



Article online at <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1N1-0EB7724239995F91.html>

SPORTS ARE SCRIMMAGES BEFORE THE GAME OF LIFE

By Brett Lawrence • Sun Publications (IL)

As I sit here watching Naperville North's football team toy with West Chicago, I wonder if they know. There are thousands of fans in the stands for this homecoming game, and most of them know.

But the players on the field don't understand, at least not yet.

A full moon, shining an iridescent orange, hangs above the field's 50-yard line, suspended like some kind of glowing marionette.

And the drummers from the Huskies marching band play, the rat-a-tat-tat bouncing about the metal bleachers like an echo ricocheting through a Colorado canyon.

On the field, 22 boys—11 in orange and blue, 11 in white and blue—play their parts in this drama, which will exist after tonight only in the videocassette of players' minds.

The play is set on a stage of grass and dirt, where fog machines are displaced by clouds of dust, theater marquees supplanted by scoreboards and spotlights give way to stadium lights. Some players fill the lead roles; others are supporting actors. And the sidelines are crowded with extras.

The scene in the bleachers resembles a church service. Some people show up just to say they were there while others throw themselves into battle as if the home team depended on them.

When the Huskies score, the referees play clergymen, their arms reaching heavenward as the congregation stands. When the game resumes, parishioners retake their seats. And throughout the contest, the scene repeats itself, the fans standing as if to read Scripture or sing a hymn, then sitting again as the excitement subsides.

And as we watch and cheer and hope, we remember. And we wonder if they know.

I walk to the concession stand, forcing my way through the gaggles of students.

While I wait to pay for a hot dog, Coke and candy bar, I listen to the sounds of students who don't know.

Some of them hang on the fences and watch the game, cheering for friends, classmates and siblings; some hardly notice there's a game being played at all.

The boys talk about cars and about sports. They crack jokes, usually at each other's expense. And they talk about girls.

The girls talk about shopping and about their nails. They wonder aloud whose homecoming dress will take people's breath away. And they talk about boys.

Not far away are men and women—20-somethings—who hug people they haven't seen in months, in some cases years. And they talk about how they didn't know.

On the field, the players think the game is all there is. A loss stops the world, at least until the next day of class, and a big win is as good as it gets.

Meanwhile, we watch as our children sprint through childhood, racing to high school graduation, bent on independence, on finding themselves. And we wonder how they'll respond when they know.

When they discover that football was just a prelude to the game of life. When a spouse looks away and says "I don't love you anymore" or a doctor looks you in the eye to say "Cancer." When Father's Day comes and there are no cards or bad ties or plaid shirts because the specialist said "I'm sorry, but you can't have children." Or when Christmas rolls around and your kids ask why they can't see Grandma and Grandpa and you have to explain heaven, all the while feeling like hell.

And we watch while the spectacle of it all overwhelms our senses, longing to trade places with those on the field—if only for a moment.

To exchange our Jeep Cherokees and Acuras for one more chance to don shoulder pads, cleats and a helmet. To trade briefcases and adult responsibilities for a cheerleading uniform and a pair of saddle shoes. To run through the locker-room tunnel and race onto the field one last time. To throw one more touchdown pass. To tackle one more running back. To trade our rickety old joints and bifocals for the stamina and clarity of youth.

And then we remember: If we traded places, they'd know much too soon.

And not knowing is what being a kid is all about.

Brett Lawrence is sports editor of The Sun. His column appears every Wednesday. If you would like to comment on or make a suggestion for a column, call him at (630) 416-5104 or e-mail him at brett.lawrence@copleypress.com.

© Sun Publications (IL)