

Everything that's Gone Wrong, has Gone Wrong Because of Football

by Thomas Easterling

My mother will cheat to beat me at checkers. My father and uncles never let me take an uncontested lay-up. My grandfather once asked me to stay in the club house so the rest of the men would have a better chance of winning the father-son tournament.

I come from a competitive family.

For most people, the fall marks the return of football. You'd think that this would be my favorite time of year. On any given night, I can watch a half-dozen sports, live, after I come home from the gym.

But I'm not ready for football. I'm not ready for it, but I live in a southern town that worships at its altar more devoutly than those suicidal beauties in James Wright's great poem.

It started in seventh grade, during the first football practice of the year. I was pumped. My dad had been a college athlete, broad shouldered, joyously swift. I wanted to be just like him. My mother was finally letting me play.

Everyone on the field knew what was going to happen—everyone except me. I had been beaming with pride and aggression: Coach Hedgecock told me to play safety. I was the fastest white kid in public school, five-seven, ninety-eight pounds. I sometimes had trouble walking during hurricane season.

My glasses were so thick I joked I could see the curvature of the earth. I had not, to that point in my life, made a B in anything other than penmanship.

As the offense broke its huddle, I glanced at my friends Rich and Derek. They were in the gifted class, too, but they were on the sidelines. I gave them a thumbs up. I strutted to my position, left hash, ten yards behind the line of scrimmage.

The center was six feet tall as a seventh-grader. His name was Adolph, and he was black as a slate chalk board, and almost as smart. He terrified me. Adolph looked up over the nose tackle—after he got in his stance—and smiled at me.

What everyone else realized at that moment was that the play was coming my way. I just smiled back at Adolph like I'd made a new friend.

Adolph snapped the ball and exploded into the nose tackle, and the quarterback dropped back. *Pass, I thought. Drift towards the play and make the tackle.*

Then I realized that the play was coming straight at me. Brian Samuels, whose thighs were the size of my waist, had plucked the ball the ball out of the air and turned upfield towards me with the grim confidence of a full-grown man taking a steer to the slaughter house.

My eyes drew to slits. I would make the stop. I was my father's son. I would make Coach Hedgecock see that I could do it. I lowered myself, squared my shoulders, and hurled myself in Brian Samuels' direction.

Rich later said he couldn't look, but Derek told me what happened. "You went right at him, dude," he said. "It was awesome. You got your arm between his knees and you were just about to bring him down when he brought his back leg forward, and that's what broke your arm. Dude, we all heard it. Crack! It was freaking cool!"

I realized something was bad wrong when I looked at my arm and it bent three inches in front of the wrist. I bounced off the turf and ran to Coach Hedgecock. He knew what had happened—he had called the play—and walked me straight to the principal's office so he could call my mom. He wanted to be kind, wanted to take my mind off the fact that my arm was flopping like a rubber chicken, but he was also pissed that he had to deal with me.

"Your dad is Gray Easterling?" he asked.

I nodded. I didn't want to faint, but I thought I was about to.

“Wasn't he a track star? I thought he was all-state in football, too.”

“Yessir,” I said hoarsely.

“What happened to you?” he said.

I looked at my arm. I didn't want to, but I couldn't help it. I can't remember what I was about to say to Coach Hedgecock, but that's the first time I fainted.

I wasn't the only one who fainted that day, though. Dr. Banks gave me some sort of shot before he set my arm, and apparently I mumbled semi-coherently the entire time I was under. I came to with the crack of my arm being set, and turned towards my parents just in time to see my all-state father collapse. My mother, who was four months pregnant, caught him and deposited him in a chair. She popped open the smelling salts Coach Hedgecock had given her. Dad looked sheepishly around and said we'd all be more comfortable at home.

I suppose I should be grateful that I broke my right arm because now I can do so many things left handed: throw a frisbee, cut a steak, brush my teeth. But I had to write left-handed, and my penmanship, abysmal enough right-handed, became indecipherable. Naturally, I used this to my advantage—I don't think I turned in another paper that semester—but Mrs. Malone, the gifted math teacher, decided one day that I hadn't been learning anything in her class since I'd broken my arm, and that it was high time to take a test.

“But Mrs. Malone,” I said with a smirk, “my arm is broken.”

“Well let's just see what you can do,” she said. “Come on to the back of the class.”

I got through two algebra equations in fifteen minutes. It's true that I had a hard time making my left hand write, but I most assuredly hadn't learned the math, either. Mrs. Malone looked over the top of her black, horn-rimmed glasses and shook her head slowly, like she really needed a cigarette. “You can quit,” she said, “if you haven't already.”

I didn't make an A.

A few weeks later—in part to cheer me up, and in part because my parents thought it would be the trip of a lifetime—our family went to Disneyland in Orlando. It was a sweet gesture but it was poorly timed: the weather was unseasonably hot and humid. My mother, then six months pregnant, was overcome, and insisted that we push her in a wheelchair. I realized that decent-looking people looked twice in my direction, sniffed, and moved off rapidly. At first I attributed this insensitive behavior to the fact that my mother was in a wheelchair, and thought sad thoughts about human intolerance of weakness. Then I realized that my own family had been making jokes about our invalid. I hung my head and soldiered on, trying to push the wheelchair with my one good arm. After a little while, my mother, that blue-eyed, delicate beauty, called my father to come push her. “Gray,” she whispered,

just loud enough for me to hear, “I know he's trying to be sweet by pushing me around, but the smell of that cast could knock a buzzard off the shit wagon. I need you to take over.” I turned red, and tried to give the cast a discreet sniff. My cast, lovingly decorated with every cliché known to junior high, stank like rancid toejam.

I wanted to go home, or at least to the hotel to watch cable, which we didn't have at home yet, but my parents insisted that we get in one more ride: the space mountain roller coaster. My father had been keen on riding it from the moment he planned the trip. He and I shuffled through the line, and when it was time to get on, he jumped in a few seats ahead of me. I smiled: finally, something good was about to happen.

Then one of the guys working the ride checked my straps and hollered out, “Hey, Chuck, this one's a little skinny.” Then he turned to me and said, “We got to get somebody else in here with you so you don't fly out on us.”

The back of my dad's lowered against his seat. Chuck showed up with a kid about my height—and seventy pounds heavier. “This is Jamie,” Chuck said. “He's going to ride in your lap. Keep you safe.”

I stopped breathing about the time we reached the top of the first rise. I wasn't excited—I couldn't breathe. Jaime bounced up and down and screamed, “Raise your hands, raise your hands!”

The next time we slowed down, he looked and said, “Why dinnya raise your hands? Oh—you only got one arm. What happened to you?”

I would have told him it was a long story, but we lurched down an incline and he started bouncing again. Gleefully. My dad couldn't believe I didn't want to ride twice. I blamed it all on football.

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It took no time for me to make the switch from football to cross country. My grades went back up. I got into Vanderbilt, where I knew I wouldn't have to worry about football. But the first opportunity I had to go on a date involved football: one of the guys down the hall, John, a Sigma Chi legacy who took pity on me because I helped him with his homework, asked me to go to Oxford with him, and to take his girlfriend's friend to the game.

I should have been suspicious when he couldn't get a Sigma Chi to double date, but I was so flattered to be asked that reason refused to kick in. I called the girl, Susan, to make introductions. She didn't sound vapid or bubbly or thrilled to go on a date, which was relieving because I didn't do bubbly too well. In fact, her voice registered a calm, calculating alto.

You're probably anticipating that Susan was heinous—acne scarred, wild-haired, morbidly obese. It's true that she would never stop traffic unless she jaywalked jaybird, but her appearance pleased the eye well enough: doe-eyed, dimpled, lean. I got in the back seat of her Volkswagon with John. They were laughing about pig run—new sorority pledges were supposed to run from the student union past the boys jeering at fraternity row and all the way to their new sisters—and moaning about the school's new common container laws.

“Which fraternity are you going to pledge?” Susan asked me.

“Probably none,” I said. John shot me a look. I didn't get the chance to say much more during the four-hour road trip. When we got to Oxford, John went straight to the Sigma Chi house to play beer pong. I followed Susan and Amy like a lost puppy until they went into a girl's dorm to change for the night. They told me they didn't know how long they'd be, but I was supposed to stay with some guy named Neil who lived in a dorm behind Fulton Chapel, and that it would be a good idea to track him down. They'd meet me back at the Sigma Chi house later that night.

“When?” I asked.

“Don't worry, we'll find you,” Amy said before bolting upstairs.

I wasn't worried. I was petrified. There were a half dozen dorms on the other side of Fulton Chapel, and no Neil I could find knew anything about me. Finally I stashed my bag at the desk of one of the dorms and went back to the Sigma Chi house. I couldn't find any of my Vandy friends, but there were ice chests full of Natural Light and a reasonably good cover band, and I figured out that if I didn't say too much, I fit in just fine. When the band played its last song, I saw John out of the corner of my eye.

“Man, am I glad to see you!” I said. “Where were Amy and Susan? Do you know where to find Neil? I think that's where we're supposed to stay.”

“I'm not walking that far,” John said. He was so drunk that I felt out of focus. “Come on to the van.”

The van, it turned out, was a Merry Miler with two captains seats and a bench in the back. Older frat brothers had claimed those. John hopped into the front seat. “You're skinny,” he said. “I bet you can fit between the captain chairs. It's shag. It's soft.”

I scurried into the spot and found that I fit. I also found a couple of unpleasant wet spots in the shag. I couldn't contort my body to avoid them. I didn't want to know what they were. I got up just as one of the frat brothers slurred, “I wish I hadnov had that tequila.”

A stranger in the dormitory let me sleep on his floor. Neither he nor his roommate had extra pillows or blankets, but it was clean, as clean as it was hard.

I had promised to meet my uncle and aunt, Ole Miss fans, in the Grove that morning. I thought it would be easy to find them. They were gregarious and short, and my aunt was the only white woman I knew who smoked menthols. I wandered around the Grove a couple of hours trying to find them, but there were five thousand cars parked underneath those stately oaks. I was just about to quit when I saw Susan. She looked a little pale, but she smiled and said how happy she was that we'd run into each other.

Then heard somebody shouting my name. "You got here!" my aunt screamed. "We were worried we'd miss you! Big Mama's here too—she wants to meet your date."

"Big Mama?" Susan asked, nose wrinkled.

"My grandmother," I said. "Come meet Aunt Pam and Uncle Charles."

Susan was not from Mississippi, and she wasn't planning on going Kappa Delta, so her conversation with Aunt Pam was brief. Susan kept looking at the stadium while she talked with my grandmother, which I thought was rude, but I knew I wasn't going to say anything about it. As we were leaving for the game, my uncle slipped me a pint of Jack Daniels and two tickets to the game. "The Rebels are good this year," he said. "You gonna need something to make it through this game."

"I'm just here for a good time," I said. "I don't know much about football."

Susan perked up a bit as we got closer to the stadium. "Let's go sit next to the Sigma Chis," she said. "Let me put your whiskey in my purse. I'll put it under some tampons. The rentacops never get past that."

We found John and his van buddies about halfway through the first quarter. They had found the hair of the dog. The fumes were so bad that I was sure the players could get drunk from them. The

Vandy athletes played like they were drunk. The game got out of hand quickly.

The Sigma Chis yelled throughout the game. Susan didn't have much to say, so I started yelling too.

"I thought you weren't into football," she said. Her nose wiggled when she talked.

"I'm not," I said.

"You sure act like it," she said. "I think I want to go sit with Amy."

"Would you mind handing me the whiskey first?" I said. "I'm thirsty."

I kept yelling with the Sigma Chis. It was almost like liking football.

At halftime, I realized that Susan and Amy were gone. I had no idea where to find them, no idea how I would get back to school. I ran back to the dorm where I had stashed my luggage, and by the grace of God saw Sally, a girl from my quad at Vanderbilt. She was leaving her date, too, and said she'd give me a ride back to Nashville. "Life is really impossible when people act that way at a game," she said.

"I agree," I said, but I was thinking that yelling at the game was the only fun I had all weekend.

That game was one of a handful I attended over the next decade. I tried to go to one when I was in grad school at Ole Miss, but my date, a history grad student, got hit in the head with a football some kids were throwing around and decided she'd better go home. "My brain is really the only asset that I have," she said.

"Of course," I said.

"You don't think I look good in this dress?" she said. She looked like she might cry.

"Don't be silly," I said. "I'll take you home." It was our last date—another one ruined by football.

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I'm married now, and my wife and I sporadically bought season tickets to football games. I was almost nervous when she suggested

we get them the first time—did she want to leave me?—but she said it was because she thought we'd have fun in the Grove, and that I'd probably yell more constructive things at the games than I did at the television. We took our kids, too, but they wouldn't sit all the way through a game. We let our tickets go last year.

Our oldest son started playing soccer that fall. He played exceptionally well, despite the fact that I was coaching him. Toward the end of the season, a game ended in a draw. I lined up our team to shake the other team's hands, and the other coach looked at me like I was crazy. "Time for the shoot-out," he said. "You got to have a winner in every game."

I tried to convince him that a draw was perfectly acceptable in soccer. He was a police officer. He outweighed me by more than Brian Samuels did those years ago. Mostly muscle. He was used to getting his way. "I've never played a sport where that's true," he said. "It sure ain't true in football."

Despite my objections, we lined our players up for penalty shots. I told our keeper to pretend like the soccer ball was a hundred dollar bill—to hold onto it every time he got his hands on it. He did well, but so did the other team's keeper. After nine kicks, the score was knotted at three. My son would take the tenth shot. If he made it, we won.

I hated it. I was ready to call the game and walk away. It was too much for a seven-year-old to handle. But I looked at that other coach and saw everything I hated about football, every no-neck jock that ever wanted to look over my shoulder during a test, every guy who didn't care if his date left him during a game. I called my son over.

"You can do it," I said. "Put it in the back of the net."

My son looks like me. Bespectacled. It is easy to count his ribs. His knees look like knobs bobbing over his shin guards.

But that night, when it counted, he rocked that ball into the top left corner. No goalie could have gotten it.

His teammates shrieked, and then tried to pick him up and put him on their shoulders. I heard the other coach telling his kids not to cry.

It was my finest moment in sports.

It had nothing to do with football.

for Tom Franklin

