

ENGL1101

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A Profile of Pirate Football

In the rural, Georgia town where I grew up, football exists beyond tradition. Every grandpa raised every daddy — who raises every son — to be a Pirate Football player, to lead community uproars on chilly, fall Friday nights in the giant stadium hollowed out in the hills of Hamilton. During the season, players cannot escape Jolly’s Southern Restaurant without signing the football of a young admirer. Marquees of elementary schools and local businesses read “Go Pirates” or “Keep It Up, Boys.” Garages empty and windows darken at exactly 6:30 PM, giving fans an hour to find the best seat before kickoff.

I had the privilege to experience Pirate Spirit at its very best. During four of the team’s most victorious years, my blonde, ribboned ponytail bounced on the sidelines as I threw plastic footballs in the stands after every touchdown, was hoisted high in the air for each kickoff, and kept a smile on my face regardless of the scoreboard. I was a Varsity Football Cheerleader. I loved the tradition of my small town, and I was a leader for its most rallying event.



For many in the town, Varsity Football games were a ritual, almost a religious experience. For me, the euphoria of a Pirate game was magical. Standing on the sidelines, I had a perfect view of the profound effects that a high school football game could have on my community. Fans, cheerleaders, band members, football players, and coaches were united and emotionally inspired as time stood still, the pursuit of victory pulsing through all of our bodies.

This is a profile of a fall Friday night in Hamilton.

The Pirate Fandom of Harriet Bass

Harriet never sat in the bleachers. She overlooked the field from the deck, an area alongside the overflowing home stands that is usually reserved for pre-game cookouts, special guests, and, of course, Harriet Bass herself. The game had not started, but Harriet was already wringing her sparkling hands anxiously.

Harriet Bass glittered. Dedicated fans described her as gaudy — borderline tacky. She was well aware of her reputation, and proud of it. Towering over the crowds at six foot four, her full-busted

frame, bleached blonde hair, and bright red lipstick were unmistakable. Her fingernails were adorned with team logos — flags and Pirate heads — that coordinated with her custom-designed sweater, bedazzled with orange and blue rhinestones. The rings twinkling from eight of her fingers and one thumb, the earrings dangling to the base of her wide-set shoulders, and the massive necklace falling directly into well-defined cleavage boasted real diamonds, emeralds, and salt water pearls. Her shimmering eyelashes may have been glued to her eyelids half an hour before, but her Chanel sunglasses, Prada handbag, and bodily assets were all completely authentic, she claimed. She was a standout, a nonconformist, a self-proclaimed “Amazon Barbie Doll,” and aside from her passions of tanning and shopping, Harriet was a die-hard Pirate Football fan.

For the hundredth time since arriving at the stadium, her focus darted from her pink iPhone to men wearing collared shirts with orange paw prints on their lapels. She knew the Clemson recruiters would come without warning. The coaching staff had been preparing Kevin for the surprise visit for months. She only wished that her son, blessed with her same statuesque frame and unbridled enthusiasm, was aware that his future as a Division I athlete would be determined by his performance in the night’s game. Soon, number 63 would run onto the field with his closest friend and teammate, Chuck Seidel, beside him, without a glance in her direction. She would fight the urge to leap from the deck onto the sidelines and attempt to instill swiftness and passion into her son, the left guard for the offensive line.

Tonight, he couldn’t afford for his best friend, number 58, to overshadow him, or cover up any of his mistakes.

Sherrie Davidson Attempts to Appear as Youthful as the Girls She Coaches

“Did you find the banner?” Holly, Captain of the Varsity Cheerleading Squad, asked the shrugging freshman.

“I know we put it in Coach Davidson’s room, but I don’t have the key. Do you?”

Holly and I rolled our eyes in unison. Sometimes, it was awesome to have a cheerleading coach who enjoyed gossiping, giggling, and gyrating to Lil’ Wayne as much as the girls she coached. Other times, it was downright irritating.

I hastily speed-dialed her — twice. On my third try, she caught the final ring.

“Hey girl,” she answered. I reminded myself not to laugh. She might be in her early 40s and answering the phone like a teenager, but she was still my cheerleading coach and AP English teacher.

“Coach Davidson, the banner is in your room. We need it for kickoff in . . .” (I glanced quickly at the scoreboard clock) “three minutes. And you have the key.”

“Oh girl.” She called me girl, again. “Relax. Let me finish straightening my hair, and I’ll be there in a jiff. Love ya!”

Call disconnected.

Apparently, Sherrie Davidson used to be fifty pounds overweight and wore frumpy, floral dresses and thick rimmed glasses; however, I had never seen her without a full face of makeup and a tight shirt revealing a peek of a perfectly toned abdomen, nor had the rest of the cheerleading squad.

A decade before my career as a student at Central High School, Brett Buford, Sherrie's ex-husband, did more than just "peek" at another teacher. Neither of them left CHS after their divorce. Sherrie continued to teach English and Sociology and coach the cheerleading squad. Matt was still the Driver's Education Teacher and the tight-end coach. Post-divorce, nose job, butt lift, breast augmentation, and braces, Sherrie Davidson transformed into a mid-life bombshell, which was why before every football game, instead of supervising and coaching the Varsity cheerleading squad, Sherrie would drive her re-furbished 1981 Mustang (with the top down) to her house, squeeze into a pair of hip-hugging jeans, orange tank top, and high heels, and make it back to campus in time to parade down the bleacher steps as the coaches filed onto the sidelines.

As players made their way onto the field, Holly and I shot each other anxious looks. Coach Davidson had better make it back to Pirate Stadium before kickoff.

Raymond Banks Prepares for Personal Victory

I'd known Raymond since kindergarten. His first day of school, he staggered into the classroom. "What's wrong with your legs?" we all asked.

Raymond shrugged his shoulders. "Always been like this," he answered. His head fell forward toward the ground, and he sighed. "Always will be like this."

Raymond Banks suffered from severe curvatures of the bones in his legs, making it nearly impossible for him to walk. Growing up, walking wasn't Raymond's only struggle. A learning disability isolated him from his classmates, and his deformity made him an object of ridicule during more than one recess in elementary school. Raymond never had the potential to play sports or compete in academic competitions. He wasn't able to hold a job and had very few friends. Until his teenage years, Raymond excelled at very little. Then, he discovered the saxophone.

When Raymond joined Central's Marching Pirates, he finally met people who appreciated him for the gifts he possessed — compassion and perseverance. Motivated by the band director and his peers, Raymond learned to play the saxophone. Throughout high school, Raymond could almost always be seen inside the band room practicing, or waiting outside the band room for an opportunity to practice. However, despite his hard work and obvious talent, the bones in Raymond's legs prevented him from ever marching with his fellow band members during a football game.

It was his senior year, and the first successful surgery had been performed on Raymond the summer before. After extensive physical therapy, he was finally able to stand upright and walk without a cane. Maybe tonight, finally tonight, Raymond Banks would perform with the Marching Pirates during halftime.

Chuck Seidel Has the Heart of a Pirate Athlete

It was fourth down, with seven yards to go, and the ball rested on the opponent's twelve yard line. After a lengthy timeout, the Pirates decided to go for it — to attempt to score a touchdown, or at least make it to first and goal. Fifteen hundred orange and blue fans quieted in the stadium bleachers, allowing a moment of peace for the offense's concentration.

Necks craned in the direction of the opponent's end zone after the snap. We held our breath as the quarterback prepared for flawless execution. A lone receiver waited to make the catch. Cheers began to erupt when — the quarterback was sacked.

The offensive line walked sluggishly from the damp field, jerking off their helmets. Offensive line coach Matt Washington waited for them beside a sweat-soaked metal bench.

“Have a seat, boys!” Washington yelled over the roar of the band, cheerleaders, and crowd.

He looked into the eyes of each of the young men before him — players he had coached since the beginning of their varsity careers. Washington knew the boys' families and understood their



weaknesses and most noteworthy accomplishments. Spending multiple seasons together on the CHS practice field and Pirate Stadium sidelines had given the offensive line and their coach an appreciated intimacy. Washington's eyes fell on the player he most admired and trusted — Chuck Seidel.

“Chuck.” Washington's face ventured close to his. “What's going on out there?”

Looking into the eyes of the coach he respected and the friend he adored, Chuck Seidel had never been more trusting, or more certain. When the five offensive linemen took the field, Chuck was aware of not only his own movements, but also those of his comrades beside him. He could instantly pinpoint hitches in the line's formation and execution, and he was almost as swift as Washington in contriving alternate tactics for success.

“It's the interior of the line,” Chuck responded. Hesitant to continue, he glanced at his best friend and fellow offensive lineman, Kevin Bass. “I think the opposing defensive guard may be giving Kevin a few problems.”

Kevin Bass had four inches and thirty pounds on Chuck, but Chuck was a swift thinker and incredible talent. Despite Kevin's many athletic strengths, he eagerly accepted criticism and suggestions from his insightful friend. The two had been best friends since they'd played football together as kids. Chuck was always the center, and Kevin was always his "wingman" as left guard. Together, they had ventured from tiny football fields at the Hamilton Recreation Department to the bright lights of Pirate Stadium. They had spent multiple weekends sharing beer and ambition in the serenity of Kevin's back yard, and had spent lazy summers together at Chuck's lake property. The two did not have to speak to know what each other was thinking. Chuck knew that Kevin often tired of long two-a-days in the heat of summertime, and the pressure to succeed often overwhelmed him. Kevin, however, knew that Chuck was ceaselessly motivated and focused, during both daily practices and Friday's games.

"I know I could succeed at anything in life, anything!" Kevin had told Chuck a few months earlier. "If I only had half the heart you have for Pirate Football."

Chuck loved football. During the fall, he lived and breathed it. He was fueled by game-day moments — like the sensation of cold air hitting his chest through his shoulder pads as he walked with his teammates towards the stadium crowded with boisterous fans. The entire coaching staff respected Chuck. He watched game film in his spare time, always attempting to perfect his already faultless snaps. He had the soul and spirit of a talented Pirate athlete. He had earned the coveted Heart of a Pirate and Offensive Line awards two years in a row. He was an invaluable component to CHS victories.

Chuck dreamed of playing football for a promising D-I university. But just as he was aware of his many strengths, Chuck knew that his height, five feet and ten inches, would hold him back in the collegiate arena. Recruiters had agreed with the CHS coaches. Seidel was one of the most skilled centers in the state of Georgia. If only these same recruiters could overlook the simple flaw in his perfection — his height.

Considering Chuck's analysis of the line's mishaps, Matt Washington retrieved the dry-erase board and tiny black marker reserved for quick offensive alterations. His bald head reflected the vivid stadium lights. Washington and Chuck collaborated, creating a new blocking scheme better suiting the force of the offensive line.

"Can you guys handle this?" Chuck asked his teammates.

Four heads nodded in unison.

Chuck glanced at Kevin. "You cool with it?"

Kevin chuckled. "Damn right I am. Just do what you do best."

The offensive line took the field once again. This time, Chuck was face to face with the monstrous left tackle. The most intimidating player from the opposing team would battle against Chuck Seidel's adroit perception. Earlier, a casual blunder from Kevin Bass had ended with a sack. With Chuck Seidel in charge, the play resulted in a touchdown.

After a competitive and tense Friday night, Hamilton was defeated by a mere field goal in the final seconds of the fourth quarter. Players staggered off the field, beaten, stinking, and covered in grass, but not conquered. I walked briskly from the sacred confines of Pirate Stadium, just in time to hear the last of the boys' cleats file into the locker room for showers, pinches of tobacco, and a few last moments in the company of teammates and buddies. Yet despite a brutal loss, the post-game atmosphere was not full of defeat and remorse. Pirate Football not only unites a variety of people, but it also inspires a broad array of emotions.

For Kevin Bass, the post-game atmosphere was one of achievement. He looked away from his intense conversation with the Clemson recruiters just long enough for me to offer him a brief wink and a thumbs up. For Kevin, there would be four more years.

For Sherrie Davidson, the atmosphere was one of hopefulness. "Better luck next week," she said with a sigh, as I gave her a quick, one-armed hug. Although she alluded to the fate of the game, she glared longingly in the direction of Coach Buford, engaged in conversation with a vibrant young teacher from the science department. For Sherrie, there would be another opportunity to snag his eye on Monday morning.

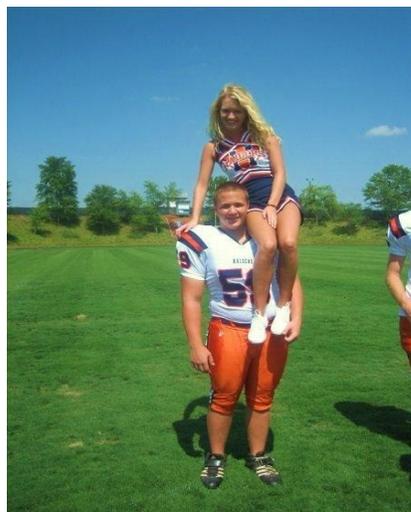
For Raymond Banks, the post-game atmosphere was one of celebration. I gave him a congratulatory pat on the back as I passed him. His hands were still wrapped around his beloved saxophone as he mentally relived his moments of marching on the field during halftime, barely an hour earlier. For Raymond, there would be the contentment of finally excelling.

For Harriet Bass, the atmosphere was one of relief. From across the crowd gathered outside of the locker room, I blew her a kiss. She caught it, giggled, and pretended to stuff it into her orange Prada handbag. For Harriet Bass, there would be another opportunity for Pirate spirit.

And for Chuck Seidel, the post-game atmosphere was ironic. He finally ambled out of the locker room, forlorn without 63 by his side. I collided with him in the same warm hug and savory kiss he'd received from me after every high school football game.

Hand in hand, we slowly made our way to the serenity of his black pickup truck — through the proud handshakes from the coaching staff and showers of high-fives from his teammates.

For Chuck, there wouldn't be four more years. Only a few Friday nights under the lights of our local stadium remained. Soon, the cuts on his knuckles, mementos of Friday night battles, would turn to scars. Chuck Seidel was inches short of his collegiate dreams as a Division I athlete. Yet, as he wrapped his arms around my shoulders and glanced back at what would become the most exciting and intense part of his past, we both knew that the fans, emotions,



and consequences of Pirate Football barely mattered. For Chuck, there would always be love and encouragement. Despite the opinions of high school football coaches or D-I college recruiters, he knew he would always be ranked my number one.

I'm now a freshman at UGA — reputed in Hamilton to be “The Harvard of the South.” I am a recent sorority girl, and my blonde ponytail now bounces on the catwalk they call a campus. Along with the the rest of my 2009 Freshman Class with the privilege to reside in Athens, I am the envy of many. So why, when I behold that sunken Hamilton stadium, which suddenly isn't so giant in comparison to Sanford Stadium, does my heart yearn for the tranquility of my high school years? Why will I always feel that I belong on the sidelines of Pirate Stadium, even as the next lineup of girls replaces me?

As precious as my days as a high school cheerleader were, they are not my glory days. Over time, bigger and better accomplishments will replace sideline memories, and my years as a Pirate will inspire nothing more than a fleeting smile. Yet there will never be a time when I will not drive past my high school and remember the sound of the loudspeaker announcing a winning score, the smell of freshly cut grass and sweaty athletes, and the lights that illuminated the Friday night sky.

The names across the backs of the CHS jerseys are different now. Seats are filled with some new Pirate supporters, but most of the fans are the same. Football and cheerleading coaches move up and on, and marching musicians, cheerleaders, and football players graduate and continue to their next opportunity. Despite the changing times, the essentials of Pirate Football will not alter much from year to year. Tobacco-chewing farmers and affluent community businessmen will still sit together on stadium bleachers. The aroma of boiled peanuts and hot chocolate will still drift intoxicatingly from the concession stand. Students will still paint their bodies orange and blue, and cheer half-naked in freezing weather. And little boys, footballs in their arms, will still view the entirety of a football game from a grassy patch overlooking the field, mimicking the movements and aggression of the players down below, preparing for the fall Friday nights in Pirate Stadium when they will carry on a heartfelt community tradition.

* Names and football numbers throughout the course of the essay have been changed.