

"While Mark was at Florida State University, I had the privilege to lead Mark to Christ in 1986. His life has never been the same. Mark not only talks the talk but he walks the walk. He is a great role model for young people to follow."

Bobby Bowden, former head football coach, Florida State University

"If you love faith, family, and football, with some wonderful leadership and decision-making tools, you will love *Make the Call*."

John Maxwell, #1 New York Times bestselling author

"Make the Call will entertain, inspire, and also challenge you to make decisions that will bless you and others that you influence. This is a must-read!"

Jon Gordon, author of *The Energy Bus* and *The Power of Positive Leadership*

"I have always had great respect and admiration for Mark Richt. Through his book *Make the Call*, we can now relive some of Coach Richt's great and not-so-great moments in his career. This book will give you great insight into the life of a Division I champion coach and man."

Dabo Swinney, national championship-winning head football coach, Clemson University Tigers

"I have admired Mark Richt as a coach because he not only produced great teams but great young men as well. *Make the Call* will give you some of Mark's coaching secrets, but also give you the secrets to making the truly important decisions in life."

Tony Dungy, bestselling author and former head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Indianapolis Colts

"If you want to know what made Coach Richt tick throughout his days as a coach and mentor, *Make the Call* will tell you where his strength came from."

Tony Evans, president, The Urban Alternative and senior pastor, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship

MAKE THE CALL

MAKE THE CALL MARK RICHT

with Lawrence Kimbrough

GAME-DAY WISDOM FOR LIFE'S DEFINING MOMENTS



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I dedicate this book, first and foremost, to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And to my beautiful wife, Katharyn, who has been my rock through it all.

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Introduction

"Make the Call, Coach"

iami hadn't beaten Florida State in seven years.

Miami, winner of five national championships. Miami, the inventors of swag. Miami, the orange-and-green gate-crasher who'd risen up out of seeming nowhere in the 1980s to shake up the blue bloods of college football. Miami, my alma mater. Miami, the U.

Miami—who was now my football team.

It was October 7, 2017. My second year as head coach in Coral Gables, and my first trip back to Tallahassee as the enemy. This was special to me. At 3:30 in the afternoon, at kickoff under bright sunlight on Bobby Bowden Field, at Doak Campbell Stadium, this was our chance to prove that the U was worthy of the nation's attention once again.

The year before, at home, we'd come close to beating them, close to at least pushing the game into overtime. Our junior placekicker, Michael Badgley, had seen his streak of made extra points end at seventy-two, with just over a minute to play. A leaping Seminole lineman had pawed the ball out of the sky, right after we'd scored late to pull the game to within one.

And this year—man, this year, it looked like they'd gotten us again. Tied at the half, tied again at the start of the fourth quarter, we finally nudged ahead 17–13 on a short touchdown pass from Malik Rosier to Braxton Berrios. But freshman Florida State quarterback James Blackman, filling in for their injured star sophomore Deondre Francois, marched his offense seventy-five yards on a four-minute scoring drive, capped by a crushing touchdown completion to a wide-open receiver in the right corner of the end zone.

New score—Florida State 20, Miami 17.

Time remaining on the clock—1:24.

The home team fans erupted. Our undefeated, thirteenth-ranked Hurricanes—winner of eight games in a row dating back to the previous year—had come into town and, from the way it was looking, we were about to get whipped for the eighth straight time. From the dancing on the other sideline, to the chanted Seminole Chops thundering down around the stadium, the mood among most of the 78,000 in attendance was clear. This ball game was over.

Only not to us.

We knew their defense, playing to preserve a win in the last minute of the game, would leave enough space underneath for us to pick up chunks of yardage, allowing us to draw closer and closer into field goal range. If we could just get to about their 35 or so. Michael hadn't missed a field goal from between 40–49 yards, not just in this season, but in his entire career. We still had a chance.

After the first two plays of the series, though, we'd gone nowhere. Both were incompletions, so at least the clock hadn't moved much: a batted-down pass at the line of scrimmage, followed by a pass to Braxton—caught, but out of bounds.

Then we converted the third and long. Out to our 41. We reeled off consecutive first downs on two gashing run plays, taking us inside their 35, still with half a minute to go. Faced with third and long again after a couple of incompletions, Braxton caught a short ball from Malik in the right flat and ran

it to the sticks. First down. Out-of-bounds, clock stopped, at the Florida State 23.

Eleven seconds left.

Which, for a kicker like Badgley, amounted to a forty-yard chip shot, to tie and force overtime.

Or . . .

What about we go for the win?

We did have a time-out to play with, but I didn't want to use it yet. I'd burned one with five minutes left, down in the red zone, when Malik's helmet had flown off after taking a vicious hit. Could have been a targeting penalty maybe, which meant he could've stayed in the game rather than be forced to sit out a play by rule, but the refs didn't see it that way. So I had to make a call. Put in a fresh quarterback, who hadn't played a down in the game? On third and one? On the 6-yard line? Needing a go-ahead score? Or should I use a time-out, and keep our quarterback on the field?

That's the thing about making calls. Sometimes you've got to decide. Right now. You don't have a week or ten days to mull it over. But whether you've got all the time in the world to sit and pray about it, or whether you've got about forty seconds, like I did,

you've got to be the one to do it. To make the call. Somewhere inside you, inside that whole complicated combination of memories and experiences, of lessons taught and logical hunches, you've got to bring it all to bear on whatever decision is staring you dead in the face. You've got to

That's the thing about making calls. Sometimes you've got to decide.

squeeze it all down and sort it all out—decide what stays, decide what goes—decide what matters, decide what doesn't—decide who you're going to listen to, and decide whose voice is misleading you—decide what's right and decide what's wrong. Or at least decide what's best. Decide what this moment is calling for.

Decide what you can live with. Decide what you can't live without.

That's what I was needing to decide that day.

In my headset, coaches were giving me their opinions, feeding me up-top observations about what they could see and had seen from the coaches' booth—information and advice that might inform the pros and cons of the various alternatives in front of me. That's what I wanted. That's what I'd asked them for. "We can either set up this field goal with a run and a time-out, or we can try to take one more shot. What do y'all think?"

The suggestions came back. This, that, the other. Why it might work. Why it might not.

Then somebody—whether it was my son Jon (our quarterbacks coach), or Ron Dugans (our wide receivers coach), or Stacy Searels (our O-line coach), or Todd Hartley (our tight ends coach), or Thomas Brown (our offensive coordinator)—whoever it was, I can't remember—somebody said, "Make the call, Coach."

Yes. That's what the head coach is there for. Especially when he's also the play caller.

Make the call, Coach.

I decided we were going to take one last shot.

Good choice? We'll see. Because a lot of things could go wrong. We only had time for one play. Not a sack. Certainly not a turnover. Malik needed to get the ball and get rid of it. Fast.

Three-step drop, first progression—not to Braxton, who'd been our primary receiver all day (8 catches, 90 yards, 2 touchdowns), but to little-used, and little-expected, Darrell Langham. Three catches on the *year*. None today.

Malik spotted the one-on-one coverage, dropped the ball in on Darrell's outside shoulder, spinning him around to make the catch. And though well defended, he held on and spun another quarter turn, lunging toward the end zone, all in one motion, stretching the ball out in front of him.

Did it break the plane? Before his knee landed? A half-yard short of the goal line?

It was close. Touchdown on the field. Replays in the booth. Five minutes' worth (or more) of whatever they do up there—slowing it down, backing it up. But apparently no single camera had caught it from a definitive angle, at least not enough to overturn it.

We'd done it. We'd *done* it. Touchdown. Confirmed. Ball game.

Our game.

I had made the call—like hundreds, perhaps thousands of calls before, over a thirty-five-year coaching career and over a sixty-year lifetime. That's a whole lot of calls. Some of them bad, but by the grace of God, in some of my most defining moments, a few well-placed good ones.

This book is about my greatest (and not so great) football and life memories and about the decisions I've made along the way. But it's also about a chance for you to make the call yourself. At your own moments of truth.

PART I

PLAYING DAYS

Lucky Jim

Actually, a pretty good one. At one point in my career, some people considered me the fourth-best quarterback in the nation.

Or maybe it was just my mom who thought that.

We can talk about that later.

But here's where it all started. When I was a kid, my family zigzagged from Omaha, Nebraska, to Broomfield, Colorado (a little town about halfway between Denver and Boulder). In 1973, after my dad had retrained himself from a tool-and-die maker to a computer programmer, IBM offered him the choice between two available positions: one in Poughkeepsie, New York, and the other in Boca Raton, Florida.

I guess not every call is hard to make.

That's how I ended up in south Florida as a thirteen-year-old kid who loved playing ball. And though baseball was my favorite, there was just always something about football. Football was where I found my identity.

Like on those days in eighth grade, when all of us who were playing city league ball would wear our jerseys to school on Friday, ahead of the games on Saturday. There was more than one jersey color roaming the halls on those football Fridays. My teammates and I wore the blue and red of the Boca Jets, while

the guys from Delray Beach wore the green and gold of the Delray Rocks. Huge crosstown rivalry.

One Friday between classes during football season, while I was swapping out books in my locker, I suddenly got the sense of being surrounded. Three Delray jerseys were pressing in close on my left—the biggest one belonging to Prince Charles Ferguson III, their imposing middle linebacker. With no other provocation than the Boca colors across my back, it looked like we were about to throw down. Meaning, since it was three-on-one, I was about to get beat down. Right there in the school hallway.

Just as I was calculating my next move, I felt and saw a hand gripping my shoulder from behind. I assumed the frontal attack had now been joined by a rear attack, but before I could spin around and try protecting myself, the guy standing behind me said to the guys standing in front of me, "If you're gonna fight him, you've got to come through me."

It was Murville King, one of my new classmates from Delray that I'd gotten to know in homeroom. Murville didn't play football on Saturdays because his family were Seventh-Day Adventists, but he was strong and athletic, and his words carried weight. They at least provided enough intervention to stall the action on that day, long enough for the bell to ring announcing the start of the next class period. I'd literally been saved by the bell and by my new best friend Murville.

But really, *all* of us eventually became good friends. Even me and Prince Charles Ferguson III. Because once we got into high school, we all became teammates. No more competing colors. All we saw were the blue and gold of Boca High.

Football was how we looked at life and at each other. Football was how I defined what mattered to me.

So when Coach Roger Coffey, head football coach at Boca Raton High, told me prior to my junior year that he wanted me at quarterback, and that if I'd focus on only one sport—no more baseball—he could train me to be good enough to earn a scholarship to play football in college, there was no real decision to make. I was football-only from that time forward.

For me, football was simply who I was.

In fact, I remember Coach Coffey asking me one time if I believed in God. I'm not sure why he asked me that. Maybe he sensed my priorities were out of whack. "I don't know, Coach," I said, "but I'll tell you what I *do* believe in. I believe in football."

I thought he'd be proud of that. But the look on his face wasn't the look of approval I expected. He didn't really say anything. In hindsight, maybe he thought he'd created a monster. Maybe he was right.

But I learned so much from Coach Coffey. He taught me how to be a quarterback. He coached me not just on the practice field and in the classroom but in his home, in his life. I spent a lot of time at his house as a high-school kid—eating meals there, watching game film there, just hanging out with his family there. One of his daughters, no joke, still calls me her brother.

Coach Coffey was the type of coach who made young men out of young football players. He had a rule for us: if any trouble ever broke out at school, which was always a possibility, we were to head straight for the cafeteria and meet him there. If you wanted to be on his team, that's where you'd better be. No fighting. No trouble.

I loved him. I'd have done anything for him.

Anything but be willing to play without him.

Unfortunately, though, that's exactly what happened. For reasons that were never explained to us players, Coach Coffey was relieved of his duties during the summer leading up to my senior year. I couldn't believe it. We had such a good team. We were going to be great that season. But not without *him*. Not for somebody else.

His firing infuriated us so much that when we found out about it, twenty or more players on our team all got together for a big, hastily called meeting at my house. The guys from Delray drove over to join the ones of us from Boca Raton. We worked up a petition that day which we took to the *Sun-Sentinel*, our local newspaper, threatening to boycott the season if Coach Coffey wasn't reinstated. One of their writers, Craig Barnes, got it printed in the next day's edition with all our signatures attached to it. We were dead serious. For the first several days of practice, we refused to show up. My senior year. Without football. Without Coach Coffey. It stunk.

Before long, though, he somehow got word out to a few of us ringleaders to come over to his house to talk things over. Really there wasn't any talking to do. He just told us not to worry about *him*. To worry about *us*. "You boys got to play. You boys got to *play*."

And, boy, did we play. Right up through the state semifinals, playing for new coach Otis Gray, we were the most successful team Boca Raton had ever put on the field. We lost by only three points to Miami Carol City, who went on the next week to lock up the championship, 10–7 against Choctawhatchee, where Mike Rodrigue was quarterback, who later became my college teammate and lifelong friend.

Coach had been right. There $\it was$ a college scholarship in my future.

I just needed to make the call about which one to accept.

One of the coaches who recruited me that year was Coach Bobby Bowden, who'd come to Florida State in 1976 after an impressive, successful run at West Virginia. I thought long and hard about going there, but in the end I decided against it. They already had a quarterback tandem of Wally Woodham

and Jimmy Jordan—both incredible players out of Leon High School in Tallahassee—who platooned with each other for three seasons in a row at FSU. Just didn't look like there was a spot for me there. I wanted to go someplace where the competition was less crowded.

I was also recruited out of high school by Coach Saban—something else you probably didn't know about me. His name was actually *Lou* Saban, but he'd been head coach of three NFL teams (most famously the Buffalo Bills of O. J. Simpson's day, including the year the Juice rushed for 2,000 yards). By 1977, one year removed from being in pro ball for the past sixteen seasons, Coach Saban landed at the University of Miami. Just down the road from my home in Boca.

And I was the guy, he said. I was to be his quarterback in 1978, he said.

Miami had basically been a wasteland of football mediocrity throughout the entire 1970s. They'd lost nearly twice as many games as they'd won. And I was the guy to bring them out of the desert, he told me. "You're going to save this program." Sure sounded better than riding the bench somewhere else.

So I made the call. Miami, here I come. To save the day. Until that day when I was hanging out at the football office—star recruit and his new coach—flipping through the pages of the *Miami Herald*, checking out a list of other football commitments whose names had been published in the paper.

Mike Rodrigue, I read. QB/DB. "He's coming here?" I said.

"Aw, don't worry about him. See that slash? He's more of a defensive back."

"Oh, okay." Still scanning. "Well, what about *this* guy?" I said, pointing to another name on the list. *Jim Kelly*, it said. *East Brady, Pennsylvania*. *QB. No slash*.

"Mark," he said, pausing to put a fatherly arm around me, "somebody's got to back you up."

Yeah. Hmh. Yeah.

Good thinking, Coach.

I had lofty goals and dreams. My plan going into college was to start as a freshman, make All-American my second year, win the Heisman my third year, and then opt out and go pro. That was the plan. And leading up to it, even as a high school teenager, I really didn't do anything in my life that wasn't tailored toward accomplishing those objectives. If I thought something was going to keep me from getting where I wanted to go, I just didn't do it.

At Boca High, you know, you pretty much fit into one of three peer groups. You were either a nerd, a jock, or a surfer dude. Not really, but in general. And I was a jock. A jock who was going places. A jock they'd all be talking about one day.

That guy who believed in football.

But what I didn't know was, it's a big problem if your identity is all wrapped up in what you do rather than who you are. When your identity is in what you do, and when what you do falls apart, *you* fall apart.

But the God I wasn't sure I believed in—the God who knew exactly what to do with a guy who believed only in football—must have decided the time was right for taking me through a crisis of identity.

He did it by letting me watch Jim Kelly live out my dreams. "Lucky Jim."

That's what Mike and I called him.

It's a big problem if your identity is all wrapped up in what you do rather than who you are. He was uncanny. I mean, Jim was a great ballplayer, don't get me wrong. The 5,000 yards of passing he piled up in four years as a starter at Miami became more than 35,000 yards in his NFL career. The man played in *four* Super Bowls. So, it wasn't like we were beat out by a

chump. But I can't tell you how many times, that first year, we'd be in a scrimmage, and Jim would launch a ball into coverage, it would deflect off the defensive back's hands, bounce right to his receiver, in stride—off for a touchdown. I'd go in there next series, drop a crisp pass across the middle, the receiver would muff it, and the ball would glance into the hands of a DB, who'd take it all the way to the house.

I'm exaggerating, of course, mostly to rationalize why I got beat out. Truth be told, Jim was tough as nails and threw the best deep ball I've ever seen. We are good friends to this day. Brothers in Christ.

But he was "Lucky Jim" to Mike and me. The guy I would forever be backing up. Because it wasn't like he was going to be leaving his seat unoccupied anytime soon. We were in the same class. Barring injury, I knew I wouldn't be seeing much playing time. Jim did get hurt our senior season, so I got to play in five games. But by then, I'd already lost most of my drive and determination. Lost it? Not really. I'd basically just thrown it away.

Instead of being All-American on the field, I'd become All-American at the nighttime games. All those big-time hopes and dreams of mine were gone. Blown out of the water. The budding superstar, the savior of the program, had been beaten out by my "backup." And yet it was my identity that had taken the biggest beating of all.

But there was this one summer. When I almost found it. My true identity.

The majority of college students, of course, bail out for home in the summer. Not the football team. We always stayed behind to train for the upcoming season. The summer of 1979, I ended up spending a lot of time with a teammate of mine named John Peasley, probably because we'd long been going down the same path. Up until that time, for as long as I'd known him—if I was an

All-American at the nighttime games, he was a Heisman Trophy candidate. We were sure to have a wild summer. Or so I thought.

Except John was different that summer. Way different. He'd gone from being this really angry kind of dude, always looking for a party and a fight, to having a real peace about him. It was just readily obvious. You couldn't keep from noticing it. I finally asked him, "What's happened to you, man?"

You can guess. Stop me if you've heard it before—where a guy who's been a rough, tough person gets tired of the trouble he's causing himself and gets cleaned up to walk the straight and narrow. He tried telling me what he'd experienced, how he'd come to know Christ, how he'd become a Christian, even though the change was still new to him and hard to explain. But I heard him out. And though I didn't exactly admit it then, I got it. I got what he was saying. His description of what had happened to him and the peace that had become so evident and so different in his demeanor made a lot of sense to me. I remember thinking, You know what? That's what I need. I needed that peace he had.

But I needed to think about it first. And the closer it got to the end of summer, the harder it became to figure out how this desire that I'd been feeling for a new life with God could possibly share space with my *old* life that would soon be rolling back into town for the fall. What would my roommates think—Clem Barbarino, Mark Cooper? What would my girlfriend think? What would *everybody* think? That's what was hanging me up. I was more worried about what people thought than what God thought. Imagine that. Not very smart.

Besides, I still wanted to be a quarterback. Even though my college path hadn't exactly led me to the stage of the Downtown Athletic Club, I still held out hope that I might get drafted after college, get a crack at the NFL. So, becoming a Christian—especially if it meant being called to be a missionary

or something—sure wasn't going to square with what I planned to be doing with my Sundays in the fall.

I knew my identity as a football player wasn't what it used to be anymore. But I didn't know if I really wanted to identify with what being a Christian seemed like to me. I thought it meant being perfect. I thought it meant never doing anything wrong, ever again. And as I took inventory of my sins—and trust me, there were a lot of them—I didn't see how I could ever turn things around without turning into a huge hypocrite. I checked down the list of all the ones I could think of. "I guess I could stop that sin," I said, "and I might could stop that other sin." But looking at some of the other ones, "Lord knows darn well I'm not stopping that sin anytime soon."

I guess I just didn't understand grace.

I couldn't seem to make that call. Not right then.

THERE ARE MOMENTS IN LIFE WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO YOUR DECISION.

Whatever you're facing, you know that no one else can bail you out. You have to make the call.

Mark Richt, former head football coach at the University of Georgia and the University of Miami and long-time assistant coach at Florida State University, knows a thing or two about making the call. In this book,

he shares some of those crucial moments—from his time as a player, through his years as an assistant coach and head coach—thirty-five years in all on some of the biggest stages of college football.

You'll love being along for the ride with Mark as he shares his experiences both on and off the field, gives wisdom for life and leadership, and encourages you to make the most important call of all.

Make the Call will entertain, inspire, and also challenge you to make decisions that will bless you and others that you influence. This is a must-read!

—JON GORDON

This book will give you great insight into the life of a Division 1 champion coach and man.

-DABO SWINNEY

If you want to know what made Coach Richt tick throughout his days as a coach and mentor, *Make the Call* will tell you.

—TONY EVANS

MARK RICHT is the former head football coach of the University of Georgia Bulldogs and University of Miami Hurricanes, and a longtime assistant coach for the Florida State University Seminoles. He is currently a football analyst for the ACC Network. Mark and his wife Katharyn are the parents of four adult children.



