



Friday, April 11, 2008

Updated: April 15, 9:49 AM ET

## Reid: Gundy's rant "basically ended my life"

---

By Tom Friend  
ESPN The Magazine

The lethal combination of testosterone, Red Bull and YouTube got us to this awkward place. It's a place where a coach is a cult figure for hollering: "I'm a man! I'm 40!" And it's a place where a quarterback is a vagabond -- for not hollering back.

Seven months later, the tirade of the century still has legs, and those legs are leaning against a rusted goalpost in Houston. The quarterback's name is Bobby Reid, and if his pulse is quick and his tongue is acid, it's because he's still stewing over the 3-minute, 20-second rant that Reid says "basically ended my life."

The problem is, nobody realizes it. He was at a party last fall with a teammate, receiver Adarius Bowman, when two co-eds found out he and Bowman were football players at Oklahoma State.

Co-ed: "Oh! Your coach is such a great guy, the way he stood up for his quarterback!"

Bowman: "This is the boy you're talking about right here. This is Bobby Reid. This is the quarterback."

Co-ed: "Well, your coach is such a magnificent man. He's a hero in my book."

Reid: "Sweetheart, pump your brakes. It's not what you think it is. Let me tell you the story."

So he told her a story ...

---

They built this quarterback in Southern Texas. They dubbed him the next Vince Young, they charted his long passes with a tape measure, and, when he led his Houston high school to the 2003 Class 5A State title, they figured someday he'd be playing on Sundays.

Reid had it all: arm, legs, smarts, manners and an unlisted phone number. Then Oklahoma State coach Les Miles, offered him his first scholarship and a mesmerized Reid accepted. Ohio State recruited him anyway, and Reid even let Jim Tressel into his home. But Reid's word was oak, and Miles considered it the biggest recruiting coup at the school since Thurman Thomas.

The kid was 6-foot-4, 235 pounds and so quick he'd never taken a direct hit. Better yet, he'd graduated from high school early, which meant he could attend spring practice before his freshman season.

It had a certain Oklahoma State quarterback coach frothing at the mouth.

A quarterback coach named Mike Gundy.

---

Right away, Reid thought Gundy was hilarious. The coach kept it loose in quarterback meetings and rarely went anywhere without a can of soda or Red Bull. Gundy, in the '80s, had been a stellar quarterback himself at Oklahoma State, but now he was a bit hyper, a bit overcaffeined and a bit entertaining. Reid dug him.

Miles and Gundy's plan had been to start the kid from Day 1, but, that first spring, Reid took his virgin hit. A linebacker smashed Reid's throwing shoulder during practice, and his labrum didn't survive. He required surgery. And not only did Reid lose his freshman season, he lost Les Miles.

Following a loss in the 2004 Alamo Bowl, Miles bolted to LSU, and Reid -- who'd grown fond of the coach -- said he felt like leaving with him. But as he was driving home to Houston, Reid's cell phone rang. It was OSU's new head coach on the line: Gundy.

He urged Reid to stay. He told him he was bringing in Larry Fedora from Florida to be offensive coordinator, and that Fedora's spread offense suited Reid's running and passing skills. Reid had only operated option or play-action offenses, but it sounded nice on paper, particularly when Gundy said, "You're the future of the program, son."

As promised, Reid started as a redshirt freshman in 2005, until, at midseason, he dislocated three toes against Missouri. His mother Rajika, a single parent, rode off the field with him on a cart -- stole that image away -- and Reid was gone five weeks.

The injury turned his first season into a wash, but, even though Gundy brought in a new quarterback from Denver, Zac Robinson, Reid still thought it was his team. He began 2006 with solid efforts, and even had a five-touchdown, 411-yard performance against Kansas, breaking Gundy's school record for most total yards in a game.

But acrimony was on its way. Against Texas A&M the next week, Reid suffered a mild concussion -- careening his head off the turf after a run -- and there was sideline chatter that it was a minor nick, that he wasn't showing much grit.

The twist was that Robinson, in Reid's place, threw for three TDs and took the game to OT. It dawned on people that Robinson was better suited for the spread offense, that he was the more assertive runner. Reid tended to run with his shoulders too high, and, if nothing else, it had Gundy and Fedora re-evaluating the QB situation.

"At times, [Reid] didn't perform like people had wanted him to," Gundy says. "Sometimes players play very well in games, and then, in other games, if things don't go well, they don't. Why does it happen to him? That's hard to answer."

There was a sense now that Gundy didn't trust Reid, that Reid wasn't machismo enough for his tastes. And the gossip got out there, even made its way to the beat writers. They just weren't brave enough to print it.

But, before long, a story was staring them in the face. In the '06 season finale against Oklahoma, Gundy and Fedora drew up a bizarre game plan, platooning both Reid and Robinson. There were empty backfield sets and direct-snap running plays to Robinson, and the scheme had OU on its heels. When Reid tossed a two-yard TD with 6:41 remaining, the Sooner lead was only 27-21. Reid was jubilant. Earlier in the game, he'd taken a pain shot for a sprained shoulder and had returned to throw that TD. He was ram-tough, after all, and he wanted the ball back. He wanted to beat smack-talking OU.

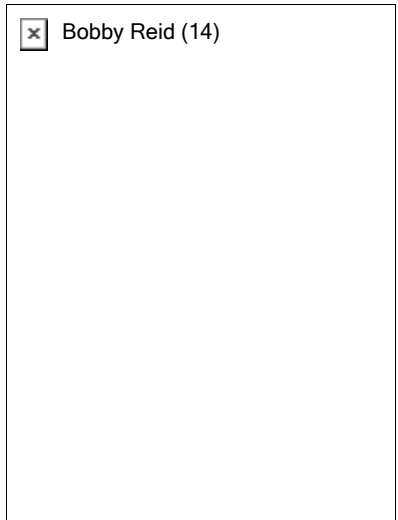
The two teams traded scoreless possessions, and, with less than two minutes remaining, OSU had the ball and one last chance for an upset.

Gundy sent in Robinson.

"I was sitting there like, 'Coach, can I go in? Let me go in, Coach,' " Reid says. "And he really didn't say nothing. I just blacked out and lost it. I was cursing and just going off."

Teammates told Reid to cool it, but he kept howling: "This is my team! I led us here! I should be in the game!"

Gundy's reaction was, "Our job isn't necessarily to satisfy every player, but to do what's best to win the football game." But the Cowboys didn't win. Robinson failed to reach the end zone, and Reid nearly quit the team -- weeks before their appearance in the Independence Bowl.



QB Bobby Reid fought injuries

The next day, the good cop to Gundy's bad cop -- Fedora -- talked Reid off the ledge, saying he still was the team's unquestioned starter. Reid went on to lead OSU to a 34-31 bowl victory over Alabama, although Gundy called Reid's performance spotty. It wasn't a ringing endorsement, and Reid had a gut feeling something was brewing, something ugly, something that might even make its way into the newspaper.

throughout his career at  
Oklahoma State.

If they were brave enough to print it.

---

This past September, it took exactly two Saturdays for the whole thing to blow.

In Week 2 against Florida Atlantic, Reid got hurt again, tweaking his ankle and knee. Robinson stepped in, threw for three TDs and stole Gundy's heart. Reid just didn't know it yet.

That Monday, Gundy and Fedora called Reid in, asking about his health. Reid says he told them he was raring to go for the next game at Troy. But Gundy told him to stop right there. He told him they were moving him to No. 2 and Robinson to No. 1.

Reid was trance-like. He'd started every game the previous season, tossing 24 touchdowns to 11 interceptions. His completion percentage had been 55.4 percent, he'd rushed for 500 yards, and he'd been the 16th rated QB in the nation. He'd been a semifinalist for the Davey O'Brien Award, given to the country's top QB. And they were benching him after only two games?

He remembers mumbling, "OK, coach," because it was his instinct to be nonconfrontational. It's why his professors and teammates loved him. And, other than that Oklahoma game in 2006, he usually loved everybody back. So he didn't stomp his feet.

Instead, he left Gundy's office and stood and watched the team get walloped by Troy, 41-23. Then, he found a shoulder to lean on: His mother's.

“

**At first, everything [Gundy] was saying sounded real and true. But I'm a believer where there is smoke, there's fire.”**

--Rajika Reid

She'd traveled all day to get to the Troy game, and was exhausted and hadn't eaten. She saw Reid chowing from a postgame box of Popeye's Chicken, and she stole it from him when his cell phone rang. When Reid hung up, he saw his mom with the box, talking to a male reporter. Reid walked over, grabbed a piece, ate it on the curb, and returned for more. When the reporter left, Rajika urged her son to ask Gundy why he was benched. And they said their goodbyes.

That next Monday, Reid asked Gundy, "Coach, why am I not playing? I'm the starting quarterback." Gundy's answer was, "I don't feel like you're being productive enough." Reid's head ached. He told Gundy, "You've just been waiting to pull the rug out." Gundy denied it and said Robinson was simply playing better.

"I thought my life was over," Reid says.

He almost quit and, on the night before their next game against Texas Tech, considered climbing out his hotel window so Gundy would have to kick him off the team. Instead, he showed up for the next day's pregame breakfast, where, curiously, not one copy of the local Oklahoman newspaper could be found. Reid thought nothing of it, but, truth was, every copy of the paper had been confiscated. Even in the hotel gift shop.

Why? Because a writer had finally gotten brave.

That morning, a columnist from the Oklahoman, Jenni Carlson, wrote that Reid was benched for being soft, for not playing through injuries, for being coddled by his mom. And, to prove her point, Carlson wrote Rajika had fed her son chicken after the Troy game.

In a lot of ways, it was a cheap shot -- because Rajika had fed no one but herself and because Carlson *hadn't even been* at the Troy game. But, in a lot of ways, the article reeked of everything the OSU coaches had been saying behind closed doors. Yes, Rajika had been a concern (remember the Missouri game in '05). And, yes, the staff felt Reid was made of tin.

Eventually, after an emotional 49-45 OSU victory, the article found its way to Gundy. He downed a Red Bull and quickly scanned it. And what he said, in his postgame news conference, ripped the doors of their hinges.

It was his inflections that made the rant famous. And his condescension toward the writer, Carlson. And the empathy he seemed to show for Reid.

It was lines like: "Here's all that kid did. He goes to class. He's respectful to the media! He's respectful to the public! And he's a good kid. And he's not a professional athlete and he doesn't deserve to be kicked when he's down."

Or the line of all lines: "Come after me! I'm a man! I'm 40! I'm not a kid. Write something about me, or our coaches. Don't write about a kid that does everything right, that's heart's broken and then say the coaches said he was scared. That ain't true!"

After Gundy was done, after he'd stormed out saying, "It makes me want to puke," there was hardy applause. Some fans had slipped into the news conference, and they liked the way Gundy had strutted around, the way he'd defended the kid.

Problem was, no one realized he'd *offended* the kid.

Reid says he was caught off guard. Here was a coach who'd been burying him and now he was going to war for him? It didn't add up. "At first, everything [Gundy] was saying sounded real and true," Rajika says. "But I'm a believer where there is smoke, there's fire."

In other words, Bobby and Rajika Reid felt info in Carlson's column came indirectly from Gundy or his staff. ("I'd have a hard time agreeing with that," Gundy says.)

In other words, they felt Gundy's rant was fake.

"Honestly, the way I took it, I felt like it was all a front," Reid says. "That it was all a big show. It didn't feel genuine."

Rajika: "It wasn't the truth. If it was the truth and this kid does everything right, why wasn't he back on the field?"

Gundy: "The last thing I would ever do would be to draw up some production to say in front of the camera. The first reason is because I don't have any interest in doing that. The second reason is I don't have time to do it. ... I didn't direct it toward football, I directed it toward he had done everything right. If they thought it wasn't genuine then obviously they have a right to their opinion. I'm not concerned with changing their mind."

In the days following the rant, Reid and Rajika waited for Gundy's call, a call that wouldn't come. During the tirade, the coach seemed hurt for Reid. So why wasn't Gundy asking Reid how he felt?

"Here's what I did," Gundy says, sighing. "I went to the team and told them, 'What's happened is over. And if anybody has any questions about why it happened or how it transpired, come see me in my office. Otherwise, I'm done with it.'"

"[Reid] certainly heard that. He was in the front row. He could've come in at any time."

Instead, Reid bit his tongue, certain he and Gundy were through. "Our relationship after that kind of faded away," Reid says. "When that rant happened, I was like, 'Blugggh, I don't think this is for me anymore.' "

Unfortunately, there was still three-fourths of a season to play.

Unfortunately, at the next home game, fans chanted: "I'm a man. I'm 40."

Unfortunately, Reid didn't own earplugs.

Reid sank into depression. "He'd tell me, 'Bro', I cry myself to sleep almost every night,' " says fullback [John Johnson](#).

What kept him going was school. He was only months away from a degree in education, as a redshirt junior, and he figured he'd go to practice, graduate and then get out of Dodge. It was a good plan, too, if he hadn't surfed onto YouTube.

Gundy's rant was all over the Web site, and Reid hadn't managed to avoid it. He saw a new [Toyota commercial](#) spoofing Gundy ("Buy from me! I'm a man! I'm 40!"). And he saw a [fake Coors Light Commercial](#) (Interviewer: "You look a little young to be drinking. Don't you have to be 21?" Gundy: "I'm a man! I'm 40!").

"It was funny, but it wasn't funny," Reid says. "I was like, 'They're getting out of hand with this.' "

It didn't help that Robinson was having one of the finest seasons in OSU history (23 TD passes, 847 yards rushing). It made Gundy look brilliant, and the coach deserved credit for the switch. He'd made a business move -- the kind coaches make all over the country -- and all Reid could do was wait for one more set of downs.

Two weeks after the rant at Texas A&M, that's what happened. Robinson suffered a concussion that day, and Reid entered and went 6-of-9 for 72 yards. But a late rally fell short, 24-23, and Reid was pointed back to the bench.

The final indignity came the next week. With OSU leading Nebraska 45-14, Gundy put Reid in with 35 seconds left -- just to kneel on the ball. It seemed cruel, and Johnson remembers the OSU fans cat-calling, "Hey Bobby Reid, we don't need you now! Game over!"

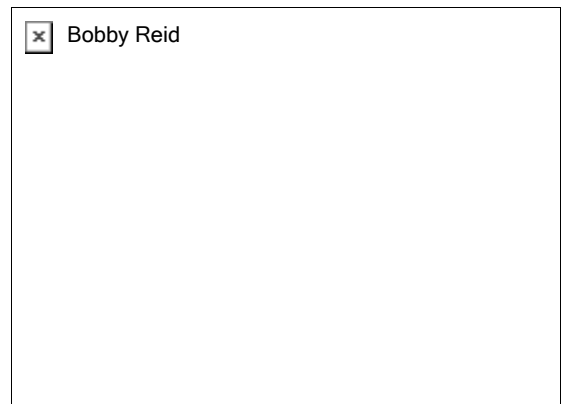
Reid took his snap, said nothing and went home. To pack.

"That game was the breaking point for Bobby," Rajika says. "He felt totally humiliated. He said, 'I'm not taking this anymore.' "

Rather than throw his own rant at Gundy, Reid skipped two days of practice. But he didn't want to be a quitter. So he returned, arms folded.

He ended up throwing only 14 passes after the rant, and, when the season ended after an Insight Bowl appearance, Reid grabbed his diploma and loaded his car. At the final team function, he tried sneaking out a side door. But Gundy noticed him and asked him to join an impromptu team photograph. Again, Reid bit his lip and gave a faux smile. It's the same smile he'd been feigning all season, which is why most OSU staffers had no idea he was suffering. He felt he'd been the bigger man ... and he wasn't even 40.

"Being 40 doesn't make you a man," Rajika says, referring to Gundy. "It's your character that makes you a man. Your integrity. That's what makes you a man. Not how old you are. I read a Chinese proverb one time in a restaurant, and it



At first, the change to a spread offense was supposed to help Reid flourish.

Game over!"

said, 'A fool at 40 is a fool always.' That tells you everything."

Reid decided he'd never play college football again, and applied for the 2008 NFL draft. People at OSU chuckled, thinking, "If he can't play for us, how is he going to play pro?" But Gundy told them: Reid might just get drafted. He said that, in workouts, Reid will look like a million bucks.

The only question would be whether NFL scouts knew about everything else: the baggage, the article, the rant, the depression, YouTube.

Hopefully they wouldn't. Because it'd make them want to puke.

---

Problem was, Reid's body language was brutal. If an NFL scout had watched him this February, they would've closed their notepad and shuffled off. He had no fire, no swagger, no gleam in his eye.

But little did Reid know, a local coach at Texas Southern University had something in mind. His name was Johnnie Cole, and even though he'd just inherited an 0-11 team, he had a plan: Get Bobby Reid.

Cole had to sell Reid fast. He told him he'd tutored Vikings quarterback Tarvaris Jackson at Alabama State, that he knew how to take a SWAC quarterback to the NFL. He told him he'd run a pro offense, with bootleg and play-action packages, that there'd be no gimmicky spread offense. He said, "You've got this cloud over you. They're questioning your heart. All it takes is a year to get it back."

Reid weighed it all, and withdrew from the draft. In the end, Cole -- a former QB at TSU -- promised Reid there wouldn't be a Zac Robinson looking over his shoulder. He promised he didn't drink Red Bull. Reid's smile resurfaced.

He was humble, too. Reid was once supposed to be Vince Young, but now he was practicing under goalposts that needed a paint job. Most would've turned up their nose at the opportunity, but Reid bunkered down. By the time spring practice began, this April 7, Reid was the unquestioned leader of the team.

"I've coached a lot of 'em, including Tarvaris Jackson, and Reid's special," Cole says. "I think he's going to be a first-day guy in the 2009 draft. If he'd left this year, he'd have been just a guy, so I think his decision to come back made him a couple million. He's got his swagger back. You should see that arm. The players are already following him."

He'll play this coming season against the Gramblings and the Alcorn States. But he probably won't be on TV, probably won't be on YouTube, probably won't watch Oklahoma State and probably ... won't read the newspaper.

"What I experienced up there in Oklahoma, something was taken away from me," Reid says. "Now I'm just trying to get it back. There was talk out there that I was soft and all that crap. But I just want everybody to know I'm not going anywhere. You can try to knock me down, but I'm standing on my feet strong."

It's just what he wanted to tell the co-ed at that party last year:

*I'm a man. I'm 22.*

*Tom Friend is a senior writer for ESPN The Magazine.*