

QUEST FOR GREATNESS

A Continuing Story by Greg Shepard

QUICK REVIEW

Chapters 1-29

Quest For Greatness is based on true stories. Coach Travis Drake is the new football Coach at Hamilton High School. With energy, enthusiasm, charisma and hard work, positive changes have been taking place.

The other major character Rick Steadman, who is a senior at Hamilton, has just been devastated by tragedy. His father and two sisters have just died in a fire that destroyed their home. Only his little brother Billy survived.

Coach Drake with a lot of caring has helped Rick overcome his problems and this tragedy. Billy and Rick are now part of Coach Drake's family. Coach Drake and his staff have worked hard in the off-season and summer helping each player realize his potential physically, mentally and spiritually.

The results have been dramatic. It's now time to get it on.

Chapter 29

The First Game

It was Friday after school, and the players began coming into the cafeteria. Coach Drake wanted the team together until the game. He felt it was better than letting the players loose on their own. A spaghetti dinner with garlic bread and ice water was waiting for the team, managers and coaches. Coach Drake felt a high carbohydrate dinner with water would give them greater energy and cut down dehydration.

Coach Miller got some short films, mostly of the "Three Stooges." The coaches felt the team was too tense, and they hoped this would loosen them up a little. It seemed to work and it helped pass the time away. Finally, it was 4:45—time to go to the gym. Coach Drake instructed the players to dress down in game pants, socks and jerseys and then report to the basketball court to stretch out and relax.

"Here we are, men," said Travis as he addressed the team. "We have a few minutes before we begin taping. Men, we've been through a lot together. You've worked harder than any team I've coached. You will do very well tonight. I can feel it. What I want you to do now, coaches included, is to be absolutely quiet for fifteen minutes. I want you to think about how far we as a team and you as an individual have come since last December. Remember what you were like then, and compare that to what you are now. Think about those people who are important to you, and then go over all your game assignments."

From that moment, the gym was quiet—very quiet. Buddy Harris was thinking how different the pre-game preparation was this year. Buddy had always loved football; the game had always been important. However, he hadn't always shown it. He kept it inside. Maybe a lot of guys did the same, but this year was different. Buddy thought about how much everyone had improved, including himself. Yes, the hard work had been worth it. Although Buddy had started last year, he knew his body had vastly improved. He was a sloppy 220 pounds last season but now he was a solid 245 pounds.

The competition between him and Lem had pushed Buddy to a 525 Squat, a 365 Bench, a 285 Clean, and a 600 pound Dead Lift. Buddy smiled to himself about how his speed had improved from a 5.4 to a respectable 5.0 forty. Even Buddy's parents were excited about football; nevertheless, his mother was still afraid her Buddy would get hurt. Buddy pondered the changes brought by Coach Drake and the help he had received from the coaches.

Finally he thought, "I know my assignments backwards and forwards. Boy, am I ready. I just want to be on that field right now."

Coach Miller was looking around and feeling a swelling sense of pride at being associated with this team. Football had been a lot more work this year, but it had been fun and meaningful.

"Hey," he laughed to himself, "my line is going to surprise everybody." His line was vastly superior to last year's. The interior starting five averaged 211 pounds. They were also stronger, quicker and more aggressive. Their progress had been unbelievable. He remembered thinking that the new coach would be in for trouble. Now, after a few short months, he thought the Hamilton Lions had the ability to beat anybody.

Wes Jackson was pounding his fist over and over. Secretly, he admitted to being proud of getting his grades up. Since his parents split up, his mother hadn't had a lot of time to set guidelines. He liked Coach Drake and Coach Myers a lot. They were the only ones who seemed to really care about him. Wes didn't even mind all the extra laps he'd done. Coach Drake had a rule of no swearing on the field. Coach didn't want a 15-yard penalty during a game, so he wanted to develop good habits in practice. If you swore, it would cost you a lap after practice. Wes remembered that Coach Drake would always run with him and never talk about swearing as they ran. Wes thought, "We'd talk the whole time about me. It drew us closer together." Anyway, he kept dreaming about sacking the quarterback. He hadn't stopped pounding his fist.

Coach Myers was just itching with anticipation. After all, it had been ten years since he'd been involved in this

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great American game. He felt like a little kid again. John looked at all his defensive starters and smiled. He liked their spirit and determination. John felt that he'd be proud to have any of them as a son. If his gut feeling was right, the Hamilton Lions were going to rip Stevens High School. As he gazed around the room, his eyes met Lem's. John squared his jaw and nodded his head. The defense was ready.

TJ Carter nervously squeezed the game ball. He stared at it. His father had talked about passing for 200 yards and had warned him about his TD pass and interception ratio. He had worked hard and made a lot of progress. TJ thought about the many extra hours he had spent throwing all the pass patterns to his receivers. In spite of all his work, he knew Coach Drake would emphasize the running game. He had tried to tell his father that, but all his father would say was, "He'd take care of things." As far as the plays, he could run them in his sleep. TJ's final thought was, "I just hope I don't screw things up."

Coach Jerry Littlewood flipped a football over and over with his right hand. He gave Travis a great deal of credit. He had really pulled things together. Who knows, if Hamilton had a great year, maybe Jerry Littlewood would get a good shot at a head job someplace else. "One thing's for sure," he mused, "I'll be a lot better prepared." Jerry's receivers were ready. He felt confident in the kicking game. Jerry felt he'd learned a lot about the kicking phase of the game. He'd always thought offense in the past. Jerry also thought about his parents. He had made sure they always got good seats. They hadn't missed a Lion's game in fifteen years.

Tyrone wasn't sure how to act or think. Basketball had always been his game. People had been forever telling him about pro basketball. However, he hadn't grown any taller since the eighth grade. Tyrone loved basketball, but Coach Drake had got him interested in football. Tyrone felt he could do both sports. And just maybe, football could become bigger than basketball in his life. He liked the team's spirit, and it was a lot more fun than he originally thought it would be. The game had come fairly easy. Tyrone understood man-to-man and zone defenses. Intercepting was a lot like rebounding, but you could get away with more contact. He chuckled to himself. He sure liked being the "Hitter," rather than the "Hittee." For some strange reason, he wasn't as nervous as he thought he'd be.

Coach McMasters could hardly sit still. In fact, it was impossible. He got up for a drink every two minutes. Brian couldn't think about anything. He used to throw up before every game he played. For the first time as a coach, he was about to do the same thing. Brian left the gym to find a suitable place.

Rick Steadman leaned his head back against the bleachers. He thought about how his life had changed dramatically. Rick looked over at Billy, who had been made an honorary manager. What a great kid he was. "You and me, kid," he whispered. The Drake family had

taken them in and had given more love than he thought possible. Maybe he'd be a football coach someday.

Physically, Rick never felt better. He loved being 198 pounds and running 4.55. Rick felt confident that he could handle the pressure that comes with carrying the ball twenty times, which was the game plan. If practice was any indication, it would take more than one guy to bring him down. "If I ever get it open, I'll turn on the juice and go for it," dreamed Rick. Then his thoughts turned to Becky. She had really been a good influence on his life and a great comfort after the fire. They had even talked about marriage. Finally and wistfully, his thoughts penetrated deep inside. Would his father, Bobby and Sharon be aware of his game tonight? Rick resolved to play like they were watching. He hung his head so the tears wouldn't show, and he said a silent prayer: "God, I miss them. Take care of them, please."

Coach Drake looked at each player and coach individually. He was awfully proud of each of them. Soon they'd be putting on their full uniforms. He'd be taking off his red suit and putting on his coaching outfit. Then, they'd collect their reward for all the hard work.

One thing Travis couldn't understand was the headline written by Bob Brentwood. "Will Hamilton's Big Bubble Break Friday?" What an idiot. He just hoped it wouldn't affect the kids. "I mean, give me a break," thought Travis, "Will Hamilton's Big Bubble Break Friday." Some people thought Travis was building the team up for a big letdown. He quickly put it out of his mind.

He marvelled at the progress of so many individuals. Their progress had really drawn them together. He felt closer to this team than any other. Travis' thoughts focused on Rick and Billy. They had been through so much pain. They'd made Travis appreciate his life and family much more, and they had added a richness to the entire family. Billy was acting like he was one of the big boys. He took his manager's job seriously and was always pestering Travis for a uniform. Travis couldn't help but love him, and he would even let him participate in some of the non-contact drills. He quickly looked at his clipboard, which contained all the plays and the game plan. Stevens had won a hard-fought battle last year, 14-7. After watching the game film, Travis felt he could run effectively against Stevens, "We know more about them than they know about us."

Suddenly, it was time to begin taping ankles.

Suddenly, it was time to stretch and to warm-up the specialty people.

Suddenly, it was time for the team prayer and the national anthem. An electric excitement filled the air and created a sense of urgency.

A full crowd was on hand for the first game of the season. Bernie Alderwood had outdone himself. The field was beautiful and in perfect condition. Hamilton won the toss and elected to receive. The sixty-man Lion team was

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screaming in one big huddle on their sideline, "Psych, Psych, Psych, Psych!!!"

Suddenly, it was show-time!

Emile was back to receive the kick, but there was no return as it went into the end zone. The Hamilton Lion offense was to begin their new era on the twenty. The team was poised in the huddle. Everyone in the stadium was still standing in eager anticipation of seeing the new offense.

TJ knew the predetermined play was still in effect. "Pro-Right, twenty-six on one, Pro-Right, twenty-six on one. Ready, break!" came the call from TJ. Rick lined up in his tailback position and prepared to blast off tackle. Porter and Simpson readied themselves for a great double-team block. The fullback, Pruitt, glanced at the defensive end. Pruitt's job was to block him to the outside.

As TJ came to Henderson for the snap, he barked out the signals, "Down, Blue 49, Blue 49, set, Hut one." Everyone bolted from his stance as the ball was snapped. Something happened with the exchange, as the ball spurted to the ground. The noseguard from Stevens alertly pounced on the fumble. Suddenly, Stevens had the ball. "Defense! Defense!" boomed Coach Myers. "Timeout! Timeout! Timeout!" ordered Travis. He wanted the time out to settle everyone down and to give Coach Myers a chance to organize the defense.

"Way to go, coach," screamed someone in the stands. Usually Coach Drake paid little attention to what was said by spectators, but this voice he thought he recognized. Strangely, it sounded like Sam Carter's.

A slight, barely perceptible smile came over Jim Donaldson, who was sitting next to Dr. Kowalski. "Damn," said the superintendent. "Well, poop!" exclaimed Fred Maddox. Bernie Alderwood replied to Fred, "The defense is supposed to be good. Now we'll see for ourselves." The fumble certainly took some of the wind out of the crowd's exuberance. The cheerleaders began chanting, "Dee-fense! Dee-fense! Dee-fense!" Quickly the crowd responded, but it was tense and it lacked the earlier excitement.

Coach Myers was giving his defense instructions and preparing an all-out attack. He looked at Lem and pointed. Lem was almost frothing at the mouth, and that pointed finger really set him off. Lem began his chant, which Lem said was actually a Maori War Chant, not Tongan. The rest of the defense followed his lead. "Ka Mate, Ka Mate, Ka Ora Ka Ora. Ka Mate, Ka Mate, Ka Ora Ka Ora. Tenei te Tangat, Puhura Huru. Ha Ha, Itiki Mai, Whaaka Whiti Teraupa ne Kaupamei, White Tera Hi!"

TJ had run off the field and went directly to Travis. TJ blurted out an apology, "I-I'm sorry, Coach." Travis put his arm on TJ's shoulder pad and with a slight laugh said, "You must be as nervous as I am. Don't worry about it. Just go over and take some snaps from Pete. You'll be just fine. We'll get 'em."

A very relieved QB went over to his center to take

some snaps. The defense charged onto the field. Tim Adams got everyone in the huddle and called the defense, "62 Rip, 62 Rip, Ready— Attack!" The defense yelled "Attack" in unison with Tim and clapped their hands together at the same time.

Stevens' offense came up to the line of scrimmage. Anthony and Lem roared, "Strong left! Strong left!" The defense eyed the ball and were poised for a violent charge at its slightest quiver. The ball began to move. Instantly, eight Hamilton Lions savagely charged forward. It was over quickly. A loss of one yard! The sideline of Hamilton's players and coaches were jumping up and down as though a touchdown had been scored. Next, Stevens tried a sweep to the right. It, too, was stopped for a two-yard loss by a swarm of Hamilton Lions. On third and thirteen, Stevens tried the obvious, a pass. Buddy jammed his man to the outside, creating a huge opening for his linebacker. Anthony blitzed by untouched and like a huge amoeba, for a sack that engulfed the Stevens QB. The team went wild, both on the sideline and on the field. The band began to play. The Hamilton fans stood and cheered. Stevens tried a 47 yard field goal, but the ball was short and wide to the right.

The offense was given a second chance.

The same play was called by a more relaxed quarterback. TJ deftly handed the ball to Rick who slashed off-tackle for eight yards. The Hamilton offense roared down the field completely dominating the line of scrimmage. Rick ripped for most of the yardage, while Pruitt kept them honest with runs of four and six yards. TJ made a nice play-action pass to Jeff, his tight-end, for twelve yards. On second and goal from the three, Rick swept to the right and rushed untouched into the end zone.

It's amazing what a TD can do to people, but this TD was special. This was a different team than Hamilton had ever seen. It wasn't hard to sense. The domination was self-evident. Maybe a winning season could be theirs. The kick was good, and the score was Hamilton 7 - Stevens 0.

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