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## THE HARD WAY

*“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” – Proverbs 22:6*



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I've always said people think far more of me than I ever did of myself. Admiration just came with the turf. So why write a book? I suppose I have some stories to tell. You can't play and coach football for 50 years without gaining valuable lessons. You can't live 86 years without learning what works, what doesn't.

My name is Bum Phillips. Remember: Bum is a nickname, not a description. If you know me by my nickname, you likely remember my days on pro football sidelines. I was the coach with the cowboy hat, boots and plug of Tinsley, which I've chewed on since 1937.

It's funny how things work out for a guy. The greatest lesson I learned in life presented itself away from football and while I chewed on a thoughtful question from a friend. If you learn nothing else from this book than the importance of that lesson, I've done my job here. We'll get to that story a bit later.

I want first to explain a few things: Where I come from, why I still wear cowboy hats and what happened behind the scenes of my favorite National Football League times. Football did more for me than I ever did for it, and I hope this book offers people as much value as the sport offered to me and my family.

Christianity became a big part of my life – and thus a big part of my story – even if I steered away from it until I was 76 years old. I’m not the type of guy, though, who wants to shove anything down anyone’s throat. I’ll simply share my Christian story and hope you learn from my mistakes. You don’t want regrets at my age – when there is no time left in the game.

Now, let’s turn back the clock. I’ve got quite a bit to say about my childhood.

**People in** East Texas are sticklers for claiming their rightful birthplaces, and I’m no different. Many people have written I was born in Beaumont. Now, I have nothing against Beaumont, but I was born in Orange, Texas. On my 84<sup>th</sup> birthday, John Dubose, an Orange County commissioner, proclaimed I was one of Orange County’s brightest stars (1). Townspeople refer to the day as “Bum Phillips Day.” I’m not sure what they do on that day, but the gesture reminds me of how grateful I am I was born there.

Orange was born in 1836 – 87 years before I showed up – and the year Texas won its independence from Mexico (2). Native orange groves attracted the hungry boatmen who navigated the Sabine River. You’d think I’d love oranges. I don’t. Every spring, my mama insisted I swallow castor oil, a pale yellow liquid extracted from castor seed. She figured it cleansed the body, purified me. The catch: It tasted like hell and I hated it. To ensure I’d guzzle the

stuff once a year, mama dripped the liquid into my orange juice, which I can't drink to this day. My wife eats oranges as part of her diet, but I don't even like to look at the peels.

Orange is the state's easternmost city. A strong-armed quarterback could heave a rock from the Texas side of the Sabine River and make a splash in Louisiana's marshy western edge. You can't see the Gulf of Mexico from Orange, but it's close, too. You understand now why I still love a hot bowl of Capt. Benny's seafood gumbo.

In Orange's early days, the city became a pass-through for outlaws and renegades. Louisiana outlaws fled their state for Texas; Texas Rangers chased homegrown outlaws east and across the Sabine. I would have loved to watch the Rangers chase those bad boys, but I'm glad I wasn't there to see those who were caught by vigilantes. My hometown, more than a century ago, planted what matured into a famous hanging tree.

By the late 1800s, Orange blossomed with almost 20 steam sawmills (3). Despite its location on the state's outer extreme, my city became the center of the Texas lumber industry. Later, large machines dredged the Port of Orange, and thick-handed men went to work building ships, many of which floated on trees milled from nearby. When World War I ended in 1918, demand for the town's bread and butter exports decreased, and the deepwater port turned into a hotspot for speakeasies, gamblers and bootleggers.

By the time I was born, Orange was a strategic link between Louisiana and Texas. I don't remember this, of course, but I love history. I can imagine those old ships filled with cotton, lumber and cattle sailing the Sabine and Neches rivers. I remember stories about the businessmen who cashed in during the good times and who weathered the downtimes. They built elaborate mansions and paid men to manage their ranches.

E. W. Brown was no exception. Brown was an entrepreneur. He owned a home in Orange and a sprawling estate just outside town. As president of Orange's Yellow Pine Paper Mill and other companies, he became one of the wealthiest U.S. manufacturers (4). He also gave my maternal grandfather the job of managing his favorite ranch.

James Monroe Parish, my grandfather, managed the E. W. Brown Estate, the oldest cattle range in Orange, for almost 50 years. My mama grew up there. They had horses and cattle. My grandfather struck a deal with Brown that afforded him a decent lifestyle. He managed Brown's ranch, and in exchange, he received half the cattle. This ranch served as my first glimpse into what became a lifelong passion.

**Despite my** hometown's citrus namesake, in some cowboy circles Orange is considered the first cattle-raising area in Texas. I always looked up to cowboys: hard-working cattlemen and horsemen. Even today, I hang a photograph of John Wayne near my front door. Nearby: 10 of my white cowboy hats, each resting snugly on a hook.

I'm not sure if critics thought I was crazy for wearing a cowboy hat and boots to NFL games, or if they figured I was just a dumb hick. I don't mind people thinking I'm stupid, but I don't want to give them any proof. I guess I always believed in being true to who you are. I was a cowboy long before I became a football coach.

I was born Oail Andrew Phillips on Sept. 29, 1923, three years after the formation of the American Professional Football Association. I don't remember most of the first couple years, but I'm told I was born in a house. Childbirth in those days often occurred outside hospitals. My first

memory is of my older sister, Edrina, who hit me with a metal hoe. Evidently, I aggravated her. I don't know what I could have said at 3 years old to prompt an attack with a garden tool.

Gardening was a big part of our lives. We largely lived off the land. Mama served vegetables and fruit, which grow easily in this climate, with most meals. Because we lived without a car and in a home eight miles outside Orange, trips to town took hours. Luckily, we lived near my grandfather on the E.W. Brown Estate, and his cattle provided our meat. We cooped chickens for their eggs and drumsticks.

If we went to town, which was rare, we ventured by wagon to load up with flour, sugar and lard. I'd sit up front with my mother, Naomi, and beg for the chance to steer. She told me I was too young, that a wrong turn could tip the rickety wagon and send both of us flying into the rutted dirt road below. Even at an early age, I yearned to hold the reins. I was born with a coach's instinct.

During those rare, humid trips to the Orange Grocery Company, we passed the Southern Pacific Railroad Depot, which delivered out-of-towners who clamored to popular speakeasies. If it had rained recently, travel along the low-lying roads became difficult at best. I wasn't worried about getting stuck, though, with mama on the wagon.

As I rode with my mother at the front of the wagon, I watched the sawmills, tugboats and oxen moving logs. From beneath my first cowboy hat, which my grandfather had stuffed with tissue so that it clung to my boy-sized head, I absorbed the ways of early Texans. By the time I was famous I bought 20 cowboy hats a year and donated each to charity. For years, I wore felt hats during the wintertime and straw hats during summers. I never did wear the hat in domed stadiums, though. Mama always told me not to

wear a hat indoors. Besides, you need a hat to keep the sun out of your eyes and the rain off your head. It ain't raining inside, and there's no sun in there either.

Because we rarely traveled to town, I received much of my education on the ranch. I also grew up near eight aunts and uncles, and all those cousins. I was kin to most everyone I knew. We worked together and, for fun, we'd gather for a Sunday fish fry near the river. During those gatherings, I played with my cousins, the men played dominoes and the women cleaned the fish. It probably didn't cost five bucks to feed 25 people.

We were poor, but we didn't know any better. At 5 or 6 years old, I received a toy car from my aunt for Christmas. The push car was my only present but I was tickled to death. I didn't starve, and I didn't do without. It's just when blue jeans got holes in them, we patched them. Nowadays, you pay for jeans to come with the holes already in them.

**Growing up**, I didn't know what football was. We didn't even have running water let alone electricity. I couldn't have listened to football broadcasts or watched TV games if I'd wanted to. I knew cattle. Like most boys, I figured I'd work forever on a ranch, at a shipyard or in the oil fields. Work began for me at an early age.

When household chores were complete, my mama loaded me into the wagon and we visited her father's ranch. She loved her father about as much as she loved horses. As a young boy I roped, pitched hay, worked the fields and helped to move my grandfather's livestock. I did everything from picking cotton to bending stocks on 80 acres of corn.

At the end of a long day, I'd climb back onto the wagon, kick the dust off my boots and make sure the beef grandfather packaged didn't bounce from the wooden seat

and to the ground. The flat scenery rolled slowly by, and images of digging my small boots into a horse at full gallop filled my mind. I still remember those boots. As a grown man, I bought boots made from lizards and alligators. I wore kangaroo and ostrich boots, which I liked because they stretched to fit my feet.

We moved temporarily from the country and into Orange so I could attend Anderson School. The building was a three-story home renovated to educate elementary school children. It had a dome on top, a round porch for an entrance and dozens of windows. Inside, I was a raucous and noisy child. I received countless whippings for being too loud or argumentative. I had opinions and I never minded voicing them. One time, I told a teacher, "Oh, rats," and she sent me down the hallway. The principal whipped me on my back with a razor belt.

After a short stint in town, we returned to the country – and my sister Edrina and I took to fighting. She was beautiful, a future class valedictorian and full of personality. Like all people in my family, she was good at taking up for what she believed in. When we didn't fight, we used the headboard and footboard of mama's and daddy's bed for our pretend horses.

Edrina, it turns out, is also the one who gave me my famous nickname. Because of her stuttering, she couldn't say the word "brother." Her attempts came out "Bu-bu-bu-Bum." The name just stuck.

Jo Annette, my younger sister, wasn't born until I was 12. She offers a different version of the story.

"This will fly in the face of everything that has been said about where Bum got his name, but this is the true story," Jo Annette said. "Mama and daddy went on a lot of picnics. Didn't have much money for anything else when Bum and Edrina were little. So, on this particular picnic, Bum was

just crawling and made his way over to an old cow skull that was full of bumblebees. They of course stung him and after that, mama started calling him Bumble. That's where Edrina got the name from because she couldn't say 'Bumble' and shortened it to 'Bum.'”

I'll let you decide which story to believe. I suppose I could have crawled through the grass headlong and into a beehive. I tell you what, though, something happened to me at an early age that created a resentment toward grass – at least the grooming part. For a reason I still can't explain, I hated to mow the lawn. Something about pushing a rusted, metal, hand-powered mower made my skin crawl. I'd get whippings for how I mowed. I wasn't lazy. I worked 14-hour days. But when I mowed the yard, I cut corners. I'd miss spots on purpose.

It might be no coincidence my first NFL head coaching job was with the Houston Oilers. Ten years earlier, the team unveiled the Astrodome, the world's first indoor baseball and football stadium. By the time I became head coach, engineers installed AstroTurf, thus removing the need for those doggone lawnmowers.

**Like any** kid, I grew up to be a mix of my mama and my daddy. I was closer, however, to my mama. Daddy never did sit around the house, so I didn't get much of a chance to talk to him.

Mama was a stern woman, but she knew how to show love without ever saying it. She played harmonica and the guitar, and fostered my passion for music. To this day, I'm friends with musicians you know by name. Every now and again we invite a bunch out to stay on my Goliad, Texas, ranch. We spend weeks catching up, eating my wife's home cooking and picking and grinning. During pro football

training camps, I had friends such as Willie Nelson and the Gatlin Brothers perform for my players. Even the athletes from urban cities seemed at home among my country friends.

Mama was about 5-foot-2-inches tall, and she couldn't have weighed more than 110 pounds. She was tough, though.

"One weekend she went home and decided to take her stepmother and one of the younger children to the picture show in town," my sister, JoAnnette, said. "But a child got in the car before anyone else and released the brake. The car rolled downhill, hit a tree and bent the tie rod. Mama took the tie rod off, fired up the forge in the barn, heated up the rod, straightened it, put it back on and away they went to town."

I remember collecting wood with mama and planting rows of carrots and potatoes. We visited in the cramped kitchen while supper brewed. She had dark brown hair, a round face and an easy-going nature. Mama, bless her heart, was so kind. She showed her affection a lot more than daddy did. She could make you feel bad for doing something you shouldn't, and she didn't have to yell. When I got to pro football, the Oilers management faulted me for being too close to my players. I don't understand that. I was real close to my mama. I loved her and did everything she asked me to do. My players were the same way and we're still close.

"She was always there to help somebody and Bum's the same way," JoAnnette said. "Mama died in 1996 and not a day goes by that I don't think about her. She was sick during those final years. One day, she fell and hurt herself and they took her to the hospital. I saw Bum sit by the side of her bed and he held her hand. He was patting her and loving her and telling her it's going to be alright. He was so

sweet and kind. I'd never seen him that way, to the point of tears. He got his compassion from mama."

Mama rarely discussed God, but she often read the Bible by candlelight at night. My parents didn't recite scripture to us, but they taught us to live by life's golden rules: Treat others like you want to be treated. Work hard. Don't lie, steal or cheat. I believed if I followed these rules, I'd go to heaven. It was only later in life I learned the path to God is through Jesus Christ.

**If I** learned compassion from my mama, I got a few things from daddy, too – namely you don't take what you don't earn.

Daddy was also Oail Andrew Phillips, but everyone called him Flip, which was easier to say with a mouthful of tobacco (1). He worked odd jobs and often seven days a week. He left home before I awoke and returned well after I fell asleep. He set the ground rules, explained why they were important and taught luck is made through hard labor. He never missed a day of work, but he couldn't afford to.

Daddy lived with a black-and-white world view. His views of life weren't colored by the erratic social mores of today. It helped that, like me, he was colorblind – literally.

He worked hard, did right by his neighbor and taught us to do the same.

Daddy could also make sentences with cuss words. He had hands big enough to deflate a grapefruit, fingers so thick he could point your way and force your belly to flip. He showed love by working hard. Hugs and encouragement didn't buy flour and sugar. He said if a man fails to discipline his children, he does them a great disservice. He believed a child should be seen, not heard, and he had

no qualms about whipping us with a leather strap. When he told you to do something, you better darned well do it. Before each whipping, he explained what I did wrong, how I could correct the problem and thus why I must be punished. The whippings hurt, but I always deserved them. One time, I cried during daddy's pre-whipping talk because I knew all too well a lashing was next. That lashing seemed less severe. So, I improvised – called an audible, you could say. I started crying before all whippings, which saved a fair amount of skin on my already-tender backside.

I could tell daddy loved me, but I don't remember him saying so. I knew he loved me just by the way he treated me. I was the same way with my players. Maybe I didn't tell them straight out, but there's a different way of saying, "I love you."

Daddy died of emphysema in the 1970s, and he was sick in his last years, too. He never came to one of my pro football games, but he'd have been proud of the way I left the sport.

After taking the Oilers to back-to-back AFC Championship games in the late 1970s, I became head coach of the New Orleans Saints. I was friends with the team owner, John Mecom. I told him he'd be the last owner I ever worked for and I was about ready to return full-time to ranching. Then, one December, he said he planned to sell the team. I'd already worked long enough in the NFL to qualify for a comfortable retirement, and Mecom's decision was all I needed to say goodbye. The problem, however, was the sale wouldn't happen until May and I couldn't quit in May. Doing so would have forced the team to scramble with little time before the season opener to find a new head coach and staff.

So, I told the new owner, Tom Benson, I planned to quit the following year. When the time came, I walked into

his office. I had three years left on a guaranteed four-year contract. If I quit then and there, I could have collected the remaining \$1.3 million owed to me.

Benson said he didn't know if he could afford to pay a guy a salary for three years when I wouldn't be there to earn the paychecks. I grabbed the contract and in big letters wrote "VOID" on every page.

"Now you can afford it," I told him.

I never did collect the \$1.3 million. I gave up a small fortune just to return to my cattle and to live by my daddy's mantra: If you don't earn something, you don't deserve it.

I think Benson appreciated the gesture. Heck, it saved his bank account some. As a credit to him, he kept me on his insurance program all these years. He still pays all my premiums.

After my son, Wade Phillips, led the Dallas Cowboys into New Orleans in December 2009 and ruined his Saints' undefeated season, Benson called me to congratulate Wade and my family. Despite the disappointment he felt for his own team, Benson had nothing but kind things to say about my son.

Sure, I was the coach with the cowboy hat and boots. I like to think what I learned to wear on the inside, though, is what made me the coach and man I am. I never let any amount of money change what I believe in.

### **BUM LESSON: Keep your word.**

I like what my former NFL tight end and friend Mike Barber tells to young men and women he mentors: "Keep it simple, stupid."

With this in mind, my first lesson to you is to keep your word. Sounds simple, right? You should tack those three

one-syllable words to a mirror you pass by often. A person is only as good as his or her word. I always told my pro players to pay their bills on time. Avoiding late payments is the same as showing up for a meeting when you said you would. It's just the right thing to do. Keeping your word also carries over into other areas in life.

My wife, Debbie, offered some kind words regarding the subject.

“The reason Bum’s kept so many friends is he’s always kept his word,” she said, leaning from her seat toward our dining room table. “That defines who you are. Either you’re trustworthy or you’re not. Do unto the Lord.”

Whatever you say you’re going to do, do it. Don’t lie to yourself or to anyone else.

