

# John Ed Bradley

It sounds as though *sportswriter* is being used pejoratively when one says John Ed Bradley (b. 1958) was more than a sportswriter the day he wrote his first sentence for the *Washington Post*, but that isn't the case at all. In the early 1980s the *Post's* sports section was brimming with talent and every day was a writing contest. Bradley separated himself from his stablemates by employing fictional devices and a poet's touch. The echoes of Faulkner and Hank Williams in his work carried all the way to New York, and soon enough he was writing for *GQ*, *Esquire*, and *Sports Illustrated*. But novels were his destiny, so he retreated to his native Louisiana and wrote six of them, including *Tupelo Nights* (1988) and *Restoration* (2003). All the while, he was haunted by his memories of playing football at LSU. He had been a tri-captain and an all-Southeastern Conference center in 1979, and then he tried to walk away from his teammates, his alma mater, his old life. Years later, after seeing his former coach on TV, wheelchair-bound and weakened by cancer, he knew he had to do what Hemingway prescribed for the things that trouble you: write about them. The result was Bradley's beautifully melancholy memoir *It Never Rains in Tiger Stadium* (2007). He laid the foundation for it in *SI's* August 12, 2002 edition with this meditation on the ties that will always bind him to the people and the game that shaped his life.

## The Best Years of His Life

**I**T ENDS FOR EVERYBODY. It ends for the pro who makes \$5 million a year and has his face on magazine covers and his name in the record books. It ends for the kid on the high school team who never comes off the bench except to congratulate his teammates as they file past him on their way to the Gatorade bucket.

In my case it ended on December 22, 1979, at the Tangerine Bowl in Orlando. We beat Wake Forest that night 34–10, in a game I barely remember but for the fact that it was my last one. When it was over, a teammate and I grabbed our heroic old coach, hoisted him on our shoulders and carried him out to the midfield crest. It was ending that day for Charles McClendon, too, after 18 years as head coach at LSU and a superb 69% career winning percentage. The next day newspapers would run photos of Coach Mac's last victory ride, with Big Eddie Stanton and me, smeared with mud, serving as his chariot. Coach had a hand raised above his head as he waved goodbye, but it would strike

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me that his expression showed little joy at all. He looked tired and sad. More than anything, though, he looked like he didn't want it to end.

We were quiet on the flight back to Baton Rouge, and when the plane touched down at Ryan Field, no cheers went up and nobody said anything. A week or so later, done with the Christmas holidays, I went to Tiger Stadium to clean out my locker. I brought a big travel bag with me, and I stuffed it with pads, shoes, gym trunks, jockstraps, T-shirts and practice jerseys. I removed my nametag from the locker. Then I studied the purple stenciling against the gold matte. In one corner someone had scribbled the words TRAMPLE THE DEAD, HURDLE THE WEAK. The source of the legend eludes me now, but it had been a rallying cry for the team that year, especially for my mates on the offensive line.

The last thing I packed was my helmet. I'd been an offensive center, and the helmet's back and sides were covered with the little Tigers decals the coaches had given out as merit badges for big plays. I ran my fingertips over the surface, feeling the scars in the hard plastic crown. There were paint smudges and streaks from helmets I'd butted over the years. Was the gold Vanderbilt or Florida State? The red Alabama or Georgia, Indiana or USC?

When I finished packing, I walked down the chute that led to the playing field, pushed open the big metal door and squinted against the sudden blast of sunlight. I meant to have one last look at the old stadium where I'd played the last four years. Death Valley was quiet now under a blue winter sky. I could point to virtually any spot on the field and tell you about some incident that had happened there. I knew where teammates had blown out knees, dropped passes, made key blocks and tackles, thrown interceptions and recovered game-saving fumbles. I knew where we'd vomited in spring scrimmages under a brutal Louisiana sun and where we'd celebrated on autumn Saturday nights to the roar of maniacal Tigers fans and the roar of a real tiger, Mike IV, prowling in a cage on the sideline. We'd performed to a full house at most every home game, the crowds routinely in excess of 75,000, but today there was no one in sight, the bleachers running in silver ribbons around the gray cement bowl. It seemed the loneliest place on earth.

I was only 21 years old, yet I believed that nothing I did for the rest of my life would rise up to those days when I wore the Purple and

Gold. I might go on to a satisfying career and make a lot of money, I might marry a beautiful woman and fill a house with perfect kids, I might make a mark that would be of some significance in other people's eyes. But I would never have it better than when I was playing football for LSU.

Despite this belief, I was determined to walk away from that place and that life and never look back. You wouldn't catch me 20 years later crowing about how it had been back in the day, when as a college kid I'd heard the cheers. I knew the type who couldn't give it up, and I didn't want to be him. He keeps going to the games and reminding anyone who'll listen of how things used to be. His wife and kids roll their eyes as he describes big plays, quotes from halftime speeches and embellishes a "career" that no one else seems to remember with any specificity. He stalks the memory until the memory reduces him to pathetic self-parody. To listen to him, he never screwed up a snap count or busted an assignment or had a coach berate him for dogging it or getting beat. In his mind he is forever young, forever strong, forever golden.

Standing there in Tiger Stadium, I squeezed my eyes closed and lowered my head. Then I wept.

Hell no, I said to myself. That wasn't going to be me.

I still remember their names and hometowns. And I can tell you, almost to a man, the high schools they went to. I remember how tall they were and how much they weighed. I remember their strengths and weaknesses, both as men and as football players. I remember the kinds of cars they drove, what religions they practiced, the music they favored, the hair color of their girlfriends, how many letters they earned, their injuries, their dreams, their times in the 40-yard dash. In many instances I remember their jersey numbers. On the day last August that I turned 43, I wondered what had happened to Robert DeLee. DeLee, a tight end from the small town of Clinton, La., wore number 43 on his jersey when I was a senior. During my freshman year a running back named Jack Clark had worn the number. Jack Clark, too, I thought to myself—where on earth has he slipped off to? I had seen neither of them in more than two decades.

That was the case with almost all of my teammates. Last summer I attended a wedding reception for Barry Rubin, a former fullback at LSU who is a strength coach with the Green Bay Packers. It had been

about eight years since I'd last had a face-to-face conversation with a teammate, and even that meeting had come purely by chance. One day I was waiting in the checkout line at a store in suburban New Orleans when someone standing behind me called out my name. I wheeled around, and there stood Charlie McDuff, an ex-offensive tackle who'd arrived at LSU at the same time I did, as a member of the celebrated 1976 freshman class. A couple of shoppers separated Charlie and me, and I couldn't reach past them to shake his hand. "How are things going?" he said.

"Things are good," I said. "How 'bout with you?"

I felt uncomfortable seeing him again, even though we'd always gotten along well back in school. The media guide had listed him at 6'6" and 263 pounds, but in actual fact he was a shade taller and closer to 275. Even after all these years away from the game he had a bull neck and arms thick with muscle. His hair was as sun-bleached as ever, his skin as darkly tanned.

I paid what I owed and started to leave. Then I turned back around and looked at him again. "You ever see anybody anymore, Charlie?" I said.

"Yeah. Sure, I see them. Some of them. You?"

"Not really."

He nodded as if he understood, and we parted without saying anything more, and two years later Charlie McDuff was dead. My sister called, crying with the news. Charlie had suffered a pulmonary embolism while vacationing with his family at a Gulf Coast resort. He left behind a wife and three young sons. I wanted to call someone and talk about him, and I knew it had to be a player, one of our teammates, and preferably an offensive lineman. But I couldn't do it, I couldn't make the call. Nobody wanted to remember anymore, I tried to convince myself. It was too long ago. So instead I pulled some cardboard boxes out of a closet and went through them. There were trophies and plaques wrapped in paper, letters tied with kite string, a short stack of souvenir programs and a couple of plastic-bound photo albums crowded with news clippings and yellowing images of boys who actually were capable of dying. If Charlie McDuff could die, it occurred to me, we all could.

At the bottom of the box I found a worn, gray T-shirt with purple lettering that said **NOBODY WORKS HARDER THAN THE OFFENSIVE LINE.**

Charlie had had that shirt made, along with about a dozen others, and handed them out to the linemen on the '79 squad. The year before, we'd lost some outstanding players to graduation, and Charlie had hoped the shirts would inspire us to pull together as a unit. We wore the shirts at every opportunity, generally under our shoulder pads at practice and games. It seems crazy now, but there was a time when I considered stipulating in my will that I be buried in that ratty thing. I was never more proud than when I had it on.

I learned about Charlie's funeral arrangements, and I got dressed intending to go. I started down the road for Baton Rouge, rehearsing the lines I'd speak to his widow and children, and those I'd tell my old teammates to explain why I didn't come around anymore. I drove as far as the outskirts of Baton Rouge before turning around and heading back home.

Are there others out there like me? I've often wondered. Does the loss of a game they played in their youth haunt them as it's haunted me? Do others wake up from afternoon naps and bolt for the door, certain that they're late for practice even though their last practice was half a lifetime ago? My nightmares don't contain images of monsters or plane crashes or Boo Radley hiding behind the bedroom door. Mine have me jumping offside or muffing the center-quarterback exchange. They have me forgetting where I placed my helmet when the defense is coming off the field and it's time for me to go back in the game.

If it really ends, I wonder, then why doesn't it just end?

I suppose I was doomed from the start, having been sired by a Louisiana high school football coach. The year of my birth, 1958, was the same year LSU won its one and only national championship in football, and the month of my birth, August, was when two-a-day practices began for that season. Although my parents couldn't afford to take their five kids to the LSU games, we always listened to the radio broadcasts, usually while my father was outside barbecuing on the patio. He'd sit there in a lawn chair, lost in concentration, a purple-and-gold cap tipped back on his head. Not far away on the lawn I acted out big plays with friends from the neighborhood, some of us dressed in little Tigers uniforms. We played in the dark until someone ran into a tree or a clothesline and got hurt, then my dad would have me

sit next to him and listen to the rest of the game, the real one. "Settle down now," I remember him saying. "LSU's on."

When I was a kid I always gave the same answer to adults who asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. "I want to play football for LSU," I answered. Beyond that I had no clear picture of myself.

Nor could I fathom a future without the game when it ended for me 23 years ago. One day I was on the team, the next I was a guy with a pile of memories and a feeling in his gut that his best days were behind him. I shuffled around in my purple letter jacket wondering what to do with myself, and wondering who I was. Suddenly there were no afternoon workouts or meetings to attend. I didn't have to visit the training room for whirlpool or hot-wax baths or ultrasound treatments or massages or complicated ankle tapings or shots to kill the never-ending pain. If I wanted to, I could sit in a Tigerland bar and get drunk without fear of being booted from the team; I didn't have a team anymore. Every day for four years I'd stepped on a scale and recorded my weight on a chart for the coaches. But no one cared any longer how thin I got, or how fat.

That last year I served as captain of the offense, and either by some miracle or by a rigged ballot I was named to the second team All-Southeastern Conference squad. The first-team player, Alabama's Dwight Stephenson, went on to become a star with the Miami Dolphins and a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and I'd seen enough film of the guy to know I was nowhere in his league. At the end of April, in the hours after the 1980 NFL draft, a scout for the Dallas Cowboys called and asked me to consider signing with the club as a free agent, but by then I'd already shed 30 pounds along with any notion of myself as an athlete. I gave some excuse and hung up. "You don't even want to try?" my father said.

I could've yelled at him for asking, but there was genuine compassion in his eyes. He and my mother were losing something, too. One of their sons had played football for LSU, and where I come from nothing topped that. "It's over," I said.

My father nodded and walked away.

Number 50 was Jay Whitley, the pride of Baton Rouge's Lee High. Fifty-one was Lou deLaunay, then Albert Richardson; 52, Kevin Lair,

then Leigh Shepard; 53, Steve Estes and Jim Holsombake; 54, Rocky Guillot. Fifty-five was linebacker S. J. Saia; then after my freshman year the number went to Marty Dufrene, probably the toughest offensive lineman ever to come out of Lafourche Parish. My number was 56. When we left the stadium after games, fans were waiting outside under the streetlamps, some of them with programs and slips of paper to sign. Even a lowly offensive lineman was asked for an autograph. "Number 56 in your program, Number 1 in your heart," I'd write, disgracing myself for all eternity but way too ignorant at the time to know it.

I don't recall how I first learned about what happened to Marty. Maybe it was from a news story about efforts to raise money to help pay his medical bills. Or maybe it was another tearful call from a relative. But one day I found myself punching numbers on a telephone keypad, desperate to talk to him again. Marty was living in LaRose, his hometown in the heart of Cajun country, or "down the bayou," as the natives like to say. His wife, Lynne, answered. "Lynne, do you remember me?" I said, after introducing myself.

"Yes, I remember you," she answered. "You want to talk to Marty? Hold on, John Ed. It's going to take a few minutes, because I have to put him on the speakerphone."

A speakerphone? When he finally came on he sounded as though he was trapped at the bottom of a well.

"Marty, is it true you got hurt?" I said.

"Yeah," he said.

"You're paralyzed, man?"

"Yeah," he said, raising his voice to make sure I could hear. "I broke my neck. Can you believe it?"

It had happened in July 1986, some five years before my call. While in his second year of studies at a chiropractic college then based in Irving, Texas, Marty was injured in a freak accident at a pool party to welcome the incoming freshman class. He and friends were horsing around when a pair of them decided to bring big, strong Marty down. One held him in a headlock, the other took a running start and plowed into him. Marty smashed through the water's surface of a shallow children's pool and struck his head on the bottom, shattering a vertebra. He floated in the water, unable to move or feel anything from his neck down, until his friends pulled him out.

As he told me about the accident I kept flashing back to the kid I'd known in school. Marty had been a lean, powerfully built 6'2" and 235 pounds, small by today's standards but about average for a center in our era. On the field he'd played with a kind of swagger, as if certain that he could dominate his opponent. The swagger extended to his life off the field. Marty liked to have a good time. He spoke with a heavy Cajun accent, the kind of accent that made girls crazy and immediately identified him as a pure Louisiana thoroughbred. Football schools from the Midwest featured humongous linemen brought up on corn and prime beef. At LSU we had guys like Marty, raised on crawfish from the mud flats and seafood from the Gulf of Mexico.

The son of an offshore oil field worker, Marty was an all-state high school center in 1976. He was a highly recruited blue-chipper coming out of South Lafourche High, just as I had been at Opelousas High the year before. Marty had vacillated between committing to West Point and to LSU before he realized there really was only one choice for him. Air Force was the military academy that had tried to lure me before I snapped out of it and understood what my destiny was.

The only problem I'd ever had with Marty Dufrene was that we played the same position, and he wanted my job. Going into my senior year I was listed on the first team, Marty on the second. One day after practice he told me he was going to beat me out. I couldn't believe his gall. "I want to play pro ball," he said.

I shook my head and walked off, thinking, Pro ball? To hell with that, Dufrene. I'm going to see to it you don't even play in college.

Now, on the telephone, I was telling him, "I'd like to come see you, Marty."

"Yeah," he said. "It would be great to see you again."

"I'll do it. I promise. Just give me some time."

"Sure, whatever you need. I'd like to catch up."

But then 11 years passed, and I didn't visit Marty or follow up with another call. Nor did I write to him to explain my silence. How could I tell the man that I was afraid to see him again? Afraid to see him as a quadriplegic, afraid to have to acknowledge that, but for the grace of God, I could be the one confined to a chair, afraid to face the reality that what we once were was now ancient history.

I might've played football, in another life. But in my present one I had no doubt as to the depths of my cowardice.



At some point I decided to turn my back on it all, rather than endure the feeling of loss any longer. Marty Dufrene wasn't the only one I avoided. There were years when I tried to stay clear of the entire town of Baton Rouge. Travelers can see Tiger Stadium as they cross the Mississippi River Bridge and enter the city from the west, and whenever I journeyed across that elevated span I made sure to look at the downtown office buildings and the State Capitol to the north, rather than to the south where the old bowl sits nestled in the trees. I struggled to watch LSU games on TV and generally abandoned the set after less than a quarter. Same for radio broadcasts: I tuned most of them out by halftime. On two occasions the school's athletic department invited me to attend home games as an honorary captain, and while I showed both times, I was such a nervous wreck at being in the stadium again that I could barely walk out on the field before kickoff to receive my award and raise an arm in salute to the crowd.

Love ends, too, and when the girl invites you over to meet her new beau, you don't have to like it, do you?

I received invitations to participate in charity golf tournaments featuring former Tigers players; I never went to them. Teammates invited me to tailgate parties, suppers and other events; I never made it to them. The lettermen's club invited me to maintain a membership; except for one year, I always failed to pay my dues. Even Coach Mac tried to get in touch with me a few times. I was somehow too busy to call him back.

It wasn't until December of last year that I finally saw him again, and by then he was dying. In fact, in only three days he would be dead. Cancer had left him bedridden at his home in Baton Rouge, but even at the worst of it he was receiving guests, most of them former players who came by to tell him goodbye. One day I received a call from an old college friend, urging me to see Coach Mac again. She said it didn't look good; if I wanted to talk to him and make my peace, I'd better come right away.

So that was how I ended up at his doorstep one breezy weekday morning last winter, my hand shaking as I lifted a finger to punch the bell. I wondered if anyone in the house had seen me park on the drive in front, and I seriously considered walking back to my truck and leaving. But then the door swung open and there standing a few feet away was Coach Mac's wife, Dorothy Faye. I could feel my heart squeeze

tight in my chest and my breath go shallow. My friend had called ahead and told her I might be coming; otherwise she surely would've been alarmed by the sight of a weeping middle-aged man at her front door. "Why, John Ed Bradley," she said. "Come in. Come in, John Ed."

She put her arms around me and kissed the side of my face. Dorothy Faye was as beautiful as ever, and as kind and gracious, not once asking why it had taken her husband's impending death to get me to come see him again. She led me down a hall to a bedroom, and I could see him before I walked in the door. He was lying supine on a hospital bed. His head was bald, the hair lost to past regimens of chemotherapy, and, at age 78, wrapped up in bedsheets, he seemed so much smaller than I remembered him. His eyes were large and haunted from the battle, but it was Coach Mac, all right. I snapped to attention when he spoke my name. "Come over here and talk to me, buddy," he said.

I sat next to the bed and we held hands and told stories, every one about football. He was still the aw-shucks country boy who'd played for Bear Bryant at Kentucky before going on to build his own legend in Louisiana, and the sound of his rich drawl made the past suddenly come alive for me. I named former teammates and asked him what had become of them, and in every case he had an answer. "Your old position coach was here yesterday," he said.

"Coach McCarty?"

"He sat right there." And we both looked at the place, an empty chair.

"And you're a writer now," he said.

"Yes sir, I'm a writer."

"I'm proud of you, John Ed."

I didn't stay long, maybe 20 minutes, and shortly before I got up to leave he asked me if I ever remembered back to 1979 and the night that the top-ranked USC Trojans came to Baton Rouge and the fans stood on their feet for four quarters and watched one of the most exciting games ever played in Tiger Stadium. "I remember it all the time," I said. "I don't always want to remember it, because we lost, Coach, but I remember it."

"I remember it too," he said in a wistful sort of way.

The Trojans that year had one of the most talented teams in college football history, with standouts Ronnie Lott, Charles White, Marcus

Allen, Brad Budde and Anthony Munoz. They would go on to an 11-0-1 season and finish ranked second nationally behind Alabama, and White would win the Heisman Trophy.

In his bed Coach Mac lifted a hand and ran it over the front of his face in a raking gesture. "They called face-masking against Benjy," he whispered.

"Sir?"

"That penalty. The one at the end."

"Yes, sir. They sure did call it. And it cost us the game."

He swallowed, and it seemed I could see that night being replayed in his eyes: the yellow flag going up, the 15 yards being marched off, the subsequent touchdown with less than a minute to play that gave USC the 17-12 win. "Benjy Thibodeaux didn't face-mask anybody," I said, the heat rising in my face as I started to argue against a referee's call that nothing would ever change.

Coach Mac was quiet now, and he eased his grip on my hand. I stood and started for the door, determined not to look back. His voice stopped me. "Hey, buddy?" he said. I managed to face him again. "Always remember I'm with you. I'm with all you boys." He lifted a hand off the bed and held it up high, just as he had so many years ago after his last game.

"I know you are, Coach."

"And buddy?" A smile came to his face. He pointed at me. "Next time don't wait so long before you come see your old coach again."

Now it is summer, the season before the season, and Major Marty Dufrene, Civil Department Head of the Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Department, motors his wheelchair to the end of a cement drive and nods in the direction of a horse barn at the rear of his 38-acre estate. Five horses stand along a fence and wait for him, just as they do every day when he rolls out to see them after work. "I'm going to be riding before the end of the year," he tells me. "I've got a saddle I'm making with the back beefed up for support, so I can strap myself in. Of course I'm going to have to use a lift to put me in the saddle. But I'm going to do it."

By now I have been with him for a couple of hours, and already the force of his personality has made the chair invisible. After the injury his muscles began to atrophy, and over time his midsection grew large

and outsized, his face swollen. But the fire in his eyes hasn't changed. Marty is exactly as I remembered him. "One thing about him," says his wife, "Marty might've broken his neck, he might be paralyzed and in that chair, but he is still a football player."

Their large Acadian-style house stands only a stone's throw from Bayou Lafourche, the place where they met and fell in love as teenagers. Lynne and their 17-year-old daughter, Amy, are inside preparing dinner, and outside Marty is giving me a tour of the spread when we come to rest in the shade of a carport. I reach to touch the top of his shoulder, because he still has some feeling there, but then I stop myself. "Marty, you must've resented the hell out of me," I say.

He looks up, surprise registering on his face. He bucks forward and then back in his chair, and it isn't necessary for me to explain which of my failures might've led me to make such a statement. "No, never," he says. "I saw you as my competition, but I always have a lot of respect for my competition, and I did for you, too. You were standing in my way, standing in the way of where I wanted to be. But even then I knew my role and accepted it. I was going to push you as hard as I could. That was my duty to you and to the team. I looked up to you as a teacher, just as you looked up to Jay Whitley as a teacher when he was playing ahead of you. We were teammates, John Ed. That was the most important thing."

Lynne and Amy serve lasagna, green salad and blueberry cheesecake in the dining room, and afterward Marty and I move to the living room and sit together as dusk darkens the windows. He revisits the nightmare of his accident and the rough years that followed, but it isn't until he talks about his days as an LSU football player that he becomes emotional. "Nothing I've ever experienced compares to it," he says. "That first time I ran out with the team as a freshman—out into Tiger Stadium? God, I was 15 feet off the ground and covered with frissons. You know what frissons are? They're goose bumps. It's the French word for goose bumps." He lowers his head, and tears fill his eyes and run down his face. He weeps as I have wept, at the memory of how beautiful it all was. "It was the biggest high you could have," he says. "No drugs could match it. The way it felt to run out there with the crowd yelling for you. I wish every kid could experience that."

"If every kid could," I say, "then it wouldn't be what it is. It's because so few ever get there that it has such power."

We are quiet, and then he says, "Whenever I have a down time, or whenever I'm feeling sorry for myself, or whenever life is more than I can bear at the moment, I always do the same thing. I put the Tiger fight song on the stereo, and all the memories come back and somehow it makes everything O.K. All right, I say to myself. I can do it. I can do it. Let's go."

Marty and I talk deep into the night, oblivious to the time, and finally I get up to leave. He wheels his chair as far as the door, and as I'm driving away I look back and see him sitting there, a bolt of yellow light around him, arm raised in goodbye.

I could seek out each one of them and apologize for the vanishing act, but, like me, most of them eventually elected to vanish, too, moving into whatever roles the world had reserved for them. Last I heard, Jay Blass had become a commercial pilot. Greg Raymond returned to New Orleans and was running his family's jewelry store. Tom Tully became a veterinarian specializing in exotic birds, of all things. And Jay Whitley, somebody told me, is an orthodontist now, the father of four kids. If they're anything like their old man, they're stouthearted and fearless, and they eat linebackers for lunch.

When the pregame prayer and pep talks were done, we'd come out of the chute to the screams of people who were counting on us. The band would begin to play; up ahead the cheerleaders were waiting. Under the crossbar of the goalpost we huddled, seniors in front. I was always afraid to trip and fall and embarrass myself, and for the first few steps I ran with a hand on the teammate next to me. Arms pumping, knees lifted high. The heat felt like a dense, blistering weight in your lungs. If you looked up above the rim of the bowl you couldn't see the stars; the light from the standards had washed out the sky. Always in the back of your mind was the knowledge of your supreme good fortune. Everyone else would travel a similar course of human experience, but you were different.

And so, chin straps buckled tight, we filed out onto the field as one, the gold and the white a single elongated blur, neatly trimmed in purple.