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Eyes on the Prize

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Nine games into the regular season, the Tigers had gone undefeated, under-challenged, and were favored by seemingly everyone to win the state championship. This was their year. Coach Smitty could feel it in his bones. Winning was all he could think about, to the point where he began to isolate himself in his office and work longer hours; he had even taken to sleeping in his office just to get in a few more hours of film study.

It was all anyone in the community would talk to him about.

Until the previous weekend.

Late Friday night, Coach Smitty received a call from the superintendent. Friday night calls from the superintendent were never good. Coach Smitty kissed his wife and took the call in his office, getting comfortable in his chair in case it was going to be worse news than expected.

He was told that Davey, the team's star quarterback and a top-100 prospect, was at a party after the game and made some racially offensive jokes. Of course, someone there caught it on camera, posted it to social media, and it was going viral. Coach Smitty had to wake Elise to boot up her computer and show him the video, since he wasn't on social media. His quarterback didn't appear drunk, Coach Smitty noted to himself. But he made a joke, people off-screen laughed, and that egged him on to make some more jokes, each more tasteless than the last. The video cut

out, and Smitty sat back in his chair. While he agreed with the superintendent that it was not a good situation, it was also the last thing he wanted to deal with at that point in the season.

News reporters, recruiters, and people from across the state pounced all over Davey. By Saturday morning, Coach Smitty had dozens of emails and text messages requesting an interview or comment. Normally, Coach Smitty was a very transparent and accessible person, but due to the pressure of the season, and the sensitive nature of the issue, he made the decision to handle everything in-house, by himself.

By Saturday afternoon, Coach Smitty was at Davey's home, having a coach-to-family conversation with Davey and his parents. It was standard for offensive remarks to have a set punishment. Social media may have thrown fuel on the fire, but the underlying violation remained the same. Typically, Coach Smitty would have suspended a player in Davey's situation for poor character, lack of judgment, misrepresenting the program, and breaking the player contract. Before that player could be eligible to play again, he would have to run 200 miles of punishment laps. But Davey was anything but a typical player, and his family was not your typical family. They had money, influence, and were used to having the rules changed for them.

With his tunnel vision, Coach Smitty saw Davey's comments as nothing more than a distraction.

Everyone from the school board to band parents had opinions on how Coach Smitty should handle the situation, and they all thought it their duty to share their solutions. By the time he got to Davey's house, he was exhausted with all of the calls to "cancel" his all-American quarterback for telling inappropriate jokes. He knew it was wrong to make an exception for Davey, but he also thought Davey was the team's best chance at winning. And that's all he could think about.

Davey, to his credit, seemed contrite—although he also spoke of feeling betrayed by the "friend" who had been filming him without his knowledge.

After their conversation, Davey's parents thanked Coach Smith for what they thought was his fair approach to their son's youthful indiscretion. They agreed to take away some privileges at home, revoking his allowance for two months and taking his phone away until things blew over, in exchange for Davey being allowed to continue his senior season. Coach Smitty knew that it wasn't the best way to handle the situation, but in his mind, it was more acceptable than the alternatives.

His eyes were on the prize.

He placated the press with a statement addressing how the situation had been handled and how both Davey and the team looked forward to putting this behind them. He arrived at school on Monday tired but resolute that the next few weeks would decide the season and bring a championship to Northwest.

As Monday's morning practice was wrapping up, Coach Smitty blew his whistle and shouted, "Okay men! Grab a knee."

There was never really a need for Coach Smitty to shout. He was as big as a refrigerator and, even though his playing days as a college linebacker were behind him, he still looked like he could strap up and bring the hammer. If he wanted the players' attention, he only had to look at them. His players didn't fear him; they respected him. But today, things were different.

Monday practice periods were usually exciting days. The players were coming off the weekend, which meant they were coming off of a Friday night victory. However, all practice the players had been at each other's throats. Even though they were in helmets and shorts, they were coming at each other a little harder than normal. The trash talking, too, seemed a little more personal.

Most noticeably, though, the respect for each other and the coaching staff was at an all-time low. Despite all of these abnormalities, Coach Smitty decided he was going to focus on the positives.

"Today was a good day, fellas. But good is not what we're after. We want to be elite! To be elite we are going to have to do the little things better than anyone. I want y'all to get focused and be ready to come back for this afternoon's practice ready to prepare for Friday night. Okay, let's break. . . ."

While he was talking, Coach Smitty looked to his left and saw Marcellus and his twin brother mumbling to each other. The brothers were the undisputed leaders of the defense, with talent, leadership, and the elusive “it factor.” Their abilities didn’t stop at the field, either. They were as bright in the classroom as they were on the field. In fact, both had committed to the same university in the fall so their parents wouldn’t have to split time watching them play.

For anybody to be talking while Coach Smitty was talking was a cardinal sin, but for those two to be talking was another sign that something was not right—another sign Coach Smitty missed.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen. I didn’t mean to interrupt your very important conversation,” Coach Smitty said sharply. “Do you know something I don’t know about our opponent on Friday? Do you want to trade spots, Marcellus? Do you think you can coach better than I can? Please, Marcellus, stand up and tell us all what is so darn important that you need to be talking while the rest of us are trying to get ready for the biggest game of the year!”

If it was uncharacteristic of Marcellus to be talking while a coach was speaking, it was even more out of character for Coach Smitty to jump on a player as he had done. Coach Smitty was rarely excitable. A jittery energy had unsettled the team. Players sat perched, nervous and unsure of where to look.

Marcellus stood up, shifting his helmet back and forth in his hands. He was never one to shy away from leadership or speaking in public, but he had never seen Coach Smitty act like he just had.

“Well, Coach, it’s just that we all heard what Davey said last weekend, but we haven’t talked about it as a team. And you’re out here acting like it’s no big deal that he called us. . . .”

“Last weekend!?” Coach Smitty shouted at Marcellus with such force that he stepped forward into the first row of players.

With the escalation in Coach Smitty’s tone, Marcellus adjusted his attitude in kind. Anger replaced fear in Marcellus’s face and Coach Smitty saw it. Everyone saw it. It was the same intense look Marcellus had when he roamed the secondary, hunting for the player with the football.

“Yeah, coach! Davey’s words made it pretty clear how he felt about his Black teammates. And I want to know what *we* are going to do about it.”

That “we” landed like a hammer strike, because Marcellus shot a look to the only Black coach on the team, Coach Washington, looking for backup. Coach Washington, however, would not take his eyes off Coach Smitty. *Figures*, Marcellus thought. *He won’t even look me in the eye because he’s too scared of Coach Smitty to have our back on this.*

Marcellus continued, “I spent all weekend waiting for you to address it, to make a statement for the team, to call us. Not reporters, or parents, but your team.

But that never came. I guess, when you're Davey, the rules don't apply the same as they do for the rest of us."

Davey, tight-lipped, looked aggrieved, ready to defend himself. The situation was escalating quickly. Coach Smitty, boiling over, lit into Marcellus. "For your information, Marcellus, I took care of Davey's situation this weekend. It's finished. Done. Over. Davey apologized to me and is being punished accordingly. I will not have anyone second guessing how I choose to discipline my players."

Marcellus shouted back, "He never apologized to me! He never apologized to us!" His brother stood up, put his hand on Marcellus's chest, and said, "Stop. It's not worth it." Marcellus stared at Coach Smitty for a long moment, then at Coach Washington, and then slammed his helmet into the ground as he took a knee again.

Coach Smitty, red in the face, began pacing as he addressed the team. "Does anyone else want to interrupt our practice to talk about last weekend?"

When no one dared to speak up, Coach Smitty lowered his tone. "Good. Last weekend is over. Now we move on. This week we have an opponent to prepare for who would love for us to be distracted. Get your minds right, men. I want our practice this afternoon to be focused on Friday night."

When he blew the whistle, the team broke from practice. Everyone jogged off the field, into the locker room.

Everyone but Coach Washington.

