

COURAGE

What is football?

To those of us in this room, it is part of the weave of our families' fabric.

For most, football is virtually a video game – brightly colored objects on a TV screen that move against each with obvious winners and losers.

But for those who play this game, football demands that they completely launch all of who they are, physically and emotionally, at those who return the favor. It is the only sport that allows for 100% full body contact at the highest level of speed and strength the human body can attain.

Clearly, football is just a sport. But why does it still captivate people like me – a 52-year-old architect who played 35 years ago? Why do we ancient men who played so long ago still have almost daily flashbacks of its fury and fire burned into our memory and heart? I think it has to do with courage -the personal courage of giving up your body, and the common courage of a team to sacrifice for each other.

Let's be real. All sports call for courage and sacrifice. The vast majority of those who see football from the outside see tribal violence, brutal collisions of angry men trying to defeat and humiliate the people in front of them. But unlike in any other sport, in football, on almost every play the vast majority of players on the field catapult themselves against opponents so that someone else can have the glory of making the play.

An offensive lineman does nothing but sacrifice his body for those who are behind him. On every play most defensive players completely sacrifice themselves so some one else can make the tackle. Even the dainty quarterback waits, and waits, and waits knowing that he will receive an enormous hit to allow the wide receiver to get open.

Despite its obvious brutality, football is the most self-sacrificial game that is played.

Self-sacrifice is something that is exquisitely rare in our me-first society, and self-sacrifice has one common denominator – courage.

If Faith is the unmerited belief in positive outcomes, if Love is the irrational devotion to something beyond your self, then Courage is unrealistic confidence despite the real threat of failure.

The 2007 football season of Hand High School was, to me, a season of courage. The young men in this room, especially the seniors, all had the common denominator of courage.

Despite what you may have heard, these young men are not stupid. They knew before the season started that they did not have the physical talent of many of the teams they would be playing. They knew that the year before the team had disappointed themselves, their coach, and their devoted fans. They understood that there were many reasons to simply “do their best” and accept a season of dedicated improvement, but there was no reason to expect excellence.

But they had the courage to believe that more was possible. It was not a courage born of confidence, rather it was a courage born of years of living the truth that if they focused and sacrificed, that the outcome would be a good one.

And it was. Winning 11 games in a row happens to a tiny minority of high school football players. When you give as much as these young men have given, and when you do not accept the premise that just “doing your best” should make you happy whether you win or lose, it’s easy to understand the grinding ache in their guts after a last quarter loss in a championship game.

But that is not what they will finally take away from this season. When the team I captained consistently lost, when the Branford team I helped coach lost a last game that could have redeemed a disappointing season two days before my wedding, when that team later went to another Class MM Championship game -and lost, it crushed a part of me.

But ultimately, losing does not crush courage. Once you’ve experienced its power courage sustains you for the rest of your life.

Boys, your courage guided you to improbable victories you had no reason to win, to overcome playing down to some opponents’ level of play, and ultimately to take you to a championship game that, when the season began, no one thought you would come close to playing.

Stats don’t mean as much as one simple truth: all of you who played this year experienced something that is rare in our culture – courage. Courage doesn’t care about outcomes. Courage is there, whether you win or lose, and sustains you when times get rough. Courage sustained this team through a season that had a lot of ups and very few downs. Ultimately, courage is what you’ll take away from this year. And having experienced a deep reservoir of courage that took you through a miraculous four months of triumph, courage is what will get you through a lifetime that will surely have more triumphs, but will also assuredly have some tragedies.

For all of us who didn’t play, it was a privilege to simply experience that aura and to vicariously live the level of commitment, love, and, yes, courage that you lived in the 2007 Hand season. Thank you boys.