

It was a strange experience for boys who most people cross the street to avoid. "We can tell people are a little afraid of us when we come to the games," says Gerald, a lineman who will wind up doing more than three years. "You can see it in their eyes. They're lookin' at us like we're criminals. But these people, they were yellin' for us! By our names!"

Maybe it figures that Gainesville played better than it had all season, scoring the game's last two touchdowns. Of course, this might be because Hogan put his third-string nose guard at safety and his third-string cornerback at defensive end. Still.

After the game, both teams gathered in the middle of the field to pray and that's when Isaiah surprised everybody by asking to lead. "We had no idea what the kid was going to say," remembers Coach Hogan. But Isaiah said this: "Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank You, but I never would've known there was so many people in the world that cared about us."

And it was a good thing everybody's heads were bowed because they might've seen Hogan wiping away tears.

As the Tornadoes walked back to their bus under guard, they each were handed a bag for the ride home—a burger, some fries, a soda, some candy, a Bible and an encouraging letter from a Faith player.

The Gainesville coach saw Hogan, grabbed him hard by the shoulders and said, "You'll never know what your people did for these kids tonight. You'll never, ever know."

And as the bus pulled away, all the Gainesville players crammed to one side and pressed their hands to the window, staring at these people they'd never met before, watching their waves and smiles disappearing into the night.

Anyway, with the economy six feet under [well, this was written in 2008 – the economy is much better now] and Christmas running on about three and a half reindeer, it's nice to know that one of the best presents you can give is still absolutely free.

Hope. ~~~~~

- 1) Read the following selection from the article:

"It was a strange experience for boys who most people cross the street to avoid. 'We can tell people are a little afraid of us when we come to the games,' says Gerald, a lineman who will wind up doing more than three years. 'You can see it in their eyes. They're lookin' at us like we're criminals. But these people, they were yellin' for us! By our names!'"

- 2) What influence might this experience have on the Gainesville players? Consider Gerald and how he might be influenced by this game.

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