



A Farewell to #13

By: Austin Rader

“I was there for the first snap of his career and likely his last, and everything in between.”

November 20, 2019 — The clock struck midnight. Inside the Mercedes-Benz Stadium, the fans dressed in crimson and white were quiet. The fans dressed in red and black were screaming with joy.

Ugh. We were headed to overtime.

“We Will Rock You” started playing on the speakers and the stadium got loud.

I couldn’t believe how we had gotten here. Saban made the gutsiest decision of his career. After a stagnant offense that couldn’t muster a first down throughout the first half, Saban rolled the dice and inserted freshman Tua Tagovailoa. This kid hadn’t started a game all season. And now he is putting him in to start the second half of the championship game? What is he seeing in practice that suggests this is the right move? Was Jalen Hurts so bad in the first half that this was a “hail mary” decision? Normally, Saban is so calculated. He doesn’t make moves like this.

But as everyone knows, this southpaw from Hawaii led a second half comeback to bring back his team from the depths of a terrible offensive first half.

As we entered overtime, thoughts of *“this must be Georgia’s year”* crept into my mind. I worried that another freshman sensation, Jake Fromm, would take Georgia to the end zone and win this game. But it didn’t happen. Alabama’s defense successfully made the stop they needed and after a Georgia field goal, it set the stage for Tagovailoa to shine.

Tua trotted out on the field with his new-found confidence from a great second half. In his first drop back, he was sacked! He lost 16 yards. I thought this could be the end of his comeback, a typical freshman mistake with limited experience.

I remember the feeling I had. Even my grandfather, one of the most optimistic Alabama fans you will ever meet said he was “in disbelief that he took the sack.” Every fan in the stadium was on their feet. 2nd and 26. Tua drops back looks off the safety and throws a perfect pass to Devonta Smith streaking down the sideline to win the game. The championship. The hearts of every Bama fan across the country. Likely the greatest play ever in college football.



Even though it felt like a road game for Bama, the stadium erupted. Everyone was in shock. A few seconds earlier, Georgia thought it was over. They thought they got in the head of this true freshman, limited playing time quarterback who was just sacked on first down. Nope. Not inside his head. Cool as a cucumber.

So unexpected, it even took over ten seconds for the confetti cannon to go off.

Replaying that game in my head is honestly just a blur. It was a surreal moment lead by a true freshman who came in to save the season from a 25-2 starting quarterback who was

beloved by Bama fans. But Tua did the unthinkable. He was a hero in the state of Alabama and in his home state of Hawaii. Hardly played all year and now a legend. We were ready to build a statue for Tua and put it on the Walk of Champions.

After the game, and all offseason, we dreamed of Tua leading the Crimson Tide to capture two more national championships.

When the 2018 season kicked off, Tua was even better, leading an unstoppable passing attack similar to playing a video game. The only person standing in Tua’s way from throwing 500 yards a game was Coach Saban. Tua transformed a once boring “pound and ground” offense into an unstoppable force.

He changed the way we view Alabama football.

He re-wrote the record books, and had fun while doing it. There was such a swagger about these Tua-led football teams. Every Saturday, a different SEC defense would come into our house, or be ready for us in theirs, and Tua would show up and smoke them. It didn’t matter if you blitzed him or dropped back in coverage, he was going to pick apart your defense. He always found the open receiver and placed the ball perfectly. It was “can’t miss” football.

I was fortunate enough to be on the field to watch every home start Tua had in an Alabama uniform. It was an incredible way to watch his performance each week.

One of my favorite Tua memories occurred during the Texas A&M game last year. Tua scored a rushing touchdown and the crowd went crazy. Rather than go and celebrate with his teammates right away, he ran over to a young fan who happened to be near me, and shook the kid's hand. His family couldn't stop talking about it throughout the rest of the game.

Pure class.

Every time Tua tossed a touchdown pass, we marveled at how spectacular it was. He was like watching a leading actor in a Broadway play sing, dance, and act better than everyone else on stage. And he did it every single game.

The only issue was, Tua was often banged up. First his hand in the 2018 off season. Then an ankle, a knee, the other ankle. He was often prone to getting hurt. I recognize that these SEC defenses were always gunning for him, and he liked to extend plays, never thinking the play was over and always tried to make something out of nothing. But he always seemed to be one play away from the "injured reserve" list all the time.

Every time Tua went down, we held our breath until he got back up. I know everyone was thinking the same thing. Maybe that's why Saban often pulled him out of the game at halftime when Bama was up by 35 points. Why take a chance?

Last Saturday, we played Mississippi State. Tua was once again having an MVP performance, even after limping off the field a week earlier and being a game-time decision. Near the end of the first half, he went down hard. And once again, we held our breath a little longer than usual.

The play happened right in front of me. I stood in the stands in disbelief. I didn't want to believe this was more than likely his last snap in a Crimson Tide uniform.

The first thing I thought when I saw the golf cart driving across the field was, could that have been his last snap in college? If it was, he by far exceeded my expectations as a quarterback.

I grew up watching future NFL quarterbacks Chase Daniel, Sam Bradford and Colt McCoy play at a fairly high level. But none of them compare to the level of skill and fame Tua Tagovailoa received at Alabama. The closest thing I can compare it to is Matt Leinart at USC from 2003-2005. But even that isn't a close comparison.

Talk about pressure. He was the biggest name in the state not named Saban and the face of college football. And this kid delivered.

As he laid on the carpet, then carted off the field, and helicoptered to Birmingham for x-rays, we all thought the same thing. This does not look good. He's always been fragile, and this was a huge hit. Reports came out that he was screaming in pain. By Saturday night, it was confirmed. Out for the rest of the season.

True Alabama fans thought about Tua and his family first. What they have done for the university. Providing leadership, energy, spirit, and class. How he put the team on his back and won a national championship. How he broke all kinds of offensive records. How he lead his team last year to the championship again, and was likely doing it this year too.

I enjoyed reading tweets on Saturday afternoon and into the night about Tua. Everyone was thanking Tua for all that he has done for the program. It would be really cool to see him come back to Alabama to coach. Forever Crimson Tide.

Yes, playing an injured Tua was risky. Yes, he lost millions of dollars when he fractured his hip. He knew it, his family knew it, and coach Saban knew it. "Tank for Tua" became a strategy among bad NFL teams in the past year. He was near the top of every expert's list. But Tua was more focussed on bringing this team to the top, and wasn't worried about his future. You have to admire this.

The truth is, we don't know what's going to happen. We don't know if Tua will declare for the draft, or come back to school for another year to rehab and possibly play again.

Some are comparing this injury to Bo Jackson's career-ending injury. But Bo had been playing on an injured hip while Tua had not. Dr. Lyle Cain has said numerous times that Tua is expected to make a full recovery. We just aren't sure how long it's going to take.

For now, all we can do is thank #13 for everything he has done for the Crimson Tide. Thank him for his talents, and the memories he made in the second half of his first championship game. Some thought we might win two more championships under Tua, and he'd rack up a couple of Heisman trophies too. While this didn't happen, he far exceeded ALL of the expectations of true Bama fans.

#13 was a leader, a great teammate, an excellent supporter of Alabama football, and cared deeply about the Alabama fans. I saw it two years ago when he lead the comeback against Georgia. There was a delay in setting off the confetti after that game.

There should be no delay in setting off the cannon with confetti after Tua's Alabama career. In my mind, the best ever.

Roll tide Tua.