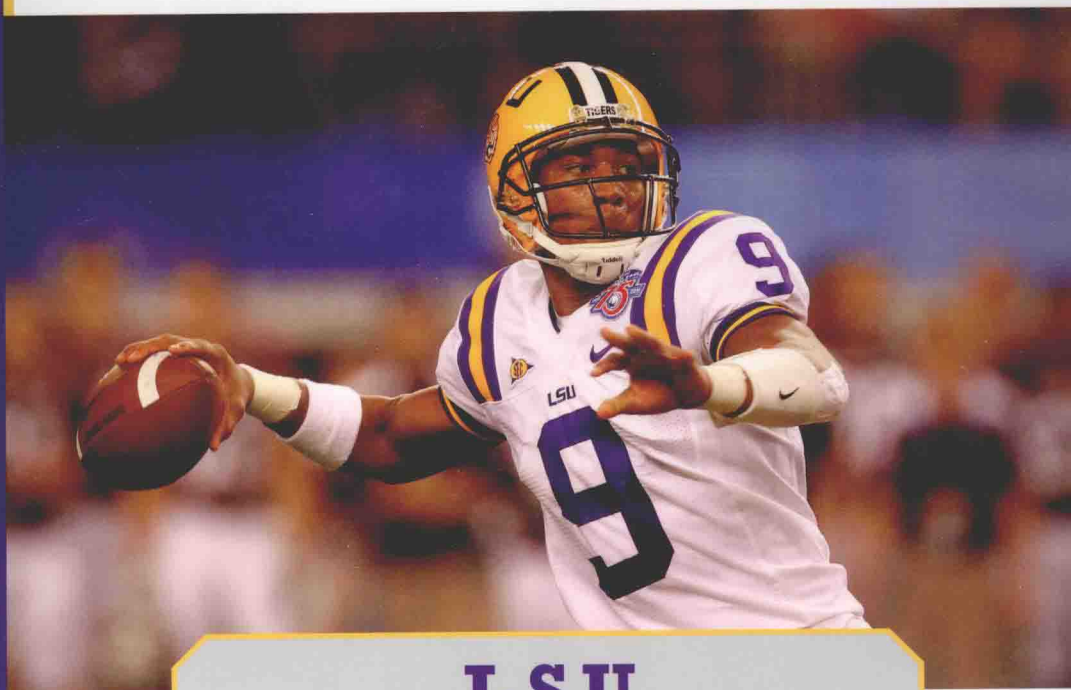


# GAME OF MY LIFE



LSU

# TIGERS

MEMORABLE STORIES OF TIGERS FOOTBALL

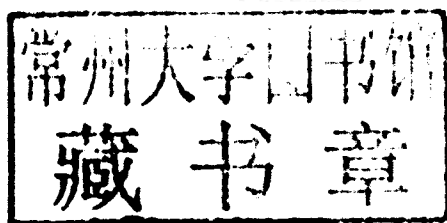
MARTY MULÉ  
FOREWORD BY PAUL DIETZEL

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# **GAME OF MY LIFE**

LSU

## **TIGERS**

For Richard Paul LaNasa, whose heart was always with the Tigers.  
And for Jo Jo, Katie, Carolina, and Conor, a litter of striped cubs.

# FOREWORD

Here we are, on the goal line with Max Fugler, Mike Anderson, and Ronnie Estay; flying downfield with Devery Henderson, Tommy Casanova and Billy Cannon; standing in the pocket with Bert Jones, Y.A. Tittle, and JaMarcus Russell. We're with Tommy Hodson the night the Tigers made the Earth shake, coming off the bench with Matt Mauck in an SEC title game, and following the blocking of Alan Faneca as we sprint with Herb Tyler to the end zone against No. 1-ranked Florida.

This living history of modern LSU football is one in which the reader goes on the field and into the huddle with the players—one in which the thoughts of central figures at the high points of their college careers and their reflections years later are as much a part of the individual stories as their memorable exploits.

I've known and coached some of these players, and it was thrilling to be back on the sidelines with them. I didn't know some of the others, but I feel I do now with a greater appreciation of their accomplishments, having lived through these games as seen by them years later—and through the writing of Marty Mulé.

Throughout my career, I've dealt with some of the finest sportswriters around—Pete Finney, Hap Glaudi, Dan Hardesty, and Bud Montet in Louisiana; and Til Ferdenzi, Allison Danzig, Tim Cohane and Red Smith in New York. Marty, a true disciple of Finney, is in their league. He has a wonderful and insightful knowledge of LSU athletics, with a writing style that conveys the feeling that “You were there” at many of the storied events of the past—not just a rote restatement of the facts but an exciting passion for the moment.

When he told me his project involved talking to the living players from LSU's most remembered games, my interest was piqued. When I read the finished work, I was delighted. Some of these games are classics that will forever live in LSU lore, as will many of these athletes.

To get the feelings of the actual players sets this book in a class by itself. You get to feel their exuberance, the thrill of victory, even the excruciating agony of a razor-thin defeat against an All-World team in which the Tigers rose mightily to the occasion.

There is no greater thrill than to be in the locker room with a team after a hard-fought game. Here, in this book, we are all there together: players, coaches, fans, and readers. It's a fun, satisfying, and meaningful experience.

Has anyone ever attended an LSU game without getting goosebumps as that Golden Band from Tigerland marches on the field playing its signature "Fan Fare"? The athletes on these pages raise goosebumps, too, just as does the spectacle and color of a Saturday night in Tiger Stadium—loud and very partisan.

The LSU passion for the Tigers goes far beyond the thrill of victory. As re-lived in these accounts of notable LSU games, the absolute frenzy generated in Tiger Stadium is without compare. This book gets to the "Heart of the Beast." This huge and constant display of emotion is the reason so many coaches feel Tiger Stadium is the most difficult site of all for opponents to play. That comes through, too, as part of this work.

But the heart of it is the faithful recounting of the exploits, the exuberance, and the disappointment of some of LSU's legends. Their inner feelings and their fights through difficulties are inspiring, remarkable moments in the lives of remarkable men.

*Game of My Life LSU Tigers* has really struck an inner chord with some of LSU's finest.

Paul Dietzel

Coach of the Fightin' Tigers, 1955-1961

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ed Cassiere for his keen eye; Jim Kleinpeter, Ted Lewis, and Mike Triplett of *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*; Butch Muir of the *Baton Rouge Advocate*; Charles Bloom of the Southeastern Conference; Peter Finney of *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, and Dan Hardesty of the *Baton Rouge State-Times*, whose on-the-scene reportage put some of these players in the games of their respective lives in clear focus.



The Chinese Bandits, colorful ancestors of modern LSU football.



# INTRODUCTION

LSU is the heart of Louisiana. John J. McKeithen, the late governor and No. 1 Tiger fan, was convinced of that.

“Even when things go bad in the Pelican State,” McKeithen said, in words recounted later on these pages, “something would happen at LSU that will lift the spirits of these sports-loving citizens.” It’s a statement backed by LSU’s across-the-board 43 national championships, the most of all Southeastern Conference schools.

It’s also a statement backed by the latest example, the gritty performance of the Tigers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina’s devastation.

Each of these games is a drama in itself, and people like Billy Cannon, Jim Taylor, JaMarcus Russell, Dalton Hilliard, Bert Jones, Tommy Casanova, Charles Alexander, and Leonard Marshall are the definition of football heroes. Some, like Ken Kavanaugh, are heroes on the field and bigger heroes in life.

It was fun to hold Ole Miss, Auburn, and Notre Dame at the goal line again, exciting to feel the Earth under Tiger Stadium shaking again, and experience the ear-splitting noise as LSU beat—finally beat—a No. 1-ranked opponent.

There may never have been an interception for the Tigers so important as Marcus Spears’ against Oklahoma in the Sugar Bowl to nail down the national championship—unless, of course, it was Jerry Joseph’s in the Cotton Bowl against Arkansas in perhaps the greatest LSU victory of all.

To relive these moments with the men who made them happen was a thrill. This wasn’t my idea, but it was one that hooked me as soon as it was proposed. This was not only an intriguing but an intoxicating project for someone who grew up hearing about the legends of LSU football, later watching and reading about those who followed, then spending a third of a century observing and reporting on yet other Tigers leaving their own indelible marks on the sports

memory bank of Louisiana. The idea of taking a personal journey through what became essentially a history of modern LSU football—eight decades from the pre-World War II era with Kavanaugh’s spectacular game against Holy Cross to Russell’s exploits at Arizona State with the horrors of Katrina as a backdrop—was more than appealing. To produce *Game of My Life: LSU* required probing the thoughts of major figures before, during, and after that event that is so embedded in their minds. It also called for putting the circumstances of the individual—and his team—at the time, the game was played in focus. Then, as important as anything, finding where they each went from that highpoint to the rest of their respective lives.

Jerry Stovall went from being an All-American at LSU to an All-Pro career with the St. Louis Cardinals, then coaching at his alma mater. He’s now CEO of a Baton Rouge sports foundation. But as much as anything, finding that his main concern upon reaching the end zone on his memorable kickoff return against Georgia Tech was his ill father-in-law was, to say the least, surprising. So was learning that Mike Anderson called the wrong defensive alignment on the goal line against Auburn, leading to the do-or-die tackle that earned him permanent reverence at LSU. Or that JaMarcus Russell spotted something during his last-gasp heroics at Arizona State that his coaches didn’t see until studying the film days later, something that allowed the Tigers to escape Arizona State with an improbable win—a victory in which Russell never had any doubt.

Thank you, Tigers, for sharing with me a glimpse of your personal athletic highlights from the Games of your Lives—and so much more.

MJM

March 15, 2006

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## CHAPTER 1

# CHARLES ALEXANDER

**LSU 56 - Oregon 17**  
**October 22, 1977 • Tiger Stadium**

Charlie Alexander was bruised, tired, and a little bewildered when he heard his name called.

Late in a game where he'd already left his mark, Alexander was ordered back on the field where the gathering of reserves who had been playing since midway through the third quarter awaited.

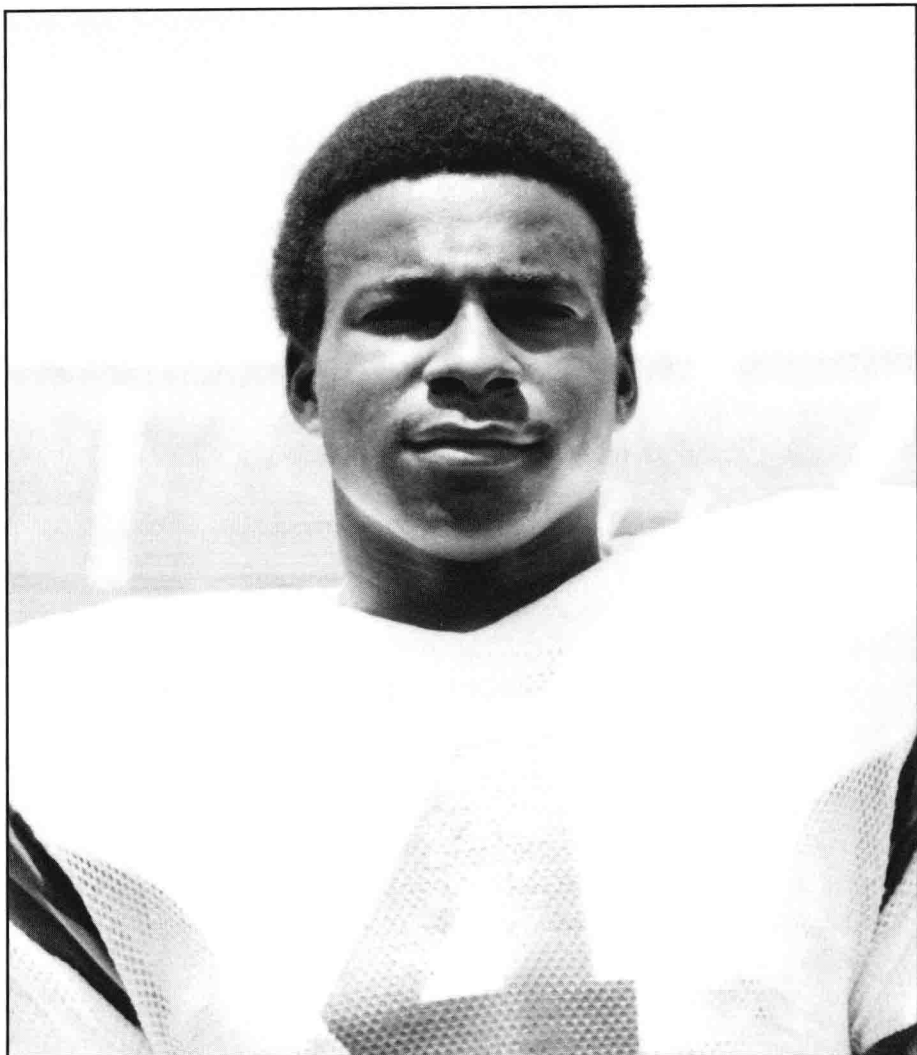
On the game's last play, Alexander bolted two yards into the end zone for a touchdown.

His name was now etched in the LSU record book. No Tiger had ever before run for four touchdowns. In fact, no Tiger had ever before had as many carries, 31, or run for as many yards, 237, as Alexander did that night. More than a quarter-century would pass before another Tiger would.

"I didn't know why I was sent back," Alexander said. "But I was happy to know I had done something that had never been done here before."

But Rich Brooks wasn't happy. "I wish that he'd broken his leg," the Ducks' coach said sourly, believing LSU had run up the score on him.

Paul Manasseh, the Tigers' sports information director, was to blame. McClendon sat Alexander down after he passed Terry Robiskie's



No. 4 was "Alexander the Great" to the Tigers.

## CHARLES ALEXANDER

one-year-old rushing record of 214 yards. Manasseh realized the junior had an opportunity to set the school record for touchdowns rushing, and called down to the field to inform McClendon, who immediately sent his tailback into the game.

"I did it because I have an obligation to my team," McClendon said later. "I have an obligation to my team and to Charles. I apologized to Coach Brooks and our fans after we did it, but you just don't know when a chance like that will come along again."

Not often—that school record has been equaled and surpassed just one time since.

The oddity is that LSU, 4-2 afterward, did not play an exceptional game against Brooks' 1-5 Ducks. LSU lost five fumbles, none initiated by contact. Oregon took a 7-0 lead before the Tigers got untracked and took a 21-7 lead by the half, then blew it open in the second half, when Alexander scored all his touchdowns on jaunts of 2, 20, 4, and 2 yards. All told, LSU amassed a school-record 503 yards rushing, which would be an attention-drawing effort against anybody, even against tall weeds.

Alexander, who had averaged 7.6 yards against the Ducks, was Brooks' biggest problem, the Oregon coach said later.

"We couldn't stop him," Brooks admitted. "We tried, but he's just a tremendous back. There might not be a better one around."

\* \* \*

St. Mark wrote: "One came running."

That was the gospel at LSU in the mid-1970s, the memorable years of Alexander in the Tiger backfield.

He wasn't from Macedonia—he came out of Galveston, Texas—but at LSU, he was Alexander the Great, a runner who left nine SEC records and 27 LSU records in his wake.

Alexander ranks with the very best who ever carried a ball at LSU—Doc Fenton, Steve Van Buren, Jimmy Taylor, Billy Cannon, Jerry Stovall, Dalton Hilliard, Kevin Faulk.

"He looks good in a hotel lobby," former Dallas Cowboys personnel director Gil Brandt sighed.

## GAME OF MY LIFE: LSU TIGERS

Yet, no one had to come from so far behind to make a dent on the charts. To say the 6-foot, 1-inch, 215-pound Alexander had an inauspicious start would be understating the obvious. In his first two varsity games, as the backup to Terry Robiskie, Alexander had a net gain of one yard in 16 carries against Nebraska and Texas A&M.

By comparison, Alexander's teammate Robiskie, at the same point in his Tiger career, had 77 rushing yards. Billy Cannon had 211, Art Cantrelle 103, Brad Davis 53. By the end of the '75 season, however, Alexander had made inroads, slight though they may have seemed at the time. An 81-yard game against Tulane in the finale gave Alexander 301 yards on 108 carries as a freshman.

"Against Nebraska [a 10-7 loss] he carried the ball a total of eight times for a minus-two yards. McClendon recalled. "In the dressing room, I patted him on the back and said, 'Charlie, things are going to get better.' He just looked at me and didn't say a word. Then came that real fine bunch from Texas A&M [a 39-8 defeat], and he carried eight times for plus-three [yards]. So here's a total of 16 carries for one yard. I kept patting him on the back and saying, 'Things are going to get better.' Now we can laugh, look back, and say that things really did get better."

That they did.

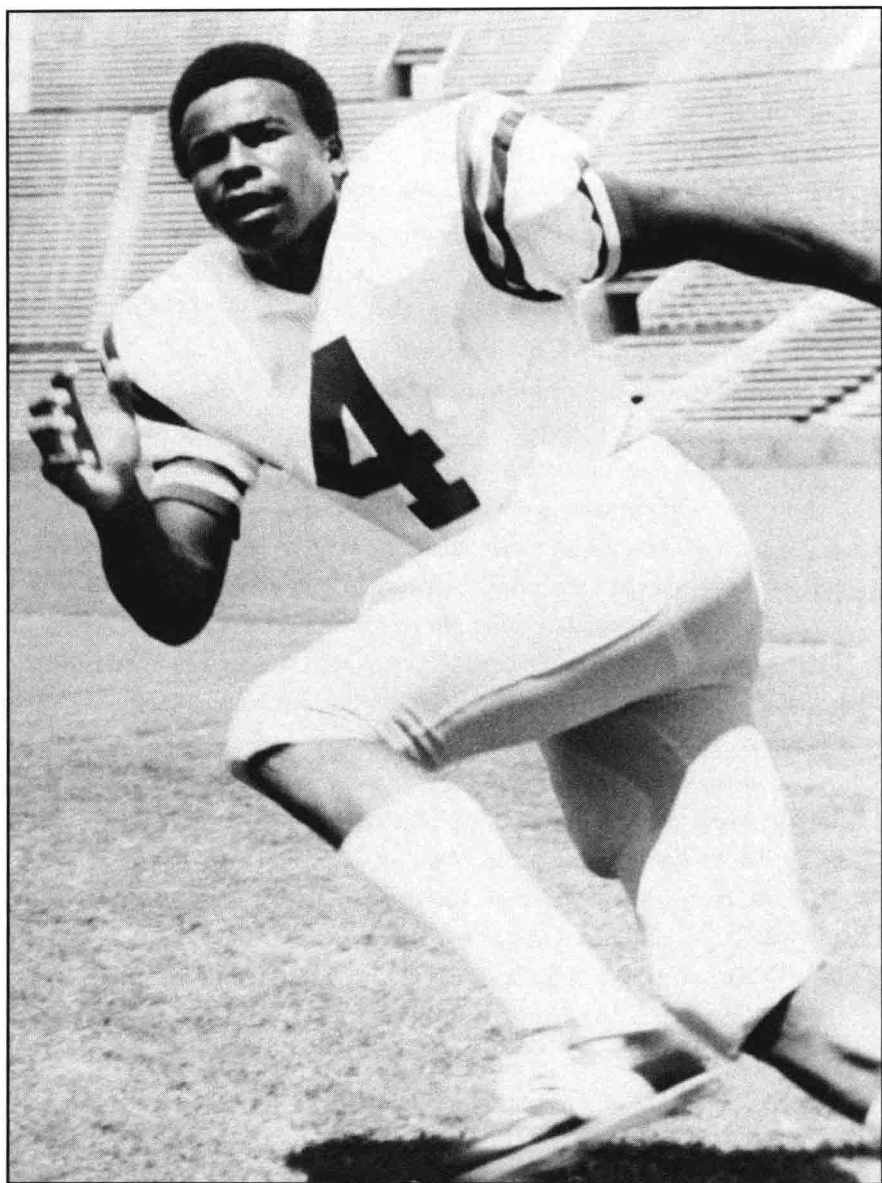
Alexander's first 100-yard-plus performance came against Vanderbilt (152) in the fifth game of his sophomore year. A 138-yard game against Ole Miss and 141 against Utah filled out the muscular Texan's seasonal stats to 876 yards on 155 carries as the Tigers began to depend more and more on their hammerin' reserve tailback.

Flashes of immense potential began to show as Alexander spelled Robiskie. "If he ever learns to run under control," observers said, "Alexander could develop into more than just a good back." He blossomed just when LSU needed it most, spearheading the Tigers to their first bowl in three years, the Sun Bowl in El Paso.

To compound matters, the 1977 Tiger defense bore little resemblance to the brick walls upon which McClendon's reputation was built. Possession, buying time for the defense, became as much the responsibility of the offense as scoring.

"The Root Hogs," the offensive line composed of men who were far more students than athletes (including tackle Robert Dugas, now an





Statisticians had a hard time keeping up with Charles Alexander.