

# The Storm Blitz

Lane Walker

LOCAL LEGENDS  
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*The Storm Blitz* by Lane Walker  
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## Prologue

My dad always told me never to worry about things that had already happened and to let the past be the past.

“Bruno, you can’t always look in the rearview mirror. That’s why it’s so much smaller than the windshield. You have to look ahead to forget about the past,” he would say.

Today, I was looking ahead.

I was staring directly in the eyes of the Seaside Mustangs All-American quarterback, Jacoby Howard.

Even though Jacoby was only in eighth grade, he already stood 6’2” and weighed over 170 pounds.

He was enormous compared to most of his teammates. But his size wasn't even his best attribute.

Jacoby was lightning quick, recognized as one of the fastest eighth graders in the state of Florida.

The stories about him embarrassing opposing players echoed throughout the local playgrounds and streamed through social media. Ever since I was in fourth grade, I had heard amazing tales about his football ability.

He was so fast he was beating sixth graders in races when he was only in second grade. He had never lost a race in track—ever!

The Mustang quarterback already looked poised to be all-state in high school, go to a Division 1 (D-1) college and become a future NFL star.

Howard could run and throw; this season alone he had gained 1,700 yards without receiving a pass, rushing 200+ yards in multiple games.

But today, he didn't need hundreds of yards.

He only needed a few inches.

It was fourth and goal, and Jacoby had the ball inches away from the goal line.

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We held a 21-17 lead over the Mustangs—a team we had never beaten and one that hadn't lost a game in over four years.

*Fourth down...*

The Mustangs used their last time out. I glanced up at the play clock; it read :03. All that stood in front of Howard was our aggressive South Bay Shark defense.

This play would be one I would remember forever; after all, it was for everything.

Our teams were both 8-0, and we had dominated all the other teams we had played. Not only was this the last game of the season; only one winner would be crowned the king of Panama City Middle School football.

Sweat poured into my eyes, creating an achy, fiery sensation. I didn't mind it; in fact, I liked the burn. I tried my best not to flinch or blink. I didn't want Jacoby to see any weakness in me when his eyes met mine. My glare was straight and intentional.

He was the star quarterback, and I was the middle

linebacker who was going to stop him from scoring. I wanted him to feel like the end zone was a thousand miles away. Confidently, Howard winked at me as he approached his offensive line to call the cadence for the last play of the game.

My body stiffened and straightened as I barked to my defensive teammates, “Not today, boys! Not even an inch—not today!”

The huge crowd fell silent, and I was alone with my thoughts.

“Who does this Jacoby Howard think he is?” I asked myself. He knew we weren’t intimidated by his mastery of the game or in awe of him. He was great, but so were we. I had spent my entire summer training for this one moment—the chance to knock off the Seaside Mustangs and secure bragging rights for the Sharks.

My teeth clenched as I dropped into the classic three-point stance playing my defensive position. I felt invincible. After everything we had been through the past four weeks, I knew there was no way he was going to get into the end zone.



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I was going to meet him head on, directly in the hole.

I was the brick wall.

Jacoby had to go through me to win the game.

*That isn't going to happen.*

“Could one play really make that much of a difference?”

*This is my moment.* I knew it was now or never.

This wasn't like any other fourth down in the history of Shark football. This one play could make us the first undefeated team in South Bay history.

Even though this was a junior-high football game, it meant so much more.

In my mind it wasn't fourth and one, it was fourth and forever!

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“Bruno, keep your head up! You can’t hit what you can’t see,” my dad bellowed during a tackling drill on the first day of football practice in early August.

I was lucky. My dad had been my football coach since I had started playing tackle football in the third grade. He was a diehard football fan and an amazing football player when he was younger. Dad had attended a small Division 2 college in Michigan where he had played linebacker. After college when it was apparent his football career was over, he had moved to Panama City, Florida, to work as a high-school Physical Education teacher.

During his first year in Panama City, he had

met another first-year teacher who had grown up on the beautiful beaches and coastal waters of the city. Within a year, they were married, and I was born a year later. My name is Brandon Michael Barnes, but those who know me around Panama City call me Bruno. I even have close friends who never knew my real name was Brandon.

I know Bruno is not a typical nickname. In the past, I had some adults ask me if I liked the nickname. I love it! To me, Bruno was a name fit for a middle linebacker. I hoped someday my name would be mentioned with other famous linebackers like Dick Butkus, Ray Lewis, and other NFL greats.

My younger brother Max was born three years after me. His full name is Maximus Edgar Barnes, but everyone calls him Bubba. My dad loved to give kids nicknames and especially to his own two boys.

Our entire team loves our team manager, who happens to be my now eight-year-old brother Bubba. Being the football manager meant the world to

Bubba, and he took his managerial job seriously. He oversaw the organization of all the game balls, served as our water boy, and made sure my dad had everything he needed during the game.

His most important job though, and the one he valued the most, was to retrieve both teams' kicking tees. Either on the kickoff, a field goal attempt, or an extra point, Bubba would dart from the sideline and return the tee to the right team.

Bubba's job became a South Bay tradition. Both teams and fans cheered loud and long as Bubba raced around the football field in his smaller-than-usual Sharks uniform. Having my little brother serve the players on my team means the world to me. A big part of that desire was because I wanted to be like my dad. I grew up listening to all the football stories and examining every inch of Dad's old scrapbooks. They were filled with articles and pictures of my dad when he played football.

Dad used to say, "Bruno, you are a Barnes, the son of Bill Barnes. Part of your dynasty is to be a linebacker."

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Linebackers, by nature, are tough, aggressive, and smart players. They are usually the biggest and hardest hitters on the team, as well as the defensive leaders.

All I have ever wanted to be is a leader. I tried to live up to that objective at every practice and in every game that I ever played. I had started at middle linebacker on every single football team I ever played on. There wasn't a single year where I didn't lead the team in tackles and sacks. I was the best middle linebacker around the Panama City area, and everyone knew it.

My two best friends, Chet Anderson and Leon Carr, were both great football players. We have played together for the past four years. Chet was our quarterback, and Leon played wide receiver and defensive back.

Our team has always been competitive and good. Last year, with most of our team being seventh graders, we went 8-1 with our only loss coming to an almost-all, eighth-grade team from Arnold Middle School.

South Bay has never had a middle school football team go undefeated.

*This is going to be the year!*

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The first day of practice was hot and sticky, typical Florida weather in August.

I loved it.

Dad blew his whistle hard three times, signaling for all of us to meet in the middle of the football field. We quickly took a knee and focused our eyes directly on my dad.

Football is about discipline, respect, and attention to detail. Dad always talked about those three basics and made them his points of emphasis when coaching.

“I like the way we are moving today. I love the energy. Boys, it shows who put in work this summer and who is prepared. For those who didn’t run and come to summer workouts, good luck,” he said.

Chet, Leon, and I hadn’t missed a single summer workout. We felt great being back on the football field.

The constant stream of sweat running down my face reminded me of all that I loved about football.

Dad introduced the three of us as captains to the team. He expected a lot from of us when we were on the football field and even more when we weren't. We were the team leaders; we had wanted it and had proven that we were ready.

“Everything is shaping up to make this year's football season at South Bay a magical one. I have one more little surprise that I wanted to let you know about this season,” Dad said.

All the players, who were leaning on one knee, leaned in to listen more intently. My dad wasn't big on surprises or changes, so we knew his announcement must be something important.

“Our last game of the year, game 9, won't be played against Edgewater this year,” Dad said.

Typically, South Bay always ended with an easy win over Edgewater. The Edgewater Dolphins had a great athletics program—in baseball and golf—but not football. They were always an easy game, and last year we won 54-0.

According to last year's football schedule, we were almost guaranteed a 9-0 season. All the players thought we would have the same schedule as the year before, *but suddenly we didn't*.

He continued, "I was able to book a game I know everyone will be excited to play in. This year our last game will be against the Seaside Mustangs."

The team tried to stifle a gasp.

*Did Dad just say we were going to play the Seaside Mustangs?*



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The Seaside Mustangs were an elite football team. They were well known throughout the entire state of Florida for having one of the best middle-school football teams every year. In fact, they were a football powerhouse in the South, not just Florida.

Last year, *The Florida Sun*, Panama City's major newspaper, featured a front-page story in their sports section about the Mustangs. The article detailed their decade of dominance in the Western Florida panhandle. The Mustangs had twice been voted the best eighth-grade team in the entire state. This year they were loaded once again and had a quarterback named Jacoby Howard. Jacoby was the younger brother of Jackson Howard.

Last year Jackson had won the Florida Gatorade Player of the Year for the state of Florida. He had signed with the Florida Gators and was already penciled in as the starting quarterback as a true freshman. He already had NFL potential at the age of 18.

The scary thing is when Jackson signed with Florida, he made an unbelievable prediction at his press conference: “My brother Jacoby is more skilled and has a better arm than I did in middle school.”

As an eighth grader, Jacoby already had offers from Florida and Florida State. Seaside had not lost a junior high football game in four years.

Even though the season hadn’t started yet, I knew theirs would be the only team standing in our way from an undefeated season and a chance to write our names in the history of South Bay football.

“Bro, did your dad just say we are playing Seaside? Or am I having a strange nightmare?” asked Chet, leaning over to me so no one else on the team could hear his question.

“I think so,” I said, trying not to sound surprised. At first, I was shocked. My dad hadn’t mentioned anything about the game to me...and I didn’t want Leon to know that.

“If we want to be the best, we have to beat the best,” I whispered with conviction. I wanted to sound confident and in control—like I was happy about the game.

Deep down inside, I was *not* happy about playing the Mustangs.

All summer I had worked out with one simple goal in mind. I wanted to be the captain of the first undefeated team in South Bay history. I wanted it so bad, but I also wanted it for my dad. His love for football was something we shared, and I wanted to be the one to help deliver an undefeated season for him.

“We can beat them,” I said loud enough for both Chet and Leon to hear me.

I added, “Guys, we are the captains of this team. If we are intimidated by them, the rest of the team will be too.”

Both nodded in agreement.

I didn't know why they were so nervous. After all, the task of stopping Jacoby Howard would be a problem for our entire defense.

I knew that.

I also knew that since I was the middle linebacker, I would be tasked with trying to slow down Howard on every play. Someone with his speed and skill set is almost impossible to stop; trying to contain him would be my main priority.

Dad's scratchy coach voice called for our attention. "Boys, forget about Seaside for now; the time to prepare for the Mustangs will come. We will focus on one day at a time, one team at a time. Our first game is only a couple of weeks away—against Lynn Haven. Only Lynn Haven—no one else—is who prepare for," ended Dad.

He had always prepared us to focus weekly on our opponent. Our team would play eight games before we took the field against the Mustangs. We were scheduled to play Seaside the last game of the year on Wednesday, October 10. One of the worst

things you can do in football is overlook other teams while looking ahead to other games.

*How can we not think about Seaside?*

I looked around the field and could feel the excitement. Images of Jacoby Howard scrambling around our football field flashed through my mind.

I knew I had to be laser focused, or we wouldn't even have a chance to be undefeated by the time Seaside came to South Bay at the end of the season. We couldn't overlook any team on our schedule.

“One game at a time...one game at a time,” I kept reminding myself.

# -4-

The first three weeks of the season went by fast. Our season kicked off with a 48-6 convincing win over Lynn Haven. I was so excited to finally have a football game and hit other people who weren't my teammates.

Our entire team played well. Chet threw three touchdowns with two going to Leon.

On the defensive side, I had twelve tackles and two sacks. I was in the Lynn Haven offensive backfield more than their running backs were. Near the end of third quarter, Leon intercepted a pass and ran it all the way back for a touchdown. I made a big block on our sideline to spring Leon free for the touchdown. Once he cleared the first level of

players, he was gone. Leon was fast and watching him pull away from everyone as he scored a 64-yard touchdown on the interception return was amazing.

I can think of nothing I loved more than celebrating in the end zone with my team.

The next games proved to be two easy victories, and I didn't play much after halftime because we had such a commanding lead.

The Sharks were 3-0, and all three wins came in a dominating manner. A buzz was starting around Panama City. The locals knew that the Sharks were developing into a great football team.

I loved everything about growing up in Panama City. The beaches, inland waterways and excellent fishing in the Gulf of Mexico made our city a worldwide attraction for tourists. Typically, we have many year-round visitors, but most visitors come from May through the end of October.

Known as a summer town, the fall is a great time to visit my hometown. Panama City plays host to several renowned fall festivals, including

the Chasin' the Sun Music Festival, the Lobster Festival, and my favorite, the Pirates of the High Seas Fest.

Each year on Columbus Day weekend, thousands of people flock to Panama City for the Pirates of the High Seas Fest. This free, family-friendly festival filled with excitement and interaction hosts scavenger hunts, a pirate invasion on the beach, a kids' parade and a huge, main attraction parade. The entire weekend offers live music and a spectacular fireworks display on Saturday night at Russell-Fields City Pier.

Our entire school, including the football team, was extra excited this year. South Bay had been chosen to be the lead float in the parade—a big honor among all the schools in Panama City. Each year, one school is honored for classroom excellence by being selected to be the first float in the parade.

Everything was coming together, and all the signs were pointing to an epic fall at South Bay.

School was crazy the week of the festival. The



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local media was present all week, and our principal, Mr. McDonald, was even interviewed by a television news show out of Tallahassee.

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Our football games always fell on a Wednesday, so practice was extra intense on Monday and Tuesday. The increase of attention had our players hitting harder and running faster. Our opponent, Sunnyside Middle School, wasn't going to be prepared for what was coming on Wednesday. I knew that if we practiced in this manner all the time, we would be almost unbeatable for any team—even Seaside.

By the time the first whistle blew Wednesday night, everyone was ready for a Shark feeding frenzy.

The game was over in the first eight minutes, as we took a 36-0 lead after the first quarter. Our team seemed so much faster, and we were making spectacular plays on both the offensive and defensive side of the ball.

My highlight came late in the second quarter. I

blitzed and sacked their quarterback. I hit him so hard, he fumbled the football. Without missing a beat, I scooped up the loose pigskin and rumbled 44 yards for a Shark defensive touchdown!

The game ended with a 52-14 victory, pushing our record to 4-0. After the game, all the guys were hyped and excited. I was all smiles as we took a knee at midfield for Dad's postgame speech.

"Boys, I am really, really proud of you all. This week you practiced like champions. That focus and attention to detail led to a dominant victory!" he said as the players erupted into cheers.

He smiled and let us enjoy a couple seconds of rowdiness before he raised his hand, signaling all of us to go silent.

"We are halfway there but don't lose focus. This is a fun, crazy weekend with the festival. I expect you to act and demonstrate the kind of character that makes the Sharks so special," Dad said.

He added, "Don't forget, Mr. McDonald has asked the football team to lead the South Bay Shark float this year. What an honor! Make sure

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you show up in your uniform at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday to line up for the parade.”

I beamed with excitement. For the first time, South Bay would be leading the parade. The whole city of Panama would be seeing Shark football players in the front, where we finally belonged.

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Saturday finally arrived as Bubba and I raced to our school’s float. We passed many other schools along the parade line. With each one, my heart swelled that they were watching us in our Shark uniforms heading to the front of the line.

When we finally made it to the front, my heart dropped.

South Bay still had the lead float, but I couldn’t believe who they placed right behind us as the second float.

# -5-

The Seaside Mustangs were the second float!

*Of all the schools in Panama City? There has to be over 30 other schools in the parade line. Why in the world would the organizers put Seaside behind us?* I thought.

The green-and-white school colors of the Mustangs were everywhere.

“Dude,” mentioned Leon, “I just saw Jacoby Howard.”

“So?” I responded sharply.

“I am just saying...I was thinking about asking him for an autograph,” Leon said.

I turned and shot Leon a look.

“I don’t think so. Come on, man. We have to

prepare to beat them. The last thing you should be thinking about is asking him for an autograph. That's embarrassing," I said sternly.

"Dude, it's one football game," Chet said softly. Chet was always quieter, which meant his words always held a lot of weight with me.

"I know, but it's going to be the type of game everyone will remember; this is our chance," I said.

"It's one game," Chet said again.

Beating Seaside had become an obsession for me. I was starting to realize I was so consumed with wanting to win that game that I was missing out on many of the great things our football team was doing. I really wanted to enjoy everything, but I just couldn't get my mind off the Mustangs.

I knew Chet was right but being right and being okay with it are two different matters.

Other Shark teammates were starting to show up for the parade. Everyone had a good laugh when Louie, our starting center, showed up with the wrong color jersey. He was the only one standing in his white jersey among a sea of blue jerseys.

Dad had told us at least three times at the end of Friday's practice to wear our blue uniforms.

"Nice one, Louie," I commented as he ran up.

"My fault, I forgot. It's fine," he said.

"Okay, you definitely will stand out in the parade," I said with a grin. Louie usually stood out no matter where we went.

Our float looked great. The South Bay Student Council had designed a huge great white shark outfitted with a pirate hat and an eye patch. The shark was eating a huge treasure chest filled with pirate gold.

About 100 students, including 35 football players, were there. I looked at the crowd and made eye contact with my dad. He was smiling from ear to ear. I could tell he was proud of his team, proud of his two sons, and proud to be a Shark.

The loudspeaker on the street clicked on, crackling as the broadcaster announced, "The parade will be starting in two minutes." After the announcement, I started hearing a strange buzz coming from behind us.

As minutes passed, the noise grew louder and louder, even getting everyone's attention at our float. I turned to see what all the noise was about.

Standing directly behind us, was a mob of Seaside football players. Their green jerseys reflected brightly behind us.

Jacoby Howard, who was out in front of everyone else, stood staring and laughing. His fresh fade haircut and jewelry sparkled in the sun. He took the role of a superstar to the next level. His gold chain was adorned with a big, heavy gold #13 on it.

Well before seeing his number, I recognized who he was. If I didn't know better, I would have thought he was at least a sophomore.

Our eyes met. "Hey, Buddy, you better help your boy next time," he said sarcastically.

"*Buddy?* Did he just call me *Buddy?*" I asked myself.

"My name is Bruno, and I am no buddy of yours," I shot back. In my mind, I heard my dad's words of wisdom after practice reminding us to be quiet and not to respond. I ignored his instruction.

The entire crowd became quiet and tense as kids from both schools waited to see who would make the next move.

“Just wait until we clobber you! You won’t have so much to say then!” a voice from behind me boomed loudly.

“Who in his right mind would say that?” I asked myself, turning around.

It was Bubba, and he was pointing directly at Jacoby!