

The Best Show On TV

by Joe Mulder

"The Office" (NBC) – 2/9/2006 - 4/2/2006
"Huff" (Showtime) – 4/2/2006 - 8/26/2006
"Big Brother" (CBS) – 8/26/2006 - 10/4/2006
"South Park" (Comedy Central) – 10/4/2006 - 11/30/2006
"The Office" (NBC) – 11/30/2006 - 1/14/2007
"24" (Fox) – 1/14/2007 - 4/5/2007
"30 Rock" (NBC) – 4/5/2007 - 4/10/2008
"House" (Fox) – 4/10/2008 - 10/5/2008
"Dexter" (Showtime) – 10/5/2008 - 11/18/2008
"The Shield" (FX) – 11/18/2008 - 11/24/2008
"How I Met Your Mother" (CBS) – 11/24/2008 - 1/8/2009
"30 Rock" (NBC) – 1/8/2009 - 9/9/2009
"Glee" (Fox) – 9/9/2009 - 10/28/2009
"Friday Night Lights" (NBC) – 10/28/2009 - present

[Mild spoilers ahead, but nothing you can't handle. I promise]

It took me a little while to get this written; as you may have noticed, the Best Show on TV title actually changed hands last October and I'm just now getting around to reporting on it.

I have a good excuse, though: nothing I could possibly write about "Friday Night Lights" (the fourth season of which concluded a number of weeks ago on DirecTV, and will start airing Friday night on NBC) would do it justice, so it's an intimidating task. It's quite simply the greatest television show of all time. Fifty years from now, in American Literature classes, students will be reading Faulkner and watching "Friday Night Lights." No, I'm not exaggerating. No less an arbitrator of contemporary American culture than *The New York Times* claimed, after only the pilot episode, that "Friday Night Lights" was

not just television great, but great in the way of a poem or painting, great in the way of art with a single obsessive creator who doesn't have to consult with a committee and has months or years to go back and agonize over line breaks and the color red; it could belong in a league with art that doesn't have to pause for commercials, or casually recap the post-commercial action, or sell viewers on the plot and characters in the first five minutes, or hew to a line-item budget, or answer to unions and studios, or avoid four-letter words and nudity.

Indeed.

"Friday Night Lights" is nothing less than the story of early 21st-century America, a meditation on the state of our union – and, more specifically, on the particular residents of our union who might have to, say, drive more than an hour to get to an art house movie theater. That half of the population is represented on "Friday Night Lights" by the inhabitants of

fictional Dillon, Texas, where high school football is king. That doesn't mean you have to enjoy football to appreciate the show, though; not by any stretch of the imagination. After all, *something* is king everywhere. In fact, I suspect even city-dwellers, childless singles, and non-sports fans alike will find themes that resonate.

By way of example: the show focuses primarily on young men and women – generally in their late teens – discovering and becoming the men and women that they will be for the rest of their lives; and also on the parents, mentors and educators charged with overseeing these kids' transition to adulthood. I personally am a decade-and-a-half removed from high school and a decade-and-a-half removed from having children that age, and yet I've never found myself more wrapped up in the fates of any fictional characters, be they on television, on film, or in books.

And what characters they are.

Coach Eric Taylor, so passionate about football, so skilled at molding boys into men and individuals into a team, so devoted to his family, and so ill-suited for a world of ulterior motives, hidden agendas, behind-the-scenes politicking; the world we all inhabit, in other words. He's a truly remarkable man with truly remarkable skills, skills which are of increasingly little use the further he gets from the football field. One gets the sense that that's a shame, though, and that if everyone were more like Coach Taylor the world would be a little bit better, and life would be a little bit easier to navigate. Not a ton; but a little.

Tami Taylor, brilliant and beautiful, having cast her lot with Eric, could resent this small west Texas life, one that others in her position might regard themselves as above. Instead, she seems to have taken to heart the late Bill Holm's contention that the heart can be filled anywhere on earth, and she spends her time trying to fill the hearts of others as well. Occasionally, she succeeds. She rarely if ever wavers from her principles or from the courage of her convictions, which as we know is remarkable and rare. But she doesn't have special powers, she's not magic; just watch as she tries to parent her teenage daughter (with earnest but minimally effective help from her husband). While she tries harder than most she has no idea if she's doing it right, any more than anybody else does.

That teenage daughter is Julie Taylor, clearly destined for a life beyond Dillon, Texas. As a parent you would drop to your knees and pray with all your might that you'd get a kid like Julie Taylor but she can still be a bit of a pain in the ass, just like any teenager. Hell, just like anybody. But teenagers especially. Ready for adulthood but trapped in childhood, and not all that interested in football. She's mature and well-adjusted enough that she's not contemptuous of football just because the masses love it; after all, her beloved father loves football too, so how bad could it really be? But she's not really invested in it beyond the effect it has on those she

cares about. Not like the rest of the town seems to be.

Not like Matt Saracen, her love interest, the backup quarterback with the soul of an artist. It's through Matt that we get to see the difference Coach Taylor makes; the Matt Saracen of Season 4 simply wouldn't have existed, and the world would be the poorer for it, if Coach Taylor hadn't taken the shy, fatherless Matt Saracen of Season 1 under his wing. Was it a self-serving act, initially? Sure; Matt was a young quarterback, raw, uncertain, wet behind the ears, and Coach Taylor's professional future depended on the kid's success. But as the years go by we find out – not that we doubted it – that once you're really one of Coach Taylor's kids you stay one of Coach Taylor's kids. Even when football is over. There's always a lot of talk about high school football shaping character and helping to prepare young men for the rest of their lives, and a lot of that talk might come from boosters and fans simply seeking to justify the enormous attention and financial support that certain football programs receive. But wouldn't you know it, just look at Matt Saracen: high school football really *can* shape your character and help prepare you for the rest of your life.

And if the life's work of Eric Taylor is reflected in the man that Matt Saracen will become, then the life's work of his wife Tami is reflected in Tyra Collette. Tyra is gorgeous and bright but is as interested in destructive, unavailable men as she is uninterested in school. It somehow has never occurred to her that her life might possibly follow a different path than that of her mother: land some job around town that pays the rent, poop out a couple of kids, and then just jump from one exciting older guy who ultimately won't settle down with you to another. Tami sees Tyra's promise, though, and tirelessly, relentlessly, refuses to let her waste it, refuses to believe that she's a lost cause.

Lost cause? Tim Riggins, perhaps. In Season 4 of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (stay with me here...) a character muses that vampires not only fear death but, "being immortal, [they] fear it more than those to whom it comes naturally." So it is for recently graduated (as of Season 4) Dillon Panthers fullback Tim Riggins. Big, strong, fast, popular, handsome, charismatic, and yet somehow able to avoid the crush of pressure that falls upon the team's coach and star players; Tim Riggins is simply immune to almost all of the fears and insecurities that occupy the mind of a typical kid his age. But when one of those fears or insecurities – difficulty with school, perhaps, or the wear and tear of a familial or romantic relationship – does manage to make its dirty little way into the back of his mind, he's much more scared than those of us mere mortals who are used to living with uncertainty and doubt. And so, being congenitally unable to avoid fucking himself over, he gets into a brawl. Or involves himself in some not-quite-legal activity. Or crawls into a bottle. It would be a tragic waste if he finally stopped crawling back out, but such tragedies dot the landscape of every town, large and small. We'll see. I know he's not real, but I still find myself desperately hoping (against hope) that

things work out for Tim Riggins.

And I haven't even gotten to Jason Street, Lyla Garrity, Buddy Garrity, Joe McCoy or the incomparable Landry Clark (who becomes – much to my delight – more and more involved in the show in each subsequent season), not to mention all the new additions to the cast you can expect in Season 4 if you aren't lucky enough to have already watched it on DirecTV like I did.

And if you haven't watched *any* "Friday Night Lights" yet, then please, please do. If you've ever liked any TV show – if you've ever enjoyed any narrative storytelling, in any form – I can't for the life of me imagine that you won't love "Friday Night Lights."

True, the show does have to accommodate some niggling television annoyances – just like any network TV program – but it manages to transcend them to such a degree that one never finds oneself wishing or wondering what the show might be like if the typical constraints of the form weren't imposed on it. Well, maybe you find yourself wishing that the FCC took a more "European" attitude in regards to titillating content during the occasional scene featuring Tyra (or, if your tastes run a different way, Tim Riggins), but that's about it.

And I suppose football fans should beware that football action is relatively scarce on the show, and when it's depicted it tends to be overly simple and somewhat unrealistic. During one game, for instance, Matt Saracen repeatedly pleads with Coach Taylor to take advantage of the other team's safeties, who are playing awfully deep. He presses the issue until finally Coach Taylor, during a timeout, reveals to him why his idea isn't a good one: those are two of the fastest safeties in all of Texas. Now, that is information a coach would certainly want his quarterback to possess prior to the fourth quarter of a game against those very safeties, yet in the interest of interpersonal drama it's handled that way instead. A point about the characters' relationship is made, but some realism is sacrificed.

Non-football fans should also be advised that, contrary to what "Friday Night Lights" tends to depict, the vast majority of points in high school football are *not* scored either on plays that traverse a full three-quarters of the field or on interceptions returned for touchdowns.

I can only assume, though, that the writers and producers of "Friday Night Lights" made a conscious choice to use actual football scenes sparingly, and to make those scenes accessible to every viewer regardless of how little he or she knows about the sport. And to do that they necessarily had to – for lack of a better term – dumb the football scenes down, and risk of turning off football fans in the process. That risk is minimal, though, since as unrealistic as the football scenes on "Friday Nigh Lights" tend to be, they're still a good bit more realistic than most other football scenes from most

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other movies and TV shows that most football fans have seen.

But "Friday Night Lights" really isn't even a show about football; it's a show about those remarkable people I mentioned before. Football is a big part of their lives, and the town's passion for football serves as a catalyst for many of the events that make up their lives, but their lives are what the show is really about.

And, football notwithstanding, their lives are ours.

Start watching it. Please.
