

EATING FOOTBALL

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As in many small towns, the biggest crowds in Gallipolis, Ohio, could be found on a Friday night at the high school football game. Located in downtown Gallipolis, Gallia Academy High School was, by far, the biggest school in the county in the 1970's, with over one thousand students spilling out of its classrooms and filling its halls at the bell, every 50 minutes on the hour. Gallipolis was a full-fledged city back then. Today only about five hundred students attend Gallia Academy, now relocated to outside the city limits. And Gallipolis itself has lost its citified status. State law demoted it to a lowly "village" when the town's overall population dipped below five thousand in the 1990 census. By all estimates, the population continues to decline.

But whatever its status, it remains a picturesque municipality nestled against a wide stretch of the Ohio River that forms its eastern boundary. Sitting on an elevated plane a good sixty feet above the river's surface, Gallipolis extends westward a meager four blocks until the elevation dips steeply again into the Chickamauga Creek Valley, whose broad floodplain provides the level expanse where the football fields and tennis courts sit. Beyond that, the unglaciated hills of the Appalachian Plateau undulate in forested waves, forcing roads to climb, tilt, and turn with precipitous drop-offs just feet from the road's edge, and so unnerving that outsiders slam on their brakes at every hillcrest. The locals, and particularly the high school students, are perfectly comfortable speeding their cars around the blind bends, just to the point of tires squealing and passengers becoming nauseated. But all that changes when the school busses are rolling, and on Wednesdays, garbage day in Gallipolis, when the frequent stops of the truck might cause teenage-normal speeds to be a danger to man and machine.

I was in the seventh grade in 1973 when Andy Evans first talked me into playing football. Jim Croce was at the top of the Billboard music charts and his song, “You Don’t Mess Around with Jim,” where the country boy named Slim defeats the hustler Big Jim Walker, made it seem less far-fetched that a skinny kid, with his wits about him, could go toe-to-toe with the best of the bullies. Andy wanted us to play on the Steak House team together, with about 25 other boys. These were combined youth teams, made up of 5th, 6th and 7th graders from all over the county, that would feed their best players into the public school teams beginning in eighth grade. You see, Andy Evans’ Grampa-Bob – yes, that Bob Evans – owned the Steak House just north of town. It was his first restaurant.

Started in 1948, it was really more of a diner than a steakhouse, a long counter lined with stools bolted to the floor faced the kitchen. The main room was narrow and rectangular with a few scattered tables. It led to another narrow rectangular dining room off to the right, like two double-wide trailers set at an “L.” The outside wasn’t remarkable either, the asphalt parking lot running the entire width of the property and melding so completely with the road that the white edge line was the only demarcation separating one from the other. The big tacky sign just off the road with the words “Bob Evans” in script lettering at the top, twice the size of the smaller block letters below spelling “Steak House,” and a garish neon arrow pointing to the building. Though it didn’t look like much, the locals and the truck drivers discovered that the food was worth a stop, and the parking was easy. There weren’t many restaurants in Gallipolis, and almost none in Belpre, or Cheshire, or Pomeroy, or any of the other small towns on Route 7 as it wound its way alongside the Ohio River from Huntington West Virginia to Marietta, Ohio, so the Bob Evans Steak House did pretty well, becoming a destination outing for a birthday or anniversary dinner.

As a boy, Andy would make a point of greeting regulars when he walked into the Steak House. If he didn't know anybody sitting at the tables, he would slip up onto a stool and ask the waitress who was cooking today, and then shout a big "hello" back to the cooks through the opening in the wall to the kitchen. He was outgoing to a fault and proud of his Grandpa-Bob's accomplishments, and he enjoyed the celebrity status that being the grandson afforded him. The Steak House was a local icon, and it only made sense that it sponsored a youth football team. So naturally that's the team Andy played on. And I was Andy's friend, so I was proud, too, to be on the Steak House team.

I wasn't much of an athlete, Andy would tell you that. It wasn't for lack of height, I did my growing early, but I would try to hide when I played sports. In little league baseball, I gravitated to right field. I could stand out there for hours in blissful isolation, watching the infielders play, and praying that the batter wouldn't hit the ball, or praying that if he did hit the ball, it wouldn't come to me. Most of the time, it didn't. Every now and then, someone would pop a fly ball high into the air and out my way. I'd run to where it ought to land with my glove up in the air, and I would pray.

Oh God, please let me catch this ball. Please let me catch this ball.

I prayed a lot in those few moments, watching as the ball's arc turned downward and realizing I was in the wrong spot, back peddling madly. And when I thought God was tired of hearing my bleating repetitions, I'd revert to the common Lutheran table prayer,

Come Lord Jesus, be our guest,

and let these gifts to us be blest. Amen.

And sometimes it worked! Sometimes the ball just smacked into my glove, and my glove

closed around it and I had it. Often, it would knock me to the ground. Prayer is such a powerful thing.

Sports can lead a young man to a life of prayer, and I prayed when I started playing football, too. Prayers at practices were petitions to keep everybody safe from concussions and other injuries, and sometimes for an end to those long leg lifts. Game time prayers were for team victory, hoping that God didn't like the kids on the other team better, and praying that their parents were all healthy and employed so as not to sway God's sympathy in their favor and away from the Steak House team.

Perhaps my most fervent prayer was that God would not let me screw up in front of everybody. It was an awkward age. The embarrassment factor was as out-of-control as the hormones, newly unleashed.

Like baseball, football played by fifth, sixth and seventh graders has a special name, it's called "Midget League." You wear all the same gear – all the pads and helmets and mouth guards – just like the high-school boys, but in smaller sizes. Cups too. In a way, it was a rite of passage, a hillbilly bar mitzvah, putting on your cup, coming to the realization there's something down there worth protecting. But everything in Midget League is smaller, and that's ok.

Even the cheerleaders were smaller. The seventh grade girls who had a brother on the team, or who dreamt of being varsity cheerleaders would join a Midget League squad to cheer, to get some experience, and maybe to get noticed. They looked just like real cheerleaders. They wore sweaters and short pleated skirts with spankies underneath. I was mesmerized by them, all bustle and smiles, lithe limbs, flying skirts, and flaunted undergarments. Their chassis were a smaller caliber than their high school counterparts, but fitting to the setting, and their enthusiasm

was intoxicating. They made it so a boy didn't mind sitting on the bench most of the time.

But I didn't sit on the bench much that season even though it was my first. I was in seventh grade, and tall for my age, much taller than the fifth and sixth graders. So I didn't sit on the bench, I played on the line, offensive and defensive line. The coaches put me right in the middle, a big kid who was hard to get around. I got my hands on the ball carrier pretty often, too, if he came close enough. During games, the announcer would call out over the loudspeaker,

"Rutz on the tackle ... among others,"

because there were always a lot of boys on the ground within an arm's reach of the tackled ball carrier. From the booth, you couldn't really tell who contributed to the tackle and who just got knocked down in the fray. So sometimes I'd hear the announcer say "Rutz on the tackle" and I'd smile, because I hadn't done anything other than get knocked down. Then I would pray a prayer of thanks.

We had pretty good coaches in Midget League, at least on the Steak House team, and we respected those coaches like they were college professors. They were tireless men, who took seriously the fact that they were molding boys into teenagers. They would yell at us until they were hoarse. We learned a lot of new words and colorful expressions, but not the kind you take home to Mom. After hours of practice, wilting under the relentless August sun, a coach would let fly with a new word or phrase, and it lit us up a little. Most of the boys, me included, didn't mind this kind of discipline;

"Hey dumb-shart,"

"Shut your sphincter,"

"You having a brain fart?"

and other such colorful phrases, most of which you couldn't find in the dictionary and thus, you had to rely on your teammates' expositions to understand what they meant.

One of the assistant coaches, a young man named Coach Wamsley, told us inspirational stories at the end of practice. He was a big man with long bushy red hair who had played a lot of football in high school, made it pretty far too – kind of a local legend. We were proud he was our coach, awe-struck that he'd agreed to teach us what he knew. He'd tell us stories about how he had run the same play we were running, and how we might do it just a little bit better, and he would spill out these fantastic details; names of his teammates, the front line who broke a hole in the defense for him, and the names of his opponents. He seemed to know everybody, and would often make the connection from his playing days to one of boys on the Steak House team.

“Your uncle Max tried to tackle me on that run,” he told one of the boys. “He didn't like it much when I stiff-armed him. He gave me the shit-eye the rest of the game.”

He knew us. He knew who we were, where we were from, who our parents were. That's the beauty of a small town. And the curse.

But one story he repeated many times. It was about his mother, about how, when she would drive him home from practice, she would nag him about his priorities, saying,

"Why do you spend so much time playing football? That's all you do. How are you going to survive in this world? You can't eat football, you know."

And then, one game, his high school championship game, he played flawlessly. He ran the ball over and over, but the defense was tough and he got tackled over and over too, barely eking out any forward yardage. But he was unrelenting and, as the Gallipolis Daily Tribune might report, “a force to be reckoned with.” It was a tough game, a close game, but he

eventually wore down the defense. And his team won! Mostly because young Wamsley had played so well and so hard, and had endured so much.

That night after the game, as she drove him home, his proud mother didn't nag him. Instead, she told him,

"Son, tonight, you ate football."

And he would tell us that story to inspire us, and it did. We would walk with our shoulders a little higher, proud to have heard the story – again – from our coach. Many of us didn't really understand what it meant, and we would debate it. I mean, he hadn't actually eaten a football. We were sure he was still very hungry. We hoped his mother had fixed him some leftovers when they got home. We thought maybe it's like the Lord's Supper, which, in the Lutheran church, isn't filling at all, and even less so for the Catholics. Coach Wamsley was probably trying to give us some spiritual message in the story. And it worked, we were inspired. We wanted to eat football, and more important, we wanted Coach Wamsley to see us eating football.

Well, towards the end of the season, one of the boys left the team, moved away with his whole family. He had been the deep safety on defense. Our head coach told us the deep safety was "A position that required speed and intelligence." And then, standing on the scaffolding overlooking the field, the head coach asked us,

"Which one of you is smart?"

And, as he had done for as long as I can remember, my friend Andy pointed to me and said "He is. Allen's really smart. He's the smartest guy I know."

Now this embarrassed me. I liked to believe it was true, because I wasn't much of an

athlete, and I figured I'd better learn how to be smart instead. I practiced looking smart in the mirror. I tried to use words that I memorized from Reader's Digest whenever I could. I didn't mind it when the optometrist told my mother I needed glasses. They made me look smart. Andy called me "four-eyes" only once. When he saw that it didn't irk me, it took the fun out of it and he dropped it.

But I was embarrassed when Andy said I was smart, especially since we had just turned the adolescent corner. Oh, he did it later in life too. In college, we would see a group of pretty girls and Andy would worm his way into the conversation with them. And then he would pull me in, his foil, and I did my best to smile and act disinterested and distracted, like I had other more important things to do. But as soon as I said anything, Andy would stick out his hand like a traffic cop to halt the conversation and he would explain to them how smart I was, as though it was a subtitle with information critical to the plot. I didn't date too much back then.

But he said it to the coach that autumn day back in seventh grade, and the coach listened to Andy. And then the coach looked at me and said,

"Rutz, are you smart?"

I really struggled with that one. Lutherans are trained not to boast, and I knew a lot of locker room ribbing lay at the end of that road, no matter what I said. But the coach needed information. So I nodded my head and said,

"Uhuh."

And that was it, I left the defensive line and became the deep safety. It was late in the season, only two games left, and I hadn't practiced the position and didn't know much about it except that if the other team threw any long passes, I was either supposed to knock down the

pass, or knock down the guy that caught the pass. I don't think the coaches trusted me to intercept the ball, and they, wisely, didn't trust me to run with it, so "knock it down" was the mantra. Nothing fancy.

And, of course, in Midget League, there aren't very many long passes. At that age, physical coordination hasn't been honed to the point that quarterbacks can throw a football forty yards with much accuracy. Long passes were generally reserved for end-of-game Hail Mary tossups, and that was kind of fun, with low embarrassment potential. Anything can happen in those scrums, so you can't really screw up. And I was tall, so a Hail Mary would have been a dumb and desperate call.

So, it was ok, I was the deep safety. It was a lot like playing right field in baseball. I stood down field and prayed there wouldn't be any long passes. And it worked. That first game at deep safety, there were no long passes. I stood alone, halfway between the line of scrimmage and the end zone, with my helmet low over my eyes so the lights weren't shining in them. I figured out where to position myself at a point where I could see the play happening and watch the cheerleaders at the same time. I liked deep safety. I didn't get banged up as much there.

And then came the following week and it was the last game of the season. The Steak House had done pretty well that year, and this was the finale, between two good teams. Of course we wanted to win. Coach Wamsley told us the story about eating football, and we were all inspired, and we hooted and hollered and jumped up and down. Then we went out onto the field excited, cognizant of the milestone, that this was our last Midget League game.

I took up my sentinel post on defense and watched and prayed and thought about cheerleaders and eating football for most of the game.

Then, late in the third quarter, the inevitable happened. The center snapped the ball. The quarterback had protection, threw it, not a long pass, down the right side of the field, to Randy Fisher. Randy barely had to reach for it, catching it mid stride, a beautiful, running catch. It took him less than a step to recover his balance, and then he was streaking down field as fast as he could go.

Randy Fisher was fast. He was older than the rest of us because he had been held back a grade, or maybe two. We thought it was kind of unfair that we had to compete against an older guy, but hey, he was a seventh grader, he deserved a chance to play football. So he played. Absolute fairness wasn't such a Holy Grail back then. You played with the cards you were dealt, did the best you could, and didn't worry too much about it.

But that meant that Randy was faster than just about everybody else. He ran down the right side of the field, evading everybody's reach, until there was nothing between Randy Fisher and the goal line except the deep safety, me. And I was a little bit out of position, toward the left side of the field, closer to the cheerleaders.

I was scared. He wasn't bigger than me, but he knew what he was doing. He'd played Midget League three years to my one. He knew how to crouch down low, how to hit a dumb defensive lineman in the gut and bounce off, causing the defender's grip to give way so Randy could slip out of it and race on. So I prayed that I could stop him. In that same instant, I knew I would have to die trying. This was high-embarrassment territory. Nothing short of death would excuse any failure on my part. I was big, I was supposed to be smart, I was the deep safety. This moment was the reason my putrid butt was on that field.

So I ran hard to cut off Randy's path to the goal line. I snuck a last glimpse at the

cheerleaders as I ran. They were all looking at me. I couldn't hide my eyes under my helmet, and Beth Yoho, one of the prettiest, caught my glance and looked straight into my eyes, straight into my soul as I ran. I felt it so deeply I thought I would throw up. I could feel the hot dog, the bun, the ketchup, all mixed up with stomach acid and inching upward in the back of my throat.

I turned my full attention back toward Randy and to my surprise he was right there, right in front of me. He had been going full throttle and, like me, not looking up, not looking at me or for me, focused on his goal, the end zone, the hero's prize, the victory dance. But suddenly I was there, and he was there, and neither one of us could stop. And at that second, just before impact, I heard him sputter two words, harsh but sweet, the best two words I could've hoped for. "Shit! Shit!"

He tried to duck his right shoulder down, but it was too late. I was upright, making myself a big target so he couldn't miss me. His shoulder hit me in the chest as he curled his arms and the rest of his body around the football. But I was too big and had too much momentum. Oh, he sent me flying alright, landing flat on my back, but the force of it brought him to the ground too, tumbling and rolling like an armadillo that's been grazed by a passing pick-up truck. When he came to a stop on his back I heard him groan a little, then saw him smack the ball into the turf as he rolled over, and then more swearing as he stood up. That was good, I thought. I tackled Randy Fisher.

But then I realized I could not get up. I couldn't move. I couldn't even muster the strength for a breath of air. It was like I had an invisible lead weight on top of me, pinning me to the ground, crushing my chest.

Seconds ticked by, and I couldn't do more than just lay there, not able to breath or move,

wondering what was wrong. I could see the stadium lights in the dark sky, so I knew I wasn't dead – yet. But I knew that if I didn't get some air soon, I was going to pass out. My hands clutched at the turf, trying to get a purchase on something, do anything to pull myself up. But I couldn't do anything.

I heard the announcer say, "Rutz on the tackle." And I thought it was kind of funny that he didn't seem to notice I was dying.

Then I prayed the desperate prayer of the dying. Not one of my memorized prayers, but an earnest, honest, and urgent plea for help.

And immediately Coach Wamsley was there. He had raced over from the sidelines with all his running-back speed. No one else was even close. Not even Randy Fisher, who had walked past me toward his huddle. He hadn't realized I was hurt. Or maybe he had.

But Coach Wamsley had realized it and he bent down, his eyebrows knitted together, his red hair fluttering in wisps around his face, his mouth set in a determined line as he asked me where it hurt. I tried to talk, but I couldn't. There was no air for me anywhere in the universe. All I could manage were guttural clucks from the back of my throat.

Then, with medical accuracy, he wrapped his big arm around me under my lower back and lifted up. At first I tried to lean into it. I thought maybe he was pulling me to my feet, but he said "stay limp", and he lifted my limp abdomen up just so, in just the right way, and the air came rushing back into my lungs. It was a miracle. I could breath. Pretty soon, I could move. And just like that, I was alright. I'd just had the wind knocked out of me.

After a moment he stood up and reached out his hand, which grasped mine as he pulled me to my feet. Then we walked off the field together and over to the bench where I sat down. A

few in the crowd gave polite applause, relieved that the stretcher hadn't been needed. Beth Yoho looked at me, her face all compassion, eyes brimming with the empathy of a nurse. All the cheerleaders looked at me that way. It was wonderful. I gave a quick smile and a thumbs-up.

I wondered if coach Wamsley would chew me out after I recovered a little. That was a dumb tackle, and somebody could've gotten really hurt. But he didn't. He didn't praise me either, and he would have been justified in wondering why anybody ever thought I was smart. But he didn't tell me I'd screwed up. I stayed put for a while, then stood up and started pacing and cheering on my team mates. After a while, Coach Wamsley let me go back in to play. But he didn't yell at me.

I don't remember who won the game. I had passed through the valley and been brought back to life, to live and fight another day. That was my story. Victory – or loss – those were trifling in comparison.

I didn't see much of Coach Wamsley after Midget League. The next year I did go out for Eighth Grade football with a different set of coaches. I thought I was doing well, but my heart wasn't in it. The leg lifts lasted much longer, and they added wind sprints, and jump cuts. One particularly hot summer day after I hit the sled during a drill, the coach yelled down from his perch on the scaffolding,

“Rutz! You ever consider joining the band?”

Now truth be told, I had considered joining the band. My brothers were in the band. There were smart people in the band. So I said,

“Yeah,” looking up at him, “sounds like fun.”

That was pretty much the end of my football career. And I did go on to play tuba and

marched at halftime through all four of my high school years. The downside of band was that it resulted in absolutely no compassionate looks from cheerleaders. But there were many similarities between being in band and being on the football team. Both involved competing for position, long practices under the hot sun, and exasperated coaches – or band directors – shouting expletives from atop the scaffolding. And while there was no locker room ribbing in the band, there were hazing rituals and long bus rides to and from those away games, where band members were equal part instigators and victims in all manner of pranks, dirty jokes, spanking tunnels, and other shenanigans. It was a reasonable trade-off for a boy who didn't crave another near-death experience.

It wasn't until years later when, home from college, I saw Coach Wamsley again. I was walking on Fourth Avenue, admiring the old elementary school with new eyes now trained by studies in engineering, physics and philosophy. It was a huge rectangular building that looked more like a military fortress than a grade school, all brick and symmetrical, with half turrets a full three-stories high flanking each side of the arched entry way that was four doors wide, the front of the building facing towards downtown and its back overlooking the Chickamauga Creek Valley where the football fields were.

It was the middle of the week, a Wednesday, and the students and teachers were inside their classrooms, making the exterior seem empty and abandoned, including the rows of empty yellow school busses sitting idle in the parking lot. The only movement was on the street out front.

I didn't recognize Coach Wamsley at first. He was wearing gray overalls over a tope shirt, a red ball cap low over his eyes with his still-long red hair spilling out, bright orange gloves

on his hands. He was riding on the back of a garbage truck, standing on a foot peg, one hand on the grab bar, the other reaching out as he leaned toward a group of cans on the curb by the school. He hopped down and hustled the contents of a round metal can into the trough at the rear of the truck, clanked the can back down, and picked up the next, and then the next, in fluid, choreographed motions. Then he re-mounted his perch as the truck rolled on to its next stop.

I smiled and waved to him, but I don't think he saw me.

And then I said a prayer of thanks for Coach Wamsley, and for what he taught me. And for what he was still teaching me.

That great men, true heroes, respected leaders, are everywhere. They're all around us, men who can teach us, and challenge us, and inspire us with their life stories. Sometimes they make us eat football. Sometimes, they pick us up when we're broken. And sometimes they pick up our garbage for us.

Allen Rutz