

road, at the back entrance to the school. The master, Mr. Pender, lived on the first floor with his wife, and upstairs there were three dorm rooms and a bathroom. From a distance I saw Chris, my future roommate, carrying a giant trunk up the stairs. He was about 5' 10", muscular, blond-haired, with an ebullient personality.

The next day at practice, in full pads, doing stretches on the main field, there was some guy behind me screaming, "Let's go! Come on, let's hear it!"

I turned around and realized it was Chris, and I thought, *What is wrong with him?* Whenever he was on the field, he was totally gung-ho. He was a sophomore determined to make the starting team. I just wanted to survive the day.

We were the only students in the small dorm during early practice, but when the rest of the guys—Dave, Bill, Dennis, and Justin—moved in at the start of the school year, each in his own way a hopeless nerd or misfit, Chris was definitely "the man" at Millbrook. He was from Greenwich, Connecticut—like all of us, had some behaviour issues—and he used to regale us with tales of his drinking, fast car, and Caroline Smith, a girlfriend he just called "Smith," who we imagined as a tall, blonde vision of loveliness. I remember returning from one vacation and seeing Dave standing at the top of the stairs, holding up two fingers and pointing toward my dorm room, mouthing the words, "He got laid twice!" I used to try to imitate the way Chris walked, with his chest puffed, his head back and neck bulled out, but the other players would just laugh at me. It was so not who I was.

Double sessions at early football practice were unlike any physical torment that I've ever experienced, before or since. A typical practice would have you out in practice pads, helmet, and cleats (with open blisters) at 9 a.m. hitting the seven-man sled, a contraption the coaches would stand on, barking orders, as we slammed into it and drove it across dry grass. We might do tackling and blocking drills, or other exercises where we'd run helmet-to-helmet into one another. It was 1964, and there was no research or discussion yet about concussions. We would break out into smaller groups to learn the fundamentals of our positions, sweating profusely, more hitting—either sleds, pads, or each other—as we got dehydrated, then we'd scrimmage, run plays, and if we were on defense, try to stop the plays. There might be short water breaks throughout the morning. After two hours, we'd trudge into the locker room, shower, and drag ourselves over to lunch. In the afternoon we'd put on wet pads and do it all over again when it was *really* hot—although in later years, they switched the second session to early evenings, when it was cooler. Usually every practice ended, especially the night sessions, with darkness falling, doing 100-yard wind sprints until the entire team was bent over, heaving for air.

The starting fullback for the team was a post grad, a "pg," named Greg, who, as it said later in his yearbook blurb, "made his own holes," meaning he was such a vicious runner he didn't need blockers. Once, when we all lined up for a tackling

drill, I started counting and realized I was going to have to tackle Greg. I started to try to fade back in the line, and this massive pg from Hawaii, Pritch, saw me, grabbed my jersey, and shoved me forward, spitting out, "You chickenshit." From then on, Pritch mocked me relentlessly, especially imitating me when I tried to walk with my neck bulled out like Chris, which I surely deserved. Luckily, I went down to JV, then got demoted to the Little B's—the freshman squad—and finally learned how to block. It didn't come naturally.

One time, sitting on the side of his bed in the dorm, Chris read a rapturous piece of prose he'd written about a snowstorm. He played the guitar and taught me how to tune the bottom three strings down, to barre the frets more easily. He liked practical jokes, and once, lying in the dark as we tried to go to sleep, he described, with convincing sound effects, the ice-cold beer he was drinking—until I got out of bed to turn the light on, saw his big smile, and realized he was making it all up. Chris didn't come back to Blair for my sophomore year. During that second football season, I was sitting at the coach's dining room table when, serving soup, he said to me, "Joe, I heard Chris got killed in a car accident."

I remember blurting out that that was impossible—I'd just gotten a letter from him. Actually, I was in denial. The letter was from a long time before, and part of me just never wanted to accept that Chris was dead. Years later, still in a kind of sepia-photo disbelief, I tried to search his Blair record online, hoping it had all been a mistake, and under his name found only the revealing stat: "1965—".

My sophomore year I played defensive end, a hard position because your main job is to contain and not let anyone get outside you to make a run up the sideline. The line coach used to yell at me to get down low, but I was 6' 3" and couldn't seem to stay low. He compared me to a lighthouse when the short pulling guards would come down the line and knock my legs out from under me. I also started punting. As it turned out, brother Ben, who'd been playing soccer, had to change sports because his doctor said kicking a soccer ball was affecting the small bones in his feet. He was already friendly with the football coach from assisting him at PT, a class that students who didn't play sports had to take.

I was probably jealous of Ben's rapport with the coach—who to me was a little frightening. When Ben came out for the team, he played center. This was a hard position because you had to hike the ball accurately, only to be hit at the same instant by the defensive nose tackle. When I became the JV punter, Ben used to hike to me. I'd get back in punt formation and think, *Hmm, it's Ben—I better back up.* Then he would still hike the ball over my head. I usually managed to run back, recover the ball, and get the kick off, but once I had to just fall on it in the end zone.

Our coach was a short, balding man, a Princeton grad, who had a no-nonsense personality. He was also my freshman algebra teacher. One ear on the side of his