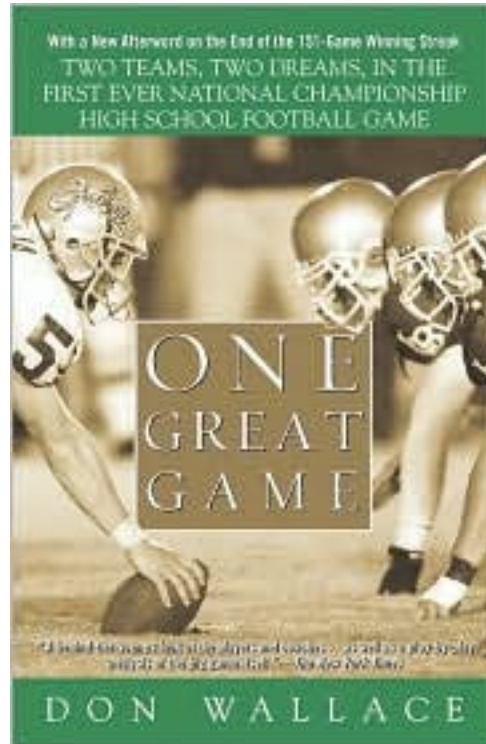


# SportsLetter Interviews

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## Don Wallace

Born and raised in Long Beach, Calif., journalist Don Wallace graduated from one of the nation's premiere sports high schools: Long Beach Polytechnic. Poly has produced more NFL players than any other high school, including such standouts as Gene Washington, Earl McCullough, and Willie McGinest. Other alumni include tennis star Billie Jean King, known then as Billie Jean Moffitt; baseball's Tony Gwynn; basketball's Mack Calvin; and track stars/Olympians Earl Thomson, John Rambo, and Martha Watson, not to mention actress Cameron Diaz and rapper Snoop Dogg.



On October 6, 2001, Poly faced off against Concord, Calif.-based powerhouse De La Salle, thus pitting the nation's number-one ranked team, Poly, against the number-two ranked team, De La Salle. The game itself was an historic moment, marking the first-ever national championship high school football game. Before a sellout crowd at Veterans Stadium in Long Beach, De La Salle, which entered the game with an improbable 10-year, 116-game winning streak, prevailed, 29-15. De La Salle's winning streak has now reached 151 games.

Wallace used the occasion to research and write "One Great Game" (Atria Books), about the two contenders. On the surface, the schools are polar opposites. Poly is a public school located in a gritty, urban setting, with a

melting-pot mix of Cambodian, Vietnamese, African-American, white, and Pacific Islander students. De La Salle is a Catholic, private school nestled in the bucolic setting of northern California, with predominantly white students. As the big game approaches, Wallace explores that dichotomy.

The result is a book about high school football that is about much more than sports. It is about how sports shape community in America, and how communities and schools gain identity through sports. In so doing, Wallace joins the pantheon of authors who have used high-school sports as a departure point to examine such issues, including H.G. Bissinger's "Friday Night Lights," Madeleine Blais' "In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle," and Darcy Frey's "Last Shot."

Now 51, Wallace lives in New York City with his wife and son. We talked when Wallace returned to Long Beach on his book-promotion tour, then completed the interview via email.

— David Davis

**SportsLetter:** When did you decide to write this book?

**Don Wallace:** My niece was surfing in Indonesia, and she bought a chess set for my son for Christmas. When she came home, she wrapped it in the sports pages of the Long Beach Press Telegram. I read the paper and saw the announcement of the game between Poly and De La Salle. I said to myself, if this is the first time a number-one and-two ranked teams have ever met, then this is a national championship game and it's the first ever. I just felt the hair rising up my neck. Also, I had been writing a memoir about the Civil Rights era and my experiences at Long Beach Poly. I had published two sections of it in Harper's. I was at the point of bringing this to the publishers when the Poly-De La Salle game came up. I thought the football game would give me the hook to tell the world about Poly, about Long Beach, about race, about sports.

**SL:** There have been several prominent books about high school athletes in the last dozen years, with Bissinger's "Friday Night Lights" leading the way. Why haven't there been more books about high school football?

**DW:** “Friday Night Lights” is still selling extremely well in paperback, years after it first was published. Normally, the publishing industry would stand up and salute if you brought that to their attention. But I think there’s a real bias against football writing. Publishing is concentrated on the East Coast. In Manhattan, there’s no such thing as high school football — schools there don’t play football anymore. The majority of editors [in publishing] are women. They look around and say, no one’s doing football books, which creates a perception that football books don’t sell. When I was in high school, we had a brief flurry of football literacy. We had “Paper Lion” [by George Plimpton], “North Dallas Forty” [by Peter Gent], “Instant Replay” [by Jerry Kramer edited by Dick Schaap], “Meat on the Hoof” [by Gary Shaw], “Out of Their League” [by Dave Meggyesy]. Then there was this tremendous falloff. What happened was irritating to me: baseball writers have taken over, with their bow ties. They’re terribly erudite, and they talk about the Euclidian geometry of the diamond. I was arguing for the primacy of football, but there was nothing to back me up. Actually, what probably helped me was the movie “Remember the Titans,” which was a big surprise hit. That was quite influential in the perception of football. Whenever you have a creeping success, suddenly everyone takes notice.

**SL:** You’re a proud Poly alum: what was the school like when you went there?

**DW:** My uncle Max played on Poly’s first team, in 1907. I was the third generation in my family to play football at Poly — I was a senior during the ‘69 season. That’s considered the beginning of the low point of Poly football. That coincided with the social changes were taking place in Los Angeles, including the sweep of what was called “white flight” following the Watts Riots. First, South Central L.A. and Compton changed from pretty much all white to almost all black in a matter of 18-24 months. Then, north Long Beach was the next stop. People’s attitudes were hostile and completely divided. At the time, Poly was still living with one foot in the 1940s and 1950s and one foot in the very troubled 1960s. On the student-social level, it was run by white fraternities and sororities, which dominated campus life — all of the political offices, the homecoming queens, the student newspaper positions. But this Berlin wall of old-style, fraternal- and sorority-based control was crumbling. There were two race riots in

my three years at the school. The first race riot — when I was a junior — was tough, but it wasn't catastrophic. The second one, when I was a senior, was a famous race riot. The school was closed. The community invaded from the outside, and the school erupted from the inside. It was extraordinarily violent and convulsive. People were locked in their classrooms eight-ten hours. People were beaten.

**SL:** What was it like to return to Poly?

**DW:** Some 30 years later, when I drove in, I found I had flashes of post-traumatic stress syndrome. I was clenched up, waiting for that moment when someone comes up and takes your lunch money. But the total opposite happened. As I walked in, I found that everyone was smiling at me and saying, "How do you do, sir? Can I help you?" One other big change; they don't use the big front door anymore. It's unsafe. They use a side door so everyone who comes in gets eye-balled. It's out of the firing line for drive-bys. Demographically, the majority of students is now Cambodian — 38 percent. The rule at Poly, as I learned, is not to have any majority. It's a "minority rules" situation.

**SL:** Why has Poly attracted such amazing football talent, from Morley Drury to Gene Washington to Willie McGinest?

**DW:** Geographically, when Long Beach began in 1888, it was very attractive to live here- it was the Miami Beach of California. Long Beach is just large enough at 400,000 people to attract real talent. For years, Long Beach spent more on education than most West Coast areas. And the city boasted of it as a marketing device to bring in people from the mid-west. Historically, people came here to work in the oil fields, in aircraft plants, in shipyards. My football classmates were the sons of riveters: they were tough. Then, World War II brought African-Americans. Poly wasn't a segregated school and began to get this reputation as a classy place.

**SL:** Is Poly just a football factory?

**DW:** The biggest problem Poly faces now is that the football program is too professionalized. They're under tremendous stress to send people to the top ranks, to produce Division I athletes. Which means that, on the

one hand, you have transfers banging on the door. Then you have players who grew up in the system from when they were four and five. Those two currents have some very strong friction-making encounters. This is the balancing act the coaches go through, and this has resulted in turmoil.

**SL:** Is De La Salle a football factory?

**DW:** The most impressive thing, on a sports level, is that De La Salle has total buy-in. No parent comes on the field and whispers in the coach's ears. At Poly, there are 10-50 people — parents, friends, hangers-on — on the field at every practice. They work out at De La Salle 49 weeks out of the year. It doesn't mean you can't miss a workout now and then, but the team is in lock-step. Those workouts, as opposed to any other high school team I've ever seen, are run on 30- and 60-second whistles. It's like this, like this [snaps fingers]. The kids are trained by masters of strength and conditioning, and they're trained to look after each other. They critique each other's form and won't allow you to do a lift without the proper technique. They would stop you and break down your technique and make you re-work it right on the spot, even if it delayed everything.

**SL:** Were they suspicious of you being part of the "Poly family"?

**DW:** De La Salle couldn't have been more open. They let me into places they'd never let anyone before, into their chapels, into their team meetings, into their locker-room. In return, they never asked anything. That was the most impressive thing.

**SL:** What else was different about De La Salle?

**DW:** The greatest difference is that De La Salle draws from a middle- to upper-income base, regardless of race. They're not an all-white team. What they have is, within their Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and African-American student body, stable families. The kids eat three good meals a day and they go home and sleep in a stable household. The poverty level in the Concord area is two percent. In Long Beach it's probably 32 percent. That's the base difference. Their lives are together. They're not being shocked by big changes. The poor lose their jobs more, the poor don't have healthcare. They are more affected by dozens of things

— including violence, asthma, poor eating choices — because they're not exposed to the proper choices. I asked the De La Salle players the supplement question — you know, how are you able to gain 10-15 pounds without taking supplements? They said, "Well, we eat steak, all the steak we want."

**SL:** Were you surprised by the outcome of the game?

**DW:** This was a classic match-up of well-coached teams with great talent on both sides. There were people who, in their gut, had the outcome already figured out, but nobody really knows anything. But it was very tough going into the game because there were journalists handicapping it like crazy. Many of them said, "Well, Poly's faster." In truth, De La Salle was just as quick as Poly. They may not have had players with the 10.3 speed of [Poly sprinter-receiver] Derrick Jones, but across the board they were faster. One reason for that is they don't carry a big squad. They carry a tiny squad — 45 kids — who have worked out for three solid years. But with a well-knit, well-trained, three-years-in the trenches brotherhood like De La Salle, playing both ways [offense and defense] is always going to be better. Actually, you realize that one of the problems Poly has is carrying 80-90 kids. They have to give players their time. They have to platoon and substitute. About the only place where it's an advantage is on the defensive line, where if you can keep rotating in the 280-pounders, the average team is going to fold. But De La Salle is anything but average.

**SL:** Will we ever see a winning streak like De La Salle's, in any sport?

**DW:** The De La Salle streak is unique, but that doesn't mean some badminton team in Pakistan won't surpass it. It's not even the longest streak in sports; the San Francisco Chronicle did a nice job researching winning streaks recently, and a wrestling team from Brandon High in Florida had the longest streak [Editor's Note: According to the Tampa Bay Tribune, the streak recently reached 375 consecutive dual meets.] But a win streak achieved in a major sport against nationally ranked competition, such as De La Salle's, is probably never going to happen again. What makes the De La Salle streak so significant is that it's in one of the sports where streaks are most rare. It's harder to put wins together in football than in baseball and basketball, simply from a management point of view:

the game puts more people on the field, has more complex components, and is subject to the quirks of an oblong, inflated ball played in all weathers. What elevates the De La Salle streak is that it is a modern one, achieved against ever-stronger competition. I don't think you can place a lot of value on the high school football win streaks of the 1920s, '40s, or even '50s. It was a different era, when athletes didn't train year-round and teams didn't stray out of their regions. They also didn't try to play a unified national schedule. Mitigating against the De La Salle streak is the fact that, in the early years, they played a regional schedule in a relative backwater that yielded only a couple of good teams a year. So they got a five-year head start on building their streak. But then that's the way these things happen; as De La Salle got better, they attracted marquee opponents. They didn't run away from the biggest powers in the state, and they beat them.

**SL:** Is there any way to quantify how much pressure each De La Salle team faces?

**DW:** The existence of the streak is acknowledged but not placed on any kind of pedestal. There's no breast-beating or trash-talking at practices or in the locker-rooms, nobody screaming in somebody's face, "You're going to make us lose!" That's the influence of [head coach] Bob Ladouceur, and his assistants, and it's important that he's backed up by De La Salle's principal, Brother Christopher Brady. I've heard "Coach Lad" start a sentence on many occasions with a matter-of-fact, "When we lose. . . ." The pressure the players receive from some parents, former players, fans, rivals, the community and their fellow teenagers is constant. It didn't strike me as oppressive; I've experienced far worse in 9-and-under soccer leagues and in pickup basketball games. But that doesn't mean it isn't there as a powerful undertow. The players have built this streak as much as the coaches, and I think they have their ways of enforcing what it takes to keep it going. Hazing may have been involved in the early years — what sport or team hasn't had some of that? — but the rituals now are about bonding, without rites involving humiliation or abuse. As the father of a teenage boy, as a former teenager and athlete myself, I almost don't know how the kids handle it — except that, having watched a season's worth of practices and key games, it's evident that complete preparation gives these kids a reservoir of self-esteem, competence, and leadership

that allows them to play at a level far above other teams. They know this going in; they play looser and better. And it helps that the coaches and the school consistently underplay the streak and even publicly debate whether it's a "good" thing or not.

**SL:** How does coach Ladouceur handle the pressure?

**DW:** I think Ladouceur handles the pressure by living fully and responsibly in the moment of every hour of every day. He's like a Zen monk or a samurai or, to place it in a Christian context, a missionary; he wears his heart on his sleeve, so he doesn't have to spend all his energy on his public image or his fame, such as it is. Like all great teachers of kids, he draws energy from the teaching, from the young minds he is trying to reach. Of course, I also know he hits the exercise bike at 7 a.m., so he's mortal like the rest of us and finds a good workout necessary to keeping equipoise. And he reads books in areas unrelated to football, about human potential and inspirational people in history. Finally, although he is very private and does not include his family in his public persona, I know these are his most important relationships: his wife and children.

**SL:** You mentioned that high-school football seems to be headed toward a BCS-like playoff system. Is that the future of high school football — and is that good for high school football?

**DW:** In the three years since the game in my book, the great American marketing juggernaut has improvised a format for selecting, hyping, and broadcasting a high school football "Super Game" of the year. The Long Beach Poly-De La Salle game is still the king in terms of Nielsen ratings, but the De La Salle-Evangel Christian game this fall, the first nationally televised game, was the clincher. It got national coverage, including a big New York Times pre-game story. It drew .56 in the Nielsens, but just as importantly established a story line we can expect to see in the years to come, for as long as De La Salle remains unbeaten: the saintly, white-hatted Spartans against the rogue, black-hatted challengers such as Evangel. Proof of this is that just this week De La Salle signed to play Mission Viejo, a team with a much-criticized program and coach. Given the increased professionalization of the major high school polls and their close symbiosis with the media — and given the likelihood that the De



La Salle streak will continue for another couple of years — I foresee that the non-league, or pre-season, games will become an alternative season tucked into the old-style league. Down the line it's really scary: I can see the various regional powerhouses opting out of their leagues and even state championships in order to pursue TV "Super Games." It's already a reality for De La Salle and Evangel, both of whom have left their regions and leagues far behind in terms of scheduling.

Is this good for high school football? No. The soul of the game is in its community roots. For high school sports in general, it may also be a disaster, because football knits together school sports and often subsidizes athletic facilities. Unlike what goes on with the college game, at the high school level football is still a relatively benign, or positive, presence.