



# MANY LOSSES YET UNDEFEATED

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**T**RED LAKE, MINN. — The final home game of the season kicks off on the south side of the reservation in a few hours. That gives the football team's head coach just enough time to pick up his daughters at school, drop them at day care and hustle home to finish last-minute arrangements for Senior Night.

Nolan Desjarlait stays in motion to keep his mind from drifting, to live in the moment. *Focus on what's in front of you*, he says often. The coach preaches this advice to everyone, and the words help him carry the weight of a losing streak that never ends and grief that will never go away.

Desjarlait grew up on the Red Lake Reservation, a star athlete at Red Lake High School. He is now the school's athletic director and coaches three varsity sports. If a game is happening on the reservation, he's there.

"I can't say no to kids," Desjarlait says. He tries to be everywhere, tries to be everything these kids need. Until he gets to the one place he lets himself be still.

The house is a quarter mile off the main road, nestled between tall pine trees. Desjarlait gets out of his car and heads toward the edge of the property, stopping when he reaches a clearing that overlooks two lakes.

Nolan Desjarlait Jr.'s grave site is here, surrounded by old sports equipment and the boy's favorite memorabilia. There is a Steph Curry sign. A basketball is on the ground. A football. The baseball bat his 10-year-old son used in a game shortly before he died. A flower wreath hangs on a tree. Solar lights illuminate the area at night. Wooden benches adorned with hand-carved inscriptions invite visitors to sit.

Desjarlait picks up the bat and leans it against his son's grave. He remembers the game when Nolan Jr. used it. Sometimes he sits here for hours, remembering everything.

People here still marvel at



## FOREVER IN THEIR HEARTS

Red Lake coach Nolan Desjarlait visits his son Nolan Desjarlait Jr.'s grave site often, a peaceful spot in his backyard. Senior quarterback Cade Beaulieu, holding a photo with his best friend, remembers Nolan Jr. as a standout athlete who won the respect of other kids. "Everything I do," Beaulieu says, "I just try to go extra hard to make him proud."

young Nolan Jr.'s athletic talent. He would have been a senior at Red Lake High this year, undoubtedly a star athlete, his father his coach.

His friends are seniors now. This is their Senior Night. They have not won a game in their career, because Red Lake has not won a game in their lifetime. Records suggest that 1999 was the last time the Red Lake Warriors won a varsity football game. Low participation puts them at a disadvantage against opponents that have twice as many players. Injuries force them to rely on middle-school players, or sometimes forfeit games.

But the players who never win keep coming back. They keep showing up for each other and for the coach who refuses to quit on them.

"I don't know how many times throughout all these five years I wanted to quit," says senior Justin Brown, tears welling. "I just can't. These are my brothers."

At halftime, the seniors get roses from Desjarlait and his wife, Nicole. The couple bring carnations for the other players and doughnuts and cupcakes for family members. Red Lake is losing, but the mood is upbeat.

Parents join their sons on the field for pictures and treats. Players gather for a group photo, then cheer when their coach joins them.

"This is *our* half!" junior receiver Gerald Kingbird Jr. yells to teammates as they buckle their helmets for the second half.

Kingbird Jr. is wearing No. 12 this season. He switched numbers because that was Nolan Jr.'s jersey number in every sport.

"I think about him every day," Kingbird Jr. says.

## Football is a tough sell

The Warriors' old football plaques fit comfortably on one small shelf of the glass trophy case that stretches along the gymnasium entrance. A display at the far end highlights the baseball team. The hallways are empty on this summer day, and Desjarlait smiles as he stares at the ensemble of pictures and trophies. He had a hand in most of them.

The Desjarlait name is well