

PREFACE

On October 5, 1991, I attended my first Washington football game.

I arrived in Seattle that June to begin a job at a legendary Seattle music radio station that would soon be known as Sports Radio 950 KJR, and everyone kept telling me how special the game day experience was at Husky Stadium. They were right. The game didn't kick off until 3:30 p.m., so my wife Renee and I walked through the parking lot enjoying the tailgating atmosphere on a perfect autumn afternoon next to Lake Washington. Sizzling grills filled the air with smoky goodness. Laughter was accompanied by the unmistakable sound of cans being opened.

The Huskies that day were as magnificent as any team I've witnessed as they overwhelmed Arizona. They played with joy and buoyed each other's spirits with smacks on shoulder pads, helmets, and backsides.

They were one of the first college teams to use the spread offense, which arrived in 1989 when Head Coach Don James hired Keith Gilbertson and charged him with adding zip to an offense that needed an overhaul. They ran an attacking defense willing to blitz on any down and in any situation. That made James nervous, but his defensive coaches, led by Jim Lambright, convinced him they had the unique blend of talented players capable of pulling it off.

The 1991 season ended happily, but the next season had an awkward finish. In November 1992, it was revealed that quarterback Billy Joe Hobert had taken a loan from the father-in-law of a friend, and a subsequent eight-month investigation into the University of Washington (UW) football program turned up rule violations in five other areas. The

university cooperated with investigators, who concluded that no one from the football program had known of or authorized behavior that resulted in violations. Yet UW was hit with one of the harshest penalties ever issued by the Pac-10 Conference. Upset with what he felt was a punishment that in no way fit the crime, as well as a lack of support from the university administration, James abruptly resigned before the 1993 season.

That part of the story has been told in many places, most notably in Sam Farmer's 1993 book *Bitter Roses: An Inside Look at the Washington Huskies' Turbulent Year*. It's a part of Washington football history that cannot be ignored but is sometimes given so much emphasis that it can overshadow the 1991 team's accomplishments.

After he resigned, Coach James agreed to do a college football show with me, and for the next three seasons we spent an hour a week together. Thanks to Don, I got the chance to interview every major college coach in America. His wife, Carol, usually came along, and we began (only half-jokingly) to refer to her as the show's executive producer. She'd jot notes to Don to remind him to say hi to the wives and families of our weekly guests.

Carol *did* help us out on the show, but her main reason for coming each week was simple. "We spent a lot of time apart when he was coaching," she said. "I want to be with him now as much as I can." Don's resignation was controversial, and I was one of many who disagreed with his decision. But it was impossible to not see how happy he was in his post-football life. He and Carol had met when they were both fourteen, and their love for each other was warm, genuine, and inspirational.

One night, Renee and I left a Mariners game early. The season finale of the hit TV show *NYPD Blue* was airing, and Renee made it clear that under no circumstances were we missing the episode during which the main character, Detective Andy Sipowicz, was getting married. I was mildly irritated that we were going to miss the end of the ballgame, and as we pulled out of the parking lot, I saw a couple coming toward us. "Look," I said. "Look at that poor guy. His wife made him leave early too." Our car got closer, and I saw it was Don and Carol.

"Hi guys," I said.

“Hi, Gasman!” Don said as he hurried by us. “We’ve gotta get home for the Sipowicz wedding!”

I decided that if Don could be enthusiastic, then I could be too.

This book focuses on the 1991 team and the evolution of the entire UW football program with Don James as a coach. In 1985 Don was considered one of the top coaches in the country. Four subpar seasons later, that reputation was gone, and many fans were wondering what was wrong with UW football. But by that time, a talented group of young players had arrived at Washington. In informal meetings, they looked each other in the eye and began setting goals. First, they would get back to a bowl game; then they would get UW back to the Rose Bowl. When they accomplished that, they would aim their sights at the prize atop college football’s tallest mountain and pledge to bring a national title to Seattle.

Along the way, the players and coaches learned valuable lessons. One stumble—just one day where a guy gave less than his most intense best—could lead to a slip. And in college football one slip could make a goal vanish like a wisp of smoke, never to be seen again.

But in 1991 there would be no slips. The Huskies knocked down every opponent put in front of them and authored a season so dominant that only one word is needed to sum it all up: perfection.

