

New shows bring back high school memories

Brandon Vogel / FOXSports.com

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It used to be so simple; America was an apple pie and hit-and-run kind of place. There was no argument.

But in recent years, America has started to feel a lot more like a hot wing and bump-and-run joint. The NFL runs its own network. College football is available on no fewer than seven national cable channels every Saturday. But the newest trend in sports programming, high school football, may be satisfying our football appetites better than any of them.

Shows like *Two-A-Days* and *Friday Night Lights* along with the unparalleled availability of live games have thrust high school football into the national spotlight. Taking a little bit of baseball's innocence and a lot of football's extravagance, the grassroots game seems to be sprouting up everywhere.

With apologies to *All the Right Moves*, high school football first gained any sort of wide spread cultural significance with the publication of H.G. Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* in 1990. Bissinger left his job as an editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, moved to Odessa, Texas, an oil boom town gone bust, and spent a year documenting the Permian Panthers' 1988 season.

While the book may have been meant to expose the passion and delusion of big time Texas football: 20,000 seat stadiums, chartered planes, fussy boosters, it actually accomplished the opposite and generalized the experience for the rest of the country. From six-man teams with volunteer firefighters on the chain gang to 6A schools with national schedules they all have one thing in common: unbridled passion, both in the stands and on the field.

My high school team, representing a community of 900 people, won one game in two years. Yet even I, by displaying a knack for catching the football, was asked for an autograph. But I'm sure there are thousands of former high school players who could claim the same experience and much more. There's a Mike Winchell, a Don Billingsley, a Boobie Miles for every town — and that doesn't discount their experience or the book. If anything it magnifies it and that goes a long way toward explaining the game's newfound popularity on the small screen.

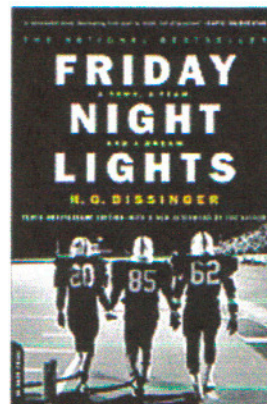
In 2004, *Friday Night Lights* got the Hollywood treatment at the hands of director Peter Berg. The film was beautifully shot and featured the best sports movie score since Jerry Goldsmith's work on *Hoosiers* but — in answer to the question head coach Gary Gaines gave his players in the movie — it wasn't perfect.

Friday Night Lights suffered some of the same problems that plague all sports movies. The "every play is the greatest play you've ever seen" syndrome was in full effect, and there were some authenticity issues for obsessive people like me. Blue Oakley visors, Under Armour and Nike gloves in 1988? Nike Sharks and Neumann gloves are more like it. But for the most part, the movie stayed on top rather than teetering over after the tearful scene where Boobie told his uncle, "I can't do nothing else but play football." I was hooked. Not perfect, but good enough to win.

Now if you watched any football at all this season, you probably knew that Tuesday was the premiere of *Friday Night Lights* on NBC.

I was wary coming in as this represented a copy of a copy of a copy scenario, but after seeing the pilot, also directed by Peter Berg, I'm begrudgingly invested.

No longer set in 1988, the school is now the fictionalized Dillon. The players, while drawing heavily on their real-life models, aren't real either. The super-quick cuts and



H.G. Bissinger's classic exposed the high school game.

Explosions in the Sky soundtrack are carried over from the film, but at this point the topic isn't new. It is no longer shocking to see an overbearing booster lay in to the poor head coach, even if that booster is played by Mack Brown in what must've been a great role reversal for him. It's become hyper-realistic, so bizarrely true that we don't even notice anymore.

But the season's other football program, MTV's *Two-A-Days*, succeeds on this very front. Everything in that show is imminently recognizable to anyone who has ever attended high school. I can see Alex go to his homecoming dance with a tie that's knotted three inches too short and I know he'll get better. I watch Goose fall into the dreaded "guy friend" zone with Kristin and I feel bad for him. I've been there.

Like Permian in 1988, life is supposed to be totally unrealistic as a member of Hoover High, the top high school team in the country, but it's not. It looks exactly like high school as I remember it.

In *Friday Night Lights*' pilot episode, Tim Riggins' brother told him, "This is life, this isn't *Maxim* magazine." But high school football is *Maxim* magazine. It's misguided, irrational, sexy and fun. The perfect summation of youth.

Boys playing a man's game are turned into heroes for a season or two every Friday. It is the most important day of their lives; the girls are always attractive and the drama always severe. It's realistic because it's unrealistic.

That's high school.

Then you go to college and you move on. If you're still toting those old game films to the dorms, your new neighbors will quickly tell you to grow up. But I think that's what will keep high school football on television for good. Be it a TV drama, a reality show or an actual game between two schools you've never heard of, they're selling nostalgia, a chance to relive the glory days in the privacy of your own home, guilt free. I don't want to have a terrible haircut anymore or listen to crappy music or worry about acne, but I don't mind being reminded of what it felt like either.

Friday night lights? I'll never get those back. But now I've got them on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday — and I can't turn away.

Brandon Vogel was the winner of the first *Next Great Sportswriter 2* competition on *FOXSports.com*. Check out his blog, [HiPlainsDrifter](#).

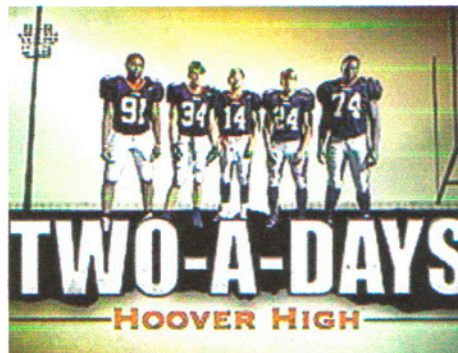
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NBC's *Friday Night Lights* was inspired by the book.



MTV's *Two-A-Days* puts one of the nation's top high school programs into the spotlight.