



1966 Varsity Football Team
Coach is the tallest person in the back row, I'm number 41

Chapter 18

Football

Fall, 1965 (1964 and 1966, too)

Boys, I learned many lessons playing football including endurance, perseverance, and team loyalty. Despite the lessons learned, if I had it all to do over again, I wouldn't play football. I would pursue sports that are safer and more in line with my abilities such as cross-country, cycling, or golf. Here's what happened.

August 20 was the worst day of that summer and probably my entire junior year. From the day my sophomore year ended the previous May, I had dreaded August 20, 1965. The dark thought of that day was always prowling my mind as I moved through summer jobs cooking burgers at the Dairy Queen and mowing grass for the school district. I dreaded August 20, because football training started that day.

We assembled at the high school for the beginning of grueling two-a-day workouts. At 8:00 a.m., we found ourselves in shorts, T-shirts, and helmets, doing calisthenics, running wind sprints, and then taking on the hilly mile-long cross-country course to end the practice. We squeezed learning the offense and defense into the few moments between calisthenics and sprints. Then we went home exhausted, only to do it all over again at 3:00 p.m. More than a few of us ended practice hanging on to the goal posts and puking.

Then it got even worse. The coaches put us in full pads the second week and added lots of tackling, blocking, and agility drills to the calisthenics, wind sprints, and cross-country running. Being an underclassman with a last name that began with W meant my equipment choices were limited. I was always at the end of the line and little was left. My helmet was too big, my shoulder pads old and falling apart, and my pants were torn at the thigh-pad pocket, requiring the pad to be reinserted regularly. I complained, but no one cared. "Get tough! Play through adversity," Coach told me in a deep voice that sounded like it was coming through one of the cheerleaders' megaphones. The same epithets were displayed on posters throughout the locker room.

Three weeks into the season, my entire body was sore. I hurt everywhere. Football was well underway and as a third-string running back, my practice job was to carry the ball, emulating the plays our coaches thought this week's opponent would run. The first-string defense, comprised mostly of members of the senior class, found the third-string offensive line a pushover, making me an easy target. I was gang-tack-

led mercilessly. More than a few times, I found himself on my back gazing up through my facemask at the five or six smirking defenders laying heavily on top of me.

How had I gotten myself into this fix? At the time, it had seemed unavoidable.

Football in Golden, like in most small towns, was more than popular; it was a religion. The faithful worshiped every Saturday at the hometown field and prayed to God for the Demons, our school mascot, to prevail. If anyone noticed the irony, they didn't bring it up for fear of excommunication.

Football was all everyone talked about from early summer on. How would this year's team do? Who were the good players? Would we go to the state championship? Dad, most of his friends, and many of my cousins had played for Golden at some point. Apparently some of those old teams in the 1930s were very good. But it was Joe's dad who had made Golden a contender. Joe's family moved to town in 1956 so his dad, Lew, could coach the high school team. Two years later, Golden went all the way to the state championship game, finally losing to Greely. That was the best Golden team ever. My cousins Paul and Ted played on the 1958 team under Lew.

And so every red-blooded, able-bodied Golden boy was expected to be on the team in hopes the Demons would bring a championship and everlasting glory to our small town. Amen. That's why I played high school football.

My preparation for playing in high school began in eighth grade. That was a short season for me, because I broke my hand in the second game, and that was it for that year. I was moved to running back on our junior-high ninth-grade team. I matured before most of my classmates. I was up to 155 pounds and 5' 11", so at that point, I was faster and stronger compared to them. I thought football was fun, except for the injuries.

Early in the ninth-grade season, I took a helmet to the thigh, resulting in a deep-thigh bruise. It was difficult to walk, let alone run. My coach took me to the high school nearly every day so I could sit in the whirlpool, hoping to heal my leg. It was from that whirlpool that I got my first look at the high-school coach. I didn't like what I saw and heard.

Coach was arguing with one of his assistants, who also served as the head baseball coach. "Everyone on this football team better be out for track this spring. I

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don't want anyone loafing playing baseball. Anyone not out for track in the spring won't play football in the fall!" As you might imagine, the assistant coach wasn't buying it, and a heated argument ensued.

How could anyone tell us we couldn't play baseball? Many on the team were excellent baseball players, and the Coach's action would surely hurt the baseball team's chances and the players' opportunities. It seemed to me that all Coach cared about was football and his win-loss record. Like some coaches, he was probably looking to move up in the football world. I silently cheered for the assistant from my tub.

A few weeks later, during the last game of my ninth-grade season, I dislocated my elbow trying to make a tackle. I ran to the sideline in severe pain holding my distorted arm. Bones were pushing at the skin in an unexpected and ugly way. Jay Bob, one of my teammates, took one look at my disfigured arm and immediately threw up. Mr. Solomon, the school principal loaded me into his truck and rushed me to Doctor Goad's office. After a quick exam in the waiting room, Doctor Goad said there was nothing he could do and sent us to the hospital. He called ahead for a specialist. A few hours later, a needle was pushed into my un-dislocated arm. I passed out as my jersey was being cut off. I awoke sometime later with a full cast and my arm taped to my body.

A year later and fully recovered from the dislocated elbow, and as if answering a siren call to defend the community, I signed up to play on the high-school team. As a sophomore, I found myself playing against boys two years older where my size was no longer an advantage. I did win a starting position on the "B" squad my sophomore year, which earned me the right to beat my head and body against the varsity players all week in practice.

Somewhere during that sophomore season, while lying at the bottom of a pile of upperclassmen or at the 50-yard marker of a 100-yard wind sprint, or maybe while sloggng through the mud on the cross-country course, I came to the conclusion that I really didn't like playing football. Unlike eighth- and ninth-grade football, in high school the sport just wasn't fun anymore.

And, I didn't like the coach. Maybe it was the self-serving position he took with regard to baseball or maybe it was the way he preached, calling forth pride and discipline. "Where's your pride? Where's your discipline?" he yelled with his baritone voice practice after practice as he strutted around the field, clearly enjoying the moment. Or maybe it was the motivational lectures (or were they sermons?) he delivered

from his position on high in the bleachers? He would spring to a point at the top of the bleachers where he would deliver his spiel. Every statement sounded as if it was lifted from an inspirational poster and delivered in the tone of one of those fire-and-brimstone types. I, for one, wasn't motivated.

As a junior, I once again found myself still on the B squad, still running opponents' plays against the varsity. I hadn't gained a pound or grown an inch in two years. Meanwhile, everyone else was getting bigger, stronger, and faster. Many of the boys on the team had spent the summer lifting weights that made them even bigger and stronger. I didn't like weights and didn't lift. As a result, I was outmatched and miserable that season. In coaching parlance, I had a bad attitude. But I was good at math; so I counted the days until the season ended.

Unfortunately for me, we had a good team my junior year. After losing two games in the pre-season, the varsity went undefeated in conference play, setting up a final game of the season against undefeated Lakewood. If we beat Lakewood, we would be in the state play-offs and the season would go on until we lost.

The week before the Lakewood game, and during a tackling drill in practice, I separated my shoulder. The runner faked one way and went the other. I reached out but he was too fast, and all I could do was get a hand on his thigh pad. My shoulder popped out of joint as he flashed past me. I lay on the ground in excruciating pain. While an assistant coach tried to decide what to do, my arm popped back into place all on its own. Feeling nauseous, I took a knee and waited for the nausea to pass and the pain to recede.

At home after practice, I was still in severe pain. Dad asked what happened and after a quick description, he called Dr. Goad. We met at his office, where he examined my shoulder, put me in a sling, and declared that I was to have no more contact for three weeks. "Give it time to heal or it will get serious," he instructed.

That was music to my ears. No more contact! "Can I run," I asked? He answered that I could run, just no tackling, blocking, or ball carrying.

And then, I did a stupid thing. Sick of football and Coach and knowing I would just stand on the sidelines and watch, I turned in my gear and started practicing with the basketball team. Pre-season practices were just starting; so I decided I would run, arm in sling, with the basketball team. "What difference did it make?" I

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thought. "I'm not going to be missed on the football team and I'm still supporting the school." Why couldn't I just stick with the football team until the season ended? That would have been the right thing to do, but 16 year-old juniors in high school with bad attitudes don't always do the right thing.

Coach was unhappy. He called me into his office and told me how disappointed he was with me for quitting. Furthermore, he was going to take a vote of the entire team to see if I would be allowed to attend the team dinner. I told him I could save him the trouble. I wasn't planning on attending. Nevertheless, he had a team meeting and took a vote. He had an example to make; I wasn't invited to present my side. Only two of my teammates, Joe and Dave, voted for me. I was disgraced.

I wasn't just another kid who turned in his gear. That happened plenty of times. I was president of the junior class, so the news of my humiliation spread through the school like a social disease. High school can be brutal. Some students and faculty reveled in my failure. My friends Dude, Chuck, and Monte stood by me though. They did everything they could to cheer me up. Dad wanted to talk to Coach, but I called him off. I told him it was my problem. Two days later, Golden lost to Lakewood 21–20 and the season ended. Four weeks later, Lakewood won the state championship.

High school life went on and with my arm healing, I managed to earn a starting spot at forward on the varsity basketball team. My disgrace was forgotten as new dramas came to the fore — a pregnant senior, suspensions for drinking or fighting, and more. There was always something and someone to gossip about.

During the course of basketball season, while going for a rebound, I dislocated my shoulder again. It popped back in and I continued to play. It hurt, but nothing like the pain I had experienced the first time. Then, it happened again and again. By the end of the season, my shoulder wouldn't stay in joint at all. It would pop out in class without any movement on my part, or even in bed while I was asleep. I would awake sweating and in pain. I would reach over with my left hand and pull my shoulder back into joint. I had surgery at the end of the season. I spent the spring in a sling and the summer trying to regain some motion in my arm. It took years to recover, but it was never the same.

Just before school ended my junior year, Coach called me into his office to let me know he had decided that I could play on his football team again next fall. I thanked him for his magnanimous offer, but told him I hadn't decided if I was going

to play or not. After a short, heated conversation in which he questioned my loyalty and I his methods, we agreed that we didn't like each other.

Many thought I was crazy and maybe I was. As much as I disliked Coach, with an arm I couldn't raise above my shoulder and still weighing 155, I went out for football again my senior year. When I showed up on August 20, 1966, he just looked at me and didn't say a word. I did it to show both of us I could take whatever he could dish out.

I spent practices on the sidelines watching that year's B squad run plays against the varsity. As a senior, I couldn't play on the B squad. I wasn't good enough to be a first- or second-string player, so I stood on the sidelines in full gear watching the varsity practice. And that was good. Since I wasn't expending much energy in practice, I did well running wind sprints and taking on the cross-country course, actually coming in first on several occasions. It was surprising how fresh I felt as practice ended and wind sprints began. Not getting my brains beat in during practice really made a difference. I thought of it as getting in shape for basketball.

I was sure I was off Coach's radar when he totally surprised me. During one game while I was sitting on the bench and doing my best to scope out the opposing team's cheerleaders, he yelled my name, "Waters, Waters, where are you?" Shocked to hear my name, I wondered how the three or four running backs ahead of me in the depth chart could all have all been injured on the very same play. "Am I going in?" I asked myself as I put on my helmet and fastened the chinstrap. I jogged over to Coach anticipating my entrance into the game.

Dude, Chuck, and Monte were watching from the bleachers. They were as dumbstruck as I was when they heard coach bellow my name. They couldn't believe I was being called to action either.

"Here, get that helmet off and take these phones," coach ordered as he marched down the sideline to engage the ref on a questionable call. Dude, Chuck, and Monte found this hilarious. "Good job, Waters!" they yelled. "Good phone!" I turned to the bleachers and took a deep bow, just as Coach came back to retrieve his headphones. He glared at me, then went back to the game. My friends amplified their cheers.

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The season ground on and our record was a mediocre five wins and four losses. It was time for the last game of the season with Wheatridge, the county powerhouse.

The season was a resounding success from my personal point of view. With our record, there was no chance of going to the playoffs, so the season would end this week. I had made it to the last practice of the season without quitting. And, thanks to my hard-earned skills as practice watcher and bench sitter, I had avoided any more serious injuries. These thoughts were running through my mind as I stood apart from the huddle of players at the end of the last practice. I was positioning myself to get a head start into the locker room, out of the cold November wind and into a hot shower, when coach announced the captain for the Wheatridge game. I wasn't paying much attention when he announced my name.

"What?" I asked. "What did he say?" I asked Steve, another n'er-do-well senior who was loitering near me.

"You're the game captain and you're starting at running back," he answered.

I was shocked. Apparently, that's what happens when you show up for another miserable season and win a few wind sprints. All I wanted to do was find a good seat on the bench to watch the last game, and now I was the game captain.

I managed to win the coin toss, but it was downhill from there on. We received the kick-off and I ran onto the field and into the huddle. Joe, our quarterback, called a play for me to run off tackle. I didn't even get to the line of scrimmage before I was hit hard, losing yardage. This happened one more time, then Bobby, our starting running back, arrived at the huddle calling my name. I jogged off the field. Chuck, Dude, and Monte cheered, either for my appearance as game captain or maybe just happy that I was out of the game and uninjured. Relieved to be out, I spent the remainder of the game on the bench trying to get a good look at the Wheatridge cheerleaders.

Wheatridge killed us, the season was over, and my football career came to an end at long last.