

play games recorded in agate type deep inside the sports pages.

But these smaller football programs have a tougher time meeting their budgets. They cannot turn to TV and long lists of alumni for support. So they go for some of the crumbs that fall from the better-set tables.

They play what are known as "guarantee" games: A small school negotiates to play a big school at its big stadium for a relatively big payday -- a guaranteed share of the take. Big schools make more money too, because The Citadel and other small schools demand less money than, say, Michigan. And the big schools get an easy win. That makes this a nifty deal all around, if you suspend the notion of competition for the sake of sport.

These games have always been part of college football. But this year, pressured by small and large schools alike, the NCAA changed its rules to allow big schools to count one victory against a small school each year in qualifying for bowl games. Under the old rules, Division I-A teams could count only one win over a Division I-AA team, such as The Citadel, every four years.

So it is that college football fans can expect to see many more mismatches like the ones this September, when Top 20 teams at California, Texas Tech and Florida State played the likes of Sacramento State, Sam Houston State and The Citadel.

Sports analyst Jeff Sagarin has studied statistical comparisons of team strengths for decades. Based on his rankings, The Citadel's trip to Tallahassee to play 11th-ranked Florida State stood out: It was likely to be the biggest mismatch of 2005.

What must players from the little team think? Who would schedule such a game?

### The Players

Zach Bryant, known as Shrek, was on the little team.

Two kinds of young men play football for The Citadel: those who grow up saying "no way," and those who grow up saying "no way in hell." Why go to a college that bans video games, sleeping in, alcohol, marriage and cussing? Zach Bryant said no way in hell. Yet here he was on The Citadel practice field just downwind from the musty-sulfur smell of the Ashley River marsh, flicking sweat from his eyes and snapping the strap of his helmet.

On this play, he needed to fly low and hard into anyone in his way, clearing a path for the guy carrying the ball. At the signal, Bryant, an ogre with a 52-inch chest, tore straight ahead, kicking up sod as he disappeared into a void between two taller teammates. An instant later, he reappeared, staggering backward as if he had run into a man carrying a piano. His knees, put together with screws, wobbled. Shrek sank to the soggy turf.

It was just after 4 p.m. on Aug. 15, one of those miserable afternoons in Charleston that can cause a football player to hate the smell of grass forever. The heat stood at 100.9 degrees, the humidity at 83.9%. In that kind of weather, it is supremely hard for human bodies to cool. People call it "stupid weather," because that's what it makes you. The head coach told the Bulldogs they could quit for the day. "Half the teams in America would."

But the Bulldogs stayed. By a trainer's count, they drank 481 gallons of Gatorade and water before practice ended. Some sweated away as much as 11 pounds.

Zach, 22, was in his fourth year at The Citadel. He was a kid who could overcome anything. He had no football scholarship. More than that, he had never played in a game. A knee injury had ruined his final season in high school. That spring, his father had left the family, and Citadel coaches urged him to "walk on" with the Bulldogs. That meant that if he turned out to be good enough, the school might give him financial aid.

His prospects were dwindling. "No way in hell" became "I can do this."

Then, a week into his first football camp, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. It meant four chemotherapy treatments and 33 radiation treatments. Zach wanted to go home and take care of her, but she refused to let him. She was unemployed, so she organized a fundraiser to help pay her bills. The VFW donated its hall. She got a two-piece band and an Elvis impersonator and netted \$2,000.

It turned out that Zach was simply not good enough for a scholarship. But the kid who could overcome anything spent two years as a reserve. He figured he would make the team that way. Then, warming up for a run, he injured his other knee doing a high kick he calls "a flyin' Russian."

More screws, and no football in 2004.

But overcome it all he did. He licked a stutter that angered him. He corralled academic scholarships that covered nearly all of his education, and he found loans to cover the rest. And now he was back on the field, hoping to get into a game.

Zach Bryant was not about to let another man defeat him, even if the man was carrying a piano. So he got up from the wet turf and trotted back into practice.

He planned to be an orthopedic surgeon. Maybe Shrek would fix his own knees one day.

Shawn Grant, a co-captain, was on the little team too.

He was the man carrying the Steinway. Square-jawed, grandly biceped, the best athlete on the team, Shawn, 21, was a senior linebacker who had vowed growing up that he would never play for The Citadel. No way.

Why not go to a regular college, where you could have a car, a cell phone and dorm-room visitors? Where you could have a TV and leave campus on weekends? Why put up with upper-classmen ordering you, on a whim, to stop and recite dumb poems, or to skip across campus like a kindergartner? Why be forced to reply to everything with a sir sandwich? "Sir, yes, sir." "Sir, no, sir." "Sir, no excuses, sir."

But Shawn Grant wanted to learn how to lead. He knew it would get better after the first year, even if you couldn't grow a beard, or stay out of bed after 11 p.m., or stay in bed after 7 a.m., or smoke dope, or curse at a teammate, or talk to a freshman, or ditch class, or wear jeans or khakis or cutoffs or anything except that damn uniform, although it did make the hotties at the College of Charleston shimmy into size-0 dresses and parade by hoping for a date.

The large schools offered no financial aid to the kid who wanted to lead. His exploits were legend in high school, but he was only 5 feet 9 -- too small for the big time. Appalachian State would give him a scholarship, but it was up in the mountains, in snow country, two hours farther from home and from his mother and uncle and aunt, who had joined hands to raise him after



**The Man in the Middle:** Citadel first year-coach Kevin Higgins, with quarterback Duran Lawson in the first half, was wary of the Bulldogs' schedule when he took the job, particularly the Florida State game.