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English 1113.002

Literacy Autobiography

23 October 2001

No Regrets

“Fake thirty-two two-f on two,” Ryan Stormo called the play in the huddle.

“They haven’t been picking up the slant all night,” volunteered Jeremiah Peckenpaugh. “I should be open across the middle.”

“Okay. Linemen, keep giving me time. Fake thirty-two two-f on two.” Ryan reiterated. “Ready...”

“Break.” We all yelled, as we headed for the line. Jogging toward the line, I reached through the facemask of my helmet and adjusted my glasses firmly back onto my face. As I reached my position on the line, I leaned over and rested my elbows on my knees. I got in a stance as if I was “taking a crap in the woods,” as my coach liked to say, and I waited for my quarterback to begin the cadence.

“Ready,” Ryan yelled over the noise of the crowd.

I moved my right hand to the ground, in unison with the rest of the line. I looked up at the defender across the line from me without really seeing him. I thought of what my first step would be when the ball was snapped, and I anticipated what my opponent would do. There was no room for error, not in this game. We needed every yard we could get.

“Set.”

The outside world began to disappear as I focused entirely on my blocking responsibility for the upcoming play. We were running a quick pass play, my role was to explode off the line, to

make it look like we were running the ball, and block my man for long enough to allow Ryan to find a receiver.

“Hut one.”

The muscles in my arms and legs become tense and ready for movement.

“Hut two.”

I was already moving. My right foot slid forward past my left and my hands quickly went to pop the defensive lineman in the chest. He strained against my efforts. I shuffled my feet, kept my body low, and held my arms on his chest. As I felt him move left, I mirrored his motion while watching for blitzing backers in the hole that had opened between the center and me. No one came. I stayed with my man. He pushed forward and I retreated backwards against his force, while continuing to match his movements.

The whistle blew. The play was over. My struggle with the defensive lineman ended, and I emerged from my two-man world into the wider struggle of the football game. I looked downfield and saw that Ryan had completed a thirty-seven pass to Jeremiah Peckenpaugh. Jeremiah had been open across the middle just as he had said, and Ryan had thrown a perfect pass. We had a first down on our opponent’s twenty yard-line with a minute and a half left in the game.

As I ran up to the huddle, my eyes moved around the stadium. I saw the fans in red and white standing quietly and the fans in blue and gold cheering excitedly. The Dakota Dome had a capacity of more than ten thousand fans and the crowd noise was immense. It was by far the biggest stadium that I had ever played in. It was also the only indoor stadium I had ever played in and the only artificial surface I had ever played on. Television cameras were placed all around the field and were sending live footage of the game, the South Dakota Class 11-A High School

State Football Championship, to everyone in the state. But I could not be concerned with that now.

We had a game to win and I needed to focus on that. We were down by seven points. Before scoring a touchdown on our last possession we had been down by fourteen, but we had never counted ourselves out. We had previous experience playing from behind. To advance to the state championship we had come back from a twenty-four point deficit in the fourth quarter of our quarter-final game. This was different though, this game had been predicted to be a blowout. Vermillion High School had twice as many students as Hamlin. They played all their home games in the Dakota Dome, while we had never played a game indoors. They had every advantage, but we were determined to win.

As we formed a huddle on the thirty-five yard-line, Ryan spoke for all of us, "I'm sorry guys, I'm really dragging out here." This self-admission of difficulty was not at all uncommon for our quarterback, not even after a great play. He was not a typical leader of a football team, he was soft spoken and the only person he would ever yell at or be angry at was himself. This time, what he said was true for all of us. Outside it was thirty degrees and on the field of the Dakota Dome it was almost eighty. Standing in the huddle, we all were panting and sweating profusely. We had not played in this kind of heat for two months. Suddenly being thrown back into it was a shock to our systems.

Twenty yards away from us, the Vermillion defense stood strong. They were accustomed to the heat and were confident that they could stop us from scoring. Before the game, the coaches had told us that the Vermillion players were wearing "1999 State Champion, 12-0 Vermillion Tanagers" t-shirts under their pads. Looking at them now, it was easy to see that they still believed their shirts.

As our huddle broke, we put aside the tiredness that we all felt so deeply and jogged toward Vermillion's confident defense. We would not show them any weakness, we were determined to fight through it and win the game. "Forty-five option on two," I repeated to myself as I headed for the line. I followed the same routine that I had all year. I adjusted my glasses, got in my stance, and planned my technique. From my end, the play went perfectly. I did not know what had happened until it was all over.

After the whistle blew, I saw our chance for victory had ended. The Vermillion players cheered as their defense began to head off the field. The rest of the Hamlin team and I began to walk off the field, heads hanging low and bodies moving sluggishly. Reaching the sideline, I looked up at the replay on the scoreboard. As Ryan had rolled out to the left on the option, the Vermillion defensive end had covered him perfectly. Ryan had made a poor choice and decided to pitch the ball anyway, and the pitch was subsequently knocked down and recovered by the Vermillion defender. Our hope for an upset had ended. The blue and gold fans became quiet as the red fans started cheering once again. The score was 14-21 and with only one minute left there was nothing we could do to change it. We had lost. The game was all but over.

As our defense took the field, I stood idly on the sideline. I did not watch the game or cheer for my team. Instead, I looked at the scoreboard and saw the remaining minute slowly tick down to zero. We had worked so hard for this and had come so close to victory, losing by seven points just did not feel right. If the coach had called a different play or if Ryan had not tried to force the pitch maybe we could have won. The clock finally hit zero, and as the Vermillion players and fans rushed the field I slowly followed my team onto the field. We congregated down by the fifteen-yard line as celebrating Vermillion fans surged past us toward midfield. I wished I could have been anywhere else. Everyone congratulated us as if we had achieved some great

victory, but we had lost.

“You guys did so good,” my parents told me.

“Don’t hang your heads,” our coaches told us.

“We really had Vermillion scared. We were so close,” we told each other. “No one thought we could even compete with them,” we tried to comfort ourselves.

But that was not how I felt. After finishing with the painfully long award ceremony, I was one of the first to head into the locker room. Picking my way through the crowd as anonymously and covertly as possible, I was relieved to get away from the people. I would not have to listen to anyone else congratulate me for the loss.

I took my time in the locker room. I slowly took off my pads, knowing it would be another year until I would wear them again. As I walked toward the shower, I suddenly remembered the pain in my left thigh that I had ignored all throughout the playoffs. Nothing could have kept me off that field. The pain had just been another obstacle to work through. But it had all been for nothing.

After a long shower I got dressed and waited for the rest of the team. Sitting quietly, I packed all my equipment neatly into my large gym bag and tried not to cry. I was disappointed, angry, and tired. The long game had left me physically and emotionally drained.

After regaining enough energy to get up, I headed for the bus. I slowly picked up my bag and headed for the door. Coming out of the locker room and back onto the field, it was dark, calm, and quiet. All the spectators had left the stadium, all the television cameras were gone, and all the noises of the game were only a distant echo. Just an hour ago, the dome had been filled with life, sound, and action. It had just been an hour, but it could have been twenty years.

All the large stadium lights had been turned off. Only a few small lights above the field

in both end zones lit the Dakota Dome. Despite the darkness, I looked around the field and saw it as I never had before. The huge white cloth roof held up only by air pressure, the countless rows of empty red, white, and yellow seats, and the large score board that had so prominently announced our defeat only an hour ago all stood quiet and calm in the aftermath of our great struggle.

The calmness of the dome washed over me, erasing the anger and disappointment from my mind. I saw the whole football season in perspective. The championship game no longer seemed like a terrible loss, but instead like a noble struggle. While Vermillion had every advantage given to them, we had to fight for every yard. Although we came up twenty yards short in the end, the struggle was no less important. Hamlin had exceeded all expectations. We had proved something. The second place trophy had not been given to us. It had been earned by hard work, determination, and unrelenting effort. Vermillion, the team with everything pointing its way, had almost folded under the pressure of a team it should have rolled over based on size and talent alone.

At that moment, I realized we had done something much more impressive than win a state championship. As I walked across the hard artificial turf toward the exit, I took a last look at the empty field. After I pulled open the door and went out in a burst of the dome's high-pressure air, I never looked back. I had no regrets, only pride.