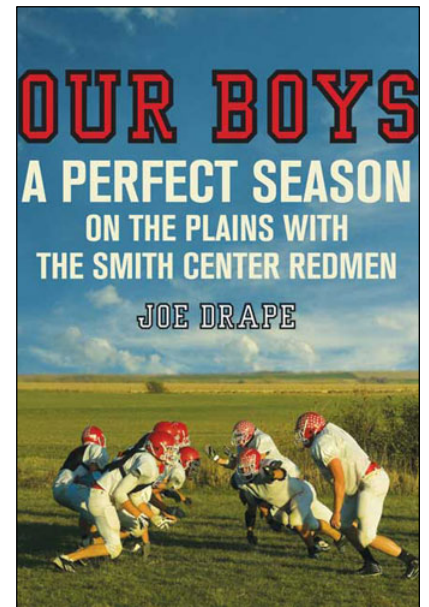




OUR BOYS:

A Perfect Season on the Plains with the Smith Center Redmen
Joe Drape

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A Conversation with Joe Drape and Coach Barta

Q. for 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 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 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.

Q. for Drape: 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.

Q. for 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.

Q. for Barta: 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 become 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.

Q. for Drape: 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 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.

Q. for 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 hardworking. I don't have to do much more than help them get a little better each day.

Q. for Drape: For a book that focuses on a high-school football team, a sense of family, including the role of mothers, plays 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 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 SC would win every game. The dads worried.

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

Q. for 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.

Q. for Drape: 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 preschool, and then we'd go to practice. We went to the school 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 best for their kids. Children bring out the best in all of us, and love, patience, and hard work is part of our nature.

Q. for Barta: The Redmen have a long way to go before they can surpass the national winning-streak record of 151 by De La Salle High School (California), but you can continue to move up the list. Do you feel any added pressure this season, given this opportunity?

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.