



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

September 10, 2004

Mr. John Bramlett
159 Cotton Ridge Cove, South
Cordova, Tennessee 38018

Dear John:

Thank you for the copy of your book, *Taming the Bull*. Your story is an inspiration, and I appreciate the thoughtful inscription. Your kind words mean a lot to me.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "GWB".

George W. Bush

TAMING THE BULL

THE JOHN "BULL" BRAMLETT STORY

John Bramlett with Tula Jeffries

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*To
Warren L. Andrews, Jr.,
my father-in-law, "Pop,"
I dedicate this book.
Proverbs 22:1 is the standard by which he lived:*

“A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favor rather than silver and gold.” He set an example of faithfulness by being faithful to his wife, his children, his church, his business, and his friends. Pop went home to be with Jesus on August 14, 1988, making heaven seem a little nearer to all of us.

Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Foreword by Adrian Rogers	11
1. Traveling in Great Company	13
2. 573 Alabama Street	25
3. Whiskey, Elvis, and Snake	35
4. Walkin' "Chollie"	43
5. In Pursuit of Freedom	48
6. Reaching for the Brass Ring	55
7. What Goes Around Comes Around	68
8. Nancy	79
9. Just Call Me "Bull"	84
10. Benched—But Not for Good	98
11. Bull Out of the Pen—Again	101
12. Putting It All on the Line	109
13. Mile High to Sea Level	118
14. Beantown	132
15. When the Walls Fall Down	140
16. Another Chance	150
17. "You're Not Bull Bramlett!"	158
18. Turning the Corner	172
19. "All I Want for Christmas"	183
20. The Power in a Tamed Bull	197
21. Unseen Links	209
22. Full Circle	216
Notes	223

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank many who have tried to help me. Although at the time their efforts may have seemed to fail, I am aware of their impact on the “new man” Jesus Christ has made of me.

My greatest model of unconditional love and understanding is my wife, Nancy, who has been tough enough to honor her marriage commitment through fourteen years of my dishonoring it.

I am grateful to Nancy’s parents, Warren and Ad Andrews, for their acceptance of me when my actions were totally unacceptable.

To all the friends who encouraged me to tell my story, I am deeply grateful. Friends who were a part of my early experiences in sports, and those in the professional arena of baseball and football, have all been significant in the development of this book.

I give special thanks to these who took the time to recall in letters and on tape, events from my past: Larry Sutton, Jerry Baskin, Russ Vollmer, Floyd Wooley, Larry Crayton, Jack Counce, Justin Canale, Charlie Haygood, Louis Mullikin, Frank Emanuel, Mike Taliaferro, Stan Mitchell, Barry Brown, Jim Cheyunski, Cliff Polite, Milton Hatcher, Jack Hoelsher, Paul Kuhlman, Clyde Smith, and Chuck Slabaugh.

I also want to thank Eddie and Sue Hanks for their faithful support over the years.

Too numerous to mention are those God brought into my life for His own purposes. They have my heartfelt appreciation as well.

Foreword

Let the reader get ready for an emotional impact. The story you are about to enjoy indeed proves the proverb the truth is stranger than fiction. In this case, it is not only stranger but stronger and more exciting.

John Bramlett is a household name in his hometown of Memphis, Tennessee. A stellar athlete at Memphis State University, he was known to be as fearless as a lion yet “mean as a junkyard dog.”

This same reputation followed him into professional sports. John played with such athletic giftedness and reckless abandon that he quickly developed a reputation as the Wild Bull. He was feared, hated, loved, and admired, on and off the playing field.

Then something amazing transpired in this man’s life that makes the story you are going to enjoy beautiful and exciting.

It seems, today, that all of the news is bad and the heroes have vanished, the story of John Bramlett will kindle a fire of hope and gratitude in your heart. When John’s name is mentioned in Memphis, Tennessee, the citizens almost always react. Some will smile, some will look puzzled, and a few will scowl; but I think I can safely say that almost everyone will speak his name with a sense of respect.

I believe you will be like I was when I read this manuscript: you will find it hard to lay aside until you have finished it. And you will most likely never lose the impact it will have on your life.

Read on and enjoy!

Adrian Rogers, Pastor
Bellevue Baptist Church
Memphis, Tennessee

Traveling in Great Company

“Come over and join us, ‘Bull,’” a tall man in a gray suit called out. “We need your opinion on something.”

“Aw, don’t ask him,” groaned Marty Schottenheimer, grinning, “or we’ll be here all night.”

Marty, Dick Butkus, and I were in Boston in 1969 at a convention of truck line executives, drinking their booze while we talked football. As we kidded around, swapping tall stories, I couldn’t help thinking, *You can’t get it any better than this. Here I am, an invited participant in this big blow-out, being paid \$500 to get drunk and have a good time.*

I finished my drink and ambled over to the group at a table. “What was the question?” I asked the tall man who had called me.

“We were talking about the great game you had Sunday,” he said, “and we want to know how you got to the play so quickly every time. How do you analyze what you are going to do?”

“Analyze!” I laughed. “Man, you’re kidding—who’s got time to analyze? You react! If you take the time to think about what you’re going to do, it’s too late to do it.”

“That’s right,” Marty agreed. “Butkus has been telling you how the man in the middle earns his living. And what Dick Butkus is to middle linebacking is what John Bramlett is to the outside. You’ve already heard my opinion of him. I say he’s the best in the American Conference—no, make that in all of football.” Marty, a six-year pro, was a highly-respected Patriots’ linebacker himself, but that was Marty, always giving credit to the other players.

Dick Butkus, then a middle linebacker for the Chicago Bears, had just finished explaining to the group how to cut your chances of getting fooled on a play. Butkus had earned his reputation as an unforgettable defensive player; he distracted everybody on opposing teams. It was hard for quarterbacks, tight ends, and running backs to keep their concentration when they knew that a split second after the play began, he was going to be all over whoever had the ball.

Five years of pro football and countless injuries had done nothing to dim my enthusiasm for the game. I never had to work myself up to prepare mentally to play a ball game. I enjoyed the physical contact, I loved the hitting, and as I told Coach Clive Rush at the beginning of my second season with the New England Patriots, I didn't see dollar signs when I played. I told him, "Hey, Coach, I'd play if they didn't pay me. But I have a wife and two boys who like to eat. I don't make unreasonable demands. Just be fair with me, that's all I ask. I love this game."

I knew soon after joining the Patriots that Marty Schottenheimer was more than a great ball player. We spent a part of most Mondays and Tuesdays in the whirlpool together, trying to soak out the aches and pains from Sunday's game. That is when I learned what a great head coach he would be. He could analyze abilities and coordinate moves instantly, going straight to the heart of a problem. I believe that all those talks I had with him helped to make me a better ball player. Today he is a highly respected, winning coach in the National Football League. When I think of all those talks we had, I'm glad so many young players can benefit from his expertise. While he coached the Cleveland Browns, I pulled for him in every game, and now that he is the new head coach of the Kansas City Chiefs, I'll be looking forward to seeing a much improved team there.

For the first twenty-two years of my life, I would never have believed that I could belong with a group like this, enjoying the company of men I admired as much as Schottenheimer and Butkus. I'd been told all my life that I was too small to be competitive in contact sports, but that only made me more aggressive and more determined to prove everyone wrong. In high school

and throughout college, I gave everything I had every game, and it was enough. But when the pro scouts told me at graduation that they were not interested in me because of my size, I thought any hope of playing football had ended.

But in January 1965, I signed a contract to play professional football with the Denver Broncos. It was for \$12,000. That same year Joe Namath signed with the New York Jets for \$400,000. His path to the pros was straight out of the University of Alabama as a high draft pick. My route was not quite as direct. I had played football at Memphis State University, but the pro scouts weren't interested in someone weighing only 173 pounds. In his first season with the Jets, Joe quarterbacked his way into Rookie-of-the-Year. I came in as runner-up for rookie honors, playing outside linebacker with the Broncos.

Players today talk about inequities of salary as if the differences were invented by management in their particular cases. Inequity has always been a factor in sports, just as it is in every other field. The first draft picks can wait for their price to show up on a contract, while the rest scratch and claw just for a chance to sign.

I went to Denver knowing that there was just one way I was going to make the club: by proving that I deserved to be there. I went out every day as if it would be my last chance to prove that I could hit people, and I had known how to do that for most of my 24 years of life. Even before I was 16, I had earned the reputation of being able to outfight any man twice my age! That kind of reputation doesn't just get you into hot water, it keeps the pot boiling. When training camp ended, I wanted to make sure I had a place on the team. I made every practice with the ferocity of a wild bull. (That was not how I came by the nickname "Bull." I got that back in my baseball days when I was playing in the St. Louis Cardinals' farm club in Winnipeg, Canada. But more on that later.) I'll admit that my style of football didn't do anything to suppress my nickname. None of those Bronco ball players had ever heard of me, and there I was out on the field every day, trying to kill them.

On my third day out, Coach Max Speedie was ready to run me

off. "Bramlett," he yelled, "if you want to kill somebody, do it somewhere else! I'm trying to build a team here. How do you expect us to win ball games if we don't have any healthy wide receivers?" He threw in a few unprintable terms to describe my tackling.

I knew only one way to play, and that was all out. When you grow up smaller than almost everybody and you still want to play football, you've got to try to make up the difference somehow.

After practice I approached Ray Malavasi, a former member of the Memphis State University coaching staff. He was responsible for my being there. "How am I going to prove I can play if I don't hit people?" I asked. "Do you think they're going to just take my word for it without my showing them?"

"Don't pay any attention to that stuff," he said. "You get in there and keep hitting them. The only way you'll get to stay is by making them remember you."

I shook my head. "I don't know—the coach is pretty upset . . ."

Ray interrupted me. "Don't worry about the coaches. Just keep on hitting the way you've always done it."

I guess all those fights I got into growing up must have sharpened my instincts. I was fast and I was quick, and believe me, there is a difference. If you're fast, that means you sometimes can blitz the quarterback and get to him a split second before he can get the pass off. Or you can get down field for an interception. Or get all the way across the field to make a tackle. With quickness, on the other hand, you develop hair-trigger reflexes. A linebacker lives by his instincts. An outside linebacker has to worry about several different blocking combinations, which means you don't have all day to think about what you need to do. Those fastbacks coming out of the backfield get by you if you hesitate. I never forgot what my high school coach, Rube Boyce, once told me.

"Bramlett, what are you supposed to be doing out there?"

"Well, Coach, I thought . . ." Before I could continue, he was all over me. "You thought! What do you mean, *you* thought! You're not out there to think! I'll do the thinking. You just *do* it!"

So I learned to read the formation, then let my instincts take

over. When the ball was snapped, I didn't think about what to do, I just did it, using my body for a battering ram. I could lay a man out with a forearm, or come up under him with a head block that would loosen his teeth. The idea in football is not just to hit, but to leave an impression. Once you get people looking around to see where *you* are, they don't have time to look for the ball.

By the time I arrived in Denver in 1965, I had worked too hard just for a shot at the pros to ever let up. Right after I graduated from high school, scouts from several teams had told me I was too small to play professional football, so I had signed a contract to play baseball with the St. Louis Cardinals. But I was so unmanageable and stirred up so much trouble everywhere I went that I didn't last long in baseball. The day I learned that the Cardinals no longer wanted my services was one of the most devastating days of my life.

Despite my defiance against management, the idea of being out of sports completely was one I had never considered. I was willing to explore any avenue. Eddie Stanky, who had always been good to me as the Cardinals' farm director, had moved to the Mets' club. I called him up. We talked, and he promised to try to help me.

"You're a little rough around the edges," he said, "but that is what we have coaches for. I'll see what I can work out and get back to you."

Considering all the times he had stuck by and defended me when I had messed up with the Cardinals, I was surprised that he still wanted to help me. Eddie Stanky had to have a stubborn kind of faith in humanity that made him hate to give up on a man, because I am sure I tried his patience to the limit. He had gotten me out of jails and had talked authorities into leniency toward me on several occasions. Instead of bawling me out for my misconduct, he attempted in each case to appeal to my sense of obligation to others.

"John," he'd say to me, "you need to stop this drinking and fighting. All it does is get you into trouble. You have a good wife and two fine young sons. You ought to think about what you are doing to them."

When I asked Eddie to help me get back into baseball, I'm sure he believed I was ready to listen. Certainly at that moment I would have promised anything for another chance. But before he had time to talk with the Mets' organization about me, I got a call from Ray Malavasi. Ray had been defensive coordinator for Memphis State University while I played football there.

Ray had gone from Memphis to Wake Forest University as defensive coordinator, where one of his better-known charges was Brian Piccolo. I knew Ray liked the way I played because I heard that he used the Memphis State game films to demonstrate to Wake Forest linebackers how to hit people with velocity. Because he knew I was always looking for someone to hit, he used me as the example. In 1964 he had just recently moved to Denver as player personnel director for the Broncos. When he called, he asked what I was doing, and how big I was. I knew he didn't really want to know what I was doing. His memory of my Memphis State escapades could tell him that, plus the fact that it was no secret that I was still stirring up trouble everywhere I went.

I told him I weighed 182 pounds, which may have been a slight exaggeration. He promised me a tryout with the Broncos if I could tip the scales at 200 by the time training camp opened. Six months can dwindle fast when you are faced with trying to do something that looks impossible. I played my entire four years at Memphis State and gained only ten pounds. But my wife, Nancy, after living with me for five years, had learned to ignore the word "impossible." She had to be a fighter to have survived my vicious temperament up to this point. I don't know if she was trying to prove that I could make it, or that she could, but she took the challenge personally. Putting on twenty pounds didn't seem to her an insurmountable hurdle.

"You are just now getting to the right age to gain weight easily," she argued. "We can do it." When Nancy said "we," she meant it. She hauled out all the rich, fat foods and piled them on. Then she sat at the table with me, watching until the last bite disappeared before she would move a dish. After I stuffed down all I thought I could hold, she would pick up a fork full and hold it in front of me. The first time she did that, I made the mistake of

telling her to take it away. Before I got the first word out, she had shoved a big bite of scalloped potatoes into my mouth. "Stop that," I said, and in went another fork full. She used every trick in the book to keep me eating. "Two more bites," she always insisted; "just two little bites." But they were never little.

At bedtime, there she was in front of me with a big malt, not in a glass—that didn't hold enough to suit her. I got it in a big bowl. Then she rolled me off to bed. Along with all of that, I started a weight lifting program, and all of a sudden I was seeing progress.

I arrived at the Denver camp carrying forty-three extra pounds, and I had put them on in six months. Nancy's perseverance had given me my chance; it was up to me to do the rest. Twenty-four years of wanting to be somebody and have something worthwhile gave me all the intensity I needed.

The training camp was at the Colorado School of Mines, at Golden. Some of the rookies grumbled that the high elevation affected their breathing, but to me it was just like breathing anywhere else. After we had been there a week, breathing was not uppermost in our minds anyway; we had a more immediate concern: dysentery. Everybody got it. The team doctors were dispensing drugs and giving shots that dried up everything in the human body except the dysentery. Some of the medicine affected our mouths the same way green persimmons would if you were crazy enough to try to eat them. My mouth got so puckered up that my tongue just curled up when I tried to talk.

"Hol'thit, doc," I mumbled, about the second day. "I know a bether thopper than thith. What we need ith thum Mithithippi Diarrhea Cordial." My mom dosed out that remedy to check the trots when I was just a little kid. All the trainers did was laugh. They thought I was making it up.

We tried making a joke out of it at first. We were not above grabbing some of the smaller guys on their way to the bathroom, and holding them, which always turned out to be a mistake. After a few days nobody was laughing. Middle linebacker Jerry Hopkins and defensive tackle Ray Jacobs had fun pulling practical jokes until dysentery hit them. When they got it, it was almost a relief for the rest of us.

In camp at night, the veterans would make the rookies sing their school fight songs. John Griffin, veteran safety, was also from Memphis State, but he couldn't help me with the songs; he didn't know them any better than I did. When it came my turn, I'd sing the big Elvis Presley hits, "You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog," and "Shake, Rattle and Roll."

Cookie Gilchrist had played Canadian football, then he had come over to the Buffalo Bills where he was AFC Player of the Year, and from there he came on to Denver. Cookie had a fancy new Cadillac with lettering on the side that said, LOOKIE LOOKIE HERE COMES COOKIE. That car had everything on it he could get on it. There was a telephone in it that would blow the horn on every incoming call.

Charlie Parker, offensive guard from the University of Southern Mississippi, was watching Cookie get out of his car one day, and he said, "The way Cookie feels about that car, you know, he'd probably sleep in it if he could stretch out." We were standing at our dorm window of solid plate glass which reached from the bottom floor all the way to the top. From where Charlie and I stood, we could see all three flights of stairs. Cookie's room was on the third floor.

I said, "Charlie, if Cookie's phone started ringing when he was on the top floor, wonder how long it would take him to get to his car?"

Charlie solemnly considered my question. "Well, when he comes in tonight, why don't we find out?"

Cookie was always the last to come in at night, so Charlie and I waited for him. We watched as he climbed the stairs and just as he reached the top floor, we dialed his number. His horn started blowing, and he took off down the stairs about three steps at a time. Just as he got the car door open, we hung up the phone. It was so funny to see him lumbering down those stairs that we kept that going for several nights. Finally, I decided to tell him. Cookie was so big and such an intense kind of guy, I didn't know what he might do. He just laughed and said, "'Bull,' you ain't gonna' make it through the season, you know that? Somebody's bound to take you out!"

He was awesome on the field. He weighed about 250, and was quick as a cat. He played fullback. When he was in the game, the coaches would free some of the tackles to double opposing team players and let Cookie block the tackles' positions. He had a great forearm and was so fast on his feet that it was hard to stay out of his reach.

I remember an exhibition game against the then Oakland Raiders in which a middle screen pass went to Cookie. Our quarterback, Mickey Slaughter, dropped back. Cookie turned, and when he caught the ball, Archie Matsos, Raider middle linebacker, came for him. Archie had timed his move perfectly. He came into Cookie full speed; I mean he threw all of his 220 pounds into that hit, one of the hardest licks I have ever seen. It didn't even phase Cookie. He kept right on going. He ran over Archie like a steam roller, and went on down the field for fifteen or twenty more yards before the Raiders finally got him down.

As I looked back down field, I couldn't believe what I saw. Archie was lying flat on his back with both legs and arms raised straight up in the air, shaking; his whole body was quivering, as though it had taken an electric shock. After a few seconds, his legs and arms slowly lowered to the ground, and a shudder passed through his body. He became still and I figured he was dead. I couldn't see how anyone could have taken that hit and still be alive. Archie was tough. He finally got up, but it was a long while before he could play again. His jaw was broken on both sides.

We received \$50 for each exhibition game. I saved my money so I could get an apartment and bring Nancy and the boys to Denver. Andy was five that year, 1965, and Don was four. When we settled into an upstairs furnished apartment, the first thing Nancy wanted to know was, "Who lives here that we know? Who are our friends?" She was hoping I had met some nice football players with nice wives. She already knew not to expect to find Andy and Don many playmates among my teammates. We married younger than most of them. Not many of the ones I knew had given much thought to long-term commitments. Neither had I, but Nancy thought enough about that for both of us.

We fought a lot over how married people were supposed to live.

“You’ve got to grow up sometime,” she would say. I hated that.

“What do you mean, grow up?” I would yell, not in just those words. To me, growing up meant being able to do more of what I had always done: cussing, chewing, drinking, fighting, and a lot of other stuff she seemed to find objectionable. I stayed out all night many times because I knew Nancy was going to be looking at me with those big blue eyes, wondering where I had been, and lying to her was going to make me feel like a dog. Then I’d get angry, throw stuff around, and break a few things.

Before we played our first regular season game, I already had earned the reputation of being a mean so-and-so. My teammates respected me for the hard-nosed way I had earned my position, but this same attitude carried over into everything I did. I thought I had to outdo everybody. Those guys were probably amazed that someone could keep up the pace I did—or would even want to. In only a few weeks, they were all calling me “Bull,” but I was so wild and unpredictable that most of them were careful about where they went with me. I was likely to get them involved in a brawl or get us all thrown in jail.

On the football field I was vicious, I was reckless, and I was out there with one purpose: to stop people. Linebackers make contact with enthusiasm or it doesn’t count, but the aggression needs to be left on the field. My problem was a deeply-rooted hostility that governed everything I did on or off the field. My willingness to fight was well documented.

By the time I made the Bronco team, the pro football arena was so important to me that I was never able to see it as only a part of the real world. To me, it was the whole thing, the only reality. During the six months that I was working my guts out in Memphis just to get to try out for the team, I didn’t drink, smoke, or chew. I didn’t even have time to fight. I was so busy running sprints, lifting weights, doing programmed exercising, and eating that nothing else mattered. Running up a hill out by the light, gas, and water subdivision became routine after awhile, so I started running up it backwards. That is tough, but it builds legs that won’t quit on you after three quarters of football in which the defense has to spend too much time on the field. Six months

of total abstinence from my usual vices must have made it even harder than I ever realized for Nancy to adjust to life in Denver. But as soon as I made the team, I went right back to my old ways, trying as hard as I could to make up for all the carousing I had missed. The Denver police soon knew me by name. They often arrested me for disorderly conduct without even booking me. They knew Ray Malavasi had taken me under his wing, and out of respect for him they eased up on me.

That first year in Denver was exciting to me. I can see now that to Nancy, it was just a big disappointment. Away from her family and friends, she had the full responsibility of the boys. I am sure she hoped that once I realized my life-long dream of doing something on my own, of being recognized as a professional athlete, I would let up on the wild life at least a little. But I was so caught up in what I was doing, I couldn't see anything else. Football, drinking, and partying made up the only world I wanted. I was thrilled to be associating with well-known personalities, and I felt good about the publicity I was getting. Here I was, just a free agent, and suddenly I was being talked about as a contender for Rookie-of-the-Year.

I was fortunate to have men like Ray Malavasi and George Dickson pulling for me from my first day in Denver. I worked hard, but a lot of others did too, with several players vying for the same position. I credit the counsel I got from Malavasi and Coach Dickson, who worked with the defensive backs, in giving me the edge. The Denver newspapers carried quotes from Coach Dickson to the effect that "Bramlett never gives you 100 per cent . . . it is always 200 per cent." He said, "There never has been a better hard-nosed football player to come on as fast as Bramlett in his first pro season." As cynical as I was about everything, I really was humbly grateful to those two great men.

The Commercial Appeal of Memphis repeated a quote from Coach Max Speedie that appeared in the Denver papers: "We definitely think Bramlett has a shot at rookie-of-the-year honors in the American Football League. After only two months of play, I think he deserves to be No. 1, and he is improving every game."

Coach Speedie mentioned others in the running: Joe Namath,

tackle Gerry Philbin of New York, halfback Gene Foster of San Diego, and fullback Jim Nance of Boston.

Nothing could have surprised me more than Coach Speedie's support. Only a short time before, he had threatened to run me off, insisting that I was going to kill all of his wide receivers. I could hardly believe it when he called a team meeting and told the players: "If we seem to be giving Bramlett more publicity than you fellows think is his share, it is because the recognition is necessary to help his chances for 'top rookie' honors. You all agree that he deserves it."

I liked the hubbub of the pro football world, but even while I was right in the middle of it, I noticed something strange. I was doing things I never believed could happen, and yet, unexplainably, they didn't satisfy me. It was an honor to be asked on as a guest to the TONIGHT SHOW while Johnny Carson talked about me as a candidate for Rookie-of-the-Year—but it was not the thrill I expected.

I stayed so tense, so on edge, and so unsatisfied with everything that came my way that years later one of my former baseball buddies commented that before he met me, he had never known anyone who was mad twenty-four hours a day, every day.

In several games during 1965, I played with injuries that should have kept me off the field. I told myself it was worth it when I was the only rookie to make any of the All-Pro teams that year.

But I was not chosen as Rookie-of-the-Year. As it turned out, Joe Namath was as great a quarterback as the New York Jets had hoped he would be, and he received the award. I agreed with their choice; he deserved it. Hey, I still felt like I was traveling in great company.