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## Texas Football and the Price of Paralysis

By BUZZ BISSINGER | Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2010



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Each year, about 1 in 100,000 high school football players suffers a serious spinal-cord injury. Paul Moakley

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In 2004, when *Friday Night Lights* was being made into a movie, director Pete Berg invited me to the Astrodome in Houston to watch the filming. It didn't take long to realize that the magic of moviemaking was no magic at all — repetitive and dull. I became bored, which is when I saw a small cluster of young men in wheelchairs on the sidelines.

I can still feel the stiffness of their fingers as I grasped their hands. I can still see the eyes of longing as they watched a movie being made about the game they still loved. I knew firsthand the willingness of Texas high school football players to sacrifice themselves to team and town and winning the state championship. But I was still unprepared for what these young men shared — the price of paralysis that had come from their experience. I fumbled for words. I played into the very thing that not a single one of them wanted: my pity.

(See the top 10 sports moments of 2009.)

Six years later, I recall that moment because

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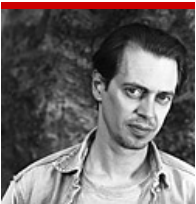
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of the attention that is finally being paid to injuries in pro football — at least head injuries, prompted by the wonderful reporting of Alan Schwarz of the *New York Times*. But I also think about it because I know the focus will not trickle down to where it is needed most: the high school level. Research has shown that young players are far more susceptible than older ones to serious injuries.

Concussions are the hot topic, and their residual effects can be hideous. But they are not the only injuries in a game increasingly engorged with unholy violence at all levels. Catastrophic spinal-cord injuries are rare, but in Texas alone there are roughly two a year. That information comes from Eddie Canales, who so unfairly knows more about the subject than anyone else.

**(See more about football.)**

On Nov. 2, 2001, San Marcos Baptist Academy, the team Eddie's son Chris played defensive back for, took on Waco's Reicher Catholic with the playoffs at stake. Chris was all of 5 ft. 7 in. (1.7 m) and 120 lb. (55 kg). He liked to "put the wood on it," as his father recalled. With the game on the line, a running back for Reicher found daylight and made a move to the inside as Chris came up to cut him off. The runner tried to leap over Chris, and it was most likely his hip that smashed into Chris' helmet, snapping his neck back. Chris made a game-saving tackle anyway, but then he lay motionless at the 30-yard line for 20 minutes until an ambulance arrived. His father came on the field and knelt next to him.

"I can't move anything. I can't feel anything. What if I am paralyzed?"

"Don't think about that," said his father.

Chris was transported 32 miles (50 km) from San Marcos to University Medical Center Brackenridge in Austin. There a doctor told Eddie and Pita Canales that their son was paralyzed from the shoulders down. Eddie, the director of operations at the University of Texas at San Antonio bookstore, quit his job to tend to his son. He turned him over every two hours to prevent bedsores because the insurance company initially refused to pay for a pressure-supported mattress. He inserted a catheter every three hours. He gave Chris medications every six hours. He slept on the floor next to Chris. His care commenced at 7:30 a.m. and did not end until 3:30 the following morning. He fought with the insurance company over virtually every piece of equipment that was needed. The company finally agreed to pay 50% of the costs, but the Canaleses' expenses the first year were still \$60,000.

**(See pictures of eccentric college mascots.)**

As a result of his experience, Canales started a nonprofit group called Gridiron Heroes to lend crucial support to other families experiencing the same horror with their sons that he had gone through. Some of the support is financial, but more of it is emotional, and Chris, who through relentless work now has some mobility in his arms, finds sustenance in his life from helping others so they are not alone.

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Eddie and Chris, who is now 26, still love the game and realize that it is a collision sport. But their efforts to increase awareness of the dangers have gotten a mixed reception. A suggestion that 25 cents of every ticket sold at high school games in Texas be set aside to help defray the cost of caring for paralyzed players went nowhere. During the off-season, the Canaleses go to clinics, and coaches listen intently. During the season, the coaches turn deaf in favor of winning at any cost.

(See the year in health 2009.)

There should be an ambulance at every high school game. There should be trainers. But don't bet on it, as school districts cry a lack of money. Kids will continue to suffer serious head injuries. Kids will continue to become paralyzed because they never learned how to properly tackle, with their heads up. The game's violence will continue because that's exactly why we like it, our gladiatorial lust still intact 16 centuries after the Romans. The bigger the hit, the greater the roar.

*Bissinger is the author of Friday Night Lights and a co-author, with LeBron James, of Shooting Stars.*

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
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Why There Will Always Be Three Amanda Knoxes



*needs to be.*”

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