FOOTBALL IS...

Also by Shawn

Rewild School: A Pedagogy of Possibility

FOOTBALL IS...

Brutal and Beautiful. Muddy and Mythic.
Above all, Love.



shawn humphrey

BLUE COLLAR PROFESSOR
Richmond, Virginia

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For her, for football.

"It is in you. Go find it." – Joseph Campbell

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PROLOGUE: INITIATION

What is seen is spectacle:

The roar of the crowd beneath the towering lights. Voices singing along to Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline." Overturned trash can lids pounded like drums. Painted faces. Painted chests. Senior posters zip-tied to the chain-link fence.

It's Anytown, USA.
In the fall.
On a Friday night.

But beneath the spectacle—beneath the anthem, the raucous band, the scent of popcorn from the concession stand—something ancient stirs.

An urge. A need.

A deeper truth lies beneath.
But to reach it we must dig.
Beneath the cheers and chants.

And when we dig, we find the rhythm of the game:

The back and forth.
The give and take.
Twenty-two bodies battling for inches of grass.
The whistle. The snap.
The silent countdown of the forty-second play clock.

And beneath the rhythm of the game—we find the moments that steal your breath away:

Crucial first downs.
Game-ending three-and-outs.
Hail Marys launched with desperation and hope.
Two-minute drills that stretch time itself.
Pick-sixes that send the game into overtime.

And beneath those moments—we find the choice:

In the gasping, lungs-heaving pause before the next snap, when your body begs for rest, something deeper must decide:

Will you rise?

And beneath the choice—we find the labor:

The bear crawls. The hill sprints.
The weight room after practice.
The playbook committed to memory.
The hours of film.
The building of your football IQ.

And beneath the labor—we find the discipline:

To show up. Day after day.
On time. Ready to go. Locked in.
To give all you've got from start to finish.
Every drill. Every rep. Every sprint.
Touch the line. Every time. No shortcuts.
Then sit in the ice bath.
Refuel. Rehydrate.
Rest your aching body.
So you can do it again the next day.

And beneath the discipline—we find *it*—the primordial hunger:

Something only humans seek—and boys are wired to need.

A rite of passage into manhood.

For millennia, when boys reached a certain unruly age, the men of the community would come for them. Wearing harrowing masks, arriving in the dead of night, they would tear the boys from their mothers' arms. The mothers would hold on tight and wail, "Don't take my boy!"

But they were playing along.

They knew.

It had to be. It was time.

Time for their sons to leave the warmth of their embrace and begin the journey into manhood.

Unlike their younger selves—and unlike their daughters, whose bodies signal when it is time to become women—boys receive no such sign.

For boys, the transition into manhood must be orchestrated.

Planned.
Amplified.
Enacted by the community.

Guided by older men who have walked the same path.

They must be *initiated.*

Initiation isn't just a test of strength, toughness, or endurance.

It's a crucible for learning responsibility, sacrifice, and belonging—for taking one's place within the community. But modernity has abandoned all this.

And in its absence, boys drift—emotionally and spiritually unprepared for the atomizing impact of our hyper-connected world.

Untethered, they are left to navigate a consumerist culture relentlessly selling them comfort, convenience, and the musings of muscled misogynists offering hollow versions of manhood.

And they feel it.

They may not know how to name it—but they know something is missing.

There's a hunger no energy drink or dopamine hit from a video game can satiate.

The primal hunger for rite.
For passage.
For transformation.

Some try to initiate themselves.
But there's no such thing as self-initiation.

Some gather with friends, hoping to initiate one another.
But boys cannot initiate boys.

So some find their way to the edge of a football field.

They crave a test.
An ordeal.
A proving ground.

They're looking for guides.

Not peers.
Not friends.
Not influencers.

Mentors.

Men who will say, "Yes," to their singular significance.
Men who will say, "No," to their diminishment of others.
Men who will say, "Do it again!" when they don't hold the standard.

Men who will call them from boyhood.
That work doesn't show up on the highlight reels.

It happens in the space *between* plays.

In those breathless pauses between plays—when muscles tremble and lungs ache, when the body pleads for rest yet something deeper resists—they enter liminal spaces.

Spaces where two things meet, converge, wrestle. They're in-between, standing in the overlap of "no longer" and "not yet." They're no longer boys—not yet men—but must choose which to become.

Within these battles of the heart, there are hidden movements. Movements the crowd cannot see. Movements not against an opponent, but away—away from the boy they were before stepping onto the field.

And in the fleeting seconds between plays, in the courageous choice to rise from the turf, again and again, football becomes a doorway to a mytho-poetic, heroic place.

Football offers what modern life so often lacks: a structured path from boyhood to manhood.

It takes boys on the epic adventure of their inner world. To the edges of their maps. Where sea-serpents breach the ocean waves. Where the great unknown is about to begin. And when their senior season ends—the final season for most of them—football sends them home.

Back to their loved ones.

Scarred and weathered.
Eyes ablaze with brotherhood.

As if from the underworld.

Not just older.
Initiated.

Not just changed.
Boys no longer.

INTRODUCTION

It begins on a patch of grass behind a high school. A field whose agreed-upon dimensions remain unchanged whether it sits in the pillared shadows of towering smokestacks, rustling palm trees, or electricity pylons.

On these identical fields across vastly different landscapes, we engage in something seemingly simple: throwing, kicking, running, catching, and recovering an oblong leather ball. All in service of carrying it across a painted white line—or kicking it through uprights—more times than our opponents, who are doing everything in their power to stop us. And we, them.

And yet—at this moment in human history—we have collectively decided that it matters. We hand our boys over to men with expertise in and love for doing these things for two or more weeks in the daylong heat of August. Then again, after school, two to three hours each weekday. All to prepare for the arrival of another group of boys, learning the same skills on their own patch of grass—or for our boys to board buses to challenge them on theirs.

On Friday night.

Communities build stadiums, create rituals, gather bands, organize cheering sections. Families brave cold October nights. We stand together for the national anthem before these contests unfold.

In a society that has distanced itself from nature, shed many of its religious traditions, and eliminated ancient rites of passage, we have placed football in that void. Amidst all we've lost but still value and

deeply need, we've chosen this game as one way to prepare boys to become men.

And so, every fall, across the country, hundreds of thousands of high school boys put on varsity football jerseys. And under the Friday night lights, they dream.

They dream of victory. Of winning seasons. Of playoffs. Of championships. They dream of their names in the newspaper, of college recruiters noticing their talent. Some even dare to dream of the NFL, of falling confetti, of running off the field while being asked "Now that you've won the Super Bowl, what are you going to do next?"

For a vanishingly small percentage, those dreams become reality.

Most won't get there, to the NFL.

Most of us didn't.

Most of us never played in a national championship or even a state championship. Most of us didn't get recruited, didn't hear our names called on draft day, didn't experience the roar of an NFL stadium as players. And yet, we still love the game. Fiercely.

What is it about this game, for the vast majority of its players—those whose careers end in high school—that their fields, whether practice or game, keep calling them back?

What is it that lingers in our minds, keeps us dreaming vivid dreams of putting on pads again, of running onto the field with our friends?

What gives us that lump in the throat when we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our brothers at high school reunions?

That August ache.

Football is not just about the handful who make it. It's about the many who live it, struggle through it, and carry its lessons with them long after they hang up their cleats. It is for the many.

I am one of those many.

I am not a former professional football player. I don't have a yellow jacket. There is no bronze bust of me in Canton. I don't have a Super Bowl ring. I didn't win all-state in high school. I didn't play Division I football. I played Division III. I was not an All-American.

I was a good football player. Good enough to start alongside future NFL talent in high school, and to be voted a captain in both high school and college.

I played strong safety my entire career. Back in the '80s and early '90s when it was essentially an outside linebacker. I was undersized. But I was savage in focus. Monomaniacal in purpose. And I had a motor—not a smooth-running, German-engineered motor, not a high-mileage Japanese motor, but the motor of a 1988 Monte Carlo SS rumbling in the center of my chest.

I could hit.

And I could give a damn good halftime speech.

That matters when you are a captain of struggling teams.

As a senior, my high school team went 4-6. At Earlham College, during my first three years, we endured losing seasons. But my senior year, we went 5-5.

There was a lot of turning inward. A lot of questioning my path and commitment to the game and the grind. I was constantly asking myself: Why suit up again? Why take another hit, run another sprint? Why keep coming back?

That repeated inward turning has given me a perspective on football that's less about glory and more about resilience, growth, and the lessons you carry when the crowd stops cheering.

That perspective now infuses my coaching.

After decades away from the game, I'm heading into my fourth year of coaching. Not as a head coach. I'm a volunteer coach, working with defensive backs at my local public high school—Freeman High School.

If you're thinking, "Why the hell am I reading a football book from this guy?"

I get it. I'm not like traditional authors in this space.

I cannot turn to records, rings, or some esteemed career as a coach or player.

There are no awards or accolades I can point to—nothing to grant me permission to write what I'm about to say. But I believe the best lessons in football aren't reserved for the players with rings or trophies. They're found in the moments when the odds are steep, and you must decide whether to keep going.

Football taught me how to handle failure, how to trust my own path, and how to be there for others in their struggles. This is the perspective I bring to my players, and it's why I can stand here, without the championships, and still know that I have something worth sharing.

And that's exactly why I'm writing this book.

This book is my search for answers.

Why do I love this game so much?

It's not about watching NFL or college games in bars or stadiums. It's not Fantasy Football. It's not the post-game commentary (although I do love *Good Morning Football*). And it's not the drawn-out, over-the-top Super Bowl halftime shows filled with strutting, aging pop stars.

I don't play Fantasy Football. I skip the halftime show. Well—except for Dolly's. She's an icon.

So why?

Why do I stand under the late-August sun for five hours a day on the turf, my 54-year-old body slowly baking, sweat soaking through my shirt?

Why do I go home, lay flat on my back, legs propped up, icing my knees—emails from my job as a professor piling up—just to do it all again the next day?

Why did I wave it off when our old head coach at Freeman—Coach George Bland—said, "Next year, let's make sure you get paid"?

"No thanks," I told him, stretching my arms wide to take in the nearly one hundred kids zipping through warmups around us. "I don't want money to change the nature of my relationship to this."

So why do I do this?

For the past year, I've been pursuing that question through a writing project I call *Football is*…

The idea was simple: I fill in the blank with a word or phrase. Then, I write an essay—doing my best to keep it under a self-imposed 1,000-word limit (which I have the tendency to break).

Sometimes the word or phrase was something obvious.

Football is The Ache of August.

Other times, it was something unexpected.

Football is The People of Cleves, Ohio.

Each essay is one of exploration. They pull from my football journey—first as a player, now as a coach. This is not a book of X's and O's. It's not about winning championships or making it to the next level. Its

purpose is to explore how the game takes us beyond ourselves, turns us inward. It's about what the game gives us, even when we don't earn trophy-hoisting moments.

These essays—forty in all—mirror the forty promised (but not guaranteed) games in a high school player's football career. They can be read in order, but they're not meant to be. Like the memories they explore, they move nonchronologically through time—sometimes I'm in middle school, sometimes high school, sometimes college, sometimes a coach, sometimes caught somewhere in between.

You'll hear themes again and again—brotherhood, transformation, the sacred space between plays—because football teaches by repetition, until the lesson lives in you instinctively. Feel free to open the book anywhere you please.

As you explore these essays, you'll also find ten speeches—one for each game in a ten-game season. I include these speeches not because I think I'm Tony Robbins with a whistle. But because every time I step into that half-circle of players on one knee, I try to name the moment. To name the fear. The opportunity. The truth. The threshold. I want our boys to feel the chill of the uninviting dark on the other side of that threshold—because that's where the real journey of becoming begins.

If you're a coach, maybe the contents of one of these speeches will speak to you. If you're a player, maybe one will echo in your helmet just before kickoff. And if you're someone who remembers what it felt like to stand on that edge of transformation, then you already know: words can shape a game. Sometimes even a life.

All in all, I want to capture the *inner journey* of playing this game. Because football is mythic. Poetic. Archetypal. Sacred. It's a shared American ritual—one that transcends geography, background, identity, and status.

This book is for the many who suit up, play their hearts out, and carry the game with them long after they've taken off their pads. And if you're reading this, chances are—you're one of those many.

Still dreaming about the game. Still feeling that autumn tug.

Because football is...

THE ACHE OF AUGUST

Every August, I feel it—the ache. My body telling me there's something I should be doing. But I'm not.

I feel a tugging—a deep, migratory restlessness that accompanies the air turning thick with triple-digit heat and humidity, and clover-specked lawns browning.

I hear the siren song of return—to the football field of my youth.

If I can't make the nine hour drive back to Ohio, I return in my dreams.

This is that dream.

I hear calls of "Run, run, run" and "Pass, pass, pass" as I duck under low-hanging branches and step out of the woods, onto my high school practice field. I'm in full pads, holding my helmet. My fingers intertwined with the facemask. There's a full-blown practice going on. Boys hitting the sled, running the stairs, and jockeying for position at the makeshift water station. Then—twigs snap behind me.

It's my boys stepping out of the tree line one by one—Randy H., Jay, Beas, Shane, Tim, JJ, Randy R., and Dan. They're in full pads, helmets in hand, getting tripped up in tangles of honeysuckle.

Not corn. Honeysuckle.

This is Cleves, Ohio.

Not Iowa.

This is *my* field of dreams. And just like the movie, we are young again.

Eighteen. Limber and lean.

We take turns placing our hands on shoulder pads, locking eyes, tousling hair, and repeating names. The affection is open—the kind we were once too guarded to give.

We may be eighteen in this dream, but we bring a lifetime's worth of love and loss with us. We know better now. We know that moments like this—time with the ones we love—are fleeting. And when they come, we don't waste them.

We have learned this over years of holding the little ones we love—our own children, our nieces and nephews, the kids in our families. Years of play at ground level, tackling them in the backyard, rolling in the grass, letting them jump on us until we couldn't breathe for laughing.

The bravado is gone.

Don't get me wrong—we're about to knock the snot out of the practice squad. We can be ferocious on command. But here, with each other, we give hugs.

Hugs that linger. That tighten. That draw water from the wells of our eyes.

When we were eighteen, maybe we couldn't say *I love you* unless we had a six-pack of Little Kings in our hands—but we found ways to say what needed to be said, even when we couldn't, wouldn't, put it into those three words. I cannot recall a time when I turned to them in need and they weren't there. Maybe there was. But I don't think so. And if there ever was, we made it right.

Quietly. Without fanfare. Without words. Just a look.

Sometimes, yeah, you wanted the "I'm sorry." But someone giving you a shoulder bump and handing you a beer was just as good. Maybe even better. And I guess that's what I'm getting at.

At school, at home, even in the locker room, we were a certain way. Some would say we had the emotional depth of a dried-up creek bed. On the surface, maybe they were right. There were plenty of moments when we flexed our underdeveloped chests, trying to impress whoever might be watching. But there were also moments of practicing emotional depth. Trying to say what we wanted—what we needed—to say about what was happening behind the closed doors of our lives.

The doors of our homes, where secrets were kept. The doors of the locker room, where we acted out an 80s kind of masculinity. And beyond all of that—the doors of the larger world, where we felt pressure to perform, to become something we weren't even sure we really were.

But out in the open—on the football field—the world between doors was different.

A world shaped by Coach and the game itself. The standards, the customs, the values, the rituals—they weren't the same as the ones behind those doors. Because on the football field, we were part of something that demanded our best. And we fought—together—to rise to it. That shared struggle bound us. It made us more than teammates.

It made us brothers.

Hence this dream.

This dream is a fleeting respite of nostalgia.

We know we must go back to our lives. And we want to.

We can't—and don't want to—stay here. But to experience that connection, that belonging—that's the pull. There should be a word for stepping onto a field and knowing—truly knowing—your brothers stand beside you.

Knowing they feel the same way about you as you do them.

To feel that again—with them.

This is the ache of August—the longing to go back, even as you know you can't. But this ache is not just memory; it is a tether through time.

Because there is no sense in going back alone.

Whoever dreams this dream—I know I am not the only one—whoever is first to step from the edge of the woods, when they look to their left and then their right, they will find the rest of us there, pulled through time with them.

The ache of August is brotherly love.

We share it.
We'll feel it for the rest of our lives.

A spine-straightening "Boys!" rings out. I cap a hand over my eyes to block out the sun.

Tall and towering. Eyes full of lightning. Bike coach shorts. Tube socks pulled high. A whistle hanging from his neck.

It's Coach Haag in his prime!

He blows the whistle, and we're off.

Full sprint.

Facemasks over our smiles.

It's a race.

Who gets to Coach first?

I shove Beas into Randy who stumbles into Tim, who barrels into Jay…