



Gang Tackle

Eric Howling

Reading Level: 2.9

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Book Summary

Jamal is a busy teenager. He works hard at school, has a part-time job, and feels compelled to help out his mom as much as possible. The only way he has to blow off steam and truly enjoy himself is to play football with his friends. Unfortunately, his school cannot afford to have a football team. That is, until Roland Fort, owner of Fort Sports, steps in with a twenty-thousand-dollar gift to get the team up and running again. Jamal soon discovers that with any gift there are catches, and before they even get going, the Saints football team wonders if they will be able to survive both on and off the field.

Gang Tackle examines the perceptions people hold regarding one another based on what a person looks like and where they come from.

Prereading Ideas

- *Gang Tackle* explores many ideas around equality in different schools. Have your students investigate the model your school board uses for funding.
- Some basic knowledge of football will be useful in reading this novel. Ask your students about the different plays they know of in football and how each line (offensive/defensive) works.
- The criminal code comes into play in this book. Have your students examine the ramifications of breaking and entering in your area.
- Jamal is interested in coding. At the end of this resource guide find links for independent computer coding websites.

Connecting to the Text

Character

- Jamal isn't looking to be a star or carry on to the NFL. He just wants to represent his school and play football with his friends. The economic reality, though, is that his school does not have the money to run a proper football team. How do you think this leaves Jamal feeling about himself? His identity is wrapped up in being a football player, so what happens when he can't play?
- Rico skips class and only comes to school to hang with his friends and play football. WWE wrestler Marc Mero speaks about how if you "look at a person's friends, you'll know who they are going to become. You hang out with losers, you're going to be a loser." Do you feel that Jamal's hanging out with Rico makes him a loser or leads to the poor decisions he makes? (Marc Mero YouTube clip: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EyniGvsVg8)
- Roland Fort is obviously supporting the team for his own needs. What leads a person to need the kind of control Fort demands? Consider recent public figures who have done much this same thing.

English

- There are three main "plot elements" in *Gang Tackle*. What are these and how are they used together to create suspense and story? (Consider Jamal's journey, the local gangs, and Roland Fort's actions.)
- Jamal is put in a difficult situation where he wants to help his friends and his school, but doesn't have the resources. He takes what looks like the easy route of hooking up with the gang. Discuss Jamal's motivations for trying to make quick money rather than believing in the game he'd been creating.
- Jamal goes on a classic hero's journey, moving from the Ordinary world, through ordeals, the road back, and finally a return. Have your students break down Jamal's journey using the 12 part Heroes Journey found here: www.movieoutline.com/articles/the-hero-journey-mythic-structure-of-joseph-campbell-monomyth.html.

Social Studies

- Jamal's school is in an "under-privileged" area. How does knowing this affect the students? How does it make them feel about themselves? Consider the following paragraph from chapter 4:

Jamal had never heard anyone describe him as disadvantaged before. Poor, maybe. Having to work hard to get ahead, maybe. But disadvantaged? That sounded like he was beat before he started. He had never felt that way—on or off the football field.

- Roland Fort sees himself as a savior of the school and the kids. Have your students pick out a few times when he speaks to the media about how he's saving the students. Ask them if anyone from a different background can actually come in and fully understand a community very different from their own.
- Fort's actions and words are racist and classist. Examine the text for examples of Fort's blatant racism and classism. Discuss the words Fort uses and the effects these words have on Jamal and his friends.
- What role do you think Fort played in creating a near-reality show out of the football team? How is he different when the cameras are on or off? And how does Jamal use Fort's need for attention against him?

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. Jamal has to balance school, football and working at McDonald's. Billy Chang has to quit the team because of his commitment to his parent's store. Discuss work-life balance and how, moving forward, over- or under-extending yourself can be harmful.
2. Football is a full-contact sport. The dangers of concussions are becoming more evident, and the ability to protect players more difficult. Malcolm Gladwell recently spoke about how football, specifically the NCAA and NFL, will likely disappear in twenty-five years. Discuss this possibility with your students. Gladwell's main argument is that people will no longer be interested in watching a sport where the players can be permanently injured or even possibly killed. (www.cbssports.com/college-football/news/author-malcolm-gladwell-says-football-will-become-ghettoized)
3. Roland Fort takes a hard line with the players, demanding they put football ahead of everything else. Meanwhile, Coach Kemp takes a softer position in regards to lateness, missing practice, and school-sport balance. What are the pros and cons of the harder tactics and the more lenient ones? Look into the research of how to get the best out of young athletes.
4. No one on the Saints is looking for a college scholarship. This isn't a group of elite players. What are the benefits of sports when there isn't the possibility of making a career from playing?
5. Roland Fort wants to be part of the team to seem important and to be called coach. He sees himself as a great guy who has come to help these "poor, under-privileged minorities." Examine Fort's character and find the numerous times where he says one thing and then does the exact opposite. How might this be damaging to the kids? How do they react?

Author's Note

They say that with great power comes great responsibility. All good coaches know and respect this. So let me say right up front that most coaches are nothing like Roland Fort, the racist and demeaning coach in *Gang Tackle*. They are selfless, hard working, put-the-team-first leaders and mentors. But when a coach does cross a line, players and schools have to know they can push back and take action.

The idea for this book came into focus a few years ago when a notorious big city mayor was fired as a high school football coach for putting down his players and the school. I wondered what would happen if a team decided they'd had enough of their bully coach and rose up to take him down themselves.

I played a lot of sports as a boy growing up in Montreal—hockey, soccer, basketball and football to name just a few. I was never the best player but I always enjoyed the competition and hanging out with my teammates. And while I may not have realized it then, the most important member of every team was my fair, understanding, motivating coach. I thank them all.

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Resources

Coding

www.tynker.com

www.chicagonow.com/between-us-parents/2015/07/coding-websites-and-apps-for-tweens-and-teens

Sponsorship Issues

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rob_Ford_conflict_of_interest_trial

Author Biography

Eric Howling is an advertising creative director and the author of the Lorimer sports novels *Head Hunter*, *Red Zone Rivals*, *Hoop Magic*, *Kayak Combat* and *Drive*. As a boy growing up in Montreal, Quebec, he always had a ball or stick or club in his hands. Now Eric's writing stories about playing some of those exciting sports. His books have been shortlisted for the Hackmatack Children's Choice Book Award, named *Resource Links* Year's Best and picked as CCBC Best Books selections. Eric lives in Calgary, Alberta. Follow him on Twitter @erichowling.