

Gridiron glory

By [Amy Laura Hall](#) in the [December 14, 2004](#) issue



In *Friday Night Lights*, which features a legendary high school football program in West Texas, Coach Gary Gaines explains to his team the situation: “Gentlemen, the hopes and dreams of an entire town are riding on your shoulders. You may never matter more than you do right now. It’s time.”

Hype? To paraphrase fullback James Miles of Permian High in Odessa, “hype” is something that’s not real. This is all for real. Although some details were changed, the narrative remains close to the book *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream*, by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist H. G. Bissinger.

At the center of the film is Coach Gaines, played with a half-grin and no swagger by Billy Bob Thornton. While often paid more than the high school principal, football coaches are hired and fired depending on the scoreboard. As one sports announcer argues, “If they lead an undefeated team, it’s worth every penny.” The stakes are high, as Gaines makes clear at summer training: “It’s a good day, gentlemen. It’s a good day to think about responsibility. It’s a good day to ask yourself if you’re willing to accept the responsibility you have to protect this school and to protect this town. The expectations couldn’t be any higher . . . This is real, sincere warfare, and we will be perfect.”

Protection from what? Local economics tell part of the story. Odessa was born as an oil town in the 1920s, when the area became second only to Alaska in energy

production. The town's employment rate precipitously follows the oil market. The links between the fragile economy and football are subtle in the film. As four players eat at a burger joint, a long-haired dad hands over his baby girl for a picture with the "next state champions." Having teased them that he and his wife are going to run out just for a bit while the boys mind the baby, he holds up his own state championship ring, all joking aside. "Bring it home. Get you one of these." In the backdrop of this scene is the oil collapse of the mid-'80s, and the likelihood that this roughneck is out of a job, with the family living on patched-together service-sector jobs.

The larger-than-life hope that comes alive on Friday nights in West Texas reflects a powerful myth of reliable masculinity, now fragmented by barbed wire, oil and agribusiness. Standing in for lost dads and the indefinable task of true manhood, Coach Gaines tells his boys, "You shouldn't have any doubt in your mind about what you're supposed to do tonight, or how you're supposed to do it." Would that were so. The goal line clearly marked, the foe designated by jersey color, the game declared won or lost—these form an unambiguous rite of passage not only for the team, but for spectators who watch "their boys" ostensibly emerge as men.

They do not emerge unscathed. The film pulls close to the lives of three players. Lucas Black depicts quarterback Mike Winchell with stoic vulnerability. This fatherless boy faithfully cares for a mentally ill mother, and his only route out of poverty requires abandoning her for a football scholarship. (His scene with recruiters from Kansas Wesleyan is exceptional.)

Garrett Hedlund beautifully plays Don Billingsley, a purposefully carefree running back who endures the abuse of an alcoholic father (Tim McGraw). The father's tragic sense of fleeting glory comes to bear on the son, as he wills the boy's failure: "This is the only thing you're ever gonna have. It's the only fact of life. You have one stink'n year to make some memories." A Greek chorus of sports announcers mercilessly hounds Winchell, Billingsley and Coach Gaines as they tenaciously crawl their way toward the playoffs.

These scars are no small matter, but they matter less than the fate of fullback James Miles (played with dead-on pathos by Derek Luke), who suffers a devastating leg injury early in the season. The team goes to playoffs on a coin toss, but the coin flip of injury leaves Miles without recourse. In retrospect, the most poignant scene of the film comes at the beginning, as Miles runs through his neighborhood toward Ratliff

Stadium with four young African-American boys running and riding bikes behind him, each wearing a copy of his jersey. He is their hero, blazing the path.

The price of putting hope primarily into high school football cuts deep for men like Miles, who cannot pass from fame into what remains of the good-ole-boy matrix. Granted, the racial politics of football is not simple. The lights of Friday night shine on a congregation vastly more integrated than any Sunday service, and Coach Gaines forges brotherhood across otherwise resilient race lines. But the cost of the spectacle falls differentially, leaving some graduates unable to read or write in a racist economy.

This football story closes with the hope that the players will be able to navigate not only a ruthless economy but also the smaller, infinitely more complicated tasks of fidelity, fatherhood and hope that make for true masculinity. In his closing speech to the boys, Coach Gaines reinterprets the town's demand for "perfection," leading his team toward something more important than the state championship: "Being perfect is about being able to look your friends in the eye and know you didn't let them down . . . Can you live in that moment as best you can, with clear eyes, with love and joy in your heart? If you can do that, then you're perfect."