

LOSERS
take all



THE SCOREBOARD HAD BEEN DESIGNED IN Japan, and our town had bought it a year ago to record Fremont's glorious football victories and track triumphs. From the bleachers where I stood with seven hundred screaming students and four thousand equally crazed townspeople, the giant live-feed LED display and the half dozen digital timers helped us follow all the action on the track far below. Twenty runners—all eighteen-year-old toned and ripped superathletes—had turned the final corner and were racing down the home stretch. And the twenty-first runner, a much older man but in terrific shape, was coasting along in the middle of the pack when he happened to glance up at the scoreboard.

That twenty-first runner was Arthur Gentry, the principal of Fremont High for more than forty years and the man most responsible for making our school into a sports powerhouse known throughout the state of New Jersey as "Muscles High." He was the kind of principal who liked to know everything that was going on in his school, so he was always poking his head into a classroom or chatting with a new student, but it would have been much better for all of us if he hadn't glanced up at that fancy scoreboard right then.

The race was the climax of Graduation Week, which at

Fremont High meant as much sports crap as they could cram into five days. It started off with Team Appreciation Day—a pep rally for teams that had already been appreciated so much it was hard to imagine the star players hadn't gone deaf from all the applause. Then came the New Trophy Ceremony, when the sacred glass case at our school's front entrance was unlocked and gleaming gold cups for the past year's championships were carefully slipped onto shelves next to tarnishing plaques from seasons gone by. And there was Captain's Coronation, when the new team captains for next year were “crowned” by the old ones and showered with confetti while cheerleaders danced around them.

I could go on, but I think you get the picture. There's not much at Fremont High during Graduation Week to honor the valedictorian or the president of the French club, but if you happen to be an elite athlete, it's like getting a Viking funeral and entering Valhalla, or being inducted into the Hall of Fame.

WARNING—this is not a typical story about the birth of a sports team dynasty, like when Babe Ruth joined the Yankees and belted out fifty-four home runs his first year, or when Vince Lombardi took over the Green Bay Packers and promised them: “You will never lose another championship.” This sports story has little to do with blood, sweat, tears, and six-pack abs. But it has a lot to do with a dental disaster, fast legs, and bad hand-to-eye coordination, plus galloping on horseback at night with a pretty girl across a Mafia-owned golf course, and learning how to make the principal of your high school so mad at you that he puts his fist through his door.

I was not an elite athlete. I'd spent years searching for the sport I was best at and never quite found it. I was a chronic hitter of foul balls, a basketball player whose jump shots slalomed around the rim before deciding to hop down rather than slip through the hoop, and a wide receiver with plenty of speed but "iron hands" that repelled footballs with an almost audible clank.

I'm tall and slender—my dad says "scrawny," and he'd been encouraging me to lift weights since I was twelve. "Bulk up and it'll pay off across the board," he assured me. "Coaches will see it, girls will notice, and you'll be able to shovel our driveway faster." I told him thanks for the advice, and I know it worked for him and my two brothers, but I'd just as soon go my own way. And that was my attitude toward our sports-crazed school, too—live and let live—till that afternoon in June when Principal Gentry glanced up at the scoreboard and everything changed.

I may sound angry, but the truth is I had nothing against pep rallies and cheerleaders dancing around next year's captains. Did I think it was nutty? Sure. But I wasn't trying to fight back or rip anything down. I did my own thing, and my first three years at Fremont I joined the computer club and kept my distance from the superjocks. Except for the fact that, by virtue of my last name, I'm one of the cornerstones of that sports culture, and you can never get far away from your own name.

Which brings me back to the grand finale of Graduation Week—Champion's Day. The culmination of Champion's Day for fifty years has been the Senior Mile Run. The twenty fastest seniors race four laps around our track while

the whole school and half the town cheers them on. The Fremont record for the mile is four minutes and seventeen seconds. I know that time because the record was set by my father, Tom Logan, twenty-seven years ago. Since fewer than a dozen high school runners in all of American track history have broken four minutes, it's a hell of an achievement to have been just seventeen seconds over, especially for a big football player like my father was. It's not likely to ever be broken in our town, but every year the top twenty athletes at Muscles High take their best shot.

That day in early June, twenty-one runners were sprinting through the sunshine for the finish line. Battling it out were four team captains, two hyperathletic girls in orange Lycra, five members of our track team, and a baseball star who had been drafted by the Yankees. But the runner drawing the most attention was old Principal Gentry, a schoolboy champion in his day, then a track letterman at Princeton, and now, at seventy, still a rail-thin specimen and a competitive runner.

"Look at the old geezer go," my friend Frank grunted. "If he's not careful, he's going to keel over."

"Have some respect," I told him. "Let's see you do that when you're seventy."

"I can't even do that at seventeen," Frank admitted. "And you know what? I'm fine with that. When I'm seventy I plan to be on my back in a hammock, eating SunChips." It's not hard to picture Frank with white hair, swinging in a hammock, staring up at the clouds and popping SunChips. He's a gentle giant who loves to pig out on junk food and

take long naps, and he avoids all physical exercise with a laziness that a sloth would envy.

Principal Gentry was made of tougher stuff. He was clearly not going to win this race—Al Flynn, the centerfielder headed to the Yankees, was neck and neck with Ramon Hernandez, the captain of the track team, for that honor. They had opened up a twenty-yard lead over the rest of the field, and the crowd was roaring and stomping so that it felt like an earthquake was shaking the bleachers. Ramon put on a final spurt and crossed the finish line in four minutes and thirty-one seconds, with Al just an eyelash behind. The two gods of sport slapped five and everyone gave them a cheer, and then all eyes swung back to our principal.

These days serious older runners compete in their own track meets, and there are records for every age group. Principal Gentry's best time was twelve seconds off the state record for seventy-year-olds, and I don't think he intended to try to break the record that day.

But forty yards from the finish he glanced up at a digital display and saw that he was seven seconds from the record. This was a man who had climbed Mount Kilimanjaro at sixty, and scuba dived with hammerhead sharks when he turned seventy, and whose motto was "Just go for it!"

The crowd began roaring again as Principal Gentry dug into his last reserves and sped up. His stride was fierce and determined as he churned down the home stretch, passing runners fifty years younger. I can still see his bony elbows pumping like pistons and the sunlight flashing off his sweaty forehead that was half-lowered toward the finish line as if ready to break an invisible tape with the point of his nose.

“GENTRY, GENTRY, GENTRY,” the crowd chanted.

He passed the captain of the basketball team, who broke stride to wave him on.

I spotted my father lower down on the bleachers, near the green turf, chanting, “GENTRY, GENTRY.” Dad is six feet three inches tall and his thick head of black hair tossed in the spring breeze as he stood with his best friends—most of them old teammates from his high school days—and cheered and shook both fists. Dad watches lots of sports events, live and on TV, and he often gets so personally involved with them that my mom and I have to tell him to calm down.

Fifteen yards to go. Gentry was only two seconds off the record. He threw himself forward with guts and willpower, as if to set a shining example and say to each of us: “This is what you can achieve, if you just lower your head and go for it.”

“GENTRY, GENTRY!” The bleachers felt like they were going to collapse at any second. I didn’t shake a fist, but I did put my arms out to steady myself. On my left, my friend Dylan Sanders, who is usually far more critical of the jock culture at Fremont than I am, got caught up in the moment and started leaping up and down. It was impossible not to get excited. I found myself clapping and shouting.

Five yards to go. Principal Gentry hurled himself at the finish line with everything he had. He zipped across, nose first, right arm following as if throwing a punch at time itself, and then his trim torso, with his left arm trailing. He raised his arms and turned to the scoreboard, and saw that he had missed the record by half a second.

There was a loud, deflating sigh from the crowd, like the air hissing out of a hot air balloon. Principal Gentry put his hand dramatically on his heart, as if to say, “I gave it my all.” The applause swelled. And then he went down on one knee, as if saying a brief prayer to the Olympic gods, and the cheering got even louder because he looked so noble kneeling there, and he had come so close and fought so well.

And then old Gentry toppled over onto the blue synthetic track that he had helped raise the money for, and the crowd went totally silent. “Oh my God,” I whispered.

The ambulance crew was tending to him in moments.

“I didn’t mean for it to really happen,” Frank whispered to me, sounding scared. “I swear I didn’t.”

We were all scared, and I saw several people start to pray.

“He’ll get back up in a second,” I whispered back to Frank. “He’s probably just winded.”

But he didn’t get back up. The sad fact is that he died right there in front of nearly five thousand people, and a week later they named the whole turf field and track after him—Gentry Field. There was even a proposal to bury him beneath it, but apparently that had to be abandoned for zoning reasons.

Now, you’d think that Gentry’s dramatic death might have given Fremont pause to say, “Maybe we’ve pushed this sports thing a little too far. Maybe as a school, a town, a community, we owe it to our kids to take our foot off the gas and hit the brakes and emphasize reading and writing and algebra a little more and biceps curls a little less.” But it didn’t go down that way at all.



THE SURPRISE ANNOUNCEMENT WAS MADE

at a school board meeting just three weeks after Gentry's death. It was very unexpected because there had been talk of a search for "an educator" from outside our community—a new principal with impressive scholarly credentials who would give our school a fresh look and feel.

I wasn't at the meeting—I was spending most of my summer vacation hanging out with Dylan and Frank, playing video games or swimming in Hidden Lake, and most of my evenings at my miserable summer job busing tables at Burger Central.

But I heard the news right away because Dylan's mother is on the board and forces him to come to meetings, and he had dragged Frank along. So my two friends were in the third row when the board president, Mr. Bryce, announced that they had not needed to search far. In fact, it seemed like they had just rolled over the nearest rock and scooped up the biggest and meanest critter that scampered out.

When the meeting ended Dylan and Frank texted me that they had a news flash, and they headed right over to Burger Central to try to score some free fries.

"Muhldinger?" I said, staring back at Dylan. "You're kidding me."

“There was applause when they announced his name,” Dylan reported. “In fact there was a spontaneous standing ovation. Everyone seems to think he’s a brilliant choice.”

“Brilliant how? What qualifications does he have?” I asked.

“He’s a proven leader,” Frank pointed out with his usual sarcasm. “What about some fries, Jack? When I’m stressed out I need to eat.”

Frank must be stressed out a lot, because his eating habits resemble those of a great white shark. He seeks out food twenty-four hours a day, or at least every minute when he’s awake, and it wouldn’t surprise me if he occasionally took bites out of his pillow in his sleep. He would be fat if his growth spurt hadn’t matched his appetite—when you’re six foot five you can carry fifty extra pounds like an overnight bag.

“Proven at what?” I demanded. “Just because he can win state championships in football doesn’t mean he can run our school. And if you want fries, go order fries from Becca. I’m not in charge of handouts—I just wipe the tables, and I’m still trying to get over Muhldinger. What the hell were they thinking?”

“The word ‘legacy’ came up several times,” Dylan informed me. “As in ‘We have to stay true to Gentry’s legacy.’ And also the word ‘tradition,’ as in ‘We have a long and glorious tradition to uphold here.’ And the news only gets worse, Jack, so a little snack might brighten things up.”

“If we had the money for fries, we wouldn’t need a friend,” Frank pointed out. “Just wander through the kitchen and slide some into a napkin when no one’s

looking. We're all doomed, so we might as well have a last meal."

I studied Dylan's face. "How could any news be worse than Muhldinger taking over our school?"

Becca was returning from a bathroom break and overheard my question as she walked past. She jolted to a stop and stared at us. "Muhldinger?" she asked in shock and outrage. "No freaking way. How is that possible? He's not even a teacher. He's just a big muscle-head. He doesn't even have a neck. They can't do that to us. He's the worst kind of sports Nazi."

It was true. Brian Muhldinger, coach of the Fremont football team, chief of the audiovisual department, which made him a nonteaching member of the faculty, and now apparently the new czar of our high school, had a broad chest that seemed to be welded directly to his fat, bald head. It was as if the millions of pounds of weights he had pumped had reconfigured his body to eliminate all thin and weak areas.

Becca's real last name was Knight, but everyone called her "Becca the Brain" because she was focused on school all the time and had never gotten less than an A on any test since third grade. I'd always admired her long legs and sharp sense of humor more than her GPA, but Becca didn't date or do anything that might waste precious time that she could spend studying. During the summer she worked the computerized register at Burger Central, punching orders at hyperspeed and using slow periods to study impossible vocabulary words that might appear on the SAT.

"Neck or not, it's Principal Muhldinger now," Frank

explained. “And you guys don’t want to hear the *really* bad news.”

Becca looked back at him. “The football team is taking over the library as their new weight room?”

“I think that’s actually quite possible,” Frank told her, “but no, that’s not the bold new policy Muhldinger announced in his speech at the board meeting—the one that got him the standing ovation.”

Andy Shimsky, who waited tables, had heard enough to join our little group of social outcasts. He was a string bean of a kid, with long, greasy black hair and wrists like toothpicks, and had been mercilessly bullied by jocks since middle school. “What bold new policy?” Shimsky demanded warily.

There was a moment of ominous silence when Dylan and Frank exchanged looks and Becca, Shimsky, and I waited for the bombshell to explode.

“In honor of Arthur Gentry’s legacy . . .” Dylan began. “And to continue his unique vision of the Fremont High School scholar-athlete . . .”

Frank finished in a mocking tone: “Starting in September all seniors will be required to join at least one school sports team and stay with it through an entire season. This will develop strong bodies along with keen minds, and create a unifying school spirit that will keep alive the legacy of Arthur Gentry.”

“But that’s three hours of practice a day,” Becca pointed out.

“Not to mention weekends and traveling to away games,” I added. “What if we’re not good enough to make any of the teams?”

“They’re adding B-team and even some C-team options, and expanding the rosters,” Dylan said. “I believe Arthur Gentry would tell you to just go for it.”

“Part of the new policy is no cuts just ‘cause you happen to suck,” Frank informed us. “They’ll keep you on the roster of one team or another and make you practice your ass off and sit on the bench. You can scrape mud off the cleats of the football stars, or sponge sweat from the basketball court during halftime, or re-lime the baseball diamond after the starters have kicked up dust and left. I guess the good news is that we all have important roles to play.”

“They can’t do this to us,” Becca declared. “They can’t make me play a sport I hate. I already have my sport. Show jumping. It’s part of my story.”

“Your story?” I asked, trying not to stare too intensely at her extremely pretty hazel eyes.

“The one I’m going to tell about myself in my college application essay,” she informed me like I was clueless. “Perfect grades aren’t enough these days. Twenty thousand applicants to the top schools have nearly perfect grades and test scores. You need a story to set you apart. And mine is about horses, and how I helped raise one named Shadow that had a damaged hind leg, and nursed him back to health, and won ribbons riding him. I’ve already written the essay. It’s called ‘Knight and Shadow.’ I don’t need another sport and I can’t afford to waste three hours a day on a stupid team I’ll never play for.”

“It’s not as if Muhlinder’s offering you a choice,” Dylan told her.

“There’s always a choice,” Shimsky announced, sounding

like he was preparing to lead a revolution. He had suffered a lot—getting beat up all the time. In sixth grade his nose had been broken by a creep who'd rammed his face into a garbage can. Our town has its tough side—the jocks rule, and if you don't show them respect you pay. It had made Shimsky tough and crafty in his loner way. "Whenever there's a rule there's a way around it."

"Not this one," Dylan said. "This is about legacy and tradition. The school board confirmed the new policy. My mom was the only 'no' vote. Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines and get ready to suffer. The lunatics have taken over the asylum and we're at their mercy."

"We're all dead meat," Frank agreed. "Sports road-kill. If I go out for shot-putter, do you think they'll make me run laps with the track team? I could run one lap, or maybe two, very slowly on a nice fall day." Frank was being optimistic—he runs about as fast and gracefully as a fully loaded garbage truck grinding up a steep hill in low gear.

"I heard the track team ran ten miles a day last year," Becca told him.

There was a moment of unhappy silence as we looked at each other and pondered what senior year would be like with Muhldinger in charge of our school.

And that was when Mr. Psilakis, the night manager, hurried up behind us and started screaming: "*Get to work, all of you!* I don't pay you to gab. Jack, a table of ten just left a royal mess. Shimsky, there are two orders of nachos getting cold. Nobody likes cold nachos. Becca, we're short-handed at the registers. *Let's go, move your butts!*"

I hurried over to the royal mess and started clearing up half-munched french fries and greasy bits of uneaten cheeseburger. Frank ambled up next to me, picked up a discarded onion ring, studied it as if debating whether he should pop it in his mouth, and then tossed it reluctantly into my tray of garbage and dirty dishes. “Sorry to be the bearer of bad news,” he said.

“I just don’t get why they’re doing this,” I told him. “Why don’t they just do their legacy thing and leave the rest of us alone? What happened to live and let live?”

“Ours is not to reason why,” Frank answered. “Ours is just to join a team and die.” He hesitated and then said softly, “Jack, your father was one of the first at the board meeting to jump to his feet and start clapping.”

“No big surprise there,” I muttered, picking up a broken ketchup bottle and turning it upside down in my tray to avoid the jagged glass edges.

Frank lowered his voice even more. “After the meeting broke up I saw him talking to Muhldinger, and I heard him say something about you trying out for the football team. Muhldinger was nodding his head. Sorry, but I thought you’d want to know.”



“THIS IS NOT REALLY TACKLE,” ROB POWERS told us. The park was empty because of the summer heat, and as the sun dipped lower the shadows of old oak trees reached out inch by inch across the grassy field, as if getting ready to trip us up.

Twelve of us had shown up for this “friendly game,” and now that I was here I could tell that it would be neither friendly nor a game. “So it’s two-hand touch?” I asked nervously.

“Not exactly,” Rob said. “We call it half-hit. Which means you’re trying to bring each other down, but not do any serious damage. You don’t need helmets or pads for half-hit—just have fun out there.”

Rob had been my closest friend once upon a time, before the school pecking order took shape. His father had played quarterback on the state championship team that my dad had captained. When they drank beers together, Rob’s father still sometimes called my dad “Captain.” Rob and I had hung out into middle school, and then we had gone in very different directions. I was scrawny, to use my father’s phrase, but Rob had sprouted muscles, not to mention chiseled features, cat-quick reflexes, and a rifle arm. Now he was contending for the starting quarterback

job, earning cash from modeling gigs, and dating a swarm of cheerleaders.

He had called me up the day before and invited me to this friendly game, and he hadn't hidden his real agenda. "One of our starting receivers just tore his ACL. Coach Muhldinger is looking for someone with good wheels to replace him, and your name has come up."

"Thanks, Rob, but I really don't think I'm varsity material," I had said.

"It wouldn't hurt you to try," he'd pointed out. "We're not allowed to have team practices during the summer, but we're going to have a friendly pickup game in the park—just an informal toss and catch kind of thing. No coaches, just some of the guys. Why don't you come and give it a run, and see where it leads?"

My dad had been in on the plan. "Just try," he encouraged at the breakfast table the next day.

"Dad, I've got iron hands."

"Cover them with receiver's gloves."

"Do I look like a football player to you?"

He lowered the sports section and glanced across at me, as if evaluating me with his gray eyes. At forty-five he still had the muscular body of an All-State running back whose toughness was legendary in our town. His nickname had been the "Logan Express" and people who'd seen him play said that it had taken three or even four tacklers to bring him down. If a knee injury in his senior year of college hadn't ended his playing career, Dad would have turned pro. It was hard to know what he was thinking as he looked back at me, but he said: "Sure."

“I thought I was scrawny.”

“The point is there’s one thing nobody can teach and that’s speed.”

My mother had been listening to the conversation, and she gently said: “Tom, if he doesn’t want to do it, don’t push him.”

“I just want him to try,” Dad told her. “Is that such a horrible thing?”

So here I was, giving it a try.

Rob wasn’t the only varsity player who had shown up. Sprinkled in with seven of us newbies were five starting members of the football team who had come, presumably, to check us out. Coach Muhldinger—or perhaps I should say Principal Muhldinger—wasn’t there, nor were any of the other dozen or so assistant football coaches. So Rob and a guy named Barlow were running the thing.

They staked out a grassy rectangle with orange cones and divided us into two teams, and I was put with Rob and four other guys I didn’t know well. We huddled up around him before we kicked off. “Stay loose,” he told us, “no pressure at all, guys. But it’s still a chance to show what you’ve got. So if you go in for a tackle, make sure you wrap him up and bring him down. You never know who might be watching.”

I looked past him, to the parking lot, and saw a big man get out of an SUV and sit down on a bench near a duck pond that offered a good view of the field. He was too far away for me to see his face clearly, but he had the bulk of a weight lifter, and even from this distance I could see that he had no neck. Another tall man strolled up and sat next

to him. He was wearing a cap that shadowed his face, but I could tell it was my father.

We lined up facing the other team, with Rob in the center, holding the ball. I tried to stay calm. There was nothing to lose. I didn't even want to make the stupid football team. If I did well it would be fine, and if I screwed up it might be even better. The June day had been sweltering—nearly a hundred degrees—and even though the sun had started to sink, it was still steamy hot. I felt a sweat break out on my legs and arms and across my chest, and took a few quick breaths.

Rob gave me a wink, as if to remind me of Gentry's motto: "Just go for it." And then he took two steps and kicked off into the setting sun—a twisting kick so high that the ball seemed to disappear for a second in the purple clouds, soaring over the receiving team's heads. As they scrambled back to pick the football up, we raced toward them, and I found myself in the lead.

I've always been fast. It's my saving grace as a mediocre athlete—the thing that partially makes up for my scrawny build and lack of coordination. I'm not the fastest in our school—there are probably two or three sprinters on the track team who can edge me out over fifty yards. But that evening in the park, when six of us sprinted across the grass toward the other team, I quickly took the lead.

As I raced ahead of my teammates, I wondered why I was doing this. It was almost as if a little voice was shouting: "Stop. You don't have to do this. You hate football. None of these guys are your friends. Not even Rob—don't

kid yourself. You don't have to prove anything to Muhldinger—he's a sports Nazi, just like Becca said. Your dad should just accept who you are, or it's his problem and not yours. Slow down and let somebody else get there first." That's what the little voice said, and I heard it as I ran, but my arms were pumping and I was flying over the grass. Instead of slowing down I sped up, and quickly pulled away from my teammates.

The football rolled deep into what would have been their end zone if the field had been lined, and stopped in tall grass. Barlow got to it first and could have just downed it. But he chose to pick it up and run it out, and I slanted toward him.

One of their players tried to block me, and I dodged around him. Barlow saw me coming and shouted to his teammates: "C'mon, you losers, block for me." One of the losers threw a nasty block at me and the bony point of his right elbow dug into my ribs, but then I was past them all and facing Barlow one-on-one. He was about my height but not scrawny at all—a star running back, one of the co-captains of the varsity team, and a furious competitor in every sport known to man.

I darted toward him, and he held his ground, watching me come on. The truth is I wasn't even thinking about tackling him—I figured my job was just to contain him till my teammates arrived to help.

Barlow faked right and went left, and I bought the fake for a half second and then reversed direction. My feet got tangled with each other, and as I took off after him I tripped

myself. I knew that any second I would do a face-plant into the grass and look like the biggest clown since the Three Stooges stopped making movies.

I fought gravity and my own clumsiness, and somehow I kept running for three more steps, if you can call that running. It was halfway between a sprint and a dive—I was already nearly horizontal and my arms were windmilling for balance.

And then I couldn't fight it anymore and went down hard, chest first, but at the very last second my arms grabbed on to something and I held on.

In my battle to stay upright I had forgotten all about Barlow, but my three-step dive to the grass had made up the distance to him, and my thrashing arms had wrapped around his knees. Instead of the clumsiest dry-land belly flop in the history of Founders' Park, I had by sheer luck executed a nearly flawless open-field tackle of the football team's starting running back.

We both went down hard and rolled over on the grass. I let go of his knees and lay there for a second, stunned. Then Rob's excited voice crowed above me: "Way to hit, Jack. That was awesome, man. A safety on the first play of the game!"

He pulled me up, and my teammates surrounded me and thumped me on the back. "Great stuff!" "Massive hit, Logan." "You're the man."

Barlow walked over, wiping mud off his forehead. He muttered, "Good hit," and tapped me on the shoulder, but there was a sharpness to his voice and his dark eyes didn't look particularly friendly.

"Thanks," I said.

“That was a safety,” Rob reminded Barlow. “We get two points and you guys kick off to us. Nice way to start a game, huh?”

Barlow made a growling sound deep in his throat as he turned away.

We lined up for their kick, and a kid named Garrett caught it and ran it back. Rob moved us up the field with two short and accurate passes. He pointed to me in our third huddle. “Three complete and we get a first down,” he said. “It’s your turn, Logan. Slant right. I’m going to count your steps. On your fifth step stop short, turn back to me, and the ball will already be in your chest. Got it?”

“Five steps,” I agreed. “Got it.”

“It’s a timing play,” he said. “Can’t miss.”

Our huddle broke and we walked toward the line together. “Don’t drill it,” I cautioned him softly. “I don’t have the best hands.”

“You’re playing like a beast,” he whispered back. “If you get daylight after you catch it, turn on your jets. The way you’re going, you’ll get a shot at a starting job.”

I slid the receiver’s gloves my father had bought me out of my pocket and pulled them on over my sweaty hands as I walked back to the line. Those two words kept tap-dancing around in my head. *Starting job*. Who was I kidding? I wasn’t a star receiver on the Fremont football team. Not me. Not close. Not ever. Tap, tap. But still . . . *starting job*. Playing before crowds. Cheerleaders at parties. *Tap, tap*. I glanced at the duck pond. The two men on the bench hadn’t budged. My father pulled out a bottle of water, tilted himself a drink, and stared right at me.

Garrett stood over the ball. “Forty-seven,” Rob called out to him. “Sixty-five. Twenty-two. *Hut.*”

Garrett hiked him the ball, and I slanted right. As I ran, I heard one of their players shout out, “One Mississippi, two Mississippi, *watch Logan!*”

I was already on my second step, with a kid named Dumont trying to cover me. He was fast, but he knew he couldn’t run with me, so he gave me three yards of cushion off the line. I counted my steps—three, four, five—and slammed on the brakes. I turned back toward Rob and *BAM*, the football arrived by express mail.

I hadn’t expected it that hard and fast, and I couldn’t quite hold it. It popped up out of my iron hands, and as I tried to grab it, other hands reached for it. Dumont had closed the distance, and he tried to grab the loose ball and run it in. I managed to get both my hands on it as Dumont’s momentum carried him on past.

I realized that I was now alone, undefended, safely cradling the football. It was time to turn on the burners and run it in for a touchdown. Once I got going, no one on this field could catch me. I started to spin back around, toward their end zone, and as I was in mid-pivot, a freight train ran me over.

The next thing I knew I was lying on my back on the grass, tasting salt and pebbles, and looking up at the purple clouds that seemed to twist and billow mysteriously, like a magician’s cloak during a good trick. I tried to stand up, but Rob told me to “Stay down, buddy. Jesus, look at his mouth.”

I put my hand to my lips, and it came away crimson. I

realized to my horror that I wasn't tasting salt and pebbles but rather blood and my own busted teeth.

"Sorry, Logan," Barlow's voice said. "Didn't mean to hit you that hard."

As the shock of the impact wore off, the pain came on in waves. I lay flat on my back and closed my eyes and made my hands into fists.

Then I heard my father say, "Stay down, Jack. There's an ambulance on the way." And then more softly, in the closest he had ever come to a loving voice: "You did good, son. I'm proud of you."



MY TWO BEST FRIENDS STOOD BY MY BEDSIDE, but they couldn't bring themselves to look at my mouth. Dylan was staring past me out the window where a gardener was mowing the hospital's large lawn, while Frank had focused his eyes on a lunch tray on my bedside table that hadn't been cleared yet. Given my condition, there wasn't any solid food that he could snag, but there was an uneaten watermelon Jell-O that he was eyeing hungrily. "I didn't even know hospitals had dentists," Frank said. "But he did a pretty slick job. Wrapped you up like a Christmas present."

"Oral surgeon," I tried to say, but it sounded like a frog croaking over a windy swamp. My dislocated jaw had been popped back into place by an oral surgeon, which I think is like a dentist on steroids. I had seen enough dentists, nurses, and oral surgeons in the past two days to last a lifetime. I'd lost track of the number of people who had come into my room, studied my X-rays, and poked around inside my mouth like it was an interesting renovation project.

A bandage now wound around my head and under my chin to prevent me from opening my mouth too wide. Two

of my front teeth had been knocked out, but one of them had been saved and brought to the hospital with me and replanted. Several more had been chipped and cracked and jarred loose, but they had been splinted to healthy teeth and were all somehow still rooted in my gums. I had also been diagnosed with a grade one concussion—the mildest kind, they told me, as if I should be grateful—and I was floating on pain pills.

“Don’t try to talk,” Dylan advised me. “Stick with thumbs-up, thumbs-down. Are there any cute nurses here?” Dylan thought about girls a lot and talked about them as if he were highly experienced, but the truth was that he was almost painfully shy and didn’t have any success with dating in the real world.

I gave him a thumbs-down.

“How’s the food?” Frank asked, following up his own main interest.

Another thumbs-down.

“He can’t chew food anyway,” Dylan reminded Frank. And then as if on cue they both glanced right at me at the same moment—at my swollen face, bandaged jaw, and splinted teeth.

Dylan shook his head and said, “Jesus, Jack, didn’t your mom teach you not to play in traffic? What the hell were you doing out there banging bodies with the football meatheads?”

“He was doing something he should be very proud of,” a deep voice answered from the doorway. I recognized the distinctive rumble of our new principal. Heavy footsteps

approached and then he was standing at the foot of my bed, his bald head shiny as a cue ball under the fluorescent lights. “Giving his all for his school.”

“Looks like he gave most of his teeth for his school,” Frank observed. “Anyway, I thought it was just a pickup game.”

Muhldinger folded his massive arms across his barn door of a chest. “Sometimes when you play hard you get your bell rung. A few months later, you don’t even remember it.”

“That could be because concussions cause memory loss,” Dylan suggested.

Muhldinger glared at them, and then he said, “I’m not surprised you two don’t understand. I’ve never seen either one of you put on the school colors. But that will change soon enough. Now, I’d like a word alone with Jack.”

Dylan rolled his eyes and headed out. Frank hesitated, as if reluctant to leave me with this maniac, but then he, too, left, and Muhldinger pulled the door shut. “I was going to stop by yesterday, but your dad said you were pretty much out of it,” he told me. “You seem much better this morning.”

I didn’t say anything back. For one thing my mouth was all wired together, and while I was curious why Muhldinger had come, he was just about the last person I wanted to see in my hospital room. So I just lay there on my back looking up at his flat nose that had been broken and reset badly, and his hard black eyes that seemed to flash down and challenge me, as if saying: “Get up, Logan. Get out of that hospital bed and answer the bell for the next round.”

But I wasn't getting up for any next round. I had thrown in the towel and I was staying down for the count. Screw him and everything that he stood for.

Muhldinger saw my face twitch, and misread my anger for pain. "I can see you're hurting," he said. "You know, I broke this schnoz three times." He pressed his index finger against the tip of his flat nose and grinned. "No worries, Jack. They'll cap your teeth and your jaw will heal up and in a few days you'll walk out of here on your own steam. A month from now you'll be eating steak and running again. And I have to say—you can run pretty fast. Sometimes you even remind me of the Logan Express." He broke off for a second and continued in a low voice: "I played with your father, and watching you in the park brought it back for a second."

And I think that was the moment when I started to truly hate him. Or maybe it wasn't him at all, and I really just hated the part of myself that had needed to impress him and my dad and had landed me here. I vowed to myself that I would never make that mistake again, whatever it cost me.

He stepped closer, and began to walk around my bed. "But that's not what I came here to tell you. Or maybe in a way it is." Again the grin, as if we were buddies now and about to share a secret. "Jack, I have some very good news." I tried to imagine what his good news might be. Maybe he had taken a job as the assistant line coach of the Giants and was resigning as principal before the school year even started.

Muhldinger walked to the head of my bed, till he was standing right above me. "You are exactly what I'm trying

to bring to our school,” he told me. “The guys on the football team already know what they can do. But you challenged yourself and stepped up big-time, and pickup game or not, you really showed me something out there.”

Suddenly I was positive his very good news could only turn out to be really bad news. I didn’t like the way he was smiling down at me. If I had become his poster boy for sports recruitment, I was in serious trouble. I wanted to say: “Whatever it is, you’ve got the wrong hospital patient. Put me on the poster that says: ‘Stay off the field and save your teeth for your old age.’”

But of course I couldn’t say any of that because the oral surgeon had wrapped me up tightly, so I just looked back up at him and wondered how much it hurt to have your nose broken three times.

Muhldinger lowered a big paw onto my shoulder. “Forget about tryouts, Logan,” he said. “You’re on the team. I’m the coach, after all. We’ll have a uniform and a number waiting for you.” His eyes were shining, as if he had just given me the greatest gift in the world. “You’re a Fremont Lion. Come see me when you’re healed up and we’ll talk some more about what it means to be a varsity football player. You’re one of my pride now.”

He pulled his hand off my shoulder and walked out of my hospital room.



I HAD INTENDED TO TELL MY DAD AT THE dinner table, when my mom could be an ally. I knew that was a little cowardly, but cowardice had taken a big step forward in my playbook since my teeth has been pulverized and I'd started my involuntary liquid diet. But my brother Carl showed up for dinner with his wife, Anne, and I didn't want to turn this into a big family discussion. Carl had been an All-League middle linebacker whose life in high school had revolved around football and the weight room, and I knew he would think I was chickening out.

So I waited till they left, and then I played a computer game and cleaned my room, and after half an hour I ran out of ways to waste time and headed downstairs.

Mom was in the kitchen, reading a thick novel. She's a part-time librarian in our town library and she's always bringing home new books to read herself before recommending them. "Want some ice cream?" she asked. "Might feel good on your mouth."

"Not hungry."

She glanced up from what looked like page five hundred. "Since when do you turn down ice cream?"

"Mom, I'm not going to play football."

She understood immediately and nodded. My mom

raised a family of intense athletes, but she never played any sport beyond a little friendly tennis, and she's never pushed me to do anything. Maybe the truth was that she'd had enough of standing in the snow, rain, and wind, cheering on her first two sons and shivering. "When are you going to tell him?"

"I figure it's better to face the firing squad sooner rather than later. Want to give me a blindfold?"

"No blindfold necessary. Just be honest," she advised. "He'll understand."

"Sure he will." I couldn't keep the skepticism out of my voice, and maybe there was just a little bitterness, too. I remembered my dad's hand on my shoulder and his whisper that I had made him proud, while I tasted my own blood and teeth.

"Give him a chance, Jack," she urged.

"I hope he gives *me* a chance," I said, and headed into the family room.

My father was sitting in the leather armchair, sipping a beer and watching the Yankees get clobbered by Boston. "Swing the bat, damn you," he growled at the batter on the screen.

"Dad, he can't hear you," I said. "That's a digital image of a man who's in the Bronx."

"He's lucky he can't hear me," my father muttered. "If there's one thing I hate it's guys who take a called strike three with men on base."

I glanced around the room. Sports memorabilia was everywhere, from a black-and-white photo of the Mick belt-ing a home run, to a framed Giants jersey signed by Eli

Manning, to our family trophy case. The glass case took up a whole wall, and while it was smaller than the case at Fremont High, for one family it was pretty damn impressive. My father and brothers had been studs at every possible sport, and mixed in with the forest of football trophies were gold men shooting basketballs, and silver wrestlers with their arms spread wide, and bronze batters with bats cocked.

“Got a minute?”

“Sure.” He clicked the game off and pointed to the couch.

“Have a seat. How’s the old mouth?”

“Better,” I told him, remaining standing.

“Try not to take the pain pills unless you have to.”

“Okay, no pills tonight. Dad, I made a decision.”

“Good,” he said. “About what?”

I opened my mouth but I couldn’t get the words out. I finally settled for just one: “Football.”

I think he sensed the truth, but he didn’t help me. He just waited as the seconds dragged by.

“Sorry,” I finally told him. “Not going to happen.”

Muhldinger had called up to tell my dad that I had a place on the varsity team, and I think it was the proudest he had ever been of me. Now he studied my face as if trying to read an answer there. “You’re afraid you’ll get hit again,” he finally said. “That’s normal. I used to feel that way sometimes after I got popped. I know you don’t believe me, but it’s true. Everyone has those moments, Jack. You took a real hard shot. But you weren’t wearing a helmet, and you’ll see that playing with pads feels a lot safer, and they’ve taken new precautions so—”

I cut him off and my words came out loud and angry. “It’s not ’cause I’m afraid. I just don’t want to play on the stupid football team.”

“Because?” he asked softly.

“That’s not who I am.”

“Okay,” he said, “then don’t.” His gray eyes looked sad, and when he spoke again his voice held no anger, but only sympathy, as if he could see me making a big mistake and wanted to help. “But, Jack, are you sure you know who you are? Because sometimes we only find that out by trying something new. Brian was offering you an opportunity. One of the most exciting chances you’ve ever had to step up and challenge yourself. Are you sure you just want to chuck it in the garbage can and go on with business as usual?”

I stood facing him, and the case of glittering family trophies on the wall behind him, and I wished I could have answered: “This is who I am, this is what I’m good at, and here’s what I plan to do with my life, or at least my senior year. I want to explore this subject at school, date that girl, and get into such and such a college so that I can spend the rest of my life doing something that I love.” But this was a moment for truth, and the truth was that I had no such answers. I’d never had a girlfriend, there was no subject I was particularly good at or drawn to, I was only applying to a few mediocre colleges, and the map for the rest of my life hadn’t arrived in the mail yet, so all I could tell him was: “Maybe I don’t know who I am, but I do know for sure that I don’t want to be on the football team. I know how much it means to you. And it’s not a stupid team—I’m

sorry I said that. A lot of people get great things out of it. But not me. I don't want it and I'm not gonna do it."

Dad shrugged his big shoulders and clicked on the game again.

He settled back in his chair and focused all his attention on the TV, as if I had already left the room. "Throw your fastball," he growled at the Yankees pitcher on the screen. "Challenge him with a heater."