

Go Hard or Go Home

NOT NORMAL

On April 26, 2019, the former quarterback of the record-setting Clairton Bears in Clairton, Pennsylvania, was shot dead a block from the stadium where he once led the team to its fourth straight state crown. He was twenty-three. At his funeral, a preacher pointed at Armani Ford's white casket and said, "This is not normal," that it was time to take back their city from those who thought killing was normal, that he was praying justice be done. In the crowd Ford's brother Isaiah "Zeke" Berry took him at his word.

They say that the only way for young Black men to escape Clairton is through football, and when you stop playing football, you die. Armani Ford was unemployed and living in Clairton when the killer struck—a killer who remains at large in this decaying mill town of six thousand that has sent dozens to Division One football programs and five to the National Football League (NFL). The Bears have racked up the most wins in Pennsylvania high school competition in the last fifteen years, even as the city itself has seen jobs go and storefronts close and the major employer, Clairton Coke Works, pollute its air. Armani Ford's best friend and high school teammate, Tyler Boyd, sat in Morning Star Baptist Church in gray suit and sunglasses to grieve Ford's death and then returned to Cincinnati, where he later penned a four-year, \$43 million contract with the Bengals to keep catching footballs.

But this story is about the Bears still in Clairton, the ones who have neither earned NFL millions nor lost their lives to the streets. It's about people like head coach Wayne "Rinky" Wade, Clairton's native son who, like Boyd, left to play professional football until a career-ending injury sent him back home to a community where more than half of its children live below the poverty line and boys start playing football at age five. Instead of getting out, Wade is giving back.

FAMILY, TOGETHER

On July 23, 2019, hours after Boyd signs his multimillion-dollar contract extension and texts his former coach Wade with the news, the current Bears players work out in the weight room in Clairton's elementary building. The team has been gathering here since February. Now they're just two weeks away from preseason camp. The room is small, crammed with weight machines and dumbbells. Nineteen athletes are there, two-thirds of the team. They follow the workouts scribbled on the whiteboard. Music blasts from a speaker in the corner, creating a cushion of sound that covers everyone as they bend and lift.

Coach Wade is not there. He doesn't need to be. These boys have been training together since they could walk. They know what's expected of them. They are safest when they're working out here, among their brothers. It's when the music stops and they leave the weight room and football field that things get more complicated and dangerous. Many of them come from broken families, fathers missing in jail, or dead, mothers claimed by addiction. Sometimes, they live with extended relatives instead. Sometimes, the coaches are their father figures.

Lance Cash, a Clairton assistant who played in college with Coach Wade, recounts one time he had to miss practice because of a doctor's appointment. When he returned the next day, a player came up to him and asked where he'd been. Cash explained. The player said he'd been wanting to talk to him about something. Cash asked why didn't he ask another coach? He said, "No Coach Cash, I wanted to talk to *you*." So Cash tries to be at every practice because he knows it might make a difference for someone.

Like surrogate parents, Wade's assistants now circulate the room, offering encouragement and instructing players on how to position their bodies with the weights to get the best results, avoid injury.

Suddenly, the music ends. Coach Wade enters. The players stop what they're doing and stand in front of him. He wears a black t-shirt. Vertical letters on the back spell out the word ETHIC. Each letter forms another word: Effort, Toughness, Heart, Intensity, Commitment.

He tells them he has good news and bad news. The bad news is that Aaron Thompson, their teammate and Division One prospect rated one of the best in the state, is ineligible. The good news is that Tyler Boyd just signed his contract extension with the Bengals. "Every single person who plays football on this team can go to college, every single one," Wade says. "I'm not saying you're going to be the best player, you're going to be better than Tyler and all of that, but you can go to college and get an education."

He speaks softly, doesn't need to yell. He has the boys' attention, including that of Armani Ford's younger brother Zeke Berry, who is short but made of muscle, legs like tree trunks. His eyes burn lasers as Wade speaks to him. Zeke wears gray braces on his knees. He's coming off an injury that made him miss all of last season. He wants to live in Columbus, Ohio, where his father, Terric, lives, where Armani lived for a while before returning to Clairton. He wants to play football at Ohio State. He wants to become an NFL star like Tyler Boyd. If that doesn't work out, he wants to be a physical therapist or design computer games. He's just a rising junior, but his intense drive wins him the respect of the team.

Wade notes the irony of the situation: the same day their star player, Aaron, is ruled ineligible, Tyler signs a big contract. "Both of them, in this locker room, in this weight room, both played on that field up here, both walked in the same locker room. Same opportunity. Same opportunity that all of you have. So you can't tell me that it can't happen. Because you can do it one way, make it. You can also do it another way and you don't." In his forties, Wade is fit, standing on the balls of his feet and gesturing with his arms, palms out, his barrel frame filling out his shirt, eyes wide and face alight. Kids' lives are on the line.

He urges the players to take care of business. He can't keep calling them, getting on them to get their schoolwork done or respect their parents or do the right things at their job. They've got to want it. He tells them they can win a state championship, something the Bears haven't done since Zeke's brother Armani and Tyler Boyd did it in 2012, ages ago for Clairton's standards. "You got to believe it. We got to start putting in the work. Everybody got that?"

The team responds with a quick "Yessir!" Wade pulls them into a circle and they throw in their hands. Another voice cries out. "Family Together on three. One two three—"

"Family!" the team chants.

The lone voice again. "One two three—"

"Together!"

"Let's get it! Let's get it!" Wade shouts, and they file out of the weight room, out of the elementary school, just two blocks down from where a shooting occurred at a graduation party a few nights before—four people shot, three girls and a boy, one of them life-flighted, one of them was pregnant.

RELEASE

There's a game called Release that former Bears used to play growing up. One team's members would go hide, and the other's would run around

and find them. If you were captured, you had to stay in the “dungeon” until somebody came to release you.

Many Bears players have been playing “release” all their lives. They’ve been trying to get out of the dungeon. As Clairton school principal Deborah Marshall explains, many of them don’t believe they will be alive after the age of twenty-five. They don’t take their lives seriously. They don’t stop to consider what they might do with themselves, and thus limit their possibilities. While they benefit from the bonds of Clairton football and everyone’s intense adulation, they are not immune to the city’s ills—aside from Ford, two other former players have been shot, one fatally, in the last two years. One local leader estimates that 70 percent of past Bears are now in the streets.

Rinky Wade got out. In 1990 he left Clairton to attend the University of Akron on a football scholarship, played seven years in the Arena Football League, came that close to making an NFL team. Now, aside from coaching the Bears, he’s working as a principal in the nearby McKeesport school system and getting his master’s degree at Duquesne. He’s married, has four kids. For Wade, getting out means “getting the opportunity to be successful knowing that you’re coming from less than.” It’s not whether you physically leave Clairton, not whether you give back—but that you make the most of chances to better yourself and your family. For Wade and his players, this means leveraging football to get a college education because for Wade, “knowledge is the power.”

STAY AND BE GREAT

After their weight room work on this July night, Wade’s players begin conditioning drills and walk through formations on the small practice field next to Clairton’s main educational building. The sun sets and a midget league football team goes through its paces on the other half of the field, with several hulking assistants ordering around preteen boys and moms yelling at them from the sideline—“You can run faster than that, Marcus!”

I chat in the parking lot with Pastor Jonathan Robinson, known as Pastor J, who has lived in Clairton all his life and once coached Coach Wade when he was young. Mothers and children walk by him with a wave. Everyone knows everyone in Clairton. Pastor J points out that when the lion is missing in the family—the father—the kids are sometimes not held accountable. With fathers dead or in jail or dealing, players don’t learn respect for others, feel like they can do whatever they want. And then, when football ends—either because of injury or they just don’t have the

talent—they don't have a plan B or C to follow and fall into depression. Some of Clairton's finest athletes become its best drug dealers, Robinson explains. For those former Bears who do make it out, he wishes they would give back to Clairton after they graduate and go to college. He wishes they would pass on what they receive from getting out to those still in town so they can taste possibility. "Don't go somewhere and be great," he says. "Stay where you are. Stay here and be great."

Rinky Wade remembers the day his life changed, when someone asked him to stay and be great. He'd been halfway back in Clairton a few years as a volunteer, helping out as a seventh- and eighth-grade coach, then as the football team's interim coach in 2001, then as McKeesport's basketball coach for several years, keeping his options open. Until 2008, when Demonje Rosser, a twenty-eight-year-old Clairton assistant coach, pulled up in his car on Miller Avenue a block away from where Wade now stands at the fifty-yard line, watching his linemen get into a three-point stance and at Coach Bunk's whistle step toward gray plastic trash barrels meant to represent their opponents. Wade points behind him, across the field. "See that building with the little satellite on it? Standing in front of that building, my dad was out there talking to a couple fellas and Monje Rosser stopped me right there. Right there. I was standing right there."

Rosser told Wade the team needed him. There were discipline problems and Wade was the man to confront them. Rosser had everyone's respect. When he talked, others listened. So Wade volunteered for the football team again that year. Then Rosser was murdered in 2009, cause and killer unknown to this day. Wade's life changed again. The whole town mourned and the team dedicated the 2009 season to Rosser. With Wade now as assistant coach, taking Rosser's place, the Bears won their first of four straight state championships. Affixed to the door of the training room in the stadium is a piece of paper in memory of Demonje Rosser with his picture on it and underneath the words "R.I.P. Our hearts will always be with you." On the faded tape sealing the bottom of the paper to the door, someone has scrawled in pen "Never Remove," with "Never" underlined. It was a pivotal moment for Wade when Rosser reached out to him because it's led to this moment now, watching his players practice and leading the team, his team. "I never thought he wouldn't be around to witness it."

Zeke Berry sprints by us in a blur. He reaches the end line ahead of everyone else. Coach Wade calls out encouragement to him. It's less than three months since Zeke lost his brother Armani. Wade says he is hanging in there. The way things happen in Clairton, he explains, is that you

become “almost numb” to the shootings as a way of survival, “like it happens and you gotta move on.”

This is what the preacher lamented at Armani’s funeral, how the people had become numb to the killing. He compared everyone’s mindset to the anesthesia he’d received after getting three teeth pulled, how half of his face was so numb that he had unknowingly bitten a hole in his lip when eating, drawing blood. How did we get so numb? he asked. How did we lose the capacity to feel?

The numbness wears off, Wade says, when “it is home, when it’s somebody in our household. That’s when it really hits.”

When Zeke is asked about Armani, his face closes. It becomes smooth like stone. His eyes look away. Losing him stays in his head, keeps him focused on football, he says. He tries to talk to younger kids in Clairton about doing the right things. He loves his teammates, but less so his town. He says that things have gotten worse here—“You can’t just really walk around, you know, and just feel safe.” He noticed this when Armani died.

Everyone loved Armani. Principal Deborah Marshall says his smile could charm you, that he was always respectful. Capri Thompson, younger brother of Bears coach Jeff Thompson, is a former quarterback for the team. He remembers how Armani followed him around, “my little brother”—everything he practiced, Armani had to do as well so that he could learn the quarterback tricks of the trade from an upperclassman. When he was shot, the shock was not that it happened, but the individual it happened to. The fact that it was “close to home,” happening within the Bear family, was the shock, recounts Thompson. Football players aren’t usually involved in something like that. Pastor J says people know who his killer is, but they’re not talking.

That summer after his murder Armani’s family puts up fliers all over town, a photo of Armani with wings attached like an angel’s, and a cash reward for information on the killer, call this number. Armani on a library bulletin board, Armani on a storefront window, Armani even on a local tv channel, video clips of his family fishing in his memory.

At his visitation in church, his mother and grandmother wore white t-shirts with his football number 10 in Clairton orange and the slogan “Boutdat” on the back—the rallying cry for those championship teams he played on, because as Tyler Boyd once said, “When we were winning, we just labeled ourselves as we were ‘about that’ because it got so nobody could prove to us that we weren’t.” Coach Wade showed up to the visitation wearing an orange polo shirt tucked into khaki pants. He was crying. He hugged relatives on either side of the aisle and then sat in one of the

rear pews, staring straight ahead at Armani's white coffin, as if he were holding vigil, waiting for Armani to come home.

GO HARD OR GO HOME

Zeke Berry gathers his teammates together in the stadium locker room. Someone has shut off the music. It is Saturday, August 24, 2019, first game, moments before they take the field against Aliquippa, another storied steel-town squad competing at a higher level—triple A to Clairton's single A—this year.

The problem tonight is numbers. Only seventeen of the thirty-one players on the roster can play. The rest, save for an injury or missing physical, are academically ineligible. This is a pressing issue. Principal Deborah Marshall explains that these student-athletes come at two extremes—“You're either gifted or you're a couple years behind and you're coming to school late, you're still catching up.”

Eleven players compete at one time, which means that no one's going to get much rest tonight, no one can afford to get hurt. They're going up against a team three times as large and twice their size. But this is nothing new to Clairton. It's always played with a chip on its shoulder. Coach Wade keeps the locker room spartan and bare—the peeling paint, the piece of paper with the word “Adversity” taped above the doorway—to keep his guys hungry. That's how they win.

Still, the few players that crowd around Zeke look small and scared. Their three senior captains are outside on the field for the coin toss. It's up to Zeke to focus—and stir up—the troops. “We go hard!” he yells, echoing Armani's past words to him about how to carry himself on the field: “Go hard or go home.” Zeke scolds guys to shape up, get their schoolwork done. He reminds them they have a future beyond football. For the Bears, their greatest enemy is themselves, not some football opponent—themselves and the circumstances they find themselves in. Outside the locker room, down the hill at Clairton Coke Works along the river, smokestacks pump clouds of chemicals into the sky. Allegheny County has issued a health advisory for children and seniors to stay inside.

“This is a war out there,” Zeke tells his team. Minutes earlier, on the field during warmups, they pounded their thigh pads, thuds echoing throughout Neil C. Brown Stadium as Zeke's fellow junior Da'Metrius “Spoonie” Weatherspoon, all six feet six inches and 290 pounds of him, rocked back on one leg and raised his head, long curly locks flying, cupped his hands to his mouth and cried, “All my soldiers, are you ready?” Each player cried back, “You know!”

In the locker room, Zeke informs everyone the Quips are planning to blow them out. “Cause that shit’s not fine with me. Is it fine with y’all?”

“No!” they respond. Outside their huddle, an eleven-year-old team manager listens, holding a football. His name is Donte Wright. He wears his Clairton Mighty Mites jersey, the one he wears as running back for the Little League team. He saw Armani’s lifeless body moments after he was shot because it happened right behind his house, saw them throw a heavy green bag over it, like you cover a car with. He feels most safe inside the stadium. He will one day play for the Bears.

“You going to feel that hit. The only thing that matters is that you get the fuck back up.” The other players don’t say anything. You’re all I’ve got, Zeke tells them. “Y’all my fucking family.” He pulls them in closer for a cheer. Someone trips the music on, and deafening beats and bass explode through a speaker near the showers. The boys strut around, singing along.

Coach Wade walks in, trailed by his assistants. The speaker goes silent. He’s worried. The team will struggle tonight—low numbers, no star players, first game, a much bigger opponent. But he keeps that inside. He asks everyone to take a knee. “When you take the field, give me everything you got.” His voice rises. “Everything you got. That’s all I ask.” You’re going to get tired, you’re going to come off and get a breather, he says. “And then I’m sending you back out there.”

Outside, the crowd is already swelling the stands. Everyone comes together for the team, especially against Aliquippa. This is the first time the town has a reason to congregate since Armani Ford’s funeral in early May.

In the locker room, someone begins the Lord’s Prayer. They bow their heads. Amen.

“Game time. Game time. Let’s get it!” Wade exclaims, and maybe he’s remembering thirty years before when he was in pads in this very place, running out through the back door of the locker room, around the corner and through the fence to the field, slapping everyone’s hand, which he does again now, as coach, because everyone loves Rinky.

KEEP YA HEAD UP

The Bears struggle against Aliquippa, losing 35–14. They look lost. Dontae “Buck” Sanders, their bruising running back who runs through people like a Mack truck, dislocates his shoulder. With only sixteen players, athletic trainer Brandon Karabinos wonders whether they should forfeit the next game. But that’s Coach Wade’s decision. After the final whistle, he gathers the team in the end zone, asks them to take a knee. We are still

a championship team, he tells them. We played a number-one-ranked triple-A team. We won't see that kind of talent the rest of the season.

But the Bears lose again against McGuffey 42–27. No matter McGuffey is a double-A rival, a higher notch of competition. The Bears shouldn't lose. Even after they pull out a nail-biter against Greensburg Central Catholic, the town isn't happy. Tongues begin to wag. What is up with this team?

Hours before their home game against Riverview, the players eat in silence in the cafeteria. They hear the criticisms. They hurt.

Zeke Berry sits off by himself at one table, headphones on, solemn. The only person near him is senior quarterback Brendan Parsons, one of four white players on the thirty-one-man roster. Since the Aliquippa game, most players have gotten their grades up enough to play, so the team is back to full strength. Parsons is solemn too. He's Zeke's closest friend. He's watched him cry after Armani's death. He listens when he needs to ease his mind. He knows better than to say anything to him right now. Zeke's in "Beast Mode," as principal Deborah Marshall puts it. Once Zeke tackled someone so hard he became an angel, like Armani—his helmet grew a halo in its middle from the impact.

Buck Sanders eats at another table. His shoulder has healed. They're holding him out of this game anyway. They want him ready for Laurel, a tougher opponent, next week. His face wears the same peaceful look he had when I first met him the winter before in Keep Ya Head Up barber salon across the street from the school where Buck sat waiting for Kenny J the barber to give him a trim. Even in Kenny J's tiny room, door falling off its hinges, walls littered with "R.I.P." headstones and names scrawled in black magic marker for recent deaths in Clairton—a lot of young people, Kenny said, he knew a lot of them—Buck kept a smile on his face, while Kenny's phone kept ringing and a tv on the wall droned, a white model flashing her white teeth on the screen. His knee was still in a brace then, the injury that had doomed the team in the playoffs, everyone said. If Buck had been healthy. . . . Buck said he wanted to go to college to play football. He said he'd be okay with coming back to Clairton after that. And when asked in that moment, with Kenny J's tiny black Chihuahua shivering and nipping at his legs, what outsiders don't understand about Clairton, he simply said "Pride." And "friends and family."

Back when Rinky Wade played football, processions were big—people would pack the street corners and go crazy as the team, led by its seniors, two by two, walked down St. Clair past Griznik's Bakery where Wade

always got two donuts for a dollar for breakfast. Police would close down traffic. Elderly folks would flock to the windows of their brick walk-up apartments as the team headed up the hill to the stadium. But those buildings are vacant. Griznik's is shuttered. Clairton has become a ghost town.

Senior player Kenlein Ogletree turns around by the metal detector at the school entrance, his close-cropped hair sticking up in jagged tufts. He checks to see if the team is behind him. Kenlein is key to their success. He can run faster, jump higher, than anyone else. Quick to the ball. Some call him "Bumblebee" because he loses focus, causes coaches to yell at him to move up, or over, get where he's supposed to go during a game. Kenlein Move Up!

Now Kenlein waits for stragglers to join the lineup by the door. Remember, two by two, someone whispers, but most of the team ignores the reminder. Suddenly they're stepping out into the September sunshine, a long ragged line. This team is still finding itself. It doesn't help that no one is out on the streets to cheer them on. They head out of the parking lot and swing left on Waddell, past Kenny J and Keep Ya Head Up barber shop, down a block to the town's main artery, Miller Avenue, where an abandoned red brick building sports an old logo, faded in large white letters—"Tobacco—Treat Yourself to the Best." Its bare windows have long since shed glass. There is no rush.

They veer right on Miller and head up the hill, past Skapik's, the old clothing store with mannequins gathering dust behind full-length windows crisscrossed in tape. A hardware store. The old Union Trust Company building, now empty. A car honks its horn at them. At the corner of Miller and St. Clair, Keith Linn watches them pass his Garletto's sub shop, where new multimillionaire Tyler Boyd stopped by last summer to order his pepperoni twists. Close your eyes and imagine the town a half century before when the mills were running and the shops were open, when people poured in and out of the Croatia Club with its frosted glass, silent now as the Bears walk by. Now picture a renovated library and retail spaces and affordable housing on that very block with a walkway connecting everything, part of a \$16.7 million project led by the Mon Valley Initiative. They're taking core samples of the buildings now, testing which ones to demolish, which ones to keep. New life is coming.

The Bears keep going. "Go get 'em, Bears!" a woman cries from a car. They walk past the Clairton Library, where Odessa Ellis, one of the librarians, used to rush out the door to yell Go! Go! Go! at them as they

made their way to midget practice when they were younger, shuffling like robots, their tiny bodies so bowed over by their helmet and pads they almost brushed the sidewalk. Someone has painted a boarded-up window with a red paw print and the words “Go Bears”; on another, “Our city is full of . . . LOVE,” the “love” in blue lettering with white stripes on a black background.

The Italian Club, an auto repair place, Medicine Shoppe, American Legion Post Seventy-Five. Almost there. Miller Avenue Dairy Delight’s windows are closed, but a life-size poster of Tyler Boyd carrying the ball for the Bengals is affixed to its front wall next to the menu. Owner Monte Norris offers free ice cream for students with a 3.0 average or above. Dairy Delight’s walls tell the story of the Bears: on the downhill side, laminated life-size posters of the fallen, including Armani Ford, his black-and-white profile in uniform gazing off into the distance like a Greek hero.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?” someone read at Armani’s funeral in May, quoting the Book of Isaiah. “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”

As the team crosses Miller Avenue, they can see the posters on the uphill side of the shop of those who got out—a picture of Tyler Boyd and Coach Wade’s cousin Lamont Wade featured as Pennsylvania high school career touchdown leaders, another one of Lamont in action for Penn State, another of Aaron Matthews as a Pitt Panther, and one of Norris’s own son Marquis in uniform for California University, where someone has drawn a line with a pen from one of his eyes, like a tear.

“Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Up the sidewalk past the Fuel On station and convenience mart, where a young man runs up to the players to crow he has fifty dollars riding on this game.

Clairton has no grocery store.

Up the final sloping rise of grass, around the dumpster, through the parking lot, past the Allegheny County Family Support building, where they will eat a postgame meal provided free of charge by Coach Wade’s uncle Carlton and other Bears boosters.

One by one they walk through the rear door of the stadium, which towers above them like a fortress, its powerful lights mounted on orange steel girders punching into the sky. Up the stone steps, then turn right for

the locker room, a place defensive coordinator Jeff Thompson describes as “peace of mind.” He says it’s there, with their brothers, that they’re “free, free from the world.” They hear music playing. Coach Wade is waiting for them, sweeping the hallway with a push broom, a mop bucket nearby. Kickoff is three hours away.