

NEXT MAN UP

david zane

"Monday Night Football makes a Rock Concert look like a bloody
Tea Party."

John Lennon

10, 9...

“This is going to be history folks”, the Announcer screams into a TV audience of two billion at least.

8, 7...

“Nothing is impossible... just unthinkable”, echoes in Ozzie’s head as he stands and stares at the field in front of him... trying his best to hold back tears that really want to come.

6, 5...

“This is not your father’s football league that’s for sure”, the play-by-play Man declares to the world.

4, 3...

“Absolutely not Troy... the stigma has been broken forever.”

2, 1...

“It most certainly has Jim. Congratulations Ozzie... lord knows you’ve earned it. Now let the celebrations begin”, the Announcer yells over the frenzy.

Cannons suddenly go off.

Confetti rains down the massive Superdome ceiling.

Blowing around like a Buffalo blizzard in February.

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy.”

The place is going wild.

Ozzie reaches down... *mwa...* and hugs his ecstatic family... every one of them... *mwa...* along with... *mwa...* juicy kisses for everyone. “Congratulations My Love.”

“Thanks Baby... and thanks for all the love.” Tears roll down both their faces as they embrace for a long second. “I couldn’t have done it without you.” Suddenly they’re locked in an embrace that spans fifty-two years; she knows exactly what this journey has been like... absolutely she does. “I’m so proud of you.” The highs and lows are meant for Ozzie’s amazing wife and Uncle Ike only - and he’s not here because he doesn’t like to fly, he refuses actually.

As the make-shift stage gets assembled quickly for the upcoming Presentation ceremony, Ozzie’s legs won’t stop their shaking - I can’t believe this... I just can’t... taking this all in provides a feeling of such intense joy... it’s surreal. Now I know what that word actually means. “Come on”, a Chaperone yells at us with his arms waving. As I move to follow with my family, my heart keeps racing... I’m following this guy onto a stage reserved only for League Champions... Champions!! My smile feels like its stretching my face to new proportions. I want to cry... but I can’t.

The big man in the black blazer and earphone has us all up on the stage... and ready.

The Commissioner of the League.

The Coach.

Our two very sweaty Captains.

And Me.

The Pandemonium suddenly hushes when the Announcer grabs the mike... and uses his other hand to signal to the crowd that we're ready.

Bizarre.

You could hear a pin drop... and so could 80,000 others.

It's beyond bizarre.

The Announcer puts his microphone in the Commissioner's face. The Commissioner turns to his right... and pulls me close. "It is my great honor to present the 2006 Championship trophy to the Los Angeles Bandits' General Manager Ozzie McKenzie."

The crowd erupts with a deafening ovation... "Ozzie Ozzie Ozzie", it sounds like all 80,000 fans are chanting my name at once.

My legs go weak. The ground is shaking. Everything inside me goes weak... but with hundreds of millions watching this is no time to stumble. "Ozzie Ozzie Ozzie." I'm overwhelmed while reaching to accept the shiny trophy from the Commissioner's hands. The second I have it... the absolute second it's in my hands... I move in with a lip-lock I'll never forget as long as I live; I know he's with me. I then hold up this shimmering prize proudly... moving in every direction so the crowd can be acknowledged. As I do my legs strengthen. "WE DID IT! WE DID IT! WE DID IT!", hearing the cheers of every player I scouted and signed. "Love you Ozzie!" Right back at them; thanks to Uncle Ike I know I'll always be grateful.

Grateful & Focused.

"Hi Mrs. Johnson."

Skipping rocks after another day of school.

"Hello Ozzie."

Along dirt roads baked dry from an unforgiving sun.

"Hello Mrs. Tomlinson."

Greeting my neighbors, some real decent smiling folks... I give them all a friendly wave back while they're perched on their porches of dilapidated shacks going back generations.

"Hello Ozzie."

Shacks that barely function as homes, to be quite honest.

"Have a good day Mrs. Robinson."

It is a cluster of weed-filled American shame that painted every part of rural Alabama that I ever saw.

"You too Ozzie."

To me this way of living was normal - I keep skipping the flattest stones into the many marshes along the route so I can try and beat my record - which I guess was part of the problem with living in the south of the '50's. I didn't know any different really, not until that first trip out of State - although out of Planet was more like it. There was far more Press than when we played for the National Championship; although this was the Heisman Trophy after all. Shocked would be the best way to describe seeing those Bright New York Lights... a Dream beyond Dreams now that I think about it... that never-ending skyline of concrete and steel... and those neon flashes of Times Square. Blacks and whites on the same sidewalk... even in the same restaurants. I saw my first black Police Officer when I was there, opening my eyes like never before; from that first day in downtown Manhattan my dreams reached far beyond my own Jim Crow Alabama.

Walking home from school was a ritual I looked forward to... even when it rained. It was normal to see rabbits and rodents scurry by, so was swinging on the tire at the local water-hole, which Uncle Ike calls *McKenzie Lake*...although *McKenzie Pond* is more like it. You get used to the turtles and the snakes and the stray dogs that lay by its' cool banks by the dozen. Back then I had no idea that in order to find yourself, to find real peace in your own skin, one needs to lose themselves in the wondrous arms of nature... at least for a little while. Every kid of the neighborhood would be out from sun-up to sun-down during those sweltering summer months... swimming, tossing a frisbee, a baseball... even a football. To this day I still try and escape to the closest green-space I can find at least once a week; peace is hard to locate when you're living out of a suitcase two-hundred nights of the year. And the fact that these are mostly five-star accommodations means little let me tell you that... I'm still the same kid from rural Alabama who finds pleasure from the things that money can't buy.

After a full-day of school I lived to see Uncle Ike on his tilted porch... rocking back and forth while smoking his pipe and whittling, or, head back, taking a mid-day nap.

"Hey Uncle Ike", became the usual as I moved up those creaky sun-stained steps.

"How was school today Ozzie?" A loving smile I grew to trust; that's why I remember that day like it was yesterday. When I think back it did seem like any other, really it did...

stopping to feed the rabbits with some lettuce I'd saved from lunch. "Here Maggie... come on, that's it... good girl." I always named the animals of my world. In fact to this day I still lean towards kids who had pets growing up... or still do; I have my reasons. Any General Manager can crunch numbers, what I'm looking for is character, a deep responsibility to others... not just out-of-this-world ability. Big-time Sports is way too hard for just ego alone.

Preparing my usual greeting while walking up the driveway, I spot an empty chair on the front porch?? Immediately I turn anxious from not seeing him. I move towards the house with an uneasy sense... and turn my head from side to side the entire time I'm slowly climbing the front stairs. There is still no sign of him??

I open the front door, and move in nervously. "Hello?... Hello?... Anybody home?... Uncle

Ike?"

Hearing the floor squeak... I stay wide-eyed with every step. A decorated World War Two Vet who returned home with plenty of issues... and little support from his Government... every stride sends stabs of worry through me. I don't think I can take losing my... moving from room to room. Where is he? In a heart-pounding panic at this point; it doesn't take long to search a tiny house meant for Sharecroppers almost a century ago?

Suddenly through the rear window I spot him... and freeze, "Uncle Ike", screaming while the fear re-calibrates. I then loosen my grip... and head towards the back screen door, "Uncle Ike are you ok?"... and charge through.

"The bomb exploded at around 10:20 this morning at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. The carnage is everywhere"... sirens wailing... "The bomb blew a massive hole in the rear wall of the Church, destroying the back steps."

The radio next to Uncle Ike spews out incredible words... beyond belief every one of them. I sit down needing to try and absorb them.

"There were children in the basement at the time."

Seeing the catatonic state on Uncle Ike's face.

"They were preparing for choir", the Announcer's voice cracks.

Nine years old is not an age where hate like this can be understood.

"OK everyone, I want ten laps around."

The whistle blows.

Everyone takes off in a straight line on the track that surrounds the field.

"Faster... we need to be faster than everyone else."

It doesn't take long to start baking under another merciless Alabama sun.

"We need to be tougher than everyone else."

I'm trying to catch my breath in this heat.

"We need to be better than everyone else."

I can feel the energy flee my body. "Come on McKenzie... games are won in the fourth quarter... when the will of every man is secretly questioned!", Coach Reinhart barks like a mega-phone. To this day his voice still rings in my head when I run. "Faster everybody... come on!" Sprinting the perimeter of the field in July can make you feel like you're dying a slow death. "Let's pick it up team!" That first year of practise was like nothing I'd ever experienced... being screamed at, pushed to my physical limits day after day after day - in that stifling heat!

Relying on Uncle Ike's words, "Nothing is impossible Oswald... nothing", to get me through the screaming pain from every sprint, tackle, catch, and block. "Your mind is your real strength Oswald." All of it coming from a man who experienced the madness of war. "The body follows the mind, remember that", his eyes burned with seriousness. "That's how you succeed in this here White Man's World", he called it. The sweat just poured out of me.

"How is Auburn University going to win the SEC if we're not tough enough?"

The whistle blows to end the run.

Immediately I put both my hands on my knees.

"OK team I want offense versus defense... come on line-up... let's go go go!"

I hated Coach's damn whistle.

Quickly lining up.

"Ready set hut 1 hut 2 hut hut."

Seventeen years old and my first time away from home.

Smashing bodies - I want to be the best I can - *fighting through* - I want my Parents and Uncle Ike to be proud of me. I race to get open... to find a spot on the field that the defense missed... getting open is very much a learned thing.

"Nice catch McKenzie."

Sprinting back to the huddle.

"Nice fake McKenzie."

After a hit that has me seeing stars.

"OK offense let's run the two-minute drill."

Alabama football has a way of making you grow up fast.

"Let's line-up and go... tempo tempo tempo." Everything moving super-fast off the line... I fight through like a Mad-Man. The air suddenly leaves my body after being tackled by two behemoths both high and low that I never saw coming.

The body follows the mind.

The body follows the mind.

I know there's a bull's-eye on my back.

"What kind of ANIMALS would do this to a Church?", the Announcer cries as sirens wail in the background. "This is not human behaviour", he sounds broken. The beer next to the radio stayed unopened the entire time. "This is not America", he sounds at his wits end, the way Uncle Ike looks.

That beer stayed unopened for days in fact - which did seem strange?? Only much later, when I was old enough to understand, did I overhear Mom and Dad talking about making sure Uncle Ike gets to his AA meeting down at the Church.

“He needs me”, they pleaded with sad eyes. It was my last year of high school when they asked me to go with Uncle Ike and make sure he sits through the entire meeting. By night’s end everything was made that much clearer for me; that beer was probably just there to help him cope... remind him of his own struggles.

“What is happening to this Country?”, the Announcer cracks.

Continuing to stare into the distance, unmoved from when I found him; I’m not used to seeing this type of face on my happy-go-lucky Uncle. No Sir I am not used to that defeated look at all! What this has definitely taught me is that even Uncle Ike is far more complicated than what I’d been seeing all these years.

Substance abuse gets my support no matter who’s asking; I’ve raised millions and always will.

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the...”

The standing-room only Church reverberates with the sound of a wounded Community. Seeing familiar faces so sad and tearful, not at all like the joyous gospel that goes on every Sunday from as far back as I can remember. The Minister motions and we all sit; if a mouse scurried I’d hear it, we’d all hear it. Sandwiched between my handkerchief-holding Mom... and a sombre Dad and Uncle Ike; never will I ever forget the pain wafting the McKenzie Baptist Church that day... the entire place sitting and weeping for so long. The very large and very well-dressed Reverend Smith sits distracted on the podium, with his eyes closed talking to someone from above.

It is ten minutes of nothing but tears.

Then twenty - suddenly he stands. The crying around me stops. His big head then tilts towards all of us... looking at us with wide-eyes and a message... as tears keep rolling down his cheeks. It was the only Sunday that nobody went to the pond.

Being the number one player in the State made sure that everyone brought their A-game when we were in town. Taking their best shot at trying to slow me down, cheap shots included; a nobody could be a somebody thanks to all the media at each and every one of my games.

But that never happened, and honestly, it started to make me believe that I was special. Swarmed by three linebackers the second I come down with the ball. Piled-on. Kneed. Buried underneath a mass of muscle... trying to catch the air that’s just been pummelled out of my body. “This isn’t high school anymore”, Coach Reinhart yells, “get up

McKenzie... they're going to hit even harder than that during a game."

Standing up groggy, I order my body to return the oxygen that has just been stolen from my lungs. "Wait until we go to Tuscaloosa."

Running to show I can take whatever these Gladiators can dish out. "Nice grab McKenzie."

I run past Coach with determined energy.

"Never let them see weakness", Uncle Ike said. Easier said than done, since every one of my teammates, and on every roster we're going to play this year.

Lining up for the next play.

These behemoths were also number one on their teams too. "Ready set hut, hut", taking off down the field for another precision route. I'm going to need to get used to running even when my body's not ready.

Helmet to helmet collisions all around me.

"Nice block McKenzie."

Because I've got a Coach that won't stop riding my ass.

"Get back to the huddle McKenzie."

My days of being special are over.

"Tempo tempo tempo!"

Everyone congratulates our star middle linebacker for laying a lick on the new guy; going over the middle at this level takes some real courage. I lift myself up in a flash even though I'm seeing colors... and different shapes of those colors; I wasn't going to let Coach yell, "Next Man Up!" on my watch. No way. "Good hands McKenzie."

Damn right I held onto the ball.

Every school closed early so no one had an excuse; heard it was like that everywhere in the State. Each day the following week was spent in Church... at least until twelve-thirty. Sitting on the back porch instead of his usual front... Uncle Ike hasn't been himself since the bombing. Whenever I come close only his hand touches mine, no smile or nothing... just a motioning for me to sit down next to him, along with an eerie tone that better belongs to a Stranger. "Go wash up for dinner", or, "Time for bed."

Confused?? Damn right... me and Uncle Ike used to talk for hours.

Half days at school... things sure are different... I definitely don't understand anything about all the politics being argued over?? But Uncle Ike shutting me out?? That was killing me. Especially since Mom and Dad had to get back to work, the Restaurant had customers, and the Foster's needed their house cleaned and laundry done.

A nine year old knows nothing about the disease of alcohol.

All the women in Church kept crying so loudly it hurt my ears.

“OZZIE! OZZIE!”

“Over here Ozzie...”

Champagne is soaking the entire room.

“Ozzie.”

Which includes me.

“Ozzie, come here for a second”, the drenched Reporter pulls me close. Rubbing my eyes from the spray. “Ozzie McKenzie... you’ve always carried yourself with class and dignity throughout your career”, shoving a microphone in my face. “OZZIE! OZZIE!”, my jubilant Players continue to scream as fountains of champagne soak anything and everything.

“Ozzie... Ozzie...”, leaning in closer to hear, “how does it feel to be the first African-American General Manager to win the Super Bowl?” “OZZIE! OZZIE! OZZIE!” “Well Troy”, feeling the lump in my throat grow, “I want to thank Arthur Levitt for his faith in putting me in charge of this great organization... the best organization in football!!”

The place erupts... “OZZIE! OZZIE!”... and so does a new round of champagne.

“I think we’re going to need life preservers here.”

“I’ll take it.”

I am extremely satisfied that my 24/7 obsession to find the best players with the healthiest minds, no matter where they’re from, has ended with me getting soaked in front of the entire world.

“You know Ozzie you’ve changed Professional football forever... you do know that?”

Whether from the biggest schools... the smallest... or even the poorest, “Character wins Championships”, Coach Reinhart beat into me. “Always carry yourself with dignity and humility”, Dad would remind on the days he got home before I had to go to bed... which, if I was lucky, was maybe once a week.

Talent is one thing; at this level everyone has talent. But heart, I found out quickly... now that’s what an organization needs to win Championships in this league.

“Anger won’t do you any good against the damn system, trust me on that one Oswald... its performance that counts”, Uncle Ike would repeat and repeat and repeat after I’d get home tired and whiney from practise, complaining about that living in the South double-standard again. “Your family came from Africa as slaves, they worked for the McKenzie family since 1827, made them one of the richest families in Alabama... and they didn’t even have the humanity to let them keep their own names. Now what’s your problem Son?”, Mom made a stern point when I was feeling sorry for myself. I was a better Quarterback than anyone in our league, but blacks couldn’t play that position. “They don’t have the mental capacity to do the job under pressure”, everybody said... every white person that is, which is every Coach down here.

Mom and Dad and Uncle Ike taught me so much; I just bottled up the anger and released it on the field, always on the field.

“OZZIE! OZZIE! OZZIE!”

“Go celebrate with your team”, the drenched Reporter gives up.

“OZZIE! OZZIE! OZZIE!”

“Thanks Troy.”

Raising both hands in victory. “OZZIE! OZZIE!”

I need to enjoy this moment with my team.

I chose Auburn University because of Coach Jake *The Snake* Reinhart, and because I just couldn't forget that look when Paul *The Lion* Belletrain, the Holy Pontiff from that Citadel over in Tuscaloosa, reached in and told me to my face that the University of Alabama, “Wasn't ready for a black Quarterback, Son.”

That's all I needed to hear - and I wasn't his God-Damn Son!

Known for slithering in two or three fearless calls during a game to earn him his nickname, “I'd have my Sister play Quarterback if she gave me the best chance to win a National Championship”, Coach Reinhart barked with seriousness.

Uncle Ike and Dad's reaction was enough... I didn't need to hear anything after that. “I'm looking forward to playing hard for you Coach”, extending my hand. “You're going to be a big part of the offense here Ozzie”, gripping back with enthusiasm, “as God is my witness I guarantee you'll be an All-American under my watch.” Appreciated the endorsement... *smiling back*... but I didn't need more motivation; Belletrain saw to that. Self-motivation is what I learned that day, the characteristic I'm looking for in all my players because I know it in myself; the gift that's needed to rise above everyone in this sport of crazed Gladiators. I had the best games of my college career against the University of Alabama. And it's plenty contagious too.

Me and Jimmy Holloway arrived on campus at the same time, both of us fresh-faced seventeen year-olds packing plenty of enthusiasm for the coming season; Jimmy's wizardry at the Quarterback position preceded him... and frankly, well I was just so damn ecstatic to have a black man at the position. Not that I needed any more inspiration. It was then and there that I made the decision to work as hard as I could with this skinny Phenom, and show the world what we could do. Every morning I jumped out of bed ready. Sweating bullets in the weight room; no way was I going to let this opportunity slip away! Day and night I dragged poor Jimmy out so we could go over plays... sync-up our timing on complicated routes... and for the life of me try to understand his out-of-this-world improvisational skills. I never saw anything like it. This shy and very impressionable kid from South Carolina... which I later came to realize was not unlike many of the kids I'm trying to recruit as Bandit's General Manager... was a potential Star. One needed to be

blind not to see it. It was his inner demons that had me so worried... and to this I was very new. From McKenzie Alabama to Super Bowl Champs - Jimmy Holloway taught me a lot about the insidiousness of bestowing someone with incredible skill... and then refusing to provide them with the character to handle it. Not pretty when it picks up steam, heart-wrenching actually. Putting together a Championship-caliber team in the NFL is not easy, for one thing college success rarely translates into pro-level success... and not wanting to sound like a broken record. Ah screw it. I will never stop saying that character is something that's not easily measured - just ask sixth-round pick Tom Brady or undrafted Kurt Warner. For that reason I continuously fly the country meeting kids and their families... spending hours at their homes, watching them interact in *their world*, paying close attention to *their relationships* with Parents, Teachers, Siblings... even their pets. It's the only chance I have at seeing what the hell I'm drafting. Let's not forget that rookie contracts in the NFL average two million a year... and usually last three years, sometimes four... not to mention a \$500,000 signing bonus just for making it this far. Hardly chump change for kids brought up in poverty who, pretty well overnight, now possess an extended family with big eyes for all those zeroes. Too many times I've seen it... way too many times; these kids don't have an Uncle Ike to keep them on the straight and narrow. Hell no - it's the complete opposite.

Instead they've got genetic leeches that feign love and concern - that's why I take some of them in myself. That's right they come live with me during their first few years in the Pros, don't think there's another General Manager in the league that does this. Honestly though, I must admit my wife Evita wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea the first time I offered it up. "I just need to do this, please just trust me", was really all I could say. She looked back at me confused... but never stopped trusting me. Without Evita I wouldn't be half the man I am today.

38 Wins.

Four years running me and Jimmy tore up the Southeastern Conference.

3 rapturous victories over State rival Alabama and that crease-faced Belletrain.

1 National Championship.

A new appreciation for nutrition and training - and thirty pounds of muscle.

SEC records for catches, yards, and touchdowns, plus three All-American honors.

A 3.7 G.P.A... but most importantly a work ethic that had me focused 24/7. I was leaving Auburn a man with clarity... and for that I'll always wish the best for Coach Reinhart. Gritty and over the top for sure, manic even... he was a hugely impactful Mentor who lived up to every word. "Gentlemen, it's the work you do that you're not told to do that will determine your future in this game and in life."

Not so easy when every muscle in your body is telling you just to coast, just to rely on your God-given abilities; which only makes you average around here. "For the great ones

it's about more than the money I can tell you that, it's about the choice to leave your mark", Coach would repeat before during and after practise.

Not to sound selfish but that Heisman would have looked pretty nice on my mantel.

"With the eighth pick in the 1974 draft, the Los Angeles Bandits select...", Commissioner Rozier moves to open the envelope amongst a hushed crowd. His stiff demeanour is taking forever; I feel faint. It's the longest few seconds of my life.

"Oswald McKenzie from the University of Auburn."

The crowd erupts with cheers and boos.

"I'm so proud of you son." "Thanks Mom." I honestly didn't hear the crowd at all. I may have been drafted by one of the worst teams in the league. "Good work Ozzie." "Thanks Dad." But I didn't care one bit because I was going to prove myself on the field.

The next day I got the biggest smile I'd seen on Uncle Ike's face in a long time. That bomb changed him. Damn alcohol.

Charter planes serving the best food and beer thanks to some very pleasant and leggy Stewardesses; fully-stocked limousines and the raging echo of 24/7 adoration... "Go Bandits!"... it's hard not to get sucked in... "We love you Bandits!", from hearing Groupies shriek as we file past. The Pros were presenting a whole new world to this bashful kid from the sticks, before one knows it a guy who merely runs fast or throws far can start to think he's better than everyone else. Playing in massive stadiums teeming with 80,000 fans that could cheer forever... fanatics dressed from head to toe in expensive team attire... both men and women screaming with their painted faces - damn right I saw this was a business first and that I needed to perform or else. Who wouldn't? The entanglement of big-time sports with human exploitation is bizarre up close.

Hearing the crowd roar.

But it's real.

"Get your popcorn ready because it's game time!", the Announcer yells as we run out from the tunnel.

The bigger the gate the bigger the indifference towards the Players.

The Stadium shakes under my feet.

As an NFL General Manager you deal with this reality every day, since this is *Big-Time Entertainment* that requires *Big-Time Entertainers*. This is no charity - some teams are worth over a billion dollars. "This is all about the money, not the Championships", long-time owner Art Levitt would constantly remind me during my Apprenticeship in the Bandit's front office. Spoken like a man who never played the game; to what degree I had

to swallow such cold hard facts has always weighed on my mind. Won't do it. Can't do it. I vowed to be different. "Success comes from failure", Coach Adams barked, "but only ONCE will it be tolerated on my team", strutting back and forth like a Dictator. Coach Reinhart he wasn't... but I didn't care... I had my agenda. Play hard. Train even harder. Let Evita raise the kids. Thank God. And do everything in my power to help my team win come Sunday... with humility of course. And let the cameras of history judge me. "McKenzie I want that route run quicker... you see here, that's where the corner is letting you break free, right here, you need to break free here. Pay attention out there!" You're lucky if you get a Coach you can respect. "Rogers, what the hell you doing out there?!" Unless it has a point loud criticism isn't coaching at all.

Running back to the huddle.

I had eight in my career, yet none matched Reinhart's ability to unify men, to bond them in such a way that they'd play their guts out for him - run through a brick wall if they had to. So just like in college I would merely keep my head down and give it everything I've got - from what I put in my body to how much sleep I need - and NO alcohol.

"Ozzie McKenzie, the fans of the Los Angeles Bandits proudly salute you for your great effort", the crowd roars after my last game. Tears welling as I wave back. "The number 80 will be retired forever." Continuing to stand and roar... what a moment; I keep waving back. After sixteen seasons, plus many team and league records, I was rewarded with a bust in Canton five years later. Six months after that, with the town buzzing, the Bandits hired me as the league's first African-American General Manager. L.A. loved me... and I loved them back. My wife is adored here. My family's grown up here. "Ozzie McKenzie is breaking new ground." "Can Ozzie break the myth?"

Nobody wanted to succeed at this new role more than me.

"You'll get 'em next time Ozzie."

It became my obsession.

"Great trade Ozzie."

Imagine for a second that everywhere you go... the supermarket... the gym... any restaurant... even the friggin' parking lot... when I say everywhere I mean everywhere. The minute you're outside your house you're met with big smiles from complete Strangers... Strangers who put more pressure on you to succeed from all this damn kindness. "Good mornin' Ozzie." Especially since a winning football team is the single greatest gust of unifying energy to a city, transforming it in a way that one can only believe from having been in it. "Good luck this week Ozzie." Crime goes down.

"Great game Ozzie." Economic activity spikes.

Even Politicians aren't reviled as much.

"OK who does everyone have as their number 1?", sitting in my office surrounded by a posse of trusted coaches. "I like Lewis." "I've got Henderson as my number 1."

"Marvin Jones is the best on my board Oz."

Since free agents and their pricey demands can absolutely put your job in jeopardy.

“Quinn is my choice boss.”

Bar none the spring draft is the single biggest contributor to improving one’s fortunes.

“A. J. Lambert Ozzie... the kid can fly.”

It’s all about picking kids who can make a quick transition to the Pros.

Ruffling through a table covered in paper.

It’s where you can get their first three years under contract for a steal.

“Who do we like at 2?”

So we can spend it elsewhere.

“Anybody going to give me their number 2?”

The first day after the Super Bowl is when it all starts.

“Anybody?”

Watching twelve hours of film at the office, then calling high school and college coaches for their personal opinions... and then of course flying around to every one-gas-station town trying to spend quality time with these candidates and their families - hopefully while not bumping into other NFL GM’s... which most certainly happens at the airport or a motel with a horrible mattress and little water pressure.

Whenever I spot it along the drive, I always make a point of stopping for some precious green-space time... walking in it really makes the difference on my frenetic psyche.

Football for me is 24/7.

A God-given ability certainly. His child-like naiveté for sure. Lamar Lincoln reminded me so much of Jimmy. Blessed with a smile that could light up a room, just like Jimmy’s...

Lamar was the baby of seven - five sisters and one brother. You could see this kid got smothering love from all the Lincoln women. “Lamar is a good boy Mr. McKenzie.”

“I’ve no doubt Mrs. Lincoln.”

“Call me Sadie.”

Just the two of us sitting in a cramped Chickasaw County living room on a torn sofa with springs digging in my backside... looking at Lamar’s trophies overflow from every available shelf; can this kid handle a six million dollar contract? And probably a million more of just ‘walking around’ money?, I wonder silently while Lamar plays video games with his brother and sisters. And can he live alone in L.A.?

A twin of McKenzie Alabama, Chickasaw County Mississippi is remote from the big city of Jackson. Its 19,000 inhabitants spread out over a vastness of un-kept rural-ness that grows nothing but cotton or tobacco; if you’ve been doing this for as long as I have... starting with illiteracy and poverty you see plenty in common from all these places. One of the five most coveted seniors in the country, choosing the University of Texas under Bo Burzynski seemed like a great move from where I was sitting. I’d met Coach Burzynski

many times, liked his approach, his dogged Philosophy to not only teach the game, but to prepare these boys for being respectable Pros and Citizens. "Yes Sir"... "No Sir"... "Pardon me Sir"... Lamar definitely showed a well-schooled politeness. My concern however went back to confidence, that inner poise to stand up to the leeches who purposely latch onto a kid like Lamar, especially in a city as diabolical as Los Angeles. I still visit his grave whenever I'm in South Carolina; I've never gotten over Jimmy's derailment, which is the biggest reason I care so much about these kids.

The number one running back in the country coming out of Chickasaw high school... 10,000 fans cramming a rickety old stadium of equal white and black, even some native Indians from the next county - rare such a racial mix down here - all of them catching a glimpse of this extraordinary specimen. Lamar ran a 4.3 - 4.0 coming out of high school. He scored 106 touchdowns from over 7,245 yards... a State record. And led his basketball team to the State finals... dunking over anyone at will, while never showing one ounce of emotion the entire time. Was he slow?... or just shy?... started to make the rounds. At Texas the ascent continued. "He was the best player on the field", became Burzynski's standard phrase after every game. Lamar's media interviews showed an uncomfortable kid who just wanted to focus on helping his team win. His answers didn't come easy. People can be mean.

Six foot three and two hundred and twenty-five pounds with blurring speed; after four years of college I was looking at a boy trapped in a man, a very large man's body. "Dinner everybody", Sadie Lincoln bellows.

Within seconds the kitchen fills with seven large children... and fourteen very hungry grandchildren. "Little ones over there", pointing to a table set up strictly for them. Everyone listens to Sadie.

Before anybody dares to reach in, "Lamar, please say the blessing", Sadie announces. Putting his hands together, closing his eyes and facing downwards, the table goes quiet.

"Thank you our Lord Jesus Christ for this meal of sustenance... and thank-you for this great family... and please bless Mr. Ozzie McKenzie... and..."

There has never been a Father in Lamar's life, but Sadie's a fine God-fearing woman.

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Lamar, happy birthday to you.”

The McKenzie’s serenade their newest addition to the family, and the most popular rookie in the NFL right out-of-the-gate. “Lamar... open this one first”, my smitten daughter Alexa pleads. His rise has been both swift and spectacular for the rest of the country. “Open mine after”, wide-eyed Tasha follows.

Showering Lamar with love and acceptance; Sadie really changed her tune when I flew her, pre-draft day, to meet Evita and the kids at the house. “You have a wonderful home”, she offered Evita. “And this will be Lamar’s room. And this will be yours whenever you want to come to LA.” Both Mothers - Evita made all the difference; I chose Lamar with our first pick. We bonded instantly.

Carpooling to and from the stadium, we spent plenty of time together, and like Uncle Ike had done for me, I challenged Lamar to think about the people around him... about his future goals... about everything except football. Which from my own experience can be overwhelming to a small-town twenty-one year old - after all this is the NFL, the most scrutinized league in the country! Damn Reporters can spend an entire week on a bad play from the previous week, or a late-night out getting nothing more than a pizza... or holding hands with a girl who has been seen with another boy. Forget it if he buys a new sports car.

Distractions all of them; I promised Sadie Lincoln right there in her well-used kitchen that I would parent Lamar like he was my own... and that was exactly what I was doing, gladly. Oh and we were 6-0 by the way... which told me I was doing something right.

Cackles of girls waiting for as long as it took to catch a glimpse of their muscular Stallion... staying late to receive treatment on a body getting sacrificed to the ferocity of the game - making it harder for us to co-ordinate leaving the stadium together; more and more I worried about Lamar... off the field that is, because on it I was a fan plain and simple. Whenever the kid put on his pads, laced up his cleats, and strapped on that helmet, he was nothing short of dynamic. Every play of every game, regardless of injury, he showed loyalty to the entire Bandits family, to me, Coach Reilly, Art Levitt, the Trainers... and most especially the paying Fans, who were now shelling out big bucks to see their new saviour in black and gold. Lamar’s burning desire to lead the Bandits to the Championship never dulled. Leading the league in rushing every year, only some bad luck and veritable inches stopped us from making the big dance in years four and five - the year Lamar decided it would be best if he bought his own place and moved out.

Sitting down with me and Evita on a typical night after eating half a cow, he flashed that big-eyed look I’d seen so many times before. He was tongue-tied something fierce; I knew something big was coming. “I saw a great condo in Malibu overlooking the ocean.” My insides started to spin with worry for this naive boy in this land of Machiavellian Vipers; I knew I couldn’t stop him.

“I still expect you here for Friday night dinners. I’ll make those honey garlic ribs you like”, Evi could not help but barter. “I’ll try my best Evita.” “You better or I’ll come get you myself.” She knows it’s all we have... food guilt.

Lamar knows he’s loved, but we had to trust that he’d be able to handle this big change. Introducing him to a Financial Advisor, a Lawyer, and an Accountant - geez the kid makes more money than me times ten, I can’t exactly keep him here by force. “If you need anything you call... you hear?” “Sure Ozzie.”

He wasn’t one of our own, but the day he left was one of the saddest of our lives. Tasha and Alexa couldn’t stop crying. Evita didn’t talk for the rest of the day. Luckily I needed to book a flight for an upcoming General Manager’s conference in Miami... I took plenty of extra time walking it off by making a few more calls in the giant park at the end of our street. It’s supposed to be a beautiful day tomorrow... and a huge playoff game for us.

“Just play your game, don’t focus on the crowd”, rambling while trying to calm myself down. I played enough big games to know this isn’t the right topic; Lamar needs to relax. “Keep your eye on Robertson, he’s a big hitter.” I wasn’t myself though. “I got it Ozzie”, Lamar reaches in to turn up the music - he doesn’t need my worry, he feels it throughout the City... been the topic of discussion non-stop.

“Can Lamar beat the tough Raider’s defense?”

“Can Lamar block Robertson on those lethal blitz packages?”

“Can the Bandits finally make it to the big dance?”

“Can Ozzie McKenzie win the big one?”

“Is Ozzie too nice to his players?”

That last one really burns.

“Good luck my boy”, leaving the car to enter the stadium. “Thanks Ozzie”, reaching in for his customary pre-game hug. I can see the fury in his eyes... glad somebody’s ready, because I’m nervous as hell for this one.

Lamar’s off to get dressed.

I’m going to take a steam.

Four agonizing hours later... the smell of fresh-cut grass that meshes beautifully with the eye-popping colors painted on it... the mammoth Coliseum has an anxious rumble. “LET’S PLAY FOOTBALL”, blares the giant speakers.

Gladiators run out to a deafening roar.

“You know this is the biggest gate we’ve ever had”, a beaming Art Levitt mentions to a special Members-Only gathering in his private box at Proctor field. Have been to so many big games in my career... many... but this one has me perspiring as if I’m playing.

“Hut 1, Hut 2, Hut 3, Hut, Hut.”

Watching a football game is a collection of manic starts and stops that really weigh on your blood pressure. “First down”, the Announcer yells on the loudspeaker.

“Hut 1... Omaha! Omaha 4! Hut Hut!”

Both sides push in either direction with do-or-die-force.

The crowd waits for the play to unfold. The Quarterback drops back to pass... and manically looks around for someone to be open... the crowd erupts from a perfect technique tackle by one of our behemoth lineman.

The whistle blows to end the play.

Anticipating the possibilities, the crowd quickly prepares for the next play.

Taking a sip of cold beer.

The game has begun with a hard-hitting stalemate, football is a unique form of fluidity like nothing else; suddenly a roar comes from a magnificent interception. “The Bandits get the ball back”, informs the Announcer over the cheering. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” Our box is going crazy... ties have been loosened... even the women are screaming.

“Hand the ball to Lincoln”, Art yells.

Everyone’s a kid in here; aren’t sports fantastic.

Lamar has not seen enough open space to kick it into that next gear... the one that leaves tacklers in his dust. With no room to run, he’s been having a tough day... 22 carries for only 66 yards is what the stat-sheet says, restless is what’s happening inside this stadium. Moving side to side instead of his customary straight ahead... dancing and dodging way too much trying to find that crease that’ll spring him... I can see that he’s trying too hard... everyone can. Lamar’s never been a finesse runner, it’s not his style... speed and power is his thing. The Raider’s D has messed with his head. “Call a trap play”, I bark out, “call a damn trap play”, not caring who’s here and what they think. My heart is beating faster with every tick of the clock.

BOOM... the gun goes off signalling the end of the third quarter. The crowd and this private box are both silent. Down 17 – 14... concern has now filled the stadium... there’s only fifteen minutes left in the biggest game of my career.

The crowd starts to rev things up.

“LINCOLN, LINCOLN, LINCOLN, LINCOLN.”

The break has been good for revving-up the energy in this place. Our offense trots onto the field; everyone knows this is becoming one of our last chances to mount a drive and score some points. *“LINCOLN, LINCOLN.”* I have never been part of... *“LINCOLN, LINCOLN”*, such a deafening display... *“LINCOLN, LINCOLN”*, as 92,000 fans chant his name... *“LINCOLN, LINCOLN.”* I can’t sit either... *“LINCOLN, LINCOLN.”*

When the Bandits break the huddle the crowd immediately halts.

When they begin to set up their offense the crowd immediately goes silent.

Moving players around... then setting... "Hut 1, Hut 2, Hut, Hut." The Quarterback takes two steps to his right, and then hands the ball to Lamar... seeing a giant guard swooping around to lead the way. "Finally", my reaction to a play I've been calling for over a quarter, and not quietly.

In response to the twenty-two yard gain, his longest of the day, "*LINCOLN LINCOLN*." Nobody's sitting... it's electric in here.

The hurry-up is a thing of beauty... "Hut 1, Hut Hut."

The next three plays are variations of the same trap scheme. Gaining big yards on each one, Lamar's taken us down to the Raider's 12 yard line. With time ticking away everyone smells touchdown... plus the fear of no touchdown. Even Art's silenced by what's at stake. Knowing very well what a trip to the Super Bowl means to Ozzie McKenzie, all my fingers are crossed... I'll gladly answer that same question over and over... pleading for a score. "Hut 1, Hut 2... Hut Hut Hut...", the Quarterback stuffs the ball into Lamar's mid-section like so many times before... skirting a barrelling linebacker with a nifty side-step. "*OHH*"... the crowd responds to Lamar suddenly falling from not even being hit?? Immediately grabbing his right knee?? The entire stadium just had an arctic blast blow through it... lowering the temperature by a good thirty degrees. "Four yard loss", the crestfallen Announcer says as Lamar writhes in pain.

Never experiencing such a setback, such a potentially career-ending injury; Lamar today has me worried, really worried. I've grown extremely frustrated with him... and it's getting worse; Lamar's will is definitely being tested. Every morning I pick him up and take him to our favourite place with great eggs and the freshest fruit, plus a view into the bluest blue Pacific; six months on and I'm starting to see a light extinguish. World-class Athletes have their bodies do all the heavy lifting since birth. "Now you need your mind to take over", I keep reminding him like a broken record. Back in my day a torn ACL meant two years of hell... a crude surgery, an even cruder rehab... and still your chances were only 50/50 of getting back. Now with medicine the way it is... and NFL teams and their injury budgets the way they are; one year and Lamar should be back to his old spectacular self. Seeing him wilt under the expectations though... especially with twelve million reasons of human temptation trying to flee his wallet - next year can't get here fast enough.

"How's he doing?"

"He's on schedule", head trainer Bob Gelkov replies in the privacy of my office.

"Is he abusing?"

"Not that I'm aware of, we're testing him every month, so I'd know."

Opiate addiction in Professional Football is as common as concussions - anybody tell you differently has never played the game pure and simple. Put two-hundred and fifty pound men in a cage and watch them crash into each other at full speed - only then can one realize this is a problem that will never go away... ever. Controlling it is the only responsible option; which is my job.

“What are his THC levels?”

“They’re not zero, I’m not going to lie to you Ozzie.”

The past few months Lamar’s fallen in with the wrong crowd. Too much free time and way too much money can be a recipe for disaster, a General Manager’s worst nightmare... to say nothing of the fact that my family and I have grown to really adore this fantastic kid. If anything happened to Lamar?

“Keep an eye on it... test him every other week from now on.” “You got it.”

Escorting Bob out of my office, “Keep me posted.”

Personally I didn’t need any painkillers. “Country Strong”, was what the Trainers kept calling me. “Amazing how strong your bones are Ozzie.” Used to take 48 hours tops to recover from a 10-catch game; ice tubs for twenty minutes three times a day always did the trick. Although no matter what you did no one in the NFL is ever 100%. And surviving for 16 seasons... my Lord I’ve had my share of aching hands, knees, shoulders... a bruised back... an arthritic neck... luckily nothing bad enough where I needed a routine of opiates; my record speaks for itself. Most of the players I knew however were not so fortunate. Unbearable pain from game to game... some needed shots just to get out of bed and make practise. Queasy & sluggish from needing them... which is a sure-fire recipe to becoming unemployed; marijuana has become the secret alternative of choice now. All of us know it... Coaches, General Managers, Trainers - it is the grand bargain between Players and Management. “After all nobody overdoses on weed”, a fellow GM once said to me in the strictest of confidence. “And we administer the piss tests for Pete’s sake”, adding a conspicuous wink.

If one ever plays football then one undoubtedly will experience pain, and if one experiences pain... everyone, and I mean everyone... will seek ways to alleviate it. You play. You know. Otherwise fuck-off... pardon the language. Always for my Players; I’m soft on enforcement because I’ve seen it work with my own two eyes... but Lamar??

“Come in.”

The door opens two months later. “Bob, come in.”

“Hey Ozzie listen, I’m sorry to bother you”, moving in sheepishly. He then swiftly closes the door.

“Don’t be silly... come in, have a seat.”

“This won’t take long.”

“What’s up?” Bob refuses to sit. “You told me to tell you when Lamar’s numbers went up.” My stomach sinks.

“Well his THC levels are sky-high... and... well... well I thought you’d want to know”, he announces awkwardly. His body language says it all. I lift to my feet in response, trying to hide the sudden fury that’s been unleashed in my stomach. “Just his THC levels?” I move in closer; Lamar is a Pothead?? “Ya it’s the darnedest thing... his opiate levels have actually gone down.” Guess that explains the TMZ thing that is littering the internet lately. “Anything else I need to know?” Jimmy Holloway pops into my head.

“His tissue is almost 100% healed.”

“How close is it?” “He’s at around 90%.” “Any mobility issues?”

“None, the kids a stud... great musculature.” “Country strong.” Bob stares in confusion, “Excuse me?” “Nothing”, leading him out.

“Thanks again Bob.”

Closing the door behind him.

I just sit thinking at my desk.

“You’re moving back in with us”, storming into Lamar’s spacious bachelor pad. I have a key for emergencies. “But I don’t want to... no offense”, Lamar barks while sprawled-out on his sofa, half-baked while playing video games. This is definitely an emergency.

“You’re going to have to believe me when I tell you that this is not personal”, checking every cupboard, “this is business... strictly business. Evita and the Girls are going to shower you with love and you’re going to be grateful”, opening his fridge. “Because the way you’re acting lately”, checking the back of every drawer, “because you don’t seem to be grateful for anything lately except drugs and pussy”, checking in the freezer too. “Come on Lamar... you heard me... get up and start packing for fuck’s sake!”

May God forgive me for my words but I need to reach this kid.

“You’re not listening to me”, Lamar hasn’t moved a muscle. “You’re damn right I’m not listening to you, that’s because I made a promise to your Mother, and as sure as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west I am not going to break it for no one... and that includes you.”

Lamar locks onto my seriousness because I can feel it coursing my veins... all I see is Jimmy Holloway... “Not on my watch... you hear me!”

Coursing is right!

It is twenty minutes more of tough words before Lamar finally slumbers-up the stairs to pack. He’s not happy... it took some corralling, more than what was needed in fact because of his paranoid state. But I don’t care if he’s happy or not.

Thankfully though... thanks to the grace of The Almighty and the power of my Girls, Lamar is both mentally and physically ready to leave his destructive crew of leeches forever.

In two months time Lamar Lincoln roars back with a vengeance; he's learned his lesson and everyone can see it in his body.

"Love always beats back the darkness", Uncle Ike used to say.

He's ecstatic entering training camp; this is going to be our year!

Ring Ring Ring.

Barely opening one eye... I see that it's 3:30 in the morning?? Evi releases a disapproving sound and rolls over - this is nothing but another urgent call from work to her.

Ring Ring Ring.

To me it's a problem, "Hello??"

"Hello, is this Mr. Ozzie McKenzie?"

"Yes... yes it is", both eyes open from the tone.

"Mr. McKenzie, this is Sergeant Russell of the Los Angeles Police Department."

My mouth suddenly goes dry as I sit up... cold chills race down my back. "Is there anything wrong Sergeant?" My body knows.

"Mr. McKenzie there's been an accident. I think you should come down to the Station as soon as possible."

Standing immediately, "I'll be there right away."

As if on instinct I run for the bathroom... What's happening? Where are the Girls?

I do my business and flee.

All of a sudden my brain reminds me that my Girls are in Vancouver for the week; thank God for that. Where are my damn socks?

I take off from the bedroom with his voice still going off in my head.

Escaping the house... I jump in my car... and race to 37 Division. I'm detached from any sense of reality.

"I'm here to see Sergeant Russell", leaning into the front desk.

"I'll get him Sir, please have a seat... this will only take a moment."

My heart is pumping like mad.

I can't sit. I can only pace.

Suddenly I spot a sober face in a full police uniform approach. "Hello Mr. McKenzie, I'm Sergeant Russell."

"Hi."

"Please follow me." The large Officer with the stiff stride turns... and begins to lead me

and my exploding nerves down a long maze of hallways.

He opens a thick, heavy, steel door with a tiny window in it, "Please Mr. Mackenzie." And then quickly moves in front of me after I've gone through... it is another long hallway of grey walls and regular doors.

The Sergeant ends at the threshold of a door with the number 47 on it. He reaches and pulls this heavy looking steel door with no window. I follow him through... "Please have a seat Mr. McKenzie", he directs me with his other hand.

"What is this about?", fighting a terrible case of dry mouth.

"Mr. McKenzie, there's been a terrible accident." His eyes look right at me.

"An accident?"

"Yes an accident Mr. McKenzie, Lamar Lincoln is dead." The Sergeant reaches over to place a box of tissues on the table. He then leans in... and puts his hand gently on my shoulder. "I'm very sorry Mr. McKenzie, I understand your pain. Everybody in this town knows what Lamar means to you."

All the strength of my body vanishes... I need to put my head in my hands or else I'll fall forward; my life's had its fair share of pain, but this hurts like nothing I've ever felt before. "Lamar's dead? How?" It hurts to breathe.

"He was eating at a fast-food restaurant near Venice when some customers started to hassle these two girls that were sitting next to him. From the eyewitnesses we spoke to Lamar stood up for those girls and drove off the loiterers."

"My God Lamar's dead?"

"This whole city is going to be asking that same question in a few hours", the Sergeant remarks as he stands, pouring me a glass of water from the cooler.

"Here, it'll help with the dry mouth", placing it on the table in front of me. His measured expression shows experience in these matters, he then quietly sits. "He was signing autographs for the girls and many others... Lamar was a good guy from what we were told. When he finished he left the restaurant with a buddy and those same girls. When they got into the parking lot a car from across the street started up suddenly, then took off speeding through the lot firing-off six rounds. Two hit Lamar and one hit one of the girls. Lamar died instantly, the girl is in hospital with serious wounds to her neck."

The Sergeant's words... no matter how monotone and clear, barely register. Lamar's dead. Seeing his smiling face in my mind.

Lamar's dead.

That innocent beam, that fabulous young kid who had the brightest future... gone just like that. He was like the son I never had... *trying to hold in the nausea*... it's Jimmy Holloway all over again.

Football isn't even registering; I'm terrified for Evi and the girls.

“BANDITS! BANDITS!”... the robust hugs are everywhere in this closed-to-the-press locker room. The best Cigars are being enthusiastically smoked while the finest Champagne flows generously straight from the bottle. Art Levitt and I lock eyes through the mayhem... I head straight for him... he does the same.

“OZZIE we did it, we did it.” It is a deep embrace. “Yes we did.” It’s a very special moment in my life because of the painful journey it took to get here.

“Ozzie McKenzie get up here”, the Commissioner calls me up. Art pulls away with a smile, the biggest I’ve ever seen on his wrinkled old face. He then happily pushes me away in the direction of the podium.

As I head up to it, “OZZIE OZZIE.” The room erupts. “OZZIE OZZIE.”

When I finally get there, when I finally make it up to the makeshift stage that’s being sprayed with Champagne, the Commissioner hands me the esteemed Trophy. I grab this filthy beautiful thing. I look at it... deeply... and realize... that this smudge-covered bust of alchemy is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life. It is the one thing that we have all scratched and clawed for, the one thing that we have all fought an entire season for... it feels like an eternity that I’ve wanted to hold this thing in my hands. “OZZIE OZZIE.” It’s in my hands and I’m admiring it with the widest eyes.

Suddenly I feel the need to turn to the packed room, “Please everyone”, to try to lower the volume, “Please... can I have everyone’s attention? Please.”

Every head in the place tilts up. The Coaches, The Trainers, The Admin Staff... even the massive Gladiators. Everyone’s eyes are fixed on me... even teary-eyed Art Levitt. The silence is instant; I have the floor. “If everyone could hold their excitement until after I’m finished that would be great.”

Ahem.

The room’s silent except for my pounding heart.

Ahem.

“I want to start-off by congratulating everyone in this room.”

Ahem.

“I want to congratulate every one of you for the collective sacrifice that’s been made which has allowed this Organization to overcome so many obstacles.”

Ahem.

The moment feels surreal.

“The NFL season is not a sprint, everybody here knows that. It is an excruciating marathon that tests each and every one of us every day. It takes nothing less than all of us working in the same direction to be Champions, which is why I want to thank all of you from the Bandit’s head office for your contribution to this great trophy. Our gratitude runs deep for Mr. Art Levitt and the entire Bandit’s family.”

All eyes of the room remain fixed on me.

“We’re all Warriors here... which means we rise to the challenge placed in front of us.”

Turning away for a second, trying to gather my thoughts.

Ahem.

This is going to be tough.

“Sadie can you come up here please”, reaching my hand to help her up to the podium. I catch the entire room as I lean in to help her... tears are now staring back at me, everyone is overcome with emotion... everyone... vulnerable human emotion while being attached to massive torsos.

When Sadie is finally up, I make sure to place her next to me.

Ahem.

“Eight years ago I signed a kid that I thought would be the final piece of the puzzle for this Franchise’s journey, and like all journeys that matter... that really matter...”, seeing their eyes well up, “this journey came filled with plenty of ups and downs is all I’m going to say.”

Taking an extra second or two.

Ahem.

Gathering myself.

“Lamar Lincoln was a football player who wanted to do his best for his teammates because he was raised to believe in the power of loyalty... the power of family. This woman here raised him to be that way, and everyone who was touched by his smile and bright light felt that. Lamar did everything that was asked of him by the Bandit’s organization because he considered us family, that is why Sadie Lincoln is here today to celebrate with us... because we are all family.”

The place erupts with applause.

Tears are everywhere; even I need to wipe away the emotion.

Reaching in for a big hug with her... we both lose it.

I miss Lamar so much.