



# 1819 NEWS

## Allen Mendenhall: The boy and the machine

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 05.25.26



*(Pexels)*

There's something about the body that resists even the polished certainties of medicine. Several years ago, after striking my shin against – was it a table leg, a car door, some ordinary household object promoted briefly to the role of assassin? – a small hard knot rose beneath the skin at the point of impact. Bone, or something impersonating bone.

Instead of fading politely with the bruise, it simply stayed there, squatting, misreading the length of its welcome.

I had an MRI done, that coffin of humming noise and clinical light. The machine found nothing alarming. A few months later, the growth vanished of its own accord, as mysteriously as it had arrived.

I think of this now because my son Noah just had an MRI, although the circumstances were considerably less ambiguous than a phantom shin-knob.

Noah is 14 now, an age that comes with a kind of quiet violence. One season, a boy is all elbows and distraction; by the next, he has shoulders broad enough to surprise you when he comes through a doorway.

He's a rising sophomore, though younger than most of the boys around him, his school having elevated him by a grade many moons ago. Since fourth grade, in fact, he has lived slightly out of season with his peers: too young for the room, too small for the moment, perpetually reaching upward toward a world calibrated for somebody else's son.

This year, something changed. Until now, football had existed only in the loose, democratic chaos of backyards, public parks, and shouted arguments about first downs and imaginary sidelines. Suddenly, with the certainty pubescent teens seemingly acquire overnight, he decided he wanted the real thing.

Perhaps against our better judgment, his mother – my former wife, a nurse possessed of the brisk realism that hospitals breed – and I said yes.

He lasted exactly one practice before his shoulder, with the theatrical timing of a silent-film actress fainting onto a chaise lounge, slipped loose from its socket. There had been a drill, a collision of helmets and adolescent ambition, and then suddenly the arm was no longer where nature intended it to be.

The coach, with frontier confidence, pushed it back into place right there on the field. Everybody declared it fine afterward. "No big deal," the boys said with the almost desperate optimism that adults employ whenever something is very obviously a big deal.

That shoulder apparently developed a taste for rebellion. The following week, it wandered out again, only this time it refused to return with dignity or haste. It lingered there stubbornly, displaced and offended, while the coach attempted physical persuasion. He finally fixed it back into place.

My former wife began consulting the informal republic of nurses. Those whispered hallway conferences and parking-lot diagnoses carry greater authority than most official medical opinions. Consensus emerged quickly: Noah needed an appointment.

The doctor, grave in the efficient manner of professionals who traffic in unpleasantness, ordered an MRI to determine whether surgery was warranted. Football, at least for the moment, was over.

Noah received this news with such composure that it was almost touching. He shrugged with pretended nonchalance, trying to appear older than disappointment, as though a lost season were merely an administrative inconvenience, not the collapse of a private dream.

Football, it turned out, *was* survivable. The true catastrophe – the thing that hollowed out his brave performance almost at once – was the MRI.

I drove him to the imaging center while he worked himself into an exquisitely operatic state. Claustrophobia, he announced. He couldn't do it. The tunnel. The noise. The *confinement*.

I told him it was simple: lie still, close your eyes, and try to nap. He received this advice with the contempt it apparently deserved. By the time we parked, he had catastrophized his way through several imagined scenarios, none of which involved simply lying still.

Then, in the waiting room, grace itself arrived in the form of an older black lady with her magnificent, unhurried air. She drew Noah into conversation without effort or agenda. I watched his shoulders (the functioning one and the mutinous one alike) slowly descend from around his ears. When the orderly called his name, he was merely nervous rather than hysterical.

He was gone a long time, or what felt like it, which is the particular agony of waiting rooms: they exist in a different temporal dimension than the rest of life.

At last, he emerged grinning, loose-limbed, almost sauntering, having faced the void and found it surprisingly manageable.

We went for ice cream. We don't do that often anymore, the ice-cream-after trips that once punctuated childhood like a reliable refrain. He's not a little boy, and little-boy rituals have quietly retired, one by one, without ceremony or announcement.

And there it is, the thing about raising children that nobody warns you about sufficiently: the milestones that matter most arrive without fanfare, tucked inside ordinary afternoons.

Not the graduation stages, not the birthdays with their candles and obligations, but a Tuesday in a strip-mall parking lot, two scoops melting faster than you can eat them, your son laughing about the machine that swallowed him whole and spat him back out unafraid.

You thought you were taking him somewhere. Turns out, you were watching him arrive.

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