

REMEMBER WHY YOU PLAY

Faith, Football, and a Season to Believe

DAVID THOMAS



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Remember Why You Play: Faith, Football, and a Season to Believe

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To Ashlin and Tyson, my two favorite athletes.

Remember why you play.

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Introduction

It is late January 2009. Kris Hogan, head football coach for the Faith Christian Lions, is receiving more media interview requests than he can accommodate. The campus is buzzing over the coach's upcoming appearance on ESPN and his trip to Tampa, Florida, for the Super Bowl—invited along with his wife, Amy, as special guests of National Football League commissioner Roger Goodell. There, the NFL would arrange more interviews for Hogan on the “Radio Row” filled with sports radio stations from around the country. There's even word circulating that movie producers want to make a film about the football team—all because of one game played last football season, against the Gainesville State School Tornadoes.

Looking back on that game, senior Greg Wright says with a shrug, “We didn't take it to be a big deal.” But apparently everyone else did, as accounts of that night had spread all over the Internet. The funny thing is that it never was intended to become a story at all. The final game of the 2008 regular season looked to be meaningless. The Lions had secured their slot in the private-school state playoffs, and the Tornadoes would not even make a good tune-up game. They were winless in eight games and had scored only two touchdowns all year.

The game was supposed to mean nothing.

The game turned out to mean everything.

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Gainesville State School is a maximum-security correctional facility whose students are teenage prisoners. The football players are among the best students, because they must earn the privilege to play. Every game is a road game for the Tornadoes, and their only fans are school personnel and volunteers, usually twenty or thirty people. With barely a handful of substitutes for most games, the players are used to being outnumbered, outplayed, and outcheered.

Which is what made the game in Grapevine, Texas, so different.

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For that game, Faith Christian fans decided to treat the visitors like the home team. To make the Tornadoes *their* team.

Before the game, Faith parents and students formed a 40-yard-long spirit line and held a banner for Tornadoes players to run through when they entered the field. Then about half of the Faith fans and cheerleaders moved over to the visitors' side of the stadium and cheered for Gainesville State players throughout the game. Among those cheering were parents of Faith players, encouraging kids they did not know to tackle their own sons. And the fans did more than cheer for Tornadoes players; they cheered for them by name. That support, an overwhelming surprise, inspired the Tornadoes to their best effort of the season. They lost again, 33–14 this time, but they scored two touchdowns in the second half to double the number of touchdowns they had scored all season.

When the game ended, Gainesville State players high-fived and embraced each other. Little did they know when they had stepped off the bus almost four hours earlier that the game would end like this. That they would feel like this. That people out in “the free world” would root for them. That a high school football game could change their lives.

After the game, the teams met at midfield for prayer with Faith fans standing all around. Mark Williams, the Tornadoes' coach, asked if his quarterback could pray. In a simple manner but with heartfelt depth, the player thanked God for things easily taken for granted, from the sun coming up that morning to the opportunity to play football that night. There was one thing, however, for which he said he did not know how to express thanks, because he never knew that so many people cared for him and his teammates.

At that point, in that circle of several hundred fans, you would have been hard-pressed to find a dry set of eyes. I was in that circle, as a sportswriter for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* following up on a tip that something special would take place at the game. The story and photos ran in the Sunday sports section, and the e-mails and phone calls began pouring in to our newspaper and both schools. Our readers began e-mailing the story to friends and family.

When sports columnist Rick Reilly wrote about the game for ESPN.com, the attention exploded. Hogan's assistant, Dana Stone, said she felt like the school's press secretary as Hogan found himself in the

unexpected and uncomfortable position of choosing which newspaper, radio, and television interviews he had time to accept. An Australian media outlet requested an interview to be broadcast on more than three hundred radio stations Down Under. A college student also requested an interview: he had been assigned to write a paper on someone he considered a hero, and the coach of the Christian school team from Texas he had read about seemed the perfect candidate.

Reports of the game were passed around the Internet on blogs and message boards. Ministers used the story of the game to compose sermons about compassion and hope. The NFL commissioner's office and movie producers called. Hogan would make appearances on ESPN, *The 700 Club*, and *Good Morning Texas*, among other shows. The story that had never been intended to be known outside the Lions' quaint stadium had literally gone global.

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In the middle of that publicity—and in the middle of basketball season now—Greg Wright expresses surprise at the ongoing reaction.

“It's kind of what we do,” he says, almost apologizing for not understanding the attention. The circumstances, he explains, may have been more dramatic for the Gainesville State game, but the opportunity was one like many others Faith coaches have taught players to look for in using football as a platform for reaching out to and helping others.

I know what Wright means. I had followed the Faith program during the previous season, in 2007, to write a book detailing how the school's coaches teach faith and football hand in hand. I had gotten to know Greg and his teammates well that year, long before anyone even knew that Faith would be playing Gainesville State. And I was impressed with what I'd seen. In fact, I was there because I'd been impressed for years. For the 2007 season the Lions were ranked number one in the state and favored to win the school's first football state championship. Facing the giants? The Lions *were* the giants. Yet despite the expectations from those outside the program, and despite the season-long pursuit of a perfect record and state championship, football remained secondary to a greater purpose.

The question most asked by those who have read or heard of the

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Gainesville State game is pretty simple: where did this school get the idea to provide fans for a team of prison-school players? The answer is simple too: their way of life. What took place that night on Faith's campus was not a one-game occurrence or confined to one season. Or even to one sport, or sports in general. It is a lifestyle the coaches teach and model, and football fields are just one place where those lessons play out. And it was time spent inside the Faith football program—even though it had been spent before that big game ever happened—that gave me that answer.

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I first met Kris Hogan during his second season as Faith's head coach, in the fall of 2004. Under his leadership the Lions had earned the school's first playoff victory the previous week. I attended their next game with friends who knew the coach, and we watched Faith's season end that night with a forty-three-point loss.

Despite the margin of defeat, there was something curiously positive about the team. The Faith players had played all out from first to last whistle. Even more notable was their sportsmanship. Through the last play, Lions players helped their opponents up and patted them on the back or helmet. They handed the football to an official after each play. And following the game, on the field, I observed a group of players and coaches that cared for each other and had set aside that night's disappointment in favor of enjoying their season-long accomplishments. That group seemed to be viewing a picture larger than one game, or even one season.

The next year, 2005, I watched a few more Faith games; the next year, even more. Along the way, I became friends with the coach. We shared similar interests and had two children the same ages. As a sports-writer, I enjoyed talking football with a coach outside of football settings. During those conversations, I could see that coaching football meant much more to him than merely coaching football. Hogan truly cares about his players and has a driving passion for developing teenagers into men of high character.

I have heard many coaches state similar admirable goals, and I also have witnessed how difficult it is to put those goals into practice.

Football can be a game of anger, of physically and mentally dominating an opponent. Of tugs-of-war between coach and players, as the coach pushes the players to physical and mental limits beyond what they realize they can attain. Of burdensome pressure to win games, even—and sometimes especially—at the high school level. Yet here was a coach who hugged his players and told them he loved them no matter what numbers wound up on any scoreboard. In response, his players played like no other team I had watched.

In 2006, the Lions were developing into powerhouse status, yet I continued to notice the same sportsmanship that had sparked my interest at that first game. The Faith Lions won, and they won the right way. By the second round of that year's playoffs, I knew I possessed more than a casual interest in Faith football. I was assigned to write a column for my newspaper from the game between two large public schools, Southlake Carroll and Euless Trinity, both of which were undefeated and had won state championships the previous season. The game drew 46,339 fans to Texas Stadium, home of the Dallas Cowboys. Yet up in the press box, as our Game of the Century played out on the field below, I was receiving e-mail updates from Faith's game.

At three o'clock the next morning, I awoke with an idea. At a much more reasonable hour that day, I pitched that idea to the coach: grant me full access to your program for one season, and I will write a book describing how your program blends faith and football. He embraced the idea, but added one stipulation: the book must be completely open and honest about his program. Anything I observed was fair game. He said if the book was not real in its presentation of how faith and football can work together as teammates, it would not be worth writing. I agreed.

As it turns out, I wrote this book in part to explain how a game like the one played against Gainesville State in 2008 could come about. But before we can get there, we have to go back to the 2007 season—and even further still, to the final game of the 2006 season, the one that took place after I struck my deal with Coach Hogan. Neither of us anticipated how much of an impact that next week's game would have on my season of following Faith football—and faith and football.

CHAPTER 1

Change of Seasons

2006 SEASON: STATE SEMIFINALS

There really was no off-season. The Faith Christian Lions' football season did not begin on the final Friday of August. In reality, it began months before the first scrimmage game two weeks earlier. Before the first two-a-day practices in Texas's midsummer heat. Before even those ten days of after-school practice the previous May.

You could say that the 2007 season, with the Lions a favorite to win the school's first football state championship, actually began December 2, 2006, following Faith's loss in the semifinals of Texas's private-school playoffs. Somewhere between the opposing quarterback's kneeling to expire the clock and the end of the 150-mile trek back home to Grapevine, each player mentally stepped into the next season.

There was no distinct start–finish line between those seasons. No clean break or clear transition point. Not considering the way the 2006 season had ended—with a 27–19 loss to The Regents School of Austin, in a game Faith had led in the second half. And especially not considering *when* it had ended—one weekend before the state championship game, in which the Lions had expected to play.

That loss, in manner and timing, would become a nine-month-long hornet sting. Only the new season could push back the old season's closing scene that still plays out through the players' mental TiVos . . .

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Faith Christian has the ball near midfield, the game clock inside its final thirty seconds, and the Lions need a touchdown and two-point conversion to send the game into overtime. It is possible—seemingly anything is possible—with Faith’s collection of exciting playmakers. But it is fourth down and a half yard to go for a first down.

One-half of a yard.

Football is funny that way. For almost three hours, two teams cover the expanse of a proving ground measuring 120 yards long by 53 1/3 yards wide. And then both teams’ futures—one dream will be extended, one extinguished—are decided by less than a step. Half a yard does not seem like much, but oh, the stories squeezed into that half yard.

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As a running back growing up, Chance Cochran never thought in terms of half yards. He thought in much bigger numbers. Football had always been easy for him. Laughingly easy. In youth games, he broke free for long run after long run. Opposing teams could not stop him, so his coaches did—taking him out of games, often before the second half, to prevent running up the score and embarrassing opponents. When Cochran reached Faith’s varsity, he became the first freshman ever to start for coach Kris Hogan. The first five times Cochran touched the ball, he scored touchdowns. And he scored in five different fashions—a running play, a pass reception, an interception return, a kickoff return, and a punt return. After one score, he came off the field laughing, arms outspread. “I *love* football,” he told his coaches, and laughed some more.

But then came the night he experienced every player’s nightmare. It was the first scrimmage of his sophomore season, and Cochran was picking up where he had left off as a freshman. He carried the ball left and had one defender to juke for another clear path to the end zone. He planted his left foot to cut back to the right. But the cut never came. His left knee buckled, and he collapsed to the ground. “Like a sniper got him from the bleachers,” his coach recalls. Just like that, with one bad step, before it really began, his sophomore season ended.

Problems lingered into this, his junior season. He had hoped to be back at full speed by now, but he was not. Cochran had always had

an innate ability to move laterally to create space, and then when the defense ahead of him yielded the slightest opening, the play became a straight-ahead dash to the end zone, and the fastest player—Cochran—won. The knee injury, however, had relegated Cochran from fastest player on the field to also-ran. He was only about 60 percent, at best, in lateral movements. He could see the openings in the defenses, like he always had. But by the time he could make the cut to start his dash to the end zone, too often a defender had beaten him to the spot and slammed shut that opening. Late in the season, the pain in his repaired knee began to increase. His doctor discovered a Baker's cyst—a collection of fluid on the back of the knee—that required arthroscopic surgery. Cochran missed the final game of the regular season and the first playoff game.

Now he was back on the field—just not all the way back. This play call on third down and five yards for the first down was for Cochran, a screen play that would allow him to catch a short pass in an isolated part of the field and use his speed to gain the first down and temporarily stop the clock, allowing Faith's offense to reorganize.

Cochran left his running back spot to line up at receiver, on the far left side of the formation. He took a step downfield, then retreated behind the line of scrimmage and back toward the quarterback. It was a "jailbreak screen," with Faith's linemen allowing Regents' defenders to rush the quarterback in jailbreak fashion. Before the defenders could reach the quarterback, Cochran caught a soft pass and turned upfield. The play was working as designed: Cochran had the ball beyond the first wave of attacking defenders with a wall of blockers ahead of him. But one Regents player got a hand on Cochran's right foot. Cochran hit the ground one-half yard short of the first-down marker.

Cochran pounded the ball into the turf. It was more than a half-yard's worth of frustration. This was frustration of a season lost, of a second season greatly limited, and of God-only-knows what will happen in future seasons. Two years ago, everyone who saw Cochran play called him a can't-miss college prospect. He was completely healthy then. A different player. And, he admits, a different person. The happiness, the love of playing football, had been replaced by doubt about his ability to recover and uncertainty about his future. He felt it. His coaches and teammates saw it. He no longer came off the field laughing.

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A fully healthy Chance Cochran would have eluded that one defender. He would have gained that half yard and more, possibly much more. But that Chance Cochran was not on the field, and Faith did not have its first down.

There was confusion. As the official marked where Cochran was tackled, it appeared from the Faith sideline that Cochran had gained the first down. “Spike the ball! Spike the ball!” coaches instructed quarterback Landon Anderson. Once the sideline markers were set to reflect the first down the coaches believed Cochran had attained, the referee would signal for the clock to restart. Because the Lions had no timeouts remaining, the coaches wanted Anderson to spike the ball into the ground to stop the clock so the Lions could set up the one big play the players felt they had been on the verge of making all day.

But it was not first down. It was fourth down. If Anderson spiked the ball, Faith would lose possession of the ball and the game, and its season, would be over. Senior offensive lineman Brian Gibson turned to the junior quarterback and told him, “It’s fourth down! Go for it!” From the sideline, Hogan saw the officials spot the ball short of the first down and shouted for Anderson to run Option Left, a run play around the left side of the offensive line in which Anderson would have the option of keeping the ball if he saw an opening or pitching to Cochran at running back. Option Left had produced big yards all season. Now the Lions needed only a half yard from the play.

Having the ball in Anderson’s hands always was an outstanding option. In addition to passing for 1,883 yards on the season, he had rushed for 585 yards, averaging 8.5 yards each time he ran the ball. Half a yard? Easy. Except on this play.

Anderson called for the snap. Faith’s linemen had become set in their positions so as to avoid a penalty, but the snap came before they were ready to block. Anderson sprinted left as his linemen scrambled to catch up to the play and block their assigned defenders. He reached the point where Option Left’s opening had been all season. But this time, when Faith needed that opening most, a Regents player was there. He brought down Anderson, short of the first down. Half a yard short. It might as well have been the length of the field.

Faith’s defensive unit entered the field to stand helplessly as Regents’ quarterback executed football’s most mistake-proof play, from what is

known at all levels of football as the “Victory” formation—the kneel-down. Just like that, void of drama, the comeback and the season were over. Dream denied.

As the final seconds counted down, Anderson looked to the team’s seniors. He would have another chance to win that first football championship, but the five seniors would not. “Seeing their high school careers just tick away,” Anderson would later recall, “it was like five, four, three, two, one . . . Taylor Hazlewood’s never going to step on the field for Faith again. Brian Gibson’s never going to step on the field. Austin Huffman’s never going to play defensive end, ever again. We’re not going to have Johnny Juliano on the practice field. We’re not going to have Elijah Hall stuffing those A-gaps anymore. It’s really a sobering feeling.” Teammate Clayton Messinger, looking back along with Anderson, nodded and added: “It’s the kind of feeling like you’ve let them down.”

No one experienced that feeling more than Alex Nerney. He was the defensive back who had allowed a long touchdown pass in the third quarter with his team protecting a 19–14 lead, and another in the fourth quarter that pushed Faith’s deficit to its final margin of eight points. As far as he was concerned, his team had lost because of him.

It seemed unfair that football fate would pick on Nerney, too. Less than three months earlier, he had suffered a hip subluxation—a complete dislocation of his right hip—during a game. As he lay on the field, told by the team trainer to remain motionless, and with the *pop* still echoing inside his head, he considered for the first time that, only seventeen years old, he might never play football again.

Looking at his six-foot-three, 190-pound frame you wouldn’t think it possible, but Nerney had been an offensive lineman in eighth grade. By his sophomore season, dedicated workouts had helped him make the unusual conversion from lineman to skilled-position player—a receiver on offense and a cornerback on defense. His first season at receiver, opposing coaches selected him all-district by unanimous vote. But then something happened. More precisely, a lot began to not happen—those dedicated workouts that had taken him to his peak.

Nerney enjoyed his success. He took it easy a day here, a day there. Gradually, the taking-it-easy days grew closer together. Then consecutive. The coaches could see a difference, even if early in his junior season his statistics still ranked him among the area’s top receivers. And he

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was on his way to another long touchdown down the far sideline when the injury occurred. He cried on the field as he waited for the cart that would take him to an ambulance. That night he lay in his hospital bed, asking God, “Why me? Why would You do that to me?” He later recalled, “I was distraught because I felt like everything had worked out and God had just slammed me back to reality. I guess I had been getting too big of a head. God tends to do that.”

He expected that his season was over. He hoped to be able to return for his senior year. Doctors, however, told him he had gotten a pass. The bone had a small crack, but no chip. If it had chipped, he would never have played again. In eight weeks, he was told, he would probably be back on the field. Nerney rededicated himself to working out to make sure he would be back for the playoffs. Three weeks after the injury, he was cleared to play.

But now he suffered from a different kind of pain—the pain of believing he had lost the game. So amid the players embracing each other on the field, amid the tears of sorrow, Nerney’s embraces and tears packed the most emotion. Next season would be different, he already had determined. He would give it his best again for the whole season.

There were five seniors, however, who would not be around to enjoy the benefits of the old Alex Nerney’s return. He embraced each one. “I’m sorry,” he said through his tears.

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Three consecutive season-ending losses for Kris Hogan as a head coach.

Actually, most football coaches would take that. There are only two ways to end the season with a victory. One is by winning the state championship. The other—and this is the case for thousands of teams in high school football—is by winning your final game, but not being good enough in your overall season to qualify for the playoffs.

Hogan’s teams make the playoffs. He has been a head coach for eight seasons. Six of the last seven have been playoff seasons. That means six seasons that would end with either a loss or a state championship. Not to say that being eliminated from the playoffs ever becomes easy to accept, but coaches understand that only one team in each classification can have that movie-type ending.

For the rest, there are car rides home like this one. Quiet.

Amy Hogan occupied the passenger seat. Kris and Amy's three children—at ages eight, five, and one—were in the backseat. For fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, the only words were Amy's. "I'm sorry," she said several times. Eventually, Amy began to say more. "Just trying to ease the pain of the situation, that's what she was trying to do," Hogan recalled. "Trying to help me through the situation, comfort me."

They talked about the game, interrupted by consoling cell phone calls from fellow coaches who know the feeling all too well. They read text messages from players thanking Hogan for being their coach, their mentor, their friend. They considered some of the what-ifs of football, they discussed the highlights of another playoff season, and they allowed themselves to imagine aloud—together, as coach and fan, as husband and wife—what could have happened the following week if only they had won this game. Then the ride ended, and suddenly this season-ending loss no longer felt like the others. "It just hit him when we got home," Amy remembered.

Unlike previous years when it was disappointment that dominated Hogan's face, this Saturday night it was sadness. He played with the kids, helped get them ready for bed and for church the next morning, but in the quiet moments, the sadness was there. "He looked like he wanted to cry," Amy said. And at one point, she saw her husband go into their bedroom, sit on his knees, and, alone for the first time since the season had ended, softly cry. Amy had never seen her husband so hurt by a loss.

Before each season, Hogan gives each assistant coach a manual that outlines the football program's goals, rules, expectations, and offensive and defensive schemes. Not once in those fifty-six pages does the head coach who has taken four teams to the state semifinals list "win" as a goal. The front page of the manual asks each coach to consider what kind of Christian he is. What kind of husband and father he is. What kind of son he is. What kind of friend and teammate. But nowhere does it mention winning games.

Yet the creator of that manual, the coach behind that philosophy, shed tears now because his team had not won. This was a state championship-caliber team, he thought, and even after replaying the game in his mind, he could not find one reason why his team was not playing for the state championship. Other than the fact that, somehow, it had lost.

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This was Hogan's fourth team to reach the state semifinals. Teams at his previous school possessed better chances to win state and did not. But he had never had a team that he wanted to win state more than this one.

Faith Christian opened its doors in 1999. When Hogan arrived in 2003, the Lions had not won a playoff game. Yet they did so in his second season. Then in 2005 and again in 2006 they reached the semifinals round, one step from playing for the state title. His previous school was accustomed to such success. Sportswriters label those programs "perennial powerhouses." Faith Christian is becoming one. "Here, the success is what's happening right now," Hogan says. "The records are being set right now, and these kids know that."

For that reason, he wanted this team to win it all, even if that's not in the manual. "Winning is important," Hogan says. "I like to win." Winning creates opportunities for what he really wants to do as a coach. Coaching at a Christian school, he sees himself as a minister as well.

"Winning is only a goal," he explains, "in that it increases the platform for ministry. If you're winning, people listen more." Not just his players and assistant coaches. Parents, too. And coaches at other schools, who flock to off-season coaching seminars and conventions to hear the most recent winners—the national champions of colleges, the state champions of high schools—share how they coached players into champions. Hogan wants that platform. He wants to talk about developing champions. And he'll even throw in a little football X's and O's while doing so.

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It was 3:30 p.m. on a Thursday, and the Faith locker room was quiet. So far, things were as they should have been—until Landon Anderson, Clayton Messinger, and Curtis Roddy came in and sat on the blue footlockers running the length of the room. They should have been out on the field practicing for the championship game. Instead, the uniform hooks lining the wall hung empty. The only remaining signs of the vanished season were the red jerseys stacked neatly on the floor—their next stop was the supply room, where they would spend the long off-

season—and those three signs on the wall. The ones stating the players' three pursuits: "Go Undefeated," "Win District," and "State Champs."

Not one of those three was achieved. The first goal fell in the fifth game, with a one-point loss on the final play of the game to a public-school team that would later earn a top-ten ranking in the state and reach the quarterfinals of the playoffs. The district championship possibility was essentially lost when the Lions were defeated by Trinity Christian in their district opener, a game in which quarterback/safety Anderson suffered a sprained ankle on the Lions' first possession. Meeting the third goal, the state championship, would have trumped the other two shortcomings.

The three players recalled their emotions during the final seconds of their ten-win, three-loss season. "Heartbreak," Anderson summed up. "Yeah, heartbreak," Roddy agreed. "Our season, our goals . . . that's our goals. That's our goals over there." He pointed to the three signs. "State champs was our last goal that we had." Messinger remembered the final play, Regents' kneel-down, and standing next to senior Brian Gibson on the defensive line. "It was his last game, and I just wanted it so bad for him. I was just looking at him and . . . it's heartbreak."

Roddy, true to his intense nature, cut straight to the chase. "I wanted to throw up." Roddy's a big Dallas Cowboys fan, but the next day he couldn't even watch their game against the New York Giants. He couldn't do anything associated with football. But then came Monday—back to school. Of course, everyone wanted to talk about the loss, to ask what had gone wrong. And at three o'clock that day, for the first time since the semester began, there was no football practice. No heading home from practice at 6:30 or hanging out with friends on the team for an extra half hour or so. Then on Wednesday, it was Roddy's seventeenth birthday. Before the season, he had let it be known that he planned on celebrating his birthday at football practice. His uncle called to wish a happy birthday and ask how that day's practice had gone—he assumed Faith had won. Although it seemed everything and everyone around him kept him from letting go of this season, Roddy had taken his step into the next one on the ride home from the game. "Dad," he'd said, "I need a gym membership."

There was work to be done. Five days after the semifinals loss, Roddy had turned in four days in the weight room. Today would be the

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fifth. “Don’t take a day off,” he said. “Take a workout off, and Trinity Christian just beat us again. Take a workout off, and Regents just beat us again. You don’t want to have that regret.” That, Messinger agreed, is the attitude he and the rest of the team’s seniors-to-be had adopted. “That’s what we’re trying to get into everyone’s head now, that every single moment matters,” he said. “No matter if you’re in the weight room, if you’re out on the field practicing, if you’re at home working out, what you’re doing right then is preparing you for football.”

The images of this year’s seniors falling one victory short of playing for their ultimate goal were burned onto the minds of next year’s seniors. “It’s like, 365 days from now, I’m done with football,” said Anderson. “I’m never going to play high school football again. So why waste a workout?”

A wasted workout, in Roddy’s eyes, is cheating. Cheating yourself, and cheating your teammates. “We’re not going to let anybody goof off,” Roddy promised. “This has to be the most important off-season I think the school has ever had.”

Acknowledgments

As a writer, the Acknowledgments section is one of my favorite parts of a book to read. Who a writer thanks and how he or she thanks them reveals a writer's heart. My heart is grateful to many people who helped make this book possible.

First, I must thank my wife, Sally. I could not even attempt to list all the different roles she played in *our* journey to publication. She helped convince me that this book needed to be written, then went so far above and beyond to make sure it was completed. After all these years, I still think it's neat—sorry to use “neat,” but we met in the '80s—that God allowed me to marry my best friend.

My kids, Ashlin and Tyson, granted Dad permission to miss a few practices and games. Their payback, I hope and pray, is that because of the lessons I learned during my season with the Faith football team, I am a better dad.

When my parents drove an aspiring thirteen-year-old sportswriter fifteen minutes to the newspaper office so he could turn in his handwritten stories and chase his dream, I wonder if they imagined that one day they would be holding a book with his name on the cover. Life has thrown some curveballs at us since this book process began, and I am so thankful that my parents can hold this book in their hands. Thanks for fighting so courageously, Mom and Dad. I love you both.

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My brother, Brad, is an amazing Web site designer. (See www.RememberWhyYouPlay.com to sample his work. How's that for a shameless plug?) But you are a better brother than Web site designer.

Celeste Williams is the best boss I've ever had. Thanks for telling me I needed to write a book, and thanks for letting me.

REMEMBER WHY YOU PLAY

Dallas Rysavy and Schuyler Dixon, in addition to being great friends, have been invaluable as sounding boards.

Steve Riach, producer of the coming feature film *One Heart*, generously shared his preproduction interviews, helping me better tell the entire story surrounding the Faith–Gainesville State game. I know that *One Heart* will touch and inspire many.

There were so many other friends who kept asking about the book, kept praying it would find its way into print, and kept encouraging me. Thank you all so much.

From Gainesville State School, I appreciate the help of Mark Williams, Walt and Lucinda Scott, Gwan Hawthorne, Karen Bates, Chris Styles, and Dottie Luera. Please know that the hope your players felt from the support of the Faith fans that night was built upon the foundation your school had established in those students.

I tell Dana Stone, Faith's assistant to the athletic director, that she is the person who truly runs the athletic department. Dana has the ability to juggle three or four tasks at once yet still look up at me from her desk and answer all my questions with a smile.

Of course, I owe more gratitude than I could ever repay to Kris Hogan and the rest of the Faith coaches. I am not sure why you allowed a nosy reporter and his recorder to shadow you for an entire season, but I am grateful you did. In addition to all the football lessons, you taught me life lessons. Throughout my time with you, I kept thinking that you are the type of coaches I want my children to play for.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to the Faith Lions—the players. I asked you to share with me a football season. Instead, you shared a season of your lives. I will never forget those of you who hugged me after the state-championship game, most with eyes still moist, and apologized that you didn't provide a better outcome for the final chapter of that season. I am still amazed that amid all of the disappointment and pain you felt, you could be so selfless. Perhaps nothing better illustrates why you guys will always be champions in my book.

2007 Varsity Roster

NO.	NAME	POSITION	GRADE	HEIGHT	WEIGHT
3	Alex Nerney	WR/DE	12	6-3	190
4	Jordan Dunnington	RB/CB	11	5-7	155
5	Brent Reeder	WR/SS	12	5-11	170
6	Landon Anderson	QB/FS	12	5-10	165
8	Weston Clegg	WR/CB	12	5-10	160
10	Peter Ashton	QB/FS	9	5-11	175
12/66	Greg Wright	RB/LB/P	11	6-0	200
14	Justin Huffman	RB/LB	11	5-10	170
20	John Elder	OL/DL	12	5-10	170
21	Pierce Shivers	WR/SS	11	5-10	175
22	Grant Hockenbrough	RB/LB/K	12	5-10	175
33	Gage Garrett	OL/DL	10	6-4	210
34	Josh O'Neal	WR/DE	11	6-2	185
44	Garrett Cox	RB/LB	11	5-8	170
50	Jacob Pruett	OL/LB	11	5-11	165
51	Steven Little	OL/DE	12	6-1	220
55	John Ashton	OL/DL	11	5-11	210
56	Clayton Messinger	OL/DL/K	12	5-11	195
60	Jeff Kallal	OL/DT	12	6-0	230
63	Mike Samuels	OL/DT	11	6-0	180
64	Curtis Roddy	OL/DT	12	6-3	285
65	Tommy Rost	OL/DT	12	5-11	230
68	Daniel Ackerman	OL/DL	12	6-1	220
80	Nathan Jordan	WR/CB	12	5-10	155
81	Brock Jameson	WR/CB	12	5-10	170
84	Nathan Alcantara	WR/LB	11	6-0	165
88	Tanner Gesek	RB/CB	11	5-10	165

Head Coach: Kris Hogan

Assistant Coaches: Matt Dowling, Steve Ford, Doug Hutchins, Andy Postema,
Axel Rivera, Matt Russell, Drew Sells, Brandon Smeltzer

Trainer: Auggie Gomez

Managers: Chris Palmara, Chris Wicker

Notes

CHAPTER 8

1. NIV.
2. Proverbs 23:7 (NKJV): “As he thinks in his heart, so *is* he.”
3. 2 Timothy 1:7 (NLT).

CHAPTER 9

1. Included by permission of Tori Guinan.

CHAPTER 11

1. Reference to Romans 12:17, 19.

CHAPTER 21

1. David Thomas, “Two Teams Share United Feeling: For One Team, Playing Host Was a Matter of Faith,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, January 25, 2009.
2. Matthew 25:35-36, 40 (NIV).
3. Preproduction interview, *One Heart* movie, March 4, 2009.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Included by permission of Kris Hogan.

CHAPTER 22

1. Preproduction interview, *One Heart* movie, March 5, 2009.
2. Preproduction interview, *One Heart* movie, March 4, 2009.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Preproduction interview, *One Heart* movie, March 5, 2009.
6. Preproduction interview, *One Heart* movie, March 4, 2009.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Rick Reilly, “There Are Some Games in Which Cheering for the Other Side Feels Better Than Winning,” *ESPN.com*, December 23, 2008, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?section=magazine&id=3789373>.
10. David Thomas, “Unique Fan Support Lifts Players’ Spirits,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, November 9, 2008.

CHAPTER 23

1. David Thomas, “Two Teams Share United Feeling: For the Visitors, Being Cared about Was an Inspiration,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, January 25, 2009.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Preproduction interview, *One Heart* movie, March 4, 2009.
8. Ibid.
9. David Thomas, “Two Teams Share United Feeling: For One Team, Playing Host Was a Matter of Faith,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, January 25, 2009.