

SUGAR BEAR

If you had a guarantee that you could compete for ten years as a professional athlete, but you knew it would shorten your life by ten years, would you still do it?

Most of us asked ourselves a variation of that question in the early '70s. And all of us answered yes. When I say all of us, I'm mostly talking about football players, because that's the game I know best. But I believe it's a sentiment that's true across the spectrum of sport, from track and field to baseball to bicycle racing. Heck, even golf is dirty. For that matter, so is Hollywood.

Let's be honest, a lot of us got our wish: early death. But some of us sacrificed a heck of a lot more than ten years. Some lost twenty. I'm guessing that I lost at least twenty-five. Plenty of guys robbed themselves of more than that, including a couple of my teammates who regrettably surrendered half their lives.

Like it or not, so did Sugar Bear. I admit to having only superficial interaction with him, but our careers overlapped, and our profiles had some similarities. I know, the evidence is circumstantial, but it fits a pattern that's too convincing to ignore. It pains me to say it because he was in a completely different category than everyone else. Notably, it was never alleged that he engaged in criminal aggression or sexual mischief away from the playing field like many of his peers. In the public's eye, he was above reproach because of the likeability factor. Many of us had villainous reputations, but not Sugar Bear. He didn't just accumulate Player of the Year trophies; he collected Man of the Year awards. You don't get a nickname like Sugar Bear because folks dislike you.

Now, before I delve too much into speculation, I'll dispense some facts by telling a story that I know with some degree of certitude. My own.

Anybody who knew me while I was alive will tell you that I was an intelligent guy. I came from an academic family. I was well-informed and an orator of some acclaim. I was also a Mormon, so I was taught that my body was a temple. I didn't use tobacco or alcohol. I didn't even drink coffee or caffeinated soft drinks. And yet I subjected my body to a degree of physical annihilation that most of you can only imagine. Depleted muscle cells, exploded blood vessels, lacerated skin, broken bones, shredded ligaments, avulsed tendons, dislocated joints, torn cartilage, even a bruised brain.

Maybe my bruised brain was the reason that I frequently evaluated my capabilities differently than my coaches did. All too often, they saw me as a tight end even though I was determined to play running back. It's true, I wanted the ball in my hands. I wanted everybody's eyes on me as often as possible. And I offered no apologies for believing that I was poised for the challenge. After all, you have to have a robust opinion of yourself to be named All-Pro multiple times like I was.

But the words of my coaches followed me wherever I went. "You're not fast enough."

For whatever reason, that assessment never resonated with me. After all, I was a state champion on my high school track team. I didn't care that there were thousands of others who were state champions on their track teams too. By the time I arrived on the college campus as a prized recruit, fast was a pretty relative term. But I was driven to discredit every coach who questioned my speed. No means were spared to demonstrate my fleetness. I had a major chip on my shoulder.

That chip fueled my appetite for working out and building my body. I was the strongest guy in the weight room. My intensity and commitment persuaded my coaches to keep me in the

backfield. It proved to be a perfect situation because my team was in the process of revolutionizing offensive football. I was a hybrid, a pass catching fullback at the epicenter of the most innovative scheme in the country. Subsequently, I produced stats that were unprecedented, and I was recognized as one of the most anomalous players in the nation. Professional scouts traveled to the mountain west to watch me play, and I never disappointed them. Of course, they expected me to play tight end in the pros.

Don't be misled by the wholesome reputation of the university I attended. Football is football wherever you go, and self-aggrandizement leads to temptation. Don't think for a moment that there weren't snake oil salesmen in the sleepy town I called home for four years. In fact, we probably made their jobs easier because of our naïve willingness to trust authority. We had access to everything that anyone else in the country had access to. When you are famous, even on a local scale, everyone in the community wants to be your friend, and folks are quick to offer favors, including doctors who want your admiration. I swallowed dietary supplements containing chemicals with names I couldn't pronounce. On a daily basis, I used anti-inflammatories and analgesics. What is more, narcotics were passed around like Life Savers. Also bear in mind that anabolic hormones were not banned substances at the time. Unaware of their long-term danger, physicians readily prescribed them for weight gain, to build strength and stamina, and to improve recovery time following an injury. Drug testing agencies didn't exist.

While I don't have firsthand knowledge, there's no reason to suppose that Sugar Bear's circumstance was any different than mine. He was from Mississippi. He was a choirboy. Literally. I mean he sang in the high school choir and played drums in the band. He also played running back at an astonishingly high level, generating numbers like a slot machine. And yet none of the universities in the Southeastern Conference offered him a football scholarship. They said he was too small. Believe it or not, they also said that he was too slow. Imagine that. Sugar Bear wasn't fast enough to play running back in the Southeastern Conference.

Well, he had a message for his doubters. He signed with a small school near his home, and he put up numbers so prolific that no one ever underestimated him again. After he graduated, he was an early selection in the first round of the National Football League draft, and he had an epic professional career. In my opinion, he is the greatest running back to ever lace up cleats. He may not have had sprinter's speed, but he didn't need it. If he couldn't outrun a prospective tackler, he leaped over him, or else he bulldozed him. As a blocker, he was equally ferocious, frequently neutralizing defenders who outweighed him by fifty or seventy-five pounds.

Don't forget, this is the same guy who was too small in the eyes of scouts. Down after down, he sized up his defenders, high-stepping and throwing divots of turf behind him before he torpedoed his helmet into his would-be tackler's breastbone. He punished anyone with the gall to try and stop him, daring opponents to hang on and try to pull him to the ground without assistance from teammates. Linebackers were afraid of him. Hall of Fame voters were in awe of him.

Truth be told, everyone worshiped him and still does. It seems Sugar Bear only had one enemy. They called it a rare condition. The operative word is rare. Thousands of star athletes discovered they had rare conditions. Doctors told me the same thing. I had a rare condition.

My first symptom was intestinal pain. Doctors said I was constipated, and they recommended laxatives. My indigestion disappeared briefly, but I was getting weak, and I was losing weight because I wasn't metabolizing nutrients. Specifically, I wasn't breaking down animal products very well. They soon discovered that my gall bladder wasn't working properly. The pain intensified. Surgery revealed a blockage, presumably caused by tissue death and

subsequent scarring. They tried to repair the damage, but the procedure didn't work. Eventually, my gall bladder was removed, but the pain never subsided. Another surgery revealed scarring and cirrhosis in my liver. I needed a transplant. I did my best to keep it a secret, but the writing was on the wall; my internal organs were dying, and malignant cells were tunneling like worms through the cavities in my body. The same thing that killed Sugar Bear was killing me.

Simply stated, if you burn too hot, you burn up. When you ask your internal organs to work at the same accelerated pace, they burn up too. Over and over, they break down, and they regenerate. And whether we like it or not, the number of cycles is finite. When our cells are finished replicating, they are indeed finished. There is no negotiation. I'm sure there will be folks who pass judgement on me, and I understand. I thought I could outsmart the devil, and I was not alone. But please respect the innocence of my children and grandchildren. It is they who must live without me.

THE MASTER AND THE RENEGADE

The Feds indicted me for racketeering and money laundering. They'd been on my trail for so long that they didn't realize I'd already been dead for four days. Yep, my body's rotting in the ground. And it's just as well that the investigation is dead too. If my case would have gone to trial, prosecutors would have wasted a lot of time and money, and they never would have gotten a conviction.

Because I wasn't a criminal.

I ran a construction company, I had structural engineering patents, I was an importer of agricultural products, I owned real estate, I opened the most lucrative poker club this side of Vegas. I can only guess what I was worth. Money came in hand over fist.

My worst crime was that I loved college basketball. One program in particular. My alma mater. The greatest college basketball dynasty ever. The one with the most beloved coach in history—a tall man with nice hair and Nordic ancestry, a straight arrow from the Midwest who touted Bible reading. Maybe you've heard of him. They called him the Master. He's won more national championships than anyone past, present, or future. His status as the greatest ever is cast in bronze.

Now don't misunderstand what I'm about to say. The Master was one hell of a coach, and one hell of a human being, but his teams won titles because he had great players. And the most outstanding high school talent in the country lined up to play for us primarily because of me. Every big time program has at least one booster like me. In fact, I created the blueprint, which has since been copied by every other school with an interest in competing at the very highest level.

Funny thing, I was the guy your parents and coaches openly warned you not to hang around with. But that was a charade. When it came right down to it, your parents were pleased that I was around, and your coaches knew they couldn't flourish without me. Make no mistake, my involvement with the program was common knowledge. The Master may not have known every detail of my involvement with those kids, just like I didn't know everything that he did on a given day, but he was very aware of my presence.

And if I was such a bad guy, how come I had so many friends? Those boys spent more time at my mansion than they did on campus. They ate lunch with their girlfriends in my kitchen, they smoked my marijuana, they swam in my pool, they had sex in my spa. And when they had problems, they didn't go to the Master. They came to see me. Auto dealers, at no charge, loaned cars to them if I signed a promissory note. I provided nice clothes for them, stereos, airline tickets. Occasionally, I privately arranged abortions for their girlfriends. Those kids called me Papa. They were my family. I even negotiated professional contracts for many of our high draft picks. My commission was one dollar. Is that what a bad guy does?

It was certainly no secret that players lived in apartments I owned. The really talented ones lived in servant's cottages at my estate. And if they happened to be seven feet tall, they had a private chef and a chauffeur. That's the American way, isn't it? You get rewarded for being the best.

I'm winking as I say that, because I know it's not necessarily true. Being the best at something often spawns jealousy and suspicion. More so if you look like me—a short, bald man who, despite knowing the best tailors in the city, can't dress fashionably in a buttoned collar and a tie because he has a tree stump for a neck. More so if you were born with shadowy eyes, thick brows, and heavy lids. And you can crank the distrust up a couple of notches if you're the son of

foreign refugees and your surname has too many syllables.

My story just took a detour. I'm not talking about myself anymore. I'm thinking about another legendary basketball coach. A cue ball who didn't like suit coats or neckties, a sweaty guy who wasn't calm on the sideline, a coach who paced and gesticulated and chewed on a towel. His critics called him the Renegade, and they referred to his university as Tumbleweed Tech. To his credit, he wasn't offended by either label. He wore both nicknames like an emperor wears a cape and a crown. But even though he coached just like the Master did, he was never placed on a similar pedestal nationally.

There's no question that both coaches were wholly dedicated to the development of young men. They weren't content to merely teach basketball but to use sport to prepare their boys to compete in real life. They both taught their guys to be team players, to maximize their strengths but to sacrifice individual glory for the success of the team. Likewise, each scouted his opponents so thoroughly that he knew their tendencies better than they knew themselves. But it wasn't enough to out think their opponents; they outworked them too. Those kids ran until their lungs were screaming for relief, and then they ran some more. Defense was the first priority. Aggressive full court zone pressure. The approach invariably led to prolific offense. And ninety percent of the time, it led to victory.

Just the same, there was one glaring distinction between the Master and the Renegade: the social status of the individuals they recruited. Because of our stellar reputation, our modern facilities, and the advantageous climate at our school, the Master was able to recruit kids from privileged backgrounds. By contrast, the Renegade was resigned to rein in the misfits and the rejects, the economically and academically disadvantaged. He wasn't averse to going into slums and ghettos. He was a pioneer when it came to signing players from junior colleges, typically considered second-rate by other programs. He was also among the first coaches who put five black boys on the floor at the same time.

At our school, there was an unwritten rule that at least three of your five starters had to be white. But the Renegade ignored that outdated tradition, and he shattered myths in the process. His teams played smart basketball just like our guys did. They played up-tempo, and they worked their tails off. They faced the same pressures we did—television cameras, hostile crowds, nosey reporters, the snoopy public—and they did it with as much poise as anybody because their coach gave them the confidence to do it.

Now anyone who knows anything at all about college basketball is aware that the Renegade had boosters who were far shadier than I was. Dozens of them. Characters in the gambling industry who were known as fixers. But I can assure you the Renegade never would have thrown a basketball game for any amount of money. Every time his team stepped onto the floor it was to win the game, and to win it convincingly. Nevertheless, his program was under constant scrutiny from the National Collegiate Athletic Association for most of his career. For years, they harassed him and threatened him, even demanded his resignation.

I know how he must have felt. Enforcement officials used to scold me for passing out apples and oranges after games. How silly is that? But, for whatever reason, they never went after my coach. The Master was untouchable. He was a God by the time he retired, leaving his post after his tenth championship amid praise and fanfare. For goodness sake, they put up a statue on campus and named the arena after him.

Not surprisingly, there were no statues or naming ceremonies in my honor. In fact, folks went out of their way to forget my name. But it doesn't matter. I didn't look after those kids for the recognition. I took care of them because I was concerned about their development, and I

loved the basketball program. Now don't suppose for a minute that I'm suggesting the Master didn't deserve all the praise that was heaped upon him. Like I said before, he was the right man for the job. And despite all of his success, he never once asked for a pay raise. Don't shed any tears for him though; he became a very rich man, selling books and collecting hefty lecture fees for the balance of his life. For that matter, don't cry for the Renegade either, because he amassed enormous wealth, including the two million he won in a lawsuit against the NCAA before his forced resignation.

It might not seem like it, but the Master and the Renegade had far more commonalities than differences. What it really boiled down to was social status. The Master may have turned good boys into good men, but the Renegade turned disadvantaged boys into good men. He wasn't always successful, and oftentimes his risks outweighed his rewards, but his challenge was much greater, and still he didn't shrink from the responsibility. Sure, his guys wore uncommonly nice clothes and drove cars they couldn't afford, but they excelled on the basketball court. Just like the Master's teams, they gave the paying public and the TV viewer exactly what they wanted. And when you consider where some of his kids came from, it's easy to see that they were much better people for having been mentored by the Renegade. He improved their position in life. Sure, he was no Master, but that job was already taken. He didn't have nice hair and wear neckties and promote the Bible. But it can't be denied that the Renegade was one hell of a man too, the perfect man for that job and a great ambassador for the game we all love.

BURNING BUSH

He belonged to the upper crust. He earned his status through hard work. He owned multiple houses. But when natural causes delivered him to the brink of death, he requested that he be transported to his seaside vacation home.

He lived a remarkable life. He was a member of the Greatest Generation. He was a bomber jet pilot in the war that didn't end all wars, but instead produced a peculiar glorification of war and caused millions of non-soldiers to romanticize military conflict. He was a congressman, a foreign ambassador, his country's director of classified intelligence, his country's vice-president, and ultimately its president.

Surrounded by his extensive lineage, he peacefully passed, soothed by detonations of surf against stone outside his window. His essence entered a white aqueous tunnel. It was like a birth canal. He felt warm, comfortable, and safe. There was a bright light at its end, and he knew that it was God. But as he got closer, the light became brighter, and its warmth intensified. Flames occupied the tunnel's exit. Eventually, he squeezed his eyelids shut because the brightness was blinding him. The heat stabbed his bare skin. "This is too much! This is too much!"

"I'll decide what's too much," a voice emanated from the flames.

For a moment he was motionless. Unexpectedly, God had frightened him. But the ensuing silence was more than he could bear. "Your Immanence, I'm here to claim my eternal reward."

"You must judge yourself."

"Well," he massaged his chin. "I'm certainly not perfect. But I welcomed Jesus into my heart."

"Why do so many of you think this Jesus fellow can rescue you from yourselves. You're responsible for your own shit. No way around it. No shortcuts. No circumventions of physics. If you're guilty of a sin, you alone are accountable for it. Not some mythologized, civilly disobedient Semite.

"Then Jesus isn't your son?"

"Don't be ridiculous. His persona has been so distorted by human imagination that he's not even a genuine being."

"In light of what you just said, it's obvious that I'm in no condition to pass judgment on myself."

"I'll get you started," the voice said. "Did you worship idols?"

"No."

"Did you honor your parents?"

"Yes."

"Did you covet other men's houses?"

"No. I saw to it that other men coveted my houses."

"Did you cheat on your wife?"

"I was loyal to her from the day we met."

"Did you ever take another person's life?"

"Not exactly.

"What do you mean? Not exactly? Either you did or you didn't."

"Well, I killed during war time, but that's justified.

"Who said that's justified?"

"You did, your Immanence."

"I said no such thing."

"But I seem to recall my pastor quoting passages from the Bible."

"All scripture was written by men, and selectively attributed to me when it suited men's needs."

"Even the ten commandments?"

"Especially the ten commandments."

"Then you're not the author?"

"No. But since you believe them so strongly, let's discuss. The Book of Exodus says, Thou shalt not kill. Period. No qualifications. No exceptions."

"I guess I was taught differently."

"Yes, by men. Men who believe that commandments can be amended. Who rationalizes murder anyway? I'll tell you who. A murderer."

"Are you implying that I'm a murderer?"

"Did you demolish Baghdad's water supply?"

"I directed the attack, yes."

"And thousands of Iraqi civilians died as a result?"

"I suppose."

"You suppose? Did they or didn't they?"

"I don't have exact numbers."

"You enlisted young kids to do your dirty work for you. There's no bravery in that."

"I did my share of dirty work when I was a kid."

"You're right, and I give much more leniency to kids who take orders than I do to grown-ups who give orders."

"But I'm a good guy. Even my opponents think so."

"Not all your opponents."

"Okay, I submit to you. What is required of me to satisfy my own justice?"

"You have to pass through the flame. Your eternal reward is on the other side."

Having no say in the matter, his essence proceeded through the canal of his rebirth and entered the inferno. The flames burned him but didn't consume him. Violent heat invaded every molecule. Time was suspended to the extent that seconds felt like minutes, minutes like hours, hours like days. It seemed like an eternity. His anguish was unspeakable, his screams in a range unfit for mortal ears. "Kill me God! Kill me God!" he pleaded for permanent relief.

And finally it came. He found himself standing on the ornately tiled upper floor of a palace. It was a badly neglected structure, but a palace just the same, with chandeliers of gold hanging from tall ceilings. He flipped a light switch but determined that the building had no electricity. He walked into the master bath and beheld a footed tub, also plated with gold. He turned a squeaky faucet handle, but found that there was no running water. The dry toilet bowl smelled of stale sewage gas. But he was an optimist. "This isn't so bad," he said to himself in his acquired west Texas drawl, shutting the toilet lid. "I'll have this place fixed up in no time. In my father's kingdom are many mansions."

Momentarily, he heard a distant hum that grew louder and still louder until it was a supersonic hiss. He knew the sound well; it was the blast of F-16 military jets. Someone was surely coming to rescue him. He hurried to a window and was shocked by the destruction in the city below him—roofless apartment buildings; brick walls reduced to bits; automobiles on their sides; starving vagrants living in makeshift tents on the river banks; the bloated, mutilated,

blackened remains of civilians melted into the asphalt of scorched roadways.

He looked upward to see clusters of oblong steel encasements dropping from the aircraft. A ballistic missile hit the ground several hundred yards away. The terrain quaked, and the walls rumbled. When the sound finally reached him it was deafening. Glass shattered throughout the palace, and a wave of hot air knocked him off his feet, temporarily paralyzing his lungs and bloodying his nose. A chandelier crashed to the floor. He pulled himself upright, using a window frame for support. Charcoal gray clouds of earth and smoke hovered above the ground, their particles dispersing in every direction. The smell of ash seeped through broken windows, accompanied by the stench of death—the vapors of rotting flesh, both human and animal.

Acutely aware that this was not friendly fire, he raced down a spiral staircase and into a spacious entry. Doors were wrenched from hinges, and every room on the ground level had been looted. Grungy walls were scattered with spray painted Arabic letters. His instinct was to flee as quickly as possible. But where would he go?

Outside, bomber jets occupied every quarter of the sky. Rational thoughts be damned, his spinal cord insisted that he run through piles of rubble and fields of reddened mud. Planes screeched overhead, and exploding bombs indifferently distributed their vicious vibrations. But his legs were surprisingly strong. He knew he must find cover if the conditions permitted such a thing.

To his amazement, he approached an intact garage behind an obliterated house. It was made of cinderblocks that stood sturdily atop their foundation, randomly preserved. He entered its doorway and found temporary comfort, somewhat insulated from the surrounding pandemonium. While catching his breath, he noticed a trap door in the cement floor. A bomb shelter, perhaps? He lifted the lid, exposing a gloomy vertical shaft containing a ladder. Without much thought, he descended into the darkness. Disappointingly, the sides of the constricted shaft were reinforced with lumber rather than concrete. The air was cool and moist, the stained boards compromised by rotting fissures. Nevertheless, he was determined to see what waited at the bottom.

Lo and behold, light bled into the space below him, revealing a subterranean vault. But it was not a shelter of reinforced concrete; it was a spider hole, a mere dugout supported by aging wooden beams. When his feet found the floor, he couldn't be sure if he had discovered a safe haven or a tomb.

Candlelight flickered behind him, and he turned in haste to discover that he was not alone. In the waving shadows, a man was seated on a stool at a small table. He knew the drooping face of his archenemy immediately, though it was smudged and thickly bearded. The man wore military fatigues. His glandular odor monopolized the poorly ventilated air.

"Greetings, Mr. President. Welcome to Hell."

The hatch slammed shut above them, and a lock engaged. His voice box tightened, allowing only a timid, highly pitched utterance. "There's been a mistake."

"The mistake was yours, Mr. President; you lied to God."

"You, of all people," he argued, "have no right to accuse me of lying."

"You told him you didn't worship idols," his archenemy continued, "but you spent far more time kneeling at the feet of your oil derricks than you spent in the service of God."

Desperately, he climbed the ladder and pushed against the bottom of the hatch. But it was immovable, fixed as though it were welded. He pounded on it with the side of his fist.

Repeatedly, he thrust his forearm into the steely surface until a bleeding split appeared in his elbow.

“Like it or not,” his archenemy calmly resumed, “you and I are fundamentally the same person. We both got wealthy by leveraging the world’s dependency on oil. I killed my enemies; you killed your enemies. Only you killed far more people than I ever did because you had more expensive weapons. But not anymore, you don’t. It’s just you against me now. Man against man.”