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Excerpt

Balls: Memoir of a High School Football Mom

By Dedria H. Barker

Is Essential

My husband had snuck in after the football banquet started and, during the program, stayed back by the door. And there he stood now, at the end of the evening, chatting and laughing. The first time I waved to him he was pointing to the gold words stitched on one of the coaches' jacket. Glittering letters said, *Olympics 2000*.

I wanted Michael to go with me to talk to the head coach. I waved again, but a man stepped into my line of vision. What to do? I couldn't go back there and take my husband by the hand like he was a boy. He'd never come along then. His ire about David not playing baseball persisted even now, after three seasons of high school football.

Up at the front of the room, Coach Smith sat alone on the dais, his eyes downcast, staring into the gift bag his players had presented him for his thirty-ninth year of coaching high school football. He was available, but for how long, there was no telling.

It would be no big deal if Michael left me mindlessly chatting while he talked to the head coach. He was Dad; but I was Mom. I felt I needed to say, let's go talk to Coach Smith! Let's go

talk to the head coach about our son, the football player. There Coach is, still seated on the dais, available.

Energy in the room revved for a finale as assistant coaches worked their way through the crowd, greeting parents, all the while moving to the exit. They were trying to go home after this long, trying day. I went the other way, intent on the head coach. Some people say this is a father's job, but damn it, I can't help it, I'm a mom.

On my way to the front of the room, I smiled at other parents, waving and calling "hey, how ya' doin'?" but moving, always moving. For all they knew, I too was sugar-high from the "banquet" entrée of cake and candy. I pushed aside empty chairs. Finally, I stood in front of the head table, and Coach Smith.

My hand was sweaty. I held out it anyway, and leveled my gaze. I opened my mouth, and said, "Coach."

He looked up from the gift bag, his glacier-blue eyes tired, melting in despair. Some grief-stricken people don't want to talk, they want to be left alone, but this was his team's night, we were all here on a night that was running hot and cold, noisy, and quiet, from celebrating to mourning, solid to liquid, now disappearing in the puff of life's unavoidable debt.

In my life, I had made many sympathy calls. They were never easy, but could be managed because the words never changed.

"I'm so sorry about Dr. Jacobs." I shook my head from side to side. "Such a shame."

"Thank you," Coach said, his eyes glassy. "He was a good man, a great friend."

Sympathy is an awkward gift to receive. His words dropped into silence.

We ran like mice in a maze of emotion: the team's great season, the terrible sudden-death ending of our play-off hopes, and early that day the team doctor's fatal heart attack.

It was unbelievable, but I couldn't continue in that direction. Nothing was going to make the Dr. Jacobs come back to life.

I waited. Finally, I said, "how do you like your gift?"

Every season, every parent pitched in five bucks for our sons to buy gifts for the coaches. I didn't know what my five bucks helped buy this year – cap, shirt, sweatshirt, gift certificates when ideas ran out. Coach appreciated the gesture, but it didn't matter what was in the bag. He had 39 seasons worth of team gifts. He shrugged. It was a small, heavy gesture a bull makes under a weighted yoke. Why was I still standing there?

I was trying to ask for help for my son. This was the last night of my son's third season of high school football. Next year he would be a senior and every game of that season would be an application for a scholarship. There was nothing to do but ask for help to pay for college. I was at the starting line in the race for that money. Coach was right here. I had to say something. I glanced over my shoulder, willing my husband to come help me, but now I couldn't see him. I took a deep breath, and focused on Smith.

"Coach. I think David can win a scholarship to college, a football scholarship."

I wanted to ask if he thought so too, but there was no room for a no answer. We had to try for that athletic scholarship.

"Can you help us?" I finished. I bit the inside of my cheek.

He looked again into the bag.

The woman in me was so embarrassed. I was being selfish. Women let the injured be, try to help them lick their wounds. Men go on, acknowledging the circumstance, but never forgetting their own cause. They keep going forward. I stood there, straddling a line between mom and dad, woman and man. An eon passed before Coach finally looked up again, and fixed me with his icy-hurt eyes.

“I’m not like those coaches in Texas. All they do is coach football full-time,” he said, not unkindly. “I teach, so I can’t do as much for you.”

He spent his days with girl and boy students, and men and women teachers, administrators and counselors. He spent his evenings with other men on the football field practicing boys to play football, checking football equipment, talking about football, strategizing football, and devising football plays for the march to victories.

He folded down the top of the gift bag. “Call me.”

He stood up, rising to better than six feet tall, at least a half foot over my head.

“Call me at school,” he said. “Make an appointment to come in. Not this week, but after.”

And he walked away, the gift bag trailing from his lagging hand.

I was left facing an empty dais, a woman standing my ground as the mother of a football player. A mom who would not be denied.

Explanation of my project

My project, *Balls: Memoir of a High School Football Mom*, shows the experience of millions of American women with their teen-age sons. The narrative is set in one of the last male bastions in America, the game of tackle football.

The work started as a series of e-mail messages to my family as I bragged about my youngest son, who elected to play football during his high school years. I was a proud mom, and a mite anxious about his growing-up. He was a smart underachiever, and for

the African American mother of a quiet, heavily muscled African American boy, the United States can be a horror. And because his growing into a man meant a major part of my life, being a mother, was passing away.

Balls is my attempt to celebrate the beauty of ordinary existence, a la Andy Warhol. It removes the blinders to the art of normal life by positioning a mirror to reflect on women who play an unacknowledged role in one of the last strictly male bastions of American life, the game of football.

Conceptually, *Balls* examines gender issues and asks, at base, in a society that is becoming increasingly gender neutral, what is it that makes a man, or woman?

This is an important question for African-American women in particular, who have been forced by the legacy of slavery all Americans live with. I feel this especially as an African American woman, who before she was wife was a mother forced to adopt traditional male behaviors to insure the survival of her child.