

Barbarians

We have the Barbos coming up on the weekend. It is the last cup game. The table¹ is settled. We are the top two teams. Regardless of outcome, we will be playing each other again for the Texas championship. That's the way the competition worked. The top two teams in the table play for the right to represent Texas in the national playoffs. It's a simple system.

This weekend's game is not without import. The winner will get the coveted home-field advantage for the championship, not to mention momentum, bragging rights and a general feeling of confidence.

Training, as usual before such a game, takes on added intensity. Our jaws are set, our eyes intent. We run through each drill crisply and with purpose. Now we are focused on the one event, the culmination of the marathon, the season-long effort to get to this point. It is no time to let up or let down. All the work will be rewarded or wasted in the next few weeks.

Even the usual chatter is gone – no chit-chat, no joking, no deriding the mistakes of others. Everything is positive: good job, great catch, you can do it. Wow.

We practice our lineouts and penalties, kick-offs and twenty-two drop-outs. Repeating and repeating. Repetition burning in the muscle memory of each action, etching the neuron paths in the brain. We won't have to think, only act when the time comes.

We scrimmage in earnest. Dallas has a formidable pack, led by their number eight. "Big Tonga" they call him. An islander, who as a ranging back-row forward, is both adept at sleight of hand and powerful. He can run around you as well as over you. That makes it an issue for a defender. You never know which he is going to do. You can't commit until it is too late.

Our seconds step up for the training and give us good competition in the scrums. They are obviously as stoked as everyone on the "A-side", intensity and adrenaline rising. Excellence and effort are contagious. We all have the bug.

¹ The "table" is the compilation of wins and losses, rating the teams in the Union. The best record on top of the table and the worst at bottom. Everyone else is spread out in between according to performance.

As we repeat the scrums, one of them goes down. It folds at the middle and crumples in on itself. With the heightened pressure and intensity, everyone is getting a little chippy.

I scream at the B-side tight-head as we untangle, “Motherfucker...! Keep your freaking feet!”

We’re up now, and for an instant, we all get a fright. Michael’s still down, on his knees, hips up, head and chest on the ground. He senses our concern and yells out, “I’m all right.”

But he still doesn’t move for a few seconds. Then slowly, he lifts his head and shoulders up, twisting his neck back and forth and moves into a position resting on his knees and haunches. He’s still slowly twisting his neck.

We’d given him some room, forming a little circle around him, still not sure how to react.

I step up next him, “You okay?”

“Yeah, just a little twist. Give me a minute.”

“We can stop the scrummaging. Move on to lineouts?”

“No. We need to do a few more. It’s going to be a battle with the Barbos. Just give me a second.”

And after a few more seconds, he’s up, stretches his arms up towards the sky, and calls the pack together, “Let’s go. Scrum here. Bind up!”

We’re back at it. A few more scrums, and then we move on to lineouts. Later, it’s an unopposed team run. It’s Thursday night, two days away and no sense in risking injury in a full contact run out. The unopposed session goes well and smoothly. All the intensity, the focus, the work for the entire season has paid off. There’s hardly a missed pass and no mental mistakes. We’re all on the same page. We’re ready.

Since it *is* Thursday, it’s off to O’Malley’s after. When I get there, I can sense the underlying beat. You can feel it from outside, the bass-line of the music pounding out through the clapboard walls and into the Houston night, rattling the neighbors and our air.

In I go. It’s busy, yet still strangely subdued, not as loud or manic as usual. Then again, maybe it’s just me with one thought, one purpose in mind. Maybe it’s that nothing else distracts from that focus.

The Gents are in the booths in the back corner, a couple of pitchers already on the table. I get a glass, sit down and fill up.

The guys are talking, quietly, with intensity. In the booth behind me, Jerry's telling Willi, the new guy at flyhalf, "... and watch Freddy, their flyhalf. He likes to run it up, then dish it back to the number eight on the inside...."

Just sharing bits of information picked up over time. Rehashing in our brains what's happened in the past. Playing it out, visualizing, imagining what will happen on Saturday.

"... and if we shut down the inside move, he likes to kick. He'll try to keep the ball down in our end so they can keep the pressure on...."

Michael, Darryl and I are talking pack play. Michael's saying, "You know they work the rolling maul. They'll press up the pitch then release Tonga off the back.

"We have to just absorb the pressure and not worry about it. We've got to keep a couple of guys out and ready for that break. That's where the danger is."

We go on and on. Trying to cover every eventuality.

Genie comes over and chats for awhile. She can tell we've got other things on our mind. After a few minutes she goes back to gab with Sharon.

Shortly, Michael is getting up to leave. He's going home early, just a sign of where his head's at. We all get the message. A few minutes after he's gone, I leave too.

On Friday night, I polish my boots – an old New Zealand tradition as Fitch used to insist.

"It's not about just looking good come game day," he'd say. "It's about keeping your mind on the task at hand.

"You play through the game in your head as you're doing the boots. You take time out today to honor your purpose, your future. It's great mental preparation.

"And then you have the added benefit of looking flash on game day."

So, I'm polishing my boots. I take my time and do it carefully. I make sure all the mud and dirt is gone. I get every little flap and crevice covered in boot-black. It's all preparation. Zen and the art of shoe-shine.

Saturday comes and it is game time. It's like every Saturday, except more intense, more focused and more important. The Caballeros gather back in the pines of Memorial Park, our little corner of the world. We go at it with the Barbos hammer and tong, tooth and fingernail, like bulls locking horns, all the

usual clichés only they are more real. This is it. The battle for supremacy in Texas. We take it seriously.

It's a see-saw affair, flowing back and forth on the pitch, no one really taking the ascendancy. Our flyhalf, Willi, is playing the territorial game and making deep kicks to keep them penned in their end. They're using the strength of their pack to relieve the pressure and clear it out. Then we start over again.

With Lug out, Darryl has moved to second row. Someone had to move up to front row, and that would be me. I'm playing out of position and doing the best that I can. The question is: is it enough? The Barbos pack is big, strong and experienced. When Willi kicks the ball down in their twenty-two, they invariably end up with a scrum. I can't put enough pressure on to disrupt it. They have a stable platform and clear the ball. It's back and forth, rugby tennis. We keep at it.

Come half-time, the score is tied, six-six. Two penalties apiece are all that's been given up.

Michael gives the half-time speech. More of the usual clichés are in order. We don't need creativity here. We just need to do the basics and be clinical. Avoid the mistakes and do the little things right. We have the ability and the will-power. We just need to translate that into action.

"It all comes down to this half, boys. All the work we've done all season. This is it.

"You've started off well. Good tackling and good intensity. It's no time to let up.

"Willi, good work on the kicks. Keep it up. We want to keep them in their end. Let's start working it a little wider in the backline now. We can beat these guys out wide. Back yourselves!"

It was a fundamental contradiction, If we're kicking it, then we're not passing it out along the backline. But we knew what he meant. We would kick it down towards their try-line to gain territory. When we got there, and got possession, we would attack wide with the ball.

This is where it came to me, "Tee, I need you to pick it up in the scrums. We have to put the pressure on and regain possession. We can't let them off when we're in their end!"

"I know. I know," I responded, more resigned and resolute than testy. He was right. I wasn't doing the job. I needed to find some inner source of

strength and get better. I was committed to it.

Michael went on, “Forwards. A little harder work at the breakdown. We’re not winning that battle yet. It’s pretty much a stalemate. We need to get there sooner and be more aggressive. Let’s get some turnover ball. They’re strong, but we can be quicker. Speed and fitness are going to win this.

“If we start winning the breakdowns, keep tackling, keep the ball in their end, get some turnovers and attack out wide, we *will* get the result we want!

“Now let’s do it!”

“Hoka Hey!”

And we are back at it. The second half is on. We keep our focus and do what Michael had asked. Willi kicks it down and we play in their half.

Shortly, there is a scrummage. Their put in. I put all my intensity and focus into the engagement. That’s where you win the scrum – when you come together. It’s ninety-percent of the battle. If you win the engage, you’re in bloody good shape. My opposite, a big guy, strong and experienced, must have been tired, or just distracted. He came in a little high and I got under him.

With position, when the ball came in, I just extended. That gave us the advantage. Michael stole the hook and the ball shot to the back of our scrum. Cy swings around and picks it up before the Barbos know what happened. We are only about fifteen meters out. The fullback is too far away. Cy runs it in untouched.

Try given! The blood flow in my veins goes from slogging, pulsing, workman-like intensity to supersonic. My head boils with the new influx of oxygenated plasma brought to my brain, and with adrenaline and just plain jubilation, ecstasy. We are over the top. We have done what was asked of us, what we had planned. That blood flowed hot, drowning our heads with the emotion.

Willi converts easily. We have taken control of the game. Now we have to stiffen our spines and keep control. There can be no let up.

The kick-off goes straight to Willi and he blasts it back down to their end. What an asset it is to have a foot like that on your side! It’s an incredible weapon.

We are back down in their half looking for a repeat performance. The Barbos have a lineout, take it to a rolling maul, then it goes down. The ref gives them the put in at the ensuing scrum.

We set up and it's focus, focus, focus. Get low. Be ready. Come in hard. Do all those things we've trained. Let the body and spine take over. The brain doesn't have to be involved. Each little muscle fiber knows its role. It's all been done many times before. Just make this one perfect.

The scrums linger on the brink, composite rams coiling, tensing, congealing. Then they are released, exploding into one another, colliding two tons of bone, sinew, flesh and will trying to gain an advantage, trying to win the ball, the moment, the day. The scrum wobbles for an instant – all that weight on thirty-two sturdy legs – before steadying, coming to a momentary balance, equilibrium, waiting for the ball. The Barbos scrumhalf approaches, presents the ball and it's in.

The moment has come, the quick-twitch fibers fire, they lever bone and drive forward, just six inches on each side. That's all it takes to transform the two tons of muscle from static, latent equilibrium to a dynamic mass of moving energy. We are moving forward, bit by bit, as the ball retreats behind their front-row. The scrum's moving though, however slowly. We're moving forward. We are going to win a tight-head. This will be our moment again – a win of this little battle in the string of battles that make up the game.

Then, there's another wobble, a shudder that moves through the pack like a wave. I feel the stumble. We've gotten too low, a little unbalanced. The front-row alters its trajectory from forward to downward. The scrum is collapsing.

The second-rows and back-rows relax their push, but too late. The whole mass is driven into the ground, momentum and purpose not permitting a cessation of the forces at work. The pack folds in the middle and squeezes accordianly closed.

“That's it!”

The plaintive cry, calm, matter-of-fact, almost quiet yet still clear and distinct, comes from right next to me. I recognize it as Michael's voice. What I don't recognize is what comes next, a long, low, wail, something primeval, not loud but penetratingly eerie. Then it ends in a raspy gurgle and starts again immediately.

We all fear the danger, each of us hoping that today is not our day. We know it can happen anytime in this game, more likely in a scrummage with its massive forces and pressure, but imminent at any point: ruck, maul or tackle. Our latent fear and the palpable dread of our game gone awry drive us to roll away from

the pile quickly but carefully, both sides knowing against hope that something devastatingly wrong has happened.

In the end we all move except Michael. He's left, his shining essence and heart, crumpled, lying with his head and right shoulder bent under, hips turned sideways and motionless, only that low moan and gurgle coming from him.

The fear, the dread, the uncanny perception are all made fact. My blood all runs to my head as the adrenalin pumps into the system ten-times faster than whenever just playing the game. All I can come up with is:

“Jesus!”

I know immediately and instinctively that this is not a case for the magic sponge. No simple splash of water in the face will bring him back to wholeness. We will not be picking him up and sending him back into action with a pat on the butt.

I follow with the modern, universal, distress call:

“Call 9-1-1!”

“Stay back, give him room.”

I crouch down on my knees, my face close to his half-buried face.

“Michael. Michael? Michael!”

No answer except the continued low repetition of the moan and gurgle.

The next moments are a blur. Michael stays bent and we hover. Someone has gone to make the call. We at least know enough not to move him, a case where inaction is the best choice of all the possible acts.

I bend close and try to talk to him, “Michael? Talk to me, buddy.”

No response. His eyes are slits, just slightly open, but there's no light behind them.

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my *God!*”

What more is there to say?

We wait through the endless moments. Someone brings a blanket. Someone else ice. It's too hot for the blanket and we're afraid to put any pressure on his neck with the ice. We opt for a damp rag on his forehead – what little comfort we can give.

Eventually, the distant wail of the siren comes to our ears. They drive right by the pitch, not seeing us. Dopey runs out to the street and waves them back.

The ambulance drives back into the Memorial Park trees and on to the pitch. The EMTs hop out and go into a whirlwind of purposeful action. After a quick

assessment and finding Michael unresponsive, they pull out the backboard and lay it beside him. Together, at their direction, holding his head and shoulders steady so the spine doesn't move, we slowly lay him out on the backboard. He's taped down to the board, loaded on the gurney, into the ambulance and gone. The moments have sped up.

The game goes on. The contest must be decided, right? I can't go, though. My legs are rubber. My head is gone. My light, my leader is down. Genie's here and I ask her to take me to the hospital. I can't drive right now.

Biting her lip and not looking at me, she says, "Okay."

Ana's not here. She had a family commitment. She was to join us later. That's a call I'm dreading.

We follow the ambulance out on to the street. Behind me, the game is just restarting. It's irrelevant now. My only thought is for Michael. Oh, Jesus! Please don't let this be as bad as it looks.

The ambulance is taking him to Ben Taub, the main trauma hospital in Houston. If you're seriously injured, that's where you want to be. On the other hand, if your injury is not life-threatening, you probably want to be anywhere else. They are too busy at Ben Taub taking care of the gun-shots and head traumas to deal with mere broken bones or sick people. I'm glad Michael's going to a place where they can give whatever it is that he needs.