The Blind Side

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MICHAEL LEWIS

Michael Lewis studied art history at Princeton, and later worked for an art dealer. In 1985, he achieved an M.A. in Economics from the London School of Economics, and afterwards worked for an investment firm. In the late 1980s, Lewis became a financial journalist. In 1989, he published his first book, *Liar's Poker*, about the history of mortgage-backed bonds. Since the 90s, Lewis has written articles for a variety of different publications, including the New York Times Magazine, Vanity Fair, and Slate. His other books include *Moneyball* (2003), *The Blind Side* (2006), *The Big Short* (2010), *Flash Boys* (2014), and, most recently, *The Undoing Project* (2016), all of which explore a little-understood sector of statistics or economics. Lewis lives in Berkeley, California with his wife and three children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Blind Side doesn't allude to a great many historical events. However, it gives a sense for the crack epidemic of the 1980s, and for the decay of black urban communities during the same period. Throughout the 1980s, the use of crack cocaine was extremely high in poor black communities, creating a spike in crime and child neglect. Michael Oher was born in a community with a serious crack problem, and only left it because a father figure, Big Tony, helped him go to Briarcrest.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Blind Side could be compared with *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* (2011), another nonfiction book about a highly gifted black man who migrates from the inner city to an elite, predominately white community—in Peace's case, Yale University. Fans of Lewis's book will also want to check out *Moneyball* (2003), Lewis's nonfiction book about the role of sabermetrics in baseball management. There's also an extended section in *The Blind Side* about Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 1854 poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," about the British army's heroic, foolish attack on the Russian army during the Crimean War.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game
- **When Written:** 2005
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** September 2, 2006
- **Genre:** Nonfiction / Sports writing
- **Setting:** Memphis, Tennessee, followed by Oxford, Mississippi
- **Climax:** Michael Oher flees his fight with Antonio
- **Antagonist:** Poverty, racism
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

The King of Hollywood. Filmmakers love Michael Lewis's books—in the last ten years, three of them (*The Blind Side*, *Moneyball*, and *The Big Short*) have been made into successful, Academy Award-nominated films.

Nobody's perfect. *The Blind Side* won good reviews from critics, but some people claimed that it made a couple of notable errors regarding the sport of football. Football wonks pointed out that Lewis misreported the number of Super Bowls the 49ers won, and the year in which the NFL allowed their players to have free agency.

PLOT SUMMARY

Lewis begins by describing how in the late seventies and early eighties, there was a major change in the way football was played at the highest levels. Rushers became bigger and faster, meaning that quarterbacks had slightly less time to react or pass the ball to their receivers. Perhaps the defining football moment of the period came in 1985, when Lawrence Taylor "sacked" the legendary quarterback Joe Theismann, ultimately breaking Theismann's leg and ending his career. In the aftermath of the Theismann injury, coaches began recruiting big, heavy left tackles who could protect a quarterback's blind side—i.e., the area, usually to the quarterback's left, that was left defenseless when the quarterback turned to throw the football. Where before, all linemen had been treated equally, left tackles were increasingly paid high salaries—if the left tackle didn't do a good job of protecting the quarterback, the quarterback could be horribly injured, just like Theismann.

In the early 2000s, at a time when left tackles were beginning to command massive, seven-figure salaries, a man named Big Tony, who lived in the Memphis inner-city, tried to enroll two students in the prestigious Briarcrest Christian Academy. One was Tony's son, Steven; the other was a kid named Michael Oher. Big Tony had taken Michael in because Michael seemed not to have a family of his own; now, he tried to provide Michael with an education. Reluctantly, the Briarcrest administration agreed to admit Michael, in spite of his low test scores, partly

because Michael seemed like he could be a talented football player, and Briarcrest was full of football-loving teachers, administrators, and alumni.

Michael's early days at Briarcrest aren't happy: he's incredibly shy and lonely, and barely speaks. He's a slow learner in class, largely because he hasn't had many of the experiences that his classmates take for granted—he's spent his entire life in the inner city. Michael isn't allowed to play sports right away, because his grades are poor. However, the Briarcrest basketball coach, Sean Tuohy, notices Michael watching the team's games. Sean is a self-made millionaire who grew up in an impoverished household. As a result, he's better than other Briarcrest coaches at having a rapport with black students from poor neighborhoods, such as Michael Oher. Sean is sympathetic to Michael, but his wife, Leigh Anne Tuohy, is even kinder: she buys Michael food and clothes, and drives him wherever he needs to go.

Michael works with special tutors and brings up his grades just enough to play basketball and football. He's an excellent basketball player—big, but also fast and agile. But Michael's greatest talent seems to be as a football player. He's so big and wide that he can tackle anyone—indeed, his coaches think he's probably the biggest kid ever to attend Briarcrest. Shortly after he begins to distinguish himself as a football player, Leigh Anne decides to let Michael stay at her house, rather than going back to the inner-city every night. She gathers that he lives with his mother, but doesn't ask any questions about her.

As Michael begins to distinguish himself in football practices, he begins receiving scholarship offers from Division I colleges. He becomes calmer and more outgoing around his peers—where before he barely spoke, he now laughs and jokes. Around this time, the Tuohys decide to adopt Michael as their own child. Michael endears himself to Collins and Sean Junior, the Tuohys' two biological children—in particular, Sean Junior, who's much younger. During Michael's junior and senior years of high school, the Briarcrest football team does exceptionally well, thanks largely to Michael's massive size and skillful maneuvering. In 2004, Michael's senior year, the Briarcrest football team wins the state championship of Tennessee. Michael is generally thought of as the best football player in the state.

In his senior year, Michael begins considering his college options. Football coaches from around the country tell Michael that he's going to be an NFL player, and probably a very good one, too. They offer him full room and board, tuition-free, at their colleges. Michael begins to narrow down his choices to three schools: LSU, Tennessee, and the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss). Michael seems to be most interested in Ole Miss, in part because the Tuohys, as well as his tutor, Sue Mitchell, attended school there.

Michael has a problem, though: he needs to bring up his grade point average in order to attend college on a sport scholarship. With Sean's help, Michael qualifies as learning disabled, meaning that he can bring up his GPA by taking correspondence courses with Sue Mitchell's help. His GPA rises to above the NCAA minimum, and he ultimately chooses to go to Ole Miss, tuition-free, where he'll be given free room and board and coached by Ed Orgeron.

Shortly after he chooses Ole Miss, Michael becomes involved in an NCAA investigation. Someone—perhaps more than one person—has complained to the NCAA that the Tuohys have adopted Michael because they wanted to recruit top talent for Ole Miss (and may even have accepted money from the University of Mississippi for adopting Michael). Leigh Anne and Sean are hurt by these accusations, but Sean cooperates with Joyce Thompson, the woman the NCAA sends to talk to Michael and Sean.

During Michael's freshman year at Ole Miss, he distinguishes himself as a left tackle, even though the team overall doesn't do particularly well. Sue Mitchell continues to help him with his classes, and the Tuohys build another house near the University of Mississippi campus, where they'll be very close to their adopted son. Although Michael seems to be adjusting to his new college life, he gets in a violent argument with a teammate, Antonio Turner, after Turner makes sexually offensive comments about Leigh Anne and Collins. Michael beats up Turner, and accidentally hurts a young child who happens to be walking nearby. Panicked, Michael runs away from the scene of the accident. However, with Sean and Leigh Anne's help, he regains his composure, returns to Ole Miss, and avoids arrest for his actions.

Toward the end of the book, Michael Lewis gives us more information about Michael's family and background. His mother, Denise, was a crack cocaine addict and a negligent parent, and Michael spent much of his early childhood searching for food and clothing, with the help of his older brothers. When he was eight, he was placed in a series of foster homes, but often ran away. Later, he was sent to a hospital center, but escaped and returned to living in inner-city Memphis. When he was a teenager, he began living with Big Tony (the point at which *The Blind Side* begins).

Michael goes on to have a brilliant career at Ole Miss—as the book ends, he's still extremely close with Leigh Anne, Collins, Sean, and Sean Junior, and is likely to be drafted by the NFL.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Michael Oher – Michael Oher is the protagonist of *The Blind Side*, and a real-life NFL star, who's played offensive tackle for the Baltimore Ravens, the Tennessee Titans, and the Carolina Panthers. Growing up in inner-city Memphis, Michael was extremely poor, and his mother, Denise, was a crack addict who

barely took care of him. *The Blind Side* begins when Michael is a sad, lonely teenager, but with the help of his *de facto* guardian, Big Tony, Michael enrolls in Briarcrest Christian Academy, where he attracts the attention of the wealthy Tuohy family. With the Tuohys' support and encouragement, Michael becomes one of the most talented high school football players in Tennessee, if not America, leading his team to statewide victory in his senior. In addition to studying Michael's rise to prominence in the world of football, *The Blind Side* is the story of Michael's coming of age. When he first meets the Tuohys, he is shy, quiet, and isolated. Though he continues to face racism and feel like an outsider throughout the book, Michael does gradually learn to fit in with his adopted family, to do well enough in school to go to college, and to form friendships and loving relationships with other people.

Leigh Anne Tuohy – Leigh Anne Tuohy is the matriarch of the Tuohy family, the wife of Sean Tuohy, a devout Christian, and the person most responsible for helping Michael Oher achieve success. It is Leigh Anne who, shortly after Michael enrolls at Briarcrest, notices that Michael needs food, clothing, and shelter, buys him what he needs, and eventually allows him to sleep in the Tuohy home. Leigh Anne says on more than one occasion that she feels compelled to help Michael, though she can never explain exactly why. She and Michael form a tight bond: she seems to understand the quiet, lonely Michael in ways that his teammates, coaches, and even his family cannot. Later on in the book, Leigh Anne is instrumental in convincing Michael's coaches to allow him to play more often, and in encouraging Michael to be social and enjoy his new life. Leigh Anne is also an important "voice of reason" during Michael's transition from high school to college—while his coaches prioritize making Michael play football and improve his game, Leigh Anne tries to make Michael feel comfortable and secure with his new life at the University of Mississippi. While Michael Lewis doesn't probe too deeply into why Leigh Anne chooses to help Michael Oher so generously, he makes it clear that she's an extraordinarily pious, single-minded woman, who sees it as her duty to help people in need.

Sean Tuohy – Sean Tuohy is a coach at Briarcrest at the time when Michael Oher enrolls there. A self-made millionaire (he owns a chain of Taco Bells), Tuohy was born into a poor family and gradually worked his way up to success, playing basketball for the University of Mississippi and later going into business. In *The Blind Side*, he's probably the person most responsible for helping Michael Oher achieve success as a football player, with the notable exception of Leigh Anne Tuohy, Sean's wife. Tuohy recognizes Michael Oher's talent and helps coach him throughout his time at Briarcrest; he's also instrumental in arranging meetings for Michael with head coaches from elite Division I colleges, ensuring that Michael will be able to go to college tuition-free, with room and board included.

Denise Oher – The mother of Michael Oher, Denise is largely a peripheral presence in *The Blind Side*, and in Michael Oher's own life. Denise lives in an impoverished part of Memphis, Tennessee, and for most of her adult life, is addicted to crack. She gives birth to many children, but fails to take care of them, spending any money she can find on her drug habit. As a result, many of Denise's children, including Michael, are taken to live in foster homes. On the few occasions when Michael visits Denise as an adult, Denise is drunk and disorderly, and seems to show little love for her child.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Tony Henderson / Big Tony – An inner-city Memphis man who takes care of Michael Oher while Michael is a young teenager, and later helps Michael enroll in Briarcrest Christian Academy.

Sean Tuohy Junior – The youngest child of the Leigh Anne Tuohy and Sean Tuohy, with whom Michael Oher forms a close brotherly bond after the Tuohys adopt him.

Collins Tuohy – The teenaged daughter of Leigh Anne and Sean Tuohy.

Bill Walsh – Highly respected NFL coach, whose time with the San Francisco 49ers was perhaps the most notable in team history. Walsh is credited with introducing a new, tactical strategy to the game of football, one that emphasized throwing the ball instead of running with it.

Antonio Turner – Teammate of Michael Oher at the University of Mississippi, who goads Michael into a fight by disrespecting Leigh Anne and Collins Tuohy.

Zachary Bright – An inner-city Memphis man who befriends the much younger Michael Oher, Zachary Bright turned down a great football scholarship, largely because his friends and family told him that college wasn't worth it.

Steve Simpson – The principal of Briarcrest at the time when Michael Oher is trying to enroll there, Steve Simpson is initially reluctant to admit Michael, since his grades are dismal, but eventually he agrees to let Michael into Briarcrest.

Hugh Freeze – Head football coach for Briarcrest, who favors intelligent, tactical players over "brute force," but eventually comes to recognize Michael Oher's formidable talent.

Tim Long – Assistant coach for the Briarcrest football team, and a former NFL player, Tim Long immediately recognizes Michael Oher's talent, and is instrumental in convincing the more tactically-minded Hugh Freeze to play Michael more often.

Steven Henderson – Teenaged son of Big Tony, who excels in school, and is admitted to Briarcrest Christian Academy on scholarship.

Sue Mitchell – Tutor and University of Mississippi alumna hired by the Tuohy family to help Michael Oher bring up his grades in order to qualify for sports scholarships.

Ed Orgeron – The flamboyant, highly energetic head coach for the University of Mississippi following the firing of David Cutcliffe.

Nick Saban – The charming, highly polished coach for the LSU football team, who takes a job with the Miami Dolphins around the time that Michael Oher is deciding on a college.

Joyce Thompson – NCAA employee hired to investigate the possibility that the Tuohy family has adopted Michael Oher in order to manipulate him into playing football for their alma mater, the University of Mississippi.

Tom Lemming – Popular football scout who traveled the country searching for NFL prospects still in high school, and whose newsletter was once required reading for football coaches and other NFL insiders.

Joe Theismann – Legendary quarterback for the Washington Redskins, whose **career-ending injury** in 1985 was partly responsible for a widespread rethinking of the game of football and a renewed emphasis on defense and the left tackle position.

Lawrence Taylor – Legendary offensive player for the New York Giants in the 1980s, whose sack essentially ended the career of Joe Theismann, and prompted a rethinking of football defense.

Kenny Anderson – Quarterback for the Bengals in the 1970s.

Dan Audick – Left tackle for the San Francisco 49ers during Bill Walsh's time as a coach.

John Ayers – Left guard for the San Francisco 49ers.

Coach Boggess – Track coach for Briarcrest.

Harry Carson – Player for the New York Giants in the 1980s.

Virgil Carter – Quarterback for the Bengals who, under Bill Walsh's tutelage, led the league in completion percentage.

Roger Craig – Runningback for the San Francisco 49ers in the 1980s.

David Cutcliffe – Head coach of the University of Mississippi, fired from his job around the time that Michael Oher is trying to decide which college to attend.

Steve Deberg – Quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers who, under the leadership of Bill Walsh, became one of the best players in NFL history.

George DeLeone – Assistant coach for the University of Mississippi football team, who believes that Michael Oher shouldn't play too often during his freshman year.

Chris Doleman – Pass rusher for the Minnesota Vikings.

Steve Farese – Attorney and friend of Sean Tuohy.

Dwight Freeney – The best pass rusher in the NFL, whom Michael Oher claims he could "take" in a game.

Phil Fulmer – Head coach for the University of Tennessee.

Jennifer Graves – The special needs teacher at Briarcrest.

Russ Grimm – Lineman for the Washington Redskins in the 1980s.

Greg Hardy – Defensive end for the Briarcrest football team.

John Harrington – Basketball coach for Briarcrest.

Ted Hendricks – Pass rusher for the Raiders in the 1970s.

Joe Jacoby – Left tackle for the Washington Redskins in the 1980s.

Peria Jerry – Football player for the University of Mississippi, and one of Michael Oher's closest friends in college.

Velma Jones – An unkind woman who briefly adopts Michael Oher after he's taken away from Denise Oher.

James Meredith – First African-American admitted to the University of Mississippi.

Joe Montana – Legendary quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, often said to be the best in NFL history.

Bobby Nix – One of the athletic tutors at the University of Mississippi, whose three-year-old child is injured when Michael Oher fights with Antonio Turner.

Clarke Norton – High school football player, and a family friend of the Tuohys.

John Ogden – Talented, highly paid left tackle for the Baltimore Ravens.

Robert Oher – Brother of Denise Oher, uncle of Michael Oher.

Bill Parcells – Head coach of the New York Giants, who favored a traditionalist, "brawny" approach to the game of football.

Bubba Paris – Overweight lineman for the San Francisco 49ers, who Bill Walsh eventually replaced with Steve Wallace.

Patrick Ramsey – A friend of Leigh Anne Tuohy who plays for the Washington Redskins.

John Riggins – Runningback for the Washington Redskins in the 1980s.

Stacey Searles – Head coach of the LSU football team.

Ron Singleton – Left tackle for the San Francisco 49ers during Bill Walsh's time as a coach, who Walsh dismissed from the team after Singleton demanded too much money.

Justin Sparks – Talented Briarcrest football player, and a friend of Michael Oher.

Quentin Taylor – One of Michael Oher's teammates at the University of Mississippi.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson – Victorian poet who wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade," one of the few works of literature that Michael Oher seems to enjoy.

Arthur Sallis – Inner-city football player who's murdered shortly after he fails to make the grades to attend college on a football scholarship, inspiring Leigh Anne Tuohy to create a

foundation for impoverished athletes who lack the academic talents to attend college.

Steve Wallace – Lineman for the San Francisco 49ers in the 1980s.

Don Warren – Tight end for the Washington Redskins in the 1980s.

Michael Jerome Williams – Father of Michael Oher.

Craig Vail – A friend of Michael Oher's from when Michael was living with Denise Oher in Hurt Village.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GENEROSITY

At the heart of Michael Lewis's book *The Blind Side* is a question: why would two rich parents, Sean Tuohy and Leigh Anne Tuohy, with two biological children of their own, adopt an impoverished inner-city teenager, Michael Oher, and lavish love and attention on him? Throughout the book, characters propose various cynical answers to this question: they suggest that the Tuohys are exploiting Michael for his football talents, or that they're motivated by white guilt or pure condescension. Nevertheless, Lewis argues that sometimes things just are how they appear to be: the Tuohys treat Michael Oher generously because they're extraordinarily generous people.

By examining the Tuohys' relationship with their adopted child, Michael Oher, *The Blind Side* makes a series of interesting points about generosity, in effect, asking, "What is generosity?" From the beginning, the book suggests that people are generous to others because they recognize their common background. Sean Tuohy, a wealthy businessman and the basketball coach at Briarcrest Christian Academy, notices Michael Oher shortly after he enrolls, on scholarship, at the school; shortly afterwards, he arranges to pay for Michael's lunches. Sean feels a need to help Michael out and give him encouragement and support, not just because he's a nice guy but because Sean also came from an impoverished household and worked hard for his success, and had help from other people: he sees it as his duty to help out others in the position he was once in. *The Blind Side* further suggests that people are generous because they feel a more abstract, universal duty to help people in need—a duty that's often rooted in religious conviction. Leigh Anne Tuohy—the woman who, probably more than anyone else, gives Michael Oher the love and support he needs to succeed—is a pious Christian; indeed, she says more than once that God has given her family money "to see how [we're] going to handle it." But even if extraordinary generosity is sometimes the product of a Christian background or of certain life experiences, it may also be an innate gift, which some people have and some people don't. The well-to-do Memphis community in which *The Blind Side* is set is full of wealthy, Christian families, surely some of them headed by self-made millionaires, but only the Tuohys choose to help Michael Oher. Furthermore, the Tuohys choose to help Michael, rather than any number of other impoverished, lonely teenagers. In all, then, *The Blind Side* suggests that generosity is a mysterious, ineffable quality. Certain people feel a deep need to help certain other people, and sometimes they can't explain why, exactly, they feel this need.

The Tuohys not only adopt Michael Oher; they also help him gain a first-rate football scholarship at their *alma mater*, University of Mississippi, give him endless love and support, and generally treat him like one of their own children. However, many people have criticized and questioned the Tuohys' near-miraculous generosity. Some would argue that the Tuohys' generosity is really just self-interest. In the final third of the book, for instance, the NCAA mounts a full-scale investigation of the Tuohys' relationship with Michael, questioning whether they only adopted Michael to ensure that he would play football for their beloved *alma mater*, and whether they accepted bribes to pressure Michael to choose Mississippi. Furthermore, some readers of *The Blind Side* have interpreted the Tuohys' treatment of Michael as condescending. They've argued that Sean and Leigh Anne chose to adopt a black, inner-city kid to assuage their sense of guilt with their own wealth and privilege, or that they treated Michael like a docile pet rather than respecting him as a mature, independent human being. Critics of the film version of *The Blind Side* took this argument even further, seeing the film as symptomatic of a "white savior complex" in Hollywood.

There is no explicit evidence in Michael Lewis's book, however, to suggest that the Tuohys are motivated by anything other than benign generosity and a strong sense of duty to the unfortunate. Furthermore, the book shows how the Tuohys give Michael the tools he needs to become emotionally and financially independent, and live a mature adult life. As the book ends, the Tuohys are in the process of donating money to a foundation for inner-city teenagers, suggesting that they're interested in helping others, not boosting their college. Ultimately, the Tuohys exhibit extraordinary generosity toward Michael, helping him become a talented NFL athlete and a confident young man.

LEFT TACKLE, PROTECTION, AND SHIFTING STRATEGY

In addition to telling the story of the life of Michael Oher, *The Blind Side* studies the history of professional football since the 1970s—an era during which many coaches and managers began to rethink the way the game was played. The book shows how Michael Oher's spectacular success as a left tackle reflects some major changes in football strategy in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, which resulted in a much stronger emphasis on passing and, therefore, protecting the quarterback. Beginning in the late seventies and early eighties, some football insiders, particularly Bill Walsh, the talented head coach of the San Francisco 49ers, began to challenge the conventional wisdom that football is a game only of strength and endurance. Walsh introduced elaborate plays that required the athletes to think tactically and pass the ball more efficiently than they were used to doing. Because he emphasized passes more than runs, furthermore, Walsh recognized the importance of good quarterback protection in the midst of an offensive play: without linemen to protect the quarterback, the other team would tackle the quarterback before he could throw the ball.

As *The Blind Side* shows, Bill Walsh's protective, pass-heavy style of football caught on in the NFL for a number of reasons. First, and most obviously, Walsh's style caught on because it worked: under Walsh's leadership, the 49ers had several spectacular seasons, and their quarterback, Joe Montana, is still recognized as one of the best in NFL history. Montana was a great quarterback not simply because of his talent, but because Walsh recruited big left tackles who could protect Montana's **blind side**—i.e., the area Montana couldn't see because his body was turned in the opposite direction (for right-handed throwers, this is the area to the quarterback's left)—and give him an extra split-second in which to pass. At the same time, the protective style, bolstered by big left tackles, caught on in the NFL because of skyrocketing player salaries. With quarterbacks in the 1990s and 2000s commanding massive, forty million-dollar salaries, the NFL needed to protect its athletes from injuries, or risk shelling out tens of millions for an athlete who could no longer play football. Thus, NFL teams began spending much more on their linemen in general and their left tackles in particular: the best way to keep the quarterback playing was to protect his blind side with a good left tackle. In all, then, Walsh's protective strategy caught on, not only because it was the best way to win games, but because it was the smartest long-term economic decision for big NFL teams.

The changes in football strategy that occurred in the 80s and 90s had some major consequences for the way that people viewed the different players. In particular, Walsh's style brought new importance to the position of left tackle, but—oddly—not much visibility. Among NFL insiders, the left tackle became one of the most respected positions. The new importance attached to the left tackle challenged the old belief that linemen were all equally valuable, and worked together as one team—now, left tackles were seen as soloists, defending against the other team single-handedly. At the same time, however, left tackles remained relatively obscure from the perspective of the average NFL fan: runningbacks and quarterbacks continued to get most of the attention, while left tackles remained the unsung heroes of many games. In many ways, Michael Oher embodies the contradictions inherent to the role of the contemporary left tackle: he's big and imposing, meaning that the other players always notice him in a game, but he's also quiet and unassuming, meaning that he's often less popular than his teammates. Furthermore, he has extraordinarily strong protective instincts, as measured by his career aptitude tests, suggesting that he's a natural for a protective role on the football field. In all, Lewis argues that Michael Oher didn't become a highly sought-after football player simply because he was a great player—he attracted attention because he came along at the perfect time, when football coaches and managers realized how important big left tackles like Michael could be.

FOOTBALL INDUSTRY AND CULTURE

In addition to studying the life of Michael Oher and the recent history of football strategy, *The Blind Side* paints a picture of the football industry and football culture in the early 2000s. In Memphis, Tennessee—and, we're led to believe, throughout the country—football is more than just a sport: it's a billion-dollar industry and a huge part of millions of people's lives, with its own unique culture and values. In particular, the book studies the lengths to which coaches and managers will go to recruit top football players for their programs, and the consequences that all this flattery often has on the players themselves.

Why, *The Blind Side* implicitly asks, is football such an important part of so many people's lives? From the perspective of fans, football is important because it showcases the best a community has to offer. Football is entertaining to watch, but it also represents a chance for a community to compete against other communities. In this sense, football strengthens the bond between people who live in the same place: by cheering for their team, they're also celebrating the town, city, or state where they live. From the perspective of coaches, managers, and businessmen, however, football is also important in the sense that it's a massive, lucrative industry. NFL teams generate tens of millions of dollars in income every year, and pay their players accordingly well. Even at the college level, where players are forbidden from accepting a salary, a good football team can be an enormous asset to a school, since it generates interest, boosts donations, and brings glory. *The Blind Side* doesn't suggest that football insiders are motivated purely

by economics, but the book does draw attention to high financial stakes of signing or trading a player, an aspect of the game that many fans aren't fully aware of.

Because of the huge cultural and financial importance of football, coaches will go to absurd lengths to recruit talented players: they recognize that, by signing the right talent, they could generate enormous sums of money for their programs. Toward the end of Michael Oher's high school career, when it's clear that he's going to be a talented NFL player, football coaches from Division I colleges try to convince him to attend their schools. The book emphasizes the amount of money that the colleges lavish on recruiting Michael: coaches wear expensive suits, spend hours researching how to flatter Michael and his family, and travel across the country, all in the hopes of wooing Michael. Expensive as the wooing process is, it's nothing compared to the money that Michael could generate for a Division I college by playing football there. Later in the book, the NCAA begins investigating the Tuohy family for manipulating Michael into attending the University of Mississippi. The idea that the Tuohys would go to such lengths just to get someone to go to a college seems laughable; however, football is such a huge part of American culture, and such a big moneymaker for teams, that the idea isn't quite as silly as it appears.

For the most part, *The Blind Side* refrains from passing judgment on the Division I recruiting process, or the centrality of football in general. However, whether intentionally or not, the book depicts a disturbing level of entitlement that football stars enjoy because of their talent. At the University of Mississippi, Michael Oher and his teammates are encouraged to take only the easiest classes: they're in college to play football, not to learn. After *The Blind Side* was published, the University of Mississippi, along with other Division I schools, came under investigation for giving out too many easy A's to its athletes. Similarly, football players aren't always appropriately punished for their actions. Toward the end of the book, Michael Oher gets in a violent fight with a teammate, Antonio Turner, who insults Leigh Anne Tuohy, his guardian. During the fight, Michael injures a three-year-old child, and later flees the scene. Michael is never tried for beating up his teammate or for accidentally hurting a child. His coach, Ed Orgeron, doesn't even tell him anything about controlling his emotions or being careful not to hurt innocent people—instead, he just says, "It's lonely at the top." Whatever one thinks of Michael's decision to defend his adopted mother's honor, the incident leaves one with the distinct impression that Michael and his teammates are never really held accountable for anything they do wrong. In some ways, Michael Oher seems more emotionally stable and less entitled than his teammates, due to his strong family support. Nevertheless, the football industry seems to create a group of elite athletes who, in the short term, are treated like princes, but who, in the long run, end up uneducated and unequipped to deal with adult responsibilities.

RACISM AND OUTSIDERNESS

Throughout *The Blind Side*, Michael Oher is an outsider. Thanks to the persistence of a father figure, Big Tony, Michael becomes one of the only black students at Briarcrest Christian Academy. He's also the biggest kid at Briarcrest by far, and he comes from an impoverished inner-city family. At school, he's extremely shy and lonely, partly because he isn't sure how to make friends with his wealthy white classmates, and partly because he hasn't had many stable relationships in his life. Michael's outsiderness is particularly noteworthy since *The Blind Side* is set in the state of Tennessee, which has a long history of racism against African-Americans, and which, even in the early 2000s, is a *de facto* segregated state in some ways. In *The Blind Side* Lewis examines how Michael responds to his outsider status in white, upper-class Memphis—in particular, the varying degrees of racism that he experiences as a young man.

In some ways, Michael Oher successfully overcomes the challenges of being an outsider. He befriends the Tuohy family, who eventually adopt him as their own son. In becoming a Tuohy, Michael conquers some of his loneliness: for the first time in his life, he has a family that gives him unconditional love and takes care of his needs—something that couldn't be said of his biological mother, Denise Oher. Because he's comfortable with his new family, he begins to befriend classmates, teammates, and others. Furthermore, in becoming a Tuohy, Michael escapes the poverty he experienced as a child in the Memphis inner-city. More broadly, he escapes the institutional racism that keeps the inner-city squalid and dangerous. In other ways, Michael uses his outsiderness to his advantage: as the biggest kid at Briarcrest—if not the biggest 16-year-old in the state of Tennessee—he's a natural football player. Michael becomes a popular Briarcrest athlete, further allowing him to fit in with his peers. In all, Michael adjusts to his new community, partly with the help of the generous Tuohy family, and partly because of his own innate kindness and talent as a football player.

Even after Michael overcomes some of the challenges of outsiderness, however, he continues to experience racism and discrimination. Over the course of the book, the Memphis police arrest him for no discernible reason, racist fans and opposing players call him offensive slurs, and at the heavily white, historically racist University of Mississippi, where he's a star athlete, he still feels like a stranger. The tragedy of *The Blind Side* is that Michael Oher is trying to adapt to a culture that was once overtly racist and remains racially prejudiced even in the 21st century (during Michael's time at the University of Mississippi, for example, there are still fraternities that refuse to admit black students). We're reminded of Michael's continued outsider status when, toward the end of

the book, he flees from the scene of a fight with a teammate and refuses to answer calls or texts from his family. As the book ends, the Tuohy family is planning a foundation designed to help inner-city children like Michael, who don't always have the talent or support to finish school and go to college. Even if Michael still feels like an outsider, and continues to face racism and prejudice, his success as a football player has helped him escape some of the worst forms of racism in American society. Furthermore, his unlikely success story draws attention to inner-city conditions and hopefully inspires other people, including the Tuohys, to do more to fight institutional racism and help impoverished, struggling children.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

JOE THEISMANN'S INJURY

There aren't many overt symbols in *The Blind Side*; however, one exception is the horrific injury that Joe Theismann sustains in a 1985 game with the New York Giants. During the game, Theismann, the star quarterback of the Washington Redskins, is tackled by a star linebacker for the Giants named Lawrence Taylor. Taylor is so big and so fast that he breaks Theismann's leg, ending his career. As Lewis sees it, Theismann's legendary injury is a symbol for the rethinking of the game of football that took place in the eighties and nineties. Around this time, coaches realized that they needed to do a better job of protecting their players from tackles like Lawrence Taylor—and, therefore, needed to spend more money on big left tackles who could protect the quarterbacks' **blind sides**.

THE BLIND SIDE

The other obvious symbol in *The Blind Side* is, of course, the idea of the "blind side": in other words, the field of vision that a quarterback can't see when he's throwing the ball, since he's faced in the opposite direction. (For a right-handed quarterback, this would be the area to the quarterback's left.) As Lewis interprets it, the blind side was a major weakness in the game of football as it was played before the mid-1980s: big, fast tacklers could tackle quarterbacks from their blind side, without being seen until it was too late to react. The blind side symbolizes, first, the major rethinking of football that took place in the eighties, and, second, the unlikely players, like Michael Oher, who seemingly emerged from thin air after the eighties.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Norton & Company edition of *The Blind Side* published in 2007.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Four other players, including, oddly, the Redskins' John Riggins, pile on. They're good for dramatic effect but practically irrelevant. The damage is done by Taylor alone. One hundred and ninety-six pounds of quarterback come to rest beneath a thousand or so pounds of other things. Then Lawrence Taylor pops to his feet and begins to scream and wave and clutch his helmet with both hands, as if in agony.

Related Characters: Lawrence Taylor, Joe Theismann

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *The Blind Side*, Lawrence Taylor, a talented pass rusher for the New York Giants, sacks legendary quarterback Joe Theismann (i.e., tackles Theismann before he can pass the ball). Taylor's sack on Theismann has become one of the most famous—and infamous—moments in NFL history, since Taylor broke Theismann's leg and ended his NFL career for good.

As the chapter goes on to show, Taylor's sacking of Theismann proved influential because it made football insiders realize the enormous importance of the left tackle position. Previously, many football coaches and fans had thought of offensive linemen as interchangeable—but after Theismann, it became clear that some linemen were far more important than others. The left tackle has one of the most difficult jobs in football: protecting the quarterback from rushers like Lawrence Taylor. The discussion of the renewed emphasis on good left tackles in the eighties and nineties is important because it shows how NFL history paved the way for Michael Oher. Had it not been for Taylor's sack of Theismann, there may never have been such a big demand for good left tackles, and Michael Oher may never have made it to the NFL.

Chapter 2 Quotes

In the early 1980s, the notion that a single lineman should be paid much more than any other—and more than star running backs, wide receivers, and, in several cases, quarterbacks—would have been considered heretical had it not been so absurd. The offensive line never abandoned, at least in public, its old, vaguely socialistic ideology. All for one, one for all, as to do our jobs well we must work together, and thus no one of us is especially important.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Two, we learn about the gradual conceptual shift that occurred in the NFL during the 1980s and 1990s. For many decades, football fans and coaches had considered offensive linemen to be equally important—the unsung heroes of football, who worked together to protect the quarterback and the running back. This way of thinking of linemen was both a reflection and a consequence of the fact that linemen tended to be paid the same amount. In the 1980s, however, NFL teams began to pay certain men far more than others—left tackles became especially well-paid, because they had the important job of protecting the quarterback's "blind side."

The passage is important because it shows how important conventional wisdom can be in football. In retrospect, it seems obvious that some linemen are more important than others, and therefore that some linemen should be paid more than others. Why, then, did it take so long for NFL coaches to see the truth? In part, the passage implies, because ideology and tradition play an important role in shaping football strategy. The idea that all linemen are equal was so entrenched in football that coaches only seriously began to question it in the late 80s.

Chapter 3 Quotes

His name was Michael Oher, but everyone just called him "Big Mike." Tony liked Big Mike, but he also could see that Big Mike was heading at warp speed toward a bad end. He'd just finished the ninth grade at a public school, but Tony very much doubted he'd be returning for the tenth. He seldom attended classes, and showed no talent or interest in school. "Big Mike was going to drop out," said Big Tony. "And if he dropped out, he'd be like all his friends who dropped out: dead, in jail, or on the street selling drugs, just waiting to be dead or in jail."

Related Characters: Tony Henderson / Big Tony (speaker), Michael Oher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Three, we're introduced to Michael Oher, the protagonist of the book. Michael is a young teenager, living in the impoverished inner-city of Memphis, Tennessee. Although Michael doesn't spend much time with his biological parents (and, in fact, has never met his biological father), a man named Big Tony takes care of him sometimes, largely out of concern that, without the right influences, Michael will end up involved in selling drugs or other criminal activities to which many people turn as a way of surviving.

The passage is important not only because it paints a bleak picture of life in American inner-cities (where crime and drug selling are often the only realistic way for young people to make a good living for themselves), but because it's one of the only passages about Big Tony, the man who arranges for Michael Oher to attend Briarcrest Christian Academy, setting in motion the events of the book. *The Blind Side*—both the book and the Hollywood film adaptation—has been criticized for perpetuating the "white savior complex," the trope in which heroic white characters (in this case, the Tuohy family) reach out to help a struggling non-white character (here, Michael Oher), when, so the argument goes, there should be more books and films about non-white people taking care of themselves, helping one another, and solving their own problems. The fact that Big Tony, in spite of his importance to Michael Oher's success in life, plays a minimal role in the book could be interpreted as evidence for the white savior complex in *The Blind Side*—the book marginalizes the help that inner-city people give each other, and instead focuses on the help that wealthy white people give to black inner-city youths.

But Mr. Simpson was new to the school, and this great football coach, Hugh Freeze, had phoned Simpson's boss, the school president, a football fan, and made his pitch: This wasn't a thing you did for the Briarcrest football team, Freeze had said, this was a thing you did because it was right! Briarcrest was this kid's last chance! The president in turn had phoned Simpson and told him that if he felt right with it, he could admit the boy.

Related Characters: Michael Oher, Steve Simpson, Hugh Freeze

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Three, we start to get a sense for the enormous importance of football in America, particularly in a Southern state like Tennessee. Millions of Americans watch football every week, and consider football an important part of their lives. Football is more than just entertainment on television: it represents a way for communities to celebrate themselves. For example, one could argue that when two high schools play a game of football with one another, they're each fighting for their school's honor and reputation.

Because football is so important in Memphis, Tennessee, it influences seemingly unrelated aspects of life, such as the educational system. Ordinarily, Michael Oher would have little to no chance of attending a school like Briarcrest, partly because he's black and Briarcrest is a *de facto* white school, and partly because his grades and IQ scores are poor. However, Briarcrest admits Michael in large part because the school president loves football and wants Michael to play for the Briarcrest team.

> By the time [Sean] met Big Mike, he had a new unofficial title: Life Guidance counselor to whatever black athlete stumbled into the Briarcrest Christian School. The black kids reminded him, in a funny way, of himself.
>
> Sean knew what it meant to be the poor kid in a private school, because he'd been one himself.

Related Characters: Michael Oher, Sean Tuohy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Sean Tuohy is the first person in the Tuohy family to take notice of Michael Oher, and in this passage, we begin to get a sense for why. Tuohy notices that Michael Oher is lonely, and has little in common with his Briarcrest peers—most of the students at Briarcrest, an elite private school, are white and come from wealthy families. Tuohy sympathizes with the feeling of being an outsider in a rich community, because he grew up very poor, and was almost always the poorest kid in his school. Even at the University of Mississippi, where Tuohy played basketball, Tuohy felt like an outsider because he could only afford to attend school on a sports scholarship, meaning that playing basketball was essentially a job for him, not a fun activity. In all, Tuohy is sympathetic to young people who are poorer than their peers, and who feel like outsiders. In the city of Memphis, where there is an enormous (and morally disgraceful) gap between the average wealth of white and black people, and where black people are often treated like second-class citizens, this in effect means that Tuohy is especially sympathetic to black people. Sean's sense of a personal connection with Michael Oher thus leads him to befriend Michael, pay for his lunches, and, eventually, adopt Michael as his own son.

> By the time Michael Oher arrived at Briarcrest, Leigh Anne Tuohy didn't see anything odd or even awkward in taking him in hand. This boy was new; he had no clothes; he had no warm place to stay over Thanksgiving Break. For Lord's sake, he was walking to school in the snow in shorts, when school was out of session, on the off-chance he could get into the gym and keep warm. Of course she took him out and bought him some clothes. It struck others as perhaps a bit aggressively philanthropic; for Leigh Anne, clothing a child was just what you did if you had the resources. She had done this sort of thing before, and would do it again. "God gives people money to see how you're going to handle it," she said. And she intended to prove she knew how to handle it.

Related Characters: Leigh Anne Tuohy (speaker), Michael Oher

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leigh Anne helps Michael Oher to a degree that many other people would find strange. After seeing that he's an impoverished, lonely student, Leigh Anne buys Michael clothes and food, and gives him far more love and attention than he's used to receiving.

A natural question would be, why does Leigh Anne treat Michael so kindly? But in a way, the passage suggests that this is the *wrong* question—in the sense that it would be wrong to second-guess Leigh Anne's generosity. Leigh Anne's peers think that she's too "aggressively

philanthropic," and later on in the book, the NCAA accuses Leigh Anne of being nice to Michael to ensure that he'd play football for her *alma mater*. Furthermore, readers of *The Blind Side* have accused the Tuohys of being condescending toward Michael. While there might be some truth in such an accusation, perhaps it's not right to immediately assume the worst of Leigh Anne Tuohy. Leigh Anne seems to be a sincere, pious woman, who thinks that, as a prosperous person, it's her duty to spend her time and money helping others. The better question, indeed, might be why *more* wealthy people don't use their money to help those who are less fortunate, particularly as both wealth and poverty are often a matter of luck rather than merit.

Chapter 4 Quotes

They called him names that neither he nor his coach cared to repeat. Harrington wasn't shocked by more subtle forms of racism away from the basketball court, but it had been a long time since he'd seen the overt version on it. "I don't think there's a white coach with a black kid on his team, or a black coach with a white kid, who could have any racism in him," he said. Big Mike responded badly; Harrington hadn't seen this side of him. He began to throw elbows. Then he stopped on the court, turned on the fans, and gave them the finger.

Related Characters: Michael Oher, John Harrington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Michael Oher is playing a game of basketball on the Briarcrest team against another high school. During the game, people from the other school call Michael offensive names, including the n-word. In response, Michael becomes much more aggressive on the court, and leads his team to a sweeping victory.

The passage is an important reminder of the racism that black youths like Michael Oher face, both on and off the court—and this won't be the first time that Michael is belittled for his race. Second, the passage suggests that Michael, in spite of his gentle nature, is capable of becoming more aggressive during sports games. Instead of being humiliated by the audience's cruelty, Michael adapts to his surroundings and finds a way to use their cruelty to motivate himself to succeed.

Of course, it's also worth noting how tone-deaf Harrington sounds in his quotation—both in assuming that a black coach's "racism" against a white player could be equal to a white coach's racism against a black player, and in thinking that the world of sports is somehow divorced from the racial prejudices of the outside world.

One afternoon the Briarcrest players and coaches looked up and saw the strange sight of Tennessee's most famous coach, Phil Fulmer, from the University of Tennessee, not walking but running to their practice. If ever there was a body not designed to move at speed it was Fulmer's.

Related Characters: Michael Oher, Phil Fulmer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

By the end of Chapter Four, it's become obvious that Michael Oher is an extraordinary football player—so extraordinary, in fact, that football coaches from Division I colleges travel across the country to watch him practice. Even Phil Fulmer, the most acclaimed coach in the state, goes out of his way to watch Michael, actually running to his practice.

The passage is humorous in its characterization of Fulmer, but also inspiring because it shows how Michael has gone from a lonely young man, who most people in Memphis would ignore or avoid, to an acclaimed athlete, who people travel across the country to watch. The passage is also significant because it foreshadows the long college recruitment process, during which Phil Fulmer, among many other college coaches, will visit Michael and try to convince him to play for their programs.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Eventually people must have noticed. As Walsh performed miracle after miracle with his quarterbacks, a more general trend emerged in NFL strategy: away from the run and toward the pass. In 1978, NFL teams passed 42 percent of the time and ran the ball 58 percent of the time. Each year, right through until the mid-1980s, they passed more and ran less until the ratios were almost exactly reversed: in 1995, NFL teams passed 59 percent of the time and ran 41 percent of the time. It's not hard to see why; the passing game was improving, and the running game was stagnant.

Related Characters: Bill Walsh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

The Blind Side alternates between chapters about the life of Michael Oher and chapters about the overall changes in the NFL in the decades leading up to Michael's career. In Chapter Five, we learn about Bill Walsh, an extraordinary coach who almost single-handedly transformed the game by emphasizing the importance of passing the ball, rather than running with it. In order to ensure that his players passed more effectively, Walsh developed some elaborate, strategic plays that maximized his players' potential and made them virtually unbeatable for much of the 1980s.

The passage is important to the book's themes because it shows why big left tackles like Michael Oher suddenly became so crucial to the sport of football. As passing the ball became increasingly important, it became equally important to protect the quarterback from sacks, ensuring that he could throw the ball safely. Therefore, Bill Walsh's inventive football strategies paved the way for Michael Oher's stunning career.

Chapter 6 Quotes

From his place on the sideline Sean watched in amazement. Hugh had called a running play around the right end, away from Michael's side. Michael's job was simply to take the kid who had been jabbering at him and wall him off. Just keep him away from the ball carrier. Instead, he'd fired off the line of scrimmage and gotten fit. Once he had his hands inside the Munford player's shoulder pads, he lifted him off the ground. It was a perfectly legal block, with unusual consequences. He drove the Munford player straight down the field for 15 yards, then took a hard left, toward the Munford sidelines.

Related Characters: Hugh Freeze, Michael Oher, Sean Tuohy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Six, Michael Oher plays in a football game against another high school. One of the opposing players is an annoying, bullying teenager, and during a play, Michael simply carries the bully across the field, pushing him all the way back to the sidelines and even over the opposing team's bench.

The incident with the bully is indicative of both Michael Oher's dominance in the sport of football, and his overall temperament. Michael is clearly a gifted athlete—he's so big and strong that he can face off against a heavy football player and essentially lift him all the way down the field. Michael is a gentle, kindhearted young man, but during football games he's capable of channeling his anger and frustration into some impressive plays, like the one discussed in the passage.

She'd been taking care of his material needs for a good year and a half, and his emotional ones, to the extent he wanted them taken care of, for almost as long. "I love him as if I birthed him," she said. About the hundredth time someone asked her how she handled his sexual urges, Leigh Anne snapped. "You just need to mind your own business. You worry about your life and I'll worry about mine," she'd said. Word must have gotten around because after that no one asked.

Related Characters: Leigh Anne Tuohy (speaker), Michael Oher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Leigh Anne plays an increasingly important role in Michael Oher's life: where before she bought him food and clothing, she now provides him with a home and round-the-clock love and support. However, instead of praising Leigh Anne for her extraordinary generosity, some of Leigh Anne's friends question the new living situation. They wonder how Leigh Anne can trust Michael Oher around her beautiful teenaged daughter, Collins.

It's easy to detect a racist side to Leigh Anne's friends' question: their confusion seems to reflect the racist trope of the aggressive, hyper-sexual black male. Leigh Anne's response to her friends' queries is simply that they should mind their own business instead of meddling in her own. Leigh Anne's response shows that she respects and trusts Michael, and never believes him to be anything other than a kind, gentle young man.

Chapter 7 Quotes

With that, Sean Junior took off on a surprisingly insistent rap. He explained how important it was for him to be near Michael, and how concerned he was that once Michael committed himself to some big-time college football program, he'd become totally inaccessible. Then came the question: if Michael Oher agreed to play football for Ole Miss, what level of access would be granted to his little brother?

"How about we get you an all-access pass?" said the Ole Miss recruiter.

"That'd be good."

Related Characters: Sean Tuohy Junior (speaker), Michael Oher

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Seven, Michael begins the lengthy process of being wooed by various Division I colleges. Michael is one of the best football players in Tennessee, if not the country, and Division I schools want him to play football for their teams, bringing honor (and money!) to the program.

In order to stand the best chance of recruiting Michael, savvy football coaches and college recruiters go out of their ways to flatter him. The University of Mississippi recruiter further tries to impress Michael by currying favor with Michael's beloved little brother, Sean Junior, promising him that he'll be given a luxurious all-access pass to the University of Mississippi facilities. The lengths to which different coaches and recruiters will go for Michael's sake illustrate not only Michael's talents as an athlete, but the central importance of football for many colleges. Football is an important part of campus life at many schools and, quite frankly, a huge source of revenue.

Leigh Anne Tuohy was trying to do for one boy what economists had been trying to do, with little success, for less developed countries for the last fifty years. Kick him out of one growth path and onto another. Jump-start him. She had already satisfied his most basic needs: food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and health care. He had pouted for three days after she had taken him to get the vaccines he should have had as a child. It was amazing he hadn't already died some nineteenth-century death from, say, the mumps. (When she tried to get him a flu shot the second year in a row, he said, "You white people are obsessed with that flu shot. You don't need one every year.") Now she was moving on to what she interpreted as his cultural deficiencies.

Related Characters: Michael Oher (speaker), Leigh Anne Tuohy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

In this ambiguous passage, we learn about how Leigh Anne tries to educate Michael Oher and help him become a mature adult. Leigh Anne believes that it's her responsibility to help Michael transcend his impoverished background, both by providing for all his material needs, and by helping him learn how to appreciate the finer things in life. As we learn in the rest of the chapter, Leigh Anne takes Michael to nice restaurants and teaches him how to order food and read a wine list. She also takes him to fancy stores and buys him beautiful suits. Michael Lewis compares Leigh Anne's actions to those of an economist who tries to help a third world country develop into a thriving industrialized nation: both by giving the nation basic material help (providing food and other necessities) and by giving the nation a strong culture.

The passage is exemplary of much that is admirable about Leigh Anne's approach: her goal is nothing less than to help Michael Oher grow into a mature, respectable adult. However, when it comes to Michael's "cultural deficiencies," it could be argued that Leigh Anne is drawing Michael even further away from the realities of the average American's life than Michael was when he lived an impoverished life in the inner-city. Similarly, one could argue that Leigh Anne isn't really helping Michael become an independent adult at all—she's just spoiling him and perpetuating his dependence on her.

Leigh Anne listened to the doctors discuss how bizarrely lucky Sean Junior had been in his collision with the airbag. Then she went back home and relayed the conversation to Michael, who held out his arm. An ugly burn mark ran right down the fearsome length of it. "I stopped it," he said.

Related Characters: Michael Oher (speaker), Sean Tuohy Junior, Leigh Anne Tuohy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

In this touching passage, Michael Oher has been in a car accident with Sean Junior, and Sean Junior is covered in blood. It ultimately becomes clear that Sean Junior is fine—although he's bleeding, he didn't break any bones or even lose teeth. Indeed, the doctors are surprised that Sean Junior is basically unharmed. Only afterwards does Leigh Anne discover what happened: the reason that Sean Junior wasn't hurt more seriously is that Michael reached out his hand to protect Sean Junior from the force of the air bag.

Michael Oher is an extraordinarily kind, gentle person, and he feels an instinctive need to protect the people he cares about, even if doing so means hurting himself. Michael's protective instincts also come in handy during football games: the same instinct that leads him to reach out his hand to protect Sean Junior also helps him to excel at protecting the quarterback during football plays.

Then he looked around, as if soaking in every last detail of the Olde English and Country French furnishings, and said, "What a lovely home. I just love those window treatments." *I just love those window treatments.* He didn't say, "I just love the way you put together the Windsor valances with the draw drapes," but he might as well have. Right then Leigh Anne decided that if Nick Saban wasn't the most polished and charming football coach in America, she was ready to marry whoever was.

Related Characters: Nick Saban (speaker), Leigh Anne Tuohy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Nick Saban, the suave, debonair coach for LSU, visits the Tuohy household in order to convince Michael to play football at LSU. Saban is wearing a beautiful Armani suit, and makes a big show of complimenting Leigh Anne's decorations, knowing that she takes great pride in such matters. In short, Saban has done his homework: he knows exactly what he's supposed to say to impress the Tuohys and convince Michael to choose LSU.

The passage reminds us of the enormous importance of football to schools like LSU. LSU needs a good football team to generate money and acclaim for itself (at Division I schools like LSU, alumni donations have been shown to correlate very closely with sports success). That's why it sends a charmer like Saban across the country to impress Michael—and that's why dozens of other colleges try to do the same thing. However, there's something disingenuous about Saban's performance for Michael and the Tuohys. Saban is only trying to charm Michael because he wants Michael's talent, not because he has any particular respect for Michael as a person. As Michael discovers during his time in college, talented athletes are superficially treated well, but beneath the surface, they're seen as means to an end—namely, winning games and earning money for the school. In all, Saban's behavior in this passage foreshadows some of ideas about football as an industry that become important to the book after Michael goes to college.

Chapter 9 Quotes

No one ever mentions Steve Wallace's name. The cameras never once find him. His work is evidently too boring to watch for long without being distracted by whatever's happening to the football. Worse, the better he does his job, the more boring to watch he becomes. His job is to eliminate what people pay to see—the sight of Chris Doleman crushing Joe Montana.

Related Characters: Steve Wallace, Joe Montana, Chris Doleman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Nine, we're introduced a relatively obscure NFL player named Steve Wallace. Steve Wallace is one of the most important players in NFL history, even if few fans remember him well: he was the first left tackle (and the first offensive lineman) to command a ten million-dollar salary. Steve Wallace began to attract more attention from coaches and managers after he succeeded in protecting his quarterback, Joe Montana, from being sacked by an

especially formidable opposing player, Chris Doleman.

The passage addresses the paradox of being a good left tackle: the better at your job you are, the less attention fans give you. Traditionally, fans ignore the contributions of the left tackle, because these contributions don't involve passing, catching, or running with the ball. At their best, left tackles are invisible. Perhaps it's no coincidence, then, that Michael Oher is so quiet and modest, in spite of his immense athletic talent—as a great left tackle, his job consists of anonymously helping the quarterback succeed.

> In 1995, Steve Wallace of the San Francisco 49ers became the first offensive lineman to sign a contract worth $10 million. The quarterback might still get all the glory. But the guy who watched his back would be moving into a bigger house.

Related Characters: Steve Wallace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

As Chapter Nine goes on, we learn that Steve Wallace achieved fortune, if not fame, after he signed a big contract to play left tackle with the San Francisco 49ers. Even if, as we saw in the previous quote, fans often ignore the contributions of the left tackle, football *insiders* are well aware of the left-tackle's vital importance. Left tackles are crucial components of any successful football team: without them, the quarterback wouldn't have that extra split-second in which to decide where to throw the ball for maximum effectiveness. It's because football teams gradually became aware of the importance of left tackles in the 1980s and 1990s that Steve Wallace was able to sign such a lucrative contract.

> It was probably true that the NFL couldn't lengthen the arms or stretch the torsos of fully-grown men. On the other hand, they could wave millions of dollars in the air and let the American population know that the incentives had changed. Boys who thought they might make careers as power forwards, or shot putters, might now think twice before quitting the high school football team. Huge sums of money were there for the taking, so long as you met certain physical specifications.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

In this interesting section, Lewis considers the effect that the rise of the left tackle's importance has had on young, ambitious football players. There are hundreds of thousands of Americans who play football with varying degrees of seriousness in grade school, middle school, and high school. Most of these people burn out or find other activities in which to interest themselves—often because they don't have the physique to become great football players. However, with the rise of the left tackle in the 1980s and 1990s, the NFL began to recognize the importance of a new kind of athlete, and, by the same token, a new body type: big-hipped, wide below the waist, and tall. In effect, Lewis argues, the NFL encouraged certain young football players who would otherwise have give up to continue playing football—and it's likely that at least a few such players have gone on to play in the NFL. Perhaps if the NFL hadn't started to place so much stock in the left tackle's body-type, then Michael Oher would never have played professionally.

Chapter 10 Quotes

> A big part of the tutor's job was to steer the players away from the professors and courses most likely to lead to lack of performance. The majority of the football team wound up majoring in "Criminal Justice." What Criminal Justice had going for it was that it didn't require any math or language skills. Criminal Justice classes were also almost always filled with other football players.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

After Michael Oher goes off to college at the University of Mississippi, he's put in a strange position: on paper, he's a college student, but in reality, he's at Ole Miss for one reason—to play football. The Ole Miss football program devotes tremendous resources to ensure that its athletes give their undivided attention to the sport. They hire expensive tutors to help the athletes learn the material from their courses as quickly as possible; furthermore, the passage implies, another part of the tutors' job is to

pressure the athletes to major in relatively easy subjects like "Criminal Law." Ironically enough, the Ole Miss football tutors—whose job, one would think, is to help the athletes learn—are mostly paid to encourage the athletes to learn as little as possible and choose an easy major, so that they can focus on football.

The passage paints a cynical picture of college athletic life. College athletes are treated like princes, especially at a place like Ole Miss, where athletics is a huge moneymaker and a big part of campus life. However, athletes' elite status can't disguise the fundamental disrespect with which the Ole Miss administration regards its athletes. Ole Miss doesn't respect football players as human beings—rather, it treats them as means to the end of raising money and prestige. Outrageously, Ole Miss makes little effort to give its athletes a worthwhile education—and in many ways it does just the opposite. In effect, this means that Ole Miss is cheating its athletic students of the education they deserve—suggesting that, if its athletes don't get a lucrative professional sports job, they have no way of providing for themselves after college.

❝ The circumstances were that the Ole Miss football team, like the Mississippi State football team, consisted mostly of poor black kids from Mississippi. When the Ole Miss defense gathered in a single room, the only white people were coaches. On the football field the players became honorary white people, but off it they were still black, and unnatural combatants in Mississippi's white internecine war.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

At the University of Mississippi Michael Oher certainly doesn't escape the racism and discrimination he's faced for his entire life. The University of Mississippi has a long history of racial prejudice—indeed, when the first black student enrolled at the university during the Civil Rights era, students and locals rioted on campus. To this day, there is a strong racial tension on campus. One side effect of this racial tension is that even elite black students, such as athletes, are only treated with respect in some situations. As the passage suggests, black athletes are still ridiculed or just ignored when they're off the field. As important as black football players may be to their school, their classmates sometimes treat them with condescension or outright racism, and even on the field they may be merely fetishized or objectified by fans.

❝ Michael beat Antonio around the face and threw him across the room as, around the room, huge football players took cover beneath small desks. That's when a lot of people at once began to scream hysterically and Michael noticed the little white boy on the floor, in a pool of blood. He hadn't seen the little white boy—the three-year-old son of one of the tutors. Who had put the little white boy there? When he'd charged Antonio, the boy somehow had been hit and thrown up against the wall. His head was now bleeding badly. Seeing the body lying in his own blood, Michael ran.

Related Characters: Antonio Turner, Michael Oher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

In this disturbing scene, Michael Oher gets into a heated argument with his teammate, Antonio Turner. Turner has made some offensive comments about wanting to have sex with Leigh Anne, Michael's adopted mother, and Collins, Michael's adopted sister. Michael is so furious that he beats up Antonio in front of a roomful of people—and he also accidentally injures a little boy, the son of one of the football tutors.

Michael's actions are horrifying and shouldn't be excused—it's absolutely wrong for an adult to settle a fight by attacking another adult (let alone hurting a small child in the process). But without forgiving what Michael does, it's possible to understand his actions. On one hand, Michael is deeply loyal to his adopted family, and doesn't like it when Antonio speaks ill of them. At the same time, Michael, in spite of his gentle nature, continues to feel uncomfortable and maladjusted at Ole Miss. He's still an immature, lonely young man, and doesn't understand how to address his own problems in a civil manner. In times of stress and anxiety, Michael defaults to one of the two strategies he learned as a young boy: fight or run. In the case of Antonio Turner, he does both.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ As [Denise] had no income except for whatever the government sent her on the first of each month, the children had no money for provisions. They had no food or clothing, except what they could scrounge from churches and the street. Surprisingly often, given the abundance of public housing in Memphis, they had no shelter. When asked what he recalls of his first six years, Michael said, "Going for days having to drink water to get full. Going to other people's houses and asking for something to eat. Sleeping outside. The mosquitoes."

Related Characters: Michael Oher (speaker), Denise Oher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Eleven, we learn more about Michael Oher's rough childhood living in the Memphis inner-city. Michael's biological mother, a woman named Denise, wasn't much of a mother: she was a crack addict, and showed no real affection for Michael or his siblings. Furthermore, Denise didn't do much to take care of her children, and she spent most of her money on drugs. As a result, Michael Oher had to learn to fend for himself—scrounging for food and desperately hunting for shelter.

The passage sheds new light on Michael's behavior. In part, Michael was quiet and lonely during his early time at Briarcrest because he simply didn't fit in with the other students—his life experiences were completely different from those of his classmates. The passage also confirms that Leigh Anne is, in many ways, more of a mother to Michael than Michael's own biological parent—she provides Michael the emotional support that Michael's biological mother doesn't.

❝ But Big Zach's girlfriend had already given birth to their first child. She didn't want to go to Florida State, and the truth was he didn't really feel like doing his schoolwork or making his grades. Surrounded by friends who told him that he'd be wasting his time to even try college, he quit. He never even finished high school.

Related Characters: Zachary Bright

Related Themes:

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

In this heartbreaking passage, we learn about a friend of Michael Oher named Zachary Bright, nicknamed Big Zach. Big Zach excelled at football, and could have attended a good college on a sports scholarship. However, partly because his peers pressured him to stay, partly because he wanted to take care of his girlfriend and kid, and partly because he was feeling unmotivated, Zach chose not to accept the scholarship.

The passage is tragic because, by accepting a football scholarship, Zach could have found a way to get out of the inner-city and build a better life for himself. With a college degree he could have gotten a good job, or even played in the NFL. Peer pressure and the more abstract, driving force of momentum can be powerful deterrents to success, reminding us that Michael succeeds not only because of his talent as a football player, but because of his determination and resolve—and his good luck in meeting the supportive Tuohys, of course.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ And, after a long round of fulsome apologies and ten hours of community service, Michael was restored to his former status of model citizen—and the incident never even hit the campus newspaper. It just went away, the way it would have gone away for some well-to-do white kid. Of course, lessons were learned and points of view exchanged. Coach O, for instance, pulled Michael into his office to discuss The Responsibilities of Being Michael Oher. Rather dramatically, Coach O extracted from his desk a thick folder stuffed with newspaper clippings, and dropped it with a thud. "Dajus da crap dey wrotebout me last sittee days!" he boomed. (That's just the crap they wrote about me in the last sixty days!) He went on to lecture Michael on the burdens of conspicuous success. "Let me tell you something, son," he concluded (in translation). "It is lonely at the top."

Related Characters: Ed Orgeron (speaker), Michael Oher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

Here Michael faces the consequences of beating up another student, and accidentally hurting a child—but the only problem is, there aren't any real consequences to speak of. Michael does some minimal community service, and that's

that. Michael's almost total lack of discipline for his actions (and, to be clear, he deserves some kind of punishment for beating up another kid) reflects his new status as an elite football player. If Michael were still living in the inner-city, by contrast, it's not hard to imagine a racist criminal justice system sentencing him to years in prison for the same offense.

As Lewis describes it, Michael gets a slap on the wrist for his actions, the same punishment that a "well-to-do white kid" would receive. However, Michael's avoidance of punishment is still unfair and enabling, just as it would be for any "well-to-do white kid." Consider the way Orgeron excuses Michael's behavior with the vague advice of "It is lonely at the top"—as if Michael, the guy who beat up his teammate, is the real victim of the incident. College athletic programs have gotten a lot of criticism for producing entitled young men who think the world revolves around them—and with enablers like Orgeron in charge, it's not hard to see why.

❝ Then and there Leigh Anne made a decision: she wasn't finished. "I want a *building*," she said. "We're going to open a foundation that's only going to help out kids with athletic ability who don't have the academics to go to college. Screw the NCAA. I don't care what people say. I don't care if they say we're only interested in them because they're good at sports. Sports is all we know about. And there are *hundreds* of kids in Memphis alone with this story."

Related Characters: Leigh Anne Tuohy (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 323-324

Explanation and Analysis

After Michael Oher goes to school at the University of Mississippi, Leigh Anne Tuohy and her husband come under criticism for allegedly manipulating Michael into attending their *alma mater*; there are even some who say that Leigh Anne and Sean adopted Michael entirely because they wanted to recruit a good athlete for their college. But at least as Lewis portrays the story, such an accusation appears entirely false. Leigh Anne is seemingly motivated by genuine love and compassion for Michael, and for other impoverished Memphis youths as well. And in this passage, we see the full extent of Leigh Anne's generosity: she wants to open a center to help talented inner-city athletes bring up their grades, so that they can go to college too.

Leigh Anne is single-minded in her quest to help the unfortunate. She acknowledges that some people might say there are better ways for her to spend her money than on a sports foundation—however, she insists, "sports is all we know," perhaps suggesting that sports, regardless of whether it's truly important or not, represent a subject that Leigh Anne and her husband know a lot about, and therefore are an excellent way for them to give to charity. In all, the passage is exemplary of what makes Leigh Anne such a compelling character: while some aspects of her character might be distasteful or annoying to people (her Republican beliefs, her Christianity, her love for sports), it's hard to argue that she's an exceptionally moral woman who feels a genuine sense of duty to help others, and actually puts her beliefs into action.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: BACK STORY

In 1985, in one of the most famous football moments of all time, Joe Theismann, the Washington Redskins quarterback, faced off against the New York Giants. Theismann passed the ball to his running back, John Riggins, and then waiting for Riggins to pass the ball back, confusing the Giants' offense. In the four seconds it took for the Giants' player Harry Carson to run toward Riggins, Carson realized that Theismann, not Riggins, had the ball—as a result, he ran for Theismann. Theismann quickly stepped out of Carson's way, at which point he could no longer see Carson at all.

Joe Theismann's 1985 game has become a notorious example of the importance of good quarterback protection. As such, it's often treated as a milestone in the history of football—after which, football coaches increasingly recognized the importance of protecting the quarterback from sacks. The passage also introduces the concept of the "blind side"—the area of the field the quarterback can't see when he turns to throw the football.

That year, the Giants had one of the most feared players in the NFL, a tackle named Lawrence Taylor. In 1981, his rookie year, Taylor proved himself to be adept at "sacks"—i.e., tackling the quarterback behind the line of scrimmage before he passes the ball. Taylor was so talented at sacking that because of him the NFL began keeping sack records for the first time in its history. All by himself, Taylor changed the game of football—before long, he'd become so admired and feared that he could feel the opposing team glancing at him nervously between plays.

Lawrence Taylor played the critical role in the 1985 Theismann injury. More generally, Taylor's aggressive sacking encouraged football coaches to focus more on protecting their quarterbacks, thereby giving them an extra fraction of a second in which to throw the ball.

Why was Taylor unique in the NFL? To begin with, he was exceptionally fast and big. Second, Taylor—unlike many professional athletes—was genuinely concerned with winning, rather than simply keeping his high paycheck. Taylor was also headstrong and reckless—midway through his career, he came a cocaine addict—but this made him a great player.

From early on, the book emphasizes the importance of a competitive, aggressive personality in the game of football. Taylor is, in many ways, the ideal football player—big, fast, and willing to win at all costs.

Lewis returns to where we were at the beginning of the chapter: the 1985 Redskins-Giants game. By this point, teams had learned to line up in special ways just to deal with Lawrence Taylor. Nevertheless, Taylor sprinted past the blockers and tackled Theismann. For most quarterbacks, Theismann included, their left side is the **blind side**, since turning to throw the football blocks their view. That night, Taylor tackled Theismann from his blind side, ending Theismann's football career. Taylor broke Theismann's leg, essentially pinning it to the ground.

Taylor's sack of Joe Theismann ended Theismann's impressive NFL career and, furthermore, proved to an entire generation of coaches and team managers that it paid to have strong defense for a quarterback's blind side. Had there been a strong left tackle to push back against Lawrence Taylor, Theismann might have continued playing for many more years.

The obvious question, following Theismann's legendary **injury**, is: who was supposed to stop Lawrence Taylor from getting to Theismann? When interviewed later, Theismann said that Joe Jacoby, the Redskins left tackle, was defending him that night. Joe Jacoby, a big, 300-pound player, was one of the best linemen of his era. However, at the time, linemen weren't a highly valued part of the game—everybody knew they were important, but nobody could agree why. In any event—and contrary to what Theismann thought—Jacoby wasn't even playing in the game; he'd been subbed out earlier.

Lewis emphasizes that Joe Theismann was injured because there wasn't a big, quick left tackle to protect him from Lawrence Taylor—Joe Jacoby, the closest thing the Redskins had to such a player, was out of the game. Also the fact that Theismann didn't even realize that Jacoby was out of the game illustrates a) the low importance that people attached to left tackles in the eighties and b) an overall lack of strategy and organization in the Redskins.

With Jacoby out of the game, the lineman who was supposed to protect Theismann from Taylor was named Russ Grimm. Grimm was smaller than Jacoby, so the coaches assigned another player, the tight end Don Warren, to help Grimm. If Taylor moved on the inside toward Theismann, he was Grimm's responsibility; if he moved on the outside, it was up to Warren to stop him. But during the play, Taylor went outside and raced past Warren *and* Grimm. When Taylor tackled Theismann, there was a sound like a gunshot; the sound of **Theismann's right leg breaking**.

In the era before left tackles were big and unstoppable, coaches had to compensate for their players' size by assigning multiple players to defend against sackers like Lawrence Taylor. However, on the night of the Giants-Redskins game, Taylor avoided both of the linemen who'd been assigned to guard him, suggesting the futility of the coaches' approach.

A study later determined that 77 percent of broken bone injuries in NFL games, including Theismann's, occur during passing plays. Taylor had broken players' legs before. However, on the night he hurt Theismann, he seemed frightened by what he'd just done—indeed, when he leapt back, he clutched his own leg. Lewis says it was the "only known instance of Lawrence Taylor imagining himself into the skin of a quarterback he had knocked from a game."

Even Lawrence Taylor is disturbed by what he's done to Theismann. That a hardened, experienced NFL player would be so repulsed by his own actions suggests the severity of Theismann's injury and, perhaps, a fundamental problem with the strategy of the game—or even the game itself, though Lewis never questions the ethics of people injuring each other for the entertainment of others.

CHAPTER 2: THE MARKET FOR FOOTBALL PLAYERS

It is March 2004, and Tom Lemming, a famous football scout, has just received a tape. Lemming, who's discovered all kinds of football legends, receives thousands of tapes from aspiring players who want to impress him. The latest tape he's received is from Michael Oher, who plays for a small private school, Briarcrest, which has no real history of producing football talent. Nobody in Memphis football seems to have heard of Oher. Based on the tape, however, Lemming sees that Oher is big and fast, comparable with NFL athletes he's discovered in the past.

From the moment he's introduced in The Blind Side, *it's clear that Michael Oher is something special: he's so big and so fast—or at least appears to be on video—that he catches the eye of one of the most important football scouts in the country.*

Tom Lemming walks into the football meeting room at the University of Memphis, and waits to meet Michael Oher—meanwhile, "the ghost of Lawrence Taylor" is waiting. Taylor's legendary performances in the NFL in the 1980s changed football, leading to a spike in salaries for players on the quarterback's **blind side**. Fifteen years ago, it would have been strange to think that certain linemen would be paid more highly than others. But now, the blind-side lineman, usually the left tackle, is often the highest paid.

Michael Oher's success as a football player reflects the legacy of Lawrence Taylor in the sense that, had Taylor not created a demand for big, sturdy left tackles, Oher's skillset wouldn't have been so highly valued in NFL games. Nowadays, coaches recognize the importance of hiring left tackles like Oher to protect against metaphorical descendants of Taylor.

In 1978, Tom Lemming began searching America for the best football talent. At the time, the idea of a single scout traveling the country for high school football was unheard of, but soon, Lemming had a devoted following—he was, in effect, the only national scout in high school football. Division I coaches would beg Lemming for tips about prospective players, and many sports fans subscribed to his newsletter. By the nineties, Lemming was no longer traveling the country as much—coaches sent him videotapes of their players. He'd acquired a reputation for being very accurate with his predictions of who would and wouldn't make it to the NFL.

In this section, we get a sense for the big, booming industry surrounding the game of football. Football consists of much more than just an audience watching the game—behind the scenes, there's an elaborate economic system whose sole purpose is the acquiring and trading of talented prospective players. Thus, coaches rely on people like Lemming to decide which players are most talented and most worthy of joining their programs.

Lemming was particularly fond of fast, violent pass rushers, many of whom wound up playing in the NFL. He also supported especially big linemen, with a lot of girth in the lower body (which made it harder for Lawrence Taylor-types to run past him). Lemming also knew that left tackles had to be fast, so that they could keep up with the offense.

The new demand for big left tackles creates a demand for a certain body type, which wasn't as highly valued in previous decades. Large linemen with girth below the waist are suddenly worth more, and Lemming is critical in bringing coaches' attention to high school players whose bodies fit the type.

At the time, football was becoming a bigger industry than ever before. Good quarterbacks, even rookies, regularly commanded salaries in the tens of millions, paid out over the course of seven years. As a result, it became especially important to protect quarterbacks; thus, left tackles commanded high salaries, too. But Lemming wants to meet Michael Oher in person, because he knows that sometimes videotapes can be deceptive. Furthermore, he recognizes that football is a team sport, meaning that players with poor character will never be great. Football often attracts big, aggressive people—in many ways, the people who were most likely to get into trouble outside the game.

With tens of millions of people watching football every year, football is a bona fide industry. As in any industry, businesspeople want to protect their assets. Therefore, they spend millions of dollars on talented left tackles who can protect the most important asset of all, the quarterback. But there's more to being a great football player than body type: football favors certain personalities, in particular those who, like Lawrence Taylor, are highly aggressive.

When he first meets Michael Oher at the University of Memphis, Lemming realizes that Michael is so big he can barely fit through the door. He has the perfect body for a left tackle. Lemming asks Michael questions, but Michael doesn't say anything; he just shrugs and refuses to speak. Not once in Lemming's quarter-century career has a player refused to talk to him. Lemming is confused—he can't tell if Michael is aloof, rude, shy, or something else. It never occurs to Lemming that Michael doesn't say anything to him because he has no idea who Lemming is, has never thought of himself as a football player, and has never even played left tackle.

Michael Oher has the perfect body for a left tackle, but it's not entirely clear if he has the temperament for NFL play—ideally, he should be aggressive and ambitious. Michael Oher seems so unambitious (or perhaps just uninformed about football) that he has no idea who Tom Lemming is, or whether he himself would made a good football player. This is just the first of many unlikely things about the life of Michael Oher.

CHAPTER 3: CROSSING THE LINE

One day in 2002, a man named Big Tony, accompanied by two teenagers, drives from the west side of Memphis to the east—in essence, from the heavily African-American part to the mostly white area. Big Tony's real name is Tony Henderson. When his beloved mother died in 2002, she begged Tony to take his own son, Steven, out of west Memphis and give him a Christian education, so that he could become a preacher. Tony is trying to comply with his mother's wishes and ensure that Steven, a bright young student, goes to a Christian school.

Big Tony is a determined man who wants to give his son the education he deserves, even if it means breaking the de facto *color barrier that exists in Memphis society. Even in the 21st century, major American cities like Memphis are still, in effect, racially segregated.*

Big Tony and Steven lived in a house in west Memphis, where a boy named Michael Oher, nicknamed Big Mike, would sometimes crash. Michael had just finished ninth grade, and Tony guessed that he wouldn't be returning for the tenth. Tony suspected that Michael was going to drop out of high school—in which case he stood a high chance of getting involved in drugs and/or going to jail. So Tony decided to take both Michael and his own son, Steven, to the same Christian academy: Briarcrest. Briarcrest is a *de facto* white school—very, very few of its students are black. However, Big Tony decides to try to enroll Michael and Steven.

In some ways, Big Tony is the person most responsible for bringing about Michael Oher's later success—had he not enrolled Michael in Briarcrest, Michael probably would never have become a great football player. Some critics have attacked The Blind Side *for marginalizing Big Tony's role in Michael's life, and even accused the book of "whitewashing" Michael's rise to success—i.e., focusing too exclusively on Tuohys, the white family that adopted him.*

The head coach for Briarcrest, Hugh Freeze, meets with Big Tony. Freeze is a deeply religious man, a successful football coach, and a successful girls' basketball coach, too. He listens as Big Tony tells him about his son, Steven—an honor student—and claims that he'll find a way to pay Steven's way through school if financial aid doesn't cover it. Big Tony introduces Freeze to Steven and Michael, and suggests that they might be able to play on the football team. Freeze is amazed by Michael—he's never seen someone so big. After laying eyes on Michael, Freeze begins to consider enrolling Michael and Steven in Briarcrest.

Another important element of life in the Briarcrest community is Christianity. Many of the characters in The Blind Side *are fiercely Christian, and sincerely believe that it's their duty to help out the needy in any way they can. However, notice that Freeze isn't sold on admitting Steven and Michael until he lays eyes on Michael and realizes that Michael could be a major asset for the football team—Freeze's interest in winning games seems stronger than his sense of Christian duty.*

A few days later, Big Tony delivers Steven and Michael's transcripts to Briarcrest. Steven is a great student, and he's accepted on scholarship without further question. Michael, on the other hand, is a poor student—however, he's clearly going to be a great athlete. Hugh Freeze passes Michael's transcript on to the school principal, Steve Simpson. Simpson is incredulous: Michael has an IQ of 80, with an "ability to learn" in the sixth percentile. Michael has been advancing from grade to grade, but mostly because his teachers don't want to deal with him again. Michael has perhaps the least impressive academic record of any private school applicant Simpson has ever seen. However, Hugh Freeze has already phoned the Briarcrest president, a football fan, and told him about Michael's (presumed) talent, and the president has encouraged Simpson to accept Michael. Simpson, who hasn't been the Briarcrest principal for long, reluctantly decides to admit Michael, on the condition that he take a home study program for one semester.

Freeze is clearly more interested in Michael's football abilities than his academics. Furthermore, it's clear that, at Briarcrest, being good at football is more than just another extracurricular activity—in some ways, it's more important than being a good student. Freeze and the Briarcrest president have some reservations about admitting a student who, the tests would suggest, has severe learning disabilities, but they have no reservations about admitting someone who can help the Briarcrest football team win some games. However, the Briarcrest administration at least tries to ensure that Michael will be prepared for his classes by asking Michael to take home study courses.

Two months later, Simpson gets a call from Big Tony. Michael, Tony explains, has been trying to study for the home study program, without success. Now, it's too late for Michael to enroll in public school. Simpson realizes that, in trying to be generous to Michael, he's barred him from getting any education at all. Feeling sympathetic, he admits Michael, but warns Tony that Michael won't play sports until he raises his grades.

Now Michael's only options are attending Briarcrest or not going to school at all. The fact that Simpson won't let Michael play sports right away suggests that although football culture is strong at Briarcrest, some faculty there still believe that the purpose of school is to learn, not to play sports.

Michael Oher enrolls in Briarcrest's special needs program. The teacher, a woman named Jennifer Graves, is unsure how to teach Michael—he never talks. She also realizes that he's never seen a Bible, and that English is "almost like a second language" to him. After noticing that Michael doesn't say hello to anyone, Graves encourages him to be friendly with children, or else he'll scare them. Later on, she notices him smiling and shaking hands with a group of small kids.

From the beginning of his time at Briarcrest, Michael Oher feels like an outsider. Because he's spent his entire life around an impoverished, predominately black inner-city population, he has no experience with the wealthy white students at Briarcrest. However, the passage also suggests that Michael is a kind, gentle kid, even if he doesn't always know how to express his feelings.

Within a few weeks, several teachers have recommended that Michael leave Briarcrest—he's clearly not ready for classes. Even in his weightlifting class, he declines to change into his uniform—all day long, he's passive. However, Michael's biology teacher takes it upon herself to go through Michael's test with him; afterwards, she realizes that, even though he's quiet, he knows some of the class material.

Michael is smarter than his tests would suggest—his problem isn't that his brain doesn't work, but rather that he shows no interest in doing anything. As a child, he's been forced to fend for himself, and has refrained from forming friendships with anyone. As a result, he has no idea how to act at Briarcrest.

After school, Michael Oher sits in the stands and watches basketball practice. The basketball coach, Sean Tuohy, notices Michael. Sean is a self-made millionaire, but unlike most rich people in Memphis, he doesn't have much respect for tradition and decorum; furthermore, he's uncommonly kind and conciliatory to black Briarcrest students. Once, he brings the entire Briarcrest track team—mostly black students—to the local country club, and lets them cheer for Briarcrest students in a tennis tournament (typically, you're not supposed to make any noise while watching tennis).

Sean Tuohy is one of the key characters in the book: in particular, he's sympathetic to Michael Oher, and helps him out in increasingly important ways. Unlike many of his colleagues at Briarcrest, Sean is a wealthy white man who doesn't ignore or condescend to impoverished black people. Sean seems to empathize with the experience of feeling excluded, which is why he invites his predominately black track team to a country club (an institution that, historically, is notorious for excluding non-white people).

Sean sympathizes with black students at Briarcrest, partly because they tend to be the poorest students—growing up, Sean was usually the poorest child in school. He played basketball on scholarship at the University of Mississippi, AKA Ole Miss, where he set many records and led the team to its only championship. Sean loved basketball, but he hated the powerlessness of having to play to pay his way through college. After graduating, he turned down an NBA draft to become a businessman. A decade later, he owned a chain of fast food restaurants. Since the restaurants ran themselves, Sean became a basketball coach for Briarcrest.

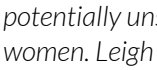
Sean—much like Michael Oher, as we learn later—was a self-made millionaire who parlayed his athletic ability into a vast fortune. The passage suggests that Sean's drive and ambition—qualities he'd honed as a basketball player—helped him succeed as a businessmen, and, furthermore, that he's sympathetic to people who also have to work hard to support themselves financially from a young age.

One day, during practice, Sean asks Michael Oher what he ate for lunch that day, and asks him if he needs money; Michael says he doesn't. The next day, Sean, recognizing that Michael isn't telling the truth, arranges for Michael to get free lunch. A few months later, Sean and his wife, Leigh Anne, are driving by when they notice Michael sitting outside in the snow, wearing shorts. At Leigh Anne's insistence, Sean stops the car and asks Michael where he's going. Michael admits that he's going to the school gym because it's warm there. Leigh Anne begins to cry when she hears this.

Sean continues to support Michael, even after Michael claims that he doesn't need help. Sean seems to recognize that sometimes people in need don't want to admit that they're in need, whether because of pride, fear, or just shyness. Leigh Anne, like her husband, seems to be a highly compassionate person—she's deeply hurt to learn that Michael is, in effect, homeless, and doesn't have a warm place to stay.

The next day, Leigh Anne picks up Michael from school and takes him to buy a jacket. She's a remarkable woman, not least because although she was "raised to loathe black people," while she was still a young women she rejected such views. Years later, when asked why she was so kind to Michael, she replies, "God gives people money to see how you're going to handle it." While buying a jacket, Leigh Anne asks Michael who takes care of him—Michael won't answer. However, she slowly learns that Michael has never met his father, and that his mother is an alcoholic. To avoid making Michael think that he's accepting charity, Leigh Anne says, "the Briarcrest basketball team needs its players looking spiffy." Not wanting to make Michael uncomfortable by taking him to a place with mostly white clientele, Leigh Anne asks Michael where he buys clothes; he names a crime-ridden place in the Memphis inner-city, and asks Leigh Anne if she's okay going there. Leigh Anne replies, "you're going to take care of me."

Leigh Anne is something of an anomaly in her community. Unlike some other wealthy white conservatives in Tennessee, she seems not to feel uncomfortable around African-Americans. Notice that Leigh Anne takes care not to make Michael feel that he's accepting something for nothing—she claims that she's only helping Michael because she wants the Briarcrest sports teams to look good. She also establishes a symbiotic relationship with Michael, instructing him to protect her while she drives through a neighborhood that's potentially unsafe (or perceived as unsafe) for wealthy white women. Leigh Anne doesn't just provide for Michael's emotional and financial needs; she also takes great care to preserve Michael's dignity.



In the store, Leigh Anne quickly realizes that almost nothing fits Michael—he's too big and tall. As Leigh Anne tries to convince Michael to choose some clothes, everyone stares at them: Michael is, literally, three times Leigh Anne's size. Afterwards, Leigh Anne buys Michael food, and gives him extra food to take home. She drives Michael to a house, which he says is his mother's, and, taking the food and clothing, he says goodbye and leaves. For reasons Leigh Anne can't describe, she finds herself drawn to helping Michael: he's so gentle, in spite of his intimidating appearance.

On the surface, it seems bizarre that Leigh Anne would go out of her way to help Michael Oher—she seems unlike Michael in every way. Indeed, there is something intangible about Leigh Anne's sense of moral duty to Michael. However, it's clear that she feels that her job is to help those who need food, clothing, and shelter. Leigh Anne is especially sympathetic to Michael because she realizes that beneath his tough, stoic exterior, he's a gentle person.

The next day, Leigh Anne devises a way to clothe Michael—get hand-me-downs from NFL athletes—only to learn that nobody in the NFL is as big as Michael. Michael's measurements are so enormous that Patrick Ramsey, her friend from the Washington Redskins, assumes Leigh Anne has gotten the measurements wrong. Ramsey asks Leigh, "Who *is* this kid?"

Leigh Anne has some important connections to professional football players—a sign of high social status. The passage is also an early example of Michael turning NFL players' heads: he's so big that Ramsey seems to recognize that he could be a great player.

CHAPTER 4: THE BLANK SLATE

Hugh Freeze can still remember the moment when he realized that Michael Oher wasn't just big, but also fast: Michael picks up a fifty-pound tackling dummy and pushes it down the field faster than most people can run. After Michael begins playing basketball for Briarcrest, the basketball coach, John Harrington, recognizes that Michael can move faster than athletes half his size. He can also throw a football seventy-five yards and make it look easy.

Michael Oher's talent goes far beyond his physical proportions. He's agile and fast in addition to being so large, which makes him an excellent football player.

In his first semester, Michael makes straight D's, though he's also working with special tutors so that he'll be able to play basketball at the end of the season. The track coach, Coach Boggess, recognizes that Michael has the strength to be a shot putter or a discus thrower. When Michael begins competing in track events, he wins first place, even though his form is poor. Boggess also recognizes that Michael learns fast: he watches his peers' technique carefully and improves his own. Before long, Michael has achieved the longest discus threw in the state of Tennessee in six years. Amazingly, Michael never practices—he's too busy working with tutors. By this time, Michael is earning high D's in class, which convinces his teachers to let him play sports.

One of the most surprising things about Michael Oher's athletic career is that he didn't think of himself primarily as a football player until fairly late in high school. That Michael succeeded at shot put, discus, and other events suggests how talented he was—especially considering that he never practiced. Furthermore, the fact that Michael learned quickly by imitating his teammates suggests that, contrary to what tests have indicated, he's not unintelligent.

In early 2003, as a junior, Michael plays defensive tackle in football games. At first, he's good but not extraordinary—his biggest talent is intimidating the other team. He seems passive and confused during the games, however. Coach Freeze believes that Michael is basically "just a sweet kid"—rarely a good quality for football players. During one game, Michael has a bad accident that leaves his hand cut to the bone; however, he refuses to open his hand. While the men try to reason with Michael, Leigh Anne, who's watching the game, is able to convince him to open it. In the hospital for his injury, Michael is terrified. The doctors try to calm him down by letting him call someone—and he chooses to call Leigh Anne. Over the phone, Leigh Anne convinces Michael to cooperate with the doctors, assuring him that if he doesn't he'll lose his hand to gangrene.

Michael isn't innately good at football, because football isn't purely a game of size and strength. A good football player, as Tom Lemming has pointed out, must be aggressive and active, not just strong. All the evidence points to Michael being cautious and timid—when he hurts himself, he feels afraid even to open his hand. Michael has gotten so accustomed to bottling up his pain that he can't imagine cooperating with doctors to make the pain go away. However, he follows Leigh Anne's directions, reminding us of the special bond between Michael and Leigh Anne.

In spite of his difficulties on the field, Michael Oher is adjusting to his new life, thanks largely to the help of Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy. The Tuohys, especially Leigh Anne, gave Michael emotional support; moreover, they pay for his transportation, clothes, and food. At first, Michael sleeps on Big Tony's floor; later on, however, he sleeps on the Tuohys' sofa.

Michael becomes a more important part of the Tuohys' life, and vice versa. The book doesn't provide much of an explanation for why the Tuohys are so generous to Michael, beyond the facts that Sean empathizes with Michael's poverty, and both he and Leigh Anne are uniquely compassionate people.

A turning point for Michael comes in the winter of 2003. Michael and the rest of the Briarcrest basketball team are playing in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina—this was Michael's first time on a plane. Generally, Michael plays about half the time—he isn't good on defense. In Myrtle Beach, however, he steps up after people in the crowd call him names like "Black Bear" and "Nigger." Michael reacts angrily and then goes on to score 27 points, winning the game against a team that had been expected to beat Briarcrest.

Although Michael seems gentle most of the time, he has an aggressive, competitive streak, particularly when other people antagonize him. The racism and bullying that Michael endures in this scene reflects the broader racism and discrimination in Tennessee society, with which Michael contends throughout the book.

When the team flies back from Myrtle Beach in triumph, most of the players have parents to meet them at the airport. Big Tony's girlfriend comes to pick up Michael, but Michael refuses to go with her—he tells Coach Harrington that she'd called him a freeloader and said that he was stupid. At Michael's insistence, Harrington drives Michael to the house where, Michael claims, his mother lives. The house looks deserted, however. The next day, Harrington tells Sean Tuohy about the situation, and Sean realizes he needs to look into it.

During Michael's time playing football for Briarcrest, the coaches, the other players, and even the Tuohy family knows very little about Michael's family situation, and seems to understand that it's not their place to ask. Indeed, The Blind Side *doesn't give a thorough account of Michael's early life until the penultimate chapter. For now, it's clear to the coaches that something isn't right with Michael's family—but they're not sure what.*

For the next few months, Michael stays with various teammates' families. One night, after a track meet, Leigh Anne drives Michael, at Michael's request, to a trailer in Mississippi, where Michael says he sometimes sleeps on an inflatable mattress. Leigh Anne tells Michael, "That's it … you're moving in with me."

The passage portrays Leigh Anne's decision to let Michael live at her house permanently as a sudden, impulsive decision. (In all likelihood, though, the Tuohys took slightly more time to decide to house Michael—perhaps this scene is an example of Lewis taking some artistic license.)

Michael Oher sleeps on a futon in the Tuohys' house (he's so big he barely fits on the couch). He bonds with Sean Junior, the Tuohys' young son—they play video games for hours at a time. Leigh Anne gives Michael some of the "rules" of living with her: he has to visit his mother at times, and he's welcome to bring friends from his own neighborhood. Sean and Leigh Anne decide that they won't ask many questions about Michael's family—that will be done on a "need to know" basis. Leigh Anne senses that Michael has blocked out most of his childhood.

Michael quickly bonds with the other Tuohys—perhaps it's a sign of his gentleness that he gets along especially well with Sean Junior, the youngest Tuohy child. Notice also that Leigh Anne insists that Michael stay in contact with his mother—she's taking care of Michael, but she seems not to think of herself as his parent, at least not yet. Leigh Anne respects Michael's right to privacy, refusing to ask too many questions about his past.

Early on in his time living with the Tuohys, Michael is a hoarder. He's had to survive from day to day for so long that his first instinct is to store as much food as possible. He's also a neat freak, which pleases Leigh Anne greatly. Sean notes, "It was like God made a child just for us: sports for me, neat for Leigh Anne."

Michael's way of life up until now has been totally foreign to the Tuohys, who don't want for anything materially. Michael has lived in squalid conditions for so many years that the concept of having extra food is utterly strange to him.

Sean begins writing letters to Division II coaches, imagining that Michael Oher could play basketball in college. Then, Freeze gets word that a football scout, Tom Lemming, is coming to Memphis; he arranges for Michael to meet with him. But Michael doesn't answer any of Lemming's questions, and doesn't even fill out the forms he's given. In spite of his odd meeting with Michael, Tom Lemming sends a report to more than one hundred Division I college football coaches, saying that Michael could be the best left tackle in the country.

Even at this point in the book, Sean Tuohy doesn't realize that Michael is a great football player (which, in retrospect, suggests that the NCAA's theory that he adopted Michael to become a star Ole Miss athlete is nonsensical). We come full-circle, back to where we were in Chapter Two—but even now, after becoming more comfortable with Briarcrest athletics, Michael doesn't think of himself as a football player.

Meanwhile, Michael Oher begins playing more football for Briarcrest. His coaches, Hugh Freeze and Tim Long (a former lineman for the Minnesota Vikings), are amazed by his size. Sean Tuohy also coaches for the team. On the first day of spring practice, Tuohy, Freeze, and Long show up and find a crowd of Division I football coaches who've come to watch Michael. Freeze is confused—Michael has barely played football.

In spite of the fact that Michael has little to no experience with the game of football, college coaches are well aware of his potential talents. Michael's body type makes him a natural lineman, independent of his skills as a player (although Michael's speed and agility also make him a prized asset for a football team).

The coaches proceed with some drills. First up is Michael Oher on the board drill—i.e., the drill that involves trying to stay on a board while the lineman tries to push you off. Michael does so well in the board drill, pushing the 270-pound defensive lineman off the edge in seconds—that a coach from Clemson College tells Sean that, if Michael wants a full scholarship to Clemson, it's his. After that, big-time college coaches show up regularly to practices. Tennessee's single most famous football coach, Phil Fulmer from the University of Tennessee, tells Tim Long that Michael is the best in the country. Although recruiters aren't allowed to speak directly to Michael, they send Sean scholarship offers for Michael.

Michael quickly acquires a reputation as a great football player. He's not an aggressive person, but he's so big and strong that he can take on virtually any opponent, even a big, 270-pound lineman. As a result, college coaches take notice.

Michael Oher continues dominating practices, but he remains a mystery. One day, he falls to his knees in the middle of practice, and tells Sean, "My dad died." Just before practice, Sean learns, Big Tony had called Michael and told him that his father had been murdered in the west side of Memphis, a full three months ago. Michael never says another word about his father—he doesn't even skip practice that day.

Michael's family situation remains unclear: clearly he seems not to have been very close to his father, since he wasn't told about his father's death for three months. Notice also that Big Tony has barely been mentioned since Chapter Three, perhaps implying that he was never really a committed full-time guardian for Michael.

Meanwhile, it's becoming clear to Michael's coaches that Michael might have a real future in professional football. Michael isn't just big—he's quick, making him an excellent NFL prospect. Although Freeze plays Michael as a right tackle at first, he quickly switches Michael to left tackle, where he'll be more useful.

Michael's combination of size and speed make him a natural left tackle.

CHAPTER 5: DEATH OF A LINEMAN

The reason Michael Oher was so interesting to college football coaches was that he fit the idea of a left tackle perfectly: big and quick. But why had left tackles suddenly become so important to the game?

In this chapter, Lewis looks at some of the recent history of professional football in order to understand the recent resurgence of interest in the left tackle position.

To answer this question, Lewis goes back to December 28, 1975, in the final minutes of a game between the Cincinnati Bengals and the Oakland Raiders. The Bengals quarterback Kenny Anderson has the ball; he's about to pass to his teammate when the Raiders pass rusher, Ted Hendricks, tackles him, effectively winning the game for the Raiders. Next, Lewis skips ahead to January 3, 1982. This time, the San Francisco 49ers are facing off against the New York Giants. The Giants rookie, Lawrence Taylor, poses a big threat to the 49ers' chances, but the 49ers coach, Bill Walsh, who was also an assistant coach for the Bengals, has an idea for how to beat Taylor.

The Bengals-Raiders 1975 game echoes the Theismann injury discussed in Chapter One. Although Anderson's career doesn't end, the opponent pass rusher tackles him before he can throw the ball, just like Theismann. In 1982, it remains to be seen if professional football coaches like Bill Walsh have found a reliable way of protecting their quarterbacks from rushers like Ted Hendricks and Lawrence Taylor.

Bill Walsh was an intelligent, creative football coach. He played college football and later became an assistant coach for the Bengals. However, his players weren't particularly good. Walsh adjusted his strategy to his players' limitations, showing them how to move horizontally and pass strategically, cutting down on the risk of interception. Largely as a result of Walsh's ingenuity, the Bengals quarterback, Virgil Carter, led the league in completion percentage, and the Bengals won their division.

Bill Walsh is one of the most famous coaches in NFL history: he used his inventiveness and ingenuity to turn multiple NFL teams from mediocre to great. Walsh's success as a coach proves that football teams succeed not just because they're composed of big, strong guys, but also because those players know how to work together and play strategically.

After being passed over for head coach for the Bengals, Bill Walsh left to coach for the 49ers. With the 49ers, Walsh transformed the quarterback, Steve Deberg, from a mediocre thrower into one of the best in NFL history. In 1980, however, Walsh replaced Deberg with Joe Montana, who proceeded to lead the NFL in completion percentage, and become, by many estimates, the single best quarterback in NFL history.

Bill Walsh made a name for himself on the Bengals, and then proceeded to make an even bigger name for himself with the 49ers. Joe Montana succeeded while playing with the 49ers not just because of his innate talent, but because Walsh found ways to optimize Montana's abilities.

By the late eighties, Walsh was known for being a brilliant coach, who applied tactical strategies and mathematical efficiency to the game. His success changed football: after Walsh, coaches began focusing more on passes than runs. Between the sixties and the eighties, the average pass in an NFL game yielded an increasing distance, suggesting that quarterbacks were getting better at passing. By the 2000s, quarterbacks completed sixty percent of their throws, versus less than fifty percent in the sixties. The rise of the quarterback and the "pass game," Lewis says, was critical to the success of Michael Oher.

Walsh proved so influential that other coaches tried to replicate his success by focusing on throwing the ball rather than running it. The emphasis on pass games is crucial to the success of Michael Oher because without a high demand for quarterback passes, there wouldn't be a high demand for big left tackles to defend the quarterback.

Back on January 3, 1982, Bill Walsh prepares for the Giants game. At this time, Walsh has already used some creative passing strategies with his quarterbacks. If Walsh represents the "brains" approach to coaching football, his opponent coach, Bill Parcells of the Giants, represents the "brawn" approach. Parcells uses his secret weapon, Lawrence Taylor, to decimate the other team. At times Taylor doesn't follow Parcells's directions, but he performs well on the field anyway.

We're back where we started: 1982. The Giants-49ers game is, in many ways, a test of two different approaches to football: the aggressive, brawny approach, and the agile, strategic approach. Parcells had a strong record as a coach, in part because he thought that the key to winning football was a big, fast player like Lawrence Taylor.

When facing Taylor, Walsh has a problem: get Joe Montana to throw a pass a split-second quicker than usual, before he's tackled. His left tackle, Dan Audick, is 250 pounds and poorly equipped to deal with Lawrence Taylor. Walsh had a better lineman, Ron Singleton, but he dismissed Singleton for demanding more money. Walsh decides to use a left guard named John Ayers for the Giants game.

Walsh tries to defend his quarterback from Taylor with the help of the left guard, John Ayers. Ayers was an effective left guard, but in the future, Walsh made a point of drafting left tackles who were much bigger, and better at their jobs, than Walsh.

During the January 3 game, John Ayers has one job: protect Joe Montana from Lawrence Taylor. Ayers weighs 270 pounds, and every season he trains by pulling a tractor tire across the field. Ayers successfully stops Taylor from getting to Montana; largely as a result of this, the 49ers win. Although Bill Parcells later finds a way to beat Ayers's strategy by blitzing the line, on January 3, brawn loses decisively to brains. After the game Walsh decides, first, that he needs to get his own version of Lawrence Taylor. Second, he decides that he'll use his first draft pick next year to get a good left tackle to protect his quarterback.

Ayers successfully protects Joe Montana from Lawrence Taylor, and Walsh's strategic approach to the game of football emerges victorious. Partly as a result, for the next twenty years football coaches imitate Walsh's strategies, stressing the importance of passes and quarterback protection. By using his first draft pick to recruit a big left tackle, Walsh further broadcast his belief in the importance of protecting the quarterback.

For the rest of the 1980s, John Ayers plays left tackle for the 49ers. At times, he's unable to deal with players like Lawrence Taylor because he's not fast enough; he also has to deal with injuries, and his own aging. By 1987, Walsh pressures Ayers to retire, and in 1995, Ayers dies of cancer. At the funeral, Joe Montana serves as a pallbearer, and a tribute from Bill Walsh is read aloud.

John Ayers performed adequately against Lawrence Taylor, but ultimately he wasn't a strong and fast enough lineman. In the future, football coaches would recruit left tackles who were much bigger and stronger than Ayers.

CHAPTER 6: INVENTING MICHAEL

The year is 2004, the Briarcrest Saints football team is beginning its season, and Michael Oher has spent four months adjusting to the idea that he's a football star. He's received more than a thousand letters from college programs, almost all offering him a scholarship. Tim Long has taught Michael some of the fine points of the game.

Michael Oher is improving at football: with the help of his coaches, he's learned how to use his size and strength optimally. As a result, it's becoming highly likely that he'll play football for a big Division I college.

While college football coaches fall over themselves to court Michael, Leigh Anne and Sean have doubts about Michael's football future. Michael is dependent on Leigh Anne and Sean for food, shelter, and emotional support, and he seems quiet and passive. He also doesn't play football aggressively because he's not an aggressive person. This changes after Michael plays in a game against Munford, another Tennessee school, and Michael faces off against a Munford player who mocks Michael for his size. Over the course of the game, Michael becomes increasingly angry with his opponent, who continues mocking him relentlessly. During one play, Michael lifts the 220-pound Munford player off the ground—a legal block—and carries him sixty yards backwards in mere seconds. Michael is calm even after the coach penalizes him, absurdly, for "excessive blocking." Tim Long is so impressed with Michael that he has to fight the temptation to giggle. It occurs to Sean that "there might be a fire in this belly after all."

A great football player must be aggressive and ambitious, not just big. One sign that Michael might have the personality, not just the body, for the NFL comes when he faces off against Munford. Michael channels his obvious anger into the game of football, even while remaining calm and orderly off the field. The fact that the referee penalizes Michael for "excessive blocking" (a made-up penalty) doesn't prove that Michael was breaking the rules—rather it shows that Michael is so far beyond the other players in the game that it's just easier for the referee to assume that he's cheating.

At school, Collins Tuohy, Leigh Anne and Sean's daughter, notices that Michael is becoming more outgoing—he no longer looks at the floor all the time, and seems to enjoy joking with the other students. Michael asks Leigh Anne to get him a driver's license, and Leigh Anne realizes that Michael doesn't have "any evidence he ever existed." Leigh Anne tries to get Michael a Social Security card, but a man at the Social Security office tells Leigh Anne that there's "no such person as Michael Jerome Oher." The man tries "Michael Jerome Williams" and learns that someone with this name—which Michael claims is his own—has been issued six Social Security cards in the last two years. Reluctantly, the man prints Michael a card. Michael visits his mother and gets his birth certificate, which lists his name as Michael Jerome Williams. Leigh Anne still needs to get proof of address, which means that she's going to need to visit Michael's mother herself.

As Michael becomes a better athlete, he seems to also become more comfortable in his new life with the Tuohys. However, his past remains murky. Leigh Anne realizes that she doesn't even know Michael's real name, which would appear to be "Michael Jerome Williams." It's interesting to consider that, so far, Leigh Anne has refrained from visiting Michael's mother or family. It may be that she just doesn't want to, and would rather Michael forget about his past (and his biological family) and start over new as a Tuohy.

To obtain proof of address, Michael calls his mother in advance, and Leigh Anne drives him to the house where she leaves. Michael's mother, whose name is Denise, is very drunk, and doesn't invite them inside. Michael says nothing to his mother. With Denise's permission, Leigh Anne takes a single electricity bill, then leaves with Michael. On the ride back, neither she nor Michael says anything. Leigh Anne drives Michael to the DMV, where Michael takes his written driver's test.

Denise seems to be a negligent parent who has no particular love for her child. Although Leigh Anne still says that she's not Michael's true mother, it's becoming increasingly clear that she's acting as a mother figure for him, as the person who cares for him and loves him unconditionally. She's the one, after all, who takes Michael to get his license.

While Leigh Anne waits for Michael to take his test, she thinks about the flak she's gotten from her friends about essentially adopting a "huge young black man." Some of her more intolerant friends are skeptical that Michael can behave himself around Leigh Anne's beautiful seventeen-year-old daughter, Collins. Leigh Anne always insists that Michael's relationship with Collins is brotherly, and snaps, "You just need to mind your own business."

Leigh Anne is fiercely loyal to Michael, whom she seems to consider a member of her own family. Leigh Anne's friends' fear that Michael will behave improperly with Collins seems to reflect the old racist trope of black men being unable to control themselves around white women. Thankfully Leigh Anne ignores her friends when they bring this up.

Leigh Anne also thinks about Michael's bad grades: he has a GPA of 1.56, but needs a GPA of 2.65 to play college football. This is a huge problem—even if Michael gets straight A's for the rest of high school, he won't qualify. She spends hours going over Michael's homework assignments with him, but to no avail—he still makes D's. One problem with Michael's schoolwork is that he doesn't tell Leigh Anne he's having trouble learning—he's quiet about his personal life. It's occurred to Leigh Anne that Michael might be gay, and perhaps this is why he's so private. Then Michael appears—he's passed his driving test, meaning that he's become the first person in his family to get a license.

This passage raises a number of questions, some of which Lewis answers later in the book (like how will Michael make the grades to go to college?), some of which he doesn't (Is Michael gay?). It's also one of the only extended passages in the book that's narrated in the third person, strictly from Leigh Anne's perspective, meaning that readers get a better idea of the depth of Leigh Anne's love and concern for Michael. Specifically one gets the sense that Leigh Anne constantly wonders about Michael's upbringing, but also has the decorum not to pepper him with personal questions.

In September 2004, Briarcrest plays against Melrose, another local high school, and loses. After the game, Leigh Anne encourages Hugh Freeze to play Michael more often, and run the ball left instead of right, since Michael is the number one left tackle in the country. Freeze is reluctant to rely so heavily on one player, but Tim Long encourages him to "run Gap"—in other words, favor a play that requires Michael to run down the field and "destroy everything in front of him." In a way, the controversy over how to use Michael during a game reflects a controversy in football in general. At the time, purists argue that football was a game of brute force, in which the strongest players win. Football "liberals" argue that guile and strategy are more important than force. Freeze is a liberal; Tim Long is more of a fundamentalist.

In the 2004 season, Briarcrest's football coaches have to decide how to use Michael Oher to the best of his considerable abilities. For Tim Long, this means running the same unbeatable play again and again, allowing Michael to push aside other players. One important aspect of the coaches' decision-making that the passage doesn't address is the coaches' responsibility to improve their players' talent, not just win the most games. Running "Gap "again and again might be the most successful play, but perhaps it doesn't train the other players as a more tactical, varied style of play would.

On Friday, Briarcrest prepares for a game with Treadwell, with the head coach from LSU, Stacey Searles, in attendance. Freeze decides to take Long's advice and run Gap, again and again, making use of Michael. During the game, Briarcrest players score touchdown after touchdown, largely thanks to Michael's talent. Searles is amazed—he's never seen anyone like Michael. In the end, Briarcrest wins, 59-20. In the next game, Briarcrest faces Carver High, to which it lost last year; Briarcrest wins, again thanks mostly to Michael. By running Gap in game after game, Briarcrest keeps winning.

Briarcrest wins the game because of Michael's size and speed, confirming that he's the most talented player and the likeliest NFL prospect on the team by far. Notice that Freeze's motivation for running Gap in the Treadwell game isn't only to win, but also to impress the LSU coach and give Michael a shot at attending a Division I football college.

Even though Michael is critical to his team's success, he's oddly underappreciated. Even Hugh Freeze doesn't realize that Michael is almost single-handedly winning games until a few games have passed. Michael doesn't run with the ball, but he clears a path for the running back. He's so quick that some referees assume he must be cheating—but in fact, he's just bigger and faster than everyone else.

The left tackle isn't necessarily the most popular, respected position in football—quarterbacks and running backs are usually far more acclaimed. However, Michael is plainly the best football player on his team, to the point where the referees assume that he must be breaking the rules.

Toward the end of the season, other teams come up with a strategy for beating Briarcrest. In the annual game between Briarcrest and its rival, Evangelical Christian School (ECS), ECS's goal is to tackle Michael. The strategy works, and ECS wins. Later in the season, Freeze compensates by stacking the line with extra blockers, protecting the running back while the opposing players concentrate on tackling Michael.

Even though running Gap is perhaps more monotonous and repetitive than the style of play that Hugh Freeze would prefer, Freeze still gets opportunities to think and play strategically: he's forced to modify his strategy in response to other teams' awareness of Michael's prowess on the field.

Briarcrest makes it to the playoffs in December—three games away from the state championships. In the first game, against Harding Academy, the Harding defensive end tries to tackle Michael, but Michael figures out how to keep the defensive end from tackling his knees, and leads his team to a narrow victory. In the next game, against Notre Dame, Briarcrest wins easily. In the state championship, Briarcrest faces ECS for the second time that year. Freeze's counter-strategy for dealing with ECS proves successful, and for most of the game, ECS is forced to play Michael "straight." Briarcrest quickly gains a big lead.

Due to the amount of play he sees in his early days as a high school football player, Michael becomes a much better left tackle. Michael is such an important asset to the Briarcrest team that one of Freeze's main duties as a football coach is to ensure that Michael doesn't get blocked early on in plays. Technically, Michael doesn't score touchdowns for his team, but he's still responsible for many of them.

As the championship game goes on, Hugh Freeze decides that he wants to try more trick plays, instead of running Gap. Freeze organizes a "fumblerooski," a play in which the center gives the ball to the quarterback, who then quickly passes the ball to a fullback, and then pretends to be running with the ball. Strangely, during the play, Michael doesn't move. Later in the game, Michael faces off against a fullback, 165 pounds, named Clarke Norton. By coincidence, Clarke's parents are friends with the Tuohys. When Michael realizes that it's Clarke, he greets Clarke kindly, and then lifts Clarke out of harm's way rather than tackling him. By the end of the game, which Briarcrest wins easily, it's clear that "Michael Oher was the best football player in the state of Tennessee."

As it becomes clear that the Briarcrest team is going to win the championship, Freeze takes advantage of his new freedom and experiments with bold new plays. The fact that Michael doesn't do well in the "fumblerooski" play illustrates some of his limitations as a player—he can be a quick learner, but he doesn't excel at elaborate plays. Michael is unusually gentle for a football player, as evidenced by his choice not to tackle his friend—but Michael still excels on the field in spite of his gentleness, perhaps because left tackle is sometimes a defensive, protective position that appeals to Michael's strong protective instincts.

CHAPTER 7: THE PASTA COACH

At the end of 2004, Leigh Anne and Sean Tuohy become Michael Oher's legal guardians. They send out a Christmas card including Michael, and it never occurs to Leigh Anne that many of her friends will wonder who Michael is. Leigh Anne is a "warrior princess"—fiercely loyal to her family, which now includes Michael. Unlike a lot of talented, ambitious football players, Michael isn't very interested in money—Leigh Anne and Sean take good care of him, and he's going to inherit millions as the child of a successful businessman.

The Tuohys seemingly adopt Michael Oher because they genuinely love him and consider him a part of their family. He's very close with Leigh Anne and Sean Junior, and seems to think of Sean as a father even before Sean becomes his legal guardian. Even though other people consider the Tuohys decision odd, the book presents their decision as the logical next step in their relationship with Michael—for all intents and purposes they've been his guardians for some time now.

As Michael nears the end of high school, he faces great offers from college coaches. Privately, Sean and Leigh Anne want Michael to play for their *alma mater*, the University of Mississippi—"their lives were as intertwined with the place as if they'd founded it." Hugh Freeze, however, pursues talks with the University of Tennessee on Michael's behalf. Michael also attends LSU's summer football camp with Justin Sparks, another talented, rich Briarcrest player. When Sparks wins an elite football scholarship from North Carolina State, Michael begins considering the college.

Although the Tuohys obviously want Michael to play for their alma mater, they don't do too much to influence Michael's decision, at least not right away. Indeed, Michael is clearly considering some other colleges, based on where his friends will be playing football—suggesting that, while he loves the Tuohys, he isn't just choosing whatever college they tell him to choose.

At the same time that Michael is considering his options for college, he is being tutored by a woman named Sue Mitchell, a Mississippi alumna herself. Mitchell tells Michael, half-jokingly, half-seriously, that the University of Tennessee is involved in an experiment to study decomposing human bodies, and buries corpses below the football field.

Sue Mitchell's joke is a good example of the extent to which Michael's parents and other friends influence his decision to choose Ole Miss. Yet while they clearly want Michael to attend their alma mater, and don't always hide how they feel, they're not actively pressuring him to go there.

Meanwhile, local news stations hang on Michael's every word for a hint about where he'll play ball. Michael receives so many calls from coaches that Sean and Hugh Freeze have to designate a special phone-answering time of the week. Michael becomes used to flying in Justin Sparks' family's private jet to play games at different colleges—so much so that, when he finally has to fly in a commercial plane, he can't understand why the trip is taking so long. A Mississippi coach notices, during one of his many visits to Memphis to watch Michael, that Michael is close with Sean Junior; he tells Sean Junior that, if Michael goes to Ole Miss, Sean Junior will get an all-access, round-the-clock pass to the school.

Throughout this chapter, we get a sense for the elaborate lengths to which coaches will go to recruit top athletes, and for the huge sums lavished on the football recruitment process in particular. Coaches are so desperate to recruit Michael that they try to curry favor even with Michael's younger brother, Sean Junior. Notice also that Michael has become so accustomed to his upper-class lifestyle with the Tuohys that he doesn't understand slow commercial flights. Strangely, as the adopted son of wealthy parents, Michael is—at least in some ways—as distanced from a middle-class American frame of reference as he was when he lived in the inner-city.

Leigh Anne is nervous that, if accepted to an elite football college, Michael won't be able to cope with the pressure, or with being so far from the Tuohys. The tragic fact is that Michael hasn't had the life experiences that other high school students take for granted. Leigh Anne takes it upon herself to show Michael how to live life like an adult. She takes him to a restaurant and orders every dish on the menu to show Michael the different foods. In all, Leigh Anne is doing for Michael "what economists had been trying to do, with little success, for less developed countries for the last fifty years." She tries to help Michael adjust to "white Christian entrepreneurial Memphis," teaching him how to buy clothes, score golf, and read a wine list. Leigh Anne also gives Michael a sense of his new social class: she calls poor white people "rednecks." Less than two years after meeting the Tuohys, Michael has begun to fit in with his community. He goes to Grace Evangelical Church every Sunday and improves his grades with Sue Mitchell's help. He adjusts to upper-class Memphis life because he has a family that loves him.

Leigh Anne thinks that it's her duty to teach Michael how to live a mature, adult life—not just play football. However, as the passage shows (whether consciously or not is unclear), Leigh Anne's idea of what constitutes a normal life is extraordinarily out of touch with the way most Americans live. Lewis seems to admire Leigh Anne's devotion to her adopted son and even approve of her methods of helping Michael (hence the comparison with economic development), but the passage also seems to question Leigh Anne's parenting methods, particularly the intolerant way that she looks down on people who are poorer than she. Michael responds to Leigh Anne's encouragement by fitting in with his community. However, the passage might suggest that because he's so loyal to his adopted mother, Michael is becoming spoiled or out of touch with how less prosperous people live.

One day, Leigh Anne gets a call from Collins—there's been an accident. Leigh Anne learns that Michael, while driving Sean Junior out to play basketball, hit another car. She finds Michael in the middle of the accident, sobbing, and tells him, "This could happen to anybody." Then, she sees what Michael's sobbing about: Sean Junior's face is covered in "swollen, oozing flesh." Sean Junior has to go to the hospital, but he's fine, and, much to the doctors' confusion, hasn't even broken one bone. Later, Leigh Anne realizes what happened: during the crash, Michael reached out his arm to stop the air bag from hitting Sean Junior in the face, sustaining a nasty burn in the process. Not coincidentally, Michael scored in the 90th percentile on his career aptitude test in one category: Protective Instincts.

The passage revolves around a driving accident for which Michael is partly to blame. The fact that Leigh Anne could forgive Michael even for accidentally hurting Sean Junior proves the sincerity of her love for her adopted child. (The incident also foreshadows Michael's inadvertent injuring of a young child in Chapter Ten). The passage also confirms Michael's fierce loyalty to his family—he endures a burn to protect his brother from the airbag. This might suggest that the same qualities that make Michael a great left tackle (his job is, in large part, to protect the quarterback) also cause him to develop a close bond with his adopted family.

Shortly after the accident, coaches from three different colleges—LSU, Tennessee, and Mississippi—come to visit Michael in his home. The first coach is Nick Saban, from LSU—a school that Michael considers "a bad place" after spending a night with LSU football stars. Saban comes dressed in an Armani suit, and his manners are impeccable. Saban's pitch is simple: LSU is going to make Michael not just an NFL star but also a college graduate. Michael says nothing—then, he asks one question: "You staying?" Michael's question is a good one, since there have been rumors that Saban was offered an NFL job. Saban laughs and said that he hadn't taken any NFL jobs yet—but three weeks later, he becomes head coach for the Miami Dolphins.

Division I football coaches are so desperate to recruit Michael that they have to "play the politics" in order to convince him to join their program. Saban's expensive suits and charming manners exemplify football recruitment at its smoothest. However, the fact that Saban equivocates about whether or not he'll stay on as an LSU coach might suggest that there's something disingenuous about the coaches' attempts to recruit Michael: the Division I coaches' task isn't simply to make Michael the best offer, but also to bend and twist the truth to make it sound as appealing as possible.

The next coach to visit the house is supposed to be David Cutcliffe of Ole Miss, but Cutcliffe is fired from his job. Phil Fulmer, head coach from the University of Tennessee, moves up his visit and comes to the Tuohy home a few days later—at the exact time when Michael is scheduled to visit Ole Miss. But Fulmer's bus gets delayed, and he begs the Mississippi recruiter to wait half an hour. In the end, Fulmer shows up at the Tuohy house just as Michael is leaving with the Mississippi recruiter.

Phil Fulmer is less organized than Nick Saban, and he misses his chance to swoop in and impress Michael before Michael goes off to visit Ole Miss. The incident further suggests that Michael Oher is becoming increasingly interested in attending the University of Mississippi and less interested in other colleges.

Later, Fulmer manages to visit Michael at Briarcrest. Fulmer is supposed to be giving a talk at the Tennessee high school football awards ceremony, where Michael will be named Player of the Year, and he convinces Michael to let him drive Michael from his house to the ceremony. When Fulmer shows up at the Tuohy house, he tries to ingratiate himself with Collins and Leigh Anne, but he doesn't have Nick Saban's polish. Nevertheless, Fulmer has a big advantage: the coach from Ole Miss has been fired while Nick Saban from LSU has agreed to take a head coaching job in the NFL. At the end of his long visit, Fulmer walks outside with Michael, and Leigh Anne and Sean notice that he and Michael talk for a long time. Fulmer drives away, and Michael comes back inside. Sean demands to know, "Did you commit to Tennessee?" Michael says nothing.

Phil Fulmer's clumsy manners exemplify the importance of polish and public relations in the recruitment process. For all Michael Oher knows, Phil Fulmer could very well be the head of the best football program in America—however, Fulmer's job isn't simply to present Michael with the basic facts about the University of Tennessee, but rather to wow Michael and flatter him. Michael remains tight-lipped about where he'll attend college, to the point where even his own parents and siblings don't know which college he's going to choose.

Sean Tuohy, worried that Michael has decided to play for the University of Tennessee, is sorely tempted to intervene in Michael's football career and ensure that he chooses Mississippi, but he doesn't want to behave unethically. However, he contemplates encouraging Michael to visit LSU again, perhaps weakening Michael's interest in Tennessee. In the meantime, he sends Michael to play in the U.S. Army All-American game, organized by Tom Lemming. After the game, Lemming writes that Michael is "far and away the nation's finest offensive line prospect." Michael refuses to tell reporters where he's going to college.

Although Sean clearly wants Michael to attend Ole Miss, he doesn't intervene in his adopted son's decision-making process. To the extent that Sean influences the process at all, he does so by encouraging Michael to explore colleges other than the University of Tennessee. Meanwhile, Michael's refusal to talk about where he's considering going to college means that it's hard for Sean to know what Michael is thinking, and therefore, it's especially hard for him to influence Michael's decisions.

Two weeks later, Mississippi gets a new head coach, Ed Orgeron. Ed's first order of business is convincing Michael to play for his college. Orgeron, a "hearty Cajun coach" with a thick accent, visits Michael and pitches him hard—but nobody, including Michael, can understand a word he's saying. Michael asks Ed Orgeron, "What are you gong to do for the kids that already committed to Ole Miss?"—i.e., people, such as Justin Sparks, who signed on to play before Orgeron became coach. Orgeron replies, "Lemsday," which means, "Let them stay." This seems to be the right answer. Michael later says that he's glad Orgeron won't dismiss kids who committed to Ole Miss—he asks, "would you play for that kind of person?"

After the excessive politeness and formality of Nick Saban and the awkwardness of Phil Fulmer, Orgeron's laid-back friendliness feels refreshing. Orgeron is still trying his hardest to convince Michael to play for his school—but unlike Saban or Fulmer, he seems to do so in a relaxed, unrehearsed way. As a result, Michael seems to trust Orgeron more than he trusted either Fulmer or Saban. Notice also that Michael, a kindhearted young man, seems to be basing his decision off of the head coach's character, not just the quality of the football program.

On February 1, 2005, Michael Oher holds a press conference about where he'll go to college. Before a sea of reporters, he announces that he'll go to the University of Mississippi, where his family went. Just a few weeks later, however, the NCAA will begin an investigation of affluent white Southerners "seizing poor black kids" from the ghetto in the hopes that they'll attend their former schools.

Even after Michael chooses Ole Miss, the idea that the NCAA would investigate the Tuohys for manipulating Michael into choosing their alma mater sounds far-fetched. At least as Lewis presents things, the Tuohys have consciously refrained from influencing Michael's decision in any major way.

After the press conference, Michael and Sean Junior play miniature baseball. In Sean Junior's room, there is a framed bloody basketball net, which Sean Tuohy "earned" after scoring points in a legendary championship game (the blood was his). The net, Lewis says, symbolizes the love-hate relationship between the Tuohys and Ole Miss: Tuohy had to steal the net from the Mississippi trophy room late one night. While playing miniature baseball, Sean Junior asks Michael when he decided on Mississippi—all the way back in September, Michael replies.

Michael remains fiercely loyal to Sean Junior, and tells him things that he doesn't tell anyone else. Also note that the Tuohys' relationship with Ole Miss isn't as loyal and harmonious as the NCAA will later allege. Most confusingly, Michael claims to have made up his mind months ago, making us wonder why he chose Ole Miss in the first place, and if he was just enjoying making powerful men from other colleges jump through hoops to impress him.

CHAPTER 8: CHARACTER COURSES

On March 30, 2005, the NCAA begins a formal investigation into the career of Michael Oher. The investigation is painful for the Tuohys, because of what it implies about their motives in adopting Michael. Someone has accused the Tuohys of "abducting" Michael so that he'll go to their *alma mater*. The investigator, Joyce Thompson, asks Michael about his siblings; Michael replies without hesitation that his siblings are Collins and Sean Junior. When Sean Tuohy repeats the questions, Michael names six biological siblings, then slowly thinks of seven more.

The NCAA's investigation concerns the possibility that the Tuohys adopted Michael because of his athletic prowess. Yet almost everything we've read about the Tuohys up until now contradicts such an idea—it seems that they adopt Michael simply because they come to care about him as a person. Furthermore, the passage reminds us that for all intents and purposes, the Tuohys are Michael's family now—making the possibility of a vast Ole Miss football conspiracy seem especially ludicrous.

Thompson asks Michael how he came to live with the Tuohys. He explains that Sean Tuohy understood his situation, since he, too, grew up poor. Sean listens to his adopted son speak, and considers how cruelly the NCAA has treated his family. The NCAA is trying to show that Sean and his wife have violated NCAA rules by giving Michael food, clothing, and shelter to support his decision to attend Ole Miss. Michael has been thinking about Big Tony, who lately has been visiting once a week, and wonders if Big Tony isn't trying to profit from his new success.

The NCAA investigation alarms Michael because it suggests that others are using him for his talent. Although Michael seems not to consider the possibility that the Tuohys would manipulate him for their own profit, he considers other people in his life, such as Big Tony, who might be trying to use him for money.

Thompson proceeds with her questioning, and Michael explains that he lived in multiple foster homes as a child; he doesn't provide many other details, however. In the middle of questioning, Sue Mitchell enters the room and explains that Michael needs to proceed with his studying, so that he'll be able to make the grades to go to college. Thompson insists that she needs at least five more hours with Michael; however, Mitchell insists that Michael doesn't have five hours.

The NCAA investigation is especially stressful because it occurs at a period when Michael needs to bring up his grades enough to qualify for college football scholarships. Sue Mitchell's dismissive, almost hostile attitude toward Thompson suggests that she too finds the NCAA's investigation insulting and absurd.

Michael spends his final semester of high school trying to raise his GPA to a 2.65. Leigh Anne calls some of Michael's old teachers, asking them what Michael needs to do to get a B in their classes. With Sue Mitchell's help, Michael brings up some of his old grades, and makes A's and B's in his current classes, ultimately graduating 154th in a class of 157. Even so, his cumulative GPA is a mere 2.05, meaning that it's time for Sean to step in. Sean knows about the loopholes in athlete GPA requirements. With Coach Orgeron's help, Sean finds a way for Michael to bring up his grades by registering as "learning disabled." Sean finds a pair of psychologists to test Michael, and they determine that he can barely read. They also realize that Michael has become adept at disguising his learning deficiencies from his teachers to avoid embarrassment. However, the psychologists conclude that Michael has perfectly average intelligence—he just hasn't had the experiences that most teenagers have. From Sean's perspective, this is good news—it means that Michael qualifies as learning disabled.

Michael improves in his classes, perhaps suggesting that after many years of falling behind in class, he just needed extra help and encouragement to grow as a student. To ensure that Michael qualifies for scholarships, however, Ed Orgeron helps Sean find a loophole for Michael's GPA, suggesting that he's had lots of experience with athletes who are also poor students. (The passage does not say whether the two psychologists who declare Michael to be learning disabled were the first two psychologists Tuohy approached—leaving open the possibility that Tuohy shopped around for a psychological finding that would help Michael play college football.) The passage emphasizes some potentially unethical aspects of the football recruiting process by stressing that, to Tuohy, Michael's disability is "good news"—suggesting that, for Sean, the fact that Michael will be able to play football outweighs the drawback of a learning disability.

For the rest of the year, Michael enrolls in a program of correspondence courses designed for the learning disabled. He works closely with Sue Mitchell to bring up his grades. He doesn't show interest in reading, and says that he's only studying so that he can play football. However, Sue and Sean find ways to make learning fun. When teaching English, Sue brings up the poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Sean, who memorized the poem years before, entertains Michael by comparing the soldiers in the poem to athletes in a game.

The passage suggests that Michael's devotion to football is interfering with his ability to learn—in other words, an important part of his development as a human being. However, it might also imply that, in spite of his setbacks in life, Michael is a curious student—it's just that, unlike most of his classmates, he hasn't had any way of making connections between his own life and his academics.

A month after her first interview, Joyce Thompson returns from the NCAA to talk to Michael again. In a way, Thompson's job is to investigate the black market surrounding college athletes. Colleges aren't allowed to offer athletes anything beyond free tuition, room, and board—even though the best college athletes generate millions of dollars in income for their schools. She proceeds to ask Michael the same questions she asked him a month ago, with Sean in the room. Sean becomes angry when Thompson begins asking Michael about his correspondence courses. Sean claims he has no idea what courses Michael takes, and Michael seems unsure, too. Thompson rolls her eyes at this information, making Sean even more furious.

The implication of Thompson's questions would seem to be that Michael is taking easy courses to qualify for football scholarships—or even that Sue Mitchell is giving him unfair help with those courses. Even if Thompson's point—that the Tuohys have manipulated Michael in order to bring honor to their alma mater—is unlikely, there's some truth in the idea that Michael is just treating class as a means to the end of playing college football. Also, the passage provides important background information about why the NCAA is investigating the Tuohys: considering the millions of dollars surrounding the recruitment process, the NCAA wants to ensure that there's no bribery or manipulation surrounding Michael's decision to go to Ole Miss (presumably, the NCAA has found evidence of bribery and manipulation before).

After the interview, Sean apologizes for his rudeness, and stresses that, whatever the NCAA might think, Ole Miss isn't bribing him to pressure Michael—clearly, he's too wealthy to be bought. Thompson begins to open up to Sean after this exchange, and she asks him more questions about Michael's childhood and family situation. Sean mentions, "We can't look at a kid who's in trouble now without asking, 'If we help him, could we turn him around?'" Thompson is shocked by this idea—apparently, the Tuohys are thinking of doing what they did for Michael, again.

Sean makes the case that the University of Mississippi couldn't be bribing him, because Sean is too rich to be bought—even though this logic seems to fall apart in the face of the reality, which is that many already-rich people often do unethical things to make even the smallest of profits. Yet by bringing up the possibility of helping another disadvantaged black youth, Sean further suggests that he's serious about helping the disadvantaged, and not just acting out of a love for football or any loyalty to his college.

As Michael approaches the end of high school, he has to find a baby picture—which, traditionally, is included in the Briarcrest yearbook. With much difficulty, Leigh Anne succeeds in finding a picture of Michael as a ten-year-old. Afterwards, she goes on the internet, finds "the cutest picture of a little black baby I could find," prints it out, and sends it to Briarcrest. Michael graduates, and his family—the Tuohys, as well as Big Tony—are present to cheer for him. However, Denise, Michael's mother, doesn't come. When Michael Oher's name is called, Sue Mitchell cries and Leigh Anne laughs and cheers.

In spite of the pressure from the NCAA, Michael succeeds in graduating from Briarcrest, bringing great pride to his family and his tutor. Michael's graduation merely confirms what was already clear: the Tuohys are Michael's true family now. (However, Leigh Anne's remarks about a "little black baby" could be interpreted as condescending, since they suggest that fitting in with Briarcrest tradition is more important to Leigh Anne than representing Michael truthfully and being honest about his early life—and they also suggest that she might see all black children as inherently indistinguishable.)

On July 29, Sean sends the results of Michael's correspondence courses to the NCAA, and shortly afterwards, the NCAA tells Michael that he'll be going to college and playing football. Coach Orgeron plans to use Michael extensively in his first season coaching the Ole Miss Rebels; however, Sean is worried that Orgeron won't be patient enough with Michael, and will rely too heavily on Michael's natural ability. Sean also stresses that Michael is a visual learner. Orgeron seems receptive to Sean's advice.

The NCAA investigation into the Tuohys' relationship with Michael yields no proof of manipulation or coercion: as we've seen, the Tuohys seem completely sincere in their love for Michael. The Tuohys continue to take an active role in Michael's life and his success as an Ole Miss athlete, but they seemingly help him play football because they care about him, not the other way around.

CHAPTER 9: BIRTH OF A STAR

In Atlanta, there is a huge redbrick house owned by a man named Steve Wallace. Wallace was an NFL lineman for the 49ers in the 1980s, when he was coached by the great Bill Walsh.

In this chapter, we'll learn about Steve Wallace, an NFL lineman whose career was a milestone in the history of football strategy.

Wallace's career kicked off after the 49ers' main left tackle, Bubba Paris, gained too much weight. Bubba was a promising player, but he was too slow to match a talented defensive player like Lawrence Taylor. In 1987, toward the end of one of the 49ers' best seasons ever, Walsh learned that his teams' hidden weakness was the quarterback's **blind side**. Chris Doleman, the pass rusher for the Minnesota Vikings, ran past Paris again and again, tackling Joe Montana before he could throw the ball. After the game, Walsh replaced Bubba with Steve Wallace.

In the late 1980s, Bill Walsh continued to emphasize the importance of protecting the quarterback from players like Chris Doleman. In order to stand the best chance of protecting Joe Montana, Walsh began using Steve Wallace.

A year after their 1987 loss to the Minnesota Vikings, the 49ers found themselves back in the playoffs, facing the Vikings again. This year, the Vikings had the number one offense in the NFL, and the 49ers weren't as unbeatable as they'd seemed the year before. Steve Wallace was nervous, especially since he'd allowed Chris Doleman to sack Joe Montana once already during the regular season. He was widely regarded as a sub-par lineman, and to make matters worse, he wasn't making much money, since he had to support his parents. To compensate, Wallace fought opposing players, which made him more unpopular.

The passage builds up the suspense about how Steve Wallace will fare against his more highly regarded opponent, Chris Doleman. Steve comes across as an underdog here: he's immensely insecure about his abilities, which is why he gets into fights.

Going into the 1988 game, Walsh keeps replaying the footage of Doleman's sack of Joe Montana, which Wallace finds embarrassing. However, Walsh replays the footage because he knows that the Vikings game will hinge on Wallace's performance. Now, more than ever, being a left tackle is a solo event: it involves protecting the quarterback from the other team.

To encourage Steve Wallace, Walsh replays the video of Wallace's earlier failure against Doleman, pressuring Wallace to succeed the second time around. That Walsh does this suggests that he still recognizes the importance of protecting the quarterback.

The game begins with Steve Wallace feeling insecure. The Vikings take an early lead, and Wallace plays little to no role on his team, largely because Bill Walsh runs the ball too much. Later in the game, however, Doleman sprints for Joe Montana; Wallace knows that he has to give Doleman a good, hard push to protect Montana. Wallace pushes Doleman so hard that Doleman stumbles back upfield. In the meantime, Montana throws a touchdown pass. Wallace doesn't get any real attention for his contribution to the touchdown, but if he hadn't protected Montana, the touchdown would never have happened.

Steve Wallace succeeds in protecting Joe Montana from the opposing team's sacks, allowing Montana to throw a touchdown. Wallace is, in some ways, the unsung hero of the 49ers' victory—although he doesn't catch or throw the ball, the 49ers' touchdowns would be impossible without his protection. In this sense, Wallace is exemplary of the left tackle position in general: he's important, but curiously underrated by fans.


To the untrained eye, it looks like Steve Wallace just pushes Chris Doleman away, but in fact, his push reflects hours of practice, and some very precise maneuvering. For the rest of the first half, Wallace protects Joe Montana from Doleman, who doesn't get a single sack—allowing Montana to throw three touchdown passes. In the fourth quarter, Wallace runs downfield while his teammate Roger Craig makes a touchdown. The commentators praise Wallace's contribution to the touchdown, boosting his profile. Later in the season, the 49ers win the Super Bowl, thanks largely to Steve Wallace's talent.

One reason that left tackles are often underrated is that they make their jobs look easy—or, at the very least, unskillful and purely physical. In reality, the left tackle position requires a lot of intelligence and strategic thinking. Indeed, Lewis implies that the 49ers are able to score touchdowns and win the Super Bowl largely because of Wallace's strong, intelligent protection of the quarterback.

In the eighties and nineties, several linemen, including Steve Wallace, became unexpectedly rich. Where before, even the most talented linemen couldn't command a salary of even half a million dollars, linemen began earning well over a million. Many NFL insiders were baffled that linemen were now making so much money. However, NFL insiders argued that they needed good linemen to protect quarterbacks—who, now more than ever, were in danger of being injured, leaving the NFL, and costing their teams millions. In 1995, Wallace became the first lineman to sign a contract for ten million dollars.

Although many sports fans remain ignorant of the left tackle's importance, football insiders fully recognize how important protecting the quarterback has become. Consequently, football franchises begin spending tens of millions of dollars on high-quality left tackles.

Steve Wallace's contract prompted a massive reevaluation of the left tackle position. For most of the nineties, the NFL classified certain valuable athletes as franchise players, preventing them from becoming free agents (and leaving the team suddenly) and guaranteeing them a high salary relative to other players in their positions. Coaches realized that they could still protect their assets by hiring expensive franchise left tackles—these left tackles were so valuable that they'd be worth the money.

For NFL teams, the utility of the "franchise player" category is to prevent talented players from becoming free agents and joining other teams by offering these players a very high salary. Many elite left tackles like Steve Wallace became franchise players, because football insiders recognized that they were crucial to the success of the team.

The new emphasis on left tackles meant that talent scouts had to reevaluate what the ideal left tackle looked like. Left tackles, it was agreed, had to have "girth in the butt" to be great players. Even talented players like Steve Wallace were now considered inadequate for the position—they were too skinny below the waist. The scouts' reevaluation of the left tackle position attracted new kinds of players. Large boys who would otherwise have quit their high school football teams stayed on in the hope that they'd make good left tackles. One such athlete, John Ogden, who weighed 350 pounds, competed in football and track during his time at UCLA. To his surprise, his football coach began using him as a left tackle. After college, he was drafted by the Baltimore Ravens, the fourth pick overall, and got a signing bonus of 6.8 million. Ogden had been a shy child, but now he was one of the most sought-after figures in sports.

Throughout the nineties, the proportions of the average left tackle's body changed. One interesting consequence of the reevaluation of the left tackle was that young football players who would otherwise have stopped playing football continued to compete, perhaps recognizing that athletes with their body type could succeed in the NFL. Ogden's unusual combination of shyness and skill exemplifies the contradictions of the left tackle position: a good left tackle is strong and imposing, but he's also the quiet, unsung hero of the game.

Before the 2000 season, the Ravens re-signed John Ogden for 44 million dollars, paid over the next six years. Ogden became an unusual figure in the NFL: extremely well-paid and sought-after, but not remotely as famous as the most popular quarterbacks or running backs. Nevertheless, he continued to be one of the NFL's best athletes. In a 2000 game against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Ogden, a huge left tackle, nearly outran the Tampa Bay cornerback. He tried to stop the cornerback by pushing one of the cornerback's teammates into him—and he barely missed. The crowd cheered when the cornerback got a touchdown, and gave the cornerback "all their attention. But they shouldn't have."

Left tackles are among the most important players in the NFL, but they're often some of the most obscure. Football fans naturally respond to the people who throw, catch, or run with the ball, because these players' contributions are the easiest to see and understand. However, fans often neglect the important contributions of linemen, who play a huge role in enabling touchdowns and other impressive plays. Even the fact that Ogden almost *outran the cornerback proves Ogden's enormous (but often unheralded) talent.*

CHAPTER 10: THE EGG BOWL

Throughout the 20th century, the University of Mississippi has had a major problem with civil rights: after James Meredith became the first black student enrolled at the school, for instance, there were riots on campus. From the football team's perspective, Mississippi's dismal record of racism was a major liability: the football team needed to attract talented black athletes to emerge victorious in its games.

One factor that Michael seems not to consider when deciding where to attend college is the long history of racism and discrimination at Ole Miss. Ole Miss is a mess of contradictions: it's one of the most historically racist academic institutions in America, but it's also a major football school, meaning that in the 21st century, it relies on the athleticism of predominately black athletes.

In many ways, the University of Mississippi was not a welcoming place for black students. Black football players stood out from other Ole Miss students, and not just because of their skin color. Many black football players, Lewis notes, didn't speak or write standard English, though they went through the "tedious charade of pretending to be ordinary college students." Most athletes ended up majoring in "Criminal Justice," popular because it didn't require math or language skills. At times, teachers and students at Ole Miss stared at black athletes with condescending looks "filtered by the past."

The experience of the average college football player is, in many ways, tragic. Black football players at Ole Miss are treated like heroes on the field, even though they're discriminated against at most other times. Additionally, many people have criticized the overly easy classes that college athletes are encouraged to take so that they can concentrate on athletics. One tragic result of such a system is that some athletes graduate with neither an NFL contract nor the academic skills necessary for success in life.


One of Coach Ed Orgeron's first priorities is battling the perception that Ole Miss isn't friendly to black people—indeed, he's hired by Ole Miss largely because of his rapport with black athletes. Orgeron is interested in Michael from an athletic perspective, but also from a public relations perspective, since Michael lives with a white family, and his adopted sister belongs to "one of the snootiest white sororities on campus."

The Ole Miss administration is well-aware of its race problems. However, the passage gives the impression that one of the administration's primary motives for battling the perception that it's a racist institution is to attract a good football team. Ole Miss, it's implied, will use Michael as a pawn for its own PR purposes.


Coach Orgeron says on more than one occasion that he wants to build his new football team on the back of Michael Oher. He wants Michael to start for Ole Miss, even though he's just a freshman. The assistant coach, George DeLeone, focuses on teaching Michael the plays, remembering what Sean had said about Michael being a visual learner. DeLeone is skeptical that Michael will thrive in his first year with Ole Miss, since he hasn't spent time in the weight room, and isn't aggressive by nature. While working with Michael one-on-one, DeLeone reaches a strange conclusion; "Michael Oher is without question one of the greatest athletes I have ever seen for a guy his size. But what we're asking him to do is impossible to do." DeLeone begins benching Michael so that he'll have time to learn about the game. But Orgeron is angry with DeLeone for not using Michael more often.

The controversy over how best to use Michael in games is similar to the argument between Hugh Freeze and Tim Long during Michael's high school career: once again, the question is whether to play Michael as often as possible (i.e., making Michael an indispensible part of his team) or to encourage Michael to develop more slowly (and, implicitly, allow the other Ole Miss players to grow as athletes, too). Orgeron wants to use Michael as often as possible—in part because he thinks that Michael can help the team win games, but, as we've seen, also partly because he wants to use Michael as a poster-boy for Ole Miss.


Lewis jumps ahead to the end of the season, when the players are preparing for their game the next day. By this point, Michael Oher has acquired a swagger—he's been featured in *Sports Illustrated*. Coach Orgeron tries to energize his players. Lately, Orgeron has been trying to acquire a good offensive lineup—he even tried to recruit Tulane players after they came to Mississippi following Hurricane Katrina—a tactic that made him wildly unpopular. Orgeron knows that his team has some of the worst offense in college football. They're about to face off against Mississippi State, in a game known as the Egg Bowl.

It's no wonder that Michael becomes more confident, and even arrogant, during his time at Ole Miss: he's the star of a football team which is itself a star of Ole Miss campus culture. Orgeron, contrary to what Michael seemed to think during the recruitment process, isn't such a decent, moral person—he's so focused on football that he's willing to exploit a natural disaster for his own ends. Orgeron is desperate because even with Michael, his team isn't strong.

In the past year, Michael has adjusted to his new life in the University of Mississippi. He's learned that Ole Miss has fraternities that don't accept black students, and that most everyone at the school drinks heavily. However, Sue Mitchell is still his tutor, and Sean and Leigh Anne have built a second house for themselves, less than a mile from campus. Michael has made friends with other students, some white, some black.

Even though he's respected for his football talent, Michael continues to feel like an outsider. As a result, he continues to rely heavily on his adopted family for love and emotional support—suggesting, perhaps, that he has yet to "come of age" and become a mature, confident young man off the field.

Coach DeLeone greets his players, and thanks them for their hard work. He asks the team to give him just one game of good offense. Michael nods—all season long, he's been playing right guard. Some of the time, Michael doesn't know what the play is, or who he's supposed to block. Still, he's become more confident on the field, and puts untold hours into his football playing—far more than he puts into his classes.

Michael has a lot to learn on the football field. In spite of his size and agility, he needs to improve as a strategic player, so that he can understand his coaches' plays and make himself as useful as possible. He's no longer on the Briarcrest team, where he could run Gap play after play.

Coach Orgeron gathers his players around him and energizes them for the game tomorrow. He emphasizes the rivalry between Mississippi State and Ole Miss, and encourages the team to fight for a win. Lewis notes the tension in the room: Coach Orgeron is the only white person there. On the field, Lewis notes, the black athletes for Ole Miss become "honorary white people," but afterward, they return to being treated differently from white students.

Even after Michael wins acclaim from his peers, he continues to feel like an outsider—and, in no small part, this is because he's a black student at one of the most historically prejudiced colleges in America. To this day, the book implies, black students are discriminated against at Ole Miss, in spite of their status as elite athletes.

The next morning, the Ole Miss team travels out to Starkville for the game, which ends disappointingly. Ole Miss starts out strong, but then the team gets into trouble: the Ole Miss quarterback keeps getting blitzed by Mississippi state, and soon Mississippi State leads 21 to 7. It is becoming clear that Ole Miss lacks a coach with the genius of Bill Walsh—someone who can maximize the players potential. The players grow increasingly disorganized and unsure, and DeLeone radios Michael to try harder. But even if Michael's performance in the game—and during his entire freshman year—isn't especially great, it's not the end of the world. He's getting useful experience, meaning that he'll be better next year. Furthermore, Ole Miss needs Michael far more than Michael needs Ole Miss.

Michael is a talented player, one of the best in Division I, but he's only one player on the Ole Miss team. Indeed, the Ole Miss team's lack of success during Michael's freshman season reminds us that football is a team sport, meaning that no single athlete, no matter how talented, can lead his team to victory. Furthermore, as Bill Walsh proved with the 49ers, great teams aren't defined solely by their players, but also by the ingenuity and creativity of their coaches—evidently, Ed Orgeron is no Bill Walsh.

The day after their loss to Mississippi State, Coach Orgeron moves Michael Oher to play left tackle. Orgeron also uses Michael's prestige to recruit other great players for the Ole Miss team's upcoming season. At the end of the season, Michael is named a First Team Freshman All-American. Invigorated by this encouragement, Michael plays even harder, hitting the weight room and losing twenty-five pounds of fat.

Michael responds well to encouragement, putting in longer hours at the gym to improve his performance on the field. Also, notice that Orgeron's public relations maneuvers seem to be paying off: great football players (presumably many of whom are black, and might otherwise have been reluctant to attend Ole Miss) join Orgeron's team because they admire Michael.

In spite of his new success, Michael Oher continues to feel lonely and insecure about his family. He goes to visit Denise, but when he arrives, he finds the police arresting his mother for driving a stolen car. For unclear reasons, the police also arrest Michael; Sean guesses that they do so because of racism, pure and simple. Even when he's at Ole Miss, Michael feels the influence of his old neighborhood. His three closest friends hail from poor black neighborhoods, do poorly in their classes, and have children. Sue Mitchell tutors one of Michael's friends, Peria Jerry, and encourages him to improve his reading skills. For Thanksgiving, Michael invites a friend, another freshman football player who comes from a similar background, to dinner with the Tuohys.

Michael continues to face discrimination because of his race and his big, intimidating appearance. Furthermore, he's constantly reminded of the experiential gap between black Ole Miss athletes, some of whom come from impoverished families, and white Ole Miss students, many of whom come from affluent Southern families. Even though Michael has been adopted by a wealthy white Southern family, Michael doesn't feel that he fits in at Ole Miss. However, he bonds with other students with a background similar to his own.

One day, toward the end of freshman year, Michael clashes with a freshman linebacker named Antonio Turner. Antonio boasts that he'd like to have sex with Leigh Anne and Collins. Michael threatens to hit Antonio; Antonio flees to another building, and Michael follows him, and then beats him senseless. Afterwards, Michael sees a little boy—the three-year-old son of a college tutor—lying on the floor in a pool of blood. Somehow, in the fight, the boy has been injured. Michael runs away, and nobody knows where he's gone. Panicked, the coaches phone Leigh Anne and tell her that she needs to get down to Ole Miss as soon as possible—she's the only one who can help Michael. Leigh Anne starts to drive out to Ole Miss, but then realizes she has no idea where to look for Michael.

On one hand, Michael's violent clash with Turner proves that he's fiercely loyal to his adopted family, and is willing to fight for their honor. At the same time, however, the clash emphasizes Michael's immaturity and his outsider status at Ole Miss: where other students might settle their arguments with words, Michael settles his argument with Turner in an ugly, immature way—by beating up Turner and, more tragically, accidentally hurting a little boy. Leigh Anne's realization that she has no idea where to look for Michael symbolizes the general disconnect between Michael and the Tuohys—even after all their time together, they don't fully understand one another's perspectives.

Leigh Anne tells Sean what's happened. Sean is reminded of an incident that happened shortly after Michael left for Ole Miss: Michael had an argument with Sue Mitchell, and left for two days. During that time, he didn't contact anyone, and the Tuohys wondered if they'd hear from him again. Sean also knows that Michael had been running for his entire life. When he was a child, he'd been sent to various foster homes, and had run away from more than one of them. Michael ran so often when he was a child that, after a certain point, the Tennessee Department of Children's Services stopped keeping track of him.

Evidently, Michael's clash with Turner is indicative of a broader problem in Michael's life—his alienation from the people around him, even those who love him. Without forgiving or excusing Michael for hurting a little boy, it's possible to sympathize with the way he handles his problems—Michael has had so few healthy relationships in his life that he doesn't know what to do when he's angry. In the confusion, Michael's first response is often to fight, or to run, or both.

CHAPTER 11: FREAK OF NURTURE

The chapter begins with an interview about Michael Oher between Joyce Thompson and Sean Tuohy. Thompson asks Sean if he knows much about Michael's childhood, and Sean is forced to answer that he doesn't. Thompson suggests that Sean "doesn't care" about Michael's past, but Sean insists that he and Leigh Anne are in "no hurry" to learn about Michael: "We got a long time."

During Michael's time living with the Tuohys, Sean and Leigh Anne don't ask him many questions about his past. It's strongly implied that this is because they want to respect his dignity and give him a measure of privacy. However, one consequence of this is that when Michael runs away (as he did at the end of the previous chapter), they're unsure how to react.

When Michael Oher's mother, Denise, was a young girl, her father was murdered. Her mother was an alcoholic, and eventually Denise was taken to an orphanage. She skipped school, and got into drugs. Later, when she was twenty, she gave birth to a child, followed by four more.

Previously we've been given very little information about Michael's early life. Now, finally, we learn that Denise was a drug addict, and had many children in addition to Michael. This information might help readers understand why Michael is so shy, wary, and lonely.

Denise's brother, Robert Oher, murdered his wife after his wife told him she wanted a divorce. In jail, Robert met a man named Michael Jerome Williams; later on, Williams, newly freed, served as a messenger, sending Denise letters from Robert, who was still in jail. Michael impregnated Denise, and Denise named the child after him: Michael Jerome Williams. Then, shortly after Denise gave birth, Williams disappeared—after that, Denise began calling the baby Michael Oher, after her own family name. In the next four years, Denise gave birth to four more children.

Michael's mother and father didn't raise him together, reminding us that, in many ways, Sean Tuohy is the closest thing to a father Michael has ever known (and, furthermore, Leigh Anne is a much more attentive, loving mother than Michael's own biological mother).

Michael Oher and his brothers lived in squalor: every month, the government would send Denise a check, and afterwards, she'd disappear to spend the money on crack cocaine. Michael and his brothers had to find whatever food and clothing they could on the streets or in churches. On April 14, 1994, a court registered Michael Oher's existence, and recommended that Michael be sent to a foster home to ensure his survival. Shortly afterwards, police cars pulled up to Denise's house. Michael and his brothers ran away from the police.

Instead of working to take care of her children, Denise spent her money on drugs and neglected her offspring almost entirely. As reprehensible as Denise's behavior might be, her negligence is in part a consequence of the institutionalized racism in the Memphis inner-city: a place in which impoverished people, many of them black, aren't given the basic health care, education, and police protection that people in other parts of the U.S. take for granted.

Even as a young child, Michael Oher wanted to be a basketball star. He'd seen basketball games on TV, and wanted to be the next Michael Jordan. On the day the police arrived at his mother's house, he ran after his older brothers and avoided the police. Later, however, the police caught up with Michael while he was in school. The police took Michael to live with an unkind woman named Velma Jones, who made Michael do unpleasant chores, and punished him by sitting on him. Two nights after being sent to Velma, Michael ran away to Denise, who took him back to Velma. Michael ran away many more times in the next two years.

Throughout his early years, Michael remains a dreamer, confident that some day he'll be a great basketball player. Michael's foster parents, such as Velma Jones, seem cruel or even just indifferent—they seem to have little interest in showing love or respect for Michael. In this way, Michael's early upbringing might suggest why he has so much trouble expressing his feelings and developing strong relationships with others—he never had a loving mother, a stable relationship that lots of people take for granted.

When he was ten, Michael ran away from Velma Jones; this time, the police took him to a floor of St. Joseph's Hospital designed for "bad kids." Michael liked being in St. Joseph's better than he'd liked living with Velma. He still missed his mother, in spite of her neglectfulness. Michael escaped from St. Joseph's and found Denise again, this time living in a housing project called Hurt Village. By 1996, Hurt Village was one of the most miserable places in Memphis: gangs were powerful, drug addiction was rampant, and the average education level was between fourth and fifth grade. For a year and a half, Michael played "hide and seek" with the Department of Children's Services: he never attended school, for fear that he'd be taken away from his mother again. By the time he'd turned twelve, he'd become adept at finding food for himself.

The passage paints a depressing picture of life in the Memphis inner-city. Even though Michael isn't a "bad kid" by any means, he's treated as a problem child because he runs away from his cruel guardians (this seems to mirror the way that some people who grow up in poor neighborhoods develop criminal records—not because they're bad people, but because they're victims of cruelty and neglect). Michael's life in Hurt Village is harsh, so that Michael must learn how to adapt to his surroundings and find food for himself, or risk starvation.

Michael didn't have many close emotional relationships in Hurt Village. One exception was a boy named Craig Vail, who Michael later described as "the one person in the whole world he fully trusted." Another exception was a man in his early twenties named Zachary Bright, who looked remarkably like Michael. Zachary was a great athlete, who'd gotten football scholarships to many elite colleges. But, largely because of the encouragement of his peers in Hurt Village, Zachary quit the football team and didn't even finish high school.

Michael's friendship with Craig is the closest thing he has to a stable relationship during his time in Hurt Village. At this stage in his life, Michael simply can't afford to trust many people. Notice also that Zachary has the option of going to college and playing football, but chooses to remain in the inner-city. Zachary's situation suggests one of the most tragic aspects of Hurt Village: even though life there is harsh, people are so used to it that they'd rather continue living there than look for something potentially better.


Around the time that Zachary Bright was turning down his football scholarships, Michael Oher had acquired the nickname "Big Mike." Michael hated his nickname—his still wanted to be a great basketball player, so he didn't want to be big at all. He continued playing basketball, and retained much of his agility and flexibility. Sometimes he attended school, but he didn't learn much. Shortly after his fifteenth birthday, Michael met Big Tony, who'd grown up in Hurt Village, and who'd previously coached Zachary. Big Tony decided that he'd take care of Michael—Michael seemed not to have close friends. Thanks to Big Tony, Michael played at a basketball camp at a local high school. There, coaches had told Michael that he wasn't going to be a perimeter player, and Michael quickly became overwhelmed by the other, more competitive players.

At this stage in Michael's life, Big Tony acts as his coach, father figure, and, in some ways, guardian. Michael still wants to be the next Michael Jordan, but doesn't do well playing at basketball camp. Michael's longstanding love for basketball helps us understand why he didn't consider himself a football player until relatively late in his career. Even though in retrospect it seems obvious that Michael is a natural football player, he always saw himself as a basketball star first and foremost.


Shortly after Michael attended the basketball camp, Big Tony's mother died, and made Tony promise to enroll his son, Steven, in a good Christian school. Tony decided to enroll Michael Oher as well.

The book comes full-circle, and we're back where we started in Chapter Two. Now that readers have learned more about Michael, however, they can better understand why Michael struggled to make friends and open up to the Tuohys and, perhaps, why he continues to feel alienated.


In Michael Oher's earliest weeks at Briarcrest, he was treated as a "freak of nature." The other kids, virtually all of whom were white, struck Michael as being bizarre—totally unlike the kids he'd spent most of his time with. The white kids at Briarcrest, Michael later wrote in an essay senior year, were overly friendly, and needed constant medical attention for the most minor problems. Michael also noticed that it was easy to steal things from his white classmates. Big Tony found out that Michael and Steven were stealing things; he impressed upon them that they couldn't "steal, or fight, or get into trouble of any sort."

Where the stresses of the inner-city forced Michael to be reserved and stoic, and sometimes break the law to find food, Briarcrest requires Michael to be overly friendly and vocal and to obey certain rules that Michael has never had to before. Big Tony's warning also suggests that Steven and Michael might be held to a different standard at Briarcrest because of their race and background. If a wealthy white student got in trouble, it might be dismissed as an adolescent mistake, but if Michael or Steven did, it could easily be punished as "criminal" behavior or used as a justification for racist beliefs.

CHAPTER 12: AND MOSES STUTTERED

Back in the 2000s, Michael Oher has fled from Ole Miss, and "all hell broke loose." Antonio Turner, the teammate Michael beat up for insulting Leigh Anne and Collins, is taken to a coach's house, while the injured little boy is rushed to the hospital. The boy's father, a tutor named Bobby Nix, says he'll be pressing charges.

The situation is dire for Michael: he's hurt a little child and, on an even more basic level, he's behaved in a way that suggests that he's not mature enough to handle the pressures of college and football stardom.

Michael Oher drives around Oxford, angry and confused. Recently, the NCAA has been saying that the Tuohys have used him for his talent, but throughout the entire ordeal Michael has remained loyal to his adopted family. He doesn't believe that Sean and Leigh Anne were manipulating him. He looks at his phone and sees that Sean has been texting him.

Without forgiving Michael for his actions, one can understand that he's been under a huge amount of pressure, both from his coaches and from the NCAA. Furthermore, one can admire Michael for being so loyal to his adopted family, even after the NCAA has accused them of manipulating him.

Meanwhile, Sean Tuohy gets a call from Coach Orgeron, who explains that the little boy who got hurt needs stitches, but is otherwise fine. However, the police are still going to arrest Michael Oher. Sean decides that it's time to call a lawyer. He talks to his old friend Steve Farese, a prominent attorney. Steve's first reaction is that the police probably *won't* arrest Michael, since the child's injury was an accident. Suddenly, Sean gets a call from Michael. Sean tells Michael to turn himself in to the campus police. Shortly afterwards, Michael meets with Coach Orgeron, who just tells Michael, "It's lonely at the top," and tells Michael that there will be "many Antonio Turners" down the line.

Although Michael certainly deserves some punishment for his actions (at the very least for beating up his teammate), it's disturbing to consider that, were Michael still living in the inner-city, he might have gone to jail for the same crime, due to institutional racism among the police and in the justice system. Also disturbing is the way that Coach Orgeron practically excuses Michael's actions and even subtly suggests that Turner, not Michael, is to blame for his own violent attack. Orgeron's remarks hint at the entitlement of college athletes—instead of treating them like responsible adults, their coaches are willing to forgive almost anything as long as they keep playing successfully.

After hitting Antonio Turner, Michael Oher does some mild community service, but is never prosecuted. He settles into success. Meanwhile, Briarcrest receives record numbers of applications from black inner-city kids, though the schools' new president doesn't want to admit any of them. Other Briarcrest teachers think that Michael's success will help spread the Christian gospel. Although Michael isn't the most outspoken proponent of Christianity, one teacher, Jennifer Graves, notes, "Moses stuttered."

It's unclear whether Lewis sees anything wrong with what he's describing. One could argue, for example, that the fact that Michael gets off with some mild community service after beating up a teammate and hurting a little boy is unjust, and might contribute to Michael's sense of entitlement and invincibility. Furthermore, the fact that Michael's success has seemingly done nothing to make Briarcrest more accepting of black students is a tragic reminder of the de facto *segregation of Memphis and wealthy white institutions in general.*

Even after Michael chooses the University of Mississippi, Phil Fulmer remains obsessed with him. He tries to convince Michael to transfer to the University of Tennessee. Fulmer also spends time scouting football practices at Briarcrest, where he notices other promising players. Sean Tuohy continues to help out with the Briarcrest football team, though he's furious that Briarcrest won't admit more inner-city black students.

Even if Michael's success as a football player doesn't result in more black students at Briarcrest, his time at Briarcrest at least changes the school into a Division I magnet school, as evidenced by Fulmer's ongoing presence.

Leigh Anne continues to spend lots of time with Michael Oher. It often occurs to her that there must be other people just as talented as Michael living in the Memphis inner-city. She reads about a talented football player from the inner-city, Arthur Sallis, who fails to make the grades to go to college, and ends up going back to the inner-city. Around this time, Sallis is shot by two robbers, and nearly dies. Shortly after he leaves the hospital, he's murdered in his home, at the age of twenty-three. Inspired by the tragedy of Arthur Sallis, Leigh Anne decides that she wants to create a foundation for people with athletic ability who lack the academic talents to go to college.

Leigh Anne, just like her husband, plans to continue helping disadvantaged youths, not just Michael. Although she loves Michael dearly, she's realistic about the fact that there are many other people like Michael living in Memphis: people who never have the opportunity to realize their potential. By sponsoring a foundation, Leigh Anne hopes to help young people in need and give them the opportunity to succeed at sports while also getting a college education.

Due to his success, Michael Oher gets lots of calls from poor friends, many of whom want money. Denise calls him more than she ever has. It occurs to Michael that many of the people with whom he grew up never worked for anything. However, Michael wants to use his good fortune to help his old friend, Craig Vail. Michael has always admired Craig for his modesty and pride—he doesn't present himself as a victim. Michael reunites with Craig. He tells him that he's been doing well with football, and claims that he could take on Dwight Freeney, the best pass rusher in the NFL.

Michael's judgment that the people in his old community haven't worked for anything seems unduly harsh: while certain people in his life, such as his mother, have certainly been irresponsible, many others—not just Craig—have worked incredibly hard just to stay alive. While Lewis doesn't really explore this, it seems as if Michael is becoming distant and unsympathetic to his old community, and is starting to buy into the typical white conservative mindset that poor people are poor because they're lazy or undeserving. Michael's rise to success is impressive and inspiring, but potentially disheartening—he's climbed the ladder of success, but it seems as if he might be pulling up the ladder behind him.

Dwight Freeney has had a remarkable career with the Indianapolis Colts. He sees himself as the successor to Lawrence Taylor. In 2006, Freeney hears of a talented kid named Michael Oher, who claims that Freeney is no match for him. Freeney later learns that Michael is three hundred and fifty pounds, six foot five, and runs the forty-yard dash in less than five seconds. When he finds out about Michael, Freeney doesn't smile. He just says, "You tell Michael Oher I'll be waiting for him."

Freeney's words (and the fact that he doesn't smile as he says them) might suggest that he's intimidated by Michael's awesome size and talent as a left tackle—or, at the very least, that he knows for sure that Michael will join the NFL one day, and looks forward to the challenge of facing him. (And, indeed, Michael is later drafted by the Baltimore Ravens.) In all, Michael is a phenomenal football player, and, as the book draws to a close, his rise to success in the NFL is all but certain.

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