

Television Review

Coach Fare

Paul Sorvino returns to "That Championship Season," wherein all the disappointments of adulthood begin with high-school graduation.

By [John Leonard](#)

On Broadway back in 1972, Paul Sorvino played Phil Romano, the corrupt businessman in Jason Miller's **That Championship Season** (Sunday, June 6; 8 to 10 p.m.; Showtime), as he would in the listless Miller-directed movie version a decade later. Now, on cable, Sorvino not only gets his chance to direct but also casts himself as Coach. While everybody in the Pulitzer Prize-winning play gets equal time to feel lousy about what's happened to himself since high school, Coach is



The best year of their lives: From left, Terry Kinney, Sorvino Tony Shalhoub, Gary Sinise, and Vincent D'Onofrio, in *Season*. (Photo credit: Michael Garland)

obviously the juiciest part -- a mingling of the gut strings, stew meats, sinew, and horseradish of Bobby Knight, Vince Lombardi, and General Patton. For television, Coach's enthusiasms are updated to include Newt Gingrich as well as Father Coughlin and Joe McCarthy, but he's still got the same silver whistle on a string around his neck. A sentence from William H. Gass's brilliant, loathsome novel *The Tunnel* comes to mind: "I suspect that the first dictator of this country will be called Coach."

Against this Coach, the little boys who twenty years ago won a state basketball championship for him are helpless -- even now, at age 38, at "halftime" -- to declare their independence. Besides the crooked, adulterous, and

Porsche-driving Phil (Vincent D'Onofrio), a narcissistic marvel who, when he cracks, actually lets us see something sympathetic, they include George Sitkowski (Tony Shalhoub), a small-town mayor who is not so much campaigning for re-election as he is drowning in self-doubt; James Daley (Terry Kinney), the junior-high-school principal who manages George's campaign as poorly as he manages his resentments; and James's kid brother Tom (Gary Sinise), who drinks more than he writes. The fifth member of their bygone starting five, Martin, never shows up at these reunions, probably because Martin, on Coach's instructions, was the one who ensured the win by breaking the ribs of the best player on the opposing inner-city Philadelphia team (charmingly described as "that eight-foot nigger jumping like a kangaroo").

At weepy, expository length, in Coach's house, at his bar, in his gun room, or sometimes outside in his backyard where they blow smoke at a disappointed moon, the aging boys feel sorry for themselves. George has risked his political career to cover for Phil's broken-lease landfill scam, while Phil is sleeping with George's wife, Marion (Denise Faye). James hates his dead-end job, his alcoholic brother, and having to borrow money to bury his parents. Tom's the sort of mean drunk who thinks that tearing down everybody else means he's being honest with himself. Only Coach, pensioned off after he broke the jaw of a boy who gave him the finger, is still in championship form. He is convinced that, with Phil's money, they can re-elect George, if they emphasize the Jewishness of his opponent and the fact -- surely anachronistic in the amnesiac nineties -- that a long-lost relative of this opponent was a blacklisted Hollywood Communist. "It takes hate to win!" Coach preaches.

It's hard to think of a worse combination than booze, sports, guns, sex, politics, bigotry, sentimentality, and, of course, high school. God, high school! From *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Rabbit, Run* to *Carrie*, *Heathers*, and *Littleton* - you would think it was Dante's *Inferno* or Boccaccio's plague. They chortle, harangue, cry, and confess about other, presumably adult matters, about property taxes, playgrounds, garbage strikes, and strip malls, but it all goes back to senior year and that shining moment, after which real life will forever be a handful of dust and a mouthful of aspirin. While *That Championship Season* is not as meretricious as *Patton*, it suffers from the same failure of

liberal nerve: There are winners, and then there are sissies. Knowing the worst, these compromised champions still buy into Coachspeak: "Love one another, boys," says the mesmerizing Sorvino; "no way a man can make it alone." Of course, they hug.

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