

Small-Town Football and the Life
and Death of an American Boy

Love,
Zac

BOOK
CLUB KIT



REID FORGRAVE



Dear Readers,

Our hearts were crushed and our lives shattered the day we lost our son Zac. He had worked hard for years to hide his struggles with the debilitating effects of CTE—caused by the concussions and sub-concussive hits to his head from playing the sport he loved, football—from us and the people who knew him best. But Zac had kept a journal of these struggles. He did it with compassion and purpose, knowing other young people would suffer from CTE and not understand why.

Zac's journals led to this book, *Love, Zac: Small-Town Football and the Life and Death of an American Boy* by Reid Forgrave. After Zac took his own life, it wasn't easy sharing his diaries with a writer we hardly knew at the time. It was a hard decision to share our worst nightmare with the world. But before he died, Zac asked us to help make football a safer sport.

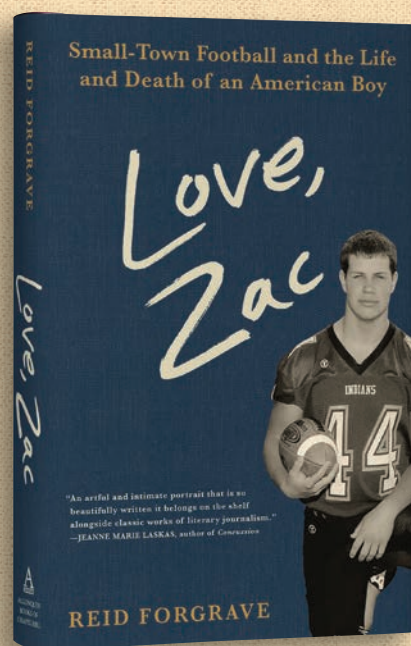
Reid spent hours with us and others who knew Zac. Everything we shared with Reid for this book was out of love for Zac. I know Zac would have liked him, and this book honors Zac.

Every day I miss Zac's beautiful smile and the time we had together. I pray *Love, Zac* gives our son peace. And I hope—as Zac did when he started writing his journals—that it will help people see the urgent need to address the complicated issues of this cruel disease.

Sincerely,

Brenda Easter

Brenda Easter
(Zac's mom)

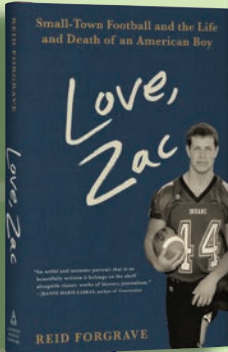


Love, Zac

by REID FORGRAVE

Questions for Discussion

1. Does the story of Zac Easter change your views about football? What would you change about football, or football culture?
2. Do you think there should be different rules for young athletes? Would you allow your child to play the game today?
3. What are the moral and ethical issues that chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) raises?
4. Who are the heroes in this book, and who are the villains?
5. Are there times when traditional notions of masculinity are useful or valuable? When do you think masculinity might turn “toxic”?
6. Which belief do you hold: that humans have an innate drive toward aggression and violence, or that violent, aggressive behavior is primarily a learned trait?
7. In the final chapter, the author writes about watching NFL games with his three-year-old son—despite being in the middle of researching this book about Zac Easter’s death. Do you believe America as a whole is hypocritical when it considers football its national sport?
8. The future of football may come down to whether our society believes the rewards of the sport outweigh its risks. What was a significant moment in your life when you had to weigh risks versus rewards?
9. Dr. Bennet Omalu speaks about America’s continuing worship of football as “cognitive dissonance”—despite knowing the negative sides of football, we ignore them because we love the sport. What else in our society or in your own life falls under the category of cognitive dissonance?
10. Zac Easter’s family has lived in Iowa for seven generations, and that has given rise to an ingrained sense of the family’s views. How have your own roots, or rootlessness, shaped how you’ve come to see the world?
11. Challenge your own views on football. If you’re more anti-football, think of one moment when football was a positive influence in your life or on society at large. If you’re a football fan, think of one moment when football had a negative impact in the world. Which argument for the opposing view on the sport holds the most merit for you?
12. If football were outlawed tomorrow, how would that change our society a generation from now?



A Timeline of the Game Zac Easter Loved

1869 NOVEMBER 6, 1869: Rutgers plays the College of New Jersey (later renamed Princeton) in the first-ever collegiate football game—the official birthplace of the sport.

1876 Football's first rules convention.

1893 Joseph Reeves of the U.S. Naval Academy team is told by a doctor that the next big hit to his head could cause “instant insanity” or even death, marking the first indication from a doctor that contact regularly sustained in football could lead to debilitating brain injuries. Reeves responded by having the first football helmet made.

1905 As football becomes too violent for American tastes, President Theodore Roosevelt convenes collegiate leaders for a summit on the future of football, which ultimately leads to the organization that became the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

1920 American Professional Football Association is formed.

1939 SEPTEMBER 30, 1939: NBC broadcasts Waynesburg vs. Fordham, the first American football game ever to be televised.

1958 DECEMBER 28, 1958: The Baltimore Colts defeat the New York Giants in the NFL championship game, later considered by many to be the greatest game ever played.

1968 “Sparring”—using the head or face as the primary contact point for tackling or blocking against an opposing player’s chest—was the direct cause of 36 football fatalities and 30 permanent paralysis injuries.

1976 All levels adopt rules changes about sparring, eliminating the head and face as the primary and initial contact area for blocking and tackling.

JUNE 2, 1991: Zac Easter is born.

2002 SEPTEMBER 24, 2002: Steelers Hall of Famer Mike Webster dies of a heart attack at age 50. He is autopsied by Pittsburgh pathologist Bennet Omalu and would later be identified as CTE Patient Zero in the NFL’s concussion crisis.

2005 Omalu’s paper with five coauthors, titled “Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy in a National Football League Player,” is published in *Neurosurgery*.

2006 AUGUST 8, 2006: Roger Goodell becomes NFL commissioner.

AUGUST 2006: Zac Easter begins playing freshman football at Indianola High School.

2009 SEPTEMBER 15, 2009: *GQ* publishes Jeanne Marie Laskas’s article, “Game Brain,” about Omalu. The story attracts national attention and inspires the Will Smith movie *Concussion*.

OCTOBER 9, 2009: Zac Easter suffers a concussion in what would be his final high school football game.

2013 The NFL introduces concussion assessment guidelines.

2015 FEBRUARY 1, 2015: 114.4 million Americans watch Super Bowl XLIX in the single most watched broadcast in American history.

DECEMBER 19, 2015: Zac Easter commits suicide.

2017 Ann McKee, a neuropathologist at Boston University School of Medicine’s CTE Center, releases a study of 111 brains of deceased former NFL players—and 110 of them were found to have CTE.