



Our Boys: A Perfect Season on the Plains with the Smith Center Redmen

Joe Drape

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An inspiring portrait of the extraordinary high-school football team whose quest for perfection sustains its hometown in the heartland

The football team in Smith Center, Kansas, has won sixty-seven games in a row, the nation's longest high-school winning streak. They have done so by embracing a philosophy of life taught by their legendary coach, Roger Barta: "Respect each other, then learn to love each other and together we are champions."

But as they embarked on a quest for a fifth consecutive title in the fall of 2008, they faced a potentially destabilizing transition: the greatest senior class in school history had graduated, and Barta was contemplating retirement after three decades on the sidelines.

In Smith Center—population: 1,931—this changing of the guard was seismic. Hours removed from the nearest city, the town revolves around "our boys" in a way that goes to the heart of what America's heartland is today.

Joe Drape, a Kansas City native and an award-winning sportswriter for *The New York Times*, moved his family to Smith Center to discover what makes the team and the town an inspiration even to those who live hundreds of miles away. His stories of the coaches, players, and parents reveal a community fighting to hold on to a way of life that is rich in value, even as its economic fortunes decline.

Drape's moving portrait of Coach Barta and the impressive young men of Smith Center is sure to take its place among the more memorable American sports stories of recent years.

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