

MUSTANG GREEN

Thirty-five white players. Thirty-two black players. Some rich. Some poor. All Myers Park Mustangs. We spent the entire fall with them to see what happens when you put kids from different backgrounds together for a season. The result is this three-part story of hard lessons, lifetime friendships, stupid mistakes, and endless optimism about uncertain futures.

BY MICHAEL GRAFF
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOGAN CYRUS



The season starts in August (this photo is from before a Week 2 game against Ardrey Kell) and ends in November.

CHAPTER I SENIOR NIGHT

HE WANTS EVERYONE around him to believe it's OK. Really, it is. It's fine that it's Senior Night and she's not here yet. He'll play it tough, because that's what football players do, and because that's what she taught him to do. He raises his chin and sticks it out and gives a quick it's-no-big-deal nod when an assistant coach volunteers to walk with him. He dances and makes a nervous joke to his best friend, who's standing behind him in line. And he knows that when his name is called, he'll strut like he always does. He's Jamal Watson, after all, number 7, the star cornerback of the football team, a tall and quick and handsome young man who just a few weeks ago won homecoming king. "Y'all can just call me *King 'Mal*," he said that night.

King 'Mal always puts on a strong face for the people, even right now, on a damp night in early November, when he's just a 17-year-old kid wishing his Mama would hurry up and get here.

"Where is she?" he asks under his breath, sneaking a peek at his phone.

He's standing alone near the front of a line of Myers Park High School football seniors and their moms and dads, uncles and aunts, grandmas and grandpas.

Watson is the best player on the team, and at times he's also the most frustrating. His coaches say he's matured a mile in the past year. Yet during practice, when those coaches look the other way, he might run a couple of plays with the back of his pants down around his thighs to moon his teammates. He has the attention of several Division I colleges, but two weeks ago he had a momentary lapse and got burned for a game-deciding touchdown against rival Independence. He's the player opposing coaches seek out after games, showering him with words about what a fine future he has, and yet last week, just two hours before game time, Watson couldn't even find his jersey.

There are moments during a long football season when you see into the soul of a young man, and, despite what you might see in movies, those moments rarely have anything to do with football. Like now. His eyes wide, his head darting back and forth between his phone and the parking lot.

"She said she was almost here," he says quietly.

Kameela Watson works as donor recruiter at the American Red Cross, and tonight she's running late. She raises Jay, as she calls her only son, and his 12-year-old sister, Tyana Ford, by herself in a three-bedroom apartment off Old Providence Road. Their complex, Gladedale, is a subsidized-housing community, but it sits in one of Charlotte's richest neighborhoods. Jamal is the "man of the house," his mother says. He handles everything from dishes to trash to laundry. He's a pretty good brother, too: "He can be aggravating at times," his sister says. "But he's always there for me."

Watson is one of the most popular kids at one of the most diverse high schools in the region. In a school district where half of the schools are segregated by race, Myers Park's student body is about 58 percent white, 25 percent black, and 10 percent Latino. It is a place that mixes kids from the richest zip codes in Charlotte—those



Coach Scott Chadwick (above), who has a 124-75 record in 17 years as a high school football coach, conducts his pregame speeches on a hill behind the locker rooms. Before the speech, the players—including quarterback Jack Davidson (eye black) and Jamal Watson (towel around neck)—take a few quiet moments to think.

In coaching, there's no telling what trouble awaits. On Senior Night, Chadwick and his staff are forced to come up with a plan to replace standout junior linebacker Ben Norris (opposite page) after Norris tears his right labrum.



around Myers Park—and the poorest, including Grier Heights, or Grier Town, as the locals call it. Each year about one-third of the nearly 2,900 students who attend school here are on free or reduced lunch. The diversity plays out in different ways. During lunch, black kids crowd at some tables and white kids cluster at others.

The football players—black and white, rich and poor—eat together.

The public address announcer starts the ceremony by calling names, cheerleaders first, then the football team, in order of jersey number. The band plays a few notes for each person called. An assistant coach walks up and puts his hand on Watson's neck. "It's OK," the coach says, "I got you."

Nod. Chin out. No big deal. Strut. The announcer introduces him. He says that Watson is a cornerback, that he's been on varsity for three years, and that he plans to play football for a Division I school next year. And finally, "Jamal would like to thank his mom and sister for being there with him every step of the way."

Watson reaches the end of his walk and stands in the line again. Minutes later, her black cardigan waving in the wind, Kameela rushes onto the field. The heels of her leather boots dig into the turf as fast as she can wheel them. She's clutching her purse with one hand and wiping away tears with the other. "I'm sorry, Jay," she tells her son. After the last name is called, she asks a photographer to walk back across the field and recreate the moment she missed. At

the very least, she says, she wants a photo.

Behind them a noise builds. Tonight's opponents from East Mecklenburg walk up the steps behind the makeshift mother-son moment, chanting a call and response: "What time is it?" "Game time." "What time is it?" "Game time."

It is the last regular-season Friday night of an up and down year for Myers Park. In a city where faces change color completely from one neighborhood to the next, few groups offer a better glimpse into integration than this team. Myers Park has 35 white players and 32 black players on the roster (along with one player who is mixed-race and one who is Asian). If you measure success simply by wins and losses, the results are inconclusive. Myers Park has a 6-4 record going into tonight's game, not so bad and not so good. But if you listen to them in the locker room and at practice and at the lunch table, you'll hear a team of teenagers who aren't afraid of conversations that many adults fear. They talk about race and class with the same matter-of-factness they use to discuss fast cars and farts, as if it's all part of life.

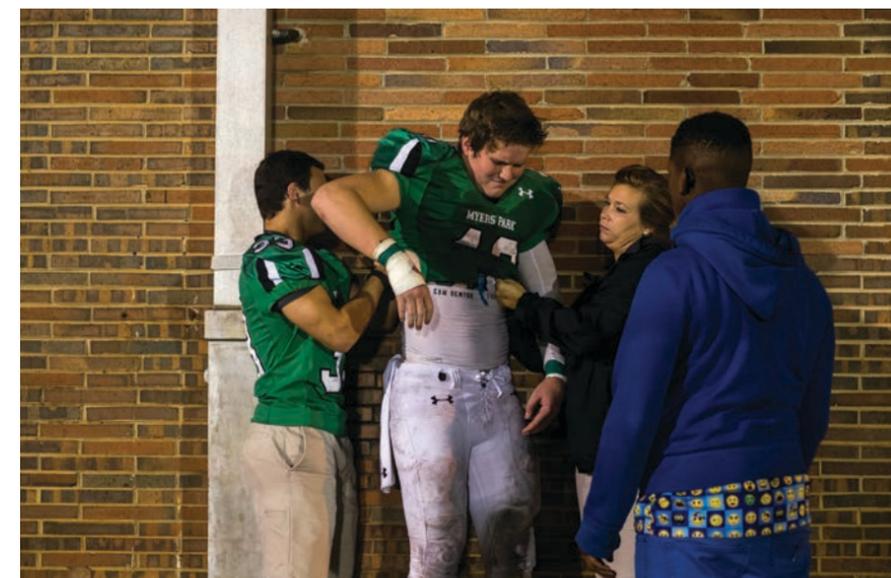
FOOTBALL BRINGS PEOPLE together; there are more than enough books and movies about that. But Charlotte is far too big and diverse to rally around one team or one game. This isn't a story about a small town way out in the country where every store closes on game night. This is a story about

a football team in the heart of the second-fastest growing big city in America, a city that's increasingly diverse and trying to figure out how we'll all live next to each other after generations of segregation in our neighborhoods and schools. It's a story about what it's like to take kids who in many ways are born opposites and put them together under helmets that are the same cost and color.

On Fridays, though, if you don't mind, they'd rather talk about football. A win tonight would boost the Mustangs' standing for the North Carolina High School Athletic Association 4-AA playoffs—the biggest and best high school football tournament in the state. A loss would push them down among the lowest seeds in the region.

Since beating out 109 applicants for the head-coaching job two years ago, Scott Chadwick has tried to establish consistency in a program and group of kids that sorely need it. Despite being one of the largest two or three high schools in the state each year, Myers Park has had just one winning season and two playoff victories in the past 10 years. Each week, Chadwick, who started his career 18 years ago in Maryland and has coached in three state championship games, talks about progress. In 2014, Chadwick's first year here, the Mustangs won five games. This year they've won six. Progress.

Tonight marks the end of a regular season that started on a hot August eve-



"You cannot DO THAT!" he yells at Williams, and Williams looks down. "Look me in the eyes. Look me in the eyes right now. You cannot DO THAT!"

the bench, he's met by Chadwick, a short and fiery man with three children of his own.

"You cannot DO THAT!" he yells at Williams, and Williams looks down. "Look me in the eyes. Look me in the eyes right now. You cannot DO THAT!"

"Yessir," Williams says, and walks to the bench.

A possession later, before the red flushes out of Chadwick's face, his running back fumbles, and East Meck returns the ball for a touchdown. The coach tosses his arms

ning in Charlotte's Memorial Stadium against neighboring private school Charlotte Country Day. Chadwick had no idea what kind of team he had then, and wasn't sure what he'd need to do to bring together players who come from such diverse backgrounds. One boy has a heart surgeon for a father and another is the son of a former NFL player; others don't claim a father at all. Eleven weeks after that opening night, the coach still doesn't know. They're 6-4, and in a way, that seems to fit. Life's usually not black or white. Life's usually not 10-0. Life's usually not 0-10. We're lucky if life's 6-4.

THE MUSTANGS FUMBLE the opening kickoff and East Meck scores a quick touchdown. On the extra point, Myers Park senior Colby Williams is called for a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty for vaulting off a teammate's back to try to block the kick. When he runs to

in the air as the scoreboard flashes the new deficit, 14-0. In the second quarter, standout linebacker Ben Norris, whose dad is the president of the booster club, tries to make a tackle with his right arm but has it ripped backward. He stays on the field for five plays before coming off to have it checked. A trainer puts pressure on his shoulder, just where it meets his chest. "Ahhhhh, *shit!*" the 16-year-old shrieks. There's a piece of cartilage that reinforces the ball and socket joint in our shoulders. It's called the labrum. Norris will soon learn that he's torn his.

At halftime, the Mustangs run behind the school to meet on a small hill that overlooks the baseball field. They've come together here for pregame and halftime pep talks for every home game this year, back to when the sun still shined deep into the evening. Before they jog back out onto the field for the second half, Chadwick gives one last speech on the hill for this season.

“You came out flat,” he says. “You’ve got 24 minutes left to fix it. Seniors, you’ve got 24 minutes left on this field.”

With 18 minutes left on this field, East Mecklenburg kicks a field goal. It’s 17-0.

With seven minutes left on this field, East Meck scores again to make it 24-0. After the touchdown, three Myers Park seniors—including Watson and Williams—get flagged for unsportsmanlike conduct penalties. For pushing. For shoving. For tossing helmets. For acting, quite frankly, like sore losers.

Noah Smith, a starting senior linebacker and the third player penalized for unsportsmanlike conduct, walks to the far end of the Myers Park bench and tosses his helmet toward the track. Athletics director Rick Lewis says, “Who is that team out there?” Assistant coach Dre Bly, a former NFL cornerback, spits sunflower seed shells on the ground and says, “This is awful.”

Meanwhile, JaMykal Neal, a big and friendly offensive lineman who fought through a sprained ankle the entire game, sits on the bench with his helmet on. Neal, a junior, will be one of the Mustangs’ top prospects next year. Big college programs, including a few from the ACC and SEC, are already looking at him. He hopes that one day he’ll reach the NFL so that he can buy his mother a house and move her out of their rental in Grier Heights. For now, though, all Neal can see through his facemask is the scoreboard, which reads 24-0. In the last regular-season game in this season of progress, Myers Park suffers its first shutout loss in seven years.

It’s the lowest moment in Chadwick’s two-year tenure, and the first shutout he’s suffered as a coach since 2000. He watches East Mecklenburg players dump a bucket of water on their coach. He hears their fans singing, “*Nah, nah, nah, nah / hey, hey, hey / goodbye,*” right here, in the very stadium he helps maintain by raising money throughout the community. The teams shake hands. Chadwick directs the Mustangs into the east end zone. They kneel in a big circle, the seniors spilling tears onto the field on a cloudy night. Watson stands in the back, hands cupped on the collar of his shoulder pads, before taking a knee and staring at the ground.

“That was a pathetically prepared, pathetically coached football team out there tonight,” Chadwick tells his players. “I bit my tongue all year. But I’m gonna hurt some feelings now. Our lack of

senior leadership finally caught up with us tonight.”

After dismissing the players, Chadwick stands with his assistant coaches for 15 minutes, trying to figure out what went wrong. They eventually decide that everything did. As they walk out of the stadium one last time, the coaches pass offensive lineman Anton O’Brien, a kid with a haircut that looks like he picked a guard-setting on the clippers and did the whole thing himself. O’Brien, a senior, is standing at the top of the concrete steps that lead out of the stadium, staring back at the empty, brightly lit football field. Each tear carries a stream of wet eye black down his cheeks, and his hand trembles as he clutches his helmet.

“You OK?” an assistant coach asks.

O’Brien can’t catch the breath to say yes or no.

“It’s alright, man,” the assistant says. “We still have the playoffs.”

CHAPTER II FALSE STARTS

BEFORE THAT, BEFORE 6-4 became 6-5, before the seniors could even consider the end of their high school football careers, before daylight savings ended, before October, before September, it’s three hours before the opening-night kickoff on a late-August Saturday, and a middle-aged, white football coach is standing in front of a room of football players that’s nearly half white and half black, and he’s trying to quote Eminem.

“And in this one he says, um,” Chadwick says, “it says here, uh, look: If you only had one shot ...”

The players burst into laughter.

“... or one opportunity, to seize everything you ever wanted...”

The coaches laugh, too.

“Would you capture it, or let it slip?”

Seriously, he’s still going. Some players are in tears.

“That’s what you’ve got. One opportunity tonight. Are you going to capture it, or let it slip?”

Chadwick loves to talk about moments. Tonight, he tells his team, is one of the biggest moments in Myers Park football history. They’re playing at Memorial Stadium, just outside of uptown, against

nearby private school Charlotte Country Day. It’s the first-ever meeting of the two teams, despite the fact that Country Day was founded in 1941 and Myers Park opened about four miles away 10 years later. All summer, Myers Park parents reminded Chadwick: “If you win only one game, it better be this one.”

Adding to the pressure is the fact that Country Day’s head coach, Drew Witman, was one of Chadwick’s assistant coaches last year.

Meanwhile, protesters are swirling around Charlotte. The trial of Randall Kerrick, the white police officer who shot and killed an unarmed black man named Jonathan Ferrell in 2013, resulted in a hung jury the evening before the game. Civil rights groups and other activists have been giving speeches all around the city, promising to keep fighting against what they believe to be another instance of racial injustice.

Two hours and a bus ride following the Eminem talk, the Myers Park players walk out onto the Memorial Stadium field for warmups in a line of twos, each pair with arms interlocked. After they stretch, the players return to the locker room for another Chadwick speech, a shorter one this time: “You’re representing decades of people today that would love to be where you are right now. It’s a big, big responsibility, but I wouldn’t give it to any other group.”

They sprint out of the locker room and into a blow-up tunnel, rip through a paper sign to take the field for kickoff, and then stumble their way through most of the first half. Country Day, made up of nearly all white players, takes a 14-12 lead into halftime.

“I think what you’re seeing here,” a man in a Country Day hat on the sidelines says to me at the beginning of the second quarter, “is this is the case of the itty-bitty guys being better prepared.”

Myers Park, in fact, held non-mandatory practices throughout the summer. Then, in early August, camp hit, and the Mustangs went at it twice a day. They ate lunch in between. On one of the hottest days, Chadwick’s assistant coaches asked him if they could keep the kids through lunch to work on football. “No,” the head coach said. “For some of them, that’s their only meal today.”

In the locker room at halftime, Chadwick gives up on big speeches. Just details now. He yells, “Receivers!” and



Quarterback Jack Davidson encounters several close games that come down to the last play early in the year.

the passing team gathers around him. He draws up a series of routes that he knows will work based on what he’s seen from the Country Day defense. He asks the group if everybody understands, and the only one who shakes his head no is Jack Davidson, a junior with sandy-red hair and a slight issue with daydreaming. “Damn it, Jack,” Chadwick says, trying to hold back a smile, “you’re the quarterback.”

The coach explains the play again. On the first series of the second half, he calls it. Davidson floats a high-arching pass that, if you’re standing in the right spot, crests beautifully atop the Charlotte skyline. As the ball comes down, senior Brandon Adams runs under it, catches it, tiptoes along the sideline, then settles in for a dead sprint toward the end zone on the uptown side of the field. The 57-yard touchdown puts Myers Park up 19-14.

In the final minute of the fourth quarter, as the sun sets and the field glows orange, Charlotte Country Day moves the ball to within six yards of a game-winning touchdown. Chadwick calls a timeout and his defensive coaches talk details—this player will go here and that player will go there. None of that “if you only had one shot” stuff.

On second down, Norris, the booster president’s son, drops Country Day’s running back five yards behind the line of scrimmage. On third down, Norris again bolts into the backfield, this time sacking Country Day’s quarterback for a nine-yard loss. In two plays, the public school has pushed the private school 14

yards in the opposite direction, and now it is fourth down, and now there are only 30.4 seconds left, and now there are 20 yards between Country Day and the winning score. The Myers Park band leader announces into his microphone, “Let’s do ‘Final Countdown,’” and soon the horns begin to blare and the drums begin to snap, and a man in a white hat on the field blows his whistle to start the play clock

Chadwick’s performance is completely dependent on teenagers who make mistakes.

for the final play, and a young quarterback in a Country Day helmet yells hike, and two young girls in the bleachers rise from their seats and stand side-by-side in a “CD” shirt and an “MP” shirt, and the quarterback slings a low-lining pass toward the goal line. Waiting there is a young man named Jason Monastra. He’s a starting wide receiver for Myers Park who scored a touchdown earlier in the game and is playing defensive back now because of injuries to other players. He’s the son of two former Division I athletes, one white and one black. And in the glow of that sunset, he snatches an interception that ends the game. He gives the ball back to the officials and sprints to the sideline, where his teammates are dumping a bucket of water on their coach.

They’re 1-0. They’re perfect.

BEN NORRIS IS EVERY All-American boy stereotype in a 16-year-old body. He’s a 6-foot-2 wrecking ball of a linebacker who will finish the year with more tackles behind the line of scrimmage than any player on the team. A white boy with a full head of hair that he parts to the right, a strong jaw, and rosy, round cheeks. A newly licensed driver who often squeals out of the parking lot after football practice without his shirt on. He’s the youngest in a family of three boys, all football players, and when he’s on the field, four-letter words fly from his mouth with the confidence of someone who’s heard them for a few years.

“Ben’s not like his brothers,” his father, Rob, tells me, smiling at the differences between his sons. “Ben’s a wild man.”

In the second game of the season, on August 28, Myers Park loses to Ardrey Kell, 21-9. That weekend, Ben goes to a party. He’s 16; things happen. The night ends with him making a phone call to his father to come pick him up. That leads to him losing his cell phone privileges for a few weeks at home. It also leads to him and his father having a conversation with the principal, and that leads to a three-game suspension from the team.

Few jobs in the world are like being a high school coach. Chadwick’s performance is completely dependent on teenagers who make w. His career began in 1998, the year before Ben Norris was born. He’s dealt with more situations like this than he cares to remember. In 2001, when he was at Bowie High School in Maryland, Chadwick suspended five players for the last game of the regular season because they skipped school on “Senior Skip Day.” That team wound up winning the Maryland state championship and being recognized on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.

With Norris out for three games, Chadwick and his Myers Park staff scramble for a solution. They move Alex Alvarez, one of the state’s best baseball players, from a safety position to line-



On September 11, the Mustangs wear camouflage against South Mecklenburg for the "Patriotism Bowl."



By the end of the night, though, most of their jerseys are dressed in mud because of a massive rainstorm.

backer. Alvarez, who didn't even play football last year, is exceptional in the first game without Norris. He leads the defense with eight tackles, a fumble recovery, and an interception in a 38-8 win over Providence, helping to push the Mustangs' record to 2-1 heading into a Week 4 game with undefeated South Mecklenburg.

A PLANE TAKING OFF from Charlotte Douglas International Airport curls over the South Mecklenburg football stadium during a moment of silence before the game. It's September 11, and state flags from all 50 states line the field for the "Patriotism Bowl." Most players were just infants or toddlers when the 9/11 attacks occurred, but both teams are wearing uniforms designed in camouflage patterns to mark the day. NFL legend Randy Moss, who lives in Charlotte, is here to flip the coin.

On the first defensive series, Alvarez, the baseball player turned safety turned linebacker, pops his shoulder out of place. He comes to the huddle and tells his teammates he thinks he's hurt. "You better not quit on me," Watson tells him. "You have to keep playing. We ain't got nobody else." Alvarez stays in the game.

South Mecklenburg has at least four can't-miss Division I college prospects on its roster. With 2:47 left in the first, South Meck's quarterback lofts a pass into the end zone for John Brannon, one of those prospects. Brannon, at 6-foot-2, easily outleaps 5-foot-7 cornerback Kevin Alford to make it 7-0.

Rain begins to fall in the second quarter. By the time the teams break for the locker rooms at halftime, it's a full-on downpour. At times, it's raining so hard that it's impossible to see from one side of the field to the other. Fans run to take cover, except for the Myers Park student section, made up mostly of white kids. They seem to enjoy the whole thing. A few even run back from the concessions stand and into the rain, screaming with joy. Another group of five students, all black young men, stands under the awning next to the field house. "Look at those people getting hype," one says. "It's all white people. They're stupid," and the group erupts in a laugh.

Chadwick and his coaches huddle around a cell phone to check the radar. The storm appears to be just one pocket of rain, perched perfectly atop Park Road,

taking the power out of Myers Park's pass-first offense. "That will pass, right?" Chadwick asks an assistant coach whose day job is real estate and not meteorology. "Man, we can't deal with this," says quarterbacks coach Jamarr Robinson, who starred at Myers Park in the mid-2000s and went on to play quarterback at the University of Maryland. "This weather ain't us."

As the Mustangs trot back onto the field for the second half, the century-old John Philip Sousa magnum opus "Stars and Stripes Forever" blares over the sound system. The cymbals smash and woodwinds whistle, the beats matching the rhythm of the players' cleats splashing mud with each step.

Davidson scores on a quarterback sneak in the third quarter to make it 7-7. It stays that way through the fourth quarter. Rain stops. Rain starts again. Rain stops again. With about two minutes left, the public address announcer says multiple wallets and cell phones have been turned in, things left behind in the rain.

The showers return at the start of overtime as the stadium's sound system howls with Kenny Loggins' "Danger Zone." High school overtime rules state that each team gets a possession from the 10-yard line. They'll go back and forth until one team doesn't match the other. South Meck scores a touchdown on its first possession to go up 14-7.

Davidson leads Myers Park onto the field for its overtime possession. On the third play, he floats a pass to the corner of the end zone. For a moment, it appears that receiver Cooper Hearn is wide open.

Then a hand goes up in front of Hearn. It's South Mecklenburg cornerback Moryah Johnson. At the top of Johnson's jump, the point of Davidson's spiraling pass plants itself squarely in the defender's palm, and as Johnson falls backward to the soaking-wet field, he pulls in the one-handed interception to end the game. Video of the incredible play goes viral, with everyone from *USA Today* to the well-known high school athletics site maxpreps.com sharing it as one of the plays of the week. It gathers more than 7,500 loops on Vine—a few of which will come from the quarterback who threw the pass.

"It stings. It's embarrassing," Davidson says later. "Especially with how popular it got."



Star defensive back Jamal Watson enters the season with an impressive streak going—he hasn't been scored upon since his sophomore year.

CHAPTER III JAMAL

JAMAL WATSON IS JABBERING again. It's 80 degrees on the Tuesday after the South Mecklenburg loss, and Tuesday practices are drags. Mondays, they watch film and learn from mistakes. Wednesdays and Thursdays, they're heavy into planning for the next game. Tuesdays, though, are work.

The coaches are frustrated today. Two running backs have taken the day off because of "injuries," Chadwick says, using air-quotes. Alvarez, meanwhile, tried to practice but the coaches told him to sit with the separated shoulder. "We had to forcibly hold him out," Chadwick says, "and then we have these other players who just don't want to practice."

Watson falls somewhere in the middle. He's here, but sometimes drifts. He's not comfortable with silence or downtime, and he often breaks the monotony by joking with people on the sideline. "Hey, my water better be cold Friday," he tells the team managers. "If it ain't, I'm coming after you." Or, later, "I'm not on Instagram this week. When we win, I'll get back on Instagram."

Still, this is growth. Last year, Chadwick says, Watson was part of a core group of players who "thought they were better than they actually are. They thought they didn't have anything to learn." But all of



The Mustangs enter the Sun Valley game with a 2-2 record, but plenty of confidence: It's their first home game of the year.

them except Watson were seniors, and when they graduated, he quickly noticed something that scared him.

"Last year, all my friends, all my black friends, I guess you could say, they were seniors," he says. "And none of them went to college. I want to play college ball."

Not only did Watson grow up in a single-parent home, he's young for his grade. He'll graduate at 17. He was called up to the varsity squad his freshman year, and by the time he was starting every game as a sophomore, he'd decided that being good at football would be enough to carry him. His grades bottomed out.

Reaching kids like Watson was one of Chadwick's priorities when he started here in the fall of 2014. He'd already put two sons through high school, and he spends a great deal of his coaching time teaching his players the same lessons he taught his own kids. He took last year's seniors out to Chick-Fil-A the week after he was hired to listen to them talk about what went wrong under the previous coaching staffs. Then he started changing things, little things. He developed homework checklists for some of the most at-risk students that his staff monitors. He checks their grades twice a season. He constantly reminds

them that they are part of something bigger than just this team—if they fail, he tells them, they let down more people than themselves. And the blunt-talking coach changed one more thing: He talked to them about their differences. He started sending groups of players to Selwyn Elementary and Billingsville Elementary to help young kids in the feeder schools with things like reading. They also talk to the kids about character traits and life as a high schooler and a football player. It's not a new program, but the older players notice one big difference under Chadwick.

"It used to be only the white kids that would go," Watson says. "Now with Chadwick, it's always half white and half black."

This isn't Chadwick's first run at a diverse school. Both teams he coached in Maryland were split fairly evenly among white and black. The difference, he says, is that at those schools all the kids were from middle- or lower-class families. "We didn't have the super-wealthy kids there like we have here," he says. "Honestly, here, we have some kids whose parents fly them to the islands for spring break, and other kids who don't have a dollar to take the bus home after practice."



Jamal Watson (this photo) prepares to receive his punishment for missing a team meeting. His coaches (right) discuss what that punishment will be.

Chadwick lives in Marvin, near Marvin Ridge High School, where he coached from 2008 to 2012. Located about 25 miles south of uptown Charlotte, Marvin is one of the wealthiest small towns in America. Marvin Ridge, with a population that's 85 percent white, is consistently ranked among the best high schools in the state. But a year after Chadwick took the job at Myers Park, his daughter, Madison, decided to transfer from Marvin Ridge to the school in the city. She's a sophomore on the varsity cheerleading squad now, and she and her dad ride home after practice together almost every day.

"I wanted her to come here," Chadwick says. "It's more like the real world."

Chadwick brings the Tuesday practice to a close at about 5:30. The players take a knee around him so he can tell them some news about this weekend's game against Sun Valley: The school is honoring the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Myers Park team that went undefeated.

"Hey, let's do something this year that they're going to have to bring us back in 50 years for," the 45-year-old Chadwick says, before pausing and thinking about what he said. "Well, I probably won't be here."

The teenage players laugh at their coach's mortality. Watson pretends to grab a microphone and act out what he'd say if they were invited back 50 years from now.

"Hey, this one's for you, Chadwick!" he says, laughing and pointing to the sky.

AT 4:30 P.M. THAT FRIDAY, the 1965 Myers Park team gathers in a room that smells like the grease and hot sauce of takeout chicken wings. Meanwhile, in the bottom floor of the athletic building, Jamal Watson stands by himself in a long hallway with white cinderblock walls on either side. He's holding his uniform pants. He'd forgotten them when he came to school today, he says, so he ran home to grab them, making him late for the meeting.

To hear Chadwick tell it, though, Watson left without telling anyone, and players aren't allowed to miss meetings without having it cleared. So when the team captain tried to enter the meeting room late, Chadwick shut the door on him.

When the meeting's finished, the players inside the room clap, then fling open the door and shuffle out wearing flip-flops and shorts as they head to the locker room to get dressed. After the last player leaves, Watson drops his head and walks into the room, hoping to explain why he was late. His mother calls him a "great debater," but he broke a clear rule. He has no room for debate. Not even a second. Watson opens his mouth to explain. Before he can say a word, Chadwick interrupts him with a scream that echoes down the hallway. "LEAVE!"

And Watson turns around.

For the next 10 minutes, Chadwick and his staff sit in the white-walled meeting room, trying to figure out what to do with their best player. Some coaches suggest benching him completely. Others



Jimmie Lee Kirkpatrick transferred from the all-black Second Ward High School to Myers Park in 1965 and led the Mustangs to an undefeated season.



suggest holding him out for a quarter. Others want him to play. "We have to set a precedent," says Bly, the former NFL cornerback and Watson's position coach. Chadwick responds, "But at what point are we hurting the rest of the team by not playing him?"

Here is a moment that coaches of young people face regularly: How do you teach a lesson to a player who needs it without having it hurt the other 60 or so players who've done what they were supposed to do? After a long discussion, Chadwick looks at his watch and tells his assistants, "You know what, I'll let you decide. I gotta go talk to the old guys."

He walks across the parking lot and into the room that smells like takeout chicken wings. Nearly all the living players from the 1965 team are here. Among them is Jimmie Lee Kirkpatrick, who lives in Oregon. Kirkpatrick is a Charlotte legend for several reasons. In 1964, as a junior at all-black Second Ward High School, he was the first black player to make *The Charlotte Observer's*

all-county team. He was born and raised in Grier Town. But before his senior year, he decided to transfer to Myers Park. He scored 19 touchdowns that year and led the Mustangs to a perfect season, but he wasn't selected for the Shrine Bowl, the annual game pitting the best players from North Carolina against the best from South Carolina. The snub set off a series of events in Charlotte, with churches and communities rallying around Kirkpatrick because of what they believed was a decision based upon his race.

With that as his school background, Kirkpatrick went on to a nearly 30-year career as a school administrator. He now teaches at a juvenile detention center in Oregon.

He's the most popular person at the reunion, until Chadwick walks in. The current coach spends about five minutes here, shaking every hand. Then he addresses the room, thanking them for coming back and promising to dedicate a victory tonight to them. "Now, if you'll excuse me," he says, "I have to go get these boys ready."

Before every home game, the players touch a horseshoe for luck, then run into an inflated helmet to prepare to take the field in front of their fans.

Injured player Charlie Cooksey (bottom right photo) celebrates a victory over Sun Valley with athletic trainer Stephanie Bowman.



The sun is setting and shining horizontally across the hill as the Mustangs gather for their pregame ritual and last-minute words from Chadwick. “I talked to the 1965 team tonight,” Chadwick tells his players. “It’s good to remember where you came from. But it’s time you start writing your own history.”

The players jump up and start their parade across the campus driveway that runs between the locker room and the stadium. Chadwick yells, “Captains!” and sends four players up to the field for the coin toss. Watson is not among them; he’s been stripped of the title for the game. He’ll play tonight, though.

They walk up the concrete steps and into the stadium and head toward a big, inflated Myers Park football helmet. On the way, they pass a rock with a horseshoe on it, and one by one, they place their palms firmly on the shoe for luck. The cheerleaders line up outside the helmet, holding a sign that’s ready to be ripped in half. The Mustangs burst through it, sprinting toward the home sideline for the first time all year.

Myers Park jumps out to a 10-0 lead. Early in the second quarter, Sun Valley lines up for a 30-yard field goal. The kick is blocked at the line of scrimmage, and the ball bounces toward the visitors’ sideline. The player who happens to be standing there is the same player who forgot his pants earlier in the day, the same player who caused his coaches an afternoon migraine.

Watson picks up the bouncing ball and takes off the other way.

His legs wind faster and faster with each stride. There’s something magnificent about true speed. In the stands, one person sees it and points. Another person sees it and slaps the leg of the person beside him. Teenage fans stop mid-text message or Facebook post. Kirkpatrick, the legendary running back, rises to his feet to watch. Watson pulls away from everyone else on the field. As he crosses the goal line to make it 16-0, the Myers Park crowd becomes a high-fiving, hugging lovefest, thanks to the legs of a 17-year-old boy who just an hour ago was his coach’s least-favorite player.

At halftime, the 1965 team is introduced as “the finest team in Mecklenburg County history.” Even 50 years later, the story of Kirkpatrick and that team’s place in local civil rights history remains prominent. “We are not black or white,” the announcer says. “Our blood flows Mustang Green.”

In the second half, Sun Valley mounts a comeback, and with less than two minutes left, the Spartans are within five yards of a game-tying score. On a fourth-and-goal to decide the game, the crowds for both teams stand and holler. Sun Valley’s quarterback receives the snap and jogs to his left, looking for a receiver. With nobody open, he sprints to the corner. It’s a race between him and Watson to see who can get there first. Watson unwinds his legs again, faster and faster, then *pop!*



They’re as far away from the home sideline as they can be when the play ends. Myers Park fans go quiet and crane their necks to try to see what happened. The officials point to a spot that appears to be short of the goal line, but from way over here, who can tell?

Suddenly, a player in a green uniform and, yes, pants, thrusts his arm into the air holding the ball. It’s Jamal Watson. He runs across the field with the football above his head, having saved a victory. Chadwick’s there waiting and ready with a hug. 🏈

Read part two of this three-part series in the March issue of Charlotte magazine.

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PART TWO OF A THREE-PART STORY

MUSTANG GREEN

The weather turns colder, the games become more important, and the lessons hit home harder. The Myers Park football team, which is split nearly evenly along racial and socioeconomic lines, hits the heart of the 2015 season.

BY MICHAEL GRAFF
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOGAN CYRUS

Summer fades into fall, but the players, including Kevin Alford (pictured), sweat more than ever as the Mustangs make a push for the playoffs.



CHAPTER IV HARD LESSONS

"GO, GET OFF!" Coach Scott Chadwick tells starting defensive lineman Colby Williams. "Go shower and get off the field."

Four days after the Sun Valley win, Williams, a senior, has been complaining all practice. When he decides he simply won't run a play like the coaches want, Chadwick sends him home.

After practice, the coaches meet to discuss what to do with him. Chadwick wonders if Williams has become such a problem that he needs to be dismissed for good. The 10-man Myers Park coaching staff, which is split fairly evenly along racial lines, has a wide range of coaching styles, and no two people are more different than Chadwick and Dre Bly.

In most other areas of life, Chadwick's a mild-mannered man. He's quiet and thoughtful, and constantly considers questions about equality and politics and other issues, especially as they relate to teenage boys. Something happens to him, though, when sports are involved. He's a huge Washington Redskins fan, and during close games his daughter, Madison, sometimes will Snapchat videos of her dad nervously shaking, then rejoicing or crumbling. Same with University of Maryland basketball. And especially with the teams he coaches. "I don't have an anger problem," he tells me one night over a rotisserie chicken dinner at The Roasting Company. "I have a competition problem."

He has friends all over the country, and those relationships run deep. He still keeps in contact with the coaches he worked with and players he taught in Maryland. He has weekly conversations with Josh McCown, the Cleveland Browns quarterback who coached with Chadwick briefly at Marvin Ridge. They bounce their troubles off each other—McCown unloading the woes of the Browns' franchise, Chadwick sharing the frustrations of a high school coach.

Bly, meanwhile, was raised by school-teacher parents in Chesapeake, Virginia. He's among a large contingent of former professional athletes who've moved to Charlotte to raise their families in recent years. His oldest son, Trey, is a freshman cornerback on the Mustangs' junior varsity team and led the team in interceptions this season. He hangs around the varsity

games, tossing a football on the sideline and dreaming of the day that he'll be playing on Friday nights, too. In most situations, Bly is the most empathetic coach on staff. He's the first to want to give a kid another chance after he's screwed up. Bly winces when he hears yelling. "Just not used to all that," he tells Chadwick at various points during the season. (Sometimes Chadwick responds by sarcastically asking Bly, an assistant, if it's OK for him, the head coach, to discipline a player.)

In the meeting about Williams, Bly raises his voice above the other assistants: "We're yelling at him. Maybe he just doesn't respond to that. And that's all we're doing, yelling at him. It's our job to help him." To which Chadwick responds, "Dre, he's been doing this all year. I've had it. And more than that, some of his teammates have had it."

They resolve to let two younger assistants talk to Williams to try to steer him straight. One more problem, though, and he's off the team.

Williams is in uniform that Friday as Myers Park dominates its first conference opponent, Rocky River, 24-10, on a rainy final weekend in September. The win pushes the Mustangs' record to 4-2, their best start in four years. Their next game is scheduled for two weeks later at Butler, a perennial state power and winner of three state championships in the past seven years.

After the Rocky River win, Chadwick heads to Taco Mac, the "official home of the Myers Park football postgame celebration." The place is packed. Everybody's laughing and sipping soda when word gets to Chadwick that some of Butler's best players hadn't played in their game that night.

More messages come in the next day, and soon the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department sends out a sparsely worded press release: Detectives are investigating the "alleged exploitation of a 15-year-old girl involving current and former students from CMS." NBC Charlotte reports that the incident involves Butler football players. The police and the Butler administration never will confirm that, though. The police won't have an update on the case even three months later. But it's true that several players are suspended for several games.

Football coaches, football fans, and football players are opportunists. But before Chadwick can even consider how

the Butler suspensions might benefit his team, his thoughts turn to Madison, his 15-year-old daughter.

The following Monday, Chadwick calls a team meeting after school.

"Guys," he says, "if what they're saying is true, and that was one of you, you couldn't play for me anymore. I couldn't coach you. I'd have a hard time giving you a high-five."

He keeps going.

"Someone's dating your future wife right now," he tells them. "You should think about how you'd want him to be treating her right now. And you should treat every woman you're with that way."

EVERY ISSUE IS HERE, somewhere, on this team: problems with poverty and privilege, conversations about rape and dating, relationships between fathers and sons or mothers and sons. One player was born in Sudan. His parents moved him here when he was an infant to escape the civil war there, but soon they split up, and now his father lives in Canada and his mother lives in Elizabeth.

It all lives under those green helmets.

On October 7, the Wednesday before the Butler game and 10 days after the Rocky River victory, the defensive backfield sits on stone benches outside of Zack's Hamburgers on South Boulevard, waiting for their position coach to come pay for their lunch. Every week, Dre Bly takes the boys out to eat, usually after Tuesday practices. But today is a half-day on the school calendar, and classes let out just after noon, so lunch it is.

Bly's late. They were supposed to meet at 1. It's 1:15, and he's still not here. Neither is Watson.

"They're on CPT," says Kevin Alford, a junior cornerback and African American. "Colored-people time." The mixed-race group of teenagers laughs hysterically at the joke.

At 1:25, a black Cadillac Escalade pulls into the parking lot with Bly driving and Watson in the passenger seat. Bly opens the door and the speakers blare with the sound of another man's voice saying goodbye. "Alright, man. I'll holler at you later," Bly responds.

Watson walks over to his teammates and whispers, "He was on the phone with Torry Holt the whole way over here." Holt is a record-setting former NFL receiver who starred at N.C. State while Bly starred at UNC in the mid-to-late 1990s. They



Speedy receiver Saiq Patrick (above) has a few key drops during the middle of the season, making it even sweeter when he makes big plays at the end. Every week, defensive backs coach Dre Bly (bottom photo, far right) takes his players to eat at Zack's Hamburgers on South Boulevard.



were both drafted by the Rams in 1999 and played in two Super Bowls together.

They all cram into the tiny burger joint, eight high school defensive backs and one former NFL all-pro defensive back. Bly tells the woman in the window that he's paying for the next nine meals. "I have all my DBs to order for," he says.

Each boy orders some version of a hamburger and fries, then they all crowd into three booths along a window. While they wait for their food, the phones come out. This is a snapshot of high school life in 2015: eight boys, sitting shoulder to shoulder with perfectly good voices, sending messages to people who aren't here. "Who you texting?" Watson leans back and asks safety Davis Ray. Ray blushes and shakes his head. "Yeah, I know who you're texting," Watson says, before whispering a girl's name into Ray's ear. Nearby, Ray's twin brother, Owen, laughs.

The twins are seniors, and they say that next year they'll probably go to different colleges. But that doesn't stop their teammates and coaches from razzing them about their similarities. "Y'all still sleep together?" Bly jumps in. All the boys crack up.

With the 38-year-old Bly asking most of the questions in the group, the conversation floats back and forth between boyish banter and honest inquiry. He asks the Ray boys what their father does for a living, and they tell him that he has his own business selling medical equipment. He asks them about their grades and where they want to go to college. He asks them if they're happy the Butler players are suspended.

Then he asks the group whether the school gives out a "Most Popular" award at the end of the year. Everyone looks at Watson, who's leaning his head against the window, drawing circles in ketchup with wrinkled French fries.

"Oh, would Jamal win Most Popular?" Bly asks.

"I could. But it usually goes to ..." Watson says, trailing off. "No, I'll let Kev-bo answer that," he continues, looking over at Alford. Alford shakes his head no. He doesn't want to finish Watson's sentence.

"A white person," Watson blurts. "They got more people."

A SIGN HANGS on the press box and looms over the field as the Mustangs go through stretches and warmups: "Butler Bulldog State Champions—2009, 2010, 2012."



As a Butler player runs the other way with a game-clinching interception return for a touchdown, receiver Brandon Adams crumbles in the other end zone, where just seconds earlier he'd hoped to grab a game-tying score.

Myers Park's last victory against Butler was in 2006. But tonight, with several Bulldogs suspended, the Mustangs clearly believe they will win.

They don't. Mostly because Myers Park's receivers stop catching the football. Time and again Chadwick calls a play, and time and again quarterback Jack Davidson delivers a pass that should be caught, and time and again the receivers drop it. The main culprits are Saiq Patrick, a junior with dreadlocks who's so fast he's open on almost every play, and Brandon Adams, a senior wideout who usually has reliable hands. Adams—widely recognized as one of the smartest kids in school ("His G.P.A. is like 10-something," a teammate tells me.)—starts the trouble by fumbling in the second quarter, and it spreads from there.

Butler takes a 14-7 lead into the final minute. Myers Park drives to within 16 yards of a game-tying score. But after another dropped pass and a sack, Davidson is intercepted by a Butler defender, who takes the ball back 90 yards to clinch the win. Myers Park loses 21-7, making it nine years in a row without a win over the Bulldogs.

"I don't know if I've ever been more frustrated in 17 years as a coach," Chadwick tells his players after the game.

At 2:30 p.m. on Monday, Chadwick sits the players in a room again to talk about where their season stands. If they'd have beaten Butler, they almost certainly would've been in a position to win a conference championship. Now, they'll need to win and get help.

"As you go through life," he tells them, "when you miss opportunities, it eats at

you for a long time."

Messages are only worth something if they're received. Toward the end of the film session that followed the conversation about missed opportunities, someone in the back farts. And then again. And again. That makes other players giggle, which makes other players giggle.

"OK, who's the funny guy?" Chadwick asks. "Who's doing that? Nobody wants to tell me? We can run right now."

He waits. Nobody owns up to it. "OK, let's go."

They lace up their tennis shoes to run several laps around the track. Jamal Watson, who's been quiet throughout the afternoon, is the first to finish. He's barely breathing hard as he turns around and waits for his teammates. He shouts at them to stop messing around.

He's wearing a T-shirt that across the front reads, "COLLEGE."

CHAPTER V HOMECOMINGS

AT 8 A.M. ON FRIDAY, OCTOBER 23, Chadwick kicks off homecoming weekend by talking to a group of senior citizens at a retirement community, telling them about the next generation he's trying to help raise. Building support beyond the 62-acre campus is part of Chadwick's job. It's not easy in a county with nearly 30 public high schools. One of the schools



Rob Norris (center right) not only has a son on the team, he's the president of the booster club.

he coached in Maryland, Lackey, is a poor, rural school about 30 minutes south of Washington. The closest high school was eight miles away; there are at least 10 high schools within eight miles of Myers Park. One year, Chadwick led Lackey to a victory over its rival in the final game of the regular season, and 5,000 fans stormed the field. Working his way through the crowd, Chadwick spotted his principal, who was staring at him with tears in her eyes. "Look what you've done for these people," she told him.

Not everybody embraces his style, though. He went 42-20 over five years at Marvin Ridge and was named the Carolina Panthers High School Coach of the Year in 2010, but was fired after a 6-6 season in 2012. He learned he would lose his job in the spring of 2013. "The day before Easter break," he says, rolling his eyes.

He took the 2013 season off from football, but worked as a school administrator back in Maryland while his family stayed here. Then he applied for the Myers Park job. The previous coach, Scott Stein, had the job for one year. He hurt his back early in the season and missed several games, and the Mustangs went 4-7. "There were some weeks we didn't know who the coach was going to be," says Norris, the booster club president.

Mark Bosco had been hired as the new Myers Park principal in May 2013, bringing with him an attitude of embracing the school's diversity. On one hand, Bosco talks regularly about the number of kids Myers Park has on free and reduced lunch, and on the other, he can tell you how many students come from families that are top earners. Chadwick still carries a sharp Mid-Atlantic accent and speaks his mind in a way that can be unsettling for people in this old South neighborhood. He

connected with Bosco immediately, and loved the principal's approach to tough conversations. The day after Bosco offered Chadwick the job, the coach asked the principal to meet him for breakfast, just to be sure the fit was right. It was.

Chadwick quickly went to work building other connections in the community. He met with Roger Purgason, who runs the elite youth football program called Hammer Down Football. Within a year, some of the best middle school athletes in the city were deciding to stay in the Myers Park school district—in years past, many of the best would find ways to attend school elsewhere.

Chadwick also began to pump up fundraising efforts with Norris and the booster club. The fall after he arrived, the booster club raised enough to build a sparkling new weight room, which opened in January 2015. The club started selling memberships—the lowest level is \$40 a year. An "ultimate membership," which comes with season tickets and a sweet parking spot for football games, costs \$350 a year. Chadwick started knocking on the doors of businesses, too. Taco Mac, which hosts the official after-party, signed a three-year deal to be a title sponsor. The sponsorship costs about \$6,000 per year, and Chadwick believes the restaurant makes at least that in return, thanks to tables full of people in green shirts after games.

In all, since Norris took over as the president in 2011, the Myers Park boosters have raised and spent more than \$700,000 on athletics.

Norris, whose two older sons also played for Myers Park, says Chadwick has done more than raise money. "He made football fun again for a bunch of guys who loved football, but hated Myers Park football," Norris says.

THERE'S NO SCHOOL on the Friday of the homecoming game, but Chadwick doesn't want his players sitting around waiting all day. The Mustangs rebounded from the October 9 Butler loss with a solid win over an overmatched Porter Ridge team on October 16, pushing them to 5-3. And tonight, the 23rd, they're set to play Independence—the school that in the 2000s went seven years and 109 games without a loss. If they win, the Mustangs could find themselves back in the mix for the conference championship.

After his breakfast at the retirement community, Chadwick has the team come in at 11 a.m.—eight hours before kickoff—for a pancake brunch. Then he and his staff set up video games and televisions in various rooms, and they keep a loose watch over the players for the next four or so hours.

Finally, at 6:45, they gather again in uniform on the hill overlooking the baseball field. This is Chadwick's most prepared and rehearsed pregame speech of the year.

"You know, I've told you about how I've gone to different programs and taken them from nothing to championships," Chadwick says. "One thing that was true with every one of those teams, there was always that one signature moment."

Some players start nodding. "There was a signature moment when you can say, 'Hey, we've arrived. We're not good anymore; we're great.'"

More affirmatives in the audience. Some players start to stand. Others clap. Chadwick raises his voice.

"Tonight, men, is your moment." The coach walks away, and the players roar.

FIVE MINUTES LATER, opening kickoff, Amari Jordan, number 3. He fields the ball at the 26-yard line and runs left. Then forward. Then he sees a tunnel to the right, protected by green jerseys, his teammates. He shoots through it. Nobody there. Touchdown.

The Mustangs are up 7-0 after one play. Jordan comes to the sideline to receive his friendly beating—teammates pounding his helmet to say congratulations. "This is our moment," defensive coordinator Andy Markatine shouts. "Hell yeah!"

Independence responds with a field goal.

Myers Park takes the field. Chadwick calls a play. A young assistant coach sprints



After the Independence game, Jamal Watson walks away wearing his homecoming crown, but his mind is still on what happened on the field a few minutes earlier.

down the sideline, giggling and telling anyone who'll listen, "Flea-flicker! Flea-flicker! He called the flea-flicker!"

It is, indeed, a flea-flicker. Davidson hands the ball to a running back. Every player on the Independence defense takes two steps forward, believing it's a running play. The runner then flips the ball back to Davidson. The quarterback stands tall and looks out into the open field, where he has two receivers running uncovered. He tosses the deep ball. The players on the Myers Park sideline raise their hands. This is a sure thing. This is their *moment*.

Only, the Davidson's pass lands about seven yards past his target, bouncing off the ground and skipping into the end zone.

Two plays later, Patrick, the speedy receiver with dreads, is wide open down the visitors' sideline. This time, Davidson's pass is on target. The players on the Myers Park sideline raise their hands. This is a sure thing. This is their *moment*.

Only, Patrick drops the ball. He keeps jogging toward the end zone empty-handed, then turns toward his sideline, head hanging.

Myers Park leads 14-10 at halftime. Markatine, the defensive coordinator, is unhappy with the defense. He shouts so loudly on that hill overlooking the baseball field that one player jokes that he might have a heart attack. "Until you start beating the man in front of you, they're going to ruin your homecoming," he yells at his players before pounding his right fist into his open palm. "We're a bunch of nails

"Call me King 'Mal," he whispers to his teammates.

out there, and I want 11 hammers."

While Markatine momentarily loses his mind, other stories are transpiring. For instance, Bly is standing in the corner on his cell phone, calling in a pizza to be delivered to his home off Carmel Road, where his younger son is waiting and hungry. And Watson, where is he?

As Chadwick gathers the team—offense and defense—for another speech, Watson comes down the hill, his cleats clicking against the pavement. He's been at the halftime ceremony with the homecoming court.

"Call me King 'Mal," he whispers to his teammates.

"What? You won?" they ask, leaning in closer.

Yes, at halftime of this all-important game, the defensive coordinator is telling his teammates what tool they should be if they were in fact tools, the defensive backs coach is calling in a pepperoni pizza, and the star cornerback is being crowned homecoming king.

The score remains 14-10 with 3:07 remaining as Independence quarterback Christian McPhail drops back. He looks left and sees a one-on-one matchup between Watson and receiver Cederick Stone.

Watson and Stone grew up together. They played pee-wee football together. All night, Watson has shut down his old friend. In fact, Watson hasn't had a player score on him in two seasons, back to when he was a sophomore. So when the ball sails toward the end zone, few people on the Myers Park sideline are worried. Surely, Watson has this. Surely, this is the homecoming king's night. Surely, this is his *mome...*

King 'Mal stretches as far as he can as he dives for the ball. But he's been beaten and burned by his old friend. Stone cradles the ball. Touchdown. Independence wins 17-14.

Watson goes through the handshake line with a Gatorade towel draped over his head, a style he picked up from his favorite NFL player, Cam Newton.

"Man, I don't give a damn about homecoming king right now," the 17-year-old Watson says afterward. "I guess it was exciting, but I'd rather walk off the field with a 'W.'"

Chadwick walks toward the stands. Not only is it homecoming for the school, but he has family in town—including his parents and brother. He reaches out to shake hands with his father, who tells him, "Boys looked good." Chadwick's wife, Beth, ponders the weekend ahead. "He won't talk a lot," she says. "This is his life. He's very passionate. He just lives it and breathes it."

The coach retreats to his office, where most of his assistants are waiting outside. He unlocks the door and walks in. The television is still on from earlier in the day when everybody was here for pancakes and video games. *Dateline*: NBC is on now. He grabs the remote and hits mute.

A box of cold Caribou Coffee sits on his desk as he starts rehashing the game with assistants Markatine and Mark Harman.

Chadwick: "Saiq and Brandon didn't catch a pass? Saiq's dropped five touchdown passes this year," he says.

Markatine: "We'd be conference champions if he just caught those balls."

Chadwick: "And what about Jack on that flea-flicker?"

Harman: "There was nobody within 20 yards of Brandon on that play!"

Silence.

Harman changes the subject: "You going to T Mac's?"

Chadwick: "Hell no."

The sad verbal replay of the game is interrupted only when 15-year-old Madison walks in, her blond hair tied up with a green

ribbon, to pick up her bag of clothes. She looks at the box of coffee and asks if it's warm. Her father tells her it isn't.

"Are you riding with me?" Chadwick asks.

Madison chuckles at the prospect of spending 30 minutes in the car with her father after a loss like this.

"Umm, no."

AN HOUR BEFORE THE BUSES take off for the next game, at Garinger on October 30, close friends Jamal Watson and Noah Smith walk down the long hallway to Chadwick's office to tell him they can't find their jerseys.

They are captains of the team, and they have nothing to wear tonight. They claim the jerseys were stolen, and they try to reason with their coach that it's the only explanation because, after all, it's weird that both players would just lose them, right?

Chadwick tells them they're irresponsible, then says they need to ask injured teammates for jerseys themselves; he's not going to do it for them. The players wear 33 and 34 for the night.

Garinger, located off of Eastway Drive, is a far different school than Myers Park. About 55 percent of the student body is black and another 30 percent is Hispanic. It's homecoming tonight, and the school's percussion-heavy band plays songs you'd hear at historically black colleges and universities. The black players on the Myers Park team dance when they hear the tunes; the white players don't.

Garinger, which has about 85 percent of its students on free and reduced lunch, has had a weak football program for years. The Wildcats are 0-9 this season, and they haven't won a game since 2011. Most of the players play both offense and defense.

Indeed, Myers Park rolls to a 40-0 lead late in the third quarter. Chadwick pulls the starters.

Then something out of the ordinary occurs. Garinger's quarterback throws a crossing route pass to Jordan Freeman, who makes the reception, sprints to the right, sees three Myers Park defenders in front of him, then stops, pivots, and runs the other way to the left. Then he looks up the field and realizes he can keep going. So he does. Quickly. As Freeman sprints down the sideline, one Garinger fan stands up. Then another. Then another. As Freeman crosses the goal line for an 80-yard touchdown, everyone in the Garinger bleachers is jumping up and down and celebrating a

small victory on homecoming.

It doesn't stop there. On the next possession, Freeman scores again on a 1-yard run. Then the teams trade quick touchdowns. And with 1:12 left, Freeman runs a crossing pattern, takes the pass, and sprints 67 yards for another score to make it 47-28.

Chadwick continues to call real plays, wanting to give his backups work. On the sideline, Bly screams at the head coach and tells him to stop, to have the quarterback take a knee and run out the clock. On the next play, the backup Myers Park quarterback throws a pass. It's intercepted.

"Let's go home, man!" Bly yells, his eyes welling up with tears. "Let's go home!"

As Garinger attempts a few final pass plays, Bly walks off the field, onto the track, and out of the stadium. He looks back twice to make sure the game ends, then keeps walking to his truck.

After the two teams shake hands, Garinger's players sprint toward a meeting on their side of the field. "I don't care what the score says, we won that game," one shouts. Then they run to the locker room and turn on music.

The Wildcats dance and smile and celebrate while the engines crank on the Myers Park buses. The Mustangs, meanwhile, are silent and solemn, despite the fact that they won by 19 points and clinched a berth in the playoffs.

AT ABOUT 2 A.M. on November 7, Chadwick can't sleep. It's been four hours since East Mecklenburg crushed his team on Senior Night (Chapter I, in the February edition of *Charlotte* magazine). He's been staring at the ceiling, wondering if he's really making progress. After all, he'd told his team going into the night that "7-4's a good season; 6-5's a mediocre season."

Is he mediocre? Is he really bringing boys together? Is he a good play-caller? Should he give that job to someone else? Will he have the opportunity to? After devoting 17 years of his life to football, were his best years really more than a decade ago? And in another state?

Finally, another question comes to his mind, one he's able to answer: Who will Myers Park play in the first round of the playoffs?

The N.C. High School Athletic Association won't release the pairings until later that afternoon. Chadwick can't

wait. He jumps out of bed and grabs a piece of scratch paper. In his quiet house out in the country, he starts scribbling like a madman.

This team won and finished with this record; that team lost and finished with that record. These guys will be seeded here; those guys will be seeded there. North Carolina's high school football playoffs are nearly impossible to understand. There are eight divisions, from 1-A (smallest schools) to 4-AA (largest schools), and the brackets are divided into two regions with 16 teams in each. It requires a team of people to work several hours on the Saturday after the regular season to compile the seedings and pairings.

Chadwick figures it out before sunrise.

The loss to East Mecklenburg means that Myers Park will drop all the way to the 13th seed in the region. In theory, that's a bad thing. But the 13th seed plays the fourth seed, and in this case, the fourth seed is Mooresville, a team with an impressive 8-3 record but a less-than-impressive schedule. Chadwick looks at the teams Mooresville played this year, and sometime in that early morning darkness, he's filled with optimism again.

"We can beat them," he says to himself.

Then he looks down at the rest of his bracket. East Mecklenburg—which less than eight hours earlier had whipped the Mustangs so badly that his seniors were standing on the top steps crying—jumped up to the 11th seed with the victory. That landed East Meck a game with sixth-seeded Mallard Creek, the defending state champion and a team seeded that low only because of a couple of early-season upset losses. Over the past few weeks, Mallard Creek has been playing like its old self, and despite its seed, it enters the playoffs as a favorite to win the title.

Sometime that weekend, East Mecklenburg's fans sneak onto the Myers Park campus and spray-paint three big rocks in East Meck colors. It's the last celebration they'll have this year. In the first round of the playoffs the following week, Mallard Creek beats East Meck, 51-3.

Meanwhile, Myers Park takes a trip up Interstate 77 to Mooresville. 📍

Read the final part of this three-part story in the April issue of *Charlotte* magazine.

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Tyree Watson leans out the bus window as the team pulls away from a pre-playoff-game dinner at McAlister's Deli, where Dre Bly (below) took a selfie with some of the players.

MUSTANG GREEN

PART THREE OF A THREE-PART SERIES

After a disappointing loss to close the regular season, the Myers Park football team hits the road for the playoffs, and some players prepare for life beyond football.

BY MICHAEL GRAFF
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOGAN CYRUS

CHAPTER VI "I GOT A LITTLE DANCE PLANNED FOR US"

AT 3:15 IN THE AFTERNOON on November 13, three white and blue Charlotte-Mecklenburg school buses pull across the county line and into a strip mall parking lot in Iredell County, about 30 miles north of Charlotte. The 13th-seeded Myers Park football team is four hours away from a matchup with 4th-seeded Mooresville in the state playoffs. It's time to eat.

This is the first time in Scott Chadwick's two years as coach that the Mustangs won't eat a pregame dinner at the school. It's only the second time in his tenure that they'll play a road game against a team that doesn't have a Charlotte address. This is a reality of high school football in the big city; there are so many schools within a few miles of yours, you never leave town.

The Mustangs think Mooresville is the moon.

They've dressed up for the trip. Most are in bowties. Backup quarterback Tim Willis is dressed in slacks with a red sweater over his button-down shirt. He's cornerback Jamal Watson's closest friend at school; the two of them live in the same Gladedale apartment complex. He plays fairly often for a backup, subbing in for a dozen or so plays each game, mostly to run. He's one of the fastest Mustangs. He's also an entertainer. Today he's wearing big, decorative glasses and white tap-dancing shoes. One of his coaches tells him he looks like Urkel, a character from a television show that went off the air around the same year Willis was born. "Welcome

to Mooresville, *North Carolina*," Willis says, overplaying a thick, Southern accent. "Y'all, we are *out* here."

They pile into McAlister's Deli and head to a baked potato bar that's been set up just for them. One by one, they load potatoes with sour cream, ham, bacon, and cheese. When the seats inside the restaurant fill up, some players head to the patio outside. Willis puts his tray on a table and starts tap-dancing on the patio. Just then, a girl who looks to be about their age walks past the patio on the sidewalk. Eight football players drop their forks and stand up, craning their necks out of their bow ties, to watch her drive away. Willis stops tapping. "Hey," Willis says, practicing a bad pickup line. "I'm from Myers Park. You from *Mooresveeille*?"

Colby Williams, the defensive lineman who sometimes talks too much for his coaches' liking, is wearing sky blue pants and flashy white shoes. He forgot a belt, though. He looks at another teammate who's decked out in a button-down shirt and tie and says, "You look like a president," before moonwalking across the strip mall parking lot.

Bly, the assistant coach, shows up as the players finish their meals. He takes a selfie in the parking lot with a group of them. Then everybody walks back to the buses.

They arrive at Mooresville High's Joe Popp Stadium at about 5 p.m., two and a half hours before kickoff. A few fans of the home team are already tailgating. A man who's toting an oxygen tank to help him breathe is blowing on a plastic noise-making horn in the parking lot. There's a guy in a period Civil War costume standing by the front gate for no apparent reason.

Otherwise, the place is quiet, especially





Chadwick, who's coached in three state title games, prepares for the playoff opener by pacing the sideline in khakis.

compared to Myers Park's stadium in the middle of Charlotte. The temperature, in the 60s during the day, is sliding down to the low 40s. At 5:30 p.m., the sun casts an orange glow across the empty field as the Mustangs walk out of the locker room, still in dress clothes.

Ben Norris, the linebacker who tore his labrum in last week's Senior Night game, wears a white button-down, khakis, and a pink bow tie as he starts hopping at the 50-yard line. He'll play in the game, despite the injury. "This is my field tonight," he says.

Williams, in those blue pants and white shoes, joins in. "That M," he says, pointing to the Mooresville emblem painted on the field, "it stands for Myers Park tonight. They can have it back. But it's ours tonight." Saiq Patrick, the receiver who's been hit or miss, wears headphones over his dreadlocks as he starts boxing the goalpost.

Watson walks out by himself wearing slacks, a black sweater over a collared shirt, a Gatorade towel around his neck, and dress shoes he borrowed from his uncle. He heads clear across the field to the end zone opposite the field house, and he holds a quiet conversation with the goalpost.

The growl of motorcycle engines in the distance breaks the silence. Watson begins his 120-yard walk from the far goalpost to the near one. A man in a Mooresville sweatshirt walks into the quiet stadium with a cowbell and air horn. "Aw," the man says, his voice echoing, "you gettin' a little preview of what's to come [in the game]?" A few minutes later, that same man comes down to the sideline and pretends to be a referee. He has a real penalty flag. "15 yards, unsportsmanlike on Myers Park," the man acts out, as if the field is a performance theater. "First *down* *down* *down*, Mooresville!"

"Some weird people up here," one Myers Park player says to another.

As the Mustangs suit up, Chadwick, dressed in a blue button-down and sweater vest, walks to the fence by himself. A crescent moon shines in the sky as his mind drifts toward other big moments in his career. The three state championship appearances. The night when a team he coached in Maryland rode the bus to a rivalry game only to find that their fans had already filled the stands, waiting to greet them. Or the night four years ago, when he had both of his sons on the same team at Marvin Ridge. They lost in the playoffs that night, and a team photographer snapped a picture of him with his arms around both boys' necks. His oldest son, Tyler, was a senior that night. He didn't take his helmet off for the entire bus ride home.

Chadwick starts to think about his own seniors. He thinks about how receiver

Brandon Adams' father came to him and said, "Brandon's having a hard time with the idea of this being his last game. How do you deal with that?" Chadwick told the father, "There's nothing you can do to deal with that. When it happens, it's going to hurt forever."

He thinks about the conversation he had with those same seniors six days ago, less than 24 hours after that disappointing night against East Meck, when he told them how they'd let down more people than themselves. And he thinks about how they responded. Three seniors skipped a recruiting visit to the University of Tennessee to attend the meeting. Then all week, they delivered the best practices he's seen from them in two years. He seems almost certain that they'll win tonight.

Chadwick's daughter, Madison, walks over to him. The coach breaks into a smile and hugs her. She pulls out her phone and says, "Let's FaceTime Tyler." Tyler, the older son, is a senior at Coastal Carolina, where he's been on the dean's list every semester. He has a decent chance of being selected in this year's Major League Baseball draft, but he tells his father he'd rather jump right into football coaching. Madison lifts her phone in front of her face, and her father leans in. The three Chadwicks talk for about five minutes.

"That was a cool moment," Chadwick says afterward.

Soon the Mooresville players walk into the stadium in two lines, holding their shoulder pads and helmets. They file down the stairs of the already-filled bleachers, and their fans give them a standing ovation. A few Myers Park players hear the commotion and walk out to see what's happening. Chadwick yells at them to get back in the locker room. At some point during the waiting process, one player takes a sharp object and scratches "M.P.H.S." into the blue paint on the frame of the locker room door.

At 7 p.m., the bell atop the nearby Presbyterian church rings. Meanwhile, cell phones throughout the stadium light up with news alerts: There's been a shooting in France. Thirty people are dead. No, 60 people. Everyone from workers in the concession stand to parents in the bleachers asks who and what and when and where and the unanswerable—why? But the players' and coaches' cell phones are tucked into bags, and

nobody's about to worry them with troubling world news at a time like this.

They walk onto the field and stand behind the cheerleaders' big sign. They have an idea for how to handle the home team's noise advantage during the introductions. Assistant coach Rod Chisholm, who played running back for Appalachian State in the 2000s, stands in the middle of the team and tells them the plan. It's pretty simple.

"We go when they go," he says repeatedly.

The players respond, "We go when they go."

As soon as the Blue Devils burst through their sign, the Mustangs burst through theirs, stealing the cheers.

There's something to this from a psychological standpoint, about needing to hear cheers instead of boos. And there's something to this from a metaphorical standpoint, about a team made up of players from many different backgrounds knowing a trick or two when it comes to finding equal footing.

Mostly, though, it's just funny to watch. As the public address announcer revs up the home fans with, "And *now* *www*, your Mooresville Blue *Devillsss!*" Myers Park's players keep their eyes on the Mooresville players. The cowbells and horns reach full blast, as Mooresville fans hope to not only shower the home team with cheers but also to intimidate the visitors. As soon as the Blue Devils burst through their sign, the Mustangs burst through theirs, stealing the cheers.

Myers Park kicks off. A freshman kicker bombs the ball into the end zone. Touchback. The Mustangs' sideline goes nuts. It's like this throughout the game—every positive play brings a celebration. At no point in this season have the Myers Park players been so ... hopeful.

They force Mooresville to punt after three plays.



While waiting for the game at Mooresville High School to start, someone in the Myers Park locker room scratches "M.P.H.S." into the doorway.



Tim Willis, the fleet-footed backup quarterback, takes a quarterback draw up the middle for a touchdown.

Then quarterback Jack Davidson tosses a screen pass to receiver Elijah Bowick, a 6-foot-2 freshman who will almost certainly be a star one day. Bowick takes the ball and shoots toward the end zone. Three defenders jump at his ankles, only to grab air. The 33-yard touchdown makes it 7-0 Mustangs.

Myers Park is a different team tonight. Chadwick isn't screaming. Nobody's moping along the sideline. And on the field, they're speaking a language that only they can understand.

"Baltimore!" Kevin Alford yells at Watson before one play, and the two cornerbacks swap sides of the field. "Zebra! Zebra!" Alex Alvarez, the great baseball player turned football player, shouts to Watson before another play, and the cornerback nods.

Norris is playing despite the torn labrum, and on a play in the second quarter, his arm is ripped back again. He runs to the sideline, where the trainers again press on the spot where the shoulder meets his chest. "Ah, God!" Norris shouts, before using a few four-letter words. He's about to take off his pads when the Myers Park offense lands in a third-and-short situa-

tion. He immediately tells the trainers to stop, then runs out onto the field. The play is a quarterback sneak, and it's Norris's job to help Davidson push the pile. Davidson calls hike, and he drives forward. Norris slams into him from behind and pushes everybody five yards down the field, then runs off for another round of "Ah, God," and four-letter words.

Mooresville answers with a 23-yard touchdown. During a timeout, the Mooresville band plays "Sweet Caroline," just before Willis—tap-dancing Tim from the potato bar—takes a snap and plants his cleat in the turf and takes off. He runs up the middle 34 yards for a touchdown with 2:31 remaining in the first quarter.

Late in the half, Mooresville scores on a long touchdown run to tie it. Then, with about a minute to play, Davidson throws a bad interception, giving Mooresville the chance to kick a short field goal at the end of the half, making it 17-14.

It's easy to wonder if this is where they fall apart again. Chadwick and the staff offer encouragement under the fluorescent lights of the locker room at halftime. The coach's final words: "I know our defense is going to throw a shutout in the

second half, aren't they? Gentlemen, I'll meet you back here after about an hour and half, and I got a little dance planned for us."

The number of people dead in Paris keeps rising. *One hundred now*, one parent whispers to another.

Mooresville tries an onside kick to open the second half, but Myers Park recovers it. A few plays later, tap-dancing Tim Willis takes a 35-yard run to the 2-yard line. A few plays after that, Davidson sneaks the ball into the end zone, again with Norris providing the final push.

Myers Park, the 13th seed, is beating fourth-seeded Mooresville 21-17.

On the next series, Mooresville's starting quarterback goes down with an injury. Myers Park's defense decides to rush the backup with everything it has. On a fourth-and-13, Colby Williams, once on the verge of being kicked off the team, bursts through the line and records a sack to pull the Mustangs closer to the upset. On the next Mooresville possession, he does it again on third down. The Blue Devils punt with about four minutes left.

The Mustangs can almost run out the clock if they can record a first down. On

their first two plays, they're pushed backward. They face a third-and-15. Chadwick has a decision. He can call a running play, which would certainly keep the clock moving but would be less likely to produce a first down, meaning they'd have to punt the ball back to Mooresville and play defense one more time. Or he can have Davidson pass it deep.

He calls a pass.

Not just any pass. He calls a pass to Patrick, the talented and speedy player who dropped one key reception after another this year. For the past few weeks, Patrick has been in his backyard until 10 or 11 at night, catching passes fired at him by his dad, hoping to overcome the yips. After Davidson takes the snap on the most important play of the year, Patrick runs straight up the field. Then, he plants his foot and cuts right, toward the home bench. Davidson chucks the ball into a tight area near the sideline. Patrick is wide open. He watches it come down. And with less than two minutes to play, he puts two hands under the ball and it sticks. He tiptoes to get his feet in bounds. The Mustangs gain 35 yards on the play.

Patrick runs off the field, and his teammates line up to smack him on the helmet.

A few plays later, Chadwick sends Watson into the game on offense for the victory formation. Davidson will snap the ball and take a knee, and it's Watson's job to stand 30 yards behind him and protect their end zone, just in case something strange happens.

Davidson takes the knee. Chadwick peels off his headset and puts his face in his hands and bends over. Davidson takes the second and final knee, and the last seconds tick off. The game's over.

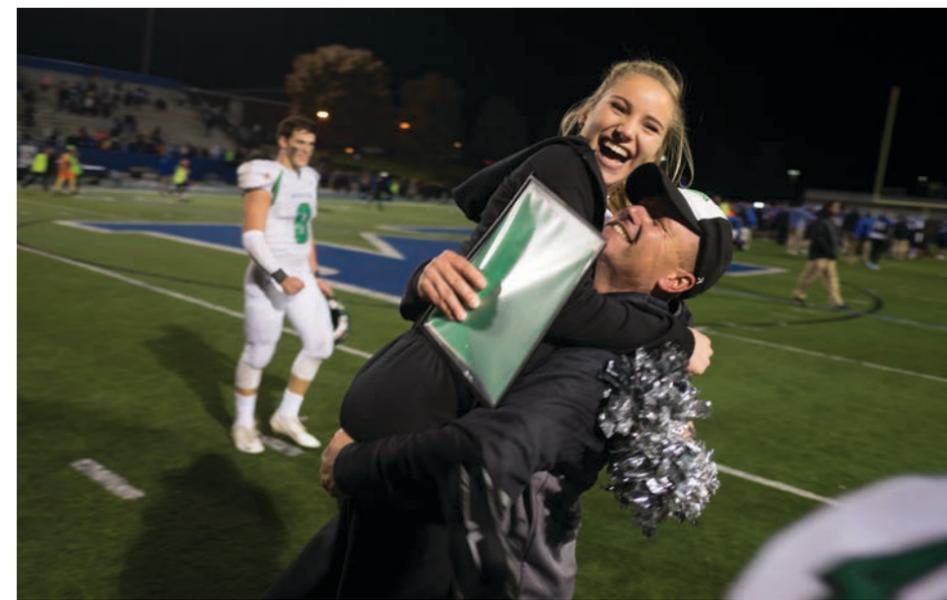
One week after being embarrassed on their home field on Senior Night, the Mustangs have pulled off the biggest upset in the North Carolina playoffs in 2015. Just as Chadwick opens his eyes, someone dumps a bucket of ice water on him. When he turns around, he sees that the man holding the bucket is Dre Bly. He points at him and smiles. Bly points at the head coach and smiles back.

The teams line up to shake hands. Myers Park's fans climb over the fence and onto the field. Chadwick sees his daughter running toward him. He grabs her and lifts her high in the air.

The players run to the locker room to change, and on a very tough evening in a world that keeps showing that it can be very mean, 60-some teenagers dance and



Smiles all around: Coaches and players dump water on Chadwick as the clock winds down. He celebrates with his team and lifts his daughter, Madison, high in the air.



sing the night away in a small town in North Carolina.

Their coach runs into the room, his hat turned backward. He promised them a dance. After a few seconds of bad moves from a man who fumbled through an Eminem quote to start the year, the players pick him up over their heads like a crowd-surfer at a rock show. They all raise their arms and pass him from one set of hands to the next.

CHAPTER VII

EPILOGUE: ONE LAST WALK

TWO DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS, Kameela Watson is preparing to make chicken and rice and beans for Sunday dinner. Her son, Jamal, is getting ready to head to the gym for an offseason workout.

It's been a little more than a month since the Myers Park football season ended in the second round of the playoffs at West Forsyth, a school near Winston-Salem where NBA star Chris Paul spent his high school days.

The Mustangs were overmatched that night, not necessarily by a team, but one player.

The Mustangs were overmatched that night, not necessarily by a team, but one player. West Forsyth's Darion Slade is one of the top athletes in the South, and he ran for one touchdown and threw for another in a 20-3 win. Within a few plays, it was clear that no matter what speech Chadwick gave his team about coming together and team unity, at the high school level, sometimes there's no match for one superior athlete.

Slade is technically listed as a wide receiver and is the fourth-best wideout in the state, according to one ranking. On his first reception in the game, he caught the ball and turned toward Watson, Myers Park's senior cornerback, with space to try to make a move. Slade juke right and left, but Watson stuck him and slammed him to the turf for nearly no

gain. For most of the rest of the game, Slade played quarterback.

It was a small show of respect for Watson, who became quite a prospect himself this year. Two seasons ago, some college coaches wouldn't look at him because of his grades. But when he started making B's and C's, his phone rang more. So did Chadwick's.

Over the holidays, James Madison University's coaches called. The Dukes are one of the top teams in the Football Championship Subdivision—the smaller classification of Division I. The JMU recruiters asked Chadwick about Watson's grades and maturity. Chadwick explained that Watson grew up in a house without a father and said it took time for him to realize the importance of school. "He's grown a ton since I got here," Chadwick told them. "He just needs discipline sometimes."

Kameela and Jamal take regular walks around their neighborhood to talk about the future. She chokes up when she thinks about what life will be like when her son goes off to school. More than that, though, she worries that Jamal's grades from his freshman and sophomore years hurt him during the recruiting process.

She never doubts his intelligence. "He's bright. He's inquisitive," she says. "He always wants to know what happened before his time, how people were raised and what the laws were and how everyone's different."

From the front door of their three-bedroom apartment in their subsidized, low-income housing complex, they can walk less than half a mile and stand in front of homes that are selling for anywhere between \$750,000 and \$900,000. The difference between his home and theirs—and the chasm between his childhood and those of some of his teammates—isn't lost on the 17-year-old.

"It all goes back to Jim Crow," he says. "I think it'll change, but it'll take a long time. Maybe even a couple of centuries."

"Centuries, Jamal?" his mother asks. "I



After his last high school game, Watson walks off the field wondering where he'll go next.

think it'll be sooner than that."

"We'll see," her son says.

Throughout January, Jamal agonizes over the uncertain future. He and his mom call Chadwick and Bly just about every day, asking for updates from colleges. The team holds its annual awards banquet in the school cafeteria on January 21, the night before a big snowstorm in Charlotte. Players and parents use plastic forks to wolf down plates of bowtie pasta and marinara sauce. Chadwick stands next to a long table and announces the awards. The best junior varsity player is Bowick, the young receiver who was called up to varsity late in the year and caught the first touchdown in the upset victory over Mooresville. Every year, the team gives out a scholarship in honor of David Shannon, a Myers Park graduate who died from a fall during his freshman year at the University of North Carolina in 2012. This year, the scholarship goes to Anton O'Brien, the offensive lineman with the short hair who was standing on the top step of the stadium crying after the loss to East Meck on Senior Night. JaMykal Neal, the young lineman from Grier Heights who will be one of the most highly recruited seniors on the team next season, wins the offensive player of the year. And the outstanding



As the season ends, the players and coaches reminisce about the fun times from earlier in the year, such as when Tim Willis posed for this photo.

career achievement award is split between the two players who lost their jerseys before the Garinger game: Noah Smith and Jamal Watson.

Less than two weeks later, on February 2, Watson—the senior captain who could drive his coach crazy and make his coach hug him, the homecoming king, the young man who grew up in the subsidized housing complex in the middle of one of Charlotte's wealthiest neighbors—signs a full scholarship to Towson University in Maryland. It's Chadwick's

alma mater. He'll be a Towson Tiger. Watson makes the announcement public on his Twitter page by posting six tiger emojis.

AFTER THE LAST GAME at West Forsyth, Chadwick huddled the Myers Park players and told them he was proud of them. He chewed hard on a piece of gum as he looked at the underclassmen, knowing that many of his best players were juniors, and that the freshman class is

the best he's ever had. He believes everything is in place to contend for a state championship in a few years. Then he looked at the seniors, who were crying over the end of their high school careers. "When we look back and get this program to where it needs to be," he told them, "you guys will be the ones whose shoulders we did it on."

Willis, the fun-loving character with the tap-dancing shoes, seemed to take it hardest, sniffing with his helmet on. After the meeting broke up, the team jogged to the three buses, parked on a hill just outside the stadium. But Watson and Willis went the other way. They trotted halfway across the field and to the sideline. They've been playing football together since seventh grade. And growing up in the Gladedale apartments, they'd spent years going at it in one-on-one basketball games and footraces. This was their last walk together as teammates.

"We were just telling each other how this hurts more than we thought it would," Watson said later. "We were crying like crazy. My whole body was shaking. Then we just remembered walking onto the field as ninth-graders. And then we were laughing. We were just trying to turn that sad moment into something else."

When they were done laughing, Willis ran up to the buses. A man in a green and yellow West Forsyth jacket stopped Watson on his way out. He was an assistant coach with the Titans, and he had something he wanted to tell the opposing cornerback before he left a high school stadium for the last time.

"You have a bright future ahead of you, son."

Watson thanked him and walked off the field. At the fence by the stadium's exit, he was stopped by a girl who looked to be about his age, maybe a year or two younger. She wore West Forsyth colors. She'd never met him, but she watched him come across the field and had been waiting for him.

"Can I just get a picture with you?" she asked.

He blushed. Then the tough guy put his arm around her and looked into the camera.

Chin out. No big deal.

Smile. 📷

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