

than two minutes. They scored a touchdown.

Then a field goal, to end the half leading by 13-10.

And so the jeering began. "West-Point Reejects. West-Point Reejects."

## The Second Half

The Bulldogs trotted out of their halftime locker room talk trailing a whiff of eau d'bayou.

Those who knew about the SUV wreck grieved for their fellow cadets.

Those who did not tried to focus on the coach's choice of opening play. The 98 Special, everyone hoped, would change their odds.

The play was rooted in trickery. Two receivers would line up to the left. One would head straight toward the defender and fake a block. The defender was meant to assume that the block meant the ball would be thrown to the second receiver. When the defender started in his direction, the first receiver would straighten up and run free to catch the pass. Everything depended upon the fake block.

"You've got to sell it," Coach Higgins shouted. "Sell it. Sell that block."

Shawn Grant, the co-captain, walked over to a starting linebacker, in the same sophomore class as the three cadets in the SUV. The linebacker fought to keep his composure. Grant stood with him, touching helmets. There was only one thing the team could do now, the co-captain said. Play hard to honor the dead.

The Citadel lined up for the 98 Special.

It was hard to count the things that went wrong. The defender did not bite on the fake block. As the Bulldog quarterback, 180 pounds, threw the pass, a Seminole, 249 pounds, drove him to the ground. Then a 6-foot-4 Seminole safety leaped over the top of the 5-foot-11 Bulldog receiver and intercepted.

So much for the 98 Special.

Three plays later, another Bulldog was hurt. A defensive starter tackled a Seminole receiver and went down hard. Trainers helped him from the field.

"Not always athletically do you match up when you go I-AA level to I-A ...," the TV announcer said.

To underscore his point, the Seminoles scored a touchdown on the next play.

Again -- now for the third time -- ESPN focused on the Bulldog offensive line coach and misidentified him as Higgins.

From then on, for The Citadel, things grew worse. Pass, run, run, a Seminole touchdown.

Then seven Seminoles rushed a Bulldog punter. Six of them overwhelmed their blockers and covered the 13 yards to the kicker so quickly he could not put his foot on the ball.

Two plays later, another Seminole touchdown.

But the co-captain, who had learned to be a leader, wanted none of it. He would not let the Bulldogs slack off. He was on them, shouting en-

couragement, instructions. The Bulldog defense tried one last time to make a stand. Shawn Grant willed himself into the backfield and knocked the Seminole quarterback flat.

The co-captain's helmet flew off. The ball fell incomplete.

On the next play, Shawn Grant hit the quarterback again, this time an excruciating moment too late. The Seminole pass was complete -- as was one more, for yet another Seminole touchdown.

The Bulldog offense seemed dazed. The defense looked exhausted, heads down.

Still another injury. A Bulldog receiver caught a pass and was tackled hard. He did not get up. Play stopped. The trainers helped him off the field.

Moments later, a 6-foot-6 receiver reached over a 5-foot-11 Bulldog to catch a Seminole pass for yet another touchdown.

Five touchdowns in 12 minutes and 38 seconds. Florida State, 48-10.

"Right now," the Bulldog equipment manager said, "they're paying us \$8,000 a point."

Coach Higgins began to yield. He sent in second- and third-string defenders so they could tell their grandchildren they played against Florida State.

Three plays into the fourth quarter, the Seminoles scored again.

And four plays after that, a 6-foot-4 freshman quarterback for Florida State skirted the left end, placed his right hand on top of a scrub defender from The Citadel, thrust him to the ground, then pivoted and ran like a whippet into the end zone.

It was Hanna-Barbera comical. But it wasn't the players' fault. The game, after all, was about money.

Final score: Florida State 62, The Citadel 10.

## The Aftermath

As the second and third stringers left the field, Shawn Grant, Porter Johnson, Zach Bryant and the rest of the team cheered and smacked their shoulder pads. But the locker room was sullen.

Coach Higgins thanked everyone who fought hard and praised the defense. "They will always have that first half, for the rest of their lives." But then he said that he was disappointed: Some of the Bulldogs gave up in the second half.

There was silence.

None of the injuries were lasting. "But some guys will look like 10-day-old bananas," the head trainer said.

Each Bulldog got a box of fried chicken, coleslaw and a chocolate-chip cookie as the team boarded buses at 11:30 p.m. for the trip home. Talk was rare and subdued. Florida State, said an assistant coach, "probably has 20 players who will play in the NFL. I don't think we put a hat on a linebacker all day."

Shrek shook his head: "That was a great experience, but ..."

The buses arrived at first light. The campus was dark, the barracks locked. Flags, snapping in spotlights, flew at half-staff in honor of the cadets

killed in the SUV. The sky turned brilliant blue. The hurricane had turned away.

The next week was grim. The college held memorials for the two crash victims. On Saturday, the third died.

The deaths helped put the Florida State game in perspective, Shawn Grant said. "We were definitely torn up by the situation. We handled it the best way we could."

Then he added: "Try to forget the game. It's done with."

Champ's mother put it best: He was "worn slam out" by the game.

Coach Higgins was blunt: "Les likes to say that these guys are going to remember this game for the rest of their lives. I thought long and hard about that on the way back on the bus. The problem right now is that the goal here is to win championships. Remember, championships. It shouldn't be to play against big schools and lose. It's nice that everyone is saying we gave a great effort. But I want you to remember, we lost a football game."

Les Robinson, the athletic director, said he had decided to schedule only one guarantee game in 2006, against Texas A&M. And he was planning for the following year. "I asked Coach Higgins about 2007. We're looking at Wisconsin or South Carolina."

He paused and said, laughing: "I was asking him, 'You want me to beat you with a club, or beat you with this rake?'"

\*Editor's note: The Citadel lost to Ole Miss, 27-7, and finished the season with a 4-7 record.

## About This Story

*Drex Heikes spent 18 days with The Citadel football team, beginning with the opening of its football camp Aug. 7. He was given full access to practices, players, coaches and team meetings. He spent more than 100 hours observing and interviewing players, coaches, trainers and The Citadel athletic director. He also interviewed college and military officials, as well the friends and families of team members.*

*Heikes and photographer Damon Winter, who helped report the story, rode team buses with the players and coaches from The Citadel campus in Charleston, S.C., to the Florida State game in Tallahassee, Fla. Heikes and Winter stayed at the team hotel. They accompanied the team to the visitors' locker room before the game and stood on the sidelines, where they observed and photographed the players, coaches and trainers.*

*After the game, they rode the team buses back to Charleston and interviewed the players and coaches during the trip. They spoke to them after they returned to The Citadel campus and as the season progressed.*