

THE “MOST PERFECT” ENDING

The following is an excerpt from an Oral History of the 2004 Harvard-Yale Football Game.

By Matthew Farbotko

INTRODUCTION

“[I]n the end all I really wanted was for the team to reach its full potential” –Tim Murphy

On November 20, 2004, the football teams from Harvard and Yale clashed in the 121st playing of “The Game,” as the yearly contest is simply referred. Harvard had recently finished “The Perfect Season” in 2001, winning all nine games in an Ivy League season shortened due to the September 11th terrorist attacks. Three seasons later, Harvard found itself in control of its own destiny the day of The Game, coming into the contest just one win shy of becoming undefeated champions of the Ivy League, but also poised to be the first Harvard team to win ten games in a season in almost one hundred years.

TIM MURPHY: Coming into the 2004 season we felt like we had some very special players, a very special senior class, and potentially a really outstanding football team that could make a run at a championship. But I tried to keep our staff and our players focused on the next building block to the next game—the next meeting, the next workout, the next practice. Sure, we had a formal goal, to win a championship, to win every game, but in the end all I really wanted was for the team to reach their full potential. If that meant our full potential was to win ten games, then that’s great. But if our team gave everything they had and we played to our potential—that would be bigger than winning a championship.

THE ATMOSPHERE

“It was an absolutely indescribable, awesome atmosphere that day” –Brian Edwards

The Game took place inside the confines of Harvard Stadium, but the significance of the day spilled outside the concrete walls.

TIM MURPHY: As far as the coaches are concerned, we would rather play the Yale game on the road because there are so many distractions with the media and with team activities. On the road, we can

get in the hotel and bunker down with everybody in the same place. It's a little more chaotic when it's a home game.

BRIAN EDWARDS: The very first thing I noticed about the crowd is the forty thousand people in the stands. It was different than normal games, when the stadium isn't really full at all. It was an absolutely indescribable, awesome atmosphere that day.

COREY MAZZA: The size of the crowd hit me when I left Dillon Field House for the short walk into Harvard Stadium. You walk through the crowd, and seeing players from the previous year's team—that made it a palpable college football game for me. Then on one of the first plays of the game, Ryan Fitzpatrick hit me on a quick little five yard pass play, and I got knocked out of bounds. I heard a good size roar from the home crowd, which was bigger than normal.

JARRED BROWN: People come to The Game because it's a big game, and it's a social thing to do. They want to feel like they are a part of it because it's a famous thing. It's a place to "see and be seen" to some degree. But if you weren't at the game, like, what were you doing? People did a lot of different activities on campus, so they just weren't as aware of what was going on with other sports as they were with the football team. That year, the Harvard hockey team was ranked in the top ten of all Division 1 programs in the country, but very few people on campus knew we even had a hockey team, much less a hockey team that was sending players to the NHL. In general I could tell people liked the football team, and they liked the fact that the football team usually beat Yale. I think they cared a lot more about beating Yale than they did about the Ivy League title.

RICKY WILLIAMSON: The crowd was electric. I wasn't involved in The Game in the three prior seasons, so I was not acutely aware of how much excitement was in the crowd. That whole game, the crowd was so involved and so excited, and really that was the best part. We didn't play many games in a packed house of forty thousand fans, so having that electric feeling in the stadium was just such an awesome environment to play a football game that day.

MIKE BERG: The crowd understood what was at stake for Harvard. We put a lot of effort into the product we put out on the field, and the fans enjoyed being a part of that day. We played in front of a packed house, and the crowd seemed into the game—as much as you can be into a game that is lopsided, but I think they truly seemed to be involved and up until the very end. There's no playoffs in the Ivy League, so there's no next step after the last game. That made the significance of a 10-0 season a little different. There was a lot of talk in the student paper, even the local and national papers about The Game that year. Harvard went 9-0 in 2001, but 10-0 hadn't happened in about a century, people appreciated the significance of that. They wanted to go to a game where something matters, so I think they truly cared.

JON BECHDOL: I thought the crowd was pretty engaged for the first half. I never really thought the crowd swayed a game, and I usually couldn't hear all that much from my perspective on the field. But I felt there was a large crowd that day, and decent amount of cheers when there were supposed to be cheers and boos when there were supposed to be boos.

LUKE COCALIS: The fans are really into the game regardless of whether or not they've seen a Harvard football game in the last ten or fifteen years. They are into the pregame pageantry, and pay attention during the game—at least for the people who go into the game. There were a lot of people who didn't go into the game, even on that day, because they stay outside the stadium at the tailgate. They were usually students. But the people who were at the game, the forty thousand plus people, they were all focused on the game. Harvard Stadium is relatively small and enclosed, so when a play happened on one side, I distinctly heard the different sounds from each fan base—the roar on the one side and the silence on the other when something big happens. It was a pretty even crowd in terms of Harvard fans and Yale fans; enough that I got a sense people were there for this game. Once the game started, who wins really matters.

THE PUNT RETURN

“Brian Edwards is a crazy son of a gun” –Jon Bechdol

Trailing Harvard by a touchdown early in the second quarter, a Yale offensive drive stalled and forced the Bulldogs to punt the ball back to Harvard.

MIKE BERG: During that entire undefeated season, Brian Edwards went on a tear finding new ways to score touchdowns, and not just as a wide receiver on offense. He returned kickoffs for touchdowns, he returned punts for touchdowns, and I think at one point he even threw a pass for a touchdown. The Yale game was no different.

I wasn't on the field during this particular play. Sometimes if we were in a safe punt mode, like expecting a fake punt or some trick play, the defense would stay on the field for punt returns, but we were not expecting that in this situation. As a defense, we did our job and stopped Yale deep in their own territory, so we came off the field to get together and prepare for the next defensive series. At that point, I heard the crowd noise building.

I don't remember seeing the play unfold, but I do know he bobbled the ball at first. It's pretty funny how a lot of times when a kick returner or punt returner initially drops the ball it causes the defensive coverage guys get out of their normal coverage lanes and open things up. They see the ball on the ground and it causes them to forget all of their defensive responsibilities. That happens more often than you might think, and Brian took advantage of that in this situation.

LUKE COCALIS: I think the game was relatively close when Brian Edwards returned a punt for a touchdown—it may have even been the first score of the game. Brian was one of my favorite players to watch. If you met him up close outside of football, he didn't look like a wide receiver, or even a football player. In fact, he looked like a guy who might play Ultimate Frisbee in his spare time. But, he had such quickness, great soft hands, and he was a lot faster than he looked. That gave him the ability to make incredible plays at any point in a game.

I was a walk-on player on the team for one year, so I got to know some of personalities on the team. After I stopped playing football, I did a little bit of work for the sporting group at Harvard Crimson student newspaper, and at the same time I joined the radio station and started broadcasting for them. As a result, I stayed around most of the players on the team. There were certain people I followed who I wanted to see have success, even more than the average player. After that punt return, I was first so happy that we scored, and then I was happy that it was Brian in his senior year, and then finally I was happy it was a punt return touchdown, because those types of plays are always fun to see. He was dodging in and out along the sideline, avoiding tacklers in front of the Yale bench. It was a pretty awesome play.

JARRED BROWN: When Brian tried to catch the punt, he fumbled it. I think it bounced off his knee or something like that. At that point I was in the stands and thought, “Oh crap, this is where we let Yale back into the game.” But then Brian ran forward, picked up the ball, and ran it down the Yale sideline for a touchdown. Then I thought, “Wohoo! Never mind!”

JON BECHDOL: Going into that play, I knew Brian’s punt return philosophy, so I always kind of perked up when he was about to return a punt. Brian refused to call for a fair catch, and it used to piss off the special teams coaches. I think throughout the course of the 2004 season there were about six or seven punts he caught where he probably should have signaled for a fair catch. Brian Edwards is a crazy son of a gun.

RICKY WILLIAMSON: Yale was pretty far back in their own territory; we did a good job on defense and forced them to punt, but I was also on the punt return team so I stayed on the field. As a unit, we were pretty aggressive so we had some kind of punt block situation on for that play. We just knew that no matter what happened with the blocking scheme up front, with Brian returning the kick we always had a chance of getting in a good return. We had such confidence in him returning punts for our team, it gave us other guys more of an impetus to do our individual assignments. We thought if we could get a good

block on our opponent, or get some pressure on the punter, Brian would have a better chance to return it. But when he muffed the punt at first on that play, I thought to myself, “Oh man.” I was running back to set up the wall and to make a block on the defender when I looked right at him and saw him fudge the ball. But sure enough, in standard Brian fashion, he picked it up and then he found the seam behind our wall and exploited it. He was gone. He was so much faster than all the other players on the field.

BRIAN EDWARDS: I was a wide receiver on offense, so if I got to touch the ball ten times a game that would be a lot. That is why punt returns were so great—it was an opportunity for me to get the ball in my hands a couple more times per game. But it is super nerve racking, to stand back there and return a punt because you are back there all by yourself, unprotected, and there are literally guys on the other team running full speed at you, trying to take your head off. If you screwed up everyone would see it, and you wouldn't have anyone else to blame for your mistake, except yourself. That gave me this adrenaline rush when I ran out onto the field to line up behind my teammates.

On a Yale drive in the first half of the game, our defense did a great job pinning Yale very deep in their own territory. On fourth down and with quite a few yards needed to get a first down, Yale decided to punt. We broke the special teams huddle on our sideline, and I trotted onto the field like I always did on punt returns. Since I knew the average length of the Yale punter's kicks from the scouting report, I stopped at midfield and faced the open end of the stadium and waited to receive the punt. At that point, I was in a state of mind where I didn't hear anything; I didn't hear or even notice the crowd. In that moment, I was just in a bubble.

The line of scrimmage was deep in Yale territory, so we weren't expecting them to attempt a fake punt to try to keep their drive alive because it would have been too risky for them. So, we had our full punt return team on the field to try and make the most of the good field position we expected to have. After the ball was snapped, the Yale punter, nearly standing in his own end zone, kicks the ball in my direction, and I started tracking it as it flew through the air. As the ball floated down to me, I

reached out my arms to cradle it into my chest. Unfortunately, on this attempt, I muffed the punt. I wouldn't say that I dropped the ball because of the enormity of the situation, with it being my last game against Yale and an undefeated season on the line—I think I just had a momentary lack of concentration and it slipped through my arms. Luckily, the ball hit the ground and didn't roll too far from me after I dropped it. I think that mistake actually worked out in my favor because when the Yale players saw the ball on the ground they thought “recover the ball” instead of “tackle the return man,” so when I picked up the ball and started running with it they weren't in a position to make a play on me. I think they call that the old *rope-a-dope* play.

We ran a return right blocking scheme on this punt return, which meant all my blockers formed a wall along the numbers painted up and down the right side of field, so after I gathered the ball I took off running up the field and to my right. Ironically, setting up our return in that way meant that I ran the ball back right in front of the all the Yale players and coaches on their bench. I didn't notice any sort of reaction by them to the play at the time; I never really paid a whole lot of attention to the other team or what was going on with them. I just remember all the blocks were set up perfectly, and I wasn't even touched going into the end zone. Basically, it was me sprinting as fast as I could to the end zone, and celebrating with my teammates after the touchdown.

Of all the things I miss about playing football, punt returns would be the number one thing. Punt returns are just absolute chaos, and every once in a while you can find your way through the chaos and you're in the end zone. It's such a huge momentum changing play in a game. For that reason, I had this unspoken rule with myself that I would never call for a fair catch on any punt return, and throughout my career returning punts I did a pretty good job of honoring that policy. That rule only added to my nerves because I knew that even if a would-be tackler was coming down the field relatively unblocked, in all likelihood I was going to get hit really, really hard. My rationale was, “Look, this is a really big football field, and there's only 11 guys on the other team trying to tackle me, and I have 10

guys on my side trying to block for me,” so the odds seemed like they were in my favor. Mathematically it didn’t come out that way, but in my mind it did. I honestly believed that every single time I caught a punt I had a chance to do something special with it.

THE WIN

“The Yale game was our victory lap” –Joe Kawczenski

Harvard emerged from The Game with a decisive 35-3 victory over Yale, and cemented itself as one of the greatest Harvard football teams in history.

JARRED BROWN: I stormed the field afterwards, but slowly, and after the initial rush of students. I’ve been a big fan of sports for a long time, and one thing I’ve learned is the first people to storm the field are never the real fans because they have no idea what they are doing. But after that win, I was really happy. I was really happy because we went 10-0, won an Ivy League championship, and we destroyed Yale.

LUKE COCALIS: I didn’t storm the field; it always felt random to me. But people stormed the field after we won that game. I could see one of my friends, Priscilla, who I can guarantee never went to a football game other than The Game, running around on the field laughing and probably drunk. This is the same Priscilla who is now married to Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook. I laughed because it was so out of character for her to be doing that. But that’s what winning The Game does for people. Generally, there’s a less socially exuberant society at Harvard, so people go crazy at The Game.

MIKE BERG: As we were about to win the game, senior linebacker Bobby Everett came up to some of us younger guys and thanked us for our effort all year, which meant a lot. As soon as time expired, our fans rushed the field just as they traditionally did after we beat Yale. Everyone was really drunk; the smell of liquor wafting over the field as the crowds of people rushed by me was intense. But that was all part of the atmosphere, the circus that is winning the Harvard-Yale game. From there it was right into

our locker room. Coach Murphy came in to meet us for our post-game huddle, and he did his usual jump into the center of the team while we chanted for him.

RICKY WILLIAMSON: We did a slow clap for Coach Murphy while we waited for him to join us in the locker room after the game. We always did that after a win, so that he would run around the corner and leap onto the team in celebration. He saved that leap for special occasions, and a lot of times we tried to get him to do it and he would wag his finger and say, “Nope, nope, not this week, maybe next week.” We had to earn it. He was so fired up after that game there was no doubt he was going to do it. To win like that at home against and to be undefeated, that’s just such a special thing. When you have so much success, winning can get old. But I could tell that he loved it, and so did I.

MIKE BERG: Of course we sang our victory song, *10,000 Men of Harvard*, as we did nine times before that same season. Then someone brought in the cup, the Ivy League trophy. We passed it around, taking pictures and posing with it.

BRIAN EDWARDS: The Ivy League trophy was at The Game. Since we beat Penn the week before, we had already won at least a share of the Ivy League championship whether or not we won the Yale game. But we won, so it was ours outright. I spent so much time in the locker room just celebrating, passing around the trophy with my team. I didn’t shower or change—I even went to the post-game press conference still dressed in my pads.

JOE KAWCZENSKI: We won at least a share of the Ivy League title the previous week at Penn, so that was when we really *won* the Ivy League championship. But we weren’t content with just winning a share of the title. There was no sort of celebration until after The Game. But I felt this crush of inevitability going into that Yale game—we were supposed to win. There was no question in my mind that we were going to win that game. The Yale game was our victory lap.

The undefeated season achieved by the Harvard football team in 2004 became known as “The Most Perfect Season.” Ten years later, I returned to Harvard Stadium with the other members of the 2004 Ivy League championship team to watch the 131st playing of The Game, and

celebrate the memories of that historic season. Just like that team a decade earlier, the 2014 Harvard squad was once again poised to become undefeated 10-0 Ivy League champions, with only the Yale game ahead of them. As if to honor the former players in the stands, Harvard scored with 0:55 seconds left in The Game to beat Yale, and be perfect once again.