

And So It Ends

BY BILL JENSEN

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After one of my many athletic failings, my dad leveled with me. Bypassing the obvious speech about lack of talent, he instead took a surprising route that has stuck with me to this day. He told me the story of Jackie Smith.

Now, if you are 30 or older (and don't hold an unnatural fetish for the sassy brunette from *Charlie's Angels*), there are three thoughts that just popped into your head: dropped pass, end zone, Super Bowl. Not a strapping 6-4, 235-pound man from Northwestern Louisiana who redefined the position of tight end by blending speed (9.8 in the 100-yard dash) with blocking. Not an NFL Hall of Famer who held onto his career for one more season in the hopes of winning that elusive championship ring.

Dropped pass, end zone, Super Bowl.

With the Cowboys down to the Steelers by seven late in the third quarter of Super Bowl XXIII, Roger Staubach threw a bullet to a wide-open Smith in the middle of the end zone. The ball hit him in the chest and dropped to the ground and Smith fell backward to the turf, as if shot with a gun. The Cowboys went on to lose the game by four points.

"Look at that guy," my dad said to me. "He practiced every day, probably for his entire life. He played his heart out. He finally made it to the pros. He gave every bit of himself to the game, and what happened? He will always be remembered as the guy who dropped the ball."

Now my dad once took me to Sagamore Hill, and he surely knew the Teddy Roosevelt quote: "Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat."

I surely knew the line: "It's better to have lost at love, than never to have loved at all," co-opted in Poison's 1987 power ballad "I Won't Forget You." My dad by no means ever told me not to dream. But that day, he was just trying to tell me that becoming a professional athlete was not a guaranteed path to happiness.

Jets kicker Doug Brien was a soccer player at De La Salle High School in California when the football team's place kicker had problems with his girlfriend and Brien was asked to join the team. He was a natural at the position, went on to play at California and was drafted in the third round by the San Francisco 49ers. For 10 seasons, Brien was what many little boys dream to be: a guy who gets

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paid to play a game in front of thousands of fans and millions on TV—a professional athlete.

But after missing two field goals in the final minutes of the Jets' playoff game in Pittsburgh, the camera showed Brien on the sidelines, a stocking cap parked neatly on top of his head. His expression was not a look of shame or dejection. It was a guy trying to be a professional, but knowing in his heart what the locker room would feel like. What the plane ride would feel like. What the offseason would feel like. It was the look of a guy who dared a mighty dream, and was about to live through his worst nightmare.

Jets fans, too, dared mighty dreams. With the specter of the "Same Old Jets" ringing in our ears, we dared to dream this season was different. The Jets *were* blowing it, but this time they were being awarded second chances. Nate



Jackie Smith remembered

Kaeding missing that field goal in San Diego. Ben Roethlisberger throwing that interception near the end of regulation in Pittsburgh. We all dared to dream. Then, at around 8 p.m. on Saturday night, we all turned off the TV in our dens, went upstairs to our bedrooms and stared at our ceilings.

If you were like me, later that night, you rifled through the channels trying to find anything other than the 11 o'clock news teasers replaying one of Brien's missed field goals with a voiceover about fairytale dreams ending in nightmares. And if you're like me, you may have smiled when your remote hit HBO comedy and you spied Larry David, sitting on his couch, watching TV. Ah, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. And you may have tucked yourself into bed, hoping to fall asleep to David's evil neurotic wit, when the camera panned to what he was watching, then back to his contorted face. "I hate the Jets," he said, "they just aggravate me so much." The scene ends with the faux TV commentator proclaiming, "Man, they shoot themselves in the foot every single time they get in this position." If you're like me, you fell asleep smiling, happy in the knowledge that there were thousands of fans going through the same thing. ①

Letters To Press Sports

MET-ROPOLIS

Dear Josh Stewart,

Quick note to thank you for the clever article titled "Amazin' Invasion" [Jan. 13]. I enjoy reading this new and upcoming newspaper; everyday *Newsday* seems to be getting worse and worse and the *Long Island Press* is really coming to the forefront as an enjoyable form of daily news. Like you, I sunk in the couch every time [Armando] Benitez blew a save as a Met. I believe we have a good team on our hands now, with more improvements to soon follow. Good article, keep up the good work, and Let's Go Mets!

Regards,

Joe Sikora, Smithtown

Response from Josh Stewart: Thanks, Joe. We'll keep our fingers crossed that Omar Minaya can pull a triple play and land Carlos Delgado. But regardless, it's nice to head to Shea with some real hope.

ANGUISH OVER ARMSTRONG

Dear LI Press Sports Staff,

I'm not a big fan of the sport. However, not to include Lance Armstrong as one of the biggest sports stories of 2004 [Dec. 30, 2004] is a huge injustice.

Bill Hesse, Centereach

Response from LI Press Sports Staff: Trust us that Armstrong winning his record-setting sixth-consecutive Tour de France was heavily considered when we debated the list. It's a shame when stories like steroid use and brawls in stands overshadow such a special accomplishment. But that's why the list was "biggest sports stories and not "best."

POWELL GOES FOUL

Is Shaun Powell a sports columnist or a comedian? His column in *Newsday* [Jan. 14], "Give Bonds Bulk Of Credit," really has to make a reader think, "What is up with this guy and his editor?" He is suggesting that we will applaud Barry Bonds for his steroid use sometime in the future. If we don't applaud him in the present for being a steroid abuser, what makes this comedian think we will applaud him in the future? He should be banned from baseball, and Shaun Powell should be banned from ever writing another column for any legit paper (in *Newsday's* case, I use the word "legit" sarcastically). Is [his next column] going to tell us that his "heroes" are the owners of BALCO for distributing the steroids?

Gene Keller, Deer Park

Response From LI Press Sports Staff: We're not about defending another paper's content, but Powell was saying that if not for Bonds, MLB would never have sat down and drafted a new steroid ban, and he should be applauded for using steroids because of that. It was written tongue-in-cheek and is the kind of column sportswriters pen to get attention. We will not, however, defend Powell's kicker of "Thank you Barry, Barry much." What is he, five?

Want your sports voice heard? E-mail any rant you wish to editor@longislandpress.com.