

1. The Talking Head Returns Home

Clark Cattoor scanned the constant motion of navy-and-white football jerseys on the field below, and said to the sky-blue Madison morning, “This is it.”

This, the fourth day of August, was the day he’d worked a decade for. All those frozen winters toiling in the sticks, chasing stories about high school volleyball players, dog mushers, and cross-country skiers, had led up to this, the opening day of college football practice at Wisconsin State.

Just as he’d always dreamed it.

Madison was Clark’s place. His town. He’d graduated from Wisconsin State and still had the memories of old glory: Sitting on the shore of Lake Monona with cool drinks and good cheer. Strolling down to the fraternity house. Sitting in the strangling Madison traffic after the Fourth of July fireworks.

Now Clark enjoyed his status as sports journalism royalty. As the main sports anchor at WMA-TV in Madison, he paced the sidelines along with three dozen other sports media types. He remembered the newspaper writers from his college days. All were a shade older and a layer thicker. Sports journalists in Madison tended to stay put. The

jobs were that cushy.

Clark watched the head coach of the Boars bark orders during the first drills.

Frank Flaherty was starting his fourth year as head football coach at Wisconsin State. He replaced Bob Monroe, the legend who'd brought the program back to glory and then left for the Philadelphia Eagles in 1999. The shadow of his predecessor turned Frank from a genial, middle-aged guy into an old man with a mean streak. A cigarette dangled from his lips as he watched his players stretch. His stomach revealed one too many fried chicken banquets and not enough exercise. His brown hair was now streaked with gray.

Clark didn't care whether Frank liked him. Clark was no brownnoser. In each of his three stops before WMA-TV, Clark had dug up the dirt on at least one sports institution. Title IX violations, academic fraud—nothing was too hard to uncover. Six months out of school, he'd uncovered a cartel of professional bull riders in Grand Junction, Colorado, who drugged bulls with a potent formula of crystal meth and coconut milk. The bulls would shake because of the drugs, but not as intensely as they normally would. This let riders stay in the saddle longer. Four bull riders and the mastermind, an announcer who served as the rodeo circuit's private bookmaker, still rotted in prison.

Clark was not at football practice to make friends. He had enough of those already. A young 31, he walked the city with his head held high, making eye contact with people just to see who recognized him. Since his divorce, he'd strutted through the bars to see if any leggy women would walk up and say, "Hey, aren't you?" His lean 6'3" frame, dark brown hair, and perpetual tan made him one of the beautiful people of Madison.

A year ago today, Clark had stood on the sidelines for the start of college football practice in Duluth. Now as he stood, arms folded, on the sidelines of the Meadow Hill Seminary, miles south of the WSU campus, he felt a tap on his shoulder, followed by a male voice saying, "Thanks for coming out."

Clark whipped around to see the friendly smile of Jim Tillman.

I really have made it full circle, Clark thought. Jim was the school's long-time sports information director, the middleman between the football team and the media.

Ten years before, Clark Cattoor had been a fan trying to become a legitimate sports journalist. He'd produced and hosted a controversial half-hour sports show on public access television. Firing Squad, he titled it. Clark would pop up on the tube and question the school's athletic programs between taking phone calls.

Jim Tillman and the coaches were not amused. Before long, Clark was WSU's Media Enemy Number One. Wisconsin State athletes were instructed not to appear on the show.

Now Jim Tillman had to take care of this former rock in his shoe. Jim was now working for Clark Cattoor, making sure Clark received all of the updated rosters and news releases.

"Thanks, Jim." Clark flashed his porcelain teeth. "Good to see you."

Jim replied with a forced smile. "Anything else we can do for you, just let me or one of my assistants know," he said, and strode away.

As the chatter on the field rose to the hill where the media were perched, Clark looked over the updated football roster. He'd spent the summer catching up on the main players and their colorful backgrounds. He'd read about their histories, on the field and in the police blotter.

Now he watched as the players broke into their groups, sorted by position. The team's cliques formed largely by where you played on the field.

Senior starting quarterback Craig Zellnoff was from the Chicago suburb of Naperville. Craig was penciled in to run the offense for his senior year. He was no pro prospect, to be sure. With imposing brown eyebrows that looked odd below his mopy haircut, Craig was steady. Nothing spectacular, but nothing stupid. The ultimate "even-keel" quarterback. His only vice appeared to be single-malt scotch.

Just weeks into his freshman year, Craig had tossed a heckler through the window of a State Street gyro shop at 3 A.M. All Craig had suffered was a \$177 ticket for drinking, when a police officer spotted him sipping from his mini-flask of scotch right after the incident.

No one messed with Craig Zellnoff after that story made its way around Madison.

The black receivers from Florida griped about Madison's winters. Wisconsin State landed the second-rate Florida receivers, not the best in the Sunshine State but certainly more skilled than anything Wisconsin would ever produce. The team's top two receivers, senior Laverneus Wilson and junior "Touchdown" Tyrone Collins, hailed from Miami. Collins was the taller of the two and easily the more flamboyant and talented. The newspapers speculated that Collins would leave for the NFL after the season. Rumors floated that he had signed with an agent, a major no-no in college football. Collins said of NFL super-agent Jerry Copperzweig, "That Jerry is just helpin' me through a few things. He just a buddy."

A buddy with two million in the bank and a contract with Touchdown's name on the last page.

Clark watched the speedy receiver run his strides on the near sideline. His #1 white jersey glistened under the sun. Collins would become an NFL star for someone.

The players from the state of Wisconsin provided few problems for the program. They were simply not talented enough to sign with agents or throw people through gyro shops in the middle of the night. The linemen consisted of corn-fed, husky Wisconsin boys, peaceful big men until the whiskey or the Leinenkugel's took effect—another Badger State tradition.

The program produced scores of NFL linemen, and that trend was continuing. Senior captains Bob Verly and Cory Larkman led an offensive line seen as one of the best in the nation. Bob and Cory had grown up in Wausau, a paper mill town two hours north of Madison, dreaming about playing for the Boars.

Looking down the roster was always a treat for Clark, seeing for the first time that season the 118 names, numbers, heights, weights, and positions. He loved absorbing the hometowns the most. After eight years of hacking around small Wisconsin towns, Clark could peg the location of just about every township in the state.

He wondered if Wisconsin State had a real kicker yet. Last year's 5-7 season should have been 8-4, but missed field goals had doomed the team. Three more field goals and the school would have brought in two million dollars at the Sun Bowl in El Paso.

A few of the new names on the roster came from familiar places,

northwestern towns like Spooner, Superior, Maple, Menomonie, Barron, and Amery. Clark had spent more than enough time chasing football games in those towns. One name popped out at him: Number 17—Jake Steffon, PK, So./Fr., 6-1, 190, Fall Creek, Wisconsin.