**STORY D—Huddling Together**

“Let’s kill ’em!” Bob exclaims as we walk toward the stadium.

“I’d love to see Zach Thomas crush Thurman Thomas,” I reply.

We are not brutal people; we are simply expressing our need to win at all costs. The Miami Dolphins are playing the Buffalo Bills, their most hated opponent. We had this game circled on the calendar since training camp began. The thermometer on this Monday night reads a cool 68 degrees, but the atmosphere in the stadium burns like desert heat.

“It doesn’t get better than this,” Bob says as we occupy our seats just a few rows up from the end zone.

“I wouldn’t trade this for anything else,” I reply. “You, me, the fans, the noise, the action: what more could I want?” The countdown to the opening kickoff nears five minutes. The crowd files in while the players run onto the field through the giant inflated Dolphins helmet. Everyone stands united during the singing of the national anthem. The Bills win the coin toss, and they choose to receive the opening kickoff. “That’s the only thing you guys are gonna win tonight!” I jest.

Bob has lived with my mother and me for five years, and he will marry my mother this coming March. Fortunately, I never experienced the crisis of anguish and rebellion that many children suffer in divorces and remarriages. From the beginning, I felt comfortable around him. He never attempted to dominate the household or me. Naturally, though, we did not immediately feel a bond as strong as the one I share with my parents. Football sparked the beautiful friendship we have.

Football never interested me earlier in my life. I thought of it as a pointless sport in which a bunch of fat men jumped on top of each other. I rolled my eyes the first time Bob spoke about football. I figured I would have to put up with this nonsense until I left for college. “Lovely,” I thought. “Just lovely.”

I reluctantly allowed Bob to teach me the workings of the game. As he helped me analyze the game, I started distinguishing linebackers from running backs in a “dogpile.” We picked apart defenses as a quarterback would, and I called penalties before the referees did. The underlying organization of the game revealed itself to me, and its logic suited my predominantly left-brained mind perfectly. More importantly, though, football fostered a common bonding ground for us.

“Touchdown, your Miami Dolphins!” the announcer proclaims. Sixty-five thousand aqua-clad Dolphin fans stand cheering in the aisles; thirteen thousand blue-clothed, blue-faced Bills fans slouch dejectedly in their seats. Bob and I carry out our own touchdown ritual: we alternate high fives between our left and right hands six times: one for each point scored. Olindo Mare kicks the ball through the goalposts as if aiming at us, and we exchange another high five for the extra point. The Dolphins jingle echoes off the walls of the stadium while the residual smoke of fireworks blankets the stadium.

“They just can’t beat our defense,” Bob says in awe. The Dolphins take a quick 10-0 lead, and our devastating defense destroys the determination of the Bills when they threaten to score. The Bills offense drives down to the three-yard line after the Dolphin defense commits a pass-interference penalty. They attempt two runs and a pass; all three fail. On fourth down, they must kick a field goal, but they fail to convert the kick to a score because a linebacker blocks the kick. Bob and I howl like wolves and bump chests. We savor the goal-line stand as we laugh at the Buffalo fans seated two rows in front of us.

After just half a season, football established itself as an institution in my household. Every Sunday, I found myself glued to the television screen for nine hours soaking up football. Consequently, I spent a good amount of time with Bob on our reclining couch, by far the best place for guys to talk. Most of the talking involved football, but beer and car commercials supplied key opportunities for other topics to slip into conversation, such as my schoolwork, my progress in karate, his job, and his latest scuba dives. Deeper subjects such as marriage, my relationship with my father, and our feelings about my mother came up as well. Football provided us with the perfect excuse to get to know each other.

“And that’s the end of the half with your Miami Dolphins leading the Buffalo Bills twenty to ten.” We leaned back in our seats and put football aside for a while.

“So when are you taking the SAT?” Bob asks.

“I’m taking it in April. It doesn’t count, though, you know. I just want to see how good my verbal is so that I know what improvements I have to make.”

“So, do you have any girl interests right now?”

“No, not really. There was this one girl I liked a few weeks ago, but she’s too fake for me. How’s work going?”

“It’s all right. Some of the tech stocks took big hits this week, but the pharmaceuticals went up nicely. When are you going to Minnesota to visit your dad?”

“Not this coming weekend, but the next one. It’s starting to get pretty cold up there.”

We continue talking until the game resumes. Miami scores a quick touchdown to secure its lead. The offense drives on cruise control, and the defense stands its ground. Time winds down, and the Dolphins win by a score of 30-13. The victory song (“Na-na, na, nah; Na-na, na, nah; Hey, hey-ey, good-bye”) plays over the speakers. Players run to the locker room raising their helmets high above their heads; fans stream into the parking lot, shouting cheers of supremacy.

“That was awesome.” My words dribble hoarsely after yelling for hours. “We couldn’t have played a better game.”

“You got that right. Marino got us 30 points tonight, we only allowed one touchdown, and Mare was perfect on his kicking. It’s always great to leave the stadium like this.”

“Especially after Monday-nighters. The last thing I’d want is to lose, sulk on the way home, and then get only three hours of sleep because I’ve got school the next day. Phew, I’m so tired. The intensity just wears me out.”

“I had a great time, Dave. It’s always fun watching with you. You get so into it. You’re a nut!”

Through our mutual enjoyment of football, I have acquired a more son-like warmth toward Bob. That change reflects Bob’s transition from visiting us to living with us. I do not say, “Hey, Bob, how’s it going?” anymore; instead, I greet him with “Good morning, Bob. What are you doing today?” I am the son he never had, and he fills in some of the holes that my father left when he moved to Minnesota. Amazingly enough, it all started with a brown pigskin ball.

The beauty of football lies in its power to unite crowds. The beauty of love lies in its power to unite individuals.