

Chapter 15  
**Looking Up**  
*June 24, 2010*

**E**ver since South Carolina's baseball team stepped into a hospital room in October 2008 to find a cancer-stricken boy laughing and bouncing on a couch, Bayler Teal had taught the Gamecocks about survival.

So it was a strange word to use as they played in the College World Series. The word had been redefined by Bayler. Talking about surviving in a baseball tournament, compared to a seven-year-old life, felt hollow. Athletic teams visit sick kids all the time, but Bayler was not a community service endeavor. He had become a friend to the Gamecocks. He had become one of them. They played for him at Georgia, sweeping the Bulldogs. They played for him again in the Super Regional, knocking out Coastal Carolina in dramatic fashion to advance to the school's first College World Series since 2004.

Just before the team left for Omaha, assistant coach Chad Holbrook went on the Gamecocks' flagship radio station in Columbia and told fans the team would again play for Bayler. Holbrook made sure Bayler was listening when he made the announcement. Bayler was weak, but he managed a smile. He still could not believe the team was playing for him.

It had been about a week since doctors at Palmetto Health Children's Hospital determined that treating Bayler was useless. With the decision to stop the chemo and radiation, his parents had been robbed of the hope they had pinned everything to for nearly two years. It was a crushing letdown that would end with the loss of their son. Only one question remained: how much time did they have left with him?

Rob was distraught on the Wednesday following South Carolina's College World Series win against Arizona State. He said he thought Bayler had a few months to live, but the idea of his son in pain tortured him. Rob had been so positive and upbeat throughout. But all optimism was gone. By then, he had been defeated by cancer just as much as Bayler.

"We kind of knew it was over," he said later.

Bayler had a scan the previous week, and the cancer, doctors told the Teals, was "everywhere."

The week South Carolina went to the College World Series was also the week Bayler received the best gift of his life. Worn down by the illness, Bayler still found the energy to drive his new Gamecock-themed golf cart all over the neighborhood. He loved it.

Bayler was in it during the late afternoon hours on that Wednesday when he pulled over in the front yard. He complained to his mom and dad that he wanted to go to the hospital. The only reason he usually wanted to go there was to play games and mess with his favorite doctors and nurses. This was different. Bayler had a way of masking his pain, but he could not hide it any longer.

His dad said he knew it was the last trip to the hospital. But how long would he have to watch the injustice of his son's suffering? The question pierced his heart.

"I'm ready for him to be out of this," Rob said, his voice unsteady. "This is unfair."

The Teals had waged war against cancer, against the monster, for twenty-two months. They surrendered that Thursday. At 9:00 a.m., Bayler was given a strong dosage of morphine to help with the pain. At 10:00 a.m., as he drifted in and out of consciousness, he offered his last words. His parents were adjusting his pillow, and he asked if they could do it later.

The day became more difficult for the Teals as it progressed. All afternoon, Rob and Risha talked with Bayler's little brother, five-year-old Bridges. They told him he needed to say goodbye to his brother. They told him it was the last time he would see his best friend.

The Teals felt all day the warmth from friends and family who had been with them every step of the way. Bayler always had a wealth of support, and a lot of it was present at the hospital. The outpouring was a blessing, but it also made it difficult for Rob and Risha to spend any time alone with Bayler. Someone was always in the room with them.

The traffic slowly dissipated into the evening hours until, around 8:00 p.m., Rob's aunt was kneeling in prayer at the end of the bed. Seeing Bayler in pain, she prayed for God to take him. She prayed for Bayler's ultimate healing. She said amen and stood, hugging two exhausted parents as she left the room around 9:00 p.m.

Rob and Risha were finally alone with their sleeping son. Sticking with their hospital tradition, Risha changed into pajamas and crawled into bed with Bayler, snuggling beside him. Rob squeezed his son's hand. Not sure what else to do, he turned on the room's television to see how the Gamecocks were faring against Oklahoma.

All was calm. His parents were with him. His Gamecocks were on TV. Five minutes later, Bayler's breathing changed.

"I believe he waited for that," Rob said, "and he let go."

In a hospital bed in Columbia, Bayler took his final breath at 9:32 p.m. On a baseball field in Omaha, the Gamecocks tied their College World Series game against Oklahoma at 9:32 p.m.

It was as if energy transferred instantaneously from Bayler to his team. The timing of the events, down to the minute, was incredibly difficult to explain. Still is.

South Carolina had not scored against Oklahoma in 7 1/3 innings until Christian Walker's RBI single got through the left side of the Sooners infield. Walker had come through at Coastal Carolina with the Gamecocks down to their final four outs, but this was with five outs remaining in their season.

They were 0 for 6 with runners in scoring position at that point.

Things played out a lot differently for South Carolina after 9:32 p.m.

Back in Columbia, Rob and Risha were unsure what to do. They were numb. It was as if they had run the length of a marathon only to find no finish line. They had fought so long that they had no idea how to suddenly lay down their arms. So they fell into their family's arms.

Leaving the hospital, Rob picked up Bayler's pillow. It had a Gamecock on it. That caused Rob to turn his head toward the TV. He saw that South Carolina had tied the game. That sparked Rob to pass along the bad news to Holbrook.

For some reason he still cannot identify, Holbrook thought to check his phone in the dugout. In the ninth inning, he picked it up to see a text message from Rob: "Bayler is in Heaven."

Holbrook knew Bayler was back in the hospital, but the message still shocked his system. Even in the late innings of a game that could end his team's season, Holbrook was floored. He decided he would not tell the team about Bayler until afterward. He didn't want to introduce new emotions in an already intense environment. But with what he had learned, Holbrook was a wreck in the third-base coaching box.

"I remember looking up to the sky and saying, 'We need you here, big man,'" Holbrook said.

Asking out loud for help from above was something Holbrook had done throughout his coaching career. Including his mother, who succumbed to cancer, he had lost several friends and loved ones over the years. Holbrook didn't know if they could help him and his teams from beyond the grave, but he wanted to believe they could. That was enough to comfort and calm him, even in the tensest times on the diamond. In fact, he had asked for divine aid from this same Rosenblatt coaching box. In 2006 and 2007, North Carolina advanced to the national championship series. The Tar Heels lost both times. With a new school and Baylor watching, maybe this time would be different.

The game went into extra innings, still tied 1-1. Oklahoma catcher Tyler Ogle broke the deadlock with a solo home run off Ethan Carter in the twelfth inning. How would the Gamecocks escape from this one?

Robert Beary, creator of the Avatar Spirit Stick, led off the bottom of the inning with a single. Marzilli struck out, failing to move Beary into scoring position. But Beary did that on his own, stealing second.

Whit Merrifield then popped to third for the second out, leaving Beary on second base. That brought up the team's best hitter, Bradley, with South Carolina down to its final out of the season.

In the first game against Oklahoma and the win against Arizona State, Bradley was 5 for 8 with two home runs and six RBIs. He was hitting .400 in the NCAA Tournament and riding an eighteen-game hit streak that started in mid-May. But going into that twelfth-inning at-bat, Bradley was 0 for 5; he had hit only one ball out of the infield all night.

Sooners closer Ryan Duke started Bradley with a fastball on the outer half of the plate, and Bradley took it for a called strike. Duke then missed with the next two pitches, putting Bradley in a 2-1 count, a hitter's count. Bradley took a big hack at the next pitch, a fastball up, and fouled it off down the left-field line.

The Gamecocks were down to their final strike of the year.

Holbrook's two boys, Reece and Cooper, were crying in the stands. They did not want to go home. The expressions worn by South Carolina's adult fans were not much more positive. They did not want to go home, either. One more out, though, and it was over. One more strike, and it was over.

Duke's 2-2 pitch was inside – but it was close.

"I even heard the pitcher kind of yell out a little bit. Like, 'Yeah!'" Bradley said. "Like he knew that he'd struck me out. And I was thinking, 'No, that wasn't a strike.'"

Home plate umpire A.J. Lostaglio, whose opinion mattered most, agreed. Everyone took a deep breath and prepared for the 3-2 pitch. The Gamecocks were doing their "whiskey" routine over the dugout rail, cupping and wiggling their hands. Patrick Sullivan had the Avatar Spirit Stick under his nose, with his lips pressed against it.

Duke grimaced as soon as he let go of the 3-2 offering. His fastball caught too much of the plate, and Bradley roped the ball under the first baseman's glove and into right field. Beary roared around third base and touched home. The game was tied, 2-2.

Shaken, Duke walked the next batter, reserve infielder Jeff Jones, on four pitches. Representing the game-winning run, Bradley moved to second base. That brought up designated hitter Brady Thomas. Like Bradley prior to his at-bat, the team's backup catcher was 0 for 5 on the night.

Thomas's time at the plate did not last long. The senior who did not even have an at-bat in the Super Regional hit a ninety-one-mile-an-hour fastball off the bottom of his bat. It glanced off the front of the mound and skipped into center field. The Sooners outfielder did not even try to make a play.

The Gamecocks had won.

For style points, Bradley slid into home plate. Adrian Morales welcomed him with open arms, bear-hugging Bradley after he popped up from the dirt. The team mobbed Bradley – and then sprinted across the infield to pounce on Thomas.

Good thing Oklahoma didn't realize what Holbrook did: Bradley missed third base on his way home. If the Sooners appealed, the game would have continued into the thirteenth. Who knows what would have happened then? Bradley denied missing the bag when Holbrook confronted him about it after the game. In the fall, though, Bradley sheepishly admitted that Holbrook was right.

They could at least laugh about it by then.

"It was an incredible win for us," Tanner said after the game. "It was a never-give-up day."

On the same night Bayler Teal died, South Carolina had pieced together the most dramatic victory in the program's history.

"I believe things happen for a reason," sophomore pitcher Michael Roth said. "I believe there is a higher being. I believe in God. I believe there is a God and Bayler was up there with Him."