SPORTS OF THE TIMES

As a Coach and a Cop in Minneapolis, Where Would He Draw the Line?

While his city struggles with the pandemic and wounds laid bare by George Floyd's killing, Charles Adams embodies the everyday people trying to make change.

By Kurt Streeter
Photographs by Tim Gruber
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On the sidelines and in the streets, caught in the riptide of race and reconciliation, Charles Adams prided himself on keeping a cool optimism.

But on a painful night this spring, as his Minneapolis erupted in anger and he readied to face protesters in his riot gear, dread consumed him.

He was a 20-year veteran of the police force, an African-American officer who tried to effect change from the inside. He was also the coach of a state championship football team in a poor, Black neighborhood, and a steadfast shepherd for his players.

As the sky darkened, he feared for them. Where were they? Were they safe?

He feared for himself. His uniform made him a target. The face shield and gas mask hid his identity from the angry crowds, obscuring the beloved figure he has been across large swaths of the city.

Three days earlier, another Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, had used a knee to snuff the life from George Floyd, a Black man accused of trying to spend counterfeit money on cigarettes. The killing sickened Adams. He could see himself in Floyd, a broad-shouldered man who was a high school football and basketball star.

Adams considered Floyd's death the result of an abuse of power that went against everything he stood for. The moment he watched the scene unfold on video, he knew the city would convulse.

Nearby, buildings burned and cops took cover. Standing outside a squad car, Adams prepared to head into the trenches. First, he had to speak to his players, the Polars of Minneapolis North high school. He opened his cellphone and addressed them on Zoom.

"I got to see your faces before I go up in here," he told them. "I have to see you guys."

Coach, you're going to be OK, they said, voices cracking with emotion. Everything is going to be all right. It was their way of boosting him up, as he had always done for them.

“Before I hit the streets, I have to tell you guys something,” Adams replied. “Just know that I care. I’m not sure what is going to happen tonight. I’m not sure if I am going to make it back and see you again.”

He needed them that night, more than ever. It made sense. “Along with my family, the kids I help, they give me a higher purpose,” Adams told me. “There’s a way that they help save me, and that night showed it.”

They needed him, too. “We just wanted to hear from him,” said Zach Yeager, the team’s quarterback. “He sets the path and gives us so much. When everything was going crazy in this town, it was good to have his back.”

Adams, 40, a baritone-voiced bear of a man, was raised on Minneapolis’s North Side, where streets lined with modest homes and maple trees belie entrenched poverty and the city’s worst gang battles.

Adams could have left his neighborhood behind. But he never did. For all its troubles, he loved its rough-hewn warmth. As an officer, he became a fixture. “One of the rocks of this community,” as a local pastor described him.

When Adams decided to become a high school coach during his off time, he did so at his struggling alma mater, Minneapolis North, four blocks from his childhood home. He turned a doormat team into a champion, his coaching powered by his ability to connect.

Now, as his city struggles to deal with the coronavirus pandemic and to mend the wounds laid bare by Floyd’s death, Adams remains. His work is a parable, testimony in troubled times to the power of everyday people who provide steadfast care to struggling communities.

“Through thick and thin,” he said. “I’m going to be here for north Minneapolis, here for the kids, through thick and thin.”

He was a cop before becoming a coach.

Adams followed in the footsteps of his father, a veteran Minneapolis officer who came of age facing harassment by the police in Minneapolis’s housing projects during the 1960s and ’70s, then joined the force to try changing it from within.

Like his father, Adams entered law enforcement aware of the trouble he would face, working in a department with few who looked like him. His eyes were also open to the difficult balance Black officers are forced to strike in a world riven by racism.

“I take that blue uniform off, I’m just like any other brother in America, dealing with all the issues,” he said. “I also look at it like this: Just because I have that uniform on does not mean I don’t know where I am from. I am a Black man first, blue or no blue.”

That said, he loved being an officer, especially in his community. He excelled.

“The guy was cool as a cucumber in every situation,” said Todd Kurth, a former squad car partner who noted the way Adams’s broad smile and high-wattage friendliness won over even the wariest. “He could be firm when he needed to, no doubt, but he also had this ability to win people over and defuse tough situations. He had a need to help.”

It was a need that led him back to North High, from which he had graduated in the late 1990s. Ten years ago, Adams transferred to a police unit that worked inside the city’s public schools. He asked to be stationed exclusively at North. The school had changed since he graduated. A campus that once served 1,400 students now had about 100. District officials spoke of closing it for good.

One thing was similar: The basketball teams were top-notch, but the football team was decidedly not.

It did not take long for Adams to assume dual roles. School cop and head football coach.

There were about two dozen players when he started. The camaraderie was low. Morale, lower. In 2010, Adams’s first season, the Polars managed three wins. The next year, none.

Adams asked his father to help coach defense. He got a few other officers to join as assistants. Nothing helped. “We were getting the crap beat out of us,” Adams said.

“He wouldn’t quit on those kids,” said Beulah Verdell, a nurse who has been an assistant coach at North since the 1990s.

Verdell said Adams proved himself early on by showing that he cared more about how the players were doing off the field than anything else. “That way, he could drive them hard on the field, and they would listen.” She added: “He kept telling everyone that we are going to win and win big. Not many believed, but look what happened.”

The tipping point came on a fall Friday in 2012. That night North took a bumpy, two-hour drive to play the high school team in rural Kerkhoven, Minn.

Adams’s young Polars were so psyched out by their surroundings, and so fatigued by the long trip, that they quickly fell behind by three touchdowns. At halftime, Adams told his players they could not quit: “We just got to do us. Just do us.”

Something clicked. In the second half, North unspooled a string of long runs, sudden defensive stops, deep passes and touchdowns. That wasn’t enough to win, but it made the game close.

On the bus ride home, Adams could sense an unusual quiet. Few players spoke. Not because of despair over the loss, but because this was the first time they did not feel defeated.

The Polars soon began winning. Within three seasons, they were among the state's best. In 2015, they lost in the Minnesota championship game for small schools.

The next year they won it all. They became the first team from a Minneapolis city school to win a state football championship since 1977.

North has contended for the title every year since.

Still, there are constant challenges, not all of them having to do with games. The team often has to cobble together equipment — socks, pads, mouth guards — from donations.

North has plenty of players who don't need much more than gentle guidance, on the field or off. But it also has plenty who need every bit of support Adams and his fellow coaches can give. Players whose families are mired in poverty. Players whose parents have been killed or have died young from diseases that wrack the community, such as diabetes.

Players who fall for the lure of the streets.

Not long after North won the state championship, one of the team's running backs was accused of involvement in a shooting. Facing arrest, he came to the school and turned himself into the one police officer he trusted: Adams.

"I can't tell a kid I love him only when everything is going good and he helps us win championships," Adams said, thinking back to the arrest and the tears he and his troubled player shed that day.

"When it goes bad, I also got to tell him I love him. That is how it works. That is how this whole team works."

Everything was set for more success this fall. The Polars were coming off a painful loss in last year's championship game and were expected to be contenders again.

Then, the pandemic. And not long afterward, the night when Adams looked at his Facebook feed and saw the video recording of Officer Chauvin's knee on George Floyd's neck.

"Right is right and wrong is wrong," Adams said. "And this was as wrong as can be. The moment I saw that video, I could tell it was going to set us back 10, 20 years in terms of trust, or more."

He knew Chauvin. They weren't friends, but they started on the police force at about the same time. In their early years, Adams recalled, he and Chauvin were once part of a group of officers who took a group of Black children fishing for a day. The details of that trip were hazy, but he remembers how Chauvin struck him.

“He came off as weird,” Adams said. “Socially awkward. Not sociable. You could see something about him in his eyes during the video with him on Floyd’s neck. Control and power, and stubbornness.”

Adams loved being a police officer, but he knew there were still members of the force like Chauvin, who was fired and now faces second-degree charges of murder and manslaughter. He was released on $1 million bail this month.

North’s players also knew that. Aside from Adams and the four officers who volunteered to help coach the team, the police made most of the players uneasy. C.J. Brown, a receiver, told me about the time he was pulled over, handcuffed and bullied. A case of mistaken identity.

“I’m not the only one on this team who has been treated like that,” Brown said. “It makes me sad. There are kids in other communities who can just do whatever, and the police treat them well. But kids here who are my color or darker, you can’t count on that.”

The fallout from Floyd’s death was immediate in Minneapolis. It hit Adams directly. His day job as North’s in-house police officer had been as important to him as coaching the football team. He was inside the school each day, more counselor and calming uncle than a cop. He ate lunch with the students and didn’t carry his gun. Instead of a uniform, he wore khakis and a polo shirt.

In June, the city’s school board voted to end its contract with the Police Department. Adams could remain as the football coach but no longer work inside the school as an officer.

The move struck many at North as wrongheaded. Mauri Friestleben, the school’s principal, publicly criticized the ruling. On Facebook, she called Adams a life changer who “stands for what is good within my school, what is good within the Police Department, and what is good within Minneapolis.”

For the first time in 10 years, Adams found himself in a squad car, once again patrolling the North Side. He managed to be put on an early morning shift. That allowed him to be at the high school’s worn practice field in the afternoon so he could oversee summer workouts.

After Floyd’s death, and with the everyday rhythms of life beaten back for months by the pandemic, the streets of north Minneapolis quaked. From his patrol car, Adams could sense the tension. His days suddenly filled with domestic violence calls, heroin overdoses, shootings, robberies.

Adams couldn’t wait to get to the school and be with his team, where he would often coach from a lawn chair, set off to the side, keeping what distance he could to avoid the virus.

At the end of one August afternoon, he rose to give his Polars news no one wanted to hear: Because of the pandemic, state high school officials had put football on hold until spring.

The players fell silent, taking in what they had just heard.

Then Adams broke the spell. The Polars would keep going, same as always, even if they weren't playing games. "We have got to practice," he told them. Not only to keep them in shape, but also to keep them safe.

"Giving you guys another two or three months when you are running around in this neighborhood with this crime, and you guys aren't here with us, and we are not here keeping tabs on you all, that is a recipe for disaster," Adams said.

His words underscored the way he navigated the pandemic. He knew the dire health risks, but paid heed to another stark reality: Kids in the neighborhood — with its rising number of gang shootouts, its shuttered schools and halted youth programs — felt increasingly alone and in despair. Like other high school coaches, he wrestled with applying the precautions required to lead his team during the pandemic — distancing and masking, for instance — but he also saw football as a lifeline.

The weeks wore on. There would be more shocks.

Adams fell ill with the coronavirus. He figured he caught it while on duty, moving about the city, often forced into close contact with strangers. It hobbled him with a fever and what felt like a terrible flu, but he recovered in about three weeks.

He returned to his job as a beat cop and could feel unease continuing to increase between the police and his community. For the first time, he felt he could do nothing to calm it. One morning on duty, he crossed paths with a childhood acquaintance from the neighborhood. Normally they would talk for a while. But now Adams's old friend wanted nothing to do with him.

"It was like all he saw was blue," Adams recalled. "He saw that uniform, and for the first time ever, he looked right through me."

That kind of interaction was happening too often. When I checked in and we spoke of Adams's police work, I could hear sadness in his voice for the first time.

In an odd twist, Adams soon received a call from the Minnesota Twins baseball team. They had become aware of Adams when he visited the team's front office to help give a Police Department update after Floyd's death and weeks of protest.

Bowled over by Adams's passion for his community and his years on the force, the Twins made him a job offer: director of team security.

It would increase his salary, get him off the streets, give him a fresh perspective. He had one request of the Twins: He needed a schedule that would allow him to coach. State sports officials had reversed course, allowing a shortened football season in the fall.

Adams would not take the Twins job if it meant giving up North football, this season or in the future. Once he was assured that he could keep leading his team, Adams did something he had never imagined before this challenging year: He left the Minneapolis Police Department.

“A difficult decision,” he called it. “But police work no longer felt the same. The time had come for change.”

What hadn’t changed was football. Now it was Oct. 16, cool and crisp in Minneapolis. The Polars prepared to play their first home game of the season, against a Catholic school from the suburbs.

It would be an unusual night, and one of celebration. Not only was football back, but over the summer, the school district had finished renovating North’s football field. The team could not have fans in the stands because of the virus, but for the first time in years, the Polars would play at home under lights.

Prepping for the game, the the team gathered at North, dressed and then walked, as they traditionally do, through the neighborhood’s leaf-strewn streets.

Adams followed, alone, dressed in his blue sweatshirt with the hood pulled up.

It felt meditative, sifting through memories of the last seven months and all of its trouble. The pandemic. George Floyd. The night he went to the trenches and called his players, worried he would not see them again.

It felt prayerful. Despite the madness in the world, there he was, on his way to coach players he loved in north Minneapolis, the neighborhood he will always call home.

Tim Gruber and Talya Minsberg contributed reporting.

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