

PART ONE: PRESEASON

CHAPTER ONE

House of Horrors

MITCH MUSTAIN'S INITIAL REACTION WAS TO REACH UP AND PULL HIS FACEMASK DOWN.

It had become almost instinct for the quarterback after being sacked or hit hard, a way to momentarily collect his thoughts when something had gone wrong on the field.

Only this time, Mustain knew something had gone terribly wrong.

He tried to lift his right arm off the worn turf at Quigley Stadium, only to be greeted by a sharp pain in his forearm. It was the kind of pain he had felt before, similar to when he broke his jaw after falling from that tractor just before his seventh birthday. The pain was so sudden he instinctively reached up from the ground with his good arm, probing the painful area.

His first thought was to stay on the ground. He rolled over to his back while teammate Mason Price stood over him, signaling to the sidelines for the trainers once he saw the bulge in Mustain's right arm.

In the next moment, Mustain decided not to wait for the trainers, instead rolling over, his elbow digging into the ground to keep his forearm off the grass. He then used his other arm to lift himself up and pull out his mouthpiece as he stood.

He had only taken a few short, wobbly steps toward the sideline before being met by team trainer Jamie Croley.

"It's broken," Mustain told Croley as they met.

Mustain could feel the bones shifting under his skin, and when Croley stopped the quarterback to feel his arm, the Springdale trainer knew Mustain's spontaneous diagnosis was a correct one.

As they started to walk toward the sideline, with Croley holding his arm, Mustain nearly collapsed. His head was fuzzy from the pain, and

after a few steps he bent down with his left arm outstretched. He was seemingly headed back to the ground before his fingers grazed the grass below — a touch that caused his senses to snap back.

Mustain pulled himself back up, the haze replaced by anger at the thought of coming out of a game in which the Bulldogs were losing, 20–0. He felt the reason for the deficit was his fault, and in his next eight steps the magnitude of his failure set in.

Croley motioned to Springdale coach Gus Malzahn on the sideline that it was indeed the right arm that was injured. A few steps later Mustain looked down and caught a glimpse of his mouthpiece still in his left hand.

With his good arm, he tossed the mouthpiece toward the sideline, his head lowering again as he reached up to unsnap his helmet.

All that was left was to wait for the ride to the hospital, leaving his teammates behind to try and clean up his mess.

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Bernie Cox's philosophy on coaching high school football offense in Arkansas was nothing like that of Gus Malzahn.

Cox's power running attack was well known throughout the state; it had led the Little Rock Central coach to six championships in 29 years. But if Cox was the gold standard of high school coaches in Arkansas, it had been hard to tell in recent years. Before the Tigers won the championship in the state's largest classification in 2003, Cox's last title had been in 1986.

One of the biggest criticisms of Cox was his style of offense. While teams across the state were developing more of an aesthetically pleasing game — the passing version — and winning with it more and more, Cox entered his fourth decade of coaching still using the same basic approach he had begun with: Control the game by holding on to the football as long as possible, i.e., run the ball.

As one fellow conference coach joked: "Give (Cox) a two-touchdown lead, and it's over. He'll never let you have the ball back."

For Springdale's Malzahn, time of possession was the absolute last concern of his entering a game, be it against Little Rock Central or any other team. Malzahn's philosophy, which was crafted as a twenty-something in eastern Arkansas and later refined while building a nationally recognized power at the tiny private school in Springdale, Shiloh Christian, was to make the game "as long as possible."

He did so by utilizing a quick-strike, no huddle approach, which allowed him to get a first look at other teams' defensive formations before sending in plays. It was an approach that had resulted in numerous state and national passing records being broken under his watch, as well as the highest-scoring game in the state's history — a 70–64 Shiloh Christian win in the fall of 1999 over tiny Junction City High School in south Arkansas. It was also an approach — one he compared to a “fast-break offense” in basketball — that had endeared Malzahn to fans across the state.

Since Malzahn's arrival at Springdale High in early 2001, his offenses hadn't quite reached the level of success that he had orchestrated at Shiloh. For one thing, he was facing tougher competition every week — moving from one of the state's lowest classifications to the highest — as well as battling the ghosts of Springdale's past, a past filled with tradition set by previous coach Jarrell Williams, a tradition of hard-hitting defense and winning.

The no huddle attack was still his calling card during his first three seasons with the Bulldogs, but the wins hadn't come close to piling up like they had during his 63–8–1 run at Shiloh, a run fueled by a 44-game unbeaten streak between 1998 and 2000. Sure, Springdale had reached the state championship game in his second season in 2002, finishing 12–2, but that was a team whose identity was cemented more in the run than the pass, a team without the Malzahn stamp fully imprinted on it.

Malzahn's third season with the Bulldogs in 2003 had ended with an 8–4 record, and it had ended at the hands of Cox's Tigers. It left the coach with a 27–10 mark in his short stint with Springdale. Acceptable? Yes. The dominating football power in the state that the Springdale alumni, administration and school board had thought they were getting when they hired the phenom coach away from Shiloh to be both the football coach and athletic director of the state's second-largest high school?

No.

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The Springdale team that made the three-hour trip to Little Rock on the Friday after Thanksgiving in 2004 was vastly different than the Bulldog team that had fallen to Central a year before.

Springdale began the season ranked No. 2 in the state, behind only Central, and whereas the Tigers returned most of the key players from

their championship team a year before, the Bulldogs entered the season with a new and talented — albeit unproven — look.

Leading the way for Springdale's new optimism was its junior quarterback, Mustain. The 16-year-old had gone 20–0 as a starter the past two seasons, both in junior high and with the sophomore team, and his rocket right arm appeared to represent the unofficial changing of the guard in Springdale.

No longer were the Bulldogs to be defined by their past; this was Malzahn's team, a team with a quarterback and players groomed under his system and ready to play his game.

The Bulldogs had made headlines during the summer with their play in Hoover, Alabama. If the regional 7-on-7 summer leagues — passing-only leagues without linemen — that many teams across the country participated in were preparation for state championship teams, then the Southeast Select 7-on-7 Tournament at Hoover was preparation for teams with national championship aspirations. It was a tournament loaded with college prospects and coaches eager to prove themselves and their teams worthy of national recognition.

There, in July of '04, with Mustain earning the starting job for the upcoming season over senior Dylan Adams, Springdale won the 16-team event. The Bulldogs defeated national power Evangel Christian of Shreveport, Louisiana, not once but twice along the way, including in the championship game. It wasn't the win, however, that made the most news back home in Arkansas. It was the news Mustain received following the event that put both him and his talented teammates on the collective radar for football fans across the state.

Shortly after returning home from Alabama, Mustain was told by Malzahn that University of Arkansas football head coach Houston Nutt had called to offer the quarterback a full scholarship to play for the Razorbacks. To those who had seen Mustain play at Hoover, the offer wasn't all that surprising, but it nevertheless put a great deal of pressure on a quarterback who was still over a month away from starting his first varsity game.

The first game that season was a rematch of sorts. It was at Springdale against Evangel, which on the strength of eight Louisiana state championships since 1992 — including the mythical national championship bestowed upon the Eagles in 1999 by *USA Today* — entered the game ranked No. 7 nationally. The game was played on

the Saturday afternoon following the first Friday night of the season, a change made to allow the contest to be televised across the Southwest on Fox Sports Net.

As good as the Eagles were in 2004 — they went on to win their ninth state championship under Dennis Dunn — September 3 of that season belonged to the Bulldogs. It also served as a coming-out party for Mustain, who led Springdale to a 38–14 win after heading into halftime 14–all. Mustain kept Evangel off balance, throwing over the defense and running when there was an opportunity. He threw for 266 yards and a pair of touchdowns and ran for 78, including opening the fourth quarter with a 67-yard sprint — the signature play of the game.

The Bulldogs spent the rest of the regular season and the first two rounds of the playoffs proving they were the team to challenge for Central's throne.

The numbers were staggering. Springdale rode the momentum of the opening win over Evangel to 11 straight wins following it, and the Bulldogs did so in style — led by the flawless play of Mustain and a junior class whose combined talent left opposing coaches in awe. Entering the game against the Tigers, the Bulldogs had outscored their opponents by an average score of 39–6, despite sitting the starters for much of the second half in most games.

“My gosh, (the University of) Arkansas would be doing good to have those guys,” remarked one opposing coach before facing Springdale, only half-joking.

More than five hours before kickoff at Quigley, a group of Springdale parents had already gathered in a parking lot outside the stadium. They included Beck Campbell, Mustain's mother and biggest fan, a fan who had predicted the Evangel win the week before the game.

A capacity crowd was expected that night, including many from nearby War Memorial Stadium where Louisiana State University was making quick work of Arkansas. Outside Quigley, Campbell and the rest of the Springdale contingent were confident their Bulldogs would fare better.

A few hours later, Central won the opening coin flip and deferred to the second half. The decision by Cox was the same one he had made a thousand times over, putting his defense on the field to set the tone. That Springdale was averaging 39.3 points per game and had reached

the margin required to invoke the 35-point Arkansas mercy rule in all but two games that season wouldn't change Cox's style.

It was a decision that didn't surprise Malzahn, who would have taken the ball if the Bulldogs had won the coin flip. He also wasn't surprised to look up in the stands and see over 12,000 people packed into the dark and damp 68-yard-old stadium.

The weather forecast that day called for a line of storms moving through Little Rock either during the afternoon or evening hours. No rain had made its way to Quigley by the opening kickoff, but its precursor — a driving wind — had. The only thing consistent about the intermittent gusts, some of nearly 30 mph, was the direction from which they came. They entered the stadium from its open end on the south and rushed through and over the brick wall that hid the field from street level on the north.

Springdale opened the game moving directly into the teeth of that wind. The Bulldogs had scored on their opening possession in 11 of 12 games that season, but they went three-and-out against the Tigers and the wind.

Defensively, the Bulldogs, who had six shutouts coming into the game, held the Tigers to start the game. However, on their next possession, a Mustain pass sailed high into the wind and off the fingertips of receiver Andrew Norman. The tipped pass was intercepted by Central's Kevin Thornton and returned 30 yards to the Springdale 12-yard line. Three plays later, the Tigers went up 7-0 after a one-yard run by quarterback Clark Irwin.

The Bulldogs didn't fare any better on their second drive, and a 23-yard punt into the wind after a Mustain sack gave the Tigers the ball just 43 yards from a second touchdown.

Springdale had trailed by no more than seven at any point during the season until Irwin found Thornton on a scrambling fourth-down play for a 24-yard touchdown pass, putting the Tigers up 14-0 with 1:53 left in the first quarter.

The two-touchdown deficit was more of a concern to the fans in the bleachers than it was for the coaches and players on the sideline. The team had scored 17 or more in a quarter eight times during the first 12 games and, other than the scrambling touchdown pass, the defense had given up just 34 yards on 11 plays.

Of greater concern for Malzahn was Mustain. The quarterback had struggled against the wind, with several passes sailing high. He also appeared both hurried and flustered by the Central rush, the first time all season a defense had bothered him.

Mustain appeared to have calmed down as Springdale finally mounted a sustained drive early in the second quarter, entering Central territory for the first time. At the Tigers' 20, Malzahn called for Mustain to fake a short pass to Damian Williams in the flat before looking deep down the sideline for Norman.

Williams jumped and waved his arms, doing his best to sell the fake, but the Tigers' secondary wasn't biting. Stuart Franks saw Norman heading toward the end zone the entire way, stepping in front of him at the goal line and picking off the pass.

All-out effort by running back Matt Clinkscales prevented a touchdown, but the weary defense yielded its third touchdown of the game two plays later. Even with a missed extra point, the Bulldogs were staring down the barrel of a 20–0 deficit, and Malzahn sent word for Adams to start warming up.

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Mustain kept going over the day and the season in his head. He had just arrived at Arkansas Children's Hospital a few blocks away from Quigley, knowing his season was finished.

He held out hope, however, that his teammates would be able to rebound.

When the doctors and nurses began tending to him, his thoughts turned. The momentary doubt about his football future was slipping away, but the pain was not. Despite his arm being heavily wrapped while the nurses moved him around for X-rays, he could still feel the bones shifting next to each other in his forearm at even the slightest movement.

Doctors put him on a morphine drip after a short time, but filling the void of the pain was guilt, and it was solely his to bear. He had just played the worst game of his life on his biggest stage and nothing he could do at this point would change that.

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Amidst the feel and sounds of disappointment immediately following the last snap, the tears could also be seen flowing down the face of Springdale senior linebacker Zach Pruitt, whose promising final season

had just ended. Both of his hands reached up, tugging his facemask and helmet down, his eyes clinched so tightly that he wasn't aware of the direction he was walking.

Everything that had to go wrong for the Bulldogs to lose had done so. The wind, the early turnovers and the gradual wearing down of their defense, which was without its two best run stoppers, had all led the way to Rob James' 32-yard field goal with 18 seconds left to clinch the 30–21 win for Central.

Behind Adams, the Bulldogs twice closed to within six points in the second half. In fact, when junior cornerback Russ Greenlee picked up a fumble with 4:29 remaining and sprinted 57 yards for a touchdown to close the gap to 27–21, it appeared Springdale had a chance.

However, the loss of 306-pound defensive tackle Kyle Janus a week earlier to a knee injury took its toll on the Springdale defense in the second half against Cox's power running game. In 2004, that attack was spearheaded by bruising running back Mickey Dean, who rushed for 138 of his 156 yards in the second half.

It was Dean who carried the load on the final drive to the Springdale 11. From there, rather than going for a first down on fourth, Cox elected to try to seal the game with James. The kick would have been good from more than 40 yards.

As one reporter quipped following the field goal, surmising the feelings of many who were left of the crowd, "The question is, 'When is (Malzahn) ever going to win a championship if he can't win one with this team?'"

Central would go on to win Cox's seventh title a week later in a 41–7 rout of West Memphis. For Springdale, a season full of excitement, hope and future promise was over.

After the crowd had filed out of Quigley, Malzahn stayed behind to do his weekly television interview, his normal gameday twitching gone and trademark short answers even more bland than usual. He really thought this had been the game — and the season — that would start a back-to-back championship run like no other Arkansas had ever seen, but early nerves in the game had gotten to him, just like Mustain. Cox's style had gotten to him and it had showed in uncharacteristically aggressive play calling early on.

As the interview neared its end, the wind that had been such a factor early in the game stopped.

Moments later, the rain started to fall.

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Back at the hospital, the morphine drip Mustain had been given started to take effect, numbing the quarterback's physical pain but not his mental anguish. His next battle had nothing to do with anything on the field; rather, it was the more than three-hour surgery he was facing that night.

It was a surgery during which doctors would place two metal plates in his forearm to help the bones heal, and he had been told that it might be as long as six months before he could participate in contact sports again.

He pushed aside concerns about his future when he looked up from his bed to see a family friend on the far side of the room, someone who he knew had stayed at the game. The somber look on the friend's face told him the result.

After three years of winning, it was official; he had lost and didn't know how to cope.

Except to cry.

