

closely shaved blond head stuck out more than the other, making him look oddly alien. Although he could be charming, his demeanor on the field was explosive and he commanded respect. This was complicated by the fact that he had an extremely sexy wife, who taught math to one section of lucky seniors. Remember, this was a boys' school. You can imagine the endless fantasies we young, sexually-deprived kids shared with each other about the coach's wife.

One year, the team was in East Hall for early practice and I was rooming with a young quarterback, Peter, right next to the fourth-floor apartment where the coach and his wife lived. She had a habit of just walking into guys' rooms without knocking, sometimes catching them in their underwear. Once, sitting around drinking beer, we posed a rhetorical dilemma, asking ourselves (in a wildly unrealistic teen fantasy) if we were screwing the coach's wife when he came home, would we face him, or jump out the window? We laughed the hardest when one guy reminded us that if we jumped out the window, we'd have two broken legs, and the coach would still come downstairs and beat us senseless.

Junior year is when things got interesting. The coach decided to switch the offense to a double-wing formation, and at the end of sophomore year, he gave me a position book that had the box next to "Halfback" checked. I was enthralled. I didn't realize that in a double-wing, the strong-side halfback lined up behind the line of scrimmage and functioned like a tight end, blocking down on running plays and catching short passes over the middle or out in the flat. This was perfect for me. It dovetailed with my wide-receiver fantasy. That summer, my father drove Ben and me up to campus and we practiced endlessly. Ben would hike the ball to my father, who would throw passes to me, which Ben would then try to break up.

During preseason in the team huddle, I used to look at Peter, the quarterback, and say, "Throw to me." And he did. Once, in a preseason scrimmage, I caught a long pass and had nothing but open field in front of me. But I kept looking back, worried that a speedy defensive back was gaining on me. I got the bright idea to slow down so I could straight-arm him. He tackled me, of course. One of the coaches, who had been running excitedly down the field with me, yelled in disbelief, "You slowed down!"

There went the wide-receiver fantasy. With my size, it was inevitable that I would end on the line. By the end of my junior season, I was playing weak-side offensive tackle, meaning the play would come through me when we ran to the left. That season, the coach quit the team for a week and paced in a tower above the field, demanding the players run practice themselves. At the final spring meeting for my senior year, the coach handed me my position book with a wry smile and a little bit of pride on his face and said, "Strong-side tackle."

My senior year, I was the biggest guy on the team, and along with Scotty, our

quarterback, a preternaturally gifted athlete who played three sports, I was elected co-captain. I called defensive alignments that were signaled to me from the sideline, and our defense got the nickname, "The Dirty Dozen." We had one pg on the team who was fast and played linebacker. We called him Mouse because he was so huge. During games, just before the other team would hike the ball, he would poke me on the side where he was going to stunt; I'd block the other way, and Mouse would be in the backfield tackling people behind the line of scrimmage. We were pretty chuffed when no team had scored on us for the first five games.

Finally, in the first half of the sixth game, at home, Admiral Farragut Academy drove down the field and scored on us. The grandstand fell silent. I remember my defensive coach throwing his hat on the turf when I missed a key tackle. This coach was a funny man who taught Spanish and smoked foul black-tobacco cigarettes called Rumbas. He walked by me every day at third period and pointed down to remind me to move my feet. He claimed that with my size, if I kept my feet moving when I hit the player across the line from me, no one in our league could touch me. I remember one day wearing red socks, and with a smile he cracked, "Joe's wearing red socks because his feet are hot!"

Unfortunately, I don't think I ever believed him.

The last game of the season was closing in fast. It would be Homecoming Day, when we played our rival (and my former school), Peddie. For our next game, we played Delbarton, a Catholic school that wore bright green uniforms. That whole week of practice, we dressed up all the sleds and hit dummies with green jerseys. Normally, on game day, the coach would bring the team together, have us take off our helmets and kneel down, and he would quietly say a prayer that ended with something like, "...thank God he has allowed you to play for Blair Academy, and I thank God he has allowed me to be your coach."

At one point, earlier in the season, when he was getting flack from the administration about something, he got angry and altered the prayer, saying "this team" instead of "Blair Academy." So, it was not out of character when, before the Delbarton game, he read us a letter from a supposed "Blair booster" that criticized the team and the coaches. I was sitting on the grass just beneath him as he read the letter to the team. But because I'd been his student, I began to realize that it was his handwriting on the pages. By the time he'd finished the devastating letter, he screamed sarcastically, "I don't care what some 'Blair booster' thinks, I like this team. This team has fought hard to get here, and this team is going to beat Delbarton!"

We roared and went charging out onto the field like we were going to tackle trains! It was a hard-fought game, but we lost 7-6, and worst of all, Scotty broke his wrist.

For the entire week getting ready to face Peddie, without our starting quar-