Isaiah’s Signature Moment

People say this year’s Shawnee Indians football team is the best in the school’s history. Since seventh grade, its seniors have never been beaten. That’s 53 games in a row, with just one more win needed to make the state playoffs.

Amazingly, as talented as this team is, it has never received enough computer points to make the post season. This year, however, a win over powerful Elida in the season’s last game will guarantee that elusive playoff berth.

You can imagine the hype around town. Shawnee fans are saying now is the time for Isaiah Pead to have his “signature moment,” a performance that people will talk about for years to come. Pead, the Indians’ star running back, is being recruited by colleges from all around the country. Nearly every athlete who lives in Allen County looks up to Isaiah. He is a 4.0 student and always strives to be the best of the best.

All of this is not lost on Isaiah. One way or another, he knows things will be different after the final result is posted on the scoreboard.

Yes, so much could change by Sunday.

Monday: For the love of grandma

“Isaiah, get up! You need to be on time for school every day this week. We can’t have you ineligible for your last regular season game,” Grandma says, waking me up from the comforts of a deep sleep.

“I’m coming, mama! I can’t wait to run through those Elida boys Friday night and see them eat my dust. Maybe after I score, I’ll run right over to see their girlfriends and give each of them a big kiss.”

Grandma let out a big belly laugh, only to stop quickly and scold me. “You dare not speak that way, Elijah. You’re no Muhammad Ali, you know.”

She loved teasing me about her childhood idol, Muhammad Ali, telling me how he not only would promise to give somebody a “whupping,” but how he always delivered “without getting a mark on that pretty face of his.”
As I pull into school in my Cadillac Escalade, all of my peers cheer and applaud. “Am I really that important?” I ask myself. It’s funny how all my friends can be happy for me and cheer for me because of sports, yet when I get perfect grades, they seem not to notice. I smile as I walk up the sidewalk and through the arched doorway of Shawnee High School. My two best friends, Alex and Ben, greet me there, and we walk together to our lockers. Ben is telling me about the deer hunting trip he took with his dad over the weekend and asks if I would ever like to go. I tell him that would be awesome. Alex asks me how he thinks we will do Friday night against Elida. He is the starting quarterback for our team and has a high football IQ. Michigan State is offering Alex a scholarship to play quarterback next year, and some people say we are the best dynamic duo of quarterback and running back in the state. Our fans and the media are expecting us to win a state championship this year. We hope to fill all these high expectations.

But today is not like any other Monday. I go through all eight class periods, then head to practice after school. Coach Kent Krogerman is glad to see that I am healthy and in great shape. We go through practice just as we have been doing every day this year. The hard work and great determination rings from our voices as we root for each other. We are focused; a team hungry for one more win. We have been practicing for two hours now and only have a half hour left when suddenly, Coach Krogerman is walking my way. The look on his face makes my mind race with worrisome thoughts as he takes me off to the side, away from my teammates.

“Son, I have some terrible news. Your house was broken into this morning, but your grandma is safe,” Coach Krogerman says.

“What! I have to get home,” I reply, all in one breath.

Coach excuses me from practice, and I race home, where I find that half of the belongings that filled our house earlier today are now missing. Sitting in the corner is my grandmother, weeping as she sways back and forth in her favorite rocking chair, all the while clutching her rosary.

Now, I do feel like Muhammad Ali. Whoever made my grandmother cry is about to learn about “a whupping.”

**Wednesday: No place for bullies**

It’s Wednesday now, and I head to school. My morning classes go splendidly until something occurs at lunch. A friend of mine, Jeremy, who doesn’t play sports but is a smart guy and an all-around nice person, is getting backed into a corner by a couple of troublemakers, Jack and Bradley. The lunch room is too loud for the teachers to notice this is going on, but I see it. They shove Jeremy, and I can see blood running down his shirt. I jump into action and pull Jack and Bradley away from Jeremy. They try to scurry to freedom, but
before they can get away, Principal Jake Williamson grabs them and takes them to his office. Later, I find out they are the ones who stole my stuff. They’re lucky I didn’t know that earlier.

**Thursday: The choice**

As Thursday rolls around, we have a walk-through practice after school. Our coaches want to make sure we don’t get any aches and pains before the game. After this practice, I will make my college choice official by declaring where I want to play football. It has been a tough decision, but I have narrowed it down to Notre Dame, Cincinnati, and Baylor. Notre Dame seems like a great school with its Catholic beliefs, great morals, and close-knit student body. Cincinnati is a good school, but recently their coach, Butch Rodriguez, died of cancer, so there are concerns about who will replace him. Baylor has an outstanding team with great athletes, but I wonder how often Grandma would be able to watch my games, given the long distance and the high cost of airplane tickets. What will I choose?

It’s time to place hats from each team in front of me, and then pick the hat of the school I will attend. The moment people have all been waiting for is minutes away. I sit down in a soft chair in The Great Hall, the biggest room in our school. There are cameras everywhere. Why are these people acting like children on Christmas day over a high school kid picking where he wants to go to college? Then the lights flash, signaling it’s time for me to end the suspense. I look down and put my hand over the Cincinnati hat in the middle, then the Notre Dame hat on the right, and finally the Baylor hat on the left. I slowly move my hand to the center, and then jerk it quickly to the right, where I drop it down and pick up the Notre Dame hat. I would like to attend The University of Notre Dame.

**Friday night: The game**

Finally, game time has arrived. The lights are flashing at Tecumseh Stadium, and I’ve never felt so much emotion for one game. The newspaper’s sports reporters have been writing about this game all week. Longtime TV newsman Prince Knowza has sent camera crews to every practice. For all of the build-up, there is one simple fact: If we win, we go to the state tournament; if we lose, our season is over.

Early in the game, we are our worst enemy and dig ourselves into a hole. Alex has thrown two interceptions, and worse yet, his confidence has been ripped from his heart. Halftime arrives, we trail by seven points, and Alex is quite down on himself. I tell him that he needs to stop worrying and just let the game flow. I guess letting the game flow is easy for me because I have averaged 200 yards rushing every game. I already have 150 yards rushing and two touchdowns this first half.
We head out onto the field for the second half. I grind the ball down the field, and we tie Elida at the end of the third quarter. Elida has the ball on offense, and all I can do is sit and watch as Elida’s Randy McAdams slowly leads his team down the field, punctuating a 12-play, 82-yard drive with the winning touchdown. We never got the ball until six seconds were left, which was too late.

**The message**

In our locker room, I can see so much pain in people’s eyes, but mostly in those of Alex. He feels as if it is all his fault, but it is not. It has been a long year, and we’re all disappointed. I gather the team together, and I give a speech that everybody in that room will never forget. This is my speech:

“It hurts, guys. Man does it hurt. But that’s a good thing. If it didn’t hurt right now, it would mean we didn’t care. So don’t mistake that hurt for failure. You only fail when you don’t try. You only fail when you don’t care, when you don’t believe in yourself or your teammates. We fought as a team. We fought as a team! And Alex, you gave it all you had, man. You hear me? I’m telling you – don’t ever drop your head when you walk off the field of battle, a place where you fought with every ounce of energy you had. You’re upset with yourself, Alex, because of the interceptions. But I hate to break this to you, man … Alex, you ain’t God. He’s the only one I know that doesn’t make mistakes. He has never made one mistake. You’re just Alex, a guy who loves this game and gives it all he has. There will be one state champion crowned at the end of this year. That’s it! So the way we feel, somebody is going to feel like that in a week. But remember, the hurt we’re feelin’ is what can make us stronger. Understand that! I’ve been proud all of these years to call you my teammates. I’m proud today and I’ll never forget you. Now one last time, Indians on three: 1-2-3 INDIANS!”

**Sunday morning**

Saturday goes by fast, and it is Sunday. I’m heading to Notre Dame by plane at 6 o’clock in the morning. As soon as I board the plane, I begin to get a weird feeling in my gut. We are nearing South Bend when the plane begins to make weird noises. Then things happen so quickly, but at the same time, it’s like everything is in slow motion. The alarm goes off as the engines sputter. The pilot reminds everyone to remain calm. Everybody starts to pray, and for a brief moment as the plane spirals toward the ground, I see the morning sun glistening off the Golden Dome. It makes me smile, and I say a prayer to God to thank him for all he has given me and done for me, and to watch out for my family.

The plane crashed at 7:30 a.m., just 10 minutes from South Bend. More than 50 people were killed.
Among those who died that day was a star running back, a leader, and a role model -
- Isaiah Pead.