



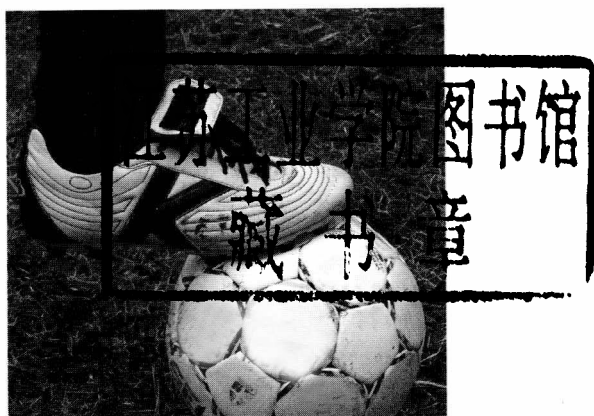
OFFSIDES

Esckisen


Offsides


A Novel by

Erik E. Esckilsen



Houghton Mifflin Company Boston 2004

Walter Lorraine  Books

Walter Lorraine  Books

Copyright © 2004 by Erik E. Esckilsen

All rights reserved. For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Company, 215 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003.

www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Esckilsen, Erik E.

Offsides / Erik E. Esckilsen.

p. cm.

“Walter Lorraine Books.”

Summary: Tom Gray, a Mohawk Indian and star soccer player, moves to a new high school and refuses to play for their Warriors with their insulting mascot.

ISBN 0-618-46284-8

1. Mohawk Indians—Juvenile fiction. [1. Mohawk Indians—Fiction. 2. Indians of North America—New York (State)—Fiction. 3. Moving, Household—Fiction. 4. High schools—Fiction. 5. Schools—Fiction. 6. Soccer—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.E7447Iro 2004

[Fic]—dc22

2004000735

ISBN-13: 978-0-618-46284-1

Printed in the United States of America

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Lee—in his prime, a formidable fullback;
today, as ever, a champion brother.*

Acknowledgments

The author is indebted to five Mohawk teenagers, students at Massena Central High School in upstate New York, for their valuable contributions to *Offsides*: Kristen Caldwell—Mohawk name, Katsitsienienh̄:tha; Spencer Jacobs—Tehorihó:rens; Joanna Jock—Karakwinon; Sandra Smoke—Kanyenthah; and Kanentahawi Delisle Thompson. This novel benefits from their generous insights into Mohawk youth culture and into life, as they put it, on “da rez.” Thanks also to Massena Central High School teacher Kathleen Dodge and Tom French, a teacher at Massena’s J. W. Leary Junior High School, for making the “Mohawk roundtable” possible. West Coast teen reader Alana Miller provided useful feedback in the book’s early stages. Finally, the publishing team—literary agent Wendy Schmalz and editor Walter Lorraine—kicked in hard, no pun intended.

Chapter 1

He stands alone in the silent, empty hallway. Only the sporadic clang of metal on metal echoing from the locker room undermines the illusion that he's the only person in the entire school building. He scans the trophy case, his eye drawn to a poster made from a blown-up *Southwind Sentinel* newspaper article. The poster is wedged in behind a row of trophies, like painted scenery in a school play. He wishes the article were imaginary, something to tear down and throw away when the pretending is all over. But it's not. It's real. A fact. History, recorded in a headline:

WARRIORS EDGE RAVENS 2-1 FOR SOCCER TITLE

And history is always written by the winners, he thinks, remembering his father's bitter words across the dinner table.

His eye travels to the subheading below the headline:

League-Leading Striker Held to One Goal

A photograph dominates the page: a huddle of dark uniforms, legs sticking out here and there, arms raised, index fingers aimed skyward.

To the left of the huddle, just a few yards away, he spots a lone figure in the visiting team's light colors. The

player's jersey is untucked, his socks bunched around his ankles, his eyes cast downward. Enlarged to at least twenty times its original size, the grainy photograph reveals the solitary player's expression: a mixture of sadness and shock, as if he has just heard the worst news imaginable. In a way, he has—the referee's final whistle.

Below the photo, a caption:

Southwind players celebrate their regional championship win Saturday. Tin River Union striker Tom Gray (at left) scored only one goal as the Warriors outlasted the Ravens.

Hearing footsteps approaching, Tom hitches his backpack onto his right shoulder and takes a deep breath.

"I'll tell you what," a man says, the stale odor of mint chewing gum drifting ahead of his squeaking steps. "I'm not sure even *I* would've put money on us that day." The man taps the showcase glass. "And after you scored on that direct kick, I had my doubts we'd be able to hold you."

"Well, you did, Mr. Dempsey," Tom says. "You held me to one goal. Some of your players *literally* held me."

Dempsey laughs and gnaws at his gum. "We play with intensity. That's why we're the Warriors."

Tom turns back to the trophy case, as if summoned by the Southwind Warriors' mascot. He regards the mascot's stern profile and furrowed brow; he traces with his eye the war paint streaking the figure's high cheekbone, the jet black hair flowing back from the flat ridge of forehead like a wave of anger.

Dempsey laughs again—falsely, it seems to Tom. “But you Ravens never quit,” the man adds. “I give you and Coach Belden all the credit in the world for that.” With a smile and a whiff of stale mint, he extends a hand.

As Tom’s grip closes around Dempsey’s, his eye travels to the SOUTHWIND ATHLETIC DEPT. patch stitched to the pocket of the man’s maroon golf shirt—four upright arrowheads replacing the four *T*s, hunting bows the *D*s.

“So, Tom,” Dempsey says in a softer, lower voice and scratches at his hockey puck-sized bald spot, which glows pink with sunburn inside a ring of close-cropped, red-gray hair. “Can I assume you’re here for preseason training?”

Tom looks at Dempsey. The man’s thin frame and slumped posture, his hands now stuffed in the pockets of his baggy khaki shorts, make him seem almost like a student killing time before class. “I’m not sure,” Tom says.

Dempsey winces, as if Tom has just called him by his nickname among players throughout the league: “Coach Dumpster,” itself an abbreviation of “Coach Dumpster Breath.” The man hitches his shorts up onto his slight gut, clasps his pale hands behind his back, and begins rocking on his sneakers—black indoor-soccer shoes, which he wears without socks.

Feeling his heartbeat quicken, Tom turns away. He lets his eyes run down and back along the trophy case shelves, fixing his gaze on the silver bowl beside the newspaper poster.

Dempsey stops rocking. “Needless to say, Tom, you’d be a tremendous asset to our squad. There won’t be a team in the league with our speed on the line.”

Eyes still on the soccer trophy, Tom notices something

poking above the rim of the bowl.

"You'll play in the center, of course." Dempsey rests a finger on the glass. "I'll keep Plutakis at center midfield." He slides his finger down a few inches, leaving a trail of sweat. "I'll shift Young up from the midfield and over to the right wing." Dempsey's finger squeaks on the glass. "And there's a sophomore coming up, Malloy, with a good left foot. He can play the other wing. I'm also expecting this exchange student from England, a stopper or wing full, but I heard a rumor he smokes. We'll see what he brings to preseason. After today, he'll either be ready to kick the habit or kick field goals for the football team. If he hasn't got the lungs, they can have him, as far as I'm concerned. So, what kind of shape are you in, Tom?"

Despite the direct question, Tom continues to ignore Dempsey, stepping closer to examine the trophy.

"So, how does that strategy sound to you?" Dempsey pulls his hand away from the glass, steps back, and folds his arms across his chest. "I'd enjoy hearing your insights."

"What's that thing?" Tom says, flipping his chin toward the silver bowl.

"What?"

"Inside the trophy."

Dempsey leans forward, but in the reflection Tom sees the man look at him, not the trophy. He suspects Dempsey knows exactly what he's talking about. The object has a handle like a hammer, but thinner.

"Oh, that's just a memento of our championship season."

Tom leans closer to the glass, shielding his eyes to cut the glare. He notices a rawhide band wrapped around the handle. "Can you take it out, Coach?"

"Why?"

"Because I want to look at it."

"It's just a memento, Tom. You know, a souvenir."

"Take it out of the case, please."

Dempsey narrows his eyes again but doesn't budge. At the sound of voices echoing down the hall, he glances away, shifts his weight from one foot to the other, and finally relents: "Well, we shouldn't take too much time with this," he says with a blast of what sounds to Tom like nervous laughter. The man pulls a set of keys from his pocket.

Tom steps aside so the coach can unlock the trophy case and remove a tomahawk from the championship bowl. Dempsey leaves the glass door open as he hands the tomahawk to Tom. "There," he says. "That what you wanted?"

Tom runs his thumb along the blade, which is made of rubber. "No. I'd have no use for something like this."

"Coach!" someone calls from down the corridor.

Tom looks up to find Paul Marcotte, a Southwind wing fullback, passing by. "Tom Gray, excellent," Paul says. "We heard you're playing for Southwind. Dude, we're going to be unbeatable. Oh, Tom, man . . . sorry about your dad."

"Thanks," Tom says, noticing Paul's new purple-dyed hair and remembering his last match against Paul and the Warriors. Tom and the other Raven strikers easily beat him, a stocky kid with only fair speed, down the wing, but

Paul marked up as tightly on corner kicks as any defender in the league.

"You have a good summer, Marcotte?" Dempsey says.

"Great, Coach."

"Did you log some miles when you weren't in the beauty parlor? You ready to run?"

"Absolutely."

"Then run out to the equipment shed and get my chalkboard."

"Got it." Paul jogs the rest of the way down the hall.

"So, what's it going to be, Tom?" Dempsey says. "You with us or not?"

Tom turns back to the tomahawk. "Why was this in there, Coach?" he says, tapping at his palm with the blade.

"It's a souvenir, like I said. The Southwind Athletic Boosters taped them to a protein bar—you know, for energy—and gave one to every player before our match with you guys. For good luck. And, well . . ."—Dempsey chuckles, breathing mint-laced vapors into the stale air of the hallway—"you saw how well it worked."

"Yes," Tom says, feeling sweat rising along his hairline. He takes a couple of even breaths and looks up at Dempsey. "But I don't think it's funny."

"Try and look at it this way." Dempsey jams his hands in his pockets again and resumes rocking on his heels. "Playing on a team—playing on *my* team, anyway—is about putting aside personal issues and giving your best for the greater good."

"The greater good."

"That's right. The team, the fighting unit. Now, I know

about your father, and I'm just as sorry as a person can be about that. Honestly, I am." Dempsey looks away and scratches at his scalp again. "And I know about your mother's dissatisfaction with the school mascot. I've read her letters to the school board. Elizabeth Gray, right?"

Tom nods.

"In fact, I've been reading letters like hers for going on a year now."

Dempsey closes his eyes for a couple of seconds, and Tom thinks he detects a change in attitude, as if the anger, frustration, or whatever Dempsey has been holding back is starting to leak out.

"And I've heard all the politically correct arguments about why the Warriors' mascot is offensive . . .," Dempsey goes on, his voice a bit louder, and rougher, "and why we should change it, and why everyone would be better off if we called ourselves the Southwind Daffodils or Puppies or Tree Frogs. But I'll tell you what I think about all that." With one hand, Dempsey gestures down the hall in the general direction of the Southwind soccer pitch; he sweeps the other along the trophy case stretching nearly the entire length of the hallway. "What we have here at Southwind High is a tradition—a *winning* tradition. I don't think I need to tell you that."

Dempsey eyes the long, even rows of trophies for a moment, then begins walking toward the edge farthest from Tom. He stops at the first glass enclosure, about twenty feet away, and gazes at the awards. "This school building was built in 1966," he says, his voice echoing over the tapping of his fingernail against the case. "I was in that very first class." He rests his hands on his hips.

"We didn't even have a soccer team then. That wouldn't come until 1978. I know that because I was the first coach." He laughs to himself. "Not that I knew anything about soccer then. Not many people did around here. But we'd had winning teams long before the soccer program. Our winning tradition, the Warrior tradition, goes back to the very beginning. We've always been Warriors. And we've always been champions." Dempsey looks at Tom down the corridor. "Always, Tom."

After a few awkward, silent moments during which Tom just stares at the tomahawk in his hands, tempted to snap it in two, Coach Dempsey walks back up the hallway, his gaze never leaving the trophies—like the dictator of some small country inspecting his troops.

"What kind of teammate would I be if I let those guys down?" Dempsey says, drawing alongside Tom. "Especially the ones who aren't around anymore."

The man's tone has grown distant, Tom thinks, and even when Dempsey turns to him, he seems to look through him.

"Which guys?" Tom says.

"The Warriors I knew back then. And their coaches. And the community that made us a part of its history."

History.

"How do you know they'd be upset?" Tom asks, so tentatively that his voice cracks.

"Because I sure as hell would be," Dempsey snaps.

Tom flinches.

The coach seems a bit shaken by his own outburst. His soccer shoes squeak on the floor as he paces a few yards away and back again. "Let me tell you something,

hotshot," he says, seething, that rough edge returned to his voice. "We did *not* fill this trophy case by letting people's petty, political complaints deter us from our mission. And we're not about to start now."

Tom takes another deep breath. "But why does the mascot have to be an Indian?" he says, scanning the newspaper poster. "There are other symbols of the competitive spirit."

With a sigh, Dempsey paces back down the hall a few steps. "Listen, Tom," he says, a bit more calmly. "Like I said, when I started coaching the Warriors, half the kids at this school didn't even know what soccer was. Same thing went for the community. But now everyone knows the game, and they know that Southwind's the best. We're regional champs, and it's not our first time." Dempsey stops pacing, crosses his arms for a second, then stuffs his hands in his pockets. "Look. What I'm saying is this: I know what it takes to build a team and keep it together. It takes four things: focus, focus, focus, and personal sacrifice."

Sacrifice. The word echoes down the hall, pulling Tom's thoughts away.

"He had once been an ironworker, and so he was always ready to help another ironworker. I'm one of those ironworkers, and I'll always remember how he sacrificed himself for his friends here at Kawehras, coming back day after day to help us with our troubles—troubles that Spencer Gray understood so well."

"Trust me," Dempsey says, stepping up to Tom. "You

put on the Warrior jersey, and I can guarantee you at least a couple of college scouts will come check out your game. The coach from State—Masseau. Guaranteed. And probably some others if you produce.”

“My game.” Tom half shuts his eyes to see the glints of light flashing off the awards. “It’s just a game, isn’t it?”

Dempsey snorts, bringing Tom’s attention back to the man’s face, now twisted in a pink sneer. “You actually believe that, Tom? It’s just a game to you? Going to be a junior, already the best center striker in the league, and you’re telling me it’s just a game? So, in other words, you didn’t listen to that radio interview you did before the playoffs last fall, didn’t catch your highlights on TV after scoring that nice game winner at Burnsfield? Is that what you’re telling me? Didn’t read that full-page article about you in your paper up there, the . . .”

“The *Tin River Tribune*.”

“Oh, so you *do* know what I’m talking about.” Dempsey snorts again. “A game.”

Tom looks down at his sneakers, new indoor-soccer shoes—Sambas—a going-away present from Coach Belden.

Dempsey raps his knuckles on the glass of the trophy case, rattling the sliding door. “Check out the hangdog look on this kid’s face here.”

Tom reluctantly looks at the *Sentinel* photograph again, his defeated posture, his downcast eyes.

“You put everything into that game, Tom. When we went up by one, you wouldn’t let your spirit be broken. I watched you. I knew you were good, but you really earned my respect that day.”

Broken. "What we ironworkers create is strong, but a man can be bent—broken, even. Spencer also knew this well, but he wouldn't be broken, and he wouldn't let us be broken."

"What does it matter what a team's called?" Tom says, trying on someone else's words. "If the game's so important, then what difference does a mascot make? Why not . . ." He stares at the angry Warrior profile in the trophy case, then shifts his attention to Dempsey's SOUTHWIND ATHLETIC DEPT. patch and, finally, to the man's face.

"Yes?"

"Why not compete under your own name, the name of your school, your town? Why hide behind this Indian head? That's not who you are."

Dempsey begins to respond but hesitates, stares at the floor as if counting to ten, the taut lines of his face twitching. "That, Tom," he says, "is either the worst attempt at reverse psychology or the steamiest pile of lefty political horse manure I've ever heard. No offense to your mother, which is where, I know, you've picked this all up."

"She's right," Tom says. He looks down the hallway, where a couple of guys are coming up the stairs from the lobby. "But leave her out of this."

"Leave Elizabeth Gray out of this?" Dempsey says. "I *wish* we could leave her out of this. What is she, like, a nurse?"

"Yes," Tom grumbles, his hands starting to shake. "But I told you to leave her—"

"An honorable profession."

Tom doesn't say anything, his pounding heart keeping

him from speaking the words spinning in his head: *Honorable. Yes, and honor is the reason I can't wear your red jersey.*

"Well, I'll say this much," Dempsey adds, sounding calmer. "She obviously takes good care of you. Maybe too good. Seems to me a time comes when a young man's got to start thinking for himself."

Tom looks away, but Dempsey steps into his view.

"What's it going to be, Tom? You ready to be a man about this?"

A man.

Tom turns to the newspaper poster again, his eye falling on the lone player sulking off toward the sidelines.

"If you did your best, son, then you have nothing to feel sorry about. Every player out there today—on both teams—respects you. They know you always play your hardest. I respect you too—as one hard-working man respects another."

Tom hands Dempsey the tomahawk. "A man doesn't play with toys," he says. Looking beyond the coach, he nods to a couple of Southwind players he recognizes from past matches. "You should move Marcotte to stopper," he adds. "He's too slow down the wing, and he's good in the air."

Dempsey grabs ahold of Tom's knapsack. "Hold up there, guys," he calls to his players. "Come on back here."

The players stop, turn around, and take a few tentative steps toward Dempsey and Tom.

“I want you to take a good look at Tom Gray.”

Confused expressions on their faces, the Warriors look back and forth at each other, at their coach, and at Tom.

Before Tom can move out of the way, Dempsey wraps an arm around him and presses him to his side.

“Here’s what we call a hotshot,” he says in the tone of a teacher explaining the most basic of concepts. “A guy who puts his own interests above the team’s. In soccer, in battle, and in life, the hotshot’s not going to be there when you need him. *Hotshot’s* just not a word in the Warrior language as we speak it. And neither is *quitter*—”

Tom slips from Dempsey’s grasp and walks away. He resists the urge to run as the man’s grating laugh dogs him, along with a phantom whiff of his stale-mint breath. Hearing the word *mother*, he spins toward Dempsey, but the coach is already herding his players into the locker room.

Tom looks at the trophy case. A black-and-white football team photo draws him in. The 1967 regional champions, the Warriors. He reads the names below the team photo, surprised to find “Brian Dempsey” in the caption. He scans the faces and finds the coach at the right edge of the group, looking much the same as a teenager as he does as an adult. In the photo he doesn’t wear a uniform, just dark pants, street shoes, and a Warriors varsity jacket. He was the team manager.

Quitter, Tom says to himself. *Is that what I am?* He looks back up the empty hallway toward the locker room. He’s alone again. *What just happened here? What have I done?*