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High School Heroes: Stories of Inspiration, Dedication, and Hope

David Lee Morgan

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HIGH SCHOOL HEROES

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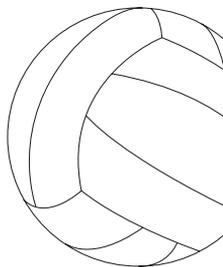
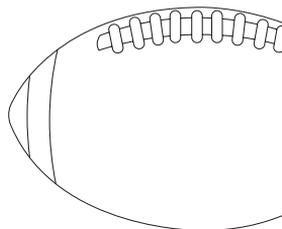
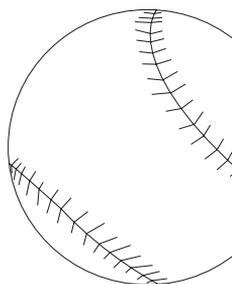
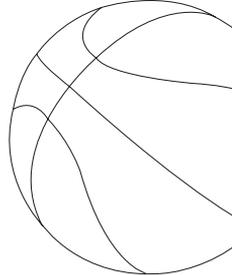
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HIGH SCHOOL HEROES

Stories of Inspiration,
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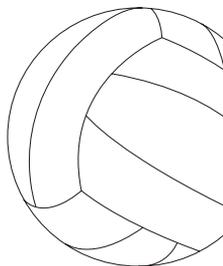
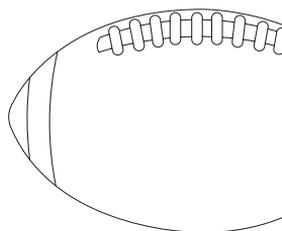
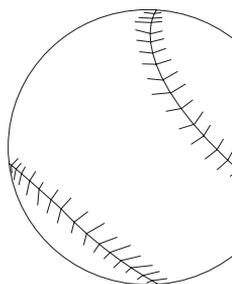
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To my family, wife Tricia, sons Trey and Christian, and daughters Brooke and Cameron (and our dog Vinnie), thanks for all of your support.

And to all of the high school student-athletes in this book, and for those athletes who aren't, know that you are all inspirations to someone, you just don't know it.

FOREWORD

One of the things that I enjoyed most about my years in high school, especially at Glenville High in Cleveland, was the fact that I got a chance to experience so many things that later helped shape me as a man. Playing football for Coach Ted Ginn Sr., one of the most influential and caring men I've ever met (Coach Jim Tressel is the other), I learned that much responsibility came with being a student-athlete and to never take my athletic ability for granted.

I went on to have a lot of success during my college career at The Ohio State University and I was blessed enough to win the Heisman Trophy in 2006. But I couldn't have won that award had it not been for my teammates, Coach Tressel and the entire Ohio State coaching staff and program. The fans meant a lot to me, too. I grew as an athlete, a student and a man during my years at Ohio State and even though we had a lot of success there, my high school years are just as special.

I'm very grateful for my opportunity now to be a quarterback in the NFL and I am unbelievably blessed to have this opportunity. But what's so ironic is the fact that I'm surrounded by the best football players in the world every day. I play against the best football players in the world every Sunday. And sure, there are many of them who have gone on to win Super Bowls, guys who have been All-Pros and guys who have been inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. But no matter how much fame and fortune they experience as professionals, they will never forget the fun and excitement they had during their high school careers, and neither will I.

So if you remember just one thing, remember this: Your high school years will go by faster than you think. Try to cherish each moment on

the field or in the classroom. Try to cherish every friendship that you develop, whether it's with a teammate, a classmate, a teacher, your guidance counselor or your principal. Try to get the most out of your entire high school experience as possible because it should be one of the most exciting times of your lives.

So good luck to all of you and here's hoping that you all become "High School Heroes" in one way or another.

Troy Smith, former Ohio State quarterback, 2006 Heisman Trophy winner, and member of the Baltimore Ravens

INTRODUCTION

As a journalist for more than 20 years, I've had the honor and privilege to do many things in this profession, from covering Major League Baseball, the NFL, NBA and several major college programs. But I can honestly say that the biggest enjoyment, the most satisfaction I get from my job is covering high school sports.

I say this with the utmost humility but I feel that the reason why I was named the Ohio Prep Writers Association Writer of the Year three times (2004, 2007 and 2009) is because the sincerity and passion I have for high school sports comes out in the stories I write.

There are so many fascinating stories hidden and tucked away in the hearts, minds and souls of the high school student-athlete that are ready to be told.

Many times, when a student-athlete sees his or her name in the paper, it may be the only time in their lives that they ever get a chance to read about themselves in a positive light in the newspaper.

Once they are in the newspaper, parents and relatives proudly cut out that story and save it for years. Years later, the article is yellow-stained, tattered and torn, but it's still priceless to that family.

That's what I feel about the inspirational high school stories I've written while at the *Akron Beacon Journal* since 1995. Those stories are priceless to me; they are priceless because those young athletes, whatever they accomplished, whatever challenges they faced, they worked hard to overcome their obstacles and become better people.

To me, the collection of columns and feature stories in this book represent the amazing human spirit that young athletes—black, white,

male, female, rich or poor, possess. And my hope is that anyone reading this book can look at each individual story and see that these young athletes are inspirations to all of us.

They are all “High School Heroes.”

CHAPTER 1

INSPIRATION

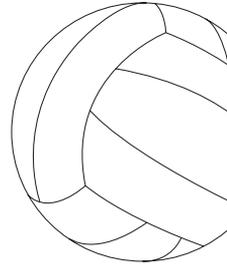
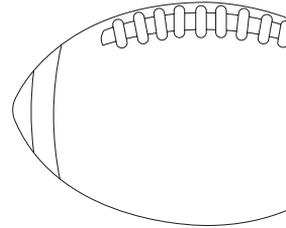
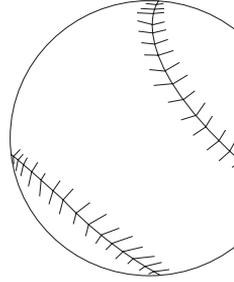
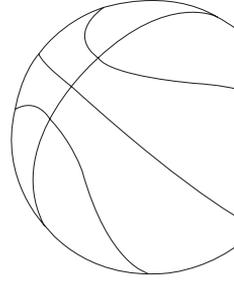
Akron Girl's Hard Work Wins Over Neighborhood

Tony Sullivan lives across the street from the tennis courts along Edgewood Avenue near the Akron Zoo. He works on cars his friends bring him to repair. His hands are oil-stained, as are the three wooden chairs outside his home, where he and others often sit and watch one of the area's most amazing stories play out every day.

Firestone junior Christine Coffman, who has qualified for the Division I state tournament this weekend at Ohio State University, walks from her house—a few doors from Sullivan's—to practice at the Edgewood tennis courts. Before long, Sullivan hears her grunts and the squeaks from her sneakers. He knows Coffman is working hard—and doing the neighborhood proud.

Coffman is 17; Sullivan is 54.

Coffman is white; Sullivan is black.



You might think they have nothing in common, but they do. Coffman and Sullivan don't care about age, race, color, gender or socioeconomic. It's all about the human spirit and the simple fact that one person (Sullivan) and one neighborhood (Edgewood) want to see one of their own (Coffman) do well.

There probably are residents along Edgewood who have no idea who Coffman is, or if they happen to see her playing on the courts, think she is a transplant—someone from another side of town using the courts because many are often open there.

Not so. Coffman, an honor student, isn't a transplant. She's a native Edgewood resident, the youngest of six children in Patricia and Donald Coffman's home. Patricia said she couldn't put into words what Christine's diligence and hard work have meant to the family. At the same time, the Coffmans appreciate how people in the community, like Sullivan, support their daughter.

"We're just so proud of Christine because she did this all on her own," Donald said. Coffman said she wouldn't want to practice anywhere else. "I love practicing here," she said. "The tennis courts are right here in my neighborhood and my neighbors are so nice to me. Everybody here knows me and they want my autograph before I leave and walk down the street to go home."

Yes, Coffman has autograph seekers, but don't take that the wrong way. She isn't full of herself or busy thinking that she's the next big thing in tennis. The autograph seekers are neighborhood folks who simply want the humble Coffman to know they appreciate the hard work she has put in to achieve her goal of playing in college.

"I was walking home one day after practice and a lady from her porch yelled to me, 'I'm going to see you on TV one day,'" Coffman said. "That just made me feel so good. I know that I may bring a joy to people here who watch me, but they give me joy just by always being here watching me and encouraging me all the time."

Living in a predominantly black neighborhood where tennis is probably the last thing residents think about on a daily basis, Coffman never

looks at race. Young kids in the neighborhood, whether they are coming home from school or playing in their front yards, are drawn to the tennis courts because of Coffman.

Many times she has been practicing for an upcoming match when a youngster, watching he in awe, has walked up and asked, “Can you teach me how to play?”

Coffman said that’s the biggest compliment she could receive.

“I’ll always hit with them,” she said. “When I was their age and I would walk by here and see someone playing, I always wanted someone to show me how to play.”

Coffman shatters the stereotypes and myths about affluence and how it pertains to success in athletics. How many other young athletes like Coffman are out there?

That’s why Sullivan is proud of Coffman. He has never played tennis. It was too “above” him (he thought), much like golf. But watching Coffman dedicate herself to tennis every day made Sullivan and others along Edgewood proud of her.

“It’s not easy for anybody in this neighborhood,” Sullivan said. “It’s 90 to 95 percent black here. But she lives in our neighborhood and she’s at this tennis court faithfully every day. She loves tennis, point-blank. That’s why we always support her and make sure she’s OK while she’s down here practicing.”

Because Sullivan sees Coffman’s daily regimen, he’s in tune with what is going on with her workouts. One day, he said, he saw something peculiar in Coffman’s behavior.

“I got off the bus close to my house the other day, and as I walked to my house and passed the courts, I saw Christine sitting on the benches at the far end of the courts, closer to the zoo,” Sullivan said.

“When I saw her, she walked onto the courts without her bag and her gear. She went to that far bench and I knew something was wrong, because she never sits on that bench.”

Coffman sat alone, without any equipment. There were no sounds coming from the courts.

“I could tell something was on her mind, so I went and sat down next to her,” Sullivan said. “She told me she had recently lost two matches earlier that day and she was disappointed and hurt. So we talked, and I just tried to explain to her that you can’t win them all. You just have to keep your head up and concentrate on that state [tournament] thing that is coming up. I told her if she keeps having that desire and determination she has, she’s going to be all right.”

Bicky Mitchell is another Edgewood resident who helps Sullivan with car repairs and supports Coffman. “I’m very proud of her,” Mitchell said. “I come out here every day after I get off work and I watch her play. We’re out here for a purpose. We do the best we can to encourage her, and like I tell her, ‘You’re going to have good days and you’re going to have bad days. You’re going to win some and you’re going to lose some, but you’re going to be all right.’”

“She’s very friendly and always smiling. She basically has the support of the neighborhood, believe it or not.”

Coffman’s tennis career began several years ago, when she met Dan Jones, who grew up in the Elizabeth Park housing projects. Coffman’s coach at Firestone is Craig Sampsel, but she also works with Jones, executive director of Say Yes to Tennis Inc. and a certified tennis professional with the United States Professional Tennis Registry.

Jones received his certification from the Van Der Meer Tennis University on Hilton Head Island, S.C. On Jones’ Web site, he explains how and why he started his program:

“One day, two young kids were watching me play tennis. Whenever I went to retrieve a ball, I noticed their gaze. I’m sure they resided in the housing development right next to the courts. That housing development is home to some of the most notorious criminals in our city.

“They peered at me longingly. Their look screamed that they would love to play this game but they had no idea of how to play or any means. There was no community tennis association in the area. Conviction gripped me. I decided right then and there that I would start a community tennis program for kids like these. Kids who could not afford the

cost of lessons at a club or even the reduced costs of a public parks program would no longer have to peer at the court from the other side of a fence.”

Jones remembers the first time he met Coffman.

“To be honest, she snuck into the program when she was too young,” he said. “She was 6. But I told a few people that one of these days I’m going to run into a kid who likes tennis more than I do, and whenever I do, I’m going to teach them totally for free. Christine is the only kid I’ve ever met that loves tennis more than I do.”

It’s obvious Jones loves teaching Coffman. He is stern at times, very stern. But he knows Coffman can take it and he knows that it will only help her. “She’s down here every day before I even get here and she’s running,” Jones said. “Then she stays after practice and runs again.”

And once Coffman packs her bags and leaves the court after several long, hard hours of practice, she makes the short walk down Edgewood, past Sullivan and his friends, past the old lady, past the young kids playing in their yards and she is proud—proud to live on Edgewood.

AUTHOR’S INSPIRATION

The “Author’s Inspiration” for this book came from Christine. Her dedication and commitment to the sport amazed me. What amazed me even more was the fact that Coffman’s story reached across race and class. It was a story that came along at a time in our country when tensions were high because of the economic, political and even racial climate. Christine showed that there are so many good people, so many good neighborhoods and so many good neighbors that are doing the right thing. The same holds true for high school student-athletes.

Christine’s story was inspirational enough, but the 30-plus emails I received from this story were the most I had EVER received in my career, and they were all positive. I thought I’d share a few:

- My wife and I wanted to write you to tell you how much we appreciated and enjoyed your article on the young lady from Edgewood Ave. What a pleasure to read a positive, heartwarming story in these times of neg-

ativity and nasty politics. Your article was very well written and showed the positive side of living in a “mixed” neighborhood and how supportive we can all be of one another if we would just get past “surface issues.” She is a winner in our book.

- I read with great pleasure the article you wrote last week regarding Firestone tennis player Christine Coffman. With all the “stuff” that goes on with pro and college athletes it is left to the high school athletes (most of them anyway) to give us the true meaning of competition and the human spirit. Beyond that, it was even more touching and heartwarming about how her local neighborhood community “adopted” her and shared in her success.
- I can’t say enough about the wonderful story you wrote about Chrissy and the neighborhood. I was deeply moved by your sensitivity to her, her supporters and the neighborhood in general.
- At the State Tournament the coach from Canton Hoover approached me and had nothing but great things to say about your article and Chrissy. He said, “I admire her so much because she is doing this the old fashioned way. Just a bunch of hard work with little money supporting her.” He went on to mention how rare it is these days to see a kid perform at her level who is from a public school.

Just as a follow up about the tournament. The girl who was the eventual winner, Kerra Sherwood, is the girl who beat Chrissy in that grueling 3 set match at the Districts in Oberlin. It just goes to show how close Chrissy is to the top players in Ohio. Finally, it was such an honor to have our program, Chrissy and the neighborhood mentioned in our hometown newspaper. I spoke with Tony Sullivan yesterday. Can you believe he told me that he and some of the old guys in the ’hood are collecting some money to try to help with her training and tournament costs?

