

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 2011

Review of *Our Boys: A Perfect Season on the Plains with the Smith Center Redmen* by Joe Drape

John R. Wunder

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jwunder1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Wunder, John R., "Review of *Our Boys: A Perfect Season on the Plains with the Smith Center Redmen* by Joe Drape" (2011). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2635.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2635>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

That classic has spawned a critically acclaimed television series and numerous awards. *FNL* not only told the story of a football season at Odessa Permian High School in urban West Texas; it also asked and answered some very big questions that concerned high school athletic corruption, coaching pressures, cheerleader/football player interaction, school integration, local community politics, treatment of players of color, Texas's new rules prohibiting playing with failing grades, pressures on teachers, drugs, player abuse, and on and on. It remains a beautifully written and crafted exposé.

Our Boys is not *Friday Night Lights*. The location and subject are comparable: a season with a Great Plains football community with a winning tradition. Smith Center, Kansas, county seat of Smith County situated in northwest Kansas near the Nebraska border, is a small community of 1,931 hardy Kansans. Note that Odessa, Texas, has a population of 90,000 plus—a significant difference, but the passions in Odessa and Smith Center seem quite similar. Many of the Smith County residents are farmers and make use of the hotly contested Republican River waters for irrigation. Farmers, whom Ag schools term producers, “produce” grains and beef for regional and national markets; Smith Center High School “produces” football players, occasionally for Kansas State University and more often for regional four-year colleges.

Smith Center has a winning tradition. It won the Kansas state 3A championship in 1982, 1986, and 1999; it then won the 2-1A championship from 2004 to 2008. It lost the 2009 championship in overtime, ending its record winning streak at 79 games. Smith Center's coach, retired teacher Roger Barta, a kind man fond of uttering football philosophical sound bites, was named national high school coach of the year in 2008. The philosophy of Coach Barta, in some ways a disciple of the late Ohio State University coach Woody Hayes, is relatively simple: train hard year round; run the football directly at the opponent, grinding the opposition into the ground; avoid mistakes and fancy plays; and win big.

Our Boys: A Perfect Season on the Plains with the Smith Center Redmen. By Joe Drape. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009. xiv + 269 pp. Photos, references, index. \$25.00 cloth, \$14.99 paper.

The best book on Great Plains sports is H. G. Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* (1990).

Joe Drape, a sports writer for the *New York Times*, moved his wife and young son to Smith Center to chronicle the 2008 season. He'd grown up in Kansas City, heard of the small-town football power, and graduated from Southern Methodist University, the only university in the U.S. to have so blatantly violated the rules that its football program received the NCAA "death" penalty. Arguably, Drape knows football.

It's clear from the book's beginning that the big questions won't be asked. This is going to be sports nostalgia. Let's look at two possible questions among many. First: Why is Smith Center's team called "the Redmen"? There is no discussion about using race—in this case American Indians—for a nickname. Colleges and high schools throughout the Plains and the U.S. have altered traditions and sought to stop the stereotyping of modern Native Americans. Apparently not Smith Center. That Pawnees, Kiowas, Comanches, and Cheyennes once called this region their homelands—their centers—is lost for the book's would-be audience. For that matter, we learn virtually nothing about the history of Smith Center and its region. And what about race? Kansas has had a racial revolution in its hinterland since the establishment of slaughter houses away from Kansas City and Wichita, bringing many workers from Mexico and other nations into Plains rural life. Tensions have been recorded. The history of Garden City, Kansas, comes to mind. One would not have a hint of this from *Our Boys*.

Second question: What about Smith Center in a tough economy? These have been difficult economic times for the rural central Plains.

Towns have lost population; stores and businesses have folded; unemployment is at record highs. Academics have spawned theories about turning the Plains into a buffalo commons or applying triage development policies to rural communities—letting one town survive but closing two others nearby. There is no question that the last part of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first have been tough on small-town Plains men and women. And Smith Center? How is it surviving in this rough economy? Yes, football provides a good way to avoid the economic chatter that can only be depressing. Is the high school training its young students to confront this demanding world? Is it devoting time to making sure its young citizens are prepared not only for football but for life? Coach Barta, we learn, does take that into consideration with his players; but there is no evidence that the school district is committing resources to this broader preparation. It may very well be a leader in education in northwest Kansas, but that isn't considered in *Our Boys*.

The book is a pleasant read; and as the season progresses we learn more and more about individual players, their families, and the community's love of football. Smith Center is a tight little world that embraces the author and his family, and they reciprocate. But the context, and hence significance, of *Our Boys* is sadly limited.

JOHN R. WUNDER
Department of History and
College of Journalism
University of Nebraska–Lincoln