

The Yank Striker:

A Footballer's Beginning

By Jason Liegois

Copyright©2023 Jason Liegois

This is dedicated to everyone who loves
the game of football. It's the game I love
that inspired this story.

ISBN: 978-1-62249-659-4

Published by
Biblio Publishing
Columbus, Ohio
BiblioPublishing.com

Author's Note:

As those fans of soccer or football may suspect, both Hamilton State University (HSU) and the Donford Football Club mentioned in these pages and their affiliated teams, players, and staffs, are entirely fictional. HSU, its home base of Hamiltonberg, and the town of Liberty Rock Park are set in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, somewhere inside or just outside the Interstate 635 Loop. As to where the fictional district of Donford is supposedly located in London, it might share the same location as Walford in the East London of the famed British soap opera *EastEnders*.

The two trophies of Donford's history of more than a century are the 1974 FA Cup and the 2002-2003 EFL Trophy. To accomplish this, I have taken these trophies away from their true winners, West Ham United and Bristol City, respectively. I beg any pardon needed from fans of The Hammers and The Robins.

As implied by the previous paragraph, there are several mentions of existing football clubs, both soccer and gridiron, throughout the book. Their depictions, and the depictions of their players and staff, are entirely fictional and not intended to accurately represent their true-to-life counterparts.

Acknowledgements

First, to any I forget below, thank you.

Thanks go out to the Muscatine, Iowa, writers' group Writers on the Avenue, as well as the Des Moines, Iowa, writers' group Iowa Writers' Corner (IWC). I have had the honor of being a member of both groups. Members of Writers on the Avenue, particularly Misty Urban and Pat Bieber, gave me advice and insights in the early stages of writing this book. Members of IWC, particularly Maggie Rivers and Mica Rossi, gave fine advice in the latter stages of revisions and editing, as well as the ongoing series.

Thanks also to Jodie Toohey for her professional assistance in editing this book. It is greatly appreciated.

Thanks go out to Biblio Publishing, of Columbus, Ohio (home of the Columbus Crew, one of the charter members of Major League Soccer (MLS) and a two-time winner of the MLS Cup) for helping bring this book (and this series) to life. Special thanks to Robert Sims and Fran Weiss for working with me on the project.

This book, and this series, is the culmination of a long self-education in both the sport and the business of soccer. Among the authors and writings I'd like to credit for helping in that education are: *Soccernomics* by Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski; *Inverting the Pyramid* by Jonathan Wilson, likely the definitive history of soccer tactics; *Among the Thugs* by Bill Buford; *The Dammed United* and *Red or Dead* by David Peace; *I Believe in Miracles* by Daniel Taylor; the pure blend of poetry and prose that is *Soccer in Sun and Shadow* by the great Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano (1940-2015); and finally, the writings of the greatest soccer journalist America has ever produced, Grant Wahl (1974-2022).

Thanks also go out to my family, starting with my parents, Bill and Suzanne Liegois. In addition to encouraging my natural curiosity and love for literature at an early age, I also must credit them for exposing me to soccer at an early age when I played in the local YMCA youth soccer league. My kids, Jacob and Madeline Liegois, are busy starting their own personal and professional lives, but they always encourage their eccentric father and his love of writing. My love goes out to all of them.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Laura Liegois, for her love and her support of my writing passion. For 25 years of marriage and a few more before that as a partnership, she has supported my interest in writing and my passion for it, even if she does not share it herself. For everything you do for me, Laura, I love you so much.

“Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.”

- Spoken by Vince Lombardi (1913-1970), head coach of the Green Bay Packers, and others.

“Someone said to me, 'To you football is a matter of life or death!' and I said, 'Listen, it's more important than that.'”

- Bill Shankly (1913-1981), manager of Liverpool Football Club.

Table of Contents

Author's Note	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	29
Chapter 3	43
Chapter 4	53
Chapter 5	64
Chapter 6	86
Chapter 7	91
Chapter 8	134
Chapter 9	152
Chapter 10	172
Chapter 11	183
Chapter 12	196
Chapter 13	231
Chapter 14	243
Chapter 15	253
Chapter 16	259
Chapter 17	271

1

Dallas, Texas.

December

There were many legends about Texas high school football. A few of them were even true.

There were people who would wait in line for days on end for game tickets. There were football stadiums costing multiple times more than the school buildings they represented and could have easily served Division I college programs.

That passion drove a caravan of cars, trucks, and RVs behind a school bus heading to Arlington. They represented about one-fourth of the 35,000-person population of Liberty Rock Park, Texas, one of Dallas' suburbs north of I-635. The bus carried the LRP High School Minutemen football team on their way to the state semifinal game at Cowboys Stadium.

Everyone inside the main bus wore athletic gear with the LRP's red and white color scheme, most showing the musket-wielding revolutionary logo. While the coaching staff quietly reviewed their game plan on their clipboards and iPads for the Eisenhower High School Lions of Lubbock, the players were in their own worlds in the back.

Many of them were silent, using their headphones or smartphones to keep the world away from them, quieting their nerves.

However, there were three players who had gathered around a fourth, a junior offensive guard named Bobby Masters, who cackled, "Shit, you've got to see this," pointing at a YouTube video on his iPad.

The video was titled "Junior Ryan's biggest hits." Junior Ryan was LRP's own folk hero, a star linebacker for the Minutemen in decades past. Intense, vicious, and driven, he'd taken his talent to Hamilton State University (HSU) a

few miles closer to Dallas, and then for a brief, glorious period with the Dallas Cowboys. Long retired, he was now the head coach for HSU.

"Aw, lookit that!" Bobby said as the others cheered on, pointing to Ryan staring down a quarterback he'd just piledriven into the ground, eyes so ice blue they appeared almost white, the eyes of a faith healer or cult leader, boring into the fallen man.

"Hey, guys, what're you watching?" a voice rumbled from above. Bobby and his buddies looked up.

The senior player standing above them didn't exactly look like Junior Ryan. He was maybe 30, 40 pounds lighter, an inch or two taller, with sharp, refined features in a wedge-shaped face rather than Junior's square face. The kid had brown dust-colored hair rather than Junior's jet-black. But the same ice blue, nearly white, eyes from the video now bore down on the kids from above.

"Oh, hey, DJ, just watching some old clips," Bobby said as he started to set the iPad down.

Daniel John Ryan stared down at the screen and then looked back at Bobby and the rest of them. With just a shrug, he turned around and walked back to his seat.

"Hey, DJ? Just wondering, he still that rough as a coach? I keep hearing all these stories," Bobby said, cringing at what the answer might be.

DJ turned back to them. "Well, he doesn't beat people up now. Verbally, maybe." With the smallest of grins, he turned around and went back to his seat.

That gave his teammates permission to chuckle. Letting out a big breath, Bobby brought his iPad back up, and he and the crew kept quiet as they watched the rest of the video.

DJ sat down in his own seat toward the front of the bus. He couldn't blame his teammates for trying to take their minds off what was coming next. He felt grateful for the silence immediately around him as he inserted the earphones for his mix of old house music. He even found himself looking through one of his journal notebooks at some

The Yank Striker

past entries, anything to take his mind off what he was feeling.

He'd played football for ten years, ever since Mighty-Mite football at seven years old. He'd always felt one of two emotions before a game, either calm confidence that he would win or a nervous energy vibrating his limbs when he wasn't sure of the outcome.

However, as DJ rode the bus toward the stadium, he realized he was experiencing an entirely new third emotion. What he found himself writing in the notebook was: *I don't care whether we win or lose. I don't feel anything I don't feel anything I don't feel anything.*

He was trying to get it down on paper. Had it just happened now? Why? Why not at the beginning of the season when he gathered in the first huddle of the first scrimmage and his brother wasn't there?

DJ looked behind him to steal a glance at Billy Hanlon, the junior quarterback who had started for the Minutemen for every game this year. The dark-haired, lanky Hanlon had performed well enough that season, avoided fumbles and interceptions and ran the offense competently. He was someone who always was polite and thoughtful to others, someone it was difficult to dislike.

Billy's not Trey, DJ wrote in his journal. It's not that Trey was DJ's brother, although it helped. On a football field, with Trey passing and DJ catching, the brothers worked in perfect synch with each other. Billy studied the game, but he was smaller than DJ and his arm would get him to Division II or III if he was lucky. Trey, already an All-American candidate, was in his freshman season at Hamilton State University under Junior's coaching.

For DJ, football had always been part of him, just like his eye color or his legs. Now it was like one of his legs was missing.

DJ wrote: *Success comes from being able to do something even when your heart's not in it. Success doesn't*

take a vacation - Junior. If his dad could read his mind right now, that's what he would tell him. And what was DJ going to do - tell the coaches to turn the bus around? They would play the game whether DJ was in the mood or not. He set his thoughts and journal aside.



Gary Gathers was the head football coach for LRPHS. He was lean and balding, with strength more in his bone structure than muscles. He had these sad brown eyes that seemed to absorb every misfortune and mistake his team made, his high Texas twang tuned higher in times of crisis. Now it was mellow in the locker room at the stadium, trying to calm the team's nerves as he went over the game plan.

DJ ignored him as he finished a mental checklist of his football gear, preparing to head out on the field. His shoulder pads, double-sided mouthpiece, and tinted red eye shields were all set. He adjusted the jersey with the #13 on the back and front. He made sure that the eye black covered not only the underside of his eyes, but a good two inches around his eyes in all directions. It was not a practical matter, but a habit copied from his father's playing days, the paint before the war. He made sure his thigh, knee, and forearm pads were in place and ready for impact.

Billy was not Trey. That was an indisputable fact, so the game plan was far simpler than a year ago when they had waltzed into Memorial Stadium in Austin and took the state title without asking. The team boasted a trio of running backs that had managed a combined 2,500 yards during the new year, so it hadn't had to depend on DJ as much to move the chains. Now he just caught the third down pass or the

The Yank Striker

long bomb, blocked for runs, and even handled placekicking duties for the team. DJ was surprised he was okay with that.

Gathers droned on, but DJ knew what he had to do. It would be a question of which team had the ability and desire to win. He knew he had the ability, but whether that would compensate for his absence of desire was another issue.



Two plays represented the game.



Minutemen 10-14 Lions, Minutemen ball, 3 and 12, opponent's 45-yard line:

The Lions were in a dime formation with a cornerback and dime back guarding DJ, who moved in motion to the left. Even before clearing the left tackle, Billy called HIKE and DJ was sprinting between the Minuteman left tackle and guard, running a pass route into the center of the Lions' defense.

The cornerback and dime back took off after him, but DJ could run a 40-yard dash in 4.4 seconds. Billy retreated three steps back from the line of scrimmage, took a single look down the field, and launched the ball.

All the catch required, other than speed, was a two-foot vertical leap and the ball dropping into the basket of his

hands. The dime back hit DJ as soon as his feet touched the ground, which was too late for the Lions. 1 and 10, Lions' 15-yard line. Without a word, DJ handed the ball to the ref and walked back to the huddle rather than make the first down sign or any other celebration. Three plays later, a run by sophomore back Eric Walker earned six points.



Minutemen 27-32 Lions, 0:10 left in the fourth quarter, 3rd and 9 at the Lions 30-yard line.

Of course, DJ thought, they would go for 40 Flat. It was where all five eligible receivers streaked down the field in a desperate effort to flood downfield in hot routes.

With the other four eligible receivers streaking down and toward the sidelines to stop the clock, DJ went in motion, and when Billy hiked the ball, he sped through a gap between the center and left guard, down the middle of the field, and toward the end zone.

Billy dropped back three steps, but as soon as he raised his eyes, he saw three blitzers within two feet of him. Before his brain was able to fully process the presence of the rushers, Billy reared back on his back foot, angled toward the sky, and flung the ball as far as it could go.

The minute DJ saw the release, he knew it was doomed. Only, and maybe only, if he'd possessed Olympic-level speed would he be able to catch it. He turned on his jets as he blew past the middle linebacker, but the ball dropped into the end zone as DJ reached the 10-yard line and the referee's whistle blew for the last time.

As Ryan turned around, he saw a kelly-green swarm of Lions players jumping for joy in a pack, howling as they hopped toward the Lions student section. His own

The Yank Striker

Minutemen teammates stood in stunned silence or slumped to the field's green plastic in tears. The Minutemen fans, the players on the sidelines, and even the coaches were slumped and silent.

DJ made his way toward the sideline, hanging his head along the way. Unlike his teammates, however, his gesture was intentional. Even with the red plastic eyeshade, he didn't want to betray the lack of emotion he felt.



There were no discussions or lectures, either in the locker room afterward or the bus ride back to Liberty Rock Park.

"We'll talk once we get home," Gathers had said. As the bus pulled into the LRPHS parking lot, the players looked at anything other than each other.

Fans in red and white gear lined the sidewalk in front of the football stadium and towards its main gate.

It loomed above the fans, two concrete flanks along the field's sidelines and metal bleachers behind each end zone that boosted the seating capacity to somewhere above 10,000. A metal sign on the top right corner of the stand nearest the sidewalk declared the stadium to be JOHN DANIEL RYAN SR. MEMORIAL STADIUM in six-foot high white lettering.

As the crowd cheered and waved, the team went down the sidewalk and through the gates toward the home locker rooms on the near stand. They had already cleaned up and dressed at the Death Star; all Gathers had planned to do was to give a final talk to the team before they went their separate ways.

Gathers strode toward the center of the room and prepared to speak, but he heard a knocking outside the metal doorway. Scowling, holding up one finger to let the players know to wait, he darted over and cracked it open.

"Who the... hell, Coach, I wasn't expecting you," Gathers said, his voice low.

"C'mon, Gary - I'm Junior to you," a rumbling voice answered behind the door.

Gathers straightened up his shoulders, pushed the door open, and waved the speaker into the dressing room. "I was just about to talk with the boys here, but since you were at the game, I imagine you'd do as good as I could."

Despite his mellow manner, Gathers was never the type of person to just hand over his team talk to anyone but himself, especially not an unexpected guest. But when the guest was a national Division I championship-winning college coach who was the son of the man the stadium was named after, exceptions were made.

Junior Ryan stood beside Gathers, filling up the center of the room. He seemed as broad as he was tall, the old build of the middle linebacker he once was still present. The ice blue eyes, square head, and the still-black hair in a flattop haircut were instantly recognizable to the kids, even if he wasn't wearing a windbreaker with the crimson and copper color scheme and the distinct Copperheads logo of the Hamilton State University Copperheads.

"Gentlemen," Junior said, his voice full of worn gravel. He acknowledged DJ with a nod, although he did the same to at least four other players and Gathers. The other players had their heads down, nervous about what a coach who had been known as Devil would have to say about their performance.

"Like your coach said, I did have a chance to see the game," Junior continued. "None of you quit out on that field, I'll say that. But the overall talent on this team, it just wasn't up to the level it had to be to win tonight, that's the truth. The Lions... On their starting defense alone, there's probably

The Yank Striker

six, seven starters that will get Division I scholarships, I guarantee that. I'm not going to lie, I hope I can convince some of them to come to my university. Most high schools, you'll only see one, two kids like that if they're lucky. And defense, you boys nearly had as much of a burden as the offense, and you at least kept things from being a blowout."

He shook his head. "Football has a lot to do with failure. In my own career, I faced more than a little failure as a pro player and the start of my coaching career. You failed today, but sometimes you can do everything right and still fail. And you always learn from failure."

Junior started to point individually at the seniors in the room. "You seniors, you played in the state semifinals this year and your sophomore year and won the state title during your junior year. No matter what, seniors, I can tell you that 99.9 percent of the high school football players in this state haven't had near the career you've had. What I challenge you to do now is to apply that drive and excellence toward new goals, whether they be athletic, academic, or personal.

"As for the rest of you, there's next season. It's your job to add to the history of the Minutemen. There's an entire community out there looking to you."

"Okay, let's hear it," Gathers said right after Junior stopped speaking and led the players in a round of applause. Gathers shook his hand and said, "Well, Junior, I don't think I can add too much to that, but I will say seniors, it's been an honor to coach all of you, and you will be missed. As for the rest of you - hope you'll be ready to go, because in seven months, all of this starts up again. One more round for Coach Ryan and all of you."

DJ added his claps to the applause. He had to admit that at times like this, when his father got into his inspirational mode, he could totally forget what an asshole he could be.



Right after the team talk, Junior was swarmed by idolizing players wanting a meet and greet with the hometown football legend. In the confusion, DJ took the opportunity to slip out of a back door out to the stands. He thought he'd be alone for a few moments, but there was another person who was already there. "Damn, Andy, how'd you get in here?" DJ said.

"Nobody ever locks the gates around here during game days," Andy Taylor said as he got up. "Thought I'd hang out away from the crowd."

DJ made his way toward his former teammate. Andy was a senior, slight of build even for a defensive back, with jet-black hair that hung over his dark eyes and skin too pale for Texas. His right arm was strapped to his body in a shoulder sling over his Minutemen windbreaker.

"Don't know why you didn't ride with us. We had plenty of room on the bus."

"Nah... my playing time was over four weeks back. No sense in hanging around when I'm not going to be useful. Besides, some of the guys... I appreciate you standing up for me, but it's still tough around them, all the hassle. Best I stay away."

"No, I get it." DJ's voice softened. He gazed into Andy's eyes, but the gaze was now a warm glow rather than laser beams. "You know, you need anything the rest of the year, I'm here."

"I get it. It's just a hassle with some of them."

"Better not to hang out with them; it's not like they're prizes." DJ came closer to Andy, standing face to face. "In half a year, you'll be out of this place, and then it'll be Cal Tech and freedom. Can't believe you managed a scholarship..."

The Yank Striker

yeah, actually, I can.” Andy had the second-highest grade point average in the school.

“Just got to keep it in perspective, I guess.”

“Yeah.” DJ leaned in toward Andy. He reached behind Andy’s good shoulder with his right hand and cupped the back of his neck, then used his left hand to brush the hair out of Andy’s eyes. “You want to get together sometime?”

Andy chuckled as the slightest blush came to his cheeks and neck. “I thought you were otherwise occupied.”

“That’s not how it works with me.” DJ leaned over and kissed Andy on the left side of his neck, nuzzling him there as he did. “I’ll make time for you whenever you want.”

“Okay, but you probably need a planner to make that work,” Andy said, still smiling.

“I might.” As he straightened back up, he brushed Andy’s forehead one more time, then kissed him squarely on the lips.

DJ heard movement behind him and turned around, his hand still on the back of Andy’s neck. His father stood at the edge of the stands by the side stairs, but with his back turned to DJ and Andy. He appeared to be looking intently at the crowd of fans below greeting the players as they exited the dressing room.

Really?” DJ muttered at his father’s practiced cluelessness. *Talk about open secrets...*

DJ turned back to Andy to see him open-mouthed in shock at the sight of Junior. “It’s fine. I’ll call you later,” he said in the same assured tone he used when he guaranteed a catch on first down. He gave him a final pat on the back of his neck.

Andy eventually closed his mouth and nodded. “See you.” He turned and made his way down a nearby tunnel out of the stadium.

DJ trudged over to his father. He looked nervous, isolated – the only bit of satisfaction DJ would get tonight. *The level of denial...*

“Hey, Dad.”

"Played okay tonight," Junior said.

Not a word about Andy. *Of course*, DJ thought. "I could have gotten that last pass."

"Bullet Bob Hayes couldn't have gotten that last pass." Junior's comfort returned, the stern teacher coming back even as his eyes darted around to see if there were any other witnesses to the scene. "I was talking about some of those blocks you laid out. You forgot how I taught you to do them. A flying body press like some pro wrestler's not it."

"You'll have to reteach me next year then."

"You signed that letter of intent yet?"

"Thought we didn't have to do that until spring."

"Well, not officially, but you might as well do it now and we'll just announce it later."

"Don't know where it is, with all of the other mail I'm getting from schools."

"They're still sending you letters?"

"Forlorn hopes and all that."

"I'll get you another copy." He nodded to DJ. "At least you acted like you were there before for once."

"I've been there before."

"I didn't see your mom around."

DJ smiled at that. Right on time. "She stayed home to watch it on TV."

"She doing alright?" Uncertainty crept back into Junior's voice.

"Great as always, Dad," DJ said, without irony.

Junior nodded, looking down and away from his son. "Okay." He clapped DJ on the shoulder. "Anyway, wanted to say hello. Trey says hello, too."

"Thanks. I'll try to call him after the Arkansas game. Good luck."

"Thank you."

As he watched his father lumber down the stairs to the waiting crowd of fans, DJ smiled at his departing form. It wasn't much, but Junior trying to act like nothing was going

The Yank Striker

on with his son was more gratifying to DJ than any touchdown he'd scored that year.



Most guys at LRPHS obsessed over their vehicles, or lack of them, more than they obsessed over female companionship. That was something DJ never understood, treating a car – a tool to get you from one place to another – with special status. “At least horses had personalities,” he’d say, “even though maintaining them was even more of a hassle.”

DJ’s truck was tucked away in a far corner of the high school’s lot. It was a four-door Ford F-150, at least a decade old. It was covered in dust and dings, but the tires and shocks were brand new. It never attracted attention from the gearheads at school.

As DJ approached his truck, a girl waited for him, leaning against the trunk bed. She almost blended in with the paint scheme with her beaten black leather jacket and faded black jeans. “If you’re looking for the MVPs, they’re still at the stadium,” DJ said.

“I thought they were in Lubbock right now,” she said, cackling at him.

He nodded as he walked up to her. “Yeah, that’s what Junior said. You always knew how to cheer me up, didn’t you, Sasha?”

Sasha Bowers leaned into DJ as they embraced, and he leaned down with a well-practiced kiss. Afterward, she tucked her head of shoulder-length, straight dark brown hair underneath his chin.

"Everything okay, Deke?" Only his family and close friends used that name with him, the result of a one-year-old Trey trying to say "DJ" after his parents had brought the infant home.

"It's weird, but... yeah. It is. Actually, it's freaking me out a little."

"What?"

"I mean, I drove up there on that bus and... I could have been going on a field trip for all I cared."

"Really?"

"Yeah... I've never had to think about getting up for a game before or not being ready for it."

"Hmm. Not that I'm an expert on sports psychology..."

"...or care about sports," he chuckled.

"Anyway." She stared up at him with those wide, warm, cognac brown eyes of hers. "Maybe it has to do with this being your last year. It's your way of coping with the fact that this is over now."

"I'll still be playing football next year, though."

She shook her head. "It's not the same thing. It's more high pressure in college. Plus, you'll have to deal with your dad, of course..."

"I dealt with Junior for 14 years, I can deal with him for another four or so. And this time, I won't have to live in the same house as him."

"I'm sure you can." She patted him on the shoulder as he straightened up.

"Okay, enough introspection for tonight. What brings you out here?"

"Thought we could hang for a while. You have time for me?"

He kissed her on her forehead. "I always do."

"You always have time for a lot of people." Not accusing him, simply stating a fact.

"I do. I love you. I love others, too. Not a lot of people, but..."

The Yank Striker

"You know, I think I'm probably the person here that knows you the best outside of your momma, but that's still something I'm trying to wrap my head around."

"Love isn't just one thing. I learned that from my mom. She still loves Junior, but in a different way from when they first met."

"Your dad loves a lot of different people too." She told it like a joke, but DJ didn't take it like that.

"I'm nothing like that." She caught a glimpse of DJ's ice stare. "He's all secrets and cheating. I'm up front with everyone in my world, and they know where they stand, including you. If Junior told the truth, Mom would still be with him..."

"I know, I know." She rubbed his shoulders, trying to calm him down. "Maybe we stay away from drama, at least tonight."

"Any news on which college yet?"

"Still waiting. It's between UT, USC, and NYU, depending on acceptance letters and scholarships."

"You still thinking communications? What about your art?"

"I can always minor in that. No preference on where I go, or don't?"

"Naw, I'm not doing that." DJ smiled at her as he drew her close. "I didn't give you veto power over my school, I don't have it over yours. This isn't about that."

"Okay." She put her arms around her neck. "Can we have each other at least? For tonight?"

He kissed her again, this time with his tongue starting to make his way into her mouth. "Of course."



By 1 a.m., DJ and Sasha were half-asleep in the nude on her bed in a basement bedroom.

"Glad we've got the place to ourselves," DJ said, a sheet not quite covering his lap as he sat up.

"They're in Dallas tonight, won't be back until maybe noon tomorrow." She lay next to him, without any sheet, stretched out on her belly. "Not that it really matters. They've known about... this for a while, even though Mom doesn't know whether to call you my boyfriend or my lover." She chuckled as he leaned over and nipped at her butt in response.

DJ and Sasha first got to know each other as eighth graders who bonded during an art class that saw them creating endless fantasy or space-themed drawings. Once they learned they had similar tastes in reading, they'd spent the following summer plunging through the stacks at the Liberty Rock Park Public Library and independent bookstores in Dallas.

Both helped each other to deal with major traumas during their freshmen year. For DJ, it was the breakup of his parent's marriage and the change in his mother's domestic arrangements, as well as the death of his paternal grandmother, Sherri, two years previously. For Sasha, it was the death of her brother Eric at the age of 12 from the cancer he'd battled for two years. That year, they had lost their virginity to each other - perfectly legal in Texas, DJ joked, as they'd both turned 15 within a week of each other.

"Lover would be closer, maybe." DJ smiled.

"Why did you never use girlfriend?"

"Never used it with anyone. That implies ownership, and you should know I'm not interested in owning anyone, much less being owned."

"I know." It had been that way from the beginning, an insistence by DJ on openness and total honesty. At first, she thought it was an excuse for DJ to sleep around, and there were rumors about a virtual harem of girls, but DJ admitted to far fewer than anyone suspected, and Sasha believed him.

The Yank Striker

Why would he lie about sleeping with some people when he admitted sleeping with others?

But when she had kissed a sophomore and future Broadway star named Wesley, DJ took all three of them out for coffee a few days later and blessed the relationship. When they did start a physical relationship, it was an anti-climactic situation, metaphorically at least. There had been another guy since then, but Sasha had nowhere near as varied an interest in sex as DJ.

"But I'd have been okay with you saying girlfriend," she did say.

"If my parents proved anything, it's that forever teen romance usually is a contradiction in terms. You are absolutely beautiful and amazing, but we can't guarantee what happens a year from now, much less 10, 20."

"I still wonder what keeps you around me sometimes."

"What do you mean by that?"

She ran a finger down the center of his chest, brushing the fine light hair there. "I broke the rule when I slept with you - girls aren't supposed to date anyone cuter than you, Deke." Sasha knew that DJ was the secret crush of many girls at school, with a toned body, strong but not massive. She was a fan of his lower body in particular - perfectly proportioned legs, square and iron-tight butt, with a penis average in length and just above average in diameter. His skin was medium fair with light and sparse body hair.

"You are beautiful." He spoke the truth - Sasha had the softest olive-brown skin, long arms and legs, and trim torso, with a slight suggestion of curves and breasts that straddled the line between A and B cups. He found himself stroking a firm, toned butt as he thought about her. "That's not why I keep wanting to see you. I don't have to be fake around you like I have to be with nearly everyone in this town just to get by."

She leaned over and kissed him slow and soft on the lips, then tucked her head into the crook of his neck. "I've got a

question. With every bit of shit you talk about your dad, why are you going to play for him? I mean, it makes sense to everyone else, but from what I know about you and your dad, it doesn't make sense."

"It's got nothing to do with liking him," he said as he put her arm around her shoulders. "It's got to do with my football career."

She looked up at him, eyebrows raised in surprise. "You think you're going to make it into the NFL?"

"The saying Junior always has for his players is if you have talent and you put maximum effort into working on and developing your skills, you're guaranteed to be a winner. Mom always said there was a third factor, luck - what she defined as outside factors out of your control going your way. I have just enough talent to make it, and nobody's willing to work harder than me. Now it's the luck I'm trying to get on my side."

"Your dad is luck?"

"Luck is all of the factors out of my control. For example, Junior is the best college football coach there is." DJ reached out and touched the tip of her nose. "There's nobody else who can teach me to be a better player than he can."

"I thought your dad was a defensive specialist."

"He picks the best assistant coaches out there; many of them'll be head coaches someplace later. He's going to win at least another national title, maybe even next year. What better way to get noticed by NFL teams?"

"So, what next, Super Bowls and glory, 20 years in the NFL?"

That made DJ laugh out loud as he pulled Sasha on top of him. "Maybe a quarter of one percent of players in the NFL get that much luck. I'm not counting on it. I'm looking for a first-round pick, the most insane amount of money I can get from a team, then play three years. Four, at the most."

"That's it?"

"The average career is only 4.5 years in the NFL anyway. My dad barely beat that. After three years I get an NFL

The Yank Striker

pension, a health care plan, and annuities. That plus the money I'll save up should be enough to let me live well enough and do whatever I want with art or writing. Maybe I could even be active in helping... people like me out. Six, eight years to get that done is nothing compared to the rest of my life, and only half of it'd involve dealing with Junior.

"That's why I don't want to tell you where to go," DJ continued. "You want to do your writing and art, and you worked hard at it to make it happen. I want to, but I want to make sure Mom is comfortable too." He looked around at the drawings and paintings decorating her room instead of typical posters, stuffed animals, or figurines. One of the drawings was DJ's. "To get where we both want to go, we may have to go to different places."

"Speaking of going places and being together, you going to play that match tomorrow?"

He looked down at her in total shock. "Why wouldn't I?"

"You're not too tired?"

"Did I seem too tired to you?"

She cackled at that. "No... but after tonight..."

"That game was just something to get over with. Tomorrow? Tomorrow's going to be a break. You coming to it?"

"Sorry, I've got to babysit the Sampson kids across the street. Where'll you be afterwards?"

"Told Sawyer I'd visit him at his place tomorrow night. Might stay the weekend."

"Ah." She kissed him again, a longer kiss than before. "I know I don't have any veto over who you see, but... just make sure he treats you okay. I don't want to see you hurt."

He smoothed her hair away from her forehead. "It'll be fine. I'll tell him hi for you?"

She hooted at that and shook her head. "I love you."

"And I love you. Don't doubt that." He looked at the alarm clock on her dresser to the left of the bed. "You said your

Jason Liegois

parents are gone until the afternoon? How about steak and eggs at Denny's when we wake up?"

"If you're buying, I'm coming along."



Unlike the concrete cathedral of Ryan Stadium, the decade-old soccer complex known as Veterans Memorial Soccer Complex a few miles to the south only had the essentials. As DJ got out of his truck and strolled through the cyclone-fence gates, there were eight regulation-sized soccer pitches, two with artificial turf and the rest natural grass.

As he wandered through the main gates, he saw a different crowd from the one at the Death Star. It was smaller and darker - Hispanics outnumbered whites and everyone else combined two to one. Those whites who were there were usually kids and their parents, there to use the fields for youth or traveling soccer team games.

Nobody was tailgating in the parking lot, but more than a few people were toting in multiple coolers of food and drink. A few people sported emerald green shirts, scarves, and caps, among other items. A couple of them recognized DJ. Nobody approached him for autographs like he got sometimes at the football games, although he ended up posing for the occasional picture.

DJ and the emerald green-clad people were headed to Field One, the largest. There were metal stands along the two sidelines; the fans at the ends of the fields had to either stand or bring their own lawn chairs; 1,000 fans might be able to squeeze in to see a game there. It had full stadium lights and a tiny press box at the top of one of the stands.