



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: Football in the South

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 08.31.26



Photo via Auburn Athletics

I travel, these days, as other men breathe: ceaselessly across a country I have come to know and love through airports and the peculiar hum of hotel air conditioners. I write this, in fact, from just such a room, the kind with a Gideon Bible in the bedside drawer and, on the wall, an impressionistic watercolor of a lighthouse that exists nowhere in reality.

And invariably the conversation this week, as it does each year around this time, wherever I am, however far from home, turns to the South and that curious, burning devotion we Southerners hold for college football.

Examining my Auburn necktie, my interlocutor this morning, a stranger with whom I shared nothing but an elevator, asked with bemusement what, exactly, we get so worked up about when college football season arrives.

The academic answer (and I do have one) concerns the South's long, unfinished project of self-definition in the wake of a war it lost and has never entirely stopped refighting in smaller, more survivable ways. Football, with its drums, bands, and players arranged upon the field in the ancient geometry of battle, functions as a ritualized war reenactment: a controlled and repeatable simulation of combat, ceremonious violence contained within chalk lines and a clock.

It's a mechanism, in other words, by which a people channel their more bellicose inheritances into something that builds rather than burns: a business, an entertainment, a form of collective effervescence, that strange electricity a crowd generates simply by being a crowd, all facing the same direction, wanting the same thing.

Which brings me to the truer thing, the thing beneath the thing. Football in the South is not, finally, about football, but about the manufacture of shared memory on a mass and recurring scale, a mechanism of social solidarity: ordinary people bound together not by blood but ritual, by the repetition of Saturday after Saturday until the repetition itself becomes a kind of family.

This is why no sensible person in the South schedules a wedding against a home game, why relatives do not merely watch those games but attend them together, generation folded into generation: because the game performs the same function as a wedding, funeral, or Sunday dinner — namely, gathering the tribe.

Some of my finest memories are built entirely of football. I was a boy, no more than seven or eight, running laps—breathless, barefoot laps—around my uncle's house with my brother and my father whenever Auburn scored against a Florida team coached in those years by Steve Spurrier, the whole pack of us screaming when Auburn won.

I remember, too, coming home late at night from games as a small child, dressed in an orange and blue uniform with a plastic helmet too large for my head, and my father lifting me from the back seat, asleep or nearly so, and carrying me—helmet and all—into the house and my bed, tucking me into soft covers while I remained ridiculously dressed for the battle I had only dreamed of fighting.

Ah, yes: I recall tailgating with my maternal grandparents, both gone now, irretrievably gone, and the Auburn football debates over the dinner table after church, iced tea sweating rings onto the tablecloth, the whole afternoon unhurried and complete.

The game, you understand, is only the occasion, the center around which the larger purpose materializes: the aunts and uncles, the dead grandparents made present again in the telling, the fathers carrying sons inside from long nights, the whole intricate architecture of belonging that a people builds for itself when it has decided, collectively and without ever quite saying so, that some things are too important to leave to chance.

That's why it matters so much down here. Not the score. Not even, really, the sport. But the gathering, the memories, the traditions.

As it has every year of my life and of my father's life and of his father's life before him, it begins: This weekend, the bands will tune, the drums will find their cadence, the crowds will rise as one animal in stadiums from the Gulf to the Piedmont—and somewhere a boy will run laps around a house, not yet knowing he's making memories that will outlast him, that will add to the sum of an experience greater than himself.

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