COLUMN ONE

The Tale of an Underdog
What would make the Citadel, a small school with strict discipline but little luck in football, schedule a game against a powerhouse such as Florida State? In this mismatch, it is money that matters,
By Drex Heikes
Times Staff Writer

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"West-Point Ree-Jects." It was like a taunt from a bully. "West-Point Ree-Jects. West-Point Ree-Jects."

The football team from the Citadel military college trotted off the field and into the exquisitely rancid locker room their hosts provided for visitors. It was halftime, and the Bulldogs had just worked a miracle. They had played the Florida State Seminoles to a standstill on national television.

The Citadel trailed by only three points, 13-10.

The Bulldogs knocked their silver helmets and cracked their hands on each other's shoulder pads. During the summer, a sportswriter had mocked their chances this season, calling for "a moment of silence for the Citadel." A moment of silence? Not for a second. One Bulldog yelled, mocking the writer: "A moment of silence!"

"We're special," another Bulldog shouted. "Special people in here gonna make some special plays." Still another hollered: "It's right in front of y'all fellas, it's right in front of y'all." They could smell victory, and the excitement was contagious. "I'm gonna get No. 83's ass out, man!" one Bulldog pledged. A teammate roared: "Play as one. One heart, man!"

"West-Point Ree-Jects." The jeering faded as the last Bulldog stepped inside, but the ceiling rumbled with the pounding of Seminole feet in the stands overhead, and the Seminole war chant warbled on and on, in never-ending loops. The locker room was not a room. It was a warren of low, short hallways, a series of corridors, lined with dressing stalls. No Bulldog could see more than a third of his teammates. Inside this accommodation, it was impossible for any visiting coach to address his team as a whole.

Trainers squeezed into a room just large enough for three training tables — no fourth injury, please. The lighting flickered and the air conditioning worked about as well as a bad vacuum cleaner. The
littered, gray carpet absorbed, cooked and time-released the ammonia-tinged odor of sweat from players the Seminoles had pounded into submission over the years. To the nose, it was urine, with a hint of bayou. It pinched the back of the throat.

But this hardly mattered. The Bulldogs were not taking insults. They were delivering them. Last year, the Citadel had won three games and lost eight. It had been thrashed, even by other small schools in its conference. Tonight, the opponent was a major college football power, coached by a man who had won more games than any major college coach in history. Florida State boasted that it had sent more players to today's National Football League than any other university — 53, exactly enough to fill an NFL team roster.

By any objective measure, this contest was one of the biggest mismatches of the year in college football. The Citadel had been bused nine hours from Charleston, S.C., to Tallahassee to be outmanned at virtually every position. This game, in a stadium that could seat the Bulldog student body 41 times over, would earn the Citadel some $400,000 — enough to keep its football program solvent. The Bulldogs fulfilled their mission just by showing up. This game was not about winning. This game was about money.

But now, guess what: The first half hadn't gone as expected. The Citadel and Florida State were just three points apart. The Seminoles left the field cursing in imaginative bursts, and the Bulldogs were on a contact high. Inside the visitors' locker room, the Bulldog coaches emerged from a huddle of their own. They scattered to speak to their players in small groups. "They don't have enough heart," one coach said of Florida State. "They're getting frustrated."

Full credit went to the Bulldog defense. The defensive squad had kept the game close, and it was the defensive squad that had scored the Bulldog touchdown. Now, one of the coaches declared, it was up to the offense to step up. He ticked off the plays that he thought would work: "Listen, Veer is there, Speed's there, Bubble's there. We've got a lot of plays. Lightning Train is there, 80 Screen, Check 98."

The head coach tried his best, across the stalls and partitions, to exhort his entire team. Against the din of the Seminole warble and the rattle of the Seminole band outside the walls, he announced his choice of plays to begin the second half.

"98 Special, first play," he shouted. "Everybody up front. Just hold your blocks forever." His steely blue eyes fixed on his undersized quarterback. "This play is there. Got it?"

The Bulldog coach didn't know it, but around a corner, paces away, his defensive unit was kneeling in prayer. During the first quarter, someone had announced over the Florida State public address system that back in Charleston, the Citadel had been evacuated in the face of Hurricane Ophelia.

Worse, as the Bulldogs left the field for halftime, someone told a defensive player about a wreck on I-95. A tire had blown on a sport utility vehicle bringing three cadets to the game. The SUV tumbled down the interstate, finally coming to rest on the median. Two of the cadets died. A third was fighting for his life.

Word spread. Almost everyone in the defensive unit knew the cadets. It is hard to make a Bulldog cry. But that did it.

The head coach hadn't heard.
"98 Special," he shouted again, as the Bulldogs started back to the field. "Come on, men!"

The Money

Big-time college football is more than ever about media exposure and money.

The nation's 119 Division I-A football teams are waging an expensive arms race. Over the last decade, they have raised ticket prices, tapped donors for bigger contributions and vied for lucrative TV contracts so they could enlarge their stadiums, install multimillion-dollar locker rooms and erect indoor practice fields. The lavish upgrades impress high school recruits, as does the chance to have their exploits televised from coast to coast.

Somewhere in that mix of dough and glitz is plain old football: 11 hats on 11 hats for the love of the game. But it's getting ever harder to find.

Not so if you drop down to smaller colleges. There the game is closer to its roots. There the game can be about as authentic as college football gets today. The players practice just as hard and sacrifice just as much. No elaborate training meals, jet rides or ESPN replays. Instead, these players eat box lunches on all-night bus rides to play games recorded in agate type deep inside the sports pages.

But these smaller football programs have a tougher time meeting their budgets. They cannot turn to TV and long lists of alumni for support. So they go for some of the crumbs that fall from the better-set tables.

They play what are known as "guarantee" games: A small school negotiates to play a big school at its big stadium for a relatively big payday — a guaranteed share of the take. Big schools make more money too, because the Citadel and other small schools demand less money than, say, Michigan. And the big schools get an easy win. That makes this a nifty deal all around, if you suspend the notion of competition for the sake of sport.

These games have always been part of college football. But this year, pressured by small and large schools alike, the NCAA changed its rules to allow big schools to count one victory against a small school each year in qualifying for bowl games. Under the old rules, Division I-A teams could count only one win over a Division I-AA team, such as the Citadel, every four years.

So it is that college football fans can expect to see many more mismatches like the ones this September, when Top 20 teams at California, Texas Tech and Florida State played the likes of Sacramento State, Sam Houston State and the Citadel.

Sports analyst Jeff Sagarin has studied statistical comparisons of team strengths for decades. Based on his rankings, the Citadel's trip to Tallahassee to play 11th-ranked Florida State stood out: It was likely to be the biggest mismatch of 2005.

What must players from the little team think? Who would schedule such a game?

The Players

Zach Bryant, known as Shrek, was on the little team.

Two kinds of young men play football for the Citadel: those who grow up saying "no way," and
those who grow up saying "no way in hell." Why go to a college that bans video games, sleeping in, alcohol, marriage and cussing? Zach Bryant said no way in hell. Yet here he was on the Citadel practice field just downwind from the musty-sulfur smell of the Ashley River marsh, flicking sweat from his eyes and snapping the strap of his helmet.

On this play, he needed to fly low and hard into anyone in his way, clearing a path for the guy carrying the ball. At the signal, Bryant, an ogre with a 52-inch chest, tore straight ahead, kicking up sod as he disappeared into a void between two taller teammates. An instant later, he reappeared, staggering backward as if he had run into a man carrying a piano. His knees, put together with screws, wobbled. Shrek sank to the soggy turf.

It was just after 4 p.m. on Aug. 15, one of those miserable afternoons in Charleston that can cause a football player to hate the smell of grass forever. The heat stood at 100.9 degrees, the humidity at 83.9%. In that kind of weather, it is supremely hard for human bodies to cool. People call it "stupid weather," because that's what it makes you. The head coach told the Bulldogs they could quit for the day. "Half the teams in America would."

But the Bulldogs stayed. By a trainer's count, they drank 481 gallons of Gatorade and water before practice ended. Some sweated away as much as 11 pounds.

Zach, 22, was in his fourth year at the Citadel. He was a kid who could overcome anything. He had no football scholarship. More than that, he had never played in a game. A knee injury had ruined his final season in high school. That spring, his father had left the family, and Citadel coaches urged him to "walk on" with the Bulldogs. That meant that if he turned out to be good enough, the school might give him financial aid.

His prospects were dwindling. "No way in hell" became "I can do this."

Then, a week into his first football camp, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. It meant four chemotherapy treatments and 33 radiation treatments. Zach wanted to go home and take care of her, but she refused to let him. She was unemployed, so she organized a fundraiser to help pay her bills. The VFW donated its hall. She got a two-piece band and an Elvis impersonator and netted $2,000.

It turned out that Zach was simply not good enough for a scholarship. But the kid who could overcome anything spent two years as a reserve. He figured he would make the team that way. Then, warming up for a run, he injured his other knee doing a high kick he calls "a flyin' Russian."

More screws, and no football in 2004.

But overcome it all he did. He licked a stutter that angered him. He corralled academic scholarships that covered nearly all of his education, and he found loans to cover the rest. And now he was back on the field, hoping to get into a game.

Zach Bryant was not about to let another man defeat him, even if the man was carrying a piano. So he got up from the wet turf and trotted back into practice.

He planned to be an orthopedic surgeon. Maybe Shrek would fix his own knees one day.

Shawn Grant, a co-captain, was on the little team too.
He was the man carrying the Steinway. Square-jawed, grandly biceped, the best athlete on the team, Shawn, 21, was a senior linebacker who had vowed growing up that he would never play for the Citadel. No way.

Why not go to a regular college, where you could have a car, a cellphone and dorm-room visitors? Where you could have a TV and leave campus on weekends? Why put up with upperclassmen ordering you, on a whim, to stop and recite dumb poems, or to skip across campus like a kindergartner? Why be forced to reply to everything with a sir sandwich? "Sir, yes, sir." "Sir, no, sir." "Sir, no excuses, sir."

But Shawn Grant wanted to learn how to lead. He knew it would get better after the first year, even if you couldn't grow a beard, or stay out of bed after 11 p.m., or smoke dope, or curse at a teammate, or talk to a freshman, or ditch class, or wear jeans or khakis or cutoffs or anything except that damn uniform, although it did make the hotties at the College of Charleston shimmy into size-0 dresses and parade by hoping for a date.

The large schools offered no financial aid to the kid who wanted to lead. His exploits were legend in high school, but he was only 5 feet 9 — too small for the big time. Appalachian State would give him a scholarship, but it was up in the mountains, in snow country, two hours farther from home and from his mother and uncle and aunt, who had joined hands to raise him after his father was killed by an assailant and his sister was killed five years later by an angry boyfriend — all before Shawn turned 9.

Citadel coaches urged him to "trade four for 40," which meant trading four years of discipline for a lifetime of success.

He prayed and prayed, and when he finished, he said "it made perfect sense."

"No way" turned into enrolling. He dreamed of making it to the NFL. And when he was named a co-captain, he knew he was becoming a leader.

Porter Johnson, 21, was on the little team as well. His father called him Champ.

He was a kid who always gave twice as much. Practicing in "stupid weather" wasn't enough. He would diet too. Everyone else had eaten a regular lunch, but on this day, when the humidity was so thick you couldn't find blue sky, Champ ate lettuce and a fruit cup.

More than that, Porter Johnson was playing in a new position. After three years on offense, he had become a linebacker. The clock was edging toward 4:30 p.m. Only 20 minutes left in practice. But the weather and the dieting were turning him stupider than stupid.

He blew a play.

"Johnson!" the defensive coach bellowed. "Get off the field. Get (pause) off (pause) the (pause) field!"

The kid who gave twice as much trudged toward the sideline, shoulders slumping. He fell to his knees. A trainer pulled a white towel from a chest of ice water and draped it over his head.

Champ had come to the Citadel on a football scholarship. Typically, he chose the hardest major: electrical engineering. Typically, he worked hard, earned academic aid and gave the football money...
back.

Through most of high school, he thought he might go to Furman, a small college with a strong team. No way would he ever go to the Citadel, although it was closer to home. He and his dad, a police lieutenant, were best of friends. Champ attended his father's high school, and, like his dad, he was class vice president. One morning, when Champ was a senior, his father lost a fight with colon cancer.

His last words to his wife were: *Where's Champ?*

After he died, his son put his arms around his mother and his sister. *We're going to be all right*, his mother would recall Champ saying. They buried his father under a pine tree, where Champ and his sister still go sometimes to talk to him.

Porter's mother wanted Champ to stay close. So Champ, the kid who always gave twice as much, went to the Citadel.

And there he was, on the field, under a cold towel, sucking wind. "Sometimes," he'd said over his lettuce lunch, "you've got to go through stuff to get what you want."

What Champ wanted, what Shrek wanted, and what the co-captain and every other player on the little team wanted was to beat the big team.

They wanted to dump Florida State.

**The Athletic Director**

Who would schedule such a game? Who had pitted young men such as these against the Seminoles of Florida State?

It was Les Robinson, the athletic director, who exercised, showered for dinner, rubbed on Paul Sebastian cologne and popped a can of Heineken. "Let's go have a look," he told a visitor, and walked him from his front door two blocks to a new, 4,400-square-foot home he was building on Sullivan's Island, a tranquil, exclusive oceanfront suburb of Charleston. Even in bare framing, it looked like a fine home. It was on stilts, like all the grand houses in the low country. It had a 180-degree view of the Atlantic Ocean.

Robinson, 63, was college basketball royalty, a genial man with a sweet-potato voice, in his second career with the Citadel. He had been head basketball coach for 11 years before moving on and eventually becoming basketball coach and athletic director at North Carolina State, in the prestigious Atlantic Coast Conference. Five years ago, he came back to the Citadel and to the house he'd held onto for 32 years and would sell to pay for the new one. Though he had two master's degrees, he was still very much a West Virginia country boy, a Southern raconteur (it was "fuh-ball," as if the T had been Heimliched) whose stories unfolded in great ornamental narratives, polished by the fine grit of many years of retelling — and always in service of a larger point.

This was Aug. 1, a week before practice, and already he was getting calls from sportswriters and alumni asking why he had scheduled a game with Florida State. Small schools could play as many guarantee games as they wanted, and he had scheduled a second guarantee game as well, against Ole Miss.
So Les Robinson told his visitor a story. Last year, after losing 33-3 in a guarantee game against Auburn, he recounted, Citadel players had come up to him on the field and thanked him for the opportunity. For them, he said, holding Auburn to 33 points was a moral victory. "The players love playing in these games," Robinson said, reaching his point. "It's a chance to test themselves." Moreover, every now and then, the little team wins.

The Citadel had been playing guarantee games for decades. Many alumni love it. Besides, Robinson said, these games are not just about the gate money. They also give exposure to Bulldog football, and that helps with recruiting and with raising money from donors, which the Citadel needs desperately. Two years ago, it had to tear down the west side of its modest stadium, built in the late 1940s, because it was no longer safe, and it didn't have the money to rebuild. Not that it could have immediately, anyway, and thereby hung a side-story: Demolition workers found graves under the bleachers. So while Robinson and others were raising funds, historians were digging up the bones of Confederate soldiers.

But now to his larger point: Thanks to the fundraising, the Citadel had about $7 million on hand for a new grandstand when it broke ground — a small sum in today's big-college arms race, but not at a school that graduates fewer than 500 cadets a year, giving it a base of about 20,000 living alumni. That's half the current enrollment at Florida State.

"I've had a great life, lived in a great country," Robinson said. "My mission … is to educate young people. A good percentage of them are going to serve our country." That is why, he declared, "I have zero problem asking people for money."

All of this was something that he would have to explain more than once. Ten days later, he and his visitor were walking near the practice field. Robinson's cellphone rang.

"Uh huh. Well, it's what we need to do…. I understand, yes. I understand. Well, come on in, I'm happy to meet with you." He hung up.

"Some alumnus. Not happy we're playing Florida State."

**The Coach**

Kevin Higgins, 49, the rookie head coach, was the man in the middle.

On Sunday night, Aug. 7, the night before football practice began, he stood at the front of an auditorium that served as a classroom and watched his team file quietly into the seats. The Citadel allowed two kinds of garb: standard dark blue T-shirts with athletic shorts or battleship-gray cadet uniforms.

Shawn Grant, the kid who wanted to lead, wore his grays.

Welcome back, Coach Higgins said. Summer was over. Time for haircuts. The school allowed two kinds: head shaved and head shaved a month ago.

"Yes, sir!"

Don't litter this classroom. "We don't want to get kicked out."

"Yes, sir!"
No cursing. That went for players and coaches. "Using profanity or taking God's name in vain will not make you a better player."

"Yes, sir!"

Higgins built to his finale. Why was it that the Citadel had won only two conference championships in 100 years? "We are leaders. We understand discipline. We have been through adversity." Why wasn't the Citadel winning? Street and Smith, the bible of preseason college football, had reviewed the Bulldog talent and schedule and had written: "A moment of silence for the Citadel."

It had picked the Bulldogs to finish last in their conference.

"All around the country," Higgins said, sounding disgusted, "that is what people think of us. 'A moment of silence …'"

Kevin Higgins didn't tell them, but he hadn't wanted to come here, not to this school, with this schedule, including the guarantee games against Florida State and Ole Miss.

After coaching Lehigh University to a three-year record of 32 wins and one loss, he had been the toast of small college football. He skipped straight to the NFL, where he became an assistant coach for the Detroit Lions, a punchless franchise that showed him the door last season. So he needed work. His resume failed to land him a job as head coach at a major college. And by spring, he had run out of options.

When he came to the Citadel, the fall was as steep as his rise. The college was only half as big as some Los Angeles high schools. He took a 40% pay cut and lost $35,000 on his house in Detroit to move to the South, where his New York accent was pickles on pecan pie. Higgins lived in a mustard-colored house he rented from the college.

He found military traditions at the Citadel more 19th than 21st century — and one of the big reasons its trophy case was small. Then there was the Florida State game. Look at the schedule, his wife, Kay, would remember him saying. How can you win? But his Irish immigrant father had started over in midlife when the mob forced him and another honest bookkeeper out of their union jobs in New York. So Kevin and Kay Higgins decided: This has got to be what God has in mind for us. "It's come full circle," he said. "I have a chance like my dad did. Now my kids have a chance to see me go through this...."

Kay's impressions of the Citadel had been formed by two national black eyes: nasty hazing incidents in the 1980s and the school's fight against admitting women in the 1990s. She arrived expecting certitude and braggadocio. But she found almost the opposite. A court had ordered the Citadel to admit women, the Justice Department had monitored its compliance, and the college had brought in new leadership and changed things. Even the alumni seemed humble. "They have a sense," Kay Higgins said, "they are part of something larger."

The Citadel, she said, teaches cadets "to sort out the difference between a need and a want." That, she said, is something big schools don't want to confront. "It's a privilege to lead," she said, and Kevin seemed to do it naturally. At church, he reorganized a group so that it did business before socializing. At school, his compact sentences and unblinking eyes suggested to cadets that you, son, should organize your thoughts before opening your mouth.
He was direct. At dinner out, he would ask his wife what she wanted, so when the menus came, they were ready to order. *You OK with water?*

He was not a socializer, she said. "He thinks amusement parks are a colossal waste of time."

**The Practices**

It was Aug. 12. Four weeks to go …

The "inside drill" was a particularly brutal way to practice. Five offensive linemen, a blocking back and a running back line up on one side of the football. Four defensive linemen and three linebackers oppose them. Everyone knows how it goes: The offense tries to open a hole for the running back, and the defense tries to plug it. The ball carrier dives forward — no swinging wide — and straight into punishment.

Sometimes Zach Bryant, known as Shrek, had to block Porter Johnson, the Champ. Other times he had to block Shawn Grant, the co-captain, the kid who wanted to lead. It was bone-jarring, often-futile. Bryant, the kid who could overcome anything, rarely got it done. Again and again, he tried. That was the Citadel way.

Three days earlier, an offensive line coach had put it this way: "You ask a kid to do something, they say, 'Yes, sir.' You ask them to run through a wall, they say, 'Would you like that face first or cross body?' Sometimes you've got to say, 'Yes, sir,' even when you don't believe it. It's a quality that has gotten lost in the Me Generation. Athletes here are submissive to authority. They do what you ask them to do and do it with great effort. They know how to lead because they know how to follow."

They had started learning early. Sprinkled on the team were a score of freshmen, known as knobs because their shaved heads looked like doorknobs. Over their cadet uniforms, they wore small backpacks — "camel packs" — containing liquids, with tubes extending to their mouths, to keep them hydrated. The packs were mandatory because football was nothing compared to the "hell week" they were going through. Up at 5 a.m. On the line by 5:05. Ninety minutes of push-ups, sit-ups and running. Line up. Brace for 20 minutes and endure the pain. Then run upstairs. Run downstairs. Run. Always run. Until 9:30 p.m., when they memorized Citadel rules. From the blue book. The white book. The red book. Then they memorized the football playbook. Lights went out at 11 p.m. Even run to bed.

On the day of "inside drill," two visitors watched. One was an Army colonel just back from Afghanistan. His gaze followed Shrek up and down the field. He appreciated Shrek's determination. "Every mother and father who sends a son or daughter to fight," the colonel said, "deserves the best leaders we can find." Character, he knew, was rarely an issue for the Bulldogs. In the athletic department, nobody could remember when a football player had run afoul of the law. On the other hand, at Florida State over the last decade, athletes had been arrested on suspicion of theft, battery, illegal gambling, burglary, drug possession, sexual assault and attempted murder.

Another thing the colonel knew: The Citadel was a public school, run by the state of South Carolina. Unlike students at West Point or the other military academies, these young men could quit anytime. They had made no commitment to four years and then to military service afterward. It meant, the colonel knew, that every day the Bulldogs did this, they chose to do it. He knew that Shrek wanted to go to medical school. Maybe the Army could help.

The other visitor was a retired colonel, an Army veteran from World War II who had played for the
Citadel in the late 1930s. He was trim and had a hard gaze. To him, the Citadel was getting soft. He said that Shrek, Champ and the co-captain — all of them, in fact — were getting too much special treatment. Then, assuming that another white person would agree, he complained that there were "too many blacks on the team."

Getting soft? One Bulldog father had said just the opposite a few days earlier. A graduate of the Naval Academy and retired commander of a nuclear submarine, this military man said he wanted his sons at the Citadel precisely for the discipline. "As the military academies have gotten softer, this place hasn't," he declared. "This is a special breed of boys. Looking at them, you have great faith in America."

But faith in their football?

So it was that Coach Higgins brought in a motivational speaker to dig into their psyches and make them the winners in football that he knew they were in life.

"You have got to be some of the most competitive men on the face of the Earth," the speaker said. "Why isn't that translating in wins and losses? Have we drifted into a place where we accept [defeat] … ? You have got to be a rare breed to choose what you've chosen here … a place that requires sacrifice. [But] leaders of leaders need to step up."

Champ would say afterward that he thought the guy was talking directly to him.

The co-captain, who wanted to be a leader, searched for a theme — and found one. "A leader is willing to confront peers when [their] actions are eroding team goals," the speaker said, echoing the Citadel's revered honor code: A cadet will not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do.

The speaker ended with an insult. "A moment of silence for the Citadel … "

Before the week was out, Shawn Grant and the other co-captains called a special meeting. Just the team. No coaches. Starting today, Grant told everyone, this team needed to find a way to turn around its losing seasons. Starting today, it was the duty of every player to act in the best interests of the team and to call out anyone who didn't.

A hand rose near the back. "I don't think I can turn in a teammate."

"Bullshit!" someone else yelled. Other forbidden words flew around the room.

Then a starter on the defensive secondary turned in his seat and faced the dissenter. "How are we going to change this if we don't all act as one? You want to keep losing?"

The Buildup

Sept. 2. One week to go …

The phone in the athletic director's office rang and rang again. Callers asked Les Robinson: Why play Florida State?

At dinner with his wife, Barbara, and a visitor, Robinson returned, often unprompted, to the subject. Guarantee games, he said, are the future for a lot of small schools. He had told his staff, only half-joking, that he intended to go to an annual meeting of athletic directors and "sit by the
As a basketball coach, he recalled, he had scheduled a tuneup game for North Carolina State with tiny Cal Poly San Luis Obispo as his team headed to Hawaii for a tournament.

Cal Poly loved the attention, he said.

But as the dinner went on, Robinson acknowledged that he was still learning the difference between coaching basketball and football. Left unspoken was that a basketball mismatch is less physically punishing.

Still, he said, his players couldn't wait to play Florida State. "They will never be as high again, until they meet the girl they're going to marry."

Against such a prospect, their game the next day against Charleston Southern was a lesser event, even as a tuneup. Still, it was a game they could lose. "A moment of silence for the Citadel … "

The Bulldogs led, 7-0, at halftime. Champ and his co-captain conferred quietly. Shrek, screws in his knees, the kid who could overcome anything, sat on the sideline. His mother, the cancer survivor, was there to watch him play, but he didn't.

Then, in the second half, Charleston Southern scored touchdowns the first two times it got the ball. In a blink, the Citadel trailed, 14-7.

"Pathetic," the Bulldog center screamed. "We're pathetic."

Champ and the co-captain both cramped. They lay face-down on the grass. Trainers sweated over them, bending their legs backward to their rumps. Champ was quiet. The co-captain yelled, instructing teammates on alignments, plays to watch for.

The Bulldogs came back. They scored the next three touchdowns.

The Citadel won, 28-14.

On the field, friends and relatives swamped Champ and the co-captain, who smiled broadly. Shrek's mother was crestfallen, but she said she would go to Florida State next week. Maybe … maybe … he'd play.

Charleston Southern was a first step, Higgins told the Bulldogs. "As long as we keep working, good things will happen … later in the season." Later. After Florida State.

Higgins was walking a line. He did not want his team to play the Seminoles, but he would not say so. It might offend his boss, and it might send his players the wrong signal.

On Monday, then Tuesday, then Wednesday, the Bulldogs could not focus. Defeatism? Anxiety? Fear?

The fastest cadet on the Bulldog team, a defensive lineman with a Hummer torso welded onto Ferrari flanks, asked his position coach: "Do you think those guys [from Florida State] are more muscle or fat?"
The question hung in the air.

Finally the coach replied: "I'd say they're more mass."

Coach Higgins' biggest fear was injuries. One afternoon, the Bulldogs' starting center injured his back. A guard took his place.

"We're playing Florida State with a guy who's never snapped the ball in a game before — and with a new guard," Higgins said. He drew an open hand down from his hair over his eyes. "This could get ugly. I'm asking myself: 'How are we going to get a first down?'"

He thought aloud about other guarantee games his athletic director had in mind. "Les likes to say that this is good for recruiting. But …"

The morning after Charleston Southern, Higgins and his assistants had watched films of the game. In a series of plays, Charleston Southern had broken through the Citadel's offensive line.

"We need to fix this," Higgins said. He barely paused. "We need to fix this because those guys we're going up against this week …"

He exhaled a long breath and blew it between his teeth.

"They're werewolves."

**The Trip**

Sept. 9. Thirty-six hours to go …

Flying to Tallahassee would nearly triple the $30,000 expense set aside for the game. So the Bulldogs climbed onto three buses, and at 7:30 a.m. Friday they pulled out. Knobs in full uniform lined one side of the quad, 6 acres of grass surrounded by cream-colored, Spanish-Moorish style buildings, anchored by machinery of war: an F-4 phantom jet, a Cobra helicopter, a Sherman tank, a missile and a pair of cannon. The knobs churned their arms and chanted: C-I-T-A-D-E-L.

Near the last turn, just short of wrought-iron gates, Maj. Gen. Roger C. Poole, the college president, stood alone.

He saluted the buses as they passed.

Champ, Shrek and the co-captain were anxious. Champ, the kid who always gave twice as much, said he was looking for a chance to measure himself. The co-captain said he couldn't wait to play. Shrek, the kid who could overcome anything, was the most tense of all. With good reason.

The first-team player at Shrek's position had been injured. He, Shrek, Zach Bryant, was about to play his first game. As it turned out, his mother couldn't make the trip, but she had asked an acquaintance to take pictures. Shrek said: "I just don't want to screw up."

At 4:30 p.m., the buses pulled up in front of a massive brick façade: the Florida State stadium. Within minutes, the Bulldogs had found the tiny visitors' locker room, made their way across the urine-smelling carpet with its soupcon of bayou, wound through its warren of corridors and found the dressing stalls. Quietly, they put on shorts and jerseys and made their way out to the field for a
first look.

This was a temple, an immense Steuben bowl, crowned with luxury suites. The Bulldogs took photos.

Champ tried to ease the tension. "The field is just 100 yards long, same as ours."

Another Bulldog tried a chant. "Whose house is this?"

Silence.

Again: "Whose house is this?"

"Their house," came a weak reply.

A worker ushered the Bulldogs out of the stadium onto a nearby practice field. A Seminole walked by, a blond at his side.

"Wonder what it would be like," a Bulldog lineman said, elbowing another, "to be an athlete at a college like this, be a wild animal…."

Game day dawned. At 11 a.m., the co-captain's mother and his uncle and aunt pondered the prospects. His uncle had coached Shawn Grant in a parks and recreation league. "Shawn is put together with good threads," he said. "If he was 2 inches taller, he wouldn't be at the Citadel."

Tonight was the co-captain's chance, on national TV, in front of NFL scouts. Maybe one would be smart enough, the uncle said, to realize that what mattered was "the size of his heart."

As for winning, "all we need is five smooth rocks and a slingshot and God on our side." Yes, he said, with a smile: God, be a Bulldog tonight.

**The First Half**

Mayan priests thanked their victims before sacrificing them. At Florida State, the band plays your school song. The Citadel mascot, a bulldog, did not have to be polite about it. He broke away from his minder and nipped a referee on the ankle.

If the Seminoles were werewolves, they were bewitchingly coiffed. Some were close-cropped, but others had layered blond hair, long dreadlocks, sheeny braids, Billy Ray Cyrus mullets, vertical cornrows, horizontal cornrows, crop-circle cornrows and orange-tinted, gravity-defying spikes. They headed into their air-conditioned locker room, with its lounge of plush couches and a big-screen TV, for a last few words before kickoff.

The Bulldogs, for their part, retired to the visitors' hovel. As they emerged, an ESPN camera focused on their offensive line coach and misidentified him as Coach Higgins.

Somehow, the kickoff seemed merciful.

At first, the Seminoles cruised 80 yards in just seven plays, and the Bulldog defense seemed slow and tentative — but that was deceptive. On first and goal to go for Florida State, a Citadel defensive back blitzed and knocked the ball out of the Seminole quarterback's hands, then snapped
it up and raced 30 yards.

Now the Bulldogs had the ball. But their offense could do nothing. The Seminoles overpowered them on three straight plays, forcing a punt.

Then the Bulldog defense forced a Seminole punt, and the ball came to rest inside the Citadel five-yard line. The Citadel coaches called for a short-yardage offense, which needed a blocking back. At nine minutes and two seconds into the first quarter, Shrek, Zach Bryant, the kid who could overcome anything, entered his first game for the Citadel.

His job was to throw his 5-foot-10, 210-pound frame into a 6-foot-2, 235-pound linebacker destined for the NFL. Shrek could not stop him, and the linebacker tackled the runner for no gain.

On the next play, though, Shrek stuck a solid block. The Seminole linebacker shook him loose. But he needn't have bothered. Florida State's defensive line had tossed aside the Citadel linemen like bags of leaves and smothered the runner.

And so the game settled into a pattern. Both defenses outplayed both offenses.

For the Citadel, that was a surprise. Its handful of fans in the temple of the Seminoles leaped to their feet. On television, an announcer declared: "The Citadel is saying, 'Hey, we didn't come here just to earn a paycheck. We came here to play some football.' "

Florida State finally managed to kick a field goal.

But the Citadel offense could not make a first down. Each time the offensive unit left the field, Higgins and his assistants talked to the quarterback and the receivers. Quickly, mathematically, they tried to find some advantage.

The offensive linemen sat quietly. They seemed perplexed. Their line coach worked feverishly with a wipe-off board, asking what was wrong, adjusting blocking assignments to overcome gaps in size and speed.

Then came the first injury. A Bulldog defender made a tackle but couldn't get up. Play stopped. Trainers helped him to his feet. He took two steps, and his knees buckled. The trainers caught him and helped him to the sideline.

On the next play, another Bulldog made a tackle. He got up, but slowly, in a daze.

Nonetheless, the first quarter ended with Florida State ahead by only 3-0. The Seminole crowd had ceased its war warble. Some booed.

The Citadel sideline, though, was a mixture of awe and joy. The Bulldog coaches glanced at each other with raised eyebrows. Players shouted and pounded each other's shoulder pads.

Early in the second quarter, Champ and the co-captain took over. Shawn Grant, the kid who wanted to be a leader, blew into the Seminole backfield and made a tackle for no gain. "Biggest hitter in the Southern Conference," the TV announcer declared. Florida State tried a pass. Now it was Champ's turn. Porter Johnson hit the Seminole quarterback as he released the ball.

A starter on the Bulldog defensive secondary leaped for an interception.
The offense stalled, but the ball was close enough for a field goal.

The Bulldogs tied the game, 3-3.

Discretely, Coach Higgins asked for a photo of the scoreboard. The Citadel had tied Florida State.

Then, however, the mismatch took another toll. A defensive back lay on the grass, the second Bulldog who could not get up. The trainers ran to him, sat him up, then stood him and helped him off the field.

In the Citadel tradition of, "Yes, sir, would you like that face first or cross body?" the team persisted. The Seminoles tried a pass to the end zone, but a Bulldog stepped in front of it and intercepted.

Again, the Florida State crowd fell silent, except for scattered booing.

But still the Bulldog offense could not move the ball, and the Seminoles took over. Champ and the co-captain got boxed in, and Florida State's star running back went 51 yards to the Citadel 18. The Seminole war warble picked up again.

The injured Bulldog defensive back had reentered the game, and now he went down once more — seriously enough this time for the team doctor to join trainers on the field. Together, they helped him up and off.

On the next play, the co-captain leveled a Seminole runner juggling a badly pitched ball. It bounced to the turf. A Bulldog scooped it up and ran to the Florida State goal line, 70 yards away. Touchdown.

"The Citadel leads Florida State," the TV announcer said. "What a stunner!"

Two of the Citadel coaches allowed themselves tight smiles. Four turnovers by Florida State in the first half, and ESPN replayed all of them.

Still, the mismatch exacted a growing price. The Bulldog who had made the 70-yard run, one of the smaller players on the team, knelt on the sideline, head down, throwing up with exhaustion.

Now the Seminoles grew visibly angry — at themselves. Coach Bobby Bowden harnessed the anger, and they began to play like gifted and disciplined athletes, covering 71 yards in less than two minutes. They scored a touchdown.

Then a field goal, to end the half leading by 13-10.

And so the jeering began. "West-Point Ree-Jects. West-Point Ree-Jects."

The Second Half

The Bulldogs trotted out of their halftime locker room talk trailing a whiff of _eau d'bayou_.

Those who knew about the SUV wreck grieved for their fellow cadets.
Those who did not tried to focus on the coach's choice of opening play. The 98 Special, everyone hoped, would change their odds.

The play was rooted in trickery. Two receivers would line up to the left. One would head straight toward the defender and fake a block. The defender was meant to assume that the block meant the ball would be thrown to the second receiver. When the defender started in his direction, the first receiver would straighten up and run free to catch the pass. Everything depended upon the fake block.

"You've got to sell it," Coach Higgins shouted. "Sell it. Sell that block."

Shawn Grant, the co-captain, walked over to a starting linebacker, in the same sophomore class as the three cadets in the SUV. The linebacker fought to keep his composure. Grant stood with him, touching helmets. There was only one thing the team could do now, the co-captain said. Play hard to honor the dead.

The Citadel lined up for the 98 Special.

It was hard to count the things that went wrong. The defender did not bite on the fake block. As the Bulldog quarterback, 180 pounds, threw the pass, a Seminole, 249 pounds, drove him to the ground. Then a 6-foot-4 Seminole safety leaped over the top of the 5-foot-11 Bulldog receiver and intercepted.

So much for the 98 Special.

Three plays later, another Bulldog was hurt. A defensive starter tackled a Seminole receiver and went down hard. Trainers helped him from the field.

"Not always athletically do you match up when you go I-AA level to I-A … ," the TV announcer said.

To underscore his point, the Seminoles scored a touchdown on the next play.

Again — now for the third time — ESPN focused on the Bulldog offensive line coach and misidentified him as Higgins.

From then on, for the Citadel, things grew worse. Pass, run, run, a Seminole touchdown.

Then seven Seminoles rushed a Bulldog punter. Six of them overwhelmed their blockers and covered the 13 yards to the kicker so quickly he could not put his foot on the ball.

Two plays later, another Seminole touchdown.

But the co-captain, who had learned to be a leader, wanted none of it. He would not let the Bulldogs slack off. He was on them, shouting encouragement, instructions. The Bulldog defense tried one last time to make a stand. Shawn Grant willed himself into the backfield and knocked the Seminole quarterback flat.

The co-captain's helmet flew off. The ball fell incomplete.

On the next play, Shawn Grant hit the quarterback again, this time an excruciating moment too late.
The Seminole pass was complete — as was one more, for yet another Seminole touchdown.

The Bulldog offense seemed dazed. The defense looked exhausted, heads down.

Still another injury. A Bulldog receiver caught a pass and was tackled hard. He did not get up. Play stopped. The trainers helped him off the field.

Moments later, a 6-foot-6 receiver reached over a 5-foot-11 Bulldog to catch a Seminole pass for yet another touchdown.

Five touchdowns in 12 minutes and 38 seconds.

Florida State, 48-10.

"Right now," the Bulldog equipment manager said, "they're paying us $8,000 a point."

Coach Higgins began to yield. He sent in second- and third-string defenders so they could tell their grandchildren they played against Florida State.

Three plays into the fourth quarter, the Seminoles scored again.

And four plays after that, a 6-foot-4 freshman quarterback for Florida State skirted the left end, placed his right hand on top of a scrub defender from the Citadel, thrust him to the ground, then pivoted and ran like a whippet into the end zone.

It was Hanna-Barbera comical. But it wasn't the players' fault. The game, after all, was about money.

Final score: Florida State 62, the Citadel 10.

**The Aftermath**

As the second and third stringers left the field, Shawn Grant, Porter Johnson, Zach Bryant and the rest of the team cheered and smacked their shoulder pads. But the locker room was sullen.

Coach Higgins thanked everyone who fought hard and praised the defense. "They will always have that first half, for the rest of their lives." But then he said that he was disappointed: Some of the Bulldogs gave up in the second half.

There was silence.

None of the injuries were lasting. "But some guys will look like 10-day-old bananas," the head trainer said.

Each Bulldog got a box of fried chicken, coleslaw and a chocolate-chip cookie as the team boarded buses at 11:30 p.m. for the trip home. Talk was rare and subdued. Florida State, said an assistant coach, "probably has 20 players who will play in the NFL. I don't think we put a hat on a linebacker all day."

Shrek shook his head: "That was a great experience, but … "

http://www.latimes.com/sports/college/football/la-sp-citadel26nov26,0,2498852,print.story... 12/8/2005
The buses arrived at first light. The campus was dark, the barracks locked. Flags, snapping in spotlights, flew at half-staff in honor of the cadets killed in the SUV. The sky turned brilliant blue. The hurricane had turned away.

The next week was grim. The college held memorials for the two crash victims. On Saturday, the third died.

The deaths helped put the Florida State game in perspective, Shawn Grant said. "We were definitely torn up by the situation. We handled it the best way we could."

Then he added: "Try to forget the game. It's done with."

Champ's mother put it best: He was "worn slam out" by the game.

Coach Higgins was blunt: "Les likes to say that these guys are going to remember this game for the rest of their lives. I thought long and hard about that on the way back on the bus. The problem right now is that the goal here is to win championships. Remember, championships. It shouldn't be to play against big schools and lose. It's nice that everyone is saying we gave a great effort. But I want you to remember, we lost a football game."

Les Robinson, the athletic director, said he had decided to schedule only one guarantee game in 2006, against Texas A&M. And he was planning for the following year. "I asked Coach Higgins about 2007. We're looking at Wisconsin or South Carolina."

He paused and said, laughing: "I was asking him, 'You want me to beat you with a club, or beat you with this rake?' "

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Editor's note: The Citadel lost to Ole Miss, 27-7, and finished the season with a 4-7 record.

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About This Story

Drex Heikes spent 18 days with the Citadel football team, beginning with the opening of its football camp Aug. 7. He was given full access to practices, players, coaches and team meetings. He spent more than 100 hours observing and interviewing players, coaches, trainers and the Citadel athletic director. He also interviewed college and military officials, as well the friends and families of team members.

Heikes and photographer Damon Winter, who helped report the story, rode team buses with the players and coaches from the Citadel campus in Charleston, S.C., to the Florida State game in Tallahassee, Fla. Heikes and Winter stayed at the team hotel. They accompanied the team to the visitors' locker room before the game and stood on the sidelines, where they observed and photographed the players, coaches and trainers.

After the game, they rode the team buses back to Charleston and interviewed the players and coaches during the trip. They spoke to them after they returned to the Citadel campus and as the season progressed.
Quotations in this story are designated in two ways: Those heard by the writer are enclosed in quotation marks. Those recalled by others in interviews are in italics.

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[Unpublished Note: The italics may not display depending upon the archiving system you are using.]