



CHAPTER 1

*“My hardest job is to convince the people of Nebraska
that 10-1 is not a losing season.”*

—Tom Osborne

Saturday, August 25, 2001. The day was finally here: *Gameday*. And not just any game, but my official Husker debut.

Like many Nebraska boys, I grew up playing backyard football and dreaming of the day when I’d put on the Big Red uniform. Now the wait was over.

Nebraskans love football the way scuba divers love air tanks: it’s a relationship of necessity, and core to our basic functioning. The Cornhuskers have sold out every home game since 1962 and are the winningest team in college football during that span. When I was 12, 13, and 15 years old, my home state’s team won the 1994, 1995, and 1997 National Championships. I pictured myself shucking tacklers like Tommie Frazier and throwing spirals like Brook Berringer. At an impressionable time in my life, the Huskers captured my heart.

The atmosphere was electric, as 77,473 fans—making Memorial Stadium the third-largest city in Nebraska at that moment—watched us congregate near the southwest corner of the end zone, pump-up music blaring, as we prepared to take the field for kickoff. I stood at the front of the pack. That morning, Coach told me I’d lead the charge onto the field. Scanning the stands, I breathed deeply and soaked in the roaring crowd before turning back to lock eyes with a few teammates, who were now bouncing feverishly as if spring-loaded and nodding their heads in anticipation. I stifled a cough, fearing that if I let it go, I might inadvertently release a butterfly from my stomach.

So much had led up to this, the first game of the 2001 season. The grueling two-a-day practices starting at 6 a.m. The punishing weightlifting regimen. The exhausting summer camps, where our squad worked tirelessly to perfect every drill so we knew we'd shine under pressure. The lingering aches and bruises, which required mental toughness to ignore, but which we knew were unavoidable parts of being a Husker.

It was time. I read Coach's lips as he pointed his finger toward the field: "LET'S GO!"

On cue, I raised my flag, emblazoned with the Big Red "N," and stormed onto the field with my fellow cheerleaders.

* * *

I had a terrific, and very blessed, childhood.

It wasn't always easy, though. My very first memory—I kid you not—is lying in my crib, face-down, squirming and screaming, as my mother fought to take my temperature—rectally. I was fifteen years old at the time. OK, I was probably two or three, but this memory still haunts me. Just try to make sense of that twisted act from a toddler's perspective. I vaguely remember wondering "*What is happening?!?*" and "*Why am I being punished?!?*" It was a simpler time, and I'm sure Mom thought she was doing the right thing, like the Medieval doctors who fought pneumonia with bloodletting leeches. The good news is things could only get better from there.

My father, Craig, grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood in South Omaha. His father was a mason tender (basically, a bricklayer's assistant) who typically worked two jobs and 70-hour workweeks to feed his family. The financial strain of my Dad's upbringing taught him three things: first, success required hard work and would not come easily; second, if at all possible, he needed a college degree; and third, he wanted to play a more active role in his children's lives than his father was able to play in his. These lessons motivated Dad to graduate from the University of Nebraska-Omaha in seven years (working full-time throughout college), achieve great success in banking, and become a loving, involved father. When I was a child, Dad attended all of my sports games, helped me build my Cub Scout pinewood-

derby car, taught me how to play chess, and entertained just about any other idea that interested me.

My mother, Shelly, was the youngest of three girls by about five minutes. She grew up in an Air Force family, and even though she moved around a lot during her childhood, she always had a steady pal in her twin sister, Kelly. Mom is kind-hearted, sensitive, and generous with her time. She'll do just about anything to help someone—anyone, even a stranger—and she always acts like it isn't the least bit inconvenient for her, even when it is. But to my Mom, *no one* is really a stranger; just a best friend in waiting. These days, I love this characteristic in her, but as a teenager it was a struggle. I would ask: "Mom, is it really important that your hairdresser knows I don't have a date to Homecoming?" Or: "Why did you tell our Applebee's waitress that Gizmo (our old dog) threw up in my ear?" The constant risk of embarrassment was a small price to pay for the gift of Mom, though, who stayed home to raise her children and sacrificed so much for us.

And then there was Amber, the first of my two younger sisters. Amber was born wearing a diamond-studded diaper and sporting a spray-tan. She texted before she could talk and sashayed before she could walk. Girly to the core, Amber was as foreign to me as a Chinese stereo manual. As far as I could tell, Amber was crazy about three things: shopping, ketchup (which she put on *everything*, even salad), and boys. Only the third category concerned me. An age-old riddle in my family was whether I innately disliked every guy Amber dated simply because I was her older brother, and that's what older brothers do (as my family maintained), or if I was fair and objective, and every guy Amber dated just happened to be a dud (as I claimed). In any case, as Amber's boyfriends grew progressively older, bigger, and more tattooed, my criticism became less vocal.

My youngest sister Kayla completed our family, both figuratively and literally. While Amber and I, at three years apart, went through typical sibling conflicts, Kayla—six years my younger—was just my kid sister who could do no wrong. Kayla loved animals and dreamt of becoming a veterinarian. One spring when she was about four years old, we discovered a litter of baby rabbits (called "kits") in a hole in our grandparents' backyard. We played with the kits all afternoon until a neighbor girl stopped by and informed us

that because we had touched the babies with our “human hands,” their mother would likely abandon or even eat them. We later learned this wasn’t true, but not before Kayla had a good cry and begged my parents to “adopt” them. Besides loving animals, Kayla seemed to exist primarily to brighten the lives of others. One time, I came home from school feeling really down. I can’t remember why, but I’ll just guess it was one of three things: a girl I liked didn’t like me back; I had a pimple; or a girl I liked didn’t like me back *because* I had a pimple (double whammy!). As I laid face-down on my bed, trying not to cry, Kayla sat on the floor next to me, silently, and obviously feeling my pain. Then she left. That night, I discovered that Kayla had spent the next hour cleaning my car—a task I wouldn’t wish on anyone. Kayla’s tangible reminder that I was cared for immediately lifted my spirits. Even as a little girl, Kayla always had a knack for showing her great, selfless love through simple acts.

Growing up, my parents gave me a lot of freedom to be a boy. Our subdivision, Summerwood, was a typical American middle-income neighborhood. Most summer mornings, I’d wake up and yell to Mom, “I’m going to Brandon’s!” and then disappear until dinnertime. My friends and I would play games like Tecmo Bowl, pickle, and Lighting Fireworks in Things. A long, sloped boulevard, which we kids just called “the ditch,” stretched through the heart of Summerwood and was our playground. Some days, my friends and I would sneak through the ditch’s keep-out bars, climb into a chosen sewage line, and just follow it until we saw daylight, where we would resurface and try to figure out where we were and how to get home.

As I progressed through middle school and into high school, insecurity set in. The source of my insecurity, I believe, was the tension between my desire to be perceived as extraordinary and my fear that, in reality, I might not be that special. I was good at a lot of sports, but not great at any of them. I was supposedly intelligent, according to teachers and standardized tests, but I didn’t feel particularly smart, and I sometimes worried that I was an imposter. I was generally well-liked, but not all that popular.

In the summer before my senior year of high school, I begrudgingly (at my parents’ insistence) joined my church’s youth group for a weeklong mission trip to New York City. When you’ve regularly attended church since

the day you were born, it's easy to go through the motions every Sunday without really growing, and that's where I had been for awhile. But on the mission trip, I recommitted my life to God—for the first time, in a way that felt personal and self-directed—and started to better understand the folly of measuring my worth by earthly standards, which could only lead to disappointment. That fall, I was baptized and grew closer to my new youth-group friends, who showed me faith and fun could mix. These developments helped lift from my shoulders the weight of anger and self-doubt I had been carrying, and freed me to be more joyful and authentic. And ironically, it wasn't until I loosened my grip on the world and refocused on God that the kinds of accolades I once so desperately chased after—in academics, leadership positions, and otherwise—started rolling in.

* * *

College was oodles of fun. One of my first orders of business when I arrived freshman year was to sign up to donate plasma—although it was more like a sale than a donation, because I made \$50 a pop. I earmarked all proceeds as “date money.” Each time I gave plasma, a nurse went through a checklist asking me whether, since my last visit, I had traveled to any one of a list of about 30 African countries considered to be at high risk for blood-borne diseases. Senegal?—No. Kenya?—No. Gabon?—No. Cameroon?—No. When the nurse got to the end of her checklist I would suddenly get a concerned look on my face and say, “*Wait—Did you say Gabon?!*” Then I would laugh and tell her that I was just kidding, I hadn't really visited Gabon. That joke never got old! (To me.)

The date money rolled in, but the dates didn't, so I decided to try out for cheerleading, where cute girls would *have* to hang out with me. Somehow I made the squad, but I was undoubtedly one of the least-talented guys on the team. Before one football game, ESPN cameras zoomed in on me and my female partner, who I proceeded to drop on live television during a stunting drill. I used to joke that you could always find me on the sidelines—just look for the guy standing next to the girl with crutches. As a rookie cheerleader, I also had some embarrassing mental lapses. One time, during a Nebraska-Kansas basketball game, the crowd was dead because we were losing by

20 points. So I picked up my megaphone and belted out a booming chant: “DEFENSE, HUSKERS, DEFENSE!” You guessed it: we were on offense. Another time, I ran the Husker flag onto the football field before the third quarter but forgot to first remove from my right pocket the full bottle of Gatorade I had stashed there during halftime. As I sprinted, my short red shorts sunk south, so I had to scuttle the length of the field with one hand holding the flag and the other holding up my pants. Cheerleading was a fun but humbling adventure.

During a social event my sophomore year, a friend and I started grumbling about the lameness of student government, and we decided that one of us should run for president. We flipped a coin, and I won. Thus, the “Boo Yah Party” was born. (Slogan: “We’re not here to cheer ‘ya... we’re here to *Boo Yah!*”) My total lack of student-government experience was received well from a jaded student body, and my running mates and I won the election handily. Once in office, we built some lasting achievements: we helped mount a successful student rally against the governor’s proposed 10% university budget cut and implemented a popular Collegiate Readership Program (giving students cheap access to local and national newspapers), among other things. But the public light magnified my more embarrassing moments—like when our student government printed thousands of postcards for students to sign and mail to state senators reminding them to support the university so Nebraska’s “best and brightest” students stayed in-state. After that debacle, I removed “attention to detail” from my resume.

The most impactful experience of my college career was counseling at Camp Kindle, a weeklong summer camp for children infected with or affected by HIV and AIDS. These children, who were battling through excruciating life circumstances at such tender ages, were precious and inspirational to me. Camp Kindle lets these kids be kids, just for a week. Campers learn they are not alone. For many, Camp Kindle is the only place where they can open up about how disease has impacted them. On the final night of camp, each child lit a candle and shared with the group one wish. I recall putting a hand over my eyes, quietly sobbing as a ten-year-old girl said, “I wish there were a cure for AIDS”; an eight-year-old boy said, “I wish camp could be all year”; and a six-year-old girl said, “I wish my mom was alive.” In each of my two

summers counseling, I learned much more from my campers than I taught them.

Throughout college, I forged lifelong friendships within my fraternity, FarmHouse—not to be confused with “Animal House.” FarmHouse started in 1905 as a Bible study, and while the fraternity’s faith-based roots remain woven into its traditions, today the organization has a more secular character. Entering college, I didn’t see myself as a “frat guy” and was skeptical of the Greek system. But I liked most of the guys I met at FarmHouse and ultimately thought, *Why not, I’ve gotta live somewhere*. It’s one of those decisions that I didn’t put a lot of thought into but am tremendously grateful I made, as many of my closest friendships today were formed within FarmHouse’s walls during my four years of college.

One of my favorite regular occurrences at FarmHouse was witnessing the power of “the Mob”—that is, the absurd antics that played out when a bunch of guys put their minds together toward mayhem. Like when the Mob busted into the room of my friend, Steve, wrestled him away from his girlfriend, carried him into the front yard, and saran-wrapped him to the flag pole for no reason whatsoever. The kicker came moments later, when Mob-member Scott decided to document the shenanigans by taking photos of Steve in his sad state, and then the Mob turned on Scott and saran-wrapped *him* to Steve. The Mob could be a fickle beast.

* * *

Around this time, I also got my first taste of the law—my future career field—when I defended myself in court against an ill-issued speeding ticket. The police had set up a speed trap on Vine Street—pointing their radar guns eastward into oncoming, campus-bound traffic—and were windmilling in hordes of unsuspecting drivers like me, seemingly arbitrarily, to park and await their citations. I was sure they had made a mistake—I wasn’t speeding. Mine was the fifth car in a steady line of traffic; how, I wondered, could anyone distinguish my vehicle from the others as the column of cars approached the trap? But the ticketing officer insisted that from 857 feet away, and while I was in a 25 mile-per-hour school zone, he clocked me driving ten miles faster than the posted limit.

Stubborn and thirsty for justice, I refused to pay the fine. Instead, for the next month, I pored over books on traffic-ticket litigation and planned my defense. On my trial date, I arrived wearing my best (and only) suit—a black polyester ensemble from the Sears sales rack—and sweating profusely. The first step of successful defense, I had learned, was to show up; thousands of tickets are dismissed every year simply because the key testifying officer fails to appear. But I would have no such luck. My officer had already arrived and was glaring at me, obviously annoyed that I was making him jump through legal hoops. An ounce of anxiety-laden regret shot through me as I began to think: *This might not go well... like, at all.* But by then, the judge’s bailiff was calling my case, and I took my seat alone at the defense table, nervously organizing my books, notepads, and accordion folders into neat piles while trying to take deep breaths and keep a leash on my fidgety legs. Without much delay, the State called their witness and the policeman started to testify, cued by the prosecuting attorney’s friendly questions. I kept my head down and focused intently on my notes, waiting for the right time to spring my carefully prepared arguments.

“Objection!” I exclaimed, standing, when the officer first disclosed the model of his radar gun. “How do we know the witness is trained and competent to use this particular device?” As I spoke, I made wide, theatrical gestures with my arms, like all of the best attorneys I’d seen over the years in *Law & Order*. The police officer responded directly to the judge, meticulously ticking through his lofty credentials. As luck would have it, he was not only certified to use the radar gun, he had actually earned advanced certification and now *taught the radar-certification course* to rookie officers. Objection overruled. State 1, Ryan 0; I sat back down. A moment later, I struck out again: “Objection,” I managed, now more sheepishly. “There is no evidence on the record establishing that the witness’s radar gun was properly functioning on the date in question. If months or years had passed since the instrument’s last calibration, the readings may not be accurate.” This created a minor stir and slight headache for my opponents. The prosecutor asked for a short recess, and the testifying officer walked across the street to police headquarters to retrieve documentation verifying that his radar gun was tested and perfectly

calibrated *the very morning* he cited me. “Overruled,” the judge said again when we reconvened, now transparently embarrassed for me.

But I kept at it. As the officer went on, I spewed every conceivable objection my studies had mined, hoping something—anything—might stick. Using terms I barely understood like “hearsay,” “best evidence,” and “lacks foundation,” I mucked up an impressive flurry of pointlessness. Then, finally, I landed a blow. During my cross examination of the officer, I noticed he was relying heavily on his handwritten notes and a copy of the citation to answer basic questions about the date, time, and other circumstances surrounding my alleged infraction. I addressed the judge: “Your honor, I request that you order the witness to put away his notes.” I explained: “The Sixth Amendment guarantees me the right to confront my accusers. But the documents the officer is reading from aren’t under oath, and I can’t cross examine them. If the witness has no independent recollection of these events, he shouldn’t be allowed to testify against me.”

To this day, I have no idea whether my dramatic proclamation made any sense. But now the judge was fighting a smile, and—much to my astonishment—she agreed, allowing the officer a moment “to refresh his recollection,” but ordering him to proceed without notes. Emboldened, I tested the officer’s memory, peppering him with questions about weather conditions on the date of the incident. He stammered flimsy answers, now visibly less confident. Sensing he was on the ropes, I circled back to the core facts.

“Officer, what was the make and model of the car you clocked me driving?” After a long pause, he answered “I think it was a 1998 Honda Civic.”

“You *think* it was a ’98 Civic, or it was a ’98 Civic?” I asked.

“It was a ’98 Civic,” the officer answered firmly.

Excitedly, I hoisted my copy of the citation toward the sky, exclaiming: “*In fact*, the citation you signed states I was driving a 1996 Toyota Camry! So which vehicle did you observe speeding—a ’98 Civic or a ’96 Camry?”

“A ’96 Camry,” the officer said, reversing course. He added, “Whichever car it was, I recognize you—you’re the one I ticketed.”

“But you didn’t clock me *running* 35 miles per hour in a 25 mile-per-hour school zone,” I reminded him. “You allegedly radared my car—which you just misidentified as a ’98 Civic.” “I have no more questions for this witness, your Honor,” I said, triumphantly turning back toward the audience and finding no one.

Moments later, I took the stand to testify and offered the judge my exhibits, which consisted of enlarged color printouts of “the crime scene.” The day after I got the ticket, I explained to the judge, my fraternity brother and I had returned to the exact location of the speed trap and measured out 857 feet, taking photos of approaching lines of traffic from that distance. Not surprisingly, it was near-impossible to distinguish one car from another.

All told, I put in a lot of time and effort to defend myself against a \$60 ticket. But it was worth it in the end. Two weeks after the trial, the judge’s decision arrived in the mail: not guilty.

* * *

Heading into my last week of college, life was looking good. I was set to graduate with a 4.0 grade-point average and had received the University’s Outstanding Student Leadership Award, an honor bestowed on one male and one female each year for achieving the highest levels of community service and leadership. I also had a plan: Teach for America, a non-profit organization dedicated to eliminating educational inequality by enlisting top college graduates to teach in low-income communities. In a month, I would leave to teach summer school in Los Angeles before moving to St. Louis for my permanent placement teaching middle school that fall.

Finally, I had a partner: Beth, my fiancée, whom I would marry in three weeks. A vocal-music major and unapologetic ham, Beth beamed joy and big-heartedness. She greeted every homeless person on campus by name and knew many of their life stories. Few things made Beth happier than chatting about her family or dancing like a fool to pop-music hits at wedding receptions. On our first Valentine’s Day as a couple, Beth snuck into my student-government office after-hours and streamed dozens of paper-cutout hearts from the ceiling, each one confessing a unique reason she loved me. Sometimes, Beth’s happiness seemed so pure and radiant that it could lift

everyone within a five-mile radius. As our college careers wound down together, I felt ever more grateful and excited to start my partnership with her. But our lives were about to change forever.