Presentation to Kit Kat
December 13, 2011
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CRIMSON ROSES

I.

This past year, we've been enduring a challenging time in College football…with the NCAA issues here at Ohio State paling in comparison to the moral and criminal issues that led to the firing of the head coach who holds the record for the most victories of any Division I school.

None of this was in the wind when I started research on this topic tonight, but perhaps this piece can serve as a reminder that football can be a positive and uplifting source of change in our society.

You might consider this a pre-game warm-up for the BCS Championship game in a few weeks or perhaps the Gator Bowl.

To paraphrase author and scientist Andy Grove – there have only been a handful of strategic inflection points in the 142-years of collegiate football - critical points in the game's history when there has been disruption, a major change in business as usual.

This essay argues for two of those moments when a simple football game sent shock waves across a region. The games were 45 years apart, connected by an historical thread, and remain largely unknown.

This story begins with a train ride, 86 years ago, on December 19th, 1925… It was somewhere along the 2,800 mile trip that a bunch of country boys found they were scared to death. They faced the most difficult pressure of all – that of great expectations. It didn't help that snow and ice had delayed their route through St. Louis. It would take the 22 college students and three coaches five days on the northern route to cross America and reach Pasadena. The players were headed to the only bowl game of its time to not just represent their University or their State or their Conference…but an entire region of the country and a way of life. Before we move on, some perspective is required.

If you review the history of college football and the number of collegiate national championships now sanctioned by the NCAA, it's hard to believe that Princeton and Yale are still number one and two. With the birth of a form of American football starting on a field in New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1869, the Ivy League dominated and developed many of the modern rules of the game.

Either Princeton or Yale would claim national titles nearly every year for decades. The game would take great strides in the Midwest by the early 1900s, when Coach Fielding Yost led a Michigan team that claimed four consecutive championships. Football dominance would continue to migrate from the Northeast to the Midwest and was symbolized by the orgy of stadium building that swept through the Midwest in the 1920s -- from Evanston to Champaign to Ann Arbor to South Bend.

In Columbus, Chic Harley's running, passing, and kicking sparked the first major case of football fever at Ohio State. In his three seasons with the Buckeyes, they lost only one game. After the 1919 season, Ohio State started planning its own massive stadium and it would open in 1922 with a capacity of over 66,000.

In the Southern region of the United States, the fervor over the collegiate game had been muted by deep poverty and a broken educational system. Yet, nearly every major University in the South had established an official football team by 1900. Most students prior to World War I showed up on campus without much knowledge of the game and those recruited often played in the first game they ever saw.

Many traditionally minded Southerners were appalled that students at their universities had even taken up this Yankee pastime. But proponents of the game saw something else. They found the battles on the gridiron as a way to recall the glory of the Civil War and often compared their football heroes – win or lose -- to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

Southern football, just as the region itself, was considered vastly inferior to any other part of the country. For some 30 years, teams went on what southern sportswriters called "northern invasions," invariably coming home badly beaten. Still, the teams who bravely made the journey garnered praise back home for playing hard, for being gentlemen and bringing honor to the region.

One southern team lost to Princeton 116 to nothing…and when Vanderbilt came back to Nashville after losing by just 18 points to Michigan, the Nashville newspaper proclaimed it the greatest triumph in Vanderbilt football history.

Sportswriters also used southern history and the relationship of the South to the North to frame these intersectional matchups. Every contest pitting the South against any team outside the South became a small chapter in a developing narrative of southern football. The identification of Southern running backs with DeForest's Raiders or Pickett's charge at Gettysburg began with southern sportswriters, but was embraced even more enthusiastically by their Yankee colleagues.

In the 1920s, Southern football was improving as war veterans filled campuses and a post-war boom helped the region's economy. While poverty was still rampant across the rural South, some prosperous urban industrial cities with new skyscrapers and streetcar suburbs dotted the region.

By 1925, there was a major crisis in the collegiate game. Rumors of lavish and systematic cheating, including cushy high paying off season jobs for players and payment of bills by alumni would begin to spark a new movement for athletic reform. A two year study was commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation that became the most thorough investigation of college athletics up to that time.

Meanwhile, the sports pages were filled with the exploits of prominent Midwestern teams like Knute Rockne's Notre Dame and of a player in Illinois called The Galloping Ghost. On the day that the University of Illinois dedicated its new stadium, Red Grange became a national celebrity by scoring six touchdowns and running for 402 yards against Michigan.

Grange played his last collegiate game in 1925 here in Columbus against Ohio State before the largest crowd of the year in college football. Illinois won the game and Grange immediately announced he planned to jump to the new National Football League and play professionally.

College coaches were outraged that Grange had taken money and left school without graduating. A few weeks later, he played for the Chicago Bears at Soldier Field and soon made a small fortune endorsing products like Red Grange Chocolates.

1925 was also the year of the Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee -- the landmark case in which a high school science teacher was convicted of violating Tennessee's law that made it illegal to teach evolution. Northern coverage of the trial created a torrent of unfavorable press for the region. A writer for the New York Times lampooned southerners as yokols and morons. The southern elite – the rich and powerful in the region - were becoming increasingly defensive and eager to somehow signal to the rest of the country that they were not like the stereotyped image of the uneducated, malnourished southerner.

As southern universities and education in general began to take on a more prominent role in the region, many college presidents openly sought to build their University through the publicity won by a successful football team.

At the University of Alabama, football would take on prominence with the entry of a bow-tied President – George Denny. He believed the game could be a way to expand funding, distinguish the University and increase enrollment, which was just 500 upon his arrival. Denny would spend 25 years at Alabama, emphasizing the quality of the football program as much or more than the quality of the education.

Although in 1925 Alabama had won all 9 of their regular season games and allowed just one touchdown, the team failed to impress the northern sportswriters or coaches who made up the football establishment.

A berth in the Rose Bowl seemed out of reach, but the Red Grange defection from Illinois had sparked a new controversy over the excessive commercialism of college football. Seeing the post-season Rose Bowl as a surrender of their values as academic institutions, Michigan, Dartmouth, Colgate and Princeton all declined invitations to the Bowl.

An unbeaten Washington was the obvious choice in the West, but when Alabama was finally suggested as a worthy representative of the East, a Rose Bowl committee member said he never heard of the team and couldn't take a chance on mixing a lemon with a rose.

The Rose Bowl sponsors became desperate and finally extended a formal invitation to Alabama. The disrespect incensed President Denny and he stalled for several days before accepting the bid. The Birmingham News claimed the entire episode was one more example of the Yankee propensity to denigrate any southern achievement.

Alabama would be the first southern team to play in the Rose Bowl and everyone outside the region gave them little chance. A prominent northern sportswriter predicted a 50 point victory for Washington. Will Rogers even joked about the team from Alabama being from "Tuscalooser."

But the entire region of the South was excited beyond belief. Writers, of course, compared the potential of an Alabama victory as important as the battles of First and Second Manassas and Fredericksburg rolled into one. Alabama had become the football team of the Entire South, with the Washington team cast in the role of the Yankees.

As that train from Tuscaloosa cut through the snow headed for Pasadena, Alabama head coach Wallace Wade knew the weight of the region was on the shoulders of his players. This was the South's chance to prove they were, at least on the football field, equal to anyone in the country.

Wade had played in the Rose Bowl a decade earlier at Brown University. He knew the stress of the trip and at many stops had his team jump out and run plays. He even loaded barrels of Alabama water on the train to eliminate the possibility of water-borne disease from California drinking water.

Alabama's team was dominated by two players – Pooley Hubert and Johnny Mack Brown. Quarterback and Middle Linebacker Hubert had dropped out of high school to join the war effort and was a 24 year old senior at Alabama. He was called Papa Pooley by his teammates. Mack Brown was a speedy and elusive running back and receiver who also played defensive back. He was one of nine children of a shoe store owner in Dothan, Alabama.

Football in 1925 was played under certain rules that would be peculiar today. Most teams played their best 11 players the entire game, because if a player was taken out of a game for any reason, rules prevented them from returning until the next half. If you were taken out in the second half, you were done for the day.

Pooley Hubert had run the Alabama team for four years and was a no nonsense coach on the field and distinctive as well, since he was the only Crimson Tide player to choose not to wear the optional leather helmet during games.

On New Year's Day, 1926, Hubert and the Alabama team ran on the field, in awe of a roaring crowd of over 50,000 spectators – twice the size of Tuscaloosa. No Southern team had ever played in front of so many people.

The Washington star was a huge presence named George "Wildcat" Wilson. One Bama player described him as looking like a giant bale of cotton. Wilson had been offered $3,000 to turn professional, but had turned down the money to play in the Rose Bowl.

It was Wilson who started the game with an interception and then helped drive the Huskies 85 yards for a touchdown. The Alabama offense was shutdown and another Washington touchdown put the score at 12-nothing at halftime. Washington had missed both extra point drop-kicks, but that didn't seem to matter. They were dominating the Crimson Tide

This was a year before any national radio broadcast of college football, so to experience the thrill of the game back in the South, folks gathered in auditoriums from Atlanta to Montgomery to New Orleans. Even students at Auburn University gathered in the campus auditorium to cheer on their cross-state rivals. An announcer on stage would read the play-by-play from the Associated Press wire service with flourishes of drama to set the scene, and a picture of a football would be moved across a large billboard marked off like a football field.

The southern audience would shout loudly when a great Alabama play was announced, but there wasn't much to cheer about in the first half of the 1926 Rose Bowl.

During the halftime break, outside the Montgomery Grand Theatre on Dexter Avenue, people milled about looking dejectedly at a giant storefront picture of the Alabama team framed by a horseshoe shaped arrangement of Crimson Roses. Win or lose, the city of Montgomery had planned a giant post-game parade with torches and fireworks to honor their team.

Back in the Rose Bowl, Head Coach Wallace Wade made a brief halftime speech. While the Pasadena Elks Club Band played their rendition of DIXIE, he came into the team locker room, looked sternly at his players and said simply, "They told me boys from the South would fight." Then he left.

In the third quarter, Quarterback Pooley Hubert took over, risking an injury that would've put him out of the game for good, he ran five straight times and scored as Alabama played with a new intensity. It was 12 to 7 after a successful dropkick.

Bama held the Huskies forcing a punt and Hubert then surprised everyone by throwing a long pass to Johnny Mack Brown, who caught it in stride for a 63 yard touchdown.

It was suddenly 14-12 Alabama. The Rose Bowl crowd, mostly from southern California, was cheering on the underdogs. When Alabama recovered a Husky fumble, Hubert threw again to Brown for 33 yards and the third touchdown in just seven minutes of play. The Tide missed the extra point and it was 20-12. Washington regrouped and scored in the fourth quarter to make it 20-19.

The Alabama defense held over and over again and finally the Associated Press Flash News Report came in …ALABAMA WINS…and the theaters, auditoriums and fraternal lodges across the South exploded in a joyous frenzy.

The game is still today considered one of the most exciting in Rose Bowl history. The Birmingham News used extravagant prose to say that mere newsprint could never do justice to the game, but that "it should be announced to the world on a ten league canvas with brushes of comet's hair." The Atlanta Journal called it the greatest victory for the South since the first battle of Bull Run.

In the mid-20s, tens of thousands of Southerners had purchased commemorative coins to finance the sculpting of the images of Civil War heroes Lee, Davis and Jackson onto the granite face of Stone Mountain near Atlanta. The Journal declared that the Crimson Tide "no longer belongs exclusively to Tuscaloosa and the state of Alabama. It belongs to the whole South just like the Stone Mountain Memorial."

The victory was an amazing boost for southerners buffeted by a legacy of defeat, of poverty and isolation from the rest of America. Alabama had not just legitimized southern football, but in some ways, the South itself.

The delirium continued as the players set off the next day for the long train trip back to Tuscaloosa, this time taking the southern route. Brass bands and throngs of southerners greeted the team at frequent stops along the way. In New Orleans, thousands had gathered and delayed the train for hours, and when they reached Tuscaloosa, the team found much of the state had descended on the city.

Players rode in a procession of decorated wagons pulled from the train depot to campus by University freshmen. The team assembled on a spot of honor called The Mound on the University quad, where speeches from the Governor and President Denny followed. Buried beneath the mound are the ruins of buildings burned to the ground by Union soldiers during the Civil War.

The stars of that Rose Bowl would take different paths after graduating from Alabama. Pooley Hubert would turn pro and play for a time alongside Red Grange before coaching several southern teams.

And then there is Johnny Mack Brown – named the MVP of the game. This photograph was taken right after the 1926 Rose Bowl victory. Mack Brown is sitting between two attractive flappers and the Elks Band once again has taken the field to play for the fans. His shins are beat-up, he's taken off his pads and wears a ratty sweatshirt.Everyone is looking at the band, except Mack Brown, who is smiling straight at the camera – a confident, handsome man with the world at his feet.

You see in his face…pure joy…and so it was for the entire southern region.

Johnny Mack Brown was discovered by Hollywood scouts during his Rose Bowl trip and went back to California after graduation, took a screen test and was signed by MGM. For the next 30 years, he made 66 films, specializing in being the hero in Cowboy Westerns.

Alabama would return to the Rose Bowl in 1927 and 1930. In a matter of five years, Alabama had captured at least a portion of three national championships and collegiate football in the South would never be the same.

Other southern teams would follow the Alabama lead and build their programs into contenders and in doing so also build their Universities….Georgia, LSU and Tennessee claimed national championships through the 1930s and 40s.

A 12 year old boy growing up in poverty in rural Arkansas had cheered on the exploits of the Wallace Wade's Crimson Tide. The boy was one of nine children and would grow to 6 foot 3 inches and lead his team to the Arkansas high school championship. He was already nicknamed Paul "Bear" Bryant when he became an Alabama player in 1932.

The degree of pride Southerners took in their college football teams during this era was framed in how they saw themselves through northern eyes. The one thing Southerners knew about the North was that people there looked down upon them -- thought of them as poor, dumb and lazy. What better way to prove otherwise than to actually defeat a northern team in a tough, physical game on a national stage.

A quote from Birmingham newspaper editor John Graves…summed up the significance of those early Rose Bowl victories in this way –

"For all the last stands, all the lost causes and sacrificing in vain, the South had a heart and a tradition. But the South had a new tradition for something else. It had come from those mighty afternoons in the Rose Bowl in Pasadena when Alabama's Crimson Tide had rolled to glory. The South had come by way of football to think in terms of causes won, not lost."

II.

It cannot be glossed over that these were victories for the white South. That when we speak and write about southerners during this time, it leaves southern blacks completely unrepresented. Those white southerners who gathered to cheer the Tide, to view their victories as a reflection of a new South, were predominately rigid in their belief of white supremacy and the continuation of a racial caste system.

Even those who were considered southern white progressives possessed a common resolve that the South remain white man's country. President Denny proclaimed after the Rose Bowl that he came back with his "head a little higher and soul more inspired to win the battle for this splendid Anglo-Saxon race of the South." Certainly, at Universities across the South in 1925, integration was non-existent, but the same could be said of some major Universities in the North. It wasn't until 1942 that Princeton admitted a black student and 1945 for Notre Dame.

Many of the best black players, chose to play for historically black institutions like Howard, Jackson State or Grambling, but a few broke the color line early in the game.

Among the first black players was George Jewett playing for Michigan and Fred Patterson at Ohio State in the 1890s… Fritz Pollard played for Brown starting in 1916 and went on to be the first black player in the National Football League. But unlike boxing and baseball, there was no singular integrating figure in collegiate football, instead, it was a long and tediously slow process spanning over 80 years.

Through the 1930s, issues arose when southern teams went north to play an intersectional competition with a prominent northern team that happened to have a black player. White southerners insisted that the color line must always be drawn. As the Richmond Times pronounced, "God Almighty drew the color line and it cannot be obliterated."

If a southern team competed against a team with a black player, it was believed the encounter would represent "social equality" and upset the natural racial hierarchy of the South. So schools North and South developed what became known as a "gentleman's agreement." Northern teams would automatically bench any black player when playing a southern team.

The agreement started to fall apart after the Second World War and Southern teams took a new position of playing integrated northern teams as long as the game was played in the North.

The acceptance of black players on southern teams would be another matter. The schools in the Southeastern Conference maintained a policy of strict exclusion of black students from admission, until forced to integrate in the 1960s. This finally opened the possibility of the integration of those college football teams, but Southern coaches moved slowly.

At the University of Alabama, Bear Bryant was called upon to become head coach in 1957 and resurrect the once proud program that had four losing seasons in a row. After playing at Alabama in the 30s, Bryant had successful head coaching stints at Kentucky and Texas A & M before going "home to Mama" as he called it and returning to Tuscaloosa.

In the 60s, the South had acquired the status of national pariah for its segregated society. The Crimson Tide would keep winning games and national titles amid incredible divisiveness at the University, including the famously symbolic "Stand in the Schoolhouse Door" by Alabama Governor George Wallace.

Once black students started arriving on campus, Bryant still remained cautious about recruiting black players, even those considered some of the best players in South. For years, college recruiters from the North and West raided the region of the best black players without any competition from schools in the SEC.

In the spring of 1969, six years after the integration of the University, black students on the Alabama campus protested the lack of any black players representing their University. That fall, Bryant quietly signed his first black player, a high school standout from southern Alabama.

But Bryant was worried about the reception black players would get from fans and alumni and arranged a contest that would draw much attention to this issue. The NCAA had announced in 1969 that teams should add an 11th game to their schedules the following year and Bryant called an old friend, Coach John McKay, and invited the University of Southern California to Birmingham for a nationally televised game at Legion Field.

Bryant was attempting to separate Alabama's team from the racial stigma brought on nationally by the politics of George Wallace. His invitation to USC may have seemed late in the process of desegregation, but was unprecedented in the Deep South.

USC came into Alabama in 1970 ranked third in the country, but more importantly brought 21 black players with them. Never before had an integrated team come into Alabama to play the all-white Crimson Tide. It would become THE GAME that symbolized racial change in athletics for the southern region.

Los Angeles Times writer Jim Murray saw the game as just a backdrop for a transformative moment, writing - "The point of the game will not be the score, the Bear, the Trojans; the point of the game will be Reason, Democracy, Hope. The real winner will be the South."

What happened next may or may not have been part of Bryant's plan.
USC overwhelmed Alabama on the football field, shocking the dedicated fans of the most dominant team in the South. The Trojans won an easy 41-21 victory.

And the key was primarily the performances of two black players, Sam "Bam" Cunningham rolled up 135 yards and scored two touchdowns. And Birmingham native Clarence Davis scored a touchdown and ran for 75 yards.

After the game, Bear Bryant entered the USC locker room to congratulate the players and met specifically with Clarence Davis to confirm he was from Birmingham. As he left Davis, he turned and said "Ain't no more of y'all ever getting out of here again."

The high profile performance by USC's black players helped legitimize athletic integration in Alabama and beyond and convinced many of the die hard fans of Southern teams that to compete nationally, it was time to accept black players on their favorite team.

Of course, this acceptance was anything but altruistic. The overriding requirement in the South was to win football games and that began to trump the race card. Black players were quickly an accepted part of the locker room at Alabama, primarily because they were there at the calling of Bear Bryant – who as a boy worked the fields of Arkansas on a tenant farm alongside poor blacks.

The following year, 1971, John Mitchell, a junior college transfer from Mobile, would be the first black player to start at Alabama. He would become an All-American Defensive End and be elected by his teammates as one of the Captains of the team in 1972 – just two years after the USC game. The John Mitchell story doesn't end there. He would become the first fulltime black coach under Bear Bryant and today is the assistant head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Though these changes certainly did not occur as swiftly and justly as anyone would wish, college football provided an important framework for blacks in the South to attain a degree of equality and acceptance in the mainstream culture of the region. Within a few years, Bear Bryant's teams became loaded with talented black players, predominately from the state of Alabama, and with those teams he would win three more national championships.

Two weeks ago, in his first news conference as head coach at Ohio State, Urban Meyer briefly discussed the dominance of southern football citing the recent string of five national championships by southern teams. The good coach may have also pointed out that we're getting ready to christen yet another southern champion in New Orleans on January 9th.

If you survey the NCAA consensus champions from 1960 to 2010, you find that in those 50 years half of the national title winners were from one region of the country – the South - including such surprises as Ole Miss, Clemson and Georgia Tech.

There is little debate which section of the country dominates the game that started in the Ivy League of the Northeast, migrated to the Midwest and started to take hold in the South with Alabama's Rose Bowl victory in 1926.

It has been said as a quip that "In the South, College Football is religion and every Saturday is a holy day."

Perhaps due to its shared history, much of it tragic, the South's devotion to this game differs from anywhere else in the country. As William Faulkner wrote of the South -– "The past is not dead. It isn't even past."

The one thing that unites football fans in the South today, white and black, is their affinity for a game that has been a powerful source of pride and self-esteem -- so much so that one's interest in and devotion to the game has come to be part of what it means to be a Southerner.

When historians point to events that are turning points, they usually refer to political upheaval or military campaigns, but the impact of other cultural phenomena has to be considered. The 1926 victory was the genesis of a new regional pride for the South, and some believe it marked the beginning of the end of the South's exclusion from the rest of the country. The 1970 game was simply a loss on the record books for Alabama, but altered the face of southern football forever. Thank you.

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