



## FWAA writing contest winners

The results from the FWAA's 15th annual Best Writing Contest, which is sponsored by Insight, are listed below. All places will be recognized at the FWAA's annual Awards Breakfast on Jan. 7, 2008, at the BCS Championship

Game Media Hotel in New Orleans. Places 1-3 will receive certificates and cash prizes, while honorable mention winners receive certificates. First-place winners also receive plaques.



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#### GAME

**First place:** Ian R. Rapoport, *The Birmingham News*

**Second place:** Pete Thamel, *The New York Times*

**Third place:** Chris Dufresne, *The Los Angeles Times*

**Honorable mention:** Rich Kaipust, *Omaha World-Herald*

#### LOOSE DEADLINE

**First place:** David Barron, *Houston Chronicle*

**Second place:** Christopher Walsh, *Tuscaloosa News*

**Third place:** Dennis Dodd, *CBS SportsLine.com*

**Honorable mention:** Pete Thamel and Thayer Evans, *The New York Times*;  
George Schroeder, *The Oklahoman*

#### FEATURES

**First place:** Pat Forde, *ESPN.com*

**Second place:** Kyle Ringo, *Bolder Daily Camera*

**Third place:** Bob Condotta, *Seattle Times*

**Honorable mention:** John Henderson, *Denver Post*; Kelly Whiteside, *USA Today*

#### COLUMN

**First place:** Ted Miller, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

**Second place:** John Adams, *Knoxville News Sentinel*

**Third place:** John Henderson, *The Denver Post*

**Honorable mention:** Tom Dienhart, *The Sporting News*  
Kalani Simpson, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*  
Angelique S. Chengelis, *The Detroit News*

#### ENTERPRISE

**First place:** Christopher Walsh, *Tuscaloosa News*

**Second place:** Ron Higgins, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*

**Third place:** Kevin Scarbinsky and Ian R. Rapoport, *The Birmingham News*

**Honorable mention:** Brian Davis, *The Dallas Morning News*;  
Pete Thamel, *The New York Times*

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# President's column



**MIKE GRIFFITH**

No cheering in the press box. We're all professionals, we all know the deal, and 999 out of the 1,000 journalists I've run across in the college football world abide by it. Some of us get so conditioned we can't even manage applause at our kids' school ball games. But then came the College Football

Hall of Fame enshrinement ceremonies July 21 in South Bend, when I found myself clapping as the game's former greats took the stage.

The *Boston Globe's* Mark Blandschun, the ol' Bulldog of the press box, sat beside me as the Bert McGrane Award winner and was pounding his hands together, too.

Clapping at a sports-related event was somewhat exhilarating; perhaps it was just remembering what it felt like to be a fan of the game we've chosen to invest our careers in.

In this day and age of reduced sports travel and expense budgets, and considerably less access to athletes and coaches than many of us were once afforded, it was a healthy boost for career ambition.

It was also a good reminder of why we decided it would be worth it to sweat the odd weekend hours and travel, along with the finicky editors (we like to pretend we don't need them, but we do), to become college football writers.

Terry Bowden was the master of ceremonies for the College Football Hall of Fame enshrinement dinner, and he was as peppy and entertaining as when he held press conferences while going 11-0 as Auburn's head coach in 1993.

Terry's a fellow FWAA member, but he's working to get a head-coaching job again. I've wondered why he hasn't gotten back into coaching sooner, consider-

ing all he accomplished despite interference from previous regime members that were still affiliated with the Auburn program.

Terry will join his father, Bobby, on the sidelines at Florida State this year to "re-acquaint" himself with the routine.

As Terry Bowden introduced the likes of Emmitt Smith, Mike Rozier, Carl Eller, Charlie Ward, Bruce Smith and Steve Emtman on a South Bend Saturday night, I watched each cross the stage and wondered: Why isn't this on television?

Instead, folks saw a major soccer promotion crash as superstar David Beckham fell over his feet for 14 minutes on ESPN.

Somebody, perhaps ESPNU or Fox Sports, could have covered the College Football Hall of Fame event in Academy Award fashion. It's worthy. It's entertaining. It's fan friendly.

It appears to be TV friendly, too, with college football season just around the corner, the backdrop of Notre Dame and plenty of film footage of the enshrinees in the vaults.

It was fun seeing Emmitt Smith in a Gator uniform again and watching Rozier tear up opponents in his Husker red.

For the first time, I saw how Bruce Smith made sacks as a Hokie and later got a refresher course on how Charlie Ward played point guard as the Seminoles' QB before moving on to the NBA and distributing the ball in much the same fashion.

Bobby Bowden used his time on stage to talk about how kids have changed, and how parents are failing.

Some were critical of Bowden's remarks the next day, but that doesn't mean Bowden wasn't spot-on in his analysis.

In fact, kudos to Bowden for using his time to extend a meaningful message to his audience – limited as it was – rather than drop names and thank everyone from Pensacola to Jacksonville to Miami.

The most disappointing turn from the event came the next morning when ESPN chose to run a list of 12 "notable"

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# Column: Ted Miller

*Comment of the judge, Mickey Spagnola: Not only was this very opinionated and well written, but I'm guessing the writer was brave enough to take an unpopular stance, though one he believed in. Seeing things a tad differently from everyone else makes for good column writing.*

**By TED MILLER**  
*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

Now wait a second here. Folks are mad at Dennis Erickson for leaving -- no, betraying! -- Idaho after a meager 10-month stint to take over at Arizona State?

Are you kidding me?

Say the following sentences out loud:

Dennis Erickson turned down a chance to quadruple his salary. Dennis Erickson turned down a chance to coach a sleeping giant in the Pac-10 to stay at WAC doormat Idaho. Dennis Erickson decided to continue to live on the frozen tundra of Moscow, Idaho, instead of moving to the resort community surrounding Tempe, Ariz. Dennis Erickson didn't want to coach a perennial bowl contender that could win 10 games next fall because he relished the challenge of leading a program that hadn't posted a winning record since 1999 and will never, never, never reach a major bowl game.

All because he felt -- sniff, sniff -- loyal to the wonderful folks at Idaho who hired him in March 2006?

That's what you wanted to happen? That would have been the right thing for Erickson to do, the ethical thing, the act that would earn him giddy kudos in the media?

Again: Are you kidding me? When did being stupid become a laudable quality?

If Erickson had turned down Arizona State and stayed at Idaho I would have driven to Moscow and beaten him with a stick.

Or at least called him and told him he was insane to allow himself to be bullied by those who throw around terms like "mercenary" and "disloyal" because they simply have never had big opportunities in their lives or have never been driven by ambition to seek the highest level of success possible.

The reflexive sanctimony is predictable and baseless and just a bit disingenuous. Erickson didn't betray his family or friends. He made an employment decision.

What about his players? We sometimes act as though college football teams are collections of Oliver Twists, wan and helpless amid the mad, mad world surrounding them. Please. Sorry if the Vandals' feelings are hurt. Buck up -- you won four games this season, most the program has in six years.

If you're looking for a villain -- and there really isn't any, other than circumstance and inopportune timing -- then consider Idaho athletic director Rob Spear.

**TED MILLER** – *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

**AGE:** 37

**COLLEGE:** University of Richmond

**BACKGROUND:** Miller, an Atlanta native, spent two years at the *Marietta Daily Journal* before heading south to the *Mobile Register*. He covered Auburn for two years and was named Alabama Sportswriter



of the Year for 1998. He moved to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in 1999, starting as the Washington football beat writer, then adding Pac-10 and national college football responsibilities. He will cover the Pac-10 for ESPN.com for a sixth year this fall. He was named a sports columnist for *P-I* in March 2006. He has earned three APSE top-10's with the *P-I*, twice in enterprise and a third-place for features. He has been a runner-up three times in the FWAA Best Writing Contest for game story, columns and enterprise. Miller enjoys travel and eating and drinking and reading. Although he reports that he tends to be grumpy, he has been married for five years to Chandra.

If Idaho is worse off for having hired Erickson -- and it most certainly is -- it is Spear's fault for making a bad decision when replacing Nick Holt last February.

Recall: After two seasons and five wins, Holt bolted Idaho as though his hair were on fire, first to the St. Louis Rams then back to USC. Spear, though in a jam with spring practices just weeks away, nonetheless could have resisted the urge to take a shortcut and showed some gumption. He could have combed the backwoods for a talented young assistant coach who was hungry to lead and build a program, knowing full well that said young coach, upon finding success, would have bitten at the first better job offer he received.

Spear didn't hire Erickson as a favor. He didn't feel sorry for a coach who was sitting out a football season for the first time since 1969. He made a pre-emptive strike on a big name who was bored while living off the \$7.5 million the San Francisco 49ers still owed him. He gambled that Erickson, 59, wouldn't get an attractive offer until he'd rebuilt the program after perhaps three or four years.

And he rolled snake eyes.

"Had we known that we were going to end up in this situation, we would never have gone down that road," Spear told The Associated Press. "We made a commit-

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# Game: Ian R. Rapoport

*Comment of the judge, Mickey Spagnola: Great rhythm to this game story, and it pulled me in, wanting me to read it all, even if I already had know the score. Game stories are tough, but the writer here tells me a story.*

**By IAN R. RAPOPORT**  
*The Birmingham News*

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. -- Everything Alabama football coach Mike Shula did at the end of the game was predicated on one assumption. Every time he signaled for a running play and every time he milked the clock, it was all based on the same belief:

That freshman kicker Leigh Tiffin would line it up and knock it through.

Twice, Alabama put Tiffin in a position to win it with a field goal. Once more, it allowed him to, at least, force a third overtime with an extra point.

Yet in the end, following Alabama's spirit-crushing 24-23 loss to Arkansas in double overtime in front of an announced crowd of 74,687 at Razorback Stadium on Saturday, there was Tiffin explaining why he missed all of those.

"I had a rough night," he said. "You go out there, you line up every kick, you concentrate like you're trying to make it. It just didn't happen."

So Alabama (3-1, 1-1 Southeastern Conference) suffered its first loss of the season against Arkansas (3-1, 2-0). In two games, the walk-on filling in for injured junior starter Jamie Christensen went from hero to goat.

Alabama now travels to play No. 5 Florida, trying to shake off a loss coach that Mike Shula called "heart-breaking."

"It's something to overcome real fast," Tide running back Kenneth Darby said. "We have to bounce back."

In most areas, Alabama did enough to stay undefeated.

At the end of regulation, thanks to 12 rushing plays, the Tide marched to the 13-yard line to set up Tiffin's 30-yard attempt.

Nope.

In the first overtime, after Arkansas quarterback Mitch Mustain threw an interception, Shula signaled in three runs for Darby, who finished with 69 yards on 26 carries. That set up Tiffin's 37-yard attempt.

Nope.

On the first possession of the second overtime, sophomore quarterback John Parker Wilson, who was 16-of-20 passing for 243 yards and three TDs in his first road start, found tight end Nick Walker for a 1-yard touchdown pass. All that was needed was a Tiffin extra point.

Nope.

**IAN R. RAPOPORT**  
– *The Birmingham News*  
Age: 27

**College:** Columbia University  
**Background:** Ian is in his second year covering the University of Alabama for *The Birmingham News*. Previously, he spent two years as *The Jackson Clarion-Ledger's* Mississippi State beat reporter. He has also worked for *The (Westchester, N.Y.)*



*Journal News* and served as an intern for *ESPN Classic*. At Columbia, he divided his time between the *Columbia Daily Spectator* and rowing on the lightweight crew team. When he's not writing, Ian hones his golf game, refines his grilling skills, and collects Pez dispensers. In 2006, among other local honors, he earned third place for game stories in the FWAA Best Writing Contest.

When it was all over, when Arkansas had cleaned up its raucous celebration sparked by Mustain's 11-yard touchdown pass to tight end Ben Cleveland and Jeremy Davis' extra point, Tiffin's teammates stood by him.

"I better not hear nobody point no finger at Leigh," said receiver DJ Hall, who made six catches for 144 yards and a touchdown. "Nobody out there played a perfect game. I know I didn't."

Perfection, this game was not for the Tide. It committed 11 penalties for 65 yards. Wilson lost a fumble that safety Randy Kelly picked up for his team's first turnover of the season and ran 40 yards into the end zone.

Tiffin also missed his first field goal attempt that would've tied the game at 3.

Yet what stands out is that, even with all the gaffes, Alabama could've - and maybe should've - been the team dancing around.

"It's tough to swallow," Shula said.

Alabama went ahead on a 99-yard drive to make the game 7-3 with 8:50 left in the first half. A career-long 76-yard touchdown reception by Hall finished it.

Late in the half, the Tide put together another drive, keyed by two Wilson scrambles, one on a fourth-and-1. That led to Tiffin's 46-yard field goal to make it 10-3 at halftime.

Arkansas made it 10-9 on a 3-yard run by Darren McFadden, who had 25 carries for 112 yards. The fumble return and two-point conversion put the score at 17-

*(Continued on page 5)*

# Game (continued)

*(Continued from page 4)*

10, Razorbacks.

"There were times when we could've folded it up and quit," defensive coordinator Joe Kines said.

The answer came 10 plays and 75 yards later on Keith Brown's 14-yard touchdown catch.

After a Jeffrey Dukes interception, Alabama took 12:03 off the clock to drive to the 13 with 3:06 left. The offense took no chances, handing it off 12 times.

"You play the percentages there," Shula said. "Knowing it wasn't a long kick, you let him kick it through. It's a feeling, and you go with it - you believe your players can win games."

Instead, Tiffin missed it right.

It was no different in the first overtime, when three running plays gained five yards before Tiffin missed a 37-yarder.

In the second overtime, after the Tide scored, Shula said he considered going with Christensen, who had taken only a few live repetitions. He might have been the choice for a field goal attempt then, but Shula picked Tiffin to try the extra point.

"Tough call," Shula said.

When the PAT was no good, Arkansas marched down in four plays and scored. That set up Davis' extra point try.

Yep.

## 2007-08 Contest Rules

Rules and procedures for the 2007-08 FWAA Best Writing Contest.

1. FWAA members in good standing can now begin sending entries for the following categories:

- GAME Story (Immediate Deadline)
- LOOSE Deadline (Spot News and Second Day Game Stories)
- FEATURE Story/Profile
- ENTERPRISE/Investigative
- COLUMN/Analysis/Commentary

2. Deadline: June 15, 2008. Entries sent after June 15, WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

3. Limit: One (1) article per category.

4. Entries had to appear in print or on-line between Feb. 1, 2007, and Jan. 31, 2008.

5. Entries MUST BE SENT electronically via e-mail to [contest@sportswriters.net](mailto:contest@sportswriters.net). Entries not sent to this e-mail address WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

6. At the top of each entry, this information should be included:

- Publication or on-line service where story appeared.
- Writer or writers
- Category
- Date of publication
- E-mail address and telephone numbers for the writer or writers

7. The entries will be sorted and stripped of identifying information and forwarded to the judge(s).

8. Entries MUST BE SENT in MS Word or text files only. DO NOT SEND HTML files, Word Perfect files, stories in other word processing software or links to stories

on the Internet or electronic libraries.

9. Delete any imbedded advertising, photos and cutlines from the files. The file should contain only your story and your identifying information.

10. Take out unnecessary carriage returns to improve the readability of your entry for the judges.

10. Files containing your entries should follow this naming convention:

**yourname-category.doc**

The category must be one of these five words:

Game, Loose, Feature, Column or Enterprise

Questions? E-mail [ken.stephens@sbcglobal.net](mailto:ken.stephens@sbcglobal.net)

## President's column (continued)

*(Continued from page 2)*

inductees rather than the entire list of 20.

More than four million have played college football. Less than 1,000 are in the College Football Hall of Fame. I'd say the ones who make the hall are all worthy of having their name displayed on a graphic for 10 seconds.

I called ESPN on behalf of the FWAA to express our disappointment with the network's decision not to list all the names.

I'll be the first to applaud when a network steps in and gives the college football enshrinement ceremony the coverage it deserves.

# Features: Pat Forde

*Comment of the judge, Corky Simpson: This is a beautifully written story about what gets into a guy who wins the Heisman Trophy. In Troy Smith's case, it was toughness, survival, overcoming personal mistakes and dealing with the pain of one very cold Christmas Eve.*

**By PAT FORDE**  
**ESPN.com**

The little boy clutched the present for his mom on a snowy Christmas Eve. Around the Cleveland neighborhood they looked for her, the 9-year-old and the man who had given the boy a home.

They walked through the snow and knocked on doors, asking where she could be. House after house, door after door. Nobody knew.

The boy never found his mother on that Dickensian Christmas Eve more than a decade ago. Never got a chance to give her the watch he'd bought from the mall with his foster father's money.

And so the crestfallen boy gave the watch to his foster mother instead, for his real mother was lost to him. Lost in personal troubles so deep and dark that her two children were taken from her and placed in the care of others.

For the 9-year-old, it was an aching empty December moment. And, wherever she was, it certainly was an empty time for his mom.

They will experience a drastically different December moment this Saturday night, the boy and the mom. A moment of triumph. Thanks to the boy's powers of forgiveness and compassion, and the mother's will to salvage a life gone astray, they will experience that triumphal moment together.

Troy Smith, the little boy who could not find his mother one Christmas Eve, will win the Heisman Trophy. Tracy Smith, the former lost soul, will be there to see it.

"We're the best of friends now," Troy said. "I don't have a better friend."

For those who know the whole story, those who know what Troy endured around the time of the cold Christmas recollection that was passed on by Troy's foster father, Irvin White, it will be a heartwarming Heisman experience.

"That's my hero," Tracy Smith said.

Troy has had his antihero moments. Was suspended by the NCAA for two games two years ago, for taking \$500 from a booster. Was arrested and ultimately convicted of misdemeanor disorderly conduct for an on-campus altercation, one week before the 2003 Michigan game. Was kicked off his high school basketball team -- and ultimately left the school -- after knocking out an opponent with a premeditated elbow to the head during a

**PAT FORDE — ESPN.com**

**Age:** 42

**College:** University of Missouri

**Background:** Forde has worked at [ESPN.com](http://ESPN.com) since 2004. Before that he freelanced for the website for about seven years. He also worked for *The Louisville Courier-Journal* from 1987-2004. He covered high schools, regional colleges and the University of Kentucky as a beat reporter, then spent 12 years writing a column. Forde is a native of Colorado Springs, Colo. He still lives in Louisville. He has won 16 APSE awards and had some of his work published in *Best American Sports Writing*. He played high school football for Gary Barnett, and remains proud of it. He is married to Tricia Forde, and they have three children: Mitchell (12), Clayton (10) and Brooke (8), all of whom will be swimming in the 2020 Olympics.



game. Was accused of lying years after the fact about the motivation behind that elbow, too: Smith told Sports Illustrated this summer that he was the target of racial slurs in the game; players and coaches on the opposing team told the Cleveland Plain-Dealer that no such slurs were ever uttered.

Some rough edges there, no doubt. But ask yourself: Where would you be and who would you be if you grew up like Troy Smith?

Alive would be a fortunate place to start. A successful college athletic career would be an improbable bonus. A college degree would be all the more remarkable. An unbreakable bond with your mother, after four years of foster care, would be amazing. And now a Heisman Trophy and revered status as the poised, fearless and charismatic leader of the nation's No. 1 football team? Bordering on fiction.

"I never thought my little baby boy would do something this huge," Tracy Smith said. "This is way huge. I don't think it's going to hit me until I get off that plane in New York Saturday morning. Then it will be like, 'I can't believe this.'"

"It's like I'm reading a book about somebody else. I'll be very, very proud."

Pride will pulse throughout a village of legal guardians and guardian angels who raised this child, helping

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# Features (continued)

*(Continued from page 6)*

him from the mean streets of Cleveland to the bright lights of Manhattan -- and, ultimately, beyond. But even with all the assistance, the kid had to take the hardest, loneliest steps of this climb himself.

When you consider where Troy Smith came from to reach this point, hero fits. And heroic describes his journey.

The football field was across the street from the house where Troy lived at 112th and St. Clair. That was the little boy's refuge.

"I was out at that field all day," Smith said.

Troy played there with other kids in the neighborhood. But what transfixed him was the sight of the Glenville A's midget football team, which practiced on the field. Coach Irvin White once had played on this same neighborhood team in the Cleveland Muni League, and now he was back as coach of the A's, building a small dynasty.

The A's became a beacon for Troy, who watched wistfully from the perimeter.

"I just kept coming back, day after day," he said.

White finally asked the boy if he wanted to join the team, but explained that he couldn't play without his parents' permission. Troy went home and told Tracy, "I've got to play football for this team."

She was unmoved.

"I was afraid he was going to get crunched up," she said.

Finally, White went with Troy to his house to lobby his mom into letting the boy play. The first night she wasn't there. The second night she was, and permission was grudgingly granted.

After Smith played a few games at tight end and running back, White moved the dynamic little athlete to quarterback. It became a harmonic convergence of ability and mentality.

"He put the football in my hand and told me that I had the ability to lead the team," Smith recalled. "That set in my mind right there, even as a little league player: if I could lead this team, I could lead the next batch of guys, and the next batch of guys, so on and so forth. I truly believed that."

But even as Troy found his calling on the football field, his family was losing its moorings off it. He and his older sister, Brittany, too often were left on their own by a young single mother with little money and big problems.

Nobody interviewed for this story wanted to discuss the details of Tracy Smith's struggles. However, Cuyahoga County court records show that a Tracy Smith was arrested on misdemeanor charges of "drug abuse" in

1993 and '94 and spent time in jail.

"I was going through a lot of personal things," she said. "Everything hit me at once, to the point where I needed to get myself together. If I couldn't take care of myself, I wouldn't be any good to my kids."

White said he recognized the signs of family problems.

"One day Troy said he didn't have a way home," White said. "He was crying. I took him home and took him to school the next day, then I called the county and told them he needed help."

White told county social workers he wanted to take Troy in. He and his wife, Diane, became certified as foster parents and were allowed to bring Troy into their home on a full-time basis, while Brittany went to live with an aunt.

White said his own mother had taken in more than 350 foster children. So adding Troy to the other four kids at home wasn't a big issue.

"To open a locked door for a kid to stay in our house was a normal thing to do," White said. "Somebody else comes in? OK, put another plate on the table."

At a time when Troy Smith desperately needed it, he became part of something. A team, and a stable family environment. The man he called "Coach" became a father figure as well.

"I want to make it clear that my foster situation was not a bad foster situation," Smith said. "I couldn't have had a better family taking care of me at that time. It's just that my mother was going through a certain situation in her life that she needed to straighten out, and she did that."

"Everything happens for a reason. When I ended up with the Whites, that happened for a reason. They taught me the morals and values I needed to have in my life, and helped me get to where I am now."

After years of parenting Troy, White began making plans to formally adopt him. Faced with the permanent loss of her children, Tracy Smith vowed to turn around her life.

The results, everyone says, have been remarkable. Once Tracy came back, she came back for good.

"You talk about a miraculous recovery?" White said. "It was great. A great thing to see."

Said Tracy: "My children were the No. 1 thing that made me want to get it together. It took a lot of self reflection. A lot of praying, a lot of crying, a lot of laughing."

There was no shortage of tears in the White household when it was time for Troy to move out and rejoin his mom.

"Everyone cried like somebody had died," White said.

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# Features (continued)

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"One of the happiest days of my life was seeing his mother come back into his life. And one of the saddest days, too. We know this is the way it has to be. Troy is still our son, but he's with his mother."

The reunion was rough.

Being together didn't automatically equate to being happy. Not after four years without his mom. Not after feeling abandoned and betrayed. Not after your mother is missing on Christmas Eve.

Scars like those don't disappear with an address change.

"It was rocky at first, because of the bitterness I had toward her," Troy Smith admitted. "I was young and I didn't understand: I was a kid who wanted his mother, and she wasn't around."

Tracy Smith did what she had to do in that situation. She let her kids unload on her. No use justifying and rationalizing; just sit there and take it.

"The thing that was most important was to let them vent to me," she said. "I told them, 'I know you're mad at me, tell me about it.' The bottom line is, I put my life back together and I came back. A lot of mommies don't."

"It was rocky at first, because of the bitterness I had toward her. I was young and I didn't understand: I was a kid who wanted his mother, and she wasn't around."

-- Troy Smith on moving back in with his mom

Said Troy: "It happened through multiple family talks, where emotions were pouring out, from myself and my sister. Through us getting back together and staying together. It was nowhere near the best situation to stay in, but we were together as a family. That's all we had was us."

They certainly had little in the way of comfort. By this time the Smiths had moved to 71st and St. Clair, inhabiting a neighborhood rife with urban dangers. The area was brutal, but it was home.

Sports saved Troy from the troubles that ensnared countless peers. At Martin Luther King Junior High he played soccer, tennis, basketball and track. And he played football for the older version of the Glenville A's in the Cleveland Muni League.

"I go back and see the guys I grew up with," Smith said. "Some of them are incarcerated. Some of them, rest their souls, have passed away. But the ones that are still there, when I see them, their whole month or year has changed. They light up like a Christmas tree."

"These are the same guys I used to play basketball with in the middle of the street, shooting at a crate. They're still maintaining. The only thing that's sad, though, the average young person back home can't see past Friday. They play it day by day, literally."

Troy Smith never has been shackled by a lack of vision. He could see past Friday -- all the way to Saturdays and playing college football, and even to Sundays and the NFL, too. Dreaming big always has been his way, and he's had the requisite ambition and hunger to chase the dream down.

The dream led Smith to parochial power St. Edward High School in Lakewood, where Troy awkwardly stood out in a predominantly white, largely affluent student body. He wound up sharing the quarterback position with Shaun Carney, who went on to be a three-year starting QB at the Air Force Academy. Smith often was shuttled to wide receiver to make room for Carney at quarterback.

That was unsatisfying for a kid who'd run every team since that day on the field at 112th and St. Clair when Irv White put the ball in his hands. Smith's stay at the school ended during his junior year, shortly after his elbow knocked out Toledo St. John's player John Floyd.

He wound up back in the neighborhood, at Glenville High. The coach was Ted Ginn Sr., who would take the male role-model baton from Irvin White.

Smith joined a team that featured receiver/defensive back Ted Ginn Jr., who was a national-caliber recruit. But Ted Jr. had a learning disability and Troy was now considered damaged goods -- a fractious child of uncertain collegiate value.

"Him and Ted were basically throwaways," Ginn Sr. said.

By the time Smith got to Glenville, his rebuilt relationship with his mom had started deteriorating again. Ginn stepped in and set up counseling -- even attended the first session with the two of them.

"They needed that," Ginn said. "Troy didn't understand his mom and the issues she went through. He was taken from his mother. That's major, to be taken as a little kid from your mom. He had to learn how to trust his mother."

He had to learn how to trust everyone.

"He had a chip on his shoulder," said Glenville High campus administrator Jacqueline Bell, a veteran of 32 years in Cleveland public schools. "Didn't trust anyone, didn't confide in anyone. It took coach Ginn to get him to trust us."

Said Ginn: "It took work to break into that fence."

Once inside, the Ginns became family to Smith.

"I think only a man can teach a man how to be a man," Troy said. "He did just that. He didn't do it in a discipline-oriented way, it was more of a mentoring way."

"We talked all the time. I would talk to Ginn Senior like he was one of my best friends. As a peer. I felt com-

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# Features (continued)

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fortable with him like that. I can talk to him about any and everything, and I still do."

Today Smith and Ted Ginn Jr., are on the short list of the most lethal pass-and-catch combinations in America. They're teammates on a 12-0 Buckeyes team that will play Florida Jan. 8 for the national title.

But only one of the two was a blue-chip recruit for the Buckeyes, and it wasn't Smith. He accepted the final scholarship offer in the 2002 recruiting class and was labeled an "athlete" by the school on its official release. That's code for "we're not sure where to play him, but quarterback is a long shot."

Troy Smith had to move on -- and prove on -- once again.

Last month. Columbus. Cataclysmic game against unbeaten archrival Michigan is five days away. Troy Smith is sitting behind a microphone, facing a semicircle of reporters from all over the nation.

"There was a certain point in time," he said, smiling, "where nobody cared who I was."

Smith easily could have been talking about his life in general, but that particular comment referred to his value as a college quarterback upon arriving in Columbus. He had none for two years.

Smith spent his first season redshirting, serving as practice-squad meat for a Buckeyes team that went on to win the national title. The next year he was a special teams utility player, running back kicks and getting some cameo duty at running back.

"I was working for scraps, taking anything I could get," Smith said.

After that he finally got his shot at quarterback, and his growth rate has been flatly astounding.

Smith backed up Justin Zwick for seven games in 2003 before injury gave him a shot at the starting job. By season's end he'd blown up on Michigan, running for 145 yards and throwing a 68-yard touchdown on the fifth play of the game to key a major Buckeyes' upset.

Then came the payola scandal and subsequent two-game suspension, which took Smith out of the 2004 Alamo Bowl and the first game of 2005. Coach Jim Tressel brought Smith off the bench in Ohio State's second game, a massive showdown against Texas, and that decision not to start him helped cost the Buckeyes the game and scuttled OSU's championship hopes.

Smith was in charge thereafter, and Ohio State went 9-1. Smith closed with brilliant games against Michigan and Notre Dame in the Fiesta Bowl, setting the stage for runs at the Heisman and national title this fall.

The 2006 season has worked out beyond even the most optimistic master plan. Ohio State is unbeaten, Smith is unchallenged for the award, and he's proven to

NFL scouts and skeptics than he's more than just a great athlete playing quarterback.

He's become the very embodiment of a field general.

"When you think of Troy, the first thing that comes to my mind is leadership, probably the second thing is competitiveness, and maybe the third thing that jumps up to me about Troy is his hunger to be in command of what's going on," Tressel said.

The former scrambler became almost an obstinate pocket passer, spending the first half of the season nearly anchored in the backfield. After proving his point, Smith once again began using his scampering ability to make plays.

His growth as a quarterback has dovetailed with his growth as a collegian. Rather implausibly, Smith has inhaled Tressel's tenets and become his star pupil. The two would appear to have little beyond football in common, but Smith has become an extension of his conservative, white, middle-aged coach.

Smith is remarkably composed and impeccably mannered -- removing his hat indoors for an interview for this story, holding open doors, looking people in the eye at all times. He never fails to default into "teamspeak" when the subject matter turns to individual achievement. He gushes on all things scarlet and gray.

"Tress, in essence, to me, is just like Ginn," Smith said. "They both value you as a man first. Football things will come, because the things you instill on the football field are some of the things you instill off the field."

Smith earned his communication degree in four years. Perhaps more importantly, a guy who once cynically scammed the system by taking booster money has become downright sentimental about the student-athlete experience.

"I didn't understand it coming in," Smith said. "Through countless days of school here, countless days of training, playing in games, it became an acquired taste. Anytime you have to represent something, you appreciate it."

Saturday night will be an appreciation. An appreciation of a heroic journey.

Troy Smith will stand behind the Heisman Trophy and in front of the nation, and he will thank the village that has raised him to this point. He'll do it without notes.

"I think anything and everything you're going to say has to come from your heart," Smith said. "I think if you write it down -- yeah, it comes from your heart, but you're going to rehearse it. I don't think that's a rehearsal thing. You don't practice something like that, you know what I mean?"

Still, some prespeech thinking will be necessary. For one thing, Troy must decide what --if anything -- he will

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say about Kenneth Delaney, his father.

When asked about his father, Smith's response is sharp.

"My father or my dad?" he said. "Your father is biological, and your dad is who raised you. ... My father, I can't really speak for him, because I don't talk to him a lot. He's doing OK. He's my father figure but he's not my dad figure."

Smith said he talked to his father about seven months ago. Delaney's attempts to reconnect with Troy were met rather brusquely.

"I don't buy into that," Smith said. "I've been a man for a while now, making decisions on my own, things like that. I've said it before: it takes a man to teach a man how to be a man. Other men have taught me that. I don't hold it against him. I just don't think there's anything he can instill in me right now that would be beneficial. But I do love him, because he played a part in my birth. He knows exactly how I feel."

The male role models in attendance with Smith Saturday night in Manhattan will be Tressel, quarterbacks coach Joe Daniels and Ted Ginn Sr.

"The perception of kids that come out of the inner city of Cleveland is that they cannot achieve," Ginn said. "Troy is proving that you can."

At home in the gritty part of Cleveland, Glenville administrator Bell will be watching on television.

"I guess some of the things she's had to endure in her life, this is an extremely positive thing. Why not let her just live it up? She deserves it. She deserves every-

thing that's coming to her. "

-- Troy Smith on attending the Heisman ceremony with his mom

"Someone that literally sat in this office with me, that I've hugged, is going to win the Heisman," she said, wonderment audible in her voice. "It's like, wow. Is this really happening?"

"These kids come in here with so many issues. If an authority figure doesn't take the time to listen and to work with them and teach them, they're not going to be all they can be. It's amazing to me, despite the odds, to see that Troy has held fast to his teachings."

Irvin and Diane White will be watching back home, too.

"We'll be boo-hooing," Irvin said, watching the boy he took into his home. "I'm not even going to try to hide it."

But the relationship most rewarded Saturday night will be between mother and son. It has survived a pain most of us could only imagine, thanks to a son's compassion and a mother's willingness to change. This time, Tracy Smith will be there to receive a December gift from her son.

"I guess some of the things she's had to endure in her life, this is an extremely positive thing," Troy Smith said. "Why not let her just live it up? She deserves it. She deserves everything that's coming to her."

And Troy Smith deserves what's coming to him Saturday night. The Heisman Trophy, and a mother to share it with.

## Column (continued)

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ment and we thought we had a commitment from the other end."

A commitment? Funny, most programs sign coaches to contracts. Erickson's had a \$150,000 buyout. Considering Holt's was \$30,000, it's obvious Spear anticipated some demand for Erickson.

Erickson flamed out in the NFL, but his college credentials are impeccable. He's been portrayed as a hired gun chasing big contracts and a higher profile, but so what? That's what winners do.

"Ambition doesn't bother me at all," Arizona State athletic director Lisa Love said. "That doesn't even make me blink."

Erickson made the right decision when he left I-AA Idaho in 1986 for Wyoming. And he made the right decision when he quickly left Wyoming for Washington State

and then Washington State for Miami in 1989. Each time he took a step up because he won consistently and another program wanted him to do so for them. And, lo and behold, he won a pair of national titles with the Hurricanes.

He darn near won a national title at Oregon State in 2000 -- old-timers know how absurd that very thought is -- before making his one colossal mistake and jumping aboard the burning, rudderless ship that was the 49ers.

Erickson will win at Arizona State, which welcomes back solid talent on both sides of the ball next fall. In fact, the Sun Devils' backloaded schedule suggests a 7-0 start is possible.

And if he replaces Pete Carroll at USC four years from now after leading ASU to its first Rose Bowl since 1996, here's what a fair-minded person should say:

Good for him.

# Enterprise: Christopher Walsh

*Comment of the judge, Gene Duffey: Great new angle on the Marshall football story, one of the most important in college football history. Well researched. Gives you a feel for the racist South of the 1970s and makes you realize how much fate plays a part in all our lives.*

**By CHRISTOPHER WALSH**  
**Tuscaloosa News**

The green folder has aged, with worn corners and beat-up edges, but the papers and newspaper articles inside have been protected from the assault of time. The headlines boldly proclaim victory, domination and greatness, but stand out even more in hindsight due to the scarring tragedy that followed.

It's been more than 35 years, and Florzell Horton Jr. can still hardly look at the pockets and their contents:

The red 36 peeled off his football helmet from Druid High School;

The recruiting letters from out-of-state colleges including Notre Dame, Illinois and Kentucky, in an era before blacks played for the University of Alabama or Auburn University;

The yearbooks and the pictures, especially of four former teammates

Horton didn't just grow up with Joe Hood, Larry Sanders, Robert VanHorn and Freddy Wilson. They were more than friends and such a part of each other, on and off the football field, that they agreed to go to college together at Marshall University, followed by Reggie Oliver a year later in 1970.

They thought they were inseparable, though quickly learned otherwise. It began when Horton suffered a shoulder injury during practice and wound up leaving school. He returned home still dreaming of playing football, perhaps at Tuskegee.

Soon after, the other four returned to Tuscaloosa too, only in caskets. They had been killed in a horrific plane crash on Nov. 14 that is considered the worst air disaster in American sports history.

"It was real tough," said Horton, sitting in his home near Birmingham.

Otherwise, he hasn't spoken much about the incident. He hasn't even told his wife and children the full story, about how a group of six black athletes from Tuscaloosa left to take on the world only to confront the cruelest of life's lessons.

"After the plane crash, I never played any more sports," Horton said. "I didn't even watch football for a couple of years after that."

But he will never forget.

## **The Druid Dragons**

There was only one high school blacks could attend

**CHRISTOPHER WALSH** –  
**Tuscaloosa News**

**Age:** 39

**College:** University of New Hampshire

**Background:** Chris currently covers University of Alabama football for the *Tuscaloosa News*. Previous beats include the Green Bay Packers, Arizona Cardinals, Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Arizona Diamondbacks for various newspapers. The writer/columnist has been twice nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, helped the *Tuscaloosa News* earn a First Amendment Award (formerly Freedom of Information Award) from the Associated Press Managing Editors, and recently earned the Alabama Sports Writers Association's highest honor, the Herby Kirby Memorial Award for story of the year. He's the author of *No Time Outs: What It's Really Like to be a Sportswriter Today*, and this fall his fourth book will be published, *Who's No. 1? 100-Plus Years of Controversial National Champions*. In his somewhat-limited spare time he likes to travel and is a self-described hockey freak.



in Tuscaloosa during the 1960s, Druid High, for grades eight through 12.

As a consequence, the school was like its own community, where everyone knew everyone else, and everything was under the watchful eye of coaches like Lou Mims.

"I didn't go out for football. I was drafted out for football," Oliver said. "I went to my mom, told her I had some talent that might take me someplace. Coach Mims, he was a great coach, not a good coach."

"He was a taskmaster," Horton said. "It was a different era. You didn't want to disappoint him, I'll say that. He reminds me of my father, no-nonsense."

Like so many other schools throughout the state, Druid took football very seriously. Mims preached discipline, respect and hard work, and no one was allowed to be flashy or to try to stand out from teammates by doing things such as wearing white shoes.

"We always knew that if the game came down to the last two or three minutes, it came down to who was in the best condition," Horton said. "Then we always felt like we would win because we always felt like we were better conditioned than anyone else. I was in the military,

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and basic training wasn't as hard as football. High school practice was actually harder than the practices at Marshall.

"Plus you had that threat always hanging over your head. You messed up ."

The 1968 football team, which wasn't supposed to be one of Mims' best, outscored opponents 265-52 including five shutouts, for its first undefeated season since 1937. With many of the same athletes, Druid's basketball and baseball teams were just as good, if not better.

"The basketball team won the state championship the fall before, and in three years I think we lost two games," Horton said. "The baseball team went undefeated the same year."

Although Druid High no longer exists -- there's no more rivalry games against Riverside on Thanksgiving weekend and most of the trophies have long since disappeared -- there are places in Tuscaloosa where people still talk about those teams and those players.

They still remember watching the likes of Casey Lavender, Clarence and Henry Taylor, Adolphus Crockett, Walter Carpenter and Sylvester Young, not to mention the six who signed with Marshall.

They tell the story of when Selma scored in the final minute to take a lead, but made the mistake of kicking off to Sanders, who was even better defensively than as a ball-carrier. From his own end zone, he returned it for a touchdown and the victory.

Or during the 1968 season when Oliver, called by teammates "The Wolf," completed 13 of 20 passes for 340 yards and seven touchdowns, and ran in another, to lead a 59-0 victory against R.B. Hudson. He had five touchdowns the following week against Carver out of Gadsden, a 45-6 victory.

They had nicknames like "Ram" and "Big Lilly." The 6-foot-5 Wilson was also an all-state center in basketball, while VanHorn played on both lines and hardly left the field.

"He was bull-legged," Oliver said. "He was 6-5 if his legs were ever straightened out, but strong as an ox."

They especially remember Hood, considered the legend of the group. Fans and former teammates say the running back made moves they've never seen, before or since.

"I had three sisters and no brothers," Oliver said. "Joe was like the brother I never had."

The sentiment went around.

"Very nice guy," classmate Bobby Williams said of Sanders. "He was the leader in his class. Good student. He was one of those persons everyone liked."

Although the 1968 Dragons went 10-0, they weren't

included in the state playoffs. It was their first year in the Alabama High School Athletic Association, and by the time Druid officials lined up the required 10th game on the schedule it was too late to get association approval.

But the fans knew.

"We never played a home game that wasn't sold out," Horton said.

The path to West Virginia

Even though the Dragons were in the backyard of national powerhouse Alabama, Horton and Hood couldn't get a meeting with Paul W. "Bear" Bryant. It was two years before Sam Cunningham's blazing performance for Southern California, which helped open the door for blacks to finally suit up for the Crimson Tide.

They also tried Auburn. Ralph "Shug" Jordan did speak with them, but didn't believe the state was ready for black players. It only made the decision to leave, and follow Sanders, that much easier.

"He basically was the one who talked us into going up there," Horton said.

When Oliver left for college in 1970, it was in a '62 white Ford Falcon that Wilson's father had purchased. He and three of his teammates climbed in, and despite it breaking down near Lexington, Ky., they somehow fixed it and made it to campus, where Sanders was waiting.

Thanks to NCAA rules at the time, Oliver knew he would spend 1970 on the freshman team and have time to get acclimated to college while attempting to play quarterback at a predominantly white school. He also had his friends to help him with the transition.

"They were, very, very special," he said. "Being a freshman, those guys looked out for me."

Oliver remembers a reporter asking him how long he had been a black quarterback. "All my life," he answered, but at the time there were just five starting black quarterbacks in the nation. People showed up at practice to see what a black quarterback looked like.

"It was an opportunity," he said, "to blaze a trail."

Joining the Herd

Things were hardly looking up for Marshall. The previous four seasons had produced records of 3-7, 0-9-1, 0-10 and 2-8. Additionally, the Thundering Herd was under NCAA probation following a 1968 scandal when coach Perry Moss brought in nearly athletes to try out for 35 scholarships. The result was 144 alleged violations, expulsion from the Mid-American Conference and gutting most of the athletic department.

Rick Tolley, who was hired to be interim coach just two days before the preseason started in 1969, was retained. Quarterback Ted Shoebridge would lead the depleted offense, along with a talented backfield including

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Hood.

On Nov. 14, 1970, Marshall lost a close 17-14 game at East Carolina, in which 10 players didn't make the trip. Eight were out with injuries, including co-captain defensive back Nate Ruffin. Defensive tackle Ed Carter had flown home to Texas for his father's funeral and defensive back Rich Taglang over-slept, missing the team bus to the airport.

Tolley was quoted after the loss as saying, "We had a real nice flight down, and some of them are still flying."

The Southern Airways chartered return flight encountered rain, fog and instrument failure. Three miles south of the Tri-State Airport in Huntington, which wasn't equipped with radar, the twin-engine DC-9 clipped a tree and crashed into the hillside.

All 75 people on the plane, including the entire coaching staff, players, administrators, students, boosters and crew, were dead.

According to news reports, some bodies were scattered outside the wreckage, the rest buried in the burning metal.

Oliver, who was waiting for his friends with a six-pack of beer Sanders had given him money for, was one of many on campus to head toward the flames piercing the night sky. He didn't get there as quickly as Jack Hardin, a reporter for the Huntington Post-Herald.

He didn't know what plane it was until a Baptist minister handed him a wallet he found. It belonged to Shoebridge.

"Everything was burned beyond recognition," Hardin later told reporters. "It was a real rugged, woody area. At one point, in order to see better, I boosted myself on what I thought was a log, but when I looked down it was a body."

A temporary morgue was set up in a hangar, and while attempting to identify everyone on board, officials asked Oliver and two of his teammates for assistance. "They asked, 'Do you think you're ready for it,'" Oliver said. "You think 'Yeah.' Then they open the door and you walk inside, and the reality staring you in the face is a little different.

"I had to grow up quick."

But that wasn't the hardest thing for Oliver, or calling his parents after initial reports indicated that he too had been on the plane.

It was coming back to Alabama, where another community was grieving.

"Tuscaloosa has suffered a great loss," Druid principal McDonald Hughes told The Tuscaloosa News for the Nov. 15, 1970 edition. "They were all fine boys. It was a shock to me when I heard it. They were very fine boys."

"It will be a tremendous loss," Mims said. "Hood was the greatest player I've ever coached, and they all had good character. They were dedicated."

On Nov. 21, the Rev. Charles Smith delivered the eulogy and the Druid choir sang both "The Lord is my Shepherd" and "Unto Thee O Lord." A number of former teammates, from both high school and college, served as pallbearers.

"The funeral was at my high school, with the four caskets all lined up," Oliver said. "To return for a funeral -- only four months earlier we had left Tuscaloosa seeking fame and fortune, and I was the only one returning -- it was a gut-wrenching thing.

"The gymnasium was packed and there were even more people outside."

## **From the ashes**

Marshall made the decision to continue football. Jack Langley was given the task of rebuilding the program when Dick Best wick backed out after a week on the job and returned to Georgia Tech.

Langley had 21 players on the roster, not-including walk-ons or a kicker from the soccer team, and no one to lead the offense. He turned to Oliver, who instead of following his parents to Germany, returned, only to miss spring practice due to an arm injury.

"They were his brothers," Langley said. "He could have left, he could have quit and gone to another school, but he decided to stay in honor of those four players. I thought that was a great tribute to his honor and character."

Langley was used to a power-style offense, but didn't have the necessary line depth. So he turned to the rival West Virginia Mountaineers and learned the veer offense from Bobby Bowden. His staff watched practice for three days, was instructed at night and then studied film until the early-morning hours.

At bare minimum, by lining up two receivers wide on each play, they took at least two defenders Oliver wouldn't have to worry about with them.

"The QB really needs to run the option two years to get the experience and timing down," Langley said. "We had to throw him into the fire. He took a heck of a beating."

Oliver was also hard-hit emotionally, with teammates looking to him for leadership. Drawing on his Druid days and former friends, he used a lot of humor, but would also do things like take half the team to a church near campus, not only for the sermon but the free lunch afterward.

"I went from being one of the youngest to the oldest in a blink of an eye," Oliver said. "I wouldn't wish it on

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anyone."

The "Young Thundering Herd" opened the 1971 season with a 29-6 loss to Morehead State, though some considered the touchdown a moral victory.

The following week, Sept. 25, Marshall had its home opener against Xavier before 13,000 emotional fans. Despite being grossly out-manned, the Herd stayed in the game and, down 13-9 with 1:18 remaining, had the ball at its own 48-yard line.

Three incompletions later, Oliver kept the drive alive with an 11-yard pass, and with no time outs and the clock running, drove Marshall to within the 20. Assistant coach Red Dawson, who was not on the fateful flight, signaled in "213 bootleg screen," and with Langley screaming "snap the ball," Oliver barely got the final play off in time.

"Great call, but it took a lot of nerve," Oliver said. "There was a lot of deception to it.

"[That situation] had been practiced in every playground situation. I had been preparing for the play on the playgrounds in Tuscaloosa. I'm styling it up, walking up and making sure I looked good. As soon as the ball was snapped, the gun sounded -- back then they still used the gun when time expired. It was make it work or lose."

From his 13, Oliver dropped back and rolled to his right, with the defense keying his first two options, the dive and the decoy wideout.

"The whole freaking defense rotated to Reggie," Langley said. "The only guy on the backside was a defensive end who stayed at home and guard Jack Crabtree leveled him. I mean he just pancaked him."

When Oliver turned back and threw across field to freshman fullback Terry Gardner, who wasn't known for his hands, there was no one there to stop him. With the catch, fans stormed the field to celebrate, and some took pieces of the goalposts to where the six unidentified people from the crash were buried, and laid them on their graves.

"That's when it hit us, after the locker room," Oliver said. "Two-thirds of the stands were still full. That's when we started to go, 'Wow.' People didn't want to let go of the moment."

Although Marshall finished the season 2-8, it's still considered one of the greatest games in college football history.

## The healing continues

This week, the movie "We Are Marshall," which tells the story of the team's rebirth, will finally be released nationwide. Parts were filmed in Huntington, and many of the people involved have spent the past few months catching up with one another.

According to those who have seen it, filmmakers did get the Xavier celebration right, but changed the final touchdown play. Oliver liked actor Arlen Escarpeta, but shakes his head at being played by someone only 5-foot-8.

"That's Hollywood," he said.

Oliver was Marshall's starting quarterback the rest of his college career and went on to play in the World Football League. From there, he turned to coaching, including five years as an assistant at Marshall and a brief stint as head coach at Alabama A&M.

One of his favorite sayings is "I have angels with me."

Langley retired as director of athletics at the United States Naval Academy in 2001, but serves on the board of directors for the National Football Foundation, the College Football Hall of Fame and the All American Football League. He's also a trustee emeritus for the United States Sports Academy in Daphne.

In 1977, Marshall dropped down to Division I-AA, and between 1966 and 1983 was a dreadful 38-150-2. Things began to turn around under Stan Parrish (13-8-1, 1984-85) and George Chaump (33-16-1, 1986-89), before Jim Donnan led the Herd to the 1992 Division I-AA championship.

Marshall won another title in 1996. The following year it rejoined the MAC and made the first of six consecutive appearances in the conference championship game, winning five. The program now boasts of some of the biggest names in the NFL, including Randy Moss, Troy Brown, Chad Pennington and Byron Leftwich.

The chant "We Are Marshall" has remained the calling card for Herd fans, and coach Bob Pruett added another shortly after he was hired in 1999: "At Marshall, we play for championships." He was also once quoted as saying: "All the great things that have happened to us, the inspiration and the momentum, all started after the plane crash."

On Marshall's campus, a memorial fountain shaped like a large flower, with 75 strands, one for each passenger, honors those who died that night, and there have been many other tributes over the years.

Horton, who lives in Hueytown, hasn't seen any of them, and has no plans to watch the movie. However, he would like to see his former friends honored in Alabama, and for someone to gather old game film from other high schools so they won't be forgotten.

"I think they should be in the Alabama sports Hall of Fame," the 55-year-old said. "There should be something there, some plaque, some kind of mention.

"What else can you give to the sport than your life?"

# Loose deadline: David Barron

*Comment of the judge, Gene Duffey: Good writing with an important subject that made you feel you were riding on one of the buses with the Rice players. Interviewing an assistant coach and player with ties to the area made it even better. Good emotional quotes from the tour guide.*

**By DAVID BARRON**  
**Houston Chronicle**

NEW ORLEANS - Another time, in a different year with a different team, perhaps they would have been mugging with Mickey Mouse at Disneyland, petting Shamu the Killer Whale at Sea World or strolling the River Walk in San Antonio.

But these are the Rice Owls, and this is the 2006 New Orleans Bowl. And so the Rice contingent spent an hour Wednesday morning driving through the Lower 9th Ward, ground zero for the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina.

Three buses filled with players, coaches and family members rolled down St. Claude Avenue, across the Industrial Canal bridge, past Fats Domino's house on Caffin Avenue, along North Prieur and Deslonde and Tennessee streets, past wrecked houses, scattered trailers and concrete slabs where houses once stood, then back to North Claiborne Avenue and across the canal toward the French Quarter.

For some, it might have been nothing more than a hermetically sealed tour through Katrina World, a land all but one or two knew only from television news broadcasts. But for assistant coach Michael Smith, who sat quietly in front of one bus, it was a bitter return to a neighborhood he remembered from his high school days.

Smith, a native of the New Orleans East neighborhood, recalls visiting the Lower 9th as a student at Jesuit High School to play teams from Holy Cross High School, which was inundated along with the rest of the Lower 9th when the New Orleans canals were breached during Hurricane Katrina 16 months ago.

He'll spend part of today, one day before the Owls play Troy University at the Louisiana Superdome, visiting his grandmother, Lorraine Smith, 76, who just moved into a FEMA trailer outside what remains of her house in the Gentilly neighborhood.

"She's a tough woman. She's a stone," Smith said. "She's stubborn in her ways, but she wants to be back in her house."

On the same bus, a few rows back, was senior deep snapper Drew Clardy of Moss Point, Miss. Clardy's family moved two years ago to Ocean Springs, Miss., where

**DAVID BARRON**  
– **Houston Chronicle**

**Age:** 54

**College:** University of Texas

**Background:** Barron has written about Texas college football since 1980 as a reporter and editor for the *Houston Chronicle*, United Press International, the *Waco Tribune-Herald* and Dave Campbell's *Texas Football* magazine. A graduate of John Tyler High School in Tyler, Texas, where he saw Earl Campbell play his first high school game in 1971, Barron graduated from the University of Texas at Austin and worked for the *Tyler Courier-Times-Telegraph* before joining the *Waco Tribune-Herald* in 1978. He began working in 1980 with Dave Campbell, an FWAA member since 1956, on *Texas Football* magazine, serving as managing editor from 1990 through 2004 and remaining with the magazine today as its longest-tenured contributor. After working five years at UPI's Dallas bureau, he joined the *Houston Chronicle* in 1990 and has worked as assistant sports editor (1993-2004), Olympics writer and sports television-radio writer. He has won awards in state and national APSE contests and last year was the first-place winner in the FWAA Best Writing with a game story on the Texas-USC Rose Bowl game.



Katrina swept 5 feet of water into their home. He spent last Christmas in a FEMA trailer with his family; he'll spend this one, after Friday's game, in their remodeled home.

Smith and Clardy knew what to expect. But for the rest of Rice's student-athletes, Wednesday was, indeed, a day in the classroom.

"Every American should see this," first-year head coach Todd Graham said. "We had some time today, and it was my choice to spend it this way."

The Owls (7-5) have had an up-and-down year, dealing with the preseason death of a teammate, Dale Lloyd, and opening the year with four consecutive losses. But they rebounded to win their last six games and earn the school's first bowl berth since 1961.

In that sense, Graham said, "We're a team of perseverance. And New Orleans is the city of perseverance. And for (the players) not to see this just wouldn't be right."

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## Loose deadline (continued)

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They traveled in silence, broken only on the middle bus by the voice of tour guide Polly Thomas, a professor at the University of New Orleans, whose narration varied from the clinical to the emotional.

"It's really hard for me to do," she said at one point. "When you see your city that has been devastated, it hurts."

Her voice trailed off. The bus was silent. Smith sat to Thomas' left, looking out the window as block after block rolled by.

"Could you have imagined this without seeing it?" Thomas said.

There are pockets of change in the Lower 9th, including a volunteer center on Deslonde, and occasional workers who waved at the passing buses. But it's still common to see houses bearing the trademark X accompanied by notes on when they were searched, who searched them and how many bodies, if any, were found.

Back in the French Quarter, the buses unloaded at the House of Blues for lunch, followed by a hospital tour, practice and a walk-through today at the renovated Superdome, site of Friday's game and a potent symbol of New Orleans' efforts to return to normal.

After Friday, the Owls will scatter for the rest of the Christmas holidays. Clardy, who spent 14 hours after Katrina not knowing if his parents had survived, will join them in Mississippi.

Smith, whose parents now live in Mandeville, La., will join his family to celebrate the holidays and process what he saw Wednesday.

"We're supposed to be one of the strongest countries in the world," Smith said. "For this to happen on our soil and to see (debris) still there two years later, it's devastating to me."

"But it's great to be here. I'm getting to see lots of friends and family. And I'll remember this day the rest of my life."



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