



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: The Deep South's Oldest Rivalry

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 10.12.26



Austin Perryman/Auburn Tigers

As I write this, the week before Alabama meets Georgia, the forecasters are warning of hurricanes, storms and flooding. I can't tell you how that game turned out. By the time these words reach you, a good many readers of 1819 News will be either insufferably pleased or quietly in mourning, and I suspect the two camps will not be speaking at church.

But I, dear reader, have already moved on, as one must, to the next appointment: Auburn and Georgia, the Deep South's Oldest Rivalry.

Rivalries of that age are less contests than inheritances, passed down like silver, and grudges. So, I did what any sensible person does before a big game: I telephoned my family and asked what they remembered.

Memory, I find, is a sports fan's real scoreboard; mine kept the losses in far greater detail than the wins.

My father went first, as he often does, and harkened back to 1970. He recalled the Auburn season and the Georgia statistics from that year with the tenderness other men reserve for old love letters. He recited them to me over the telephone, and I let him. Some numbers are not mere figures but small, glowing rooms a person can walk into and stay awhile.

My brother's wound is 1994. We had gone undefeated in 1993, and we came to the Georgia game that autumn still unbeaten, riding the sort of confidence that's always, in the South, an invitation to disaster. We tied.

Remember tie games? A tie is a peculiar insult, like being slapped by someone who refuses to say why. My brother has never forgiven it.

I was there, a small boy in the stadium, when it happened. Georgia equaled the score with the clock nearly spent, and my father, who has never in his life been a man to suffer quietly, announced that we were leaving.

So out we trudged, down the concrete ramp, into that peculiar hush of a stadium losing its own people. Then the crowd behind us let out a roar, a great animal sound that rolled over us. My father spun around and began shoving us back toward the gates like cattle toward a barn fire.

We had missed it, you see: Auburn had very nearly returned the kickoff all the way but came up short. I watched my father go, in the space of a minute, from sick to hopeful to sick again. My brother and I still talk about it, the way old soldiers talk about battle wounds.

Then there was 1996, the year Auburn learned what overtime was, in the cruelest way. It was the first extra-session game in Auburn's history, and it went on and on, round after round, like a dinner guest who won't take the hint, and in the end we lost.

We were, by every honest measure, the better team. Dameyune Craig was our quarterback, a slender, quick-footed marvel. But the game is remembered less for its football than for the bulldog (UGA himself) lunging and snapping at

one of our players.

My mother's worst memory is a quieter one and rather more elegant. It was 2007, when Georgia turned the stadium black. Now they call it "blacking out the stadium." She'd never seen such a thing before, and she took it, I think, as a kind of shocking impertinence. She hasn't entirely gotten over it, and I would not ask her to.

Yet the family keeps one jewel among all this coal: 2013, the Prayer at Jordan-Hare. I was at home in Auburn that day, a young father with two small children underfoot, watching from the den while my parents and sister sat in the stands. It was the first autumn since my mother lost her own father, and the whole afternoon felt hung with a sort of tender gauze.

Then, in the fourth quarter, Aubie appeared dressed as an angel, which struck me as either inspired or blasphemous, but which turned out to be prophecy. Down we were, and hopeless, and then the ball was in the air, and then it was not where it was supposed to be, and then it was in our hands, improbable as a snowfall in July, tipped in the air and into our receiver's hands. Only destiny could explain it.

We won. The series, I am told, was knotted all the way back to even. At Thanksgiving dinner in Atlanta, of all places, deep in enemy country, my uncle played the catch over and over on his iPhone, as young ladies replay their wedding tapes.

That, I suppose, is the lesson of this rivalry. It teaches you to expect the worst, and it keeps you faithful by granting, perhaps once a generation, a miracle.

Here's what I propose, as one reasonable adult to another. Let's admit what the numbers say. Let's admit that history, that tight-fisted old accountant, isn't on our side. And then let's hope anyway, absurdly, in defiance of every

ledger, because that's the only way anyone has ever loved a team. If an angel can show up in the fourth quarter once, who's to say he won't be wearing orange again this Saturday?

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