

straight to the NFL, where he became an assistant coach for the Detroit Lions, a punchless franchise that showed him the door last season. So he needed work. His resume failed to land him a job as head coach at a major college. And by spring, he had run out of options.

When he came to The Citadel, the fall was as steep as his rise. The college was only half as big as some Los Angeles high schools. He took a 40% pay cut and lost \$35,000 on his house in Detroit to move to the South, where his New York accent was pickles on pecan pie. Higgins lived in a mustard-colored house he rented from the college.

He found military traditions at The Citadel more 19th than 21st century -- and one of the big reasons its trophy case was small. Then there was the Florida State game. Look at the schedule, his wife, Kay, would remember him saying. How can you win? But his Irish immigrant father had started over in midlife when the mob forced him and another honest bookkeeper out of their union jobs in New York. So Kevin and Kay Higgins decided: This has got to be what God has in mind for us. "It's come full circle," he said. "I have a chance like my dad did. Now my kids have a chance to see me go through this...."

Kay's impressions of The Citadel had been formed by two national black eyes: nasty hazing incidents in the 1980s and the school's fight against admitting women in the 1990s. She arrived expecting certitude and braggadocio. But she found almost the opposite. A court had ordered The Citadel to admit women, the Justice Department had monitored its compliance, and the college had brought in new leadership and changed things. Even the alumni seemed humble. "They have a sense," Kay Higgins said, "they are part of something larger."

The Citadel, she said, teaches cadets "to sort out the difference between a need and a want." That, she said, is something big schools don't want to confront. "It's a privilege to lead," she said, and Kevin seemed to do it naturally. At church, he reorganized a group so that it did business before socializing. At school, his compact sentences and unblinking eyes suggested to cadets that you, son, should organize your thoughts before opening your mouth.

He was direct. At dinner out, he would ask his wife what she wanted, so when the menus came, they were ready to order. You OK with water?

He was not a socializer, she said. "He thinks amusement parks are a colossal waste of time."

The Practices

It was Aug. 12. Four weeks to go ...

The "inside drill" was a particularly brutal way to practice. Five offensive linemen, a blocking back and a running back line up on one side of the football. Four defensive linemen and three linebackers oppose them. Everyone knows how it goes: The offense tries to open a hole for the running back, and the defense tries to plug it. The

ball carrier dives forward -- no swinging wide -- and straight into punishment.

Sometimes Zach Bryant, known as Shrek, had to block Porter Johnson, the Champ. Other times he had to block Shawn Grant, the co-captain, the kid who wanted to lead. It was bone-jarring, often-futile. Bryant, the kid who could overcome anything, rarely got it done. Again and again, he tried. That was The Citadel way.

Three days earlier, an offensive line coach had put it this way: "You ask a kid to do something, they say, 'Yes, sir.' You ask them to run through a wall, they say, 'Would you like that face first or cross body?' Sometimes you've got to say, 'Yes, sir,' even when you don't believe it. It's a quality that has gotten lost in the Me Generation. Athletes here are submissive to authority. They do what you ask them to do and do it with great effort. They know how to lead because they know how to follow."

They had started learning early. Sprinkled on the team were a score of freshmen, known as knobs because their shaved heads looked like doorknobs. Over their cadet uniforms, they wore small backpacks -- "camel packs" -- containing liquids, with tubes extending to their mouths, to keep them hydrated. The packs were mandatory because football was nothing compared to the "hell week" they were going through. Up at 5 a.m. On the line by 5:05. Ninety minutes of push-ups, sit-ups and running. Line up. Brace for 20 minutes and endure the pain. Then run upstairs. Run downstairs. Run. Always run. Until 9:30 p.m., when they memorized Citadel rules. From the blue book. The white book. The red book. Then they memorized the football playbook. Lights went out at 11 p.m. Even run to bed.

On the day of "inside drill," two visitors watched. One was an Army colonel just back from Afghanistan. His gaze followed Shrek up and down the field. He appreciated Shrek's determination. "Every mother and father who sends a son or daughter to fight," the colonel said, "deserves the best leaders we can find." Character, he knew, was rarely an issue for the Bulldogs. In the athletic department, nobody could remember when a football player had run afoul of the law. On the other hand, at Florida State over the last decade, athletes had been arrested on suspicion of theft, battery, illegal gambling, burglary, drug possession, sexual assault and attempted murder.

Another thing the colonel knew: The Citadel was a public school, run by the state of South Carolina. Unlike students at West Point or the other military academies, these young men could quit anytime. They had made no commitment to four years and then to military service afterward. It meant, the colonel knew, that every day the Bulldogs did this, they chose to do it. He knew that Shrek wanted to go to medical school. Maybe the Army could help.

The other visitor was a retired colonel, an Army veteran from World War II who had played for The Citadel in the late 1930s. He was trim and

had a hard gaze. To him, The Citadel was getting soft. He said that Shrek, Champ and the co-captain -- all of them, in fact -- were getting too much special treatment. Then, assuming that another white person would agree, he complained that there were "too many blacks on the team."

Getting soft? One Bulldog father had said just the opposite a few days earlier. A graduate of the Naval Academy and retired commander of a nuclear submarine, this military man said he wanted his sons at The Citadel precisely for the discipline. "As the military academies have gotten softer, this place hasn't," he declared. "This is a special breed of boys. Looking at them, you have great faith in America."

But faith in their football?

So it was that Coach Higgins brought in a motivational speaker to dig into their psyches and make them the winners in football that he knew they were in life.

"You have got to be some of the most competitive men on the face of the Earth," the speaker said. "Why isn't that translating in wins and losses? Have we drifted into a place where we accept [defeat] ... ? You have got to be a rare breed to choose what you've chosen here ... a place that requires sacrifice. [But] leaders of leaders need to step up."

Champ would say afterward that he thought the guy was talking directly to him.

The co-captain, who wanted to be a leader, searched for a theme -- and found one. "A leader is willing to confront peers when [their] actions are eroding team goals," the speaker said, echoing The Citadel's revered honor code: A cadet will not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do.

The speaker ended with an insult. "A moment of silence for The Citadel"

Before the week was out, Shawn Grant and the other co-captains called a special meeting. Just the team. No coaches. Starting today, Grant told everyone, this team needed to find a way to turn around its losing seasons. Starting today, it was the duty of every player to act in the best interests of the team and to call out anyone who didn't.

A hand rose near the back. "I don't think I can turn in a teammate."

"Bullshit!" someone else yelled. Other forbidden words flew around the room.

Then a starter on the defensive secondary turned in his seat and faced the dissenter. "How are we going to change this if we don't all act as one? You want to keep losing?"

The Buildup

Sept. 2. One week to go ...

The phone in the athletic director's office rang and rang again. Callers asked Les Robinson: Why play Florida State?

At dinner with his wife, Barbara, and a visitor, Robinson returned, often unprompted, to the subject. Guarantee games, he said, are the future for a lot of small schools. He had told his staff,