



Foreword by **MACK BROWN**

# ALL | IN

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE THE BEST

2010 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP WINNING COACH

# GENE CHIZIK

with DAVID THOMAS

**ALL IN**



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— *with* DAVID THOMAS —



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# DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to the four most important people in my life: my beautiful wife, Jonna; my daughters, Landry and Kennedy; and my son, Cally. I know how much all of you have sacrificed so Daddy can be a coach. Not many people understand those sacrifices, but I surely do. I know you guys always have my back—even when “Coach” is seemingly not doing a very good job.*

*Jonna, you are the rock of our family. You have stood by me through the long hours, the hectic schedules, and the less-than-desirable Valentine’s gifts. You are my inspiration and have shown me what it looks like to truly have a servant’s heart.*

*Landry, it has been a blessing for me to see your spirit and your ability to captivate those around you. Your heart is the thing that separates you from most—the way you try to protect me is incredible and much appreciated. You are your mom reincarnated.*

*Kennedy, I admire your insight and commitment to excellence. You amaze me with your organization and attention to details. Your dry sense of humor and quick wit keep me smiling all the time. You remind me of your daddy when I was little.*

*And my boy, Cally. You have fulfilled every aspect of what your name represents—a legacy to be proud of. You are a wonderful kid: talented, smart, and so much fun. I believe the YouTube video of you dancing in the locker room probably received more hits than my press conference after the National Championship Game. Your manners and polite gestures have an impact on everyone around you, and I know you will be a tremendous leader. You will always be my boy!*

*You all have shown me what it truly means to be all in. I love you.*



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# FOREWORD

ONE OF MY EARLIEST MEMORIES of Gene and Jonna Chizik is from the first time Gene brought his son, Cally, then five years old, to our Longhorn football offices. Chip Robertson, our equipment manager, brought some Texas gear to give to the kids, and among the items was a small football. Politely, Cally asked, “Can I throw this football with my dad?”

Gene’s moment with his son demonstrated one of the significant pieces of what my wife, Sally, and I have come to believe is the most important foundation in a person’s life—that it should be built on faith, family, and friends. And of course, in our business, you can add one more *f*—football.

In that moment, what I saw in Gene was his love for and devotion to his family. It obviously came from his roots. From a dad who was a proud Marine, Gene had learned the value of discipline, and he also got a good dose of loyalty at the same time.

In the 2005 season, with Gene as our defensive coordinator, we won the Rose Bowl and the BCS National Championship in a 41–38 victory over Southern Cal. While our quarterback, Vince Young, earned credit and respect that night in Pasadena, the fact

was that it took a defensive stop on a fourth down with just a couple of minutes left in the game for us to even have a chance.

On that fourth down play, Gene and our defense found their inspiration from a source that his dad would have been proud of—it is part of the creed of every Marine who ever fought, and it is part of the fiber that is handed down to their children. In that moment our defense wasn't fighting for Texas or for its fans or even for the national championship that we wanted so badly. Every player and every coach was fighting for each other.

Gene's faith has always been an inspiration. His love and devotion to his family are evident in everything he does. As he forms friendships, he employs the principles we share at Texas. We have built our program on communication, trust, and respect, as well as a common purpose. That combination works for a football team, and it also works in life.

I knew from the moment Gene and Jonna came into our lives at Texas that his destiny was to become a great head coach. To make that happen, he wasn't afraid to accept challenges, and he never paid attention to what others said and thought. He would seek advice, of course, but ultimately he knew where he was going, and he knew what he would do to get there.

In the end, he returned to his roots when he went back to Auburn. He knew Auburn's tradition, and he knew he wanted to be a part of it. It was there that he secured the final piece of our team goal—a common purpose. And it was there, with everybody pulling together, that he achieved his dream.

## **MACK BROWN**

*Head football coach, the University of Texas at Austin*

# PROLOGUE

IT WAS THE INTERVIEW I had been waiting for my entire life. My dream job. The head football coaching position at Auburn University. Unfortunately the dream was quickly turning into a waking nightmare.

As my wife, Jonna, eased the car up to the hotel entrance, I struggled through the passenger door and gingerly pulled myself to a standing position. The pain was excruciating. I strained to reach behind my back and tuck my white dress shirt into my light-gray suit pants again, still feeling the aftereffects of the back surgery I had undergone only two days earlier. *Man*, I thought to myself, *this is not how I had planned to walk into this thing.*

On the bright side, at least I didn't have to worry about how my back would handle the usual load of notebooks, calendars, recruiting plans, training schedules, laptop, and other presentation pieces I had carried into previous interviews for head coaching positions. This interview had come about so quickly I'd barely had time to begin pulling my notes together the previous night. And frankly, what I *had* been able to get down on paper wasn't looking all that great to me.

In fact, after closer inspection, I decided to just scrap my notes entirely. All one page of them. *Whatever*, I thought, wadding up the page and tossing it into the backseat. *They know who I am. I'm just going to have to go with what I know.* And if there was one thing I knew, it was football—*Auburn* football.

Once inside the hotel, I shuffled as quickly as I could through the lobby and made my way toward the small conference room that Auburn had reserved for its interviews, hoping my slow pace wouldn't give anyone enough time to recognize me. That's all it would take for ESPN to start scrolling a "Chizik Interviews for Auburn Job" headline across the bottom of television screens all over the country—especially back home in Iowa. A news leak was about the only missing element that would have turned this scenario into a complete nightmare for me.

So with a throbbing back, no notes, and a mind that a meteorologist would have reported as "mostly cloudy" at best, I staggered toward that small meeting room, knowing that the Auburn search committee was already seated around the table and there was an empty chair waiting for me. It was my turn to try to impress upon the committee members that I was the right man for their job.

Thankfully Jonna hadn't mentioned to me that, on top of everything else, my skin still had kind of a postsurgical greenish tint to it. I suppose she figured I had enough on my mind already. Between a hectic recruiting schedule, my surgery, and now the painkiller-aided recovery, there simply hadn't been enough time to assemble a formal presentation detailing how I would lead the Auburn Tigers to a national championship. Still, with more than two decades of coaching experience behind me, including three recent postseason bowl game appearances as Auburn's defensive coordinator and a national championship with the University

of Texas as assistant coach and co-defensive coordinator, I was more than confident in my ability to do this job and do it right. I might not have had any fancy handouts or PowerPoint presentations with me that afternoon, but in many ways, I had been preparing for this interview for the past twenty years. *Bring it on*, I thought, opening the door to the conference room. *I'm ready.*

As soon as I entered the room, I breathed a slight sigh of relief. As it turned out, all the committee members around the table had been at Auburn when I was the defensive coordinator there four years earlier, so I knew they'd be able to look beyond my less-than-stellar physical appearance that day . . . including my Grinch-like skin.

These guys knew me. They knew I understood everything there was to know about Auburn—the school, its football program, and its fans. They knew I steadfastly believed in doing things not just the right way but the *Auburn* way. They knew I could coach. And they knew I could win.

But there was one factor they could not overlook: my 5–19 record in my two seasons as head coach at Iowa State. That was going to be a tough hurdle to clear—especially in my current state.

As expected, it took only a few minutes for my record to come up.

“If we hire you as the head coach at Auburn, Gene,” one of the interviewers asked, leaning forward in his chair and staring at me intently, “how in the world are we going to explain it to the public?”

The other committee members' eyes fastened to me. The looks on their faces told me this could be a make-or-break answer.

I took a deep breath.

*Now that*, I thought to myself, *is a great question.*



# 1

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## THE JOURNEY BEGINS

AS SOON AS the interview was over, I stepped outside to call Jonna.

“Baby, I think I got it.”

It was 2006. Iowa State University was looking for a head coach, and I was looking for my first head coaching job.

The biggest question facing me was, if Iowa State *did* offer me the job, should I take it?

The biggest question that friends, colleagues, and members of the media would be asking me in the weeks ahead was, “Gene, *why* did you take that job?”

Back when I first interviewed with Iowa State, I was considered one of the hottest head coaching prospects in college football. I was one game away from finishing my second season as assistant head coach, co-defensive coordinator, and linebackers

coach at the University of Texas, where we had just won a national championship the year before and were now poised to finish the 2006 regular season with a 9–3 record and to earn the program’s ninth consecutive postseason bowl appearance.

Prior to that, I had spent three years as defensive coordinator at Auburn, where in my final season we compiled a perfect 13–0 record, won the Southeastern Conference Championship, and went on to defeat Virginia Tech in the Sugar Bowl. That same year I received the Broyles Award, presented annually to the nation’s top assistant coach.

General consensus was that I was going to land my first head coaching job, and soon. General consensus also held that Iowa State was not the best place for that to happen.

In a way, the general consensus was right. As much as I wanted to become a head coach, I initially had some pretty strong reservations about the possibility of taking over the reins at Iowa State.

Aside from a brief streak of successful seasons under their most recent coach, Dan McCarney, Iowa State was not known for having a winning tradition in football. As the school’s longest-tenured coach at twelve seasons, Dan was also Iowa State’s all-time winningest coach. Heading into 2006, Coach McCarney had led his teams to at least seven wins and a bowl game in five of the previous six seasons. But before that the Cyclones had made only four bowl appearances, and the school had been playing football for more than one hundred years. When a team doesn’t have a string of winning records behind it, the already-difficult job of recruiting top talent becomes that much harder.

Plus, the Big 12 Conference is a very tough conference, and it might have been at its strongest during that time period. In addition to Texas, Iowa State had to contend with traditional

powerhouses such as Oklahoma and Nebraska, not to mention a number of programs that were on the rise, like Kansas, Missouri, and Texas Tech, to name a few. Whoever stepped into the Iowa State coaching job was going to have a tough road ahead of him if he wanted to build up the program to become consistently competitive in the Big 12.

From a personal standpoint, Jonna and I wrestled with the fact that we had never lived that far north—in fact, we'd never lived farther north than Tennessee. For that matter, neither of us had ever even *been* to Iowa. We had to look up Ames on a map, and when we learned that Canada was only a nine-hour drive from there, we realized how far from our home state of Florida we would be. Since our entire immediate and extended families lived down South, we knew we'd be completely on our own if we decided to make the move. Not to mention the fact that if I took the job, it would be the third time in five years that I would have to uproot my family. The kids would have to say good-bye to all their friends . . . again, change schools . . . again, and learn a whole new routine . . . again. And because I would be working ridiculously long hours and constantly on the road recruiting, Jonna would be left to pack, unpack, and set up a new house in a strange city, with no friends, family, or support network to lean on. There were a lot of challenges, both personal and professional, to take into consideration.

Shortly after Coach McCarney announced in early November that he would be resigning at the end of the 2006 season (in which the Cyclones ended up finishing 4–8), I received a call from Dan Parker of the search firm Baker Parker and Associates, asking if I would be interested in a head coaching vacancy at a Bowl Championship Series–level school.

“Of course I would,” I told him.

I had been steadily working my way up through the coaching ranks for years, and at age forty-four I felt like I had attained all the goals I had set for myself as an assistant coach. I firmly believed I was ready to become a head coach. Granted, I had envisioned that the opening would be at a school with an established winning program (or at least one that was on the verge of winning regularly), but I figured at the very least, interviewing with Iowa State would be a good learning experience for me. So with Texas coach Mack Brown's blessing, I accepted the invitation to interview with Iowa State's athletic director and associate athletic director.

The interview was set for the following week. It was technically an off week for the Longhorns, but you'd never have guessed it. We were using every minute to prepare for our final game of the regular season against our archrival, Texas A&M.

Some coaches like to have their names floated out in the media as head coaching candidates, hoping the publicity will boost their careers. But I prefer not to have that kind of attention around me. I like to be able to focus on the job at hand. I didn't want the distraction of having to answer questions from the media and deal with speculation about my job prospects during such a critical point in our season. Our team was looking to win the Big 12's South Division title and earn a spot in the conference championship game, and the last thing I or the team needed was a lot of extraneous media attention disturbing our focus. Interview or not, winning that final game against the Aggies was my number one priority. I was bound and determined to keep it that way.

## **GOING TO IOWA . . . VIA DALLAS**

We arranged to hold the interview in Dallas to help keep things confidential. In addition to the possibility of a job candidate

being sighted near a university other than his own, there is also the risk that a media member or a school alum will use public information to track airplane destinations. If Iowa State had flown me from Austin, Texas, to Ames for the interview, someone could have picked up on the flight itinerary and connected the dots to discover that I was a candidate for the job. Dallas makes a good place for such meetings because of its size and central location; plus, with Southern Methodist University, Texas Christian University, and the Dallas Cowboys all located in the Dallas/Fort Worth area and other large college football programs not far from the Metroplex, there are plenty of rabbit trails around to throw off the hounds. I know all that secrecy seems crazy, but when it comes to monitoring head coaching job searches, the interest really is that intense.

To make sure the interview didn't interfere with our practice schedule, I arranged to drive to Dallas the night before the interview and leave as soon as it ended. I'd be back at work in Austin shortly after lunch.

I was prepared down to the last detail. I went in armed with my short-term plan, my long-term plan, my calendar for how my schedule would look as soon as I took the job (if they offered and I accepted), my mission statement, and all those things you think might impress during a job interview. For two hours the athletic director and his assistant quizzed me about everything you could think of regarding the running of a college football program.

They wanted to know my philosophy for recruiting players to their school. I told them my first emphasis would be on players from the state of Iowa. My research had told me that the rival University of Iowa was signing more high school players from the state than Iowa State was, and I made clear my intention to

match them for in-state recruits. Outside of Iowa, I would use my connections in talent-rich Florida and Texas to bring speed players into the program.

The athletic officials also wanted to know what kind of coaching staff I would put together. I said I didn't want them to focus too much on the specific places I'd be hiring from. I wasn't concerned with trying to wow them by saying I'd bring on staff from, say, the Denver Broncos or the New York Giants. In fact, I said I'd probably be hiring some coaches whose names they hadn't heard. I was going to hire a great staff who I knew could coach football well, would work hard, and would make it a priority to recruit quality athletes and upstanding young men. My basic message to the athletic director and his assistant was, "Trust me. I'm going to hire the best guys for the job whether you've heard of them or not."

They also asked my immediate plan if I became their head coach. I laid out my first month's plan from the day I would step onto campus, including meeting with the team's players to introduce myself and communicate my expectations to them, and meeting with the current coaching staff and deciding who would stay on with me. I also presented my three-month plan and my one-year plan, casting a vision for where I saw the future of the program at those points into my tenure.

I had prepared every detail for every question I anticipated they might ask. I hadn't been a head coach before, but I wanted to show them I had thought through exactly how my first program would look. I knew I was ready to become a head coach.

After answering the interviewers' questions, I asked them questions for an hour. As that hour progressed, and as my questions about the school and the program were answered to my

satisfaction, the possibility of coaching at Iowa State began to make more and more sense. Perhaps the largest potential stumbling block was how much the school was willing to put in the recruiting budget to bring in the athletes I believed the team would need, as well as the amount of money they were prepared to spend to hire the assistant coaches we would need. But after talking through some details that day, I felt satisfied that the commitment level I sought was there.

Another important issue to me that I discussed at the interview was my desire to create a team chaplain position. That idea was met with full approval, and as the interview went on, I was hearing everything I needed to hear—and honestly hadn't expected to hear—to convince me that not only was Iowa State a place I could be head coach, but it was also a place that wanted to build a winning football program and was serious about putting in the effort to get there.

I felt confident throughout the interview, and at the conclusion I was told I could expect to be contacted in four or five days. As soon as I left the building, I called Jonna.

"Baby, I think I got it," I said.

"Really?" she asked. "How do you know?"

"I just have a good feeling about it," I answered.

The next day Dan Parker called and told me that Iowa State wanted me to meet with the school's president for a second interview. In Dallas, of course. It was understood that the second interview would not take place until after our game with Texas A&M and that there would be no more conversations about the job until the interview. I didn't want anything to distract me from that final game.

Unfortunately, in spite of all our preparation, we lost our

final game of the regular season 12–7 to Texas A&M on the day after Thanksgiving. It’s always a bitter defeat when Texas loses to the Aggies, and missing out on a chance to play for the conference title made that loss even more painful. Even so, our 9–3 record gave us the opportunity to play in the Alamo Bowl in San Antonio, Texas.

*By the time the bowl game rolls around, I wondered, where will I be?* I wouldn’t have guessed it then, but as it turned out, I’d be living in a hotel in Ames. And I’d be head coach of the Iowa State Cyclones.

Jonna went with me for the second interview. It was a Saturday, the day after the A&M game, when we met with Jamie Pollard, Iowa State’s athletic director, and Gregory Geoffroy, the school’s president. It wasn’t until later, when Jamie and I were reflecting on the interviews, that I learned they had worked out a signal for the president to indicate whether he liked me and approved of hiring me. I can’t remember for sure, but it was something like President Geoffroy’s scratching the lapel on his suit jacket or rubbing the Iowa State pin he was wearing. Jamie laughed when he told me that, shortly into the interview, the president gave his signal of approval.

After we chatted briefly, they offered me the job and a contract for six years with more than \$1 million in annual salary. I was caught slightly off guard by being offered the job on the spot. And although Jonna and I have always kept our priorities in line when it comes to money, hearing *million* attached to *dollars* certainly caught our attention.

The athletic director and the president wanted to give us time to make our decision, so the interview ended there. Of course, Jonna and I had much to discuss. Based on the answers to my questions

during the first interview, and having those answers affirmed in the meeting with the school president, we both believed that a winning program could be built at Iowa State. As an assistant and a coordinator, I had been part of too many successful traditions to think otherwise. And during the interviews, it became clear that the school officials were 100 percent committed to creating a strong, championship-caliber program. Going to Iowa State made sense to us—from a football standpoint, at least.

It would still mean a big move—and uprooting Jonna and the kids—but we'd done it before. And while it wouldn't be easy, we knew that if we needed to, we could do it again.

But these two pieces were only part of the equation.

As deeply spiritual people, Jonna and I agreed that we would not make the move unless we felt confident that it was what God wanted us to do. Since fielding the first phone call from Dan Parker, we had prayed on a regular basis about the Iowa State opening. The time between the two interviews allowed us plenty of time to pray and discuss the situation together. At each step of the process, we continued to ask God to give us confirmation—that “gut feeling”—whether we should accept the job if it was offered. Iowa State hadn't made a lot of sense to us at first, but ever since the first interview, the job was becoming increasingly attractive to us.

I have always loved being a coach, but to me, coaching is about so much more than X's and O's. Don't get me wrong. I am extremely competitive, and I love to win. (Just ask my three children about our family game nights.) But I also see my job as a ministry and an opportunity to have a deep and lasting impact on kids' lives—whether those kids are in Austin, Auburn, or as it turned out, Ames.

After praying it over and talking to Coach Brown, Jonna and I were confident that God was calling us to Iowa State. Coach Brown agreed that it would be best to leave the team before the Alamo Bowl so I could get started at my new job.

I know there were plenty of people—other coaches and media, particularly—who were scratching their heads over our decision. To them, Iowa State didn't appear to be the logical next stop on my career track. They would have advised me that the annual merry-go-round of coaching vacancies would soon kick into high gear as teams finished their regular seasons, and among those would be programs with histories of winning that Iowa State did not offer. And in case one of those jobs didn't come up, I could have stayed at Texas, where each year the team has an opportunity to win eleven, twelve, thirteen games and be in contention for a national championship. Either way, sooner or not much later, I would have been able to practically handpick the school for my first head coaching job. But we were completely convinced that this job was an opportunity God was providing for us, and we believed wholeheartedly there was a reason he wanted us at Iowa State.

It might not have made a lot of sense to people on the outside, but from the inside looking out, it made all the sense in the world.

## **MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

As significant as my coaching journey is in my life, my relationship with Jesus Christ is even more important. In fact, in many ways, my spiritual journey has defined who I am as a coach.

I grew up Catholic, and Jonna grew up Methodist. We got married in 1996, and you'll enjoy the story I tell in a later chapter

about how we met. After the wedding, we discussed whether I should attend a Methodist church or Jonna should become Catholic. We attended various churches together, but we never seemed to settle on one that we felt would help forge our spiritual identity as a couple. Then, about a decade ago, while I was coaching at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, we found a church we both liked. The services were different from the churches either of us had attended before. Partly because of that, it provided the groundwork for the spiritual identity we had been seeking as a couple. This wasn't Jonna coming to my church or me going to hers. It became *our* church, and it was there that my faith really began to grow.

I had always believed in God, and on a certain level, I always knew that he had a plan for my life. But now, for the first time, I was beginning to grasp that there was a deeper purpose to my life than just being a football coach. As I listened to other people talk about their relationships with Christ, I felt a hunger to pursue a richer spiritual journey myself.

Among other things, I began to understand that we have been placed on earth not to be served but rather to serve others. I also came to understand that God put each of us here for a specific reason—in my case, to help shape the lives of young men who play football.

It wasn't long before we moved to Alabama, where I had accepted a job as defensive coordinator/defensive backs coach at Auburn University. There were two significant spiritual developments that occurred during my first coaching tenure there.

First, we began attending Victory World Prayer Center in Auburn. We remained in the background at first, sitting near the back during services and not taking part in many of the

church functions. But as our children became more involved in kids' activities at the church, Jonna and I started developing a relationship with the pastor, Mike Wright, and his wife, Sue. They quickly became great friends, but more than that, they ended up being mentors to Jonna and me. The timing could not have been better.

Our second year at Auburn, 2003, was a difficult one professionally, and it ended up bleeding into our personal lives as well. We entered that season with high expectations, having been ranked number one in the country by some voters in the preseason polls. But then we lost our first game 23–0 to the University of Southern California. At home, no less. Then we lost the following week at Georgia Tech. The 0–2 start dropped us out of the top twenty-five rankings and effectively ended our hopes of winning a national championship. We managed to bounce back and win our next five games, putting us back in the national rankings, but we followed that with another poor stretch in which we lost three of our next four games.

Not surprisingly, with our team failing to live up to preseason expectations, speculation erupted that our head coach, Tommy Tuberville, might soon be replaced. When a head coach loses his job, typically his assistants do too. With Tommy's job on the line, all our jobs were in jeopardy. And believe me, that led to a few sleepless nights at the Chizik household. What if they let Tommy go? Who would they bring in to take his place? Would we have to leave? Where would we go?

Tommy ended up retaining his job at Auburn, but dealing with all the uncertainty that season took its toll on the entire coaching staff, including me. And Jonna.

Even under the best of circumstances, being a college-level

coach comes with its share of pressures. Our children were young at the time—our twin daughters, Landry and Kennedy, were in kindergarten, and our son, Cally, was just a toddler. I wasn't home much because of my job, which meant Jonna was shouldering the bulk of the child-rearing stress on her own.

I love my job. But I also love my family, and unfortunately one of the downsides of coaching at this level is the amount of family time you have to give up. Between recruiting, off-season practices, the regular season, and—if things go well—bowl games, we are basically on the go year-round. Most days I'm at the office early and I don't get home until late—I usually put in a sixteen- or seventeen-hour day. From August 1 until the first Wednesday of February (National Signing Day), we pretty much run nonstop—no days off, no holidays, no breaks. Add a bowl game into the mix, and there goes Christmas and possibly New Year's.

Over the years, I have had both the great fortune and the great misfortune of having to reassure my kids that “Yes, Santa will be able to find us here at the hotel tonight!” There's no question—it's a fantastic job, and I absolutely love it, but it's also a grind. As a result, Jonna is pretty much a single parent six to seven months a year.

At any rate, with both of us under so much pressure at the same time, we knew we needed people we could lean on—people with whom we could close the door and say, “Hey, this is where we're at, and we need some help.” The Wrights filled that role for us, and we weren't too bashful or too proud to go to them with our needs. We really leaned on them during those early years, soaking up their advice and insights. One of the themes they kept repeating to us was how big our God is, and during that stressful

time, we trusted in that big God and felt his peace comforting us amid all the rumors, speculation, and turmoil we were facing.

A couple of years after we plugged into their church, the Wrights announced that they were leaving Auburn to enter foreign missions work. It was a tremendous shock and a disappointment to say good-bye to these people who had become such an integral part of our lives and had helped guide us through a rich time of spiritual growth. But as is often the case in the coaching business, it wasn't long before we, too, were moving on—this time to Texas, where I'd signed on with the Texas Longhorns.

## **A LASTING INFLUENCE**

That period of spiritual growth under the Wrights' mentorship proved to be a major turning point in my life because for the first time I felt like I was gaining a true relationship with God. Again, it wasn't that I didn't know God was there before—I had prayed regularly since I was a little kid. But now I realized that I was able to talk with God and sense his guiding presence inside me. It's a difficult thing to explain, especially to people who have never had that type of connection with God, but I can assure you it is real and it is life changing. It didn't take long before the people who were around me the most started to see that there was something different about me.

I soon realized, however, that it wasn't enough for me to keep this relationship between just me and God. One day in 2002, not long after we moved to Auburn, Mike said to me, "Gene, look at the opportunity you have to change kids' lives." I had always treated my players fairly, and I'd always been up front and honest with them. But with Mike's one sentence, God's purpose for me as a football coach became clear.

I believe God has blessed me with the ability to be a good coach. He has given me football instincts and knowledge that could only come from him. I also have been given the gift of being able to communicate with players. I know my players; I can read their body language. And that helps me sense what they are thinking and feeling—when they're confident and, more important, when they're really struggling.

But why have I been given these abilities? The more time I spent listening to that guiding presence inside me, the more clearly I was able to see the purpose behind those gifts. Mike's words drove home the opportunity I'd been given: to influence eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds who are being exposed to everything from A to Z in college.

Because of my coaching abilities and the doors that have opened as a result, I have the chance to make a significant impact on those young men. Because of that, I can have an influence on their futures that extends far beyond football.

Since 2002, my mission has been to develop godly young men who will become good men, good husbands, and good fathers in a society that is woefully lacking in those roles. I have a platform from which I can teach them the value of real winning—being a positive addition to society, serving others, making a difference in the world, and being a leader both on and off the field.

As God began to shape my vision for serving him as a coach, he brought another key person into my life—a man by the name of Chette Williams.

Chette was the team chaplain when I came to Auburn in 2002. He played football at Auburn in the 1980s and graduated with a degree in adult education, then went on to earn a master's of divinity from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. In

my first tenure at Auburn, I was inspired as I watched Chette work with young men in the football program, many of whom had come from dysfunctional backgrounds. A number of players told me that until they came to Auburn, they'd never had someone like Chette to turn to for spiritual guidance. He offered them wise, godly counsel, just as the Wrights had done for Jonna and me.

As I watched Chette's role in transforming the guys during those three years at Auburn, I thought, *Now that is what it's all about right there*. Like any assistant coach with plans to one day become a head coach, I was compiling mental notes of how I would run my own program when the time came. Based on my observations of Chette and the impact I saw him having on our players, I decided that when I became a head coach, the first thing I'd do would be to make sure my program had a team chaplain. If there wasn't one, I would get one.

So when I took over at Iowa State, I got down to my first order of business. And let me tell you, I was totally unprepared for the controversy that would create.

There's a valuable lesson to be learned here. Just because you are following the path you believe God has laid out for you does not mean the journey will be easy. Nor does it guarantee you will win a national championship, or whatever the equivalent is in your profession. But committing to a journey with God *does* lead to victory—even though that victory may not be what other people would consider a win.

I know, because that has been my journey.