

# “GRIDIRON”



*Book Seven in the*

**ERIC LEWIS BOOK SERIES**

*by the coach*

*Thomas Smythe*

## DEDICATION

To: two varsity coaching staffs, my early stint at Lakeridge H.S. and at Mc Nary H.S. These men were great coaches and great friends. It was their loyalty, friendship and talent that made our success a reality. Thank you all.

### Lakeridge

Frank Everhart  
John Fossatti  
Jerry Grossen  
Jerry Hackenbruck  
Jay Locey  
Royce Mc Daniel  
Ed Mc Quarry  
Dave Morris  
George Shull  
David Shultz  
Rick Ward

### Mc Nary

Ted Anagnos  
Jeff Auvinen  
Greg Marks  
Craig Nicholas  
Dave Snook  
Ty Wilson

## FORWARD

As a young boy growing up in Oregon I was an athlete and lived an athlete's life. I played games year around and in my spare time read a number of books written by Clair Bee about a young athlete named Chip Hilton. The group of books was called the Chip Hilton Sports Series.

I've often thought about those Chip Hilton books and now that I've retired I have the time to recreate a series of sports books loosely based on my own coaching and playing life.

Mr. Bee and I actually have a lot in common. Clair Bee was a college basketball coach and I just retired after a 48 year coaching career. Most of my time was spent teaching physical education and coaching football at the high school level.

My hope is that the books I write have the same effect on the youth of today that Mr. Bee's series had on me as a young boy. I truly believe that in our country we need a role model for our young to emulate. Quite possibly, Eric Lewis and his friends will fill that void.

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# ONE

## “I DREAMED A DREAM”

### *LES MISERABLES*

**SUSAN BOYLE**

I

The day after baseball ended coach Vince called me into the coaches office for a chat.

“Eric I think it’s time for you to make some decisions about your upcoming summer.”

That made a lot of sense to me and I was glad coach Vince had offered to counsel me.

“Thanks Coach, I’ve been putting some thought into what I should be doing to prepare for my senior season. I’ve always wanted to play in college. I guess you could say I dreamed a dream.”

“I’m sure you have son, and I want to ask if you’ve you made any ‘Camp’ decisions?”

“I haven’t and that’s one of the things I want to talk about.”

“You probably are aware of the ‘QB’ camps springing up around the mid-west, but I wanted to warn you to be careful about that.”

“Coach I don’t think much of them. It seems to me it’s just someone trying to milk me for some money while promising things they can’t deliver.”

“Good, that’s my feeling exactly. Someday when Joe Montana, Roger Staubach or Joe Theismann retire, and run a camp it might be worth the money. There is one other just beginning, and run by someone I know will do a good job. His name is Greg Bart, and I watched him play some in the NFL, and met him during my time in the old World Football league. He’ll do it right, but it might take some time.

I told coach Vince that I’d already been contacted by some camp people but told them I wasn’t ready to make any

commitments. That wasn't totally truthful, but it's hard to say no sometimes. I need to get better at that.

"I'm afraid in the not too distant future parents will fall for the propaganda, and send their no-talent kid to some camp thinking he'll come back as Johnny Unitas. But it's the wave of the future I guess."

"Coach I don't want to be anyone but me."

"Good for you. Now, do you have a list of colleges you might want to attend at this point?"

I gave coach my list, which included the obvious. The University of Iowa, Nebraska, Notre Dame, Indiana, and Missouri.

"It would be a good idea, I think, to attend camps at your top two or three school choices. I know that could change as the recruiting season progresses, but for now its all you can really do."

"Coach I was at UI's camp last year, so I think I'll cross them off the summer list."

"Just be careful to let them know you're still interested, if that's the case."

"It is, and I'll let the recruiter know that. I've been very impressed with coach Osborne at Nebraska, and would like to do their camp, and also the one at Notre Dame. Then I think I'll need to choose between Indiana and Missouri."

"That sounds like a good list to me son. Do you need me to make any calls or contact anyone for you?"

"Not really coach. I've been in touch with coaches at all three of those schools, so I'll just make sure there are no conflicts, and sign up."

"One more question. If another school or camp looks to me like it might be beneficial to attend can I tell them I'll check with you?"

"Sure, I don't want to miss something that would improve my chances of getting better, and it will also be a good time to compare myself with other quarterbacks."

"Great, I'll keep you posted if something looks interesting. In the mean time what are your plans for early summer?"

I told coach about summer basketball, and that I planned on curtailing my baseball legion play. I loved baseball, but it was a distant third on my sport list, and I knew that football was a priority. I wasn't completely ruling out basketball, but the fact was football

was my favorite sport, and choosing the right school could certainly help me reach my ultimate goal of playing in the NFL.

## II

I was confident my plan was a good one, and then just after school was out I got a phone call that changed it. It was a good thing my summer plan wasn't written in stone.

"For you, again," mom said. "Sounds like another football coach to me."

When the caller introduced himself as Y. A. Tittle I almost fell off the chair.

"Son I've heard from a bunch of my friends in the mid-west about you, and after speaking with the head coach at my alma mater, I wanted to give you a call on their behalf."

"I have to tell you Mr. Tittle that my head coach uses you as an example all the time. You retired about the same time as I was born, but I've done my research, and I admire how you played the game."

"Thank you for the compliment, I tried to do it right, and son, Mr. Tittle is a bit formal for me. I'm from Texas, and try to stay on a first name basis when I can. Just call me Y. A. please."

"Yes sir Mr. Tittle. Ah, I mean Y. A, and you know I know what your initials stand for, Yelberton Abraham, right?"

"Now you know why I go by Y. A."

We talked for a while about football, and my goals. He was very easy to talk with and seemed genuinely interested in helping me make a good college choice. I went on to tell him that coach Vince was an admirer. Especially when you played for the 49ers. Coach Vince even knew the names of the famous 49er 'Alphabet Backfield'. That would be Y. A. Tittle at quarterback, C. R. Roberts at fullback, R. C. Owens at flanker, and J. D. Smith at running back.

He spent some time telling me about the program at LSU, and it's history of excellence.

"Son, they had a down year this past season, but I think coach Stovall will get it turned back around quickly. I'm not an official LSU recruiter, but I try to keep an eye and an ear open to help out when I

can. Let me ask a question, would you be interested enough to come to their summer camp for high school players?"

I told him that I had just been discussing that very thing with coach Vince, and was in the process of making 'Camp' decisions.

"Mr. Tittle, Y. A. I would like to know a little more about it, but to answer your question, yes I'd be interested."

"I'll gather information for you, and get back to you in the next few days. Will that work?"

"Yes Sir, it will."

Yelberton Abraham Tittle, wow!

When I told coach Vince that I had spoken with Mr. Tittle his answer surprised me.

"You didn't call him Mr. Tittle did you?"

"At first yes I did, but then Mr. Tittle told me to call him Y. A. and I tried."

## TWO

### “JUST THE WAY YOU ARE”

*BILLY JOEL*

I

The school year had just ended, and I was sitting in coach Vince's office chatting about this and that.

“Coach are you planning on changing anything with the offense this fall?”

“We'll do some tinkering as usual, looking to fit the offense to our personnel. We'll be different without those two tall slot's, so we'll need to change a bit.”

He was speaking about the twins, Thomas and Toby Hart-Zeller who had graduated. The twins were 6'5, starters since their sophomore year in basketball, and after missing a year turned out for football last season. They were a big, or should I say tall, reason for our successful season a year ago. They had moved on to the University of Nebraska Kearney. It was a division II public school, and the twins were there on basketball scholarships.

We talked about our offensive players, and how we might fit new players into our system. Coach Vince said, “I like some of the new receiver group, but I'll wait until after our summer workouts to make any kind of change. There are a couple of kids that look like tight end types I like. Maybe we'll just run the football next fall.”

“That would be different. I like it just the way it is coach. But, have you always thrown the football? I mean as your main emphasis.”

“Let me tell you a story about that Eric.”

Coach went on to tell me about a game he was coaching as the head Frosh coach early in his career. It explained a lot about why we run such a wide-open and versatile offense.

“We were up at halftime 21-0, and as I began to speak with the team this voice, of my college coach, keep whispering in my ear to ‘Establish the Run’, which was always the main thrust of his

offense. In fact I set a school record for pass receptions with ten. That ought to tell you how much we threw the ball. Anyway, the last thing I told our team before we left the locker room was we needed to 'Establish the Run'.

We kicked off, and they drove down the field for a score. Then on our first possession we ran the ball on three consecutive downs before punting. They scored again. Once again we ran three times, trying to 'Establish the Run' and punted. They scored again to make it 21-21. As our kids ran on to the field to receive their next kick our quarterback, his name was Randy Walk, stopped, and turning to me asked, "Coach, are we through establishing the run"? Out of the mouths of babes."

He told me they went on to win the game 48-21, but that he learned a great lesson.

"Do what you do, run or pass, it makes no difference, but I repeat, "Do What You Do Best!"

What we've been able to do best the past two years, since coach Vince arrived, is throw the football. My sophomore year, while playing receiver, and waiting my turn in the quarterback progression, our pass offense was the reason we made it to the state semi-final. Our quick little running back ran mostly draws and delayed runs, as well as option pitches, but it was enough to keep defenses off balance. Last year in our state championship season our senior running back, Stevie Curry, now at Washington State gave us some semblance of balance in our attack.

This year our senior running back, Randy Taylor, had proven his ability last year during the playoff run when Stevie was injured. He would be a major threat for sure. We had run some two-back stuff as well, and our big linebacker/fullback J.D. Graves would also be a senior. I thought we might just run more two back this season, but I'm going to let coach make that decision.

"Well coach since we've got Randy and J.D. returning do you think we'll do more two back?"

"That certainly has crossed my mind. I think they can both be on the field at the same time for sure. If we want to go with four receivers I think Randy would have no problem playing in the slot. That way we wouldn't need to sub or change personnel to run both two back, and one back offenses. It's something to think about for sure."

The fact that four of our offensive line starters returned might influence how much we ran the football. It was a formidable group only lacking at this point a replacement for our two-year starter at center.

“What about the other receivers? Do you have some guys in mind?”

“Obviously we have Luke, and J. J. Bird looks to me like a star in the making.

I said, “Let’s not forget about Blake Denton, and that frosh kid from last year. What’s his name, the fast one? Oh, Dustin Lloyd, he could be pretty good if he’s ready.”

Coach Vince, looking thoughtful said, “I’m going to keep a close watch on the development of Ryan Ruff. I like his attitude. He seems to be able to combine competitiveness with a sense of humor. And he’s about six three or four. What he showed everyone last basketball season, as a freshman, tells me a lot.”

“He’ll be on our summer hoops team, so I’ll get a close look at him. And he stepped in during basketball when Toby went down, and showed everyone he’s a very capable athlete.”

Coach then told me about a phone call he had received from a parent of a possible transfer.

“The dad was real complementary of our program, and said he had two sons, one would be a senior, and the other a sophomore. They were both two-sport athletes in football and basketball. Their name was Schmid. The boys, Ryan and Matt, Ryan, the older was 6’4 and a slot receiver.

“I don’t want to make any premature decisions, but I’ll be keeping a close eye on all the young or new receivers during the summer for sure. Remember ‘Best player plays’, regardless of year in school or anything else.”

“I like that rule coach!”

## II

We continued our little chat which included some talk about summer plans other than sports. But there was one more football question I needed to ask.

“Coach, I’ve been asked a thousand times about our last play in the championship game. Most of the time people want to know

how we came up with it? So, my question is how did 'you' come up with the 'With Ya'?"

"Eric, I've always been enamored with watching football clips from the very early years of football, mostly around the turn of last century. The game of football developed as an off-shoot of rugby, and in the early games the football was lateralled all the time. Some of the plays are really fantastic. It was not unusual to have two or three laterals on the same play, and most of the time it looked to be spontaneous."

"I've seen a few of those, and you're right some of those plays look really cool."

"I just decided to have some fun with it, and see where it might lead. When I was coaching in Nebraska at the small college level I had some players that played on the school rugby team in the spring. They were eager to try, and do the 'With Ya' thing in football, so we worked on it in practice. Then in our first game that next season we ran a counter play, and the next thing I knew our wide receiver was in the end zone with the football. You know the view from the sideline is pretty limited, so I had to ask what the devil happened. The running back told me, with a sheepish grin on his face, 'With Ya' coach. Worked like a charm."

"Wow, so that was how it started. Did you do it again?"

"Later in the season we were backup up on our own one yard line. We sprung a quick trap play on first down right up the middle, and our running back, the same kid, broke clear with only the free safety to beat. This time I saw it developing, and could tell it was going to be a ninety-nine yard score. About the fifty yard line the safety closed in for the tackle, but again our wide receiver was trailing the play, and the lateral was an easy pitch and catch."

"Nice, one other question. Did you ever do it on defense?"

"We did, and it was in a high school game. I had left the small college world, and landed at a good high school. I fell into a pretty good situation as we had talent, and good numbers. They'd had only one league title in the twenty-five years of the school though, and were hungry to win. We had a couple very talented players who basically split time at quarterback, and wide receiver, and both played defense. We were at home, and our opponent had the ball on about our twenty-five yard line for the last play of the first half. They threw a post route, but our safety picked it off on the one, and

started up the opposite sideline. When he got hemmed in he stopped, and threw a lateral all the way across the field to his buddy, who caught the ball, and raced up our sideline for the score. It was also a ninety-nine yard touchdown, and the place went nuts!”

“Was that one of your state championship teams?”

“Actually that team got beat in the semi-final. It was a close game, but our starting QB, the kid who finished the ninety-nine yarder was injured. He played but wasn’t his usual elusive self.” But we won it all the next year.”

“Hey just like us coach. Lost in the semi-final two years ago, and won it the next year. Have you ever won two in a row?”

“Not yet, my boy, not yet.”

# THREE

## “LOST HIGHWAY”

*HANK WILLIAMS*

I

Shortly after summer vacation began we took a long planned family trip to Superior National Forest in Minnesota. It was a five hour drive up highway 35 to Duluth which is located on Lake Superior and then another hour in to the Forest area. We had reserved a camp spot months ago and would spend a week playing outdoorsmen. The camping spot we reserved was for campers only, no motels or hotels in the area. We had rented a motor home or more like an RV camper that slept six. It was one of those fold-out RV's that once you got situated was actually very roomy.

There was horseback riding, fishing and rafting opportunities available as well as hiking trails galore. I for one was ready for a break from the telephone and needed time away from the recruiting scene and I think Cezar was as well. Paul wasn't sure he could do without his golf clubs for that long but once we got there and settled in he was a happy camper just like everyone else.

Our particular area was a 'boundary waters canoe area', which meant you needed to be careful not to drift into the wrong part of the border lake between Canada and the US. Regulations were pretty strict for obvious reasons.

We arrived in late afternoon, found our designated spot and set up camp. There were probably twenty other campers in the vicinity and some of them looked like they might be here for a long time. I was amazed at the size of some of the RV's and most of the other people looked to be veterans. We weren't, but that was also part of the fun.

After we unloaded folding chairs, bar-b-q paraphernalia, bicycles, fishing gear and the like the boys wandered down to the lake to put in our request to reserve a canoe or two. They came in

multiple sizes. The one we reserved was large enough that three could easily enjoy some on the water time.

By the time we walked back to camp mom had a snack set up and you know how long it took four growing boys to whittle that pile of goodies down to size. Then we spent time fighting over who slept where and claiming space. The weather forecast for the entire week was for clear weather so being inside or under cover wasn't an issue. Danny got the inside spot over the top of the cab which was too small for everyone else anyway. Mom and dad got the big bed in the back which left outside for Paul, Cezar and me. We gave Paul the spot under cover of the patio cover while Cezar and I spread out opposite but close to the camp fire. Looked pretty good to me.

By the time we'd explored the closest bike trail and found a little 'country store', more like a cabin with some snacks, and spent some quality pinochle minutes we were all pretty tired. Funny how riding in a car for five or six hours can tire out young athletes. Mom and dad hit the rack first, followed closely by Danny. Paul thought he'd stay up late but he wasn't down for five minutes before he began his soft snore. Cezar and I chatted for about a half hour and I threw one more mid-sized log on the fire to keep the bugs away.

"It's sure nice to not have to listen to more coaches try to tell me how great their program is, again," I said to my Croatian buddy.

"Ah, I don't know about that sometimes it's nice to be fawned over. Kind of like chicks fighting over a piece of meat."

"You're talking about birds and hamburger right?"

Cezar never seemed to quit with the jokes and the insinuation that he was the 'cock of the walk'. Well I guess he is a bit like a rooster. And I loved him dearly.

Dawn showed up earlier than it does in Iowa and the birds began their serenading routine about the time the sun peeked above the horizon, such as it was with a million fir trees blocking it. But the air was crystal clear, the temperature was quickly warming and a day of recreation lie ahead of us.

Cezar was gone to the world and I had been up for probably thirty minutes before anyone else stirred. I spent the time re-starting the outdoor fire and daydreaming. I wanted my senior year of high school to be special. I thought about committing before the season began so I could relax and enjoy my last high school year

without being bugged by coaches doing their job and classmates, friends and even family asking me what I'm going to do without break. The more I thought about it the more I liked the idea.

I was going to the camp at LSU that Mr. Title arranged for me. The campus was in Baton Rouge, not too far from where the saints go marching in. I would also do the one at Nebraska and Notre Dame. I thought I knew enough about Iowa already but the other three should give me enough insight to make a good decision.

A recruit could make five official visits but I had decided already not to take that many. My thought was after the summer camps I would narrow my decision down to my top two and make official visits only to them. That was the plan anyway.

Mom was the next to stir which was no surprise of course. She put on a pot of coffee, I don't know how so many people like that stuff, and piddled around the camp re-organizing like women all seem to do.

"Sleep well son," she asked while giving me a good morning hug?

"I slept like a bear cub mom. Maybe I should sleep outside back home."

"Don't you remember you three boys sleeping out in the back yard when we moved into our new place?"

"I do but I got too used to the air-conditioning I guess. That and the bugs. Guess I'm not such a outdoorsman after all."

We had upgraded about three years ago. I think it was the summer before I entered Crater High. Our dog, Joey, was twelve at the time and slowing down. He's been gone now for about a year and I'm just not sure why we haven't replaced him with another.

And then mom said, "I'm not sure we want to head down that lost highway son. You'll be gone soon and Paul's on the golf course all day. Anyway it's just too hard when they go."

"Well enjoy this week son, it's the only free time you're going to have for awhile. With your summer schedule of camps, basketball summer league, baseball and some time on the golf course you'll need this time of easy living by the lake to re-energize."

The week flew by and we had a ball. I enjoyed pretty much everything but I liked the canoe races the best. We had buddied up with some young guys from the Chicago area and Cezar, being Cezar set up a water course that required skill, luck and some skullduggery to come out on top. After a day biking, hiking and swimming we usually finished the day with a Cezar organized water race. It was a blast.

One of the new Chicago friends was also a soccer player and it turned out he was also being recruited by Northwestern. Cezar and his new friend, his name is Jerry Hancock, spent a lot of time comparing notes about the different college programs they were being recruited to. Come the end of the week I got the impression they just might end up at the same school. Time would tell.

On the way home I spent a lot of time thinking about our Crater football team. We would need to replace some awesome players and I wanted to make sure I didn't miss anyone.

On offense our returners were Luke, Blake and J. J. at wide receiver and Dustin might make it four. At the slot position we had Ryan Ruff and I'll be anxious to see how skilled Ryan Schmid would be. Our running back or backs if we do the two back personnel group are solid at number one with J. D. Graves and Randy Taylor. I think maybe Dom can also play RB but he'll need to adapt to the speed the game is played here which might not be so easy. But he's really smart and very athletic so that might work out fine. At back up fullback we have Dan Chock a rugged kid who can also play linebacker or defensive end. He's a junior who was a standout for last year's JV team and got some action on special teams during the playoff run.

In the offensive line we had four excellent players returning.

We needed to find a replacement for Mike Fritch who's playing JC ball at Iowa Western in Ames. That would be the key because right now I didn't see an obvious candidate. Three of the returners, Beau Lander, Rob Wien and Brandon Janes are being recruited by D-I schools. We'll need to develop some depth for sure and find a center if we do it would be hard to find a better starting group in all of Iowa high school football.

Tommy Keck would be a starter in most other programs at quarterback and gives us great insurance. And Luke's cousin Leo, a sophomore, should be the JV starter and suit with us on Friday nights.

On defense our strength will be the returning linebackers, all of whom started last season. J. D. Graves was a first team All-State player last year and both Myke Vares and Scott Kenston were second team All-League choices. Dan Chock will more than likely be the first LBer back up and we would need to bring along one or two young players as quality reserves.

The secondary was also solid. Gage Nichols and Mark Mack were starters last season at corner and Karli Vurm, our new principal's son, looks like an athlete. It will be interesting to see how he compares to our two returning starters. At safety we've got Jared Vick who shared time last year with Dan Winters and Jimmy Prather who can also play corner. At our strong safety spots Tony Berg returns for his senior year and Rob Shiff who played a lot in a reserve role last season will be the other starter. I think one of the corners could also move inside if needed.

It's the defensive line that is the question mark. Mike Serre, Nick Nell and Mark Kelly were back up's last year and they've all three grown and added strength with a lot of work in the weight room during the off-season. And I think Mickey Holly can be a sleeper in that group. He's got a goof frame at over six three and has worked his hind end off in the off season weight program.

The kicking chores are in good shape. Cezar will return and he'll be once again one of the best in Iowa. I've been the starting punter since my sophomore year and Jimmy is pretty good too. Coach Nook will once again be coaching the 'Special Teams', he actually calls them the 'Special Forces' out of respect for our armed services. I'm sure he's cooked up some new tricks since last season.

The coaching staff returns with just one addition and no other changes and that's always a positive. The addition is actually a returner as Coach Carter Mc Queen is coming out of retirement to volunteer. He'll be working with the linebackers and I'm sure providing valuable experience for Coach Nichols with the defensive game planning.

Coach Vince had told me the only change on defense would involve Coach Nichols. Adding coach Mc Q will allow him to move from the linebackers and work with the strong safeties. While, of course, concentrating on the Coordinator job. That will free up Coach Allenon to work with just the free safety and the corners. The years of experience working together with that group and the addition of Coach Mc Q forms a pretty impressive staff.

# FOUR

## “THINK IT OVER”

### *BUDDY HOLLY*

I

The first football camp would be the one at LSU. The Nebraska camp would follow a week later and the one at Notre Dame would be the last week in July. I spent a week after our vacation getting ready for the trip to Baton Rouge. It would be my first trip to the south and I was pretty pumped.

I was working out in the weight room being run again by Coach Shell. He's not actually on the coaching staff but he's been with Coach Vincetti for years. He's a retired PE teacher and coach who moved to Crater to be with his long time friend. It's been our benefit. He runs a non-nonsense program but is very knowledgeable. He's 'Old-School' for sure but it's my opinion a program needs that sort of discipline.

Coach Shell had me doing some light flexing exercises trying to keep my upper body and shoulders from getting too tight when a big good looking kid walked in the room accompanied by Dom. After speaking briefly with coach Shell Dom brought the new kid directly to me.

“There is a God Eric. I want you to meet Alek Milanovic.”

I reached out to shake his hand and found my paw to be enveloped.

“Alek is a transfer from Virginia Beach and guess what? He's a center.”

Now the kid had my full attention. At first glance it was clear he's one of those guys you want to get off the team bus first.

“How tall are you Alek,” I asked?

“Almost 196 centimeters.”

“Ok, now translate that Dom.”

“It's almost 6'6.”

“And I'm guessing about 250 pounds?”

“Just about, it's close to 115 kilograms.”

After I regained a semblance of composure I asked, "With that name you've got to have some Serb blood I'm guessing? Tell me about your background."

Alek turned out to be a quiet kid who might have been a bit overwhelmed but sure seemed like a good addition. He had been a starter in Virginia and his background was indeed Serbian. He told me his family had moved to the USA when he was just five or six years old. Obviously his English was excellent.

"Can I ask if you've had college coaches talking to you?"

"A few, none of the big guys though. I was hoping UVA would show some interest but they haven't yet."

After a pause he said, "Maybe playing for a quality team like here at Crater will get me some attention. We weren't a very good team last year, finishing with only three wins on the season."

"That's not going to be a problem Alek, and I'm sure Dom has told you we've been wondering who our center was going to be. I think that problem just got solved."

I couldn't stop smiling after Dom and Alek left to head to the counseling office. I was just about finished so it didn't take long to head to the shower room. There was a buzz with guys talking about our new transfer.

As I headed out the door coach Shell said, "Enjoy your time down south Eric. I'll get the new kid shaped up and by the time you get back from your camp circuit you won't be worrying about who the center is going to be."

I headed out and ran into Luke, J. J. and Blake getting ready for some throw and catch.

"Getting in some work guys?"

Luke said, "We'll have most of the varsity guys here in a few minutes as Leo jumped out of Luke's clunker to join, and about that same time Tommy drove up in a nice BMW."

"Where'd you get those wheels," asked Blake as he ogled the spiffy sports car.

"Birthday present," he said with a big grin on his face.

"Damn I'd better let dad know I've changed my mind. I just asked for a watch."

By the time everyone got ready Dustin and Ryan had arrived, and then a tall good looking red head showed up and it had to be the transfer Ryan Schmid.

I was about to head home to pack my gear, as we needed to leave for the airport in about two hours. But quickly decided I needed to hang around for a while. I walked over towards Ryan and before I could say anything he waved and said, "You've got to be Eric. I'm Ryan Schmid, and I'm so glad to meet you and join the Crater family. I've heard so many good things about you and this program I can't wait to get started."

"Thank you Ryan and welcome. Coach told me you had a younger brother that also plays."

"I do and Matt should be here soon I think. He had a dentist appointment so I don't know if he'll be participating today."

"Ouch. Not one of my favorite places."

I noticed Tim Ligott walking towards me, and he didn't look ready to participate. I wondered about that.

"Hi, Tim, what's up?"

Then he surprised me by confiding in me that he had decided not to play football. He told me after he had a great summer baseball season there were colleges talking scholarship.

"I just don't want to take the chance of getting hurt. Baseball will be my chance in college, and a scholarship is within my sights."

I told him his decision made good sense to me, and I think that made him feel better. The truth was we were fine at backup quarterback with Tommy, and the secondary was already crowded. Tim would have earned time for sure, but he's made the right decision.

Luke and Tommy had everything organized and it didn't take them long to get into throwing drills. Tommy was really looking good as he had filled out a lot since last season and seeing him throw to the receiving corps opened my eyes. I thought, I'd better not let my guard down or I might be moving back to receiver.

This had turned out to be quite a day. Alek certainly will solidify the offensive line group and the two Ryan's could give us darn near identical slots as the twins did last year. Certainly in size as both were 6'4 plus. Add our wide receivers to the mix and heck we were two deep and I just couldn't stop grinning. Ok Iowa if you

think we won't be ready to defend our state championship, better take another look.

## II

We arrived at the airport in plenty of time for the 3:10 PM flight direct to New Orleans. I would be met there by one of the assistant camp directors and driven to camp. It was about seventy-five miles and with airport traffic I was told it usually took about an hour and a half to reach the LSU campus in Baton Rouge.

The sprawling campus sits on a plateau overlooking the Mississippi River and Tiger Stadium, with a seating capacity of over seventy five thousand. It boasts sky boxes called the Tiger Den and games are played mostly at night with the home team wearing white jerseys. The fortunes weren't up to the expectations recently but coach Jerry Stovall, a former LSU All-American, was confident of a return to dominance in the always tough Southeast Conference.

It was a four day camp, Monday through Thursday, and most of the LSU coaching staff took part. There were also local high school coaches working the camp and there were over 100 campers which included fifteen quarterbacks.

The football offices were adjacent to the stadium and we all got a tour of the entire facility. The entrance hall to the area was dominated by the Heisman Trophy won by legendary player Billy Cannon in 1958, which was also the year of the first LSU national championship.

There were two sessions surrounding lunch in the team dining area and also nightly video opportunities. The position coaches showed game and practice film of LSU during the past season.

The head camp instructor ran the entire camp and he seemed to be everywhere. His name was Mr. Camsker but everyone just called him Coach Cam. He had one of those personalities that put a smile on your face and kept it there.

The QB coach handled our session and gave us a good account of how he would use film to offer constructive criticism to his QB's. It was a bit of an eye opener for me and much more detailed than I was used to at Crater. I could tell the 'Next Level' would be a much more complex version of football, but I also thought it would come down to execution of fundamental football

skills. For the quarterback's that meant accurate throwing and an ability to read a defense.

Our drill sessions were pretty much throwing to receivers in a group drill which was followed by what is called seven on seven or 'Outside'. The offensive group ran plays called by the quarterback coach Vs a defensive group of linebackers and defensive backs. At the end of each session there was a short 'team' controlled scrimmage. It was competitive and fun and all fifteen quarterbacks had an opportunity to be involved. There seemed to be no favoritism and in fact when one of the younger campers who might have been a bit overmatched took his turn the entire group showed obvious support. It's called teamwork and the LSU coaches demanded it which may have been the most impressive part of the camp in my eyes.

I had a chance to speak with Coach Stovall and he was very well informed about my success as an athlete. He mentioned that being recruited in both football and basketball put me on a different level.

"Son, you've obviously got some decisions to make and the biggest one might be which sport to play."

He went on to tell me to be open-minded and take my time before making sport and college decisions.

"Your skill is obvious to me and our entire staff Eric and I'm taking this moment to let you know we are offering you a football scholarship here at LSU. You would be part of what is shaping up to be an outstanding recruiting class. I hope you'll give us due consideration."

I thanked him and let him know that I was a long way from making a decision.

"Coach, I want you to know I've been very impressed with everything I've seen here and please, if you get the chance, let Mr. Title know how much I appreciate his effort."

"Oh I hope you didn't call Y. A. Mr. Title."

We both laughed and I assured Coach Stovall that I did make that mistake but only once or maybe twice.

The last session was a Red Zone scrimmage with teams selected by the camp coaches and of course Coach Cam ran the show. I was the quarterback on Coach Coop's team. He was a local high school coach and I could tell he had a great future. He

had been a super star receiver in high school, first team all-state, and had been a bright spot on a couple of average LSU teams.

It was a spirited contest with each team getting twenty plays of offense in ten play sequences. We went first and scored twice in our first set of ten. So did our opponents. In the second series we crossed the goal line three times with the last one being an acrobatic catch by a receiver from Mississippi who I had gotten to know quite well. His name was J. R. Laughlin.

“Great catch J. R.,” I hollered as I sprinted in his direction for a leaping high five.

“You put the ball in the right spot buddy.”

“Yeah right.”

One of the neat things, I was finding out about the camp opportunity, was getting to know athletes from different parts of the country. J. R. was only 6’1 and maybe 180 pounds but had an uncanny ability to make even a poorly thrown ball look good. He wasn’t the fastest receiver in camp but his combination of speed and quickness would be hard to overlook. He was leaning towards the University of Mississippi but told me in confidence that he really hoped he could earn a scholarship offer from LSU and that’s why he was at the camp.

I told him, “After the way you’ve played these last four days I don’t know how they couldn’t offer. You were in my mind easily the best receiver here.”

Then there was this kid from New Mexico, his name was J. J. Todd. He was an offensive lineman and the clown of the camp. But, he was a big time player being recruited by all the major football powers.

J.J. had a personality that everyone loved. When he came into the room it lit up. He was funny and somewhat of a pied piper. Others just naturally gravitated to him. It wasn’t long before J. R. and J. J. and I became buddies.

When camp finished we had a chance to chat about our choices, J. R. had been offered which made the effort worthwhile. We exchanged phone numbers and promised to stay in touch. I tried to talk him in to coming to the Nebraska camp but he had a commitment next week.

“I’m going to see if I can change it and if so I’ll be calling to see if there are any spots left up Nebraska way.”

I didn't think that would be a problem after I told coach Solich about my new friend. But I didn't share that with J. R. because I didn't want him to think I had any pull with the 'Husker coaches and maybe I didn't and wouldn't want to look like a fool.

The last thing I said was, "Think it over J. R. love to see you in Lincoln."

When I asked J. J. if he was interested his answer was typical J. J. "How will I fit in another camp when I've already got about twenty offers?"

He said it with a big grin on his face which seemed to be a permanent fixture. Someone was going to get a talent and a born leader.

As J. R. and I left Coach Cam appeared out of nowhere.

"Hey you two, thanks for coming to camp. Hope you enjoyed Cajun hospitality."

We assured him we had a ball. He just smiled and bounced on to the next challenge waving goodbye.

# FIVE

## “THAT’S ALL I NEED TO KNOW”

*KENNY CHESNEY*

I

The ride home gave me an opportunity to think about the camp at LSU and about the opportunity to play there. I liked the area and I liked the coaching staff. Coach Stovall seemed very confident about turning the program around, but the question is do I want to take that chance. It was the same thought I had about Notre Dame. Both schools were excellent and both had an impressive football history and both were in a down cycle. Maybe I would be a part of the rebuild and maybe I'd be a part of a program that struggled during my career. If that were the case there would probably be a coaching change as well and that was something I didn't want to be a part of either. This decision was far from over for me, I just hoped after the week in Lincoln I'd have a better idea, maybe even a clear and obvious one.

I called coach Solich when I got home and asked if they had any openings for camp next week. Then I told him about J. R. and he said he'd make sure they had a spot. I then called J. R. to relay that news and he was pretty excited. I gave him Coach Solich's phone number and told him Coach was waiting for his call.

It wasn't twenty minutes later that J. R. called me back, "Looks like we'll be roommates buddy."

We talked for a little longer and I invited him to spend the weekend after the Nebraska camp with our family here in Crater. He quickly accepted.

"Nice of you to invite me to stay with the poor folk of Iowa," he said. And I could just see the smirk on his face. We had become pretty good friends in a short time. I really knew almost nothing about him other than what I've seen on the football field but he had a warmth about him that maybe is common to the south.

Just before hanging up I said, "Let's put on a show for our friends from the Big Red."

"That, my new friend, sounds like fun. See you in three days."

Mom and dad quizzed me about the LSU camp and Danny was all over me about everything from food to football.

"Do they really have southern fried chicken? And what's the difference? Isn't fried chicken fried chicken?"

I tried to explain I thought it was the added spices they use but by that time Danny had moved on to, "Did you get to meet Billy Cannon?"

Actually he did make an appearance on the last night at the end of camp gathering. We were all sitting in the stands at the game field and a number of coaches spoke first. The 1958 Heisman Trophy winner looked to me like he could still play. He spoke to us about the commitment to the sport of football needed to reach your potential. The son of a janitor grew up poor in Baton Rouge and his 'Punt Return' Vs Ole Miss on Halloween night clinched the national title for the Tigers and his Heisman Trophy. While at the same time adding to the legend of Billy Cannon. As he spoke the 'Punt Return' played on the giant screen above the end zone. The same end zone he raced 89 yards to reach, breaking tackles along the way and leaving Old Miss Rebels lying in his path.

On Friday afternoon the guys would be throwing at the practice field again and I was anxious to join in the fun. I knew I'd get all sorts of questions about my LSU visit and that wouldn't be a problem but I really wanted to get a good look at Ryan Schmid and Dustin Lloyd. I knew how good Luke, Blake and J. J. were and I had a pretty good idea about Ryan Ruff as well. Then there was our exchange student Dom. Everyone told me what a good athlete he was and I wanted to see where he might fit best in our scheme and with the other talent we were assembling for our 1983 season.

Pretty much everyone was there for the noon start, most doing some individual warm up exercises. The offensive line guys were in the end zone walking through some footwork drills that looked to me like simulating pass protection. That put a big smile on my face. They were an impressive looking group and not a lot of extra around the middle weight. Rob and Jake were wrestlers while Beau had played some JV hoops. Brandon spent his off season in the weight

room and Alek would join him. Five seniors and two, Rob and Beau had started since their sophomore season.

We started with some simple throw and catch drills with the receivers while the defensive guys shadowed working on hip turn and footwork while warming up the muscles at the same time. Tommy and Leo both looked at ease and we chatted a bit about the camp and Leo asked, "How did you compare with the other QB's?"

"There were some pretty impressive guys," I told him. "The best was a kid from the Dallas, Texas area. His name was Mike Coin. He was as tall as me and had a rocket for an arm."

"Was he better than you," was Leo's next question?

"Well to tell you the truth, for a little while I wasn't sure but I held my own and that's really all I needed to know. I'd say it was pretty much a toss up. It looked like Mike was leaning towards Kansas State. They would be getting a good one.

We were the two QB's chosen to play in the end of camp Red Zone competition."

"Who won?"

"Who do you think buddy? The good guy in the white hat from Iowa."

"Ok, sure. I bet you were a Dixieland Delight." He said that with a wink.

## II

Once we began the 7 on 7 drill things got a bit more competitive. I was very impressed with the depth of our secondary guys. Gage, Mark and the new kid and principal's son Karli, looked to be in mid-season form. Another senior, Rick Sanchez also was a solid player at corner. I also like the looks of sophomore David Either. Rob and Tony looked right at ease at the strong safety spots and Mark took some turns there as well. At free safety Jared and Jimmy both covered a lot of ground. We were solid at every position in the defensive backfield, but that was no surprise it was a veteran group.

Both J. D. and Dan spent time at linebacker along with Scott. Myke was visiting relatives out of state in the month of June but I wasn't a bit worried about him. He had shown everyone last season he was a potential D-I player. But his absence gave our young guys

a chance for some valuable repetitions. The best of the group in my eyes were sophomore's Joe Carthy and Clarke Smithe. Both of them were aggressive and seemed comfortable and confident for young players. Part of that might be, at least with Clarke, heredity as his dad Jake was a volunteer coach at the Frosh level. He had played for Coach Vince in college and it looked like his oldest son might just follow in dad's footsteps.

On offense we began the drill with Blake and Luke alternating with J. J. and Dustin at wide receiver. We were playing with four receivers so both Ryan's were at the Slot positions. They looked pretty much like clones, both tall and coordinated like you would expect from basketball players. Randy and Dom took some reps there as well. I knew Randy had ability to catch the football and his speed adds another element. Dom was naturally a little hesitant at first but as he got more comfortable he showed good skill and a competitiveness I hadn't seen in his personality prior. That was very good news, the Piano man would be right at home by the time the regular season began in September.

The play got even more physical and competitive towards the end when we worked in the Red Zone. The DB's were playing an aggressive man-to-man coverage with a free safety over the top and they weren't out classed. Tony was his usual physical self and Rob surprised a bit as he had gotten obviously stronger since the end of last season.

Luke did his usual thing and used his quickness to shake loose and both J. J. and Blake made some excellent plays. Dustin looked overmatched for a while but after a great corner catch seemed to suddenly gain confidence. But the most impressive to me were both Ryan's. Their height helped of course but they both had that basketball sense that allowed them to screen defenders and break toward the ball a step ahead. Of course the quarterback crew was used to throwing to tall guys like the twins so it was no surprise.

We worked out for about an hour and a half and by the end we were all drenched with summer workout sweat. It felt great. As we cooled down the talk turned to the LSU camp and the upcoming one at Nebraska next week. I told my teammates about J. R. and how he had made me look good with his acrobatics.

"You'll get a chance to meet him next weekend. He'll be staying with us before heading back home to Mississippi."

Luke wanted to know if he would have been able to compete with the receivers in camp and I told him he was better than most of them.

“J. R. was in my opinion the best one in camp but there were a couple others who were obviously D-I recruits.”

Luke wanted to know about the campus and we spent our warm-down time discussing the pro's and con's of such a large university. Luke had always had the opinion that he would be better off in a small college environment and maybe so. But, his personality would allow him to be at home no matter where he ended up.

“You'd have loved looking at the southern bell's. I've never seen so many good looking girls in my life. It looked to me like they all came out of a movie set. And that southern accent just adds to the charm. Come to think of it Luke, maybe you should look at a small college in the south.”

I got a chance to speak with Ryan Schmid for an extended chat. It was the first time we had managed to do that. I asked him about his younger brother and he told me Matt, who would be a freshman, wasn't sure he would play football.

“He's really immature and I think a little intimidated. I've tried to tell him no one here would care if he shaved or not, and playing would give him the chance to get to know people faster. But, my guess is he'll wait for basketball. I was the same as a frosh, tried to be last in the shower.”

I asked if it might help if I spoke with him and Ryan thought that would be a good idea. I made it a point to find time to do that after I got back from the Husker camp. Summer basketball would be in full swing by then and it would probably be a good time to meet. If he was anything like Ryan we would love to have him in the football program.

As we left I told Tommy to keep up the good work. He's looking so much more confident than he was last season.

“Are you OK with being a back up again buddy?”

“I'm just waiting my turn Eric,” he said with a confident look on his face. I really liked Tommy and knew he would never be anything but the best teammate.

“Just be as ready as you can and be yourself. No one on this team will blink if you have to take over for any reason.”

He just smiled as he headed for his fancy sports car.

## SIX

### “IT’S A GOOD NIGHT FOR SINGING”

*JERRY JEFF WALKER*

I

We had three major changes in our administration as both our long time Principal and Athletic Director have retired. Our new principal Karl Vurm wasn't the complete opposite of Jack Beech, but it was close. He was friendly enough and seemed to be a supporter of our athletic programs but he was way more businesslike. He had never been a teacher and I'm not yet convinced that a person in charge of about sixty or so teachers shouldn't have been in their boots at least for a while.

The second news was we also had a new VP. His name was Mr. Cramer and he had been a counselor and baseball coach before moving into administration. He had moved up from the junior high where he had been for a while and was very popular with both teachers and students. Most of us knew him from our junior high days and that made it an easy transition for him.

Don Kling had also retired and filling his huge shoes was John Sander. He was also a long time member of the staff, most recently as activity director after many years teaching photography. He had coached football and wrestling and had a strong background in athletics. Everyone felt like this was an excellent decision by the administration. During his first week he was interviewed and his words were simple.

“I don't want to change anything Don set up. He was the standard bearer for AD's in this state. I'll simply try to follow his blue print.”

A bit more good news was Karl Vurm's son Karli was very athletic and looked to me like he would fill in nicely at one of the defensive back spots. They had come from Wisconsin where Mr. Vurm had been a vice-principal at Madison East High. This was going to be his first as principal. But he was at East for ten years so

I'm sure he's ready to take the next step. Apparently our school board thought the same thing.

I asked coach Vince what he thought of the new administrative team and he paused before saying, "I've worked for a lot of good ones and fortunately only a couple poor ones. Our new principal Mr. Vurm has paid his dues in administration, and I'm sure he's excited for the opportunity here at Crater. I'll say this, I like what I've seen so far, and leave it at that."

Coach went on to say, "Having Michael Tehman here will make it easier for Mr. Vurm to adapt to the new surroundings. I think it's going to be a good combination. Mr. Tehman was a long time history teacher, then counselor and now our second VP. Everyone thought highly of him, teachers and students alike. And, Mr. Cramer is full of positive energy and shows a great interest in our athletic program. That's also good news.

Jack Beech was sort of like a father to most of us, so it will take a bit of getting used to a different style in the principal's chair. I just hope Karli doesn't worry too much about that. It's got to be hard being the principal's kid. Getting involved in football should help and he's made a lot of friends quickly.

Dad was going to drive me to Lincoln on Sunday. The report time was 5 PM, so that wouldn't be a problem. It would give us a chance to visit, just the two of us. We don't always get that opportunity, so I was looking forward to it. Then he would pick J. R. and I up Thursday after camp finishes.

We spent time talking about college, and dad wanted to know where LSU set in the order.

"After thinking about it I believe they're ahead of Iowa. I really like the offensive coordinator for the Hawkeyes, but I'm just not convinced I'd be happy sitting behind the incumbent for two years."

"What's the QB situation at LSU?"

"They'll have a senior this season who started last year, and two underclassmen. I got to meet all three of them, and they seemed like good guys to me. The quarterback coach told me neither of the back ups had separated themselves, and they wanted to bring in someone who could compete right away. No guarantee, but at least there isn't an established QB waiting in the wings."

We talked a lot about our up coming season at Crater as well. Dad thought we might have a better team than last year.

“With all those offensive linemen returning you guys might be able to establish a bruising ground game.”

“I think Coach Vincetti has something like that in mind. But with our receivers looking so good I think we’ll be affective either running or throwing.”

As we got closer to campus dad asked more questions about Nebraska. The more we talked about it the more I thought it was going to be very hard to say no to the Huskers. They were still on top of my list. Maybe that would change after this week’s camp, but I was trying to keep an open mind.

J. R. had arrived already, and was waiting at the camp check-in point talking to Coach Solich. We had indeed been assigned the same dorm room, which was cool.

“I think I need to thank you Coach for picking my roommate.”

“J. R. made that real easy. He insisted he would talk you in to going to Mississippi if I didn’t make that happen.”

We all got a chuckle out of the exchange. Then Coach Solich took time to explain the camp procedure, and head us in the right direction.

Dad had a chance to meet J. R. and say hello to Coach Solich. He wished me well, and gave me a dad-son hug before he headed back east on highway I-80 E.

“You don’t look a lot like your dad,” said J. R.

“I get my good looks from mom, buddy.”

The coach in charge of room assignments was a grad assistant I had met during one of my unofficial visits. His name was Hugh Gunner but everyone just called him coach Huey. We checked into our dorm room and got settled. Then we spent some time just chatting about football, and what we expected to accomplish at the Husker camp. J. R. thanked me again for helping to set up this opportunity for him.

“I’m really looking forward to see how I match up with these guys. I know there are some real blue chip receivers here. I poked around a bit before you got here, and spoke with the receiver coach.”

He went on to explain that Coach Huey told him about two or three of their prize recruits they hoped to convince to wear Husker red.

Then with a shrug and a funny look he told me, “This is a great opportunity for me to see how I match up with these guys.”

We talked for a bit longer before we decided it was time to head for the conference room where the opening welcome meeting was to be held.

As we headed out the door I looked at my new friend and said, “Just compete like you did last week. I think you’ll find out pretty fast where you stand. And for that matter so will I.”

## II

I’ll say this right up front. The Nebraska camp was a thrill and pretty much put a stamp of approval on my having the Huskers on top of my list. It was a success in every phase. The staff couldn’t have been nicer or treated me any better. It was obvious everyone was trying to make this a good experience for me, and they accomplished that goal with flying colors.

J. R. showed some early nerves, but it didn’t take him long to relax and show his talent to everyone. Before the end of camp coach Huey confided in me that J. R. had impressed everyone, and there was a lot of staff talk about offering him a scholarship.

“Will you be able to make that decision this week?”

“I hope so. Ultimately it will be Coach Osborne’s call.”

There were some quality quarterbacks as well. Most of them were equally skilled in running and throwing. But I felt like my skills stood up to the comparison. The coach working with the QB’s was a grad assistant, and he did a good job. I got the feeling that Coach Osborne was the one who coached the QB’s, as they didn’t have a designated QB coach on staff.

I asked Coach Solich if that was true, and he told me that was the case, and that he also spent time with the quarterbacks when the running backs were working in the same drill. After the Wednesday practice session, walking toward the dining hall, Coach Solich confided in me, “Eric just in case you haven’t figured it out, everyone on our staff has been impressed with your skill level.”

Then he paused, but before I had a chance to say thanks, he continued, “But, maybe just as important is the way you’ve presented yourself. Your parents have done a great job son, your demeanor couldn’t be more positive. And I for one really like the

way you communicate with the other QB's. Don't get the big head son, but you're the real deal, and I'm going to do everything I can to convince you Nebraska is the place to spend the next four years."

I tried not to stammer my answer, "Coach thanks for the compliments. My parents wouldn't let me be a jerk even if I wanted to. I'll tell you what I'm sure you already know, everything I've seen from our first visit to watch a game until now has been first class. I can't commit just yet, but coach I've decided to choose my school and do that before our season begins this fall. I don't want the decision to keep me from enjoying my senior season."

"That's great, I'll pass that on to Coach Osborne if it's ok?"

"Of course."

Thursday was similar to the camp at LSU. We had some competitive seven on seven competitions, and followed that up with some goal line action. Like LSU the staff picked two teams to compete in the end of camp challenge. I was the quarterback on the Red team and a kid from Kansas was the White team QB. J. R. was one of my four receivers.

The linemen were also in action but it was mostly a silent style with no tackling allowed. It was eleven on eleven but very controlled and all pass. But it was fun to be surrounded by a full compliment of players.

In my opinion the best offensive linemen in camp was a big kid from Oregon. His name was Ryan Belch and he was a beast. Six foot four and close to three hundred pounds of football player. He could move at that size and one on one nobody could put up much of a fight. I hoped he would become a husker.

There were a lot of good players in camp, but I thought our guys back at Crater were as good as any of the linemen in camp. That fact made me feel pretty confident. And J. J. Todd, the kid I met in the LSU camp from New Mexico, was way better than any and that includes two or three who had already earned a full scholarship.

The area from the plus 40 to the end zone was lined with campers, parents, and interested spectators The atmosphere was electric. The format was White on offense first, and we would alternate with each team having the ball four times. We had four downs to make the ten yards on each possession, and a score

ended the session. So it was possible to have a maximum of four scores.

The White team had three scores, failing on their last possession. We scored our first three times and went to fourth and five after an initial first down gave us four more chances. They allowed the QB's to call the play, and I wanted to isolate J. R. so we lined up in a trips formation with J. R. the single receiver. He was singled covered, but a LBer would try to cover underneath. J. R. had shown the same skills he had at LSU an above average speed with quickness unmatched by anyone in camp. On this crucial play he ran a slant route on which he was pretty well covered. But, he planted his foot and pivoted back to the outside on what is called a 'Delete' route. He left the corner stumbling to stay with him, and out ran the LBer under the route. I threw a strike, and we had four more downs.

We didn't need four or even a second down. Again we lined up in trips to the field. The ball was on the twenty-one yard line. The route called for a three step sprint away from the single receiver and the first option was a throwback to the wide out. Once again J. R. started the slant, but then broke up field beating the corner. My pass lead him a bit outside but he made a tougher than he made it look adjustment, and sailed into the end zone after an over the shoulder catch. The play drew a huge ovation, and the Red team acted like it was a championship play. It was.

J. R. won the outstanding receiver award at the end of camp ceremony. I won the award for quarterbacks. I only mention that because it culminated a sudden relationship that I hoped would continue after a season apart as high school seniors. J. R. was the real deal.

Later, as we were saying our goodbye's to everyone, and dad was waiting with the engine running coach Osborne asked both J. R. and I for a moment.

"I wanted to be sure to tell you that scholarships are on the table for both of you. Eric there has never been a doubt for us, and I hope you'll make a decision in our favor in the near future."

Then turning towards J. R. Coach said, "Son, you were the biggest surprise of camp, and in our staff meeting last night a decision to offer you a scholarship was unanimous."

The smiles on our faces as we jumped into the car couldn't possible have told the full story, but it came close. And as we headed east towards Iowa J. R. shouted, "It's a good night for singing the Husker fight song." Neither of us knew the words.

# SEVEN

## “FOR A LITTLE WHILE”

*TIM Mc GRAW*

I

By the time we arrived home it was Thursday evening, but mom had a light supper waiting, which was no surprise. We got J. R. settled in the guest bedroom, and Cezar joined us for what amounted to a snack.

Of course Paul and Danny wanted to know how things went at camp, and mom just listened. Dad had been there for the last part so I let him give a parents eye view of how that went down. He did mention that a certain receiver made me look pretty good. J. R. just blushed, and stayed silent.

Danny was unusually quiet during dinner, but finally looked over at J. R. and said, “You talk funny.”

Mom shook her head and apologized for her youngest son.

“No need ma’am.”

After dinner Cezar, J. R. and me decided a quick trip to the ‘Doorway’ needed to happen. As it turned out both Tim and Doug were there having an evening snack, so we joined them.

It turns out Doug has family in Mississippi so those two Rebels had a lot to talk about. We spent over an hour talking teenage business, and having a quiet time together. Tim thought Val was up for a gathering on Saturday, and everyone assured J. R. he would not only be welcome, but probably be hit on by most of the girls in residence. He was a good looking young man, and had that southern gentleman countenance that I’m sure made him a charmer to most young women. We would find out on Saturday.

I took our Mississippi friend up to the Friday weight workout where he jumped right in the mix. I spent most of my time doing light weight work while he pumped some impressive iron.

“Hey, for a skinny wide out you’ve got some hidden strength pal.”

About that time Coach Shell came by and after introducing himself talked a lot about strength conditioning, and asked a lot of questions about J. R.'s summer weight program. It turned out it was pretty similar to ours and I think that made Coach Shell feel good about what we were doing. Not that his expertise had ever been in question around the Crater locker room.

The on field workout was missing a few players so we cut it back a bit but still got in some good work. J. R. just jumped into the receiver line, and did his thing without showing off or holding back. The kid just seems to fit in as I'd learned at both the LSU and Nebraska camps.

Cezar had a summer soccer game in the early evening so after we showered, and grabbed a quick bite to eat we took an hour to lie back and chat more about football. It didn't take long for the talk to turn to decisions about college.

"Is Nebraska still number one on your list," asked J. R.?

"It is and I'll tell you LSU is now number two."

"Really, I'm a little surprised about that. Ahead of Notre Dame and Iowa?"

"Right now I'd put Iowa at number three and I'm thinking of canceling my camp time at Notre Dame."

"Really, that's a surprise. Why?"

"I've just never got the same vibe from them as I've gotten from either Nebraska or Iowa, and now LSU being in the mix I just don't think I want to do the camp when I know the chances of me changing my mind are nearly zero."

"Have you said anything to your parents about that?"

"Not yet, but that camp isn't until nearly a month away. I'll think about it some more, talk with Coach Vincetti, and then make the decision."

Paul came in about then and he had obviously just come from the golf course.

"Hey you guys going to Cezar's game tonight?"

"Yep."

"Cool. Can I come along?"

"Only if you promise to root for the good guys."

He just shook his head yes, and headed for the kitchen.

Paul would be an incoming freshmen in a few weeks, and I know he just wanted to be one of the guys. His days at junior high

were over. I told J. R. about Paul's golfing skills, and he shared with me that was one sport he just had zero feel for.

Then I asked him, "We've talked about my decision now tell me where you stand. You've got offers from Ole Miss, LSU and Nebraska. Not bad for an up to now unknown little rascal from the heart of Dixie."

"Eric would it surprise you to know that I would love to go to the same place you're going?"

"Package deal huh?"

"Yep."

"Ok lets write down the order in secret and then compare."

"Got it."

It didn't take me long to list #1 Nebraska, #2 LSU and #3 Iowa. Then I waited as J. R. contemplated his choices. When he was finished we simply exchanged paper.

His was listed #1 LSU, #2 Nebraska and #3 Ole Miss.

Then we spent some time explaining our reasoning. We talked about offensive schemes, and coaching staffs and even about academics. J. R. turned out to be an A student which was no surprise to me. We were in the most agreement about one thing, we both listed girls as a plus for LSU. And that was the least surprising thing in our rational.

## II

We watched with a couple hundred fans the soccer match, and Cezar was, surprise, surprise, the star. He's really good, and he's got a school decision coming up too. I wonder if LSU has a good soccer program.

Afterwards we stopped in at the 'Doorway' and finished off a pizza while Cezar and Paul argued about who was the best player on the planet. Paul thought it was Pele from Brazil, and Cezar had his money on Diego Maradona from Argentina. That argument will probably go on for centuries.

The talk got around to J. R.'s football history. Paul wanted to know if he'd always been a receiver.

"Actually I was a quarterback until just last season. Then probably because our QB was better than me coach moved me to receiver. I fell in love with the position, and now I wonder what took

me so long to figure out I wouldn't be a college player at quarterback."

Cezar asked about scholarship offers, and quickly learned about our conversation earlier in the day.

"So you guys might be a package deal huh? I thought that was for me and you," Cezar said looking directly at me.

"Now I'm crushed. You've thrown me under the bus for a boy from frig'in Mississippi. If I'm not mistaken that's under the Mason/Dixon line, whatever that is."

Paul asked, "Who the devil was Mason Dixon?"

Cezar just stared at him frowning and then said, "It's two people idiot. Mason and Dixon and I think they were gay tobacco farmers or something."

I nearly choked on that line and J. R. was laughing so hard he nearly fell out of the booth. Paul just shrugged.

Finally with as straight a face as I could muster I said, "We don't want to let the word out that we're not concerned with political correctness guys. We better tone it down."

"Ok, ok," piped in Cezar, "I'm sorry, two off center guys."

We kept laughing all the way out to the car. In fact we were still chuckling as we parted back home. Cezar headed up to his garage bungalow, and the three of us into the house.

"See 'yawl in the morning," J. R. said to Paul and I as we headed upstairs.

Saturday was a pretty slow day. We watched some TV, and messed around the house for most of the morning. In the afternoon Paul talked me and J. R. into joining him at the country club for nine holes of golf.

J. R. rode the cart and acted as official score keeper while the Lewis brothers battled it out on the links. That rascal Paul won with a nifty even par 36 while I limped home with a 41. I think the worm has turned in the apple.

We grabbed Cezar and headed for Val's place about seven, and enjoyed another evening showing off a friend. Dom was there and his first question went something like, "Do I officially pass the torch to the kid from Mississippi or is that Val's job?"

He didn't have to because it took the girls in the house no time at all to discover J. R., and fall in love with both him and his southern drawl.

Later while playing bad pool downstairs we all three accepted a beverage from Doug. I took one sip, coughed, and put it down. Cezar took two before he did likewise. J. R. just sniffed, looked at Doug with nearly crossed eyes, and then chugged the thing. If anyone hadn't accepted our friend up to that point they quickly converted to best pals. The kid just had a way about him. For a little while I thought I might have to match him, but decided discretion was the better part of valor.

The party fizzled out short of midnight, and a very sober Cezar drove us home. Actually J. R. didn't take another drink, I wasn't counting anyway, and we spent a pretty relaxed and enjoyable night visiting. A lot of people asked the 'Have you decided about college yet' question, and all three of us gave the same reply. "Not yet."

J. R. was heading back home in the morning so I wasn't in any hurry to rush to bed. We stayed up late still talking about football and agreed to stay in close touch throughout the entire recruiting process. I confided in him that I would probably make an early decision, and he thought that was a good idea.

"If we decide to go to the same place, and I hope we do, what about making a joint announcement?"

"Let's drink to that," I said, and we called it a night.

# EIGHT

## “NOBODY BUT ME”

*BLAKE SHELTON*

I

It was the last week in July. The week I had scheduled to be at the Notre Dame camp. After a few weeks of adding up the pluses and the minuses I called off my plans to attend. I spoke at length with people I trust and respect which included coach Vincetti, Coach Edwards, my parents and finally Coach Knight. In the end it was my decision and I feel the correct one.

Maybe Bobby Knight sealed the decision when he told me, “Eric, coaches appreciate honesty, and although all of us hate to hear no thanks, in the end it makes our job easier.”

It wasn't an easy conversation, but the assistant coach I spoke with was very understanding and made it easier. He didn't try to talk me out of my decision, and I appreciated that. I've heard stories about coaches that just won't take no for an answer, and I didn't want any part of having to deal with a situation that didn't look to have a peaceful ending.

I hope when I've made my final college choice I'll feel as sure that it is the right one as I did about the Notre Dame conclusion. In the end it would be nobody but me making the decision. It was really coming down to Nebraska and LSU. I've vacillated back and fourth between the two for the past month. At times I wonder why it's even close, as the Big Red seems so perfect. First, it's a great program, which just might win the national championship this year. Second, their quarterback is a senior, and it's a two hour drive from home. There is no negative.

Coach Solich, without being obnoxious, kept up his recruiting even showing up a summer basketball games. Now and then I'd get a call from a Husker alum who would lend his opinion as to how good I'd look in Red. I must admit when Bobby Reynolds a 1950 All-American halfback and College Hall of Fame inductee called I

was thrilled. I had met him during a previous trip to Lincoln, and was pretty much awed by his stature and his presence. After his career at Nebraska ended he had gone on to become a hugely successful businessman, and was still living in Lincoln.

His advice came down to loyalty. "Son, when you leave the University you'll have opportunities everywhere, but those Husker Alum's don't forget who represented them on the football field."

He went on to say, "You'll no doubt have NFL opportunities, but when your football life ends, they'll still be there for you."

On the other hand the case for LSU could be made to look pretty strong as well. LSU won't stay average very long. Their tradition is too strong. It would be great to be part of the return of the Tigers championship lore. The difference in offense plays a small part. At Nebraska I'll be asked to both run and throw as the option is a big part of their game. While at LSU it will be all throw.

I'm getting all sorts of advice from friends and family. Mom was a bit distraught when I crossed the Irish off my list, but she understood. She said, "Listen Eric I can learn to cook jambalaya too you know." Paul says Nebraska all the way and Danny says LSU. Dad doesn't offer his opinion, and just tells me to not look back once I make the final decision.

I've kept in close contact with J. R. and he's told Mississippi that it's either LSU or Nebraska, and they moved on to other receiver recruits. We talk about once a week, and it's not in stone that we'll go to the same school, but I think we'd both enjoy that possibility. I have the feeling it might be as hard for him to leave the South as it will be for me to spurn a great program only two hours away.

Summer basketball had gone well. Coach Edwards, like always, played all sorts of combinations, and we won some and lost some. Unlike some programs he never takes the summer hoops agenda too seriously, preferring to experiment and get a good look at the younger players.

I only played in a couple of the games, and was pretty rusty but the good news is how good the Schmid brothers looked. Ryan will help immediately, and his young brother Matt, once he grows into his feet, will probably be even better.

I had a chance to chat with Matt about football and he's still

considering playing, but I wouldn't be surprised if he chose not to don shoulder pads and a helmet. I told him, "Football isn't a game for everyone." I emphasized, "You should only play because you want to, and not because your older brother is or someone else wants you to play."

I only played in a hand full of summer baseball games with the blessing of Coach Mack. The team was doing well as the young pitchers Roger Hanning and Les Fay continued to impress everyone. Les had a growth spurt and looked about ten years older. His uniform almost fit.

## II

I had mulling over the final decision it seems like forever and I wanted to speak with J. R. one more time before I made my final choice. I needed to know where I would attend classes the next four years. We both had decided to get it over with, and wanted to do it prior to high school football beginning. The 'Letter of Intent' day wasn't until February, but you could make a 'Verbal' commitment. Of course that wouldn't stop the hard charging assistant coaches who never quit, and refused to take no as an answer, but it will make it easy to say to them, "I've made up my mind."

It was Sunday afternoon the day before practice was to start. The first thing I said to J. R. on the phone was, I think we should make the decision as if we had never met. I mean not letting the other guy influence our own decision. Does that make sense to you?"

"I've been thinking the same thing Eric. I'm trying to evaluate which place will be the best place for me. I really hope we choose the same place, but the worst thing would be me choosing Nebraska because I thought you wanted to go there or you choosing LSU because you thought I wanted to be a Tiger."

Then we discussed how we could do that without the other knowing the choice and being influenced.

"OK, I've got an idea. Cezar is standing here so I'm going to tell him my choice and then hand him the phone and you tell him yours."

"Got it."

I whispered my final decision in Cezar's ear. He just looked at me with a funny expression, and then grabbed the phone. I watched his reaction and it was exactly the same.

"Well," I asked?

"Both you idiots chose the Big Red Machine!"

I found myself jumping up and down as if I just hit the winning three-pointer, or scored the winning run in the bottom of the seventh inning. Then I grabbed the phone and asked, "Really, really? Tell me J. R., why Nebraska? Seriously.

"Eric, I just felt like in their offense the importance of a quality wide receiver would compliment the offense, and we have such a great chemistry I wanted four years of that."

"Wow, and I love having the opportunity to both run and throw. I think a great run offense will just make the passing game easier. I think that's what coach Vincetti is going to do with our offense at Crater this fall too."

We talked for another twenty minutes, and we were both really excited. I told him how if Y. A. Title hadn't called and basically set up the LSU camp visit we would never have met. We both knew Mr. Title would be disappointed we didn't choose LSU, but he'd be very happy that we chose the same school. He's that kind of man.

I told J. R. that I wanted to speak with mom and dad, who were having dinner out with friends, and Coach Vincetti before I called Coach Solich. But I thought I'd do that later in the evening. He said he'd do the same.

"Ok teammate," I said let's stay in touch and try to stay healthy please."

We agreed to call every week after our games, on Friday nights if at all possible, and if not first thing Saturday morning.

After I hung up Cezar looking nonplused simply said, "Would you be too upset if I told you I was going to Nebraska too?"

I looked at him with what had to be the most surprised look he'd ever seen on my face.

"You're kidding right?"

"Want to see my new red sweater?"

We laughed and hugged and finally I asked, "Why"?

"They have a good team, and quietly they just keep letting me know how much they wanted me. It's nice to be wanted. And my

best friend will be a freshman with me. That's something I've got here and I didn't want to give it up."

Then we hugged. Then we both cried.

# NINE

## “AMERICA”

### *SIMON & GARFUNKEL*

I

The phone only rang once before coach Solich answered.

“Coach Solich, what can I do for you?”

“Coach it’s Eric Lewis,” and before I could say anything else he said, “Hey son, how’s it going? You guys ready for the season to begin?”

I assured him we were and then got quickly to the reason for the call.

“Coach I wanted you to know I’ve made my college decision.”

I could hear breathing on the other end of the line before I quickly said, “I want to be a Husker.”

“Son, you’ve made my day. I know this wasn’t an easy decision but now that you’ve made it let me say something.”

There was a pause before he said, “It’s the right one and Husker nation will be the benefactors. Congratulations.”

Before I hung up I told him to expect a call from J. R. as well.

“I hope it’s the same kind of news.”

“I’ll let J. R. tell you coach.”

The pressure I had felt for almost a full year was off my shoulders and I felt great. We chatted for a few more minutes before finishing. He wished me well and ended our conversation with, “Stay healthy son.”

As I listened to Coach Vincetti speak to the assembled team under the goal post my mind wandered a bit. I heard every word but in the back of my mind I was thinking about my last year being coached by this man. My admiration and respect for him would probably never be duplicated. I owed him so much.

I looked around the group gaining eye contact with most of my senior teammates. We all had a determined look on our faces, and

I knew that everyone of us had the same goal. Winning another state title would be the only acceptable finish to our senior season.

“We’re the defending state champions boys,” said Coach as he finished his talk, “And I expect us to prepare like champions beginning right now.”

As I saw it our task was to develop depth while keeping the starters sharp. On offense we had a lot of weapons, and it would be up to Coach Vince to juggle the group efficiently. I didn’t think that would be a problem.

As practice developed during the next two weeks it became obvious that coach wanted us to be multi-formation team. We would run a two back three wide receiver group, a one back four wide receiver group and an empty backfield five wide group. We had the talent to do all three and I believe Coach will go with the group that best fits the challenge either game by game or even during the course of a given game.

It was fun exchanging personnel on the run as during team we would line up all the players involved in the different groupings and as Coach called the personnel group and the play the proper players would sprint on to the field while those not involved hastened to the sideline. It kept everyone on their toes and as practice progressed we became very proficient. I was confident that this philosophy would give our opponents fits.

We would again have two pre-season games and both were against teams from Nebraska. We would open the season at home Vs Millard West High of Omaha and travel to Pius X the following week to challenge the Thunderbolts of Lincoln. We were ranked number one in the Iowa pre-season poll, by the sportswriters, and some were going so far as to predict we would march through the season undefeated.

It was the task of the seniors to keep everyone’s focus on working hard and working smart, and not overlooking even the smallest detail. When we were a little sloppy the Thursday before the first game I was upset and didn’t hold back.

When we were half way through the short forty-five minute practice I had had enough.

“Hey,” I hollered to my teammates. “This isn’t how champions practice. Let’s get our head out of our behind and concentrate.”

I don't often do anything like that, and I think my teammates were not only surprised, but somewhat alarmed. We quickly showed more urgency, and it wasn't long before our team spirit became more positive while finishing on a good note.

The last drill was a goal line session, and we were crisp as sharp cheddar cheese. Coach has a 'Goal Line Script' that he follows in practice, but not always during the game. As we huddled for the fourth play in the sequence Coach reminded us about that.

"I just want you all to understand that in my opinion a script gives me an idea but it's the game feel that counts most. If we've got the football on the one yard line and the script calls for a pass I just might go with it, if I feel like it's the right call. But I just as easily could change to a run if I feel like the circumstances make that a better play call. I'm not married to a script I make up three days ahead of the game. Many times a 'Gut' feeling is better."

When we finished the drill and Coach called us together as he closed practice with his usual pep talk, he lead off with "Eric was right boys, focus is the key for us and let's not forget that for a minute."

Sometimes he's funny, sometimes serious and sometimes off the wall but we get the message every time. I'm sure twenty years from now we'll be sharing memories of 'Coach Speak' at reunions.

As we walked toward the locker room I asked Coach Vince, "Who was your coaching idol when you were just beginning?"

"Actually I had more than one and I gained a lot from each one, but if I had to name one it would be Fred Speig."

He went on to tell me about him.

"Coach Speig was just close to retirement when we played them in a playoff game. I was a young second or third year head coach and they gave us a good lesson."

"Did you ever beat his team?"

"No. We played in the state semi-final his last season and they nipped us by seven. But, strangely I didn't feel that bad. Everyone knew it was the last season for 'Speig' and wanted him to go out with a state title. The respect for him around the state was unparalleled."

"What was it that you took from him?"

"I think the obvious thing was how he respected everyone in the coaching game. He treated everyone as equals. In fact the first

time I met the man he made me feel completely at ease. I have tried to emulate him in nearly everything I do in this business. It's a hard job and he understood how fortunate he was to have found a home. He was at the same school for something like twentyfive years. That isn't always the case in this profession. He was a class act and his teams, always good, played with the same kind of sportsman ship that I've tried to instill in my teams."

Leaving the field and heading for the locker room I am feeling great. This is a group that helped jump start the Comet football program two years ago and it is now our task to keep the engine running smoothly. The senior class is, in my mind, a special group. My two best friends, Cezar and Luke, understand how I feel about making this season special. I know in my heart, baring unforeseen roadblocks, we have an excellent chance to make it two football championships in a row and possible go down as one of the best teams in state history. It is the driving force for me and I'm not about to let anyone be careless in preparation. That is the role of a senior three-year starter. Luke, Beau, Rob and I have all started since our sophomore season and that's probably why our teammates voted us team captains.

The four of us were last out of the shower room and as we dressed we chatted about making tomorrow's game an 'eye opener' for those teams around the state that thought they had a chance to dethrone the Comets.

"If we put up fifty points we'll turn a few heads," commented Beau.

Luke added, "If we're as good as I think we are fifty will be a number blinking on our side of the scoreboard all year."

I just smiled and nodded in agreement and Rob, not much of a talker, just gave us his big smile before saying, "Well let's just be sure to let America know how good we are. Fifty sounds like a good number to me."

## II

The early season contest Vs Millard West was an easy sell to the boosters of the Crater Comets. The Green and Black Wildcats had a history of success in all sports and football was at the top of the list. The stands were full before either teams specialists took to

the field. And, both student sections were hyped and ready for the battle.

Coach Vincetti had lined up these two powerhouse programs for our pre-season games in order to challenge what should be a senior dominated team defending the Iowa state title. In many ways the opener was a state Vs state game that would send the winner into a second game against a cross state rival. Millard West's second contest was Vs West High of Sioux City. Pius X opened their season at Lincoln High of Des Moines.

"Boys, I want to see just how good we are and that's why our schedule is top heavy at the beginning. Central was a Nebraska semi-final team a year ago and word is they will be better this season. We'll need to be mentally, physically and emotionally ready for this challenge", were his words prior to our leaving the locker room.

When I joined the other captains for the coin toss I couldn't stop thinking about what a great ride this has been. When coach Vince arrived two years ago this football program needed a boost and he's given us all we could have hoped for. A state semi in his first year and a championship in the second is testimonial to his ability to develop both a coaching staff and a team of teenagers. I'm so lucky and I know Beau, Rob and Luke feel the same.

We won the toss and chose to receive. Here we go, the season begins in seconds and our deep return guys, Randy and Blake were lined up on our ten yard line anticipating the kick. West pulled a surprise though and their strong legged kicker dribbled an on-side kick that was perfectly placed. It caught our up front guys off guard and a white shirted Wildcat pounced on the football just past mid-field. Wow, gutsy call, and it caused their stands to explode while ours sat in stunned silence.

They had a senior quarterback who was a tall and mobile athlete. He had flaming red hair and a disposition to match. His name was Jeff Austier and he had been a starter since his junior year. Apparently there were a number of division II schools that had him on the top of their recruiting list. I could see where his competitive nature would entice a lot of interest.

He hit two swing passes to begin their first possession as the Wildcats quickly moved the football down field with two easy first downs before J. D. and Rob combined to sandwich their shifty

tailback forcing a fumble. Tony recovered on our eighteen and our offense sprinted on to the field a bit later than expected but ready to show everyone our diversity.

Coach had decided to open with an empty backfield and we lined up with five receivers causing a bit of confusion on the defensive side. It looked like they were going to double Luke but that left Ryan Ruff uncovered and my quick throw was on target. First throw, first catch and first, first down.

We went without a huddle in our 'Green' tempo and again lined up with five receivers. This time they singled Luke and I hit him on an out pattern along our sideline for a fifteen yard gain and one more first down. Once again no huddle, and once again a throw and catch, this time to Blake. He ran a deep curl route and settled into the open spot in their zone. The fifteen-yard gain put us on their

forty-two yard line and I could tell they were gassed.

We were at the line of scrimmage and many of their players were bent over breathing hard as we snapped the ball. The play called for Randy to run a quick out route with both Luke and Ruff releasing up field on go routes. They had some confusion in their coverage and Luke broke clear along their sideline while both the corner and the outside linebacker bracketed Randy in the flat. My pass hit Luke in stride and the first touchdown of the season was in the books. Cezar's extra point kick was true and we took a quick seven to nothing lead on our suddenly anxious and dis-spirited opponents from Nebraska.

They were a well-coached team and again moved the ball into our territory with passes to their two senior wide receivers. We had been schooled on the skill of Tyler Math and Spencer Russ so it was no surprise that their offense relied on the two seniors. They stalled near midfield, mainly due to a ten yard sack by Mike Serre and forced to punt. Mike has quietly become one of our most consistently good players. There's no bravado about him he simply goes to work with his lunch bucket and does his job. On third down the QB took a shot after a pass attempt and had to be helped off the field. It was obvious he didn't like that and showed his fire as he admonished his teammates to keep up the fight.

On our second possession coach had us in our two-back personnel group. J. D. lined up at fullback with Randy behind him at

tailback. Ryan Schmid was on the sideline while Luke and Blake were at wide receiver with Ruff in the slot. It was a totally different look than the 'Open' look we showed the first time we had the ball.

We were still in our up tempo mode but this time we featured the run as Randy reeled off three quick plus ten yard runs. The ball was on their forty-nine when J. D. got his first carry of the season off a fake toss to Randy. The counter-trap play sprung our big back free off Brandon Jane's crushing block on their defensive end and he raced into the secondary before being horse collared at their fifteen.

We lined up quickly with the slot to our right and I faked a counter to Randy and bootlegged towards our single receiver. Blake had run a slant route that turned into a double break to the corner and he was clear in the end zone. Another strike and we had a two touchdown lead after two possessions. Cezar again made it clear his point after touchdowns would be a formality as he split the uprights.

By halftime we had built a substantial lead and trooped into our locker room with a twenty-eight to zero score. We were all business during the break, and the coaching staff did their usual job in small position groups. I could tell by the confident look I saw on my teammates that this team had a chance to be something special. I knew our reserves would get some quality time in the second half and I spent a few moments with Tommy letting him know what to expect.

The second half proved to be more of the same and although the Wildcats wearing their black pants and white jersey's with pride didn't go down without a fight.

They had a quick and tough running back by the name of Brett Ski. He made some big yards and at times seemed to be their entire offense. He scored both their second half touchdowns and generally showed the kind of fight that would become contagious for the 'Cats.

The fourth quarter was mop up time, but as coach expected, the starters were on the sideline encouraging our teammates. No one was relaxing on the bench or gazing into the stands. Focus was what coach Vincetti preached and it's what he got.

Tommy led a touchdown drive and Dom, the piano man, scored his first touchdown on American soil with a nifty six-yard

dash late in the game. Our entire sideline and most of the girls in our rooting section were on their feet cheering. The kid's made a bucket load of friends in his short time here in Iowa.

The final was forty-six to sixteen and we had good reason to celebrate our easier than expected victory. Their long time head coach, Gleason Atkins, was all compliments when we spoke briefly after the team hand shake ceremony.

"Son, you've got a great team and if what I hear is true I'll be rooting for you soon wearing Cornhusker Red."

"Thanks coach. You heard right but I've got a lot of football left to play here in Iowa."

Then their tall offensive tackle stopped me as I was heading towards their sideline with the rest of our team.

"Eric, my names Pete Vito, and I'd like to say hello I'll be joining you at Nebraska next fall and cheering for touchdown passes instead of cursing. And thank goodness tonight is the last night you and I will be on opposite sidelines."

He was a tall good looking kid and if Nebraska had recruited him he must have great potential. With his tall frame he will probably grow into an NFL size offensive lineman.

"Thanks Pete, stay healthy and have a good year."

I wished him luck as well and then joined my teammates lining up on our opponents sideline and clapping as we acknowledged their crowd and their teams effort. Then we jogged across the field and repeated the ritual on our own sideline. This was something coach Vincetti had brought with him and the act had drawn a lot of superlatives from opponents and media alike. Win or lose we did the same thing. I've never seen anyone else do it, but classy things were something we expected to come from our coach.

Before I left the field their QB and I had a nice chat. He congratulated me on the win and wished us well Vs Pius X.

"They'll give you a better game than we managed to do."

"We got off to a quick start and it seemed like pretty much everything bounced our way. You guys will rebound I'm sure. Good luck."

**TEN**

**“AS GOOD AS I ONCE WAS”**

***TOBY KEITH***

I

The very first thing I did after leaving the locker room was to make a phone call. No not to a girl, but to J. R. in Mississippi. The call went to message and I told my new friend all about our victory and asked him to return the call when he had some free time.

“You’re probably squeezing some southern charmer about now and celebrating your opening season win. But break off when you come up for air and give me a call.”

We had made it through the contest without injury which was always a concern. Mom and dad and my young brothers were waiting as I finished my call.

Mom asked, “Was that your new girl?”

“Of course the problem is keeping them straight. Who is it this week sometimes gives me issues.”

“Funny boy.”

“I just left that rascal J. R. a message and now it’s off to the ‘Doorway’ with my teammates. When was that curfew again,” I said with a grin?

“Midnight my boy and I’ll be waiting up.”

I was excited about seeing all my friends at our after game restaurant. It had become the place to be after a home game and in some ways we had saved the life of the little restaurant. Last year when we began meeting here after games I think it gave them new life, and they've been great hosts. There is all sorts of Comet paraphernalia on the walls and a ton of action pictures of our sport teams.

The usual crew was in attendance. The 'Yeti's were obvious in their presence and it looked like most of the girl friends were as well. I saw Val first and she gave me a hug and said, "You've got to introduce me to the new guy," pointing at Alek.

"Oh my you two together would be a sight to see. He's 6'6 and you're tiny. His arm weighs more than you do my friend."

"True but I love his smile."

"I'll tell him the host of the wildest parties in town wants to give you a personal invite to the next gathering."

"Just be sure to tell him to stay away from my mom."

About that time I noticed Kim Herod heading towards me, and it had been a long time since I'd spoken with her.

"Hi Kim," I said, "Long time no see."

"You've been busy doing the football camp thing, and I've been preparing for my senior year. It's what serious students do you know."

She was giving me her usual hard time about the student/athlete thing, but I was used to it so took it in stride. We chatted for a bit and I found out she and Pete Pulski were still somewhat of a twosome although Pete was now a freshman at Iowa State.

"Remember if you get too lonely I'm only a phone call away."

"That sounds like a come on from a horny teenager."

I just rolled my eyes, and smiling said, "Not yet my friend, not yet."

Her brother Tim broke up our little conference about that time.

"Hey pal it looks like all that summer camp time paid off for you. Did you throw an incomplete pass all night?"

"I was awful during warm up, but those tall receivers made me look pretty good once the game began."

I actually had a pretty good stat line, which I don't normally even pay attention to. Luke was giving me serious smart talk about

it though as usual. Twelve for fourteen, two hundred yards and three touchdowns will look pretty good, but I was actually a bit disappointed because both incompletions were throws I should have made. Coach V had put in a new 'Hot-Option' play where I had the option of throwing or running and it led to some easy yards on the ground. I finished with seventy yards on just five carries. My brother Danny will have it all in his stat book. He's kind of like a human computer with that kind of thing.

About that time Alek thanked me for being included with the group and I told him, "You'll not be getting a written invitation buddy so just count yourself in the group. Ok?"

It didn't take long for the conversation to turn towards our next game Vs Pius X in Lincoln, Nebraska.

"I'll bet all the Husker coaches will be in attendance to watch their prize recruit kick some butt," offered Doug Rollins as he stopped by to say howdy.

Doug was always the life of the party and a closet Eric Lewis fan. I tried not to remind him in front of friends.

"I'm not sure if the NCAA rules allow them to be at our game, but I'm sure one of the assistant coaches will inform me before Friday rolls around."

"This Pius team's pretty good I hear."

"They'll be a bigger challenge than West turned out to be. But to be fair I think we caught West a bit unprepared for our new look offense tonight."

The party broke up about 11:30 right after the local sports news gave us a big time play. They had quite a few clips of big plays and of course the local reporter was all praise. I hope his evaluation of us being the best team in Iowa turned out to be true.

At home there were two messages. J. R. had returned my call and promised to call again in the morning and the second was from Coach Bobby Knight. I hadn't heard from him for a while so it was a bit of a surprise, but a welcome one. We had established a pretty cool relationship, and I always enjoyed our conversations. He had simply wished me good luck and 'Stay healthy son.' I wish he was a football coach although I confess that in my wild dreams I play both football and hoops in college. Wild dreams I said!

I hadn't been up long when J. R. called. I was reading the local sports page when Danny said, "It's that kid who talks funny," as he handed me the phone.

"All I need to know is how much did you win by," were my first words.

"We weren't as good as you guys were, but we won 24-7. Tell me what kind of stats did you have?"

"I wasn't quite as good as I once was," I said while laughing at the play of a Toby Keith song I liked.

We chatted for a while about our games, and the next challenge. Then I reminded him that next week we play in Lincoln.

"Cool, now don't choke or they'll rescind their scholarship offer, and I'll be stuck there alone."

"Yes but we could join the same fraternity, and I'll be in the stands with all the 'brothers' rooting for the skinny kid from Mississippi."

"Nice."

About that time mom said, "Breakfast's on everyone," so I ended our chat and beat Paul to the scrambled eggs. Danny was about half way through his plate before either of us sat down.

## II

The weekend went by pretty fast and by the time practice began on Monday celebration of our opening win was in the books and we were focused on Pius X. They had an opening win and it would be two 1-0 teams meeting in week two of the 1983 football season. I'm quite sure they wanted to stay undefeated Vs teams from Iowa.

I spoke with coach Solich on Monday evening. He told me NCAA rules would keep him from attending Friday night's game, but he wanted to know if I would like to stay overnight and attend their game Vs Wyoming on Saturday afternoon?

I talked it over with mom and dad and decided to do exactly that. They would book a hotel, and after our game the family would stay in Lincoln. I had to clear that with coach Vincetti but that wasn't to be a problem.

His answer when I asked didn't surprise me at all.

“Of course Eric you can stay over.” And then with a smile, “We’ll be able to find Crater without your guidance I think.”

Cezar would stay with us as well. He wanted to see the game, and also to speak with the Nebraska soccer people who had actually asked him if there was a chance he would like to do dual duty for the Huskers as he was here at Crater.

“Now that would be cool.”

It also happened that his new friend, Jerry Hancock, who he had met during our summer vacation, would be doing his official visit on the weekend. He hadn’t committed to a school yet so this would be a chance for Cezar and the Husker soccer staff to make their pitch.

Coach Vince was pretty happy with how our different personnel groups had preformed Vs West so he planned on doing more of the same Vs the Thunderbolts. We put in some new play action passes out of our two-back alignment, which I thought might be pretty affective. Also we had worked on a version of the veer out of the shotgun. The difference was the quarterback read the backside instead of the front side defensive end. I liked it a lot because it gave me another chance to carry the football.

Coach Mc Q had suggested a scheme that looked good against what Pius X like to do in their offensive emphasis, which was run the ball down our throats. They were very good at it and featured a big offensive line and a bruising fullback leading the way for their tailback who was a tall kid who ran with a forward lean that punished tacklers.

For this game we would have our strong safety and nickel back play more like outside linebackers, and would be more involved in the run force than usual. Coach Nick liked the change up and gave coach Mc Q credit for his ideas. We all felt like the simple adjustment would probably catch our opponents off guard a bit and we might need that to slow down their machine. We would look to the novice eye more like a five-three defense than our normal three-five alignment. Last season the ‘Bolts had averaged over three hundred fifty yards a game on the ground, and last week piled up over four hundred Vs Lincoln of Des Moines in their opener.

Paul had settled in to the high school routine quickly. He wasn’t playing football as he had decided to spend his time with the fall golf program. He was determined to make golf his main

emphasis, and in a way deflect the natural comparison with his older brother that playing the same sports would cause. He'd never been in love with football, and when he asked me my opinion I quickly told him to go with his heart. He would play basketball, but the extra work during the fall might be just what he needed to be the number one player come spring on the Comet golf team.

The other thing was my young brother excelled in the classroom with straight A's out of junior high, and was very popular with his classmates. I don't think I could have been more proud of how he had grown into such a good kid. He had had a growth spurt during the summer, and was nearly six feet two now and I think I noticed a whisker or two as well on his upper lip. It looked like he would mature a bit faster than did his older brother. Another good thing as it had caused me a moment or two of embarrassment during my freshman year in school.

My younger brother Danny was ten and still acted like he was much older. He was also a three-sport athlete, and spent the fall playing in the Little Guy football program. He was, surprise-surprise, a quarterback. Tall for his age it looked to me like Danny would follow in my footsteps as a three-sport athlete. He was my biggest fan, and had always kept close attention to my statistics in all sports. I think he's got eight or ten 'stat' books lying around, and could find the answer to any question about how many points, or touchdown passes or batting average during my high school playing career.

At dinner on Wednesday mom asked, "Can we expect anything different on Friday?"

I thought about that for a moment before saying, "They'll be the most physical team we'll meet all season, and if we can't slow down their offense we'll be in for a tough battle."

Dad was out of town on business so it was just mom and her three boys.

Paul offered his opinion as well.

"I've seen the video and Eric's right they are huge up front. But, I really think our quickness will nullify that advantage."

Danny piped in with, "The bigger they are the slower they are," with the confidence of a ten year old.

We tossed those thoughts around for a while, and then mom asked another good question.

“Do you think because the game’s in Lincoln you might have some extra pressure to play well?”

I thought that over for a bit and finally said, “I feel pressure every game, and I think that’s good. I’m always nervous before the first play, but once the ball is snapped my total concentration is on the moment and I forget all about nerves. The only real pressure I feel is what I put on myself, and I think I’ve figured out how to use pressure as a plus.”

Danny broke the silence with, “What’s for desert mom?”

# ELEVEN

## “ME AND MY GANG”

### RASCAL FLATS

I

The bus left at 2 PM. Me and my gang were as ready as we could be. Our practice week was excellent and I felt like our game plan was right on the money. We would try to force them to throw the ball, which is something that they don't want to do by stacking the 'Box' with eight players. We felt like it was important to get ahead early and coach planned on a consistent pass first attack. We wanted to spread the field and force them to defend the pass first and then we'd catch them off balance with our run game.

It was a quiet two hour bus ride and even quieter in the visitor locker room as we silently dressed for our challenge. We were wearing our blue pants with the white jerseys than had black here and there to emphasize the powder blue numbers and trim. The weather was cool with a cloud cover but there was no rain in the evening forecast. It would be a good night for football.

During our pre-game specialists time I was in a great rhythm and driving my punts high and long. To me it's a bit like the golf swing when things go right it's easy to create distance. I could see some of their players looking at the soaring punts and shanking their heads almost in disbelief. Of course my hope was that I wouldn't be punting often once the game began.

Our receiving corps was loose and seemed to make every pass look like it was on target. I felt really good, and Tommy, as usual, matched me throw for throw. I caught a glimpse of coach Vince chatting with their head coach, a man he knew from his time coaching in Nebraska, probably swapping lies. The Pius X coach looked to be spending more time looking at our side of the field and I could see by his body language and his gestures that he was either impressed or wanted to give that impression.

I rarely spend any time looking at our opponents during warm ups but I couldn't help notice when their linemen came out how huge they were. They were led by their two time all-state offensive guard Matt Clerk. He had already committed to Nebraska and by the looks of him I was very glad we would both be wearing Cornhusker Red. We had met briefly during my un-official visit last spring and hit it off pretty good. He didn't look the part of the beast he was on the field, with his pince-nez glasses and soft spoken demeanor. But one look on film and it was obvious he played with an aggressive chip on his shoulder.

His best friend and other All-State lineman, Jeff Alain, was 6-4, 240 and athletic. Those two alone might be more than we could handle. Although I like our up front guys, they won't back away from a challenge. In fact I've heard them all say more than once how much they love playing against quality.

The defense had some very good players as well. Their best was the middle linebacker. His name was Joe Carthy and he was a three year starter. Word was he was being heavily recruited by all the D-2 teams and a few D-1. I would need to keep a close on him for sure.

It looked like they dressed close to a hundred players and at least half of them were wearing numbers between fifty and seventy nine. I had no worries about our own offensive line holding their own but I did worry about our defensive front being overwhelmed. We weren't very big up front but we were extremely quick and that was our advantage, I hoped.

During our pre-game instructions it was still as quiet as a Sunday sermon as coach Vincetti spoke to us about our challenge.

"Let's show these guys that we are here to win. I believe the key is to score first so if we win the toss we'll certainly receive. We've spent good time practicing against their defensive scheme and I like what we've done. Now it's simply execution and focus. We've got a lot of weapons and we'll use them all. For you defensive players just remember to play your assignment first and then run like hell to the football."

With that we headed out to the field. The locker room was at least a quarter mile from the game field so we took our time. Something caught my eye as we left the safety of the locker room. And then I realized what it was that had alerted me, there was a

group of unruly guys standing between us, and the field. As we walked around them I heard the “N” word directed at J. J.. I’m sure he heard it as well but he didn’t react, which was good.

In this part of the mid-west, western Iowa and eastern Nebraska there weren’t a lot of black people. We had, at Crater, a handful and a few of them were athletes. Along with J. J. we had Dave Either, who was a sophomore defensive back with a lot of potential. And, the Mc Coy brothers, Kiley and K. J. on the frosh team. Race relations didn’t seem to be an issue and to be fair this was the first time I’d encountered this kind of behavior.

We moved past the group of idiots, and me the other three captains stopped at the entrance to the field to wait for everyone to catch up, and then it was time. The stands were full, the sky was clear; there was little or no wind. It couldn’t have been a better night for high school football. Two teams from two different states both ranked number one. How do you get any better than that?

As the visitors I called the toss as the coin was in the air, “Heads,” and the head referee caught the tumbling coin, slapped it onto his wrist, looked down and said, “Crater wins the toss,” before asking the home team captain which end of the field they wanted to defend. We had the football first now we had to put some points on the board.

Blake, Luke and Randy lined up along the ten yard line and as their kicker approached the ball Randy slid back to near the goal line. The kick came directly to him on the two and he headed straight up the middle of the field. As he approached the fifteen yard line he suddenly swerved to his left and hit the wedge formed near the hash mark perfectly. A small hole opened up in their coverage and using his speed Randy flew threw the gap and was suddenly clear. Another change of direction toward the boundary on our sideline forced their kicker to adjust his angle but he wasn’t fast enough. Randy sailed down the field with our entire sideline leaping to the sky as he flew past on his way to the end zone.

I glanced back to see if there were any flags and seeing none raced on to the field with the extra point team. Cezar was on my heels and I turned back and said, “That’s one now it’s your turn buddy.” Our crowd was still screaming as his kick sailed true through the uprights. Comets 7, Thunderbolts 0.

Luke is usually the holder but he had sprained a finger during Wednesday's practice and coach Nook made the switch. It wouldn't have been a problem for Luke to catch the snap but Cezar could possibly re-injure the finger during the kick. It wouldn't be a problem and it wasn't on the first kick of the night. It wouldn't be our last.

Their return team looked confident enough as they lined up and when they returned Cezar's kick to their twenty six yard line their equally confident offense took the field. Three run plays later they had a fourth and nine as they gained a total of one yard. The three and out wasn't something they were used to I'm sure, and I could sense a little concern from their side of the field. Their rooting section, which was ablaze with enthusiasm before the game began, was sitting on their hands as the punt only reached mid-field where Luke made a fair catch of the towering kick.

We knew they would be in a cover two alignment and our first play was designed to break our wide receiver clear under the safety across the field at about twenty-five yards. I faked a dive play and bootlegged towards our trips alignment. Our inside slot ran a speed cut to the sideline while the other two receivers sprinted across the field towards their two safeties. J. J., taking his turn in the rotation relieving Blake, timed his move perfectly, and came clear near their twenty. My throw hit him in stride. Luke had taken the near safety deep with his route, and by the time the defender reacted J. J. was in full gallop down the opposite sideline. As he crossed the goal line our stands erupted again, and the extra point team raced onto the field for the second time in the first three minutes of the game. Cezar was true again. Comets 14, Thunderbolts 0.

They were a good team and well coached and weren't about to give up the ghost even after two quick scores. This time they made two first downs, both on third and short plays and came to the line of scrimmage at the forty-two yard line on their side of the mid-field stripe. Then they made an error that would cost them dearly. The play was designed as an off-tackle play but Myke had come free on a blitz and jammed the play up forcing the tailback to re-direct to the outside where Rob and Jared sandwiched him stripping the football. The crazy bouncing football was nearly collared by players on both sides before J. D. recovered the slick pigskin on the thirty-three. The players headed for the respective sideline, but one didn't. Their tailback was lying facedown and hadn't moved. The silence was

nearly as disruptive as had been the cheers as both sides focused on the down player.

Players on both sides of the field took a knee in respect as the medical staff worked over the injured running back. Matt and I made eye contact and I shook my head as if to say, sorry about that. He simply shrugged and acknowledged my concern for his fallen teammate. Finally they hoisted him up and carried him toward their sideline with his right leg encased in a huge brace. He would be done for the night but hopefully the injury wouldn't be season ending.

We lined up in our trips formation once again, to the field, and ran our 'read' option play. The defensive end on the field side chased Randy on his slam action and I kept the football. The second possibility on this version of the play was an option and I was focused on their strong side linebacker. He chased Luke who had lined up as the inside slot and was the pitchman, so I turned up field. Both their safeties were late reacting to the keep and as I made a pitch fake the near safety took himself out of the play. The backside safety then over-reacted and my cut back left him grasping air. The goal line seemed to reach out and welcome me home and after crossing the final line I flipped the football to the referee just before being mobbed by my excited teammates. Cezar's third kick hit the right upright and ricocheted inside the pole. It seemed like everything was going our way. Comets 21, Thunderbolts 0.

## II

We scored again mid-way through the second quarter on a Cezar thirty yard field goal and trooped into the locker room with a 24-0 lead. The group of hecklers, we had encountered on the way to the field, were no where in sight.

We had a substantial lead but the mood in the room was all business. We knew Pius X wouldn't quit and they had done a good job of slowing us down in the second quarter. We had one good chance to score again but a fifteen-yard penalty took us out of field goal range.

Coach Vincetti cautioned us about any let up and urged us to keep playing hard.

“Football is a four quarter game. We’re half way to the finish line but we’ve got a lot of work left.”

A couple of the senior players spoke about state’s rights and bragging rights but that was the last thing on my mind. We would be kicking to begin the second half and I felt like the first possession would set the tone. We had shut their run game down so I expected them to open up a bit to try and force us out of our eight man front. And that is exactly what they did.

Cezar’s kick flew into the end zone and our worthy opponents took over on the twenty. Their first three plays were play action passes, all complete. They crossed mid-field with a nifty bootleg by their quarterback. When his receivers were all covered he scampered for an eighteen yard gain. They had established momentum and their student body suddenly came alive.

After the consecutive passes and QB run they ran a simple toss to the new tailback. They cracked down on Rob pinning him inside and their fullback took out Karli with a pancake block. Suddenly there was open space and forty six yards later their back was in the end zone. After a two pointer on a fake kick the home team had closed the gap. Comets 24, Thunderbolts 8.

They didn’t kick the ball to Randy but lined a bouncing cross-field ball that Dom, playing on our return team, fell on with the ball on our twenty five yard line. We made a quick first down on two runs and then my pass to Luke on a curl was tipped by their stud linebacker and landed in the arms of their corner who made a diving interception. The Thunderbolts took possession on our forty-five yard line.

The green clad ‘Bolts were pumped and after another play action pass caught our secondary playing run their tight end lumbered to our eight yard line while their sideline exploded with energy. On first down their tailback, proving not to be a down grade from the injured starter, bounced off a Scott Kenston arm tackle and raced into the end zone. This time they lined up to go for the two pointer and made the decision look brilliant as another mis-direction run worked to perfection. Comets 24, Thunderbolts 16. Suddenly it was a one possession game.

Our coaches urged us to stay calm and execute the game plan. With the sudden change of events that might not prove to be as easy as it seemed at one time. But we were a veteran team and

obviously now was the time to show confidence in each other and regain momentum.

There were two minutes left in the third quarter when we ran the kick-off back to near mid-field. Blake had fielded the ball on the ten and cutting off a nice lead block by J. D. and spinning off an attempted tackle near the thirty raced to just our side of the fifty before being hammered to the turf.

It was tight collar time but I felt confident as we lined up in our deuce formation with two wide receivers on each side. The play was our 'Read' option play that had been so successful early on and it was again. I read the defensive end pursuing Randy, kept the ball the hit Ruff on a bubble screen. He cut off Blake's block on the corner and picked up a nice fifteen yard gain. That was the good news. The bad news was their safety stripped the ball from behind and a green shirted linebacker fell on it as the quarter came to a close.

Our defense had been on the field way too long and it showed as Pius X drove the ball steadily towards our goal line. The clock was winding down and becoming more of a factor. There was exactly six minutes on the clock after that darn back up tailback broke another long run before being pushed out of bounds on the three yard line.

This time they faked the toss and handed the ball to the fullback who wouldn't be denied as he churned across the goal line. There was no doubt a tying two point try was next up for the top ranked high school team in Nebraska.

They showed the same formation they had been in most of the night. It was a double tight end I-formation alignment with a single wide receiver. I thought their play selection was questionable as they faked the power run and the quarterback lofted a pass towards the corner of the end zone. At first it looked like a spectacular over the shoulder catch but Mark Mack never giving up on the play managed to pull the football out of the receivers grasp as both players landed on the turf. We had dodged a bullet. Comets 24, Thunderbolts 22. There was four minutes and forty five seconds left on the fourth quarter clock.

Coach Nook had the 'Hands' team deployed, as everyone knew there was about to be an onside kick attempt. Ten of our receivers and skill players lined up close to the fifty anticipating the

on-side attempt. The football bounced along the ground for a few yards before suddenly flying into the air as if it had wings. Ryan Schmid out leaped a hoard of green shirts and came down with the football holding it like the 'Holy Grail'

We needed to make some first downs to milk the clock. They had two time outs left making it imperative to make at least one first down to keep the Thunderbolts from getting the football back. The ball was on our forty-eight yard line. We were in our 'Red' mode, which meant we were in our huddle. The clock would begin when we snapped the football.

Coach signaled in a fake sweep by our slot receiver and a keep for me. It was a simple play with the motion and fake to the slot back making it a mis-direction action. I made a long ride with Blake as he sprinted under me on his sweep action before pulling the football. I read the defense, which had over-reacted to the sweep action, and I found a nice open lane between guard and center. Brandon and Alek had come off the ball at the snap and drove the defensive linemen back off the line of scrimmage.

Their weak side linebacker's pursuit angle closed the gap somewhat but I made a nice spin move and suddenly found myself alone in the secondary. I thought for a moment just to slide down but my competitive drive pushed that thought out of my mind in an instant. Dustin Lloyd, getting some game time subbing for Luke, was occupying the corner with a nice stalk block and I cut outside the entangled players towards our sideline. Now it was a foot race between me and the safety who had recovered his initial pursuit towards the fake sweep and was trying to cut down the angle. He didn't have a chance.

What was a simple keep play designed to make a few yards turned out to be a fifty two yard touchdown sprint. Their stands were in shock and ours were in a state of euphoria. I handed the football to the referee, and before I could get more than a step or two out of the end zone, I was engulfed by screaming and jumping teammates. Cezar nailed the extra point kick sealing the win. Comets 31, Thunderbolts 22. The nine-point lead would stand up as Jared intercepted their ensuing desperation pass, and I knelt down twice ending the contest.

I didn't plan on doing much bragging but we had won the game and the state rights. The number one ranked team in Iowa had

defeated the number one ranked team in Nebraska. It was a dogfight that I'm sure people would be talking about for a long time. For me all I wanted at the moment was a hot shower and maybe a hug from mom and dad.

# TWELVE

## “INDIAN OUTLAW”

*TIM Mc GRAW*

I

As I waited for the TV reporter to finish speaking with long time Pius X head coach Lewie Sullivan, I spotted the Nebraska grad assistant who had helped me and Cezar during our un-official visit last spring. He shook my hand and said, “One great game and a hell of an effort Eric. Congratulations, Coach Osborne will be really excited to know the clincher was your touchdown run. He loves a running quarterback you know.”

He told me he couldn't wait to talk with him, meaning Coach Osborne, and assure him their early commit was all he was cracked up to be. I'm not sure I'd put the game on my best effort list, but I couldn't hide the pride I had in our guys meeting adversity head on, and finishing the job. Come to think of it, maybe it was in my top five.

Players, friends, and family spent more time than usual on the field after the ritual of handshakes between the teams. And, there were more TV cameras lining up for player and coach interviews than normal. It had a feel good atmosphere, and I think most people just wanted to bask in the mood.

Even the Pius X players hung around and we had a chance to chat with some on them as well. They were good losers, and very complimentary. Joe Carthy said, “Eric, Matt told me you were good, but he didn't tell me you were that good.” I wished him well and also chatted quickly with Jeff Alain as well.

After spending time wishing Matt Clerk well, I chatted with their All-State defensive linemen, Martin Miller, who had given me grief all night, and brought up the incident that happened on the way to the field. Martin is a 6'6 very imposing athlete, who happens to be black.

“Those guy’s are idiot’s Eric. I’ll make sure our security people have that under control before we play another home game. I’m sorry.”

I thanked him and we wished each other well, and best of luck during our upcoming league seasons. And then, before moving on, I chatted some with their quarterback who was, I’m told, a heck of a baseball player and may well also end up at U. Nebraska.

“Eric, we’d heard all about your ability and of course watched too much video in preparation, but I have to say you lived up to all the hype. The Huskers are getting the real deal.”

“And I hear you might join me there? Is that right?”

“I’ve got a decision to make. U. Kansas is all over me, but I’ve got some time to think about it, and although it will probably get old, I’m enjoying the attention for the moment.”

His name was Todd David and he shared an interesting story with me.

“Baseball is really my deal, and I wasn’t going to play football this year. Fall baseball is pretty big around here, and although I love football I know where my future lies. Then one day I was talking with my father, and he told me there would only be one high school opportunity, and I should think hard about my decision. The worst thing would be to regret it five or ten years down the road. After that, I put in some sole searching time, and decided to play football. I don’t regret that decision at all. I’m having a ball, and this game just proves it. I’d be pissed if I was in the stands today watching two great teams square off.”

I wished him well, and waving at mom and dad headed for the locker room. It was a very happy bunch of Crater Comets as we showered and dressed. We had finished our two game series Vs Nebraska schools, and I know for certain these games will help us down the road. We’re a better team now than we were two weeks ago, and come Monday we’ll set our sights on the Canyon Valley League schedule. The first game was against Washington on the road.

I stepped on to the bus and told the guys great job, and to enjoy the weekend.

“Just stay away from the college chicks, buddy,” said Luke sitting next to Alek in the front row.

“Remember, I’ve got Cezar along for the ride. He’ll be like a heavy anchor keeping my boat out of troubled waters.”

Dad had set us up in a nice motel not far from campus. Cezar and I would share a room, so would the boys and, of course, mom and dad had their suite. We all gathered there to watch the local TV highlights while munching on pizza.

The local sports reporter was all-complimentary, and he led off his session with this little bit of wisdom.

“Iowa super-star Eric Lewis led his Crater team to a compelling victory over Pius X, clinching the victory with a super charged fifty-two yard run in the closing minutes of the tight game.”

He went on to praise both teams for the inter-state contest, and they showed about ten minutes of highlights. My final run was replayed again and again, and the reporter didn’t leave any doubt as to his impression.

“The early commit from Crater showed everyone the kind of athlete he is, and why he was pursued by so many of the nations top football programs. Rumor has it he turned down Notre Dame, Iowa and LSU among others, to become a Husker. After tonight’s performance Coach Osborne has to be smiling at his good fortune.”

“We better dress you up in a disguise tomorrow buddy, or we won’t be able to watch the game in peace and quiet,” piped Cezar.

With that note we headed to our room. The telephone was blinking its warning light as we walked into the small living space.

“That won’t be for me,” said my best friend, as he pointed at the blinking red glow next to the bed.

There was a message from J. R. with a phone number to call. I had told him where we were staying, and I’m sure he wanted to find out first hand how things turned out.

I called back and he answered on the first ring.

“Were you sitting on the phone my friend?”

“Ha, ha. Almost. How’d you do?”

I spent the next ten minutes telling him all about the game, only pausing long enough for him to tell me they had also won.

“It was really a fun atmosphere, and I swear the last five minutes of the game you could hardly hear anything, the noise was so loud. I had to use hand signals because there was no way my teammates could hear my audible’s. It was crazy.”

We chatted for another ten minutes, and by the time I put the phone down Cezar was fast asleep. It wouldn't take me long to join him in quiet slumber dreaming of football.

## II

The sun was up and bright when I managed to slip out of bed. I had slept like a log, and I don't think I moved after I closed my eyes. Cezar, proving my equal, was still fast asleep as I headed for the bathroom. It was Saturday my usual shave day. I had grown maybe a half-inch, the last time I was measured I was 6'4 ½ and weighed in at 187 pounds. Frankly I was happy about no beard, and I hoped it would last a lifetime. Shaving just gets in the way. The only drawback being I still get some major ribbing during basketball season, as my baby face seems to always draw attention from the rabble rousers in the opposing rooting section. I can live with it though, it's kind of humorous, and it's quite possible the razzing just makes me focus more.

By the time I'd nearly finished in the bathroom Cezar had stirred, and caught me with my pants down as I stepped into the shower.

"You're looking good touchdown boy. Ready for the day?"

"I'm ready to relax and enjoy the college football atmosphere. No pressure on me is a good thing."

"Yeh, I've noticed you don't handle pressure very well."

"Shut up and flush the toilet when you're done, and don't be acting like an Indian outlaw today."

We had a nice breakfast down the road from our motel. We walked the two blocks, and although it was still not quite nine o'clock there were masses of red clad Husker fans everywhere.

There were no tables available but the headwaiter said the wait wouldn't be long. It wasn't, but while we waited two young boys, probably in junior high, came up and asked if I was Eric Lewis?

"You've found me guys, what can I do for you?"

"Told you," said the taller of the two to his companion as he thrust a game program from last night at me.

I just smiled, accepted the pen mom held out for me, and signed while Cezar said, "Hold on to that guys. It'll be worth a lot of money some day."

"I told you last night we should put you into a disguise. How about a wig and a dress?"

We had tickets waiting at "will-call," and when we got to our seats it appeared we were smack in the middle of a large group of mature and successful looking adults. My guess was these were people with some sort of pull, probably big time contributors. The gentleman next to me smiled and offered a hand.

"Welcome to Husker land Eric, glad to meet you. My name is Terry Crabb I own a little spread just outside of town, and pride myself on being the number one Cornhusker fan."

It didn't take long for him to get me up to speed with a history of Nebraska football. I discovered quickly that he had a way of putting me at ease, and ingratiated himself to our entire family. He introduced me to a few other big time boosters, and it was almost too flattering. As I said my hello's I couldn't help but think I hope I wouldn't let these guys down in the next four years.

The Wyoming team was on the field when the place suddenly just shook with noise. The Big Red players sprinted out of the tunnel leading to the field to a standing ovation. The rally led the way, the band had just left the field, and eighty thousand red clad fans cheered their hero's. Wow.

The Huskers had begun their season on August 29<sup>th</sup> by blowing out a good Penn State team 44-6. The number one ranked team in the nation had left no doubt the early season ranking was legit. Wyoming, it seemed to me, would be quickly outmatched. I'm sure it was one of those games in which less pronounced programs took on as a money game. I'm not sure the Wyoming players would agree with the reason or the decision to schedule a high powered program on the road.

There was a bit of history, as Mr. Crabb expertly informed me, soon after Turner Gill and the other Nebraska captains won the coin flip. The coach prior to Coach Osborne, Bob Devaney, had quickly taken the Husker program into a national power elite after leaving Wyoming, where he had built a competitive team which had been noticed by a lot of larger football programs.

He coached at Nebraska for ten seasons, from 1962 to 1972. He was 9-2 in his first season, an immediate turnaround, and with a first ever Bowl victory to boot. The fans quickly got on board, and the record and ongoing sell out streak began during that first year, twenty one years ago. Prior to his retirement after the 1972 season, to become athletic director, and during his last four seasons at the helm his record was an outstanding 42-4-2, a winning percentage of .896. Coach Osborne who was his offensive coordinator, succeeded him, and the victories just kept coming.

It was only a seven hour drive from Laramie, home of the Cowboys, to Lincoln on Interstate I-80, and the little strip of non-red color spectators high up in the southeast corner of the stadium was proof of their loyalty.

The game, to nobody's surprise, turned out to be somewhat of a laugher. The final score of 56-20 could have been worse but Husker subs played most of the second half. The lopsided score didn't take any of the fun out of the experience, and I got to see two back-up quarterbacks in action. Craig Sundberg a junior from Lincoln played about half of the third quarter. He was my host during last springs visit. The other was Travis Turner a sophomore from Scottsbluff, who took all the fourth quarter snaps.

I thanked Mr. Crabb for his hospitality as we left front row seats on the forty-five yard line. As we headed towards the exit a young man wearing a Nebraska polo and looking like maybe a grad-assistant approached, and asked us to please follow him to meet Coach Solich.

He was waiting just outside the locker room, and quickly made everyone feel at home.

"We, in the Nebraska football program, are so glad you chose to watch us play today. Especially after that great win last night."

Looking directly at me he said, "I'm thinking you might have wanted to celebrate with your teammates but I'm gland you didn't."

He talked a little about the game, before telling us that Coach Osborne was hoping to say hello before we had to leave.

Without missing a beat mom said, "I want to meet the man who will be watching over my son for the next four years."

Looking at coach Solich, I just shrugged, and before I could offer anything the door opened and Coach Osborne stepped out.

He went directly to mom and dad, shook their hands and offered a Husker greeting.

“I’m so glad to meet the parents of our young recruit. Usually this happens in your home during a recruiting visit which thank goodness isn’t necessary.”

Then he turned to my brothers, “You must be the golfer in the family,” he said as he shook Paul’s hand. Then without missing a beat he reached out to Danny and said, “I’m told you’re another three sport star, and a very competent statistician.”

Then to everyone’s surprise he stepped up to Cezar and said, “Son I’m looking forward to watching you score more than a few goals during our soccer season.”

We talked a little more and everyone made it plain how impressed we all were with his team. Then mom said, “You know coach you’re still welcome at our home. I do hope you find time in your busy schedule after the season to pay us a visit in Crater.”

“Ma’am, you’ve got a date.”

# THIRTEEN

## “NEVER GONNA FEEL THAT WAY AGAIN”

*KENNY CHESNEY*

I

On the ride home we all chatted about how informed Coach Osborne was about our entire family.

“He knew my name,” Danny must have repeated ten or twenty times.

“How do you suppose he knew about me playing golf,” asked Paul?

I assured everyone that recruiting was a rough and tumble affair and the more informed coaches were about their recruits and their families the more impressive their pitch would become.

“I was a little disappointed he didn’t offer me some World Cup tickets,” piped in Cezar. At which point Danny threw his Husker baseball cap at our roommate.

The first league game was Vs Lincoln who was fresh off a total restructure of their football program. The last two years have been somewhat of a mess and most say a huge embarrassment to the school and the community.

They have picked a new coach, his name is Andy Harr, and he’s from Nebraska. The word was the new administrators wanted to make a clean sweep and felt by going out of state for a new coach they could find someone who could come in and build the type of program that would make everyone proud. And do so without bad memories of the previous fiasco. There apparently was some sentiment to hire one of the young assistants but the administration vetoed that idea. The word I got was they weren’t going to let parents run the program.

Monday’s practice was very up-tempo as we were all still on a high from the big win on Friday. We zipped through our drills and finished with a team offense/defense time that emphasized the game plan for the Colonials. Their new coach has installed a

spread offense and a base 3-4 defense. It seems to have fit well as they've won both their pre-season contests. So it will be two undefeated teams matching strengths on the Washington home field come Friday night.

After practice I noticed Dustin Loyd looking somewhat sad and thought maybe he needed some cheering up.

He has had to make some early life adjustments, which can't be easy for a young fifteen year old. His parents split up just before school began, leaving Dustin pretty much to fare for himself. Fortunately one of our great teachers, Letty Owen, offered him a place in her home. Her only son had just graduated from Crater last spring, and I think she welcomed the chance to raise another youngster.

"What's the sad face for Dustin?"

"To tell you the truth I'm just not very confident right now. I'm not sure I'm ready for varsity football. And I'm pretty bummed with all that's been going on in my life."

"How is it going with Mrs. Owen?"

"She's great. She treats me just like part of the family, but I'm really worried about mom and dad. Neither of them know what lay's ahead."

He did need some cheering up, and I felt like it was part of my job as a senior in a leadership role to try to do that.

"Let's go get a coke at the Doorway, my treat."

I think Dustin was a bit surprised, but I slapped him on the back, and told him to hop in my beater car. When we got to the restaurant it was pretty empty, and we found a booth quickly.

"Tell me why you think you're not ready for the varsity Dustin."

"I just don't have much confidence right now, and I feel like the harder I try the worse I get. I've dropped more balls in the last two weeks during practice than I have in my entire football life, such as it is."

"Let me tell you what I think," as our drinks arrived.

"You've got all the tools, and the bonus is how fast you run. Last year J. J. went through this same kind of thing, but he got over it, and told me when he stopped beating himself up he was able to relax, and just play. He said he just let the game come to him."

"Well J. J. has special talent. I'm not sure I'm in his category."

"Trust me Dustin, you're close."

That brought a smile to his face for the first time. I felt like I was heading in the right direction. We talked some about the game last week, he had only played a few snaps, and I assured him that Coach Mack, in charge of the wide receivers, thought it was only a matter of gaining experience before he would be on the field longer.

“Really, he told you that?”

“He thinks before this season is over you’ll be making good plays routine, and I do too.”

He asked me if I’ve ever felt like I was over matched, and I told him everyone has doubts, but it’s what you do about it that counts.

“When I was a sophomore I wasn’t sure about anything, but Coach Edwards gave me some good advice. Basically he told me the same thing I’m telling you. *Relax and enjoy the moment.* Keep a smile on your face, and never dwell on the negative.”

“Wow, I do have a tendency to be negative. I think you’re right about that, and I’m going to do my best to change. I like that smile idea too Eric,” while flashing his grin.

We finished up and I drove him home. When he jumped out of the car I felt like he had a big load off his back, and I really felt good about taking the time to let him know I cared. People have done that for me all my life. It’s a lesson I want to pass on to everyone. Life can be a challenge, and it helps when you know you’re not in the battle alone.

When we got into our ‘Outside’ 7 on 7 drill on Tuesday I made sure to get the football to Dustin whenever I had the chance. He made a couple circus catches, and everyone could see the new bounce in his step. And what I saw was a great big smile!

Coach Edwards said to me as I watched Tommy take his turn with the starters, “Dustin finally looks like he’s relaxed. That kid can make an impact down the road I think.”

I didn’t answer, but I felt great, and I knew Dustin had taken the first big step.

## II

We arrived at Washington with a lot of confidence. We all realized they would be a different team than we’d seen the last two years and no one was taking them for granted. Plus, it was the first league game and we wanted to make a statement to the rest of the

league, if our impressive win last week over Pius X hadn't already done that.

Their coach met us as we got off the bus. He had worked briefly for coach Vincetti at one time. He had his small son with him and the first thing he did was introduce Coach V.

"Coach, I'd like you to meet Dusty, he's only five but already a sports freak."

"Looks like the water boy to me," said Coach as he picked up the youngster.

And then Andy followed up with, "Well he was exactly that during daily doubles."

It didn't take long to realize that the Colonials were a different program. No more hot dogging or showboating. Gone was the arrogance that seemed to have had a strangle hold on the program under the previous leadership. It was easy to respect the direction they were headed but it was our job to keep them from too much early success.

There was an exchange of punts as both teams failed to move the ball into opposing territory. But on our second possession we got into a nice rhythm. Two quick first downs courtesy of throws to Luke and Blake got us over the fifty and into Colonial territory. Then we ran a well executed sprint draw play and Randy broke it down to their seventeen. The next play was a wide receiver screen after a sweep fake and cutting off a great block by Ryan Schmid Luke took it the distance. Our automatic kicker didn't fail and we led 7-0.

They had some good skill players and I liked the way their quarterback moved around. He was a tall kid but had deceptive speed and they ran a version of the spread that emphasized different option looks. This was a huge improvement from a year ago, but the big difference was a simple confidence that told me the new coach had made a big impact. About that time Myke put a lick on their running back that shook the ball loose and Karli recovered.

Coach Nook gave Luke and Blake a rest and our two young backup's J. J. and Dustin were in the lineup. Once again I felt in good rhythm and hit J. J. on a curl and followed that with a fifteen yard out cut by Dustin. Our up tempo was in cruise control and another option pitch to Dom, taking a turn at running back, gathered in another fifteen, and a first down on their twenty-two yard line.

We lined up quickly again and this time in an open alignment with Dom in the slot. The five receiver formation seemed to catch them off guard and out of position. The play called for our inside slot on the trips side to run a speed cut to the outside while the two outside receivers ran what we call a 'Switch' route. The wide receiver runs a slant and up while the middle receiver runs a 'Wheel' route. The corner picked up the wheel and Dustin was alone up the seam of the defense. My throw was just a bit long but the kid made a leap at the goal line first tipping the ball and then grabbing it on the rebound as he tumbled into the end zone.

Our entire sideline erupted and the grin Dustin had on his face as he trotted off the field could be seen on Mars I think. How cool was this? I joined the parade of players patting him on the back and he looked at me and said while grinning ear to ear, "Did you overthrow that on purpose?"

We added another score before halftime and trooped into the visitors locker room with a comfortable if hard earned three touchdown lead.

Coach Nick was letting the defense know how well they had played and at the same time cautioning them to be ready for more downfield pass attempts.

"They'll think they need to score quick so let's be ready for some home run shots."

He proved prophetic when on the very first play after the kick off they went deep. Mike Serre came hard off the edge and forced their QB to hurry his throw, only to have Jared make a leaping interception on our thirty-three yard line.

It didn't take us long to find the end zone again as first J. D. and then Randy sprinted for first downs. Then a play action pass to Blake on a deep crossing route moved us into the Red zone. Coach called for the 'Read-Option' play and when the defensive end chased Randy I pulled the ball and hit Ruff on a 'Bubble' route and he used Luke's block on the corner to his advantage and glided into the end zone for our fourth score. A snap, a hold and a kick later and we led 28-0.

From that point we were able to play some sub's as the steam had gone out of the home team. They never quit and fought to the end but the final of 42-0 certainly made a statement for us and let them know they had a way to go.

My friend Mark Hatten had graduated and I didn't really know any of the Washington players but it was great to see them handle the handshake line with class. I kept repeating 'You guys are on the right track, good luck', to player after player as we passed by.

Their new coach made it a point to tell me, "You guys are really good Eric and by the way congratulations on your decision to head to Nebraska."

I thanked him and returned the compliment as Dusty thrust a program at me to sign.

"Coach, you've got this team heading in the right direction and the attitude change is remarkable."

He pointed to an un-assuming man talking with one of their players and said, "You see that man. He's our new principal and he has set the tone. We'll have no football player embarrassing our program by acting like a jerk on or off the field. His name is Dave Annala and everyone on our staff would follow him to hell and back. Good programs always have good leadership and someone should clone the man."

"You're right about that and we've been fortunate to have that kind of leadership at the administrative level here at Crater."

They had some very good young athletes and it was great to see them respect the game and their opponents. It won't be long before they establish themselves as a team to recon with. It's nice to see the good guys in charge. This is too great a game to spoil with ill-advised leadership.

From what I've been told the new administration has clamped down on the overbearing parents. Apparently the new AD called a meeting of parents and boosters and set down a pretty strict set of do's and don't. "Parents are to be supporters of the program. Any complaints or concerns should be addressed to me. Our coaches will be chosen by me and I will support them to the fullest." Then he went a bit further. "Those of you who threaten to move if you don't get what you want will have my full support. Take your spoiled kid and give someone else a headache."

We are so fortunate to have people in charge who see the big picture. Obviously when no one knows who's in charge it's a circus without a ringmaster. It looks like Washington has figured that out, and as long as Coach Harm is in charge there will be discipline in the program. Congratulations Washington High.



# FOURTEEN

## “THE CLOSER YOU GET”

### ALABAMA

I

On the weekend Luke dropped by and he showed me what looked like an old-fashioned ‘Walkie-Talkie’ that you see in many of John Wayne’s war movies.

“It’s the wave of the future. It won’t be long until everyone is carrying something like this.”

“Oh my God. Do you really think people will want to lug something that obnoxious around just to make a phone call?”

“Trust me buddy, they’ll be tiny and won’t just be a phone. You’ll be able to access the Internet and it will have a huge memory. It will change how we live.”

“What the devil is the internet?”

“Man, you’re really out of it. You’ve got to break out of all day long sports and discover where our world is headed.”

“Well, if your idea about small phones is right on that’s the end of life and we know it. Can you imagine girls with phone access 24/7?”

“Well that would keep them out of your hair buddy. And by the way any new news about your love life?”

“My love life is right where I want it to be buddy.”

“Oh yea, in your right hand. Cool.”

That’s when Danny walked into the room.

“What about his right hand?”

“I was just saying he’s got to work more on the left hand. Those options pitches, in that direction, are getting a bit shaky.”

“Ok, let’s move on, I think lunch is about to be served.”

Because we are so close to the Nebraska border and Lincoln we get all of the Cornhusker games on TV. Their game against the U. of Minnesota in Minneapolis was about to kick off so we gathered

around the TV in the den with a plate of sandwiches to share. Everyone but Paul who, big surprise, was on the golf course. Luke and Cezar felt like the game would be a rout but I thought coming off the big 56 to 20 win over Wyoming there might be a letdown.

So much for my insight, before I finished my second sandwich and still with five minutes to go in the first quarter my Huskers led by a 28-0 score. The 62,000 home fans were sitting on their hands watching the beginning of a slaughter. Turner Gill, Erving Fryer, Tom Rathman, Mike Rozier and his tailback twin Doug Du Bose were taking turns demolishing the Gopher defense. I think they had rolled up close to 200 rushing yards in four possessions and four scores.

I think everyone on the traveling squad must have seen action and some maybe who hadn't played in a game yet managed to get their white jerseys soiled. The final was a home team embarrassing 84-13 defeat. Next up for the Huskers was a home contest Vs the UCLA Bruins the top ranked team on the west coast. They weren't in the top ten in either the AP or Coaches Poll, in fact no west coast team was in the top twenty other than the Bruins who currently held down the seventeenth spot.

Near the end of the game, as I was sitting on the couch, another one of my very infrequent rapid heart beat episodes began in earnest.

Luke, looked at me with a strange look and asked, "You OK?"

"Just excited about the game."

"Bull, you must be dreaming about some late night back of the car play time."

"Stop it buddy, you're the one who's over sexed." And about that time the heart slowed to a normal beat.

Saturday night there was going to be another gathering at Val's place and it promised to be a fun evening. Our group of seniors had been together forever, most of us since early grade school. The recent additions of Dom and Alek just added more romantic possibilities for the group of senior girls.

The TV would be on in the den and some would be watching the last episode of the series MASH. I had never been a big fan of making fun out of war but I did admit to some hilarious episodes. The room in the basement would be full of guys playing bad pool, while now and then sneaking outside to smoke a cigarette or sip on

some hooch. The music in the living room would be quiet and not so loud as to drown out the conversation.

I loved to visit with my friends while munching on Val's mother's treats. Usually I was the only guy in the living room surrounded by Val, Jackie, Karen and Marion.

The question of the night centered around J. R. who had obviously made a big impression during his summertime visit.

"How's the cutie from Mississippi doing," asked Marion.

"If you're referring to J. R. I can tell you he's doing great. The team is undefeated and he's off to a good start."

"Did I tell you he called on Monday? Said he was bored and the Monday Night football game was putting him to sleep."

"Do I detect a budding relationship?"

"I'll tell you this much, I'd love to get him in the sack and find out if he's a real man."

Marion was never bashful but I think most of her chat was bluff. But it was also in good fun and I think she just loved teasing the guys. Anyway everyone knew her and Donnie Crick were an item and knowing Donnie since the third grade it just might be serious.

"Promises, promises my friend. How come you've never said that about me?"

"Oh pshaw shorty, everyone knows you're gay."

All I could do was laugh and shake my head while the rest of the girls all joined in the humor.

"Why do you think you're the only boy at the party that we allow into our little group? You're no threat," said Karen with a smirk on her face.

The party broke up close to midnight, and Cezar and I were busy helping the clean up group when Val popped her head into the kitchen.

"Thanks guys, now answer one question for me."

"Sure, fire away. If it's too serious I'll let Cezar do all the talking."

"No, no. I just want your thought about Arnold Schwarzenegger becoming a US citizen? And, she said it with a straight face.

Cezar was quick with his answer, "It's a trick. I just don't trust those Austrians. They want to conquer the world about every fifty years or so. And come to think of it, Dom's probably a plant."

At that very moment Dom walked into the room.

“I’ve been called a lot of things but what kind of plant? Maybe a cactus, I can be kind of prickly.”

And of course at that Marion offered, “Easy now with that word in mixed company.”

Moving towards the door and trying to keep a straight face, I said, “It’s definitely time to say Good Night.”

## II

The week flew by and we were ready for our league home opener Vs the T. F. Brown Falcons. Adam Gunn was in his second season with the team and if pre-season is an indication of their improvement we could face a very different team than we have the past couple years.

We had put a thumping on the Falcons last year. The final was 56-6 but they had shown some improvement during the remainder of the season and this year were off to a 3-0 beginning, having defeated North Marian by a 24-21 score after two lop sided victories to open the season. Neither of the two non-league teams were powerhouses but 3-0 was 3-0. We needed to keep working and not succumb to the temptation to take them lightly.

Coach Vincetti gave us enough information to understand this would be a different team and the film evaluation confirmed it. They weren’t world-beaters yet but Coach Gunn had the Falcons moving in the right direction.

After the first week of league action we led a group of winners in league play. Prep beat Fort Brenner and Lakeside nipped South 17-14. The four winners played each other and so did the four losers. After this weekend there would be two teams left at the top of the league standings.

We were fairly healthy with only one starter out. Robb Shiff had re-injured his tender shoulder and would sit this one out. Mark Mack moved from corner to Nickel and Karli Vurm would step in at the corner spot. Jared Vick our free safety had a sore knee but would play. I’m sure Coach Allenon would have Jimmy Prather ready for some quality playing time though. On offense we were totally healthy and I hoped it would stay that way.

Our league home opener drew another turn-away crowd and our stands were full way before kick-off. We had no 'Reserved' seating, which upset a few parents, so those wanting front row seats needed to arrive early. It wasn't an issue with mom and dad as they preferred to sit high up and out of harms way. Paul would be in the student section and Danny somewhere on the sideline with his stat book at the ready. My brothers had given up their ball boy duties now filled with younger brothers of Blake and Mark Kelly our junior defensive end.

We won the coin toss and our return team lined up in position. Coach Nook had warned about a possible on-side kick so our front five guys were not about to leave early. They kicked the ball deep but not to Randy, his reputation proceeds' him I'm guessing, but to Blake who found a running lane on his side, returning the kick to our thirty-six yard line.

I remember how last season the Falcons reminded me of a JV roster and it was obvious this team was a lot more mature. They had a couple huge defensive tackles in their four man front and some angry looking linebackers. You could tell by their demeanor they had way more confidence that last years group.

We started with three runs, gaining two first downs. With the ball on their forty-two we ran our shovel-option play and the defensive end stayed at home so I out ran him to the outside. Luke was in perfect pitch position and when the outside linebacker committed to me I flipped a soft toss that Luke took in stride. The twenty-five yard play moved the ball to their seventeen yard line, and again we went without a huddle.

We ran a 'switch' pattern and Blake drew the corner inside just enough for Ryan Schmid to break clear along the sideline. My throw was on target and he slipped into the end zone for our first score of the night. Cezar's PAT was right down the middle. Comets 7-0.

I had to give the Falcons and their staff credit because they played hard and well. Their problem was, so did we, and the talent level was still obviously in our favor. We had a good mixture of run and pass and our defense gave up some yardage but no points. At the half the score was 24-0 courtesy of a Cezar thirty-six yard field goal on the last play as time expired.

The only negative was we suffered two injuries that had everyone concerned. First, Nick Nell, our small but quicksilver nose

guard limped off with an apparent foot injury. It didn't look good for him to return in the second half. The other one was J. D. may have broken his hand. Dr. Soda wasn't sure and I overheard him say to Coach Vincetti that he'd need x-rays to determine the severity. If his hand was broken that would cause some major concern on both sides of the football. Neither players played a down the second half.

Dan Chock subbed at middle linebacker and was our two-back fullback but Coach didn't use that at all. We went with our one-back four wide receiver personnel the entire second half and at times it looked like men playing against boys. Brown had improved considerably but the gap was still ominous.

Tommy took over at quarterback for the last series of the third quarter and led us to a quick score. He led another one mid way through the fourth and then let Leo get some varsity game action. The little rascal looked quicksilver and although his group didn't score he made some eye-opening plays. The final was 45-14. We were 2-0 in league and 4-0 on the early season. I loved where we were but I was worried about those injuries, neither looked very promising.

Our trainer, Pete Rock, had his able assistant escort both Nick and J. D. to the x-ray room and by the time we got out of the shower both were sporting casts. Not a good sign. And it put a damper on the good feeling of playing well and winning. I asked Dr. Soda what he thought and being conservative like most good team doctor's he told me both might be out for a least a couple weeks.

Next week we had Fort Brenner who was now 0-4 on the season after losing to Washington tonight. But we followed that up with South Catholic, Lakeside and Prep our three closest pursuers. That could be a challenge bigger than normal if those two couldn't play, and I didn't have a very good vibes about the injury situation. It seemed to me this season we were constantly patching things up. I didn't like the feeling but that's the closer you get to the brass ring the harder the climb.

# FIFTEEN

## “ANGELS LOVE BAD MEN”

### *THE HIGHWAYMEN*

I

As the week progressed we had good and bad news about our injury situation. First, It looked like Nick and J. D. would both miss this weeks contest for certain. But there was a chance that one or both would return next week vs. South Catholic. But, Blake had come down with a fever, and sat out Tuesday and Wednesday's practice. Time would tell if he'd be ready by game time.

School was going well. I had finished my required courses by second semester last year, so along with the usual fourth year college prep classes; I've added a mixed-choir class. I wanted something that would be fun, and everyone told me Marie Mullin was not only a great music teacher, but made her classes enjoyable for everyone. That had quickly proven to be true because she even made me feel like a singer. I'm no threat to anyone's ears, but I'll admit to sounding much better in the shower.

She had also spent time as the Spanish teacher, and I had a not so great experience in Spanish One from her when I was a freshman. I managed to pull down a B+, but I think that was more due to her largess with athletes than my ability. I quickly decided to make German my foreign language priority.

The other thing about Mrs. Mullin was she happened to be the mother of my brother Paul's best friend. Jim Mullin and Paul spent a lot of time together, and maybe because of that Marie treated me like family. My relationship with her had actually begun about five or six years ago. She had been teaching in the district forever, and at one point was a grade school PE teacher.

I'll never forget during out fifth grade PE class, when she stormed into the boys' locker room after we had stopped up the drain in the shower room. We were having the time of our life, and

obviously making a lot of racket, sliding our pre-pubescent bodies in and out of the flooded shower area.

She barged through the door and yelled, "If you boys don't get this mess cleaned up in minutes, I'll have you all running laps," as we scurried around to hide our privates behind towels too small. I thought I saw a gleam of a smile just behind the clenched teeth as she broke up our little party.

That was a long time ago but one time when the choir class was in a moment of funk trying to make "I'll Never Walk Alone" sound professional, while overcoming the off key sound coming from the tenor section, she reminded me, "Eric, I've seen you butt naked sliding around a flooded locker room, so don't think you can get away with anything in my class." That brought a lot of smiles, and a few chuckles from the girls in class.

Kim, standing in the row of soprano's just behind me, said to Karen, "I'd like to see Eric butt naked but not in a locker room." I just rolled my eyes and tried to get back on tune.

During lunch Kim, sitting with the usual group, asked as I walked past, "So, you have a thing with Marie huh?"

"I was hoping to keep it secret, but you know older women, they want everyone to know they haven't lost it yet."

About then Val said, "Why don't you bring her to Saturday night's get together?"

Frowning, in my best you've been cut down to size look, I said, "I think that might just be an issue for Mr. Mullin, so I'll just let all you girls continue to fight over me. Angels love bad men you know."

Val couldn't stop laughing as she said, "Oh yeah Eric, you're a real bad man." Then she gave me a wink.

I just love Val. Neither of us have a 'friend', but I've got a feeling whoever she ends up with will be getting the pick of the litter.

I just loved our group of friends. Most of us have been together since early grade school, and bantering back and forth about almost anything is just part of the drill.

Kim, of course, is new to the group as is her brother Tim. The twin Herod kids had moved into the district just last fall, but both had quickly become part of the group. Tim was a full-fledged member of our 'Yeti' club, and Kim, although still dating Pete Pulski who is a freshman at Iowa State, keeps everything in perspective with her dry if sometimes piercing sense of humor.

Luke interrupted the party when he waved and yelled, “Eric, break up that little discussion, we’ve got Video to watch.”

We usually took our lunch to the football locker room where we watched our opponents’ latest game film. I wasn’t so sure eating lunch in a room filled with odor’s best left by themselves was very smart but then boys’ will be boys’.

We took our time, often repeating plays, to make sure we got a feel for what our opponent was trying to accomplish. It looked like Fort Brenner was trying to improve. The Bulldogs actually looked pretty good at times, a reminder not to look past them to the big three games coming up. And, it was just last season that we had done just that, and ended up in a dogfight with a bulldog. It wasn’t pretty, but we did prevail.

Coach July and Coach Vince had a bit of a history, and we had been reminded all week long about how motivated they were last year. We were told, over and over, to expect Coach July’s team to always put up a good fight, even when they were over-matched.

J. D. was with the group and I asked him, “What’s Dr. Soda think about your chances to play next week?”

“He wants to take another look Saturday, but he did say not to get my hopes too high. I think he prefers to play it a bit conservative, which is probably best, but I’m going to do everything possible to convince him to tape it up, and let me play.”

The session continued and before the bell rang to head to our fifth period classes we had seen what we needed to see. They would probably play their base defense, a zone over the top of their 4-1 defensive front. But Coach V wouldn’t overlook other possibilities, he had told us about doing that early in his career, and wouldn’t make that mistake again. We had spent time on Monday and Tuesday vs multiple fronts and coverage’s. No stone unturned is Coach V’s drill.

## II

The weather continued to cooperate and as Friday approached we were still in a late summer heat spell. It was an hour and a half before kickoff and it must have been still hovering around 90 degrees. I’m not so sure the group of forty something men who had gathered to help celebrate what everyone hoped would be Coach Vincetti’s two hundredth win would agree.

It was a group of players he had coached during his short stint coaching in the small college ranks. One day while talking about that experience, he laughed and said, "There's something about the small college environment that attracts small minded people."

Anyway the group of ex-players had a small get together before the game, and would have a bigger one after. As I walked into the locker room coach was with four of his ex-players as they wished him well. When he noticed me coming he motioned for me to stop and he introduced them to me.

"Eric, these guys made my years at the college memorable ones for all the right reasons. The bad part is an almost forgotten memory thanks to them."

Mike Andrews, Pat Basel, Cletus Goff and Don Groves all introduced themselves and wished me well.

It was Mike who said to me, "Coach made our football experience great, and I know he's done the same for all of you here at Crater. I'm sure your performance has made him proud as well."

I thanked him, and them for taking the time to help coach celebrate.

Just before we broke up another of Coach's ex-players joined the group and promptly introduced himself.

"I'm John Jeubitz, Eric. Glad to meet you. I just wanted to add one more thing to this discussion. We've been out of football now for about twenty years, using a slight hand gesture, to include everyone in the circle. I think we can all honestly say the thing we miss most is the adrenalin rush you get competing. There's nothing like it in the real world. So, my advice son is to savor every moment."

That was pretty strong stuff. After thinking about what to say for a moment, I offered this, "I think our entire team is on the same page here. We're going to do our best to make this victory number 200 for our Coach a memorable one."

The two hundred win deal had given us all an extra incentive to play well and we did. From the kickoff that Cezar drove into their end zone, to the precision in which both offense and defense preformed, we made the game look easy. The Bulldogs tried to put up the good fight and did for a while. But our motivation and our skill just wouldn't be denied.

There best player, Wayne Light, was injured on the opening series, left and never returned. He was a fast running back and

everyone called him “Lightning”. It was appropriate as he had led the league in scoring a year ago. Without him there offense was stuck in neutral.

The halftime score of 35-0 told the whole story. I walked around the locker room encouraging everyone to stay focused and reminded them of our commitment to excellence.

“Guy’s, we wanted to make a statement for our Coach so let’s not even consider letting down.”

The staff was workmanlike, as usual, urging us to ‘Play the next Down’, which is one of our coaches favorite lines. Coach Edwards told me I would probably only play a series or two but to stay in the moment. Then he looked at me and said, “I probably didn’t need to remind you of that.” He didn’t.

We took the second half kick off and scored in five plays. The touchdown coming on a simple block and go route off of play action. Dustin was miles behind the defensive back who had bitten on the run fake. It was almost too easy and it was my last play of the game.

First Tommy, and in the fourth quarter, Leo took over and we put the ball across the goal line two more times. Dan Chock bulled in from the four on a simple dive play and Leo scampered fifteen yards for the last score on a busted play that was designed quite different than the actual execution. Leo had turned the wrong way and did an athletic and spontaneous move that almost looked planned. It wasn’t, but the mis-direction froze the defense long enough for the little rascal to dance into the end zone.

The 56-0 score put an exclamation point on Coach V’s win number 200! During the after game handshake I heard Coach July say, “Darn Coach, this might be your best team. Good luck and bring that state title back to the CVL.”

I could see Donna Mary talking to some of Coach V’s ex-college players as we exited the locker room. She was the perfect coaches wife, and if looks meant anything those guys certainly agreed. I waved, and she hollered, “Nice win Eric. Enjoy the weekend.” As I walked away I could still feel the excitement of the game, and understood what John Jeubitz had said about the adrenalin rush. I was still pumped, and had a bounce to my step. Winning sure beats the heck out of the alternative.

## **SIXTEEN**

### **“THAT’LL BE THE DAY”**

#### ***BUDDY HOLLY***

I

The week of the South Catholic game the weather began to cool. In fact the forecast said possible thunder showers for the weekend. We hadn't played in rain for the entire season but it would come sooner or later. Coach must have had that in mind as we spent a lot of time on the run game during practice. It looked like J. D. would be ready, so our two back personnel group put in some extra work during our 'inside' period.

On Tuesday I had an early release as I had decided to drop my PE aide class. I usually used the time to watch extra video in the film room the coaching staff used on a regular basis. As I was heading in that direction Coach Vince's PE class was just heading out.

“What's the activity today Coach”? I asked as the last of the students passed on their way to the field.

“It's two-pitch softball Eric. It used to be my favorite but now it's more like slow-pitch and beg someone to bat.”

I just shook my head. I can vividly remember in grade school running from our classroom to the softball diamond the second the recess bell rang. The boys always played 'workup', and positions were attained by the order of reaching home plate. The first four to do so were at bat, while the remainder played the infield and outfield positions. As long as you didn't make an out you stayed at bat. After an out the fielders would rotate up one position. The pitcher became the catcher, the first baseman the pitcher and so on. It was a blast.

I'm not sure what the girls did but none of us cared we were too busy playing and enjoying the exercise. In today's version of PE no one ran because no one wanted to sweat. It had to be torture for teachers used to kids competing, running, sweating, and never complaining about the physical aspect. It was supposed to be physical education. Sadly it was no longer the case.

The day administrations decided boys and girls should be in the same class physical education became recess. I'm sorry, call me an idiot but boys and girls don't belong in the same PE class. It has zero to do with equality and it doesn't work. Someone's idea of equality is way off base and makes no sense at all. If one of these fools that make the rules would watch a PE class today they couldn't possibly think it worked. But then most of them never taught a class and I'm sure never played a game. Professional administrators would be the downfall of education. If I was running the show everyone would teach. Want to coach, great after you teach class. Want to be an administrator, great after you teach class.

I couldn't watch it any longer and that's why I dropped the class. Our people running schools have managed to 'dumb down' nearly everything. Coaches now had to fight to get students to try. In the old days, I sound like an old man, it was never an issue. I'm quite sure at recess in the third grade the kids walk towards the softball diamond and probably don't get there until the end of recess bell sounds. What a shame.

The weather worsened during the practice week and made our game plan heavy with our run game. But, that also gave the play-action part of the offense come into use. If you are successful with running the football it makes defensive backs get involved in stopping the run and also makes them vulnerable to all the play action passes.

Of course it involves different pass protection, as it requires the offensive guards or the center to pull and protect the quarterback both play side and backside as well. Some of the plays are designed to be 'big plays' and some more of a simple short yardage make the first down type. I like it because it gives me the opportunity to run if receivers are covered and I can beat the contain put up by the defense. Coach had some new designs as

well as our standard play action plays and I felt like it was a good combination.

By Thursday we had to call practice short because of the downpour but I felt like we had mastered the game plan and didn't need a long Thursday practice.

I woke up on Friday and looked outside. What I saw didn't make me a very happy camper. It was trying to snow but it came down more like ice. The driveway was slick and I found it difficult to even walk to the car. This could certainly make a football game fall victim to the elements. And might make both teams equal as bad weather kept both from playing their normal game.

The stands were full, as usual, and most of the spectators were dressed for the weather. Everyone was bundled up like they were watching a late season NFL game in New England or Green Bay. Those that weren't prepared were in for a long night. I just hoped that wasn't the case for my teammates and me.

## II

There were patches of slick ice covering spots here and there on the entire field. It was worse at the east end when from the twenty yard line to the end zone it required great balance just to keep from falling.

We won the toss and chose to receive while the Saxons wearing blue pants and nifty white jerseys with stylish red numerals and arm stripes looked confident as they lined up. Their color combination made them look like a high school version of the NFL New York Giants. We seemed to bring out the best in some teams and South's coach Jay Loce always had his squad prepared.

With our speed and quickness somewhat nullified by the poor weather this might be one of those games that far exceeded expectations. Their rooting section, ignoring the freezing mist, was hyped and loud as the opening kick tumbled into the arms of Randy on the ten yard line. We had our middle return on and as he tip toed up field suddenly there was a gap in the coverage team. He hit the crease going full speed and looked like he might just take it the distance until a slight cut at our forty caused him to lose his balance and down he went untouched.

Randy was really upset as we formed the huddle and he had fire coming out of his eyes as he said, "Give me the damn ball," an unusual comment from the normally silent running back.

It was nearly comical as we moved slowly down the field. Each play it seemed players on both sides were tip-toeing and trying desperately not to fall as they carried out their respective assignments. Finally with a first down on South's ten yard line we ran a simple counter play and it seemed like their entire defensive team bought the fake to our right and trying to stop slid nearly out of bounds as Randy eased into the end zone before losing his footing as he reached the iced end line. Down he went in a pile landing just under the feet of the back judge signaling touchdown.

The rest of the half was more of the same. Players were mostly unable to keep their footing and the game seemed to me to be played in slow motion. Fortunately we were somehow able to handle the elements better and trooped into the locker room ahead 21-0.

The temperature had continued to drop and the field conditions were becoming nearly unplayable. With the field now nearly covered with an icy glaze it became a survival contest in the second half. We continued to dominate the line of scrimmage and when Dom, getting a lot of playing time, scored his second touchdown of the half on another counter play we led 35-0. Game over.

On the sideline I gave our Austrian friend the thumbs up sign and he answered with his big grin and said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Hey, it's just like skiing the Alps, stay balanced and let the mountain guide you down, or to the end zone."

It was mop-up time and our reserves finished the job in workmanlike fashion while the starters stood shivering on the sideline. The crowd had dwindled and by the time the horn sounded ending the game it looked to me like only the diehard's remained.

Standing in a hot shower seemed to be the smart thing to do and most of us stayed longer than usual trying to thaw. I finally felt some feeling in my feet and also had a bit of a hip bruise that the cold had keep under wraps. As I limped out of the shower area Luke asked, "Hey, what's up with the limp?"

"I must have landed on it wrong when I slid out of bounds during the first quarter. It didn't bother me at the time but it hurts like hell now."

“Better have Dr. Bob take a look.”

First I saw Pete Rock and asked him for his opinion and after some pressing and pinching and a response by me of ‘Ouch’, he said he thought I might have a hip pointer.

“They’re different in everyone and can be very uncomfortable. My advice is to ice it and stay on the couch this weekend. Just grab some ice off the field on your way out, he said with a grin as he moved on to another player.

By the time Luke and I walked into the Doorway I was in a lot of pain. Luke noticed and told me, “Toughen up buddy, you’re acting like a wimp.”

“Easy for you to say, but it feels like my darn hip is on fire.”

The usual group was there and everyone was complaining about the weather.

Doug and Tim were having an animated discussion vigorously complaining when I limped up. They both looked at me like I was Luke’s wimp.

“Hey, we had it worse. You got to run around and stay warm while we had to suffer in the stands.”

“Doug I thought you were tougher than that?”

“Well buddy, I’m tougher than you think but I’m not about to put on a bunch of funny looking clothes and prance around the football field in the freezing rain.”

“It’s a lot of fun buddy, you ought to give it a try.”

“That’ll be the day”, imitating Duke Wayne in one of his cowboy roles, probably from Big Jake, one of my all-time favorite’s.

“Your John Wayne impersonation leaves a bit to be desired my friend.”

“Well, the way you’re walking buddy you look like him or Walter Brennan.”

The pain in my hip finally began to abate somewhat as the night came to a close. I thought by morning I’d be fine.

But, when I woke up and climbed out of bed a pain shot through my sore hip that got my attention real fast.

“Hey, you look like John Wayne in the Alamo, limping down the steps,” said Paul as he was working on a huge glass of juice.

“Not you too.”

# SEVENTEEN

## “THE AIR THAT I BREATHE”

*JULIO IGLESIAS*

I

The weekend was uneventful but I spent most of it lying on the living room couch watching football games. My Cornhuskers traveled to Stillwater, Oklahoma to take on the Oklahoma State Cowboys. It was the opening of the Big 8 regular season schedule and we were favored by a large margin.

The game proved to be anything but a rout as the Cowboys nearly pulled a gigantic upset. The ‘Huskers finally prevailed 14 to 10 but not before dodging a few well aimed bullets. The offense, which had been averaging 57 points per game, was held to 14. Fortunately the defense was dominant as usual holding the ‘Boys to 10. I’m sure coach Osborne will have them working extra hard next week as they travel again, this time to Columbia, Missouri to play the Tigers.

My hip was getting better and by Sunday evening I was walking fairly normal and most important without much pain. I’m sure I’ll take it a bit easy during the practice week and coach Vince will probably keep me out of harms way as much as possible.

Luke and Cezar both dropped in and watched a bit of football with me. I didn’t feel much like going out so when the games were done I turned on Gunsmoke reruns and the boys went girl hunting.

“Hey, just because I’m not around to chaperone don’t be crossing the line with any of my girl friends.”

It was Cezar who beat Luke to the punch with a sarcastic answer.

“Just because you’ve struck out so many times don’t get the idea either of us will ever get to strike three.”

I just rolled my eyes as my two best buddies headed out into uncharted waters.

Pete Rock had designed a sponge padding that covered the tender area and it fit nicely under my hip pads. I felt a bit awkward at first but it didn't take long for me to adjust and although it hurt a bit when I tried to throw long, most of the time I had no discomfort. Coach had said he might cut down on my run plays and we didn't run any option plays during our team drills.

Lakeside was 3-1 in league and we would be on the road. I hoped we didn't have the same kind of scare as did my Huskers but the Pelicans were certainly capable of giving us a contest. Coach Hasty's teams were always well coached and as usual they had a size advantage on us and everyone else. I don't know what they feed those kids but the result is the same year after year. This year their offensive line averages well over 275. Our defense will need to match their physicality. I'm sure our defensive coaches will have a plan ready for the run dominated Pelican offense.

Coach gave Tommy a lot of reps during the practice week and to no one's surprise he looked great. Everyone was impressed with how much he had developed but he wasn't one to blow his own horn.

"I'll just keep the seat warm for you Eric," he told me during team on Tuesday.

I just smiled in reply. I watched most of the time but was sure to pay attention to the game plan and by Thursday's short practice I was feeling pretty chipper. That is until after practice when coming out of the shower I slipped and went down in a heap.

I landed on the sore hip and felt the same sharp pain I had after the game on Friday.

"Damn, how could I be so stupid," I said loud enough to get the attention of those guys close by.

"What the hell are you doing on the floor?"

It was Dom who was just entering the shower area and before I could answer he bent down and helped me up.

"You Ok," he said after he realized the pain I was in?

"I think so, but you might just need to help me into my clothes."

"Oh sure. You sound like my Saturday night date, and I'll give you the same answer. You're on your own."

Leave it to our Austrian friend to put some humor into the situation. He had fast become one of the most popular students at Crater. Everyone loved his sense of humor and his easy going

manner. His presence seemed to give the air that I breath a cleaner feel. And he was developing into a pretty darn good football player as well.

I managed to get dressed without doing any more damage to my sore hip and actually walked to the car with only a slight limp. I think I dodged a bullet.

By the time I sat down for dinner all the pain was gone and I quickly settled in to concentrating on mom's spaghetti Bolognese.

"Pass the parmesan Paul," as I spooned a large portion of the meat based red sauce onto my plate.

Glancing at my generous helping he said, "Looks like a sore hip didn't affect your appetite big brother."

## II

Friday night rolled around and although it was still cool the freezing temperatures had moved on to our east coast. As we boarded the bus for the hour drive to Lakeside the skies were clear and there was a chill in the air. It would be a perfect October evening for a high school football game.

Past history told me that Coach Hasty would have the Pelicans ready for battle and for a half it was a tight game. The Pelicans managed to stay close as their defense, not having to defend the option or quarterback run, had stacked the line of scrimmage and made our run offense look very average. Usually when we see that we throw nearly on every down, or run the option part of our offense.

But, they had two tall and aggressive defensive ends and they were able to force me to get rid of the football before our patterns had developed. The twin defensive linemen were exactly that, twins. Both were 6'4 and athletic and were giving our offensive tackles fits with their pass rush. When that's all they need to worry about it makes their job easier. They were both good enough athletes we didn't need to make their task a simple one.

We managed to punch in a short Randy run after a long drive and later Cezar kicked a short field goal. With just a few minutes left in the half we led 10-0. But before we could get off the field with the ten point lead they got a break. I had tried to scramble after I

saw nobody open and one of the twins caught my arm from behind and ripped the ball out. His brother recovered on our twentytwo yard line.

Doug and Dan Write were proving to be worthy nemesis. I'd seen both of them on the basketball court so I knew how athletic they were. It was Doug, doing double duty as their tight end who scored on a beautiful play action fake that our safeties bit on leaving him all alone behind our secondary. The 10-7 half time lead was hard earned but I knew that we would need to get our offense in gear or an upset was not just possible but probable.

Coach Vince had a simple plan to thwart the pass rush.

"We'll need to utilize our quick screen game and our three step pass drop to nullify those two ends."

I was confident our defense would do their job, just as the Husker's had last weekend, so it was up to the offense to get into a rhythm. We did.

We took the second half kick-off and quickly marched down the field. We looked like a different team as one quick pass after another moved the chains. The score came on what we call 'Jail Break'. It's a wide receiver screen but not to the outside. Luke slipped inside after I pump faked to Randy running into the flat and he followed a host of linemen friends into the end zone from fifteen yards out. After Cezar's kick we had some breathing room at 17-7.

Once again we forced a three and out. This time we hit a big play. With the defensive ends charging up field so fast the 'shovel' became a weapon. We had run the play twice in the first half for nice gains, but this time we lined up in an empty backfield, giving them a different look, and Randy came in motion across the formation. I took the shotgun snap and started in the opposite direction with what looked like a roll out. Randy had reversed his direction on the snap and when Doug Write came flying up field it made the shovel pass easy. We caught the entire defense leaning the wrong direction and after Randy made a defensive back miss he cut to our sideline and was long gone.

The seventy seven yard play sealed the Pelican fate and gave us an insurmountable 24-7 lead. In the stats the play would look like a long pass, the shovel is a forward pass, but the fact is I threw it all of four or five yards. That was my last play of the night as Tommy mopped up and led us to another touchdown.

The score came mid fourth quarter after recovering a fumble in their red zone. Aggressive defensive teams can be vulnerable to mis-direction plays and that's exactly what happened. Dom ran a counter play, catching the defense pursuing the wrong direction, in for the score. He made one nice move near the line of scrimmage after cutting off a Jake block and then ran over their safety near the goal line to put the final touch on our 31-7 victory.

In the locker room he was all bravado.

"Hey did you see me run over than monster defensive back?"

It was Luke who responded first, "Yeah they pulled him up from the pee-wee league on Thursday. You're a beast my friend."

"Yes, but I'm our beast," he said in counter with his grin lighting up the room.

After dressing I was waiting just outside our locker room when Doug Write came by.

Shaking his head, he offered his hand and said, "Man I thought we might catch you guys looking past us. But I guess that was just wishful thinking."

"Let me tell you something. You and your brother are by far the best two defensive ends in the league. I love the way you play."

"Part of how we played today was because coach Hasty knew you might not run because of your hip injury. We didn't have to worry about defending the option or probably not you scrambling unless you had to. But, you always seem to have an answer, and that darn shovel really cost us."

"Two great coaches in a chess match"

"And you guys left us with nothing but check mate."

I wished him luck and I meant it. The truth was I was glad I'd seen the last of the Write brothers on the football field.

# EIGHTEEN

## “I’M A BELIEVER”

*NEIL DIAMOND*

I

The game at Prep would be a mad house. Both teams were undefeated at 5-0 in league play and 7-0 for the season. Big games such as this one are what competitors strive for. It’s what keeps them coming back again and again seeking that sometimes elusive thrill of victory. In our case we’ve grabbed the ring just enough times to want it again. As for me, I’m a believer in our coaching staff and my teammates. Buckle down your helmets Crusaders because we’ll be bringing it tonight.

The week had flown by and we had enjoyed spirited practices in preparation. My hip was feeling great and coach had no restrictions on his play calls. Our student body was pumped up and there would be an overflow crowd. I’m sure the security people will have their hands full. Our stadium only seats about three thousand so it will be standing room only. Be sure to get here early if you want a seat.

Coach Staut had rebuilt his team after graduating a lot of very good football players. The Bacon brothers, Mark and Greg, had graduated but in spite of that their defense had given up only a few points all season long. Their big defensive end, Jack Bryant, lived in our district so we all knew him well. He was the unquestioned leader of their front four and we would need to be aware of him at all times.

On film I had noticed that this season they showed a lot of different looks especially up front. They lined up with three down most of the time but sometimes with four and their linebackers were very aggressive. We would need to be alert to the blitz and as always coach Vince had a good plan.

Their star of offense was their quarterback. He was a junior playing his first season as the varsity starter but he looked nothing

like a rookie. His name was Michael Miovic and he was a three sport athlete. His mobility will test our defense, especially because from their wing-t set he was a magician with the football. The cross action made it nearly impossible to find the football and made the play action pass a legitimate weapon.

We kicked off to begin the game and quickly we were in for a surprise. Instead of a wing-t look, they lined up with four wide receivers with one back along side Michael. It looked to me like they had stolen our playbook. On the first series they moved the football steadily down field with short passes and QB runs. Our defense looked a bit confused as we had some trouble adjusting to something we hadn't seen on film.

With first and ten on our twenty-six yard line they lined up empty, with no backs in the backfield. We dropped our outside linebackers and rushed only three. The result was their nifty QB biding his time with no pressure found one of his receivers open in the corner of the end zone. He had somehow eluded our coverage and Michael threw a perfect strike on the dead run.

Their fans went nuts and we tried to regroup. The defensive coaches were huddling with the defense on the sideline as we prepared to receive the ensuing kick off. I could see coach Nick trying to settle our guys down. It might not be as easy as it looks.

We opened the game on offense with a spread of our own. We had worked for the last few weeks on our version of the 'empty' backfield. Randy lined up in the slot on the trips side. The first play was a designed QB run after a bubble fake to Randy. We trapped their big nose tackle and I cut off Brandon's block and found daylight. The DB's all chased Randy and after making their weak side linebacker miss I set sail down our sideline. Near midfield their safety closed in but Luke was following me and in perfect position for what we call 'With 'ya'. The safety made his move and I lateralled the football to my buddy. The result was a seventy-six yard touchdown. Cezar's kick tied the score.

This beginning had all the earn marks of a barnburner and the first half turned out to be just that. Neither offense could be stopped as we both scored the first three times we had the football. Both rooting sections were going nuts and with six minutes even left on the clock the score was 21-21.

They moved across mid-field easily enough but then made their first mistake of the evening. On a third and five their center snapped the ball over Michael's head and by the time he fell on the errant snap it was a fifteen yard loss. They punted and Randy called for a fair catch on our twenty-nine yard line. There were exactly two minutes left in the half.

Both Ryan Ruff and Ryan Schmid had a distinct height advantage on their defenders and both had multiple receptions. Coach didn't see any reason to change tactics and I found each of them open for nice gains on our first three plays. The third one put us into Crusader territory. Fifty five seconds remained.

Blake had replaced Randy as the inside receiver on the trips side leaving both Ryan's as slot receivers. That left Luke and J.J., our speed guys, on the outside. When one of their free safeties showed his hand a little too soon, I knew they were going to double Ruff on the trips side. Coach had designed a play just for this occasion. We brought Ryan Schmid across the formation in motion towards the trips. That brought the backside safety to the front side and left J.J. a huge hole in the deep middle. He was doubled by the outside linebacker, and corner but they had no help deep. It was an easy throw and catch good for the go ahead touchdown.

Our half time lead of 28-21 gave us some relief but we all knew this game wasn't going to be a walk in the park.

## II

The defensive coaches were scrambling a bit during the break but I had confidence coach Nick and his defensive staff would have the answers. Talk about night and day. Expecting more wing-t ground pound and instead seeing a spread with a mobile and athletic quarterback. But the good news is our defensive players see the spread every day in practice.

One had to give coach Staut credit. This total change of offensive strategy came as a blind shot. They must have been working on the new formation all season but just chose this game to spring the trap. I knew the first year offensive coordinator for the Crusaders. He had played for them and just a year ago graduated from college where he had played in a spread offense.

His name was Brian Trajjeer and it looked to me like he had convinced coach Staut that spreading field would allow their best athlete to create and exploit his considerable talent. And Michael Miovic was proving he had the talent to take over a game.

We received the second half kickoff and once again Prep kicked the ball on the ground. By the time Blake got to the football he was surrounded by white shirts and had no chance to advance. We would start from our own nineteen yard line. If we could put together a scoring drive it might take some wind out of their sails. We started off with two quick first downs on short passes to Luke and Ruff. From our forty we shifted Randy into his usual backfield position and ran a simple slam play.

Sometimes the simplest play can catch a defense off guard and this was the case. Randy followed crushing blocks by Brandon Janes and Rob Wien and in a flash was loose in their secondary. His quickness caught the twin safeties in a momentary pause and before they could react he was past them with nothing but green grass in front of him. The sixty yard run might have broke their back as I could plainly see on the faces of the defenders a look of defeat.

Prep didn't quit and Michael continued to confound our defense but our offense was on fire and try as they might the Crusaders had no answers. The water they threw on the flames was more like petrol. The final was sixty-seven to thirty-six. It looked for a time like the lights on our scoreboard might be over worked. The final score blinked on and off at one end of the field in contrast to the black night. But there was no black hangover for the Comets. Only a resounding win that I'm quite sure will get the attention of high school football fans throughout Iowa.

I heard coach Vince give coach Staut praise as they met near mid-field.

"Coach, that was the best kept secret I've ever witnessed. You caught us totally off guard and that young kid can really play!"

"Thanks coach but it looks like we should have come up with something different on defense as well."

I had a chance to chat with their young QB as we met at midfield.

“Michael that was one great performance for a first year starter. I have to ask, were you a bit disappointed not getting any playing time last year?”

“Ah, no. I was just waiting my turn.”

His answer didn't surprise me at all. I don't know him well but we've crossed paths here and there and he has always come across as a humble kid. He'll have a lot of college coaches chomping at the bit to talk to him sooner rather than later.

As we were just finishing up the hand shake routine I overheard Coach Vince chatting with Coach Staut as they also headed toward the locker rooms.

“Who was that little rascal you had at running back at the end?”

Coach Staut answered, “You must mean Smokin' Jones?”  
“There's got to be a good story behind that nickname?”

Coach Staut chuckled and continued, “Two weeks ago while his parents were out of town for the weekend and he was home alone their house burned down. The official ruling was 'smokers carelessness'.

I laughed all the way to the locker room.

A boisterous bunch of teenagers didn't waste time celebrating the victory. Dom did his usual and led shower room cheers. He's often said in Europe naked isn't a big deal and his lack of modesty is frankly refreshing. I for one think its healthy for teenagers to get over the sometimes over protective reaction by adults to some rowdy fun and let loose. We did. The thought crossed my mind that if Ms. Mullin were on the coaching staff it wouldn't be long before she barged through the door scolding her minions.

Later at the Doorway the enthusiasm didn't slow down much. This win would affectively give us the league title and although we had a game remaining Vs North Marian, they were 0-6 having lost tonight to Lakeside, and shouldn't give us any problems.

By the time Cezar and I walked in the front door it was close to midnight but everyone was still up. The local TV station had just completed its coverage of the CVL with the majority of the video obviously showing highlights from the Crater/St. Christopher Prep contest.

“You were the star of the show,” brother Danny yelled as we walked into the room.

I just shook my head before saying, “I bet they didn’t shortchange the Prep QB. He’s really talented.”

About then Mom pointed at the Champaign glasses filled with non-alcoholic fluid on the kitchen counter.

“Help yourself boys. It’s time for a toast to the champions.”

# NINETEEN

## “A HUNDRED MILES OF BAD ROAD”

**ANDY GRIGGS**

I

The North Marian Mustangs must have felt like they traveled a hundred miles of bad road on their way to what was sure to be nothing short of an execution.

They were on their third head coach in my three years and to an outsider it felt like they were grasping for straws. The new coach, Bill Single, was a Stanford graduate, originally from the southern Illinois town of Mount Vernon. This was his first head job after being the offensive coordinator at Township High School in his home town. He had his work cut out for him.

I was somewhat surprised while watching video. The Mustangs were winless but they didn't look like a team without a clue. There were signs that coach Single had them heading in the right direction. They looked, on film to be sound in all phases of the game. They ran a semi-spread offense that obviously emphasized the pass as they actually were third in the league in offensive statistics. But it was also obvious that they were very young. Checking the program it looked to me like they started at least five different sophomores on both offense and defense. The challenge for coach Single would be to keep those young kids happy and healthy.

During the practice week coach Vince made it plain that he respected what North was doing and expected them to be a competitive team in short order.

“If their administration will let coach Single coach I believe he will have that program on the rise soon.”

He went on to say in his opinion they had pulled the plug way to fast on previous coaches and needed to stay the course with the guy they now had running the program.

The maroon and white Mustangs didn't look like a no win team as they took the field for warm ups. Their kids went about the pre-game routine with confidence and enthusiasm. I was impressed. Their coaching staff were dressed in matching outfits and everyone of them showed their team a professional demeanor as they went about their business.

Some of the coaches didn't look much older than the players and even the head coach looked like he could still play. He had been a starting wide receiver at Stanford and I'm sure that influenced how he had begun his program. They emphasized the pass, showed a lot of formations and used an up tempo rhythm that didn't allow the defense much time to adjust. Coach Nick's troops would need to be on their toes.

Our stands were full and the visitor section was nearly so. It was game nine and they were 0-8 but it didn't seem to deter their fans as they supported their team.

Our coaching staff had warned us about being complacent and urged us not to overlook the Mustangs. It was obvious the talent level wasn't divided evenly but that didn't seem to stop the youngsters wearing classy all white uniforms from putting up a good fight. At the end of the first quarter the score was 7-0 and they were moving the football.

With a first down on our twenty yard line their sophomore quarterback tried to force a pass into double coverage and Mark Mack timing his move perfectly picked the errant throw and returned it to mid field. Their quarterback made the touchdown saving tackle and I could tell he was upset with himself for the ill-advised throw. And I was also impressed as coach Single met him near the sideline and put his arm around his young player while urging him to stay positive. I'm sure it was a lesson learned.

By halftime we had upped our lead to 24-0 and I knew coach Vince would begin subbing. He did and my night was done. Tommy had earned playing time and he took advantage of his opportunity. If anyone thought we would be in trouble with our second stringer in the game, they would be mistaken.

The final was 38-8. We had finished the regular season with an unblemished 9-0 record for the second straight season. The playoffs loomed, but we wanted to celebrate first.

I managed to say a few words to their young QB during the player hand shake routine and wished him well. His name was Alex Pert. A name that soon would become familiar to followers of high school football in Iowa.

“Hang in there. You guys showed a lot of class and to me it’s pretty obvious your coach has you heading in the right direction.”

He thanked me, wished us well and then said, “On Monday we’ll nearly all be in the weight room. This season was a learning experience for sure, but I’m positive we’ll turn this around quickly.”

I believe he’s right.

Coach Single made it a point to hustle over and say a few words.

“Son, you guys are really good. Good luck during the playoffs. I’ll tell you this, our guys will be rooting for you and taking note of how you handle yourselves. Coach has you doing things the right way. Our goal is to follow your lead.”

Wow. Nice compliments. Sometimes opponents can be jealous of winners, obviously this won’t be the case in the Mustang program. Winners win, losers bitch, and there was no bitching coming from the kids in white as they left the field.

## II

In the Iowa playoff system two teams from each league make the sixteen team tournament. St. Christopher Prep finished second and also qualified. We would play Lincoln of Des Moines at home and Prep would travel to City High of Iowa City for the first round games. We were seeded number one in the upper bracket and Xavier of Cedar Rapids was number one in the lower bracket.

There were four rounds to complete the tournament bracket. In round one all the first place teams are at home while the number two teams travel. In the second round the highest ranked team would get home field. The semi-final and final would be played in Iowa City on the campus of the U. of Iowa at Kinnick Stadium.

Our opponent, the Rail Splitters, had finished the regular season with a seven win and two loss record. They featured a fivesome of players called the ‘C-Train’. Cris Drougas was their running back, Collin Bobb and Cory Sotta were slot backs and Chad Luke and Calvin Jones were wide receiver’s. They were all seniors

who had started since their sophomore season. The fivesome had pretty much been unstoppable the second half of the season. If we were going to prevail we would need to slow down that train.

Their coach, Don Davis, everyone called him Mouse, had been quoted in the newspaper talking about his talented group of seniors.

“Once the coach figured out to get the football in the hands of these kids we’ve been pretty unstoppable on offense.”

That was certainly true as they led their league in total points averaging just over forty points per game. It wasn’t one of the strongest leagues in the state but after losing two of their first three they have reeled off six straight and seem to be on somewhat of a roll heading into the playoffs.

Coach Davis is a legend in the state. He’s been around for years and built a program at Lincoln that has gotten everyone’s attention. Before he arrived they had been known as a hard hitting defensive team with an offense that featured the run. He changed that in a hurry and I believe is the first coach in Iowa to run a four wide receiver offense without a tight end.

This year what makes them even better is a pair of slot’s and wide receiver’s that have the skills to play in any offense. They utilize some motion to isolate or overload and their speed it difficult to match. Add to that the run threat from Drougas at tailback has taken them to a new offensive level.

Coach Vince told us about how many people criticized Mouse with his spread offense.

“You can’t win football games without a tight end,” most experts said. And then added, “What are they going to do in the red zone without a fullback?”

That criticism was ten years ago and they’ve led the state in scoring pretty much every year. Some said that Mouse was just lucky, refusing to recognize the obvious. Coach Vince told us he’s a great football coach and just for the record let me say this, “If his record was all about luck it would have run out by now.”

And then he continued, “Trust me boys, Mouse is an innovator way ahead of his time. I truly believe in ten years you’ll see a spread up tempo offense all over college football and it won’t be long until the NFL does the same.”

We spent the week toning our offense. Lincoln plays what is called a ‘split-6’ defense that causes some adjustments with our

offensive line. It wasn't a huge adjustment but we needed to close our splits a bit to nullify gap blitzes.

The defensive staff had set the defense game plan to be aware of where their play makers were at all times. Coach Nick could be heard all over the practice field, "Make them go somewhere they don't want to go."

We were favored by most experts in the media but a couple articles noted that since the C-Train got healthy the Rail Splitters were nearly unstoppable. This was a game that some saw as an upset possibility. I know I felt a bit apprehensive as the week progressed and by game time Lincoln had my total attention. My teammates understood our challenge as well and come game day we all had our game faces on and were ready for battle.

And quite a battle it turned out to be. In spite of coach Nick and his defensive staff's thorough and detailed coaching effort Lincoln's offense moved the ball up and down the field. So did we. At the quarter it was a 14-14 game and at the half Lincoln led 28-24.

All five of their stars had big plays. Chad Luke was proving to be the main nemesis as he had two touchdowns on nearly double-digit receptions. We had done a good job containing their big slot but both Collin Bobb and Cris Drougas had touchdown runs.

We had been diverse as well. Luke and Ryan Ruff both caught TD passes and Randy scored on a long counter play. Cezar kicked a 28 yard field goal mid second quarter and we trooped into the locker room behind at half for the first time all year.

The locker room was workmanlike as coaches on both offense and defense first met to discuss strategy while players sipped Gatorade and tried to relax. I sat next to our receiver core and we went over their secondary coverage. They were mixing up coverage's but it hadn't slowed us much. In my mind this game was going to come down to weather or not our defense could somehow slow down the C-Train.

Coach Nick had decided to play more of a straight up coverage meaning man-to-man with some free safety help on Chad Luke. It seemed to work as on their first possession we forced a three and out. Randy ran the punt back to our thirty-five yard line where we took over. Five plays later we took back the lead when J. J. snuck behind their secondary and hauled in a twenty-six yard touchdown pass. He was getting extended playing time as Blake had an

injured ankle that has kept his time on the field to a minimum. Every time he tries to go hard on it he comes up limping.

Another three and out set the tempo. Again we raced down the field with Randy taking an option pitch in for the score from the ten yard line. Cezar's P.A.T. made it 38-28 and gave us some breathing room. But before we could get comfortable Cris Drougas took a swing pass, broke two tackles near the line of scrimmage and set sail down our sideline. He didn't stop until he reached the end zone and suddenly it was a three point game.

Luke said as we trotted onto the field after the kick off went into the end zone, "This is a blast. Our turn to score quick." I just looked at him for a moment and then said, "Ok buddy let's do a one and done."

We had had some success with what we call running back 'Bubble', which was a simple play run into a trips alignment. All three receivers blocked the man guarding them and I tossed a quick pass to Randy. It was really more like a run play but the ball got their quicker than a pitch or lateral. This time we faked the Bubble and all three receivers ran block and go routes. Holding their blocks for a moment convinced the defensive backs to react towards Randy. Luke came off his finesse block and was five yards behind the trailing defender. I lofted a soft touch pass that Luke easily ran under and outraced their trailing secondary for an eighty yard score. This was a shootout. Comets 45-35.

The play broke the back and spirit of the Lincoln team and we controlled the tempo the entire fourth quarter. The final was 48-35 as Cezar capped the scoring for the night with a thirty yarder mid way through the quarter.

Coach Davis was all compliments during the handshake ceremony after the game.

"Son I have to admit to be excited at seeing the last of you. Every time we got close you just pulled another rabbit out of the bag. Good luck with the Huskers although I'd rather see you in Hawkeye black and gold."

I thanked him and wished him well. Rumor had it this might be his last team but I didn't want to spoil the moment so I didn't ask. I got a chance to speak with all of their C-Train guys and each was very complimentary and wished us good luck in the coming weeks.

“I want to say we lost to the champs,” said Cory Sotta as he headed for the visitor locker room. I hoped he was right.

# TWENTY

## “MY BEST FRIEND”

*TIM Mc GRAW*

I

The gathering at the Doorway was all festive as we devoured our burgers while watching highlights. Prep had put up a good fight Vs City but eventually fell 28-25. North High of Sioux City had won and would be our next challenge. The North Stars had been the winners in District #1, the Missouri River Conference. For the first time in state history all eight number one teams won. The quarter-final games would match league champions throughout Iowa.

The first phone call Saturday morning was from my good friend J. R. Laughlin from Mississippi. We had kept in touch all year and his team had also qualified for the playoffs. However, their season had ended last night.

“It was a real downer. I got hurt in the first quarter. I made a catch over the middle but got sandwiched by a couple of their guys and came up with a shoulder injury. At first the trainer thought it might be a broken collarbone, but that turned out not to be true. But my night was done. We lost 26-18.”

“That is a bummer.” Then I told him about our exciting win and we chatted for another fifteen minutes. He said his shoulder was very sore but after game x-rays had shown no break.

“I’ll be ok for basketball practice but probably take some time just to be sure.”

Before he hung up he told me if we make the final he would be sure to come up for the weekend.

“Now that would be cool.”

The second call was from coach Solich at Nebraska. He congratulated me on our win and we chatted for ten minutes or so. He was aware that I would be at the game and wanted to be sure to tell me to drop by the locker room after the game. I told him I would be first in line.

The Huskers were still ranked number one in the nation and were rolling again after having some offensive issues during the middle of their season. I asked him about that and he was very honest.

“I think the bottom line was we just got a bit over confident and probably a little complacent.”

In their last two games they had put up 69 Vs Colorado and 51 Vs Kansas State.

About the time we finished our conversation the boys strolled into the kitchen still sleepy eyed but looking for food.

I was planning on leaving early for the game in Lincoln so I was anxious to grab a bite and hit the road. I would be picking up Ryan Schmid and his brother Matt.

Two weeks ago I got a phone call from Chuck Raskel, the president of the ATO house on campus. They wanted to invite me to a ‘Rush’ party on the day of the Iowa State game. I had been hosted by them during my unofficial visit last spring and enjoyed the guys and the atmosphere. It didn’t take long for me to agree. I asked if I could bring a friend and of course the answer was positive.

I asked both Cezar and my best friend Luke but both of them had prior commitments and while I was chatting with Luke Ryan Schmid overheard our conversation and wanted to know if he might be able to tag along. Yes was my immediate answer.

“Maybe my brother Matt could join us?”

“Let me check with the house president first, but I don’t think it will be a problem.”

We would be staying overnight because mom and dad didn’t want me driving back too late. We had a large room with three beds at the same motel we had staying in after our game early in the season with Pius X.

The other thing was I hoped to see some of the Pius guys, maybe even at the ‘Rush’ party before the game. Matt Clerk would almost certainly be there and it would be great to see both Martin Miller and Todd David. I wondered if Martin was being pursued by all the major schools and would be very surprised if he wasn’t. Todd had probably made his college decision and I was anxious to hear that story as well.

We arrived on campus and found the ATO fraternity house. As you might expect we were greeted with open arms. Chuck Raskel was a real salesman. He was everywhere chatting with everyone and making sure no one was overlooked. There were about twenty five or thirty visitors but I didn't see anyone I knew.

Refreshments were readily available but no alcohol. I asked Chuck about that and he was quick to say, "Against the rules Eric." Then he added with a wink, "The fraternity counsel would close us down in a second and I need somewhere to sleep."

About that time I saw Matt Clerk arrive. He was quickly greeted by Chuck and other brothers, which was no surprise. I managed to get his attention and after introducing him to Ryan and Matt spent some time getting reacquainted. They had also won their first playoff contest and would be at home next Friday.

"I think we've got a good chance to win it all, but it won't be easy."

I asked about Martin and Todd and learned that both of them had committed to Kansas. He told me Martin wasn't pursued very hard by the 'Huskers and he wasn't sure why. I knew Todd had been recruited hard by Kansas for baseball and I guess he felt it was his best opportunity.

We had a good time and everyone enjoyed the attention the ATO's gave us. Fraternity guys want to find the best prospects just like football coaches. Both Ryan and Matt enjoyed the attention.

"Wow, that was cool," said Matt as we headed for the stadium. I think I'd sign up right now if I was a senior."

Ryan was a little more diplomatic.

"I think I'd like to see what some of the other frat's have to offer but it might be hard to beat the atmosphere here."

## II

The game turned out to be a laugher. The Huskers scored early and often and the Cyclones looked out manned and overwhelmed. The final was 72-29 and it wasn't that close. It's quite possible this was the worst defeat in team history, and that dates back to 1892. The Huskers played with emotion and spirit while Iowa State looked like they just wanted to get the game over

with, go home to Cyclone Stadium and lick their wounds. I'm guessing the trip back to Ames was filled with gloom.

The quarterback for our next opponent, North High, has committed verbally to the Cyclones. It looked to me like he had a chance to step in and play right away. But then the program needed a lot of help.

Will Helm, was a big strong kid who had won the state title in wrestling as a junior in the heavy weight class. He was 6-3 and a solid two hundred ten pounds. He was left handed and threw darts. He also started at linebacker.

The Stars had put together an outstanding record. Their only loss was a pre-season game against Pius X in the season opener, the team from Lincoln Nebraska who we beat in the second game. They were undefeated in Iowa. Their coach, Stacy Coll, was a crafty veteran who had his team prepared in all aspects of the game. He wasn't a large man but looked somewhat frightening. He was in charge of school discipline and word had it, you never wanted to be called into his office. The rumor mill said he had a large paddle prominently displayed behind his desk and he wasn't afraid to use it.

He was an old school hard guy and his team played with the same kind of chip on their shoulder. Coach Vincetti made it very clear that we would be in for a dogfight.

"You'll have your self-discipline challenged. So, let's be sure to keep our composure while we meet toughness with toughness."

To no one's surprise it turned out to be a physical contest. I think I got hit harder than I ever had but it was never dirty play. They were a tough bunch of kids, no doubt, but to their credit they didn't cheap shot or trash talk.

The halftime score was 21-10 in our favor. Our pass game had given us the upper hand. Both J. J. and Luke were giving the defensive backs covering them fits and when they doubled our outside receivers it just opened up passes to our slots. Dustin got some reps but Blake's ankle wasn't responding and he didn't suit for the game. Ruff and Schmidt became easy targets. They actually scored first after recovering a fumble which never should have happened. The play called for a fake handoff to Randy and somehow I managed to loose grip on the ball and the took over on

our twenty-three yard line. Three plays later they had a 6-0 lead that quickly became 7-0 after the P.A.T.

We didn't let adversity get the best of us and after a five play drive Luke shook loose on a throwback route down their sideline. My throw hit him in stride and he completed the forty yard play easily. We scored two more times in the second quarter, both on passes, one to Ryan Ruff and the other to his clone Ryan Schmid. The two scores were sandwiched around a field goal by our worthy opponents.

We were all business in the locker room at the half. Coaches reminded us to concentrate and keep the pressure on. Our defense had stiffened after their first score and the field goal came after a very nice punt return put them in position inside our red zone. They gained nothing on three plays after which their kicker split the uprights to close the gap. Schmid's touchdown catch gave us the eleven point lead at the break.

We had done a good job controlling their run offense and our pass rush had kept Will Helm from getting into any kind of rhythm. We had sacked him a number of times and also forced him out of the pocket where he tried his best to find an open receiver. He wasn't the fastest player on the field by far and when he decided to run we ran him down pretty quickly. But his was a tough guy for a QB and always popped up ready for the next play. I was impressed with his competitiveness and could see why he was a defending wrestling champion.

The final was 35-10. After the game I chatted with their QB and told him I had watched the Husker/Cyclone game last weekend.

"Ouch, that was a bit embarrassing," he told me while cringing.

"The good news is they need lot's of help, so you might be in the hunt for playing time right away."

"I hope so. They've indicated the QB battle is wide open."

He asked about what I'd been told about the Nebraska QB situation and I told him the subject had come up a time or two.

"They've got a couple veteran guys who I think will step in without much drop off. But, to be truthful I think I'd prefer to red-shirt and get my college feet wet without wasting a year of eligibility standing on the sideline."

“I’ll tell you this Eric. From what I’ve seen in your performance in high school I think you might be able to beat out their returning guys.”

“Coach Solich told me they wouldn’t make a decision about the red-shirt deal until fall camp, and that’s ok with me.”

## **TWENTY ONE**

### **“ALL I NEED TO KNOW”**

***KENNY CHESNEY***

I

The semi-final games were set. We would play Don Bosco High of Gilbertsville and the number one seed in the other bracket, Xavier of Cedar Rapids, would play Dubuque Senior High. Both games would be played at the University of Iowa, a double header on Friday night. The winners would advance to the state final the following Saturday.

It should have been a fun week but on Monday one of our backup defensive backs cornered me in the locker room and asked if I had some time to talk. His name was Rick Sanchez and he was a senior who had never been a starter, but a solid player with limited skills who probably played more than his talent would normally allow because he was a senior and had paid his dues.

We walked into the physical education side of the locker room and had the place to ourselves.

“I just wanted to talk to you about my situation,” he said.

We had no sooner sat down, when he handed me an envelope. It was opened and he asked me to please read it.

“My father wrote this and he wants me to give it to coach Vincetti, but I wanted to ask your opinion first.”

He was Hispanic and his family lived just outside of town. I had noticed his father a few times talking with him after games but

never talked to the man. I opened the envelope and began to read the letter. It was obvious immediately that his father wasn't very fluent in English. Most words were misspelled and the sentences had zero punctuation. However it didn't take long to recognize the letter as an indictment of coach Vincetti. Basically he was accusing Coach of being a racist. This wasn't good and if anyone found out about this letter it could tear the team apart.

The other thing is the dad was accusing coach of playing a coaches son in front of his boy. The first thing I did was to ask Rick a direct question.

"Do you believe these accusations to be true?"

"Yes I do," was his immediate answer.

I just shook my head. I wanted to scream at him but I managed to keep my composure.

"Let's look at it and let me ask you a few questions."

"Mark Mack is white and you are Hispanic and the third player at that position, David Either, is black. And your father thinks a white coach is playing a white player instead of one of color."

"First question. Who is the best pass defender of the three of you?"

"Well," he hesitated and then continued. "Mark is better at that and I guess so is David."

"So you are third. Now, who is a better tackler?"

This time his answer came instantly.

"David is best but Mark is also pretty good. I sometimes have trouble in the open field being a sure tackler."

I nodded my head and tried not to say the obvious.

"So, in the two areas that are vital to playing the position you are actually third best in both. Is that right? And you are complaining about playing time. What do you think David might say about all this? Did you tell your father that you were actually third best?"

"But David's only a sophomore."

"Yes he is and don't you think coach has been more than fair. He's playing you, a senior, ahead of a better player. Can't you see that?"

He repeated, "But David is a sophomore and Mark is coach Mack's son."

“So you’re saying a coaches son shouldn’t be playing ahead of you even though he’s a better player?”

“It’s not that simple Eric.”

“Really?”

“I’m a senior and I’ve put in my time. I deserve to play.”

I just looked at him and shook my head.

“Why did you ask me to look at this letter? Do you want my opinion? And, are you ready to accept what I say?”

“Dad told me to give the letter to coach Vincetti, but I wanted you to see it first.”

I paused for a moment while looking him in the eye.

“Your father has made a terribly wrong assumption in my opinion. Coach Vincetti has given you more playing time than you actually have earned. You’ve been a good support player. You play on all the special teams. I’m sure he’s done that to reward you for your effort over the years. And now you want to accuse him of being a racist.”

Before he answered I handed him back the envelope and said, “Do with this what you want, but you need to open your eyes. I’m sure you want to please your father but, he is wrong!”

On Tuesday before practice I saw Rick in coach Vincetti’s office. They were having a discussion and it looked to me like Coach was doing all the talking.

Later on the practice field it looked like nothing had changed. Rick was lining up with the second group and when we got to special teams he was in his usual spot. Maybe Rick finally figured it out and we had dodged a bullet. A team game like football requires its players to be ‘All In’, and when that didn’t happen all sort of bad things began to happen.

## II

On Wednesday as I left the locker room I could see that Rick’s practice gear was hanging in his locker. Coach Nook, in charge of the special teams, and Coach Vincetti were having a discussion just inside the gate leading to the field. I knew what it had to be all about.

Before we began practice Coach called us together. I'm the only one who saw the letter so I'm sure most of our team was in the dark about the situation.

"I just want to let you know that Rick has decided to quit the team."

He paused before continuing, "The bottom line is he and his family felt he was not getting a fair shake. There is nothing I can do to satisfy their needs, and I'm not going to jeopardize our chances at a state championship by trying. The team is and always will be more important than the individual. If any of you are unhappy at your playing time or anything involving the team I urge you to come a voice your concern directly to me. I'll evaluate your concern and make a decision that I feel is best for our team."

No one said a word. We had two other Hispanic players, both sophomores, and a total of five black players. If anyone felt like coach Vincetti or any of our coaches were racist it was new to me.

Before we broke up and began practice Luke asked for permission to speak.

"We have the opportunity to play for the best football coach in Iowa. There is no one who understands how to mold a team in fairness more than Coach. Let's get down to business and prepare like always and take out any frustration on Don Bosco."

We broke and as we began the practice I got the feeling no one felt like an injustice had been done. We moved on. I think Rick at some point would figure out his father was the one with the prejudice.

At the dinner table mom asked how practice had gone and I told her, "Just a normal Tuesday practice. We're focusing on the 'Dons and we'll be ready by Friday night."

The rest of the week flew by and our entire school was caught up in the playoff fever. Something about state playoffs brought everyone together. The nerds, the jocks, the girls, the guys, the faculty and staff acted as one. Spirit was high and even the most dower of teachers recognized how important it was to join in the fun.

Mr. Madson, Miss Mullen and Ms. Murtry were always into the fun, it didn't make any difference which sport, they were on board. Even our new administrators, Mr. Vurm, Mr. Tehman and Mr. Cramer seemed to enjoy the obvious school spirit. By Friday everyone was sporting some kind of Comet Blue in their attire.

Ties, shirts and scarves were the obvious choice but Mr. Vurm stole the show with his sky blue suspenders. Go Comets!

We were set to play the first game of the double header so that meant we would go through our normal pre-game routine. The teams playing in the second game wouldn't have that luxury. There was a huge crowd. They close off half the stadium but the open half was completely full with navy blue and gold of the Don's and Carolina blue and white of the Comets. Navy and Red, supporters of Xavier and Dubuque, weren't as obvious but many of their fans wouldn't be in attendance until the second game began.

This was Don Bosco's first semi-final game in school history and during the coin toss ceremony I could sense a lot of tension in the Don players. We, of course had now been in three semi's in a row and it felt like we belonged. We did.

Our main task defensively was to stop their top receiver from going wild. His name was Wes Mill and he was a two-way player. He was a wide receiver on offense and free safety on defense. Cat quick he would be hard to contain so Coach Nick's plan was to double him whenever possible. On defense he was all over the place and seemed to be like a coach on the field. I would need to keep an eye on him for sure.

They were a very good defensive team, especially in the secondary where along with Wes Mill were the Works brothers, Clete and David. Both of them had a well earned reputation as 'lock down' corners. Our receivers will need to be at their best.

The experts had us rated a touchdown better but it didn't take long for that to look conservative. We took the opening kick off and drove down field with seeming ease. It wasn't easy but our execution made it seem so. The score came on a Randy run on a simple zone play. He followed crunching blocks by our All-State combo of Beau Lander and Brandon Janes into the end zone from nine yards out. Cezar's kick made it a quick 7-0 game.

On the kickoff David Either, subbing for Rick, stripped the football from their ball carrier and Mark Mack recovered. I thought that was rather apropos.

On the play one of their brother combo corners had to be helped off the field with what looked like a leg injury. I took note of that.

On first down I faked a hand off to Randy on the same zone play and J. J. ran a perfect waggles route. I pump faked to Ryan up the seam of the defense drawing their free safety towards him. When I looked back J.J. was easily ten yards behind their substitute corner and my throw was on target. Another P.A.T. and with only five minutes gone in the first quarter we led 14-0. The Don's didn't know what hit them. The half time score was 31-0 and game over.

During the second half our backups got a lot of action. Tommy was his usual self and spread the football around with precession. Both Dustin and Dominic had big plays and both scored touchdowns as well. David had a pick six as he timed his move perfectly on a flat route. The entire team met him near the player box with high fives and back slaps. This team was together and everyone felt a part.

Coach slowed down the offensive onslaught in the fourth quarter as our sub's ran the ball and we all watched the clock wind down to zero. Final Comets 48, Don's 0.

Coach Vincetti and the Bosco coach, Craig Walk, were having a conversation near our locker room entrance and Coach motioned for me to join them.

It was the Bosco coach who spoke first.

"I wanted to tell you face to face son that your performance in every game film I watched was superb. And, after watching you in person I'd like to ease your mind a bit."

Then he paused while I waited.

"I've got some Husker connections and I know how excited they are that you'll be joining the big Red. In fact, my son, who's a young assistant in the CFL, had been a graduate assistant for Coach Osborne. Let me assure you, your decision will allow you to enjoy a fabulous experience. Now, good luck next week."

I thanked him of course and wished him well. Then I headed for the locker room to join my teammates in a shower room celebration. But, before I got there Wes Mill offered his congratulations.

"You guys just have too many good players and your play selection keeps everyone guessing. You got me out of position way too often."

“Thanks, our coaches do a great job of game planning. I had my eye on your alignment all night long.”

I joined the celebration in the locker room and couldn't keep my emotions under control. Neither could my teammates and once again we were headed to the state final. This time to defend our championship. All we need to know now is who our opponent would be.

## TWENTY TWO

### “BREAK AWAY”

### RASCAL FLATS

I

It seemed to me like yesterday that I was walking towards the practice field, a skinny sophomore with all sorts of questions. All the memories were racing through my mind as I stepped onto the field for the last Monday practice of my career. Luke saw me standing alone and walked up, “Sure has gone fast huh?”

“Too fast my friend. Let’s see if we can make our last week something really special.”

Luke just gritted his teeth, shook his head and we walked onto the field together true brothers in arms. When we reached the goal post where the team was assembling I looked around and said, “I’m really going to miss this.”

The seniors before us had set the bar high and it was our challenge to maintain. As I glanced around at all my teammates I marveled at the excellence shown by this group of teenagers.

The other captains, Luke, Beau and Rob were all three year starters and this would be our thirty-eighth game together. I flashed on the semi-final loss on the last play of the game my sophomore year, and shook my head. Images of our last play victory a year ago put a smile on my face. What memory would I carry from this seasons state title game? A week from now I’m confident of one thing, the pride I would feel wouldn’t be tarnished by the heartbreak of a loss or embellished by a victory. Win or lose we’ll give our best effort and walk off that field with our heads held high knowing that for thirty eight weeks over three years we gave our best effort.

The coaches laid out the game plan to us, just like any other week, as the practice routine continued. Xavier was a talented team, of course, and they would feature the running game. It would be pass Vs run a contrast in styles. The light blue Comets Vs the

navy and silver Saints for all the marbles at Kinnick Stadium on the campus of the University of Iowa Saturday afternoon.

I tried my best to stay calm but it wasn't an easy task. As the week progressed the phone calls and messages just piled up. The Nebraska staff sent a note and so did Bobby Knight. J.R. called and told me he'd arrive on Friday afternoon. All my close Yeti friends made sure to slap me on the back. Even Doug's normally sarcastic wit was held in check.

"Good luck my good friend. Stay the course!"

I thanked him with a nod and a wink.

The faculty and administration took nearly as much pride in our success as did the team and that was cool, but not unexpected.

Ms. Murtry told me on Monday, "I'm giving you a pass this week on homework. But, if you don't win expect double next week."

Of course she said it with a smile and then she did something really nice. She put her hand on my shoulder and said, "Eric, it's been my pleasure to watch you grow as a student, and athlete and a young man. It's the reason we teachers teach."

I came close to tearing up but managed to keep my composure. She was a great teacher and would be in my corner forever.

Coach had put in a new wrinkle and it was looking good. He replaced Randy with Dustin who lined up in the slot. It was an 'empty' backfield formation and we had a couple simple passes that we worked on, but the best play was a 'Jet' sweep. Dustin lined up away from trips and on my signal went in short motion just behind me as I lined up under center. I snapped the ball just as he gained full speed and he went flying around the corner with three blockers in front of him. Our plan was to do it early in the game. Coach thought we might just catch Xavier off balance as we hadn't show this all year.

Of course Dustin was excited. After practice on Wednesday he asked me what I thought about the play.

"I think we have a very good chance to catch them off guard and I can see a big play."

"You know Randy could do it, maybe even better than me. Why do you think coach chose me?"

"You've earned playing time Dustin with your effort all year. Randy could certainly do it but I think coach wants to reward you for

all your hard work. But if he didn't think you could do it Randy would certainly be the guy."

By Friday's walk-through we had our game plan down pat and felt confident. There was a business like atmosphere and to emphasize that Luke stepped to the front as we were about to break and said to the team, "Remember guys, this is a business trip. We've got a great plan. Let's be sure to execute like we can. The scoreboard will take care of itself."

Cezar joined us for dinner with the family. Everyone was pretty pumped. Paul and Danny couldn't stop talking about the game and mom just kept saying things like only one more or last time wearing the blue game jersey. Dad just did what dad usually did, smile and give me confidence. He was a man of few words but when he talked everyone listened.

"This team is the best Crater team ever son. You and your friends have met all challenges. I'm confident you'll do it one more time, as he glanced around the table. I smiled. I love my dad.

## II

As the last notes of the star spangled banner were being played I looked at my teammates and couldn't miss the confidence. I felt like there was nothing or no one who could stop us. The faith in my teammates I felt was overpowering. I didn't feel any pressure at all. The noise soon drifted into the background and the action on the field slowed to an odd mixture of the sounds of pads popping, whistles blowing and players grunting and exhorting their teammates. It was high school football at the highest level.

We received the kick-off and Randy ran it back to the thirty yard line. Then he took a place on the sideline and Dustin raced on to the field. We lined up without a huddle and I didn't wait for them to get lined up. Their safeties looked a bit confused pointing at our formation and trying to match up.

I sent Dustin into his motion, called the snap count at just the right moment, and he went flying around the edge, quickly outrunning the inside pursuit. Our three wide receivers, Luke and the two Ryan's engaged the defensive backs just long enough for Dustin to sprint past and head for our sideline. It was no contest.

The break away run went for seventy yards without him being touched and our fans went nuts.

After Cezar added the extra point we had taken a quick 7-0 lead. But Xavier wasn't about to lie down, they were also a confident team and very well coached. Their head coach, Jim Kagel was a veteran of Iowa football. His fifteen year career had league champs and playoff contender all over his resume.

They used their power run game to slowly move the football down the field. Our defensive coaches had a sound plan but as Coach Nick said, "Any team that uses two tight ends causes defenses trouble.

The Saints had two excellent ones. They sometimes lined up with both on the same side, one being in a wing position. At other times, they were on opposite sides in a balance formation. Their cat quick quarterback was adept at running the option and an athletic fullback excelled at blocking for their tailback.

They had used the power game towards the wing affectively and then on first down they faked the zone run towards their power and the quarterback pulled the ball. The tight end had blocked our outside linebacker and the wing headed for our safety. He was actually faking the block and releasing to a vacant area over the top of our zone coverage. It was a great call but the quarterback underthrew the pass and our free safety, Jared Vick, was johnny on the spot.

He may have scored if he cut towards our sideline but in his excitement all he wanted to do was punish the first player trying to tackle him. He lowered his shoulder and collided with the Saint wide receiver. They both went down in a heap and neither got up right away.

After trainers rushed to the field and gave assistance eventually they both got up and walked off although Jared needed strong assistance from Pete Rock our excellent trainer. They went directly to the bench where Pete kept a close eye on Jared who to no one's surprise insisted he was all right.

This time we began with Randy in his normal tailback position and began our second drive of the game. A Randy off tackle run, a short flat pass to Ruff on an out route and a quarterback keeper off a fake dive to Randy and we had two quick first downs. Then on successive plays Randy went down with a leg injury and Luke a

shoulder after a nice catch and run. Suddenly two of our best players were watching from the sideline.

Good teams handle adversity easily it seems. Dom stepped in and carried the run load the remainder of the drive. Dustin replaced Luke and there was little drop off except for three years of experience. During a time out called by the Saints when we reached their fourteen yard line with a first down Brandon, who never says anything, suddenly called us together.

“Eric tell coach to run the damn ball. Us guys up front will get the job done. Let’s make a statement right now.”

All ten teammates looked at Brandon with agreement stamped on their collective faces. I walked over to where Coach was standing and told him what Brandon had said.

“Seems like a good idea to me. Sometimes you are better throwing out the game plan or the script and having some situational awareness!”

The play he called was a simple dive behind Alek, Brandon and Rob. Dom ate up nine yards and Coach called it again in the opposite direction. This time he followed Alek, Jake and Beau and waltzed into the end zone untouched.

The tone was set and the rest of the half was all Comets. We dominated the line of scrimmage. Our five seniors worked in a rhythm and unison to clear room for the run game. Our receivers turned into affective blockers and we sprinkled in some play action passes to keep things balanced. The halftime score was 24-0 Comets.

Our team had been dominant all year. And, we had beaten the team playing for the Nebraska state championship as well. There was no doubt about our place in the annals of Iowa high school football.

Luke and Randy were both able to return and both played in the second half. But after a quick score to begin the third quarter Coach made sure everyone got minutes in the State Title game.

I finished my career with an eight for nine day with two touchdowns and added a running score on my last high school series.

The entire fourth quarter was a celebration. Everyone saw action and the starters didn’t get very far from the sideline while supporting the back up players. This team was focused from the

first game of the season to now. There were a lot of stars but not one of them acted selfish. It couldn't get any better than this.

The final was 38-7 and as we hoisted coach Vincetti to our shoulders wearing our championship medals around our necks the roar from our rooting section was thunderous. I think at that moment anyone could have walked into the town of Crater and walked away with the bank. Everyone was in Iowa City watching their team defend their championship with style. And this time the outcome was never in doubt.

My family was waiting for the field to clear so they could hug their two sons. Cezar was one of us and in some ways just as close as a blood brother. J. R. was with them and he was smiling and beaming like a proud parent.

"Wow, I'm sure as heck glad you guys didn't come down to Mississippi and play. That's the best high school football team I think I've ever seen."

All I could say while pointing towards my Yeti buddies who were crowding the sideline was, "We get my vote!"

Doug yelled, "Hey superstar I hear there's a party tonight at the Doorway."

"Is there a curfew in Crater," was all I could think of as an answer?

The seniors gathered alone near mid-field and we all said a few words. My contribution was simple, "Guys in our career we were 37-1 with two state championship trophies. It's going to be hard for any team to be better than that."

After everyone had their say there wasn't a dry eye in the group, and as we all headed for the shower room Dom hoisted the championship trophy and said, "Mission accomplished."

# CAST, GRIDIRON

## CRATER PLAYERS

**LUKE ATWOOD**, Mc Nary & Vienna Vikings: **LUKE ALWOOD**  
**BRYCE BOHLANDER**, Mc Nary High: **BEAU LANDER**  
**DUSTIN BOYD**, Mc Nary High, **DUSTIN LLOYD**  
**DOMINIC BUNDSCHUH**, Vienna: **DOM BUND**  
**JEFF DANCHOCK**, Lakeridge High: **DAN CHOCK**:  
**BLAKE DUTTON**, Lakeridge High: **BLAKE DENTON**  
**DAVID ETHERLY**, Lakeridge High: **DAVID EITHER**  
**J. D. GROVES**, Mc Nary High: **J.D. GRAVES**  
**MICHEY HOLUB**, Vienna Vikings: **MICKEY HOLLY**  
**BRANDON JONES**, Mc Nary High: **BRANDON JANES**  
**MIKE KELLY**, Lake Oswego High: **MARK KELLY**  
**SCOTT KENISTON**, Mc Nary High: **SCOTT KENSTON**  
**TOMMY KNECHT**, Lakeridge High: **TOMMY KECK**  
**JAKE LUCEY**, Mc Nary High: **JAKE LUCE**  
**JOSH MANNING**, Mc Nary High, **JOSH MANN**  
**JOE Mc CARTHY**, Lakeridge High: **JOE CARTHY**  
**K. J. Mc CRAE**, Mc Nary High: **K. J. Mc KOY**  
**KILEY Mc CRAE**, Mc Nary High: **KILEY Mc COY**  
**MARK Mc DANIEL**, Lakeridge High: **MARK MACK**  
**ALEK MILANOVIC**, Vienna Vikings & Sac St: **ALEK MILANOVIC**  
**GAGE NICHOLAS**, Mc Nary High: **GAGE NICHOLS**  
**RYAN RUFENER**, Mc Nary & Jyvaskyla Jaguars: **RYAN RUFF**  
**JIMMY SATHER**, Lakeridge High: **JIMMY PRATHER**  
**RYAN SCHMIDT**, Mc Nary High: **RYAN SCHMID**  
**MIKE SERES**, Lakeridge Highd: **MIKE SERRE**  
**ROB SHIFFER**, Lakeridge High: **ROBB SHIFF**  
**CEZAR SIMION**, Romania: **CEZAR SIMION**  
**CLARKE SMITH**, Lakeridge High: **CLARKE SMITHE**  
**NICK SNELL**, Lake Oswego High: **NICK NELL**  
**MYKE TAVARRES**, Lakeridge High: **MYKE VARRES**  
**ANDY TAYLOR**, Mc Nary High: **RANDY TAYLOR**  
**ROB VIAN**, Mc Nary High: **ROB WIEN**  
**TONY VREDENBERG**, Mc Nary High: **TONY BERG**  
**JARED WICK**, Mc Nary High: **JARED VICK**

**KARLI WURM**, Vienna Vikings: **KARLI VURM**

**OPPOSING PLAYERS:**

**JEFF ALLEN**; Lakeridge High, **JEFF ALAIN**  
**JEFF AUXIER**, Lakeridge High, **JEFF AUSTIER AUSTIER**,  
**COLLIN BIBB**, Saarland Hurricanes, **COLLIN BIBB**  
**MATT CLARK**, Lakeridge High: **MATT CLERK**  
**CHRIS DOUGLAS**, Saarland Hurricanes: **CRIS DROUGAS**  
**ALEX HAUPERT**, Saarland Hurricanes: **ALEX PERT**  
**BRYANT JACKSON**, Lakeridge High: **JACK BRYANT**  
**CHAD LUCAS**, Saarland Hurricanes: **CHAD LUKE**  
**JOE Mc CARTHY**, Lakeridge High: **JOE CARTHY**  
**WAYNE LIGHTBURNE**, Lakeridge High: **WAYNE LIGHT**  
**MICHAEL MIADICH**, Lakeridge High: **MICHAEL MIOVIC**  
**MARTIN MILLER**, Mc Nary High: **MARTIN MILLER**  
**WES MILLER**, Saarland Hurricanes: **WES MILL**  
**BRETT OKONESKI**, Lakeridge High, **BRETT SKI**  
**JOEL SCHWARTZ**, Lakeridge High, **JOE SCHWARTZ**  
**CORY SOTO**, Saarland Hurricanes: **CORY SOTTA**  
**DAVID TODD**, Lakeridge High: **TODD DAVID**  
**J. J. TODD**, Lakeridge High: **J. J. TODD**  
**PETE VITEZNIK**, Lakeridge High: **PETE VITO**  
**CLETE WERTS**, Lakeridge High: **Clete Works**  
**DAVID WERTS**, Lakeridge High: **David Works**  
**ERIC WILHELM**, Lakeridge High: **WILL HELM**  
**DOUG WRIGHT**, Lakeridge High: **DOUG WRITE:**

**OTHERS:**

**RYAN BELCHER**, Mc Nary High: **RYAN BELCH**  
**PAUL COOPER**, Lakeridge High: **COACH COOP**  
**MICHAEL COYNE**, Lakeridge High: **MIKE COIN**  
**TERRY CRABTREE**, Lakeridge High: **TERRY CRABB**  
**ADAM GUENTHER**, Lewis & Clark: **Coach Huey**  
**DUSTY HARRAH**, LC College: **DUSTY HARR**  
**THOMAS KAMSTER**, Vienna Vikings, **COACH CAM**  
**RANDY WALKER**, Tigard High: **RANDY WALK**

**EX COLLEGE PLAYERS:**

**MIKE ANDERS**, L & C College: MIKE ANDREWS  
**PAT BASSO**, L & C College: PAT BASEL  
**CLETUS COFFEE**,: L & C College: CLETUS GOFF  
**DON GRAVES**, L & C College: DON GROVES  
**JOHN JEUB**, L & C College: JOHN JEUBITZ

### **CRATER COACHES:**

**TED ANAGNOS**, Mc Nary High: COACH ANGELOS  
**JEFF AUVINEN**,: Mc Nary High: COACH ALLENON  
**LARRY BOWMAN**, Lake Oswego High: COACH BOWMAN  
**VINCE DULCICH**, Lake Oswego High: COACH BART VINCETTI  
**BOB EDWARDS**, Lake Oswego High: COACH EDWARDS  
**JERRY GROSSEN**, Lakeridge & Mc Nary High: COACH GROSS  
**KEITH HURDSTROM**, Lakeridge High: COACH KENNY HURD  
**TERRY LOGAN**, Lakeridge High: COACH HOGAN  
**GREG MARKS**, Mc Nary High: COACH MARK  
**ROYCE Mc DANIEL**, Lakeridge High: COACH MACK  
**ED Mc QUARY**, Lakeridge High: COACH Mc Q  
**CRAIG NICHOLAS**, Mc Nary/Lakeridge High: COACH NICHOLS  
**GEORGE SHULL**, LOHS & Lakeridge High: COACH SHELL  
**JAKE SMITH**, Lewis & Clark College: COACH SMITHE  
**DAVE SNOOK**, Mc Nary High: COACH NOOK  
**TY WILSON**, Mc Nary High: COACH WILSON

### **OPPOSING COACHES**

**DARRELL 'MOUSE' DAVIS**, NFL: COACH DON DAVIS  
**GLEASON EAKIN**, Willamina HS: COACH GLEASON ATKINS  
**ANDY HARRAH**, LC College: COACH ANDY HARR  
**CRAIG HASTIN**, Tualatin HS: COACH CRAIG HASTY  
**JIM NAGEL**, Ashland HS: COACH KAGEL  
**STACY COLLINS**, College Coach: COACH COLL  
**BILL SINGLER**, South Medford HS: COACH SINGLE  
**FRED SPIEGELBERG**, Medford HS: COACH SPIEG  
**GARY STAUTZ**, Gresham HS: COACH STAUT  
**DEWEY SULLIVAN**, Dayton HS: COACH LEWIE SULLIVAN  
**BRIAN TRAGER**, Western Oregon U.: COACH TRAGIEER  
**CRAIG WALKER**, Bend High: CRAIG WALK

## **CRATER FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION**

**TOM DAVIS**, Lakeridge High: MR. DAVIS

**MIKE LEHMAN**, Lakeridge High School: MIKE TEHMAN

**MR. MATSON**, Lake Oswego High: MR. MADSON

**MARIE MULLINS**, Lake Oswego High: MARIE MULLIN

**SCHOLASTICA MURTY**, Lake Oswego High: MISS MURTRY

**LETTY OWINGS**, Lakeridge High: LETTY OWEN

**BOB KRAMER**, LOHS & Lakeridge High: BOB CRAMER

**JOHN SANDERS**, LOHS & Lakeridge High: JOHN SANDER

**KARL WURM**, Vienna Vikings: MR. KARL VURM

## **OTHER FACULTY**

**DAVE ANNALA**, Mc Nary High: DAVE ANNALA,

## **YETI'S**

**MIKE ANDERSON**, LOHS: MIKE GRANDERSON

**DOUG COLLINS**, Lake Oswego High: DOUG ROLLINS

**DON CRUICKSHANK**, Lake Oswego High: DONNIE CRICK

**BILL CHURCH**, Lake Oswego High: BILL CRUTCH

**JOE DAHL**, Lake Oswego High: JOE DALE

**TIM HERROLD**, Lake Oswego High: TIM HERROD

## **FRIENDS**

**GREG BARTON**, QB camps: GREG BART

**MARION BLEW**, Lake Oswego High: MARION GREEN

**VALRIE DAVIDSON**, Lake Oswego High: VAL DAVID

**DONNA MARY VINCETTI**, Lake Oswego High: MRS. DULCICH

**MARSHA GAGNON**, LOHS: MARSHA GOODING

**TERRY HANCOCK**, Lakeridge High: JERRY HANCOCK:

**J. R. Mc LAUGHLIN**, Lakeridge High: J. R. LAUGHLIN

**KAREN KISKEY**, Lake Oswego High: KAREN LISKEY

**DON MATHER**, Lake Oswego High: DON MATHE

**CHUCK RASK**, University of Oregon ATO: CHUCK RASKEL:

**JACKIE WEST**, Lake Oswego High: JACKIE NORTH

**PREVIEW**

# **“FULL COURT PRESS”**

*Book Eight in the*

**ERIC LEWIS BOOK SERIES**

*by the coach*

*Thomas Smythe*

**ONE**

**“AIN’T NO GOOD GOODBYE”**

***BILLY RAY CYRUS***

|

It was a long ride home from the state championship game, turned short by our huge victory. As we approached the town I just couldn't stop the memories from flooding my brain. Another State Title was ours and I held the championship trophy to prove it. I thought of the many trips home from victories on the field, the court or the diamond and couldn't keep from smiling. This sport ride for me was winding down, two more seasons to go and my high school career would be history. Moving on is part of life, but I wanted to be sure and savor every moment and I reminded myself, *“Never forget*

*the people that helped make this all possible*". And as I thought about that I said in a low voice to myself, "*There ain't no good goodbye.*"

Good thing the buss driver understood how boisterous teenage boys could be when celebrating a victory. Coach had to quiet us once or twice but he didn't do it with a lot of sternness in his voice, more noticeable was the smile on his face. He had to be one very proud man but he would be the last to gloat. His accomplishments in the coaching world would be forever printed in stone and I just thanked God I was able to be a part of his legacy.

By the time the team bus pulled in to the Crater parking lot there was nearly no room for the bus. It looked to me like most of the town was there, and the enthusiasm never waivered. We stepped off the bus, one by one, and the cheers just kept coming. The four captains were the last to descend the steps and if there had been a decibel meter close by it would have never made it through to the end.

There was a makeshift podium which the team assembled behind and Coach Vince gave the kind of talk we were used to hearing, but my guess is most of the people in attendance had no idea his oratory skill was equal to his coaching talent. The man had the group in his spell and you could tell he was enjoying the moment.

He gave credit to his coaching staff first and then spent time congratulating the senior class for three years of effort. By the end there wasn't a dry eye on the team or in the audience. If you haven't played on a team you would have no idea how much emotion can be involved. For us it was the culmination of three years of blood, sweat and tears. It was also three years of laughs, smiles and enjoyment. Coach Vince is right on when he says, "You can't replace the feeling you get by doing a hard job well." We had faced the challenge of a hard job, and yes, we did it well.

By the time we met with family and friends and stored our equipment for the last time it was approaching dinner time, and I for one was famished. My family was enjoying the moment of course and mom had Cezar in a mom/son embrace that nearly brought a tear to my eye. I know my Croatian buddy wished his mom and dad had been here to witness our victory, but I knew our family was a pretty good substitute.

“You guys enjoy the night and remember we’ll have a victory cake waiting when you get home. Don’t make it too late.” Mom said that last bit with a smirk on her face but I knew she was dead serious.

“I’ll leave some room for chocolate mom,” I said as I headed into the building with my teammates.

As we came out of the locker room Luke said, “Round up time at the Doorway guys. Last man there buys the drinks.”

Luke had a quality of leadership that would take him far in real life, and none of his good friends doubted that for a second. He was super confident without being obnoxious, and had a sense of saying the right thing at the right time. Playing three sports with my sidekick was the frosting on the Crater cake for me. Lucky guy.

The entire group was already crowding the Doorway’s limit and there were quite a few standing as all the tables, booths and stools were occupied. The staff was hustling around trying to fill orders and falling a bit short, but no one really cared.

I told the waitress, “The usual,” and she just smiled and wrote down burger and fries. J. R. had come along and he looked either bemused or confused depending on which moment you glanced in his direction.

“Eric, I thought we had a rowdy bunch down in Dixie, but we couldn’t hold a candle to this group.”

I just smiled, held up my coke and said, “Let’s see if we can bring the same kind of camaraderie to Husker land my friend.”

It wasn’t long before Val was tugging on my shirt, but it was so loud I couldn’t quite make out what she was saying.

Finally she stood on tip toes and whispered in my ear, “Aren’t you going to give your prom date a championship kiss?”

Neither of us had a ‘steady’ or in my case even a non-steady and we had agreed long ago to be a couple at the senior prom. Of course I couldn’t stop thinking why the devil hasn’t someone latched on to this diamond?

I held my friend up and suddenly it got very quiet. We both looked around smiling, and then I planted a kiss squarely on Val’s lips and the place suddenly sounded like our rooting section after a score. We both laughed and hugged again. I gave my friend a wink and the smile I got in return told me everything I needed to know. We would be life long friends.

We had heard rumors that two key defensive linemen for Xavier were injured and wouldn't play. They didn't. In the game of football often times the backup players are nearly the most important. Injuries occur and the good teams fill in with players nearly of the caliber of the starters.

During my three years playing varsity sports here at Crater we've been pretty fortunate. I guess the most we've been hurt by missing talent was when Luke was suspended for the feral cat incident during basketball. But we've pretty much dodged that bullet most of the time.

Luke and Randy missed some series in our final but were both able to return and play significant minutes. Fortunately for us Dom and Dustin stepped in without us missing a beat. Maybe even more important is that the reserve players mentally prepare as though they were starters and when opportunity comes take advantage. That type attitude works for those teams that win. Losers don't get it.

I spent Sunday watching the NFL games and fielding phone calls from friends and relatives. I love sharing our success on the athletic arena although I've always been pretty good at keeping sports in perspective. That's something all of our coaches here have drilled into me and my teammates as well. We might be good athletes, but we should never feel entitled or above those non-athletes I see every day in the halls and in my classrooms.

Monday was sort of a celebration and a culmination day rolled into one. We accepted the State Championship trophy at a morning pep assembly, and it put a closure on the season. Well sort of, I spent most of the day accepting congratulations from fellow students and faculty. Leave it to Miss Murtry to help with the perspective point of view.

"Ok Eric let me be the last to tell you how great you are and then let's move on to figuring out how you can score enough points on the English SAT to make it in to Harvard."

That brought some chuckles from my classmates but the quick stern look Scully gave us got our attention and we dove into the lesson of the day. She was awesome and every student in her

classes understood how prepared we would be for the next academic level because of her.

When I saw Luke at lunch he had his right arm in a sling of sorts protecting his injured shoulder and that caught my attention.

“Wow, how long will you be wearing that gismo?”

“I woke up yesterday with the darn shoulder joint throbbing and it didn’t get any better. So, last night dad took me to the emergency room at the hospital and they did x-rays and also took an MRI. I won’t get the results of the MRI until later today but the x-ray didn’t show any break.”

I gave him a quizzical look and then offered, “Looks like you’ll need to learn how to shoot with the left hand buddy.”

He just gave me a left handed version of the universal sign for self gratification with a Luke only smirk on his face. I just rolled my eyes and headed for the lunch line.

It looked like either Blake Denton or Jimmy Prather would be getting a lot of minutes at the point guard position beginning tonight at hoops practice.

Because the football season went into the first week of basketball we would shuck the pads and hitch up the shorts for a contest on Friday night. No rest for the weary.

## Inside Back Cover



After a long and distinguished coaching career coach Smythe turned to writing. You can find all of his books on his web site [www.smythe-books.com](http://www.smythe-books.com). He is semi-retired and lives in Vienna, Austria.

## **BACK COVER**

The heart breaking loss on the final play of the game in last year's state baseball championship still haunts Eric. The summer prior to his senior year is filled with football camps and high hopes. His goal is to set a record that can't be broken.

No school had ever won three state championships in football, basketball and baseball in the same year. The Comets had come precariously close last year and they wanted, to a man, to finish the job. They knew it wouldn't be easy but they had veteran teams returning in both football and basketball. Baseball would possibly be the biggest challenge but first things first.

Coach Vincetti had set up the season schedule with high ranking opponents during the two game preseason. Two teams from across the border in Nebraska would show everyone in Crater if their high hopes and lofty goals were real or fantasy.

A football scholarship was a certainty for Eric, something he had dreamed about since entering high school. He had verbal offers from Nebraska, Iowa, Notre Dame just to name a few.

It would be easy to look ahead but Eric will tell anyone that asks that there is business to finish at Crater on the gridiron, the court and the diamond.