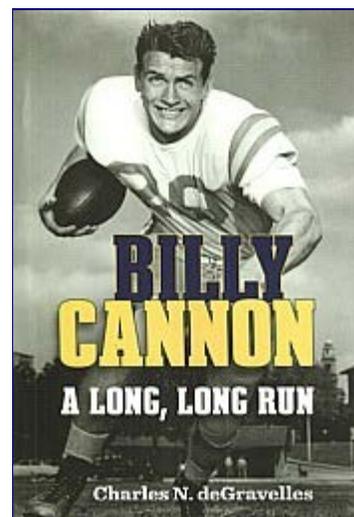


A READER'S JOURNAL

Billy Cannon
A Long, Long Run
by
Charles N. deGravelles

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
Published by LSU Press/LA in 2015
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2016



The year before I went to college at Louisiana State

University, I listened to my first ever football game on radio and I heard raves about LSU's sophomore halfback Billy Cannon who was in the same backfield as the outstanding senior halfback Jimmy Taylor. I felt the excitement of the announcer about Cannon's prospects and decided that I would go to LSU. I was not disappointed: LSU won every game in 1958 and ended as National Champion. The following year Billy Cannon won the Heisman Trophy and I thought that LSU would win every football game while I was there. I was hooked on LSU football for life.

This book tells the story of the amazing halfback who carried LSU to so many incredible victories in 1958 and 1959. Even though I was at LSU through Cannon's junior and senior years, I only knew of him through what he did on the track and football fields, and through rumors and speculation about what he did off the athletic fields. I knew he was a champion 100-yd dash runner and a champion shot-putter, a combination of speed and strength which powered him into being a champion football player. I knew he got married in college and drove a new Chevrolet convertible, with everyone speculating on how he got

the car. In this book, deGravelles reveals the untold story of Billy Cannon, a man as amazing off the field as on the field.

The story of his football career began in December of 1955 when Cannon, arguably the best football player in the country, sat down with Paul Dietzel the coach of LSU, who was there to recruit Billy to join the Fighting Tigers football team. The Coach laid out for Mr. and Mrs. Cannon what LSU had to offer their son.

[page 2] Dietzel assured the Cannons that Billy would be surrounded by excellent athletes. He ticked off a list of those he had already signed. Billy's Istrouma teammate, Duane Leopard, an excellent center, had been among the first to say yes to LSU. Billy had played against many on the list: Emile Fournet from Bogalusa, Carroll Bergeron from Terrebonne High in Houma, and three standouts from Istrouma's rival, Baton Rouge High School — Warren Rabb, Don Norwood, and Gus Kinchen. Johnny Robinson of University High of Baton Rouge, Billy knew only by reputation. But the name that stood out was Max Fugler, an astute and relentless linebacker from Ferriday, the only other high-school All-American from the state. In Billy's only game against him, the North-South High School All Star Game, Fugler had dogged Billy all four quarters, stopping or slowing him down on nearly every run. [RJM Note: Max Fugler went on to be All American Center at LSU.]

Florida wanted Cannon, but a recruiting flight in an airplane to Gainesville was aborted due to bad weather. Ole Miss wanted Cannon, but Johnny Vaught couldn't meet Cannon's requirement to run sprints and do the shot put as they had no track program. Billy would have liked to take a recruiting trip to see Bear Bryant at Texas A&M, but Dietzel had warned his former coach that he'd turn him in if he

continued to use that private airplane to haul Louisiana athletes over to College Station. As a result Billy never had a chance at Texas A&M.

Billy was born to a very poor family. His father had several jobs which took him away from home often. When his mother had labor pains for Billy, she sent for the doctor, but the midwife had birthed Billy three days before the doctor could arrive. Once they lived near a Campbell's soup factory in the Birmingham, Alabama area. Bill would stand in line with his mom at the factory and carry home buckets of leftover chicken broth which his mom would cook with. Eventually his father got a permanent job on Scenic Highway in Baton Rouge, and Billy entered high school at Istrouma.

Billy tried making money as a kid selling soft drinks in high school stadiums, but quickly discovered an easier way of making money: buy discounted tickets at a gas station and sell them full price on the night of the game. This buying and selling tickets lasted into his college years. The Athletic Director Jim Corbett found out about his ticket selling and made him promise not to do it again. Before the 1958 season, Cannon went to Corbett with a list of 100 seats in the north end of the stadium that he wanted to buy and resell. He pleaded for permission, citing his pregnant wife and one small child. Corbett went to Coach Rabenhorst to ask about the sale and the Coach said, "Jim, you got anybody else to sell them to?" When Jim said, no, he said then sell them to Cannon. (Page 110) Cannon was an entrepreneur with a desperation born of necessity. He had invested almost all of his money on speculation that this was going to be a great season for LSU and it was. The third or fourth game was a sell-out and most of the games after that were sold out. Billy's tickets were a hot commodity. You can successfully predict something will happen, if you can help make it happen.

During the summer of 1958, Billy was working at a natural gas cycling plant in Krotz Springs and when the guys asked him how the Tigers

were going to do in the fall, he told them, we are "going to win them all." They thought he was crazy, but he turned out to be right. They did win them all. One of his jobs was to manually add the foul-smelling mercaptan additive which gives odorless natural gas its distinctive smell. Billy discovered that smell drew buzzards, so on one slow day, he left a can of additive out to evaporate and attract the buzzards, picking them off one by one as they approached with a shotgun. He was having a grand time, when his boss called to say the sheriff called about some shooting going on. Billy said, "Oh, that. I heard those shots too. Must be some crazy fool out there somewhere shooting buzzards." (Page 94)

An article about the 1956 game against Texas Tech appeared in the sports pages in 2015 when LSU was due to play them again, this time in a post-season bowl game. One sports writer interviewed two men who were on the field during Cannon's 97-yard kickoff return. Before the kick the two had decided that one was going to hit Cannon high and the other low, but they ended up colliding into each other as Cannon roared between them untouched! "That damn Cannon!", they were quoted as saying, as if the game had happened the day before instead of 60 years earlier. Scooter Purvis said he watched the stadium clock during Cannon's run and only ten seconds had elapsed during the hundred yard dash Cannon made with full pads on, dodging opponent tacklers. (Page 103) Cannon commented in this book, "Poor Jimmy [Taylor] took the brunt of the beating from the defense, while I sailed along and had a fun time." LSU beat Texas Tech 56-27 in the Texas Bowl in 2015 with its halfback Leonard Fournette scoring five touchdowns. From the first time I saw Fournette run with the ball, he reminded me of Billy Cannon. No doubt he will join Cannon in the memory of Texas Tech supporters.

In 1958 LSU met Ole Miss in Tiger Stadium for first official sellout in its history. Johnny Robinson and Billy talked as they warmed up catching punts before the game.

[page 123] "How are you feeling," Johnny asked. "Are you nervous?" "Nervous?" Billy said. He pointed to the north end zone. "I'm feeling great. My whole section is sold out!"

With the score of the final game in 1958 at 55-0, Dietzel sent Cannon in to tell the Quarterback Durel Matherne to run out the clock with simple up-the-middle runs. Cannon decided to defy his military-minded coach and went into the huddle and said, "Durel, Coach Dietzel said to run that toss play to me. Don't wait. Right now!" Final score was 62-0, which was followed by two other games of the same score against Tulane in succeeding years. These games led, in part, Tulane to drop out of the SEC and to stop playing LSU every year as their final game. Dietzel was accused of running up the score, which he denied.

[page 129] Years later, at an event where Billy and Paul Dietzel were featured speakers, Billy told the audience the story of that last touchdown against Tulane. "Afterwards," Billy said, "Coach Dietzel came up and told me that a Tulane fan claimed to have watched through a pair of binoculars Dietzel calling that toss play. 'Well, Coach,' I said, 'next time you see him, tell him I did it. I've been accused of a lot of stuff, but that one I did!'"

When Billy received the Heisman Trophy, he accepted it on behalf of his team, calling it "Our trophy". But during the presentation, Billy had to make an assist and joked later about the event.

[page 140] The presentation ceremonies lasted several days and including gatherings with former trophy winners, press events, and national television appearances. The trophy itself was presented to Billy by Vice-President Richard Nixon. "It was an awkward position to hold the trophy and it's heavy," Billy recalled, "so I had to help him lift it and keep it up." He laughed, "I presented myself the

Heisman Trophy."

Billy was the first superstar to sign with the new AFL, and after he signed, many other star players decided to sign, so Billy helped the AFL get its start. He played with the Oakland Raiders in the game now known as Super Bowl II and dropped a perfectly thrown pass because he was looking ahead to where he would run. Later when he retired from the Raiders, he continued his studies and became a dentist.

He recalls a prank he was involved in during an anatomy class almost got him and his cohorts kicked out of school.

[page 171] It was a stifling day in the lab with no air-conditioning. "We were so tired we were starting to get goofy," Billy remembered. "In this class was the first woman dental student in the history of the school. Some of the male students came up with an idea to run a string around the penis of one of the cadavers. I had some string in my locker and offered it. Somebody else rigged it so that when she came by, the string was pulled, and the penis went erect. Everybody got a big laugh out of this — until we saw this hand come across and jerk the string away. It was Dr. Fitzgerald. He stormed out, totally upset."

When Billy got into financial straits in the summer of 1980, a guy with a printing shop began joking with him about printing money. Over time it became more serious and Billy saw it as a way to get out of his serious financial trouble. Well, he got into serious legal trouble and after he pleaded guilty to counterfeiting was sentenced to five years in prison. When he got out, the lawyer he had left in charge of his financial affairs had spent all his remaining money, and Billy had trouble getting a license to do dentistry again. The warden of Angola, Burl Cain, hired him as a consultant to work improving the prison's dentistry and bring it into constitutional compliance. Eventually Billy

was hired to work full-time at the prison, and, in four years, the suit against the prison was dismissed, indicating that Cannon's work had been a huge success. Cain said that Cannon was like *Brubaker*, the prison reformer in the Redford movie; Cannon changed the attitude of the prisoners and improved the way things were done at the prison.

[page 208] "Sometimes I catch flak from people," Billy said. "They hear about what I do, and they think I'm soft on convicts. They're misunderstanding the difference between sympathy and empathy. I'm not soft on criminals. I treat them like human beings. I've been where they've been. I can empathize."

Billy stayed out of public sight for many years, living on a twelve acre ranch in West Feliciana Parish, a short drive from his job in Angola prison. One day his good friend Boots Garland called him and convinced him to go to a Gridiron Club meeting of Tiger boosters. Billy finally agreed to go, but said he wouldn't talk. Boots rebutted him, "We're going, and you're going to talk. Billy, it's time!"

[page 209] Billy was not prepared for the reception he received — nor was Garland. "Word got out that Billy was going to speak. When we drove up to the restaurant, there wasn't a parking place within two block. It was packed with fans and old friends — even some guys from Ole Miss whom Billy had played against. When I introduced him, all I said was, 'I know two things about this man. One, he made friends with my three-year-old grandson faster than any person I've known, and two [as an orthodontist] he gave my daughter a beautiful smile. Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Billy Cannon.' I'm telling you, they jumped to their feet roaring. The hair on my arms stood up. They nearly tore the place down."

Billy may not have been prepared for the warmth of

his reception, but as always, he was quick with a one-liner. He stepped to the microphone with a grin. "Thank you, Boots, for that kind introduction. You said it just the way I wrote it."

Halloween night, 1959, I was in Tiger Stadium with the girl who later became my first wife. We were in the North Stadium standing up for the punt which went all the way across the field to Billy near the South end zone. When he began breaking tackles and running towards us, I got so excited I believe I knocked her down to her seat. It was the most exciting play I had ever seen in my lifetime and the drama had just begun because Ole Miss got the ball back and drove to the Tigers two-yard line and it took a monumental effort on the last play of the game by Warren Rabb and Billy Cannon to stop Doug Elmore from crossing the goal line and keep the score 7 to 3. Billy Cannon is the No. 1 on the list of the Top 150 Most Influential People in LSU Athletics History and is high on my list the Most Influential People in Louisiana history. He changed LSU football forever; he changed Professional football forever; he changed Angola Prison forever; and we will never forget him.

