

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. For public distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, contact ccasey@texasmonthly.com for reprint information and fees.

[PRINT THIS](#) | [CLOSE THIS](#)

TexasMonthly.com

September 2010

Arms Race

After decades of irrelevance, Texas passers—from Colt McCoy and Greg McElroy to Drew Brees and Vince Young—have suddenly become the dominant players on football fields at every level. What turned our little old high school programs into virtual quarterback factories?

by Bryan Curtis

Colt McCoy's finely tuned, defense-destroying brain is still trying to process the events of January 7, 2010. "I knew it was going to be a great night," Colt says. "And then it's over, in one little hit." Colt and his dad, Brad, whom Longhorns fans know as his ever-vigilant high school coach, are back in the McCoys' adopted hometown of Tuscola. They're sitting at a long table in an old hotel that a friend has recently converted into an office. Both men appear friendly and solicitous, if slightly guarded. A gallery of taxidermied hunting trophies surrounds the McCoys, a metaphor, if we're feeling literary, for athleticism interrupted.

Colt and Coach are sitting here in May, four days before Colt must report to the Cleveland Browns, who selected him in the third round of the NFL draft. But this discussion—this *reckoning*—centers on the events of the national championship game against Alabama, and it is awfully uncomfortable. A four-year starter at UT, Colt became the winningest quarterback in the history of college football, but the national championship remained just beyond his reach. That one little hit, which came on Texas's fifth offensive play, made Colt's right arm go numb.

"They asked me to pick it up," Colt says. "I could raise it to about right here." He points to a spot just below his shoulder, then drops his arm and lets it dangle by his side. His doe-like eyes have always made him look childlike, but with his arm hanging stiffly he looks positively helpless, like a kid forced to try on a sports coat and check the length of the sleeve.

After he was hustled off the field, Colt and his dad huddled for more than an hour in a locker room at the Rose Bowl. None of the 30 million viewers at home had any idea what Colt and Coach were planning, a rare blackout in our information-saturated world of sports. When word finally came that Colt wouldn't emerge from the tunnel like Willis Reed and beat Alabama, some fans—here we're thinking of Texas Exes with accounts on Internet message boards—were so dumbstruck that they wondered if Colt had laid up to protect his NFL prospects.

"People say that I skipped out on it because of my future," Colt says, a tinge of anger in his voice. "That's stupid. If I could have gone back in the game, I would have. I couldn't hold on to a ball. I couldn't take a snap." In the seven years that he'd been a starting quarterback, Colt had never felt so forsaken. In 2003, Coach says, he and Colt rode down Graham Avenue, Tuscola's main street right outside this office, in a fire truck to celebrate Jim Ned High School's undefeated regular season and a run to the state title game. He finished his high school career as the all-time leading passer in 2A and was twice named state offensive MVP by the Associated Press. But if he fell short of a state championship, failure had never visited him in such a freaky, near-biblical way—which is to say, his arm had never

just stopped working like it did in the Rose Bowl. As UT offensive coordinator Greg Davis puts it, “You just wonder . . . why?”

What we need is to inject some kind of meaning into that numb right arm, to write a satisfying ending to the story of Colt McCoy.

Coach has a suggestion. He says the injury allowed his son to become a religious messenger. Colt told ESPN after that game that, despite the seeming unfairness of it all, he would continue to put himself in God’s hands, that he was “standing on the rock.” The statement proved powerful. When Coach repackaged the story of Colt’s unbreakable faith for a speech at a church, a speech he has given many times since, an account of it quickly appeared all over religious and football websites.

But this is not the Colt McCoy ending that we seek. Forgive us, for ours is football-oriented. Colt was a near-legendary college quarterback: He threw for more yards (13,253), more touchdown passes (112), and had a higher quarterback rating (155) than any UT passer before him. He also rushed for 1,571 yards, won 45 games in 53 starts, and took a horrendous weekly beating—who could forget Coach’s reaction shots on TV? But beyond being a great quarterback, Colt was heralding a new era of football in Texas. High schools have turned into a quarterback assembly line. The state is churning out great passers like Colt every year, and now those quarterbacks are beginning to overrun college football and the NFL.

Consider that night in Pasadena, for example. As Colt was witnessing his faith, another Texas high school quarterback, Southlake Carroll’s Greg McElroy, was hoisting the national championship trophy for the Crimson Tide. And Colt’s own replacement in the Longhorns backfield was Garrett Gilbert, a two-time state title winner from Lake Travis. Austin Westlake’s Drew Brees, the quarterback of the New Orleans Saints, won this year’s Super Bowl. Matthew Stafford, of Highland Park, was the first overall pick in last year’s draft. And according to ESPN.com, four of the top five quarterback prospects for next year’s draft—Colt’s heirs—are Texans too.

“Just look around the Big 12,” says Davis. Now a senior, Humble’s Jerrod Johnson has developed into a freaky-good passer at A&M, becoming the first Aggie to throw for more than 300 yards in seven games. Robert Griffin, a sophomore from Copperas Cove, breathed some life into Baylor’s cursed football program as the youngest starting quarterback in the NCAA before injuring his ACL last year. Ennis’s Graham Harrell graduated from Mike Leach’s quarterback finishing school at Texas Tech in 2009 having set the NCAA record for touchdown passes, with 134. Since there are only so many job openings in the soon-to-be downsized Big 12, Texas quarterbacks have formed a kind of *Friday Night Lights* diaspora across the NCAA. Andy Dalton, a product of Katy High School, led the TCU Horned Frogs to an undefeated regular season last year and a number three ranking. Last season Texans accounted for 24 out of 120 starting quarterbacks in big-time college football, according to data kept by Mike Huguenin, a writer with the recruiting website Rivals.com. There was a Texan starting at Florida State, Stanford, Arizona, Arkansas, Ole Miss, Kansas, Tulsa, Tulane, New Mexico, Miami of Ohio, and Utah. And this is to say nothing of the Houstonian Colt took over for at Texas, Vince Young, who until a tussle at a Dallas gentleman’s club in June seemed to be on the way to recovering some of his former mojo with the Tennessee Titans.

To end Colt McCoy’s story with his heartbreaking final game is to miss how he fits in the cosmos of Texas football. Before you can understand Colt’s place, you have to know the amazing things that happened before that disastrous little hit—and the amazing things that have been happening since.

How long has it been since Texas could really brag about its quarterbacks? Try half a century. That was the last golden age, when Sammy Baugh, Y.A. Tittle, Bobby Layne, and Davey O’Brien all walked the earth. Giants of Texas high school football, the first three made the Pro Football Hall of Fame, while the latter won the 1938 Heisman Trophy and gave his name to the award that is bestowed upon the best quarterback in college football. Through the fifties and sixties, Texas could also boast Mount Vernon’s Don Meredith, who was a star at SMU before becoming the first ace passer for the Dallas Cowboys; San Antonio’s Tobin Rote, who won an NFL championship with the Green Bay Packers; and Fort Worth’s Frank Ryan, who made three Pro Bowls with the Cleveland Browns and had enough spare time to earn his doctorate in mathematics from Rice. And then?

“And then it seemed like there was just a famine of passing quarterbacks,” says Dave Campbell, the venerable publisher of *Dave Campbell’s Texas Football*. Call it the Great Texas Quarterback Famine. As hard as it is to believe, for the next four decades there was no such thing as a Texas quarterback—not an all-world one, anyway.

Pennsylvania would produce Joe Montana and Joe Namath and Dan Marino. California had John Elway and Dan Fouts. Even Oklahoma could claim Troy Aikman. Texas, meanwhile, gave the world Billy Joe Tolliver. After Davey O'Brien's Heisman, there would be a drought of 51 years before another Texas schoolboy quarterback, Andre Ware, would win it again. Bobby Layne, the University of Texas and Detroit Lions star, threw his final NFL pass in 1962. Layne is still the last Texas quarterback to make the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Try that piece of trivia out on your friends at halftime.

Something strange happened to Texas quarterbacks during the Great Famine: They stopped throwing the football. "The basic role of the Texas high school quarterback was to take the snap and hand the ball off," says Doug Stephens, the offensive coordinator at powerhouse Taylor High School, in Katy. Running back—think John David Crow, Earl Campbell, or Eric Dickerson—was the real glamour position, the most talented guy on the team. The quarterback was merely a middleman between the pigskin and the talent. When you thought of a Texas quarterback, you thought of someone like Longhorns wunderkind James Street, who never lost a game as a starter. He was smart and dependable (someone had to get everyone lined up correctly), but as a passer, he was what Bill Parcells used to call a JAG—"just another guy."

Texas quarterbacks were stuck in run-heavy schemes like the wishbone, the veer, the wing T. If those names mean anything to you, you know that "three yards and a cloud of dust" is not a cliché but a term of art. "Not that there weren't good quarterbacks coming out on those teams," says Greg Davis, "but they were so much harder to evaluate." Take Ware, the future NFL quarterback, who toiled in the wing T at Dickinson High, south of Houston, in the eighties. Today, Ware can hardly remember throwing a pass in high school. What he remembers is *blocking*, flipping the ball to his running back on a Wing Right 21 pitch play and then knocking a linebacker to the ground. If you were a quarterback during the Great Famine, that's the menial labor you were expected to do. "Don't think for one minute I went to the University of Houston thinking I was going to throw it forty to fifty times a game and win the Heisman," says Ware, who threw for 4,699 yards and 46 touchdowns his junior year with the Cougars.

The Great Famine consumed more than just Texas high schools. Ty Detmer had managed to push back against the tide of history and throw the ball forty times a game at San Antonio's Southwest High in an offense designed by his dad, Sonny. But before his graduation, Detmer took one look at the state's colleges, the Longhorns and Aggies and the other medieval programs, and thought, "Geez, these guys never throw the ball either."

"I felt like I had to leave the state to be successful," Detmer says now. Leave Texas to be a great quarterback—imagine that! Detmer went off to Provo, Utah, and won the Heisman Trophy in 1990. Yes, Texas was a state where quarterbacks went to die. And even if Ware or Detmer or the University of Houston's David Klingler somehow broke through in college, they inevitably failed to become major stars in the pros. According to Bobby Burton, the former editor of Rivals.com, there wasn't even a *good* Texas quarterback in the NFL from the moment Tommy Kramer joined the Minnesota Vikings, in 1977, to when Drew Brees joined the San Diego Chargers, in 2001. No Lone Star Montanas. No Aikmans. Not even a Romo.

The Famine was so sweeping, so complete, that it left Colt and company with only one option: rebuild the position from the ground up.

There's a very old joke about how Texas has only two sports: football and spring football. In 1997, as the Great Famine was ending its third decade, Bobby Burton, Doug Stephens, and John Heidtke of Fox Sports sat in an office in College Station. They were pitching Texas's third sport: summer football. Called 7-on-7s, this version of the game would ignore big, surly lineman. The offense consisted of the so-called skill players (the quarterback, running backs, and receivers) and the center; on defense, the seven players were the linebackers and defensive backs. There would be no shoulder pads, no handoffs, no three yards and a cloud of dust. No, 7-on-7s were cast in opposition to the intellectual march of Texas football. They would be a quarterback's laboratory.

As a quarterback in 7-on-7s, you took the snap from center. And you found you were supposed to—gasp!—throw the dang ball. And you had to do it quickly—a timer gave you only four seconds. You started on your own 45-yard line, and you had three plays to make 15 yards and a first down. And you marched down the field, as in regular football, until you scored a touchdown or turned it over on downs—no punts allowed.

Stephens, who's now the executive director of the state tournament that's held in College Station each July, got the idea after reading an article that said California was miles ahead of Texas in producing NFL quarterbacks. What was

California doing that was so great? he wondered. As it turned out, California high schoolers had been playing 7-on-7s in some form since the seventies. A smart but aloof coach named John Mackovic picked it up there and brought it with him to Texas in 1992, when he became head coach of the Longhorns. Stephens and Burton later devised a system where teams that won their local 7-on-7 qualifying games and regional tournaments could advance to a state championship tournament.

What 7-on-7s did in Texas was create a never-ending football season. During the Famine, as soon as school ended, quarterbacks were often lost to summer baseball or basketball leagues. But a 1996 UIL rule change said that a quarterback and his receivers could play together during the summer. “It gave us all an excuse to show up and practice,” Colt says. Summer football became a prelude to the fall. “It becomes muscle memory when you put on the pads and have linemen coming after you,” says Drew Tate, a quarterback at Baytown’s Lee High School who in 2001 won the 7-on-7 state tournament and went on to star at the University of Iowa. Moreover, thanks to another UIL rule intended to “de-professionalize” the off-season, teams had to play summer football without their head coach. That made the quarterback the de facto field general. He did everything from making sure his receivers ran the right routes to making sure they brought their entry fees.

Colt caught the 7-on-7 wave when he was fifteen, just before he became a starter on the varsity at Jim Ned High. He needed the practice, because Coach hadn’t let him play a down of organized football until he was in seventh grade. Some of the parents hated this—why can’t we get the coach’s son onto our Pop Warner team? But Coach wanted full control of Colt; he didn’t want him touching a football unless Coach was the coach. That meant 7-on-7s were the only place Colt was in charge. “I called all the plays,” Colt says.

Jim Ned was a 2A school, a “low” classification where the players were generally smaller and slower than the football factories in the Dallas and Houston suburbs. But in 7-on-7s, Colt and his teammates could compete with the big boys. Without the size disadvantage on the lines, all they needed to do was outpace them. (The tournament now has a dedicated small-school classification.) In 2002 Colt and the Indians won a 7-on-7 regional qualifier and made it to the state finals, where Stephens’s and Burton’s tournament had turned into a two-day-long football festival attended by coaches (who can only watch), the media, parents, girlfriends, everyone. Colt led the team to victories over bigger schools like Arlington’s Sam Houston and Round Rock High before losing to the juggernaut from Lufkin.

Looking back, the lineup for that year’s tournament looks like a who’s who of star quarterbacks: Stephen McGee, a three-year starter at Texas A&M who now plays for the Dallas Cowboys; Matt Flynn, who led LSU to the national championship in 2008 and now plays for the Green Bay Packers; and Tate, the University of Iowa star. In the next few years, the state tournament would host Jarrett Lee (LSU), Kirby Freeman (Miami), Christian Ponder (Florida State), Andrew Luck (Stanford), and Garrett Gilbert (Texas). The Great Famine was ending, even if no one realized it.

Long gone are the days when a quarterback like Andre Ware discovers his inner passer only in college. These days, by the time a Texas high schooler graduates, he has played some four hundred 7-on-7 games, Burton estimates, in addition to dozens of high school games and hundreds of practices. And as 7-on-7 has evolved, Colt and his brethren look like comparatively late bloomers. Ty Detmer, the guy who thought he had to leave Texas to be a great quarterback, coached a *fifth-grade* 7-on-7 team in Lake Travis this spring. In their first game, Detmer’s eleven-year-old quarterback—watch out for this guy in a couple of years—completed eleven of his first twelve passes. “The one we dropped,” Detmer says, chuckling, “we took a shot at the end zone. The kid had it, and when he hit the ground, it popped out. These kids are a lot more developed mentally than we were. They see it, and they can understand it. And they’re only fifth graders.”

Thanks to 7-on-7s, Texas quarterbacks were given an endless football season, but they could hardly audition for the colleges unless the offense they ran in the fall was more imaginative than the old hand-off-and-block business. Thus, it took a second innovation—the spread offense—to end the Great Famine forever.

Though we can trace the spread offense in Texas as far back as the twenties, to Fort Worth’s Masonic Home and School, no one knows quite when it became the standard formation of Texas football. Certainly Jack Pardee, who ran the run-and-shoot with the University of Houston, the Houston Oilers, and the USFL’s Houston Gamblers, was one of its godfathers. By the late nineties, just as 7-on-7s were kicking into gear, some form of the spread had been run by coaches like Todd Dodge at Southlake Carroll (now the head coach at the University of North Texas), Art Briles

at Stephenville (now the head coach at Baylor), Hal Mumme at Copperas Cove (later the head coach at Kentucky), Dick Olin at Baytown Lee, and Sam Harrell at Ennis. Brad McCoy had studied this scheme and thought, “This is an offense my son can win with.”

You don’t need to be a Mike Leach to understand the spread. Just imagine taking a typical prehistoric offensive formation, where the receivers and backs are bunched close to the linemen, and stretching it out horizontally. Wideouts are spread all the way across the field. There may be running backs—or not. The quarterback stands far behind the line in the shotgun, awaiting the snap.

For eighteen-year-olds, this small geographical tweak proved to be a godsend. A spread quarterback doesn’t have to master the age-old art of running backward five or seven steps while scanning the field—one of the hardest things to learn about the position. In the spread, as many as five wide receivers are scampering around the field, running vertically and horizontally. Often the receivers will outnumber the defensive backs in a particular area of the field. Or else, the best receivers will find themselves matched up against a slower defender. And if the defense manages to defend all that, the quarterback can take off running and find that the distended defense can’t catch him.

It’s impossible to overstate how the spread changed high school football in Texas. For one thing, the quarterbacks, rather than the running backs, became the undisputed stars of the state. Campbell and Dickerson gave way to Brees and Young. For another, the quarterbacks started to look like real athletes. They were bona fide gym rats who could sprint out to create passing lanes or keep the ball themselves. The offense took all comers. You could be a six-foot-six Big Tex clone like Texarkana’s Ryan Mallett, who’s now a future number one draft choice from the University of Arkansas. Or you could be a five-foot-eleven gnat like Lake Travis High’s Todd Reesing, who went up to the University of Kansas and won the Orange Bowl in 2008, his sophomore year. Do you see how Texas football is changing, and where Colt’s tale is going?

Colt began playing high school football at the spread’s high-water mark. Coach ran an average of 70 percent of the Indians’ plays out of it. In Colt, he had the spread’s ideal practitioner. Colt was six feet two, 175 pounds after basketball season. That was plenty big enough. Colt didn’t have a humongous arm, but he was uncannily accurate. He could sit back in the shotgun and calmly pick out one of two targets Coach had laid out for him. He could take off running, and though early on it would look like the most awkward thing you’d seen since Leon Lett, he could put the ball in the end zone. Colt completed more than 63 percent of his passes at Jim Ned, a huge number in the high school game, where a lot of the drops are because wide receivers are often worse than their quarterback. Not that that was an excuse.

“What’s the definition of a good pass?” Coach asks Colt during our conversation in Tuscola.

“A pass that’s caught,” Colt answers, for the millionth time.

This was their relationship, Coach and Colt, father and son, teacher and student. Besides a few free moments for church and hunting trips, Colt’s life became devoted to what Coach calls quarterbacking “craftsmanship.” Coach’s creation was almost too successful. By Colt’s junior year of high school, Coach knew that Colt didn’t like people to come up and physically touch him before a big game. Colt’s brain was already robotically whirring through the passing-game progressions, mentally flipping the pages of the Indians’ playbook—he was lost in some phantom zone. Colt could hardly stand a pat on the back.

Playing 7-on-7s had perfected the Texas quarterback’s timing and touch; a few years studying the spread helped enlarge his mind. “We’ve had kids from Virginia, Florida, California, from all over the place,” says McElroy, the quarterback of the national champion Alabama Crimson Tide. “But us Texas kids have been able to develop faster when it comes to reading defenses and understanding blitz schemes and protections.”

When Colt arrived at the University of Texas, in 2005, Texans were beginning to run the spread all over the NCAA. Todd Reesing started running it at Kansas. Chase Daniel, who’d won a state title with Todd Dodge at Southlake Carroll, started running it at Missouri and led the Tigers to their first number one ranking in decades. Texas Tech’s Graham Harrell—who’d learned the spread from his father-coach, Sam, the guy who was refining it at the same time as Coach McCoy—beat Colt and Texas in 2008, spoiling their perfect season and, for one brief, mind-blowing instant, making Tech a contender for the national championship.

Before Colt's junior year, head coach Mack Brown and Greg Davis realized their best chance to win would be to put Colt in an offense that was similar to what he ran at Jim Ned. As Brown puts it now, "Colt was exactly the same guy he was in high school as he was in college." Just as it had at Jim Ned, Colt's arm became the greatest predictor of Texas's success. Now, Texas was no Jim Ned. Davis's plays were far more complex than Coach's; the Longhorns' wide receivers were better than Colt had ever had in Tuscola. But what Colt was playing—what much of the NCAA was playing—was a glorified high school game.

"The offense the last couple of years was wide-open," says Bob Shipley, the head coach at Brownwood High, whose son Jordan was Colt's favorite wide receiver at UT. "That's exactly what Colt and Jordan had grown up doing in Texas high school football."

Back in Tuscola, Colt is watching a YouTube clip of the last pass he threw two seasons ago, in his junior year at Texas. He's smiling—unlike the Alabama game, this is fun stuff—and he begins to break down the game-winning play from the 2009 Fiesta Bowl. He's in the spread—five Longhorns receivers are scattered across the field. And, see, he was worried about Ohio State's middle linebackers blitzing and putting him on his butt. Colt was so scary good that season (he set the all-time NCAA record by completing 76.6 percent of his passes) that that's how teams tried to stop him, by beating the hell out of him. But he was way ahead of the Buckeyes. Colt knew that if they blitzed, the Buckeyes' secondary would expect speedy receiver Quan Cosby to run an out pattern, which Texas had used as its reaction to the blitz all night. Colt knew this, and so he motioned for Cosby to run a slant. The Ohio State safety took one false step, and Cosby was sprinting toward the end zone when Colt's pass hit him for the winning touchdown.

This was Colt at his highest level of quarterbacking. It's why the Cleveland Browns took him in the third round—a little later than Colt wanted but still a tremendous opportunity at the next level. He will work with the team's president, Mike Holmgren, who once tutored Brett Favre. As Colt watches the clip of himself walking off the field at the Fiesta Bowl, two healthy arms raised high, there's an eerie feeling. Colt knows it was the last completely perfect moment he would have in college.

Though Colt's senior year hadn't been nearly as pretty as the previous season—it was balkier, less consistent, a lot of times just plain out of sync—nothing could have prepared him for the events of January 7. Texas had the ball after a moronic Alabama fake punt, and Colt's brain was just beginning to process the Tide's defense. "It was only the fifth play," Colt says with disbelief. Greg Davis's call was a quarterback run option, which means that Colt could pitch it to his running back, but the play was designed for him to keep the ball. Alabama's strong-side linebacker took away the pitch. So he did what his craftsman's brain was programmed to do—he held on to the ball and looked for an opening in the line where he could slide through for a few yards.

The hit came from Colt's right, from an Alabama defensive end named Marcel Dareus. Colt, whose mind contains an exhaustive catalog of past injuries, can transport himself back to the moment. He notices that the sensation in his right arm feels completely different from the stinger that knocked him out of the Kansas State game his freshman year. This time, there is no pain. "My arm was completely numb," Colt says. "My whole right side is just dead." He picks himself up off the grass and motions to the bench with his left hand.

Standing on the sidelines, Brown saw Colt coming toward him and frantically scanned his face. "I was hoping he was fine, because he didn't look like he was in any pain," Brown says. But up in the stands, Coach McCoy knew. He had seen enough Colt knockouts to recognize game-over body language. The trainers guided Colt into the locker room, and when he didn't return after the end of the first quarter, Coach had to get down there, because somebody had to be with Colt—had to sit with him while he processed the fact that his great career had gone wildly off track.

Coach has a metaphor to describe Colt as he found him in the locker room. Colt, he says, was an animal that had been hit by a car on the highway—one of those squirming armadillos you see on the side of I-20 on the way to Tuscola. He was hurt and scared and angry—not only inconsolable but unreachable. It was as if Colt had reverted to his typical pregame mental state. At first Coach couldn't touch his son. Couldn't even hug him.

Brown didn't see Colt again until the half. He came into the locker room and found him with Coach and the trainers, and Colt told him, "Coach, I'm ready. I'm going to go out and play." Over Colt's shoulder, Kenny Boyd, the head trainer, pitifully shook his head no. Brown asked Colt to throw the ball to his dad, and when Colt couldn't do it, Brown told him he was through. Colt fought him, Brown says. "And that's when I said, 'Colt, I love you, I admire

you, I know you want to play, but you can't. We've got to be smart here.'" They took away Colt's helmet, Coach says, and locked it up.

His mind still reeling, Colt put his pads back on—that was a point of pride, even if he couldn't feel his right side—and trotted back out onto the sidelines for the second half. He found himself meeting with Garrett Gilbert, the freshman from Lake Travis—the *third* Texas schoolboy quarterback to play in the national championship game. Davis remembers it being surreal, Colt, reduced to a supporting player, pointing out to Gilbert how to watch the Alabama safety.

Do not be fooled by Colt's Zen demeanor and his doe-like eyes. He is furious about what happened that night. "I get to that point where I know we're going to play great," he says. "Then five plays into it, we're just done. I was upset. I was disappointed, because I knew what would have happened in that game. That's something I'll think about forever."

What most angers Colt—he said this to his dad as they sat in the locker room, watching on TV as the Longhorns played without him—is that he knows he had them. The Crimson Tide were lining up in the beatable formations he'd studied for weeks. Colt *knows*, with an athlete's self-assuredness, how his arm and his brain would have carved them up. And yet this is secret, useless knowledge. "Nobody knows that except me and my coach," Colt says.

As Colt stood on the sidelines, his right arm hanging at his side the way he showed us in Tuscola, a strange thing happened. Gilbert, the Longhorns' eighteen-year-old from Lake Travis, threw two beautiful touchdowns to Colt's pal Jordan Shipley. Texas clawed back into the game, cutting the deficit to three points, and the dazed Longhorns fans began chanting *Gil-bert! Gil-bert! Gilbert?* The greatness of Colt had been so overwhelming that little attention had been paid to the six-foot-four sandy-haired kid who had won two state titles with the spread at Lake Travis. Gilbert had also grown up playing 7-on-7s, and he learned from his own quarterback craftsman dad, Gale, who played eight seasons in the NFL. *Gil-bert*—yes! Here was the next great Texas quarterback, never mind that wounded animal on the sidelines with the secret knowledge that he'd had Alabama right where he wanted them.

Is the true ending of the Colt McCoy story becoming clear? Do we need to make it more explicit? Well, let's leave the McCoy's and drive east from Tuscola, taking a left turn at Fort Worth and heading north on I-35 West, to Denton. There stands the field house of Denton's Guyer High School. The star quarterback here is a senior named J.W. Walsh, eighteen years old, two hundred pounds, and the highest-rated quarterback on all the Texas recruiting sheets. His father—his coach—is John, a man with brown hair and cobalt-blue eyes, who has been ministering to his son just as carefully as Coach McCoy did to Colt.

It was in second grade that Coach took J.W. into the backyard and said, "You play quarterback, son. I'll play wide receiver." By the fourth grade, J.W. was turning his school assignments into meditations on the art of quarterbacking. One worksheet asked him, "The kinds of decisions that are hardest for me are . . ." And J.W. wrote in his shaky handwriting, "When I have to choose which way to run the veer." Coach proudly pulls that page out of his desk—he's had the thing laminated!—to show that J.W. knew he was going to be the next great Texas quarterback, the heir to Colt and all the rest. J.W., too, is aware of this noble lineage. "Yessir," he tells you, "I've been playing in 7-on-7s since sixth grade."

You see how this is going to end, right? How this new quarterback is constantly compared to Colt McCoy, for the way he commands the spread, throws those outs, and takes off in slick scrambles. How Greg Davis made the pilgrimage to Denton, just as he had to Tuscola six years earlier, and looked at J.W.'s size and said that, just like Colt, he was plenty big enough to be a Longhorns quarterback. Davis and Texas ultimately chose another for next year's class, a kid from Belton High—so many quarterbacks to choose from! So J.W. committed to Oklahoma State, but there are still letters piling up on Coach's desk, from LSU, Auburn, Florida State—schools that have had one Texas quarterback on the roster and want another one. "J.W.," the college coaches write out in longhand (it looks more sincere), "if anything doesn't work out with the Cowboys, you call us. You're the next great Texas quarterback, the inheritor, the man."

Coach Walsh takes us out to the field for spring practice. The Wildcats are running the spread offense—of course they are—when J.W. takes a snap and notices three big, unruly defenders streaking toward him. He takes off in a sprint toward the right sideline, stops just before he goes out of bounds, and fires to a receiver named Cameron

Hunter, who leaps in the air and hauls it in, eliciting a big whoop from Coach. We know this play, because Colt ran it his junior year against Colorado, with the same sneaky speed, and hit Jordan Shipley for a touchdown.

Let it be said that Colt and J.W.—and Garrett and Greg and all the rest—have a ton of God-given ability. But they are players in something huge, this *factory* that spits out quarterbacks at a frightening rate and disperses them all over the country. Colt McCoy could master the spread offense; he could lead his team through 7-on-7s; he could win more games than any quarterback in the history of college football and make himself Austin's latest folk hero. But now there's a shiny new model right behind him. Actually, a few dozen models. That's the true ending of Colt McCoy's story, the one that makes it feel as if there is something bigger at work here than some little hit and a numb right arm. In Texas these days, as singular as a quarterback may seem, as frighteningly good as he may become, he is instantly, abruptly replaceable.

[Copyright](#) © 1973-2010 [Emmis Publishing LP](#) dba Texas Monthly. All rights reserved.

[PRINT THIS](#) | [CLOSE THIS](#)