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Friday, December 13, 2002

## Players continue to grieve loss of friend

MICHAEL ROTHSTEIN/Staff Writer

PHELAN — Adam Starling remembers the last conversation he had with Sara Rojas.

Rojas was at Starling's house, as she had been so many times since she transferred to Serrano.

She bounded into his house as excited as ever. Rojas had just made the Diamondbacks varsity basketball team, and her number would be the same as Starling's No. 23.

"We always hung out together and went swimming," Starling said. "We were all excited about having the same number. She looked up to me but I looked up to her as well."

So when it was time to tell Starling that Rojas had died, it took the entire football team to sit him down and break the news. Despite the grim looks on the faces of his Serrano teammates, the sophomore running back didn't believe them so he went to Ray Maholchic, who confirmed the heartbreaking news.



Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer

Serrano's Justin Taylor, as well as the rest of the team, have writing on their helmets in memory of Sara Rojas, who died Dec. 5, in a traffic accident.

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"It shocked me," said Starling, whose older brother, Travis, was dating Rojas. "I was surprised. It doesn't feel like she's gone still. I just talked to her the other day. If I could, I would switch roles with her right now.

"She deserves to be here."

While most of the Diamondbacks have "4 U Sara" scrawled on the back of their royal blue helmets, Starling chose not to have it. Instead, he has little markings on five different places of his helmet, including an "I love you Sara" message written inside the American flag on the back right.

Besides the helmet, Starling had Rojas' initials, SR, and number drawn on his forearms, a honor the sophomore will continue throughout the rest of his high school career, he said. Saturday will also be the last time Starling wears No. 23. He is switching to No. 22 for the rest of his career and, if allowed, will place his jersey in Rojas' casket at today's funeral.

Starling, along with the rest of the Diamondbacks, dedicated the semifinals and finals to her memory.

"It feels like she helps us to win," Starling said. "She's another person I talk to, just like God. I can talk to her still."

Steven Beaver will never forget the moment he found out Sara Rojas was killed.

Beaver was at a friend's house when Cory Thompson showed up. Thompson, who usually has a smile on his face, wasn't smiling at all Dec. 5. He had to be the messenger of some most unfortunate news.

He had to tell the senior cornerback, who had become friends with Rojas through class, about her death.

"She was a happy person," Beaver said. "She was always singing or dancing. She was always laughing. She had a lot of friends and was really popular. She was a nice person to know. She was fun to be around."

Today should have been a happy day for the Serrano football team. It's the last day of school before the Diamondbacks' first CIF Final. The team should have been wearing their jerseys, joking around and accepting adulation for its so-far remarkable season.

But instead they will be inside the Desert View cemetery in suits and in mourning, placing flowers — sold at Serrano on Thursday with the proceeds going toward Rojas' funeral costs — to lay on her grave at the request of her parents.

"We're always going to be thinking about her but I don't think it'll affect us during the game," Beaver said. "As a whole it was a shock to everybody but now it's like we have to win these last couple of games for her.

"It's given us more motivation to come out and beat Kaiser."



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