

“Home Town Heroes”
By
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This book is dedicated to the Men, Women, Coaches, and Marines who have influenced my life.

This book is also dedicated to my parent’s family, who have been my best friends over these many years.
And, my parents themselves.

Lastly, this book is dedicated to my own family: Patrick, Megan, and Kaylyn, and in particular, to my loving wife, Peggy.

A special thanks goes out to the late Rosemary “Ma” Dunk, and Mike Tawney for their encouragement and support,
And to those young men who have fought, bleed, and supported me on my own sports’ teams over the years- Thank you; I have loved you all.

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List of Main characters

“Skipper” O’Brien - A former Korean Marine who coaches in a small town in Texas. He has decided that this is the year they could go all the way to the state play-offs. He has decided to invest in a new offensive coordinator.

Emil (Robert E. Lee) Lee Sanchez- Of Cajun/Spanish descent: a young man who is new to Texas high school football, but a former college player himself. He has just been hired by Skipper and the Rocin Bulls.

Bob Zeminski- a coach at Rocin High School. A former Vietnam soldier who is called “Killer Bob” by the players due to his intensity and light amount of talking. Coaches the linebackers and kick-off teams.

Harry Smith- Called “Handsome Harry” by the players. Tries to romance every woman he meets and does succeed more often than not. Coaches the receivers and secondary.

David Sheppard- a troubled young man who is very close to Skipper, makes a mistake and has the choice to go to jail or to prison. He has family trouble, and he a very talented athlete. See Skipper as his father figure.

Deputy Zycheck- deputy who arrest and helps Skipper with David.

Vice Principal Smith- portly middle aged man , who has a inferiority complex, and is jealousy of Skipper’s success.

Doc Woods- Town and team doctor.

**Father Tom Fitzgerald (?)- Catholic priest at St.

Reverend Hope- First Baptist of Rocin

Pastor Charles (Chuck) Neilson- Lutheran minister

David Shepard- former captain of football team, that got in trouble and had to join the Army.

Anne Beckingdorf- nurse and wife of Muley Sanchez

Jimmie (Aussie) Knowles- QB move in from Australia

Doug Wohl- good player who gets in trouble with girl-friend and is suspended for one game.

Whale Hale- Heavy lineman; CPR object, loses dad?

Hog Curtis- grows into body. Parents confront Skipper

Gloria Nugent- girl-friend of Doug Wohl

Henry- Old WW I veteran who works as the janitor at the Rocin field house. Has a run in with Mr. Smith the Vice-principal.

Johnny Steptoe- Young kid who does not have enough to eat. Skipper shares his food with him, and starts buying him bread and peanut butter to keep in a locker so that he has lunch.

Dell "Clydesdale" Schrick - Large and raw boned youth, slow, but powerful at the T.E. position.

Jay "Juking" Jones- One of a pair of running backs. Can take a hit and keep running.

Mike "mincemeat" Mentz- A defensive L.B who can throw a football. Makes a great play at running back for the pitch pass.

James Stuckey III- Star basketball player, wants to play for Skipper, but parents would not let him, so that he could get a B-ball scholarship.

Rico Vasquez- large lineman who is graduating Muley's first year at Rocin. Fight James after verbal exchange during lunch. Muley stops them, and Skipper sets-up the boxing event.

Shamus O'Rourke- One of the founders of the town; Rocin named after him: stubborn mule, bad -tempered human.

James McStay- Another founder of the town.

School: Rocin High School in Central Texas , between Houston and San Antonio-headed out I-10. The community is based on farming (this is starting to change) and is mostly white in its make-up. Does have a growing Hispanic population.

Sister Mary Margaret - Muley's Catholic elementary school teacher.

Mary Bella Koreneke- History department head at Rocin H.S.

Mrs. Shupac- Garage apartment landlady for Muley

Leon (Old Mac) McCall- old time farmer, retired and spend time in court house square.

“Tiny” Martinez- best B-B-Q around Rocin; heavy set man, with restaurant. Caters for Muley’s wedding reception

Ignacio “Iggy” Martinez- Owns the meat market next to his brother’s restaurant

Homer Hal Halichek- owner of burger. (Greasy hair, white T-shirt) joint near school, ask about Skipper

Edward”Zippy” Zipalac- The other running back with “Juking” Jones

Sean “The Rooster” - not the Hen- Hennessy- back-up QB for Aussie at the El Toro game.

Nacho Rios- linemen Skipper send in during game between El Toro and Rocin

Mike “The Vise” Vacek- the other linebacker besides Mentz

George “Godzilla” Godfrey- Fullback for Rocin. Large and strong

Guadalupe “Lupe” Lopez- Center for team.

James “and the giant peach” Jarvis

Common sense in schools today is still an issue but on a larger scale. When Zero Tolerance can send a student to jail and deprive them of the learning environment for a pocket knife brought accidental to school, we are losing a battle with our youths. The professionals who tell me that giving a student three or four pops with a no-nonsense piece of oak is not promoting respect, but fear, I say - YOU BET! Fear is what keeps your students from making too many mistakes. Fear is what will keep the respect and authority in the schools, and keep the law out of it. Young people will make mistakes, that is a given, but should their mistakes be compounded by dealing them into the judicial system and giving them a criminal record? Over the past few years, I watched many of my own players lead down this twisted judicial path, and seen the effects it has on the family. When you compare the life a youth lives to a race you find, it is in running the sprints right out of the blocks that our youths lose themselves to the seven deadly sins, but the true measure of a youth’s life is taken many years from now in the long distance race of time.

Skipper was not afraid to “lay the wood” to needed victims, but he used it very judiciously. Holes played it off with a treasure trove of paddle assortments and implied threats. But, should a firm and strong hand be needed to weld a paddle, then Handsome Harry was the best choice. For a man who spent his life going from bar to gym and back again, he was the one who could “light them up”. Two good licks from Harry’s paddle made a believer out of many a would-be felons. In all my experience, it is the fear of a consistent and a immediate punishment that keeps your athletes in line.

Chapter One:

Killer Bob

I felt a strange sense of homecoming mixed with a fear of the unknown as I entered the new stadium in Rocin. The stadium had been named after Robert E. Zeminski, the head-football coach for Rocin High School the past twenty years. He had retired at least five years ago from Rocin's newly consolidated school district, but his memory had been itched on so many young men from these small farming towns and communities, that they gave him the highest tribute they had to offer: his name on their stadium.

I jammed my hands into my leather bomber coat as a cool wind blew through me on the shady side of the stadium. It was not a blue norther, but the wind was not aware of the difference as it cut through me and lifted what little hair remained on my head. No real damage that a good finger swipe could not fix, but I wish I had my cap.

My path lead me into the stadium and up towards the top of the stands. From this vantage point I could see the field, the sidelines and the end zones in entirety. There was no sound: no cheers, no yells, or whistle's, just the sound of your own thoughts as they bounced around your head looking to be chosen and nursed into a vivid memory. And as I sat down on the cold metal seat, I realized : what memories I have had.

It had been a long time since I had sat in the stands. My retirement gave me certain benefits such as sitting in the press box observing numerous high school football games. I had never sat in the stands at Rocin High School before. Or had I?

No, I had sat in the stands at Rocin Stadium. It was the night I found "Killer Bob" at the old stadium drinking alone in the stands. Alone with his fears, and mine.

I had a habit of thinking of Ski as "Killer Bob", I guess I was as bad as the kids...heck I was a kid then and Ski scared me, but Ski's death had brought me back to the town of Rocin , and fond memories of Rocin High School, which started my introduction to Texas high school football, and my mentor, Coach "Skipper" O'Bryan. Ski's death had brought me full circle again to the home of my working youth, to the beginning of what the sport's columnists called a "very successful career" in coaching high school football. In those two years Skipper taught me more about life and people, than in the past twenty-eight years I spent coaching football. And, for that, I cannot thank him enough.

I wish there was a way to break down the word love and separate it into categories, but to my mind, love means a deep and abiding affection, and should not be confused with a robust and passionate feeling called lust. I can say I loved Skipper, and in the mix of words that penetrate my mind and erratically amble through my head, that mean many things, such as : respect, admire, care, trust, and yes, even a little bit, fear. Looking around at the new stadium with its gleaming chrome rails, white shining cement, and sparkling fresh paint, I realize, this is what Skipper's love had built.

But, it was in a much smaller Rocin Stadium then this one that the fear Ski and I shared ended my second season at Rocin, and the love we shared was Skipper and the Boys. Skipper

started building this dream catcher my first year at Rocin. That was the reason he brought this unknown, untried offensive coordinator here. This is where my memory, my career, and my undying love for Skipper and our Boys starts.

Skipper..... He is never far from my mind or thoughts. Perhaps one of the highest tributes I can pay the man was, I never made a decision without wondering, "what would Skipper do?". I still wonder what Skipper would have done in our last few play-off games that last season. I wonder about a lot of things.

I wonder why I did not melt as I drove that '61 Chevy Impala down that dusty iron ore road Skipper told me about that ran down the side of the school, and ended at the field house. Rivulets of sweat ran down my neck and buried themselves into my tight-collared cotton shirt, soaking the collar and collecting the dust as it filtered into the open window. If rivulets ran down my neck, then streams ran down my sides leaving a large amount of water damage on the sides of my dress-shirt. Not quite the best impression I had hoped to make when leaving the house of a college friend, whose parents owned a home there in Beaumont that morning.

And, even with all that physical discomfort, I was in a euphoric state. I was to be hired sight unseen as the offensive coordinator for the Rocin (pronounced "Roe-sin" by the locals) Bulls in South-Central Texas, between San Antonio and Houston. Not bad for a twenty-three year old from Homa, Louisiana. Not bad for a boy who had played a practice team running back at a division one school in my home state, and who played no more than five series in his senior year at Tech. This was my chance, and Coach Hoyt had seen to that. Coach Hoyt was my position coach at Tech, who roared when he talked, and thundered when he yelled. His hat rarely left his head, and on the rare occasions when it did, tufts of gray hair would gently move by the wind he created as he marched down the hallways of the College of Education, much like stalks of wheat, rippled by the wind in staggered waves of gusty air. He had sold my abilities to Coach Michael Patrick O'Bryan of Rocin High School in Rocin, Texas without having shook my hand or heard my voice. Now that is trust. A trust I did not want to let down.

What I did know from Coach Hoyt, about Coach O'Bryan was they had serve together in the Marine Corps during Korean "Conflict". They had fought their way out of the Chosin Reservoir with the First Marine Division and their legendary commander Colonel, later General, Lewis "Chesty" Puller. The lessons they had learned there in that frozen fight against the Chinese, about themselves and other men, would be the building block for all their relationships throughout their lives. Every hard situation they encountered, they could look back on this time and say, "I've seen worse", or "I've lived through worse". They would judge the men they coached, taught, and played against by the standards of the Marines, and the measure of bravery that common men have during uncommon times.

I found out later that Coach O'Bryan had joined the Marines near the end of the Second World War, left the Corps as soon as he could be mustered out to get married, and finish his college education on the G.I. Bill. He had almost made the civilian transition from Marine to educator, when he received a small letter in the mail asking him to report for duty in Korea.

He was not alone. These men who had fought so gallantly on Iwo Jima, and Guadalcanal were now being called back into service, after about a four year absence. These men who had thanked God for the safe return of their lives and their sanity after W.W.II, were now being asked to return to a new task and a new enemy. The bitter taste of resentment could well have

lead them to a desire to run, but they did not. They could not: duty called, and they reported. I would not understand the special pride men who have served in the Marines have until my son joined and became one of the Few, the Proud. I will never forget his letters, nor the pain I felt during his time in training, but , I also will not forget the strange feeling a man has when he observes his son doing something he did not or could not do. To give oneself to a greater cause than self; to hold oneself, and those he is responsible for, accountable to accomplish the mission- that is what my son did, and that is what Coach O'Bryan did every day of his life. To see my son, give up self, and join the ranks of those proud and fierce men, I cannot begin to explain the pride or overwhelming emotion that drained out of me and down my face the morning of his graduation. These memories volley around my head as I think back on Coach O'Bryan and the town of Rocin.

Another strange detail I learned about Coach O'Bryan from Coach Hoyt, was that he considered himself Irish but had never been to Ireland. He was not the only one who felt this way in a town founded by Irishmen. The whole town of Rocin was made up of a generous amount of Irish, German, Ceche, and people of Mexican descent. I should not have been amazed at this make up of the town, given my own mixed French-Spanish-Irish heritage, but these people seemed to like each other, or better yet, they liked football and Skipper. The more I mixed with the town people, the more I realized they considered themselves Rosin Bulls first, and individuals second. Their loyalties started with the team and ended with the team. That could be a mixed blessing sometimes.

The last detail I learned about the man who would be my new Boss from Coach Hoyt, was that he had given up alcohol some years ago, and , I was told, you might not want to drink in his presence. I was not much of a drinking man but I did imbibe from time to time, and I wondered how this was received in a town made up of country folks who enjoyed their beer. None of this seemed to matter at the time. All the information I had learned was just back ground to what I had been asked by Coach O'Bryan through Coach Hoyt to do: I was to create an offensive power house that would get the Rocin Bulls to the state play-offs.

Besides the dust and the heat of that morning, I was ready- sticky, but ready.

Chapter Two

The Beginning

As I drew nearer the high school, I began to notice the typical brick architecture of the 1930's, and how clean the school campus was in comparisons to other high school campuses I had seen as I drove through Southwest Texas. There seemed to be some pride in the school and the school ground's appearance. I liked the school already. I liked its strong lines made up of red brick and white-painted wood frames, which outlined the doors and windows. There was an openness about the whole campus, with the central building the focus and the out buildings arranged in organized symmetry. The school's broad fields looked like hay meadows, and the trees they had left on the perimeter were tall, strong and shade worthy. I hoped I would be able to use the car's dusty mirror before I meet Coach O'Bryan, or Skipper as I was to find out later he liked to be called, with the idea that I could arrange my clothes and hair, so that he would have the same impression of me. I wore my hair a bit long back then, and the dust and the wind combined from the open window to give it a Neanderthal appearance.

I pulled into a somewhat shady spot near the field house, and stopped the car, allowing the orange dust to catch up and enter into the gaping window of my car. The heat was not so bad here, but my shirt was already soaked with sweat and had achieved a somewhat smoky coloring due to the aggressive dust particles that had cling desperately there. All I could do was re-tuck this sponge I called a shirt, and straighten my tie. I opened the battered back door of the Chevy and took out my sports coat. I could not wait to put on this sweat producing blanket, I thought sarcastically, but nothing could ruin the pure joy I felt in my heart on my first day here at Rocin.

After the coat was fastened I took a moment to check out my appearance in the Chevy's small driver's side mirror. I raked my hand through my hair to re-establish a part, and felt a sticky satisfaction concerning my physical deportment. I was as ready as I would ever get. A moments hesitation gave me a chance to make the decision to leave my new briefcase, a gift from my mother, in the car. First, I wanted to meet the man who would be my "Boss", then second, I could show him what I knew with help from my new briefcase.

As I directed my steps toward the field house; a white and red wooden structure on the east side of the field, a rather large man in faded denim overalls, a cotton undershirt and a dirty, sweat stained Notre Dame cap came out of the middle door and, looking at me, stopped. A slow smile spread across his face, and after a slight inquisitive glance, he spit a brown stream of tobacco juice onto the dry iron ore parking area in front of the field house. I decided, after only a moments thought, he must be the janitor, or grounds keeper, and I asked him where I could find Coach O'Bryan. He seemed to regard me with a strange and bemused look, and with a chuckle, spit again, and told me to follow him. I thought it rather foreign to see a Notre Dame cap in the heart of Texas, and on a janitor or grounds keeper at that, who obviously worked for the football team. I chuckled to myself as I followed him towards a dusty old school bus melting in the late morning sun.

We got on the old yellow school with the dangerously rusted first step. I almost stepped through to the ground on my first attempted at boarding, but the man in front of me grabbed my

arm and helped pull me up. The bus was parked on the west side of the school, and we waited in an awkward silence. The silence gave me time to regard the face of the man in the review mirror.

He had light blue eyes, that seemed even paler in the worn brown shoe leather you might call a face. When he turned sideways you could see the strong hawk-shaped nose, and even make out the path of the crow's feet that raced to see which one could get to the corner of his eyes first. His hands, as they gripped the steering wheel, were freckled and surprisingly light of hair. The hair that was there had a reddish hue to it. I could not see under the cap, but I knew that the hair on top of his head would be cut short as was the fashion of the men of his era. He was obviously an outdoors' man. This was the type of man who I should ask about whether there was good hunting around these parts. I am sure there was good hunting, especially as we moved closer to San Antonio. These thoughts were interrupted when I noticed his eyes regarding me in the rearview mirror. Just as I had decided to introduce myself to the janitor, bus driver, or whatever, a young man ran onto the bus speaking hurriedly while bounding over the first step.

“Skipper, I know I can do it! I won't let you down!

“I know you won't Petey. We are in for a fine day so let's get going before it gets even hotter.”

This exchange led me to change my mind about the janitor. This man must be a coach, but if he was a coach why would the kid call him by the name “Skipper”?

The man Skipper spoke again, “Get everyone on board Petey, I want the whole defensive secondary to make it today. Nobody drops out and nobody quits”.

Petey responded in a militarily playful, yet respectful way, “Aye, Aye Skipper!” and was off.

I was not too much into things military back then, Vietnam and its protest had watered down my interest and understanding, but I believe the response had something to do with the Navy. I thought it was a silly thing to say and I vowed I would never make others say it to me, or even use it myself.

Just as I had reconciled myself to this fact, I heard Skipper say,

“Hold on, here comes the thundering herd!”

Sure enough, twelve boys raced towards the bus and their feet began to beat a hasty tattoo up the metal steps of the bus- skipping the rusted step- and down the aisle, choosing their seats as they went. Their voices were the loud and excited voices of young men headed out upon an adventure. I had no idea where we were going, but I felt the excitement becoming a part of me.

The Skipper ground the bus into first gear, and we were off. The big bus shot out of the parking lot, leaving a trail of dust behind us. We turned left onto Main street, and, with a quick exchange of gears, we were headed down the road and out of the town. The excitement turned into fear as I realized I did not know where we were going, or what we were doing. I found my thoughts getting louder in my head as the whine of the engine rose, and the noise of the “Herd” behind me took on epic proportions. After a failed attempt to make conversation with Skipper, I leaned my head and back against the window, picked my feet up, and decided to keep my ever increasing volumes of thoughts to myself and wait. This man, who had invited me with his Notre Dame cap, did not seem to be an idiot, and he had understood my question- or had he? My nervousness increased, but I did not want to show my ignorance to this man and these boys over the sound of the bus's engine.

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