

# One Verdant Tree Hill

A Short Story by a USMNEWS.net Reader

In some ways, USM athletics is like dramatic fiction, set during high school. Take the 10<sup>th</sup>-grader who is well on his way to being the school's valedictorian in two years. He is the president of the science club, and is working on his own computer software program to assist doctors in avoiding dangerous drug interactions in the prescriptions they assign. College scholarship offers are already coming in, and a dual career in medicine and technology is over the horizon. However, like many other 10<sup>th</sup>-graders, he's awkward and shy, and perhaps not so good-looking. Still like others, he has a crush on one of the more attractive, yet least attainable girls at his school. At some point between his 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>-grade years, he begins to associate with one of the cool kids in school, and he confides in cool kid about his crush on the unattainable girl. The cool kid dates such a girl, and offers, in good faith, to train the young scholar on the ways of the world. In an attempt to build "game" in the young scholar, the cool kid educates in how to dress, speak, and (hopefully) "pick up" unattainable girl. For nearly two years they practice and develop the young scholar's girl-magnet skills. Then, leading up to the biggest stage of a high-schooler's social life, the young scholar asks unattainable girl to the senior prom. Remarkably, she says yes. In the days leading up the big event, the young scholar is congratulated and cheered on by cool kid, who also assists in tux-wear and other particulars for the big night. However, the day before the prom the unattainable girl calls the young scholar and admits to having a prior offer from another, more popular student, and that she will not be attending the senior prom with the young scholar. She admits to having accepted the young scholar's invitation at the behest of her girlfriends, as part of a prank played, not involving cool kid, on the young scholar. In doing so, unattainable girl reveals herself as also a mean girl. Crushed, the young scholar's high school career ends with a thud. Still, there is now another problem facing the lad. After having put so much energy and effort into becoming a cool kid, the boy has lost his grade point average, and all of the interest he was previously getting from big-name universities. His GPA is now a 2.734, and his SAT score is only 1,060. What the boy failed to realize is that if he had stuck to his studies, he would have ultimately attained an unattainable, nice girl within the coming decade, after getting well on his way to becoming a successful doctor/software engineer.

Fans of USM athletics, including USM president Martha Saunders, are not unlike the young scholar. They long for that unattainable "next level" in athletics. In their efforts to reach such an elusive goal, academics (funding) falls by the side, while support for athletics is, at worst, maintained, and possibly even ratcheted upward. The unattainable seems attainable when the football team heads into the 2010 season with plans of being C-USA champions and Liberty Bowl participants. Those plans are nearly dashed, however, when South Carolina destroys the Eagles on a national stage (ESPN) in early September. Still, the athletic department, with Saunders' support, strides forward, waiting for the next chance. That chance seems to come when the team is 8-3 heading into the Tulsa game. Again, though, those dreams are slapped down as Tulsa takes the win, dropping the team to 8-4. Yet again, in St. Petersburg's Beef 'O' Brady's Bowl, the Eagles have a shot at Louisville, the attractive school in the unattainable BCS conference known as the Big East. Yet despite leading UL on two occasions by 14 points, the Eagles hopes are once again destroyed in a 28 to 31 defeat. Next comes the 2010-11 basketball

season, where the Eagles jump out to an 12-2 record heading to Marshall. Again, all hopes for the unattainable are nearly lost on a 30-point blowout at the hands of the so-so Thundering Herd. Still, confidence is restored in two consecutive victories, the second being a win at home over nationally-ranked Central Florida, that raise the record up to 14-3. The most recent win also begins to bring the kind of home crowd that will be beneficial in luring the unattainable. Hopes are high for the Memphis game, as USM faced a team that had suspended a starter and was having a mediocre season (by UM standards). Yet, despite jumping out to about a 20 point lead in the first half, the Eagles' dreams are crushed again, this time by a 3-point basket with 1.2 seconds remaining in the game. At the same time, Central Florida loses a game at home to a mediocre East Carolina squad, revealing that USM's earlier victory against them was little more than fool's gold. Now, USM fans are populating Internet sites with dire predictions of another year without a noteworthy basketball accomplishment, and another period of low attendance. It's a heartbreaking story, played out over and over and over again.

In a practical sense, the unattainable "next level" in sports is just a measure or sense of some type of renown for the university, nothing more. Yet, like the saga involving the young scholar, that renown could have come from the *academic* side of the institution if the financial support for sports were shifted, at least partially, to academic affairs. That was not, and is not, in the cards. Instead, the USM family has seen the opposite, as Saunders and her cadre of university caretakers have stripped the USM of economics, religion, philosophy, Greek, German, and other pillars of a traditional liberal arts education. Like the young lad in the story above, USM is now left with no glory, and little hope.