

PLAYERS

by
T.M. Taylor



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Dedicated to my students at Sandy Creek High School in the
class of 2002

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In a world of fast access and immediate results, going back to basics invites a calming balance in an otherwise hectic world. 2B (Back to Basics) Press publishes resource-oriented books which add value to our daily lives.

About the Author

T. M. Taylor is a teacher, author, coach, and speaker. The Georgia native was motivated to write books, both for and about teens, after repeatedly encountering high school students who hated to read.

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1

I have always hated school. Always. Some kids started out liking it in first grade and then grew to hate it later on. Not me. I have always hated it. I guess the first thing that I hated about it was the teachers. They were always telling us what to do all the time. Telling us when our games had to end and when we had to stop playing. Telling us that we had to start paying attention to important stuff. To stuff in books. Yeah. Books. Stop playing games and start reading books. That's what they told us. I started out hating school and teachers, and I ended up hating books.

I was thinking about all this as I picked up my chemistry book and headed off to school on that Friday morning back in November. I was thinking about the homework assignments I didn't do the night before. About how I was going to copy the work from Jessica or Heidi sometime before each class began. About sitting in the back of six different classrooms and listening to a bunch of boring teachers tell me about important stuff in books.

Don't get me wrong. I wasn't dumb. At least I don't think I was. I just knew what I liked and what I didn't. I knew what I wanted to do. And what I didn't. I didn't need anybody to school me up in those things. I already knew. I had learned a good bit in seventeen years.

My mom had left a note on my windshield reminding me to be home that night by one. She left every morning for her job downtown a half hour before I got up. She and my dad had split up when I was three. I never knew exactly why, although hearing them argue over the phone through the years, I figured it probably had to do with not seeing things eye-to-eye. My dad lived on the north side of town. I saw him a couple of times a month and worked construction with him every summer. I guess some people just aren't meant to stay together.

I thought about my dad a lot even though I didn't see him or talk to him much. Shawn Hunter, Sr. He dropped out when he was sixteen and joined the Marines when he was eighteen. Stayed in three years and then worked construction ever since. People say I look just like him. Black hair, square features, a stocky build with big arms and wide shoulders. I figured I would join the Marines too if I couldn't get any college teams interested in me. I figured nothing the Marines could do to me could be any worse than Coach Martin's two-a-day practices. My dad would say this was a stupid thing to think since I'd never been to Boot Camp. Maybe so. But then again he had never played a season for Coach Martin.

I threw my chemistry book in the back seat of my car and drove to Jessica's house. I had barely come to a stop in her driveway when she came bouncing out. She was wearing a pair of faded blue jeans and a tight red sweater. Her brown hair hung loose down over her shoulders, and her arms were full of books. She smiled at me in a way that only she could. Jess looked good. She always looked good. She never looked the same, but she always looked good.

She tossed all of her books but one into the back seat and leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“Well, don’t you look awful,” she said. And she opened the book and began working on some homework that she had not finished.

“Thanks,” I said, “I love you, too.”

She just smiled again and kept right on working on her homework.

Her crack about my looks was because of a cut under my right eye that I’d gotten in football practice the day before. Coach Martin hadn’t liked the way that we’d done a certain drill so he made us do it over and over till we got it exactly right. Fourteen times in a row. Somewhere about the eighth or ninth time one kid’s toe came through my facemask and hit me right under the eye.

When we had first started dating back in May, I was in spring practice and Jess would always make a big fuss over every little cut and bruise I’d get on my hands and arms. But now, at the last game of my senior season, I think I could be missing my two front teeth and she wouldn’t even notice. I guess you just get used to some things.

Jess usually did most of the talking on our morning rides. I just added a few words here and there to keep her going. She jumped right into a story Tami had told her last night about the latest con Tami was going to run on her parents. I laughed several times and asked a couple of questions to show I was listening. I was mainly paying attention to how fine Jess was.

Jess’s dad had been a cop on the local police force for twenty years, and her mom worked for a lawyer in the city. Luckily, her dad had never busted me or caught me in anything before I started dating Jess. All the kids knew him and respected him including me. I knew I had been accepted by Jess’s parents when they had said it was alright for me to drive

her to school every morning. I liked Jess's parents, and, best I could tell, they liked me. I was glad because Jess was a prize I didn't want to lose.

Jess had dated only two other boys her whole time in high school. Each for about nine months. I knew both guys, and both were losers. Each time Jess had been the one that had ended it. I was the total opposite. I had dated ten girls in the last three years. None for over two months. I broke it off with all of them when I got tired of them or when I had a chance at something better. I was always the one who ended things. Every time but once anyway.

Jess finished her homework and her story at the same time. She tossed her book in the back and then pulled her legs up into the seat and sat Indian style. I knew what was coming.

"Well, did you talk to him yet?" she asked.

"Jess," I said, "it ain't like that. Ryan ain't like other guys. If you want the two of them to get together, I'm telling you this ain't the way to play it."

Jess had asked me the day before to talk to Ryan Thomas, our quarterback, and see if he'd be interested in dating Jess's best friend Tami. I was trying to explain to her that Ryan didn't operate that way. Besides, it wasn't like Ryan and I were real close. He was a Pretty Boy. He played on offense, and all offensive players were Pretty Boys. Most of us defensive guys were borderline thugs.

"Look, Jess," I said, "Ryan don't date girls. He don't even ask girls out. He just shows up someplace, a party or something, and a girl is just *with* him. It just happens, you know. And he's never with the same one for more than a couple of weeks. You know how he is. You've known him for as long as I have."

“I know,” she said, “but Tami is still interested.”

I thought about Tami. I’d heard that when you got married, you married the girl’s family as well as her. Maybe you didn’t want them, but you were stuck with them. Well, I found out a long time ago that when you dated a girl, like it or not, you dated her friends too. I knew I wasn’t going to win this round.

“Well,” she kept on, “will you at least mention it to him?” And she smiled again.

I had learned a few things about girls over the years. I had learned the rules of the game. I learned to buy gifts and write notes, to remember special occasions, to let them talk about stupid stuff, and to pretend to listen. I had learned to give them what they wanted in order to get what I wanted. I played by the rules.

Ryan, though, Ryan ignored the rules, especially when it came to girls. He made up his own rules, and he made them up as he went. I think this was the reason I wasn’t sure I really liked him, and I know it was the reason I didn’t trust him.

Besides, Tami was not Ryan’s type. Her butt was too big, and her chest was too small, and she didn’t look good enough in the face. She was also a little too smart for him. I had seen Ryan with enough girls since ninth grade to know what he was looking for, and Tami was not it.

However, the object for me right then was to keep Jess happy, and that’s what I did.

“Sure,” I said, “I’ll talk to him after the game.” Jess unbuckled her seat belt and moved next to me and began kissing my neck and running her fingers under my shirt collar. I smiled. You just got to know how to play them.

I kissed Jess goodbye by her locker when we got to school, and the two of us both did our usual morning things. Jess

went to go find Tami in the lunchroom and talk about stuff that girls talk about when they are with other girls, and I went to find the guys.

Tyrell and Tiny were standing out on the sidewalk with Brick and a couple other players.

“What’s up, Hunt,” Tiny said as he saw me.

“What’s up, guys,” I said. And I walked up and became the cream in the middle of a big Oreo.

Tyrell was two inches taller than me and twenty pounds heavier. All the muscles in his body were developed. You could even see his neck and jaws flex when he chewed his food. He played the other linebacker beside me on defense, and he was good. Real good. Tiny was the free safety, and Brick played noseguard. Tiny fit his name. He was five-eight and weighed maybe one-fifty soaking wet. And Brick was...well...he was a brick. He weighed nearly three hundred, and he could bench press a house. These guys had several things in common. They were black. They played defense with me. And they would hurt you. Nobody messed with these guys.

Tyrell was leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets. He rolled a toothpick to the other side of his mouth.

“You gonna lose, white boy,” Tyrell said. “Score is twelve to eight. Ain’t no way you gonna catch me now.”

“It ain’t over till its over,” I said. “You know that. Don’t forget last year.”

“Now how you gonna make four points in just one game?”

“Oh, it can be done,” I said. “It *can* be done.”

Tyrell and I had been the team’s leading tacklers for two years in a row now. In fact, we both had a chance that night to break the school record for most tackles in a season. But the

record wasn't what we were talking about. We were talking about our bet. We had a contest going for who could hurt the most people.

It all started back in our freshman year. Tyrell and I had played on different middle school teams, and we each had our own reputation. I heard how everyone was afraid of Tyrell and he heard how I had broken a quarterback's arm in three places in the eighth grade. Coach Martin always put his best players on defense. So I ended up on that side of the ball with ten black kids. And he always put his hardest hitters at linebacker. So beginning with J.V. and continuing until now Tyrell and I had always played side-by-side. And naturally over a period of time, we began to brag about who could hit the hardest. So last year we came up with a point system to decide who was right. Loser paid the winner twenty bucks.

Here's how it worked. One point if someone we hit had to be helped off the field. Two points if he had to be carried off. Three points if he was knocked cold. Broken bones and anything that required a brace or a cast was two extra points. We always had two contests. One in the preseason and one during the regular season. The one in the preseason was against our own offensive guys in practice. We didn't discriminate. We figured all Pretty Boys deserved to be hit. It's what they got for lining up on that side of the ball. Teammates or not, we didn't really like any of those guys.

The preseason contest had to be called off this year because Coach Martin caught wind of it and threatened to hold us both out of practice if we didn't stop sending his running backs to the trainer and his receivers to the hospital.

We all talked about girls for the next few minutes. Then when the bell rang, I bumped fists with Tyrell and Tiny, threw my

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