

# Miles of Scars

## *The LSU head coach's emphasis on family comes at a price*

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“Scars are souvenirs you never lose.”

These words from “Name” by the band The Goo Goo Dolls are becoming all-too-true a reality for LSU head coach Les Miles.

Last Friday, Miles announced that 2011 Heisman Trophy finalist and Bednarik Award winner Tyrann Mathieu was dismissed from the team for continued violation of team and school rules. Because Mathieu was suspended for the Auburn game in the middle of last season for smoking synthetic marijuana, it is likely that the player known as the Honey Badger ran out of chances to correct his problem with substance abuse.

As good of a player as Mathieu was for LSU, it is the person that Miles seemed to be most disappointed in when he spoke at the press conference on Friday. When addressing the void left from a football standpoint, Miles was direct in his statements, speaking pointedly to the fact that LSU was talented enough to move on. But when addressing the void left from an emotional standpoint, Miles was obviously more shaken and hurt by the decision he absolutely had to make.

“This is a very difficult day for our team,” Miles said. “We lose a quality person, teammate and contributor to the program. However, with that being said, we have a standard that our players are held to, and when that standard is not met, there are consequences.

“It’s hard because we all love Tyrann. We will do what we can as coaches, teammates, and friends to get him on a path where he can have success. We are going to miss him.”

This is not just coach-speak. Miles is known for his family-oriented approach to both coaching and life in general. A lasting image in Tiger fans’ minds is of Miles and his family taking pictures on the field before the BCS National Championship Game last year in New Orleans while his counterpart Nick Saban prowled around all alone, looking more like a hungry Tiger than Miles did.

Maybe the scene and its stark contrast in personalities was a representation of how badly Miles was out-game-planned by Saban that night. But discussing Miles’ past shortcomings as a football tactician is not my objective here.

My aim is to highlight Miles the man. And how utterly difficult it must be to continue to open himself up to love a group of young men that are at an age where too often they think life revolves around them and that they are invincible to the repercussions of their actions.

“He’s a family man,” kicker Drew Alleman said. “He tells our parents when he’s recruiting us, ‘I’m going to take care of your son.’ He’s going to be a father figure to us. And he does a great job of it. He’s really a different coach. I couldn’t see playing for anybody else.”

It sounds charming, and some may wonder if it works so well why more coaches don’t employ this open approach to the job. But one need only look at the tough decisions Miles has had to make during his tenure at LSU to see that some coaches probably just don’t want the heartache.



### YOUNG MEN WHO WOUND

After the 2007 national championship season, Miles had to kick off star quarterback and SEC Championship Game MVP Ryan Perrilloux for repeated discipline issues. Last year he had to deal with the Shady’s Bar debacle in August and the aftermath of quarterback Jordan Jefferson’s return to the team. These are just two examples, but surely he has had to tackle smaller issues behind closed doors in dealing with young men who play for a program that is king in Louisiana, young men who sometimes think it is their right to do as they please.

Miles the man must deal with the innate selfishness and delusions of grandeur that so often claim the minds of these young people. If he were to take the standoffish approach to coaching like say a Nick Saban, he might be able to deal with these issues with fewer headaches and heartaches.

But that is not Miles. Miles is good because players and their families trust him. He is good because he genuinely loves those players. And that makes having to say goodbye to a young man like Mathieu the dark part of the job.

“This is difficult at best,” Miles said twice, once in response to how Mathieu handled the news and once in response to how he himself was handling it.

“Difficult at best” most certainly means Miles is feeling worse things inside. He just lost one of his sons.

Another aspect of this sad story is Mathieu’s family background. In an exclusive story written by Fox Sports this past January, Mathieu fought back tears as he struggled to talk about his past. His biological mother Tyra Mathieu has five children, but Tyrann was the only one she didn’t

raise. It left him to live with a maternal uncle and aunt—his adoptive parents—after his grandfather’s death. Mathieu’s father Darrin Hayes is serving a life sentence in the Louisiana State Penitentiary for murder.

Such a troubled upbringing, coupled with his diminutive size and the fact that he wasn’t highly recruited out of high school, put a two-ton chip on his shoulder that served him well in his shortened career at LSU. But that success came at a price.

Mathieu was notorious on Twitter for his war of words with Alabama quarterback AJ McCarron this past off-season, his rants against anyone in the media who dared to question his cornerback skills, and most recently his claim to be the best defensive player in college football. In the hands of a young man like the 5’9 Mathieu who has lived his entire life feeling like he has something to prove, a social network like Twitter is the perfect breeding ground for a poisonous self-centeredness that can destroy someone.

Even the Bible verse Mathieu posted on Twitter a day after his dismissal—Jeremiah 29:11—has to do with him rising above the pain of this recent situation. Such a post may say more about how wrapped up Mathieu is in himself than it does about his faith. What he should have found was a Bible verse that could have illuminated the great pains Miles and others have endured to raise him the right way when so many others wouldn’t.

Which is why, as a well-meaning coach, it has to kill at least a little of Miles’ spirit every time he has to make one of these difficult decisions. It must kill him even more to see that Mathieu, instead of taking the humble road, is still tweeting and posting on Facebook things that reflect his self-centeredness. Apparently nothing got through to Mathieu. Not even Miles’ father-like love.

“I respect Coach, and whatever decision he makes I go along with it,” Mathieu said of his Twitter use just days before his dismissal. “There’s a lot of guys on this team who are deserving of the spotlight. I don’t have to be in it all the time and I’m fine with that.”

Clearly he was repeating the words of Miles the mentor. And clearly he was just giving lip-service to the lessons with which Miles had entrusted him.

“We extended ourselves personally and professionally to him,” Miles said. “He has really improved and has a chance to take some steps as a person.”



#### LET THE SCARRING BEGIN

As The Goo Goo Dolls’ “Name” says, Mathieu lost himself somewhere out there. He got to be a star. “Honey Badger” had become a household name in the world of college football to the point where it destroyed the Tyrann inside, the young man just happy to be playing football, the young man who had overcome so much and was brought to tears when talking about his family.

This is the person Miles had to let go of. The young man. The big smile. Tyrann. The player and person no other major college program wanted.

This is the person Miles must grieve.

Even in Mathieu’s departure, Miles—the constant father—has a lesson for his prodigal son.

“For Ty, I think it’s an opportunity for him to redirect. I think that he can really accomplish all the goals he set for himself. It’s not going to be easy, but it’s going to be doable.

“I think he gave us a lot of examples that we can learn from,” Miles added. “I think that he’s a quality, quality guy, who had behavior issues. And that’s it. So I think that certainly the overview of his time with us is positive.”

Clearly Miles is a man who is able to see the bigger picture in a person and not label them by the isolated decisions they make. It is what makes him a father figure to his players, and why the feel of the program as a whole is like a family.

It also makes losing a member of that family that much harder. It makes the scars of those broken bonds permanent, and while players like Mathieu move on and start to broadcast themselves on the Internet yet again, it is Miles in the darkness alone at night who must remind himself yet again why it is he continues to believe in these boys like he does.