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**A memory that inspires**

Thoughts of coach who died over the summer have been a rallying point for Girard High School football team.

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GIRARD, Kan. | The night before the big game, Mike Cook buries his hands in his letter jacket. A heavy mist swirls around him, the wind whipping through Girard Cemetery.

Cook lowers his head and focuses on the marble headstone, the one covered with flowers, letters and snapshots of smiling faces, the one you can't miss.

Cook is here to talk to Coach. He searches for the right words. It wasn't so hard when all he had to do was pick up the phone or walk through the stuffy locker room and knock on Coach's door.

Cook paces around the grave, his footprints stamped into the wet grass. He has retraced these steps every day since Coach died over three months ago.

All around the Girard Trojans, life has resumed. School is in full swing, football is being played and Coach's weights classes are being taught, but the Girard players refuse to move on, not while the season is still alive.

"He's still my coach," Cook says.

Coach was a father figure to Cook and to many other boys in Girard. They could talk to him about anything, from issues with girls to problems with their families, and he would actually listen.

Coach may be gone, but Cook is still talking. He stands here in the rain, hoping to be heard. Cook, a senior running back, tells Coach about the next night's game against Columbus. They've gone 6-2 this season, somehow. If they win, they're in the playoffs. If they lose, they're out.

He tells Coach that he's sorry for not having his best year, but for the longest time, he just couldn't imagine playing football without him. Cook thinks he's ready now, to play like himself again, to make Coach proud. That's all the Trojans have wanted from this year, and it's gotten them this far, one win away from their first playoff berth since 2003.

Cook closes his eyes. He recites the Lord's Prayer, as he does during each visit. Cook finishes, crosses himself and says goodbye until the next day, when he'll return with news about the game.

He drives back down the gravel road, the headlights clearing a path through the darkness.

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On the last day of his life, Craig Crespino woke up at 7:30 a.m.

He called team manager Jace Cobb. There was work to be done at the practice field.

If Crespino were the coach at a bigger school on July 21, he might not have had to go to the practice field that day. At a bigger school, someone else might have had to move the goal post into position.

But Crespino had made his choice. His love for Girard, the kids and the community, was more powerful than the need for a new challenge. Crespino had been head coach at Girard for 14 years. He was building something.

Cobb and Crespino, all 5 feet 7 of him, moved the big metal goal post that morning. A power line hung over head. The post hit the power line, all 7,200 volts of it, and sent an electrical surge through Crespino. His heart stopped on the spot.

Cobb, dazed from a lesser surge, looked over at his coach, lying lifeless on the parched ground. For the first time in Craig Crespino's 45 years, he had stopped moving.

Cobb called 911, and the ambulance sirens blared through the town square, past the school, to the field. Phones rang all over town as the news spread. Coach was dead.

Cook picked up his cell phone and hung up on the caller. It couldn't be true. Coach had just stopped by his house out of the blue the day before, bursting with energy about the upcoming season.

Crespino had been grooming these boys since they were sixth-graders, always with the view of this season in sight. He had finally gotten the team new uniforms. If you were going to win state, Coach thought, you might as well look good doing it.

All of that seemed pointless as the team rode together to the wake and funeral. As thousands gathered to honor their coach, questions ran through their teenage minds. How could this have happened? Should they even play this season? What would football be without Coach?

They'd find out in a few days. It was almost time for camp.

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Blaise Bauer had chosen to become a principal. Eight years ago, he traded watching film for watching test scores. The cap and whistle had been replaced with a suit and tie, and the change had fit him well, especially since becoming Girard's principal in 2001.

Bauer and Crespino were close friends. They coached together at Girard in the early 1990s, and during Bauer's five years as the head coach at Galena, they coached against each other.

As a friend and colleague, Bauer wanted to mourn Crespino's death. As a principal, he knew he didn't have time. He had to figure out how to move forward without a veteran educator of 22 years and how to salvage the school year. In the end, that meant Bauer returning to the sidelines to coach the team on an interim basis. None of the assistants wanted the job, and Bauer would not hire an outsider under the circumstances.

"To me it wasn't something that I was looking to do," Bauer says, "but it was very apparent, on a personal note, that I was supposed to do it.

"How we respond and how we deal with the emotional loss of a dear teacher and close friend is far more important than state assessment scores. It's going to define our school year."

So imagine the team's shock when Bauer called a team meeting and informed them that he, the principal, was now their head football coach. They tried to avoid Bauer's office for years, and now they were instructed to come knocking.

"I don't know what must have been going through that man's head," Cook says. "It was awkward, but he's done a lot for the team."

The first few weeks of practice were tough, but time had begun to heal the Trojans. Bauer started to see glimpses of why Crespino was so excited for this season.

"I've never been more proud of a bunch of kids in my life," Bauer says. "Did we look good? No. Was there a lot of enthusiasm? No. Our goal was to get them all through practice."

The first game against Riverton was dark and emotional. Bauer had never been so nervous for a football game.

Riverton, a team Girard should have beaten, led at halftime on Girard's home turf. From there, the season would go one of two ways. They would either turn this thing around, becoming a living tribute to their coach, or they would crumble under the weight of their pain. It was up to them.

In that locker room at halftime, Bauer pulled the Trojans together. They had come so far in the last month. They had to stay positive.

"There's a lot of people pulling for us this game," Bauer reminded them.

The Trojans remembered who else they were playing for. The locker room became filled

with cries of, "Let's win this one for Coach!" They came out the second half a different team emotionally, and Girard won easily, 36-10. The Trojans haven't let down since.

"Nobody gives up," Cook says. "If one person thinks of giving up, a teammate slaps him on the back of the head before he can finish the thought."

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Eight games have passed, six glorifying wins and two heartbreaking losses, and the journey has brought Girard here, to the brink of a Class 4A playoff berth.

Crespino would have been bouncing off the walls on a night like this. Blaise Bauer is more stoic, but he can feel the importance as he gathers his Trojans in the locker room before the game.

His comments are about running the football and playing sound defense. They do not need Coach as a rallying cry anymore. This is a different team than the one Bauer spoke to at halftime against Riverton.

"They know who they're playing for," says Girard assistant coach Joseph Clark, Crespino's nephew.

Outwardly, there are only little reminders now, the "CC" inscribed on each Trojan helmet, the street behind the stadium named for him and the yellow bracelets being sold at the game that say "Coach."

Inwardly, the Trojans think about him every time they put on their brand-new uniforms, as they do on this perfect Thursday night for football. Crespino would have loved to see his boys run onto the field against Columbus, the lights shining down on their jerseys, which almost perfectly mirror those of the USC Trojans.

But Coach isn't here, and he can't do anything to stop Columbus from taking a 7-0 lead in the first quarter.

That's when Cook starts to take over. He's playing with a bad shoulder, a bad knee and a bad ankle, but Columbus can't find an answer for him up the middle. This was what Cook envisioned back in the summer.

In the second half, Cook runs for two touchdowns, helping Girard build on a 14-7 halftime lead. Cook felt like he let Coach down after the team's two defeats, and he doesn't want to have that feeling again.

The Trojans pull away 32-21, and as the clock runs out, the Girard fans rush the field. They're going to the playoffs, where they'll meet Labette County in the first round tonight.

In the far end zone, Bauer tells the Trojans that he's proud of them. It's not exactly Lombardi, but it's the most they'll get out of him. When the season started, he was Mr. Bauer. Now, he's Coach Bauer.

The Trojans disperse. Sophomore running back Darian Kelly and junior quarterback Tyler Bennett pray together, as they do after every game.

"Thank you, God," Kelly says, "for another chance to shine for Coach Crespino."

There will be four more days of practice. Win or lose, state title or not, the 2006 team has already cemented its legacy.

"I think we'll be remembered for Crespino," senior lineman Trent Crask says. "They'll say, 'That's the season Craig died. They still came out and played.' "

They came out, played and won. Cook stays on the field and shares the moment with his family. Soon, he'll be back at the cemetery for another talk with Coach. He can't wait to deliver the good news.