

A high school quarterback prepares for a big football game in this excerpt from Friday Night Lights, a book based on a true story that chronicles a season of the Permian High School team. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

from Friday Night Lights

by H. G. Bissinger

- 1 Mike Winchell hated these moments in the field house, wandering around in his uniform as the minutes dripped away with excruciating slowness. Secretly he wished that he could be knocked out and not wake up until five minutes before game time when there was no longer any time to dwell on it. He was the quarterback and that gave him a certain status, because just about everybody in town knew who the quarterback was and the novelty of having his picture in the local paper had worn off long ago. But with all the responsibilities—learning the audible calls and the three-play packages, not getting fooled by that overshifted defense the Rebels liked to run—it was hard not to feel overwhelmed.
- 2 He awoke early that day, in the darkness of the shabby house on Texas Avenue that shamed him so much he wouldn't even let his girlfriend enter it. In silence he had carefully wrapped up some toast and bacon in paper towels so he would have something to eat when he got to school. Then he got his mother up so she could drive him there since, unlike most kids at Permian High School, he didn't have his own car. They barely said anything to each other, because he hated questions about the game. When she dropped him off she whispered, "Good luck," and then left.
- 3 Once he got to school he had to go to the pep rally, where his long, angular face, framed by balloons, had a look of delicate sadness as haunting as a Diane Arbus¹ photograph. It was a fascinating face, Huck Finnish, high-cheekboned, yet somehow devoid of expression, the eyes flat and deadened against the roar and tumult that surrounded him, impervious to it, unable to react.
- 4 He welcomed going to class afterward, finding relief in the equations spread across the blackboard in algebra II, glad to have something else filling his head besides the thousand and one things that were expected of him. But outside class the pressure intensified again, the Lee game hovering over him like a thundercloud, the incessant questions of the students as he walked through the halls driving him crazy and offering him no escape.
- 5 Everyone seemed uptight to him, even the teachers who always dressed up in black² on game day. When he walked through the halls of school during the season it wasn't

¹ *Diane Arbus* — a photographer known for her portraits of people on the fringes of society

² *black* — one of the school colors

as a proud gladiator, but instead he seemed enveloped in an almost painful shyness, his head ducked to the side and his eyes shifting furtively, fending off questions with one-word answers, especially hating it when people came up to him and asked, “Do y’all think you’re gonna win?”

6 He had first started as a junior, and back then he had been so nervous that the butterflies started on Tuesdays. In the huddle his hands shook. Teammates looked at him and wondered if he was going to make it. But this season he was leading the district in passing and had cut his interceptions down to almost none. A big game against the Rebels would be further vindication, further proof that he had what it took to be a college quarterback in the Southwest Conference.

7 There could have been other options for him. During the season he had gotten a letter from Brown expressing interest in him because he was not only a decent quarterback but a good student. But for Winchell, who had never been east of the Texas-Louisiana border, the mere idea scared him to death. Rhode Island? Where in God’s name was *Rhode Island*? He looked on a map and there it was, halfway across the earth, so tiny it could move into West Texas overnight and no one would ever know it, taking its anonymous place beside Wink and Kermit and Notrees and Mentone.

8 “Hell, Brown, that might as well have been in India” was the way he put it. He had read about the Ivy League³ in the sports pages and seen a few of those games on ESPN where the caliber of play wasn’t too bad but it sure as heck wasn’t football the way he had grown up to understand football. He also got a nibble of interest from Yale, but when he tried to imagine what these schools were like, all he could think of was people standing around in goofy sweaters with little *Y*’s on the fronts yelling, “Go Yale, beat Brown.”

9 A series of meetings was held in the field house, the five Permian coaches trying to pound in the game plan against Lee one more time. Afterward, as part of a long-standing tradition, all the lights were turned off. Some of the players lay on the floor or slumped against concrete posts. Some listened to music, the tinny sound from their headphones like violent whispering in a serious domestic spat. Winchell, who had gone over the audible calls in his mind yet again, agonized over the wait. It was the worst part of all, the very worst. After several minutes the lights came back on and he and his teammates boarded the yellow school buses waiting outside.

10 With the flashers of a police escort leading the way so there wouldn’t be any wait at the traffic lights, the caravan made its way to Ratliff Stadium like a presidential motorcade.

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11 The team left the dressing room and gathered behind a huge banner that had been painstakingly made by the cheerleaders. It took up almost half the end zone and was fortified by the Pepettes with pieces of rope like in some scene of war from the Middle Ages. It became a curtain. The players congregated behind it in the liquid, fading light,

³ *Ivy League* — an athletic league comprising eight academically challenging colleges

yelling, screaming, pounding each other on the shoulder pads and the helmets, furious to be finally set loose onto the field, to revel in the thrilling roar of the crowd.

- 12 The fans couldn't see the players yet, but they could hear them bellowing behind that banner and they could see their arms and knees and helmets push against it and make it stretch. The buildup was infectious, making one's heart beat faster and faster. Suddenly, like a fantastic present coming unwrapped, the players burst through the sign, ripping it to shreds, little pieces of it floating into the air. They poured out in a steady stream, and the crowd rose to its feet.

- 13 The stillness was ruptured by a thousand different sounds smashing into each other in wonderful chaos—deep-throated yells, violent exhortations, giddy screams, hoarse whoops. The people in the stands lost all sight of who they were and what they were supposed to be like, all dignity and restraint thrown aside because of these high school boys in front of them, *their* boys, *their* heroes, upon whom they rested all their vicarious thrills, all their dreams. No connection in all of sports was more intimate than this one, the one between town and high school.