

**COUNTDOWN TO KICKOFF**  
*A Short Story about College Sports in Our Times*

By Larry LaForge

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Smashwords Edition

*This story is about college sports, a driving force on many campuses and a unique part of higher education in America. All characters, locations, and events are fictional, but the underlying issues are real and cause for reflection. Technology, economics, and social norms intersect in the following tale to create a new phenomenon in the wacky world of college football.*

***COUNTDOWN TO KICKOFF***

***One Month***

The Spencer family is getting pumped. The Lone Star State University Hornets open their season in less than four weeks, and anticipation is at an all-time high. Radio, television, and online blogs are producing multiple reports each day about the happenings at football practice. Almost every move of the touted freshmen players is chronicled, even though they have yet to play a down or attend a class.

“We bleed green,” Will Spencer states simply and matter-of-factly. Will and his wife Audrey graduated from LSSU nearly thirty-five years ago, joining his father and grandfather, two brothers, a sister, and several cousins as proud holders of an LSSU degree.

Will met Audrey during their undergraduate days. Their two older children are also LSSU grads, while the baby of the family, 20-year old Wilson Spencer, is currently enrolled at LSSU as a business management major. With three grandchildren in the mix, this is a very busy family that plans many of its activities around the schedule of LSSU Hornet sports.

Football game day is a celebration for Will and Audrey Spencer and their family and friends. It’s time to start thinking about preparations for those famous tailgate parties they seem to live for.

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Robert Henderson is feeling the pressure. With only a month to go there is considerable

work to be done on the most important project Henderson Engineering and Construction has ever undertaken.

Alumni Memorial Stadium on the LSSU campus is sacred ground, and thousands of Hornet fans are following the renovation progress through a campus webcam that updates every sixty seconds. Most people on campus give directions to visitors by using the football stadium as a point of reference (*Go to the main scoreboard and take a left.*), so everyone will notice any change to the appearance of this towering structure.

LSSU has been no straggler in the arms race for college football facilities. Major renovations over the years have added multiple decks providing additional seats (from 26,254 to 33,431 to 56,805 to 67,941) as well as luxury boxes, HD video boards, seat backs, and other amenities.

Robert Henderson – known as Rob to his friends and associates – is on top of every detail for the current project, which many consider to be the most important in the history of the stadium. It's more than just business for Rob; he is also an LSSU grad and an avid Hornet fan.

“We lost considerable time on the front end when Walt allowed fans to weigh-in on some of the design elements,” Rob laments to his staff. Walt is LSSU's highly regarded athletic director Walter Wiggins, who may be the only person more nervous than Rob Henderson.

## ***Two Weeks***

Audrey Spencer is trying to light a fire under her husband Will. She understands that tailgate extravaganzas don't just happen. Grills, lawn chairs, canopies, and other stuff that hasn't been used since last season have to be found in the clutter of the garage, cleaned up, and prepared. The Spencers like to have a different theme for each game, so it's time to do some general menu planning for the entire season.

“Come on, guy,” Audrey scolds Will as he is glued to the latest TV sports report on the team's practice that day. “I can't do *everything*.” Will points out that he does all the grilling before and after each game, but admits that he needs to help more with all the preparation. It's just that kickoff seems such a long time off (fourteen days, three hours, and six minutes, to be exact).

The pride that Will and Audrey Spencer take in their game-day activities is a reflection of the pride they have in their school. The Spencers are not just sports fans; they take great pride in the academic, public service, and economic development efforts of their beloved alma mater.

Just yesterday, Audrey and Will reminded each other to make sure the DVR was set when they heard that LSSU might be mentioned in a story on the national news about innovative educational programs at state universities. (To their disappointment, the story did not mention LSSU.)

Audrey persuades Will to check out the grill and make sure other essential tailgate items are accounted for and in workable condition.

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“Verify the delivery schedules and double check the specs on all incoming materials,” Rob Henderson barks to his onsite project manager. “We cannot begin the installation until we verify the specs. Are the fasteners in yet?”

Rob remains focused and consumed with the details of the project. As a bachelor, he has virtually no family constraints and spends most of his time working. He is direct with his employees, but always professional and respectful. After all, Rob is an LSSU man. But don’t think for a moment that Rob’s firm was selected for this project because of his LSSU connections. He is considered a rising star in the athletic facility design and construction industry.

Walt Wiggins is too smart of an athletic director to allow school connections to play a part in contracting for this job. This is not Walt’s first rodeo. He led LSSU’s previous stadium expansion projects, which were funded in large part from the television contracts he helped to negotiate.

Television contract revenue also allowed Walt to build up the school’s entire portfolio of sports for both men and women, providing excellent facilities to support great student-athletes. It didn’t stop there. Walt wisely invested increased revenues from the latest television contract to build an academic support facility and staff it with professionals of impeccable integrity. All of these things added to the great pride that faculty, students, and alumni feel for their school.

“That’s unacceptable,” Rob Henderson told someone on the other end of his cell phone. “Please get those fasteners and clamps here by Monday.”

### ***One Week***

Will Spencer has finally gotten with the program. He has a working grill (which he cleaned while day dreaming about the opening kickoff) and plenty of charcoal for the pre-game and post-game grilling for at least the first three games. His main canopy was the victim of mildew, so he replaced it with a larger and better one from the local club store. Finding one with

a Hornet logo was no problem.

Young Wilson Spencer, the baby of the family and current LSSU business student, helped his dad with the grill and the canopy. Wilson has been assigned responsibilities in both setup and cleanup on every game day. He cheerfully performs these tasks knowing that one day he will be promoted to the grilling duties now performed by his dad.

Audrey Spencer has finalized the menu for the opening game, which translates into several grocery store trips during the week. It's a labor of love for Audrey, who always plans things so that her food preparation and Will's grilling do not require either of them to miss any of the game.

During game week, as the Spencers pass each other in the hallways of their expansive home, a familiar refrain is repeated: *Go Hornets!*

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The webcam at the stadium does not capture the full frenzy of activity at the site. Just outside the view of the camera, crews are staging large panels to begin the installation process. If all materials are in, and all specs are met, the installation should be completed easily in the week that remains.

Rob Henderson is not one to assume that everything will go smoothly. He frets over the color of the panels, quality of the materials, strength of the fasteners, installation challenges in adjusting to the proper tension and, of course, the weather during the coming week. He remembers the concerns about getting the color right – it must be *Hornet* green not just any shade of green – and whether the manufacturer can fulfill its promise to produce panels that will withstand the elements.

Rob's solid engineering and science background from LSSU is serving him well. He is clearly in command of everything in this project, from technical issues to people issues. In many ways he represents the best of what this great school has to offer.

Veteran athletic director Walt Wiggins is impressed. This is the best stadium enhancement project he has seen. While realizing that it's not done yet, Walt surveys the very organized staging area at the stadium and says to no one in particular: "We're going to pull this off."

## ***Game Day***

The Spencers arise early in the morning. Who could sleep late on this day!

Will and son Wilson have lots to do in setting up the canopy and getting the grills going. The Spencers are glad to have Wilson living at home, especially on a day like this. Wilson is taking his LSSU business program online. Ironically, he hasn't set foot on campus since enrolling as a student two years ago.

With a 1:00 PM kickoff, guests will be arriving soon.

The Spencers decided a few years ago that they could maximize their experience following Hornet sports from the comfort of their home. The savings in ever-rising ticket prices and newfangled seat license fees to Hornet sports more than paid for their 80-inch, 3D high-density television set and accompanying sound system. Equally important to the Spencers are the hassles avoided by not making the 47-mile drive to campus, fighting the traffic, dealing with parking, worrying about the weather, and navigating through crowds of sometimes ill-behaved throngs of people.

"It's a no brainer," says Will in his matter-of-fact style. Giving up the block of season tickets he held for over thirty years has not fazed him a bit. "Nowadays every game is on TV, home and away," Will notes. "We have a better view of the games than ever, and we don't have to explain to our grandchildren why so many adults are using such bad language in talking about our coaches and players."

For the Spencers, Hornet football is a family affair, and leaving the grandchildren behind is not an option. Will knows that the children and grandchildren of current LSSU fans are the future Hornet Nation.

The setup Will and Audrey Spencer have in their home for Hornet sports is perfect. The 80-inch TV is in a large family room that can be viewed from several adjoining rooms in the open floor plan of their home. A smaller HD screen is mounted on game days on a large patio, covered on this day by the new canopy. On good weather days like this one, many guests prefer the outdoor option.

The usual crowd of about twenty loyal LSSU supporters is expected, mostly extended family members but also some close friends and neighbors who share Will's philosophy about the game-day experience. It might look like a party, but this is no drop-in. This is serious football watching by serious LSSU fans looking for a better way to follow their beloved Hornets.

The rules are simple. Guests arrive before the game. Everyone is in his or her preferred watching position by kickoff. The game is on continuously from start to finish (no channel surfing to check on the hated state rival Wildcats). No one gives up on watching the game no matter what the score. Negativity and foul language are not allowed. There is plenty of alcohol available, but responsible drinking is the rule.

“I guess we’re just die hard fans,” Audrey says without a hint of apology for the house rules.

Will adds “We get loud and proud, and that’s what it’s all about. We have plenty of fun, but don’t have to worry about anyone getting vomited on like the last game we attended on campus a few years back.”

Audrey laughs and gently reminds Will about a near incident last season at their home involving some undercooked sausage before the opening game.

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The doorbell rings as the first guest arrives at the Spencer home around 10:00 AM, about three hours before kickoff.

Rob Henderson walks in and gives Audrey a big hug. They have known each other since high school, and Rob is a regular who is usually the first to arrive on game day. He appears very relaxed but eager to see how the stadium looks on TV.

“Have they shown any shots of the stadium yet?” Rob asks while staring at the pre-game studio show. “They did a cut-in to the game announcers a few minutes ago,” Will Spencer replied. “What I could see looked awesome.”

Will Spencer was right. When the pre-game show moved to the campus for a panoramic view of the stadium as it was filling up, the sight was truly awesome.

There will be no empty seats at this game, despite the large and growing number of loyal fans who are doing the same thing as the Spencers.

The corners of the top decks on both sideline stands are neatly dressed in the new tarpaulin covers that conceal the most undesirable seats in the stadium. Each green panel blends in with the “sea of green” that will eventually fill the uncovered seats with appropriately dressed fans at today’s game. The end product is both aesthetically pleasing and functional.

The aesthetic part is extremely important, and all agree that the final product will look great even when the stadium is empty. About 7,500 seats have been taken out of service. The remaining 60,000 or so seats are expected to be filled for all the games, including today. This “packed house” image of Hornet football is very important for the brand, and should help in negotiating the next television contract.

We’re talking big money here. The next television contract should be the largest yet. The proud Hornet athletic program needs these additional TV revenues just to sustain current initiatives, let alone keep up with the Joneses. Of course, each new contract brings even greater exposure for Hornet teams, not only through television but also mobile platforms such as smart phones, tablets, and other devices that haven’t been invented yet.

Young Wilson Spencer comes in from the patio to greet Rob Henderson. Wilson has made no secret of his desire to go to work for Rob's firm upon graduation.

"You're the man!" Wilson says to Rob in a not-so-subtle attempt to suck up. He piles it on deeper with this preposterous statement: "When Michigan decides to turn the Big House into the Little House, who they gonna call!"

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Back on campus as kickoff is about to happen, athletic director Walt Wiggins is pleased but in a very reflective mood. A staff member congratulates Walt on the outcome of the project, saying that it not only looks good but the tarps can come down when ticket demand goes back up.

Walt doesn't say anything but thinks to himself something that he has verbalized on several occasions about the changing landscape in college athletics:

*That train has left the station.*

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### ***About the Author***

Larry LaForge spent thirty-five years in higher education as a teacher, researcher, and active member of the academic community. He taught business management courses at every level from undergraduate students to doctoral students, received major research grants, published in top journals, directed dissertations, and served on editorial boards. He also advised student organizations, chaired major campus committees, and worked closely with athletics as a faculty representative to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

Dr. LaForge received significant professional awards during his academic career. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching named him 1995 *South Carolina Professor of the Year*, and the Clemson University faculty recognized him with the *Class of 1939 Award for Excellence*, their highest honor.

He received his B.S. from Clemson, and his MBA and Ph.D. from the University of Georgia.

As an independent writer, Larry LaForge draws on his experiences in higher education and intercollegiate athletics to create stories that illustrate interesting issues and dilemmas in our times. To follow his other works at Smashwords, please visit:

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