

A Sign from the Football Gods

| Joseph Eastburn

I was near the airport and starting to pump gas when a young guy, who was cleaning out a dirty white rental, walked up to me and asked if I wanted a football. I said, "Sure." Meanwhile, I was time-traveling in my head, remembering early high school practice all those blazing Augusts ago in New Jersey, 93 percent humidity, double sessions, pulling on wet pads for the afternoon practice—wishing I was anywhere but here.

Was this random gift a sign? I thought, *Yes*. I had a football amends to make to a guy named Chris on my high school team, which made me think of another Chris, a roommate from freshman year, who never made it.

Normally, you have to be invited to practice with the varsity team, but when I was accepted to Blair Academy, a boys' boarding school in northern New Jersey, at age fifteen, I asked to attend early football practice. As a freshman, this was unheard of. Not until I was out there in the August heat did I realize how insane it was. Even more bizarre was that I had transferred from the Peddie School (in Hightstown, New Jersey), Blair's arch rival. When my parents had decided to split up two years earlier, they had sent my older sister and me off to boarding schools. I remember many hours at Peddie, lying on my dorm room bed, daydreaming of football glory. As I approached high school age, I already knew my father had bought a farm near Blair, and that his fiancée's son, Ben, one year ahead of me, my future brother, was already attending Blair. So, I envisioned myself returning to Peddie years later, but as a star wide receiver for Blair. This was an endless fantasy that played out in my head. Of course, I was big and slow, destined never to be a wide receiver. On the day of my graduation from the Junior School at Peddie, I remember walking to my mother's car and seeing the hurt expression on her face when I told her I was going to live with my father on the farm.

When I arrived at my first early football practice, the coaches said, "Let's see who got in shape this summer!"

The players were asked to run twice around the quarter-mile cinder track that surrounded the field, in the midday heat. I thought I was literally going to die. Several guys started puking, but the coaches yelled at them to keep running while they threw up. This was my introduction to the most popular sport in America.

My father and I decided I should live on campus my first year, even though the farm was close enough for me to be a day student. I moved into Millbrook Cottage, a small, two-storey white house, past some empty campus fields across a country