

Lost and Found

Part 8

By Douglas Fox

Chapter 71

After Penny and my family left, I headed down to the Mix to pick up soup, a sandwich and the Sunday newspaper. Lunch went in the refrigerator. I settled down on the couch to catch up on the rest of the world outside Happy Valley.

Most of the top teams avoided an upset yesterday. Texas barely managed to beat Kansas State, 43-40. They needed Mike Johanson's interception to stop KSU's go ahead drive in the last two minutes of the score-fest. Nebraska throttled Missouri's normally high flying offense, 23-17.

Oklahoma was the first of the top ten teams to fall. Texas Tech bested them, 34-27. Ed and the Florida Gators handily beat South Carolina's Gamecocks, 51-30. Ed had another good day, throwing for over three hundred yards. Alabama dismissed Georgia Southern easily, 42-21.

Ohio State went up to Ann Arbor and edged out Michigan 31-30. It looked like they would be filling the Big Ten slot at the Rose Bowl this season. LSU and Georgia Tech both won, helping them keep their perches in the top ten. West Virginia fell to Pittsburgh in the last seconds, 34-31. My high school teammate Drew McCormick picked up 121 yards on 25 carries. Drew scored two of the Mountaineers' TDs.

Notre Dame beat Duke handily. Jeremy had nine tackles, two sacks and an interception. I knew he had to be pleased at his performance. Rutgers struggled but beat Louisville 15-12. Hal Long won the game in the final seconds with a 48 yard field goal. Hal was five for five kicking that day.

Jake Kring and Syracuse beat South Florida, 28-24 to assure the Orangemen their first non-losing record in almost a decade. They were bowl eligible and would end the season with a winning record if they beat Connecticut next Saturday. Jake was having a tough initiation as the starter but he was performing. Zack Hayes had struggled to a barely winning record his first year as he laid the foundation for our high school teams' future success. Hopefully Jake was doing the same in Syracuse.

My brother's Delaware team lost a tight game against Villanova yesterday, 28-27. Andy had six catches for 98 yards and two TDs. It wasn't enough to beat the Wildcats. I'm sure Kenny Weaver crowed to Andy after the game was over. They had been friendly

rivals since Andy started at Delaware. The loss would drop Andy's team's standing in the FCS playoffs, but probably wouldn't knock them out of the playoffs.

I gave Jason Turner a call in the afternoon to discuss my high school team's game against Conrad Weiser. Jason let me know that the game was on Friday night at 7:00 pm at our Harrison Field. When I expressed surprise that we had a home playoff game, Jason explained that the PIAA had instituted the change for early rounds of the playoffs to save on travel money for the schools. I certainly didn't object to our team having home field advantage for the game. Jason invited me to join the team for their pre-game Thanksgiving meal on Friday evening. I accepted.

I gave John Waters a call that afternoon too. I recognized John's voice when he said, "Hello?" but I was careful anyway.

"Is this John Waters?" I asked politely.

"It is," he confirmed.

"This is Kyle Martin calling," I explained. "I said I would give you a call after I found out when the high school football team I coach is playing. Our game is Friday night."

"I don't have to schedule our meeting around my team," John replied. "Strath Haven kicked our asses."

"I saw that in the paper," I replied. "Sorry about how things worked out for your team. My team played Strath Haven last season. They are an excellent team."

"That team is a beast," John declared. "If anything, they are stronger this year than last when they were state champions. I expect they're going to repeat."

"I know my high school team will do its best to stop them," I replied. "...assuming we get that far."

"We could help you with that," John said, chuckling. "It would be my pleasure to help you with that. I could get you the film and notes we have on them to you. Heh... heh... heh... it wouldn't bother anyone at my school if your team figures out how to take those guys down a peg or two."

"That would be great," I agreed.

"That's settled," John said. "When do you want to meet? I was thinking we could get together for lunch Friday or Saturday. What do you think?"

"How about Saturday?" I responded.

“Saturday is good,” John agreed. “How about I meet you half way? Say... at the Friendly’s in Gap.”

“Noon at the Friendly’s in Gap,” I confirmed. “You got it.”

“I’ll see you then, Kyle,” John answered. “Have a good Thanksgiving. I will bring lots of film and notes for you.”

“Thanks, John,” I agreed. “Enjoy your holiday with your family.”

Coach Burton and the other coaches were in excellent moods at dinner Sunday night. Coach Burton reviewed our schedule for the week. We were skipping our usual Sunday evening review of the previous day’s game. We would work out a bit on Monday and then come inside for the post-mortem on our victory over Michigan State. Tuesday we had drills on fundamentals. Everyone cheered when Coach announced we would be off Wednesday afternoon through Sunday afternoon. We had to return home from our Thanksgiving holiday for the team dinner on Sunday night.

He also let us know that he had the video people hook up the projection system in the auditorium with a TV feed from one of the late games. Aaron Morano’s 49ers were playing Zack Hayes’ Packers. It would be switched over to ESPN’s BCS Standing show at 8:00 pm. Most of the team took advantage of the rare Sunday evening off.

About ten minutes remained in the game when we came into the auditorium at the Lasch Building. Zack’s Packers were leading 21-20. That was good for my friend. His promising 2-0 and then 3-2 start dissolved in a rush of four straight losses in the past five weeks.

The 49ers had the ball and were handing off to Jerome Waterston, the big tailback we had so much trouble stopping three years ago when we lost to Notre Dame in my freshman season. He pounded the ball ahead against a sagging Green Bay defense. Six plays into the drive the 49ers crossed Green Bay up with a play action pass. Michael Crabtree came free and streaked to the end zone. Our former teammate, Andrew Perkins, drilled the point after to increase the 49ers’ lead to 27-21.

It was hard to figure who to cheer for in this game. Andrew and Aaron Morano played for the 49ers. Zack played for Green Bay. I settled for watching, without rooting for either team.

Zack led his team down the field. I watched him run the West Coast offense. It was interesting to observe the differences in his play now that he had mastered the scheme. I watched him go through his progression, checking his first and then his second receivers. I knew there was at least one more check he should do, but Zack rarely had time for it.

Zack's offensive line just could not buy him more than a couple seconds before letting someone through to chase him.

Zack managed to work his team down the field while avoiding getting sacked and mutilated by the talented 49ers defensive line. 1:33 remained in the game and the Packers were down to the 49ers' 33 yard line. Zack dropped back and fired a ball towards his flanker on a hitch pattern. The big defensive end jumped and swatted at the ball as it went by. He managed to tip it, sending the ball much deeper than Zack intended. Aaron coolly backpedaled and snagged the errant pass.

He raced for the end zone but was intercepted by his ex-roommate and best friend. Zack popped Aaron good as he took him down, undoubtedly taking out a lot of his frustrations on Aaron. Zack got up first and helped Aaron to his feet. I saw the two exchange words before Aaron patted Zack on the butt and the two headed for the opposite sidelines.

The 49ers never let Zack near the ball again. The 49ers' tailback pounded out yards behind his big offensive line. He ran the ball until the Packers burned all three timeouts. After that the 49ers QB kneeled down twice to finish the game.

The promising start Zack had was now reduced to a 3-7 record, the mirror image of Aaron's 7-3 record. Zack's words last spring were prophetic. The offensive line was his Achilles' heel. The left tackle was too slow. The left guard was too small. The center was big but immobile. The right side of the line was no better. No matter how brilliant Zack could be, he couldn't do it alone.

The Packer's 3-7 record made them a team that could draft me. I didn't want to go join my friend. I wasn't the answer to their problem. I needed a team with a solid offensive line and a quarterback with some experience if I wanted to show my skills in their best light. How was I going to find a team like that? That problem would have to wait for another day.

There weren't any real surprises as ESPN read off the latest BCS standings. We stayed number one. Texas stayed at #2 but the gap between them and #3 Nebraska narrowed further. Florida moved up to #4, followed by Alabama. Oklahoma's loss dropped them to #6. Ohio State, LSU and Georgia Tech filled the next three spots. Notre Dame jumped into the #10 spot, replacing West Virginia.

Coach Burton and Coach Adams concentrated on the second half of our game against Michigan State at Monday afternoon's film study session. There wasn't a lot to say to the first string other than 'good job.' We scored 45 points in the first thirty minutes and never allowed our punter, Mitch Jackson, onto the field.

After Monday's study session was over, I stopped by to ask Coach Burton a question, "Do you have about fifteen minutes tomorrow to talk about a couple things, Coach?" I asked. We compared schedules. Coach agreed to meet with me at 9:00 am.

I showed up five minutes early (Penn State Football time). Marie sent me into Coach's office immediately. Coach Burton invited me to have a seat on his couch.

"What on your mind, Coach?" Coach Burton asked.

"You know I will be living down in Philly next semester when I student teach," I began.

"Sure, you are going to be at Conestoga High School," Coach Burton replied. "I remember."

"I know I will have to stay in good physical condition while I get ready for the NFL Draft," I explained. "Do you have any suggestions for places where I could train while I'm teaching? I suspect Conestoga High School will not have the kind of facilities I need. I don't know if you know of any gyms down that way that specialize in football players or other places I could stay in shape."

"I know there are some gyms down there, but only one I know of that does much with sports training," Coach suggested. "It is owned by a former Penn State player that I know from my time here as a grad assistant in the early 90's. I'm not sure if it would be what you want. I don't know if he would be what you want. He specializes in middle school and high school football players."

"He probably has the proper equipment," I noted. "Any idea how expensive it may be to train there? I already owe my Dad a ton of money."

"You could try one of the local universities," Coach suggested. "Maybe Penn or ..."
Coach smiled and chuckled "...or Temple. I could give Coach Golden a call. We've been friends for decades, since he played here and I was a young grad assistant."

"That would work," I agreed quickly. Coach picked up the phone and dialed.

"This is Robert Burton calling for Al Golden," Coach said after a few seconds. He waited about twenty seconds before continuing. "Hey Al, it's Bob, how are you doing?" Coach waited a bit for Coach Golden to answer.

"I'm sitting here with one of my seniors, Kyle Martin," Coach Burton explained. "May I put you on speaker and explain why we're calling?" I assume Coach Golden agreed because Coach Burton pushed a button on his phone.

"Hello Kyle, how are you doing?" Coach Golden asked.

"I'm fine, sir," I replied.

“What can I do for you and Bob?” Coach Golden asked.

“Kyle is a secondary education major,” Coach Burton explained. “He will down in your area this spring doing his student teaching. I was wondering if you could do Kyle and me a huge favor. Kyle needs a place to train in the spring so he is ready for the NFL draft. Could he work out in your team’s facilities?”

“I would be happy to work out whenever it suited your schedule,” I added. “I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your team’s training.”

“I would be honored to have you train with my guys,” Coach Golden replied. He chuckled. “I want you to train with my team, Kyle. If an All-American wide receiver is going to train at my facilities, I want my guys to see what you needed to do to get where you are now.”

“Thank you, Coach,” I replied. “I really appreciate your generosity.”

“When are you coming down to Philadelphia?” coach Golden asked.

“I think I will be arriving around January 8th,” I replied. “At least everybody up here is assuming we have a game on January 7th.”

“I’m sure you do,” Coach Golden agreed. “Give me a call when you get into town. I’ll set you up with credentials for access to Edberg Olson Hall. That’s our football facility.”

“Thank you so much, Coach,” I said. “I don’t know how I can thank you.”

“Set the example for my guys, Kyle, and we’ll be even.” Coach Golden replied.

“Thanks for your help, Al,” Coach Burton added. “Good luck on Saturday against Miami of Ohio.”

“I’ll need it,” Coach Golden said. “Schroeder’s got his guys really playing.”

“Yes, John does,” Coach Burton agreed before ending the phone call. Coach Schroeder had done an excellent job turning around last year’s MAC doormat. They were 10-1 going into the final game of their season. It was quite a contrast to the team’s 1-11 record last season.

“What was the second thing you wanted to discuss, Coach?” Coach Burton asked me.

“I know the letter of intent I signed is a binding contract between me and the university,” I said. “I’m required to play football for the team. The university is required to provide me with an education, room and board.” Coach nodded his agreement. “I know you can’t provide me housing down in Philadelphia. I don’t expect that. I expect to be

returning to campus for at least four or five weekends next semester. I was wondering if you planned to assign someone to my apartment with Trevor, Damian and Chip.”

“I really don’t have a choice, Coach,” Coach Burton replied. “I have a record eleven mid-year freshmen showing up. I have two empty dorm rooms in the football dorms. Thankfully five of your fellow seniors are graduating next month. There is no way I can leave an empty room in one of the apartments. I will need every space when I move some of the sophomores into the apartments.”

“I understand, Coach,” I replied. “I was just hoping that I’d still have a place on campus next semester.”

“You’ll have to rent a hotel room,” Coach Burton suggested. “...or ask a friend if you can crash on their couch.”

“OK, Coach. I guess I can do that,” I agreed.

“I have some news for you too, Coach,” Coach Burton added. “The athletic department completed its investigation of Derek Whitaker. We’ve concluded that he is not affiliated with an agent in any way. If the two of you wish to talk or have lunch together, you are free to do so. Pay for your own meal to keep things on the up and up.”

“OK, I’ll keep that in mind, Coach,” I said before departing. “Thanks for your help.”

The team spent our ninety minute practice on Tuesday drilling on our fundamental skills. We had no opponent for our final game, so that was the most useful thing we could do with our time.

I packed my things after breakfast Wednesday morning and loaded them in my VW before going to my English class. When that class was done I headed up the mall, past the library, to the Chambers Building and my Military History course with Dr. Brennan.

I bumped into Derek outside Chambers after class. I waved him over when we saw each other. I let him know he was off the department’s “banned” list. We didn’t do lunch together. I headed for the East Parking Garage instead, grabbing a sandwich from the Onion in Finley Commons on the way.

I made it through Harrisburg and Lancaster before rush hour traffic. I pulled my trusty old VW Golf up to the front of my house a little after four o’clock that afternoon. Nobody was home when I arrived. I took my things inside, started a load of wash and settled down in the family room to watch a movie until everyone returned home.

Andy returned home about half an hour after me. The FCS playoffs didn't start until the following weekend, so my brother had a four day holiday from football like me. Andy settled in to watch the movie with me until his kids got home from day care.

The pounding of six small feet announced the boys' arrival before their calls of "Daddy!" "Unka Ky!" "Kyle," and "An-dee." The boys smothered Andy and me with hugs and sloppy kisses as they welcomed us home from college. We played with the boys until Mom announced it was time for dinner.

The dinner table didn't get expanded, even though I was home from college. Liz met up with her boyfriend Chris after he finished football practice. The couple, along with Liz's best friend Annie Stoltzfus and Annie's boyfriend Nick Heisey, were going out to dinner that night. Annie had been dating Nick Heisey since she broke up with Matt Sauder back in September.

Andy and I helped Mom with the dishes and then went downstairs to get our daily workout done. Noah, Connor and Hunter came too, to watch. The little kids peppered us with questions about what we were doing and why we were doing it. We explained as best we could why football players had to work so hard to stay in shape.

Andy took the boys upstairs to take a bath and get ready for bed when we finished working out. I hung out in the basement, listened to music and read while I waited for Will, Abby and Penny to get home from Philadelphia.

My patience was rewarded around 8:30 when I heard Will and Abby arrive. I rushed upstairs in hopes of seeing Penny. "Where's Penny?" I gasped breathlessly.

Abby and Will were standing in the living room with Mom and Dad. A sleeping Rose was draped over her father's broad shoulder, looking like an angel.

"Well... hello to you too, little brother," Will chided.

"Sorry," I apologized. "Hi Will, hi Abby. I'm glad you're home. Where's Penny at?"

"We dropped your girlfriend off at her house," Abby added.

"I'll see you guys later," I said as I dashed for the front door. I left without a coat, ignoring the twenty-five degree cold and wind outside. By the time I reached Penny's house, I did sort of wish I had grabbed a sweatshirt or something. I knocked at the door. Thankfully Jim Edwards answered almost immediately.

"That didn't take you long, Kyle," Jim said as he opened the door. "Come inside and warm up." He probably saw me shivering. "Penny is in the kitchen with her mother."

“Thanks, Jim,” I said as I walked briskly for the kitchen. Jim followed me. Penny was standing beside the kitchen table. Her mom, her sister Nikki and her brother-in-law Adrian were all seated at the table.

“Sweetie! I am so happy to see you,” Penny exclaimed when she saw me. We rushed together, hugged and kissed.

“It’s so good to see you again,” I exclaimed as we kissed. Jim Edward’s loud throat clearing and the laughter of the rest of Penny’s family reminded us of our manners.

“Sorry everyone,” Penny apologized. “I’m just so happy to see Kyle.”

“Sorry about my thoughtlessness,” I added. “It’s just that I don’t see enough of Penny.”

“Young love,” Jim replied. “We’ve all been there before.”

“Some of us still are,” Adrian teased before he tickled Nikki. That was when I saw Nikki’s condition.

“You’re expecting?” I gasped. Nikki rewarded me with a big smile. “That’s wonderful.”

“It’s a little hard to miss,” Nikki replied. “I’m getting huge.”

“How far along are you?” I asked politely. “You aren’t that huge. You look as lovely as your sister.”

Last summer I had started to get used to the idea that Jim and Marilyn Edwards could be my future father and mother-in-law. It hit me that Nikki’s baby was likely to be my niece or nephew soon.

“I’m five months along,” Nikki said, sitting back down.

“Penny and Kyle, why don’t you sit down,” Marilyn suggested. “We can enjoy some ice cream, talk and catch up with each other.”

Everyone agreed. Nikki and Adrian slid around to make room for Penny and me. Jim had a seat beside his wife. Marilyn served dishes of Turkey Hill Moose Tracks Ice Cream, very tasty.

We talked for a good half hour, catching up with each other’s lives. Nikki got a job at a small law firm after she graduated from law school last May. She passed the bar last month so she was a full fledged attorney now. Adrian passed his broker’s exam and had his license. That entitled him to a raise and promotion at the insurance agency he worked at.

Now that Nikki was done with school, Adrian and Nikki had decided that, at age 26, it was time to start their family. They started trying right after graduation. It took a month or so for Nikki to “catch.” Their first son was due March 17th. Jim, Marilyn and Penny were delighted at the news of their first grandchild or nephew.

Jim and Adrian had lots of questions for me about Penn State football and how I expected things to play out for our championship game. I assured them that whether we played Texas, Nebraska, Florida or whoever, Penn State planned to win. Adrian asked about the Heisman hype he saw on line for me. I told him not to believe it. I had ZERO chance of winning the Heisman. It was an honor to even be mentioned among the ten guys on the ballot.

Penny and I headed upstairs. I stuck around, helping her unpack. We hung out for awhile talking. Eventually we cuddled on Penny’s bed. One thing led to another and we got into making out.

“Do you want to spend the night?” I gasped between kisses.

“Mmmm.... that’s a tempting offer,” Penny purred before giving me another kiss. “I need to pass. We’re leaving early to go to my grandparents. It’s a long drive.”

“Not to your Hunsecker grandparents, I presume,” I said. “Intercourse isn’t a long drive.”

“Daddy’s parents live in Lewistown,” Penny said.

“You could spend the night with me and have Thanksgiving with my family,” I asked. “My parents would love to have you over for dinner.” I emphasized my intentions with another kiss.

“Very tempting,” Penny said. She sat up. “We need to be practical. Next year you will be playing football in some city, who knows where. You and I will have Thanksgiving there. This holiday may be the last shot for you and me to spend Thanksgiving with our own family for quite a few years.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. Dad’s question from Sunday popped into my head. ‘Does she feel the same way?’ I knew instantly Penny felt the same way I did. “Have I told you how much I love you often enough?” I asked as I gave Penny a blazing kiss. She returned it with equal fire.

“Not nearly enough,” Penny murmured. We returned to kissing passionately as we heated up. I rubbed my hardness against her. My lover ground herself against me as we embraced and kissed. One thing stopped us from consummating our love – the sound of Adrian and Nikki coming up the steps to go to bed.

“Sorry, honey,” Penny said as we disengaged. “I’d feel funny with Adrian next door overhearing us. I’ll make it up to you tomorrow night. I’ll spend tomorrow night with you after I get back from Poppi’s and Grammy’s.”

“I’m a patient man,” I responded. I gave her a kiss. “I can wait until tomorrow night.” I gave my lover a wink. “...as long as you don’t drag me out to go shopping with you on Black Friday.”

“I’m not that much of a sadist,” Penny said. “I know how much you detest shopping and holiday crowds. Anyway, if I took you along, all the well wishers and autograph seekers might slow down my shopping.”

“Good, I will work on my final history term paper while you shop,” I said. That settled, Penny and I cuddled for a bit, cooling down and allowing my erection to subside. I gave my girl a good night kiss before returning home.

I slept in on Thanksgiving Day until eleven. I showered, shaved and headed upstairs. Noah, Connor and Hunter met me at the top of the step.

“Make ‘tuffed Fwench Toast, Unka Ky?” Noah asked politely.

“P’ease Unka Ky?” Connor added. “We ‘ike [like] your breakfas’s [breakfasts]”

“I have to go to the grocery store to buy everything,” I explained. “I don’t have cream cheese, bananas, chocolate chips or cinnamon sticks. How about I make pancakes and sausage? How does that sound?”

“Yeah! Good!” all three boys agreed. This was an easy task. I nuked precooked sausage in the microwave. I whipped up some pancake batter and fried up the golden disks for my pint-sized crew. It took me three full frying pans to fill the little guys. They thanked me and took off for the family room to play while I prepared my own breakfast. I fried up enough pancakes to satisfy me and cleaned up in time for the noon Fox pre-game show before the Detroit Lions versus the New Orleans Saints game.

The Saints were 8-2 and were leading the NFC South. Two of my former teammates from Penn State played for the Saints. Evan Foster took over the starting tight end role from Jeremy Shockey this season. Evan was playing well. The big surprise was Max Rosen. Max unexpectedly won a spot on the roster as a free agent last summer.

Max impressed the Saints’ head coach, Sean Payton, enough to earn the slot receiver spot on the team. When Marques Colston went down in the third week of the season, Max stepped up. He was the receiving leader of his team, catching 61 passes for 918 yards so far this season.

His prowess earned him an interview with Terry Bradshaw on the pregame show. Terry had an excellent question for Max. I sat up and listened carefully when Terry asked, “How do you account for your success this season? Your college career at Penn State was...” Terry added tactfully, “...undistinguished.” Max gave Terry a hearty laugh.

“That’s being polite,” Max responded. “I didn’t listen to Coach Paterno or Coach Burton when I was in Happy Valley. I didn’t pay attention in class or study. I goofed around and partied too much. I was in my coaches’ doghouse for good reason.”

“What clicked this year?” Terry asked. “How do you account for your success here with the Saints? Was it something Coach Payton did for you?”

“Coach Payton has been great,” Max answered. “...but I woke up sooner than that. It started last season at Penn State. Our slot receiver got hurt and I had to step up and fill in. The experience was eye opening... and also a little embarrassing. The other starters, who are younger than me, worked so hard to prepare. That is what opened my eyes. I squandered my opportunities in college. I swore then that I wouldn’t waste the chance if I got another one.”

“I guess you are taking full advantage of this opportunity,” Terry said. “Good luck against the Lions, Max.”

“Thank you, Terry,” Max replied before the pregame show went back to the studio.

“I guess you’re one of the younger guys who embarrassed him,” Dad commented.

“I was,” I agreed.

“Was the guy really as bad as Terry indicated?” Andy asked.

“Max was suspended for bad grades, arrested for underage drinking and nearly kicked off the team,” I explained. “He really did waste his chances in college.”

“...Penn State has been known as Linebacker U for decades,” Howie Long explained as Andy and I talked. Mention of Penn State drew our attention back to the broadcast. “From Dennis Onkotz to Jack Ham to Matt Millen, Shane Conlan, Andre Collins, LaVar Arrington, Paul Posluszny, Dan Conner to Pete Klein, down through the years Joe Paterno and Penn State has a reputation for developing outstanding NFL caliber linebackers.

“Occasionally the university would develop good skill players such as Kerry Collins at quarterback, Curt Warner at tailback or Bobby Engram and Joe Jurivicius at wide receiver, but not regularly like some universities. That trend seems to be ending. In the past few years we have seen an offensive explosion from the Penn State. Glenn Tucker comes out of the university and makes it to the Pro Bowl as a rookie. Phil DiStefano and

Zack Hayes both are outstanding quarterbacks. DiStefano is pushing Jay Cutler for the Bear's starting spot. Hayes took over in Green Bay in his first game as a rookie."

"Hayes is a fantastic talent," Terry Bradshaw interjected, drawing a dirty look from Long. Terry pressed on, undaunted. "Give him some help on the offensive line and give him a running game, the kid is going to tear up this league."

"Back to MY point," Howie responded forcefully. "If Max Rosen can perform like this in his rookie NFL season, what does it say about the current Penn State receiving corps? Rosen didn't crack the starting lineup until three games before the end of this senior season. What is in store for the lucky teams' that draft those younger players in the future?"

"I can answer that," Jimmy Johnson stated. "Brian Henson, their sophomore slot receiver, is young, raw and very fast. He shows great promise to be a top receiver by the time he graduates in a couple years. Christian Hunsecker, another senior wideout, is an excellent possession receiver with sure hands and good quickness." Jimmy stared directly into the camera and gave a smarmy grin. "As I've talked to GM's around the league, they all talk to me about the best of the group, Kyle Martin. These guys are literally salivating over the prospect of drafting Martin."

"Of course they are," Howie confirmed. "Kyle Martin has beaten the college records of Jerry Rice, the best NFL receiver in history. During his four years at Mississippi Valley State, Jerry caught 301 passes for a then record 4,693 yards and 50 touchdowns. Martin destroyed those 28 year old records this season. He is credited with 283 catches for 5,611 yards and SIXTY-TWO touchdowns. Add in his punt and kick return skills, the young man has averaged an eye popping 222 yards a game for the Nittany Lions over the past four years. Is it any wonder that the Lions have ranked #5, #2, and #9 in the country in his previous three seasons and are currently ranked #1 in the nation?"

"If I had a vote on the Heisman committee," Mike Strahan added. "I would vote for him."

"I do have a vote for the Heisman and I am voting him #1," Jimmy concluded.

Curt Menafee moved the discussion on to a different topic – Matt Stafford's nearly chronic shoulder troubles. Stafford broke his collar bone a few weeks ago. Jeremy North's old teammate, Jamison Peters, was filling in at QB while Stafford healed. Peters had gone 0-4 since taking over.

"Well... that was surreal," Andy commented as the TV heads continued talking. "How much did you pay those guys for the Heisman hype?"

I gave my brother a big grin and replied, "Terry Bradshaw, a cup of coffee – one buck; Michael Strahan, Donovan McNabb's address so he can go hit him some more - \$4.95 on PublicRecords.com; Howie Long, a Villanova sweatshirt - \$29.99 plus tax; Jimmy Johnson – a bottle of hair conditioner - \$10.95; and... Heisman hype – priceless.

MasterCard, don't leave home without it." I waved my MasterCard in Andy's face as I finished my joke. Dad and Andy had a good laugh.

"Seriously, I need to keep all this nonsense in perspective," I said when they were done laughing. "You and Mom already know about the Campbell Scholar/Athlete Dinner in twelve days. Coach Burton tells me I'm likely to get invited to the ESPN College Football Awards Show two days later. I presume you and Mom will be invited too."

"Where is this event at?" Dad asked.

"I have no idea," I answered. We turned back and watched the pregame show again. Andy pulled out his smart phone and started browsing.

"It's in the Atlantic Dance Hall at Disney World Resort in Lake Buena Vista, Florida," Andy announced. "It's on December 6th."

"Coach told me that ESPN pays travel and hotel expenses for the finalists and their families," I explained.

"Families? I'm family," Andy queried hopefully. Then he realized, "... who has finals a couple days after that."

"Disney?" Connor chirped.

"We go Disney Wor'd [World]?" Noah added hopefully. Hunter turned away from the blocks he had been piling up and listened too. The three boys knew exactly who Disney was and what Disney World meant.

I had fond memories of visiting last winter before the Capital One Bowl. I had better memories from our family's last real vacation together. We spent a week in Orlando when Liz was five, Andy was seven, I was nine and Will was thirteen. The next summer Will went to Algonquin for ten days and the family had settled for a long weekend at the beach instead of a real vacation. That was something that wasn't going to change in the future either.

"Don't get excited boys," Dad said. "I doubt we will be able to take everyone IF Kyle gets invited. I also wouldn't expect ESPN to pay for more than a day or so, if Kyle goes. You boys should plan on watching Disney on TV for now rather than seeing Mickey, Minnie, Donald and company down there."

The boys moaned but grudgingly accepted Dad's word. We settled in to watch football as the scene shifted to Ford Field. The records of the two teams foretold the results of the game. New Orleans dominated the first half. Evan Foster had four catches and a TD. Max had a few catches, including a TD catch. It was an out route. Max caught the pass in front of the cornerback. He made a nice, very familiar looking move, faking the cornerback out of position, and ran down the field. The free safety had been helping

cover Reggie Bush's deep route down the middle of the field. He couldn't get over in time to tackle Max before Max ran into the end zone.

"That was sweet," Andy declared. "How'd he do that?"

"I can show you, if you want," I offered. "I taught that to Max last fall."

"That's bull crap," Andy declared, staring at me like I had three eyes.

"Believe what you want," I countered. "I figured that one out last fall while I was practicing against Shawn Byrd. I tried it out during my next game. It worked well, so I taught it to Christian, Max and Brian."

"Reeeally?" Andy drawled suspiciously.

"I saw Kyle do that exact move a number of times the past two seasons," Dad added. "Let your brother teach you the move. It'll help your game."

Later in the second quarter, Max made a key 22 yarder to extend the last drive on a third and 15 play. Reggie Bush caught a swing pass and ran it into the end zone to bring the score to 28-3 before halftime.

Jamison Peters rallied his team to a TD and a field goal in the third quarter. The Saints added the same by the end of the third quarter. The Saints' prevent defense allowed another TD before time ran out. New Orleans won, 38-20.

The second game proved closer. The Giants visited Jerry Jones' billion dollar stadium to take on Jerry's Cowboys. The Giants were tied for the division lead with the Eagles at 7-3. The Cowboys were back on game at 6-4. The NFL had back loaded the schedule with divisional games.

Will, Abby, Rose and the Hendricks arrived soon after the game started. Will and Mr. Hendricks brought Rose along to the family room to join us guys. Her assistance would not be needed in the kitchen for some years. Rose got passed from uncle to uncle to granddad while we watched the football game.

My niece was growing so fast. Will said she weighed nineteen pounds at her last checkup and had grown to twenty-eight inches tall. She cooed and giggled as I played with her. The little lady was a delight to hold.

The football was fun to watch too. The Cowboys and Giants put on a superb show that afternoon. The lead changed three times in the first half. The Giants were ahead 17-14 when Abby called everyone to the dining room for Thanksgiving Dinner. Dad hit the record button on our Tivo so we could enjoy all of the remainder of the game after dinner was over.

Mom, assisted by Liz and Abby had done their usual excellent job preparing the dinner. Everyone enjoyed it, included the boys and little Rose. Her four front teeth weren't up to the turkey or corn but Abby did let her try the stuffing and the cranberry sauce. Rose gave the stuffing a thumbs down. She loved the sweet cranberry sauce. Noah, Connor and Hunter all dove into the full Thanksgiving meal. They finished messy but satisfied.

I thoroughly enjoyed the meal and time spent talking with my family. I hadn't gotten enough of that since I started college. I was determined to enjoy every bit of this holiday and the Christmas holiday. Who knew when I would get these opportunities after this year?

Mrs. Hendricks' pies were outstanding, as they always were. I had a small slice of her pumpkin, a slice of minced meat and a slice of cherry. A scoop of ice cream topped off my dessert.

The family shared our weekend plans with each other. This weekend Will had to prepare a final exam for the physics course he was teaching. Andy, Abby and I all were starting preparations for our finals, which would be a few weeks. Liz was going out with Chris, Annie and Annie's boyfriend Nick for some midnight pre-Black Friday shopping. Liz was driving, since she was the only one in the group that had her senior license and was allowed to drive after 11 pm.

I let my family know about my plans for Friday – dinner with the high school football team and then help on the sideline during tomorrow night's game. Liz and her crew were planning to attend and cheer on her boyfriend Chris. He was our starting right cornerback. Eric Connell and Sammy Hoover insisted that Andy go to the game with them and their other friends.

When the young boys heard football game, they demanded to go too. After some discussion, the boys would go with Andy, Mom and Dad. We knew they wouldn't stay awake until the end of the game, which would be well past ten o'clock. Mom and Dad would bring the boys home when they conked out.

Dad offered the assistance of the men in the family to clear the table and do the dishes. Mom refused. I doubt she trusted us with her good china. We were sent back to the family room to finish watching the Giants/Cowboys game.

Dad started up the recording. We picked up with a minute left in the first half. Tony Romo managed to drive his 'boys down the field and squeak in a long field goal before halftime. The score was tied at 17-17.

We fast forwarded through the half time show and commercials and picked up the action quickly. The second half was just as exciting as the first. I enjoyed watching Salim Rogers play on special teams for the Cowboys and Tyler Madden play for the Giants. Salim signed as a free agent with the Cowboys last spring. It was a major accomplishment for him to make the team. He played strictly on special teams. Tyler

was a second round draft pick for the Giants. He was expected to supplant Antrel Rolle, the Giants' good eighth year free safety sooner rather than later. Tyler currently was playing nickel and dime coverages along with special teams.

My head told me I should cheer for the Cowboys to beat the Giants, giving my favorites, the Eagles, a one game lead in the division. My heart absolutely would not permit me to cheer for the hated Dallas Cowboys. The best I could cheer for was for each team to beat the other to a bloody pulp and end the game in a tie. Tom Coughlin and Jerry Jones would both hate that and my Eagles would be safely atop the division.

Thinking about this led to a really ugly thought. What if Jerry Jones decided to draft me next April? Was there a fate worse than playing for the team I grew up hating? After thinking about a few of the teams stuck at the bottom of the NFL standings, I realized that maybe Dallas wasn't the worst possible place I could be next fall.

I was going to have to learn to overcome my boyhood favorites before I got drafted. But right now, I was still a college student, not a professional. So – Fly Eagles, Fly!

The Cowboys opened the second half with a long touchdown drive. Eli and the Giants couldn't answer. The 'boys added a field goal as the third quarter was ending. Eli finally got his guys in gear in response to the field goal. Brandon Jacobs and Ahmad Bradshaw took turns pounding the ball down the field straight into the middle of the Cowboys defense.

The Giants wore down the Cowboys nose guard, Jay Ratliff. With blocking help penetrating the defensive line, Brandon Jacobs pounded on the inside linebackers, Bradie James and Sean Lee. Each linebacker gave up about twenty pounds to Jacobs. The Giants' running backs gouged out yards and pushed their team down the field, stuffing the ball in the end zone to narrow the score to 27-24.

Tony Romo and his offense took the field determined to defend their lead. They pushed down field, running Choice and Jones. Near midfield they tried a play action pass. The Giants weren't fooled. Osi Umenyiora flushed Romo from the pocket right into Justin Tuck's sack. On second and sixteen, Tuck and Umenyiora both broke loose and forced Romo to throw the ball out of bounds.

The Cowboys managed to block Justin Tuck on third down as Tony Romo rolled right. He spotted Roy Williams one on one and rifled the ball to him. Just as Williams was catching the ball, a blue gloved hand slipped in and knocked the ball away. I let a big cheer and shouted, "Way to go Tyler!" Tyler Madden was in playing nickel back and had coverage on Williams.

My shout startled the young boys, who turned to stare. Rose woke up from napping on her daddy's lap. "I take it you know him," Will commented as he soothed Rose.

"He's a Penn Stater," Dad confirmed.

“Tyler was the captain of our team last season,” I explained.

“He’s a nice guy,” Andy added. “I remember him from my official visit two years ago.”

The Cowboys punted the ball back to the Giants, hoping that their defense could hold and preserve their lead. Eli Manning didn’t allow that. He used the remaining two and a half minutes to move his team down the field using a well balanced mix of runs and play action passes. The drive stalled out in the red zone. The Giants were forced to take a field goal to tie the game.

The Giants won the coin toss and elected to receive the ball. Eli ran the same two minute drill that he used to tie up the game and drove his team down the field again. The increasingly desperate Cowboys started blitzing as the Giants moved into field goal range. The decisive play came from the Cowboy 23 yard line. The Cowboys blitzed both linebackers on the strong side. Coach Coughlin had the perfect play called for that blitz. Eli coolly tossed the ball over the blitzers’ heads to his tight end on a screen play. Kevin Boss ran off his blocks and barreled into the end zone. The Giants won, 33-27.

Will bundled Rose up for the trip home. He and Mr. Hendricks went off, searching for their wives. Andy took Noah, Connor and Hunter upstairs for their baths. Dad and I switched the channel to the NFL Network so we could watch the third game in our football orgy.

The Steelers were hosting the Chargers out in chilly Pittsburgh. I had two friends on the teams facing each other. J. T. Hill took over last season when the Steelers lost their fourteen year starter at center. JT was already noted as one of the premier centers in his two seasons. I expected my friend to have a long and successful career for the Steelers.

Jake Washington was starting this season as the right defensive end for the Chargers. Jake had ten sacks so far this season, putting him two behind his former teammate Antwaan Booker. Antwaan led the league in sacks.

The game announcers reminded everyone that the Chargers were 0-16 in Heinz Field during the regular season. They had won two playoff games there in the past. Snow was pouring down, covering the field. Wind whipped swirls of snow across the field as the camera panned across the stadium. It did not look like good weather for a California team that evening.

Weather and history did foretell the results in the game. The Chargers were down 7-0 ten minutes into the game and had just fumbled the ball to the Steelers when Penny arrived. I met her in the hallway when Mom announced her.

“I hope you had a great Thanksgiving meal,” I declared as we hugged.

“It was nice,” Penny replied. “I got to see all my aunts, uncles and most of my cousins.” She chuckled. “Everyone was there except my cousin Beth. She got married last winter. She and Rick had Thanksgiving at Rick’s parents’ place in Syracuse.”

“Whose daughter is Beth?” I asked. “I haven’t learned all your aunts and uncles yet.”

“It’s no wonder,” Penny replied. “I have nine aunts and uncles and nine cousins. I’ve known them my whole life and I have trouble keeping up sometimes. Beth is my Uncle Craig’s and Aunt Joan’s oldest daughter. She’s Nikki’s age.”

“OK, noted,” I agreed, nodding my head. “Do you want to go downstairs and watch a movie?”

“We could,” Penny said. “What were you doing before I got here?” She chuckled. “Like I don’t know already.”

“I was watching football,” I admitted, confirming my lover’s suspicions.

“Who is playing?” Penny asked. “I enjoy football.”

“It’s the Steelers,” I answered.

“Goody! Let’s watch it for awhile,” Penny responded. “You know I grew up watching the Steelers. Who are they pounding tonight?” Jim Edwards is a diehard Steelers fan going back to high school during the Chuck Noll, Terry Bradshaw, Franco Harris, Joe Greene and Jack Ham dynasty.

“San Diego,” I answered as I escorted Penny back to the family room. The TV showed the Steelers celebrating after successful kick. I checked the score box, which showed the Steelers ahead, 14-0. “What did I miss?”

“Polamalu intercepted a pass and ran it back for a touchdown,” Dad explained.

“Darn! I would have liked to have seen that,” I said.

“This is on Tivo,” Dad responded. “I can back it up so you can see it.”

Penny and I sat down on the couch and cuddled. Dad stopped rewinding just before the pick. Troy Polamalu had jumped a route in front of Vincent Jackson, snagged the ball and took off. None of the Chargers touched the big Samoan before he streaked into the end zone. It was just the kind of play that made him famous.

Penny and I ended up watching the entire game. The Chargers did get things going eventually but their rally was too little, too late. The final score was 31-20. Penny and I had a snack of some of the leftover pumpkin pie before we headed downstairs.

Penny and I cleaned up for bed and then joined each other under the covers. Penny and I shared our bodies slowly and lovingly. We needed to share ourselves but the need wasn't so urgent since we had been together a few days earlier. We cuddled in the warm afterglow.

"That was wonderful," I said as I nuzzled Penny's neck and gave her small kisses.

"I'm so glad we're nearly through fall semester," Penny replied. "It is so much nicer when we can spend more than a few hours together once a month."

"I agree totally," I answered softly. "Speaking of togetherness, you aren't going to drag me off shopping with you at the crack of dawn, are you?"

"No, silly, no," Penny replied. "I know better than that. I'm not even getting up at the crack of dawn. Kath, Tammy and I are meeting at ten o'clock. There will be plenty of bargains left for us. What are you planning tomorrow?"

"After you leave, I'll work on my history term paper until lunch," I explained. "I'm meeting with Dad after lunch. We need to discuss the agents that want to represent me. I head over to the school and meet with Coach Turner and the rest of Wolverines coaching staff around 3:30. They're going to brief me on the plans for tomorrow night's game before the team arrives. The football boosters are doing a dinner for us and then we meet Conrad-Weiser on the field. Are you still planning to come to the game?"

"Kath, Tammy and I will be there, honey," Penny responded. We exchanged good night kisses, cuddled together and feel asleep.

Penny and I were up around 8:30 on Friday morning. Noah, Connor and Hunter met us in the kitchen.

"Make 'tuffed Fwench toast for us, Unka Ky?" Connor asked.

"P'ease, Unka Ky?" Noah confirmed.

"Tomorrow, guys," I answered. "I'll make you regular French toast today."

"Why?" both twins whined. "P'ease make 'tuffed Fwench toast... 'p'ease..."

"I need to go to the grocery store," I explained. "I don't have bananas, cream cheese or cinnamon sticks. I simply can't make it today."

"Uncle Kyle will get everything today and we'll have the stuffed French toast tomorrow," Penny added. "That will work, won't it boys?"

“O-kay, Pen-nee” Connor agreed. “O-kay,” his twin agreed.

Penny prepared some brown and serve sausage while I took made regular French toast for the three boys. Everyone enjoyed their breakfast. The boys headed off to play after thanking me for their (second) breakfast. I sent Penny off for her Black Friday shopping with a hug and a kiss.

I went to the grocery store and picked up the things I needed for my own lunches for the weekend and for breakfast for Penny, the boys and me. I wrote the first draft of my American Military History term paper. My topic was President Truman’s firing of Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War.

Dad and I met in his study after lunch to discuss his progress evaluating sports agents.

“What have you got, Dad?” I asked as I settled into the chair across the desk from my father.

“Seventy-three agents filled out your questionnaire and asked to be considered as your agent,” Dad answered. “I have sorted through them and picked out eight candidates that I would like to discuss with you.”

“Let’s get started,” I responded. “I have to be over at the school by 3:30.”

We reviewed the questionnaires for the eight candidates one by one. I was pleased to see Dad had Max Solomon on the short list. Todd Rosenbaum made Dad’s list too, even though I never said anything to my parents about my close call with losing my eligibility from my lunch with Derek at the beginning of the month.

Our aim was to slash the list down to five potential agents. Dad and I talked about it and decided that he would schedule interviews with the five candidates the weekend after the BCS Championship game.

The first to go was George Sears with the Creative Artists Agency. He worked for the sports division of the huge agency. They handled some big sports stars including Peyton and Eli Manning, David Beckham, Derek Jeter, LeBron James, LaDanian Tomlinson and Tony Romo. I had no interest in being a small fish in their very big pond.

It took us longer to cut the other two. In the end, I decided against William Bernard because his clients frequently held out to get better contracts. I really didn’t think that was the route I wanted to follow for my rookie contract.

The last I eliminated was Lawrence Cohen. He was a younger guy, judging by his academic credentials and the number and names of the clients he had. He had seven clients, mostly mid to late round draft picks. I didn’t want to be his guinea pig by being his first high round draft pick.

“How soon can you be here from your school for the Friday night we’re starting the interviews?” Dad asked.

“The final period is over at 2:20 pm,” I answered. “I am sure I can be here before supper, even if I have to drive back to Philly to pick up Penny.”

“Are you planning to have Penny help with the interviews?” Dad asked.

“You know what I talked to you about last weekend, Dad,” I replied. “This affects her future as much as mine. I want her input too.”

“We’ll do one interview on Friday night, three on Saturday and one Sunday afternoon,” Dad said. “I’ll take care of informing your mother and lining up the interviews with agents. You need to discuss this with Penny.”

“That’s a plan, Dad,” I agreed.

I headed over to the school gym around 3:30 pm. The entrance nearest the gym was locked. I circled the building and tried the main entrance. It was locked too. I went around the building trying entrances, without luck. The place appeared deserted except for the seven cars in the parking lot. I recognized Justin’s Baer’s mini-van, so I knew the coaches were around somewhere. In desperation I called Justin’s wife Sherry and got his cell phone number. Justin met me at the door a minute later.

“Sorry, dude,” Justin said, smiling apologetically. “We forgot you don’t have a key to get in the building.”

“Security is tighter than when I went to school here,” I commented as I followed Justin back to the locker room.

“The way of the world, man,” Justin agreed. I followed Justin into the coaches’ room.

Our head coach, Jason Turner, was already there, sitting down with our offensive coordinator, Patrick Brady. Our offensive line coach, Kurt Rodgers, wasn't there yet.

At another table Dick Wyndham, our defensive coordinator, was meeting with his staff. Frank Fisher coached our defensive line and Doug Ressler coached the linebackers and d-backs. The fourth person at the defensive table I knew, but I didn’t. He was Andy Groff’s older brother Bill, who I had seen working at the family drug store.

“You know everyone, don’t you, Kyle?” Jason asked.

“Almost everyone,” I answered as I gestured towards Bill Groff. “I know Bill is Andy’s older brother, but we’ve never been formally introduced.”

“That’s easy to remedy,” Justin said. “Bill and I go way back... to when we were playing for the Wolverines together. Kyle, this is Bill Groff, defensive lineman extraordinaire, and good friend from my playing days.”

“Good to formally meet you, Bill,” I said politely as we shook hands.

“Bill, this is Will Henry’s little brother, Kyle Martin,” Justin continued. “You might have heard. He dabbles in football too.”

“Yeah, I guess you do,” Bill said, laughing. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you. My brother Andy has said many good things about you.”

“I enjoyed playing with Andy,” I replied. We settled down to work after the introductions were done. I joined Jason, Justin, Mr. Rodgers and Patrick at the offensive table. Jason reviewed the scouting report on the Conrad Weiser Scouts. They rely heavily on their run game to move the ball. They are successful with play action passing, keyed to their running success.

Jason reviewed our game plan. There wasn’t anything surprising in the plan. We would spread the formation out and stretch the defense with vertical plays. Cody would exploit the weak middle as the Scouts chased our fast receivers around the field. All the coaches were confident that we would be able to take down the Scouts, assuming our guys stayed focused on their tasks.

“Kyle, you’ll be working the sidelines with Kurt [Rodgers] and me tonight,” Jason explained. “I want you to debrief the receivers as they come off the field. Make sure they understand what is happening and how to beat whatever defense you see the Scouts using. Fill me in if you see any surprises like the zone defense last year, though I doubt we’ll see anything like that. Conrad Weiser is still working on Football 101 plays. They haven’t gotten into the advanced stuff like Central.”

“OK, I’ll do my best,” I promised.

“We have a set of headphones for you,” Patrick added. “You’ll be plugged into the net with Justin and me, up in the booth.”

“Wow! Headphones!” I blurted. “You’re making me feel like a real coach.”

“Don’t get too carried away,” Justin teased. “We bought a spare headset when we replaced the old system last spring, so we would be able to replace one if we had a breakdown. Everything’s working so it’s available.”

“Anyway, it’s still cool,” I responded.

“It is good,” Justin agreed. “I can give you specific directions for Dave, Gary, Jared and Garrett, without bothering Jason.” Justin was referring to Dave Mitchell, Gary Harrison, Jared Stoltzfus and Garrett Houseman, our starting wide receivers and tight end.

We continued reviewing the plans for the game as the players arrived. Jason took the team down to the auditorium and reviewed the game plan with the team while the football boosters prepared our dinner. They served lasagna with garlic bread and lots of Gatorade – lots and lots of Gatorade to hydrate the players.

I was impressed by the way my high school team had improved since I played here. I remember some of the older guys showing up for before games when I was freshman, toting McDonalds bags. One time Don Higgins gorged on a Big Mac ten minutes before warm-ups. Pete Houck downed a big order of fries. I understood the flaws in my freshman and sophomore teams now that I was indoctrinated by the nutritionists at Penn State. I was glad my high school team was acting on those findings too.

The coaches headed for the locker room after the team was finished eating. We hung out while the guys dressed and prepared for combat. Past team members arrived to visit our team as the boys dressed and prepared.

Dustin Roberts, Karl Weaver, Marcus Shaeffer, George Reynolds, Taylor Ranck, Kevin Peachey and Jason Harting came to visit. Kenny Weaver teased my brother Andy about Villanova’s victory over Delaware last weekend. Both teams were in the FCS playoffs. Their teams had byes the first weekend.

The visiting old hands circulated among the team, talking and encouraging them to carry on our tradition of playoff excellence. Dustin, George, Karl and I were the most senior alumni present. All of us started on varsity together seven years ago. Marcus, Jason, Kenny and my brother Andy started varsity after us. Taylor and Kevin were the most junior alumni, having played for the Wolverines last season. Penn State was well represented among us. Karl graduated last spring. Jason, Kevin and I were still attending PSU.

Andy Groff made his typical late arrival to the gathering. He came just in time to give the pregame talk to the team. Jason Turner gave Andy this honor since he was the only alum there to have played high school, college and professional football.

I thought about how I would most likely be joining the professional ranks before next season’s playoff run started. Of course, I would not be here next year to give the pregame talk. I would be in some NFL city preparing for a Sunday game.

Andy gave a nice talk about traditions and the things our team did to prepare and excel year in and year out. He related how things were his first season on varsity when the team went 4-6. He described the team learning their craft and establishing a 6-4 record the season before George, Dustin, Karl and I arrived. He related the familiar (to me) story of how our team finally made it over the hump and beat Central the first time. He

reminded the guys about our two state championships and the annual playoff runs. He challenged them to keep the team's long legacy going.

The team took the field enthusiastic and ready for the contest. I pulled a Polartec pullover on and then pulled my red and white Wolverines Football hoodie over that. That was enough to keep me warm for the evening. The temperature hovered around 40 degrees all day. There was a 5 mile an hour wind from the northwest. It was a good night for some football.

Harrison Field was packed. Nearly two thirds of the stands were wearing our red and white. The other third was dressed in Conrad Weiser's blue and white. It was good I had a Wolverines hoodie. If I had come in my normal Penn State gear, I would have been mistaken for a Scouts fan.

The pregame ceremonies went quickly. Conrad Weiser won the coin toss and elected to receive the kickoff. The result of the coin toss did not matter much. Our defensive line stopped any penetration into our defense. Nate Trimble plugged the holes in the middle. We stopped the Scouts in three downs.

We quickly found out that our offensive line could dominate them too. They didn't have the speed outside to match Dave Mitchell and the other receivers. Our deep passing threat pulled run support away from the Scouts' overmatched line. Cody Stevens, Brad Auker and Dylan Landis had no problem running on them.

I debriefed Dave, Gary, Jared and Garrett after each series. I gave them tips on handling the cover techniques Conrad Weiser was using. My charges understood.

The game quickly got out of hand for Conrad Weiser. We were ahead 34-10 before half time. Jason and Patrick started sending in backups for some plays in the second quarter. I coached up Kyle Pratt, Garrett's backup at slot, and Chris Gable, Dave's backup at flanker, as they left the field. I could see where all this was heading. Matt Sauder could see it too.

Matt focused in on Dave Mitchell during the Wolverines' final drive of the first half. Dave and Matt put on a clinic for the other players on how to run an effective passing scheme. Matt hit Dave on a quick out play for five yards. Dave made the cornerback miss and picked up an extra twelve yards.

On the second play Matt hit Dave on a fifteen yard hitch. Matt made no pretense of looking for other receivers. He was on a mission – to highlight Dave Mitchell's abilities. Conrad Weiser's defenders understood. The third play they double covered Dave and played a safety deep on that side to help out. Matt showed his touch, lofting a ball to a leaping Dave Mitchell. Dave snagged the ball over the head of the shorter cornerback, gaining twenty-two yards.

Matt sent Dave on a slant route the next play. Matt led Dave perfectly as he crossed the middle. Dave took the ball in stride and sprinted downfield, cutting and weaving through the defensive backfield, displaying his speed. Dave sprinted into the end zone, to the delight of our fans. We made the PAT to go up 41-10.

Matt made a beeline for me when he came off the field.

“Make damn sure Coach Caffrey and Coach Burton see that film,” Matt declared. “Dave’s got scholarship offers from Maryland, Syracuse and Temple. I WANT him with me next semester. Dave is too good a receiver to let slip away from Penn State.”

“I’ll deliver the film and the message,” I promised. “Contrary to what you might imagine, I don’t have all that much influence over recruiting.”

“Do what you can, Coach,” Matt answered. “These aren’t scrubs out here we’re playing against. They’re 9-3 and a strong playoff team. This should show the coaches what Dave can do against good opponents. He dominates.”

“I will pass the message on,” I agreed.

Conrad Weiser managed to get things together for one drive before the first half ended. They kicked a field goal to narrow the score to 41-13.

Jason substituted the second string in after half time. I had more work to do with Matt, Dave, Garrett and Gary on the sidelines, coaching the second string receivers on route running and blocking for runs. Jake Baughman and the second string played good, ball control football. Brady Auker, Dylan Landis, Mike Neubauer and Alex Klein took over carrying the ball from Cody. They kept the Scouts at bay and managed to score ten more points before the end of the game. The final score was 51-23.

Penny, Kathy and Tammy came down out of the stands at the end of the game to join me and various team members celebrating their victory. I earned a hug and a kiss. Nate Trimble, our middle linebacker and Kathy’s little brother, happened by.

“Good job, short stuff,” Kathy commented as she patted her brother on the back. “You played well and Jeremy will be proud of you.” That was high praise from a lady who watched top level linebacker play for the past seven years.

“Thanks, sis,” Nate replied. “I felt great tonight. Everything is coming together just the way Jeremy told me it would last summer.”

Nate headed off in search of other juniors to celebrate with.

Tammy asked, “Do you guys want to go out for a snack before we head home?”

“I’m game,” Penny agreed.

“How about some burgers?” I suggested.

“How about Friendly’s?” Kathy countered. “I DON’T need a burger tonight. I need something chocolate!”

“Friendly’s can take care of that,” Penny said. Tammy agreed.

“Give me a second,” I added. “I need to see Jason before I go. I have to turn in my headset and thank him for letting me help out tonight. The girls followed me down the field to where Jason and Patrick were hanging out and talking with players, parents and fans.

“I want to thank you for letting me down on the field with the team tonight,” I said. “What do you want me to do with your headset?”

“Give the head set to Billy,” Jason responded. He extended his hand and we shook. “Thank you so much for your help tonight.”

“I didn’t do all that much,” I replied.

“You did,” Jason responded. “I didn’t have to fuss with the receivers at all. I knew you had everything under control. That made my job much easier. Are you going to be available next weekend?” He gave me a wink. “I checked my cell a minute ago. We’re hosting Central next weekend.”

“They beat the Braves?” I queried. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. No one expected the Braves to make the playoffs, much less beat Central. We’ve been expecting to play Central since last summer. Matt, Dave and Cody were teasing Josh Hunsecker about their final showdown all through camp.”

“I understand we can expect a surprise from Coach Williams every year,” Jason commented. “I will need all the help I can get to cope with whatever he comes up with next weekend.”

“I hope I can,” I answered. “Do you know whether the game is Friday night or Saturday?”

“Not yet,” Jason said. “The league won’t announce that until tomorrow night, after all the games are done for this weekend.”

“I’ll definitely be here if the game is on Saturday,” I replied. “I may be late if the game is on Friday night. We have mandatory team dinners on Sunday through Friday nights. I can’t leave State College until around 6:45 pm.”

“Give me a call tomorrow and I’ll let you know what is going on,” Jason said. “We’ll put you to work if you are available and muddle through if you aren’t.”

I found Billy Baer. He and his best friend Brian Miller were collecting odds and ends of equipment around our side of the field so it could be put away in our locker room. I turned my head set over to him.

Penny rode with me. Kathy and Tammy rode together and followed me down Route 30 to Gap. The waitress seated us immediately. The restaurant wasn’t busy. I had walked and worried off my dinner carb fix during the game and was starving. I ordered a couple cheeseburger sliders, mini-mozzarella sticks and loaded waffle fries. The fries were smothered with cheddar cheese sauce, sour cream and crumbled bacon.

The girls ordered more sensibly. Kathy and Penny ordered the Forbidden Chocolate Sundae with double fudge ice cream, hot chocolate sauce, brownie pieces and Swiss chocolate shavings. Tammy kept her sundae simple – vanilla ice cream with hot fudge sauce and peanut sprinkles.

A few car loads of high schoolers showed up while we were eating. Matt Sauder, Cody Stevens and Dave Mitchell all showed up with girls on their arms. They greeted us and then headed over to sit with their friends.

Kath, Tammy, Penny and I talked about school a little and our holiday plans. Penny and I were likely to be together for Christmas. Kathy and Jeremy were almost certain to be separated for the holiday. Notre Dame was 9-2 with a game against USC tomorrow. Regardless of the results, the Fighting Irish were looking at a bowl game, probably a BCS bowl game.

Tammy and Hal were likely to be together for the holiday. Rutgers was 6-5 and bowl eligible but they weren’t considered a “hot” team. They were middle of the pack in the Big East conference, which wasn’t considered a strong conference. The Scarlet Knights could do themselves a lot of good if they managed to beat West Virginia tomorrow.

Kathy was hosting her annual post Thanksgiving football party. At 3:30 Jeremy and the Fighting Irish would take on the USC Trojans. All our circle of friends were invited to her house to watch the game on her dad’s big screen TV. After Jeremy was done, we would watch Ed Fritz and the Florida Gators take on their in-state rivals, the Florida State Seminoles. We planned to order pizza for dinner during the first game.

The four of us hung out at Friendly’s until around 11:30, talking and enjoying the company of close friends. Tammy and Kathy followed Penny and me back to Paradise. Penny stopped off at her house for a change of clothes and then headed back to my house to spend the night. Penny and I enjoyed an unhurried and very relaxing round of love making before falling asleep.

Penny and I woke up around 8:30 on Saturday morning. We showered and headed upstairs. Noah spotted us as soon as we came up the steps and called for reinforcements. Connor and Hunter came running.

“Make us ‘tuffed Fwench toast today, Unka Ky?” Noah asked expectantly, but politely.

“Yeah, p’ease?” Connor confirmed.

“You bet, guys,” I agreed.

Penny and I got to work as the boys “helped.” I warmed some syrup with sticks of cinnamon first. Penny diced the banana and mixed it with the chocolate chips and cream cheese. I took care of making the batter and frying up the French toast. Penny fried some bacon to go with our breakfast. I assembled the stuffed French toast and served it.

Penny and boys agreed that it was excellent. The five of us devoured every bite of the sweet treats. The boys headed back to the family room to watch more cartoons. Penny headed home. We would meet that afternoon for Kathy’s Notre Dame football party.

I worked through the final couple pages of my history term paper. Proofreading and editing filled the rest of my morning. I headed for Gap around a quarter to twelve. I was dead on time when I pulled into the parking lot at Friendly’s. I didn’t need to worry about finding John Waters. A tall, fifty-some year old man with a slight paunch walked up to me as I got out of the car. His hair was mostly gray with some scattered dark brown. He sported a bald spot at back of head

“Kyle?” he asked to confirm my identity.

“John?” I answered. We shook hands. “It’s good to meet you.”

“I figured I wouldn’t have any problems recognizing one of the most famous college receivers around,” John replied. “Let’s go inside, have some lunch and get to know each other better.

The waitress seated us quickly. I ordered one of their BBQ burgers with fries. John ordered an Apple Harvest Chicken Salad.

“That burger you’re having sounds so good,” John commented ruefully. “My wife would have my hide if I had something like that for lunch. Such is middle age.”

“I’ll find out eventually,” I agreed.

The waitress came with our drinks. John and I spent the time getting to know each other better. John attended West Chester University. He played linebacker for their football team. John has taught history and social studies at Conestoga Senior High School since

1987. His wife Emily graduated from West Chester a year after him. They married as soon as she finished college. She was as a nurse at the Brandywine Hospital.

The couple had three children, Jennifer, born in 1987, Emma, born in 1989 and Kurt, born a few months before me. Jennifer was getting married next summer. She lives in Allentown with her fiancé Justin. Emma was in grad school at Columbia. Kurt was a senior at East Stroudsburg State, majoring in phys ed. He had played defensive back for ESU's football team, the Warriors. His final game was two weeks ago, when the Warriors lost to Edinboro. They did not make the Division III playoffs.

John briefed me on how he operated in his classroom and a little about the Conestoga High School. I learned that most students did not have a class during the 7:20 am first period. They showed up for home room at 8:03 am. The first period was used by teachers for special, advanced placement classes – such as the AP European History course I would help John teach.

Not surprisingly our talk turned to football too. “I have a surprise for you, Kyle,” John said. “I decided to go watch your Wolverines play last night. I was in the stands watching your team play Conrad Weiser.”

“What did you think?” I asked.

“I was most impressed,” John said. “You just might be able to keep up with Strath Haven with that offense. The defense looked good too.”

“I agree with you,” I answered. “I was worried how things would go after Coach Caffrey moved to Penn State. Jason Turner hasn't skipped a beat taking over from a top high school coach.”

“I wondered when you told me you were coaching your old team, how active you would be,” John said. “You worked pretty much non-stop with your receiving corps last night.”

“That was my assignment,” I replied.

“You'll know what to do with the present I've brought for you,” John said. “I have our notes my team produced to prepare our game plans for Strath Haven along with film from every game they played this season.”

“That will be fantastic, John,” I gushed. “Thank you so much.”

“You can thank Dan Werley when you get to school, Kyle,” John said. “Dan is...”

“...head coach at your school,” I replied. “Coach Burton said he is doing an excellent job with your team. I will be sure to thank him.”

John glanced at his watch. "We've spent nearly an hour talking. I'm sure a young guy like you probably has much better things to do with his day than hang out with an old fart like me."

"You're not an old fart, John," I said. "I've enjoyed our lunch. I'm looking forward to working with you next semester."

"I think we will have a productive partnership," John said. He waved for the check. The waitress delivered it promptly. "I'll pick up the check, Kyle. This lunch is my treat."

"That's very generous of you, John," I said. "I am not allowed to accept your generosity. I'm under NCAA restrictions and can not accept gifts from outsiders. I hope that doesn't offend you."

"No... no, I didn't think about that," John said. "I don't want to get you into trouble with the NCAA." I paid the bill for both of us and then John reimbursed me for his share. That kept me clear with the NCAA.

I gave John a wave as he headed east to his home in Parkesburg. I was impressed with John. The two of us hit it off immediately. I was going to enjoy having him as my mentor teacher.

I stopped at the Weis Market in Gap to pick up munchies for Kathy's party before returning to Paradise. I picked up a case of Sam Adams Old Fezziwig Ale for the party. I had some last weekend at the team party and had enjoyed the cinnamon and ginger flavor.

I carried my beer and snacks down the street to Penny's house, picked her up and then the two of us headed through her backyard to the Trimbles. Kath's little brother Nate greeted us at the back door.

"Oh... you brought some Sam Adams," Nate gushed. "I've heard that's good."

"Not a chance, Nate," I replied. "You can have some beer when you show me a license that says you are twenty-one. Until then... you stick to soda."

"Spoil sport," Nate groused.

"Where is everybody?" Penny asked as we trooped through the kitchen.

"They're setting up in the living room," Nate answered. We met Kathy, Tammy and Stacie Thompson, who were setting up snacks for the party. Things were slightly tense. Tammy's boyfriend Hal was playing for Rutgers, who was facing Stacie's boyfriend

Drew McCormick and the West Virginia Mountaineers. The TV was set to ESPN with the sound turned down.

A crawler came across the screen reporting that score as 15-10, Rutgers' favor. West Virginia had the ball with 1:32 left in the fourth quarter.

Nate took me out to the kitchen and helped me get the beer on ice in a cooler. We overheard a distinct "Shit!" from Tammy Brooks' usually pristine mouth. Nate and I looked at each other and stifled a laugh.

"What happened?" I called back to the other room.

"Touchdown, McCormick from twelve yards out," Stacie answered.

"I can't BELIEVE you guys scored with 92 seconds left in the game," Tammy declared.

By the time I got back, the ESPN ticker scrolled "WVU-17, Rutgers-15 FINAL" across the bottom of the screen.

"I hope the next two games go better today," I commented. "Stacie, give my congrats to Drew when you see him tomorrow. Tammy, give Hal my condolences. It's been a tough season for your team."

"It has been," Tammy agreed. "Thanks, Kyle."

"I'll pass the message on to my honey," Stacie added.

Kenny Weaver arrived, followed shortly thereafter by Brandon McCafferty, Holly Cox, Paul Abbott and Mark Good. We settled in around the TV. Nate's friends, Jake Baughman, Andrew Krause and Jared Stoltzfus joined us. The younger kids were party crashers, so Kathy made them sit in the back.

The USC/Notre Dame game was fun – if you were a Notre Dame fan. USC's starting quarterback, junior Joe Garcia, had been hurt in the victory over Oregon the previous week. The Trojans were forced to start red-shirt freshman Braden Flowers in Garcia's place. As a result, the Trojans passing game was weak. Malo Kaapana, USC's excellent tailback, had to carry the load.

Notre Dame's outside linebackers had enough speed to force Malo inside on his runs. Jeremy was there, waiting for him. Jeremy had ten tackles, including three for a loss, by halftime. The Fighting Irish led 20-10 as they went inside.

The game did not get closer in the second half. Dylan Harris, Notre Dame's quarterback and Jeremy's close friend, drove his team down the field after the second half kickoff and took a 27-10 lead.

Flowers and the Trojans were forced to go to the air. Notre Dame turned up the pressure. Jeremy picked off one pass that a lineman batted up. Another Fighting Irishman picked off another pass as they cruised to victory. The final score was 37-16. The Trojans promising 7-1 start died in the month of November. They were now 8-3 and in second place in the Pac-10, behind Arizona.

We snacked on half a dozen pizzas during the second half of the game. We watched the ESPN scoreboard show while we waited for the Florida/Florida State contest.

Texas struggled but beat Texas A&M, 34-31. They needed a last second field goal to break the tie. Nebraska handled Colorado, 31-10 for their final regular season matchup. Colorado was moving to the Pac-10 and Nebraska was joining us in the Big Ten next season. Alabama bested Auburn, 26-21. The Arkansas Razorbacks shocked LSU, beating them in Death Valley, 30-24. The Georgia Bulldogs beat Georgia Tech 31-20. Oklahoma would take on Oklahoma State at 8:00 pm, same time as the Florida/Florida State game.

The announcers speculated on Ed's chances of winning the Heisman this season. Ed had played well all season but was playing absolutely lights out in the past month. The analyst indicated that Ed had thrown 324 completions on 497 attempts this season. He accounted for 36 touchdowns and only 10 interceptions. His QB rating of 153.0 was tops in the FBS, slightly ahead of Todd Landry, Nick Wilson and Chip Brinton.

The game turned out to be a boring game unless you loved offense or were rooting for Ed Fritz. Ed put on a passing clinic against his in-state rivals. He completed 24 of 31 passes for 347 yards, 4 TDs and no interceptions. Eric Peters, Ed's roommate, caught three of the TDs and gained 193 yards in the game. The Seminoles fell 42-24.

I gathered up the few bottles of beer my friends hadn't consumed and headed home with Penny. She didn't stop at her house as we passed it. We headed straight to my basement bedroom for our nightly lovemaking. It was wonderful.

We cuddled together in the afterglow for five minutes or so before Penny commented, "I should probably go, Kyle."

"What?" I exclaimed. "I thought you were going to stay like the other nights this holiday."

"Daddy has been on my case," Penny explained. "He is complaining that I'm home for the holidays but I'm never home... at our house. I really need to spend the night in my own bed."

"OK," I sighed. "I'm going to miss you. I love waking up with my arms around you."

"I like that too," Penny agreed. "We will have plenty of time for that in January when you move down to Philadelphia." Penny gave me a consolation kiss. "What time are we meeting for church tomorrow?"

"8:30?" I replied. "Is that OK?"

"Absolutely," Penny agreed. I got another kiss before she abandoned me for her own bed.

The three boys begged for me to make them the stuffed French toast again. I demurred. Two bagels with cream cheese and a glass of orange juice was all I had time for. I was happily munching on my second bagel when Andy appeared carrying the sports section.

"Do you know who the finalists for the Maxwell Award are?" Andy quizzed.

"I have no idea," I answered.

"Somebody close to home," Andy hinted.

"Ed?" I responded. "Closer to home than that."

"Excuse me?" I asked, slightly shocked at what that meant.

"What did you say, Andrew?" Dad piped up.

"The Sunday News says the Maxwell Club announced their three finalists for the Maxwell Award for the College Player of the Year," Andy said. "The finalist are: William Johnson of Michigan..."

"He's a shoe in," I said. "William is the most dominating lineman I've seen in four years... and I played with Antwaan Booker."

"Todd Landry of the Texas Longhorns," Andy continued.

"Excellent quarterback," I added.

"...and Kyle D. Martin of the Penn State Nittany Lions," Andy finished.

"No way," I said. "It isn't possible."

"WAY!" Andy insisted as he pushed the sports page in front of me. It did list me as one of the Maxwell Award finalists.

“Well... I guess I know I’m going to the ESPN awards show now,” I said, still stunned at this turn of events. “Dad, are you and Mom going to come down for the show too? I’m pretty sure you will be invited. It’s an expenses paid trip.”

“Your mother and I will have to talk about it,” Dad replied.

I finished my breakfast and hurried down the street to meet Penny. Jim Edwards met me at the door when I knocked.

“Maxwell Award finalist,” Jim said. “That’s pretty good, Kyle.”

“Thanks, Jim,” I replied. “It’s an honor but don’t be surprised when I don’t get the award. William Johnson from Michigan is the best lineman I’ve seen in college football. I expect he will take the award.”

“Still, it’s a credit to you and all the hard work you have done,” Jim replied.

“Is Penny ready?” I asked.

“She’s on her way, Kyle,” Jim said. Penny appeared at the door a minute later, dressed for church.

“The Maxwell Award,” she gushed. “That is wonderful. You so deserve this award.”

I did my best to be humble. We drove over to my church and headed inside. Nearly everyone in the narthex stopped me to congratulate me for the honor. It was all a bit much. Penny and I headed inside and found a pew.

Reverend Hollinger recognized me during the morning announcements at the beginning of the service. I was able to sink back to anonymity during the rest of church. The Rev was his usual effusive self when he greeted us at the end of the service.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again Miss Edwards,” Rev said as he shook Penny’s hand. “What do you think of this boyfriend of yours now? A Maxwell Award finalist... it’s a blessing.”

“It is Reverend,” Penny agreed. “Thank you for the wonderful sermon today.”

“It’s my job,” Rev replied. The Rev shook my hand vigorously as I stepped up to him in the receiving line. “The Maxwell Award! I’m so proud of you, Kyle. That is wonderful news.”

“It is a wonderful honor,” I answered. “...but, I’m not likely to get it. William Johnson from Michigan is too good. He’s a lock, in my opinion.” Rev chuckled.

“I remember Zachary telling me exactly the same thing two years ago,” Rev countered. “Look what happened there. Don’t sell yourself short. I’m sure the voters at the Maxwell Club will recognize your excellent qualities and reward you appropriately.”

“We’ll see,” I replied. “I’ll probably see you next weekend, Rev. I plan to come home and help coach against Central next weekend. There is a game where we will need all your prayers.”

“I’ll see you next Sunday, Kyle,” Rev replied.

I drove Penny home, stopping at her house instead of my own. “Can you get away for next weekend?” I asked as we sat at the curb.

“I’ll have to see how the week goes,” Penny said. “I’ll be back here if there is any way at all.”

“We’ll keep in touch this week,” I replied. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Penny agreed before we exchanged kisses.

I headed home, changed into everyday clothes and then carried my bag out to my car. I grabbed a sandwich and some chips before it was time for me to leave. Each one of the boys got a hug and a kiss before I departed.

The weather started OK on the drive back to campus. I ran into drizzle as I went around Harrisburg. The further west I drove the heavier the rain became. I was worried as I went over Seven Mountains. The temperature was near freezing. Thankfully I did not run into ice anywhere on the way to campus. I pulled into the parking lot beside my apartment a little after four pm. I moved my things inside and then returned my car to the East Parking Garage.

Everyone on the team made it back for the team dinner on Sunday night. The guys from northeast Pennsylvania and from New York City complained about driving back in the snow. Everyone else had warmer temperatures and rain to deal with.

The news about me being a Maxwell Award finalist traveled quickly. I received a lot of congratulations and at-a-boys from my coaches and teammates. I did my best to be humble.

Coach Burton announced that we did not have any meetings that night. We would have fundamentals drills tomorrow afternoon in Holuba Hall. Many of the team headed over to the Lasch Building anyway. We wanted to see the end of the Patriots/Jets game. We also wanted to check out the BCS standings and see the announcement of the football awards finalists at the end of the standings show.

Tom Brady and the young, voracious Patriots defense took care of Mark Sanchez and the Jets. My cell phone rang just as the game was ending. I did not recognize the number.

"Hello, Kyle Martin," I said as I answered it.

"Kyle, this is Andrew Morgan with ESPN calling," the voice said. "You've been a very hard person to get a hold of."

"I'm just hanging out with my teammates watching the Patriots/Jets game," I replied.

"I tried your home in Paradise and your campus apartment number," Andrew said. "Luckily one of our producers had your cell phone number. You should make sure you tune your TV to ESPN at 8:15 tonight. We are announcing the awards finalists. I am calling around to all to give the finalists a heads up and start the planning for the awards announcement telecast."

"I read in the paper this morning that the Maxwell Club likes me," I said.

"Among quite a few other groups," Andrew added cryptically. "ESPN will pay for you and your family to fly down to Disney World and spend two days at the resort before the awards show. We pay for travel, food and lodging."

"Cool," I said. "Do you mind a question?"

"Sure, Kyle," Andrew agreed.

"Would you cover my fiancée?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, no," Andrew said. "We would do your wife but not your fiancée."

"That's fine," I said. "I don't know that she could get away from classes anyway."

Andrew and I exchanged contact information. He promised to e-mail me travel details.

"Can you help me out, Kyle?" Andrew asked when we were done exchanging details. "Do you know where I can contact Trevor Conwell?" I laughed. Trevor, who was sitting beside me turned to see what was up.

"I can help you, Andrew," I said. "Trevor is sitting here beside me. You guys can use my phone." I handed my phone to Trevor. He gave me a funny look.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Andrew... something or other from ESPN," I said. "Talk to the man."

I watched my roommate as he listened to Andrew explain the reason for the call. Trevor's face went from neutral to a slight smile to a big smile as Andrew continued to explain about the awards show and our trip to Disney World. When Trevor was finished talking he stood up and walked across the room and handed my phone to Shawn Byrd.

Trevor and I watched as Shawn went through the same stages of recognition and then elation as he learned about his nomination. I assumed Trevor was up for either the Bednarik or the Outland Award. I guessed Shawn was a finalist for the Jim Thorpe Award for defensive backs.

Both of us were surprised when Shawn finished his call, stood up and walked across the room. I expected him to stop and give my phone to Chip. He deserved consideration for being one of the top quarterbacks in the nation. Shawn walked past Chip and tapped Mitch Jackson on the shoulder. He handed Mitch my phone when he had Mitch's attention.

Trevor and I both gave Shawn thumbs up when he turned to us. He gave us a big Cheshire cat grin in return. Mitch talked with Andrew Morgan for a couple minutes before bringing my phone back to me.

"Can you believe this?" Mitch gasped. "How can I be up for a national award? You guys score all the time. I never get to punt the ball."

"I guess you've punted enough to impress the voters," I said.

"Congratulations, man," Trevor added. "This is great."

The four of us waited impatiently for the game to end and the BCS standings show to start. It finally got underway. The BCS standings didn't have many shakeups. The order was: Penn State, Texas, Nebraska, Florida, Alabama, Oklahoma, Ohio State, Notre Dame, Michigan and Boise State. The losses by LSU and Georgia Tech dropped them from the top ten.

The rest of team had figured out from the way Trevor, Shawn, Mitch and I were acting that something big was up. They waited and watched as the broadcaster began reading off the finalists for the various college football awards.

They announced the Doak Walker Award first, for the top running back. DeSean Reese from Iowa, Malo Kaapana from USC and Tre Benjamin from Clemson were the finalists. The Maxwell Award announcement was anti-climatic. All of us knew already. My friends cheered when my name was announced anyway.

The punting award was next – the Ray Guy Award. They announced Mitchell Jackson of Penn State first. The room filled with cheers as we congratulated our excellent punter. Kyle Cunningham from Alabama and Elliot Craig from Virginia Tech rounded out the list for the Guy Award.

Trevor, Chip and I stared in disbelief when the first name was read for the kicking award, The Lou Groza Award. They announced Harold Long of Rutgers University was the first finalist. I had no idea Hal was in the running for any award. It was a real credit to my hard working friend. Gabriel Rhodes from UCLA and Dustin Chapman from Montana completed the list for the Groza Award.

The Biletnikoff Award for the top receiver was next. My name was announced first, just as Coach Burton had predicted a few weeks ago. My friends cheered and shouted congratulations as the other finalists were announced. Jamal Wallace, the excellent receiver from South Carolina was announced next. Trevor and I cheered when the third finalist was announced – Eric Peters from the University of Florida. The other guys didn't realize that Eric was a friend until we explained about the two or three spring breaks we spent with Eric.

The moved on to some defensive awards next. William Johnson from Michigan was the first name announced for the Bednarik Award for the best defensive player in college football. William totally deserved this award. Chip, Trevor, Christian and I did a double take when the second name was announced. Jeremy North of the Notre Dame University was up for the award. Way to go Jeremy! The last finalist was Marshon Wilkins, the big defensive tackle from USC.

The Jim Thorpe Award for the top defensive back came next. Eldon Burkholder of Ohio State was announced first. He received a couple jeers from the younger guys on our team. I shushed them. Eldon was a quality guy and he deserved this recognition. Ryan Moore, the free safety from Georgia Tech, was announced second. The announcement of Shawn Byrd was met with cheers as we congratulated Shawn for the honor.

They saved two of the biggest awards for last. Everyone listened closely as they started with the Outland trophy for the top lineman in the country. William Johnson from Michigan was announced first. We cheered as Trevor Conwell of Penn State was announced second. Michael Olson, the big defensive tackle from Nebraska completed the finalist for the Outland Trophy.

The Davey O'Brien Quarterback Award was last. Nick Wilson from Michigan was announced first. Todd Landry from Texas was next. The Chester County/Lancaster County contingent cheered loudly as our own Ed Fritz was announced as the last finalist for the Davey O'Brien.

We thought the awards were over, but we were wrong. The announcer then moved on to the Coach of the Year Award. The first nominee was Mack Brown from the University of Texas. Our own Robert Burton, from the Pennsylvania State University was announced second. The final nominee was Bo Pellini of the University of Nebraska.

The week after next was shaping up to be real busy. I had the Chapman Award Dinner on December 2nd and now the ESPN Awards show in Orlando on the 4th. How in the hell was I going to fit everything into my schedule? Time would tell.

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Our team used our afternoon practices the week after Thanksgiving to do more fundamentals drills. It was almost like summer training camp except we worked out inside Holuba Hall instead of outside. Sunday's rain continued into Monday. Slightly colder temperatures gave us snow on Tuesday. Coach Burton saw no purpose in having us freeze our tails off outside. Our final game was in Arizona where the average temperature for the beginning of January was 66 degrees.

I conferred with Jason Turner back home Tuesday evening. My high school team would face off against our arch-rivals from Central on Saturday afternoon. The game would be played at McCaskey High School in Lancaster. The site was a couple blocks from Charlie Taylor's house, so I knew how to get there.

I called Penny immediately to see if she would be able to come home for the weekend.

"Hi, Kyle," Penny asked as she answered the phone. "What's up?"

"The Wolverines' playoff game is on Saturday," I explained. "I'm coming home for the weekend. Any chance you can get away and join me?"

"Things are getting really busy," Penny answered. "How many weekends do you want me to come home? I know I can't come every weekend. Finals week runs through the 12th to the 19th. I know I won't be home then. Would you prefer to see me this weekend or on the 8th and 9th?"

"I guess if you can only get home one time, why don't we plan on getting together at home on the weekend of the 8th and 9th," I replied.

"I'll probably take the train home from Philly," Penny said. "Can you pick me up?"

I don't know, honey," I answered. "I have team dinners every night except Saturdays. I can't leave State College until around seven pm. I won't get to Paradise until 9:30 in the evening."

"We'll figure it out, sweetie," Penny said. We talked for a few minutes more about our schedules and classes before saying good night.

I grabbed Coach Caffrey as we were walking back to the Lasch Building after practice. "Do you have a minute, Coach?" I asked.

"Sure, what's up, Kyle?" Coach Caffrey replied.

“Did you get a chance to see any video from the Wolverines game against Conrad Weiser last Saturday?” I asked.

“I know our team won,” Coach replied. “Is there anything in particular I should look for?”

“You should check out Dave Mitchell’s performance,” I answered. “He had an excellent night and it wasn’t all speed routes deep. Dave had excellent yards after the catch. He used his body well to screen off defenders. He out-leaped the DB for the ball. He had nine catches for three TD’s and 130 some yards. You really should give him a harder look. He desperately wants to come to Penn State.”

“He can,” Coach answered. “I would love to have Dave in my receiving corps next season.”

“But he wants the validation of receiving a scholarship,” I explained. “He probably will go somewhere else if he doesn’t get a scholarship here.”

“I understand that,” Coach agreed. “I’ll never get a fifth scholarship for a wide receiver this season. It’s a miracle that I have four. If Dave gets one, who do I cut? Josh Hunsecker... Devin Kerr... maybe Carter or Brody?”

“I wouldn’t want us to lose any of those guys,” I replied.

“Even if I were to beg and get a fifth scholarship...” Coach asked, “...how can I get all five guys quality playing time in a couple years when they’re all competing for three starting spots and need to beat out Davis and Greer?”

“I don’t know,” I responded.

“Dave Mitchell is an excellent football player and nice guy,” Coach said. “I would dearly love to have him here with me. It just isn’t likely to happen.”

“Thanks for talking to me about this, Coach,” I said. “At least I fulfilled my promise to Dave to discuss this with you.”

“I hope Dave finds himself a top college program and proves Coach Burton, Coach Adams and me dead wrong,” Coach Caffrey said. “I would love to have that happen.”

Since I had no particular opponent to study, I used some of my free time to study the videos and notes that John Waters gave me. I had a preliminary report ready to turn over to Jason Turner on Saturday.

Planning was continuing for the Campbell Award Banquet and ESPN's College Football Awards Show. Mom and Dad planned to attend both. The rest of my family would stay at home or at college. Mom and Dad considered our education the top priority.

Mom absolutely insisted that I had to buy another suit. Even though I was renting a tux for the Campbell Awards, Mom said one suit wasn't going to be enough for everything I had going on in December and January. I headed downtown after class on Tuesday to make the purchase. I found a nice one at the same store where I rented my tux for next Tuesday night.

Everything was set with the NCAA and our athletic department for me to hitch a ride to the Campbell Banquet with Coach Paterno, Coach Burton, Mr. Hurley and President Spanier.

ESPN wanted to buy tickets for Trevor, Mitch, Shawn and me to fly out together from State College Airport on Tuesday afternoon to head to Orlando. Obviously I couldn't do that, since I needed to be in New York on Tuesday night. Andrew Morgan suggested they could fly me from NYC to Orlando on Wednesday morning.

That didn't suit me either. Dad and I had already paid the university \$500 for my share of the charter flight. We paid that money so I could attend my classes on Wednesday. I refused to head south until after class. Andrew finally set me up with tickets to fly out of State College late Wednesday afternoon to Philly and then hop a flight down to Orlando.

I made arrangements with my professors to make up for the Art History class I would miss on Tuesday and the Education & Public Policy, Geography 160 and Art History I would miss on Thursday. All my professors were accommodating. I would use my travel time to and from the various awards ceremonies to read up on what I was missing.

Coach Paterno called me in to talk Thursday morning. Coach let me know that while I would not need to speak as the winner of the Pearce/Paterno Scholarship, I should be prepared with an acceptance speech in case I won the Campbell. He offered to assist me in preparing a suitable speech. I did a first draft Thursday evening.

Coach Paterno sat down with me Friday morning after my Geography lab and before my English Short Story class. He liked what I had but still suggested a few revisions. I promised to make them before our trip to New York on Tuesday.

I picked up my new suit from the men's store after History 454 and dropped it off at my apartment before practice. Friday's practice went well, same as the entire week. The guys looked sharp doing the drills. The entire team had bought into our "On to Phoenix" vision and was determined to finish our last goal, winning that game out in Arizona. I packed my car after practice so I could get out of State College quickly when our team dinner was over.

The weather was unseasonably warm for the 30th of November. The temperature reached 57 in the late afternoon. The warm front also brought Gulf moisture with it. The sky was overcast all day. We had sprinkles and drizzle throughout the afternoon and evening. AccuWeather reported that the rain would cover central and eastern Pennsylvania on Saturday too. The rain could be heavy at times. It wasn't the best weather forecast for my Wolverines.

I drove home through the rain, fog and poor visibility. Thankfully I made it home safely. I pulled alongside the curb in front of my house around 9:30 in the evening. Liz and Chris were at the movies when I arrived home. Andy was still in Newark, waiting to play his first playoff game tomorrow afternoon against Lehigh. Noah, Connor and Hunter were all asleep.

Mom made me model my new suit for her. She approved of my choice. Mom and Dad also recommended a jeweler for me to visit on Saturday. Dad recommended the jewelry store on Main Street in New Holland. The lady who owned it was a good client of Dad's and promised to help me choose the perfect engagement ring for Penny.

I woke up Saturday morning to the noise of three small boys trying to be quiet. A loud "SSSSHHH!" woke me up.

"Di'n't know Unka Ky come home dis weekend," one twin commented.

"Make 'tuffed Fwench toast?" another voice asked. I was pretty sure it was Hunter.

"Mom-Mom say Unka Ky home today for foo'bah game, Connor," Noah said.

"Make 'tuffed Fwench toast?" Hunter repeated as his nephews conferred.

"Why Unka Ky not on TV for foo'bah?" Connor asked. "Daddy p'aying today.

"Don't know," Noah answered.

"T'ink Unka Ky s'leeping?" Connor asked.

"Not anymore guys," I said as I sat up. All three boys squealed in surprise and then gang tackled me on my bed. We exchanged hugs and kisses.

"Make 'tuffed Fwench toast?" Hunter asked when we finished greeting each other.

"I don't have the things I need," I explained. "How would you like cheesy eggs?" Mention of their term for cheese omelets set the kids off. They approved. They wanted me to go upstairs immediately to make them breakfast but I insisted on showering first.

I made three small cheese omelets for the boys along with some hash browns. I made a big western omelet for myself. Mom told me I could have some of the ham left over

from dinner last night. I chopped plenty of onions and peppers to go with the ham and cheese. My omelet was quite delicious.

The jewelry store in New Holland was exactly where I'd remembered it, in the center of town. I introduced myself to the young clerk in the front of the store. The owner, Mrs. Von Heyden, came out immediately and greeted me. Dad had called ahead to warn her I was on the way.

She laid out a selection of half a dozen engagement rings in the price range Dad indicated. I looked the selection over but didn't have a clue what Penny would like. Mrs. Von Heyden was very helpful. She had me describe the kind of jewelry Penny wore. She had me show her a picture of my girlfriend.

In the end she recommended a simple but elegant band with a ¼ carat diamond. It was beautiful. I blanched when Mrs. Von Heyden showed me the price. I called home to my "Banker", Dad.

Dad said, and this is a direct quote, "Asking Penny for her hand is special. It calls for the very best. Don't worry at all about the price tag. We'll work that out. You only get married once."

I purchased the ring Mrs. Von Heyden recommended. As she was ringing me up I spotted a necklace with interlocking gold rings. It was a perfect Christmas present for Penny. It spoke my feelings and intentions perfectly. I had Mrs. Von Heyden add it to the total. I needed to take a big breath before I signed the credit card slip. I had never spent that much money in my life!

The rain began to pour down as I drove home from New Holland. Our planned aerial game against Central was going to be drowned in this mess. The weatherman predicted the rain would stop in the afternoon, but would it stop in time?

Mom and Dad had to see the engagement ring as soon as I stepped inside the front door. I handed Mom the engagement ring box while I took off my wet coat and shoes. Mom opened the box and stared for a moment.

"This is lovely, Kyle," Mom cooed. "Just lovely. It is so elegant and graceful. It's very traditional in design. Penny will love this."

"You chose well, son," Dad added as he stared over Mom's shoulder.

"The charge will be a little higher than I said on the phone, Dad," I explained. I pulled out the necklace box. "I found the perfect Christmas gift for Penny. I had to get it." I opened the box and showed them the interlocking ring necklace.

"This is lovely too," Mom said. "But don't you think it's premature?"

“What?” I responded. “What do you mean?”

“The rings... they’re wedding rings,” Mom explained. “This is the sort of gift a husband gives his wife for an anniversary.”

“Oh,” I said quietly. After a pause I added, “I thought it was a good symbol of how Penny and I would spend the rest of our lives together.” I looked at Dad for support. He shied away a little.

“I don’t argue with your mother about things like this,” Dad said. “Would it be appropriate after Kyle proposes? Do you know when you want to pop the question, Kyle?”

“I’m not certain,” I replied to Dad. “I want to make sure I make the proposal a really special, memorable night for Penny. I was thinking of taking her to a nice restaurant to pop the question. I don’t know if I will have enough time to set things up with the time I am likely to have at Christmas.”

“Well, Kyle, maybe you set it aside for now and use it for an anniversary gift,” Dad suggested.

“I guess I’ll have to,” I agreed.

“Why don’t you try earrings?” Mom suggested. “I’m sure Penny would like a pair of earrings.”

“OK,” I nodded. “I can do that.” I shook my head. “Man, I’m going to have to go into the NFL. That’s the only way I will be able to pay the two of you off.”

“Don’t worry, Kyle,” Dad said. “We won’t demand repayment in one lump sum. We’ll work with you.”

“That’s good to know,” I replied.

I made myself a couple sandwiches to take along to the game. Rain was still coming down when I headed for McCaskey High School’s stadium, but not as heavily as earlier in the morning. I brought my video, notes and summary report on Strath Haven when I headed into the Wolverines locker room.

“Hey, Jason,” I said in greeting when I caught up with our head coach.

“Hi, Kyle,” Jason replied. Chuckling, he added, “I hope you brought your poncho. I think we’ll get a little wet this afternoon.”

“Yeah, I’m ready,” I answered. “I have a special present for you. Set it aside for now and look at it a couple weeks, when you may need it.”

“What is it?” Jason asked.

“Video, notes on how Strath Haven plays and my analysis of how we could beat their defense,” I explained. “I hope it’s helpful.”

“I hope we need it,” Jason responded. “You do know where we would meet them if we play them this season?”

“Sure,” I agreed. “AAA State Championship Game. I like our chances of going all the way. I also can’t see anyone else in the east more likely to be there to meet us than Strath Haven. We have unfinished business with them.”

“Well, maybe,” Jason agreed.

“Consider it an early Christmas present from Dan Werley and Conestoga High School,” I explained. “I’m going to be student teaching there after Christmas. CHS is in the same league as Strath Haven and would love nothing more than see their nemesis go down.”

“That is a good reason to help us,” Jason agreed. “I’ll put this in the back of my file cabinet, ready for me if we need it in a couple weeks.”

“Hopefully we will,” I responded.

“Let’s get this team ready for today,” Jason added. “How to beat Strath Haven doesn’t matter if we don’t take care of Central today.”

Justin Baer briefed me on our game plan for Central. We had a few sets of plays that they hadn’t seen before but we really didn’t have a lot of changes from our standard offense. Jason was confident, given that we hadn’t lost to them in the past two years.

Jason, Patrick and Justin felt our wide receivers and running backs were equal in talent to Central’s. We had a big edge at quarterback and tight end. Our offensive line was larger and was able to move their defensive line earlier in the fall. Our defense didn’t have a lot of stars, beyond Nate Trimble. They played smart football and didn’t give up big plays.

The team dressed and prepared for their semi-annual battle against our rivals from the northwest end of the county. We got a very pleasant surprise when we came out to warm-up. The rain had stopped and we could see blue sky to the northwest of us. Clear weather would be good for our aerial game, one of our advantages. The field was soggy, but that would hurt Josh Hunsecker’s speed just as much as it would hurt Dave Mitchell’s.

Jason gave a nice speech before the team went out to play. He reminded them of all the work they put in through the winter, spring and summer to prepare for this season. He talked about all the sweat, tears, aches and pains from thirteen football games this season. Every bit of that was on the line that afternoon. The guys HAD to make it mean something. They had to beat Central to reach their goal of being state champions. They cheered the pep talk enthusiastically and then charged out to the field for the game.

McCaskey Stadium was overflowing with people when we came out. The stands behind our side of the field were filled with red clad residents of Paradise and the vicinity. The stands opposite us were filled with fans dressed in Central's burgundy and gray. The people that overflowed from the stands were sitting in lawn chairs along the side of the track surrounding the football field.

Central won the coin toss and elected to receive the kickoff. Their return man gained about eighteen yards on the soggy field before our guys tackled him. Coach Wyndham and Jason sent in our base defense. We caught the first change on Central's game plan immediately.

Central lined up immediately after the referee uncovered the ball, before all our guys had lined up in position. The center snapped the ball immediately. Thank God, Josh Strickler was one of the guys in position quickly. Central's QB, Adam Weatherly, rifled the ball over to Josh Hunsecker on a quick out. Josh Strickler dropped Josh Hunsecker quickly after a two yard gain, before Hunsecker could get moving.

Central skipped the huddle again, lining up as the referee spotted the ball. Coach Wyndham barely had time to signal in the defensive call. Nate Trimble was yelling directions when the ball was snapped. Our defensive line fired off, holding Central's offensive line to a standstill. Nate, who knew the defensive call already, fired into the gap where Central's tailback ran, stopping him for a one yard gain.

Central lined up without huddling again. The QB screamed out a play call immediately before taking the snap. Coach Wyndham and Nate had time to set the defense this play. Josh Hunsecker ran a slant over the middle. Nate Trimble dropped into coverage with deep help from Andy Krause, our strong safety. The QB rifled the ball across the line to Josh six yards downfield. Nate and Andy hammered Josh immediately, driving him back towards the line of scrimmage.

Central was one yard short and it was fourth down. Coach Wyndham frantically signaled in a short yardage defense, expecting Central to try to take advantage of our unpreparedness. Everyone on the sideline let out a sigh when Central pulled its offense and sent the punt team out. I guess they didn't want to risk going on fourth down and one at their own 32 yard line.

"Damn!" Jason growled. "They're going to run a fast break offense on us."

“Is our defense in shape?” I said. “Can they stop a two minute drill for forty-eight minutes?”

“Our guys are in good shape physically,” Jason replied. “Have you ever played defense?”

“Not in college,” I replied. “I did play cornerback against Josh Hunsecker’s brother. Coach had me play free safety a little too.”

“Good,” Jason declared. “Go help Dick [Wyndham]. He’s going to need an extra hand more than I will. I have to get our offense in gear to score, but not too quickly. Our defense is going to need time to rest between possessions.”

I headed down the field to Coach Wyndham. On the field, Central punted the ball back to us. Garrett Houseman caught the punt at our 22 and advanced it six yards before he was tackled.

“Coach, Jason sent me down to help you,” I explained when I had Coach Wyndham’s attention.

“Did he?” Coach said with a smile. “Excellent! Bill, I want you to concentrate on working with the linebackers. Kyle, you debrief the defensive backs as they come off the field. Explain what they’re facing in coverage. Give them any tips you’ve learned since you played for me four years ago.”

“OK,” I agreed.

“Switch your radio to channel 2,” Coach Wyndham added. “You need to be on the net with Doug [Ressler, the LB/DB coach], Frank [Fisher, the D-line coach] and Bill [Groff]. Also, grab a clipboard and some paper. I want you to track every defender’s playing time. I need to be able to quickly know who is fresh and who is tired. We are going to have to send in subs frequently to keep the kids fresh.”

“You got it, Coach,” I agreed. Bill Groff hooked me up with a copy of the defensive roster and a clipboard. I marked time on the field for the eleven guys who covered the first series.

I gathered Andy, Josh, Chris Zimmerman and Ethan Gockley, our starters, along with our backups, Bill Yeagley and Austin Good. I informed them that I would be helping out. We talked a little about what they observed so far.

A big cheer from the stands on our side of the field interrupted us. We all looked to the field, to find Dave Mitchell waving a football in the end zone. Matt, Cody, Garrett, Gary and Jared were racing to him to celebrate a touchdown.

I gave my charges a couple more instructions before four of the guys headed out onto the field to cover the kick off. Central's first possession had taken a minute off the clock. Our scoring drive had taken four minutes off the clock. We would be OK if our offense could stay on the field for four or five minutes every possession. The defense would be able to rest and prepare for the next drive.

I charted the defensive players on the field for special teams with an 'S'. The regular defensive plays were tracked with a 'D'. I circled any extra tiring defensive play, such as long runs or covering deep throws. Coach Wyndham checked a couple times and approved what I was doing.

Coach Wyndham had Ethan Gockley, our free safety, playing center field twenty yards behind the line of scrimmage. Ethan's job was to make sure Josh Hunsecker, or any other Central receiver, didn't get deeper than him. He was to pick off any stray deep balls and tackle anyone who came his way.

Josh Strickler and Andy Krause had in and out coverage on Josh Hunsecker. Josh Strickler would stay between Josh Hunsecker and the QB. Andy would stay behind Josh Hunsecker, ready to run deep or come up and make the tackle on shorter passes. Coach Wyndham had things set so Josh Hunsecker was double covered on short plays and triple covered on deep plays. We may not be able to shut Josh down, but we would limit the damage he did to our team.

My job charting players' time on the field kept me busy, especially considering the fact that Central ran another play roughly every twenty to twenty-five seconds. Coach Wyndham checked my chart from time to time to judge when he needed to send in substitutes.

"Good work, Kyle," Coach Wyndham said as he studied my chart. "This helps tremendously. Keep it up."

I had a little time to talk with my charges when our offense was on the field. I talked about techniques I taught Josh Hunsecker. I also talked about the things Shawn Byrd had developed to counteract the moves Josh was making.

Our defense was preventing Josh from making big plays. That success was at the expense of our run defense. Our front seven players held up well against Central's running game, but if anything went wrong, the runner would go for big yards before the defensive backs could tackle him.

Matt, Dave, Cody, Gary and the rest of our offense dominated against Central's defense. We were ahead 24-21 at half-time. Our defense was grateful for the short break from their whirlwind afternoon. Even better, our team had the ball first in the third quarter. With luck, our defense could have twenty to twenty-five minutes break time before they had to play again.

Coach Turner challenged the offense. He wanted to see them play pedal to the metal football. We needed some cushion in the score before our defense ran out of gas.

Garrett Houseman took the second half kickoff and ran it back twenty-seven yards to give us good field position. Matt and his crew did their jobs too. Matt led the offense on a thirteen play, textbook execution drive. Matt crowned the drive with a five yard pass over the middle to Gary Harrison. Gary bulled his way past Central's middle linebacker for the TD. Nick Sterling drilled the PAT through the uprights. Score: Wolverines-31, Central-21

During that drive, Josh Strickler grabbed me for a question. "I noticed something near the end of the first half, Coach," Josh explained. "Whenever Eby [Central's QB, Adam Weatherly] includes the word 'Pop' in the play call, Hunsecker runs a seven yard out route. Can I try to jump the route next time and go for an interception?"

"You're sure, Josh?" I asked. He nodded yes. "By all means, jump the route if you hear that play call again. Make sure Andy and Ethan know this key too, so they're prepared when you are out of position."

"Sure thing, Coach," Josh agreed.

We had occasion to use the knowledge a few minutes after the conversation. I was working on my charting when I heard Adam Weatherly yell, "Zebra 27 Pop Apple Tango"

I looked up and saw Josh Strickler give me a smile and a nod. I acknowledged him. Josh back pedaled at the snap. Josh Hunsecker drove down the field, passing Josh Strickler. As Adam Weatherly's arm came up, Josh Strickler cut and headed for the sideline in front of Josh Hunsecker. Adam Weatherly drilled the ball when Hunsecker cut to the sideline. Strickler drove in front of Hunsecker's outstretched hands, snagging the ball inches from Hunsecker's grasp.

The Wolverines' stand broke into cheers as Josh Strickler dodged Josh Hunsecker's tackle attempt and sprinted for the end zone. Bill Wenger, our strong side linebacker, knocked Adam Weatherly aside, clearing the way for Josh Strickler to run into the end zone.

Our fans gave another big cheer as Nick Sterling increased our lead to 38-21 with the successful PAT. The pick broke Central's spirits. No doubt Josh Strickler's week of practice against Josh Hunsecker at summer camp had given him confidence to gamble this way. So had Coach Wyndham's defensive scheme. Josh wouldn't have dared to guess this way without deep help from Andy and Ethan.

Matt's crew added two more touchdowns before the game was over. Central managed a single touchdown against our prevent defense late in the fourth quarter. The final score was Wolverines-52, Central-28.

I gave my headphones to Brian Miller before heading out onto the field. I found Matt, Dave and Cody holding court with their teammates. I congratulated my friends on their superb performance. Josh Hunsecker wandered over while I was talking with my friends.

“Congratulations, Matt,” Josh said. “You had a good game.” Matt and Josh shook hands.

“You did great too, Cody,” Josh added. The two shook hands. Josh turned to his close friend Dave.

“It’s hard to believe football is over, at least for me, isn’t it?” Josh said.

“It is amazing,” Dave answered.

“What’s it going to take to get you to State College?” Josh asked.

“A scholarship,” Dave snorted, “...and that’s not going to happen.”

“You might as well tell him, Dave,” Matt added.

“What?” Josh asked.

“Coach gave it one more shot after my game last week,” Dave explained. “The coaches at Penn State don’t consider me worth a scholarship. I accepted the offer from Temple. I’m going to be an Owl.”

“Noooo,” Josh howled. “We were going to be together in college. How could you?”

“I’m sorry, Josh,” Dave said. “I’d love to spend college with you but I can’t go to a team where the coaches don’t respect my abilities.”

“I did my best for him, Josh,” I added. “Coach Caffrey told me that he already has you, Jeremy Carter, Devin Kerr and some kid named Tyler Brody lined up with scholarships this year. Normally we pick up two or three a year. Add Dave into the mix with the four of you and you’re going to have an ugly logjam at your position. What good does it do Dave to come in as low man in that situation?”

“I guess you’re right,” Josh admitted. He paused for a couple seconds and asked, “If you normally get two or three freshman receivers, are we going to be jammed for playing time anyway?”

“I don’t think it will be too bad,” I replied. “We normally have nine to eleven receivers. We have nine now and three of us graduate this year. Add the four of you, we will have ten next season. It’ll work out fine.” I chuckled. “Of course you freshmen won’t get a

lot of playing time. Wait until you see the playbook. It'll take you the first year to learn what you're doing."

"You'll help us learn the playbook, won't you Coach?" Josh asked. Matt agreed quickly.

"I'm not going to be on campus next semester, guys," I explained. "My student teaching will be near Philadelphia. I'm living down there." I gave Dave a big grin. "Dave is the one who is going to see a lot of me. Coach Burton convinced Coach Golden to let me work out at Temple's facilities. You could see me every day, Dave."

"That'll be cool, Coach," Dave said.

The four friends talked for a couple more minutes about the game before the group broke up. I asked Josh, "Did your brother come? I should stop by and say hi if he did."

"Yeah, Christian and Bev came down this morning," Josh answered. "You can come with me. I was going to look for them now."

I followed Josh across the field towards the stands where the Central fans were sitting. It didn't take us long to find Christian and Bev. I gave Bev a friendly hug and shook hands with Christian as we greeted each other.

"Did you two come down last night?" I asked.

"We drove down this morning," Christian replied.

"I came down last night," I said. "I had shopping that I needed to do." I leaned in close. "Can you keep a secret?" Christian and Bev nodded their agreement.

"I bought a ring for Penny this morning," I explained.

"Really? That's excellent news," Christian said. "Yes it is," Bev agreed.

"Do you know when you're going to pop the question?" Christian asked.

"Not yet," I answered. "It depends on our team's holiday schedule. I doubt it will happen before our trip to Phoenix."

"It is wonderful news, whenever you ask Penny," Christian said. "You looked like you were having fun this afternoon. Headphones, clipboard – you had everything. You were coaching up a storm for the offense today."

"I was helping the defense," I replied. "I had to. Someone decided throw a curveball at us today. Who runs a hurry-up offense in high school?"

"It didn't work out as well as we hoped," Josh said.

“What’s next for your team?” I asked. “You’ve put your fastest receiver to shut down our best guy and couldn’t. You tried running a zone defense and that didn’t work. You tried a hurry-up offense and failed. What’s next?”

“Let Matt, Cody and Dave graduate,” Josh replied with a rueful smile. “We’re going to be better next year. Our #2 QB is going to be a good one. We have some good receivers coming along too. Wait until next year.”

“Yeah, I know you guys do,” I agreed. “You don’t get a three decade record of success without knowing what you’re doing on the field.”

“Wish Dave, Matt and Cody good luck next week,” Josh said. “I heard Bishop McDevitt won their game against East Pennsboro last night. Your team will play them next weekend for the district title.”

“Thanks, I will convey the message,” I said. “I’ll see you Sunday at dinner, Christian. Josh, I’ll see you some weekend when I’m on campus next semester.”

I found Jason, Patrick and Justin conferring along our sideline when I was preparing to leave. They thanked me for helping. Coach Wyndham told Jason my charts were the key to him being able to substitute rested players in who could keep up with Central’s hurry-up offense. Jason asked me if I planned to help out the next weekend. The game was Saturday at 1:00 pm at Hershey Stadium. I said I did.

I made it home in time for a quiet dinner with Mom, Dad and the boys. Liz and Chris were going to a party that evening to celebrate the Wolverines victory. I caught up on a couple of the conference championship game results after dinner when I flipped on the TV to ABC. They were broadcasting the Florida/Alabama showdown for the SEC title.

Ed’s Gators were down 28-24 with five minutes left in the game when I flipped the TV on. The Gators had the ball and were driving on the Tides’ goal line. Ed worked his team down the field expertly against Alabama’s fierce pass rush. On the seventh play of the drive, Ed found Eric Peters running loose after a ‘bama corner fell down. Ed hit Eric in stride. Eric sprinted into the end zone for the decisive TD.

The crawler at the bottom of the screen reported Pitt beat Connecticut 24-17 to take the Big East title. Florida State had beaten last year’s national champions, the Georgia Tech Yellowjackets, 34-30 earlier that afternoon to clinch the ACC title. Nebraska was leading Texas 30-28 with 1:55 remaining in the fourth quarter.

I was confident Florida’s defense could hold the Crimson Tide in the final two minutes. Ed always raved how lucky he was to have them backing him up. He felt his team had the top defense in the nation, not that anyone in State College would have agreed.

I watched Ed standing on the sideline, holding his helmet against his hip as he watched his defense wrap up the title. Unfortunately, things did not play out the way he or I expected. The Tide crossed up the Gator defense with a delay draw on first down. The Gators had a three man rush, which the Tide easily blocked out of the way. The 'bama runner picked up a dozen yards before the secondary or linebackers could catch him.

The Tide fooled the Gators again, repeating the run – off tackle to the strong side. They picked up ten yards and another three downs. The Gators sent their normal 4-3 defense out on the next down. The run fake on the play action pass froze the linebackers. The Alabama tight end caught the ball over the middle and rumbled downfield for twenty yards before three d-backs could gang tackle him.

1:08 remained on the clock. The Tide had moved the ball down to the Gators' 44 yard line. The Gators tried blitzing, only to get caught by a screen pass. The running back raced forward eighteen yards before he was taken down. Alabama called a timeout to stop the clock at 0:52.

I saw Ed on TV, staring in disbelief at how quickly his lead was evaporating. It was almost like the Tide was reading the Gators defensive coordinator's mind. They had managed to call the perfect play four times in a row.

The Tide tried the delay draw again, but this time the Gators were ready. A linebacker nailed the tailback after he picked up one yard. A cornerback blitz forced the 'bama QB to throw the ball away on the next play.

The crawler reported: "TEX-35 NEB-30 32 yd TD LANDRY TO HAKE" 0:22 4Q" It looked like my team would be seeing the Longhorns in Phoenix. There was no way Nebraska was going to score in twenty-two seconds.

Alabama crossed up Florida again on third down and nine yards to go. They ran their delay draw. The Gators middle linebacker managed to pull the running back down a yard shy of the first down marker.

I spotted Ed on the sideline high fiving another Gators QB. Alabama and Florida lined up for the 42 yard field goal try. The snap was clean. The holder caught the ball as the kicker started forward. I gasped as the holder tucked the ball under his arm and ran to the right. The kicker was sprinting outside too. The Gators safety came up as the holder carried the ball ahead for the first down. When the safety went for the tackle, the holder flipped the ball out to the kicker.

The holder blocked the safety away as the kicker sprinted down the sideline into the end zone untouched. The Alabama players went nuts celebrating as the Gators stared in disbelief at the outcome. Alabama's Coach Saban made an incredibly gutsy call running a fake field goal with the game and the SEC championship on the line.

The camera scanned the Florida sideline for reactions. They focused on Ed, standing beside Coach Meyer. Ed's mouth was hanging open in disbelief as he stared out onto the field. Coach Meyer patted Ed's shoulder, leaned in and whispered something to my friend. Ed gave a weak smile and nodded in agreement with his coach. Coach Meyer and Ed both walked onto the field to congratulate their victorious opponents.

My buddy wasn't going to the Sugar Bowl after all. His team still should get a BCS bowl game. Win or lose, they were one of the best teams in the country.

After running through the highlights of the day, the post-game announcers speculated about bowl game berths.

"#1 Penn State will play #2 Texas on January 7th in Glendale for the national championship," Mark May asserted. "Pencil Nebraska in for the Fiesta Bowl, Alabama for the Sugar Bowl and Florida State for the Orange Bowl. The Rose Bowl will most likely feature Ohio State against Arizona."

"Expect Pittsburgh to come down to the Sunshine State and play Florida State at the Orange Bowl," Lou Holtz predicted. "The game in the Georgia Dome today was amazing. I would expect the Gators consolation prize to be a trip to Arizona to face the Nebraska Cornhuskers."

"That would be a good game," Mark agreed.

I flipped the TV over to CBS, who was televising the USC/UCLA game. I had no interest in listening to a half hour of speculation about who went to which bowl. We would find out tomorrow night when the bowl lineup was announced.

I read my Education and Public Policy text, trying to get ahead for the class I would miss next week. I took a break from studying at eight o'clock and read my nephews and little brother their bedtime story. Thank God they had moved past the Cat in the Hat.

It was around 9:15 in the evening when Andy got home from his first playoff game. The Blue Hens easily beat Lehigh, 42-20. Andy had seven catches for 114 yards and two touchdowns. Andy already knew his next opponent – Bethune-Cookman. Andy's team would be traveling to Daytona Beach next weekend.

I read my text, keeping half an eye on the USC/UCLA contest. USC was down from its peak two years ago, but they were still good enough to beat UCLA. The final score was USC-30, UCLA-21.

I got a good night's sleep. I had time for a good breakfast and then headed to church with my family. Reverend Hollinger was surprised to see me in church again. I assured him that I would be around more in the next six months than I had been since college started.

I grabbed some lunch at home and then headed back to campus. The warm weather from earlier in the weekend was gone. The sky was overcast as I drove west for state College. I ran into some light snow as I went up Seven Mountains, west of Lewistown. Thankfully it didn't stick to the roads. Driving would have been ugly if it had.

Chip, Trevor and Damian were all hanging out in our apartment when I returned, watching some football. Kansas City was playing the Raiders. No one was paying a lot of attention.

"Did you hear?" Chip commented after I put my bags in my room.

"What?" I responded.

"We got confirmation on our new roommate for next semester," Chip said. "They followed our request and assigned Brian Henson to us."

"That's good, Chip," I said. "You need to get really friendly with Brian. He is your meal ticket next season after I'm gone."

"That's good advice, Coach," Chip agreed.

"I think it sucks that you're leaving after this semester," Damian added.

"Yeah it does," Trevor agreed.

"I understand," I replied. "I can't believe I have three weeks left on campus. I will be back to visit a few times next semester."

"Yeah, you and Penny can have my room when you visit," Damian said. "I won't mind spending a few weekends at Billy's apartment."

"I bet you wouldn't," Trevor agreed. "Not that it's any different than now."

"True," Damian said. "What can I say? I love my guy."

"Make sure your calendar has the Thon weekend marked on it," Trevor added. "You and Penny have a date to dance that weekend."

"I know you want me to, Trev, but I don't know if that is going to be possible," I replied.

"The Thon committee approved having a non-student dance," Trevor countered. "Penny can participate."

"That's one of a number of problems, Trev," I replied. "My last class is dismissed at 2:20 pm. Presumably Penny will have some afternoon classes too. How are you going to get us from Philadelphia to State College by 5:00pm when the dancers assemble?"

“Hmm... we’re going to have to work on that,” Trevor replied.

“Don’t forget someone has to get us home on Sunday night too,” I added. “We need enough time to get a good night’s sleep. I have a forty minute drive to the high school and my first class is at 7:20 am Monday morning. I don’t see any way to solve all these problems.”

“We will, Coach,” Trevor answered. He cocked his head and smiled. “Get your dancing shoes ready. Every problem has a solution. We WILL find the answers.”

I didn’t argue with Trevor further. If he, Jon Stafford and Dave McCall could solve all those problems, I would do my duty and dance at the Thon.

The four of us joined the crowd of players heading to the Training Table at a quarter to six. Coach Burton called Trevor, Damian, Chip and me over to his table near the end of dinner.

“Sorry for the short notice for this, guys,” Coach explained. “I just got the request forty-five minutes ago. ESPN would like to interview us during their bowl selection telecast. Are you guys willing?”

We glanced at each other, smiled and nodded our agreement. “Sure, Coach,” I replied. “We’ll do whatever you need.”

“Excellent!” Coach replied. “Be over at the Lasch Building conference room at 7:30 tonight.”

“Will we be able to see the Bowl selection show?” Trevor asked. “We’re kind of curious for how things turn out.”

“I’m sure they will have a monitor in our room so we can follow the broadcast,” Coach promised.

“See you there, Coach,” all of us promised. We headed over to the players’ lounge in the Lasch Building. The featured late afternoon game on Fox was the Giants/Redskins contest. Eli and his teammates were ahead 24-20. The game had about ten minutes to go.

The Redskins had the ball and were relying on the run to get them down the field. The Giants had Chris Cooley, the Redskins dangerous tight end, double covered. The rest of the Giants secondary were tight to the line, ignoring medium and deep passing plays. Not surprisingly given the defense, the Redskins couldn’t sustain their drive.

I knew the solution to the Redskins dilemma. They needed outside speed. They had a fourteen year vet at one wide receiver slot. The guy was a decent receiver but had never

been known for speed. The other spot was held by a second year player who had trouble getting open. The Redskins needed guys like the Eagles used when they trounced the Giants two weeks ago. You respected the Eagles deep threat or DeSean Jackson and Jeremy Maclin made you pay a steep price.

The Redskins were a team where my skills could be helpful next season and I would make an immediate impact. I wasn't sure I wanted to join the soap opera that had been the Redskins since Dan Snyder bought the franchise thirteen years ago. Churning head coaches every year or two and overpaying aging former stars was not the way to build a great team.

I dismissed the thoughts from my mind. I had the biggest game of my life to play before I could waste time thinking about an NFL career. It was not a surprise to me when the Giants won the game, 27-20. Everyone in the room migrated over to our auditorium. Coach Burton had the video people rig our projection system up to show ESPN.

I got to catch up on the results of the NFL games with ESPN's post game show while we waited. Zack Hayes earned his fourth win of the season, beating Sam Bradford's Rams earlier in the afternoon. I would need to send my buddy a congratulatory e-mail later that evening. Hopefully the Packers would get Zack the help he needed along the offensive line next season.

Trevor, Damian and I headed down to the conference room to join Coach Burton for the interview with ESPN. The director insisted that we needed makeup for the interview. Grudgingly, Trevor, Chip, Damian and I accepted the advice.

We were lucky. ESPN's Bowl Selection show started off by reading this weeks' BCS standings. Things were shaken up a bit, thanks to losses by Florida and Nebraska. The end of regular season standings were: Penn State, Texas, Alabama, Oklahoma, Ohio State, Florida, Nebraska, Notre Dame, Michigan and Boise State.

We heard the cheering in the auditorium next door in the background as the list was read.

"Of course these standings lock in the teams for the Tostitos Fiesta BCS National Championship Game," Rece Davis, the host said. "The Pennsylvania State University Nittany Lions will face the University of Texas Longhorns on January 7th for the national championship. Ready to talk with us is Head Coach Robert Burton of the Nittany Lions and team captains Kyle Martin, Trevor Conwell and Damian Thompson along with their quarterback, Chip Brinton. Take it away, Al"

The camera light in front of us blinked to red. Alan James, ESPN's reporter with us, smiled and stared into the camera.

"Thank you, Rece," Al replied. "Bob, what's your first reaction to the matchup with the Longhorns?"

“I’m looking forward to it,” Coach Burton answered. “The Longhorns are an excellent football team that will provide quite a challenge for our team. I think it will be an excellent game.”

Al kept the questions fairly simple. We managed to answer them without providing the Longhorns with any bulletin board material. Trevor, Damian and Chip all answered questions. It was my turn last.

“Kyle, one of your high school teammates plays for the Longhorns,” Al said. “What can you tell us about Michael Johanson?”

“Mike is a fantastic cornerback,” I responded. “I’ve known him for four and a half years, since his family moved to Pennsylvania from their native Texas.”

“That explains how a Pennsylvanian ended up on the University of Texas team,” Al replied.

“Mike is a Texan who lived in Pennsylvania for a few years,” I explained. “I know Mike is very happy to be back home and playing for his beloved Longhorns.”

“Rivals or friends?” Al asked. “Which would describe your relationship with Michael?”

“I guess we started as rivals,” I said. “I was a senior and one of the team captains. Mike was the new tenth grader who was very cocky. It took us a couple months to understand each other and come to terms. Now I consider Mike a good friend. I am looking forward to seeing him on and off the field in Phoenix next month.”

“Thank you Bob, Kyle, Trevor, Damian and Chip for sitting down with us and discussing the championship game,” Al said. “Good luck to all of you in Glendale.” The University of Phoenix Stadium is actually located in Glendale, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix.

We headed back over to the auditorium when the interview was done and found a seat. Rece Davis, Lou Holtz, Craig James and Mark May talked about each matchup as they discussed the bowls. They took the better part of an hour to cover the thirty-five bowls. The big bowl games and bowls featuring my friends ended up like this:

- Dec. 29th - Pinstripe Bowl - Syracuse vs. Baylor
- Jan. 1st - Gator Bowl - West Virginia vs. Boston College
- Jan. 1st - Outback Bowl - Iowa vs. LSU
- Jan. 1st - Cotton Bowl - Kentucky vs. Boise State
- Jan. 1st - Capital One Bowl - Michigan vs. Florida
- Jan. 1st - Rose Bowl - Ohio State vs. Arizona
- Jan. 1st - Sugar Bowl - Alabama vs. Oklahoma
- Jan. 2nd - Fiesta Bowl - Nebraska vs. Notre Dame
- Jan. 3rd - Orange Bowl - Florida State vs. Pittsburgh
- Jan. 5th - BBVA Compass Bowl - Rutgers vs. Florida International

Jan. 7th - BCS Championship Game - Penn State vs. Texas

Ed Fritz was definitely disappointed by his team missing a BCS bowl. Lou Holtz explained that his former team, Notre Dame, earned an automatic BCS bowl bid by finishing in the top eight. When the Fiesta Bowl committee picked who would play Nebraska, they had to choose either Pittsburgh or Notre Dame. That left Ed and the Gators out in the cold.

I never heard of the bowl Hal Long's Scarlet Knights were going to. Fortunately Mark May filled everyone in when he announced that matchup. The bowl had been known as the Papajohns.Com Bowl until this year. The BBVA Compass Bank in Birmingham, Alabama took over sponsorship of the bowl.

My friend Jake Kring was going to play football in Yankee Stadium in New York City. His team from Syracuse had to have an advantage over the team from Texas. An upstate New York team was much better adapted to playing in cold northeastern weather. The average temperature in Waco, Texas was about twenty degrees higher than New York City's average.

The show was winding down as they announced some more minor bowls. One of the PR guys from our athletic department came in and tapped me on the shoulder.

"ESPN wants to do another interview with you, Kyle," Mike said. "Can you come back to the conference room, please?"

"Sure," I agreed. "Do you want Trevor, Chip and Damian too?"

"No, they want just you this time," Mike answered. I followed him down the hall to the conference room again. They redid my makeup. I changed back into a blue Penn State polo so I could represent the university properly. I had a seat across from Alan James in front of our Penn State logo background. The two of us watched the BCS Bowl show on the monitor as we waited.

I realized what was going on when Rece Davis announced, "The Heisman Trophy is the most prestigious award in college football. Each year the Heisman Trust awards the trophy to recognize the outstanding college football player whose performance best exhibits the pursuit of excellence with integrity. Winners epitomize great ability combined with diligence, perseverance, and hard work. The Heisman Trust has announced this year's finalists."

"Is that what this is about?" I gasped. Al just smiled and patted me on the shoulder.

"Of course it is," he answered. "Take a deep breath, Kyle, and smile. We are interviewing each of the five finalists, so it may be a few minutes after the announcement before we go live."

“To make the announcement for the Heisman finalists,” Rece said, “I turn things over to 1981 Heisman Trophy winner, Mr. Marcus Allen of the University of Southern California.”

“Thank you Rece,” Marcus said as his image appeared on the screen. “It gives me great pleasure on behalf of the Heisman Trust, to announce the five invitees to the Heisman Announcement Ceremony in New York City on Saturday night. The invitees, in alphabetical order, are: Edward W. Fritz, quarterback of the University of Florida Gators; William T. Johnson, defensive tackle with the University of Michigan Wolverines; Todd F. Landry, quarterback of the University of Texas Longhorns; Kyle D. Martin, wide receiver with the Pennsylvania State University Nittany Lions; and DeSean S. Reese, running back with the University of Iowa.”

The camera switched back to the main desk. Mark May took over. “William Johnson is from Detroit, Michigan. He has been a monster in the middle of the Wolverines’ line. William made 102 tackles, 14 sacks, 6 forced fumbles and had 29 tackles for a loss this season. He has been virtually unblockable.

“Texas Longhorn quarterback Todd F. Landry, from Nacogdoches, Texas, has completed 333 passes on 467 attempts for 4180 yards. He has made 37 touchdowns passing against 6 interceptions. His QB rating of 172.6 is the best in the FBS,” May continued.

“The next finalist is Penn State’s wide receiver Kyle D. Martin from Paradise, Pennsylvania,” Mark announced. We could hear the cheers next door in the auditorium as my teammates heard the announcement. “Kyle has broken nearly all receiving and all purpose yards records in the NCAA. Kyle gained 5,612 receiving yards in his career with the Nittany Lions, besting Jerry Rice’s twenty-eight year old record by nearly a thousand yards. He leads the FBS in yards receiving, yards per game and yards per catch this season. This versatile athlete has gained 11,097 yards in his career, returning kicks, punts, catching passes and running in Penn State’s wildcat offense. Kyle holds the record for most career touchdowns and most points scored by a non-kicker. He provides the spark that has driven the Lions to the BCS Championship game.”

“The Heisman is rarely won by defensive players or non running back or quarterback skill players,” Lou Holtz added. “William Johnson and Kyle Martin are such strong candidates that one of them may break the Heisman tradition.”

“Florida’s Edward W. Fritz, is also from Paradise, Pennsylvania,” Mark May reported. “Ed had a rough start in his early career with the Gators. He lost the battle for starting quarterback last season and sat on the bench for half the season. He was called on repeatedly to rescue his team in the second half of the season. His play helped put the Gators in the BCS Championship Game last season.”

“I believe that if Fritz had started that game, the Gators would have been national champions,” Lou Holtz interjected.

“Many in the Gator Nation agree with you, Lou,” Mark said. “Fritz won the starting spot this season and has played lights out. Ed has thrown the most completions, the most yards and most passing touchdowns in the FBS. Only a defensive breakdown yesterday kept the Gators out of a BCS bowl game. He has another year of eligibility. I can’t wait to see what he does for an encore next season.”

“Ed Fritz and Kyle Martin played on the same high school team,” Craig James added. “Can you imagine what that team was like?”

“My notes say that team won the Pennsylvania state championship,” Rece Davis said. “No surprise there.”

“The remaining finalist for the Heisman Memorial Trophy is Iowa running back, DeSean Reese, of Toledo, Ohio,” Mark May reported. Mark went on to extol DeSean’s contributions to the Hawkeye’s season. I agreed. The only reason we beat Iowa easily was that we got an early lead on them and forced them into passing. It would have been an entirely different game if DeSean Reese could have run the ball.

“It will be a few minutes, Kyle,” Al James told me. “We’re interviewing Reese first, then Todd Landry, William Johnson, Ed Fritz and finally you.”

“OK, I’m ready whenever,” I replied.

The interviews were brief, about thirty seconds each. William Johnson was asked about how he felt to be the only defensive player under consideration. Todd Landry was asked about his thoughts about the Longhorns’ chances of beating us. Todd was diplomatic, saying his team would have to work hard to beat us.

Emily Pearson, of ESPN, was in Gainesville with Ed. She asked, “Is there something in the water in Paradise, Pennsylvania? Your small hometown has produced three Heisman finalists in three seasons. What do you attribute this to?”

“It’s not in the water,” Ed answered. “Zack Hayes set the tone at our high school. We expect nothing but excellence. He taught us how to work out, practice and prepare to be our best. Coach... er, Kyle and I have just followed the excellent example of our mentor.” Ed flashed a big grin. “Do you mind a personal note?” Before Emily could respond, Ed pumped his fist and exclaimed, “Way to go Kyle. You deserve the Heisman.”

“I guess on that impromptu segue,” Mark May responded, “we go to Alan James, waiting with Kyle Martin in State College, Pennsylvania.”

“Thank you, Mark,” Al said. “Kyle, I know many of your teammates here at Penn State call you ‘Coach.’ I was surprised to hear your friend Ed Fritz use that nickname too. Can you tell us the origins of the nickname?”

“It started when I was a junior in high school,” I explained. “I blew out my knee, destroying my ACL. I was stuck on the sidelines on crutches. All I could do was help teach the other receivers on the team. That is when they started calling me ‘Coach.’ The nickname migrated up here to Penn State a couple years ago. I was working a football camp for high school kids for Coach Burton. We had four kids from back home at the camp. Coach Burton overheard the kids call me Coach. I guess it struck his funny bone. He started to call me Coach too. It didn’t take long after that for the nickname to spread to the whole Nittany Lions team.”

“How do you like your chances of beating your friend Ed Fritz for the Heisman?” Al asked.

“I don’t like my chances for winning the Heisman at all,” I responded. “Ed is much more likely to win than me. I will be in the front row cheering loudest if he wins. Ed deserves the honor.”

“Thank you for talking with me, Kyle,” Al said. “Good luck on Saturday night. Back to you, Rece.”

A tech unwired the microphone from me while another helped take off the makeup. I headed back to the auditorium for the end of the bowl selection show. Everyone in the room came around to offer their congratulations to me. It was amazing.

Chip, Trevor, Damian and I didn’t get back to our apartment until after 10:30 that evening. I found a voicemail from the Heisman Trust asking me to call that evening, regardless of time. They wanted to pin down reservations for my visit to New York City next Saturday night.

I called the number on the voicemail. The man from the Heisman Trust briefed me on the plans. They were paying for tickets for William, Todd, DeSean, Ed and me to fly up from Orlando on Friday morning to New York City. They would put us up in the Marriot Marquis Friday and Saturday nights. They would fly four of us home to our campuses on Sunday. The winner would stay for Monday night’s presentation dinner.

I called home to talk with Mom and Dad, in spite of the late hour. I gave them the number to call in the morning to arrange their transportation and stay in New York for the weekend. I also sent off an e-mail to Penny, asking her to get in touch. I wanted to get her there too, even if I had to pay her way.

I was surprised when my cell phone rang fifteen minutes later. It said the call was from Penny.

“Hi sweetie, I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon,” I said as I answered the call.

“I checked my e-mail just before I went to bed,” Penny explained. “Congratulations on being Heisman finalist. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you,” I answered. “What do you think? Can you make it to the award announcement on Saturday night? That shouldn’t conflict too much with you class schedule, especially considering we had planned to be together that weekend anyway.”

“I guess I can go,” Penny agreed. “The only problem I see is how I get to New York City.”

“Dad already agreed to give you a ride with the rest of my family,” I explained.

“What will I wear?” Penny gasped as she realized that this event was televised live. “I don’t have anything fancy here at school. I don’t do formal events here.”

“Coordinate with my mom,” I suggested. “She will be talking with our coordinator at the Heisman Trust. He’ll be able to explain how you should dress. My mom and your mom can arrange for my parents to bring you anything you need from home when they pick you up.”

“I guess,” Penny agreed. “I’m still stunned to hear about this. You and me... in New York City. It’s all so sudden.”

“Tell me about it,” I agreed. “I fly to New York with Coach Paterno, Coach Burton and our university president on Tuesday night for a banquet at the Waldorf-Astoria, come back for three classes on Wednesday and then fly to Disney World for Thursday. They’re flying Ed and me and the other finalists up to New York on Friday. The whole thing’s a whirlwind.”

“Ed? Our Ed?” Penny asked, clearly confused.

“Shit! I’m sorry,” I apologized. “I forgot to put that news in my e-mail. Ed is one of the Heisman finalists too.”

“Ed Fritz is a Heisman finalist too,” Penny repeated. “This is... is... just amazing.”

“I know,” I agreed. “I can’t wait for the weekend, so we can tour NYC together.”

“...and go shopping,” Penny added.

“...and go shopping,” I agreed.

“I have to get to bed, Kyle,” Penny said. “I have an eight o’clock class tomorrow. I love you.”

“I love you too, honey,” I agreed before we ended the call.

On Monday morning I confirmed my travel arrangements with my contact at the Heisman Trust. Sharing my room with Penny would cost me an extra \$300. I did not care. I wanted to share this experience with my girl.

I picked up my new suit and rental tux downtown before classes in the morning. I made sure the professors knew I would be missing their classes on Friday. Dr. Brennan was delighted at the honors I was receiving. She wished me the best of luck on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday nights.

Coach Burton had us run our fundamentals drills on Monday afternoon, like every other practice for the last two weeks. After dinner on Monday we would have a team briefing on our holiday plans and get our first look at the game plan against the Longhorns.

We would continue our afternoon practices through Friday, December 22nd. Anyone who had a scheduling conflict with a final between the 17th and 22nd was to see our academic staff to schedule a make-up time for the final.

The team was off between December 23rd and December 28th, when we would reassemble for a team dinner at the Training Table. We would fly to Phoenix on Saturday the 29th. We would have two a day practices Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. One a day practices with touring and time for fun would follow Wednesday through the following Sunday. We played the game on Monday, January 7th.

I gave Jason Turner a call Monday evening after Coach Burton's team meeting.

"Hey Jason, I wanted to warn you that I can't come home this weekend to help coach against Bishop McDevitt," I explained when he answered his phone.

"What? You're kidding!" Jason replied in alarm. "We're dead meat if we don't have you on the sideline."

"Umm..." I stuttered. I hadn't expected that reply. Jason laughed after a couple seconds.

"Well... duh!" Jason teased. "I certainly did not expect you to blow off the Heisman ceremony so you could come to a high school football game and coach for me. The football team's been buzzing all day with excitement. It's great you're getting recognized the way you should be. I hope you do better than Zack Hayes did two years ago."

"We'll see," I allowed. "I kind of doubt I will get it. Wide receivers almost never win it. I should be able to get down for the game after this one... assuming you guys take care of McDevitt."

“We WILL take care of McDevitt,” Jason promised. “You go and get yourself that Heisman. Next weekend you can join us. We’re planning to kick either Pine-Richland’s or Thomas Jefferson’s butts.”

“I’ll do that, Jason,” I agreed.

I delivered my travel bag and rental tux to Ann Marie at the front desk at the Lasch Building before class on Tuesday morning. Coach Burton would pick me up from my Education & Public Policy class to save time.

Boy, did heads turn outside the Waring Building when a long, black limo stopped at the curb after class that afternoon. The stares turned to shock when the window rolled down and Coach Paterno poked his head.

“Let’s go, Kyle,” Coach announced. “We need to hurry.”

“Sure, Coach,” I agreed. I hopped in the limo when the back door popped open. We pulled away as the students outside continued to stare in disbelief at the scene.

“Thanks for picking me up, Coach,” I said to Coach Burton.

“Have you met Graham?” Coach Paterno asked as I settled into a seat opposite our university president.

“No, I haven’t,” I replied.

“Kyle, this is Graham Spanier, president of Penn State University,” Coach Paterno said. I reached forward and shook his hands.

“It’s an honor to meet you, sir,” I said. “I’ve seen you down on stage speaking but never met you in person before.”

“That’s fair,” President Spanier replied. “I’ve sat in the stands and enjoyed watching you perform on the field in Beaver Stadium for four years without meeting you. It’s a pleasure to have you here at the university.”

“I love this place, sir,” I responded.

The four of us made small talk on the way to the State College Airport. We boarded a Learjet through a special gate. Five minutes after we arrived we were in the air and on the way to New York.

Coach Burton was kind enough to get me a box lunch since I hadn’t had time to get lunch after class. I ate my meal and then read my Art History assignment, to make up for the

class I was missing. President Spanier, Coach Paterno and Coach Burton talked for most of the half hour long flight.

We landed at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey. The National Football Foundation had a limo ready for the four of us when we got off the plane. We had just gotten on the New Jersey Turnpike when one of our cell phones buzzed for an incoming text.

“Whose is it?” Coach Burton joked as all four of us checked our phones.

“It’s me,” I said as I looked at my phone. It was a text message from Jeremy North. It read : “OMG BUTKUS HERE! CALL ME JEREMY”

“Butkus?” I said aloud, unintentionally. “What the...”

“Dick Butkus?” Coach Burton asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “All the message says is ‘Oh my God! Butkus here! Call me.’ It’s from my friend Jeremy North.”

“North?” Coach Burton said. “Your linebacker friend at Notre Dame?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“I know what that is,” Coach Paterno added in his low, gravelly voice. He gave me a big smile. “Your friend just learned he is being awarded the Dick Butkus Award for being the best linebacker in the country. Dick likes to surprise the recipients and show up on campus to inform them. He’s been to Penn State a few times.”

“I guess so,” I agreed, “...our school being Linebacker U and all.”

“Graham, Jeremy North is the starting middle linebacker at Notre Dame and a close friend of Kyle’s from back home,” Coach Burton explained. “So... what are you waiting for, Kyle? Call your friend.”

“OK,” I agreed. I dialed Jeremy’s number. He answered in two rings.

“Hey, Kyle,” Jeremy said. “I wondered who would call back first. You aren’t going to believe who I just met.”

“Dick Butkus,” I responded. “He personally showed up on campus and told you that you won the Dick Butkus Award for being the best linebacker in the country.”

“Boy, you sure spoiled my surprise,” Jeremy said. “How did you know all that?”

“I had a little help,” I conceded. “I’m with Coach Paterno and Coach Burton. Coach Paterno knew exactly what was going on when you texted. He has been through the awards process with Mr. Butkus a few times in the past.”

“Yeah, I guess he has,” Jeremy agreed. “What in the hell are you doing sitting around with your coaches?”

“We’re all in a limo on the Jersey Turnpike on the way to the National Football Foundation (NFF) Banquet,” I explained.

“That’s tonight?” Jeremy responded. “I forgot. Say hello to Tom Butler for me. He’s our starting left guard. He’s another one of the finalists for the Campbell award.”

“I’ll do that buddy,” I agreed. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.” Coach Burton motioned for me to give him the phone. “Hang on a second, someone else wants to congratulate you.” I handed my phone to Coach Burton.

“Hello Jeremy, this is Bob Burton,” coach said. “Congratulations on winning the Butkus Award. I’ve seen film of you playing. The award is well deserved.” Coach Burton handed my phone to Coach Paterno when he signaled for it.

“Hello Jeremy, this is Joe Paterno,” Coach Paterno said. “It’s been a few years since we talked. I still wish you had come to Penn State for me, but you seem to have done well at Notre Dame. Congratulations on the honor. Don’t forget what Dick told you about your responsibilities now. You need to give back and set the proper examples for your peers.”

President Spanier took my phone next. “Hello Jeremy, this is Graham Spanier, President of Penn State University. Congratulations on the award.” Mr. Spanier handed my phone back to me.

“It’s me again,” I said when I got my phone back.

“You have some posse riding shotgun with you,” Jeremy said. “Take care of yourself and good luck tonight. See you tomorrow.”

“See you, Jeremy,” I replied before ending the call.

Our driver said the trip from Teterboro to the Waldorf could take thirty minutes in light traffic. We didn’t have light traffic. The Jersey Turnpike and the Lincoln Tunnel were packed. The streets in Manhattan were worse. The first 220 miles of our trip took less time than the last thirteen. The limo pulled up in front of the Waldorf-Astoria around 4:30 in the afternoon.

The National Football Foundation (NFF) had a suite reserved for us to leave our things in and to clean up and dress in. Each of us showered and changed into our tuxedos before

heading down to the banquet room. After we checked in, Coach Paterno was sent off to coordinate his presentation that evening. I was sent to hang out with the other finalists.

I got to meet Jeremy's friend, Tom Butler. We had a nice talk while we waited for all the finalists to arrive. I didn't know any of the other guys. Photographers took pictures of all of us and then did individual photos of each finalist. It was close to 7:00 pm when they escorted us to our tables. Mom, Dad, Coach Burton and President Spanier were already seated when I got there. Coach Paterno was seated up front with the other presenters.

I gave Mom a hug when I found her. Dad got a handshake. He looked nice in his tux. The last time the two of us were dressed this way was at Will's wedding. The next wedding in our family would probably be next occasion for us to dress up again. Hopefully that day wouldn't be too far in the future.

I was able to coordinate details of Thursday's trip and Saturday's award show with my parents. They were flying down to Orlando tomorrow morning. They had a flight from there to New York on Friday. Liz was driving from Paradise to Philadelphia after school on Friday and meeting Will, Abby and Penny at Will and Abby's apartment. They were driving up to New York City Friday evening.

I gave Mom and Dad the good news of Jeremy earning the Butkus Award. They were pleased for my friend. The Emcee called forward a minister to give the invocation. Dinner was served after that. The food was good, but not that spectacular. They served a choice of garlic and herb stuffed chicken breasts with red wine sausage risotto or ginger crusted salmon. Everyone except President Spanier had the chicken. They topped the meal off with a crumb topped cherry tart. It was excellent.

The ceremony started after the wait staff cleared the dishes. The program began with announcement of this year's class of college hall of fame inductees. Twelve men were inducted into the hall, along with two coaches. Awards were presented to the Top athletic administrator, broadcaster and football referee.

The National Scholar-Athlete awards were the last thing on the agenda. I watched as each finalist was called up and presented with his award. Each guy gave brief remarks, much briefer than the ones in my pocket. I pulled my speech out and started making notes on the back so I would be ready when it was my turn.

Each finalist stayed up on the dais as they were called forward for their award. I started counting the finalists across the stage. Twelve... thirteen... fourteen... I stopped working on my alternate short speech when Doug Flutie stood up and announced the fifteenth finalist. Coach Paterno looked my way and gave me a big smile.

Coach Burton leaned in and whispered, "Congratulations, Coach. I'm so proud of you."

"What's going on?" Mom whispered to Dad.

“Fifteen finalists are on the stage now,” Dad explained sotto voce. “The only award left is the Campbell Award. Kyle won it.”

“I’m so proud of you, son,” Mom gushed. “This is wonderful.”

Doug Flutie finished presenting his \$18,000 scholarship award to Tom Butler and walked across the dais. He tapped Coach Paterno on the shoulder as he passed him. “You’re turn, Coach.”

Coach Paterno walked slowly to the podium. “It’s a hell of a thing to drag an old man away from his wife and warm, comfortable house on a cold December night. I was asked to present the Pearce/Paterno Scholarship to a fine young man from my university. I get here this evening and they tell me the award is off.”

Coach Paterno gestured with both hands in the air. “What’s an old man to do?” He gave the audience a big grin. “Seriously, it is wonderful for a New York born and raised boy like me to come back here for this final presentation tonight. The committee placated me by asking me to present the final award this evening. It is a distinct honor and privilege to make this presentation to a young man I have known for six years. Please turn your attention to the screen on either side of the stage to learn more about this year’s William V. Campbell Trophy winner.”

“Kyle David Martin, Wide Receiver of the Pennsylvania State University. Secondary Education Major with a GPA of 3.68,” the P.A. system announced as my picture filled two huge screens on each side of the stage. The announcer read my biography as various shots of me in high school and college appeared on the screens. After the biography was done, they showed a clip of Coach Caffrey discussing my high school football career. They showed various clips of me playing for the Wolverines as Coach talked about me.

John Holloway, the director of the scout camp where I worked for seven summers, appeared in the next clip. John talked about my work as a merit badge counselor and assistant aquatic director for the camp. He briefly commended me for saving the scout’s life last summer. The scout section concluded with a picture of Ed, Jeremy, Hal and me at our Eagle Court of Honor. “Kyle David Martin, Eagle Scout and still an assistant scoutmaster of Boy Scout Troop 312 in Paradise, Pennsylvania.”

A clip of Deborah Morgan, one of our school’s Thon committee organizers, appeared next. She talked about how I helped organize the football team’s Thon effort and turned the team into an active fundraising participant. She credited the team with raising \$325,345 over the past three years and then thanked me for being the key promoter on our team that pushed us to that large figure.

The next clip was from Dr. Brennan. She talked about my academic career. “I had this tall, muscular young man walk into my introductory American History overview course three years ago. I really took notice of him later in the semester when he prepared a term paper on two local Mexican War heroes. This young sophomore turned in a graduate,

nearly professional level paper for an introductory history course. This is unheard of, even by history majors. I have been actively recruiting Kyle to switch his major and join our History Department since then, without success. I know Kyle will make an amazing high school history teacher when his football career is over.”

The announcer intoned, “Kyle David Martin, this year’s National Scholar/Athlete and winner of the William V. Campbell Trophy.”

Coach Paterno announced, “Kyle, would you please join me on stage.” I made my way forward to the applause of the fifteen hundred people jamming the ballroom. Coach Paterno pumped my hand up and down as I approached the podium.

“I’m so proud of you, Kyle,” Coach said, out of range of the microphone. “I am so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Coach,” I replied. I stepped up to the podium, cleared my throat and set my speech on the podium.

“Wow!” I began, shaking my head. “I’m humbled by this honor. I want to thank Walter Caffrey, the varsity football coach at Paradise for finding a tall, skinny eighth grade kid and recruiting me to try out for football. I would not have done it without Coach’s gentle shove. I want to thank young Zack Hayes and Mike Wagner, who gave up time that whole summer to try to turn a green kid into a passable wide receiver.

“I want to thank my high school teammates for their dedication and assistance as we turned our team into a local powerhouse. I owe a debt of gratitude to Coach Joe Paterno, who recognized my talent and recruited me to go to Penn State. I also owe Coach Robert Burton for his constant tutelage to help me learn to play and then excel as a college wide receiver.

“I want to thank my offensive coordinator, John Schroeder, who worked with me for three seasons. I also want to thank Paul Adams, my receivers coach for three seasons and now my offensive coordinator. I have learned so much from those two men. I also want to thank Walter Caffrey again. Coach Caffrey rejoined me at Penn State last January and has been my mentor and teacher this past season as my receivers coach.

I want to thank my teammates Zack Hayes and Aaron Morano, who tutored me, mentored me and kicked my backside when needed and help turn me into a sound college football player. I want to thank Anders Voight, first my teammate for two years and then a graduate assistant coach for the past two years. Anders’ assistance has been invaluable.

“I could not have envisioned this night three and a half years ago. My freshman fall, I received a failing grade in a calculus mid-term. The week before that, I had performed poorly against Ohio State. I personally caused an interception with my error. I almost blew what turned out to be the game winning touchdown play by not knowing what play

Zack Hayes wanted to run. I was afraid I was going to be kicked off the team, lose my scholarship and be sent home in academic disgrace.

“In what was undoubtedly my darkest hours at Penn State, I went in to see Coach Paterno. Coach sat me down and spent an hour talking with me about my goals, my responsibilities to the team and myself and then taught me how to prioritize and organize myself so I could accomplish everything I was expected to do. Coach lined up tutoring that helped me pull my F in calculus up to a C before the end of the semester. His advice allowed me to get myself organized and be successful, academically and athletically.

“Our coaches at Penn State always emphasize that our academic work is our number one priority.” I gave the audience a smile and chuckled. “Of course, football is priority 1A. We at Penn State believe there is no conflict between being a successful athlete and being a successful scholar. It is the right way to do things.

“In five months I will walk across the stage and receive my degree in secondary education. I wish to dedicate my life to furthering both scholarship and athletics among our youth. There is no more noble calling.

“I want to recognize my parents for their constant support of my football obsession. They’ve driven me to games and practices, picked me up afterward. They’ve attended countless games over the past eight seasons. Thank you, Dad. Thank you, Mom.” I threw a kiss to Mom.

“Last, I would like to thank the National Football Foundation for recognizing me tonight. I promise to do my best to uphold the honor of this award.”

Two assistants carried the massive Campbell Trophy out to me. The trophy showed of a kicker following through after the kick. Coach Paterno shook my hand before the two assistants handed me the trophy. I hoisted it up even though it weighed close to twenty-five pounds. I stepped back and joined the semi-circle of my fellow scholar/athletes while the emcee concluded the evening.

The next half hour was a whirl of photographs, meeting people and accepting congratulations. I met former players, coaches, broadcasters and other celebrities. Coach Paterno introduced me to John Cappelletti, Penn State’s only Heisman winner. Coach Burton introduced me to his friend John Shaffer, the quarterback on the 1986 national championship team. Coach Burton had been John’s backup. John worked in finance in New York City.

The most memorable meeting for me was with Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable, a.k.a. Bill Cosby. I’ve always loved his work. I was surprised when Mr. Cosby commented that he may see me on campus next semester.

“Umm... I won’t be at State College next semester,” I explained. “I’m student teaching in...”

“Philly,” Mr. Cosby stated. “Coach Golden told me. I may bump into you at Edberg-Olson. I visit occasionally to fire up our troops.”

“Thanks, sir,” I stammered. “I’d love to talk with you more.”

“Good luck Saturday night with the Heisman, son,” Bill said, shaking my hand again. “I’ll see you around town.”

It took me a bit to collect myself again before I remembered. The Temple sweatshirts he wore on the TV and then I remembered stories in the Inquirer. Bill Cosby was a Temple grad and a huge Owls fan.

Coach Burton rescued me from the throng after about half an hour of shmoozing. I wished Mom and Dad good night. They were staying at the Waldorf for the night before flying down to Orlando tomorrow morning.

“You ready to go, Coach?” Coach Burton asked. “We can stop by the suite so you can change if you need to.”

“I’m happy to go back to campus the way I am,” I replied. “I can stand the monkey suit for another hour or two. Anyway, it’s getting late. Let’s hit the road.”

“It is way past my bedtime,” Coach Paterno added.

“Sleep on the plane, Joe,” Coach Burton replied.

We caught up with President Spanier and headed for our ride to the airport. The traffic was light. Our limo dropped us off at Teterboro forty minutes later. We loaded our bags and hopped aboard. The jet was airborne within a few minutes. I slept most of the way back to State College.

I had a brain storm before I fell asleep. New York City... world class restaurants... time with Penny... I had the perfect plan to make sure the 8th of December would be a day I would remember for the rest of my life.

(To be continued)

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Trevor was finishing breakfast when I got up. He and Shawn Byrd were heading down to Orlando in the morning. Mitch Jackson and I would catch up to them later in the day, after my classes and Mitch's afternoon lab.

The staff at the Daily Collegian must have had warning about the Campbell. They used half the front page of our college's daily paper to report about my night in New York City. People stopped me and congratulated me everywhere I went that morning.

I dropped my tux off at the rental shop and packed my bags for the next four nights. Professor Reed recognized me at the beginning of my English Short Story class. I grabbed some lunch and headed for American Military History.

"Congratulations, Kyle," Dr. Brennan said as I walked into the classroom. "Top scholar/athlete in the country... it certainly is a well deserved award."

"Thank you, Doctor," I answered. "Thank you for doing the nice film clip for the presentation last night. I appreciated what you said."

"It was from the heart, Kyle," Dr. Brennan responded. She gave me a big smile. "I'm going to continue to recruit you for the department. You would make a hell of a historian."

"It's tempting but I love teaching," I replied. "I want to be able to do that too."

"Historians can teach," Dr. Brennan responded. "I teach. I love to teach."

"But you don't have time after class to go over and coach the football team too," I countered. "I will keep your offer in mind but I think I'm on the right path."

Dr. Brennan gave me a big grin. "Can't blame a girl for trying."

Dr. Brennan's lecture for the day was on the U. S. Army post-Vietnam and how it transformed itself from the nearly dysfunctional corps based on draftees to the all volunteer force that liberated Kuwait in 1991. It was an interesting lecture.

I headed straight back to my apartment. I picked up one more small package before Mitch arrived. I had a brainstorm on the plane ride home last night.

Penny and I would be spending the weekend in New York City. The city had a hundred excellent restaurants where we could have an intimate lunch. I could have the maitre d' chill his best champagne. It could be the perfect romantic spot for me to propose to Penny.

I knew from my team's schedule, that I would not have time to propose properly over Christmas. I would be busy on the 22nd moving my things from State College to Philadelphia. The 24th and 25th were too busy with family activities. I wanted my proposal to be intimate and romantic. I wasn't certain I would find time after Christmas before I had to return to campus for the trip to Arizona.

The trip to New York may be the one chance I have until after our bowl game. The ring went in my carry-on bag, where I could keep an eye on it. I brought my car down to the parking lot nearest to my apartment and loaded my bags in the back. Mitch arrived a few minutes later.

"Ready to go, Coach?" Mitch greeted me as he lugged his suitcase towards my front door.

"Let's do it," I agreed.

We needed to hurry. Our flight left State College at four o'clock. We had an hour and forty-five minutes to get there, check in, go through security and board our plane. Thank God for small airports. We made it with time to spare.

The commuter plane delivered us to Philly in almost exactly one hour. Our gate was in Terminal F. We had sixty minutes to get dinner and get over to Terminal B for our flight down to Florida. We had to hustle.

"Where do you want to eat, Coach?" Mitch asked. "You're from this end of the state. What do you recommend?" Mitch grew up in Rochester, Pa., northwest of Pittsburgh.

Just as he asked, I spotted a bright red and yellow sign for Chickie's and Pete's and chuckled. "That was a timely question. I suggest Chickie's and Pete's. I've eaten at their main restaurant near the Phillies' ballpark. I'm sure they'll have decent food here too. Make sure you order the crab fries. They're excellent."

We stopped in and grabbed cheese steaks and crab fries to go. The food was still warm and relatively tasty after we lugged it over to Terminal B and checked in for our flight south. The airport version of Chickie's and Pete's wasn't as good as the south Philly version, but it probably was as good as anything in the airport. Our plane started boarding around 5:30 pm.

I worked my way through tomorrow's chapters for Education and Public Policy on the two hour and forty minute flight down to Orlando. We got to baggage claim around 9:30 pm. We found a young man in an ESPN T-shirt holding a sign that said: "Burkholder, Jackson, Kaapana, Martin, Reese & Wilkins."

Eldon Burkholder was standing by the man from ESPN. I greeted my former rival warmly. The man from ESPN introduced himself as Tom. He was one of the production

assistants for the broadcast. Mitch and I grabbed our bags and followed Tom and Eldon down to the baggage claim area in search of the other guests. DeSean Reese's flight from Iowa (via Atlanta) came in next.

Tom checked and found out Malo Kaapana and Marshon Wilkins flight from LA made it on time to Dallas. The airline was dealing with some maintenance problems so they were stuck in Dallas. Tom called his boss, who said to bring us over to the hotel. Just after Tom called, the flight board changed and updated with an arrival time for their flight about thirty minutes from then. Tom decided we should wait and get everyone at the same time.

DeSean, Mitch, Eldon and I killed time talking while we waited for the other ESPN guests. We watched the escalator down to our level when the flight board showed the flight from Dallas was at its gate, around 11:15 pm. A 6'-8", 300 pound defensive tackle, black as night and a 6'-0", 220 pound Polynesian tailback were easy to pick out in the crowd when we saw them come down the escalator.

Tom introduced Malo and Marshon around the circle of guests while we waited for their luggage. We helped them get everything outside and into our van. The trip to Disney World took about half an hour. The van dropped us off in front of the Disney Boardwalk Inn. Bell-hops came immediately to bring our luggage inside.

Tom stayed with us as we checked in. He handed out schedules for us and warned us the breakfast buffet would be open from eight to nine tomorrow morning. A bellhop helped me get my luggage to the room.

The room was dark when I stepped inside. I flipped on the light, hoping I wouldn't wake Trevor.

"About time you got here," Trevor announced from under his covers. "Flight trouble?"

"Sorry if I woke you," I answered.

"No, I wasn't asleep yet," Trevor answered.

"Mitch and I didn't have trouble," I explained. "It was Malo Kaapana and Marshon Wilkins. Their flight was stuck in Dallas for awhile."

"That sucks," Trevor commented. "Go ahead and get your things settled."

I hung my suits and good clothes in the closet and did my business in the bathroom. I stripped and hopped in bed, turning out the light at the nightstand.

I let out a sigh. "It will be nice to relax tomorrow. The last twenty-four hours have been so hectic." That drew a laugh from Trevor.

“Didn’t you read your schedule?” Trevor asked. “Fun day was today. ESPN has us booked with a bunch of interviews and things tomorrow.”

“Shit!” I exclaimed. “Oh well, I still should have some free time on Friday after I get to New York. Did you run into anyone today?”

“Shawn and I hooked up with Ed, Eric, Jeremy and Hal,” Trevor answered. “We’re meeting for breakfast at 8:30 tomorrow.”

“That’s cool,” I agreed. “Good night, Trev. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Trevor, Shawn, Mitch and I bumped into Mom and Dad on the way down to breakfast. I introduced my parents to Mitch, who they had never met. They let us know Ed, Eric, Jeremy and Hal were downstairs already, waiting on us.

Mom and Dad were catching a shuttle over to Epcot, where they planned to spend the day. The parents didn’t have any time commitments on their schedule the way the athletes did. We agreed to meet for dinner that evening. My parents headed off for their adventure. I followed my friends to the dining room.

“Hey, man, it’s good to see you,” Ed gushed as we shook hands. We pulled in tight, slapping each other’s back as we shook. “It’s been too long.”

“It has been,” I agreed as we separated.

“Congratulations on the Campbell, Coach,” Jeremy added. “That is a well deserved honor.” My other friends at the table seconded Jeremy’s sentiments. I thanked them.

Trevor, Shawn, Mitch and I headed through the buffet line for our breakfast. Ed, Eric, Jeremy and Hal already had their food. I noticed as I headed back to our table that some of the football players were sitting with their parents. More were sitting alone or with one other player, most likely their roommate last night. I was lucky to have so many friends here for the awards ceremony.

My friends and I talked about how our seasons went as we ate. Eldon Burkholder and DeSean Reese walked by as we were talking. I invited them to join our crew.

“Do you know everybody?” I asked Eldon as he sat down beside Trevor and me.

“I know you guys from Penn State,” Eldon answered.

“This is Ed Fritz, of the Florida Gators,” I said, indicating Ed. “Beside him is his roommate Eric Peters. Ed lives two doors down the street from me back in Lancaster County, next door to my girlfriend.” Ed and Eric shook hands with Eldon and DeSean.

“This is Jeremy North, who plays for...” I explained.

“...for Notre Dame,” DeSean said. “I know who Jeremy is.”

“Jeremy lives directly behind my girlfriend’s house,” I continued. “This is Hal Long. Hal lives down the street from Jeremy. He kicks for Rutgers.” Jeremy and Hal greeted the newcomers.

“DeSean, I’m sure you know Trevor, Shawn and Mitch from Penn State,” I said.

“Shawn and I have run into each other a few times over the past four years,” DeSean said with a smile. “Trevor and I... well, we have run into each other many, many times.”

“Eldon has a Lancaster County connection guys,” I said. “His ancestors moved from Lancaster County out to Ohio a few generations ago.”

“That’s no surprise with a name like Burkholder,” Jeremy noted.

My friends welcomed our compatriots to our table. Everyone at the table was going to a bowl. DeSean was heading for the Outback Bowl, Eldon to the Rose Bowl, Jeremy to the Fiesta Bowl and Ed for the Capital One Bowl. Even Hal’s 6-6 Scarlet Knights managed to squeeze into the BBVA Compass Bowl.

Ed was not real pleased his team was shut out of the BCS bowl games. He felt that his team should be in the Fiesta instead of Jeremy’s team, since the Gators ranked sixth and the Fighting Irish ranked eighth. Jeremy disagreed. Notre Dame’s agreement with the BCS stipulated that the Irish automatically qualified for a BCS bowl if they finished in the top eight. The SEC was guaranteed one automatic qualifier. This year that was Alabama, based on their last second victory over the Gators.

Ed’s, Jeremy’s, Hal’s and my parents stopped by our table. “We’re taking a water taxi over to Epcot,” Mr. North explained.

“We looked over your schedules, guys,” Mom added. “All of you are going to busy during the day with interviews and such. We’ll catch up to you for dinner. How does that sound?”

The four of us agreed. Our parents headed off for the day. We finished up breakfast and then headed off for our morning. All finalists had a briefing at 9:30 am. From 10:30 to 11:30 all finalists were available for press interviews. The interview questions were routine.

The same crowd of friends and acquaintances gathered again at lunch. Jeremy entertained us with the complete story of his meeting with Dick Butkus. Coach Kelly called Jeremy into the Guglielmino Center, Notre Dame’s equivalent of our Lasch

Building. When Jeremy got to Coach Kelly's office in the "Gug," he found Dick Butkus waiting for him. Dick spent the next hour talking with him. Dick emphasized the responsibility Jeremy bore due to this honor. He needed to set the example for his teammates. Dick talked about the importance of character and integrity. Dick expected Jeremy to do the right thing in good times and bad. He talked about his "I Play Clean" campaign to combat steroid and other drug use in football. Jeremy said the talk reminded him of our Eagle Charge from the night Jeremy, Ed, Hal and I received our Eagle Award.

After lunch everyone was scheduled to film interviews with the ESPN staff for the Red Carpet show that ESPN would show prior to the awards show. I was scheduled for four different segments. The first would include Eric, me and Jamaal Wallace from South Carolina, the three finalists for the Biletnikoff Award. In the second they wanted the Maxwell finalists. I would be interviewed with William Johnson and Todd Landry. The third interview included Ed, me, William, Todd and DeSean Reese, the five Heisman finalists.

ESPN was doing an unusual interview set that they normally didn't do as a prelude to the awards show. They wanted to interview Ed, Jeremy, Hal and me together to talk about growing up in Paradise and playing for the Wolverines. This one would be the last interview for the day.

The Biletnikoff interview was scheduled for 1:15 pm, immediately after lunch. Eric and I walked over to the interview site. ESPN erected an open backed stage between the Atlantic City Dance Hall, where the awards show would be in the evening and the end of the Boardwalk Inn, incongruously labeled "Dancing Pianos." I didn't know what that was about.

The stage was set so the boardwalk and lake would provide a backdrop for the interviews. Someone had done their homework choosing this site. It was an excellent setting.

Kirk Herbstreit welcomed us to the set when Eric and I arrived. He would be doing the interview. A couple makeup people gave us a light dusting. The techs clipped on lapel microphones. Kirk invited us to have seats while we waited on Jamaal Wallace. Eric and I talked about our experiences this season as we waited.

"You and Penny coming down this spring?" Eric asked after we exhausted football topics.

"I don't know," I replied. "We haven't talked about it."

"I missed having you guys around last break," Eric answered. "You and Penny – Ed tells me the two of you were hot and heavy in high school."

Kirk cocked his head and gave the two of us a funny look. "Excuse me," he asked politely. "Do the two of you know each other?"

“Sure,” Eric answered. “We’ve done spring break together for a couple years. After all, Ed Fritz is my roommate.”

“...and my neighbor and best friend,” I added.

“Two wide receivers getting together... is there any rivalry between the two of you?” Kirk asked.

“No,” I answered.

“Why should there be?” Eric added. “Our teams haven’t played each other in the past four years.”

“Well, if you don’t count the beach football game when we were freshmen,” I said. “Anyway, Eric and I were on the same team so there wasn’t any rivalry then.”

“I cheer for the Nittany Lions if I happen to see them on TV,” Eric said.

“I do the same. Sorry about last Saturday’s game, man,” I added. “I was rooting for you guys to win.”

Jamaal Wallace finished up with makeup and sound and joined us on the set. Kirk and Eric greeted Jamaal. Eric introduced me. He knew Jamaal from their annual games. Both teams were in the Eastern Division of the SEC.

The director let us know they were ready to start the interview.

“I have with me three of the top wide receivers in college football,” Kirk announced as the interview began. “To my left is Jamaal Wallace from the University of South Carolina. Jamaal leads the FBS in receptions with 109, gaining 1643 yards and 17 touchdowns in twelve games this season. To my immediate right I have Eric Peters from the University of Florida. Eric leads the FBS in receiving touchdowns with 22. He has caught 91 passes for 1687 yards in his thirteen games.

“To Eric’s right I have Kyle Martin from the Pennsylvania State University. Kyle holds the FBS season record for receiving yards with 1712 yards from scrimmage on 82 catches. Kyle has 21 touchdown catches this season in twelve games. Kyle also holds the NCAA career yards receiving, touchdowns receiving and yards per game records, having bested Hall of Famer Jerry Rice by almost a thousand yards.

“I want to thank the three of you for joining me today,” Kirk said, concluding his intro. We acknowledged his thanks. “Let’s talk a moment about the current state of college football and the FBS. Do you favor the current BCS system or would college football be better off with playoffs? Jamaal?”

“I guess the BCS system is fair,” Jamaal replied. “Of course I wish my team were playing in a BCS bowl instead of the Gator Bowl but we got the spot we deserved. The losses to Kentucky and Eric’s Gators still hurt.”

“Eric, what do you think?” Kirk asked.

“The BCS system has been very good to my school over the last decade,” Eric answered. “This season reminds me of the value of a playoff system. Despite that, I think it would be better for the teams, the players and the fans if we had a playoff system. I say this with all respect to Alabama, but if we played them again, we would beat them. I believe my team is one of the best in the nation and playoffs would allow us to show exactly what we are capable of.”

“With a berth set in the national championship game, I bet you disagree, Kyle,” Kirk said. “What do you think?”

“Surprise! I agree completely with Eric,” I replied. “My support for a playoff system goes back two years. I say this with all respect to the USC Trojans and my good friend Brady Rasmussen. If it weren’t for that fluke catch at the end of the game at your alma mater, Kirk, we would have been able to show the country we were the best team in the nation. We WOULD have beaten Brady’s Trojans, if we had the chance. With a playoff system, the purpose of your season won’t evaporate before you’re half done the season.”

“Do you see it happening in the next few years, Kyle?” Kirk asked.

“I don’t see it happening in my lifetime,” I answered. “The bowls make too much money for them to change. We were stuck two years ago by the system. Kirk, your old team won on a very good, though fluke play that season. That loss to Ohio State eliminated us from national championship contention at midseason. The third and fourth year players this season were determined not to let that happen again. We decided we needed a perfect record this season if we wanted to reach our goals.”

“Are you going to beat Texas?” Kirk asked. “Care to make a guarantee?” I knew from Kirk’s smile that he was teasing.

“I’m guaranteeing that my team will play hard and give Texas the fight of their lives,” I answered. “May the best team win.”

“That’s fair,” Kirk agreed. “Good luck with your game.”

The interview turned to more conventional topics. Eric, Jamaal and I talked about our team’s style of offense.

“I have one final question for the three of you,” Kirk said. “Playing wide receiver, you’re intimately familiar with quarterback play. Handicap tonight’s O’Brien Award. I’ll put

you on the spot first, Eric. Who's the best quarterback – Ed Fritz, Nick Wilson or Todd Landry?"

"I haven't seen Wilson or Landry play, so I guess I'll be a homer," Eric replied. "I can't imagine anyone being better than Ed. I think Ed deserves the O'Brien."

"Jamaal?" Kirk asked.

"I haven't seen any Michigan games," Jamaal answered. "I did watch the Texas-Nebraska game last weekend. Landry looked really good last Saturday. I also watched on the sidelines as Ed and Eric's team trashed mine three weeks ago. I think I'll have to go with Fritz. He oughta win the award."

"How about you, Kyle?" Kirk asked. "Are you going to make it unanimous?"

"It's a tight race," I answered. "I watched Nick Wilson play my team twice since he became the starter. He is very good and I consider him a friend too. I haven't had much time to watch video of Texas yet, but Todd looked very good from the hour of film I managed to look at this week. Eric is right about my buddy. He is an excellent quarterback. I'll cheer if Ed wins. Unfortunately the award voters missed another candidate. Chip Brinton from my team is every bit as good as Ed, Nick Wilson or Todd Landry. He should be down here too."

"Are you being diplomatic or do you really believe that?" Kirk asked. "I understand Chip is your roommate."

"Chip is excellent at protecting the ball," I explained. "He's only thrown eight interceptions in the whole season. He's near the top in the country in passing yards, especially for someone who gets pulled in the second half frequently when we blow out opponents. His passing yards per completion rate is one of the best in the country. His QB rating is almost exactly the same as Ed's. I've watched the two of them standing side by side on the practice field. Chip is every bit Ed's equal as a quarterback."

"Where did you see them practicing side by side?" Kirk asked.

"All three of us worked as counselors at a Scout camp two summers ago," I explained. "Ed, Chip and I worked out and ran passing drills with some younger guys. They're very similar and both are excellent quarterbacks."

Kirk leaned over towards me as the camera zoomed in. "I'll let you in on a secret, Kyle," Kirk explained. "I have seen the voting tally for the O'Brien. I won't say who number three is, but Chip Brinton missed by a few votes beating out this year's number three vote getter."

"I'll make sure Chip knows that," I responded.

“I want to thank the three of you for sitting down with me,” Kirk said. “Good luck with the Biletnikoff tonight.”

The technicians removed our makeup and collected the clip-on microphones. Eric and I called our friends to see where they were. We met them down the boardwalk at the ESPN bar. They were hanging out waiting their turns to be interviewed.

Hal was up next for interviews. Mitch followed twenty minutes later. Shawn and Eldon, then DeSean and then Trevor headed over for their interviews. The rest of us hung out on the boardwalk, at the ESPN café, the arcade or the hotel lobby while we waited our turns.

I slipped away from the group for half an hour and went back to my room. I spent the time on the computer searching for romantic restaurants in Manhattan. I found a few with good reviews. I called around, getting reservations for two at Gramercy Tavern. I headed back downstairs, finding my friends at the arcade.

Ed headed over before Trevor returned for the interview with him, Todd Landry and Nick Wilson. I headed over to the prep area about twenty minutes behind Ed for my Maxwell Award finalist interview.

I met William Johnson in the makeup area. “Good to see you, William,” I said as I met my some-time friend. I shook his hand.

“Martin,” William acknowledged with a smile. Every time since I first met him four years ago on Michigan’s campus when we were doing our official visits, William was quiet and reserved... and quite unlike the next arrival.

“You must be Kyle Martin!” a voice boomed off to my side. I turned and found Todd Landry with a big grin on his face and hand extended. Todd pumped my hand up and down as he exclaimed, “Damn good to meet you, Kyle. Your buddy Eddie has some good things to say about you.”

“Thank you... thank you, Todd,” I answered as he continued to pump my hand up and down.

“Mikey said some mighty nice things about ‘cha,” Todd declared.

“Mikey?” I queried as Todd finally stopped shaking my hand.

“Johanson... you know... he played with you in high school,” Todd explained.

“Oh, Mike... yes, he’s a good cornerback,” I replied. “I haven’t spoken with Mike since last June when he headed back to campus for summer term.” Todd turned towards William and gave him another ear to ear grin.

“Big Bill!” Todd enthused as he extended his hand. William gave Todd a polite smile as they shook hands a couple ups and downs. “You’re a big’in.” William continued the polite smile and stiffened his arm after a couple more pumps.

“Nice to meet you,” William acknowledged.

“Billy, you’re ‘most big enough to rope a steer without a horse,” Todd continued as he tried to continue to shake William’s hand. After a few seconds he gave up the effort.

“Almost ready?” Todd asked. “Kirk is itchin’ to get ridin’ on this interview.” Todd headed outside. William rolled his eyes. I smiled and nodded agreement. Todd was so overblown he seemed like a caricature of a boisterous, obnoxious Texan. William and I finished up and headed outside to join Kirk Herbstreit and Todd.

William and I took seats on the stools on the set when we got outside. Kirk greeted us informally. All of us had done previous interview segments that afternoon, so we didn’t need further briefing. The director signaled us to start.

Kirk kept most of the questions easy. He hit me with the first hard question.

“Kyle, what attributes would you expect the college player of the year to have?” Kirk asked.

“Player of the year...” I pondered momentarily. “I guess I would say the player should be the most dominant player on his team... the player you spend the most time trying to defend, to block or to neutralize in our game plan.” I paused and frowned. I knew I wasn’t expressing what I meant clearly. “The best way to illustrate what I mean is with an example. I don’t want to put you on the spot, William. Do you mind being my example?”

William smiled and nodded his agreement as he said, “OK,” quietly.

“When my team played William’s earlier this fall, every aspect of our game plan was influenced by William,” I explained. “Obviously our offensive plan had to account for him. We knew he would dominate our offensive linemen, so we assigned two to block him and had our running back available to help too. We ran away from his position. We kept our passing routes short so William wouldn’t have time to catch our quarterback.

“William influenced our defensive plan too. We knew we needed to keep Michigan’s explosive offense slowed down because William was going to make it hard for us to score. Our special teams had to play extra hard to gain as much yardage as possible for the offense before William took the field. Every single thing we did that day was keyed on William.”

“Kyle’s bein’ shy,” Todd interjected. “I been studin’ film of Penn State this week. When we git our defensive plan together, he’s goin’ to be nigh on impossible to stop. Everybody knows he’s faster ‘n a jack rabbit and can jump as high too.”

I tried not to roll my eyes as I listened to this guy. Could he really be as much of a hick as he sounded?

“Kyle runs sharp, crisp routes,” Todd continued. “He goes over the middle, works the short game well and you can’t press him at the line. He’s so big you’ll get beaten fast that way. Doesn’t matter whether you play zone or man, he’ll be on the right spot at the right time and catch nearly every ball nearby. You put three guys on him to cover him and the other receivers will gut you. I don’t know how’n we gonna stop Kyle’s team.

“Are you endorsing Kyle for the Maxwell?” Kirk asked Todd.

“All I know is that anyone who beats a hall of fame receiver’s career records has got to be darn good,” Todd answered. “Jerry Rice is acknowledged as the best pro receiver ever and Kyle’s done beat him by a thousand yards.”

Kirk moved on to a different question. While Todd and Kirk talked, I thought about the distinct change in voice that came over Todd when he talked about football. He lost that southern drawl. I glanced over at William while Todd drawled on about how great high school football was in Texas. Landry definitely was a piece of work.

When the Maxwell interview was over, Todd took off for a minute. William looked over at me and gave me a smile when Kirk stepped off stage.

“Good luck, Martin,” William said. “You gotta play ‘im again. I don’t see him until we hit the NFL.” William got a big grin. “It’d be a shame if I fell on ‘im, wouldn’t it?”

“It’d be a real shame,” I agreed. “Don’t be too obvious. You don’t want to cost your team fifteen yards for roughing the passer.”

“I can do that,” William responded. He gave me a wink. “A guy does get tripped sometimes back there.”

“Good luck at the Outback,” I said. “Don’t fall on my friend Ed.”

“Fritz is OK,” William agreed. “I’ll get in his face but I won’t hurt him... much.”

“Ed will appreciate that,” I answered.

“Take down that cowboy,” William said. “Beat those Longhorns.”

I was surprised. That was the longest conversation I’d ever had with him, since we met four years ago on Michigan’s campus as high school seniors. Ed Fritz and DeSean Reese

joined us on stage when we wrapped up the Maxwell Award interviews. The director gave all of us a five minute break before we started the Heisman finalist interview. Kirk and Todd rejoined us.

The questions were easy by the third go around. Each of us answered a couple simple questions since there were five finalists. Todd Landry continued displaying his “aw shucks” cowboy image.

The workmen were unrolling the red carpet outside the entrance to the Atlantic Dance Hall beside us as we wrapped up the Heisman interview. Ed and I stayed at the set when William, Todd and DeSean headed back to their rooms. ESPN set up an extra interview session for Ed, Hal, Jeremy and me.

“That Landry is something else, isn’t he?” I commented to Ed while we were waiting for our friends. “It’s hard to visualize someone like him winning the starting spot on a major college program and playing for the national championship.”

“Don’t underestimate him, Kyle,” Ed responded. “He’s a lot sharper than he lets on in public. I know the QB who lost the starting spot to him. Bob transferred to Ole Miss when he lost, which is how I got to know him. Bob says the whole cowboy drawl is a shtick. Landry makes Dean’s List every semester and he’s majoring in economics. He wants to lull you to sleep. That’s why he focused so much attention on you during the last two interviews. You’re his next opponent.”

“Thanks for the heads up, Ed,” I replied. “I caught a hint of that in one of the answers he gave during the Maxwell interview.”

Jeremy and Hal joined us on the set. Kirk followed a moment later and we got thing underway.

“I have four awards finalists with me this afternoon...” Kirk began, “Kyle Martin from Penn State, Ed Fritz from Florida, Jeremy North from Notre Dame and Hal Long from Rutgers University. What is unusual about this group is that they are all from the same high school in Paradise, Pennsylvania. Occasionally we have two athletes from the same school on an awards program but never three or four from the same school in the same year. How do you gentlemen account for this oddity? Is there something special in the water back home?”

“No, Kirk, there is nothing special in the water back home,” I explained. “It’s just H₂O. The four of us are good athletes, but not that special. We have been blessed to have a fantastic coach in high school who has created a great football program.”

“Coach Walter Caffrey, our high school head coach, inspired us to strive for excellence,” Ed added.

“How did the four of you get started in football?” Kirk asked.

“Ed and I signed up for junior pee wees in third grade,” Jeremy responded. “We loved it. We’ve been doing it ever since.”

“I came a little later,” I added. “Ed and Jeremy worked on Hal and me for two years to try it out. I agreed to play when we were in fifth grade. I was big for my age. The coaches, a couple of dads, decided since I was behind in ball handling skills and knowledge of the plays, to put me on the offensive line. The dads weren’t the best coaches and I never learned what I was supposed to do. I didn’t play well, got yelled at a lot and didn’t have any fun. I hated football and quit after one season.”

“Obviously you changed your mind,” Kirk said. “How did you get back into football?”

“Ed lives two doors down from me,” I explained. “Ed and I used to hang out in the back yard and toss the football around – all the time. Jeremy and Hal would join us. My girlfriend lives beside Ed and Jeremy lives directly behind her. Hal lives down the street from Jeremy, so all four of us would get together and play catch with the football or maybe grab some other neighborhood kids and have a game.”

“Jeremy and I tried to get Kyle back in organized football without any luck,” Ed added.

“Kyle and our soccer weenie over here,” Jeremy said, gesturing towards Hal, “wouldn’t have any of it.”

“That changed near the end of eighth grade,” I explained. “The whole middle school was outside for field day. My home room put me up to run the 100 meter sprint since they knew I could run fast. Coach Caffrey, the varsity coach, had been tipped off that I was running and came over from the high school to watch. I guess I impressed him, so he invited Ed and me to work out with him after school that day. Zack Hayes was there too.”

“Zack and I threw Kyle some passes, enough to satisfy Coach that Kyle could work out as a receiver,” Ed added.

“Coach invited me to try out for football,” I said. “Wide receiver sounded like a lot more fun than offensive line was, so I said yes. Zack Hayes and another varsity receiver worked with Ed and me all summer, getting us ready for football. I learned enough to make the varsity team that fall.”

“I should have made varsity too,” Ed added. “Coach Caffrey admitted that I was a better quarterback than the eleventh grader who backed up Zack, but he sent me down to JV anyway. I was pissed at the time, but Coach was right. It was much better for me to quarterback a winning JV team than to sit on the bench all season while Zack led the team to the playoffs.”

“My speed proved to be the missing ingredient on our team,” I said. “We had a good defense before, a good offensive line and a good running back. Zack told me teams stacked up on the line and stopped them cold. With my deep threat they had to assign people to watch me. I didn’t know much more than how to run a post or a flag route. I had no moves. Still, it was enough to turn a 5-5 team from the previous year into a playoff contender.

“Things went well in the playoffs with me running speed routes until we ran into a team with someone as quick as me. I think all your viewers have heard of the 49er’s Pro-Bowl cornerback, Aaron Morano. Aaron is as fast as me. He covered me like a wet blanket, clinging to me the whole game. I think I caught about one pass. Our first playoff season in half a decade was over.”

“Zack Hayes was the second key to our high school team’s success,” Jeremy added. “Zack had a scholarship to Penn State. Even so, he spent the winter with us reviewing game film from the past season, teaching us how to play top flight football.”

“Zack’s teaching and example inspired the rest of us,” I explained. “We did physical training and studied our playbook and our opponents all winter. In the spring Zack led passing drills to prepare us for the next season.”

“That tradition of the older players teaching the younger players is one of the major reasons our high school team has been so dominant over the past eight seasons,” Jeremy explained.

“It’s still going on too,” I added. “The team has made the playoffs every year since I started and won two state championships. They’re heading towards a third this season. They play in the quarterfinals on Saturday. They won the last two games, against good playoff teams, by 51-23 and 52-28. They stand a good chance of winning the state championship this season too.”

“Hal, I hope you don’t take offense if I borrow a phrase from your neighbor Jeremy,” Kirk asked. “How did a soccer weenie like you end up on the football team?”

“I’m used to my friends teasing me about my love of soccer,” Hal replied. “I don’t take offense to being called a soccer geek or weenie. I love the sport. For years Jeremy, Ed and later Kyle begged me to try out for a ‘man’s sport’ like football. I loved soccer and stayed with that. A couple weeks after we finished tenth grade, I got a call from Coach Jordan, our school’s soccer coach. He asked me if I would be willing to help out the football team the next season. They needed someone to replace the kicker who moved away.

“Coach Jordan allowed me to play two sports, soccer and football in the fall. Coach Caffrey and Coach Jordan worked with me, using Jeremy as my holder. We spent the summer practicing. I got halfway decent. I was more than good enough, given how our

team developed into an offensive juggernaut by our junior year. We rode that the whole way to our first state championship.”

“Kyle, I’ve heard before that you were injured that season,” Kirk asked. “What happened?”

“I was going great at the start of the season,” I answered. “I caught something like sixteen touchdowns in the first four games. I visited Penn State. Coach Paterno was interested in having me come to State College to play for him. Things were going great. In the fifth game I was covering our arch-rival’s fastest receiver. We got tangled up when we came down on one of the pass plays. I blew out my ACL. My season was done and I feared my career was done.”

“Ed, how did your team compensate when you lost your best player?” Kirk asked.

“We had a lot of good players on that team,” Ed responded. “Our tight end had a scholarship to go to Boston College. Our tailback that year is the starter at West Virginia now. I’m sure you’ve heard of Drew McCormick.”

“I have,” Kirk answered. “He is very good.”

“Kyle’s brother Andy was a key,” Ed explained. “Andy made varsity as a freshman and we were breaking him into the game slowly as a third receiver. Coach Caffrey, Kyle, and the others on the team stepped up Andy’s education. Andy filled in admirably for Kyle.”

“The whole group came together and overcame losing Kyle that season,” Jeremy added.

“You guys said your team won two state championships,” Kirk said. “Did you win the second one when you were seniors?”

“No, unfortunately not,” I replied. “We made it to the state semi-finals our last year in high school. We got knocked out by a couple people you’ll know.” I pointed off camera at Trevor. He was standing in the back. “My roommates Trevor Conwell and Chip Brinton’s Unionville team knocked us out.”

Kirk stared out through the glare of the lights and spotted Trevor. “Trevor, come on up and join us,” he motioned. The crew gave my buddy a portable mic. He exchanged high fives with Hal and Jeremy as he passed them. Trevor squeezed in between Ed and me. He reached over and shook Ed’s hand too.

“I take it you know everybody here,” Kirk remarked.

“Of course,” Trevor said. “All of us come down together for spring break each year. Ed and Eric make the arrangements for us.”

“Eric?” Kirk asked.

“My roommate, Eric Peters,” Ed explained as he pointed off camera to where Eric was standing alone now that Trevor was on camera.

“Come on up and join us,” Kirk said as he waved to our friend. I slid my stool closer to Jeremy. Eric squeezed in between Trevor and Ed. “Isn’t this cozy?” Kirk asked rhetorically. “Trevor, can you shed any enlightenment on how these four managed to excel in college football?”

“Sure, I can,” Trevor agreed. “I got to see the man they have described as their mentor in action. Nobody at Penn State worked or studied harder than Zack Hayes... with the possible exception of Coach... er, Kyle. I’m sure Jeremy, Hal and Ed are the same way.”

Eric motioned for the mic. “I agree completely,” Eric said when he had the mic. “I’ve roomed with Ed since we were freshmen. Ed was red shirted our first year. Even so, he was studying the playbook constantly and watched more film than Elijah Carter, our starting quarterback. Ed’s work ethic and dedication to our program are the things that put him where he is today.”

“That is an excellent summary of how four young men from one small town ended up here today,” Kirk said. “I want to thank all of you for joining me. Hal Long, a Lou Groza Award finalist; Jeremy North, the Butkus Award winner and Bednarik Award finalist; Ed Fritz, a finalist for the Davey O’Brien and Heisman Awards; Trevor Conwell, a finalist for the Outland Trophy; Eric Peters with the Biletnikoff Award; and Kyle Martin, finalist for the Biletnikoff, the Maxwell and the Heisman Awards – good luck to all of you tonight.”

My friends and I headed back to the hotel to clean up and change for dinner. We met our parents downstairs in the Big River Grille and Brewery for dinner. The Conwells, Eric and his parents joined our crowd. The food was decent, though not Emeril Lagasse quality like my dinner here in Orlando last December.

The restaurant had a glass wall on one side to display the operations in the brewery. Dad and I both had a glass of the made on-site artisan beer. Mom didn’t say anything about our beer, but I wouldn’t have been surprised if Dad got a lecture later in the evening.

Coach and Mrs. Burton had dinner at the restaurant with Coach and Mrs. Pellini from Nebraska and Coach and Mrs. Brown from the University of Texas. All three of them were up for Coach of the Year.

We enjoyed some dessert before heading over to the Atlantic Dance Hall for the evening’s festivities. A camera crew and a bunch of photographers took photos individually of each finalist as we walked down the red carpet into the dance hall. Ed, his parents, my parents and I found seats in one of the rows of the small hall. Ed and I were sitting together in the middle of the row.

The small hall filled rapidly. Mark May from ESPN acted as the MC for the evening's broadcast. Mark gave a brief welcome and launched straight into the festivities. I knew from the morning briefing that the Biletnikoff Award was up first. Things moved fast. Mark introduced Bobby Engram, the first winner of the Biletnikoff, to announce the award. Bobby read brief biographies of me, Eric and Jamal while they flashed our picture and key stats up on the screen up front.

Before I knew it Bobby was announcing, "The winner of this year's Biletnikoff Award is... Kyle D. Martin from the Pennsylvania State University."

Ed gave me a slap on the back as I stood. Mom and Dad congratulated me as I slipped out of our aisle and made my way forward to the stage. Bobby shook my hand.

"Congratulations, Kyle," he said. "You certainly earned the award for college's top wide receiver. You've gained the most yards receiving this year, the most yards receiving in your career and the most all-purpose yards in your career."

"Thank you," I said into the microphone up front. We had been instructed at the briefing that only the O'Brien, Bednarik and Maxwell Award winners were allowed to make a speech. Even those winners had to limit their speech to thirty seconds. Bobby shook my hand again. "This is special coming from you," I said. "Thanks for coming tonight to do the announcement." I went back to my seat to the applause of the room.

I looked back at Coach Burton a couple rows back when I found my seat again. He gave me a big grin and a thumbs up. My coach had been exactly correct when he predicted that I would take the Biletnikoff.

DeSean Reese won the Doak Walker Award for the top running back. That wasn't a surprise. You don't get nominated for the Heisman if you aren't the very best at your job.

Elliot Craig from Virginia Tech won the Ray Guy Award for the top punter. Mitch Jackson didn't seem too upset to lose. I was disappointed when the Lou Groza was announced. Gabe Rhodes from UCLA beat out Dustin Chapman from Montana and my buddy Hal.

The Penn State contingent cheered wildly when the winner of the Jim Thorpe Award for the top defensive back was announced as Shawn Byrd of the Pennsylvania State University. I agreed with the award voters. Shawn was the best cornerback I had faced since Aaron graduated and moved out to San Francisco.

The Outland Trophy was next. No one was surprised when William Johnson beat out Trevor and Michael Olson, the big tackle from Nebraska. I glanced over at my buddy. He gave me a slight smile and shrugged his shoulders. We had talked about this before. Trevor knew that William was a shoo-in for the award.

I noticed Ed tense a little as Kerry Collins began reading the introductions for the O'Brien Award. I leaned over and whispered, "Good luck, buddy." Ed held up two crossed fingers.

"The winner of the Davey O'Brien Award for the best quarterback is... Todd S. Landry of the University of Texas," Kerry Collins announced.

"Sorry, man," I whispered to Ed. He pasted a fake smile on his face as Todd walked to the stage to acknowledge the award. I couldn't completely fault the voters. Todd had the best QB rating, completion percentage and interception percentage in the FBS. Ed had the most passing yards and touchdowns.

The Bednarick Award didn't produce any surprises. William Johnson beat out Jeremy and Marshon Wilkins from USC. I felt a little bad for Jeremy even though he predicted this result yesterday. William was the most dominating lineman I had seen since Antwaan Booker graduated three years ago.

Frank P. Bilfuco, Jr. from Home Depot, took the podium to present the Coach of the Year Award. He gave a brief description of the award before announcing the result. "This coach has the nearly impossible task of succeeding the one of the greatest legends in college coaching that ever stood on the college sideline. In four years since succeeding Joe Paterno at the helm of Penn State, this coach has three top ten finishes and has his team ranked first in the nation and preparing for the national championship game next month. I give you the Home Depot Coach of the Year, Robert Burton of the Pennsylvania State University."

Coach took the stage to prolonged cheers from Shawn, Mitch, Trevor and me and applause of the remainder of the audience. Coach gave a brief speech crediting Coach Paterno, our university and the players on our team for making him a success. I was proud of my coach. He deserved the award and recognition.

"The final award for the night is the Maxwell Award for the college player of the year," Desmond Howard announced. "The finalists are: William F. Johnson of the University of Michigan, Todd S. Landry of the University of Texas and Kyle D. Martin of the Pennsylvania State University."

"Good luck, Kyle," Ed said as he leaned close. "You deserve this award."

"The winner is... Kyle D. Martin of the Pennsylvania State University," Desmond announced. "Kyle is the ninth Nittany Lion to win the Maxwell Award."

I sat stunned momentarily. This award is only won by quarterbacks and running backs. Now I knew why they had Desmond Howard announcing the award. He was the only wide receiver to win and that was before I was born.

"Way to go, Kyle," Ed exclaimed as he slapped my back. "Way to go!"

Mom and Dad congratulated me too as I slid down the row to the aisle and walked to the front of the dance hall. I was dazed as I climbed the stage and shook hands with Desmond. I stepped up to microphone and cleared my throat.

“Thank you,” I declared. “This is amazing. Thank you so much. I want to thank my parents for their support with my football obsession. I want to thank my teammates in high school...” I waved towards Ed, Jeremy and Hal in the audience, “and my teammates back at Penn State. All of them helped me accomplish the things I have done. I want to thank Coaches Walter Caffrey, Paul Adams, Al Ferguson, John Schroeder, Bob Burton and Joe Paterno for everything they have done over the past eight seasons to teach, coach, mentor and befriend me. This award is as much theirs as mine. Thank you everyone.”

Desmond shook my hand. Mark May took the stage again and shook my hand. A floor reporter interviewed Mom and Dad briefly.

“Congratulations, Kyle,” Mark said. “Kyle and the other Heisman finalists are off to New York for Saturday night’s Heisman announcement ceremony. Good luck, Kyle. I want to thank everyone for watching tonight’s ESPN College Awards Telecast. Good night, everyone.”

I headed back to my seat when the camera light went out. The hall full of people cheered and applauded me. I received handshakes and hugs from Jeremy and Hal. Mom gave me a hug and a kiss as I passed her. Dad insisted on a hug too.

Coach Burton came over to congratulate me. Kerry Collins and Bobby Engram both joined Coach, Trevor, Mitch and Shawn. It had been an excellent night for Penn State football.

I met so many famous football players and sportscasters that evening that I couldn’t keep track of everybody. Lou Holtz, Lee Corso, Steve Spurrier, Roger Staubach, Barry Sanders, Eddie George, Herschel Walker, Tony Dorsett... the list just went on and on.

We headed back to the room after a half hour of hobnobbing with all these famous people. I was still dazed at their reception of me when my cell phone rang.

“Kyle Martin?” the familiar voice asked. I couldn’t quite place it but I knew I knew this guy.

“Hi Kyle, this is Ron Jaworski,” he said. Of course! I’d heard him broadcasting on Monday Night Football so many times.

“Hello Mr. Jaworski,” I replied.

“Ron... please call me Ron,” Ron answered. “I called to apologize for missing the awards show this evening. I had pressing family business back here in Philly and

couldn't make it down. I'm the president of the Maxwell Football Club and wanted to call and convey our club's formal congratulations on your winning the Maxwell Award this year. It is a well deserved honor."

"Thank you, Ron," I replied.

"It's great to have a local guy win the award," Ron said. "You've had a remarkable season and college career. I will send you info about our awards dinner shortly. It's at Harrah's in Atlantic City. You and your family will enjoy it."

"Can I bring my fiancée too?" I asked. Mom and Dad didn't blink when I said it but Ed and his parents did double takes.

"Certainly, Kyle," Ron agreed. "Your fiancée is welcome. Good luck out in Phoenix. I'll talk to you again before the dinner."

"Thank you, Ron," I said before he ended the call.

"Was that really Ron Jaworski?" Dad asked. Ron had been one of my Dad's boyhood heroes. He had a slight case of hero worship since Ron led his Eagles to the victory over Dallas that put the Eagles into the Super Bowl in 1981. Dad still had the Kelly green number 7 jersey in his closet.

"It was," I confirmed. "Ron is the president of the Maxwell Club. You'll get to meet him. You and Mom are invited to the Maxwell Award Dinner in Atlantic City next March 1st." Meeting Ron Jaworski was the cherry on top of Dad's ice cream sundae. He was in heaven.

I hadn't taken more than a couple steps before I was hit with the next question.

"Your fiancée?" Ed asked. "When did this happen and why haven't you told me?"

"Because I haven't asked Penny yet," I replied. "I bought the ring a couple weeks ago. I plan to ask Penny at a romantic luncheon I'm planning on Saturday. Keep this quiet until Saturday afternoon, OK?"

"You got it, buddy," Ed agreed. "This is great news. I wouldn't want to be tied down yet, but I know you and Penny will be good for each other. Congratulations."

"Save that for after she says yes," I answered.

Ed and I headed back to our room and went to bed. I'm sure my parents and Ed's parents talked about that news when they went down to the restaurant for drinks and to relax. Ed and I had to be packed and out of our rooms by six am the next morning to catch our flight to New York. The parents were following on a later flight. ESPN had some sightseeing and filming they wanted to do with Ed, me, Todd, William and DeSean.

Trevor went out for drinks with Shawn, Mitch, Eldon and some of the other finalists they got to know while they were down here. I was asleep by the time he got to bed. I finally had time to think when I lay down to sleep.

This had been an amazing week so far and it wasn't over. I never dreamed I could win the Maxwell. Wide receivers just did NOT win it. I made a mental note. I better polish up my speech I had prepared in case I won the Heisman. That wasn't out of the question anymore.

One thing I noticed about the night. All the people here, coaches, retired players and sportscasters, seemed like they were part of a fraternity. Tonight seemed to mark my induction into this football fraternity from the way everyone treated me. Twenty years from now would I be a middle aged Maxwell recipient announcing the award for some young kid that wasn't any older than my nephews or little brother?

I was very quiet when I got up Friday morning around 5:30 am. I managed to get my shower, dress and pack without waking Trevor. I was scribbling a note to Trevor by the dim desk light when the alarm went off.

"Damn! It's too early," Trevor growled.

"I didn't disturb you, did I?" I asked solicitously.

"No, I have to get going," Trevor answered. "I have to be down for breakfast by 6:30 so I can catch the bus to the airport by seven."

"I didn't know your flight out was that early," I said.

"Shawn, Mitch and I fly out of here at 9:05 am, have a layover in D.C. and then fly back to State College around two o'clock," Trevor explained. "How about you?"

"I need to be checked out and at breakfast now," I replied. "Ed and I fly to La Guardia by way of Charlotte at 8:30 am."

"See you Sunday, Kyle," Trevor said as I crumpled and tossed the unneeded note in the trash.

"Maybe," I answered. "It might be Tuesday if I win the Heisman. I have to stay for their Monday night banquet if I win."

"Then don't come back until Tuesday," Trevor responded. "Come back with hardware!"

“We’ll see,” I said. “Make sure the guys focus on Texas and not on how I’m doing. We have unfinished business left this season.”

“I know it,” Trevor said. “Good luck, Kyle.”

Ed and DeSean were at the front desk when I arrived to check out. The three of us grabbed some breakfast at the buffet line ESPN had for their guests. William joined us a few minutes later. Just as we were leaving Todd Landry showed up. He grabbed a couple Danish and hurried to follow us outside.

ESPN had a van ready for us. A PA (production assistant) met us and introduced himself as Tom. Tom would be with us until we got to the hotel in New York where he would turn us over to a New York based crew.

Tom took us through the VIP ticketing line, which was nice. Security... well, it was a pain in the ass like always. Ed looked at his boarding pass while we were waiting.

“Sweet!” Ed exclaimed. “I didn’t know ESPN was flying us first class.”

“We are?” I countered.

“I’m in seat 2A,” Ed said. “I can’t get much further front than that.”

“I’m 2C,” I responded when I looked at my ticket. “This is sweet.”

Ed, William, DeSean, Todd and I hung out together while we waited for our plane to board. Todd wasn’t too annoying. Just as the attendant called for first class boarding a golf cart showed up carrying Barry Sanders and Desmond Howard. Barry and Desmond recognized us and greeted us as we boarded.

The plane had twelve first class seats, two to a side. It turned out 2A and 2C were beside each other. Our group took up the bulk of first class. An older couple returning from their Orlando vacation and a couple of businessmen filled the seats.

Sitting in first class was great. I had enough leg room for the first time flying since I was nine years old. It’s hell having long legs. It had to be worse for William. Could you imagine a 300 pound tackle sitting in economy class?

Ed and I talked for a bit before we got down to studying. I had one week of class left. The University of Florida’s finals began tomorrow. Ed was lucky, he didn’t have a final until Monday morning. He kept his head buried in his books to make sure he passed that final.

We had a fifty minute layover in Charlotte on our way north. Tom picked up the tab for lunches to take on the plane. We would be in New York too late to deal with lunch on

the next leg. I enjoyed my sandwich and chips as soon as our plane reached cruising altitude. Touchdown in La Guardia was right on time at 1:26 pm.

Tom helped us retrieve our luggage. Everything made the trip successfully. Still, I was glad I carried Penny's engagement ring in my pocket instead of my checked and carry-on bags. I had no interest in losing her ring before I had a chance to give it to her.

Penny texted me while we were riding into Manhattan from the airport. She was finished with classes. She was ready for Liz, Will and Abby to arrive for the trip north to New York. She was counting the hours until we could be together. I texted back to let her know I was anxious for us to be together too.

Ed commented that the traffic seemed heavy as we crawled into Manhattan. The driver laughed and said that traffic wasn't bad. It would be much worse later in the afternoon. He promised it would take thirty minutes from airport curbside to our hotel. He was right. Twenty-nine and a half minutes later he pulled up in front of the Marriott Marquis in Times Square.

Tom hustled us up to our rooms to drop our luggage, to freshen up and change into suits. He wanted us downstairs in the lobby promptly at 3:30 pm. I ended up with the room beside Todd. Ed was down the hall. DeSean and William ended up on the floor below us. We had about fifteen minutes of spare time before we headed downstairs again.

Tom turned us over to the New York crew when we met downstairs. The crew took us on a whirlwind tour of Manhattan that afternoon. We started at the southern end at Battery Park. They filmed us there looking out over the harbor at the Statue of Liberty. They took us to the World Trade Center site and then to the Empire State Building, filming us at each stop.

It was dark and pushing six o'clock when we got down to the street level again and loaded up in our vans. Howie, the PA riding with us, let us know our next stop was dinner. That was fortunate, all of us were famished. All I could do was laugh when we pulled up in front of the restaurant – Gramercy Tavern. It was the same place I made reservations for lunch tomorrow with Penny.

Howie took us back to the private dining room at the tavern. William Dockery, the president of the Heisman Trophy Trust, introduced himself and welcomed us to New York. Mr. Dockery introduced the other trustees that were able to make it to dinner that evening. The others were Michael Comerford, James Corcoran, Anne Donahue, Brian Obergfell and Carol Pisano. Two trustees had other commitments and were unable to make it.

The waiters took drink orders while everyone mingled and talked about our experiences this fall. I ordered a Founders Porter, which turned out to be quite tasty. Ed and I entertained the trustees with stories about our experiences in high school and college. We spent about fifteen minutes getting to know each other before sitting down for dinner.

The menu was set up in two courses. I had the Ruby Red Shrimp with polenta and salsa verde. I sat by Mr. Corcoran. He was an engaging dinner companion. He told me about his experiences playing free safety in college and how he tried out for thirteen different NFL teams before giving up his dream of playing professionally. Mr. Corcoran went to Wall Street and did very well for himself. He also told me about his experiences on 9/11. He lost a close friend who worked for Cantor Fitzgerald in one of the towers.

I had the veal loin with red wild rice and heirloom beans for my second course. The food was superb. I had made an excellent choice for tomorrow's luncheon with Penny. Mr. Corcoran continued talking about his experiences with the Heisman and the Downtown Athletic Club. The DAC had shepherded and protected the integrity of the Heisman Trophy from its creation in 1935 until the demise of the club in 2002. The club lost too many members in the 9/11 disaster and had been closed down for months since the club was located too close to ground zero. The Heisman Trust took over administering the trophy.

Mr. Corcoran recommended I try the chocolate bread pudding for dessert. It was excellent. I knew what dessert I would recommend to Penny after lunch tomorrow. The meal had been fabulous and the company most interesting. That feeling I had last night about joining a fraternity was even stronger now. I really was meeting the movers and shakers in football.

The crew filmed parts of the dinner but mostly stayed out of the way as the trustees got to know each of us. I made sure to thank each of them for their hospitality before we headed back to the hotel. My phone said it was a little after nine o'clock when I called Penny's cell phone on the way back to the hotel to find out where she was. Penny reported she was visiting with Will and Abby. Mom, Dad, Liz, Will and Abby were all on the same floor as Ed and me.

Ed headed for his parents' room. I went back to our floor to Will and Abby's room. I knocked at the door. It opened a millisecond later.

"God, it's good to see you!" Penny gushed as she hugged me.

"It's good to see you too," I agreed. Penny invited me in. I greeted Will, Abby, Liz, Mom and Dad when I stepped into the room. We spent about fifteen minutes updating Will, Abby and Penny about our time down in Orlando. I briefed everyone on Saturday's schedule. The Heisman Trust and ESPN gave us most of the day off. I had to be back at the hotel at 3:30 pm for an interview session. All the guests were invited to a dinner in the revolving rooftop restaurant.

Mom, Dad, Liz, Will, Abby and Penny all wanted to do some Christmas shopping in the city. We would meet at nine o'clock tomorrow morning at the Encore Restaurant in the hotel for breakfast. The ladies already had the morning planned. We would walk over to Fifth Avenue and head north. Saks, Bergdorfs, Louis Vuitton... there were plenty of

places they wanted to see. FAO Schwarz was that way too. Noah, Connor, Hunter and Penny's unborn nephew would have excellent Christmases.

"Where do you think we should go for lunch?" Dad asked.

"I could Google some places," Will suggested. "There must be a million good places to eat here in New York." Everyone agreed.

I was sitting on a bed beside Penny with my arm over her shoulder. "I hope you don't mind me taking the liberty of making reservations for the two of us at Gramercy Tavern," I said.

"I've heard of the place," Abby said. "I heard it is really good."

"Maybe we could try them too," Will said.

"I don't know, Will," I responded. I raised the hand draped over Penny's shoulder and wiggled my ring finger out of Penny's sight. "It's really popular. I doubt you would get reservations this late."

"You're probably right, Kyle," Will agreed quickly.

"We could go with your family," Penny suggested. "It could be fun."

"You will die for the food at Gramercy," I explained. "I found it on-line and made the reservations when I was in Orlando. By dumb luck, they took us there for dinner tonight. The food is amazing. Trust me, you will not regret keeping the reservations I made."

"You two have fun," Mom said. "You don't need the old folks horning in on your private time."

"OK," Penny agreed. "I don't know New York City well. I'll take the advice of someone with more experience."

"You ready to head down the hall to my room?" I asked.

"That's sounds like a plan," Penny agreed. "We'll see all of you at breakfast."

We had an excellent reunion, making love twice before falling asleep. Penny woke me Saturday morning.

"Honey, get up," Penny said as she gently shook me. "You have to get up. We're meeting your family in half an hour."

"Oohhh... I was up so early yesterday morning," I groaned. "A few more minutes... please."

“Poor baby,” Penny cooed sympathetically. “NOW get out of bed!” she added as she whipped the covers off.

“It’s going to be hell next month when I have to be in Berwyn for a 7:20 AP European History class,” I grumbled as I stumbled to the bathroom. A shower, brushing my teeth and a shave restored me to alertness. Penny was pulling on a pair of jeans when I came out.

“You might want to dress up a little,” I suggested. “The place we’re having lunch is fancy. Anyway, you wouldn’t want Saks, Bergdorfs or Louis Vuitton to think you’re a bag lady.”

“True,” Penny agreed. “Very true.”

We barely made it down to the restaurant on time. Ed and his parents were there with my parents and Liz. Will and Abby joined us a couple minutes later. I went with the eggs and hash even though the Crab Cake Benedict sounded intriguing. The hash came covered with a nice, mustardy hollandaise sauce that was fantastic.

Everyone headed out for our shopping expedition after breakfast. The Fritzes joined us. We walked a couple blocks over to Fifth Avenue and started browsing. The first place that caught our group’s attention was the Build-A-Bear store. Between Rose, Noah, Connor, Hunter, Pete Fritz’s kid in California and Penny’s unborn nephew, pretty much everyone was interested in toys and things.

Saks Fifth Avenue was the first big department store we hit. The couples wandered through the store browsing to start with. After awhile the women all hooked up and left us men together. We’d been given our less than subtle hints about what would be appropriate Christmas gifts, so it was time to purchase. When we were browsing, Mom noticed Penny and me examining pearl studs. She gave me a smile and a nod. I understood. I bought them when I came back.

We worked our way north on Fifth Avenue all morning. The crowds on the streets and in the stores were ridiculous. I guess that was to be expected two and a half weeks before Christmas. We hit all the big name stores as we headed north for our final stop, FAO Schwarz. Our group was a block short of the toy store at 11:30 am. Penny and I promised to call after our luncheon and rendezvous somewhere.

My sweetie and I hiked a couple blocks north to a subway stop. I bought two one-day MetroCards to get us down to our lunch and back uptown again. We waited a couple minutes for the N train and hopped aboard. Six stops later we hopped off at 23rd Street. It was an easy four minute walk down Broadway to 20th Street. Gramercy Tavern was half block west of Broadway.

Penny and I were a few minutes early for our noon reservation. Penny went off to “powder her nose.” That gave me a chance to confirm the arrangement I made last night with the maître d’. He would bring two glasses of champagne out after I proposed and before dessert. He showed Penny and me to our table just as soon as she returned.

“These dishes look very interesting, Kyle,” Penny remarked as she studied the menu. “I see why you wanted to come here. If the food tastes as good as it sounds, it will be excellent.”

“I knew you would enjoy it here,” I agreed.

Penny ordered the apple salad with radicchio, walnuts and cider vinaigrette for her first course. She decided on the sea bass for her second course. I ordered the lamb pappardelle for my first course and the hanger steak with fingerling potatoes for my second. We took the waiter’s recommendation for wines to go with our selections.

Penny seemed relaxed and upbeat as we talked over our meal. I was a little nervous – not that I had any doubts about proposing. I just wanted to make sure I made it romantic and memorable. Penny enjoyed her apple salad. My pappardelle was wide, rustic noodles covered with a lamb ragu. It was a good start for my luncheon.

The second course came a few minutes after we finished up our first. Penny took one bite of the sea bass, closed her eyes and cooed, “Ooooh... this is so good, Kyle. Thank you for insisting we come here today.”

“I know,” I agreed. “I want this is meal to be one we remember forever.”

We enjoyed our second courses. “I’m so proud that you won the Maxwell Award,” Penny commented. “I know it’s a huge deal. Do you think you have any chance of winning the Heisman?”

“Before Thursday night I would have said there was no chance at all for me to win,” I replied. “One wide receiver in the last seventy-five years won the Maxwell... before Thursday night. Now... I think I might have an outside chance of winning. We’ll see tonight.”

“Will it disappoint you terribly if you don’t win?” Penny asked.

“No, I’ll be all right if I don’t win,” I said. “Frankly, I think Ed or Todd Landry have the best shot. I’ll be cheering as loud as anybody if Ed wins. DeSean Reese is a long shot. William Johnson and I might have an outside chance, but expect to see one of the quarterbacks walk up front tonight.”

“Well, I hope you win,” Penny responded.

“It will be a great weekend, win or lose,” I countered. “How often do we get to come to New York City and spend a weekend at such a nice hotel?”

“Like never?” Penny said.

“Exactly,” I responded.

We lingered as we dined on our second courses. The food was fantastic. Penny leaned back as she placed the last fork full of sea bass in her mouth and savored the flavor.

“Coming to this restaurant was a sublime idea, Kyle,” Penny gushed.

“I knew you would enjoy it,” I said. “You know I love you, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Penny agreed.

“That spring break nine months ago was a blessing for me,” I said. “Having you in my life has been the best thing that has ever happened to me. You tether me when I get carried away. You pull me up when I’m down. You’re my rock.” I slid off my chair and went down on one knee. I slipped the ring box out of my side coat pocket.

“Penny Edwards, I love you with all my being,” I declared. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?” I placed the ring box in front of my lover.

She sat stunned for a moment before opening the box. She took the ring out of the box and stared at it momentarily before looking directly into my eyes and exclaiming, “Yes!”

She rose as I stood up. We embraced and kissed... ardently to seal our commitment. Polite applause from the diners around us brought us back to the present. We smiled and waved thanks to the well wishers around us. Penny sat down and slipped the ring on her finger. With absolutely perfect timing, our waiter flew in bearing to two glasses of champagne.

“To our lives together,” I said as I raised my glass.

“To our lives together,” Penny agreed as our flutes clinked together. We took a couple sips of the bubbly. “I’m so happy, Kyle.” After another sip of champagne Penny added, “I am stunned that you did this here today.”

“We’ve talked before about our future together,” I replied. “I didn’t think this would be a big surprise.”

“No, your proposing wasn’t surprising,” Penny explained. “I knew that was coming. I kind of expected the proposal over Christmas unless your football schedule got too crazy. I suspected we might not have this dinner until next semester.”

“That’s kind of what I thought too,” I agreed. “I didn’t expect us to have enough free time at Christmas to do this dinner properly, so I was expecting to pick out a nice restaurant in Philly for the proposal. I even started saving restaurant review clippings from the Inquirer. When the Heisman popped up tonight and we got a paid trip to New York City... well the opportunity was too good to miss.”

“I’m glad you chose this restaurant, it’s lovely,” Penny said. “You did well, Kyle. The restaurant, the food, the ambience, you did so much better than...” Penny stopped abruptly. “I shouldn’t compare.”

“There is no Harrison. There is no Kelly. There are just you and me,” I answered. “We come with warts, pasts and difficulties. We will overcome them and build a life together.”

“Amen to that,” Penny agreed.

“Are you up for a little dessert?” I asked. “The chocolate bread pudding is the greatest.”

“Mmmm... chocolate,” Penny responded. She sighed. “I’m stuffed. Maybe I should pass.”

“How about if we share one dessert?” I suggested. “This bread pudding is excellent. You should at least try it.”

“OK, I’m not hard to convince when it comes to chocolate,” Penny agreed.

Penny agreed with my evaluation of the bread pudding and cacao nib ice cream. She may have been full from lunch but she wasn’t too full for this smooth, velvety and chocolaty treat. My “stuffed” fiancée (gee, that sounds nice) polished off over half the bread pudding and most of the ice cream.

The maitre d’ came over after the waiter cleared our dessert dishes. “I hope everything was to the satisfaction of sir and madam.”

“It was excellent,” I declared.

“I will recommend your restaurant to all my friends when they visit New York,” Penny added.

“On behalf of the Gramercy Tavern, I wish both of you a long and happy life together,” the maitre d’ said. “The champagne is compliments of the tavern as our way of wishing you the best in your future together.”

“Thank you, that is very kind of you,” I said.

“Thank you,” Penny echoed. The waiter returned with the bill a couple minutes later. I settled up. After we stepped out of the restaurant Penny suggested, “Why don’t I give Abby a buzz and see where we can meet up with them. I can’t wait to give everyone the good news.”

“Mom, Dad, Will and Abby won’t be surprised,” I said. “They knew why we went off for a private lunch. Mom and Dad helped me with the ring. Will and Abby gave me advice to make sure I made today romantic and memorable. I suspect Liz knows too but I’m not positive.”

“We’ll see,” Penny said as she pulled out her phone. Two seconds later she was on with Abby. “How’d it go?” Penny repeated after Abby answered. “Hey Sis. Isn’t it great to be able to say that?” There was a longer pause on our end, presumably while Abby relayed the news to the rest of my family.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Penny agreed. “We’ll see you later this afternoon.”

“What’s the plan?” I asked. I knew half my afternoon had just been planned.

“Your parents, Will, Abby, Liz and the Fritzes just finished up their shopping,” Penny said. “They’re on their way back to the hotel to drop off their packages. They are planning on a late lunch. They suggested we take the subway back to FAO Schwarz. The store has some fantastic things for...” She gave me a radiant smile. “...OUR nephews, niece and little brother.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” I agreed. Penny and I walked back to the subway station and caught a train north for 59th Street. Penny and I browsed through the iconic toy store for forty-five minutes, picking out excellent presents for Noah, Connor, Hunter, Rose and Adrian and Nikki’s unborn son. We took the subway back to 49th Street and walked the last couple blocks to our hotel. We got there with a few minutes to spare for my interview session with ESPN.

Penny and I dropped our bags off at our room and went down the hall to Mom and Dad’s room. Penny stared straight at Mom, smiled and declared, “Hi Mom. I’ve always wanted to say that.”

Penny huddled with Mom, Liz and Abby to show off her ring and compare notes. Dad, Will and I were completely ignored.

“I feel superfluous,” I commented. Will and Dad grinned.

“He’s starting to get it, Dan,” Will said.

“He will soon, if he doesn’t now,” Dad agreed.

I glanced at my watch. I needed to split. “Honey, I’ll see you before dinner,” I explained to the gaggle of ladies conferring by the far bed. “I have to go do my interviews.”

“I’ll see you at dinner,” Penny said, breaking her attention away from the other ladies for a moment. “I love you, Kyle.”

“I love you too,” I agreed.

“This is a good result, son,” Dad said. “Now your mother and Marilyn Edwards haven’t wasted all their time planning out your wedding.”

“Planning? How long have they been planning?” I asked.

“Seriously for about a month,” Dad answered. “Before that it was just speculation.”

“Do I get any say?” I asked.

“No,” Dad replied.

“Go with the flow, Kyle,” Will added. “It will work much better that way.”

I headed down the hall to get Ed. Certainly Dad and Will were joking... weren’t they?

The EPSN PA took us across the street to the Best Buy Theater for the interviews. The interviews with Ed, Todd, William, DeSean and me were completely routine. That was to be expected. I was being interviewed for the umpteenth time in the past four days. The interviewers had run out of new questions on Thursday. Cameramen did photos of us after the interviews were finished.

The other finalists and I had time get back to our rooms, shower, shave and change before dinner. Thank God Mom made me buy an extra suit a few weeks ago. I needed it with all the events I had been attending this week.

ESPN was organizing the dinner in the revolving restaurant at the top of our hotel that evening. The elevators taking us up were dreadfully slow. The view over Manhattan at twilight was worth the wait.

The tables were small, so my family and friends were scattered a bit. William’s mother remembered Dad from our official visit four years ago, so the Johnsons sat near us too. Penny and I had a steady stream of well wishers when they found out about our engagement.

My phone buzzed just before we ordered dinner. It was a text from my brother Andy. He reported, "B-C DOWN. WHO'S NEXT?" Apparently Delaware had won their game against Bethune-Cookman that afternoon. I reported the news to the rest of my family.

Penny and I both had the leek and potato soup with jumbo lump crab as an appetizer. The food was worth the wait to get up to the restaurant. I had the pan seared salmon for my entree. Penny decided on the sautéed chicken breast. The food was excellent at this meal too. I was going to need to work out a lot after the way I had been eating for the past week. The waiter delivered cookies for everyone to take with them when we headed for the theater.

Everyone headed next door to the Best Buy Theater for the pre-announcement reception. Hors d'oeuvres were available. The Heisman trustees greeted us as we entered. The room was filled with an unbelievable group of football players, broadcasters and celebrities. The list of Heisman winners I met was astounding - Andre Ware, Bo Jackson, Billy Sims, Jim Plunkett, Archie Griffin, John Cappelletti, Earl Campbell, Marcus Allen, Herschel Walker, Doug Flutie, Tim Brown, Ty Detmer, Eddie George, Steve Spurrier, Paul Hornung, Pete Dawkins and Desmond Howard.

I introduced Penny to John Cappelletti. The three of us had a good talk. John asked about how things were on campus. I filled him in on the happenings. John congratulated Penny and me when Ed spilled the fact that we had gotten engaged over lunch.

Coach Burton met up with us during the reception. He flew in from State College earlier in the afternoon. He had supper with the coaches from Michigan, Iowa, Texas and Florida. I introduced Coach and Penny, informing him of our engagement. Coach congratulated Penny and me heartily.

The production people herded everyone into the theater at a quarter to eight. They wanted everyone settled in their seats before the broadcast started at eight o'clock. The PA showed DeSean, Todd, William, Ed and me to our seats – front row center. Penny and my family were seated to my right. Ed's parents were seated behind us beside Todd's parents. Mrs. Johnson and William's Uncle Jarrod sat behind William. DeSean's family sat off to his left in the left section of seats.

The director gave us directions just before the broadcast started. Doug Flutie acted as the master of ceremonies for the broadcast. Doug was perfect for the job, being both a Heisman winner and broadcaster. Doug introduced filmed biographies of each of the finalists. They played them alphabetically, so Ed's was first. William's and Todd's followed the first. I recognized quite a bit of the film from last Tuesday's Campbell Award in my biography. They finished with DeSean's biography.

The bios were well done. They stated the case for each of us to win the Heisman. The previous Heisman Trophy winners walked up onto the stage and formed a semi-circle around the perimeter of the stage under photos of them during their playing days. Doug

introduced Sanford Wurmfield, one of the Heisman trustees. Professor Wurmfield walked to the podium and began his speech.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I'm privileged to represent my colleagues on the Heisman Trust by announcing the winner of the 79th Heisman Trophy. Congratulations to all the finalists on their achievements and the distinguished manner in which they have represented college football. In selecting the outstanding college football player of the year, the Heisman Trophy Trust strives to emphasize the core values necessary to achieve such excellence. Perseverance, hard work and integrity – these are qualities learned primarily from parents and family. The youth in our country also learn from teachers and mentors, frequently our high school coaches. Many Americans, not only these fine candidates and the trophy winners behind me and even Heisman Trophy Trustees can all think back to a defining experience with a coach. I'd like to take this opportunity to salute these coaches and remind communities to preserve sports opportunities for students because not all formative educational experiences are learned in the classroom but can occur on the playing field.

“And now to what you have been patiently waiting for. The gentlemen standing behind me are ready to welcome another member into the elite Heisman fraternity. But whoever wins, the rest of you should be proud of your and your team's accomplishments. And the winner of the 79th annual Heisman Trophy is... William T. Johnson, defensive tackle from the University of Michigan.”

Ed, Todd, DeSean and I stood up and congratulated William on his victory. I whispered to him as we hugged, “I'm so glad it was you. It's about time someone other than a quarterback or running back won this thing.”

“You're equally deserving, Martin,” William whispered back. “Coulda been you and that woulda been good.”

William leaned over our chairs and exchanged hugs with his mother and uncle before climbing up to the podium on stage. Ed, Todd, DeSean and I pasted smiles on our faces and applauded with the rest of the crowd.

Would I have liked to have won? Of course. Was William the wrong choice? Certainly not. He was the toughest defensive player we ever faced. Losing was bittersweet. I was happy for my big friend but it hurt to lose. Ed, Todd, DeSean and I sat down as William prepared to speak.

William's comments were brief, totally in keeping with his quiet persona. He thanked his mom and uncle, Coach Carr, Coach Rodriguez and his teammates.

I noticed ESPN was displaying the vote results on a monitor to the side of the stage. William had earned 1399 points. I placed second with 1386 points. Todd Landry was third with 1131 points. Ed received 1008 points. DeSean trailed the top four badly. He received 296 points.

The Heisman Announcement broadcast ended immediately after they displayed the vote tally to the TV viewers. The previous Heisman winners gathered around William to congratulate him on his selection. Ed, DeSean, Todd and I suddenly become irrelevant to the evening.

“Sorry, man,” Ed said as he patted me on the back. “You should have won this one.”

“You deserved it just as much,” I replied.

“No, I wanted you to win,” Ed countered. “I have another shot at this next season. You’re done with college football in a few weeks.”

“I’m glad it was William if you and I couldn’t win it,” I added. “William is a worthy recipient.”

“Yeah,” Ed agreed as Penny embraced me.

“Are you OK, Kyle?” Penny said before giving me a kiss. “You should have won.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted. Mom, Dad, Will, Abby and Liz joined me to offer their sympathies. Ed and his parents joined our cluster. Mr. Edwards suggested we head back to the bar at the hotel and unwind after the hectic week we had.

The Atrium Lounge is located on the eighth floor of the Marriot Marquis with the 35 floor atrium soaring above us. It is an impressive location. Most of us enjoyed beers or cocktails while we unwound, except Mom and Liz.

This had been a hell of a week. Ed got skunked on both awards he was up for. I managed to get three out of four, which isn’t too bad. Still, losing stung for both Ed and me. Our loved ones endeavored to lessen the sting. Our informal party broke up around 10:30.

Penny and I headed upstairs to our room. We showered before heading to bed. We made love to celebrate our commitment to join our lives together. The commitment made it a special night.

I snuggled up behind Penny after we finished making love the last time. She clasped my hand over her heart as she fell asleep. I thought about what a day it had been. All in all, this was the best day of my life.

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My flight from La Guardia to Philly and then onto Philly to State College landed me in town a little after 1:30 pm Sunday afternoon. I gathered up my luggage and retrieved my car that had been parked at the airport since last Wednesday. It was nice to get back to campus and feel like a normal guy instead of the pampered star I had been the past six days.

I picked up a newspaper and a sandwich for a late lunch when I got back to the apartment. The sports section of the Inquirer had a big article on Delaware's victory over Bethune-Cookman on Saturday afternoon. It had been a close fought game. Andy scored two touchdowns in the afternoon, including the come from behind TD that gave Delaware a 38-34 victory with a minute and a half left in the game.

The Inquirer reported that Appalachian State beat Georgia Southern, James Madison University beat North Dakota State and Eastern Washington beat Stephen F. Austin. Next weekend my friend Jay's JMU would face Appalachian State and my brother would go out to Washington to play Eastern Washington. Wouldn't it be interesting if my close friend and my brother ended up facing each other for the FCS Championship?

I headed over to the Lasch Building for a desperately needed workout and some film study. I was way behind in my preparations to face Todd and his Longhorns. The guys I ran into congratulated me for the awards I won on Thursday and offered condolences for losing the Heisman last night.

I talked with Jason Turner from my old high school later Sunday night. He gave me a blow by blow description of the Wolverines' victory over Bishop McDevitt on Saturday afternoon in Hershey. Our team fell behind early in the game, 17-3. Matt and the other guys didn't panic. They went to work and slowly made up the deficit over the next two quarters. Matt hit Cody on a screen early in the fourth quarter. Cody had good blocking and took the ball into the end zone for a 62 yard score.

This gave the Wolverines a 31-30 lead, their first of the game. Coach Wyndham tightened up the defense, holding McDevitt scoreless. Matt, Dave, Cody and our offense continued scoring, bringing the final score to 41-30. Jason reported we would face Thomas Jefferson High School in Holidaysburg next Saturday morning at 10:00 am.

Jason asked if I wanted a grab one of the rooms in the team's block of rooms. They were coming up on Friday night. I passed. Holidaysburg is only an hour from State College. I indicated that I would join the team early on Saturday morning.

My finals schedule arrived in my e-mail while I was gone. My finals were: History 454 - Monday 10:10 am, Education & Public Policy - Tuesday at 10:10 am, English 184 - Wednesday 12:20 pm, Geography 160 - Thursday 8:00 am and Art History 100 - Friday 8:00 am. It was a good schedule for me – spread out across the whole week and no conflicts with football practice. I wouldn't need to schedule a makeup exam for any of my courses.

I decided I better put my mornings to better use than sleeping in. I needed to catch up on my preparations for our game against Texas. I was up and over at the Lasch Building by 8:00 am each morning during the week. I got some teasing from the coaching staff. They definitely weren't used to seeing me first thing in the morning.

My studying revealed some interesting things about the Longhorns. Their defensive line didn't have one outstanding star like Michigan had with William Johnson or we had with Trevor, but all four linemen were very good. Even Nebraska's big offensive line had trouble gaining yards up the middle.

The Longhorn outside linebackers were quick and very good tacklers. The middle linebacker was involved in tackles from sideline to sideline. I already knew the Longhorns had a good secondary. I started my video study with the Texas/Nebraska game, since that would provide me a good comparison since we played Nebraska too.

I turned in homework from the previous week on Monday and Tuesday. All my professors congratulated me on my awards. The Daily Collegian did a nice write up on my visits to New York, Orlando and New York again the previous week.

I received congratulatory e-mails on my engagement with Penny from Jeremy and Kath, Hal and Tammy, Andy, Brandon, Drew and Stacie and Holly Cox as the news circulated through the Paradise grapevine. Kelly congratulated me in History class on Wednesday. I assume she heard about it through Trevor's fiancée Stephanie.

The team practiced in Holuba Hall all week. That was useful for us. We had some special plays we needed to practice where no one outside the team could watch. We never ran them during the course of the year and we hoped to be able to get some points from them when we sprang them on Texas.

The team didn't need much motivation from the team leaders or the coaches to focus and work hard at practice. A season of drilling our goals into the team kept everyone motivated to do their best.

I talked with John Waters later in the week, just to keep in touch. He knew about my high school team's progress. John reported that Strath Haven continued winning, which I already knew, thanks to Joe Ricci. We made plans to get together after Christmas for lunch so we could be prepared for my arrival in his classroom on January 10th.

The week's classes flew by. Before I knew it I was sitting in Room 208 of the Chambers Building as Dr. Brennan announced, "Well... that's it class. Good luck on the final."

Cameron Miller and I stood up and started for the door. Kelly intercepted us before we left the room. "I know you're heading to Philadelphia for your student teaching, Kyle," Kelly said as we met. "I wanted to wish you and Penny good luck with your future. Good luck with your last game too."

"Thanks, Kelly," I responded. "I appreciate you stopping by to tell me that. That was sweet. Good luck next semester."

We exchanged kisses on the cheek before we parted. It's amazing that I was done with my final college lecture. Do my five finals and I was done with my time on Main Campus .

I spent the rest of the afternoon studying more video with Chip, Christian, Brian and Bob Smith. We had a hard practice followed by our team dinner. The five of us returned to the Lasch Building to continue our video study.

It was super quiet Saturday morning when I got up at 6:30. I managed to shower without waking Trevor, Chip or Damian. I grabbed some breakfast from the Mix before heading west on 322 out of town.

The week started with decent weather (for December) but deteriorated during the week as an arctic front brought snow squalls and cold temperatures. The sky was overcast when I left State College. The radio reported the temperature was 16 degrees. Snow was coming down and blowing as I climbed over Bald Eagle Mountain. Thankfully it stopped when I made it to the far side of the mountain. I had clear sailing once I got on I-99 and headed south for Holidaysburg.

I pulled off I-99 about an hour later and used my Google Map directions to find my way through the town to the junior high school. The stadium was located behind the junior high. I spotted a long line of school buses coming up and turning off Route 36 as I headed down towards the school. I recognized them. They were from my school.

God knows what time those poor kids had gotten up this morning. I knew it had to be a three to three and a half hour drive from Paradise to get here. As I pulled up to Hart Street, I let the stream of buses make their left in front of me. Another dozen went in before I followed them into the school complex. I found a parking space near the far end of the parking lot.

I gave an involuntary shudder as I stepped out of my warm car. I was wearing Under Armour, a T-shirt, a flannel shirt, a polartec pullover and my Wolverines coaching staff hoodie, but damn, it was cold! It couldn't have been much warmer than the 16 degrees

back in State College when I left this morning. The wind was blowing too, probably at 15-20 miles an hour. I didn't want to think about how the wind chill added to the biting cold.

I walked between a couple buses heading for the football field when I heard someone knocking on a bus window. When I looked up I spotted my sister Liz and her best friend Annie waving to me. I gave them a big smile and a wave before heading for the field in search of my team.

A couple grounds keepers were by the score board, but otherwise the field was deserted. I gave Justin Baer a call on my cell phone. Justin reported that the team was in the field house north of the field getting dressed. He invited me to join the rest of coaching staff and the kids.

I received a lot of atta-boys and back slaps as I came through the locker room to meet up with the coaches. The kids at my high school were well informed about my Campbell, Maxwell and Biletnikoff Awards.

I found the cluster of defensive coaches first – Coach Wyndham, Coach Fisher, Coach Ressler and Bill Groff. I passed them after saying hello to find the other offensive coaches. I spotted Jason, Patrick Justin, Coach Rodgers and... uh... a fifth coach?

When I called out, "Hey guys," they turned towards me and I found out who the mystery coach was. "Ed!" I gasped. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"My last final was on Thursday afternoon," Ed replied. "Coach Meyer wants our team to relax a little bit. Mom and Dad bought me a ticket so I can visit home. Of course, if I'm home and there's a football game..." Ed gave me a big grin. "You know EXACTLY what I mean. You're here too."

"I consider this to be my college internship," I countered. "A future coach learning the ropes."

"Whatever reason the two of you are here, it's a good thing for us," Jason added.

"Can you imagine what the Jefferson coaches will think when they look across the field and see two Heisman finalists on our sideline helping out?" Patrick commented.

Jason laughed. "I think they'll say, 'It's a good thing those two can't have the ball in their hands. We'd be in real trouble otherwise.'"

"You'll work with the receiving corps like usual, Kyle," Patrick said. "Ed will work with Matt and Jacob [the Wolverines QBs]. When we get outside to... heh... heh... warm up, or maybe I should say test the field conditions and freeze our yah-yahs off, I'd like Ed to throw some balls to Kyle to see what kind of passes we can call during the game. Ed, give that info to Matt and Jacob."

“You got it, boss,” Ed agreed. I nodded my consent too. Justin filled Ed and me in on our team’s game plan for the day. Thanks to the weather, our team would be running more than normal and throwing short passes. We still would try deep occasionally to force Jefferson to defend deep. Who knows? We might get lucky and hit one or two when we have the wind in our favor.

We headed outside half an hour later to check out the field conditions. Low, threatening clouds promised snow would arrive soon. Wind from the west-northwest was blowing at 15-20 miles an hour with gusts to 30 mph. Ed and I found that you could throw 8-12 yards deep into the wind if you rifled the ball and kept it low. If you put any loft on the ball the wind carried it God knows where.

I tried catching a couple deep balls throw into the wind. It was an adventure. The wind buffeted the ball and blew it every which way. I felt like I was fielding a punt on the worst days of my career at Penn State. Throwing the ball with the wind wasn’t too bad. We would be able to go deep when the wind was at our back.

Ed and I worked with Matt, Dave, Gary, Garrett, Jacob, Jared, Kyle and Tim so they understood what they needed to do to make the passing game work. Matt and Jake threw balls to the ones and twos into the wind and with the wind for a few minutes until everyone understood what was required.

The team hurried back inside to warm up from their “warm up” and finish preparations for the game.

“That was nice work, guys,” Jason commented to Ed and me when we got inside. “I wish I had you guys helping out all year. Any chance you’ll be available next weekend if we win today?”

“I don’t have to fly down to Orlando until Sunday evening,” Ed answered. “I will if the next game doesn’t interfere with my family’s Christmas plans next weekend.”

“My commitment to Coach Burton is done around a quarter to five on Friday,” I added. “You know I’ll be there. It takes a lot to make me miss.”

“Like a Heisman ceremony,” Jason added, laughing. “Good, I’ll count on you if we win this thing today.”

“I see they gave you a Wolverines coach’s hoodie,” I commented.

“It’s nice looking, isn’t it?” Ed replied.

“We had to get him one,” Justin interjected. “We couldn’t risk him wearing one of those ugly blue and orange things he favors now-a-days.”

“Hey! Watch it,” Ed responded. “I like my team’s colors.”

“Red and white are best,” Justin answered. “Blue and white is barely tolerable but that orange of yours... ugh.”

“Justin... Justin... Justin,” Ed commented as he shook his head sadly. “I will forgive you your parochialism.”

Both Justin and Ed were joking around. Even though he was six years older than us, we had always considered him to be more like a big brother rather than another adult. When Ed and I were starting Boy Scouts, the six years age difference between us and Justin was half a life-time. Now at twenty-one, it didn’t seem to be nearly as big a deal. Yes, my friend was married and had two kids, a house and a job. Of course, a year from now I’d be married and have a house, or at least an apartment. Kids would wait a little longer for Penny and me, until she finished up veterinary school.

Jason called the whole team together when the kids finished their preparations. He reminded them that the conditions outside were going to be brutal. This wasn’t going to be a finesse game. The two teams would pound on each other until someone broke. The team with the most heart and desire would be victorious and head to the state championship game. The team responded enthusiastically when Jason pointed towards Ed and me and challenged them to live up to our high school’s past champions.

The kids were cheering as they headed out for the field. Ed and I followed the team and the rest of the coaches. Ed shuddered as he hit the cold chill of the morning.

“Damn, I’m definitely not in Gainesville anymore,” Ed commented.

“Welcome to central Pennsylvania in December,” I agreed.

We found spots along the sideline with the offensive players. Billy Baer and Brian Miller, our ball boys, came by, handing out headphones to the on-field coaches. I took the pair Billy gave me.

“What about me?” Ed asked as Billy walked off.

“We only have one spare pair,” I explained. “I have seniority. I have been coaching the team for over a year. Anyway, we can share these.”

“That’s cool, Kyle,” Ed agreed.

I noticed a really strange thing on the opposite side of the field. One of the coaches for the Jaguars was out in this cold, nasty weather in shorts! I couldn’t believe it. There’s macho and then there’s crazy. I guess his players got the message that the weather wasn’t going to be an issue today.

Matt and Tristan Hibshman took the field with the referee and the Thomas Jefferson High School captains. Our team was top ranked and served as the home team. The Jaguars lost the coin flip. Matt told the referee our team deferred taking the kickoff until the second half. He told the referee we would defend the southern end zone. We would have the wind at our backs in the second and fourth quarters.

Nick Sterling, our kicker, kicked a low, line drive kickoff, bouncing it down across the Jaguars' side of the field. It bounced and dribbled down through their return team until one of the up backs grabbed for it. It skittered away from him but he managed to land on it before our cover guys could get to the ball. The Jaguars started at their 28 yard line.

By habit and design, Thomas Jefferson was a run first team and they were very good at it. They drove down the field, alternating runs by a couple tailbacks and their quarterback run the ball. They moved the ball down the field with eight straight runs before fooling our guys with a play action pass that netted them 22 yards. They reverted to form, shoving the ball across the goal line with four more runs. Their kicker nearly missed the PAT when the wind pushed the ball further left than he intended. It glanced through off the right upright to give Thomas Jefferson a 7-0 lead.

I was pleased with how my team responded to the challenge from Jefferson and the weather. The kids punched the ball down the field. Cody and Brad Auker, Cody's backup, ran hard. Dylan Landis, our 210 pound fullback, provided some extra punch to our running game. Matt threw a couple lasers over the line of scrimmage when Jefferson crowded it too much. Gary's and Dave's catches forced them back some and opened up space for our running game again.

Jason ran some option and even triple option plays. I had never seen our team run the triple option before. Matt did a good job running the ball when he kept it, cutting behind Gary's seal block. Our guys moved the ball down field and scored a touchdown on the twelve play drive. Nick Sterling's PAT kick into the wind wasn't pretty but it went through the uprights.

Our team finished the drive as the snow started, beginning with scattered flakes that turned into big gobs of snow. The two long drives just about ran out the clock on the first quarter. The Jaguars ran one play before we switched sides of the field for the second quarter.

The Jaguars kept the ball on the ground for the next half a dozen plays, pushing across midfield. They tried crossing our defense up on a first down play with a play action pass, but their QB didn't have the arm to drill the ball into the wind. It went incomplete. They still managed to make their first down on the next play.

Coach Wyndham put an eighth man up in the box to defend against the run after we saw they couldn't pass effectively. This slowed the Jaguar's rushing attack. They still pushed down into our red zone. A well timed run blitz by Nate Trimble put Thomas Jefferson in

trouble. Nate dropped the running back for a four yard loss on second down and seven yards to go.

Jefferson's coach platooned his quarterbacks. He sent the second QB to try on third and eleven. He was worse than the first quarterback. Jefferson was lucky our nickel back, Austin Good, didn't pick the ball off. They sent their kicker out to try a 31 yard field goal. They got lucky, he squeaked it in to give them a 10-7 lead.

Patrick, Ed, Matt, Dave and I conferred on the sidelines as the Jaguars drove down the field. We prepped Matt and Dave for the next drive. The guys were ready when the ball came back to us.

Jason called three straight run plays off tackle behind Jordan Mower and Gary Harrison. We gained fourteen yards on our first set of downs. The Jaguars defense was edging up, anticipating the run. Jason called a play action pass on the fourth play.

Cody made an excellent fake, diving into the line and attracting nearly all the defenders to his fake. Matt casually dropped back after handing off the "ball" to Cody. He drifted left, hiding the ball along his side while Dave ran down the field. The cornerback and free safety both bit on the run fake. Dave flew by them and sprinted downfield wide open. Matt rifled the ball downfield to Dave. The ball was slightly short. Dave adjusted his route, grabbed the ball out of the air and sprinted for the end zone. No Jaguars came close to catching him. Nick Sterling drilled the PAT with the aid of the wind. Score: Wolverines-14, Jaguars-10.

Coach Wyndham talked with our defense while the offense was scoring. He explained the Jaguar's current limitations this quarter. He had the kids fired up. They were doing some fierce hitting as the Jaguar's offense tried to push up the field.

Ed and I were standing near Jason as we watched our defense work. After the third play, Jason tapped me on the shoulder.

"Brief the punt return team, Kyle," Jason explained. "Safety first! Got it?"

"I got it, Jason," I agreed. I took half a dozen steps down the sideline to give Jason space before yelling, "Punt return team, ON ME!" The kids gathered in a circle that included me. "Coach Turner expects a punt any second."

I fixed my stare on Garrett Houseman, our punt returner. "Coach doesn't want any heroics, not in this wind. Who are your eyes, Garrett?" I demanded.

"Chris has my back," Garrett answered, indicating Chris Gabel, a sophomore backup flanker. I stared at Chris.

“OK, Chris. You tell Garrett ‘no return’ unless you see two unblocked adjacent lanes open,” I explained as I held up two fingers to reinforce my point. “Is that clear? Two unblocked lanes.” Chris nodded his understanding.

“Garrett, regardless of what Chris says,” I said turning back to face my returner. “You do NOT return the ball unless you have any easy catch. If the wind swirls and pushes the ball around, just let it go. DO NOT TRY TO CATCH IT.” Garrett nodded his understanding.

“Put safety first on this change of possession,” I demanded. “Their punter’s stats indicate he doesn’t make many long punts and he’ll do worse today. The most important thing we get from the punt is the BALL. The ball may not even reach you, Garrett. The rest of you need to pay attention to the flight of the ball too. It probably will come bouncing down the field or drop out of the sky when the wind catches it. If you touch ball, it is LIVE. Get the hell out of the way if it comes towards you. Does everyone understand?” I looked around the circle and saw eleven heads nodding their understanding. “What are your orders, Garrett?” I demanded.

“Catch the ball if it’s an easy catch,” Garrett answered. “Otherwise, get the hell out of the way.”

“Good!” I agreed. “Chris, what’s your job?”

“Tell Garrett if Jefferson has a brain fart and forgets to cover the punt,” Chris replied, with a grin, “otherwise tell Garrett no return.”

“Good, you got it, Chris,” I said. All us turned out attention to the field in time to see Nate Trimble, Tristan Hibshman and Luke Sullivan gang tackle the Jaguar running back and shove him, along with two blockers backwards across the line of scrimmage for no gain. I glanced up at the scoreboard. It showed that the preceding play had been third down and four yards to go. “That’s your cue, guys,” I announced. “SAFETY FIRST! Don’t touch the ball.”

The punt return team jogged onto the field as our defense came off. They lined up in a normal punt return formation, with Garrett standing on our 23 yard line, waiting for the punt. As I expected, the Jaguars punter who averages only 33 yards a punt, had trouble. The wind knocked the ball down abruptly after it flew about twenty yards. Our return team listened. They scattered like the ball was a skunk ready to spray anyone handy.

The ball bounced to the ground and rolled towards the line of scrimmage. One of the Jaguar players downed it quickly before they could lose any more yards. We had possession on our 38 yard line.

“Good job!” I repeated as the punt return team came off of the field. “Good job!” I high fived or patted the players as they came off the field. Matt, Dave, Cody and the rest of the offense went out.

Ed commented, “You really do coach this team, don’t you?”

“Well, duh!” I responded. “What did you think we’d be doing if we’re invited to coach the team?”

“I didn’t expect much more than observe from the sideline and share my thoughts with Coach Turner and Matt,” Ed answered.

“Remember this is my seventh game coaching with this staff,” I countered. “I didn’t do much more than what you said the first game. Once Coach Caffrey and Jason got used to my judgment, they gave me more work to do. Anyway, who has more experience on this sideline with punt and kick returns than me?”

“Point well taken,” Ed agreed. Ed and I focused back on the field.

Thomas Jefferson’s defense backed off the line of scrimmage, playing more balanced than our last possession. They double covered Dave to make sure he didn’t get loose again. That stopped us from getting a big play but let our standard balanced offense work effectively. Jason mixed runs and passes well, keeping the Jaguar defense off balance. Matt drove his guys down the field crisply, running the ball into the end zone himself on a naked bootleg from the 4 yard line. Nick drilled the PAT to give us a 21-10 lead.

A little over a minute remained in the first half. Thomas Jefferson tried to score through the air, unsuccessfully. The first two passes dropped incomplete. Josh Strickler intercepted the third pass. Matt and the offense went out and kneeled down to run time out in the first half.

When the team assembled in the locker room, Jason announced to the team, “Excellent first half, everyone. We get the ball to start the third quarter. Offense, you get a touchdown and we will have this game won. Can you do that?” Jason challenged.

“We got it, Coach!” a couple dozen players shouted in unison.

“Defense, you’re going to be tested in the third quarter when Jefferson has the wind at their backs,” Jason added. “Slow them down and make them pay for any mistakes. That’s your job. Can you do it?”

“We got it, Coach!” the remainder of the team shouted in response.

“Huddle with your position coaches,” Jason demanded. “We’re going to review a couple adjustments we need to make and some adjustments we may need to make to counter what Jefferson is plotting right now.”

I huddled with the wide receivers and tight ends. I reviewed a couple tweaks Patrick wanted the receiving corps to make in the passing game before getting to the key point I wanted them to have.

“What’s the difference between a three yard run and a twenty-three yard run?” I challenged. A couple guys offered suggestions that I rejected. “The difference is downfield blocking. You guys take out the safeties and cornerbacks...” I stared over at Gary, “...and the odd linebacker, the defense loses its depth and becomes brittle. Break through the first line of defenders and our runners go for twenty or thirty yards. What is blocking?”

“Blocking is attitude!” the group responded fervently. I had drilled this into Dave and Gary for two summers. They apparently had passed it on to their teammates.

“Let’s get nasty!” Gary added enthusiastically.

“LET’S GET NASTY!” the receiving corps seconded.

Ed gave me a funny look from the QB huddle nearby. I smiled and mouthed the word, “blocking” in response. Ed just smiled. None of my friends questioned my desire or willingness to hit since I had put Jeremy on his butt a year and a half ago.

By the time the too brief halftime was over, our team was fired up and ready for battle again. I was impressed with what Jason and the coaching staff had accomplished in a short time. Jason communicated the big picture to the team. His assistants went over the details with their charges. Everyone on the team understood the big picture and their part in accomplishing it. This was just as important as motivating the kids to go out and hit hard. Communication happened and that was the essence of coaching.

The third quarter unfolded exactly as Jason had predicted. Thomas Jefferson’s kicker put the ball through the back of the end zone. No surprise. I could have done that with the wind at my back that morning.

One of Jason’s tweaks caught Jefferson off guard the first play. We came out of the huddle into a three receiver set. Jefferson’s third linebacker had to scurry off the field quickly as their nickel back ran onto the field.

Forcing the personnel shift was the key. The linebacker who left was the fast guy that set the corner to stop our outside runs in the first half. On the first snap, Gary, Dave and Garrett blocked their d-backs and let Cody run wide, turn the corner and pick up nine yards. Cody went wide repeatedly, gaining seven, nine and six more yards before their coach called what he thought was our three wide receiver bluff.

The threat to pass wasn’t a bluff. Dave Mitchell ran a slant, easily beating the strong side linebacker, and catching the ball Matt rifled to him seven yards downfield. Dave picked

up six more yards before a swarm of d-backs caught him. This put us on Jefferson's 36 yard line.

Tyler Nichols, our big 250 pound sophomore left guard, flinched when the Jaguars threatened a blitz on the next play. That backed us up five yards. Thankfully our three receiver spread set kept the strong side linebacker on the sideline. Cody and Brad Auker made up the fifteen yards in three plays to get us another first down.

Jefferson tried sneaking the linebacker in again, but Dave Mitchell burned them over the middle. Only a desperation lunge by the free safety brought Dave down, six yards shy of the goal line.

The time for finesse was gone. Jefferson put in six down linemen with five linebackers. Jason countered with two tight ends, a fullback, Cody at tailback and Dave Mitchell split wide to the right. We gained two yards running off tackle between Jordan Mower and Gary Harrison. We got two more when we tried the same play again. On third and goal at the two, Matt faked a hand off to Cody and dropped back three steps.

The outside linebacker had hit Dave Mitchell as he crossed the line of scrimmage. Dave let the linebacker "slip off" his supposed block. The linebacker cut inside to pinch off any outside run by Cody while Dave side slipped a couple yards to the right along the goal line. Too late the linebacker realized Matt had the ball. He tried to knock it down as Matt gunned it by him to Dave. Dave caught the pass and ducked into the end zone for a TD. Nick Sterling managed to put the wobbly, wind tossed ball through the uprights for the PAT. Score: Wolverines-28, Thomas Jefferson-10.

Our big lead forced Thomas Jefferson to pass to try to catch up to us. Our defense has a good pass rush and a decent secondary. They were up to the task of protecting the lead. Jefferson is a talented team. They managed to score ten points in the third quarter. But Matt and company added a field goal to our lead before we switched sides of the field.

Jefferson was down eleven points and faced our high powered offense with the wind at its back. The result of the game was easily foretold. Matt's crew scored another touchdown in the fourth quarter while they protected our lead. The final score was 38-20.

Ed and I headed out onto the field to congratulate the guys on the team. We happened upon Jason Turner's meeting with Thomas Jefferson's coach. He was the slightly crazy guy that was wearing shorts on this cold, snowy day. He spotted Ed and me after he finished talking with Jason. He gave Ed and me a big grin and motioned for us to join him.

"I knew I was in trouble when I looked across the field and saw two Heisman finalists on opposing coaching staff," the coach said as he shook Ed's hand. "Ed, you had a fantastic season down in Florida."

“Thank you... um, sir,” Ed replied.

“I guess I should introduce myself,” the coach responded. “I’m Bill Cherpak, head coach for Jefferson.”

“It’s good to meet you, sir,” Ed replied. “You have quite a team.”

“So does your school,” Mr. Cherpak replied. He smiled and extended his hand to me. I shook it. “It’s certainly a pleasure to meet you, Kyle. You have had an outstanding season this year. Maxwell, Biletnikoff and the Campbell... that certainly is to your credit, Kyle.”

“Thank you, sir,” I replied.

“Call me Bill, guys,” Bill Cherpak responded. “Kyle, make sure you tell Walt Caffrey I said hi.”

“You know Coach?” I asked.

“Sure, we go way back,” Bill answered. “We were teammates in college.” He chuckled. “We barely were teammates. I was a redshirted offensive lineman as a freshman. He was a senior defensive back. I got to know him better after he graduated when he became our offensive grad assistant. Of course, we’ve seen each other at a lot of coaching seminars over the years too.”

“I’ll tell Coach you said hi,” I agreed.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Bill,” Ed said as we parted.

“Yes, it’s been a pleasure,” I agreed. Bill headed one way. Ed and I went to find our friends on the team. As usual, we found Matt, Dave and Cody together celebrating with their friends.

Cody was the hero of the day. Matt had done well orchestrating the drives and had made some tough throws under difficult conditions. Cody’s 6.9 yards a carry and 179 yards on twenty-six carries had been the key to victory.

I made a point to congratulate Jordan Mower and Gary Harrison. Their blocking had made Cody’s running possible. I also went around thanking all the receivers for their blocking during the third quarter. It was unheralded but had been important to us getting that pesky strong side linebacker off the field.

Ed and I headed back to the locker room as the field emptied. We hung back with the other offensive coaches while Jason praised everyone’s contributions to the team’s victory. He reminded the guys that they had a half hour to clean up and board the buses for the trip home. Jason made a beeline for Ed and me when he finished talking.

“I want to thank both of you for your help today,” Jason said as we met. “Can you guys help us next weekend?”

“I expect to,” I replied. “My last final is over Friday morning at 9:50. I’m done with practice between 4:30 and 4:45. I should be able to make it.”

“I don’t know, Coach,” Ed added. “I can if it’s a Friday night game. I can’t on Saturday. My parents are having an early Christmas dinner for me, my brother and his family. We haven’t had the whole family together in seven or eight years. Do you know the schedule yet?”

“I don’t,” Jason answered. “I suspect we’ll play on Friday night. We face either Strath Haven or Allentown Central Catholic. Neither team will waste money on rooms in Hershey. They can take buses to the game like we do. I suspect that factors into the PIAA scheduling decision.”

“Let me know when you find out,” Ed said. “I’d like to help again if I can.”

“I’ll give you a call in a couple of days, Jason, and confirm everything,” I added.

Jason returned to getting his team ready for the trip home. Ed and I headed outside for the parking lot.

“Are you doing anything tonight?” Ed asked. “Maybe we could see what kind of night life we can find in Holidaysburg.” He chuckled after making the remark. We both knew the night life wouldn’t be what a couple college kids were used to.

“Actually, I’m hosting a party at my apartment tonight,” I responded. “This is my last weekend on campus.”

“Damn, I forgot,” Ed said. “I have another year of classes before I’m done.”

“You’re welcome to come up for the party,” I suggested. “Chip and Trevor will be glad to see you.”

“Maybe...” Ed replied. “State College is a pretty good haul from home. I doubt I’d feel up to a three hour drive after partying. Unless...”

“Of course you’re welcome to crash at my apartment,” I said, acknowledging his less than subtle hint. “Damian always stays downtown at his lover’s apartment over the weekend. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if you slept in his bed tonight. Worst case... you can crash on our couch in the living room.”

“You sold me, buddy,” Ed replied. I gave Ed general directions on how to get to State College and told him to keep up with me. We stopped off for lunch at the Friendly’s Restaurant near the Walmart on our way back to I-99.

The road crews had the roads in good shape as we headed north for campus. The climb over Bald Eagle Mountain wasn’t too bad. Ed followed me onto campus and into a parking lot near the Nittany Apartments.

“Hey, look who I found hanging out on the sidelines of my football game,” I announced as Ed and I stepped into my apartment.

“Ed, my man, how’s it going?” Trevor replied as his head popped over the back of the couch.

“Hi, Ed,” Steph added. She was on the couch watching a movie with her fiancé.

“Hey, guys,” Ed responded, grinning.

“Ed Fritz!” Damian said as he poked his head out of the kitchen. “Damn, it’s been a long time since we’ve seen each other.”

“Hey, Damian,” Ed agreed. “What’s it been... like five years?”

“Yeah, since you guys stole my state championship,” Damian teased.

“Earned fair and square!” Ed and I insisted. Ed and I dropped our coats and greeted our friends properly. Steph got a hug from my buddy. Damian and Trevor settled for handshakes. Damian introduced Billy to my friend.

“How the hell did you get up here from Florida?” Trevor asked after introductions were finished.

“I took an airplane,” Ed commented dryly. He paused for a second before grinning and adding, “My last final was at eight o’clock Thursday morning. My parents flew me home so I could spend some time home over the holidays. My brother and his family are flying in from California in a few days.”

“That’s cool,” Trevor commented. “What I meant was ‘How did you end up at Penn State?’”

“That’s easy,” Ed replied. “I’m home, my Wolverines are playing in the state semi’s and I haven’t seen any of their games in four years. I ran into Kyle on the sideline and he invited me to come up for the party tonight. I hope you don’t mind me crashing it.”

“You’re not crashing, Ed,” Trevor. “You’re always welcome here.”

“Cool... thanks,” Ed responded.

“Did your Wolverines win, guys?” Damian asked.

“Silly question,” I started.

“Of course they won,” Ed added. “Your future QB played brilliantly.” He told the crew about Matt’s play and how the game went.

“What is everyone doing for dinner?” I asked during a lull in the conversation. “I had a great idea as Ed and I were coming up from Hollidaysburg. We’re leading our team to a national championship game. We should take Ed out to dinner and pick his brain for tips and ideas to help us prepare for the game. I assume playing for the BCS championship is more than just another bowl game.”

Ed laughed before he responded. “It’s a lot more.” We discussed it briefly. Billy and Stephanie agreed to go to dinner with us. Trevor caught up with Chip. He was over at the Lasch Building studying video. Chip gave Claire a buzz. She agreed to join our dinner party. I convinced everyone to get our dinner at Spats. I called for reservations. They could seat our group of eight if we could be there by 5:30 pm.

Chip and Claire met us down at Spats at the appointed time. They managed to assemble a table for the eight of us in the tiny restaurant. We ordered beers before we perused the menu. Ed ended up ordering Cajun Platter so he could sample the various offerings from the kitchen. I had the Voodoo BBQ Shrimp and Scallops.

Ed, Trevor, Damian, Chip and I spent part of the meal talking about our experiences playing against William Johnson and Michigan. We pumped Ed for information about his experiences last year playing for the national title. We let Ed know about our plan to force William to always chase every play in order to wear him out. We had a big play ready to run as soon as William left the field.

Ed explained what we were going to experience soon when we got out to Phoenix. We needed to know that the press coverage of the game was beyond anything we had ever seen before. The potential number of distractions was immense. We needed to guard against our guys losing their focus on why we were in Phoenix. Last year Coach Meyer and the team captains had significant issues with groupies trying to get to the team’s stars.

“We’ve been getting that lecture from our team leaders since we were freshmen,” Trevor scoffed. “One our standing rules on the trip is ‘No Girls!’ We’ll be OK.”

“Zack, Antwaan, Aaron and JT beat that into our heads when we were freshmen,” I agreed. “Our guys know better. We preach that this game is a business trip, not a pleasure trip. Girls are to be left alone until after we get back to campus.”

“We said the same thing until we got to New Orleans,” Ed replied.

“Well, yeah... that’s New Orleans,” I countered. “I doubt things will be as wild in Phoenix. It’s a much more conservative area.”

“New Orleans wasn’t like this the first time we played Georgia Tech two years ago,” Ed said. “Don’t let the distractions get to your team. It’s a killer.”

“Was that why your team lost the championship to GT last January?” Chip asked politely.

“Not really,” Ed admitted. “You’re all friends here so I can say something I’d never say back on campus. Terrence was gun-shy after he got hurt midseason last year. Coach Meyer should have started me instead of Terrence. We would have won if I was in the whole game.”

“Nobody here disagrees with you, Ed,” Trevor said, “but do you think that affected the outcome of the game?”

“A few guys took advantage of the situation,” Ed answered. “It certainly didn’t help. I wasn’t in a position to say a whole lot, being a backup QB and not the starter.”

“We’ll warn our guys and keep an eye out for that problem,” I said. “Thanks for the heads up.”

“Thank you for the tips on how you beat Michigan,” Ed answered. “We noticed when we were studying the film of your game and the one where Ohio State beat them, that William did a lot of running around. It’s good to know that was intentional. We certainly noticed you capitalized on his absence from the field every time he left. Hopefully our team can win the same way.”

“Good luck with that, Ed,” Chip said. “We’ll be rooting for your team if we have time to watch the game at all.”

“Do you guys want to do dessert before we head back to the party?” Ed asked.

“No, you don’t want to do that,” Damian answered. “We’ve got some excellent snacks planned for tonight’s party. We have to do this one right. It’s Coach’s final party on campus before he abandons us and runs off to Philly.”

“I’m not abandoning you,” I insisted. “Philly or Pittsburgh are the only places I can finish my degree... and given a choice between Philly, with my fiancée and Pittsburgh without... I’m moving to Philly. Anyway guys, this isn’t my last party with you. Penny and I will come up a few times this spring, time permitting.”

“You bet you will,” Trevor agreed. “The two of you ARE dancing at the Thon.”

“If... IF you guys can work out the logistics so we can get there without missing classes,” Ed added.

“I know,” Trevor agreed. “I just about have everything worked out. Your final class is over at 2:20 pm. Penny’s Bio Lab is done at 1:30 pm on Friday. We will get you to Main Campus on time Friday and have you home in time to get a good night’s sleep on Sunday.”

“How in the hell do you plan to accomplish this?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about the details yet,” Trevor answered. “Just get your dancing shoes ready. You and Penny are going to dance.”

“If you can pull off what you promise... I guess we can dance,” I agreed.

“It WILL be done, Coach,” Trevor said.

“What kind of dancing is this, Kyle?” Ed asked.

“Our student body organizes a Dance-a-Thon to raise money for cancer research and care,” I explained. “We’ve been doing it for almost forty years. We raised something like eight million dollars last year.”

“Eight million?” Ed gasped. “Are you serious? Eight million dollars?”

The rest of our group explained about the Thon and our team’s involvement over the past four years as we walked back to the apartment. Damian and Billy launched into the final preparations for the snacks for the party. The rest of us set up the bar, put out the other snacks and got the music ready for the evening.

My phone buzzed with a text message close to eight o’clock. “E WASH DOWN. APP ST NEXT. A”

“Hey everybody, I have good news and bad news,” I announced. “My brother’s Delaware team beat Eastern Washington University this afternoon. Andy’s going to the FCS Championship game.”

Everyone expressed approval of the news. “What’s the bad news?” Trevor asked.

“Jay Nicholson’s James Madison lost to Appalachian State today,” I added. “Delaware will face Appalachian State on January 4th.”

A number of us texted our condolences to Jay. Melanie and Sarah arrived just before the start of the party to provide cover for Damian and Billy. It wouldn’t do for them to appear without the “girlfriends.”

The party got rolling well. I introduced Ed around my crowd of friends. Damian out did himself with the hors d'oeuvres. I shared some of the Troegs Amber Ale I was so fond of with Ed. He enjoyed having it again. I had shared it with him a couple years before. He wished it was available down in Gainesville.

Joe Ricci proudly informed me about a text he received from his brother Tony. Strath Haven won their game with Allentown Central Catholic that afternoon. His team and my team would face off next weekend in Hershey for the PIAA AAA State Championship. I wasn't surprised in the least. I saw this game coming a month ago. My time spent studying Strath Haven back at Thanksgiving would pay off for Jason and my Wolverines.

I spent a relaxing evening talking with friends and playing the genial host for our affair. Ed was naturally attracted to the cluster of girls that hung out with unattached team members. He was using his usual charm to coax one of the ladies into spending the night with him.

I headed for the kitchen for a second beer. Beth Naylor bumped into me while I was along there. "Hey Kyle, how's it hanging?" Beth purred as she purposely bumped into me. The junior cutie was in full flirt mode that evening.

"Just fine, Beth," I replied.

"Up for a little fun this evening?" Beth queried. "A repeat of last winter would be nice." Beth and I had shared a bed a time or two after I broke up with Kelly. It had been fun.

"I guess you haven't heard," I said as I wiggled my (empty) ring finger in front of her. "I got engaged last Saturday."

"Nuts!" Beth pouted. "We'd have had fun and a hook up with a Heisman finalist would be something to talk about."

I took Beth by the arm and escorted her to the living room. "Your chances of hooking up with a Heisman finalist tonight aren't over," I pointed toward Ed, who was talking with Brian Henson, Emily Galloway and Amber Noel. "You might recognize my friend Ed Fritz over there. He was seated beside me at the Heisman announcement ceremony last Saturday night. He is one of my closest friends from back home and the starting quarterback for the Florida Gators."

"Really?" Beth asked. "Is he as talented as you, Zack, who I know only by reputation, or that sweet Mattie?"

"Mattie?" I asked. I suspected she meant Matt Sauder.

"Mattie... you know," Beth responded. "The sweet high school kid the team is trying to recruit."

“Oh, Matt Sauder,” I confirmed. “Matt is signed, sealed and delivered. He finishes the last of his high school finals in a few days, plays for the state championship next weekend and is already registered for classes here next semester.”

“Oh, goodie!” Beth replied enthusiastically. “I hadn’t heard that. Now, is your friend, Ed, as talented in bed as the others from your hometown?”

“I’ve never experienced his talent first hand,” I answered, “but I have been nearby while he entertains his ladies. They all seemed quite satisfied, from what I heard.”

“Oh-kay...” Beth said. “Wish me luck. I’m on a mission.” She sashayed across the room to Ed, Brian and the girls. I headed over to spend some time with Christian and Bev. I chuckled as I went. Was getting a buddy laid considered doing a good turn?

I noticed as Christian, Bev and I talked about my future plans with Penny that Beth had no trouble attracting Ed’s interest. They danced a bit, made out a little and then disappeared into one of the downstairs bedrooms.

Jon Stafford and Ashley Burton had been dating much of the fall, in spite of my warnings to be careful. Their interest in each other had deepened through the fall. This night they were pretty much oblivious to the rest of the people at the party. They danced together most of the evening before grabbing one of the oversized living room chairs to cuddle and make out. Maybe I had been overly sensitive when I discouraged their romance. Jon had not suffered any repercussions so far.

I enjoyed the party, spending time with all my friends here. I was a little melancholy by the end of the night. How could my time at Main Campus be nearly over? It just didn’t seem possible.

Beth Naylor didn’t split with her friends after her hookup with Ed in one of the bedrooms that evening, the way she usually did. Beth and Ed were still together, arms circling each other as the party was breaking up. Ed and Beth helped Trevor, Steph, Chip, Claire and me clean up the apartment as the party ended.

The end of the party uncovered one complication. Marco Cuchiella and the cute freshman he was with assumed they could use Damian’s bedroom, like Marco often did.

“Sorry, Marco,” I explained. “Damian said Ed could use his bedroom this evening. You’ll have to head back to your dorm room tonight.”

“Shit! This isn’t good,” Marco said. “Jon and Ashley had a romantic night planned back at our room. Where do Kim and I go?” I just shrugged my shoulders. “Kim, is your roommate around?”

“Yeah, she’s there with her boyfriend,” Kim answered. Marco looked more disgusted.

"I'll call Jon and warn him we're on our way back to the room," Marco said. He called Jon quickly. "Hey, sorry to bother you, Jon. Kim and I have to come back to the room. There aren't any free bedrooms here at Coach's."

Marco listened for a fifteen or twenty seconds, nodding occasionally. "You can? Great!" Marco had a big smile when he ended the call. "Ashley's roommate went home this weekend. Jon and Ashley are moving their party over to her room. We can have our fun in my room."

"That's excellent, Marco," Kim agreed with a kiss.

"I'm glad everything worked out," I responded. "Good night, Marco. Good night, Kim."

Trevor, Steph, Chip and Clair headed upstairs. Ed and Beth went to Damian's bedroom. I went to my room and changed my sheets. I sent Penny a good night e-mail before I went to bed. I promised to talk with her tomorrow afternoon.

I was the first one up in the apartment on Sunday morning. I guess not having a partner handy for extracurricular fun allowed me to get more sleep than my friends. I headed down to the Mix and picked up a paper and a breakfast sandwich to tide me over until Ed woke up.

The Inquirer had a nice write up on Delaware's victory over Eastern Washington yesterday on the third page of the sports section. Andy and his offensive cohorts went on a tear, scoring 42 points on the Eagles. Andy caught two touchdown passes that afternoon and also ran a punt back for a touchdown. Delaware's stalwart defense held Eastern Washington's normally productive offense to 24 points.

The sports section's high school sports page had a big write up on Strath Haven's victory the previous afternoon. The paper reported that the championship game would be Friday night at Hershey Stadium. That was excellent news. Ed and I both could help out the Wolverines coaching staff.

Ed and Beth were the first couple to get up after me. Beth headed upstairs to shower first. Ed and I shared the paper while he waited. Ed got a good bye kiss and hug when Beth departed. Ed cleaned up and I took him downtown for an authentic Penn State breakfast at the Penn State Diner. He enjoyed the meal. Ed wished me luck on my finals before he departed.

Kelly came over to talk when I arrived in 212 Willard for Monday's American Military History final.

“Bev told me about you and Penny,” Kelly commented. “Congratulations, Kyle. This is a very good match.”

“Thank you,” I responded. “It is kind of you to say that, considering everything that has gone on between us.”

“You were right last fall when you broke up with me,” Kelly said. “I hated you at the time but you were right that we got too crazy when we were together. It took me some hard knocks to learn that lesson. In spite of everything, I will treasure our time together. I know how you are with finals. You’ll be finished and gone today before I finish the last couple questions. Good luck down in Philly with your student teaching. Look me up next spring when we graduate. I want to say a proper good bye then.”

“I’ll do that, Kelly,” I promised. “You take care of yourself too.”

Unlike her standard practice, Kelly took a seat beside mine. Cameron Miller joined us a minute later. The three of us speculated on Dr. Brennan’s questions until it was time to start. The final was a piece of cake. I wrapped up my eight essay questions in an hour. I had time to go back and check spelling and grammar so my answers would shine when Dr. Brennan graded the exam. I took off around 11:40, twenty minutes before the end of the finals period.

Jon Stafford and the team got a shock at Monday’s practice. Coach Burton demoted Jon down to the third string and brought Bob Huber up to run the second string team. Coach Burton spent an inordinate amount of time and attention on observing and critiquing the third string that afternoon. Jon received the brunt of Coach’s wrath. The rest of us had no idea why Jon landed in Coach’s doghouse. Jon did not complain nor enlighten us on what had happened.

My Education and Public Policy final went well on Tuesday morning. My phone vibrated part way through the final. I couldn’t check it until after I finished. I found out it was Penny who called. I hit the “call back” feature.

“I’m in!” my ecstatic fiancée gasped when she answered. “I’m in! Can you believe it? I’M IN!”

“In what?” I asked when she calmed down.

“Veterinary school, of course,” Penny finally managed to say. “They accepted me into the veterinary school.”

“That is fantastic news, honey,” I responded. “That is great. Now we know where you will be next fall. I knew you would make it.”

“I wasn’t so sure,” Penny allowed. “Two of my classmates who applied got rejected.”

“You were a shoo-in, honey,” I responded.

“How was your final this morning?” Penny asked.

“Easy,” I answered. “I had no problem at all. I have English tomorrow morning, Geography Thursday and Art History on Friday. After Friday afternoon’s practice I will head straight to Hershey. Are you coming for the game?”

“I don’t know, Kyle,” Penny responded. “I can’t sit with you during the game. You’ll be on the sidelines. If I drive to the game I can’t ride back home with you. I wouldn’t get to spend any time with you the whole evening.”

“You could ride to Hershey with Ed,” I suggested. “He’s coming up to help coach. After the game you can ride home with me.” I chuckled. “...and you can spend the night at my place. I’m sure the boys will be anxious to see their auntie or big sister.”

“That’s an idea,” Penny agreed. “I’ll give Ed a call when I get home and see if he minds taking a passenger to the game.”

“Are we still on to move my things down to Philly on Saturday?” I asked.

“I have the whole day set aside to help you get moved into my... our apartment,” Penny said.

“I love you, babe,” I said.

“I love you too, sweetie,” Penny agreed.

Whatever Jon Stafford did to get in Coach Burton’s doghouse had not been worked out by Tuesday’s practice. Coach was constantly on Jon’s case. The rest of the team performed well, trying to ignore the little drama between our head coach and our backup quarterback. Coach Adams and Coach C made sure the first string performed at their peak efficiency.

Damian, Trevor, Chip and I talked about the Jon situation after practice. We all agreed something needed to be done. We needed Jon as our backup quarterback and we needed him in good mental health and prepared to come into the game if something happened to Chip. Bob Huber’s a nice guy and a decent quarterback. He simply does not have the physical talent or game experience that Jon has. Jon is heir apparent to Chip. Bob is likely to be our next Glenn Korbel – a career backup with limited prospects as a college starter.

The four of us sought Jon out after dinner to see what was going on between him and Coach Burton. I was direct.

“What in the hell did you do to piss off Coach?” I asked when we were alone.

“You didn’t hear?” Jon asked. “Coach found out about Ashley and me sleeping together.”

“How did that happen?” Trevor demanded.

“When Marco and Kim displaced Ashley and me from my room on Saturday night, we went over to her room,” Jon explained. “I know better than to answer Ashley’s phone when we’re over there... normally. Sunday morning Ashley called her friend Emma to arrange for Emma, her boyfriend and us to go out for brunch. Emma needed to confer with her boyfriend, Ashton. He was in the shower. When the phone rang a couple minutes later while Ashley was down the hall in the bathroom, I answered it.”

“Shit!” Damian growled.

“Yeah, exactly,” Jon agreed. “Coach recognized my voice as soon as I said, ‘Emma?’ I knew I was in deep shit when he asked, ‘Jon, what are you doing in my daughter’s room?’ I tried to explain but...”

“You don’t need to go through the gory details,” Trevor said.

“What have you tried to square things with Coach?” I asked.

“Ashley thinks she has a better chance of reaching her father than I do,” Jon explained. “She’s probably right too. I tried to talk to him Monday morning. He threw me out of his office before I could say anything. You saw how practices have been going. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I wouldn’t be surprised if Coach left me behind when we go to Phoenix. Is there anything you guys can do for me?”

“I don’t know, Jon,” I replied. “Getting in the middle of something between a father and his daughter is dangerous.”

“I should have listened to you, I guess,” Jon admitted. “Still, I love Ashley. I don’t know if I would do anything differently if it meant we wouldn’t have become a couple. Can anything be done?”

“We’ll talk about it and see if we can think of anything, Jon,” Trevor promised.

The four of us headed back to our apartment, talking about Jon’s and the team’s dilemma. All of us agreed we needed to help Jon some way. We needed him for our last game. Even Chip admitted that. He had studied Texas’ pass rush as much as anyone on our team. He knew he was going to be hurried and roughed up when we played the

Longhorns. Having an experienced backup was critical if something went wrong with our protection in our final game.

We talked the whole way back to our apartment and then for another fifteen or twenty minutes. The guys kept coming back to the same idea. They wanted me to speak with Coach and try to clear things up with him and Jon. Eventually their argument that we needed to do something for the good of the team got to me. I agreed to meet with Coach and try to help Jon out of the jam.

I called Ann Marie, Coach Burton's receptionist, after I got up on Wednesday morning. She arranged an 11:30 am appointment with my coach. I tried to spend the morning reviewing for my English 184 final, but my mind kept coming back to my talk with Coach Burton. I thought about how to delicately approach this tricky subject. At 11:20 I headed for the Lasch Building, hoping I didn't do anything that would harm my relation with Coach.

Ann Marie sent me right into Coach Burton's office. Coach greeted me with a smile and ushered me to his couch – his place for informal, get comfortable type meetings. That was a good sign, I hoped.

"Coach, you know I want to win just as badly as you do, don't you?" I began.

"I know you want this championship very much, Coach," Coach Burton agreed.

"What I want to talk about with you is difficult," I explained. "I just want to do everything I can to give us a chance to beat Texas."

"Oh-Kay...", Coach Burton agreed, nodding. He was clearly a little perplexed at where I was taking the conversation.

"Please understand that I don't want to get in the middle of things between you and your daughter Ashley," I said, "but..."

"Well, then you shouldn't!" Coach Burton snapped. "Did Stafford put you up to this?"

"No, he didn't," I answered. "The other captains asked me to talk with you. We're concerned that demoting Jon will hurt our chances of winning. Even Chip admits that having a strong backup for him is going to be essential for us. That Longhorn pass rush looks nasty."

Coach Burton fixed a hard stare on me. "We recruit high character players here. Stafford has shown he is not worthy of our trust or respect. Winning is important but it is NOT more important than doing things the right way."

"I know you are upset with Jon for spending the night with Ashley," I counted. "I understand that." I stared back into my coach's eyes, trying to show confidence. "Ashley is eighteen and a freshman in college now, right?"

"Yes," Coach agreed.

"Legally she is considered an adult," I explained. "Don't you expect that she is going to want to go out with guys?"

"Well... yes..." Coach admitted. "It still doesn't excuse Stafford for taking liberties with my daughter."

"When you and Mrs. Burton were dating, how did your father-in-law treat you?" I asked. "I bet he wasn't real impressed with you or your interest in Mrs. Burton. I know my future father-in-law blew a cork when he found out about Penny and me. He didn't forgive me for a year."

Coach Burton turned his head away a moment and tried to suppress a smile. He said, "Mr. Conklin didn't think much of me back then. Hot shot high school quarterback... scholarship to Pitt... none of that swayed him. Still, do you expect me to just accept his abusing my trust and... and corrupting my daughter?"

"Ashley is going to make her own decisions, Coach," I replied. "I've seen them together for a couple months. Jon treats your daughter very well. He really cares about her. Anyway, think about this... would you want Ashley dating someone like Jon, who you have known for what... three or four years?"

"I first met Jon at a football camp four years ago," Coach Burton confirmed.

"Four years... you know Jon and his parents," I continued. "You know he works hard. You know he's smart and talented. You wouldn't have offered him a scholarship if he wasn't. Think about this, Coach. Would you rather have Ashley dating Jon, who you know well, or dating some college guy you don't know from Adam?"

"Well..." Coach admitted.

"You don't know the guy at all," I said, pressing on. "You have no influence over him. You don't know if he's a decent guy or not. With Jon, you know him well AND have some influence over him."

"I'll give you that point, Coach," Coach Burton admitted.

"I've seen Ashley and Jon together this fall," I said. "I've known him for two years. He isn't one of those guys that hops in bed with a different girl every Saturday night. We have some of them on the team. Jon treats Ashley like a queen. She could do far worse than Jon Stafford."

Coach Burton stared at me for a few seconds before allowing himself a slight smile. "Stafford owes you a lot," Coach allowed.

"I'm just trying to be a good captain and give our team the best chance to win," I said.

Coach pursed his lips and nodded his agreement. "I will take your comments under advisement. Thank you for coming in to discuss this."

"Thank you for talking with me," I responded. I gave Coach a wink and added, "Thank you for not killing the messenger." That drew a slight smile from my coach. I headed out.

I grabbed a sandwich on the way to my English final. The final was all essays but wasn't too bad. I thought I stood a good chance at getting an A on it.

I filled in Trevor, Damian and Chip about my conversation with Coach Burton before practice. Nothing was said by the coaches but Jon was back running the second team offense like normal that afternoon. Coach Burton still rode Jon's tail hard about any mistakes he made, but that's OK. That will make Jon and our team better.

"Thanks, Coach," Jon said after practice was over. "I guess you got through to Coach Burton."

"I guess," I agreed. "Remember that Coach is putting a great deal of trust in you, on the field and off. He's trusting you with one of his most cherished things, his daughter. Don't screw things up."

"I would never do anything to hurt Ashley," Jon responded.

"Work hard for the team," I added. "Be ready to do your job, if we need you. Don't disappoint me or the team."

"You can count on me, Coach," Jon answered.

My eight o'clock final on Thursday morning went well too. I picked up the paper on the way back to the apartment and relaxed a bit with it before breaking out my art history book to study for Friday's final for a couple hours. I signed up for Art History 100 as a pass/fail course so I wouldn't have to drive myself crazy with the extra work. That afternoon was my pay day for that decision.

I spent the afternoon packing all my things to take home on Friday. I started to load my VW but quickly found out that everything wouldn't fit. I hadn't realized how much stuff

I had accumulated in the past year and a half. I hadn't taken everything home from school since the end of sophomore year.

I gave Penny a call. She was home, after her last final on Wednesday afternoon. I explained my dilemma. I feared I would have to make two trips from State College to Paradise, wasting time on our weekend that we could have used more productively. Penny said she had an idea to salvage most of our weekend but she needed to make one phone call before she told me her plan.

Penny called back a couple minutes later. Her pride in her plan was evident even though she was a hundred twenty miles away.

"My Grandpa Hunsecker will loan us his truck," Penny explained. "You load up your car with everything that fits and drive it to Hershey tomorrow night. Your sister Liz can catch a bus to the game and drive your car home afterward. I will meet you there with Grandpa's truck. The two of us ride back to State College Friday night. Saturday morning we load up the rest of your things and bring them down to Philly. Depending on timing, we can stay in our apartment in Philly Saturday night or we can head home to our parents' places. How does this plan sound?"

"It sounds great," I agreed. "I'll give Liz a call and set up her part tonight."

"It's probably easier for me to catch up to her tonight," Penny responded. "She's three doors down, tonight is a school night and I'm sure I will catch up to her easier than you will. I will take care of recruiting her for the plan."

"You're the greatest, honey," I answered. "Thanks for helping figure out my problem."

"That's what partners do," Penny said. "Get set for that last final. I love you, honey."

"I will," I agreed. "I love you too."

I reorganized the things in my car. The VW would take all the things that were going home to Paradise. Anything that was going to Philadelphia went back into the apartment. It could ride down directly to Philadelphia on Saturday.

I received a call from an official at the Senior Bowl later in the afternoon before practice. They wanted me to play in the game. I tentatively accepted, assuming I could get Mr. Waters and my student teaching advisor to agree to let me have the time off. I had expected the invitation.

Trevor, Josh Bruno, Mitch Jackson and Shawn Byrd also received Senior Bowl invitations that day. Penn State was going to be well represented at the bowl.

Thursday's practice went well. Jon Stafford still drew extra attention from Coach Burton. All of it was constructive, focused on making Jon a better football player. Brian Henson hit me up after practice.

"How soon can I move into your old room?" Brian asked. "I have to be out of my dorm room before Friday's practice. My dad is coming for me immediately after practice tomorrow."

"I'm not getting all my things out until Saturday morning," I answered. "Talk to Damian, Trevor and Chip. Maybe you can stack your stuff in the hallway before I finish moving my stuff out."

"OK, Coach," Brian agreed. "I'll talk to them."

I finished boxing things and preparing for my move after dinner Thursday night. I spent a couple hours reviewing my notes for the Art History final Friday morning. Trevor, Chip and Damian discussed options as I took down my Blu-Ray DVD player and loaded up my flat screen TV.

Brian Henson and Jon Stafford showed later that evening bearing boxes of Brian's stuff. The guys had him stack it in the hallway between the steps and the downstairs bedrooms. Brian and Jon were doing double duty that evening. All of Jon's stuff was getting moved into Ben Witte's spot a few doors down from us. Ben was graduating in a few days.

Friday morning's Art History final was easy. I probably should have taken the course with the normal grading system. I was certain I had earned an A even though I was graded pass/fail. I headed for the Lasch Building and a day of film study.

I stopped by Joe Ricci's locker as we were suiting up for practice. "Are you going to the game this evening?"

"I'd love to but I can't," Joe responded. "Coach Burton has selected juniors doing a leadership seminar tonight and all day tomorrow. I won't be dismissed until nine o'clock Saturday night."

"I'm sorry to hear you will miss the game," I said. "I'll say hi to your brother when I see him. I'll tell my tight end not to beat him up too much too."

"I think Tony can handle himself," Joe answered. "Enjoy the game, Coach." Joe chuckled and added, "Don't take it too hard when you guys lose... again!"

"We'll see, Joe," I responded. "I'd bet you a couple weeks of laundry again... except I won't be here to collect my winnings."

Joe good naturedly gave me a raspberry as I left to go out to Holuba Hall. The teasing was just in fun. I certainly respected his high school team and I knew he respected mine.

Our final on-campus practice went well that afternoon. Coach Burton circled the entire team together at the end of practice.

“This is our final practice on campus this season,” Coach announced. “I want you to enjoy the next few days off and spend time with your family. Take your playbook and game plans home and make sure you’re familiar with them. I want everyone prepared to face the Longhorns. Coach Martin asked to lead the final cheer. Coach...”

“Our team set a vision a year ago when we were down in Orlando. Win every game this year and compete for the national championship. We have achieved every goal we set except for one. Enjoy a the break and come back ready to work. We are inches from achieving a national championship. Together we can reach that last goal. On to Phoenix on three. one... Two... THREE....”

“ON TO PHOENIX!” all one hundred and nine players chanted.

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It certainly felt weird as I left the Holuba Hall field from the final practice. I showered, dressed and gathered my extra things from my locker. All that was left would make the trip out to Phoenix. I was feeling emotional as I finished my work. I left quickly, calling out, “Merry Christmas everyone. See you on the twenty-eighth,” as I departed. I didn’t want to get maudlin. I had to go help my high school team win a state championship yet that night.

I grabbed a sandwich and some chips at the Onion in East Halls on the way out of town. I wolfed down my dinner as I hurried south to Hershey. The full moon added a glow to the scenes along the highway. The day had been clear but scattered clouds were coming in as I drove. The temperature in Hershey was expected to be around freezing at game time. Very nice weather compared to last weekend. There was a gentle breeze blowing from the northwest.

The parking lots were full when I pulled into Hershey Park Arena a little after seven o’clock that evening. I passed rows and rows of Strath Haven and Paradise buses as I hurried to our locker room. I got there just as Jason finished his pregame pep talk to the team. The guys lined up and headed for the tunnel to the field.

“Nice of you to join us,” Justin teased as Ed and I followed the other coaches out to the field.

“I’m just a loaner, dude,” I countered. “Coach Burton kept us in practice until a quarter to five today. I’m just glad I made it before kickoff.”

“We’re glad you’re here,” Justin admitted. He headed upstairs to the booth with Coach Ressler and Patrick.

“Did you see if Penny made it?” I asked Ed after Justin left.

“Oh yeah, she made it,” Ed answered with a big grin. “Your sweetie looks funny driving an F-350 pickup, but yeah, she is here. What’s the deal with the truck?”

“I have more stuff to move home from campus than I realized,” I explained. “Penny borrowed the pickup from her grandfather. We’re going back to campus after the game tonight. Penny is going to help me move my things down to our apartment in Philly tomorrow.”

“Stop by and visit when you get home tomorrow night,” Ed suggested. “I want to see the two of you a little before I head back to Florida. My plane flies out of Baltimore at 6:35 Sunday morning.”

“We’ll do our best,” I promised.

Billy Baer gave Ed and me our set of headphones as we settled in on the sidelines. Ed and I talked with the starting skill players while we waited for the start of the game. Matt Sauder and Tristan Hibshman went out for the coin toss. Strath Haven won and decided to take the ball first.

Nick Sterling did a good job on the kickoff, driving the ball five yards deep into the end zone. Their returner decided to run it out. He made it to the 17 yard line before one of our gunners caught him and stopped him. A wave of tacklers put him on the ground without allowing him to gain any more yards.

The Panthers lined up with a fullback and halfback behind the quarterback, pro style. One receiver lined up wide as a split end with the other player in the weak side slot. I smiled as the slot receiver went in motion. He stopped in the wing position, a yard behind and to the right of the tight end. The formation was the classic Wing T formation.

The quarterback pivoted and placed the ball in the fullback’s belly as he rushed straight ahead on a dive... or at least that’s what I thought I saw. The quarterback continued to the right, cradling the ball(?) as the halfback ran parallel and outside of him. The quarterback ran into the gap between the wingback and tight end before I knew where the ball was. Thankfully Nate Trimble had a better vantage point than me.

Nate sniffed out that the fullback had gotten ball, drove forward and filled the gap between the center and left guard, smashing into the fullback and bringing him down as he crossed the line of scrimmage. Nate’s momentum pushed him and fullback back into the backfield. The referee gave the fullback credit for half yard, based on forward progress.

Last year my team had been confused by the multiple formations, the fakes and the shifts before the snap. The Panthers had confused us and run all over us. This year with John Water’s scouting report and the play tendency chart I made up, our guys were confident they knew how to deal with the Wing T.

The Panthers tried an option pitchout on the next play. Andy Krause properly diagnosed what was coming and set a hard corner, preventing the QB from pitching the ball outside. He was forced to keep the ball and follow his wingback and tight end into the line. Nate Trimble, Tristan Hibshman and Bill Wenger all converged at the point of attack, dropping the QB for a yard and a half gain.

The Panthers were faced with a third and eight. Coach Wyndham backed off our nine man front defense, dropping people back to normal depth, anticipating a pass play. The Panthers lined up in the Wing T. Motion took the wingback out to the weak side slot. Our defense didn’t reset until the motion stopped. Nate yelled to change our coverage for the offensive set we saw now. It was a simple two receiver set, no problem. Nate coolly told Luke Sullivan to cover the wingback’s route while he shifted a yard to his right to

cover some of the ground Luke normally covered. Andy Krause shifted to fill some of Nate's ground.

The split end, the wingback, and the tight end went deep on passing routes. The halfback drifted right to provide an outlet in the flat. The Panther's fullback stayed in to help with pass blocking while the QB dropped back five steps. When the QB should have stopped and scanned for receivers, he pivoted and thrust the ball into the fullback's gut. It was a delay draw!

Nate Trimble had dropped back a couple yards to defend against crossing routes. He spotted the draw immediately and flew up into the hole, dropping the fullback at the line of scrimmage.

Emotionally our defense was high as a kite when they came off the field for the punt return team. Bill Groff, the defense's sideline coordinator, calmed them down as he praised their play. It was a much better start to the game than last year. John Waters' help was going to be invaluable this game. This year our guys were confident about how to handle all the sets, motions, and fakes involved in defending against a Wing T offense.

The Panthers punter got the ball off under pressure. Garrett Houseman, our returner, fielded it just on our side of midfield. He picked up eight yards before he was tackled at the Panther's 44 yard line.

Matt, Cody, Dave, Gary and rest of our offense wasted no time. Gary picked up seven yards on a slant to start things. Dave caught a 22 yard pass when the Panthers stacked up against our run fake. Cody picked up seven yards on a screen when the Panthers blitzed. Matt finished the drive off looping a ball into the corner of the end zone to Dave Mitchell. Nick Sterling booted the ball through the uprights for the PAT. Score: Wolverines-7, Panthers-0.

I had the kickoff team fired up. Nick kicked deep again. My tacklers took the returner down on their 21 yard line this time. The Panthers QB's fake to the fullback was excellent. I had trouble seeing from the sideline whether the fullback had the ball or not. Thankfully Nate Trimble had a better view. He spotted the fake each play as the Panthers ran wide to the strong side.

Our guys played tough, but the Panthers were an excellent, well drilled football team. They managed to pick up a couple first downs as Andy Krause, Chris Zimmerman and Bill Wenger struggled to get off their blocks and shut down the outside runs. On the seventh play Tristan Hibshman broke through the blocking and forced the halfback wide. Chris and Andy put him down for a two yard loss.

The Panthers tried to cross our defense up on the next play, actually handing the ball to the fullback. Nate Trimble diagnosed the play and dropped the fullback after a one yard gain. Faced with third down and eleven yards to go, the Panthers went to the air. Josh Strickler easily batted the ball away from the split end.

The Panthers had advanced the ball up to our 45 yard line. They punted the ball back to us. Garrett Houseman caught the ball at our 11 yard line and advanced nine yards before he was tackled. We took possession on our 20 yard line.

Our team's mixed runs and passes kept the Panthers off balance. It worked to a point. Matt moved the team forty-eight yards down the field on eight plays before the defense got us off balance. It was first and ten at their 32 yard line when their left cornerback tipped a ball meant for Garrett Houseman. The free safety caught the tip. Gary Harrison put him down hard, but the damage was done.

The Panthers offense took the field at their 18 yard line. Ed and I pulled Matt, Cody and the receivers together to discuss what we learned from the previous drive. Cheers from our sidelines interrupted us three times. The third time all of us looked at the field in time to see Nate Trimble jump off the downed running back and celebrate. It looked like they were down around the Panther's 22 yard line.

"That looks like your cue guys," Ed said. "Go get them. Play smart, Matt. Look at the middle. I expect to see it open."

"You got it, Ed," Matt said.

Garrett caught the punt from the Panthers near midfield and picked up eight yards on the return. We started on the Panthers' 42 yard line. Matt hit Gary on a curl when he found Dave double covered on the first play of the drive. Gary picked up twelve yards.

Ed had been right. The linebacker covering Gary was mismatched against my friend. Cody blasted the ball ahead behind Jordan's, Gary's and Brad Auker's blocks on the next play for seven yards. A holding penalty negated Dave Mitchell's spectacular leaping catch against double coverage on the next play.

Matt hit Gary Harrison over the middle again for a tough seven yards. The Panthers defenders swarmed Gary and stopped him from gaining any yards after the catch. It was third down and six to go. Matt found Garrett Houseman open and rifled the ball to him. Unfortunately one of the Panthers' linemen tipped the ball as it sailed by. Garrett couldn't get to it.

Nick Sterling came in to kick the field goal from the Panthers' 23 yard line. Even for a good high school kicker like ours, a forty-one yard kick is an iffy thing. Nick showed why Delaware offered him a scholarship. He made the field goal. Score: Wolverines-10, Panthers-0.

I realized as I watched the last drive that our offensive line was establishing dominance over the Panthers' line. Last year it had been the other way. I swore their line was bigger than ours the last time we faced them. I guess a couple of their big guys graduated. Our guys were a year older and a year smarter and the difference showed. The Panthers were

fundamentally sound on defense and did not give up points easily. Our guys would need to be patient to score on these guys.

The Panthers' offense was sound too. Nate kept the fullback from gaining yards on his carries, meeting the first of the three goals John Waters suggested in his notes on how to beat this team. I overheard Bill Groff reviewing with Josh Strickler, Ethan Gockley, Tristan Hibshman and Bill Wenger the technique they needed to achieve the second step of disarming a Wing T offense – set a hard corner and force the sweeps inside.

When our defensive efforts slowed the Panthers' strong side sweeps, they started adding in weak side sweeps too, to keep our guys guessing. The Panthers moved the ball downfield, to our team's growing frustration. Jason and Bill Groff preached patience. The Panthers' big break came on a play action pass Chris Zimmerman mistook for another weak side sweep and ran up to help stop the run.

The Panther QB managed to fling the ball out to his split end behind Chris. Chris and Ethan Gockley recovered from the mistake and took down the split end, but not before he gained twenty-two yards and moved the Panthers into our red zone. The Panthers needed seven plays, but they punched their way into the end zone. Our team did catch a break at the end of the Panther drive. The kicker hooked the point after attempt, leaving the score, Wolverines-10, Panthers-6.

There were about three and a half minutes left in the half when Strath Haven kicked the ball back to us. Matt and our offense played brilliantly. Jason kept the Panthers off balance with his play calling. He exploited the center of the Panthers' defense again. Their linebackers and strong safety did not match up with Gary Harrison.

When the Panthers brought extra help to the center to help cover Gary, Matt found Dave running downfield one on one. Matt launched a deep pass. Dave ran under it, caught it and carried it into the end zone. Nick Sterling drilled the PAT through the uprights. Score: Wolverines-17, Panthers-6.

The Panthers did not try to do anything with the last thirty-two seconds of the first half. Jason was supremely confident when our team assembled in the locker room. He gave a similar speech to last Saturday. He challenged the offense to go out and take charge of the game with the second half kickoff.

"You score on our first possession, guys," Jason intoned. "This game is ours! Strath Haven is not built to win by passing. We put them in an eighteen point hole and they are done. Seize the game and seize the state championship you have worked for all season. Can you do it, offense?"

"Yes we can!" half the team fired back.

"Defense, you are doing great!" Jason pronounced. "Coach Wyndham tells me that the Panthers are averaging 3.5 yards a play instead of their normal 6.7. Keep reading your

keys and keep those backs contained. Do that for another half you're going to be champions. Can you do that?"

"Yes we can!" the other half of the team shouted back.

"Huddle with your position coaches and review the adjustments we want to make for the second half," Jason added.

The position groups huddled with their coaches. Ed and I joined in with Jason, Patrick and Justin to review the things we wanted the skill players to exploit in the second half. The guys were fired up when it was time to take the field.

Matt was walking out beside me. "We're really going to win this thing, aren't we, Coach?"

"You score a TD on this possession, you bet we are," I agreed. "Go get them, Matt!"

"Will do, Coach," Matt answered.

Matt and the guys did just that, too. Garrett had an excellent kick return to start the half, giving us the ball on our 34 yard line. Matt exploited the soft center with Gary and Garrett again. Cody ran enough to keep the Panthers guessing between run and pass each down. When the Panthers singled up coverage on Dave outside, Matt hit him for a 27 yard pass to put us inside their red zone.

It took four more plays, but we stuffed the ball into the end zone. Nick Sterling made the PAT. No surprise there. His kicking over the last two seasons had been superlative. Score: Wolverines-24, Panthers-6.

Jason's halftime prediction proved prescient. Our eighteen point lead forced Strath Haven out of their normal run oriented offense. Their team was not built to pass but they tried on about half the plays. Chris Zimmerman picked off one of their passes. Nate Trimble got another. Strath Haven managed to score a touchdown in the second half. Matt and the offense added two field goals as they protected the ball and padded their lead.

It was hard to keep the kids on the sideline calm as Cody, Brad Auker and Dylan Landis ran out the clock on the final drive. Jason assigned Ed and me one final task as the game clock wound down – keep him from taking a Gatorade bath.

Sad to say, we let our attention wander. Nate Trimble, Josh Strickler and Tristan Hibshman got Jason during the final kneel down that ended the game. Ed and I protested we had no idea how the kids got past us as Jason confronted us and the perpetrators. It was OK. Jason couldn't help from laughing too as he tried to scold us.

The other players mobbed their coach, shouting congratulations and slapping him on the back. Ed and I exchanged hugs in the pandemonium around us. Matt and Cody came bouncing up to us.

“We did it!” Matt shouted. “We did it! All of us owe you, Coach. You too, Ed.”

“It was great to be here to watch you guys win,” I said.

“You had a great game, Matt,” Ed added. “It’s not too late to change your destination to Florida.”

“I’ll overlook the recruiting violation,” Matt answered with a wink. “I’m blue and white the whole way. Penn State, here I come!” Matt paused and smiled. “Damn! What a day. I finished my last final yesterday afternoon, graduated this afternoon and won a state championship tonight. Amazing!”

“Yeah, it is amazing,” Cody agreed.

“What’s amazing?” Dave Mitchell asked as he joined our huddle.

“Everything,” Matt answered. “Graduation, winning the championship... everything about this day.”

“You said it, buddy,” Dave agreed.

“You guys keep celebrating,” I suggested. “I have to go find my honey.”

“See you, Coach,” the three called as I left. “Thanks for everything.”

“I’m coming along,” Ed said. “I’ve got to find Kathy. I’m giving her a ride home.”

“Cool,” I agreed. It didn’t take us long to find the girls, since they were searching for us and Ed and I tend to stand out in a crowd, even a crowd of football players.

“Did you have fun?” Penny asked as we exchanged hugs when we met.

“It was as much fun as five years ago,” I replied. “Even better, since I don’t have a limp anymore.”

“Let’s see if we can find Nate,” Kathy suggested. “I want to congratulate him.”

The four of us headed out onto the field. We found a middle linebacker quickly, but one dressed in the wrong uniform. Tony Ricci gave me a rueful smile when he saw me.

“Hey, Kyle,” Tony said. “Your team played a great game.”

“You played well yourself, even if you didn’t win,” I replied. “I’ll tell Joe when I see him.”

“I didn’t play as well as your middle linebacker,” Tony countered. “I’ve never seen anybody stop Nick the way he did. He’s a hell of a player.” I presumed the Panthers’ fullback’s name was Nick.

“I’ll tell my brother when I find him,” Kathy said. “He’ll be pleased to hear what you said. I’m Kathy Trimble, by the way, Nate’s sister.”

“Kathy is being modest,” Ed added. “Do you know who Jeremy North is?”

“Shoot, anyone who knows college football knows who he is,” Tony replied. “He’s the best linebacker around.”

“...and Kathy’s fiancé,” Ed added. “Jeremy has been coaching Nate for quite a few years.”

“That explains a lot,” Tony said. “I’d still like to congratulate Nate personally.”

“Come with us,” I suggested. “We’re looking for him right now.”

“Hey Nate! Nate!” Kathy called out as she waved in the crowd to get her brother attention. It didn’t take long for us to attract him.

“Hey, Sis. How’d you like that game?” Nate asked when he managed to plow through the crowd on the field to join us.

“You played great, Nate,” Kathy replied. “Jeremy is going to be so proud of you when he gets home and reviews the tape of the game.”

“I can’t wait to sit down and review it with him,” Nate responded. “I know he will have more tips to help me get better.”

“Nate, I want to introduce you to someone,” I interjected. Nate turned to look at me. “This is your opposite number on the Panthers, Tony Ricci. Tony plays middle linebacker for their team. His older brother is a teammate of mine at Penn State.”

Nate extended a hand to Tony and they shook. “Tony, this is Nate Trimble,” I explained. “Nate is a neighbor of mine and a top notch middle linebacker.”

“It’s good to meet you, Nate,” Tony said. “I wanted to stop by and congratulate you on the win. You had a hell of a game. I know the Wing T offense and I have trouble stopping Nick, our fullback. I don’t know how you managed it, but it was a hell of a performance.”

“Thank you, Tony,” Nate replied. “I noticed you made the middle of the field pretty inhospitable for Cody and Brad.”

“Are Cody or Brad your tight ends?” Tony asked. “I couldn’t do a thing with that tight end of yours.”

“That’s Gary,” Nate replied. “I can’t cover him on pass routes either. He hits like a freight train too when he’s blocking.”

“Yeah, he does,” Tony agreed. “I just wanted to tell you I thought you played great and congratulate you on your championship.”

“Thanks, Tony,” Nate said. “Good luck on football next year.”

Tony headed for his sideline and teammates. The rest of us congratulated any and all of the Wolverine players we found on the field. Liz found me in the center of the field. I gave her my car keys and told her where to find my trusty VW Golf.

“Take good care of my baby,” I teased. “No dents, dings or scratches.”

“Relax, big bro,” Liz responded. “I haven’t backed into anything in almost six months. Your precious car will be safe with me.”

“You haven’t what?” I teased. The grin on my sister face told me she was pulling my leg.

“It will be fine, Kyle,” Penny added reassuringly.

“I know,” I agreed. “Tell Mom, Dad and the boys that I said hi. Penny and I will be home tomorrow night.”

We continued circulating among the mass of celebrating players, coaches and fans. After about ten minutes of celebrating, Justin and Bill Groff came through, chasing the players to the locker room. It was close to eleven o’clock and the bus drivers had a long drive home.

“Ed and I should drop by the locker room and thank Coach Turner before we leave,” I explained to Penny.

Penny said she and Kathy would meet us at her grandfather’s truck. She explained where we would find it. Ed and I promised not to take too long. Ed and I popped into the locker room, expecting to say a quick good bye and take off. We came just as Jason was gathering everyone’s attention for his post game speech.

“This has been a special treat for me,” Jason began. “I came into a great program a year and a half ago. You guys have pushed the program even higher since I arrived. Every

one of you will remember tonight for the rest of your lives. This is a great win for you and a great win for our school.

“I have four game balls I want to hand out to night. The first goes to Nate Trimble, our middle linebacker and the man who keyed our success against the Panthers’ Wing T offense. Congratulations, Nate,” Jason said as he handed a ball to Nate. The team cheered him as he accepted and waved the ball to his teammates.

“The second game ball goes to our leader and quarterback, Matt Sauder,” Jason said as he walked to Matt and gave him a ball. “Matt sets the tone and drives the offense. Tonight was the best game I’ve seen you play. Congratulations, Matt.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Matt replied. “Thanks so much.”

“The third game ball goes to a coach,” Jason said. He walked over to Bill Groff. “Coach Groff taught the scout team how to run a Wing T offense. Then he taught our defense how to beat a Wing T. Here you go, Bill.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Bill replied. “My four years at Delaware and my brother’s four years there helped tremendously. My college developed the Wing T offense, so I guess it’s poetic justice that I learned how to beat it there.”

“The final game ball goes to another coach, Coach Martin,” Jason announced. He stepped up to me and handed me a ball. “You guys may not know it, but everything we knew about playing Strath Haven came from Coach. About a month ago he recognized who we would play tonight, obtained scouting reports and defensive plans for them, watched miles of film and cataloged their tendencies. The tendency charts we used tonight to predict what the Panthers would do... Coach created all of them.”

“Thanks, Coach Turner,” I replied. “I was happy to help. Most of you know I want to be a football coach some day. This was fun.”

“You are a football coach already, Coach,” Jason countered. “We all know it.”

“I want to be a paid football coach,” I added. “With the team’s permission, I think there is one more game ball that ought to be awarded.”

“Oh... you’re exactly right, Coach,” Jason agreed. “Would you take a game ball back to Penn State and present it to Coach Walter Caffrey at a suitable time? I was just the driver in this car this season. He’s the one who built it. None of us would be here tonight without Coach Caffrey’s valuable contributions to this team.”

“I’d be honored to present this to Coach Caffrey,” I agreed, “He has earned it, but he wasn’t the person I had in mind. Coach John Waters, the defensive coordinator at Conestoga High School, is the person who prepared the scouting reports and defensive game plan that you used. Next semester I will be student teaching for Coach Waters. He

was gracious enough to lend us the support. What do you say, guys? Does Coach Waters deserve a game ball too?"

The team's resounding cheers told Jason and me what we wanted to know. Jason left three game balls with me.

"Everybody, get showered and dressed," Jason announced. "We have a long drive home. Team captains, along with Dave Mitchell, Gary Harrison, Nate Trimble and Andy Krause, have a press conference to do. Hurry up and dress so we can get it done. I think all of us will be ready for bed when we hit Paradise."

"Thanks for letting me help out coaching during the playoffs," I said to Jason when he finished his announcements. "I appreciate the chance to start learning my craft."

"I want to thank you too, Jason," Ed added.

"It was my pleasure, guys," Jason responded. "You're welcome to help out any time you're home. You guys will always be a part of this team."

"Thanks, Jason," I said. Ed echoed my thanks before we headed for the parking lot.

Ed and Kathy headed for Paradise. Penny handed me the car keys. "Why don't you drive Grandpa's truck?" she suggested. "You know the way back to campus better than me and I feel silly sitting behind the wheel of this big monster."

"I bet you and Kathy were a sight, driving up here in this big truck," I teased.

"I'm sure we were," Penny agreed.

I dumped my three footballs in the back seat and hopped aboard. I headed down Park Avenue for the center of Hershey and Route 422.

"What are all the footballs for?" Penny asked after we got underway. "Does Penn State have a shortage or something?"

"No, smarty. They don't have a shortage," I replied. "The team awarded me a game ball for scouting Strath Haven and for helping prepare the defensive game plan."

"You? The defensive game plan?" Penny scoffed.

"Yes... me and the defensive game plan," I retorted. "Actually the second game ball is involved in why I helped with the defensive game plan. You remember me talking about John Waters, my teaching mentor next semester?"

"Sure," Penny replied.

“John is the defensive coordinator at Conestoga High School,” I explained. “Strath Haven is in the same league as Conestoga. John supplied me with detailed reports and plans, along with video of all Strath Haven’s games. I compiled his notes and suggestions into a report I gave Jason... er, Coach Turner. I also studied the video and compiled a tendencies chart by formation, down and distance and situation to help our defense understand what Strath Haven would do today. The team voted to give John a game ball to thank him for his assistance.”

“What about the third?” Penny asked.

“That goes to Coach Caffrey,” I answered. “Jason has done a great job running the team this year, but face it – this state championship is due as much to the foundation Coach Caffrey laid as anything Jason did this season. Coach deserves credit for getting all of this rolling.”

“You’re right about that,” Penny agreed. “Our school, the football team... your life would be a lot different if it weren’t for Coach Caffrey.”

“You got that right,” I agreed.

Our conversation turned to our plans for tomorrow and the rest of the holidays as I drove west for Harrisburg and then on to State College. The trip back to campus took almost two hours. Thankfully the traffic was light and the weather clear. Penny and I arrived back on campus a little before one in the morning.

Damian was asleep in his room when we arrived, so we made sure to be quiet. Damian had no interest in an evening drive home to Erie last night, risking lake effect snow on the way. He planned to head home Saturday morning.

Penny and I found a big note taped to my bedroom door. Trevor had written across the bottom of the paper, “Arrangements all set.” The title at the top said, “Thon Schedule – Kyle Martin & Penny Edwards.”

The schedule listed the following:

Friday, Feb. 15th

1:45 pm	Driver picks up Penny at UPenn campus
2:30 pm	Driver picks up Kyle on way to G. O. Carlson Airport in Coatesville, Pa
3:15 pm	Depart Carlson Airport for State College
4:00 pm	Touchdown at State College Airport – Football Team Thon Committee driver picks up Penny and Kyle and delivers to apartment
4:30 pm	Thon Comm. Driver delivers couple to Bryce Jordan Center
5:00 pm	Start Dancing – 46 hour marathon

Sunday, Feb. 17th

4:00 pm	Thon concludes – Thon Comm. Driver delivers Kyle & Penny to SC Airport
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5:00 pm Plane arrives at Carlson. Driver returns Kyle & Penny to Philly.
Monday, Feb. 18th
6:30 am Driver picks up Kyle and delivers him to Conestoga High School
(optionally, the driver could take Kyle to school on Friday so his car
stays at the apartment for the weekend instead of delivering him on
Monday)

I pulled the sheet off the door and brought it into my room. "It looks as if Trevor figured out transportation to get us across the state for the Thon. I never thought he'd pull it off."

"How can he afford the air fare?" Penny wondered. "Carlson is a small airport that doesn't have scheduled flights. It must be a charter flight."

"I'd guess he has help with the charter fees from either Green Bay or San Francisco," I answered.

"Green Bay is Zack," Penny said. "Who is in San Francisco?"

"Aaron Morano," I answered.

"You talk about him a lot," Penny said. "I take it he's a good friend. Have I ever met him?"

"I doubt you met him," I answered. "Aaron is a very good friend. He is a huge supporter of the Thon." I stared into Penny's eyes. "Are you willing to dance for the marathon? I can beg out if you don't want to do this."

"What are we supporting?" Penny asked.

"The Four Diamond's Fund, which supports cancer research and care," I replied. "It's a great cause. We raised over eight million dollars last year. The weekend is a blast. I figured we should come up and visit, even if we don't dance."

"It's a good cause," Penny agreed. "Let's do it. We should, since Trevor has gone to so much trouble setting things up for us."

"That's settled," I agreed. "Let's get some sleep. It's late and we have a lot to do tomorrow."

Penny and I got to bed quickly. I was up at 6:30 that morning and had a very long day. I fell asleep cuddled with Penny.

It was a little after seven o'clock when I woke up Saturday morning. I had a wicked piss hard-on that demanded immediate attention. I stumbled out of my room and nearly ran into Billy Robinson, who I definitely had not expected to see that morning.

"Excuse me," I mumbled. "I didn't know you spent the night."

"Big boy wanted some company," Billy answered. He stared down at my erection and then gave me a wink. "Mmmm... Let me know if you need a hand with that. It looks delicious."

"Umm... I'm good," I responded. "I just need to drain this thing."

"Too bad," Billy answered. "Let me know if you change your mind."

He headed for the kitchen. I stepped into the downstairs bathroom. That flirtatiousness was unusual for Billy. He normally wasn't as blatant about his homosexuality. I drained my bladder and headed back to my room.

"C'mon Billy," Damian demanded from his bedroom. "I NEED round two now!" I chuckled as I returned to my room. Billy was like that because he was still horny.

I tried to slip back into bed without waking Penny when I came back. She rolled over and gave me a big smile as soon as I lay down on the bed.

"Good morning, honey," Penny said with a smile.

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?" I asked.

"No, you didn't," Penny answered. "We have a lot to do today. Maybe we better get up and get started."

"That's a good plan," I agreed. "The shower is open upstairs. Heh... heh... a least for a few minutes, until Damian and Billy are done with each other. Do you want to shower first?"

"We could save time and do it together," Penny countered.

"I don't know that we would save time," I responded.

"I don't care," Penny said. "Let's go big boy. I want to get you sparkling clean."

"We can do that," I agreed readily. Penny and I headed upstairs. The sounds of Damian and Billy making love were quite loud as we passed through the hallway and headed up the steps. Not surprisingly, Penny and I did end up making love in the shower. Damian and Billy were finished and out in the kitchen when we came down from upstairs.

“Do you guys want some breakfast?” Damian asked.

“Why not?” I agreed. “What are you making?”

“A breakfast scramble,” Damian answered. “I brown some sausage, add hash brown potatoes and brown, and then add eggs and finally cheese.”

“That sounds good,” Penny said. “We accept your offer.”

Billy headed upstairs for a shower while Damian started work. I took over at the frying pan when Billy came back so Damian could get a quick shower too. The sausage and potatoes were nicely browned when he came downstairs again. Damian whipped up some eggs and added them to the pan. A couple minutes later, after they were set he added his spices. Finally cheese went on top. He covered the pan on low heat and let the cheese melt all through the breakfast treat.

I made some toast and set the table while Damian finished. The four of us talked as we enjoyed my buddy’s excellent cooking.

“Do you guys want a hand loading Kyle’s stuff?” Damian asked. “It’s the least we could do.”

“I guess,” I agreed. “I did notice you borrowed my big frying pan that was packed already to cook breakfast in this morning.”

“I didn’t figure you’d mind if I fed you,” Damian countered.

“You’re right,” I said. “Wash it up and help us load,” I said. “We’ll be even.”

Damian did the dishes while Billy, Penny and I started loading up. Damian joined us after a couple minutes. With four people working, we finished loading in about fifteen minutes.

“Thanks for your help, Damian,” I said as I shook my buddy’s hand. “Thanks, Billy.”

“Yes, thank you both,” Penny added.

“I’ll see you on the twenty-seventh,” Damian added.

Penny and I hopped in her grandfather’s pickup and headed east for Philly and then home. Once we were on the road, Penny commented, “You know, we need to talk about Christmas day. My relatives are going to want to meet you.”

“Yeah, mine will too,” I agreed. “Who’s hosting your family’s Christmas dinner this year?” I knew Penny’s family took turns hosting the dinner.

“We’re in luck,” Penny replied. “Dinner is at my house.”

“That’s convenient,” I said. “My family always meets at my house. Maybe we can split time between our families. What time is your dinner?”

“We eat at six pm,” Penny said. “How about you?”

“One pm. This is perfect,” I replied. “We get two Christmas dinners in one holiday. Cool!”

“As long as we don’t eat too much at the first,” Penny cautioned.

“Good point,” I said. “You need to come over Christmas morning when Noah, Connor, Hunter and Rose get their presents. My parents say having the little kids around brings back some of the joy of Christmas we felt when we were little.”

“That sounds great,” Penny agreed. “We exchange our presents after breakfast, but it’s not like it was when Nikki and I were kids.”

“Come over for the kids opening the presents and you’ll see what I mean,” I said.

“I will,” Penny agreed. “What else do you have planned for the holidays?”

“I have a lunch meeting with John Waters on the 26th,” I replied. “I have a half day briefing at Brandywine Campus on the 27th. I’m finally going to meet Professor Buchanan. We’ve exchanged e-mails and talked on the phone to get ready for next semester, but we’ve never actually met. Other than that, my time is free. Are you going to work for Dr. Chu after Christmas?”

“Not until after you leave for Phoenix,” Penny said. “I want to spend as much of your time at home with you as I can.”

“That’s cool,” I said. “We have a few other things I think we need to do together that aren’t scheduled yet. I would like the two of us to sit down with my dad and talk about selecting our agent.”

“Our agent?” Penny asked.

“The name on the contract I sign will be mine but I think it’s important for us to share everything,” I replied. “What kind of job our agent does will materially affect you and me. I want your input when we choose the agent.”

“OK,” Penny agreed. “I don’t know how much I can tell you about choosing agents, but I’ll listen.”

“Good,” I agreed.

“There is one other huge thing we need to talk about this holiday,” Penny said. “My mom has already asked three times if we know when we’re getting married. We need to talk about that.”

“We have another three and a half hours until we get to Philadelphia,” I replied. “Let’s talk. The football season is probably going to drive the decision. Do you want to get married next summer or wait until after the NFL season is over?”

“I certainly don’t want to wait a year,” Penny said.

“Most NFL teams have mini-camps that run between the week after the draft and the middle of June,” I said. “My coaches at Penn State have two or three weekends of football camps for high school kids in mid to late June. I definitely want to invite Coach Burton, Coach Adams, Coach Ferguson and Coach Caffrey to the wedding.”

“When do NFL training camps start up?” Penny asked.

“I think towards the end of July,” I responded.

“That certainly narrows down the date for the wedding,” Penny said. “That probably only leaves two or three weekends if we leave time for a honeymoon.”

“That should satisfy our moms for now,” I said. “I presume we’ll have the wedding at your church.”

“No, we won’t,” Penny responded. “I don’t like the new minister at my old church. I want Reverend Hollinger to officiate at OUR church.”

“That’s cool,” I agreed. “Rev is great. I know he’ll be delighted to do the service.”

“I like him a lot,” Penny said.

“Any thoughts about our honeymoon?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Penny answered. “Do you have any ideas?”

“I had one that’s probably crazy, but I’ll mention it anyway,” I said. “I was thinking of Algonquin. It is where things started with us. Do you remember on our first trip – after the campfire our last night, how we kissed?”

“I do,” Penny said. “Algonquin is a possibility.”

“The black flies would be bad if we went in July,” I said. “Probably we should look at more traditional destinations – Hawaii, Fiji, the Caribbean, or maybe touring Europe.”

“We don’t need to decide today,” Penny said. “We’ve made a lot of progress already today. It’ll keep our mothers busy planning for awhile.”

We filled the rest of the drive down to Philadelphia with small talk about our apartment, her classes and my student teaching. We stopped at the Bowmansville Rest Stop on the Pennsylvania Turnpike for a lunch of burgers and fries. We headed east for King of Prussia and then southeast into Philly on Schuylkill Expressway.

Penny called ahead to the doorman at her... or, well... our apartment to let him know we were close. Penny arranged with him that we could bring the pickup into the courtyard at the back of the building and unload there.

I got off at the Girard Street exit and then went south on 34th Street. Penny called again when I turned onto Powelton Avenue. Two minutes later I pulled into the side entrance normally used by service vehicles. One of the maintenance men closed the gate behind us and directed me where to park.

“Thank you so much, Freddie,” Penny said as she hopped out of the truck. “This is going to make it so much easier for us to unload all of Kyle’s things.”

“So, this is the fiancé you’ve been talking about so much,” Freddie commented.

“It’s good to meet you,” I said I stepped forward to shake his hand. Penny did the introductions. Freddie was Fred Stolorowicz, one of the regular maintenance people for the apartment complex. He was a small man, probably in his early thirties. He wore his long brown hair tied in a pony tail.

Freddie showed us the way to the west elevator. Penny and I got started moving my things up to our third floor apartment. The place looked pretty much as I remembered it from last spring, except it was furnished... so to speak. The furniture was an odd assortment of cast-offs and old things that Penny’s parents didn’t want or that she and April had found at second hand stores or flea markets.

We piled my boxes and things in the empty walk-in closet in the bedroom. The second walk-in closet held all of Penny’s things. We could organize my stuff after I moved in officially after the national championship game. Penny and I had everything unloaded in an hour. She took me down to the first floor and out front.

“Vincent, I want to introduce you to my fiancé,” Penny explained as we met the doorman inside the main entrance.

“Ah, the famous fiancé,” the distinguished looking man in his late forties replied. He was around 5’-10” and carried his maybe 200 pounds around his waist. “You must be Kyle Martin. Penny has talked about you and I’ve enjoyed watching you play on TV. You’re quite a receiver.”

“Thank you, sir,” I replied.

“This is Vincent Rizzo,” Penny said. “He’s one of the regular doormen here at the court.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Vincent,” I said. “Rizzo... are you related to...”

“I’m not with Frank or Frank Junior,” Vincent replied, “but I am a fan of Frankie and his dad.”

“Kyle will officially be moving in on January 9th,” Penny said. “I wanted you to meet him, Kyle, so Vincent will know you when you come back from your first day of school.”

“Are you transferring from Penn State, Kyle?” Vincent asked. “It’s kind of a long commute to any of their campuses.”

“No, I’m student teaching out in Berwyn next semester,” I explained. “I’m still registered with Penn State. They send all their history student teachers to Philly or Pittsburgh.”

“You chose Philly for obvious reasons,” Vincent replied. “Your fiancée is a very pretty and talented young lady.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said. “That’s why I proposed a couple weeks ago.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for you, Kyle,” Vincent said. “I normally work the three to eleven weekday shift. I’ll be on duty when you return from class.”

“I’m looking forward to getting to know you, Vincent,” I said.

“Good luck when youse guys take on them Texas kids,” Vincent said.

“Thanks,” I promised. “We’ll do our best.”

We shook hands again before Penny and I headed out the back way to her grandfather’s truck. I backed out the service way onto 35th Street.

“Do you mind if we go past Conestoga High School?” I asked as I put truck in forward.

“No, that would be fine,” Penny agreed.

“If I did my homework correctly, Lancaster Avenue becomes Route 30 when it leaves the city, right?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Penny agreed. “It will be slower going home that way, but I don’t mind seeing the school where you’ll be teaching.”

The traffic was light on that late Saturday afternoon, but it still took us forty minutes to work our way out the Main Line to Berwyn. I had no trouble finding the school. We drove in the loop in the front of the building. It looked like a normal high school, no different than a hundred others. Still, I was going to spend the next four months working there.

“Next stop, Grandpa’s,” Penny announced as I pulled back onto Route 30. “We can return his truck and pick up my car.”

“I’m curious about something,” I said. “Why don’t you take your car down to campus? It’s got to be a pain in the butt to have to walk everywhere.”

“It’s not that bad,” Penny replied. “Most places I go are close enough to walk to. Anyway, having a car in Philly is a pain in the butt. You can’t simply park it somewhere and leave it there for a week or two. They have street sweeping days. I’d spend more time dealing with the car than it is worth. Plus, some crook can’t break into it if I have it parked back home.”

“Is that likely?” I asked.

“It is, if you’re not careful,” Penny said. “Never leave ANYTHING sitting in plain sight in your car. I guarantee someone will break a window to steal it or the whole car. You should even think about getting a new radio with a face that pops off. It decreases the likelihood of somebody breaking into your car.”

“Will it be that big a deal?” I responded. “I have a beat up, seventeen year old VW. Why would anyone want to bother it?”

“You’d be surprised,” Penny said. “I think you’ll do all right since it is so old and you’re moving it every day. Just take the precautions I told you about.”

“I will,” I agreed. “I guess I better add ‘new radio’ to my to-do list for my time home.”

I thanked Bill Hunsecker profusely when we dropped his truck off at his house near Intercourse. Penny took the wheel when we retrieved her car. It was getting late and we had missed our families’ suppers, so we decided to eat out. Penny drove us over to the Olive Garden at Rockvale Square Outlets.

We got back home just in time to catch Hunter and the twins before they went to bed. Andy graciously let us read the boys their bedtime story. We had just started reading to them when Noah got a serious expression on his face and remarked, “Daddy say you gonna be ouwa [our] Aunt Penny soon. Why?”

“I’m going to marry your Uncle Kyle and be his wife,” Penny explained.

“Penny be my aunt too?” Hunter asked.

“No, she will be your big sister,” I explained. “She will be just like Abby is to you.”

“When maw-wee [marry] Penny?” Connor asked.

“Next summer,” I answered.

“Why you maw-wee [marry] Penny?” Noah asked.

“I love her and want to spend my life with her,” I explained. “We’re going to start a family of our own, just like Uncle Will and Aunt Abby.”

“You gonna have a baby like Aun’ Abby did?” Connor asked.

“Not for quite a while,” Penny said.

“Enough questions, you little monkeys,” I said. “It’s time for you to go to sleep now.”

“Ahh, no fai’ [fair],” both twins pouted. “We want stowy [story]!”

“Do you promise to listen quietly and then go right to sleep?” I asked.

“We do!” “We do!”

Penny and I took turns reading them their story. The kids fell asleep before we reached the end. Penny helped me transfer Noah and Connor to their beds. We turned out the light and closed the door behind us as we left.

“You’re going to make a very good father some day,” Penny said.

“I love the twins and my little brother,” I responded. “It’s almost like I get to be a practice dad occasionally to get me ready for when we have our own family.”

“They are really great kids,” Penny agreed. “We’ll have to wait a bit for our own. I’d like to wait until I finish veterinary school.”

“That makes sense to me,” I agreed. The two of us went downstairs and visited with Mom and Dad for a bit. They were delighted that we had started in on the wedding planning. We were given strict orders to pin down the two or three weekends that would suit before I left for Arizona.

Penny and I went down the street to her house to let her folks know what we were planning for the wedding. Nikki and Adrian were there too. They had arrived from

Charlottesville yesterday afternoon. Nikki was bigger than Thanksgiving. She had twelve weeks to go until her son was born.

Penny packed an overnight bag and came back to my house with me. She would shower and go straight to church with me tomorrow morning. Penny and I had unwound from the go-go-go of finals, moving and everything by the time we headed downstairs to my bedroom. We made love twice before we went to sleep.

Penny and I were up in time to grab some breakfast before following my family to church. My family had grown to the point where we filled almost two pews just with the people who came every Sunday. Will, Abby, Rose, Penny and I took another pew nearby since there wasn't room for all of us.

Noah, Connor and Hunter raced to the front of the sanctuary when Rev called all the children to come forward for the children's talk. Abby brought Rose along too so she could feel like one of the kids. I don't know how much she understood, but she seemed to enjoy all the kids around her interacting with Rev.

Reverend Hollinger did a good sermon about the star in the east and the wise men's quest to find Jesus in Bethlehem. The Christmas hymns during the service set just the right mood for me. It was great to spend a Christmas holiday with my own family.

Reverend Hollinger greeted us warmly when we went through the receiving line at the end of the service.

"The happy couple!" he exclaimed when we stepped up to shake hands with him. "This is indeed wonderful news."

"I know our mothers will be in touch to arrange the details," Penny said. "We want to hold our wedding here and would like you to officiate, Reverend."

"I would be delighted, Penny," Rev replied. "Do you have plans for the date yet?"

"Next summer sometime," I said. "Mom will get in touch with you when the planning has progressed a little more."

"I am so happy for both of you," Rev said. "You two will make an excellent match."

"I have one other question for you Reverend," Penny added. "I have been accepted into Penn's veterinary school. I'll be down there for four or five more years. Kyle is going to who knows which city and will be busy on Sundays anyway. I doubt he will have time to join a church in the city he plays in. Is it possible for me to transfer my membership here and for both of us to be on the church's list even though we don't get here very often? I

don't see the point in joining a church down in Philadelphia where we won't spend much time."

"I'm sure we can work something out for the two of you," Reverend Hollinger promised.

"I'll see you tomorrow night," I said. "I'm looking forward to your candlelight service."

"I am too," Penny agreed.

"I'll see you then," Rev added.

Penny and I did not plan to spend every second of every day of our vacation together. She had a few things to get ready for Christmas and spent time with her family. Andy, the boys and I watched some football while I studied our game plan against Texas. The first game was Green Bay against the red hot Falcons team.

This was the first time I got to see an extended amount of play by Zack Hayes. It would have been better if I hadn't seen the game. The Falcons' defensive line dominated Zack's offensive line. They hurried, chased and pounded my friend. Zack was sacked five times in the first half. All the things he told me last summer were still true about his team. The offensive line sucked, their running game was weak and they needed help on defense too.

Zack took a vicious hit late in the first half that laid him out for a couple minutes. The trainers had to help him to the sideline. During the halftime show, Fox Sports reported that Zack had suffered a concussion and would not return to the field. Fox switched most areas of the country to the Carolina/Tampa Bay game. Andy and I watched it for a few minutes, but were bored by the uninspiring play. We agreed to check out the Steelers/Broncos game on CBS.

The Steelers were leading the Broncos 14-13 early in the third quarter. Antwaan Booker left little time for Ben Roethlisberger to find any open receivers. The Broncos defense didn't yield much to the Steelers normally potent running game. Antwaan and the defensive end opposite him, first year player Marcus Everett, made life difficult on passing downs.

The announcers noted how well JT Hill blocked the normally unstoppable Antwaan Booker. Why not? They had sparred for four years while they were at Penn State. Few offensive linemen knew Antwaan as well as JT did.

Brady Rasmussen's offense struggled to get going against the Steelers defense. I noticed the Steelers pushed everyone up close to contain Simeon Thomas, the excellent tailback from Oklahoma. The solution to them crowding the line was obvious – threaten them deep. Coach Baldwin tried, sending his receivers on flag and post routes, to no avail. No one could get open against the Steelers secondary.

I couldn't help thinking as I was watching, I could really help this team go from a .500 team to a good winning team. I knew I could force those defensive backs off the line of scrimmage and open up running for Simeon Thomas. The Steelers ended up winning 24-20.

I switched the channel over to watch the four o'clock game. It was Fox's premier game of the week. The Eagles and the Giants fought for control of the NFC East. If the Eagles win, they take a two game lead. If the Giants win, they tie the Eagles record and hold the tie breaker over the Eagles.

I had many reasons to watch this game too. I had my longtime love of all things Eagles going back to elementary school. My friend Domonic "Cuch" Cuchiella was making his first start at free safety. Nate Allen, their excellent free safety, had gotten hurt in last week's game and was out for the rest of the season. This game would give Cuch a chance to prove he was capable of starting in the NFL.

My close friend Tyler Madden was anointed the starter at free safety at the Giant's training camp and had played well all season. The Eagles took an early, 13-3 lead in the game, on the strength of great plays by DeSean Jackson and Jeremy Maclin. Tyler and the rest of the secondary struggled to cover these two fleet receivers.

The Giants concentrated on running the ball, which they are very good at. I could see the Eagles defenders starting to stack up against the runners. I knew the solution. I'm sure Tom Coughlin knew too.

The Giants had an outstanding defense. They always had a good offensive line. Eli Manning is an excellent quarterback. They have a good running game. Why didn't they dominate more? They had years and years of mediocre to poor receivers.

Boy, I could see myself there, catching passes from Eli. Other than my youthful distaste for the team, they probably were a near perfect match for me. They had a stable team ownership and coaching staff. I already enumerated the various things they did well. What a difference a speedy receiver could make for them. Would I be that guy? I certainly wouldn't mind playing with Tyler again, that's for sure.

Andy and I put the game on pause when Mom called us for supper. We hurried back to see how things turned out after dinner. The Eagles extended their lead to 24-13 during the third quarter. The Eagles broke the game open with an eye popping touchdown off a short slant route. Bad luck or poor play calling left the Giants middle linebacker to cover DeSean Jackson on the slant. DeSean caught the ball in stride and exploded down the field, leaving the MLB with nothing but air to tackle. DeSean faked Tyler Madden out of his jock strap on the way to the end zone. The receiver deficient Giants couldn't come back from the deficit.

I headed over to Penny's house. Both of us felt it was important for me to spend more time with my future in-laws so everyone could get to know each other better. Lesson number one – Jim Edwards and Adrian Murray are big football fans. Jim, Adrian, Penny and I ended up watching the Patriots/Chargers NBC Sunday Night Game.

The game was played in Foxboro in a heavy snow storm. That didn't suit the southern California team at all, with the possible exception of my former teammate, Jake Washington. As a Penn Stater, Jake knew snow. He played a great game, but without enough support from his teammates. The rest of the Chargers team seemed frozen in the cold, white night. Shawn O'Conner got a lot of carries for the Patriots in the second half of the game as they sealed their victory over the stone cold Chargers.

I gave commentary and answered questions from Jim and Adrian as we watched the game. They enjoyed my stories about playing with Jake and Shawn. It seemed to bring them a little closer to the action to have this kind of inside information. Hopefully next year my in-laws would be rooting for whatever team I played for. I knew they would be bragging at work about their in-law, the wide receiver for ??? – team name to be determined later.

I finally got to sleep in on Christmas Eve. It was great. Noah, Connor and Hunter joined me for brunch about 11:30 that morning. I made the three boys cheesy eggs and bacon. I had a western omelet myself.

Penny and I got together after lunch and went out to pick up some stocking stuffers, like candy canes, Hershey's Kisses and such. We picked up wrapping paper and bows too. We headed back to her house and helped each other wrap presents.

The stack of presents was amazing. In the past I was used a lot of presents, for my four grandparents, Mom, Dad, four brothers and sisters, two nephews and my girlfriend. Proposing to Penny added a future mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister-in-law and brother-in-law. It took us two trips to move everything from her house to mine that belonged under my tree.

I did my daily workout, showered and headed back to Penny's for dinner. Penny and I wanted to do as much as a couple as we could and still spend time with both families. This was probably the last Christmas we would have in Paradise with either family for who knew how many years; unless one or both families decided to fly out to the city I was playing in for the holidays.

I hung out with Penny, her parents, Adrian and Nikki after dinner, until it was time to get ready for church. Penny met me back at my house at 7:30 pm, in time to help Mom, Dad and Andy load up the boys. Liz took off to meet her boyfriend Chris Zimmerman before joining us at church. Will, Abby and Rose were meeting us at church too.

The sanctuary looked as beautiful as ever by candle light. My extended family ended up taking three pews to fit everyone in. The service opened with "Hark! The Herald Angels

Sing.” Rev invited the kids up for the children’s talk. Noah, Connor and Hunter hurried forward, followed by Abby, Rose and a few of the other young mothers and toddlers in our congregation.

Rev gave a nice talk about Jesus’ birth and how Saint Nicholas gave presents on Jesus’ birthday. He reminded the kids that tomorrow was our Savior’s birthday and how each of them should say a prayer and remember for whom and why we celebrate this holiday.

We sang “O Little Town of Bethlehem” and “Joy to the World” before Rev told the story of Jesus’ birth in the lowly stable in Bethlehem. He did a good job weaving together the accounts of Matthew and Luke. The service concluded with a moving rendition of “Silent Night.”

Noah and Connor both fell asleep during the service. Hunter managed to stay awake but was too tired to walk when the service was finished. Dad carried him. Andy motioned for my help. He took Connor out to the car while I carried Noah. Penny and I helped Andy and Dad put the three boys to bed.

The family convened downstairs to enjoy egg nog, pumpkin bread Mom made and Capra’s classic movie, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” All of us, except Mom, turned in early. The boys would be up early on Christmas day. Mom whipped together a breakfast casserole that she could bake while everyone exchanged presents in the morning.

Penny and I headed downstairs. They say young love is insatiable. Penny and I were young and certainly did our best to confirm that statement. Both of us were happy and satisfied when we cuddled together and fell asleep.

I woke up to the sounds of three excited boys running around upstairs yelling, “Santa C’aus came! Santa C’aus bwrought pwesents!” Mom’s shushing couldn’t dampen the boys’ enthusiasm. They knocked at the basement door. “Unka Ky... Aunt Penny, Santa C’aus was here! Come up!”

I gave Penny a hug and a kiss on the neck. “Honey, the boys are up. We need to get moving.”

“Ooohh... can’t I sleep a little longer?” Penny sighed.

“Three year olds can’t wait,” I answered. “Andy and Liz promise that Christmas with the boys will be fun. You can’t help but mimic their enthusiasm.”

“I guess,” Penny replied.

“I’ll go upstairs and check with Mom and find out if we have time for a shower before the kids open the presents,” I offered.

“I hope so,” Penny responded.

I pulled on a robe and padded up the steps, sticking my head out the door. “Hey, Mom, how much time do Penny and I have until we start with the presents?”

“At least twenty minutes,” Mom replied. “Will said it would take at least that long for them to get over here.”

“Cool,” I said. “Thanks Mom, we’ll be up in a bit.” I returned downstairs and announced, “We have twenty minutes.”

“Good, go take your shower and that will give me ten more minutes to sleep,” Penny answered.

I showered and then Penny prepared for the day. We found my family gathering around the Christmas tree in the living room when we came upstairs. Mom, Dad and Abby ended up on the couch and living room chair. The rest of us sat outside the tight circle of anxious, expectant little boys.

Dad acted as impresario, handing out the presents to keep everyone involved and busy. Noah, Connor and Hunter squealed with delight as they opened each of their many presents. There are certain advantages to growing up in a big family and Christmas Day displays one of the best things – lots of presents.

Rose didn’t fully understand what was going on but she loved tearing the wrap off the boxes and opening the boxes. She had just as much fun as her cousins and young uncle.

Penny was delighted, if not surprised, by the pearl stud earrings I bought for her. I earned a hug and a kiss for the present. Penny’s present to me came gift wrapped in a large 30” by 42” and about 2” thick box. I tore the wrapping off and opened up the box.

Penny had a huge plaque made commemorating my senior season of football. Penny obviously had some inside help from Penn State and Billy Robinson. Our “On to Phoenix” picture was at the top of the plaque. A chart in the center of the plaque showed each game we played, the score and my personal statistics. The final line Jan 7th vs. Texas was left blank. Pictures of me in action surrounded the game chart.

The plaque was an excellent gift. I promised Penny that we would hang on our wall in our apartment and gave her a hug and kiss as a thank you. I did not let on that Kelly had done the same thing two years ago.

I received some cash, always welcome to a cash-starved college student. I also received a lot of button down dress shirts and ties. I was going to be the best dressed student teacher in Conestoga High School next semester.

“You were right, honey,” Penny commented as the frenzy of gift opening finished. “Sharing Christmas with the little ones certainly adds to the joy and meaning of the day. I’m glad you asked me to join your family for this.”

“You’re part of the family now,” I replied. “You said yes. You’re in and that’s that.”

“Kyle’s right,” Abby added. “I found the same thing when I agreed to marry Will. This family is so open and welcoming.”

“I’m seeing that,” Penny agreed. “I hope you feel the same way with my family, Kyle.”

“I know I will,” I agreed. “Your parents, Nikki and Adrian have welcomed me with open arms.” Dad interrupted as I made this comment to Penny.

“Hey everybody,” Dad announced. “There’s one more present to go. This one doesn’t come in a box and doesn’t need to be unwrapped. It is for everyone here, including you, Penny.”

“Dad and I decided to treat the whole family to a trip this Christmas,” Mom said. “We have reservations on January 3rd and 4th in San Antonio and more reservations for Phoenix on January 5th, 6th and 7th.”

“Cool, Dad!” Andy exclaimed. “This is a great present.”

“Yeah, this is fantastic, Dad,” I added.

“I hope you will be able to join us, Penny,” Dad said. “You’re part of the family now.”

“I’d love to,” Penny agreed, “...but I planned to earn some money working for Dr. Chu that week.”

“We don’t leave until Thursday night,” Dad said. “You’d only miss one day of work.”

“Actually, I would miss a meeting with my advisor,” Penny said. “I have to go in and see my advisor on Friday morning.”

“Why would an advisor want to see you that close to the start of classes?” Andy asked. “If he’s advising you then, I think he’s starting a little late.”

“It isn’t my undergrad advisor,” Penny explained. “I am meeting my veterinary school advisor. He has a list of things I need to do to prepare for next fall.”

“You could fly out to Phoenix and meet up with us on Saturday,” Mom offered.

“Maybe... I’m not sure how I’d get down to the airport,” Penny replied.

“You’re taking my car down when you go to school,” I said, reminding Penny of the agreement we had made earlier. “You seem hesitant. No one is forcing you to go, but I would love to have you at the game cheering us on.”

“It will be fun,” Dad said. “Think about it a couple days. We’d love to have you come with us. I can make arrangements anytime you tell me you want to go.”

“I’ll think about it, Dan,” Penny replied.

The whole family headed for the kitchen for breakfast. It took more than a little coaxing to get the twins and Hunter away from their new toys. Rose insisted on taking the stuffed koala bear Andy gave her to breakfast. She loved it.

The eggs, bread and milk breakfast casserole with sausage, cheese and herbs was excellent. Mom had fresh croissants with jam and orange juice to go with the repast. The boys ate quickly and headed back to the living room to play with their new toys. Rose was starting to eat solid things, though Will picked the sausage out of the casserole. Rose’s four front teeth weren’t up to chewing sausage yet.

Penny and I headed for her house after breakfast for our second round of present exchanges. It gave me a chance to explore Penny’s reasons for not wanting to go out to Phoenix.

“You know how we’ve talked before about how you pull me back when I’m ready to do something impulsive?” I asked. Penny nodded yes. “You said I help push a little when you get a little too comfortable. How much do I need to push to get you out to Phoenix?”

“Good point,” Penny replied. “I don’t have a lot of experience flying. I’ve never done it alone.”

“It’s not that big a deal,” I said.

“I don’t know what to do at the airport,” Penny said. “Where do I go? What do I do with my bags? How does security work? I have no idea.”

“Dad and I can tell you about all of that,” I answered. “If Andy and I can do it successfully when I was seventeen, you certainly can handle it. Anyway, it will be good to get used to flying. I’m sure you and I will be doing a lot of it after I get drafted.”

“True,” Penny agreed. “Very true. I’ll go if you help me figure out everything.”

“Done,” I agreed. “I know you’ll enjoy the warm weather in Phoenix and you’ll enjoy the game.”

Jim, Marilyn, Nikki and Adrian were relaxing in the living room with some coffee when we arrived. Jim got Penny and me cups too. The gift exchange was much lower key with the Edwards family.

I gave Adrian and Nikki a gift card to the Cracker Barrel restaurant. I was sure they had one somewhere in Charlottesville. I bought a gift card for the Strasburg's Iron Horse Inn for Jim and Marilyn.

"Penny said the food there is excellent," Jim commented.

"Yes, it is. Harrison took me..." Penny said before stopping abruptly.

"It's OK to say his name around me," I reassured. "I don't care. I know the Iron Horse Inn is excellent. I took a date there last January. The past is past and doesn't matter anymore. You and I are together and none of that matters."

"Well said, Kyle," Adrian agreed.

I don't know if Penny passed the word on from my family, but Jim and Marilyn gave me a dress shirt and tie. Christmas with the Edwards family was much lower key than my family, but it was nice. I've known Penny's parents and her sister Nikki most of my life and they're great people. I didn't know Adrian as well, but I liked him. I was going to feel comfortable becoming a part of this family.

We sat around talking for awhile. Since Christmas dinner wasn't until six o'clock, Marilyn had time to relax a bit. I had one important question for Jim.

"Jim, Penny and I are sitting down with my dad and some others tomorrow afternoon," I explained. "I'd like you to join us if you have time. We are going to be reviewing the status of the finalists to be our agent when I get drafted into the NFL. I'd value your advice with this."

"I really don't know anything about sports agents or the NFL," Jim responded with a laugh, "other than what I see on TV. I don't know how much assistance I can be."

"I'm not looking for football judgment," I replied. "I am looking for people with common sense and an understanding of people. My dad and I figure more heads working together on a problem will get us a better solution than less heads thinking about it. Choosing the right agent will be critical to Penny's and my financial future."

"Who else is invited?" Jim asked.

"Me, Penny, my Dad, my brother Will and John Hayes," I answered. "Dad hopes to talk Uncle David into coming too. Uncle David is an attorney over in York."

“I’ll come,” Jim agreed. “You have a father with two sons in the NFL and an attorney. I’m not sure how much more I will add, but I will come.”

“If nothing else, you can make sure Penny’s interests are taken care of,” I said.

“What time is this meeting?” Jim asked.

“Two o’clock tomorrow afternoon in my Dad’s study,” I answered.

“I will be there,” Jim agreed.

Penny and I hung out with her family until around 11:30 that morning before heading back to my house. We found some guests had arrived already when we returned home. Grandpa and Grandma Robinson were there along with Aunt Lisa and Uncle Doug and their son Sean and daughter Taylor. Sean was a strapping fifteen year old soccer nut. Taylor was twelve and cute as can be. The Hiddlesons didn’t have a long drive to get here, they lived over in Leola. Grandpa and Grandma Robinson still lived in the house in Bird-in-Hard they bought when they married in 1956.

Dad, Uncle Doug, Will, Andy and Sean were relaxing in the living room when we came back. Will was holding his daughter. I introduced Penny around to everyone she didn’t know.

“I’m going to introduce Penny to the female half of the family,” I said when introductions were done. “I assume they’re in the ...”

“Kitchen,” nearly all the males in the room responded.

“Be careful, Kyle,” Grandpa cautioned. “You show your nose in the kitchen and the women will put you to work.”

“There are worse things than helping prepare dinner,” I answered. They replied with laughter.

Mom and Aunt Lisa were working at the stove when we arrived in the kitchen. Abby was mashing potatoes and Grandma was arranging a relish tray.

“Grandma, Aunt Lisa, I want to introduce you to my fiancée, Penny Edwards,” I announced.

“It’s nice to meet you, Penny,” Aunt Lisa said. “Forgive me for not giving you a hug right now. I’m up to my elbows in turkey.”

“That’s fine,” Penny said.

“Let me take a look at you dear,” Grandma added. “Let’s see who Kyle has picked out.” She appraised Penny briefly. “Kyle has chosen well. You’ve grown so much since I saw you what... maybe ten years ago when I was babysitting Kyle and the rest of my grandchildren here.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Robinson,” Penny said.

“Mrs. Robinson is much too formal for family,” Grandma insisted. “Call me Betty or call me Grandma, please.”

“OK, Grandma,” Penny agreed.

“Come over here with me, dear,” Grandma asked. “Let’s get to know each other.” As Penny sat down beside my grandmother, Grandma gave me a stare. “Now shoo, Kyle. You don’t belong here in the kitchen.”

“Yes, Grandma,” I agreed. I knew better than to argue with some of her prejudices.

I heard Penny defend me as I disappeared. “Kyle really is a very good cook.”

“Men!” Grandma retorted. “If I want my meat burned, I’ll send them outside to the grill. Otherwise, they can stay out of my way.” I suppressed a laugh as I headed for the men in the living room. I loved Grandma dearly but she did have some funny ideas.

I joined the men in the living room. Uncle Doug and his son, Sean, quizzed me about my season. Uncle Rick and Aunt Donna arrived next. Donna headed for the women’s domain after greeting everyone. Rick joined us. Rick let us know that his oldest daughter, Stephanie, was spending time with her husband Ryan’s family in Allentown this year. His son Justin and Justin’s family were expected any minute. Justin’s wife Megan had called and said they left Philly an hour ago and were nearly here.

Penny rejoined me about the time Justin and Megan Jones arrived with their kids, Matthew and Samantha. Five year old Matty led his three year old sister back to the family room to join the younger relatives. Justin and Megan were a year older than my brother Will. I introduced Penny to my older cousin and his wife.

“Justin and Megan live in Philly, not too far from Temple University,” I explained. “Justin, Penny and I will be sharing an apartment in Philly too, starting after my last game in a couple weeks.”

“Actually, Kyle, we moved out of the city a last spring,” Justin explained. “We’re in Ardmore now.”

“Matty started kindergarten last fall,” Megan explained. “We weren’t going to send him to public school. They’re a disaster where we were. After we priced private schooling,

Justin and I decided we'd rather spend that money towards getting us a nicer place in the suburbs."

"That makes sense," Penny said.

"Ardmore? That's interesting," I commented. "I'm driving through Ardmore every morning next semester to get to the school where I'm student teaching."

"What school are you teaching at?" Justin asked.

"I'm teaching at Conestoga High School," I answered.

"Tredyffrin-Easttown," Justin said. "That's an excellent school district. Megan and I looked at a couple houses there but they were too pricy for us."

"That's what I heard," I agreed. Uncle Mike and Aunt Julie's arrival stopped further talk about the Philly suburbs. Mike Junior, Nicole and Zach accompanied their parents. Mike Junior is a year younger than me. Nicole is Liz's age and Zach is three years behind Nicole.

Zach and Sean hooked up as soon as Zach found a place to dump his coat. Two thirds of the Three Musketeers were reunited – at least that's what the rest of the family called little Mike, Sean and Robbie. Robbie is my Mom's oldest brother's son. They were all close to the same age and hung out together as long as I can remember at family gatherings.

"Is this everybody?" Penny asked quietly as members of my extended family greeted each other.

"Almost," I answered. "Uncle David's family isn't here yet. It's a quarter to one, so we don't expect them for another twenty or thirty minutes."

"Isn't dinner in fifteen?" Penny asked.

"It is," I agreed. "Uncle David and Aunt Linda have a reputation for arriving ten or fifteen minutes late for everything. They've done that for most of their lives."

"I don't know how I'll ever be able to keep track of all these people," Penny commented. "I thought my nine cousins made for a large family. This is beyond me."

"Just organize everyone," I suggested. "My Grandpa Ben married Betty Sensenig in 1958. They have five children – David, born in 1959; Donna, born in 1961; Michael, born in 1964; Lisa, born in 1967 and Mom, born in 1971."

"OK," Penny said, nodding.

“David married Linda and they have two kids – Robert and Nick,” I said. “Donna married Rick Jones. They have two kids – Stephanie and Justin.”

“...and I just met Justin,” Penny said.

“Uncle Mike is next,” I said. “He married Aunt Julie. They have three kids – Mike Junior, Nicole and Zach. After Mike comes Aunt Lisa, who married Uncle Doug. They have two kids – Sean and Taylor.”

“...and this is just your Mom’s family?” Penny asked. I nodded yes.

“Just the Robinson side,” I said. “There are fourteen cousins in our generation. On my Dad’s side we have fifteen when all of us get together.”

“Good Lord, we’re going to have a big wedding, aren’t we?” Penny exclaimed.

“It’s inevitable,” I said. “Between all my relatives, your relatives, our high school friends, your college friends, my teammates, my former teammates and my coaches, it is going to be a huge wedding.”

Dad interrupted us as he came through announcing, “Everyone, make your way to the dining room for the blessing. We’re going to get this thing underway.”

Penny and I followed the flow of people towards the food. Dad asked, “Ben, would you give the blessing for this meal?” It was Grandpa’s job, since he was our patriarch. Grandpa gave the blessing and we all dug into the food.

Our family served Christmas dinner buffet style, out of necessity. Everyone filled their plates and found space somewhere to eat – in the kitchen, the family room, the living room or wherever. Penny and I ended up at the kitchen counter with Justin, Megan, Will, Abby, Rose, Andy, Noah, Connor, Hunter, Matty and Sammy. Moms and dads helped their little ones get their food cut. I helped out my little brother with his dinner.

We turned the kitchen into the young adults with small children’s area. Liz and my younger cousins took over the family room. The older generation congregated in the living room and dining room. Uncle David, Aunt Linda and their kids, Robbie and Nick, arrived shortly after everyone went through the serving line. I made sure they met Penny when we finished eating our first course.

“Hey, the Maxwell Award winner deigns to dine with the commoners this year,” Uncle David teased when I met him. “It’s been a long time since you showed up at a Christmas Dinner.”

“My scholarship requires me to attend practices and games when and where the university determines,” I countered. “I haven’t forgotten the little people like you.” I

gave my uncle a wink. “If you want to kiss the Maxwell Trophy, it’s in my room in the basement.”

“I kiss enough backsides at work,” Uncle Dave replied. “I’ll pass on kissing your trophy. Anyway, it is good to have one of the high and mighty dine with us this afternoon. Hopefully this common fare isn’t too plain for your fine tastes.”

“Don’t let your uncle tease you, Kyle,” Aunt Linda said. “Dave keeps that autographed photo of you catching the winning touchdown pass at your first Rose Bowl prominently displayed in his office for all his clients to see.”

“You have done fairly well up at Penn State,” Uncle Dave said. “By the way, Kyle, I will be able to come tomorrow and help with your quest for an agent.”

“Thank you, Uncle Dave,” I replied. “I know I’m going to need legal advice. Dad and I are hoping you can recommend a good attorney.”

“OOoooo... score!” Robbie commented. “He got you with that one, Dad.”

“Seriously, Uncle Dave, I do appreciate your agreeing to help,” I said.

“It’s my pleasure, Kyle,” Uncle Dave said.

Uncle Dave and his family filed through the buffet line and picked up their dinners. Penny and I grabbed small portions of seconds, being sure to leave room for dessert and our dinner later that evening.

Grandma Robinson and Aunt Donna were renowned for their baking skills. Between the two of them, they brought ten pies to feed the small army encamped in my house. Apple, cherry, blueberry, peach, minced meat, lemon sponge, lemon meringue, chocolate cream and pumpkin – the variety astounded Penny.

I sampled the blueberry and lemon sponge. No one in the world makes a better pie than my grandma’s lemon sponge. Period! Penny tried it too. She agreed it was excellent.

Mike Junior hung out with Penny and me along with Justin, Megan, Will and Abby. The teens hung out together upstairs with Liz. The pre-teens headed for our attic to play ping pong. The little kids gravitated to the family room since our boys had most of their toys there. Andy popped a Disney cartoon in the DVD player and kept things quiet among the young set. Grandma, Grandpa and the aunts and uncles gossiped and talked in the living room.

Penny and I hung out as long as we could. We headed for her house around three o’clock. Her family was supposed to gather then. A couple cars were in the driveway and a certain F-350 pickup was parked along the street, so we knew the guests were arriving.

A car pulled along the curb out front as Penny and I were climbing onto her porch. “It’s my cousin Bill,” Penny remarked. We waited for Bill and the girl he was escorting to join us.

“Hey Bill, how’s it going?” Penny asked as Bill and his girl stepped onto the porch.

“Good, cous... very good,” Bill answered. “I see you dragged your new fiancée along for this evening.”

“Certainly,” Penny agreed. “Kyle, this is my cousin, Bill Witwer. Bill, this is my fiancé, Kyle Martin.”

“Nice to meet you, Kyle,” Bill said as we shook hands. “This is my girlfriend, Gina Ingram.”

“Nice to meet you, Bill,” I said. “Nice to meet you too, Gina.”

“Bill and Gina live up in Reading,” Penny explained. “Bill does graphic design for a website design company. He created the plaque I gave you this morning.”

“You did?” I replied. “It is a wonderful job, Bill. I love it. Thank you very much.”

“It’s a pleasure, Kyle,” Bill replied. “When you finish your last game I will printout and send you the final version of the plaque with the results of the Texas game filled in.”

“That’s super, Bill,” I said as we headed inside. “I really appreciate that.”

When Bill and Gina carried their coats upstairs to the bedroom, I commented to Penny, “I figured you worked with Trevor and Billy Robinson to get the plaque made. The ‘On to Phoenix’ image is one he did.”

“Trevor probably did,” Penny replied. “I asked him to get me digital images of you to put on the plaque. He probably got that one from Billy.”

“However you pulled it off, it is a wonderful present that we will have to hang in our apartment,” I said.

“I have a place picked out already,” Penny replied.

Penny and I headed for the kitchen, where we expected to find more of the guests. We bumped into Penny’s Uncle Paul and Aunt Deb in the dining room. They were Bill’s parents. Penny introduced me to them.

Their younger daughter Kristen popped into the room as the introductions were finishing. “Penny!” she squealed. My fiancée and her cousin hugged and kissed each other’s cheeks as they met.

“It’s so good to see you, Kristen,” Penny exclaimed.

“So, this is your new fiancé,” Kristen said as she appraised me. “Good looks... well built... not too bad, cousin.”

“Are you going to keep this one?” Bill queried as he and Gina caught up with us.

“Yes, I’m going to keep this one,” Penny declared. “He’s much better behaved than my last fiancé.”

“Like I have a choice,” I added, “what with your spies at Penn State to keep me on the straight and narrow.”

“Moi?” Penny teased. “I’d never...”

“Are you going to tell me that you don’t hear all about what I do at our Saturday parties?” I countered. “I know Shawn Byrd reports on me to his best friend Dave Hanson. I know your friend Dave keeps you updated... and I don’t mind. I have nothing to hide.”

Kristen, Bill and Gina snickered as Penny and I exchanged verbal jousts. When Penny and I finished, Kristin gave me a big grin and shook my hand.

“It’s really good to meet you, Kyle,” she said. “Penny’s talked about you for years. I’ve seen you play back in high school and then on TV more recently. You really hammered my high school back in the day. It a lot more fun watching you now that you play for our university.”

“Are you a Penn State student too?” I asked.

“I am,” Kristen confirmed. “I go to the Penn State Harrisburg.”

“When are you coming to Main Campus?” I asked.

“I’m not,” Kristen answered. “I have one more semester to go before I get my finance degree.”

“I didn’t know they did baccalaureate degrees there,” I said.

“They do, at least a limited selection of degrees,” Kristen said. “Are we going to beat Texas?”

“My teammates and I will do our best,” I promised.

The last guest arrived as we talked about my team's prospects out in Phoenix. A middle aged man I estimated to be in his mid-forties popped in on us.

"Uncle Joey!" Kristen and Penny exclaimed simultaneously. Everyone greeted the youngest of Ben and Betty Hunsecker's children. Penny introduced me to Joe, the uncle who worked as a geologist for an oil company. Joe traveled the world, helping search for oil deposits for his employer.

The whole family gathered in the living room to catch up on the past year's events and to get to know me better. Marilyn Edwards and Grammy Hunsecker popped into the kitchen periodically to make sure dinner was progressing. The ladies headed to the kitchen around 4:30 to finish prepping the meal, excusing Nikki and Penny from duty. Her mom wanted Nikki to rest due to her condition. Penny was excused, this year only, so she could spend more time with me.

Jim, Adrian, Uncle Paul, Uncle Joe, and Bill asked me about my experiences at the various awards shows. I enjoyed talking with them as we got to know each other better. I found out Paul was an estimator for a local contractor in Willow Street, where he, Debra and Kristen lived. Aunt Debra worked as a nurse for Lancaster General. She normally worked at their health campus on Harrisburg Pike.

Close to dinner time, everyone not involved in food prep set the table and prepared for our dinner. The combined efforts of Marilyn Edwards, Grammy Hunsecker and Aunt Debra produced a fine meal. Grammy Hunsecker's pies equaled Mom's and Grandma Robinson's best efforts. The Christmas dinner was much more formal and lower key than I was used to at home or on the road with the team, but it was excellent.

The family didn't spend hours after dinner was finished talking the way my family did. Paul, Debra and Kristen headed back to Willow Street soon after we finished dessert. Joe headed for Lancaster and Bill and Gina drove back to their home in Reading. Penny and I volunteered to help Marilyn and Grammy Hunsecker with the dishes.

We were nearly done when Marilyn asked, "What do you think of your first Hunsecker Christmas, Kyle? I hope the big crowd wasn't too overwhelming." Penny and I both cracked up.

"Fourteen people? Big crowd?" I gasped. "We have almost that many people when my whole family sits down to the table."

"Mom, didn't you see all the cars on the street today?" Penny asked. "How many people did your mom have over today, Kyle?"

"I think she said we had thirty-four people for our Christmas dinner," I answered.

“Oh my, that is quite a crowd,” Marilyn replied. “I hope we weren’t too boring for you. I’m sure having thirty-four relatives over for dinner has to be exciting. I can’t imagine.”

“This evening was wonderful,” I answered. “I enjoyed spending the time with your family.”

“Our family, Kyle,” Grammy Hunsecker added. “You’re becoming part of our family now.”

“I know,” I agreed. “I appreciate how open and welcoming everyone is.”

“Don’t forget you and Penny are meeting with Sharon and me to get started on the wedding planning,” Marilyn added. “We’re way behind if you’re going to have a ceremony next summer. We need to get to work right away.”

“That’s my day tomorrow,” I said. “Lunch – planning and preparing for my student teaching, afternoon – prep for choosing a sports agent and evening – planning for the wedding.”

I spent Christmas night at Penny’s house. Both of us wanted to spend as much of our break together as we could without slighting either family. After breakfast I headed back to my house. I took care of one chore first. I lettered the two game balls to commemorate the Wolverines’ state championship before I handed them over to Coach Caffrey and John Waters. I spent the rest of the morning reviewing information for our game against Texas in a week and a half.

John Waters and I met at a new restaurant in Gap for lunch. I had a couple people tell me good things about the 4 Brothers Diner. Calling the place a diner was a misnomer. The restaurant was located in a large stone building, either an oversized farm house or an old tavern and inn.

John greeted me warmly when I met him at our table. “Are you doing a fumble drill?” John teased when he saw the ball tucked under my arm. Naturally I was carrying the ball like I always do on or off the field, nestled between my arm and my body.

“It’s not some kind of fumble drill,” I replied. “The ball is for you. I don’t know if you heard. My high school team won the state AAA championship a few days ago.”

“Of course I know,” John answered. “I watched the game on PCN. Your team did a hell of a job shutting down Strath Haven. I recognized some of what you guys did defensively. I wish my guys could execute the ideas the same way yours did.”

“What you recognized our defense doing is directly from the notes and advice you gave me last month,” I said. “That is why I brought this football. The team voted you a game

ball for your assistance and advice. We don't think we would have won without your help." I handed the ball over to John.

"State AAA Champions – Paradise Wolverines-30, Strath Haven Panthers-13," John read from the ball. "This is wonderful. I'm going to display this ball in my room where my team can see that it IS possible to beat Strath Haven. Thank your team for this honor when you see them next."

"I'll do that, John," I agreed.

The waitress brought us menus. The food was classic American diner food. John and I placed our order before getting down to business. John and I reviewed my role in his classroom, Conestoga High School (CHS) procedures, class schedules and other pertinent information I would need for next semester.

Our meal was decent, though not top of the line gourmet. I hadn't expected that. It took us an hour to finish up most of our business. When we were wrapping up our meal, John asked, "Do you know when you will be reporting for class? I know Penn State student teachers normally start after two days of orientation at Brandywine Campus. The letter I have from Penn State lists your start of classes as January 7th and your first day in the classroom as January 9th. Since you will be in Phoenix on the 7th, I assume you will start in my class room later than planned."

"I'll find out tomorrow, I think," I answered. "I have a half day orientation with Professor Buchanan. I'll let you know after I find out."

"That sounds fine, Kyle," John agreed.

"I have one final question for you," I said as we stood from our table. "Do you see any problem with me participating in the Senior Bowl and the NFL Combine? I have an invitation to the Senior Bowl and I'm sure I will get invited to the Combine too."

"I expected you to go, Kyle," John replied. "Someone with your talents should be showcased at both of those events." John chuckled. "I've managed to handle my classroom alone for many years. I suspect I can manage for a week or so while you're gone."

"My participation isn't a done deal yet," I replied as we walked out of the restaurant. "I have to clear it with Professor Buchanan too. I don't imagine it will be a problem with the university. I know Zack Hayes did both while he was student teaching."

"Update me tomorrow after your meeting," John said. We headed out to the parking lot and exchanged our goodbyes. "Good luck in Phoenix," John added as we got in our cars. "I'll be glued to the TV set that Monday night, cheering myself hoarse."

“Don’t do that, John,” I replied. “I’ll be flying back to Philadelphia on Tuesday and can’t help you in class if you lose your voice.”

John gave me a smile and wave before he headed east for Parkesburg. I turned the opposite way and headed for my house.

My sports agent brain trust assembled about forty-five minutes after I got home from my lunch with John. Penny and I met with Dad, Uncle Dave, Penny’s dad, John Hayes and my brother Will in our living room.

Dad handed out copies of the questionnaires the five finalists had returned to Dad earlier in the fall. After everyone had time to review the five candidates, we discussed merits and weaknesses of the various agents. We formulated questions for specific agents, along with general questions we planned to ask all the agents. John Hayes’ suggestions were invaluable. He knew just what we needed since he had been down this road already with Sam and Zack.

We finished by working out who would be in the formal interview party. Penny and I were a given. The agent would work for us and be responsible for securing our financial well being. Dad was in since he had spent the most time studying and vetting the candidates. I asked Jim Edwards to join us but he demurred. Jim was comfortable that we had the interview process well in hand. I had one more person I wanted to include in the process.

“Uncle Dave, would you be willing to sit in with us?” I asked. “I think it would be valuable to have someone with legal experience be a part of the process.”

“I won’t sit in as an attorney, Kyle,” Uncle Dave replied. “I have no background or experience in sports law. I am willing to sit in on the interviews as your uncle and assist you with the selection. I don’t mind if you give each of the agents my business card. It won’t hurt for them to see the esquire behind my name before they give their presentation.”

“That would be fine, Uncle Dave,” I agreed.

“I will get a list of good sports attorneys together for you,” Uncle Dave added. “You’re going to need someone like that review the agent’s contract before you sign it. I don’t want you hammered by your agent just because you signed a contract using the so-called ‘standard’ conditions.”

“That will be excellent, Uncle Dave,” I replied. “Thank you for your help.”

Penny and I thanked everyone for their help as they left. I felt much better about the agent interviews knowing I had the backup of all these people to help us make a good decision. We would be ready for the first interview on January 11th.

Penny and I went downstairs to my room to do a little research on-line for the evening's wedding planning meeting. We looked up the dates for Penn State's high school football camps. The last camp finished on June 23rd. We also checked the dates last year for when the final NFL organized team activity (OTA) finished up and when the earliest training camp opened.

Last year the Lions and the Buccaneers finished OTA's on June 25th. The Cleveland Browns opened training camp first in the NFL last year, on July 23rd, for rookies only. Now Penny and I had a window of opportunity for our wedding – June 29th, July 7th or July 14th.

Penny and I met with our moms after dinner for an hour, scoping out the plans for the wedding. Mom would contact the church and get the available dates. Marilyn Edwards would check into locations for the reception. Both Nikki and Will had their receptions at the Eden Resort. Penny and I would be happy to use it if it was available one of our weeks.

I committed to paying for my football guests from my future team. I felt it was politic to invite my future head coach, offensive coordinator and receivers coach. I had friends or former teammates on about half the teams in the NFL. I would certainly invite them to the wedding.

By the time the session was done, we had the beginnings of a plan. Music, caterers, invitations, flowers and all the rest, that would come in due time. Penny and I headed downstairs when the planning was done, cuddling and enjoying a movie together before bedtime.

I left very quietly on Wednesday morning for the trip down to Penn State Brandywine, down in Media, Pa. My session with Professor Buchanan ran from 8:00 am to noon. I filled out some paperwork. Professor Buchanan reviewed things from the Student Teaching Handbook. He talked about how my performance would be reviewed. I found out my first day in the classroom would be on January 10th. I was to report to the office at 8:00 am.

I got great news when I asked Professor Buchanan about me going to the Senior Bowl and NFL Combine. "I saw an article reporting you were invited to the Senior Bowl," Professor Buchanan explained when I asked. "I already penciled those two events into your schedule. I assumed you would want to go to them."

"Thank you, that is fantastic," I responded. "I hoped to participate in them."

“We certainly wouldn’t want our star receiver to drop in the draft, would we?” Professor Buchanan retorted.

That certainly was a refreshing change from my experience with Dr. Henderson. Why couldn’t Professor Buchanan have been my advisor for the past four years? My life would have been a lot less complicated that way.

When I got back to Paradise, Penny helped me move my bags out to the car. I drove the pair of us into Lancaster to Charlie Taylor’s house. Charlie graciously consented to drive me back to Penn State.

Penny helped me load my bag into Charlie’s trunk. I handed the keys to my Golf to her before giving her a hug and kiss.

“I love you, honey,” I said.

“I love you too,” Penny agreed. “Good luck in Phoenix.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll see you next Saturday.” We hugged and kissed one last time before she hopped in my car and headed for home. Charlie and I hopped in his car and headed for campus.

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Charlie Taylor and I got back to campus around 4:30 that afternoon. Brian Henson was moved into my old room already, so I left my bags in the living room. I'd spend the night on the couch. I completed checking out of the apartment that afternoon before dinner.

Trevor, Damian, Chip, Brian and I joined the crowd of football players heading for the Training Table at a quarter to six. The guys teased me about the football I carried over to dinner, at least until I showed them what it was for. Coach Caffrey had earned the guys' respect over the last eleven months.

I let Coach Burton know that I wanted time after dinner and before the team was dismissed for the evening activities. After dinner Coach gave me a signal that it was my time. I called for quiet as I stepped to the front of the dining room.

"I'm sure most of you know I was a member of the Wolverines football team at my high school," I announced.

"Yeah, you never shut up about it," some joker in the back called out.

"Coach Caffrey was head coach of the team for thirteen years," I continued, ignoring the heckler. "Last Friday night the Wolverines won the AAA state championship by beating the Strath Haven Panthers... heh.. heh... heh... Sorry about what we did to your old team, Joe."

"Your guys earned it," Joe answered magnanimously.

"The Wolverines voted to honor their long time coach after the game," I explained as I carried the game ball over to Coach Caffrey's spot at the head table. "On behalf of the Wolverines team, I want to present a game ball to Coach for all the time and effort he gave to mold and form the team into the formidable force it has become in AAA football in Pennsylvania." I handed the ball over to Coach. "The team feels you are just as responsible as anyone for their championship this season. Thank you for everything."

"Thank you, Kyle," Coach Caffrey replied. "I will be sure to thank all the guys when I see them."

Coach Burton announced that we had position meetings after dinner. They ran until 8:30 pm. Coach Caffrey reminded us that we needed to be at the training table at 7:00 am tomorrow and have our bags on the buses before breakfast.

Friday, December 28th

My roommates and I were up around six am. We showered, dressed in our best blazers and slacks and then took our bags over to the Lasch Building. The whole team grabbed breakfast before heading to the buses.

About a dozen Pennsylvania TV stations and a small coterie of fans saw us off. Coach Burton did a brief Q&A session with the TV reporters before all of us boarded our buses and headed for the airport. The flight out was a little under five hours. We had box lunches on the plane, supplied by the Training Table. The plane dropped us into the Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport a little after noon, Phoenix time.

We needed an hour to get our luggage and get loaded on the buses to our hotel. The weather was about what we expected. It was sixty-five degrees and sunny. There were a few clouds off to the west of the airport.

The trip to the hotel took about fifteen minutes. Our bus driver pointed out one of Tempe's landmarks, the Tempe Town Lake, as we drove by. The athletic department booked us at the Tempe Mission Palms Hotel. Our hotel was a modern Spanish style building near the west side of Arizona State University's Tempe campus. Phoenix's light rail metro system ran right behind our hotel. A station was across the street from us. We would have the chance to travel around the city cheaply if and when we had free time.

The hotel staff needed a half hour to process everyone and get us to our assigned rooms. Trevor and I ended up on the third floor beside Damian and Chip. The window in our room overlooked the Tempe Police Station. Beyond it we could see Sun Devil Stadium on ASU's campus.

The rooms were large and well appointed. We had a mini-fridge, coffee maker, a 37 inch plasma TV and an in-room safe so we could protect our laptops when we were out. I had to give Penn State credit. They took excellent care of their athletes.

The team reassembled at three o'clock on the first floor in the Palm Room. Two sections of the massive ballroom were set up for team meetings and dining. The other four sections were separated for the coaching staff, the players, and smaller meeting rooms for the offense and defense.

Coach Burton reviewed our schedule for the trip, went over the team rules, reviewed our meal arrangements and reminded us that we were on a business trip. Our business was to beat Texas in ten days.

Coach drew groans when he announced we would have two-a-day practices tomorrow, Monday and next Saturday. We would have Sunday morning free as well as all of New Years Day. The rest of the days we would go sight-seeing in the afternoons. The team would have meetings in the evenings to prepare us mentally for our game.

Coach gave us the rest of the afternoon off before dismissing us. We had to be back to the Palm Room by six for dinner. The team headed out to our rooms or to explore. Damian, Trevor, Chip and I decided to check out the surroundings around our hotel.

As we were walking through the lobby, two very familiar men walked into the hotel. Matt Millen, the broadcaster, Detroit Lions team president, NFL linebacker, and late 70's era Penn State defensive lineman, was entering with another man that looked familiar but I couldn't place. I knew I should know him.

Matt spotted us and gave us a wave and a big grin. "Here comes the Penn State brain trust. How's it going?"

"Hey Matt," "Good to see you again," and "Hi Matt," echoed from the four of us. All of us knew Matt. He had broadcast a few of our games over the years.

"Do you guys know Sean?" Matt asked, nodding towards the familiar looking gentleman beside him.

"Um... I'm not sure," Chip said before the rest of us could admit the same.

"Guys, this is my broadcast partner, Sean McDonough," Matt said. "Sean, I would like to introduce you to Penn State's team captains, Kyle Martin, Trevor Conwell and Damian Thompson, along with quarterback Chip Brinton."

We exchanged greetings and handshakes. When we finished I asked, "What brings you two to our hotel?"

"We have a little time before we have to be at the stadium," Matt answered. "I knew the team came in this afternoon. I figured I could stop by and say hi to Joe. Do you guys know where he's at?"

"Coach Paterno?" I asked. Matt nodded yes. "He didn't fly out with us today. I think he and Sue are coming out in a few days."

"Oh... OK," Matt answered. "I'll catch up to him sometime next week. Is Bob around?"

"Coach Burton?" Trevor asked. "Coach is probably still in the Palm Room back there. We just finished a team meeting."

"Thanks, guys," Matt said. "Good luck against the Longhorns."

Matt Millen and Sean McDonough headed into the hotel while my friends and I went outside to the street. I couldn't remember what bowl Matt and Sean were broadcasting. The dress of the people on the street let us know immediately. Nearly everyone was dressed in Michigan State's green and white or in black and gold. Some of the

pedestrians had “Missouri Tigers” on their sweatshirts. That was enough to remind us that the Insight Bowl was tonight, apparently in Sun Devil Stadium. That was the direction the people were heading. We headed the opposite way, against the flow of people.

Tempe City Hall was across the street from us. We headed up to Mill Avenue, the street the buses brought us in on. We found two pubs, five restaurants, a Starbucks, a Dunkin Donuts, a frozen yogurt shop and an adult store in the first block. Further north we found tall buildings and little to interest pedestrians. We back tracked across Fifth Street and headed south. We found more restaurants, another bar and a number of retail stores.

Mill Avenue reminded me of College Avenue back in State College. The next block down we turned west on University Drive and found out why it looked so familiar. Half a block up, Sixth Street abruptly ended in a turn-around. The pedestrian walkway led you past City Hall and onto ASU’s campus. We backtracked again and continued exploring to the south.

We headed back towards the hotel around 5:30, passing a small store I missed on the way south. It was a shop that sold homemade cookies and homemade ice cream. They also made sandwiches out of the ice cream and cookies. Boy, did that sound tasty. It was too close to dinner to stop then, but the four of us made a mental note to come back after we finished our meetings that evening.

The team assembled in our dining room in the Palm Room at six o’clock. The room smelled wonderful. A sign announced tonight’s buffet was Caribbean themed. I grabbed the cucumbers in lime vinaigrette, peppered pineapple and couscous with curried coconut dressing, sugar cane smeared pork loin with sweet rolls and French Creole mustard and black beans and rice. It was spicy and delicious. Everyone had toasted coconut cream cake for dessert. The Tempe Mission Palms impressed us with our first meal.

We had an hour and a half meeting after dinner. The offense met in one of the big rooms and reviewed game tape of the Longhorn’s defense. Mike Johanson must be considered to be the best defensive back by his coaches. He almost invariably was assigned their opponent’s best receiver. I knew I would be seeing a lot of my old friend during the game.

My roommates and I headed down the street to the little ice cream shop we found earlier after the meeting was over. We could hear the roar of the crowd over in Sun Devil Stadium. I wondered how Michigan State was faring against Missouri. At 6-6, the Spartans barely qualified for a bowl game. Missouri was 8-4 and second place in the North Division of the Big 12.

The small Cookiez on Mill store was beside a much larger ice cream store, Sparky’s Creamery. The four of us agreed the small store must be something special to survive beside the larger store. We found the store was tiny when we stepped inside. We couldn’t have gotten more than a dozen people inside if we squeezed.

We had a choice of a dozen types of cookies and nearly two dozen flavors of homemade ice cream to choose from. I ended up having the chocolate chip cookies filled with mint chocolate chip. My friends made their selections too.

We were shocked at the size of the cookies. They had to be at least six inches in diameter. The man behind the counter put at least an inch of ice cream between the two soft cookies. He sliced them in half and gave them to us in paper bowls. The man charged us \$2.75 each for our snack, since we were college students.

The sandwiches were delicious. I knew we would be back a few more times while we were in town the next ten days. Matt Frye, Jon Stafford and Charlie Taylor walked in as we finished our sandwiches. We promised them they would enjoy their treat.

Trevor and I headed up to our room when we got back. I turned on the Insight Bowl. Mizzou was leading Michigan State 27-17. About ten minutes remained in the game. The Spartans managed a field goal before turning the ball back to Mizzou. The Tigers held on to win 27-20.

Saturday, December 29th

The team breakfast was 7:30 am most days. The hotel put on a nice buffet spread with eggs, bacon, sausage, ham, potato pancakes, French toast and blintzes along with an assortment of cereal, oatmeal, bagels, Danish and muffins. The coaches gave us directions to the visitors' locker room at Sun Devil Stadium. We would change there and then practice at Arizona State University's practice fields.

It was a seven minute walk down the street, past the police station and across the light rail tracks to the stadium. The sky was cloudy as we left our hotel. The temperature was just short of fifty, much colder than I had expected.

The equipment staff had delivered our personal things and workout clothes to our lockers already. Everyone hurried to change and take the field. Most of us were surprised when we headed for the practice fields that they were further from the locker room than our hotel was from the stadium.

We spent ninety minutes working on football fundamentals – blocking, tackling, ball handling and fumble recovery. Coach Burton promised the next few days were going to be just like training camp. The guys worked hard, albeit with a little grumbling. The coaches and team leaders reminded everyone we're playing one of the best teams in the country in ten days. We needed to play textbook football if we wanted to be the national champions. Every one of us wanted that.

We cleaned up and headed back to the hotel for an early lunch. We spent an hour and a half meeting in our position groups and reviewed video of Texas. The thick clouds were drizzling on the dry desert landscape when we headed back for our second practice. The

desert may have needed the rain, but we didn't. The cool temperature hadn't risen since the morning.

We practiced for ninety minutes in the cold rain, getting thoroughly chilled in the process. The hot showers in the locker room at Sun Devil Stadium felt great. The coaches gave us about ninety minutes of free time between practice and dinner.

I headed up to my room when we got back so I could catch as much of the Pinstripe Bowl as was possible. Jake Kring's Syracuse Orangemen were taking on the Baylor Bears in Yankee Stadium. Baylor had the ball with about ten minutes to go when I clicked the TV on. Syracuse led 28-27.

I was impressed with the Baylor QB and offense. They moved the ball down the field crisply. They scored on a pretty lob into the corner of the end zone, using up six and a half minutes of time. Now it was time for Jake to earn his scholarship.

I hadn't seen my friend play since he won the Pennsylvania AAA Championship four seasons ago. Jake had improved dramatically. I watched as he barked out commands to his guys and drove his team down the field with pass after pass. Baylor's defense had the run bottled up. Brian Griese, the color commentator, raved about how well Jake ran the hurry-up offense.

Baylor slowed the Orangemen when they hit the red zone. The clock continued ticking down toward zero. Baylor blitzed their free safety on the next play, taking Jake down from his blind side. Jake made up for it with a twelve yard sideline strike on the next play. 0:51 remained on the clock, it was third down and five yards to go at Baylor's 12 yard line.

Baylor blitzed again, flushing Jake from the pocket. My friend rolled away, frantically searching for an open receiver. Jake spotted his tight end running along the goal line. Jake drilled the ball between two linebackers. The tight end smoothly snatched the ball out of the air, dipped a shoulder and slid into the end zone.

Baylor went all out to try and block the extra point but couldn't get it. The kicker drilled the ball through the uprights. Syracuse led 35-34. Baylor tried to hurry down the field but forty-two seconds wasn't enough time to answer the Orangemen's final score.

The Mission Palms did a barbecue theme that evening. They had a variety of salads, prime rib, racks of baby back ribs, or salmon with baked potatoes and corn on the cob for everyone. We had a choice of a brownie, ice cream, an apple tart or warm berry cobbler with ice cream. I chose the cobbler. Nothing hits the spot like that on a cold winter night.

We had ninety minute offensive and defensive meetings after dinner. The athletic department set up one of our conference rooms so people could watch the Alamo Bowl. A few people did. More people played cards or board games to kill time.

Sunday, December 30th

Trevor and I had the best intentions on Sunday to go to church. We set the alarm to get us up at eight o'clock that morning. It didn't work out. Neither of us is sure who woke up when the alarm went off and shut the damn thing off. It was ten thirty when I woke up and Trevor was just getting out of bed.

We had missed breakfast and the bus to church, so neither of us was in a hurry to get downstairs. I read the Philly paper on-line while we waited for brunch to start at 11:30 am.

The hotel did a big Sunday morning breakfast buffet every Sunday. We ate with the other guests in the hotel in the Cloister Room instead of in our own dining room. Man, did they put out a spread. Eggs, pancakes, hash browns, sage sausage, bacon, waffles and fruit crepes. They had spectacular Belgian waffles with white chocolate and toasted walnuts covered with mint infused maple syrup. They also were running an omelet station. I had a western omelet and those delicious waffles.

Sunday was a less hectic day than the day before. We slept in. We didn't have to hurry over for practice until two o'clock that afternoon. We did our ninety minutes of drills and then headed back to the hotel. I had time for a long talk with Penny before we left for dinner.

The athletic department scheduled us at a banquet facility in the southeast end of Tempe, the Secret Garden. The banquet facility was near the foot of South Mountain. The trip took us about twenty minutes. The team was seated outside on a large patio overlooking the perimeter garden of the facility. It was quite nice except for the weather.

The rain had stopped in the morning but the temperature stubbornly stayed in the low fifties. All the locals commented how unusual it was for it to be this cold. We wore our sweatshirts. It was fine. State College was probably having a snow storm as we enjoyed our dinner.

Our caterer gave us a choice of lasagna, chicken marsala, stuffed shells, or chicken parmigiana. I had the lasagna. Every meal came with a salad, garlic bread, iced tea and a dessert. I had the carrot cake.

The coaches gave us a break from studying that evening. Our video people hooked up a feed to our equipment so we could watch the final couple games of the NFL season that evening. We caught the end of Cardinals/49ers game at University of Phoenix Stadium when we got back to the hotel. We were in time to see Aaron Morano pick off a pass to seal the 49ers victory. Aaron's team was going to the playoffs. The Cardinals were done for the year.

Aaron probably would miss our game next Monday, assuming his team won. The last game tonight would determine the 49er's destination next weekend. If the Vikings beat New Orleans in the Sunday Night Game, they would host the 49ers next weekend and Chicago would go play Philadelphia. If the Saints won, the 49ers would go to Chicago and the Vikings would go to Philly.

Zack Hayes' Packers lost to Miami today. Zack was flying from there to join our team late tonight. He worked out a deal with Coach Burton to work as a volunteer grad assistant for the rest of the week. Leigh Ann and Laurie would join us in Phoenix in a few days.

Coach Burton and a couple other coaches were hanging out in the back, talking and occasionally checking out the game. I decided it was a good time for a talk about the dinner I wanted to throw for our leadership group. I started to the back but was accosted by Brian Henson and Tanner Riggs before I got there.

"Are we going to do a special teams dinner like we normally do?" Tanner asked. Brian nodded as Tanner asked.

"That's up to you guys," I answered. "I really haven't played on special teams this year. I was going talk with Coach right now about doing a dinner for the team leaders. You can come along and talk to him about your dinner too, if you guys are willing to host it."

"We planned to pay the bill, Coach," Brian said. "Just like you, Christian and Tanner did last year."

"Do you mind helping us set it up, Coach?" Tanner asked. "You've been doing this a lot longer than I have."

"I'd be happy to help you set things up," I agreed. "I'm sure we could get Damian to help too."

"Cool, thanks, Coach," both guys replied.

The three of us headed back to the coaches' table. "Coach Burton, do you have a minute?" I asked politely.

"Sure, what's up, Coach?" Coach Burton replied.

"I was wondering if there was time in the dinner schedule this year for thank you dinners?" I answered.

"Ahh... the infamous special teams dinner," Coach said. "I wondered when you were going to ask about that one. I'm sure we can squeeze in that dinner."

“Actually Tanner and Brian are going to organize that dinner this year,” I explained. “I really haven’t done much with special teams this year. I wanted to do a second dinner for the team leadership group that has helped Trevor, Damian and me this season. You, Coach C and Coach Adams are invited, of course.”

“Damian and Chip already asked me to do a thank you dinner for their blockers,” Coach Burton said. “They are skipping our Mexican theme on Wednesday night and doing their own thing. Perhaps you guys could use the same evening?”

“Not for the leadership dinner,” I answered. “Tanner, Damian and Chip all should be part of the leadership thank you dinner. Could we do it another night?”

“Brian, Tanner, what do you guys think?” Coach Burton asked. “Would Wednesday night work for special teams? I doubt there will be much conflict between the starting blocking corps and the special teams players.”

“Sounds good, Coach,” and “Good for me,” came back from my two teammates.

“I assume tomorrow and Tuesday nights are out,” Coach said. “I doubt you want to miss the country club dinner Thursday. We doing team building exercises and a dinner at F1 Racing Friday night. You will NOT miss that dinner. Saturday we’re going to a fancy steak house. I doubt that works.”

“No, I don’t think anyone wants to miss a steak house,” I agreed.

“You could do it Sunday evening,” Coach offered. “We don’t have anything special. Dinner is here at the hotel.”

“Sunday night it is,” I agreed. “I’ll let you, Coach C and Coach Adams know more about the details once I find us a nice restaurant.”

“I’m looking forward to enjoying one of your famous dinners, Coach,” Coach Burton replied.

I grabbed Trevor and our resident gourmet, Damian. The five of us headed up to my room where we could do some searching on-line while we watched the New Orleans/Minnesota game. We found quite a few highly rated restaurants on-line, most associated with one of the many hotels in the Phoenix area.

Brian and Tanner ended up choosing the J & G Steakhouse out in Scottsdale. Damian, Trevor and I chose the Ristorante Tuscany on the north of Scottsdale on the northern edge of the metro area.

We turned our attention back to the TV when we finished arranging our dinner. Jamison Peters, the quarterback who led Notre Dame to its last national championship, was doing well in his third season in Minnesota... but not as well as Drew Brees. Peters made a

fight of it but Brees and the Saints prevailed that evening. Aaron Morano and his 49ers were bound to Chicago. The Vikings would head to Philly and face the Eagles in the first round of the playoffs.

Monday, December 31st

The day was more of the same – breakfast, morning drills, lunch, meetings, afternoon practice and then back to the hotel. We found the first change in routine as we walked back to our hotel. Municipal workers had fenced off Fifth Street in front of our hotel while we were at our afternoon practice. A ticket booth was set up in the middle of the street in front of the driveway into our hotel.

Our guys were excited. The Fiesta Bowl Block Party was tonight and we were smack in the middle of the New Year's Eve celebration. We headed upstairs and changed into Penn State polos and khaki pants, the "uniform" our coaches specified for the evening. The team met in the Palm Room before we left for the party.

"Gentlemen, enjoy the block party tonight," Coach Burton announced when he had everyone's attention. "See your position coach before you head outside to the block party. Everyone gets \$15 in meal money for the evening. We do not have dinner here at the hotel tonight." The guys gave a cheer. The hotel's food was good, but variety is good too – especially with the chance for some good street food.

"Please be aware that you represent the Pennsylvania State University tonight," Coach continued. "Conduct yourselves accordingly. Players from Texas, Notre Dame and Nebraska will be attending the block party tonight too. Keep the interaction between teams friendly, especially with the Longhorns. We do NOT need to fire them up with knuckle headed boasting.

"If you are under twenty-one, don't even think of having a drink tonight. If you are of age, I don't mind if you have a beer or two. I am placing great faith in each of you this evening. Please do not let me down. Under no circumstances do I want a call this evening from the police telling one or more of you have been arrested. You will be put on the first plane home tonight, even if it is midnight.

"Enjoy the party, behave, and remember tonight's curfew is 12:45 am. Be on time!" Coach demanded. "Captains, see me before you leave."

Trevor, Damian and I bucked the crowd of players heading for the exits and the party. "What's up, Coach?" the three of us asked when we reached him.

"The block party organizers want the team captains from the four bowl teams to appear on stage tonight," Coach Burton explained.

"Do we have to do anything?" Trevor asked.

“Smile, wave and answer a few questions,” Coach replied. “Keep your answers innocuous – tough opponent, we’ll need to play a good game to win, etc.”

“That won’t be hard,” I commented. “They are a very good team.”

“Exactly,” Coach agreed. “This is going to be much tougher than four years ago when we won our last championship. Kentucky was playing over their heads all season. We had a dominant team. Next week’s game will be a lot tougher than that one.”

“OK, we got it, Coach,” Damian agreed. Coach gave us directions on when and where to meet so we would be ready at the intermission in the main show. The three of us headed to the back and picked up our passes to get into the block party, our meal money and a map and schedule of the night’s events. Christian Hunsecker and Shawn Byrd waited for us to finish with Coach Burton. The five of us headed for the streets.

Fifth Street was full of people heading down from Sun Devil Stadium for the gate in front of our hotel. We joined the line to get inside the party. The party began at five pm. We got inside about fifteen minutes later. Hundreds of people were wandering the streets already.

“Do you guys want to grab a beer?” Damian asked.

“I’d rather wait until after dinner,” I suggested. “If all I get tonight is two, I want to make them last.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Christian agreed.

“Are we going to hook up with Jeremy tonight?” Trevor asked.

“I’ll give him a call,” I said. I pulled out my cell phone and gave him a buzz.

“Hey, what’s up, Kyle?” Jeremy asked when he answered my call.

“Where the hell are you?” I asked. “Trevor, Damian, Christian and I are here at the party. We’re waiting.”

“Umm.. we’re on a bus on an interstate,” Jeremy answered. “We left Glendale twenty-five minutes ago. I’ll check with the driver and see... wait, we’re passing a dam on a river and there’s a big lake behind it... and there’s a mountain with an ‘A’ on it.”

“You’re almost here,” I said.

“I see Sun Devil Stadium,” Jeremy said. “Oh, now we’re getting off the interstate.”

“You’ll see ASU’s practice fields on your left,” I said. “You’re probably coming to the block party on Fifth Street. Why don’t we meet you inside the gate in front of City Hall?”

“That’s cool, Kyle,” Jeremy agreed. “Dylan, Jeff, Joe and I will meet you there.”

I knew Dylan was Dylan Harris, the starting quarterback and Jeremy’s close friend. I wasn’t sure who Jeff or Joe was, but we’d find out soon enough. We met the four at the appointed place about ten minutes later. Jeff proved to be Jeff Duncan, the starting right cornerback for the Irish. Joe was Joe Munoz, left offensive tackle. I introduced Jeremy’s friends to my friends.

We headed down the street to the food court, which was located on Fifth Street to the west of Mill Avenue. There were plenty of vendors to choose from. I found a stand selling fish tacos. They were tasty. All of us grabbed some fries before wandering down Mill Avenue.

Trevor and I took our group down the street through the artists’ exhibits to Cookiez on Mill. Everyone enjoyed the excellent ice cream sandwiches. We wandered down Mill Avenue past the carnival rides. No one was interested in them. They were more for the younger crowd. The singer at the Brickyard Street Stage was OK. We continued down the street after listening for a couple minutes.

We headed over to the Centerpoint Stage on Seventh Street. A Tom Petty tribute band was playing. Everyone, except Christian, grabbed a beer at the beer garden and sat back to enjoy the show. The band was very good.

We headed up the street to the Scandeleusque Stage. They were doing hourly burlesque shows. The show was a little risqué, which made it fun for awhile. Jeremy, Dylan and company insisted we head up to the Insight Main Stage for the Notre Dame Marching Band’s performance. Our band would not be performing that night. They didn’t arrive until the day after tomorrow.

We bumped into a group of Nebraska players. “Hey, Mike. How’s it going?” I called out cheerily when I spotted Mike Kessler, the Nebraska linebacker.

“Hey, Kyle. It’s good to see you,” Mike said, returning the smile. The two of us talked for a couple minutes. I introduced him to my friends. He introduced me to his. I recognized the one. He was the cornerback that had primary coverage on me when we played Nebraska earlier in the year. The scorch marks on his back from where I torched him were gone now. We wished each other a safe game before we parted.

“Wasn’t that the linebacker that tried to decapitate you last fall?” Jeremy asked when the Cornhuskers were out of earshot.

“The one you steamrolled later in the game?” Dylan added helpfully. “That play was on Sports Center for a week.”

“Yeah, that’s Mike,” I agreed. “He’s a decent guy.”

“Really?” Dylan asked. “No hard feelings?”

“No, none,” I responded. “He made a good play on me. I made a statement to my team later when it was needed. I don’t have hard feelings. Julie introduced me to Mike after the game. He’s a good guy.”

“Julie?” Jeremy asked. “Your Julie?”

“Well... she’s not my Julie anymore,” I said. “She’s engaged to someone else. She and Mike went to high school together – at least the last two years. Julie was at Paradise for ninth and tenth grades.”

“It is a small world, isn’t it?” Jeremy commented.

“It is,” I agreed. “Dylan, make sure you don’t lead your receivers too much over the middle. Mike WILL take their heads off if you do.”

“I’ve seen that on the tape,” Dylan agreed. “I doubt my receivers will take Mike out if they do get popped the way you did. They’re not quite as large as you and Christian.”

Our gang headed over to the sports club when the Notre Dame Marching Band finished their set. They had some tailgate style games to play. The crowd recognized Dylan, Jeremy, Trevor and me. We talked about our games with our fans and did autographs. A local band played to entertain the crowd.

Trevor, Damian, Shawn and I had our second beers for the night. Coach Kelly was more restrictive with his players. Coach Kelly limited Jeremy, Dylan, Jeff and Joe to a single beer for the evening. I guess that was understandable. They were less than forty-eight hours from their bowl game. We were a week away.

Later our group headed over to the dance club on Mill Avenue north of Fifth Street. The DJ was spinning some good music. We chilled out and enjoyed the scene for about an hour. Fireworks started up while we were at the dance club. We watched the spectacle from the street.

“Let’s head over to the Main Stage,” Jeremy suggested. “I’m looking forward to seeing ZZ Top. They are supposed to get started after the first fireworks.” The rest of us agreed.

The big parking lot behind the Marriot Courtyard Tempe Hotel was jammed with people waiting for ZZ Top to take the stage. The band came out a couple minutes later.

There was no question where the sentiments of the “Best Little Band from Texas” lay. They abandoned their normal cowboy hats for burnt orange University of Texas Longhorns hats. The band wasted no time on talk. They launched straight into “Thunderbird.”

They played song after song. The band was rocking out. The crowd was into the music too. I’d never been to a better concert than this. It was a great way to spend New Year’s Eve – much better than most years for our team. This was another one of the bonuses for going to the national championship game.

The band wound into “Got Me Under Pressure” around eleven o’clock. Dylan, Jeremy, Trevor, Damian and I fought our way through the crowd to the side of the stage and then headed around back.

Tom Morrissey, one of our athletic department coordinators, met us there, gave us passes and led us into the back stage. A handler from Notre Dame met Dylan and Jeremy and brought them along. We met Todd Landry and another Texas captain dressed in burnt orange Texas colors along with the red clad Nebraska captains.

We introduced ourselves to each other. I knew everyone already except for Devonte Howard, the right defensive end and other captain of the Longhorns. The band swung into “Rock Me All Night Long” as the emcee met us. A stagehand handed everyone a pair of sunglasses.

“Everybody wear these when you go on stage,” the emcee directed. “You’ll see why in a second. I need one spokesman for each team. Who are they?”

Trevor and Damian both stared at me. I accepted the role of spokesman, as I did much of the year. Mike Olson spoke for Nebraska, Jeremy for Notre Dame and Todd for Texas.

“Spokesmen, I will intro each of you,” the emcee said. “Give your name and team, give the hosts a thank you and tell us about your expectations for your bowl game. Keep it brief, no more than sixty seconds. Got it?” All of us nodded our understanding.

The emcee led us over to the side of the stage, offstage, as the band started “Cheap Sunglasses.” That explained why we had to wear sunglasses at 11:15 at night. We stood in the wings as the band flew through the ode to eyewear.

“Glasses on, everyone,” the emcee called out. Stagehands took the instruments from the band. The emcee led us on stage as Billy Gibbons, Frank Beard and Dusty Hill headed off. As we passed the band exiting the stage, Billy did an about face and followed Trevor, Damian and me back to center stage. He did an exaggerated inspection of us as we walked.

Billy stepped up to the mic and interrupted the emcee before he could get going. “It looks like a damn Yankee invasion here,” Billy commented as he stared specifically at me. He turned to the audience, raised both hands in the Longhorns’ two fingered salute and said, “Hook’em, Horns!” Billy exchanged high fives with Todd and Devonte as he left the stage.

“Thanks, Billy,” the emcee said as the musician left the stage. “That’s Billy Gibbons. Give him a hand.” The audience dutifully applauded. “Wow! What a beautiful evening, Tempe. Weren’t those fireworks fantastic? We’re here to have some fun and good food, enjoy some great music by ZZ Top, see in the New Year and get everyone psyched up for two more bowl games. Wednesday night’s Fiesta Bowl will match the #7 ranked Nebraska Cornhuskers against the #8 ranked Notre Dame Fighting Irish. Here to tell us a little about the match up is Cornhuskers captain, Michael Olson.”

Mike introduced his co-captain, thanked our hosts and predicted a good game in two days. Jeremy went next, giving similar information about his team. Jeremy added one thing at the end of his talk.

“Hey Billy, I’m proud to say I’m a Yankee,” Jeremy declared, staring offstage towards where ZZ Top left. “I’ll be cheering for my friends up in Penn State next Monday night. Count on it. Go Lions!”

This threw the emcee off balance slightly. He recovered. “Next Monday night our city is honored to host the BCS National Championship game. It will pit the Penn State Nittany Lions against the Texas Longhorns. Representing the Lions, I have Kyle Martin, All-American wide receiver, Heisman finalist and winner of the Maxwell and Biletnikoff Awards.”

“Thank you. On behalf of my co-captains Trevor Conwell and Damian Thompson, I want to thank all of you for hosting us in this beautiful city of yours,” I said. “I’ve enjoyed all the hospitality you’ve given us over the past four days and I’m looking forward to the next week our team spends here. My team has been dreaming, planning and working towards spending our holiday here for the past year. We made it Phoenix! Come on out and enjoy the game next Monday night.”

I tried to step back but the emcee stopped me. “Who’s going to be national champions this year, Kyle?”

“Whoever wins next Monday,” I answered, trying to dodge the question. I didn’t want to fire up the Longhorns with predictions.

“No guarantees of victory?” the emcee challenged.

“I guarantee...” I saw Damian and Trevor cringe, “that we’ll play hard. We have a great team. So do Todd and his Longhorns. I guarantee the game will be fun and you’ll enjoy it. May the best team win.”

“Thank you, Kyle,” the emcee replied as he allowed me to step back with the friends.

“Last I want to introduce Todd Landry, All-American quarterback, Heisman finalist and Davey O’Brien Award winner,” the emcee said as he motioned Todd to come to the mic.

“Thank you, Don,” Todd said as he stepped up. “Howdy y’all.” The crowd gave him a cheer. He gave Trevor, Damian and me an exaggerated inspection. “Yep, them’s citified Easterners.” Todd made a face like he swallowed a whole lemon. “Me and my Longhorn buddies are going to teach them city boys a lesson. Make sure y’all come out next Monday and cheer us westerners on as we put them city boys in their place.”

“City?” I commented to Trevor. “There’s a cornfield behind my house.”

“I have woods behind my house and a horse pasture across the street from my cul-de-sac,” Trevor added.

“Maybe Landry’s speaking of me,” Damian said. “It would be hard to call Erie rural but that certainly shouldn’t apply to Penn State. We’ve had a hell of time recruiting brothers to come out to a place in the boondocks like State College. Is this hick a little crazy?”

“Don’t let the drawl and ‘Ah, shucks,’ fool you,” I countered. “The public Todd Landry is all show. The football Todd Landry that we’re going to play is as smart as they come.”

“You’ve met him,” Damian replied. “I haven’t.”

The emcee touted the Fiesta Bowl on Thursday and our BCS National Championship Game next Monday and urged the crowds to get out and support their community’s bowl games. The four sets of team captains headed offstage as the band returned. The band played half a dozen songs as the minutes wound down towards midnight.

ZZ Top paused the music after “Brown Sugar.” It was almost midnight. The emcee came out and filled the couple minutes until the countdown. The tens of thousands of people in the square counted down, “ten... nine... eight... Seven... Six... Five... Four... THREE... TWO... ONE... **HAPPY NEW YEAR!**”

Five minutes of fireworks over the Town Lake welcomed the new year. It was a great show. ZZ Top played “Just Got Paid.” They ended the show with “Gimme All Your Lovin’.” The band exited the stage to sustained applause from the audience. The audience continued cheering and clapping until the threesome returned to the stage for an encore. They performed “Sharp Dressed Man” and finally “Legs” before exiting the stage the final time.

Trevor, Damian, Shawn, Christian and I wished Dylan and Jeremy good luck against Michigan in two days at the Fiesta Bowl as we walked back to the exit from the block party. Jeremy’s and Dylan’s buses were picking them up in front of our hotel. Other

Penn State and Notre Dame players were heading our way, along with a good number of Nebraska and Texas players.

We found out why all the players were heading that way when we reached the exit to the block party. Fourteen buses were lined up there taking `` football players and band members from Notre Dame and Nebraska.

My friends and I had just turned back towards our hotel when we heard someone call out, "Hey Coach! Hey Coach!" We turned to find Mike Johanson, in a burnt orange Texas Longhorns sweatshirt, walking determinedly towards me. "Coach, it's great to see you."

"Good to see you too, Mike," I replied as we met and shook hands. "Let me introduce you to..."

"I remember," Mike interjected. "I appreciated the talk we had when I visited two years ago, Shawn." Mike and Shawn shook hands. "Trevor... Damian... and Christian. How could I forget someone who gave me so many problems when I had to cover him in high school?"

We talked with my ex-teammate, glancing at his watch as we talked. After a minute, Mike said, "It's been good to see all of you again. I've got to head out. Coach Brown will have my nuts if I miss the bus back to our hotel."

"Good to see you, Mike," I said as he turned away. I decided to try for a little intell from the chance meeting. "They decide to give you any help covering me next Monday night?"

Mike turned back and gave me a big grin. "That's need to know information, Coach." He chuckled. "You don't need to know that until the game. See you later."

My friends and I headed inside and up to our rooms. Trevor and I had barely undressed when the bed check knock came at the door. "Trevor? Kyle? Are you ready for bed?" Trevor and I looked at each other in surprise. It wasn't Anders or Yasin. Traditionally one of the grad assistants handled bed checks for the coaching staff.

Trevor and I gave each other a grin before bounding over to the door to meet our inquisitor. "Hey Zack," Trevor said when we found Zack Hayes standing outside in the hallway.

"Zack, what the hell are you doing?" I demanded when I greeted my good friend.

"I'm working as a volunteer grad assistant for the next week," Zack explained. "I'm low man on the totem pole so I get the scut work. So..."

"Bed checks," I confirmed.

“Exactly,” Zack agreed. “Now get to bed so I can report everything is good. I’ll talk to you guys in the morning.”

Tuesday, January 1st

Trevor and I left a wakeup call for ten am. We showered and dressed, and then took a walk down the street to the Starbucks for our morning coffee and pastries. We took our treats back to the hotel and headed for the players’ lounge in the Palm Room. The video people had the projection system hooked up and set to the pregame show of the Capital One Bowl. Our team had more people interested in the Florida/Michigan showdown than the West Virginia/Boston College Gator Bowl or the Kentucky/Boise State Cotton Bowl.

More of my friends joined us as we watched the pre-game show. Todd Blackledge, one of the broadcasters for the bowl game, did his ‘Taste of the Town’ segment on a restaurant in Orlando that was familiar to us— Roy Yamaguchi’s Hawaiian fusion place where Tanner, Christian and I took the special teams last year.

Zack Hayes came in a few minutes later. He took a big sniff as he sat down beside Trevor and me. “Mmmm... Starbucks. Is there a shop in the hotel?”

“No, you have to go down the street,” I replied.

“Go out the front, turn right and go across Mill Avenue,” Trevor added helpfully. “You can’t miss it.”

“How soon is the game going to start?” Zack asked.

“You have about half an hour until kickoff,” I answered.

Zack headed off for his morning caffeine fix while we watched the pregame show. Christian joined us shortly after Zack left. Shawn, Damian, Chip and GJ found seats to watch too.

Zack returned with coffee and a couple Danish. We talked a bit about his season while we waited for the Florida/Michigan contest to start. It began with so much promise when his team went 3-2. The Ravens came in the following week and beat the snot out of his Packers.

Having the bye week after the ugly loss to the Ravens didn’t do Zack’s team any good. They proceeded to go 1-9 in their final ten games. That’s a terrible record, but seven of those ten games were against teams that made the playoffs. Zack said he finished the season bruised, battered and frustrated.

The young tailback they picked up this spring was working well. He was the one bright point offensively. Zack’s receivers were decent, but nothing great. The offensive line was just as porous this season as last. The Packers’ defensive line wasn’t much better.

They had one stand-out linebacker and two decent ones. The secondary was pretty good, but got beat up making tackles all the time because the guys in front of them couldn't stop the runner or receiver.

The game kicked off before we could finish talking with Zack about his experiences in the NFL. That didn't matter. His grad assistant internship ran for the whole week. We'd be able to catch up before next Monday night's game.

More of the team collected once the game got started. The Gators had a decided rooting edge among our crowd. All of us knew people on the Michigan team and respected them. Still, those Wolverines were our rivals and always would be. Most of the team had met Ed at our party three weekends ago and felt comfortable cheering on my good friend.

The game proved to be close and exciting. The Gators' game plan proved to be similar to ours in the fall. Ed did three step drops, rolled right and anything to minimize William's chances of making a play. The Gators struck first, kicking a field goal on their first possession. Michigan answered with a TD.

The lead changed three times before Anders stopped in and reminded everyone that the lunch buffet was open for another ten minutes. The big crowd headed next door to grab food before the hotel staff took it away. Coach Burton had noticed the sudden influx of players and came over to learn more.

"What the hell is so fascinating next door?" Coach asked me and Trevor as we waited at the end of the line for food.

"We're watching the Florida/Michigan game," I answered.

"The guys are getting into it," Trevor added. "It's more fun to cheer for the Gators when you know the quarterback."

"They all know Fritz?" Coach Burton questioned.

"They do now, since he visited a few weekends ago," Trevor responded.

"He visited campus?" Coach asked, surprised at the news.

"Ed finished finals a week ahead of us," I explained. "His parents flew him home for a week before his team started preparations for his bowl game. I met him at one of our high school team's playoff games and invited him to come visit campus when the game was over. Most of our team met Ed at the party at my apartment."

"Am I going to have anyone come for the hospital visit?" Coach asked.

"I'll be there," Trevor said.

“I’ll be there too,” I added, “...though I would love to see the end of the game before we go. Is it possible to postpone our visit an hour? I know I can get more guys to go if we wait until after the game finishes.”

“How is Michigan doing?” Coach Burton asked.

“The Gators are leading 24-21 and it’s almost halftime,” I answered.

“I’ll call the hospital and see if we can postpone our visit,” Coach said. “I want a good turnout for the hospital visit. I better listen to my teams’ interests.”

“That’s appreciated, Coach,” I replied. I grabbed some lunch and hauled my food back to the players’ lounge area. The game was at half time when I returned. The Gators still led 24-21.

Coach Burton stopped by a couple minutes later and announced, “I have rescheduled our visit to the Phoenix Children’s Hospital until 3:00 pm today.” My teammates let out a big cheer at the announcement.

The halftime allowed William Johnson a good rest. The re-energized Heisman winner dominated as Florida went to work after the second half kickoff. On the first play William broke through the line and chased Ed down, even though the play was a short, three step drop pass. Ed managed to heave the ball away in the general direction of a receiver before William pulled him to the ground.

William personally wrecked every play, even though the Gators tried to run away from him. Ed’s team punted the ball back after three unsuccessful plays. The Gators made a few defensive adjustments, slowing down Nick Wilson and the Wolverine offense too. The two teams sparred without scoring through much of the third quarter.

Ed’s Gators stayed true to their game plan, continuing to run their plays away from William Johnson. Slowly they wore the big guy down. After a play where William chased Ed over the far sideline, that technically was considered a sack, William was forced to go off the field for a play’s rest.

Ed found Eric Peters on a slant the next play. Eric caught the ball in stride and sprinted away from the d-back covering him. He motored into the end zone untouched. The play looked real familiar to me. It was a carbon copy of the play when I had scored a TD against Michigan last fall. It put Florida up 31-21 over Michigan.

The Wolverines managed to score a field goal on their next possession, but that wasn’t enough. Ed and the Gators ran a long, ball control possession, using half the fourth quarter and scoring a TD. The Gators were up 38-24 now.

Michigan’s late TD made the score more respectable but wasn’t enough to overcome the Gators’ lead. Ed’s team took the ball back when the on-side kick failed. They burned the

last two and a half minutes off the clock without letting the Wolverines have another opportunity to score.

Ed's other friends and I did not have much time to celebrate the Gator victory. Coach Burton hustled us off to the hospital for our visit that afternoon. I texted Ed congratulations from me and my teammates on the twenty minute ride over to the Phoenix Children's Hospital.

The nurses that met us at the door asked us to split up for various wards of the hospital. Tony King, Charlie Taylor and I volunteered to visit the orthopaedics patients. All of us had experience in that area – me with my knee, Tony with his knee problems last year and Charlie's severe arm fracture when he was in high school. We followed the nurse to the orthopaedic surgery ward.

Two girls and six guys were in the ward. The TV was tuned to the Rose Bowl broadcast. No surprise there. Arizona was representing the Pac-10 against Ohio State. All the guys were watching the game. The girls – not so much.

One of the girls was in for scoliosis surgery, as was one of the guys. The second girl had torn her MCL in gymnastics a few weeks ago. She was in to have it replaced. I talked with her a bit about my own experiences with similar surgery for my ACL.

Tony, Charlie and I all talked about rehab with each of the kids. We warned them to be prepared for a brutal experience that would get them healthy and active again in the end. All three of us were living proof of that.

The boys let out a moan when Ohio State scored a touchdown. Charlie, Tony and I warned the guys that Arizona was in for a long afternoon. Ohio State had been our toughest foe so far this season. We needed a come-from-behind score with a little more than two minutes and a fingernail biting defensive stand to win against them last fall. The Wildcats were going to need to play their best to beat the Buckeyes.

I was surprised at the dress of the last boy I talked to that afternoon. He was wearing a Green Bay Packers T-shirt. The thirteen year old's name was Brady Foster. He had torn cartilage in his ankle playing basketball and had surgery to repair the damage.

"How'd you end up a Green Bay fan?" I asked politely. "I would have expected you to be wearing a Wildcat, a Sun Devil or a Cardinal shirt living here in Phoenix."

"My dad's from Madison, Wisconsin," Brady answered. "I've always rooted for them like my dad does. Hrmph... not that there's much to root for right now."

"They're working on improving," I said. "Their quarterback is smart and he'll get his team there eventually."

“Do you think Hayes can?” Brady asked. “Things haven’t gone well the past two seasons.” I could see the light click on in Brady’s head. He smiled and asked, “You’re from Pennsylvania, aren’t you? Have you ever met Hayes?”

I laughed briefly before answering. “Yes, I have met Zack Hayes. Did you forget that he graduated from Penn State? Zack and I played together for two years in college and another year in high school. We’ve been friends half our lives.”

“Wow! Really?” Brady wondered. “It must be cool to know someone that plays in the NFL.”

“Penn State has sent quite a few people to the NFL over the years,” I responded, “but I do agree it’s pretty cool to watch games and see someone you played with on the field. Of course, you will be able to say that to your friends, assuming I make it into the NFL next season.”

“Kyle will,” Tony added. “There’s no doubt you are talking with a first round draft pick today, Brady.”

“That’s cool,” Brady answered. “Are either of you expecting to make it into the NFL?”

“Charlie and I have another year of eligibility in college,” Tony said. “Charlie’s a junior and I lost a year with my knee problems. We might make it in a year and a half.”

“Would you like to meet Zack Hayes?” I asked.

“Really? You could do that?” Brady said.

“Zack is a Penn State grad,” I said. “He is here in Phoenix this week working as a volunteer grad assistant coach. We rode to the hospital together this afternoon. He’s visiting kids in another ward right now.”

“Wow!” Brady exclaimed. “That would be great.” I talked with the nurse on the floor with us. She called over the oncology ward where Zack was visiting. Zack would come over shortly. Tony, Charlie and I watched the Rose Bowl with the kids for about ten minutes, until Zack arrived.

Ohio State was ahead 14-3 then and not looking backwards. They had expected to compete for the national championship when the season started. They were pissed when Miami ambushed them down in Miami early in the season. Their #5 ranking was not what they planned on and they chose to take out their frustration on the handiest victim, the Wildcats.

Zack talked Packers football with his young fan for about ten minutes. He signed Brady’s T-shirt and left him two autographed photos, one for Brady and one for his dad. Zack visited with the other kids in the ward before we headed back to the hotel.

The hotel did an Arizona Barbecue theme for our dinner that evening. They served prime rib, baby back pork ribs and seared salmon. We had a baked potato bar. Salads, soup, and corn on the cob were available too. Apple tarts, brownies, ice cream or berry cobbler with ice cream rounded out our meal.

We were full and satisfied when we went back to watch the end of the Rose Bowl. Ohio State led 27-13 mid fourth quarter when we got back. The Wildcats managed a late TD to bring the score closer, but they lost 30-20.

The final game of the evening didn't draw as much interest from our crowd. No one knew anyone at Alabama or Oklahoma, other than Mitch Jackson, who had gotten friendly with Kyle Cunningham at the ESPN awards show. Cunningham was Alabama's punter. Most of the team watched the game. After all it was football and this was our last night off before we played Texas. We expected the game between two 10-2 teams to be close. It wasn't. Alabama won 45-23

Wednesday, January 2nd

The team headed over for practice after breakfast. Two-a-days and fundamentals drills were over. We were into our normal practice week now. Today was the equivalent of a "Monday" where we would practice our base plays against the scout team. It went well.

We had lunch at the hotel before the team split up. About thirty of us took a bus with most of the coaching staff over to the University of Phoenix stadium for media day. Texas, our team and the media had the field from 1:00 pm to 3:30 pm. We had to clear out promptly. Notre Dame was assigned field time from 3:45 to 4:15 that afternoon. I stood a good chance of personally wishing Jeremy North good luck against Nebraska that evening.

Media Day was the first opportunity I had to experience what Ed Fritz warned me about last month. I think every newspaper and TV Station in Pennsylvania, Texas and Arizona interviewed me during the afternoon. Every sports outlet imaginable did too. I had interviews with Mexican, English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Australian and New Zealand news organizations. ESPN, Fox Sports, CBS Sports and NBC Sports all interviewed me. Bryant Gumbel stopped by to talk for a piece on RealSports on HBO.

I was repeatedly asked why the Penn State team was hiding. Why weren't we doing interviews? At first I replied that I was there. Of course we're doing interviews. After answering the question half a dozen times, I realized that the media was after more interviews and more in depth interviews than just what media day provided.

After I realized that Coach Burton was deflecting most of the press attention away from us this week, I answered the question about interviews by directing them to Coach Burton. I was happy to do interviews, as long as they didn't take away from my preparation time for the game. I didn't tell the press. I knew that was exactly why we

weren't doing more interviews. Coach wanted things to stay on an even keel, just like we did every year at our bowl games.

The media kept me busy from a couple minutes before one o'clock until twenty minutes to four. I was wrapping up what I thought was my final interview of the day when someone behind me tapped me on the shoulder.

"I'm with the Notre Dame Observer," a deep, unnatural voice announced. "I would like to discuss the pretensions your team has to college football's pinnacle."

I spun around on my chair to find my good friend. "Jeremy! How's it going?"

"I'm good, Kyle," my friend replied. He was dressed in workout clothes, obviously ready to check out field conditions for the evening's game.

"You guys ready for the contest tonight?" I asked. "It's going to be a tough one. Big Red is big and nasty. Josh Bruno had a hell of a time keeping that center off him."

"I know," Jeremy agreed. "Shawn told me all about that when we were in Orlando."

"Quit jawing, Kyle," Zack announced as he walked up behind us. "We got to get out of here for the Irish." Zack stopped short when he realized I was talking to an Irish player, not a reporter. "Oh... hello..." Jeremy turned around and gave Zack a big grin.

"How's it going, Zack?" Jeremy said. My friends exchanged greetings quickly.

"You got to get moving, Kyle," Zack repeated when he and Jeremy were done. "We have to clear out so the grounds crew can clear the field and get things ready for tonight. Good luck, Jeremy." Zack headed down the field to roust Damian away from a reporter.

"What's Zack doing here?" Jeremy asked when our friend left.

"He's working as a volunteer coaching intern this week," I explained.

"It figures," Jeremy responded. "You two are two of a kind. Who else finishes a football season and decides to relax by coaching some more football? Just you and Zack."

"And Ed," I added. "He helped our high school team when he was home. There's nothing wrong with that. Good luck tonight. I'll be cheering for you when I get back from dinner. We're doing the special teams thank you dinner tonight at the J & G Steakhouse."

"We were there a few days ago," Jeremy replied. "You WILL enjoy dinner." Jeremy and I said good bye. I headed for the team bus. Jeremy went about his business preparing to face the Cornhuskers.

The rest of the team returned to the hotel a little after the media day contingent returned. Everyone dressed for dinner. That was required when we ate outside the hotel. The special teams assembled in front of the hotel around 5:15, shortly after the rest of the team departed in buses for the Macayo Mexican Restaurant for their dinner. Yasin Clark and Anders Voight drove the two vans north from Tempe to Scottsdale. Tanner sat in the front of Anders' lead van and navigated to get us to our restaurant. Thankfully the directions were pretty simple. We pulled up in front of the huge Phoenician Resort hotel complex.

We were a few minutes early for our reservation but the steakhouse was ready for us. They took us into our private room. Since most everyone on special teams was underage, those of us that could order beer or cocktails passed. The waitresses brought iced tea or sodas for everyone.

Tanner and Brian ordered the tasting menu for everyone that evening. The chefs started us off with tuna tartare drizzled with avocado and spicy radish and ginger sauce. The next course was a parmesan risotto with mushrooms and herbs. Chilean sea bass followed the risotto. Petit filets with hand cut French fries and spinach was the climax to the meal. Boy, did these guys know how to age and prepare a steak. I'd never had any better. The meal finished with warm chocolate cake and caramel ice cream. The entire meal was excellent.

Tanner and Brian stood up and thanked everyone involved in special teams this season for their efforts. Their help had allowed our punt and kick return teams to maintain the top ten ranking we had in the past three years. Tanner asked if I wanted to say anything but I passed, since this was their dinner and I was just a guest. Tanner finished the dinner by reminding everyone that we would need maximum effort to beat the Longhorns next Monday night. They also had top ranked special teams units.

The vans dropped us off at the hotel again around 7:30 pm. Everyone headed inside to the player's lounge to see how the Fiesta Bowl was going. It was halftime. Notre Dame led Nebraska 21-9. Apparently Jeremy's team was handling the Cornhuskers.

I wondered how Jeremy's team managed to hang so many points on Nebraska in one half. The halftime program showed how. One came on an interception run back for a touchdown. The second came on an uncharacteristic blown coverage by Nebraska. The third one came the old fashioned way – grind it out a few yards at a time.

I was impressed as I watched Notre Dame in the third quarter. Nebraska had a strong balanced offense that was hard to stop. Jeremy and his defensive mates were firmly in control. They held the Cornhuskers to a field goal and a touchdown in the second half. The Irish scored a TD to cap a 28-19 victory over Nebraska.

Thursday, January 3rd

Thursday morning was gray and forbidding. Low clouds covered the sky as we practiced in the chilly morning. The temperature at the start of practice was 44 degrees. I guess guys were a little sluggish at the start of practice. Coach Burton tried to cheer us up with news from home. Mrs. Burton reported it was seventeen degrees when she and the girls left home for the airport this morning. Coaches' families and the Paternos were flying out today with the Blue Band.

Things went better once our activities warmed us up. The sun peeked out a couple times as practice continued. The coaches were satisfied with our efforts by the time practice ended. We cleaned up, changed and headed back to the hotel for lunch.

Our team was scheduled for the afternoon at Arizona State's golf course. Coach Burton had Trevor, Damian and me split the team into foursomes. We drew names out of the hat to determine starting order for the foursomes. The early foursomes walked over to the course on the other side of our practice field immediately after lunch. The late foursomes hung out at the hotel until closer to their tee time.

The afternoon was warmer than the morning, probably with a high temperature of around 56 for the afternoon. A little drizzle dampened everyone mid-afternoon but we dried quickly in the desert air. Trevor, Damian, Chip and I were one of the last foursomes to tee off. I was the hacker in our group. I scored a 94, 22 over par for the course. God gave me a lot of talents, but hitting a little white ball with a club was not one of them.

The team cleaned up, dressed in coats and ties and assembled by our buses at the hotel at 6:00 pm. Dinner was at the Shalimar Country Club. We ate buffet style in their big wedding ballroom. We had a garden salad, a choice of chicken cordon bleu or chicken teriyaki, a vegetable medley, rice pilaf and ambrosia salad.

I had the chicken cordon bleu, which was quite good. The caterer served warm bread pudding with ice cream and brandy sauce. Boy, was that good. It was a nice meal, a good change of pace from our dinners at the Mission Palms. The buses dropped us off at the hotel around a quarter to eight, just in time to catch the beginning of the Orange Bowl.

Pittsburgh versus Florida State didn't really excite too many of the players. The coaches who played at Penn State back in the seventies and eighties still jeered anything to do with Pitt. Apparently the rivalry was intense back then. I'm sure Coach Caffrey got a lot of ribbing from the other coaches, given that he was the only Pitt grad on the coaching staff.

I headed for the video room and studied game film of Texas rather than watching the Orange Bowl. That was much more useful to me. Dad called while I was studying film.

"The whole family made it to Dallas this afternoon," Dad said when I answered my phone.

“That’s cool,” I replied. “Do you have big plans for tomorrow?”

“We’re taking the boys to the zoo in the morning,” Dad answered. “We’ll do the aquarium in the afternoon. After dinner we’ll head over to the stadium and cheer for your brother.”

“If you see Andy tomorrow, tell him I’ll be cheering for him too,” I said. “I should be able to see most of the game after we finish dinner tomorrow. What’s your schedule look like on Saturday? Do you think you’ll have time to visit? We’re doing a scrimmage in the afternoon. Maybe the family could stop by and then join us for dinner.”

Dad laughed. “You don’t know? Coach invited all the families coming out for the game to join the team at a steakhouse Saturday night. I made sure Penny is invited too.”

“That’s excellent,” I responded. “Thank you, Dad.”

“Thank your coach, Kyle,” Dad replied. “I have a couple other pieces of business for you. What with all the preparation for the trip, I forgot to call with your grades. You got straight A’s in all your courses.”

“That’s good,” I said. “I thought I did well in my finals.”

“The other business is with Mike Montgomery, the reporter from the Lancaster Newspapers,” Dad said. “He is interviewing Andy and the rest of the family tomorrow. He would like to interview you and the family Saturday or Sunday, if that is possible.”

“I’ll see, Dad,” I responded. “Coach Burton isn’t allowing us to do interviews except on Media Day. I talked to Mike already this week.”

“Whatever,” Dad replied. “Let me know if Coach Burton says it’s OK. I don’t want you getting in trouble with them. Mike’s going to have to accept Coach Burton’s decision. Let me know when you find out.”

“I’ll do that, Dad,” I agreed. We said good bye and I went back to my film study. I spent an hour and a half studying game film. Trevor and I turned the game on when we headed to our room around ten o’clock. Pitt ended up beating Florida State 27-24.

Friday, January 4th

The day was sunny, which was needed. The day started out just as chilly as the previous day, but quickly warmed under the winter Arizona sun. The morning was pretty comfortable as practice continued. The guys were more enthusiastic and focused. Coach Burton had the special teams work extra that morning. The hands team for onside kicks practiced. I recovered the ball one time and was able to bat the ball to Christian for a recovery the other time. Hopefully that skill would not be needed next Monday.

I spoke with Coach Burton about participating the interview Mike Montgomery wanted to do with my family. Coach OKed it since Mike and I had a long standing relationship that went back to tenth grade. We could accommodate Mike Sunday afternoon after the team meetings were finished.

We had lunch at the hotel after we cleaned up at Sun Devil Stadium. The travel coordinators for the athletic department helped distribute the swag bags. Every bowl distributed gifts to all the participants of their bowl. This year the swag bag included an iPod Touch, a Tostitos BCS National Championship sweatshirt and ball cap, a \$100 gift card to Red Lobster and assorted smaller gifts.

Buses took the team across town to the F1 Racing Complex. Coach Burton scheduled an afternoon of teambuilding exercises at the complex. It was a short trip from our hotel. The building was located on the north side of the Town Lake near the airport.

Every team member got to race a go-kart on one of the two indoor tracks. We did sixteen laps around the serpentine course. The scorekeepers kept everyone's time. Marco "Andretti" Cuchiella posted the best time. My time was middle of the pack. I accepted that with some pride. I try to be a safe driver, not a hell-for-leather nutcase when I'm on the road.

The first team offensive skill players beat all comers in the pit crew challenge. The lady taking us around the complex teased that someone from NASCAR would be calling soon. They could use a group like us on a real team. The complex had a room to relax and watch TV in.

They also had a billiards room with pool tables and foosball tables. It was popular with the guys waiting their turn for the race track or the pit crew competition. Damian and I made it to our informal foosball semi-finals before falling to Josh Bruno and Shawn Byrd. Josh and Shawn bested all comers that afternoon.

The complex had a snack bar but Coach Burton warned us not to eat too much. The team had a nice spread of food scheduled for 5:00 pm for our dinner. I texted my brother Andy a short message just before our dinner was ready. "KICK APP ST ASS 2NTE, GL K" [Kick Appalachian State's ass tonight, good luck, Kyle]

"CID, U DO SAME, A" came back a couple minutes later. [Consider it done. You do the same, Andy]

The racing complex put together a nice, southwestern style dinner for the team. Appetizers featured mozzarella sticks, southwest egg rolls and hot wings. Dinner included chimichangas, tamales, tacos, enchiladas, chips, salsa, guacamole with cinnamon and sugar covered churros for dessert.

We had offensive and defensive team meetings when we returned to the hotel. We finished up a little before eight o'clock, just in time for me to see my brother's game. No one in the player's lounge was interested in seeing the FCS Championship game, so Trevor and I headed up to our room to watch it. Zack and Anders heard our plans and joined us.

I didn't know much about Appalachian State other than they were one of the more successful FCS teams. I found out they ran a version of the spread offense called the spread option. The quarterback lines up in the shotgun beside a running back. They had a tight end and three wide receivers on the field.

The Mountaineers' QB had three options – hand the ball to the running back, keep the ball and run outside himself or throw the ball downfield. Just like our team, the three wide receivers spread the defenders out and give the QB and running back more space to run.

This type of attack provided the defense with a conundrum similar to the Wing-T and triple option. The defense needed to be very disciplined to stop this offense. The defenders had to be excellent tacklers because they weren't going to get much help, the way the offense kept them spread out.

Fortunately for my brother's team, Coach Keller stressed exactly that with his defense. The Mountaineers scored first but the Blue Hens kept up. The two teams traded scores until late in the second quarter. The Blue Hens managed to get a stop on the Mountaineers. Andy took the punt at Delaware's 22 yard line, squirted through a gap in the coverage and took the ball to the end zone.

The Blue Hens took a 24-17 lead into halftime. Coach Keeler made good adjustments at halftime. His team came out ready to go. Andy returned the second half kickoff up to his 41 yard line. Coach Keller called a well balanced offense that reminded me of our team's efforts. They moved rapidly down the field. Seven plays later the QB found Andy free in the end zone. He rifled the ball into my brother to give the Blue Hens a 31-17 lead.

The Blue Hens were quite capable of protecting a fourteen point lead. The Mountaineers didn't go easily. They scored 13 points in the second half. Andy's team scored ten. The final score was 41-30. My brother caught seven passes for 127 yards and two touchdowns.

I texted congratulations to Andy when the game ended. I was proud of how well my little brother had done that evening. Anders and Zack started bed checks in our room. Obviously Trevor and I were there. Saturday was going to be a good day. I would get to see my family and my honey that evening.

Saturday, January 5th

We had a controlled scrimmage on Saturday morning instead of our normal practice. Coach Burton wanted us to run through certain situations live at full speed. We had lunch at the hotel and had an hour of position meetings before returning to the practice field.

This was our final practice. As teammates dressed, Trevor, Damian and I initiated one of our team's long held traditions. I took my number 87 jersey over to Dave McCall's locker and exchanged it for Dave's number 29 jersey. Trevor swapped his number 98 jersey with Chip's number 6. Damian exchanged his number 34 jersey for Joe Ricci's number 53. The rest of the team exchanged jerseys so no one wore their normal number.

There was a purpose to the tradition too. Symbolically Trevor, Damian and I were turning leadership of team to younger players. My roommates and I had carefully selected the three to receive the jerseys marked with the captain's C. We expected that these three were most likely to lead the team next season.

The practice went well. The guys worked hard and knew their roles. We were ready for our game on Monday. The whole team huddled and did a "Win in Phoenix!" chant to close practice. Fans lined the edge of parking lot along the side of the field and watched as our huddle broke.

Trevor, Damian and I stayed huddled as the team dispersed. "Can you believe this is our last practice?" Damian asked. I could detect the slight catch in his throat as he said it. I understood. I had one too.

"This went by so quick," I agreed, trying to keep my voice even.

"We just have to go out and win on Monday night," Trevor added. "That will cap our careers properly."

"That's right," Damian and I both agreed.

"Anyway, let's not get maudlin," Trevor added. "Steph, Kimberly and my parents are over on the sideline. I need to see my girl."

The three of us followed the crowd of football players off the field. As we were walking off I saw three small children storm onto the field and head for Dave McCall. I knew who they were. The boys got half way to Dave before they recognized that the person wearing the 87 jersey wasn't me. The boys stared back at the rest of my family along the sidelines.

I jogged for them and shouted, "Hey guys, I'm over here." The boys looked at me, recognized me and came running. Just before we met I noticed Penny jog onto the field too. I stooped down and gave me nephews and little brother big hugs.

"It's so good to see you guys," I exclaimed.

“Why he wear your shirt?” Noah demanded after his hug. “Eight... seven... that your shirt.”

“You not two... nine...” Connor added. “Who is he?”

“That’s Dave McCall,” I said. “He’s a good friend of mine. We were playing a game this afternoon. Dave and I exchanged jerseys. Number 29 is his jersey.”

“Why he brown?” Hunter asked just as Penny met us. My brother’s question went unanswered as Penny and I hugged.

“God, it’s good to see you, honey,” I exclaimed as we hugged. “Everything went well with your flight out?”

“The flight was fine,” Penny replied. “I’m so glad to see you too.”

Hunter tugged at my sock and repeated, “Why he brown?” as he pointed towards Dave.

“Dave’s family came from Africa a long time ago,” I explained. “It’s always hot and sunny there. Our family came from Europe where it’s cold and you have to where a lot of clothes.”

“He is suntanned,” Connor added helpfully.

“Dave is African-American,” I agreed. “It’s not a sun tan but it is a defense his body has to protect it from the sun.” Hunter accepted the explanation. Penny and I wrapped our arms around each other’s backs and walked off the field, trailed by the little boys. I greeted Mom, Dad, Liz, Will, Abby and Rose. I reached for Rose to greet her. The sight of a big guy in pads and helmet startled my niece. She started to cry so I gave her back to Abby immediately.

I popped my helmet off and leaned in. “It’s OK, Rose,” I cooed soothingly. “It’s just your Uncle Kyle. It’s OK.” The sound of my voice did the trick. Rose turned to look at me again and gave me a big smile. “Hi, sweetie. You don’t need to be frightened of me. This is what I do. I play football.” She let me nuzzle her nose and give her a kiss.

Penny, my family and I talked for a couple minutes. Most of the players had disappeared towards the locker room in Sun Devil Stadium. “I guess I better get going,” I said. “Are you guys going back to your hotel?”

“No, we planned to stick around with you until dinner,” Penny said. “Is that OK?”

“I guess,” I agreed.

“Will and I will move the cars over to the Mission Palms,” Dad said. “Why don’t the rest of you walk over with Kyle?” My family agreed. Everyone walked back to Sun Devil Stadium with me.

When we got to the stadium, I said, “I’ll see you in the hotel lobby. I’ll be about twenty minutes.”

“Can we go wit’ Unka Ky?” Noah asked politely.

“Yeah, can we?” Connor added.

“I don’t think a men’s locker room is the place for little boys,” Mom said. “You boys do not need to see grown naked men.”

Noah, Connor and Hunter tittered at the mention of naked guys in the locker room. They didn’t argue further with Mom. I needed to learn Mom’s skill at deflecting the boys interest when Penny and I started our own family.

My family headed for my hotel when I went inside to shower and change. I grabbed a couple items I would need from my locker to take back to the hotel. Our equipment staff was transferring the contents of our lockers in Sun Devil Stadium over to the University of Phoenix stadium tomorrow so things would be ready for us Monday afternoon when we got to the other stadium.

I found my family sitting in the lobby talking with Coach and Mrs. Paterno. Joe was talking with the grownups while Sue entertained Noah, Connor and Hunter. Both seemed quite happy talking with my family. Penn State is just blessed having a couple like Joe and Sue Paterno associated with it. I headed up to my room to change into a coat and tie for dinner.

Shawn Byrd’s parents and Trevor’s family were sitting with the Paternos and my family when Trevor and I came back downstairs. Leigh Ann and Laurie had joined Zack in the cluster around Coach Paterno.

The team, the coaches’ families and team families gathered in the lobby for the trip over to the steakhouse. The team arranged for an extra bus. My family piled on the bus with Penny and me, and Zack and his family. The trip across Tempe to the Rustler’s Rooste took about twenty minutes. The restaurant sat on a plateau near the eastern foot of South Mountain, not that far from the Secret Garden where we ate last Sunday.

We passed an indoor slide on the way to the banquet room. Noah, Connor and Hunter went nuts when they saw it. They wanted to stop and play immediately. My mean Mom insisted that they had to come to the table and order their dinners before the playing on the slide. Penny and I sat across the table from Will, Abby and Rose. Zack, Leigh Ann and Laurie took seats beside us.

Our athletic department arranged three choices for our dinners: 12 ounce New York strip, all you can eat BBQ beef ribs or half a BBQ chicken. Dinner came with cowboys beans, garlic mashed potatoes, corn on the cob and a dessert. The department had a kids menu too. They had a choice of a petite, 5 ounce sirloin with fries, two beef ribs with fries or chicken fingers with fries.

Penny went for the New York strip. I decided I had to have the all you can eat beef ribs. I noticed most of the team selected the same as me. When you feed a hundred and nine football players all you can eat, you better have a lot of ribs. When the orders were settled, Penny, Liz and I took the boys over to play on the slide. Will, Rose, Zack and Laurie came along.

Hunter and the twins loved the slide. Will took Rose down it on his lap a couple times. She wasn't sure about it the first ride but she enjoyed the second time. Zack gave Laurie a ride too. She definitely did NOT like the slide. Zack took his unhappy daughter back to her mom. Penny, Liz and I had to pry the boys loose from the slide when our dinners arrived.

Coach Burton apparently was getting a little more comfortable with Jon Stafford being his daughter Ashley's boyfriend. Jon sat with the Burton family during dinner.

The beef ribs were immense and delicious. I must have put away ten myself. The waiters and waitresses were constantly bringing plates of ribs back from the kitchen to keep our team fed. We probably ate our way through a whole herd of cattle that evening.

We had a choice of apple pie, nine layer chocolate cake, cow pie, an ice cream sundae or bread pudding for dessert. The cow pie was a pie crust filled with vanilla ice cream and chocolate ganache. It sounded good but the cake sounded better.

Penny and I both picked the nine layer chocolate cake for dessert. The pastry chef layered chocolate cake, raspberry marmalade and chocolate mousse into the fantastic, extremely delectable treat for the finale of our meal.

Coach Burton gave a short speech welcoming all the families to Tempe. He reviewed briefly the opportunities they would have to visit with their son, brother, fiancé or husband. Penny wasn't the only fiancée. Jada Owens, Shawn Byrd's intended, was here along with Trevor's Stephanie.

The buses dropped the families off at the Marriot Courtyard Hotel on the way back to our hotel. As our bus pulled to a stop in front of the hotel, I suggested to Penny, "Give me a call around eight tomorrow morning. I don't want to oversleep like last Sunday."

"Were you a bad boy last Sunday?" Penny teased. "I'll give you a call when I get up. Do you know where the nearest Presbyterian Church is at?"

“I didn’t find one that’s close,” I answered. “There is a UCC church on the other side of town hall. It’s a short walk from my hotel.”

“That’s perfect,” Penny agreed. Penny’s old church back home was a United Church of Christ church. There wasn’t a great deal of theological difference between UCC and Presbyterians. I gave Penny a pretty romantic good night kiss. When all the families left the bus and we pulled away, some joker in the back called out, “This is a business trip, Coach! Keep your mind on football, not girls.” The whole bus cracked up at the jibe.

“My mind will be on football,” I called back. “Don’t worry. I WILL be ready to kick some Longhorn ass on Monday night. I guarantee it.”

Trevor, Zack and I headed to my room to watch the BBVA Bowl on TV. No one else on our team had the slightest interest in watching Rutgers play Clemson. It was a fairly lackluster game unless you cheered for kickers. Of course that was why we were watching. The Rutgers defense declawed the Tigers’ offense. The Scarlet Knights won 16-13. Hal was three for three on field goals, including a fifty two yarder to take the lead in the fourth quarter. Our friend did himself a world of good with NFL teams that evening.

Sunday, January 6th

Trevor and I were up when Penny called a little after eight that morning. Penny and Stephanie had talked last night. They suggested that all of us meet at the Starbucks for coffee and breakfast before heading over to the church.

Trevor and I met Penny and Steph at the Starbucks at nine o’clock. We grabbed some coffee and pastries before heading back to our hotel. We hung out in the lobby, relaxing and talking while we waited for the church service. We strolled across the street, past the town hall and across to Sixth Street and First Congregational Church of Tempe.

The people at the church were very friendly when we came in. They recognized Trevor and me as being football players and correctly assumed we were from Penn State. Texas was staying at a hotel in Scottsdale. Trevor, Steph, Penny and I found a pew and settled in for the service.

I wasn’t surprised when my family came in a few minutes later. Mom, Dad, Liz and the boys took one pew. Will, Abby and Rose squeezed in with us. Zack, Leigh Ann and Laurie showed up for the service too. Penn State probably ended up with fifteen or twenty players, more families and two coaches at the service. Coach Burton, Mrs. Burton, Jenna, Ashley and Ashley’s boyfriend, Jon Stafford, came in a minute before the services started.

Reverend Hines, the woman pastor, did a nice service. This church’s service was more contemporary than I was used to. Reverend Hollinger was quite traditional. The people around us welcomed us warmly during the greeting period. The reverend included all us

from Penn State in the prayer after the sermon. I enjoyed the visit immensely. It was too bad Trevor and I missed last Sunday's service. I would not have minded hearing another service at this friendly church.

My family, Penny and I headed down Sixth Street toward Mill Avenue and their hotel. Penny and I kind of dragged out our good bye when we got to Mill Avenue. We weren't going to have much time together again until after the game.

"Could you join us for lunch, Kyle?" Penny asked.

"I doubt it," I replied. "Coach likes to keep everyone together for team unity."

"That's too bad," Penny said. Coach and Mrs. Burton and the rest of their family walked up to the corner just as we decided lunch together wouldn't happen. I was shocked when Penny stepped over to my coach and asked politely, "Coach Burton, could you spare Kyle for an hour? I'd like to have lunch with my fiancé."

"Miss Edwards, I think I can spare Coach for an hour," Coach Burton replied. Coach looked over at me. "You'll be back to the hotel promptly at one o'clock for the team meeting, right?"

"You can count on me, Coach," I agreed quickly.

"I always do," Coach replied. He gave Penny and me a wink. "I'm playing hooky from lunch too. I'm taking my family over to Robbie Fox's Pub. It's supposed to serve some excellent food and beverages. You may want to try it too."

The light changed. Coach and Mrs. Burton headed across the street to the pub. Jenna, Ashley and Jon trailed behind them.

"What do you think?" I asked. "I don't know anything about the place but I bet Coach will know what he's talking about."

"Let's do it, Kyle," Penny agreed. We hurried across the street before the light turned red on us.

Robbie Fox's was a Pub made up to look like any Irish pub you would find in the old country. The waitress found a small table for the two of us. Penny ordered the house burger with a salad. I had the corned beef sandwich with fries. It was nice to spend time with Penny.

We would have precious little time together after this. We'd be together for half an hour later in the afternoon when Mike Montgomery interviewed my family. Families were allowed to visit on the field during pregame warm-ups. Beyond that, we would be together again until we flew home to Philly after the game.

I made my way back to the hotel with a couple minutes to spare before Coach Burton started the team meeting. The whole team met for half an hour and then we spent another hour and a half in position group meetings.

I hustled up to my room and changed into a coat and tie for the interview with Mike Montgomery and my family. I'd be ready for dinner too, in case the interview went longer than expected.

The athletic department made a suite available to us, the one Coach Burton used for his daily press briefings. My family and Penny arrived about ten minutes later. Mike Montgomery came in a couple minutes after my family.

Mike's interview focused mostly on Mom and Dad and their experiences having two sons playing college football at the same time. He was interested in the fact that Mom or Dad made nearly every one of Andy's and my home games over the past two years.

Dad recounted the experience of watching Andy help his team win a national championship last Friday night. Mom, Will, Abby and Liz talked about it too. Mike even asked Noah and Connor what they thought about their daddy's game.

Mike's question to me dealt with how I felt about having my parents and other family at my games the last three years and having them out here for my final college game. I introduced Penny to Mike. Mike took a few pictures of my family before he left. Penny and I settled for a hug and kiss when the interview was done. I had to get going for my team leadership dinner.

Coach Adams and Coach C drove the two vans that took our leadership group to Ristoranate Tuscany. It was about a half hour ride to the restaurant on the north end of the city.

The restaurant started us off with antipasti. Everyone had a choice of hand pulled mozzarella, heirloom tomatoes and marinated olives or mortadella with roasted garlic and fennel relish. They were served on a toasted chiabatta.

Our guests had a choice of Bistecca Fiorentina (a Tuscan steak), Veal Marsala, Free Range Chicken, Atlantic Cod or Pork Osso Bucco. I had the Osso Bucco. It came with polenta, heirloom carrots and scallions. It was excellent. Everyone had tiramisu for dessert.

As people were finishing their desserts, Trevor, Damian and I took the floor. We had rehearsed what we wanted to say to everyone.

"Coach Burton, Coach Czarwinski and Coach Adams, on behalf of the team leaders," Trevor began, "We want to thank you for inspiration and direction the past four years. You made it possible for us to achieve what we have achieved."

Damian stood. "On behalf of Trevor, Coach and myself, we would like to thank each of you in the team leadership group. This team this year is more together... more of a team than any other football team I've been associated with in high school or college. We don't have egos or cliques. Everyone really does support and help everyone else. No team member got in trouble academically. No one has been arrested. No one got in trouble with the coaches and been suspended. That is an amazing record for a team of 109 players and it is due to your work. We are here to play for the national championship and we did it the right way. Everyone associated with the university: faculty, students and alumni, can be proud of what we have accomplished. You guys made it happen. Thank you so much for your efforts."

"A year ago the seniors here today met in a hotel room down in Orlando and set a vision for our team," I said as I stood. "We've chanted 'On to Phoenix' for the past year. We're here. Unspoken in that slogan was the intent to win tomorrow. We've achieved every goal we set. One remains... beat the Longhorns. I know everyone here will give it everything they have and will help their teammates do the same. Win or lose tomorrow, I am so proud to call each of you my teammate. Juniors, after tomorrow's game the mantel will pass to you guys. Keep up the standards we set and keep our football team on top. That will be your challenge."

Chip stood when I finished talking. "The other juniors nominated me to speak for them. We accept your challenge. Win or lose... and it better be win... we will keep the team running to the high standards you guys have set for us. I think Trevor, Coach and Damian deserves three cheers." Chip led the leadership group in three cheers for us.

The group got back to the hotel around 8:30 pm. We joined a good portion of the team in the players' lounge. The last wildcard NFL game was playing. The wildcard Patriots dispatched the AFC South champions, the Jaguars, pretty easily. Shawn O'Connor had 19 carries for 107 yards in the victory. During the half time show we got to catch up on the other playoff games. The Bears beat Aaron's 49ers earlier in the afternoon. Sadly for our friend, he was going to get to attend tomorrow's game. Zack Hayes spoke with him before Aaron boarded his plane for Phoenix earlier in the evening.

Monday, January 7th

Coach Burton let us sleep in a little on the game morning. Mandatory team breakfast was at 9:30 am. We spent an hour doing a final review of our game plan before changing into our coats and ties. The athletic department had a pep rally/luncheon.

Penny and my family were invited. Duty required that I host a table of alumni instead of sitting with my family. I was allowed to include Penny at my table. I entertained the eight alumni and wives. We had stuffed chicken breasts. They were dry and less than appealing. Coach Burton and Coach Paterno both spoke after the meal, firing our supporters up for the game that evening.

The buses took us over to the University of Phoenix Stadium to prepare for the game. A horde of media greeted us when we arrived. It was bigger than anything I had ever seen. TV, print media, radio, foreign press – everyone was there to document every step we took. We headed inside to the calm of our locker room. All of us prepared in our own way.

I listened to some music as I studied the game plan for the umpteenth time. Some guys played cards. Other did video games. All of us prepared for the biggest contest of our lives. We got a walk around on the field about an hour later. The field was immaculate. Tostitos banners and BCS National Championship banners decorated the stadium.

It had been cold for most of our stay in Phoenix. The temperatures moderated in the last couple days. It was 64 degrees when we arrived at the stadium. Not that it mattered at all. We were playing in a sealed dome in perfect warm, no wind conditions. No one would get over heated and no one would get cold.

We had a light, high carb meal around four o'clock before we went outside to warm up. Everyone did their preparations around the field. Mom, Dad, Penny and the rest of my family was allowed to visit with me briefly during warm ups. Marco and Brian played with Noah, Connor and Hunter. The little boys loved it.

Mike Johanson stopped by to say hi while my family was visiting. He congratulated Penny and me when he found out we were engaged. That news hadn't reached Texas before. Penny gave me a hug and kiss and wished me the best when I had to go back inside.

We finished dressing inside. Coach Burton gave a brief speech reminding everyone of our goal for the year. He challenged us to give our utmost to make it happen. We would remember this day the rest of our lives. I led the whole team in a "Win in Phoenix" cheer before we filed out to the tunnel before the start of the game.

Coach Burton lined up in the front with Trevor, Damian and me. The rest of the team crowded behind us in the tunnel. I looked around. The scene was exactly like Billy Robinson's poster. Too quick for me to fully appreciate the moment, our Blue Band struck up our song and we charged onto the field behind Coach Burton. The 20,000 Penn State fans cheered wildly for us.

A military choir did a beautiful rendition of our national anthem. After a sixty second pause for TV commercials, it was time for Trevor, Damian and I to take the field.

Trevor, Damian and I walked out to the center of the field to meet Todd Landry and Devonte Howard. As the top ranked team, we were considered the home team. Todd called heads when the coin was flipped. It came up heads. I chose to defend the north goal. The referees lined us up with our backs to our goal line and had us shake hands.

Jared Gray did a nice job with the kickoff. He pounded the ball four yards deep in the end zone. The Longhorn returner did not come out of the end zone. Todd Landry demonstrated why he was a Heisman runner-up. He led his team on an eight play drive down the field right at our defense.

We knew the Longhorns were good at running the ball. Jerry Whitfield and Mike Pollard had to stay at home to plug the center of the line. The Longhorn linemen were good at getting blocks outside for off tackle and outside runs. Trevor, Bill, Josh, Tony and Brendan had to flow with the play and gang tackled to bring down the big tailback. The guy was built very much like Damian – 5’-11” and probably around 250 pounds.

Todd kept our defense off balance as he threw play action passes. They moved down into our red zone. Trevor sniffed out a play action pass and whipped outside around the tackle. The tackle was forced to drag Trevor down to avoid letting him sack Todd. The yellow flag flew to the ground and the referee signaled holding. This moved the Longhorns back to our 17 yard line. They ran twice, gaining only four yard against our fired up goal line defense. On fourth down and goal to go they booted a field goal to put themselves ahead 3-0.

Tanner Riggs took the kickoff two yards deep in the end zone. Matt Frye frantically yelled “Run... run... run...” Matt made a good call. Tanner skipped and dodged ahead, bringing the ball out to our 43 yard line.

I took a deep breath before stepping onto the field. Fifty-four weeks of planning, sweating and studying came down to the next 57 minutes of football. Chip, Damian, the rest of our offense and I jogged onto the field and huddled. Coach called a deep pass play to open the game. We intended to test the Texas defense immediately.

I lined up in the slot between Bob Smith and Christian. Mike Johanson lined up opposite me. We gave each a smile and nod. Before the snap I went in motion across the backfield, ending up in the weak side slot between Brian and our left tackle, Joe Cleveland. Mike went along. Texas was playing us man to man.

I took off on a deep post route. Mike shadowed me nearly step for step. The free safety came over and helped Mike out deep. Chip found Bob free coming across the middle with the strong safety trailing him. Chip rifled the ball to our tight end. Bob turned up field and gained another five yards after the catch before the Texas defense swarmed him and took him down.

Mike and the free safety gave me no room to breathe on the drive. Damian had trouble gaining yards in the middle. Texas’ run defense was excellent, as advertised. Brian, Christian and Bob exploited the single coverage they faced. Chip moved us down the field into Texas’ red zone in six plays. We tried a lob to me in the corner of the end zone on the next play.

Texas' left end broke free. Chip scrambled to our left away from him. I broke off the route and came back towards Chip as he scrambled for safety. I got position on Mike just inside the end zone. Chip rifled the ball into my belly moments before the left end crashed into him and flattened him to the turf. Touchdown! The 20,000 Penn State fans roared their approval. Jared Gray kicked the PAT to put us ahead 7-3.

Jared Gray booted the kickoff three yards deep into the end zone. The Texas returner decided to take the ball out. Our kick coverage team converged on him. Mark Markovich dropped him on Texas' 19 yard line. It was an excellent play by the freshman linebacker. That boy could play football!

The Longhorns went straight to work. In many ways they were a similar team to us. Todd was a top notch QB. They ran a pro style offense with three receivers on most plays. They balanced the number of runs and passes to keep their opponents guessing what came next. Todd drove his team down the field patiently, running seven times and play action passing six times. Coach C and our defense slowed them but couldn't find a way to stop them. They stuffed the ball into the end zone from our three yard line on the thirteenth play of the drive. Score: Texas-10, Penn State-7.

Tanner took the kickoff at our 2 yard line and advanced the ball out to our 31 yard line. The first play was a roll out to my side. Chip needed some relief from the intense pass rush Texas gave him last drive. I did a fifteen yard out. Chip lofted ball perfectly, putting it on my outside shoulder away from Mike. Both of us leaped.

I am about two and a half inches taller than Mike. His leaping ability nearly equals my own. Chip had about a six inch circle for a target and he hit it perfectly. I snatched the ball from the air as I reached my apex. Mike and the free safety made quite sure I didn't gain any yards after the catch.

Damian carried the ball on a delay draw the next play. We hoped to catch the Texas linemen rushing all out. They weren't fooled. Damian was dropped after a one yard gain. We went back to working the passing game. Chip hit Christian twice. Brian and Bob each caught a pass to keep our offense moving. The Texas defense started blitzing to add to the pressure on Chip. The first six plays moved us down to Texas' 48 yard line. Coach Burton called for our crossing pass patterns, expecting that to "clean" Mike off me. I lined up outside on the weak side. Brian went in motion from the strong side slot to the weak side. I ran a slant from the outside. Brian ran an out from the slot. Brian neatly picked off Mike as we passed each other. I ran free across the middle. I looked over my shoulder, expecting to see the ball any moment. The ball came a little too far in front of me.

I burst ahead and stretched out, barely snagging the ball by my finger tips. Thankfully I was too far for any linebacker or safety to wallop me immediately after the catch. I came down hard but maintained possession of the ball. I had advanced us up to Texas' 27 yard line.

I flipped the ball to a referee and turned back towards Chip and my teammates. I found out why the Penn State fans hadn't cheered much for my catch. Chip was on the ground clutching his ankle as Joe Cleveland climbed off him. Two Texas linemen were dancing around in our backfield celebrating. Damian was in close and getting personal with the backfield judge.

"That's roughing the passer!" Damian insisted loudly. "The ball was out well before they hit him!"

"Not what I saw," the referee said evenly. "The end's momentum took him into the quarterback as the ball came out. No penalty."

Greg Nowicki and Joe Cleveland both motioned for the trainers. They hustled onto the field. They got to Chip about the same time as me. I collared Joe to find out what had happened.

"Damn it, Joe, what happened?" I asked.

"I was riding my guy outside away from Chip," Joe explained. "The other end chased Chip into me from behind. I think when he hit Chip, he pushed the pair of them into the back of my legs. I went over backwards and landed on Chip's ankle. It's not going to be good."

"OK," I replied as evenly as I could. "You got to hold your man outside more. Chip has to have room to work!"

"I'll do my best," Joe agreed. The trainers had helped Chip to his feet and let him try to put weight on his left ankle. He nearly crumpled in pain. The trainers kept my friend standing. They supported Chip, one on each side, as he hopped off the field. I looked over at the sideline to see Jon Stafford strap on his helmet and get last instructions from Coach Burton. I wished I hadn't been so prescient last month when I had insisted that it was essential that we have Jon present on the team for this game.

Jon called a run off tackle to our strong side. We lined up and Jon called for the snap. I was running a dummy deep route to pull Mike and the free safety away from the play. I sprinted down field, dragging them with me. I slowed to a stop when the whistle blew a second and a half later. I expected to see a pile of bodies over by Bob and Elijah a few yards in front of the line of scrimmage. Instead I found the pile two yards deep in our backfield. Three Texas players were pointing towards our goal line as if they had the ball.

It took the refs a minute unstack the pile of bodies and locate the ball Jon was the next to last person up. Texas' left defensive tackle was last up. He handed the ball to the referee. Shit! Greg and Jon fumbled the snap. Our defense hustled onto the field as the offense retreated to the sidelines.

“Don’t let it bother you,” I offered to Jon as we settled in along the sideline. “We will get it next drive.”

Coach Caffrey huddled with the offense and reviewed photos from the last two drives. Coach had Jon and Greg practice some snaps to get the two more comfortable working together. Unfortunately, our offense had too much time to get comfortable on the sideline. Texas methodically moved the ball down the field towards our end zone.

Jon stood on the sideline with his head down as Todd’s crew pushed into the red zone. “Hey, heads up,” I said consolingly. “Fumbles happen. Shake it off and get ready. We’ll make this up.”

“It’s not how I wanted to start,” Jon answered. “I can do better.”

“We all know you can,” I agreed. Todd hit a beautiful strike to a receiver as I said it – at least it would have been beautiful if it had been against another team other than us. The split end ran the ball the last ten yards into the end zone. Texas’ kicker came on and booted the PAT. Score: Texas-17, Penn State-7.

Tanner returned the kickoff out to our 27 yard line. My teammates and I jogged out to the field and huddled.

“We got your back, Jon,” Damian said as we circled together.

“Take a deep breath,” I added. “You’ll be fine.”

Coach Burton kept the first play simple. We ran off tackle behind our two best blockers, Elijah Berks and Bob Smith. Jon took the snap, pivoted and stuffed the ball in Damian’s belly and watched as my roomie blasted into the gap and picked up three yards. I saw the relief on Jon’s face when we huddled again.

Coach Burton called a pass. Brian and Christian were going deep. I was a decoy this time, running about ten yards downfield and doing an out. Mike and the free safety shadowed me as I ran my route. I was shocked when I turned out and found the ball flying my way. Mike cut in front of me. The ball was high. Mike and I jostled each other as we went for the ball. He got his hands on it first but I got mine in too and batted the ball out of bounds.

“Jon, I was the three read,” I said when I got back to the huddle. “I was doubled. You shouldn’t have thrown the ball to me.”

“Chip hit you when you were doubled,” Jon said. “I know how you can leap. I knew you’d be able to go over him.”

“This cornerback leaps as high as me,” I retorted. “You can’t just throw it up and pray. Make your reads the way Coach Peterson preaches. Christian or Brian should have been open.”

“I was,” Brian agreed.

“I didn’t have that much time to wait,” Jon answered. “The end was closing in and I had to get the ball out.”

“Play smart,” I said. “Don’t try to do too much yourself. If it isn’t there, throw the ball away. We’ll get it next play.”

The next play came in as I said that. Jon gave us the call. We suckered the Longhorns with a tailback screen. Damian blasted ahead for a dozen yards. The following play Jon had to dodge one tackler before hitting Christian for a fifteen yard gain. All of us could see Jon gaining confidence.

Brian lined up in the weak side slot. He ran an out again. I crossed his path as I ran my slant. Mike managed to avoid Brian and the nickel back as we passed. I was the primary receiver. I watched for the ball as I crossed the middle, Mike trailing me by less than half a yard. I saw the ball fly out to the left side of our formation. Apparently Brian was loose. I turned back to block Mike and make sure he couldn’t get in on the tackle.

I was shocked to see Brian sprawled on the ground and the nickel back sprinting down the field for our end zone. He avoided Joe Cleveland easily. Jon tried for a tackle but couldn’t bring the guy down. The nickel back scampered into the end zone and held the ball aloft to the cheers of the large crowd of Texas fans. Their kicker made the PAT. Score: Texas-24, Penn State-7.

“My bad,” Jon admitted. “I should have known better than to throw that pass,” he added to everyone as we came off the field.

“That was not a bad decision, Jon,” Zack countered. “You were throwing to the right receiver. “You can’t help it when he falls down. That’s not your fault.”

“I have to do better,” Jon declared. “I’m fucking everything up for the team. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Coach Caffrey said as he came up to the cluster with Jon. “You will do fine out there. Everyone knows you are a good quarterback. Let’s look at what happened and how to get a better outcome next drive.”

Coach Caffrey and Zack reviewed the results of the drive. The rest of us grabbed some Gatorade and rested for a moment. Tanner Riggs took the kickoff, found a hole in the coverage and sprinted up the field. He dodged, juke and stutter stepped by three guys. The kicker managed to grab him and bring him, otherwise he would have scored. We took position at our 39 yard line.

Coach Burton called for a wildcat play to start the drive. The snap came to me. I followed Jon's, Bob's and Christian's blocks. I sprinted outside past Bob and Jon. Christian pushed his guy for the sideline so I cut inside. Greg Nowicki pulled and helped block a couple linebackers out of my way. I motored down the field, picking up twenty-seven yards before the free safety and Mike came over and shoved me out of bounds.

Charlie Taylor spelled Damian on the next play. Brian and I were lined up on the weak side. Jon took the snap and pitched the ball out to Charlie as he circled outside. I blocked Mike back a couple yards before I knocked him on his butt. Mahmoud Greene, who pulled, passed me closely followed by Charlie. Brian interfered with the outside linebacker. Charlie shot forward past Mahmoud as he took out the middle linebacker. I tried to catch up to Charlie but couldn't. Charlie picked up a dozen yards before the free safety caught him.

A false start on Elijah on the next play backed us up to Texas' 27 yard line. We tried passing on the next play. Devonte Howard broke free and forced Jon to throw the ball through the end zone to avoid a sack. We surprised the Longhorns with a shuffle pass the next play. Charlie rolled forward thirteen yards. Coach sent Damian back in on third down and two yards to go. We flooded the end zone with receivers, pulling half the run support with us. Jon handed the ball to Damian, who pounded ahead.

Devonte met Damian at the line of scrimmage. Damian bulled ahead while Devonte wrestled and shoved Damian down sideways. The referee gave us a bad spot. Coach Burton signaled for a measurement. We came up over a yard short of the down marker. Jon, Damian and I all begged Coach to let us take another shot at the yard. Coach Burton sent Jared Gray and the field goal team in. Jared kicked the 30 yarder easily. Score: Texas-24, Penn State-10.

I went over to see how Chip was doing when we got off the field. I was in time to see to trainers help Chip hop off the field and head for the locker room. I headed for Zack. I figured he would know what was up with my friend.

"What's the story on Chip?" I asked when we met.

"Definitely an ankle injury," Zack said. "Doc's not sure if he has a fracture or a sprain. They're taking him in for X-rays right now."

"We shouldn't count on him, I guess," I replied.

"Don't know," Zack said. "Coach Peterson is radioing down direction to Coach Caffrey right now for some things we need to review with Jon. We can make this work with Jon."

3:01 remained in the half when Jared Gray kicked the ball deep into the end zone. Kicking in a dome was tremendous for him. No nasty winds whipping over Bald Eagle Mountain to deal with in here. Texas' kick returner took the touchback.

Todd and his crew tried to hustle and get another score before half time. Coach C made a couple adjustments to our defense. They managed a dozen yards on the first three plays. Todd hit a receiver deep for another 22 yards on the next play. Trevor stunted and blew between the guard and tackle, sacking Todd for a seven yard loss.

Todd hit his tight end on a curl next play, gaining eight yards. 0:55 remained when Todd called his final timeout. Texas had the ball at our 45 yard line. It was third down and two yards to go. Todd faked a handoff to his tailback. Jeff Knox bit on the fake. The tight end came free. Todd hit him for a dozen yards. The big guy rumbled down the field, picking up another 18 yards before Dave and Shawn could slow him and drop him.

Our secondary protected the sideline, leaving just Dave McCall deep to cover the middle of the field. Todd hit his slot receiver at the twelve yard line. Dave blasted forward and took him down around the nine yard line. 0:35 remained and the clock was running.

Todd scrambled to line his guys up, get set and spike the ball. 0:11 remained on the clock when the referee signaled to stop the clock. An incomplete pass ran the clock to 0:06. Coach Brown sent the kicker out for a field goal. The holder bobbled the snap but managed to hang on to it. He fled the backfield, swinging around the right end of his line, trying to avoid getting caught. The kicker threw a block to kick out Chris Richardson on the outside. The holder legged it into the end zone. The PAT was good. Score: Texas-31, Penn State-10.

0:02 remained on the game clock. Jon and our offense came out and kneeled down to run the clock out on the half. Our team was subdued as we headed for the locker room. No one expected to be on the short end of 31-10 score in this game we had worked for over a year to prepare for. We found quite a scene when we got to the locker room. The door to the training room was open and we could hear everything.

"Can I hurt myself worse playing on it?" Chip demanded.

"No, you can't," Doc answered. "I still don't recommend you playing on this ankle. It is going to be painful."

"It's the God damned national championship!" Chip retorted. "Wrap the damn ankle up and let me play. I am NOT sitting on the sideline. Just DO IT!"

Coach Burton popped into the training room and closed the door. We could hear Chip's voice as he loudly demanded to play. We couldn't hear the others so we didn't know how his plea would come out.

Everyone met with the position coaches and discussed plans for the second half. We reminded each other that we had been down 17-0 against Ohio State and come back. They were a damn good football team. We could pull this out if everyone played smart football.

We got our answer a couple minutes later about Chip playing. Chip stomped out of the trainer's room, limping noticeably with his ankle tightly wrapped with tape.

"No disrespect, Jon, but I AM playing the second half," Chip said as he met with Jon, Bob Huber and Trey Connelly. "This is the damned national championship game and I have worked for this for three years. I WILL PLAY."

"You've earned it, Chip," Jon agreed quickly.

Damian rallied the starting offensive line together. "You guys will have to block like your lives depend on it. Chip won't be able to dodge blitzes. You've got to man-up and stop those Texas rushers cold. Can you do that?"

"Got it, boss!" the five linemen and Bob Smith agreed in near unison.

We had a couple minutes more before the coaches announced it was time to head for the tunnel again. I had the whole team form a circle in the center of the locker room. "Win in Phoenix on three," I demanded. "one... Two... THREE!"

"WIN... IN... PHOENIX!" we shouted in unison.

We headed out through the tunnel and took our spot along the side of the field. The Longhorns jogged out onto the opposite side of the field. Tanner and our return team took the north side of the field. The Longhorn kickoff team lined up opposite them. The Longhorn kicker booted the ball into the end zone. Matt Frye shouted for Tanner to down the ball. He did. We took possession on our twenty yard line.

Charlie Taylor started in the backfield in the second half. The Penn State fans let up a big cheer for Chip as he gingerly limped onto the field. We ran another weak side sweep. I blocked Mike away from the play. He was more wary of me and I couldn't take him down. Mahmoud and Brian cleared the way. Chip pitched ball out to Charlie. He scooted ahead for ten yards before he was tackled. Chip hit Bob on a tight end screen, outfoxing the Texas blitz. Bob picked up thirteen yards before he was tackled.

Coach Burton decided to test the Texas secondary deep while the front seven were still thinking about the sweep and screen. I simulated a hitch pattern a dozen yards down field when Chip pumped the ball. I took off, leaving Mike in my wake. To my shock, the free safety had headed over to double Christian. Chip spotted me come free. He lofted the ball to me twenty-five yards down field. I kicked into high gear, knowing Mike had to be close behind me. I sprinted at top speed down the field. Around the ten yard line I felt a light tug at my jersey. I pulled free and motored into the end zone.

I held the ball aloft for our fans and turned back to the field. Mike had skidded down to the five yard line after missing the tackle. He was getting up a little dazed as our fans cheered my TD.

A Texas end had hit Chip after he threw the ball. The referees signaled roughing the passer. Jared Grey split the uprights on the PAT. Score: Texas-31, Penn State-17.

“Are you OK?” I asked Chip when we met on the sideline.

“You made a fifty-seven yard TD,” Chip answered. “I’m fucking great. Keep doing what you do. We’ll win this game. Bet on it!”

Jared boomed the ball through the end zone, thanks to the extra 15 yards he got, thanks to the roughing the passer penalty on the touchdown play.

The offense huddled with Zack and Coach Caffrey while Texas had the ball. Coach C’s adjustment paid dividends. Trevor forced the tackle into holding on one play. Trevor and Bill’s excellent pass rush sandwiched Todd on another play and forced him up in the pocket. Jerry Whitfield and Mike Pollard crushed him for the sack. The Longhorns had the ball for almost five minutes. Their nine plays only gained 43 yards. They tried a 48 yard field goal. The kicker missed wide left. Score: Texas-31, Penn State-17.

We got the ball on our 31 yard line. Coach Brown’s experiment of letting Mike cover me one on one was over. The free safety lined up towards my side of the field. Damian blasted off tackle behind Elijah and Bob again. He gouged out five yards. On the next play, Damian took a pitch out to the strong side and followed Brian’s block up field for another five yards.

Chip hit Bob for nine yards on a play action pass when the strong safety bit on the fake. Chip hit me on the next play when I ran a hitch route. I blocked Mike away from the ball with my body. Chip was perfectly on target, hitting my outstretched hands just out of Mike’s reach. I picked up seven yards to put us on Texas’ 43 yard line.

Coach Burton called for another wildcat play. Brian was lined up in my split end spot. Tanner was in the slot on the weak side on the play. Brian and Tanner took off down the field when the ball was snapped to me. I ran to the weak side for my sweep option play. Mike stubbornly stayed with Brian as I sprinted for the sideline and line of scrimmage. On sheer guts alone, Chip ran out to my right and blocked the outside linebacker as I approached the line of scrimmage. We targeted Mike on purpose. No one on the field knew better than him how much of a threat I was running or passing on the option play. He had seen it a dozen times when we were in high school. Mike stayed on Brian until my front foot crossed the line of scrimmage.

Mike turned and started towards me as I crossed the line. I launched a pass half a step later, just before my back foot crossed the line too. It was a wobbly pass but Brian ran

under it, scooped it up and sprinted for the end zone. The free safety tried to pull Brian down near the goal line but the 175 pound player had little chance of taking down my 200 pound protégé. The 20,000 Penn State fans roared their approval as the referee signaled touchdown. Jared scored the PAT to narrow the Longhorns' lead. Score: Texas-31, Penn State-24.

Each team was starting to get the measure of the other team. Texas staged a ten play drive, moving the ball down to our 6 yard line. Shawn Byrd made a brilliant leaping interception when Todd lobbed the ball into the corner of the end zone to a receiver.

We took the ball at our 20 yard line. We moved the ball 44 yards down the field on six plays. Damian pounded away but couldn't make more than three or four yards consistently. Brian and Christian took the load on the passing game. Chip didn't want to risk Mike getting an interception. He was gambling for the pick since he had free safety help deep. Chip got hit twice on the drive, the second time on a sack on third down and three to go. We were forced to punt the ball back to the Longhorns.

Forty-seven seconds was left in the third quarter when we punted the ball back to the Longhorns. They went on an epic eleven play drive. Coach C blitzed Todd. Shawn and Dave baited Todd, trying to convince him to throw INTs. Nothing worked. We finally got a break when Trevor's outside rush forced the tackle to hold him. Texas was forced to accept a 28 yard field goal. Score: Texas-34, Penn State-24.

The clock read 7:04 when Tanner made another good return, giving us possession on our 36 yard line. Charlie Taylor made a good sweep to the strong side, picking up nine yards on the first play. Chip hit Bob on a curl route for another eight yards on the next play. Chip took another hit on the play but he didn't let it faze him. He limped into the huddle and called the next play. My friend was putting on a gutsy, inspirational performance.

Coach Burton dipped into our bag of tricks again. We had run our brush or pick play twice and Texas proved they could handle it. I lined up wide left. Brian came in motion to the weak side slot before the snap. I started a slant over the middle as Brian ran an out. Half a step before our paths crossed, both of us cut and changed our routes. Mike and the nickel back were already dodging the pile up to follow us on a slant and an out route.

Brian turned up field and sprinted for the post. I switch to a flag route, heading for the marker at the front of the goal line. The poor free safety was faced with two open receivers without ready support. Brian was deeper than me so he shifted to his left to try to cover Brian. Chip saw me come open and arced a beautiful pass to me. I ran under, cradled the ball to my body and sprinted for the end zone. Mike and the free safety managed to knock me out of bounds at the twenty two yard line.

We passed again on the next play. Christian was single covered. Chip hit him on a simple in pattern. The cornerback misplayed the tackle. Christian exploded away and streaked into the end zone before anyone could touch him. Jared kicked the PAT to give us a prayer of winning the game. Score: Texas-34, Penn State-31.

4:09 remained in the game when Jared booted the ball down to Texas. We had all three time outs. Texas put the game in the hands of their two running backs. The big back pounded the ball at our tiring defense. The little back kept us from crowding inside. They steadily moved their team down the field in four or five yards chunks. Coach Burton was forced to spend two of our time outs to keep time on the clock. We finally managed to stop them when they were hit by a false start and a holding call on consecutive plays. Texas sent their punter in. He nailed an excellent coffin corner punt, sending the ball out of bounds at our 8 yard line.

0:46 remained on the clock when we took the field. Brian and I swapped spots. I lined up in the slot while he took the split end spot. Texas countered by sending Mike into the middle to cover me. The rest of the Texas defense covered the sides of the field. They went to a three man rush with eight defensive backs.

I ran deep each play to draw as many defenders as possible with me. Chip hit Brian for a fifteen yard gain along the sideline. Brian managed to get out of bounds to stop the clock. Chip hit Charlie coming out of the backfield on the next play. Charlie raced for the sideline, gaining a dozen yards before he was shoved out of bounds. Chip hit Christian for another ten yards next.

Chip threw for Brian again. The pass was slightly low. The cornerback batted it away. The clock read 0:21. The left defensive end batted Chip's pass to Christian away on the next play. 0:12 was left and we were 55 yards from the end zone.

We all knew this was the next to the last play in the game. I did a hitch fifteen yards down field as Chip pumped the ball. Mike bit on the fake as I turned and sprinted down field again. Chip hit me in stride. I managed another five yards before the two safeties hit me and brought me down. The ball was on Texas' 35 yard line. Coach Burton called the last timeout immediately. 0:04 was left on the clock.

Jared Gray and our field goal team trotted out onto the field and lined up. Just as the ball was to be snapped, Coach Brown called a timeout to "ice" our kicker.

All the offense lined up together along the sideline to watch. Our hearts were in our throats and we had both sets of fingers crossed. "C'mon Jared," somebody called. "You can do it."

The snap was good. Jon Stafford put the ball down clean and turned the laces the right way. Jared got a good kick on the ball. It arced up towards the goal posts. We watched, desperately praying that it went through. I stopped breathing as I saw its flight start to drift a little right... a little more... NNNooooo! The ball bounced against the right upright and careened off to the right.

Desperately I searched the field for a yellow flag. There weren't any. The clock read 0:00 as the Texas fans gave out a raucous cheer. It was done. Final Score: Texas-34, Penn State-31.

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The Penn State players stared at the ground as the Longhorns swarmed onto the field to celebrate their championship. Christian stepped over beside me. I looked up at my friend.

“I guess this is a good news, bad news situation,” Christian said with a forced smile on his face. “The bad news is obvious. The good news is we don’t have to dance on TV.”

“Dance?” I asked. I had no idea what my friend was talking about.

“Your birthday,” Christian said. “Don’t you remember? We promised a dining hall full of scouts we’d dance on the 50 yard line if we won the national championship.”

“I’d forgotten,” I admitted. “I guess not embarrassing myself on TV is one small consolation.”

“It is,” Christian agreed. Christian and I trudged towards the tunnel, following our teammates. No one wanted to watch Texas celebrate their victory. Mike Montgomery spotted Christian and me walking away.

“Do you guys have time for a quick interview?” Mike asked.

“I’ll pass, Mike,” Christian said politely.

“Not, tonight, Mike... sorry,” I added. I knew if I talked with the press right now, I would say something I would regret. We walked on. I guess Zack saw the exchange.

“Why did you blow off Mike?” Zack asked as he caught up to me. “He’s a good guy. You should fulfill your responsibilities as a captain and talk with the man.”

“I’m so pissed right now that I know I will say something I’ll regret,” I countered. “It’s safer this way.”

“If you’re going to be a professional you better get used to handling defeat,” Zack said. “The best teams in the NFL lose 25-30% of their games. Compose yourself, get your head on straight and go face the press. It’s hard but it’s the professional thing to do. God knows, I know about this.”

“I don’t want to rip anybody in the press,” I answered. “It’s better this way.”

“Bullshit!” Zack fired back. “Are you blaming Jared for our loss?”

“No, I don’t blame him,” I replied. “Asking Jared to hit a fifty-two yard field goal to win the game is asking too much of a first year kicker. We shouldn’t have been down that much at the end.”

“Do you blame Jon?” Zack asked. “Do you think he is a bad quarterback?”

“No, it’s not Jon’s fault,” I explained. “Jon had some rough times this game but it wasn’t all his fault. Jon will be a good quarterback, given more time and experience. He was kind of like Ed Fritz a couple years ago when Ed was pressed into service down at LSU. Ed had a really ugly game that day. Look where he is now.”

“Exactly my point,” Zack replied. “Do you hold yourself personally responsible for the loss? The preliminary stats would indicate otherwise. You are being credited with six catches for 142 yards receiving and two touchdowns. You picked up another 27 yards running and threw a TD. That’s not too shabby.”

“I wish I could have gotten closer to the goal line on that last catch,” I said. “I was worried if I fought too hard to break loose when they collared me that the time would run out and we wouldn’t have a chance at the tying field goal.”

“They did have you collared when you went down,” Zack agreed. “You did the right thing when you went down on contact. Now, like it or not, you are done with college football. Now you need to act like the professional that you are going to be. Go see Mike and do your job, so Mike can do his. Tell him what you just told me. That’s how a professional acts.”

“Yeah... yeah, you’re right,” I agreed. Christian had been standing beside me listening to the exchange between Zack and me.

“He’s right,” Christian said, motioning for me to follow. “Let’s go talk to Mike.”

“Yeah, I agree,” I said. “Thanks for keeping my head on straight, Zack.”

“That’s what friends do,” Zack answered.

Christian and I had to do a little searching to find Mike Montgomery. We found him near one end zone, having just wrapped up an interview with Mike Johanson.

“Hey, Mike, sorry for blowing you off before,” I said when he saw us. “We needed to get out heads together.”

“Kyle and I can do an interview now if you still want one,” Christian added.

“I understand completely, guys,” Mike replied. “I’m sure this is a tough loss to take.” Mike spent a couple minutes talking with us. His questions weren’t difficult. Mike asked me to evaluate Mike Johanson’s performance during the game.

“I have to give total credit to Mike,” I answered. “He covered me as well as anyone has ever done it in college. He played a tremendous game.”

Mike Montgomery tried unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh. When he recovered his composure, Mike explained, “Your former teammate is upset with himself with how poorly he played. You gained well over a hundred yards receiving today. Mike hasn’t allowed any receiver to gain over a hundred this season. You scored two touchdowns. Mike gave up only six this season, before today. He said he felt like you were taking him out to the woodshed again like you did back in high school. What is he referring too?”

“Oh... that,” I said. “I think he’s referring to an incident during his first training camp with the Wolverines. He was acting pretty cocky back then. Ed, my brother Andy and I did take him to task a little. We scored touchdowns on him on something like five or six consecutive plays. Our defense was tired of his boasting too. They were in on the trick. They left Mike out one on one with me or Andy and made it easy for us to score. Mike got our message about teamwork after that. He’s a tremendously talented cornerback. The bottom line is Mike went out and did his job today. His team won. My team lost. Credit is due to his play.”

“That’s a very magnanimous thing to say, Kyle,” Mike responded. “I will pass your kind words on to Michael’s parents, assuming I can find them in this sea of people.”

Mike went to question Christian about his performance during the game. Christian was our leading receiver with eight catches for 127 yards and a TD. Brian Henson matched my six catches but didn’t make it into the end zone. Bob Smith caught four passes. Charlie and Damian caught one each.

Christian and I retreated to our locker room when Mike was done. We had no interest in staying on the field while the BCS awarded the national championship trophy to the Longhorns.

Coach Burton spoke to the team briefly. “I know tonight didn’t go the way all of you planned,” Coach Burton said. “In spite of how things turned out, I am so proud of the way this team played all season. All of you played your hearts out all season. Coach Martin, Trevor Conwell, and Damian Thompson have done a hell of a job leading this team this season. I salute you. Seniors, all of you will be sorely missed next season. Everyone else, we will go back home, regroup and get ready for the next season. I know the Nittany Lions will be back better than ever next season.”

“Can I say something, Coach?” Chip asked as he struggled to stand. He shifted his weight off his injured left ankle. Coach Burton nodded his consent. “I want to thank Kyle, Damian and Trevor for their leadership this season. I want to thank all the seniors for the examples they gave us younger members of this team. You taught us the right way to play football. Thank you. I also promise all of you, next season we are going to come back to this game and get it right! On to Pasadena!” Chip chuckled. “Of course I

mean next season's BCS Championship Game, not the Rose Bowl. Nebraska, Michigan or Ohio State can have that one. On three everyone... On to Pasadena!"

The younger players on the team repeated Chip's chant three times, until the locker room echoed with sound. We showered and dressed, eager to get out of this locker room and back to our warm beds back at our hotel. Coach Burton walked out to the buses with me. He offered me a seat up front beside him.

"Are all your travel arrangements set, Coach?" Coach Burton asked. "I wouldn't want to leave you stranded when we leave tomorrow morning."

"They're set," I answered. "My brother and sister-in-law and Penny are meeting Zack, Leigh Ann and me for breakfast at seven o'clock tomorrow morning at our hotel. Will is going to give us a lift to the airport. We're all flying home together to Philly."

"It sounds like you're set," Coach Burton replied. He paused and took a deep breath. "This is one of the hard parts of coaching, saying good bye. I'm doing exit interviews with the rest of the seniors but I won't have that opportunity with you. Maybe we can get together some weekend when you're back on campus this spring. I'd like to have your input on your experiences with this team."

"I'll make sure you know ahead of time when I will be back to campus," I agreed. "I know I'll be back for Thon weekend." I chuckled. "Unless you want to do the exit interview on the BJC floor, it'll have to be another weekend later. Penny and I are lined up to be one of the team's dance couples."

"That would be a sight," Coach agreed. "You and Penny dancing beside Mrs. Burton and me while we did an exit interview. That would be funny. Let's do it sometime in March or April. Will you be here for Pro Day?"

"I plan to be," I answered.

"One other thing, Coach," Coach Burton said, "and I mean 'Coach' in the most literal sense. If things don't work out for you after you get drafted this spring or when you're done playing football, call me. I will always have a spot on the staff for you."

"I appreciate the offer, Coach," I replied. "I doubt I will take you up on it right away. If I decide against playing in the NFL, I will be looking for a teaching and coaching position nearer Philadelphia. Penny has a five year commitment to veterinary school at Penn."

"I don't know why an ag school like ours doesn't have its own veterinary school," Coach mused. "It seems like a natural for Penn State."

“It would have solved all kinds of complications in my life the last four years if it had one,” I agreed. Coach got quiet and looked out at night time Phoenix as the bus took us back to our hotel.

The buses dropped us off at our hotel close to midnight. Trevor and I went straight to bed. He had a 6:30 am breakfast. I didn’t need to be downstairs until 7:00 am to meet Penny, Will, Abby and company.

I tossed and turned, unable to sleep. The loss stung too much. I kept going over where we went wrong. I didn’t blame Jared for missing the field goal. At that range, the best kickers only made the field goal 50% of the time. Jared was a good kicker. I didn’t see how I could have gotten more yards on the last catch. Mike was on my tail. The two safeties had me pinned in. If I fought to break the tackle I risked have the ball batted out of my arms or fighting for yards until the time ran out. That wouldn’t have helped.

Chip certainly played a fantastic game. My already high estimation of Chip’s talents had risen during this game. His throws were deadly accurate. He stood in, took a beating in the second half and still put the ball on target to the right receiver.

I certainly didn’t blame Jon for our loss. He was thrown into a huge, pressure filled game with no time to prepare. He had some rough spots to start with but he settled down and played well enough. His interception happened because Brian lost his footing. That wasn’t Jon’s fault. I couldn’t blame Joe Cleveland for falling on Chip. Those things happen in a football game.

I kept coming back to the same conclusion. We had been unlucky that day. Trevor, Bill, Mike and Jerry had gotten good pressure on Todd Landry all game. He could have been injured just as easily as Chip was. If we had played the best of three games against Texas, we could have beaten them two times. It just hadn’t been our day. I finally fell asleep around 1:30 in the morning.

I woke up a little before 6:30 on Tuesday morning. Trevor was finishing his packing by the half light from the bathroom.

“You ready to take off?” I asked as I climbed out of bed.

“I’m packed and ready to go,” Trevor answered. “Damn... this is tough. You have a good flight back to Philly.”

“You have a good flight too,” I agreed.

“I’ll see you at the Senior Bowl,” Trevor added as he headed for the door. Chuckling, he added, “...and at the Thon. Your driver will have orders to kidnap you if necessary to get you and Penny to campus on time.”

“That won’t be necessary,” I replied. “Have a safe flight back to campus.”

I showered, dressed and packed my things. I found Aaron Morano, Zack, Leigh Ann and Laurie in the lobby saying good bye to our team as they left the hotel to board the buses for the airport. I joined Zack in saying good bye to our team as they headed out. Penny, Will, Abby and Rose showed up just before the last team members stowed their luggage below and climbed aboard the buses. The nine of us waved good bye as the three buses pulled out and headed for the airport.

“I heard rumors you were in town,” I teased Aaron after the buses left. “I was expecting to see you on the sidelines, like other years.”

“I made arrangements to come see the game too late to get a sideline pass,” Aaron explained. “I was stuck way up off the field in a box...” Aaron chuckled. “President Spanier insisted I watch the game with him.”

“I see,” Zack teased. “Champagne and caviar... I see how it is.”

“No, no... we had burritos and tacos... and lot of other good southwestern food,” Aaron said.

“Aaron, I want to introduce you to my fiancée, Penny Edwards,” I said. Aaron smiled and shook Penny’s hand.

“Enchanted,” Aaron said. “Kyle always has exquisite taste in women. I don’t understand how he could find someone so lovely who is willing to put up with him.”

“This is Aaron Morano,” I countered. “He’s been a pain in my backside since ninth grade. Aaron flew in Sunday night after his team got beaten by the Bears up in Chicago.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Aaron,” Penny said. “Kyle has told me so much about you.”

“Are we ready for some breakfast?” Will asked. “Some of us have morning planes to catch.” There was no need to introduce Will or Abby to Aaron. They had all been in Leigh Ann and Zack’s wedding party two years ago.

“Let’s do it,” Zack agreed.

We headed inside to the Mission Grille for breakfast. The restaurant served much the same thing as we had eaten at our buffet table the last ten days.

During breakfast Aaron asked, “Have you and Penny figured out where you want to leave your car during the Thon? I need to get the arrangements set at some point in time.”

“I really haven’t focused on something that far ahead,” I replied. “I did suspect you were the source of funds for the ride and charter flight.”

“Actually, both of us are chipping in,” Zack added. “You made Leigh Ann and me dance. You made Aaron and Tania dance. You and Penny are NOT getting out of dancing at the Thon.”

“I’m not surprised both of you are involved,” I replied. “What do you think, Penny? Would it be better if I left my car in Philly by the apartment or out in Berwyn at school for the weekend?”

“Definitely out at your school,” Penny said. “It’s a whole lot less likely to get broken into in Berwyn than in Powelton.”

“You heard her,” I said. “I guess I’ll drive myself to school on Friday morning and will need a ride on Monday morning.”

“We’ll set it up, Kyle,” Aaron said.

“We probably need to get moving,” Will said, “...at least those of you riding with me. We’ve got a 10:15 flight to catch. How about you guys? Do you need to rush off?”

“My flight leaves at 11:25 this morning,” Aaron said. “Zack agreed to act as my chauffeur for the weekend.”

“Leigh Ann and I have a 12:05 flight back to Milwaukee,” Zack added. Zack waved for our waitress. “I’ll catch the bill, everybody.”

“I’m a poor college student,” I commented. “I would be honored to let you be the first to buy me dinner now that the NCAA doesn’t care who pays my way.”

“It is nice not to worry about that shit, isn’t it?” Aaron commented. “Pretty soon you won’t be poor anymore.” Aaron gave me a wink. “Make sure you take a good hard look at your agent candidates next weekend. You’ll be hard pressed to beat Max.”

“I plan to take a good look at all five,” I responded.

“Good for you,” Zack said. “I hear you convinced Dad to sit in and help.”

“Yes, your dad was gracious enough to agree to help,” I said. “I really appreciate his thoughts. I have Penny, me, my dad, your dad and my Uncle Dave, who’s an attorney, doing the interviews.”

“You got all the bases covered,” Aaron agreed. Zack paid our bill and we headed out of the restaurant. Everyone said their good byes. Zack, Aaron, Leigh Ann and Laurie

followed us out to the parking lot as we loaded up. They waved good bye again as Will pulled the rental mini-van onto Fifth Street and headed for the airport.

Check-in, luggage, security and finding your gate were a much bigger hassle going on a commercial flight than I was used to after four years of travel on the team's charter. A plane load of Penn State fans was checking in at the same time as us. They were flying to Philly too, on one of the alumni association's charters. I shook hands, accepted condolences over our team's loss and signed a few autographs while we waited.

Will, Abby and Rose boarded promptly at 9:45. People traveling with small children went right after first class passengers boarded. Penny and I had to wait another ten minutes until our rows were called. Luckily my fiancée had an aisle seat. She graciously allowed me to squeeze into that seat.

Apparently the charters that Penn State used were set up with more room than standard airliners. The seat spacing was smaller than the distance from my backside to the front of my knees. The only way I fit was to prop my knees up on the seat in front of me or to stretch them out in the aisle. I better make it into the NFL. I was going to need the money to pay for first class tickets from now on.

We had booked a non-stop flight to Philly. The trip took over five and half hours. The airlines served us small sandwiches and bags of chips, along with drinks. Thankfully Abby had come prepared. She had extra snacks that she distributed to everyone to keep us satisfied.

Penny, God bless her, listened as I rehashed the game again. I didn't come to any new conclusions. Chip had played brilliantly under severe duress. Mike played outstanding coverage against me, partially negating my talents. Still I had six catches for 142 yards. I caught two touchdowns and threw another. Mike's speed, height and leaping ability meant Chip or Jon had to hit a moving target smaller than a basketball at fifteen to twenty yards. Chip could do it. Jon wasn't as accurate.

Jon being forced in to take Chip's place was the decisive moment in the game. That isn't a slight against Jon. If the same thing had happened two years ago and Chip had taken Zack's place against USC, we most likely would not have won the game. Chip getting hurt was just... happenstance. Six inches one way or another and Joe Cleveland is landing somewhere other than Chip's ankle. It all boiled down to luck. Texas had it and we didn't last night.

Penny was sympathetic and consoling. She helped me keep my head together. I was talked out after about forty-five minutes. Our conversation turned to our coming week. Penny had a comparative anatomy lecture in the morning and at a lab all afternoon. I had to report to Penn State Brandywine Campus at 9:00 am. I volunteered to go shopping and prepare dinner for the two of us after I finished with my classes. Penny's lab was over at 5:00 pm.

There must have been a good tailwind on our flight home. We were on the ground ten minutes ahead of schedule. Will, Abby, Rose, Penny and I made our way to the baggage claim area. The fine gentlemen at the airport needed nearly forty-five minutes to get our luggage from the plane to us. Will, Abby and Rose called for a shuttle bus to the hotel where their car was parked. Penny and I took another shuttle to the airport's long term parking.

I followed Penny off the bus at the proper stop. She led me across the parking lot to my trusty old VW.

"Here's your key," my lover said. "I made sure to take good care of the key over the long weekend. I didn't want us stranded in this big parking lot."

"I was prepared," I replied, giving her a wink. I pulled my spare key out of my pocket. "We weren't going to get stranded."

"That's what I love about you," Penny responded. "Be prepared, always the good Boy Scout."

We loaded our luggage in the trunk and backseat of my car and hopped in. I paid our parking fee and headed into Philly per Penny's directions. After we passed under I-95 and were safely headed north on Industrial Highway, I went to turn on the radio so we could have a little music. I reached for the on knob when I got a shock.

"Honey, where did this radio come from?" I asked as evenly as I could manage.

"Surprise!" Penny said. "Call it an extra Christmas present. I knew you didn't have time to go out and replace the radio with one that is safe for our neighborhood while you were home for Christmas. I went out and got it for you while you were in Phoenix. I hope you like it. It has a detachable face to discourage burglars."

My old radio wasn't anything special. It was the original one that came with the car. It had a CD player and cassette tape player. Most likely it was considered top notch when the car was new – in 1995. Now it was kind of old, but it worked.

"I guess it's OK," I said.

"You'll like this one," Penny replied. "It plays CDs like your old one and it has a USB port. I bought a flash drive to go with it. You can download your MP3 collection onto the flash drive and listen to MP3s when you drive to and from school. I thought that made more sense than getting a satellite radio and you having to pay a fee every month. You bought the MP3s already. Why not listen to them?"

"Plays MP3s?" I said. "That's cool. Thank you. This was very sweet of you." I turned the radio on and drove about thirty seconds before another question occurred to me. "Is

the neighborhood where we live really that unsafe that someone would break into an old beater like this VW and steal an ancient radio?"

"It's safe enough if you take the proper precautions," Penny answered. "Always take the face of the radio and stick it in your pocket when you park the car. I'll make sure you know the things you need to know to be safe in Philly. I'm sure you didn't have to deal with any of this in little State College."

"We have crime in State College," I answered. "You needed to lock up and protect your things. But since you know this area better than me, I will listen and learn."

"Do you want to stop at the McDonalds ahead?" Penny asked as we approached the north end of the airport complex. "I'm starved."

"I am too," I agreed. "How about something a little classier? How about Chickie's and Pete's? I know we're heading in the general direction of the stadiums."

"We could do that," Penny agreed. "It's a few blocks off our route home but it'll work."

I followed Industrial Highway, which turned into Penrose Avenue, about three and half miles until I found Packer Avenue. I remembered from my other visits there that Chickie's and Pete's was on Packer Avenue. I pulled into the parking lot a few minutes later. The restaurant wasn't busy. The waitress seated us immediately.

Penny ordered a hot roast pork sandwich and crab fries. I ordered the jumbo crab cakes and a combo fries. The fries were a mix of regular and sweet potato fries with crab seasoning and white cheese dipping sauce. I ordered a beer. Penny had a diet Pepsi.

We were nursing our drinks and waiting for our food when Pete Ciarrocchi spotted me. He headed straight over to our table.

"Kyle Martin, it's a pleasure to see you here in my place this evening," Pete said effusively. "I'm surprised to see you here tonight. The local station just reported on your team's return to State College fifteen or twenty minutes ago."

"I'm student teaching outside Philly this semester," I responded. "I just flew in to the airport here a few minutes ago. My fiancée and I were hungry. Your place is the first place that came to mind for dinner."

"I'm delighted you stopped by," Pete responded. "I'm very sorry about your loss last night. I think the whole state was cheering for your Lions."

"Texas is a tough opponent," I replied. "They played extremely well and we had a bit of bad luck. C'est la vie."

"Enjoy your meal," Pete said. "Thank you for stopping by."

Our food arrived shortly afterward. It was every bit as good as our last visit. The TV was still tuned to Sports Center. They released the final BCS standings while we were eating. Naturally Texas was ranked #1. Alabama's big win over Oklahoma pushed them up to #2. I was pleasantly surprised to find us ranked at #3. I expected us to drop at least three or four spots after our loss. The remainder of the top ten were: Florida, Ohio State, Notre Dame, Nebraska, Boise State, LSU and West Virginia

The drive home took around fifteen minutes. I double parked in front of the main entrance to the Court Apartments. Vincent Rizzo, the doorman I met last month, was on duty. Penny and I unloaded our bags onto the sidewalk in front of the building.

Vincent and Penny would watch our bags while I found a parking spot for my car. I circled around a couple blocks and found a space about a block and a half from the apartment. I remembered to grab the radio face plate and flash drive from the radio. I walked back to the Courtyard and found Vincent outside guarding my bags. Penny had started moving things upstairs already.

I thanked Vincent for his help, gathered up my things and headed upstairs for my new home. I dropped my bags in my closet in our bedroom. Penny let me use her patch cable to hook my laptop up to the internet. I hadn't checked e-mail in a couple days and I had urgent business to research before tomorrow morning.

How do I get to Penn State Brandywine from here? Where could I get breakfast? There was no food left in the apartment. Penny cleaned it out before she went home for Christmas. I found my answers along with the location of a grocery store near Media that I could stop at after I finished my student teaching prep at Brandywine Campus.

I received quite a few e-mails from my friends and my brother Andy. Everyone commiserated with me over my team's loss. I sent a thank you back to each of them. When I finished on-line I made a mental note for myself. I needed to get to a computer store and pick up a wireless router so Penny's computer could stay hooked up to the internet while I would be free to roam around the apartment with my laptop and stay connected too.

I spent some time unpacking and organizing my things before Penny and I went to bed. We made love before going to sleep that evening. It was a good way to start off our life together.

The alarm woke me at 7:30 in the morning. I stumbled off to shower and shave. Penny was awake when I went back to the bedroom.

"Good morning, honey," Penny said cheerily when I walked back into the room.

“Did I wake you?” I asked. “I tried to be quiet.”

“I got used to waking up early last semester,” Penny explained. “I had an eight o’clock class three days a week.”

“I’m going to head out,” I said. “How does spaghetti sound for dinner?”

“That’s fine,” Penny agreed. “Have a good day. I love you.”

“You do the same,” I replied. “I love you too.”

No one bothered my car overnight. I headed out of the city on Market Street, which turned into the West Chester Pike outside the city. I found the Wawa right where I expected it, just before I got to Route 1. I had been in the Wawa convenience stores a couple times before. I found they would be an excellent place to get breakfast on the run.

They had five varieties of coffee to choose from. I could have a breakfast sandwich made to order or I could grab one of the ready-made sandwiches. They had doughnuts, muffins and Danish available too. I could get used to the place.

Traffic wasn’t too bad on Route 1 as I went around Media. More people were coming into the city than were heading out like I was. I had no trouble finding my turn onto Route 352. The Penn State Brandywine campus was a couple miles up the road. The visitor’s parking and administration building were right where I expected to find them.

I spent most of my day with Mr. Jonathan Atkins, a grad assistant half dozen years older than me who worked for Professor Charles Buchanan. Jonathan, as he insisted I call him, was an inch or so shorter than me and thin as a rail. I probably would be built like him too, if I hadn’t spent the last seven and a half years lifting weights and training to play football. He had wire rimmed glasses. Jonathan’s jet black hair was conservatively short and neatly groomed.

I spent an hour filling in forms and paperwork. Jonathan gave a quick briefing about the talk Professor Buchanan gave the other eleven student teachers Monday. The professor was out visiting each of the schools today, making sure everything was starting off properly for the student teachers. I spent the rest of the morning reading through the CI 495E Student Teacher’s Guidebook.

Jonathan gave me an hour off for lunch. He recommended that the Country Deli, a restaurant he liked that was about a mile north of the campus. I gave it a try. The food was quite good. I had some time to read the paper while I enjoyed my lunch. I was going to have to develop a whole new routine for my days now that I was finished with regular college classes.

Professor Buchanan hadn’t returned when I came back to campus after lunch. I spent another half hour reading the student teaching manual before my professor came back.

The professor and I spent an hour reviewing the handbook, paying particular attention to how my performance would be evaluated and graded. Professor Buchanan confirmed that I would be off for the Senior Bowl between January 20th and the 24th. He also had me scheduled to be off February 21st and 22nd for the NFL Combine.

I would report to Conestoga Senior High School at 8:00 am tomorrow. Professor Buchanan would be around during the morning to check in and make sure everything was going properly for me. I thanked the professor before heading home.

The grocery store I found in Media was small but well stocked. I picked up enough food for Penny and me until the weekend. The drive home wasn't too bad. Traffic was light except around where I-476 intersected Route 1. I got home around a quarter to four.

Vincent Rizzo greeted me at the door when I carried my bags of groceries in. "I hope you had a good day Mr. Martin," he said as he opened the door for me.

"Please call me Kyle," I responded. "Mr. Martin seems too stuffy. I had a boring day preparing for student teaching."

"That's too bad, Kyle," Vincent responded.

"Tomorrow will be better," I responded. "Tomorrow is the day I've been preparing for over the past three and a half years. I get into the classroom to start my student teaching."

"Good luck with it, Kyle," Vincent said. I carried my groceries to the elevator, headed up to the third floor and carried them to our kitchen. I had everything away in a few minutes time. I decided to give Coach Golden at Temple a call. I needed to get back in the gym and get to work on my training.

"Coach Golden?" I said, when he answered the phone. "This is Kyle Martin from Penn State. We talked last month about me using your team's training facilities this spring while I do my student teaching. Would you have time to discuss that?"

"Kyle? Yes, I remember the conversation," Coach Golden responded. "Certainly I would love to have my team see how a Maxwell and Biletnikoff Award winner trains. I think it would be very educational for my team. Are you in Philly yet? When do you want to start?"

"I flew into Philly from Phoenix yesterday afternoon," I said. "I would like to start as soon as it suits your team's schedule."

"What time of day do you want to work out?" Coach asked.

"Hopefully late afternoon or in the evening," I responded. "I have to be in Berwyn by 7:10 in the morning."

“That should work out fine,” Coach Golden said. “The weight room isn’t too crowded in the afternoon. What are you doing right now? You and I need to get together so I can get a Temple ID badge made up for you.”

“I’m not doing anything in particular right now,” I responded. “I was going to read the newspaper until it was time to make dinner. I could come over now.”

“Good, that’s settled,” Coach Golden said. “How long will it take you to get here?”

“I have no idea,” I answered. “Where am I going? I don’t know Philly very well yet.”

Coach Golden gave me the address. I told him where I lived. He figured I should be able to get there in fifteen or twenty minutes. I Googled directions and printed them out. They weren’t too hard to follow. I found my way up to Spring Garden Street and crossed the Schuylkill River. The route passed the Museum of Art that Sylvester Stallone made so famous in his Rocky movies. I continued across the city to 11th Street and headed north. I went past block after block of cityscape.

I started looking for Diamond Street when I reached the Temple campus. I turned left on Diamond and quickly found the football practice field and Edberg-Olson Hall. What I didn’t find was a parking space. I circled a couple blocks until I found a spot.

The Edberg-Olson Hall reception area had an impressive two story atrium. I explained I had been asked by Coach Golden to come over when the receptionist asked me about my business with the team. She confirmed that and then sent me upstairs. Coach Golden’s office was impressive. It was situated at the back corner of the building with two walls of glass overlooking the practice field.

“Kyle, thank you for coming over so promptly,” Coach Golden said as he met me and shook my hand. “I’m sorry about how things went on Monday night. I was rooting for you guys to beat Texas there at the end.”

“We came close,” I said.

“Six inches to the left,” Coach Golden said. I nodded my head in agreement.

“How’s Dave Mitchell doing?” I asked.

“Mitchell?” Coach asked before he remembered where Dave comes from. “I forgot you knew him.”

“He was my sister’s best friend from the time they were in pre-school together,” I explained. “Dave worked at the pool I ran for a few summers too. We also worked out together in the summers with some of his friends.”

“Did you?” Coach smirked. “Dave is already getting a reputation for being a beast in the training room. Were you involved in that?”

“I guess,” I admitted.

“This is definitely going to work out having you work out with us,” Coach said. “I will get one of my grad assistants to help get you an ID badge and then show you around our facilities.”

“Thank you, Coach,” I replied. Coach Golden asked me a few questions about the game against Texas. We talked for a couple minutes about the game until the grad assistant came.

“Kyle, I would like to introduce you to Matt Dellavecchia,” Coach Golden explained. “Matt’s been helping the coaching staff for the past year. He’ll take care of you.”

“Thank you so much for your help, Coach Golden,” I said before Matt and I left. “This is a huge help for me.”

“No problem, Kyle,” Coach Golden replied. “Set a good example and you will repay me amply.”

I followed Matt into the hallway. “It’s good to formally meet you, Kyle,” Matt said as we walked towards the steps. “I saw plenty of you standing on the sideline the two games you played against us last fall and two years ago. You just killed us both times.”

“I don’t remember all the particulars of those games,” I replied. “I guess a lot of the teams I’ve played against say the same thing.”

“That’s true,” Matt agreed, chuckling. “We’re going to head over to the security building and get your ID badge.”

“Sounds good,” I agreed. “You said you saw me play against your Owls two years ago. Were you a player here too?”

“Sure was,” Matt agreed. “I was one of Coach Golden’s first recruits. I worked my way up to QB#3 over my five years here.” Matt chuckled again. “I was the guy standing on the sidelines with a clipboard beside Coach Golden.”

“So being a grad assistant isn’t much of a change,” I said. “Are you enjoying it?”

“I am,” Matt agreed. “I love football and plan to make a career of coaching, if I can.”

“I understand,” I said. “I am planning the same thing, when I am done playing.”

“That will be awhile,” Matt replied. “By the way, I know a couple of your teammates. I was in Boy Scouts with Trevor Conwell and Chip Brinton.”

“Were you?” I said. “I roomed with Trevor and Chip for the past year or so. They are two of my closest friends on the Lions team. I assume you are from Unionville too.”

“Kennett Square actually,” Matt replied. We continued talking as Matt led me a couple blocks down and a block over to the campus safety services. I liked Matt. We had a lot of interests in common other than, as he self-deprecatingly commented, “not one tenth of my athletic talent.” Matt would still be playing football if he had my talents.

The people at campus safety services needed about fifteen minutes to make up an ID badge that identified me as someone with a legitimate reason to be on campus and frequenting Edberg-Olsen Hall. We headed back to Edberg-Olsen when the badge was ready.

Matt took me on a tour of the locker room, training room and weight room. I wouldn’t have locker space on campus. I would have to bring my things along with me every day. We bumped into Dave Mitchell in the weight room. He gave me a big smile and a cheery, “Hey Coach, how’s it going?”

“Fine, Mitchell,” Matt replied as I said, “Good, Dave.”

“I meant Kyle, Coach Dellavecchia,” Dave added when he realized the confusion. “Sorry about the loss to Texas. I was cheering for your team Monday night.” He chuckled. “Not that it was a terribly popular stance around here.”

“That’s understandable,” I agreed. “Temple hasn’t gotten much love from Penn State over the last seventy years or so.”

“Are you here to work out today?” Dave asked.

“Not today,” I replied. “I needed to talk with Coach Golden and get an ID so I would be allowed into the building.”

“I look forward to seeing you around, Kyle,” Dave said. He went back to his workout. Matt and I finished up the tour of the facilities.

“Do you know Dave, our new workout beast, well?” Matt said when we were out of ear-shot of Dave. “I’m frankly shocked at the way the new kid works. Freshman just DO NOT come in ready to hit the machines the way this kid does.”

“Dave and I go way back,” I explained. “He’s one of my sister’s closest friends since pre-school. I was his Troop Guide when he joined Boy Scouts. He worked for me at the scout pool I ran for the last three or four summers. We worked out together during the summers.”

“Mitchell had an example to follow when it came to working out,” Matt noted.

“I guess so,” I agreed.

“If you work out half as hard as Mitchell, I understand why Coach Golden is opening our facilities to you,” Matt said. “Setting the example is a key element of leadership. I guess that’s why you were a team captain with Trev.”

“Yeah, I think so,” I agreed.

“There isn’t a lot more to show you, Kyle,” Matt said as we exited the weight room. “Any more questions?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I responded. “I’ll probably be back tomorrow later in the afternoon or in the evening to work out. After that I won’t be back until Monday. I have agent interviews, starting Friday night and running all weekend.”

“Good luck with that,” Matt said. “No one here can give you a lot of advice about that. We haven’t had anyone make it big since Raheem Brock, and he was gone before Coach Golden came.”

“Thanks for your help, Matt,” I said. “I really appreciate it.” I headed back to my car and headed home. Traffic was worse during the evening rush hour. I didn’t get back to the apartment until a quarter to six.

“How was your day?” Penny asked as I stepped into the apartment.

“Fine, kind of boring,” I answered. I hung up my coat and headed straight to the kitchen. Penny followed me. “I spent half the day reading the student teaching manual and waiting around for the professor to get back to campus.”

“That’s too bad,” Penny commented. “My Comparative Anatomy class should be good. The lecture this morning was interesting. We got right to work in the lab this afternoon.”

“That’s cool,” I said.

“What help do you want for dinner?” Penny asked as I rooted through the refrigerator for the makings for our dinner.”

“Get a pot of water on for spaghetti,” I said. “I’ll get the meat and sauce ready.”

“How was the visit to Temple?” Penny asked.

“It went well,” I replied. I told my lover about my talks with Coach Golden, Matt Dellavecchia and Dave Mitchell. Penny prepared garlic bread and a salad while I

browned the meat and warmed the sauce. Twenty minutes later we were sitting down to a nice dinner. Penny brought wine back to the apartment before she went to the airport the previous week. We enjoyed half a bottle with our dinner.

The phone rang while Penny and I were doing the dishes after dinner. “Hey, Katie,” Penny said with a big smile when she answered the call. “Quizo? I don’t know. I haven’t talked to Kyle about it yet.” She listened a little more. “Let me talk to Kyle.”

“What’s up?” I asked when Penny turned to me. “It’s Katie Zamora. She wants to know if we’re going to join the group down at the pub for Quizo tonight. A bunch of us often go on Wednesday nights if we aren’t swamped with homework.”

“What’s Quizo?” I asked.

“It’s a team trivia game,” Penny said. “It’s a lot of fun. We should go.”

“Cool,” I responded. “Obviously I don’t have any homework. Let’s do it.”

“Kyle and I are in, Katie,” Penny said into her phone. We’ll catch you down there around nine or so.” After a brief pause she added, “Bye.”

I filled in the time after dinner unpacking my things and setting up the hi-def TV, Blu-Ray DVD player and sound system. Everything was up and looking fantastic by a quarter to nine.

Penny and I walked the roughly eight blocks through University City neighborhood and the Penn Campus. The pub was an Irish style tavern on Sansom Street. Katie and her boyfriend Dakota Sheppard along with Dave Hanson were there when we arrived. Diane Johnson came a few minutes later with a guy I hadn’t met.

It turned out no one else knew him either. Diane introduced us to Jordan Whitaker. She and Jordan met in a poly sci class that morning. Jordan asked Diane to go out for coffee after class and the two hit off. More accurately, I think Diane had the hots for Jordan. That was understandable. Jordan was handsome and certainly worked out. He was muscular looking, for a non-football player.

Penny and I each ordered a Guinness. The rest of the group ordered ale or beer too as we talked and waited for the Quizo game to start. Jordan eyed me occasionally, like he couldn’t quite place me. It took about five minutes before he exclaimed, “You’re Kyle Martin!”

“Well, duh!” Diane said. “That’s how I introduced him to you.”

“No... I mean he’s Kyle Martin,” Jordan responded. “THE Kyle Martin... the football player!”

“So?” Dave deadpanned. After a pause he smiled and added, “Yes, Kyle is that Kyle Martin from Penn State, the one who won the Maxwell Award.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Jordan asked. “Shouldn’t you be up at Penn State or something if you play football for them?”

“Past tense,” I answered. “Monday night was my last game for Penn State. I’m living here with my fiancée and student teaching in Berwyn this semester.”

“Wow!” Jordan commented. “I never expected to meet someone famous here.”

“Don’t get too titillated by Kyle,” Dave cautioned. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“That’s easier to say when you know him already,” Jordan countered.

“Penny grew up with him and I’ve known Kyle since we raced against each other in the 100 at States four years ago,” Dave said.

“The rest of us have followed Kyle’s career after we got to know Penny as freshmen,” Dakota added. “Katie, Diane and I only met him last spring. Any boyfriend whose first stop after finishing finals is his girlfriend’s apartment to help her move is OK in my books.”

“Don’t feed his ego too much,” Dave teased. “He has to fit out the door tonight.”

“I’ll keep the fawning to a minimum,” Jordan said. “It’s just cool to meet someone who I’ve seen on TV in real life... someone that’s going to end up in the NFL.”

“We’ll see if that works out,” I replied.

I answered a few of Jordan’s questions about playing football at Penn State. He calmed down considerably as he got to know me better. The rest of Penny’s regular college gang seemed used to me being around.

The Quizo game got started around ten o’clock. All of us worked together as one team among about a dozen teams. The quizmaster asked questions and we did our best collectively to come up with good answers. Nobody at our table was surprised when I answered the football questions easily. I think I impressed them when I authoritatively answered most of the history questions too. I’ve always been a movie buff, so I was helpful with those questions too.

Our team did pretty well, placing second among the dozen teams that evening. I enjoyed the night out with Penny’s friends. It was close to midnight when Penny and I got home. I crashed immediately. I had a six am wakeup call.

I was up at 6:30 am Thursday morning. I dressed in one of my new dress shirts and a tie Liz gave me at Christmas. I made it out of the apartment without waking Penny. Her first class was at 10:30 that morning. She finished up at 3:00 pm Tuesdays and Thursdays, so she was making dinner. I should have time to hit the weight room at Edbeg-Olson after school and before dinner.

I stopped at the first Wawa Store I found, the one in Haverford. I picked a sub for lunch, a breakfast sandwich, a newspaper and a large coffee to get me going. Traffic was pretty heavy as I traveled west on Route 30, heading for school. I noticed a computer store in St. Davids as I headed west. I should stop by on the way home. I needed that wireless router to make things easier at the apartment.

I pulled into the faculty and visitor parking area around a quarter to eight. I didn't need to be in the school office until eight o'clock. I read my paper for a few minutes before heading into the school.

Signs directed all visitors to the main office, which was close to the entryway. I gave the mid-fifties woman who greeted me a big smile. The sign on her desk said, "Patricia Green."

"Mrs. Green, I'm Kyle Martin, the new student teacher," I explained. "I have an eight o'clock appointment with Dr. Cooper."

"Have a seat, Mr. Martin," Mrs. Green replied. "He's running a little late. He will see you in a few minutes." I had a seat on one of the chairs lining the outside wall of the office. I knew the spot. This is where the trouble makers waited when they were sent to the principal's office. I still remembered my time in that spot after Chad Hurst and I had our fight in ninth grade.

I listened to the morning announcements when they came on at 8:10. The homeroom dismissal bell rang at 8:16 and the hallway outside the office was flooded with students heading for class. Dr. Cooper was still in his office. The second period bell rang at 8:20 and I waited. The principal finally came out a couple minutes later.

"Mr. Martin, please come in," he said with a smile. He escorted me into his office and indicated that I should have a seat at one of the chairs in front of his desk. "I apologize for making you wait so long. When the superintendent calls, I have to take the call."

"It isn't a problem, Dr. Cooper," I replied. The name plate on his desk read "Dr. James T. Cooper."

"Welcome to Conestoga Senior High School," Dr. Cooper said. "I'm looking forward to working with you this semester. I believe you will find John Waters will be an excellent mentor as you test out the theories you've learned in college in a real life classroom."

“I’m looking forward to the opportunity,” I replied. Dr. Cooper spent about five minutes briefing me about Conestoga Senior High School and the Tredyffrin-Easttown School District. He talked about my role regarding discipline in the classroom and hallways. He asked if I had any questions. I didn’t.

“It’s a pleasure to have you working with us this semester,” Dr. Cooper remarked before chuckling. “You have created a stir in the school before you even arrived. We host two or three student teachers every semester. We never had a star football player student teach here and certainly none who came bearing Strath Haven’s head on a platter for us.”

“Give that credit to my old high school team,” I replied. “I passed on the information Mr. Waters gave me to the coaches on my old team. They implemented his suggestions and put the game plan together.”

“I like that,” Dr. Cooper laughed. “A brilliant student, a brilliant athlete and humble too. Your mentor passed the word around the football team about you student teaching here and what your old high school team was doing. Most of the players watched and cheered as your team beat up our arch-rivals. They watched you and Penn State Monday night too. Sorry that game didn’t go as well as your high school’s game.”

“C’est la vie,” I answered. “Texas played a good game. We missed a couple opportunities and got some people hurt. We almost came back against the Longhorns.”

“Yes, you did,” Dr. Cooper agreed. “Our head football coach, Coach Werley, and some of the players are anxious to talk with you about what your high school team did this fall. You’re under no obligation to help. Our budget is tight and I cannot compensate you for any time you put into assisting our football team, but any help or advice you can give us will be appreciated.”

“I’d be happy to talk and help any way I can,” I answered. “Part of the reason I chose teaching as a career is so I could keep a hand in football when I’m done playing. I plan to coach.”

“Our football coaching staff will love to hear that,” Dr. Cooper responded. He glanced at his watch. “I bet Mr. Jarvis is wondering where you got to. He’s one of our three assistant principals. He will walk you through the rest of the orientation process.”

“Excellent,” I said. “Thank you for helping get me started, Dr. Cooper.” Dr. Cooper buzzed Mr. Jarvis. He introduced me to his assistant. The two men were quite the contrast. Dr. Cooper was tall and slim, not more than a couple inches shorter than me. His dark brown hair was starting to gray. Dr. Cooper had a neatly groomed and trimmed full beard.

Eric Jarvis was clean shaven and probably no more than 5’-9” tall and 165 pounds. He was beefy and had a low center of gravity. He looked for all the world like a wrestler – a

very powerful wrestler. I could visualize him taking out a college linebacker with ease. I doubt he had a lot of problems with discipline from the kids at the school.

Mr. Jarvis got an ID badge made up for me that showed I was faculty. He joked when he gave it to me that the school wanted me to look like a faculty member even though I wasn't one officially. The students would be less likely to take advantage of me that way. I added the new badge to the lanyard around my neck that had my Penn State and Temple IDs.

Mr. Jarvis also gave me a copy of John Waters' class schedule, since it would also be my schedule. We took a tour of the school building so I could get familiar with the layout. The tour finished up outside of John Waters' classroom just before nine o'clock.

"John, here is your new protégé," Mr. Jarvis indicated as we walked into John's classroom after the flood of second period students exited.

"Glad to have you aboard, Kyle," John said as he shook my hand. "Let me show you your work area for the next few months." He led me to a table in the back of the room. "This is your desk... such as it is."

"It'll be fine, J..." I said before catching myself. The students for the next class had started coming into the room. "... Mr. Waters. I don't need a lot of space."

"I'll introduce you at the beginning of each class," John added. "Do you want a moment to speak after I introduce you?"

"Yes, that would be good," I replied. "I think it would be best to address talk about my football fame and the ground rules we talked about last month right up front. What do you think?"

"I think that is an excellent idea," John agreed.

I had a seat at the "my" table as more kids poured into the room and took seats. They chatted as kids will do, but they were well behaved. Obviously John had his students trained to behave. Most of the students glanced my way when they came in.

John took roll quickly. "Well class, I told you last month that we would have a student teacher who will work with us for four months. He is here today. I would like to introduce Kyle Martin to you. Mr. Martin, would you like to come up front and meet the class?"

"Sure, Mr. Waters," I responded as I walked to the front of the room. "Hello everyone, it is a pleasure to be here. I'd like to give you a little background about me. I am a senior at the Pennsylvania State University. I am majoring in secondary education with a specialization in social studies and history. I will be working with you until the end of April.

“I am sure most of you already know that I play football. I was a wide receiver for the Nittany Lions until I finished my athletic eligibility on Monday night. I love football and I love talking about football. I also want all of you to know there is a time and place for football and in the classroom during class time is not the time or the place. If any of you want to talk football, we will confine those discussions to before class or after class.

“I will mostly be observing for the first few days. I’m sure over time we will all get to know each other better. I am looking forward to that experience. Mr. Waters, I’ll turn things back to you. We have more important things to do than listen to me, like studying European history.”

“Thank you Mr. Martin,” John said. “Let’s turn our attention to the English Civil War.”

I returned to my table in the back of the room and listened as John lectured about the divine right of kings, the conflict between King Charles I and the Parliament, and the ensuing civil war. John was an excellent lecturer. That didn’t surprise me. The school wouldn’t assign him four sections of AP classes if he wasn’t the best. I took notes of John’s teaching techniques. That would go in my web folio I had to prepare as a part of my student teaching assignment.

Half a dozen guys came to my table in the back when the bell rang for the end of third period. I shook hands with them and answered their questions. Mr. Waters was shooing the kids to their next class when the last guy stopped to talk.

“I think you know my sister,” the young man commented.

“Oh, really?” I asked. “What’s her name?”

“Jennifer D’Antonio,” the boy replied.

“Jen? Sure, I know Jen,” I said. “I dated Jen’s roommate Kelly for a couple years. What’s your name?”

“Alex... Alex D’Antonio,” the boy said.

“It’s good to meet you, Alex,” I said. “Tell your sister I said hi the next time you see her. I glanced up at the clock in the front of the room. It said 9:53. The class started in a minute. “You better get moving. I don’t know that I can give you a late pass just for talking after class.”

“OK, I’ll see you around, Mr. Martin,” Alex said. “I’ll be sure to tell Jen about you teaching here next time she’s home.”

John came back to the back of the room with a notebook when the last of the students left. Fourth period was a work period. I expected that we would go over lesson plans. John sat down beside me and opened up the notebook. It was lesson plans.

“Before we get started, John,” I warned. “I think I better tell you about that last conversation.”

“Did Alex say something wrong?” John asked, clearly surprised that there could be a problem with the boy.

“It’s nothing he said,” I replied. “In the interests of full disclosure, I thought you should know something. Hopefully it won’t be a problem. Alex commented that he thought I knew his sister, which I do.”

“You know Jennifer?” John said. “She was an excellent student of mine.”

“I do know Jennifer...” I answered, “... in the biblical sense.”

“Oh...” John responded. “Is this still going on?” He didn’t comment about whether I was cheating on Penny. I had talked about my fiancée a number of times when we met as we got ready for my student teaching.”

“It was two years ago,” I said. “It’s very definitely in the past. I haven’t even spoken with Jen in over a year. We haven’t stayed in touch.”

“OK, that’s not so bad,” John said. “You’re young. I guess you were unattached then. What two adults do in the privacy of their own rooms isn’t my or the school’s business. Let me know if Alex says anything more about this topic.”

“I will,” I agreed.

“I doubt Alex is going to say anything, if he knows,” John added. “We will deal with that situation, if it comes up. I’ve taught Jennifer, Marie and Alex. They’re all good kids.” I didn’t know Jennifer had another sister. Presumably Marie was between Jen and Alex in age.

John and I got down to work. John reviewed the lesson plans for the rest of the day and for tomorrow with me. I would be in his classroom for the first two periods of the day. I was to shadow a ninth grade class for the day, observing the school from a student’s perspective. After second period, I would follow the bulk of the class to Math, English, CADD, lunch, World Language, Phys Ed and Digital Photography. John asked me which language class I preferred to sit in on – Spanish, French, German, Italian, Chinese or Latin. I picked Deutsch, natürlich [German, naturally].

Dr. Buchanan stopped by before fourth period ended. John, the professor and I talked for a few minutes. Dr. Buchanan was satisfied that I was off to a good start for my student teaching experience.

Fifth period was an eleventh and twelfth grade honors Economics class. I did my introduction the same way I did with the third period class of tenth graders. John lectured while I observed and took notes about his teaching techniques and how he controlled his classroom.

John and I headed to lunch after the fifth period was over. John introduced me to the other faculty in the faculty lunch room. I couldn't begin to remember everyone's name. I did meet one of the other two student teachers. Megan Murphy was student teaching for Mrs. Emory in the English Department. Megan was attending West Chester University.

Our sixth period class was ninth grade World Cultures. I did my intro and went to the back to observe and take notes. Seventh and eighth periods were AP U. S. Government and Politics classes with a mix of eleventh and twelfth graders. A couple football players talked with me for a minute after seventh period. No one was interested in talking at 2:20, the school dismissal time. Every student stampeded out of the room for the buses, their cars or after school activities.

John and I talked about my day for a few minutes. I would report at 7:10 am tomorrow morning, so I would be present for the first period AP Comparative Government and Politics class. After homeroom I would stick with the second period World Cultures ninth graders for the rest of the day.

"Got any big plans for the rest of the afternoon, Kyle?" John asked when we finished talking about my schedule.

"Nothing big," I replied. "I'm going over to Temple to work out. Coach Golden has been kind enough to allow me to use his team's facilities."

"Ah... a drive down the Sure-Kill Expressway," John teased. "Now you know why I live in Parkesburg."

"I was planning to take Route 30 back into the city," I said.

"No, that's the long way right now," John countered. "I have to go to the city occasionally. If you leave now, Route 202, King of Prussia and the Schuylkill will still be moving pretty well. Go an hour from now and it'll be a parking lot."

"I'm not sure I know the way to Temple if I go that route," I replied.

"It's not too bad," John said. He explained how to get to the nearest Route 202 entrance ramp, about a mile and half north of the school. "Once you're on 202, just follow it to

the Schuylkill and follow in into Philly. Take the Roosevelt Expressway north and get off at the Broad Street exit. You'll be well north of Temple and need to go through quite a few blocks of city, stop and go driving. You'll still do better than going Route 30. That's stop and go the whole way."

"I'll give it a try, John," I said. "See you tomorrow."

John's directions were pretty easy to follow. I arrived at Edberg-Olsen about forty minutes after I left school. I checked in with my new Temple ID with the receptionist at the front desk. We talked for a minute. I found her name was Katie Hahnemann. She had worked for Coach Golden for about two years. She was very friendly. I wouldn't need to have my badge examined every day when I came in to workout. She would remember me.

I got started on my workout. Dave Mitchell came in with another young guy his age while I was working. Dave introduced me to his roommate, Jaden Williams. Jaden was starting college a semester early, same as Dave. The young man from Reading, PA played defensive back. Jaden was around 6'-0", 180 pounds and had light skin, at least for an African-American.

Dave and Jaden worked out at the equipment near me. We spotted each other for the bench press. Dave asked if he and Jaden could run with me when I headed outside to jog around the field. We circled the oversized football field a dozen times to put in our three miles.

Temple had much more limited facilities than Penn State. They had a single practice field compared to our three. They added about thirty yards of practice area past the north end zone. I assumed that was used so the second team had a place to practice while the first team used the main field.

Jaden complained about the cold while we ran. It was around thirty-one degrees and the sun was bright. To someone who spent three and a half years in State College, this was a positively balmy January day. We rarely had temperatures above twenty back on our campus this time of year.

I showered when I finished. I teased Jaden and Dave that they better get busy studying their playbook. Both guys agreed it was much more complex than they expected. I informed them that I'd needed a full year to learn the whole thing at Penn State. They should expect the same here.

Penny had a casserole in the oven before I got home around 5:30 pm. I helped set the table and get ready for dinner. The casserole was tasty. It was a recipe Penny and I learned in Venturers and adapted from a dutch oven to a regular oven.

After dinner my lover and I did a little on-line research. We checked out SEPTA's website to find out what train Penny could take after her History class tomorrow to get

out to Berwyn. We packed our overnight bags in the trunk of my car that evening. It would speed things up for our trip home. We had a 7:00 pm appointment to meet with Douglas Nolan at my house.

Traffic was a little lighter on the way to school on Friday morning. Of course I left the apartment at 6:20 am, so that wasn't surprising. Wawa took care of my breakfast and lunch. I introduced myself to the first period AP Comparative Government class after John took roll. The kids taking this class were mostly seniors and amazingly sharp. It's hard to imagine a classroom full of kids engaged in serious discussions at this time of morning, but they were.

Homeroom hadn't changed at all in the past four years. John ran it much the same as my homeroom teacher did when I was a senior. John had the first thirty kids from the tenth grade, alphabetically. Alex D'Antonio was in the home room. He gave me a cheery good morning when he spotted me in the back.

I did my final introduction to the second period World Cultures class. I followed most of the students to Math class for third period. I had trouble staying alert during that class and the English class that followed. I did my best to write down my observations of the teachers' techniques.

The fourth period CADD [computer aided design and drafting] class was fascinating. I had done hand drafting in high school in ninth grade and architectural drafting in tenth grade. I concentrated on history and football after tenth grade. That was when I decided on the career I wanted to prepare for. I could see where CADD could be a lot of fun and big help in doing good looking drawings for a project.

I purposely ate my lunch in the cafeteria with the students instead of in the faculty room. I was supposed to be getting a student's eye view of the school. John spotted me sitting with the kids and tried to convince me to join the rest of the faculty. He didn't argue with me when I explained my reasoning.

The high school cafeteria at CHS wasn't much different from my high school. It had its loners, its clusters of nerds, preppies, brains, athletes and in kids. I was about half done with my sub when four guys asked to sit with me. All were defensive players on the Pioneers' football team.

The boys quizzed me about how my Wolverines had beaten Strath Haven last month. I enjoyed talking about the ins and outs of football with them. The guys seemed to enjoy it too.

I headed to the deutsch Unterricht after lunch [German class].

“Guten Tag Frau Blake,” I said as I walked into the classroom “wie geht es Ihnen? Ich bin Student-Lehrer und beobachte diese Klasse heute.” [Good day, Mrs. Blake. How are you doing today? I am the student teacher observing this class today.]

“Wie ist dein name, Herr?” Frau Blake asked. [What is your name, sir?]

“Ich heiße Kyle Martin,” I replied. [My name is Kyle Martin.]

“Herzlich Willkommen, Herr Martin,” Frau Blake said. “Ihre Aussprache ist sehr gut.” [Welcome, Mr. Martin. Your pronunciation is excellent.]

“Vier Jahre deutsch Unterricht,” I answered, smiling. [Four years of German instruction.]

I found a seat in the back and observed the class. This was German 1. The kids were learning extremely basic German. I doubt most of them understood one word in four that Frau Blake and I exchanged at the beginning of class.

The kids headed to phys ed seventh period. I halfway expected to run into Dan Herley when I was at the gym but I didn’t. I was sure he would show up soon enough. John and the football players I talked with at lunch all said Coach Werley was anxious to sit down and talk with me about my experiences at my high school as we turned an mediocre team into a championship team.

The final class for the day was digital photography. I found the topic fascinating. I didn’t remember to take many notes as I listened to Mr. Jacobsen’s talk. Class was nearly over when my phone vibrated. It was Penny texting me to let me know she had arrived at the Daylesford station. I texted back that I would pick her up in twenty minutes or so.

I headed for the parking lot as soon as the dismissal bell rang. The station was about half a mile away, such as it was. The station was simply a glass enclosed waiting area where riders could wait for their train without getting wet in bad weather. Penny hopped in my car and we headed for home.

Penny and I both agreed since we were living as a couple now, we would continue to do that when we visited home. We would stay at my house tonight and Penny’s house on Saturday night. Dinner tonight would be with Penny’s parents. Saturday night we would eat with my family.

Dinner with Jim and Marilyn Edwards was relaxing and pleasant. We finished up around six o’clock. We had a little time to visit with Andy and the little boys. I congratulated my brother on his national championship. Andy was doing very well down at Delaware.

Noah, Connor and Hunter were delighted to have us around. Noah and Connor proudly showed us pictures they had colored. The twins were into that now. Hunter preferred building things with his blocks. The boys weren’t so happy when Uncle Dave and John

Hayes showed up to prepare for our first interview. Andy and Mom sent the boys to the family room instead of letting them visit with our company.

Dad, Uncle Dave, John Hayes, Penny and I went to the living room and reviewed the questions we going to ask while we waited for Douglas Nolan, our first interviewee. He was scheduled to arrive at 7:00 pm. He didn't make it.

We discussed our questions while we waited for him. Our phone rang about 7:05 pm. Dad answered. He listened for a minute before explaining, "Mr. Nolan got caught in an ugly traffic jam on Route 202. He's clear of it and passed through Gap a minute ago. He should be here shortly."

We expected him to show up any minute. Gap is usually less than a five minute drive from our house. Ten after seven... quarter after seven... twenty after seven... we waited for Mr. Nolan. We chatted while we waited for Nolan.

"Excuse me," Penny said politely after a couple more minutes. "I need to use the powder room."

My fiancée had no more than left the room when the doorbell rang. Dad hopped up to answer it.

"You must be Mr. Martin," we heard a strange voice say. "I'm Doug Nolan from Nolan Pro Management."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Nolan," Dad replied. "Please come in."

"Call me Doug, Mr. Martin," Mr. Nolan answered. Dad ushered him into the living room.

"You can call me Dan," Dad said as he ushered Doug Nolan into the living room. "This is my brother-in-law, David Robinson; a family friend, John Hayes; and of course my son, Kyle."

"David, it is good to meet you," Doug Nolan said as he shook hands with my uncle before moving on to Mr. Hayes. "John, it's good to see you again. How's Sam doing?"

"Sam is fine," John Hayes replied. "He loves it out in Seattle. He's married and is expecting a son soon."

"That's wonderful," Doug Nolan said. "Give him my best. If he decides to change agents, have him give me a call. I'd love to talk with him again. The same goes for your son Zachary."

Mr. Nolan turned to me, grasped my hand firmly and looked me in the eye. "It's certainly a pleasure to finally meet you, Kyle."

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mr. Nolan,” I replied.

“Please, call me Doug,” he responded. “I hope we’re all friends here. I hope we become close and good friends. Please call me Doug.”

“OK, I’ll do that, Doug,” I agreed.

“I want to thank all of you for giving me time this evening to present my case for why Nolan Sport Managements is the right agency for you, Kyle,” Doug began. “You’ve assembled an outstanding group of advisors to assist you with your decision. You show great foresight in handling the crush of agents seeking to represent you. This is a salient decision in your professional career.

“You’re interviewing the five finalists for your agent this weekend,” Doug said. “Don’t be in a rush to make this most important decision. I would like to invite you to come out to Los Angeles to see the Nolan operation before you make a final decision.” He chuckled. “Southern California would be quite a change from the snow and cold you’re having. Sunny, 68 degrees and our place is located right by the ocean. You can’t beat that for a place to get to know each other better.” It had started snowing during supper that evening.

“I don’t know,” I responded.

Doug leaned in close to me and whispered, “We got babes too... lots of babes.” He winked and gave me a nudge. “You know what I mean.” I understood exactly what he was offering. Come out to LA and spend a weekend partying with and screwing some beautiful babes.

“Umm... I don’t know,” I began. Penny rescued me from possible temptation. She came back and had a seat beside me on the couch. “Doug, allow me to introduce you to my FIANCÉE. Doug, this is Penny Edwards. Penny this is Douglas Nolan.”

Nolan didn’t miss a beat. He went from panderer to diplomat smoothly. He greeted Penny courteously. Without further ado, he launched into his formal presentation. Nolan spent about fifteen minutes outlining the reasons he felt he could best represent me with whichever team drafted me.

Dad, Uncle Dave, John Hayes and I asked Nolan the questions we prepared after Christmas. How many first round draft picks had he represented in the past decade? Four. Are you the principal in your firm and how many employees does the firm have? Yes, he was. He has eight employees.

I asked how negotiations went for his four first round draft picks. Two had signed before training camp started. One held out for two days before signing. The last player held out for four and a half weeks. I was pretty sure I knew who he was. The holdout had set the guy back a year. He didn’t perform up to expectations until this past season, his second

year in the NFL. I didn't say anything, but I had no interests in going there. I was going into the NFL to play. Holding out didn't interest me at all.

My biggest question was what help did Nolan provide to his players to prepare them for the Senior Bowl, the Combine and the draft. He strongly recommended that I drop my student teaching this semester and concentrate on improving myself. He had three slots set aside for his players out at Ameri-Sports Training, the top training facility for pre-draft training. The players were expected to go to their Alabama or Arizona facility and work out there full time.

Of course this did not suit me in any way, shape or form. I needed my student teaching to get my degree and teaching certificate. I considered these important. They gave me leverage with any NFL team that drafted me. I wouldn't need to play professionally if I didn't want to. I could teach or work as a grad assistant coach somewhere. Without the degree, my only option was to play in the NFL. I rejected full time work outs out of hand.

Nolan took that news better than I thought he would. He said he would work with me, however I choose to prepare for the draft. He warned me that I was likely to be lowering the spot I was picked in the draft by six to twelve spots. That literally could cost me millions of dollars.

John Hayes asked if any clients had fired him in the last decade. Nolan indicated he lost two clients among the two dozen clients he had. He talked about what he thought motivated the two to switch. Both went to a much larger firm, the Creative Artist Agency. They were looking for big paydays on their second contracts and also wanted more high profile endorsement deals.

We talked about what services his agency provided and who his top clients were. Dad asked about payment arrangements. When did Nolan get paid and how? I would pay him his percentage from each paycheck. Paychecks, after the initial signing bonus, came after each game. Nolan said I could arrange to have my team send his percentage directly to him instead of writing another check. Nolan indicated it was all per the NFLPA's Standard Representation Agreement (SRA).

We finished up the interview around a quarter to nine. Nolan did a summary of why he felt he was the best choice to be my agent. Nothing he added was persuasive.

"Doug, I thank you for coming in this evening to discuss the possibility of you representing me," I said as we stood at the end of the interview. "Thank you for inviting me to come out to LA next weekend. My schedule is too booked to permit that. My advisors and I will have to make our decision based on your presentation tonight. We will let you know what that decision is in a few days."

Nolan was very cordial as he thanked Dad, Uncle Dave, John Hayes and Penny for the opportunity to make his presentation to them. Dad escorted Nolan to the door. When Dad returned he sat down.

“What are your first impressions, Kyle?” Dad asked.

“My first impression is that I will not be using Nolan,” I replied. “I didn’t particularly like his idea about visiting LA. Did any of you overhear what he whispered to me at the beginning?”

“I definitely missed something,” Penny interjected. “What was it you were saying about going to LA next weekend?”

“Nolan suggested Kyle should visit LA and the Nolan operation before making a final decision,” Dad said.

“I didn’t hear what the man said but I suspect he offered to get you laid,” Uncle Dave said. “I caught a momentary look of panic when Penny came into the room immediately after his comment and was introduced as your fiancée. He covered it pretty well. I think he knew he wasn’t getting this job from that moment.”

“He’s out?” Dad asked.

“The other four would have to be complete stiffs for me to choose Nolan,” I said. “I’m 99% sure he won’t be my agent.”

“This was a good dry run for this crew,” John Hayes commented. “We’ll be better prepared for the next interview. Who’s on tap tomorrow?”

“Todd Rosenbaum at 9:00 am, Steven Frost at 1:00 pm and Max Solomon at 7:00 pm tomorrow,” Dad said.

“Remember, I am going to recuse myself during the interview with Max Solomon,” John said. “He represents both my sons.”

“That’s fine during the interview,” Dad added. “I want your input when we analyze the candidates. That is part of why I asked you to help us with the interview process. You know better than anyone how Max has worked out as your sons’ agent. I know Kyle is leaning towards him before we started the whole process.”

“Zack and Aaron Morano both tell me Max is the best,” I said. “I’m going to give the man a hard look no matter what.”

“OK, we’ll reconvene at 8:45 tomorrow morning,” Dad said, “...unless you want to meet over breakfast. I could probably get Sharon to put something together.”

“Why don’t I make my stuffed French toast?” I suggested. “All of you are here helping me out. It’s the least I could do.” Everyone agreed to my suggestion. We would meet at 8:15 for breakfast.

Penny and I ran to Gap to the grocery store to pick up the ingredients I needed for the French toast. One of the things Paradise lacked was a grocery store. Stores in Lancaster, Leola and Gap were all about equally distant, a fifteen minute drive from my home.

Penny and I had a snack when we got back and then went downstairs to watch some TV before bedtime. I offered to make love to Penny, but she demurred. Her period had started that day. She settled for some cuddling. I got a blow job for being a loving boyfriend.

Our alarm woke us much too early, about seven o’clock. I showered first and then staggered upstairs to start breakfast. Hunter and the twins abandoned their cartoons when they heard the pans rattle in the kitchen and came running.

“Whatcha’ makin’, Unka Ky?” Connor asked.

“Fwench Toast?” Noah added hopefully. “Can we have some?”

“Yeah, please?” Hunter echoed.

“Yes, I’m making stuffed French Toast,” I replied, “...and when have I ever not fed you guys?”

“A’ways feed us,” Connor agreed.

“It will take awhile to get all of this ready,” I suggested. “Why don’t you boys go watch your cartoons until I call you.”

“Oh-kay,” all three boys agreed. They scampered off to watch more TV.

Penny joined me about twenty minutes later. Penny got to work on the filling for the French toast. I browned sausage and bacon for our guests. The boys heard Penny and came running to visit with her. They peppered the two of us with questions about what we were doing and how we made French toast.

Noah got a real serious look on his face and asked, “Penny, are you our aunt now?”

“No, not yet,” she answered. “Why would you think I am?”

“You wive [live] with Unka Ky now,” Noah said.

“You two wike [like] Unka Wih’ and Aunt Abby,” Connor added.

“I don’t become your aunt until Uncle Kyle and I get married,” Penny explained. “It’ll be a few months until I’m officially your aunt.” She stopped down to the boys’ level and added, “If you want to call me Aunt Penny now, I won’t mind.”

“Yeah!” “T’anks Aunt Penny!” the boys yelled as they gave her hugs.

“Why don’t you guys watch more cartoons?” I suggested again. “I haven’t started cooking the French toast yet. It will be about twenty minutes before we sit down to eat.”

“Oh-kay,” the boys agreed before scampering off again.

I finished up the cinnamon infused syrup and started on the toast soon after the boys disappeared. Uncle Dave arrived while I was cooking. Mom set the dining room table, since we wouldn’t have room for everyone in the kitchen. I made enough to feed Liz and Andy but they weren’t expected to be up in time for the breakfast. They could heat theirs in the microwave when they finally woke up.

John Hayes arrived just as I was putting the last pieces of toast on the griddle. Andy staggered down just as everyone was sitting down for breakfast. Mom added another place quickly and dragged a stool in from the kitchen for my brother. Everyone enjoyed their stuffed French toast. Penny volunteered to help Mom with the dishes while Uncle Dave, Dad, John and I prepared for our next interview. I warned Penny I wanted her in the living room as soon as the interview started. I didn’t want to be embarrassed again by an offer to procure women for me.

Todd Rosenbaum arrived a couple minutes before nine. I answered the door. “Good morning, you must be Kyle,” Todd Rosenbaum said with a big grin. “I hope you don’t mind. I took the liberty of picking up doughnuts on the way over here.” He handed me a box of doughnuts from Achenbach’s. The bakery made the best doughnuts in the world! Well at least the best in southeast Pennsylvania.

“Come on in, Mr. Rosenbaum,” I said.

“Todd... please call me Todd,” Todd Rosenbaum replied.

“Todd it is,” I agreed as I led him into the living room. I introduced him to Dad, Uncle Dave, John Hayes and Penny. We sampled the doughnuts while Todd started talking about what his firm, Football Management, Inc., could do for me.

Todd spent about ten minutes giving us the background on his company. The presentation was shorter than I expected. Todd turned the tables and asked me, “What are you aiming to get out of a professional football career?”

“I enjoy playing,” I responded, “...but money isn’t my primary motivation. When I am done playing, I plan to coach. The higher a level of football I play, the more I can learn.”

“You’re on route to playing at the highest level, Kyle,” Todd said. “I don’t think there is any question you will be a first round draft pick. You will get a chance to learn football from the very best.”

Todd asked me more questions about my ambitions and goals. That was a refreshing change from Doug Nolan. We spent about ten more minutes talking about that before my advisors and I started asking him our questions.

Todd Rosenbaum was the owner of his company. He had a junior associate training to become an agent helping him along with half a dozen clerical and administrative employees. The junior associate hoped to pass the NFLPA Agents exam in the next year. I would be dealing with Todd for all substantive issues, as was required by the NFLPA.

Todd represented twenty-two clients, three of them first round draft picks. He normally picked up about three new clients a year. One of his first round clients held out before signing, but only two days.

We asked Todd the various questions we had. Most of his answers were similar to Doug Nolan’s answers last evening. I waited until we were about half way done with our questions to ask a key one. I hadn’t bothered asking Doug Nolan last night since I didn’t expect I would be signing with him after he tried to bring me out to LA for some tail.

“Todd, I found myself watching NFL games a little differently the past year,” I began. “I keep looking at the team and wondering if I fit there. I have seen some teams that I REALLY don’t want to play for. One example would be Green Bay.” I tipped my hand towards John Hayes.

“With all respect to John’s son, Zack, I do not want to be drafted by Green Bay,” I explained. “I would love to reunite with Zack for a third time but I know it is a bad idea. The skills I would bring to the team are not the ones that will turn them into winners. They need offensive and defensive line help more than a fast receiver. I met Coach Wilkins at Zack’s wedding and thought he was a good coach. Still, if I went there, I’d be flying down the field, getting open twenty-five yards downfield and have nothing to catch. Without more and better linemen, Zack will be flat on his back under a couple defensemen and I wouldn’t get the ball. What good would I do for the Packers?” Todd nodded to acknowledge he was following me.

“I have a list of teams that I don’t want play for,” I explained. “What can you do for me to make sure I don’t get drafted by one of them?”

Todd pursed his lips and took a deep breath before looking me in the eye. “I’d like to say I can fix that for you, Kyle,” Todd said, “but I can’t. Agents would like to have influence over who drafts their clients and when they’re drafted, but they don’t. The owners, GMs

and head coaches make those calls. I can speak with a team to warn them you aren't interested in them but there is no guarantee that they'll listen. Who drafts you is out of my or your control."

"I appreciate your honesty, Todd," I answered. I couldn't suppress the smile. He answered exactly how I wanted. I knew agents didn't have any way to change the draft. I wanted to know if Todd was willing to tell me something he thought I didn't want to hear. He passed my test.

Todd stared at me for a moment before nodding his head and returning my smile. He understood what I really wanted to know. I sensed as we talked that Todd's answers were less simplified than they had been at the start of the interview.

One point that Todd laid particular importance to was that I needed to get to one of the professional gyms for as much training as possible so I understood the tests at the NFL Combine and was prepared to show my very best effort. That was going to complicate my time management issues over the next six weeks.

This interview ran longer than the one with Nolan. I felt, and I think my advisors felt, that Todd was extremely impressive. Derek Whitaker had not been blowing smoke when he told me how excellent an agent Todd was. We wrapped the interview up a little after eleven o'clock.

"Thanks for coming, Todd," I said. "It's certainly been a pleasure getting to know you."

"Kyle and I will sit down with our other advisors when all the interviews are done and help Kyle choose an agent. We will be in touch in a few days."

Todd thanked each of us before heading out. When Todd stepped off the porch and was likely outside of hearing, Dad asked, "What do you think, Kyle?"

"I could easily see myself using Todd as my agent," I answered. "I liked that he actually asked about my career goals and how I wanted to live my life. Doug Nolan didn't seem to have any interest in that. What do you think, honey? Can we trust our financial future to him?"

"I like him," Penny answered. "He seems knowledgeable about his business. I liked when he told you off about your idea of influencing which team drafts you. You need someone else other than me that will tell you things you don't want to hear."

"You already knew the answer to that question didn't you, Kyle?" Uncle Dave asked. I smiled and nodded yes. "I agree with Penny. It is a good thing to have an agent who is willing to tell you no when you need to hear it. That was very cagey. Have you ever considered becoming an attorney?"

“No, I want to make an honest living,” I countered. The whole group had a good laugh at Uncle Dave’s expense. He didn’t really mind. He told as many lawyer jokes as anyone in the family.

The five of us discussed Todd’s merits for about ten minutes. Everything looked quite positive. The other three guys were really going to need to blow my socks off to beat out Todd.

Dad invited John Hayes to stay for lunch. He went home instead. We had an hour and a half until Steven Frost arrived for his interview. He could use the time to work on his “honey do” list.

My advisors and I reassembled around a quarter to one. Steven Frost arrived on Coach Burton time, a couple minutes ahead of the scheduled time. Steve brought along another assistant, Justin Beale. Steve was probably around fifty. Justin couldn’t have been more than twenty-six or seven.

Steven Frost went on for nearly half an hour, touting his Steven Frost Agency. He said he had represented twenty first round picks over the past twenty-two years. His firm had six agents, currently representing forty-two NFL players, six GMs and four head coaches. The man crowed about his firm’s experience and ability to get great contracts for his clients.

The whole presentation was a turnoff for me. I caught Penny rolling her eyes a couple times as Frost rattled on. I believe Dad, Uncle Dave and John felt the same way too. No one was as enthusiastic as they asked questions. I popped Steve with my ‘How do I avoid getting drafted by a bad team’ question. The answer was revealing.

“The Steven Frost Agency has contacts all across the league,” Steve explained. “We can certainly pass the word to the GMs and head coaches we know.” He gave me a wink. “We know just about all of them personally. No one will be better able to get the word out to the teams you want to avoid than our firm.”

The non-answer really didn’t tell me they could help or that they couldn’t. Steve danced artfully around my question. That wasn’t a trait I was looking for in my agent. I wanted to hear how things really worked, not what he thought I wanted to hear.

Dad, Uncle Dave, John and I ran out of questions around 2:30 pm. We thanked Steve and Justin for their time and let them know they would let them know my decision in a few days. The five of us looked at each other for a few seconds and laughed.

“Well, Mr. Frost certainly runs the premier agency in football, doesn’t he?” Dad remarked before laughing again. “He certainly is proud of himself.”

“I’m guessing you don’t want to include him in your final cut,” Uncle Dave added.

“No, I don’t think so,” I agreed. “So far, Todd is head and shoulders above the other two. Max and Mr. Jenkins will have to make me stand up and say wow to get me to take them instead of Todd.”

“We’re not finished, are we?” John asked.

“No, I want to see the other two,” I replied. “I am especially anxious to see how Max Solomon stacks up against Todd.”

“We’ll find out after dinner,” Dad said.

John Hayes headed home to continue to work on his “honey do” list and to get dinner. Penny called her mom. Marilyn came over to meet with my Mom, Penny and me to discuss progress of the wedding plans.

Mom reported that our church was available June 29th or July 6th. The Host Resort was available either weekend for the reception. The Eden Resort was only available on July 6th. Penny and I decided to go with July 6th as our wedding day. Mom would make arrangements for the Rev and the church. Marilyn would set things up at the Eden Resort. We talked about entertainment for the reception. Those decisions gave Mom and Marilyn enough to keep them busy for a few weeks. Penny and I expected to be home the weekend after the Senior Bowl.

My crew of advisors reassembled around a quarter to seven on Saturday evening. Max Solomon showed up minutes after John Hayes arrived, about ten minutes early. I like punctual people, so that was a good start for Max.

“Daniel, it is good to put a face to the man I have been talking to,” Max said as Dad escorted him into our living room.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Max,” Dad replied. “My son and some of his former teammates have praised your abilities as an agent. It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“John Hayes, this is an unexpected pleasure,” Max said as he shook John’s hand. “How are Zachary, Leigh Ann and sweet little Lauren?”

“They’re doing well,” John said.

“Is Trish holding up well with her pregnancy?” Max asked. I hadn’t been aware until this weekend that Sam and Trish were expecting.

“She’s doing well,” John replied. “It will be a couple more months before I have my first grandson.”

“That is wonderful,” Max replied. “Young ones are such a blessing.”

“Max, this is my brother-in-law, David Robinson,” Dad explained.

“David, it is a pleasure to meet you,” Max said as he shook my uncle’s hand. “It is very kind of you to assist your nephew in his quest.”

Max turned to Penny and gave her a big smile. “Penelope Edwards... it is such a pleasure to meet you. Zachary and Leigh Ann have said such wonderful things about Kyle’s intended.” He paused for a moment to appraise Penny. “They did not do justice to your beauty.”

“Thank you, that is very kind of you to say that,” Penny answered as she shook Max’s hand. “Please call me Penny. I never use my full name.”

“As you wish, Penny,” Max replied. Max turned to me, grasped my right hand with both of his and shook vigorously. “Ah... the man of the hour. How is your psyche faring after the disappointment out in Arizona?”

“I’m surviving,” I answered. “They say you can’t win them all. I guess six losses in four years of college is something I can live with.”

“You have had a very good run in college,” Max replied. “We’ll just have to see if we can get you affiliated with a team to bring you that championship you desire in the NFL. Shall I begin my presentation?”

“Certainly, Max. Go ahead,” I agreed.

Max’s initial presentation was surprisingly brief. He talked for a couple minutes about his experiences representing some of the big names in the NFL. He currently had seventeen clients, including seven first round draft picks. Max explained that he purposely kept his business small and intimate so he could deliver the best service to his clients. No client let Max go in his thirty-two years as a sports agent.

Max started asking me questions about me. What did I want from football? What did I want from life? What made me happy? This went on for about ten minutes. It almost felt as if I was being interviewed instead of Max.

“Max, can I ask you a question?” I interjected after answering his latest query.

“Certainly, Kyle,” Max replied.

“You’re here to sell us on why I should use you as my representative,” I explained.

“You’re spending all your time asking me questions. How is that going to convince me you are the best agent for me?”

“How am I going to represent your best interests if I do not know your plans, goals and desires?” Max asked. “Perhaps a story will illustrate my point. A senior, well respected professor demonstrated this story to his management class. He was giving a lecture on time management. He put a gallon, wide mouthed glass jar on his podium at the start of class one day. He placed large stones, three or four inches in size, into the jar until it they reached the top.

“The professor asked his students if the jar was full. A couple students raised their hands in agreement. Most did not. The professor took out a can of smaller, one inch diameter stones and poured them into the jar. He shook it and continued filling until the jar overflowed. ‘Is the jar full now?’ the professor queried.

“More students raised their hands this time. The professor pulled out another can full of pea sized gravel. He carefully poured the gravel into the jar, shaking it so the small gravel worked its way into the voids between the other stones. When it was overflowing, he asked again, ‘Is this jar full?’

“A majority of the class raised their hands this time, thinking the jar had to be full now. The professor pulled out a can of sand and proceeded to pour the sand into the jar until the sand overflowed onto the podium. ‘Is it full now?’

“All the students except one agreed that the jar was full. The professor gave his students a big smile and pulled out a bottle of water. He poured the water into the jar of stone and sand until it was level full. He gave his class a big smile and said, ‘I think we can finally agree that the jar is full. What point does this story illustrate?’

“The students threw out various suggestions, but the consensus of the group was that the story showed there always was time to do a little more. The professor frowned when they reached this conclusion. ‘No... no, no, no... that’s not the point at all. You have to put the big stones in first. If I hadn’t, they wouldn’t fit.’”

Max looked directly at me. “What are the big stones in your life, Kyle? I need to know what your goals in life are and what brings you fulfillment and happiness if I am to successfully represent you. So Kyle, what are the big stones in your life?”

“I guess having a happy marriage and raising a family are my top priority,” I responded as I patted Penny’s knee. “I have a good start to that one already. I love working with kids and teaching. Of course I love football. I think I’m on the right track planning a career as a school teacher and football coach.”

“That makes sense,” Max agreed. “Do you have a burning desire to play professional football?”

“I want to give it a shot,” I answered. “I know I can learn a great deal from playing professionally. Some of the very best coaches are there.”

“How important is money?” Max asked. “Do you want to be a millionaire?”

“It’s not that important,” I replied. “I want my family to be comfortable but I don’t need to be the richest man around.”

“Penny, does this fit your life’s plans?” Max asked. “No marriage will last if the partners have incompatible goals.”

“Kyle and I have discussed this quite a bit over the past nine months,” Penny answered. “I think our ambitions and goals are compatible.”

Dad, Uncle Dave and I asked Max our standard questions we asked the other agents. Dad asked about first round signings and if Max had any hold outs. Max had one player who held out almost a month when Cincinnati tried to low ball the player. Other than that, Max prided himself in getting his players signed and to training camp on time.

I decided that this was a good time to ask Max my question about how to avoid playing for certain teams who I didn’t want to play for. Max didn’t bat an eyelash as I went through the question. He chuckled before answering.

“Contrary to what some of my brethren will claim, agents do not have the power to change the draft,” Max replied. “Let’s turn the question around, Kyle. What are YOU willing to do to avoid playing football for a team that does not bring you towards the goals you desire? Are you willing to sit out professional football for a year? Can you give up the millions you could be making for this?”

“I think I could,” I said. “I want to play professionally to learn more about football, though plenty of successful coaches never played a down in the NFL.”

“I can discreetly warn the teams that you will not play for them,” Max said. “That may give them pause before they draft you. It will work only if you have a credible backup plan for the year the undesirable team that drafted you holds your rights.”

“That’s easy,” I replied. “I will have my teaching degree and a teaching certificate in May. I would be happy settling down around Philly, teaching and coaching football at some high school. I also have a standing job offer from Coach Burton. He will hire me as a grad assistant whenever I am finished playing football.”

“It sounds like you do have a credible plan for life without football,” Max said. “That’s always a good thing. Football is a gossamer building block for a life. You need something more substantial.”

I was pleased with Max’s response to my test. Not only could he tell me what I didn’t want to hear, he was willing to consider all kinds of possibilities to help me achieve my personal aims even at the cost of revenue for him. Max wouldn’t get one penny for representing me if I held out for a year.

Max asked me my training plans to prepare myself for the NFL Combine. “I have an arrangement with Coach Golden at Temple,” I explained. “He is letting me work out with his players. He’s been very generous in agreeing to help me.”

“That’s probably not enough, Kyle,” Max said. “Most of the people you will be competing against at the combine will be training full time for the next two months to prepare. You will be placing yourself at a substantial disadvantage unless you work out with one of the nationally recognized gyms to get ready.”

“I understand,” I agreed. “I don’t see how I will find time to do that, though. I have to be in school to complete my student teaching this semester if I am going to graduate on schedule. My education is a priority. Anyway, I would lose all credibility in threatening to boycott an undesirable team without my degree. I couldn’t teach. I couldn’t get hired as a grad assistant if I was still an undergrad. I am committed to being in the classroom from 7:20 am to 2:20 pm, five days a week until the end of April. That’s non-negotiable.”

“I understand,” Max replied. “I want you to understand you could be risking one or two million dollars with this decision.”

“Big stones, Max,” I answered. “I value my education over the money.”

“That’s a good attitude,” Max said. “Education is for a lifetime. A million dollars can go away faster than you might think. We will figure something out for your preparation if I end up representing you.”

It was close to nine o’clock when we finally ran out of questions. I thanked Max for coming for the interview. Dad asked, “Are you heading home from here tonight or are you staying in the area?”

“My dear Eleanor will have to do without me for a few days,” Max said. “I have to go up to State College on Monday to meet with a couple of Kyle’s teammates. I will be enjoying a day of rest in your fair county before heading up to Penn State.”

“Do you mind telling me who you’re seeing?” I asked, “...if it doesn’t break any rules of confidentiality.”

“No, it wouldn’t break any rules,” Max replied. “I’m surprised the news hasn’t traveled the Penn State grape vine yet.”

“This week has been real busy for me,” I explained. “I haven’t talked to anybody on campus since we parted out in Phoenix on Tuesday morning.”

“I am meeting Trevor Conwell and Christian Hunsecker,” Max said.

“Good luck with your interviews with them,” I said. “They will be dynamite clients if they sign with you.”

“Can we have your cell phone number, Max?” Dad asked. “We may have further questions for you while we deliberate tomorrow after we finish our last interview.”

“Call me any time, Dan,” Max said. “It’s been a pleasure sharing an evening with you in your fine home.” Max stood and thanked Penny for her attention and patience. He thanked John, Uncle Dave and Dad too.

“Kyle, it’s been an absolute pleasure to talk with you this evening,” Max said as we shook hands. “Whatever decision you make, I will value your friendship. I wish you the very best in your future career.”

“Thank you for coming tonight, Max,” I said. I knew I shouldn’t but I couldn’t help myself. “We’ll be seeing each other real soon, I’m sure.”

“Good night, all,” Max added as Dad escorted him to the door.

When Dad returned to the living room, Uncle Dave commented, “You don’t have much of a poker face, Kyle. What is your first reaction to Max Solomon?”

I stood and said, “Wow!”

“Don’t hold back, Kyle,” Dad teased. “How do you really feel? Are we finished with the interviews?”

“No, not yet,” I said. “I’m sure Mr. Jenkins is in town already. It wouldn’t be fair not to hear him out. We’ll do his interview. Imagine if he’s as impressive as Todd or Max? Wouldn’t it be great to have that many good agents to choose from?”

“That would be nice,” Dad agreed.

“Penny, what do you think so far?” I asked. “You’ve been real quiet through this whole thing.”

“The agents say hello and ignore me for the rest of the interview,” Penny replied, “except for Max, of course. I like him best of the four we have seen. I like his approach. He is interested in everything about us, not just in how much money you can make in football.”

“What do you think, Dave?” Dad asked.

“I think you would do well with Max or Todd,” Uncle Dave said. “I like it that you have two strong candidates. This will give us some negotiating room when we do your contract. There are some clauses in the SRA that I don’t care for.”

“John, what do you think?” Dad asked.

“I said I wouldn’t comment on Max,” John answered. He gave us a wink. “Both of my sons use Max as their agent. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“Yes, I think so,” I agreed.

“We’ll meet at 1:45 pm tomorrow for the interview with Joseph Jenkins,” Dad said.
“Thank you for your help.”

Penny and I packed up our overnight bags and headed over to her house. It was her parents’ turn to host us. We filled in Jim and Marilyn about our progress interviewing an agent. Penny and I watched a bit of TV in her room before going to bed.

Penny and I went to church Sunday morning. Reverend Hollinger was delighted to hear we had a date picked out for the wedding. Rev added one more thing to our list of things to do this spring. He wanted us to do pre-marriage counseling with him. We promised to schedule it somehow.

My advisors reassembled at 1:45 pm at my house. The interview with Joseph Jenkins was anti-climactic. Joe was in his early thirties, younger than I expected. He ran a one man operation, with a secretary and an administrative assistant to help him keep track of everything. Joe had been in business for eight years and had ten clients. He had represented one late first round pick last year. He seemed like a pretty decent guy. He passed my “tells unwelcome truths” question. I promised to let him know my decision within a few days when he left.

When I came back to the living room, Dad asked, “Well, is it decision time? Do you have enough information to make an informed choice, Kyle?”

“I think so,” I said. “Does anyone think Joe Jenkins is a serious candidate for my agent? I think he’s a nice guy but would be out of his depth working for me.” No one disagreed.

“Can we go around the room,” I suggested. “I’d like to hear what each of you recommends. Dad?”

“I think Todd or Max would make an excellent agent,” Dad replied. “I think it’s a matter of personal preference. Who are you and Penny more comfortable with?”

“Uncle Dave?” I asked.

“I agree with your dad, Kyle,” Uncle Dave said. “I do like the fact that you have two top choices. I want to negotiate a few changes in the standard representation agreement to better protect your and Penny’s interests. Having two finalists gives us some leverage.”

“But which one do I offer the job to first?” I asked.

“It’s a very close call but I would probably go with Max Solomon,” Uncle Dave answered.

“Mr. Hayes?” I asked.

“All of you know I’m prejudiced,” John answered. “I was deeply involved when Zack chose Max Solomon. I recommended him then and I still think he is the best choice.”

“Penny? What do you think, honey?” I asked.

“I think Max is the best choice,” Penny answered. “I can live with Todd Rosenbaum if you prefer him, but I think Max will take better care of us and our family.”

“Then it is unanimous,” I said. “I’ve always leaned on Zack’s and Aaron Morano’s advice as I’ve come up through football. Why change now? I also think I probably would have come up with the same result without their advice. Max seems like an excellent agent. I know I’ll do well with him representing me.”

“That was quick,” Dad said. “Do you want to give him a call? I’m sure Mom could add another place to the table for Max tonight.”

“OK, let’s do it,” I agreed. I dialed Max’s cell phone. He answered on the second ring.

“Max Solomon,” he said.

“Max, this is Kyle Martin,” I replied. “I have finished my interviews. My advisors and I came to a conclusion. How would you like to be my agent?”

“I would be delighted, Kyle,” Max responded. “Thank you for your confidence in me. When can we meet to get to work? You have a lot of decisions to make and very little time to make them.”

“How does a home cooked meal sound tonight?” I suggested. “My family and I would love to have you come over for dinner. We can talk after dinner.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea, Kyle,” Max replied. “When is dinner served?”

“How does 5:30 sound?” I answered.

“It sounds like you are saving me from a burger and fries at one of the local restaurants near my hotel,” Max said. “Thank you for the call, Kyle. I am looking forward to working with you.”

I'm looking forward to it too," I agreed.

[I must credit an unknown author (to me) for the story about the big stones. I found it in a book of Scoutmaster's Minutes about twenty-five years ago. I've lost the book but I've never forgotten the story. Doug Fox]

(To be continued)

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Max Solomon arrived for my family's Sunday evening dinner a few minutes ahead of schedule. Noah, Connor and Hunter were fascinated by our guest. They showed Max how they liked to play football, which was their term for rough housing. Uncle Dave stayed for dinner too. We would need him when I sat down to negotiate the agreement with Max for him to serve as my agent.

Mom usually made a nice supper on Sundays. This week we had pot roast, pan roasted potatoes and peas. Mom broke out the ice cream for our dessert. Max was a convivial dinner companion. He engaged everyone in conversation over dinner.

I teased Andy. "You know you will have to report this contact with an agent to your compliance office. You don't want to get declared ineligible by the NCAA."

"Your brother is quite right, Andrew," Max added. "You don't want to cut short your collegiate career." Max was well versed in Andy's exploits at Delaware. He certainly came prepared.

Noah, Connor and Hunter politely asked to be excused when they finished their ice cream. "Andrew, Dan and Sharon... you are raising absolutely delightful children," Max said as the boys left. "This meal was wonderful. Thank you for inviting me to dine with your family tonight."

"Do you want to retire to the living room?" Dad asked. "We still have important business to do this evening and Kyle and Penny have to drive back to Philadelphia tonight."

"Yes, let us get to work," Max agreed. Dad, Uncle Dave, Penny, Max and I found comfortable seats in the living room. Mom brought coffee for everyone. Liz was delegated to watch the kids while she caught up on her homework. Andy took off for Newark and his dorm.

"I guess the first order of business is to make the deal official," Max began. "David, are you acting as Kyle's counselor? Shall I send you a copy of my standard representation agreement for your review?"

"No, I'm not Kyle's attorney," Uncle Dave replied. "I'm acting as his uncle in this matter. We will be engaging Blake, Taylor and Mays as our attorneys. They have experience in sports law. I do not."

"They are an excellent firm," Max replied. "I've worked with them with other clients. They are familiar with my standard agreement. We shouldn't have any trouble at all finalizing the agreement."

“There are a couple things in the NFLPA SRA that I would like to discuss, Max,” Uncle Dave said. “Kyle is fairly sure to go in the first round in the draft. Typically teams want to sign their high picks to long contracts – say five, six or seven years.”

“Correct,” Max replied. I saw Max tense a little as Uncle Dave talked.

“The SRA is set up so that you get paid over the entire life of the contract, regardless of whether you are still my nephew’s agent,” Uncle Dave said. “There isn’t a lot of incentive for you to be zealous in representing Kyle once the long term contract is signed. The money will roll in for you regardless of how much work you do for Kyle at the back end of the contract. I would like to make sure an incentive is in place for you over the entire length of the contract.”

“You are forgetting something, David,” Max countered. “I do 90% of my work for my clients up front. I have large expenses for travel and training my athlete for the combine that I pay long before I see one penny from their contract.”

“I don’t expect you to pay for travel and expenses for Kyle,” Dad added. “My family is fully capable of bearing those expenses.”

Things went back and forth between Max, Dad and Uncle Dave for about ten minutes. Uncle Dave wanted to make Max’s compensation dependent entirely on his remaining my agent. Max wanted to keep his standard compensation. We agreed in the end that Max would get the maximum agent’s compensation of 3% for his work on my contract. We would guarantee him the first three years of the contract. He would continue to get the 3% after that for the remainder of the contract, as long as he was still my agent.

“The next topic we need to talk about, Kyle, is getting you maximum exposure to the NFL teams,” Max said. “Are you planning on playing in the Senior Bowl?”

“I plan to,” I answered.

“Are you 100% healthy?” Max asked. “You will spend a week under close scrutiny by all the NFL teams. I want you to shine when they get their first close look at you. Are there any lingering strains, aches or pains from your last game?”

“The last game was relatively pain free for me,” I replied. “Mike Johanson is a cover cornerback. He knew better than to get physical with me. I out-weigh him by twenty pounds. I am ready and anxious to play against the best seniors in the country.”

“Excellent,” Max said. “That settles the first issue. The next is your training. I need to get you into a pro gym where you can learn exactly how to do the NFL Combine’s tests. It is critical that you learn the correct techniques. I took the liberty of speaking with Steven Sanderson at the Pro Train Institute. He is willing to work with you at their Cherry Hill, New Jersey center. That should be convenient for you on weekends.”

“Pro Train? Is that the same people who have a center over in Millersville?” I asked. “Isn’t that the one that Zack used two years ago?”

“Yes, it is the same company,” Max confirmed.

“If I’m working out over the weekend, I think I would prefer to work out here in Lancaster County,” I replied. “What do you think, Penny? How does a few weekends at home sound?”

“I’d like that,” Penny agreed. “Our moms will like it too. We’ve got lots of planning to do for the wedding.”

“Mark July 6th down on your calendar, Max,” I said. “You and your wife are invited to our wedding.”

“Excellent,” I will do that right now,” Max responded. “How does your schedule look after the Senior Bowl, Kyle? We need to get you into Steven’s gym as often as possible between now and the end of February.”

“I have nothing on Super Bowl weekend,” I answered. Chuckling, I added, “....except watching the Super Bowl. The weekend after that Penny and I have to fly down to Florida for the Biletnikoff dinner. We do the Thon at Penn State the weekend after that.”

“I will contact Steven and arrange for him to meet you at his Millersville gym the weekend after the Senior Bowl. Are you available to start work on Friday evening or should I arrange it for Saturday morning, Kyle?”

“Friday evening will work,” I agreed. “What do you think, honey? We could do that weekend like we did this weekend.”

“I could take the train out to Daylesford and meet you after school,” Penny answered. “It worked out fine this weekend.”

“I will arrange for you to meet Steven at Pro Train on February 2nd,” Max said. “It would be beneficial if you did a few evenings over in Cherry Hill. The more practice you have, the more confidence you will have doing the drills. You report to the Combine on February 21st.”

“OK, I guess I can squeeze a few evenings in,” I replied. “I figured I would need the 21st off from school for travel to Indianapolis.”

“When is Penn State’s Pro Day?” Max asked. “I assume you are planning on attending.”

“It’s March 16th, I think,” I replied. “I assumed I should be there.”

“You should, even if you don’t work out for the scouts,” Max said. “Most NFL teams place great stock on their interviews with you. You should do interviews with as many teams as possible.”

“That’s fine,” I agreed.

“We need to do some practice interviews with you, Kyle,” Max said. “There is an art to giving a good interview. I want you to present yourself in the best possible light to teams that may draft you.”

“That’s fine,” I agreed.

“You will start doing interviews with teams at the Senior Bowl,” Max said. “Do you have any free nights later this week? I could meet with you at your apartment to practice.”

“That’s fine,” I agreed. “Do you want to join Penny and me for dinner? We’d be happy to feed you before we get to work.”

“No, why don’t I treat the two of you to dinner instead?” Max suggested. “You’re poor college students. I know budgets are always a little tight at your age.”

“That would be wonderful,” I agreed. Penny liked the idea of dinner out too. We arranged a time for Max to meet us and gave him the address of our apartment building. That wrapped up the business end of the meeting. Uncle Dave headed back to York. Dad, Mom, Penny and I talked with Max for a while. Max asked about Penny’s classes and career plans. We talked about my student teaching. Max got to know my family better before he left, soon after Noah, Connor and Hunter went to bed around eight o’clock. Penny and I headed back to Philly when Max left.

John Waters had me assist him in preparing an exam for the honors economics class during our fourth period work time on Monday. He also let me know I would be giving my first lecture on Friday for the third period European History class. My topic was the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. The topic was tailor made for me. I had given the same lecture last spring to Scott’s AP European History class.

I took Lancaster Avenue back to Philly after school on Monday. I stopped off at the big computer store in St. Davids to pick up a wireless router so I could use my laptop anywhere in our apartment instead of staying tethered to a cable in the living room.

Mondays were a light days for Penny. She was home, deep in study of her comparative anatomy textbook when I got home. I volunteered to make dinner, since I wasn’t busy. We ate at six o’clock, as was becoming our custom. I headed over to Temple after finishing the dishes to do my daily work out.

Edberg-Olson's weight room was pretty empty when I went in. I noticed one big, and I do mean big, guy on the weight machine. He had to rival Mike Pollard from Penn State in size. I got to work on my routine. About ten minutes later, after he finished his routine, he stopped by.

"You're the guy Coach told us about," he said. "You're Kyle Martin, aren't you?"

"I am," I answered.

"I'm Jamaal Anderson," he answered.

"Jamaal... yes, I should have recognized you," I said. He was Temple's excellent guard. He made the second-string All-American team. "I looked at a lot of video since our teams played last summer."

"I understand," Jamaal responded. "I have watched a lot of tape since our teams played each other. I doubt you spent a lot of time watching offensive line play anyway. I guess we'll be flying out to the Senior Bowl together."

"Are we?" I responded. "I haven't heard anything about flight arrangements yet."

"I got an e-mail confirming just before I came over here," Jamaal said.

"I'll find it when I get home, I'm sure," I responded. "It's good to meet you, Jamaal." The two of us talked for a while about our football experiences. Jamaal seemed like a nice guy. He was going to make a decent traveling companion.

Sure enough, I found e-mail from the Senior Bowl confirming my travel information to Mobile. Someone somewhere made a goof. They had me flying out of State College with two stops, one in Philly and the other in Charlotte. I sent an e-mail back warning them to drop the flight from State College to Philadelphia. I had no intention of driving to State College to catch a plane that would return me to the city where I lived.

I learned one other important piece of information that evening. The NFL named the two coaching staffs for the Senior Bowl. The Denver Broncos staff would coach the North Team. The Oakland Raiders would coach the South Team. I would be playing for Coach Jeff Baldwin, the Broncos head coach. I went on-line and found the bios on the other coaches I probably would be working with – Craig Holt, the offensive coordinator, Chris Frank, the wide receivers coach and Brian Kovacevic, the special teams coordinator. Coach Kovacevic's bio was interesting. He graduated from Penn State. He played there in the mid-nineties as a defensive back.

John and I monitored a study hall fourth period on Tuesdays and Fridays. Four guys went up front and talked with John, who they called 'Coach Waters', for a minute before coming back to my table in the back.

"Mr. Martin, Coach Waters says we can talk with you if you're willing and we talk quietly," one of the guys asked in a low voice. "Would you be willing to talk about your old high school team and how they beat Strath Haven?"

"Sure, if it's all right with Mr. Waters," I responded. John had been watching the exchange. He smiled and nodded his head yes. "Have a seat guys." They did introductions. They were Dean, Tyler, Mike and Bill. All played in the Pioneers defense. Dean O'Connell was the starting middle linebacker, Tyler Flynn a free safety, while Mike Durning and Bill Walsh were defensive linemen.

"We watched your old high school's game on the PCN last month," Dean said. "We were amazed at what your old team did. We know through Coach that you were at the game helping out. Could you tell us a little about how they managed to shut down Strath Haven?"

"These guys come in and dominate us nearly every year," Mike added. "We're sick and tired of losing to them."

"Sure, I'll do my best to answer your questions," I agreed.

"How did the middle linebacker know what plays were coming?" Dean asked. "It was spooky, almost like he was reading their minds."

"He was on the spot, making tackle after tackle," Bill added. "It was like he wasn't human. He was inside the Panther's coach's head."

"No, Nate isn't clairvoyant," I said. "Our team had a tendencies chart that told us the kind of plays they ran in any given situation. Nate was making educated guesses and reading his keys."

"Cool!" Mike asked. "That explains a lot."

"He was like a beast tackling," Dean said. "How did he get so good?"

"He had a lot of help," I responded. "Do you know who Jeremy North is?"

"Of course!" Dean snapped back. "He's just the best linebacker in college."

"He's also Nate's future brother-in-law," I said. "Jeremy has been dating Nate's older sister for the past seven years. Jeremy spent the last two or three summers teaching Nate how to play middle linebacker."

“That explains a lot,” Tyler said. “Having an All-American tutoring you, that must be nice. I guess we aren’t going to be able to duplicate what your old school did. We don’t have anybody like that to teach us.”

“You don’t need an All-American to learn to play football well,” I replied. “Jeremy didn’t have an All-American to tutor him when he started out. What do you guys do to prepare for the season during the off season?”

“We have weight lifting sessions twice a week during the winter,” Tyler said.

“Do you do any film study off season?” I asked. “How about drills on the field in the spring?”

“We can’t,” Dean said. “Our coaches are limited in how much time they have to work with us. Does your old team do all those things?”

“You’re right, your coaches can’t instruct you in the winter and spring,” I agreed. “No one says you guys on the team can’t get together and work on your own. My old team meets weekly, starting after New Year’s, and spend an hour and a half to two hours a week studying game film from last season. By the time it gets warm in the spring, we have studied every bit of film we have on us and our opponents. When it gets warm, we head outside and do drills.”

“All of this without the coaches’ help?” Bill asked skeptically.

“Look where it took me and my friends,” I countered. “It’s a lot of work but it was worth it. What record did you have doing things the way you always do?”

“We were 6-4 last year,” Dean acknowledged.

“My old high school team was 15-0 and won a state championship,” I said. “Which way, your team’s way or my team’s way is going to get you further?”

“Your team’s way,” all four guys agreed.

“Could you help us organize, Mr. Martin?” Mike asked. “I’m not real sure where we need to start.”

“Would that violate any rules?” Tyler added.

“I don’t think so,” I responded. “I’m not officially a faculty member. I haven’t been hired by the school district to work with the team. I don’t think I would fall under the PIAA prohibitions on coaching activities. I will talk to Mr. Waters and Coach Werley and find out if they mind if I help you guys.”

“There’s one other thing, Mr. Martin,” Dean said. “Do you think your old team would be willing to share that tendencies chart? It sure would help us on defense next season.”

“I don’t need to ask,” I explained. “I created the chart from information Mr. Waters gave me. It belongs to me as much as it belongs to my old team. I will speak with the coach over there, but I’m sure they won’t mind sharing information. They would have had a much harder time winning without help from your team.”

“Anything you can do to help us would be great, Mr. Martin,” Dean said. The other three agreed.

The economics class took their exam on Tuesday fifth period. I scanned the exams as John lectured during sixth and seventh periods. I was impressed; the students did very well on the test. I probably shouldn’t have been. My research into Conestoga High School before this semester noted that the students were top academic achievers.

After the students cleared out after the last period, a tall man in his early forties popped his head in the room.

“Hey, John... do you and Kyle have a minute?” he asked.

“Yeah, Dan. What’s up?” John replied. Dan walked into the room and I got a better look at the man. He was slim but muscular. He had a bushy mustache that matched his curly, sandy blonde hair.

“I hoped you might introduce me to your famous protégé,” Dan said. I walked forward to meet Dan as he asked. I suspected this was Dan Werley, the head football coach.

“Yes, it’s about time the two of you met,” John replied. “Kyle, this is Dan Werley, our head football coach. Dan, this is Kyle Martin. I guess I don’t need to tell you who he is.”

“No, I should say not,” Dan replied as we shook hands. “The football world knows exactly who you are. John’s also been talking about you since he met you last Thanksgiving. It’s a real pleasure to finally meet you, Kyle.”

“It’s good to meet you too, Dan,” I replied. “I’ve heard good things about you too.”

“John’s been overselling me, I’m sure,” Dan replied.

“Not just from John,” I said. “Coach Caffrey and Coach Burton told me you’re a top notch coach when they heard that I was going to be student teaching here. Coach likes the work you’re doing.”

“Really?” Dan replied. “I know Walt pretty well but I wouldn’t have thought I was on Coach Burton’s radar.”

“Coach Burton knows who you are,” I replied. “We keep a close eye on high school football programs. He thinks you run a quality program.”

“That’s flattering to hear,” Dan said. “I had an interesting conversation with four of my players this morning. They told me about a talk they had with you today about how your old high school prepares during the offseason.” I nodded in agreement that they had talked with me. “Could you spare some time some evening after school to fill me in on what they do?”

“Sure, I’d be happy to Dan,” I agreed. “When do you want to meet?”

“Would now suit?” Dan answered. “They’re all fired up and want to start on this program immediately.” Dan laughed. “When I have a group of high school kids fired up to do film study in the offseason, I want to encourage them as much as possible and get them to work.”

“I understand,” I said. “I was going over to Temple to do my work out but I can stick around awhile. Do you want to talk here?”

“Do you mind coming over to our weight room?” Dan asked. “I have to monitor the kids. Today is one of the days the weight room is open for the team to work out.”

“Sure, no problem, Dan,” I agreed. “I can go over to Temple after dinner. It isn’t a problem.”

John and I packed our brief cases and followed Dan over to the gym. I was surprised at the turn out. They had between 40 and 50 kids waiting their turns to use the equipment. The school didn’t have nearly enough equipment to get half the kids working simultaneously. The kids were patient, waiting their turn. They certainly were putting a good effort into the workouts they did.

Dan, John and I sat down at a table at one end of the room and discussed what my Wolverines did each offseason to prepare for the following fall. They listened closely.

“That certainly explains some of the amazing things I have seen your old team do,” John said.

“The trick is motivating the guys to put in that amount of effort,” Dan said. “It’s no easy thing convincing a teenager to put in the level of effort you are talking about. You told Dean, Mike, Bill and Tyler you would be willing to work with them setting up the film study sessions. Are you sure you have time for it?”

“I do,” I replied. “I am not talking about running the film study sessions for them. I want to teach them to do it on their own. They need to take possession of this whole process. Can we sell the seniors on assisting the younger players?”

“I have six guys going on to play football in college,” Dan said. “I should be able to sell them on helping the younger guys as helping them prepare for the next level, especially if I can tell them you’re helping too.”

“Excellent,” I said. “What day would be a good day for the film study?”

“We do work outs on Tuesdays and Thursdays,” Dan said. “Maybe Wednesdays after dismissal?”

“That works for me,” I agreed.

“Who gets invited to this?” Dan asked. “Do you really include middle schoolers in your film study sessions?”

“We do,” I said. “They start learning what is involved in serious football early.”

“We’ll have to skip that, at least initially,” Dan said. “The kids from Tredyffrin/Easttown Middle School aren’t too far away but the Valley Forge Middle School kids are three and a half miles from here. I don’t have a way to transport them over to this building or home when they’re done.”

“Starting small makes sense at the beginning,” I agreed. Dan, John and I discussed what I would need for the film study session. We agreed we could get things together for tomorrow. Dan called the kids together at the work out, introduced me and explained the film study sessions would be weekly, starting tomorrow. They seemed enthusiastic. We’d see tomorrow.

An e-mail from the Senior Bowl organizers confirmed the correction to my flight arrangements. I would fly out of Philly the following Saturday morning. I would most likely get to see friends on the flight. If I was scheduled to fly from State College, most likely Trevor, Shawn and Mitch would be on the flight too.

Wednesday fourth period John had me correct the Economics tests. He checked my work when I was done and recorded the grades in his computer. I reviewed the answers to the tests with the class during the first twenty minutes of fifth period. I was finally in front of students doing what I wanted to do! Yahoo!

John told me on the way to lunch that I had done a decent job my first time in front of the class. After dismissal that day, John took me down to the gym. Coach Werley had a room near the gym set up for video study. About fifteen football players were there when

we arrived. The coach posted last year's and next year's schedule on the bulletin board so we could see what we were working with.

More players arrived while Coach Werley was setting up. Coach called one of the older students to the front. I recognized the face. He had AP U. S. Government and Politics seventh period with John. I couldn't remember his name.

"Mr. Martin, I would like to introduce you to one of our team captains, Taylor Fabre," Dan explained. "Taylor, this Mr. Kyle Martin. His football pedigree needs no further introduction."

"Wow, it's a pleasure to meet you Ky..., um, Mr. Martin," Taylor said. "Watching you play at Penn State has been inspiration to me. My dad, my brother and I watched all your games. Dad is a Penn State grad and big fan."

"I'm glad you enjoyed watching the games," I replied modestly.

"I hope I learn a lot from your brother Andrew," Taylor added. "I've committed to playing at Delaware in the fall."

"Good for you," I replied. "I take it you are a receiver."

"Actually Coach Keeler hasn't made up his mind," Taylor explained. "I'm listed as an athlete. I played wide receiver and defensive back here."

"Taylor played both positions well too," Dan added. "He was probably the best athlete on our team. Taylor has agreed to work with the younger guys on the film study sessions we're starting."

"That's excellent," I said. I gave Taylor a wink. "This is going to help you when you get to college. Knowing how to study film in depth is a skill you will need to master. Getting a head start now is going to make things easier for you in the fall."

Coach Werley called for everyone to take their seats. He introduced me to the crowd of players. He briefly explained what the team was aiming to accomplish through the video study and then excused himself. None of us wanted the school to receive a violation from the PIAA for the coaches spending too much time with the team.

I outlined what my team did from January to late March each season and how it helped us. I also let the kids know that my old team found that the people who attended the film study sessions tended to end up as starters too. Not because my coach took attendance, but because the time spent learning to improve our play and analyzing our opponents made us better football players.

We spent an hour reviewing their first game last year against Owen J. Roberts last season. They won a close game 34-29. I went through the video with the group, asking

them to explain what worked and didn't work on each play. It took a little while but the group got the hang of what I learned back in Paradise. By the end of the session, the guys were having fun breaking down what worked and didn't last season.

"This was amazing, Mr. Martin," Dean O'Connell commented when we finished.

"Yeah, where were you three years ago when I started varsity?" Taylor asked. "I really could have used all this information when I started out."

"You'll be better prepared for next summer when you get to Delaware for camp, Taylor," I replied.

I headed straight home when I finished with the video study session. I didn't have time to get over to Temple before making dinner. It was my turn to cook that evening. I did my workout right after dinner so Penny and I could join her friends at the pub for Wednesday night's Quizo game.

I was pretty dead when I got up Thursday morning. Penny and I didn't get back from the pub until after midnight. It's damn hard to work on five hours sleep. Some of Wawa's high test coffee got me awake enough to get to school and not fall asleep while John lectured. I spent my time in the back observing for most of the day. I used the final period of the day to review my own lesson plan for tomorrow's lecture on the French Revolution and rise of Napoleon.

Traffic was intense on the way back to Philly. Max Solomon called while I was stuck in traffic. He wanted to warn me to wear a coat and tie for dinner. I gave Max Penny's cell number and asked him to call Penny to warn her. Max was going to meet us in front of the apartment building at 6:00 pm.

I got home around 5:15, leaving me enough time to clean up before meeting Max. Penny got home a couple minutes later. Both of us wondered where Max was taking us to dinner. We were out in front of our apartment five minutes early. Max hopped out of a cab when it pulled up to the front door.

"Hop in," Max said. He held the back door for Penny and me. He climbed in behind us. "Barclays's... 237 South 18th Street." The cabby took off for the center city restaurant. I had read about Barclay's Prime in the Inquirer food section some months ago. I knew it was one of the high end steakhouses that served top quality, aged steaks. I also knew from the review that their prices were through the roof. Thankfully, Max was treating us to supper. This beat one of the casseroles Penny and I typically made to stretch our food budget.

Barclay's Prime was as high tone as I expected. I was a bit underdressed in my khakis and sport coat. The restaurant had dark paneled walls and chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Max, Penny and I had a glass of wine in the bar while we waited for our table.

Max ordered a bottle of red wine along with Kobe sliders for appetizers. Penny thought a steak was a little heavy for dinner but Max coaxed her into trying the Australian Kobe filet. He didn't have to coax me. I ordered one of the dry aged New York strips. Max had the same.

Max talked life philosophy with us while we waited for our meals. The two of us were likely to be quite wealthy in a few months. Max preached that we needed to be careful with our new wealth. Money had many wonderful uses but it didn't bring happiness.

Max cautioned us about our spending once I received my first check. I would blow through whatever I got if I bought new cars, houses or bling. A two year, good condition used car was better than a brand new car. Someone else could take the hit on the initial depreciation. Even though I was inclined to agree with Max, my eighteen year old VW Golf was going to need to be replaced sooner than later. Penny's six year old Nissan had plenty of life left, I thought.

Max said that until Penny and I were settled for a couple years, we should rent rather than buy a place to live. He expressed a bit of concern about us getting married and then living apart for half the year. He was relieved when we outlined how we thought it could work for the five years Penny was in veterinary school and doing her internship.

The Kobe sliders came as we were talking. They were amazing. I'd heard about how good Kobe beef was but didn't understand until that evening. Max continued on as we enjoyed the wine.

Max preached that football careers are short and that we would need to conserve our money for the future. I couldn't be so focused on football that I forgot about the rest of my life. Balance – remembering the big stones – was what could take me through the surreal world of professional football and get me safe and sane on the other side, ready for my second career.

Our steaks arrived shortly after Max finished his sermon on how to stay a normal person while playing professional football. My New York strip was excellent. Penny loved her Kobe filet. Max offered to get dessert for us but we were stuffed.

Max reviewed my Senior Bowl schedule. Penny was going to drop me off at the airport for an 11:45 am flight to Charlotte, North Carolina. Another commuter flight would deliver me to Mobile, Alabama around 3:09 pm. Physicals were Sunday afternoon. My teammates and I would practice in the morning and spend the afternoons and evenings meeting with NFL team representatives. Max was flying down to the Senior Bowl to be available if Trevor or I needed help during the week.

Max took Penny and me back to his hotel. Max and I were going to tape a sample team interview this evening and critique it. He offered to get Penny a cab back to our apartment, but she decided to stick around and help critique my performance.

Max had a video camera set up in his room, pointed at the chair. I sat in the chair. Max and Penny sat on the bed as he threw questions at me. He started off with easy questions about my background and family. He hit me with the first hard one half a dozen questions into the interview.

“I understand you had a run in with the law a year and a half ago, Kyle,” Max said. “Can you explain what happened?”

I related the story about how Kelly and I had our fight about going out to the frat party and that she went without me. I told Max about my 2:30 am call asking me to give my drunk friends a ride back to their apartments. I related the story of my arrest and how the cops tried to railroad me and not give me the blood test. I related how my attorney worked with the D.A. to get the tests done which showed I had not been drinking.

“The answer is too long, Kyle,” Max said when I finished. “Call them policemen not cops. Don’t get personal about the one that arrested you. Just tell them that you took a blood test and it came back showing your BAC was 0.0%. You also should have copies of that test available for anyone who asks to see them.”

“I can do that, Max,” I agreed.

“Next, let me diagram a play for you Kyle,” Max said. He took the small white board and laid out a simple play for me. “Remember that play, Kyle. We will talk about it again, later in the interview.” Max erased the white board as soon as I finished studying it.

“You injured your knee when you were in high school, Kyle,” Max said. “Can you tell me about the injury and your recovery?”

“I blew out my ACL in the fifth game of my junior year in high school,” I explained. “A month later a surgeon in Lancaster, Pa. grafted a tendon into my knee to replace my ACL. I did seven months of rehab to get my knee back into shape. In an odd way, the knee injury actually made me a better receiver. I was forced to learn how to use my height, my body size and position and fakes to make catches instead of simply outrunning my opponent to make the catch.”

“I like that answer, Kyle,” Max said. “Make sure you add that last part when you talk about your knee injury. Do you have any lingering effects from the injury?”

“Not really, other than I can predict storms about twenty-four hours ahead of their arrival, thanks to the injury,” I answered. I massaged my left knee and gave him a wink. “Snow or rain is coming tomorrow.”

“Really? That’s interesting, Kyle,” Max said, “... but not pertinent to an interview with an NFL team. Keep your answer to: ‘No, I have no problems at all with my knee.’ Got it?”

“OK, Max,” I agreed. Max asked me to talk about my family life. I briefly talked about my parents, brothers and sister.

“Should I mention my brother Andy’s boys?” I asked. “They were born out of wedlock. Would that reflect poorly on me?”

“Absolutely, talk about your nephews,” Max said. “Any team that is serious about drafting you will do their due diligence and independently verify what you tell them about your family life. Not disclosing your nephews, who live at your home, would reflect poorly on you.”

“OK, Max,” I agreed.

“Tell me about your hobbies or pastimes when you are not playing or studying football,” Max asked.

“I read a lot, mostly history,” I replied. “Penny and I enjoy camping, hiking and canoeing. We also enjoy skiing in the win...”

“Stop!” Max commanded. “Don’t talk about skiing at all. That can be considered a high risk activity by teams.”

“Do you mean the team that drafts me might tell me I can’t ski?” I demanded. “That won’t do at all.”

“We aren’t going to talk skiing initially, Kyle,” Max answered. “If this is important to you, we will address it after you are drafted, when we negotiate your contract. I believe we can work this out. Most likely the team will ask that you carry an insurance policy to protect them if you are injured while skiing. I could ask your father to look into that, if you wish.”

“That sounds like a plan,” I agreed.

“Diagram your favorite play from college for me, Kyle,” Max asked.

“There are a lot of plays I love from college,” I said. “I love the offense Coach Burton has us run at Penn State.”

“Pick one – maybe something from your bowl game, one of the ones that you scored on,” Max suggested.

“OK, let’s do our crossing play,” I said. I diagrammed the play, showing how Brian and I had run pass routes that crossed, forcing the defensive backs to scramble to avoid running into each other or into us.

“That looks like a pick play to me,” Max commented. “Why wouldn’t a referee flag your team?”

“It would be a pick play if Brian or I had blocked or impeded the defenders,” I countered. “We know the routes we are running and practice avoiding each other. The defenders have to watch their man and watch other receivers and defenders when we create the cross. It’s hard for them to look two places at once. The defenders tend to get in each other’s way and give us a momentary opening to make a catch.”

“Show me the other players’ responsibilities on this play,” Max asked. I outlined the tight end and flanker responsibilities as well as running back’s and quarterback’s jobs.

“Don’t be brief when you talk about the plays, Kyle,” Max suggested. “I understand one of your strengths is your deep knowledge of football. Showcase that knowledge. Talk about the play, variations on the play and anything else pertinent until the interviewers tell you they have had enough. Teams want to know that you know football and haven’t reached your current position strictly on physical talent alone. Coaches especially love having players who love football as much as they do.”

“It shouldn’t be hard to show them that,” I replied. “I DO love football. That’s why I want to become a football coach after I’m done playing.”

“Work that career goal into an answer as soon as you can in the interview,” Max said. “That fits with the nickname I understand you had in school. How did you get the nickname ‘Coach’?”

“I got the nickname when I hurt my knee in high school,” I explained. “I helped Coach Caffrey, my high school head coach, on the sidelines and in the press box during games. My high school teammates started using the nickname. A couple years after I started college, Coach Burton had me help at a football camp. Some of the kids from back home were calling me ‘Coach.’ I was notorious with my college coaching staff for constantly asking why things worked on the field. Coach Burton adopted the nickname immediately when he heard it. The rest of the team started calling me ‘Coach’ when our head coach started using the nickname.”

“Excellent story, Kyle,” Max said. “Work that into the interview when you can. It further illustrates your knowledge and love of football.”

Max asked about my extra-curricular activities. I talked about my Scouting background, working at camp and at college as a lifeguard, and my work with the Dance-a-thon. Max wanted me to emphasize my civic activities. That would be a strong selling point to teams looking to draft me.

Max predicted that teams were likely to ask if I had any questions for them. I needed to be prepared for that. The first question I came up with was when I could get access to the team’s playbook and appropriate video so I could begin preparing to play for the team.

Max suggested asking about nearby rental housing, use of the team's training facilities and if the team would allow me to meet and practice with other players outside the team's OTAs and mini-camps.

Max had me diagram the play he showed me earlier in the mock interview. I diagrammed the basic play on the whiteboard and then started talking about what I expected to see from the defense when they were faced with me in the play. I discussed possible variations on the play and ways we could disguise the play as it unfolded. I was still talking when Max finally said, "Enough, Kyle. You have made the point I wanted you to make. You have a strong grasp of football."

Max, Penny and I reviewed the video tape of my interview and critiqued it some more. We wrapped up the session around 8:30 pm.

"Do you get to go home and relax tomorrow, Max?" I asked as Penny and I put on our coats.

"No, I am flying out to Los Angeles to finalize a deal with my latest signee," Max replied.

"Trevor told me yesterday he signed with you," I said. "Who'd you pick up out in la-la land?"

"I believe you met him," Max said. "Marshon Wilkins decided to work with me."

"Trevor, me and Marshon," I said. "You hit the jackpot this year. The prophets are predicting you have three first round picks."

"Probably, yes," Max agreed. "I have one more thing for you, Kyle. Here is your copy of the representation agreement. I sent copies to your father, your uncle and your attorneys yesterday."

"Excellent," I said. "I will sign it and return it to you as soon as I get word from Blake, Taylor and Mays."

Max called for a cab for our ride home. He escorted us down to the street. He paid the fare and gave a generous tip to the cabby for taking us home. Penny and I were home by 8:45 pm. I reviewed my lesson plans for tomorrow's lecture on the French Revolution. Penny was reading her Anthropology assignment for next Tuesday. My cell phone rang.

"Hello?" I said when I answered the call.

"Is this Kyle Martin?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

"Yes, it is," I acknowledged.

“This is Bob Mazzuca, with the Boy Scouts of America,” the man said.

“Yes Mr. Mazzuca, what can I do for you?” I asked. I still had no idea who the man was.

“I’m the Chief Scout Executive for the BSA,” Mr. Mazzuca replied. “Our charter from Congress requires that the BSA present a report each year. Traditionally we present the report during our anniversary week. I would like you to be part of the delegation that presents the report. Your high national sports profile, the fact that you are an Eagle Scout and that you are an active Scouter and camp staffer make you a natural choice to help with this task.

“When exactly is this presentation?” I asked.

“The delegation will visit prominent sites around Washington, including tour the White House and meet the President,” Mr. Mazzuca answered. “On February 8th, you and the other members of the delegation will formally present the report to the Speaker of the House and the Senate President Pro Tempore. You would be in D. C. from February 3rd to February 9th.”

“Oh my, a whole week?” I answered. “There is no way I can afford to spend a whole week away from school. I am doing my student teaching this semester. The school has already given me a week off so I can attend the Senior Bowl and another two days off for the NFL Combine. I really can’t miss another week of teaching, Mr. Mazzuca.”

“Please, call me Bob,” Mr. Mazzuca replied. “I understand your dilemma. Your education is more important.” He let out a sigh. “I had hoped you would be able to assist Scouting in some manner.”

“I’d love to, if I could,” I replied. “Scouting has made all the difference in my life. If it were something over my spring break or after I graduate, I would be happy to help out Scouting. I owe it so much.”

“Would you be open to doing a public service announcement sometime to promote Scouting?” Mr. Mazzuca asked. “Sports stars really grab the attention of boys.”

“I would be quite happy to do that if we can work out the scheduling,” I replied. “Would you like to include a couple more stars? Jeremy North from Notre Dame and Ed Fritz from Florida received their Eagle the same night as me. I bet they would be willing to help out too.”

“North and Fritz?” Mr. Mazzuca said. “That might be interesting. Do you have contact information for them?” I gave Mr. Mazzuca Ed and Jeremy’s cell phone numbers.

“Do you mind me being nosey?” I asked as we finished the call. “How did you get my name and number?”

“Your Scout Executive suggested you,” Mr. Mazzuca replied.

“Wait until I see Dick Wallace again,” I teased.

“He speaks very highly of you, Kyle,” Mr. Mazzuca said. “The way you handled the publicity when you and your staff rescued that young scout last summer was impressive. The way you handled the press coverage was the reason Dick suggested you for this delegation.”

“I do appreciate the confidence you and Dick displayed in me,” I replied. “I will help when and how I can. Get in touch with me if you want me for the public service announcement. I would be willing to do it if we can work out the schedule.”

“I will keep that in mind, Kyle,” Mr. Mazzuca said. “Have a good evening.”

“You do the same,” I replied before we ended the call. I glanced out the window. The snow showers that my knee predicted had started. The weatherman said it would be under an inch, so I didn’t think much about it. I went back to prepping for tomorrow’s lecture.

I got up at my usual 5:30 am. I glanced out the window. The weatherman was on the mark. There was around an inch of snow blanketing the streets and sidewalks. After my years in State College my only thought was, ‘That’s a pretty scene.’ The phone rang while I was in the shower. Poor Penny had to get up to get it.

“Kyle, it’s for you,” my lover said groggily as she rapped on the bathroom door. I dried off quickly and stomped out to see who would want me at 5:45 am.

“Hello?” I asked wearily.

“Kyle, this is John Waters. I thought I should warn you. School is delayed two hours, thanks to the snow.”

“For this?” I replied. “There’s an inch of snow here. Are you kidding?”

“I have close to three inches here at my house,” John replied. “The school district would rather be safe than sorry.”

“What does this do to our schedule?” I asked. “Do we skip some periods?”

“No, we have all the periods,” John explained. “They shorten the morning periods.” He chuckled. “You will have fourteen minutes to cover the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon.”

“You’re joking,” I said.

“No, I’m not,” John answered. “Do as much of your lecture as you can today. I will finish it up on Monday.”

“I’ll see you at school... a little after nine, right?” I answered.

“Yep, that’s right, Kyle,” John said. “Be careful coming in. Philly drivers are nuts in the snow.”

“Ok, I’ll see you later, John,” I said. I reset the alarm. Why not get a little more sleep now that I had the opportunity?

“What happened?” Penny asked as I climbed back in bed.

“The school has a two hour delay,” I explained. “A dusting of snow and they postpone school. We’d never do that back in State College. The kids would never get to school if we reacted this way every time it snowed there.”

“Enjoy the extra snooze, honey,” Penny replied. “Be careful on the drive to school. Philly drivers are crazy in bad weather.”

“John said that too,” I said before rolling over to nap. The alarm woke Penny and me about 90 minutes later. Penny decided to get up with me. I shaved and brushed my teeth while my lover showered. It felt a little weird sharing a bathroom. Penny and I had been “bedroom intimate” for years. “Bathroom intimate” is different and more personal. I guess we’ll get used to that part of being a couple.

I made eggs and bacon for both of us. I enjoyed a relaxing breakfast instead of my usual hurried affair eaten on the road heading for school. I left at eight o’clock, leaving myself about fifteen minutes extra to deal with the crazy drivers Penny and John warned me about.

Boy, were they right! Cars followed too close. They were spinning out and sliding all over the place. These people had no clue how to drive on slippery roads. Thankfully I managed to stay out of the way of the knuckleheads and get to CHS without wrecking my poor old Golf.

John rushed the kids to their seats at the start of first period and skipped roll call. Still, fourteen minutes of class was pretty ridiculous. I understood the reason for the short classes and that the school would get full credit for a day of school, but it didn’t give John and me much time to accomplish something with the students.

First period, home room and second period flew by – literally. Forty-five minutes after school started I was up front, ready to deliver my first lecture. I wasn’t nervous at all. If

anything, I was a little pissed off that my first lecture was being shortened so much for the piddling little snow we had last night.

Professor Buchanan came in just as I was ready to start. I knew he was coming when my lecture was scheduled for 9:07 to 9:50 am. I wasn't sure if he would be able to make it with the delay. I launched into my talk about Louis XVI, his war debts and his attempts to raise enough taxes to cover the money he spent fighting Great Britain in the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. I talked about how several bad harvests had raised food prices to the point that many Frenchmen went hungry.

I covered the assembly of the Estates-General and how the Third Estate seized control by declaring itself the National Assembly. I glanced at the wall as I began talking about the constitution proposed by the National Assembly and saw I had a minute left before dismissal.

"We will finish this topic on Monday," I said. "I want to give all of you one thing to think about over the weekend. George Washington commanded the troops who inadvertently started the French and Indian War when he marched on Fort Duquesne, now known as Pittsburgh. All of you know he also commanded the American troops in our revolution. France and Louis XVI were deeply in debt thanks to those two wars. Did George Washington cause Louis XVI's fall and beheading?"

"Have a good weekend, everyone," I added. "Mr. Waters will talk more about the French Revolution and whether our founding father ended the *Ancien Régime*. I will see all of you on the 27th, after I get back from the Senior Bowl." My timing was perfect. The dismissal bell rang just as I finished posing my question. The kids filed out. Many of them wished me luck down at the Senior Bowl.

"Nice lecture, Mr. Martin," Alex D'Antonio said as he left. "Good luck at the Senior Bowl. I'll be watching and cheering for you. By the way, Jen says hi."

"Thanks, Alex," I responded. "Wish Jen the best for me. Have a good weekend." I headed to the back of the room to join John and Professor Buchanan. I sat down with them at my table.

"That was a decent first effort, Kyle," John said. "You had a couple odd pauses and a few 'you knows' and 'likes'. It probably is as good a first lecture as I've seen in the fifteen years I've hosted student teachers."

"I concur," Professor Buchanan agreed. "You definitely have places to polish your skills but you do live up to your billing. Your file from CI 495C said you were an accomplished lecturer."

"Thank you," I replied.

"Were you nervous, Kyle?" Professor Buchanan asked.

“Of twenty-seven tenth graders? No, I wasn’t,” I explained. “I catch footballs dropping out of the sky with three hundred pound linemen chasing me and 107,000 fans watching. I taught twenty to thirty Boy Scouts an hour for seven summers. No, I wasn’t nervous about talking with tenth graders about the French Revolution.”

“I’m glad you’re comfortable,” John said.

“Comfortable or not, there is room for improvement,” Professor Buchanan added.

“There always is,” I agreed.

We used the remainder of the abbreviated fourth period to identify where I needed to improve. The fourteen minutes flew by. Professor Buchanan left when the fourth period dismissal bell rang. He had to head over to Upper Merion High School to observe another first lecture. I took my place in the back of the room at my table. We were back to our normal 43 minute periods for the rest of the day. I spent the rest of the day observing John lecture.

John and I met in the back after dismissal. “Good luck at the Senior Bowl, Kyle,” John said. “Give ’em hell down there.”

“Thanks, John,” I replied. “I’ll do my best.”

I headed for Temple to do my work out. I met Jamaal Anderson there. We talked for a couple minutes. He was all packed for our trip tomorrow. I needed to do that after supper. I gave Jamaal a hearty “see you tomorrow,” as I left for home.

After dinner I went out to the copy center near Penn’s campus and had forty copies of my BAC report made. I would be prepared for anyone who questioned me about my arrest. I finished packing after I got back. I didn’t need a lot of clothes. Under Armour sponsored the Senior Bowl and provided nearly all the clothing we would wear during the week.

Penny sent me off with a smile Saturday morning. Not only did we make love twice Friday night, we did it again Saturday morning. I didn’t need to be at the airport until 9:45 am for my flight south. I drove the two of us down to the airport and parked by the outgoing Terminal C unloading area. I gave Penny a good bye kiss before grabbing my bags and heading inside. She gave me a wave as she drove off in my VW.

Ticketing went smoothly. My bags were underweight, so I only owed the normal bag charge. I kept the receipt. The Senior Bowl committee was to cover all my travel expenses. I headed down to the C terminal after I cleared security. I found a sign at

Gate C26 for “Flight 1815, Charlotte, NC”, so I was in the right place. We didn’t have an airplane yet, but it should be arriving shortly.

Jamaal Anderson arrived a few minutes later. I shared my newspaper with him while we waited for our flight. Our airplane arrived about fifteen minutes later. Our gate was momentarily busy while those passengers debarked. Things were still hectic when a voice boomed out, “Hey, there’s Coach!” I turned to see Trevor leading the Penn State contingent up the terminal to our gate.

“Hi, Coach,” “Good to see you, Coach,” and “Hey Coach,” echoed after Trevor’s greeting. I saw Shawn Byrd was following Trevor, followed by Mitch Jackson and... Josh Bruno!

“Josh, what the hell are you doing here?” I asked as my friends reached Jamaal and me. “I thought you didn’t get an invitation to the Senior Bowl.”

“It’s a last minute thing,” Josh explained as the group took seats by Jamaal and me. “Chas Kerry from Colorado dropped out last week. The committee called me to take his place on the North Team.”

“I think they should have invited you from the start,” I replied. “In any case, I’m glad you’re here now.”

“I’m glad to be here,” Josh said.

“Did you guys bring the package for me?” I asked the group.

“We have your helmet with us,” Trevor said. “Relax. We have your back.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that, guys,” I said.

I introduced Trevor, Shawn, Mitch and Josh to Jamaal. We relaxed a bit before heading down the terminal to pick up something for lunch. We finished eating just as they announced boarding for our flight. The flight down to Charlotte lasted around an hour and forty-five minutes. We had to hustle from Terminal B to Terminal C to catch our plane to Mobile.

We found Hal Long talking with two other guys who obviously were also football players. Hal introduced us to Jake Smith from NC State and Clint Brown from Virginia. They were both playing on the South Team. I introduced my crew to Hal and his new friends. We had a half hour wait before we boarded the commuter plane to Mobile.

The plane backed away from the gate a couple minutes ahead of schedule. The pilot got us to Mobile promptly, arriving about four minutes ahead of our scheduled 3:09 arrival time. The nine of us headed for baggage claim. We met up with the driver from the

Senior Bowl. He wasn't hard to find. He was carrying a sign that said, "Senior Bowl Transport."

Our bags came down the line about forty minutes later. Most of the bags were no problem. Four boxes came down the carousel.

"Grab the boxes guys," Trevor directed as they came by.

"What are these?" I asked.

"Larry (our equipment manager) packed the helmets for us," Trevor answered. We waited for a fifth box to come by. We waited five minutes for the box as the carousel delivered the last of the luggage to the passengers.

"Are you sure you remembered my helmet?" I teased.

"Absolutely, Coach," Trevor insisted. "We had five boxes when we checked them in State College."

"We really did, Coach," Shawn confirmed.

"I have three bag claims," Trevor added. "One for my suitcase, one for my helmet and one for yours."

"Whose helmet is missing?" Mitch asked. The guys checked their claims check slips.

"Sorry, Coach. It's yours," Trevor said after he checked the three claim checks he had against his bag and box.

"Fantastic!" I snapped sarcastically.

"There's a claim office over there," Trevor observed. "Let's get this thing sorted out, Coach."

Trevor and I headed over to the small office. A fiftyish African-American woman asked curtly, "What do you need?"

"One of my bags didn't come off my plane," Trevor explained. "We were on Flight 2477. The last of the bags came down the conveyor almost ten minutes ago. It's just not there."

"So, you have the claim ticket?" the lady asked. Trevor handed the ticket to the lady. She made a quick phone call. She pulled a form from her drawer and asked, "What were the contents of the suitcase?"

"It was a box, not a suitcase," Trevor said.

“It has my football helmet in it,” I added. “We’re playing at the Senior Bowl on Saturday. I really need it for the game.” Trevor waved for Shawn to come over. We showed the lady what the box looked like.

“What is the value of the contents of this box?” the lady asked.

“I’m not totally sure,” I replied. “I’ve never had to buy my own helmet. I’d guess somewhere around \$150 or \$200 dollars.”

The phone rang again while she was making notes on the claim. She nodded as she listened to the phone.

“The plane is clear,” the lady said. “The transport is empty and nothing is along the conveyor route. I’m doubt the box made it to Mobile.”

“What happens now?” I asked.

“We will put a search out for the package,” the lady answered. “Where are you staying? We will deliver it to your hotel if we locate it.”

“We’re staying at the Renaissance Riverfront Hotel in Mobile,” I said. The lady took my name and home address too. She promised to send my helmet over as soon as they located it.

We headed out to the van with our driver. I called the Lasch Building back at Penn State as we drove across town to our hotel. Larry, our equipment manager wasn’t in. None of the coaches were around either. They were all out on recruiting visits this weekend. Ann Marie, our receptionist, promised to track down someone and get another helmet sent down to Alabama, ASAP.

The drive over to our hotel was only about fifteen minutes. A representative from the Senior Bowl met us at the door and took us to the hotel front desk to check in. The clerk had about half of us signed into our rooms when we heard a call from behind.

“You guys made it!” We turned and found Jeremy North and Dylan Harris standing behind us. Hal and Jeremy gave each other hugs. I introduced Josh, Jamaal and Shawn to everyone and introduced Dylan and Jeremy to them.

The clerk finished checking us in. We were sent upstairs to the ball room to register for the week. We signed in, received packets of information, a schedule and ID badges on lanyards. We had to wear the ID badges at all times. They gave us access to restricted, players only and team only spaces at the hotel and convention center.

Our guide took us on a short tour of the facilities. He showed us the dining room where we would get most of our meals. There were areas set aside for team meetings, coaches’

offices, media interview rooms, an equipment room and a players' lounge where could relax.

We headed up to our rooms when the tour was done. Jeremy and Hal were sharing a room. Trevor and I were together, as usual. Shawn and Mitch were rooming together. Dylan was waiting for Jim Watkins to arrive from Oregon before he had a roommate. Josh Bruno took the last available slot, rooming with Rodney Hart, the offensive guard from little Slippery Rock University. The big man from the school in western Pennsylvania had turned quite a few heads even though he competed in Division II football.

The hotel set up part of one of the ball rooms as a dining area for the coaching staffs, the teams and other officials of the Senior Bowl. Our group of friends headed downstairs for dinner around 5:30 pm. Our group of Penn State and Notre Dame players stuck together over dinner. Hal, Jamaal and Josh's roommate Rodney hung with us. They were the only representatives from their schools at the Senior Bowl.

Nick Wilson, Terrell Ross, Garrett Bradford and William Johnson came into the dining room a few minutes after us. I waved our former foes over so we could visit. They took the table beside ours, since our table was full. I made sure everyone was introduced to everyone else.

When dinner was nearly over, I pulled the quarterbacks aside. "Nick, Dylan..." I began before remembering Garrett Bradford was a tight end. "You too, Brad. I had an idea that will help all of us this week. You quarterbacks are judged on completing passes. Brad and I get judged on catching passes. We should try to get a little extra work in together so we're all on the same page on Saturday. It will help all of us shine if we do that."

"You're absolutely right, Kyle," Nick agreed.

"Good idea, Kyle," Dylan added.

"I know things get real hectic during the week," I said. "Zack Hayes and Aaron Morano have briefed me on what to expect here. We're going to get sucked into team interviews, press briefings and all kinds of things during the week. We need to get all the North quarterbacks and receivers together and make time to practice together. It WILL pay big dividends on Saturday and when the NFL teams evaluate us."

"You're absolutely right, Kyle," Nick agreed. Brad and Dylan readily agreed too. We talked about when we would have time (and light) to practice. We decided to gather as many receivers and quarterbacks as we could immediately after breakfast tomorrow.

"Who's going to track down the rest of this crew?" Nick asked. "Obviously Kyle and I won't have any trouble with the Big Ten guys."

“I can get the west coast guys,” Dylan said. “I know a lot of them from high school. [Danny] Clay and I did some quarterback camps together back then. I also know [Jalil] Hoge, the kid from San Diego State.”

“How about the Nebraska guys?” Nick asked.

“We played them this year,” I replied. “Why don’t I work on them? I will recognize them. If I need an introduction to anyone, I’m sure Mike Olsen will help me.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Nick said. “Let’s try to get everyone down here to eat breakfast together... say 8:30 am?”

We all agreed. The group decided to head over to the meeting room set up by Under Armour. We passed Coach Baldwin and a number of the Broncos coaching staff heading in for dinner.

“Coach Baldwin, would you have any time tonight for a question or two?” I asked politely. The coach stared at me for a second.

“Martin... right?” Coach Baldwin said hesitantly. He smiled. I nodded my agreement. “Kyle Martin... what can I do for you, Kyle?”

“I had a couple questions and a small matter of concern I want you to be aware of,” I explained. “I don’t want to interrupt your dinner. When would be a good time to stop by to see you?”

“Stop by our team ‘office’,” Coach Baldwin said. “We’re setting up in one of the meeting rooms for our coaching center. Why don’t you stop by around 7:30, Kyle?”

“I’ll do that, Coach,” I replied. “Thanks.”

I caught up with the rest of my friends in the Under Armour room. I was astounded by what I found. The people at the “store” equipped us with underwear, workout clothes, sweat suits and uniforms. I picked up enough clothing for the whole week. I checked out the cleats they had available, but didn’t take any. I brought two pair from Pennsylvania. I would be more comfortable in my familiar cleats than a new pair during the game.

I found the Husker teammates Titus Locke and Roy Wilson and let them know about the plan to meet with the quarterbacks after breakfast tomorrow to begin preparing our passing game for Saturday’s contest. I made it back downstairs just before the 7:30 time Coach Baldwin set for me to see him.

“Kyle, what can I do for you?” Coach Baldwin asked as I stuck my head in the North Team’s coaches’ office.

“I wanted to warn you about a small problem I have,” I began. “The airlines seem to have lost my helmet. I called back to Penn State. The receptionist promised to track down our equipment manager and get another sent as soon as possible. I don’t know how soon it will come. Are we practicing in pads and helmets on Monday?”

“Yes, we are, Kyle,” Coach Baldwin said. “At the worst, you can borrow someone’s for practice if yours isn’t here yet.”

“Mitch Jackson offered to loan me his,” I said. “I doubt we’ll be on the field at the same time.”

“Jackson, the punter from your school?” Coach Baldwin said. “That’s still to be determined. We have fifty-two players, so nearly everyone will put in some time on special teams. Coach Kovacevic has been toying with the idea of using you on punt and kick coverage. Have you ever done that, Kyle?”

“No, I haven’t,” I said. “I’ll be happy to do whatever you want, Coach. I may not be experienced at covering punts and kicks, but I certainly have extensively studied how the coverage is supposed to work. I think I can handle it.”

“The helmet problem is dealt with,” Coach Baldwin said. “Is there anything else you need?”

“I was wondering if it was possible to get a copy of the playbook we will be using,” I answered. “I like to be as prepared as possible. I also was wondering if we will be able to study film of the players on the South team. It helps me a great deal to study the defensive backs that will be covering me.”

“We are still setting up our office,” Coach Baldwin said. “I don’t know if the boxes with the playbooks came off the truck yet. The video study area isn’t set up either.”

“I would be happy to help move things in if you want a hand,” I offered. “I don’t have anything special that I need to do tonight.”

“We’d welcome the help if you want to help carry boxes in,” Coach Baldwin said.

I spent about twenty minutes helping workmen and the quality control coaches carry boxes into the impromptu coaches’ office. I helped rearrange boxes at the direction of the coaching staff. When that was finished one of the coaches remarked, “Did you realize that we share a school connection?”

“You must be Coach Kovacevic,” I said. “I read that you are a Penn State grad too.”

“Yep, I’m one of JoePa’s boys,” Coach Kovacevic acknowledged. “How’s Coach doing?”

“Coach Paterno is great,” I answered. “I guess in a way, I’m a member of the last class of his ‘boys.’ He recruited me and was the one to offer me a scholarship. Coach also helped me when I had trouble in calculus.”

“Education comes first,” Coach Kovacevic said. “I don’t know how many times Coach preached that to us. I understand he monitors academics for the team now.”

“He does,” I confirmed. “He makes sure we stay true to being scholar-athletes.”

“I hear you want to look over the playbook,” Coach Kovacevic said. “I can’t give you one but I can let you study it here. You can have a seat over there out of everyone’s way and study to your heart’s content.” Coach gave me a wink. “Just promise me you will study extra hard when you get to the special teams plays. I suspect you will be executing some of them.”

“Sure, no problem, Coach,” I agreed. I accepted the thin book he offered me. I spent almost two hours studying the playbook. The Bronco’s terminology was different from what I was used to at Penn State, but not too different. The playbook was probably a quarter of the size of the one we had back at State College.

It included more than a few three receiver formations, a fact I found encouraging. I knew Coach Baldwin and the Broncos ran a West Coast offense, so they were used to passing more than they ran. That suited me fine.

“We’re ready to shut down for the evening,” Coach Baldwin commented. “What do you think, Kyle?”

“I love the three receiver formations you have in the playbook,” I answered. “I hope we use them a lot on Saturday. Thanks for letting me get a preview. It will help me on Monday when it’s time to start practicing these plays.”

“No problem, Kyle,” Coach Baldwin replied. “Go get some sleep. You’re going to have a busy week.”

“I’ll do that, Coach,” I agreed. I headed upstairs to my room.

“Where the hell have you been?” Trevor asked when I got to our room.

“I was down in the coaches’ office,” I replied. “They let me go over the playbook for a while.”

“I should have guessed,” Trevor responded. “What did you find out?”

“The playbook is pretty slim,” I answered. “We shouldn’t have too much trouble learning it in a week.”

Trevor and I headed down for breakfast around 8:20 on Sunday morning. Jeremy and Hal joined us. We went through the breakfast line, turned and looked for a place to sit. Dylan Harris stood up and waved for us. He had a large group with him at his table. My friends and I headed for their table.

I recognized Titus Locke, Roy Wilson and Casey Kerrigan with Dylan Harris, Nick Wilson, Garrett Bradford. I did not recognize the last person at the table. Four seats were left at the table.

“Kyle suggested getting all the passing game players together,” Dylan said. “We’re expecting Danny Clay too. Do you mind sitting somewhere else, Jeremy?”

“Coach is at it again,” Jeremy teased. “Let’s go find a table for defensive players.”

I took a seat with the others. “Do you know everyone?” Nick asked.

“Obviously I know Titus and Roy,” I replied. I recruited the wide receiver and tight end from Nebraska for the morning’s practice last night. “I know Casey too,”

“Hey, Kyle, how’s it going?” Casey asked as he reached across the table to shake my hand.

“Is anyone else expected?” I asked.

“Danny Clay should be along any minute,” Dylan said. “Jalil [Hoge] didn’t see a need to get up this early. Pierre Kowalski [from Boise State] won’t be here until later this morning.”

“Stephen Jarrett [WR, Minnesota] and Kevin Pettis [TE, Marshall] won’t be here ‘til later this morning,” Nick added.

We talked for a couple minutes as we ate breakfast before Danny joined us. Danny Clay was from Stanford. We talked about where to do our workout. Casey suggested using the park across the street from the hotel. His room overlooked the park and river. We talked about the sorts of routes we should work on.

“Do you think the Broncos staff will have us run some version of the West Coast offense?” Casey speculated. “I’ve heard it’s a real bear to learn.”

“You’re right about the West Coast offense,” I agreed. “I keep in touch with both Brady Rasmussen, the Broncos quarterback, and Zack Hayes in Green Bay. They’ve told me a little about the West Coast offense and it is complex. We’d never master it in a week. They have a simplified offense for us.”

“How did you learn that?” Nick asked.

“I talked with our coaches last night,” I explained. “Coach Kovacevic let me look over our playbook in the coaches’ offices for a couple hours last evening.”

“Very cagey,” Nick replied. “I’m impressed, Kyle. Tell us what you learned.”

I discussed the plays I found last night with the rest of the passing game players as we finished breakfast. The nine of us headed across the street to the small riverfront park beside the convention center. We spent most of the morning outside, getting to know each other and get used to working together. Jalil Hoge joined us later in the morning.

The group headed back to the hotel around 11:30 to clean up before lunch. I rejoined my Penn State and Paradise friends for lunch. Physicals were scheduled for the afternoon. My appointment was for 1:30 pm.

The doctor checked me top to bottom, paying particular attention to my left knee. I didn’t get any results from the doctor but I knew the thirty-two NFL teams would get copies of it.

ESPN, the NFL Network and Fox all interviewed me in the media room later that afternoon. Jeff Morgan from the Philadelphia Inquirer interviewed me too. Their questions were pretty general and my answers were generic. What was there really to talk about? Yes, I plan to play in the NFL. No, I have no idea who I will play for. I was excited to be there.

I managed to get a little time in the player’s lounge. Jeremy, Hal, Trevor and I got to reconnect with Ed Fritz’s roommate, Eric Peters. Eric introduced us to his Florida teammates, Nate Thornton and Da’Norris Brewer.

I expected to be seeing Nate during the game. He played cornerback and was considered to be one of the best cornerbacks on the South Team. Da’Norris was going to see more of Trevor. He was a right offensive tackle for Florida.

The players’ lounge was set up with a couple pool tables, foosball tables and half a dozen game stations. Trevor and I took on Kyle Cunningham and Vaughn Gilbert from Alabama in foosball. Kyle was the South’s punter, who I met in December in Orlando. Vaughn was one of the South’s quarterbacks. I stayed clear of the game stations. I was way too out of practice to go up against most of the other guys. I spent my time away from football during college studying, not playing video games.

I got time to talk with Eldon Burkholder. I introduced him to some of my friends from home. Jeremy and Eldon speculated if they might be related. Jeremy’s grandmother was a Burkholder.

Just about all of the 104 players were assembled by dinner time. The Oakland and Denver coaching staffs ate dinner with us in our dining room. We had a little free time after dinner. Nick, Dylan and I collected Kevin Pettis, Stephen Jarrett and Pierre Kowalski and introduced them to the rest of the passing corps.

Both teams reassembled over in the convention center at 7:45 pm for our first meeting of the week. Senior Bowl President Steve Hale welcomed us and gave us a half hour orientation about the Senior Bowl. We were dismissed to meet with our team's coaching staff after the introduction.

The North Team met in another room in the convention center. I looked over the room as the fifty-two of us assembled for the first time. We represented the cream of NCAA football players. There were 20-25,000 seniors that played NCAA football at some level last season. We were some of the very best of that group.

Catching the eye of the scouts and coaches was going to be extremely difficult. The caliber of competition Saturday wouldn't NFL caliber, but it would be damn close. Virtually every one of us was going to be on an NFL team next fall.

Coach Wilkins reviewed our schedule for the week. Coach cautioned us to treat the week as a business trip. We were there to show the NFL our capabilities. Scouts, coaches and owners would be scrutinizing us every minute of the day.

Coach Baldwin introduced us to the Broncos coaching staff. Of note to me were: Craig Holt, the offensive coordinator; Chris Frank, the wide receivers coach and Brian Kovacevic, the special teams coordinator who I met last night.

The coaches handed out playbooks to everyone. Coach Wilkins asked us to spend our free time between now and 2:45 pm tomorrow studying the playbook. We would be expected to know what was going on at our first practice.

My friends and I headed back to our rooms after the team meeting. We had a lot of studying to do.

Monday morning after breakfast, everyone headed across the skyway for the National Scouting Weigh-in in the convention center. It was the single most embarrassing thing I ever did in my eight years in football. All 104 players paraded one by one in front of close to 300 NFL owners, executives, scouts and coaches in nothing but thigh length boxer-briefs. I had to strut across the front of the auditorium in the convention center with every eye scrutinizing me. I felt like a model on the runway at a swim suit show.

I weighed in at 212 pounds. They confirmed my height to be 6'-4 5/8". My arm length was 34 1/2". My hand span was an even 10". The Senior Bowl officials announced my stats to the crowd as they were recorded.

“Look at the people here,” Jeremy commented when he finished his turn. “There’s Andy Reid... Jerry Jones... Bill Belichick... the Harbaugh brothers... the Ryan brothers... Pete Carroll... Al Davis...”

“I know,” I agreed. “It doesn’t seem real to be here. We’re dreaming, aren’t we?”

“It’s not like in my backyard when we were eight,” Jeremy said. Back then we pretended to be Bret Favre, Troy Aikman or Brian Uhlacher when Ed, Hal, Jeremy and I played together back home. “Think any little kids will dream of being ‘Coach Martin or me?’”

“I have no idea,” I responded. “It’s hard to imagine.”

It took quite awhile to go from the first, Chris Allen, the center from Georgia the whole way through the alphabet to Ahmad Yount, the defensive linemen from Southern Arkansas. Thankfully we didn’t need to stay in our skivvies the entire time, just while we were up for measurement.

We headed back to the hotel for lunch. I stopped off at the hotel front desk and asked if any packages had been delivered for me. I checked the Senior Bowl staff suite too. They hadn’t seen a package with my helmet. I dialed the front desk at the Lasch Building.

“Hello, Ann Marie?” I said. “This is Kyle Martin down at the Senior bowl. Did you track down Larry and have him ship me another helmet?”

“Yes, Kyle. Larry came in Saturday afternoon and boxed another helmet for you,” Ann Marie replied. “Anders Voight took it to FedEx for me and shipped it ‘Next Morning, Guaranteed’ for you. You should have it by now.”

“Thank you, Ann Marie,” I replied. “Thank Anders and Larry for me. I owe all of you.” I took a deep breath. “Now all I have to do is figure out where it is down here.”

“I can help there,” Ann Marie replied. “I have the billing slip. I can track the package for you.” It took Ann Marie a minute or so to come back on. “A Mr. John Arendall signed for it.”

“Thanks again, Ann Marie,” I replied.

“Good luck at the game on Saturday, Kyle,” she answered before hanging up.

I checked back at Player Relations. Mr. Jones was there. “I need to find John Arendall,” I explained. “He received the replacement for the helmet the airlines lost on the way down. Do you know where I can find him?”

“Sure, John went to lunch already,” Mr. Jones replied. He glanced at his watch. “I’m ready to go over myself. Walk with me. I will introduce him to you.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that, sir,” I answered.

“Call me Charlie,” he said with a smile. I followed him over to the training table. He led me to a table near the front. “John, I have someone who is looking for you.” The man stood.

“What can I do for you?” he asked politely.

“I’m Kyle Martin,” I explained. “You received a package from Penn State for me this morning. I wanted to pick it up.”

“Relax, Kyle,” Mr. Arendall said. “I knew the airlines lost your helmet. The box was clearly marked, ‘Senior Bowl Helmet.’ I sent it over to your locker room at the stadium. You’re all set to go.”

“Excellent!” I answered as I shook his hand. “Thank you so much for your help.”

“No problem, Kyle,” Mr. Arendall said. “We wouldn’t want you playing football without a helmet. That wouldn’t impress the scouts.”

I went through the chow line and joined my friends from home and Penn State. It was great to spend time with both high school and college teammates. Both teams loaded up on buses and headed out for practice. We went to the Ladd-Peebles Stadium in downtown Mobile. The South Team headed across the bay to the Fairhope Municipal Stadium.

We all found our lockers inside the locker room. The lockers were assigned alphabetically. I found my spot two locker down from Hal Long, beside Larry Marecic. Danny McNeil and Rick Murray were between me and Jeremy.

We got dressed. It felt weird having all new equipment. At least the shirts were blue. I looked the jersey over. “MARTIN” was stitched over my number 87. This was the first time in my career that I had a jersey with my name on it. At Penn State, team is always more important than the individual. Here, not quite as much.

“Anybody got some tape?” I queried to the guys near me. Hal tossed me some trainer’s tape. “How about a marker?” I asked after Hal gave me the tape.

“What’s up, Coach?” Jeremy asked as he tossed a red broad tip marker down to me.

“Just one of my traditions,” I replied. I wrote the number 82 on the tape and adhered it to the inside crown of my helmet.

“82?” Jeremy asked. “How long have you been doing that?”

“Since my first college game,” I said.

“Toss me the tape and marker when you’re done,” Jeremy said.

“I’ll take it too,” Hal added. Jeremy added the tape to the inside of his helmet before tossing the tape and marker down to Hal.

“What is that about, Kyle?” Larry Marecic asked.

“We’re remembering a high school teammate who was killed by a drunk driver,” I explained. “He was supposed to play at Boston College after high school. He didn’t make it there.”

“That’s quality thing to do,” Larry said. “Gimme the stuff when you’re done, Long,”

“You lose a teammate too?” I asked.

“Nah... my best friend from elementary school,” Larry said. “He got blown away in a drive-by when we were twelve.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“It sucks to lose a friend,” Larry said. “Drunk driver... drive by... gone is gone. It’s good you remember your friend.”

“Yeah... yeah, it is,” I agreed.

The quality control coaches for the Broncos came through the locker room and hustled everyone. Coach Baldwin wanted to have as much time on the field as possible that afternoon.

The Ladd-Peebles Stadium was a smallish stadium, at least by my standards. It seated around 42,000 people. I was surprised at the crowd our first practice drew. Hundreds of people lined the sidelines and the first few rows of seats. Scouts, coaches, GMs, owners and press waited for us to get started.

Coach Baldwin ran practice crisply. We stretched, warmed up and went straight to work. The coaches substituted players in frequently as we reviewed and practiced the slim playbook. The ninety minute practice went quickly. The Broncos coaches spent most of their time instructing us, quite different from what I was used to the last couple years in college. They were downright dogmatic about correct technique. Coach Frank didn’t need to correct me too many times. The other receivers received quite a bit of direction. My timing wasn’t down with Dylan, Danny or Nick yet, but we were getting there. I had one sweet reception of Nick’s pass near the end of practice that would have gone for a TD, if Coach Holt hadn’t blown the play dead after I picked up twenty-five yards.

Some members of the crowd watching the practice were fans, not team officials. The gates were opened when practice was over. I greeted some fans on my way off the field. A gentleman in his late thirties stopped me.

“Do you have a minute, Kyle?” he asked.

“Sure, would you like an autograph?” I asked.

“No, I’m Jim Stewart with the Dolphins,” the man explained. “I wanted to see if we could sit down and talk later this evening after the media dinner is done at the battleship.”

“Sure,” I agreed. Mr. Stewart handed me his card.

“Why don’t we meet in the lobby at nine o’clock tonight,” Mr. Stewart said. “We can find somewhere quiet to talk after we meet.”

I thought my meeting might be something special. Jeremy and Hal both had been contacted by teams for interviews too.

We cleaned up and headed back to the hotel to prepare for dinner. Buses took us over to the Battleship Alabama for Media Night. The ship had a big buffet line set up for us in a large tent on the fantail by the aircraft catapult.

Superficially the ship looked very similar to the Battleship New Jersey that I toured last spring. I also knew the New Jersey was a year newer (1943 vs. 1942) and 185 feet longer than the Alabama. The stern of the ship where we had dinner looked identical to the New Jersey. The extra length of the Iowa class battleships, like the New Jersey, went into the long, sleek bows of the ships.

The Senior Bowl committee took interview requests from the media and did introductions. I was an extremely popular interview subject. The first nine interviews with Pennsylvania media and some of the national media went well. The tenth... well, judge for yourself.

Anthony Edward Brown, the young reporter from ESPN, was introduced to me. He had interviewed me before the BCS Championship game earlier in the month. Everyone knew Brown. He had a brilliant, though brief career with the Patriots, helping them clinch one of their too many Super Bowls. His career ended with a devastating knee injury that sidelined him for two years and ultimately cost him his wide receiving career. Anthony had taken to journalism and broadcast the same way he attacked defensive backs when he played.

I should have been wary, but I wasn’t. Anthony had been friendly and fair a few weeks earlier. We started talking about wide receiver things, technical details of our craft that I knew wouldn’t make it into any broadcast. Anthony asked me a few generic questions,

which I answered easily. Then came the curve ball – except it didn't look like one to begin with.

“What team would you prefer to play for, Kyle?” Anthony asked.

“I don't have a preference,” I said. That was my normal answer to that question.

“C'mon, surely you must have somebody you rooted for when you were a kid?” Anthony retorted. “Who is it? You must have a team poster or pennant on your bedroom wall back home.” I shook my head no. “How about a player's jersey?” I couldn't suppress the smile when I remembered the lengths Penny went to, to get me a Donovan McNabb jersey when we were in high school. Anthony caught the smile. “Who is it?”

“My fiancée got me a Donovan McNabb jersey for Christmas when we were dating back in high school,” I explained. “It still has the tear where Michael Strahan tried to sack Donovan.”

“It's the real thing? Not a replica?” Anthony asked.

“Zack Hayes' brother Sam was a backup with the Eagles back then,” I said. “He helped my fiancée get the jersey.”

“It wouldn't bother you at all if the Eagles drafted you?” Anthony asked.

“No, it would be a boyhood dream come true,” I answered. “Not that it's likely to happen. With DeSean Jackson, Jeremy Maclin and Jason Avant, the Eagles have one of the best receiving corps in the NFL. I would be superfluous there. I expect to be drafted by some other team. Hopefully a team that can use my particular skill set.”

“What skills do you believe you bring to a team?” Anthony asked.

“My speed is my biggest asset,” I said. “I can stretch the field for whichever team drafts me. I can open up a lot of possibilities for an offense. I'm pretty good catching in traffic too. Penn State has used me extensively that way. I can be physical when I need to be, too.”

“That linebacker at Nebraska found that out,” Anthony confirmed. “Are you ready for NFL caliber opposition? How do you think you'll stack up against a top cornerback?”

“I'll guess we'll see in a few months,” I said. “Of course I already have practiced and played against a two time Pro Bowl cornerback, Aaron Morano.”

“Morano? He was a teammate of yours,” Anthony commented. “When did you play against him?”

“We faced each other in high school,” I said. “Aaron got the best of me that day. It sparked my drive to improve myself. I hated losing to him.”

“High school? That must have been quite a few years ago,” Anthony asked.

“Seven years ago,” I confirmed.

“Don’t you think Morano has learned a few things since he was in high school?” Anthony asked. “What makes you think you are up to facing that caliber of opponent now?”

“I’ve learned quite a few things since I was in high school too,” I countered. “Am I ready to take on Aaron now? I don’t know, but I intend to find out next fall.”

“You talked about finding a team that fits your skill set,” Anthony said. “Do you have teams that you don’t want to play for? Teams that don’t fit your skill set?”

“Obviously I can’t help teams that need defensive help,” I said. “I can’t help teams whose biggest needs are offensive linemen, running backs or quarterbacks.”

“I’m told you’re an astute student of the game. You watch NFL games on TV,” Anthony said. I nodded in agreement. “Which teams have needs that your skills won’t meet?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I haven’t made a list.”

“What happens if the Redskins, the Lions, the Chiefs or the Raiders draft you?” Anthony pressed. “Would you play for Al Davis? You know how much he loves the vertical passing game.”

“That’s all hypothetical,” I replied. “My fiancée, my agent, my family and I will deal with whoever drafts me in April, after I know which team has my rights.”

“Is there a chance you wouldn’t play football if the wrong team drafts you?” Anthony asked.

“Anything is possible,” I admitted. “I will have a degree in education and a teaching certificate by the end of the school year.”

“Give up millions in the NFL and teach school?” Anthony asked incredulously. I nodded yes. “What teams are on your list of team that you won’t play for?”

“I don’t have a list,” I insisted. My patience was wearing thin. “I look forward to meeting with any team that is interested in me and talking with them. After the draft my future wife and I will decide whether I teach and live in Philly with her or go play in the NFL.”

“Which teams would drive you away from millions of dollars?” Anthony queried. “Give me the list.”

“I don’t have a list,” I snapped. “I think we’re done talking, Anthony.”

“Thank you for your time, Kyle,” Anthony answered.

I walked away to get distance from the annoying reporter. Trevor caught part of the exchange. “You let that guy get under your skin,” Trevor commented.

“He kept pressing me for a list of teams that I will refuse to play for,” I explained. “I don’t have a list like that.”

“Keep things cool with the press, the way Max told us,” Trevor replied. “I assume he gave you the same media advice he gave me.”

“I would assume so,” I agreed.

Buses took us back to the hotel soon after I wrapped my ESPN interview. We had to drop our jerseys off at the convention center and then headed back to our rooms. I had half an hour to study the playbook before my meeting with Mr. Stewart with the Dolphins.

I found Mr. Stewart downstairs in the lobby at nine o’clock. He took me upstairs to a sitting area outside the ballrooms. The interview was quite informal, compared to what Max prepared me for. Mr. Stewart asked me about myself, my family, Penny and my schooling. He asked me to describe how I injured my knee, how I rehabbed it and what effect it had on me since the injury.

We talked about my arrest for drunken driving and resisting arrest. I gave him a copy of the BAC report. He seemed satisfied with my explanation. We actually talked very little about football. We finished the interview in twenty minutes. Mr. Stewart thanked me for my time. I thanked him for his interest.

I headed back up to my room. Trevor came in a few minutes later, totally stoked. His interview was set up with a scout from the Jets. Coach Rex Ryan ended up joining the interview team. Coach Ryan was just as colorful in real life as he appeared on TV.

Trevor flipped on ESPN for background while we went back to studying our playbooks. Sports Center came on soon after we laid down to study. They had a segment on the Senior Bowl practice soon after the broadcast started. The camera crew had been at Ladd-Peebles that afternoon. The video was of the North Team. They had a good shot of Trevor when he broke loose one play and nearly nailed Danny Clay. My buddy let up, wrapping his arms around the QB in a bear hug, seeing as Danny was wearing a red jersey. If it had been a real game, well... that hit would have hurt. The final clip they showed was my almost touchdown near the end of practice.

One of the anchors reported, “Our Anthony Edward Brown met with Maxwell Award winning wide receiver Kyle Martin this evening to talk about his future plans.”

“Thank you, Mike,” Anthony began on TV. “The NFL’s teams are excited at the prospect of drafting wide receiver Kyle Martin. His speed and explosiveness have drawn notice around the league. I asked Kyle about his preference about which team drafts him”

“I don’t have a preference,” my image on TV replied.

“C’mon, surely you must have somebody you rooted for when you were a kid?” Anthony retorted. “Who is it?” Brown cut the first part of my response to his question.

“My fiancée got me a Donovan McNabb jersey for Christmas when we were dating back in high school,” I explained. “It still has the tear where Michael Strahan tried to sack Donovan.”

“It wouldn’t bother you at all if the Eagles drafted you?” Anthony asked.

“No, it would be a boyhood dream come true,” I answered. Brown cut more of my answer and went straight to the end of my response. “I expect to be drafted by some other team. Hopefully a team that can use my particular skill set.”

“What skills do you believe you bring to a team?” Anthony asked.

“My speed is my biggest asset,” I said. “I can stretch the field for whichever team drafts me. I can open up a lot of possibilities for an offense.”

Anthony asked, “Are you ready for NFL caliber opposition? How do you think you’ll stack up against a top cornerback?”

“I’ll guess we’ll see in a few months,” I said. “Of course I already have practiced and played against a two time Pro Bowl cornerback, Aaron Morano.”

“We faced each other in high school,” I said. “Aaron got the best of me that day. It sparked my drive to improve myself. I hated losing to him.”

“Don’t you think Morano has learned a few things since he was in high school?” Anthony asked. “What makes you think you are up to facing that caliber of opponent now?”

“I’ve learned quite a few things since I was in high school too,” I countered.

Brown cut more before asking, “Do you have teams that you don’t want to play for? Teams that don’t fit your skill set?”

“Obviously I can’t help teams that need defensive help,” I said. “I can’t help teams whose biggest needs are offensive linemen, running backs or quarterbacks.”

Anthony pressed. “Would you play for Al Davis? You know how much he loves the vertical passing game.”

“That’s all hypothetical,” I replied. He cut the rest where I talked about discussing things with my family and Penny.

“Is there a chance you wouldn’t play football if the wrong team drafts you?” Anthony asked.

“Anything is possible,” I admitted. “I will have a degree in education and a teaching certificate by the end of the school year.” He cut more of our exchange where I indicated I would consider playing for any team.

“After the draft my future wife and I will decide whether I teach and live in Philly with her or go play in the NFL.”

“There you have it, Mike,” Brown said. “Kyle Martin – an exciting talent or another prima donna on the way to NFL?”

“Ouch!” Trevor commented when the clip finished.

“That is a total hatchet job,” I snapped. “Half the interview was him pressing me to name teams I didn’t want to play for. He cut everything out where I talked about being willing to play for whichever team drafts me.”

“Well, that sucks,” Trevor commented. “I bet that asshole doesn’t have nerve to try to interview me.” My cell phone rang, interrupting Trevor’s rant.

“Hello?” I asked when I punched the Answer button.

“Kyle, this is Max,” Max Solomon replied. “We need to talk... right now. That segment on Sports Center is NOT good.”

“That report was a hatchet job,” I insisted.

“Sit tight,” Max commanded. “I’m coming over right now to plan our response.”

“Where are you, Max?” I asked.

“I’m at the Holiday Inn a few blocks down the street,” Max replied. “Hang loose until I get there. No press interviews.”

“Got it, Max,” I agreed. “I’ll see you shortly.”

(To be continued)

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My cell phone rang a minute after I hung up with Max Solomon. “May I invite Marshon Wilkins to come over to your room, Kyle?” Max asked. “I need to give you my PR 201 lecture, and it would be easier for me if Trevor and Marshon got the lecture at the same time.”

“That would be fine, Max,” I agreed. Marshon arrived a couple minutes before Max.

“Malo and I were watching Sport Center,” Marshon said as I welcomed him to my room. “You stepped into some shit tonight, didn’t you, Kyle?”

“Yes, I did,” I agreed. Trevor, Marshon and I talked for the couple minutes it took Max to arrive. Marshon and his roommate and ex-USC teammate Malo Kaapana were playing for the South Team this week.

I let Max in when he knocked at the door. He sat in the one chair in our room. Trevor, Marshon and I sat on the beds.

“I knew I would be having this lecture with the three of you eventually,” Max began. “The media needs to be fed. This vexation is not unusual. Brief me in full detail what questions Brown asked you and how you responded during your interview, Kyle.”

I explained how the interview went, blow by blow. I protested the cuts Brown made in my answers but Max cut me off.

“Brown has a job to do,” Max explained, waving off my objections. “You wouldn’t fault a cat for catching a mouse. Why would you fault a reporter for doing what he perceives as his job? How long was the interview he did with you?”

“Probably fifteen or twenty minutes,” I answered.

“His report lasted thirty seconds,” Max said. “Do you three see how a reporter, any broadcast reporter, will have to cut your answers down to fit the time and space available?” Trevor, Marshon and I nodded yes. “Kyle, you gave Brown long, nuanced answers when he needed short answers.”

“But he edited them in a way to make me look bad,” I protested.

“He edited them to fit the time he had and to make the story attract viewers,” Max countered. “Attracting viewers is his job. Contention attracts viewers. You need to understand the reporter’s motivation when you talk with him.”

“OK, I guess I see,” I admitted.

Max looked around at all three of us. “Have any of you taken a journalism course?” He got three head shakes no.

“I dated a journalism major for two years,” I added.

“Did she ever talk about how to write a news story?” Max asked. She hadn’t. “You always start with the most important point at the beginning of the story. You three need to do the same thing when you do broadcast interviews. Give the reporter his short, sound bite answer up front. It is fine to expound on that answer. The reporter may or may not use the rest of your answer, but you put the most important part out first.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Max,” I replied. “What do we do now about this hatchet job report that’s out for the world to see?”

“I hope he asks me for an interview,” Trevor bristled. “I’ll rip the dick a new asshole!”

“No, that would not be good,” Max countered. “Never get in a shouting match with someone with a microphone. You will lose.”

“We can’t ignore this, Max,” Marshon said. “I can talk with the west coast players I know. This Brown turkey shouldn’t get any interviews at all this week.”

“We need to be more subtle,” Max said. “If Brown comes to you directly for an interview, be polite but be busy. ‘I am sorry,’ you say. ‘I am needed over here.’ As you turn and walk off, add this, ‘Give Max Solomon, my agent, a call. You can set up an interview time with me through him.’ Walk off and get clear of this reporter.”

“OK, I can do that,” I agreed. Trevor and Marshon agreed too. “What do I say tomorrow when other reporters question me about Brown’s interview?”

“What do you see as the biggest issues arising from the interview, Kyle?” Max asked.

“I see two problems,” I responded. “The first is him calling me a prima-donna. The second is the idea that I might not play in the NFL.”

“How about disrespecting a Pro-Bowl cornerback?” Max added.

“Disrespecting Aaron?” I replied. “Good grief! I would never disrespect Aaron. He’s a close friend. He’s been my mentor for the past four years. He inspired me to study football properly and turn myself into more than a speed receiver.”

“That is exactly the correct answer if any reporter questions you about your comments on competing with Aaron,” Max said. “What are you going to say WHEN you get questioned about your intent to play in the NFL?”

“I got that answer covered,” I said confidently. “I am looking forward to playing in the NFL. I wouldn’t come to play in the Senior Bowl if I didn’t plan to go into the NFL. I wouldn’t have scheduled days off from my student teaching so I could go to the NFL Combine. I certainly wouldn’t have picked my wedding date to miss the NFL mini-camps, off season training activities and the Rookie Symposium if I didn’t plan to play in the NFL.”

“That is not a bad answer,” Max allowed. “Put the answers in the positive. ‘I am at the Senior Bowl because I plan to play in the NFL’ and ‘I scheduled days off from student teaching so I can go to the NFL Combine next month.’ Does that make sense?”

“Positive answers... I got it, Max,” I agreed. “What do I do with the prima donna question?”

“I do not expect the reporters to be that direct with you, Kyle,” Max explained. “How would they ask the question? I believe that question is more than likely to go to one of your teammates. How would you answer that question, Trevor?”

“Kyle is the farthest thing from a prima donna,” Trevor answered. “No one on the Nittany Lions is more team oriented than Coach. I’ve watched from the sidelines after he successfully caught a pass and go back to the huddle and chew out the quarterback for throwing him the ball when someone else could have done more with the ball. Coach is all about playing football the right way, whether that means he gets the ball or some other receiver does.”

“That will do,” Max agreed. “What WILL the other Penn State players say who are here? Do you have any enemies among these men, Kyle?”

“Shawn and Josh are close friends,” I answered. “I’ve known Mitch for almost four years. We’re not close buddies, but we get along fine. I don’t see him running me down if the press asks about me.”

“That is positive,” Max said. We spent a couple more minutes going over pointers to help the three of us handle press questions better. Max wished us a good night and headed back down the street to his hotel. Marshon told me not to worry. He’d watch my back too.

My friends were supportive at breakfast. All of them saw Brown’s report last night. Jeremy’s attitude summed up the feelings of the rest of the group. “That SOB Brown better not show his face anywhere near me. I’m going to clock him if he does.” I suspected somewhere between a quarter and a half of the North Team planned to shun interviews with the guy.

The North Team was assigned to the morning practice session at Ladd-Peebles. The first half of practice went much the same as yesterday. We wrapped up practicing all the plays in our playbook. The last forty minutes of practice was dedicated to special teams practice. Coach Kovacevic used Jalil Hoge, Titus Locke, D. J. Wright and me to handle the punt and kick returns.

Coach Kovacevic had me handle a couple kickoff returns and a couple punt returns during practice. I also found out what Coach Kovacevic was talking about on Sunday night. He assigned me to be one of the gunners for the kick and punt cover teams.

I was in for two punt returns that afternoon. I managed to blow up D. J. Wright on the second one, holding him to a two yard return. It was fun getting to hit somebody instead of always being on the receiving end of the hits.

Half a dozen reporters hit me with questions at the end of practice. Max's tutorial the night before was spot on. I assured all the questioners that I intended to play in the NFL. I got the "dissing Pro Bowler Aaron Morano" question too. I gave them the answers Max helped me prepare last night. No one had the nerve to ask me, even indirectly, about Brown's question whether I was a prima donna or not.

Three teams sought me out and asked for interviews after practice. Scouts from the Rams and Ravens lined up interviews with me. I would meet with the Rams at 4:00 pm and the Ravens at 8:30 that evening. I was walking back towards the locker room, thinking I was finished, when another gentleman stopped me.

"Do you have a minute, Kyle?" someone asked. I turned and found 49ers head coach, Jim Harbaugh, standing behind me smiling.

"Sure, Coach. When would be good?" I answered. We talked for a bit. We couldn't find common time that day. We agreed to meet at 3:30 tomorrow afternoon, after my position meeting.

Meeting one of Harbaugh brothers was way cool. I had heard about both John and Jim growing up; John from his association with my favorite team, the Eagles, and Jim through his work at Stanford and then at the 49ers. Aaron spoke highly of his coach.

Trevor, Shawn, Josh, Mitch, Jeremy, Hal and Dylan joined my table at lunch time. The Michigan contingent sat down at the table beside ours. We were talking about who interviewed us after practice.

"I couldn't believe how many questions I got about Kyle this morning," Jeremy commented. "I got ten variations on the question, 'Is Kyle a diva?' Can you believe it?"

"I got it too," Shawn replied. "What bullshit! Coach is the most team oriented player on the Lions. He's always helping other guys improve their techniques. Why do you think everyone calls him 'Coach'?"

“I’ve only known Kyle since New Year’s Eve, but I’ve never seen any sign of him being a me-first egotist,” Dylan added. “This week when Kyle wanted to work out with the QBs, he suggested everyone would benefit. If Brown were right, Kyle would have been trying to get Danny, Nick and me to practice with just him, not the whole receiving corps.”

“You’re right, Dylan,” Garrett Bradford agreed. “I know the session Sunday morning is helping me when I’m with you and Danny. We’ve had more time together on Sunday morning than both our practices together. Kyle pushing all of us to prep together was good for everyone. There is nothing self-serving about it.”

“If that bastard Brown gets away with pulling this shit on Kyle,” Dylan added, “he can get away with pulling it on any of us. I don’t think that SOB should get an interview from anybody.”

“Damn straight!” Nick agreed. “We all stick together!”

“I appreciate the support, guys,” I responded.

“Don’t worry, Coach,” Shawn added. “We got your back.”

“Thanks, guys. I appreciate that,” I replied.

Conversation turned to the topic of rookie hazing. We all knew the veterans on whatever team we joined would be putting us new guys in our place. That led to stories from our introduction four or five years ago to college football. Trevor told about J. T. Hill hoisting me by my collar and screaming at me during a freshman year practice when he thought I wasn’t paying enough attention.

The other guys had stories about episodes when they were starting out with their college teams. The other guys’ experiences were much like those of my teammates. It reminded me of our similarities, even though we played for teams from all across the country.

The North Team offense met after lunch to review our plans for the game on Saturday before breaking up for position meetings. Coach Frank went over video of the first two days practices. He spent most of the time discussing and correcting techniques as he reviewed our practices. I enjoyed learning about receiving from a different perspective.

Don’t misunderstand, I loved working with Coach Caffrey the past year, but I hadn’t gotten any fresh ideas on being a wide receiver since coming to Penn State. It was time for me to move on and learn some fresh things from different coaches.

I met Russ Evans, the scout from the Rams, on the second floor mezzanine level. He brought Bill Devaney, the general manager, along to interview me. We found a quiet area and talked for about twenty minutes. I enjoyed the talk. They asked about my high

school knee injury and my arrest when I was a junior. They seemed satisfied with my explanations on both matters. When they asked me if I had questions, I hit them with the ‘When can I get a playbook?’ question. That drew a smile from Mr. Devaney.

It was a good interview. I could see myself playing with Sam Bradford. He was turning into a pretty good NFL quarterback in spite of the protection problems they had last year. Mr. Devaney indicated they were very interested in me if their free agent signing plans came through the way they hoped. They planned to pick up one of the available free agent offensive linemen to solidify their offensive line. They wanted to add a receiver like me to the team to increase Sam’s effectiveness.

Trevor was excited at dinner. He had an excellent interview with Mike Tannenbaum and Rex Ryan. The sting from what Tom Brady did to their team three days ago in the conference championship game was still quite fresh. The Jets were looking for a high motor, athletic defensive end to pressure opposing quarterbacks.

Trevor felt he had exactly the skills they were looking for. The draft pundits were expecting him to be taken in the mid to late first round of the draft. The Jets had a weaker record than Chicago, who lost to the Vikings Sunday evening, so they would be picking 29th in the draft. Maybe he could end up on that very solid team with an aggressive coach who loved rushing the passer.

After dinner I met with Nick, Dylan, Danny and about half the offensive skill players. We spent most of the evening reviewing the playbook and getting familiar with the plays we would be running. People came and went from the informal meeting as they had interviews with the teams or with the media.

I took off at 8:25 for my meeting with Mr. Tasko from the Baltimore Ravens. He found me in the hallway.

“Let’s go upstairs, Kyle,” Mr. Tasko said when we met. “We have a suite. It will be a more comfortable place for the interview.”

“Sure, no problem,” I agreed. We headed up to the twenty-sixth floor. Mr. Tasko ushered me into Suite 2602.

“Thank you for coming, Kyle,” a tall man, nearly my height said in greeting. He walked to me and gave me a big smile as we shook hands. I did a double take.

“Coach Harbaugh... I wasn’t expecting to meet with you tonight,” I stammered.

“I like to look potential first round draft picks in the eye before I consider drafting them,” Coach Harbaugh said. “Have a seat, Kyle. Get comfortable while we get to know each other.”

“Thank you, Coach,” I replied as I took a seat on the couch opposite the chair where the coach sat.

“I see you grew up in Lancaster County,” Coach Harbaugh said. “Were you a Ravens fan as a boy? I know our broadcasts cover central Pennsylvania.”

“Sorry, Coach, I wasn’t,” I replied. “The Eagles and Steelers have more fans in Lancaster County than the Ravens. I did grow up watching you work on the sidelines, but back when you coached special teams for the Eagles. My dad, brothers and I are confirmed Eagles fans.”

“Those were good times,” Coach Harbaugh confirmed. Mr. Tasko and Coach Harbaugh got down to the meat of the interview. We talked about my experiences at Penn State. We talked about my high school knee injury. We discussed this year’s Nebraska and BCS Championship games at some length. Coach Harbaugh asked me about my favorite play at Penn State. I gave him the answer Max and I rehearsed the previous week.

The whole interview lasted about half an hour. I got an excellent vibe from the interview. Coach Harbaugh and the Ravens seemed really interested in me. As we were wrapping up the interview Coach Harbaugh asked, “Are you related to the Andrew Martin that plays at the University of Delaware?” He chuckled. “My QB has been raving about this wide receiver at his old school. You know Joe played there.”

“I knew that,” I agreed. “Andy is my younger brother. He has had a very good season this year.”

“Is Andrew a year behind you?” Coach asked.

“Two school years,” I answered. “We’re actually exactly eighteen months apart... to the day.”

“Really?” Coach Harbaugh replied, chuckling. “I am fifteen months older than Jim, to the day. I was born September 23rd. Jim was born December 23rd of the next year.”

“That is funny,” I said. “I was born July 9, 1991. Andy was born January 9, 1993.”

“You and I have one other connection,” Coach said. “Have you kept in touch with John Schroeder?”

“Unfortunately no,” I responded. “I’ve been a little busy trying to take my team to a national championship. Coach Schroeder has been pretty busy resurrecting Miami of Ohio.”

“My alma mater,” Coach said. “John Schroeder has done an excellent job getting my old team back to winning football.”

“I’m not surprised,” I said. “Coach Schroeder was excellent when he was with us. I was sorry to see him go but I’m glad he got a promotion and his own program. He deserves it.”

“Yes, John does,” Coach Harbaugh agreed. “John and I go back a long way, since I helped recruit him to play at Miami. I expect him to join the NFL coaching ranks one of these years.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me either,” I responded.

“Thank you for taking time to talk with me, Kyle,” Coach Harbaugh said. “It’s been a delight. Maybe we will talk again before the draft.” He gave me a wink. “Assuming we can figure out how to jump high enough in the draft to have a shot at getting you.”

“Thank you for the talk,” I said. “I enjoyed it.”

I headed back down to rejoin my teammates who were studying our playbook. I was pleased with the way the interview went with Coach Harbaugh. I certainly could see myself playing for his team. They had a fantastic defense. They had an excellent, strong armed quarterback in Joe Flacco. They had a good running game. They needed another good receiver to take pressure off Anquan Boldin. That was a role that was perfect for me.

Playing for the Baltimore Ravens was exciting for another reason. Penny and I might be able to live together year round if they picked me. We could find some spot on the Eastern Shore that wasn’t too far from Philly or Baltimore. That would be sweet. It might be hard for the Ravens to accomplish though. The Patriots beat them in the divisional playoff round. They were going to be drafting late in the first round.

Max Solomon checked in with Trevor and me later Tuesday night to make sure things were going OK. He was pleased that I had managed not to put my foot in my mouth again. The Ravens’ interest in me pleased Max. He said they were a well-run team that fit my skill set and needs nicely.

Coach Baldwin worked us hard at Wednesday morning’s practice. We had one more full pads practice before our game on Saturday. The last forty minutes were spent on special teams. I managed to break a punt return for a touchdown. Coach Kovacevic seemed pleased with my work.

Todd Landry’s aw-shucks cowboy act drew attention from the Brown story. I talked with half a dozen reporters but no one asked if I planned to play in the NFL. Max had predicted the furor would abate quickly. He was right.

Eric Williamson, from the Dallas Cowboys, talked with me after practice was over. He arranged for me to meet with Jerry Jones, Coach Jason Garrett and him later that evening. In some way, I felt like I was treating with the enemy. I guess I need to let my boyish allegiances go now. Eagles fans are trained from inception to hate all things Dallas.

Coach Wilkins had a short team meeting after lunch, followed by position meetings. I got a double dose. The receiver meeting came first and was followed by the special teams meeting. I barely made it to my meeting with Jim Harbaugh at 4:00 pm.

Jim Harbaugh and Ray Everett, the GM of the 49ers, spent about twenty minutes interviewing me. Jim Harbaugh was just as impressive as his older brother John. It wouldn't bother me in the least to join a team like the 49ers. They had the added advantage of employing Aaron Morano. I certainly wouldn't mind being Aaron's teammate again.

Nick, Dylan, Danny, Garrett, Kevin, Roy, Pierre, Steve, Titus, Casey, Jalil and I met after dinner to continue reviewing the playbook and game plan. All of us excused ourselves at various times during the evening to meet with media or team representatives.

I met Mr. Williamson on the second level. He took me to the Dallas hospitality suite. Coach Jason Garrett and owner Jerry Jones were there for my interview. The interview went well. Jerry Jones wasn't quite the ogre that Philadelphians made him out to be. That opinion would NOT be shared when I got back home.

I joined the offensive skill players' playbook study session when I finished my interview. My week at the Senior Bowl certainly was full between practices, team meetings, interviews with the press and interviews with the teams. I was learning a lot and loved the coaching I was receiving from Coach Holt, Coach Franks and Coach Kovacevic. I was confident I would be prepared to play my best on Saturday afternoon.

The number of reporters, camera crews, and photographers had increased during the course of the week. The number of NFL executives and coaches dropped significantly. I found out later that most of the executives headed for home Wednesday night and Thursday morning. They had three opportunities to see us practice. I guess that was enough for them.

I was getting to know my three quarterbacks better as the week progressed. Nick Wilson was the most polished of the three. He could throw the deep ball, as well as touch passes and timing passes. Nick clearly deserved the consideration he received for the Davey O'Brien Award last winter. Dylan Harris was quite capable. He could hit pinpoint passes short. He did not do as well on the deep balls. Danny Clay had a rifle arm but wasn't real accurate. I had to pay close attention to get the passes he intended for me. More than once I found myself playing defense to keep Terrell Ross from intercepting a pass intended for me.

I thought Thursday morning's practice went fairly well. It had better. This was our last full pads practice before the game. We would do a walk through for an hour on Friday morning.

Our schedule got switched up Thursday afternoon. The Broncos staff spent the afternoon with the South Team. We spent the afternoon with the Raiders coaching staff. I met with their receivers coach, Sanjay Lal for twenty minutes. Hue Jackson, the head coach, and Al Saunders, the offensive coordinator, met with me for a bit too. John Fassel stopped by to talk with me about my special team experiences at Penn State. Steve Wisniewski, one of their offensive line coaches, stopped by to talk with the Penn State contingent. Steve was a standout offensive lineman for JoePa back in the day. My classmates and I just missed playing with Steve's nephew Stefen, who graduated just before we started at Penn State. Zack, Aaron and J.T. Hill used tell stories about Stefen.

There was a bit of commotion in the conference room as things were winding down that afternoon. I spotted Al Davis, the owner, founder and manager of the Raiders walking through the room, greeting the North Team players.

"Kyle Martin!" Mr. Davis said as he stepped up to me. "You certainly don't need an introduction. You've impressed a lot of people with your play in college."

"Everyone in football knows you too," I agreed. "How do you do, Mr. Davis?"

"I'm fine. Thank you for asking, Kyle," Mr. Davis replied. He asked me a few questions about my experiences this week. He asked how my knee has held up during my college career.

"I saw the hatchet job Brown did on you Monday night," Mr. Davis commented. He chuckled. "It's a professional hazard. I've been the victim of these kinds of reports for decades. Don't pay attention to them."

"I guess I'll have to learn to do that," I agreed.

"The point Brown was pressing, 'Are you planning on playing in the NFL', is a good one," Mr. Davis asked. "What are your plans?"

"I'm here, sir," I answered. "I am attending the Senior Bowl because I plan to play in the NFL. I have two days off scheduled from my student teaching so I can attend the Combine. Heck, I even scheduled my wedding so it will be after mini-camps, OTAs and the NFLPA Rookie Symposium. Of course I am planning to play in the NFL."

"I noticed you cut the interview off when Brown asked you if you would play for me," Mr. Davis asked. "Would you play for the Raiders?"

I had to think quickly. The Raiders were one of the teams I was less than enthusiastic about playing for. “You probably know I love the vertical passing game,” I commented as evenly as I could manage. “Stretch the defense and force them to defend the whole field. I did that in high school and college. Doesn’t that sound like a formula you’re familiar with?”

Al Davis chuckled before replying. “Yes that does sound quite familiar. It’s been very good talking with you, Kyle. Hopefully we will get more time to talk in the future.”

“It was good to talk with you, sir,” I answered. I was relieved he bought my non-answer to his question. I thought the Raiders needed offensive line help to protect Elijah Carter before they needed a fast receiver like me – and that was assuming Elijah recovered from his ACL rupture in time to play next season. While the Raider philosophy may fit my own, my skills would be wasted until they drafted guys or signed the free agents they needed to make their philosophy really work.

Trevor, Marshon Wilkins and I met with Max in the bar around ten o’clock that evening to talk about our experiences and how our various interviews went. Trevor met with the Steelers and Bills. Marshon met with the Eagles and Buccaneers. I told about my meetings with Al Davis, the 49ers and the Cowboys.

Friday’s practice was cut short by half an hour. The crowd watching us was less than half the crowd we were used to earlier in the week. Max had warned Trevor, Marshon and me that most of the NFL executives and coaches had headed out on Thursday.

Practice went smoothly. It should, we had been working together for a week. The South Team was lining the field, waiting their turn as we wrapped up that morning. Our team skipped talking with the media and the fans so we could let the South Team onto the field. Coach Baldwin hurried us. He had a team meeting back at the convention center at 11:30 pm.

Coach Baldwin announced the starting lineups for our team on offense and defense at the team meeting. I would line up at flanker for the first quarter. That was fine with me. I spent four years in the flanker spot in high school followed by four years on the opposite side of the field as Penn State’s split end. I could play wherever they wanted me.

Casey Kerrigan would be our split end. Pierre Kowalski would be our slot receiver at the start of the game. Brad, as I got comfortable calling Garrett Bradford this week, was starting at tight end. Nebraska’s DeMarco Dimitry would be our starting tailback. Nick Wilson would start at quarterback.

Jeremy and Trevor both were starting for the defense. Shawn Byrd and Eldon Burkholder were playing the first quarter too. Terrell Ross would take over from Eldon on the right cornerback spot in the second quarter. Josh Bruno’s turn wouldn’t come

until the third quarter. Of course Hal Long and Mitch Jackson would handle kicks and punts throughout the game.

Coach Baldwin promised everyone would get at least a quarter of play in the game. The fourth quarter would be used to make up for any disparity in the time of possession to give equal opportunity to everyone. Coach Baldwin would put in the top performers into the game in the final minutes and let them finish things out. Hopefully they would run the clock out and not have to try and mount a comeback.

We had position meetings after lunch for ninety minutes. We spent the rest of our afternoon over at the convention center to meet and greet the public. Everyone wore their jerseys to the affair. The organizers had tables spread across the big hall for players to sit at. Banners above groups of tables designated the conferences represented at the tables.

One thing threw me and my friends for a loop. They had two banners for the Big Ten, one for the Leaders Division and one for the Legends Division. None of us were entirely sure which division our teams belonged to. We knew which teams played together in the divisions but couldn't remember the division names. The fourteen guys from Michigan, Michigan State, Nebraska and Minnesota took the five tables in the Legends Division. The remaining eight of us sat at the three tables assigned to the Leaders Division.

Initially there were mostly adults visiting us. We talked with them, signed autographs and had our pictures taken with them. Trevor, Shawn and I were very popular with the crowd. Josh and Mitch were less so. Across the way Jeremy and Dylan were busy meeting and greeting visitors.

The three hours went faster than I expected. The mix of visitors changed after school dismissal in the afternoon. I enjoyed interacting with all the kids that visited my table. They made the meet and greet fun for me.

Eric Peters and his friend Nate Thornton ended up sitting with me for dinner. I enjoyed talking with Eric again. It had been too long since we had time for a relaxed conversation. Getting to know Nate was good too. Nate was the Gator's standout cornerback. I stood a good chance of going against him in the game.

I had pumped Nick Wilson and Garrett Bradford for intel about Nate. Their team had played and lost to Florida at the Capital One Bowl. I liked being able to put a human face onto the scouting info I had dug up.

Nate was one of three likely DBs that I would face at the game. The others were Sean Allen from Texas and Eric Young from USC. I had studied video on Sean all through December. Facing him didn't scare me in the least. Hell, even Texas didn't consider him good enough to cover me. They had given that job to Mike Johanson when we played.

I had faced Eric Young two seasons ago when we were both juniors. I had bested him, though the rest of my team hadn't kept up with my production that day. Danny Clay and Dylan Harris were helpful too. Both played against USC every year. I could handle Eric.

I doubted the Raiders staff would let any of the cornerbacks in single coverage against me. I expected to see Georgia's Ryan Moore helping with deep coverage. Moore was much harder to get intell on. No team represented on the North had played Georgia this season. I tried pumping Eric Peters for info. He talked freely until he realized that this wasn't a casual talk. The Gators and Bulldogs may have no love for each other, but Eric was loyal to his South Team. I learned nothing more about beating Ryan from Eric.

I would have to see what came on Saturday. The only thing about the Senior Bowl that made me uncomfortable was the lack of study about our opponents. I wasn't used to flying by the seat of my pants. I suppose that was what the Senior Bowl committee and NFL had in mind for this game. They could find out who had the physical talent and football instincts to shine under these conditions. No doubt the NFL teams assumed they could give us all the necessary coaching.

We had position meetings after dinner. Coach Franks emphasized that the top performing players would get the most playing time. All of us understood where our coaches were coming from and what was expected tomorrow by the time the meeting was finished. I invited Hal, Jeremy, Dylan and Eric Peters to join my Penn State teammates in our night-before-the-game poker game upstairs in my room.

We had played about half an hour when I got a knock at the door. Eric let the visitor in.

"I'm sorry," Max Solomon apologized. "I didn't know you and Trevor had guests this evening."

"No problem, Max," Trevor said. "A pre-game poker game is a long time Penn State tradition. What's up?"

"I just stopped by to make sure you and Kyle are ready for tomorrow," Max answered. "I doubt I will see you after the game. I have to head over to New Orleans Saturday night."

"Enjoy the Super Bowl, Max," I added. "Tell Shawn O'Conner I said hi." My other Penn State teammates echoed my sentiments.

"All of you gentlemen have a good game tomorrow," Max added. He started out the door before turning back. "Trevor and Kyle, I better see the two of you at Pro Train next weekend."

"Yeah.. yeah... yeah," and "We'll be there," we answered back. Max headed back to his hotel while we continued our poker game. Max had a client on the Minnesota Vikings and two clients on the New England Patriots. He was going to have an interesting week in New Orleans next week.

My cell phone rang about fifteen minutes after Max took off. I had to smile when I looked at the name on my phone.

“Hey Zack, what’s up?” I asked after clicking the answer button.

“You ready for some fun tomorrow?” Zack responded.

“I think so,” I replied. “We’ve been working hard all week. My teammates and I have the playbook down. We’re ready.”

“Don’t worry about the scouts watching,” Zack said. “Don’t worry about how things affect your draft position. It’s football. Go out, play and have fun. Everything else will take care of itself.”

“I know, Zack,” I agreed. “You’re talking to the number one test taker around. Mr. Perform-under-Pressure. I promise I will have fun tomorrow.”

“Are all the Penn State guys with you tonight?” Zack asked.

“Yeah, they are,” I replied. “Trevor, Josh, Shawn, Mitch... they’re all here. Jeremy and Hal from back home are with us too. Jeremy’s buddy Dylan from Notre Dame is in the game too.”

“Harris... their quarterback?” Zack asked.

“Yep, that’s Dylan,” I acknowledged.

“Pass the phone around,” Zack asked. “I want to wish the rest of the crew luck.” My phone went around the circle. Zack spoke briefly with each of us, wishing us luck and giving us words of wisdom from someone who’d already played in this game. I thanked Zack for the encouragement when the phone came back around the circle.

Zack and I talked for a couple minutes about his life and family. Little Laurie was growing quickly. Zack said she was crawling all over the house. She hadn’t started talking yet, but Leigh Ann was expecting that shortly. She babbled happily whenever either of her parents was around.

The love and joy Zack’s little “rugrat” brought was palpable, even a thousand miles away over the phone. Penny and I would get our chance to experience that, one of these years. I thanked Zack for his call and asked him to give my love to Leigh Ann and Laurie.

I gave Penny a call before Trevor and I went to bed. We talked for a few minutes. Penny was planning a Senior Bowl party with some of her friends. They promised to cheer for me.

I woke up at my usual 7:00 am on Saturday morning, even though the Senior Bowl committee had pushed breakfast back an hour. I showered and read my Philly paper online while I waited for Trevor to get up.

Trevor, Shawn, Mitch, Josh and I joined Hal, Jeremy and Dylan for breakfast. My friends seemed relaxed and in a good mood. I stopped by to talk with Eric Peters for a few minutes. Eric was curious if Penny and I planned to make it down for spring break. I let my buddy know that was our current plan.

Buses hauled all 104 players over to the stadium to prepare for the game. We took a few minutes to check field conditions. The field sported a fresh coat of paint on the lines, Senior Bowl logo and Under Armour logo. Other than that, it was the same field as we practiced on all week. It was ready for our game.

The offensive and defensive players met inside with our coordinators to review the game plan until lunchtime. We had a light meal and then dressed for the game. I was a bit nostalgic. This was my final game as a collegian. I wasn't alone.

"I can't believe I won't wear my gold helmet again," Jeremy commented to no one in particular.

"I know," I agreed. "Penn State's uniforms may be plain but I've grown to love them."

That led to reminiscences by Jeremy, Hal and me about our old times together. Our fellow high school captain Greg Harrison came up in the remembrances. Hal, Jeremy and I said a short prayer in honor of our fallen teammate and friend. Rick, Leo and Larry, the three players with lockers between Hal, me and Jeremy bowed their heads in respect too as we prayed.

Leo Nields, the fullback from Stanford, cracked a joke after we finished, bringing us back to the here and now. Leo asked about my interview with Coach Jim Harbaugh. Leo had been recruited by and played for Coach Harbaugh for a couple years. Leo thought the world of his former coach.

Everyone went about their preparations in their own way – telling jokes, reading, studying the game plan, listening to music, whatever got you in the right frame of mind for battle.

The North Team went out to warm up. I shagged punts for Mitch Jackson, just like old times back in State College. Nick and Dylan threw me a few passes to get me ready. I felt good, ready for whatever came my way that afternoon. I repeated to myself: 'Have fun. This is just a game.'

The team headed back inside to finish suiting up. We came out around 2:40 in the afternoon. The Senior Bowl officials talked to the crowd and introduced the latest hall of fame members of past Senior Bowls. A country singer most of us never heard of sang the

national anthem. Josh, our resident country music expert, knew of the young lady. She did a credible job hitting that troublesome high note. Naval aviators from the Pensacola base flew four F-18's over the stadium as the anthem concluded. It's time for some football!

At the beginning of the week Coach Baldwin had announced that our starting quarterback and starting middle linebacker would serve as the representatives for the team at the coin toss. Trevor and I were standing together on the sidelines as Nick and Jeremy went out for the coin toss.

"This certainly feels different, doesn't it, Coach?" Trevor asked.

"Yeah, it does," I agreed. "We better get used to watching the coin toss from the sidelines again. It isn't likely that we'll be team captains for the foreseeable future."

It didn't matter who from the North Team was on the field. South correctly called the coin toss and chose to receive the ball. I lined up on the left end of the kickoff cover formation and waited for Hal to drive the ball deep. My buddy really got his foot into the ball, driving it down a yard or so into the end zone.

Mao Kaapana didn't hesitate. He started forward, staying in the middle of the field, waiting for the coverage and blocking to develop. Number 12, from Clemson, was aiming to block me. He tried to run me out of bounds as I ran down close to the sideline, covering that route should Malo run my way.

Number 12, I think his name was Jenkins, was short but stoutly built. Still, I was six inches taller and probably outweighed him by almost twenty pounds. He didn't force me out of my lane. Malo decided to try his left side, away from me when he hit the 15 yard line. I stripped Jenkins' hands off me and turned the corner, keeping my position and pursuing Malo from the rear.

Eldon Burkholder was the gunner opposite me. He broke free from his blocker and forced Malo to double back again. I drilled the sucker before he took another step. I offered a hand to Malo to help him up.

"How's it going, Martin?" Malo asked politely. We were passing acquaintances from December's ESPN's awards show.

"Good," I replied as he stood. "Good luck today, Malo."

Eldon Burkholder, Josh Bruno and half a dozen other teammates slapped my back and congratulated me. We trotted off the field to the sideline. Trevor, Jeremy, William and company took the field.

Todd Landry and the South offense quickly found they had no answer to William Johnson. Big William wasn't a surprise to the Raiders' coaching staff. They did appear

surprised by exactly how hard William was to control. They tried two offensive linemen initially. The first play was a run. William was unmovable. He forced Tre Benjamin into the hole where Jeremy tackled him, allowing only a yard and a half gain.

Todd tried a deep pass on the next play. William broke through the two linemen blocking him and chased Todd into Trevor, who dumped him for a sack. Todd found Eric Peters on a third and long when Eric cut his route off in front of Shawn Byrd. Eric made a first down. It didn't help the South Team. Our front seven continued to dominate their front. Three plays later they were forced to punt back to us.

Titus Locke handled the punt return. He fielded the punt at the 26 yard line and picked up six yards before he was tackled. Nick led our offense onto the field. Pierre lined up on the weak side slot between Casey and the left tackle.

Coach Baldwin called a crossing route to start us off. I faked a deep post. Pierre ran a deep in while Casey and Brad crossed in the middle. Nick hit Brad as Casey drew the middle linebacker's attention away from his responsibilities. Brad churned out another three yards after the weak side linebacker hit him.

I learned two important things on the first play. Eric Young was assigned to me. Ryan Moore would help with deep cover. I also could outrun Eric easily. That was good information for the future.

It was now second down and two yards to go. Coach Baldwin, bless his heart, thought very much like Coach Burton. I was primary on the next play and running a deep flag. Pierre lined up on my side and run a short post, hopefully drawing safety help away from me.

I outran Eric Young in the first twenty yards of the route. Ryan Moore didn't bite on Pierre's fake. Nick launched the ball to me. It was a hair high, so I stretched out and snagged the ball with my fingertips. I came down hard on my side. Ryan downed me before I could get more yards. The referee spotted the ball at South's 18, so I gained forty-two yards on the play.

DeMarco Dimitry finally got a carry, pushing the ball ahead five yards. Brad caught a quick out over the middle to move the ball down to the 5 yard line. Nick tossed an easy fade to me in the corner of the end zone. Touchdown! Hal, reliable as ever, drilled the point after through the middle of the uprights. Score: North-7, South-0.

Our defense's excellent front seven kept Todd Landry scrambling. Todd never managed to sustain a drive. Our guys did not allow it. The South ran three plays and punted back to us.

Casey, Pierre and DeMarco were featured in our second drive. Brad and I spent most of our time blocking or running decoy routes to help Casey, Pierre and DeMarco display

their abilities. We led 10-0 when Hal kicked the ball back to South for their third possession.

South managed one first down on their next possession, thanks to an acrobatic catch by Eric Peters. William and Jeremy combined to drop Malo Kaapana for a four yard loss on third and six. South punted the ball back to us.

Coach Baldwin continued featuring Casey, Pierre and DeMarco on our third drive. South's defense adjusted, putting more emphasis on covering Casey and Pierre. Nick checked down on one play, hitting Brad for a twelve yard gain. Two plays later Nick checked to my deep decoy route, finding me one on one with Eric. Nick waited until I came open and launched a deep ball to me. I ran under it and sprinted for the end zone. I had left Eric in the dust. Ryan Moore, who was drifted over to cover Pierre's post route was hopelessly out of position. I motored into the end zone untouched. Hal booted the PAT through the uprights to increase our lead to 17-0.

A minute and change remained in the first quarter. Coach Baldwin sent our starting defense out on the field again. The Raiders' coaching staff finally tried what Penn State and Florida had found would work against Michigan and big William. They rolled Todd away from William's side and concentrated on shorter passing plays. I'm sure Al Davis was having a fit of apoplexy, but the strategy worked. They managed to put together a sixty-two yard drive that ended in a field goal.

The score was North-17, South-3 when Gabe Rhodes booted the kickoff down to me. Shawn Byrd was deep with me. Shawn shouted for me to run the ball out as I fielded the ball three or four yards deep in our end zone.

Shawn took care of the gunner on his side. Jock Carter from Nebraska, a safety I knew too well, took care of the gunner on the opposite side. I ran ahead behind my wall of blockers waiting for an opening. Josh Bruno hit his man and pushed him aside as Jim Watkins from Oregon took his man the other way.

Instantly I accelerated into the small crack and sprinted through the first line of coverage. I angled away from the pursuit and sprinted for the right sideline. I juke away from Jamal Wallace, making him miss. Gabe Rhodes, the smallish kicker was the only one left. He tried to take out my legs as I came by. I danced over him and sprinted for the end zone. Shawn, Josh and Jock escorted me into the end zone.

"Way to go, Coach!" Shawn shouted as we celebrated another TD.

"Just like old times," Josh added as he slapped me on the back. "Blocking on your returns brings back some good, old memories."

"Thanks for your good work, guys," I replied. "Your blocking was as good as ever."

We trotted off the field. Shawn and I were done for now. Hal made the PAT to bring the score to 24-3, North's favor. My friends and I relaxed on the sidelines. Most of our duties were done until at least the fourth quarter.

Jamal Wallace made an excellent kick return after my latest score. South took over on their 44 yard line. Quinton MacElree took over the quarterbacking duties from Todd. With William, Jeremy and Trevor on the sideline, South actually had a fighting chance on offense. Quinton engineered a nice nine play drive to a touchdown. Eric Peters caught the decisive pass that put them on our 2 yard line. Jaiquawn Henry, from West Virginia, shoved the ball across the goal line. Gabe Rhodes' PAT brought the score to North-24, South-10.

South did a better job of covering the kickoff after their TD. I managed to bring the ball out to our 34 yard line before a swarm of South players took me down. Dylan Harris and our second quarter team had to work harder to move the ball than Nick and the starters. Jalil Hoge from San Diego State made a spectacular twenty-two yard catch to keep the drive going. The drive ended with a field goal. Score: North-27, South-10.

Quinton MacElree put together a decent second drive, moving the ball down the field. Our defense stood up and prevented a touchdown. Gabe Rhodes had no problem making the twenty-seven yard field goal. Score: North-27, South-13.

Gabe Rhodes boomed the ball deep into the end zone. I listened when Shawn told me to down the ball. Our team started on our 20 yard line. Dylan's crew struggled on this possession. They managed to get across midfield before stalling out. Mitch Jackson dropped his first punt inside the ten yard line. I raced down along the sideline. Eric Young stayed with me but didn't try to muscle me out of bounds this time.

Jamal Wallace made a fair catch signal and then abandoned the catch when the ball went over his head. Shawn and I knifed in, trying to down the ball before it crossed the goal line. I managed to snag the ball and bat it towards Shawn just before it crossed the line. Shawn fell on the ball at the three yard line. Three and a half minutes were left in the half.

MacElree did his best but wasn't able to move his team. Kyle Cunningham punted the ball out of bounds to prevent me from having a shot at a return. Coach Baldwin was happy to take a 27-13 lead into the locker room at halftime.

Coach Baldwin and Coach Holt huddled with the third quarter offensive players. Coach Salas huddled with the third quarter defensive players. The rest of us hung on the periphery listening to the coaches' plans.

Steve Jarrett, the excellent receiver from Minnesota, took the second half kickoff. He took the ball on the goal line and advanced behind his blockers. I spotted the hole almost the same time as Steve Jarrett. He accelerated through the small gap, cut left to avoid one tackle and ran for daylight. Gabe Rhodes, the slight South kicker, managed to grab Steve

and wrestle him to the ground. Gabe might have had a pound or two weight advantage over the smallish Gopher receiver.

The referee marked the ball down on our 48 yard line. I congratulated Steve as he trotted off the field. Coach Baldwin featured our running backs on this drive. Our third receiver came off the field and Leo Neilds went in at fullback.

Leo was a fun teammate. The 246 pounder was a font of jokes, one-liners and quips all week. Leo was smart, not really surprising for a player from Stanford. He also proved to be a hell of a fullback. He plowed open big holes for Oklahoma State's Austin Brown. The tandem drove our team down the field, pushing to South's 22 yard line.

The South defense moved the safeties up to the line. Danny Clay correctly checked out of the called running play to a quick pass outside. Unfortunately, Dane Williams from Auburn anticipated the change too. He stepped in front of Pierre Kowalski, snatched the football and took off down field.

Dane outran Danny, Austin and Leo. Jalil Hoge made a game try at tackling the interceptor, but he started on the far side of the field and couldn't catch Dane before Dane ran into the end zone. Gabe Rhodes made the point after to bring the score to North-27, South-20.

Coach Baldwin and Coach Holt gave Danny instructions while the kick return team took the field. South kept Steve Jarrett penned in this time. He delivered the ball to our team on the 31 yard line. Danny and his crew managed to take time off the clock and control the ball, but they couldn't press in close enough for one of Hal's long field goals. Mitch took the field and punted the ball out of bounds around the ten yard line, ensuring that South had a long way to go to score.

Vaughn Gilbert, the three year Alabama quarterback, took his turn at the controls of the South team. Andy Fua from Stanford, and Jarvis Boling from Washington manned the center of our defensive line. Andy and Jarvis weren't the quickest tackles around, but they were too big to be pushed around. Josh Bruno finally got on the field, commanding the defense from his middle linebacker spot.

Josh doesn't match Jeremy North in size or quickness. He did match up well with Jeremy in football smarts. Josh's signal calling kept the South from making big plays. It also couldn't get the South offense off the field. South pushed down, managing a long field goal to bring the score to North-27, South-24.

Tony Scott from Oklahoma went out to handle the kick return for us. Gabe Rhodes put the ball a couple yards deep in the end zone. Tony decided to run it out anyway. He made it out to the 27 yard line before he was collared by the South players. Tony should have gone down but he didn't. I suppose he wanted to put on a good show, but he didn't. One of the South players punched the ball loose and another fell on it before our guys could get it.

“Fuck!” Jeremy growled. “We had this game in hand and they’re screwing it up. We should have cruised to an easy win.”

“It’s not over yet,” Trevor countered. “We can pull this thing out.”

“MARTIN!” Coach Kovacevic shouted before I could add my thoughts. “On me now!”

“We’ll get them,” I said to Jeremy and Trevor before jogging over to join my special teams coach.

“Martin, you’re handling ALL punt and kick returns from here out,” Coach Kovacevic commanded.

“You got it, Coach,” I responded.

“Rule number one is safety,” Coach Kovacevic directed. “DO NOT LOSE THE BALL. Rule number two is make something happen. We need a playmaker.”

“I’ll do my best, Coach,” I promised. A big roar rose up from the crowd that had been quiet heretofore. Coach Kovacevic and I turned to see a South receiver dancing in the end zone. The crowd was cheering their home state quarterback, who had just tossed the TD.

“We’re not losing to the God-damned Raiders staff,” Coach Kovacevic grumbled. “You’re a premier receiver and return man, Kyle. Show the stadium why everyone rates you so highly.”

“I’ll do my best, Coach,” I reiterated. Gabe Rhodes drilled the extra point to their lead in the game to 30-27. Coach Kovacevic cursed. “Coach, can I have Shawn Byrd as one of the halfbacks? He knows me and my style. Shawn will give me the best chance of breaking loose.”

“BYRD!” Coach Kovacevic yelled. Shawn trotted over. Coach Kovacevic briefed Shawn quickly before calling the rest of the kick return team over and briefing them.

We headed out to the field to receive Gabe Rhodes’ kickoff. Gabe boomed the ball five yards deep into the end zone. Shawn called off my return.

“Sorry, Coach,” Shawn explained. “I couldn’t let you run that one back. Safety first.”

“Absolutely right,” I agreed. “Why do you think I asked for you to watch my back? You know when to send me and when to hold me back. That was a good call, Shawn.”

Coach Kovacevic congratulated us on the correct call on the return. That was not a ball to run out of the end zone. Danny Clay led the offense onto the field again. Danny did

better this time. He pushed the team down the field into South territory before the drive sputtered to a halt. Hal went out to try a 54 yard field goal. My normally sure footed friend let the ball drift a little right. Hal missed by less than six inches.

Two and a half minutes remained in the third quarter. Vaughn Gilbert ran a careful offense, avoiding gaffs and turnovers. Short passes were interspersed with running plays to push down the field. Josh Bruno finally got Tulsa's Zac O'Dowd as the South team pushed into our red zone. Josh upended the guy for a three yard loss on third down and two. South took the sure field goal. Score: South-33, North-27.

We were into the fourth quarter. Coach Baldwin decided it was time to reward his best performers and give them more time on the field. It also didn't bother our coach that sending his best performers out would give his team the best chance to win. Officially whether your team won or lost was meaningless to the NFL coaching staffs.

Unofficially... there was absolutely no love lost between the Raiders' staff and the Broncos' staff. If Coach Baldwin could get one up on Al Davis, Coach Jackson and the rest of the Raiders' staff, so much the better.

Shawn and I settled in deep for the kickoff. Gabe Rhodes lived up to his billing as the nation's best senior kicker and put the ball about four yards into the end zone. Shawn shouted "Return! Return!"

I caught the ball and ran forward, scanning the field for a break. My front was well covered by the cover team. I ran forward, waiting for something to break. Shawn leveraged the gunner on the left side backwards from me. What the hell? I ran for the slight crease, hoping to break loose before the cover team could react. Shawn kept me free as I flew by him. South had all their lanes covered. I tried to dodge the first tackler but he slowed my and allowed two more tacklers to take me down at or 37 yard line.

Nick Wilson took our offense onto the field. Casey Kerrigan and Jalil Hoge joined us on the field. The Raiders staff reacted quickly when they saw who from our team trotted out onto the field. Marshon Wilkins, Tony Sherrod, Colin McClain from West Virginia and Brooks Smith, the pain in the ass defensive end from Texas. Brooks had made Chip and Jon's evening most uncomfortable at the BCS Championship game a few weeks ago.

Coach Baldwin went against his well-known tendencies by running twice in a row to start our drive. Rick Murray from Oklahoma ripped off five yards on first down, followed by three more on second. Leo Neilds came in in Jalil's place. We lined up in the I formation. The South defense crowded the line of scrimmage, just as we anticipated.

I took off down the field on streak for the flag. I beat Lance Foster, the tall, skinny defensive back from Miami, easily. Dane Williams from Auburn retreated with me too, to provide safety help. I broke off the route when the ball went sailing by us, quite a few yards out of bounds.

I found out why when I reached the sidelines. Marshon Wilkins and Tony Sherrod had broken through and forced Nick to throw the ball away. Mitch Jackson came in to punt the ball away.

Vaughn Gilbert continued QBing the South Team. Somebody on the Raiders staff had been paying attention to how Penn State and Florida had handled William Johnson when we beat Michigan. Wherever the play went, they made sure William had a long run to get involved. Having Trevor and Jeremy assisting William helped, but South still managed to gain ground, albeit slowly.

I headed over to Coach Frank to talk about what I observed on the last series. “Coach, do you mind me making a suggestion for the next possession?” I asked politely.

“What’s up, Kyle?” Coach Franks replied.

“I know most times you use the fastest receivers on the outside,” I explained. “The linebackers are reacting fast up front and filling running holes. Nick’s not getting enough time to go deep. I was thinking maybe you could put Titus or me in the slot. We have the size to go over the middle and we may catch the linebackers out of position if we run some slants or other crossing patterns behind them.”

Coach Franks smiled and chuckled before answering. “That is exactly what Coach Holt and I were discussing a minute ago. That’s a good observation, Kyle. You are going in the slot on the next drive.”

“I’ll be ready to go, Coach,” I promised. I headed down the sideline to give Nick a heads up. “Coach Frank said I’m going to switch over to the slot next series.”

“That’s cool,” Nick agreed.

“I think the coaches plan to draw the linebackers up to the line and get me behind them,” I added. “Don’t be afraid to give me a high ball. I can out jump any of the d-backs on their team. I hope you remember what we worked on last Sunday. Hit me in stride and I will take the ball for a home run strike. Make me wait a little... well, let’s not go there. I value my head.”

“I’ll give you a good lead, Kyle,” Nick answered. “I’ll take care of you, Kyle.” He gave me a smile. “Man, I wish you would have picked Michigan instead of Penn State. What swayed you away from us?”

I gave him a wink and replied, “His name is Pete Cochrane.”

“I know where you’re coming from,” Nick agreed with a big smile, “... and if anybody ever asks, I never said that.” We watched the defense as they struggled to contain the South Team. They were forcing William to chase after the ball on every play.

“God damn! This looks too familiar,” Nick growled from the sideline. “I watched you guys, the Buckeyes and those damn Gators all run William ragged. Damn, I hate to lose this way.”

“Relax,” I offered. “Jeremy, Trevor and the other guys will back William up. He doesn’t have to carry the whole defense himself.”

My friends did step up and make life more difficult for the South offense. Still, they continued pushing our defense down the field. Allowing them to score would be disastrous for our team. The clock was approaching seven minutes in the game. We would have difficulty scoring twice.

Jeremy and Trevor exhorted their teammates to greater effort. William was determined to change the game. The two blockers assigned to him couldn’t hold him back. William broke through play after play, helping Jeremy, Trevor or Marcus Kendricks, our strong side linebacker from Boston College, make the play. Our guys finally got a break on the South team on a third and four yards to go at our 33 yard line.

Trevor set a hard corner, forcing Malo Kaapana back inside. Marcus and Jeremy penetrated the line, tackling the slippery tailback with an assist from William on the back side. South lost four yards on the play.

South elected to try a fifty-four yard field goal. William dominated again. He blew up the two blockers assigned to him on the kick attempt, burst into the backfield and leapt as Gabe Rhodes made the kick. One of William’s big hands grazed the football as it went by. The ball fluttered and flew left, completely missing the goalposts.

The players on our sidelines jumped and cheered. The crowd cheered politely. I was used to working in either an extremely friendly or an extremely hostile environment. This crowd was enjoying the game but didn’t have a big rooting interest one way or another.

Coach Baldwin called the offense together briefly before we took the field. “This is the tipping point, gentlemen,” Coach explained. “Playmakers make plays. Step up your game and we win this thing. What are we going to do?”

“Win this game!” Nick shouted. “Touchdown on three!”

“One...Two... THREE.... TOUCHDOWN!” everyone shouted.

We jogged out onto the field. I glanced up at the clock 4:03 remained in the game. Nick called the first play. Coach Baldwin wasted no time testing our theory. Nick faked a handoff to Austin Brown. Jalil ran a flag pattern from the flanker spot while I ran a slant. Our personnel switch caught South flat footed. Jon Lohan from Louisville was left covering me. I ran a couple yards downfield before cutting into the slant.

Austin's run fake brought the linebackers up as we anticipated. I looked towards our backfield as I crossed the middle a few yards behind the linebackers. Marshon Wilkins was bearing down on Nick. Nick sidestepped away and rifled the ball my way. The throw was a little high but I sprinted ahead and snagged the ball by my fingertips. Jon was hopelessly behind me. I turned down the field and motored. Much sooner than I anticipated Ryan Moore came flying in and tackled me. He helped me to my feet after I tossed the ball to the ref. I had gained fourteen yards.

Nick, Brad and I worked the middle of the field as the drive continued. Austin carried a few times to keep the linebackers up. On the seventh play of the drive Nick noticed the safeties and linebackers were crowding towards the center of the field, anticipating Austin, Brad or me getting the ball. He pumped faked as I dragged across the middle and then fired to an open Casey Kerrigan, who was running a post route. Ryan Moore managed to take Casey down before he got the end zone. Our team moved up to South's 12 yard line. A run fake froze the linebackers. Casey and Jalil went for the corners of the end zone while I went for the post. Brad provided a short outlet for Nick.

Nick calmly surveyed the field. Casey and Jalil were covered. Ryan Moore and Sean Allen were on me. Marshon forced Nick to scramble to the his left. I followed, the way Coach Adams and Coach Caffrey had taught me. Nick spotted me and rifled the ball to me.

It came hot and high. I out-leapt Ryan and Sean, snagging the ball by my fingertips. Both d-backs pawed and jostled me as I came down. I landed on my tip toes, knowing I was close the end line. The crowd let out a roar as the referee blew his whistle and signaled touchdown.

I looked down at my feet. My heels were within a fraction of an inch of the end line. Casey, Jalil, Nick and Austin mobbed me to celebrate our team's score. We hustled out of the way to let Hal and the kicking unit kick the point after. It was good. Score: North-34, South-33.

"Go get them, Jeremy," I coaxed. "Make sure these guys don't score! I don't know if there will be enough time for another comeback if you guys don't stop them." The clock read 1:27.

"No sweat, Coach," Jeremy countered. "These guys won't even sniff the end zone. We WILL shut them down."

Jeremy, William, Trevor and their defensive mates made good on Jeremy's boast. South needed seven plays to even get to midfield. The threat ended when Shawn Byrd picked off a sideline pass to Eric Peters. Nick took the offense out for one kneel down play and the game was over.

Players from both teams mingled in the center of the field, talking and comparing notes from the game. I noticed Coach Baldwin and Coach Jackson talked very briefly before separating. There really wasn't any love between the two coaching staffs.

Mike Montgomery was the first reporter to reach me. "What do you think, Kyle?" Mike asked politely. "Any comments on the award?"

"What award, Mike?" I asked. Jeremy came bouncing over.

"Congrats, man!" Jeremy exclaimed. "You're the game's MVP."

"Oh..." I exclaimed as the news sunk in. "Is that the award you meant, Mike?"

"That's the one," Mike answered. "Do you have any comments for the readers back home?"

"I'm surprised by the award," I replied. "I expected William Johnson would have gotten the award. With due respect to Jeremy here, I thought William's play was the key at the end of the game. Without his work, we wouldn't have been able to score the go ahead touchdown."

"Coach is being too modest, Mike," Jeremy added. "He scored three touchdowns, including the game winner. I think the Senior Bowl got it exactly right. Kyle deserves this award."

"William Johnson earned the Defensive Player of the Game," Mike said. "I guess you approve of that award. Kyle and Jeremy, can you tell me about your experiences here at the Senior Bowl?"

Jeremy and I talked with Mike for a few minutes while the grounds crew erected a stage in the center of the field. Nick Wilson was Offensive Player of the game. Quinton MacElree was named the Outstanding Player for the South Team. Shawn Byrd was recognized as the North Team's Outstanding Player.

Coach Baldwin joined the five of us on the stage to receive awards from Steve Hale, the president of the Senior Bowl. He presented trophies to each of us to recognize our achievements. We were given a few minutes after the ceremony to clean up and change into better clothes before we went to the post-game press conference.

The press conference size rivaled media day at the national championship game. The press conference lasted forty-five minutes before the Senior Bowl officials mercifully ended it. I continued to praise William and Nick's play during the game. I let everyone know how proud I was that the Bowl recognized Shawn Byrd's contributions to the team. Shawn deserved every accolade that came his way.

One of the bowl transportation captains drove us back to the hotel when the press conference was over. I found a note in my room when I got back that there was a package at the front desk for me. William, Nick, Quinton, Shawn and I got together and went down to the restaurant in the hotel for dinner. All our friends had eaten dinner already.

The Harbor Place Restaurant served pretty decent food. I went with the shrimp, scallops and cheese grits. My compatriots tried the steak, salmon and veal osso buco. After dinner I stopped off at the front desk. The airline finally found my missing helmet now that the game was over.

William, Shawn, Nick and I hooked up with our friends on our team. We headed downstairs to the Fathoms Lounge to relax, talk and have a beer or two for the evening. I enjoyed the low stress time visiting with my friends. My life was so hectic. It felt good to not have any responsibilities or worries... at least until Monday when I was back in the classroom. I gave Penny a call later in the evening to catch up.

"Congratulations, Kyle," Penny said when she answered my call. "You had a great game. How are you feeling?"

"I feel good," I replied. "I didn't take too many nasty hits. Nick Wilson did a good job delivering the ball on time. He didn't let the defenders pop me. How are things at home?"

"We're good here," Penny answered. "Katie, Dakota, Erin, Dave, Diane and Jordan all came over and watched the game with me. They told me to congratulate you when we talked."

"Do you remember the time my flight comes in?" I asked.

"6:39 pm at Terminal B," Penny answered. "There might be a problem with that, Kyle."

"What's up?" I asked.

"The weatherman is predicting a snow storm," Penny said. "You better keep an eye out for where it hits. They reported the storm is heading up the coast. Most likely it will head inland when it hits the Del-Mar-Va peninsula. If it follows that track we will get a few inches here in Philly." Penny chuckled. "If it stays along the coast, it could get ugly here. The last time Philly had a nor'easter like this, they got sixteen inches of snow."

"I can't imagine Philly with that much snow," I replied. "The place nearly shuts down with a couple inches."

"Call here tomorrow and I'll give you the latest weather report," Penny suggested.

"I'll see you tomorrow, honey," I answered. "I love you."

“I love you too, Kyle,” Penny agreed.

Trevor and I headed to bed around 11:30 pm. It had been an eventful, and I think, a very productive week. I certainly hadn’t hurt my standing with NFL teams. I fell asleep relaxed and contented.

Chapter 80

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The Senior Bowl committee gave everyone vouchers good for breakfast at the Harbor Place Restaurant in the hotel for Sunday morning. Everyone had slightly different departure times so the hotel couldn't keep the players' dining room open from 6:00 am to sometime after 9:00 am when the last player departed.

Trevor, Shawn, Mitch, Josh, Hal, Jamal Anderson, Jake Smith, Jamal Brown and I met at the Harbor Place for breakfast. We had an 8:45 am departure from the hotel. I arranged for Doug Anderson from the Senior Bowl committee to ship my two helmets back to State College for me. I had no reason to risk them to the airlines again.

Check-in at the airport went smoothly, as did our trip through security. We relaxed at our gate until it was time to board. I gave Penny a call while we were waiting.

"Hey honey, how's it going at home?" I asked when Penny answered my call.

"Are you sitting down?" she answered.

"Yes," I agreed warily.

"You know the storm I told you about last night..." Penny explained, "the one they said would probably stay inland?"

"Yeah"

"It isn't," Penn continued. "Last night the Action News said we could expect a couple inches of snow. Now they are saying a foot plus... and they're not real confident it will stop at one foot. You are going to have a serious problem getting home tonight. Philly shuts down when the snow gets like this. That might include the airport."

"Oh shit," I groaned. "That's just what I need. Maybe the airlines will redirect us to Baltimore or Newark."

"This weatherman says this is a huge storm. I don't know that you'll do better with any of them. You better talk to someone from the airlines. Otherwise you might be sleeping on the floor in an airport."

"Good idea," I agreed. "I'll call you when we get to Charlotte. They still list our first flight as on-time."

"I'll wait for your call," Penny said. "Be careful. I love you and want you to stay safe."

“I will,” I agreed. I explained our dilemma to the rest of our group. Jake and Clinton weren’t worried. Both were being picked up from the Charlotte airport and driven home from there. The rest of us... well we needed some answers.

Trevor and I went up to the desk at our gate and talked with the lady about our flight to Philly. The airlines hadn’t canceled the flight... yet. They were monitoring the weather and airport status. The lady indicated there was a fair chance we might get stranded in Charlotte that afternoon. She thought the people at Charlotte might be able to reroute Trevor, Shawn, Josh and Mitch through Pittsburgh or Cleveland and get them back to State College that evening. Hal, Jamal Anderson and I were less lucky. She doubted we would get to any airport on the eastern seaboard that day. She suggested that we might want to go on-line and reserve hotel rooms in Charlotte for the night. It would beat sleeping in the terminal.

I discussed the situation with my traveling companions. Trevor, Shawn, Josh and Mitch were willing to gamble on getting back to campus that day. Jamal echoed Penny’s sentiments. If Philadelphia got a foot of snow, we were not going home that day. Hal, Jamal and I decided to try to reserve a hotel room in Charlotte in case the worst happened and we couldn’t fly home.

I found a hotel near Charlotte’s airport on-line and made reservations for three in one room. Jamal and Hal didn’t have a lot of money for a hotel room. I figured at worst, Hal and I would have to share a bed while Jamal took the second bed in our room. Nobody was sharing with the 323 pound offense guard unless they were VERY close to him.

Our flight pulled away from the gate in Mobile at 11:11 am, a minute ahead of schedule. The flight to Charlotte was smooth. We headed straight for the flight board when we debarked from the plane from Mobile. Flight 1578 to Philadelphia was still listed as on-time. Our group headed for our gate.

A long line of people were waiting at the desk when we arrived. We left our carry-ons with Mitch and joined the line. The man at the desk had worked his way through about ten people in front of us when the sign for our flight switched from on-time to delayed. A collective groan echoed through the queue.

Six people were ahead of my group. By the time Trevor stepped up to talk with the man, the flight status changed again to canceled. Trevor, Shawn, Mitch and Josh discussed their predicament with the gentleman. He was able to get them on a flight through Pittsburgh that left in a couple hours.

“We’re on Flight 1578,” I explained. “Is there anything you can do for us to get us to Philly, Newark or Baltimore?”

“The storm is forcing all three of those airports to close,” the man replied. “I could reroute you to Pittsburgh, Boston or Syracuse. Would any of those destinations help?”

I looked at Hal and Jamal. Both shook their heads no. “How about Harrisburg, Pa.? Is that possible?”

“I have quite a few connections to Harrisburg,” the man answered. “Many of them go through New York or Philadelphia, so they most likely will get canceled. I could route you through Atlanta or Boston, though I’m not sure that will help you. The big nor’easter is spreading far enough inland that we have a watch on flights going to Harrisburg, Pa. You may make the next connection and still be stranded.”

“What do you think, guys?” I asked.

“Why would we want to go to Harrisburg?” Jamal asked. “It’s a hell of a long way from campus. Where would we stay?”

“We both grew up in Lancaster County,” Hal explained.

“My parents or Hal’s parents could pick us up and take us home,” I added. “We could provide a bed for you until we can get back to Philly.”

“But the man says Harrisburg may close too,” Jamal said. “Maybe we are better staying here. At least we have rooms here. If we fly to Atlanta or Boston, we’re gonna stay on the terminal floor for the night.”

“Hal?” I asked.

“Stay here,” Hal answered.

“Can you book us on the first flight to Philadelphia when the airport opens up again?” I requested.

“I will do that, sir,” the man replied. “Will you be staying in the airport or are you going to one of the local hotels?”

“God bless my fiancée,” I answered. “She warned us about the storm when we were in Mobile. We have reservations at the Holiday Inn near the airport.”

“Very good, sir,” the man answered. He jotted a phone number down on a slip of paper. Call this number to check on our progress booking you a flight to your destinations.”

“Thank you for your help,” I responded. “Where do we go to pick up our luggage?”

“That could be difficult to track,” the man said. Can you survive the night without it?” We looked at each other and agreed. We might be a little grubby in the morning but we could survive without a change of clothes.

Trevor, Shawn, Mitch and Josh wished us luck as we headed for the airport's transportation courtesy desk. We needed a couple minutes to arrange a ride from the airport to the Holiday Inn. Half a dozen other smart passengers heading north and east joined us in the ride to the hotel.

Thankfully the Holiday Inn was able to put us in a room with king sized beds. Hal and I are good friends but I had no interest in snuggling with him overnight so we could both fit in one small bed. Jamal and Hal decided to check out the fitness facilities at the hotel. I had a couple phone calls to make first.

I called Penny first. "Honey, I have horrible news," Penny said when she answered.

"I know, they closed the Philly airport," I interjected. "Every airport along the east coast is closed between here and Boston."

"Where are you?" Penny asked. "Did you get a room?"

"Jamal, Hal and I are at the Holiday Inn near the airport here in Charlotte," I replied. "After I talked to you in Mobile, I called ahead and made reservations for a room just in case we needed it. I'm glad you gave me a warning this morning. Otherwise we'd be sleeping in the terminal tonight. How are things in Philly?"

"The snow is probably eight or ten inches deep already," Penny answered. "Action News is running half hourly bulletins. They are predicting we will get between twelve and sixteen inches before the storm is over. The way the snow is coming down reminds of that blizzard we had two years ago over winter break."

"I remember that storm," I said. "Philly is shutting down, isn't it?"

"Pretty much completely," Penny agreed.

"Stay inside, stay warm and stay safe," I said. "Don't worry about digging my car out. I'll catch a taxi or bus from the airport when I get in tomorrow."

"Call me when you know when you're coming in," Penny asked. "I worry. I love you, Kyle."

"I will keep you informed," I promised. "I love too, honey."

My second call was to John Waters. I needed to let him know that I wouldn't make it to school tomorrow. Mrs. Waters answered the phone.

"Could I speak with John, please?" I asked politely. "This is Kyle Martin from school calling. I am..."

“John’s student teacher,” Mrs. Waters interjected. “Yes, John’s told me so much about you. It is good to finally talk with you.”

“It’s good to talk with you too, ma’am,” I said.

“Please, you can call me Emily,” Emily Waters answered. “I’ll get my husband. He will be happy for an interruption. I was ready to send him out to clear our walks and driveway.”

“Thank you, Emily,” I said. It took John a couple minutes to get to the phone.

“What’s up, Kyle?” John asked. “Are you safe inside enjoying a view of the snow?”

“No, I’m stranded in Charlotte, North Carolina,” I explained. “I will not be able to get to school tomorrow.”

John just laughed. “Tredyffrin/Easttown canceled school for tomorrow half an hour ago. I will be surprised if we have school on Tuesday either. You will have plenty of time to get back home from your trip.”

“That’s a relief, John,” I replied.

“You had a hell of a game yesterday, Kyle,” John added. “Congratulations on winning the MVP. You deserved it. Tell me more about how the game went.”

I spent about five minutes telling John about the game. He enjoyed hearing about all the other name players I met and got to know during my week down south. John gave me an assignment too. I would deliver a lecture to the AP Modern European History class on Napoleon’s campaign in Russia in 1812 two days after school opened up again, whenever that was. John wished me luck and a safe trip home before we hung up.

I headed down to the fitness room to get in my daily workout. Hal and Jamal were half done with their routines when I arrived. They hung out with me until I finished. They headed back to the room to watch some TV. There isn’t much to do at our hotel when you’re stranded without transportation. I headed for the computer center with my laptop. I could get started refreshing my memory about Napoleon’s catastrophic Russian campaign.

It was a boring afternoon for the three of us. We had dinner at the hotel lounge. The food was OK, nothing to write home about. We called the airport after dinner. They gave us the rearranged flight times. Both Philly and Newark expected to have the runways cleared and planes operating tomorrow. Jamal and I would be on a flight that departed at 11:20 am for Philly. Hal had to get moving earlier. His flight left Charlotte for Newark at 9:17 am.

I gave Penny a call after we confirmed our departure times. The snow finally stopped at home. Penny said the airport got 15.1 inches. The University of Pennsylvania canceled Penny's classes for tomorrow. Will wasn't going over to Princeton. It was closed too. Andy was storm stayed at home in Paradise. Southeast Pennsylvania was at a standstill until the road crews could open things up.

Trevor called a little after nine o'clock Sunday evening to see how Hal, Jamal and I were faring. Trevor and his traveling buddies had been bumped twice before they finally got a flight to Pittsburgh. They caught the last flight into State College that evening. Damian, Chip and Brian sent their regards.

We ate the continental breakfast before we left the hotel on Monday morning. Jamal and I decided to ride over to the airport with Hal even though our flight left an hour and a half later. There wasn't anything to do at the hotel except stare at the walls in our room.

Jamal and I helped Hal get checked in for his flight. We hung out by the check-in area until the staff could process us. The lady at the check-in desk assured Jamal and me that our luggage was already tagged and ready to load on the airplane. We headed through security hoping she was right.

Jamal and I hung out at our gate until about forty minutes before departure. We grabbed some food to take aboard the plane for lunch. Both of us knew we wouldn't be getting anything from the airlines on a flight that lasted an hour and 35 minutes. We boarded on time but were caught by the jam up of airplanes in Charlotte that hadn't gone one to their east coast destinations yesterday. Takeoff was about fifteen minutes behind the 11:20 scheduled departure.

The flight was quiet and routine, thankfully. Our landing was delayed thanks to the snow. We circled Philly for half an hour before our plane made it to the top of the landing queue. Philadelphia looked so pretty blanketed in white. Very little traffic was moving on the highways around the city.

We got jammed up getting to a gate too. The grounds crew was still clearing around the terminals. We got off the plane around 2:40 pm, fifty minutes behind schedule. Thank God we were back in Philly!

Miraculously, U. S. Air got our bags to us on time. Jamal and I lugged our bags down to Terminal A. The SEPTA trains ran into the city from that terminal. Jamal's train arrived first. He had a train that ran directly through the center of the city and on to Temple's campus. He had an easy trip home.

I took the next train to 30th Street Station. I had to lug my bags over to the trolley terminal and take a trolley across West Philadelphia. My stop at 36th Street and Lancaster Avenue came seven minutes later. I lugged my bags through the streets two

blocks to reach my apartment building. Residents were out trying to clear the 15 or 16 inches of snow off the sidewalk when I was hiking home. The Courtyard Apartments had the snow removed, so the last half block was easy walking.

It was a Monday afternoon, so Vincent Rizzo was on duty. He gave me a big smile as he opened the door for me.

“You had one hell of a game on Saturday, Kyle,” Vincent said as I stepped up to the door.

“Thank you, Vincent,” I replied. “It’s great to get home. I hope the snow wasn’t too much of a hassle for you.”

“No, it wasn’t too bad for me,” he answered. “My boys loved the day off from school. I didn’t work yesterday so I didn’t get trapped here. Poor Sam couldn’t get home when his shift ended at noon yesterday. He didn’t get to leave here until after lunch today.”

Sam Tartaglione was one of the weekend security men. I hadn’t seen much of him yet, since I was rarely at the apartment on the weekends.

“Have a good day, Vincent,” I said as I stepped inside. “I guess I’ll unpack, rest a bit and then go find my car and start digging.” Vincent chuckled.

“That may be easier than you think” Vincent replied. “Penny and her friends worked on it for a while this morning. I think it is nearly cleared out... at least until the city plows the street it’s on.”

“I guess I’ll see,” I agreed. “Have a good day, Vincent.”

I headed upstairs to our apartment. Penny met me with a big hug inside the door when I stepped into the apartment.

“I’m so glad you are home,” Penny exclaimed before we exchanged kisses. “Did you have much trouble getting here from the airport?”

“Not really.” I replied. “The train from the airport was on time. The trolley was late but got me within two blocks of here. I had to walk in the street half way here. Not many people have their sidewalks cleared.”

“I’m glad you made it safe and sound,” Penny said. We exchanged kisses again. “Dakota and Dave came over to help me dig your car out. It’s mostly cleared, except the city hasn’t plowed Pearl Street yet.”

“I’ll deal with the car after dinner,” I said.

“Why don’t you go unpack,” Penny suggested as she released her hug. “I’ll get dinner started. We can see about your car after dinner... assuming you have school tomorrow and need your car.”

“Do you think there is any chance of that?” I asked.

“Penn already canceled tomorrow’s classes,” Penny answered. “The university was concerned that the staff won’t be able to get into the city for classes in the morning. I will be surprised if you have school.”

“I guess I’ll find out later,” I answered. “Maybe I’ll talk to John Waters after dinner.”

Penny splurged on my welcome home dinner. We had steak, baked potatoes, green beans and cheese cake that Penny picked up from the Stan’s Deli a couple blocks down the street. John Waters called as we were finishing dinner. Tredyffrin/Easttown canceled school for tomorrow. John expected we would also have a two hour delay for Wednesday.

I did a light workout at the fitness room in our building. I had no interest in trying to get over to Edberg-Olsen for a workout. I doubted enough buses would be running in the evening to get me there and back anyway.

Penny and I got to sleep in Tuesday morning and have a leisurely breakfast. I borrowed a snow shovel from the maintenance people at our apartment and hiked over to my car. The city had plowed the snow one lane wide on Pearl Street. I spent an hour moving snow away so I would be able to head to school Wednesday morning.

I spent the rest of the morning preparing my lecture on Napoleon’s Russian Campaign. I sent the lesson plans off to John Waters. I gave John Waters a call after lunch to warn him to look for the lesson plan. John was kind enough to assign me two other lectures for next week. I wanted to use my rare day off to get ahead on my planning.

I would give lectures to our two ninth grade World Cultures classes about the Philippines. My second topic was for our AP Comparative Government and Politics class. I would lecture about the Cuban constitution at 7:20 am next Wednesday morning. I was going to need to be creative to keep a bunch of seniors awake with this topic. I spent the rest of the afternoon researching and preparing my lesson plans. I e-mailed them to John when I finished.

I received a call from Jonathan Atkins late in the afternoon. “Kyle, you need to come in and see Professor Buchanan at 8:00 am tomorrow morning,” Jonathan explained.

“What’s up?” I asked. “Conestoga High School has a two hour delay tomorrow but that might leave me short on time to get over to the school before our first period. Could Professor Buchanan meet me fifteen or twenty minutes earlier?”

“I have my orders for you,” Jonathan answered. “You are to be at the professor’s office at the appointed time.”

“What is this about?” I asked. It seemed unusual for me to be called in to see the professor. Normally he tried to visit us at our schools so he didn’t disrupt our teaching schedule.

“I haven’t been told anything more,” Jonathan answered. “The professor got word from the department on Main Campus that you are to be here and that’s all I know.”

“From Main Campus?” I responded. “Why would they be calling me in? I guess I’ll see tomorrow morning.” I thanked Jonathan for giving me a call. I was taught to be polite when I was raised, even if the message I received from Jonathan was confusing.

Penny and I picked up some Thai takeout from the restaurant a couple blocks away on Lancaster Avenue. The sidewalks were mostly cleared. The snow was out and the temperature was in the mid-thirties, so the snow was starting to melt. Give the city a couple more days of nice weather and travel should be passable again.

After dinner, I took the subway over to the 11th Street Station in center city, walked from there over to the Market Street Station and transferred to the light rail heading north. I had a two block walk from the Temple University Station north to Edberg-Olsen Hall.

The Owl’s weight room was busy for a weekday evening. There was an empty machine beside the one Jamal Anderson was working out at. I walked over to begin my workout. Jamal stopped, stood up and offered me his hand in a high five.

“Good to see you, Kyle,” Jamal said as I exchanged a high five with him. “I see you made it home safely.”

“I did,” I agreed. “It was slow and I had to walk the last two blocks up the middle of the street, but I made it. Did you have any trouble?”

“No, it was easy,” Jamal answered. “Temple brought Bobcats in to move the snow off the walkways around campus. I got off at the station and walked straight to my dorm. It was a piece of cake.”

I settled in at the machine beside my friend. “Last week was fun but I’m glad to get back to a normal schedule again.” Jamal agreed. We went to work. About a dozen of Jamal’s teammates, including Dave Mitchell and his roommate Jaden Williams, stopped by to talk with Jamal and me about our experiences at the Senior Bowl. I took the train and subway back home when I finished my workout. It took half an hour to get home, slower

than driving. Driving wasn't an option right now, until the university and city got more parking spaces cleared.

I took off around seven o'clock on Wednesday morning for the drive to the Brandywine Campus. The drive out to the campus took nearly fifty minutes, instead of the normal half hour to thirty-five minutes. The drivers were still maniacs in the snow, but there weren't too many of them on the road with me. I guess most employers wanted to let the sun come up and let PennDOT do more work on the roads before their employees came out.

I showed up at Professor Buchanan's office a couple minutes before my appointment. Professor Buchanan did not have his usual cheerful smile on his face when he greeted me.

"Have a seat, Kyle," the professor said. "There is no easy way to do this. This letter arrived from Main Campus yesterday." He took a deep breath. "Please read this. I will do my best to answer questions when you are done." Professor Buchanan handed me a sealed envelope with my name on the front. I opened it quickly and began reading.

January 28, 2013

Mr. Kyle D. Martin
3500 Powelton Avenue, Apt. 306
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Re: CI495E, Practicum in Student Teaching

Dear Mr. Martin:

It has come to the attention of the College of Education that you have taken five days of unexcused absence from your student teaching assignment at the Tredyffrin/Easttown School District's Conestoga Senior High School last week. Successful completion of the CI 495E course requires your constant attendance to all classes at your assigned school throughout the duration of your student teaching assignment. Student teachers are permitted no more than three days of absence for sickness during their assignment.

The College of Education agreed to allow you to miss the first two days of your student teaching assignment since you were engaged in university business in Arizona at the start of the semester. The College can accommodate athletic schedules to an extent, but you have far exceeded the allowances that can be made. Since you will be unable to attend the numbers of days required for CI 495E, you will be unable to satisfactorily complete your student teaching practicum.

You are hereby dropped from CI 495E effectively immediately. Please see the bursar at the Brandywine Campus to file the necessary forms to officially drop this course. You may want to

consider changing to a less demanding major, as failure to complete this course will prevent your obtaining an undergraduate degree in the College of Education.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Daniel M. Friar
Dean of the College of Education
The Pennsylvania State University

PTH/edt

cc: Dr. P. Thomas Henderson
Professor Charles Buchanan, Brandywine Campus
Dr. James T. Cooper, Tredyffrin/Easttown School District
Mr. John H. Waters, Tredyffrin/Easttown School District
file

I stared at the piece of paper in my hand for a few seconds, too stunned to speak. “How the hell...” I stuttered before realizing locker room language was inappropriate here. “Uh... what the heck is going on?” I demanded. “How can they call last week unexcused absences? I cleared my attendance at the Senior Bowl with you, with Mr. Waters and with Dr. Cooper at Conestoga High School. How can they do this?”

“I wish I could give you a proper answer, Kyle,” Professor Buchanan answered. “I have been on the phone since I received my copy of this letter yesterday. The College of Education is firm on this. Apparently I exceeded my authority when I granted you permission to attend the Senior Bowl.”

“Exceeded your authority?” I growled. “What am I supposed to do now? Can I appeal this decision?”

“I am deeply sorry for this, Kyle,” Professor Buchanan said. “I thought this was a routine request that you made. Someone in the department learned of your trip and hit the roof. I was unable to find out whom in my phone calls yesterday. I suppose you will be able to appeal to the Dean.”

“I think I know whom,” I said. “My advisor, Dr. Henderson, has been at war with my playing football since I was a freshman. He has tried to get me to leave the College of Education numerous times. I would guess he was the one behind this. Can you help me fix this, Professor Buchanan?”

“I would like to, but doubt I can,” Professor Buchanan replied. “I am an adjunct professor working out of a branch campus. I work semester to semester at the pleasure of the department. I have very little pull compared to Dr. Henderson, a tenured professor and a senior member of the College of Education.”

“How do I start an appeal of this crazy decision?” I asked. “I am scheduled to give my first full period lecture on Friday morning. I have to get this fixed as soon as I can.”

“I know, Kyle,” Professor Buchanan replied. “Mr. Waters forwarded copies of your lesson plans for your next three lectures to me yesterday. They are well prepared. I doubt you will get the chance to deliver them. I don’t see an appeal process moving quickly enough to resolve this situation before Friday... unless you know someone on Main Campus with enough clout to make a dean take notice.”

“I do know a few people with clout on Main Campus,” I said, smiling. The beginnings of a plan was forming. “I suppose I should start with Coach Burton and the football coaching staff. I probably should talk with Coach Paterno.”

“That is someone with clout at the university,” Professor Buchanan agreed. “Do you know him well enough to ask him if he would help you?”

“Coach recruited me to play football at Penn State,” I explained. “He works part time as the players’ academic advisor. This should be right down his alley. I suppose I could try President Spanier if Coach Paterno can’t help.”

“You know the President of the university?” Professor Buchanan asked.

“I do,” I answered. “We shared a flight to New York City and back when I received the Campbell National Scholar/Athlete Award last month.”

“It is inconceivable to me that the university would drop a student with your public profile,” Professor Buchanan observed. “How would it look to the world if they dropped the national scholar/athlete and prevented him from graduating?”

“I hope you’re right,” I agreed.

“I will do whatever I can to assist you, Kyle,” Professor Buchanan offered. “Would you like a letter attesting to the fact that your absence was an EXCUSED absence that does not interfere with your student teaching experience?”

“That would help,” I agreed. “Do you have the phone numbers for the dean’s office and the president’s office? That would also help me.”

“I will write the letter immediately,” Professor Buchanan replied. “Why don’t you go downstairs to the campus office. You can get the phone numbers down there. I will have a letter for you when you return.”

“Thank you for your support, Professor,” I said.

I headed out to the hallway. I had another phone call to make. I glanced at my watch. It was a little after 8:15. I called John Waters and explained what was happening. I asked John to write a letter indicating that my excused absences from his classes were excused.

"I will write the letter during fourth period and e-mail it to you immediately," John promised. "This can't stand. It just can't!"

"Thank you for your support, John," I replied. "I really appreciate it. I will keep in touch and keep you informed of my progress at getting reinstated."

"Good luck, Kyle," John said. "I want you back as quickly as possible."

"I hope I am," I agreed. I headed downstairs to the campus administrative office. The secretary looked up the two phone numbers I needed. I decided to call the Lasch Building first, to give Professor Buchanan more time to finish his letter.

"Ann Marie, this is Kyle Martin," I said when our receptionist answered the phone.

"Did you lose your helmet again?" Ann Marie teased.

"No, I didn't. My two helmets should arrive from Alabama any day," I retorted. "I had the Senior Bowl staff mail them back to the university for me. I figured that would be safer than trusting the airlines again." Ann Marie chuckled. "Is Coach Burton, Coach Adams or Coach Caffrey in today?"

"They're all out on recruiting visits," Ann Marie replied.

"I'm not surprised," I replied. "We have to get all our recruits lined up before next Wednesday's signing day. Is Coach Paterno in this morning?"

"Joe? Yes he came in about fifteen minutes ago," Ann Marie answered. "Would you like to speak with him?"

"Yes, please," I responded. I waited about thirty seconds for Coach to answer.

"Hello, Joe Paterno... how may I help you?" Coach asked politely.

"Coach, this is Kyle Martin," I answered.

"Kyle, how are you doing?" Coach Paterno asked.

"I'm fine... physically. I ran into an academic problem that I hope you can help me solve," I added. I detailed what happened this morning and described the contents of the letter to Coach Paterno.

“Henderson,” Coach Paterno growled part way through my description of my plight. “I’ve dealt with him before. Evan Foster... Stefen Wisniewski... I could go on and on with the challenges he has thrown up in front of our players.

“I’m guessing he’s involved,” I agreed.

“I should talk with Bob,” Coach Paterno mused. “Football players should stay clear of the College of Education. It would save a lot of heartache and trouble.”

I finished telling Coach Paterno what had happened. “The letter says my absence was unexcused – which is flat out wrong,” I declared. “I had permission from my student teaching supervisor, my mentor teacher and the principal of the high school I teach at. I need help getting this injustice corrected, Coach. My supervisor tells me that there is an appeals process. Can you help me through that, Coach?”

“You are right, Kyle,” Coach Paterno replied. “There is an appeals process. We must follow the process precisely so we can avoid any hint of favored treatment for football players.”

“How quickly can we get the process started?” I asked. “Dr. Henderson is right about one thing. I DO need to be in the classroom. I should be there right now instead of being on the phone trying to fix this problem. I am scheduled to give a lecture on Friday morning. I don’t want to miss this.”

“Friday? Oh my,” Coach responded. “I will need to call in a favor or two to get the College of Education to move that fast. I know from past dealings with the education faculty, that you will need to be prepared to give something back. Are you prepared to do that?”

“Give something back?” I said. I was momentarily puzzled before the light came on. “They made a big deal in the letter about how many days of teaching I was missing. What if I taught over spring break instead of taking that week off?”

“That is exactly the sort of offer that should demonstrate that you are serious about teaching and obtaining your degree,” Coach Paterno said. “Let me make a couple phone calls and see how quickly I can arrange to get you in front of the dean or an appeals panel. How do I reach you today?”

“I guess I will be hanging out at Brandywine Campus until I know something,” I replied. “I’m sure I can’t go over to my high school and sit in on classes after I’ve been kicked out of the student teaching course.”

Coach Paterno and I talked for another minute or so about details that he thought would help with my appeal. I told him about the letters Professor Buchanan and John Waters were preparing in my support.

“I’ll wait to hear from you, Coach,” I told Coach Paterno before we ended the call. I gave Penny a call and briefly filled her in on what was going on. I promised to text her more information, especially if I needed to go to State College to see the dean or an appeals board.

I picked up the letter from Professor Buchanan after I finished my phone calls. I headed for the Vairo Library. It would provide a quiet place for me to hang out until I heard back from Coach Paterno.

A thought occurred to me as I was walking over to the library. I wasn’t the only secondary education major that attended the Senior Bowl. I gave Josh Bruno a call. It went direct to voice mail. I left him a message to call me as soon as he got an opportunity.

I completely read my copy of the Philadelphia Inquirer while I waited for news from someone. Josh Bruno returned my call first. I stepped out of the library and returned his call.

“Hey Josh, I’m calling to see if you caught any flak from attending the Senior Bowl,” I said. “Are you still in the student teaching program?”

“Still in the program?” Josh parroted. “What are you talking about?”

I explained my predicament. “I’ve heard nothing like that, Coach,” Josh responded. “I’ve been in the classroom here at State College High for the last three days. I did a biology lecture last period. I’m on my prep period right now.”

“OK, I will keep your participation in the Senior Bowl quiet,” I said. “I don’t want to get you in hot water with me. I suspected this was Doctor Henderson continuing his three and a half year vendetta against me and my career choice. Thanks for confirming that.”

“Good luck, Coach,” Josh offered.

“Thanks, man. I suspect I will need a lot of luck to get by Henderson,” I replied. “I’ll talk to you later.”

I headed back to the library to wait for more phone calls. The librarian at the front desk hooked me up with one of the IT guys. He helped me set up my wifi internet connection while I was at the library. I spent forty-five minutes browsing on-line to find more information for the two lectures I hoped to deliver next week.

Coach Paterno called next.

“Kyle, I was able to get Dean Friar to see you at eight o’clock tomorrow morning to hear your appeal,” Coach explained. “Come prepared to argue your case. I went through

something similar with Stefen Wisniewski five years ago. Expect Henderson to show up too.”

“OK, that doesn’t surprise me,” I said. “I need a little more advice. Should I bring up the other secondary education major who attended the Senior Bowl and has not been dropped from the student teaching program?”

“Really? Who is it?” Coach asked.

“Josh Bruno has had no problems at all,” I explained. “Josh has been in the classroom the past three days, since he got back from the Senior Bowl. I don’t want to get Josh in trouble by bringing him into my problems, but I want to be treated like other students. I shouldn’t be singled out because of my football success. Treat me like every other student.”

“That is the attitude you need to take,” Coach agreed. “Keep Josh’s name low profile for now. You can mention Evan Foster and Stefen Wisniewski’s participation in the Senior Bowl and successful completion of their education degree requirements. Those two are beyond Henderson’s reach now.”

“OK, I’ll do that,” I agreed. “Can I include Zack Hayes’ example too? He has a teaching degree... in physical education, not through the College of Education.”

“It can’t hurt to include him,” Coach agreed.

“Can someone from the team be at the hearing to help me?” I asked. “It would probably help me calm my nerves.”

“That would be counter-productive,” Coach Paterno responded. “We don’t want it to look like the athletic department is putting undue pressure on the dean. You will have to go through this one alone.”

“OK, I guess I can do that,” I said.

“Why don’t you come see me, Kyle?” Coach Paterno suggested. “You can rehearse your case with me. I would be willing to critique it and help you make your best case for reinstatement.”

“Thank you, Coach,” I said. “I will give you a call when I know when I will get to State College this afternoon. I have to stop at home and pick up some clothes and things for an overnight stay.”

“Do you need a place to stay when you get here, Kyle?” Coach asked. “I’m sure Sue and I could put you up.”

“That’s very generous, Coach, but I am sure I can stay with Trevor, Damian and Chip at my old apartment on campus,” I replied. “I can sleep on the couch. It won’t hurt me at all.”

“Good luck, Kyle,” Coach replied. “I will await your call.”

I ended the phone call. The time for sitting was over. It was time for action. I texted the news about my trip to State College to Penny, who was in her Comparative Anatomy lecture until noon. I e-mailed John Waters to update him on my progress. John had sent me the letter he promised. I gathered up my things and went over to see Professor Buchanan. He was out visiting one of the other student teachers. I left him a note informing him of what was going on.

I found my way to West Chester and then on to Exton and the Route 30 Bypass. Route 30 took me straight home. I hit home around eleven o’clock. I wasted no time at home. I grabbed a towel, toiletries, a change of clothes, a coat and a tie. I left Mom and Dad a note letting them know about my trip to State College and that I would call after dinner and let them know what was going on.

I gave my old apartment a call before I got back on the road. Chip answered.

“Hey Chip, it’s Kyle,” I explained. “Do you guys mind a guest sleeping on your couch tonight? I have an eight o’clock meeting with the Dean of Education tomorrow morning.”

“No problem, Coach,” Chip responded. “This is still your apartment too, as far as all of us are concerned. You’re welcome anytime.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” I said. “I will give you a call when I get to State College. We can coordinate a rendezvous so I can get into the apartment. I don’t have a key anymore.”

“I’ll leave a note for Trev, Damian and Bri, so they know you’re coming,” Chip said.

“Thanks, I’ll see you later this afternoon,” I answered. I gave Coach Paterno a call too and let him know I expected to be on campus around two o’clock. He asked me to come see him as soon as I hit campus.

The roads were clear between Paradise and State College. I stopped off at Red Rabbit in Clark’s Ferry and picked up a sack of burgers for lunch. I made the trip back to Main Campus in about two hours and forty-five minutes.

I pulled into a visitor’s parking space outside the Lasch Building. It seemed odd, but where else could I park? I didn’t have a parking sticker for the West Parking Deck this semester. I headed inside to the reception area.

“Hi Ann Marie,” I said warmly as our receptionist gave me a big smile. “I have a two o’clock appointment with Coach Paterno.”

“Yes, Joe told me,” she responded. Ann Marie gave me a smile. “Your two helmets arrived this morning.”

“Thank you for your help getting me equipped last week,” I responded. “The coaches had me going over the middle a lot in the fourth quarter last Saturday. The helmet really helped.”

“Good luck with your meeting tomorrow morning, Kyle,” She added as I headed back. I turned and gave Ann Marie a smile.

“This is a small community, isn’t it?” I commented.

“We’re all family,” Ann Marie answered.

I headed back the hallway into the main part of the Lasch Building. I noticed three new blocks on the Wall of Captains when I went by. I stopped and stared. Blocks saying “Trevor A. Conwell”, “Kyle D. Martin” and “Damian R. Thompson” now graced the wall. That punctuated the end of my college career with finality. Now I had to exit college with my degree.

I headed back to the Academic Center and Coach Paterno’s office. I showed Coach the letter from Professor Buchanan. He was satisfied with it. I tried to show him the one from John Waters on my smartphone but he waved me off.

“I can’t read this thing,” Coach griped. “Put it on paper for tomorrow morning. These new things...” Coach muttered. “What wrong with paper?” My coach emeritus was a bit of a Luddite. When I’m eighty-seven, I’m sure my grandchildren will say the same about me.

“I’ll do that, Coach,” I agreed quickly. Coach Paterno and I spent about an hour reviewing what I should say to best build my case for reinstatement in the student teaching program. Coach Paterno seemed confident I would be successful in convincing Dean Friar to allow me back into the student teaching program.

“Thank you for your help, Coach,” I said as we finished up.

“That is why I’m here, Kyle,” Coach replied. “Come over after your meeting with the dean. I want to make sure everything goes as planned.”

“OK, Coach,” I agreed. “I’ll see you in the morning after I meet with the dean.”

I headed out to my car and grabbed my overnight bag. I might as well take advantage of the workout facilities at the Lasch Building while I was here. I grabbed an empty locker

near the far corner of the locker room, since I no longer had a locker of my own. Jerry Whitfield and Kenyatta Jackson were changing after their workouts.

Jerry, Kenyatta and I had a good talk while they finished dressing. Jerry was a senior like me. He hoped he could hook up with an NFL team as a free agent, so he was continuing his fitness training. He hadn't gotten an invite to the Combine but he wanted to be prepared for Penn State's Pro Day in March. Hopefully he could open some scouts' eyes.

Kenyatta had two more years of eligibility since he red shirted his first year at Penn State. He was taking over Jerry's spot in the center of our defensive line. I knew he would do well. Our defense never suffered when Kenyatta rotated in to allow Jerry some rest last season.

Jerry and Kenyatta took off before I finished dressing. Four familiar and close friends showed up just as I finished dressing. Matt Sauder, Josh Hunsecker, Devin Kerr and Jeremy Carter arrived together to dress for their daily workouts.

"Coach, damn good to see you!" Matt exclaimed. "What brings you to campus? I hadn't heard you were coming." The other three new comers on our team echoed Matt's sentiments as they greeted me.

"I have an 8:00 am meeting with the Dean of Education tomorrow morning," I explained. "You didn't hear because I hadn't expected to make this visit. Chip's the only one on the team that knows, if you don't count Coach Paterno. How are your classes going, guys?"

"Good," "Fine," and a couple "No problems," came back in reply.

"Make sure you study real hard," I offered. "The work is going to get real hard, real soon. Don't wait until you screw up a mid-term. You guys should go see Coach Paterno and look into tutors. They help a lot." I stared over at Matt. "Are you taking calculus this semester?"

"Yes"

"We went to the same high school and I know what you learned in math class there," I added. "Go see Coach Paterno immediately for a math tutor. Our school didn't do a great job preparing us for college calculus."

"I'm OK so far," Matt responded.

"Take it from a guy who flunked his first calculus midterm," I said. "Go see Coach Paterno tomorrow and ask for a tutor. He helped me pull an F up to a C by the end of the term. You may not have the problem I had if you start with a tutor right away. Learn from my mistake, Matt."

"Well... I'll think about it, Coach," Matt answered.

I headed over to the weight room and got to work on my normal workout routine. A couple dozen of my teammates were working out. My friends greeted me warmly. I managed to complete my workout while my friends talked about the Senior Bowl and how things were going for me down in Philly.

Brian Henson showed up around four o'clock, as I was finishing my workout. "Hey Coach, it's great to see you again!" Brian announced enthusiastically. "Chip told me you were spending the night with us."

"Yes, I have a meeting with the Dean of Education at 8:00 am tomorrow morning," I responded. "I didn't want to get up at 2:00 am to make it here for the meeting."

"It's great to have you back on campus," Brian answered. "It doesn't seem right not to have you around to talk with and keep everyone on track for next season."

"I have two or three weekend visits to campus this semester and then I'm gone," I replied. "It's time for guys like you to step up and take leadership of the team."

"I know," Brian agreed. "Chip and Dave McCall already asked me to join the leadership group next season."

"Next month," I corrected. "Your next season starts when you prep the team for spring practice." I waved towards Matt, Josh, Jeremy and Devin. "You're one of the experienced guys who know how to prepare and play football at this level. It's time for you to teach them what it takes."

"I've only been here a year and a half," Brian commented. "It seems too soon for me to lead."

"You are the most experienced receiver on the team," I countered. "You have two classes of players younger than you. Who leads them if you not you?"

Brian looked momentarily chagrined. "I guess you're right," he responded. "Man, this thing goes fast, doesn't it?"

"Now you get it," I answered. "Grab everything you can while you're here. It literally jets by. You'll be where I am now looking back nostalgically before you realize what is happening."

"I'll do my best, Coach," Brian said. He was quiet for a moment.

"You said a mouthful, Brian," I responded.

"If you hang out here until I'm finished with my workout, I can take you back to our apartment and get you inside."

“That sounds like a plan,” I agreed. I filled the time while Brian did his routines visiting with my teammates. Matt Sauder got a chance to hear how Dave Mitchell was doing down at Temple. I had directions to pass Matt’s regards onto his close friend when I saw him the next time at Edberg-Olsen.

Brian and I headed over to the apartment a little after five o’clock. Chip had passed the word on to Damian and Trevor, so my appearance wasn’t a surprise when I stepped into my old apartment. Damian was on a cooking kick, the guys told me. He heard as I was on campus in time to make extra food so I had dinner with my friends.

I huddled with Josh Bruno after dinner for an hour. We discussed what the department was doing to me. I promised to keep his name out of any discussion when I met with the dean tomorrow. I wasn’t interested in getting him kicked out of the student teaching program the way I was. I thought using Evan Foster, Stefen Wisniewski and Zack Hayes would be enough examples without adding Josh to the mix. Evan, Zack and Stefen had their degrees, so the Dr. Henderson and the College of Education couldn’t hurt them anymore.

I filled in the rest of the evening on-line, reading for the lecture I hoped to give on Friday about Napoleon’s invasion of Russia. Unlike the rest of the guys in the apartment, I didn’t have any homework to do for classes. I was a week ahead with my lesson plans, which I might never get to deliver. What was the point of bugging John Waters for more assignments right now?

I gave Penny a call. We talked for half an hour about my predicament. She guaranteed that the department would never, ever drop a student teacher with my fame and academic standing. It would give the university a terrible, very public black eye if word got out to the rest of the world. I hoped Penny was right.

I got up around a quarter to seven Thursday morning. I took a shower, changed into my dress slacks and shirt, coat and tie. I left the guys a note thanking them for their hospitality. I dropped my bag off at my car before heading to the Mix. I grabbed a newspaper and my traditional breakfast sandwich before heading for the Chambers Building.

The Dean’s office was on the second floor. I told his secretary about my appointment. She asked me to have a seat and wait until the dean was ready. Promptly at 8:00 am, the dean announced through the intercom that he was ready to see me. The secretary motioned for me to go in.

Dean Friar, who I met briefly at freshman orientation three and a half years ago, stood and shook my hand before saying, “Please have a seat, Mr. Martin.” Dean Friar looked distinguished in his tailored suit. The dean was tall and thin, maybe an inch or so shorter

than me. He was in his late forties, though he looked younger. A few stray grey hairs betrayed his age.

Dr. Henderson, my advisor and tormentor, sat in the chair beside me across the desk from Dean Friar. Dr. Henderson nodded in acknowledgment of my presence as I sat down at the empty chair beside him.

“Thomas, you brought this matter to my attention,” Dean Friar said. “Please explain to Mr. Martin why it was necessary to recommend this action.”

“David, you know how I feel about teaching,” Dr. Henderson began. “It is more than a job or a profession. It is a calling. We educators are tasked with passing on the accumulated wisdom of the ages to the next generation. We inspire and excite a passion for learning in our students. This mission should be undertaken by serious people dedicated to their profession.

“Mr. Martin is a dilettante dabbling in education. He has missed seven days of classroom time just this month. How can someone so unserious about education successfully complete the student teaching curriculum? How many days will he miss by the end of the semester?”

Dean Friar looked to me for a response. I took a deep breath and launched my defense. “I do not believe I can be characterized as a dilettante. Does two straight semesters of 4.0 GPA sound like someone whose interest in teaching is superficial? I received top marks last spring when I did my intermediate student teaching practicum. I have a 3.78 GPA overall. How many seniors in the College of Education can say that, Dean? Maybe ten percent?”

“I expect it’s closer to five percent,” Dean Friar replied.

“The mere competence at regurgitating facts on a test does not make an educator,” Dr. Henderson countered.

“Competence at regurgitating facts?” I answered. “Do you remember what grade I received from you when I took your Educational Psychology 14 course three years ago?” Dr. Henderson shook his head no, even though the look on his face told me he did remember. “You gave me an A in that course. You and I disagree about my playing football and my career choice but I respected you for grading fairly back then. Precious few students at this university work as hard as I do and have given up social and recreational pursuits during college the way I have.

“I am required by my contractual obligation to the university to put in between twenty and forty hours a week to my football training, studying and practicing. I carry a full load of courses each semester. I have managed to juggle the course load and football load successfully for three and a half years and maintain excellent grades.”

“Your record does indicate that,” Dean Friar agreed.

“David, you and I have both seen education students who received outstanding grades but failed as teachers,” Dr. Henderson countered. “Learning to control a classroom, to reach and connect with the students and to test student’s learning of the material are skills best developed through practice and repetition. That is why the C I 495E course is set up for a specific number of days in the classroom observing and practicing the pedagogy. Regardless of Mr. Martin’s grades, he has missed seven days in the classroom already and the semester is less than a month old. How can he ever recover and reach proficiency in the most important skill we teach – how to translate the knowledge he apparently has into effective teaching techniques that work with youth? I do not see how it is possible for him to be successful.

Dr. Henderson gave me a pity stare. “It’s best that you not waste everyone’s time obtaining a degree you have no intention of using. Drop this quixotic quest and carry on with your real intention – playing your child’s game for the amusement of the masses and getting paid millions of dollars to do so. We all know you will not be in a classroom next September even if you manage to get a degree.”

“You most likely are right, Dr. Henderson,” I agreed. “I probably will be playing in the NFL next September.” I turned towards Dean Friar. “Do you know how long the average NFL career is, Dean Friar?”

“I have no idea,” Dean Friar replied.

“The average career is a little more than three years,” I answered. “What do I do when I’m twenty-four and my NFL career is over? Do I go home and sit in a rocking chair for the next six or seven decades? I plan to go into the classroom when my playing career is over. My degree is very important to me. I love teaching and want to make it my life’s work. While I’m working with our youth in school, I plan to also work after school as a football coach.

“Football has been a major influence on my life over the last eight years. I have learned discipline, the value of hard work and the value of teamwork through football. The things I learned in football helped make me who I am today. In eighth grade I was a bright, underachieving student coasting along without direction or ambition. Football gave me the drive and discipline to succeed academically and the ambition to make myself the best. I want to pass what I have learned on to future generations of students and help them achieve amazing things the way I have. I agree with every word Dr. Henderson said at the beginning about how critical our mission is. That is why I want to finish my education degree.”

“The words sound fine,” Dr. Henderson answered. “How are you going to successfully complete CI 495E when you have missed so many days already? Seven days missed in less than a month, five of which were unexcused. I do not see how it is possible to overcome that.”

“First off, I want to make it clear that last week was NOT unexcused as Dr. Henderson contends,” I countered. “I went through the proper channels as I was instructed to get permission to attend the Senior Bowl last week. I have a letter from my student teaching supervisor, Professor Buchanan, attesting to that fact. I also cleared my participation at the Senior Bowl with my mentor teacher and the principal at the Conestoga High School. Here are the letters.” I handed them to Dean Friar. He looked them over briefly and smiled when he finished reading them.

“I do not know if the two of you realized that I was contractually obligated by my Letter of Intent to play, practice and attend meetings for the football team at the university’s discretion. In return the university provides me with tuition, books, room and board for my education. It was not my choice to be in Phoenix on January 8th. That was determined by the athletic department and the university. Do you know that I spent time during my winter break to go down to Brandywine Campus and begin preparation for my student teaching so I would not fall behind the other student teachers?”

“No, I did not know that,” Dean Friar agreed.

“I am perfectly willing to student teach over my spring break, if that helps me get in the required amount of practice teaching,” I offered. “That should cover the five days I missed last week. I am also scheduled to have off two days at the end of February so I can attend the NFL Scouting Combine. I am willing to work two days extra at the end of the semester during finals week. I’ll be able to do that since CI 495E is the only course I am taking this semester and it does not have a final.”

Dean Friar pondered my offer for a few moments before smiling. “Well Thomas, I think that addresses all the concerns you shared with me. Welcome back to the student teaching program, Mr. Martin.” Dr. Henderson tried to mask his distaste for the dean’s decision but his face looked like he had sucked a lemon dry.

“Thank you, Thomas, for bringing your concerns to my attention,” Dean Friar said. “May I have a few minutes in private with Mr. Martin?” Dr. Henderson was unhappy with the dean’s decision and also at being summarily dismissed. He left without a word.

“I want to commend you for your well prepared argument for reinstatement to the student teaching program,” Dean Friar said after Dr. Henderson left. “I am not a football fan but I watch games occasionally. I can understand the time and effort you have expended over the last four years to be successful on the football field and maintain an exemplary academic record. The department has had a few other football players who managed to balance the demands of their sport. I commend you. Do you know Evan Foster or Stefen Wisniewski?”

“I was a teammate of Evan’s,” I replied. “I haven’t met Stefen, though I met his uncle last week. The older players used to tell Wisniewski stories when I started. I understand he is quite a guy.”

“Stefen won the Paterno/Pearce Scholarship for scholar/athletes,” Dean Friar observed. “Were you considered for that this year? Your academic record looks just as impressive as Stefen’s was.”

“I was nominated for that award,” I answered. “The Paterno/Pearce Scholarship goes to one of the runners up for the national Campbell Scholarship award. I ended up winning the Campbell.”

“That explains the phone call I received yesterday afternoon,” Dean Friar said. “It was not necessary to enlist President Spanier in your quest to be reinstated.”

“I really know nothing about that, Dean,” I replied. “Coach Paterno is in charge of academic counseling for the football team. I went to him after I got the letter dropping me from the student teaching program. He was the logical choice to help me. Maybe he spoke with President Spanier about it. I knew Coach expressed concern about the PR for the university if the national scholar/athlete were dropped from his degree program months before graduation.”

“I can’t argue with Joe Paterno,” Dean Friar said. “His efforts and dedication in building a football program using true scholar/athletes is above reproach. Good luck with the remainder of your student teaching experience. I look forward to handing you a diploma next May.”

“Thanks you for your time and consideration, Dean,” I said. The dean shook my hand before I retreated from his office. I gave Coach Paterno a call after I got out of the Chambers Building. He had me come straight over to his office and discuss the results of my meeting with the dean. Coach admitted he asked President Spanier to inquire about my status with Dean Friar. It never hurts to have a heavy hitter on your side.

I texted Trevor, Chip, Damian and Josh Bruno to tell them everything was squared away with my student teaching. I would see all those guys at Pro Train training center in Millersville on Friday night. Josh, Trevor, Shawn Byrd and I were going for our first workout there. Damian, Greg Nowicki, Christian and Brendan Hayden had put in two weekends of work at Pro Train already while the rest of us were down in Alabama.

I called Penny with my good news before I left campus, catching her just before she headed to campus for her morning Animal Behavior class. I pulled off the road at Potter’s Mill before 322 turned back into a four lane divided highway. I called John Waters since he should be on his fourth period break. I was sent to voice mail. I left him a message confirming that I would see him at 7:00 am tomorrow and I would be giving the lecture on Napoleon’s invasion of Russia.

The drive back to Philly wasn’t too bad. I pulled into the King of Prussia mall when I got off the turnpike and had some lunch at one of the restaurants near the mall. I headed straight for Temple. I might as well get a work out in since I didn’t have any other school

work to do that day. The weight room was fairly deserted when I arrived. I was about an hour earlier than usual. Owl team members filtered in as they finished up their afternoon classes. I passed Matt's message on to Dave Mitchell when I saw him.

Penny and I had a quiet evening at home. She worked on homework from classes that day. I had time to relax and mentally prepare for my lecture on Friday. We packed our overnight bags for the weekend and stashed them in my car trunk that evening. We wanted to get going to Lancaster County as quickly as possible on Friday.

The football players at CHS had lots of before and after class questions for me about my experiences playing in the Senior Bowl. I hadn't seen them in two weeks. My third period lecture went as smooth as I could have hoped for. The students seemed to grasp the statistical map of the campaign prepared by Charles Minard. You could easily follow how Napoleon's army shrank from its campaign start size of 422,000 soldiers to 100,000 when it occupied Moscow three months later. Particularly striking was the thin line representing the army as it retreated from Moscow in the teeth of a bitterly cold Russian winter, hounded by Cossacks and other Russian light cavalry. 10,000 men staggered back across the Nieman River at the end of the campaign in December 1812.

John Waters and Professor Buchanan complimented me on my lecture. I felt proud that they were pleased with my work. I had gone through a stranding, heavy snow, and a fight with the College of Education's bureaucracy to give that lecture. I helped John prep a test for next week during fourth period and then spent the rest of the day observing John teach.

My cell phone vibrated a little after two o'clock. I glanced at it surreptitiously. Penny was at the train station, waiting for me to pick her up. I headed over as soon as school was dismissed.

We ran into snow as we passed Coatesville. Western Chester County and Eastern Lancaster County had more snow than Philadelphia. It wasn't anything my VW couldn't handle.

We got to my house a little before four o'clock. We took our overnight bags down to my room and got comfortable. I came upstairs around 4:30 to get sodas for Penny and me. I could hear Liz and her boyfriend Chris upstairs doing the nasty. Hearing couples having sex didn't bother me the way it did a few months ago. Since Penny and I moved in together, we made love every night except one, not counting the few days during her period.

Noah, Connor and Hunter found Penny and me in the basement when they got home from day care. We played with them for awhile. Mom got a phone call from Andy as she was finishing dinner prep. He was stuck in a traffic jam in southern Chester County caused by a serious, snow related accident on Route 896. We weren't going to wait for him for

dinner. That was fortunate. I had to leave at 6:15 to get over to the gym near Millersville for my appointment.

Mom's dinner was good. Penny headed over to her house to see her parents and have some quiet time to study while I worked out. Andy and I passed on the street as I was leaving. I gave my brother a smile and a wave.

The Pro Train gym was easy to find. I'd seen it many Saturday nights on the way to the movies. I parked in front of the gym and headed inside. The lady at the front desk greeted me and asked my business.

"I have an appointment to meet Mr. Sanderson at seven o'clock," I explained.

"Why don't you have a seat," she answered. "We are waiting on a few other customers before Steve begins the evaluations."

"OK, that's fine," I agreed. I took a seat on one of the chairs near the door. The door opened a couple minutes later. I looked up to see who it was. I gave the newcomer a big smile.

"Hey, Christian, how's it going?" I said to greet my friend.

"Hey, Coach. I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see you here," Christian replied. I stood and shook hands with my friend. "You'll enjoy working with Steve. He's a great trainer."

"I've heard that," I agreed.

"I'll see you later," Christian said. "Well, I've got to get to work. Steve did my evaluation a couple weeks ago. I guess you, Trevor, Shawn and Josh will be doing that tonight."

"I presume so," I agreed. Christian headed into the gym to work out. I waited a couple minutes longer before the Penn State contingent arrived.

"There he is!" Trevor boomed as he stepped in the door. Damian, Shawn Byrd, Josh Bruno, Brendan Hayden and Greg Nowicki followed Trevor into the anteroom.

"Coach, good to see you!" Greg announced. The rest of the guys greeted me too. I had seen them yesterday or last Sunday. We took a couple minutes to catch up with the happenings in each other's lives. Everyone was pleased to hear things had worked out with Dr. Henderson and Dean Friar.

The receptionist sent us back to meet Mr. Sanderson. Damian, Brendan and Greg went to work on their workouts. They had been down at Pro Train the last two weekends preparing for the NFL Scouting Combine while the rest of us were at the Senior Bowl.

Steve Sanderson was younger than I expected, probably in his late thirties. He had short, carefully trimmed, dirty blond hair. He was muscular, as you would expect from a personal trainer and former linebacker. His diploma was from Millersville. He had a Millersville Marauders team picture hanging in the entry area too. The team picture indicated Steve had played linebacker.

I checked out Steve Sanderson and Pro Train on-line earlier in the week. Steve's gym trained twelve to fifteen Steelers, a dozen Eagles and assorted other NFL players during the off season. Many Penn State seniors made the trip down to Lancaster County over the years to prepare for the Combine.

Steve took us newcomers back to one end of the gym. "Welcome to Pro Train. I'm Steve Saunders. Thanks to the abbreviated preparation period my staff will have with you four, we will concentrate on techniques you will need to be successful at the Combine. There will not be sufficient time to improve your state of physical training.

"I presume that the four of you should be in good condition since you all had football games on the 7th and 26th of last month. Tonight we will do some physical testing to determine the state of your conditioning. Tomorrow and Sunday we will be teaching you the drills you will see at the Combine and practice techniques to improve your results. Does anyone have any questions?"

We didn't. Steve took Trevor, Shawn, Josh and me through a series of strength and agility drills to evaluate our abilities. He had us run the first 10 yards of the 40 to evaluate our starts. We did the Combine bench press test. We had to see how many reps we could do bench pressing 225 pounds.

Trevor volunteered to go first. He pumped out 34 reps before tiring out.

"Well done, Trevor," Steve commented. "Good form, pumped them out quickly... nice job." Steve turned to the rest of us. "Trevor must have been religious about working out back at school. The scouts are going to be impressed when they see him. Who's next?"

"I'll go next," Shawn volunteered. He managed 22 reps before tiring. Steve was pleased with the result.

"Coach, you want to go next?" Josh asked.

"I can, if you want me too," I agreed. I lay down on the bench, grasped the bar and went to work. The guys counted off my reps as I went 10... 15... 20... My arms were starting to burn. I pushed on. Steve shouted encouragement to me as I pressed on. 25... 26... 27... My arms were just about ready to buckle

"Give me one!" Steve shouted. "One more... give me one more!"

I managed to get the weight up again. “Twenty-eight!” my friends shouted. I raised the weight shakily. “twenty-nine!” my friends shouted triumphantly as I raised the bar to my full extension. I lowered it and tried for another as Steve shouted encouragement. After a few seconds he grabbed the bar from and dropped it on the rests.

“Excellent, Kyle,” Steve gushed. “You just beat the record of the best wide receiver at the last Combine.” He laughed. “Your form wasn’t all that good. I have some tips that will help you perform better in a few weeks.”

“I guess that’s good news,” I replied.

“You must have spent a lot of room in the weight room in college,” Steve commented.

“Coach was as dedicated to working out as anyone on our team,” Trevor said.

Josh Bruno did his reps last. Josh did well, by Steve’s estimation. He was disappointed to come up one short of Trevor’s 34 reps. Steve was pleased.

Steve timed us on the first 10 yard split of the 40 yard dash. Naturally I had the best time of the night. Shawn was 0.02 seconds behind me. Trevor and Josh weren’t as fast.

Steve commented, “That is the second fastest split I have ever seen, Kyle.”

“Who had the fastest?” I inquired. Steve pointed across the room at Christian. “That makes sense. I can beat him in the 40, but he was murder to cover after the catch when we played against each other in high school.”

“Yes, it does make sense,” Steve agreed.

Steve wanted us back tomorrow at 8:30 am on Saturday morning. We would spend the day learning the drills we would do in Indianapolis and working on our technique. Christian, Damian and Greg joined Trevor, Shawn, Josh and me when we finished up that evening.

“Where are you guys staying?” I asked as he headed for our cars.

“We’re over at the Red Roof Inn on Lincoln Highway East,” Trevor replied.

“I’m in Christian’s brother Josh’s room,” Shawn added. “The Hunseckers invited me to stay with them this weekend.”

“Do you have any plans for tomorrow night?” I asked. The guys just shrugged. “Are you guys interested doing dinner together and then hitting one of the clubs in Lancaster? We’ve got some that have excellent music. You and Bev are invited too,” I added.

The guys agreed it sounded like a good plan. Trevor and the guys in his car followed me through Lancaster. I gave them a wave as they turned off at their hotel. I headed back to Paradise.

Penny and I headed downstairs to watch a movie when I got home. Penny liked the idea of having dinner and going to a club with my friends. Andy came down to do his daily workout, interrupting our movie. Penny and I didn't mind. We hadn't had a chance to talk with Andy in ages.

Andy had a lot of questions for me about the Senior Bowl. He was shocked to hear that John Harbaugh asked about him and that Joe Flacco was praising how he played. Andy knew Joe in passing from when Joe visited campus during the off-season. Both Baltimore and his parents' home in South Jersey were convenient to Andy's campus.

Penny and I resumed our movie when Andy finished his workout. We went to sleep early since I wasn't going to be able to sleep in on Saturday morning. We still had time to make love once.

Noah, Connor and Hunter were up watching cartoons on TV Saturday morning when I came upstairs for breakfast. They came running when they heard the basement door close.

"Can you make us Fwench Toast?" Noah asked politely.

"We wike [like] your Fwench Toast, Unka Ky" Connor agreed.

"Sorry, guys. I don't have time for that today," I explained. "I don't have enough time this morning."

"Why?" Hunter asked.

"I have to drive to Millersville and work out," I explained. "I have to take a test in three weeks."

"Why take test?" Connor asked. I grabbed a bagel and stuffed it in the toaster. I knew the kids would keep asking me questions all day and I wouldn't get breakfast if I didn't talk and prepare my breakfast at the same time.

"You guys know how I play football for Penn State, right?" I explained. All three boys nodded yes. "I finished playing for them a few weeks ago. I finish college in three months and have to find another team to play for."

"Who wi'h you p'ay for?" Noah asked.

"That's the perfect question," I said. "I take the test so the professional teams like the Eagles, the Steelers, the Ravens, etc. can decide if they want to pick me and have me play

for them. At the end of this month I fly out to Indianapolis where they will test how fast I am, how high I can jump and how well I catch the ball. The tests will help teams decide if they want to pick me to play for their team.”

“Wi’h Eag’as pick you?” Noah asked. [Will the Eagles pick you?]

“Probably not, Noah,” I answered as I popped my bagel in the toaster. “They have really good receivers like Jackson, Maclin and Avant. You guys remember watching them, don’t you?” All three boys nodded yes. “I probably will play for a team that doesn’t have good receivers. Some team that needs my help.”

The boys kept asking questions as I ate my bowl of cereal and bagel with cream cheese. They hung out with me until I left for the gym. The drive over to Millersville wasn’t too bad. PennDOT and the city had the snow cleared from yesterday. Traffic was light and those out early on Saturday morning knew how to drive in snow, unlike their Philly counterparts.

Steve Sanderson’s assistant had Trevor, Damian, Christian, Shawn, Greg, Brendan, Josh and me do some warm-up exercises before we got to work. Steve joined us once we were warmed up.

We practiced our starts for the 40 yard dash. It felt unnatural to scrunch my body into the setup they would use in Indianapolis. The blocks put my feet much closer to the start line than I was used to. Once you got into the crouch, this setup did turn your body into a tightly wound spring and gave you a better, more explosive start on the 40.

Steve had us demonstrate our vertical jump and broad jump. My years between sixth and eighth grade where Ed, Jeremy, Hal and I would ride bikes all over eastern Lancaster County paid dividends in leg strength. I had been building those muscles long before I started working out to play football. Eight years of training in high school and college had further built my leaping ability.

Steve Sanderson was blown away by the 43 ½ inches I posted on my first vertical jump. He didn’t have a lot more to say about that test. He did have good pointers for the broad jump. I worked exclusively as a runner in my one year doing track and field.

We worked on the three cone drill. You exploded off the line by the first cone, raced, five yards to the second cone and touched the line. Then you raced back to the first cone and touched the line. After that you ran around the second cone, made a ninety degree turn, went eight yards and around the third cone. You finished the drill by running around the second cone and back across the line by the first cone.

The drill tested acceleration and ability to turn at high speeds. I did what Steve informed was a very pedestrian 7.04 seconds on my first test. Christian ran a 6.78 immediately after me. Even Damian beat me with a 7.01. At least I beat Josh, Brendan, Trevor and Greg.

Steve worked with each of us on our techniques. My second try brought my time down to 6.78. Trevor, Josh, Shawn and I improved our times significantly; Christian, Damian and Greg less so. This was their third weekend practicing the drill.

We worked on the shuttle drill next. You had to start in a three point stance. You ran five yards to the right, bent down and touch the line. Then you ran ten yards to the left, bent down and touched the line. You finished by dashing right and crossing the start line five yards away. Steve explained that this drill tested our lateral quickness, explosiveness and bending ability. Shawn dominated this drill. He was timed at 3.97 seconds. Steve said it was excellent. I did the drill in 4.07 seconds. Trevor did exceptionally well for his position when he posted a 4.15 second time. Times for the rest: Christian- 4.22 seconds, Josh- 4.34 seconds, Brendan- 4.38 seconds, Damian- 4.43 seconds and Greg- 4.63 seconds

Steve dismissed us around 4:30 that afternoon. In deference to it being Sunday, we were expected back at the gym at 9:30 am. The eight of us gathered to confer about our evening plans when we finished. Trevor knew about Jenny's Diner. He suggested we eat there. The food was plentiful and delicious but we would have to wait thirty to forty-five minutes to get seated.

After a couple phone calls to our girlfriends, we settled on Fuddruckers, which was near the hotel where the guys were staying. If we couldn't get eleven people in there, an Applebees and Texas Roadhouse were next door. We certainly could get everyone in and out at one of the three places tonight.

I offered to let Christian and Shawn shower at my house instead of driving back to Manheim. Bev would meet Penny and us in Paradise. We would drive over to the restaurant and meet everyone else there.

The kids were delighted to see me when I got home from the gym. Christian and Shawn drew their curiosity. Connor recognized Christian first.

"You were at Unka Ky's brit-day party," Connor noted gleefully. Hunter and Noah agreed with their brother/nephew's prompting. I introduced the boys to Shawn, who they didn't remember from Arizona a few weeks ago.

I let Shawn and Christian shower in the upstairs and basement bathrooms first. Bev arrived while they were busy. The kids had to meet the new guest. They peppered Bev with questions while she waited for Christian to finish upstairs. They tired after about ten minutes. They headed off to find Andy.

"I hope the kids weren't too much trouble," I offered after they left.

“It was no problem,” Bev said. “My older sister has two kids. My niece is five and my nephew is three. I’m used to dealing with little ones. These boys are close in age to my sister’s, aren’t they?”

“Noah and Connor will be four in May,” I said. “Hunter will be three in July.”

“They are so cute,” Bev said. Christian came up from downstairs while Bev and I were talking. I headed downstairs to clean up. Penny was sitting in the living room with Christian, Bev and Shawn when I came back upstairs.

The five of us headed for the restaurant. When we got outside Christian offered, “Do you want me to drive everybody? You and Penny won’t have to worry about a designated driver that way.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Are you willing to drive us the whole way back here after we’re done this evening? Taking us back here is the opposite direction from Manheim.”

“I’m sure,” Christian said. “It’s not that far out of the way.” Christian turned to Penny. “You don’t mind sitting between these two big lugs, do you?”

“No, it will be fine,” Penny answered. “It won’t be too bad between Kyle and Shawn. It could be worse. You could stuff me between Trevor and Greg or Trevor and Damian. Let’s do it.”

Shawn climbed in first, followed by Penny and then me. It was tight in the back of Christian’s Chevy, but we managed. Christian headed for Route 30 and Lancaster. Once he turned onto 30, I asked, “Whatever happened to that guy I used to room with when we were freshmen? The one that lectured me about drinking? You’ve certainly changed.”

“Well, I’d hope so,” Christian answered. “It wouldn’t say much about Penn State or my four years of college if it hadn’t changed me some. I guess I’ve expanded my world view a little bit since four years ago.”

“I’m still surprised that you would facilitate Penny and me drinking tonight,” I replied. “That is something you wouldn’t tolerate when we shared a room.”

“I understand better now and you have matured,” Christian said. He chuckled. “I would not have made this offer a year and a half ago. You have learned to control your drinking since then. I guess I’ve made my peace with responsible drinking.”

“I appreciate the offer, my friend,” I replied. “Penny and I flipped a coin to see who would be our designated driver tonight. I lost.”

We found Trevor, Josh, Damian and Greg outside the Fuddruckers Restaurant. The burgers were good, as they usually were when I stopped there other times. We headed for the Green Iguana after a leisurely dinner.

The club was packed with Millersville and Franklin and Marshall students. The club had a local band playing. They were excellent. A few guys recognized me. A few more recognized Trevor and Christian. All of them figured out that the rest of our group were also football players. It was pretty obvious.

Penny and I danced a bit. We limited ourselves to a couple beers during the evening. Everyone headed for home around 11:30. The guys had to get back to Millersville in the morning.

Sunday's session at Pro Train was similar to Saturday. We worked on our techniques for the various drills we would face at the Combine. Steve reviewed the position specific drills each of us would face too. The big one for Christian and me was the gauntlet. We would catch five balls from opposite directions as we crossed the field. Steve said it was a test of concentration, vision and our ability to catch a ball.

Steve used his assistants, Shawn and either Christian or me to run the drill. The throws Christian and I got weren't the greatest, but we got a taste of this critical drill for wide receivers.

Steve brought everyone together around four o'clock to wrap up the weekend. Steve reviewed drills he wanted us to work on before next weekend. Everyone planned to be back except for me. Penny and I were heading south to Tallahassee for the Biletnikoff banquet next weekend. Steve asked me to stay a moment when the rest of my friends headed for State College.

"Kyle, you have remarkable talents and could do extremely well at the Combine," Steve explained. "Your schedule will limit your preparation time. Is there any chance you could fit in some time during weeknights?"

"Maybe," I allowed. "I teach in Berwyn and will have trouble getting here at a decent time."

"I understand from Mr. Solomon that you live in Philadelphia," Steve replied. "Could you do your workouts at our Cherry Hill facility? It's just across the river from the city. You would benefit greatly from more practice than this single weekend."

I knew Steve was right. The two of us compared schedules. I would try Tuesday and Thursday evenings next week. I would schedule more if it worked out next week.

Penny and I had dinner with her parents. We stayed in Paradise with the Edwards to watch the Super Bowl showdown between the Patriots and Vikings. Wes Welker was injured early in the game when he was sandwiched between Karol Ziska, the Viking's middle linebacker and their strong safety. Bill Belichick inserted Shawn O'Conner in

Welker's spot. The move proved masterful. Shawn was good at catching the pass out of the backfield when he played at Penn State. He was equally talented as a slot back. Shawn had one other advantage. Every Penn State player knew Karol had trouble covering Shawn over the middle. Tom Brady and Shawn exploited the mismatch mercilessly. The Patriots built a 24-10 lead at half time. They cruised in the second half, winning their fifth Super Bowl 38-17.

This may have been Tom Brady's fourteenth season, but he still had it. Joshua Montgomery, the Viking's fourth year QB from Florida State, had torn up the league this season. He and Adrian Peterson, Percy Harvin and Sidney Rice played well, just not as well as the Patriots.

Penny and I headed back to Philadelphia around 10:30, when the game was over. The next three weeks were going to be very busy between banquets, workouts, teaching and the Thon.

(To be continued)