Seven Days in the Life of a Catastrophe
By Gary Smith

(The following is an excerpt from an article that appeared in the June issue of Sports Illustrated)

For six weeks, before the call came, I'd been living with a rock in my gut. Living in a place surrounded by waterways, marshlands and beaches, watching on TV as a pipe 700 miles away spewed death day after day, and doing nothing because ... because those were *someone else's* waterways, marshlands and beaches?

So when the boss called, asking me to go to the Gulf Coast to write a story about the oil spill, I felt almost relieved. But then, being a sportswriter, I couldn't help myself. I asked, What's the connection to sports?

Sportfishing's dead there, he said. A multibillion-dollar industry, shot. I felt bad for all the people who depended on it for a living, but something about that angle—*damn, now that hundreds of thousands of fish in the Gulf are getting killed by oil, nobody gets to kill tens of thousands of fish for the sport of it!*—was unsettling. . . .

Thirteen hours, the drive to New Orleans, the first hour spent remembering all the big moments that had taken me there. . . Every memory full of revelry ... absurdity ... life... .

DAY 1: I awoke and left New Orleans behind, driving south into the bayou. Everywhere I turned, it looked like war. Black Hawk helicopters ripped the sky. National Guard trucks and Humvees and bulldozers rumbled across the land, Coast Guard boats zipped across the water, strike teams prowled the bays for oil. *The Lakers and Celtics should apologize to us!* cried the sports talk show host on the car radio. Men in camouflage gear poured in and out of Homeland Security trailers. Men in hard hats piled out of commandeered New Orleans tour buses and set to work erecting vast tents to serve as mess halls. . . *The game was lousy! It was a dud!* Barracks went up. Barges rolled in. Police working 14-hour shifts waved tractor trailers toward forklifts and cranes. It *looked* like war, but in truth, a cop muttered, it was all "a big pig f---," and the locals couldn't wait to explain to a sportswriter what was really happening.

On one side were the outsiders, watermen from Texas and Alabama and Mississippi whom BP had hired to lay protective boom around the marsh islands and ports, scratching their heads over maps. On the other were the local fishermen, men who'd been navigating the bayou's maze of islands and waterways since they were old enough to spit, aching for something to do now that their livelihoods were gone. Boom, poorly anchored, kept washing away, they said, and oil kept swamping marsh isles, and the federal government and military kept yielding to BP, and BP kept proving that it was just an oil company with no clue how to organize an unprecedented cleanup, and the parish presidents and councilmen kept screaming at both the government and BP to try their homespun remedies, to do something *now*, before it was too late. On came the crude . . . so dense that baby crabs and turtles were trapped atop it, unable to break through. Seabirds plunged from the sky to feed on them, only to get mired in the sludge too. *LeBron made the rounds last night!* the man on the radio was saying. *He was on Jimmy Kimmel and Nightline!*

"This is the death of the Gulf of Mexico," said Capt. Brian Clark of the marine division of the St. Bernard Parish sheriff's office. "How can we clean up something that's not even fixed? It's like mopping a bathroom floor while the toilet's still spewing. I'm thinking, there's a monster out there ... a beast we've never fooled with."

I pulled over at docks and marinas along the road. People from every part of the earth had been carried here by the world's loop current: Cajuns, Croats, Cambodians, Canary Islanders, Cubans, Serbs, Africans, Vietnamese, Native Americans, Filipinos, Greeks, Italians, Germans and Lebanese. . . .The marsh was their workplace, their playground, their grocery store. They smelled oil at night and couldn't sleep, wondering how they'd pay off the big loans they'd taken to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. They were fighting one another

over who got work from BP to help with the cleanup. . ., friend turning on friend, brother against brother. They sensed the oil had begun seeping inside them. "People don't want to admit it," a crab dealer named Tino Mones said, "but they are scared, scared, scared. And if there's a hurricane... ."

All of them pausing to ask me the same thing: So what does this horror have to do with sports?

DAY 2: Next stop, BP. Its crisis command center in Houma, La.. . . The building sat on an entry road that VP executives had named Learning Lane.

The two military men at the checkpoint wouldn't let me in. The p.r. person who appeared a half hour later said that anyone I might want to speak to was busy or elsewhere . . . Perhaps we could talk about BP's program offering local fishermen the chance to convert their fishing craft into oil cleanup boats, the program executives had named Vessels of Opportunity.

In New Orleans that evening, an hour's drive north of the impacted zone, a short 57-year-old woman with a big bowl of curly white hair was taking a knife to the numbness and distance that such words created. Ro Mayer . . .was leading a funeral procession—for the Gulf and the birds and the fish—around the fringe of the French Quarter. She lives in a city of fatalists, she explained, people who revel in their capacity to eat and drink in the face of disaster,. . . and they haven't yet grasped that this disaster is a different and darker one. Just the day before, she'd been listening to a CD of marsh sounds in her car when the quacking of ducks froze her. It's a sound she grew up hearing at Thanksgiving, when the ducks paused on their long migration to the Caribbean and Central America, and suddenly it occurred to her that on the heels of the massacre of the fish in the heart of their spawning season, the five million migrating birds arriving in the delta to rest this autumn and winter would splash down in a toxic dump. Right there, at the steering wheel, she began crying.

A protest, Ro said, wouldn't draw flies here. To protest something, you have to believe in something else; no, . . . not after Katrina and Bush, not after FEMA became an acronym for Fix Everything, My Ass. But a costume party, a procession for the dead, a musical parade? That'd get hearts thumping. And so she'd Facebooked 300 people and placed a papier-mâché woman inside a coffin to represent the Gulf, and now there were pallbearers and trumpeters. . . and skeletons and death masks and papier-mâché heads of pelicans and sea horses, all with black paint cascading over them, all chanting down Julia Street—"What the flock, BP, what the flock!"—their numbers swelling to 500 called the Krewe of Dead Pelicans.

"What do you do when you're facing the firing squad and know you're going to die?" Ro asked. "You have some fun and try to reach a critical mass of people who'll stand up as giving a damn, because if we don't ... we end up like the frog that's put in a frying pan with a little cold water over a low flame. He boils to death and never knows it—that's us till now. I refuse to be paralyzed. My hair's on fire. My dogs won't come near me. My husband wants to sue BP for loss of consortium. He hasn't seen me for weeks—my face has been in a computer talking to people forming Krewes of Dead Pelicans in other cities, trying to create a community that will make a stand."

. . . Her family, like most people here, was waist-deep in oil ... but did that really make them any different from the rest of us? "We made a deal with the devil," said Ro, "and now it's time to dance."

DAY 3: I'd never lived near oil. "Offshore" drilling had lulled me into thinking, Out of sight, maybe out of mind. No more. Every few miles another hulking mass of metal, rusted and rotted by the salt-soaked air rose and ripped the eternity that marshes and oceans and shoreline offered the eye and the heart.

It was time to see and touch the beast we've never fooled with. I boarded a Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries boat and headed to the front lines, out where men were trying to keep oil from coating and killing the marsh

grass and cane whose root systems were the wetlands' very glue, holding silt and sand together so it all wouldn't wash away. And why did that matter terribly? Because every 2.7 square miles of marsh reduces the storm surge of every hurricane by *one foot* . . . The lives of every man, child, dog and cat in southern Louisiana could hang on the fate of those wetlands, on how much of the 436,000 tons of sediment belching from the Mississippi River each day coheres into islands ... and how much is dispersed in the Gulf. Two hundred seventeen square miles of marsh vanished because of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005; 1,900 square miles have disappeared since the 1930s as levee building and river dredging and oil pipeline laying carved up the delta and made the mighty river run deeper and faster and fling its golden silt farther into the Gulf, and into oblivion.. . .

The boatman killed the engines. Listen. No sound. No insects. No birds. And the fish?

The Mississippi estuary is the babymaker for about 30% of the nation's fish, a festival of redfish, blue marlin, yellowfin tuna, speckled trout, amberjack, flounder, grouper, wahoo, cobia, mahimahi and drum. . . .But all that life could never have made it past the egg and larval stages without being protected from predators by all the marsh grass and cane, without the refuge and slack water that beach shoreline simply couldn't offer. *Fifteen thousand* miles of crenulated coastline in a state 130 miles wide—that's what those marsh islands had wrought, that's what spawned more than one billion pounds of seafood a year, 52 million pounds of crab, 12,000 Louisianan commercial fishermen, 572,000 recreational fishermen and a zillion grams of omega-3 fatty acids unclogging American arteries every year.

The pilot took the boat closer to a cluster of marsh islands at the mouth of the Mississippi and pointed. Miles of white absorbent boom ringed each island, but in just over a week they'd been turned brown, been broken by currents, and now they absorbed nothing. The marsh grass and mangroves were greasy with oil, dying or already dead, awaiting time and tide to carry them and their underlying soil away. Unless the battle turns, said the biologist at the wildlife station at the delta's tip, the fish—whenever they finally come back—will have nothing to come back to.

I stared at the slimed delta. This was Wisconsin, Ohio, Missouri, Tennessee and Arkansas, land flushed down hundreds of small rivers into scores of large ones into one massive one and deposited here. Land for which the men in those states would fight to the death were an enemy taking it, now being seized by oil while the men got coffee and fresh updates on LeBron's free agency.

I looked at the hapless boom and remembered what Jack Stephens, the sheriff of St. Bernard Parish, had told me: "I've had friends diagnosed as terminal, and it's just like this. You can't really accept your fate, or you'll go crazy. So you see all the frenetic energy to do something about it—but the oil will get past the boom, and once it gets deposited against the levees and in the marshes, it'll contaminate all the fresh water coming through. We won't see a recovery in a decade. This will show up in Europe, in Africa, in Asia. . . I can't sleep at night. They're calling for the worst hurricane season in 10 years. If one comes here, all that oil will be in New Orleans."

The boat returned to shore. On my car radio the people calling in to the local news talk show couldn't stop blaming; it was almost worth getting so wronged just to feel so right. Like all of us, they'd clicked I ACCEPT next to the Terms of Agreement without reading them, had assumed that oil companies all over the world could go right on drilling—at roughly twice the ocean depth that would crush a modern submarine—without ever doing what humans ALWAYS do: cut corners, make mistakes. Yes, people were right to have assumed that contingency plans existed, but the longer their efforts went into blaming, the less likely it would ever be applied to new alternatives, to new energy: the perfect outcome for the very oilmen they were blaming.

I pulled over at a Buddhist temple. A bald monk in an orange robe stood outside. Thousands of Vietnamese fishermen live in Louisiana, their lives frozen now, and many look to him for guidance. What is needed now? "If you stay still and take a breath," said Wutthichai Phojhachai, "you can begin to see everything moving around you. The answer will come if you just watch it. The problem has already occurred, so now is not the time for blame. That is wasted time. Involve yourself. Do what you can. So many families with four people—and four cars. Can you drop each other off on the way to work and school? Can you push for new forms of energy? You have to think of action and reaction. You have to see all the links in the chain."

Four years in the West, and the monk still doesn't understand. The oil is what keeps man moving. The oil is what makes sure he never stays still and sees all the links in the chain.

DAY 4: On the fourth day I saw what God saw. Two Black Hawks hoisted me. . . Looking down on the (Grand) Isle's main drag in mid-tourist season, so empty you could bowl on it. Down on the whitecaps, white no more, and on the stunning peacock plumage that about three million barrels of oil make on water: dull gray sheen giving way to iridescent blues and greens giving way to thick orange scum giving way to dark clotted pools, reddish brown like old blood.

Estimates of how much oil was gushing had just taken another dramatic leap, to the equivalent of the *Exxon Valdez* disaster every eight to 10 days. Frantic residents had begun sucking up crude with plastic vacuum hoses. . . The heat index was 110. For the birds—820 brought to rehab centers by that morning, half of them dead—the Gulf was a vat of cooking oil.

The Black Hawks descended on East Grand Terre isle. Here, two days earlier, *National Geographic* photographer Joel Sartore had sunk thigh-deep in oil and realized he couldn't get out; had he been alone, he likely would've died. On the beach Governor Bobby Jindal led Dudley (head of BP response) straight into a pool of oil two football fields long, their shoes sinking into it with each step. . . The guv found a piece of wood to use as a dipstick and held it in front of Dudley . . . "You can see pictures, but until you come here and see it, touch it, smell it, you don't really understand," said Dudley. "It's ... it's tragic."

Kerry Sanders, the NBC correspondent, wanted more. "Look over your shoulder," Sanders ordered Dudley, camera rolling. "What do you see?"

"It's devastating ... it's very emotional."

. . .Not enough. From the railing of a boat that the group had climbed aboard, CBS's Harry Smith pointed to a phalanx of orange, fist-sized tar balls. "This is your oil," declared Harry. "Do you feel guilty?"

Dudley, hangdog but litigation-leery: "I just feel sad."

Sorrow without money means nothing anymore so Dudley stepped dutifully in front of a media mob. . . and pledged $360 million to build six sand berms along Louisiana's barrier islands, to keep more crude from reaching the wetlands. At his sides he was still trying to get the oil off his hands.

Jindal bounced back to the microphone for a second go-round, shouting, "We're in a war! Sean Payton gets it! Drew Brees gets it! Reggie Bush gets it!"A gust of relief went through me. It *did* have something to do with sports.

DAY 5: Bring on the Saints. Bring on the marching band. . .They all came the next day to rally the oil refugees at Fort Jackson. Men like Daniel Bourgeois, who'd spent the first two months of the crisis reporting

to his boat every morning and staring into nothingness for hours, a shrimper for 44 years who'd grown up without electricity or running water and now feared he was going to die that way. He, like many fishermen, was about to sign on with BP to join the cleanup, and he, like all of them, was appalled at the thought of a moratorium on drilling because it would wipe out the *other* half of the local economy. He, like almost everyone else here, was now dependent for subsistence on the very company that was choking them. They were grateful to the Saint for giving them a few hours to forget all that . . .but just as Brees opened his mouth the mike went dead. A hush fell over all. "It's the oil!" hooted a lady.

A man on the edge of the pep rally, the secretary of Louisiana's Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, wasn't whooping. . . it was what was being done to make the stain go away that brought dread to Robert Barham's stomach. It was Corexit 9500, a dispersant banned in Britain, with which BP was bombarding the Gulf to break down the oil,. . . biologists feared small fish were mistaking for eggs or microorganisms and devouring. New chemical compounds were being created out there in the hot stew of oil, Corexit and tropical water, compounds whose toxicity to plankton and algae and larvae no one fully knew. "We have no idea what we're doing to life out there," Barham told me. "They're conducting the largest lab experiment in history—on us."

DAY 6: I walked into a coffee shop at a Chevron station in Port Sulphur and looked around. In the corner sat a black man whom people addressed as Mr. Eugene. He was 94 years old, but he was still a link in the chain. Every day he pushed his boat into Grand Bayou and caught minnows that ended up in the mouths of fish that ended up on the plates of Americans everywhere. C'mon, Eugene Barthelemy waved, he'd show me.

We went to his trailer down in Happy Jack.. . . The trailer sat on the concrete slab where his house used to be, until that night 5 years ago when Katrina swept Mr. Eugene out of it and onto the back of a pickup truck that the wind lifted into the sky and hurled the length of 2 football fields, where he landed in water over his head and climbed a tree and hung on till the other side of the hurricane sent him thrashing to a rooftop that he clung to as shards of houses and trees screamed by his head, forcing him to crawl down and through a shattered window of the house into a room with but a few feet of air left and then pull himself through its ceiling into an attic where he could barely breathe and where, hours later, he heard the roar of the sheriff's airboat and was saved.

Resilience, not resistance, was how men survived on the delta. Absorb the blow and start over, absorb the blow and start over ... only none of those other blows went on and on and on, or found their way into phytoplankton or food chains or molecular structures.

Mr. Eugene was one of the five happiest people I'd ever met, and he'd lived for 94 years, he said, because he'd found a recipe. He worked all day catching minnows. He sang and laughed to himself on the water. . . He held no anger, not even toward the oil company. . . "BP's nice people," he said. "Accidents happen to anybody." He made just enough money, selling minnows for 15 cents each, to go to Boomtown Casino on weekends and do the alligator dance to *Jambalaya.* All of that was what kept an old man alive and to prove it he hooked his thumbs in the waist of his jeans, grinned and did a *Jambalaya* jig right there beside the marsh.

But chains went both ways. When the oil shut down the fishing, the fishermen stopped buying the minnows, the old man stopped working, the old man stayed home ... and felt his memory going. "I can't lose my memory," he said.

So some days, even though his chances of selling many minnows were slim, he went out anyway on Grand Bayou, which hadn't been shut down. . . yet, and kept the ones he caught in a basket underwater. A few days earlier he'd seen a pelican coated with oil sitting on a marsh isle, and he'd crept up to it. "It's O.K., Honeydew,". . . "Calm down, Honeydew... . I won't hurt you." He reached with a rag and tried to rub off

some of the oil, then returned a few hours later to check on the pelican. Honeydew was dead. Mr. Eugene dug a hole in the mud with his bare hands, tucked the pelican's head under its wing and buried it.

DAY 7:*This is seismic! The entire nation's landscape is changing! It's astonishing how quickly it's happening, and it seems reckless... . It's all driven by money, and it's all driven by fear! ... What everyone's talking about today is Nebraska leaving the Big 12 and going to the Big Ten!*

Making the long drive home, I looked up at myself in the rearview mirror. Yep. I was listening, so I must be one of the everyones. Seismic? A college football team changing conferences . . . could be seismic only in a country where all the basics were taken care of: air, water, soil, food, shelter, education. Obsessing over Nebraska and LeBron, over fun and games, was a luxury that evolved because we had all those things; the loss of them would turn sports back into what they once were, a frivolity, an occasional sideshow. That was the answer to everyone's question. That's all it took for the Gulf oil spill to be a sports story: one look at the whole chain.

And they were right, those two radio sports guys: It's *all* being driven by money and fear. That's what had made the out-of-uniform cop in the oil port of Fourchon . . . erupt from his police car and scream that if I didn't leave now he would arrest me for trespassing ... for driving on a public road toward the shoreline.

That's what made everyone keep subdividing, compartmentalizing, seeing only *his* link.

That's what made the oil company try to hide the carnage and send the oil underwater.

That's what made all the marsh dwellers scream about the moratorium on deepwater drilling, even though that was the very thing that had just shattered their way of life.

That's what kept their leaders from doing what they knew must be done, and their countrymen from demanding it: the conversion to energy that didn't poison the water or land or keep us mired in expensive wars when the national bank was broke.

Affluence is a funny thing. Once so many millions of people have so many millions of dollars at stake, even life-and-death issues are resolved on the basis of what protects *my* money, right *now*—not the general good or the planet's health. Money and fear will choke even the strongest to death ... unless they take that step back, take that breath, and see what money and fear are doing to them.

I called Mr. Eugene a few days after I got home. He couldn't help himself, the old man said, he didn't want to lose his memory. He'd gone and caught 2,000 minnows, placed them in his big underwater basket where they'd always lasted a good four or five days, and he was stunned, the very next day, to find every one of them dead. Oil had been sighted on Grand Bayou. It was just too much for him to wonder if that's what had killed them all. All he could do was fall to his knees and cry.