

## **The Dangers of Vicarious Living in *Friday Night Lights***

Vicarious living can be succinctly described as “living through someone else’s experiences.” As a description, this more than adequately describes the town of Odessa, Texas as a whole. In his novel *Friday Night Lights*, author H. G. Bissinger documents his experiences with the southern town of Odessa, an oil boom and bust town where high school football reigns supreme. The introduction of the book reveals that the author had spent much of his life contemplating such a town, where he expected to find a close community centered around and strengthened by high school sports to bring them together. Instead, what Bissinger found was a backwards town with a backwards set of priorities, little economic or educational potential, and an unnatural dedication and reliance to its high school football team, the Permian High School Panthers. In a dead-end town where everyone is a supporter of Mojo fever, there is little recourse for most citizens but to live vicariously through these players: the celebrities of Odessa, Texas.

The way in which the town of Odessa was born matched the future character of the town perfectly. Conceived in the middle of the desert as a paradise, a claim supported by propaganda alone, the town grew slowly and without much ambition. As the oil boom sparked the Texas economy, Odessa came to match the dynamic nature of the market, spending in excess during the good years and depressing into a slump during the bad. It could be argued that Odessa never developed any ambitions beyond the oil market, evidenced by the fact that there was little industry or focus on education in the town. In the early half of the twentieth century, however, high school football came to dominate the public consciousness, and as Permian High was built,

the town's focus moved with it. People grew up in a culture of football, from people radically supporting the football players, to children dreaming of growing up and playing on the team, and even to adults who reminisce about the team and how they had their chance to win (or lose) it all. Consequently, Permian Football players became like celebrities, treated with far more benefits and respect than necessary of any high school student.

The motivations behind each person living vicariously through the Panthers are different. Some students lived through them out of jealousy that they had the skill necessary to become a football player. Other adults may have had few other ambitions in life, and now dedicate themselves to the addicting nature of Permian football to fill that void. There were those in Odessa who had the chance once to become State Champion when they themselves were on the team, but were not able to make it and now supported Permian High as some small way to share in their glory whenever they won a championship. Still worse were those parents of the football players who were like this, such as Charlie Billingsley, who lives vicariously through his son Don, having gotten nowhere in his own life. As most people were not prepared in the Permian education system to truly apply themselves, many people ended up living in the same town as their parents did; as such, Permian football was not only the center of the town, but its legacy.

This situation was most dangerous when it bordered on the fanatical, and people were prepared to fight rivals or opponents for the sake of a high school football team. The coaches and players of the Panthers team were abused when they did not live up to the town's lofty expectations, as though they owed something to the town and were obligated to win. Conversely, the town also treated the football players like stars, including giving them passing grades with little work to back it up, simply so they could continue to play football. As a result of

this, the players never learned to apply themselves, and basically came to the conclusion that they were invincible, which only led to trouble for them later on in life. Even the most successful football student, Brian Chavez, was not that focused on football, but instead on his schoolwork. The culture of Odessa, Texas did not foster a healthy environment for football players to grow up in, but instead, a sensational environment where the players were adored and adulated, which ultimately ended up hurting them.

There were situations where living vicariously through high school players was more direct, such as in the case of Don Billingsley. His father was an excellent football player in his day, and was known for his legacy of being one of the meanest and characteristic players in the league, making up for his lack of an intimidating physical stature with raw recklessness and talent. His son, Don Billingsley, was a starting tailback for Permian, just like his father. However, it became apparent over time that he was not as good as his father—dropping the ball often and not being able to keep his head—and his father, by this time in his life an established alcoholic, would beat and humiliate Don when he felt he was not living up to his potential. Despite having an illustrious football career in high school, Charlie perhaps felt the need to make up for the lack of direction he found in his own life after high school, and thus took to living vicariously through his own son in the hopes that he would win the State Championship. In turn, Don began to take up drinking, drugs, and sex, though he fortunately managed to break the cycle years later. Regardless, this is one of the prime examples in *Friday Night Lights* of the destructive impact vicarious living can have.

Don was not alone in his situation, as the parents and guardians of many other Panthers were pushing them as well. A tragic case is in the form of Boobie Miles. While it can be argued

that the relationship between he and his uncle L.V. was out of love and respect for one another, it is hard to overlook the fact that L.V. had wanted during his childhood nothing more than to play actual football at the white school. L.V. and Boobie had a beneficial relationship between them, but L.V.'s insistence on Boobie applying himself to football nearly devastated his chances of going into college after his accident. Without football as an incentive for colleges to accept him, Boobie was never pushed to study or to educate himself, since it was presumed (by himself and L.V.) that he would always have football to get him there. Even despite their loving relationship, it cannot be denied that, in some way, L.V. was attempting to live out his dream through his nephew Boobie.

Vicarious living is a prominent theme in *Friday Night Lights*, virtually being the theme of the town itself as its citizens give in and join the fanatical cult that is Permian Pride. In the town of Odessa, where there is little ambition beyond waiting and hoping for the next oil boom to come along, football is not only a source of entertainment, but a way of life. There is nothing to be condemned in supporting one's team, but many people in the town took this too far, living vicariously through the football players in the hopes they would be able to make something of themselves. When one lives vicariously through another person, it not only hurts oneself—as he or she no longer has the ambition to strive for their own goals—but the person being lived through, as they are pushed beyond what their own goals are into the dreams of someone else. The consequences of this can be devastating, but are often all too common in high school sports, where parents and fans want to experience the glory of winning a Championship, but cannot do so themselves. Worse yet, this description fits nearly any Permian Panther fan living in the town of Odessa.