

# RUN & SHOOT

By Jay Busbee

## Chapter 4: All Zeroes

If some corporation somewhere ever designs a process for cloning sideline reporters – those blonde, curvy mike-gripping angels who know enough about sports to make conversation, but not enough to intimidate the menfolk – they would do well to start with Monica McAvoy. A goddess in a headset, Monica was the uber-sideline reporter, a blank-slate former woo-girl – the ones who scream “woo!” at every social event, of course – who teased you with the promise of both quality fantasy football advice and the very real possibility of athletic but not freaky sex.

And on this particular morning, she stood smiling in front of the Bootleggers’ stadium. “Thanks, Frank!” she bubbled, replying to a throw-over that wouldn’t be tossed for an hour from now, when Atlanta’s CBS affiliate sportscaster would alert the state that Rip Thackston was indeed gone.

Monica was on an hour-long tape delay for a very good reason: she had absolutely no innate sense of direction in her journalistic career, and had to be led around by the nose to every conceivable plot point and storyline emotion. She was already a minor Internet sensation for writhing in pleasure, shampoo-commercial style, while Chase Utley poured an entire bottle of champagne over her head as the Phillies celebrated a division win at Turner Field last year. And today, she was frothing with enthusiasm at a time when what was required was a Somber, Thoughtful Journalist who could remind us that This Puts It All In Perspective.

The cameraman pulled his eye away from the lens. “Monica, you want to take it down a few notches on the happiness scale?”

“Vance, I don’t tell you how to do your f-stops or whatever, so don’t you go telling me to – ” The voice buzzing in her earphone telling her to calm the hell down was loud enough for passersby to hear. “ ... right. Sure, I can do sad.” And as if she was remolding the clay of her face, a frown of tragic empathy instantly appeared on Monica McAvoy’s face. It was something to behold, it was.

“A campus: mourning. A team: adrift. A hero: departed,” she began, and Vance felt his breakfast surging up out of his gut. *A cameraman: nauseous.* “It’s quiet here on the campus of Deep South University ... ” *Don’t say it, don’t say it,* Vance thought, but she did: “ ... too quiet. A college, a town, a nation shocked to

its core by the senseless murder of one of the most beloved figures in college football, Rip Thackston. We have not yet spoken with any member of the Bootlegger team ... ”

And they wouldn't, either, not for several hours yet. The team's sports information director had locked the Bootleggers down tighter than preacher's daughters, ordering them to avoid any and all contact with the media. But like preachers' daughters, the Bootleggers were working on wriggling their way out through various cracked windows.

Wray Mattiece worked out silently in the gleaming gym, the echo of free weights resounding throughout the Bootleggers' multimillion-dollar training facility. His cell phone lay in a thousand pieces nearby, the decisive loser in a battle with the cinderblock wall.

Mattiece was an anomaly for an SEC quarterback, a quiet, reserved type who didn't bask in the rock-star glow that surrounded others in his position. He'd had the same girlfriend since he arrived on campus, and his quotes to the press were straight out of the Tiger Woods school of studied blandness. He'd been ranked the dumbest athlete in college sports three years in a row by three dozen blogs and magazines, but if he even read them, much less cared about them, nobody knew.

He viewed his body as a machine designed for a specific task. You wouldn't use a toaster to mix a margarita, and you wouldn't ask Wray Mattiece to do anything but be the best goddamn quarterback that Deep South University had ever seen.

By the time Nguyen wandered in at around ten, Wray had been slinging iron for three hours. He'd burst blood vessels in his palms, and tears were running down his face ... which Nguyen totally misinterpreted.

“Sup, Wray ... hey, man? You okay?” Nguyen tried to reach out a hand, but Wray kept him at bay as he curled a hundred-pound bar. “Look, coach wouldn't want us to be ... ”

“Shut ... the ... fuck ... up,” Wray gasped at each curl.

“Dude, this ain't the time to be pulling your hermit-on-the-mountain shit,” Nguyen said. “The team needs you.”

Mattiece finished his reps and tossed the bar on the ground. “They always do,” he said, reaching for a towel. “Buncha fuckin' babies, all of you.”

“Is that how you really feel?” Nguyen said. “Because there's a man looking down on us who's cryin' his eyes out hearing that. A man who taught us what it means to be men. A man who taught us what it means to be a team. A man who - hey, what the hell are you looking at?”

Mattiece had cocked his head like a dog hearing a silent whistle. “Hmm? Oh, I was just waiting for the music to start. You know, some real inspiring classic stuff like Bon Jovi that we work out to, and then we go out and beat Texas Tech for Coach Rip. That's how the movie goes, right?”

“Except for the Bon Jovi, I'm cool with it. That shit'll rot your soul, man.”

Mattiece snorted once, derisively. "Get the hell out of here, Nguyen. Shag your fat ass back here for gametime and get ready to play. And Nguyen?"

Nguyen raised an eyebrow, still not certain whether this was some complex motivational ploy or just a dick move. "Yeah, Wray?"

"Don't ever tell me what it means to be a man again. Not till you become one."

Nguyen shook his head and left the gym.

*Yep. Dick move.*



It took Davon Jeffries a good thirty seconds to realize that his girl's sex grunts were precisely in sync - rhythm, key and volume - with the beeping of his alarm clock. And it was another minute and a half before he realized that alarm clock was telling him something.

"Baby ... " She was still writhing on top of him, bouncing in ways that made it very hard for him to stay focused. "Baby, I've got something I've gotta do ... "

"So do I," she said, reaching her hand back behind her. Davon wasn't quite sure what she was planning on doing, but suddenly his eyes rolled almost completely backward in his head.

"Whoa ... " He had no idea where the hell a white suburban girl like Emma had learned a trick like that, and he wasn't certain he wanted to know. This thing with Emma - great banging aside, of course - was going very, very well, and he didn't want to go screwing it up by asking too many of the wrong kinds of questions. Questions with, apparently, multiple-choice answers.

*Multiple choice ... ? Shit!*

Davon suddenly realized what he'd forgotten. He had a geometry test that started in - he looked at his alarm clock - Christ, ten minutes ago! He shoved Emma off him, darn near fracturing his hip in the process, and tried to find something to throw on. Geometry, geometry ... he tried to get a handle on what he was supposed to be remembering, but he couldn't sort through the Battle of Hastings, the supply-demand curve, But soft, what light through yonder window breaks, and all the other crap he'd had stuffed into his unprepared and unwilling head over the last few months.

"Emma, why didn't you tell me that geometry test was today?" Davon said as he struggled into a shirt.

Emma, who'd been texting someone, looked up. "Huh? That's today?"

"Of course it's today! Same day as Coach's funeral! Don't you remember talking about this?"

She looked at a spot on the ceiling, then shook her head. “Nope. Sorry.”  
“You are the worst advisor ever!” Davon snarled, and dashed out of the room, leaving Emma to shrug and think about where she’d go shopping during the funeral.



Coach Rip Thackston’s funeral took place on a brilliant Thursday morning, and if you happened to wander onto the DSU campus, you’d almost think it was a football Saturday. There were the throngs of out-of-town visitors, there were students milling aimlessly about – though this time in grief rather than in a state of extreme intoxication – and everyone slowly wended their way through the campus toward the stadium.

There was no laughter, no shouts of joy, not even a “woo!” from a woo-girl, and those ladies screamed at everything. No, the only incidents that disturbed the somber calm were a couple of fistfights; a few DSU students, unaccustomed to problems they couldn’t drink or punch away, simply resorted to their most effective means of communication – their fists – and just flailed away at one another until the cops arrived. The campus police didn’t even bother booking them; they sent the brawlers – five guys, one very feisty and already-hammered girl – back off into that depressing day.

But it wasn’t just the students who were beaten down. Even the air seemed more still, with not a breath of wind to ripple the oaks and dogwoods that dotted campus.

ESPN had even thoughtfully commissioned a minor-key rendition of its “College Football GameDay” theme song to give an appropriately downbeat tone to the day’s proceedings. All three local stations were carrying the funeral live, and at just after 1 in the afternoon – the time that DSU was still scheduled to kick off against Texas Tech in two days – a solitary trumpeter from DSU’s marching band began a heartrending version of “Taps.”

Coach Rip’s coffin was being borne by a greatest-hits array of his former players, along with Wray Mattiece. The men holding Coach Rip’s coffin would have made a decent first five picks in a fantasy football draft, counting among their number two Super Bowl winners, four All-Pros and one league MVP. The pallbearers entered from the players’ portal at the far corner of the stadium; a couple, purely on instinct, reached up and tapped the Black Rock that hung in the entranceway.

The crowd rose as one, and the DSU marching band joined the solo trumpeter in the performance. The notes sailed out over the nearly-full stadium, and grown men wept as the procession walked across the end zone and out onto the field. The pallbearers carried their coach across the very same yard lines

where they'd carried the rock for game-winning touchdowns. Across the 10, across the 20 ...

Nobody in the procession wanted to admit it, but this coffin was getting a little bulky.

Across the 30, across the 40...

The band reached the end of "Taps." The director, reaching back for a little appropriate sentiment, instructed the band to begin "My Old Kentucky Home" in tribute to the coach's home state. It was a nice idea, but the entire stadium began murmuring as the funeral suddenly took on the feel of the Kentucky Derby.

Across midfield, across the far 40...

"This is some bullshit, man," Jimbo said, tugging at his starchy polyester collar. He had exactly one good collared shirt to wear on game days, but he'd covered it with airline food coming back from Oxford. So he bleached the unholy hell out of the shirt, doused it in spray starch, and then tried to iron it into something remotely presentable. He wasn't even close, but Coach Rip would've appreciated the effort.

"Little respect, bro?" Nguyen whispered back. The two were standing with the rest of the team, among rows of folding chairs near the impromptu stage ... the stage which, ill-advisedly, had been set up at the far end of the field from where the procession had entered.

Across the 30, across the 20...

"Dude, check it," Jimbo said, nodding at the procession. "That old dude's about to drop the coffin."

"Old dude? That's Waylon Drury!"

"Wow," Jimbo said, looking over his sunglasses to get a closer look at the former Heisman winner, who was indeed sweating under the load and the autumn sun. "How old is he? Fifty?"

"Probably thirty-five."

"Huh. That's still pretty damn old. Five bucks says he doesn't make it onto the stage."

"Man, I'm not going to bet you at Coach's ... " Nguyen took a hard look at the sweating Drury. "Ten says he bails before the end zone."

"Done." They watched as the procession ticked down the final yards toward the stage, Drury's steps growing more and more halting by the moment.

"Come on, old man," Nguyen whispered. "It's hot out here. Take a knee."

"Keep it going, old-timer," Jimbo shot back. "Take it to the house!"

The front line of the procession - Wray Mattiece and Miles Lee - stepped onto the brilliant red of the DSU end zone, and that's when Drury held up his hand and asked for them to stop. His feet were inches from the goal line.

"Turn around, turn around," Nguyen said.

"Push through, push through," Jimbo said.

Drury took one step forward into the end zone, then stopped. He let go of the casket – the others took the weight so Coach’s body didn’t come spilling out onto the turf – turned, and slowly walked back to his seat, his hand at his eyes, his knees visibly wobbling.

“Boom. Dude, pay up,” Jimbo said.

“What? He didn’t get into the end zone!”

“You shitting me? He broke the plane!”

“Will you two assholes shut the fuck up and show some fuckin’ class?”

Deck snarled from down the row.

Nguyen nodded quickly and slunk down in his seat, while Jimbo looked at Deck and held a mock-solemn fist to his chest.

“Cranky bastard,” Jimbo said through a plasticine gentle smile. “He’s just pissed that they didn’t ask him to be a pallbearer.”

“Why not?”

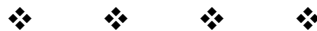
“Hands of stone, man,” Jimbo said. “Remember that Sugar Bowl where he couldn’t pick up that fumble? They were afraid he was gonna dump Coach right there on the field.”

Nguyen snickered. “Right, and then he’d kick him out of bounds and blame somebody else!” They both bit down on their knuckles to keep from laughing out loud ... until it hit them that they were giggling about the idea of brutalizing the coach’s corpse while they were sitting at his funeral. And for a moment, they were very quiet indeed.

“All right, screw this,” Jimbo said. “This is sad and all, but we’re gonna have to do something. “

“Do something? What are you talking about?”

“What the hell do you think I’m talking about?” Jimbo said. “We’re gonna solve this murder ourselves.”



Sometime after midnight, Byron Delahanty stumbled back into his dorm room, which looked pretty much exactly as he’d left it four days before. Underwear still hung on the desk chair, books with uncracked spines still lined the shelf, and the laptop open to his personal web page still sat expectantly waiting for him.

He arrived alone, of course, Kaitlyn/whatever now almost as far gone as the memory of what could have been had it not been for one dead old dude and one very unfortunate Twitter posting.

He’d spent the last 96-plus hours as a guest of the Shepherd’s Ferry police department as a material suspect in the murder of Rip Thackston, and he’d been

released only when police determined that he had neither the motive nor the balls to beat the old man to death. Byron thought of arguing that point, that he could indeed beat someone to death if the occasion called for it, but wisely decided that pursuing such an argument would be a very dumb move indeed.

So he returned to his dorm room – very, very much alone, alas – and collapsed face-first onto his bed. Briefly, his mind tried to tell him that he probably ought to shower the stink of the holding cell off himself before passing out, but he shut that argument down in a hurry.

“Hey, man,” his roommate muttered from the far bed. “I borrowed your meal card. Nacho night. Had to double up. I’ll give it back to you tomorrow.”

“You even miss me?” Byron said from inside his pillow.

“You were gone?”

“Ugh.” Byron rolled onto his back and stared at the stippled plaster above him. Rip was a national treasure, a guy Byron had worshipped almost from the moment his own eyes could focus, and for him to be dead – and Byron a suspect – it wrenched through him like someone scrambling his insides with a spatula. It was fairly obvious that he hadn’t killed Coach Rip, but the cops were so furious that Byron had posted the crime scene for the whole planet to observe that they’d spent the last four days hours trying to figure out what charges to hang around the poor dumb freshman’s skinny neck. They settled on trespassing, but the lawyer bought by Byron’s parents – with Byron’s future tuition money, no doubt – got Byron sprung on the grounds that nobody in history had ever done jail time for sneaking onto a football field with the intent of scoring some freshman tail.

So with the worst of it presumably behind him, Byron felt the weight of the days slipping off his shoulders. He felt his eyes creak closed and his consciousness slip toward the window. He felt his cell phone vibrate an instant before its ringtone – Hall & Oates’ “Maneater”; it was supposed to be ironic – yanked Byron back to the here and now. He groaned and flipped the phone open.

“Is this Delahanty?” a voice said, coming from a room that sounded like a wrestling match. Byron distinctly heard screaming in the background.

“This is,” Byron said, realizing he was going to be dealing with cranks for a long time to come now. “Look, it’s not my fault, I didn’t know he was dead, I –”

“Delahanty, shut up,” the voice said, and it had that kind of stern lecture-from-Dad quality that made Byron zip it. “You might want to check out the precinct house in about thirty minutes.”

“The precinct house? But I just came from there! Why would I want to – hey, who is this, anyway?”

“Jesus, they make ‘em stupider every year,” the voice said. “Kid, this is what’s known as a leak. Get your camera and get down to the precinct house, right now.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because the cops have made an arrest in the Thackston murder ...  
and you’re never gonna believe who it is.”