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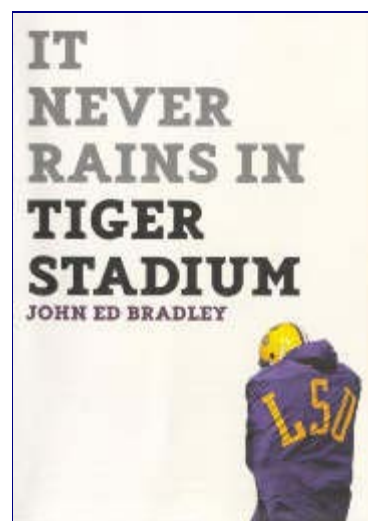
A READER'S JOURNAL

It Never Rains in Tiger Stadium

by
John Ed Bradley

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2013

This is a true story of a football player at LSU who left the team, but the team never left him. It stuck around him like a man's ghost hangs



around the scene of his sudden death, only his sudden death came when John Ed graduated and left college and football for good, or was it for good? Football for him was like a disease from which he never quite recovered, one which infected his memory, tickling it into action at curious times, like when, years after he left college, the temperature in Baton Rouge was 35 one day, and he said aloud to himself, "That's cold. Better wear your winter coat, Rusty Brown" because Rusty Brown wore 35 on his football jersey. That's silly, you may think, but it's not silly when you remember everything from your football days as if it had just happened and you can barely remember what you ate for dinner yesterday.

[page 6, 7] I still remember the most insignificant things about my teammates, even though I have to concentrate to tell you what I had for dinner last night. I remember how tall they were and how much they weighed — that's easy — but I also remember things that don't matter anymore, that probably never mattered: the kinds of cars they drove, the music they played in the dorm, how many letters they earned, their injuries, their dreams, their girlfriends' favorite lipstick colors, the length of their sideburns, their times in the 40-yard dash. . . . I remember their voices and how they sounded when we prayed together deep in the stadium before kickoff, and how they sounded later when things were coming apart and they cursed in anger and despair out on the field. I remember how quiet they could be after a road loss on the flight back to Baton Rouge. And I remember how they carried on when we won. Heaven help me, but I remember how they smelled on a Saturday morning in the spring when we scrimmaged in Tiger Stadium and the beer they'd drunk at sorority parties the night before came whispering from their pores like sewer steam from the manhole covers on Dalrymple Drive.

The title comes from a myth, that is more true than not, that it *never rains in LSU's Tiger Stadium on Saturday night*, the most common time for an LSU football game. Our Fall weather in South Louisiana brings the driest time of the year for us, as cold fronts slide through with only a sprinkle or two followed by dry, cool air which hangs around, often until the next cold front. But, like a Kentucky Derby winner is not a sure thing to win the Triple Crown, it does rain on occasion in Tiger Stadium, and I remember such an occasion. In the 1980s, my wife and I hovered under a plastic covering as cold rain pelted us during an LSU-Tulane game, which LSU lost 34-32 in the last minute. She and I vowed never to make that long drive to Baton Rouge to watch an LSU game — a pledge made easier by the increasing availability of LSU games on TV. The hardest part for me was the drive back, when even after an invigorating win I had

to fight to stay awake on the way home. For John Ed Bradley, the eponymous expression seemed aimed at his life, in which a lot of rain fell, but not while he was on the field in Tiger Stadium in his LSU uniform. It was like he walked a foot above the ground and a rain shield covered him from the elements. For him, during his days at LSU, as it was for me, it never rained in Tiger Stadium on football nights. And any rain that did fall could not erase the spots on the field, e.g., the spot near East sidelines on the South end of the field at the 8-yard line where Billy Cannon received a punt on Halloween night and ran it back all the way to beat Ole Miss 7-3 in 1959. Being a football player on that field, John Ed had a lot more spots than I did, as he recalls the day he left the LSU football team forever.

[page 20] When I finished packing, I walked down the chute that led to the playing field. I pushed the big, metal door open and squinted against a sudden blast of sunlight. The stadium was quiet against a blue winter sky. As I glanced around, I could point to virtually any spot on the field and tell you about some incident that had happened there. I knew where teammates had dropped passes, made key blocks and tackles, threw interceptions, and recovered game-saving fumbles. I knew where they had suffered career-ending injuries. I could point out the spot where Scott Sulik blew out a knee in a collision with Charles Alexander, our All-America running back. It had happened in spring practice, and Scott, a strong safety, never played again.

Was this going to have been the best time of his life? He was scared it might, but swore then and there it wouldn't.

[page 21] I was only twenty-one years old, and yet I was afraid that nothing I did for the rest of my life would equal those days when I played for LSU. I might have a satisfying career and earn a lot of money, I might marry a beautiful woman like Missy and fill a house with perfect kids, I might make a mark of some significance in the world. But what if I never had it better than when I ran out under the goalposts on Saturday night, the crowd on its feet, my team-mates all around?

In my junior and senior years at LSU I tutored football players at Broussard Hall, and got to know some of the players like Sammy Odom, Billy Truax, and Jerry Stovall, but I never got to see any of the athletic dormitory other than the small study hall, so I couldn't even have imagined the scene which John Ed portrays in this next passage.

[page 25] Players lived year-round with injuries that required antibiotics, painkillers, and other drugs, and the trainers made sweeps to make sure we weren't stockpiling the stuff and flirting with addiction. The sweeps came only a couple of times a year, but they were reminders that our lives were not our own.

Drug stockpiles weren't the only things forbidden in your room. Mac wouldn't let us have women in there either. In fact, women weren't allowed past the sitting area in the lobby. Get caught with one and you were gone from the team, your scholarship revoked, your name forever sullied. It took only one incident and you were banished. "I don't care if it's your mother," Coach Mac warned us. Up went his thumb again. "Please don't test me, fellas."

One night, I got up late and staggered down the hall to the bathroom. A naked coed was sitting on the middle toilet, her long hair hanging in a tangled mess in front of her face and covering her breasts. The overhead lights were off, but I could see her in the moonlight pouring through windows made of mottled glass. I recognized her as one of the regulars who hung around the stadium after games, hoping to catch our attention. The guys called them groupies, but I'd been calling them regulars ever since I mentioned the breed in front of my father and he gave me a look. I stood before the urinal and fiddled with the slit in my boxers. There was nothing doing. I decided to go back to my room and pee in the sink.

"They catch you with him and he's off the team," I said to the girl. She reached for

the roll of toilet paper on the floor between her feet. "He doesn't get off the bench anyway. Wouldn't matter none."

John Ed wanted most of all to be a writer, so he enrolled back in LSU to study creative writing, but out of Broussard Hall and the regimen of a football player, it wasn't the same for him. Things of football, the hard things, disappeared and things of academics were easy to him. Why did he feel like his life was done when it was only beginning?

[page 46] I was deep into the spring semester, moving along like a cheap clock that needed to have its batteries changed. Classes ended for the day, and there was nowhere to go, nothing to do. No meetings with coaches to attend, no film to watch, no workouts to complete, no practices to endure, no reporters to talk to, no autographs to sign. I didn't have to visit the training room for whirlpool or hot-wax baths or ultrasound treatments or massages or traction or complicated ankle tapings or shots to kill whatever pain had sprung from whatever injury.

I didn't have the dorm, I didn't have the food, I didn't have my teammates, I didn't have the life. My mother encouraged me to look for the good in things, and I'd managed to come up with only a few noteworthy items. For one, I didn't have to stay up late and get up early to shoehorn study time into my day. I slept a lot now. And keeping up with class assignments; once an impossible task, suddenly had become a breeze. I was carrying twenty-one credit hours and making straight A's even though I was barely trying.

One day you're on the team, the next you're a guy with a pile of memories and a feeling in his gut that he is seriously done.

Bradley offers me many memories of my four years at LSU, such as sitting in the live oak-shaded Quadrangle between classes. On page 47 he conjures up something I saw on many occasions, but he puts into a wonderful maternal simile: "Even more satisfying was the parade of girls in faded jeans and cashmere sweaters who moved across the Quad, books held like nursing babies at their chests."

So many of my memories of LSU get conjured up by my post-graduation visits to the campus, even it's mostly on TV during football games, that I seem to be hallucinating during those times. While writing this review, the scanner software kept converting *LSU* into *LSD*, and I had to correct the OCR error so often that it made me consider the hallucinogenic quality of my years on the LSD, er, LSU campus during the pre-LSD drug era of the 1950s.

One day at Opelousas High School, a boy came to John Ed's classroom to say that he was wanted on the phone in the office.. When he got to the phone, the caller was Charlie MacClendon, the coach at LSU. The coach wanted to know if John Ed had been paged on the school's public address system. When John Ed said, no, the coach said he'd try back the next day. In this episode, you can see how Coach Mac wanted to publicize each of his recruits as well as LSU's football program to the whole school, to every high school he called. One can imagine that the coach asked her to say "Coach Mac at LSU" on a followup page when he called the next day and the office lady didn't mention his name on the first page.

[page 87, 88] . . . the coach called again the next day, and this time the front office didn't bother to send a messenger.

The voice of one of the ladies who worked in the office came sputtering over the intercom. "John Ed Bradley, please report to the principal's office."

I got up and moved toward the door and the woman's voice sounded again. "John Ed Bradley, Coach Mac at LSU needs to speak to you on the telephone."

As I started down the hall headed to the front of the building, classroom doors pulled open and kids came out to congratulate me. We slapped hands and traded high fives, and then one of my teachers stepped out and applauded with his physics manual tucked under an arm.

"Did they announce it?" Coach Mac asked when I reached the phone at last.

"Yes, sir, they announced it to the whole school."

"Oh, I'm glad. One of these days you're going to look back and be grateful to your old coach for doing that."

What a great gift Coach Mac gave John Ed by having their two names linked together in the minds of the entire school. In this book, John Ed is expressing his gratitude to his old coach for that gift.

One weekend my bride and I went to her company's function at the Seabreeze condos near Destin, Florida. On Saturday night, as the waves crashed on the beach and gulf breezes tossed our hair, some of the guys hovered around a small portable AM radio to listen to the LSU-Southern Cal football game being played in Tiger Stadium. USC was one of the top teams in the country and the Tigers kept the Trojans at bay, leading them 12-10 until the final minute. On the decisive drive of the game, an LSU's player's hand brushed the face mask of a USC player on a third and 9 play and that was called a penalty, which allowed USC to score a touchdown with 33 seconds left in the game to seal a 17-12 victory. At the end of the game, all of us listening in the dark around the small radio were exhausted, and we knew that LSU had performed admirably. Former USC players from that night recall it as the most memorable game they ever played. John Ed Bradley remembers it that way himself and mentions it more often in this book than any other game in his four years at LSU.

After that game, John Ed, bruised and bloody, beat his fists in the turf of Tiger Stadium in despair. As he walked off the field, LSU fans were still cheering for their team, and some of them yelled at him for a souvenir, so he stripped off parts of his uniform and pads, until he walked into the dressing room nearly naked. His chest was bloody from an old scar, and when a student trainer asked how he was, here's how he replied.

[page 90] "I did fine," I lied. Then I turned and had another look at Tiger Stadium.

Thousands of fans were still at their seats, beating their heels against the aluminum bleachers and cheering us on, even though our game with top-ranked USC had ended. We'd lost 17-12 when the Trojans scored with only thirty-two seconds left on the clock, ruining our dream of pulling off the biggest upset in school history. Somebody needed to tell the fans that the wrong team had won and it was time to put away their whiskey flasks and go home.

"What are y'all doing?" I said under my breath.

Maybe I imagined it, but no sooner had I asked the question than the crowd erupted with more noise. You like to make the home folks happy, but you typically don't do that unless you win. Going back to my days as quarterback of the Opelousas Junior High Cavaliers, I couldn't recall any fan who ever stood and cheered for me when I left the field a loser. Tonight had changed my understanding of what it meant to win.

When he met someone he loved, she was so much older than he was that John Ed couldn't introduce her to his parents, but he did introduce her to the scar on his chest. It was an old wound which he never allowed to fully heal and had pulled out its stitches too early, an act which allowed him to continue playing, but it continued to pop open again during every game. He literally bled from his heart to play football.

[page 138, 139] Later, in her garage apartment, it came to me that I should tell her everything. "Connie, I need to show you something."

She was on the other side of the room. I could smell the smoke on my clothes. Music from the Oaks still rang in my ears.

"I don't think you know me well enough yet to show me anything."

"I need to show you my chest." I began to unbutton my shirt. My hand was trembling.

"What happened?" she said.

"Football," I whispered then let out a breath.

She walked up to me and inspected the scar, her eyes washing over with tears as she brought her face close.

"It's like this is all I have left," I said. "LSU took everything else.[\(1\)](#) Or else I left it there."

She shushed me and put a finger to my lips, the painted nail touching the tip of my nose. "I think you're beautiful," she said.

"Don't lie to me."

"You're beautiful," she said again. She leaned forward, holding her long hair, and kissed the scar with such tenderness that for once I believed it might go away forever.

Sometimes when I am writing a particularly poignant passage, I will get goose-bumps all over — I will have to get and walk away for awhile just to let them play out over my body. I always thought there needed to a better way of naming this exquisite feeling than by using the portmanteau phrase "goose-bumps" and in this next passage [I](#) found it, *frissons*. Marty never got to play because he was on second string in the line-up behind his buddy now visiting him, John Ed. Marty was sitting up, paralyzed by a swimming pool accident, and explained how he felt running out onto Tiger Stadium for the first time as a football player.

[page 231, 232] "Nothing I've ever experienced compares to that first time I ran out with the team as a freshman — out into Tiger Stadium. God, I was fifteen feet off the ground and covered with *frissons*. You know what *frissons* are, John Ed? They're goose bumps. It's the French word for goose bumps. It was the highest high you could have, and no drugs could match it — the way it felt to run out there with the crowd standing and yelling for you. I wish every kid could experience it.

This is a book full of spots, *frissons*, and scars — scars of John Ed bleeding from his heart upon the pages of this book, each letter a tiny scar upon the page, assembled together artfully into words of scars, into sentences of scars, into paragraphs of scars, into chapters of scars, into a book of scars, into a night of scars in which the LSU Tigers along with John Ed Bradley gave everything they had and left it on the field against USC in 1979, emerging not as winners of that game, but winners in the game of life.

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. My comically-inspired OCR software broke the moment by converting this touching passage into "It's like this is all I have left," I said. "LSD took everything else."

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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