

Abuse in Friday Night Lights

One of the main themes of *Friday Night Lights* is the pressure forced onto the high school athletes of Permian High, and the vicarious lives that they themselves live out. Both of these are examples of abuses on the players, by themselves, their coaches, or the fanatic population of Odessa. Each of the players react to these pressures differently, and in their own lives may have other issues to deal with. However, the players all share the same coveted position as a Permian Panther, including all the evils that go with it.

Don Billingsley is put under a great amount of pressure not only by his peers, but by himself to live up to the example that his father set when he was a Permian Panther. A legend himself, Charlie Billingsley was a famously characteristic player for the Panthers, not quite having the physical stature expected of a football player but making up for it in his utter recklessness and talent. However, from the very first game, Don fails to meet the high expectations that had been placed on him, mostly by himself, dashing his self-esteem and putting much pressure on him to improve.

Boobie fails to live up to a legacy of his own—the one he had before his accident. No longer able to move like he does, he is caught in emotional duress when people no longer notice him and he's replaced by another star player, rendering him useless to the team he was once the star of. Including the pressure exerted on him by his coach and mentor J.V., as well as the very low respect the coaches had for Boobie (especially after the accident), Boobie is left with little recourse and eventually decides that quitting is the best way to escape what had become of his once promising career.

Gary Edwards is an example of a typical Permian high school student's attitude towards school. Because of his honored position as a member of the Permian Panthers, he was given an excess of leniency on his tests and grades in school, despite doing little work and in general, not being very intelligent. All of his teachers would ensure that he was able to get a 70 or above on his report card, so that he could meet the requirements of the no-pass, no-play rule and still be on the team. Even when he is given a grade lower than 70 by his Algebra teacher, it's contested and overturned by the school board, and Gary is allowed to pass. This supposed privilege is just as well an example of abuse, as it jeopardizes the kid's educational future, which most of them will have to rely on once they grow out of football in college.

The coaches are a major source of abuse on the players. While harsh and diligent coaching tactics would be expected from a team like the Permian Panthers, the coaches often take it to psychological extremes in order to motivate the players. For instance, the coaches wrote their own hate letter to the team, signed anonymously, in hopes that it would anger and inspire them to work harder. Couple this with Coach Gaines' extreme stories of self-sacrifice from Olympic stars or war veterans, it puts an enormous amount of pressure on the kids to sacrifice themselves well beyond what should be expected of football.

Coach Gaines, for exerting an undue amount of pressure on his own players, was also readily abused by the town of Odessa. He was placed under much pressure to bring them to "State in Eighty-Eight," and every mishap along the way would cast him under public scrutiny and scorn. From people placing "For Sale" signs in his lawn to the public outcry over nearly not making the playoffs, Coach Gaines, in this sense, acted remarkably by dealing with the abuse as just a part of his job.

Other examples of abuse and vicarious living are abound in the novel. The players themselves often find their distinction as the Permian Panthers an excuse to pass up on their other responsibilities, which the town of Odessa and Permian High are more than willing to accommodate. This includes skipping classes, completely ignoring the curriculum and getting good grades simply by favor, or partying excessively on weekends, all without not having to own up to their mistakes. With most of the players, there's cases of excessive drinking, drug use, and sex. As the football players of Odessa, they are essentially celebrities, and can get away with far more than the average high school student. Though they still have to deal with the pressures put on them by their parents and peers, they are granted numerous privileges as well.

These themes are similar to any sports or team organization. Parents put pressure on their kids, trying to live vicariously through them or not wanting to see their kids betray whatever preconceived image of success they have dreamed up for their legacy. Peers put pressure on each other and often make fun or taunt each other, whether across teams or even in the same locker room. Privileges are often granted academically to athletics, noticeable or not, when the pride of one's school is at stake or teachers don't believe that their academics are as important as the student's role as a school athlete. All of these things are not universal, and there can be many institutions where they are not found, but they're not unfamiliar to most students who have been a part of a club or sports team.