THE BOYS *of* RIVERSIDE

A DEAF FOOTBALL TEAM AND A QUEST FOR GLORY

THOMAS FULLER

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A Deaf Football Team and a Quest for Glory

Thomas Fuller

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About the Author

To Jocelyn, Harrison, and Sophie,
for your love and patience as I rumbled off to Riverside

Prologue

Sometimes a journey begins with an email. This one was a routine message sent to journalists from the California Department of Education, a note applauding the undefeated season of a deaf high school football team in Riverside, east of Los Angeles. The deaf school was founded a few years after World War II, but in seven decades none of its sports teams had ever made it to a championship, let alone prevailed in one. Now the California School for the Deaf, Riverside was in the playoffs. The email concluded with a plea for assistance: please help the school upgrade their facilities and write a check with "bleachers" on the memo line.

My job for *The New York Times* was San Francisco bureau chief. That meant covering wildfires and homelessness, deaths of despair on the streets of California cities and mass shootings. These topics are in line with the arc of my three decades in journalism, most of which have been spent abroad for the *Times* writing about natural disasters and military coups, uprisings and financial crises. It was heavy stuff, both the stories and the reporting. I had interviewed a rogue general in Thailand who was killed by a sniper as I was asking him a question. The bullet had whizzed over my head. I had counted bodies floating down a river after a terrible cyclone in Myanmar.

Then along came this group of high school kids and their quest for a championship. Something about the Riverside Cubs pulled me in like metal to a magnet. Riverside was seven hours away from my home in the East Bay of San Francisco. I got into my car and barreled down the eight-lane California freeways, arriving just in time to meet with the players and to

watch them crush their opponents in the second round of the playoffs. I interviewed the coach of the losing team, and he told me he had never competed against a squad that communicated so fluidly, and so well.

Reporting this story introduced me to the world of eight-man football, a division for smaller schools in California that have trouble fielding eleven-player teams. The California School for the Deaf, Riverside had just fifty-one boys in its regular high school academic programs. Nearly half of them were on the football team.

I came to appreciate the eight-man game. It was fast, hard-hitting, and a little more down in the dirt than eleven-man ball. Sometimes literally. At Trona High School, in a mining community in the Mojave Desert, the team plays their games on sand. The field is known as the Pit, part of the desolate landscape that envelops the town on the edge of Death Valley.

The eight-man division includes schools on the endless farms and ranchlands of the Central Valley, on Indian reservations, and perched high in mountain passes. There's even an eight-man team on Santa Catalina Island, an hour's ferry ride into the blue-green waters of the Pacific Ocean, where home-field advantage comes with the hope that the opposing team gets woozy on the boat ride over.

Smaller and far-flung does not mean less athletic. Big names have come out of California's eight-man football programs, including Josh Allen, the Buffalo Bills quarterback, who played for Firebaugh High School in a farming town in the Central Valley. The 1994 Heisman Trophy winner, Rashaan Salaam, played on an eight-man team in San Diego.

In reporting the book, I came to see the Cubs as a flesh-and-blood realization of the American dream. Coaches and players had backgrounds that spanned the globe. Their parents were from Mexico, Romania, El Salvador, Ethiopia. The team's defensive coordinator, Kaveh Angoorani, was born in Iran to a mother who was deeply distraught when she discovered her son was deaf. She sent Kaveh (pronounced "kaa-vey") to the United States, where he thrived in the deaf community and took up this curious game with an oblong ball. Football would become a central part of Kaveh's new American identity, one that he embraced so enthusiastically

that his idea of retirement was to buy a Harley-Davidson and ride into the California desert.

I marveled at the challenges that some of the players faced off the field. Phillip Castaneda, a lightning-fast running back, was homeless and slept in his father's car in a Target parking lot across from the school. His love of football motivated him to get up every morning, wash his face in the Target bathroom, and go to class.

The article I wrote about the Cubs for the *Times* got the school a lot of attention and put intense pressure on the team to win. I decided to put my career on hold, give up my position as San Francisco bureau chief, and follow the team for an entire season. It was a dream journey and a window into Deaf Culture, a term that many deaf people capitalize because it encompasses an entire class of people and their way of life. I was honored that the players, coaches, and administrators at the school trusted me—someone with little prior knowledge about deafness—to tell their story. I interviewed historians and linguists, psychologists and a neurosurgeon, all of whom had contributed to the incredible leaps in knowledge about the complex structure of sign language and how the human brain adapts itself to deafness by enhancing other senses.

The sports program at the California School for the Deaf had endured indignities for years. Visiting teams would sometimes talk about how it would be embarrassing to lose to a deaf team. During their many years with a losing record, the football team had the sinking feeling their opponents came expecting an easy win. Many of the talented athletes on the Cubs had previously played football in weekend leagues, with hearing people, and they had come away feeling lonely and alienated, unable to take part in huddles or team meetings. At Riverside, they came together as a squad with a sense of mission, an all-deaf team and coaching staff. They were underdogs, but they had something immeasurable. They had a brotherhood.

As I stood on the sidelines watching the team practice day after day, I witnessed a passion for the game of football. I was inspired by the players and their relentless pursuit of that championship ring. That email, which came as the pandemic was raging across a bitterly divided United States,

led me to realize that this team’s journey, a tale of belonging and excellence, was the story I wanted to write. It felt like a salve at a time of such turmoil in the country.

More than a hundred high schools in California play eight-man ball, and only two of them are deaf schools. The Cubs were determined to show the world that deafness was no impediment to sporting glory. On the contrary, they wanted to prove that being deaf on the gridiron gave them an edge.

1

Phillip

The story begins before the reporters and the television correspondents flocked to interview the team. Before the offers from movie producers, before the National Football League invited the captains to participate in the Super Bowl coin toss. Before success.

The story begins in the late summer of 2021, just as California, the nation, and the world were emerging from the worst of the coronavirus pandemic. It begins with a newcomer to the school, Phillip Castaneda, in the parking lot where he slept.

Phillip had a morning ritual. He would scamper out of his father's Nissan Sentra, get his clothes from a suitcase in the trunk of the car, and then slide back into the car to get dressed for the day. He had to wait until 8:00 a.m., when Target opened its doors, to slip into the entrance, hang a left, and head for the bathroom.

The backseat of his father's compact car was his bedroom. And if he looked out the car's windows, he could see, across four lanes of traffic, the football field where he hoped to shine. Football was his first love. He had played on various teams when he was younger, and despite his short stature and slight frame, he had impressed coaches with his speed and his toughness. Now he planned on displaying his talents across the street, on the varsity football team of the California School for the Deaf in Riverside, California.

Phillip's father, Jude Ward Castaneda, had driven to Riverside with the express purpose of giving his son a place to sleep. The Nissan was the only shelter he had the means to provide. Each night, Jude Castaneda would find a spot, preferably away from other vehicles, in the lot on Arlington Avenue. In addition to Target, there was a Yum Yum Donuts, where Phillip would also sometimes use the bathroom, a small Pizza Hut, a nail salon, a cannabis dispensary, and a dentist's office. It was a classic California strip mall. Phillip scraped together enough money to get a membership to the gym down the road, where he could use the showers. Every night, at around midnight, after all the shops had closed, Jude and his girlfriend would settle into the front seats of the car and Phillip would have the back to himself. All three are deaf, but Phillip had just enough hearing that he could make out the blaring horns of freight trains passing on tracks a few dozen yards away.

In his younger years, Phillip's father had been a gifted athlete and had competed as a wrestler in the International Games for the Deaf, the Deaf Olympics. But by his own assessment, Jude Castaneda had traveled down the wrong path, becoming hooked on methamphetamines and spending time in prison for domestic violence and violating probation. He had stayed out of trouble for the past decade, he said, and now he hoped that he could give his son a better chance at life. "I didn't want him to be messed up like me," he said in a conversation on the sidelines of a football game.

California has around 12 percent of the nation's total population, but almost a third of its homeless. Living in a car, in a tent, or on a piece of cardboard has become distressingly common in the Golden State, where the average house costs $700,000. For Phillip Castaneda, homelessness was compounding an already tough childhood. He had been enrolled in six different schools and had struggled in all of them. Studying English, a language with all its peculiar spellings and syntax, was especially tedious. You could say that learning English for Phillip was the equivalent of an American person with perfect hearing studying a foreign language, Portuguese or Swahili, take your pick, but never being allowed to hear it spoken. American Sign Language, which is as different from English as two

languages can be, is his native tongue. But of course “native tongue” is a term, like so many in English, that is not quite adapted to the deaf world.

Born just outside San Francisco and raised in the Central Valley, the vast agricultural expanse that produces everything from almonds to truckloads of tomatoes that get mashed into a good share of the world’s ketchup, Phillip was dealt a difficult hand from the start. His mother, also deaf, had been born in El Salvador and moved to California when she was a child. Among other ailments, she had a debilitating case of rheumatoid arthritis, the disease where the body’s immune system attacks its own tissue. It left her unable to work and relying on government disability checks.

As a teenager, Phillip had played football with hearing kids in and around the Central Valley city of Modesto. A friend offered to pay the $400 in fees that the league required. Phillip excelled on the field, but it was difficult being the only deaf person on a hearing team. Not understanding the instructions for some of the drills at practice, Phillip made sure he was always at the back of the line, where he could watch his teammates go first. But he loved the sport and told his family he wanted to play in the National Football League.

“Football was his escape,” his sister, Priscilla Castaneda, said. “Football gives him joy.”