

## The Pit

My friend Tom and I arrived ten minutes late to Desoto High School. He quickly found a parking spot and we popped out of the car. We were greeted at the gate by the touchdown siren, which meant Desoto had just scored. Soon, we found some of our other friends and sat down in the stands. After talking with them for awhile I looked out over The Pit, which is the name of the football field there. The Pit got its name because the field is surrounded on all sides by hills with bleachers on those hills; the school is on top of the hill looming over the crowd and field. I grew up watching football there, and then played my four high school years. In many ways this field made me who I am today.

I looked at the dirt path going in a circle around the whole complex, a path made by the football team during the first two weeks of two-a-day practices. Running on that path was the first thing the team did at practice, and it was horrible. At 7:40 a.m. we would run that path, wearing pads that were still soaking wet from the day before. We would run, almost limping because we are all so sore from last night's practice. The grass was always soaking wet with dew and it only took about five steps for our cleats and socks to be drenched, as well as covered in mud from the trail.

At the east end of the field where the tree line started was the creek. I don't think anyone knows the name of it, if there is one. It was the place at practice where everyone vomited or urinated, and it's also where people got pushed in if they weren't looking. The memory came back of the time we were practicing in the heat index of 102 degrees and the seniors decided the whole team had to go dive in the creek. The dirty water and the mud from the shores of the creek clung to our pads and clothes. After that the locker room smelled like something crawled up and died in there for two weeks. Not as if it ever smelled good, but it was twice as bad as body odor and I don't think the coach was too pleased about the whole ordeal.

I was pulled out of my memory when I looked back up to see Desoto scored another touchdown making it 14-0. It was no surprise; they were expected to kill Kickapoo and they would. The crowd exploded with cheers from the stands, and the siren once again screamed its approval. As the cheering faded I heard a voice yelling "neighbor!" It was my old neighbor, Chase Penkalski.

Chase is a great friend of mine who happens to be autistic. He is a great spirited kid who loves life in everyway. Because of his condition, he never really got to play much, although he was a member of the team. For some reason, he hated Waseka, a division rival of Desoto. It was decided by our coach and by the seniors that in his senior year he had to score a touchdown against what he called "the pansy-faced hornets from Waseka." On the cold night we put him in the back field, everyone smiled as he got into a three-point stance, which running backs generally don't do but he didn't know any better. The ball was snapped and handed to him, but he was immediately stopped. Then our quarterback slammed into him, sending the whole pile into the end zone. In that moment the Desoto crowd cheered louder than I can ever remember. I am not an emotional guy but when he got back to the sidelines, football in hand, waiving a towel in the air, the crowd giving a standing ovation, the look of triumph and joy in his eyes brought a tear to mine. He gave me a big hug, and it was pretty obvious his dream had come true.

I walked up the steps at half-time to the concessions, stopping to talk to the various townspeople, parents, and teachers I saw. I bought a raffle ticket and a hot dog and made my way back to my seat. On my way back down, I watched the team take the field after halftime. I knew exactly what they were feeling as the locker room door opened.

There is a truly electric feeling coming out from the locker room. Walking down the road to the field, a player's adrenaline starts flowing; the excitement from the crowd intensifies. Desoto comes down in two lines, footsteps in unison that work well with the sound of a heart beat. As they arrive at field level, every

step gets their hearts beating faster and the crowd gets louder. The lights glimmer off the wet grass, and the field almost becomes brighter than daylight. The feeling cannot be compared with any I have ever felt.

I took my seat again watching the second half kickoff. The returner let it go, and the ball took some weird rolls and then finally stopped on the two-yard line. When I looked at that goal line, another memory shot back to me.

It was homecoming night in Desoto, and the score was 0-0. We had the ball on the one-yard line against Belmont in week six of the season. It was a cool night, stars only being blocked partially from view from the bright lights of the field. The play that the whole team expected was called, I Right 34 Power; it was a run between me and a good friend of mine, Keagan Abbott. The ball was snapped, and I drove my feet in the ground to push my man away. In that instant, the center cut his man and created a pile. As people barreled down on me, I could feel the pressure mounting on my leg. My cleat was stuck in the hard ground, and I could not move it. My knee couldn't bend. More and more weight was added to the pile, and there was nothing I could do. The pressure on my leg kept mounting, and I knew it couldn't last long. I heard the first snap and then multiple after that. The pain shot quickly up my leg, and I didn't have the guts to look down. We scored and everyone was celebrating, except for Keagan. He looked down at me with shock in his eyes. He had heard the snap just as well as I did and later told me he immediately knew I was gone for the season.

As the trainers were looking at my leg, I looked up to see Keagan crying. That was the moment where I couldn't hold it anymore and tears starting flowing down my cheeks as well. My leg hurt, but my heart hurt worse as they carted me off. I had broken the tibia bone in my leg in many places, and the season was officially over for me that night. It is hard for me to think about that; I would have loved to have played that whole season. Instead I never returned, and we lost to Seneca in the third round of the playoffs. We had finished two games short of the state title game.

The final second of the clock went out, and I was quickly pulled out of my thoughts. Desoto had won 41-6. The crowd was roaring, the players had smiles all around, and everyone was happy as expected.

As the game ended, I tried to figure out what it was about that field that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It wasn't the 100 yards of grass; it wasn't the fresh paint on the sidelines or the big D on the 50 yard-line. It wasn't the pirate flag and the American flag flying in unison so perfectly together. It wasn't the hill surrounding the field or the hundreds of fans on the hills. There is something more to The Pit. It's about giving up a month of your summer every year. It's about bleeding and sweating on that field in August when the heat and humidity are so high an egg could cook on a helmet. It's about running until Coach says stop. It's about laying on the field long after practice is over because there is just not enough energy left in the tank to walk up the hill to the locker room. It's about winning a playoff game in overtime on that field and watching the crowd flood The Pit from every direction. It's about the pride you have every time you put that "D" helmet on your head.

As I walked up the steps after the game, I took a moment to look back one more time at that field. The Pit was where I had come when I was little to watch the game. It was where I laughed, cried, and smiled. It is where many dreams were born, and it's where I had dreams ripped away from me. My freshman year, I had walked on to that field a boy, and senior year, I had walked off a man. For that, a piece of my heart will always belong to those yards of grass and dirt. A piece of my heart will forever remain in The Pit.

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