

# INTRODUCTION



## A HISTORY OF AGGIE FOOTBALL, PARTS I AND II

WHAT DO THESE MEN HAVE IN COMMON: Harry Stiteler, Ray George, Paul (Bear) Bryant, Jim Myers, Hank Foldberg, Gene Stallings, Emory Bellard, Tom Wilson, Jackie Sherrill, R. C. Slocum and Dennis Franchione?

You guessed it, of course. All of them coached the Texas Aggie football team, without duplicating the success of Homer Norton, who delivered a national championship to the banks of the Brazos back in a year historic for other reasons, as well, 1939.

Of course, there is still hope for Coach Fran, still new to the job, who in his second season performed one of the major turnarounds of 2004. The mystery meat of college football, the Aggies won six in a row after an opening loss to Utah, then dropped four of their last five games and still wound up in the Cotton Bowl.

Against an Oklahoma team ranked Number 2 in the polls, they improved by seventy points over the previous season before falling, 42-35. This is a recovery of gargantuan proportions, even in defeat, because the Aggies were trying mightily to avenge the massacre of '03, when the Sooners laid on them something they did not expect—77 points.

In the entirety of 1939, A&M yielded a total of 31 points to ten opponents during the regular season.

Yes, Aggie football means having a sense of history and a sense of humor. A Houston newspaper columnist, Morris Frank, one of the country's most popular toastmasters, gave the school's former students this enduring description: "Invincible in defeat, insufferable in victory."

Although the record is spotty, its passion and unwavering loyalty long ago established A&M as a marquee program, famed for its Twelfth

Man, its marching band, its midnight yell practices, Bonfire, and the sonic sound levels at storied Kyle Field.

Through the decades, the Aggies have known almost biblical cycles of feast and famine, stretches of misery broken by seasons of stirring triumph, tantalizing their fans by coming within a win or a tie of matching that last perfect season, one ring from the bulls-eye.

After 1945, the Cadets suffered seven losing seasons out of nine, including two under Norton, whose talent had been drained by the war. Harry Stiteler, a former Aggie quarterback who had been on Homer's staff, and Ray George, a line coach hired away from USC, each lasted three years.

A&M went from no wins under Stiteler in 1948 to one in '49 and seven in 1950, when Bob Smith carried on the tradition of great Aggie fullbacks. He set a conference record with 297 yards rushing against SMU, playing in a mask welded with a shield to protect a broken nose. The Aggies were invited to play for the Presidential Cup, a short-lived bowl game at College Park, Maryland, and Smith ran back the opening kickoff 100 yards as the Aggies thumped Georgia, 40-20.

Ray George had the salt and pepper hair and sturdy build of a police lieutenant. He was a pleasant fellow who, after every loss, had a stock comment when asked about next week's opponent: "We're going to get after them."

They did just that in the last game of Ray's first season, 1951, upsetting Texas at Kyle Field, 22-21, for their only conference victory. Yale Lary ran 68 yards for one touchdown and caught a pass from Darrow Hooper for another. Hooper, an Olympic shot putter, also kicked a 31-yard field goal.

Lary went on to a solid career with the Detroit Lions, where he punted, played safety and was a teammate of Longhorn immortal Bobby Layne. It was Lary who said of Layne, "When Bobby said block, you blocked. When Bobby said drink, you drank."

The Aggies grew weary of looking for silver linings. Twelve years without a title had taken a toll and, when desperate measures are required, those who embrace the maroon and white do not think small.

They hired Paul (Bear) Bryant from Kentucky, who was not yet an icon, the godlike figure he would become at Alabama. The later Bryant had a weathered face with fine lines like a road map folded over

and over, and a voice so deep it seemed to rumble like a train out of a tunnel.

Bryant was approaching his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, handsome and vigorous and still willing, in a T-shirt and khakis, to drop into a stance and demonstrate the proper technique for one of his linemen.

Books and movies have been produced about the Bear, and his Junction Boys, and there is no need to devote reams of space to him here. His four years at Aggieland attracted a notoriety oddly out of proportion to his twenty-five at Alabama.

But there appears to be no question that the team nearest to his heart was the one that gave him his only losing season out of the thirty-seven he spent as a coach. The team that survived the scorched earth of Junction earned its only victory against Georgia, 6-0, on a day that the Aggies suited up twenty-seven players.

Before the game, his rival, Wally Butts, asked Bryant if those were the only players he had. "No," he replied, "these are the only ones who want to play." Actually, he had driven off the others, and years later Bryant would express his regrets: "I couldn't have played for me in those days, either."

But he had a mission to complete at A&M and he was in a hurry to get it done. The 1954 Aggies played hard and lost late, and the win in Athens was so sweet that in the locker room after the game Bryant and his elderly trainer, Smokey Harper, danced a jig.

Wins became a bit more routine a year later, when the Aggies finished 7-2-1. In one of the great comebacks in college football history, they scored 20 points in the final minute and 26 seconds to rally past Rice, 20-12, in Houston. Rice Stadium would not always be so kind to them.

In 1956, the players who had been sophomores at Junction—notably Gene Stallings, Jack Pardee, Lloyd Hale, Dennis Goehring, Don Watson and Dee Powell—provided the senior leadership and the Aggies went unbeaten in 10 games, with a 14-14 tie against Houston the only blot.

All dressed up with no place to go, the Cadets stayed home because of NCAA sanctions, but Bryant had given them their first SWC championship since Norton's 1941 team.

They were #1 in the nation for most of the 1957 season, and extended their streak to nineteen wins without a loss after a squeaker over Arkansas and a 19-6 victory over Don Meredith and SMU.

The quintessential Bryant moment came in the Ozarks in the closing seconds of a 7-6 classic. The Aggies had the ball at the Arkansas 12 with a minute and 20 seconds to play, and the Bear sent in a sub to tell his quarterback, Roddy Osborne, to keep the ball on the ground and run out the clock.

On the next play, the Hogs put on a hard rush and were about to bury Osborne, who looked up and saw John David Crow alone in the end zone. He said, later, he had no intention of throwing the ball, but it was as if "God had raised my arm."

The next thing anyone knew, the ball was in the air, and Donny Horton, a sprinter on the track team, maybe the fastest player on the field, cut in front of Crow and intercepted the pass at the goal line.

He had a blocker and nothing but grass in front of him. The Arkansas crowd was going berserk and many of the fans began to pour out of the stands. Only Osborne, the slowest man in the Aggie backfield, had a play, and he took an angle, fought off the blocker and made the tackle at the 27-yard line.

The gain went for 64 yards. The Hogs completed a pass to the 15, where Crow made a saving tackle, and on the next play John David picked one off in the end zone and the game was over.

That Monday morning, Bryant was on the phone, as coaches usually are, and he was describing Horton's long, frightening run to Bobby Dodd of Georgia Tech.

When he finished, Dodd said, "Paul, there's one thing I don't understand. If the Arkansas boy is as fast as you say, and your boy is as slow as you say he is, how the hell did your boy make the tackle?"

Bryant said, with feeling, "Oh, Bobby, that's easy. The Arkansas player was just running for a touchdown. Osborne was running for his life."

The Aggies were unbeaten and ranked Number 1 on the eve of the Rice game, when the story broke in the *Houston Post* that Bryant had been offered the coaching job at his alma mater, Alabama, and would accept it.

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No one really knows what effect that rumor had on the Aggies, but they were playing an exceptional Rice team that had two future pro quarterbacks in King Hill and Frank Ryan. The Owls stunned A&M and wrecked its hopes of a national title, 7-6.

On Thanksgiving Day, the Aggies lost to Texas, 9-7. A 62-yard quick kick by Walter Fondren put them in a hole early, on their own four-yard line. Bobby Lackey scored the Texas touchdown and kicked the field goal that proved the difference.

The Aggies used only fifteen players, and Crow was all over the field, catching a pass from Osborne for 57 yards, making tackles and batting away passes. But the game and the season had gotten away.

Crow became the only Aggie and the only Bryant player to win the Heisman Trophy, and the Bear helped his cause greatly when he announced to the press, "If John David doesn't win it, they ought to quit giving it."

The Aggies lost to Tennessee in the Gator Bowl, 3-0 and Bryant went back to Alabama, where his teams won or tied for five national titles. But any reference to 1957 could ruin the Bear's mood—and you always knew when his mood was ruined. On a trip to Houston, ten years later, he stayed at the Shamrock Hilton Hotel, and when a friend walked in he was cursing because the desk clerk had given him a room overlooking Rice Stadium. "I can't even look out that window," he said, "without seeing THAT damned stadium and having to replay THAT game all over again. Cost us the national championship."

He went on to break Amos Alonzo Stagg's record as the winningest coach in college football history. He kept saying that he would never retire, claiming that "if I gave up coaching I'd probably croak in a week."

He did retire after a victory in the 1983 Liberty Bowl, and died of a heart attack three weeks later. "I wish people would quit writing that," said Mary Harmon Bryant, who was his sweetheart and school beauty when both were students. "Papa wasn't ready to die. Papa had lots of things he wanted to do."

A few years later, a movie about his life was released starring Gary Busey, who had been in a hit in the *Buddy Holly Story*. Mary Harmon was not pleased. "Papa was handsome," she said. "Can you imagine that buck-toothed boy playing Papa?"

The Aggies were having their own withdrawal pains, trying to find someone to play Papa on the sidelines. The athletic committee launched a national search for a successor, as did several influential former students. The result was that nearly every famous coach in America had his name linked to the job. Frank Leahy said he was “ninety-nine percent sure” he would be the next Aggie coach, then bowed out for health reasons.

The committee offered the job to Jim Myers, of Iowa State, then had to withdraw it when Eddie Erdelatz, the Navy coach, showed up on campus as a guest of the board of regents. Erdelatz backed out, and the Aggie student body sent a petition to Myers, who accepted the second time around.

Bryant left behind the core of a winning team, with Charley Milstead a rising star at quarterback, skilled players in fullback Gordon LeBoeuf, tackle Ken Beck and receiver John Tracey, and the scrappy little guards, Buddy Payne, Gale Oliver and Joe Munson.

Myers, a Tennessee lineman under General Bob Neyland, installed the single-wing, and Milstead ranked among the national leaders in total offense and punting the next two years.

But the Aggies were missing something intangible, and their defense no longer gang-tackled. After four losing seasons, Myers was out, replaced by Hank Foldberg, one of the young Aggies pirated away in the 1940’s by West Point, where he became an All-America end.

Sadly, Foldberg’s stay was not much longer than his first one. His teams went backward, winning three games, two and one before he was fired after the 1964 season.

All of which led to another bold, dramatic, emotional decision. The Aggies reached out for one of their own, Gene Stallings, known as Bebes, a Junction boy, then on the Alabama staff of his former coach, Bear Bryant.

At 29, Stallings would be the youngest coach of a major college team in America. Bryant was in his room at the Waldorf Astoria, preparing to attend the Heisman Trophy dinner in New York, when a phone call came from Houston.

It was vintage stuff he gave me. “I can’t stop bawling,” he claimed, “I’m so proud that A&M has hired Bebes, but I’m also sad because he’s a helluva coach and now I’ll have to go back to work.”

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I milked the quotes for all the familiar Bryant flavor, and thought nothing more of it, until months later when I bumped into a Boston writer named Bob Curran.

He had an interesting story to share. He had gone to visit Bryant before the Heisman dinner, and when he walked in his hotel room he saw that he was on the phone and—here was the kicker—“big ole tears were running down his cheek. I turned to one of his coaches, Dude Hennessey, and he put a finger to his mouth so I’d keep my voice down.

“I said, ‘What’s wrong with Paul?’ And Dude said, ‘He just lost one of his assistants.’

“I whispered, ‘How old was he?’ And Dude said, ‘Twenty-nine.’ I said, ‘Oh, my God, that’s so young, what happened?’

“Dude said, ‘Oh, he didn’t die. He just went to Texas A&M.’”

Thus did Stallings return to College Station, uncaring that Bryant had called A&M “the toughest recruiting job in America.” The Aggies had not yet admitted coeds on more than a token basis, and were still not recruiting black athletes. The Southwest Conference was still an all-white sanctuary, although SMU would soon sign Jerry LeVias and Baylor would be close behind.

The University of Houston, still an independent, would beat them all, recruiting Warren McVea out of San Antonio.

Stallings wore the Bryant label proudly, but hoped to create his own identity. Still, he realized quickly that he would be competing with the 1954 team, not the 1939 Aggies. His seniors had learned little from defeat except how to lose.

They had three wins going into the final game against Texas, and had been shut out four times. Gene had to juggle players to shore up weak spots and few had started at the positions they were now playing. His quarterback, Harry Ledbetter, had been a halfback. He had two prime time players in Dude McLean, an end, and Joe Wellborn, at linebacker.

The week of the Texas game, I drove to Kyle Field to watch the Aggies practice and pick up an interview or two. I was standing there, chatting with Billy Pickard, the trainer, when Stallings walked over—in the middle of practice—and said, “Come take a ride with me.”

We piled into his school car and I waited in a puzzled silence while Bebes pulled into the baseball stadium and parked under the stands.

Then he folded his arms across the wheel and dropped his head against them.

It looked like a case for Crisis Hotline. All sorts of wild thoughts rushed through my mind, none so shocking as the words Stallings spoke when he raised his head: "I've got a play that is guaranteed to score a touchdown against Texas—if I have the guts to call it."

I did the quick math. Before edging Rice, 14-13, they had been shut out in three straight games, out of four, and scored once in two others. They had nearly wrecked one of the school's most cherished traditions, in which the Cadets kiss their dates after each Aggie touchdown. Every mother in the state felt safe, knowing her daughter was attending an Aggie game.

Logic tells you that if a team can score, it has a chance to win. But the way Stallings described the play, it sounded like something out of burlesque:

"The quarterback bounces the ball to a flanker. Everybody acts like it was just a bad pass. They turn around as if to go to the huddle. Then the flanker straightens up and throws the ball as far as he can. Our wide receiver runs under it. Touchdown."

The trick was this: the play had to look like a forward pass, when in fact it was a lateral with the ball still alive. If you threw it a certain way, Gene insisted, it would hop right into the receiver's hands.

Of course, they had not worked out all the wrinkles. Eleven backs tried out and only one could throw the ball far enough, Jim Kaufman, a defensive back, left-handed, a junior who had played no offense in college. They had practiced the play all week. They had not yet completed it.

So Saturday rolled around and early in the second period Jim Kaufman trotted onto the field. *The ball was at their nine-yard line.* Stallings had wanted to make the call at midfield, so if it misfired they might contain the damage. But the Aggies never got to midfield. They spent the entire first quarter turning back Texas near their own goal line.

Now, in the shadow of his goal-line, Harry Ledbetter, the quarterback, took the snap and threw a long lateral that reached Kaufman on one hop. Even the Aggie linemen kicked the dirt in disgust and turned their backs to the field.

Downfield, Dude McLean stopped his pass pattern, but only for an instant. Suddenly, he took off, past relaxed Texas defenders, gathered in Kaufman's pass near the fifty and sped ninety-one yards for a touchdown.

They called the play The Texas Special. There was absolute silence in the stands until the referee raised his arms and signaled a touchdown. The fake bounce pass so unsettled the Longhorns that the Aggies scored again on a 71-yard drive and added a long field goal by Randy Sims just before the half to lead, 17-0. After the game, Darrell Royal was asked what he thought when he saw the ball in the air.

"I knew we'd been had," he said. "McLean was so wide open he looked like he had come out early for practice."

At the half, Royal gave one of the best pep talks in memory. He said nothing. He went to the blackboard and wrote in chalk, 21-17. A trick play and adrenaline could carry the Aggies only so far. Texas' power and depth wore them down and UT won by the very score Royal predicted.

There were several odd footnotes to the game. Kaufman did not return for his senior year, and the only pass he ever threw was for many years the record for a touchdown pass in the Southwest Conference.

Exactly what the moral of the story is, each reader will have to decide. There is no point in getting sentimental about the merits of losing creatively. As Stallings said later that Thanksgiving night, "I'd rather have had a sorry old play and won the game."

A Texas ex said, "I'd rather get beat by the Aggies than tricked by them."

The Aggies who played as sophomores that day went to the Cotton Bowl in 1967 and beat Alabama, coached by the man who had coached their coach. Three years later, Stallings was fired.

The play was considered by many to be a sort of tribute to Homer Norton, who had died in May of 1965. He loved the unexpected, and had jump-started the win over Texas in 1939 with a hideout play. You wouldn't expect such a gimmick to catch a well-coached team asleep, but Norton had used it effectively in other victories.

Stallings' job did not look very secure when the Aggies started the 1967 season with four straight losses, and trailed Texas Tech, 24-21,

with time running out and the Aggies facing fourth-and-15 from the Tech 45.

Ed Hargett found Bob Long in a crowd of Red Raiders at the fifteen, with 11 seconds on the clock. Hargett rolled to his left to pass, but all his receivers were covered. He then tucked the ball away and darted for the red flag at the right hand corner of the end zone, and scored, to give A&M its first victory of the season, 28-24.

The Aggies wouldn't lose again. The night before the game, they had gone to a movie starring Lee Marvin, called *Water Hole Number 4*. For the rest of the year, no matter what movie they saw, the team's itinerary listed it as *Water Hole Number 5*, and *6*, and so on.

*Water Hole Number 11* matched A&M and Alabama in the Cotton Bowl. Stallings had rebuilt his offense around Hargett, Long and running back Larry Stegent. The defense featured Billy Hobbs, Tommy Maxwell, Grady Allen and Rolf Krueger, Charley's kid brother.

His old teammates were on Gene's side of the field as the Aggies upset Alabama, 16-7, with Curly Hallman's interception of a Ken Stabler pass sealing the win. One of the lasting images in Cotton Bowl history came when Bryant hoisted a startled Stallings on one shoulder. An unsteady equestrian, the Bear carried him a few feet before letting him down.

No one could have guessed that the ride would virtually end there. Four losing seasons followed, each ending with losses by big scores to Texas. He was one of theirs, but the Aggies loved Stallings much more when he won.

You had a clue to their problems when their punter, Steve O'Neal, made the All-America team in 1968 (and later set an NFL record with a 98-yard punt against Denver.) Every week was a struggle. In 1970, they played three straight games on the road, all losses, against LSU, Ohio State and Michigan. Dave Elmendorf's performance at safety and returning kickoffs landed him on the All-America team that year. The Aggies returned lots of kickoffs.

Gene went to work for Tom Landry and the Dallas Cowboys for fourteen seasons, then returned as a head coach in a dead end job with the Cardinals in St. Louis and Arizona. At last, in a second closing of the circle, he went back to Alabama, where the Crimson Tide won the

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national championship in 1992, stuffing favored Miami in the Sugar Bowl.

Stallings got his. The post-war Aggies were still searching for theirs.

In a throwback to the Roaring Twenties, the men in maroon decided to join an old but proven twist, Trading With the Enemy. Dana X. Bible had enjoyed eleven prosperous years at A&M, fielding three teams that were unbeaten and two unscored upon. (Granted, these records came in 1917, with an eight-game schedule that included Austin College, Dallas U. and the LSU "B" team; and in 1919, against the likes of Sam Houston, San Marcos, Howard Payne and Trinity.)

After the 1928 season, Bible bolted from Aggieland and moved to Nebraska, which hired him on a recommendation from Knute Rockne of Notre Dame. After six seasons with the Cornhuskers, D. X. heeded a call to return to Texas, to the Longhorns, where he added 62 wins and added the final flourishes to his long career as a coach and athletic director.

The Aggies signed handsome, pipe-smoking Emory Bellard, the top assistant to Darrell Royal and the architect of the Wishbone-T offense.

Bellard brought the bone with him and, after a 5-and-6 debut in 1973, his teams won eight games the next year and then kicked it into another gear. They did what no other Aggie squad had ever accomplished, with back to back 10-victory seasons and a share of the conference title in 1975.

They would beat Texas for the first time since '67, and run their record to 10-and-0, climbing to Number 2 in one poll and sending Aggie spirits into orbit. But a season-ending loss to Arkansas at Little Rock, 31-6, and a 20-0 shutout by Southern Cal in the Liberty Bowl brought them back to earth with a thud.

Bellard felt his first true exposure to Aggie mood swings with the displays of grief over that season-ending disappointment.

But A&M had rejoined the community of elite teams, and they enjoyed a true restoration on defense, with Pat Thomas, Garth Ten Naple, Ed Simonini, Lester Hayes, Robert Jackson and Jacob Green coming through the pipeline.

One of Bellard's shrewdest moves was to hire as an assistant coach a former McNeese State tight end named R. C. Slocum. After a year with the offense, Slocum switched to the other side and preached pressure defense. Although no one had yet given it a name, the "Wrecking Crew" tradition had been launched.

They led the nation in total defense in 1975, and Simonini, a prototype Aggie linebacker, was voted the Southwest Conference defensive player of the year.

They were 10-and-2 again in '76, and dumped Texas in Austin, 27-3. "That was a very emotional night," said Bellard. "Darrell was gracious as ever, and Mike Campbell came by. They were special in the coaching field, special people.

"Those were very similar teams, the same offense, fine defense, both with great fullbacks." The Tyler Rose, Earl Campbell, would win the Heisman a year later. The Aggies had the massive George Woodard, who made the field tremble when he carried the ball.

Nearly all the A&M defensive stars went to the pros. Lester Hayes intercepted eight passes his senior year, and would win stardom with the Oakland Raiders. By the end of his playing days, his most cherished pieces of jewelry were a gold crucifix he wore around his neck, and his two Super Bowl rings. The one from Super Bowl XV, a win over the Eagles, was locked in a safe. The other, earned three years later, had been auctioned off on the Internet for \$18,200. It had languished in a Reno pawnshop for nearly a year.

Please do not jump to the nearest conclusion. This is not a tale of hearts and flowers, with gypsy violins in the background. This is not about a busted ex-jock who was down and out in Modesto, where Lester had made his home since he retired after 10 years with the Raiders.

This is the condensed version of what happened:

Hayes was in Reno for a sports memorabilia show. Had an abscess in his mouth "the size of a walnut." Found a dental clinic. When asked how he would pay, he reached for his billfold and found an empty back pocket. His wallet was in another pair of slacks back in Modesto.

When you are hurting with an abscessed tooth that feels as if it had invaded your right eye, you do not think with absolute clarity. He needed eight hundred dollars and he found it in a pawn shop. He

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removed the ring and kept the cross because “I couldn’t take out a loan on Jesus.”

He had four months, plenty of time to reclaim it, but a prostate problem clobbered him. He spent most of 1999 in bed and in pain. The pawnbroker gave him a final notice and when he didn’t pick up the ring, it went to the high bidder on eBay. He wasn’t dumb, just afflicted, as many in the perspiring arts are, with a sweet irresponsibility. He talks about Julius Caesar. He knows the story of Jim Thorpe. A lot of football players do not.

The last anyone heard, he was still trying to trace the anonymous purchaser and buy back a ring he could have recovered for the price of the loan, plus \$320 in interest.

But the point is, Hayes could have covered his dental bill by hocking the gold cross, but he did not. Which reminds us that football, at any level, has a spiritual and mental and emotional side.

You can walk into any locker room before a game and feel the intensity, the edginess, the tension. Some players can’t tell you the name of the guy who lines up next to them. But whatever trance they are in, to whatever lengths they are prepared to go, all of it is in pursuit of that elusive piece of jewelry, a ring for winning the conference, or a national title, or a Super Bowl. Which is what makes Lester’s story funny and poignant and painful at the same time.

He was a terrific and colorful player for the Raiders, one who had at least a minor role in a decision by the NFL to outlaw a substance called “stickum,” a caramel-colored adhesive widely used for a time by both receivers and defensive backs. They practically dipped their arms in the stuff.

When the league banned it, Hayes was asked what effect he thought the new legislation would have. “You won’t see guys catching passes with their elbows anymore,” he replied.

But we digress.

Emory Bellard enjoyed the characters on his teams, the camaraderie and the good times that were meant to be enjoyed. He had seen Royal criticized at Texas for not winning by bigger margins, or with more variety. Emory did not have the hide of a rhinoceros and he resented the second guessing that came even in successful, but not perfect, seasons.

When his '78 Aggies opened with four straight wins, then lost two in a row to Houston and Baylor, he gave the job back to them. He never appeared openly bitter, just weary, and in time he became that rare figure who could look at life from both sides now.

He never did decide which school worked up the greater passion, which crowd raised the more hellish noise, which team found the winning sweeter. "I have never found much difference," he said, "in the attitude of the two squads. They are both pretty sincere about winning. That winning, it feels pretty good whenever you get it."

Of course, no one can be neutral when the Aggies and the Longhorns collide. It is the maroon and the orange, Reville versus Bevo, the Texas drum and the Aggie bugle, the tower and the bonfire, boots and saddles.

Somewhere amid all that symbolism is a football game with roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a rivalry so intense that loss can hurt for a lifetime, if not longer.

Bellard had a perspective on the series shared by few: he was a player and assistant coach at the University of Texas, in a different era, and then the head coach of the Aggies. His teams won big in both places. He restored the Aggies as a national power and spoiled their fans so quickly that they grumbled when he didn't deliver an unbeaten season. A proud man, who measured his words, Bellard did a remarkable thing long after he thought he had retired from coaching.

He went back to the basics, accepting the job at Westbury High, in Houston, burying like an old bone the ego that would have prevented most coaches from considering such a move. Of course, the bone he buried was not the Wishbone. He won with it wherever he went.

The move was much the same as the one Homer Norton had made, when he decided to coach Ball High in Galveston, a world away from his national championship heyday.

Tom Wilson, a onetime Texas Tech quarterback, moved up from Bellard's staff to the top job and the Aggies finished the 1978 season with eight wins, beating Iowa State in the Hall of Fame Bowl.

They struggled to stay around .500 the next three years, and by the end of the '81 campaign the Aggies were once again in the market for a head coach. Like getting out of bed in the morning, hiring coaches doesn't get easier with practice.

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One more time, the Aggies sent shock waves through the college ranks, reeling in Jackie Sherrill from Pittsburgh, where he had won a national title and developed a running back named Tony Dorsett. And there was another Bear Bryant connection. Sherrill had played multiple positions on Bryant's first teams at Alabama.

They gave him the richest financial package ever offered a coach in the Southwest Conference, and maybe the nation, valued at \$250,000 a year. The media had a field day over what was viewed as a display of Aggie excess, and tensions began to build even before Jackie settled into his office.

There was a good deal of gloating when Sherrill failed to create any instant miracles. His first three teams were mediocre, despite the presence of the great Ray Childress, who had fifteen sacks as a junior, a school record for a defensive tackle.

But in the last game of that third season, 1984, the Aggies turned a corner. No, they not only turned it, they did a wheelie. A 5-and-5 team and a heavy underdog, the Cadets drubbed Texas at Memorial Stadium and knocked the Horns out of the Cotton Bowl. They did it behind a scrub quarterback, Craig Stump.

In '85, the Aggies would unleash Kevin Murray at quarterback, and a pair of explosive runners, Keith Woodside and Rod Bernstine, not to be confused with the two reporters who broke the Watergate story for the *Washington Post*.

With Johnny Holland and John Roper raising havoc at linebacker, A&M would win the next three Southwest Conference titles and compile a 29-and-7 record.

In their three consecutive Cotton Bowl appearances, they encountered two Heisman Trophy winners. Twice they stopped Bo Jackson on fourth and goal at the one and spanked Auburn, 36-16, and bottled up Timmy Brown in a 35-10 rout of Notre Dame. Brown had a tantrum when an Aggie flicked the little towel from his waistband and carried it to the bench, and never quite regained his groove. In between those wins, they lost to Ohio State.

Through it all, Sherrill remained a lightning rod. Although his critics loved to picture him as self-centered and vain, the truth is he fit into no particular box. He was quite capable of being gentle and even generous. In 1988, what turned out to be his last season in College

Station, he made one of the rarest gestures the conference had ever seen and it went virtually unremarked.

When one of the state's top recruiting prospects, Conroe's 6-6 Paul Montgomery, narrowed his choices to UCLA and Texas, Sherrill urged him to sign with the Longhorns, saying, in effect, "Stay home. It will be in your long term interest after football."

No major college coach in America had shown the guts or imagination of Jackie Sherrill, in finding a way to play students on a regular basis: his Twelfth Man kickoff unit. Few coaches put more emphasis on their players getting a degree. In most of his actions, Sherrill stood with amateur football's idealists in promoting what nearly everyone claims they want: a game played by student-athletes. Yet he seldom received any benefit of the doubt, much less credit, from the big city press in the state.

Yeah, that's right, Liquid Paper breath, the media didn't give him an inch.

When Sherrill flew to Atlanta, hoping to free one of his players from the claws of a sports agent, newspapers in Dallas and Houston reacted with puzzlement. It was pointed out that the player in question might not even be a starter his senior year.

Yet the obvious answer required too large a leap of faith: that Jackie really cared about saving the young man's scholarship, his education and possibly his chance to play in the NFL.

The news reports were almost gleeful in describing Sherrill's surprise, and his rudeness, when the agent, this slimeball, showed up with writers and a TV crew.

There are figures in sports who provide writers with an endless source of copy, and we repay them by magnifying their faults. Sherrill was one of them. In time, Jackie won over the A&M faculty, but the media doesn't retreat so easily. He was resented for limiting his players in their contacts with the press. And when a newspaper and TV station in Dallas accused the Aggies of multiple infractions of the rules, Sherrill was labeled as arrogant for denying the charges.

A few months before he resigned, sparing the school an exhaustive investigation by the NCAA, the University had made him a full professor and given him tenure. It is naïve to think A&M would have reacted in the same way if his teams had not won so handsomely. But

he had been sensitive to the school's traditions and to the unique character of its former students.

It wasn't enough to simply attract prime specimens. He had shown that he knew how to mold and teach and motivate them. During the week of the Cotton Bowl, a Dallas newspaper ran a psycho-profile of Sherrill, in itself a kind of bizarre compliment. An incident was related in which Jackie, coming into his own as an Alabama football star, paid back an ex-sweetheart who had dumped him in high school. He stood up the young lady and two of her friends after inviting them to the campus for dates.

Of course, this was in a more innocent time, before the movie, *Fatal Attraction*. But you suspect that the story revealed more about the immaturity of the press, than it did about Jackie Sherrill at nineteen.

For once, continuity was on A&M's side and the program would not skip a beat. The one good consequence of this turmoil was the elevation of R. C. Slocum to the heading coaching position.

He had been on the scene since 1973, less one season spent on the West Coast before Sherrill brought him back. He was a quiet contrast to his flashier boss, but that was not thought to be a disadvantage.

Tall, angular, white-haired and folksy, Slocum would hold the job for fourteen seasons. He was fourth on the list of coaches who reached one hundred wins the fastest, doing so in the eighth game of his 11<sup>th</sup> season, one game earlier than Joe Paterno and Steve Spurrier. He would leave as A&M's winningest coach, having turned out fourteen All-Americans and sending a few dozen players to the pros.

A broken ankle had ended Kevin Murray's career a season too soon, but there was no dropoff at quarterback. Slocum inherited Bucky Richardson, whose running exploits almost changed the job description for the position. Around him, the Aggies were loaded, with Darren Lewis at running back, Richmond Webb a force at offensive tackle, William Thomas and Aaron Wallace backing up the line and Kevin Smith roaming the secondary.

The Aggies repeated Sherrill's triple, winning the conference in 1991, 1992 and 1993. They won ten games or more in four straight years, going 12-and-1 in '92, their only loss to Notre Dame in the Cotton Bowl.

Slocum's 1994 team went unbeaten, with ten wins and a tie against SMU. His seniors did not drop a Southwest Conference game in four years, meaning that they never lost to Texas.

They tore down the SWC a year later, and the Aggies joined Texas, Texas Tech and Baylor in the expanded Big Twelve. With the stroke of a pen, a hundred years of college football history faded into the sand and fog, replaced by a better marketing idea.

In their second season in the new league, the Aggies won the Big 12 South, only to get crushed by Nebraska in the championship game, 54-15.

In 1998, they atoned for that misstep by staggering Number 1 ranked Kansas State, in double overtime, 36-33, with Surr Parker scoring on a 32-yard pass play from Brandon Stewart.

They fell to Ohio State in the Sugar Bowl and finished at 11-and-3, their last season with double digit wins, through 2005.

There would be no more title runs, but easily the most heart-wrenching victory of Slocum's career came in '99, in the 20-16 upset of Texas in what is remembered as the Bonfire Game. A week earlier, twelve A&M students had died in the collapse of the wooden tower erected for the annual ritual.

The Aggies loaded their luggage on the back of Ja'Mar Toombs, who was built like a barge, and let the fullback ram the Texas middle 37 times for 126 yards and two touchdowns. But the winning points scored on a 14-yard lob pass from Randy McCown to Matt Bumgardner with five minutes left. The Aggies had trailed seventh-ranked Texas at the half, 16-6.

They listed Toombs at 275 pounds on the depth chart, but his weight was not an exact science. It fluctuated from week to week, putting him in a category with the world price of crude oil. He had a value to his team not reflected in the yards per carry. He had his biggest games against the most daunting teams.

With 23 seconds to play, linebacker Brian Gamble pounced on Major Applewhite's fumble, caused by a blitzing Jay Brooks, and the victory was assured. Emotions held in check for a week and sixty minutes burst their moorings in the stands and on the field. Gamble fell to his knees, his arms upraised, his index fingers pointing to the heavens.

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If you remembered nothing else about the game, you would remember this: the twelve white doves that circled the stadium and then flew away, one for each Aggie killed in the bonfire catastrophe. And the four Air Force F-16 jets, piloted by A&M grads, doing a fly-over in the missing man formation, and the Longhorn band playing *Amazing Grace*.

The dynamics of the rivalry may have changed forever on a day when the two natural enemies seemed to bond. With their sympathy for the pain that engulfed Aggieland, and their respectful attitude toward the tragedy, Texas made it difficult, if not impossible, for the teams to summon again the level of loathing and anger that had always marked this series.

But you can be sure future teams will try.

Life goes on. So does football and the scoreboard always tells another story.

When the Aggies slid to 6-and-6 in 2002, only their second non-winning season in twenty years, it turned out that R. C. Slocum did not have a lifetime contract, after all. He had been an innovator, who designed the Lion Backfield to get Greg Hill and Rodney Thomas in the game at the same time. He recruited an undersized linebacker from the fishing town of Rockport, a son of Vietnamese immigrants, and saw Dat Nguyen sweep the Lombardi and Maxwell Trophies as the best defensive player in the country.

R.C. recruited so well, for so many years, that his players started turning pro before their senior seasons. It was a mistake for Toombs and Leeland McElroy, but not for wide receiver Robert Ferguson, who made it with the Green Bay Packers. Patrick Bates went in 1992, Aaron Glenn and Sam Adams in '93; they were first round draft picks by the NFL.

In a blinding snowstorm on New Year's Eve of 2000, Toombs played his last game at the Liberty Bowl in Shreveport. He plowed through the snow for 193 yards and three touchdowns. The Aggies lost, in overtime, 43-41. To Mississippi State. Coached by Jackie Sherrill. This excruciating loss dropped their record to 7-and-5. The season left their fans feeling as if the team had been put on earth to torture them.

No one can be certain what caused the Aggie skid, but they started to hit the wall just as the vigorous Mack Brown was rejuvenating Texas. The defense misplaced the fearless abandon that earned the Wrecking Crew its reputation. The true freshman, Reggie McNeal, electrified A&M fans by coming off the bench to lead an upset of Oklahoma in 2002. But too often, insulting losses followed big wins or near misses.

Slocum had been a splendid representative of the Aggie culture for thirty years, as an assistant and a head coach. In 1992, after his team went 12-and-0 and never rose higher than third or fourth in the polls, R. C. was invited to speak at the Heisman Trophy dinner in New York.

He walked around like a little kid in a museum, craning his neck to view the paintings and statues. "I've been to a few banquets," said Slocum, "and had chances to speak, but to be at the Downtown Athletic Club, with two thousand people in the audience, and seeing these guys walking around...well, I was awestruck.

"That was kind of the theme of my talk. Most of us who have played the game were average, but we always had these great players to look up to and inspire us. I can remember playing in the back yard, wanting to be Doak Walker. You wanted to wear their jersey numbers. You think about what those people have done for the game: Roger Staubach, John David Crow, Billy Vessels, Bo Jackson, Herschel Walker, on and on.

"They set a standard of excellence, something you could look up to and say, as a coach, 'That's what you shoot for, that's how you do it.' So it was a special treat for me. I kept bumping into Jay Berwanger, of the University of Chicago, the first Heisman Trophy winner (in 1935). I was thrilled. Of course, John David has been up there a bunch of times. There were twenty to twenty-five past winners on hand, and that's a pretty amazing fraternity they have."

His love of the game, and A&M, were greater than the hurt of being fired. "I do want to emphasize how remarkably positive he was," said Earl Nye, the chairman of the board. "He is naturally disappointed, but he doesn't seem to be angry. He doesn't seem to hold a grudge. He wants what is best for the university."

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At most places, a coach gets fired and he wants to blow up the science building. At Texas A&M, some of them try to comfort the guy who broke the bad news to him.

So the newest knight to try to remove the sword from the rock was Dennis Franchione, a salvage specialist who turned around programs at New Mexico, TCU and Alabama in their second seasons.

It should be noted that this was not part of A&M's original plan, mainly because no one expected his first season to be such a disaster, four wins and eight losses, and a defense that allowed an average of 46.5 points a game.

But the even-tempered Coach Fran isn't the type to throw chairs or kick Reveille or file a lawsuit after a few defeats. He and his staff had misjudged how thin and young the Aggies were, he said. They went back to work, recruited a strong freshman class and hauled in some junior college prospects, and put on the field the least experienced team in the Big 12.

After opening the 2004 season with a tough loss to an ambitious Utah team, at Salt Lake City, the Aggies turned the ball over once in seven games, including six wins in a row. The season would have gone from splendid to spectacular if they had not dropped a crazy one to Baylor, blown a 14-point lead three times against Oklahoma, and closed with losses to Texas and Tennessee, in the Cotton Bowl.

They should have beaten Oklahoma, then ranked Number 2 in the land, because twice they tricked the mighty Sooners for touchdowns, on a fake punt and a fake field goal. (Shades of Homer Norton.) Punter Jacob Young was nearly an Aggie hero forever, after the senior passed to Earvin Taylor for 71 yards and a 28-14 lead in the middle of the second quarter.

With two minutes gone in the final period, with A&M facing fourth and goal at the four, holder Chad Shroeder straightened up and fired to Joey Thomas in the end zone, tying the score, 35-35.

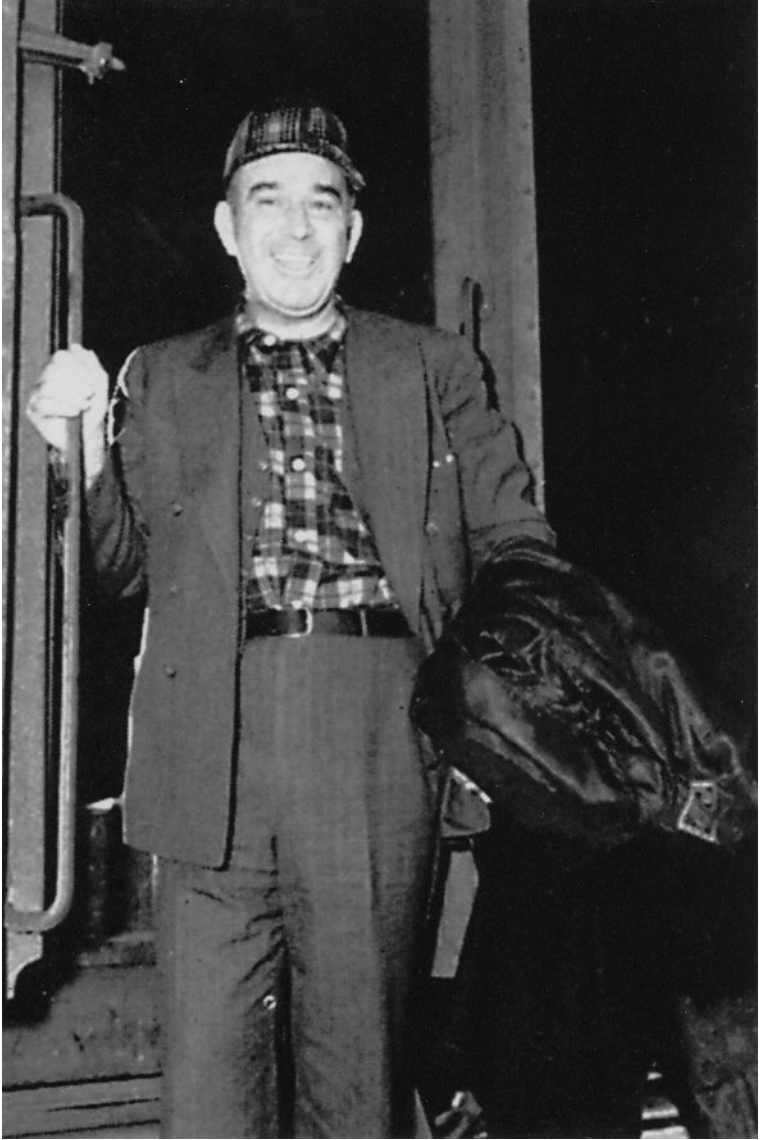
OU won it on Jason White's fifth touchdown pass with just under seven minutes to go, but the Aggies still brought the game down to a failed Hail Mary pass on the last play.

So you do the math, and find that Coach Fran's kids improved by three games over the previous season. In 2005, they had another year in his system, and a wiser team still led by McLean, with Courtney

Lewis, Jaxson Appel, Jason Carter, and Red Bryant in leadership roles.

But the year would end in disappointment and disbelief, with four straight losses, their misery compounded because they had Oklahoma on the ropes and played Texas tough. The Longhorns would go on to win the national title, while A&M saw its defense vanish, finished 5-and-6 and again missed going to a bowl. Sadly, the career of Reggie McNeal, the most gifted quarterback they had ever recruited, had been wasted.

Meanwhile, the Aggies are still paying tribute to the idea of winning everything. No matter how much we try, you can't live in the past, although it would be a great way to reduce the national debt. The clock is ticking in Aggieland.



*Coach Homer Norton*



*John Kimbrough (39) and Bill Jeffrey (28)*