

The Junction Boys

How Ten Days In Hell With Bear Bryant Forged A Championship Team

By Jim Dent

[Fertig notes]

In 1954 the Texas A&M football team went to a little town called Junction for preseason training camp. We went in two buses and came back in one. Now that I look back on that experience, I realize that it helped build my character. I learned that you never quit.

When our bus pulled out of Junction, we knew we would be winners.

Toughness was what he was really looking for. Coach Bryant remains one of the most powerful influences on my life. He's my hero.

Gene Stallings

If you believe in yourself and have dedication and pride – and never quit – you'll be a winner. The price of victory is high, but so are the rewards. Paul "Bear" Bryant This arena, this stage, was what Bryant had coveted growing up dirt-poor in the Arkansas creek bottoms. He recognized things about human nature long before anyone knew this about him. He often told himself, even on the darkest and saddest days, that someday he would be somebody.

A hugely successful Thoroughbred breeder and owner, Hancock slapped Bryant's shoulder and said, "Paul, I don't think it's so much that you coach football as you coach people. You just have a way with folks."

The coach had learned a vital secret about communicating; a leader should carefully limit his time with the troops so that every syllable counted and every word was remembered. Bryant had gone ballistic when he thought Kentucky president Herman L. Donovan lied to him – privately promising to fire Rupp after a shameful point-shaving scandal rocked the basketball team. Instead, Donovan had awarded Rupp a contract extension and given him a new Cadillac. In turn, Bryant got a new cigarette lighter.

Bryant dropped a silver spittoon on the table. "I made my commitment when I took this job. Now it's time for you to make yours." Nobody moved. "Boys, just think of this as going to church and dropping the dough in the plate. Let's see how much commitment you got in your hearts." The first two rolls of hundred-dollar bills were bundled by rubber bands. They amounted to \$5,000. From the corner of the table came another \$5,000. When the tithing had stopped, the spittoon was almost full. It all amounted to \$30,000. Not bad. He'd never collected that much money in one sitting at Kentucky, where the bluebloods kept that much cash around for cab fare or for betting the daily double. He knew it would buy two or three good players.

An important lesson Bryant had learned through the years was that you don't buy every boy. Studs with big up-front bonuses tended to develop an attitude you could spot a mile away. Clothes, cars, and pretty girls normally spoiled a boy.

The coach had logged mental notes on the big center – some good and some bad. When Fred felt like practicing, he could mow down anybody on the field. Other days, when his heart wasn't in it, he was mediocre, like most of the boys. Bryant didn't mind if a player was a little short in talent or stature if he compensated with a big heart. The players he hated were heavy on talent and light on guts. That was Fred all right.

“You know what I think? I think we should blow it up and start over. The wrong people’ve been runnin’ the joint for too long. Let’s just torch the barn and kill the rats.”
“In a crisis, don’t hide behind anything or anybody. They’re going to find you anyway.”
“In life, you’ll have your back up against the wall many times. You might as well get used to it.”

Bryant had started cooking up this secret trip at the end of spring training when he got fed up with the meddling jock sniffers. What sold Bryant was the remote location. It would take weeks for the Aggie leeches to locate Junction, and the staff would have no trouble shooing away local folks who wanted to watch practice. No press would be poking around. Mamas and papas might worry about their boys but wouldn’t know where to find them. Bryant could teach the boys to play football his way – or they could hit the highway.

When Acie Ray returned home, Mira Huddleston took one look at her husband’s puffy face and said, “You know better than to fight a man like Jim Box. You knew you couldn’t whip him.” Acie Ray smiled in spite of the swollen lip. “I knew it. But just think of the prestige if I had.”

”You never know how a horse will pull until you hook him to a heavy load.”

“Coach, we came out here to propose a barbecue. We could cook up some steaks and some hamburgers and maybe even roast a pig. We’d like to invite some of the townsfolk and, well, have a big time.” Bryant stared impatiently at the floor. In a monotone as flat as Lubbock, he said, “We didn’t come out here to eat. We came out here to practice football.” “You know, Coach, it ain’t gonna get any cooler or wetter out here! Heck fire, Coach, we’re in the middle of a dang drought. As president of the chamber, I’d like to offer to bring some Cokes out here after practice for the boys,” Bryant glared at the man and said, “We didn’t come out here to drink Cokes, either.” Little did the boys know what awaited them with tomorrow’s sunrise.

“Sacrifice. Work. Self-discipline. I teach these things, and my boys don’t forget them when they leave.

That stillness was shattered at 4:00 A.M. Bear Bryant liked to get an early jump on the day. “Coach Bryant says there ain’t gonna be no breakfast. He’s gonna work you fellers till you puke. Says he don’t want a bunch of eggs, bacon and grits all over the field. So get up, take your vitamins, drink your orange juice, take your salt pills, shut the hell up and get ready to vomit.” “I wonder if he’s gonna teach us about the fishes and the loaves,” Weasel Watson said in a low voice. Nobody laughed.

Maroon was for the first team, white for the second, blue for the third, orange for the fourth and yellow for the fifth-teamers and anyone else without a designation. From day one, Bryant wanted his players to understand exactly where they stood in the team’s pecking order. The different colors created tension among the troops, and Bryant liked that.

Bryant had been around football long enough to know that some injuries should be treated seriously. But he also subscribed to the old gridiron adage that a pampered boy will never play with pain.

It seemed he could change his personality by simply changing clothes.

“I can reach a kid who doesn’t have any ability as long as he doesn’t know it.”

As A&M players boarded the busses that night after the victory, they could still see the stadium lights shining brightly. They could hear bodies colliding down on the field. Bryant was so exasperated with the defeat that he'd ordered a midnight scrimmage to begin at the same spot where the game had ended. He marked the ball and blew his whistle, and the Kentucky Wildcats went to work – until four in the morning.

“We come to pick up your boy with the broken back. Doc Wiedeman says he's got four broken bones. He needs to come on back to the hospital. We'll get a stretcher and load him up.” “Won't need to do that.” “Why not?” “Because the boy with the broken back is out there on the practice field right now, quarterbackin' our offense. Besides, you walk out there on that field with stretcher, you might just find it shoved up your ass. Bear Bryant is pretty good at shovin' things,”

“I don't care how much talent a team has – if the boys don't think tough, practice tough, and live tough, how can they play tough on Saturday?”

So Mickey decided to rework yesterday's piece and spice it up. Nothing in the last twenty-four hours had changed his mind about a camp that, to him, resembled the Bataan Death March. Bryant was running some players into the ground and others off.

In a few minutes, the entire coaching staff would convene for its daily meeting, and already Mickey could hear some arguing and spirited discussions emanating from the Quonset hut, which the norm this time of the day. Bryant hated dull staff meetings.

Through the years, Bryant had become a master psychologist, and one of his favorite tricks was tossing the problem into the other person's lap. Bryant knew that people naturally felt better about the solution if they helped solve the problem.

Big-time college football programs rarely provided day-to-day treatment for athletes beyond the taping of ankles or the whirlpool. Players were expected to play with pain and heal quickly on their own.

“The first you quit, it's hard. The second time, it gets easier. The third time, you don't even have to think about it.”

But everyone knew that Fred was no longer the great center who had once dominated the SWC. Bryant had psychologically broken him down, piece by piece, and forgotten how to put him back together again.

“Tell him to kiss my ass. If a boy'll quit on me in practice, he sure as hell'll quit on me in the fourth quarter. We don't need his kind around here.”

“When you win, there's glory enough for everybody. When you lose, there's glory for none.”

Texas had 120 varsity players. One hundred and fifty freshmen were drilling in helmets and pads on the adjoining field. For years, Longhorn had flared out across the state, signing players they knew would never set foot on the playing field, especially now that one-platoon football had returned. Marginal players were signed to scholarships to keep them off competing rosters at Rice, Baylor, SMU, TCU, Texas A&M and Arkansas, - the other SWC schools.

“Winning isn't imperative, but getting tougher in the fourth quarter is.”

Fatigue had made cowards of many of the boys, who'd run off in the moonlit nights without even saying good-bye. Now there were forty-one left, but only twenty-eight were able to practice. In spite of the near-exhaustion, the survivors seemed more

determined than ever to stick it out. Jack Pardee said, "I'd die before I'd quit."

A day earlier, Easley had made a dreaded phone call back to Houston. "Dad, this guy is killing everybody. We don't have more than three dozen players left and we got here with over a hundred." Robert Easley, Sr., a plumber and pipe-fitter and man of few frills, said, "Boy, I never figured you a quitter. But if you're a quitter, than do what you gotta do." Easley hung up and decided he wouldn't quit even if Bryant held a .45 to his head. There were so many reasons to leave, yet so many to stay.

If he doesn't stop, he's going to kill one of us, Charles Hall thought. *Maybe I should just haul my ass off the field just like Fred Broussard did*. Instead, Hall stood there shaking, wanting to cry. He wanted to leave but couldn't force his legs to start walking.

Maggie and Bill Schroeder knew they were wasting their breath. They'd spent the last twenty years instilling pride and ambition in the son, and now they were asking him to change. A determined man is hard to stop, and especially when he's your son.

"I'm just a simple plowhand from Arkansas, but I have learned over the years how to hold a team together. How to lift some men up, how to calm others down, until finally they've got one heartbeat, together, a team."

"You know," Bryant said slowly, his head tilting forward, "at least a few of those quitters had the guts to come in here and tell me they were haulin' ass. When they did, we gave those boys a bus ticket, a ride down to the station, and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for the trip. The others were so chickenhearted that they ran out of here at three in the morning like it was some kind of goddamn jailbreak."

"Why do you figure," Smokey asked, chomping on a thick cigar, "that boy just lit out without so much as a good-bye?" "Lack of respect," Bear said. "Nah." "Then what is it, Smokey?" "Fear. If a boy ain't got the guts to stick it out, he sure as heck ain't gonna walk in here and tell ya why. By God, Coach, those boys snoring in their bunk beds tonight are scared to death of ya." Bear walked toward the screen door, turned, and jabbed a finger at the old man. "The4n what in the hell am I supposed to do?" Smokey pulled hard from the uncapped bottle, smacked his lips, and exhaled. "Have you ever sat down and wondered why the hell you gotta be the meanest damn sumbitch in the valley?" Bear didn't answer and Smokey could see deep thinking in those faraway eyes.

By the time Paul Bryant was three, his father fell ill and was rendered a semi-invalid. Since the family's religion didn't allow for doctors, it never was known what struck down poor old Monroe. Seeking medical care then was considered a sin among the Bryants. When the fourteen-year-old boy learned that a carnival man was willing to pay a dollar to anyone who'd wrestle a bear onstage, he was the first and the last boy in line. The id was growing up tough and a little mean.

It was obvious now to Smokey that the frustration of inheriting such a lousy football team at Texas A&M was eating a hole in his boss's stomach. A man who'd overcome so much and then grown accustomed to winning big couldn't fathom the thought of a losing season. Fear of failure had always driven him, and now it was traveling at a blinding speed.

If they keep quitting, we won't have enough to play Tech in the opener. Guess I'd better change my ways and heed your lecture here tonight. I'd better be nicer to these boys, or they'll sure as hell run me out of coaching." Smokey didn't need to look at Bryant to

know he was rolling his eyes.

You have to be willing to outcondition your opponents.

“Hell, I don’t want to see any more players quit. So maybe I need to change some things.” The coach paused and gazed around the room. He could sense a shift in the collective mood. The players studied his face even more closely and, for the first time, detected a trace of compassion in his eyes. They had heard him utter the word *change*. They all wondered if he really meant it.

“I tell you what I’m gonna do.” His voice was rising. “Tomorrow’s Sunday. How many of you boys’d like to go to church in the mornin’?” Heads began to turn as the players looked at one another, and hands shot up. A trip to church would mean a cancellation of the morning practice. They had visions of sleeping until seven o’clock, eating a big country breakfast, and then loading up the buses for a trip to town. Most of the boys wouldn’t have gone to church on their own.. But they’d walk ten miles through cactus to church if it meant they didn’t have to pull on those cold and soggy uniforms before daybreak. Bryant studied their eyes. Instead of fear, he could see rays of hope. Fatigue no longer tugged at their faces, and he could feel a surge of human energy generating through the room. Boys who had slumped in their seats from exhaustion were now sitting up straight.

“Hey, Pat!” he hollered at assistant coach Pat James. “Make sure you get all the names because we’ll be going to church in the mornin’.”

As James recorded the names, Bryant strolled to the chalkboard where he would deliver the evening address on defense. He began drawing Xs and Os on the board, dragging the screeching chalk across the blackboard. He quickly diagrammed a defense that the Aggies had been working on during their morning practice.

“Yes sir, boys,” he almost sang as he drew. “We’ll be goin’ to church in the mornin’ . That’s right. To church we’ll all be going. Right *after* morning practice.”

In unison, forty boys stopped breathing.

Bebes Stallings could feel his young bones creaking and knew that it was going to take a lot more than prayer to make his body feel whole again. Bebes wondered if old people felt this bad.

Football changes and so do people.

I don’t need to tell you that you’re putting the boys at great risk. Every day that you continue to practice in this brutal heat with no water breaks, you’re putting lives on the line. I don’t know if you realize this, but Billy almost died before we got him cooled down.

Bryant hated to lose, but for the moment he wasn’t overly concern with what might happen against Texas Tech. More important was establishing the right tone and raising calluses and vanquishing the quitters. Still, it would take weeks, months, and possibly the whole season to get his team on the fast track. In the meantime, he would be dogged by waves of wide-eyed alums..

He often drew peace of mind from his own physical and mental fortitude. There wasn’t a man alive who could outwork him, much less outcoach him.

The first thing a football coach needs when he’s starting out is a wife who’s willing to put up with a whole lot of neglect. The second thing is a five-year contract.

Just what he needed, more pressure. He could never imagine expectations being so high at a place where losing had become a stubborn habit.

A few months earlier, a carload of football players had been riding around campus, telling dirty jokes, when Bennie interrupted: "Does anybody in this car know any jokes that are funny?"

Bryant said, "Boys, you're right about the cussing. Our mamas and our papas didn't raise us to talk like this. Tell ya what we're gonna do. We're gonna start us a cuss bucket. Every time a player cusses, he'll throw in a quarter. An assistant coach, it'll cost him a dollar. Me, I'll throw in ten bucks. Then at the end of the season we'll have a party. Think of all of the stuff we could buy with that damn money." Bryant smiled and told the boys he'd see them at the afternoon practice. The Aggies were thirty minutes into the workout when a rash of offensive mistakes inspired a volcanic eruption. Profanity rolled like thunder from Bryant's tongue.

"Shoot, Bennie, that's gonna cost me," he blurted. "I'll pay for every word of that."

Bryant's right hand dipped into a pant's pocket and found two crinkled hundred dollar bills. He tossed them both toward Billy Pickard. "That oughtta cover me for a while, Billy. When that's gone, run me a tab."

After arriving in Athens, Bryant was approached by Atlanta newspapermen Harry Mehre and Ed Danforth.

"Coach, where's the rest of your team?" Mehre asked.

"This *is* the rest of my team."

"Well, uh, why didn't you bring more guys?"

"Because these are the only ones who want to play."

When you make a mistake, admit it, learn from it and don't repeat it.

Losing week after week can test a man's sanity, especially when that man is accustomed to winning in a big way and has an ego to feed.

The boys were not aware that Bryant had a spiritual side.

He had taken them to church during the dog days of Junction and had seemed quite comfortable singing from the Baptist hymnal. But his language on the practice field and around the locker room didn't suggest a godliness. Now, though, he seemed in the midst of a religious experience. He clasped his hands and spoke in a low voice that had lost its edge. "Now, I know this has been a rough time on you boys. We lost a lot of players, a lot of your buddies, in Junction. We've already lost a helluva lot of football games. But there's something I know about y'all. I can see it in your eyes and feel it in your hearts. If y'all will just hang in there, you're gonna win a championship. Maybe not this year, maybe not next year, but you'll take that championship before you walk off from A&M for good. I believe that. Now is the time for you to start believin' that, too."

Minutes before kickoff, Goehring was informed that he would open the game at left defensive tackle. That meant he would come face to face with All-American Forrest Gregg, possibly the best lineman in the country and a man who seemed destined for a great pro career. Dennis knew he was up to his neck in snakes against Gregg, but it didn't take long for him to concoct a plan. On the first play, Dennis charged offside and smacked Gregg in the face with a forearm shiver, knocking the 235 pounder into his own backfield, where he landed on his butt. Bryant sent a sub into the game, and as Dennis

trotted to the sideline the big man grabbed him by the collar and shook him. “Why’d you do that?” “Because, Coach, I thought it was the only way I could beat my man. Besides, I needed to get the big ole boy’s attention.” Bryant’s mouth fell open. Then he popped Dennis on top of the helmet and said, “I always did like a lineman who could think in an emergency. Get your butt back in there.”

Bryant had spun his own magic in luring many of the boys to College Station. Instead of making his sales pitch directly to the player himself, he spent much of the time wooing the parents. He would typically show up at a boy’s house late in the afternoon and then work his way into the kitchen, where he would help the mother prepare supper.

Afterward, he insisted on washing and drying the dishes. His down-home charm was often effective, and it drove enemy recruiters nuts.

One Saturday, Bryant was forced to miss his own television show due to a prior speaking engagement. He asked Smokey Harper to fill in. The moderator was A&M sports information director Jones Ramsey, and the sponsor was Lilly Ice Cream. Ramsey finally asked the question that was on everyone’s mind: “Do you think all of those great freshmen will make us a better team next year?” “Sure do,” Smokey said. If the damn coaches don’t run ’em off.” Ramsey almost swallowed his spoon. “Guess we better get back to eatin’ some more of this good ol’ Lilly ice cream.”

Bryant accepted the fact that some of the Aggie blue chippers had been paid. He knew that prominent Aggie ex-students had been beating the bushes with cash in hand. He had firsthand knowledge of a slush fund. But he also was aware that several other conference schools – especially Rice and Texas – had been paying studs under the table for years. He didn’t worry about his own players who had accepted money to play at A&M. They were not likely to spill the beans on their school. It was the ones who had turned down the cash and went elsewhere. They were the potential loose cannons.

Their respective coaches had helped them file affidavits with the SWC office stating they’d been offered \$200 to sign by A&M and \$50 a month over tuition. Bryant couldn’t believe his ears. That kind of cash was chicken feed. Up front, he’d told the Aggie alums to “meet the competition” when it came to bankrolling players. Money cited by the committee would be considered pocket change by his Aggie bagmen.

Perhaps the only compliment from an insider had come from TCU coach Abe Martin, who said, “Bryant’s gonna make the rest of us put away our golf clubs and go to work.” Minutes before kickoff, Bryant stood before the players. “As you leave this locker room, I want each and every one of you gentlemen to come by me and shake hands and look into that mirror right over there.” The mirror was situated above a sink next to the door that led to the stadium tunnel. As they left, Bryant said, “When you come back in here tonight, take another look in that mirror. Then you’ll know if you gave your best.”

Then he stood over Henry Clark, who sat on his stool with his head bowed. Bryant grabbed the chunky tackle by the shoulder pads and lifted and shook him like a sack of potatoes. “Henry, you let that man shoot the gap on you one more time and you’ll walk all the way back to Texas.” Henry gazed at Bryant with dark, sad eyes. “Coach,” he said in a high-pitched voice. “I haven’t even been in the game.”

Bryant was the master at asking for forgiveness, not permission.

Billy Ray Bowman was considered one of the best linemen in Texas and might have been

headed for the Kodak All-American team if he hadn't outsmarted himself in the classroom. As he prepared for a final exam in an English course, he asked his tutor to prepare six papers. The professor had announced in advance the six possible topics he would ask the class to write about. Billy Ray placed all of the papers in his sock and walked to class. Throughout the three-hour exam, he scribbled in his notebook and appeared to be deep in thought. At the end, he pulled out his six papers and handed in the three correct ones. A few days later, he got a call from the professor. "You flunked. In fact, I'm recommending that you be expelled." "Why? I answered all of the questions." "Yes. And all of the answers were typed."

During his first ten years as a coach, Bryant steadfastly believed that players should neither be overly praised nor criticized in print. But John David Crow had become the exception to most rules. "John David gives so much of himself without regard for his well-being," Bryant told the press, "that he's got a chance to be the greatest player I ever coached."

On the second day of spring drills, John David had jumped the gun on two snap counts and Bryant halted practice. "John David. Does your mama back in Louisiana have a scrapbook of your press clippings?" "Yessir." "Well, you oughta tell her to burn it."

If anything goes bad, I did it. If anything goes semigood, we did it. If anything goes real good, you did it. That's all it takes to get people to win football games.

No coach has ever won a game by what he knows; it's what his players know that counts. In 48 hours, the Aggies would play the biggest game in their history on Thanksgiving Day in Austin. Bryant gazed around the room. He cleared his throat and said, "I want the Junction Boys to stand up." Eight seniors rose. They were the last of the 111 players who had boarded two buses outside of Walton Hall bound for the western edge of the dehydrated Hill Country that summer morning in 1954. For the first time anyone could remember, the boys saw emotion tugging at Bryant's face. The boys studied his expression as they had so many times. They had never seen him even close to tears. They never expected this hardened man to formally say good-bye to the Junction Boys. But he'd just come close.

There's one more reason we're gonna win, and I'm serious about this. Everybody talks about those turds bein' rich country clubbers and us boys bein' poor folks from the country. Well, I think we're gonna win because our mamas and papas are better than their mamas and papas.

"Coach, tell me why y'all can't beat Texas."

"I guess it's because they hate us more than we hate them."

I'd rather see my sister in a whorehouse than my brother at the University of Texas.

"This win is for the boys who survived Junction." Voices erupted again. "They showed us that you by-God don't quit."

I left Texas A&M because my school called me. Mama called, and when Mama calls, then you just have to come running.

Player after player approached Bryant. They shook his hand and told him of their happy and successful lives. Each one delivered the same message – that Bryant had been the most influential person in his life.

“Coach Bryant,” Dennis Goehring said, his voice slightly breaking, “If not for you, I couldn’t have done the things I had to do in my life. If I hadn’t been tough, I never would have made it. You are the person who made me tough.”

Bear Bryant had eerily predicted that he’d “croak in a week” if he ever stopped coaching. 28 days after his final game, he was gone. He was 69 years old.

Some men are measured in wins. In the end, Bear Bryant was remembered more for the people who loved him.

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