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Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: Make straight the way of football

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 08.17.25



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August persists, yet autumn whispers its arrival with the subtlety of a lover's first confession. At 4:30 a.m., a pearl-gray hour when the world exists in parentheses between night's certainty and day's demands, I emerge into the Alabama air for my ritual of motion. The pavement beneath my running shoes still radiates yesterday's heat, but the atmosphere has changed, carrying that first crystalline hint of transformation that makes the skin prickle with eager recognition.

Sixty-seven degrees, my iPhone claims, yet no algorithm can capture the quality of this early coolness, how it wraps gently around my throat like a silk scarf, seems to arrive not from above but within the morning molecules, bearing news from September's advancing army of shorter days and longer shadows.

The scent arrives first: that ineffable combination of dying summer and emergent fall that bypasses the conscious mind and reaches into the oldest chambers of recall. It's the fragrance of anticipation, of Friday night lights just weeks away, of parking lots soon blooming with cornhole boards and portable grills, of autumn's grand theater preparing its familiar, sacred drama of helmets, pads, and pom-poms.

Suddenly, I am transported across the decades to those tailgates when my grandparents still moved through the world with their careful, deliberate steps, when their hands still arranged coolers and unfolded lawn chairs with the practiced efficiency of devotees preparing for worship. I am young again, my body an instrument of pure kinetic joy, capable of running and leaping and throwing with the unconscious grace that belongs only to those who have not yet learned to fear mortality. No alcohol required for *this* intoxication; only youth and promise and the sweet ache of feeling ever at home.

The marching band plays in my mind's aluminum bleachers, its brass chorus echoing across years, summoning the faithful to gather in their tribal colors for traditions older than reason. Orange and blue, crimson and white, or whatever hallowed hues bind strangers into family: these bright markers become identity, the uniform of a congregation that needs no doctrine beyond shared devotion.

Here is the miracle of it: surrounded by thousands, most of them mysteries to you, faces you'll never see again, yet at this moment you'd lay down your life for any one of them. You scream together, cry together, hug one another after touchdowns. You grasp truths essential to their souls because these eerily familiar strangers know what you also know: the weight of custom and covenant, the sweet burden of loyalty, the pleasurable pain of caring too much about something that matters and doesn't matter at all.

Then there are the chants and cheers, passed down like DNA, like family recipes, like the unspoken understanding of what it means to become at once larger than the protective boundaries of selfhood.

Ah, yes, the cool drift meets my cheeks in the pre-dawn darkness, and I am simultaneously 42 and 14, running toward a future that smells like October and rings with the sounds of a boisterous Saturday.

Word to the wise: Pay attention to these small awakenings of the past; they are more fragile than the turning leaves and field goals they foreshadow, and like your grandparents' voices amid the stadium din, they will not call out to you forever.

Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Capital Markets Initiative at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com.

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