

his father was killed by an assailant and his sister was killed five years later by an angry boyfriend -- all before Shawn turned 9.

Citadel coaches urged him to "trade four for 40," which meant trading four years of discipline for a lifetime of success.

He prayed and prayed, and when he finished, he said "it made perfect sense."

"No way" turned into enrolling. He dreamed of making it to the NFL. And when he was named a co-captain, he knew he was becoming a leader.

Porter Johnson, 21, was on the little team as well. His father called him Champ.

He was a kid who always gave twice as much. Practicing in "stupid weather" wasn't enough. He would diet too. Everyone else had eaten a regular lunch, but on this day, when the humidity was so thick you couldn't find blue sky, Champ ate lettuce and a fruit cup.

More than that, Porter Johnson was playing in a new position. After three years on offense, he had become a linebacker. The clock was edging toward 4:30 p.m. Only 20 minutes left in practice. But the weather and the dieting were turning him stupider than stupid.

He blew a play.

"Johnson!" the defensive coach bellowed. "Get off the field. Get (pause) off (pause) the (pause) field!"

The kid who gave twice as much trudged toward the sideline, shoulders slumping. He fell to his knees. A trainer pulled a white towel from a chest of ice water and draped it over his head.

Champ had come to The Citadel on a football scholarship. Typically, he chose the hardest major: electrical engineering. Typically, he worked hard, earned academic aid and gave the football money back.

Through most of high school, he thought he might go to Furman, a small college with a strong team. No way would he ever go to The Citadel, although it was closer to home. He and his dad, a police lieutenant, were best of friends. Champ attended his father's high school, and, like his dad, he was class vice president. One morning, when Champ was a senior, his father lost a fight with colon cancer.

His last words to his wife were: Where's Champ?

After he died, his son put his arms around his mother and his sister. We're going to be all right, his mother would recall Champ saying. They buried his father under a pine tree, where Champ and his sister still go sometimes to talk to him.

Porter's mother wanted Champ to stay close. So Champ, the kid who always gave twice as much, went to The Citadel.

And there he was, on the field, under a cold towel, sucking wind. "Sometimes," he'd said over his lettuce lunch, "you've got to go through stuff to get what you want."

What Champ wanted, what Shrek wanted, and what the co-captain and every other player on the little team wanted was to beat the big team.

They wanted to dump Florida State.

The Athletic Director

Who would schedule such a game? Who had pitted young men such as these against the Seminoles of Florida State?

It was Les Robinson, the athletic director, who exercised, showered for dinner, rubbed on Paul Sebastian cologne and popped a can of Heinek-en. "Let's go have a look," he told a visitor, and walked him from his front door two blocks to a new, 4,400-square-foot home he was building on Sullivan's Island, a tranquil, exclusive oceanfront suburb of Charleston. Even in bare framing, it looked like a fine home. It was on stilts, like all the grand houses in the Lowcountry. It had a 180-degree view of the Atlantic Ocean.

Robinson, 63, was college basketball royalty, a genial man with a sweet-potato voice, in his second career with The Citadel. He had been head basketball coach for 11 years before moving on and eventually becoming basketball coach and athletic director at North Carolina State, in the prestigious Atlantic Coast Conference. Five years ago, he came back to The Citadel and to the house he'd held onto for 32 years and would sell to pay for the new one. Though he had two master's degrees, he was still very much a West Virginia country boy, a Southern raconteur (it was "fuh-ball," as if the T had been Heimlich) whose stories unfolded in great ornamental narratives, polished by the fine grit of many years of retelling -- and always in service of a larger point.

This was Aug. 1, a week before practice, and already he was getting calls from sportswriters and alumni asking why he had scheduled a game with Florida State. Small schools could play as many guarantee games as they wanted, and he had scheduled a second guarantee game as well, against Ole Miss.

So Les Robinson told his visitor a story. Last year, after losing 33-3 in a guarantee game against Auburn, he recounted, Citadel players had come up to him on the field and thanked him for the opportunity. For them, he said, holding Auburn to 33 points was a moral victory. "The players love playing in these games," Robinson said, reaching his point. "It's a chance to test themselves." Moreover, every now and then, the little team wins.

The Citadel had been playing guarantee games for decades. Many alumni love it. Besides, Robinson said, these games are not just about the gate money. They also give exposure to Bulldog football, and that helps with recruiting and with raising money from donors, which The Citadel needs desperately. Two years ago, it had to tear down the west side of its modest stadium, built in the late 1940s, because it was no longer safe, and it didn't have the money to rebuild. Not that it could have immediately, anyway, and thereby hung a side-story: Demolition workers found graves under the bleachers. So while Robinson and others were raising funds, historians were digging up the bones of Confederate soldiers.

But now to his larger point: Thanks to the fundraising, The Citadel had about \$7 million on

hand for a new grandstand when it broke ground -- a small sum in today's big-college arms race, but not at a school that graduates fewer than 500 cadets a year, giving it a base of about 20,000 living alumni. That's half the current enrollment at Florida State.

"I've had a great life, lived in a great country," Robinson said. "My mission ... is to educate young people. A good percentage of them are going to serve our country." That is why, he declared, "I have zero problem asking people for money."

All of this was something that he would have to explain more than once. Ten days later, he and his visitor were walking near the practice field. Robinson's cell phone rang.

"Uh huh. Well, it's what we need to do.... I understand, yes. I understand. Well, come on in, I'm happy to meet with you." He hung up.

"Some alumnus. Not happy we're playing Florida State."

The Coach

Kevin Higgins, 49, the rookie head coach, was the man in the middle.

On Sunday night, Aug. 7, the night before football practice began, he stood at the front of an auditorium that served as a classroom and watched his team file quietly into the seats. The Citadel allowed two kinds of garb: standard dark blue T-shirts with athletic shorts or battleship-gray cadet uniforms.

Shawn Grant, the kid who wanted to lead, wore his grays.

Welcome back, Coach Higgins said. Summer was over. Time for haircuts. The school allowed two kinds: head shaved and head shaved a month ago.

"Yes, sir!"

Don't litter this classroom. "We don't want to get kicked out."

"Yes, sir!"

No cursing. That went for players and coaches. "Using profanity or taking God's name in vain will not make you a better player."

"Yes, sir!"

Higgins built to his finale. Why was it that The Citadel had won only two conference championships in 100 years? "We are leaders. We understand discipline. We have been through adversity." Why wasn't The Citadel winning? Street and Smith, the bible of preseason college football, had reviewed the Bulldog talent and schedule and had written: "A moment of silence for The Citadel."

It had picked the Bulldogs to finish last in their conference.

"All around the country," Higgins said, sounding disgusted, "that is what people think of us. 'A moment of silence ...'"

Kevin Higgins didn't tell them, but he hadn't wanted to come here, not to this school, with this schedule, including the guarantee games against Florida State and Ole Miss.

After coaching Lehigh University to a three-year record of 32 wins and one loss, he had been the toast of small college football. He skipped