

Prologue

They were crazy.

Wild.

And reckless.

A bunch of good old boys who had hung up their cleats as soon as the last strains of a high school band had faded into the night.

For years, they had been Friday night heroes.

But the last whistle had blown.

They had spit the last blade of grass from their teeth.

The last cheerleader had walked off the field.

The last patch of sweat and blood had dried on their faces.

They had kissed their last homecoming queen.

That's what they thought.

That was the cold, harsh reality facing them all.

No more wins.

No more losses.

At least, not personally.

For them all, the memories might grow brighter by the day, but the glory of it all had dimmed.

And now it was gone.

A few smaller colleges, a handful of junior colleges, might have wanted them, might have given them a chance to play again, might have promised to resurrect the bare remnants of a fading dream.

But, to a man, they wanted Texas A&M and the academic hope that the university offered them. For so many, the maroon and white tradition was a family inheritance.

They could go to any college they wanted, but dad's money was going to Texas A&M.

Life was no longer measured in yard lines and hash marks.

The future lay at the end of four, maybe five years, not a mere hundred yards and a cloud of dust away.

With few exceptions, none of them had any right to even hope of wearing a Texas A&M football uniform.

Division One football, in all of its collective wit and wisdom, glanced haphazardly at each of these players and, with prejudiced eyes, quickly made up its mind.

They were a little too slow.

They were a little too short.

They didn't weigh quite enough.

They weighed a little too much.

And they jumped like they had lead weights or far too many hamburgers in their shoes.

They were out of shape, generally hadn't lifted serious weights for a long time, were better at chasing girls than running backs, never expected to come any closer to an on-field collision than their seats in the third deck of the twenty yard line, and, most often, suffered bodily injury only when they slipped off the barstool or found themselves face to face with a wayward fist at the *Dixie Chicken*.

They simply didn't have the speed, quickness, agility, strength, or muscle to play big-time college football.

That's what Division One Football thought.

But Division One Football didn't see what I saw, know what I knew about Texas A&M, its traditions, its legacy, and the never-say-die, never-say-quit, never-back-down spirit that dwelled deep within the hearts of a student body that would run through a brick wall or tear the sonuvabitch down with their bare hands if the maroon and white asked them to.

They were the builders of bonfire.

They were the keepers of the flame.

Individually and collectively, they were the heartbeat of everything so special about Texas A&M.

Like E. King Gill, the original 12th Man, they were ready to come down out of the stands if the football team needed them.

Unlike E. King Gill, they did take the field, time and again, year after year, a handful of them becoming my notorious 12th Man Kickoff Team, a motley collection of nondescript walk-ons with more courage than sense, a wild bunch with eyes peeled back and ears laid flat, charging hell-bent-for-leather toward the promised land like a runaway freight train with its boiler exploding, ready to hit or be hit, break a wedge or break a neck, with one undeniable thought in mind, and that was find the man with the football and tear his helmet off, preferably with his head still inside it.

Nobody, from one end of the country to the other, believed they could take the place of scholarship athletes and successfully accomplish what they had been assigned to do.

Most high-dollar, big-time, buttoned-up college football coaches thought I was as crazy, maybe even crazier, than those madcap renegades and mavericks who formed the 12th Man Kickoff Team.

Jackie's lost it, I heard them say.

He's mad.

He's naïve.

He's a little touched in the head.

Don't worry. It's just a publicity stunt.

He'll never pull it off.

It'll never happen.

But they didn't see what I saw or know what I knew about a special time and a special place at Texas A&M.

They had never looked into the eyes of that kickoff team and stared into the depth of a raging wildfire burning deep in their souls.

They were walk-ons, all right.

Well, maybe they weren't.

They were run-ons.

They were running hard wherever they went, on the field, off the field, in practice, in games, in unison, even when they knew that some six-five, 290-pound, All-State, All-American Defensive End was only a step away from taking the hundred and eighty pounds that God had given them and slamming them ground-level flat on dirt, on grass, on turf, on their back.

They didn't flinch.

They never hesitated.

Knock them down, and you knew you had to stand up and do it again.

They were tackling dummies in practice.

They were cannon fodder and dared those high-profile, highly-recruited, well-publicized varsity players to take their best shot.

They left their blood on the field.

They left their skin on the turf.

They went home at night battered.

And bruised.

A day without pain was a day that no longer existed for any of them.

But they stood tall and defiant, did the members of those 12th Man Kickoff Teams, and they never stayed down no matter how many times they were hammered to the ground.

They played with broken bones.

They played with twisted ankles.

They played when they would have been better off in an emergency room. They played hurt simply because they were afraid that an injury, regardless of how serious it might be, could well keep them off the team.

It didn't.

But there was always that nagging fear digging ragged holes in their chests.

Most were high school stars with All-District patches on their back-home letter jackets.

All-district didn't count anymore.

A few had played on Friday nights before thirty or forty thousand screaming fans. Others had even experienced the glory of Kyle Field during an autumn run of playoff games. And some only knew the agony and ecstasy of grinding it out beneath the dim glare of packed stadiums that barely held four hundred on a good night.

One played six-man football.

And two had never even played a down of high school football. One came from the Fightin' Texas Aggie Band, although he had been on the golf and tennis teams back home, and another had to choose between football and a cello in the high school orchestra. He selected the cello.

But they were all athletes.

They were tough.

They loved to compete.

And while running with the scout teams during practice, they were willing to get battered play after play, day after day, hour after hour, for just one clean, open shot at a starter.

Eyes open.

Jaws clenched.

Muscles tight.

Bones jarred.

Impact.

God, how they loved impact.

In practice, my scholarship players were preparing for Saturday.

For the 12th Man Kickoff Team, every day was game day.

They came with everything they had.

I could count on it.

They made my varsity players better.

I could depend on it.

In practice and in games, they showed no mercy.

They gave no quarter.

They had no idea what the word *quit* meant.

On kickoffs at home and away from Kyle Field, they had only one goal, and it kept their engine running even when the gas was low. They wanted to keep the kickoff returner inside the twenty yard line, not a yard farther, not a step better, and they faced the best that college football could throw their way, including All-Americans and a Heisman Trophy winner.

During my years as head coach at Texas A&M, no one ever returned a kickoff for a touchdown. Only a couple ever reached the fifty. Every yard came with a price, and it was paid for with stitches and blood.

It was commonplace for the 12th Man Kickoff Team to lead the nation with the fewest return yards allowed, or at least be in the top three. It wasn't unusual at all for them to have a better average in the kickoffs they covered at home than my varsity return team had on the road.

I would have proudly taken them to every game.

I would have lined them up on every kickoff.

I had that much confidence in them.

But NCAA rules limited our travel squad to sixty players, and, except for the last road game of the year when that restriction was eliminated, I had no alternative but to keep my 12th Man Team at home.

Kyle Field has traditionally been recognized as one of the loudest and most frenzied venues in the nation for college football.

But when those towel-waving members of the 12th Man Kickoff Team bolted out of the tunnel, Kyle Field exploded.

The noise was deafening. The decibel level touched nerves that hadn't been touched in years. You could scream, but there was no way you could hear the words you were screaming.

I had All-Americans playing for Texas A&M. Many would go on to have great careers in the NFL playing on Sunday.

But those members of the 12th Man Kickoff Team weren't just a hand-me-down collection of small-time, small-town football players.

On campus, they were rock stars.

They were the Aggie connection with the student body.

And, amidst the tumult and the shouting, they brought the hopes and aspirations of the entire student body down onto Kyle Field with them.

I believed in the 12th Man.

They never let me down, and I never doubted they would.

But then, from the very beginning, nobody else was able to see what I saw or know what I knew about them and the indomitable spirit that drove them so hard.

Individually, they may not have belonged on a college football field.

But collectively, they would fight until there was no one left standing, and no one was ever able to get them all.

They had a job to do, and no one did it better.

They were the 12th Man.

They were Texas A&M.

They became a legend.

(Jackie Sherrill Signature)