

# Not the Seasons I Expected



Not the Seasons I Expected  
Blant Hurt

The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette is serializing the new book from Blant Hurt, who has 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](http://www.blanthurt.com) to purchase his works.

## SECOND INSTALLMENT

### PEEWEE LEAGUE DREAMER

**I**nspired by The Big Shootout, in the fourth grade I played pee-wee league football.

The Whirlwinds of South School wore white jerseys with red numerals, which somewhat resembled the Hogs' away uniforms. The coach put me at quarterback, chiefly because I could remember the plays and help the other boys get lined up in the right spots. The only downer was that I never actually threw the football, which, at regulation size, was too big for my hands. Whenever our coach called a pass-play, I took the snap from center and lateraled to the halfback, our best runner and passer. My role thusly circumscribed, you could say I was little more than a game manager.

At my insistence, I wore number 10, same as Bill Montgomery, the Hogs' dapper quarterback. On television, I had noted everything about him: the shape of the white facemask on his red helmet, the white sweat bands up his forearms, the slash of eye black on each cheek, the hand towel that hung out of the front of his white pants. Bill Montgomery was who I wanted to be. One day I, too, would quarterback the Hogs, a dream as vivid to me as was the Ponderosa Ranch on the "Bonanza" TV show: Facing a crucial third down, I signal timeout to the referee

and trot to the sideline to confer with Coach Broyles. I wipe my face with a towel, then put my helmet back on and, with my chinstrap dangling, trot back to the huddle where I take one knee and look up into the expectant eyes of my Razorback teammates and bark out the play call.

My goodness, how fantastic was that going to be! Actually, the odds of any such future for me were quite long. My father was five feet eight, and my mother stood at five feet — both of them the smallest of their several siblings. When my mother was pregnant with me, she and my father had fretted over whether they'd have a boy or a girl, a concern my plainspoken grandfather had considered misplaced.

"You two had just better worry about not having a damned midget," he declared.

Like The Big Shootout the previous December, the opener in 1970 against Stanford was also broadcast on national television, thus perpetuating my belief that Razorback football was a matter of world-shaping influence. Led by Jim Plunkett, Stanford jumped out to a 27-0 lead. Then in the second quarter, with the score 27-7, a black Razorback player named Jon Richardson caught a 37-yard touchdown pass from Bill Montgomery to cut the lead to 27-14. Until that day, it had never occurred to me that a black guy would play for the Razorbacks — or for any opposing team, for that matter. All players on both sides in The Big Shootout were white, and rest assured when the Hogs had played Ole Miss in the Sugar Bowl the previous January, all the Mississippi players had been white as well.

Did I realize that Jon Richardson's appearance in this game represented something momentous? No, I did not. Jonesboro was still mostly segregated, with a so-called "colored" neighborhood just east of downtown. Sure, there were two black girls in my fourth-grade homeroom class, but I didn't think of them as symbolic in any way. They liked me and thought I was cute, and I liked them and thought they were cute, too. There were no black boys on my pee-wee league football team, and the only black man I knew did odd jobs for my grandfather. Nevertheless, sports can open minds: If a black player wore a Razorback jersey and lined up at running back behind Bill Montgomery, that was fine by me.

Late in the fourth quarter, the Hogs cut the lead to 34-28, but Bill Montgomery came up inches short on fourth- and two inside the five-yard line. While this took some of the shine off of my number 10 pee-wee-league jersey, I still then dreamed of quarterbacking the Razorbacks one day. But that lingering ambition was soon to suffer a mortal blow.

One fustidial morning, the South School Whirlwinds, in our white helmets, were pitted against a cross-town rival, the black-helmeted East School. The dew-soaked grass was tracked with footprints, and as the sun rose higher my team faced a crucial fourth and one. We all huddled with our coach, a gaunt man with what I took to be the world's largest Adam's apple. He called a quarterback sneak. This was to be my moment to shine. All 11 of us fourth-graders broke the huddle with an almost synchronous clap. I lined up under the center, but

across the line of scrimmage, staring at me with his pit bull eyes, was a thick-necked linebacker named Scott Reed, a savvy player whose father was the football coach at Jonesboro High. Certainly, Scott Reed knew I was about to attempt a quarterback sneak. In an effort to confuse me, he darted around behind his nose guard, crouching off his left rump, then his right rump, then back and forth like a madman. I glanced at our coach, who, in a show of confidence, declined to call a timeout. My eyes went back to Scott Reed in his dastardly black helmet, and I knew that one of two things was going to happen when the ball was snapped: I would either go left of the center and Scott Reed would go right and I'd easily pick up the first down. Or I would go left and he would go left, too, and it would get ugly. Obviously, if I went right of the center, the calculus of limited possibility applied. Only when the ball was snapped did I decide which way I would go.

Woxy and likely concussed, I walked slowly to the sideline. After I gathered my wits, I examined my heretofore scarf-free white helmet and was impressed by the long black scar near the crown; there was even a rough-grained chip in the white of my helmet. Meanwhile, the game went on and whenever one of my teammates came to the sideline, I showed off my scarred helmet as if to justify it. I hadn't picked up the crucial first down. But our pee-wee league coach didn't call any more quarterback sneaks, and my duties as the team's signal caller were even further narrowed. I became a caricature of the quarterback as game manager.

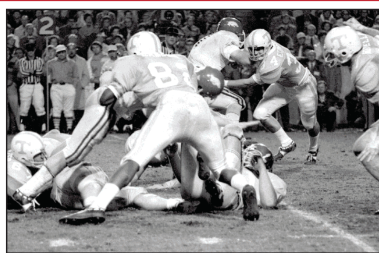
### DNA OF A FANATIC

**D**espite a thrilling 31-7 mid-season win over arch-rival Texas, the 1971 Razorbacks were relegated to the lesser Liberty Bowl in Memphis, which presented an opportunity for my father and me to take a road trip. It was a great chance for us to be together. My dad was a busy man, with a talent for spotting opportunity. Years before, while working at my grandfather's John Deere dealership in Jonesboro, he'd noticed that the coffin-sized tool boxes of the kind mounted behind the cab of a pickup truck were hot sellers. So Dad ordered a few from the manufacturer, loaded up my mother's wood-paneled Ford Country Squire Station Wagon with them (two in the back and two on the roof), and drove around Craighead County selling them to farmers. Emboldened by his initial success, he took a gamble and ordered 100 more tool boxes. When they arrived, my grandfather, who'd fronted most of the money, said, "Okay, you little snot, you wanted 'em, now you'd better sell 'em." So my father traveled all over the Mid-South hawk-ing these tool boxes. After this scrappy beginning, he launched a company called Stor-All Tool Box.

I had been to Memphis many times, but usually with my mother and sister. Those visits, more like scavenger hunts, were for the purpose of buying things that were unavailable in a small town like Jonesboro. How well I remember those trips, piled into my mother's wood-paneled station wagon with Mother smoking a cigarette (a habit she later quit), my sister and I roaming freely throughout the car because no one wore seatbelts in those days. We crossed the flat Arkansas delta and then, suddenly, the rugged skyline of the River City came into sight. Crossing the long bridge, the water below coursing in great swirls of brown was, like being transported into another world.

Our usual first stop, at my urging, was James Davis, a well-known haberdashery, where the neatly folded boys' shirts were stacked in a wall of wooden cubbyholes. Locating the one marked with my size, I pulled out every shirt and chose my favorites, which I then presented to Mother. She would tell me I could only have three shirts and what that was pushing it, but she was ultimately fighting a losing battle: My father was well dressed, and my grandfather was a veritable clotheshorse.

After lunch at Britling's Cafeteria



Arkansas competes against Tennessee in the Liberty Bowl on Dec. 20, 1971 in Memphis. Ninth-ranked Tennessee defeated 10th-ranked Arkansas 14-13. (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette file photo)

on Poplar Avenue, we would resume our shopping at department stores like Goldsmith's and Julius Lewis. Later, we would hit See-See's Supermarket for date bread, French horns, and chocolate éclairs, and then we would double back for a stop at Mednikow's as we headed to the hotel. By this time it would be getting dark and my sister and I would be getting cranky, so to placate us Mother would take us to TGIF Friday's on Overton Square for fried shrimp dipped in cherry sauce. On the drive back to Jonesboro, Mallory would fall asleep under the glow of the car's dashboard and I would tell Mom that I was never going back to Memphis with her ever again. But inevitably, as Christmas drew closer, I would re-think that position.

This December trip to Memphis with my father, however, was no mere pre-Christmas shopping excursion. He and I were headed to a Razorback post-season bowl game against Tennessee. It would be a game my dad would never forget—the game in which his son's once-private fanaticism first showed its rabid face in public.

The night was cold and misty, and the brooding atmosphere in Liberty Bowl Stadium evoked what I imagined to be the feeling of war. My pulse quickened when the Razorback players charged the field like a white-clad army. I've always easily surrendered to the grandeur, pageantry, and formality of college football. No other sport offers quite the same sense of scale and drama and clash, and at any game involving the Arkansas Razorbacks, I've also always—since this Liberty Bowl game against the Tennessee Volunteers—had a problem with self-control.

It happened late in the fourth quarter, when, with the Hogs up 13-7, Arkansas running back Jon Richardson fumbled. The fumble happened on the far sideline, but I swear I saw a Razorback player (specifically, number 74) rise from the pile with the football cradled to his chest. He handed the

ball over to the referee, who promptly awarded possession to Tennessee.

At which point I snapped like The Incredible Hulk.

I stood on my seat and booted and stomped. My squeaky 11-year-old voice carried to all those around us as I, incredulous, implored my father to make sense of what had just happened. "They can't give the ball to Tennessee! Can they? Huh? Huh? How can the referee do that? This isn't right! Can't somebody do something?"

I brayed and brayed. I would not let it go. (I have never let it go.) By this point, my father was less interested in what had happened on the field than in what was happening right beside him. Even he was taken aback by my sustained outrage. Yet he did nothing to deter me. I didn't even offer a calming pat on the back. He just let my berserker fit play out, regarding my tantrum with eyebrows raised and perhaps—as I've gathered during his many retellings of this story through the years—some kind of twisted pride.

As fans, it's interesting to ponder just what influences our behavior. How much of what we owe to nature? How much is due to nurture? My dad has always been a moderate man. He drinks a bit, but never over-drinks. He likes good food, but seldom overeats. He rarely ever uses a bad word. Yet, like his mostly-Irish mother and two younger brothers, he can get hot when his temper is stirred. Growing up, I remember Dad's ongoing war on mosquitoes. Each summer, as these pests swarmed in from the flooded rice fields that encircled Jonesboro, Dad would say, "So many mosquitoes, they fly in formation!" Inevitably, over the course of any summer, my sister or I would carelessly leave the screen door ajar, and each time the house became infested with mosquitoes, Dad would come unhinged. Tormented by the thought of even one mosquito in his bedroom, he would stalk it like a demon and smack it against the white ceiling with my mother's flyswatter.

Yet throughout this blatant rip-off at the Liberty Bowl, my father, the crazed mosquito hunter, kept his cool. My outrage was enough for both of us, apparently. And my anger burned even hotter when, after being gifted the fumble, the Vols scored to win the game.

Dad and I walked silently to the outer parking lot. It was late, and with the gloomy weather and the winter solstice, I felt as though it had been dark all day. The fact was, my sense of right and wrong had been deeply offended, and any lingering joy I felt in being with my father was buried beneath my disappointment over how the Hogs had been jobbed. As we crossed over the Mississippi River, the lights of Memphis receded and the sprawling cotton fields of eastern Arkansas were as black as my mood.

When I walked into our house, my mom said, "I'm so sorry, hon," as if I'd been mugged in Memphis. Her hair was matted on one side — she had fallen asleep while waiting up for Dad and me — and the TV was still on. I doubted that she had watched the game; she'd probably heard the result from the WMCA 10 o'clock sports report with that loudmouth Jack Eaton.

"Are you hungry, hon?" "No," I replied, even though I was indeed hungry. But I was in no mood to be agreeable. I plopped down in front of the TV. Who cared what was on? It was only five days before Christmas, always an exciting time because school was out. The previous Christmas, my mother, ever the Good Samaritan, had spiced things up by arranging for us to be joined by Darryl Hamilton, a rough-edged 15-year-old from juvenile detention down at Cummins Prison. I hadn't asked Darryl any questions about his checkered past, though it didn't take me long to discern that he wasn't a Razorback fan. Despite our lack of common interests, over the course of his two-week stay I realized that the only true difference between Darryl Hamilton and me was that I had been born to a good family and he had not.

Through the doorway to the kitchen, I saw my mother and father buddled in conversation. On the wall near the refrigerator hung her flyswatter, the same one that Dad used to stalk mosquitoes and Mother sometimes used to rap my sister's bare legs. I turned down the TV and overheard Dad telling Mother about my brattish behavior during the game. Now I'd stood up on my seat, my yelling, my sustained upset. He seemed more pleased than when I'd brought home top marks on my mid-year fifth-grade report card. But as he spoke, I saw a look of consternation spread across my mother's face, and I knew she wished she'd been sitting beside me earlier that night at the Liberty Bowl with her flyswatter in her hand.

"I'm going to bed, y'all," I called from the living room. I offered this in a conciliatory tone as I'd decided it was best to end my post. "Night all. Nite-nite."