

The Voice

Jeff Mikels

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Chapter 1 :: Has Beens

“I’m telling you,” Edwin said, as if to someone, though no one was paying attention to him. “That boy has the fastest pair of legs and the best set of hands I’ve ever seen! If only we could get someone to throw the ball to him, we’d have a championship season.” Sometimes you just couldn’t get Edwin Bean to shut up, and at the end of Peter Millikan’s Junior year, Edwin took it upon himself to speak up for Peter’s potential. No one else really cared. At least not at the bar of *Millie’s Pub* on a steamy August afternoon.

Ed Bean’s voice was sharp and whiny. It was an old man’s voice weathered by years of yelling at teenagers, and sharing too much information, and it had the quality you would expect to hear if you took a chalkboard and smacked it with the bottom of a soft tennis shoe. There’s a resonance there, but riding above the lower frequencies, there’s this other scratchy, grating sound. You can’t tell it’s there really until you have heard it four or five or six or seven times, but once you have heard it, you can’t ever not hear it again. People always complain about the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard, and Ed’s voice could irritate you in just the same way. Perhaps that’s why people shut him out as much as they did.

He was a smart man, according to some ancient High School transcripts, but still, he rarely proved it. He was supremely confident about the right way to eat, and the right way to exercise, but he was at least 150 pounds overweight (by all estimates), and his personal hygiene left much to be desired. He was clearly knowledgeable of how to run a business at least by the advice he constantly doled out, but none of his endeavors ever lasted more than 18 months before fizzling out or flaming out in the blazing glory of bankruptcy. And on top of all that, he knew more about football and football strategy than anyone in town, or so he’d have you believe, but his track record as a coach was truly abysmal. Put it all together, and it was as if Ed Bean wanted influence over others

but had absolutely no ability to influence his own in any positive way.

He wasn't alone in that attitude either. The town of Fairfield had a number of elderly people who formerly had been mayor, chief of police, fire chief, school superintendent, principal, or like Edwin, high school football coach—people who *used to be* important, people who *used to be* influential. There's nothing unusual about all that. Towns always have people who used to be something, but in Fairfield, you just had the sense that there were more of them. Perhaps it was because in most cases these has beens believed they never lost their influence when they lost their jobs. Perhaps it was because in Fairfield, a town of only 1783 residents (according to the last census), was just small enough that these has beens could still have a rather loud voice. Or perhaps it was because in Fairfield, the people had a real skepticism toward leadership, a real critical spirit. Turnover in every area of leadership was high, and that meant there were a lot of "former" everythings.

Edwin was a has been. And he was loud.

Edwin, led the Fairfield High Jaguars to 5 consecutive 1-11 seasons back in the mid 80s. The first year, he blamed the losing season on the fact that his system was different from the previous coach and the kids wouldn't give him the respect he deserved. He would go on and on about how the next year would give him a fresh crop of students. He would tell the story again and again about how the new freshmen would put the pressure on the upperclassmen so that the juniors and seniors on the squad would have to shape up under the stress of new competition.

The second year, he blamed his losing season on the fact that the freshmen weren't naturally gifted and were certainly not willing to put in the effort to actually compete with the upperclassmen. At the end of the year, he reported to the local newspaper, "We're still trying to deal with the bad attitudes of the past, but all of that is behind us now. I see fire in the eyes of the underclassmen now. They hate to lose, and next year, we won't!"

The third year, he had been sick for the opening game, and

they won, under the guidance of the assistant coach. However, according to coach Bean, they won that game as a result of some “unorthodox” play calling that “didn’t fit with the overall scheme of the program.” He fired his assistant and went on to lose every remaining game that year. At the end of the season, he said, “When you lose your assistant coach right at the beginning of the season, it puts you behind an eight ball emotionally and strategically. We couldn’t recover. Next year, though, next year is our year.”

The fourth year, somehow the school just didn’t have any talent for the game.

The fifth year, he was “tired.”

After another terrible season, the school board called a special meeting with Coach Bean and informed him that they believed it was time to go in a new direction with the football team. They had been interviewing some other coaches, and had been considering other changes that could be made. That woke him up, and upon hearing that, Coach Bean stood up in anger and asserted that he would “be damned” if he ever allowed some school board to suggest changes to the program or to interview potential assistants for him without his approval or consent, and that he would hear no more of it. He quit vociferously, and though he breathed a sigh of relief once he got back to his car, he has for decades now never admitted to his own failure and regularly offered his criticism of the school’s football program to anyone who would listen. Or even to those who wouldn’t.

“We were so close! Five years of instilling my system were tilling the soil. We were almost there! If it hadn’t been for those underhanded board members, we’d have gone to state the very next year. I know it!”

He was still convinced that his way was better and that if he had just had the nerve to last a few more seasons, he would have been able to pull it all together for something amazing.

But that’s not the way it went. Coach Mitch Franzen came the next season, a young coach right out of college, and has been with the school ever since. For 20 years, he has never had a losing season,

has maintained great rapport with the kids, parents, school board, and town, but in 20 years he has never taken the team to the state championships, and Edwin hates him.

So when Edwin criticized the football team in Millie's Pub that Friday afternoon, no one really paid attention to him. He was just the rambling old man who used to be the football coach and couldn't let it go. Plus, it was honestly difficult to keep listening to the same chalkboard scratching over and over again. You really couldn't blame Millie's Pub for ignoring him like they did.

Nevertheless, as president of the Fairfield Football Booster Club and the local authority on high school football strategy, Edwin believed he had the right and the duty to point out faults in Franzen's coaching methods.

"I said, 'Peter Millikan is the fastest sonofagun I have ever seen and if we could just get someone to throw to him, we might have a team!'"

"Shut up!" Frank yelled from across the room. "No one is paying attention to you anyway. Brett Franzen did just fine as the QB last year and he'll be even better this year!"

Of course, Brett Franzen was Coach Franzen's oldest son, and though he was the best QB the Jaguars had had in 5 years, that wasn't saying much. He could throw a tight spiral for about 10 yards or 15 if the wind were behind him, and he had a good bark for the line of scrimmage, but other than that, it was the running game that kept Fairfield's hopes alive.

In all his complaining, sometimes Edwin Bean was right, and today was one of those times. Peter was fast, the fastest boy in the county, and he had great hands, but Brett, the coach's son, couldn't get the ball to him.

Peter Millikan was a has been in his own right. When he started playing football at 10 years old, he was a superstar right from the get-go. Everyone saw his potential immediately. He was the top

running back in the league every season. He was the top receiver in the league every season. He was the top linebacker in the league every season. He set 5 different major records for pee-wee football in total yardage, total touchdowns, sacks, tackles, and kick returns.

It was like that all the way until he reached high school. By the time he reached high school, he had even more speed, but he had not gained any more bulk. Five eleven and a half, but only 150 pounds, he was slight for a football player and in constant danger of being snapped like a twig by the juniors and seniors on every team in the league. For his freshman year, he sat on the bench constantly. For his sophomore year, he saw action at wide out and corner and had some success whenever Chris Aames was at QB at could throw him a long pass.

However, Chris had a hard time handling the pocket, and he was a good runner too, so he'd usually start running himself before Peter would break past his man into the secondary. By the time Peter was in the clear, Chris had already been brought down for a six yard gain, and Peter would have to turn and run back to the line. It happened like that over and over and over.

When Chris graduated, Coach Franzen gave the ball to his son Brett, a sophomore who was capable as a QB. Capable, but not great. He struggled to find an open man down the field but struggled even more to get the ball to him. It wasn't only a problem of arm strength. He had a hard time reading a defense and making the crucial decisions about when and where to throw the ball. Brett wasn't the brightest tool in the shed, unless by brightest tool you mean the one that never does any real work.

Peter's Junior year was one more year of running the post, coming back to the line, running the slant, coming back to the line, running a hook, coming back to the line, running an out, coming back to the line. He ran pattern after pattern with little hope of ever seeing the ball.

It was a whole season of disappointment for a player everyone thought would be a superstar when he was 10.

And now, six weeks before his first game as a senior, standing

on the sidelines during defensive drills, Peter was thinking about his chances for the upcoming season. It was his senior year and he was thinking of anything he could do to build some stats, gain the attention of college scouts and find himself a scholarship. He knew that there was no way he could be a running back. He was too thin. He also knew that he wouldn't have any success as a wide out again. Franzen just couldn't get the ball to him. He couldn't be a slot receiver. The 10 yard gain across the middle would be a death sentence for someone his size. That's where the defense hits the hardest. As far as he could tell, it was going to be a sad Senior year. Next Monday, conditioning would start and then Freshman Trials the week after that with a whole crop of cocky, talentless, immature losers flooding the field thinking they were God's gift to football. They would be nothing-yets. He was already a has-been. He was getting depressed.