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Still Life

by Skip Hollandsworth, May 2009

Thirty-five years ago Dallas—and the country—was gripped by the tragic story of John McClamrock, a high school football player paralyzed during a violent tackle. But after the newspapers moved on, another story was quietly unfolding, one of courage, perseverance, and a mother's fierce love.

Compared with the glistening two-story mansions that surrounded it, the house looked like something from another time. It was only 2,180 square feet. Its redbrick exterior was crumbling, and its gutters were clogged with leaves. Faded, paint-chipped blinds sagged behind the front windows. Next to the concrete steps leading to the front door, a scraggly banana plant clung to life.

Built in 1950, it was one of the last of the original single-story homes on Northport Drive, in Dallas's Preston Hollow neighborhood. The newer residents, almost all of them affluent baby boomers, had no idea who lived there. Over the years, they'd see an ambulance pull up to the front of the house, and they'd watch as paramedics carried out someone covered in a blanket. A few days later, they'd see the paramedics return to carry that person back inside. But they'd never learned who it was or what had happened. Some of the local kids were convinced that the house was haunted. They'd ride their bikes by the lot at dusk, daring one another to ring the doorbell or run across the unwatered lawn.

None of the neighbors knew that mailmen once delivered boxes of letters to the front door and that strangers left plates of food or envelopes stuffed with money. They didn't know that high school kids, whenever they drove past the house, blew their horns, over and over. They didn't know that a church youth group had stood on that front yard one afternoon, faced the house, and sung a hymn.

In fact, it wasn't until the spring of last year that they learned that the little house used to be one of Dallas's most famous residences, known throughout the city as the McClamrock house. It was the home of Ann McClamrock and her son John, the boy who could not move.

On the morning of October 17, 1973, John McClamrock bounded out of bed; threw on bell-bottom jeans and a loud, patterned shirt with an oversized collar; jumped into his red El Camino with a vinyl roof; and raced off to Hillcrest High School, only six blocks away. He was seventeen years old, and according to one girl who had dated him, he was "the all-American boy, just heartbreakingly beautiful." He had china-blue eyes and wavy black hair that fell over his forehead, and when he smiled, dimples creased his cheeks. Sometimes, when he sacked groceries at the neighborhood Tom Thumb, Hillcrest girls would show up to buy watermelons so that he'd carry them out to their cars. On weekend nights, they'd head for Forest Lane, the cruising spot for Dallas teenagers, hoping to get a look at him in his El Camino—or better yet, catch a ride. One cute Hillcrest blonde, Sara Ohl, had been lucky enough to go out with John on her first-ever car date, to play miniature golf. After he took her home, she called all her friends and told them she had had trouble breathing the entire time they were together.

That morning, John sat restlessly through his classes. When the lunch period bell rang, he drove to the nearest Burger King to grab a Whopper. He pushed buttons on the radio until he found the Allman Brothers' "Ramblin' Man," turned up the volume, and pressed down on the gas pedal to get back to school. He walked past the auditorium, where the drama club was rehearsing Neil Simon's *Plaza Suite*; made a left turn; and then walked on toward the boys' locker room to put on his football uniform. John—or "Clam," as he was known among his friends—had a game that afternoon.

Earlier that summer, John had quit playing for the Hillcrest Panthers so he could work extra hours at Tom Thumb to pay off his El Camino. When he tried to rejoin the team at the start of his junior year, the coaches had ordered him to spend a few weeks on the JV squad. He was five feet eleven inches tall and weighed 160 pounds. He played tackle on offense, linebacker on defense, and he was the wedge buster on the kickoffs, assigned the task of breaking up the other team's front line of blockers. That afternoon, the junior varsity was playing Spruce High School, and John was determined to show the coaches what he could do. This was the week, he vowed to his buddies, that he would be promoted to varsity.

On Hillcrest's opening kickoff, he burst through the Spruce blockers and zeroed in on the ball carrier. He lowered his head, and as the two collided, John's chin caught the runner's thigh. The sound, one teammate later said, was like "a tree trunk breaking in half."

John's head snapped back, and he fell face-first to the ground. For the next several seconds, another teammate recalled, "there was nothing but a terrible silence." Because there were no cell phones in that era, a coach had one of the players run to the high school's main office to call an ambulance. When it arrived fifteen minutes later, John was still on the ground, his body strangely still. "You've got some pinched nerves," a referee told him, speaking into the ear hole of his helmet. "You'll be up in no time."

But as soon as he was wheeled into Presbyterian Hospital, doctors knew he was in trouble. They gave him a complete neurological exam, scraping a pencil across the bottoms of his feet and taking X-rays, then ordered that his head be shaved and two small holes be bored into the top of his skull. Large tongs, like the ones used to carry blocks of ice, were attached to the holes, and seventy pounds of weight was hung from the tongs in an attempt to realign his spine.

A Hillcrest administrator called John's mother at her office at a local bank. Ann McClamrock was 54 years old, a striking woman, green-eyed with strawberry-blond hair. She was, as her niece liked to say, "perpetually good-natured." She always had extra food in the refrigerator for the neighborhood kids who came running in and out of the house, and on weekends she loved to throw boisterous dinner parties, most of them ending with her exhorting everyone around the table to sing corny old songs like “Skinnamarink.” When she arrived at the hospital, a doctor took her aside and quietly asked if she had any religious preference.

“I’m Catholic,” Ann said, giving him a bewildered look.

“Maybe you should call your priest, in case you need to deliver your son his last rites,” the doctor said. “We’re not sure he’s going to make it through the night.”

The doctor told Ann that John had severely damaged his spinal cord and was paralyzed from his neck down. He was able to swivel his head from side to side, but because his circulatory system had been disrupted, causing his blood pressure to fluctuate wildly, he could not lift his head without blacking out. “It couldn’t be any worse,” the doctor said.

At least outwardly, Ann seemed to take the diagnosis rather calmly. Or maybe, she later told her friends, she had simply been unable to comprehend the full meaning of what the doctor was saying. She stood at her son’s bedside until her husband, Mac, who had been out of town that day—he worked for a company that insured eighteen-wheelers—arrived with the McClamrocks’ other child, Henry, a quiet boy who was a freshman at Hillcrest. It was right then, with the family all together, that Ann felt the tears coming.

She slowly turned to the doctor, her hands trembling. “My Johnny is not going to die,” she said. “You wait and see. He is going to have a good life.” And then, her voice choking, she fell into Mac’s arms.

John made it through the night and then through the next day. His friends flocked to the hospital, many of them dropped off at the front door by their parents. One night, nearly one hundred kids were in the ICU waiting room, all of them signing their names on a makeshift guest register—a legal pad—pinned to a wall. There were so many phone calls coming into the hospital about John that extra operators were brought in to work the switchboard.

The local newspapers jumped on the story, and soon just about everyone in Dallas was following John’s struggle to stay alive. Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry and star defensive back Charlie Waters came to see him. The owner of the local Bonanza steakhouse chain held a Johnny McClamrock Day, donating 10 percent of all the restaurants’ sales to a medical fund. “Buy a Drink for Johnny” booths were set up at shopping malls all over the city, with proceeds from the $1 soft drinks going to the family. And at Hillcrest alone, there was a bake sale, a benefit basketball game, a bowl-a-thon, a fifties dance, and even a paper drive conducted by the Ecology Club.

After one of the national wire services ran a story about John, letters began pouring in from all over the country. A group of North Carolina women who attended Sunday school together mailed John a card with an encouraging Bible verse. A faith healer from Michigan sent a note to let John know that “healing sensations” were coming his way (“You will begin to feel sensation … KNOW you are going to be UP and around very

SOON”). John received hand-drawn get-well cards from Texas schoolchildren and sentimental notes from teenage girls who had never met him. (A girl named Patti wrote to let him know that she had played “Bad, Bad Leroy Brown” on her record player in his honor.) Then, in November, a letter arrived at the hospital from the most unlikely place of all: the White House. President Richard Nixon, who was in the midst of his spectacular downfall from the Watergate scandal—he was only ten days away from delivering his “I am not a crook” speech—had read about John and stopped what he was doing to write him a sympathetic note.

“Mrs. Nixon and I were deeply saddened to learn of the tragic accident which you suffered,” he began, “but we understand that you are a very brave young man and that your courage at this difficult time inspires all who know you. You have a devoted family and many friends cheering for you, and we are proud to join them in sending warm wishes to you always.”

In December doctors suggested that John be moved to the Texas Institute for Rehabilitation and Research, in Houston, which specialized in spinal injuries. Maybe someone down there could figure out a way to get him to move, they said. When he left Presbyterian, there were nearly four thousand names listed on the guest register. Students stood by the hospital’s exit and held up signs that read “Good Luck, Clam!”

While Ann lived in an apartment near the rehabilitation center and Mac and Henry visited on weekends, John stayed in a ward with other paralyzed men, going through two hours of physical therapy every day. The following March, when forty of his high school friends showed up to surprise him on his eighteenth birthday—they gave him the new albums by Elton John and Chicago—he was too weak to blow out the candles on his cake. But he assured them that the therapy was working. Speaking into a telephone receiver held by his mother, he told a *Dallas Morning News* reporter that he would walk again and “probably” would go back to playing football. “I will never give up,” he said in as firm a voice as he could muster.

But late that spring, doctors met with Ann, Mac, and Henry in a conference room. Staring at their notes, they said that not a single muscle below John’s neck had shown any response. He still couldn’t raise his head without losing consciousness, they added, which meant there was almost no chance he would be able to sit in a wheelchair.

One of the staffers took a breath. “We’ve found that ninety-five percent of the families that try to take care of someone in this condition cannot handle it,” she said. “The families break up.” She handed them a sheet of paper. “These are the names of institutions and nursing homes that will take good care of him.”

Ann nodded, stood up, and said, “We will be taking Johnny home, thank you.” A relative arrived with a station wagon, John was loaded into the back, and the McClamrocks returned to Northport Drive, where a newspaper photographer and some friends were waiting. Mac, Henry, and a couple of others carried John, who was wearing his Hillcrest football jersey, into the house. They twisted him into a sort of L shape as they turned down the hall and turned again into the guest bedroom, where they laid him on a hospital bed with a laminate headboard.

To make everything look as normal as possible, Ann redecorated the bedroom, hanging photos on the wall of John in his uniform. On a set of shelves she displayed footballs that had been autographed by members of various NFL teams, and she also placed the football from the Spruce game, which had been signed by his teammates. Because she had heard John tell his friends that he was determined to go hunting again, she had Mac buy a Remington 12-gauge shotgun, which she hung on another wall. Then she told her son, "Here we are. Here is where you are going to get better."

Every morning before sunrise, she got out of bed, did her makeup and hair, put on a nice dress or pantsuit, dabbed perfume on her neck, and walked into John's room. She shaved him, clipped his nails, brushed his teeth, gave him a sponge bath, shampooed his hair, and scratched his nose when it itched. She fed him all his meals, serving him one bite of food after another, and she taped a straw to the side of his glass so that he could drink on his own. She changed his catheter and emptied the drainage bag when it filled up with urine, and she dutifully cleaned his bottom as if he were a newborn whenever he had a bowel movement. To prevent bedsores, she turned him constantly throughout the day, rolling him onto one side and holding him in place with pillows, then rolling him onto his back, then rolling him to his other side—over and over and over.

From Monday through Saturday, she almost never left the house. On Sunday mornings, she went to Mass at Christ the King Catholic Church, lit a candle for John, and put a $10 check in the collection box. Afterward, she drove to Tom Thumb, the same one where John used to work, to buy groceries. Once a month she'd treat herself to a permanent at the hair salon at JCPenney. But that was it: Every other minute was devoted to John.

Perhaps Ann kept up such a schedule because she thought he didn't have long to live. Within weeks after their return from Houston, he developed a kidney infection so severe it caused blood poisoning. An ambulance pulled up to the house. Paramedics ran inside, picked up John from his bed, and drove him to Presbyterian Hospital. Somehow he recovered, and when the paramedics brought him home, Ann kissed him on the forehead and said, "I'm so proud of you." A few weeks later, he developed pneumonia, which forced another trip to the hospital. Once again, he made a comeback, and once again, as he was returned home, Ann went through her ritual, kissing his forehead and saying how proud she was.

For the next few months, his friends constantly dropped in to visit. Driving past the house on their way to and from school, they always honked their horns. When John's friend Jeff Brown bought a classic 1939 Chevy Coupe, he drove it onto the McClamrocks' front yard so John could see it from his window. And because the newspapers in those days printed the home addresses of people they wrote about, strangers did indeed show up with food and gifts. At least five well-wishers gave him copies of *Joni*, the autobiography of a young woman who was paralyzed at the age of seventeen but became a skillful artist, using only her mouth to guide her brush.

One Saturday night in May 1975, Ann left home for a few hours with Mac so that they could accept John's diploma at Hillcrest High School's graduation ceremony. When his name was announced and Ann began to walk across the stage, the cheers were so loud that people put their hands to their ears. The reporters wrote about his graduation; "Gridder Scores" was the *Dallas Times Herald*'s headline. When one journalist came to see him, John remained upbeat, saying he might take business law courses and someday try to pass the bar exam. “I really appreciate all the help everyone has given me and my family,” he said. “Tell everyone thanks.” But when the reporter asked him about his dream of walking again, he simply said, “Oh, I don’t know.”

Later that summer, before heading off to college, John’s friends came over to say their goodbyes. In September the sound of the crowds cheering at the Hillcrest football games on Friday night began drifting across the neighborhood. Although John’s window was always shut—his mother didn’t want pollen coming into the house because it might congest his already weak lungs—the sound slipped in anyway. John would listen to the band play the school fight song, and he knew exactly the place in the song where the cheerleaders would kick their long, beautiful legs. “Right there,” he’d softly say. “Right there.”

“Come on, Johnny, we can get through this,” Ann would say when she saw that look of despair cross his face. She would often read to him her favorite lines from a Catholic book of devotions she owned: “You can find the good in what seems to be the most horrible thing in the world… . God tells us that in all misfortunes we must seek the good… . Acting hopeless is easy. The real challenge is to hope.”

She would also show him a small, well-worn card, titled “Prayer of Thanksgiving,” which she kept on her bedside table. The prayer ended with the lines “Lord Jesus, may I always trust in your generous mercy and love. I want to honor and praise you, now and forever. Amen.” She told John that she read that prayer every night. “We must pray for God’s mercy,” she said. “That’s all we can do.”

But a lot of people who knew the McClamrocks could not help but wonder if God had abandoned them. In 1977, during Henry’s senior year at Hillcrest, doctors found cancerous lymph nodes in his neck. After removing them, the doctors told Ann and Mac that there was no guarantee the cancer was gone. A few months later, after paying his own visit to the doctor, Mac came home and told Ann that his nagging cough had been diagnosed as acute emphysema. Ann couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She had been married once before, right out of high school, and she had given birth to a son named Cliff, who was now grown. But her first husband had died of liver disease before she turned thirty, and now here was Mac—“the genuine love of my life,” she liked to say—telling her he too was going to die.

As Mac’s breathing worsened, oxygen tanks piled up in their bedroom. In January 1978 he walked down the hall to sit with John. Wheezing, he patted his son on the shoulder and said he was going to need to spend a little time in the hospital. He walked out of the house and died four days later.

The funeral was held on a frigid afternoon. Ann dressed John in a suit he hadn’t worn in five years and had him driven in a van to Christ the King Catholic Church. Other than his emergency trips to the hospital, it was the only time he had been out of the house. As he was pulled from the van and placed onto a stretcher outside the church, he exhaled heavily. “I can see my breath,” he said, his eyes widening. “I can see my breath.” He was pushed to the front of the sanctuary, next to the family’s front-row pew, and he turned his head so that he could watch a priest swing a burner of incense over his father's casket. When John started to sob, Henry wiped the tears from his eyes with a tissue.

Incredibly, just two years later, Cliff called to say he had been diagnosed with lung cancer. He died in 1981, at the age of 39. At that funeral, people looked at Ann, convinced she was at the breaking point. Two husbands and one of her sons were dead. Another son was battling cancer. And, of course, there was John. Her niece, Frances Ann Giron, who always called her "Pretty Annie," told her to take a vacation. "Go someplace you've always wanted to go, like New York City," Frances Ann said. "I'll take care of John. A long weekend. That's all."

But Ann shook her head. She drove home from the funeral, walked into John's room, and put on her best smile for her son. "We're going to keep fighting," she said. "That's all I ask—just keep fighting."

They lived on Social Security disability benefits and a little insurance money. To help make ends meet, Ann, who had never gone back to her bank job after John's injury, found part-time work with an answering service, taking after-hour phone calls for a Dallas heating and air-conditioning company that were forwarded to the McClamrock house. To save money, she ordered inexpensive clothes for herself from catalogs, and she continued to wear the same clip-on earrings she had bought when she first met Mac.

She and John developed a daily routine. In the mornings, either she read to him, mostly stories out of *Reader's Digest,* or he read alone, using a page-turning device that he could operate with a nod of his head. They watched game shows and *Guiding Light*. They watched all the news broadcasts and movies on a VCR. Henry, who by then was living in his own apartment and working as a car salesman, would come over to sit with John on Sundays so that Ann could go to church and the grocery store. When she returned, she would fix a huge meal, usually chicken or pot roast with potatoes. Finally, at the end of each night, she would kiss John on the forehead and go off to her own bed, always reading her prayer of thanksgiving before falling asleep.

At least once a year, John came close to dying. He developed a urinary tract infection that nearly caused renal failure. Bladder stones clogged his catheter. His lungs filled with fluid, nearly drowning him. During his stays at the hospital, the doctors would say to Ann, "It's touch and go." But he always recovered, and as he was brought back into the house, Ann would always kiss him on the forehead and say, "I'm so proud of you."

One afternoon, as paramedics carried him back into the home, he looked at his mom and Henry and said, "Here I am, still kicking." He grinned and added, "Well, maybe not kicking."

Ann was delighted. "That's the spirit," she said.

Although John had found it impossible to get through a college correspondence course because he couldn't write anything down, he began watching all the history documentaries on PBS, he studied encyclopedia entries in hopes that someday he would be able to answer all the questions on *Jeopardy,* and he carefully read the newspaper (his mother folding the pages and putting them in front of him) so that he could have a better chance at guessing who would be the Person of the Week on ABC's Friday-evening newscast.

Sometimes, he'd blow into a specially designed tube that allowed him to turn off the radio or television, and he'd stare at the ceiling, letting his mind wander. He kept a mental list of places he wanted to see: Alaska, the Swiss Alps, and the Colosseum, in Rome. He imagined himself taking a trip down the Nile or exploring Yellowstone National Park in the winter. And he spent hours thinking back on his life before his injury: the street baseball games he played with neighborhood kids in the fourth grade, the time he put twenty pieces of bubble gum in his mouth in junior high school, the students who passed by him in the halls, the Saturday nights cruising in his El Camino. He seemed to remember some days at Hillcrest in their entirety, right down to the food he ate in the cafeteria. "It's like everyone else has all these new memories filling up their brains," he told one of his closest friends, Mike Haines, a former lineman on the football team who had become a lawyer. "All I've got are the ones before October 1973."

In March 1986, to nearly everyone's surprise, he made it to his thirtieth birthday. Ann threw one of her old-fashioned dinner parties, inviting relatives and friends. At the end of the meal she made everyone sing "Skinnamarink." Then she sang the ballad "How Many Arms Have Held You?" The dining room got strangely quiet. Everyone stared at Ann, this woman in her sixties who refused to be broken. At the end of the song, they turned to look at the motionless John, who was smiling at his mother, cheerfully telling her she still sang off-key. "You simply could not fathom how they were able to do it, day after day," Ann's niece, Frances Ann, later said. "I'd say to Pretty Annie, 'Don't you ever feel overwhelmed? Aren't you ever bitter at what has happened to you?' And she'd say, 'Frances Ann, we can either act hopeless or we can make the best out of the life we have been given.' And she'd show me that prayer of thanksgiving card and she'd say, 'God will provide. I know he will.'"

Another year passed, and then another. Around the neighborhood, older residents began to sell off their little houses to a new generation of wealthy Dallasites, who would almost immediately tear them down to build mansions with high-ceilinged foyers and impressive "great rooms." Ambitious young real estate agents would knock on the front door of the McClamrock home, and when Ann answered, they'd tell her that they could get her a large amount of money if she'd sell too. But she would quickly turn them away, their business cards still in their hands. "I'm sorry," she'd say politely, "but this is our *home*."

It was perfectly understandable that the new residents knew nothing about the McClamrocks. By then, John was no longer being written up in the newspapers: Reporters, predictably, had found other senseless tragedies to write about. In fact, by the time the nineties rolled around, a lot of people in Dallas who had once followed John's struggles had forgotten all about him. Many of John's classmates—the very ones who had flocked to the intensive-care waiting room so many years ago—had also lost touch with him. They'd certainly meant to visit, but one thing or another had gotten in the way, and now, after so many years, they were no longer sure how to restart the friendship they'd once had.

But in 1995, the organizers of the twentieth reunion festivities for Hillcrest's class of '75 put out the word that John, his mother, and Henry would be more than happy to entertain visitors. (Henry had moved back home after a divorce and undergone two more cancer surgeries on his already scarred neck.) During the reunion weekend, fifty or so classmates went by the house, and they were stunned at what they saw. Perhaps because he had not spent a day in the sun since 1973, John hardly seemed to have aged. His skin was perfectly smooth and his hair was still jet-black and long over the ears, exactly the way all the guys used to wear their hair in high school. And except for the shotgun—John had told Henry years earlier to take it down and give it to someone who could use it—nothing in his room had changed. The photos of John in his football uniform were still on the wall, and his clothes from high school, including his jersey, his bell-bottom jeans, and his loud, patterned shirts with oversized collars, were still in the closet. Even the same shag carpet covered the floor.

A couple women who had once dated him blinked back tears when they saw him. Another classmate, Sara Foxworth, a Dallas housewife and mother, gasped when she walked into his room and he called her name.

"But I thought you didn't know who I was," she exclaimed. "I was too shy to talk to you."

"You sat three seats behind me in English," he said. "And your locker was over by the cafeteria." He gave her a gentle smile. "I remember," he said.

Several of his old teammates, still muscular and narrow-waisted, had no idea what to say to him. They certainly didn't want to make John feel worse about his plight by telling him about all the things they had done since high school. But John asked them about their careers, their wives and children, and where they went on vacations. He also assured them that he was doing just fine—that he even watched football on weekends and didn't flinch when he saw a jarring tackle. "I'm the same person I've always been—only I don't move," he joked. And when each of his visitors told him goodbye, he said cheerfully, "Come on back, anytime you want. Believe me, I'm not going anywhere."

Some of his classmates did come back around. A few of them brought along their children to meet John so they could learn about courage. (As soon as they got back to their homes, the kids would go lie in their beds, trying to see how long they could stay still.) Bill Allbright, a trainer on the junior varsity team who had become a successful financial adviser, found himself driving over to see the McClamrocks after he lost his wife to cancer, knowing they would understand his loss. And when Sara Foxworth was diagnosed with leukemia, she too showed up at the McClamrocks'. After she left, John asked his mother to come into his room with some stationery so that he could dictate a letter for Sara. He had his mom write the lines "You can find the good in what seems to be the most horrible thing in the world. Take good care of yourself. Sincerely, John McClamrock."

Ann was then in her late seventies, and she was still maintaining her daily schedule, changing John's catheter, cleaning his bottom, and turning him every couple hours, refusing any help. A few years earlier, after reading an article about exercise and a healthy heart, she had ordered a cheap stationary bicycle from a catalog, which she put in her bedroom and faithfully pedaled each night. Wearing ancient, cracked tennis shoes, she had also been taking quick walks around the block, pumping her arms back and forth.

But she knew that time was catching up with her. It wasn't long after the twentieth reunion that she began adding a single sentence to the end of her prayer of thanksgiving. She asked God to let her live one day longer than John—only one day, she fervently prayed—so that she could always take care of him. "I'm not going to leave him," she told Henry. "He's hung on for me. I'm going to hang on for him."

John did continue to hang on. He came down with another urinary tract infection. His intestines suddenly twisted, which forced doctors to push a tube down his throat and pump everything out of his stomach to provide him some relief. He got a bedsore so severe that plastic surgery was required to mend it. His lungs again filled up with fluid. But each time, he bounced back. As paramedics carried him inside the house, he would say, "Still kicking," and his mother, following her ritual, would kiss him on the forehead and say, "I'm so proud of you."

One afternoon, a pretty brunette named Jane Grunewald, who had been a classmate of John's, called and asked if she could visit. Jane had married soon after graduating from Hillcrest and spent twenty years trying to be what she described as "the perfect PTA mom," raising two children in the suburbs. But her marriage had fallen apart, and she was struggling. On that first visit, she and John talked for two hours. She began returning once a month, often wearing a lovely black dress, always bringing along Hershey's Kisses for John. Before she arrived, John would have his mother wash his hair, comb his mustache, dab some cologne on his neck, and then pull his bedsheet up to his chin so she wouldn't see his painfully thin body. Sometimes, Ann would fix them cocktails, carrying them into John's room on a tray (with a straw always taped to the side of John's glass). Then she'd leave them alone.

During one visit, Jane told him that he was the kind of man she longed for—someone who genuinely appreciated her. "And you're always there for me," she said.

"That's true, you never have to worry about me running around on you," John replied. He told Jane to look in the top dresser and pull out his old Saint Christopher pendant. "It's yours," he said. "I never did get the chance to give it to someone in high school." She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek, leaving a thick red lipstick print.

He later told Henry that his monthly visits from Jane were his version of a love affair. "Not that we are going to have sex," he said with a sort of resigned smile. "You know, I never had sex. I'll never make love to a woman." He gave his brother a look. "Is there any way you can tell me what it feels like?"

For Ann's eighty-second birthday, on January 12, 2001, Henry brought home a gift, along with a takeout chicken-enchilada dinner from El Fenix and a bag of red licorice, her favorite candy. "To Mom, still kicking," John said as she opened her present, a small bottle of perfume that Henry had bought at Dillard's. Five years later, on her eighty-seventh birthday, Henry again brought home takeout enchiladas and a bag of red licorice, and John again said, “To Mom, still kicking.”

By then, it was obvious she was slowing down. Instead of getting dressed as soon as she got out of bed, she spent her mornings in her nightgown and her favorite green terrycloth bathrobe. She was having trouble hearing, and her eyesight was weakening. She began to wobble when she walked and once fell while cooking breakfast. A doctor told her that she had a type of vertigo and that she needed to stay off her feet. “Absolutely not,” she replied.

But in the fall of 2007, she fell again, breaking a bone in her right shoulder and tearing her left rotator cuff. It was the first time she had been admitted to the hospital since Henry’s birth, in 1959. Still, she left a couple days earlier than the doctors wanted so that she could get back to John. “I have to keep going,” she said when Henry came to take her home, and she suddenly burst into tears. “Henry, I can’t leave him.”

Only then did she allow Henry to take over the task of turning John in his bed. She let him make the instant coffee in the morning for the three of them. Because of her eyesight, she also agreed to let Henry drive her to Christ the King and the grocery store on Sundays. But she still had precise rules for their excursions. She told Henry that as soon as he dropped her off at the church, he had to immediately return to the house to sit with John. He then could pick her up at the end of the service and take her to the grocery store, but he had to drive right back to the house again to sit with John, and he could return to the store only when she called.

In January 2008, Ann, John, and Henry celebrated her eighty-ninth birthday with another takeout meal from El Fenix and another bag of licorice. A few weeks later, in the middle of the night, she thought she heard the sound of bedsprings squeaking in John’s room. She heard footsteps and then a hesitant cry.

“Mom … ”

She sat up, pulled her green terrycloth bathrobe over her gown, and headed down the hall. Because she could barely see in the darkness, she kept one hand on the wall to keep herself from falling. When she reached John’s bedroom doorway, she stepped forward and peered toward his bed, in the corner of the room.

“Johnny?” she asked. “Johnny?”

She was nearly out of breath. She turned on a lamp and there he was, 51 years old, lying on his back in his bed just as he had been for the past 34 years. He turned his head a few inches to the side and looked at her.

“Mom, are you okay?”

She took a breath and said, “I thought … ” And then she paused for a moment.

“I thought you had …” But she paused again, unable to bring herself to say the words.

It was the first time, she later said, that she had ever dreamed that John could walk again. “What does it mean?” she asked Henry. “What do you think it means?”

Not long after the dream, two new bedsores appeared on the backs of John’s knees. In late February, he was taken to Presbyterian. The doctors, realizing the tissue of his skin was wearing out and unable to withstand the constant pressure from the bed, suggested that he be admitted to a nearby rehabilitation facility, where a wound-care specialist could treat him.

Within days, he developed a fever, and because he could not cough with any strength, he was unable to expel any dust or mucus from his lungs. His weight dropped to 98 pounds. “You have to admit, my body held up for a long, long time,” he said when Henry dropped by to check on him.

“Come on now, you can get through this,” Henry said, using one of their mother’s phrases. “All you have to do is keep fighting.”

“Why don’t you bring Mom over?” John said. “Have her look pretty. She’d like for me to see her that way.”

“John, are you giving up?”

There was a long silence. A food cart rattled down the hall and a nurse’s sneakers squeaked on the hallway floors. From other rooms came the beeps of heart monitors and the deep whooshing sounds of ventilators.

“We know about her prayer,” John finally said. “We know she doesn’t want to go first.” He looked at Henry and said, “I need to go so she can go.”

On March 18, Henry drove Ann to JCPenney to get her hair done before he took her to the rehabilitation facility. Because she was so feeble, Henry put her in a wheelchair. He pushed her into John’s room, where she immediately began to check his catheter and inspect the bandages on his bedsores. “Mom, it’s okay,” John said.

She smoothed John’s hair along the temples. She touched his forehead, and she slowly ran her hand down one side of his face, past his cheekbones and the curls of his hair. She said, as if she knew what was about to happen, “Johnny, we’ll be back together soon.”

“I know we will,” John said.

Then he told his mother something he had never said before. “I know how hard it’s been for you.”

“Hard?” Ann asked. “Johnny, it’s been an honor.”

Henry took her home, helped her into her bed and made sure she had her prayer of thanksgiving card. After she fell asleep, he drove back to the rehabilitation facility to check on John one last time. A nurse greeted him at the door. John had died about thirty minutes earlier, she said. He had closed his eyes and quietly drifted away, not making a single sound.

It was standing room only for the funeral. Some of John's childhood friends had flown in from around the country. Jane Grunewald, of course, arrived in one of her black dresses, and Sara Foxworth, less than a year away from death herself, was also there, gingerly taking a seat at the end of a pew. John's schoolmate Jeff Whitman, a prominent Dallas eye surgeon, came straight from a hospital, still wearing his scrubs, and Dave Carter, the former Hillcrest swimming coach, who had named his dog after John, already had tears in his eyes when he walked into the sanctuary.

The mourners looked toward the front rows to get a glimpse of Ann. But just before the service began, a priest walked up to the pulpit to announce that she and Henry would not be there. Earlier that morning, the priest said, Ann had collapsed while getting dressed for the funeral and Henry had rushed her to Presbyterian Hospital.

The organist launched into the opening hymn, and John's casket was rolled down the main aisle. He was dressed in the suit he'd worn to his father's funeral. The priest waved a burner of incense over John's casket and said, "May the Lord bless this man who is finally freed of the binds that have held him. May he run over fields of green."

Ann returned home a couple of days later. Clearly disoriented, she wandered through the house, always holding onto a wall, not sure what to do. At one point, she picked up the phone and asked Henry for the number of a Dallas department store that had been closed for decades. She asked to talk to her father, who had been dead for fifty years. She then stood in the doorway of John's bedroom, staring blankly at his bed. "Johnny?" she said. "Johnny, are you walking?"

Eight weeks after John's death, Ann died in her bed, her prayer of thanksgiving card on the bedside table. Henry was sitting beside her, holding her hand. He had her cremated and her ashes put in an urn, which he decided to bury in the ground directly over John's casket, at a cemetery near Love Field. At her service, the same priest who had presided over John's funeral said, "We send off Ann today to be with the son she loved. We send her to the mansions of the saints." The priest was about to say something else about Ann, but he saw Henry holding his hands to his face. "And may God bless Henry, who gave his life to his family," the priest said. "God bless Henry."

For days, Henry just sat in the little house on Northport Drive, not sure what to do. He finally got rid of John's hospital bed and, except for his mother's terrycloth robe, donated her clothes to charity. He then planted a For Sale sign in the front yard. Many of the neighborhood's residents were no doubt relieved: The old house was finally going to be demolished so that a new mansion could be built.

But one afternoon, when he was in the front yard watering the banana plant, two young mothers on their power walk slowed down and waved at him. They said they had read a sports column in the newspaper eulogizing the McClamrocks. “We’re sorry we never got a chance to meet your mother and brother,” one of the women said, grabbing Henry’s hand. A few days later, a man got out of a luxury car, rang the doorbell, and told Henry he lived down the street. “If there’s anything we can do for you, let us know,” he said.

In March, a year after John’s death, Henry still hadn’t accepted any offers to sell. “I know I need to move on and get my life started again,” he recently told a visitor while the two of them sat in John’s room. “But I keep hearing Mom’s and John’s voices. In the mornings, I keep making three cups of instant coffee. When I go to the grocery store, I drive back home as fast as I can, thinking someone might need me.”

The visitor noticed that Henry had started remodeling, pulling out the old shag carpet and repainting the walls. Henry shrugged. “I don’t know if I can ever leave,” he said. “This has been a good home. It’s been a very good home.”

Sports Illustrated

The Boy Who Died of Football

by **Thomas Lake**

Three days after he collapsed from heatstroke at practice in 2008, 15-year-old Max Gilpin became one of at least 665 boys since 1931 to die as a result of high school football. Here's what made his case different: The Commonwealth of Kentucky tried to prove Max's coach had a hand in killing him

On the day Max Gilpin ran himself to death before nearly 140 witnesses, he did almost nothing but what he was told. He began complying an hour before dawn, when he stumbled out of bed at his father's command, and he continued through the morning and afternoon behind the brick walls of his school as the August sun parched the valleys of Kentuckiana. After school he surrendered to the will of his football coach, a man he loved as he loved his father, and he hoped this surrender would be enough to please them both.

This is a story about obedience, the kind that gives football and religion their magnetic power. Max Gilpin was an obedient boy. He was, to borrow a word from his adoring mother, a pleaser, and if he misbehaved, he had four parents to set him straight. They had family meetings, four against one, mother and stepfather and father and stepmother. Max's mother told him to obey his stepmother, and his father told him to obey his stepfather. So he did. And although he hated the Adderall pills—although they flattened his personality, made him smile less, made him want to hurl them off the deck into the backyard—he took them, usually, because they also made him stare at the teacher instead of the ceiling fan.

Max had a girlfriend named Chelsea Scott, a cheerleader with green eyes and shining auburn hair. They were sophomores at Pleasure Ridge Park High in Louisville, and they'd been a couple barely 48 hours. It should have been much longer, but Max couldn't muster the courage to ask her out. Fortunately Chelsea was a modern woman. Since the end of their freshman year she had kept a picture of Max on her phone, with the caption MY BABY, and over the summer, on MySpace, she had asked for and received his cell number. Still he needed encouragement. Finally Chelsea wrote Max a love note, delivered by her best friend, and he understood. That was Monday. Today was Wednesday. He had never taken Chelsea on a date. Instead they commiserated in the halls between periods, and Max complained about football.

In middle school Max's mother, Michele, struggled with Max to put his pads on. He was on the verge of quitting until Michele (head cheerleader, Western High) called his father, Jeff, and put Max on the line, and when the conversation was over, Max was no longer quitting. He did manage to sit out for a couple of years, but at the start of high school Max told his father he was going to play football. And his father (offensive lineman, Butler High) taught him power cleans and leg presses and rhythmic breathing. He bought Max protein shakes, and his mother bought him the muscle-building substance creatine. Max tried to quit again that year, but his parents talked him out of it, and gradually he came to embrace football. By August 2008, just after his 15th birthday, he stood 6'2" and weighed 216 pounds. He had gained about 26 pounds in six months and had begun wearing sleeveless shirts to show off his muscles.

One thing stood in the way of Max Gilpin and football greatness. Football demands a certain brutality, a hunger to smash the other guy's face, and Max had no such hunger. He liked to fix things—decks, porch swings, BMX bikes—and he talked about opening a mechanic's shop on Miami Beach. He didn't want to smash anything, even though he was an offensive tackle and his job was knocking people down. The coaches told him to get angry, get mean, use that helmet, quit being so nice. Max tried very hard, and his father saw him improving by the day, but he had a long way to go. In practice, as the linemen took turns facing off to improve their skills, Max stepped aside and let others go in front of him. His girlfriend from freshman year said Max was a true Christian, and this sounds about right. If Jesus had played football, He might have played like Max Gilpin.

Max's football coach also believed in Jesus and lived his life in relentless pursuit of heaven. His name was Jason Stinson, and he sat in the balcony on Sunday mornings at Valley View Church in southwest Louisville with a bible called God's Game Plan on a lap whose wide expanse would barely fit between the door and the center console of his Toyota Camry. Coach Stinson was 6'4" and 300 pounds, and he had been such a fearsome offensive lineman at Louisville that he got an NFL tryout with the Giants before being cut in the preseason of 1996. Now he was 35 years old, with a wife and two children, and he saw the 104 boys on the Panthers' football team as sons of a different kind. They came to him for money when they couldn't afford lunch, counsel when their girlfriends turned up pregnant, new shoes when their old ones wore out. And although his coaching job paid only $20 a day on top of his salary as a Web design teacher, he never turned them away, because he knew God was watching. The coach liked to say he wasn't making football players; he was making good daddies, good citizens, good taxpayers. So he was more surprised than anyone when his conduct at football practice on Aug. 20, 2008, became the subject of one of the largest investigations in the history of the Louisville Metro Police Department.

It was a miserable practice. The temperature hit 94º that day, and the boys, after staying up late all summer, came in exhausted from a new routine that had them out of bed long before sunrise. Around 5:30 that afternoon, after team stretching and individual drills, Coach Stinson called the 22 varsity starters to join him near the center of the field. This is how he remembers it:

"Offense, huddle up!" he said. "Defense, put your skivvies on!" (Skivvies in this case were jerseys of an alternate color.) The boys either ignored him or didn't hear.

"OFFENSE, HUDDLE UP! DEFENSE, PUT YOUR SKIVVIES ON!"

Still they did not come. Perhaps they were distracted by the girls' soccer game beginning on the next field.

"OFFENSE, HUDDLE UP! DEFENSE, PUT YOUR SKIVVIES ON!"

Only four or five boys obeyed. Later, several witnesses would use the words mad and angry to describe Stinson's reaction. But Stinson insisted he was not angry. He was just disappointed, and now he needed a new plan.

"ON THE LINE!" he bellowed. "IF WE'RE NOT GONNA PRACTICE, WE'RE GONNA RUN."

The command applied to everyone, not just the starters, and the boys got on the line. They knew what was coming. In helmets and pads they would run across the field and back and across the field and back again, a total of about 220 yards, or one eighth of a mile. Each of these runs counted as a single gasser, and today the boys were starting the gassers earlier and running them longer than usual. Yes, it was good preparation for the hard running they would do in games. But this early running was also widely seen as a punishment. Max Gilpin was not a varsity starter and therefore not one of those who had misbehaved. He was, however, a poor runner. And so he quietly accepted a punishment he had not earned, which fell harder on him than on those who deserved it.

The events of the next 50 minutes are a case study in the limits of eyewitness testimony. No video footage surfaced in the police investigation, and the roughly 140 spectators told stories that ranged from the plausible to the mathematically impossible. They couldn't even agree on whether Stinson was wearing a whistle that day. Nevertheless, a parade of witnesses said they heard the coach say one thing that set the tone for the gassers. It seems strange that Stinson still denies saying it to the runners, because it wasn't just soccer parents who said they heard it. It wasn't just assistant coaches and disgruntled players. In the opening statement at Stinson's trial for the reckless homicide of Max Gilpin, the coach's own defense attorney acknowledged, "Jason said it."

And what Jason Stinson said to his players, according to many people, was this: "WE'RE GONNA RUN TILL SOMEBODY QUITS."

Football coaches have a long and rich tradition of daring their players to quit. It probably didn't start with Bear Bryant, the most revered college coach of all time, but he did it as well as anyone. Bryant believed any boy who quit on him in practice would quit on him in the fourth quarter, and he did horrible things to make sure no quitter ever got the chance. In 1954, his first year with Texas A&M, he led 111 young men to a thorn-infested wilderness camp in Junction, Texas, and proceeded to nearly kill them. Bryant didn't believe in injuries, because he'd once played a whole game on a broken leg, and he didn't believe in water breaks, because he thought his boys would be tougher without them. His radical expectations are described in the following passage from Jim Dent's 1999 book, The Junction Boys. "All of these boys need some time off," [trainer Smokey Harper] said. "Some got bad injuries in there, Coach. Joe Boring can barely walk with that bum knee, and another boy looks like he's got a fractured ankle."

Bryant nodded and said nothing. Then he swung open the screen door and marched into the trainers' room. He jabbed at the air with his index finger and shouted, "You, you, you, you, you, you, and you! Get your butts dressed for practice. Be on the field in ten minutes. I want no more excuses out of you candy asses!"

So the boys limped out for more punishment. Players who collapsed from heat exhaustion had to crawl to the sideline or be dragged off by student assistants. When a boy fell face-first to the ground from heatstroke, Bryant kicked his fallen body. Sure enough, he ran off all the quitters. Seventy-six boys quit during those 10 days, and another 10 were too badly hurt to play in the opener. The Aggies went 1--9 that season, but two years later they went undefeated and finished fifth in the national rankings. The survivors of Bryant's hell camp discovered that nothing in life could stop them. They became doctors, lawyers, engineers, chief executives. By the time of their team reunion 25 years later, many were millionaires.

In the genealogy of football coaches, you can draw a line from Bear Bryant straight down to Jason Stinson. Bryant begat Howard Schnellenberger (he played tight end for the Bear at Kentucky in the 1950s and served as his assistant coach at Alabama from '61 to '65), and Schnellenberger coached Stinson at Louisville in the early 1990s. In '89 Schnellenberger recruited a lineman named Thomas Sedam. According to Sedam, water was never available at practices. Schnellenberger, who declined to comment for SI, made his boys run gassers, just as Bryant had and Stinson would, and when thirsty players took mouthfuls of the ice that was kept to cool down injuries, coaches forced them to spit it out. One day Sedam collapsed from heatstroke after running too much. He spent almost a month in the hospital and later sued Schnellenberger for negligence. They settled out of court.

After Louisville, Schnellenberger went to Oklahoma. He resigned at the end of a mediocre season during which two players quit because of heat illness. One of them, defensive tackle Brian Ailey, nearly died of heatstroke. He filed his own lawsuit, but Schnellenberger said water was not restricted at his practices, and a federal judge threw the case out for lack of evidence. According to a 1996 Tulsa World story, "Schnellenberger dismissed Ailey's incident as unfortunate but insisted his coaching techniques were not out of line. He points out that he had been doing business like that for years." Schnellenberger, who coached Miami to a national championship in 1983, is still doing business, at 76, as coach at Florida Atlantic.

Sedam played for Schnellenberger before Jason Stinson did; Ailey played after. You might expect Stinson to tell stories similar to theirs. He will not. He says the coach was demanding but never abusive and always provided sufficient water at practice. He says he would play for Schnellenberger again. And if this is hard to understand, remember that the Junction Boys—that is, the ones who survived Junction—would almost certainly play for Bear Bryant again. They wore those 10 days like a badge of honor for the rest of their lives. Jason Stinson says his father made him a man. But when Stinson left the care of Howard Schnellenberger, he considered himself even more of a man.

In the '60s at Southern High in Louisville there was another football coach who didn't believe in injuries. When a player broke his thumb and said, "Coach, I broke my thumb," and it was all swollen and purple, the coach told him to spit on it and get back in the game. Around that time a boy named

David Stengel decided to tend his horses instead of attending the coach's unofficial spring practice, and when the coach punished him that fall by giving him old equipment and shoes that didn't fit, David quit.

Nearly 50 years later, after David Stengel became Louisville's chief prosecutor, after he had Jason Stinson indicted for the death of Max Gilpin, he would say Stinson reminded him of his old football coach. And when Stengel got e-mails from around the world telling him what a "sissy" he was, going after a football coach for doing nothing but coaching football, well, Stengel begged to differ. In his younger days he could bench-press 370 pounds, and he kept a picture of the Mohawk OV-1A in which he flew 127 combat missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, including one in which he was shot down. Football is a pale imitation of war. Sissy? David Stengel would love to see you walk through this door and say that.

About a month after the fatal practice, under questioning by the police, Coach Stinson made a casual remark that explains quite a lot about Max Gilpin's collapse. "Now, but Max is the kind of kid," he said, "if you don't see him, you wouldn't notice him." Even though he was 6'2" and 216 pounds, Max was not a commanding presence. He could be almost invisible. And visibility made a crucial difference on that sweltering afternoon.

The boys were allowed to run at their own pace, but they had an incentive to run as hard as they could. It went beyond merely impressing the coaches. If Stinson noticed a boy giving extraordinary effort, he might dismiss him from the running and let him cool off in the shade. One of the team's best runners was Antonio Calloway, a safety who also sprinted for the track team, and Antonio ran angry that day. First he was angry at the other boys for goofing off, and then he was angry at Stinson for not rewarding him with a license to quit. At some point the soccer spectators heard a horrible sound, something deep and strange and very loud, which turned out to be Antonio Calloway gasping for breath. His reward for blind obedience was a precautionary trip to the hospital.

The boys ran on. They took turns. The smaller players ran while the big boys (including Max) rested, and then they switched. Most players agree that Max ran hard, but there is a wide range of stories about how the running affected him. Some say he had no trouble breathing. Others say he vomited, fell to his knees, struggled for breath. There were many reports of players vomiting, and one boy said he heard others crying. None of this was enough to make Stinson call off the drill. "If we stop the drill every time somebody got hurt," he said later in a deposition for the wrongful-death suit filed by Max's parents, "we wouldn't have any drills left to do."

MICHAEL COOPER, PLAINTIFF'S ATTORNEY: Well, let's say that we have players, one or more, that are vomiting—

STINSON: No, sir.

COOPER: —would you stop a drill?

STINSON: No, sir.

COOPER: One or more players that are vomiting, another player had to quit the drill because he had passed out.

STINSON: No, sir.

COOPER: Players vomiting, passing out, they want water, do you quit the drill?

STINSON: No, sir. I mean, you can keep building on this all day long and keep adding up, and eventually, yes, you quit the drill, but it's not to the point of if a child is vomiting do we stop the drill, no, sir.

COOPER: I'm just trying to figure out, is there something you as head coach can tell me if I saw these events occur with my players I would stop the drill because I think they're getting overheated. Can you give me any scenario where that would occur?

STINSON: Not that I can think of.

In any case, Stinson had other things to worry about. Some boys were running and some were not. Understand: This was not an elite squad. If you wanted to play football at Pleasure Ridge Park High, you just showed up and took the physical. You might not get playing time, but at least you'd get a jersey, and some boys just wanted that jersey. They were called the jersey-wearers, and they had no intention of overworking themselves. As one of them later told the police, "We wasn't really runnin' for real, we was walkin' and laughin' and stuff, 'cause we wasn't about to run for no hour in the sun." (Not that it was even an hour; the best estimates put the running at 35 to 40 minutes.)

Those boys demanded attention, and Stinson gave it to them. He called them away from the group and supervised them in a drill called up-downs, which involved running in place and then dropping to the ground and then running in place some more. Even at this they performed badly, which, according to the court transcript, led the coach to say something like, "We're gonna do 'em right or we're gonna do 'em until somebody quits." Today the coach says that this statement might have been misconstrued as applying to all the players, including the ones still running gassers. He claims to have said at the beginning of gassers, "If you don't want to do what we're asking you to do, please feel free to quit. We'll still be friends, we'll still high-five you in the hallway, but you can't play football." All this may be true, but there is a loose consensus that the boys running the gassers believed Stinson was telling them to keep running until someone quit the team.

Which someone did.

Now, a word about quitting. Stinson believed that if you quit in practice, you wouldn't just quit in the fourth quarter. You would quit in life. Bear Bryant actually wanted the boys to quit—that is, he wanted the quitters to quit—but Stinson, despite appearances, actually wanted to keep them. If they stayed on the football team, he kept his leverage. He could make sure they made good grades and behaved in class. He could keep trying to mold them into good daddies, good citizens, good taxpayers. And if they really did quit—if they called his bluff—he lost that leverage. Which is why he tried to bring them back. A player named David Englert had quit three times, and Stinson always talked him into returning. Sure enough, he was in the up-down group, the incorrigible group, and sure enough, he quit again. And sure enough, a few days later he was back on the team. (Not long after that, he quit for the last time.) Later he wrote Stinson a letter that read, in part, "You have always been there for me in everything I do. I haven't been able to sleep for the past couple of days, I walk around with a lump in my throat.... I love you.... Please pray for me as I pray for you."

Jason Stinson didn't believe in quitting on anyone. After all, Jesus never quit on the dying thief.

But there is another way to see David Englert, and in this light he needs neither mercy nor forgiveness. What he deserves is a round of applause. "I congratulated the child for quitting the team," a soccer spectator named Timothy Moreschi testified at Stinson's trial. "I said, 'You're the only man out on that field.'"

Take a moment now to go with Max Gilpin as he runs the last mile of his life.

Early in the running, before the damage is irreversible, he can look to the right through the face mask of his steaming helmet and see his father watching him. And this sight must give him the courage to run harder. Max is a pleaser, remember, and he wants to make his father proud. His father played lineman too, for Butler High, class of '80, and Butler won the Kentucky Class 4A championship his senior year. But his father quit football before that season and missed his chance at immortality.

Max has a shot at starting for the jayvee, and what he lacks in meanness he can try to make up in determination. At a scrimmage just last Friday, his father saw him take on a powerful defensive end from another school and play better than he'd ever played: "Max shut this kid down. He knocked him down two or three times. He turned him. He got under him. This kid never made another tackle or another play that I saw. In fact, Max played so well that they put him on defense. He's never played defense on a high school level. He didn't even know the plays. They just told him to go for the ball."

Later, when presented with Jeff Gilpin's account of that scrimmage, Stinson will refuse to confirm it. ("Didn't see it happen, didn't hear about it and didn't have any film to review.") Which will leave two ways to interpret the story. Either Jeff Gilpin is imagining things or Coach Stinson is oblivious. And both possibilities leave Max with the same mandate. Either he must close the gap between his actual performance and his father's vision of his performance, which means he must work even harder; or he must play so surpassingly well that Coach Stinson finally takes notice—which means he must work even harder.

Like most sons, Max regards his father with a blend of love and fear. Jeff will later say Max was his best friend. He will talk about driving Max to guitar lessons, about missing the way Max laughed so deeply that his eyes nearly shut. And while both Jeff and Michele want Max to go to college, Max would rather be an auto mechanic just like his father. But in other ways Max is nothing like Jeff. There is some indication that Jeff is capable of violence and coercion. In 1999, when Max was five and his parents had separated, Jeff was arrested and charged with aggravated assault after allegedly punching and bruising his live-in girlfriend. (Records of the case's outcome are no longer on file at the courthouse.) Max's stepmother, Lois Gilpin, will later say Jeff used to slap Max on the back of the head and drag him around by the ear. Jeff will deny all this, but Lois will not be the only one to say Max saw Jeff as a bully. She and Katlin Reichle, who dated Max during freshman year, will say Jeff monitored Max's performance at football practice and, if Max didn't play well enough, left him there and made someone else pick him up. Lois will say Jeff sent Max text messages to express shame in Max's performance. Katlin will say Max told her, "I'm trying my best, but I don't know what more I can do."

All around him now on this August afternoon, Max's teammates find ways to get out of running. Fast ones are dismissed for good effort. Freshmen are dismissed because they're freshmen. Some of the fat kids are barely running. The goof-offs are pulled out to do up-downs. Max is a slow runner, of course, so running hard doesn't make him stand out more. It makes him stand out less. It puts him closer to the middle of the pack. It ensures that he will run the maximum distance at maximum effort. And if he shows signs that something is wrong—if he vomits or falls to his knees or stands up only with the help of his teammates, as witnesses will later testify at the trial—Stinson doesn't notice. He's distracted by the jersey-wearing goof-offs who can't even do the up-downs right.

Max's temperature is rising to catastrophic levels, to 105º, 107º, perhaps 109º. The cells in his body are melting. And so, when his father sees him cross the finish line on the last sprint, fall on all fours, stand again, stagger and fall for the last time, there's no telling whether Max hears Stinson say the mystifying line that marks the end of practice. The Panthers have run until someone quit, and the quitter is not Max Gilpin. "DING, DING, DING!" the coach yells as David Englert quits once again. "WE HAVE A WINNER!"

Looking back on the practice two years later, the coach noticed a major coincidence. David Englert quit at nearly the precise moment that Max's group finished what was always going to be the last sprint. Neither event caused the other, Stinson said. He insisted that practice would have ended regardless, because everyone knew that the activity bus was on a fixed schedule and many of the boys had to ride it home.

Then, more coincidences. The coach wasn't looking when Max collapsed. Nor did he notice anything was wrong when Max's father ran onto the field, or when at least three assistant coaches hustled to Max's side, or when the athletic director drove toward Max on a John Deere utility cart. A lot was happening right then, with nearly 100 players leaving the field and a soccer game proceeding a few feet away. The coach was busy. He had a team meeting to conduct, but first he had several goof-offs to yell at once again. They'd gone straight to the water, which was forbidden until after the meeting, and he had to round them up. And then he had to yell at everyone for the terrible practice and tell them they didn't deserve to be Panthers, which half of them probably didn't. All this time Max's cells were melting. Numerous soccer parents turned around to witness the practice, because Stinson was loud and the soccer game was boring. Some saw fit to inform the local newspaper, The Courier-Journal, whose reporting led to the criminal investigation.

There followed a series of natural disasters that coincided with milestones in the investigation. On Sept. 14, the day Stinson gave his statement to the police, rare winds battered Louisville with hurricane force and caused four deaths from falling timber. The following January, just after Stinson was indicted for reckless homicide, an ice storm came upon Kentucky and deprived nearly half a million homes and businesses of electricity; at least 55 people were killed. And on Aug. 4, 2009, the day Stinson was indicted for wanton endangerment in the same case, many residents of Louisville fled to their rooftops to escape a rising flood. Stinson worked with his church to ease the suffering of the victims. Nevertheless he saw these events as acts of a God who cared enough to keep him off the front page.

In general the people of Pleasure Ridge Park took Stinson's side. They knew him to be a good Christian man and trusted him with their boys because their boys loved Coach Stinson. They held a silent auction to help pay for his legal defense, and Howard Schnellenberger donated an autographed football. A barbecue joint called Mark's Feed Store promised to donate a portion of its profits over several nights to Stinson's cause, and so many people showed up that one night the place had to shut down because the food was all gone. Stinson's friend Rodney Daugherty wrote a well-researched book—Factors Unknown: The Commonwealth of Kentucky vs. David Jason Stinson & Football—that redirected blame from Stinson to the prosecutors who brought the case. Pleasure Ridge Park High principal David Johnson (free safety, Louisville) summed up the feeling of many others when he said he knew Stinson did nothing wrong because "I know what kind of person he is."

It wasn't just that Stinson did nothing wrong. Stinson could do nothing wrong. Max's mother said that Stinson's wife told her around the time of Max's funeral that the coach was on "suicide watch." Not possible, according to Stinson, because he didn't blame himself for Max's death, and he would never consider suicide—that would be quitting. A soccer mom swore at the trial that Stinson said something to the boys during the running that no one else seemed to remember: "Come on, who's going to be the sacrificial lamb?" No way, Stinson says. He would never say that, because he knows of only one sacrificial lamb. And that lamb's name is Jesus.

But football is America's game, and more than 1,000 boys and men have been killed since 1931 as a direct result of playing football. No other team sport comes close. The National Center for Catastrophic Injury Research measured catastrophic injuries in all high school fall sports from 1982 to 2009 and found that 97.1% of them occurred in football. And it must be no coincidence that in an '08 Gallup poll, more Americans chose football as their favorite sport to watch than chose baseball, basketball, hockey, soccer, auto racing, golf and tennis combined. We can say we watch for the precision of the quarterbacks, the grace of the receivers, the speed of the running backs, but this is only part of the truth. We watch because football players are warriors, because they are brave, because all that throwing and catching and running is done under threat of lethal violence. There is such a thing as touch football, and such a thing as flag football. Both are safe. No one pays to watch them.

You've got a man looking at prison time for being a football coach," defense attorney Alex Dathorne (cornerback, Miami Palmetto Senior High) said in his closing argument on Sept. 17, 2009. "Jason Stinson on August the 20th of 2008 did absolutely nothing different than every coach in this county, in this Commonwealth, in this country, was doing on that day."

This was part of the reason Dathorne and his law partner, Brian Butler (rabid fan, Notre Dame), two of the best defense attorneys in Louisville, took Stinson's case at a discounted rate. They believed the game of football was on criminal trial and a loss would be disastrous. Coaches would quit by the hundreds for fear of prosecution. The media coverage already had them terrified. During jury selection, one potential juror (a coach, apparently of another sport) said, "Literally every practice, if we're running, I make a point of telling the kids up front so people can hear me, 'You can stop, you can go on or you can do whatever you want on your own.'"

Before the trial Stengel put his chance of winning a conviction at less than 10%, based on how the people of Louisville felt about football. "Football coaches," he said, "are right up there with the Father, Son and Holy Ghost." This is why, during jury selection, his assistants did their best to identify football bias. They asked all fantasy football players to raise their hands. They tried to weed out college football season-ticket holders. They tried—and failed miserably—to stock the jury with women. And women might not have helped them anyway. Max's girlfriend's mother, Misty Scott, had marinated so long in football culture that she could stand in her driveway one afternoon and say about Louisville coach Bobby Petrino's departure: "Louisville football went down the drain so fast that we're still washing the red out of the sink."

More to the point, the commonwealth had a fragile case. Stinson would later look back at the 13 days of the trial and decide his attorneys had racked up 12 wins, no losses and one tie. So why did Stengel prosecute a case he knew he would lose? There are two prevalent theories, and Stengel denies them both. One says he got the indictment before he understood the science of what happened to Max, and by that time it was too late to back out because the national media had descended. The other theory says the prosecution was a kind of public-service announcement intended to make coaches be more careful. Which it did. Some coaches reconsidered their use of negative motivation, and the state passed regulations that required more first-aid training and better education on heat illness.

The prosecutors tried to prove that Stinson withheld water that day, but one player after another said he'd taken several water breaks, including one right before the sprints. Besides, dehydration wasn't a factor in Max's death. Three doctors said so: Bill Smock, who usually testifies for the prosecution in Louisville; George Nichols, who founded the state medical examiner's office in Kentucky; and Dan Danzl, a co-author of the hallowed textbook Rosen's Emergency Medicine. The best the prosecution's kidney expert could do was to conclude from the records that Max was just dehydrated enough to be thirsty.

When the commonwealth attacked Stinson for his failure to help Max, the defense was ready. Stinson's attorneys showed that several other people quickly came to Max's aid and did the same things—

applying ice packs, dousing him with water, removing his socks, calling 911 after a few minutes—that Stinson would have done if he'd been there. Both sides agreed that the presence of a certified athletic trainer might have improved Max's chances, but trainers are expensive, and the school was not required to have one at the practice.

The doctors agreed that Max died of complications from exertional heatstroke. This, of course, raised a crucial question: Why was Max the only player to die? The defense proposed an answer.

Tests from the hospital showed amphetamines in Max's system. They were most likely from the Adderall, the drug Max reluctantly took for better focus in school. And while it's impossible for Adderall alone to have caused Max's collapse—he'd been taking it for a year, and other boys at the practice also took Adderall—it could have slightly raised his body temperature.

There was also the creatine. It's not a banned substance, but the NCAA forbids colleges to distribute it to athletes. Max's mother said she hadn't bought it for him since March or April, but a friend testified that he saw Max taking creatine a week or two before his collapse. While scientists disagree on the possibility of side effects, a 2002 article in the journal Neurosurgery said there is credible evidence that creatine might contribute to heatstroke in some people.

But Max had probably been on both Adderall and creatine at other practices, some of them hotter than 94º. Something had to be different on Aug. 20.

The prosecutors had a theory. The difference was Coach Stinson. He lost his temper and forced the boys to run much harder than usual.

Except they weren't running for that long. Many football teams practice twice a day in the summer. There was just one practice that day, and it was a short one. The boys ran sprints for no more than 40 minutes; actually it was much less, because they were in two alternating groups. Each group ran for about 20 minutes. Some boys gave implausibly high estimates for the number of 220-yard sprints they ran in that time period—as many as 32. It probably seemed like 32, but Coach Stinson always said it was 12, and the math works in his favor. No one was allowed to start running until everyone in the other group had finished, including the players who were barely running; that would mean Max ran about a mile and a half, the majority of it in helmet and pads.

What was extraordinary, then, about Aug. 20? The defense had another answer: By the time he got to practice, Max was already sick.

Here the medical experts fought to a draw. They argued over his white blood cells, his elevated lymphocytes, but it all came down to guesswork. The numbers neither proved nor disproved that he had a viral infection. They could be made to support either belief.

That left eyewitnesses, who were also problematic because of their vested interests in the outcome. Max's parents, who said he wasn't sick that day, were seeking more than $19 million in a wrongful-death suit. Some of Stinson's players, who said Max was dragging along and complaining that he didn't feel well, felt a powerful loyalty to their coach. Two girls who knew Max contradicted each other, even though they were best friends: One, who was friends with Max's mother at the time of the trial, said he had seemed all right at lunch; the other, whose parents openly supported Stinson, said Max was obviously sick after school.

The truth was in there somewhere.

The defense called Lois Gilpin.

You should know a few things about Lois, the stepmother who saw Max before school on the day of his collapse. She and Jeff Gilpin had gone through an unpleasant separation. A judge granted her a restraining order against him after she said Jeff had threatened to drag her out of the house by her hair. She was also attending Stinson's church, Valley View, and she had accepted $700 from its benevolence fund to help pay her mortgage.

But when a prosecutor suggested that Lois had pulled a new story out of thin air to help Stinson, there was evidence to suggest otherwise. Two days after Max was hospitalized, a doctor wrote in the record, "New history, that patient may not have been feeling well on day of collapse." Lois swore that her story had remained the same all along, and the doctor's note seemed to corroborate it.

This is the story Lois Gilpin told under oath about Max's last morning at home: "I asked him if he wanted juice. He was to take his medicine, his Adderall that morning. And he was cranky. And I leaned over and I kissed his head, and he told me he had a headache and he was sick and he was hot. Jeff walked in and told him, 'We're going to be late, you need to get up; you need to get your butt in gear and you need to get to school.'

"He just said he didn't feel good, he had a headache. He didn't talk back to his dad. You know, when I kissed him, I told him he was hot. You know, I imagine he would have liked to have stayed home. I wish he would have stayed home. But he did what his dad said."

Later, when he looked back at his son's last practice, Jeff Gilpin was filled with pride and wonder. "I underestimated this kid, big-time," he said. "His heart. Can you imagine the fortitude it took to keep running out there?"

It is almost unimaginable. Never mind how long Max actually ran. What matters is that he ran far longer than he should have, despite what must have been terrible pain, even though quitting would have saved his life. And in dying he probably saved the lives of several boys who might otherwise suffer the same fate.

Cold blue twilight, Salvation Army parking lot. A very large man stands by a folding table, digging for clean underwear in a cardboard box. When he finds the white briefs, he holds them up, like a merchant or an auctioneer, until a poor man steps out of the crowd to claim them.

"Got a large sweater! Anybody? Anybody?" The large man's voice carries across the parking lot. "Long-sleeve, flannel! Nah, we're outta socks right now. Still lookin'. All right, brother. You have a good one."

All right, brother. This is how the men of Valley View Church talk. They come downtown every Monday night to feed and clothe the needy, and Jason Stinson comes with them because he is a free man. To him this is an act of godly obedience, not atonement, because Stinson is not guilty of anything. The jury said so. It took less than 90 minutes to decide.

When the giving is done, Stinson walks into the Texas Roadhouse off Dixie Highway, less than a mile from Max Gilpin's grave, and orders an eight-ounce sirloin, medium, and a baked potato with butter and sour cream. Every few minutes a high school girl comes over to smile and say hello. While he was under indictment, Stinson was placed in an administrative position away from children. But he is back in the classroom now, coaching basketball this fall. He plans to coach football again. Another man might have moved to another school or even another town, but that would be quitting. Anyway, there was no need. Stinson's stature in Pleasure Ridge Park is probably greater now than it was before. His supporters rose up with him for victory.

"We busted 'em in the teeth," Stinson says, referring to the criminal trial, by way of saying he and his lawyers would have done the same thing in the civil trial if it had gone that far. It was the school's insurance companies that insisted on the $1.75 million settlement in September with Max Gilpin's parents, he says. Purely a business decision. No one admitted anything.

During a bench conference at the criminal trial, Stinson's own attorney, Dathorne, said to the judge, "I think you can almost take judicial notice that Jason Stinson was being a jerk that day. Everybody said that." Now, at the roadhouse, when Stinson is asked to acknowledge the truth of this statement, he refuses. "I don't know what Alex meant by that," he says. "You'd have to ask him."

After interviews with more than 125 witnesses, the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) delivered their own report on the Max Gilpin incident. It was so favorable to Stinson that Stengel called it "the biggest cover-up since Watergate." Nevertheless, school superintendent Sheldon Berman had a few things to say about Stinson's conduct:

"While the evidence did not reveal any violation of ... JCPS rules, I am extremely troubled—actually I am outraged—by the statement made that day by head coach Jason Stinson—that the running would end when someone quit the team. While this kind of negative motivation may be used in some amateur and even professional sports, that kind of culture has absolutely no place in JCPS' athletic programs."

The superintendent established an annual seminar that trains coaches not to motivate their players the way Stinson did that day. Stinson has attended it twice. Now, at the roadhouse, when asked to acknowledge that the seminar is a result of what he did on Aug. 20, 2008, he seems genuinely unaware of the connection. And if this is hard to believe, consider the story he gave in his civil deposition about a brief encounter with Max Gilpin after Max had finished the running that killed him.

At the trial, one of Stinson's own witnesses said Max leaned over and breathed heavily after the running. Another defense witness said Max fell and beat the ground in anger. Other players said Max couldn't even finish the running and had to be propped up. One of them said he returned from the final sprint to find Max on his hands and knees. Soon after that, he said, Max appeared to be foaming at the mouth, and his face was pale blue. But in the civil deposition, Stinson gave this account:

STINSON: Yes, sir. He had finished conditioning and was headed where he was needed to go.

PLAINTIFF'S ATTORNEY: He really wasn't in any distress as far as you could see?

STINSON: As far as I could tell.

For a few minutes on that Wednesday, after school and before football practice, no one told Max Gilpin what to do. And what he did was a total surprise. He was walking to the bus with Chelsea Scott, the green-eyed cheerleader who became his girlfriend through sheer will and persistence, and he was wearing one of his favorite outfits: a pair of yellow plaid shorts and a butter-yellow Aeropostale T-shirt that nicely set off the tan of his arms. He may have done what he did because he knew she wanted it, but perhaps this one time he decided to do what he wanted, just because. Anyway, he bent down and hugged her, close enough to smell the vanilla in her Victoria's Secret perfume, and then he kissed her mouth, for at least two seconds, as if he knew exactly what he was doing. It was their first kiss, and of course their last: a glimmer of the man Max Gilpin was becoming.

Then he walked toward the locker room and returned to obedience. He never stopped obeying, not even at the hospital. He hung on for three days, never fully conscious, as his body fell apart from the inside. His best friend, Zach Deacon, told him, "Hang in there. Keep fighting. I love you." And Max kept fighting. His heart rate seemed to rise when people prayed. A nurse asked him to squeeze her hand, which he did, and said, "Max, if you can hear me, wiggle your toes." And he did.

Toward the end he had blood in his mouth and tears on his cheeks, and he finally got permission to quit. His mother whispered into his ear, "It's O.K., Max. You can let go." A minute later he was gone.