

Dancing in the Shadows



Photography by: Gabriel Burgos, Tampa, Florida.

**Dancing
in the
Shadows**

Larry Gagner

—privately published—

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I dedicate this book to:

my loving, patient, caring wife, Doris,
my fellow Christians of the church of Christ,
my fellow athletes from high school, college and
professional football,
artists everywhere,
and to the loving God that makes this possible and fulfilling.

Oh, and to my two cats, Stella Jean and Pepper. Wouldn't want to forget them! For cats that can't read, they sure like to use the mouse and keyboard...good thing they don't know about paint brushes.

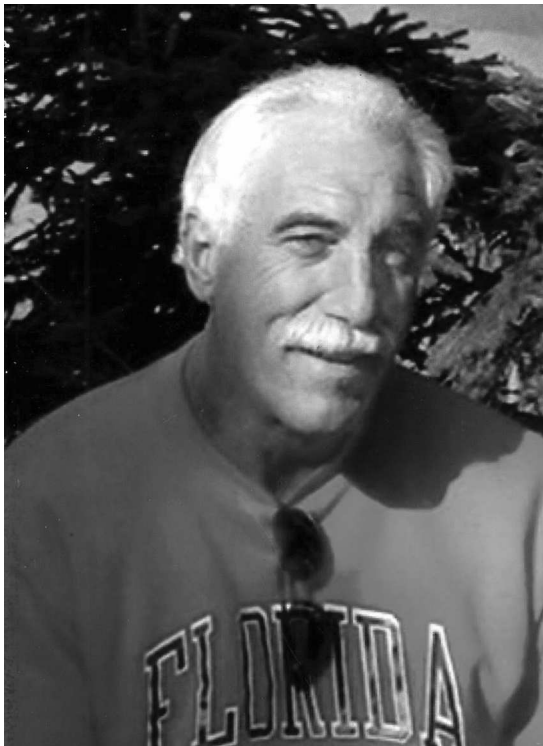


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Forward

When Larry first mentioned his "book" I did not realize that he was more than toying with the idea. He'd actually written one. Kudos for doing it. So I read it, and as a first effort, his initial manuscript had lots of interesting reading, never mind the technical errors. (That's what I'm for.)

What I cannot fix though, is content. And Larry's retelling of his life on the fringes of "at-large" fame and fortune is entertaining and encouraging. He keeps doing things not "expected" of him, or the archetype society would ascribe to a man that's done what he's done, namely working as a four year starting offensive (left guard) lineman for the Pittsburgh Steelers. And that's the beauty of it. Rather than adhere to social stereotypes, Larry has been true to himself—something I'm certain more of us wish we could claim for ourselves.

As an artist, he divorced himself from the leverage you'd get from being a sports star. As a sports star, athletics competed directly with his love of creative art, and to some extent, hurt his standing in the artistic community, again, due to stereotyping. Larry once told me: "I think of myself as an artist who had a pretty good run at sports, rather than an athlete who took a side-order of art."

And Larry's life happened while pursuing these plans, much as John Lennon predicted. These are the vignettes of Larry's life. Each an episode, each satisfying. I can relate to many of Larry's stories, having been in similar situations. Some I do not relate to, but find interesting, getting a peak into the inside world of professional (American) football.

My part in this book was to help Larry with technical issues, of which there seem to be more, now that computers have made things "easier." As a result, I got to see his manuscript develop into the book you now own. Enjoy.

David Weeks

Preface

If you were to ask a sports fan to name their favorite pro football player, for sure he's not going to be an offensive lineman. In fact, they'd probably be hard pressed to name just one active, or for sure not, retired O-lineman. And, when's the (not the last time) first time you've ever seen an offensive lineman interviewed on television? Never, right? Right. That's because we're the invisible players-the unknowns, the no-names, the unsung heroes. The ones working in the shadows. The ones laboring in the foreground of the football formation but hidden in the background of your mind. Who knows, maybe the ones existing to promote the credentials of the more "skilled" players.

Admittedly, we man the positions that kids love not to play. Everyone admits that we're essential to winning, they just don't acknowledge us (sans the exceptions like John Madden and Howard Cosell) unless we've committed an infraction like holding or an off sides penalty. But playing football in the shadows of obscurity just wets my appetite to excel elsewhere.

Please don't misinterpret, this isn't meant to be sour grapes, but there has to be something more fulfilling than being indirectly responsible for putting mere points on a scoreboard, even at the pro level. That's not to say that I'm at all displeased with having been a football player. But I've found that my bragging rights derive, not from the boring statistics (that I don't possess), but from the enthusiastic storytelling of anecdotes that usually happened to me as the result of my exuberance to willingly step out of my comfort zone and go the extra mile, generally to my embarrassment. And, in nearly all of these situations, I was far removed from any immediate participation in the NFL's trench warfare.

And my highlighted experiences aren't necessarily the exclusive property of professional athletes either. Everyone experiences them, and as

luck would have it, more often than not, they usually have some form of humor attached to them. But initially finding them can prove to be difficult because they're usually buried, and to unearth them, you've got to think somewhat like an artist.

You see an artist doesn't necessarily concentrate his total attention on just the obvious. Noteworthy material also exists in the secondary light of the shadows and in the details of the background. It just takes a little deeper digging to find them. And while others may question your experienced treasures as to their worthiness, ultimately, the fact of your participation in them and their special meaning to you and others should provide enough merit to elevate them to your TD status short list.

So, just as you have to look closely at NFL line play to appreciate it, so do life's "hidden scores" require a similar scrutiny for initial discovery. But once detected, we have ample opportunities to score points with people, instead of with footballs, in theaters without boundaries. It's my hope, that *Dancing in the Shadows*, will instill confidence in others to also embark on their own road less traveled, which doesn't always lead to a home run, but when it does, the bases always seem to be loaded.

Some of the more graphic anecdotes that I'm not too proud of anymore, I've included anyway, as a reference point in which to measure how far I've possibly matured as an individual. Don't misinterpret, admittedly, I have yet to arrive and still consider myself to be a godly work in progress.

I wish to acknowledge that I've been blessed with a double portion: athleticism and creative talent. Success in athletics came relatively easy in comparison to the like in the visual arts. I believe that creating visually is as close to imitating God as one can come. For as He stepped back from each day's canvas to assess the quality of His creation, we too, as artists, mimic that very process. But nailing it the first time, is quite another matter for us finite beings.

It is also my contention that visual artists, in particular, pay homage (glory) to God anytime they use nature as a source of inspiration for their creations. In doing so, we acknowledge that His creation is worthy of our contemplation, consideration, and feeble imitation.

Finally, do yourself a favor. Never measure your progress as a human being by someone else's yardstick. They have yet to walk in your shoes. The comparison should simply be, am I a better person today than I was yesterday, and let God Almighty take care of the rest. Amen? Amen.

Acknowledgments

I respectfully submit that if Tack Chumbley had not voluntarily come forward (after I asked him for informative help) on a pro bono mission to help me get published, my project would still be in limbo—without the stick. I met Tack during a series of lectures he gave to the Henderson Boulevard Church of Christ in Tampa, Florida, a couple of years ago. He readily took me up on my impromptu invitation to see my art studio and home on a quick dinner break. That break turned out to be a blessing for me via Tack's experience as a Christian author. Among his many lectures and writings on Christian principles, I feel honored that he used one of my book anecdotes that mirrored the providence of God, in one of the church bulletins he writes and publishes weekly. Thanks, Tack, for being such an accommodating (serving) Christian. God blessed me through you, and through me He gave you the opportunity to advance the cause of Christ.

I'd also like to thank Ralph Walker Jr. and Ron Drumm, our two Henderson Boulevard Church of Christ evangelists, for keeping me on the "straight and narrow" during the writing of this book. And a special thanks to Roger Orrell (my best man and buddy), who over the years has proved to be a positive influence on me while waiting in the wings for me to mature from my earlier, fleeting, football identity. And some lasting thanks for all the colorful offensive linemen who never seem to get the recognition (nor the equal pay—think female here) they so richly deserve.

“Larry, let’s you and I swim out there and investigate.” I reply, “Excuse me? Let me get this straight. You want me to swim forty to fifty yards offshore to some unknown living object that could probably eat me in an instant? Put my body in harm’s way. Is that what asking of me coach?” And he says, “Yes.” I paused for a few moments to contemplate my decision. I could fathom no good reason for possibly sacrificing my life, but reply anyway, saying, “Let’s roll.”

FORMATIVE YEARS

Bare-handed Keeper

This particular story is probably responsible for all the others being written. It's a story that I've told umpteen times (sans the stripping to the jockstrap and underwear) as a warm-up to substitute teaching elementary students in Florida's Hillsborough County School System, over a period of eight years. After penning it, others followed almost automatically; enough of them, in fact, to merit a collection, so I thought. I hope you share this conviction. Subsequent stories are, for the most part, in chronological order, so you may have to wade through a few of the not-so-spectacular anecdotes to get to the more colorful ones. My apologies. Trust me on this one. It'll be worth it (my opinion).

It is now 2017. During the summer, fifty years plus ago, my teammates and I from the American Legion Baseball Team Post 267 of Ormond Beach, Florida, were involved in a most unusual life experience. One that, in retrospect, may very well be the highlight of my athletic career, even though I was an All-American at the University of Florida, and then a starting guard with the Pittsburgh Steelers for four years. But, let's start from the beginning.

Compared to today, it was an age of innocence. You know, when things were more black or white and not so much gray, (i.e., no political correctness to muddy the waters); the late 1950s, to be exact. Post 267 of the American Legion in Ormond Beach sponsored a baseball team that played neighboring teams within a 150-mile radius of Ormond Beach.

The treasured, unforgettable event started with a ballgame that was scheduled in Palatka, but after five innings, was rained out. We piled, soaking wet, into the yellow bus for our return journey home. Just over the St. Johns River, which separated west from east Palatka, there appeared a watermelon stand. Johnny Jones, our beloved coach, stopped and purchased several watermelons for the team. Mind you, it's still

raining. Just down the road, he pulled the bus into a wayside park, sliced-up the watermelons, and we began to consume them with the gusto of a hound dog. You get the picture, don't you? Fifteen drenched ballplayers slopping down watermelons on a rainy day. Life doesn't get much better than that.

Almost finished, we decided to have ourselves a watermelon food fight. These partially eaten watermelons are flying through the air like guided missiles from all angles, hitting everyone and turning their once-white uniforms into a tie-dyed, watermelon red. It was the best food fight I was ever involved in, including the one I participated in at the training table at the University of Florida years later. When we had our fill of fun, our coach ordered us back onto the bus, for our return trip home. But he didn't take us back in an opposite, southeasterly direction from which we had come. Instead, we headed due east towards Crescent City, a small beach community, which is some forty miles north of Ormond Beach and considerably out of our way.

If you are traveling in a southerly direction from Flagler Beach on the ocean road, also known as A1A, you can see the Atlantic Ocean along the way. But, traveling south from Crescent City on A1A, the ocean is separated from the road by about a quarter-mile of Tarzan-like vegetation and scrub palmettos. And this is fifty years ago. Very few dwellings at best, and absolutely no condominiums. Every mile or so, there would be a finger road to the ocean from A1A. These soft, sandy paths were barely large enough for a car to travel on because of the dense undergrowth.

Our coach arbitrarily decided to venture down one of these fingers. You can imagine our surprise and suspense. This rutted, sandy pathway, barely navigable by an automobile, is now being furrowed by a large, yellow, battleship-sized bus. Talk about going where no boys had gone before! The overgrown vegetation scraping against the bus made all kinds of weird sounds, and we questioned one another, wondering if the coach had lost his marbles—you know, gone off the deep end by taking us on a road less (maybe never) traveled. Well, after about five minutes of

traveling at what seemed to be a snail's pace, we finally saw the sand dunes and the ocean beyond. Mind you, it's still raining. We leaped off the bus, and since no one is on the beach except us wet chickens, with our uniforms weighing a ton from soaking up the rain, most of us stripped-down to our jockstraps and underwear to go swimming in the surf.

We're frolicking around having ourselves a ball, when someone shouts, "What's that on the surface out there?" We all immediately looked toward the pointed direction and witness a great splash-splash happening some forty to fifty yards offshore. We can't make out what is causing this disturbance from the water's edge, so coach comes over to me and says, "Larry, let's you and I swim out there and investigate." I reply, "Excuse me? Let me get this straight. You want me to swim forty to fifty yards offshore to some unknown living object that could probably eat me in an instant? Put my body in harm's way. Is that what asking of me coach?" And he says, "Yes." I paused for a few moments to contemplate my decision. I could fathom no good reason for possibly sacrificing my life, but reply anyway, saying, "Let's roll."

Can you visualize it? Two idiots swimming to their potential death, for all we know, and can't get there fast enough. Several yards away from the object in question, we ducked our heads under water and spotted not a whale, or an octopus, or a squid, or a sea turtle, but a gigantic fish! A giant sea bass, to be exact, also known as a jewfish (now called a Goliath Grouper, per political correctness). This thing was over six-feet long and would later weigh-in at over 350 pounds.

Taking a second look, our coach discovered about two feet of rope dangling through the fish's gills. We later surmised that it was in tow by a commercial fishing boat and had probably broken loose. Discovering the rope, our coach poked his head out of the water and shouted to everyone, "Form a human chain!" I don't think many of us knew what that meant, but one of our team members at the water's edge spread his arms out and said, "Grab hold of me!" Everyone spontaneously interlocked their hands to the next person's wrist all the way out to the coach. He reached near

the fish, grabbed the rope, and commanded us to pull with all the might we had. The tug-of-war was officially on. We pulled until our backs were about to break and them some more. Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity (probably no more than thirty minutes), the deed was done. The huge fish was beached. We were all exhausted, but oh, so elated.

The enormous fish was breathtakingly beautiful, and I wanted proof of our catch for bragging rights, because no one would believe us if we just “said” that we caught it. (No cellphone cameras back then.) It would just be another fish tale. But I couldn’t focus on proof right now, because we were busy figuring our next move.

Our mission now was to how to move our dead weight catch from the water’s edge to the bus some forty or so yards uphill over sand and dunes. We rolled it, shoved it, tugged it, and, at times, I think, we cursed



it. Finally, it’s below the back door of the bus, but we are so exhausted, we can’t lift it up into the opening. So, we dragged it to the lower side door and gave it a big heave-ho. It landed exactly halfway in and halfway out of the side doorway, the halfway-out part, being the recognizable tail of the fish. Three plus feet of tail are now protruding from the side of the