

excerpt from

A DARKER SHADE OF RED

A Novel

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DISCLAIMER: The following excerpt contains mild coarse language that may be offensive to some readers.

A BRIEF PREFACE

This novel is based on the real experiences of a group of young men who came together in September of 1964 to attempt to survive four or five years as football players at Tulane University in New Orleans. They were no different from thousands of other eighteen-year-olds reporting to football programs at campuses around the U.S.

Nor, for that matter, were they different from hundreds of thousands before them who played the game after it took root in millions of hearts throughout the Heartland. Nor would they be different from the four-plus decades of players who have followed from then until now.

It is often said football players are a breed apart. This manifests in grade schools everywhere, when a select few boys begin to demonstrate on playgrounds that they have a special skill, or a special desire, to excel at the game.

By junior high, their natural positions have become apparent. By high school, they are solidly tracked. Those with enough ability to move up to the next level, to the college game, will almost universally do so. Then, if fate and fortune continue smiling on them, they become pros.

Because football players start so young, they end up heavily indoctrinated in the game's totems and rituals, to the exclusion of much else in their lives. Football becomes their primary interest, and they will play until they reach the limit of their ability, or they physically can't do it any more. Very few leave the game willingly or without regret, and after they do leave, they tend to become avid fans.

It is the first great love of their lives.

So it was with the Tulane group in 1964, no different from thousands of others before or since—except that I was among them, and the second great love of my life, writing, gave me the ability to tell our story by wrapping it in the accessible format of a fact-based novel.

My novel's events, while based on experiences unique to me and my teammates, are not substantially different from what many others might have written if they were so inclined. We all played the same game in the same way.

And then there is this astonishing fact:

Every year, in the first week of December, a core group of those who came to Tulane in 1964 return to New Orleans to enjoy a weekend of reminiscing and reconnecting.

Reunions of old football teammates are not especially noteworthy, but what sets our Tulane group apart is that we have sustained our yearly gatherings *for the past 25 years!* Nothing has stopped us, not even the massive devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

This, clearly, we do *not* have in common with football players who preceded us or who have followed us. In fact, I doubt if our record has ever been matched, and because it seems destined to continue until the majority of us are permanently benched, it will almost certainly never *be* matched. (Those who attend our seasonal get-togethers have now reached—or hover perilously close to—sixty.)

The fact that we hold our reunions every year is, among other things, a testament to what we all endured in the

two, three, four, or even five years that we played football together. It forged a ferociously tight bond between us, in the way wartime experiences bond young soldiers.

Our bonds were forged in blood, pain, fear, and anguish, the same witch's brew that turns soldiers at war into bands of brothers. Yet, despite all that, we found ways and means to have a helluva lot of fun, too. This is also the fate of soldiers, as are the wounds inflicted on their bodies, and the often more painful ones that fester in their minds.

We football players also had wounds inflicted on us in various zones of conflict, and like the old soldiers who survive their wars, when asked we will readily discuss our physical injuries. We proudly display them as symbols of achievement, knowing they represent something exceptional we accomplished in those long ago days at Tulane.

Our emotional injuries are another matter. As with war survivors, we tend to hide those away, ashamed to have them, to feel them, to carry them to our graves. We seldom if ever get to unburden ourselves from them. They are as permanent as the scars that show we once were warriors, fighting for what we believed was a good and noble cause.

My hope is that this book will help at least some of us come to grips with the emotional baggage we all carry. The scars on our bodies can't be erased, but the wounds in our hearts can be salved, I think, by giving our battles—our dark and often shocking experiences—a shape and a form we can share with those we love, and who love us.

A DARKER SHADE OF RED

This book is a novel, although not entirely a work of fiction. The author participated in, witnessed, or was privy to information regarding many of the events depicted in it. Nevertheless, the recreations of those events are not necessarily accurate, and the characters who participate in them are never portraits of real people, living or dead.

It is, always, a novel, employing approximations, composites, and fabrications to enhance clarity and continuity within the story, and to establish and maintain compelling characters. It is a painting in words, not a photograph.

WAKE-UP

My position as senior manager of the Cajun State Fightin' Crawdad football team required keeping to a few basic commandments, one of which was: *Thou shalt not interrupt or try to influence the natural flow of events on the team.* Consequently, even though Jimbo Wheeler was a good guy and a friend, I left the chiding note tacked to his door when I went in to rouse him and his roommate.

The dormitory's fluorescent hall lights flushed dawn from the left side of the narrow, evenly divided room. As usual, Wheeler's immaculate, military-style bedding tucks barely loosened during the night. From the clothes in his closet to the books above his desk, everything in Wheeler's half of the room was neat and tidy. Even his hair seemed to stay combed when he slept.

I glanced right to check Quink Thompson, his roommate. Equally asleep. I moved along the middle aisle between their beds and leaned first toward Wheeler, shaking his shoulder firmly. "Jimbo, it's time."

His eyes creaked open and focused on me.

"Okay, Sage . . . thanks."

As always, no problem. He accepted what had to be done and got on with it. I turned to deal with the Quink.

Technically, a *quink* is someone short enough to fart in a bathtub and break the bubbles with their nose. This Quink was a shade under five-nine, but dense, knotty muscles widened his frame to create the impression of a shorter man. Those overly taut muscles projected a bristling physical intensity that stayed with him even at rest.

Waking the Quink during two-a-days was not my favorite task. At his best, he was surly and difficult to rouse in the morning, but these two weeks of double practice sessions put him at his absolute worst. Without my fifty pound size advantage over him, he was one sleeping dog I'd be safer avoiding. I reached for his shoulder and heard Wheeler's sleep-slurred voice behind me.

"Wait! Is another note stuck on the door?"

I turned to shrug apologetically. "Sorry."

"That damn Everett!" he grouched. "What does it say?"

"*Stoner's freckles have muscles.*"

I heard a kind of snort, then, "They probably do."

Three days earlier, it became obvious that junior Jimbo Wheeler had rolled senior Sandy Hancock as the starting center on our team. They engaged in a stirring battle for the job, but Hancock was bigger and slower while Wheeler was lighter and quicker. Because centers were the heart of the offensive line, quickness off the ball was paramount.

Barring injury, in nine days Wheeler would make his first start for us against the defending National Champion Texas Longhorns. He would be head-up against the man considered by most knowledgeable fans to be the toughest middle linebacker in all of college football—a heavily freckled mass of speed and power named Kevin Stoner.

As a junior last year, Stoner was elected to nearly every All-American team in the country. He was 6-4, 240, and fast and aggressive, which made him certain to be a high first-round pick in the pro draft. However, much of his future worth depended on how well he performed in this, his final year. He would be at his best for the first game of the season, especially against a weak team like ours.

Wheeler was 5-11 and weighed 200 soaking wet, so even if he was as quick as a lightning bolt, he didn't have a hope in hell against an agile, mobile, hostile monster like Stoner. Everyone connected with the team accepted that grim reality; everyone, that is, except Wheeler. He doggedly refused to confront, much less accept, his fate, which was a primary reason he was starting.

Successful self-delusion is a skill without equal among football players, and Jimbo Wheeler had mastered it. That brought the first note taped to his door two mornings ago. It was a good-natured attempt to reconnect him with reality: *Stoner is God*. Yesterday morning's said: *Stoner eats nails and shits bullets*. Wheeler would endure those reminders of impending doom until game day, and by then he'd be strung out tighter than a piano wire.

"Just do your best against him, Jimbo," I said matter-of-factly. "That's all anyone can expect." It was all anyone *could* expect. He was going against a true stud hoss.

I stepped across the thin strip of white tape that ran the length of the floor, dividing the room into halves. Shortly after Quink and Wheeler became roommates, they discovered that while they got along fine in everyday activities, they were completely unable to live together comfortably. On our team roommates were assigned instead of chosen, so they had to make the best of their situation.

Since a wall was out of the question, their only recourse was the strip of tape. It did little more than symbolically isolate them from each other, but they found it comforting and sometimes useful when resolving territorial disputes.

Quink lay in a twisted heap of sheets, dirty clothes, crumpled skin magazines, food crumbs, and one lone shower sandal. The entirety of his side of the room looked as if a tiny cyclone passed through in the night, and he looked, as the saying went, like death warmed over.

On any other morning, I would assume he had a few too many at one of the campus watering holes, but not

during two-a-days. Nobody had any energy for anything but the practicing, rehydrating, eating, and repeating that cycle; then—most precious of all—sleeping.

During two-a-days, I tried to wake all the players gently because they tended to sleep poorly. They'd toss and turn all night in an effort to find comfort for their aching bodies. Fear kept them checking the clock whenever they woke up enough to remember who and where they were. Most discovered the inevitability of time watching phosphorescent hands sweep darkness toward these particular dawns. Some had a difficult time accepting it.

I shook his shoulder. "Rise and shine, Quink."

He jerked his arm away, turned his back to me, and crammed the bare pillow over his head.

"Wake up! I can't waste time coddling you."

He lay unmoving. I reached out and shook him again, harder. Without warning he swung a vicious backhand that barely missed my left knee. I was on him in an instant, rolling him over so I could press my right knee onto his chest and pin his shoulders with my hands.

"Listen to me, you little pissant! I can put the air horn against your head tomorrow morning and blow your goddamn eardrum out! *You hear me?*"

He went limp in my hands. No matter how angry and retaliatory he might have felt, not even Quink would risk a return to the more traditional way of waking a team on two-a-day mornings. That was walking from one end of a dorm hall to the other, blasting everyone out of bed with a hand-held, high-compression air horn that rattled teeth.

That method took twenty seconds per dorm wing, while mine took twenty minutes for the whole team, so I had no time to waste on laggards. For the two weeks of two-a-days, my first responsibility was to get everyone checked in for breakfast by 6:45 am, and this was the next-to-last day of that obligation. Nobody had been late during my two seasons of seniority, and I was determined to prove decency as effective as that godawful horn.

I glared at Quink and shook him again. "Well?"

He was bold and reckless, and it wouldn't be beyond him to fight back. However, it was hard to be reckless with 230 pounds of strong-armed threat kneeling on your chest.

"All right . . . I hear you."

"You better!" I snarled, giving him a last hard shake before pushing up off him and turning to leave their room.

I closed their door and waited a few seconds. When Quink felt I was out of earshot, he started in on me.

"What's *his* problem? He doesn't have to go out and get his ass kicked through every practice the way we do! He's going to school on a goddamn *laundry* scholarship!"

Wheeler set him straight. "You almost hit his bad knee."

I heard a long, low whistle, then, "Ho-lee shit!"

Laundry scholarship. . . .

That hurt nearly as much as the shot I took that blew out my knee because it was a truth I couldn't deny. A lot of my responsibility as senior manager involved making sure junior managers properly handled all the parts of players uniforms, dirty and cleaned. In my year as a junior manager, I picked up and washed and rolled up thousands of socks, jocks, and the half T-shirts that went under shoulder pads, not to mention the jerseys, pants, and redshirt tank tops that were part of every practice.

Soiled uniform pieces were a huge part of my life during that year, as they would be in this coming season. So Quink's put-down was painfully accurate. I *was* attending college on what amounted to a laundry scholarship.

BREAKFAST

Players shuffled to breakfast wearing variations of the same basic costume: sandals, cut-off jeans, and a T-shirt

of some kind—seldom anything different. Enormous density bore down on them, a pressure they couldn't escape, and their outfits were an outward attempt to lighten the load. It was as if coolness and brevity before practice could balance out the heat and weight of what came during it.

Their destination was Seward Cafeteria, “the sewer,” a dining hall midway between the dormitory and stadium. I checked them all into the sewer by 6:45, and by 7:00 most were finished nibbling or sipping whatever they chose to try to eat in those taut minutes preceding suiting up for practice. Then they went to the dressing rooms beneath the stadium's west side: varsity to the south or “front” end, freshmen and redshirts to the north or “back” end.

In the dressing rooms they started the agonizingly slow rituals of preparing for a hitting practice. It was called “quantum time” because it was like the slowdown that supposedly occurred as you approached the speed of light. The faster you went, the more time slowed for you relative to everything around you. It could get to a point where it slowed so much, the air around you felt like clear syrup.

To fight the slow grind toward practice, everyone found ways to stretch the tiniest actions into major projects: a sock had to fit exactly right; a loose screw had to be tightened; shoulder pads had to be adjusted a dozen times; every strip of tape had to be perfectly applied with no wrinkles—anything to fight that excruciating wait.

The only thing lightening the mood today was that it was the last day of double sessions. There was still an important scrimmage tomorrow that officially ended two-a-days, but today would put the worst behind them. Each player wanted only to get through the day unhurt, but they all knew it was unlikely everyone would.

Every practice during two-a-days seemed to bring injuries, as summer-softened bodies slowly adjusted to the power and velocity of full-speed, college-level collisions.

After breakfast, we walked to the stadium and I went into the equipment room, located exactly opposite the varsity's "front" dressing room, where my assistant, Chris Stanton, and I would "pull" equipment for practice.

We'd gather up canvas bags of towels and of footballs, and a case of medical equipment like moleskin for blisters and ammonia caps for rung bells. Another case held spare parts like chinstraps and mouthguards, and tools like the screwdrivers needed to tighten face masks. Then came blocking and tackling dummies, big heavy things with weighted bottoms that required both of us to lift them up into the bed of the battered old equipment truck.

That dark green pickup was new before World War II, and it was on duty at the stadium when a couple of our team members' fathers played at Cajun State. It had over 80,000 miles on it, all racked up driving in and around the stadium complex. So far as anyone knew, it had never been off campus, and the rumor was that a few children had been conceived in its spacious rear bed. I didn't know that to be gospel truth, but I had no reason to doubt it.

Once the gear and dummies were in place in its bed, we set about a duty that started for us the previous season. We began filling two 10-gallon metal canisters with water and the salty tasting concoction we were asked to test on the players. It had no name, so we dubbed it "green gold" because it was pale green in color and was so precious to a player during a hard, dehydrating practice.

All the teams in our league had been asked to test the stuff for scientists at the University of Florida, who were trying to find a way to prevent the two dozen heat-related deaths that occurred during two-a-days throughout the blistering Deep South and Southwest each summer.

Up until now, and certainly when I could still play, there was no such thing as drinking during a practice. It was absolute gospel that if you drank anything during the intensity of a typical two-a-day practice, you'd get stomach cramps and your muscles would seize and your

practice would be over. That was as certain as knowledge came in the world of football that I grew up in.

It was so certain, in fact, that nobody ever even thought to challenge it. It just *was*, like the sun or moon. But now, incredibly, coaches at selected colleges all over the south were permitting fluid breaks in the middle of practices.

A lush oasis had opened up in the middle of our humid Sahara, for which we all were profoundly grateful.

Stanton and I stirred in and dissolved the two packets of green powder sent to us by the Florida researchers. Once the canisters were ready, we loaded them into the old green truck and moved everything out to the field.

Nobody ever drove the truck *on* the field. That would risk sinking its wheels into the well-groomed turf, making turned ankles a certainty. Instead, we drove around the eight-lane, quarter-mile cinder track that circled the field, on which track meets were held during the spring track season. By pausing the truck at various places on the track, we could transfer everything we carried in it to where it all needed to be during practice.

Because the canisters went into the bed last, they came out first. They were quite heavy, so we moved them one at a time, each of us holding one of the thick metal handles. We carried them to two large tables set up on the other side of the track, in the shade cast by the three-stories of Holt Field House, closely abutting the track complex.

Later, after practice began, an old assistant equipment manager named Soupbone would fill 150 large paper cups with the green gold. Those cups would be on the tables and waiting for players, coaches, and staff when the mid-practice break whistle blew. It was served cool, hence the shade, but without ice, as the Florida people instructed.

Our players wouldn't balk if we served it hot with dung balls as a chaser. They'd guzzle the green gold and smile munching the dung. That needed break, and that precious cup of liquid, had become all-important. Now nearly

all of them got through every practice without entering the first stage of heatstroke. Before green gold came into their lives, that would have been all but impossible.

Not every round we prepared was equally successful. The Florida technical people asked us to report on the formulas that worked best for our players. Each packet was a distinct color with a number followed by a letter, which facilitated charting the impact of each solution.

Sometimes a packet made a solution too salty, resulting in "cotton mouth" among the players after they drank it. Other times it was too diluted, which had refreshing water in it but left the players susceptible to leg cramps. Most of the time, though, it was within a wide range that provided refreshment while preventing dehydration.

When all was said and done, green gold was probably the greatest thing to happen to football since the forward pass became legal. During each two-hour practice of two-a-days, I used to drop 20-25 pounds, while skinny little backs and ends lost 10 or more. Then, in the several hours between practices, we all had to furiously rehydrate those lost pounds. Now, at worst, everyone lost 5-15.

To call it a lifesaver could never do it justice.

After Stanton and I finished with our field chores, he drove me back under the stadium so I could go to the training room, while he parked the truck outside so it would be handy in the event of a serious injury like a broken limb or a blown knee or shoulder. I was carted off the field in that truck bed with my blown knee, and I couldn't imagine how many hundreds were in it before me.

The training room was always a steady swirl of muted voices and slow movements. Players, trainers, and occasionally coaches passed in soft eddies of sound that were felt more than heard in the hushed, intense atmosphere.

Whirlpool baths located in the rear produced a background white noise as a few injured players tried for a last-minute loosening of knotted muscles and bruised

joints. Others sat or stood on tables with jockstraps on beneath towels around their waists, waiting to be wrapped or rubbed or treated in whatever manner was necessary to get them through another hitting practice.

Senior managers were experienced enough to care for minor injuries, so I often spent time taping ankles and covering abrasions. I worked at a rear-corner table, away from the front-wall tables of the team trainer, Cedrick Hanson, who loathed his first name and demanded to be called "Trainer Hanson." He, along with his two assistants, Bud Ross and Ray Trent, cared for most varsity players and all serious injuries, while redshirts, freshmen, and routine tape jobs like ankles and wrists usually came to me.

We could talk safely at my isolated table if we kept our voices low, which provided some relief against the inescapable grimness of what was playing out all around us.

"Heard anything about Prosser today?" Quink asked, as I taped his ankles. "He looked good yesterday."

I shrugged. "He looks good every day."

Our wake-up confrontation was forgotten, being little more than the kind of jawboning two players might do after a late hit or a block in the back in the heat of competition. Your hackles raised and you shouted at each other a bit, then you both dropped it and moved on.

"He didn't rise on the depth chart . . . I checked it."

Quink was obsessed with Pete Prosser, a new player on our team with singular football ability but an impudent attitude. He was also the current redshirt tailback, where he had been mired since the start of two-a-days.

"He won't move up," I said. "Don't worry."

Redshirts existed outside the varsity's three offensive and defensive units. They were no longer freshmen, but they hadn't been able to achieve varsity status, so they were expendable. At practice, they imitated each week's upcoming opponent, which made them little more than cannon fodder for the varsity. Their life expectancies as players were the shortest of any sub-group on the team.

Quink's thick black eyebrows pinched in toward a nose splayed by a forearm in junior high. "The rumor is that Teekay Junior said the coaches might move him up if he has one more good day today. You think they might?"

Quink was running at third team tailback and knew he was fortunate to be there. Tailbacks carried the ball more than any other runners, so the redshirt slot was a highly vulnerable position. All third teamers who lived on the bubble at any position dreaded getting rolled down to the redshirt squad, which in Quink's case would happen if Prosser moved up into his far more desirable slot.

"They could go back to the single wing or even the flying wedge and it wouldn't surprise me."

Quink's hot temper flared. "Dammit, Sage!" he hissed, "I want to know what you *think!*"

I felt sorry for him, but he couldn't handle a straight answer. Irrefutable generalities were what bubble riders needed to hear when they were as anxious as he was.

"Things almost never make sense around here, Quink, they just happen. Nothing can be predicted, so why worry about it? Just take it easy, man . . . take it as it comes."

He knew that was true, so he changed the subject. "What about him?" He nodded toward where Don Slade stood on Trainer Hanson's table. "How's his knee doing?"

I glanced over at the heavy, crisscrossed tape job being applied to Don's right leg from mid-thigh to mid-calf. It was wrapped that way before every practice to prevent licks like the one he took yesterday from buckling it.

Don's knee was torn up almost exactly a year ago, and everyone was amazed at how well he was playing on it. I still had trouble walking comfortably on mine.

"Bruised," I said. "Back like it was in a few days."

Quink smiled slightly. "That's the end of his shot at the Bull, though. He couldn't afford to lose even one step."

The Bull—Ken Rowley—was Quink's best friend and the team's starting fullback. Don Slade had challenged him for supremacy since the start of two-a-days.

Ken went at football and life in general “like a bull in a china shop,” and his superior size and strength made him our best all-around back. Don’s bruised knee would slow him just enough to remove what little hope he had of rolling the Bull off first team, but Don would be okay with that. He knew he was damn lucky to still be playing.

“That’s true,” I agreed, “but second team is a helluva lot better than where he was last year at this time.”

It happened at the start of last year’s two-a-days, and he’d worked like a fiend to rehabilitate it. Looking back, that’s where I may have screwed up with my own knee. I didn’t rehab it worth a damn. On the other hand, I maintain a strong suspicion that my surgeon came in hung over the day he operated on me. I haven’t been free of pain for a single day since it happened, so I can’t help thinking he must have left something wrong inside it.

I was finishing Quink’s ankle when he spoke up again.

“What about Prosser, though? Could he move up?”

I gazed into his pinched, worried expression. Prosser would be a heavy millstone around Quink’s neck until the coaches got rid of him, which would be any day now.

“He deserves to move up, doesn’t he?”

“Well, ahhh. . .” Quink knew the truth if anyone did.

“Then he probably won’t, so relax.”

I slapped the sole of his foot to indicate I was through, and he walked off looking and feeling measurably better about the threat Prosser represented to his position.

MORNING PRACTICE

At precisely 8:15, Stanton blew a shockingly loud air-horn to signal our team to take the field and spread out across the south end-zone for warm-up calisthenics.

BRRRRRAAAAAAKKKKKKKKKKKK!!!!

Whooping like madmen, a hundred green-helmeted Cajun State Fightin' Crawdads poured out from under the stadium and crossed the track to take warm-up positions. They all wore white practice pants, with the offense in white jerseys made of thick cotton that would stand up to a season of hard use and daily laundering. The defense was in green, and redshirts wore a red singlet over their white jerseys, an extra layer of heat to battle against.

Both the field and the track were bounded by the baseball field and stadium to the north; a field house, tennis courts, and racquetball courts to the east; and, to the west, a chain-link fence that separated the track and the football area from a long row of residential homes.

The airhorn woke everybody in the neighborhood who might still be asleep. Those unfortunate people tried to complain when the airhorn was first introduced, but they quickly learned it was impossible to go against the power of the coaching staff. Besides, the coaches argued, if their incessant whistles were tolerable for decades, what was so bad about an occasional blast from an airhorn?

The sun was up and sweat was pouring when the players broke into position groups at 8:30. Each specialized group went off with its respective coach to its particular area, while freshman and redshirts avoided cluttering the practice field by running plays against each other over on a small portion of the adjacent baseball outfield.

Surveying it all from atop his portable coaching tower was head coach T. K. Anderson, Senior.

Coach Anderson was a bona fide enigma. He was starting his second season as our head coach, after spending many years as the top assistant at Auburn. He brought a big-time reputation and attitude to this job, so none of us could understand why he would decide to come to a school like Cajun State. A team like ours could do nothing but put a big-time drag on his big-time career.

I walked over to my usual position near the south end of the west sideline. From there I could survey each drill at a glance and be ready to assist anyone who might need, say, an equipment fix. I was so absorbed with what was going on in front of me, I didn't notice Randall Webber come from behind to put a friendly hand on my shoulder.

"How's it going this morning, Larry?"

I looked down into his round face and smiled. We'd met at a couple of preseason press functions for the team and hit it off fairly well. He was my age and just starting out as a junior sportswriter on one of the city's newspapers.

He was built like a troll, short and squatty, with the kind of bowed-up, bristling energy more expected in a boxer than a reporter. Only black horn-rim glasses and a notepad in his hand gave away what he really was.

"Going good," I replied. "Last morning workout of two-a-days, so everyone is cranked up. How have you been?"

After the first day of practice, Randall wrote an article about our widely acclaimed status as a "breather" on the schedules of powerful teams. Our value, he wrote, was that we were good enough to be a spirited opponent, but bad enough to always lose against superior teams. Randall hadn't been around since then, and I knew why.

"Ahhhh, my asshole boss got a call from your asshole boss suggesting I make myself scarce for awhile. I've been covering a bowling tournament and a ladies' golf match."

I couldn't help smirking. "Sounds about right for you."

"Bullshit," he said sourly.

We gazed at the action on the field for several seconds, then I asked him, "To what do we owe the honor?"

"I wanted to get a look at Prosser. He's all I've been hearing about down at the office during my 'suspension.' Prosser this and Prosser that. Hell, they make it sound like he could run through a rainstorm and not get wet."

I grinned at the cliché, which in Prosser's case was close to the truth. The day after checking in, everyone was timed in a 40-yard dash, a 100-yard dash, and a

mile run to check stamina. Prosser ran a 4.3 forty and a 9.6 hundred, with nobody else close to his times. And he was near the head of the pack when backs and ends ran the mile. If there was one thing he could do, it was run.

“Is he really as good as they say?”

“He’s the best pure runner I’ve seen here, or anywhere else, for that matter. He’s in a class by himself.”

“Then *why* is he only a redshirt?”

“His attitude is atrocious.”

“In what way?”

“He lets the coaches know what he thinks of them.”

“Lowbrow pricks,” Randall grumbled.

“It’s part of the job description. But players—and I guess reporters—are supposed to pretend they don’t notice it.”

“So the best runner on the team is a redshirt because he won’t play kiss-ass? Is that what you’re saying?”

“In a nutshell.”

“But isn’t the object of the game to *win*? Don’t they play their best people no matter what?”

It suddenly struck me that this was no longer a sideline chat between friends. I was being quizzed by a reporter who could quote me verbatim in tomorrow’s paper. If that happened, I could end up as exiled from practice as he was. I decided to take out some insurance against that.

“Everything I’m telling you better be off the record, Randall . . . waaaay off. Understand?”

He bowed up like a bantam rooster. “I’m offended you’d even suggest otherwise. We’re friends, Larry! Besides, it’s not you I’m after. It’s those idiot coaches who won’t play their best people to try to win games. That’s insane!”

“It’s not insane, it’s human nature at work, that’s all.”

His head shook. “Not the humans I’m familiar with.”

I thought about trying to explain it to him, about how the difference between the top three or four players at any one position was often very slight, that one could fill another’s role as easily as yet another. Injuries proved

that on every team every season, when a starter went down and his substitute turned out to be a better player overall. Stories like that were legion in football.

Coaches were people, with likes and dislikes, and blind spots and prejudices, and emotional tangles that often prevented them from making the best decisions possible. Choices of who played ahead of whom were often capricious and arbitrary, based on nothing more than simple likes and dislikes. Some players were a lot more likeable than others, and in any situation where the talent differential between two was not dramatically wide, the likeable one always played ahead of the not-as-likeable one.

To have a system of such importance based, at bottom, on little more than individual whims, it made those doing the whimming, so to speak, easily vulnerable to abusing their positions of authority. In fact, abuse of that power was inevitable and, without a doubt, rampant.

Not every coach, but certainly most, were ex-players who did not have admirable careers at the high school, college, or even pro level, so their lives became a perpetual “do-over” of a failure they could never quite remedy. That left a majority of them angry, unfulfilled, frustrated men trying to somehow become stars in a different aspect of the system they didn’t shine in the first time around.

Seen in that light, it was hard to feel much for them except pity, but I didn’t think Randall could understand that, much less write sympathetically about it. More importantly from my viewpoint was that, as in the military and government, coaches avoided having to defend stupid or petty decisions by making those decisions—and, by association, themselves—as far beyond question, doubt, or reproach as they could arrange it.

As in the military or in government, the worst breach of football protocol was to even obliquely question any coach’s absolute authority and/or scintillating brilliance, so even a washed-up ex-player like me could not afford to be quoted criticizing them because the consequences

would in all likelihood be dire. I didn't want to risk it.

That left me no choice but to be evasive with Randall, which I intended to do if he asked me anything else about why our coaches didn't always start their best players.

HALF-LINE DRILL

Stanton blew the drill-change signal and the half-dozen specialty groups immediately broke up, the players scurrying to their new areas in order to avoid punishment laps for failure to hustle. I led Randall across the field to a spot near where the half-line drill would take place.

"You'll get to see Prosser in action now," I said as we walked. "It's a half-line drill. Half of the redshirt offense goes full-speed against half of the varsity defense."

The left side of the varsity defense—linebacker, nose guard, tackle, end, cornerback, and safety—were joined by the freshman offense on the twenty yard line's far hash mark. The redshirts joined the varsity's right side defense on the hash mark nearest us. Only half the offensive lines would go on each snap, and the ball would always move toward the short side of the field. Since the varsity was defending the short side in both halves of the drill, things were heavily stacked against the offense, but practice wasn't held for the benefit of redshirts and freshmen.

"Which one is he?" Randall asked.

I nodded at the slender figure standing to one side with his arms folded across his chest, motionless. The other redshirts seemed typically nervous about the impending contact, squirming and fidgeting as the drill set up.

"Doesn't look like much," Randall observed.

That was true. At close range the uniform's illusion of size dissipated and you could clearly see how slight Prosser was. Not only that, he was very blond, a few shades

away from albino, giving him a ghostly aura of fragility.

“He’s big enough,” I replied. “5-11, 170, but tough as a hickory knot, and quick as anyone you’ll ever see. Plus, when he wants to, he can hit like a train. Don’t make the mistake of judging him by how he looks.”

Randall nodded, then mentioned the obvious. “Why is he dressed different from the others?”

Because of his pale skin, Prosser avoided the sun as much as he could. He wore his own special long-sleeved thin cut-off T-shirts under his shoulder pads, and thin white knee-length socks over his calves. When he practiced, all he exposed to the sun was his hands and his face, which he liberally covered with bootblack under his eyes. It gave him a distinctive, very noticeable look.

“He has some skin problems,” I replied to Randall’s question as Teekay Junior, Coach Anderson’s recently graduated son, stepped in front of the redshirt huddle and assumed the position of the signal caller while Tom Everett, the quarterback, stood respectfully to one side.

Part of the humiliation dumped on redshirts was not letting them call their own plays, or even giving them credit for enough intelligence to remember called plays. It was still worse that Teekay Junior was a total incompetent who got his job through flagrant nepotism, which he tried to justify by imitating T. K. Senior whenever any opportunity arose. He was a sad, even pathetic case.

Before each snap, Teekay Junior would produce notebook-sized laminated sheets with basic plays diagrammed on them and say, “This one, on two. Got it? Break!” The redshirts would check their assignments on that schematic, the huddle would then break, and they’d shuffle up to the line of scrimmage to take their positions.

Texas ran an I-formation offense, with their running back usually lined up behind the fullback, quarterback and center. The redshirt fullback, Dave Duggan, got down in a normal football stance, while Prosser assumed

a semi-upright position with his hands on his knees, to maintain a clear view of the line of scrimmage.

Tom Everett stepped behind center, barking out signals. The lines clashed together as he handed off to Prosser on a dive over left guard. Bill Hopper, a stout tackle, threw his man aside with a loud grunt and smothered Prosser.

Randall winced. "Not much there."

"Not much anywhere."

The next play was a power sweep snuffed when cornerback Andy Ferragino stripped away Duggan's lead block and left Prosser naked against the backside pursuit.

"Can't those guys block any better than that?" Randall asked. "Prosser's getting creamed!"

"They're just following their motto."

"They have a *motto*?"

"Do it wrong the first time."

His confusion amplified. "*What?*"

"If redshirts run a good play, it means someone on the varsity screwed up. When that happens, coaches make them run it over until the varsity gets it right. Getting it right means creaming the redshirts, so it's to everyone's advantage—varsity and redshirts alike—to make sure the redshirts do everything wrong in the first place."

While I talked, Prosser got smeared on an inside trap, but Randall didn't notice. He was muttering to himself, "Do it wrong the first time, eh? I bet there's a story in that."

"You better forget that one," I advised, "if you don't want Anderson to ban you permanently."

Randall kept silent until after Tom Everett handed off to Dave Duggan on a cross-blocked fullback dive.

"Why should I pretend redshirts don't exist?" he finally said. "They're an important part of the team, aren't they?"

"Yeah, they are, and every season someone like you writes a nice story about how much their selfless dedication helps the team prepare for its opponents. What I'm saying is that you can't get into what it means to actually *be* a redshirt. And you sure as hell better not tell the

truth about what happens to them. If you do that, it'll be the end of your career on this campus."

Randall stood silent as Everett ran an option left, then he shrugged and said, "We'll see."

Twenty minutes later Randall sighed with disappointment. "I guess it isn't his day. I'm going back to the office."

The redshirts had run a couple dozen plays, and Prosser carried the ball on half of them, showing nothing of his true talent. I'd half expected him to respond to the rumors Quink heard about him moving up if he had a good practice this morning, but he was giving the standard redshirt performance of into the line and onto the ground in the most direct way possible. Everyone on the field knew he was sandbagging, but that was exactly what the coaches expected—and wanted—redshirts to do.

Prosser knew his personal die was already cast, so he didn't have a chance in hell of moving up no matter what he did, no matter how good he looked. I did admire the fact that he hadn't fallen for Tom Everett's latest ploy.

Tom was our team's main prankster, which put him behind the string of chiding notes on Jimbo Wheeler's door. He'd also be behind Teekay Junior allegedly saying Prosser might move up, a rumor he would have planted to get under Quink Thompson's extremely paranoid skin.

"Why don't you stick around a bit longer?" I suggested. "You might see something interesting when they bring the defense back together after the break."

His blunt face grimaced. "Naaah, I've had enough. I'll come back this afternoon to see if things pick up then."

"I can't blame you. Mornings are usually routine."

Just then Randy Colter, the right safetyman, came tearing upfield to help stop a sweep. He speared Prosser much harder than necessary, which could only mean Wade Hackler, the head defensive coach, had decided to stir things up by ridiculing Colter in the defensive huddle.

Colter was a square-jawed Alabama redneck who would

respond with a vengeance to Hackler's prodding. That was a major reason he was a starter. Coaches loved guys with insecurities large enough to manipulate easily.

Prosser normally didn't respond to late hits or any of the other garbage the coaches laid on him, but I'd seen him tangle with Colter twice already since he got here.

A quick glare from pitch-smearred eyes told everyone he took umbrage at that flagrantly cheap shot.

Colter took a threatening step toward him, but Prosser just turned and jogged back to his huddle.

"Better hold up on leaving," I said to Randall. "I think we're about to see something here."

PAYBACK

Randall moved back beside me as Tom Everett barked out the next snap count. It was an end run, shallower than a sweep, but still leaving Prosser plenty of room to maneuver. He took Tom's short pitchout and headed left behind Dave Duggan's fullback escort. Will Jensen, the defensive end, sensed what was coming.

Jensen shed his blocker outside to force Prosser to cut back inside, but as soon as Jensen stepped in to fill the hole, Prosser jumped back left with a quick hop. Jensen hit the ground empty-handed, and Corky Ames, the linebacker who joined Jensen anticipating the inside move, found himself tangled up in the interior double-team that neutralized the defensive tackle.

Prosser's move left only two people with decent shots at him: Ferragino at cornerback and Colter at safety. Ferragino had outside responsibility, which left him no choice but to take on Duggan's block. That left Prosser and Colter one-on-one in the defensive secondary.

Prosser stuck his nose straight upfield for his first two

strides beyond the line of scrimmage, but then inexplicably swerved toward the sideline. That move exposed his right side to Colter's unbeatable angle, and Colter, like a shark sensing blood in the water, accelerated for the kill.

Three yards away from contact, he lowered his head toward Prosser's knees—and the instant his eyes went down, Prosser reacted. He pivoted directly toward Colter and lowered his own head, stepping full force into the blow. Their helmets made a sickening crunch that drew startled glances from all parts of the field.

Colter, totally unprepared for that kind of blow, dropped like a wet rag and lay stunned. Prosser drove on through the contact point, touched his free hand to the ground to regain his balance, and then, as was required, jogged several yards downfield until he crossed the goal line.

“God-dammit-to-hell, defense!” Hackler raged at them. “Get back on the line and run that one over!”

He stomped over to Colter's still-prostrate form and kicked him hard in the butt.

“He made you look like drizzleshit, Randy! Get your lazy ass up and pay him back this time! *Stick him!*”

Colter staggered to his feet and weaved to his position, while Hackler grinned behind his back. Hackler was a grossly overweight ex-substitute defensive tackle with the jowls of a blue-ribbon hog and the disposition of a constipated rattlesnake. He was an obese, ugly, mean-spirited, socially inept slug of a man, which made him the most important coach we had after head coach Anderson.

Every coaching staff needed at least one blatant asshole to attract and focus player animosity the way a lightning rod grounds electricity. They were usually men who channeled deep shame at having been mediocre, unaggressive players into success as vicious coaches. Hackler fit that to a “T,” because it was more than a rumor that he played without talent or courage at a Midwestern backwater.

No defensive player acknowledged Prosser as he made his way through them toward his own huddle. Even his

redshirt teammates weren't sure how to react. Their football instincts applauded the beauty of his run, but their survival instincts feared how the defense would respond.

"What now?" Randall asked.

"They run it over until Prosser gets creamed."

"How many times?"

"Depends on how pissed off the coaches are."

The redshirts assembled at the line. There was no need to huddle; everyone knew the play. The defense waited eagerly because they knew who was coming at them and from where. They didn't have to play the usual position football, so they could afford to tee-off on their opponents. The redshirts hesitantly took their stances.

The ball was snapped. Prosser took the short flip from Everett and went left. The defense instantly reacted and hurtled themselves after him. After four steps Prosser hit brakes and then cut back inside over tackle. The entire defense had over pursued, and Prosser blew by them all. He quit running twenty yards downfield.

"God-damn-shit! How many times do we have to tell you turds—*don't over pursue!* Now get your stupid asses over here and do it again, and this time *do it right!*"

The defense held their ground and waited for a hint of Prosser's same inside move. When he gave it they all froze, so he had no trouble changing direction back outside. In five steps he turned the corner and showed them his heels. In two plays he hadn't been touched.

"Christ on a bleeding crutch! You look like a bunch of limp-dick pussies out here! Can't you hit? Can't you pursue? That's a fucking *redshirt* over there doing that to you! Now get up on the line and stop his ass! *Stop him!*"

The air crackled and adrenaline gushed. Everyone was on edge. Even Randall began breathing in short gasps.

At the snap, the defense fired out and stopped every redshirt charge at the line. After being burned every way possible, they weren't going to fall for anything else. Prosser must have seen it because he cut into the hole

without a fake. As the defensive line sagged in on him, he leaned into their waiting arms. They were heading for the ground and the play seemed all but over.

Suddenly, Prosser executed a violent spin that twisted him out of their relaxing grips. Standing clear, he found himself face-to-face with Ames, the linebacker. Ames lunged and made solid contact with Prosser's right thigh, but as he slid his arms around to lock the tackle, he found himself holding air and falling. Prosser had given him a classic limp-leg and was now pointed as before, straight at Colter in the secondary.

Colter had learned. He came up in full control and maintained a perfect hitting position—head up, feet apart, tail low. Prosser didn't even bother with a fake. He lowered his head five yards away and left Colter no choice but to do the same or risk getting pancaked backward.

One stride away from contact, Prosser suddenly straightened back up. Colter was fully extended with his head down and didn't see the move, so he dove through the contact point and continued onto the ground. Prosser, meanwhile, had jumped straight up, hovering for a brief instant with his cleats above the small of Colter's back.

It seemed certain Prosser would stomp Colter into the turf, which he had every right to do, but at the last second his feet spread and landed on either side of Colter's kidneys. Staggering more than striding, he jogged the required extra yardage. Exhaustion was beginning to show in him, but his mastery of the moment was complete.

BRRRAAAAAAKKKKKK!!!!

Stanton blew the water-break signal just as Prosser turned to head upfield for the fourth straight time. Usually, when that signal came all football activity stopped, and everyone went directly to the break area. Not this time.

"Goddammit!" Hackler roared, yanking his baseball cap off to throw it on the ground, revealing a sweaty bald head glistening in the morning light. "*Nobody move!*"

Everyone stopped dead in their tracks.

“I’m gonna find someone who can tackle that sonofabitch if it takes all day! I want every last one of you turds to get after his ass, and nobody stops till he’s down! *Move!*”

The six men on the right-side defense began running full tilt at Prosser. I don’t know if he was being defiant or was simply too winded to run anymore, but he made no effort to get away. He tossed the ball aside and crouched in a hitting position to absorb the blows coming his way as fast as they could run toward him.

Colter was closest to Prosser when Hackler shouted his instructions, so he reached him first and the two men hit head-on once again. The five others piled right into them, creating a cordwood stack of exhausted bodies.

Suddenly, a loud whistle blew from the tower positioned at midfield, Coach Anderson’s incontrovertible signal to end the work period and start the water break.

Subdued players jogged past Randall and me toward the break area. Randall stood in a kind of shock, staring at the spot where Prosser was plowed under.

“Wow!” he muttered. “I’ve never seen *anything* like that.”

“Prosser’s talent or Hackler’s assholery?”

“Both . . . together . . . I mean . . . shit!”

“A Darker Shade Of Red” by Lloyd Pye is now available in book stores everywhere. Signed and inscribed copies available from www.BellLapBooks.com.