

Crossing *the* Goal Line

*Football
and the
Inner-City*

Steve Axman

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DEDICATION

*To my wonderful wife
and best buddy!
Dr. Marie L. Axman*

*A ballcarrier scores a touchdown
once any part of the football in
his possession crosses over the
very front of the goal line.*

CHAPTER 1

MID-NOVEMBER 2007 (CHICAGO, IL)

“How’s your mom doing, Johnny?” asked the St. Ignatius linebacker coach, Sean Dempsey, with a sincere smile stretched across his face. The two walked side-by-side towards the football practice field. Johnny Larkin’s mother was halfway through radiation treatments for a brain tumor. The trauma had been extremely difficult for the young linebacker being so close to his mother. Unfortunately, the doctors were not giving the woman much of a chance to make it. *Too bad*, thought Dempsey. *Johnny’s mother is all he really has.*

“She’s hanging in there, Coach,” replied the youngster sullenly as he took a deep, slow breathe. “It’s been so hard. I’m just lucky she’s such a tough person and that she has such strong religious beliefs.” The two became very quiet finding it hard to formulate words that could have significance. “And, Coach, ...I really appreciate your concern. You’ve really been a great help to me,” as tears started to well up in his eyes.

“Remember, Kid, if you need a ride home, let me know,” added Dempsey. “And I can pick you up in the mornings if you’re stuck, John. I also want you to know that my wife and I are praying for her. Keep in mind what you just said, Kid. She’s one tough lady which is a big part of all this.”

“Got’cha, Coach,” said the youngster. “I’ll definitely take you up on that ride if I’m stuck. Thanks, Coach. Thanks a lot.”



“Bend your knees, Sully,” encouraged Sean Dempsey, the first year, hard-nosed, varsity linebacker coach at St. Ignatius College Prep as he intensely corrected the linebacker’s performance. “Ram your inside flipper right under his grill! Dominate his ass! Get yourself ready to kick some butt, Sully! Make that fullback quit on Friday!” *We can’t get complacent just because we made it to the play-offs*, thought the assistant coach. *These kids have to understand it’s show time. We can win the whole damn thing and go home state champions again if we can get our act straight.*

“Atta boy, Sully! That’s the way to keep your outside arm free. Just keep your pads down, Kid. Be ready to stuff that fullback’s ass once you read his run course. You can do it, Sully. I know you can,” supported Dempsey, with a warm smile across his face and an arm over the player’s shoulders as the two walked back to the huddle. Dempsey was a tough coach, ...often extremely tough. However, he was equally caring and positive when dealing with his boys. “We can definitely get this one done, Sully. I know we can. Blow’em up, Son. Blow’em up. I know you can get after that fullback’s ass.”

Dempsey reached for a water bottle from one of the student trainers. “Thanks,” said the smiling assistant coach as he squirted the power drink liquid into his dry mouth. He then extended the bottle to Johnny Larkin. “Keep your pads down and I know you’ll stuff those blockers cold, right in their tracks Johnny. Just keep focusing on maintaining your outside leverage. You’ll get it. I promise you. You’ll get it, Kid. There’s no doubt in my mind, Big Man. You’re going to be my hit man in this game. I want you to knock the snot out of any gold colored jersey that crosses your face. And, be sure to get after those running backs every chance you get. Got that, Johnny?”

“Yeah, I got’cha, Coach,” said Johnny. “You just wait and see. I’ll be taking care of business, ...just like I always do.”

“You got that right, Kid,” reinforced Dempsey with a haughty

retort. I've got to get the backers to play as physically as they can. They simply have to out-hit Chaminade if we're going to get done what we're capable of doing. It's now or never.

The burley, well-built Dempsey prowled the practice field with the same intense focus and demeanor that he did as a standout high school and college football player but a scant few years ago. Well known for his ferocious tackling, the rugged, six foot two, 232-pound coach had swiftly transformed his highly aggressive style of play as a first team, all-conference linebacker to his new found profession of football coaching where he was now working at his alma mater. The young coach, whose fire seemed to burn so brightly, was the real deal agreed the staff's veteran coaches. He was a student of the game and applied his trade with a solid balance of toughness, preciseness and a sincere concern and respect for the players he worked with. As intense as Dempsey could be, he was often found smiling and shouting with excitement when one of his players met with even small measures of success or improvement. He loved the game of football with a passion that was easy to see as he roamed the practice field. The players under his wing practiced intensely with great execution and discipline. He pushed young players of average talent into aggressive, hard-hitting, fierce-tackling linebackers of all-conference caliber.

"That was some good stuff out there, Guys," said the linebacker coach assuredly. "You play like that come Friday night and it will be lights out for these dudes."

St. Ignatius was a long time Illinois high school football juggernaut. Large banners of red with silver markings displayed bold inscriptions that declared an overwhelming number of conference and state championships from the past that ringed the St. Ignatius Crusaders stadium. The strength of the team's daily practices matched fierce, game day performance efforts by the players. On a daily basis, significant groups of parents and students filled the practice field bleacher seats, fervently following every practice drill repetition. Loud, excited cheers or adverse utterances of disappointment followed each practice repetition with success or failure.

An even more frantic passion was clearly exhibited by the young, Sean Dempsey whose instructions could clearly be heard all across the practice field.

“You have the front side gap when the ball carrier action is away, Connor!” Dempsey yelled out to his weak side linebacker as the defense practiced their red zone defense versus the scout squad. “You can’t forget that!” He expected his linebackers to execute precisely. He could not accept anything but efforts for perfection. “We can’t overrun that gap. You’ve got to pace the ball carrier. Stay home for any cut backs. If you’re not patient, that Moore kid will smoke us! We can’t let him cut back on us! We can’t let that happen! Do you understand that, Gentlemen? No way, no how,” as the tough, demanding coach constantly pushed and prodded his linebackers to excel. “Do it right...”

“Or do it again,” chimed in the linebackers in a familiar reply to a Dempsey coaching decree. The linebackers had quickly learned that Dempsey would drive them unmercifully. They also knew he would help them to play at their best come game time and that he had great concern for them as people. He was the tough army sergeant type coach who pushed his troops to the limit to help ensure success but then put his arm over their shoulder when they needed words of encouragement or support. And yet, the players greatly enjoyed Dempsey’s sense of humor. At times, he seemed ferociously intent. At other times, he would slyly, but wittily, make a coaching point that would send a message to his players putting knowing smiles on their faces.

“You stay that high when taking on that isolation block and you’ll find yourself flat on your ass. You can do it, John,” stated Dempsey. “Keep your pad level down and get under that fullback’s block. You know how to do it so go out and get it done.”

This coaching method was true for all of the St. Ignatius linebackers but one, ...Juron Potts. The six-foot, one inch, 205-pound Potts was known as the “...baller...” of the Crusaders football team and everyone knew it. And, if another teammate didn’t know it, the star athlete made sure that he quickly did. The brash, cocky Potts

was unanimously named the first-team, all-state middle linebacker after his junior season, filling his mind with self-proclaimed greatness. Even more impressive was the fact that he was also named the Defensive Player of the Year at the 6-A division, the highest level of play in the state. Unfortunately, Potts cared about one person and one person only, ...Juron Potts. No one would ever categorize Juron as a team player.

“Man,” whined Potts. “I can’t believe this turkey they call a coach isn’t still working with the freshmen. The guy’s a clown, man. Nothing but a clown. And, he’s supposed to be coaching me! You got’ta be kid’n. He don’t know jack shit, f’sure.”

“Oh, shut up, Potts,” retorted one of the linebackers. “You might think you’re Superman. But, the rest of us have to work our asses off to be good. So why don’t you just shut that stupid yap of yours and practice like you’re supposed to?”

“Kiss my ass,” growled Potts. “All you’re good for is kissing Dempsey’s ass anyway. And, what the hell do you know about be’n a backer? Man, you’re a clown just like that fool.”

Potts couldn’t stand Dempsey. He couldn’t stand the feeling that the upstart coach had crowded in on his own limelight. Juron was the star of the team and felt he didn’t need a new, hotshot coach infringing on his notoriety. *They bring in Bozo the Clown to work with me and I’m supposed to feel lucky? All he ever did was get a cup of coffee for a few days as a free agent and everyone treats him like he was an All-Pro.*

In turn, Sean Dempsey had no love for Juron Potts. Dempsey had to work his tail off to be the tremendously productive linebacker that he was. Nothing had come easy for him. He had to toil unbelievably hard to achieve what he had accomplished in his high school and college playing days. In actuality, Dempsey was jealous of the talented Potts. He couldn’t accept that Potts was so arrogant, obnoxious and lazy. Secretly, Dempsey felt like smashing Potts in the mouth every time he saw him walking around the practice field or sauntering into the defensive huddle with a routinely smug smile spread across his face. *How could a player be so talented and, yet,*

be so selfish,? thought Dempsey. *If I had half of that idiot's ability, I'd still be playing. What a total waste of God-given ability!*

Dempsey finally complained about Potts's lack of effort and poor work habits to the St. Ignatius head coach. The young coach simply had enough of Potts and his obnoxious, spoiled-brat attitude. "You've got to help me out, Coach. Potts is a pompous ass and I'm getting sick of his crap. He doesn't give a damn about anyone but himself. As talented as he is, he's a detriment to our team."

"Sean, I hired you to handle the linebackers for me," replied the wizened, sagacious head coach. "Son, you have to realize that good coaches are a dime a dozen, ...easy to find. Players with Juron's abilities only come along but once in a great while. Do you like being here at St. Ignatius, Sean?"

"I love it here, Coach," said the down-hearted young man. "This is my school. St. Ignatius is my alma mater. I'm extremely proud to be a Crusader and I always will be."

"Well, Sean," said the head coach seriously, "then I suggest you find a way to get this situation straightened out because I sure wouldn't like having to go out and find a new linebacker coach this late in the season."



As impressive a young coach that Sean Dempsey was, he had one major flaw in his personality. He could easily lose his temper. Actually, he could become quite violent. This trait had reached all the way back to his elementary school days. "Nice young man," wrote one elementary teacher on Sean Dempsey's report card "...but Sean fights too much."

"Juron, you've got to open up and burst to the end of the line," shouted Dempsey during a run game drill as he slowly shook his head from side-to-side. Focus, intensity and effort were three of the most important characteristics that Dempsey felt his linebackers needed to be successful at St. Ignatius. *What a shame,!* thought

Dempsey disgustedly. "You've got to move your ass, Juron! You're loafing, Man! You're killing us! There's so much at stake and you don't give a damn, do you? All you care about is your punk-ass, Juron," as the angered coach closely trailed Potts back to the offensive huddle.

"Hey, don't worry about me, Home Boy," barked out Potts. "When Friday night comes, you'll get all the action from me you want. Right now, I'm pace'n myself, Dude, so I can get game-time ready. You dig, Coach? I need fresh legs, Bro. You know what I mean, COACH Dempsey?"

"Get off the field, Potts! I don't need your crap anymore," stated a riled-up Dempsey as a hot-tempered rage began to roil within him. He needed to back off and let the situation calm down. Unfortunately, he did just the opposite.

"You're a joke, Man. You don't know noth'n! I don't need your bull shit, that's f'sure!," yelled Potts as he continued strutting back to the defensive huddle.

A crazed look of rage suddenly lit up across Dempsey's face. *Enough is enough*, thought the young coach. His fists were clenched tight and he reached his limit with the loathsome player. At this point, Dempsey didn't bother to think about the possible consequences of what he was about to do. He simply didn't give a damn.

Dempsey fought through the myriad of players hustling back to their respected huddle spots. He sprinted directly to Potts. Dempsey dipped down low to get under Potts' shoulder pads just as he did so many times in his linebacker playing days. However, instead of tackling Potts to the ground, he reached underneath and through Potts's legs with one arm and over-the-top of his shoulder with the other to put the repulsive player in a wrestling carriage hold. Dempsey then lifted Potts up into the air and violently slammed him to the ground.

"My shoulder! Oh my god! My damned shoulder!" Potts laid on his back, screaming out in pain, rolling around on the ground from side-to-side. "Why did you do that, Coach! You broke my shoulder! You broke my damn shoulder!," as the players and coaches alike

hustled over to Potts and Dempsey, shockingly mesmerized by the chaotic scene in front of them.

Dempsey's head started to spin. He had just committed an extremely egregious act and he knew it. His entire body seemed to freeze into a locked position. Unfortunately, Potts did have a broken shoulder.

"What did I do?," whispered the shocked coach to himself. "Oh my God. What did I do?," as he hung his head down to the ground.