

QUEST FOR GREATNESS

By Greg Shepard

QUICK REVIEW

Chapters 1 -4

Quest for Greatness is based on true stories. Coach Travis Drake prepares for his interview for a new head football coaching position at Hamilton High School. He contemplates interview strategies and reflects on his past coaching experiences. Coach Drake also ponders the effect a possible new move could have on his wife and children.

The other major character is Rick Steadman who is a junior at Hamilton. It is November and he wishes he had gone out for football. A lot of negative things are happening in Rick's life. He comes from a one parent family with a dad who also has problems. Rick is faltering in school and is beginning to submit to peer pressures with drinking problems. He lacks direction and is beginning to not care anymore.

Chapter 5 The Interview

Three other men were in the lobby of the administration building. Travis was informed that the selection committee was prepared to stay all day to interview the four finalists – one at 9, one at 10:30, one at 1:30, and one at 3:00.

Dr. Kenneth Kowalski, the Hamilton School District's Superintendent, addressed them, "Who wants to go first?" "I will," offered one of the candidates. Travis thought it was kind of strange that the interviews were not prearranged. Someone would have to wait around all day. Travis quickly sized up Dr. Kowalski. Dr. Kowalski was a burly man in his fifties. He had a graying crewcut and looked about thirty pounds overweight. But make no mistake, he was an authoritative figure. Travis' thoughts moved from Dr. Kowalski back to the interview. Travis had always believed that going last in an interview was best. The last man had the best chance to leave a strong impression, plus the selection committee already knew what it didn't like about the other candidates. They would try to see if the last man had it. His mind picked up a little song that Matt & Shauna, his two youngest kids would sing. "First the worst, second the same, last is best of all the game."

"I don't mind going last," Travis interjected. The other two candidates flipped for the middle spots.

Each candidate was given a packet from the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. Travis looked quickly through the material and decided to look around town and drive by the high school before his interview at 3:00.

Hamilton was a nice enough town. Its streets were clean and the new buildings satisfied Travis' question about Hamilton's progressive attitude.

"What's this!" Travis exclaimed. "A McDonald's and a 7-11!" he grinned. That was his kids' one prerequisite.

Hamilton had to have a McDonalds and a 7-11 before they would move.

As Travis meandered through the neighborhoods, he liked what he saw. Not a lot of fancy homes, but nice, well-kept properties. A few for sale, too. "Maybe, just maybe," Travis pondered.

Then he came to Hamilton High School. It appeared about twenty years old and in good condition, at least from the outside. But something just wasn't quite right. Kids were in the parking lot, and several of them were smoking. Why weren't they in class? "That's not so unusual," he rationalized. Most schools have that problem. Then he noticed another problem. The school was messy. Litter was all over the place. "How in the heck can students have pride in their school when garbage is strewn from one end to the other?" thought Travis reflectively. His eyes continued to move from building to building.

"Look at that!" Travis exclaimed outloud. "What a stadium! Now that's all right." It must hold 5,000 people. Nice lights. Nice scoreboard – I'd like to light that up. The track also looks good." Travis bubbled with enthusiasm as he hopped out of his car and ambled down to the playing field. "Someone has really taken good care of this grass," he thought almost reverently. "Good facilities are almost as important as a good coach," he said to himself.

As he stood on the fifty yard line, Travis turned slowly around. He paused. A strange feeling came over him. "This is the place – this is where I am supposed to be next," he said to himself softly.

Travis' watch showed 2:45 when he returned to the administration building. The secretary said he would have to wait only five minutes because they were running a little ahead of time. "Amazing!" Travis blurted. His heart was pounding louder and faster, especially with the thought of going in a little early.

"Good afternoon, Coach Drake." Dr. Kowalski shook Travis' hand and walked with him into the interview room and introduced him to Mary Putnam, School Board Member; Bernie Alderwood, District Athletic Director; Sam Carter, Booster Club President; and Jim Donaldson, Principal." Travis nodded to each one in turn.

"Coach Drake, we'd like to ask you a few standard questions. Please feel at ease. We want you to know that we want a good football program. That is why we are going through this process," stated Dr. Kowalski, not even sounding like what he said was rehearsed. Travis looked around the table at each person as Dr. Kowalski spoke.

The table was about ten feet long with Dr. Kowalski at one end, Travis at the other, and the committee split on both sides. Everyone was now looking at Travis as the questions began.

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-six."

"Are you married?"

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"Yes. My wife's name is Diana.."

"Any children?"

"Yes, sir. Three. Andrea, Matt, and Shauna."

"Why were they asking these questions," Travis pondered. "All this information is on my application. Maybe they are just trying to make me feel at ease," he decided.

"How did you do this year at Riverside?"

"Now, they must know the answer to that one," Travis challenged in his mind. "Ten wins and three losses. We lost in the state semifinals. All in all, it was a very good season. We had a lot of good kids," Travis responded thoughtfully.

"Why do you want to leave when you have the program going so well?"

"Aha! The first important question!" thought Travis.

Travis stated frankly, "I am ready for a new challenge. Riverside was down when I started, and now it's up. We turned it around. In my three years, we made giant strides in three major areas: (1) we increased the number of participants, (2) we helped the athletes increase their physical strength and size, and improve their speed and agility, and (3) which I feel is the most important of all, their general character improved and their grades went up. The coaches and young men at Riverside have accomplished a lot. Some coaches like to 'maintain' a program; others like to turn them around.

At this time of my life, I get a tremendous thrill at being able to make positive changes. To see a football program turn around really excites me! When a program turns around, young men turn their lives around," added Travis.

"I know Hamilton has not had a winning season in ten years. I know they have not been to the playoffs in twenty-five years," Travis continued.

Sam Carter squirmed a little in his seat. He guessed accurately that losing really stuck in Sam's craw.

Travis beamed as he kept his "roll" going. "As I see it, all the ingredients for success are here. Hamilton is a beautiful town with progressive businesses and has nice houses with fine yards. Hamilton is a fine school, and what a stadium! It is great, and somebody has really taken care of that turf!"

Bernie Alderwood was smiling, and Travis guessed he took responsibility for the stadium; but Sam Carter kind of snorted. As far as he was concerned, all Bernie could do was take care of turf. He'd trade that good turf any day for a winning football program. They were about to find out that Travis wanted both.

"What we need to do is instill pride, enthusiasm, and a positive self-concept in the athletes. We can reach these goals with weight training and conditioning. That is how we did it at Riverside. We can start right now. Everytime a kid gains a pound, gets a little faster, and gets a little stronger, he feels better about himself, his school, and the community. Why it's like magic. Each time a young man feels that magic, we will be a little closer to winning games, a little closer to winning a championship, and a little closer to helping these young men reach their potential. I did my graduate work in this area, and I guarantee that we can

have, in a very short time, the best program in the state," Travis said as he picked up the pace considerably. Every comment was prefaced by "we" not "you." He wanted them to be thinking of him as a part of Hamilton High even before they made a formal decision.

Dr. Kowalski was getting a little edgy. He had a list of questions, and he was going to ask them. Travis could tell that Dr. Kowalski wanted the interview back, so he paused long enough to allow him to ask his next question.

"What kind of offense do you like, Coach Drake?" Dr. Kowalski quickly interjected.

"One that scores a lot!" Travis responded with a laugh.

Sam Carter chuckled the loudest. Mary Putnam stared straight ahead. Travis had not figured her out yet. "How about defense, Coach?" continued Dr. Kowalski.

"One that doesn't let the other team in the end zone!" said Travis with the same laugh. "Maybe I shouldn't have answered that way," responded Travis - this time seriously. "But I believe you win with people. If we have motivated people who are honest and loyal, who have good character, and who believe in our program, we can win with almost any offense and defense. However, I really do have some preferences.

The offensive system that I like best is the multiple I formation. I'm confident we can find one good running back; and with the great weight program that we will have, we can develop the size and strength to spring that running back free. As for defense, I like a 4-4 concept with variations and a primarily man-to-man coverage in the secondary," concluded Travis.

Dr. Kowalski nodded approvingly and said, "Coach Drake, we have one final question. What do you need to win?"

Coach Drake stood as tall as his stocky frame would allow and stated with conviction: "I need three things. (1) a weight room with weight equipment. If the school can't afford everything I need, then give me permission to raise the money myself. (2) weight training classes to accommodate all students, not just football players. (3) I need to have a complete say regarding my assistant coaches. Also, if a teaching opening comes up, you will consult me as to the possibility of hiring a teacher who can also coach football. If you can give me these three things, I can give you a winning program.

I want you to know how much I have appreciated this interview. If you want for Hamilton what was done for Riverside, I will be available to start right after Thanksgiving.

If you go with me, you will get total dedication from me in helping your young people reach their greatest potential as athletes, as students, and as human beings."

Travis kind of expected a standing ovation, but they all just sat there with glazed eyes. He guessed everyone was tired. Almost automatically, everyone stood up and smiled. They thanked him for coming and said that they really appreciated his philosophy.

"We will make our final decision in a day or two. We will be in touch," said Dr. Kowalski as he shook Travis' hand.

Travis nodded and headed for his truck and "Willie" and the long drive home.

CHAPTER 6

The Decision

Dr. Kowalski was the first to speak. "Well people, we all have had a long day. Let's take a short break, then we'll take a look at our notes and vote to decide who will be our next coach."

It was indeed a long day. Everyone stretched, yawned, and walked into the foyer.

"I like him," offered Bernie Alderwood.

"Like who?" questioned Sam Carter.

"Why, Travis Drake,"

"Yeh, so do I," said Sam. "How about you, Jim?"

"I don't know. He wants to change my curriculum with weight-training classes. I just got everything on our new computer system," said Principal Donaldson shaking his head.

"What the blazes are you talking about? I can't believe you said that" replied Carter, almost sharply. "Here we spend all day trying to come up with the best football coach for Hamilton, and you are worried about your damn computers!"

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! We are all tired," said Mary Putnam, trying to make peace.

Dr. Kowalski suggested they go back in and make their decision and go home.

"I'd like you to vote for your choice by ranking each candidate in order of preference on these blank sheets of paper. Please sign them. As you know, if you remain divided, I reserve the right to break a tie vote," said Dr. Kowalski.

After the ballots had been turned in, Dr. Kowalski studied each one intently and then looked at individual selection committee members. It was kind of unnerving them.

"Jim, I see that you marked Travis Drake second on your ballot and then put a question mark after his name," observed Dr. Kowalski.

"Sheesh!" blurted Sam Carter.

"What are your concerns?" continued Dr. Kowalski, seeming not to notice Sam Carter's outburst.

"Well, Ken, I am not sure how to handle any curriculum changes on our new computer system. Drake is probably the best man for the job. I just wanted to voice my concern in being able to live up to any commitments on our part," stated Donaldson.

Dr. Kowalski had hired Jim Donaldson on the strength of his academic and organizational qualities. His new system was working out well, and he was generally pleased with Jim's work even though he did not relate well with some of the older teachers. However, he was always very professional and always dressed to the tee. Most of the parents appreciated this emphasis on and work in the academic area. His experience in athletics was limited; but since that was one of his own strengths, Dr. Kowalski had

thought the two of them could balance each other to insure the best interests of the Hamilton educational system. But when it came to choosing the football coach, Dr. Kowalski himself was in charge!

"Jim, I know you work hard, and I have been very, very pleased with the work that you have done. I have faith in your abilities to make any small changes necessary in accommodating Coach Drake. I like him and I want him," stated Dr. Kowalski.

"Now, hold on just one minute!" asserted Mary Putnam. "I am not convinced. I represent the school board and, thus, the community. Our school is not here in Hamilton just to have a good football team. The reason I did not vote for Mr. Drake is because he is too gung ho! I don't want a football factory at the expense of our children's education."

Dr. Kowalski could have kicked himself, and he was slightly red faced. He should have addressed Mary first. "You are right, Mrs. Putnam; you are absolutely right. That is why I like Coach Drake. Our programs have improved as well as our offerings, yet our attendance has gotten worse. Grades at Hamilton High School are down, and our drop-out rate is up. We also have more kids drinking and into drugs. Our best kids who should be leaders are not being good role models. If Coach Drake can get some enthusiasm going and put some pride back into the school, I feel we can have some positive changes in all areas, including the educational areas. He didn't have to wear that red suit, but he did to demonstrate his pride and enthusiasm. I'm betting it will rub off on the kids. And, doggone it, I think football will be fun again for our students!"

The room was silent. No one had really said those things before. Dr. Kowalski hadn't even put it all together in his mind until he said it.

"Mary," said Dr. Kowalski, "If you will give your vote of confidence for Travis Drake, I assure you that I will watch him carefully and make sure he understands our emphasis on education at Hamilton. And if he understresses our values, his job will be on the line!"

"OK Kenneth, I will go along with you on this one. But I would like to remind you that everyone here, except Mr. Carter, is an employee of and, thus, accountable to the Board of Education," asserted Mrs. Putnam firmly.

Dr. Kowalski's gut twinged, but he smiled at Mrs. Putnam and thanked her for her input.

"All those that can support Travis Drake as our new football coach say Aye," stated Dr. Kowalski.

"Aye."

The voting was unanimous.

Sam Carter bellowed, "Hot Damn, we're in business!"

Dr. Kowalski waited until about 9:30 that night before placing his call.

"Mr. Drake, Mr. Travis Drake please; long distance is calling," said the operator.

"Hello. This is Travis Drake."

"Coach Drake. This is Dr. Kowalski. You are our unanimous choice. We want you to be our new football coach," said a pleased superintendent.

MORE IN NEXT ISSUE!