

A Season Held Hostage:
Charlie Bradshaw's Thin Thirty

Duncan Cavanah
February 4, 2010

Like many members of this society, I inherited from my father the unfortunate trait of being a Kentucky football fan. Thus, I have devoted a great deal of time, attention and money to the time-honored pursuit of traveling around the southeastern United States watching all manner of opponents dash my hopes and dreams each Fall. I suppose that like most Wildcat fans, I am either an eternal optimist, or simply glutton for punishment.

As part of my duties as a fan, I have attempted to learn something of the program's history. Unfortunately, the history of Kentucky football does not produce a lengthy list of memorable teams. Aside from a few years under Bear Bryant, and a few renegade teams from the 1970s under Fran Curci, Kentucky's football history is mostly forgettable. As I learned more about the history of the program, however, one team always intrigued me, in part because it seemed like such a mysterious story, and in part because it was the only UK squad I was aware of that had earned a nickname, "the Thin Thirty." The full extent of my knowledge of the team was that they played with just 30 players, and beat Tennessee. My impression was that it was a feel-good story of grit and determination overcoming difficult circumstances. I held that perception until I recently read Shannon Ragland's book, The Thin Thirty. Only then did I realize that the story was much darker than I could have imagined.

In the mostly forgettable history of University of Kentucky football, the early 60's were a time that held some promise. While the program was not at the heights it enjoyed a decade earlier under legendary coach Bear Bryant, Blanton Collier had kept the program at a very respectable level. In fact, in succeeding

the Bear, Collier was 41- 36 and 3 over 8 years and, importantly, Collier held a record of 5- 2 and 1 against border rival Tennessee. Collier himself was a brilliant coach who would later coach the Cleveland Browns to an NFL championship in 1964 and runner-up finishes in 1968 and 1969. Beyond his individual skill, Collier's coaching staff at Kentucky was loaded with star power including Don Shula, Chuck Knox, Howard Schnellenberger, and Bill Arnsparger.

Aside from his successes on the field, Collier was widely reputed to be of the highest moral character and integrity. He was consistently liked by his players, who described his Kentucky teams as akin to a family.

In a move which demonstrates one of the reasons that Kentucky has remained at the bottom of the SEC pecking order over the years, the Kentucky administration, in its infinite wisdom, decided that Collier was not fit for the job following his 5 and 5 1961 campaign. Ultimately, Collier was not the Bear, and he fell victim to the age-old truism about following a legend.

Collier was out, and the administration needed to find their new man for the upcoming 1962 season. It was widely reported that the search came down to two names: Hopkinsville's own Jerry Claiborne, then head coach at Virginia Tech and Charlie Bradshaw, assistant to Bear Bryant at the University of Alabama. In a move that spoke largely to the administration's continued infatuation with Bryant, Bradshaw was hired in January, 1962.

Montgomery, Alabama native Charlie Bradshaw first arrived in Lexington Kentucky in 1942 on a football scholarship. His initial stay in Lexington was a brief one, as he enlisted in the Marines and served for two years with an artillery

battalion in the South Pacific. He returned to play football at Kentucky in 1946. Bradshaw was the perfect Bear Bryant player. He was undersized for his position, and not terribly talented, but was incredibly tough, and played with a maniacal violence that Bryant strongly endorsed. Star UK quarterback of the era, Babe Parilli, remembered Bradshaw's style of play rather simply. "Charlie played mean."

Collier returned to Lanier High School in Montgomery as an assistant coach immediately after his eligibility expired at Kentucky. Four years later, he returned to Lexington as an assistant to Blanton Collier. He served in that capacity until 1959, when he left to join Bear Bryant at Alabama. Bradshaw coached the offensive line at Alabama and was given a great deal of credit for the offense's production in Alabama's undefeated national championship season of 1961.

Bradshaw seemed to be the perfect fit at Kentucky. He had played for Kentucky in its golden era under Bryant, had served as an assistant at the school, and was by all accounts and up and coming star in the coaching profession, mentored by the nation's most legendary coach. The administration was certain this hard-nosed Bryant protégé would produce the same results at Kentucky that Bryant had a decade earlier. No one at that time could have predicted the grim reality of Bradshaw's "total football," and its impact upon the university and its student athletes.

Football is and was a copycat sport. When a team has success with a new offensive or defensive system, that system is soon duplicated by others. In

the late 1950's and early 1960's, Bear Bryant dominated the college football landscape. He did so with an emphasis on mental and physical toughness. Bear's teams were known to be small by college football standards, but extraordinarily aggressive and physical. This aggressiveness, bordering on the excessive, was born out of intensely physical "boot camps." These camps actually began at Kentucky in 1946 when the Bear took his team to the Millersburg Military Academy. The more famous example of Bryant's training practices was that of the 1953 Texas A & M team chronicled in the book and movie "The Junction Boys." Bryant took his first team at A&M to Junction, Texas in the middle of a draught for a ten (10) day boot camp. Following this camp, the team's roster dropped from approximately from 100 to about 35. Though the Bear's initial team at Texas A&M went just 1 and 9, Bryant instilled his personality on the program, and the Aggies won a conference championship within two (2) years. A similar process was duplicated by Bryant at Alabama.

Because of Bryant's tremendous success, the SEC itself was formed in his image, focusing not on size or speed, but on sheer brutality. There was no question that Bradshaw, who honed himself in Bryant's image, would follow the same blueprint at Kentucky.

In his opening address to his team, then 88 in number, Bradshaw described what he called "total football." This meant that every ounce of a player's being must be devoted to the solitary goal of playing winning football. He told the players that what lay ahead for them would be the hardest work they had ever done and would not be for the faint of heart. Bradshaw was already

aware, having gone through similar seasons under Bryant, that players would quit the team. He stated to the team in his initial address that they would forget the names of those who quit. It would not take long for the quitting to begin.

Because Bradshaw was hired in January, there would be no formal and legal practice until the spring. Bradshaw had no intention of waiting until April to instill his brand of total football. Instead, he initiated what was euphemistically referred to as “voluntary” winter conditioning. In his initial address to the team, he stated that he only asked for 45 minutes a day, and commented that anyone could do anything for 45 minutes. These initial practices took place at an indoor facility, which was actually little more than a building holding four (4) racquetball courts. Had the players been paying attention upon arrival, they may have been clued in to some degree as to what lay in store for them if they had looked towards the windows, which had been blacked out for the occasion. Bradshaw did not want prying eyes observing what was to take place during these workouts.

The winter workouts consisted of four (4) stations that players would run through at full tilt. There were no breaks, and there was very strictly no water provided. In room one, the players performed what were called grass drills. This was agility training in which the players did all nature of calisthenics, push-ups and sit-ups. There was constant movement, with coaches at all times screaming, berating and cursing players. It was not unusual during these grass drills for coaches to stomp on player’s hands or spit on them if they felt that maximum effort was not being exerted. Players frequently got sick due to the intensity of

the drills. For this reason, the coaches placed vomit boxes around the corners of the room. It was demanded that a player not pause from his exercises when he got sick, but rather simply run toward the nearest box, and vomit in that general direction before being pushed back into the drill.

From the grass drills, the players moved next to the blocking room. The blocking room contained wooden blocking sleds with no padding, but rather covered with a simple burlap sack. Under the prescribed technique of the era, the players were instructed to hit the sled with their faces. This very often resulted in the players bloodying their noses and foreheads over and over again. While still in the blocking room, the players quickly moved to tackling drills. These drills were conducted at full speed and full contact on the hard racquetball court floors with no helmets or pads.

The third station was the weight-lifting room. Like Bryant, Bradshaw did not want his players to be bulky, so the emphasis was on repetition. As in all of the other rooms, coaches were constantly hovering above players, cursing and belittling them as they attempted to lift.

The most brutal room was saved for last. In this final room, after all of the blood and sweat was spilled in the first three, the players faced off for wrestling matches. Though it was referred to as wrestling, it had very little to do with that sport. Instead, it was essentially a no-holds barred, full contact fight between players in which the only act not allowed was a punch. It was not at all infrequent to see players badly injured, but girded on by coaches to continue the fight. The coaches praised the most savage of tactics. When a player lost one of these

“wrestling” matches, he was forced to fight again against a new man until he won. Once the wrestling finally ended, the workout finished with the players going outside to run wind sprints. Despite the promised 45 minutes, players remembered that these workouts frequently lasted twice as long. Numerous players reported losing forty or fifty pounds from the previous season due to these workouts.

Aside from being simply barbaric in nature, the winter workouts were also totally contrary to NCAA rules. The NCAA prohibited any actual football practice, and thus did not allow players to wear pads or use a football. Bradshaw attempted to skirt these rules by simply requiring full contact football without pads. Additionally, to get around the no football rule, the offensive skill position players carried rolled up towels rather than footballs in all drills. Ultimately, these ploys of Bradshaw proved unsuccessful, as probation would ultimately lie in wait due in large part to these workouts.

Between his hiring in January, and the commencement of spring drills in April, Bradshaw lost 18 players. In an address to his team prior to spring practice, an unsympathetic Bradshaw did not seem concerned by the reduction in his roster. “Those guys that quit, they’ll be quitters their whole lives. They’ll be eating hamburgers and you guys around here will be eating steak.”

With his squad dwindling in numbers, Bradshaw promised that things would lighten up for spring drills. They did not, and players began leaving as early as the first day of spring practice. The nature of a Bradshaw practice was described by Jim Cheatam, who would later be a Colonel in the U. S. Army after

serving tours of duty in Vietnam. “I guess I could say nothing I have seen in training compared to those terrible practices at UK. If the services pulled anything like that, someone would be put in jail.”

Another description was provided by John Mutchler, who transferred to Western Kentucky prior to the 1962 season. In an interview by the *Paducah Sun Democrat*, Mutchler described his reason for transferring. “I quit the team because of the physical and the verbal abuse to me and to especially to my teammates which I can’t stomach. This turned me against the whole situation and I lost my desire to play under these conditions. I knew big time football was a big business, but this just got out of hand and simply turned into a nightmare.”

As if the physical toll of constant hitting between the players was not enough, the coaches felt very comfortable delivering blows themselves. Russ Miracle, of Bell County, described assistant Bob Ford as a “sadist.” Ford’s inspirational tool of choice was the forearm shiver, which he frequently delivered to players who did not meet his expectations. Bradshaw, on the other hand, implemented a blindside peel-back block as his primary motivational tool. Bradshaw, still just 38 years old at this time, was a powerful man who could do significant damage even to a young player when delivering an unexpected hit.

On the final day of spring practice, an incident took place that greatly impacted all of the young Wildcats. Louis Owen, a mild-mannered quarterback and defensive back, was beaten in drills on a passing play and missed the subsequent tackle. In a fit of rage, the maniacal Bob Ford raced to Owen and struck him in the jaw, knocking out one of Owen’s teeth. Though Ford would

claim that it was an accident, it was apparent to everyone that it was yet another example of reckless brutality from the Bradshaw regime.

In addition to the toll that Bradshaw's tactics took on the players' bodies, he also waged war on their minds. Mike Menix, a sophomore on the Kentucky roster, was a pre-med major. Unfortunately for Menix, this demanding academic schedule interfered with Bradshaw's total football mentality. Specifically, Menix had a lab that took place at the same time as a football strategy class presided over by Bradshaw. This class was a required course for Kentucky football players, and was nothing more than another opportunity for the team to practice under Bradshaw's guidance. Bradshaw instructed Menix that he must drop his pre-med major and prioritize his football career. To his credit, Menix refused Bradshaw's demands, quit the football team and ultimately practiced medicine.

By the end of spring practice, 21 additional Wildcats had made their exodus from Bradshaw's program, leaving the roster at 49. The annual spring game was cancelled due to the low number. The school newspaper, the *Kentucky Kernel*, the only local paper that seemed willing to report on the story, published an article following spring practice in 1962 detailing the purging of the roster. Bradshaw was quoted in article as follows: "I don't think we should acknowledge the quitters, but bolster the ones who are out here. If a boy quits once, he'll quit again. We'll play with ten men and a coach if we have to."

Five additional players left the team during the summer, leaving the squad at 44 entering fall practice. In 1962, freshmen were not eligible for varsity action, so the coaches could not rely on incoming freshman to fill out the roster. Instead,

the Wildcats would go into a brutal Southeastern Conference schedule with exactly one-half of the roster Charlie Bradshaw inherited seven months prior.

As inevitably happens with a coaching change, there was excitement and optimism to begin the 1962 season. Kentucky first played Florida State at home at Stoll Field. In front of a near capacity crowd, 25 Kentucky Wildcats played Florida State to a 0 to 0 tie. Though the game was by no means an offensive showcase, it did lead to some optimism due to Kentucky's spirited and aggressive play.

Kentucky's next task would be much tougher, playing seventh ranked Ole Miss in Oxford, Mississippi. Interestingly, this game was held the very week that the University of Mississippi was ordered to admit its first black student, James Meredith. The game became, to a large degree, an enormous segregation rally, spirited on by Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett. Sandwiched between this rally and campus rioting that would claim the life of two people, Kentucky lost 14 to 0 to the Rebels. Despite the loss, Kentucky again displayed significant fight, with legendary Ole Miss coach Johnny Vaught, stating "that was the best conditioned, hardest hitting team that we have ever faced, and we are happy to have won." Though not having won a game, Bradshaw's Wildcats had performed admirably through two weeks, and were given significant praise both by the coaches and the media. Bradshaw had legitimate reason to believe that his tactics were about to turn the program into a perpetual winner. His absolute faith in total football blinded Bradshaw to the dark clouds that were now encircling his program.

Bradshaw's first significant blow during the 1962 season happened not on a football field, but in a magazine. For weeks, a *Sports Illustrated* writer had followed Bradshaw and his coaches as they went through their paces with the team. Remarkably, Bradshaw was under the delusional impression that the article that was to be written would be a glowing endorsement of his coaching that would serve to promote the program. Instead, the article, entitled *The New Rage to Win* was a scathing attack on Bradshaw's barbaric methods. The article detailed physical violence against the players by the coaches, including specifically the Louis Owen incident in which Bob Ford knocked out Owen's tooth. It also described in great detail two NCAA violations that would ultimately lead to probation. The first was the clearly non-voluntary winter workouts. The second was the deplorable pulling of scholarships for those that had quit the team.

The article detailed that players were not only run off by Bradshaw's practices, but that they were hounded to sign releases of their scholarships. In fact, almost all of those who quit during the winter or spring workouts in 1962 signed such a release. This practice only stopped when Ole Miss coach, Johnny Vaught, stated to the *Courier Journal* in an interview that players were entitled to four years of room and board regardless of whether or not they played football. Why did it take a rival coach from Mississippi to sound the alarm about the wrong being perpetrated on Kentucky's student athletes by their coach and their school?

The UK administration shamelessly supported Bradshaw's purging of the roster. In response to the article, UK's Athletic Director, Bernie Shivley, stated "all football players who gave up the sport, but who stayed in school, voluntarily signed statements they were giving up their scholarships. The boys all feel when they quit the sport, they should relieve the University of any financial obligation because they aren't living up to their obligation." According to the players, there was nothing voluntary about it. Players had no idea they were entitled to stay in school when they quit the football team, and simply signed the statement the coaches said they had to sign. Some players who had voluntarily given up their scholarships appealed to the University to have their scholarships returned, but following a brief hearing presided over by President Dickey, their appeal was denied.

Despite these clear abuses, the local media continued to protect the University. Rather than further question Bradshaw's intentions, the *Herald Leader* responded to the *Sports Illustrated* story with an article entitled *UK is Victim of Hatchet Job*. If Bradshaw did not have control of his anger or his coaches, he certainly had solid control over the local media.

The negative vibe that surrounded the program in the wake of the *S / Article* was enforced with a 16 to 6 loss the following week to a mediocre Auburn team. Bradshaw was now winless in three starts at Kentucky. Fortunately for him, the schedule offered a near guaranteed win against lowly Detroit in week four, and Bradshaw earned his first Kentucky victory with a 27 to 8 win.

The following three weeks would not prove to be as kind to the Kentucky squad. In week five, Kentucky lost to fourth ranked LSU by a respectable 7 to 0. Kentucky then tied a poor Georgia team 7 to 7, before losing to the Miami Hurricanes 25 to 17. Due to injury, Kentucky played just 18 players. Kentucky led into the third quarter, but ultimately wilted in the Miami humidity. (An interesting aside on the Miami game, Kentucky played at Miami the very week of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The game was almost cancelled, but was ultimately played when the crisis subsided.)

Bradshaw got his second win at Kentucky in week 8 verses Vanderbilt, a team that had lost 15 straight games. Despite getting a needed win, it was a rather unsatisfying 7 to 0 Kentucky victory.

From the 1940's through the 1960's, Kentucky routinely played Xavier as its second to last game as a tune up for Tennessee. In the twenty years leading to 1962, Kentucky had lost the game only once. In that era, there were not lower classes of football (for example, Division I-AA, Division II, etc.), but Xavier was certainly not considered to be a major college program. During the '62 season, Xavier had lost to programs such as Ohio, Marshall and Villanova. Kentucky was installed as a 21 point favorite. In a game that has been widely regarded as fixed, Kentucky lost the game 14 to 9. The claim that the game was thrown has never been substantiated, nor are there any culprits directly accused on the UK team. The perception is based largely in the claim that Kentucky could not possibly have lost to a team the quality of Xavier had both teams played to their capability.

Regardless of whether or not the game was fixed, the poor national publicity and poor record had begun to create some heat on Bradshaw going into the season finale against the rival Tennessee Volunteers in Knoxville. The Wildcats were considered to be a significant underdog against the Vols. Kentucky took the field that day in Knoxville with 28 players in uniform, though only 23 were healthy enough to play. Using a last minute drive, and field goal by Clarkie Mayfield (his only successful attempt of the season, by the way), Kentucky won the contest 12 to 10, ending a dismal season with a heroic victory. Still, despite the feel good win, the famed "Thin Thirty" at UK ended with a record of 3-5 and 2, significantly worse than the record that ended the Kentucky career of Blanton Collier.

There remained very little attention to the diabolical behavior of Bradshaw and his staff by the local media. Throughout the season and beyond, both the *Herald Leader* and *Courier Journal* defended and even promoted Bradshaw's tactics. Following the *Sports Illustrated* article, for example, *Herald Leader* writer Billy Thompson responded that "practices are no tougher than at Eastern or Western. It isn't a game like drop the handkerchief or spin the bottle. It wasn't meant to be a parlor sport played at parties." In other words, the local media put the blame for the attrition directly on those who had left, saying they simply lacked the toughness to play Bradshaw's brand of hard-nosed football. By doing so, the media condoned the abuses, and allowed them to continue unchecked.

One question that has been asked repeatedly is why the players who remained on the roster put up with Bradshaw's madness. There were periodic

moments of player rebellion during the '62 season. John Mutchler once caught an attempted forearm to the head from Bradshaw. Holding the coach's arm in his large hands, Mutchler said simply; "If you touch me again, I'll kill you." Bradshaw wisely told the team to hit the showers. A later incident was described in which a player actually punched Bradshaw after Bradshaw drug him across the practice field by his facemask. These incidents, while indicative of the player's feelings about the coaches, never led to mass rebellion.

I was able to gain some additional insight into why players tolerated Bradshaw's antics during a conversation with Hopkinsville native Rick Deason, who played for Bradshaw at Kentucky from 1967 to 1968. Rick stated that he and his teammates had no idea that the methods which Bradshaw employed were any different than other big time football programs. He went on to describe the psychological tactics which were used to pacify angry players. Despite their belittling and abusive behaviors, Rick described that he believed that he, not the coaches, was doing something wrong. In other words, if he would simply live up to the expectations that the coaches had for him, he would not be treated so poorly. Surely, the survivors of the 1962 season experienced similar emotions.

Bradshaw's remaining years at Kentucky were forgettable. For one moment in 1964, it appeared as though his maniacal reign would finally turn Kentucky around. This occurred when Kentucky beat number one ranked Ole Miss in Oxford. Following this dramatic victory, the Wildcats skyrocketed to a ranking of fifth in the country, only to be blown out the following week by Florida State. Bradshaw would never duplicate these heights again, and would finish his

Wildcat career after seven years at 25-41 and 4. It is indicated in the book that practices were somewhat less ferocious following the '62 season. However, according to Mr. Deason, all of the practices detailed by the book took place during Bradshaw's final two years in the program as well.

Following his failure at Kentucky, Bradshaw served as an assistant coach both at Vanderbilt and at Texas A and M before ultimately assuming the head coaching duties at Troy State in Alabama for seven years. He actually had a modicum of success, going 40-27 and 2 before being fired in 1982. From there, his life took a dramatic turn for the worse. Out of football at age 58, Bradshaw was given a job by Bear Bryant's son, Paul. Jr., managing a dog track in Tuscaloosa. He then moved on to another dog track in Nebraska. Bradshaw suffered a stroke in 1992 that limited him severely, and then another stroke that killed him in 1999.

The Thin Thirty had a thirty year reunion in 1992 in which they were invited by the administration to be introduced to the Commonwealth Stadium crowd at halftime of a UK football game. In a final act of exclusion by the University, none of those who had quit the team under pressure and abuse by Charlie Bradshaw's staff were invited to attend. Also not on the invitation list was Bradshaw himself. According to players on the 1962 team, it would not have been a good idea to include Bradshaw. The wounds suffered thirty years earlier at the hands of total football were apparently still too fresh.