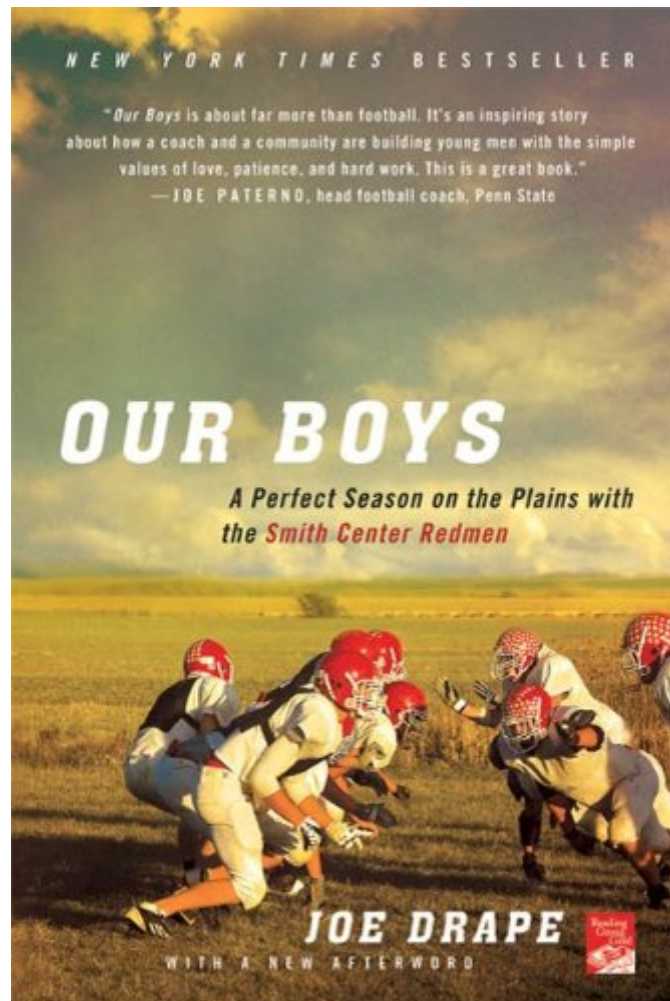


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Our Boys: A Perfect Season On The Plains With The Smith Center Redmen



Synopsis

An inspiring portrait of the extraordinary high-school football team whose quest for perfection sustains its hometown in the heartland. The football team in Smith Center, Kansas, has won sixty-seven games in a row, the nation's longest high-school winning streak. They have done so by embracing a philosophy of life taught by their legendary coach, Roger Barta: "Respect each other, then learn to love each other and together we are champions." But as they embarked on a quest for a fifth consecutive title in the fall of 2008, they faced a potentially destabilizing transition: the greatest senior class in school history had graduated, and Barta was contemplating retirement after three decades on the sidelines. In Smith Center's "population: 1,931" this changing of the guard was seismic. Hours removed from the nearest city, the town revolves around "our boys" in a way that goes to the heart of what America's heartland is today. Joe Drape, a Kansas City native and an award-winning sportswriter for The New York Times, moved his family to Smith Center to discover what makes the team and the town an inspiration even to those who live hundreds of miles away. His stories of the coaches, players, and parents reveal a community fighting to hold on to a way of life that is rich in value, even as its economic fortunes decline. Drape's moving portrait of Coach Barta and the impressive young men of Smith Center is sure to take its place among the more memorable American sports stories of recent years.

Book Information

File Size: 691 KB

Print Length: 287 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 0805088903

Publisher: Times Books; Reprint edition (August 18, 2009)

Publication Date: August 18, 2009

Sold by: Macmillan

Language: English

ASIN: B00FO9GB46

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #603,871 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #358

inÂ Books > Sports & Outdoors > Miscellaneous > Sociology of Sports #548 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Sports > Football (American) #1944 inÂ Books > Sports & Outdoors > Football (American)

Customer Reviews

Our Boys is an amazing tale about the high school football team from tiny Smith Center, Kansas. As of the 2000 census, the town had just 1,931 people with most of them living in town or near it on family farms. Despite having such a small town to draw athletes from, the Smith Center High School Redmen football team prior to the 2008 season had won four consecutive Kansas 2A titles and boasted a record winning streak of over 50 games. Joe Drape, a reporter for the New York Times, a Kansas native, originally discovered the Redmen and Smith Center after the team set a high school scoring record, scoring 72 points in one quarter. Drape moved his entire family to Smith Center at the beginning of the 2008 season in order to chronicle the Redmen's drive for their fifth straight 2A state football title and their pursuit of the all-time winning streak record of 66 wins in a row. This book is the result. The book's over 250 pages, and I read it in a single day. That's how good this story is, and how much I as a reader cared about Head Coach Roger Barta, his assistants, the players, and everybody else in the town of Smith Center that Drape writes about. This isn't "just a sports book," although the game action described by Drape is very well done. The point of the book, and according to Coach Barta, is it's not about the wins and losses, one just needs to focus on getting better each day. That's a good life lesson for all of us. Barta knows that his players aren't going to go on to play in the NFL, (although one of his former players already has) he wants to make them better people while they're playing football and having fun.

The best service I can do for "Our Boys" is to say that, despite the photo on the cover, this is not a sports book so much as it is a book about the power of community, family and the inherent rewards of hard work. Joe Drape's first hand account tells the true story of one high school football team's run for history in the small, rural Kansas town of Smith Center. At first blush it would be easy to dismiss this book as yet another "Hoosiers" tale with helmets and cleats. But readers will find that "Our Boys" isn't just a story about a group of kids striving to do what no one (including themselves) thought they could. This book is about something much bigger than "winning the big game". The Smith Center Redmen were known throughout Kansas and the country for their incredible winning streak that had spanned 4 seasons and counting. Pressure was mounting to eclipse the win record held by another school. "Our Boys" allows us to be a fly on the wall to observe that journey, a

journey taken by the entire town. Joe Drape integrates himself and his family into the community and indeed becomes a part of it. And while a fair share of the book is about what takes place in the games, the vast majority of the book is instead devoted in great detail to the people of Smith Center. Those who built it up and continue to keep it alive and breathing. These are simple but smart farm folk with old fashioned values. They still teach "yes sir" and "yes ma'am". Yes, their kids go to school and play ball, but also tend their farms along side their parents.

Author Joe Drape penned a trifecta of critically-acclaimed books on Thoroughbred racing before tackling the turf of high-school football in rural Kansas in *Our Boys: A Perfect Season on the Plains with the Smith Center Redmen* (August 2009; Times Books: Henry Holt and Company, LLC). When Drape first became acquainted with the Redmen in November 2007, they were on the cusp of capturing their fourth straight Division 2A state championship, with the current senior class about to finish their four years by winning an incredible 54 games in a row. But Drape hurdles past the statistics to get to the heart of a dynasty when he returns with his wife and young son the following summer to explore a true foundation that's built on community - the Smith Center population is less than 2,000 - and teamwork in a 165-member student body. "I tell our boys it's about the journey," says long-time head coach Roger Barta, whose 2008 squad was shooting for state records in consecutive wins and most consecutive state titles. "What we do around here real well is raise kids. None of this is really about football." Drape picks up the pre-season drills as June is about to give way to July and weaves an oftentimes tragic history of the region - dust storms of the 1930s, recent economic woes - with well-paced and placed sketches of coaches, players and residents. There is the battle between the core values found in the heartland with some perilous dangers in the fast-paced first decade of the new century; juvenile abuse cases on the rise and methamphetamine labs being found in abandoned farmhouses. Through it all, writes Drape, "...the Redmen were proof that hard work and accountability still meant something.

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