

only half-joking, that he intended to go to an annual meeting of athletic directors and "sit by the pool and take bids."

As a basketball coach, he recalled, he had scheduled a tuneup game for North Carolina State with tiny Cal Poly San Luis Obispo as his team headed to Hawaii for a tournament.

Cal Poly loved the attention, he said.

But as the dinner went on, Robinson acknowledged that he was still learning the difference between coaching basketball and football. Left unspoken was that a basketball mismatch is less physically punishing.

Still, he said, his players couldn't wait to play Florida State. "They will never be as high again, until they meet the girl they're going to marry."

Against such a prospect, their game the next day against Charleston Southern was a lesser event, even as a tuneup. Still, it was a game they could lose. "A moment of silence for The Citadel ..."

The Bulldogs led, 7-0, at halftime. Champ and his co-captain conferred quietly. Shrek, screws in his knees, the kid who could overcome anything, sat on the sideline. His mother, the cancer survivor, was there to watch him play, but he didn't.

Then, in the second half, Charleston Southern scored touchdowns the first two times it got the ball. In a blink, The Citadel trailed, 14-7.

"Pathetic," the Bulldog center screamed. "We're pathetic."

Champ and the co-captain both cramped. They lay face-down on the grass. Trainers sweated over them, bending their legs backward to their rumps. Champ was quiet. The co-captain yelled, instructing teammates on alignments, plays to watch for.

The Bulldogs came back. They scored the next three touchdowns.

The Citadel won, 28-14.

On the field, friends and relatives swamped Champ and the co-captain, who smiled broadly. Shrek's mother was crestfallen, but she said she would go to Florida State next week. Maybe ... maybe ... he'd play.

Charleston Southern was a first step, Higgins told the Bulldogs. "As long as we keep working, good things will happen ... later in the season." Later. After Florida State.

Higgins was walking a line. He did not want his team to play the Seminoles, but he would not say so. It might offend his boss, and it might send his players the wrong signal.

On Monday, then Tuesday, then Wednesday, the Bulldogs could not focus. Defeatism? Anxiety? Fear?

The fastest cadet on the Bulldog team, a defensive lineman with a Hummer torso welded onto Ferrari flanks, asked his position coach: "Do you think those guys [from Florida State] are more muscle or fat?"

The question hung in the air.

Finally the coach replied: "I'd say they're more mass."

Coach Higgins' biggest fear was injuries. One



Part of Something: Porter Johnson, right, known as Champ, jokes with teammates after practice at The Citadel. The hard-working, family-oriented Johnson returned his football scholarship after earning academic aid.

afternoon, the Bulldogs' starting center injured his back. A guard took his place.

"We're playing Florida State with a guy who's never snapped the ball in a game before -- and with a new guard," Higgins said. He drew an open hand down from his hair over his eyes. "This could get ugly. I'm asking myself: 'How are we going to get a first down?'"

He thought aloud about other guarantee games his athletic director had in mind. "Les likes to say that this is good for recruiting. But ..."

The morning after Charleston Southern, Higgins and his assistants had watched films of the game. In a series of plays, Charleston Southern had broken through The Citadel's offensive line.

"We need to fix this," Higgins said. He barely paused. "We need to fix this because those guys we're going up against this week ..."

He exhaled a long breath and blew it between his teeth.

"They're werewolves."

The Trip

Sept. 9. Thirty-six hours to go ...

Flying to Tallahassee would nearly triple the \$30,000 expense set aside for the game. So the Bulldogs climbed onto three buses, and at 7:30 a.m. Friday they pulled out. Knobs in full uniform lined one side of the quad, 6 acres of grass surrounded by cream-colored, Spanish-Moorish style buildings, anchored by machinery of war: an F-4 phantom jet, a Cobra helicopter, a Sherman tank, a missile and a pair of cannon. The knobs churned their arms and chanted: C-I-T-A-D-E-L.

Near the last turn, just short of wrought-iron gates, Maj. Gen. Roger C. Poole, the college president, stood alone.

He saluted the buses as they passed.

Champ, Shrek and the co-captain were anxious. Champ, the kid who always gave twice as much,

said he was looking for a chance to measure himself. The co-captain said he couldn't wait to play. Shrek, the kid who could overcome anything, was the most tense of all. With good reason.

The first-team player at Shrek's position had been injured. He, Shrek, Zach Bryant, was about to play his first game. As it turned out, his mother couldn't make the trip, but she had asked an acquaintance to take pictures. Shrek said: "I just don't want to screw up."

At 4:30 p.m., the buses pulled up in front of a massive brick facade: the Florida State stadium. Within minutes, the Bulldogs had found the tiny visitors' locker room, made their way across the urine-smelling carpet with its soupcon of bayou, wound through its warren of corridors and found the dressing stalls. Quietly, they put on shorts and jerseys and made their way out to the field for a first look.

This was a temple, an immense Steuben bowl, crowned with luxury suites. The Bulldogs took photos.

Champ tried to ease the tension. "The field is just 100 yards long, same as ours."

Another Bulldog tried a chant. "Whose house is this?"

Silence.

Again: "Whose house is this?"

"Their house," came a weak reply.

A worker ushered the Bulldogs out of the stadium onto a nearby practice field. A Seminole walked by, a blond at his side.

"Wonder what it would be like," a Bulldog lineman said, elbowing another, "to be an athlete at a college like this, be a wild animal..."

Game day dawned. At 11 a.m., the co-captain's mother and his uncle and aunt pondered the prospects. His uncle had coached Shawn Grant in a parks and recreation league. "Shawn is put together with good threads," he said. "If he was 2 inches taller, he wouldn't be at The Citadel."