

The Life and Legacy of “The Bear”

Christopher Richman

Many college football fans consider Paul “Bear” Bryant to be the greatest head coach of all time. These fans have plenty of statistical information to back this up, as proved by a large number of NCAA records that Bryant still holds. Bryant completely turned around the Alabama Crimson Tide program from when he took it over in 1958.¹ The Crimson Tide went 5-4-1 in his first season as head coach.² This was a complete turnaround from the previous season when the team went just 2-7.³ A few years later in 1961, Alabama went undefeated and won the national championship.⁴ If this was all people knew about Bryant, it would be easy to understand why many consider “The Bear” to be the greatest coach of all time. However, not only did Bear change football in the South, he also revolutionized racial relationships in the southeastern region of the United States.

Bear consistently turned poor and average programs into national championship contenders. Once he left those programs, it took them many years to get back to where they were under his tutelage. Bear Bryant was well known throughout the college football world well before he arrived at Alabama. His previous head coaching jobs and the experiences he had while living with his parents and grandfather in Arkansas all played a significant role in influencing his decision-making later in life.

Paul “Bear” Bryant is largely credited with integrating college football in the South while being the head coach at the University of Alabama. Bryant coached Alabama from 1958 until 1982.⁵ During this twenty-four year span, America was undergoing major changes. One of the largest movements in the country was the Civil Rights Movement. This movement was aimed at garnering attention towards the mistreatment, discrimination, and inequality that African Americans were still facing in the country, most frequently in the South. As Martin Luther King described this movement: “Much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism.”⁶ The Civil Rights Movement was forcing Americans to self-reflect on the amount of improvement needed within their country. Jerome Smith, a former civil rights activist, said that the only way for someone to really understand what it was like to be black in America was through only one way: to wait, “until tragedy knocks on your door.”⁷ This was why Smith thought the majority of the country, including the top officials in Washington, could never feel completely sympathetic to the movement.

¹ “1957 Alabama Crimson Tide Stats,” *College Football at Sports-Reference*, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/alabama/1957.html>.

² “1957 Alabama Crimson Tide Stats.”

³ “1957 Alabama Crimson Tide Stats,” *College Football at Sports-Reference*, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/alabama/1957.html>.

⁴ “1957 Alabama Crimson Tide Stats.”

⁵ Nancy Hendricks, “‘Bear’ Bryant (1913–1983) a.k.a: Paul William Bryant,” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. November 12, 2014. Accessed September 29, 2016

⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233.

⁷ Tappan, Nancy. 2016. “When Truth Spoke to Power.” *American History* 51, no. 5: 47.

There was also a plethora of anti-Vietnam War protests around the country, especially on college campuses, that resulted in an ever-growing distrust of the government. One of the most famous anti-war demonstrations occurred at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. This anti-war demonstration was a peaceful protest that drew in a large number of college students and the National Guard was called in to help contain the demonstration. This protest made headlines across the country for the wrong reason, as the “National Guardsmen... killed four Kent State University students,”⁸ The twenty-five guardsmen who fired into the crowd were cleared of any wrongdoing; this ignited rage in the Kent State community and other campuses throughout the country.⁹ Draft dodging was also a popular act of protest against the war. Large numbers of draft dodgers fled to Canada.¹⁰ These people lost a connection with the United States and felt “disaffected from their nation of birth at an early age.”¹¹ Teenagers who had not even been alive for two decades had already lost their trust and faith in the government. These events speak volumes as to what the attitude was in the country during this crucial period in United States history.

Together, when looking at the Civil Rights Movement and the attitude of southerners, of whom many retained a white supremacist ideology, the integration of southern college football appeared unlikely. White supremacy was still very popular amongst whites in the South. Earnest Cox, a Methodist preacher from the South, exemplified white supremacy and gained a large following in the 1950s and 1960s.¹² He lobbied against the Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, used black crime statistics and put aside black achievements to demonstrate that “African Americans posed a clear threat to white civilization.”¹³ Cox also believed that there was only one solution to what he believed was racial chaos: “[B]lack repatriation, a program that “would be in keeping with the racial ideals of our most illustrious statesmen.”¹⁴ This view was held widely throughout the South and is reflective of how extreme some of the southern attitudes and views were at the time. This only makes Bear’s actions of integrating his team seem more like an improbable feat.

During Bear’s tenure, the University of Alabama’s football stadium was located off-campus in Birmingham at Legion Field.¹⁵ This stadium was just a few blocks from where the church in Birmingham was fire bombed by Ku Klux Klan member Sam Bowers.¹⁶ Integrating a team in the 1970s when the majority of southerners still held racist and violent attitudes, and where many school districts were not yet integrated, took great courage and was very risk.

⁸ "Comment." *New Republic* 163, no. 21 (November 21, 1970): 5-9.

⁹ "Comment," 6.

¹⁰ Frank Kusch, *All American Boys: Draft Dodgers in Canada from the Vietnam War*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 26.

¹¹ Kusch, *All American Boys*, 2.

¹² Ward, Jason. "'A Richmond Institution': Earnest Sevier Cox, Racial Propaganda, and White Resistance to the Civil Rights Movement." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 116, no. 3 (2008): 262-93.

¹³ Ward, "A Richmond Institution," 271.

¹⁴ Ward, "A Richmond Institution," 271.

¹⁵ Bob Carlton, "Legion Field through the Years: A Timeline of Important ...," AL.com, January 2, 2015.

¹⁶ "1957 Alabama Crimson Tide Stats."

Bear made it his mission to successfully integrate his football team; the actions he displayed were truly courageous and make him a central figure in the lengthy history of integration in the South. The actions Bear took were for the benefit of society as a whole and were not just an opportunity to make his team better. Bear saw other collegiate sports integrated in the South and believed it was time that he made Southern collegiate football the next sport to be integrated.

Early Life

Paul Bryant was born into a large family with his parents, Wilson Monroe and Ida Kilgore.¹⁷ In addition to growing up poor, the Monroe house was very crowded. Bryant had eight siblings, and was the youngest of the children,¹⁸ not counting the three that died in infancy.¹⁹ By experiencing so much death this young, Bryant quickly came to realize that life was short, often unjust, and one had little control over it. The lack of stability and impoverishment was not ideal for such a large family. Paul’s mother was not around very often as she needed to work multiple jobs, and when his father fell ill, Bryant was sent to live with his grandfather, W.L. Kilgore, in the town of Fordyce.²⁰

From an early age Bryant was instilled with the qualities of a hardworking blue-collared man. He was forced to work in the fields at a young age so that his family could have enough money to scrape by.²¹ Bryant summarized his childhood in just a few sentences saying, “The one thing I disliked most about growing up was getting up every Saturday, hitching up our mule to our wagon, and going to Fordyce with Mama. I didn’t mind the work... what I hated about it was coming face-to-face with the people we met along the way.... I didn’t feel like I was as good as those people. I thought they looked down on me.”²² Bryant was up early in the morning six days a week helping his parents make money so they could “eke out a meager existence.”²³

When Bryant was still young and naïve he earned the nickname “Bear.” While working in the fields, Bryant would make only fifty cents a day no matter how much cotton he picked.²⁴ A wagon came into town one day offering anyone a dollar per minute to wrestle a bear.²⁵ Bryant saw this as a tremendous opportunity; he could make more money in a matter of minutes than he could from picking cotton all day. Bryant lasted only a few moments before the bear bit his ear. From that day on, Bryant would be known as “Bear.”²⁶

Once the Bear went to live with his grandfather, due to the health problems occurring at home with his father and their financial situation, he developed his love for the game of football.²⁷ Previously, Bear had always been too busy working in the fields

¹⁷ “Bear Bryant Biography,” *Childhood, Life Achievements & Timeline*.

¹⁸ Hendricks, “Bear Bryant,” 1.

¹⁹ “Bear Bryant Biography.”

²⁰ Hendricks, “Bear Bryant,” 1.

²¹ “Story of Bear Bryant.”

²² “Story of Bear Bryant.”

²³ “Story of Bear Bryant.”

²⁴ “Story of Bear Bryant.”

²⁵ “Story of Bear Bryant.”

²⁶ “Story of Bear Bryant.”

²⁷ Hendricks, “Bear Bryant,” 1

and participating in any extracurricular activity was unrealistic. Once Bear began attending Fordyce High School, he joined the football team.²⁸ The football legend of Bear Bryant began in 1930. That year the Fordyce High School Redbugs were exceptional and won the Arkansas State Championship.²⁹ The following year an Alabama assistant coach came to one of Fordyce's games, not to scout Bear, but to look at two other players.³⁰ Bear's performance in this game must have been remarkable. Instead of signing the two players he came to look at, the Alabama assistant ended up signing Bear to a scholarship to play football at the University of Alabama.³¹

When Bear arrived at Alabama in 1933 the Southeastern Conference (SEC) was in its inaugural season and Alabama was a member. As a freshman, Bear was an immediate contributor playing as a right-offensive end. He helped Alabama win the SEC in its inaugural season.³² Bear's success continued. The characteristics and work ethics he developed as a child working in the fields aided him in a 1935 game against Tennessee. Bear was the key player in the 25-0 victory against Tennessee, and after the game it came to light that Bear had actually played a portion of the game with a broken leg.³³ During this game, Bear caught multiple passes and was considered the catalyst to the offense.³⁴

That same year, Bear married his girlfriend, Mary Harmon Black. The couple went on to have two sons while still in college.³⁵ The next season in 1936 was Bear's last. During his senior year, Alabama went to the Rose Bowl for the national championship and won. This capped off a historic collegiate career for Bryant who became one of the most iconic college football coaches of all time.³⁶

From 1936 to 1958 when Bear assumed the position as head coach at Alabama, relationships between African Americans and whites became increasingly volatile. This is demonstrated by a newspaper in South Carolina, when talking about race relationships in school: "No one on Earth...has treated the Negro more kindly than we have. We want better relationships but we're not going to mix. Too great are the biological differences."³⁷ Race relations continued to deteriorate and as a result, African Americans began the Civil Rights Movement to draw national attention to the injustices that had been continuously committed against them since the end of Reconstruction.

Historical Context

In 1958 the southern region of the United States was in the midst of a growing Civil Rights Movement that was quickly gaining momentum all over the country. Prior to 1958 there had been a number of discriminatory acts of violence, including lynchings, which were directed towards African Americans in the South. Although these acts

²⁸ Hendricks, "Bear Bryant," 1

²⁹ Hendricks, "Bear Bryant," 1.

³⁰ Hendricks, "Bear Bryant," 1.

³¹ Hendricks, "Bear Bryant," 1.

³² Hendricks, "Bear Bryant," 1.

³³ Hendricks, "Bear Bryant," 1.

³⁴ John Shearer, "Remembering When Bear Bryant Came To Tennessee – As A Player," September 15, 2013.

³⁵ Hendricks, "Bear Bryant," 1.

³⁶ Hendricks, "Bear Bryant," 1..

³⁷ Julian Scheer, "The White Folks Fight Back," *New Republic* 133, no. 18 (1955): 9-12.

garnered national attention, there were many more that went unnoticed by the media. This negligent attitude was typical of many southerners towards African Americans. Many of the black young men lynched in the South were wrongfully accused of making white women feel uncomfortable or supposedly committed acts of violence against them. For example, when Emmett Till was visiting his family in Georgia, he went to a candy store where he was dared to whistle at a white woman. Till was mercilessly murdered for this action. In a similar case, Jesse Washington was convicted of rape and murder of a white woman (even though there were no witnesses), and was brutally killed by the white citizens of Waco, Texas. The Ku Klux Klan was experiencing a resurgence, and racism was nearing an all-time-high in the South when Bear Bryant took over the Alabama football program in 1958,

Much of this new hatred was directed towards the 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Many white Southerners viewed themselves as better than African Americans, regardless of how established or successful an African American might be. This gave even the poorest whites a sense of superiority, or feeling of white supremacy, which reinforced the idea that they were still the dominant race. These white supremacists enjoyed and promoted the segregation of public spaces, which was enforced by Jim Crow laws in the South. The white facilities were nicer, cleaner and in better overall condition than the facilities for African Americans. Just one year after Bear Bryant took over the Alabama program, the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the case *Cooper vs. Aaron*. The court ruled mob violence was not a good enough reason to delay the integration of schools (many of these southern schools would not be integrated until as late as the 1970s).³⁸ This case was brought to court because the wording in *Brown v. Board* included integration with all deliberate speed. Alabama was one of the last three states to comply with desegregation to some degree at the elementary and high school levels during the 1963-1964 school year.³⁹ The other two states to finally comply with the order were Mississippi and South Carolina; both former Confederate states.⁴⁰ This order was written largely due to the fact that many governors were using the excuse of multiple threats of excessive violence towards African American students as a reason to keep schools segregated. Although some schools in Alabama complied with this desegregation order, the majority of schools stayed segregated long afterward: “It has been for a decade, at the end of which, last fall, a little over half of the 3,000 or so districts in the 17-state Southern and Border region remain wholly segregated.”⁴¹ Although states were ordered to comply with *Brown v. Board* in the late 1950s and early 1960s, over half of the schools in the South remained segregated in 1965. This shows that even though the Supreme Court made a decision on paper, it did not mean that decision was actually enforced in reality.

In 1957, there was an extreme anti-integration demonstration in Little Rock, Arkansas. Governor Orval Faubus was determined to defy the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision and not allow Little Rock Central High School to be integrated. At the beginning of the 1958 school year, Governor Faubus deployed the Arkansas National

³⁸ Lisa Vox, “Civil Rights Movement Timeline From 1951 to 1959.” April 7, 2016.

³⁹ Jim Leeson, “The First Ten Years,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 45, no. 8 (1964): 362-70.

⁴⁰ Leeson, “The First 10 Years,” 364

⁴¹ Alexander M. Bickel, “Speeding Up School Integration.” *New Republic* 152, no. 20 (1965): 14-16.

Guard to prevent black students from entering Central High School.⁴² Apart from these troops stationed to intimidate the nine black children from entering the school, there were hundreds of white parents lined up outside the building. They brandished racist signs, screamed racist slurs, and spit upon the nine black children who attempted to walk to the front door. President Eisenhower, fearing Russia might use this incident as more propaganda for the Cold War, had to send the 101st Airborne Division to enforce peace. The troops, armed with bayonets, were sent to Central High in Little Rock to ensure that the integration happened.⁴³ Even this, however, was not enough. Soon afterward, these children had to be rushed out of the school for fear of mob rule. Eventually they were able to attend the school. The next year, the district decided to close their schools instead of allowing them to be integrated, but the Supreme Court ruled these schools must be reopened to continue with the effort of desegregation.⁴⁴

In 1962, Ole Miss was one of the first southern colleges to be desegregated. James Meredith led this effort. Given the fact that the majority of high schools were still not integrated at this time, this was a dangerous proposition on Meredith's part. When he arrived on the campus of Ole Miss, a newspaper columnist described the event as "a second American Civil War [being] fought on the campus of the University of Mississippi."⁴⁵ The entire demonstration by white protestors was over just one African American student wanting to receive a higher education. The threat of violence proved to be so high that President John F. Kennedy was not sure if the forces he sent to Ole Miss were enough to ensure the safety of James Meredith. Kennedy sent a substantial number of military forces to ensure safety: "In the end, 500 United States marshals and 60 Mississippi National Guardsmen, along with bayonet-wielding U.S. military police, beat off a mob of 2,500 Mississippians."⁴⁶ All this potential violence coupled with the echo of Reconstruction-era racism demonstrated that segregation was still very much alive in the South during Bear Bryant's tenure as Alabama's head football coach. This also proves that Mississippi, like much of the South, still believed in their Dixiecrat governor, Ross Barnett. Barnett stated, "Ross Barnett will rot in jail before he will let one Negro ever darken the sacred threshold of our White Schools."⁴⁷ There was an intense amount of hatred towards even just the slightest mixing of races early on in Bear Bryant's tenure at the University of Alabama.

Unlike the strategy for the protests of many civil rights groups, anti-Civil Rights riots were anything but peaceful and non-violent. Anti-civil rights movements were about as racist and violent as one could imagine. Protestors utilized everything from tear gas, dogs, clubs, baseball bats and guns. For example, this riot in Birmingham was typical in terms of the riot gear that was used: "There was nothing phony about the brick-bats and clubs and switch blades, nor about the frenzy with which they were used...ordinarily it is held within bounds by a healthy fear of law."⁴⁸ The town of Birmingham did employ a public safety official whose job description entailed crowd control during demonstrations. It is perfectly reasonable to believe that someone in charge of public

⁴² "Little Rock School Desegregation (1957)."

⁴³ "The Week," *New Republic* 139, no. 7/8 (1958): 3-7.

⁴⁴ "Little Rock Desegregation."

⁴⁵ "What Next in Mississippi?," *Saturday Evening Post* 235, no. 40 (1962): 18-23.

⁴⁶ "What's Next in Mississippi," 19.

⁴⁷ "What's Next in Mississippi," 19.

⁴⁸ "Society in Civil Rights Movement," Shmoop.

safety would at least attempt to stop these violent demonstrations. However, Bull Connor did just the opposite: “The fraud is the assumption that never-dying race hatred is the cause of these outbreaks. The true cause is the conduct of those officials who gave the plug-uglies reason to believe that they would permit and perhaps secretly welcome outbreaks.”⁴⁹ Bull Connor and other public safety officials in the South did nothing to stop the riots and acts of violence directed towards Civil Rights groups that involving both blacks and whites, until a large amount of damage was done. Moreover, the governor of the state openly supported the anti-Civil Rights groups and tipped off local officials when a group of Civil Rights protestors were coming through their town. These combined incidents accurately depict the atmosphere, relationships, and types of tensions that whites had with blacks in the 1960s, all centering on the fear of integration. Coach Bear Bryant lived in and dealt with this environment on a daily basis.

As the 1960s progressed, the overall feeling in the South towards Civil Rights activists became more and more violent. Bloody Sunday took place on March 7, 1965.⁵⁰ Members of two Civil Rights groups, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Martin Luther King Jr.’s group, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), were going to march from Selma to Birmingham in a protest for voting rights. Before these groups could make their way across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Sheriff Jim Clark and Bull Connor were waiting to forcefully beat the protestors if they tried to cross the bridge (see figure 2).

These SNCC and SCLC members were peacefully marching, and yet, they were viciously beaten. The white South could not bear the thought of losing power and of being deemed as “equal” to African Americans. Whites thought they would be most successful in re-establishing the racial hierarchy by physically and psychologically beating the Civil Rights protestors until they could take it no more.

The whites also had a skewed vision of what equal rights meant to African Americans. Sheriff Jim Clark, in 1965, expressed his feelings to a reporter from the *New York Times* about what he felt was the real reason behind the Civil Rights Movement for African Americans: “What they want... is black supremacy.”⁵¹ One might believe that this statement does not accurately reflect the beliefs of all whites in the South and certainly not all southern white politicians during this time. However, this sentiment was widespread amongst the people who had the most power to create change. In 1963, Governor George Wallace made his inaugural speech, and announced his feelings on civil rights and equal rights for African Americans in the South. In his speech Wallace proclaimed, “I say ... segregation now ... segregation tomorrow ... segregation forever.”⁵² His speech was broadcasted, allowing thousands of people to hear this declaration and giving white people something to rally around together. Six months later, Wallace made headlines again by standing at the front doors of the University of Alabama, blocking two students who were court ordered to attend.⁵³ In response,

⁴⁹ “Society in Civil Rights Movement,” Shmoop.

⁵⁰ Margalit Fox, “Jim Clark, Sheriff Who Enforced Segregation, Dies at 84,” *The New York Times*.

⁵¹ “Society in Civil Rights Movement,” Shmoop.

⁵² “From ‘Brown’ (1954) to ‘Fisher’ (2013),” *USA Today*.

⁵³ Debra Bell, “George Wallace Stood in a Doorway at the University of Alabama 50 Years Ago Today,” *US News*, June 11, 2013.

President Kennedy was forced to order one hundred troops from the National Guard to ensure the entrance and safety of these two black students.⁵⁴

In 1970 the final season before Bear Bryant officially integrated the Alabama football team, racial tensions were extremely high in the South. The largest riot in Augusta, Georgia during the Civil Rights Movement broke out that year in response to the fact that a black teenager was tortured and murdered while in custody of law enforcement.⁵⁵ Civil Rights leaders did not feel that this section of Georgia, near Atlanta, was completely safe for African Americans until 1987. The University of Georgia has been part of the Southeastern Conference since its inaugural season in 1933, the same as Alabama. Given this type of attitude towards blacks in the South where a major college football conference plays its games, Bear must have had some other reason besides wanting to improve his team, to integrate it.

The Impact of Billy Varner

Many people have made the argument, including those who knew Bear the best, that he only surrounded himself with personnel whom he completely trusted. The person that Bear Bryant trusted the most was Billy Varner, also known as his do-everything man. Varner largely kept the details of how he and Bryant first met in confidence. However, the belief is that Bryant first encountered Billy Varner who was bartending at a local Tuscaloosa country club near Bear's residence.⁵⁶ This could have been as early as 1962-1966, during the height of the Civil Right Movement and years before Bryant integrated his football team.⁵⁷ Once Bryant and Varner met and formed a friendship, they were practically inseparable. Linda Knowles, Bryant's secretary for the majority of his duration of leading the Crimson Tide, confirmed the men's close relationship upon stating, "No one knew Coach Bryant better than Billy. Even Mrs. Bryant didn't know him as well as Billy did. He was with him almost 24 hours a day."⁵⁸ Varner was with Bryant for all the early morning weight lifting and film study sessions, and during late night strategy meetings. It was part of Varner's many responsibilities to pick Bryant up in the morning and bring him home at night.⁵⁹ One may assume that Varner was forced to do this because he was an employee, but Bear Bryant believed Varner was so much more than just a hired hand. When Varner was about to be pulled over for speeding, Bryant only had to wave his trademarked black and white checkered hat out the window and the policeman backed off.⁶⁰ This is evidence of Bryant's high-level of community standing at the time. College football was, and still is, an important aspect of southern culture. Because the University of Alabama was performing at a very high level and winning championships, Bryant was one of the most liked people in the state. Popular football coaches were almost above the law in certain respects. In this era, Bear probably waved his checkered hat out the window multiple times to get out of a traffic violation.

⁵⁴ Bell, "George Wallace Stood at Alabama," 1.

⁵⁵ Stephen Tuck, "Civil Rights Movement," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, September 9, 2004.

⁵⁶ Don Kausler, Jr., "Former Paul Bryant Associate Billy Varner Dies," AL.com, October 1, 2012.

⁵⁷ Wright Thompson, "Bear and Billy's Last Ride," 1

⁵⁸ Thompson, "Bear and Billy's Last Ride," 1

⁵⁹ Thompson, "Bear and Billy's Last Ride," 1.

⁶⁰ Thompson, "Bear and Billy's Last Ride," 1.

Controversially, this time the coach was using his influence to protect an African American.

A white man standing up for an African American man in Alabama during this time period could have endured unpleasant consequences as proven by the events surrounding the Freedom Riders. These Freedom Riders were both Whites and African Americans from the North and they would ride in a bus to the South to protest segregation on buses. Often, Freedom Riders were greeted with much violence and poor treatment in the South. Also, Bryant allowed Varner to see him at his lowest points: “Billy saw him weak and insecure...he saw him cry.”⁶¹ No routine employee, black or white, was allowed near someone who was as influential as Bear Bryant when he was at a point of vulnerability. Bear truly must have had a profound love and respect for Billy Varner for him to be present when these events took place. These previous pieces of evidence that explained why Varner was more than just hired help to Bryant could be seen as merely circumstantial evidence. The piece of evidence that puts to rest any doubt is that Bear Bryant had Billy Varner accompany him when Bryant went fishing with his grandson.⁶² Despite the southern sentiment regarding contact between blacks and whites, Bryant voluntarily allowed Billy Varner, a black man, to have a relationship with his white grandson.

Therefore, the actions of Bryant, a man that was born in the midst of a culture based on racism and white supremacy, prove that he actually viewed Billy Varner as a friend and confidant. Lastly, it appears as if Varner was accepted within the Alabama football office, even amongst female employees. Bryant’s secretary, Linda Knowles, said this about Billy: “I admire him as much as anybody I have ever known...Billy was the epitome of loyalty and hard work... We’ll miss sweet ol’ Billy.”⁶³ This was coming from a white secretary. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement there was still the “Black Man as Beast” theory, which asserted that black men would take any opportunity to pursue and be with a white woman.⁶⁴ Knowles describing Varner as the complete opposite, along with Bryant allowing him to interact with his grandson, legitimizes Varner as a friend and someone who had an impact on Bear’s decision to integrate his team in 1970.

The First Taste of Integration

The historic 1970 USC-Alabama football game, during which USC’s black fullback Sam “Bam” Cunningham obliterated the Crimson Tide’s defense, is largely credited with the first integration of the Southeastern Conference. Many of his former players and assistant believe that Bryant scheduled USC because they had black players who were stronger and faster.⁶⁵ Combining that with an average Alabama team and Bryant knew it would only be a matter of time before he would be allow to have black players. This, however, is true only to an extent. The first integration of the Alabama

⁶¹ Thompson, “Bear and Billy’s Last Ride,” 1.

⁶² Thompson, “Bear and Billy’s Last Ride,” 1.

⁶³ Kausler, “Billy Varner Dies,” 1

⁶⁴ Lisa Lindquist Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia, 1900-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 9.

⁶⁵ Steven Travers, *One Night, Two Teams: Alabama vs. USC and the Game that Changed a Nation* (Taylor Trade Pub., 2010).

football squad actually took place under Bryant's coaching staff in 1967.⁶⁶ This integration was not kept secret by Bryant or anyone on his staff as one might expect. A newsreel explicitly stated that there were black players on the Alabama football roster during spring practice that year.⁶⁷ It is odd that the coaches allowed this to happen since Bloody Sunday had occurred just two years ago. Also, from the beginnings of Reconstruction until 1968, Alabama was the state that had the fifth highest total number of lynchings in the country. A total of 347 people were lynched of which 299 were African American. Whites were also lynched but lynchings were predominantly reserved for African Americans.⁶⁸ The first African American to approach Bear Bryant about trying out was a lineman named Dock Rone.⁶⁹ Bear did not immediately tell Rone to leave because he was black, but instead, Bear told him the challenges he would face if he should make the team. At the end of their meeting, Bryant told Rone, "I admire your courage, young man."⁷⁰

Rone marked the beginning of an integrated Alabama football team. Non-coincidentally, the year 1967 established the one-year anniversary of Bryant and Billy Varner's tight-knit relationship. I strongly believe that having Billy Varner around definitely had an impact on the integration. Along with Rone, four other African Americans tried out for the team, three successfully, although they had to wait an extra week after practice began to be cleared academically.⁷¹ The white players were given advanced warning that there would be black players joining them and were told not to make a big deal out of it. Shockingly, the majority of the players did just that. Rone even stated many of the other white players "went out of their way" to make him and the other black players feel welcome.⁷² All three of the walk-ons never played or dressed for a game and only one left the team for personal reasons before the season started. Rone dropped out of school for personal reasons he does not discuss, although he did return later to pursue a degree in Political Science.⁷³ Only one black player named Parnell stayed on the team throughout the 1967 season.⁷⁴ Most likely, these players were unable to stay on the roster because the SEC at that time did not allow students receiving scholarships to play sports, and the students would have been unable to afford college without the scholarship.⁷⁵ The Crimson Tide had just won a national championship in 1965, and since most of the players had remained at school, the Tide clearly did not need these black players to walk on to make the team better.⁷⁶ The most important part about Rone and the four other African Americans who attempted to walk on was that Bear Bryant told his

⁶⁶ C.J. Schexnayder, "The 1967 Walk-ons: The Forgotten Pioneers of Alabama Football's Integration," *Roll 'Bama Roll*, June 6, 2012.

⁶⁷ Ed Herlithy, "Attempt to Integrate Alabama College Football. (1967)," YouTube video, 0:36. Posted May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OWoEFHrrAU>.

⁶⁸ Linderd, "Lynchings: By State and Race, 1882-1968." *Lynching Statistics*, UMKC.

⁶⁹ Schexnayder, "The 1967 Walk-ons," 1.

⁷⁰ Schexnayder, "The 1967 Walk-ons," 1.

⁷¹ Schexnayder, "The 1967 Walk-ons," 1.

⁷² Schexnayder, "The 1967 Walk-ons," 1.

⁷³ Schexnayder, "The 1967 Walk-ons," 1.

⁷⁴ "Documentary 'Three Days at Foster,' Examines the True History of Integration at Alabama," August 27, 2013.

⁷⁵ Christopher Walsh, "A-Club Honors Dunning, Pernell & Rone," April 23, 2015.

⁷⁶ "1957 Alabama Stats."

assistants and recruiters that they were allowed to start recruiting African American football players for the 1968 season.⁷⁷

Bryant was more than aware of the potential consequences that openly recruiting black players could have on his job security and his family's safety. It is widely believed that Bear, more than anyone, could understand the Southern view of segregation: "Bryant seemed to embody the worst Northern fears of the South as a land of irrationality and violence."⁷⁸ This is clear evidence that Bryant integrated his team for reasons other than to just make them better. No sensible man would put his wife and children's well-being in jeopardy for a reason so miniscule as to make a team better. When the 1969 season rolled around, there were still no black recruits on the roster. Although Bryant gave the green-light for his coaches to recruit black players, the school administration and Crimson Tide fan base would not go for it just yet.⁷⁹ The USC game softened the stance of the fan base into believing that allowing black athletes might not be such a bad thing after all. In 1970 Bryant's first black recruit was a freshman named John Mitchell.⁸⁰

How the Real Integration of Alabama Football Began

In 1969, John Mitchell was recruited from a junior college, but was not given a scholarship. He was on Alabama's roster in 1971. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that it was virtually unknown that there was an African American on Alabama's football team. Mitchell did not end up playing a down for the University of Alabama in 1970, but when he finally did in 1971, he became the first African American to ever play for the Bear and the University of Alabama.⁸¹ After his second full season playing, Mitchell became an All-American, making history as the first black All-American for the Crimson Tide.⁸²

The recruiting process that Mitchell went through, because he was the first African American to play for Alabama, was unlike anything Bear had gone through. A large part of the reason why John Mitchell and his mother felt comfortable about John attending Alabama had to have been due to the presence and respect of Billy Varner. The collegiate options for the great African American football players were somewhat limited in the 1960s and 1970s. Due to the racial attitudes in the South, the top recruiting pipelines for black high school players normally sent the players to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) like Grambling State, USC, and Michigan State.⁸³ Big time southern programs like the legendary Crimson Tide did not often approach African American families in order to recruit their sons. Michigan State was already well

⁷⁷ Keith Dunnavant, *COACH: The Life of Paul "Bear" Bryant*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁷⁸ A. Doyle, "Bear Bryant: Symbol for an Embattled South," *Colby Quarterly* 32 (1996), 72.

⁷⁹ Jason Lewis, "Black History Month: Desegregating College Football - Los Angeles Sentinel," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 9, 2012.

⁸⁰ Allen Barra, "The Integration of College Football Didn't Happen in One Game," *The Atlantic*, November 15, 2003.

⁸¹ Randy Kennedy, "Former Alabama Star John Mitchell of Mobile to Enter Alabama Sports Hall of Fame," *AL.com*, May 29, 2009.

⁸² John L. Festervand and Troy A. Festervand, "The Impact of Integration, Affirmative Action, and Diversity on Minority Student Recruitment at the University of Alabama: A Longitudinal Perspective," *Journal of Diversity Management (JDM)* 1, no. 2 (2011): 29.

⁸³ Eddie Pells, "U. of Alabama Football's Integration Legacy Revisited," *Diverse*, January 4, 2010.

known for “plucking” the best black athletes from the South and bringing them north. However, Bryant was persistent and had his scouts call all the Mitchells in the Mobile, Alabama phonebook until he got in touch with the right family.⁸⁴ Weeks later, John Mitchell and his mother arrived on the Alabama campus and met with Bear Bryant.

Inside Alabama football and anyone close with Bear, knew who Billy Varner was and it would be inevitable that the Mitchell family met him during their visit to the campus. For Bear to have the type of relationship that he did with Billy Varner, it must have made a statement to the Mitchell family, especially John. A few years earlier in 1963, Governor George Wallace was blocking the doors at this same university to prevent black students from entering. Now one of the most powerful men in Alabama was an ally of an African American, and this must have provided much relief to Mitchell’s mother. Mitchell stated, “I knew quite a bit about Alabama... In the back of my mind, you’re thinking, that’s where I want to go. A lot of kids wanted to go there. But you didn’t know, deep down, if you’d be able to cut the mustard if you got the chance.”⁸⁵ To know Bear had Billy Varner looking out for John was huge. To have an ally at a southern campus like Alabama and to know that your child was not alone and would be protected was the most a parent could ask for. Luckily for Mitchell, he grew up in the right era and was good enough to be recognized by Bryant and his staff. Mitchell went on to change college football in the South forever.

Although Mitchell was the first recruited black football player at Alabama, the basketball program was already in the process of making strides towards integration. In 1969, black basketball player Wendell Thomas Hudson received a basketball scholarship to the University of Alabama.⁸⁶ Hudson made history as the first African American to ever receive an athletic scholarship to play for the Crimson Tide in any sport.⁸⁷ The SEC had previously integrated basketball, just a few years before football in 1967, when Vanderbilt’s Perry Wallace suited up for a varsity game.⁸⁸ It was not until 1969 that Auburn’s Henry Harris joined Wallace as the only other African American basketball player in the Southeastern Conference, thus making only two out of the 120 basketball players in the conference African American.⁸⁹

Harris and Wallace both faced countless numbers of racial slurs thrown at them by fans and also faced more physical contact while playing than the normal player did. Even so, they did not get the calls from referees.⁹⁰ Basketball had already been integrated and the presence of black players in the South was not uncommon. For example, an all-black Texas Western basketball team won the national championship over an all-white Kentucky team in 1966.⁹¹ Basketball was not held nearly in the same regard as football in the South. Football was almost a religion, and by far and away the number one sport. The integration of the Southeastern Conference in basketball helped, but it did not have nearly the cultural impact that John Mitchell did in 1971. Although basketball integration upset

⁸⁴ Pells, “U of Alabama Legacy Revisited.”

⁸⁵ Pells, “U of Alabama Legacy Revisited.”

⁸⁶ Festervand and Festervand, “The Impact of Integration,” 29.

⁸⁷ Festervand and Festervand, “The Impact of Integration,” 29.

⁸⁸ Charles H. Martin, “Jim Crow in the Gymnasium: The Integration of College Basketball in the American South,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 10, no. 1 (1993): 68-86.

⁸⁹ Charles, “Jim Crow in the Gymnasium,” 70.

⁹⁰ Charles, “Jim Crow in the Gymnasium,” 71.

⁹¹ Charles, “Jim Crow in the Gymnasium,” 71.

many white segregationists, it was found to be tolerable.⁹² To imagine this happening in football was an entirely different story, one that was unimaginable. Football was long considered a southern sport while basketball had stronger ties to northern states. Southerners considered football their sport and did not want it to be mixed.

The first black player to be awarded a football scholarship to the University of Alabama was Wilbur Jackson in 1970. In fact, Jackson signed at Alabama before Mitchell.⁹³ However, this happened months before the USC-Alabama game in 1970, which is largely credited with integrating college football.⁹⁴ Jackson, a running back from Ozark Alabama, was in the stands for this game. The experience and joy Jackson must have felt watching a black running-back named Sam Cunningham tear up a nationally-known defense had to have been exhilarating. There was no guarantee that this would happen. It very well could have turned the other way around where Alabama’s stout defense and offensive line pummeled the first integrated team (USC) to ever play at Alabama. Even if this would have happened, I firmly believe Bryant would have let his scholarship offer stand with Jackson.

The recruitment process involving Wilbur Jackson, up to when he finally stepped onto campus, was unique. Jackson was going to attend a university any way he could. His parents were poor and did not have the means to send him to college.⁹⁵ Alabama was the only school that offered Jackson a scholarship.⁹⁶ Along with meeting Coach Bryant and Billy Varner, two of Jackson’s former teammates were also going to play at Alabama.⁹⁷ Jackson stated that one conversation with Bryant really convinced him to play there: “On my recruiting trip, Coach Bryant said, ‘If you ever have a problem you come see me.’ The entire time I was there, I never needed to go see Coach Bryant.”⁹⁸ The interesting part of Jackson’s days at Alabama was his living arrangements. Bryant roomed Jackson with a white recruit from Minnesota named Joe Bayne Doughty.⁹⁹ Bryant did not make Jackson room alone in a dorm away from all the other white players, but arranged for Jackson to be with a white student. Bryant placed them in what was the nicest and largest suite in the athletic dorm.¹⁰⁰ This arrangement worked out so well that when John Mitchell arrived, Bryant also matched him up with a white roommate.¹⁰¹ This is largely due to the fact of how well Jackson got along with Doughty and the white dorm director Gary White.¹⁰² The way Mitchell and Jackson worked on the field also helped them fit in and not have problems with the white players. It was well known that Jackson’s personality helped him gain acceptance: “At Alabama, Jackson helped soften hearts with his speed, his work ethic, his humility and his ready smile.”¹⁰³ Jackson knew that integration was “the law of the land; but old habits die hard...there were still those who

⁹² Charles, “Jim Crow in the Gymnasium,” 71.

⁹³ Festervand and Festervand, “The Impact of Integration,” 29.

⁹⁴ Barra, “Integration Didn’t Happen in One Game,” 1.

⁹⁵ Jimmy Smothers, “Jackson Hears Old Story for First Time,” *The Gadsen Times*, June 10, 2007.

⁹⁶ Smothers, “Jackson Hears Story First Time.”

⁹⁷ Smothers, “Jackson Hears Story First Time.”

⁹⁸ Phillip Marshall, “Jackson Made History as First Black Tide Football Player,” *The Gadsen Times*, July 23, 2006.

⁹⁹ Smothers, “Jackson Hears Story First Time.”

¹⁰⁰ Smothers, “Jackson Hears Story First Time.”

¹⁰¹ Smothers, “Jackson Hears Story First Time.”

¹⁰² Smothers, “Jackson Hears Story First Time.”

¹⁰³ Marshall, “Jackson First Black Tide Football Player,” 7.

resisted.”¹⁰⁴ The integration of SEC basketball helped take some of the stress and attention away from Jackson, but he still faced an incredible amount of adversity while at Alabama. By the time Jackson left Alabama and due to his success on the field, people were starting to warm up to the idea of including some black players, as long as they produced on the field.

Bryant had wanted to award scholarships to black players for a while, but his main concern was what would happen to them when they were seen running onto the field.¹⁰⁵ In the 1960s Bryant did not believe it was time to integrate and was not comfortable challenging Governor George Wallace.¹⁰⁶ As early as 1963, former Alabama University President Frank Rose stated that Bryant had already brought up the issue of integration: “The coach, of course, was concerned about the problems of segregation, and he felt that the university should move forward as quickly as possible in getting the matter settled.”¹⁰⁷ Bryant wanted to integrate as early as 1963. He went to talk to all the important people involved with the university, including state leaders and prominent alumni, and also went to talk to multiple legislators with Rose.¹⁰⁸ However, all this progress came to a screeching halt. On the same day George Wallace was blocking black students from integrating the University, Rose and his staff members were with Bryant in his office, and they could all see Wallace from the window.¹⁰⁹ It was unrealistic for Bryant and Rose to think that they could integrate a football team at a school where football was religion, especially if the governor himself personally prevented African Americans, who were not student athletes, from attending. By the early 1970s, football in the ACC, which had some schools in the South, and the basketball programs in the SEC, Alabama, Auburn and Vanderbilt, had already been integrated. When the early 1970s rolled around, Bryant decided enough time had passed since Governor Wallace stood in the doorway. Bryant decided it was time to integrate the Alabama Crimson Tide regardless of what events had previously transpired.

The Other Side: Anti-Bryant Views

Although Bear Bryant was a highly regarded coach and central figure in college football, there are still people who believe that Bear put off integration as long as he could because they believed he was a racist. Much of this discontent comes from Bryant’s perceived silence regarding Governor George Wallace’s policies and beliefs. The connection between Bryant and Wallace is viewed by some with contempt as some see it as an acceptance of segregationist ideals: “Either Bear Bryant knew George Wallace’s policies were wrong and did nothing (moral cowardice) or he agreed with them, in which case no football victories could redeem his fitness to be a human being.”¹¹⁰ This view of Bryant explicitly states he agreed with Wallace, or that Bryant was basically too much of a coward to stand up and do anything that might have angered

¹⁰⁴ Marshall, “Jackson First Black Tide Football Player,” 7.

¹⁰⁵ Harwell Hoyt, “Bryant and Blacks: Both Had to Wait,” *The Huntsville Times*, June 6, 1983.

¹⁰⁶ MrSportshistorian, “Bear Bryant - Sports Century (Complete),” YouTube. January 4, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Harwell, “Bryant and Blacks.”

¹⁰⁸ Harwell, “Bryant and Blacks.”

¹⁰⁹ Harwell, “Bryant and Blacks.”

¹¹⁰ D.J. Byrnes, “The Bear, JoePa, Leaders & Moral Quandaries,” *Eleven Warriors*, February 2, 2012.

Wallace. Religious groups became involved in their outcry over the Crimson Tide’s racial makeup. In a 1969 article in *Presbyterian Life*, Wilmina Rowland made a bold statement about Bear and his team being racist: “A varsity football player who was black could be regarded by some as an embarrassment to the University of Alabama.”¹¹¹ This negative view of Bryant portrays him as a white segregationist and implies that if it were up to Bryant himself, he would have never integrated. Having a religious newspaper call you a racist is not the position you want to be in, especially in the heart of the Bible Belt. This could only have Bear viewed in a negative light. Many people also believed that football clouded Bear’s moral judgment: “Bear Bryant was a moral coward. He was faced with a rudimentary moral equation and...shit the woods.”¹¹² In response to this, many scholars bring up the fact that Bear wanted to integrate earlier but the social climate did not allow him to do so; therefore, he scheduled the USC game in 1970 to clearly demonstrate the need for desegregation.¹¹³ People do not accept his excuse about the social climate or the fact that “the time wasn’t right.”¹¹⁴ They believe that this logic is completely flawed and it is a coward’s excuse for not integrating. People also criticize Bear for being silent on race issues: “Where Bear was silent, others outright vile actions were willing to shape public opinion on the matter.”¹¹⁵ Historians have argued that the void in Bryant’s influence and his silence left the door open for people like Governor George Wallace, who was in favor of segregation.¹¹⁶ The time slot that was available for Bear to speak out, which he ignored, opened the door for Governor Wallace to speak out and proclaim his views that reinforced segregation and white supremacy in the South. However this is not even the worst criticism of Bear that is commonly shared. Other people believe that Bear integrated only because he was forced to, “but just know Bear Bryant cow-towed to this man’s desires [Governor George Wallace] until he couldn’t compete otherwise.”¹¹⁷ This statement tarnishes a large portion of what Bryant’s legacy consists of. Even though many people see Bryant as a catalyst for the acceptance of African Americans in the South, there are others who view Bryant in an extremely negative light. These people see him as someone who conformed and gave in to societal influences because, if he did not, Alabama football would no longer be at the top.

The people that believe Bear Bryant’s moral judgment was clouded by football clearly do not know all the facts and anecdotes that pertain to the process he had to endure and go through to integrate his team. These people clearly have not done their research because this view indicates they do not know about Billy Varner. However, it is still important to note that everyone does not view Bear in such a positive light; to some people he is seen as an immoral hypocrite who only integrated his team because it would benefit him as a coach. Bryant’s humble and unstable upbringing led him to different households that eventually molded him into arguably the greatest college football coach of all time. Had Bryant not moved to Fordyce from Morro Bottom, society could very well have missed out on a central figure to college football. More importantly, the Civil

¹¹¹ John David Bailey, *Career in Crisis: Paul "Bear" Bryant and the 1971 Season of Change* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006).

¹¹² Byrnes, “The Bear and Moral Quandaries.”

¹¹³ Byrnes, “The Bear and Moral Quandaries.”

¹¹⁴ Byrnes, “The Bear and Moral Quandaries.”

¹¹⁵ Byrnes, “The Bear and Moral Quandaries.”

¹¹⁶ “From ‘Brown’ (1954) to ‘Fisher’ (2013),” *USA Today*.

¹¹⁷ Byrnes, “The Bear and Moral Quandaries.”

Rights Movement may have stalled and not progressed as successfully as it did.

Prominent Civil Rights activist Jesse Jackson indirectly praised Bear Bryant: "The reason why Saban is so great - he can choose from the whole field of players, not just white players."¹¹⁸ Had it not been for Bryant, current Crimson Tide Coach Nick Saban would not have the luxury of being able to recruit the players he *feels* could help his team the most. Although Jesse Jackson blames the Birmingham Street bombing as the cause of integration, it is too far of a stretch to say that event caused Bryant to integrate. Historical evidence supports my stance that Bryant integrated because he felt it was unjust not to do so. Not just so he could improve his team. Jackson's statement saying the reason why Saban is so great is actually, I believe, praise directed towards Bryant for what he accomplished. Regardless, this acknowledgement of Bryant for what he was able to do for integration in the South, as he "gave many African Americans opportunities that they otherwise wouldn't have had the chance to have."¹¹⁹

Conclusion and Legacy

When Bryant's life in football was forced to come to a close in 1982, Bear died just over a month later.¹²⁰ Bear Bryant and football were synonymous for the majority of his life. Bryant's legacy is a vivid reminder of just how great a coach he was statistically. He played a key role in the acceptance of African Americans in the South just as the Civil Rights Movement was coming to a close in the early 1970s. I believe this provides evidence that he was one of the greatest coaches of his time. It is impossible to compare coaches who lived in different social times with their social achievements. Even if Bryant did encompass views that would be deemed unpopular today, it is important to remember that he grew up in a small town in Arkansas during a time of rampant racism and white supremacy. It is evident that Bear was able to put aside the cultural feelings of many whites during the mid-twentieth century and did what he felt was necessary and just. Even if you take away all of the national titles and victories that Bryant obtained during his illustrious career, his recruiting actions alone would be enough to designate him as an iconic figure in college football and civil rights history.

When people view Bryant's coaching record alone, it is almost equally as impressive as his accomplishments off the field with the integration and acceptance of African Americans on his team, in the South, and on the University of Alabama campus. In the history of Division I and the FBS (football bowl subdivision), Bryant ranks third in wins with 323.¹²¹ During the course of these wins, Bryant coached at five different schools, the most prominent and successful being Alabama. Coaching at different schools often meant he had to continuously rebuild. With Bryant, there was often no time for a rebuild: "Bryant left a legacy that encompassed more than 37 winning seasons overall...No college coach in the second half of the twentieth century commanded a

¹¹⁸ Greg Garrison, "'The Reason Why Saban Is so Great ...' Jesse Jackson Says Bama Should Thank the Four Little Girls," *AL.com*, September 15, 2013.

¹¹⁹ "Bear Bryant and the Color Barrier (Covert Racism)," *The Exploration of Race and Sports*, December 11, 2011.

¹²⁰ Mike Puma, "Bear Bryant 'Simply the Best There Ever Was'," *ESPN*.

¹²¹ Kevin Ryan, "Most College Football Coaching Wins All Time, Division I/FBS," *247Sports*, February 10, 2015.

bigger presence.”¹²² Bear Bryant’s last game as head football coach at Alabama was in December 1982, when he appropriately ended his career with a 21-15 victory over Illinois in the Liberty Bowl.¹²³ Just a little over a month later, Bryant died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-nine in Tuscaloosa, where he is still remembered to this day.¹²⁴ Bear will never be forgotten due to his outstanding record and reputation as a coach. More importantly, though, despite all of his achievements on the football field, Bear’s most significant achievements were in the social sphere where he integrated the University of Alabama football team.

Chris Richman is graduating from the University of Arizona in May 2017 with a Bachelor of Arts in History with a minor in Pre-Law. In the fall, he will be attending Syracuse Law. He hopes that upon his completion of law school that he will be able to earn a job in the private sector. While he is not sure where he will end up, ideally he would love to live in California. He played baseball during his freshman year at a small school in Pennsylvania before transferring to the University of Arizona. In his free time, he enjoys going to the gym and hanging out with friends.

¹²² Puma, “Bear Bryant Best There Ever Was.”

¹²³ “Bryant’s Career Record.”

¹²⁴ Joseph Durso, “Bear Bryant is Dead at 69; Won a Record 323 Games,” *New York Times*, January 27, 1983.

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