



On Rocky Top: A Front-Row Seat to the End of an Era

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“The best book on college football I’ve read in a generation....If you love college football, you’ll love this book.”

— Jeff Pearlman, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Boys Will Be Boys* and *The Bad Guys Won!*

Part *Season on the Brink*, part *Fever Pitch*, *On Rocky Top* is a rollicking, all-access pass to the rough-and-tumble world of University of Tennessee football. The book chronicles the 2008 season, during which the team suffered its second worst record ever and Head Coach Phil Fulmer, the most beloved and recognized man in Tennessee, was fired. Author of *Dixieland Delight*, Clay Travis offers a fascinating inside look at the inner workings of a major college sports program, and chronicles a season of promise that went terribly wrong, ending a long, fabled era.

On Rocky Top: A Front-Row Seat to the End of an Era Details

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Robert says

Another solid sports book from Travis. I like his other book a bit more, but if you are a fan of college football his stuff is worth the read. Crazy to think that A. Foster went from his very disappointing senior year at Rocky Top to where he is now in the NFL. Good showing of perseverance by the running back.

David Ward says

On Rocky Top: A Front-Row Seat to the End of an Era by Clay Travis (Harper Collins 2009) (796.33623) was intended to be nothing more than an inside look at the Tennessee Vols 2008 football season. It became instead a chronicle of the death march of the era of Phillip Fulmer's tenure as the Tennessee football coach. A fine man was fired so that a pencil-necked wimp of an administrator could try to demonstrate that he had "grown a pair." The always touchy football gods have turned away from the Vols ever since; karma has assured that every small victory since has been repaid by pain, heartache and disgrace. For instance, the former Athletic Director who caused this mess left in disgrace (that's good). However, he was replaced as the Athletic Director at the University of Tennessee by an *Alabama alumni* (and that's horrible). Go Vols. My rating: 8/10, finished 2009.

David says

Painful to read for any dedicated Vols fan, but it was an insightful peak behind the scenes of the disastrous 2008 season. One of the things I appreciated about Travis's book is how it occasionally wrestles with the question, "Why do I care so much?" and gives you a look at how our obsessive fandom affects the actual players-as-people and their families. He also situates the firing of Fulmer in the larger context of the radical change in SEC football over the past few decades: the SEC has become a "mercenary league", noting how Fulmer was the LAST SEC coach to have played for his team and grown up in the state his school represents. I'm certainly on the "Lane-train" as far as my passion for Tennessee football goes, but I do think it is fascinating how the culture of SEC football has changed as the SEC has risen to dominance in the college football world.

Fred says

Terrific book about college football and insight into the football fan's mind. I'm a Florida Gator but I gained a new respect for the Tennessee football program. Anyone who likes college football, or any wives or girlfriends who need to understand a football fanatic's mind.

Andy says

Being a huge Tennessee Volunteers fan, as well as a 1990 graduate of this fine east Tennessee institution of higher learning, my review of this book is admittedly biased from the beginning. That being said, Clay Travis has written a compelling and highly entertaining book on the 2008 season of UT football. Unbeknownst to Mr. Travis as he set out to write this book, the 2008 season turned out to be one of the most tumultuous and controversial seasons in the past half-century, arguably ever in the annals of UT football history. Long story short, Phillip Fulmer, who had been a player, assistant, and ultimately head coach of the Vols over the past four decades, finds himself in the middle of a terrible season, which leads to his dismissal by the UT administration. The conflict present is should Phil have received more time to turn the program around. UT fans generally were split 50-50 on this issue, but the book brings forth the angst and conflict that were present leading up to the fateful decision to fire him. I would recommend this book to all UT fans, and probably to football fans in general as a lesson on the changing landscape of college football from the year 2000 on....enjoy.

Gilbert Soesbee says

An Excellent Read For Vol Fans

I really enjoyed this book--read it in record time. It's an excellent read, even essential--if you're a fan of University of Tennessee Football. If you follow Southeastern Conference football, or college football in general, you'll find it interesting. If you don't care much at all for college football, you'll probably want to give it a miss.

For the record, I'm a Vol football fan. Always have been. Always will be. I graduated from UT in 1979 at the start of the Johnny Majors era. In my four years there, I went to most of the Vols' home games--it was sort of a requirement for those of use who lived on campus, where Neyland Stadium constantly dominates the landscape. My years as a student with easy access to live home football games were not exactly the high point of Tennessee football successes. I saw a lot of great wins and a lot of bad losses. But it was always Tennessee Football--with a loyalty that passes a lot of understanding. That is the particular part that I thought made the University of Tennessee different; what I thought made UT a family. We learned to support our school and our teams, not to slink off after a loss like we were looking for the nearest pity party after a lecture on Kafka.

As Travis very successfully, and very clearly, points out from a variety of angles--the coaches', the players', the trainers', the managers', and even the equipment big-rig driver's--that is the part that has changed. Like it or not, Vol Fans (and I'm one of those who absolutely detests the development), college football has become a business, a BIG business. At major universities in the United States, it has become the business that supports academics, research, project development, and almost every other aspect of the university program. So a winning football team means more than just hoisting the SEC, the TaxSlayer Bowl, or the National Championship trophy.

Phillip Fulmer was Tennessee's first victim of this atrocious, but seemingly inevitable, development in college football. By all accounts a good and honest man at a time when being a good and honest man meant more than having a single 5-7 season, Fulmer is the second-winningest coach in Tennessee football history, second only to the legendary General Neyland. His overall record at Tennessee (which Travis explains in

perfectly-clear detail in the book) includes the 1998 national championship and would be envied at the end of nearly any coach's career. Yet he left the field in 2008 in what the majority of fans, boosters, and donors, seemingly tried hard to portray as disgrace.

My favorite quote from "On Rocky Top" is how one man described the 2008 fiasco: "They done that man wrong." They surely did. It's an unfortunate reality in the cut-throat world of football business, yet it left UT in a downward spiral that Coach Butch Jones began straightening out six years later in 2014. Brick by brick. I don't think that would have even been necessary if Athletic Director Mike Hamilton had done the right thing in 2008 and not pushed the brick house down.

But enough editorializing. Travis has given Vol fans a good book about a time that is important to understand. It's well-written, well-researched, and enjoyable. Even if it does cover a difficult time in Tennessee football history.

Michael says

The 2008 football campaign is one that most University of Tennessee fans are eager to put behind them and forget about. It started off with great promise, only to see it all coming crashing down in a manner of weeks, leading to a free fall that saw the Vols drop from defending SEC East champs to the termination of long-time coach Phillip Fulmer.

When writer Clay Thomas agreed to write a book chronicling the season of the 2008 UT Volunteers football season, he had visions of a trip to Atlanta for the SEC title game and possibly the chance to celebrate the 10th anniversary for the 1998 national title by competing for another one. Instead, what he got was the story of a season in turmoil and a program at a crossroads. And all of that is chronicled in his new book, "On Rocky Top: A Front-Row Seat to the End of an Era."

Thomas' chronicle of the 2008 season from a fan turned journalist perspective is a fascinating one. It may be hard for a lot of UT fans (myself included) to relive the horror that was last year. Thomas has some fascinating insights in the book, including one that stated he felt more comfortable in the stands, pulling for the team than he did on the sidelines watching as things unfolded. He also examines some of the aspects of the passionate fans--both himself and others--wondering if they know how the players view the games they play each Saturday and the impact what they say and how they act have on the players. Thomas talks to Arian Foster and his family at several points in the unfolding narrative, looking at how Foster entered the season with the chance to become the leading rusher in UT history and ended the season as a goat of sorts and possibly having his chances for an NFL career go up in flames.

But make no mistake that the focus of this book is Fulmer. Fulmer began the season as the dean of SEC coaches and was facing a crossroads. Despite making it to the title game three times in a decade, the Vols hadn't won an SEC title since 1998. He was also bringing in a new offensive coordinator, who was told he would be the next guy with Fulmer decided to retire in a few years.

And then the season began with a road loss to LSU and quickly spiralled out of control, leading to the moment when athletic director Mike Hamilton felt the time had come to replace Fulmer. One interesting chapter shows two boosters and their views on Fulmer and why he should be either allowed to stay and given time to right the ship or why he should be removed as head coach. Both sides have some interesting

arguments and, in the end, it comes down to a decision of whether to go with your head or your heart in keeping or firing Fulmer. Hamilton looked at the bottom line with declining attendance and the lack of a bowl game on the horizon and made the call.

The chronicle of what happened is peppered by personal observations by Travis, wondering why he cares so much about the team and its successes or failures. He also examines the growing trend of bloggers and Internet chat rooms, discussing not only Fulmer but also the players and their impact. And, along the way, Travis litters in some history of the Vols--not only their history as a team, but his own moments that defined him as a Vols fan.

Oh and he calls Urban Meyer a midgit wrestler, too. Pure gold, if you hate all things Florida.

The book weaves in stories of the impact Fulmer had both on the field and off it. And it also makes you wonder if UT didn't sell out the last little bit of its old soul and that of the old SEC to try and become a national powerhouse by hiring Lane Kiffin.

If you're a UT fan, this is a must read. But I think the story and observations go deeper than that. If you're an SEC football fan or a college football fan, this is essential reading. The questions about the cost and price of winning and being a national powerhouse are shaking as well as the implications of the new hires at various schools around the SEC. Travis argues that a part of the identity of the South was lost when Fulmer was fired because he truly was one of the last of the old guard who attended the school he coached at and cares passionately about the program beyond the wins and losses. Again, read the chapters on the trainers or the man who drives the equipment to and from road games to see how Fulmer was more than just the guy who coached the team on Saturday afternoons and how great a loss his firing truly will be to the UT program long term.

Travis asks some hard questions and offers no easy answers in the book. But if you want to really get inside the program and understand a bit more of all that went on last year, then this is a must read.

Kyle says

Wonderful insight into one of the most painful decisions in Tennessee Volunteers history. It is amazing that the project was intended to be one thing, but as the year progressed, so did this project. Seven years removed from the decision to fire Philip Fulmer, this book can become even more painful to read knowing that the grass was not greener, and the turmoil that has plagued the Volunteers ever since. Georgia and LSU fans can use this as a perfect example of how your current coach might not be that bad, and the impact a change can have on the players, coaches, families, and fans.

John says

I liked it.

Holly Cline says

First of all, *On Rocky Top* is a better book than Clay Travis's previous outing *Dixieland Delight*. The writing is better, the voice is better, things are just better. If you read *Dixieland Delight* and found it enjoyable and with potential but lacking in maturity level and trying too hard to be awesomely funny, read *On Rocky Top*. Everything is toned way down for the better, without losing completely the author's sense of personality. Perhaps this newfound sense of better writing is due to a few years of human growth, the arrival of a newborn son or just the coincidence of picking the most disastrous year ever to follow your favorite team around with close access. Whatever the reasons, the change is good.

Even if you're not a fan of Tennessee football (I'm not), you'll be able to relate to this book if you're a fan of ANY team of ANY sport. The fan experience is truly universal. Especially in hard times of seemingly never ending agony. A few of my favorite parts: 1) Clay's superstitiousness in overdrive regarding a Chrysler Sebring, 2) the reappearance of Clay's friends that I met during *Dixieland Delight* proving his circle hasn't changed much in the last few years, 3) Goodtime Charlie, and 4) Lane Kiffin is a snake.

I also liked the internal struggle as Clay's fandom comes to know the Tennessee staff and players firsthand. The way that putting a human face on the players and coaches makes it harder to be angry at them in times of defeat. Inky's story of injury and how awful he feels thinking about his real-time reaction in retrospect. These moments of fan struggle and caring for the people behind the jerseys are where *On Rocky Top* really excels.

Matt Galyon | readsandcoffee says

Perspective is Key

I was a freshman at the University of Tennessee during the 2008 season and a steady stream of cheap beer blocked out most of these memories. Reading this with 6 years of perspective...it reads like a Greek tragedy knowing how everything with the football program would go between then and now. This book was excellent, however. Travis gave a thoughtful and honest look at the most difficult year the Vols have experienced in recent times. Required reading for an Vol fan.

Jeremey M says

I fully admit I struggled with this book at the beginning. What was the exact purpose? What was Travis trying to accomplish by writing this book? Is this just an elaborate excuse for him to live out his ultimate fan dream? As the book progressed I think it found its voice. It's about a man grappling with growing up and his obsessive fandom. It's about a program evolving and a good man caught in the middle of it.

Travis is obviously a diehard Tennessee fan and at no point do I feel this clouds any of his writing, in fact it's probably one of its strengths. As you read the book I think you get a really good look into the kind of person Phil Fulmer is, and what he brings to the table. And if anything, I think it's about the tragedy of men like Fulmer losing their place in a world that obsesses with immediate results and the narrow focus of "winning is all that matters." We should all be so lucky to have men like him in our lives, let alone as our coaches.

As a sports book I don't know if it holds up, I really struggled with it through that lens. I recently read John

Bacon's Three and Out and I felt that book was far stronger on the football aspect than On Rocky Top. That said, I believe that On Rocky Top is the better book, the better story. And in the end, that's all you can hope for.

Chet says

The 2008 Tennessee football season is one that most Volunteer fans would like to forget. It was the year we watched our beloved team implode and have the worst season most of us could ever remember. It was a season that would, ultimately, end with the firing of longtime coach, Phil Fulmer, and one that was the beginning of a 5 year (so far) drought of the quality football the Tennessee faithful are used to seeing...a drought from which we have yet to emerge.

So, as one could imagine, reliving this terrible season is not something that makes a Big Orange fan happy. However, I rather enjoyed the book, despite the pain it caused me to read it. I love Tennessee football and this gave a lot of insight into the behind-the-scenes stuff that most fans don't ever see. It gives you a glimpse into just how much the players and coaches care and it made me ashamed that I was one of the fans calling for Fulmer's head back in '08. I thought that the game had passed Fulmer by and that he couldn't compete. One thing I always felt, though, was that he was a class act, and this book didn't change that belief.

On Rocky Top is, for all intents and purposes, a fan's love letter to the sports team that has meant so much to him over the course of his life. Clay Travis has a great, relaxed writing style and it was strange that, even though I knew the outcome of every game and, ultimately the season and the book, I still found myself getting excited as I read, hoping that he was going to tell me the Vols came back and won. It would have been nice if Travis had gotten a Championship season to write about, but as it stands, he still has written a great book, capturing all of the excitement, heartbreak and strength of the team and the fans during one of the most trying times of a sports fan's life.

Joseph says

Great fun book. I loved his other book as well. I still laugh thinking about some of the descriptions he has given to the other SEC schools. If you are a TN or SEC fan this is a good read. It is about the last season of Philip Furmer at UT and how he was clearly loved by a school, a state and many more.

Kristopher Muir says

Best quote: "in the end Phil Fulmer [Tennessee coach fired in 2008 after 150+ wins] represents the final capstone of an era when the SEC went national. He is the final man to be born in the state where he coached, the final head coach to be a graduate of his school. For better or worse, all of our football teams will be helmed by hired mercenaries now; a once-regional game has become the nation's pastime. CBS and ESPN have turned our teams into national behemoths. Yes, more people than ever before see our teams play from all four corners of the country--and beyond. But I'm afraid that's going to make the teams feel, paradoxically, further and further away from the way we experienced them in our youth. It used to be that the SEC solely belonged to the people of the South. No longer."

