

A Little Team That's Full of Big Dreams

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"a moment of silence for The Citadel." A moment of silence? Not for a second. One Bulldog yelled, mocking the writer: "A moment of silence!"

"We're special," another Bulldog shouted. "Special people in here gonna make some special plays." Still another hollered: "It's right in front of y'all fellas, it's right in front of y'all." They could smell victory, and the excitement was contagious. "I'm gonna get No. 83's ass out, man!" one Bulldog pledged. A teammate roared: "Play as one. One heart, man!"

"West-Point Ree-Jects." The jeering faded as the last Bulldog stepped inside, but the ceiling rumbled with the pounding of Seminole feet in the stands overhead, and the Seminole war chant warbled on and on, in never-ending loops. The locker room was not a room. It was a warren of low, short hallways, a series of corridors, lined with dressing stalls. No Bulldog could see more than a third of his teammates. Inside this accommodation, it was impossible for any visiting coach to address his team as a whole.

Trainers squeezed into a room just large enough for three training tables -- no fourth injury, please. The lighting flickered and the air conditioning worked about as well as a bad vacuum cleaner. The littered, gray carpet absorbed, cooked and time-released the ammonia-tinged odor of sweat from players the Seminoles had pounded into submission over the years. To the nose, it was urine, with a hint of bayou. It pinched the back of the throat.

But this hardly mattered. The Bulldogs were not taking insults. They were delivering them. Last year, The Citadel had won three games and lost eight. It had been thrashed, even by other small schools in its conference. Tonight, the opponent was a major college football power, coached by a man who had won more games than any major college coach in history. Florida State boasted that it had sent more players to today's National Football League than any other university -- 53, exactly enough to fill an NFL team roster.

By any objective measure, this contest was one of the biggest mismatches of the year in college football. The Citadel had been bused nine hours from Charleston, S.C., to Tallahassee to be outmanned at virtually every position. This game, in a stadium that could seat the Bulldog student body 41 times over, would earn The Citadel some \$400,000 -- enough to keep its football program solvent. The Bulldogs fulfilled their mission just by showing up. This game was not about winning. This game was about money.

But now, guess what: The first half hadn't gone as expected. The Citadel and Florida State were just three points apart. The Seminoles left the field cursing in imaginative bursts, and the Bulldogs were on a contact high. Inside the visitors' locker room, the Bulldog coaches emerged from a huddle of their own. They scattered to speak to their players in small groups. "They don't have enough heart," one coach said of Florida State. "They're getting frustrated."

Full credit went to the Bulldog defense. The defensive squad had kept the game close, and it was the defensive squad that had scored the Bulldog touchdown. Now, one of the coaches declared, it was up to the offense to step up. He ticked off the plays that he thought would work: "Listen, Veer is there, Speed's there, Bubble's there. We've got a lot of plays. Lightning Train is there, 80 Screen, Check 98."

The head coach tried his best, across the stalls and partitions, to exhort his entire team. Against the din of the Seminole warble and the rattle of the Seminole band outside the walls, he announced his choice of plays to begin the second half.

"98 Special, first play," he shouted. "Everybody up front. Just hold your blocks forever." His steely blue eyes fixed on his undersized quarterback. "This play is there. Got it?"

The Bulldog coach didn't know it, but around a corner, paces away, his defensive unit was kneeling in prayer. During the first quarter, someone had announced over the Florida State public address system that back in Charleston, The Citadel had been evacuated in the face of Hurricane Ophelia.

Worse, as the Bulldogs left the field for half-

time, someone told a defensive player about a wreck on I-95. A tire had blown on a sport utility vehicle bringing three cadets to the game. The SUV tumbled down the interstate, finally coming to rest on the median. Two of the cadets died. A third was fighting for his life.

Word spread. Almost everyone in the defensive unit knew the cadets. It is hard to make a Bulldog cry. But that did it.

The head coach hadn't heard.

"98 Special," he shouted again, as the Bulldogs started back to the field. "Come on, men!"

The Money

Big-time college football is more than ever about media exposure and money.

The nation's 119 Division I-A football teams are waging an expensive arms race. Over the last decade, they have raised ticket prices, tapped donors for bigger contributions and vied for lucrative TV contracts so they could enlarge their stadiums, install multimillion-dollar locker rooms and erect indoor practice fields. The lavish upgrades impress high school recruits, as does the chance to have their exploits televised from coast to coast.

Somewhere in that mix of dough and glitz is plain old football: 11 hats on 11 hats for the love of the game. But it's getting ever harder to find.

Not so if you drop down to smaller colleges. There the game is closer to its roots. There the game can be about as authentic as college football gets today. The players practice just as hard and sacrifice just as much. No elaborate training meals, jet rides or ESPN replays. Instead, these players eat box lunches on all-night bus rides to



Ready and Waiting: Citadel's Zach Bryant practices: the player known as Shrek would take part in his first college game the next day in Tallahassee.