

Bryan Curtis

Bryan Curtis (b. 1977) is predictable only in that there seem to be surprises in everything he writes, good surprises, the kind that let readers know they can count on him for a unique take no matter what the subject. Consider the surge in concern over concussions in football from the NFL on down to the youth leagues. It was the youth leagues that fascinated Curtis, a staff writer at the website Grantland and a native Texan whose byline appears frequently in *Texas Monthly*. He wanted to see “how they were processing the news about football. How they were coming to grips with it. How they were, in some cases, ignoring it.” Curtis found the perfect team to study in Allen, Texas, outside Dallas—undefeated for years, loaded with prize elementary school athletes who would realize only later that they were saying good-bye to childhood. His story about them, “Friday Night Tykes,” appeared in *Texas Monthly’s* January 2013 issue and provided further evidence that he is one of the new century’s very best sportswriters. Curtis began his journalism career by writing about the real world for the *New Republic* and *Slate*, first explored the world of fun and games at the *New York Times’* sports magazine *Play*, and returned to the serious side to help Tina Brown, the mercurial former *Vanity Fair* and *New Yorker* editor, launch *The Daily Beast*. While working for Brown, he says, he “sustained repeated concussions.”

Friday Night Tykes

I. THE HAWKS

Preteen football players are usually described by other preteen football players with one of three words: “nice,” “funny,” or, the highest possible compliment, “awesome.” Celdon Manning, a running back with the Allen Hawks, is the rare athlete who makes his teammates reach for the *Scholastic Children’s Thesaurus*.

“Celdon is very . . . shy,” said Nick Trice, the center.

“He’s very . . . quiet,” said Bryce Monk, an outside linebacker.

He is also “so dope” and “so beast,” to page further through the twelve-year-old’s thesaurus, which is to say he can jump-cut and stiff-arm and cut-block and do things that make his teammates’ jaws drop. There was this one play, in the Allen Sports Association Super Bowl this past November. The Hawks were playing the Wild Dawgz for their fortieth consecutive victory and fourth straight league title. Celdon

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lined up in a Wildman formation with the Hawks leading 27–6. He took the snap and sprinted left. He saw a Wild Dawgz linebacker fill the hole. What was in his mind? As his teammates watched from the sidelines, Celdon jabbed his left foot toward the linebacker's chest and then shifted his body weight to the right, like a metronome. In a split second, he was traveling in the opposite direction, past the defense and toward the end zone.

For four years, the Allen Hawks had been the best youth football team in the most football-mad suburb in Texas—which is to say, the world. In season after season, they'd been so untouchable, so dominant, that trophy-collecting had actually gotten slightly monotonous. "After the first one, I got excited," Eric Engel, a linebacker, told me. "And after the second one, I got excited. After the third one, I was like, okay. . . ." But this Super Bowl had the Hawks' full and undivided attention—it was the last game they would play together. The sixth-graders had grown up together, fought together, gotten their shins skinned together. Next year most would become seventh graders and start playing for their middle school teams. "This is about the Hawks winning on this field for the final time," said their head coach, Kevin Engel (Eric's father), before the game. He sounded like he might cry.

Celdon was one of the few who wouldn't be moving on, since he was actually in fifth grade. While many parents hold their sons back a grade to gain a competitive edge, Celdon's mom, Tracy Wallace, insisted her son play "up." Celdon, who was ten when the 2012 season began, has three older brothers, so he was used to it. "When he was three," Tracy told me one afternoon, "he had a pacifier in his mouth, and he'd get down in a three-point stance." Celdon's dedication to football is fairly ordinary in Allen, a well-heeled suburb of Dallas that made national news in August when the high school opened the doors of a new, \$60 million stadium, the largest in Texas devoted to a single school. Celdon was simply a product of that environment. Before every game, his mom made him watch a highlight video called *NFL's Top 10: Football Moves*. The images were burned in his brain. When he had the ball under his arm, Celdon said, he felt he could access those moves as easily as he could make a *Madden 13* player execute a stiff-arm in the video game.

On that run in the Super Bowl, you could see Celdon mentally tapping the buttons. He jukeed right—*tap*—and the Wild Dawgz linebacker

wound up facedown on the ground with his hands around Celdon's shoe. Celdon saw a crowd between him and the goal line. *Tap*. He leaned his body forward so it was at a 45-degree angle and rammed into the defenders.

"Celdon is the best eleven-year-old football player in America," Ronnie Braxton, his trainer, told me. "In *America*." Celdon isn't the first youth football player to inspire that kind of claim. But when he hit the pile, his powerful legs churning furiously as he wormed his way through the defenders, the assessment seemed indisputable. As the referees pulled everyone off the pile and found Celdon lying in the end zone, his teammates began hopping up and down, and one of the grandmas in the stands rang a cowbell, and the Hawks cheerleaders—yes, the Hawks have cheerleaders—shook their metallic red-and-black pompoms, and the sound system that Coach Engel had rigged up with two car batteries and an ice chest began pumping out triumphal music, and I abandoned journalistic objectivity to throw my arms in the air and cheer until my throat hurt. How does it feel to watch a running back from the best preteen football team in the most football-mad city in Texas exert his will? It's so beast.

Football isn't supposed to feel like this anymore. We know too much, don't we? We know that if Celdon were to plow his helmet into the pile at the wrong angle, a player could receive a mild concussion. We know that enough mild concussions can cause something called chronic traumatic encephalopathy, which could leave a former youth footballer, a few decades hence, unable to recognize his wife. We know that a thousand former NFL players right now are suing the league for the damage they incurred while slamming themselves into one another on television. We know that when Dave Duerson, a former Chicago Bears safety, killed himself in 2011, he aimed the gun at his chest, so that researchers could study what had happened to his brain.

Whenever football lights up our brains these days, we fear it's turning someone else's to mush. It's a conflict that's playing out not only in the offices of NFL commissioner Roger Goodell but on the sidelines of football fields all across the country, in places like Allen. By any measure, Allen, which has around 80,000 residents, is intensely devoted to football. "It's *ray*-bid down here," Coach Engel said. The high school football stadium that opened in August is not just big and

expensive, it's also fully outfitted, with an air-conditioned press box and an HD screen for instant replays. And the residents of this highly Republican community agreed to pay for it with new taxes.

In the city's youth football league, the Allen Sports Association, 1,200 boys play football. In kindergarten, they pull flags out of one another's waistbands. By second grade, they're tackling each other by the legs. By third grade, they're studying elements of the spread offense. By fourth grade, they're glancing at the play charts on their wrists, just like Tony Romo. By the time an Allen boy can read Harry Potter, he has become a football savant. Cullen Perkins, a Hawks tackle, told me he watches Blu-ray game film on his flat-screen in bed at night and writes little notes to himself about what he can do better.

But the wave of concern over concussions hasn't bypassed Allen. When former San Diego linebacker Junior Seau committed suicide in May—aiming his gun, like Duerson, at his chest—moms and dads blitzed the ASA with emails. “There was all this craziness out there that everybody's going to get a concussion and kill themselves like Junior Seau did,” Blake Beidleman, the league's commissioner, told me this summer. For the first time in nearly a decade, the number of boys playing football in Allen leveled off.

As the start of last season drew near, however, Allenites didn't abandon football. They doubled down on the things they valued about the game in the first place. They decided that football was important for a boy's growth and essential to the identity of the city and that concussions—which they would try to avoid as best they could—were manageable nightmares.

Allen, like much of the country, decided that it was going to try to save football from modernity. It was going to see if what was primal and brutal about the game could exist in an era of science and safety and lawsuits and attachment parenting. I wanted to see this struggle. I wanted to go to a city where kids practiced football three times a week and played once a week while Mom watched from a lawn chair; a place where they had the best protective gear and the best doctors; where the game was coached the right way and played exquisitely well—even by kids. I wanted to see the sport trying to survive in our new, wised-up universe. And what better way than to spend a season with the Hawks? As Beidleman told me the first time we met, “When

somebody in Iowa gets a copy of *Texas Monthly*, they're either going to think that we're crazy or that this is the greatest thing ever!"

II. HELL WEEK

"When we get a chance in football," Coach Engel asked the Hawks, "we do what?"

"Hit!" the Hawks shouted in unison.

"No," Coach said, fighting a smile. "*Breathe*. But 'hit' is a better answer."

It was a hot night in July, and Coach was standing at the top of a steep hill in a park in Allen. The Hawks were at the bottom. Coach had already dubbed the season (on the Hawks' Facebook page) "The Final Flight" and ordered new, \$135 uniforms for each boy. He expected not only to win one last Super Bowl but to have a perfect season, which would mean absolutely mud-holing the other ten sixth-grade squads. The Hawks received his expectations with aplomb. Most of them hadn't lost a league game since second grade, and I couldn't find a single one who even remembered that dark day.

"Vertical planks!" Coach called out. The Hawks got into a push-up position and began to crawl up the hill with their arms. Then they crawled down again.

"Backward planks!" Coach called out. The Hawks reversed their posture so that their chests faced the sky. Then they inched up the hill with their arms again. Chris Washington, a running back who was in his first season with the team, lay down on the hill in exhaustion. Coach walked over until he was standing directly over him, and, reluctantly, Chris got up and kept going.

Coach Engel is 42 years old, with carefully combed dark hair and a cherubic face. He wore a baseball cap that said "Violence Solves Problems." He had a pinch of chaw in his lower lip, which he often inserted after polishing off a can of Rock Star Energy Drink. He was not a tyrant. In fact, he is as close to a mensch as a sport like football allows. As a kid in Dumas, he played youth football for the Shamrock Hawks (he named his team in Allen after them). He served in the Navy—he still has "The Star-Spangled Banner" in his white F-150's audio system—and, while he was stationed in South Carolina, married a pretty girl named Pam. Now Coach and Pam and Eric live in

a typical Allen red-brick dream house, with leather furniture, thick carpet, and several flat-screen TVs.

During the season, they had Hawks practice three nights a week. Pam coached the cheerleading squad with the help of their older daughter, Nicole, who is 23. The girls performed at halftime, and Coach commanded the players to sit on their helmets and pay attention.

Coach had a literary streak. He'd read George MacDonald Fraser's Flashman novels and had perfected a kind of exurban Texas articulation. "What would you like to eat if there was a bunch of it?" he liked to say, by way of asking a player where he wanted to have lunch. At a restaurant, he'd notice Celdon scraping cream gravy off a chicken-fried steak. "You don't like gravy?" he'd ask. When Celdon, forever quiet, shrugged, Coach would say, "So you'd say you're ambivalent about it."

He'd put the Hawks together like a college team, starting out with a few great players, like the running back Maurice "Mo" Perkins (no relation to Cullen), in kindergarten, and every year, "recruiting" a few more. Recruiting is how you win in Allen. You can't steal a player from another team—any player vacating his squad has to go into the draft, where lousy teams like the Cobras and Cardinals pick first. But Coach could find would-be Hawks who were new to football or, like Chris, the running back, have just moved from out of town. He looked in malls, neighborhoods, everywhere. "I roll with blue Powerade and Now and Laters," Coach liked to joke. He had found Chris chasing a rabbit around his neighborhood.

Coach didn't relish Hell Week, his annual preseason combine. He saw it as a necessary evil. The kids saw it that way too. "He works us hard," Monk told me. "Which is a good thing." Monk was the team's wise guy. Once, during Hell Week, Coach was giving a speech. "Your bodies are changing," he told the team, to which I heard Monk reply, under his breath, "Yeah, we *know*."

"Were those horrible or merely awful?" Coach asked the panting Hawks, who were standing at the bottom of the hill after their backward plank exercises. He told them to jog in place "on two," simulating a snap count. If any Hawk started jogging early, they all had to start over. "Bear crawls up and down the hill!" Coach called. They squirmed along the ground on all fours. "Get off your knees!" Coach said. His sound system was playing the 1812 Overture.

Later, he had the Hawks lie on their backs and raise their feet six inches off the ground. Coach called it “tough bellies.” Twelve-year-old cries of agony sounded until everyone’s legs were on the grass. You didn’t have to be a psychologist to see that the torturous workout endeared the coach to the Hawks and that when the season started in three weeks, the most horrible thing they could do would be to disappoint him.

As the shadows began to get long, Coach gathered the team around and stuck out a meaty fist. The Hawks piled their hands on top of it. They chanted, in voices that were at various stages of puberty,

*Hit 'em hard,
Make 'em bleed,
Hawks, Hawks, Hawks!*

“You want to see it?” Coach Engel asked me one afternoon. In Allen, “it” is the new football stadium. The *New York Times* and *Time* magazine had already described it with a form of the cliché “Everything’s bigger in Texas.” On some level, they were right. But as we hopped in Coach’s truck, I suspected the stadium represented something more than the culmination of a simple arms race.

Buzz Bissinger’s *Friday Night Lights*, published in 1990, is the classic tale of Texas high school football. In his depiction of Odessa, Bissinger unwittingly announced the end of an era. Even by 1990, the locus of Texas football had moved from the cities to the suburbs. The old capitals of Texas football were Odessa and Houston and Dallas; the new ones were places like the Colony and Sugar Land and Allen. Named after Texas secretary of state Ebenezer Allen, the community of Allen was founded in 1872. A local named L. C. “Big Daddy” Summers (in a memoir dictated to his son, Biff) described the town in the thirties as an idyllic farming village on the interurban rail line. But football madness simmered even then. During the forties, Allen High School put together great six-man football teams. According to an account compiled by Tom Keener, a historian at the local library, 1,500 Allenites traveled to see a bi-district championship game in Vernon, in 1948. When asked, “Who’s mindin’ your store?” an Allen mercantilist replied, “Who’s mindin’ the town?”

If Richardson was the “it” Dallas suburb of the seventies and Plano the eighties, then Allen and McKinney, where you could get cheaper

and bigger red-brick houses, have conquered the recent past. And with Whole Foods and Cabela's, not to mention three different semipro sports franchises, Allen doesn't depend on Dallas for anything. "Allen does not like to be called a suburb," Keener told me. "It is the *City of Allen*."

In 1999 Allen High was rebuilt as a college-size, red-brick campus, the city's latest trophy. "It's a yuppie school, let's face it," said Tim Carroll, the director of public information for the Allen school district. And it's growing. Allen claimed fewer than 20,000 residents in 1990 but is pushing 100,000 two decades later. Allen High's enrollment has swelled to 5,500 students, but the city has been loath to build a second high school, because, as numerous residents explained, that would dilute the team's football talent.

The Allen Eagles are good. They won a state title in 2008 under Coach Tom Westerberg. But their stadium on East Main Street was a sad collection of metal bleachers that Allenites derisively called the Double Wide. By 2011, 7,000 fans were squeezing into the Double Wide's seats on Friday nights and another 7,000 were squeezing into temporary bleachers in the end zone. So the city decided to build a new stadium: a grand football palace that would hold 18,000 fans. (In addition to the \$60 million for the school's new football field, another \$59 million was earmarked for other improvements.) The bond proposal passed with more than 60 percent of the vote.

Allenites are defensive about the stadium's size. They insist that the city did not intentionally set out to build the biggest high school stadium in Texas. Rather, it gave itself a kind of testicular self-examination and concluded that its consuming interest in football ran so deep that building the biggest stadium was unavoidable. "We built it because of the demand," Carroll told me.

Coach Engel pulled his F-150 into the parking lot, and we stared at the stadium. A sign said "Your Bond Dollars at Work"; construction workers scurried in front of the truck. The structure looked like it belonged to a small, well-funded college, with light-pink brick and the words "EAGLE STADIUM" in giant block letters. Two warlike eagle statues stood sentry on either side.

We sat in silence for a moment. Then Coach said, "It's very Reichstag."

III. THE PSYCHOLOGIST

The second-best sixth-grade team in Allen was the Wild Dawgz. For the past three years, the Dawgz had made it to the Super Bowl, only to be routed by the Hawks. The loss in 2011 had been so crushing that the Wild Dawgz had decamped from the Allen Sports Association entirely and reorganized the club in McKinney. Following their departure, a new Wild Dawgz team was formed in the ASA, and as it turned out, these new Dawgz were still the Hawks' biggest competition.

In the second week of the season, the Wild Dawgz were on the schedule. I found Coach Engel at home, pacing nervously. He sat down at the kitchen table, under plaques that said "Praise" and "Faith" and "Love," and punched the keys on his laptop. He'd gone to see the Dawgz play the previous Saturday and shot a couple of hours' worth of video. Taping games is common in Allen. (There was a minor scandal the previous season when a few coaches tried to tape one another's practices.) Coach studied the boys running across his screen and made notes. *Stop the handoff to No. 8. Make sure No. 94 doesn't knife into the backfield and sack Joey on passing plays.* This was mere refresher—he'd already told the Hawks all this stuff at practice.

Eric came downstairs in his jersey. "You ready, bubby?" Coach said. They threw the sound system into the bed of the truck. Between Hawks plays, it would pump out music like the *Jaws* theme, just as at an NFL game. "Nine hundred watts of power," Coach remarked. He flipped on the music and wiggled his butt in ecstasy. Then we hopped in the truck and headed for Lovejoy Stadium, a high school field in nearby Lucas where most of the ASA's sixth-grade games are played.

Before kickoff Coach morphed into a kind of child psychologist, strolling up and down the field where the boys were warming up, planting motivations deep inside the collective preadolescent consciousness. When you coach a team that has won thirty games in a row, Coach explained later, enemies have to be invented. The tricks were transparent even to the players, but they still worked. Coach approached Mo, his running back. "They've been talking about you," he said.

"Who?" Mo said, suddenly very concerned.

"Oh, I hear things through the back channel," Coach said. "'The gap has closed.' 'Mo isn't as fast as he used to be.' Crap like that."

Mo frowned and jogged off. Coach walked over to Monk, who was practicing extra points. The Hawks were the only team in the ASA regularly kicking extra points—an incredibly tough feat for a twelve-year-old. They did it out of boredom.

Coach watched as Monk drilled a 17-yarder. “I told you steroids were a good idea!” he laughed.

Monk backed up 10 yards and nailed another field goal.

“That was *Monkalicious!*”

As we moved on, Coach explained that Monk responded better to praise. If you tore into him, you could lose him.

Joe Crisci, the Hawks’ offensive coordinator and father of the quarterback, Joey, was on the opposite side of the field, tending to the offense. It was common in the ASA to have multiple coordinators, just like a pro team, and even an athletic director.

Crisci, who’d played quarterback in high school in California, had designed an incredibly complex offense that incorporated elements of the spread. Some plays he found online; others he reverse engineered from TV. The Hawks’ playbook now had around eighty plays. Crisci would call a number from the sidelines, and then Joey would consult the play chart on his wrist. It would have been a complicated system for college players.

“Wing Left 37 Pitch,” Crisci said. Joey ran the play.

“Wing Right Fake 38 Pitch Counter.”

“I Left Fake 33 Tight End Drag.”

Crisci called a Double Wide Left 30 Hitch, a screen pass to Mo. Coach Engel watched proudly. “It’s so there,” he said. Crisci looked across the field at the Wild Dawgz’ coaches. “I’m just showing ‘em that because I’m going to do a fake later,” he told Coach Engel. That would mean a fake to Mo and then a bomb to the wide receiver.

After the long hours of preparation, the game was anticlimactic. The Wild Dawgz went three-and-out on their first possession. The Hawks blocked the punt and took over at the 5-yard line, and on their first offensive play, Mo, perhaps stung by the anonymous disses Coach had planted in his head, ran to the left and scored. Monk nailed the extra point.

The Hawks were leading 33–6 in the fourth quarter when Engel and Crisci decided to break out their fake. “Coach, you got a stack?” Engel asked. A “stack” meant putting two blockers on one side of the field.

Crisci glanced at his play sheet and yelled, "Forty-six!" Joey looked at his wristband and called the play.

The Wild Dawgz bit all over the fake screen to Mo, and receiver Grayson Ream was wide open when Joey's ball landed in his arms.

The final score was 41–6. The Wild Dawgz coach asked me not to mention the score in my article, because he feared it would hurt his recruiting.

IV. "WHAT ELSE IS THERE?"

An hour and a half before kickoff on a Saturday in September, Celdon answered the door of his red-brick house. (If there are houses in Allen made out of anything else, I didn't see them.) I'd come to watch his famous pregame ritual—or, as some described it, his mom's pregame ritual. Celdon launched right in. "First, I start by taking my Advair," he explained. Celdon had asthma. He held up a purple cylinder and began to suck on it.

"Next, I watch *Top 10: Football Moves*," he said as he turned and walked into the living room. He plopped on a gray couch and turned on the TV. NFL Films music filled the room, and Curtis Martin was running across the screen.

"Turn it up, Celdon!" shouted Tracy when she emerged from her bedroom. She was wearing jeans and a black Beverly Hills Polo Club T-shirt. As we watched Martin stiff-arm a defender, Tracy said, "I always tell him to pick two moves from *Top 10* and apply it in the game."

Tracy has four boys—the others are named Camrin, Colton, and Chase—and all of them are football players. The family had moved to Allen from Lancaster, a nearby suburb, in 2008. That made Celdon a prime recruit who could avoid the draft. One afternoon, an ASA coach saw Celdon and his brothers playing football in the yard. He and Coach Engel showed up at the family's front door around eight o'clock that night. Coach watched Celdon doing cartwheels in his Batman pajamas and, despite having never seen him carry a football, signed him immediately.

On TV, Barry Sanders executed a spin move. "Look at that, Celdon," Tracy said. "Are you looking?"

Celdon nodded and said nothing.

While the video played, Tracy went to the kitchen to prepare the third part of Celdon's pregame ritual. She emerged with a container

of PRO Shield, a liquid vitamin supplement whose label, she noted, said “Banned Substance Free.” She directed a spoonful into Celdon’s mouth, and he gulped it down without taking his eyes off the screen.

About that time, Coach Engel showed up. He is a frequent presence at the house—once, upon discovering that the clothes dryer didn’t work, he’d helped Tracy find a new one. Today he was doing some minor electrical repairs. They waved at him.

Then, after Celdon’s asthma had been staved off and his brain had been stimulated and his vitamin count had been upped, came part four of the pregame ritual: a massage. Celdon, like a lot of youth football players in Allen, is also a track athlete. “I do the one hundred,” he told me. “The two hundred. The four hundred. The long jump. The four-by-one. The four-by-four. I might do the shot put. But I’ve never run the mile. *Never.*” He and Mo had been members of the ten-and-under state champion 4x100 relay, but Celdon had strained his groin that summer. Tracy, vowing it would never happen again, had bought a handheld massaging device. Celdon lay on his back on a yoga mat while she started massaging his legs. When she got to his quads, Celdon giggled uncontrollably and took the massager and did it himself.

“Smellidon, you ready to do it?” Coach called on his way out the door. “I’ll see y’all.”

During games, I’d seen Celdon execute his jump cuts, his spin moves, and his other NFL-inspired maneuvers with grace. “But I can’t say that he plays at that level all the time,” Tracy told me. “He plays at that level for the most part. But in the fourth quarter, he’ll start looking at the scoreboard.”

What do you think he needs to work on besides concentration? I asked. “His hands,” she said.

“I can catch good, Mom!” Celdon said.

“You can catch the ball,” Tracy admitted. “But you need to work on catching with your hands and not your body. Go *to* the ball.”

Which is why the fifth and final part of Celdon’s pregame ritual is hands practice. Celdon and his brother Camrin picked up a football. I thought they’d take it into the backyard, but they began to throw it back and forth right in front of the television that was playing *Top 10: Football Moves*. Camrin is fifteen, a muscular defensive end on the Allen High varsity team, and Celdon shook his hands in pain when he caught the ball.

“Camrin, don’t throw it that *hard*,” Celdon pleaded.

“Camrin, don’t throw it that hard,” Tracy repeated.

Camrin gave his mom a skeptical look. “I’m not throwing it hard.”

A couple of weeks later, in another large red-brick house a few streets over, Nick, the Hawks’ center, said, “I want to try to play professional sports my whole life.” It was just before noon on a Sunday. Nick and his mom, Shannon, were arranged on leather couches in front of the flat-screen. Nick was wearing a Cowboys jersey. *Fox NFL Sunday* played on mute in the background.

Like Celdon’s mom, Shannon and her husband, Danny, always imagined having sons who played football. Nick came first. Ten years later, Shannon got pregnant again. “When we found out we were having a girl”—that would be Nick’s younger sister, who’s now two—“we didn’t even talk to each other on the way home,” she told me. “We didn’t know what to do with her.” They named her Landry.

They hadn’t had such challenges with Nick. He was 22.5 inches long and weighed nine-and-a-half pounds at birth. “When he was little, he couldn’t wait to learn to read because he couldn’t wait to read the sports section,” Shannon said.

“I just read Victor Cruz’s book,” Nick told me. “Now I’m reading Tim Tebow’s book.”

“Forget Harry Potter,” Shannon said. “He’s not interested.

“We started Nick playing football when he was four,” Shannon continued, “because we could play him up. That first year in tackle, we told him that for every sack, he’d get ten dollars. And he’d get five dollars for every tackle.” She turned to Nick. “How many times did you sack the quarterback the first game?”

“I sacked him, like, four times,” Nick said.

“We had to renegotiate his contract when he was four,” Shannon said, rolling her eyes.

When Nick was seven, he entered the ASA through the draft. “Unfortunately, he got picked by the Razorbacks,” Shannon said. The Razorbacks were a crummy, disorganized team. “I had to get involved,” Shannon said, “and get that team disbanded.”

Since his team no longer existed, Nick became a free agent rather than a player who had to go into the draft. Coach Engel signed him as a Hawk in 2009, and Shannon became the Hawks’ photographer,

webmaster, and team mom. “Frankly,” she said, grinning at her son, “they’re lucky to have him.”

Birthright had made Nick and Celdon football players, but the city of Allen took over from there. Like all local boys, in elementary school they had received solicitations from a training outfit called Performance Course. The owner, Geno Pierce, has short-cropped hair and bulging biceps. He’s Allen’s youth fitness guru, its Billy Blanks and Jack LaLanne. For a fee, he’ll pump your kid up. When we met at his office across the street from Eagle Stadium, Pierce was wearing a T-shirt that said “100%.”

“Jake, give us a video of the kids,” Pierce told his assistant. On a computer screen, we watched elementary-age kids running bear crawls, like the Hawks had done during Hell Week. Nick had spent three summers in Performance Course; Celdon had opted to go with a different trainer who had a similarly intense regimen.

When an athletic Allen boy gets to middle school, he can start attending Performance Course five days a week for seven weeks during the summer. By high school, Performance Course becomes nearly mandatory if you’re playing team sports at Allen High. “Jake, give us a high-intensity video so he can see a piece of that,” Pierce said. “Watch this!” Another Allen kid—bigger and more muscular, no doubt because of his training—appeared on the computer screen. He was lifting weights and crying out in pain.

Pierce was coaching his youngest son in youth football. But to my surprise, he was agnostic about the game. “Most kids start at a very young age around here,” Pierce said. “Now, I don’t particularly think they *should* start that early. But I start my kids early. The problem is, if you wait, you get left out. You’re almost a victim to the monster.”

I asked Pierce if he worried about his kids getting a concussion. “Is it possible?” he said. “Yes. Is it probable? No. I wouldn’t let them play if the answer was yes.”

“Look at what’s going on in this town,” Pierce continued. “Sports are important. Parents have a ton of”—he searched for the right word—“resources.”

Pierce, like a lot of Allenites, was sensitive about all the national coverage of the new stadium. Beyond the veneer of exotic Texanness—everything’s bigger, etc., etc.—he felt something important had been

missed. Allen was so passionate about football, and its families were so dedicated to the training required to play the game, that its children were able to take part in a total program that stretched from the crib to the locker room. "If you haven't lived here, it's easy to make rash judgments," Pierce said. "I've been here seventeen years. You don't have to explain anything to me."

He leaned forward in his chair. "Sports," he said, "is a vehicle to raise our kids."

After Nick and Celdon and every other youth footballer complete half a dozen summers in personal training, they'll finally reach the big time: Allen High, the Reichstag. I met the Eagles' head coach, Tom Westerberg, in his office one Friday morning. It was a big, spacious room that a lot of college coaches would envy, with a picture window overlooking the south end zone of the stadium. I noticed that Westerberg's Allen Eagles polo shirt had been manufactured by Nike.

If Allen's parents and personal trainers are the ones who produce an army of young athletes, it's Westerberg's job to manage the herd. The downside to a football-mad town is that everyone expects Junior to play at Eagle Stadium, and there are more Juniors than Westerberg can handle. "I've got an email from a dad whose kid is ten years old," Westerberg said, nodding at his computer. "The dad wants him to play quarterback here, and he wants to know what he can do in the meantime." Westerberg rolled his eyes. He gets more than a few emails like that.

There are around 1,200 elementary-age kids playing football in the ASA. Another 700 play in Allen's three middle schools. At Allen High, Nick and Celdon will find themselves competing for starting positions in a pool of 500 active football players (about one-fifth of the school's male population). The talent is generally so deep that even though Pierce's older son Oliver began the year as the Eagles' starting quarterback, he was replaced mid-season by Kyler Murray, whose dad, Kevin, had been a star at Texas A&M.

I told Westerberg it must be nice to command all that talent while coaches in Dallas were scrounging around for able bodies. "People say, 'Boy, it's awesome to have that,'" he replied. "But I've got to find games for all those kids." According to the rules in Allen, you can't cut a football player, and in middle school, you have to *play* every

football player. So even if Celdon and Nick are good enough to start, they'll still have to come out of the game fairly often while lesser players rotate in. (In the fourth quarter, however, all teams play to win.)

For coaches, this was a magnanimous gesture but also a self-interested one. A few years earlier, a quarterback named Alec Morris had trained at Performance Course. He'd worked on his passing. But Morris got lost inside the Allen football machine. The talent in front of him was so good, and so deep, that he didn't start for the Eagles' varsity squad until late in his high school career. Morris is now a scholarship quarterback at the University of Alabama.

"I do see potential in Nick," Shannon said, "but he's got to do the work. He's got to prepare himself for middle school." She turned to Nick. "You've got to suck in some of that passion. You're going to be trying out with thirty or forty people for the same position."

Nick nodded, and Shannon turned back to me. "When he complains about going to practice now, I say, 'Are you going to complain when you go to middle school practice?' You've got to be one hundred percent in, in every way."

Could Nick ever *quit* football? I asked her.

"We pretty much let him make the decision on how much he wants it," she said. "It's up to him."

"What?" Nick said. He'd tuned us out for the NFL pregame show.

"If you came up to Dad and me and said you wanted to quit, would Dad and I be okay with that?" Shannon repeated.

"No," Nick said, and everybody laughed.

Shannon showed me a family photo, a professional shot with three generations of Trices side by side. Nick's 92-year-old great-grandmother, Ivah, was wearing a Cowboys jersey.

"What else is there?" Nick said with a smile.

Shannon nodded her head. "What else is there?"

V. HEAD SHOTS

After the Hawks won their first three games by a combined score of 106–20, I asked the players if it was ever boring rolling over the competition. Ryan Asonganyi, a bespectacled guard who was one of the brainiest Hawks, told me he had simply evolved past watching the

scoreboard. "For me, it's like playing a game," he said. "It's not necessarily like we're trying to win."

Their fifth game, against the Cardinals, had that kind of feel. The cool weather of the early season had turned into a fall monsoon, and you could hardly see the opposite sideline. Up 32-0 in the fourth quarter, the Hawks began to pass the ball. It's a quirk of youth football that you pass, rather than run, when you're ahead. On a good day, a thrown ball has about a one in four chance of connecting, whereas if you're handing it to Celdon or Mo, your odds of scoring increase exponentially.

Joey was dropping back to pass when one of the big Cardinals defensive ends began to get chippy. He hit Joey late. He did the same thing on the next play. And on the next play.

Joey came off the field in a rage. "I'm gonna punch him in the face!"

"You punch him in the face," his dad said, "and you'll be thrown out of the league for six months. Be calm."

Joey swallowed his anger and went through the postgame handshake line: "Goodgame, goodgame, goodgame, goodgame..."

I found out later that the referee had thrown the Cardinals player out of the game. When he did that, a woman on the Cardinals' side of the stands flipped him off. The ref threw her out too.

The Hawks were 5-0.

After another win, the 6-0 Hawks were playing the Cobras. You could tell it was October because the Hawks came out wearing pink socks and gloves for National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, just like their NFL counterparts. They rolled up and down the field. Mo scored on the first play from scrimmage on a Pro Left Shotgun 37 Sweep. Then Celdon, playing linebacker, forced a fumble. On the next offensive play, he took a screen pass and jumped right, making two Cobras run into each other; he made another Cobra miss at the 37-yard line, and another miss 2 yards later. As he broke into the open field, he had only a scrawny safety hanging around his waist. Celdon's brain activated—*tap*—and he lowered his body to 45 degrees and left the safety on the ground at the 25-yard line. He looked almost bored tossing the ball to the referee in the end zone.

When the Cobras got the ball back, their quarterback ran right on a scramble toward the Hawks sideline. Just as Celdon and Mo were about to reach him, the Cobras quarterback ran headfirst into his wide receiver, who was blocking for him. There was a sickening crack. The receiver ended up on his back with his hands gripping his face mask.

The Hawks didn't need to be told what to do when a player goes down. They'd seen it last year, when Grayson broke his leg. They made a semicircle around the Cobras' wide receiver and took a knee. The Cobras did the same on the opposite side. It almost looked like a religious ritual was taking place, with supplicants in white and black converging around one fallen man. By this point, he had flipped over onto his stomach and pushed his face mask in the ground.

When I got onto the field, the kid was breathing in low, ragged gasps. "Does your neck hurt?" someone asked him. "Just your head?" He took off his helmet and massaged his temples. His behavior fit to a T the Mayo Clinic's description of a concussion: "confusion or feeling as if in a fog," "seeing stars."

After a minute or so, he caught his breath. And then he hopped up and jogged off the field.

Four plays later, he charged off the sidelines and back to his position. The Hawks said he talked more smack than anyone else on the field. They won 40-0.

Beidleman, the league commissioner, suggested we meet one morning at the Allen Café, one of the few old-time places in a town increasingly dominated by the Cheesecake Factory and P. F. Chang's. Beidleman is a walking boulder of a man, with a shaved head and a tattoo on his right bicep. "I'm livin' at the corner of happy and healthy," he said as he scrunched into a booth. We ordered monster gyro omelets with hashbrowns.

In 2011 Beidleman ran a quixotic campaign for mayor of Allen and lost by 86 percent. But no matter, because he sees his job as ASA commissioner as inherently political. In a sense, Beidleman is a conservative warrior. He is standing athwart football history yelling, "Stop!"

Junior Seau's suicide caused a lot of upheaval among other youth football leagues. Pop Warner, the most venerable youth football organization in America, made a new rule that coaches could use only a third of their practice time on contact drills. Pop Warner further

required any kid with concussion-like symptoms—say, the Cobras wide receiver—to get a medical release before he could play again. Beidleman thinks both rules wussify the game too much. At a coaches' orientation that summer, he declared, "There's reasons Pop Warner's not real prolific in the area we're in."

Football, he insisted, is supposed to be a tough, violent game. "I had a fourth grader making a tackle," Beidleman told me. "His hand went through the face mask and up another kid's nose to the first knuckle. When they stopped play, they pulled out the kid's finger, and it was covered in boogers and blood."

"I get an email from a bystander mom saying, 'How do we make the game safer?'" He chuckled. "How do you answer that?" The price football extracts is boogers and blood.

Which isn't to say Allen is a safe haven for nose-gougers. Like his NFL counterpart, Roger Goodell, Beidleman thinks the solution isn't to radically change football but to more closely enforce the rules already on the books. (He made the Cardinals player who took cheap shots at Joey write an essay before he could play again.) Moreover, Beidleman feels that football's battle against modernity has to be fought on grounds other than medical ones. "Our biggest competition is social media and video games and iPhones," he told me. Every kid in Allen—like every kid in Peoria and Seattle and Brooklyn—plays *Madden*. The problem with *Madden* is that it's arguably more fun than real football, it's certainly safer, and it instills a false sense of confidence. Every kid thinks he can catch 40-yard bombs like he can when he's playing as Calvin Johnson in the video game. "Can you imagine a new kid who's never played football lining up against Cullen Perkins?" Beidleman said. Cullen, a Hawks tackle, weighs 195 pounds.

If football is destined to undergo touchy-feely transformations, Beidleman is determined to hold the line. The ASA has mandatory rotations so that every kid gets to play in every game. But Beidleman, who coaches a fifth-grade team called the Warriors, noted, "I fired my own kids from several positions." At the coaches' orientation, Beidleman warned against coaches trying to cut kids who couldn't play. But he also announced that the ASA had done away with end-of-year participation trophies. That made the coaches burst into applause.

In Beidleman's mind, you can build a \$60 million high school stadium; you can put your kid in \$135 uniforms; you can vigilantly

protect against concussions. But football, even when played by children, should still be a sport Tom Landry could love.

VI. THE SUPER BOWL

In eight regular-season wins, the Hawks outscored their opponents 285–20. So the coaches reacted with some alarm when the Hawks gave up 18 points to the Gators in the first round of the playoffs. (They went on to win 30–18.) On the Friday before the Super Bowl, I found the team practicing in Beidleman’s backyard, which he’d converted into a 100-yard football field with two stadium lights. He called it Camp Warrior.

The Hawks were facing a Super Bowl rematch with the Wild Dawgz, who hadn’t lost since falling to the Hawks in week 2. Coach Engel was worried about their giant defensive end. “Number ninety-four, the Hurst boy,” he told the line. “I want you to chop him every now and then. He’ll get mad. He’ll get frustrated. He may even punch you and get a fifteen-yard penalty.” He paused. “You just laugh silently and chop him again.”

On offense, the Wild Dawgz had a big, lanky running back, Grant Tisdale, who liked to get loose on a screen pass. “Monkey, the sackmeister,” Coach said to Monk, “go get him if he flares out.”

“Okey-dokey, artichokey,” Monk said. He started calling Tisdale “Ashley Tisdale,” after the actress in *High School Musical*, and vowed to do the same thing during the game.

At the end of practice, Beidleman gathered the team for a mock-inspirational speech about winning. If you win, he told the Hawks, “the world is your oyster. You can look your mom dead in the eye and tell her, ‘I’ll be taking my dinner in my room while I play Xbox. I require a ribeye, medium-rare, with mashed potatoes—no greens.’

“And your father will stand by your side nodding at his wife with the knowing look of, ‘You have to do it, babe. He’s a winner.’”

An hour later, Coach Engel and Coach Crisci sat on leather chairs at the Engel house. Celdon and Mo were on the floor, and Joey was on the couch. Coach Engel had a surprise: game tape of a scrimmage the Hawks had dropped to a team from Fort Worth. A *loss*. It was his final psychological ploy. The boys immediately protested.

“This game’s ugly,” shouted Joey. “I don’t want to watch it.”

“Me either!” said Mo.

Celdon said nothing.

Coach ignored them, putting in the DVD to create a final, annoying flicker of doubt for athletes who never much felt it.

Joey watched the DVD intently. Finally he offered his assessment of why the Hawks had lost: "Dude, something, like, possessed all our minds."

They would never let it happen again.

At three o'clock the next day, Shannon began to cry. Nick could hardly say a word. Shannon tried asking him if he was sad about this last game—this ostensible end of childhood—and Nick just said, "No, Mom. No, Mom."

An hour later, I found Mo at his house, punching the palm of his hand and tapping his feet on the floor. He wanted to run into the end zone.

One of the Wild Dawgz had started talking smack at school, Mo told me. "He said, 'You guys will probably beat us, but not by as much as last time.'"

Mo thought this was the lamest smack talk he'd ever heard.

At six that evening, Coach walked out of his bedroom. His hair was combed neatly to one side, and he was wearing a black visor. He heaved his music machine into the bed of the F-150 for the final time. Eric hopped in the backseat. Coach inserted some chaw.

"Say a command," the F-150 said.

"Bluetooth audio," Coach said. Suddenly the truck was filled with a hard-rock version of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

When we reached the rendezvous point for the Hawks, Coach opened the doors and let the song drift into the night.

After the Hawks had reached Lovejoy Stadium in a honking caravan, after the players had argued about whether the lightning they saw in the distance would get the game canceled (consensus: maybe), after Coach Crisci had made them practice Wing Left 37 Pitch and Hot Left 33 Lead, they huddled around Coach Engel for the last time.

"I'm so jealous," he said. "I'm so jealous. I wish I could be out there. . . . It's about a football game. It's a football game. We wanna play harder than we ever have." He gave a sly smile. "Y'all ready to do it?"

The Wild Dawgz got the ball first. Tisdale, the running back, ran right. As the Hawks converged on him, Tisdale suddenly planted his feet and threw a pass across his body to a wide-open Wild Dawgz receiver. The receiver ran untouched into the end zone. The Dawgz led 6–0. But when they tried for a two-point conversion, the pass was intercepted, and on the ensuing return, Tisdale hurt his leg. He limped off to the sideline. The game was never really close after that.

Mo got the Hawks' first touchdown. And the second one. Monk missed two extra points wide left. After the second, he was standing on the field with his hands on his knees, breathing hard. "Is Monk hurt?" Coach asked. "I think so," said an assistant coach. But on the next play, Monk knifed into the backfield from his right outside linebacker position and blew up the running back. Monk wasn't hurt. "Monk's *pissed*," one of the other assistant coaches said.

In the fourth quarter, Celdon got the ball. He planted his left foot and moved his body right, lowering his torso and scampering into the end zone. Coach Engel counted down the final seconds with his fingers above his head, and the Hawks said, "Goodgame, goodgame, goodgame..."

The season was over. In a matter of months, the kids would begin funneling into different middle school teams, and eventually to Allen High, with its fierce competition for the few available spots, and then, who knew? To college, maybe, and to the pros if they were good enough. Most, of course, would not be. Most wouldn't be able to live out Nick Trice's dream of playing pro sports their whole lives. Sooner or later, most would have to quit playing football altogether and find a life outside the game. And what about football itself? What would it look like in ten years? In twenty? The Hawks didn't know. What they did know was that most of them would never again get to play together. This was it, the last moment of uncomplicated bliss right on the edge of a big change. I watched as the Hawks embraced their coaches and hoisted their trophies and kissed their moms, and I couldn't help but think that nothing would ever be this easy again.