CHAPTER EIGHT

Friday Night Lights: A Dream Deferred or Delusions of Grandeur

High school athletics have become the latest entree on the American sports menu, served up to help satisfy the voracious appetite of the fan. As a result, scholastic athletes are on the verge of becoming as important to the billion-dollar sports industry as their college brothers and sisters—and just as vulnerable to big-time exploitation.

—Gerald Eskenazi, New York Times

H. G. Bissinger’s, Friday Night Light’s: A Town, a Team, a Dream, provides tremendous insight into the interworkings of high school football in the state of Texas. Although his primary focus detailed the 1988 season of the Permian Panthers, a high school football team in Odessa, Texas, it captured a culture of high school football that is replicable throughout the United States. It also grasps the issues of how a town and a team’s love for football create misguided priorities that privilege athletics over academics. Furthermore, it highlights the sores of racism that festers beneath the glamour of the lights on every Friday night during the fall football seasons.

Bissinger’s analysis provides a critical examination of the preeminence high school football has in the lives of communities throughout the United States like Odessa, Texas. He informs on how the town of Odessa, Texas supported and even idealized high school football to the point of obsession. During the fall of each year, the community businesses actually function around the football schedule in order to attend games. Friday night football was a staple in this community and it gave meaning to the lives of Odessa, Texas residence.

Another interesting feature of Bissinger’s account of interscholastic football in Odessa, Texas, is the culture of high school football, specifically, and sports, in general. Football is and has been an American passion and a favorite pastime. It is important to note that the culture of football places a premium of masculinity, and for many young boys, it is a rite of passage into manhood. It is a training ground for masculine development, where
the ideals of masculinity are branded into the psyche of young boys who endure and make the team. There is no crying in this testosterone-driven emotionally conservative environment. Emotions are only allowed to be expressed during celebratory moments or in moments of defeat and only if the defeat is significant: championship type competitions. Teams are a type of fraternity, a group of unarmed mercenaries who develop a brotherly bond that often last a lifetime. On and off-the-field, they are expected to take care of one another, even sometimes when race or class segregates a community, team dynamics sometimes affords them the opportunity to transcend these differences to achieve a common goal and reach a specific destiny. According to Elliott J. Gorn and Warren J. Goldstein:

It [football] built camaraderie among men who were expected to take up leadership positions in their communities. The intense emotional identification fostered by football bound men to one another and to their class long after their gridiron days had passed. The shared experience of violence made these bonds especially strong. The risk of serious injury run by each player, the degree to which he depended on his fellows to protect him, the relief at surviving danger, and the sense of having gone through something together that others could not share gave football players the feeling of being special, distinct, and worthy. Such feelings are also perhaps the defining characteristic of the bonds between combat veterans of military units.

It is the culture of football that creates a unique experience for its participants. Beyond the positive traits and characteristics of training leaders, instilling hard-work ethics, fostering teamwork, and so on, there are negative aspects of this culture that have garnered national media attention, for example, the objectification of women, hazing, the abuse of illegal and prescription drugs, and anti-intellectualism.

It is this culture that cultivates dreams of playing at the intercollegiate and possibly the professional levels. For many young Black males, who desire to excel beyond the economic and social limitations of their family and community, football, specifically, and sports, in general, become a way out; an avenue to a better life. They are bombarded with images of athletes, like themselves, who started in similar socioeconomic conditions and become representatives of the “rags to riches” model. I would be hard-pressed in writing about the experiences of Black athletes in the intercollegiate setting and not highlight their experiences at the interscholastic levels. This chapter will examine how the increased commercialization of interscholastic sports, specifically football, is impacting lives and communities and creating breeding grounds for dreams deferred and delusions of grandeur. This chapter will also examine the role interscholastic football plays in the lives of Black males in a small Southern town. It is an unfortunate reality for these Black males, but their delusions of grandeur are concealed within every dream deferred. Black male