

EDITOR'S NOTE: Joe Drape is a reporter for The New York Times and the author of *The Race for the Triple Crown* and *Black Maestro*. A graduate of Southern Methodist University, he previously worked for The Dallas Morning News and The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. When he doesn't live in Kansas, he lives in New York City with his wife and son.

It was a beautiful September afternoon and the Smith Center Redmen bus was rolling down Highway 36 on its way to Plainville and the opening game of the 2008 football season. Some players studied the scouting report, others bopped to their iPods as the coaching staff mostly napped.

I had butterflies, even though I was a longtime sportswriter who had covered a variety of so-called big events - Olympics, Final Fours, college football national title games and the Triple Crown of horse racing. This was different: I was back in high school in a small town 1,450-miles east of Manhattan, New York, where I had lived for the past 12 years.

I was loving it, too. So was my wife, Mary, and my son, Jack. Smith Center had welcomed us to town like we were returning natives, and with each passing day the Drapes were becoming more invested in the high school, the town and all of northwest Kansas.

By the time we turned off US-183, and edged our way into Plainville's stadium breezily nestled in trees, I was calmed by the rituals I would witness for the next 12 Friday nights and made me fall hard for Kansas High School football.

As the players shuttled from the locker rooms to the field for warm ups, their moms and dads, teachers and fellow students were opening up the concession stand. Supplies moved from the bed of a pick up truck as the radio broadcast crews carried their equipment up to the wooden press box. Smiles and "good lucks" were exchanged as anticipation built for a kickoff still two hours away.

Over the course of the season, I traveled to many corners of the state and saw some of the hardest hitting football I've witnessed. Still, sportsmanship reigned. I can honestly say I never saw a cheap shot delivered no matter how fierce the rivalry.

I still get goosebumps remembering how the sound of cleats scraping on gravel thundered above the stadium at Norton. No one knew where it was coming from until the Norton Bluejays appeared on top of a hill. They were in a tight formation, marching into the stadium and to mid-field behind their yellow and blue school flag. It was intimidating and beautiful.

So was the game that followed: a bruising 22-20 victory for the Redmen, who knew they were fortunate to escape their Mid Continent League rival's home with their winning streak intact. The Bluejays were, and will continue to be, a force behind running back Terrell Lane, who is only a junior and already a surefire Division I prospect.

How hard do MCL teams hit?

The next day Lane came to Smith Center to watch a tape of the game with some of the Redmen he had gotten to know in multiple sports over the years. It's like that in northwest Kansas. He had rushed for over 110-yards, three touchdowns and endured 17-stitches to his forearm at halftime. The Redmen were hurting, too - Colt Rogers was stiff and moved like an old man, and Trevor and Travis Rempe could barely swivel their necks.

When the undefeated and talented Ellis came to town, the spirit of Kansas was electric as their faithful, in their orange and black fleeces and windbreakers, packed the visitor's side of Hubbard Stadium. There was little doubt they loved their Rainers and understood there was no place else to be on a Friday night than under the lights of a high school football field.

In fact, I not only saw one town after another's tremendous support for their teams, but also a true passion for high school football. On the last night of the regular season, folks from at least a dozen different towns made the pilgrimage to Phillipsburg to watch the Panthers play Beloit.

It was a beautiful October evening and Phillipsburg has a stadium that should be on a post card. Its lights loom over Highway 36, and its stone stands and surrounding wall make it look like castle. A standing room only crowd lined every inch of sideline and cheered the good plays of both teams.

It is true that a team of burglars can make a bundle on high school football Friday nights. Mary, Jack and I thought we had stumbled on to a ghost town when we drove into La Crosse for Smith Center's sectional playoff game with the Leopards.

There were no signs of life until we made our way to the faint glow in the distance. Pick up trucks circled La Crosse's stadium. In the stands, most folks nestled under blankets on a windy and frigid night, while those unlucky enough to not have a seat hopped from foot to foot to stay warm.

Still, several thousand people there would not have dreamed of being anywhere else. It was the playoffs. Both teams were undefeated and the Leopards had Marshall Musil, who was smart, athletic and on his way to the University of Oklahoma on a scholarship.

Musil was a powerful runner, a technically perfect blocker and had soft, sure hands. You could see immediately why Oklahoma Coach Bob Stoops wanted him to play H-back for the Sooners. But what impressed me the most, and the reason I will follow him closely in college, is for the class he demonstrated in defeat.

It had been a tense, nerve wracking game, and Musil had wreaked havoc on defense from his linebacker position. The Redmen, however, had prepared well for him and Musil, the explosive offensive threat, never really popped off a big play.

When the final gun sounded and the two teams got in line to shake hands at midfield, it was Musil who led the Leopards on to the field. He had just played his last high school game, and a state title would once more elude him, but he had a smile on his face, and a kind word for every player and coach on Smith Center.

Sure, he wanted to win and was disappointed he didn't. But more than that he had fun playing a game he loved. For the previous two hours, Musil had competed at a high level and was proud of his effort. Now, he was exhilarated and satisfied that he had tried his best.

The following week in Meade, at the opposite end of the state near the Oklahoma border, I was reminded again how Kansas football can transcend wins or losses. Meade High School plays excellent high school football, and will continue to do so.

But as much as I'll remember the Buffalos for their single wing offense, I'll cherish most the memory of the players and coaches for both teams gathering in the school cafeteria after the sub-state playoff game to share a meal. The Meade parents, and faculty and towns folks, knew that Smith Center had a five hour bus ride ahead of them

Time and again over my season on the Kansas plains, I witnessed so many of these moments where town pride, player camaraderie and a shared love for football showed what is best in all of us. It really is something to celebrate.

So, I wish nothing but success and good health for the players on and off the field. I thank you all for providing these memories.

I promise I'll be back to experience more of them.