

# Chapter 1

The knot in Tom's stomach tightened as he watched his twelve-year-old son take his shot at greatness. The waning seconds of this football game would decide more than who won or lost: Marc's future rested on the judgment of the hulking figure at Tom's side. Tom strained to see what formation Marc's team took as they approached the line of scrimmage.

"Yes, a pass play!" he whispered, not sure how much emotion he should show in front of this man. He wiped his sweat away as it threatened to drip into his eyes. This late in the game the offensive line would be tired, and the stifling heat would sap what little strength they had left. Tom searched the defense for weakness. He knew his son was doing the same. Marc knew what to do. Tom had taught him well.

"Hut! Hut! Hut!" Marc's commands echoed across the open field. As the ball snapped into his hands, the opposing lines slammed into each other in a collision of muscle and armor. Marc retreated five steps and positioned himself to throw his last strike at victory. Tom strained to see the receivers break and get open.

"Yes, there!" He saw Timmy fake inside and turn out toward the goal line. "He's open, throw it, Son! Now!" But Marc couldn't see the receiver make his move; he was running for his life as a defensive tackle

yanked at his jersey. Tom felt the fabric of his confidence rip along with his son's jersey. Marc, driving his powerful legs, managed to break free from his assailant. He distanced himself from the short-legged tackle, but he'd missed his opportunity with Timmy. Tom heard the bearded figure beside him let out a disapproving snort. A line of sweat ran down Tom's back. Couldn't he see that Marc was scrambling? There was no way he could have hit Timmy. Tom felt panic grip his throat as he spoke. "Wow, that was a great move getting away from that tackle!" Tom said as he turned to the bearded man, searching for approval.

"Yeah, but he missed the receiver open at the goal line."

A new wave of panic rushed over Tom as he turned back to the field, praying that Marc wouldn't miss his next opportunity. So much depended on his performance here. This important visitor had not arrived until the beginning of the fourth quarter, and had seen Marc in only two drives. Marc's game was good, but not spectacular. The president of the most successful, select youth football program in New Jersey was interested only in spectacular.

Marc scrambled to his left, and Tom knew he was running out of time as he scanned the open field. Somebody had to be open, please God, somebody! Just as Marc was about to disappear under a wave of defenders, the ball sailed up and over the roiling line of scrimmage. Tom's eyes shot downfield, searching for the ball's destination. There was Timmy, alone in the corner of the end zone. His defender had turned inside when he turned outside. The ball arched toward Timmy in a perfect spiral, hitting him right between the numbers on his jersey. He couldn't hang on, and the ball bounced up, hitting Timmy in the facemask. Tom drew a breath and held it, along with every other parent on the sideline. Timmy stayed with the fluttering ball, pulling it back into his chest as he fell to the battle-scarred turf.

The sideline erupted with adults, hugging and spinning each other around like drunken revelers. Tom ran along the line of fathers who edged the field, high-fiving, slapping backs, and receiving congratulations for his son's game-winning performance. But the approval he wanted most was not forthcoming. Tom looked in the direction of the man holding his son's future in his hands. The piercing eyes hidden behind the full black beard and black baseball cap revealed nothing.

Tom moved back down the line of fathers. The celebration

continued, and Tom felt himself buffeted about by the congratulatory slaps on his back and shoulders, but his eyes stayed focused on the massive man at the end of the line and the stoic look that revealed nothing.

Fred Melensky had called Tom early in the week and told him he wanted to come see his son play. As president of the Lansville Football Club, Melensky did a lot of the recruiting for the other teams in his program. Tom knew who he was by reputation: the most powerful man in youth-league football. His Lansville club was an open program, which allowed players from other towns. Most clubs were closed to out-of-town players. Melensky and his coaches scoured the tri-state area for the best youth-league players to stock the Lansville teams.

Tom had studied the best youth and high school players in the state and knew what it took to excel. He trained his son to be a winner, to read defenses and exploit their weaknesses. He knew his son was the best, but all his work depended on Marc's performance today. Marc had shown flashes of brilliance, especially in how he managed the final drive that won the game. But it wasn't Tom's opinion that mattered now.

"Tom, I'm sorry to say I was truly disappointed with what I saw here today."

Tom felt his throat tighten. Tom was 6' 2", and Melensky beat him by another three inches, but standing before him now, Tom felt the big man towered over him. Yet a twinkle in Melensky's eyes betrayed his true meaning. He threw his head back and let out a roar of laughter, which drew the attention of everyone on the sideline.

"I didn't mean I was disappointed in Marc!" Melensky said as he shifted his feet and put both hands on his hips. "What I meant was that I was disappointed seeing such a talented player having to play at this level! Marc needs to be on an elite team like the Lansville Rams!"

Tom's neck muscles relaxed as exhilaration rushed through his body. His son was finally jumping on the fast track to football success. He was going to play where his talents would be noticed; where college scouts would start keeping a book on him before he even took his first snap in high school.

Tom missed out on his own football dream when his knee gave out in the Thanksgiving game of his junior year in college. Having missed out on his dream of becoming an NFL quarterback, he placed the

mantle on his son's shoulders. He raised his son to be a star quarterback, and training began as soon as his little hands could handle the ball. And now, the football world was recognizing his talent!

"Wow, that's great, Fred! We accept!"

"Not so fast there, chief." Melensky's eyes widened, and he held up his hand as if to stave off Tom's exuberance. "There's a minor hurdle Marc has to jump before he can put on a Lansville uniform."

"What's that?" Tom said as the knot in his stomach retightened.

"He's going to have to try out for the coach. I coach the next younger group. Bob Reynolds is the coach of the Rams, and he's got to have a look at him." Melensky smiled wryly, and that twinkle returned to his eye as he leaned down to Tom's face. "As president, I get to recruit for the whole club, so you see, it's really just a formality." Melensky winked as he straightened up; his attention was drawn over Tom's shoulder. Tom turned to see what he was looking at and beamed as his pride and joy ran toward them.

"Here comes the star QB now!" Melensky announced as Marc approached them. Marc was tall for his age, already 5' 10" with a powerful frame built up by an intense conditioning program Tom had put into place when his son was eight. Tom threw his arm around Marc's neck and pulled him close.

"It's about time you got over here, champ! There's somebody I want you to meet." Marc winced when Tom threw an arm around his neck. "What's wrong, Son?"

Marc straightened up and shrugged off his father's arm, "Nothin', just my shoulder, a twinge, that's all."

"We'll look at it at home," Tom said as he quickly turned back to the issue at hand. "Marc, this is Coach Melensky. He's the president of the Lansville Football Club." Marc reached out to grasp the huge hand offered to him.

"Nice to meet you, sir."

"I'm real happy to meet you, Marc. I've heard a lot about you, and I thought it was time to see you in action for myself."

Marc looked at his father quizzically. Tom was about to explain the situation to him when Melensky spoke first.

"Marc, how'd you like to have a chance to play for a state championship next year?"

“I’d love it,” Marc said, looking again at his father.

“Son, Mr. Melensky came here today to see if you were good enough to play for a Lansville team.”

“I...I have a team. Why should I go to...uh...wherever to play?”

Tom grabbed him by the shoulder pads and looked into Marc’s eyes. “Son, we’re talking about a real opportunity here. This is a team that will surround you with the best players so you can excel...”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here, folks,” Melensky interrupted. “The only thing I can offer you now, Marc, is the chance to try out for a team that most likely will be competing for a state championship this time next year. You talk it over with your dad and have him call me by tomorrow night if you’re interested in the chance to be one of the elite players in the state. I’ll see if I can fit you in for a try out with the coach on Friday night.” He patted Marc on the shoulder pads, shook Tom’s hand, and started to walk away.

“Wait, Fred, we’ll walk you out.”

“No, I gotta run. Call me.” He pointed a finger, first at Tom, and then Marc, as if to keep them from following, then turned and strode to the parking lot.



Tom shot a glance at Marc, who was leaning against the window, staring out at the decaying waterfront. The view from Route 95 along Philadelphia’s deserted waterfront, north of Center City, was not a pleasant one. The blank look on Marc’s face told Tom that his son was not absorbed in the scenery. Marc would play for Lansville if Tom asked him to, but he had to be convinced this was the right move to make.

“Was that an exciting game, or what?” Tom asked, hoping to break the ice.

“Yeah.”

Tom stared ahead for a moment. Marc didn’t have the advantage of age and wisdom to help him see the benefit of this move. He was a kid, his goals shortsighted. Tom could see the benefits an elite team offered a talented player like Marc: quality teammates to help him execute the offense, talented defenses to test him and make him grow. Most importantly, college scouts watched the elite teams, something

Marc wouldn't understand at his age. He needed his father to look out for him and his future. Playing for the Rockets might be fun, and there was nothing wrong with that. Marc had a bright future in football and he was at the age where he needed to be taking the game and his preparation seriously. Tom wanted Marc to find his own motivation so he would have personal goals to keep him going when it got tough. He just needed a push in the right direction.

"Son, playing for the Rockets was great, but you've outgrown them. Your skill level keeps improving, but the rest of the team has stayed the same. Remember, the only way to get better is to play better teams. Staying here will only hold you back. In Lansville, you'll be surrounded by the best players, kids who not only catch the ball, but hold on to it. Think how much better your stats would be if Timmy and Andy could hold on to your throws."

"But they're my friends, Dad. Part of the reason I like to play ball is because of my friends. I won't know anyone on that team. I'll be alone."

"No you won't, I'll be there with you."

"But... you're my father. It's not the same."

"They can still be your friends, Marc. You'll still be going to the same school, still living in the same neighborhood. Your friends will still be your friends. Football isn't about making friends; it's about your future. Remember our dream, Son. What is it we're trying to do here?" Tom paused a moment to let that sink in. Marc had wrapped into a ball and wedged himself in the corner between the seat and the door.

"You have a gift. You have skills that most kids would kill to have. Your left arm is as accurate at twelve as some college quarterbacks. You have concentration, vision, height, and speed. It would be a sin not to make the most of the talent you've been given.

"My father was a salesman, and so am I. Let me tell you, kissing ass to make a living is a life I never would have chosen if I had the talent you have, Son. If you're willing to make sacrifices now-- I mean choosing better teammates over friends-- you'll be on the way to fulfilling your dream." Tom could see he wasn't getting through to him. "Marc, a man is nothing without a dream. I had a dream of football glory, and it was taken from me."

"I know, Dad." Marc said in a huff. Tom dropped it, realizing Marc

had heard that story too many times.

“You are better at twelve than I ever was. I wouldn’t be doing my job as a dad if I didn’t help you fulfill your dream.”

“Can’t I fulfill it when I’m older?”

“You can’t just turn it on when you’re older. You have to build each step of the way, and this step is the best opportunity you’re gonna get. If you don’t grab it when it presents itself, well, you may not get the chance later. I’m trying to help you onto the right track, Marc. The time is now. You have a shot at greatness, and with greatness comes privilege. You see how the top quarterbacks live: cars, houses, money, girls. It’s all waiting for you. Son, all you have to do is follow me. I’ll take you there.” Tom watched the pensive look on his son’s face start to curl into a smile.

“Are you with me, Son? If not, then there’s no point in going on. We should just quit now, and you can go have fun with the rest of the boys who have no future to work for.”

“Yeah, I’m with you.”

Tom sensed his uncertainty. “Do you mean it, or you just sayin’ what I want to hear?” Tom grabbed his chin and pulled his face around to make eye contact. Marc’s eyes darted back and forth, not wanting to look into his father’s eyes. Tom pulled the car onto the shoulder of the road and turned to face his son.

“If you’re not convinced, Marc, tell me.” Marc’s eyes continued to dart from side to side. “I’m not going to force you to go. But if you don’t take advantage of opportunities when they come up, then you’ll find yourself peddling goods like your old man. I can tell you from experience that hard work and vision now will make for a more fulfilling life as an adult. You think about it, but I have to call Mr. Melensky by tomorrow night. He has to know what we’re going to do.” Tom let go of Marc’s face and rubbed the top of his head. He put the car in gear and pulled back onto the road. Tom wanted to tell him he had to go, that if he stayed in Parkersburg he would languish on a mediocre team, unnoticed and unprepared for high school. But if he made him go, Marc would be miserable and only find a way to fail. He had to want it; he had to find his own motivation.

As they started up the approach to the Betsy Ross Bridge to cross the Delaware River, Marc spoke into the window, “Call Mr. Melensky.

Tell him I wanna play.”

Tom looked at his son, studying his profile. “Are you sure? Are you sure this is what *you* want?”

The smile returned to Marc’s face as he met his father’s eyes, “What else am I gonna do, be a salesman?”