



CHAPTER 6

Word of Meyer's accident spread quickly. Brittney had called Barb Anderson, Meyer's assistant for eighteen years at David Lipscomb. Anderson immediately began dialing the numbers of Meyer's old players by memory, and one of the first she called was Wade Tomlinson, a shooting guard Meyer coached for four seasons, from 1986 to 1990. He had fallen asleep in the room of his young daughters at his Indiana home, and after his wife, Jennifer, handed him the phone, he had sat out on the stairs, stunned.

Tomlinson had known Meyer since Wade was in the fifth grade, when he first attended Meyer's summer camps, and while Meyer didn't easily betray his feelings, other players on the team thought that Meyer had a unique admiration for Tomlinson.

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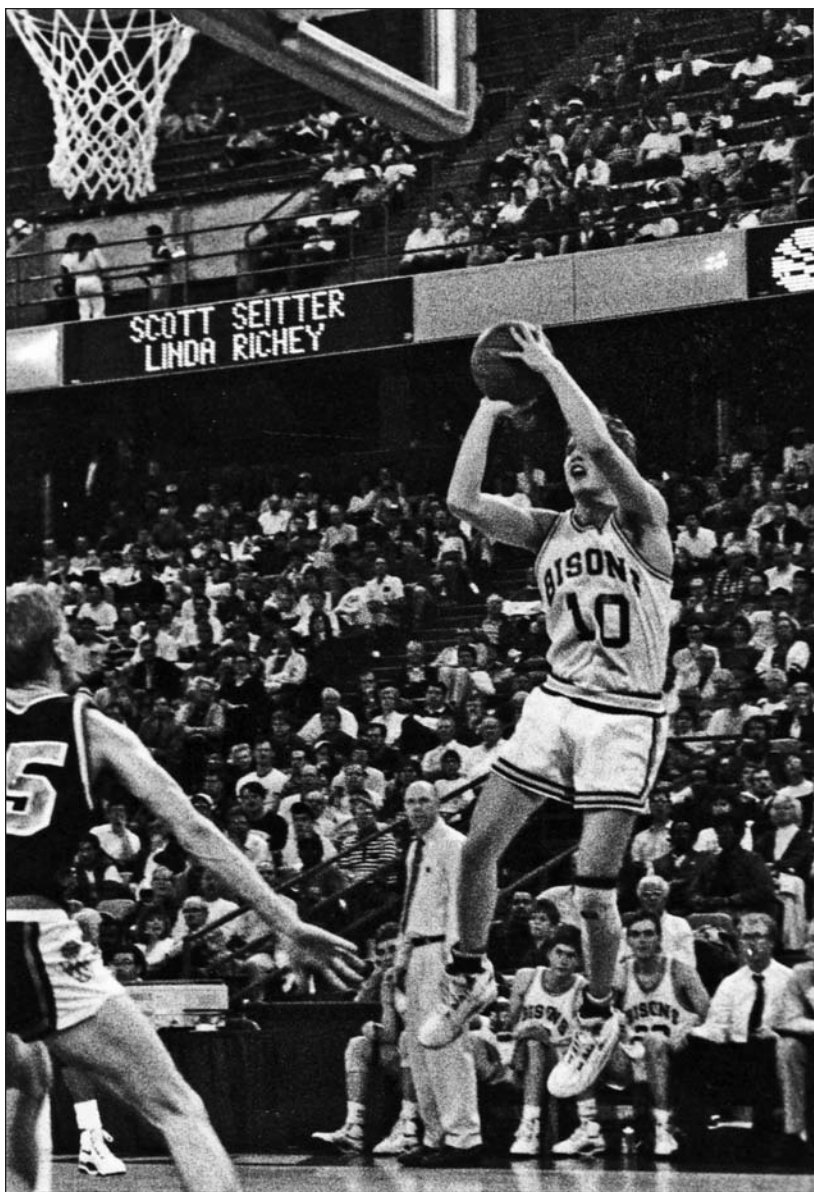
They recognized the similarities between Tomlinson and Meyer: Tomlinson had grown up on a farm—in Danville, Alabama—and like Meyer, he had driven a tractor by the time he was in the second grade and had been raised to work hard. When Tomlinson was a teenager, he noticed that the only time that his father would not ask him to work was when he was shooting baskets on the hoop at their house; Wade Tomlinson would make a point of dribbling hard enough that the echoes from the ball would reach his father in the barn. At David Lipscomb, he would ask Meyer each May for permission to miss the first part of the basketball summer camps to help his father with the planting of crops.

Like Meyer, he had drawn a lot out of his relatively modest physical abilities; he was six foot one and as skinny as a hoe when he started playing in college; he shaved for the first time in December of his freshman year. Tomlinson was genial and generally quiet, politely deferential. But Meyer demanded that he become more vocal and communicative with teammates, especially on the basketball court. There were times when Meyer would stop practice and penalize the players with push-ups when Tomlinson failed to speak up. One day, Meyer announced to the team that Tomlinson would do all the talking for all the players that afternoon; Tomlinson was the only player to speak. He was mortified, but adapted quickly, calling out anything that popped into his head. When you are a freshman and the seniors on the team are being penalized for something you failed to do, Tomlinson said, you make sure you change.

Numbnuts, Meyer called Tomlinson. As in, *Numbnuts here didn't call out the screen. . . . Just start running.*

Tomlinson spoke with an Alabama drawl, and wore his hair a little longer than some of his teammates, enough so that there was a swirl of blond curls. He wasn't supposed to play much as a freshman—in fact, there was some talk of redshirting him, giving

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Wade Tomlinson shoots in front of the Lipscomb bench.

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him a year of only practice before he would join the team for games—but Meyer had kept him on his active roster as a spare part. One night, David Lipscomb got locked into a close game, and one guard was out sick and a starting guard fouled out with about a minute to play. Tomlinson sat in his chair on the Lipscomb bench and saw Meyer—in need of a player at that moment—look at him, and then look elsewhere, and then look back at him. “Put in Wade,” an assistant coach said to Meyer, and grudgingly, Meyer sent Tomlinson into the game. With time running down, a rebound was knocked loose to Tomlinson, who threw up a three-pointer that turned a two-point deficit into a one-point lead with seven seconds left. After Lipscomb won, Meyer sought out Tomlinson just before he met with reporters. “Make sure you talk about your teammates,” Meyer said. “Say something nice about your teammates.”

Meyer could be curt with players’ girlfriends as well. During Tomlinson’s senior year, he was dating Jennifer Jean, and Meyer saw her after a game. “Be sure Wade ices those knees,” Meyer said, the only words he uttered to her before graduation.

Tomlinson devoted himself to weight lifting, creating strength, and as his chest and shoulders got bigger, Meyer would bark at him in practice that he was doing all this just for beach muscles. But in truth, Meyer admired his devotion to making himself a better player and to growing into a leader. Tomlinson might have been reluctant to talk as a freshman, but by his last years at Lipscomb, he had developed a strong voice on behalf of his teammates.

In the fall of Tomlinson’s senior season, David Lipscomb was playing a controlled scrimmage against Aquinas Junior College, in which the coach of either team could stop the action to instruct his team. David Lipscomb was ranked number one in the preseason, but Meyer was particularly tense. In the midst of that

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scrimmage, one of the Bisons failed to step into the path of an opposing player driving with the basketball, and an infuriated Meyer called a time-out and told his players that none of them had the physical toughness to draw a charge from him, a forty-five-year-old man. Like Bear Bryant running a football drill, Meyer made the David Lipscomb players who were on the court line up and practice taking a charge, with Meyer acting as the offensive player and ramming into them with his shoulder. Jerry Meyer was the first and he tumbled back, and the others fell over like bowling pins.

Tomlinson was on the bench nursing an injury, but seeing Meyer challenge the players in that way inflamed Tomlinson, and so he stood up. "I'll take a charge from him!" Tomlinson snapped, cussing, and others on the bench had to physically restrain him from going onto the court; finally, they wrestled him out of the gym. "I'll take a charge from *you!*" he yelled.

Meyer had always growled at the players that when they wanted to quit, they could just leave their basketball shoes in their lockers, and in this instant, Tomlinson yelled that he was quitting and threw each of his shoes. But Meyer—whose players had always thought he was a little hard of hearing—had his back turned to Tomlinson, and either didn't hear him or chose not to hear him. An assistant retrieved the shoes before Meyer saw them. Tomlinson was at practice the next day, of course.

There were times, after practices, when he would go back to his dorm room and smack his pillow, imagining that he was punching Meyer's face . . . and enjoyed it. But at the same time, Tomlinson realized that Meyer's criticism was on the mark. "There's this deep internal respect that I think all the players had for him, no matter how aggravated or mad or frustrated they got, because they know he's right," Tomlinson recalled. He came to think that this was part of the process of evolving from a boy into

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a man—a teenager’s feeling of invincibility and self-importance gradually honed into a young adult’s perspective on mistakes and accountability. “He was great in reminding you—life’s not all about you,” Tomlinson said. “If you want to be happy in life, you’d better learn to serve others.”

Tomlinson finished his career with 1,792 points, but beyond that, he left the program with special status bestowed upon him by Meyer. Philip Hutcheson, one of Tomlinson’s peers, first noted the seemingly superhuman powers of their predecessors—the guys who had played for Meyer before them. Meyer held them up as extraordinary models of effort, of execution, of achievement. Meyer spoke of them with such reverence, Hutcheson said to his teammates, that they were like the Super Friends, referring to the TV cartoon. One night, the Lipscomb players had sat up and matched the Meyer graduates with characters from the show. Ricky Bowers, a player that Meyer respected, clearly was Superman. Bob Ford and Richard Taylor had to be Batman and Robin, because Meyer never mentioned one without the other. “It was always, ‘Bob and Richard,’ ‘Richard and Bob,’ ” Tomlinson recalled.

After Tomlinson graduated, he became one of those held up by Meyer as an unattainable god to Meyer’s latest generation of players. Tomlinson remained deeply loyal to his teammates after he moved to Indiana and started a family with his wife, Jennifer. In his daily work, Tomlinson found himself relying on words that Meyer had said during practices and in the team meetings, mantras that Tomlinson had written down in his notebook or that had lodged in some corner of his brain.

Don’t let your greatest strength become your greatest weakness.

Do the right thing the right way at the right time.

If ya ain’t what ya is, ya isn’t what you ain’t, so you ain’t what you are. In other words, be yourself.

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If you wrestle with a pig, you're going to get muddy and only the pig enjoys it.

He came to believe that Meyer had probably been the best possible person to usher him and his teammates into adulthood, someone who had made him believe that excellence was obtainable if he did things the right way, and that failing to do the right thing was not an option.

Tomlinson would drive to Nashville to go to David Lipscomb to visit Meyer and the others in the Bisons basketball program, bringing Riley Jean, his son, when the boy was just one year old. When some of his former teammates started coaching themselves, it was typical for Tomlinson to show up to their games unannounced. He once drove two and a half hours to see a game coached by Jason Shelton. “Hey, I wasn’t doing anything today anyway,” Tomlinson said, after Shelton thanked him. The Bisons talked all the time, like a band of brothers.

Tomlinson called Shelton on the first Saturday of May in 1999. Initially, Shelton could not understand the words that his old friend was saying; he was incomprehensible. Shelton was able to slow him down. “My boy is gone,” Tomlinson said softly. “My boy is gone.”

Earlier that day, the Tomlinsons had realized that Riley was out of sight, and in the frantic search, Wade Tomlinson had raced to a neighbor’s pool, to which there was a small opening that spring, because of construction. He saw his son at the bottom. Wade Tomlinson administered CPR and he later told Shelton that, for a moment, the boy’s eyes opened—and then closed.

Meyer and Shelton drove to Indiana immediately. When they came through the door, Jennifer Tomlinson greeted them with a hug and thanked them for coming. “I’m okay,” she said. “Wade

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needs you.” Tomlinson was on the floor, in a fetal position, moaning.

Meyer and Shelton reached down to him. At that moment, Jennifer Tomlinson recalled years later, Meyer was the person that Wade Tomlinson most needed. Tomlinson needed comforting, and Meyer—who had probably had the greatest influence of anyone in his life—was the person who could do that.

Hour by hour, Shelton saw Tomlinson emerge from his deepest grief, as others of his former teammates arrived, as they began telling the old war stories from the days they had played together. One day, Meyer took a long walk around the neighborhood alone with Tomlinson, and when they returned, Shelton thought Tomlinson had reached a point of equilibrium. Meyer, however, was more shaken than he let on; he was almost overwhelmed by seeing Tomlinson so devastated. Tomlinson had asked Meyer on their walk whether he thought it would be right for Riley to have a basketball jersey in the casket.

Meyer and Philip Hutcheson took care of the memorial service for the boy. Wade Tomlinson stepped forward to the casket and read a book to his son.

When Meyer spoke, he talked about how families faced with traumas like this often broke apart. It was a good thing, he said, that Wade and Jennifer had the tools to stay together. “You need each other,” Meyer said in the church. “You have to help each other.”

More than three dozen former David Lipscomb players—many of whom did not play with Tomlinson—attended the service, and when it was over, Meyer gathered the young men he had coached. It is a time like this, he told them, that distinguishes you.

For years afterward, friends and neighbors of the Tomlinsons would recall how exceptional Meyer’s tribute was that day. Jen-

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nifer Tomlinson thought back on what Meyer had said and knew the coach was concerned about how the young couple's marriage would survive the tragedy. In the months that followed, Jennifer Tomlinson could see her husband slowly emerging from his pain, but there would be days when he seemed to drift emotionally, when he'd fall into emptiness. She'd call Meyer. "I'm right on it," he'd say, and a minute or two later, she would hear Tomlinson's cell phone ring in some other part of the house.

In retrospect, Tomlinson wasn't sure if he would have been able to stick with the marriage if not for what he had learned playing under Meyer. "I don't know what kind of family guy I would be," he said. The death of his son was "really hard to get over—you never really get over it—and I'm really thankful for the things that I learned."

It wasn't long after Riley's death that Tomlinson approached Meyer at a summer basketball camp. "Coach, I can't thank you enough—" he said, but Meyer cut him off. "Wade, we *all* can't thank each other enough," Meyer said. "I can't thank you guys enough for how you helped me. If you want to thank me, go do something for somebody else."

Tomlinson listened. He decided to make a point to talk to others about loss, about its depths, the depression. "As bad as you get," Tomlinson said, "as bad as you feel, you survive."

The front of the Tomlinsons' refrigerator was sprinkled with little cards that Meyer had sent, and Jennifer Tomlinson would hear her husband talk to their two daughters and instantly recognize phrases she knew were inherited from Meyer: *Girls, the only things you can control are your attitude and your effort.*

But now Meyer was badly hurt and Tomlinson wasn't sure what he could do. "Wade," Jennifer Tomlinson told him, "you need to go."

At 1:30 the next morning, Tomlinson walked into Avera

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McKenna Hospital in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, not knowing whether Meyer was alive. He braced himself for what he would see, but the vision of his badly bruised coach, attached to tubes, was still jarring. Meyer had blood on him, and the doctors had told Carmen Meyer and her children that it was still not clear whether Don Meyer would live.

“Hey, Coach, Numbnuts is here,” Tomlinson said, his voice light.

“Wade . . .” Meyer said, his voice barely a whisper.

Tomlinson continued to joke, as he often did with his coach.

“I love you,” Meyer said.

Tomlinson knew this. But he was sure that nobody who played for Meyer would ever believe that their coach had said it out loud.



CHAPTER 7

In Meyer's first days in the hospital, others asked what he could remember about the accident. He told them that he recalled looking ahead for the turn to the hunting lodge. Then he remembered a flash of white—presumably, he said, this might have been the air bag as it deployed. And he told family members that he recalled being above his own car, floating, so that he could see himself sitting, while Brett Newton and Kyle Schwan, his players, shouted at him to stay awake and keep his focus. Meyer remembered the people helping him.

He clung to life in those first days, his condition still serious, and it was the first time that Jerry Meyer could recall seeing his father this vulnerable and open. Some of that, Jerry thought, was