

QB1

By Mike Lupica

IF YOU WERE A HIGH SCHOOL QUARTERBACK, A TEXAS HIGH school quarterback, this was the moment you imagined for yourself from the first time somebody said you had some arm on you.

This was football now, pure football, the way you drew it up, but not in some playbook.

In your dreams.

And in Texas, usually your dad had dreamt all the best ones first.

Two minutes left, ball in your hands, game in your hands, *season* in your hands. State championship on the line, the new 1AA championship for small schools like yours. One of those small-town, big-dream schools. Like you were the one in the book or the TV show and you were playing for Friday Night Lights High.

Only this was *your* school, the Granger High Cowboys, against Fort Carson, in Boone Stadium, the fancy new stadium at Texas State University.

Fort Carson ahead, 20–16. Cowboys' ball at their own twenty-yard line.

One time-out left.

Even if you were a high school senior, already had a college scholarship in your pocket to the University of Texas, even if you could see yourself in the pros someday, there was no way to know if it would be exactly like this for you ever again—one shot like this with it all on the line.

Unless you were somebody like Eli Manning, and you got to do it twice, in the Super Bowl, the way Eli had done it twice to the Patriots. Eli: bringing his team from behind in the biggest football game there was, winning both of those Super Bowls in the last minute, something no one—not even Eli's big brother Peyton—had done in the history of the National Football League.

But the quarterback in Boone Stadium now wasn't a Manning. It was Wyatt Cullen. Son of Troy Cullen, who'd been the greatest quarterback to come out of this part of Texas—at least until his son Wyatt came along.

Around here, people lived out *their* dreams through their high school football stars. All the ones who'd grown up in Granger and knew they'd probably die there wanted to know why you'd ever want to be one of those Manning brothers when you could be a Cullen in Granger, Texas.

Now Wyatt: in his senior year, in the last high school game he was ever going to play, his last chance to be a total high school hero and win the state title in the last minute the way his dad had once.

Like Wyatt was born to do it, born for this kind of moment, with what felt like the whole town of Granger in the stands on their side of the field.

Some sportswriter would quote Wyatt later as saying he imagined every pickup in their town was parked outside Boone Stadium, like there had been some kind of caravan of pickups all the way from Granger to here, to the kind of big game that made a small town like Granger feel like the capital of the whole world.

First down pass for him, left side, the kind of deep-out-pattern throw you needed a big arm to make, the throw all the scouts wanted to see and had been seeing from Wyatt since he became Granger's starter as a freshman. This one was to Wyatt's favorite receiver, Calvin Morton, a sophomore with big speed and big hands, tall as a tight end at six five, but skinny as a fence post. Gain of twenty to Calvin right out of the rodeo chute, as Wyatt's dad liked to say.

Ball on the forty, just like that. Room for Wyatt to maneuver now. Room to *breathe*. Clock stopped when Calvin went out of bounds. Minute fifty remaining.

All day.

Everybody standing in Boone Stadium. All those familiar faces on the Granger side, Dad and Mom pretty much in the same spot they had for home games at Granger High, fifty-yard line, maybe ten rows up. All the other Friday nights and Saturday afternoons had built up to this one. Cheerleaders on the field in the big area between the wall of the stands and the Cowboys' bench, not doing much cheering right now, almost like they were frozen in place, all those pretty girls

watching along with everybody else to see how the big game would come out.

Sarah Rayburn, the only freshman on the squad, she was *that* pretty, looking so scared and so nervous you were afraid she might be about to cry, even with that cheerleader smile of hers locked in place.

Wyatt went right back to Calvin on the next play. Fort Carson's pass rush made Wyatt work this time, flushing him out of the pocket, same kind of pressure they'd been putting on him all day. But Wyatt bought himself just enough time, scrambling to his right. Wyatt was as accurate on the run with that arm as if he had all day in the pocket and hit Calvin in stride at midfield.

Clock running.

Wyatt hurried everybody up to the new line of scrimmage, going with the second play he'd called in the huddle, a right sideline route to his tight end, Roy Gilley. Another strike, Roy shoved out of bounds by their strong safety.

One minute, one second left.

Next came the play they'd talk about for a long time in Granger, in the ice-cream parlors and barbecue joints where they all grew up, where the only thing they talked about all week in those places, and on the town's lone radio station, was last week's game.

Wyatt Cullen, number 10, in that Cowboy blue that matched the blue of the Dallas Cowboys, surrounded this time, huge pressure now, one of the defensive linemen with a handful of blue jersey, trying to fight off a blocker and pull Wyatt down with his free hand.

The action actually seemed to stop in that moment, everybody saying afterward that they were sure Wyatt was getting sacked, guys on both teams saying they kept waiting for the ref to blow his whistle.

But he didn't.

Because Wyatt wasn't about to go down.

Instead he stumbled as he somehow freed himself of the guy's grasp and left the pocket, pulling free, *gettingfree*, running for his life to his left.

Half the Fort Carson defense still coming for him.

But Wyatt wasn't looking behind him, he was looking down the field. Having bought himself just enough time to do *that*, Wyatt was able to fling the ball while running, barely taking long enough to plant his right foot, heaving it half-sidearm as far as he could in the direction of Calvin Morton.

Letting it rip even though Calvin was double-covered by a corner and a safety. Wyatt told everybody later that he'd overcooked the sucker on purpose, that's

why it looked like an overthrow as it started to fall out of the sky, Wyatt wanting Calvin to be the only one with a chance to go up and get it.

And there was Calvin, going up for that pass like this was the way he'd drawn it up in his dreams.

The safety and the corner could both jump pretty good. Yet not like Calvin Morton, who went up and outfought both of them, bobbling the ball just slightly, somehow pinning it to the front of his right shoulder pad with his huge mitt of a left hand.

Landing hard on his back, helmet going sideways as he did, somehow maintaining control of the ball.

Now there was Wyatt racing down the field, maybe as fast as he'd ever moved on a football field, waving his teammates to run with him. Not wanting to burn that last time-out in his pocket, wanting everybody lined up as soon as the ref started the clock again, having stopped it because of the first down.

He spiked the ball as soon as it was snapped to him. Twenty-eight seconds left. Ball on the Fort Carson seventeen.

Wyatt figured he had all the time he needed, even if they didn't make another first down, that he could make four throws to the end zone, easy, if he had to.

But he needed only one.

Needed only one because Calvin made this sweet, tight inside move on the corner, like he was going to run a post, then just flat froze the guy and the safety giving inside help when he made an even better cut, at full speed, toward the left corner of the end zone.

Wyatt's pass, dead spiral, hit those big hands as softly as your head hitting your pillow, and it was 22–20, Granger.

Now it had become the high school moment, in Texas or anywhere else, they had all really dreamed about their whole lives, going ahead in the last seconds of the big game like this.

Couldn't tell it by watching Wyatt Cullen, though. He was the coolest guy in Boone Stadium, pointing up to where his parents and his kid brother were, all of them losing their minds the way everybody around them was.

There was Sarah, the close-up of her face they'd use not only in the TV highlights, but also in the *Granger Dispatch*, looking about as happy as a high school girl ever could, eyes on Wyatt.

There was old Coach John McCoy, his Granger jacket halfway zipped the way it always was, no matter how hot the Texas weather was, showing you the white shirt and the tie he always wore, had worn since he coached Troy Cullen in games

like these. Coach getting some love from the TV cameras his own self, as they liked to say in Texas, calmly holding up one finger, not saying the Cowboys were already number one, not getting ahead of himself, just telling his boys to kick the point after.

Clay Smolders's kick was center cut. Now it was 23–20 for Granger.

Fort Carson managed to get off three desperation heaves. When the last one fell harmlessly to the ground at around the Granger forty, it was over.

Then Wyatt Cullen was in the air, above it all, carried around by the bigger guys on his team. Even looking cool up there, above the action now instead of in the middle of it. Smiling when the cameras closed on him, like he was exactly where he was supposed to be, like he knew all along that this was the way his day and his high school career were supposed to end.

His kid brother, Jake, froze the scene right there.

Hit the remote and froze his big brother on TiVo. Right there on the close-up, on Wyatt's smile. Like Wyatt really had known all along, since he first played catch with Troy Cullen in the pasture behind the barn, the first time Dad was the one telling him he had the arm.

Jake pointed the remote at the big screen, sat there in the quiet den, waiting for

his buddies to come pick him up and head over to Mickey's Bar-B-Q tonight, wondering all over again what the view was really like up there for Wyatt. What it was like to actually *be* Wyatt Cullen, even though he'd grown up in the same house with him, looked up to him his whole life.

Jake: wondering if he'd ever get anywhere near a moment like that at Granger High.

Or if he'd ever even *be* the first-string quarterback at Granger High, whether he was a Cullen or not.