

We Are The Champions

by
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English 4

Autumn sunshine has a way of laughing along towards sunset. Reds, yellows, and flickering golds play about the clouds. Warm yellow-blues romp on the brisk winds of the Eastern sky. Poetic as all hell.

As Reggie and I walked out to the Belmont High School football field the sky was playing its damned games. Heroic colors for a heroic season in the high school year. It felt funny walking to the football field in street clothes rather than pads.

The junior high school football team was playing a big game against the Garner team. Our little Ponies were behind by three or four touchdowns. That always killed me. They called those skinny little hair-bombs the Ponies because they were supposed to grow up to become Belmont Broncos. Two years worth of boys being ground to hamburger, and all of them hoping to survive just long enough to be called young men . . . just long enough to be called Broncos instead of Ponies.

"If you're too cold, John," said Reggie, "we can go back into the school."

Somebody had obviously told him to take good care of me. Some finger-wagger with glasses hung loosely on his plump red nose had told Reggie, our class president, not to let Johnny Last catch a chill and get sick again. Our beloved coach.

"I ain't cold, Reg."

We walked up to the fence behind the Ponies' bench. Coach Stevenson and coach Barker were chewing out the poor little hair-bombs for not doing anything right.

"They don't get many fans when it starts gettin' colder," said Reggie.

I looked at the seven or eight parents sitting huddled together in the stands.

"Too bad. I wonder if they know, most of 'em, that their parents aren't here to see them play?"

Reggie laughed. He even laughed like a class president.

"I don't think most of 'em would want their parents to see them today," he said.

"My parents always came to see me get kicked."

"Aw, Hell," said Reggie, "YOU never got kicked."

Number twenty-three was standing in front of us listening to every word. Ricky Harper was a Bronco split end. The little man in the purple number twenty-three jersey was Harper's little brother, Dennis. He stood with his back to us. He wore a scarred-up, box-eared helmet that had belonged to the varsity years upon years ago. His shoulder pads were too big and came up next to his ears like angel wings. His jersey was too short and it left him bare around the middle. His sweatsox were a pair his brother used to wear. He stood there watching the action on the field and listening to Reggie and me. My shadow fell across the fence and covered him up.

"Hey, little Harper," said Reggie, noticing where my attention had wandered, "what happened to your team? Looks like you're gettin' your arses kicked."

Reggie could be vicious towards lesser football persons since he had attained his high non-athletic rank. I'm sure he remembered, though, how a jock once busted his glasses in a fight.

"We'll make it up next game," said Dennis.

He turned around and smiled defiantly at Reggie. His braces sparkled as I let the sun shine on him for an instant.

"You little friggers always get kicked," said Reggie. "Just wait till you get to high school. Then you'll really be hurtin'."

Dennis tried hard not to look at me. He never looked at me any more.

"Certain people who aren't out for football have no right to comment," said Dennis.

I felt a bit tight in my chest. I put my hand over my heart and pressed at the pain. I remembered the first time I had ever met the insolent kid. . . . When I was a freshman in high school and we were practicing basketball at the junior high gym.

The sweat was dripping off me and I had gone to the water fountain to get a drink. All the little hair-bombs were busy shooting baskets off to one side of the gym. They were practicing and dreaming of sinking winning buckets in overtime games. Our freshman team was practicing hard on the main floor trying to do whatever it was that had to be done in order to win our first game after six losses.

I let the water fill my mouth and make my teeth ache with the cold. I let it run on my sweaty nose and rubbed it into my forehead with my hand.

When I stood up and turned around, there he was. He was wearing his brother's old gym clothes. The shorts hung down almost to his knees like knickers. His dark brown eyes were fixed on me.

"What are you lookin' at, kid?" I asked.

"You."

His honesty and audacity stopped me from saying something mean. I'd never seen him before, but I recognized Rick's initials printed on the gym shirt.

"You a last-stringer?" he asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. But I'm gettin' better," I lied.

"I'm a last-stringer too," he said.

He offered his hands palms up. I slapped them in the traditional way and let him slap mine. His small hands came down so hard they made my palms sting.

"Wanna shoot some baskets with me?" he asked.

"Can't," I said. "Coach'll skin me if I'm not ready to scrimmage when he calls on me."

I didn't make the excuse sound very convincing. Perhaps that's why I did shoot baskets with him and the coach did skin me.

A couple of people cheered in the stands as one Pony discovered he had the ball and galloped seventy yards for a score.

"What position do you play?" I asked Dennis.

He watched the field intently with his back to me. He wouldn't talk to me.

"He's an end," said Reggie. "An end like his brother, not like you. A real pushover."

Dennis kicked the grass with his cleats. He didn't look at us.

I had been an end. Not like Ricky and Dennis. I had been a defensive end. The coaches talked a lot about me.

As a sophomore in high school I had learned how to deal out blows like a maniac. I was taught to contain the opponents' running game, keeping them from running around the strong side. My shoulder popped into the guts of running backs and tight ends, making their bowels explode. I ripped heads like a demon. I remembered vividly how tubby blockers would look nervously across the line at me. I could see fearful eyebrows knitting themselves together over pimpled faces in those god-awful waiting periods before each play. The local Gridiron Club was impressed with my unassisted tackles and the fumbles I created. The coaches were proud of me. I was the hardest hitter on the team.

Dennis had talked about me incessantly. He recounted my every move to his little friends. Some of my friends had begun to kid me about my number one fan.

"Did you hear that the little Harper kid has already made plans for you to play with the Minnesota Vikings, Johnny?" they said.

"That little Harper brat was bragging about how he got to sit by you and Sally at the movies, Johnny. You didn't really let him sit there did you?" they said.

When the Broncos played I could always hear him. No matter how much noise there was, his voice always came to me.

"Hit 'em, Johnny! That's my man!"

It was in the Britt game against the Britt Eagles that bubbles started bursting. We were unbeaten and so were they. They had the number one fullback in the whole damn conference. A kid by the name of Brad Schwarm.

"Okay, Schwarm. I'm ready. I'm gonna bite your goddam head off."

"You sonuvabitch, Last. Do that again and I'm gonna kill you!"

"Ox-headed moron!"

"Hit 'em, Johnny! That's my man!"

"Come on, you old sod-eater. Just try to get past!"

Those big red heroic letters. My immovable Bronco Blue. His eyes walled away behind those goddam athletic glasses. His big hams churning. His cleats biting turf. I bit my mouthpiece so hard my jaws ached. My back tensed like an iron spring. I could read those heroic red letters . . . B-R-I-T-T. Death in those eyes. Those goddam glasses. Those cleats. We came together like all heaven and all hell meeting at once. Blinding pain. Stars. Heroic stars. Smiling stars. Cursing stars. Death. Hate.

"Hit 'em, Johnny . . ."

I didn't get up. Schwarm went sixty-six yards for six points. He threw his arms up and danced. They carried me out. Hell, I wasn't feelin' no pain. They told me I smiled as they carried me out, but I don't remember.

I stumbled through school and practice for the next two days. On the third day they admitted me to the hospital. A possible concussion, they said. And in the hospital I developed pneumonia. I came down with pneumonia three days after the game and I slept in a hospital bed for a week. I wished I could die and get it over with.

You and I both know that kids are fickle. I mean, his brother caught several passes that year for touchdowns. Why couldn't he have chosen Ricky over me? He didn't have to believe in me.

Our team didn't win another game. I watched them all from the bleachers, wrapped in blankets and carefully tended by my mother and the coach's wife.

Reggie and I stood for some time behind the Ponies' bench. I studied the loose threads around the edges of the two and the three. I looked at the ruddy skin showing between the jersey and the football pants. A little bit of the band on his jockstrap was showing in the back, peeping over the edge of his football pants.

That bastard nearly killed me. He blew me down. It was a wonder I ever got up again. Goddam heroic letters! Goddam

athletic glasses! Goddam braces! No, he didn't have any wire on his teeth. What could've made me think that? I had a right to lay there and not get up. I had a right to be in that hospital bed. I couldn't be expected to pop back up like I was never beaten. Even Broncos lose once in a while.

Reggie was looking at me. He looked puzzled. I wondered just what he thought of me.

I leaned over the fence. I put my head as close as I could to Dennis' head. Dennis never turned, never looked at me.

"Fuck ya, Dennis."

As Reggie and I walked away from the Pony game I tried to imagine Dennis standing there with his back to the heroic red sun with tears on his face. I tried to imagine it. I tried . . .