

First-year NFL expansion teams typically fare rather poorly. Until the Memphis Musketeers make an improbable run at the first ever Super Bowl played in Paris, the home of the original Three Musketeers.

Three Musketeers in Memphis By Michael Zielinski

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THREE MUSKETEERS IN MEMPHIS

First-year NFL expansion teams typically fare as well as tissue paper trying to hold back flood waters.

Until the Memphis Musketeers.

MICHAEL ZIELINSKI



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Print ISBN: 978-1-961266-81-0

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-379-6

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Zielinski, Michael

Three Musketeers in Memphis by Michael Zielinski

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026900534

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2026

First Edition

Chapter 1

Chad Dawson, Jubilee Jones and Nuke Gomez, three All-Pros who had just led the Tennessee Titans to two straight NFL championships with superlative Super Bowl performances, were meeting with their agent Cassius de Monet, nicknamed Cash da Money, in Dawson's poshly decorated family room in his Nashville mansion.

They weren't discussing Russian literature or the writings of Emily Bronte. Rather, Cash wanted to discuss an opportunity that was lying taut on the horizon like a drawn bowstring.

The four had urgent business. The three superstars were free agents because Tennessee owner Skinflint Scrooger was too cheap to pay them megabucks. Besides Scrooger's frugal nature, a recent divorce had cost him a fortune.

"She took everything but my nuts," he complained to the media, trying to justify to Titans fans why he was letting his three stars walk.

Titans fans weren't buying it. Outraged, they were threatening to lynch Skinflint. No dummy, he went into hiding. There were reports he was surrounded by armed bodyguards, bottles of Scotch and his latest lady love, a 22-year-old hot yoga instructor named Bubbles.

“Where we going, Cash?” asked Chad, who was 27, surfer blond, handsome, sculpted with lifeguard shoulders at 6-4, 220 pounds and blessed with a howitzer for a right arm and fast wheels that made him the prototype of a NFL quarterback who could hit a fly between the eyes with a 70-yard pass and also run past defenders like a deer shot in the ass.

“The Rams or the Chargers because I love Los Angeles?” asked sensational wide receiver Jubilee Jones, a 6-3, 220-pound Black specimen who also was 27 with blazing speed, astonishing hops, the wingspan of a condor, could run pass patterns with the nimbleness of a ballet dancer and had the sticky fingers of a pickpocket. He was a weightlifting fanatic with sculpted muscles who loved to run wind sprints to exhaustion. All that work constructed an upper body that looked like a bag of rocks lashed together with steel cable.

“How about the Giants or Jets because you can’t beat the Big Apple?” asked tight end Nuke Gomez, a 28-year-old 6-5, 250-pound Latino who as a pass receiver was explosive as an ammo dump on fire and as a blocker could level an entire downtown Manhattan block. He was a bulldozer with the acceleration of a Formula 1 racecar.

“Remember, wherever we go, we’re going as a threesome,” reminded Chad.

“After all, we’re the Titanic Trio,” chimed in Jubilee.

“Guess we’ll have to get a new tagline,” added Nuke.

Cash took a puff of his cigar and smiled.

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“How’s the Three Musketeers in Memphis sound?” he asked with peacock flamboyance.

“You’re blowing smoke at us, right?” asked Nuke, not very nicely.

“How’d you like to spit teeth?” snapped Jubilee, who wasn’t flashing his teeth in a smile.

“The freaking new expansion team?” hissed Chad. “You have a death wish? Or simply want us to fire your ass?”

“Calm down, boys,” Cash said confidently. “Hear me out. And remember, your agent is Cash da Money, the best dadgum agent in sports. You’ll going to love this, or my name isn’t Cassius de Monet.”

“Spill it,” commanded Nuke, “and remember you’re just one left hook away from having Cassius de Monet scrawled on your tombstone.”

“The owner of the Memphis Musketeers is Kerri Knox, a real bombshell in her 50s who’s the spitting image of Raquel Welch in her prime with a killer body, hair that could hide several children, and a face to die for,” said Cash. “She’s worth billions and wants to pay you guys a king’s ransom.”

“We’re listening,” said Chad.

“As you know, Memphis is just a stone’s throw by Chad from Nashville,” said Cash. “I can’t believe Memphis got an NFL franchise, but I suspect commissioner Big Red Robbins was enchanted by the size of Kerri’s chest and her bank account.”

“How much money is she offering us?” asked Jubilee.

“We need a little drum roll here,” said Cash, giggling.

“Get to it,” barked Nuke.

“All of these numbers are fully guaranteed for five years,” said Cash. “She’s offering Chad \$500 million, which is a whopping \$100 million per year.”

“Those kind of bucks makes it somewhat worthwhile playing behind an expansion team offensive line,” responded Chad.

“As for Jubilee, it’s \$250 million, \$50 million per, and for Nuke, it’s \$200 million, \$40 million per,” gushed Cash, “all top shelf for your positions.”

“Hot diggity!” exclaimed Jubilee.

“Ditto,” added Nuke.

“Tell us about the owner and how she got her billions,” said Chad.

“Kerri Knox is a Memphis native, and her dream was to give Memphis an NFL franchise,” replied Cash. “She knows football. Her father was a high school coach, her grandfather was a high school coach, and her two brothers played college football. Once widowed, she immediately wanted to use her billions to buy an NFL franchise. She wants you three badly because she wants to siphon fans from the Titans.”

“What did her late husband do?” asked Nuke.

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“Kenny Knox was a tech billionaire,” said Cash. “He reportedly left \$34 billion to Kerri. She became a merry widow after he crashed out of a 47th floor window after spending a night doing coke with four high-class hookers.”

“What a way to go,” said Jubilee. “Why the merry widow?”

“The money, and their marriage was apparently loveless,” explained Cash. “Her longtime lover is Vito Scaloppine, a spitting image physically and facially of the late actor Charles Bronson. He owns a big waste management company in Memphis and Nashville.”

“Why is she calling them the Musketeers?” asked Nuke.

“Memphis has a rich history of French influence and French bakeries and restaurants that cater to French cuisine,” said Cash. “Kerri is enamored with *The Three Musketeers*, the novel by Alexandre Dumas and reportedly has read it 17 times. She also has watched the 1973 *The Three Musketeers* movie like 25 times that stars her lookalike Raquel Welch and Michael York, who she thinks looks a lot like Chad.”

“Interesting,” remarked Chad. “When can we meet her?”

“Tomorrow at her Memphis mansion,” Cash said. “Head coach Sam Slick Street, who’s also the offensive coordinator, and general manager Billy Bob Beauregard will be there as well. She already has dubbed you guys the *Three Musketeers* and says there will be a lot of lucrative marketing opportunities for you playing off that name.”

“We’ll have to practice sword fighting,” joked Chad.

“They call them rapiers,” explained Cash. “A mandatory accessory for the Three Musketeers.”

Chapter 2

It wasn't just Chad, Jubilee and Nuke going to Memphis with Cash. The players' better halves were along to check out what could be their new home.

Gabby Davis was Chad's smoking hot girlfriend, a 6-1 stunning brunette with the perfect body for a striking supermodel, which she was.

Bunny Roberts, a 5-10 beautiful voluptuous blonde, was Jubilee's girlfriend and she starred in a popular action thriller Netflix series called The Angry Assassins.

Nuke's wife Marilyn Mason Gomez was a petite, pretty redhead and the mother of his six kids ranging in age from 2 to 12. They had four kids before getting around to marriage. They had their first one when both were only 16.

The three couples and Cash were astonished when they piled out of a stretch limo and saw Kerri Knox's Memphis mansion surrounded by several lovely acres. On the exterior along with carefully manicured landscape and gardens there was a swimming pool, a sauna, a grotto stocked with fish, a basketball court, a tennis court, a paddleball court and a three-hole golf course.

“Looking at this spread, I wonder if she’s lowballing her contract offers,” cracked Chad.

“You forgot about the salary cap,” reminded Cash.

“I can’t wait to see the inside of this shack,” said Gabby.

As they approached the house, Kerri bounded out on the porch to greet them. Her smile was incandescent. Her physical presence sparkled like fireworks in a catacomb. She was so luscious that no fly or mosquito would dare ever land on her. She also was in the lingerie business. Did you expect her side gig to be doorknobs?

Then Vito popped out. His smile was non-existent.

“Welcome,” she gushed as the crew joined her on the porch. “This is my significant other, Vito.”

Vito grumbled, “Jeezum rice.”

“What’s that?” asked Cash.

“Never mind him,” laughed Kerri. “It’s the way he says Jesus Christ. He prays a lot.”

“Got it,” said Chad.

Cash then introduced everyone to their hosts and Kerri took them on a tour of her mansion while Vito disappeared.

If the gang was astonished by the exterior of the mansion, they absolutely were floored by the interior. The tour seemed to last about 90 minutes. The family room, living room, dining room

and kitchen were as spacious as football fields and immaculately decorated with expensive paintings. Except for the kitchen, all featured Oriental rugs.

The family room had one wall devoted to a gigantic aquarium and another wall devoted to five large-screen televisions. There also was a pinball machine, a popcorn machine and a huge video game platform in the room.

The first floor also had four bathrooms, all equipped with not only toilets, sinks and showers but also urinals and bidets. And there was a large office, an even larger conference room and a library stocked with novels, including of course *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas along with plenty of historical books and novels.

“What? No comic books?” marveled Nuke, whose personal reading mostly was confined to his playbook.

The basement featured an indoor swimming pool, an enormous workout room stocked with weight machines, treadmills, ellipticals, plenty of barbells and dumbbells, a heavy bag, a speed bag, exercise mats and workout benches. There also was a ballroom.

The second floor had seven spacious bedrooms, each with its own bathroom equipped with a toilet, large vanity, urinal, bidet, large tub and shower. The beds were large enough to accommodate a whole orgy if so desired. The master bedroom had a wall-to-wall mirrored ceiling and a closet bigger than Japan.

Upon completion of the tour, Kerri took the bedazzled troupe down to the conference room, which had a massive oak table surrounded by huge, leather chairs. The three couples and Cash sat down, giddier than kids in a candy store.

“Your home is fantastic, fabulous,” gushed Gabby.

“There are no words to give it justice,” exclaimed Bunny.

“Can Nuke, me and our six kids live with you?” joked Marilyn.

“Only if your husband and fellow Musketeers sign with us,” laughed Kerri.

Kerri stood up and walked over to a corner, where there were three authentic rapiers and three authentic muskets just like those in *Three Musketeers* lore.

Vito walked in and helped her distribute them to Chad, Jubilee and Nuke.

“Once you guys are on board,” Kerri said, “I want you three to become experts with both weapons. We will provide training for you. Trust me, there will be spectacular marketing opportunities for you playing off the Musketeer brand.”

“What’s not to like, boys?” asked Cash.

Before they could answer, Memphis head coach/offensive coordinator Sam Slick Street and general manager Billy Bob Beauregard walked in, smiled, said a warm hello and joined the group at the table.

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Sam Slick Street looked like his name implied. Slim, slicked-back black hair, black mustache and wearing a black suit and a black shirt buttoned up to the collar. Slick wasn't his nickname. It was his middle name. People called him Slick because it fit exactly who he was.

Billy Bob Beauregard, often called Triple B or Boss Hogg because he resembled the Dukes of Hazzard character, was fat and bald and wearing a white suit and shirt, a white cowboy hat and holding an unlit expensive cigar. He was a direct descendant of Confederate general P.G.T. Beauregard. Billy Bob was about as athletic as a tablespoon but had a hound dog's eye for hunting athletic talent.

"Coach Street, I'm not familiar with your name," said Chad. "Any NFL coaching experience?"

"Call me Slick," said Slick, smiling mischievously. "Nah. But I coached Mugwump State to a dozen championships in the Possum Conference."

"That Division II or III?" asked Chad.

"Neither," replied Slick. "NAIA. We never had the studs the other schools had but we always had better coaching. Heck, the only two letters in the alphabet I can read are X and O. Trust me, my Xs and Os can dance the polka, the foxtrot and the jitterbug all at the same time. You're going to love playing quarterback for me. Perfect for a gunslinger like you."

"I've seen Mugwump State's game films," interjected Kerri. "I've watched football since I've been knee high to a gopher and

I've never seen anything like it. Slick confuses the bejesus out of defenses. They wind up running around like a Chinese fire drill, frequently into each other."

"I learned a long time ago that when your guys can't block a hat, it helps to have defenders knock themselves over like bowling pins," added Slick.

"Think your gadget offense will translate to the NFL?" asked Jubilee.

"It's not keeping me awake nights," chuckled Slick.

"To be honest, I have my sincere doubts," said Chad.

"Figured you would," said Slick. "So I've brought along my iPad."

He grabbed his briefcase, pulled out his iPad and fired it up.

"Huddle up guys around me," Slick said.

The three of them stood up and walked over behind him. Soon their jaws dropped like drawbridges and their eyes were as large as flying saucers as if they just had seen Martians soar by their noses.

"Unbelievable," yelled Jubilee. "The receivers always are wide open. Like running patterns in an open prairie."

"I love that your tight ends get plenty of balls and often get to pancake the last guy standing after the rest of the defense crashes into a 10-car pileup," marveled Nuke.

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“Your quarterbacks must throw for a thousand yards a game,” chirped Chad excitedly.

“I realize it won’t be quite that easy in the NFL,” admitted Slick. “We might even have to punt once or twice a season. At Mugwump State we never punted. Not once. I even stopped wasting a scholarship on a punter.”

“What happens when defenses catch on to your gimmick offense?” asked Chad.

“You’ll be throwing passes to either angels or demons by then,” cracked Slick.

The three players, who had looked dubious before watching the game films, were portraits in excitement.

“Your thoughts in one word?” asked Kerri.

“Astonishing,” said Jubilee.

“Unreal,” gushed Nuke.

“Superlative,” responded Chad.

“I’m sure impressed,” gushed Cash. “Ladies?”

“I don’t know football, but I haven’t seen Chad smacking his lips like this since the first time he saw me naked,” Gabby said, adding a wicked laugh.

“Nuke hasn’t looked this happy since the last time I served him prime rib and lobster for breakfast,” said Marilyn.

“The breakfast of champions,” said Nuke.

“Jubilee wasn’t even this excited when our first Lamborghini was delivered with me lying naked on the hood,” interjected Bunny.

“Billy Bob Beauregard, what’s your background as a general manager?” asked Chad.

“Zilch,” drawled Billy Bob with his Southern tang. “Hooter Pudnick, my assistant GM, handles the administrative side and the salary cap. My specialty is personnel. I’ve been watching live football and game films ever since my baby teeth started falling out. I’m a real bird dog when it comes to finding talent. Since we’re gonna get a lot of scrap in the NFL expansion draft, my job is to sniff through that rubble and find hidden gems. Same thing with the draft and combing through free agents.”

“And then me and my staff coach them up,” added Slick. “By the way, my staff is all NFL veterans who we poached easily from other teams once they saw my offense. The defensive coaches who joined us said they primarily did so because then they wouldn’t have to coach against my offense.”

“Of course they’ll be getting undressed by that offense every day at practice,” chuckled Billy Bob.

“What do you call your offense, Slick?” asked Chad.

“Helter-skelter,” he said proudly.

“Have we a deal, gentlemen?” asked Kerri.

“The Three Musketeers at your service,” Chad, Jubilee and Nuke chimed in unison.

“They rehearsed that,” said Cash.

“Gentlemen, let’s sign the contracts and enjoy the sumptuous meal our chef has prepared,” said a beaming Kerri. “I believe we’re having goose, lamb chops and a vegetable medley. And mille-feuille, a French delicacy, for dessert. All washed down with expensive French wines.”

“I usually just have a slice of chicken, some tuna and a protein shake for dinner,” laughed Jubilee. “Gotta stay lean.”

“Relax,” said Slick. “You’re run your ass off in the helter-skelter, which doesn’t work unless everybody can run like the wind all game. I’m a players’ coach but I’m a stickler for players having great cardio. We’ll run gassers out the ass after every practice.”

“Since we didn’t sign on the dotted line yet, call the Rams or Chargers, Cash,” joked Nuke.

Cash smiled and exclaimed, “Just count da money, Nuke. Just count da money. Enough to buy a new set of lungs if you burn your current ones out.”

“Chad, God put you on this earth to run the helter-skelter where the quarterback is like the handle of a whip -- every movement ripples back to him,” Slick said.

“Just don’t be bringing that whip into the bedroom, Chad,” Gabby laughed.

Chapter 3

NFL players often are myopic to things that don't pertain to football. Chad, Jubilee and Nuke weren't as singularly focused as a sniper, but they left most of life's other essentials to their significant others and to Cash. Indeed, at times agents for star athletes earn their handsome fees by babysitting them.

While the Three Musketeers were in Memphis immersed in learning the helter-skelter offense, Gabby, Bunny and Marilyn were busy putting their Nashville homes on the market and looking for new ones in Memphis. Plus Gabby and Bunny were balancing that with their careers and Marilyn with her kids. The latter also was looking for good schools in Memphis. Why she was looking for good schools was a mystery because none of their kids seemed destined for Ivy League schools. She would have been better off looking for reform schools.

"Thank God for Cash," Gabby said to Bunny. "We'd be lost without him. Especially with me jetting to New York and Paris for fashion shows."

"Chad and Jubilee haven't done squat preparing for our move," responded Bunny. "They dump everything on us. And I start shooting our new season in two weeks in Hollywood."

“Imagine if we didn’t live with them and we stayed based in Nashville,” Gabby said. “They’d live in Memphis hotels until they retired.”

“I feel sorry for Marilyn handling all this with six kids,” Bunny said.

“The only thing Nuke does with the kids is play with them,” Gabby said.

Meanwhile, their neglectful guys were hardly neglecting football.

They immediately realized why Kerri and Slick wanted them for the helter-skelter. Their abilities were paramount in making the offense revolutionary and legendary.

As they studied it, they soon realized it was a fantastic hybrid of previous innovative offenses enhanced by Slick’s creative embellishments. There is nothing really new in football. The game evolves but often just gives new twists to previous schemes.

But as a total package, they had never seen or heard the likes of the helter-skelter. It was as if Slick had burned a path across the window of time to discover the offense of tomorrow and cart it back to today. It’s a rare man who can remove the hinge on the door that opens tomorrow.

The helter-skelter was part run and shoot, which utilizes one running back and four receivers, one of them which would be Nuke, allowing for extensive receiver motion that creates

mismatches with defenders and reveals the defensive coverages. The quarterback not only reads the defensive coverage but also reads the defenders to determine the probable route his receivers may run. The combo of reading and adjustment is the key to success. The quarterback must throw with anticipation and know the ins and outs of his receivers. The complex offense requires intelligence and communication between the quarterback and receivers.

At times Slick would switch it up to the Flexbone offense, with two receivers on the outside edges and two slotbacks lined up just outside and behind the offensive tackles.

And frequently Slick would ditch the lone running back and line up the quarterback in an empty backfield. That formation spreads out the defense, making it difficult for defenders to identify the play and execute coverage responsibilities.

The offense relies on the defense to make quick decisions as the quarterback's alignment forces defenders to adjust their coverage accordingly. The empty backfield is particularly effective when the quarterback is skilled and can make quick decisions. Two traits that Chad had in abundance.

Then in a dramatic switch, Slick would throw in some Wishbone with a full-house backfield running the triple option in which the quarterback can hand off to the fullback up the middle, keep it for a run around the edge or pitch it to one of the halfbacks trailing behind. The lone receiver would be Nuke with Jubilee lined up as one of the halfbacks.

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In all of these variations, everything hinged on the precision and timing of execution.

Slick went no-huddle on most every offensive snap. Which meant everybody had to be in fantastic shape. Getting gassed screws with timing and execution. And fatigue makes cowards of us all. Somebody famous once said that. It was either Paul Brown or George Halas or General Patton or Mel Brooks.

Slick often would mimic the Air Don Coryell offense that emphasizes vertical passing and motion plays, throwing deep passes with precision. Deep and mid-range passing stretches defenses and creates mismatches. The tight ends and receivers frequently are in motion, allowing them to avoid being jammed at the line of scrimmage.

Slick at times would go double tight end, the second one also a dual receiver/blocker combo like Nuke.

A strong inside running game was essential to complement the passing game. Lighter but stronger, quicker, more athletic offensive linemen were integral components. Pass blocking was the fuse that ignited everything but run blocking was critical as well.

Slick was enamored with the flea flicker, which starts as a run but ends with a deep pass. The quarterback hands the ball to a running back, who runs toward the line of scrimmage, then flicks the ball back to the quarterback who passes deep to a receiver.

Just to keep from getting bored, Slick would employ the moving pocket, which has the QB and O-line moving in unison to one

side or the other, creating and exploiting gaps in the defense. It gets the defense running laterally to tire it out and prepare for misdirection. It can change the QB's launch point, forcing defenses to adjust their rush lanes and responsibilities.

And then there were Slick's circus embellishments in which he did everything but send in the clowns.

There was the Double QB catch and throw in which the backup quarterback or a receiver like Jubilee who played quarterback in high school lines up to the left. That second quarterback retreats backward to get behind the quarterback, who rolls out to the right and then tosses it back to the other guy who's careful to be a yard or so behind him. He in turn will throw it back to the starting QB, Chad, who now is a yard or two behind the backup quarterback or receiver. At Mugwump State defenses would either rush one of the other and sometimes both. While the two are playing backup catch, the OL keeps retreating as well until one of the passers sees a receiver breaking wide open.

Slick also was in love with plenty of double and even triple reverses and at times would pull the tackles instead of the guards.

He used a lot of OL zone blocking ... all five guys are just one synchronized marionette moving in one direction. They have a series of steps that they all will do where each man is occupying a zone. Running backs basically don't have to think or react ... they have a very specific assignment to follow. There is no true hole to run through, simply a point of attack as the linebackers are displaced by the shift of the offensive linemen.

His undersized linemen were quick and agile and lifted a ton of benches and squats to be stronger than their size.

But like everything else in the helter-skelter, variety was the spice. Slick mixed in man/angle blocking as well as gap blocking, a hybrid of man/angle and zone. A gap blocking scheme involves the linemen blocking players in the gaps to either side. A guard might pull through to create a hole for a running back. Slick mixed up angle blocks, hook blocks and drive blocks.

He emphasized set and hand punch pass blocking. A successful hand strike or punch starts with the feet or base. O-linemen need to be explosive out of the stance at the snap and establish a strong base while firing independent hand alternate strikes or two-handed strikes.

Slick mandated that all O-linemen do boxing drills daily, hitting speed bags and heavy bags and sparring to sharpen striking techniques.

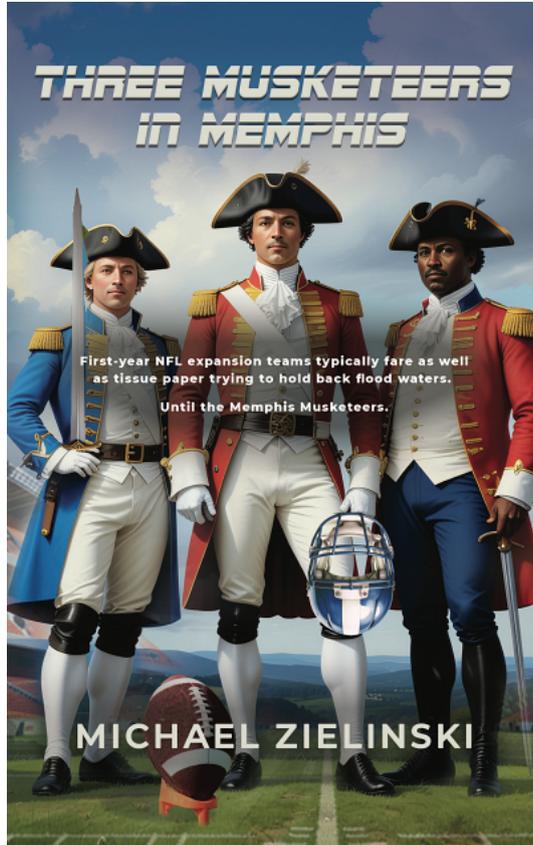
In another exotic twist, sometimes the entire O-line would backpedal in sync with the QB's pass drop and then form a protective shield around him, mimicking Roman legions creating a shield wall around the archers.

“Trust me, our OTAs and minicamps are going to look like a slapstick comedy until we get our timing down,” Slick warned the trio. “But once we all get in sync by training camp, that Chinese fire drill is going to fry defenses like their chop suey.”

“How do you think of all this crap?” Nuke asked.

“I spend a lot of time doodling on the john,” Slick said with a smile. “Which is why I never take a laxative. I need time to create. Genius can’t be rushed. I consider myself part choreographer, part composer and part conductor.”

Indeed, the helter-skelter was a symphony in flamboyance but more finely tuned than a Stradivarius. Slick was a stickler for details. He would have made a smashing microbiologist. And he complemented that trait with the steely calculation of a riverboat gambler.



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