



# FOURTH DOWN FOREVER TO GO

THE IMPROBABLE BIOGRAPHY OF **KEN LITTLE**

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## **DEDICATION**

*Dedicated to my wife and best friend, Kate, for always supporting and standing by me in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.*

*For my daughters, Caroline, Claire, and Emily.*

*Your grandfather would be so proud of you.*

*This book is also dedicated to the coaching profession and those dedicated to the education of children.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

**T**o say this book is “by Brad Little” would be an overstatement.

First and foremost, thank you to my wife, Kate, who has supported me throughout my career in finance. In the past eighteen months alone, she has stood with me while I have changed jobs, moved our family to another city, written a book, and started a company, all while taking care of our three children and starting her life over in the middle of a global pandemic. There aren’t enough words to express the gratification for her love and support. I could not have done any of this without Kate.

Second, I could not have written this book without the help of numerous individuals, including coaches, administrators, friends, and players. The stories and memories they so graciously and vividly shared were the “magic” that brought to life all of the great and true stories shared in this book. These individuals included but certainly were not limited to Del Barnes, Greg Chalk, John Chenault, Sam Chenoweth, Misty Culp, Chase Colston, Will Cureton, Grayland Dunams, Gwen Fenton, Cord Fletcher, Corey Fletcher, Dennis Glenn, Phil Hicks, Trey Hill, Jacoby Hodge, Jimmy Holland, Tyler Jones, Jordan Leake, Ricky Meeks, Casey Minshew, Bobby Moore, David Moore, Stephen Reese, David Seago, Sonny Simmons, Butch and Lanita Smith, Kenny Smith, John Stanley, Richard Strickland, Andree Thompson, and Trey Vallier. I would also like to thank the *Tyler Morning Telegraph*, *Longview News-Journal*, *Rains County Leader* and *Henderson News*.



Thanks also to Greggton Baptist Church and pastor, Rev. Bobby Moore, who provided the audio recording of the January 12, 2012 funeral for Ken Little. The testimonies at the funeral from former players, coaches, and friends provided the true-life content that served as the basis for this book. This recording was transcribed and included at the end of this book.

Special thanks to Bob Ledbetter, Joe Martin, Glen West and the entire Texas High School Coaches Association family. Their contributions and support have been immeasurable.

Finally, I want to thank all coaches and teachers. Your hard work goes largely unnoticed. The pay is not the best and the hours are long. Whether you teach kindergarten, sixth-grade math, high school football, or second-grade soccer on the weekends, you have a gift. Not just the gift to selflessly and patiently teach kids a new skill or sport, but to lead by example and to show them what it means to work hard, overcome adversity, treat everyone with respect, achieve greatness, and never give up, regardless of what test scores or the scoreboard shows. Not everyone has the skill set or patience to be a teacher, but we can all learn from you. Without great teachers and coaches, our society is destined for failure.

In wrapping up, it has taken me almost ten years to write this book. I have interviewed dozens of people and performed numerous hours of research in telling this story as truly and accurately as possible. Each of the stories included are real and accurate to the best of my knowledge and research. Any inaccuracies are unintentional. Immaterial adjustments were made to improve the flow and readability of the book.

I hope you enjoy the book as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

In the Bonds,

**BRAD LITTLE**

*Twenty-five percent of the proceeds from the sale of this book  
will be donated in support of education-related and other charities.*

# **FOREWORD**

WILL CURETON

I have been blessed to have played quarterback in the National Football League. I was the starting quarterback for an East Texas State University football team that won a NAIA national championship in 1972, and I have gone on to develop real estate for over 30 years, primarily in Dallas and Austin, Texas. Considering where my story began, in tiny Whitewright, Texas, a town with a population of fewer than 1,500 people, that would have been a pipe dream for ten-year-old Will Cureton. In 1969, I graduated from Whitewright High School with 27 other classmates.

Following a decent high school career, I was recruited to play football at East Texas State University. But at 6 feet, 3 inches, weighing less than 170 pounds, I was so far down on the depth chart that my expectations of ever playing a meaningful role on the team were low. I was designated as a “red-shirt” freshman my first year. This meant that I would not lose a year of NCAA eligibility, but I would have to sit out my first year to focus on working out, getting stronger and learning the offense. It was a daunting process.

My life and my career trajectory changed dramatically in the spring of 1970. That was the spring I met Ken Little. Ken had just transferred from Texas Tech University, where he played football his freshman season. Ken



and I joined the same fraternity and had virtually the same off-season schedule between school, spring football workouts, and fraternity pledge-ship. Ken and I became best friends very fast. I knew him as “The Riddler,” which was the nickname we gave him because of how he would describe things, things that made perfect sense in his mind, but did not always translate into complete understanding by the listener. As one of our fraternity brothers put it, “Ken, are you talking to us in riddles?”

In those days, most athletes worked multiple jobs during the summer so that you had money to spend during the following year. Ken and I were no different. During the summer of 1970, I managed to get a construction job at a company in Mesquite, Texas. This happened to be Ken’s hometown. When I told him this, he offered to have me stay with him and his family during the summer. When I showed up at their house for the first time, it did not quite go as planned. Apparently, Ken forgot to tell his mother, Virginia, that I would be staying with them for the entire summer. I was prepared to leave and find somewhere else to live, but Virginia and Ken’s father, Earl, took me in as if I were their own son as well.

Ken also forgot to tell me that there was only one bed, a double bed, between the two of us in the guest bedroom. How the rumor mill would have been humming had that ever gotten out during the “summer of love” era! But that was Ken. He cared most about me and making sure I had a place to stay, and he worried about all of the seemingly insignificant details later.

During that summer, we both worked difficult jobs during the day. We would both get home in the afternoon following a long day’s work, and I would be ready to relax. Ken would not stand for that. After a quick meal, he dragged me to Hamby Stadium in Mesquite, Texas, where he went to high school. Every evening that summer, Ken took me through a series of grueling workouts. We lifted weights, ran several miles through an obstacle course he arranged, which I called the “torture track,” and ended every night by running 20 to 30 pass routes, maybe more. It was difficult for me, but I only had

to drop back five to seven steps and throw the football. Ken ran pass route after pass route, some as far as 40 or 50 yards downfield. He was a machine. It was almost like he never got tired, even though I know he was fatigued. The way Ken viewed it, we were underdogs and were not thought to be good enough to play and start for the team. But what they did not realize is that nobody on that team was going to out-work us or be more prepared.

Ken pushed me harder than any coach had ever pushed me, and I increased my weight, strength and conditioning entering my sophomore season. I truly came back a changed man and a changed quarterback. Ken had a nice season, and I ascended to backup quarterback, number two on the depth chart. The following season, in 1971, I won the starting quarterback position and would help guide the ETSU Lions to a national championship in 1972.

Beyond his competitive spirit, which was second to none, the thing about Ken that always stood out to me was his love for people and his friends. He had a tremendous amount of respect for his teachers, his teammates, and his fellow classmates. ETSU was a member of the Lone Star Conference, which was one of the first conferences to integrate in the late sixties. There was still a fair amount of racial tension across the country, and several larger area schools still did not allow black athletes to compete in their programs. Any concerns around acceptance on the team were eliminated by how close we all were. We had guys like Harvey Martin, future Hall of Famer with the Dallas Cowboys; Dwight White, All-Pro with the famous Steelers "Steel Curtain Defense"; and Autry Beamon, who went on to have a seven-year NFL career, just to name a few. We had a team full of big personalities and high character guys. Ken Little was right at the top of the list and was instrumental in bringing us together: black players, white players, and anyone else on the team.

Ken had a passion for pushing people to their limits, helping them achieve success, and overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds. I truly

believe Ken knew I could be better, and he wanted me to be great. Had he not pushed me as hard as he did during that summer of 1970, I am certain I would not have gone on to have the same success I have had on the football field and likely not in the business world.

Ken Little's story is one of overcoming adversity, respecting others, and working harder than anyone else to compete at the highest level. It is a story of never giving up, regardless of what the score is. *Fourth Down, Forever to Go* is both a feel-good story and a template by which to live your life. It is a good read whether you are an aspiring football coach, an established businessperson or just curious about what Texas high school football is all about.

Brad has done a great job bringing Ken's story to life in an entertaining and accurate manner.

**WILL CURETON**

Quarterback, East Texas State University, 1969-1973

Quarterback, Cleveland Browns, 1974, 1975

NAIA National Champion, 1972

## **DECEMBER 10, 2010. SHORTLY AFTER 5 P.M.**

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*Hello?*

Hi, son.

*Well, Dad. I thought this day would never come. How are you holding up?*

Good. I am standing at midfield, right in the middle of the “star” at Cowboys Stadium. This place is a lot bigger than it looks like on TV! We are a long way from Wildcat Stadium in Big Sandy.

*We sure are, Dad. I can't tell you how proud I am to be your son ... with or without winning a state championship. Speaking of, your boys ready tonight? I understand that Chapel Hill's offense is unstoppable.*

Well, you're right. They are great. Well coached and good kids, too. This will be the biggest test of my career. You know Sam Brandt is coaching over there; it'll be good to see him.

How are the kids handling the pressure of playing in such a big game in a big stadium?

*They are focused. Ready. If I went into the locker room right now and yelled “fight,” they'd come charging right through the wall. Never seen them this intense. Focused. The game isn't too big for them. We are going to open a lot of eyes tonight. I've left 10 tickets for you at Will Call outside of gate 10. Find your sister and make sure she's OK. Drive safe, son. I love you, and I'm so proud of you and your sister. Tell Kate I said hi.*

Love you, Dad. Good luck.

*No luck involved. We've prepared, we're ready. Now we just have to go out and go get this thing! Goodbye.*

Bye, Dad.

## INTRODUCTION

**"F***riday Night Lights*". Those words have been brought to life in Hollywood through movies, TV series and numerous books. It draws on the relationship that the game of football has with the state of Texas. To call it a religion is neither cliché nor hyperbole. It is a way of life.

On a chilly Friday night in 2010, those "lights" never shined any brighter for a man that was concluding his 37-year coaching career: Ken Little, my Dad.

His career was fraught with triumph and tragedy, gratification and grief, sacrifice and success.

Having passed up numerous opportunities to follow other coaches to the college and professional ranks, he chose to instead to ply his craft at smaller schools, primarily in East Texas, where he could connect with the community and help bridge deep-seeded racial and social-economic divides. In many cases, he was the only "father-figure" many kids, both white and black, could rely on.

While winning was always the goal, winning championships never defined him or his teams. Ironically, and perhaps prophetic, that was exactly where he was in the final game of his career: in Cowboys Stadium as the Defensive Coordinator for the Henderson Lions as they would play in the State Championship.

I'll always remember the conversation I had with Dad that day, just a few hours before the 2010 3A State Championship game. It has stuck with me to this day.

I always looked up to him. With nearly 40 years of experience as a high school football coach and science teacher, his leadership skills were deeply engraved in his personality and heart.

Even more impressive to me, he maintained the same level of passion teaching chemistry to special education classes as he did to coaching. When he was off the field, he had the same spirit, the same qualities, and he made sure he left no one behind, even if they played for another team. When someone goes out of their way to do something that wouldn't even benefit them, that's when you know it is special.

Teaching science is, let's say, atypical in the coaching profession. Many of the students he taught chemistry and physics to had little or no previous understanding of these topics and many came from underdeveloped or impoverished backgrounds. Dad's approach was to get to their level and teach them based on things they already knew. High school sophomores may not be experts in the periodic table, but they all know how to dance.

As an example, when teaching the basic components of the atomic structure, he related it to a high school dance. It became known as "Ken Little's Disco-Theory of Atomic Makeup." This theory included the personification of neutrons, protons and electrons. Neutrons may be the shy kids who are hesitant to go ask someone to dance. Protons may be the attractive kids who stand around and wait for the more aggressive electrons to come around and ask them out. He would divide the kids up and role play with them so they all understood how each of the atomic particles worked. When I talked to one of his students years later, they said they passed college level chemistry because of the way Dad taught them in high school.

Dad had this energy that pushed people toward the next level. He had the ability to make people believe in themselves and to strive for greatness,

regardless of the obstacles or challenges that lay ahead. As the Baseball Hall of Famer Jackie Robinson once observed, “A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives.” The very same could be said about Ken Little.

It was unlikely that Dad would help coach the Henderson Lions to the 2010 Texas State Championship game. But the unlikely is exactly what happened.

Just two years before, he would have been content with the life he was living. He was moving into retirement, and Michelle, his second wife, and her two daughters were there to accompany him.

But he was a coach to his core, and when the Head Coach for Henderson, an old friend and rival, called on him to coach his defense, he could not resist. What they accomplished that year just by getting to the championship game was nothing short of legendary. It was unexpected and completely out of the blue.

But to truly tell you the story of one of the most unlikely championship runs, we have to go back to the very beginning ...