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Opinion

# Allen Mendenhall: The gift of disappointment

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 10.03.25



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“I want to have a watch party,” my son Noah announced last Friday, his voice carrying a mix of authority and supplication. Auburn football, naturally. We’d hosted these gatherings before when the Tigers ventured away from Jordan-Hare Stadium.

Saturday afternoon: The boys materialized one by one at our door – six, seven, perhaps eight adolescent souls draped in orange and blue, their faces earnest with the hope of true believers.

I phoned Papa John’s, ordering an armada of Shaq-A-Roni pizzas, having witnessed these creatures devour food with the ravenous intensity of raccoons in a dumpster. Poor Gabriela, my daughter, nearly 12 and the evening’s sole female, observed this masculine invasion with bemused tolerance.

Our covered veranda, typically a serene sanctuary overlooking the lake and golf course, became a testosterone-fueled amphitheater. Shakers rattled, music blared, voices crescendoed.

Auburn stumbled immediately: three downs, nowhere to advance, Jackson Arnold crumpling under pressure like tissue paper in rain. Texas A&M responded quickly, the running back piercing Auburn’s defense for six. The first quarter dissolved into frustration, our offense as sluggish as molasses in January.

Midway through the second quarter, Alex McPherson’s field goal sailed between the uprights: Auburn’s first score. The boys erupted in cautious celebration: 7-3, Texas A&M.

Randy Bond, the Aggies’ kicker, answered with his own field goal, then another before halftime: 13-3. The mathematics of defeat began calculating in my mind.

Those extraordinary Shaq-A-Roni vanished with remarkable efficiency, along with an entire cookie cake. Trash accumulated like autumn leaves, though the boys maintained their Southern politeness,

using “yes, sir” and “no, sir” to punctuate conversations whenever I appeared. Even in excitement, breeding shows.

Halftime statistics painted a grim portrait: Auburn managed zero third-down conversions from eight attempts. Our offense moved with the enthusiasm of a funeral procession.

A fortuitous penalty against Texas A&M – running into our punter – gifted us yardage, yet we squandered it like trust fund children burning through inheritance. Only Texas A&M’s missed field goal as the clock expired prevented disaster. Auburn trailed by 10.

The third quarter offered glimpses of resurrection – quick plays, short bursts, methodical advancement – before penalties strangled momentum like weeds choking flowers. No points scored.

The boys, unable to endure such torture, fled to the backyard, staging their own football contest. They preferred creating destiny to watching catastrophe.

Fourth quarter: Texas A&M drove relentlessly toward what appeared to be an inevitable victory. Then magic struck: Xavier Atkins, sophomore defensive back number 17, intercepted a deflected pass and raced 72 yards toward glory. The boys stampeded back to the porch, drawn by collective telepathy that senses momentum shifts. Jackson Arnold punched the ball into the end zone on the next play.

At 13-10, impossible had become possible.

Five minutes remained when Auburn punted from dreadful field position. Texas A&M took excellent real estate and drove toward the end zone. With 2:50 left, the Aggies threw what looked like the finishing blow: a touchdown pass sealing Auburn’s fate. The boys groaned, heads dropping like flowers after frost.

But wait – yellow fabric on the ground! Ineligible receiver downfield. Touchdown nullified. Life restored.

Third down and nine for the Aggies. Incomplete. Fourth down. Forty-four-yard field goal attempt. Bond split the uprights; 16-10, Texas A&M, with 2:41 left.

Auburn's anemic offense faced its final test. Two minutes, 41 seconds to traverse the field and score; a field goal wasn't enough. But our line collapsed like a house of cards in hurricane winds. Fourth and ten with 2:26 showing. Punt.

Auburn retained three timeouts, plus the two-minute timeout, but without an offense, time was merely sand in an hourglass. Texas A&M managed only a three-and-out, returning possession with 1:48 left. The boys oscillated between nail-biting silence and shrieking anticipation, emotions swinging like pendulums between hope and despair.

Fourth down and one, 1:03 remaining. Arnold crumpled again beneath the Aggies' pass rush. Silence enveloped the porch like fog rolling across the lake. Then eruption: screams of anguish echoing across the water.

I observed these young men – barely more than children – experiencing something profoundly indefinable. Their faces reflected not merely disappointment over a football result, but recognition of life's truth: sometimes, despite preparation, passion, and hope, defeat arrives anyway. Sometimes the field goal sails wide, the pass falls incomplete, the sack comes at the worst moment. Sometimes the hero doesn't rescue the day. Sometimes the last-second miracle never happens.

But there was more in their expressions as the sun began to set. Something deeper than grief, more enduring than victory. They had shared this experience: the hope, the heartbreak, the inexplicable

loyalty to something larger than themselves. They had learned that to love anything – a team, a person, a dream – is to accept the risk of loss.

Years from now, when these boys are men facing their own fourth-and-one moments, with only seconds left, they may remember this day less for the defeat than for the lesson it offered: that resilience reveals itself in the way we bear disappointment together, steady one another when hope collapses, and choose to care about what lies beyond our control.

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