

The End of the Season

The captains met in the middle of the field for the coin toss. It's cold, freezing cold, Wisconsin-in-November cold. The coin lands, sides are chosen, they all shake hands with a "May the best man win." There's a reason for the cliché, especially in the high school state finals.

What do we put our hope in? We know we've worked hard. We watched extra hours of game tapes. We took the weights an extra 15 pounds as often as we could. We listened intently to the coach—and he always had exactly the right thing to say, knew just what needed to be done here or tweaked there to pull out each game of the season at that pivotal moment.

And our record—we're undefeated. Our guys are the best. Those eleven guys on the field are so focused, have worked so hard—not just on plays, but they've been determined in their quality of sportsmanship and worked together as a team. You can count on them to take up the slack or offer a hand up. You can count on them to "play their hearts out." And the fans know it. Our parents, the school, the whole town supports us, encourages us, cheers for us. They know we can do it.

But what happens when some of those things don't seem to work? Or if some of our key guys get hurt? I know they'll tough it out, but it's still going to affect their play. You can tape them up, give them flack jackets and compression vests, but playing hurt takes an edge off of your game. What if it's colder than it's been all season—significantly colder? So cold you can't feel the football when it hits your hands. What if you can't hold onto the ball for a number of other reasons—like four or five or six other reasons? What happens when that cold saps your energy, your intensity, your focus? What happens when the plays we run in practice don't work—or penalties stack up? When is it just not enough? Is it ever really enough?

Even when you win, can you truthfully take full credit for your strength or your intensity or your driven work ethic? If so, then the game does belong to the fastest, the strongest, the most intense. But even the strongest will meet a stronger, the fastest encounter one more fleet of foot.

And there are those nebulous intangibles. 'Well, sometimes things like that just happen'—sometimes things work for us, sometimes against us. But do they truly decide the outcome of a game? And if strength or speed or passion cannot take full credit for success, then can their lack truly take all the blame for loss?

But the loss hurts. Joy erupts when success is secured; but the heights to which it takes us never seem to equal the depths into which we plunge when we taste defeat. And when we're in the throes of those bitter emotions, we wonder: Is it possible we've overlooked something? If this had been different or that had worked like it was supposed to, what then? What is the ultimate hope for success?

When hope is grounded in speed or passion or accuracy or hard work, is it truly hope? Those things change, shift, are dependent upon variables that we can't fully understand, can't foresee, can't control. Is our hope in our mentors, our coaches, our teammates, our fans? They're only human, so sometimes—even in the best of times—their wisdom fails, their decisions falter, their best intentions disappoint, stumble, fall short. So what is hope built on? Where is it safe to secure my deepest desires? There are answers. There is a solid foundation for hope.