

HOMEFRONT
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The Peculiar Sadness of Overtime

In Alabama, a dying high school football coach shows his long-shot playoff team the way to one more tomorrow.

LEIGHTON, ALABAMA

WHEN IT WAS OVER, the head coach sagged and the quarterback wept. And they were on the winning team.

Leading up to that emotional moment were 2 1/2 hours in the life of a Southern town, a one-stoplight place where football is what matters, still and always, and questions of life and death are put on hold Friday nights as the opening kickoff hangs spinning in the lights.

Here, in a little high school stadium on the edge of nowhere, the America that was thought to be lost Sept. 11 abides. Colbert County High School's tradition-rich football team did not miss a game all season in its march to this quarterfinal match-up with

Litchfield in the state playoffs, forging ahead on schedule even as New York

burned. "It took people's minds off it," Colbert County Principal John Landers



said. "Around here, you know, football's king." Although many prep teams nationwide played scheduled games the first weekend after the attack, Colbert County took the field that Friday under more trying circumstances than most. Days before the attack on New York, beloved coach Jimmy Moore had

announced he was sick with cancer, giving folks in this economically depressed area yet another hometown worry—one that would overshadow the troubles of a faraway big city with which they feel little connection.

"Folks around here got the attitude, 'Look out for No. 1,'" said Melvin Castle, whose son, Colbert County player Tim Castle, weighed 11 pounds at birth and now wears No. 53 stretched across his ample frame. "That's just the way it has been over the years. The South looks out for the South."

The attack Sept. 11 had little effect on Colbert County's players, who practiced as usual that afternoon.

"It didn't change anything," quarterback J. Michael Jones said. The team "was already fighting a battle, with Coach being sick. It just added a little part to that."

MOORE, THE MOST successful active high school coach in Alabama, plans to quit after the season, but his emotionally charged team is doing all it can to delay his retirement by

advancing through the playoffs. So it was that the weary coach, his khaki pants hanging on him in folds and his belt cinched to the last hole, was back in the field house last week at packed C.T. Manley Stadium for his team's home game against Litchfield in the quarterfinals.

What happened under the bright lights behind Colbert County High School was pure Southern melodrama, a spectacle in an otherwise dark and lifeless town. And in the middle of it all was Moore, who spends Monday through Thursday each week undergoing cancer treatment in Houston. Moore, coach for the last 10 years, sat slumped against the field-house wall as his players pulled on their black-and-gold uniforms. Then, not long before his team took the field, he rose and strode slowly into the locker room.

"You guys have done a heckuva job," he told his players.

"I wish I coulda been there with you all the way. It's just the adversity we face. You're gonna face hurdles and you just gotta deal with 'em. You just gotta pray on 'em and deal with 'em straight." Moore took his cap off and rubbed his head, then waved the team to the center of the locker room.

"Let's have a word of prayer," he said quietly. "Father, watch over this team, keep 'em free of major injuries. Watch over 'em tonight and watch over 'em throughout their lives."

The players erupted, exhorting themselves and each other. Then, with their cleats clicking on the concrete floor, the players marched out of the locker room and took the field.

This part of Alabama is a hotbed of high school football--"You take Highway 20 through this part of the state and we probably have more state championships than anywhere else,"

Principal Landers said--and Moore is a legend around here.

Colbert County, with an enrollment of 570, has won six state championships in football, but with the worry and distraction of Moore's illness, this has been something of an off-year. The team lost 39-0 in the only game he missed and was the overwhelming underdog going into the game against undefeated Litchfield.

Like many other Colbert County players, 18-year-old Daniel Newman was thinking of Moore. "We dedicated the season to him," Newman said. "This is for coach Moore."

Compared to the bad news about their coach, the attack on New York seemed distant and irrelevant, Newman said. "We felt for what happened and all, but we knew we had to come out and play our game. Other people had lost their lives, but we were still able to play football. We felt lucky."

Many boys growing up among the cotton fields in this area dream of nothing more than playing for the University of Alabama Crimson Tide.

"Everybody's born and raised with Colbert County football from the time they're 4, 5, 6 years old," quarterback Jones said, smiling. Few outgrow the pull of Indians football, and many return like conquering heroes to watch the games and say hello to Moore.

"He's like a father to most of these children," assistant coach Fritz Vaughn said.

Fueled by emotion Friday night, Moore's team jumped to a 12-0 lead over Litchfield before halftime. The team's wan coach showed no emotion, but the crowd on Colbert County's side of the overflowing stadium stomped and cheered.

"We shouldn't be here," Becky Stoll said of the team's unlikely place in the playoffs, "but we got a coach diagnosed with cancer and once they announced that I think the boys started playing with a lot of heart.

Stoll is the mother of a freckle-faced Colbert County cheerleader named Miranda, who was standing on the sideline in her black-and-gold uniform.

Even though a teacher at Colbert County who is in the Army reserve shipped out after Sept. 11, the war on terror remains an abstract concept here, Stoll said. "Nobody's scared," she said. "Everybody feels kind of safe right here. They don't think a plane will be landing here in the middle of a football field."

Charles Aston, a neutral football fan from Huntsville, attended the game after visiting relatives in the Leighton area for Thanksgiving.

"I think Sept. 11 had an effect on everybody," Aston said.

"One of my best friends' sisters lives in Manhattan, so it touches people in different ways. And after Sept. 11, you couldn't find a flag down here; there was a shortage at the stores because everybody wanted one.

"But football in Alabama is a release. These people, for two hours all they care about is the team they're pulling for."

Friday night Colbert County fans grew quiet as their team squandered the early lead. On a

touchdown with less than a minute to go in regulation, powerful Litchfield pulled even at 12-12 but missed the extra point attempt, sending the game into overtime.

DURING THE BREAK, Moore huddled with his quarterback. Then the skinny Jones

directed Colbert County into the end zone for the winning touchdown and thus into another game this Friday. "It's all about believing," Moore told his jubilant team in the locker room. Then he took his grandson by the hand, walked out of the locker room and slumped once again on a bench in the field house. "I'm sick. I'm worn out," Moore said. "I'm on a tough ride."

Standing outside in his undershirt, Jones hugged well-wishers and accepted congratulations, his smiling face shining with tears under the bright lights of the stadium.