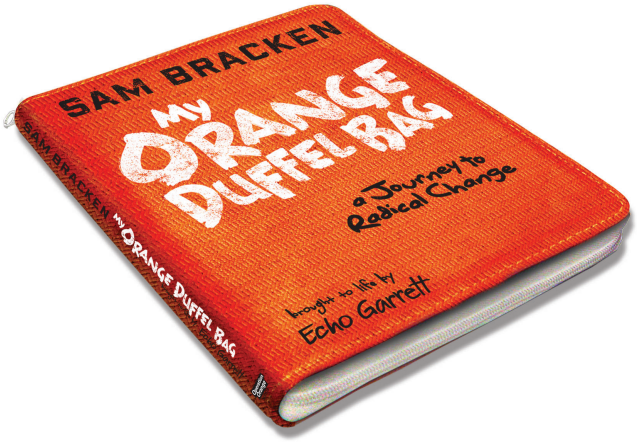

While 8-year-old Sam Bracken fended off more than his fair share of degenerates, probably the last thing in his mind was the thought that football would one day take him out of his sordid Las Vegas life and into the world of corporate executives and motivational speakers with a story so moving it inspired one reader to dye her hair orange to match the cover of this fascinating autobiography.

My Orange Duffle Bag, a Journey to Radical Change, is the first book I've ever owned that zippers (I do have a book with shoelaces). Part photos, part artwork, part diary, the story is "brought to life by Echo Garrett ." With a rough orange cover evoking the duffel bag in which Sam was able to place all of his belongings at 18, Bracken holds nothing back.

Jason Butt, writing for The Atlanta Jewish Times, sums up Sam's childhood:

... Bracken ... writes about his arm being doused with lighter fluid and set on fire by an older boy, later becoming his stepbrother, at age 5. He writes about seeing his mother abuse drugs. He writes about his stepfather's beating him. He writes about smoking marijuana for the first time at age 8, with his parents not minding – sometimes even using drugs with him.

He writes about being sexually abused by a friend and his older brother. And about being used as a human dartboard by his stepbrother. And Bracken writes about his mother's kicking him out of her apartment at just 15 years old.

The scariest part of the description above is that it's only part of what Sam endured. Donald Conkey, one of the key people in Sam's college years who helped him climb out of a crippling childhood, writes:

Sam's first book is a book on how he, by personal determination and with the help of many ... overcame being told he was not wanted (a child of rape), the dredges of poverty, a drug-drenched home life, drug and motorcycle gangs, prostitution, and finally, told by his mother to leave - with her parting words "Sam, you will thank me some day for this."

My Orange Duffel Bag is as unique as Sam's early years. Written in the style of a diary, Sam chronicles his life sequentially in short bursts:

AGE 16

I take my orange duffel bag and go live with my best friend's family. Is this what normal feels like?

Football becomes my life.

I work harder than ever. I bounce between school, football practice, my busboy job and my friends' houses. No sleep.

Mom has a mental breakdown.

I visit her in the desert where she's staked her claim to a long ago abandoned gold mine.

Sometimes she stays in a dirt-floor shack, warming herself by a pot-bellied stove.

She feeds me dumpster stew and tells me who my real father is.

I start looking for God.

DESPAIR

Sam is brilliant and athletic. Inducted into the National Honor Society, named All-State in football and track, at 18 he sees glimmers of a new life as major colleges send recruiting letters. Sam turns them all down. Except for one.

"I'm going to Brigham Young University," he writes.

If this were a movie, this is where you would weep silently into your popcorn while the credits roll. But this is real life. Sam's real life:

Right before my [high school] graduation, I find out my football scholarship at BYU has gone to someone else.

Unfazed by what must have felt like 18 years of someone tossing you a football while your hands are tied behind your back, Sam takes this crushing blow in stride:

That's okay. I'll just walk on.

And he moves to Provo. Taking a construction job, Sam works out with the BY team over the summer, coming back to Las Vegas only to play in an All-Star Game.

Not just any All-Star Game. The All-Star Game where he blows his knee out. Forget walking on. Limping, maybe. Sam sees his "gridiron dreams slip away."

If this were a movie, this is where you would get up and leave because the plot is no longer believable. Nobody's life is this cruel.

Sam's doctor insists his knee will eventually heal and be strong enough for college football. He helps Sam put together letters and highlight reels. Sam works as a teamster on a casino's loading docks, coming home every day to:

... another rejection letter in my mailbox.

Turns out Sam was looking in the wrong place. His life turns around when the phone rings. It's Coach Ken Blair from Georgia Tech, asking Sam to visit the school. Sam flies to Atlanta, meets Coach Bill Curry and, in the blink of a nearly blind eye, his life turns around as Coach Curry offers him a "full ride football scholarship."

So that's what it feels like – having some place to go and having someone want you to be there.

End part one. All of his worldly possessions - an extra pair of jeans, a couple of T shirts and some underwear – fit into his orange duffel bag with room left over. Sam writes:

... I pack it with all my hopes and dreams and fly away.

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ow',bgcolor:'#FFFFFF',menu:'true'},{id:'p_avreloaded0',styleclass:'allvideos'});

Part two details life at Georgia Tech where, as a freshman reserve linebacker, Sam makes the Dean's list and is told by Coach Bill Curry:

I see you becoming an All-American and being a significant draft pick in the NFL.

If, of course, "things go well and you don't get injured."

Sam's friends raise money for him to visit his mom in Las Vegas for Christmas. No one picks him up at the airport. It takes him two days to find his mom, who is not happy to see him and "sneers" at the Christmas tree he buys her.

Sam misses the next two seasons due to injuries and surgeries. Both of his shoulders are popping out of their respective sockets on a regular basis. Sam recalls being issued broken shoulder pads freshman year and how his shoulders stung every time he took a hit.

The doctors tell him the damage is permanent and finally the unfairness of it all overwhelms him. Friends convince him to take a trip to Destin, Florida, to forget about his trouble. Same believes they are asking because they need a designated driver. Either way, he decides to go, spending his time in Destin sitting in a chair by the pool while his friends "frolic in the pool."

Depression is taking over his life. Telling himself that "life sucks" and it "cannot possibly get any worse," Sam endures the insult that changes everything:

At that very moment, a flock of seagulls flies overhead and craps all over me. The smelly mess hits the top of my head, stinging my eyes and dribbles down my puny atrophied chest. "The world has spoken: I am a crapping stick!" I scream.

His friends cannot stop laughing and their laughter is contagious. Sam writes:

As strange as it sounds, that incident becomes a defining moment.

I recognize a great truth: Life is not fair but nothing good comes from sitting around feeling sorry for yourself.

Coach Curry tells him he will keep his scholarship and helps Sam develop goals for himself outside of football.

End part two. The third and final portion of the book is called "7 Rules for the Road," a method Sam painstakingly put together to help himself and others not only cope with failure but to succeed.

Sam eventually received an MBA from Brigham Young (some dreams never die) and, after a successful career in sales, became general manager of FranklinCovey Media Publishing.

What do you call this kind of relentless optimism? Jason Butt reports :

"I call it the theory of miserable relativity," Bracken said. "There are 6.8 billion people in this world and no matter how miserable or how hard you have it, especially in this country, no matter how hard we have it, chances are there are billions of people in this world that have it worse. It's all relative."

Now, Sam is determined to help those who are aging out of the foster care system, and homeless children. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of My Orange Duffel Bag will go to the Orange Duffel Bag Foundation.

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For more information:

The Buzz (Georgia Tech Summer 2010 edition) – interview with Sam Bracken

Don Conkley column – Cherokee Gazette

Chrysalis – Learning through Living (Atlanta Jewish Times)

Article about Sam Bracken - Atlanta Journal Constitution (AJC)

Echo Garrett's Web site

The Coaching Commons