

Preface

MAYBE IT WAS A SUDDENLY ACUTE AWARENESS OF BEING "thirtysomething."

Maybe it was where I lived, in a suburb of Philadelphia, in a house that looked like all the other ones on the block. Or maybe it was my own past as an addicted sports fan who had spent a shamelessly large part of life watching football and basketball and baseball. I just felt something pulling at me, nagging at me, a soft voice telling me to do it, to see for myself what was out there and make the journey before self-satisfaction crept in for good.

The idea had been rattling in my head since I was thirteen years old, the idea of high school sports keeping a town together, keeping it alive. So I went in search of the Friday night lights, to find a town where they brightly blazed that lay beyond the East Coast and the grip of the big cities, a place that people had to pull out an atlas to find and had seen better times, a real America.

A variety of names came up, but all roads led to West Texas, to a town called Odessa.

It was in the severely depressed belly of the Texas oil patch, with a team in town called the Permian Panthers that played to as many as twenty thousand fans on a Friday night.

Twenty thousand . . .

I knew I had to go there.

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CHAPTER 4

Dreaming of Heroes

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WHEN HIS FATHER GAZED AT HIM FROM THE HOSPITAL BED with those sad eyes that had drawn so narrow from the drinking and the smoking and the endless heartache, Mike Winchell had been thirteen years old. He knew something was wrong because of the way his father acted with him, peaceful in the knowledge he didn't have to put up a fight anymore. Mike tried to joke with him as he always had, but Billy Winchell didn't have time for playful banter. He was serious now, and he wanted Mike to listen.

He brought up Little League and warned Mike that the pitchers were going to get better now and the home runs wouldn't come as easily as they once had. He told him he had to go to college, there could be no two ways about it. He let him know it was okay to have a little beer every now and then because the Winchells were, after all, German, and Germans loved their beer, but he admonished him to never, ever try drugs. And he told his son he loved him.

He didn't say much more after that, the arthritis eating into his hips and the agony of the oil field accident that had cost him his leg too much for him now. In the early morning silence of that hospital room in Odessa, he let go.

Mike ran out of the room when it happened, wanting to be by himself, to get as far away as he possibly could, and his older brother, Joe Bill, made no attempt to stop him. He knew Mike

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would be back because he had always been that kind of kid, quiet, loyal, unfailingly steady. Mike didn't go very far. He stopped in front of the fountain at the hospital entrance and sat by himself. It was one in the morning and hardly anything stirred in those wide downtown streets. He cried a little but he knew he would be all right because, ever since the split-up of his parents when he was five, he had pretty much raised himself. Typically, he didn't worry about himself. He worried about his grandmother.

But he didn't want to stay in Odessa anymore. It was too ugly for him and the land itself bore no secrets nor ever inspired the imagination, so damn flat, as he later put it, that a car ran down the highway and never disappeared. He longed for lakes and trees and hills, for serene places where he could take walks by himself.

Mike came back to the hospital after about half an hour. "You were the most special thing in his life," his brother told him. "It's a hard pill to swallow, but you're gonna have to make him proud of you." As for leaving Odessa to come live with him, Joe Bill gently talked Mike out of it. He used the most powerful pull there was for a thirteen-year-old boy living in Odessa, really the only one that gave a kid something to dream about—the power of Permian football.

He talked about how Mike had always wanted to wear the black and white and how much he would regret it if he didn't because there were so few places that could offer the same sense of allegiance and tradition. Mike knew that Joe Bill was right. He had already carried that dream for a long time, and despite what he thought of Odessa, it was impossible to let it go.

He stayed in Odessa and sometimes, when he went over to his grandmother's house and talked about his father, it helped him through the pain of knowing that Billy was gone forever. "His daddy worshiped him," said Julia Winchell. "He sure loved that little boy." And Mike returned that love.

"When he died, I just thought that the best person in the world had just died."

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Billy and Mike.

There was Mike, smiling, curly-haired, looking into his dad's face at Christmastime. And there was Billy, thin and wizened and slightly hunched, like a walking stick that had warped in the rain. There was Mike at the flea markets they went to together on Saturdays and Sundays over on University, helping his father lift the boxes from the car and set them in the little booth. There was Billy following him to a chair so he could sit and rest. There they were together on those hot afternoons that Mike hated so much but never complained about, selling the cheap tools and knives and toys and Spanish Bibles that had been found in catalogues or on trips to Mexico.

There was Mike playing Little League baseball with that goto-hell stance of his—feet close together, up on the toes, taking as big a stride as he could possibly muster into the ball—jacking one homer after another. And there was Billy, the proud master, watching his gifted disciple from the car, unable to get out because of the pain in his leg and the arthritis.

Under the demanding tutelage of his father, Mike could do no wrong in Little League. He became the stuff of legend, with twenty-seven pitches in a row thrown for strikes, a single season in which he hit thirty home runs. And then somewhere around the time his father started slipping, Mike lost that innate confidence in himself. The gift was always there, but he began to question it, doubt it, brood over it. When he hit three homers in a game once, he didn't go back to the bench feeling exalted. "Why in the hell can I hit these home runs?" he asked himself. "Why could I do it when other kids couldn't?"

There had always been something inward and painfully shy about Mike, but the death of his father forced him to grow up even faster than he already had. He knew Billy was in pain and he also knew that only death could stop it. "It was hurtin' 'im and there was nothin' they could do," he said. "You don't want nobody to die, but you don't want him hurtin' all the time either."

After Billy died, Mike's life didn't get any easier. He had a

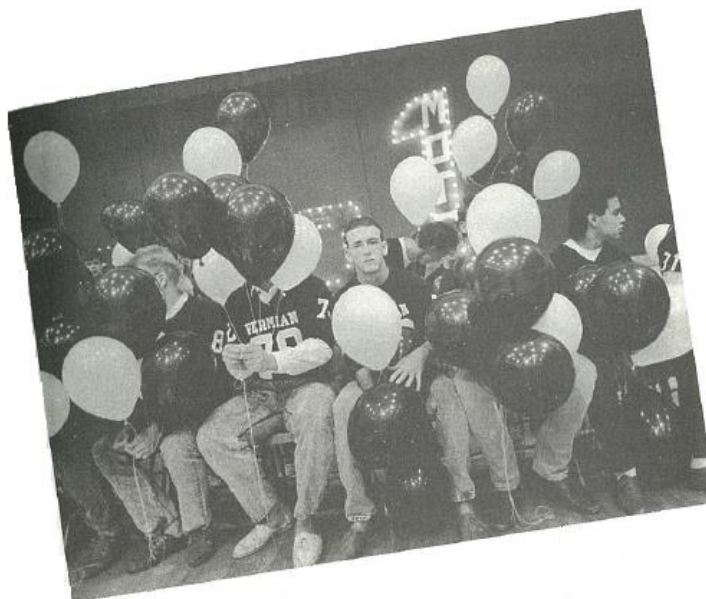
brother who was sent to prison for stealing. At home he lived with his mother, who worked at a service station convenience store as a clerk. They didn't have much money. His mother was enormously quiet and reserved, almost like a phantom. Coach Gaines, who spent almost as much time dealing with parents as he did with the players, had never met her.

Mike himself almost never talked of his mother, and he was reluctant to let people into his home, apparently because of its condition. "He never wants me to come in," said his girlfriend, DeAnn. "He never wants me to be inside, ever." When they got together it was over at his grandmother's, and that's where his yard sign was, announcing to the world that he was a Permian football player.

"Me and him talked about not havin' a nice home or a nice car and how those things were not important," said Joe Bill. "I told him, you make your grades and stay in sports, you'll one day have those things."

Mike persevered, a coach's dream who worked hard and became a gifted student of the game of football, just as he had in baseball with his father. The one ceaseless complaint was that he thought too much, and he knew that was true, that whenever he threw the ball he didn't just wing it, go with his instincts, but sometimes seemed to agonize over it, a checklist racing through his mind even as he backpedaled—*be careful. . . get the right touch now . . . watch the wrist, watch the wrist! . . . don't overthrow it now, don't throw an interception. . .*

He started at quarterback his junior year at Permian, but his own obvious lack of confidence caused some of his teammates to lose faith in him in a tight game. When the pressure was off and the score wasn't close, it was hard to find a better quarterback. When the pressure was on, though, something seemed to unravel inside him. But now he was a senior and had had a whole year to process the incredible feeling of walking into a stadium and seeing twenty thousand fans expecting the world from him. He seemed ready, ready for something truly wonderful to happen to him.





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He didn't dwell much on his father's death anymore. It had been four years since it happened and Mike had moved on since then. But he still thought about him from time to time, and he said he had never met anyone more honest, or more clever, or more dependable. He smiled as he talked about what a good "horse trader" Billy was, and how he loved animals, and how he had bought him every piece of sports equipment that had ever been invented. When he had had trouble with his baseball swing, he knew that Billy would have been able to fix it in a second, standing with him, showing him where to place his hands, jiggering his stance just a tad here and a tad there, doing all the things only a dad could do to make a swing level again and keep a baseball flying forever.

And Mike also knew how much Billy Winchell would have cherished seeing him on this September night, dressed in the immaculate black and white of the Permian Panthers, moments away from playing out the dream that had kept him in Odessa. The two-a-days in the August heat were over now. The Watermelon Feed had come and gone, and so had the pre-season scrimmage. Now came the Friday night lights. Now it was show-time and the first game of the season.

Most everyone thought that Billy Winchell had given up on himself by the time he died. But they also knew that if there was anything making him hold on, it was Mike.

Billy and Mike.

"He would have liked to have lived for Mike's sake," said Julia Winchell. "He sure would have been proud of him."

"Some of you haven't played before, been in the spotlight," said assistant coach Tam Hollingshead in those waning hours before Permian would take the field against El Paso Austin. He knew what the jitters of the season opener could do, how the most talented kid could come unglued in the sea of all those lights and those thousands of fans. He offered some succinct advice.

"Have some fun, hustle your ass, and stick the hell out of 'em."

"It's not a party we're goin' to, it's a business trip," Mike Belew

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told the running backs. "If you get hurt, that's fine, you're hurt. But if you get a lick, and you're gonna lay there and whine about it, you don't belong on the field anyway."

The team left the field house and made its way to the stadium in a caravan of yellow school buses. They went through their pre-game warmups with methodical, meticulous determination. Then they went to the dressing room and sat in silence before Gaines called the team to huddle around him. He didn't say much. He didn't have to.

Everyone knew what was at stake, that if all went without a hitch, this game would be the beginning of a glorious stretch that would not end until the afternoon of December 17 with a state championship trophy. It would be a sixteen-game season, longer than that of any college team in America and as long as most of the pro teams' seasons. Three and a half months of pure devotion to football where nothing else mattered, nothing else made a difference.

"That 1988 season is four and a half minutes away," Gaines said quietly with a little smile still on his lips. "Let's have a great one."

At the very sight of the team at the edge of the stadium, hundreds of elementary school kids started squealing in delight. They wore imitation cheerleading costumes and sweatshirts that said PERMIAN PANTHERS # 1. They began yelling the war cry of "*MO-JO! MO-JO! MO-JO!*" in frantic unison, rocking their arms back and forth. A little girl in glasses put her hand to her mouth, as if she had seen something incredible, and it made her momentarily speechless between screams. As the black wave of the Permian players moved out into the middle of the field, eight thousand other souls who had filled the home side rose to give a standing ovation. This moment, and not January first, was New Year's day.

Brian Johnson opened the season with a fifteen-yard run off the right side through a gaping hole to the Permian 47, lurching forward for every possible extra inch. Two quick passes from Winchell to split end Lloyd Hill gave Permian a first down at the El Paso Austin ten. Winchell looked good, setting up with

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poise in the pocket, throwing nicely, no rushed throws skittering off the hand.

Then Don Billingsley, the starting tailback for the Permian Panthers, got the ball on a pitch. He was a senior, and it was his debut as a starter.

The roars of the crowd got louder and louder as Don took the ball and headed for the goal line. A touchdown on the first drive of the season seemed destined, to the delight of the thousands who were there. And no one wanted it more, no one felt it more, than Charlie Billingsley.

It was his son Don down there on that field with the ball. But it was more than the natural swell of parental pride that stirred inside him.

Twenty years earlier, Charlie Billingsley himself had worn the black and white of Permian, not as some two-bit supporter but as a star, a legend. He still had powerful memories of those days, and as he sat in the stands on this balmy and beautiful night where the last wisps of clouds ran across the sky like a residue of ash from a once-brilliant fire, it seemed impossible not to look down on the field and see his own reflection.

II

There were some kids who came out of Odessa ornery in the same way that a rodeo bull with a rope wrapped tight around his balls is ornery, kids who went through life as if they were perpetually trying to buck someone off their backs to get that damn rope off their nuts, kids whose idea of a good time was to look for fights with townies from Andrews or Crane, or do a little bashing at the local gay bar, or bite into the steaming flesh of a fresh-killed rabbit, or down a cockroach or two in the locker room, or go rattlesnake hunting by shining a little mirror into the crevice of some limestone pit where the only sign of human life was the shards of broken beer bottles that had been used for target practice.

They were kids for whom the story of David and Goliath

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wasn't some religious parable but the true story of their own lives, kids who were lean and mean and weighed maybe 170 pounds dripping wet but were built like steel beams and had a kind of fearlessness that was admirable and irrational and liked nothing better than to knock some slow, fat-assed lineman up in the air and watch him come falling down like a tire bouncing along the highway.

Charlie Billingsley may not have been the meanest kid ever at Permian, but he was somewhere near the top, and it was hard to forget how that tough son-of-a-bitch had played the game in the late sixties.

His sense of right and wrong had been mounted on a hair trigger. If he thought you were jacking with him, he didn't go grumbling back to the huddle making empty threats about revenge. He just put up his fists right there and if that didn't work, then what the hell, he'd just rear back and kick you smack in the face.

And it wasn't like he left all that anger on the field or anything. He wasn't one of these chameleons, one of these split-personality types. He was as memorable off the field as he was on it, hanging out at Cue Balls or Nicky's or the old A & W over on Eighth Street or wherever he happened to be night after night. He won a lot and lost a few and the coach of Permian then, Gene Mayfield, finally told him that he'd be off the team if there was one more fight. But Charlie Billingsley wasn't about to change his ways. The minute the season was over, he got into a fight and someone broke his jaw. They had to wire it shut and he dropped to 130 pounds but that was okay because Charlie Billingsley got an opportunity for a rematch, which is all he really wanted, and taught the kid who had messed up his jaw a very serious lesson.

If all he had been was a hell-raiser, Charlie Billingsley might have been in some trouble. But he also had the numbers, the kinds of numbers that everyone in Odessa understood and admired: 890 yards rushing to lead the team as a junior, when it went all the way to the state finals before losing to Austin Reagan; 913 yards to lead the team as a senior.

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Those were great days back then, great days, and it was safe to say that life was never quite the same afterward. In the succeeding years he had traveled a lot of miles, too many to tell the truth, loaded down with the baggage of too much booze ("I've spilt more whiskey than most people have drunk") and too many wives ("I wouldn't have married a couple of girls I married"), still casting around for the proper fit twenty years out of high school, still trying to find the way home.

He had been recruited by Texas A & M, and as he recalled all the false promises that were cooed into his ear he couldn't help but give a little chuckle. He played for a few years, but one thing led to another, and Charlie Billingsley found out that life in college was a whole lot different from what it was in high school when it came to football: you were a whole lot more expendable in college, a hero one day and a broken-down nobody the next, and if you didn't like it no one really gave a crap because there was always a bunch of guys ready to replace you in a second. He transferred to a small school in Durant, Oklahoma.

"It was the worst mistake I made in my life," said Charlie Billingsley, looking back on it. "Those inbred Okies, they didn't take kindly to the pros from Dover." A friend got shot in a bar one night, and he and some others beat up the assailant.

Charlie Billingsley left school after that. He floated from one job to another, some of them good, some of them not so good. He was in the floor-covering business in Houston, but high interest rates kind of put a damper on that. And then he sold casing pipe during the boom, and that worked out pretty great for a while. He made \$40,000 the first year out when Houston back in those days "was blowin' gold." But then the bust set in after a couple of years and Charlie moved back to Odessa. He helped start up a new bar in town that featured bull riding on Sunday afternoons—there was a ring in back—and kick-ass rock 'n' roll acts, but a falling-out with one of the partners put an end to Charlie's involvement in that. He started running another bar-restaurant in town where, as he gently put it, "it was hard to deal with drunks sober." He had also been through two

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marriages at that point, one to a girl from Odessa, the other to a girl from Houston, and then an unexpected element entered his life: his son Don.

Don had been living up in Blanchard in Oklahoma with his mother. It was a quiet, sedate kind of place and he was a star there, a starter on the varsity football team as a freshman. But Don, who spent part of every summer with Charlie, knew of Permian and of his dad's exploits there. He knew that every year the team had a chance of going to State and had won the whole shooting match four times since 1964. The more he heard, the more he realized how badly he wanted a piece of it.

Right before his sophomore year, he informed his mother that he wasn't coming back to Blanchard; he was going to stay with his father in Odessa so he could play for Permian, even though he had little chance of starting there until his senior year. He didn't want her to take his decision personally because it had nothing to do with his loving one parent more than the other, it just had to do with playing football for Permian High School. Don remembered his mother's being "kind of pissed off" about his decision. But since she herself had been a Permian Pepette during Charlie's senior year, she also understood.

Don had been three when his parents had split up, and his coming back into Charlie's life on a permanent basis wasn't the simplest of moves. Living with Charlie was sometimes more like living with an older brother or a roommate than with a father. There were times when Don stayed up almost all night, regaled by his father's stories of how to live the world and how not to live it. Don treasured those sessions and learned from them. But when Don came home one night with a black eye, Charlie's idea of advice was to tell him to "stop leading with his face."

Charlie's drinking didn't go away. He would go on binges, three- or four-day hauls that were tough for everybody to handle. "I'd get pretty hairy at the end of one of 'em. Those three or four days, they were eventful" was how Charlie Billingsley said it, giving a hoarse laugh that made you realize that at

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the age of thirty-seven he had been through one hell of a lot in his life since his playing days for Permian.

During the spring of his junior year, Don moved in with one of his grandparents while Charlie Billingsley went to a clinic for alcohol rehabilitation. Don went to visit him a couple of times. It was difficult to watch his dad try to pull himself through, and Don was glad he had football. The locker room became his home, the one place where he always felt he belonged.

Whether he knew it or not, Don had become the spitting image of his dad, Charlie Billingsley reborn seventeen years later. The physical resemblance they bore to one another was striking—the same thin, power-packed frames coiled and ready to strike if the wrong button got grazed, the insouciant swagger, the same shark's-tooth smile that could be both charming and threatening, the same friendly way of speaking, the words falling casually out of the side of the mouth like cards being slowly flipped over during a poker game.

Like his father, Don was a fighter who didn't think there was anything irrational about mixing it up with kids who were a whole lot bigger than he was. His reputation was established sophomore year when he told Boobie one day after practice to take the stocking cap off his head. Boobie told Don to go ahead and make him, but Don wasn't intimidated. "Those niggers, they talk a lot," he later said, describing how he had eagerly taken up Boobie's challenge. Although he gave up about five inches and forty pounds to Boobie, he took him down easily and earned the admiration of many who had always thought Boobie was too damn cocky for his own good. When Don had a few pops in him, which was frequently, he felt the urge to fight even more.

He had taken his first drink in fifth grade, and by the time he was a senior had built up quite a reputation for drinking. There was nothing exceptional about that in Odessa, where kids drank freely, often with the tacit blessing of their parents, who saw it as part of the macho mentality of the place. When Don went home from school for lunch, he sometimes raided

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the liquor cabinet. As a sophomore at Permian he was found wandering around the field house parking lot one day drunk. Customers at the various bars his father worked in were quick to buy him beer.

Like his father, Don was also the starting tailback for Permian. Charlie Billingsley had been the most valuable offensive player in the district when he had played that position his senior year. He had left his mark on the program, even though it sometimes seemed he used his fists as much as his legs. But he had been one hell of a runner, tough as leather, hard-nosed, and people around town still remembered him for that as if it had happened yesterday. They always would.

Until he went into the rehabilitation clinic, he admitted, he had been right on the edge, making things tough not only for himself but for Don. Their relationship, he knew, had been at the point of fracturing. But he was more in control now. He had settled down, and he had his son's football season to look forward to. As Charlie Billingsley said, "I got him to live through, and that's something pretty special."

After all, football was what had brought the two of them together in the first place, and it seemed destined to keep them together. At least for as long as the season lasted.

III

With all those eyes focused on him, the ball popped loose from Don's hands without anyone's touching him. He went after it on his hands and knees, desperately trying to recover it and redeem himself, but he couldn't get to it. A groan went up from the crowd as El Paso Austin came up with the ball.

He came off the field, his eyes downcast and brooding, his eagerness to do well in this first game and live up to the legend of Charlie putting his whole body out of sync. "God Almighty," he said to no one in particular on the sideline. "I can't believe that."

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El Paso Austin was held to six yards in three plays, the hapless Austin running backs suffocating under a pile of five or six raging dogs in black shirts. *Swarm the ball!* That's what the coaches had told the Permian players time after time after time. *Never let up! Swarm the ball every play!*

Permian took over after a punt. With a first down inside El Paso territory at the 47, Winchell dropped back to pass. He saw flanker Robert Brown open, but the touch was too soft and the ball fluttered, a high fly up for grabs, the kind of pass that had become a Winchell trademark the year before, etched with hesitation. It was destined for an interception, but the El Paso defensive back mistimed. The ball plopped into Brown's hands, a gift, an absolute gift, and he had a clear path down the left sideline. He scored, and the ice was broken.

Winchell, coming back to the sideline, almost, but not quite, looked pleased with himself, a tiny look of relief, perhaps even the glimmer of a smile. "What do you think?" he said, motioning to the crowd, to the stadium, to the starry beauty of it all. "You ain't seen nothin' yet. Wait till Midland Lee."

Permian scored twice more in the first half to go ahead 21-0. Winchell threw a five-yard touchdown pass to Hill and then made it three when he hooked up with Brown for a sixty-one-yard bomb with twenty-four seconds left. In the locker room at halftime he seemed as if he was walking on air. Three touchdown passes in the first half. *Three!* Last season it had taken him his first four games to get three touchdown passes, and he only had eleven the entire season in fifteen games.

As for Billingsley, his debut as a starter had become further mired after that first nervous fumble. Regaining his composure, he had peeled off a nice thirty-four-yard run on a sweep. But then, with time running out in the half, he had fumbled again, as if the ghost of Charlie caused the football to go bouncing along the turf like a basketball. The mixture of excitement and anticipation had him in knots, his legs working so hard he looked like a cartoon character going at fast-forward speed.

The coaches, who had always harbored concerns about Bil-

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lingsley because of his life-style, were not terribly surprised. They knew of his drinking and partying and the fact that he and his father moved around a lot. "I think we got a big-assed choke dog on our hands," said one at halftime.

Gaines called Billingsley into the little coaches' room and threw him a football. "Hold on to it," he said.

Then Belew took him aside. "Just put that behind you. If you worry about it, it's gonna screw you up. It's history."

The locker room was hot and steamy, and Gaines and his four assistants were hardly euphoric. The Panthers were dominating every facet of the game, but fumbles and penalties had kept Permian from leading 35-0 at the half.

"We should have had two more [touchdowns]," said defensive coordinator Hollingshead. "Don laid it on the ground."

Billingsley continued to drown deeper and deeper the second half. After Permian took over on downs on its 41, he took the hand-off and had clear sailing on the right flank. But his feet were still moving too fast for him and he slipped, adding to the rumbles that Charlie Billingsley's boy sure as hell wasn't going to follow in his father's footsteps, at least not on the football field.

"God damn!" said Hollingshead derisively.

If Billingsley could do nothing right, Winchell could do nothing wrong. Three plays later he threw his fourth touchdown pass of the night, tying a Permian record for most touchdown passes in a game.

The game ended with Permian beating El Paso Austin 49-0. El Paso Austin had been a helpless opponent but even so, the performance of Winchell had been wonderful. He had had the best game of his life—seven for nine passing for 194 yards and four touchdowns. His performance proved how high he could soar when he could unleash himself from the constant self-doubt that had entrapped him after the death of Billy.

Billingsley's starting debut had been just the opposite; it was hardly the kind of game that would make him a legend alongside Charlie, or anyone else for that matter. And now there was

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something else to contend with, something that to Don's way of thinking was disappointing but somehow inevitable.

It began at halftime when Gaines said he was going to let an untested junior named Chris Comer play the entire second half at fullback. It was Comer's first game ever on the Permian varsity, and it was only because of the injury to Boobie that he was there at all—otherwise he would have been back on the junior varsity. He had talent, but the coaches were wary of him. The previous school year he had been ineligible for spring practice because of academic problems, which put him way down in the doghouse. The coaches questioned his work habits and desire, and they were hardly inspired by his background—from the Southside, living not with his parents but with his grandmother.

But these concerns began to lessen when Comer took the ball early in the third quarter at the 50, lingered behind the line for a split second until a tiny alleyway developed, turned the corner, broke past two defenders with an acceleration of speed, and dashed down the sideline for a touchdown. The run had been so stunning that it was hard to know what to make of it. Had it been a fluke? Or, in the aftermath of Boobie's knee problems, had he just become the new star running back of Permian High School?

When he did it again, this time on a twenty-seven-yard touchdown where he just bullied his way past several tacklers, the answer became obvious.

Belew, who had spent most of the game in the press box relaying offensive signals to Gaines over the headset, moved down to the sidelines in the waning moments of the game, clearly beside himself. He started to gush about Comer, and then he eyed Boobie, who had had knee surgery the day before. He

obviously did not want to hurt Boobie's feelings by raving in front of him about someone else. He moved until Boobie was out of earshot. Then he opened up like an excited child. "Did you see that?" said Belew of Comer's performance, 116 yards and two touchdowns. "Comer's a motherfucker!"

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With the injury to Boobie, Billingsley had thought he might get the ball more often. But if Corner continued to run as he had tonight, Billingsley could pretty much forget about that. The ball would go to Corner on the pitches and the sweeps and he would lead the noble but anonymous charge trying to take out the defensive ends and the linebackers. Corner would get all the touchdowns, all the attention, all the glory, and Billingsley would get the aches and pains of being a blocking back.

That sure as hell wasn't why he had given up so much to come to Permian, to have a black kid come in and steal away his chance at glory. It was something his father had never had to contend with. There wasn't one black around when Charlie played. Back then they all went to high school on the Southside, had their own stadium, and as long as they stayed put there was no problem. But things were different now.

Don knew they had talent. It was just the way some of them kind of swaggered around that bothered him, how some of them seemed to do whatever they wanted in practice and the coaches let them get away with it. It seemed obvious to him that the Permian system was prejudiced against him—it had rules for blacks and then rules for everybody else. "In practice, the niggers, they do what they want to do, and they still start Friday night," he said. "There are different rules for black and white at Permian."

So the injury to Boobie hadn't made a damn bit of difference. As he later looked back on it, it seemed that the minute one black player got hurt there was another to take over.

"I didn't get to carry the ball" was how Don Billingsley sized it up. "They moved up another nigger to carry the ball."

Jerrod McDougal appears facing page xiv.

Boobie and L.V. Miles appear facing page 56.

Boobie Miles appears facing pages 57 and 202.

Mike Winchell appears facing page 76.

Don Billingsley appears facing page 77.

Ivory Christian appears facing page 118.

Brian and Tony Chavez appear facing page 180.

Gary Gaines appears facing pages 240 and 256.

Sharon Gaines appears facing page 257.

Photographs facing pages 57, 155, 241, and 257 were taken during the game against Midland Lee.

Photographs facing pages xiv and 240 were taken in the Ratliff Stadium dressing room immediately following the Midland Lee game.

The photograph facing page 274 was taken outside the field house following the Midland Lee game.