

Breakdown: A Season of Gang Warfare, High School Football, and the Coach Who Policed the Streets

Bob Halloran

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Playing on the 2006 Chelsea Red Devils' football team wasn't easy. But then, just surviving in Chelsea wasn't easy, especially if you were a teenager growing up in one of the most violent towns in the Boston area. Bob Halloran's *Breakdown* gives powerful—and sometimes chilling—insights into the struggles and challenges of trying to bring hope for a better life to students who daily face a world of gangs, drugs, dysfunctional families, and a bleak future.

Into this volatile mixture enters James Atkins, a member of the Chelsea Police Department's Gang Unit, who became the head coach of the high school football team in 2004. Atkins' obstacles were many, such as trying to revive a football program using players who had no concept of success, discipline, or teamwork. He knew that he would have to be tough with the boys as they adjusted to his authority and expectations.

But the book is not intended simply as a tribute to Atkins' excellent work. Author Halloran was granted unlimited access to all the coaches and players, and he provides compelling looks inside the very troubled lives and families of the young men. Blending personal stories with the accounts of the football season paints a clear picture of the difficulties that confronted Atkins as he tried to create positive influences for the players. As one might expect, there were some glowing success stories, but also many heartbreaking failures.

Halloran's storytelling skills, gained from twenty years as a New England news and sports anchor, shine through in *Breakdown*. He successfully balances the contrasting storylines. He doesn't try to hide the many negative aspects of Chelsea or its residents, and he accentuates the positive when appropriate.

Breakdown is brutally honest in its portrayals of the people involved and the incidents it describes. Although Atkins needs to be tough with his team, his frequent profanity-filled rants at the teens, usually in the setting of a team meeting, often border on verbal abuse. But considering the tough attitudes and personalities he was dealing with, and his background of interacting with the local gangs, Atkins seems to have known what he had to say and do to get his players' respect and attention. Ironically, *Breakdown* is an inspiring story of building up the human spirit.

JEFF FRIEND (September / October 2010)

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