

# RUN & SHOOT

By Jay Busbee

*The story so far:* The Deep South University Bootleggers are one of the SEC's football powerhouses. But they're now a decade removed from their last national championship, and like a bad plumber, the cracks are starting to show. Can Coach Rip Thackston hold the team together long enough to make one more charge at No. 1? ([Click here for the R&S home page.](#))

## Chapter 2: Run Down *DSU @ Ole Miss*

When the body plummeting out of the oaks landed on the lush Grove turf, you could hear the beer sloshing inside.

For a long moment, nobody said anything. Then, miraculously, the body twitched ... shook ... and rose to its feet. More zombie than human, the Ole Miss kid had mud in his teeth and grass stains along the length of his shirt, khakis and tie, but as he lifted his arms in triumph, a crowd of at least two hundred cheered as one.

"Flim flam bim bam!" the kid shouted, spitting out a tooth in mid-chant.

"OLE MISS, BY DAMN!" the crowd bellowed in response. One final cheer, and the crowd dispersed back into the ten-acre college football nirvana that is The Grove. There's no finer place to tailgate before a game in the country, and there's no finer way to drown out the sorrows of a loss, either ... which is exactly what the Ole Miss faithful were doing tonight, their beloved Rebels having fallen 38-14 to the Deep South Bootleggers.

The Grove stands as the centerpiece of the Ole Miss campus, a rolling expanse of green dotted by towering oaks and flowering magnolias. On game days, it's covered almost completely by red and blue tents, magnificently-dressed ladies and sweaty, tie-wearing gentlemen mingling in what will be the finest moments of their lives. There aren't many kids named "Grove" in Mississippi, but there ought to be.

The grassy expanse runs gently uphill toward the Lyceum, the colonnaded Greek Revival edifice best known as the building where federal troops and the Mississippi National Guard threw down over the attempted

desegregation of the school nearly fifty years ago. Today, though, as on every game day, that trauma seemed a thousand years away.

The Manning boys threw some of their first passes as children playing in the Grove, a legend that holds the unusual-for-Mississippi distinction of being completely true. And although the crowd of debutantes and trust-fund frat dudes didn't know it, they had in their midst a guy who could have eclipsed both Peyton and Eli combined.

Clay Brennan loved it here, loved it more than any other school he'd played against. He longed for the smell of the grills and the taste of a cold beer in red or blue plastic go-cups, the sight of unbelievably gorgeous women and a cloudless blue sky, the sound of absolute, unabated college joy.

He'd visited Oxford twice while quarterbacking DSU in the late '90s, and each time the game - victories, of course - had been far less memorable than the events surrounding it. He'd sat in the rocking chairs on the balcony of Square Books on Oxford's courthouse square, waiting for a girl he'd been eyeing to finish thumbing through a poetry book, and had to admit that for a bookstore, it was still a pretty fine place to be. He'd snuck out past curfew and partied with college kids setting up in the gray predawn hours at the Grove, a few years before camera phones that could have derailed his career even existed. And although he didn't know Colonel Sartoris from Colonel Sanders, he'd gotten bat-crazy stoned on the steps of William Faulkner's home, Rowan Oak, and launched into a Southern-gentleman soliloquy that was far closer to Foghorn Leghorn than Faulkner.

But those days were ten years gone. And though Clay still had a touch of that old-school DSU swagger to him, he didn't draw stares the way he used to. Local radio color commentators didn't exactly possess the same chick-stacking cachet as Heisman-winning, NFL-bound quarterbacks.

He still walked with a limp, even a decade later, but by now he'd gotten so used to it that he didn't even bother to curse when his knee flared up. And usually, he was fine with his anonymity. Sure, it had been a shock, bouncing from job to meaningless job after his DSU days were done, and it had been an even bigger shock the first time a young couple didn't recognize his name when he was trying to sell them a new car.

But he'd worked his way back into the DSU family, cakewalking into a job doing radio and trying to keep the resentment out of his voice as he relayed the stories of new generations of Bootleggers. And he'd reached his peace with the way things had turned out. Or so he kept telling himself.

"Dude!" A kid of maybe 19 came wobbling toward Clay, dressed in the requisite postgame garb: shirt untucked, red-and-blue striped tie dangling in two mismatched strands, one shoe missing, stench of beer visible around him. "Dude, are you...?"

He struggled for his next words, and Clay was about to help him out with the usual "Why, yes I am Clay Brennan. Got something you'd like me to sign?"

But the kid burped once, held his mouth shut for a long moment, swallowed ... something, and figured out what he was trying to say.

"Are you ... sober?"

Clay tried not to keep his shoulders from visibly deflating. "Yes," he said, "yes, I am. I just did the radio for the —"

"Yeah, sure, okay," the kid said, then tossed Clay a football. "Look, my boys —" he waved aimlessly in the direction of a couple of guys who slumped in lawn chairs, barely conscious — "bet me twenty bucks I couldn't catch a pass up there on the steps." He waved at the Lyceum, about twenty yards away from where he wobbled in front of Clay.

"Sure, get rolling," Clay said. The kid flipped him the ball, then started off on a loping wobble toward the stairs. He pinballed off a table with a full candelabra and a tent with a hanging chandelier, and mumbled apologies at both. Finally, he reached the stairs and began waving his arms — looking in completely the wrong direction.

As Clay waited for the kid to realign himself, he twirled the ball in his hands the way he used to on endless, nameless practice fields. He aligned his fingers along the laces, sighted the kid downfield ... and fired.

The ball never got any higher than six feet off the ground, and zipped on a dead laser through half a dozen tailgates. Without even thinking, Clay had targeted a perfect line between the crossing partiers, as if running a thread through five moving needles. The ball hit the kid straight in the chest, a leather sledgehammer, and drove him back against one of the columns. It wasn't until the kid slumped downward on his ass that Clay realized he might have actually hurt the little moron. Then the kid twitched once, turned his head, vomited on the marble steps, and gave Clay the thumbs-up.

Clay returned the gesture. Ah, Oxford.

With his detour through The Grove, Clay was very nearly late for the team plane back to Atlanta. He was the last of the DSU armada to board, and as he did, Deck Talbot, stretched out in first class, smiled and tapped his watch. "Tick tock, tick tock," Clay's former teammate said.

"I'm right where I need to be, Deck," Clay said.

"Not quite." Deck thumbed back toward the rear of the plane. "Where you need to be is back in coach."

Without another word — because there really wasn't one he could say to that — Clay limped back to his seat. The knee always twinged worse on planes, especially now that he had to ride back with the cattle.

For tonight, though, the cattle were in a very good mood. They'd come into Oxford four-point dogs; while DSU had knocked around UNC-Greensboro in its first game, Ole Miss had absolutely trounced Memphis, a school that had actually fielded a football team for more than three years. But DSU treated that spread the way movie monsters treated nameless extras, and even before

halftime the Ole Miss faithful were raising their plastic cups and looking forward to next week's menu: cupcake.

Kedrick Reed was simply astonishing, racking up three touchdowns, one by air and two by ground. Wray Mattiece had a less-than-spectacular game, but with Reed shouldering the load, he didn't need to be anything more than mediocre. And Davon Jeffries put himself in the running for the most ridiculous penalty of the 2009 season, getting an unsportsmanlike conduct flag for tossing Ole Miss's quarterback to the ground and performing what looked for all the world like a pantomimed prison rape. The tut-tutting of newspaper columnists bemoaning the thug culture of the NCAA was already making its way around the web, as was a slowed-down video backed with porn-movie music.

Once the flight was airborne, Coach Rip stood up and walked up and down the aisles, pacing the cheap rug like Patton. "Men, that was one hell of a fine win today," Rip said, "one *hell* of a fine win. That's the kind of win that's going to keep us playing football through January." All around him, flight attendants began handing out trays of food, and he plucked a dinner roll off one as it passed.

"You boys know I think speeches are horseshit. Anyone needs a speech to get 'em going wasn't going anywhere to begin with. But I will tell you this," he said, punctuating every syllable by pointing with his half-eaten roll, "this team is special. This team's got potential. This team's got the kinda juice that reminds me of another Bootlegger squad. Any idea what I'm talking about, Deck?"

"No idea, coach," Deck said, casually holding his right hand – the one with a golf-ball-sized championship ring on one finger – up above his seat. The team went insane and segued into a chant of "Num-ber One! Num-ber One!"

Clay took an intense interest in the in-flight magazine.

"Let's run it down. Passing game: solid. Defense: stout. Running game: exceptional!" Rip bellowed as he pointed at a clearly-embarrassed Kedrick Reed. All around Kedrick, teammates shoved at him and kicked his seat, and he grinned as he looked at his feet.

"Matter of fact, this was damn near a flawless game. I'd like to recognize somebody here, if y'all don't mind." He pointed at the back of the plane, toward a pudgy, curly-haired man wearing a DSU windbreaker. "Coach Vincent, come on up here."

Wally Vincent, the Bootleggers' special teams coach, was a genial, dorky-uncle type, a guy with thick hornrim glasses who looked completely out of place in a major 21<sup>st</sup>-century Division 1 college program. He didn't yell a whole lot, mainly because nobody paid attention to him when he did. Still, he had an uncanny ability to suss out opponents' trick plays and bizarre alignments, so he'd stayed on staff as kind of a legacy hire. As Wally walked forward up the aisle, players cheered, and he grinned and held his hands above his head like a prizefighter

Clay focused on his dinner. He couldn't watch what he knew was coming next.

"Stop right there, Wally," Rip said when Wally was about five rows from him. "Men, I said this game was damn near flawless. And you know where it wasn't flawless?" Silence from the plane. "The punting game. Two shanks, one runback touchdown allowed. The kickoff game. Another touchdown given up. The kick receiving. Three fumbles. Three!" Rip glared down the aisle at Wally, who wasn't grinning any more.

"You wanna tell me what the hell's wrong with your little corner of this Bootlegger team, Wally?" Rip seethed.

"Coach, I, uh - we didn't - " Wally began, then forced a small smile. "We won, didn't we?"

Rip closed his eyes and took one deep breath. "I'll tell you what's wrong with our special teams, men. It rots from the head." With that, Rip fired the half-eaten roll straight at Wally's head. It knocked his glasses cockeyed, and he fumbled to get them on straight.

"Their coach can't catch a goddamn thing!" Rip bellowed. He reached down and grabbed a sandwich off one player's plate and flung it down the aisle. "No hands at all! None!" Next, a plank of chicken piccata, which he flung down the aisle like a Frisbee; it bounced off Wally's windbreaker and left a splotch of tomato sauce. "This how you boys want to play ball, sitting there letting shit bounce off of you?"

"Rip, please," Wally said quietly, but that only seemed to enrage Rip more. He snatched a carton of milk right out of one player's hand and sidearmed it down the aisle. It hit Wally full in the chest, splattering milk all over his face. And as he stood there, milk dripping off his glasses and the tip of his nose, the only sound in the air was the hum of the jet's engines.

After an eternal five seconds, punter Jimbo Roy silently, slowly lifted his mostly-full tray up above his head ... and then flung it backwards, dousing three rows behind him in sauce, salad dressing and Coke. And that was all it took; the air was suddenly full of crappy airline food, bouncing and splatting off the bulkhead walls as the DSU Bootleggers screamed in absolute delirium. It didn't stop when the flight attendants begged for order, didn't stop when the pilots shut off the cabin lights, didn't stop until the plane landed in Atlanta, everyone utterly spent.

Clay kept his sportcoat pulled over his head, but out of the corner of his eye he could still see Wally Vincent, slumped in his seat, eyes downcast, hair and face covered with thrown-away food. And above all the noise, Clay could hear Rip Thackston laughing loudest of all.

Selling cars didn't sound like such a terrible gig anymore.

As Clay walked down the endless, soulless stretch of gates and shops that made up the Atlanta airport's terminal C, flecks of food still on his clothes, he

tried hard not to think about the fact that he passed up a chance to avoid all this for the rest of his life.

His junior year, 1999, he'd had one of the most spectacular seasons in DSU history. He led the Bootleggers to a national championship, defeating Florida State in the Fiesta Bowl. He won the Heisman in a rout. The NFL beckoned; he was a consensus top-5 pick. He'd done more with the DSU program than anybody could ever have expected.

And then he got greedy.

Clay could have gone pro and nobody would have blamed him. He'd brought the fourth national championship and unparalleled prominence to DSU. But he decided to return for his senior year to go for the double-repeat, Heisman and national championship. It had never been done before, but Clay and DSU had as good a chance as anyone ever.

At first, all went well. DSU cruised through the SEC, defeating Florida in a thrilling SEC championship to set itself up for a trip to the Sugar Bowl. Clay won the Florida game with a frantic, last-second 40-yard dash to the end zone. But in the ensuing pileup, someone hammered on Clay's knee - he still had nightmares about that moment to this day - and ligaments virtually from his ankle to his hip sprung like cut guitar strings. This was more than so long, pro career; this was so long, walking normally for the rest of your life.

Tonight, Clay tried again to reach his fiancé - no answer - and tucked away his phone. He was about to descend the escalator into the bowels of the airport when he was stopped in his tracks.

"Brennan!" The voice was unmistakable, and Clay closed his eyes.

"Brennan, get on over here!" called Deck Talbot, and when Clay turned, he saw Deck sprawled out on an airport-lounge half-couch, two astonishingly gorgeous off-duty flight attendants reclining next to him. They had the tops of their uniforms unbuttoned - this kind of public display of skin was probably going to get them fired, but Deck had a way of talking people past their boundaries.

"Have a seat, Brennan," Deck said, grabbing the haunch of one of the flight attendants and scooting her toward him to make room.

"No thanks," Clay replied. "Got a long drive."

"Oh, that's right," Deck laughed, "you gotta drive yourself. Sucks, bro."

"Yeah, sucks. So I'm going to -"

"Sit your ass down. Have a drink. Home'll still be waiting." Deck motioned at the empty spot on the couch. "Really? You really gonna leave me hanging like this?"

Against his better judgment, Clay sat. Deck nudged the flight attendant between them. "Honey, go get my boy a drink. Crown and Coke still do it for you, Clay?"

He knew he shouldn't, but ... "Sure. Why not."

"Why not, indeed," Deck said, and popped a fried mushroom in his mouth. "How 'bout that game today? Not quite us whippin' up on Ole Miss back in '97, but it'll do, right?"

"The boys looked good," Clay allowed.

"Damn right they did," Deck said. "So how'd you run 'em down this time? I bet you busted on Mattiece, didn't you? You got some serious hate for that kid, bro."

"I don't hate anybody, Clay. Wray's a fine quarterback. He'll have a good pro career."

Deck winced. "Ouch. Bet that touched a nerve."

"Believe it or not, Deck, I made my peace with what happened."

"Uh-huh." Deck sipped his drink, his eyes never leaving Clay's.

"Deck, am I missing something here?"

The flight attendant returned with the drink and set it on the small table between the men. Reading the atmosphere, she faded back into the lounge.

"I never did like you, Clay," Deck said, staring out into the terminal. "You treated every single one of us like we were shit on your shoe, right from Day One."

"What the hell are you talking about? I brought you a goddamn national championship."

"Yeah, I seem to remember having a little something to do with that myself," Deck said.

"Whatever," Clay shot back, a decade's worth of stored-up bile forcing its way to the light. "Without me, you wouldn't have gone first-round. I was the one that put us in the headlines. Hell, you probably owe me half your damn signing bonus. All of you guys do. Coach Rip got himself an extra 10 years on his contract thanks to me. Bunch of ungrateful tools, every one of you."

Deck just smiled at that, staying silent for a long time. Finally, he motioned at Clay with his hand. "Come here, come here. Don't flinch, I'm not going to hit you." Deck then gently pushed the flight attendant on his other side on the small of her back, and she slid right off the front of the couch.

"Ouch!"

"Classy," Clay said.

"She'll be all right," Deck said, "plenty of cushion. No, come close. I gotta straighten you out."

Clay leaned in close. The stench of cologne and tequila swirled around Deck's head, and he lasered Clay with those eyes that had terrified an entire generation of NFL quarterbacks. Distantly, Clay was very glad he'd never had to line up against Deck in a real game.

Deck wrapped his hand around the back of Clay's neck.

"I know something you don't know."

Deck then whispered into Clay's ear. And at the words, Clay felt his stomach shrink to a cold, hard marble. The world suddenly receded, and Clay

felt his airplane dinner pushing at the back of his throat. And when he turned back to Deck, Deck was grinning.

“Learn something new every day, huh?”

Clay rose to his feet, slowly – he absolutely could not collapse in front of Deck – and wordlessly left the lounge. He would go home ... but now he had a stop to make first.

“Who was that guy?” one of the flight attendants asked.

“Best football player I ever saw,” Deck said, “also the dumbest.” He drained the last of his drink. “A’ight, now, who’s up for a little security check?”

Coach Rip ended the call and closed his cell phone, then stared at it for a long, long time.

His office, lit now by only a single desk light, was immaculate and ordered, the 2009 playbook sitting neatly alone on his desk. He had four large photos on his wall, pictures of the final scoreboard in each of his championship seasons.

Around them were scattered dozens of smaller photographs. But these weren’t the pictures of himself with celebrities and presidents. The photos featured his former players not in NFL gear but at their weddings, holding their children and grandchildren, displaying their diplomas. It was a rare display of sentimentality, and it’s why he never allowed media, his players, or most of his coaching staff in here.

On his desk, he had a photograph of his wife from 1959, the year they’d met. He reached past it now to turn off his light.

Rip walked out onto the Bootleggers’ practice field. It was after 2 a.m. now, and in the distance he could hear faint bass beats, the last fading remnants of Saturday night’s celebratory parties. Rip treasured these moments alone on the field, smelling the grass, listening to the silence. He’d miss moments like this more than anything.

A pair of headlights illuminated at the far end of the field.

Rip scowled at the headlights, then turned his back on them. High school kids looking for a little privacy often found their way to the quieter parts of campus; as soon as they were spotted by grownups, they tended to flee like spooked pigeons.

The car started rolling onto the field.

Rip turned back toward the car and shook his head in frustration. He knew what was going to happen here; a couple of drunk or stoned kids had recognized him, and they were going to holler and cheer and ask him about the game and –

The car picked up speed.

Rip swallowed once, and his throat was dry. He looked to the sidelines – he was twenty yards from safety in any direction. He was completely exposed out here, nowhere to run.

The car's tires began spitting up turf. Like some grim parody of a running back, it literally chewed up the yardage to Rip, who realized he could do nothing but stand and wait.

Twenty yards away, and Rip could hear the engine rev even higher as the driver stomped on the gas.

Ten yards away, the headlights grew brighter, and Rip held up one hand to block out the light.

Five yards away, he saw who was behind the wheel, and his eyes widened.

And then it was over.

Next: vs. Texas Tech