

## The Storm Before the Storm



His is one of the greatest stories of perseverance and grit in college sports history, and it's finally getting its due. In this exclusive excerpt from the new Freddie Steinmark biography, we visit the University of Texas at Austin campus in the tense days before the 1969 "Game of the Century."

*On Dec. 6, 1969, Freddie Steinmark helped the Longhorn football team win a historic rivalry game. Then cancer took his leg and his life—but not his courage. A half-century later, the Steinmark story is now coming to a wider audience, with a new biography from UT Press out this month and the major motion picture *My All-American* opening Nov. 13. In this exclusive excerpt from Freddie Steinmark: Faith, Family, Football, we get a rare glimpse at the high-stress days before the championship, when a nation devastated by the Vietnam War found a welcome distraction in the "Game of the Century."*



Defensive backs coach Fred Akers with Denny Aldridge, Ken Ehrig, and Steinmark.

The sky cleared above the University of Texas Tower, but the air over the South Mall was thick with collegiate anxiety.

Final exams approached, and campus spirit ratcheted up for the weekend's impending football game between the Longhorns and the Arkansas Razorbacks, the first- and second-ranked teams in the nation. There was something else in the air as well, a dissonant rattle. Austin's atmosphere in the preceding days had become a disorienting mix of "Hook 'em, Horns" enthusiasm and distress over the quagmire in Vietnam. The United States had been increasing its troop numbers in Southeast Asia every year since 1961, and by December's end in 1969, 40,024 American service people had perished—a figure that is difficult to imagine in 21st-century America.

For the United States to continue its perceived mission, the military needed more able-bodied men. At 8:00 CST on the evening of Dec. 1, CBS preempted the regularly scheduled *Mayberry R.F.D.* in order to provide breaking live coverage. The newsman Roger Mudd turned toward the camera and began the broadcast from the noisy government headquarters, speaking in hushed tones: "Tonight, for the first time in 27 years, the United States has again started a draft lottery."

Numbered slips of paper, one for each day of the year including Feb. 29, were placed in individual plastic capsules and gathered in a large glass fishbowl. The order in which the capsules were drawn would determine the order, by birth date, in which young men would be called for physical examination and conscription into military service as needed. Representative Alexander Pirnie (R-NY) drew the first capsule and revealed number 258. Those who were born on September 14 had "won" the lottery.

In the lobby of Jester Hall, Scott Henderson and several of his teammates gathered around the television set. Five days shy of the most important game of their lives, they were about to learn whether they might expect to die in Southeast Asia within the next couple years. In Fayetteville, Arkansas, their opponents likewise awaited their fates.

Rumor had it that President Nixon would attend the matchup, which the networks were already hyping as the “Game of the Century.” It seemed ironic that on this night Nixon could order some of these boys to pay what might be the last full measure of devotion, and then watch them play football on Saturday.





An autographed photo from Steinmark to his parents.

Freddie Steinmark didn't stay with his teammates to watch the lottery. Instead, he hurried through Jester Hall's main doors. Freddie hated to be late, especially when a friend was

waiting for him, and he had plans to meet his girlfriend, Linda, for the basketball team's season opener versus Ole Miss.

When Freddie walked UT's campus, he always acknowledged others with a quick smile or slight nod, exhibiting his cheerful nature, offering no inkling of a negative thought. Yet as he headed toward Gregory Gym, there had to have been much on his mind. A man's birth date would either protect him or draw him into a confusing war. Some of his teammates and their families were going to receive good news in the midst of others receiving the worst. Many had siblings in the draft pool. And some of them, such as Bobby Mitchell, had already lost brothers.

Moreover, the pressure mounted in anticipation of the Arkansas game. Freddie had played in 18 straight victories, going back to last season, and a potential national title was within reach. Last year, Texas had triumphed over Arkansas, 39–29, in an Austin barnburner. But the dangerous tandem of quarterback Bill Montgomery and split end Chuck Dicus had returned—and improved. Freddie knew that a unique challenge awaited him.

As he made his way across campus, eager for the temporary diversion of the basketball game, Freddie wasn't able to stretch his stride much—the persistent pain lingered in his left thigh. With pain came doubt. He had told himself and others that it was just a calcium deposit or a bone bruise, but it had grown worse. His limp, ever more severe, resisted concealment.

Freddie walked Linda home after the game, kissed her goodbye, and then returned to his dorm, his concerns undiminished. As he did almost every night, Freddie lifted his rosary from his desk drawer and knelt next to his bed. He bowed his head, crossed himself, and began in a whisper, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.”

Attention from the national press was relentless. Reporters from all around the country came to Austin to spend a couple of days on campus. They roamed the coaches’ offices, the dorms, the student union.

“The first question always was,” Freddie writes in his memoir *I Play to Win*, “How do you feel about putting it all on the line, on the last day of the season? How is the pressure?” The answers were usually the same. ‘This is everybody’s fondest dream,’ said [star split end Cotton] Speyrer. ‘I figured we would be playing for the conference championship in this last game, but never for the national championship. This is really something.’”

Freddie’s week was given to little else than preparing for the game, and because of his leg, he spent his days resting: “So that was my exciting routine before the biggest game of our lives ... I would eat breakfast and stay in bed all morning, get up and eat lunch, and go back to bed until it was time to walk the few hundred yards to the training room for my whirlpool session and workout.”

In the empty, quiet training room, team trainer Frank Medina set up the whirlpool, likely with no suspicion of how

badly Freddie's leg hurt. "I didn't tell Mr. Medina the whole truth," Freddie writes, "because I wanted nothing to endanger my playing against Arkansas. People, lots of them, go through their entire careers without a chance to play in a game like this."

Once his leg had warmed, Freddie got dressed for practice: "I wore full pads every afternoon." He never allowed himself to miss the chance to play, yet was careful not to aggravate whatever was wrong. In his words, "I had already determined I was going to find out exactly what [the injury] was, after the season was completed. Of course, every now and then, when my leg loosened up, I would fudge a little on my private resolution. I'd say to myself, well, the season actually doesn't conclude until the bowl game. I'll wait until January 2."





Steinmark playing with his little brother, Sammy.

The Steinmarks' house on South Kingston Street in southeast Denver resounded with the ring of the telephone. Freddie's sister, GiGi, ran to it.

"Collect call from Freddie Steinmark. Will you accept the charges?"

"Yes ... yes!" GiGi was overcome with worry over Freddie and his leg. Everyone in the family had been discussing the injury and how he must be feeling about playing in the

Arkansas game. That past week, GiGi had noticed her mother worrying about Freddie Joe.

“Freddie?”

“Gloria Gene! You keeping up with your studies?”

“Yes, Freddie.” GiGi was glad to hear her brother’s voice, but didn’t have long to speak with him before P.K. grabbed the receiver.

“Freddie Joe! You need to win on Saturday! I made a bet at school,” she explained. She had \$15 dollars riding on a Texas victory, and she couldn’t afford to lose. Freddie laughed, promising to do his best.



Steinmark (front left) with his family in 1953.

Since it was an expensive long-distance call, Big Fred let Freddie's younger siblings, P.K., GiGi, and Sammy, speak with their brother for just a few minutes. Then it was time for Big Fred to speak with his son. He had been considering

that whole week what was at stake in Saturday's game, and he asked Freddie what special plan Coach Akers and Coach Campbell had to counter the Arkansas passing attack. He cautioned Freddie to cheat his position deep in order to give himself some cushion.

Big Fred and Freddie Joe discussed the speed of Chuck Dicus, the challenge he would present in man-to-man coverage. Freddie told his dad that practice earlier that day had been miserable. Coach Royal had said it was the worst day they had had since the second week of the season. Freddie later wrote, "I know I had a bad practice because Coach Campbell told me about it, frequently and quite loudly. I think it was the worst he ever fussed at me."

Gloria remembers her husband specifically asking Freddie Joe about his injured leg. Freddie's collision during the Texas A&M game had triggered a great pain in Freddie's thigh, and Big Fred pressed Freddie to see the doctor. Freddie promised he would, after the season.

Yet Freddie confided in his father: "I'm not able to go full speed and it bothers me some, but I plan to get it checked."

"I trust your judgment," Big Fred told his son. "But you make sure you get it checked. We love you, son." He told him how proud he was, what an accomplishment it was to be playing for the national championship.

As always, Gloria spoke with Freddie last. She told him how much she missed him. She would pray for him during the

game. Freddie ended every phone call in the same way: “I love you, Mother.”

As Wednesday’s practice ended, UT fans and students entered the stadium for what would be the largest pep rally in university history. Former linebacker Scott Henderson recalls the event as surreal. The Longhorn Band, the bands of nine local high schools, the UT cheerleaders, the hog-calling contests, and more than 25,000 Longhorn fans created an utter cacophony.

The players, dressed in coats and ties, paraded into the stadium, perched on the back seats of convertibles from the local Ford dealer. It was like a parade following an ancient Roman triumph, but it wasn’t lost on either the coaches or the players that they hadn’t won anything yet.

Quarterback James Street addressed the crowd: “This is the greatest thing I’ve ever seen.” He continued, “This is the most important game of my life. All those past victories are meaningless, just building up to this game. I wish we could take you with us.”

Enthusiastic telegrams were read, one coming from Apollo 12 astronaut and UT alum Alan Bean, still in quarantine after returning nine days earlier from NASA’s second lunar landing. “You can bet your moon dust,” the astronaut’s telegram read, “I’ll be watching on television and pulling for you.”

Arkansas had its pep rallies as well—throughout the entire state. In Little Rock, more than 180 miles from the University

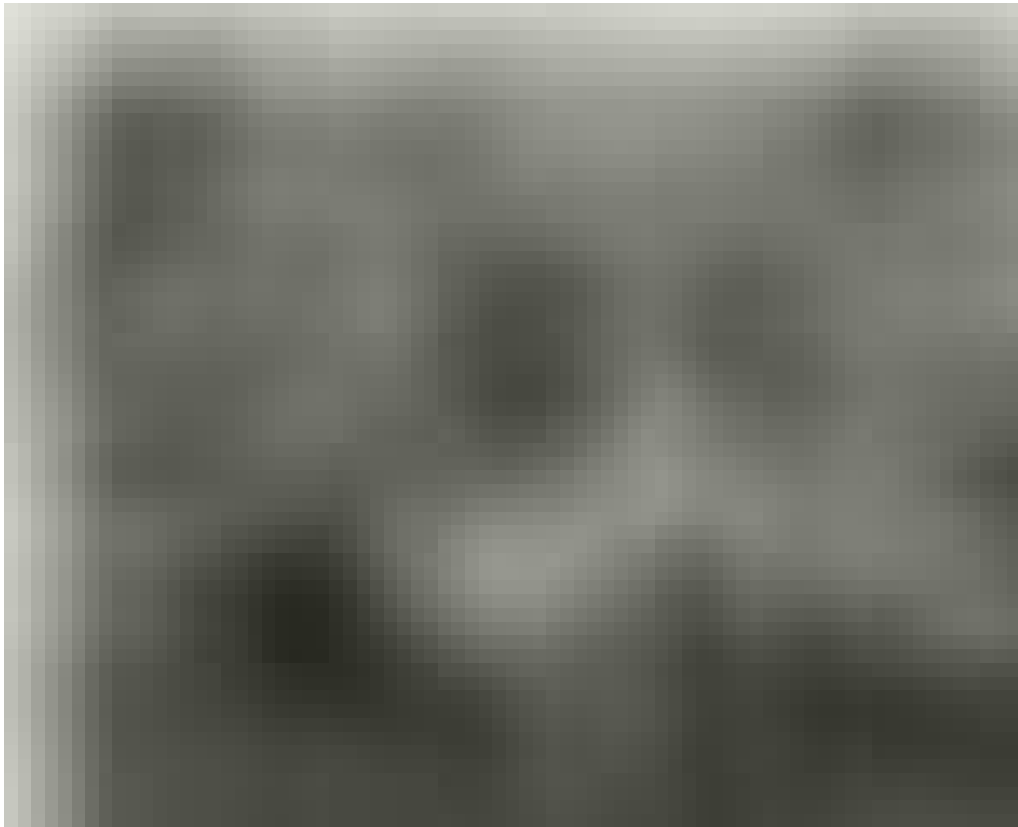
of Arkansas campus, 5,000 people turned out for some hog calling with the Razorback cheerleaders—no band, no team. On the Fayetteville campus that Friday night, they held a full-blown pep rally for an overflowing crowd in the university's Greek theatre. Freddie writes in *I Play to Win*: “The night before a Razorback home game, Dante's Inferno becomes an also-ran. You can bury your head beneath the pillows but you will still hear those W-O-O-O-P-I-I-G-G S-O-O-O-E-E whoops all through the night.”

The Longhorns boarded a bus on campus shortly before noon on Friday. They would drive to the airport and fly to Arkansas. Freddie was one of the last to take his seat, walking slowly, his leg aching but his mind focused.

As Freddie would later write, “If you've never invaded the state of Arkansas to play their sainted Razorbacks, you don't know what real horror is. Coach Campbell, our resident philosopher, once described it: ‘Playing in Fayetteville is like parachuting into Russia.’”

I like to think that as the plane lifted off from the runway in Austin, anticipation eased some of the pain in Freddie's leg. The fields of Texas fell away beneath the plane, and the Ozark valleys of Arkansas loomed. Nobody on the plane imagined that this would be Freddie's last time to travel with the team as a player. That this would be his last time to suit up in burnt orange. That this would be the last football game Freddie ever played.





Steinmark targets Oklahoma running back Steve Owens.

*Text by Bower Yousse and Thomas J. Cryan excerpted from  
Freddie Steinmark: Faith, Family, Football is used by  
permission of the University of Texas Press. Copyright © 2015.  
For more information, visit [www.utpress.utexas.edu](http://www.utpress.utexas.edu).*

*Images courtesy the Steinmark family, the University of Texas  
at Austin, and the University of Texas Press.*

