





# A n H o n e s t G

IN THE WONDERLAND OF NAIA FOOTBALL, NOTHING IS QUITE WHAT IT SEEMS

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*"If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?"*

—ALICE IN WONDERLAND

The Middle of Nowhere, the very dead center, is probably somewhere on South Dakota's Country Highway 40 in Lake County. The city of Madison, pop. 6,474, birthplace of Entertainment Tonight co-host Mary Hart, is a good enough place to start looking. The town's motto is "Discover the Unexpected." That's as close to a warning as you'll get.

This is a college town where they play perhaps the most honest iteration of college football in America, which means it is mostly built on lies. Begin with this one: "college town."

## THEY PLAY PERHAPS THE MOST HONEST ITERATION OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL IN AMERICA, WHICH MEANS IT IS MOSTLY BUILT ON LIES.

The primal appeal of college football is rooted in its tribalism. Teams don't relocate, players don't pick new free-agent landing spots and there is no high-round draft pick next year. There is no parity; there are no salary caps. You are who you are. We picture banners, barbecue, perhaps game day beer specials, cute girls with painted faces, well-heeled alumni tailgating out of the back of luxury SUVs. There are battles of marching bands, a line of sweatshirts in school colors streaming to the stadium and teams bounding out of steam-filled tunnels while the PA fires up "Hell's Bells." It smells like smoke and sweat and urine and stale Budweiser. The fantasy into which we walk every fall weekend is that this can continue indefinitely, that college football as it exists today will ever be thus. That's all before kickoff.

There are blood rivalries in college football, enmities that date back a century or more, sometimes based on football and sometimes on something else: Slave states and Free

states, North and South, vinegar slaw or mustard slaw, city or country, smart kids vs. football factories, Ag schools and Land Grants and Ivy Leagues and lesser-thans. There are the fallen dynasties, the perpetually downtrodden conference-basement have-nots, the nouveau-riche upstarts with a wildcatter's oil money — the tapestry of America and Americana laid bare, 11-on-11, settled in the dirt.

College football, at its finest, is more than the sport itself. Here, it's less.

Madison on a Saturday morning, just blocks from the campus of Dakota State University, whose team last achieved something of note more than 40 years ago, is dead quiet. There are virtually no stores selling Dakota State gear, or many stores selling gear at all. There are more maroon signs for the local high school team than for the Trojans, whose colors are blue and yellow.

Madison is in a perpetual state of quiet during the harvest season, when life in the Midwest should be rowdiest. Instead, a clean, wide boulevard with angled parking spots frames stores selling Christian knick-knacks and tiny diners that serve biscuits to farmers at 5 a.m. and shutter after noon.

Dakota State underlines 1971 as its high-water mark, a 23-20 victory in the short-lived Boot Hill Bowl in Dodge City, Kan., over Northwestern Oklahoma State, becoming the first South Dakota team ever to play in a bowl game, albeit one last played in 1980, one year after the school's last conference championship. Few outside the teams and the residents of Dodge City would know it happened. But it was a bowl game — a bowl win! — and it is the first thing people from this school will bring up in discussing the pride of their Trojans.

With kickoff in a crucial league game just two hours away, barely a soul stirs in the brick-and-concrete downtown. A banner welcoming visitors flutters across the city's main street, linking a bar and a discount store. That's a fair accounting of the entertainment options for this area: Beer. Lots of it.



*Foley's Bar, a staple of downtown Madison.*

The Dakota State Trojans play in the North Star Athletic Association of the National

Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. That puts them under the dominion of perpetual powerhouses in a region that's rich in NAIA schools, like Morningside College and the University of Sioux Falls, which won so often it moved up to the NCAA in 2011. It also means they're operating in a Mad Hatter's Wonderland: The Trojans won only two games last year, which nevertheless somehow left them only one game shy of winning their conference championship.

You see? Nothing is what it seems in the NAIA.

Like deep-sea bacteria that evolved to use deadly sulfuric vents as a food source, schools like Dakota State with football teams like the Trojans have learned to adapt to their environment, inhospitable though it may be. There isn't much recruiting in South Dakota, and the few promising kids begin by looking at the University of Nebraska. The next batch is at least trying to make a Division II school, and if pressed, might settle for Division III. For many, by the time you've reached the NAIA in your decision-making, you're either failing athletically, scholastically or, um, drug-testingly. Your defeat is their victory in the place where nothing is what it seems.

So Dakota State soaks up those kids, the ones who were dumped at the last minute by a bigger school, the ones who neglected to take a standardized test for college admissions, the bad seeds whose behavioral issues made them unwelcome at larger programs.

Actually, the Trojans do more than soak them up; they welcome them with open arms. They require this odd, occasionally toxic mix to survive.

At a school like Stanford, we may picture the perfect recruit: Elway teeth, honor roll, some kind of extracurricular activity, Division I size.

Not here.

On this spit of rolling hill country, players fall in two camps. First is the mostly white, mostly Midwestern contingent who couldn't hack it at a higher level, but couldn't let go of the college football dream. They're the kids who pay full tuition and either live at home or drive back on offseason weekends to re-enact high school, and when they're asked at their five-year reunion what they did in college, they can jut out their chins and say, "I played ball."

Then there's the second group. They are the key to a successful NAIA program, and coaches also have an ideal recruit in mind. But this isn't Stanford.

Here, the ideal player should have barely passed the ACT — a score that's too good will draw attention from bigger schools. So an 18 or 19 out of 36 should do. Next, he should come in with some financial aid in place. Ideally, this is a Pell Grant, worth as much as \$5,730, intended for the lowest-income college students, which allows the school to offset some of its costs.

Talent-wise, the perfect player did well in high school, but not so well he caught a D-I recruiter's eye. They are the four-star lineman who couldn't shake the injury bug, the speedy wideout who can't pass Algebra II, the tweener too small to play end and too slow to play linebacker.

## THE SCHOOL TAKES STOCK OF ITS TALENT



# EACH YEAR, ASSESSES THEIR PAST PERFORMANCE, PREDICTS THEIR FUTURE VALUE, AND STICKS A DOLLAR SIGN ON THEM.

And if we're talking about a truly perfect candidate, the student is on Medicaid, too, so he has some kind of insurance.

Then, it's payday. Unlike Division I, NAIA scholarship money doesn't go directly to the school for books and tuition. It goes to the player, to pay out how we wants, though tuition usually get paid — about \$14,000 for an in-state player and \$16,000 for out-of-staters. This is the most honest iteration of college football in America for that one simple reason: They pay their players. And not just some agreed-upon median, either. The school takes stock of its talent each year, assesses their past performance, predicts their future value, checks which other recruits it can snag and sticks a dollar sign on them.

Put \$5,000 or \$10,000 in the hands of most college students, athletes or not, and spring break is paid for. This usually happens to thousands of students who misuse student loans, who will have to regretfully cough it up later. But here, the cash comes first, lump sums at the start of each semester, and it's up to the student how to spend it. It isn't delivered by a shady guy wearing a fedora from a booster-owned car dealership handing over a bag of unmarked bills. No, there's an honest-to-God series of checks made out with your name on it, to do with what you will — send it home, get another tat, buy books, spring for beer or weed. The lure of that money, promised in four or five zeroes to college players who are dirt-poor or near it to begin with, is hard to turn down.

It's all justified, of course, under the banner of opportunity, of David overcoming Goliath-like odds, by the hard luck kid with "great character" who is nevertheless motivated and supremely talented, brought to the Great Plains to turn his last chance into a made-for-TV movie: Heartbreak, struggle, perseverance.

These are the stories the NAIA lives off. In this instance, the story of a young football player reaches the higher limits of Hallmark television credibility. Then there was a sudden, tragic turn and a faceless bureaucracy that ground his dreams to dust, leaving him stranded, ineligible and abandoned.

It sounds good. The truth is something else entirely.

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*Running back Robert Johnson sits in the stands in the stadium Dakota State shares with the local high school.*

If you take the same route as our Hallmark hero, this is how you get to the Middle of Nowhere:

You board a tiny passenger jet in a mid-sized regional airport and fly vaguely north. Then you land at a far smaller airport and walk past windswept dirt mounds to a rental car and drive 40 miles west through golden stretches of wheat fields and patches of brown left fallow onto a neglected state highway and past an ethanol factory belching steam into cerulean skies and a combine in which two men are sitting expressionless staring into the horizon and you realize with a thudding slap that you've done something wrong months or years ago and you don't have any way to fix it and it's too late to turn around.

It's about 20 miles from there.

The eerie quiet of game day softens a bit near campus. Autumn cold fringes shadows in the bright October sunshine and a few dozen shuffling folks in blue sweaters make their way through a parking lot, past a chain-link fence to rows of bleachers behind the home team bench.

Months ago, a talented, energetic new running back was the talk of the young squad. This staid Midwestern crew was energized by the brash Californian with 4.4 speed who gave the struggling program hope, who instantly became a team leader, who led everyone to dream a little bigger and even delivered some football basics: A motto and something to yell.

But this player had a problem. Despite pleas from his coaches, despite arguments of hardship after the death of a parent, the NAIA ruled him ineligible just before the season. It



seems that in his last semester of junior college before falling through the looking glass, Robert Johnson was supposed to take a full-semester course load, and he didn't. The NAIA was unmoved: Hours are hours and grades are grades and he could not play. Yet, for some reason, he stayed.

Game day mornings, Johnson's eyes still open without an alarm clock. Luck and good decisions grant you access to nicer digs, to breezy campuses in friendly college towns. Bad decisions and bad luck force you here, to college football's edge, one sprain, tweak or tear from insolvency, in a place that would not know if you lived or died.

## BAD DECISIONS AND BAD LUCK FORCE YOU HERE, TO COLLEGE FOOTBALL'S EDGE, IN A PLACE THAT WOULD NOT KNOW IF YOU LIVED OR DIED.



*Robert Johnson with Colby Morgan, a four-star defensive tackle from South Florida.*

He is given a moment to consider his circumstances: Highly-touted running back from California shirks from the SAT and therefore Division I programs to seek his fortune at a junior college that produces a half-dozen top prospects each year. Junior college running back struggles against Division I-level competition. Struggling athlete takes first offer made to him.

Result? Robert Johnson comes to South Dakota.

From the crown of his head to the bridge of his nose, Johnson could be comedian Kevin Hart. Same crinkled eyes, same brow. He widens at the cheeks, affecting a droopy countenance accentuated by a broad grin that pulls his whole face down with it.

His massive arms are half covered with tattoos. There are a series of blueish rhombuses on his right arm that look like the interlocking plates of a stegosaurus. These are clouds. Among these are vaguely pointy shapes. These are stars. And as he traces his finger up his arm to the top, he comes to three birds. He points to the middle one. This is his father.

Johnson talks a lot about his father. The two were close, both as father and son and as player and coach. Johnson's father, also named Robert, was the one manning the barbecue at Pop Warner football games, the one who corrected his passing routes, taught him to drop a shoulder and run low. He told his son he'd be a quarterback if he grew up tall and a running back if he didn't. He played catch. He took his son camping. He fathered.

Johnson was always the big kid on the field then. He remembers those early, gawky days in Pop Warner, how the grass smelled, and what it meant to hear from his dad that he threw to the right receiver, ran the right route.

He proceeded down the patented Athlete from Limited Circumstances roadmap: AAU basketball traveling team, practices after school in some sport every season and a coterie of friends with the same schedule. Johnson relied on his father in a place that required stern hands to keep kids free of trouble. The year before he was born, his hometown, East Palo Alto, Calif., led the nation in homicidal violence.

"All of the murdering and all the fuss," as put by East Palo Alto native Leighton Lang, who has known Johnson since boyhood and coached him in junior college. Johnson's talent landed him a spot at St. Francis, a Catholic school in the Bay Area, part of a competitive league that launched the careers of Tom Brady, Brandi Chastain and Barry Bonds. The school has two more active players in the NFL, the Vikings' Rhet Ellison and Jaguars fullback Will Ta'ufo'ou and three in MLB: the Cardinals' Daniel Descalso, Marlins outfielder John Gall and Daniel Nava of the Red Sox.

After pushing for playing time as a freshman and sophomore, Johnson was poised for a breakout year to launch him down a similar path. Football ended and basketball was in full swing when Johnson's mother walked into the gym, which was strange, and the coach saw something in her face and stopped a scrimmage, which was stranger yet.

"You could see something happened," said Kenneth Harris Jr., Johnson's childhood friend. "Then she told him. He tried to hold it back, but he got pretty emotional."

His father suffered a stroke. This, to Johnson, was the end of one world. Even today, he keeps a picture of his father on his phone, tubes running out of his nose and the neck of his hospital gown. Back then, he suddenly no longer wanted to play football. He has trouble explaining this now. Something just went quiet inside of him — whatever compels people to endure two-a-days and bull-in-the-ring hitting drills and end-of-practice gassers, was gone.

So he left football, left St. Francis, transferred to Carlmont High, a public school where he wasn't an athlete. He wasn't anything, really. The food was terrible. The classes were huge. People walked over you, if you let them. He was as trapped as his father, paralyzed and inert, a Nowhere Kid.



He passed a year this way. Then one day that summer, his father in a hospital bed 100 miles south, Johnson's mother drove him past his Pop Warner field. This sounds like a football fairy tale, but this is how Johnson tells it. He smelled the grass, he saw the lines being painted and he wanted to come back, was sure he was ready.

And boy, did he. At about 5'10 and 190 pounds, with 4.46 speed, Johnson hit California's high school Peninsula Athletic League like a comet. A 2010 story in *The San Jose Mercury News* labeled him "Mr. All-American" after he gashed a rival high school for 278 yards and three touchdowns, part of a senior campaign that saw him lead the league in rushing yards and be named Offensive Player of the Year. Recruiters contacted him. He says he got attention from Notre Dame and Cal, though today he can't find the old Facebook messages to prove it. Finally, to a kid with NFL dreams, things were falling in place. But while at Carlmont, Johnson made a very bad decision.

He neglected to take the SAT.

Harris Jr. said Johnson would have been coaxed into taking the test if he stayed in private school. Lang, his mentor, says academics were always a struggle with Johnson. His mother didn't know he missed the test until years later. Whatever the case, Johnson said he simply didn't do it, even though it was one of the few barriers between him and a scholarship.

Without a test score — Johnson said Cal stopped contacting them when he told them he hadn't taken the SAT — he enrolled at the College of San Mateo, where Lang is an assistant coach. This was, for JUCO, the big time. San Mateo often sent kids to major football programs, and Johnson was sure he'd be next in line.

But then he didn't start. And he didn't get many carries. Buried on the depth chart under future Division I starter George Naufahu, now at UNLV, Johnson was getting tired of waiting. You can still watch him at San Mateo, [in videos on a recruiting website](#), sometimes wearing No. 18 and sometimes No. 3, darting around defenders and diving into the end zone. But his sophomore season ended with just 303 all-purpose yards.

Then his mother called. His father was dead. It was on Nov. 9, 2013, just before a mid-season contest against De Anza College. He played, but doesn't remember much. He's sure he did well, perhaps his only really good game at San Mateo. Stat sheets show he scored on a 71-yard touchdown catch.

The following semester, he spent more time at home. His grades dropped and he took a half-load of classes. He was preparing for a shot at another school. But few came calling, and none of them Division I. Or II. Or III. But Dakota State did.

## IN THE NAIA, YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR. THERE IS NO SENSE OF PARITY.

For the NAIA, the Northern Plains are a hotbed of talent. Cynics would say this is because there's just one big team nearby, the Cornhuskers, and everyone else relies on whatever Nebraska discards. But for whatever reason, schools like Morningside are dominant programs. Grand View University in Des Moines began last decade as a perpetual loser,

but is now a small dynasty.

Grand View shows what happens when you spend money. In 2007 GUV decided to field a football team, the first in school history, and decided to spend money on its football program, recruiting players from Texas to come north. The results have been immediate: A 14-0 record in 2013 that culminated in a national championship.

Let's be clear here. In the NAIA, you get what you pay for. There is no sense of parity; there are scholarship limits, but no limits on how many players you may have in a program. So private schools can stock up on actual talent, and then let the freshman, JV and third-string squads full of walk-ons cover the cost — they're paying full tuition for the privilege. Some schools have programs of 150 players or more. And those are the schools that usually make the playoffs.

"There can be a great discrepancy in the size of budgets at NAIA schools that plays a role in the recruiting of players," allowed Matt Hanson, NAIA's Director of Legislative Services.

This is the promise we make to college football players: Maintain your academic standing, which has very little to do with football ability, and we will offer you the chance to earn untold millions when you leave; we won't pay you, but someone might. It is a gamble in which the school cannot lose. And in the NAIA, they hedge their bets.

Johnson is one of those bets. Brought to this school with the promise of a Pell Grant and scholarship money, Johnson boarded a plane from Palo Alto and came to a place he'd never heard of, a place he never imagined himself to be, and called himself a Trojan.

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*Head coach Josh Anderson on the sidelines with starting QB Justin Summers and offensive lineman Zac Woods*



All coaches have their eye on their next job. This job had its eye on its next coach.

Dakota State coach Josh Anderson led the team to four wins this year in the NAIA's North Star Athletic Association. That's the most they've won in their five years in conference play. They nearly took the conference with only two wins last year, but lost their final game to finish 2-9.

"It's crazy to think we could have won it with three wins, but that's how it is here," he said. Anderson, a Madison native, was once a Trojan, spending 1994 and 1995 at tight end. But then, like some of his very own players, Anderson bailed for higher ground and secured a scholarship at North Dakota State University, where winning was not a hope but an expectation.

Anderson then worked his way up the coaching ranks, most recently in an Arizona high school in the mountains south of Flagstaff. The area isn't cacti and cow skulls, and the football is tough as hell. "White Mountain boys are not to be messed with," said Anderson. The area is lumberjack country. The fans expect the best, and Anderson delivered, being named the *Arizona Republic's* Small School Coach of the Year and winning the 2008 3A state championship. Then he came to Dakota, called home by a wife who wanted to be closer to family and the prospect of leading this tiny team to something other than utter futility.

Back in Madison, he somehow had less money, fewer resources and maybe a quarter of the passion he saw in high school. But Anderson's relative success this year, his sixth season as coach, is also a challenge: After the year they've had, he's not sure he can afford to pay his starters enough to keep them.

NAIA players are more like free agents signed to one-year deals, and their coaches more akin to general managers. From his meager athletic budget, Anderson had to divide 29 athletic scholarships worth \$2,500 each into a football team of 86 souls. This often means kids on the lower rungs get \$500 for the year, if they get paid at all, while the top recruits pull in \$5,000 or more. Winning is costly.

Say this for the kids on the Dakota State roster: Few of them are under the ongoing delusion of collegiate amateurism. Cliff Marshall, a young 300-pound Chicago-area sophomore with a 1,000-watt smile, doesn't blink when discussing the realities of the NAIA.

"It's a business. Let's not even kid around," Marshall said. "And if you can't play, they'll pay somebody else."

**"IT'S A BUSINESS. LET'S NOT EVEN KID AROUND. AND IF YOU CAN'T PLAY, THEY'LL PAY SOMEBODY ELSE."**

Marshall is one of a small contingent of players from out of state. Anderson recruited kids from southern California, Florida and Texas, usually by email. After some of these kids learned that Florida Atlantic and Florida International and Florida A&M were going in a

different direction or only offering partial scholarships, they ended up here, the pirate ship of college football.

Now they're in a place they never imagined they would be, a place that was 94-percent white at the last Census. But it's easy to tell most of the out-of-state athletes in Madison, S.D., in their own skin, they're in a sort of uniform all the time. In Madison, if you're black, the assumption is you probably play for Dakota State.

Madison has an uncertain relationship with the team. Some of that can be attributed to the constant losing. But Dakota State has other challenges. Over the years, there's been little continuity at head coach, no face of the program.

To make up for what the school won't give him in athletic dollars, Anderson is often literally going door-to-door with his hand out. The school can't pay to feed 86 kids for three weeks before the season. So to afford preseason camp, Anderson is forced to turn to restaurants, bars and churches ("Church dinners are the best ones," he says wistfully. "Everything homemade.")

But not everyone is receptive, like main street cafe co-owner Beth Klingbile. She should fit the profile of a school booster: A cheery local business owner who graduated from Dakota State and stayed in town. But when the topic of Dakota State athletics comes up, Klingbile's smile is a little less certain.

"Yes, they come and ask for donations," said Klingbile. "But that's the only time I see them."

Have you ever given them money?

She shakes her head.

Anderson realizes he's competing for dollars with everyone from youth soccer to missionary outreach programs. And if he has one true supporter in Madison, it is a man with the unlikely name of DeLon Mork.

Mork owns the Dairy Queen in town, as did his father and his grandfather. He survived testicular cancer, twice. On National Blizzard Day, he outsells any DQ in the country. He busies himself around the store, fiddling with the shades or clearing counters. Customers leaving get a "see yuh!" in his heavily-accented speech from the Upper Plains. People like DeLon Mork.

A few wins and a few more close losses have him in high spirits.

"Aw jeez, dey're just turnin' it around up there, aren't dey!" he says, his perpetual smile brightening. He, perhaps more than anyone else, believes in this team and his friend, Coach Anderson.

Two years ago, after nonstop losing, Dakota State's president pledged 2013 would be Anderson's last season. Then that president resigned. His replacement, an interim president, hasn't issued any final edict. In the meantime, in an effort to win now and save his job, Anderson decided to go on a spending spree and spent double his \$70,000 athletic budget. "I told my wife, I'm sick of nickel-and-diming it," he said. "If I have to hold bake sales, I'll make the cookies myself."



He is not exaggerating. There is no certainty he will be able to make up the money he invested in this year's class — with most of football season in the books, he still has a \$20,000 hole. He brought in a four-star defensive tackle from South Florida, to whom he pledged \$10,000. He spent a couple grand on a tiny cornerback from Jacksonville, Fla. And he offered a cool \$5,000 to a 5'10, 190-pound running back from San Mateo Junior College named Robert Johnson.

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Johnson spent all of summer and fall camp here, making his presence known as the fastest, most game-ready back on the field. And it wasn't just speed and power — he also brought the feel of a real program with him, the swagger few of his teammates possessed, something that helped them all believe that playing for Dakota State meant something more. The College of San Mateo is a feeder school to FBS programs. Johnson watches his JUCO teammates from last season on television, at Alabama, at Auburn, at LSU, at Oregon.

## IT WASN'T JUST SPEED AND POWER — HE ALSO BROUGHT THE FEEL OF A REAL PROGRAM WITH HIM, THE SWAGGER FEW OF HIS TEAMMATES POSSESSED.



*Robert Johnson with quarterback Justin Summers.*

Once here, though, he was quickly introduced to the realities of college sports, the NAIA, and Madison. After late-summer practices in which he dominated scrimmages, Johnson was pulled into his coach's office. Bad news. He couldn't play this year. The NAIA decided he was supposed to take 12 hours in his final term at San Mateo before joining Dakota. He

didn't. That was that. No further appeal.

Once again, the Nowhere Kid was trapped.

To the coaches, to the school's supporters and to Johnson, this is a manifest injustice. Here's a kid who just wanted to play, who came 1,500 miles from home to this foreign place because they told him he had a shot. But like everything in this place, there is more to the story.

First, in this rabbit hole of not quite anything quite being what it seems, even his claim of filial loyalty to his father doesn't quite add up. For four years, Johnson's father lay in a nursing home 100 miles south of his Johnson's hometown of East Palo Alto, Calif. In four years, Johnson never once made it down to see him.

He says now it would have been difficult. He didn't have a car, and couldn't organize a ride down. But his mother, a secretary at Stanford University, says simply that her son never asked to go.

He says that a half-sister intervened, writing him out of his father's will, stealing the man's cellphone and then cutting Johnson out of his life.

That couldn't be independently verified. A guess: Perhaps he didn't want to see this once-powerful man laid up in a hospital bed, tubes running out of his arms. His dad was a dad but also a refuge. To hear he was incapacitated was to hear not only that his father was ill, but that his entire support system from his earliest days as a child and as an athlete was no longer there. It was like hearing that your house burned down with all your stuff in it, everything that made you safe and made you who you are. Oh and also, your dad had a stroke.

After some prodding, he admits that he simply couldn't see his dad that way. "As bad as I wanted to see him I couldn't because I know I would break down and become weak," he says in an email. "Not seeing him helped me grow up. Decisions that I would (have) normally asked my dad about I made them by myself."

Then there's the money. Johnson talks about getting by, just barely, in South Dakota. He claims he has a delivery job, running school supplies to people who order them. He doesn't have set hours, and he makes money off the number of deliveries he makes. He says he sends money home to his mother from every paycheck.

Except she says it's not like that.

"He doesn't send money," his mother said. "He gets money, from here, from what his father left him."

Every month, she says she sends Johnson \$1,300 from his father's pension and death benefit. Asked about this, Johnson didn't respond for days, and then later said he splits the check with his mother, sending \$600 a month back, which she confirmed.

Finally, there is football. Since fall practice, Johnson hasn't made much of an effort to return to the team. The group he once inspired now barely mentions his name. When a clutch of football players in the lunchroom are asked about him, they mention, yeah, they heard about him ... months ago. Now it's "Don't really know the dude," and "Hasn't been around."



Anderson complains that Johnson could be out there practicing, even if he can't play. He could be lifting with the team, getting stronger, helping out. But he isn't.

Johnson's explanation is simple: If he's injured, he's done for. What good is practicing when he could end up broken without ever performing before scouts at a bigger program?

Wonderland is where he followed the white rabbit of an NFL dream. Now, he waits, a cat without a grin, a grin without a cat.

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This Saturday in October, there are no scouts in the stands; there rarely are. There is only Johnson and a few other injured and ineligible kids clustered on the sideline. A few yards apart, the rest of the team huddles. A small crowd slowly grows in the stands.

This game, against the University of Jamestown (N.D.) Jimmies, would set the tone of the rest of the season. At 3-3, with the possibility of a winning season on the horizon, this conference game could be the team's first chance to announce it was no longer satisfied with all the losing. And a loss would almost certainly seal Dakota State's fate for the year. It wouldn't be easy — coaches knew Jamestown recruited big players, choosing size over speed, so their hurry-up offense would have to counter with short, horizontal plays in quick succession that tired out their larger opponents.

On the field, the Trojans' redshirt sophomore quarterback was taking a beating. Hit after hit during the season appeared to leave him unsteady. The score was 10-3 at the half, and Dakota State was lucky it was that close.

Arms crossed, Anderson was running out of ways to say "wrap up and tackle" or "double the inside rusher." The secret weapon, the one that might have been the key to saving this team and his coaching career, stood on the sideline.

Anderson isn't sure what to make of Robert Johnson now. At least, that's what he says. He expected an all-star, a game changer, a job saver. What he got was a slogan, a promise, and then ... nothing.

He wants Johnson back with the team, lifting and running plays, making the defense better even if it doesn't benefit Johnson personally.

## EVERY WIN AND EVERY CONTRIBUTION BY EVERY PLAYER HELPS, AND HELPS BRING A BETTER CALIBER OF PLAYER TO DAKOTA STATE.

But oh, it would help Anderson. Every win and every contribution by every player helps, and helps bring a better caliber of player to Dakota State, and then — who knows? He knows Johnson is far better than his typical recruit and could have been that kind of player who changes a program and gets a coach another job, maybe one with a D-II school, or an assistant's job at D-I. The coach Anderson first mentions as a model is Brian Kelly, who rose from obscurity at places like Assumption College in Massachusetts and Michigan's Grand Valley State to coach Notre Dame. They are similar in height and build. Same eyes. Squint, and you can see Anderson 20 years from now with Kelly's pasted-down coif and downturned mouth.

Win, and Anderson could begin to dream of Kelly's career path. Johnson was that important, but Anderson still scoffs at Johnson's NFL dream. He wasn't even the best player at San Mateo.

"He'd be great at Division III. A good Division II player," Anderson said.

"The NFL?" He shakes his head. NAIA is Robert Johnson's acronym.

Halftime ends and the teams make a slow jog back to the sidelines. Dakota State's offense lumbers onto the field, but there's something different. The redshirt sophomore quarterback who spent half the game on his back is now on the bench. In his place is the best hope Anderson has, a gawky beanpole of a local hero named Jake Giles.

Giles is nominally on a redshirt in his true freshman year, but he's been coming on strong for the quarterback position in practice, and his teammates have noticed. Dakota State shares its field with Madison High School, which Giles led to the state championship game last year as a first-team all-state selection. In a coup for the school, Anderson managed to land Giles against offers from schools in Divisions II and III.

They are both hometown kids at their hometown school, Anderson and Giles, and for once, the Trojans look like a real team. Giles has the offense rolling, sprinting to a score on a red-zone QB bootleg, hitting receivers in stride and putting the defense on its heels.

People in the stands warm up. The sideline does too. The future of the program blossoms before the crowd's eyes and they know it. This is what hope looks like when you haven't had much of it in a good long while.



Just beyond the clapping and shouting is a quiet cluster of \$20,000 in promises Anderson made earlier this year that can do nothing but stand on the sideline.

Game day is a choice when you're ineligible. You can sleep through the game, usually played around noon. You can come to the game and sit in the stands. Or you can suit up and watch from the sideline.

Three ineligible players chose the sideline for the Jamestown game. Together, they comprised nearly one-third of Anderson's budget. Then, because of injury, behavior or academics, they found themselves ruled out.



*Ineligible players Collins Macauley, Robert Johnson, and Colby Morgan watch from the sideline.*

One of them is Johnson. Another is Colby Morgan, a four-star defensive tackle from South Florida whose hand injury scared off bigger schools. Then, before Dakota State's season, he tore his MCL.

It hasn't been fixed yet. That's in part because he has no insurance, and Dakota State doesn't offer him much in the way of health care. Many of the out-of-state football players are on Medicaid, Anderson and players said, leaving them without many options when they're injured. Morgan is waiting for the end of the semester to have surgery at home. He doubts he'll come back.

And about that money. Morgan was promised \$10,000 to come here, but once his hand injury became apparent, he says the school started waffling on its pledge. They weren't sure they could pay him, or even that they should. He says he's not bitter. He's just done here.

Collins Macauley, the tiny cornerback from Jacksonville, Fla., is the third ineligible on Anderson's roster, one whose grades kept him on the sidelines. Macauley continues to practice with the team and wants to stay.

Johnson has been noncommittal. He wore his No. 22 Trojans jersey on the sidelines and kept his eyes on his iPhone. His girlfriend was in the stands. To the running backs, he



shouted encouragement. "Hit that hole! Hit that hole!" he called to Jeremy Christner, the tall, lumbering running back from Broken Bow, Neb. To his smaller counterpart, Jabree Shorter, Johnson yelled, "Don't dance in there!" He didn't make eye contact with Anderson, who didn't seem interested in saying hello, either.

The ineligible players, grouped near the north end zone, chatted easily.

"These the real coaches right here," Macauley said, pointing to himself and Johnson.

"Fuck this shit," Johnson said evenly when a running play lost 2 yards. "Fucking bullshit. They calling everything wrong."

Giles had the offense rolling, but the defense still struggled to handle bigger Jamestown, and the score was 37-22 with less than two minutes left. The game appeared out of reach.

Then, a big return on a squib kick. The Trojans scored in one play, a Giles pass, and Dakota State was within a touchdown, 37-29. The Jimmies got the ball back but for once, the Dakota State defense held them back. Something was happening. The crowd began to stir. Third down, incomplete pass. Fourth down-and-8.

The clock showed 40 seconds left. A big punt return, a couple quick passes — anything was possible. The rest of the season was possible. Johnson and the other ineligible players were quiet for the first time all afternoon, watching, muttering under their breaths, "Come on, come on, come on." The long snapper sent the ball back, the punter rolled to his right, and ... catastrophe.

A flag on Dakota State. Running into the kicker. First down, Jamestown. Game over.

It was at this point that Robert Johnson showed real emotion for perhaps only the second time that weekend. He did this by throwing his phone on the ground, WHAM!, and that means something: This phone is his life. It's his connection to his home and his friends and everything that isn't South Dakota. In that one instant, even here in the middle of the prairie, Johnson cared about this group of people he'd likely never play with again. Or maybe in that flag he just saw the futility, the absurdity, of his own situation.

The team left in pieces, the starters greeted on the field by the booster-led "home families" that serve as surrogate parents to a few players each year, the backups shuffling to the locker room, the ineligible players headed home. The coaches went back to their offices to watch tape for a game the following week. In a few minutes, everyone was gone. The field once again belonged to the high school. If no one told you, you'd never guess they played college football here.

\*\*\*

*"I can't go no lower," said the Hatter: "I'm on the floor, as it is."*

—ALICE IN WONDERLAND

You come to this stretch of glacial till to write about an organization, the NAIA, that cynically manipulated a young football player into serving as a practice dummy. You expect to find a system of one-way abuse. You hope to find some kind of feel-good story, anyway. It is not there.

The truth is, everyone in this system is using someone. The coach needs the kids to keep his job and get the next one, even if it means cutting scholarships because of poor performance or shit-talking players who don't practice. The players use the team as a springboard to a bigger program or as a safe haven from NCAA suspensions, eyeing their options all the while. And the league uses everyone, conveniently only drug-testing during the championship game and crying poor-mouth the rest of the year.

## THE NAIA AND DAKOTA STATE ARE REFRESHINGLY HONEST – THEY REALLY DON'T GIVE A SHIT.

So what? That's college football. But here's what's surprising: Here, it's all out in the open. It's all above board. Everyone here has agreed to the principles at hand, even if they are severe and unforgiving.

In the world of college football, where so much is premised on the fantasy of loyalty and care for players' well being, the NAIA and Dakota State are refreshingly honest — they really don't give a shit.

Universities, especially the big ones, *especially* the big, successful ones, like to talk about preparing young men for life after football. Somewhere in every coach's wallet is a tiny script that reads, "My most important job is to get my players ready for the future." It's saccharine and horrible and cynical, a lie agreed upon.

But really, what better preparation is there for the real world, for life after football, than the lessons taught in the NAIA?

Life is brutish and short. No one will catch you if you fall. Dreams do not come true. Perform and eat. Fail and starve.

Nowhere Kids in the cold reaches of the Northern Plains don't get the chance to appeal, no matter if their fathers are dying or their desire to play flagged for a semester or they just could not will themselves onto the field or into the classroom.

There are no breaks in the looking glass in Wonderland.

*Dakota State finished the 2014 season 6-5, 2-4 in the North Star Athletic Association. Robert Johnson did not appear on the field. He is still uncertain if he will return next season.*



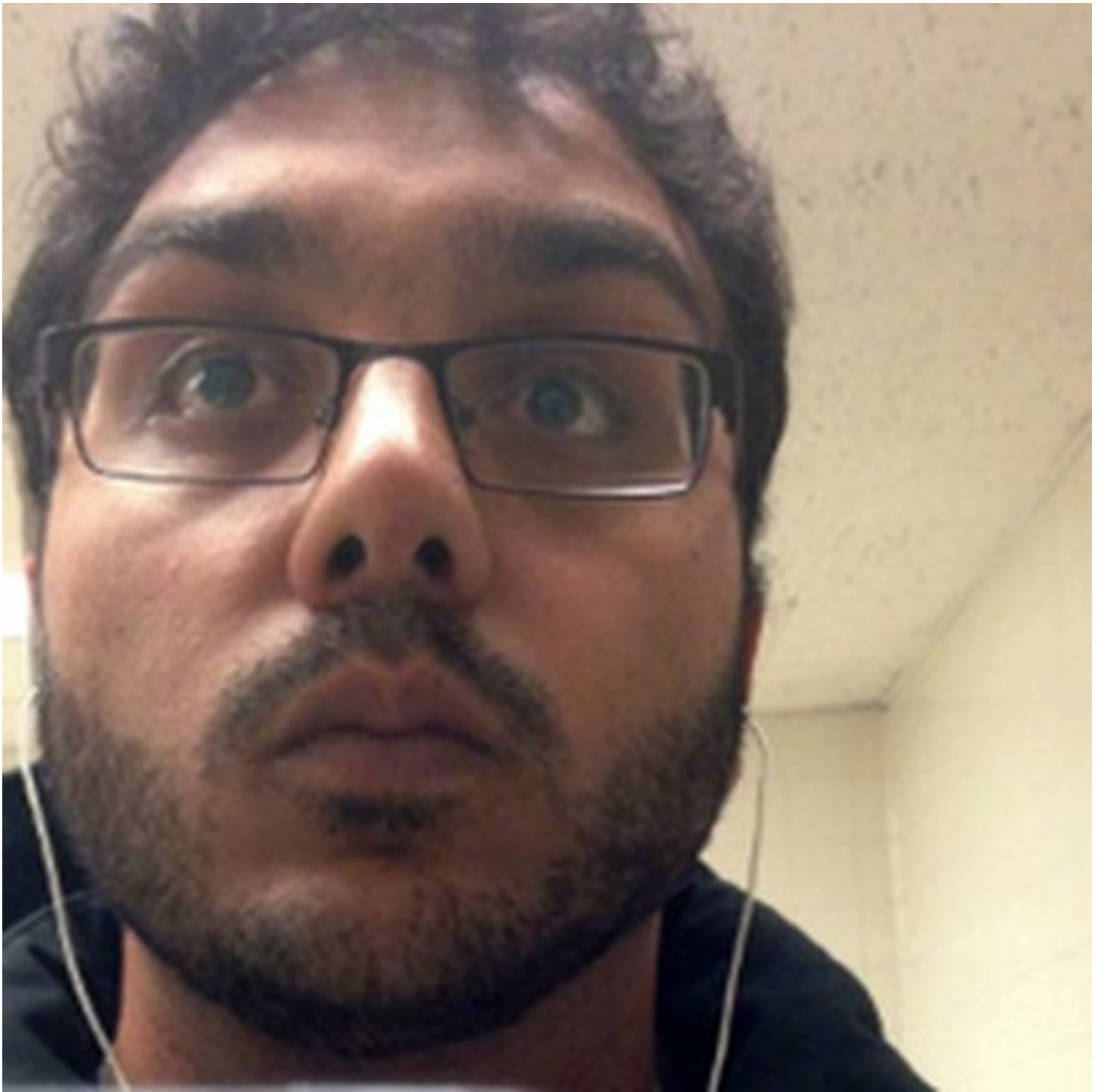
The Gyms of Holmes County

Higher and Higher

Buffalo and Wide Right, 25 years later

**A B O U T   T H E   A U T H O R**





Nigel Duara recently left his position as a reporter for the Associated Press in Portland, where he led coverage of the Ferguson civil unrest, investigated the Boy Scouts' confidential "perversion" files, and unraveled the history of a Bosnian war criminal living for decades in the U.S. In January, he will begin his new position focusing on immigration and the border as a national writer for the Los Angeles Times. He hopes his brother-in-law, an assistant at Dakota State, will allow him to stay in the family. Follow him on Twitter at @nigelduara.

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