



# THE CHECKERBOARD STATEMENT

## KNOXVILLE, 2001

“Men, you can make history today.”

Mark Richt let that sentence soak in, one more time. He scanned the faces in the locker room, looking for confidence and intensity. If they were going to steal a win in Knoxville on October 6, 2001, these Bulldogs would have to find something new, something relentless within themselves and within each other.

Was that something there? Since January, Richt and his staff had spent a fair amount of time with this group of young men. In September, Georgia had won one and lost one in conference play, defeating Arkansas but losing a game in the final moments to South Carolina. Which result suggested the truth about these Bulldogs—the victory or the defeat?

The new head coach wasn't completely sure. The staff and the players were still taking each other's measure. Since winter conditioning, the team had been pushed to its limit in a boot camp atmosphere designed to instill toughness and togetherness. But it wasn't yet clear that the team had bought into the new ways of doing things. This season could go in one direction or the other. Transition years are difficult even in the best of circumstances.

Yet Richt had full confidence that good things were going to happen sooner or later. Maybe sooner—he was an optimist by nature. And at this

## TOP DAWG

moment, he felt a certain electricity in the stillness of the room, in the intensity of the eyes that met his.

From overhead came the muffled roar of one-tenth of a million adrenalized football fans, most of them ravenous for a Tennessee victory. Richt pointed toward the doorway and the field. In his typically placid tone, he continued to speak: “The last time any Georgia Bulldogs got a victory out there, some of you weren’t even born. You know what year that was?”

Some of them mumbled the answer: 1980. It was a year whose facts were drilled into every new Georgia player: Herschel Walker and the undefeated national champions—twenty-one long football seasons ago. For these players it was once-upon-a-time stuff.

“Men, twenty-one years is a long time. But you can do something about it today. Just stay focused. Execute. Take care of your assignment for one play, then do it again on the next one. We’ve got a good game plan; let’s believe in it and carry it out.”

It was a lot to ask for a football team under full renovation. Coach Jim Donnan, Richt’s predecessor, had left a roster stocked with NFL-capable talent. Still, the coaching staff was new, the season was young, and everyone was learning the new rules. Today would bring the first test outside the comfort of Sanford Stadium in Athens.

The new staff would make its road debut under the following conditions:

- Tennessee would enter the game ranked sixth nationally; Georgia hadn’t cracked the Top 25.
- Wide receiver Reggie Brown, injured the previous week against Arkansas, would miss the game as well as the rest of the season.
- Linebackers: Will Witherspoon would miss the next few games, Ryan Fleming was out with a knee injury, and Boss Bailey was playing with a broken hand in a cast.
- This injury-ridden linebacker corps would be called upon to stop Travis Stephens, one of the nation’s most physical and

## THE CHECKERBOARD STATEMENT

durable running backs. He was capable of forty carries and of personally wearing down a defense.

- Tennessee had more than its share of injuries on both sides of the ball, but the roster was deep and talented.
- Georgia's quarterback, David Greene, would be a freshman also facing his first road game, in a hostile venue with 107,000 aggressively boisterous fans.
- While Georgia had accumulated three sacks, Tennessee already had ten.
- Georgia had made Arkansas quarterback Zak Clark, a 30 percent passer, look like an all-star. Yet Tennessee's Casey Clausen had last week lit up LSU for 309 yards—256 of them to phenomenal newcomer Kelley Washington.
- Decent and recent Georgia teams (including one that had beaten Florida by 20 points) had been overwhelmed and dominated in their last two appearances in Knoxville. That memory rested vividly inside the heads of the Bulldog upperclassmen.
- Georgia's kick coverage, which had given up touchdown returns in each of its two league games, offered a dangerous opening for Tennessee.
- The Volunteer defense was giving up all of 41 yards per game rushing.
- CBS planned to show the game to a national audience. Tennessee, wanting to impress the pollsters, was ready for its close-up.

There was no way to add up those factors and arrive at an encouraging total. Richt and his assistants recognized a zero-sum situation. Georgia had to play at a level it hadn't yet shown. The inconsistency of the previous games would mean disaster in Knoxville with the football world watching.

On the other hand—and here is what the coaches had to preach—the

## TOP DAWG

tougher the challenge, the more brilliant the prize. To be the best, you must beat the best. If the Georgia Bulldogs wanted to reclaim their place among the nation's elite, they needed to show proof, and this game was Exhibit A.

With all these things at stake, Tennessee Week began.

Monday's practice was less than inspiring. It's a common problem coming off a weekend, but on this occasion, excuses were unacceptable. The coaches wanted to optimize every detail of preparation for the game in Knoxville, and they pushed the players as hard as they had since mat drills, the torturous off-season endurance regimen. And they got a bit of a boost from unexpected quarters.

Every college team has a small squad of unsung heroes known as walk-ons. These student-athletes receive no financial scholarship and usually no playing time in games, but they show up on the practice field to help the team prepare. They're football's equivalent of the sparring partner in boxing, the guy who stands in the ring and takes a beating from the genuine contender.

Many walk-on players are used on the scout team, the unit that mimics the upcoming opponent in practice. Early in the week, one of them bought some orange adhesive tape and fashioned his helmet into a reasonable facsimile of the Tennessee Volunteer headgear. He then announced his intention to do everything in his power to "piss off the offense." He would even get into their faces, talk trash in hillbilly dialect, and grab the wide receivers illegally.

The idea caught on. Soon the rest of the scout team was busy at work creating UT helmets and taunting the offense. Richt chuckled, deciding it wasn't a bad idea at all. Some of the offensive players were losing their temper, delivering an extra blow to the Vol surrogates after the whistle (usually a common occurrence anyway). All to the good—angry practices make for angry execution on game day.

Richt held a practice in Sanford Stadium and piped in crowd noise and the music of the Tennessee marching band playing its fight song, "Rocky Top," over and over. The stadium sound system was maxed out so that the music and shouting were audible for miles. Students stood on the bridge beside the stadium, trying to catch a glimpse of the practice. As for the players, they couldn't hear anything but the music. Richt wouldn't allow

## THE CHECKERBOARD STATEMENT

them to speak. They worked on communicating their signals visually, by hand, on both sides of the ball.

The players knew that nobody was giving them a shot in this game, and that's a time-tested motivation in itself. ESPN's Rece Davis wrote, "Tennessee is giving up a yard and a half per carry on defense. They are just too much for Georgia right now. Tennessee wins the game 34-14." Tony Barnhart of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* saw Tennessee winning by 14. And the same paper's Jeff Schultz, having some fun with what he called "ChihuahuaNation," wrote, "No upset this year. Take the [Vols], give the 11<sup>1/2</sup>. Arf."

The annual battle of the bulletin board also had to be waged. On Monday, Tennessee's freshman running back Jabari Davis, from Atlanta's Tucker High School, said that he chose Tennessee because "Georgia was always talking about getting to the Peach Bowl. Here, we're not talking about the Peach Bowl. We're talking about going to the Rose Bowl." He was alluding to the Rose Bowl as an occasional national championship site.

Proud Georgia fans predictably took umbrage. Richt, declining to take the bait, said that he thought the jibe was humorous. "Freshman," summarized offensive tackle Jon Stinchcomb, rolling his eyes.

Before Davis's remark could be dutifully tacked to the Bulldog bulletin board, Greene, of all people, provided ammunition for the other side. When asked about the challenge of playing his first road game in Knoxville, Greene said, "I've heard it's a tough place to play, but I've heard it's overrated, too."

The battle of words, fought by freshmen, ended in a tie; the real battle, the one fought on grass and gridiron, was ready to commence.

## ROCKY TOP, ROCKY START

Richt took one more look at his troops before leading them onto the Knoxville field. "If they blow the doors off us early, keep your composure," he advised. "Believe in the plan. Now let's get out there and finish the drill, men."

Everyone stood up, and there was the metal pop of scores of chin guards snapping to helmets. Then everyone gathered around the door, and you could hear the rising din of eighty-five student-athletes marshalling their

## TOP DAWG

battle spirits. Some shouted, some simply gritted their teeth, many were profane, but every man reached deep into his own personal psyche and summoned the emotional fuel he needed. Jumping up and down, restless for contact, the team moved into the tunnel and waited for the signal.

Then, just like that, they were emerging from the shadow and onto the bright field of battle. The younger ones were struck by the sheer noise level of the nation's second-largest sports venue. You can be told about it, you can practice with crowd noise over the speakers all you like, and you can prepare yourself mentally; you still won't be ready for the shock of 107,000 feverish, bellowing spectators surrounding you on every front while the band plays "Rocky Top" over and over.

Besides, if you know your team is a work in progress while the other coach is 51-4 on these premises, your full measure of intestinal fortitude had better be present and accounted for. The coaches and players believed, hoped, hungered.

There had been rain early in the morning, and a few clouds remained, but it was becoming a nice enough day. At noon, kickoff time, the temperature was holding steady at fifty degrees. Tennessee won the toss, deferred its possession option to the second half, and kicked off to the visitors.

And instantly, Greene, who had wondered about the intimidation factor in Neyland Stadium, was leading his offense onto the field to find out.

Early events seemed to confirm the wisdom of the pundits. On first down, Greene had to divest himself of the ball under pressure of stampede. On second down, Terence Edwards dropped a pass as he absorbed a percussive collision. A third-down pass completion came up short.

Three and out, and Georgia had been too timid even to attempt a handoff. The crowd thundered its approval.

Tennessee then took the ball and submitted a showcase touchdown drive—Tennessee power football at its most imposing. Clausen handed the ball to Stephens repeatedly, and Stephens shed tacklers like old sweaters. He finally broke into the open field and looked a cinch to go the distance, until he stumbled over his own feet at the Georgia 7.

It was only a momentary stay of execution for the Bulldogs. Kelley Washington caught a touchdown, one foot in bounds, in the left end zone over double coverage. The score stood at 7-0, and the Tennessee bench

## THE CHECKERBOARD STATEMENT

was visibly relaxed, laughing, enjoying its afternoon. After one possession for each team, no one could have mistaken which squad was the national contender and which was the pretender.

After freshman Fred Gibson returned the kickoff to the 43, the Dawgs acquitted themselves well. Musa Smith rushed twice for a first down. Ben Watson caught one pass for 9. Labrone Mitchell ran a slant route to perfection and the 18-yard line. This was a vast improvement over the first brief possession. But Tennessee became tougher in the shadow of its own goalpost; the drive stalled, and Billy Bennett kicked a field goal. Tennessee 7, Georgia 3.

As the first quarter progressed, the Bulldogs seemed to be taking the coach's advice. UT had "blown off the doors" just as he had warned, but the Georgia team refused to lose its composure. The defense discovered it could make a stop, and the offense was picking up confidence—until the moment when the freshman portion of Greene made its first appearance. He forced a terrible throw into coverage over the middle of the field, and Tennessee's Rashad Baker took the ball out of the air on a full sprint. He returned it to the Georgia 17, and Clausen hit Leonard Scott for an easy touchdown pass on the next play.

Now it was 14-3, with a feeling in the Georgia fan section that it could be a long day. The Bulldogs' challenge was tall enough without spotting the opposition gift touchdowns. It pumped up the crowd noise, encouraged the Vols, and put the Dawgs in a very treacherous position. Too often they'd done this very thing: come into Neyland and let the game get out of hand. Tennessee was looking loose, hungry, ready to bring down the hammer.

Yet once again, the Dawgs answered; once again they provided a clue that a new breed had replaced the old psychologically and physically intimidated Georgia Bulldogs. Gibson returned the ensuing kickoff 31 yards. Fullback Verron Haynes was isolated on a beautiful play-action fake and rambled for 29. Smith ran for 5, and then for a first down. Against a defense like Tennessee's, every yard on the ground was like gold, giving Greene the opportunity to work the passing game.

On third down, inside the 10-yard line, the referees called for a measurement; Georgia was about a foot short. Smith powered forward for what appeared to be a full yard, but another measurement was commissioned—and the Dawgs came up short.

## TOP DAWG

This was a key moment in the game. The Bulldogs had bogged down after an impressive drive, settling for the field goal. This time everyone on the Georgia side was certain that Smith had picked up the necessary yardage and put his team in position for a touchdown. The team had another opportunity to be discouraged. It had been a tough drive, a physically exhausting one, and it ended with no points and a questionable measurement. But the defense “bowed its neck,” as Richt liked to put it, and forced a Tennessee punt.

Damien Gary wasn’t even supposed to be returning punts. Reggie Brown had that job, but he’d been lost for the season. Now, Gary fielded the kick, made a couple of lethal fakes in traffic, and suddenly had nothing but stripes in his field of vision. He sprinted toward the delighted, Georgia-dominated end zone, completing the school’s first punt return touchdown in eight years. Finishing with the obligatory somersault into the end zone, he provoked a 15-yard celebration penalty that made the extra point a bit more adventurous than usual.

The effect on the Georgia bench was galvanizing—a quick charge of electricity that put every player on his feet screaming for Gary to run. This was the point when the most outlandish hope suddenly seemed within reach. Tennessee was bringing its usual power game and—what a concept—the Bulldogs were counterpunching. Neyland fell silent except for two factions: the Georgia bench, whooping and hollering, and the visiting Georgia fans, who were cramped within the league’s smallest seats but bursting with fresh pride.

## FIGHTING BACK

Gradually the Georgia defense began to believe in itself. The players refused to back down, increasing their intensity as they discovered they had a shot to take home a victory. Stephens began to go down behind the line or after modest gains, rather than imposing his will on the defense every play. Somehow the Dawgs began winning their share of battles along the front line. David Jacobs was having a career day; Tony Gilbert, one of the few truly healthy linebackers, seemed to participate in every tackle. Georgia had failed to measure up physically to recent Tennessee teams in Neyland. Now the players were beginning to believe they could stand toe-to-toe with their rivals.

## THE CHECKERBOARD STATEMENT

On offense, Georgia was doing much of its damage with two weapons. Fullback Haynes seemed constantly open in the flat and capable of rambling down the sideline once he got the ball. Tight end Randy McMichael, on the other hand, never seemed open on his post and crossing routes—which made no difference as he pulled down highlight-reel catches, putting on a show for a CBS-TV national audience. The next time the Dawgs pulled into scoring position, Gibson found himself all alone in the middle on an underneath route, and he trotted easily into the end zone. Again, the touchdown was scored directly in front of the exhilarated visiting fan section. Having once been down by double digits, Georgia was suddenly leading by a field goal. How long could it last?

Not too long. Stephens could not be held in check forever. He escaped again for 64 yards, though Georgia managed to hold Tennessee to a tying field goal. The Vols had one more shot to take the lead before halftime, but Alex Walls missed a 34-yarder with twenty seconds left in the half.

It was a hopeful way to go into the locker room for intermission. The position coaches quietly reviewed assignments with their players, who gulped POWERADE, caught their breath, and realized they were part of something that could be special.

Richt sat down and counseled with Brian VanGorder. The question was whether to adjust for Stephens. Tennessee was on a pace to rush for nearly 300 yards for the day. The defense had adjusted and limited the damage for the most part, but there was the danger of simply wearing out, particularly with no health or depth at linebacker. Tennessee had held the ball for nineteen minutes to Georgia's eleven.

"Stay patient," said Richt. "Let's stick with the game plan. I think our guys are up to the challenge." The way to stop the ground game, of course, was to bring up the safeties. But that would mean isolating the cornerbacks in single-man coverage with UT's dangerous Washington and Scott. The previous week, LSU had tried that approach and lived to regret it. Washington had set a school record with 256 yards, eventually breaking loose on a long run that sealed the victory. Therefore it was a matter of naming your poison: death by Stephens's legs or Clausen's arm? Richt and VanGorder didn't want to gamble in either direction.

Cornerback Tim Wansley was rising to the challenge. He was on a

## TOP DAWG

mission, hounding Washington on every play. He was calling the receiver out, getting in his face and saying, “Not on me!” And he was backing up his talk by limiting the damage. But the Georgia coaches knew that if Wansley and Bruce Thornton were left in man coverage, the dam was going to break sooner or later.

VanGorder agreed to stick with two-deep pass coverage in the second half. Eight different players would be rotated on the defense—including freshmen like David Pollack—and they would simply have to step up and make plays. Richt was a game-plan guy: prepare your best strategy, commit to it, and stay calm and on task.

It was Richt’s first great strategic test as a head coach. He was ready to put the headphones back on, work thirty more minutes on the clock, and see how it all came out.

## ENDGAME

The third quarter had a clear theme, and that was field position. Kick coverage, which had seemed like a liability coming in, was achieving something remarkable. On two straight occasions, Jonathan Kilgo got the punt high in the air, and his coverage team had gotten downfield to down the ball at the 1-yard line. On the first of these, Wansley grabbed the ball and neatly dropped it thirty-six inches from the goal line as his body fell into the end zone.

As a result, Tennessee was running uphill all quarter. Backed up in his own territory with the score tied, Vol offensive coordinator Randy Sanders became even more conservative, staying with the running game. For the first time, a few boos emerged from the home crowd. On the other hand, Georgia couldn’t do a thing with its superior field position. To its credit, Tennessee’s injury-ridden defense stepped up and made plays.

The game was becoming a chess match, mostly played on the Tennessee side of the board. If you wore orange, you felt that Tennessee was gradually wearing its opponent down, slowly turning the field around, and preparing for a fourth-quarter kill. If you wore red, you were a bundle of nerves, but you just knew Georgia’s big break was going to come at any second. And if you were neutral, you were sitting back and

## THE CHECKERBOARD STATEMENT

enjoying the show; this was one of the most intense football games you'd ever seen.

With eight minutes remaining in the game, Georgia got the ball at its own 12. Gibson came up on an underneath route, grabbed a pass, and sprinted 55 yards to the Tennessee 33. Running back Jasper Sanks carried the ball down to the 21. After a penalty, McMichael got the yardage back on a magnificent pass by Greene. Sanks took the ball to the 12, where there was another penalty against the Dawgs. It seemed as if nobody had scored for hours. Finally, with a little more than five minutes remaining, Bennett kicked a field goal to give Georgia the lead.

It was time for Tennessee to decide if it was going to win this game. Georgia's defense was winded. Was there anything left in the tank?

The Vols began to move, though Georgia's defensive backs were covering pass routes beautifully. That day they seemed to have grown up. With 1:53 left on the clock, Tennessee had managed to reach the outskirts of field goal territory. Georgia safety Jermaine Phillips leaped into the air and stole a pass over Bobby Graham. Georgia's fan section exploded. Could it really have happened? Was the game over?

The answers were yes and no, respectively. With the ball deep in its own territory, Georgia tried to milk the clock while Tennessee used all its timeouts in desperation. Again, Richt chose the conservative route: Execute, protect the ball, don't beat yourself by forcing a pass. Yet after three running plays, only twenty-one seconds had drained from the clock. In the immortal words of Bulldogs play-by-play announcer Larry Munson, "The clock just wouldn't move."

Tennessee sent its roster after Kilgo's punt and almost got a hand on it. The Vols began their final possession 79 yards from the end zone with 1:15 on the clock and no timeouts.

No one could have anticipated the extraordinary finales that both teams had reserved for this afternoon.

## FINISHING THE DRILL

Tennessee appeared to have run out of luck. Washington dropped a pass with a little help from Phillips. Fleming caught his pass for a first down, but

## TOP DAWG

the Vols were still 63 yards from the end zone. Bailey nearly intercepted the next ball. It was time for Georgia to slam the door. The Bulldogs seemed to be sitting on every pass route.

Then Clausen tossed a screen pass to Stephens. Stephens broke free, but he didn't seem to have any extraordinary angle for a long run. What he did have was a gear he hadn't used yet, and he put down the stick and accelerated to it. Georgia's exhausted linebackers and defensive backs strained to overtake Stephens, but he sailed into the end zone.

Neyland erupted like a rocky mountain volcano. The noise level was nearly apocalyptic. This would be one of the great Volunteer wins, a 62-yard miracle play that saved the home team from disaster, preserving a national championship run. It would be an afternoon to tell the grandchildren about.

During the ear-splitting chaos, Richt registered no particular emotion on the Georgia sideline. "The headphones were outstanding," he said later with the slightest trace of a smile. He was already talking to Greene, already dipping back into the plan.

The game, which seemed like a multiseason epic by now, still had forty-two unused seconds and one unused miracle.

Tennessee squibbed the kickoff. There was much consternation about this decision afterward in the home locker room. The intent was to avoid a long return, but Georgia started on its own 40. The deficit was 4 points, so a field goal would be useless. Greene brought the team on the field with as calm a demeanor as his head coach. In the huddle there was a lot of insistent chatter.

"We're gonna do this!"

"Let's finish the drill."

"Let's get it done."

"Stay focused," said Greene. "There's plenty of time to win this thing."

Every man believed. The stadium was still erupting in invocations of support for the defense, but the Georgia players paid no attention. The coaches had told them there would be a moment like this. They were either going to claim their destiny as winners or they were going to stop believing in each other, give in, and accept defeat. The coaches had pushed them to the limit in mat drills months ago. They had made them run wind sprints until they were physically ill.

## THE CHECKERBOARD STATEMENT

The team was ready to find out what the future held for Georgia football. Greene called for silence and gave out the play.

Gary lined up in the slot, took a pass from what Richt called an option route, broke a tackle, and took the ball to the Tennessee 47. On the next play, Greene rolled out to his right to avoid the murderous pass rush. But Tennessee's defense was flooding the routes, and no one was open. Greene threw incomplete.

The clock was down to 00:26. McMichael, tangled up in orange, somehow came down with a catch in the middle of the field, at the Tennessee 20.

The jubilant noise in the stadium began to subside. For the Vol faithful, this game against an inferior opponent had gone off script. It was becoming almost quiet enough to hear the clock tick off the seconds: 00:20, 00:19 . . .

McMichael turned up in yet another section of the field, snagging a pass at the 6-yard line—unthinkably close to the goal line. Could it be happening? The Georgia sideline was now in disarray, with players leaping up and down, pumping fists, shouting at the top of their lungs.

Ten seconds was a good round number, and Richt called time out.

On the sidelines, the head coach's hair was tousled, but his demeanor was unruffled. Greene listened attentively as Richt found the play he'd had in mind for this very situation.

### P-44 HAYNES

It was dubbed P-44 Haynes, in honor of its primary target.

This was the kind of play designed to work against one type of coverage only. Richt had to assume the Vols were going to double up on the wide receivers and that they would also come after the quarterback. If the middle linebacker could be accounted for, a fullback could sneak up the middle and have a clear shot at the end zone.

Greene had to watch for Tennessee's defensive alignment. "If there is a single safety," Richt told the quarterback, "just throw it into the stands, and we'll have one more play. If there are two of them, we'll split the middle and throw it to Verron." It seemed a good bet that UT would use

## TOP DAWG

two safeties and assign each one to a side of the field, but it was important for Greene to identify the coverage. A single safety would play in the middle and spoil the call.

On the sidelines, Haynes was standing nearby as he heard Richt and Greene mention his name. For a moment he wasn't certain what play they were talking about. Then it hit him.

This was a play Richt had loved using at Florida State with "Pooh Bear" Williams at fullback. The play had been put in for the Bulldogs before the season, and Haynes naturally loved it. He had asked Greene several times when he would hear it called, so he could run up the middle and grab his easy pass. But Richt had never called it during the first three games, and Haynes had forgotten the whole thing.

Now, with a jolt, he realized he would get his shot at P-44 Haynes. It wasn't his job to account for safeties, block, or anything else. All he really had to do was keep his feet under him, dodge the middle linebacker, and turn around for the ball—and one other thing. *Hang on.*

As Greene called signals, he watched Tennessee reveal its scheme. Sure enough, it was "quarter coverage," meaning that the four defensive backs were splitting the field into four quadrants, and there would be a beautiful seam right up the middle. That meant P-44 Haynes had a chance to work.

Greene took the snap and faked a handoff to the running back. Haynes moved toward Keyon Whiteside, the onrushing linebacker, as if he were going to throw a block. At the last second, Haynes sidestepped Whiteside, took several steps forward, and found he was alone on the orange checkerboard—or perhaps it was a chessboard, because Richt had established a checkmate.

For the fullback, time seemed to move in slow motion, just like in a movie. The game clock ticked to 00:05 and simply seemed to stop. The brown pigskin, spinning in a perfect arc, seemed as big and round as a beach ball. Greene might have muffed the throw; Haynes might have muffed the catch. It was all simply too easy, considering the McMichael catches in heavy traffic.

*Don't drop it, thought Haynes. Do not drop it!*

But the ball slid perfectly into the fullback's desperate hands, and Haynes, who had been recruited only by I-AA Western Kentucky, who had transferred and walked on in Athens without a scholarship, who

## THE CHECKERBOARD STATEMENT

had sat out a season before carrying the ball ten times in two full seasons—Verron Haynes, obscure blue-collar fullback, joined the ranks of the legendary.

The Georgia bench dissolved into delirious chaos, with the exception of Richt, who was still playing chess. He signaled for no extra-point conversion. Meanwhile, Haynes sprinted toward the sideline, pounding his helmet with one fist and still cradling the ball in the other. No way he was going to drop that thing, even now. Wherever he is now, he still might be holding that ball.

Hardly anyone noticed the strange play that followed, because nearly everyone in attendance was either weeping or wailing or gnashing his or her teeth. Richt elected not to kick the point because of the risk involved. It was a 2-point game now, 26–24, and a blocked kick could be returned to the other end zone for precisely the value of a tie. And why not? By now every other conceivable miracle had transpired in this game.

Instead, Greene ran the “victory formation”—full protection with the quarterback kneeling to cradle the precious ball—and Georgia sat on the lead with five seconds remaining.

Georgia still had to execute one play, a kickoff to Tennessee. The Vols received, attempted a completely nonmiraculous lateral, and were smothered by one joyful army of Bulldogs.

Game over.

## FACE-STEPPING AND FINISHING

Georgia’s legendary radio announcer, Munson, was inspired to a kind of coarse, almost poetic, frenzy. “We just stepped on their face with a hobnail boot and broke their nose!” he shouted. For good measure, he added, “We just crushed their face!”

Meanwhile, Richt was making his way to the middle of the field to shake the hand of Tennessee’s head coach Phil Fulmer. Then he jogged over toward the Georgia fan section and saluted the faithful who had stayed on their feet and shouted the minority opinion until their voices were gone. The fans saluted him back—with the remains of their vocal cords.

Richt, the coaches, and the team enjoyed a wild celebration in the locker

## TOP DAWG

room. The Georgia football program had found its point of convergence. No longer was there any question that the team had bought into the new leadership. From that day forward, coaches and players alike always noted that this was the moment when it all came together. The pieces fit: the mat drills, the boot camp preseason, all the tension that results from a new staff inheriting an established team.

The coaches had talked about “finishing the drill” until everyone was sick of the phrase. They had preached the doctrine of hanging tough in the fourth quarter when a game was won or lost; about the full year of conditioning that is required so a man can rise up to prevail in those brief, grueling moments two or three times a season in the games that separate the elite teams from the rest of the pack.

They had finished the mat drills. They had played as hard as they could possibly play against South Carolina, and none of it had worked. The Gamecocks, a team that Georgia had once owned, finished that drill. But now, with this final, shocking drive against the sixth best team in the nation, every Bulldog understood what those words meant, where this program was going, and how good it felt to come through the fire as the victor.

Before every game, as the team does its calisthenics on the field, it eventually circles around the head coach at the 25-yard line. He leads them in a “breakdown” drill in which they follow his rapid commands, touching helmet, then thigh pads. After this game, when Richt trotted into the Knoxville locker room, he started the breakdown drill again, and all the players took part just as they would before a game. It was a unique bonding moment between coach and team. It was as if, though they’d performed this drill many times with him before, now the union was complete. “Breakdown” meant breaking down the walls, breaking down the resistance to new ways of being a team and a winning program. The Georgia Bulldogs had become more than a team. Now they were family.

Richt called out, “Did we finish the drill?”

The team shouted their answer in the affirmative.

“Did we stand together like brothers?”

The team shouted again.

Richt said a few more words, poured out his heart, and then it got crazy. Coach Jon Fabris broke into an amazing solo dance. The players

## THE CHECKERBOARD STATEMENT

circled around him, laughing for all they were worth. Those who were there claim that even Vince Dooley showed a couple of nifty steps. That day, anything was possible. Later, Dooley said, “We haven’t had a game like this in a very long time.”

True. But it was also beyond question that there would be more of these to come, and this time the wait would not be so long.

No historical distance was required to understand what was taking place. You could feel it that very moment in a Knoxville locker room. Dawn had broken for the Georgia football program. It was the beginning of a new day.