

# HOMETOWN FAVORITE

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A NOVEL

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Bill Barton and Henry O. Arnold

Foreword by Chris Sanders

  
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## Foreword

It was impossible, so it took a little longer to accomplish.

—Wally Byam, Airstream founder

All of my life people have told me what I cannot do. In high school, I was told I could not play college football. After a successful career at Ohio State, I was told I could not play in the NFL. After being drafted in the third round by the Houston Oilers, naysayers told me that I would not make it, and even after being in the league for a few years, I still had my share of doubters as well as moments of self-doubt.

Just like everybody else, I have had my share of “Job-like” experiences. Some of these were on the playing field where it is just a game, and others have been in the game of life that have left me “sitting in the ashes,” wondering if it was worth it to go on. Still, I have learned over the years that the Rodney Atkins lyric is true—that when you’re going through hell, you’ve got to keep on going.

When Bill first approached me with the idea for this book and asked for my help authenticating the life of a professional football player, I did not hesitate. Although fiction, the story in *Hometown Favorite* is an inspiring example of how people get through difficult times. It demonstrates something I have seen over and over—with God’s help and a lot of work, anything is possible.

Chris Sanders

former Tennessee Titans wide receiver

# 1

The lemon yellow Hummer skidded to a stop in front of Dewayne Jobe's house, the hip-hop music vibrating the vehicle's insides with percussive explosions. Jesse Webb, owner and operator of the pulsating vehicle, blew his horn to the rhythm of the beat.

The front door of the house swung open. Cherie Jobe stepped out onto the porch and planted her free hand on her hips.

"Jesse Webb, I'm gonna call the police if you don't turn off that yellow tank and stop raising the dead."

Jesse's grin transformed into a look of mock hurt. "Miss Cherie, we're just celebrating." Conceding to her trumped-up scold, he reached over to lower the volume.

"You got that thing so loud I couldn't hear Gabriel's trumpet." No longer able to hold a scornful expression, her face gave way to a bright smile. "Get in this house, both of you. My boy's not ready."

Riding shotgun with Jesse was Sylvester "Sly" Adams, quarterback for the Springdale Tigers and record holder for throwing the most touchdowns in the high school's history—due in large measure to his best friend Dewayne, Springdale's star wide receiver.

"Still trying to make himself look pretty for the cheerleaders." Sly opened his door and bounced off the front seat.

Jesse came around the front of his Hummer. “He could spend all day in front of his mirror and still not look as pretty as Sly.”

“My man,” Sly said, and the two boys pounded fists.

Cherie smiled at the antics of her son’s friends and ushered them into the house.

Springdale had only one recreational offering for its citizens . . . high school football. As soon as young boys showed the least bit of interest in the sport and displayed a reasonable measure of aptitude and competence, they were absorbed into the peewee league for early training and experience. Jesse, Sly, and Dewayne were born in the same year, signed up for the peewee league in the same year, and grew into the rhythm and flow of the game together, perfecting their skills and at times showing true genius. Tomorrow the three friends would play their final game of high school football for the Mississippi state championship.

Sly sauntered toward Dewayne’s bedroom, with Jesse at his heels.

“Jesse, could you come here a minute?”

At Cherie’s request, Jesse started turning back toward the living room, but not before throwing a playful punch at Sly’s shoulder. He flashed a boyish smile of surprise when Sly wheeled to smack him back. The boys traded a few good-natured slaps before Sly dodged the last backhand and disappeared into Dewayne’s room.

“My boys. What am I gonna do without all your craziness!” Cherie said.

Jesse gave Cherie a quick peck on the cheek and then settled his thick frame into a well-worn Webb factory recliner. In spite of his fireplug physique, Jesse was swift on his feet. With his agility, he had racked up an impressive number of tackles as a linebacker for the Tigers.

It would have been easy for him to stay with his kind and class growing up in Springdale, Mississippi, but the team sport of football worked a strange magic on Jesse’s impressionable psyche, and he had instead chosen two African Americans to be his best friends. It went as far back as those first years in the peewee league when kids recognized different skin shades only as colors from the same palette and not with

any overtones of bigotry. The mutual respect the three boys had for each other's talents closed the deal on a permanent friendship, and their trust for each other on and off the field made them inseparable.

Cherie perched on the sofa near the young man she considered an adopted son. "I'm in a quandary, Jesse." She smoothed the wrinkles out of her dress with agitated fingers.

"About what, Miss Cherie?"

They ignored the playful jive coming from Dewayne's bedroom.

"My boy and his future," she said. "God has given him a gift, and I don't know what's the best way for him to use it. You're going to college, I know, and I want that for Dewayne, but I don't know the best choice for him."

"I envy him." Jesse's head drooped. "I don't have choices, Miss Cherie."

Heir to Webb Furniture, a fourth-generation business, Jesse had every intention of accepting the CEO mantle as soon as he fulfilled another Webb tradition of attending Ole Miss and playing football, if not exceptionally, at least honorably.

"Ole Miss, Webb Furniture, and the rest of my days in Springdale are laid out for me. I couldn't change that destiny if they offered me the moon."

Cherie reached her hand over to Jesse's thick leg and patted the firm muscle above the knee. "There's pride in knowing who you are, where you come from, where your future's headed. It will be a comfort to me knowing you're close by."

Jesse gave her hand a quick squeeze. Her motherly tenderness seemed to ease the sting of resignation that came from having his future set in stone.

Cherie sighed. "But my boy . . . it's the moon they seem to be offering," she said.

"How's that?" Jesse leaned forward in the easy chair.

Cherie stretched herself over the arm of the threadbare sofa and reached behind it. She pulled out a battered shoebox with a rubber

band over the top that tried to keep the stack of letters tucked inside. The lid pushed upward as soon as she removed the rubber band, and the top letters popped up and spilled onto the floor. Cherie bent over to retrieve them from the faded carpet.

“Colleges and big-time universities wanting Dewayne to come play for them and offering to pay his way,” she said as she collected the letters and displayed them for Jesse to behold.

Jesse moved over to the couch to look at the pile and gave a whistle. “You need a bigger box.” He picked up a few of the envelopes. “Guess folks all over have figured out how good our boy is.”

“I don’t know where to begin. Robert and I never went to college.”

Cherie Turner and Robert Dewayne Jobe met on the assembly line of Webb Furniture, each one thinking the other a thing of beauty. They began spending as much off-hour time together as possible, and months later, neither of them could think of any reason why this relationship should not become permanent.

Cherie had never remarried after her husband’s death . . . a tragic accident of a fatigued husband working double shifts to provide for a new wife and their soon-to-be child. Early one morning a police officer spotted the rear bumper of Robert’s car sticking out of the water of Deer Creek. With no evidence to the contrary, the coroner ruled it death by drowning, probably due to falling asleep at the wheel just as the car came upon the precarious curve onto the bridge over the creek.

The likes of Robert were not to be found again. Rather, Cherie raised her son by herself, believing the good character of his father was installed at birth and trusting God’s mercy would make up for all human deficiency. The quantity of inquiries displayed before Jesse’s unbelieving eyes was evidence enough that character and talent flowed in Dewayne’s bloodstream.

Dewayne’s size, dexterity, and quickness defied reason. By his seventeenth birthday, he had topped out at six feet six inches, weighing two hundred forty pounds, all muscle, bone, skin, and functioning organs

to sustain this young man under the grueling training regimen he endured from his coaches. The grocery bill for the two of them would have fed a family of six. By his last season of high school football, he was a good head taller than anyone on his team and most of the boys from all opposing football teams who lined up against him. Add another three feet of arm span to his six-six height, and any player assigned to cover Dewayne would need a miracle to stop a pass completion or bring him down. Double coverage and gang tackle were about the only defense a team could use to stop Dewayne, and even then, he would drag his tacklers along like Gulliver dragging the Lilliputians for a few extra yards. His proficiency at offense applied to defense as well. He and Jesse were a formidable pair of linebackers who knew the game and each other's moves so well, it was not often they were duped by another team's offensive play. And each time Sly came onto the field with his all-star quality at quarterback, it was hard for the hometown fans not to expect a touchdown. Being undefeated their senior year was not a cakewalk, but it never was in question either. By midseason, everyone in Springdale knew their team would play in the state championship, and they were the odds-on favorite to win.

The clamor of Sly's entrance broke the spell cast over Jessie and Cherie staring at the queries for Dewayne's talent. Sly burst into the living room as though pursued by tacklers. He gripped a football and pumped his arm in several directions, looking for would-be receivers as he provided his own sports commentary.

"The offense has collapsed and the blitz is crashing in on the Sly. He fakes right, then left. He stiff-arms one three-hundred-pound tackler. He leaps over the second one like a gazelle. No one can sack the Sly."

"Somebody shut him up," Dewayne said as he entered the living room.

"He dashes across the field, waiting for a receiver to get open." Sly danced sideways. "He lobs the pass over the heads of the opposing team"—he pump faked toward Dewayne, then turned and pitched the ball—"dropping the pigskin into the outstretched hands of the receiver."

Jesse caught Sly's pitchout without ever taking his eyes off the stack of letters Cherie held in her hands.

"Another touchdown for the Sly." Sly acknowledged his imaginary cheering crowd by waving his hands in the air.

Sly might have had an exaggerated view of his skills, but on the football field, he lived up to them. He was fast enough to evade most defensive players who got past his front line, and he enjoyed dancing around the field, dodging tacklers, almost as much as throwing touchdowns. Orphaned at a young age and raised by a doting grandmother, Sly had created an image of himself that required a belief that he was superior to most other humans. In spite of a fawning public, Jesse and Dewayne were the only ones allowed into his narcissistic bubble, and to his credit, Sly did not mind his two best friends taking him down a notch or two when the preoccupation with his ego got out of control.

The three boys were rarely apart, except when the social norms kept Mississippi's blacks and whites separated, but the trio pushed even those boundaries. They sat in the pews of each other's churches or went to a single-color restaurant or attended a public function with a young lady of the opposite race. These small challenges to social traditions raised eyebrows and stimulated behind-the-back conversations, but as long as the Springdale Tigers kept winning, the boys could do no wrong and all was right with their world.

When Cherie cleared her throat, Sly redirected his attention from his fantasy fans to the letters in Cherie's hands. "Is that D's fan mail, Miss Cherie?"

"I guess you could call it that," Jesse said.

"What did I tell you about throwing the football in my house?"

Cherie's mild scold made Sly fidget and produced a rare sheepish grin on his face. "Sorry. Too excited about State tomorrow."

"Dewayne, you never told us about all these letters," Jesse said, waving a stack of letters in front of his face like a fan. "You sure been secretive."

Dewayne shrugged. "Nothing to tell really."

“Nothing to tell,” Sly said, taking a handful of letters out of Cherie’s hand. He began to flip through the stack, discarding each one into the shoebox after reading the letterhead. “D, you got Penn State, Michigan, Ohio . . . too cold for your black Mississippi blood. The University of Tennessee . . . you just volunteer yourself onto the next one. It looks like the entire SEC is coming after you. You got your cowboy colleges, and finally your elite West Coast Rose Bowl contenders. That’s an impressive list . . . almost as good as mine.”

“What are they offering?” Jesse asked.

Dewayne shrugged his shoulders again, looking more uncomfortable. “Full rides.”

“Don’t be hanging your head, my brother.” Sly slapped Dewayne across his broad shoulders. “This is a proud moment.”

“So what should he do?” Cherie asked.

Quiet settled over the boys. Jesse stopped fanning himself and handed Cherie the letters. She shuffled them into a neat pile before returning them to the cardboard box.

“What do you want to do, D?” Jessie said, and he picked up the football in his lap and began to pass it back and forth from hand to hand. The thump of the ball smacking Jesse’s hands as he played his own game of pitch and catch dominated the sounds in the room.

“I want to score touchdowns,” Dewayne said.

“That’s right.” Sly went from slap to embrace. “My man here wants to catch himself a boatload of touchdowns and a fat NFL contract.”

“Mama and I have been doing a lot of praying about this,” Dewayne said. “We need God’s direction.”

“What do you think, Sly?” Cherie asked.

“As long as God don’t send him to Miami, he can go anywhere that pays to let him play.”

“You never told us you decided on Miami,” Jesse said.

“Strong program that made me the best offer, eighty-degree winters, and women as far as the eye can see.”

“Careful now in front of your mama,” Cherie said.

“Ain’t any of them ever going to replace you, now.” Sly leaned over and gave Cherie a kiss on the cheek.

“Don’t be playing with me.” Cherie waved him away, unable to resist a smile. “Be serious now. Where should my boy go to college? The coaches have been talking. The recruiters have been calling. But I want to hear from his best friends.”

“Miss Cherie, D needs to get as far away from Springdale as he can,” Jesse said. “I think a West Coast school might be his best bet.”

“No lie, Miss Cherie,” Sly said. “With our boy’s hands he can pull in those passes. The sports pages like to see that kind of beauty and that is what gets the attention of the NFL.”

Sly intercepted the ball from Jesse, stopping the hypnotic rhythm of the passing. He stretched out his passing arm dramatically and pretended to throw a “Hail Mary” out the front window in the westward direction. “Go west, young man.”

Dewayne just smiled and then patted Cherie on her shoulder. “We need to go, Mama.”

“Don’t want to be late for your last pep rally,” Cherie said.

“No, ma’am,” Jesse said, springing from the recliner. “We win State, I’m buying you a new recliner.” He kissed Cherie on the cheek before bounding out the front door.

Sly repeated Jesse’s farewell on Cherie’s cheek with an extra “You know I love you,” and Cherie added her own tender pat to his face.

“You coming?” Dewayne asked.

“Of course I’ll be there,” she said.

Like his friends before him, Dewayne kissed his mother on the cheek.

“You know the Lord is gonna steer us right, Mama,” he said.

“No doubt, son, no doubt,” she said. “Now go on. Don’t be late.”

Dewayne squeezed his mother’s arm before walking out the door.

Cherie picked up the few letters that still lay on the floor, folded them, and replaced them in the shoebox. Before sealing the box, she laid her hand on the letters and closed her eyes.

“Lord, we need thy wisdom,” she whispered. “Let the right one rise to the top.”

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The only location large enough to accommodate the town of Springdale for the pep rally was the Webb family farm. The level of play, the team’s competence, and the town spirit had not had a simultaneous appearance before in Springdale, and talk was that it would be another generation before the convergence of the three would happen again.

Neighboring counties could spot the three blazing bonfires. The multitude roared as the head coach introduced each starting player, accompanied by a blast from the marching band’s brass section as the player dashed into position facing the crowd. Cherie had maneuvered onto a small rise a short distance from the center of the celebrations. This bond of humanity had one goal in mind: to unite their individual desires and energies into a force powerful enough to win the support and blessing of the gods of football, and to raise the town of Springdale out of the universal plainness of small-town America.

Jake Hopper, the receivers’ and quarterbacks’ coach for the Tigers, did not like standing with the other coaches and staff and the team for these football rituals. He preferred anonymity. He preferred the controlled discipline of the practice field or the blood rush of the game. He accepted these chaotic traditions as a necessary evil.

He ambled through the crowd until he spied Cherie. Here was a friend, a calm in the maelstrom. He moved toward her, but a group of teenagers bolted in front of him, blocking his path and nearly trampling him as they rushed to get a better view of their heroes. He waited for the herd to pass and then made steady progress toward his goal.

Jake stepped up beside Cherie. “And what do you think of our pagan rites?”

“It’s loud enough to bring down Jericho’s walls,” Cherie said. “I should have brought my OSHA earplugs from the factory.”

“That assembly line working you hard?”

Cherie cupped her hands over her ears. “Hard enough, but I don’t think it ever gets as loud as these kids.”

“Humanity changes little, I’m afraid, except through calamity, and then reluctantly,” he said, approving his pithy statement with a smirk.

Jake Hopper gave of himself body and soul to taking the God-given talent of each player and molding it. In his heart of hearts, he considered himself a sculptor of living, flesh-and-blood models, shaping and perfecting the fluidity of speed and motion of the human body. And a well-executed, unrepeatable moment on the field brought a bigger smile to his face than a touchdown or even a win.

Jake prized the singular bond between player and coach, a bond of souls when competitive physical play brings out a special bliss between men. Jake and Dewayne had that bond, an idealized bond of a father and son, free of responsibility beyond the rules, discipline, and training necessary for the game. Dewayne had no father. Jake had no children. Yet the two men provided for each other what was missing in their lives.

“Excuse me for being forward, but if all our sons had mothers such as you, the world would be whole,” Jake said, a bold statement, especially from someone unaccustomed to making them. Perhaps the sips of vodka before arriving at the pep rally inspired the boldness. He felt a pang of regret, a flushed embarrassment at the compliment. He was thankful for the darkness. It helped conceal his chagrin.

At that moment, the music from the marching band raised its decibel level, and the cheerleaders, shimmering pom-poms stuck to the top of each raised arm, began their escort of the senior boys to the front of the team.

“Hush now. They’re about to introduce my boy,” Cherie said.

Jake turned his eyes away from Cherie and wondered how life might have been different had he met Cherie in their younger days. She might have spoken the same words just now but substituted them with “our boy.” The thought produced in him a pang of regret.