

Band of Brothers

February 23, 2004

Playing football does not feel good. Over the course of two and a half hours I look at the guy in front of me and repeatedly throw my body into this. Nothing else matters. My task is to make this guy wish he never decided to try this goddamn sport. After each play, I hobble back to the huddle along with my teammates. If this weren't a football game, I would hardly be able to walk. If this weren't a football game, I would hardly be able to breathe. I can't see straight. All I can taste is dirt and blood. My brain is telling my body to quit, but my heart won't let it. That's what football is. Making your body do things that your mind tells you aren't possible. Having your hands stepped on and your knees pummeled by helmets isn't fun. Neither is spending your entire summer, your entire adolescence, gauging your decisions with football in mind. I have spent thousands of hours in the weight room, trying to gain those few extra pounds that little bit of extra strength that might give me the slightest advantage. And for what? So that when I recklessly hurl my body into the ball carrier, he gains three fewer inches of now torn-up grass? What is the point of watching film after film of the enemy, trying to develop strategies and realize tendencies, when I know that the game will bruise my body and take all the life out of me? I love the game, and playing it has truly been the most rewarding experience of my life, but there has to be some reason why I continue this love/hate relationship. Something bigger kept me coming back, and I wanted to know what it was.

The first time I threw on the old shoulder pads and buckled my chinstrap, I was a fat kid. I didn't particularly like football. I joined the seventh-grade football team because everyone else did. Living in Texas, you either play football or you don't. Coach Ashton saw that I was not athletic enough to play any of the skilled positions, so he sent me over to play line because he "wanted to see my footwork". I played defensive tackle that year, and I wasn't good. Despite starting every game but two that I missed with a broken hand, I finished the season with probably about six tackles. It was sort of fun, but it really wasn't a part of me. Football was just another thing I did. I considered quitting the team, but I didn't want to be a quitter. So, I entered the summer knowing that I would return in late August to report to preseason.

I returned in late August with an extra three inches and twenty-five pounds. My body had elongated and my shoulders had widened. Coach Ashton told us that good football players played on both sides of the ball, but that he wanted the mean, nasty, ferocious guys on defense. That description appealed to me. I consider myself a naturally gentle person, but I realized in my first couple of games that in football you are not yourself. For a few hours once a week, I was given the opportunity to purposely try to hurt people. I wanted to play defense again with my new body. On the first day of practice before we went out on the field, the coaches divided us up into the offense and defense. I was sent to the offense. Offensive line. I knew the game a little better now, but I still thought of the offensive linemen as the huge guys who stand there while the quarterbacks and receivers go about their business. I wasn't happy about it, but I entered the season as the starting offensive tackle. I kicked ass. Playing offensive line was fun. Playing football was fun. I enjoyed knocking people over. I loved the competition, trying to prove that my team was better than the opposition. I enjoyed the smell of grass and sweat and the feeling of satisfaction when you can't feel your legs, but you look up at the scoreboard and your team has

more points. At the end of the season, they gave out the eighth grade Achievement in Football Award to six players. I was one of them. For the first time in my life, I was a football player.

From that moment on, when people asked me what I liked to do, my first response was “football”. To that point in my life, I wasn’t really a sports person. As hard as it is for me to believe now, I didn’t really watch very much football on television until I was about thirteen or fourteen. But now, it encompassed me. It was all I ever thought about. I drew football plays during class when the teacher was boring. If I ever saw a football I had to pick it up and throw it for at least ten minutes before I could return to whatever I was doing. I quickly memorized every single player in the NFL and his stats. I became a student of the game as I anxiously awaited the next step: high school football.

High school football is much different than middle-school football. In high school, if you blink your eyes, you miss your assignment. It happens that fast. No one cares if you have a broken hand: you’re going to play. I reported to St. Marks School of Texas’s two-a-day practices a little bit bigger, and a little bit faster. Two-a-days were not fun. In Texas, football preseason begins on August first. Every day for three weeks, I woke up at 6:30 AM to go to the first of two practices. Coach McAuley said that we would have 3-a-days if it wasn’t ruled unsafe by the league due to risk of heat exhaustion. I survived preseason with the big boys before splitting off with the other freshmen to become the JV squad. I was probably the second or third biggest guy on the team, and I’m guessing that my teammates thought I would be intimidating to shake hands with before a game because I was elected captain without really doing much in the way of leadership. I have great memories from my early experiences with football, but the best memories of my entire life occurred during my three Deerfield seasons.

As the snow slowly fell upon the completely shredded battlefield, I wiped the mud out of my eyes and looked up at the scoreboard. Overtime. New England Championship. Deerfield 21 – Hotchkiss 14. Hotchkiss was first and goal from the three-yard line. That means that Hotchkiss now had four downs to go three yards and tie the game, sending into double-overtime. The end zone was surrounded by hundreds of screaming fans. Apparently the roar of the crowd was deafening, but I didn’t hear a thing. All I heard was the voice in my head saying, “Never give up. Never give up.” I couldn’t feel my left arm, but it didn’t matter. All I cared about was finding the guy with the ball and then driving him so hard into the snow turf that he couldn’t get up. Three times in a row, they ran up the middle. Three times in a row, they were met by a human wall of flesh. Danny Shribman was crying. Not in pain or fear, but in confidence. Fourth down. Now-or-never. My entire life had led me to this moment. One play. The center snapped the ball to the quarterback, who rolled out to my right as hundreds of pounds of pads and humans and mud slammed into each other. It was a pass play. I dropped into my zone as our defensive linemen closed in on the quarterback. A Hotchkiss tight end was running toward me from my left, so I stepped in front of him as the quarterback’s eyes turned to me. No one was open. Right before the quarterback was pummeled into the snow, he threw up a desperation pass to the corner of the end zone. My world froze as the ball spiraled through the air. The fate of our season and consequently, the one thing I had devoted my childhood to lied in the flight path of this ball. It seemed to take ten seconds for it to come down, but as it did, Matt Collin jumped up in the air and dramatically swatted it out of the sky. The ball hit the ground and hundreds of people rushed the field from every direction. I dropped to my knees a New England Champion

as tears streamed down my face.

One thing about this game is that it's literally impossible to explain what makes it so great to someone who doesn't play it. During this year's Exeter game, my co-captain, Alex Berg's face was bleeding. He head butted Tommy Schmicker's facemask with his own, and blood spewed all over Tommy's face as they both screamed a bloody battle cry. Only in football does this image make me want to sacrifice myself for both of them. They have dedicated themselves to each other and to the good of the game. Those who play football understand this; those who don't play it are completely dumbfounded. Football is not really a sport – it's a way of life. Many people cannot hack it because to be a football player you must convince yourself to sacrifice your body for the ultimate goal of victory.

In this game you cannot achieve anything by yourself. Every man has one job he has to perform, one assignment. If everyone does his job, the team succeeds; if someone misses an assignment, the team fails. The game has thousands of intricacies and infinite possibilities of how a play can end up, but when it comes down to it, it's very simple. Basically, you pick a guy on the other team, look him in the eye and say, “----- you. I want this more than you do.” My teammate Will Smith sums it up with the saying, “If I don't kick his ass, he's gonna kick mine.” He's exactly right. Football is the only sport where any team can truly win any game. Whoever wants it more will win, every time.

Deerfield football is built on the principle that we want it more than the other team. We didn't have the biggest guys, or the fastest guys, or the strongest guys. We had guys who came together and busted their butts for each other because of trust. I risk it all for my teammates because I know when it's their turn, they're going to risk it all for me. I trust my brothers and they trust me. With few exceptions such as war or medical emergency, I don't think such trust exists in many other life situations.

If I never play this sport again, many facets of football will stay with me forever. Football has taught me teamwork, trust, leadership, and personal sacrifice. I truly believe I am a much better person for having played it, and I will never forget the things it has taught me about myself. Before being a football player, I was weak. I don't mean physically. I mean mentally weak, emotionally weak. The game has taught me to believe in myself and to believe in my teammates. To trust them. Despite the pains and hardships of such a sport, such a life, I kept coming back because of one thing: trust. Deerfield football has been the most meaningful experience of my life, but what I will remember the most is the looks in the eyes of each guy in the defensive huddle when I could call a play. In their eyes I saw some fatigue and pain, but I also saw confidence, perseverance, and sacrifice. I saw commitment to this band of brothers that I have committed my entire life to. Without speaking a word, we told each other that we would do this because we trusted each other and were willing to give up everything, and then we broke the huddle, lined up and did, together.