

# 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!”, into a TV audience of two billion at least.

**8, 7...**

“Nothing is impossible... just unthinkable!”, the yelling Announcer echoes in Ozzie McKenzie’s head as he stands staring 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 adds to the watching world.

**4, 3...**

“Absolutely not Troy... the stigma has been broken forever”, the Announcer gets choked up.

**2, 1...**

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

The cathartic voice screams 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 all. “Congratulations My Love.” “Thanks Baby... and thanks for all the love.”

Tears roll down both their faces as they need to embrace for a long second.

“I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Locked in an embrace that spans fifty-two years; this gorgeous Angel knows exactly what this journey has been like, absolutely she does. “I’m so proud of you.” The highs and lows have been 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”, under his breath. Taking this all in provides a feeling of such intense joy... of such a surreal moment - now Ozzie knows what that word means. “Come on”, a Chaperone yells at Ozzie with his arms waving. Ozzie gathers his brood in response... and starts to lead them in tow, heart racing with each step. He’s following this guy onto a stage reserved only for Champions... for League Champions!! He wants to cry, but he can’t because of all the staring faces. Stoic was how Ozzie was raised; his smile feels like it’s stretching his face to new proportions.

The Big Man in the black blazer and earphone has them all up on the stage... and ready.  
The Commissioner of the League.

The Coach.

Two very sweaty Captains.

And Ozzie.

The Pandemonium suddenly hushes when the Announcer grabs the mike... and uses his other hand to signal to the crowd that they'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 Ozzie 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 his name at once. Ozzie's legs go weak. The ground is shaking.

Everything inside Ozzie goes weak... but with so many watching this is no time to

stumble. "Ozzie Ozzie Ozzie." Overwhelmed while reaching to accept this glimmering trophy from the Commissioner's hands... but that's not what the world sees... the second

Ozzie has it... the absolute second it's in his hands... he moves in with a lip-lock that he'll never forget as long as he lives. I know he's with me, Ozzie thinks while he's kissing.

He then holds up his prize proudly... and begins to move in every direction so the crowd can be acknowledged. As he does his legs really start to strengthen. "WE DID IT! WE DID

IT! WE DID IT!", hearing the cheers of every player Ozzie scouted and signed... "LOVE YOU OZZIE!" Looking right back at them; thanks to Uncle Ike Ozzie knows he'll always be

grateful... grateful & focused.

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"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 his neighbors, some real decent smiling folks... Ozzie gives them all a friendly wave while they're perched on their porches of dilapidated shacks going back generations.

"Hello Ozzie." Shacks that barely function as homes to the naked eye.

"Have a good day Mrs. Robinson."

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

"You too Ozzie."

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

Walking home from school was a ritual Ozzie looked forward to... even when it rained. It was normal to see rabbits and rodents scurry past, so was swinging on the tire at the local water-hole, which Uncle Ike called *McKenzie Lake*... although *McKenzie Pond* is more like it. You get used to the turtles and snakes and stray dogs that lay by its' cool banks by the dozen. Back then Ozzie had no idea that in order to find himself, to really find peace in his own skin, he needed to lose himself in the wondrous arms of nature... at least for a little while. From sun-up to sun-down every kid of the neighborhood would be out during those sweltering summer months... swimming, tossing a frisbee, a baseball... even a football. To this day Ozzie still tries to escape to the closest green-space he 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, since Ozzie is still the same kid from rural Alabama who finds pleasure from the things that money can't buy.

Everyday after school little Ozzie McKenzie looked forward to seeing 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 while moving up those creaky sun-stained steps. "How was school today Ozzie?" A loving smile little Ozzie grew to rely on; like it was yesterday he remembers that day. Thinking back it did seem like any other, really it did... stopping to feed the rabbits with some lettuce he'd saved from lunch. "Here Maggie, come on, that's it... good girl." Ozzie always named the animals of his world. In fact to this day he still leans towards kids who had pets growing up... or still do; Ozzie has his reasons. Any General Manager can crunch numbers, what Ozzie's 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.

Suddenly Ozzie spots an empty chair on the front porch?? Instead of preparing his usual greeting halfway up the driveway, he immediately turns anxious from seeing that empty

chair. Moving towards the house with an uneasy sense... turning his head from side to side the entire time he's climbing those creaky old front steps. "Hello Uncle Ike?", opening the front door, and moving in anxiously. "Hello?... Anybody home?... Uncle Ike?" Hearing the floor squeak only makes Ozzie's heart beat faster. Wide-eyed with every step while looking for 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 his body... he knows he can't take losing... moving from room to room. Where is he? In a heart-pounding panic at this point; it does not take this long to search a tiny house meant for Sharecroppers almost a century ago? Spotting his Uncle through the rear window... and freezing from it. "Uncle Ike", yelling so the fear can finally loosen its' grip. Racing towards the back screen door... and charging through. "Uncle Ike, are you ok?"

*"The bomb exploded at around 10:20 this morning at the 16<sup>th</sup> 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. Ozzie needs to sit down 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.

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"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."

Ozzie is trying to catch his breath in this stifling heat.

"We need to be better than everyone else."

He can feel the energy want to flee his 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 Ozzie's head whenever he's running. "Faster everybody, come on!" Sprinting the perimeter of the field in July can make anyone feel like they're dying a slow death. "Let's pick it up team!"

That first year of practise was like nothing Ozzie had ever experienced in his life... being screamed at, pushed to his physical limits day after day after day – all in that stifling heat. Relying on Uncle Ike’s words, “Nothing is impossible Oswald... nothing”, to get him 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”, Uncle Ike called it.

The sweat just keeps pouring out.

“How is Auburn University going to win the SEC if we’re not tough enough?”

*The whistle blows to end the run.*

Immediately Ozzie puts both hands on his knees.

“Ok team I want offense versus defense, come on line-up... let’s go go go!”

He hated Coach’s damn whistle.

*Quickly lining up.*

“Let’s go McKenzie!”

Really hated it.

“Ready set hut 1 hut 2 hut hut”, the Quarterback starts the next play.

Seventeen years old and it’s his first time away from home.

*Smashing bodies* - Ozzie wants to be the best he can be - *fighting through* - Ozzie wants his Parents and Uncle Ike to be proud of him... racing to get open... racing 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.*

“Like the fake.”

*After a hit that has Ozzie 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... Ozzie fights through like a mad-man. Suddenly the air leaves his body after being tackled by two behemoths both high and low that he never saw coming.

*The body follows the mind.*

*The body follows the mind.*

Trying to get up.

Ozzie know there’s a bull’s-eye on his back.

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“What kind of animals would do this to a Church?”, the Announcer cries out 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 Ozzie was finally old enough to understand, did he overhear his Mother and Father talking about making sure Uncle Ike gets to his AA meeting down at the Church. “He needs you Ozzie”, both of them pleaded with sad eyes. It was the last year of high school when Ozzie got asked to take Uncle Ike to his meeting and make sure he sits through the entire thing. By night’s end everything was made that much clearer for Ozzie; that beer was probably there to help him cope, to remind him of his own struggles.

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

Continuing to stare into the distance, unmoved from when he found him, Ozzie’s not used to seeing this type of face on his happy-go-lucky Uncle. No Sir he is not used to that defeated look at all! What this has definitely taught Ozzie is that even Uncle Ike is far more complicated than what he’s been seeing all these years; which is why substance abuse always gets his support no matter who’s asking. Ozzie’s raised millions and always will - his reputation is that good.

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The standing-room only Church reverberates with the sound of a wounded Community.

*“Amazing Grace how sweet the sound... I once was lost but now I’m found.”*

Seeing familiar faces so sad and tearful, not at all like the joyous gospel that goes on every Sunday from as far back as he can remember. The Minister motions and the entire Church sits; if a mouse scurried everyone would hear it, definitely everyone would hear it.

Sandwiched between his handkerchief-holding Mom... and a sombre Dad and Uncle Ike; never will Ozzie ever forget the pain wafting the McKenzie Baptist Church that day... the entire place weeping for so incredibly long... while being so incredibly loud. With his eyes suddenly closing... the large well-dressed Reverend Romeo Smith sits distracted on the podium, looking like he is talking to someone from above.

It is ten minutes more of nothing but tears.

Then twenty - suddenly he stands. The crying stops. His big head then tilts towards the congregation, looking at them with wide-eyes and an upcoming message. The tears start up again, as if on demand. It was the only Sunday that nobody went to the pond.

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Being the number one player in the State made sure that everyone brought their A-game when Ozzie was in town. Taking their best shot at trying to slow Ozzie down, cheap shots

included - a nobody could be a somebody thanks to all that flashbulb-media at each and every one of his games. But that never happened, and honestly, it started to make Ozzie believe that he was special.

Swarmed by three linebackers the second he comes down with the ball. Piled-on. Kneed. Buried underneath a mass of muscle... trying to catch the air that's just been pummelled from his body. "This isn't high school anymore", Coach Reinhart yells, "get up McKenzie, they're going to hit you even harder than that during a game."

Standing up groggy, ordering his body to return the oxygen that's just been stolen from his lungs.

"Wait until we go to Tuscaloosa."

Running to show that he can take whatever these Gladiators can dish out and then some.

"Nice grab McKenzie."

Ozzie runs past his Coach with a determined energy. "Never let them see weakness", Uncle Ike stressed. Which is easier said than done, since every one of his teammates, and on every roster they'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. Ozzie needs to get used to running even when his body's not ready.

*Helmet to helmet collisions all around.*

"Nice block McKenzie."

Because he's got a Coach that won't stop riding his ass.

"Get back to the huddle McKenzie."

Ozzie's days of being special are over.

"Tempo tempo tempo!"

Everyone congratulates their star middle linebacker for laying a lick on the new guy; going over the middle at this level takes some real courage. Ozzie lifts himself up in a second even though he's seeing colors... different shapes of colors; he wasn't going to let Coach yell, "Next Man Up!" on his watch. No way.

"Good hands McKenzie."

Damn right he held onto the ball.

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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 he came close only his hand would touch Ozzie, no smile or nothing, just a motioning for him to sit down next to him, along with an eerie tone that belongs to a stranger. "You wash up for dinner?", or, "When's bed time?"

Confused?? Damn right... Ozzie and Uncle Ike used to talk for hours. Half days at school... things sure are different now... Ozzie does not understand anything about all the politics being argued over... but Uncle Ike shutting him out?? That was killing Ozzie. Especially since both his Mother and Father 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 loud it hurt Ozzie's ears.

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"OZZIE! OZZIE!"

"Over here Ozzie..."

Champagne is soaking the entire room.

"Ozzie."

Which includes Ozzie and the Reporter with the microphone in his hand... "Ozzie, come here for a second", the drenched Reporter pulls Ozzie close. Rubbing his eyes from the spray. "Ozzie McKenzie, you've always carried yourself with class and dignity throughout your career", shoving a microphone in his face. "OZZIE! OZZIE!", the 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 his throat, "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."

Ozzie is so extremely satisfied that his 24/7 obsession to find the best players with the healthiest minds, no matter where they're from, has ended with him 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 school or the smallest, or even the poorest, "Character wins Championships", Coach Reinhart taught Ozzie. "Always carry yourself with dignity and humility", his father would remind on those days when he got home before Ozzie had to go to bed... which, if he was lucky, was maybe once a week. Talent is one thing; at this level everyone has talent. But heart, Ozzie quickly found out, 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 after he'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?”, making a stern point whenever her son starts to feel sorry for himself. Ozzie was a better Quarterback than anyone in the 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 Ozzie so much; he 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!”

This kid from the South needs to enjoy this moment with his team.

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In all honesty choosing Auburn University was easy, Coach Jake *The Snake* Reinhart was a stand-up Guy for sure, and I just couldn’t get that look out of my head when Paul *The Lion* Belletrain, that 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.” “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; it’s the gift that’s needed to rise above everyone in this sport of crazed Gladiators.

Number 80 had the best games of his college career against the University of Alabama. And it’s plenty contagious too.

Ozzie McKenzie and Jimmy Holloway arrived on campus at the same time, both of them fresh-faced seventeen year-olds packing plenty of enthusiasm for the upcoming season; Jimmy’s wizardry at the Quarterback position preceded him... and frankly, well Ozzie was

just so damn ecstatic to have a black man at the position, not that he needed any more inspiration. In fact, it was then and there that Ozzie made the decision to work as hard as he could with this skinny Phenom, and show the world what they could accomplish. Jumping out of bed each and every morning ready to go... sweating bullets in the weight room and beyond; no way was he going to let this opportunity slip away! Day and night he dragged poor Jimmy out so they could go over plays, sync-up their timing on complicated routes, and for the sake of his sanity try to understand those out-of-this-world improvisational skills. Ozzie never saw anything like it. This shy and impressionable kid from South Carolina, which he later came to realize was not unlike many of the kids he was 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 Ozzie so worried, and to this he was very new. From McKenzie Alabama all the way to the Super Bowl - Jimmy Holloway taught Ozzie McKenzie 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. Ozzie the GM will never stop saying, not for a single day, that character is something that's easily measured - just ask sixth-round pick Tom Brady or undrafted Kurt Warner!

For that reason Ozzie continuously flies around 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 seeing what the hell I'm drafting", explaining another trip. Let's not forget that rookie contracts in the NFL average two million per... and usually last three pers, 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 Ozzie's 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 forge concern; that's why Ozzie takes some of them in himself - that's right they come live with him during their first few years in the Pros. Don't think there's another General Manager in this league that does such a thing. Honestly though, Ozzie must admit that his wife Evita wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea the first time he offered it up. "I just need to do this honey, please, just trust me."

She looked back so confused, but never stopped trusting.

Without Evita I wouldn't be half the man I am today.

Four years running Mr. Jimmy Holloway and Mr. Ozzie McKenzie tore up the Southeastern Conference for an incredible total of 38 Wins. 1 National Championship. SEC records for catches, yards, touchdowns, and three All-American honors. Three rapturous victories over State rival Alabama and that crease-faced Belletrain. A new appreciation for

nutrition and training - and thirty pounds of muscle. A 3.7 G.P.A. - which made both Mom and Dad cry. I was leaving Auburn with a 24/7 work ethic... 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 desk.

"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; it's the longest few seconds of Ozzie's life.

"Oswald McKenzie from the University of Auburn."

The crowd erupts with both cheers and boos.

"I'm so proud of you son."

"Thanks Mom."

Drafted by one of the worst teams in the league.

"Good work."

"Thanks Dad." Ozzie didn't care one bit about the crowd... because he was going to prove himself on the field.

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

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Charter planes serving the best food and beer thanks to some very pleasant and very leggy stewardesses... plus those fully-stocked limousines... and the raging echo of 24/7 adoration - it's hard not to get sucked in

"Bandits forever!" "Go Bandits!"

It's hard not to get really sucked in.

"We love you Bandits!", shrieking Groupies as they get off the bus in front of the stadium.

The Pros were presenting a whole new world to this bashful kid from the sticks.

"Ozzie! Ozzie!"

Before you know 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 for hours, fanatics dressed from head to toe in expensive team attire, both men and

women screaming with their painted faces - damn right Ozzie saw this was a business first and that he 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 they run out from the tunnel.

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

*The Stadium starts to shake.*

As an NFL General Manager you deal with this reality every day; there is no cowering this day or any other day, this is Big-Time Entertainment that requires Big-Time Entertainers. This is no Charity - some teams are worth over a billion dollars!

"It's all about the money, not the Championships", long-time owner Art Levitt would constantly remind during those Apprenticeship years in the Bandit's front office. Spoken like a man who never played the game; to what degree Ozzie had to swallow such cold hard facts has always weighed on his mind.

Won't do it.

Can't do it.

He 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 Ozzie didn't care... he had his agenda. Play hard. Train even harder. Let Evita raise the kids. Thank God. And do everything in his power to help his team win come Sunday... with humility of course. And let the cameras of history judge him.

"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.*

Ozzie had eight in his 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, Ozzie would merely keep his head down and give it everything he's got - from what he put in his body to how much sleep he needed to get - and NO alcohol.

"Ozzie McKenzie, the fans of the Los Angeles Bandits proudly salute you for your great effort." The crowd roars after Ozzie's last game. Tears welling as he waves back. "The number 80 will be retired forever." Continuing to stand and roar... what a moment; Ozzie keeps waving. After sixteen seasons, plus many team and league records, Ozzie McKenzie was rewarded with a bust in Canton five years later. And six months after that, with the

town buzzing, the Bandits hired him as the league's first African-American General Manager. L.A. loved Ozzie... and he loved them back. His wife is adored here. His 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 Ozzie. "You'll get 'em next time Ozzie." It became his obsession. "Great trade Ozzie."

Imagine for a second that everywhere you go, the supermarket, the gym, any restaurant, even the friggin' parking lot... everywhere means anywhere! The minute he's outside his house Ozzie is met with big smiles from complete strangers... strangers who put more pressure on him 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.

"So who does everyone have as their number 1?"

Sitting around a large board room table surrounded by a posse of trusted coaches.

"I like Lewis."

Steaming coffee in front of every anxious attendee.

"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 a team's fortunes. "A. J. Lambert Ozzie... the kid can fly." It's all about picking that one kid 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?"

In order to 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 at a motel with little water pressure and a horribly-uncomfortable mattress.

Whenever Ozzie spots it along the drive he always makes a point of stopping for some precious green-space time... walking in it really makes the difference on his frenetic psyche. Football for Ozzie is 24/7.

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A God-given ability certainly, and a child-like naiveté for sure, Lamar Lincoln reminded Ozzie of Jimmy so very much. 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. "Lamar is a good boy Mr. McKenzie." You could see this kid got smothering love from all the Lincoln women. "I've no doubt Mrs. Lincoln."

Just the two of them in a cramped Chickasaw County living room on a torn sofa with springs that really want to dig in. "Call me Sadie." Looking at Lamar's trophies overflow from every available shelf; can this kid handle a six-million-dollar contract? "Only if you call me Ozzie." And probably a million more of just 'walking around' money? Ozzie silently wonders while Lamar plays video games with his brother and sisters. And can he live alone in L.A.? Wondering even more.

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 Ozzie has... starting with illiteracy and poverty, you see plenty in common from places like these. 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 Ozzie was sitting. He'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. Ozzie's concern went back to confidence though, 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.

Whenever he's in South Carolina he still visits his grave - he's never gotten over Jimmy's derailment, which is the biggest reason he cares 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 whites and blacks, 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 - 40 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 each 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 Ozzie 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.

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*"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", Ozzie's 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 Ozzie flew her, pre-draft day, to meet all of the McKenzie's 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; Ozzie chose Lamar with their first pick.

They bonded instantly.

Carpooling to and from the stadium, they spent plenty of time together, and like Uncle Ike had done for him, Ozzie challenged Lamar to think about the people around him... about his future goals... about everything except football. Which from his 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 outing 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; Ozzie promised Sadie Lincoln right there in her well-used kitchen that he would parent Lamar like he was his own... and that was exactly what he was doing, gladly.

Oh and they were 6-0 by the way... which told him that he was doing something right.

Cackles of girls waiting for as long as it took to catch a glimpse of their chiselled Stallion, staying late to receive treatment on a body getting sacrificed to the ferocity of the game -

making it harder for them to co-ordinate leaving the stadium together; more and more Ozzie worried about Lamar, off the field that is, because on it he 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 Ozzie, 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 ever. Leading the league in rushing every year, only some bad luck and veritable inches stopped The Bandits 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 Ozzie and Evita on a typical night after eating half a cow, he flashed that big-eyed look Ozzie had seen so many times before. Tongue-tied something fierce; Ozzie knew something big was coming. "I saw a great condo in Malibu overlooking the ocean." Ozzie's insides started to spin with worry for this naive boy in this land of Machiavellian Vipers; he knew he 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 she has... food guilt. Lamar knows he's loved, but Ozzie had to trust that he'd be able to handle this kind of change. Introducing him to a Financial Advisor, a Lawyer, and an Accountant - "Evi, the kid makes more money than I do times ten, I can't keep him here by force." Her face said it all.

"If you need anything you call, you hear?"

"Sure Ozzie."

He wasn't one of their own, but the day Lamar Lincoln left the McKenzie household for good became one of the saddest of their lives. Alexa and Tasha would not stop crying. Evita didn't talk for the rest of the day. Luckily Ozzie needed to book a flight for an upcoming General Manager's Conference in Miami... but after that he took plenty of extra time walking it off by making a few more calls in the giant park at the end of the street.  
*Sitting on a bench.*

It's supposed to be a beautiful day tomorrow... and a huge playoff game.

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"Just play your game, don't focus on the crowd", rambling while trying to calm down. Ozzie 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."

But someone is not feeling himself.

"I got it Ozzie", reaching to turn up the music - he doesn't need Ozzie's worry, he can feel

it throughout the city... it's 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.

Can see the fury in his eyes... I'm glad somebody's ready, because I'm nervous as hell for this one. Lamar's off to get dressed. A steam is always good for the nerves.

Four agonizing hours later... the smell of fresh-cut grass 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 his career... many... but this one has Ozzie perspiring as if he's playing.

"Hut 1, Hut 2, Hut 3, Hut, Hut."

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 just after the entire Stadium jumped to its' feet.

Smart fans know how to quickly keep it quiet when their team is in the huddle planning for their next play.

The Quarterback leads his team to the line.

"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 gives a collective "Ooooooh", from a perfect technique tackle by one of their behemoth lineman. *The whistle blows to end the play.*

Anticipating the possibilities, the crowd quickly prepares for the next play, leaving the disappointment behind. Short memories are key in every sport.

*Taking a sip of beer.*

The game has started out as a hard-hitting stalemate... suddenly the stadium roars from a magnificent interception.

“The Bandits get the ball back”, the Announcer informs over the cheering.

The interception was nothing short of amazing athleticism

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” The box is going crazy... ties have been loosened... even the women are screaming; football is a unique form of tribalism like nothing else.

“Hand the ball to Lincoln”, Art yells.

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

Ozzie is worried.

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... Ozzie can see that he’s trying too hard... everyone can. Lamar’s never been a finesse runner, not his style... speed and power is his thing. The Raider’s D has messed with his head. “Call a trap play”, Ozzie barks out, “call a damn trap play”, not caring who’s here and what they think. With every tick of that clock everyone’s heart is beating faster.

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

*“LINCOLN, LINCOLN, LINCOLN, LINCOLN.”*

The crowd starts to rev up.

*“LINCOLN, LINCOLN, LINCOLN, LINCOLN.”*

The break has been good for revving-up the energy in this place.

The Bandit’s offense trots onto the field; everyone knows this is becoming one of their last chances to mount a drive and score some points. *“LINCOLN, LINCOLN.”* Ozzie has never been part of... *“LINCOLN, LINCOLN”*, such a deafening display... *“LINCOLN, LINCOLN”*, as 92,000 fans chant his name... *“LINCOLN, LINCOLN.”* No one up here in the box can sit either... *“LINCOLN, LINCOLN.”* When the Bandits break the huddle the crowd immediately halts. When they begin to set up their offense the crowd goes downright 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”, Ozzie reacts to a play that he’s 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 his team 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 his fingers are crossed... he'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.

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Never experiencing such a setback in his life, such a potentially career-ending injury; Lamar today has Ozzie worried, really worried. He's grown extremely frustrated with his attitude, and it's getting worse - Lamar's will is being tested. And because of that Ozzie drives across town each and every morning to Lamar's Condo, picking him up and taking him to their favourite place with great eggs and the freshest fruit, plus a view into the bluest Pacific. Ozzie knows he needs that view in his life, but after six months, and regardless of that view, Ozzie is starting to see a light extinguish in Lamar. World-class Athletes have their bodies do all the heavy lifting since birth. "Now you need your mind to take over", he keeps reminding Lamar like a broken record.

Back in Ozzie's 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 Ozzie's 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 that this is a problem that will never go away... ever. Controlling it is the only responsible option; which is Ozzie's 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 Ozzie and his family 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 his office, “Keep me posted.”

Ozzie didn’t need painkillers during his playing days. “Country Strong”, was what the trainers called him. “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!

Ozzie has had every finger on both hands broken, a bruised back, a deeply arthritic shoulder... yet never once has he used opiates; his record speaks for itself. Most of the players Ozzie 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. Everyone knows 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 Ozzie 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 will undoubtedly experience pain, and if one ever experiences pain, then everyone, and Ozzie knows it is everyone, will seek ways to alleviate that pain. You play. You know. Otherwise fuck-off... pardon the language. Always for his Players, Ozzie McKenzie is soft on enforcement because he’s seen it work with his 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.” Ozzie’s stomach sinks. “Well his THC levels are sky-high... and... well... well I thought you’d want to know”, announcing awkwardly. His body language says it all.

Ozzie lifts to his feet in response, trying to hide the sudden fury that’s been unleashed in his stomach. “Just his THC levels?”, moving 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 Ozzie’s 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 back in confusion, “Excuse me?”

“Nothing”, leading him out.

“Thanks again Bob.”

Closing the door behind him.

Ozzie moves to his desk... and just sits there thinking.

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“You’re moving back in with us”, storming into Lamar’s spacious bachelor pad with the killer view. Ozzie has 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 the seriousness coursing Ozzie’s veins. All Ozzie sees in return 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 Ozzie doesn’t care if he’s happy or not. Thankfully though... thanks to the grace of The Almighty and the power of his girls, Lamar is both mentally and physically ready to leave his destructive crew of leeches forever.

“Love always beats back the darkness”, Uncle Ike used to say

In two months time Lamar Lincoln roars back with a vengeance; he’s learned his lesson and everyone can see it in his body. Ozzie’s ecstatic entering training camp; this is going to be our year!

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*Ring Ring Ring.*

Barely opening one eye... Ozzie can 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 Ozzie 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.”

Ozzie’s mouth suddenly goes dry as he quickly sits up... cold chills race down his back. “Is there anything wrong Sergeant?” His 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 Ozzie takes off for the bathroom... What’s happening? Where are the girls?

He does his business and flees.

All of a sudden Ozzie’s brain reminds him that his girls are in Vancouver for the week; thank God for that. Where are my damn socks?

Ozzie takes off from the bedroom with the Sergeant’s voice still going off in his head.

Escaping the house... he jumps in his car... and races to 37 Division.

Ozzie is 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.”

Ozzie’s heart is pumping like mad.

He can’t sit. He can only pace.

Suddenly a sober face in a full police uniform approaches... “Hello Mr. McKenzie, I’m Sergeant Russell.”

“Hi.”

“Please follow me.” The large Officer with the stiff stride turns... and begins to lead Ozzie and his exploding nerves down a long maze of hallways.

He opens a thick steel door with a tiny window in it, “Please Mr. Mackenzie.”

And then quickly moves in front after Ozzie’s 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 open this heavy-looking steel door with no window, just door. Ozzie follows him through... “Please have a seat Mr. McKenzie”, directing 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 Ozzie.

“An accident?”

“Yes an accident Mr. McKenzie, Lamar Lincoln is dead.” The Sergeant reaches over to place a box of tissues on the table not a second after. He then leans in... and puts his hand on Ozzie’s shoulder, gently. “I’m very sorry Mr. McKenzie, I understand your pain.

Everybody in this town knows what Lamar means to you.”

All the strength of Ozzie’s body vanishes, he needs to put his head in his hands or else he’ll fall forward. Ozzie’s life has had its’ fair share of pain, but this hurts like nothing he’s 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 a glass of water from the cooler.

“Here, it’ll help with the dry mouth”, placing it on the table. 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 and took off speeding right 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 his mind.*

Lamar’s dead.

That innocent beam who had the brightest future... gone just like that. He was like the son Ozzie never had... *trying to hold in the nausea...* it’s Jimmy Holloway all over again.

Football isn’t even registering; Ozzie’s 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 Ozzie lock eyes through the mayhem... Art heads straight for him... Ozzie does the same.

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

“Ozzie McKenzie get up here”, the Commissioner calls Ozzie up. Art pulls away with a smile, the biggest Ozzie has ever seen on his boss’ wrinkled old face. He then happily pushes Ozzie in the direction of the podium. As Ozzie heads up. “OZZIE OZZIE.” The room erupts. “OZZIE OZZIE.”

When he finally gets there, when he finally makes it up to the makeshift stage that’s being sprayed with champagne, the Commissioner hands Ozzie the esteemed Trophy.

He grabs this filthy beautiful thing from a soaked Commissioner. He then closely looks at it... deeply... really deeply... and realizes... that this smudge-covered bust of alchemy is the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen in his life. It is the one thing that he has scratched and clawed for, the one thing that he has fought an entire season for... it feels like an absolute eternity that he’s wanted to hold this thing in his hands. “OZZIE OZZIE.” It is in his appreciative hands and he is admiring it with the widest eyes. Suddenly he feels 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 Ozzie, even teary-eyed Art Levitt.

The silence is instant; Ozzie has the floor. “If everyone could hold their excitement until after I’m finished that would be great.”

*Ahem.*

The room’s silent except for Ozzie’s 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 Ozzie.

“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 his thoughts.

*Ahem.*

This is going to be tough.

“Sadie can you come up here please”, reaching his hand to help her up to the podium.

Ozzie catches the entire room as he does... tears are now staring back, everyone is overcome with emotion, everyone... vulnerable human emotion while being attached to massive torsos.

When Sadie is finally up, Ozzie makes sure to place her next to him.

*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.*

*Ahem.*

“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 Ozzie needs to wipe away the emotion. Reaching in for a big hug with Sadie.

“I miss Lamar so much.”

“I know you do, my boy was such a blessing to everyone.”

“He sure was.”

Their tears need to explode.