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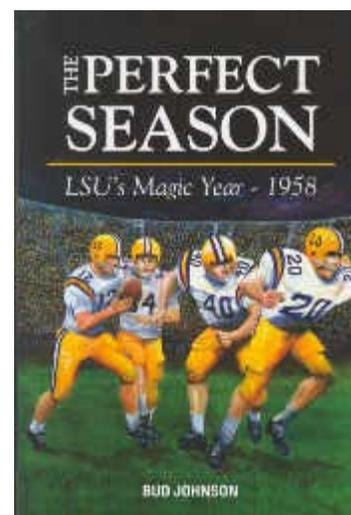
A READER'S JOURNAL

**The Perfect Season
LSU's Magic Year - 1958**

by
Bud Johnson

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2007

This was the perfect Christmas present for me this year as my alma mater will attempt to achieve its third National Championship in January in the BCS Bowl in New Orleans.



While waiting for that game to begin is a great time for me to reminisce about my freshman year in 1958 at Louisiana State University. It was the year the LSU Tigers won their first National Championship at the end of the "perfect season" in which they went undefeated: 10 wins, no losses, no ties. It was a syzygy of elements: talent, platooning, and morale which led to this perfect season, and no one but Bud Johnson, the sports information director of LSU during that year, is better suited or more capable of compiling the statistics, personal comments, photos, and news reports to give us an inside look at the people and circumstances which brought LSU to the fore of college football in that magic year of 1958.

Up until enrolling at LSU my background in its football team was limited to listening to one or two games on the radio during the 1957 season when Jimmy Taylor and Billy Cannon were in the Tiger backfield. I was already planning to go to college at LSU the next year and as I listened to those games, I could tell there was some excitement about the flashy sophomore Cannon, who was playing varsity ball for the first time (freshman played in the freshman league back then). As my college days approached, I was too busy figuring out how to finance my college, what courses I would take, and adjusting to live on-campus and away from home to worry about football.

But it was impossible for me to ignore football because I lived in the cheapest dorms on campus, the North Stadium dormitory, Section H2, right over the athletic offices, ticket windows, and lockers rooms of the football team. Plus, on football nights, the student section sat directly above my head. You either went to the game and or went home each Saturday, and it was cheaper for me to go to game on my student pass than to buy a ride home some 90 miles away down river.

How the stadium got built with student dorms under the seats is an object lesson in Louisiana politics. Governor Huey P. Long was the biggest LSU fan ever. He marched with the band before and during games and even wrote an LSU fight song. He wanted a huge stadium for his Tigers to play in and the legislature was balking at the price tag. He decided to submit a bill for the construction of dormitories and they passed *that* bill. Then he had the architects design the dormitory in the shape of a football stadium!

What I remember of that whirlwind football season was the long Saturday waiting for the games to start, looking out the open the casement windows at the crowd building up below my H2 second floor dorm room. The radio would be on with the scores of games which could affect the national rankings as we earnestly pulled for the Tigers to climb to the top, to the pinnacle of No. 1. Each Monday, I'd rush to get

the Baton Rouge Morning Advocate newspaper with my breakfast at the Huey Long Field House and sit down to see how far up the Tigers had climbed after Saturday's win.

About the third or fourth game, Coach Dietzel dubbed the defensive platoon the "Chinese Bandits" after a character in the "Steve Canyon" comic strip who called Chinese bandits the most feared bandits in the world. Soon my fellow dorm residents and I were banging on garbage can lids and gathering a crowd as we donned Coolie hats and marched across campus to the girls' dorms. These impromptu pep rallies happened sometimes several times a week, and my ears kept perked up as I studied in my room for the sound of one beginning, and would close my physics text and jump down the stairs to join the fun. The avenue for letting off the steam of freshman libido, which panty raids provided on other campuses of the time, came from these spontaneous pep rallies to support the football team in 1958. The girls would be there, leaning out their balconies as we arrived and would join us in the cheering. Then we would return to our rooms. As the season progressed, we began to end our pep rallies outside Broussard Hall, the football dormitory and on occasion, Coach Paul Dietzel would come outside to address us for a few minutes.

Dietzel believed in motivation and morale, and his talks to the media, his weekly TV show, and his talks to us were all upbeat and boosted our morale and that of his team. In this book Johnson reveals the source of his high regard for morale. It was from the writings of a distant relative of mine, Erwin Rommel, who, I learned, was descended from Johann Rommel whose daughter Regina married my ancestor Nicholas Matherne in 1797. Curious that I would choose to go to LSU in the very year that they would be helped to a perfect season by the writings of a distant relative.

[page 19] In 1953, Harcourt, Brace published a 545-page book, which Dietzel, an Army assistant, immediately obtained, read and retained. It had nothing to do with coaching football. In Dietzel's mind, it had everything to do with coaching football. *The Rommel Papers* was German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel's papers, letters and account of the North Africa campaign in World War II. Dietzel frequently quoted this line from Rommel — "I will take morale over material, three to one."

Then came the Ole Miss game at LSU Stadium, Nov. 1, 1958. Two undefeated teams were meeting each other, No. 1 LSU and No. 6 Ole Miss. The National Championship could be riding on this game. Our "impromptu pep rallies" became a regular event every night that week. In addition, someone planted an "eternal flame" atop one of the two mammary-like Indian Mounds in front of the Huey Long Field House. Was it Dietzel? We never knew. It just showed up on Monday night, this pyramidal shape of aluminum with a propane flame burning at the top. Every night, LSU men from all classes gathered around the flame to protect it from the Ole Miss fans who threatened to put out the flame. It was all-night vigils, made more difficult because beer and alcohol was forbidden on campus back then. But we were drunk on our libido and our intoxication was higher than any Jack Daniels or Dixie beer could instill. Cars passed by at all hours of the night, and we were sure that one of those cars would contain some Ole Miss Rebel fans ready to snuff our flame. By the end of the week, we heard about a plane flying over the Ole Miss campus in Oxford, Mississippi dropping leaflets which echoed our nocturnal war chant, the one we yelled as we circled the flame atop the ancient Indian burial ground: "GO TO HELL, OLE MISS, GO TO HELL!" We all suspected that it was Coach Dietzel who paid for the plane and leaflets, and his denial to that effect made no difference. We knew that once more he had stoked the fires of the eternal flame of spirit which was burning in our hearts. It was the most magical week in this magical year, and the game had not even started!

I suspect the author of this book, Bud Johnson, was probably home asleep while we cavorted on the Indian Mounds through the night because he mentions nothing about it. We figured that if LSU were going to climb to the top of the mountain of college football, we should go to the top of the highest point of the flat LSU campus and keep that fire burning until the fires burned in Tiger Stadium lights on Saturday night.

That covers the morale portion of the triple-convergence of events which comprised this magic year. The platooning portion was created by a rule change for that year which allowed a limited amount of

substitutions, two per quarter. Dietzel had some good players who excelled only on offense and some only on defense, so they could not make the White team which was the top-notch first string which excelled in offense and defense. What he did was to innovate a three-platoon system which had an offense-only second string and a defense-only third string. However, once the season got started, it was clear that these so-called second and third string platoons were as good or better than the first string in their specialty.

The Gold team was re-named by accident the "GO Team" by a Miami newspaper after the second-string offensive platoon tore Miami University's defense to shreds in LSU's dominating win, 41-0. After that the second-string tag got dropped, and it was simply the GO Team. When LSU wanted to GO on offense, the GO Team went in the game.

On defense, the third-string tag was soon dropped as well. The playing of the Chinese Bandit stalwarts of Mel Branch, John Langan, Tommy Lott, Andy Bourgeois, Gaynell Kinchen, Hart Bourque, and Merl Schexnauldre, among others, kept opponents's scoring so low that they became thought of as our first-string defense. The Bandits were even called upon to replace the White team to stop important drives near our end zone. In one memorable photo of the Bandits stopping Clemson's attempt to score at the goal line, there were Bandits stacked so high that the Clemson back carrying the ball looked like he was trying to climb a huge wall. That photo became known as "The Great Wall of China". There was morale *par excellence* combined with material. Football players who couldn't play on the first string for both offense and defense were excelling on either the *offensive* GO Team or the *defensive* Chinese Bandits, and they were playing their hearts out!

The most amazing convergence was found in the White team's backfield, three players from the local Baton Rouge high schools formed the back field: Warren Rabb (QB), Billy Cannon (HB), and Johnny Robinson(HB). These two halfbacks fit beautifully into the new Wing-T formation that Dietzel brought to LSU for 1958. With speed, strength, and deceptive moves, they were to bedevil the best teams in the SEC and stalwart teams like Rice, Miami, and Duke before the season was over. When the *Birmingham News* pegged LSU as a preseason No. 8, the author asked Cannon for his opinion, "It will be between us and Ole Miss." He mean the whole enchilada, and Billy put his money where his mouth was. He bought all the tickets for an entire North Stadium section for the LSU-Ole Miss game way back in the summer, when no one else suspected that game would be the first ever sell-out in the new 67,500 seat expanded stadium. The ticket office rarely printed more than 30,000 tickets for any game, up until then. When Cannon's prediction bore out and LSU and Ole Miss were nationally ranked and unbeaten for the Nov. 1 game, the following conversation happened between the two star halfbacks:

[page v] In pregame warm-ups, a tense Johnny Robinson, one of LSU's best backs, asked Cannon, "Billy, are you nervous?"

"No," Cannon replied with a glance toward the north end zone. "My section is filling up."

Bud Johnson closes the Introduction to his book by saying, ". . . there was never a year like 1958 in Baton Rouge." Amen! I agree wholeheartedly. I was there. And there has yet to be another year like it in the fifty years since then. It was and remains to this date, "The Perfect Season," undefeated and untied in ten games.[\(1\)](#)

What happened in 1958 was not only perfect, it was unprecedented.

[page 1] LSU came out of nowhere. The Tigers had not won a Southeastern Conference championship in 22 years. Other places celebrated the bowl season. Other teams got national television exposure. For most of the 1950s, LSU had its nose pressed against the candy store window of college football.

And there I was, a freshman born inside the candy store helping myself to unlimited goodies of pep rallies, football games in the stadium, on the radio, in bowl games, and on television. How did I find time

to study during football season? Studying was my first priority along with working to keep myself in school. I went to LSU with the little bit of money I'd saved, enough to get me barely through two semesters. Basically I studied when I wasn't in class, working, or watching football. It was the most exciting time to be in college. The only thing I missed from the college experience that I had expected was the panty raids. I had heard about them, but the pep rallies took up so much libido energy that there were never any panty raids while I was at LSU.

Something else changed:

[page 4] LSU football suddenly became the main event on Saturday night in Baton Rouge, the place to be for movers and shakers. Social events, after the '58 season, were not finalized until the football schedule was announced.

Fifty years later and that is still case in most households in south and central Louisiana. A lot of it because of Billy Cannon. Why?

[page 9] Cannon was the centerpiece of Dietzel's new offense. The junior halfback had been labeled the previous spring as the "strongest sprinter or the fastest shot putter in the nation" after running the 100 in 9.4 and throwing the shot 54 feet — the most unlikely double in college track and field. *Time* magazine used that "strongest sprinter" line to describe Cannon in its preseason football story. The college football world would be watching Billy Cannon.

It's said today that over a million people were in Tiger Stadium the Halloween night that Billy Cannon ran back a punt 89 yards to beat Ole Miss 7-3. The reason is because so many people you talk to claim to have been there that night! Another phenomenon is the number of people you talk to who think that famous run, re-broadcast each year around Halloween time, happened during the National Championship year. Not true. In 1958, LSU beat Ole Miss 14-0 in Tiger Stadium. Given the arrangement Athletic Director Jim Corbett had made with some schools with smaller stadiums, Ole Miss played LSU in Oxford one year, and then two years in Tiger Stadium. The TD-run was made in 1959. I was there for both games, and I know there were only 67,500 people in the stadium each year, but there was one person there that shared the stadium with me in 1958 that I was unaware of until I read this book. He was a favorite sports announcer of mine, one I had watched call baseball games since I was twelve. Here's part of the story told by Doug Daniel, a high school coach from Poplarville, Mississippi who brought thirty high school kids with him to the 1958 game in Tiger Stadium.

[page 35, 36] "John Grant, a bright and fairly sophisticated young man brought his binoculars and had them trained on the Ole Miss sideline before the game. He was looking particularly for Curtis Holston, one of Poplarville's former players who was on the Ole Miss team.

""There's ole Curtis,' John said.

""What number is he?' one player asked.

""He's number 82,' John said.

""And there,' said John in a loud voice, 'is ole Dizzy Dean.'

""And what number is he?' another player asked, unaware of Dean's legendary status."

During the run-up to the Ole Miss game, all the hype in the media was about the Rebels' running back, Charley Flowers, who was supposed to run all over the smaller Tigers. I remember seeing some placards hanging out the North Stadium dorm giving the LSU perspective: "FLOWERS GETS PLOWED". Well, not only did he get plowed, but Flowers got plowed by a Cannon!

[page 55] The Rebels were big and deep. On a decisive goal-line stand in the second quarter, Cannon made one of the big stops — meeting fullback Charley Flowers head-on and knocking the Reb back. A linebacker would have been proud of that hit. LSU

won 14-0. Ole Miss had beaten the Tigers in Oxford the previous season, 14-12.

Billy Cannon was honored in a unique way, one that no football player at LSU can ever be honored again because his jersey, No. 20, was retired after he graduated. The fans living near his alma mater, Istrouma High School, no doubt were responsible for activating the blinking school zone lights warning everyone to slow down to 20 MPH.

[page 168] On Sunday afternoon in North Baton Rouge, motorists near Istrouma High School were treated to an unusual tribute to Cannon. The flashing caution lights used to warn driver about the school zone had been turned on. This was no school day. The flashing "20" on the school zone lights let everyone know that the neighborhood was proud of Billy Cannon, who wore No. 20.

LSU was a team of destiny it seemed, and the gods seem to be on their side, even anointing them with a lightning bolt strike during practice in Alex Box Stadium for the first game of the season. No one was hurt, but the bolt hit close enough to knock out Scooter Purvis and send Durel Matherne and trainer Marty Broussard to the training room for observation. (Pages 89, 90) It was from that very field that several decades later LSU was to go on to win five National Championships in college baseball.

Another part of being a team of destiny was the curious coincidence that eight players on the 1958 football team had experienced undefeated seasons earlier in their football past, including Billy Cannon, Mickey Mangham, Tommy Lott, and Duane Leopard. (Page 93)

Coach Dietzel, using his motivational skills to build up morale, reminded his team often during pre-game pep talks, "You have a chance to own something no one can ever take away from you." The players who had done it before wanted an undefeated season, those who had lost only one or two games wanted it even more. The next passage illustrates what happens to a team which is suitably motivated the quiet way Dietzel motivated his team.

[page 94] His subtle challenge made them all focus on the task at hand. They read and re-read the scouting report. They were given to long periods of quiet and reflection as the season progressed.

Practice was no longer drudgery. The squad was attentive in team meetings and diligent in routine drills. As LSU climbed in the polls, Saturday night could not come soon enough.

The invincible aura of the Chinese Bandits defensive platoon came early in the year in an away game played against first-year Alabama head coach, Bear Bryant. It came as a big surprise and it made the Bandits, not Bear Bryant, legendary that night. Dietzel needed a fresh team on the field to stop the Tide, and his faith in his "third-string defense" was re-paid by the valiant group of Bandits that night. I listened to that game in my girl friend's room in Metairie, and it was a breath-holding and white-knuckles time in the second quarter, when the Bandits were called to rise to a great challenge.

[page 99] The Chinese Bandits made a grand entrance in Mobile, Ala., in the second game of the season. A Cannon fumble presented Alabama with a golden opportunity in the second quarter. The Crimson Tide's Duff Morrison plucked Cannon's bobble out of the air at midfield and carried it 45 yards to the LSU 5. Dietzel, to the surprise of everyone in Ladd Memorial Stadium, waved the Bandits onto the field. An LSU football legend was about to be born. Bama gained one yard in three tries and had to settle for a field goal, the Tide's only score of the game.

Then came Kentucky into Tiger Stadium in the fifth game of the year. LSU was in the top ten at No. 9. The town was abuzz about the strength of the Tiger team. Game tickets were getting hard to find, but luckily I had bought tickets for my dad and my girl friend to this game and I paced anxiously outside N. Stadium H-2 Section waiting for them to arrive. I noticed an older man who was standing dazed, and since

I wasn't going anywhere for a while, I went to see if I could help him. "What's the matter?" I asked.

He barely raised his head up to answer me, and he hesitated as if he couldn't find the words to express what was wrong. I could tell from his voice that something incredible had happened to him. He finally spoke, "I've been coming to LSU games here from Pensacola for twenty years and this is first time I cannot buy a ticket." Something big was definitely going on. The Tigers dispatched Blanton Collier's Wildcats 32-7 that night.

There were other great games, but none brought more relief to Tiger fans than the final game of the season. This was against their traditional SEC across-state rival Tulane in their own turf in New Orleans. Tulane's premier running back made an off-hand comment to a sportswriter, Cro Duplantier, of the *New Orleans States-Item*, "LSU will choke." When that comment appeared in the Monday edition, Dietzel had hundreds of flyers printed and papered the Tigers' locker room. In addition, the Tulane quarterback, Richie Petitbon, was due to break the 1,000-yard mark for offense, and Dietzel challenged his team to stop him short. Someone hung an effigy of Billy Cannon on the Huey Long Field House and students took it right down, put some green clothes on it, re-dubbed it "Paul Tulane" and set fire to it. The game was settled definitively in the second half when Billy Cannon scored 3 TD's and Johnny Robinson scored 4. The regular season was over, and the Tigers had ended it in telling fashion, 62-0. It was enough for LSU to easily reach No. 1 over the second place team, Iowa, from whose coach Dietzel had received valuable instruction in how to apply the Wing-T Offense earlier in the year.

LSU won the National Championship by virtue of finishing No. 1, while Iowa finished No. 2 in 1958. But Iowa got a curious bit of payback almost 50 years later in 2004. The LSU Tigers played Iowa in a big bowl game Jan. 1, 2005. It was the first time that Iowa had climbed so high in the rankings since 1958 or so. With the Tigers leading, and only seconds left on the clock, an LSU defensive back made the wrong call, allowing an uncovered Iowa pass receiver to catch a pass and run untouched into the end zone to win the game!

To culminate their first National Championship year the Tigers beat Clemson in the Sugar Bowl. It was called the mythical championship because back then the championship wasn't official, just a presentation from the Associated Press for the team finishing No. 1 in its poll. But there was nothing mythical about the championship to the LSU Tigers and their fans. We had climbed to the top of the mountain, the ultimate Indian mound of college football, and the view was great. It still is!

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

Footnote 1. Compare 1958 to the 2007 season when LSU went undefeated for thirteen games in regulation play, losing two games which would have been tie scores but for the rules change which created the over-time play-offs.

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

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