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When Joey Estrella began his baseball coaching career at the University of Hawaii at Hilo in 1976, music from Kalapana, Cecilio & Kapono and Nohelani Cypriano soaked the airwaves, Kilauea volcano was producing regular fireworks, and the Vulcans basketball team was on the verge of becoming a small-college powerhouse.

The young Estrella, hired by UHH athletic director Ramon Goya, was riding high. He had recently finished a standout baseball career at UH-Manoa under legendary coach Les Murakami, earned a degree, and got hired at UHH as a teacher and the first baseball coach in the infant program’s history.

Life was definitely good for the 20something Estrella, sporting the trendy Beatles’ length hair of the '70s and a robust enthusiasm that would become a trademark of his coaching style that would last 37 years. He got along fine with the older generation, picked up some valuable pointers from the soft-spoken Goya and Vulcans basketball coach Jimmy Yagi, and related well with his players — being close in age and understanding the times while Kalapana’s “Naturally” or “When The Morning Comes” often satisfied many of those living and going to school in paradise.

Estrella, a 1969 St. Joseph High School graduate, loved being back home and contributing to UHH and the community in a way that energized him and made his parents extremely proud.

In that first season at UHH, Estrella put together his first squad and did the best with what the young program had to offer. He was also an assistant to Yagi on the men’s basketball team, in its first season in the NAIA and playing an all-collegiate schedule.

Yagi and assistants Dwight Sumida and Estrella led the Vulcans, a combination of local players and California junior college transfers, to the NAIA District 29 title and a berth in the NAIA National Championships — a stunning accomplishment for the first-year NAIA team. That remarkable 1976-77 season also included shocking upsets over NCAA Division I New Mexico (81-78) and Nebraska (71-66), igniting “Vulcan Fever” and attracting soldout crowds of over 3,000 at Hilo Civic Auditorium.

The Vulcans’ NAIA playoff games as well as two games in the NAIA national tournament in Kansas City, Mo. were shown on statewide television.
The following year, 1977-78, Yagi, Sumida and Estrella repeated the success — winning a second straight District 29 (Oregon, Idaho, Hawaii schools) title and earning a return trip to the NAIA National Championships.

Yagi provided most of the game strategy, Sumida the discipline, and Estrella the enthusiasm as the Vulcans became the most popular basketball team in Hawaii during those two seasons. Ironically, the University of Hawaii basketball team was on probation at that time and went through some losing seasons.

But the following year, Estrella stepped away from the basketball program to focus on teaching and building the baseball program. The Vulcans would go on to enjoy success at the NAIA level over the years, struggle for a short stint in the highly competitive NCAA Division I world, and finally find their proper home in D-II and the Pacific West Conference.

In between there were a couple wins over UH-Manoa, a trip to the NAIA World Series, and a bunch of talented players and teams over the years,

In all, Estrella would spend 37 years coaching baseball — and he closed that final chapter on Saturday at Wong Stadium.

The Vulcans swept Academy of Art University 7-3 and 8-5 in a season-ending PacWest doubleheader before about 300 appreciative fans.

Estrella coached UHH in 1,596 games during his tenure and finished with a 660-931-5 record. In his final year, the Vulcans went 12-32 overall and 11-29 in the PacWest.

But with Estrella, who announced his pending retirement at the start of this season, he never measured his value to the program in only wins and losses. He always believed he was there to help the student-athletes grow, get a degree and be better prepared for life when they left UHH.

On Saturday, several of Estrella’s ex-players from over the years — guys from Oahu, Maui, Kauai and the Big Island — showed up for their former coach’s aloha. That gesture touched Estrella’s heart and he spoke about it during a ceremony honoring him between the games.

“I’m truly, truly humbled by the opportunity to have coached at the university,” he said. “I’d like to thank the administration over the years, the faculty, my friends and the community for their support. I hope I’ve been a positive influence for the university.”

He then spoke directly to his former players in the crowd: “The ultimate tribute to me is in what you’ve done to make it easier for me to coach and what you’ve done after you left here.”

Earlier in the ceremony, Estrella was presented resolutions honoring his career from the Governor, Hawaii County Mayor and County Council, and the State House of Representatives and State Senate. Current UHH Chancellor Donald Straney capped the short speeches by telling Estrella: “You’re the gold standard for commitment to the students and the community.”

The crowd then gave Estrella a standing ovation while the coach smiled and waved back.

“The good thing is that I’m not going to be working on the field again,” Estrella said about the usual postgame activity to upkeep the diamond.

Then he smiled even bigger, with a gleam in his eyes, and said: “That’s the good thing, I’m not going to be working on the field again.”
Goya, long retired from the university, sat with his grandson, Jamie Ebersole, in the stands. He was the man who hired Estrella in the mid-1970s and had watched many of the peaks and valleys of the baseball program over the past 37 years. But Goya was glad to be there Saturday afternoon as the now white-haired Estrella closed out his coaching career with a sweep.

Like a number of other fans in the crowd, Goya and Jamie walked down to the diamond after the second game to congratulate Estrella and wish him good luck in the future.

Estrella was decked in lei and still soaked from the cooler water that his players dumped on him after the coach did a final run around the bases to cap Senior Night for 11 Vulcans. Estrella took it all in stride, seeing his baseball world in a different fashion, now as a retired coach ready to move on in life.

His wife, Geri, and daughter, Allyson, watched from the stands. It was a special moment, seeing “Coach E” wind down almost four decades of helping others with hugs and handshakes.

Former assistant Kallen Miyataki looked on from a distance, wanting Estrella to “enjoy his time” in a memorable last weekend. Miyataki has been named the interim head coach and will run the program until athletic director Dexter Irvin decides to hire a permanent coach.

On his final day of coaching, Estrella went out the way he wanted to — with a pair of wins, a supportive crowd and his players, including his beloved seniors, walking away feeling good about themselves.

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