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*In the tradition of FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS and A SEASON OF LIFE, a remarkable story of victory and recovery in the face of incredible odds*

# HURRICANE SEASON

*A Coach, His Team, and Their Triumph in the Time of Katrina*

By Neal Thompson

*“Friday Night Lights in crisis mode, this book packs an undeniable emotional punch.”*  
—*Publishers Weekly*

August 29, 2005. Hurricane Katrina slams into the Gulf Coast communities in Mississippi and Louisiana as a massive category 3 storm, resulting in the widespread destruction of buildings and homes across New Orleans, multiple levee failures and colossal flooding on a scale never before seen on American soil. It is one of the worst natural disasters in modern-day history, resulting in almost two thousand deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, all of whom flee in a desperate attempt to escape the battering winds that are literally tearing apart their hometowns.

Just a few nights previous, the players and coaches making up the John Curtis Patriots compete in a football jamboree with five other area high schools, their full attention focused on an impending run for a record twentieth Louisiana state football championship. A team from a small, private Christian school of modest means, which had improbably become a New Orleans football powerhouse under the guidance of legendary coach (and son of the school’s founder) J.T. Curtis, the Patriots were unsure of how their season would progress, with inexperienced new starters at several key positions. They were concerned but optimistic, certain that their team would come together and succeed as they had always done before. Then Katrina came. And with it, their lives were changed forever.

**HURRICANE SEASON: A Coach, His Team, and Their Triumph in the Time of Katrina** (Free Press: July 31, 2007; \$26.00) is a full-access account of the John Curtis Patriots and their miraculous 2005 season. Journalist Neal Thompson vividly illustrates the challenges faced by the players and staff as they struggled to piece together a team and a season following Katrina’s brutal landfall on the bayou. In particular, Thompson focuses on J.T. Curtis, the second-most winning coach in high school football history, and his dogged determination to not only reopen the school and reconstruct his scattered football team, but to refocus the players’ minds on the task of returning to their “normal” lives and, of course, winning on the field. After a demoralizing first-game defeat, the Patriots achieve victory after improbable victory in a thrilling run towards the state championship, and along the way they provide an inspirational model of discipline, hope and strength for their entire community – of which many (including the players and coaches) are tasked with the grueling and painful process of tearing out moldy walls and salvaging what little remains of their homes and businesses. Thompson shows how the team’s emphasis on hard work, spirituality and leadership (all principles that Coach Curtis demands of his players) would become a beacon of New Orleans’ resurgent spirit and how their ultimate triumph would provide a healing salve for their shattered community.

**HURRICANE SEASON** is much more than just a tribute to J.T. Curtis and his team's achievements on the field, however. Thompson also takes readers deep into the lives of the players and their families, revealing the human stories behind Katrina and putting a deeply personal spin on the challenges faced by New Orleanians upon their return to the beleaguered city. Among those whom **HURRICANE SEASON** introduces include:

- **Joe McKnight**, the team's mercurial star whose incredible athletic gifts would eventually make him the number one ranked highschool player in the country and the most decorated football player in Curtis history. Joe is also a troubled kid who is estranged from his mother and often migrates from home-to-home, deeply distrustful of those trying to get close to him.
- **Kyle Collura**, the team's new starting quarterback who is nervously trying to replace departed star, Johnnie Thiel. Kyle, after recovering from a broken collarbone, has trained relentlessly for his shot at the starting job and realizes that he must grow up fast and become an effective leader if his team has any hope of succeeding.
- **Tank English**, a massive defensive tackle and the cheerful leader of the team's defense who, in the weeks following Katrina, adamantly refuses to accept that he may need to attend, and play football for, another school despite pleas from his family. Instead, he chooses to just fish and wait until Curtis reopens.
- **The Curtis family**, an incredibly close-knit group of siblings and spouses, all of whom currently work at the school founded by their father under the concept of "love, leadership, understanding, trust and caring." They would have to band together like never before to keep the school running, with few guarantees that the buildings would still hold, or that the students and teaching staff would ever return.

At a pivotal point in **HURRICANE SEASON**, Thompson cites one of Coach Curtis' favorite football sayings to his players: "If you get knocked down, get up and chase the ball. You can't ever let what happened in the past affect what you do in the future." This refusal to give in to bad fortune lies at the heart of the Patriots' dramatic football season and, even more so, provides a stirring motto for a city that simply refuses to lay down and die in the face of unprecedented disaster. **HURRICANE SEASON** is Thompson's moving tribute to this never-say-die civic spirit, as well as a universal contemporary legend about the transformative power of athletics to make men out of young boys – and bring hope to a city in desperate need of it.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Neal Thompson** is a veteran journalist and author of the critically acclaimed biography *Light This Candle: The Life & Times of Alan Shepard—America's First Spaceman* and *Driving with the Devil: Southern Moonshine, Detroit Wheels and the Birth of NASCAR*. His stories have appeared in *Outside*, *Esquire* and *Men's Health*. He lives outside Asheville, North Carolina.

#### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

**HURRICANE SEASON: A Coach, His Team, and Their Triumph in the Time of Katrina**

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