

LEISURE & ARTS

**Linebacker's Last Tackle?**

By **Bryan Gruley**

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Herndon, Va. -- A moon like the face of a clock gazes between the goalposts at one end of the field, and a chill breeze slices through the bleachers where I sit, bundled. It's going to get colder, but I'm determined to savor this evening, because my son is playing football, and this might be the last time I'm privileged to watch.

**Joel** is a starting linebacker for Herndon High School's varsity squad. At 5-11 and 170 pounds, he's small for his position, and he could stand to be a step or two quicker. But he's smart and fearless and he dearly loves the game of football.

Or at least he once did. He's just a junior, so he could play another season for the Hornets, but he's been talking seriously as if he won't. This breaks my heart, because I've been watching **Joel** play for 10 years, and I hate to see this good thing come to an end. From way up in the stands, though, I feel as likely to change his mind as I am to race onto the field and help him make a tackle.

**Joel** and I started playing football in the front yard when he was four or five years old. I played quarterback and taught pass patterns -- square-out, post, buttonhook, flag -- that **Joel** used against neighborhood defenders, weaving between the weeping cherry tree, the forsythia bush and cars parked in the driveway. He joined a little-league team when he was seven. During his first scrimmage, he lowered a shoulder into an opponent and knocked him flat. Angry, the kid grabbed **Joel's** facemask and **Joel**, looking surprised and a little miffed himself, whacked the kid over the helmet with a forearm. I chuckled to think that, for the first time in his short life, my son was on his own.

The next season **Joel** started carrying the ball, and in his first game sprinted for touchdowns of 65 and 39 yards. Though a quiet, easy-going boy off the field, **Joel** was a ferocious player who loved to hit and wasn't afraid of being hit. After games he would collapse onto his bed, his arms and torso splotched with bruises and scrapes. He didn't complain, though; he was having too much fun.

In seven years of little league, he collected two championships and countless memories. One afternoon he returned interceptions on back-to-back plays for touchdowns. In one championship game, he logged more than a dozen pounding carries and a touchdown on a drive that sealed his team's win. In another title game, played in a cold drizzle on a field slick with mud, **Joel** fought back tears after his team fell five yards short of tying the game as the clock ran out. I didn't know what to tell him, except that it was one of the best football games I'd ever seen.

By the time he tried out for the high-school varsity last year, **Joel** was no longer among the fastest or strongest of his peers. He made the team as a linebacker and, although he didn't play much, he earned his letter. His coaches spoke glowingly of his future, and of the way he played with such spirit and abandon.

This fall, he started every game but one and played on the kickoff, punt and extra-point squads. I had always loved watching him, but high-school ball was the best. I liked the thrum of the marching band tom-toms, the smell of hot dogs and cocoa wafting through the bleachers, the sun glinting off the Hornets' black helmets, the announcer's voice crackling over the public-address system: "Tackle by **Joel** Gruley."

Of course the football was better because the players were bigger and faster. But I only cared about one of them. As the ball moved up and down the field, I'd keep changing seats to get a clearer view of **Joel**, squinting into piles of tacklers for a glimpse of his No. 6. Sometimes I'd ignore the game entirely to watch him on the sideline, huddled with his fellow linebackers, helmets off, steam rising from their close-cropped heads in the evening coolness.

Late one night before each game, **Joel** and I would stand in the kitchen and talk about how he and his teammates would try to stop their opponent's offense. As someone who has long enjoyed football but never played at **Joel's** level, I was fascinated to hear the detail of his preparation, down to which shoulder he would use to hit a certain blocker on a particular play. I was thrilled to be so intimately involved in a vital part of my son's life.

But even as **Joel** shared his knowledge of the game, he told me in other conversations that he was losing his love for it. Even before the season began, he had started counting the days until it would end. He had come to dread the daily regimen of school, practice, homework and sleep. On Friday nights, he was still the first man on the field for kickoffs, he still jumped up and down after a big play, he still bragged about "sticking" opponents and laughed about getting "pancaked" himself. But on Saturdays he would talk of being tired of football. "I just can't get fired up," he would say. "I don't know why. It's just no fun anymore."

I listened and empathized, all the while conjuring up reasons for his disenchantment: His team was losing. His favorite coach had left for another school. He was getting hammered by blockers who outweighed him by 100 pounds. It didn't add up, though; **Joel** liked his coaches, his lamenting had begun before the losing, and on the field he usually gave as good as he got. Maybe it's only an adolescent mood, I thought. Or maybe **Joel**, at 17, was just growing up. When he says he probably won't play next year, he sounds vaguely apologetic; I'm gratified to know that this matters to him. Only he can say whether he's really finished. From the bleachers on this chill autumn night, I root for my son, though not so much to squash a tailback as to rediscover the joy of playing. Then I linger after the game has ended, watching from afar as he doffs his helmet and trots off the field, laughing and talking with his teammates, moving away from me in the shadows of the stadium lights.

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Mr. Gruley is a reporter and editor in the Journal's Washington bureau.

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