

# RUN & SHOOT

By Jay Busbee

Chapter 1:  
Game On  
*Vs. UNC-Greensboro*

The first Saturday in September, and the field was gleaming. The stadium grass and the north Georgia sky were impossible colors, the kind of green and blue that first-graders slather with broad strokes. The bass drum of the band was thick and loud enough to reroute heartbeats. The crowd pulsed in a sea of blue and red, the colors of its beloved Deep South University. The sorority girls with canyons of cleavage, the frat dudes already sweating cheap tequila through their pores, the kids with their foam Bootlegger pistols getting a fast education in the ways of the world, the alumni trying to convince themselves that they hadn't picked up inches around the waist and lost them off the hairline, the jocks and stoners and geeks and hotties and skanks and douchebags and MILFs and everyone – all these and more all beat in time, all with one overriding mantra: Game on, man. Game on.

Kedrick Reed, the freshman tailback for the Bootleggers, took a moment to stand up from his stretches and let the noise of the crowd wrap him up tight. This was the moment he'd waited for his entire life. All the Pee-Wee and Pop Warner leagues, changing high schools and practicing fourteen hours a day, giving up friends and family and anything approaching a normal school life – it had all been for this day, this time, this crowd.

Sure, he'd been recruited by every team in the Top 25, but the Ohio States and Notre Dames of the world could go blow. He was playing for DSU, baby. He was playing for Coach Rip. This was every Southern boy's dream, playing for the juggernaut that was the Deep South University football team. You survive DSU and Rip Thackston, baby, the rest of your life was a sweet downhill slide of cotton candy, easy money and thong-wearin' hotties. Oh, it had been so much work for Kedrick to get here, so many times he wanted to just give up and play for some second-class school. But he hadn't, he'd stayed strong and clear-eyed and devoted, and now it was all paying off like a greased slot machine.

He thought of his moms, of how she'd worked three jobs to keep him and his sisters fed, of how she'd never let him take a play off or a day off. He thought of her as piano music played in his head – he knew how these flashbacks were supposed to go, he knew how perfect this moment was – and he wished she could here to see him now, at the moment of his ultimate triumph. He looked hard at the American flag, billowing out over the south grandstand, and he felt a single tear in the corner of his eye.

And right about then, a football hit him dead in the nuts.

Game on, man. Game. *On.*



If this wasn't a hypercritical season for Deep South University, it'd do until one came along. It had been ten years since DSU had won its last national championship, ten long years in which Florida, Texas and USC had eclipsed the Bootleggers on the national stage, and Georgia, LSU and Alabama had taken chunks out of DSU's once-impenetrable hide in the SEC. The DSU talk these days across sports radio, blogs and message boards wasn't negative; no, it was far worse – it was *indifferent*.

But so far, 2009 looked promising. For starters, the team was returning quarterback Wray Mattiece, a senior and legitimate Heisman frontrunner. The Bootleggers boasted one of the most devastating cornerback combos in the nation in Lyle Lerew and Davon Jeffries. And they'd roped in the future in Kedrick Reed ... although at the moment, their future was writhing on the turf grabbing at his crotch.

The first thing Kedrick saw when his vision refocused was Coach Rip Thackston, standing over him with the sun silhouetting him like some ancient god.

"Now ain't the time for a nap, precious," Coach Rip said. "We've got a football game to play."

"Coach, I got hit in the boys," Kedrick said, every syllable pounding on his throbbing crotch. "I can't –"

"How about you stop right there before you say something you're gonna regret?" Coach Rip knelt down, and for a second Kedrick thought – hoped? – he was going to give his newly-minted backfield star a fatherly hand up. Instead, Coach Rip slapped Kedrick on the helmet – not hard enough to draw attention from the TV cameras, but hard enough to ring Kedrick's bell from the other end – and motioned for him to rise.

"Get your ass on your feet, son," Coach Rip said. "We got us a ballgame to win."

And when that gravelly, iconic voice spoke, you damn well better listen. Kedrick did, clambering to his feet and dusting off his uniform. He had no idea that a fan had filmed and already uploaded his crotch-shot video, that by halftime more than a million people would laugh at him taking one to the gonads on YouTube. Sure, he'd spend the next six weeks embarrassed as hell as the clip made the blog-nightly news-talk show rounds, and the childish scream he'd squealed on impact would follow him the rest of his days, but for now, he was playing for DSU, and all was right with the world.



Twenty yards away, DSU punter Jimbo Roy smacked the shoulderpads of a man-mountain lineman. "Fifty bucks, Nguyen," Jimbo said.

"Fifty? Bet was for twenty!"

"Bet was to hit him for twenty. Drilling the jewels cost extra."

"Fine," Nguyen waved him off. "I'm good."

"Yes you are," Jimbo said, making a note in a pad that he then tucked into his uniform pants. "Always a pleasure, Nguyen."

Jimbo might well have been DSU's best overall athlete, but he was without a doubt its most legendary screwup. A fifth-year senior, he'd carved a swath of prankish destruction across campus for half a decade. Sometimes his goofs were low-end one-shots, like yanking off a teammate's towel while the ABC cameras rolled in the locker room. And sometimes they were faked-moon-landing-level conspiracies, like the time NCAA investigators swarmed Tuscaloosa looking for evidence that Alabama had illegally recruited a blue-chip Louisiana kid named Neon Delacroix – a blue-chipper whom Jimbo had created out of thin air with a network of fake emails, transcripts and message board posts.

Coach Rip had recruited him as a quarterback, but he possessed a nasty combination of laziness and vindictiveness; he once hung a pass to a receiver who'd stolen his dessert that morning, and two defenders nearly snapped the receiver in half. Still, Jimbo was too good of an athlete to boot out of the program, so Coach Rip worked his leg into serviceable punting shape, and kept him around as insurance. Better to have him inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in, so to speak.

Today, as the rest of his teammates stretched (or, in Kedrick's case, squirmed), Jimbo stroked his brown chin whiskers and scanned the crowd for some new tail. Sidelight of his new role: plenty of time to focus on stacking both home and road beef.

"Jimbo!" The voice was deep, laced with menace, and belonged to one of the few men who could actually throw a scare into Jimbo. Deck Talbot, defensive

coordinator and hands-down the most fearsome linebacker ever to emerge from the DSU program, stormed through the stretching players like Robert Duvall striding across the war-torn beach in *Apocalypse Now*. Six-foot-seven and meaner than ten pounds of rattlesnakes, he'd been an All-American at DSU and later an All-Pro for the Vikings. He'd ended a dozen careers on the field, and right now he looked mad enough to end Jimbo's life.

He pointed at Jimbo, who felt his insides liquefy. Deck began yelling while he was still fifteen feet away, and by the time he was in Jimbo's face, he'd achieved jet-engine volume.

"What in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ you think you're doing, you dumb motherfucker? That's the franchise right there! Good thing you got a rag arm, boy, or I'd rip it off you!" He grabbed Jimbo's face mask, his face a contorted rictus of rage. His voice dropped so low that only Jimbo could hear it.

"Goddamn, son, that was funny," Deck said through his teeth. "I gotta yell to keep from busting my ass laughing. You feel me?" Jimbo, eyes widening in realization, nodded. "Good. Now, how much you make for that?"

"Fi-fifty bucks."

"All right then," Deck said, his catcher's-glove-sized fist still locked on Jimbo's facemask. "First, you gonna give me that fi-fifty. Drop it in my office 'fore you leave tonight. Next, look over my shoulder. See them reporters?"

Jimbo looked – it was like peering around the side of a building – and saw them thirty yards down the sideline, a knot of rumpled sportswriters furiously Twittering away on their phones. Some were coiffed and greased up like used-car salesmen; some had the stains from the press-box buffet on their shirts. "Got 'em," Jimbo said.

"Good. Couple of those guys been giving Coach Rip some grief. You know, 'Time to step down,' 'Get the rocking chair,' that kinda shit."

"Assholes," Jimbo said, grateful for the chance to get on the same side of the fence as Deck.

"Damn right," Deck said. "I been watching you punt lately, boy. Having a little trouble with accuracy, aintcha?"

"Coach, you point to a seat in this stadium, I'll drop the ball in it—" He saw Deck's expectant expression. "Oh. Oh. Yeah, coach, I haven't been feeling it lately. No idea where the ball's gonna go. I think I need a little more practice."

"I think you do." Deck released Jimbo's facemask. "Get to practicing, now."

Deck turned and left Jimbo to limber up, for real this time. He walked over toward Coach Rip, who surveyed the far sideline with the patient air of a chess grandmaster.

"Those Greensboro boys are getting bigger," Coach Rip said, nodding his chin at the Spartans doing jumping jacks.

"Another ten years, they'll be up to our knees," Deck replied. "Got Jimbo showing some love to those writers for you."

Rip waved indifferently at that; he didn't have the bloodlust of these youngsters anymore. "Your boys good to go?"

"If we give up even ten yards of offense, I'm makin' 'em run till Tuesday."

Down among the reporters, there was a sudden commotion; they scattered as a punt landed like a concussion grenade among them. One writer whose oversized shirt draped him like a shroud dropped to his knees and picked at the remains of his shattered iPhone, his credential lanyard swinging mournfully.

"Sorry!" Jimbo called. "My bad!"

Both coaches glanced sideways down the sideline, then refocused on UNCG. "How's the kid's nut sack?" Deck ventured.

"Fine," Rip laughed. "Dumbass, sitting there woolgathering, doing that silly 'I dreamed of this' shit in his head. Deserved what he got. Next time he'll keep his mind on the damn game."

With a sixth sense born of years of dodging curfews and NCAA investigators, Deck spotted a cornerback loafing his way through pregame warm-ups, and stormed off to tear the kid a new orifice. He left Rip Thackston alone near the center of the standing-room-only stadium, the centerpiece of all of Deep South University.

DSU was a sprawling land-grant institution in the foothills of the north Georgia mountains, a party school of mythic proportions, an institution whose athletics budget dwarfed that of many Central American nations. DSU had spawned politicians and athletes and Southern business titans, and even the scholars who'd graduated from Deep South tended to be the alpha dogs of their biology departments or corporate think tanks.

The place bred winners. And it all stemmed from Rip Thackston.

He'd brought four championships to north Georgia, and sent forth untold numbers of pro ballplayers from it. And now, as of 2009, he'd been here forty years.

Forty years of winning and losing, of chasing recruits and dodging investigators. Forty years of buttering up rich boosters and activist university presidents and arrogant media. Forty years ... but what had it gotten him? Sure, he was a coaching legend, ranked right up there with the Bowdens and Paternos of the world. But the respect was flaking away.

Just look at the TV schedule. DSU's most bitter rival, the University of Georgia, would get national airtime for its game against Oklahoma State, one whose kickoff came before DSU's game would end. Worse, Alabama and Virginia Tech, two schools DSU had beaten more times than Rip could count, were playing right down I-75 tonight in the Georgia Dome, a marquee matchup that Rip took as another slap to the face. The DSU-UNC Greensboro match, meanwhile, was on a low-rent pay-per-view channel. This was no way to treat a legend.

Rip first burst into the national consciousness in 1962. Back then, he was in his first year of coaching at Stillwater State University, a South Carolina institution long written off as “Backwater State” for its third-rate academics and tenth-rate athletics. But Rip was lean and hungry and pretty much willing to do anything to win, and on a hot-blanket August weekend, the nation found out just how tough he was.

That particular weekend, Rip was sitting in his office trying to work up any kind of offensive set that his boys – who were slower than a Friday afternoon clock – could run without getting pulverized. The televisions and papers those days were full of the civil rights struggles exploding a few states away, but for Rip, buried neck-deep in Xs and Os, they might as well have taken place on the moon. Several hundred miles away, right as the sun was setting on a little Mississippi hamlet by the name of Prosperity, a black teenager by the name of Miles Lee made the unforgivable mistake of knocking a bottle of corn syrup to the floor of the local general store. The bottle shattered, the corn syrup spilled in rosy waves over Miles’ feet, and the store owner came out from behind the register with bat in hand.

What happened next was a matter of some dispute. The owner contends he was only waving the bat to scare young Miles, and had no intention of swinging it until the boy leaped at him like a mad dog off the leash. Miles and his friends, along with a local schoolteacher shopping two aisles over, remembered it somewhat differently. As they told the *New York Times* a few days later, the owner took one swing, then another, then another at Miles – who dodged them all with air to spare, neat as you please. And even then, Miles might have been all right had he not decided to laugh at the panting, red-faced owner. But he did – right as the county sheriff happened to be walking up on the store’s front porch.

The sheriff drew out his blackjack, and Miles, he ran. Christ Almighty, did he run. He ran past the sheriff and a deputy, he ran home to kiss his mother goodbye, he ran into the woods steps ahead of the lynch mob that burned his family’s house to the ground. And thanks to a *Life* magazine photograph – one which showed the reed-thin boy, terror in his eyes, a step ahead of the bat-wielding shop owner and the sheriff reaching for his sidearm – Miles ran straight into the nation’s consciousness.

In his office a few days later, Rip saw that picture, saw the look in the boy’s eyes, and booked himself on a train to Mississippi. He brought Miles, his momma, and his two sisters to South Carolina, put them all up in university housing – this was long before the NCAA would have lumped him in with Hitler for doing such a thing – and set about making sure that one dumb mistake wasn’t going to cost a kid his life.

“Shoot, I didn’t do nothing anybody else wouldn’t have done,” Rip would say at a banquet years later. “Now, I ain’t gonna lie to you. I ain’t sayin’ that boy didn’t deserve a smack,” Rip would laugh. “But me, I’d have stopped at one. I’m

not sure those Mississippi fellas would have been quite so restrained. You tell me, Miles – you ever go back and ask ‘em what the fuss was all about?” And everyone in the ballroom – gathered there in the Spartanburg Hilton to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Stillwater’s national championship season – laughed at the absurdity of it all, United States congressman and Heisman Trophy winner Miles Lee loudest of anyone.

If Rip had looked hard enough, he could see Miles up in his skybox now, settling in to watch the start of another. But it was five minutes to kickoff, and Rip had other matters on his mind.



Wray Mattiece stood on a bench and looked out over his team, fidgeting and twitching with anticipation. Over at the far end of the sideline, Kedrick Reed was puking up the last of his pregame meal. Lyle Lerew and Davon Jeffries were placing their private bounties on UNCG receivers. And Jimbo Roy was texting three different women at once, staggering liaisons for later that evening with the practiced air of a military tactician.

“Circle up!” Mattiece finally bellowed, and when one of the most famous quarterbacks in the land called you out, you showed up.

“Where we at?”

“DSU!”

“Who’re we?”

“BOOTLEGGERS!”

“Who we gonna beat?”

Murmuring among the players. What was UNC-Greensboro’s mascot, anyway?

“Spartans, y’all,” Wray sighed.

“SPARTANS!”

Wray stuck his golden throwing arm into the mass of Bootleggers, and the entire team crowded around to touch the hem of his jersey. Wray nodded in approval. “Triple Boot on three! One two three!”

“BOOT BOOT BOOT!” the team shouted as one. All around them, a crowd of 100,000-plus screamed so loud that the noise wasn’t even audible, just a physical force shoving the Bootleggers forward, headlong toward inevitable victory.

And for one of them, it was the last time they’d ever set foot on this field.  
Game on.

Next: DSU @ Ole Miss

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