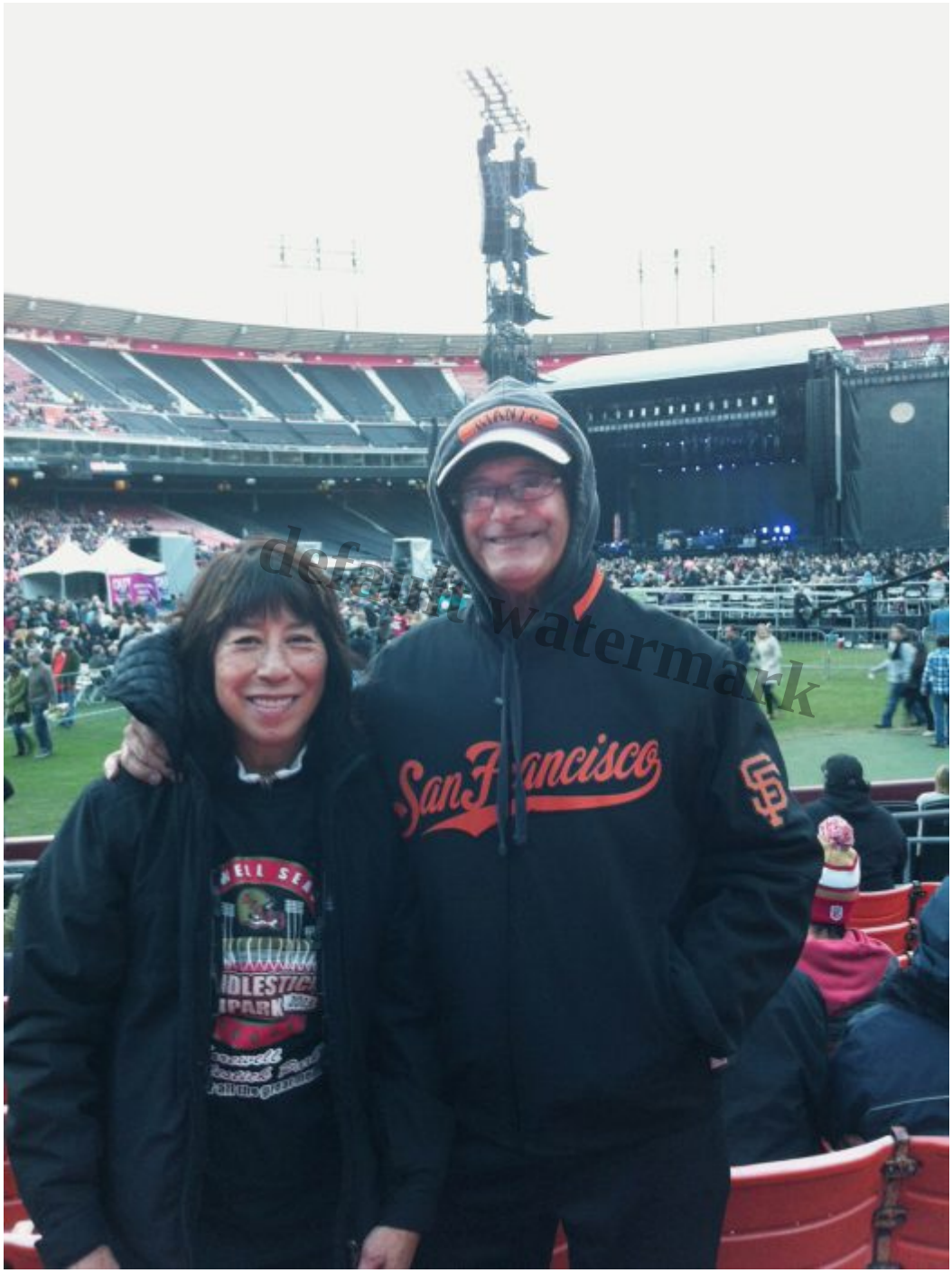
Pujolar taught the fundamentals of sports in track, basketball, rope climbing, wrestling and softball. Because there were kids at all levels in his classes, he devised a scheme to integrate those good at sports with those who were not. â??I asked the gifted kids to act as my aides to pass along their knowledge,â?• he said. â??It worked pretty well.â?•

Title IX changes

Over the years, Pujolar had to adapt to changing rules and new cultural norms. He taught only boys until Title IX of the Education Amendments integrated physical education classes in 1972. â??It set up a whole new set of challenges,â?• he said. â??Certain sports like softball worked with boys and girls together; wrestling and rope climbing, not so much.â?•

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Throughout his career in the school district, Pujolar coached after-school teams. He saw it as an opportunity for in-depth training of better-skilled athletes, a chance to â??really interact with the kids.â?• He coached â??just about anything that was coachable,â?• including track and field, boysâ?? basketball and baseball, girlsâ?? softball, and badminton and swimming for both genders.



Pujolar and his wife, Andrea, are big fans of sports, particularly those played by their grandsons, and oh, the San Francisco Giants.

As if all that activity wasnâ??t enough, at 30 Pujolar decided to become a professional basketball referee. â??My uncle was a basketball referee and he made it sound like fun,â?• he said. â??Playing basketball in the recreation leagues, I was getting injured too often, so I thought refereeing was a good way to stay in touch with a sport I loved.â?•

He refereed in junior and four-year colleges until 2000, when he went back to high school games. Being a coach himself, he understood the frustrations of the other coaches at his games. He sometimes

allowed them to let off a little steam after a close call. â??Everybody wants to win,â?• Pujolar said, â??so if a ref makes a call thatâ??s not in your teamâ??s best interest, it upsets you for a second.â?•

As a basketball referee, he went easy on the whistle blowing. â??If you blow the whistle, everything stops. If there are too many fouls, good players sit down,â?• he said. â??The game is more fun if the play is more continuous.â?•

Hall of Fame

Pujolar worked as a paid basketball referee until he was 70 years old. In 2020, he was inducted into the San Francisco Prep Hall of Fame for his service as a basketball referee. The nonprofit honors high school athletes, coaches, officials and the media, and offers athletic scholarships to youngsters.

Pujolar ended his career with the school district in 2003, but he had plenty of ways to stay active. He was still working as a referee and volunteering as a cycling instructor at the Stonestown YMCA, something he had been doing for 20 years. His classes included challenging virtual rides that he set up around the city. Students on stationary bicycles would maneuver as he called out street names and descriptions, the exercise training them to manage their speeds on different terrain.

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Bad knees ended his teaching stint, but he still cycles twice a week.



Pujolar and his wife, Andrea, and their grandsons Zane, who is about to turn 14, and Xander seven years ago at the Golden Gate Bridge.

Sports is a family preoccupation. Andrea, who has been married to Pujolar for 33 years, is a 4th degree black belt in Okinawan karate. She competed in track in the Senior Games when she was in her 50s and early 60s, and one year was the California State Champion bench press weight lifter for her age and weight.

They have two daughters and two grandsons. After retirement when the boys were young, Pujolar and his wife spent â??serious grandson time.â?• Today they watch the boys play multiple sports. Xander is finishing his 4th year in the baseball program at Monte Vista High School and will be attending the University of Washington in the Fall.

In the early days, the Aloha Walkers took meandering routes. After a while, Pujolar developed structured four-mile walks through pre-planning reconnaissance, marking interesting landmarks. â??I take a practice walk with a couple of friends, making sure to keep to the two-hour schedule,â?• he said.

The walks used to end with lunch at a restaurant. Now itâ??s a picnic lunch of deli sandwiches and cookies ordered ahead and delivered by Pujolar and his helpers, a ritual he said he really enjoys. â??A huge part of the fun for me is the planning of the walks and meals.â?•

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