

### *The religion of Texas high school football*

*Written by Peter Berg and Buzz Bissinger (34 episodes)*

*Directed by Jeffrey Reiner (12 episodes)*

Kyle Chandler ... Eric Taylor  
Connie Britton ... Tami Taylor  
Gaius Charles ... Brian 'Smash' Williams  
Zach Gilford ... Matt Saracen  
Minka Kelly ... Lyla Garrity  
Aimee Teegarden ... Julie Taylor  
Taylor Kitsch ... Tim Riggins  
Adrienne Palicki ... Tyra Collette  
Jesse Plemons ... Landry Clarke  
Scott Porter ... Jason Street

Looking around Amazon.com for something for Mama for Christmas, it occurred to me she's a huge fan of Kyle Chandler... esp. his role in the mid-1990s series, *Early Edition*, where he plays a young man who for mysterious reasons receives a newspaper every morning with news of events 24 hours into the future. (An innovative idea with more plot possibilities than *Star Trek*! Mom rarely missed an episode.)

So that settled it: I'd track down a DVD collection with Kyle Chandler in it. Turns out CBS hadn't yet released the DVDs on *Early Edition*, but the actor was heading up the cast of a critically acclaimed new series based on the book *Friday Night Lights* (FNL)... which had also been turned into a movie of the same name starring Billy Bob Thornton. So with Mom also having spent some time in a small East Texas town (Tyler) and being fully aware of the fanaticism Texans bring to their high-school football experience—recall the incident of the mother in a town near Houston who wanted to kill her daughter's rival on the cheerleading squad (made into a movie)—I figured Mom'd appreciate the first season of the *Friday Night Lights* miniseries. Did I ever get that right!

But I was unprepared for how much I got into it. We would go through episode after episode—it's nice not to watch 20 minutes of commercials per hour—until we had finished the series well before New Year's Day. The story centers on a mythical "west-central Texas" town of Dillon and its high-school football team. A new coach, Eric Taylor (Kyle Chandler) has been hired to carry on from a successful predecessor; the only acceptable outcome for Coach Taylor and the Dillon Panthers is a state championship. Everyone in the town is an football expert and no one, from the meter maid to the mayor, hesitates to give the new coach a piece of his or her mind.

Coach Taylor's wife Tami (Connie Britton) and high-school-aged daughter Julie (Aimee Teegarden) have come to Dillon with him; it seems that a large proportion of Dillon high-school kids are only-children. My favorite player-character in the show Tim Riggins (Taylor Kitsch), who lives with his older brother, seems to be an only child mainly because their alcoholic old man walked out on them years ago. Riggins is the punishing fullback for the Panthers, and he reminds me of a couple of the bad boys from my days in high-school sports one state up: Oklahoma; they're cocky, tough, man-strong, get the hot chicks, and walk around all the time with this sly grin on their faces. In the case of Riggins, there's also a quiet depth of feeling occasionally coming to the surface. We're introduced to him sleeping off a bender on the morning of a big practice/media day, as his slutty girlfriend Tyra Collette (Adrienne Palicki) jumps him for another round of fun.

I'll say one thing about *Friday Night Lights*, it dispels any notion that high school kids "just say no" to sex in any significant numbers. Makes preaching abstinence dangerously absurd. (Another note is none of these kids ever uses marijuana; hence this is clearly a network television show.)

Riggins' best friend is Jason Street (Scott Porter), the team quarterback and a top college-recruiting prospect for all the Division 1A schools. Street is everyone's all-American hero, smart, a leader on the field and off; he's in love with cheerleader Lyla Garrity (Minka Kelly). (Lyla is the daughter of the biggest businessman in Dillon and Panther booster/schemer/scoundrel Buddy Garrity. Buddy is constantly pressuring Coach Taylor to do this or that, some of it borderline unethical, to give the team an edge.) Jason and Lyla, with Tim Riggins, form a sort of triangle of all the hopes and ideals of Dillon youth; indeed, we see the three of them at a party, Riggins raises a beer in a toast to their future, to happiness, and to Texas.

Not to give any specific information, let's just say life has a way of throwing you a curve ball. Other major player-characters emerge with their own set of goals and family issues. Dillon also has a top-tier prospect running back, Brian 'Smash' Williams (Gaius Charles), who has come from the wrong side of the tracks and faces enormous pressure—a lot of it self-imposed—to live up to expectations. If he doesn't make it to the show, his mother and sisters will probably never emerge from the rundown tenements. This is a good point to comment that the series provides a totally authentic picture of the typical nondescript homes where these kids, on any side of the track, grow up in these hundreds of small Texas towns.

Finally, the remaining major player-character is Matt Saracen (Zach Gilford), who's starts the season as second-string quarterback and really spends more time bantering with his geeky, funny-guy friend Landry Clarke (Jesse Plemons) than practicing football. Well, stuff happens, and the starting job is thrust upon Matt. In addition to facing huge new responsibilities as the Dillon Panthers' QB1—the quarterback is only slightly less worshipped for winning or scorned for losing than the coach in Texas high-school football—Matt has become the man of the house, caring for his increasingly senile grandmother while his father/son is off in Iraq. (Matt's dad returns briefly, but has great difficulty adjusting to life away from the army.) Then Matt brings another complication into his budding young life by falling for Julie, the coach's adorable daughter.

So that's the setup, and in the middle of it all Coach Taylor and his Panthers are on a mission to win state. We get a bird's eye view of the work, the drills, the thinking, the agony and the ecstasy of football in Texas, football in America. As I think back to how we used to follow our football and basketball teams at Putnam City HS in Oklahoma City—I only played varsity baseball in HS—a flood of memories comes forth. I love these coming of age movies, with the characters' lives all in front of them, that sense of excitement, of just starting out. Raging hormones and high ambition.

The series is a winner of several awards, in my opinion the most important being the Television Critics Association Award for Outstanding New Program of the Year. Not solely focused on what happens on the football field, the story lines are true to life and speak to the human condition. Football simply becomes the stage on which the people make their game plan, execute their choices, and learn to live with the consequences. We see loss and hope, screwups and redemption, love and deeper love; as with a Larry McMurtry novel, we get so wrapped up in the story, in the people, we have a hard time letting go, and then experience a profound sadness that these wonderful characters will walk out of our lives when we turn off the set.

Whether or not you like football, Friday Night Lights will enchant you.

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*Friday Night Lights | Kyle Chandler | Texas High School Football*