

FOREWORD BY PETE CARROLL

# BEN MALCOLMSON

WITH PATTI MCCORD

From Pee Wee Dropout  
to the NFL Sidelines —  
My Unlikely Story of  
Football, Purpose, and  
Following an Amazing God

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# WALK ON

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For the sake of narrative flow, some time lines have been condensed or modified.

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Dedicated to anyone who ever  
wonders what exactly God is up to.

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# Foreword

Ben Malcolmson has a fascinating and inspiring story to share that has touched my life, my family, and my career in ways I could never have imagined. He will share the details of his incredible story in this book, and I'm proud to share my version of this treasured relationship, one impacting my life and the work that has surrounded coaching football at the University of Southern California and for the Seattle Seahawks.

My first informal interaction with Ben happened in 2003 when he was an undergraduate journalism student working for USC's *Daily Trojan*, the campus newspaper. Although my early impression of him as a sports journalist was subtle, he was soon to make a breakthrough that would be career changing for both of us.

In the springtime of each school year, leading into spring football, the USC coaches would hold an open workout for students on campus. The candidates who showed up were young wide-eyed types with high hopes and big dreams of playing for the USC Trojans! The coaches took these workouts very seriously in their search for potential nonscholarship walk-on athletes. We wanted to create an opportunity for students to make a dream come true.

Having a role in the lives of these players as they pursued their dreams of playing big-time college football was something I always held dear to my heart. Most likely the players' greatest memories were of making it onto the game field at the historic Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum—and fittingly so. But for me, knowing they got to pull on that helmet and wear the cardinal and gold was every-

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thing. To share the challenges and excitement of representing that great program has been a lifelong treasure.

In March 2006, Ben walked into my office at USC with a wild thought. He wanted to try out for Trojan football and write about the experience for a *Daily Trojan* article. He was excited about the idea, and finding no real objections, I gave it a green light. That was the beginning of the relationship that would forever impact my days to follow.

As for the workout, Ben was athletic and demonstrated basic ball-catching skills. Based on the less-than-stellar competition, the uniqueness of what he offered made it happen. Ben was invited to join the USC Trojan football team! There had been a long-standing, proud tradition of USC walk-on football players, and Ben became part of that select group.

Ben established himself as a hardworking, dedicated ballplayer, and when he was challenged with a devastating shoulder injury and a daunting rehabilitation, he showed his true character and competitiveness. He eventually overcame the rigorous rehab and made it to the playing field prior to graduation.

After graduating, Ben was offered and accepted an internship in my office. Giving him an opportunity to continue to help the Trojans may have been one of the most significant decisions of my working life. He found himself situated in the jam-packed outer office with only enough room for a keyboard and a computer screen, but from that postage-stamp spot, Ben began a career in football and in the new, wide-open frontier of the soon-to-flourish intersection of sports and social media.

Ben worked with me on a moment-to-moment exchange to formulate the brand that was the Trojan football program. He also

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helped create a line of communication outside traditional media that allowed us to directly share our Trojan football programming and messaging with the fans. We created the USC *Ripsit* blog that was, at the time, a forerunner and trendsetter.

Not long after that, Ben got my attention with a suggestion of another new mode we might consider experimenting with—Twitter! Two-million-plus (and still counting) followers later, it's obvious that again Ben was ahead of the curve.

Throughout our time together Ben has demonstrated unmatched dedication, loyalty, innovation, and friendship. In 2010, when I came to the Seattle Seahawks, I asked Ben to come with me and continue our work. His creativity and innovation are evident every day in all that we do here in Seattle.

These last eleven-plus years together at USC and the Seahawks have been full of great challenges, thrills, and excitement. We have crossed paths with so many extraordinary people from players and coaches to administrators, fans, celebrities, and statesmen. Former Heisman Trophy winners and future Hall of Famers have all left their marks on an unforgettable run.

Throughout all the savored victories and heartbreaking defeats, there has been no one person who has been more integrally involved with and contributed more to my work than Ben.



Pete Carroll

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## INTRODUCTION

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# Super Bowl Stunner

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The Super Bowl was on the line, and I had a feeling I would remember the next thirty seconds for the rest of my life.

My eyes were on my boss, Seattle Seahawks head coach Pete Carroll, frantically pacing in front of me, chewing a wad of pink Bubble Yum. Even in the incredible noise of the crowd, I could almost hear Coach's brain whirring. As far as what he was thinking, no one really knew, which was what made Coach Carroll, well, Coach Carroll.

As his special assistant for the previous seven seasons at that point, my job at the end of every game was to craft a bullet-point outline for his postgame speech, and I was already formulating how the key themes would lay out, since it seemed obvious the Seattle Seahawks were on their way to a second straight Super Bowl win. Down by 4 points, second down on the 1-yard line, and twenty-six seconds to go, we simply needed to advance the ball a distance I could easily cover with one giant step to secure the game-clinching touchdown and claim back-to-back championships.

Typically I would have been in the locker room by now, roughing out Coach's speech, but there was no way I was going to miss the

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end of Super Bowl 49 and the chance to celebrate as the navy and neon green confetti rained down to blanket the field, exactly what we had experienced just one year earlier at Super Bowl 48.

Every person in University of Phoenix Stadium on that cool February night had risen to their feet as the anticipation quickly built to a crescendo, the sound of the crowd a near-deafening roar, a cacophony. Circling the field was a sea of media personalities, security personnel, and photographers jockeying for position to get the perfect shot when we crossed the goal line and won the game.

With my journalism background, I had been trained to always anticipate the ending of a story before it happened so I could get a head start on writing it. The story lines of this particular postgame speech were going to be magical: the defending champion Seahawks had won eight consecutive games to reach Super Bowl 49 and now stood on the precipice of history. Winning one Super Bowl is an incredible achievement, but winning back-to-back Super Bowls is nearly impossible. Only seven teams have ever done it in the history of the game. At that time, we were moments from stepping into the pages of the NFL record books, and the weight of that was monumental.

Coach Carroll knew what the Patriots were expecting. In fact, the whole world knew where the ball was going: right into the hands of running back Marshawn Lynch. Why not? The Seahawks had been the most efficient rushing team in the NFL for five straight seasons, and up to that point in the game, Lynch had run the ball twenty-four times and gained at least one yard on twenty-two of those carries. It was a no-brainer, right?

I watched the orange fluorescent numbers on the scoreboard clock steadily tick down with less than thirty seconds to go. The pressure building in my head from the anticipation was bordering on

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painful. *Snap the ball already and take it in! Let's go!* I had no doubt as to the outcome; I simply wanted to get it over with so we would be Super Bowl champs once again.

I couldn't hear the snap count in the roar of the stadium, but the ball passed perfectly from the center into Russell Wilson's ready hands. With smooth poise, he took three measured steps backward, scanned the field, and cocked his throwing arm to fire the winning touchdown pass, which would smack wide receiver Ricardo Lockette squarely in the center of his navy jersey.

But as they say, the rest is history.

In a split second, I saw Patriots cornerback Malcolm Butler angle in from the right and obscure Lockette. As the two men merged into one before you could say "Lombardi," the silver and white image blurred, and I experienced one of those moments when you can't believe what just happened and your heart stops beating.

The stadium erupted with a muddled sound I had never heard before and will probably never hear again. As the gasps from the Seahawks fans mixed with the cheers of the New England Patriots fans, I stared blankly ahead in horror. I had imagined a hundred different ways the game would end, but not one of them looked like this. This was beyond belief. While my mind frantically searched for an explanation, I looked back and forth from the officials to the coaches, reading the agony etched on their faces.

*Wait! This has to be a mistake. There must have been a penalty. It can't end this way.*

It was one of those situations where you long to have the last few seconds of your life back, like when you get a speeding ticket or impulsively spout off something foolish or hurtful and desperately wish you could get a do-over.

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The pain of that moment was crippling, as if Muhammad Ali had just hit me with a brutal gut punch. It nearly dropped me to my knees, and I could hardly breathe.

I searched the sideline, where everyone seemed to be frozen in time, until I saw Coach Carroll, slumped forward, elbows on his knees with his head bowed, his hands clasped in front of him, and his black headset trailing behind him like a sad dog's tail. Seeing him like that was heart wrenching for me. I had an idea what the cost had been to him; he had invested his forty-year coaching career to get to this point. To watch someone who had become like a father to me experience that depth of pain was almost too much to bear.

In a matter of moments, we went from back-to-back Super Bowl champs to losing in the most painful way possible. *Sports Illustrated* dubbed it “the worst play call in NFL history” and *that* play along with *that* game will undoubtedly be remembered by sports fans for a long time.

As the final twenty seconds ran off the clock, I snapped back into work mode, and the instant I saw 0:00, I bolted for the locker room. I mentally tossed my postgame victory speech into the trash can and tried to compose some words of consolation for Coach to deliver in just a few minutes. It didn't take long for the locker room to fill, and I watched a hundred grown men express their grief in a variety of ways. Some were weeping with clenched teeth and tears rolling down their cheeks, while others were pounding their fists into the gray metal lockers.

I know this may sound like a gross overreaction to a football game, but this was what these guys had been working for and sacrificing for their entire lives. We all knew there were no guarantees; many of us would never be there again.

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The air was thick, and one question blanketed the room like an Arizona desert sandstorm. It was the exact question being asked by the more than 114 million flabbergasted television viewers: *Why in the world would you call that play?* But this wasn't the time to sketch out Xs and Os on the whiteboard or to debate strategy; that would be an exercise for another day.

When Coach brushed by me, I held out his postgame speech and quietly asked, "Do you want this?" He reached for it without even looking up, but instead of grabbing it, he let it flutter to the floor and stepped over it. It didn't bother me. I understood that the only meaningful words in this moment would have to come from his heart. He plodded to the center of the room, head down, shoulders sagging, while the entire team slowly encircled him. I stepped back and stood just outside the ring of the team, wanting to give the guys their space.

The room was quiet now, and Coach Carroll raised his head as he calmly and resolutely looked at the face of every player in turn. With emotion, while jabbing his index finger into the center of his chest, he said, "If you're going to blame anyone, if you are going to point any fingers, you can point them right here at me. You don't blame anyone else here, any player or any other coach, you . . . blame . . . me. This was completely my fault. I'm sorry, guys."

Right when he said that, I felt the tension that had been building in the room dissipate, and each man went slack with the realization he had just been absolved of any responsibility. Coach Carroll could have blamed a number of different guys or pinned the loss on his assistant coaches, but on behalf of his players and staff, he took the fall.

I had now experienced both ends of football's emotional spectrum—the utter elation of a Super Bowl victory one year before

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in New York and the tormenting heartbreak of defeat on that crushing night in Arizona.

A painful loss like this, whether in sports or other circumstances, often brings reflection.

I thought back to our Super Bowl championship and remembered how most of us felt let down in the days following. You work your whole life for something, thinking that when you finally achieve it, you will be fulfilled and satisfied; your life will be complete. But that wasn't the case at all. We were sitting in a staff meeting only two days after our Super Bowl 48 win when Coach Carroll asked, "Does this feel as good as you guys thought it was going to feel?" We all agreed that something was missing; there must be more.

I had run this extreme gamut of emotions once before in my life. Eight years earlier I reached a summit by accomplishing something far greater than I ever dreamed possible before falling into a dark valley where I experienced a depth of sorrow that nearly broke me. That journey allowed me to discover the one thing that has changed my life more than any Super Bowl victory ever could.

What follows is my story. And as you read it, I encourage you to think about *your* story—and welcome with great joy the divine nudges that give you hope as you walk on in your faith journey.

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## Rude Awakening

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Had I known the day ahead was going to change the course of my life, I probably would have been more eager to get out of bed that morning.

But for a college student at the University of Southern California, especially a second-semester senior, waking up at 7:30 a.m. felt painful. On that Thursday in March, I made the sacrifice of getting up so early to celebrate my friend Tim's birthday at Denny's across the street from campus. The air was thick with the smell of freshly brewed coffee and hot grease, the universal Denny's smell that sticks to your clothes for the rest of the day.

With USC's spring break just a day away, students were all looking forward to a week off that we would spend on the slopes of Colorado, lounging on a crowded beach in Mexico's Cabo San Lucas, or at home to take advantage of Mom's laundry service. I was going on a road trip with twelve of my buddies to Crested Butte, Colorado, to spend five days skiing without a textbook in sight. While eating my go-to \$3.99 Grand Slam, I drifted off in a day-dream of knee-deep powder. I was roused back to reality just in time to join a pitiful, off-key rendition of "Happy Birthday" and watch

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Tim blow out the blue and white striped candle stuck lopsided in his pancake.

Half an hour later, I hopped on my bike and rode the half mile back to the fraternity house, considering my options for the next couple of hours. Since I didn't have class until eleven, I had some time to pull together my notes and maybe even complete the article I was writing for USC's newspaper, the *Daily Trojan*, about the walk-on football tryouts that had taken place on Tuesday.

As a journalism major and student reporter who had covered the team for the past three years, I wanted a unique first-person angle for the story, so I had secretly participated in the tryouts. I was still so sore that the motions of raising my leg over my bike and pedaling made my quads burn intensely. I thought how dumb it was to have gone through all that just for an article and still be paying for it two days later.

No story was worth that much wear and tear on my body, and I made a mental note not to make that mistake again, even if it was for the article of a lifetime.

At the time, USC was on an unparalleled trajectory in college football history. Two months earlier, the Trojans had come within nineteen seconds of beating the undefeated Texas Longhorns in the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, which would have earned an unprecedented third consecutive national title. But even with the gut-wrenching loss, USC had established itself as the premier program of the decade and perhaps even earned a place among the all-time great dynasties in college football history. In the previous four seasons, the Trojans had won thirty-four straight games, two national championships, four Pacific-10 Conference titles, and three Heisman Trophies. Their fans routinely packed the ninety-two-thousand-seat Los Ange-

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les Memorial Coliseum as Coach Pete Carroll spearheaded an unmatched run—all while making USC football fun and becoming the envy of many college football programs in the country.

Unfortunately at that early hour, I didn't have sufficient brain cells awake enough to work on my article. So as the pancakes hit rock bottom, I decided to hustle home and hop right back in my bed, bury my head in my pillow, and sleep for another hour.

After crawling up the wooden ladder onto the top bunk, I collapsed onto my bargain basement IKEA mattress and began drifting in and out of consciousness. I nodded off around 9:30, but at exactly 9:44 a.m., my blissful sleep came to an abrupt end.

Jolted awake by my annoying ringtone—the sound of an old rotary phone ring—I flipped my phone open while trying to focus on the caller ID. “Lana” was the name on the display. *Lana, Lana, Lana. Who is Lana, and why in the world is she calling me in the middle of the night?*

My half-asleep brain struggled to place her until I finally remembered. Lana had crossed my path a bunch over the years, but she had never called me before. I mumbled a groggy “What’s up?” and her voice, way too cheery for that time in the morning, said, “Ben! Did you try out for the football team?”

Now I was really confused. I hadn't told anyone that I was doing the undercover tryouts story except for a few friends and the head coach. I figured that one of my friends had told her, and I was a bit embarrassed. I rolled onto my side, propped my head in the palm of my hand, and sheepishly replied, “Yeah, who told you?”

“Well, you made it!” she said enthusiastically.

As if an errant bolt of lightning had just struck me, I was jolted wide awake. “What are you talking about?”

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Without missing a beat, she said, “Your name is on the list,” emphasizing each word. Suddenly I remembered a passing comment one of my fraternity brothers made the night of the tryouts. He asked me what I would do if I actually did make the team. I had dismissed the notion and hadn’t given it another thought, until now.

I weighed a whopping one hundred sixty-five pounds and I hadn’t played football since I was ten years old, making this scenario utterly ridiculous—or more like *impossible*. This had to be someone’s idea of a prank, and I wasn’t particularly amused. I snapped my phone shut without bothering to say goodbye and slid off my bunk onto the floor with a million thoughts running through my head. I knew there had to be some mistake. There was no way it could be real. I bounced around the room for a few seconds like a pinball, trying to figure out what to do next.

I knew the coaches were going to post a list of the guys who made the team that morning, and I had already planned to get over to the football building to interview a couple of the lucky ones for my story. But that call added a fresh sense of urgency, so I snatched my keys off the desk, grabbed my reporter’s notebook and pen, and shoved them into my pocket. I looked like a slob, with a severe case of bed head and still wearing the same wrinkled gray T-shirt and black athletic shorts I had slept in. I put on my brown Rainbow sandals, flung the door open, and bounded down the stairs two at a time.

I passed one of my fraternity brothers in the hallway. “Whoa, Ben, what’s wrong?” I must have looked distraught, but I didn’t even answer. Eyes focused straight ahead, I just kept moving as fast as my stiff, achy, post-tryouts legs would go.

I leaped down the steps into the courtyard, raced to the bike rack, and fumbled with the lock on my bike. My hands were trem-

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bling, and I could not get the key into the lock. When it finally clicked into place, I turned the key, ripped the lock off, and yanked my bike out of the rack. I slammed open the back gate, vaulted onto my bike, and tore out into the alley.

It was now 9:48 a.m., precisely four minutes since I had received the phone call. The bike path was jam-packed with students scurrying to their ten o'clock classes. I stood up on the pedals, cranking like I was in the final stage of the Tour de France, and searched for the fastest route through the crowd. My black cruiser bicycle had been my main mode of transportation since I started college almost four years earlier, and we had traveled countless miles together, although none more potentially life changing than this one. My mind was racing as fast as my feet were pedaling.

One thing I knew for sure: there was no way a scrawny, six-foot, 165-pound newspaper reporter, who hadn't played organized football since one horrific youth football experience in the fifth grade, had actually landed a spot on the nation's top-ranked college football team.

This was beyond any sense of reality. Heck, this was beyond any dream. There was just no way this could be true.

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### Expect the Unexpected

Looking at life with an expectant perspective, through a lens of excitement and anticipation of God's goodness, can fill every day with wonder. Getting that phone call from Lana took me completely by surprise. You just never know what

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God has planned for you; it may be something completely unexpected, far more amazing than you could ever hope or dream. Will you join me in embracing the adventure God promises when we live by faith?

**Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.**

**—Ephesians 3:20**

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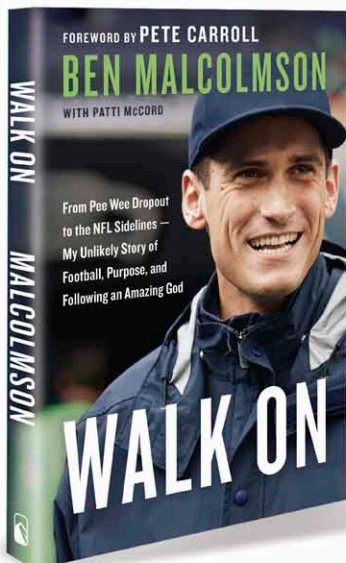
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