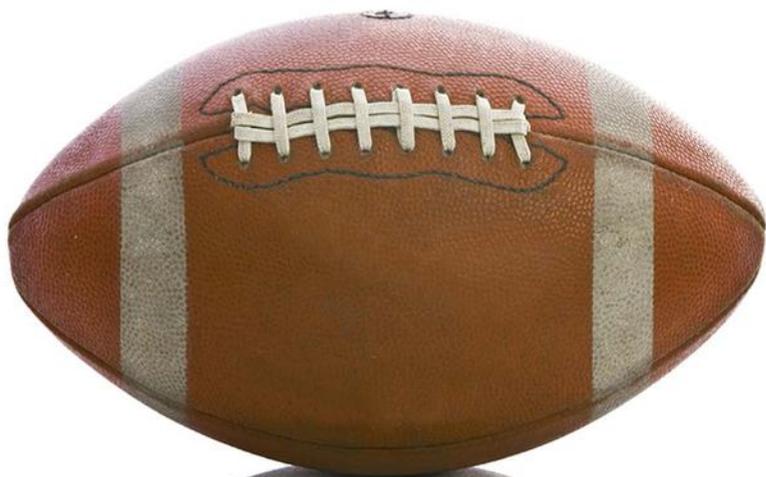
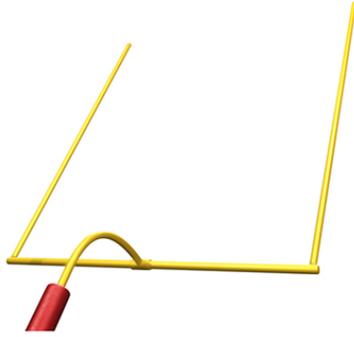


BEAR BRYANT'S WINNING WAYS

The Editors of New Word City





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Bear Bryant's life was football, and he once predicted that he would "probably croak in a week" if he ever stopped coaching. In an ending that no self-respecting scriptwriter would have concocted, Bryant died of heart failure at 69, just a month after announcing his retirement and 37 days after coaching his last game, a 21-15 victory over Illinois in the [1982 Liberty Bowl](#). In Alabama, the impact of his death was so great that three Tuscaloosa churches were needed to hold the 1,500 mourners at his funeral, and people lined the highway for 53 miles as the cortege traveled to the cemetery in Birmingham. President Ronald Reagan called Bryant "a hero who always seemed larger than life."

He had come a long way. Born into crushing poverty in Moro Bottom, a hamlet near the small town of Fordyce in southern Arkansas, Paul William Bryant was the son of a hardscrabble farmer and a determined mother. When his father was disabled by high blood pressure, Bryant's mother Ida earned the few dollars the family survived on by selling vegetables from a mule-drawn wagon. In a 1966 *Sports Illustrated* interview, Bryant described his childhood in vivid terms: "I can remember so well being on that old wagon with Mama, peddling milk and butter and eggs, turnip greens and black-eyed peas and watermelons and whatever else we had. . . . And, oh, my, so cold. Mama would heat those bricks to keep us from freezing to death on the wagon. Boy, I hated it. I hated every minute of it, making those rounds."

Despite his deprivations, Bryant grew into a strapping teenager, quickly reaching six feet four inches. He'd always craved attention and got it by acting up - once, for instance, throwing a cat through a church window into a girl's lap. And he got even more attention the day he won his nickname.

At an age variously reported from 11 to 13, he stopped by the movie theater in Fordyce, where the owner was trying to draw an audience with a wrestling match between a carnival bear and a man, who was to get a dollar for every minute he stayed in the ring. But as Bryant told the story, the man who had promised to wrestle the bear hadn't shown up.

Someone in the crowd saw Bryant and said, "Why don't you go in there?" And as Bryant explained years later, "I sorta glanced

at Drucilla Smith, , and said, 'For a dollar a minute I'd do anything.' You know, big-dogging it. I was chopping cotton for 50 cents a day at the time, and I felt I'd wrestle King Kong for a dollar a minute."

His friends said the bear was the scrawniest thing they'd ever seen, "but to me it looked 30 feet tall." Sure enough, when the bear reared up, Bryant charged and threw it to the ground. He held it there, unable to break free, and he was counting the seconds while the promoter was nudging him to let the bear up and provide more fun for the fans. The bear finally squirmed loose, and Bryant threw it again. The bear became enraged. Then its muzzle came off, and Bryant felt a searing pain at the back of his neck. He touched the place, saw blood on his hand, and jumped off the stage to hide behind the seats. "After a while I went around to get my money," he said, but the man and the bear were nowhere to be found. "All I got out of the whole thing," he recalled, "was a nickname."

The Fear of Chopping Cotton

The Fordyce High School football coach couldn't help but notice a kid as large as Bear Bryant and urged him to try out for the team. He'd never played football before, but he quickly showed a flair for the game. He played both ways, as offensive end and an all-state defensive tackle on the state champion Fordyce Redbugs, and, in 1931, he was offered his ticket out of Moro Bottom: a scholarship to play for the University of Alabama.

Bryant, who said he "wasn't very smart in school, and lazy to boot," was well aware that no one in Fordyce expected him to stick it out at Alabama. They were nearly right. Even given the lax standards for football players in those days, he needed two courses at the local high school to bolster his credentials for admission. When his father died and his mother was struggling in the Great Depression, he had an excuse to quit. He wrote to his cousin telling him he was looking for a job and got a telegram back: "Go ahead and quit, just like everybody predicted you would."

"I wasn't about to quit after that," Bryant said.