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Sports & Recreation

Thanksgiving 1959: When One Last Corner of New York City Was Still Part of Small-Town America and High School Football Was the Last Thing Guys Did for Love

Jay Price
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"The Thanksgiving Day game between New Dorp and Curtis high schools was part rivalry, part high school reunion, part block party, as much a part of life on Staten Island as its namesake ferry," author Jay Price writes. As the book begins, former students and colleagues fill St. Clare's Church to say goodbye to the man who believed it was possible for anyone to fulfill his dreams as long as he worked hard and had a little direction.

Sal Somma, former player and New Dorp High School football coach, came from an Italian immigrant family. During the Great Depression, Somma quit high school to help support his family at a job paying twenty-seven cents an hour. When Al Fabri, Curtis High School's coach, saw Somma play football in a neighborhood game, he convinced Somma's father to let him go back to school, with the promise of a better paying job in the future and a possible college scholarship.

Somma's story is told within the context of his times and his blue-collar Staten Island neighborhood before there was a bridge linking the island to New York City. This was a time before television, before there were participation trophies for five-year-olds playing tee-ball; this was a time when "where kids were allowed to be kids and the guys played ball just for the love of it…"

Somma is only one of the colorful characters included in the book, which is full of historical narrative and anecdotes. Author Price makes the rivalry between the high schools come alive, especially the annual Thanksgiving Day game, around which family dinners were scheduled. What fuels the rivalry is the relationship between two long-time coaches, Andy Barberi and Somma, former teammates at Curtis High School in the early '30s.

The setting of the 1959 game is a stadium that was a hodge-podge of wooden bleachers "shoe-horned into an asymmetrical space between a polluted creek, a railroad right of way

and…the local Dodge dealership." Every seat in the 7,500-seat stadium was filled an hour before game-time. The overflow crowd ringed the field, sat on the hillside and on top of the snack bar.

While the outcome must remain a surprise to the reader, Price does an excellent job of creating tension and suspense. His storytelling is excellent, his history impeccable. Sports fans, especially football fans, will enjoy this book, as will history buffs and people who just like a good tale.

Jay Price is an award-winning columnist for the *Staten Island Advance*. He has covered the World Series, the Masters, U.S. Open, Final Four and twenty-five Super Bowls.