

Nacua’s Rams ascent inspiring to Polynesian, Hawaiian fans

BY GARY KLEIN, LOS ANGELES TIMES
The Tribune Content Agency

From the moment the Rams landed in Maui, Puka Nacua embraced the spotlight and provided sunshine vibes.

The star receiver, with several colorful leis draping his shoulders, turned heads upon arrival at a Monday night luau.

The next morning, flag football players excitedly buzzed “It’s Puka!” as he entered War Memorial Stadium for a Rams workout and clinic. That afternoon, autograph seekers lined up 100-deep for an exclusive afternoon Puka-centric event at a team pop-up store.

On Wednesday, several thousands of fans showed up to see the Rams’ public workout, dozens of them wearing Nacua jerseys.

Nacua, who is of Hawaiian, Samoan and Portuguese descent, welcomed the attention with open arms.

“These are people who have similar backgrounds to me,” Nacua said this week. “This is how I was raised - to call everybody Auntie and Uncle, and to be with them and give hugs and kisses, and to eat a lot of food with them.

“This feels like home.”

Nacua, 24, is clearly comfortable in his role.

He is the latest Polynesian NFL star, joining players such as Detroit Lions offensive tackle Penei Sewell and Philadelphia Eagles tackle Jordan Mailata.

Nacua burst onto the NFL scene in 2023 with a record-setting rookie season. His boundless enthusiasm, physical style and daring athletic catches thrilled fans and showed Polynesian athletes that opportunity and success at a so-called skill position was in their grasp.

Linebacker Junior Seau, safety Troy Polamalu and center Kevin Mawae are Polynesian players enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Nacua is respectful of the players who paved the way for his opportunity, citing Marcus Mariota, JuJu Smith-Schuster and Polamalu as just a few of the many that led the way.

He aims to show that opportunity exists beyond “the trenches” for aspiring Polynesian athletes.

“It makes it super exciting,” he said, “because the skill positions are coming.”

The influence of Polynesian pro players dates to the 1940s, when offensive lineman Al Lolotai played for Washington. In the 1950s, offensive lineman Charlie Ane twice made the Pro Bowl and won two NFL championships with the Detroit Lions.

Ane returned to Hawaii and tutored a young offensive lineman named Norm Chow. Chow played at Utah and coached as an assistant at Brigham Young, North Carolina State, USC, the NFL’s Tennessee Titans, UCLA and Utah before Hawaii in 2011 made him the first Asian American head coach at a major college program.

Watching Nacua’s ascent has been gratifying for the Hawaiian-born Chow.

“It’s a cool deal,” Chow said. “He’s a tough guy.”

Toughness was a hallmark for Polynesian players such as Jesse Sapolu, an interior lineman on four San Francisco 49ers Super Bowl-title teams. Sapolu was twice voted to the Pro Bowl during a career that spanned from 1983 to 1997.

In those days, Sapolu



JOSEPH RONDONE / Imagin Images

Rams receiver Puka Nacua's boundless enthusiasm, physical style and daring athletic catches have thrilled fans and showed Polynesian athletes that opportunity and success at a so-called skill position is in their grasp.

said a dearth of Polynesian players in the NFL led him to study the schedule each year and identify the teams that included Polynesians.

“I’d look five weeks down the line at the roster,” Sapolu said, “and put it in the back of my mind, ‘I can’t wait for that week so I can say hello to that person.’”

Sapolu is the co-founder and chairman of the Hawaii-based Polynesian Football Hall of Fame. He has known Nacua since 2019, when Nacua played in the organization’s annual high school All-Star game. As an ambassador for the 49ers, Sapolu was on the sideline at Levi’s Stadium in 2023 when Nacua broke the NFL record for catches and receiving yards by a rookie.

“This generation is looking at this picture with a broader lens,” Sapolu said. “We still have the top linemen ... but now we’ve got the Puka Nacuas coming up that Polynesian kids can say ‘Hey, you know, not only can I be big and strong, I can also be skinny and fast and go out there and do things that Puka is doing.’”

Manti Te’o grew up in Hawaii. In 2009, he was one of the most highly recruited players in the U.S. before going on to star at linebacker for Notre Dame and playing eight NFL seasons.

Te’o, an NFL Network analyst, has a home in Utah. He recalls watching Nacua play at BYU, where he displayed tenacity, physicality and fearlessness that harked to Smith-Schuster, the former USC star who has played eight NFL seasons. Nacua’s humility and the way he represented his family and community also stood out, Te’o said.

Nacua’s success might have helped pave the way for former Arizona receiver Tetairoa McMillan, selected by the Carolina Panthers with the eighth pick in the 2025 draft.

“They’re starting to believe that they can be more than just the typical O-lineman,” Te’o said. “It’s nice to see that transition and progression.”

Mariota helped lay the groundwork. He grew up in Hawaii, starred at quarterback for Oregon, became the first Polynesian player to win the Heisman Trophy and was selected by the Tennessee Titans with the second pick in the 2015 draft.

Mariota, who will begin his second season with the Washington Commanders, pointed to Jack “The Throwin’ Samoan” Thompson, Jason Gesser, Timmy Chang and Darrell Arceneaux as Samoan and Hawaiian-born quar-

terbacks who paved the way for him.

“I really value some of these guys that played before me, and what they were able to do, and what they went through to allow me to even have the chance to play quarterback,” Mariota said.

Tua Tagovailoa of the Miami Dolphins and Cleveland Browns rookie Dillon Gabriel followed Mariota to play quarterback in college and the NFL.

Now, Nacua is showing other Polynesian athletes that they don’t have to be “loopholed” to play as a lineman or linebacker, Mariota said.

“Guys like Puka and guys across the league are really taking this Polynesian generation to the next level,” Mariota said. “So, it’s cool to see him, and I’m excited to see what’s next because this is just the beginning.”

This fall, Jayden Maiava is expected to start at quarterback for USC, Nico Iamaleava for UCLA.

Maiava said Mariota and Tagovailoa “set the example and set the tone” for him as a quarterback.

Nacua’s example as a Rams receiver also inspires, he said.

“Just to wake up and hit that standard he sets every single day,” Maiava said. “It’s something to look up to and gives a young kid like me something to strive for, and one day hope we can get there.”

The Rams returned to Hawaii for the first time since 2019, when they played a preseason game against the Dallas Cowboys on Oahu.

In Maui, they opened a pop-up for five days in Wailea that featured merchandise designed by Aaron Kai, an Hawaiian artist who lives in Los Angeles.

Sales were brisk, but the main event was Nacua’s appearance.

Joshua Cabjuan, 21, of Oahu purchased caps, a hoodie and other items. He said he met Nacua at the Polynesian Bowl a few years ago, so he brought a replica of Nacua’s Orem (Utah) high school jersey to be signed.

“He was really excited, like, ‘Whoa, this is crazy - I haven’t seen this in so long,’” Cabjuan said.

Kristin Domingo of Maui had always been a Lakers and Dodgers fan. Becoming a Rams and Nacua fan, she said, naturally followed.

“We support anyone who comes from the islands or is of Hawaiian descent,” she said after Nacua signed a jersey.

And what does she like about Nacua?

“He’s an excellent wide receiver,” she said. “He kicks ass on the field.”

Peyton Koerte, 12, and Kiara Nishimura, 14, from Kauai each emerged with a signed Nacua jersey.

Why Nacua?

“We picked him for our draft in fantasy football,” Peyton said.

For decades the NFL’s Pro Bowl was played in Hawaii.

Te’o remembers watching players such as Rams stars Kurt Warner and Isaac Bruce in person.

“To see them play allowed me to dream big,”

Te’o said.

Nacua hopes the Rams’ visit to Maui has a similar effect, and that it uplifts an island that was ravaged by the 2023 wildfire that destroyed much of Lahaina.

In remarks at the Rams welcome luau, Maui County Mayor Richard T. Bissen Jr. noted that the team donated more than \$260,000 in initial relief and helped spur donations from other pro teams of \$450,000 to the

American Red Cross.

He also recalled attending a football camp in Maui overseen by former Rams quarterback Roman Gabriel in the 1970s.

“Thank you for what you’re going to do for our youth in the next couple of days, uplifting them and teaching them,” he said, adding that perhaps the next Puka Nacua might be among the attendees.

Nacua was thankful to help play a role in healing.

“To know the support that you want to give to those people who are going through that issue, and to see how it can change and bring the community closer together in that time, I think our team has felt that,” Nacua said.

Nacua once looked up to players such as Mariota and Smith-Schuster. Now, young players are looking up to him.

“The discipline to have the consistency to go out there and perform very well, I feel like those are things that are staples in the Polynesian community,” he said.

Nacua will return to Los Angeles and begin preparing for training camp and a season of high expectations. The Rams are regarded as potential Super Bowl contenders, with an offense that includes star quarterback Matthew Stafford and new star receiver Davante Adams.

But Nacua will not soon forget his time in Maui.

And he will have plenty of reminders.

“I’m sure I’m going to have 50 leis by the time I go home,” he said.

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Legals

Change of Name

To whom it may concern: Notice is hereby given that by an order of the Circuit Court of the County of Jackson County, Missouri, Division No. 29, Case No. 2516-FC04142 made entered on the record on May 29, 2025, the name of Talia Mae Brizendine was changed to Talia Mae Cullen Brizendine. IPL0240033
Jun 10,16,23 2025

NOTICE OF BID

OA-FMDC, State of MO will have the following MO National Guard projects that will be open for public bid through September 2025, subject to available funding. When released, bid documents will be available at <https://oa.mo.gov/facilities/>
T2117-01 Ft Wood Readiness Ctr Replace Existing Lighting with LED
T2234-01 Camp Crowder Training Site, Construct New 60 Soldier Barracks
T2334-01 Harrisonville Readiness Ctr Repairs to Interior/Exterior Bldg 27
T2337-01 Camp Crowder Training Site Construct 60 Bed Enlisted Barracks Bldg 758
T2338-01 Jefferson City LAASF Readiness Ctr Install Solar Array
T2412-01 Ft Wood Readiness Ctr Construct Solar Array Bldg 1029
T2424-01 St. Louis Readiness Ctr Lambert Field Bldg
T2522-01 Richmond Readiness Ctr Asphalt Paving Repl
IPL0244640
Jun 23-27,29-Jul 3 2025

PUBLIC NOTICE

Sale of Restricted Indian Chat Interests

ACTION: Invitation for Oral Bids

SUMMARY: The Superintendent of the Miami Agency, Eastern Oklahoma Region, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Department of the Interior, is announcing the sale of Restricted Indian Chat Interests, along with an associated Business Lease for the Restricted Surface Allotment(s) where the chat pile is located in Ottawa County, Oklahoma. This sale will be conducted through an oral bidding process.

DATE: The auction is scheduled to be held on or about August 11, 2025.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT: Mr. Randall Trickey, Superintendent, Miami Agency, at (918) 542-3396.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: All bids will be accepted in the Court Room of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Miami Agency, at the following address:

Bureau of Indian Affairs
Miami Agency
10 South Treaty Road
Miami, Oklahoma 74354

Interested individuals or firms wishing to place a bid or seeking additional information are encouraged to contact the Agency between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. IPL0239642
Jun 23-27,29-Jul 4,6-7 2025

Legals & Public Notices

BIDS ACCEPTED

The City of KCMO will receive Bids by 2:00 PM, on 7/8/2025 at KCMO City Hall, 1st Floor 102W, Kansas City, MO 64106 for Project: 89005596 BRO-R126002 Raytown Rd Over Lumpkins Fork Bridge Replacement IPL0237495
Jun 12-13,15-20,22-23 2025

NOTICE OF BID

Bids for REBID Replace Fire Alarm Panels - Multiple Assets, Project No. C2325-01 will be received by FMDC, State of MO, UNTIL 1:30 PM, 7/31/25. Project information available at: <http://oa.mo.gov/facilities>
IPL0247601
Jun 23-27,29-Jul 3 2025

Animals

Dogs

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Mini schnauzers

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Mini Bernedoodle & Cockapoo

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