

Championship Season

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“Is this how it’s supposed to feel? Just this?” The first thought of the “Day After” came groggily through the haze of too-little sleep. Chet Bascomb, fifty-five, the head football coach of the now NCAA champion Domers, woke to find that yesterday’s championship game had not been a chimera but a fact. Now came the hard part: How to survive it.

Minutes later he was performing his daily shaving ritual. He liked the shaving cream from the Body Shoppe – it smelled faintly like the incense he remembered as an altar boy – and he spread it frugally on his stubble while regarding himself in the mirror. “Not bad,” he thought; Well perhaps, in comparison to other men halfway into their sixth decade. He had gone soft in the middle the last twenty years; not fat exactly, just rearranged, as if the twin hands of time had grasped him around his upper chest and thighs and squeezed the flesh towards his middle. He still worked out, but even he had to admit his half-hearted weight lifting sessions did little to change his body geometry; and he hated running long distances, which he defined as anything longer than the forty-yard sprints he used to do as a power fullback in college and his single season in the NFL. No, he had become a trainer of other, younger, men, directing them to accomplish things he could no longer do, both orchestrating and conducting their efforts on that hundred by fifty yard grid with a virtuosity no one else could equal.

“Just another candle to light for St. Lawrence” he thought, repeating to himself a comment famous among his assistant coaches, who learned that he considered St. Lawrence the patron saint of football since he had been roasted to death on a gridiron by third-century pagans. “That’s us, Christians against lions..” he’d tell his players, insisting always that they were underdogs even when winning by two or three touchdowns.

Funny, his knowledge of the early martyrs of the church might be the only remnant of his intended career, which was to be a professor of early medieval history. He had taken his first coach's job only to support himself in graduate school, but then he'd shown a gift for designing winning offenses, and that had brought lucrative offers from progressively richer and more famous programs. Ten years ago he'd found himself at the summit of the Catholic football world as the head coach of the University of Our Lady's Domers. He'd restored their winning tradition, but had fallen short of the national championship until this year. Now, he'd done it all for a school that measured coaches by how god-like they seemed. Now Chet was God.

"The usual this morning, Dad?" Chet was still startled by his daughter's voice first thing in the morning. He often found it hard to imagine that Monica was his, especially now that she had "gone Goth" sporting multiple piercings and a steadily spreading and colorful array of tattoos. Today, her hair was red with green highlights, other days brought other colors, but when she smiled at him as he sat at the kitchen table, she looked just like her mother. He had met Lilah while both of them were graduate students at the University of Virginia, he in history and she in creative writing. She was as diaphanous and he was bulky, fun and lighthearted with a crackling intelligence and a way with words that often left him tongue-tied and sputtering. And before he could catch up, Lilah was always off ahead of him, taunting him with that wicked laugh; so full of life, so full of life. And now she was gone.

Football had taken her from him, Chet knew. She had hated the game, even as he carefully explained its subtleties to her, hoping she would see it as he did: as a blend of ballet and strategy in its physicality, while the difference between victory and defeat came down to desire and mental toughness. To her it symbolized all she loathed about American culture: its bloated, bullying emphasis on bigness; its insistence on ever larger stadiums, grander practice facilities, more pampered athletes, not to mention its subversion of the academic purpose of universities. "Why is our university in the entertainment business?" she railed, "Why is the English department closing down its program in Old English while you're hiring a new backfield coach and a strength coach, for Chrissake!" He had no answers for her.

Why was he paid hundreds of thousands, even millions, of dollars to stage a spectacle twelve times a year that for most was merely an opportunity to get drunk? No one could deny his genius. He was famous for building teams that could score at least four touchdowns a game, while giving up at most two. And as easy as that sounded, it required a singular focus from recruiting “Bascomb boys” -- i.e. players with speed, quickness, and intelligence – to training them to adapt their style of play to any adversary. Chet called this his three-platoon system, in which he used exhaustive scouting reports of his opponents to compose each week’s offense and defense to expose and exploit any weaknesses he saw. His ingenuity in throwing at his adversaries different offenses, different defensive looks, in wave after wave of brilliant detail and impeccable execution by boys often smaller than their adversaries, but always better conditioned and coached, was legendary. He’d beat you on the ground, in the air, with brilliant defense, playing thirty or forty of his boys in dizzying rotation; and he’d rather beat you by sixty than by six.

“Are the eggs, okay?” Monica asked. Chet was once again shaken from his reverie, “Yes, they’re fine,” he replied. In truth, her eggs always seemed to stare back at him reproachfully, as if startled, rather than cooked, into doneness. His daughter sat down across from him, and they began the awkward silence that usually seemed to reign between them, especially since Lilah’s death. She had watched her mother fade as had he, how the single pill by her breakfast glass of orange juice became two, and then three; the nerve pill combining with the anti-depressant in a hazy chemical dance that removed her from them a morning at a time. “What’s on for today?” he asked, lamely. She responded with chatter about a composition class, then astronomy, as his attention wandered. “Oh, Dad, I almost forgot, Father DD called and wants you to stop by his office first thing this morning. He said it was urgent.”

“Dieudonne, [pronounce it Dewdone] that bastard, what could he want?” Chet thought. He might ordinarily have been more respectful of the Athletic Director, a member of the religious order who ran his university, but he frankly detested him, thinking that his name’s meaning in French (God given) aptly described the man’s opinion of himself. Chet went through a mental checklist of recent issues with his AD wondering what this summary meeting could be about. As he backed his SUV out of the

garage and directed it along the familiar path to the university, he remembered a rumor of the NCAA looking into something involving the university's athletic boosters. "Couldn't be that," he thought, "I would have surely heard something from someone before now."

Still lost in thought as he arrived and parked his Ford Expedition, he walked along the familiar hallway of the athletic center towards his office. As he passed the varsity locker room he glanced in at the silent rows of lockers now emptied of their gear. The smell of turf and sweat still lingered this last time, for the facility was slated for demolition, as the huge new center neared completion. Chet had a hard time understanding the need for the 100 million dollar mega-creation, with its multiple indoor practice fields, luxury locker facilities, multiple training and Jacuzzi rooms, all finished with the best money could buy. None of this built winning football teams, Chet knew from experience. In fact it often made players less hungry to win, as they often fell into the trap of expecting reputation alone to make the next block or tackle. Earlier in his career, Chet had specialized in defeating the big name teams with his squads from unknown, undersized, but distinctly hungry college programs. Chet often missed those days when winning was a prize, not just expected, like the forecasted dividend from a costly investment.

"Hi, Sylvia..." Chet addressed the AD's secretary with the deference due the power behind the throne. "Hi, Coach. Congratulations on your championship. You must be very proud of your boys." By this time Father DD had poked his head out his office door. That head was not his most attractive feature. In fact, he had no attractive features that Chet could ever see, being undersized, quite thin of face and body, with a perpetual squint through half glasses. He was absolutely passionate about football, as physical wimps often were in Chet's experience, and insisted on discussing offensive strategy after every football game. Chet always sat silently through these monologues, as if in a perverse role reversal of the confessional, with Chet as the instrument of football absolution.

"You wanted to see me, Father." Chet summoned his blandest look as he regarded his AD, who had now perched himself on his rather too tall desk chair. An expanse of walnut and desk nick-knacks separated them, as Dieudonne began.

“Chet, a marvelous job, marvelous this year, just according to our business plan; and revenues, revenues, up as well. Great... Great...” Dieudonne favored a speaking style long on nouns, skimpy with verbs. “But the thing, Chet, the thing now, capitalize on it, go out and raise money; you to hit the speaking circuit. “Bascomb on Leadership”; “Teambuilding the Bascomb Way”; “Creating Your own Championship Season;” The possibilities are endless. We’ll be able to add on to our new athletic building, no doubt about it.”

“First off, Father, you know I hate public speaking. You hired me to win football games, and that’s what I’ve done.” Chet’s temper was beginning to flare and he knew it. But that was no way to talk to the AD. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Chet. But later, we can talk more about that later. Right now we’ve got a problem that involves you.”

For the next ten minutes, Dieudonne told a story of how an athletic club booster, a middle-aged woman who was a vice president in a local bank, had, without his knowledge, funneled gifts of hundreds perhaps thousands of dollars to various of Chet’s players. This had apparently been going on for several years, and Chet had heard rumors about gifts, but had done nothing about it. Now it appeared that the money had been embezzled from the bank, the woman had been arrested, and the NCAA was on the point of launching an investigation.

“Chet, head off, we must head this off before it spoils everything, all we’ve worked for.” “And like you, I think that the best defense is a good offense, that’s why I’ve called a press conference at 9 a.m. in our media center, where you’re going to make an important announcement.” The AD’s eyes gleamed at Chet as the strategic possibilities flitted through his mind. “Yes, ahead, ahead of the game...” he mused. “An announcement, you’re going to announce a sabbatical you’re taking, because of the shock of your wife’s death...all that... and to pursue your motivational speaking career.” “What...What, Father.” Chet responded, shocked. “Do you think that will help?” he stammered.

“Chet, never underestimate the transformative power of money.”

At that moment, there was a commotion in the outer office. Chet heard what sounded like Sylvia’s voice first in a murmur, then rising in pitch and strength until the door burst open, and his daughter stood there framed in the door, her chest heaving as if

she had run there, her red/green hair askew. “Dad, I heard the news, don’t let Dieudonne intimidate you. It’s not your fault; it’s his.” She pointed at the AD “and that’s only the beginning.” The AD had leapt to his feet but seemed frozen in place by the shock of Monica’s effrontery.

Monica then launched into a ferocious denunciation of the “tutoring” program she’d been involved in the past two years. Chet had known that she’d picked up a little extra money working in the athletic department’s “Office of Academic Success” the token space allotted by the AD to assist the most bone headed of his athletes. But in Monica’s story, she and the other tutors had researched and written term papers for players, likewise with take-home exams, lab manuals, all the class work required of varsity players was taken over but the corps of tutors on the Athletic Director’s payroll. Dieudonne responded in kind, but Monica did not back down, pointing a richly tattooed arm squarely at him in a J’accuse gesture that amazed Chet. So absorbed were they in their confrontation that Chet simply walked out into the outer office, into the corridor in the direction of the media center.

As he entered, the TV lights were on; the room was full of reporters. Chet, though still a bit stunned, accepted the lapel mike pinned on him by a technician, strode to the lectern, faced the camera. And at last he knew what he wanted to say.