

## College Football

# He's an expert on stem cells, cancer, biotech. And he loves UCLA football practice.



By Chuck Culpepper

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UCLA's Michael Teitell, the director of the university's cancer center, is a regular on the sidelines of the team's football games. (UCLA)

LOS ANGELES — “In cells, there’s mitochondria, and they generate energy, so they’re like, an organelle, or a piece of a cell, and they’ve always been considered, for years and years, that these

organelles were fixed in the cells they were born in. Turns out they can move between cells. And when they move between cells, they shift the metabolisms of the cells they move into or out of.” Music blared as he spoke, for he spoke *at football practice*, a dude at football practice talking cells upon request.

“We’re sort of pioneers and leaders in that space (at UCLA). So we understand how we can do that artificially, and we’re trying to figure out how that actually happens naturally. And if we can help with that, then people who are afflicted with cancer, undergoing chemotherapy, or have some other debilitating illness, we can try to help them for their energy and their energy levels, and help them fight off diseases.”

UCLA’s Michael Teitell, whose list of titles could tire a typist, had just given a seminar in Singapore, had just returned from Singapore, had just extolled the mighty Singapore Airlines, had just shed some of his jet lag and had just hurried on out on a Saturday morning to football practice, and not just any football practice but, with this being late April, *spring football practice*, where only the hardcores dwell.

He’s not really a hardcore. He became a faculty athletic representative after serving on the library committee and then trying for the admissions committee but finding it full, all while a cancer center director and professor of pathology and other crucial whatnot. He calls his sports memories “more diffuse than specific.” He commits humanity by misremembering at least two aspects of the first World Series he saw on TV (the Orioles’ stifling sweep of the Dodgers in 1966), and he mourns slightly that the Dodgers’ three most recent titles happened in shortened seasons (1981, 1988, 2020), only to learn 1988 wasn’t shortened. (“So you’ve fixed me. Thank you,” he said.)

And he adores football practice, but not in that fanboy, selfie-with-the-coaches kind of way. “Oh, this is amazing stuff,” he said. “This is society. This isn’t separate. This is it.” And: “This should a thousand percent be here (as part of a university). This is part of life. This is part of society.”

In fact, he’s something else. He’s a college-sports believer in a national landscape rife with skyscrapers of forgivable cynicism. He spots vitality while others spot vitality-sucking TV deals and realignments. He does all this while hailing from academia with a voice more pragmatic than crusading.

Wait, surely the midsummer news of [UCLA and Southern California abandoning the Pac-12](#) for a financial merger with the Big Ten, a move set to kill debt, charm and athlete sleep schedules, might trip him up or at least lend pause.

“I am really pleased with the news,” he said via a spokesman in late August, citing “greater resources for mental health, nutrition, academic services, career development, athletics aid and NIL opportunities.”

He doesn’t even revel in the usual way about the football Bruins being 6-0, ranked No. 9 and heading for No. 10 Oregon come Saturday.

He cited a team “playing really well and putting in a lot of hard work against tough opponents,” added an exclamation point to that, and pronounced himself as “looking forward to the second half of the season.”

How measured.

“Go Bruins!” he concluded.



UCLA's Michael Teitell, the director of the university's cancer center, often attends football practice and tries to just hang out. But occasionally he'll get a picture, such as here with star quarterback Dorian Thompson-Robinson. (UCLA)

How measured, save for the exclamation point.

*“So, cells have two ways to generate energy. One way is to burn sugars and fats, and make ATP which is the energy currency in the cell, so ATP powers enzyme reactions, you use it, and you convert it into another form to allow an enzyme to do a reaction. And life is basically biochemical reactions in a cell. And so that’s one form. Another form is to take the lipid or the sugar and route it into these organelles called mitochondria, and they make about 18 times the amount of energy that doing it the other way, called glycolysis, makes energy. And so you can imagine that this function in that organelle can screw up cells, and us, screw up how we function and how life works for us. And so our goal is to understand how those organelles called mitochondria work, and how we can manipulate them for good.”*

“It’s fun work,” he concluded. “It’s good work.”

*And now you’re at football practice.*

“I’m always here.”

“I’m looking at culture,” he said. “I’m looking at the kids. I’m looking at the coaches. I’m looking at how everybody’s interacting. I’m trying to get a feel of vibe for how the spirit, environment, the excitement is. I’m looking at a little bit of technique because it’s curious and interesting to me, like, how does somebody catch a ball out of one of those throwing machines? Some people have softer hands and some people have harder hands to catch the ball. But it’s mostly culture. It’s mostly, like, Do these kids seem happy? Do they seem like they’re engaged? These coaches seem like they’re involved and engaged. Does this feel healthy?”

Amid his voluminous days as a UCLA student and graduate student and further graduate student, in the 1980s, while the Pac-8 had become the Pac-10 and would become the Pac-12 long before it might become the Pac-10 again or Pac-14 or Pac-16, he wasn’t one of those practice-studying, stadium-lurking, face-painting students. He did scrape some extra money by tutoring two primo football players — Flipper Anderson, who would catch 267 NFL passes including a bunch of big ones for the Rams, and Terry Tumey, who would become an athletic director, these days at Fresno State. He did start spotting parallels between the drive of science people and the drive of sports people. He did start cementing his view of school and sports furthering one another: “We have evidence for that,” he says. “When the student-athletes are in season, they tend to do better. And that’s because their time-management skills are at their peak ... And they’re tired, I mean, they’re working it really hard, but I think their attention is on the details, that’s when they do the best.”

He notices how being on the high school softball team has bolstered his teenage daughter. He notices college athletes performing before crowds while navigating formative years that include crises such as having “just got broken up with by his boyfriend or his girlfriend or her boyfriend or her girlfriend.” He notices how college athletes shift well into a field such as medicine, especially once he can counsel them to alter their egos, as he did with a high jumper.

With all of that, he rides along separately and quietly and occasionally on UCLA team buses and planes feeling something perhaps different from all the other riders. His agony proves fleeting in Philadelphia with a [narrow loss to North Carolina](#) in the 2022 men’s basketball Sweet 16, or in Indianapolis with the [classic 2021 national semifinal with Gonzaga](#) that featured no losers, or in that haunting softball finish against Florida State in the 2018 World Series in Oklahoma, which he followed from afar and which, okay, lingered a bit more.

He thinks it’s all for the good.