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Somewhere in a School of the Future

Gregory Shafer

The Problem

Elizabeth was incensed and tried to channel her anger by walking around the library. The new uniforms for the academic team were missing the team mascot, and that would surely hinder the group's concentration and spirit. Just two days away from the long-awaited meeting with Maple Creek High School and she had done little to prepare herself. Of course, her coach had spoken eloquently about the need to stay focused, but this whole travesty involving the uniforms threatened to distract everyone. How could one be expected to think about iambic pentameter when her uniform was inferior to the other team's?

Outside the Academic Team's multi-million dollar practice facility, she could hear the incoherent voices of the football players as they again tried to drum up support for an after-school team. Again the inducement was a brownie sale, and again the effort seemed doomed to failure. "How sad," she thought as she opened her book and began her work. "They just don't seem to understand the apathy students feel toward aggressive games that seem invariably to trivialize academics." Indeed, many parents had become so concerned about the anti-social aspects of football, they were lobbying to have it completely banned.

Elizabeth laughed again, but her ruminations were interrupted by Calvin as he lightly tapped her shoulder. "Hey, did you read the latest edition of the newspaper? They say the entire town's showing up to watch us this Friday."

"It's sold out?" questioned Elizabeth with a nervous look.

"Yup. They're lucky they built that new complex. Some estimates are as high as fifteen thousand."

"But that would be more than what we had for the lecture on Socrates," said Elizabeth with a smile.

"Yup," said Calvin with a grin.

Neither wanted to say too much, but both knew that all of the accolades—the varsity letters, the lectures, the lonely nights in front of the computer—were all to culminate in this celebration of language. "This is going to be a big night he added," as

he looked away from his book—a really big night."
"Yup," added Elizabeth with a smile.

A Solution?

Moments passed and the team's concentration was again interrupted by Coach Walters as she strolled in from the research wing of the library and called the team to attention. "I know," she said while rubbing her hands together, "that many of you are feeling a bit unsettled about the new uniforms. Well, I've taken the liberty to communicate your disappointment to the booster club in charge of the purchase, and they've agreed to see what they can do."

The room was silent. That was a euphemistically safe way of saying that more money would have to be raised before the uniforms could be redone. "I think I speak for many," said Angela, "when I say that an endeavor of this magnitude deserves nothing but the most aesthetically pleasing uniforms."

Hands clapped in a rowdy spirit, causing the room to come to life. "We've worked too hard for too long to wear second-class uniforms," added another participant.

"Give them to the football team," laughed a third.

"Now let's not get sarcastic," warned the coach.

Finally, after a bit of derisive laughter, the coach regained the team's attention. "The only other alternative I can envision is to take some of the money from the general fund, perhaps from the revenues raised from the camp we ran last summer."

Silence. The thought of new uniforms quieted the team and a feeling of optimism pervaded the room. Coach Walters was again ready to speak when she was interrupted by the noisy entrance of Jason from the hallway.

The Academic Team

"Can we help you, Jason?" asked Coach Walters with a patient smile. Jason was a football player, so it seemed natural for many of the team to take him less than seriously. The question of whether or not such sports detracted from more erudite and practical activities had long been a point of contention

among parents in the community. Still, until the controversy could be resolved, these kids would be free to run into each other with helmets on their heads.

"Uhm, I was wondering if it was too late to join the Academic Club—to be part of the team."

"Well," interrupted Coach Walters, "let's talk about it after our workout. How did you do in English last year anyway?"

Jason hardly had time to blurt out his grade, before running over to join the rest of the poets. Not surprisingly, he was especially interested in joining Angela and Bridget, the team's captains. Their position on the team had elevated them to celebrity status among most of the student body. They were trendsetters, fad-makers. Bridget, in particular, had popularized Shakespeare tattoos, which usually adorned the arm of the more popular students. Equally in vogue was the movement to shave one's head so that words like "Twain" or "Thoreau" appeared above the neck. It was, to quote from a student, the ultimate in "cool."

As the team welcomed Jason to the team, it was again interrupted. This time, it was Mr. Joodas the principal.

Competition?

"Hey, poets!" he said with a forced smile. "Good news! I just spoke to Dr. Montague, who has volunteered to take over the duties for the booster club, and the message from his office is that money is of no concern when it comes to getting our students ready for Maple Creek."

The sudden announcement was met with a round of applause and smiles all around. "And," added Joodas while blushing, "I'd like to take the opportunity to lead you in a little cheer. In my time, as many of you know, we didn't have poetry teams and coaches to help us with our literature. It was, well, a kind of dark age. So, anyway, I've always wanted to do this: Who's number one?"

The room fell silent as the poets shook their heads in disbelief. "Is he going to try that worn-out cheerleading stuff again?"

"A little trite," added a second.

"Let's not forget," said a third, "he hasn't had the same advantages we have."

The team members shrugged their shoulders. Practice would have to wait—at least a little longer.

It was after his third cheer that Bethany had the nerve to break the news to Mr. Joodas, who by this time had worked up quite a sweat from trying to lead cheers.

"It's not that we don't appreciate your spirit and the sentiments behind them, but, well," she paused for a moment as she watched the man slowly wilt in his perspiration, "What I'm trying to say is that

we don't buy into all of that competitive rah-rah stuff. We know it worked for you in your time and that American schools used to be a hotbed of aggressive games that glorified violence and mindless rituals—but," she added while the others united behind her, "we're better now because we've learned to work together, to make learning a game that everyone can win, to elevate the mind over physical contests that teach force rather than reason—sorry."

With each word, Joodas had seemed to shrink a little further, so that by the end of the declaration he looked like two-year-old lettuce. "So I guess you're not interested in my secret plan for beating Maple Creek?" he said with an increasingly weak voice.

"We're not interested in beating them, sir," said a senior from the team. "We're interested in sharing knowledge. In some cases we work together. We compete against ourselves and create a symbiotic relationship."

Joodas started to pronounce the word silently with his lips, but was quickly saved. "It means that we depend upon each other, Mr. Joodas."

"Oh, yes, of course it does. I knew that. It just slipped my mind," he said with a smile and hurriedly turned to leave the room. "Well, I'll just wish you lots of luck and leave you to your preparation. Carry on, poets," he said as he crumbled up his secret strategy for defeating the visiting team.

Silence ruled for a moment as team members examined the floor and mused on their preparation. Tomorrow would be a big day. They needed to get back to work.

Academic Excitement

Game day found the entire school and county talking scholastics. House persons watched local television to refresh their memories about favorite poems, while the barbershop was packed with men who argued furiously about the interpretation of canonical works. Rumor had it that Jeb Marks had asked his neighbor to leave the barbershop when he refused to admit that Longfellow had gained most of his fame through professional advantage rather than literary skill.

Around town, this Friday, proud citizens unfurled their favorite flags. Some liked Hawthorne or Chopin, but the clear icon this year was Willa Cather. "My Country, My School, My Antonia," was the most popular bumper sticker to adorn cars during the season. Others liked the simplicity of "Willa Knows Literature." Clearly, the energy was rising to a fever pitch.

Game Time

Finally it was game time. The talk shows, the

color commentary, the debates, and partisan bickering had culminated in this moment of community pride. The students from each team entered the center of the multi-million dollar facility. Around them stood a crammed crowd that was buying tickets simply to be able to stand and hear the questions. Restaurants and bars closed early so they could be better prepared for people after the spectacle.

With the master of ceremonies entering the center stage, it was time to start the celebration of knowledge. As custom dictated, each school would work to answer a series of questions through essays and short oral responses. When one school participant couldn't answer, the other school tried. If both had answers, their responses were discussed, analyzed, and solved. Rumor had it that federal officials often watched such local games to uncover answers to the most vexing national problems. Of course, everyone knew that their main interest was academic curiosity and had little to do with professional concerns.

The Question

The first question went to the visitors and involved a variety of what were called educational/political problems. The crowd quieted itself in anticipation.

"Your first question," announced the man, "involves the late 1900s in American educational/political thought." The students concentrated. "Analyze the role of test scores in the political manipulation of educational policy during the second half of the twentieth century." In the audience, men and women whispered in quiet effort. Closer to the center, Gwen Johnson prepared for an answer.

"Test scores were most often used to stave off any consistent ability by schools to garner more financial assistance," she said confidently. "This, of course, was a dark time in history, where people spent millions on entertainment while schools remained underfunded. Teachers' pay was often frozen while private institutions and the economy in general flourished.

"Guns and violence were also used as excuses for cutting funds to schools, but the biggest excuse was test scores. Despite the indifference students felt toward these standardized monsters, they were invariably used as an excuse for funding cuts. Schools were told to increase scores or face even greater deficits. Teachers' jobs were even threatened. In the end," she added, "people became sick of the ploy and demanded more money and better measurements tools. They started letting educators control education and made funding mandatory.

And of course, there was the demise of the politicians who tried to do away with funding for the arts. . . ."

As she finished the crowd gave her a round of applause, while others sat back and took a deep breath. It was nice, they thought, to live in an enlightened society. "I read somewhere," added someone in the crowd, "that they paid athletes more than college professors and that business wanted to use schools as a way to exploit kids and make money—you know, like a business."

"Nah, that didn't happen, did it?" asked another. For a moment there was a heavy and unsettled silence as others considered the shame of such a possibility. "So they wanted to model schools after McDonald's and T.V. Talk Shows?"

"Those hamburgers are so greasy," said one parent in the crowd.

"And the drive to make profits rather than educate kids. . . ."

Again there was silence. Some ideas were just too horrific to even consider.

The games would go on, but people in the crowd implicitly agreed to stop talking about those periods in American history where students and schools were used for political games. It simply was too depressing. Anyway, it was over now.

Over the Edge

Much of the crowd had settled down when the man asked his next question.

"Explain the damage done to educational progress by former Secretary of Education William Bennett."

Again a rumble of discontent resonated through the stands. "Why do they ask questions like that?" asked one concerned parent.

"There are certain people that just shouldn't be mentioned," stated another.

"I'm not for censorship," stated a third, "but William Bennett?"

Eventually the leader sensed the extreme uneasiness radiating through the audience and voluntarily withdrew the question. Some subjects were simply beyond the pale.

No reason to rehash bad memories.

Kids really weren't old enough to discuss people like William Bennett.

Finally, order was returned to the facility, and the game continued.

About the Author

Greg Shafer, a professor of English at Mott Community College, taught high school and middle school English for ten years.