

THE MOMENT, THE MAN - DEC. 12, 1983 - THE DEATH OF REX DOCKERY

Commercial Appeal, The (Memphis, TN) (Published as The Commercial Appeal) - December 12, 2003

- Author/Byline: Story by Zack McMillin
- Edition: Final
- Section: News
- Page: A1

A long, long time ago

I can still remember how

That music used to make me smile

And I knew if I had my chance

That I could make those people dance

And maybe they'd be happy for a while

The chant began to build, and the players began clapping and a football team drunk on the giddiness that comes with newfound winning circled round their coach.

Memphis State had just thumped old rival Louisville, 45-7, and that meant a 6-4-1 record for the 1983 squad. It meant the first winning season in six years and vindicated their coach for coming from Texas Tech, showed he wasn't loony for talking about chasing national titles even during a 17-game losing streak.

It also meant that coach, Rex Dockery, had a promise to keep, right there in Louisville, right there on the icy turf.

"County Fair! County Fair! County Fair!" came the cry, and pretty soon Rozelle Clayton was out in front, pumping his fists and doing a jig and Dockery's upside-down smile grew even wider.

And next thing they knew, their coach was down and back up, down and back up and flopping and rolling through the grass drills they called the County Fair.

When he finished, Clayton lifted Dockery in a bearhug and the players carried him to the cheers of fans who had traveled up for the Tigers' Thanksgiving Day finale.

Rex's wife, Wallene, marveled at the joy her husband had created. "It was an incredible moment," she says.

It has been 20 years since Rex Dockery had folks in this city believing the football program was on the verge of great things, and since his untimely death, the program has struggled to regain that optimism. The 2003 Tiger football team is 8-4, headed to the program's first bowl game since 1971 and returning almost all of their key players next season.

Like Tommy West, the team's current coach, Dockery played at Tennessee, and, like West, used his disarming personality to charm the city and tap into Memphis's fertile recruiting market.

"It was very similar to the feeling going on here right now," says Bob Winn, the football team's media relations director since 1976. "It was euphoria and a feeling that, 'Hey, we've turned the corner and this is the guy to take us to the promised land.'"

That was the feeling on Dec. 12, 1983, when Rex prepared to leave his Germantown home. He teased his 8-year-old son, Dee, making him surrender a kiss goodbye before catching the school bus, and then Wallene recalls Rex saying he hadn't decided whether to drive to that night's Lawrenceburg Quarterback Club meeting in Middle Tennessee or fly in a booster's private plane.

"A voice in the back of my head said, 'Wallene, you'll never see him again,'" she says. "But, you know, we were in a hurry, both of us trying to get to work, and it's one of those things you put out of your mind."

Winn remembers seeing Dockery later that morning and hearing about the latest recruiting victory. Everything seemed right in the world of Rex Dockery, and he was looking forward to giving his speech in Lawrenceburg.

"You start getting that taste of winning, and the atmosphere changes," says Danny Sparkman, the quarterback in 1983. "The water tastes better. The air smells fresher."

But February made me shiver

With every paper I'd deliver

Bad news on the doorstep

I couldn't take one more step

It would be one of the coldest Decembers ever in Memphis, but on Dec. 12, it was merely overcast and in the low 40s when Glenn Jones lifted his Piper Seneca six-seater into the sky.

The flight plan listed five passengers for the trip to Lawrenceburg.

Jones, the pilot, was a devoted member of the Highland Hundred, the football booster club, and he owned a local oil company.

Charles Greenhill, a star freshman defensive back for the Tigers, had won the club's state player of the year award in 1982, as a senior at Frayser High. Many considered him one of the best athletes to come through the city's high school ranks, a four-sport star who, at 18, already possessed NFL size and speed.

Chris Faros, the 31-year-old offensive coordinator, had seen the Tigers put 37 points on Ole Miss and 45 on Louisville and watched Danny Sparkman become one of the best passers in school history.

Jeff Womack, a Tiger running back and Lawrenceburg's 1981 state player of the year, had planned to take the flight, but he didn't like the look of the clouds. Even though it meant a chance to see folks close to home - Womack was from McMinnville - he decided to stay in Memphis.

But clouds never did much to discourage Rex Dockery, the 41-year-old Tiger coach who looked like Huck Finn, collected friends like Will Rogers and applied Norman Vincent Peale's philosophy to everything he did.

"If you get up every mornin'," he would tell people in his East Tennessee twang, "smile until 10 a.m., and believe good things are gonna happen, you'll be surprised how well your day'll go."

To live with Rex, then, was to always look for the positive, and so when Wallene carried Dee home from basketball practice, she'd forgotten about the dread feeling that hit her that morning. Dee looked forward to watching the "Monday Night Football" game between the Green Bay Packers and Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Long before cell phones and the Internet had transformed relationships into a series of hourly updates, they had no way of contacting Rex, no way of knowing he had not yet arrived at the Lawrenceburg Quarterback Club.

Fred Pancoast, the Tiger football coach who logged winning seasons in the early '70s, was the president of the club and had talked to Dockery earlier in the day. Maybe misty weather and the low ceiling of clouds had delayed his keynote speaker.

About 10 miles outside Lawrenceburg, where folks live among the rolling farmland, many residents heard the dull drone of a plane's engine, flying low.

It brought many outside their homes, and they saw a small blue-and-white plane, careening nose first through the sky before crashing hard into a clearing, not far from the woods.

James Earl Estes and his wife ran to the scene. "Four bodies is all we saw," Estes would later tell a reporter.

And no movement.

It was about a half-hour after sunset, at 5:25 p.m., when the first call came to the Lawrence County Sheriff's Department.

From there, word spread, first to Nashville's news organizations and then to Memphis.

Jeff Walker, a lineman who would play seven seasons in the NFL, was at Gold's Gym in Eastgate when he found out. He drove so fast back to campus that a policeman pulled him over.

"I said, 'It's an emergency,' and then I began to get emotional," Walker says.

The policeman gave Walker an escort back to campus.

"There were three or four hundred people already out in the parking lot," Walker says. "It was just an unbelievable scene. Lots of emotions. Lots of crying."

Across town, the doorbell rang and a tow-headed 8-year-old boy got up from watching "Monday Night Football" to answer the door.

But Dee Dockery had no idea why two Germantown policemen stood on the front porch.

His mother, coming down the stairs, saw them, and remembered her premonition.

"She knew right away, something had happened," says Dee, who is now a doctor in Birmingham.

The couple's other son, Trey, lived in the dorms on campus and was a team manager. By the time he got to the house, it was filled with people.

Dee remembers falling to sleep in his parents' bedroom, next to his mother, with a dozen or so people still in the room.

"What about Dee?" he recalls hearing someone say. "He's so young."

Back at the campus, a priest, Monsignor Paul Clunan, tried to help with the grief.

"It was the day time stopped," says Greg Sanders, a Memphis policeman who then was a senior defensive back. "You could not believe it. It was like losing your father or your brother."

By that weekend, the temperature in Memphis hit 20, and two weeks later, the Mississippi River had turned into a flotilla of ice.

On Dec. 25, the thermometer hit zero. In the recorded history of Memphis, there has never been a colder Christmas Day.

I can't remember if I cried

When I read about his widowed bride

But something touched me deep inside

The day the music died.

To this day, Bob Winn has difficulty recalling the joy that filled so much of the 1983 season. A tragic coda taints the victory over Ole Miss, the winning record, the Thanksgiving celebration at Louisville.

A few thousand people attended the memorial service at the Mid-South Coliseum, and the team took a bus to Cleveland, Tenn., to help bury their coach.

Frayser High hosted Greenhill's funeral, Faros was returned to his hometown of Kansas City and Jones was laid to rest in Memphis. It is still unclear why the plane crashed.

Tiger athletic director Charles Cavagnaro settled on two finalists to replace Dockery: Mack Brown of Appalachian State and Rey Dempsey of Southern Illinois.

He chose Dempsey, who took the Dockery talent to a 5-1-1 start in 1984 before dissension and mistrust led to a four-game losing streak. Dempsey would win only two of his final 15 games before resigning in 1985.

Brown is now the coach at the University of Texas.

For Tiger fans, it is hard not to wonder what might have been.

Walker recalls a conversation he had with Florida State coach Bobby Bowden over the summer while Bowden was watching his son, Dallas, at a quarterback camp.

"If Rex hadn't had that tragic accident," Bowden told Walker, "y'all could've been on the same pattern we were on."

Instead, the Tigers defined mediocrity over the next 19 seasons, with moments of joy accompanying wins over a Florida here or an Alabama there. Even in 1996, when the Tigers beat Tennessee, it was just one of four wins.

That is why 2003 feels so different for Tiger fans, because it has been 20 years since winning seemed not only possible but probable, 20 years since, as Winn puts it, "There's light at the end of the tunnel and we know it's not a train."

For Rex's widow, Wallene, this winning season seems to evoke even more memories as she and her family remember the plane crash. She and her husband of three years, Tommy Leek, are in Cleveland, Tenn., today, and they will visit Rex's grave with his father, John, and sister, Pam.

Wallene works for New York Life, selling insurance, among other things, and, when she's back in town, she hears many Tiger fans saying the same thing.

Tommy West sure reminds them of Rex Dockery.

"People say it's like having Rex back again," Wallene says. "It makes me feel good to hear people say that."

Wallene attended the Tigers' victory over East Carolina on Nov. 1, and sent West an E-mail he later posted in the Tigers' new locker room.

As you probably know, Rex's last season 20 years ago in 1983 was 6-4-1 . . . and no coach at the U of M has matched that record since. I just wanted you to know that I can't think of anything that would please me more than you, your staff and your 2003 Tigers beating that record and going to a bowl game . . .

It has taken 20 years, but the Tigers are finally fulfilling the promise that an eager coach from East Tennessee always predicted for them.

It's enough to make you wake up smiling.

INFORMATION BOX: By Zack McMillin

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

-- Rex Dockery's wife, Wallene Dockery Leek, is a licensed agent for New York Life and lives in Nashville with her husband of three years, Tommy.

-- Her older son, Trey Dockery, who was adopted by Rex, works as a system administrator in Miami for FedEx Express and has two sons, Chase, 8, and Dylan, 6.

-- Dee Dockery, their younger son, is a graduate of the University of Tennessee and Emory Medical School and is doing his residency at University of Alabama-Birmingham. He and his wife, Braxton Flautt, have a year-old daughter, Lyles. Rex's father, John, and sister, Pam, both remain in his hometown of Cleveland, Tenn.

-- Chris Faros's wife, Pam Faros Russell, remarried seven months after the accident to another Tiger assistant, Rusty Russell. They live in Statesboro, Ga., where Rusty is a defensive coordinator for Georgia Southern.

-- Brian Faros, Chris's eldest child, is a computer engineer in Kansas City and lives a mile from Chris's mother, whom Pam calls one of her best friends.

-- His older daughter, Jill, is married, teaches elementary school and is expecting her first child in June.

-- Angie, his younger daughter, is a nurse living in Dallas. Pam and Rusty have two daughters, Audrey, a freshman at Georgia, and Charlee, a freshman in high school.

-- Charles Greenhill's mother, Sylvia Greenhill-Watkins, owns a day care center in Frayser, Sylvia's Hug-A-Baby. Greenhill's twin sisters, La-Dora and La-Donna, still live in Memphis, and he also has a 15-year-old sister, LaTeisa.

-- Glenn Jones's widow, Marty Jones Dobson, is married to Bill Dobson and lives in Hot Springs Village, Ark.

-- Glenn and Marty's two children, Sue Madden and Pat Jones, live in Memphis. Sue is the office manager for the Crump Firm and has a 16-year-old daughter, Rachel. Pat is an electrician with a 4-month-old son, Jacob Wesley. Jimmie Jones, Glenn's brother, is still active in the Highland Hundred, and his sister, Linda Dungan, lives in Enid, Miss.

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- Caption: photo (3)File photosMemphis State coach Rex Dockery lights up the fans at a pep rally on Sept. 3, 1983, a day of victory over Ole Miss. "It was euphoria," says team publicist Bob Winn of a winning feeling - also being felt today.The 37-17 win over Ole Miss in 1983 lifts Tiger spirits and coach Rex Dockery, too. But a plane crash in December extinguished the hopes that rode with his presence.CAPTION: Wallene Leek

- Memo: See Information Box at end of text

• *Index terms:* COLLEGE FOOTBALL OFFICIAL DEATH ANNIVERSARY MEMPHIS HISTORY FAMILY NAMELIST AIRPLANE ACCIDENT FATAL REACTION

• *Record:* OFF68A626EAB5E1B

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