

It's a Wonderful Life Story

by Steve Rushin

STEVE RANDALL is a small man making small money in small towns, a 5' 6" high school basketball coach who climbed a short professional ladder from Turtle Lake to Montfort to Oshkosh, Wis. He drives a banana-yellow Caprice Classic that cost \$200 used, a car so mortifying that his three daughters put a FOR SALE sign in the window whenever it's parked in the driveway.

Lance Randall, Steve's only son, is a bigger man whose bigger plans draw him to bigger cities. At 25 he becomes the head coach at Webster University, whose streak of 13 losing seasons is broken his first season. Then he coaches the Birmingham Bullets in England, grounding himself in the professional game. Homesick after 9/11, Lance returns to the States as a D-I assistant at Saint Louis University, an ambitious young coach on the rise.

In October 2004, 53-year-old Steve is poised for his 16th season at Oshkosh West High. During a routine angioplasty, doctors nick one of his arteries. A week later, while watching a Cardinals-Dodgers playoff game on TV, Steve tells his wife, Cindy, that he doesn't feel well. He lies down on the couch and dies.

Lance, by now 33, and the father of a one-year-old girl, drives to Oshkosh for the wake and is struck dumb: A line extends for three blocks outside the funeral home, which stays open three extra hours to accommodate the mourners. "When 3,000 people show up at a high school phys-ed teacher's wake," he says, "you suddenly see the effect a simple man has had on so many people."

The Oshkosh *Northwestern* receives hundreds of tributes to Coach Randall, from around the country and overseas. At the funeral players speak of his indelible impact on their lives. "That's when I had the epiphany," says Lance. "I *had* to do this."

What Lance had to do was leave Saint Louis, walk away from his \$56,000 salary, move his family in with his mother and accept a \$4,000 part-time coaching stipend to take over his father's team at Oshkosh West, which already had a locker labeled RANDALL.

It means finding a full-time job that allows him to leave at 3 p.m. "I don't want to make the team practice at seven because the coach is doing double shifts at the Quik-Mart," says Lance, who signs on as a fund-raiser for the Experimental Aircraft Association.

His first season is a fairy tale. Oshkosh West is ranked No. 1 in the state for the first time and takes an unbeaten record into the playoffs. "There was a fairy-tale ending to be written," says Lance. "But a *lot* of kids—not just ours—dream of winning state." West is upset in the sectional semis and sees two of its best players



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graduate. There is no happily ever after.

This season the Wildcats' starting point guard is lost to suspension in December, but they are unbeaten. Over Christmas, West renames its home floor the Steven L. Randall Court and is touched by a strange magic. In early January senior Andy Polka—the quintessential Wisconsin name—makes a 75-foot heave at the buzzer to keep the Wildcats unbeaten. A teammate jumps up and down so hard in celebration that his shorts fall down, a spectacle spot-shadowed on *SportsCenter*.

West continues to win, skating through sectionals, making it to Madison for the state tournament, where a metropolitan power from Milwaukee or Madison always wins. But that hardly matters. The Wildcats get to stay in Steve Randall's favorite Madison hotel, the InnTowner, where he and Lance holed up every year as state tourney spectators. And Oshkosh brings the tournament's biggest party of fans, bigger even than Madison's own Memorial High, West's powerhouse opponent for the state championship.

With two minutes to go, Polka dunks to give West a 12-point lead. The crowd chants "STE-ven RAN-dall," reducing his widow to tears.

The team buses back to Oshkosh that night, escorted by police and fire trucks, past congratulatory bedsheets. They are met at West End Pizza by a spontaneous pep rally for the new state champions.

"I've been blessed beyond imagination," says Lance. "If I took over at Duke or won an NBA championship, it couldn't surpass what I've been a part of at Oshkosh West."

Turns out, the small time is the big time. "They say 'Don't sweat the small stuff,'" Lance says. "But my dad has shown me, even in death, that the small stuff is what's important." Steve Randall so loved his players (and vice versa) that he cried at every postseason banquet. I tell him his dad reminds me of George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

"You're the first person outside the family to mention that movie," says Lance. "It's my favorite. My parents gave it to me when I was little. I cry just taking it out of the box." The son inhales deeply and says, "You're exactly right: My dad was the richest man in town."