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Paul Bryant: The Life, Times, and Legend of the “Bear,”
Before the Houndstooth Hat

Russ Guffey
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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary/Treasurer, Fellow Presenter, Fellow Athenaeum Members:

With college football's bowl season upon us, and yesterday's announcement that Nick Saban has been hired by the University of Alabama to try and resurrect the Crimson Tide's storied past, I thought it only appropriate to share with you tonight the often untold story of an individual that I find perhaps more intriguing than any figure I've ever studied. A man whose will-to-win was matched only by his honesty and sense of humor.

Just the other night, in fact, I found myself huddled in the living room of my grandparent's house, as four generations of Guffey's watched the Independence Bowl. I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride in Alabama's football heritage – and I have had little, to no, influence on *anything* the university has ever done. The question burned inside of me, “Why is this?”

The more I researched the subject, the more one central figure came to mind. And, interestingly enough, even as a Tide faithful, I found so much about the man that I never knew I never knew. Why people delayed their surgeries to hear him speak. Why people moved their weddings to watch him coach. Why people, to this very day, name their children after him. Thus, I share with you tonight, my paper,

Paul Bryant: The Life, Times, and Legend of the “Bear,” Before the Houndstooth Hat

Born September 11, 1913, Paul William Bryant was the 11th of 12 children born to William “Wilson” Monroe Bryant and Ida Mae Kilgore Bryant, in Moro Bottom, Arkansas. The town, named after nearby Moro Creek, was more of a “widening in the road,” and boasted a population of some 6-12 families (As with much of Bryant's childhood, details aren't exact). Like many others during this time, the Bryant's were farmers, and grew and sold vegetables, cotton, chickens, and hogs on their 260 acre farm.

Due to his father's semi-invalid state, Paul was raised predominately by his mother, and learned firsthand about such axioms as “hard work” and “dedication,” which he would later teach and instill in his players and staff. One thing was certain, though: Money was not readily available, and Paul would do almost anything – No, Paul *would* do anything – to earn a dollar or two.

In fact, it was Paul's hunger for money that landed him his nickname.

The year was approximately 1927, and the Lyric Theater was playing host to a bonus act: bear wrestling with a dollar-a-minute prize. Paul, of course, was first in line to sign-up, and would later recount to People magazine, “I felt I would wrestle King Kong for a dollar a minute... I wanted to hold him till he died.” And wrestle the bear Paul did. That is, until the bear's muzzle came off and latched on to Paul's ear.

Longtime sport's author, Allen Barra, in his book, The Last Coach: A Life of Paul "Bear" Bryant, quotes Paul's sister, Louise, who was sitting in the theater's second row for the event, as saying, "You should have seen him jump off of that stage when he realized that thing had bit him! He was brave enough to get up there and wrestle that bear, but he wasn't about to let it eat him alive" (pg. 21)!

Nonetheless, Paul had survived the event, and both his name and legend had been born. For years afterward, Paul got a good laugh out of showing others the scars on his legs where he had crashed into the theater's seats after hastily exiting the stage. Perhaps of biggest disappointment to Paul, though, was the bear owner, in all the commotion, skipped town, and never gave Paul his well-earned reward.

Growing up around other farmers and near textile mills, Bear (as he was commonly called now) knew that theatrics wasn't going to be his ticket from lower-class mediocrity. What Paul *didn't* know – especially since he was first introduced to the game just a year earlier – was that football was going to be his way out.

Larry Lacewell, the current director of scouting for the Dallas Cowboys, and a son of one of Bryant's teammates, commented, "When I was growing up, nobody asked a boy if he *wanted* to play football – they asked what position you were *going* to play" (Last, pg. 6). Due of Bear's parent's disapproval of the game, though, and his family relocation later in Paul's youth, Bryant didn't start playing for the tradition-rich Fordyce High School until later than most of the boys his age. But, given Bryant's size (6'3", 190#), and his willingness – even love – to practice, Bear took immediately to football. He had finally found something that he was both good at and enjoyed. Paul loved the camaraderie, the competition. Even the cleats.

Bear recounted years later about his first pair of makeshift shoes: "Boy, talk about proud. I wore those cleats to football, to class, to Sunday school. I wore them in the house, everywhere... I'll never forget how much those high-top black shoes with cleats meant to me" (Last, pg. 18).

As a sophomore, Bryant was named to the All-State team, playing on both sides of the ball as a defensive tackle and an offensive end. As a senior, Bear helped lead the undefeated Redbugs to the 1930 Arkansas state championship. Fordyce's success also caught the attention of several college coaches, and while he was not the most sought-after player, Bryant's size would make him a valuable addition to any team. In fact, longtime Alabama assistant coach Hank Crisp, on a failed recruiting trip intended to sign Bear's teammates, the Jordan twins, extended Paul an offer to come play for the Crimson Tide after seeing him only once in Fordyce's Coach Cowan's office.

Bear accepted, and, thus, the Alabama-Bryant relationship began.

Before Paul was allowed to enroll in the university, though, he first had to complete a few academic courses that he had failed to finish in Arkansas. As such, Paul studied Spanish, math, and English at Tuscaloosa High School while red-shirting and practicing for the Tide football team (Obviously, eligibility rules were much more liberal than those of today). Unlike many of Bryant's peers, academics proved quite challenging to the rural student. It was this same farm-reared toughness, however, that Bryant utilized to more than prove his worth on the practice field.

In his autobiography, Bear, Bryant commented, "All I had was football, and I hung on as though it was life or death" (Last, Part One). And to a boy who was the first in his family to attend college, Paul knew that a return to Moro Bottom was more *death* than life. Accordingly, Bryant practiced with an insatiable hunger. Sports Illustrated's John Underwood once quoted Bear as saying, "I didn't care if we ever quite practicing football. I loved it" (Last, pg. 50). Paul's persistence paid-off.

Ironically, Bear Bryant never got to play for Coach Wallace Wade at Alabama. Wade, who was also nicknamed "Bear," had compiled quite an impressive resume during his 8-year tenure with the Crimson Tide, winning 4 conference championships and 3 national titles. Wade was also the coach that Bryant had read and heard so much about while growing up in neighboring Arkansas. Just before Bryant gained eligibility to play, though, Wade was entwined in a dispute with, then, University President, Mike Denny. The battle led to Wade's departure, and in 1931, immediately following Alabama's impressive 24-0 Rose Bowl victory over Washington State, Wallace left for Duke's athletic department.

Enter Frank Thomas.

Coach Thomas was a Knute Rockne protégé, and brought with him to Alabama the now-famous Notre Dame box offense. Thomas saw potential in Bryant early on, and pushed Bear, both on the field and during the team's chalk talks. Paul was constantly called upon to diagram a play or describe a formation, and he came to despise Thomas' northern "Bry-ant" twang. What Bryant *didn't* abhor, however, was what he was learning. In Bear, Paul wrote, "The more I listened, the more I enjoyed it... every minute was a revelation" (Last, pg. 75). Bryant would later say that, save his mother, Coach Thomas had more of an impact on him than any other person, and Bear flourished under his tutelage. Thomas taught Bryant, and all of the Crimson Tide players, that the coach *is* in control, that no one player can define a team, and that a program's success is often predicated upon the care that each individual shows to others. And Bear jumped at the opportunity to be a part of something special.

In Bryant's 3 years as a player, there were also 3 occasions, in particular, that helped to solidify his legacy. The first came in the 1934 Rose Bowl, when Alabama, as a decided underdog, was to take on Stanford for the national championship. Playing opposite of the great Don Hutson – the "Alabama Antelope" – Bryant was simply known as "the other end" in the Tide's offense. However, given Bear's ability to block for Hutson, and to run

the more treacherous routes through the center of the field, some credit should be given to Bryant for Hutson's success. And, I suppose, vice-versa.

During one of the Pasadena practice session, as the offense was executing its passing patterns, Coach Crisp commented to his players that he'd be willing to give a \$2 bounty to the *first* player that knocked down a reporter or photographer that was crowding their side of the practice field. Without hesitation, Bryant called for a hail-Mary, and "introduced," shall we say, himself to one of the members of the media by knocking him out. Bear also caught several key passes in the actual Rose Bowl game, and helped the Crimson Tide knock-off the heavily-favored Cardinals, 29-13, to claim the national title.

Perhaps Bryant's most famous incident as a player, though, occurred the following year. During the third game of the season, on the *second* Saturday of October, Alabama lost to Mississippi State, and in the process, Bear broke the fibula in his right leg. The next week, of course, was the Tennessee game, and Bryant's absence left a huge gap in the Tide's roster (It's also important to note that this was still during the single-platoon era, when players were expected to play both offense and defense). As a student of Rockne, though, Coach Thomas had a "Win One for the Gipper" ploy, himself, and asked for the team physician to remove Bryant's cast and allow him to dress-out for "moral support." In the locker room, Thomas delivered his usual pep talk, and then asked Coach Crisp if he had anything to add. As Richard Sikes details, in his book, Laughing with the Bear: Humorous Tales of a Coaching Legend, "The assistant," just as planned, "stood to address the team with a cigarette dangling from his mouth and said, 'I don't know about the rest of you, but I know one thing, ol' number 34 will be after 'em today'" (Pg. 11&12).

The suspense of this speech was that players during this time, in an effort to get spectators to buy programs, didn't always wear the same number. Each player nervously looked at their own chest, and then eagerly scanned the locker room to identify their yet-to-be-named leader. Then, to everyone's surprise – including his own – Bryant's head arose and the numbers 3 - 4 could be seen stitched on his jersey. Coach Thomas then went to Bear and asked him if he could play. "Could I play," Bryant remembers thinking to himself? "It was just one little bone" (Last, pg. 71), Bear later told Ralph McGill of the Atlanta Constitution.

Alabama won 25-0.

The third incident of Bryant's college days is, surprisingly, the one that perhaps had the greatest impact on his decision to pursue coaching. As his senior year began, Paul and Mary Harmon Black, his sweetheart of a few years now, snuck away and were married by the justice of the peace in the tiny town of Ozark, Alabama. Due to the socio-economic differences between Bear and Mary Harmon's families, and Coach Thomas' belief that married players were often distracted from their athletic responsibilities, the couple kept their nuptial arrangement a secret from everyone. What the two *weren't* going to be able to keep secret was the pregnancy of their first child, due sometime after

graduation. Bryant had to get a job, and given his football acumen, coaching was a logical, and available, option.

After graduation, Thomas offered Bryant a spot on his staff, coaching the offensive and defensive lines. The job would pay him \$1,250 a year, plus housing and transportation. Bear accepted, and for four years he continued to procure as much information from Thomas as he could contain – including learning the coach’s ruses for recruiting (Tactics that Bryant would later employ, and even be known for, as a head coach). And, then, in 1940, Bryant, who was the youngest member on the Alabama coaching staff, took a giant career step forward. Bear Bryant was offered, and accepted, the head assistant’s role at Vanderbilt University.

Once with the Commodores, Bryant proved his expertise immediately – both with the existing and potential players. “I recruited up a storm,” Bryant said, using the guise of *also* recruiting the parents. “If the mother’s for you, not much can be against you. I’d be in the back room eating cake [with the mother] while other coaches were visiting in the living room” (Last, pg. 86).

With Bryant’s assistance, Vandy went from 3-6-1 in 1940, to 6-1-2 in 1941, including a 7-0 upset of Frank Thomas’ Crimson Tide. Despite the turnaround – or, *perhaps*, because of it – Vanderbilt’s head coach, Red Sanders, failed to renew Bryant’s contract at the end of the season. And while no concrete reason has ever been given for Bear’s dismissal, some speculate that Sanders saw the tremendous potential in Paul, and fearing for his job, he took Bryant’s job into his own hands. Nonetheless, the University of Arkansas’ head coaching job had just opened-up as well.

As he would do so many times throughout his career, Bryant called upon a person of influence to help him when a situation arose. In this case, Paul contacted fellow Arkansas native, Bill Dickey, the great New York Yankee catcher, and asked him to call Governor Homer Adkins on his behalf. Dickey obliged, and Bear was soon assured that the position was as good as his. Only one hurdle stood in the way of Bryant’s homecoming: December 7th, 1941.

Paul Bryant voluntarily enlisted in the Navy on December 8th, and as a college graduate with coaching experience at two major universities, he was commissioned as a Lieutenant Colonel. He was sent to preflight school in Georgia, and then flown to Virginia and New York for his overseas’ assignment. Lt. Col. Bryant was to be stationed aboard the *USS Uruguay*, which was headed for North Africa. And while Bryant’s time in the armed forces was *somewhat* uneventful, he served his country with the same vigor he had played with while in school. In one letter home to Mary Harmon and Mae Martin, their daughter, Paul wrote, “The country is about like north Fla., and most of the natives are Arabs. They don’t shave, dress in robes, and ride little donkeys and camels... Hope I am

lucky enough to bring you a German scalp. In any event I shall give every effort to get the job done” (Last, pg. 91).

While Bryant didn’t manage to scalp any Nazi’s, he did survive the near-sinking of his boat when another American ship accidentally rammed the *Uraguay*, and in 1944, Paul was reassigned to the Navy’s preflight training school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Here, in an effort to help keep the sailors physically fit – and, no doubt, to help scratch his itch to get back into football – Bryant (with the “okay” from his commander, Admiral Tuttle) fielded the North Carolina Navy Pre-Flight football team. Or the Carolina Cloudbusters as they would come to be known. And while official Cloudbuster statistics aren’t reflected on his career marks, the Pre-Flight team *did* compete against other major colleges; and, technically, a 13-6 victory over Duke University was Bear Bryant’s first win as a head coach.

Now that Bryant had a taste of running a program, there was no way he was going back to being an assistant. After being honorably discharged on September 28th, 1945, Bryant officially began his head coaching career at the University of Maryland. And Bear wanted to make one thing known: He expected his players to listen, to work hard, and to do what was asked of them. In return, Bryant promised success. Unfortunately for Vic Turyn, the Terrapin’s quarterback, *he* was the first to test Coach Bryant’s rules. Vic, along with fullback Harry Bonk, were criticized by Bryant for not blocking the defensive end properly. Turyn, in a fit of frustration, yelled out, “Well, why don’t *you* come over here and show *us* how it’s supposed to be done?” Vic would later call this “a little mistake.” “I started to lose my confidence when he walked up to the line without so much as a hesitation. At the snap, he tore into both of us. I swear to God, players in the thirties must have had razors on their elbows. He took us both on, and fought us to a standstill. I never challenged him again” (Last, pg. 97).

Just as with Vanderbilt, Maryland showed instant progress, and the players began to see that their hard work was resulting in victories – and fun. As former Alabama player and Tennessee coach Bill Battle described to sports’ publicist, Keith Dunnavant, in his book, Coach: The Life of Paul “Bear” Bryant, Bear “could push you till you hated him and then he could say one or two words and... you loved him again” (pg. 231).

Perhaps no better example of this dichotomy can be illustrated, than when Joe Drach broke a bone in his hand during a game with West Virginia. After exiting the game, Bryant asked Drach to “tape it up.” “Uh, tape it... up,” Drach replied, just as Bear grabbed his arm and popped the bone back in place? Joe passed out, but did recover in time to play in the second half. After the game, Bryant approached Drach and told him, “I had to do that. We needed you. We would have lost without you.” Joe remembered that he was still upset with his coach for his actions, but commented, “When he said that, I swear, I’d have gone out and broken another bone just to show him I could have done it again” (Last, pg. 97).

Unfortunately for Paul, the university administration didn't listen to his requests as well as his players did. After returning from Christmas break, Bryant found that the school's President, Curley Byrd, had gone behind his back, and not only reinstated a player that Bryant had suspended for violating team rules, but had also fired an assistant coach. Bear knew that in order to establish a solid football program, one needed to establish solid relationships. And if such undermining was going to take place within the university's brass, Paul knew that Maryland was not the place for him. Bryant told Byrd of his intentions, and, even though he had only been at the school for a year, the student body came out en masse to support Bear. Picket lines were set, meetings were called, newspaper articles were written. Bryant did his best to quell the supportive students, and reassured them that the football players he had recruited would remain, but affirmed that this was something – for the sake of all things loyal – that he *needed* to do.

And as fate would have it, Paul was sorting through a stack of mail that he had just recently cleaned-out from his office, and a telegram caught his eye. The enclosed message read: "If you want to be head coach at Kentucky call me collect. Dr. Herman Donovan, President" (Last, pg. 102).

Bear's return to the SEC was certainly a heralded occasion. As Kentucky football historian Russell Rice put it, "Beginning in 1946, coaches in competition with Bryant were forced to neglect their golf games" (Last, pg. 109). In Bear's first season at the helm, the Wildcats went from 2-8 the previous year to 7-3, including an especially gratifying 10-7 victory over his former boss, Red Sanders' Vanderbilt squad. Paul knew, however, that in order to remain competitive, he, *too*, would have to continue to step up his game. From a coaching standpoint, this meant landing even better recruits – and no one was better at recruiting than Bryant.

George Blanda, a sophomore at Kentucky when Bear arrived, recounts his first meeting with the coach: "This must be what God looks like," Blanda thought to himself. "A very handsome man, tall and smooth. He was the most energetic man I'd ever seen. He'd walk into the room and you wanted to stand up and applaud. He [gave] this speech to the student body, and I thought he was going to get elected president" (Last, pg. 114).

Be it president, coach, or God, himself, Bryant didn't care how he got players to join the Kentucky team. And he certainly didn't mind a little "divine intervention," if you will. In fact, on one recruiting trip, Bryant was visiting the home of Gene Donaldson, a highly sought-after high school player. Coming from a Catholic family, though, Donaldson was leaning towards Notre Dame. Bear knew he'd have to dig deep into his bag of "Frank Thomas tricks," and as the Fighting Irish coach, Frank Leahy, alleged, Bryant went so far as to dress his student manager, Jim Murphy, up as a priest to entice Donaldson to commit to the Wildcats. Bryant later conceded, "Maybe Jim... did tell Donaldson he was a priest. Shucks, I'd have told him Murphy was Pope Pius if I'd thought we would get Donaldson that way" (Laughing, pg. 18).

Bear used a similar tactic to talk Howard Schnellenberger out of his verbal commitment to Indiana. In all fairness, though, Bryant did, at least, use a *real* priest this time (the archbishop of the Louisville diocese), who convinced Howard – *and* his mother – that the Lord would understand his change of heart to remain in Kentucky and play for his home state.

Barring this year's 8-5/Music City Bowl championship squad (☺), in 1950, Bryant had assembled, arguably, the best football team in the university's history. The team's 11-1 season, spotted only by a 7-0 defeat at the hands of Gen. Neyland's Tennessee Vols, was capped-off with an SEC crown, as well as a trip to the Sugar Bowl. The Wildcats squared-off with Bud Wilkerson's #1-ranked Oklahoma team, and, led by Babe Parilli, Walt Yowarsky, Charlie McClendon, and Bob Gain, UK thwarted the Sooner attack, and pulled-off the improbable 13-7 victory. The loss also snapped Oklahoma's 31-game win streak, which was the longest in the nation at that point.

Much to the chagrin of Bryant and his players, though, the 1951 Sugar Bowl would not be taken into consideration when compiling the final rankings. The wire polls of the time were, almost annually, changing their policies on whether or not to include the bowl games in their calculations. And when the national championship was awarded, it was Oklahoma, not Kentucky, which lifted the trophy.

Bear would have to wait another 10 years before he had that luxury.

While major colleges cannot acquiesce 100% or plan with complete certainty for their separate programs to succeed simultaneously, 1950 was perhaps the worst year for UK football to assert itself. The basketball-hungry state was still riding high from its back-to-back national titles in '48 and '49, and Adolph Rupp had *well*-established himself as *the* face of the university. When NCAA recruiting violations suspended the Wildcat's entire '52 and '53 basketball seasons, though, Paul was assured by university President Donovan that Rupp would soon be forced to step down; and, as an added measure of good faith, more money would be channeled into the football program to upgrade the team's facilities. However, on a recruiting trip to Alabama, soon thereafter, Bryant was floored when he picked up a newspaper and read where Kentucky had just offered Rupp a new, multi-year contract.

Paul was devastated. It seemed as if he was at Maryland all over again. And to add insult to injury, over Bear's 8-year tenure, he had turned down other job offers from Southern Cal, Arkansas, Minnesota, and even Alabama. Bryant simply couldn't "turn the other cheek" again, but, sadly, all of these coaching positions were now filled. His only choice was College Station.

"According to Jim Dent, whose book The Junction Boys immortalized Bryant's first year at [Texas A&M], 'The campus possessed all the glamour of a stock show' and 'boasted the color scheme of a grocery bag'" (Last, pg. 157). One thing was certain, though:

Bryant was resolved to go about his business of coaching, *just* as he always had. Not even the notoriously meddlesome A&M alumni – or, “Aggie Exes,” as they were called – were going to stop Bear from winning.

In fact, on one occasion, just a few short weeks after arriving at College Station, one self-proclaimed football aficionado showed up at Bryant’s office with 5 “sure-fire prospects” from Palestine, Texas. What the Cadillac-driving alum didn’t know, however, was that Paul’s assistants had already scouted the eastern part of the state, and had returned an unfavorable report. Bryant, with a tact and tone that only he could produce, surmised to the gentleman, “If thin shoulders and a skinny tail will get the job done, you’ve got *you* five All-Americans” (Laughing, pg. 41).

Needless to say, the Exes’ pestering ceased, and Bear was willing to take his team off-campus to ensure this “peace and quiet.” After all, he had to find some way to sift through the pedestrian talent he had inherited.

There is no denying that the Junction practices were brutal. Three busloads caravanned some 100 players to the middle of the Texas desert, and at the end of the 10-day session, only 29 made the trip back as a member of the football team. Rob Roy Spiller, a clerk at the nearby bus station recalls watching countless players flee in the middle of the night. “Most didn’t care which way the bus was going,” he conveyed. “They just wanted the first bus out” (Last, pg. 172).

Most would be surprised, however, to hear the words of Gene Stallings, who *was* one of the 29 survivors. Stallings surmised, “I honestly think if [Coach Bryant would] have known how bad [the Junction facilities were] (For instance: no running water, working toilets, military style barracks, and a four-year drought-stricken area), he wouldn’t have taken us there” (Last, pg. 169). Furthermore, Stallings alleges, “I’ve never done anything harder in my life, but I don’t recall a single instance in which Coach Bryant was unfair” (Last, pg. 174). Howard Schnellenberger even called the modern portrayal of the Junction experience “b.s.” Similar sentiments have also been shared by Bum Phillips and John David Crow (Who, as an aside, was Bryant’s only Heisman Trophy winner).

Regardless of the validity of the Junction claims, one indisputable fact was clear: A&M was showing improvement. Even in their 1954 campaign (Which, by the way, was Bryant’s only losing season in his 38 year career). And, for the third consecutive time (4, if you include Vanderbilt), Bryant had taken a perennial cellar-dweller, reversed their fortune, and molded them into, at least, a conference, if not national, contender.

Regrettably, though, the NCAA put Bear’s 1-9 Aggies on probation for recruitment violations. Most thought these sanctions to be a ploy; a way of making an example out of one of college sport’s biggest names. In what seemed almost laughable at the time, the probation included a 2-year ban from post-season play. Little did anyone believe – except Bryant, possibly – that this would cost his team a chance at the national title.

In 1956, A&M went 9-0-1, and were crowned Southwestern Conference champions. The Aggies only blemish on the year came during the fourth week of the season, when Houston tied Bear's squad, because he refused to kick a last-second chip-shot field goal, and, instead, went for, and failed to convert, a goal-line quarterback sneak. Even with A&M's conference rivals lobbying on their behalf, the NCAA would not lift the bowl ban imposed on the Aggies. Thus, for the second time in Bryant's career – even though he had a *legitimate* claim to the championship – Bear would not be rewarded with a ring.

On the wall of Coach Bryant's office, he had a sign that read: "Winning Isn't Everything, But It Beats Anything That Comes In Second." In 1957, Bear delivered to his Texas players (and, subsequently, to the nation via the swarm of media that was in College Station that day), what would come to be known as his "Mama Called" speech. As Paul explained it, "When you were out playing as a kid, say you heard your mother call you. If you thought she just wanted you to do some chores, or come in for supper, you might not answer her. But if you thought she *needed* you, you'd be there in a hurry" (Last, pg. 200).

As everyone knew, Paul Bear Bryant was not willing to settle for second. The University of Alabama had called, and the rest, as they say, is history.

best

was yet to come ...

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