

THE BOYS *of* RIVERSIDE

A DEAF FOOTBALL TEAM
AND A QUEST FOR GLORY



THOMAS FULLER

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About the Author

*To Jocelyn, Harrison, and Sophie,
for your love and patience as I rumbled off to Riverside*

Prologue

Sometimes a journey begins with an email. This one was a routine message sent to journalists from the California Department of Education, a note applauding the undefeated season of a deaf high school football team in Riverside, east of Los Angeles. The deaf school was founded a few years after World War II, but in seven decades none of its sports teams had ever made it to a championship, let alone prevailed in one. Now the California School for the Deaf, Riverside was in the playoffs. The email concluded with a plea for assistance: please help the school upgrade their facilities and write a check with “bleachers” on the memo line.

My job for *The New York Times* was San Francisco bureau chief. That meant covering wildfires and homelessness, deaths of despair on the streets of California cities and mass shootings. These topics are in line with the arc of my three decades in journalism, most of which have been spent abroad for the *Times* writing about natural disasters and military coups, uprisings and financial crises. It was heavy stuff, both the stories and the reporting. I had interviewed a rogue general in Thailand who was killed by a sniper as I was asking him a question. The bullet had whizzed over my head. I had counted bodies floating down a river after a terrible cyclone in Myanmar.

Then along came this group of high school kids and their quest for a championship. Something about the Riverside Cubs pulled me in like metal to a magnet. Riverside was seven hours away from my home in the East Bay of San Francisco. I got into my car and barreled down the eight-lane

California freeways, arriving just in time to meet with the players and to watch them crush their opponents in the second round of the playoffs. I interviewed the coach of the losing team, and he told me he had never competed against a squad that communicated so fluidly, and so well.

Reporting this story introduced me to the world of eight-man football, a division for smaller schools in California that have trouble fielding eleven-player teams. The California School for the Deaf, Riverside had just fifty-one boys in its regular high school academic programs. Nearly half of them were on the football team.

I came to appreciate the eight-man game. It was fast, hard-hitting, and a little more down in the dirt than eleven-man ball. Sometimes literally. At Trona High School, in a mining community in the Mojave Desert, the team plays their games on sand. The field is known as the Pit, part of the desolate landscape that envelops the town on the edge of Death Valley.

The eight-man division includes schools on the endless farms and ranchlands of the Central Valley, on Indian reservations, and perched high in mountain passes. There's even an eight-man team on Santa Catalina Island, an hour's ferry ride into the blue-green waters of the Pacific Ocean, where home-field advantage comes with the hope that the opposing team gets woozy on the boat ride over.

Smaller and far-flung does not mean less athletic. Big names have come out of California's eight-man football programs, including Josh Allen, the Buffalo Bills quarterback, who played for Firebaugh High School in a farming town in the Central Valley. The 1994 Heisman Trophy winner, Rashaan Salaam, played on an eight-man team in San Diego.

In reporting the book, I came to see the Cubs as a flesh-and-blood realization of the American dream. Coaches and players had backgrounds that spanned the globe. Their parents were from Mexico, Romania, El Salvador, Ethiopia. The team's defensive coordinator, Kaveh Angoorani, was born in Iran to a mother who was deeply distraught when she discovered her son was deaf. She sent Kaveh (pronounced "kaa-vey") to the United States, where he thrived in the deaf community and took up this curious game with

an oblong ball. Football would become a central part of Kaveh's new American identity, one that he embraced so enthusiastically that his idea of retirement was to buy a Harley-Davidson and ride into the California desert.

I marveled at the challenges that some of the players faced off the field. Phillip Castaneda, a lightning-fast running back, was homeless and slept in his father's car in a Target parking lot across from the school. His love of football motivated him to get up every morning, wash his face in the Target bathroom, and go to class.

The article I wrote about the Cubs for the *Times* got the school a lot of attention and put intense pressure on the team to win. I decided to put my career on hold, give up my position as San Francisco bureau chief, and follow the team for an entire season. It was a dream journey and a window into Deaf Culture, a term that many deaf people capitalize because it encompasses an entire class of people and their way of life. I was honored that the players, coaches, and administrators at the school trusted me—someone with little prior knowledge about deafness—to tell their story. I interviewed historians and linguists, psychologists and a neurosurgeon, all of whom had contributed to the incredible leaps in knowledge about the complex structure of sign language and how the human brain adapts itself to deafness by enhancing other senses.

The sports program at the California School for the Deaf had endured indignities for years. Visiting teams would sometimes talk about how it would be embarrassing to lose to a deaf team. During their many years with a losing record, the football team had the sinking feeling their opponents came expecting an easy win. Many of the talented athletes on the Cubs had previously played football in weekend leagues, with hearing people, and they had come away feeling lonely and alienated, unable to take part in huddles or team meetings. At Riverside, they came together as a squad with a sense of mission, an all-deaf team and coaching staff. They were underdogs, but they had something immeasurable. They had a brotherhood.

As I stood on the sidelines watching the team practice day after day, I witnessed a passion for the game of football. I was inspired by the players

and their relentless pursuit of that championship ring. That email, which came as the pandemic was raging across a bitterly divided United States, led me to realize that this team's journey, a tale of belonging and excellence, was the story I wanted to write. It felt like a salve at a time of such turmoil in the country.

More than a hundred high schools in California play eight-man ball, and only two of them are deaf schools. The Cubs were determined to show the world that deafness was no impediment to sporting glory. On the contrary, they wanted to prove that being deaf on the gridiron gave them an edge.

Phillip

The story begins before the reporters and the television correspondents flocked to interview the team. Before the offers from movie producers, before the National Football League invited the captains to participate in the Super Bowl coin toss. Before success.

The story begins in the late summer of 2021, just as California, the nation, and the world were emerging from the worst of the coronavirus pandemic. It begins with a newcomer to the school, Phillip Castaneda, in the parking lot where he slept.

Phillip had a morning ritual. He would scamper out of his father's Nissan Sentra, get his clothes from a suitcase in the trunk of the car, and then slide back into the car to get dressed for the day. He had to wait until 8:00 a.m., when Target opened its doors, to slip into the entrance, hang a left, and head for the bathroom.

The backseat of his father's compact car was his bedroom. And if he looked out the car's windows, he could see, across four lanes of traffic, the football field where he hoped to shine. Football was his first love. He had played on various teams when he was younger, and despite his short stature and slight frame, he had impressed coaches with his speed and his toughness. Now he planned on displaying his talents across the street, on the varsity football team of the California School for the Deaf in Riverside, California.

Phillip's father, Jude Ward Castaneda, had driven to Riverside with the express purpose of giving his son a place to sleep. The Nissan was the only shelter he had the means to provide. Each night, Jude Castaneda would find a spot, preferably away from other vehicles, in the lot on Arlington Avenue. In addition to Target, there was a Yum Yum Donuts, where Phillip would also sometimes use the bathroom, a small Pizza Hut, a nail salon, a cannabis dispensary, and a dentist's office. It was a classic California strip mall. Phillip scraped together enough money to get a membership to the gym down the road, where he could use the showers. Every night, at around midnight, after all the shops had closed, Jude and his girlfriend would settle into the front seats of the car and Phillip would have the back to himself. All three are deaf, but Phillip had just enough hearing that he could make out the blaring horns of freight trains passing on tracks a few dozen yards away.

In his younger years, Phillip's father had been a gifted athlete and had competed as a wrestler in the International Games for the Deaf, the Deaf Olympics. But by his own assessment, Jude Castaneda had traveled down the wrong path, becoming hooked on methamphetamines and spending time in prison for domestic violence and violating probation. He had stayed out of trouble for the past decade, he said, and now he hoped that he could give his son a better chance at life. "I didn't want him to be messed up like me," he said in a conversation on the sidelines of a football game.

California has around 12 percent of the nation's total population, but almost a third of its homeless. Living in a car, in a tent, or on a piece of cardboard has become distressingly common in the Golden State, where the average house costs \$700,000. For Phillip Castaneda, homelessness was compounding an already tough childhood. He had been enrolled in six different schools and had struggled in all of them. Studying English, a language with all its peculiar spellings and syntax, was especially tedious. You could say that learning English for Phillip was the equivalent of an American person with perfect hearing studying a foreign language, Portuguese or Swahili, take your pick, but never being allowed to hear it spoken. American Sign Language, which is as different from English as two

languages can be, is his native tongue. But of course “native tongue” is a term, like so many in English, that is not quite adapted to the deaf world.

Born just outside San Francisco and raised in the Central Valley, the vast agricultural expanse that produces everything from almonds to truckloads of tomatoes that get mashed into a good share of the world’s ketchup, Phillip was dealt a difficult hand from the start. His mother, also deaf, had been born in El Salvador and moved to California when she was a child. Among other ailments, she had a debilitating case of rheumatoid arthritis, the disease where the body’s immune system attacks its own tissue. It left her unable to work and relying on government disability checks.

As a teenager, Phillip had played football with hearing kids in and around the Central Valley city of Modesto. A friend offered to pay the \$400 in fees that the league required. Phillip excelled on the field, but it was difficult being the only deaf person on a hearing team. Not understanding the instructions for some of the drills at practice, Phillip made sure he was always at the back of the line, where he could watch his teammates go first. But he loved the sport and told his family he wanted to play in the National Football League.

“Football was his escape,” his sister, Priscilla Castaneda, said. “Football gives him joy.”

Hell Week

On the first day of practice of the 2021 season, Galvin Drake pulled into the parking lot of the California School for the Deaf in Riverside, music blaring. The thumping beats of Daft Punk and Damian Lazarus were so loud it seemed as if they could loosen the bolts holding together his green 2005 Toyota Camry. Galvin couldn't hear the melodies or the lyrics, but it didn't matter. Music had a different meaning for him than it did for hearing people. The beats pulsed through his seat. He didn't listen to music; he *felt* it. Late at night when he would drive near his home in Riverside, Galvin would turn it down, as a courtesy for his hearing neighbors. But on campus, he let it rip, often with the windows open.

Galvin was the assistant varsity football coach at the school, or CSDR, as everyone calls it. He was the team's enforcer, lecturing the players on the importance of weight lifting and eating well. No junk food and soda during football season, he told the student athletes. He looked the part. He could deadlift 405 pounds—not 400, but 405, he noted—and had the bulging muscles to prove it. He ended his text messages with a flexing biceps emoji. But on this first day of practice he was worried. The pandemic had forced the cancellation of football the year before, and everyone had languished in front of computer screens, attending their classes remotely on Zoom and playing video games when class was over. Many of the players were overweight. All were out of shape.

The pandemic set back millions of students across America, but for deaf children it was especially hard. Many lived in homes or neighborhoods where no one spoke their language. School was the place they found peers, they learned to advocate for themselves, they came out of their shells. “When COVID happened, all they had was this little tiny screen on Zoom,” one administrator at the school said. “School was their access to the world.”

Keith Adams, the burly head coach of the football program, with a shaved head perpetually tanned by the California sun, could relate to what the pandemic had done to his players’ bodies. He had gained thirty pounds himself. On day one of practice, Adams arrived with cases of Gatorade that he had bought at Costco to ward off dehydration. He was determined to get his players into fighting shape.

. . .

August in Riverside can feel like the inside of a pizza oven. Unlike the California coast, which benefits from the natural air-conditioning blowing in from the Pacific Ocean, Riverside is one mountain range away from the Mojave Desert. To avoid the worst of the heat, the coaches had scheduled their first weeks of practices for the evening, when temperatures typically fell into the low nineties. The players had a name for the first days of conditioning: Hell Week.

Phillip Castaneda didn’t have far to travel to get to practice. He walked across the street from the Target parking lot. He cast an eye at his new teammates. They were greeting one another like long-lost relatives. High school students get only four years to prove themselves on the football field. This cohort would get only three. The cancellation of the previous year’s season had made the players hungry to play again, to be teammates again, to block and tackle. They had missed the physicality of the game that came so naturally to them. In the plainest of terms, they were restless boys who wanted to hit again.

The first day began with Coach Adams gathering the team for orientation meetings in the air-conditioned bliss of the athletic facility. This could have been a meeting of any football team in America, coaches and players sitting on plastic folding chairs in a colorless classroom discussing their hopes for the season. But there was an important difference for the Cubs, a kind of inescapable togetherness. Teenagers, boys in particular, are known for their adolescent grunt years, for eyes-cast-down, monosyllabic conversations. This was rarely the case in Cubs meetings. Communicating in sign language required unbroken eye contact; it demanded that a listener watch not only the hands but also the slightest nuances in facial expressions. When Keith Adams reminded his players, as he did so often, that the team would succeed only if everyone did their job, all eyes were on him. Most days, Adams did not need to ask for his players' attention: it was ingrained in Deaf Culture. The boys were, by necessity, locked in.

Much of what the team discussed on this first day was practical. Face masks were obligatory inside, Coach Adams told them. School was back in session, but the coronavirus still stalked students and teachers. Write your name on your water bottle and don't share it, he said. Only eight people allowed in the weight room at once.

The weight room, which had two heavy doors that automatically locked unless you found a way to prop them open, ran along a corridor that led to the locker rooms. When one stood in that hallway looking through the sealed-shut windows, it was nearly impossible to hear people inside the weight room. But this was no obstacle for the Cubs. They could effortlessly converse through the thick glass, one person signing in the hallway to another inside using the weights.

If it had been a hearing school, a student might be able to bang on the door loudly enough for someone to open it. That wasn't an option for the Cubs. No one would know you were knocking. The Cubs were window people, not door people. Window versus door; it was a leitmotif in deaf art and literature.