

A Family Torn

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There was a slight breeze flowing through the air. It was just enough to keep the heat at bay. The sun was hidden behind a sea of clouds. Every now and then it made an appearance before disappearing again. The smell of freshly cut grass was thick in the air. Unlike the calm weather, tensions were high on the practice field. Every player on his toes, eyes wide, was waiting. There had been two fights already, both involving an offensive and defensive player. Never has a team this close been more ready to turn on each other. Two practices had passed, two fights, one team turned into two. Everyone was breathing heavily. We were near the end of practice. It was the last team period of the day. A couple more minutes and the team would be split into their individual groups. Unfortunately, a couple of minutes would be too long. It was going to happen again, offense and defense would get tom apart, and two friends would turn on one another.

Talk of the barbaric practices had spread throughout the school and reached the ears of many outraged parents. Football was meant to bring young men together to play a sport they all loved. The team was meant to make the players throw all differences aside and pull together. Even if a player had a fight with someone else on the team during school, it was forgotten just long enough to get through practice. I had to trust the man next to me, and he had to trust me. There could be no petty arguments on the field. Yet, this week the team had forgotten about the fundamentals of the game and were all ready to rip each other's throats out.

Just a couple of minutes and after that the two sides would not have to be together until

game day. That would be long enough for things to cool down. Time seemed to have come to a standstill. Every second was dragging to the point of eternity. The pops of the pads hitting were louder than normal as the offense collided with the defense. Another play had been completed. Only a few more and the coach would blow his whistle to end the period. I did not know how everyone would act if something happened now. Each group of players was under different commands from the coaches. The receivers had been told by the head coach to not take part if a fight should break out. He was a tall man, only forty-five, yet his face was aged and hair thin and gray. He had been fighting leukemia for ten years, and it showed. Though he had given the entire team the same order as the receivers, he was quickly undermined by the other coaches. The offensive line was told by their coach, a huge muscular man that had an undying love and respect from his line, that they would be running gassers, two hundred yard sprints, if they did not run to the aid of another offensive player. I, on the other hand was a linebacker. Our coach, and head defensive coach, had told us to use our imagination. He was taller than average with an almost shaved head, and an extremely short temper.

We broke the huddle and got to our positions. "Just a few more," I told myself. The breeze had stopped blowing as if holding its breath for what was going to happen next. The quarterback, being the loser of the second fight, hiked the ball with a fierce determination to beat the defense. One of my better friends on the team, Jeffery Bell, an offensive lineman, charged at one of my fellow linebackers, Eric Northworthy. After the initial hit, Bell was supposed to stop, yet he kept shoving and hitting the linebacker. Bell used his size and weight to overpower Eric who was no bigger than me. He was not satisfied until Eric had fallen backwards onto the ground. Bell stood over him and gave a look of superiority. After the whistle blew, I could hear the argument continue. "It's just practice, take it easy," said Tad Brock. I looked over to see Tad,

another linebacker, the same size as Eric, helping his fellow linebacker to his feet after Bell had pushed him down. "Don't be such a pussy. If you can't handle it, get off the field," said Bell. He had gone too far, not a smart move seeing as how he was still on the defense's side of the line. He must have realized this. I could see his eyes scanning around, he knew that if we wanted, we could have knocked the smile off of his face right there.

Yet, the smile on his face did not fade. He knew the rest of the offense was only a couple of yards away, and the rest of our defense was on the side lines. I looked over to them and saw that they had all noticed the argument and were now slightly leaning forward as if waiting for a command to charge. The players on the defense were not the only ones who had noticed, the head coach was looking over, wondering why his practice was not continuing. Even the sun had moved from behind the clouds as if wanting to see what had happened. Not wanting to know the consequences of another fight, Bell had turned around and started walking back to the huddle. One of the secondary had made a joke to ease the tension. Taking advantage of the situation, Tad pushed Bell just as he was passing through our huddle. Bell turned around and charged at the first person he saw, me. He was bigger than me and certainly not a person I wanted charging at me. I had barely seconds to react as he was tackling me. I turned as much as I could to ensure that he would not land on top of me. We hit the ground on our sides. My friendship for him was quickly replaced with hate and disgust. Being in full pads, punching was ineffective; instead, I went for his throat and started choking him. We were almost immediately surrounded by swirls of red and white as the rest of the team came running in. Bell and I barely had enough time to inflict damage on one another before the offense took a hold of me and pulled my arms back leaving me defenseless. The defense was not slow to react as they ripped Bell away and stalled to work on the offensive players holding me down. The fight ended almost as quickly as it began

as one of our coaches came in screaming: "This is stupid! Never in all of my years have I ever seen a team behave like this! Y'all are looking for a fight!" I don't remember what he said after that; I was looking at our head coach. His face was filled not with anger, but disappointment. He lowered his head and looked at the ground as if we were not good enough to look at. We had let him down. That was worse than any punishment we could have gotten.

"Practice is over," that was all he said as he started walking back to the locker room. One of the team captains yelled for a team meeting. As distant as we had recently been that day, I was surprised that we were all able to come so close to one another. Offensive and defensive players, only inches away, were kneeling side by side. We had a long talk right there on the field. We got a lot off of our chest that day. Everyone made a promise to look after one another and to settle our differences by talking, not by fighting on the field. We all walked back to the locker room not as individuals, but as a team. As I sat down at my locker I started to take off my cleats when I saw Bell walking over. We had apologized to each other on the field, but only at the captain's request. His face had changed drastically from what I had seen on the ground. It was no longer filled with anger but with regret. I could tell that he knew he made a mistake. Most of the team had slowly drained out of the locker room, eager to get home and relax. He shook my hand and gave me a sincere apology. Bell and I talked for so long that we were the last ones to leave.

I never realized what I was a part of until then. It was more than just a team; it was a way of life and a culture all on its own. Of course everyone would find out about the fight because that is all they cared about. They would never know the feeling of looking over at another teammate and laughing at something that had happened during the previous practice or running out onto the field with great friends on a Friday night. They would never know the feeling of a week's practice all coming together for a victory. They would never know what it felt like after

that last game, the last ride home. They would never know how I felt when I put my helmet up knowing I would never take it down again. We had many different people with many different backgrounds, but there was one thing that we all had in common. We were the Riverside Academy Rebels, and we were more than just a team. We were brothers.