

Coach Paul W. “Bear” Bryant: A Giant in the College Coaching Ranks and a Powerful Influence on  
Two Generations of Alabamians

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April 22, 2012

The University of Alabama Crimson Tide football team has won two of the last three national championships in college football. The year between the “other” university in Alabama, Auburn University, won it. Two of the last three Heisman Trophy award winners, identifying the best college football player in the nation, have been won by an Alabama running back and an Auburn quarterback. The Harvard College Sports Analysis Collective studied attendance at college football games in 2010 and Alabama ranked first in the nation at 110.51% capacity for each game and Auburn ranked fourth in capacity compared to population, 87,451 in a city of 125,781 residents.<sup>1</sup> To say college football in the state of Alabama is important to the residents of the state is an understatement. Sadly, this generation of fans, especially the younger ones, do not know the history of Alabama football, from early Rose Bowl wins to decades of greatness. The saddest thing of all is they do not know the history of the greatest coach not only for the University of Alabama, but college football itself. They are not aware of the career and life story of one Paul W. “Bear” Bryant.

In this paper I will be making two distinct arguments. The first argument is that football coach Paul W. “Bear” Bryant was the greatest college football coach of all time. This argument is not based on his record of wins and losses or the number of national championships he won. It is because he was the only coach in history to be extremely successful in three distinct eras of college football. Those eras were one-platoon football (pre-1964), where players played both offense and defense, two-platoon football (1964 to the present) where players played only offense or defense and the post-integration era, when college football was finally integrated. My greater argument is that “Bear” Bryant had a huge impact on two generations of Alabama residents, the baby-boomers (like myself) and the parents of the baby-boomers, making integration more acceptable through his ability to integrate the football team.

Bryant's success in coaching one-platoon college football at Maryland, Kentucky, Texas A&M

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Koenig. "The 2010 College Football Attendance Rankings." The Harvard College Sports Analysis Collective. <http://harvardsportsanalysis.wordpress.com/2011/01/18/the-2010-college-footballattendance-rankings/> (accessed April 22, 2012).

brought him back to his alma mater, the University of Alabama, where he subsequently became very successful. He coached six national championship teams at Alabama, one in the era of one-platoon football in 1961 and five more when the new substitution rules were enacted creating two-platoon football, in 1964, 1965, 1973, 1978 and 1979. These successes and his Southern roots helped to make him a respected role model who was then able to gradually integrate athletics and then football at the university. Bryant's success in this third stage of college football, the integrated period, helped to bring begrudging acceptance of desegregation even among those who had been staunchly segregationists.

Like every great story about someone's life, we must start at the beginning. Paul Bryant was the son of Wilson and Ida Bryant and was born and raised in the hard-scrabble countryside of Morrow, Arkansas.<sup>2</sup> He had ten older brothers and sisters. The family generated their income from a small truck farm. The closest town to Moro Bottom was Fordyce, Arkansas. Bryant attended Fordyce High School and tried out for and made the school's football team. The first game he ever saw was the first game he played in. He had a great high school career and was recruited by several colleges, including Arkansas and Alabama. He chose Alabama over his home state's school, Arkansas, because he had listened to their win in the 1931 Rose Bowl over Washington State on a radio in a local store.<sup>3</sup>

One question people ask is how did Paul Bryant get the nickname of "Bear"? While playing football at Fordyce, he agreed to wrestle a bear at a traveling carnival that came to town. The event was actually advertised by carnival workers parading around the streets of Fordyce with signs promoting the event. Early in the wrestling 'match' the bear's muzzle came off and Bryant jumped off stage. The bear and its owner went in the opposite direction and Bryant was never paid for his effort.<sup>4</sup>

From 1933 to 1935 Bryant had a successful playing career at Alabama. In his three seasons the teams he played on were 7-1, 10-0 and 6-2-1. In a great example of foreshadowing of the amazing life Bryant went on to live, the other end on his Alabama teams was Don Hutson. Hutson had an All-

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<sup>2</sup> Paul W. Bryant and John Underwood, *Bear: The Hard Life and Good Times of Alabama's Coach Bryant*. (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2007), 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>4</sup> Allen Barra, *The Last Coach: A Life of Paul "Bear" Bryant*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 20-21.

American career in college and went on to be a great end for the Green Bay Packers, being named to the National Football League All-Century team alongside Jerry Rice.<sup>5</sup> A great example of the sacrifice Bryant was willing to make as a player and in the future asked of his players was the 1935 Alabama versus Tennessee game. The Crimson Tide opened that season with a 7-7 tie game with lightly regarded Howard University and lost 20-7 to Mississippi State two weeks later. Bryant broke his leg in the Mississippi State game. He offered to dress out to be on the sidelines to cheer on his teammates. The night before the game the team doctor removed the cast from his leg. Bryant was standing the pregame locker room meeting with crutches when the head coach, Frank Thomas, asked his top assistant coach, Hank Crisp, if he had anything to add to Thomas's speech. Crisp said he did. He told the players, "I'll tell you one thing. I don't know about the rest of you, you or you or you, but I know ol' Number 34 will be after them today." Bryant looked around and did not see a number 34. He was wearing the number 34. In that era, the players wore different numbers each game to make sure fans were forced to buy programs for each game. This was the genesis for the saying "You can not tell who the players are without a program." Bryant not only played in the game but had one of the best games of his career in a 25-0 win for Alabama.<sup>6</sup>

When Bryant's playing career was over, he stayed at Alabama the following season as an assistant coach. He was offered a better assistant coaching job by Vanderbilt in 1940 and accepted the offer. He coached at Vanderbilt until the attack on Pearl Harbor. The next day, he enlisted in the Navy. His career in the Navy provided another opportunity for Bryant's leadership skills to come to the front, and he saved lives. The troop ship he was stationed on, the USS *Uruguay*, was rammed by another troop ship. Everyone ran to the deck and was ordered to abandon ship. Bryant surveyed the situation and decided the ship was safe to stay on and told the men around him to stay on the deck instead of jumping overboard. The men who heard him and listened lived. Over two hundred men did not hear

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 71.

him and jumped overboard and died. Bryant was quoted as saying “[I was] praying, and I was leading 'em.”<sup>7</sup>

Bryant's first opportunity at being a head football coach came late in his Navy enlistment. In 1944 he was assigned to coach the North Carolina Navy Pre-Flight School football team. The team, The Cloudbusters, played and beat Duke University that year 13-6. It was his first college win as a head football coach, though it does not appear on his win-loss record. In another example of how Bryant's life always seemed to have brushes with other greats over the years, his quarterback on that team was future Cleveland Brown's Hall-of-Famer Otto Graham. The other example was his coaching method during his tenure in the Navy. He demanded his players to work extremely hard and this drove some of them to quit. This is a pattern that followed him to his other coaching stops during his career.<sup>8</sup>

Author Allen Barra, in his well-researched biography of Bryant, *The Last Coach: A Life of Paul “Bear” Bryant*, supplies a chronology of his life and career. It covers the 1945 football season, when Bryant accepted an offer to be the head coach at the University of Maryland and coached the team to a 6-2-1 record, with several players from his Navy training school team playing for him at Maryland. Following that season, he left Maryland due to disagreements with the school president over disciplining players and accepted an offer to coach at the University of Kentucky. Prior to Bryant's arrival, the 1945 Kentucky team went 2-8. In 1946, under Bryant, they went 7-3. The following year he took the Wildcats to the first bowl game in the school's history, a win over Villanova in the 1947 Great Lakes Bowl. The 1950 team featured the first of many great quarterbacks Bryant coached, Babe Parilli. The Wildcats finished the season 11-1, ending with an upset victory over legendary coach Bud Wilkinson's Oklahoma Sooners in the Sugar Bowl, snapping their thirty-one game win streak. 1953 was Bryant's final season at Kentucky.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately for Bryant, his brush with greatness was not a good thing this time. Kentucky featured one of the greatest college basketball coaches of all-time,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 524-25.

Adolph Rupp. Rupp coached basketball at Kentucky for forty years.<sup>10</sup> The running joke that Bryant liked to tell for the remainder of his life was that the year he won that Sugar Bowl the basketball team won the national championship, so Rupp received a new Cadillac and Bryant received a shiny new cigarette lighter.<sup>11</sup> The accepted reason for Bryant leaving Kentucky was that he felt he was overshadowed by Rupp but this was not the case. Kentucky basketball was investigated by both the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the Southeastern Conference (SEC) for rules violations and the basketball team was suspended from playing the 1952 and 1953 seasons. The reaction of this was that University of Kentucky administrators enacted rules to prevent future violations. One of these was limiting the football team's number of scholarships they could give to out-of-state recruits to five. Bryant knew that in the state of Kentucky with its limited population he could not compete under these rules. The team manager at that time, Frank Sadler, later said: "That infuriated him. He knew damn well there was no way Kentucky was ever going to be a major football power with just in-state talent, particularly if he couldn't recruit black players."<sup>12</sup>

After turning around two college programs from losing to winning, Bryant was now headed to Texas A&M. His first year there has been immortalized in a book written by Jim Dent, *The Junction Boys*, and the subsequent movie. Bryant wanted to create a new culture of winning at the school and decided to hold a training camp away from the campus. Three buses loaded with players and coaches left College Station for a remote camp the university used for its geology and physics schools in Junction City, Texas, six hours away. After eight days of intense practices under draconian measures, one bus returned with the coaches and the twenty-nine players who refused to quit. Two players from that team went on the successful coaching careers themselves, Jack Pardee and Gene Stallings.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, Stallings went on to win a national championship at Alabama as head coach. Bryant's team

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10 University of Kentucky. "Men's Basketball." Kentucky Wildcats Official Athletic Site. <http://www.ukathletics.com/sports/m-baskbl/archive/all-time-coaches.html> (accessed April 21, 2012).

11 Bryant and Underwood. *Bear*, 106.

12 Barra. *The Last Coach*, 151-52.

13 *Ibid.*, 168-75.

won one game and lost nine in his first season as coach. A year later, his 1955 team won seven games, lost two and had one tie. The next year the Aggies won the Southwest Conference championship, winning nine games with one tie and no losses. That 1956 team was the first in school history to win a game at arch-rival Texas. 1957 was Bryant's last year as coach of Texas A&M. Ironically, that season he coached his only Heisman Trophy winner of his career, John David Crow.<sup>14</sup> The University of Alabama came calling his name.

For the fourth and final time in Bryant's coaching career, he accepted a job to rejuvenate a losing program. This time he was returning him to his alma mater, Alabama. The once-proud Alabama football program had fallen on hard times. The four seasons before Bryant's arrival, Alabama had lost its annual meeting with arch-rival Auburn by a cumulative score of 128-7, including a 40-0 loss in 1957. To pour salt in the wound, the 1957 Auburn Tigers won the national championship.<sup>15</sup> In a repeat of his first season at Texas A&M, Bryant's initial practice sessions at Alabama were so intense that twenty-two players quit.<sup>16</sup>

Bryant's career at Alabama cemented his status as one of the greatest coaches of all time. His first season there, in 1958, he took a 2-7-1 team and led them to five wins, four losses and a tie. The following season he took them to a bowl game after beating Auburn, the first time Alabama had won a game over the Tigers since 1953. That 1959 team won seven games, lost just one and tied two. The Crimson Tide went to Philadelphia to play in the Liberty Bowl against the Penn State Nittany Lions. They lost 7-0, but the game had far more significance than the final score. It was the first time an Alabama football team played an integrated football team.<sup>17</sup> Integration and Alabama football went on to be a hotly discussed topic for the decade that followed. The conference Alabama played in, the SEC, did not attempt to integrate football until 1967 and that first attempt had a tragic result.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 525-26.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 526.

Alabama's football team had a decade filled with great accomplishments in the 1960s. It won national championships in 1961, 1964 and 1965.<sup>18</sup> The 1966 team began the season as the preseason number one team in the country and as the defending two-time national champions. It handily won all of ten of its games, outscoring its opponents 301 to 44.<sup>19</sup> Alabama did not finish as a three-time national champion, perhaps for reasons other than its play on the football field. Notre Dame and Michigan State tied each other that year, 10-10, and finished number one and two respectively at the end of the season. Alabama finished the year at number three. Coach Bryant theorized that the voters were sending him a message. Notre Dame featured an African American and future NFL Hall of Famer, Alan Page and Michigan State did the same with Bubba Smith. In *The Missing Ring*, Keith Dunnivant wrote, "Believing the racial situation cost him the title, Bryant took the offensive and announced that the Crimson Tide was trying to schedule regular season games against integrated, non-Southern programs – a small step, but one loaded with symbolism and significance."<sup>20</sup>

1964, two years prior to Alabama football being denied its third consecutive national championship, was a watershed year for civil rights, the nation and the state of Alabama. Before its signing on July 2, 1964, the proposed Civil Rights Act was the focus of great consternation in Alabama. The *Birmingham News* newspaper was filled with stories about the proposed legislation and various reactions. It contained a story quoting state Republican leader James D. Martin of Gadsden announcing that the bill was "ill-advised ... inhumane ... hate-breeding." According to the article, Martin addressed citizens in a television broadcast across the state, urging them to write letters protesting its passage. He went on to say, "You are on the verge of having your individual freedom and privacy wiped out by this monstrous civil wrong."<sup>21</sup> This article set the tone for future newspaper stories. The *Birmingham News* included a special report that included the paragraph: "Southerners, led by Sen. Richard Russell, D-Ga.,

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18 University of Alabama. "University of Alabama Official Athletic Site - Football." Alabama Crimson Tide Official Athletic Site. <http://www.rolltide.com/sports/m-footbl/archive/alab-m-footbl-archive.html> (accessed April 21, 2012).

19 Barra, *The Last Coach*, 517.

20 Keith Dunnivant, *The Missing Ring: How Bear Bryant and the 1966 Alabama Crimson Tide Were Denied College Football's Most Elusive Prize*. (New York, New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2007).

21 "Martin Rips Rights Bill as 'Inhumane.'" *Birmingham News*, March 3, 1964.



have attacked the fund cut-off provision as one of the bill's 'most repressive' features. Some Republicans, among them minority leader Everett M. Dirksen, have also raised objections to title VI.”<sup>22</sup>

The thought of the federal government withholding funds from states who refused to desegregate upset many southerners. Alabama's United State senators, Lister Hill, made a speech on the floor of the senate in opposition of the proposed bill. The *Birmingham News* published it in its entirety. In the speech, he listed several things he was opposed to. A few of these were telling. They included “I am opposed to taking away from the states their constitutional right to set voters' qualifications.”, “I am opposed to telling the states that a sixth grade education automatically makes their citizens qualified to vote.”, “I am opposed to telling businessmen how they may use their private property and whom they may hire and fire.” and “I am opposed to the extension of the federal commissions that harass our people and waste our taxpayer's money.”<sup>23</sup>

In that same edition of the *Birmingham News*, an editorial was titled “Sen. Hill's Experience Shows” and began with the sentence “If there is a chance of diminishing impact of a civil rights bill, it will result from the work of senators such as Lister Hill.”<sup>24</sup> Another story in the newspaper that day, at the bottom of the front page, was titled “Board Votes to Reopen Seven Community Centers” and reported the Birmingham Park and Recreation Board voted to reopen the city's community recreation centers. According to the article, “The centers have been officially closed since January 1962, following a federal court order desegregating all Birmingham recreational facilities.”<sup>25</sup>

The issue of integrating Alabama's schools intensified in the spring of 1964. The Friday, March 13, 1964 *Birmingham News* was plastered with the large, above-the-fold headline “New Justice Department Attack, U.S. Asks Federal Court Panel to Rule Statewide Desegregation of Schools.” The article included the passage “The brief specifically asked for an injunction barring Gov. George

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22 Erwin Knoll, “Booby Trap’ Seen in Rights Section”, *Birmingham News*, March 8, 1964.

23 “Rights Bill is Blank Check, Hill Warns”, *Birmingham News*, March 11, 1964.

24 “Sen. Hill's Experience Shows”. *Birmingham News*. March 11, 1964.

25 Lou Isaacson, “Board Votes to Reopen Seven Community Centers”, *Birmingham News*, March 11, 1964.

Wallace and Alabama state officials from interfering with county and city boards of education in desegregating school systems.” The article went on to tell how Wallace had prevented the opening of Tuskegee High School, “surrounding the school with state troopers and barred admission of any student.”<sup>26</sup> On page four of that same edition a story was titled “Won't Cancel Graham, City Denies Negro Parade Request” and told how the Birmingham City Council voted 4-4 in refusing to allow Negroes to form a parade raising the issue of the “walls of segregation.” In that same article, it told how “Mrs. Mary Lou Holt, secretary of the United America for Conservative Government, urged council not to permit the Negroes to parade or allow the integrated meeting at Legion Field.”<sup>27</sup>

The Thursday, March 19<sup>th</sup> *Birmingham News* headline story was “At Overflow AEA Session, Wallace Warns Chaos Would Follow Rights Bill” and told how the convention had “an overflow crowd of more than 5,000”. Wallace told them “the proposed civil rights bill puts every American school system in Federal hands and everyone is beginning to find that out, all over the nation.”<sup>28</sup> The Wallace was George Wallace, the governor of the state.

In “*The Schoolhouse Door*”, E. Culpepper Clark wrote: “Alabama was to the civil rights movement what Virginia was to the Civil War – its significance lending itself to enlargement in the public mind because the most memorable engagements occurred on its soil.”<sup>29</sup> Wallace was the general in Alabama's war against integration. Desegregation created an atmosphere of controversy and hostility in Alabama. George Wallace ran for the office of governor with a vitriolic, anti-desegregation platform in 1962. He had lost in his previous campaign for governor, but he vowed to win the 1962 election because, in his words, “I was out-niggered by John Patterson. And I'll tell you here and now, I will never be out-niggered again.” He then said, “I tried to talk about good roads and good schools and all these things that have been part of my career and nobody listened. And then I began talking about

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26 “New Justice Department Attack, U.S. asks Federal Court Panel to Rule Statewide Desegregation of Schools”, *Birmingham News*, March 13, 1964.

27 “Won't Cancel Graham, City Denies Negro Parade Request,” *Birmingham News*, March 13, 1964.

28 “At Overflow AEA Session, Wallace Warns Chaos Would Follow Rights Bill”, *Birmingham News*, March 19, 1964.

29 E. Culpepper Clark, *The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1993), xi.

niggers, and they stomped the floor.”<sup>30</sup> 1963 began with Wallace declaring during his inauguration speech, “segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever!”<sup>31</sup>

Birmingham, Alabama, had become the focal point of racism for the entire nation on September 15, 1963. The issue gripped the country when a bomb exploded on a Sunday morning at the city's largest black church, the site of multiple meetings led by Martin Luther King, Jr. The explosion killed four little girls attending Sunday school. The bombing came just days after Wallace was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying “a few first-class funerals” were needed to end the discussion of desegregation.<sup>32</sup>

On March 26, 1964, subscribers of the *Birmingham News* read three stories on the front page concerning the civil rights issue. The headline story was titled “Agrees To Take Up Bill, Senate Votes to End Civil Rights Deadlock.” The other two stories were “Dixie Senators Fear Wallace May Hurt Anti-Rights Cause” and “State Baptist Leaders Reject LBJ Rights Plea.” In the article concerning Governor Wallace, it concluded with a quote from a southern senator: “I'm afraid that Wallace is arousing a lot of resentment against the South. He could actually add strength to the civil right cause, stimulate more contributions to the NAACP, bring more clergymen and other volunteers into the move for ending racial segregation.”<sup>33</sup> In the latter article, the Baptist Executive Board's executive secretary, George Bagley, and the president of the Alabama Baptist Convention, Dr. Leon Macon, were quoted as saying, “We cannot in good conscience endorse the bill. We urge the 750,000 Baptists in Alabama to study its inherent dangers, and decide for themselves”.<sup>34</sup> The previous day, the other Alabama U.S. senator, John Sparkman, had portions of his speech on the floor of the senate published in the *Birmingham News*. It contained a telling passage, “The second provision is sinister. It constitutes a renewed demand for power to initiate civil actions to force desegregation of the public schools.” This is

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30 Maggie Riechers, *Racism to Redemption: The Path of George Wallace*. Humanities. <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2000-03/wallace.html> [accessed March 31, 2012].

31 Debbie Elliott, *Wallace in the Schoolhouse Door*. NPR : National Public Radio. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1294680> [accessed March 31, 2012].

32 Diane McWhorter., *The Way We Live Now: 7-29-01; Aftershock*. New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/29/magazine/the-way-we-live-now-7-29-01-aftershock.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> [accessed March 31, 2012].

33 “Dixie Senators Fear Wallace May Hurt Anti-Rights Cause”, *Birmingham News*, March 26, 1964.

34 “State Baptist Leaders Reject LBJ Rights Plea”, *Birmingham News*, March 26, 1964.

telling in the illustrating of how Senator Sparkman shared with most of his constituents the view that they were resistant to desegregation and being legally forced to implement it was in his words “sinister”. He went on to say, “We should remember that there is nothing in the Constitution which delegates to the federal government any role, however minor, in the area of education.”<sup>35</sup>

Against this backdrop of state politicians and religious leaders voicing their opposition to the Civil Rights Act, a monumental event took place in Birmingham. Reverend Billy Graham held an Easter Sunday Crusade at legendary Legion Field, the stadium where Alabama played its important games, including the annual “Iron Bowl” game against arch-rival Auburn. The *Birmingham News* reported that “Contrasted with the hundreds of other afternoons of football madness, the stadium yawned with a strange reverence. Coach Paul Bryant, of the University of Alabama, a platform guest, came here relaxed for a change.”<sup>36</sup> Coach Bryant was making an early, if silent, statement of how he felt about integration by sitting on the integrated stage that day. According to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's website, Coach Bryant might not have been that relaxed. The story on Billy Graham website about that Easter Crusade told of the church bombing the previous September that killed four black children. It contained the passage “Despite threats of violence, Billy refused to call off an integrated meeting in Birmingham’s Legion Field Stadium. “The Ku Klux Klan went around and knocked out our signs,” he recalls. “The State Police had to send policemen with us wherever we went—before my car and after my car. The police were also in the rooms around me, because they were afraid we would get shot.” The article went on to add:

Not long after, in the early months of 1965, African Americans were beaten and attacked by police dogs during a march from Selma to Montgomery. President Lyndon B. Johnson responded by calling Billy to ask if he would hold a series of meetings in Alabama. He agreed, preaching in Dothan, Tuscaloosa, Auburn and Tuskegee. Later that summer, Billy canceled a vacation in Europe to hold a 10-day Crusade in Montgomery. Nearly 100,000 people attended those meetings, and more than 4,000 accepted Christ.<sup>37</sup>

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35 “Opposing Civil Rights Bill, Sparkman Cites ‘Voices From Precincts’”, *Birmingham News*, March 25, 1964.

36 “Says Bill Graham, What a Moment in Birmingham”, *Birmingham News*, March 30, 1964.

37 “Billy Graham Breaks Racial Barriers.” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. <http://www.billygraham.org/articlepage.asp?articleid=1965> [accessed March 31, 2012]

For Alabama, the state, the decade of the 1960s painted a picture of a state filled with racial hatred and violence.

Sadly, it was Kentucky, not Alabama, that first saw racism raise its ugly head on a college football field. Greg Page and Nat Northington were taking part in drills for their college football team, the Kentucky Wildcats. Two years earlier they became the first two African Americans to sign athletic scholarships and attempted to break the color barrier of the Southeastern Football Conference. During practice on an August afternoon defensive end Page was given the task of being a ball carrier. With no blockers to lead the way, his coach ordered him to run through all eleven defensive players. All eleven defensive players hit him. After the eleventh hit, Page lay motionless on the ground. Thirty-eight days later, on a Friday night, he died. The only African American left on the roster, Northington, left Lexington a few weeks later, leaving Kentucky's entire Southeastern Conference all-white once more.<sup>38</sup> Ironically, Bryant had wanted to integrate the football team at Kentucky when he coached there. Barra wrote that Bryant had attended games at black high schools and hoped to be able to recruit them, but his “overtures to the university administration were greeted with embarrassed smiles and silence; he did not pursue the matter, nor did he speak openly to many people at Kentucky about his beliefs on integration.”<sup>39</sup> In 1980 Bryant told *Time* magazine writer B. J. Phillips “I wanted to be the Branch Rickey of football when I was at Kentucky.”<sup>40</sup>

When the decade of the 1960s was coming to an end, desegregation was still in the news and on the minds of the residents of Alabama and the country. In 1968, George Wallace ran for president as a third-party candidate hoping to garner support for states' rights to continue segregation and actually captured twenty-two percent of the popular vote (over ten million votes) and remains the last third-party candidate to garner electoral votes, winning five southern states.<sup>41</sup> In 1969, to many white

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38 Alexander Wolff, "SI Flashback: Ground Breakers." SI.com, [April 2 2007]. <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/web/COM1058019/index.htm> [accessed March 31, 2012].

39 Barra, *The Last Coach*, 148.

40 Ibid., 148.

41 Maggie Riechers, *Racism to Redemption*. Humanities. <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2000-03/wallace.html> (accessed March 31, 2012).

people's dismay, Alabama's high school basketball playoffs, for the first time, included games between all schools, black, white or desegregated.<sup>42</sup> A senior playing his final high school game in the finals of those playoffs became a pioneer in the state. Wendell Hudson of Birmingham's Parker High School played on the 1969 Alabama state high school championship team and then became the first African American scholarship athlete at the University of Alabama. His signing at Alabama came six years after Governor George Wallace had stood in front of the doors at the school, attempting to block the arrival of the first-ever African American students at the school. The athletic director who allowed basketball coach C.M. Newton to sign Hudson to a scholarship was Coach Bryant. Wendell Hudson became the only black resident of Bryant Hall, Alabama's athletic dormitory.<sup>43</sup>

At the epicenter of racial divide, against the backdrop of a decade of violence, 1970 provided a college football game that became a pivotal moment in the desegregation of Alabama. 1968 was a poor season by Alabama football supporters' standards as the Crimson Tide went 8-3 overall, lost two conference games and did not win the SEC championship for the second straight year. 1969 was worse, as the Tide finished the year 6-5 and had a losing record in the conference at 2-4. Both years ended with embarrassing bowl game losses. Coach Bryant scheduled the University of Southern California (USC) as the season-opening game in 1970, at Legion Field, in Birmingham, Alabama. As a reporter for the *Orange County Register* wrote twenty-seven years later, it was "The game that changed the world."<sup>44</sup>

USC was the first fully integrated football team the University of Alabama played in a regular season game at home. The game was played on Saturday, September 12th, three days short of seven-year anniversary of that horrendous church bombing, in a city nicknamed "Bombingham"<sup>45</sup> Bryant scheduled the game while trying to balance politics and racial emotions. A review of some earlier

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42 Malcolm Moran, "Trailblazer back at 'Bama".. *USA TODAY*, January 20, 2004. [http://www.usatoday.com/sports/college/mensbasketball/sec/2004-01-21-alabama-hudson-cover2\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/sports/college/mensbasketball/sec/2004-01-21-alabama-hudson-cover2_x.htm) [accessed March 31, 2012]

43 Ibid.

44 Blythe Bernhard, "The Game that Changed the World." *Orange County Register*. <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/danehe-62292-usc-alabama.html> [accessed March 31, 2012]

45 McWhorter.. "The Way We Live Now: 7-29-01; Aftershock."

letters to Paul Bryant in the Paul Bryant Museum illustrated this. On April 14, 1967, a fan in Madison, Connecticut, in his words, a “White Yankee Fan”, wrote him to say, “Just a note to congratulate you and the Crimson Tide players for giving Negroes a fair chance to play ball.”<sup>46</sup> This letter was in response to an April 6, 1967 article in the *Tuscaloosa News* titled “Bryant Checks Negro Hopefuls” about five black walk-ons attempting to make the team. They did not make the team.<sup>47</sup>

On October 12, 1967, a doctor from Hammond, Louisiana wrote a letter to Coach Bryant, copying the editor of the *New York Times*, the president of ABC Television and Hugh Downs of NBC Television. Dr. Frank A. Hava's subject for his letter was “THE PREJUDICED NORTHERNER” and complained about the bias of ABC television's coverage of southern college football teams compared to teams in the north. He wrote that he could not find scores on television for his schools of study, “Tulane, L.S.U., and Vanderbilt” but could get scores of games for “Slippery Rock, John Hopkins, Kent State, etc...” He complained about the lack of respect in the polls for southern schools. He wrote, “Seriously, though I have emphasized sports, I think that there is prejudice in many areas against the South. Sure, many of us Southerners have our prejudices. My point is so do other sections of the country, yet it would seem to be played down in those other sections by the press and other news media.”<sup>48</sup> A letter dated September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1970, just eight days before the epic USC game, addressed to Dear Coach Bryant, told about an article in the letter writer's local paper in Florida concerning Alabama's lack of black football players. W.E. Boyer of St. Petersburg, Florida wrote:

What this dumb-dumb weirdo is really saying is that we can't win without having a nigger (he underlined this word for significance) on the team or niggers (underlined once more). I know you spell it negro but I'm calling it like it is (underlined again). We know this is hogwash because you have done it before without them and you can do it again.<sup>49</sup>

One letter demonstrated the tight rope Coach Bryant had to walk between football and politics. It was from ex-Birmingham Police Chief and then-current president of Alabama's Public Service

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46 Marty Loughlin to Coach Bryant, letter, April 14, 1967, Paul W. Bryant Museum.

47 John David Briley, *Career in Crisis: Paul "Bear" Bryant and the 1971 Season of Change*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2006), 23

48 Dr. Frank A. Hava, M.D. to Coach Bryant, letter, April 14, 1967, Paul W. Bryant Museum.

49 W. E. Boyer to Coach Bryant, letter, September 14, 1970, Paul W. Bryant Museum.

Commission, in effect the head policeman of the state, Eugene "Bull" Connor. Connor was infamous for the nationally televised firehose and German Shepherd attacks on civil rights protesters in the 1960s in Birmingham when he was the Police Chief. On October 28, 1970, he wrote Coach Bryant a letter, on official Public Service Commission letterhead, concerning the USC football game. He told Coach Bryant that "They never would have gotten away with what they did if you had called Ole Bull to get rid of those niggers with my dogs. I would have stopped them. They might not have had any seats in their pants, but I would have stopped them."<sup>50</sup> Alabama was crushed by USC, 42-21, and the star of the game was Sam Cunningham, an African-American. Bryant was quoted as saying "Cunningham did more for integration in Alabama in 60 minutes than Martin Luther King Jr."<sup>51</sup>

Coach Bryant had begun the integration of Alabama's sports with the signing of Wendell Hudson to a basketball scholarship in 1969. In 1971, he played his first African American football player, junior-college transfer John Mitchell. This had a tremendous effect on the views of Alabama football fans. Author John David Briley, writer of "*Career in Crisis: Paul 'Bear' Bryant and the 1971 Season of Change*" wrote: "The people were ready for it but integrating the football team made it that much easier. John clearly had a role in the civil rights movement."<sup>52</sup> John Mitchell's success playing for Alabama that fall had a tremendous trickle-down effect on the state of Alabama. The 1971 Southern League of Little League Baseball in Huntsville, Alabama, had several all-white teams and one all-black team. The league's all-star team that year had no African American players. The following season, after Mitchell had starred on the football field for Alabama the previous fall, several teams had one or more African-American players, the team that was all-black the year before had a couple of white players, and the all-star team was integrated for the first time in league history. I know this because I was an 11-year-old second baseman on an all-white Southern League All-Star team in 1971 and played on an

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50 Eugene "Bull" Connor to Coach Paul "Bear" Bryant, letter, October 28, 1970, Paul W. Bryant Museum.

51 Erik Spanberg, "He Was a Giant in the World of College Football." *Christian Science Monitor*. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0913/p17s01-bogn.html> [accessed March 31, 2012]

52 Sean D. Hamill, "John Mitchell, a Football Pioneer, Builds Big Men for the Steelers." *New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/24/sports/football/24steelers.html?pagewanted=all> [accessed April 21, 2012].



integrated Southern League all-star team as a twelve-year-old in 1972.

Bryant went on to win his fourth, fifth and sixth national championships in 1973, 1978 and 1979. He coached nineteen seasons of one-platoon football, winning 73% of his games. He coached nineteen seasons of two-platoon football, winning 83% of his games. His overall record was 323-85-17. Ten of his players went on to be successful coaches themselves.<sup>53</sup> More importantly, to my generation, he was a second father figure. To this day I take my hat off when I enter a store or building. To my parents and even my bigoted grandfather, he taught them that integration could work. He passed away on January 26, 1983. His funeral procession from Tuscaloosa to Elmwood Cemetery in Birmingham, Alabama, was estimated to have been witnessed by an estimated quarter of a million people.<sup>54</sup> I was working in Holland when my boss gave me the news. He gave me the rest of the week off. I remember it like it was yesterday. I cried like a baby. My father passed away in 1972, when I was 12 years old. Coach Bryant, on his Golden Flake Potato Chip and Coca-Cola Sunday afternoon coach's show, became my second dad. I miss them both.

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<sup>53</sup> Barra, *The Last Coach*, 511, 512, 517, 519.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

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