



MAKING HIS MARK

FROM THE GRIDIRON TO THE MINISTRY

BY DEREK MARKS

"TURNING THE CULTURE OF A COLLEGE FOOTBALL PROGRAM IS NOT LIKE A JET SKI TURNING IN THE WATER—IT WAS LIKE TURNING AN AIRCRAFT CARRIER."

The energy around campus was contagious. The anticipation throughout Bozeman could almost be felt. It was the third week of November, and every Bobcat fan knows what that means. In 2019 it meant "the

team over the hill" was coming to Bobcat stadium. Every year, the Brawl of the Wild is highly anticipated. But 2019 was different for both sides. In 2018, we had mounted the greatest comeback in Brawl of the Wild history that ended in dramatic fashion. No one on either side of the rivalry forgot how it ended. Certainly, both teams remembered the outcome very clearly. Was last year's finish a fluke? A year later, we were about to find out. Saturday finally came, and with it all the expected pregame energy. The year-long wait was finally over and both teams took the field for the kickoff. Our defense stood on the sideline, waiting with great anticipation for the first play, which would set the tone for the entire game. Tristan Bailey's opening kickoff brought the game underway. Our kickoff team held the return within the 20-yard line in the Sonny Holland end zone. And it was finally our turn. We loved this moment as a defense. We could sense the camaraderie as all eleven of us stepped onto the field to execute the plan we had talked about all week. We took the field with swagger. The fans wearing blue and gold rocked the stadium as Montana began their first drive with their backs to the student-section. Our confidence was put on full display the very first snap of the game. Dalton Sneed threw a screen pass to Samori Toure on our sideline and every guy on our defense sprinted to the ball like they were going to make the tackle. Jahque Alleyne sprinted up from his safety spot and laid one of the hardest hits I had seen in my four years playing college football. The ball spilled onto the turf; we recovered; the tone was set for the rest of the game; and we never once lost focus or let our foot off the gas. We played at a high level, executed the plan, made the big plays we

needed, and we put our stamp on the final Brawl of the Wild that we seniors would ever play in. As the clock ticked down to zero, the scoreboard read 48-14, the goal posts came down, and our fans spilled onto the field as my teammates and I celebrated our fourth-straight win over the University of Montana. Three weeks later, I took the chair in front of me and pulled it out from under the table. Still dressed in our pads and uniform, Lewis Kidd, Brayden Konkol and I took a seat in front of the microphone. We sat down next to Coach Choate—a man who has impacted the lives of so many—in front of the media to comment on what had been one of the most historic games in Bobcat history. Just minutes ago, the fans at Bobcat stadium were in a frenzy after a strip-sack of Austin Peay quarterback JaVaughn Craig was recovered by Bryce Sterk, sealing the quarterfinal playoff victory. For the first time since 1984, we were headed back to the FCS semifinals. As we sat in that room, Coach Choate made the comment that we were in "rarefied air" as a program. Coach Choate, our coaching staff, and our seniors had pioneered the



program to new territory. Bobcat football had reached a new height. As I reflect back on my time as a Bobcat, I could be brought to tears thinking about all that my time at Montana State means to me. But when I think about how being a Bobcat added value to my life, it wasn't just the big moments like these that have shaped me. It was the process of getting to these historic moments from where we were when I first stepped foot on campus in 2016 that have shaped me. Following the Austin Peay





game during my senior season, we would eventually go on to lose to North Dakota State in the FCS semifinal game. But nonetheless, Bobcat football was set on a new trajectory. The difference between how we started and how we finished was night and day. Being a part of this process, led by Coach Choate, led by the leaders in our program, supported by the great fans at Montana State and the great people of Bozeman and the state of Montana is what has molded me and added value to my life. In our final season, the question the seniors and I would often reflect on is how did we go from a 4-7 record and losing six straight Big Sky conference games in 2016 to taking the program to a height it hadn't been in decades? The answer is very simple: we built a culture based on character, accountability, toughness, and the pride and recognition of the privilege it is to be a Montana State Bobcat. Let me be clear, transforming our culture wasn't easy. It took work. But Coach Choate made very clear

that things worth doing in life aren't easy. We had to grow up, and we had to go to work. After our 2016 season, every individual in the program was discontent with the mediocrity that characterized the product we put on the field. Yet, we needed to realize that how we played on the field was simply a byproduct of how we operated off the field. We needed to change the very fabric of our program; we needed to change the way we operated. We needed to heighten our level of accountability. We needed to stop doing things the easy way. We needed to look beyond ourselves and work toward the good of the program. And that's exactly what we did. We turned our focus from the product to the process. We focused on the work we were putting in day to day and trusted that the results would follow. Not only did this transform our program, it also added value to the lives of the men who jumped on board the changing culture. Throughout this whole process, my teammates and I were

challenged like many of us never had been before. Amidst the many great days, there were difficult days. There were mornings when it was hard to get out of bed and get to work. There were things each of us had to sacrifice. Yet, throughout the process, I was driven. I was compelled to be as great as I possibly could be. What drove me? The only honest answer I can give is that I had sought to live a life that honored the Lord in every way. The desire of my heart was to obey the command of the Apostle Paul in Colossians 3:23 even as it applies to football: "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward." This biblical principle controls every ambition of my life. God created me and is the Source of every good thing in my life. Because of that, He deserves my life. He deserves a life lived for Him in every way. Because of God's goodness toward us, I desire to honor him in every way. I wanted to work hard, not so that I could make a name for myself, not so that I could receive all of the recognition, but so that through my life, He would be exalted. I was driven by the fact that no matter what I did in life, I was working for the Lord and that compelled me to give everything I had. God alone is the consuming passion of my life. Because of that, I couldn't simply do what He had given me to do with half of my effort or half of my commitment. I knew that whether it was football, my relationship with my wife, my degree, serving in the church—whatever I did, I was ultimately working for the Lord. And by God's guidance in my life, the object of my work was the turning culture of our team. I'm so thankful I was able to be a part of the changing culture because it taught me how to work hard. Being a part of the

transformation of a program developed habits in me that have shaped the man I am today. Hard work was demanded. And hard work was practiced. Turning the culture of a college football program is not like a jet ski turning in the water—it's like turning an aircraft carrier. We had to put our heads down, keep our mouths shut, pull together, and work. If we were going to start winning games, we needed to outwork our opponent. Not only in our preparation leading up to the game through practice, film, and meetings during the week; we needed to beat teams in the offseason. We wanted to be the hardest working program in the country through the work we put in during the offseason. We wanted to beat teams through conditioning, lifting, studying film, and doing extra work on

our own. This was the culture we built. We weren't perfect, we didn't build it apart from much opposition and much adversity, but we bought in, and we fought for and protected our culture. Each year we kept reaching new ceilings in our devotion to the process of being as good as we possibly could be and the results followed. And because I was working for the Lord, I gave everything I had. Playing football at Montana State raised the bar for me in terms of what it means to work hard as we fought to turn the culture and set our program on a new trajectory. My experience at Montana State shaped me for the work I am doing now as I strive to conform my life to the same biblical principles. Being a Bobcat prepared me in countless ways for a life in pastoral ministry, and I thank God for my time at Montana State.



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