



The Last Coach: A Life of Paul "Bear" Bryant

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When Paul William "Bear" Bryant died on January 26, 1983, it was the lead story on the all three networks' evening news. New York City newspapers reported his death on their front pages. ("Crimson Tears," read the headline in the *New York Post*, "Nation weeps over death of legendary Bear Bryant, 69.") Three days later, America watched in awe as an estimated quarter of a million mourners lined the fifty-five mile stretch from Tuscaloosa to a Birmingham cemetery to pay their respects as his three-mile long funeral cortege drove by.

President Reagan and the three former American presidents sent flowers, as did people as diverse as Bob Hope, ABC's Roone Arledge, advice columnist Ann Landers and the Reverend Billy Graham. Scores of Bryant's former players, including Joe Namath, Lee Roy Jordan, Ken Stabler and Ozzie Newsome, were in attendance. So were Bryant's most distinguished colleagues, the greatest living football coaches, including Southern Cal's John McKay, who said, "It was like a presidential funeral procession. No coach in America could have gotten that. No coach but him. But then, he wasn't just a coach. He was the coach."

Bryant's passing was noted with the kind of reverence our country reserved for statesmen or military leaders, though Paul "Bear" Bryant had insisted for much of his life that he was "just a football coach." For millions he was much more, he was the greatest coach the game ever saw, the heir to the tradition established by Knute Rockne. He took his Alabama Crimson Tide teams to an unmatched six national championships. But to the players, journalists and fans whose lives he touched in his more than half a century as a player and coach, he was the last symbol of values that transcended football—courage, discipline, loyalty, and hard work.

To his critics, Bryant represented the dark side of big-time college football—brutality, fanaticism and blind adherence to authority. The real Bear Bryant was far more complex than either his admirers or detractors knew. While maintaining a public friendship with Alabama governor George Wallace, he continually sought ways to undermine the governor's segregationist policies, finally forcing a legendary football game in Birmingham with the University of Southern California that opened the floodgates to the integration of football at the University of Alabama, including its coaching staff. Old fashioned in his politics, he was nonetheless an admirer of Robert Kennedy, whom he planning to vote for in 1968.

Allen Barra's *The Last Coach* traces Paul Bryant's rise from a family of truck farmers to recognition as the most successful and influential coach in the game's history. The eleventh of thirteen children, Bryant was born in tiny Moro Bottom, Arkansas in 1913 and grew up in nearby Fordyce—where his legend was born when he wrestled a live bear on the stage of a local theater. Paul was raised by his mother, who barely managed to keep him out of trouble and on the Fordyce High School Redbugs long enough to get a football scholarship at Alabama, where he would meet and marry the love of his life, campus beauty queen Mary Harmon Black.

At the height of the Depression, football took Bryant to the Rose Bowl with Alabama's 1934 national

champions and on to a career as an assistant and, finally, a head football coach, where he matched wit and grit with the greatest coaches of two generations, men like Tennessee's General Robert Neyland, Oklahoma's Bud Wilkinson, Notre Dame's Ara Parseghian, Ohio State's Woody Hayes, and Penn State's Joe Paterno. Along the way, he stirred controversy with his infamous "Junction Boys" training camp in 1954, during which almost two-thirds of the Texas A football team quit; his legal battle with *The Saturday Evening Post* over the accusation that he had conspired to fix a college football game, a trial which rocked the sports world; and his pursuit of Amos Alonzo Stagg's all-time record for college coaching victories.

Through it all, Bryant's influence has not only endured but prevailed as his former players and assistants continue to define the best in not only college but professional football. A *USA Today* and *Washington Post* Best Sports Book.

The Last Coach: A Life of Paul "Bear" Bryant Details

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David Ward says

The Last Coach: The Life of Paul "Bear" Bryant by Allen Barra (W.W. Norton & Co. 2006)(Biography). This is a paean to the greatest college football coach of all time. It was Bear who said, "It ain't braggin' if you got the skins on the wall." In his case, it was all true. My rating: 7.5/10, finished 2007.

Al says

Being a graduate of the University of Alabama and a dyed in the wool Crimson Tide fan, my review of the book may look a little biased. Coach Bryant was, and still is, a legend at Univ of Alabama. This book dwells on the man that Paul "Bear" Bryant was as much as he was as a coach. Did he skirt the rules? You better believe he did. It just makes him more mortal to me. Don't look for this book to make him to be something more than he was. He was a man driven to excellence, but occasionally stubbed his toe. All I have to say is "ROLL TIDE".

Doug Wilkerson says

Goes all the way back to Fordice, Arkansas, and you are reminded of the dirt scratch nothing this man came from. Glad I read it.

Stephen Acton says

Recommended for any fan of American Football. Bryant lead an interesting life. Readers interested in 1930s American history will enjoy reading the picture this book offers or the deep South during Bryant's youth. As a biographer, I felt Barra was balanced; the book does drag in parts, as biographies can.

Geoff says

Fantastic.

Bob says

Should be required reading for all Crimson Tide fans. Other college football fans will enjoy it too, but it

might be a bit long for some people. Barra is a good writer, but injecting himself into the book on several occasions got a bit boring.

Eric Ryan says

I've never been a big college football fan, so this book about its most famous coach did a great job explaining the mystique to me. The afterward makes a pretty convincing case for him being the best coach of all time as well. I deducted a star for getting a little woshipy and not diving into some of his thought on other subjects besides football.

Greg says

I really enjoyed Allen Barra's "The Last Coach: A Life of Paul "Bear" Bryant". Not so much because it was a wonderfully book, it was OK, but because it was a wonderful subject. Coach Bryant was so big and so full of life that he leaps from the page. Coach Bryant was larger than life and although he was demanding; he had a thoughtful side to him. This book covers it all from Bear's birth in Moro Bottom, Arkansas in 1913 to his death in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 1982 when there was such a stir that the phone system crashed from the overload.

Bear always made a point to recruit not the best athlete or the biggest players but the ones with the most heart. He told his players "We are going to do two things. We are going to learn to play football, and we are going to get up and go to class like our mamas papas expect us to. And we are going to win. Ten years from now, you are going to be married with a family, your wife might be sick, your kids might be sick, you might be sick, but you will get your butt up and go to work. That's what I'm going to do for you. I'm going to teach you how to do things you don't feel like doing."

His tough side is well know. The Junction Boys story is a legend. But the softer side of Bear is not so well known. In 1973 a player for opposing TCU was hit during a play in Birmingham and was paralyzed. He said that Bear Bryant did more for him than his own school ever dreamed of. He said Bear would come into his hospital room in Birmingham and prop him up and put him at ease as if everything was going to be OK and then he would walk out in the hall and sit down and cry with the boy's parents.

Bear was the winning-est coach in college football history at his death. That came from skill and hard work. He often quoted Branch Rickey who said that "Luck is the residue of design".

Bear carried a devotional in his wallet:

"This is the beginning of a new day. God has given me this day to use as I will. I can waste it or use it for good. What I do today is very important because I am exchanging a day of my life for it. When tomorrow comes this day will be gone forever, leaving something in its place that I have traded for it. I want it to be a gain, not loss...good, not evil. Success, not failure in order that I shall not forget the price that I paid for it."

Inspiring with no hype, a good book on a GREAT man!

Zach Opsitnick says

Very well written account of one of the best coaches to ever take the field. So much more information than I ever knew.

Jamie says

How do you rate a book by a family member?

I've been meaning to read it since it came out...especially since it is dedicated to me. Finally got around to it and couldn't be more ready for football season. A little misty still about the ending. A great man and coach, but love that Allen says not exactly a role model but someone who inspired hundreds of role models. Love that.

Jason Evans says

A must read for any football fan. A great story about the sport's most dominant coach. His history before his legendary years at Alabama may be even more interesting than the 6 national titles he won with the Tide.

Seth Gorman says

Barra does a very thorough job in this biography of Paul Bryant. The book is quite lengthy covering the coach from birth to death, with all details in between.

Jacki Moss says

I was at The University of Alabama when Bear was coaching. I would go hang out along the football team practice field and watch our team and listen to Bear bark, growl, and cajole from his tower. He saw EVERYTHING. Not just play execution. Not just how someone performed their job. He saw nuance, detail: stance, technique, attitude, lack of enthusiasm, great enthusiasm, sportsmanship, heart, respect, intelligence, resilience, ownership, and confidence vs arrogance.

He saw the intangibles that made our team more than a football play machine. He saw and addressed, one way or another, the aspects of being a team, of being responsible for your own actions, of doing your best.

Those young men on the field lived for the slightest positive acknowledgement from Bear, with good reason.

He wasn't just making a great football team, he was making great men.

This book gives some insight into Bear beyond the Xs and Os.

Roll Tide!

John says

One of the best biography's I've read. Most are rather dry and I have to push myself to read them, this one I couldn't put down. It read more like a good novel. No doubt that the subject had a lot to do with it. I'm a huge Alabama fan and grew up with Coach Bryant. It's hard to describe the affect that he had on Alabama, he gave us something in which to be proud. One of the best descriptions of the affect had on his players and assistants came not from an Alabama fan, not even a Southerner or a football fan, but from a guy from New York City of all places. In the spring of 1979 novelist Richard Price came to Alabama to write a profile of Bear for Playboy. He interviewed Bear, some of his players and other officials. In the midst of one of his interviews he recounted that Bear told him a joke and that he didn't laugh because he didn't understand Bear's deep mumbling drawl. Days later he found: "I'm still smarting about that missed joke. I feel I understand something then about why this man is successful. There is something about him-- about me in that moment when I blew being an appreciative audience-- that goes beyond past embarrassment. I fell like I let him down. I feel like I could have pleased him by laughing, made him like me for a moment, could have broken through the interviewer-interviewee roles for a few seconds in a way that would have made me feel like a million bucks because I would have given him pleasure. There is something in Bear's subdued dignity, his cordial distance, that got to me. He is a man of character. I could see myself having done Mexican tailspins during the interview to get his admiration. If I were one of his five-year player, I could see myself doing 90 mph through a goal post to get a pat on the back. And, frankly, I can't define motivation,either,but whatever it is he lays on his boys, I got a tiny ray of it myself. The man could literally crush you by letting you know you were a disappointment to him."

Alcino says

This book was amazing the research that went into this must have taken up his entire life. Not only do you get information about Paul Bryant, but at key games and moments you get incredible details about the people involved in that moment.

The only reason this isnt 5 stars for me is that sometimes that extra information is a little confusing and long winded. however overall this was an amazing book written about an amazing man.
