

Miss 1977

Jack Shock

It was the 2009 homecoming football game between the University of Tennessee and the University of Memphis. We were guests of Amanda, a friend who works at the University of Tennessee, who had scored prime real estate 11th row center tickets.

We spent a great fall football Saturday poking around in Knoxville where even the trees were sporting Volunteer orange. I had ransacked my closet before the trip. I didn't want to embarrass Amanda by wearing Razorback red. There is a difference between Tennessee orange and Texas orange. Orange is orange, or so I thought. Very regrettably, I chose Texas orange to wear to a Tennessee game.

As we walked up to the stadium, I was immediately awestruck with the floats - - yes floats. We had to wait until halftime to hear the winners. "And the small float award goes to the Pi Phis." The Delta Somethings took large float and they actually said on the PA "And the winner of the large float category is" while all the Delta Somethings were cheering and carrying on like they had found a cure for cancer. And then it was time for the halftime show.

I was in a marching band for seven years. That's seven years of second chair and John Phillip Sousa and cheerleaders who wouldn't give you the time of day. I know marching bands. I was glued to my seat for a major college halftime show.

First up...the University of Memphis Marching Tigers.

The marching Tigers performed a moving tribute to the recently deceased Michael Jackson, complete with white gloves and a slide around the field to Beat It and Billie Jean. When it came time for Thriller, each bandie put down his instrument while the announcer piped in the real Thriller music over the PA. All those Memphis flutes, slide trombones and flags did the entire Thriller dance, complete with the signature monster mash. When it was over, the otherwise hostile Tennessee crowd rose as one with an intergalactic roar of appreciation to Michael, wherever he was or is. And I was right there with them.

I'm happy to report that the University of Tennessee band favors an old school show. Big hats, lots of trumpets, six steps every five yards. And twirlers.

There was a core corps of about 5 twirlers, and each could have had a foot squarely planted in 5 different decades. The frosty hair and all those teeth could have been homecoming 2009 or homecoming 1959. And when you get right down to it, is there really a difference?

And then there was the lead twirler. Her baton seemed to fly just a little bit higher and float just a little bit longer than the wannabees twirling behind her. Her one-piece swimsuit of a uniform was making all the right moves. She handled three batons like an old pro, weaving them in and out in a tapestry that tells a tale of years of practice. I'm not sure, but I think I caught a distinct whiff of her Aqua Net. I was in heaven.

As part of homecoming, the UT band was having a band reunion, and about 200 band alums marched out for the grand finale. As a card carrying bandie, I have to tell

say I was a little jealous. I secretly wanted to be one of those proud old trumpet players out there strutting around in their dockers and sensible shoes.

But then the trumpets parted, and out came...the alumni twirlers. About 40 shiny goddesses who were literally just a few feet in front of me and my VIP seat on the 11th row. The years have been kind. To some. Okay. To most. I find that twirlers generally have good DNA.

I was mesmerized. I couldn't take my eyes off the lipstick and bobby pins. There was even a lead alumnae twirler. Miss 1977. My year. My class. My girl. I alone knew that Miss 1977 was staring straight down the barrel of a 50th birthday party. Nevertheless, Miss 1977 stepped just a couple of steps oh so slightly ahead of the rest of the pack, and she took her rightful place as lead. My heart was pounding, and I was drunk on nostalgia.

Some cruel prankster had dressed all the alumni twirlers in nylon tracksuits. All black. No one piece glittery swimsuits for these old gals. No doubt this was the work of the current twirlers and I thought it was a little rude and maybe even a little bit of an insult. But I myself would not want to be on the 50 yard line, at 50, in a one piece.

The current crop of twirlers stepped aside and stood at parade rest as the old girls busted it out and let me just say those 40 batons were screaming with years of pent up energy and sexual frustration. Those windsuit sisters grabbed the spotlight and worked their show, hair and heads held high.

And then it was time for the big finish. Miss 1977 took a step toward the crowd and added two more batons to the mix, throwing and catching all three with the precision of a surgeon. Her message was unmistakable. Baton cougars rock.

And Miss 1977, with her new nails and bad marriage, rocked her big finish with a triple twirl, caught all three batons and ended with an extended bow that aimed her tracksuit behind right at Miss 2009.

Miss 2009 took one look at all that nylon square footage on Miss 1977 and thought “no way is my behind ever going to be that big.” Miss 1977 gave her the slightest hint of an over the shoulder stink eye that seemed to say

Yes.

It.

Will.

Miss 1977 finally straightened up and settled into her Lead Twirler Pose for one last moment of Saturday night fame, her face glowing warm under the friendly lights of her glory days. And then she faded back with the rest of the cougars to let Miss 2009 lead everybody off the field and back to our real lives.

And right there, in the 11th row, I made direct and prolonged eye contact with Miss 1977. I mouthed the words I had been longing to say for 30 years: “I. Love. You.”

And in return, Miss 1977 gave me a wink, a smile.....and a reason to live.