



HarperCollins e-books



The Rise of the
Bulldogs

Dan Taylor

THE RISE OF THE BULLDOGS

THE UNTOLD STORY OF
ONE OF THE GREATEST
UPSETS OF ALL TIME

Dan Taylor



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To Thomas J. McWilliam
For igniting the flame

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CHAPTER 1

Taken by Storm

JUNE 24, 2008—One couldn't fault many among the Fresno State fans if they felt that the morning portended a gloomy game result. Dark clouds had brought a thunderstorm to Rosenblatt Stadium, delaying the game by half an hour. Hours after losing the first game of the best-of-three national championship series to the University of Georgia, Fresno State was in serious trouble. The Bulldogs were in a 5–0 deficit headed to the bottom of the third inning.

Lose this game, and the Cinderella hopes of a national championship would be over. The supportive signs had been rolled up. The voices of Fresno State's fans among the crowd of 17,223 were now silent. The Bulldogs had shocked the eight-team College World Series field by jumping quickly into the winner's bracket with a seventeen-run outburst to defeat Rice. Now they had added even more wonder to

their improbable run with two wins over second-seeded University of North Carolina to reach the title series.

Georgia had blitzed through their bracket play to reach this game with a 4–0 record. They showed their might by jumping on Fresno State's starting pitcher, Justin Miller, scoring five runs in the game's first two and two-thirds innings.

While it may have gone unnoticed by most fans, a small spark was lit in the Fresno State dugout in the top of the third inning. When Georgia chased Miller from the game with a run-scoring two-out rally, Fresno State's head coach, Mike Batesole, brought Holden Sprague on in relief. His challenge was to face Georgia's dangerous Ryan Peisel. Sprague battled the .341 hitter and Colorado Rockies draft pick to a full count before the Fresno State pitcher won the duel, getting a swinging strike three to end the threat and the inning.

In the bull pen, Mike Mayne was especially pleased. Since becoming Fresno State's fourth pitching coach in four years back in November, he had invested considerable time and teaching to develop Holden Sprague into an effective and reliable contributor.

Mayne's belief in Sprague and the confidence of his teammates grew greatly late in the season. Following the season-ending injury to Fresno State's heralded pitcher Tanner Scheppers in mid-May, Sprague had filled the void and come through with a series of big outings.

So strong was Mayne's belief in Sprague that a dugout shouting match broke out between pitching coach and head coach during the team's opening game of the Long Beach regional in May. At issue was a disagreement between the two as to whether Sprague was the correct relief pitching choice.

Rosenblatt Stadium stirred to life in the bottom of the third inning. Steve Detwiler, courageously playing with a torn ligament in his left thumb, opened the inning with a single. After Jordan Ribera struck out and Danny Munoz walked, Gavin Hedstrom singled to load the bases.

The fans' signs were quickly unfurled; their voices awakened as the faithful sought to spur their Bulldogs. Suddenly a wild pitch skipped past the Georgia catcher. Detwiler raced home and scored the first Fresno State run.

Erik Wetzel, ever patient at the plate, worked the count to three-and-two before winning the duel and drawing a walk. That brought the Western Athletic Conference player of the year, Steve Susdorf, to the plate. Opportunity lay before him to draw the Bulldogs closer and earn a dog paw.

Susdorf was among a number of Fresno State players to think the dog paws were a corny idea. Mike Batesole had developed a theory through considerable research. He told his players his study showed that five key actions contribute to winning a game. Throughout the season any time a player produced one of those key actions, he had the sticker of a dog paw affixed to his batting helmet if Fresno State won the game.

A single by Susdorf could bring in two runs and give Fresno State three in the inning. That would meet Batesole's criteria for a big inning and earn a dog paw for the senior.

Georgia's pitcher was struggling with his control. Both Muno and Wetzel had successfully worked full counts. Now he had fallen behind three balls and one strike to Susdorf. The Academic All-American thought he might get a hittable fastball in this situation. He fixed his gaze on the pitcher's release point.

The offering was what he wanted and thrown where he wanted. Susdorf reacted, drilling it through the right side for a single. Hedstrom and Muno both dashed home to score. Georgia's once five-run lead was now just two. It was 5-3, with only one out in the inning.

Teammates leaned over the dugout railing to shout, clap, and show their excitement at Susdorf's clutch hit. Fresno State's fans were on their feet all around Rosenblatt Stadium, enlivened by the rally.

Susdorf's hit produced a Georgia pitching change. Alan Ahmady, the first Bulldog to face the new Georgia pitcher, popped out to first base. Two outs. Tommy Mendonca was coming to the plate with two runners on.

Mendonca had enjoyed a hitting renaissance in Omaha. Throughout the regular season he amassed a staggering number of strikeouts. Few Bulldogs had endured the amount of failure and frustration that burdened Mendonca at the plate during the season. At one point there was even talk of benching him. However, Mendonca's fielding skills were too good and too valuable for him to be removed from the lineup.

Opposing pitchers in Omaha were feeding Mendonca a steady diet of fastballs. Breaking balls, which his swing flaws left him susceptible to, were few and far between. For Mendonca and several teammates, this proved manna from above.

The previous night Mendonca homered. In their bracket elimination game, his three hits and four runs driven in helped send Fresno State into the title series.

From his seat in the stands, Mendonca's father, Ray, rose to his feet. A night earlier, rare negativity out of Ray Mendonca evoked the wrath of his brother. Following the loss to Georgia, Ray Mendonca said he had a bad feeling this game might be the end of the team's miracle run. His brother reacted angrily and chastised him for making the suggestion. But now as son Tommy settled into the batter's box, Ray Mendonca turned to his wife, Tami, and said, "He's going to swing at the first pitch. Watch."

Tommy Mendonca studied the Georgia pitcher. All around the ballpark Fresno State fans were shouting encouragement. Georgia's fans were trying to vocally implore their heroes, too. The ESPN cameras focused in on the challenge.

Steve Susdorf took his three-step lead off of first base. Erik Wetzel advanced cautiously from third base. The Georgia pitcher took a peek

at both, ready to make a quick throw should either stray too far from the bag. Satisfied, the pitcher then turned his concentration to his catcher's glove. He raised his left leg, rocked into his motion, and delivered the pitch.

Mendonca's eyes quickly read the pitch, a hittable curveball bending its way into the strike zone, and his hands reacted. Swiftly they whipped the bat through the hitting zone, the top hand gently rolling over as his swing reached midbody. The twist of his right hip brought his lower body around, thrusting the bat across the plane of home plate, where it made contact with the ball. The off-white sphere exploded off Mendonca's aluminum bat. Launched high into the air toward right field, it brought screams, shouts, and cheers from the seventeen thousand fans who encircled the field in the stands.

The Georgia right fielder ran toward the outfield wall, his eyes following the flight of the ball. Its high arc looked to one and all as though it would carry the ball into the stands. When it did, Fresno State players erupted, rushing from the dugout to home plate. There they celebrated their teammate's game-changing three-run home run. As Mendonca jogged the base paths, he soaked in the loudest cheers his hitting had ever produced in a baseball stadium. The ninety-foot trot from third base to home plate saw teammates bursting with excitement.

Georgia's five-run lead was gone. Mendonca's three-run blast capped a stirring comeback. It gave Fresno State a 6–5 lead. Brimming with confidence from their big inning, Fresno State exploded again. The Bulldogs scored five times in the fourth inning. They added four more runs an inning later. By the time the game reached the sixth inning, Fresno State had scored fifteen runs. At game's end they had scored even more to win by a staggering 19–10.

Just as in the Long Beach regional, in the Super Regional, and in College World Series bracket play, Fresno State managed to fight back from within one loss of elimination.

There was jubilation among the hundreds of Fresno State fans at Rosenblatt Stadium. Many wore T-shirts, and others displayed signs emblazoned with the Bulldogs' new postseason slogan: "Underdogs to Wonderdogs."

The triumph allowed them what-if thoughts. In less than twenty-four hours they would return to Rosenblatt Stadium with hopes of witnessing the Bulldogs cap a mutinous run through college baseball's elite and capture the most improbable national championship in collegiate sports history.

CHAPTER 2

Coming Back to What?

NOVEMBER 11, 2007—The chill of a Central Valley winter belied the summertime activity taking place within Beiden Field. In one area, returning all-conference outfielder Steve Susdorf was whacking balls off of a three-foot-high rubber tee, honing his swing. Many were surprised he had turned down a fifty-thousand-dollar signing bonus and contract offer from the Detroit Tigers to return for his final season at Fresno State.

In the outfield, pitchers Clayton Allison, Justin Wilson, Justin Miller, and Tanner Scheppers were playing long-toss, stretching tight muscles and building arm strength for the season ahead. The infielders picked batted balls off the infield dirt. The throws from the third baseman, Tommy Mendonca, from the shortstop, Todd Sandell, and from the returning second baseman, Erik Wetzel, smacked the leather glove held out as a target by Alan Ahmady at first base.

Emerging from the dugout, Brandon Burke produced a crunching sound as each step forced metal cleats into the mixture of rock and dirt that made up the field-encircling warning track. These were steps Burke never expected to take. Four months earlier he had declared himself through with baseball. Burke was frustrated with his head coach, blaming him for not being drafted and angry that a transfer wish had been refused.

During his three seasons at Fresno State, Burke and Mike Batesole clashed repeatedly. In his freshman year Burke was among players who encouraged a revolt of sorts when the coach punished the team over poor play. That afternoon Batesole had launched into the players with a verbal tirade, telling them they were an embarrassment. He placed their locker room and training facilities off-limits and ordered them to run for the duration of the day's practice. Burke joined two others in encouraging their teammates to defy their coach and walk out of Beiden Field. They did so, refusing to complete the ordered running. Their walkout briefly threatened the playing of a game against Cal Poly. Players considered forfeiting the game in protest of their coach's action.

A starting pitcher at the time of the confrontation, Burke was soon removed from the rotation. Despite having a winning record at that stage of the season, he would never again be the starting pitcher in a game for Fresno State. He believed the move was retaliatory.

Leaving Fresno State was not a new idea to Burke, nor was he alone among Bulldog players seeking a different playing environment. The seeds of his unhappiness were sewn when Batesole and his pitching coach, Tim Montez, parted ways in July 2005. Many of the seniors on the 2008 team had been recruited by Montez. They liked him, felt he was an effective teacher, and were not happy with the treatment—real or perceived—that sent him from the program.

Montez's departure gave Burke cause to contemplate leaving. After much thought over the summer, he elected to return. An eight-win

sophomore season generated hope that he would be chosen in the draft following his junior year. Burke made up his mind that if he was chosen, he would definitely sign and leave Fresno State behind. When the June 2007 draft concluded, Burke had not been picked. Burke stewed and ultimately decided he'd had it with playing at Fresno State.

Shortly after the season ended, Burke contacted former high school and summer-league teammates to explore the possibility of a transfer to another school. He looked into enrolling at a school closer to his San Diego–area home. When he discussed leaving with Mike Batesole, the coach refused to release the pitcher from his scholarship. Burke would watch fellow pitchers Eric Otterson and Drew Gagnier leave the program. The parents of another teammate also desperate to leave enlisted help from an attorney and gained the release sought by their son. Brandon Burke didn't have such resources and, thus, reached a more sobering decision: quit baseball.

Back home in southern California during summer break, Burke discussed his feelings with his parents. Mike and Debbie Burke had instilled in their four children a "live life to the fullest" attitude. Brandon learned the value of the philosophy from his mother's successful fight against cancer. There were times, however, when Brandon Burke enjoyed life a little more than his college coaches wished.

Talkative and opinionated, he earned respect for his views from several of his teammates. His head coach often felt differently, and a point came in Burke's junior season after which coach and pitcher rarely spoke. At the Western Athletic Conference championship in the spring of 2007, Burke slipped away from the team hotel and went drinking. He was later caught by his coach. From that day forward Batesole would attempt to prevent repeat incidents by collecting each player's driver's license when the team played on the road.

Discouraged that his attempt to leave Fresno State and play at another school had been denied, Brandon Burke decided to walk away

from the game at which he had excelled since his youth. He would seek fun and enjoyment through other means—at least, that’s what he told his dad. But Mike Burke hoped his words would point his son in a different direction. Cancer was back in the Burke household. His mother had fought it successfully. This time it was Mike who was being attacked. His message to his son was to be happy. He reminded Brandon he had already spent three years playing and studying at Fresno State and was not far from finishing. Mike Burke wanted his son to get his degree. He suggested Brandon give baseball at Fresno State one last try. If he didn’t like the way things were going by spring, he could quit and come home. Brandon relented, and when summer ended, he packed his belongings and traveled north to Fresno.

Shortly after arriving to begin the fall semester, Brandon Burke and fellow pitchers learned that the program’s latest pitching coach had resigned. This was the third pitching coach to leave Fresno State in three years. Ted Silva’s resignation to become pitching coach at UC Irvine meant that every pitcher on the Fresno State staff would have learned from a different pitching coach in each of their seasons at the school. The new pitching coach would be the fourth to tutor Burke and fellow senior Jason Breckley in as many years at Fresno State.

With no one on staff to coach the pitchers once fall practice began, Burke and fellow senior Clayton Allison assumed leadership of the group. Allison oversaw the conditioning sessions. Burke led the throwing sessions and worked with teammates on pitching mechanics. All the while the group wondered whom Batesole would hire to tutor them in the new season.

During drills with the pitchers it became clear there was considerable talent on the staff. In fact, there was an impressive collection of talent all around Beiden Field. Still, that did little to generate enthusiasm within Brandon Burke. He had seen an immensely talented 2006 Fresno State team fail to fulfill its potential.

Throughout fall workouts, the talent of Tanner Scheppers impressed his teammates. Inserted into the starting rotation during the second half of the 2007 season, Scheppers finished strong and capped his development with a tremendous performance in the NCAA regionals. A power pitcher, Scheppers had seen his control improve while playing amateur ball over the summer. Scheppers and Burke talked at length about developing personas—adopting a habit or trait that would project command and confidence to opposing hitters.

Clayton Allison was an imposing six feet five inches tall and 230 pounds. He had played linebacker and tight end on his high school football team and brought a football-like tenacity to the mound. Coaches in the Western Athletic Conference tabbed the right-hander the preseason pitcher of the year. Allison and Scheppers would anchor the Bulldogs' staff. Justin Wilson had won nine games as a sophomore in 2007 and had another spot in the rotation nailed down.

The league's new schedule format added a fourth game to each conference series. It meant coaches in the WAC would need four starting pitchers instead of the three-man rotations previously used. As much as Burke hoped to return to a starting role, it was not to be. Batesole had recruited a junior college pitcher, Justin Miller, from Bakersfield College, to fill the fourth slot. Miller was a six-foot five-inch right-hander with a live slider that the coach thought highly of.

With the four starters identified, it was the bull pen that was going to take work assembling. Jason Breckley was projected as the closer. Most roles were undefined, and the seven pitchers challenging to fill the various relief roles were anxious to get a pitching coach on board and begin the competition for attention and innings.

Time was short. It was early November. The season was less than ninety days away. With players soon heading home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the monthlong semester break, there wasn't going to be much practice time available to get a new pitching coach up to speed and familiar with the staff.

Gathered one mid-November afternoon, several of the pitchers saw their head coach with a gray-haired man. “Who’s the old dude?” Burke wondered aloud to a teammate. Like his fellow pitchers, he was about to be introduced to their new pitching coach, Mike Mayne—a man who would have a profound impact on his life.

CHAPTER 3

An Unearthed Gem

FEBRUARY 23, 2008—A persistent rain left puddles on and around Fresno State’s Beiden Field. While the rain did not fall hard enough to call off or even delay the Bulldogs’ season opener with UC Davis, the performance of the Fresno State baseball team did dampen the enthusiasm of more than a few fans who were on hand. Despite the inclement weather, a number of spectators turned out to see for themselves a team heralded as “special” by its head coach, Mike Batesole, during the off-season.

Preseason practice produced a lineup centered on returnees. Erik Wetzel, a junior, was given the responsibility of batting leadoff. He would play second base. Steve Detwiler, a hitter with promise, would start the season opener in right field. He was written into the second spot in the batting order. Much was expected of Steve Susdorf. Voted