



OUR BOYS

by Joe Drape

Behind the Scenes

- A Conversation with Joe Drape and Coach Barta
- Photos from On and Off the Field

Keep on Reading

- Joe Drape Talks Books
- Reading List and Resources
- Reading Group Questions

*A
Reading
Group Gold
Selection*

For more reading group suggestions,
visit www.readinggroupgold.com.



ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



A Conversation with Joe Drape and Coach Barta

Question for Joe Drape: What initially drew you to the story of the Smith Center Redmen?

I had gone there in 2007 to write a story about the Redmen, who, at that time, had won fifty-four games in a row and had set a national record by scoring seventy-two points in the first quarter of a game.

I'm a native of Kansas City, and I look for stories in the Midwest. But two things that seldom happen occurred in Smith Center: First, I really clicked with Coach Barta and the Redmen's athletic director, Greg Hobelmann, and several of the kids and townsfolk. I liked them. They were engaging and I didn't feel like I was working. Second, when the story appeared, I received a tremendous response from readers who were taken by how much integrity and simple values the team and the town employed and lived by. I had been, too—a bunch. What it told me was that we all wanted a story that made us feel good about America and sports and ourselves.

What part of the story did you want to explore that you hadn't captured in your initial piece for *The New York Times*?

I wanted to understand this deep sense of community in Smith Center, and how that translated to their success in football and beyond. These were folks who worked harder than you can imagine farming, were hardly rich, but laughed and loved and enjoyed life. I wanted to know why they were this way, and how it was passed down.

*“[W]e all
wanted a story
that made us
feel good about
America...
and ourselves.”*



Question for Coach Barta: How did it feel to have a city slicker reporting on your team, coaching staff, and you?

When all was said and done, it felt pretty good. I was impressed how Joe got some of our kids to open up and talk about their feelings and dreams. They told him things that they would never tell us, and by the end of the season you could see how they accepted him as part of the community and wanted to talk to him.

In the beginning, I was a little wary because I didn't know what would turn up and you don't want something bad to happen to your kids or your program. But Joe and I got along immediately. He's from the Midwest, and I could tell immediately that he was looking for a larger story about the town and life. I trusted him; a lot of folks around here do.

You emphasize hard work, not winning. Do you think this strategy separates you from other high school football coaches?

When I was a young coach, the most important thing to me was winning, and I put a lot of pressure on myself. You get older and you mature and evolve, and reaching kids becomes more important. And it's effective because if you work hard on the little things, it allows you to win. So that's what we emphasize here: not only about football but about life. If you focus and work on the little things, if you do it enough, success happens.

Joe, why did you feel compelled to relocate your family to Kansas in order to write *Our Boys*?

My wife, Mary, is originally from Chicago, and we both wanted to go home and focus on being really good parents. We agreed that our son, Jack, who was three, needed to chase grasshoppers and play tackle football

*“I just...
take it
one day
and one
season at
a time.”*

and become a boy. We had grown up with a level of freedom we couldn't offer our son in New York City.

Mary was willing to walk away from a successful career that she had been blessed with and was tremendously grateful for. We were ready to quit hustling for subways and plane flights and working into the night, and just concentrate on our son.

I had felt on my first trip that Smith Center was exactly the place to do that. I was right.

Coach Barta, what role does the community play in your overall coaching strategy?

I'm blessed that I live in a place where hard work and being there for one another is ingrained in the community. I mean, at harvest you have grown kids and grandkids coming from all over the country to work eighteen hours a day to help their parents and grandparents bring in the wheat or the soybeans. We don't know any other way. And what everyone values most here is their kids. We raise them really well.

So when I get kids they already are tough and hard-working. I don't have to do much more than help them get a little better each day.

Joe, for a book that focuses on a high school football team, a sense of family, including the role of mothers, plays in fairly prominently. Did this surprise you?

I don't think that I was surprised, but I was reminded how important moms are to everything their kids do. They are the ones ferrying them back and forth to games, and up at dawn fixing breakfast before early-morning practices.

The Redcaps, which is the high school's all-purpose booster group, is run by moms and does everything



from raising thousands of dollars to providing two meals every game day for the sixty-five Redmen and coaches.

The neatest thing about the moms was that they were knowledgeable about every nuance of the Redmen system, and believed in their boys unconditionally. They were the one constituency in the stadium who thought Smith Center would win every game. The dads worried.

The moms were also the first ones on the field after every game, and all the Redmen hugged their moms first before anyone else. It's true—we love our mothers most.

Coach Barta, what has kept you in Smith Center your entire career? When do you think you'll retire?

I grew up nearby in Plainville, Kansas, as did my wife, Pam, and our folks were in the area and so were our brothers and sisters. We wanted to stay near our parents and take care of them when they needed help on the farm or as they got older. Later, every time we had an opportunity to move on, my kids never wanted to go. We have zero regrets—this is a great place to raise a family.

I'm sixty-four now, and these days aren't going to last forever, I know. But I still enjoy going to practice every day, and I love every step of the journey. I just want to take it one day and one season at a time.

Joe, your son and wife became immersed in the Smith Center culture. What changes, if any, did you notice in your family?

We all slowed down and grew up together. Jack was transformed from a stroller-bound New York City toddler to an independent boy who could join a roaming pack of kids like he had known them all his life. We

were inseparable, too. We'd pick Jack up from pre-school, and then we'd go to practice. We went to the junior high volleyball games or the plays and pageants together.

We now have a greater appreciation of community and how children are a great foundation for bringing joy to a community. In New York or in Smith Center or wherever you live, most folks want to do what's best for their kids. Children bring out the best in all of us, and love, patience, and hard work is part of our nature.

Coach Barta, do you feel any pressure about keeping the winning streak going?

We know the streak is going to end someday, and really all we can do is just enjoy holding on for as long as we're able. We never talk about winning or losing around here because if you compete and work hard every day those things take care of themselves. We're proud of the streak, especially, because it took a lot of different kids and classes to put it together. And I enjoyed every one of them.



Photos from *On and Off the Field*

Reading Group Gold



The author on his book tour in Wichita, Kansas



Coach Barta and the author at 2009 training camp

Behind the Scenes



Smith Center welcomes back the Drapes



2009 Opening Game

All photos taken by Mary Kennedy

I love to read, and that habit was instilled when I was a boy by my mother and father. Dad always had the morning and evening newspaper on the kitchen table. Mom, who on the too-frequent times I was in trouble, punished me by making me read the classics. I owe them my love of the written word and storytelling, my career, and a whole lot more.

—Joe Drape

“Folks believe being a sports-writer is the greatest job around, and they are not far from it.”

Who are your favorite writers?

Richard Russo, Jim Harrison, Nelson DeMille, Bill Barich, William Least Heat-Moon.

Which book/books have had the biggest influence on your writing?

As I mentioned, when I was in trouble as a boy, my mother made me read the great books as part of my grounding. Among them: Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn*, and Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. These nurtured my love of reading first, and each provided a great template for vivid storytelling.

Richard Russo’s *The Risk Pool* and Jim Harrison’s *Legends of the Fall* showed me how important “voice” is to storytelling. They are wonderful storytellers and elegant writers. Bill Barich’s *Laughing in the Hills* and William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways* are terrific books that blend journalism with voice and personal narrative. Nelson DeMille keeps me chuckling and turning the page.

What is your favorite quote?

“Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value.”—Albert Einstein



What is the question most commonly asked by your readers?

“Have you interviewed (name of famous athlete)?”

Folks believe being a sportswriter is the greatest job around, and they are not far from it. I often feel like I’m on talk radio because readers ask for your opinions on all sports. It is fun.

Now, at the same time, when I’m not working and someone asks me if I want to see a ball game, I usually decline. I tell them that it’s like asking a postman to take a walk on his day off.

What inspired you to write your first book?

It was the inaugural game of the Charlotte Hornets in 1988—they were an NBA expansion team. They won, and people stormed the court. I had read *The Breaks of the Game* by David Halberstam, which was about a season with Bill Walton’s Portland Trailblazers. I was no Halberstam, but I was interested in how twelve guys live and compete together and how they impacted a New South city like Charlotte, North Carolina.

Where do you write?

I write at home on my laptop at the kitchen table. I always have—no matter the chaos swirling around me. In fact, I like the chaos.

Outside of reading, what are your other hobbies and interests?

I have remained a reader, and I cook in the most basic Midwest fashion.

I’m interested in all kinds of sports by virtue of being a sportswriter. I am a passionate fan, however, only about my boyhood team—the Kansas City Chiefs. Trust me, it’s hard to be a Chiefs fan.

*Keep on
Reading*

I've owned, handicapped, and bet on racehorses, and do ascribe to the horseplayers' creed that a "bad day at the races is better than a good day anywhere else."

What is the single best piece of advice anyone ever gave you?

Swim in your own lane. Don't worry about what anyone in the left or right lane is doing. You'll get where you're going when you're supposed to be there.

READING LIST AND RESOURCES

One of the many joys that came out of my writing *Our Boys* was the discovery of a growing group of educators and coaches across the country who, like Coach Barta, believe that building character and teaching life lessons are far more important than just winning games.

Jim Thompson, for one, founded the nonprofit Positive Coaching Alliance (www.positivecoach.org) to offer parents and coaches the tools to give all young athletes the opportunity for a positive, character-building experience.

His books are must-reads for any mom or dad who spends many hours of their weeks on the sideline watching their sons and daughters, and for athletes as well:

*The Power of Double-Goal Coaching:
Developing Winners in Sports and Life*

*Positive Sports Parenting: How Second-Goal Parents
Raise Winners in Life Through Sports*

*Elevating Your Game: Becoming a
Triple-Impact Competitor*



Tom Lickona and Matt Davidson are sharp, dedicated researchers and thinkers who have spent their lives studying how certain cultures produce excellence and leading the charge for greater “character education” in America’s schools. Lickona directs SUNY Cortland’s Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (www.cortland.edu/character); Davidson directs the nonprofit Institute for Excellence & Ethics (www.excellenceandethics.com). The Institute’s Power2Achieve programming provides teachers and coaches with research-based tools for developing the character needed for success in school, sport, and beyond. Their books are remarkable:

Smart & Good High Schools: Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond (Lickona & Davidson)

Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues (Lickona)

I was recently named a Sports Ethic fellow by the Institute for International Sport, a remarkable organization founded “to promote and improve relations among nations, particularly in nations experiencing internal conflict.” The Institute will turn twenty-five on July 1, 2011, and continues to foster an extraordinary number of global friendships through sport, culture, and education, connecting tens of thousands of people. Please check it out at www.internationalsport.com.

*Keep on
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. Coach Barta is very clear about his approach to coaching high school football early on in the book: “None of this is really about football. . . . What I hope we’re doing is sending kids into life who know that every day means something.” His main goal is to raise the town’s children well, but do you think there’s something about his philosophy that actually helps the team win? Why?
2. The residents of Smith Center are very close-knit. Jay Overmiller tells Joe Drape, “I’m one of those lucky guys who have coffee every morning with Mom and Dad.” Many of the boys on the football team work closely with their parents and aim to one day take over their family businesses. What are the benefits of having multiple generations of a family reside in the same town? What opportunities does it provide for the kids? Does it hinder them in any way?
3. What are some of the things the boys’ mothers do to show their support for the team? How do they influence the boys? The team parents don’t seem to push their children too hard to excel at football, nor do they seem to be overly competitive with one another. Why do you think that is?
4. Since there’s so much talk about the prior year’s talented senior class, this year’s seniors are under a great deal of pressure to carry on their streak. Do you think that’s a burden for them? Or does it help inspire them? Have you ever been in a similar situation?



5. Coach Barta is known to be superstitious. He tells the players not to talk about wins or losses, but the players' mothers plan meals for thirteen games—all the way through the regular season and into the state championship. Do you think this a sign of their unconditional belief in their boys, or of their practical natures? Do Coach Barta's superstitions signify anything more than his own practicality?
6. Think about the differences between small town and city living. Do you think there's something about living in a small town like Smith Center that deepens the impact of Coach Barta's lessons? What kinds of opportunities does small town life offer kids? What about urban living? Do you think one is better than the other for raising kids?
7. "Training camp is meant to forge camaraderie through communal misery." Have you ever had an experience like this that helped you bond with others? Why do you think it works? What does that say about human nature?
8. What do you make of the fact that no political campaign ads—for either Republicans or Democrats—ran in Smith Center during the 2008 presidential campaign? When a place is seen as so solidly aligned with one party that neither feels the need to advertise, what effect does that have on the people who live there?
9. Many Redmen supporters are townspeople who no longer have children in the Smith Center school system. How does it benefit the town to have something to rally around?

*Keep on
Reading*

10. Do you think that in some ways Smith Center football acts as a kind of equalizer, erasing the differences between the poorer kids and the relatively more affluent ones? Are the “country boys” equally at home on the team?
11. Consider the influence of the prepzone.com message boards. Do you think that knowing what other people all over Kansas thought about them had an effect on the team? What about the coaches? Is there any advantage or disadvantage to having this kind of knowledge?
12. Take a moment to discuss how the Redmen handle themselves—and treat one another. What does that say about the character of the players? Do you think Coach Barta—and all of Smith Center—have succeeded in raising the kind of kids they want to raise?