



Above All Else

Jeff Ross

Reading level: 3.4

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Book Summary

Del plays striker on his high school soccer team, the Cardinals, and they've gone almost three seasons undefeated. To Del, it's just a game, but some of the players think winning is all that matters. When an ugly tackle results in a major loss for the Cardinals against their main rival, the Rebels, things get heated between the teams. That night, one of Del's teammates has his ankle broken by an unknown assailant, leaving him unable to take part in the playoffs.

As Del tries to figure out which of the Rebels' players is responsible for the attack, his coach brings in a substitute player, and he's actually really good. Is it just a coincidence, or did someone finally take the *above all else* mentality too far?

Prereading Ideas

- Is winning everything?
- If winning isn't everything, why do so many of us forget that?
- Under what kinds of circumstances is it acceptable to break someone's trust?
- Why is it important to get to the bottom of a mystery instead of simply making assumptions about what happened?

Connecting to the Text

Plot

- Ask students what they know about red herrings in mystery novels. Have them look the term up and talk about the purpose of red herrings. Read chapter 6 again. Ask students to identify how Coach is set up as a red herring. Can they find other examples of red herrings in *Above All Else*?

Character

- When Del and Riley leave the pizza parlor after the first game, Jared holds his fist out for a bump. Del delivers, but it makes him feel awkward and cheesy. “I’ve tried to get into this whole sport-guy culture, and it just isn’t me,” Del reflects. “I love soccer, but I leave it on the field.” When Del talks about “sport-guy culture” he’s referring to stereotypes. Discuss these with your students. When are they useful? When are they not?
- As a follow-up to the above activity, have students work in small groups to create a stereotypical athlete (groups may choose their sport, or they may decide to do a “global athlete” who represents many sports). Trace or outline the body of one group member on chart or banner paper. This creates the athlete’s shape. Then, use labels to map his or her characteristics. Share these stereotype maps with the class.
- One way of developing strong characters is through dialogue. In dialogue, the reader is able to “hear” characters as they speak. Carefully-written beats (see *Literary Techniques* below) help the reader to “see” the characters as they speak with each other. We can see their body language and the way they move, which furthers our understanding of the characters and their relationship to one another. Have students read the conversation between Del, Riley, Jared and Oz at Romano’s restaurant in chapter 8. Talk about what makes this section of dialogue so strong. Ask students to find a passage of dialogue in a different book. Can they find places where the dialogue can be improved? Challenge them to add beats and/or words to their chosen passage to better help the reader see and hear the characters.

Theme

Like plot, setting and characters, *theme* is also an important literary element in any novel. Theme is an idea or message about life revealed in a work of literature. It’s not really a moral, but it’s kind of a guiding message all the same. Break your class into small groups and have them discuss what they understand to be the theme of *Above All Else*. Have them go through the book and flag at least three areas where the theme is apparent.

Literary Techniques

- Have students reread the ending to chapter 2, and ask them how the ending piques the reader’s interest. Discuss foreshadowing and what its purpose is. Challenge

them to find one other area in the book where foreshadowing is used. Would they say it's subtle, or is the messaging overt?

- Good dialogue is anchored by *beats*—small bits of internal monologue or action that help to place the characters in the scene and develop their personalities. Consider this example from chapter 3:

“Coach called weekend practice. I just got the email.”

“Man, I got stuff to do,” Oz said.

“You want to be benched, then go ahead and don’t show up.”

Oz laughed. “He can’t bench me. We’ve already got three guys injured. Now with Rom out, we only have one sub.” He flexed his arms. “Besides, who could leave this kind of beauty off the field?”

“Ten am, Oz,” Jared said. Oz crossed the parlor and went outside, causing the little bell above the door to ring.

“I gotta go too,” Riley said. He slapped me on the arm. “And Del’s coming with me.”

“I am?” I said.

“Yeah, remember?” He gave me a look that said “play along.”

“Oh, yeah, for sure.” I slid out of the booth.

Have students underline or highlight the beats—the areas of narrative that show the characters’ emotions or movements. (Note: an attribution like “I say” doesn’t count as a beat.)

Discuss: How do beats help to pace the dialogue? How do they develop characters and add to the scene? Challenge students to find other places in *Above All Else* where the beats and dialogue combine to create strong, forward-moving scenes.

Vocabulary

Following is a list of vocabulary words from *Above All Else*.

brawl	elimination	stoic
composure	impetus	suburb
contentious	rejuvenate	vaguely
dictating	retaliate	

- In small groups, in pairs or independently, have students create definitions for some or all of the above words. You may choose to have them use a print-based dictionary, an online dictionary or some combination of both.
- Have students create an online or print word search using the terms from *Above All Else*

Connecting to the Curriculum

English

- How does the first line of a book set the tone? Look at the first line of *Above All Else*. What tone is set by Jared Haynes’s statement? Have students look

- for three other books where the first line is particularly effective at drawing the reader in. Why is a first line so important?
- Find a chapter in the book that ends in a cliffhanger. Discuss cliffhanger endings as a powerful way to make a reader want to find out what happens next. (See **Resources** below for TV shows and book series where cliffhanger endings are frequently used.) Have students write a cliffhanger ending, using the following tips:
 - ◆ Select familiar characters to star in your cliffhanger ending. You can pull them from a book you're reading, a movie you've seen, an ancient legend or a religious text. You can even mix and match characters like DreamWorks does, throwing Puss in Boots together with Humpty Dumpty. Choosing familiar characters makes it easy to focus on creating a mysterious ending, since you don't have to invent a whole new cast.
 - ◆ On a separate sheet of paper, sketch out a beginning, middle and end for your story. If you're writing a chapter in an ongoing story, that's fine too.
 - ◆ To create a killer cliffhanger, put your characters in situations that force them to make hard choices. Create crises. Is there a threat of physical harm? Is there a moral dilemma? Raise the stakes for one or more characters.
 - ◆ Cliffhangers can also contain unexpected revelations. You can have your characters reveal previously unknown information through their conversation, or have a character see something s/he wasn't supposed to.
 - ◆ Stop the story right at the height of the action or at the most tense part of the crisis

When students have completed a draft of their short story or chapter and its cliffhanger ending, have them trade stories with a partner for peer editing. Encourage peer editors to pay special attention to places where the reader becomes confused, or where events don't make sense.

- In chapter 3, the Rebels are under pressure from the Cardinals—and their coach starts “coming unglued” on the sidelines. But people can't really *come unglued*. This is a figure of speech—a word or phrase that is used in a nonliteral sense to add impact to a description. Have students find two or more other figures of speech in *Above All Else*.

Social Studies

- When Elsa and Del are in the mall, searching for the pry bar that would link Riley to the attack on Romano, Del tells her that it's starting to feel like a witch hunt (chapter 17). Divide students into pairs and have them research the meaning of Del's statement. Wikipedia is a great place to start—the entry on witch hunts is informative, comprehensive and well-supported with academic and non-peer-reviewed citations.

Physical Education

- The book begins with Jared Haynes going through a series of rituals before his soccer game: slapping his shin pads, fiddling with his necklace, pacing the room. Superstition and ritual is an important part of sport for many athletes. Ask students: Are you aware of any well-known athletes who partake in similar rituals before competition? What about the students themselves?
- Sport involves a lot of psychology, or understanding the way the human mind works. In *Above All Else*, Coach likes to have his team come out onto the pitch a little late, to get the other team angry and therefore set them up for making bad decisions as a result of frustration. Discuss with students: What do you think of this strategy for putting the opponent off-center? Is it fair play? Have students think of other examples of where coaches, teams and athletes make these kinds of decisions to position themselves advantageously.
- Much of the Cardinals' strategy is understanding how to play against the *opposing* team's strategy (see the beginning of chapter 14 for an example). In what other sports is this knowledge of your opponent's tactics so important?
- Soccer and football have come under fire in recent years as being potentially dangerous to the human brain. In soccer, heading the ball has raised red flags, while tackling in football has done the same. Have students find out the facts about brain injuries in these sports. What do experts recommend? Students can create an illustrated poster that raises awareness about the risks, and presents some steps to take to minimize those risks.

Health/Personal Planning

- On their first date, Elsa takes Del to her special spot high on a chairlift. This is where she goes to get some perspective when she finds herself getting caught up in life's complications. Discuss with students how taking time away to chill out and look after yourself is an important thing—especially in such a fast-paced world where we're constantly connected. As a way of expanding this topic, choose one or more of the following:
 - ◆ Lead students in a simple breathing exercise. Have them breathe in, watching the breath enter their body. Pay special attention to the place where the in-breath turns around to become the out-breath. Watch the breath as it leaves the body. Repeat. This is the basis of mindfulness meditation, which is a key practice in managing anxiety.
 - ◆ Have students write a short journal entry about their chosen way of decompressing. Whether they climb a tree, journal, go for a run or lie on the earth looking up at the clouds, ask them to describe their mellow-out techniques.

Talk about the importance of disconnecting. Recent research shows that kids are woken an average of three times a night by incoming text messages. But sleep—and especially Stage IV (deep) sleep—is an essential part of brain and body development, not to mention emotional balance and wellness. How well are your students sleeping? How easy is it for them to unplug?

- Many times throughout the book, Del is swept up in what's going on around him. And even though he may not be comfortable with it—fist-bumping like a jock; breaking into an abandoned mall to look around; promising Elsa he won't tell what he knows about Doug Richards's lack of an alibi—Del still goes along. Peer pressure is incredibly strong and it's difficult to resist. Talk about this with students. Why is it so hard to stand up for what you believe in—and to take a stand against what you don't believe in?
- When Del and Elsa are spotted by the thugs in the mall, they are mistaken for two girls—and the chase is on. The leering men throw sexually-laden comments and try scare tactics in their pursuit. Del and Elsa escape. And besides, Del is a guy. But what if they *had* both been girls—and what if they hadn't escaped? Although in the book the scene is exciting and suspenseful, the deeper reality is that, had they both been girls and been caught, they would have been at significant risk of sexual assault. Talk about this with your students. How does “mob mentality” put girls at risk of sexual assault? Is sexual assault only a problem for girls? Do victims ever bear responsibility for being assaulted? What needs to change in our society for girls and women (for the most part) to be free of the risk of being raped? Use the links in Resources to help your students find answers to these questions.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. As the book opens, Del reflects that things are feeling a little too competitive on his soccer team lately. Winning, he says, had become part of the team's culture, and losing was no longer an option. What do you think? Is there too much emphasis on winning in sports? Or is winning really the only point to playing? What about having fun—how important is that? What would change your mind about how “winning” and “having fun” should balance out?
2. Chapter 5 opens with a description of the skate park that was originally built for a child actor who was preparing for his role in a film. Del narrates that “there had been a bunch of complaints about it too, since it sat right next to the beach and ‘ruined the atmosphere.’” What is it about skateboarding that gives it such a bad rap? Is it warranted? How so? How is it not warranted?
3. When Elsa calls her brother to ask where Doug Richards was on the night of the attack on Romano (ch. 8), Del notices that “this family didn't have any issues with telling half-truths.” How important is truth to you? Do you expect it of yourself? Do you expect it of others? When do you make exceptions?
4. After their escape from the gang at the abandoned mall, Riley explains to Del that he knows the mall backwards and forwards as a result of spending so many hours there, waiting for his mother to finish her shift at the shoe store (ch. 10). Del is surprised that Riley's mom let her son roam around in this way—but then again, he had to have something to do while she was at work. What about you? How do your parents or caregivers expect you to entertain yourself when they're busy?
5. In chapter 13, Jared makes it clear to the group that there is no other option than to retaliate against the person who injured Romano. Oz and Del aren't very happy

with the idea, but Jared counters: “We don’t retaliate and these guys will be laughing at us on the field. They’ll own us before we even step out there.” How much truth is there to what he’s saying? How does this contradict what you may have learned in anti-bullying programs (like W.I.T.S., for example) where the victim is encouraged to simply let it go?

6. After Del breaks Elsa’s trust by refusing to support her assertion that Doug Richards is innocent, Del figures he’ll never hear from her again. So he is surprised when Elsa texts him to ask him to talk (ch. 13). What do you do when you suspect other people are angry with you? Do you drop the subject and avoid contact? Or do you try to communicate about the issue to ensure both sides understand each other?
7. At the end of chapter 15, Del tells Elsa he refuses to go back inside the abandoned mall. He is very clear about it. Del knows how to set himself limits—in this instance, as well as earlier in the story, where he decides not to become involved in a physical fight. Can you find other examples of where Del sets his limits? Find a place where he *doesn’t* stick to his original limits. What would you advise him?
8. In chapter 18, Del reflects on what might have driven Doug to attack Romano. He can’t see the reason for the attack. *But I wasn’t Doug*, he thinks. *That’s the problem with trying to figure people out. You never know what’s going through their heads.* Where has this been true in other stories you’ve seen or read? Where has it been true in your own life?

Author’s note

Dear Reader,

My two sons participate in a number of sports, so I often sit at the rink, at the side of the pitch, or at the track meets. And I have seen something recently which I can’t say I have seen before: elaborate celebrations. I’m uncertain when this trend began but it certainly has taken hold. Of course we should be happy when we score a goal or win a big game. But these celebrations seem to be something completely beyond the sport. It seems as if the celebration is the end result of playing sports. You do all the practice, all the sprints and work-outs, all the early mornings and late nights, so you can, at some point in time, run or skate around pretending to shoot an arrow at the opposition’s goal or hold your hands dramatically to the heavens.

Above All Else came from my questioning of this trend. I had always seen sports as something we do for exercise and to work with other people toward a common goal—not as a way to become a hero. Del is my representation of how I’d like to see individuals in sports. He’s someone who works hard to improve his skills because getting better is why he participates in the first place. Yes, winning has some importance; no one wants to always be on a losing team. But when a group of people work hard to get better together, the team will always be stronger. And, as has been said, you learn a lot more from losing than you ever will from winning.

Jeff Ross

Resources***Cliffhanger Endings****In books:*

Percy Jackson series
Hunger Games trilogy

In TV shows:

Pretty Little Liars
Vampire Diaries

Peer Pressure

The Young Teen's Place for Info on Alcohol and Resisting Peer Pressure

<http://thecoolspot.gov>

Dealing With Peer Pressure

http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/friend/peer_pressure.html***Sexual Assault***

Support Network for Rape Victims (includes statistics)

www.assaultcare.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=49&Itemid=58

RAINN: America's Largest Anti-Sexual Violence Organization

www.rainn.org/statistics***Books****Fiction*

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*
Cormier, Robert. *The Chocolate War*
Friend, Natasha. *Perfect*
McClintock, Norah. *Snitch*
Spinelli, Jerry. *Wringer*
—*Stargirl*
Walters, Eric. *House Party*

Nonfiction

Blank, Dan. *Soccer IQ: Things That Smart Players Do*
Cherniss, Hilary and Sara Jane Sluke. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Surviving Peer Pressure for Teens*
DK Publishing. *The Soccer Book*
Hamm, Mia. *Go For The Goal: A Champion's Guide to Winning in Soccer and Life*
Humphrey, Sandra McLeod. *Hot Issues, Cool Choices: Facing Bullies, Peer Pressure, Popularity, and Put-Downs*
Scott, Sharon. *How to Say No and Keep Your Friends: Peer Pressure Reversal for Teens and Preteens*

Author Biography

Jeff Ross is the author of four previous YA novels, all with Orca Book Publishers. He teaches scriptwriting and English at Algonquin College in Ottawa, where he lives with his wife and two kids. His previous books have been listed on the CCBC's Best Books for Teens and YALSA's Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Readers. His soccer skills have been in question since he was six, but sometimes determination is more important than skill. Right?

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orca sports