

'Wrong Way Riegels'

The college football season has come to a close, and two teams -- not one -- have been crowned national champions. Louisiana State University and the University of Southern California both claim the title, based on their achievements on the field. From what I have seen, they both deserve to share the honor.

Seldom does the gridiron schedule conclude that I am not reminded, in one way or another, of the story of "Wrong Way Riegels." It is familiar to most football fans, but worth repeating.

On New Year's Day, 1929, Georgia Tech played the University of California in the Rose Bowl. In that game, a young man named Roy Riegels recovered a fumble for Cal. Picking up the loose ball, he lost his direction and ran 65 yards toward the wrong goal line. One of his teammates, halfback Benny Lom, ran him down and tackled him just before he scored for the opposing team. When the Golden Bears lined up to punt, Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety, demoralizing the Cal team.

The strange play occurred in the first half. At halftime, the Cal players filed off the field and into the dressing room. As others sat down on the benches and the floor, Riegels took a seat in a corner, wrapped a blanket around his shoulders, put his face in his hands and cried.

A football coach usually has a great deal to say to his team during halftime. That day, Coach Clarence "Nibs" Price was quiet. No doubt he was trying to decide what to do with Riegels. When the timekeeper came in to advise that there were three minutes before playing time, Coach Price announced that the second-half starters would be the same as those in the first half. All but Riegels began heading toward the field.

"Coach, I can't do it," he said. "I've ruined you. I've ruined my school. I've ruined myself. I couldn't face the crowd in that stadium to save my life."

Price told him, "Roy, get up and go back. The game is only half over."

According to accounts of the game, Riegels played a brilliant second half, particularly on defense, blocking a Georgia Tech punt. Tech scored in the third quarter on a 15-yard run by Stumpy Thomason (the extra-point kick failed), offsetting Lom's 10-yard touchdown pass late in the fourth quarter, and the game ended 8-7 in favor of Tech. Riegels became Cal's football captain the next season and gained all-America mention. He was later a member of Cal's football coaching staff, coached in high school, served as an officer in the Army Air Forces during World War II, then owned an agricultural chemicals company. In 1991, two years before his death, he was inducted into the Rose Bowl Hall of Fame.

Hearing or reading that story produces pathos, because all of us have run a long way in the wrong direction at some time in our lives -- and especially in the spiritual sense. Because of God's mercy, however, the game is only half over. And we know how it will end -- in victory for the believer.

The story also demonstrates the power of forgiveness. Is there someone who needs your forgiveness today?

--Beecher Hunter