

Kathy Hillman: Friday night lights, Saturday highlights & Sunday morning heights

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This year marks the 25th anniversary of *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream*. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist H.G. “Buzz” Bissinger penned the best-seller after spending a year in Odessa experiencing the culture of Texas high school football.



Kathy Hillman My family enjoys football—the games, the colors, the sights, the sounds, the enthusiasm, the unity—and has for five generations.

My grandfather scored all six points—a touchdown worth five and the extra point—in Baylor University’s first homecoming contest. He introduced the pastime to my hometown, and I literally grew up under Friday night lights. Their glow illuminated our windows, since Eldorado’s football field lay just across the back pasture. Before being deemed old enough for games, I heard the band play and the crowd roar. Thankfully, our fourth-grade P.E. teacher taught and tested us girls on the sport.

Although the stadium has moved, those Friday night lights continue to burn

brightly—none so brilliantly as on Sept. 12, when the school district renamed the field in honor of Coach Larry Mitchel, who taught in Eldorado



42 years.

Kathy Hillman's grandfather, T.P. Robinson, holds the ball in the center of a photo of Baylor University's 1909 football team. (Kathy Hillman Photo) And none in Waco as radiantly as the evening before the funeral for Midway High School coach and Howard Payne University graduate Kent Bachtel, who requested those attending his service wear their school colors.

Photographs and newspaper stories about both men reminded me of the year I taught high school speech. Under the rules then, varsity players received a weekly academic sheet. Each teacher recorded grade-to-date and signed. To be eligible on Friday night, the athlete had to be passing three of five solid subjects. I had the quarterback in class. He wouldn't give a speech. I noted his zero and signed the sheet.



China Spring

students tailgate before the China Spring vs. Cameron Yoe high school football game recently. (John Hillman Photo) Shortly afterward, the head football coach loomed over me: “You have to pass Billy Roy (not his real name). He’s failing two other subjects, and we can’t win without him.”

I probably should have been intimidated, but my college job in Baylor’s athletic department gave me courage.

Coach wasn’t happy. I explained, “Knowing public speaking’s scary, I guarantee students 70 if they write an outline and make an honest speaking attempt.” Then I added: “I’ll let any student give a late speech with a 10-point deduction. The first-week’s topic is student’s choice.”



Members of the Cameron Yoe High School Band. (John Hillman Photo) Billy Roy's football speech the next morning scored a touchdown. He was funny, thoughtful and articulate. His grade zipped from 0 to 90 like his passes. No gift, just a bit of grace and a little lesson that athletes had equal standards. The quarterback played a great game and also ultimately earned an A in the class.

With growing children, Friday night lights transitioned into Saturday highlights that included larger stadiums, more elaborate halftimes, exclusively licensed apparel—including shoes and boots—and creative tailgating. This year, however, we're returning to smaller bleachers with two grandsons playing flag football and two on West Middle School's seventh-grade team.



Pregame warmup

before the China Spring vs. Cameron Yoe high school football game. (John Hillman Photo)As I donned my new West-red shirt and sat in the grandstand watching fans stream in as we waited for Gilbert and Gabe to take the field, John commented football might just be the “state religion of Texas.” My Baptist mind rebelled.

“Think about it,” my husband explained. “More people congregate with more enthusiasm and more commitment under Friday night lights than on many Sunday mornings. In some places, the whole town attends games. Remember in Eldorado how nursing home residents loved pep rallies? You’ll find involvement by all ages—from tiny girls and boys in miniature cheerleader outfits and jerseys to grandparents proudly sporting school colors. Everyone’s unified. They’re all on the same team.”



China Spring

cheerleaders with young supporters at a China Spring vs. Cameron Yoe high school football game. (John Hillman Photo) My mind whirled as the boys took the field. What if as Christ-followers we demonstrated the same excitement for our faith we show for the teams we follow? What if we all willingly participated? What if we realized we're on the same team, regardless of church membership? What if we agreed roles and positions change depending on situation—player, substitute, special teams, trainer, coach, referee, cheerleader, band, fan or concession stand hand?

What if we proudly and lovingly displayed God's colors everywhere? What if we understood we may use different strategies, but we ultimately have the same goal—to win the world for Christ?

The Message puts the Apostle Paul's pre-game challenge to the Ephesians this way: "And that about wraps it up. God is strong, and he wants you strong. ... This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish" (Ephesians 6:10-12).

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Kathy Hillman is president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. She

also is director of Baptist collections, library advancement and the Keston Center for Religion, Politics and Society at Baylor University.