



The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette is serializing the new book from Blant Hurt, who has been been thrilled, tantalized and tormented by his favorite college football team, the Arkansas Razorbacks, over the past 50 years. Selections from his book will be published weekly through Nov. 15.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blant Hurt is a graduate of the University of Arkansas and lives in Jonesboro. "Not the Seasons I Expected" is his third book. He is also the author of "The Awkward Ozarker," a memoir, and "Healer's Twilight," a novel. Visit www.blanthurt.com to purchase his works.

Not the Seasons I Expected

FOOTBALL FRIENDSHIPS

Through my youth, if I could assign friends grades of permanence, Jimbo Osmont, Bob Childress, and Neal Harrington would score most highly — and, critically, each of them totally got Razorback football. The bond between the four of us was such that we'd formed the HOCH Club, an acronym comprising the first initials of each of our last names. Our Club included a membership card as well as a little ditty of a song, coined by Jimbo, that's too embarrassing to recount here.

In the fall of our sixth-grade year, I was beside myself with excitement about Razorback football. My fervor had been stoked by the summer issue of "Dave Campbell's Arkansas Football" with this banner on the cover: "1972: Blockbuster Year for Joe Ferguson and the Razorbacks." Inside was an article entitled, "A Dream Team Takes Shape at Arkansas," and, on page 13, a prediction that this Razorback team would go on to be crowned national champions.

Certainly, that prophecy suffered a serious setback when the fourth-ranked Hogs lost their season-opener to the USC Trojans. But over the next month, the Porkers reeled off four in row, and it was during this stretch that my enthusiasm, and to a lesser degree that of my football-savvy HOCH Club friends, spilled over onto the playground at South School Elementary.

These were the halcyon days of Dickey Morton, who, at five feet ten and 160 pounds, was the leading rusher in the Southwest Conference. On his Sunday television show, Frank Broyles sometimes mentioned the "Inside Belly Series," a package of running plays that were propelling an itty-bitty white guy to a place as one of the greatest running backs in Hog history. Thus inspired, the full HOCH Club membership initiated the Razorbacks' offensive attack as best as we could.

During both the morning and afternoon recess, Jimbo, Bob, Neal, and I lined up in the wishbone formation (invented at Texas in 1967 and, trust me, quite popular back in the early 1970s) and ran various phantom plays of our own devising: some runs, some passes, some run-pass options. We used unsuspecting classmates as defensive obstacles, darting and weaving among them

on the blacktopped playground. I took the phantom snap and ran at half-speed down the imaginary line of scrimmage, then I inevitably encountered (or sought out) a classmate on the crowded blacktop and, at this "decision point," I either cut up field or pitched the football to the trailing halfback. In another go-to-play, I faked the fullback handoff to Jimbo, dropped back five steps, and fired a long pass as he lumbered down the blacktop.

As my friends and I executed our skeleton offense—as quarterback, it all revolved around me—it's hard to imagine what our elementary-school teachers thought of us. Mr. Dobbs, impossibly large at six foot six, stood on the fringe of the playground in arms-folded silence, smothering a smile. He was a with-it dude—in that era of Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky, he let us to play chess in his homeroom class, and we also got to shoot BB guns in a school-sanctioned program (we actually fired at targets in our classroom). Nevertheless, even for the with-it Mr. Dobbs, our phantom wishbone attack was probably a little surreal.

When I got to junior high, I made other new friends, among them a blond-headed boy with the improbable last name of Gschwend, first name Chuck. We both played golf at the Jonesboro Country Club in the summer; we both were short in stature, and we both, owing to unrelated bicycle wrecks, had one crowned front tooth that was ringed with silver. Chuck, whose father was an Arkansas State fan, had never been to a Razorback game, but I would eventually remedy that—in our eighth-grade year, he came with me to Little Rock for the 1974 season opener against Southern Cal.

In my mind's eye, I can see Chuck and me, along with my grandmother, in a crowded bus on our way to War Memorial Stadium. I'm no longer exactly sure why we were riding this bus, but it was probably because we were staying at the Coachman's Inn in downtown Little Rock where my grandmother, our chaperone, had attended a prep game party of some sort.

In any case, our bus, full of hearty Razorback fans, rolled along—but then, as we neared the stadium, traffic slowed, and slowed, until we were hardly moving. Meanwhile, my grandmother, who had no doubt knocked back several shots of Canadian Club whiskey at the Coachman's Inn, had a mighty urge to pee, and her polite yet increasingly urgent requests to be let off the bus fell on deaf ears. Plainly, this

THIRD INSTALLMENT

bus driver was determined to deliver us all to the stadium without opening any doors on the way. Meanwhile, my grandmother sat in her seat and stewed, her ire rising. When she could take her discomfort no more, she stood up, grabbed the leather strap above her head, drew a labored breath, and yelled, "Let me off this damn bus!" A pause followed. Then louder, "Let me off this damn bus!"

All eyes turned to my grandmother, as if she were protesting some sort of civil rights injustice. Chuck had moved to a seat across the aisle to gain distance, and underneath his bang of blond hair he was wide-eyed. When our glances met, I silently, needlessly, mouthed the words, "She really has to go to the bathroom," and shrugged.

Again, "Let me off this damn bus!" Another pause. Then, with exquisite enunciation: "Let Me Off This Damn Bus!"

Finally, the driver opened the doors and she got off.

I gazed out through the tinted windows as my grandmother, dressed in a flowy Razorback-red outfit, trundled up the sidewalk to a stranger's house. There was a brief conversation punctuated by her emphatic hand gestures, then the stranger opened the front door and she disappeared inside. As our bus pulled away, I slunk down into my seat and tried to vanish.

From the opening kickoff, this game against USC was sheer magic. Coached by John McKay, the Trojans were led by such stars as Pat Haden, Anthony Davis, and Lynn Swann. They arrived early in the morning, yet departed on the short end of a 27-0 outcome.

As Chuck and I left the bright lights of War Memorial Stadium that night, the magic trailed us. It was mid-September and the air was warm and humid, like every night of the long Indian summer. But this wasn't just any other night. Something momentous had happened, and even outside the stadium the atmosphere was buzzy and jubilant, with spontaneous Hog Calls breaking out here and there. I don't remember how Chuck and I got back to our hotel in downtown Little Rock—we rode a magic carpet, I guess. As for my grandmother, she was waiting for us when we got there.

The next morning, I went to the lobby of the Coachman's Inn to pick up a copy of the Arkansas Gazette. But because the game had ended late in the evening, the coverage in that morning's newspaper was thin, with only a front-page headline and a brief summary and

no in-depth stories in the sports pages. But on Monday morning, back home in Jonesboro, I eagerly fetched the "Arkansas Gazette" from our driveway, stuffed it in my backpack, and then headed to school. Later, in math class, I pulled out my newspaper, tossed away each section but the sports pages, then pored over every game-related article in sight, all the while hoping the math teacher didn't notice what I was up to.

I especially relished the column written by Orville Henry, whose writings were like tutorials in the ins-and-outs of a college football game. Other tidbits in that day's newspaper: The Hogs had moved up 10 spots in the Associated Press poll, and linebacker Dennis Winston, with his 22 tackles, had won National Defensive Player of the Week. I read and re-read the excerpts from other newspapers around the country, the more glowing and one-sided the better. Something like this from "The Los Angeles Times":

"On a brilliant night in Little Rock, the mighty Trojans were exposed by a gutsy group of Razorbacks, who announced themselves on the national stage." Or a similarly fawning snippet from the "St. Louis Post-Dispatch": "Once again, the Arkansas Razorbacks proved they are the cream of college football."

Today, I'm aware that some of my yearning for recognition from outsiders owed to my sense of my home state's fraught place in the world. My mother had travelled a fair bit: When I was seven, we drove to California in my mom's wood-paneled station wagon. We made a stopover in Las Vegas, where Mother's purse was stolen from our hotel room while we were at the swimming pool, and finally reached southern California and its many famous attractions, such as Knott's Berry Farm and Disneyland. This trip opened my eyes to the vastness of America and Arkansas' comparatively inconsequential place in it.

Not surprisingly, then, this fabulous victory over the big-city USC Trojans only amplified my love for the Arkansas Razorbacks. Granted, this love mine was narrow and tribal—an abiding affection for a region, a land, a team, a mascot. Nevertheless, I knew it was deep and as important to me as is the love a proud Frenchman feels for his country.

A week after the USC win, however, the Razorbacks lost 26-7 to Oklahoma State, on their way to a 6-4 finish.

Meanwhile, USC went on to win 11 in a row and finish Number 1 in the final UPI Poll. This is just another example of why my fan's journey has felt like a never-ending trip down Irony Lane.

who, it must be said, was smack dab in the middle of it all. There were threats to ground me, and even my not-so-innocent sister, for weeks on end.

In so many areas of life, bright lines can be hard to draw, and those who do so are considered harsh and judgmental. (My sister and I sometimes called my mother a fuddy-duddy.) Not surprisingly, many us lead muddled lives full of gray areas. We tolerate—and are told we must tolerate—moral ambiguity, lapses of discipline and loss of focus, underperformance, and general sloppiness. In many realms of life, there's no scorecard, per se. No winning or losing. Yet one of the satisfactions of being a football fan is that we don't have to put up with such ambiguity. We enter an alternate universe with a tight coupling of cause and effect, with clear-cut winners and unmistakable losers. Football is not necessarily nice, and it's not supposed to be.

There was wisdom in Lou Holtz's suspension of three key players for the Orange Bowl, just as there was wisdom in my mother's hard line. Coach Holtz had made a tough decision and, with this unlikely victory, was rewarded for it. Even though I ultimately got off the hook for hosting this rousing party without my parents' permission, the example he set was not lost on me.

Most of all, I was pumped that Lou Holtz had won 11 games. The Hogs finished ranked third behind Alabama and national champion Notre Dame. The only loss was to Texas, 13-9 at home and four days before my 17th birthday. If the Hogs had won this one, they probably would've been voted national champions. In any case, this unlikely win in the Orange Bowl only turbocharged my passion. Razorback football was once again ascendant, as further confirmed by the cover of "Sports Illustrated" the following September, where the "College Football" 1978 edition, which read, "No. 1 Arkansas" and featured a picture of Lou Holtz, Ron Calcagni, and Ben Cowley among the three players suspended for the Orange Bowl. But the "Sports Illustrated" cover story jinxed the Hogs, who sustained back-to-back losses in mid-October and a disappointing season overall, given the preseason hype.

LIFE LESSONS

Coming to my father's on-going entrepreneurial success — his company that manufactured tool boxes had taken off — my family had moved into one of the nicest houses in Jonesboro, with Spanish tile floors, vaulted ceilings, a swimming pool, and even a pool house. Our new house was across the street from our old house, which we'd only lived in for five years. But my father had long coveted this new home of ours.

In addition, Lou Holtz's first year as head coach had gone remarkably well, with only one loss amid 10 wins. It was early-January of 1978, and a post-season appearance in the Orange Bowl loomed and, not surprisingly, given my dad's history with Razorback football, my parents travelled to Miami for the Big game against the Oklahoma Sooners, leaving me and my 13-year-old sister at home. No big deal. Mallory and I were generally well behaved. Yet my parents made the uncharacteristic mistake of hiring a pliable young couple, friends of our family, as overnight house sitters.

Word soon got out about the vulnerable situation at my new house, and soon I was host to the most legendary party of my high school years. Everyone who was anyone in my orbit showed up, and the spree gathered momentum at roughly the same pace with which the Hogs overwhelmed the Sooners — which is to say things got deliciously out of hand early.

The events of that night remain a bit hazy. I vaguely recall our house sitters churning out dozens of grilled cheese sandwiches as if they were short-order cooks. Meanwhile, my father's liquor cabinet was invaded with the precision of a military maneuver.

Weeks before this Orange Bowl matchup, Lou Holtz, invoking his "Do Right Rule," had suspended three players who'd accounted for 78 percent of his team's points; reportedly, the police had found a partially clothed woman in the players' dorm room. Accordingly, the Razorbacks entered the Orange Bowl as 24-point underdogs.



Arkansas coach Lou Holtz is carried off the field after the Razorbacks defeated Oklahoma 31-6 on Jan. 2, 1978, at the Orange Bowl in Miami. (AP file photo)

Top-ranked Texas had lost in the Cotton Bowl earlier that day, so to win the national championship, all second-ranked Oklahoma had to do was to beat an outclassed, depleted Arkansas team. But the Sooners didn't allow for an aroused opponent, featuring a show-stealing performance by Roland Sales, an unknown backup who rushed for 236 yards, an Orange Bowl record. At halftime, the Hogs were up 24-0.

Somebody give me another Budweiser! When my parents returned from Miami the next day, they were transfixed by the deck furniture submerged in the brackish water of our swimming pool. I have no idea why I, or our house sitters, didn't bother to fish the furniture out of the pool before my folks got back. We were like burglars who neglected to wipe off our fingerprints.

I tried to avoid Mother, whose jaw was set. Yet in my father's gentle brown eyes I detected a twinge of understanding. He, like me, was in an upbeat mood after the monumental Hog victory. I could tell he was impressed that my father and I had pulled off such a happening party. Gone were several fifths of his bourbon and scotch and numerous bottles of a then-trendy sparkling red wine called Cold Duck. But all this swill was replaceable with a trip to the

middling package store down at the county line.

"Everybody still got their fingers and toes?" my dad said, his cryptic way of asking if any of my friends had been injured, tickled for drunk driving, or even tossed in jail. My mother, however, was solidly in the camp of Lou Holtz and his Do-Right Rule. Three years before, as part of my mom's spiritual awakening, she had heard from God to stop even her modest drinking. To disguise this in front of their friends, my father would pour her a 7-Up, drop a maraschino cherry in her glass, and garnish it with a tiny umbrella.

"How many people came to your party?" Mother said. "Everybody," I replied, seeking safety in numbers, even though my friends and I, especially my HOCH Club buddies, were hardly hell-raisers. Jimbo Osmont and I, along with several other party attendees, had even recently witnessed the Fellowship of Christ United Athletes to a crowd in the main sanctuary of the First Baptist Church. I had felt the Holy Spirit move me, or so I'd thought.

Still, my mother's green eyes bore down on me. She was concerned about the impact of such a boisterous party on my impressionable 13-year-old sister,