

## Turnover

by

Andrew Miller

*It was one of those days where the wind determined everything. If it were January, it would be fifteen-below outside. Instead, it was the first week of September, and the gusts felt like the first rush of heat that comes out of a hot oven. My old '87 Jeep Cherokee had no air conditioner, but even if it did, it could never compete with the blazing interior.*

*I arrived at Howard Wood Field with my friend, our quarterback Derek Falor. Though he stood 6'6", weighing about 200 lbs., Derek was a gentle giant. He possessed quiet leadership - the best leadership - and earned respect instead of ever demanding it. Along with these intangibles that all great field generals possess, Derek had a canon. In two weeks of practice, he'd turned a program known for a "three yards and a cloud of dust"-offense into a pass happy, Bill Walsh-style attack.*

*As we began walking towards our locker room, pads and combat gear in tow, I played small talk with Derek in a weak attempt to quell my pre-game jitters.*

*"You think we can do this," I asked.*

*"Hell yeah. This is our time," he shot back. "They can't touch us."*

*I wanted to agree, but something in my stomach wouldn't let me.*

*I made my way down the stale, dark hallway to the locker room, dropping my pads in front of my locker. Four high schools shared the same locker rooms at Howard Wood Field throughout the season for decades. Sometimes, lockers would still be entrenched with soggy athletic tape and puddles of sweat. The lockers were where the blood, sweat, and tears were collected, game after game.*

*My stomach twisted and my blood rushed to my head, and I bolted towards the murky, dank bathrooms, falling to my knees in front of a toilet. I must have dry-heaved for a good ten minutes. It wasn't food poisoning or the flue, but nerves, though I didn't know what was causing them. I knew all of the plays by heart, and I knew I was facing off against a weak defensive end that looked more like a feeble punter. I was in shape - probably the best shape of my life - but for some reason, I felt like I was going toe-to-toe with Christ and the twelve disciples.*

*After a quick recovery from my gastric attack, I listened to Linkin Park's "Hybrid Theory" while putting on my pads. Tonight, we would sport our new road jerseys, fashioned after the Miami Hurricane's jerseys, but in the glorious colors of cardinal and gold. I'd always operated on the "look good, feel good, play good"-mantra over the years, making it my own. As a ritual for each game, I put on a pair of football camp shorts I'd gotten in fourth grade. When I first got them, they sagged well beyond my knees. Now, they were like an overly-enthusiastic pair of boxers. But they calmed me down.*

*I picked up a game guide, reading down the list of names from both teams, remembering the names of some kids I used to play with in Pee Wee Football. I found my name: #69 Andrew Miller...Senior...6'2"...219 lbs...an asterisk noting I was a letter-winner the previous year. I was proud of myself for being on that list. I always thought that maybe I would make a great block some game, and maybe a young kid who saw it would pick up a game guide, and look for my number. He would find "Andrew Miller", and remember that name until he, too, was a lineman at Roosevelt High School, himself. Maybe.*

*The O'Gorman side of the roster was considerably shorter. They were fewer in numbers, smaller as players, but more seasoned in experience. While they were starting the talented, but unproven Tommy Hill at a quarterback and operating the same offense we had never been able*

*to stop, their defense, lead by senior middle linebacker Will Kappenman, was our biggest concern. Kappenman, a two-time letter-winner already, played ornery football. He was the kind of player you loved to have on your team, but hated if he wasn't wearing the same colors as you.*

I always lived within a mile of Roosevelt High School, so I became a fan of RHS athletics by default, because for me, RHS was *the* home team. I remember standing outside my elementary school before the morning bell, playing touch football in the dewy grass as cars and trucks decked out in cardinal and gold window-paint and streamers raced by, various numbers and phrases like “Sheldon Rules!” emblazoned from bumper to bumper. I must have been seven, not even old enough to spell “pride”, but I had a strong sense of it. Football Friday’s meant something.

Sometimes, the team was good and sometimes, the team was dismal, but overall, the RHS football program had developed a reputation of disappointments, close-calls, and perennial mediocrity. In the heart of Rough Rider Country, “fall” and “fail” were seemingly synonymous, as we were always one step short, always one freak play away. Losing was nothing new some years, but other years, we found new ways to lose.

Whenever football camp forms arrived, I would have the forms filled out and filed in minutes. I remember filling out the first form: “Name: Andrew Miller...Age: 10...Height: 5'1"....Weight: 150 lbs....Position: Offensive Line.” There were so many reasons to be excited about football camp, even though I was a pudgy, short kid with no athletic ability.

Where camp came around, I showed up with a vendetta. I led the pack whenever we had to start off that camp with a lap around the field, and I passed on all water breaks because I knew water was for wimps. After camp, I would go to my friend Andy’s house. His father was the special teams coach for RHS, and unfailingly, I would have to know how he thought I’d

performed: “Good, Andrew. You really worked hard.”

Right around seventh and eighth grade, football became something I hated. I loved watching the sport, but playing it wasn't what I expected it to be. Plus, I wasn't the athlete I wanted to be. Even so, I stuck it out. I always wanted to skip practice. Because I knew I wouldn't get to play much, I didn't look forward to games. I hated pre-game warm-ups because I thought they were more like pre-game wear-outs. I hated ladders and conditioning. And my coach was a veteran of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. This guy would have made Bear Bryant wet his bed. I had a premonition that someday, somebody was going to die. Although it never happened, my friend Tyler Jepperson once broke his arm in two places. I almost quit on the strength of that injury.

As if Pee Wee Football wasn't enough of a hassle, I decided to play 8<sup>th</sup> grade school football, also. This meant that I would have one practice from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and another from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. During the hours between practices, I would bike home to grab a snack and refill my Thermos with water, and then I would bike up to the other practice twenty minutes early to run routes with my friends, all of whom played running back or wide receiver. I always felt that I would have made a good tight end.

In the summer prior to my freshmen year, I started taking golf more seriously. Rather than go to Roosevelt to lift weights like most of the other incoming freshmen, I had my mind made up that I would play high school golf and I would be great. I played 36-holes a day, and my skin tone proved it: I was dark on all parts exposed to the sun, but my feet were a deadly shade of white, appearing as if they hadn't proper blood circulation in years.

Because both sports took place during the same season, I was forced to make a choice between playing either golf or football. Going with how I felt at the time, I opted to played golf, though deep down inside, I knew I would miss playing football. After all, I was just taking the

easy way out. High school football practices scared the crap out of me. I didn't want to be puking between three-a-day practices. I didn't want to get damaged by the bigger upperclassmen. There was no way I was willing to suffer through the "physical adjustments" and make the transition into high school football. I was perfectly fine with keeping each and every one of my bones intact.

Golf tryouts didn't go as well as I planned. I was shanking my drives further right than the Reagan-administration, and I couldn't bury a three-footer if I was putting into the North Atlantic. I landed in the seventh spot on the freshmen team, hardly making me the "go-to-guy" on the squad. With my poor play and my lowly position on the team, it took me only a month to realize I was wasting my time with golf. I wanted to play football. I was going to be a Rough Rider for Roosevelt High School.

*We finished our pre-game warm-ups, and gathered as a team on the 50-yard line. Everyone was already drenched in sweat, some of us were bleeding. You could see the fiery eyes of intensity in each and every player, starting quarterback to third-string long-snapper.*

*"Make it loud, Beau," I said. Beau Hudelson was our nimble 5'5" running back and team captain. Beau was the best running back I had every blocked for, and what he lacked in size he made up for in heart, making him the best leader on our team.*

*He led us in "The Rider Code":*

*"Dear Lord, the battles we got through life, we ask for chance to spare, a chance to do our best, and a chance to do it here. If we should win, let it be by the code, faith and our head held high. If we should lose, let us stand by the road and cheer as the winners go by. Day by day, we get better and better! A team that can't be beat! The O'Gorman Knights we will defeat!"*

*We took the opening kickoff deep on our side, starting at about the 20-yard line. I took a*

*moment to look at each side of Howard Wood Field, as some 10,000 fans filled the stands just to us (or them) play.*

*“I Right, 20 Trap on 1, on 1. Ready...(break!),” Derek said, juggling each word with the same nervous energy each one of us felt. We jogged to the line, facing a much smaller, weaker defense. I planted three fingers of my right hand into the ground, as I had done a million times before, leaving my left arm cocked at my waist, locked and loaded.*

*“Red 72...red 72...down...set...hut!” Derek yelled. I blocked down hard on an unsuspecting tackle, throwing all my weight behind my punch, laying him out with ease. We tore a hole in their defensive line as Beau reeled off a 7-yard run up the gut, over their stud middle linebacker.*

*Derek found Andy Kokenge and Nate Ovenden, our star receivers, on the next handful of plays, each pass a seven-yard out, as Derek threw bullets through the wind on target each time. They couldn't stop our passing game, and our running game was also proving effective. Things were ticking.*

*We reached the 25-yard line, and we were ready for Derek to throw one of his signature fade routes for 6. We lined up in I-formation, playing it safe with the ground game behind the strength of our offensive line, which was causing a huge surge on every down. On a 2<sup>nd</sup>-and-short, we lined up in another I-formation. Our line blew a gaping hole through the left side, but the ball squirted from Beau's grasp and O'Gorman scurried to cover it up. After sustaining momentum the whole drive, we were quickly halted by our own mistake. This would be our only turnover. Instead, a pattern was taking shape.*

*It's been said that you notice the most progress within the first three months of weightlifting, and I was living proof. Puberty had made me a stretched out, gangly freshmen I*

was 5'11" and 175 lbs., attempting to become a linemen. After a few months of weightlifting, I was 6'0" and 200 lbs. My bench press had shot up from 125 lbs. to 210 lbs. I was gaining back all of the pounds I'd walked off 7 a.m. tee times and 5 p.m. lunches. I was becoming a football player.

Sophomore year was a crash course in high school football. Even though we'd taken a few bumps, we were 5-0. Most of our key players were seeing time on the varsity squad and our starting quarterback Derek Falor had broke his fibula and tibia, leaving our backup Andy Rose at the helm. He grew up as a ball boy for Roosevelt, so it was like coming full circle when he fell into the starting role.

After one sophomore game, our offensive coordinator summoned me to the coach's office. The coaches continued to trade barbs over the varsity team and its shortcomings. Temporarily lost in their arguments, Coach Clayberg tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a stack of varsity attire - the silky, gold pants, the knee-high cardinal game socks. A junior that played line had quit, and subsequently, I was 69. I could really give a damn if people thought I chose that number, because to me, it was the best number in the world. It was *my* number.

"Obviously, you're on the team," Coach Clayberg said. He always spoke with a bit of cynicism, but his message meant more than his words to me at that point. As a sophomore, as a rookie to the RHS football program, I was going to be on the varsity team.

Our sophomore team finished out 8-1, losing the final game to cross-town rival Washington, 14-7 in overtime. Our varsity team was smoked 54-7 in the first round of the playoffs. I started for the sophomore team the whole year, but even though I suited up for the varsity team every game, I didn't see one play on the varsity team. However, it whetted my appetite no less.

Junior year went by a little too fast, and I didn't see much playing time. I was on special teams and played some mop-up minutes when we found ourselves on the short side of the stick. I was able to make two sacks in the five defensive plays I was in for, and performed well at offensive tackle in the late seconds of a few games. I was preparing myself for senior year. Two starting line positions would free up after my junior year, and I would have my chance. Above that, I circled one date on the calendar: President's Bowl, September 6<sup>th</sup>, versus O'Gorman.

The rivalry between Roosevelt and O'Gorman made Israel and Palestine look like happy neighbors. In RHS's twelve years of existence, not once did we beat O'Gorman. 0-15. We had lost to them in so many gut-wrenching ways, from giving up a 21-0 lead with seven minutes left in the 2000 President's Bowl to the more traditional lopsided 31-7 defeat in 1999. While most high school programs were motivated by playing for a state title, RHS teams always had an ulterior motive or an extra goal: beating O'Gorman and ending the streak. "We can do it this year. They're so weak." I must have said that every day for nine months.

Practices were easier my senior year for a few reasons: I was stronger than most of the kids I had to square up against in practice, I knew the playbook by heart and had nothing left to learn, and the school board backed up the football schedule to make closer to the start of school, thus leaving us with one, instead of two, weeks of two-a-day practices. I was fresh for the second week of practice, and worked my way into starting left tackle on the offensive line. I was also the long-snapper for the punting and field goal teams, as well as on the kickoff and kick return teams. I was involved and getting a ton of playing time. In our first game, I played all four quarters, and managed five tackles on special teams. Needless to say, I had insured myself another start next week in what would be the biggest, most memorable game of my life.

*Halftime marked a mix of frustration and confidence, all at once. We knew we were playing*

*better, knew we were the better team, but we simply kept making the same mistakes. Coach DeBoer gave one of his trademark speeches about execution and the importance of getting the job done. We got the point before he finished his second sentence, so needless to say that five-minute ramble was unnecessary.*

*We started the second half down 6-0, knowing it was nothing our high-octane offense couldn't overcome, as long as we quit giving up the ball. We'd blown enough opportunities already. Now it was time to play like we knew we could.*

*Our defense made a big stop on third-and-short, as we took the ball somewhere around the 30-yard-line. We found a play that worked and stuck with it. We ran I-Right, Iso Left for what seemed like a dozen times in a row, knocking off three, four, five yards. For an offensive line that loved bumps and bruises like ours, battles won in the trenches, it was the ideal drive. The type that football purists' fancy. It wasn't exciting to watch, but it was effective, and our line was dominating their overmatched defensive line more each play.*

*When we came within yards of the goal line, we ran Trips Right, 94. Nate ran an out pattern two yards into the end zone, turned, and reached for the touchdown catch. We took the lead, 7-6. We had the win packaged, sealed, and sent. All we had to do was sit on the ball, burn some clock, and call it a win. Granted, the season wasn't hanging in the balance, but this would be the biggest win in Roosevelt football history, bar none.*

*With just four minutes to play, Derek took a bad snap. The moment had all the makings of tragedy, like the few seconds of silence before a heinous car accident or the sound a body makes before falling from great heights. The ball escaped from Derek's grasp, just out of his reach as he dove to grab it. O'Gorman's sophomore defensive end, Josh Mahoney scrambled towards the ball, his feet already speeding towards the end zone before he had grabbed the ball. With little*

*deference, he snatched the ball on a bounce, rumbling 79-yards to the end zone like a robber evading bank security after a heist. O’Gorman reclaimed their lead, making the score 13-7.*

*We thought everything would be fine in a panicked confidence. “It’s okay...we’re okay.” We dominated the two-minute drill in practice and in our first game. With our aerial assault, any play could be a big play.*

*After receiving the kickoff at around the 35-yard-line, we went to work. A few quick seven-yard routes helped us gain some confidence, as only half the field stood between us and our destiny. In a quick turn events - quicker than the shortest phrase could ever describe - Derek under-threw a post pater to Andy, as an O’Gorman defensive back robbed us of our fate, intercepting the pass. O’Gorman ran out the clock, letting our dreams expire.*

*No one seemed shocked that we had blown it, but more disappointed that we were just another victim to the apparent curse. Overall, we had dominated the game at every facet, save for turnovers, and we knew we were the better team. My friends, guys I’d grown up with and used to play two-hand touch at recess with and seen dozens of RHS football games with, were just as wrecked as I was by the defeat. Most of us were reduced to tears. Next week didn’t matter. That night didn’t matter. All that we had done to become the first team to beat O’Gorman...it didn’t matter.*

I made the trip to Sioux Falls this past fall for the 25<sup>th</sup> annual Bob Burns Dakota Bowl, a massive fund-raiser for O’Gorman that attracted about 12,000 people. I met some of the guys from my graduating class at the top of the stands at Howard Wood Field. One the field, the varsity team had just started the same pre-game warm-up routine we had gone through before each game. We sat around, pointing at the many differences from last year’s team. Howard Wood Field’s notoriously worn-and-torn grass was replaced with a new surface of FieldTurf.

The team sported new pants that better matched the same jerseys we had worn. But otherwise, everything was the same, save for the fact that we weren't playing. We did know everyone that was playing, though. We cheered for them, even during warm-ups. We watched as RHS won 14-7, beating the O'Gorman Knights for the first time in school history.

I grew up within a mile of Roosevelt High School, and I know whether or not that gave me the right to care as much as I did or as I still do, but I do know this: So many times in our lives, we're told to declassify, demote so many of the things that we hold so important in our lives. There's something sacred, no matter how childish, in the ability to make little things mean so much. It's the ability to be sentimental about the smallest things that makes this life worthwhile. We never remember what we've lost or what we've won, but rather, how much those wins and losses meant to us. We remember how hard we tried to make things work, and how we felt when they did or didn't.

That game, no matter how much anyone can belittle it, was a great moment in my life. No matter how many years pass or how many times new players face off in the rivalry, part of me always care who wins, and that's beautiful. As any real person knows, true delight is hard to come by. And while I can replay that game over and over in my head - and trust me, I do - I take pleasure in knowing that in that one little game, in trying to win that game, trying to be the first, I'm left with one of the best stories in my life, and vivid memories that will always last.