

PLAYING DEFENSE

No team kicked our ass like Wyndmoor.

We never beat them. As I recall, we never even scored on them. In the 85-pound division of little league football, they were the class.

Wyndmoor was a suburb of Philadelphia, sitting near the leafy, Chestnut Hill section of the city. I played for the Hillcrest Hornets. Hillcrest was a neighborhood in the bluest-collar part of blue collar Olney. Wyndmoor's uniforms were gleaming white with large, blocky red numerals dominating their jerseys. Their helmets were solid red. Our uniforms consisted of red helmets and red jerseys with small white numbers. The pants were khaki. Their red and our red were as different as the colors of blood and brick.

When we were in the 75-pound division, Wyndmoor had stomped us twice. My father prowled the sidelines like a caged Bengal tiger. The ride home after a Wyndmoor game was always unpleasant. My father's ability to catalog my mistakes was exact, precise, and withering.

The final Wyndmoor game in the late autumn of 1962, however, belonged entirely to me. I brought to it all the athletic experience of my eleven years and three months. And I brought more than that. My father was out of town on business, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His absence was a gift.

The game was played on a November Saturday drenched in a chilly rain. The strong wind made the field feel ten degrees colder than it was.

The previous week, we had lost to Pennsauken, the team from Jersey with that black kid in the backfield named Beetle. He was the fastest ball carrier I ever played against. His body had the lithe agility that made me think of a cat. When Beetle carried the ball, which he did on almost every play, he would cut and twist and shimmy and leap. If he made it to the open field, he was untouchable. In his pale yellow Pennsauken uniform, he darted down the sideline like a low-flying kite pulled by a taut string.

Late in the game, I caught Beetle with a clean, jarring tackle, my arms locking his churning thighs. My efforts, however, went for naught. His momentum carried both of us clear across the goal line for his, and Pennsauken's, third touchdown of the day. Hillcrest's touchdown production amounted to exactly two.

How we lost the game was not entirely clear to me. I suspected that I bore a major share of the blame for the defeat. The ride home with my father confirmed that suspicion. There weren't many words spoken. It was a long ride from New Jersey to Pennsylvania, from Pennsauken to Olney, from football field to kitchen table.

Supper, as I recall, was cold that night.

After six straight victories, the Pennsauken game was our first loss of the season. It was the perfect prelude to Wyndmoor. Beetle had punished us with his thrashing legs and his sharp shoulders, yet playing against him made me run faster, think quicker, and hit harder. True, Beetle carried me with him on the play that nailed the win for them but before that play, our bodies had collided many times one-on-one. Almost every time, he went down where we met. By the end of the game, I was getting up from the ground slowly but I noticed that Beetle wasn't getting up any faster than me.

On offense, I played tight end. With rare exceptions, my role was to block. The pass routes I ran were mainly intended to divert attention from a play going in the opposite direction. On infrequent occasions, I was the intended receiver on a pass play. On occasions even less frequent, I caught the

ball.

My position on defense was safety. With the other safety, Tommy, I formed part of the “last line” against our opponent. Our primary responsibility was to defend against the pass. On running plays our job was to evade blockers and assist our teammates in stopping the ball carrier.

Despite the higher visibility of my defensive position, and a thinner margin for error, I was comfortable there, and strangely confident. Small for my age and lighter than most of my teammates, I did have some speed. Although I rarely made an interception, I was usually able to get my hand on a pass and prevent the receiver from pulling it in. I learned how to watch the quarterback's eyes and the way he moved his shoulders. Because of that, I was almost always correct in determining where he would throw the ball and I was able to pivot quickly and position myself there before the ball arrived.

On running plays, I was adept in assessing the direction of the action and getting myself to where the ball carrier was headed. My main contribution was to be another body in the wall of tacklers that collapsed on the halfback or the fullback. In those swarming tackles, I experienced an athletic solidarity I would find in no other sport.

Playing defense, I possessed an edgy alertness, an intuitive sensitivity for the shape of the coming play. There was the freedom to throw my body at the opponent, not in the measured, calculated movement of an offensive blocker but with arms outstretched and hands free to grab anything but a facemask. My helmeted head could pound a hip or a thigh or burrow straight on into an opponent's stomach.

Playing defense gave me the opportunity to be reckless and unrestrained, an opportunity that existed in no other corner of my strict, Catholic boyhood.

Playing defense felt like what I was always doing with my father, the former PT boat radioman whom I idolized and feared; my father, the man whose attention I both coveted and cowered from; my father the man whose standards I never felt capable of meeting. Being on the defensive, for me, was as

natural as breathing.

On a football field, the lines were clear, the direction from which the attack was coming was known. The game was always a fight but it was a fair one. On that field, I always knew what I was supposed to do. With my father, it was different. When or where the raw-edged sarcasm would come from was mostly a surprise. What might provoke his fierce, lightning fast physical discipline was never entirely clear. Staying on defense became a core element of life at home with my father.

The final Wyndmoor game was played on their field. Seeing the puddles slowly consume the grass and hearing the raindrops patter on my helmet, I felt calm in the final moments before the kickoff. The butterflies that normally tormented my stomach were still and quiet. There was no nausea.

I was uncharacteristically eager for the game to begin.

Wyndmoor was the best passing team in the league but between the rain and the slippery conditions, I guessed there wouldn't be much passing in the game. In previous games, I frequently saw Wyndmoor passes sail over my head. They almost always found their way to the waiting arms of a receiver several steps ahead of me. Most times, I'd catch the receiver, but not always. The game conditions for this final game weren't favorable for passing and that was fine with me.

By kickoff time, the rain was falling harder and the field had the texture of a swamp. The air tasted like a blue popsicle.

The pattern of the game quickly established itself. The team in possession of the ball would grind away on the other, sending runners up the middle or on sweeps around end, slogging through the mud in an attempt to maintain footing and pick up some modest yardage. The weather and the deteriorating conditions on the field favored the defense. I was wet and cold but very, very, loose. Even the sharp, staccato voice of the Wyndmoor quarterback didn't rattle me as he called the offensive signals.

At the half, we trailed 7 – 0. Wyndmoor had scored the game's only touchdown by recovering our fullback's fumble deep in our own territory and taking it across the goal line. By that point in the game, however, the score was irrelevant to me.

All that mattered were Wyndmoor's two running backs, Number 23 and Number 2. One of them would get the ball on every play. Their linemen were doing a good job opening holes for them up the middle. Their ends were doing a good job of flattening our linebackers with hard, clean blocks. By the half, it felt like the real game, the only game that mattered, was number 23 and Number 2 against Tommy and me.

Number 23 had run hard into me several times up the middle—head down, arms cradling the ball deep in his chest, knees churning high. He was broad-shouldered and barrel-chested. He hadn't seen eighty-five pounds since the preseason weigh-in. Number 2, tall and slender, was sent on sweeps around end, struggling for traction so his long legs could open up. He was their fastest ball carrier but his speed depended on an open field and good traction.

At the half, neither of the Wyndmoor running backs had scored a touchdown.

Without the heavy burden of my father's eyes on me, I wasn't worried about making mistakes. In this game, I was playing football from my gut, not my head. This was a brand new sensation, and one that I liked very much. There was no thinking, just instinct. Never had I enjoyed a game the way I was enjoying this one.

During half-time, in the locker room of the upscale recreation center, we sat side by side on long benches and ate the fresh orange slices that were passed out. The steam rising from our bodies created a foggy haze in the narrow room. My Uncle Frank, one of the coaches, spoke to each of us individually, offering encouragement. As always, there was a soft smile on his wide, gentle face.

“Steve, you're playing great,” he said. “You're doing a terrific job at safety.”

He was the only adult in my enormous extended Irish family who called me by that name. To everyone else, even my cousins, I was “Stephen,” always “Stephen.” Frank patted me on the knee and moved on to the next player.

The orange was bright in my mouth. I ate it slowly. The head coach, Jim Lynch, was giving a pep talk but I tuned him out. The game, the real game, already belonged to me. I parked one orange slice in my mouth and worked on the pulp of another with my tongue and my teeth.

Every part of me was wet; there was layered mud on my pants and jersey. My feet squished when I moved them in my cleats. I felt comfortable. I was eager for the second half to begin.

By the beginning of the fourth quarter, we were down by two touchdowns and Wyndmoor was driving hard for another touchdown. The only remaining question was their margin of victory.

I was playing the final ten minutes of my final game of organized football. Our family was relocating to Ohio early in the New Year. I knew there would be other sports—there would always be other sports—but this was it for organized football with shoulder pads, knee pads, endless practices, sore muscles, plays to memorize, and vomiting from nervous anxiety on the sidelines before the game.

I lined up at safety with my back to our goal line, set up and waited for their next play.

Number 23 was rumbling through the gap opened up by the guard and tackle on the left side of their line. Tommy and I dodged their blockers and scrambled into position to stop him. Hillcrest might be losing, but Tommy and I weren't giving up. Number 23 seemed determined to score a touchdown and he was plowing straight ahead. We crashed into him and our combined efforts brought him down on the five-yard line.

No touchdown yet.

On the next play, Number 23 got the ball again and found another huge opening to run through. He was just about at the goal line when I lowered my shoulders and inserted myself into his churning

legs. At that precise moment, Tommy hit him from the other side with such force that it jarred the wet ball loose and carried Number 23 and the two of us into the soupy mud.

The cheers from our sideline meant that Hillcrest had recovered the loose ball. I stood up feeling like I had scored a touchdown myself. Tommy was laughing and clapping.

The morale boost from the recovered fumble gave our offense one last jolt of energy. We were able to advance the ball to midfield where, on fourth and three, we ran out of downs. I was using my blocking assignments as a way to keep loose for going back on defense.

There were less than two minutes remaining in the game when Wyndmoor took over. They weren't slowing things down, even with the victory in hand. On a sweep wide to the left, my side, Number 2 picked up a few good blocks and found some running room down the sideline. I closed on him quickly and was in the right position to force him out of bounds with a push, which I prepared to do. He saw me clearly and knew that I had shut the door ahead of him.

As I approached him, running full stride, leaning slightly, with my arms outstretched, his left arm shot out, stiff as a two-by-four and he straight-armed me. He rammed his hand into my helmet, fingers grazing my facemask, and then finding their way into my eyes and mouth. Our momentum carried us into each other and we tumbled together out of bounds on the Wyndmoor side of the field.

Sprawling on the ground, in the midst of their players, I felt a sharp kick to my ribs, followed by another to my leg. Then I felt a thump on my helmet. I rolled over quickly, got to my feet, and sprinted back onto the field. I was spitting mud out of my mouth. My eyes were smarting and slightly out of focus. My side felt like it was on fire.

I took a few deep breaths and resumed my position at safety. Running in place for a few moments and shaking my head helped to restore my equilibrium. With my drenched jersey, I wiped my mouth. The rain felt like it was coming down even harder.

Wyndmoor broke their huddle and lined up over the ball. As the quarterback rasped out the

signals, I settled into a deep stillness within myself. The way their backs were lined up indicated exactly what play was coming. I watched and waited.

Everything in front of me and around me seemed to be slowing down. I was wide awake. I knew precisely how the play would unfold.

The quarterback took the snap, turned, and faked a handoff to Number 23. Then, he placed the ball in the hands of Number 2 who tucked it into his gut and followed Number 23 through another gaping hole in our line. The rain was now coming down in slanted sheets, pushed by an unrelenting wind.

Splashing through the muck, Number 23 led the ball carrier as he cleared two Hillcrest defenders out of his path. They were moving like an accelerating freight train barreling straight into our territory. As I got myself into position, Tommy cut across in front of me, heading straight toward Number 23.

“He's all yours Stevie,” Tommy yelled, just before he made Number 23 take him out with a full body block that sent both of them into a mud bath a few yards to my left.

My path to Number 2, and his path to me, was now unobstructed.

Gaining a bit of cautious traction, Number 2 had his head down and his legs pumping high in the style of his larger teammate. Keeping my eyes fixed on his midsection, I ran straight at him with all the speed I could muster over the mushy ground.

With my arms wide and my torso low, I hit him full speed. My shoulder-padded shoulder met the ball on his stomach and jammed it squarely into his gut like I was pushing a large rock into a shallow hole. The thrust of my upper body into his midsection produced a crisp, loud wheeze as though every cubic inch of air had been forced from his lungs in an instant.

My arms encircled his slender waist. My feet found purchase in the soft ground and I drove myself forward, forward, forward. I propelled Number 2 straight back, tightening my embrace and

driving my shoulder deeper into his midsection. Every step I took felt deliberate, firm, and purposeful.

For me, nothing else existed but him and me and the rain, the mud, and the movement of our uniformed bodies. This was the game, the whole game, and the game was everything. I was screaming with fury, joy, and utter release.

Then, I lowered my arms to the back of his thighs and pushed myself forward using every straining muscle in my legs. With my body on top of his, he went straight down on his back. We landed in a puddle that was probably twice as deep as it had been just a few minutes before.

Number 2 was flat on his back, gasping and rolling his head slightly from side to side. He somehow managed to hold on to the ball.

I got up quickly and stood looking down at him. I put my hands on my hips and stood motionless. My breath was coming in heaves from the deepest part of my lungs. The feeling of triumph that surged through me would never be equaled in any athletic contest for the rest of my life.

A circle of players had formed around the two of us. Until the adult coaches and the referees hustled in and took over, it felt as though all the other boys were awaiting my permission to resume play. Then the whistles blew and adult voices ordered us back into position.

Two Wyndmoor coaches were supporting Number 2 under his arms as he limped slowly off the field. Tommy and I resumed our positions at safety. After a few more moments, Wyndmoor's offense lined up for the next play. The quarterback's voice, harsh and clear, resumed its drill sergeant authority and everything fell back into place. The game ended less than a minute later.

On the phone from Grand Rapids that night, my father wanted the essential details of the game.

“How did you do on offense?” he asked. “Catch any passes?”

None were thrown to me, Dad.

“Well, you just don't run your pass patterns right, anyway,” he said. “On defense, did you make

any interceptions?”

They didn't throw the ball, Dad.

“You guys just can't beat Wyndmoor, can you?”

No, Dad, I guess not.

“Well, they're just the better team.”

Not today they weren't I said to myself; I made no verbal reply to my father.

In the years that followed, I was a second stringer in little league baseball and warmed the bench as an eighth grade basketball player. In high school I lettered on the varsity cross country team and was good enough to run legs on the mile and two mile relay squads on a track team that won a state championship in 1969. Every race was run under the furrowed brow of my father whose fierce gaze darted between me and the stopwatch that never left his hand.

In college, I pulled an oar in the bow seat of the second crew boat. The college I attended had no football team at the time, so I had to compete against former high school linemen and fullbacks to win my crew seat at the Division I school. My final competition in organized athletics was as a rower on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia on a bright May morning with the pear trees in full bloom along the riverbanks.

We didn't win that last race but I do remember how hard we made the winning boat work to beat us over those two thousand meters of dark, chilly water.

And now when my memory scrolls rapidly back, as it is wont to do in moments of strong provocation or flagging resolutions, it tends to bypass decades and delivers to my mind a magnificently rainy day and a football field in suburban Philadelphia. It is late November in 1962 and from my position on defense I am looking calmly across the line of scrimmage. I can see two running backs get

into position. They attend to the signals issued in a raw, crisp cadence that I can hear as clearly now in my memory as I heard it on that marsh of a football field.

The players on whom I focus are wearing white jerseys, spattered with mud, but with the large, scarlet numbers still perfectly visible. And the numbers on their jerseys are 23 and 2. And I am calm and still and ready for what is coming.

I am on defense and I know well how to play it.

To this day, I have no recollection of the number that adorned the tired, red jersey that I wore when I played safety for the Hillcrest Hornets of Olney in the Philadelphia of my boyhood.

Stephen J. Stahley

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