

## Big Game

Noah Sawyer

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Things slow down when fall returns to St. Joseph, Michigan. Apples are ripe on the tree and the streets are a little bit sleepier as the tourists pack up for the year. The lake is too cold for swimming, the sunsets lose their lackadaisical summer luster. There are no more festivals, no more late nights at the Dairy Korner—polyurethane ice cream cone rising through the roof, teenagers getting their knock-off Blizzards. The kids don't stay out as late, playing in the back alleyway, and the rough, pitched asphalt street out front is quiet. The town prepares for winter.

But there is high school football.

St. Joseph High School—the only public high school in town—was built in the '50s. The design was ripped from the notebook of a California architect; the school is full of floor-to-ceiling windowpanes and the old boilers strain during the winter. My mom started working there as a physics teacher in the '80s, and I know it hadn't been renovated in the years since. The walls were yellowed, the paint chipped, and the exterior needed a facelift. One early winter morning when I showed up for class the heating system had given out, pouring acrid smoke into the hallway where my classes were held. We shuffled out to find a class that didn't reek of burnt plastic. Another year the power inexplicably went out in one wing of the building, requiring another game of classroom musical chairs. The education was great (probably the best you could get in the county), but the building didn't show it. Kids used to joke about the

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fact that we couldn't keep it above 60 degrees on cold days.

Renovations officially started in 2012 after many months of budgeting and pushback from the community. Locals thought that the finances were going to line the pockets of greedy and overpaid teachers. My neighbors put out a wireframe hand-painted sign telling the town to not to give any more money to our corrupt school system.

The stadium where the St. Joe Bears played was renovated ten years before the school. It was not the only construction in the renovation—the building project added a new fieldhouse with basketball courts and an indoor track field, new spaces for the wrestling team, new weight rooms used by community members and many student athletes, and a new outdoor track for the track team. The field was also a bit older than the school proper, having



A simple and  
blameless life on  
thin captain's  
biscuits

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been built in 1949. But it becomes obvious which of these facilities is most important on a fall Friday night. Parents, grandparents, students, children, and alums file into the stadium. Stale popcorn pops and lukewarm Domino's is placed onto paper plates at the concession stand underneath the bleachers. The band warms up in their marching uniforms, cheerleaders stretch on the track, and the flag twirlers practice their twirls. And the team, hidden away in cinderblock rooms below the stadium seats, hype themselves up for the game about to begin.

St. Joe, Michigan, like many Michigan towns, has seen better days. The population has been steadily declining from the '60s—down from their post-white flight population of nearly 12,000 to an estimated 8,300 in 2014. Families are leaving for better employment prospects elsewhere, and many young adults see little reason to move back to the town if they get outside of the county for college. Much of the industry that made up the backbone of the community—electronics and appliance assembly for companies like Whirlpool and Heathkit—has dried up or simply gone out of business. The freight industry that supported many coastal communities across the Great Lakes—the giant, rusty freighters that would bring in copper and salt on hot and hazy summer days at the beach, ambling

But we  
merely  
urged him  
not to be  
an ass.



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slowly towards the mouth of the St. Joe River—have fallen apart as well. While the city has fared much, much better than many of the outlying communities after the financial collapse, most of the town's economy is centered on tourism. And those rich Chicagoans are buying up properties that were once home to native Michiganders and turning them into posh summer homes that lie vacant during the winters. Like many small towns across America it can feel like the soul of the city is dying—and that's a hard pill to swallow for families that have lived there for generations.

The relationship between education and football is fraught. There are many students who would not be able to pass high school if it weren't for the minimum GPA that is required of all athletes in the state of Michigan. Football gives those kids a sense of fraternity and a reason to show up to school in the morning. On the other hand, our communities still spread a flawed message of the plucky young football player being picked out to go and play at a university. A high school education is often considered secondary to the athletic training of players—meet these minimum requirements so that you can stay here, but remember that football is your ticket to college and success. This belief is reflected in the mandatory extra PE courses that the football players take—necessities of the sport. You might wonder what the point of a minimum GPA is if we don't teach our kids to enjoy school, to find inherent value in their education. Are the at-risk football players really gaining anything from being forced to maintain a 1.67 so that they can continue to play football?

There were few things more important to my town than the St. Joseph-Lakeshore game. Five miles of Cleveland Avenue tarmac—a literal straight shot down one unbending country road—is all that separates my old school and its rival. The days preceding the perennial “big game” fill the slow September air with a sort of murmur. Teenagers travel from one town to another when it gets dark to graffiti their rival's property—a tradition that usually starts in good fun and eventually devolves. Townsfolk grumble about defaced cars or maize-and-blue bear paws that have been spray-painted over by kids. Across the border, people in Lakeshore probably deal with the same thing. But without fail the story is passed around that the others did it first—and so the rivalry continues.

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And then the night of the big game is here. The players run out through the wide cement opening in the bleachers of Dickinson stadium. Parents cheer; middle schoolers stand expectantly at the edge of the field hoping to get a high five from the quarterback. The marching band plays. And the game begins. In the long run it doesn't matter who wins or who loses. Both teams go through their strong and weak streaks and trade off who makes it to the state playoffs. What matters is that moment—that enthusiasm, that sense of community, that fraternity. Those kids out on the field get a taste of glory, and we tell them that this will be the best time of their lives.



There is no poetry about Harris—no wild yearning.