

Nine Straight

By Stuart Reb Donald

This book is dedicated to my brother, Steve and our father who taught me to love football. It is also dedicated to the exclusive fraternity of men who played and/or coached in **the** game.

Prologue

“I’d rather beat the cow college once than beat Texas 10 times.”

Paul “Bear” Bryant

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama December 2, 1972

When the clock expired signaling the end of the third quarter the second ranked Crimson Tide was up 16 points over number nine Auburn. Coincidentally 16 points was the spread according to Vegas. The Alabama defense had been relentless limiting the Tiger’s offense to few yards and no points. Auburn’s only real moment of glory had come when Roger Mitchell had blocked the extra point following Steve Bisceglia’s second quarter touchdown. With just fifteen minutes separating Coach Bryant from playing for another national title it appeared the Crimson Tide had a date with destiny. The following events changed the libretto of the 1972 college football season and became the catalyst that propelled the Iron Bowl to a rivalry of unbridled ferocity.

4th Quarter 9:15. 4th down Auburn.

“There’s the snap, the ball is down, and the kick is good! Gardner Jett connects from 48 yards out and that cuts the Tide’s lead to 16-3, but I fear it is too little too late. Auburn still needs two scores to take the lead.”

“Yep, it appears Auburn’s fairytale season may be coming to an end.”

4th Quarter 5:30. 4th down Alabama.

“Greg Gantt into punt. Johnny Simmons is going back as a single safety. Mitchell and Langner on the line of scrimmage coming from either side trying to block the kick. Auburn trying to go after it. Here’s the snap. They got it! Blocked kick. Ball is back to the 25! Picked up on the bounce at the 25 yard line and in for a touchdown is David Langner!”

4th Quarter 1:34. 4th down Alabama.

“Langner will be on the far right. Roger Mitchell on the far left and Auburn is again going after the kick as you might imagine. Greg Gantt is standing on his own 30. Auburn will try to block it. Auburn going after it. Here’s a good snap. It is blocked! It is blocked! David Langner! David Langner has scored and Auburn has tied the game!”

“As Dave Beck will hold, Gardner Jett will attempt on one of the biggest point-afters you ever want to see. What a big one. All right. Snap. Kick. Good! Good. With time out on the field the score is Auburn 17, Alabama 16!”

That game gave birth to the most popular sports bumper sticker in history, *Punt Bama Punt*, in reference to Bill Newton’s two punt blocks. To this day the mental image of Shug greeting the Bear at midfield after the game burns in the mind of many an Auburn fan. The ‘72 team was one of the greatest and most beloved in Auburn history. They were nicknamed the Amazin’s. Most of the experts had predicted them to finish near the bottom of the Southeastern Conference that year and why not? Pat Sullivan and Terry Beasley (the most prolific passer/receiver tandem in league history) were gone to the NFL.

The Amazin’s went 10-1 that year with their lone loss being at LSU. The Tigers went on to defeat Colorado 24-3 in the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, FL and finished 5th in the final AP poll. Bill Newton and David Langner became household names. Shug would proclaim the ‘72 team his favorite. In the post game locker-room Auburn tailback Terry Henley was quoted saying, “When those cows get mad, they kick,” in

response to Bryant's notorious comments at the Birmingham Quarterback club earlier in the week.

The Crimson Tide came into the Iron Bowl undefeated, ranked #2, and having already clinched the SEC championship. Afterwards Bryant accepted blame for the loss saying, "The best-coached team won." Alabama finished the season with a 10-2 mark and ranked #7 in the final AP poll, the second of 11 consecutive Top 20 finishes. After the loss to Auburn the Tide then went on to lose to Texas in the Cotton Bowl in Dallas by a score of 17-13. In his illustrious career, Coach Bryant never beat the University of Texas.

The 1972 season had hardly finished when preparations began for the 1973 season. Both Bryant and Jordan hit the recruiting trail. Shug trumpeted Auburn's merits to prospective players by reliving the 17-16 victory. Bear growled his usual sales pitch, *I can't guarantee you will start; I can't even guarantee that you will ever get to play, but you **will** get to run out on that field wearing the crimson jersey.*

*“His nickname was Bear. Now imagine a
guy that can carry the nickname Bear.”*

Joe Namath

So passionate is this rivalry in the state of Alabama that families have been literally shattered by its outcome. The divorce rate sky rockets statewide in the days following each Iron Bowl. Losing to the enemy is an agonizing embarrassment to every fan of the conquered. Being edged out of victory in the waning moments of play only adds weight to the cloud of humiliation especially when the loss is one of historical measure. A feeling of disgrace fills the pit of one’s stomach until the loss can be avenged.

For an entire year the Alabama fans endured the barbs from their Auburn counterparts. It seemed that every other car had a *Punt Bama Punt* sticker on it. Constantly, the score was proclaimed, “17-16!” The endless reminders that Auburn had cost Bama another national championship ate at the Crimson faithful and their legendary coach, Paul “Bear” Bryant.

To make matters worse was the knowledge that Alabama had not just led the game entering the fourth quarter but had been overpowering their rivals. Bama had proven the better team on offense and defense and still lost

the game. Tide fans called it a fluke but Auburn fans reminded them that special teams play was one third of the game and in that department the Auburn team had established itself the alpha male.

Recruiting came and went as did spring ball. The summer lulled away with headlines centering on the conflict in Vietnam and the resignation of Vice-president Spiro Agnew. Chevrolet was on top of the world with its Monte Carlo taking car of the year honors from Motortrend.

Alabama hit the practice field gunning for another championship. With the Bear atop his observation tower the Tide was always the favorite to win the nation's toughest conference. The '73 team was loaded with talent and despite the endless clichés about “taking them one game at a time” a rematch with Auburn was the foremost thought on everyone's minds.

Paul Bryant owed, at least in some small part, Ralph “Shug” Jordan for the historic carrier he forged at the Capstone. In 1957 Auburn ended Oklahoma's three year stranglehold on the national title. Along the way they had pasted Alabama 40-0 in Birmingham to cap their title run. J.B. “Ears” Whitworth was fired as head coach and the administration brought in former player Paul Bryant (class of '36) to take the reins.

Until Shug was hired at Auburn prior to the 1951 season, it had always been the norm in the SEC to hire a man who had coached and/or played at Notre Dame. Shug was not a disciple of Knute Rockne, Shug was an Auburn man. Likewise, Bear had played at Alabama and had coached at Maryland, Kentucky and Texas A&M, but never Notre Dame. Bryant was a Bama man.

In the 1960's his visage was immortalized on a popular postcard that depicted the Bear walking on water. Ironically Bryant's mother had always wanted him to be a minister. He had tried to convince her that preaching and coaching were very similar but as he put it, "I don't think she believed me."

The Bear was a cultural icon. His celebrity transcended the Alabama state line and the boundaries of college football. Bryant was bigger than life, a towering figure majestic and confident in his infamous hound's tooth hat. He often found himself in the company of media magnets. From whirlwind circuits of the Vegas strip to regularly visiting the White House to doing commercials for Hertz rent-a-car, he was as big as the Beatles and as respected as Walter Cronkite. It has been said that if the South had won the Civil War that Mount Rushmore would be adorned with the faces of Robert E. Lee, Elvis Presley, Dale Earnhart, and Bear Bryant.

By contrast, Shug Jordan was grandfatherly and sincere. His folksy mannerism made him approachable. He was jovial and friendly; always quick to smile. He was kind hearted, compassionate, and a stern disciplinarian. Coach Jordan always said that players were at Auburn to get an education and to play football, and in that order. Jordan is to this day the all time winningest coach in Auburn's storied history with 176 victories.

From 1951 to 1982 the two coaches combined to bring the state of Alabama seven national championships. Comparatively, during the same time period the states of California, New York, and Florida combined for six national championships. Not bad for a state of modest population. Additionally, Auburn and Alabama produced 16 conference titles, and 39 bowl appearances during the Jordan/Bryant era.

Though the Tide opened the 1973 season with the Cal Bears the underlying attitude was "beat Auburn." Alabama held a slight advantage in the overall series with the Tigers leading 19 – 17 – 1 heading into the season and they were looking to open it up. Gary Rutledge was now at the helm of the Tide's two year old wishbone offense. However, the buzz was about Mobile native Richard Todd, the latest quarterback in a long list of Bama

signal callers who would move on to star in the NFL much as Starr, Namath, Stabler, and Hunter had done before him.

Wilbur Jackson would lead the way for the Tide's rushing attack and Wayne Wheeler would provide a quality target for the passing game. Although Rutledge would lead the team in passing it was understood that the younger Todd was the leader of the offense.

California hardly proved a match for the Tide falling 66 – 0 in Birmingham. The following weeks saw Bama take easy wins from Kentucky, Vanderbilt, Georgia, Florida, and Tennessee before venturing back outside the SEC to throttle Virginia Tech 77 – 6. Alabama then crushed Ole Miss 35 – 0 and Miami (FL) 43 – 13. The stage was now set for a showdown with #7 LSU. Tide QB Gary Rutledge was the star of the game as he threw for two long touchdowns and ran for another as Alabama won in Baton Rouge 21 - 7. Finally, it was time for the Iron Bowl. It was time for Auburn.

The predictions of a falloff for the Tigers after the graduation of Sullivan and Beasley were a year off. Unfortunately the highlight of the season would be the official renaming of Cliff Hare Stadium to Jordan-Hare Stadium in a ceremony mastered by Alabama Governor George Wallace.

The act made Shug the first active coach to have a stadium named after him. Auburn started the season by doubling up Oregon St. 18 – 9 and beating Tennessee-Chattanooga 31 – 0, but the following week Auburn fell to the Volunteers in Knoxville 21 – 0. The shut out was the first in a long time and foreshadowed the mediocrity that was about to unfold. The game was also the cause of some tension between Shug and Tennessee coach Bill Battle. The rainstorm in Knoxville that day was so bad that the teams could hardly handle the ball. As a result Battle refused to play offense by punting the ball back to Auburn every time they got it. Not on third down mind you, but on first down. There was no handshake between the two coaches after the game.

Auburn rebounded with a seven point win over Ole Miss, but fell the following week to the Bayou Bengals. Old foe Georgia Tech proved little match losing 24 – 10 to Shug's team in Atlanta and Houston suffered a similar fate on the Plains. Florida came to town next and left with a 12 – 8 win. The hot cold streak continued with Auburn topping Mississippi State 31 – 17 and then falling at Georgia 28 – 14. Now they were off to Birmingham.

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama December 1, 1973

Revenge was the order of the day as the Tide and Tigers took the field. Auburn managed only one first down on the opening possession of the game. Alabama was more determined on its first possession using nine plays to go 64 yards capped by a 7 seven yard TD run by Randy Billingsley. Billingsley also had a 22 yard run that was the key play of the drive. The lightening quick scoring drive was just a glimpse of things to come.

On their next drive Auburn quarterback Wade Whatley tossed a little pass to the flat that was picked off by Mike Washington who raced to the Auburn two before being tackled by Tommy Gossom. On second and goal Alabama quarterback Gary Rutledge scored on a sneak play over left guard. With a 1:31 left in the first quarter Bama enjoyed a 14 – 0 advantage.

The two teams exchanged fruitless drives in the second quarter with none ending in scores. Auburn appeared to be rebounding from the opening torrent by the Tide. They put together a pair of promising drives but both ended just after crossing midfield. For its part Alabama never got farther than the Auburn 41 yard line. Statistically it looked like a close game at halftime and if not for the Washington interception it most likely would have been only a seven point lead.

The second half began with the Tide marching 77 yards in 11 plays on its opening possession. Bama's attack was brilliantly diverse. Rutledge, Billingsley, and Wilbur Jackson shared evenly in the offensive duties which included a 19 yard run by the quarterback and a trick halfback pass from Billingsley to Jackson that was good for 16 yards. Rutledge put the finishing touches on the drive by scoring his second touchdown of the day from three yards out. Auburn put together its only threat of the third quarter but it ended when fullback Secdrick McIntyre fumbled at the Tide 40 where the ball was recovered by Woody Lowe. As the fourth quarter approached Lowe, Mike DuBose, and the Alabama defense were pitching a shutout at 21 – 0.

Flood gates broke in the final stanza. First Alabama scored on a drive that began in the third quarter. On the march Rutledge completed a 19 yard pass to Jackson. Jackson finished the drive with a 14 yard scoring sprint. Now under the direction of sophomore quarterback Richard Todd, Alabama began another drive into Auburn territory but it ended short when Todd lost the ball and it was recovered by Auburn at their own 48. The Tigers' rally was short lived as they went three and out.

Alabama with second and even third teamers in the game made one last emphatic drive of 67 yards highlighted by a 19 yard run by Duffy Boles

and sealed by an eight yard TD run by James Taylor, the “ragin’ Cajun” from Citronelle. With freshmen QB Phil Gargis at the helm Auburn made its deepest penetration of the day on its final drive. This drive got as far as the Alabama 34 before it ended when a Tiger pass was intercepted and nearly returned for another score. The final score was Alabama 35, Auburn 0.

Bill Newton, hero of the ’72 game led an overmatched Tiger defense. Newton produced no miracles in this game as the Alabama offense saw 11 different ball carriers combine for 352 yard rushing on the day. Wilbur Jackson led the way with 89 yards on 15 carries and Billingsley was just behind him with 66 on 10. McIntyre was Auburn’s top rusher with 59 hard fought yards on his 17 carries. In fact the lone bright spot for the Tigers was from Mike Fuller, one of the top return men in the nation. Fuller tallied 75 yards on four kick-off returns, however he was held to zero punt return yards.

The drubbing was a complete team effort with celebrated efforts from the offense, defense, and special teams. The offense scored five touchdowns and racked up over 500 yards of total offense. The defense pitched a shut out and held Auburn to just 192 total yards. The kicking game was sound. Place kicker Bill Davis’s five extra points brought him to within a single

point of being the NCAA record holder for points scored in a career. And most importantly Greg Gantt, now established as one of the best punters in the country, had no kicks blocked.

After the game Shug Jordan genially conceded defeat and was complimentary of Bear's boys saying, "Alabama is certainly #1, and as far as I'm concerned they are one of the very best team I've ever seen in my 42 years of college football." A jubilant Bryant pronounced that he was proud of his team and staff for the win rejoicing, "I'm just sitting here trying to remember that little tune. How'd it go, "punt, Bama, punt?"

The Tigers followed their loss in Birmingham with an uninspired setback to Missouri in the Sun Bowl by a score of 34 – 17. Auburn finished 6 – 6 and unranked. It was their first non-winning season in seven years. The lone bright spot of the year was the emergence of true freshmen quarterback Phil Gargis who looked to be a real up and comer. Gargis had quarterbacked the same Colbert County High team that produced future Alabama star Ozzie Newsome.

Basking in the glow of the rout Bama was named national champions by UPI voters even before the bowl game was played. Good thing too as Alabama fell to Notre Dame 24 – 23 in the Sugar Bowl on New Year's Eve

in a game that saw six lead changes. They finished ranked #4 in the final AP poll and guard Buddy Brown was named a consensus All-American. Like Texas, Notre Dame was a mountain Bryant never leveled and the University of Alabama as a whole did not taste victory against the Fighting Irish until its 94th year of existence. The game was historical in many aspects. It was the first time that Notre Dame and Alabama, the two most recognizable teams in the sport, had met undefeated to settle the national championship. More significantly Bear named John Mitchell an assistant coach just before the Sugar Bowl making Mitchell the first black assistant coach at Alabama.

“If Alabama is #1, I’d say offhand that we’re #1½.”

Ralph “Shug” Jordan

A rebuilding year was what Auburn faithful called the previous season. A rebuilding year. But Tide fans still on high from the 35 – 0 win and consequent national championship portended that it was merely a sign of things to come. Alabama was rolling and Richard Todd was going to make everyone forget about Stabler and Namath. *Bear’s* wishbone offense was going to revolutionize college football.

Auburn fans will tell you that that very attitude is why they hate Alabama so much. It isn’t Bryant they hate, or the players. It is what they consider the arrogance of the common Alabama fan, the way they act as if they are of greater universal importance simply because they are Alabama fans. According to these connoisseurs of football history Auburn can never win enough championships, bowl games, or accolades of any sort to ever put it on equal footing with *the* University of Alabama. The posture that championships are not just an achievement but rather an entitlement is infuriating to Tiger fans. The constant bragging about their national titles, legendary coaches, all-star quarterbacks, and worst of all their “tradition” is made more exasperating by the undeniable truth behind the boasts.

When asked why Bama fans hated Auburn the answer is simple, *Punt Bama Punt*.

Sylvester Croom was the starting center for Bryant in 1974. He was one of the first black players to start at Alabama and like his father, Sylvester Croom Sr., he was named an All-American at the position. After graduation Croom played one season in the pros before beginning an extensive coaching career. He spent 11 years as an assistant at Alabama then 17 more years in the NFL. In his career Croom has coached or played in 13 bowl games, 14 including Super Bowl XXIX, and has been a part of three national championships. When Croom took over the Mississippi State program in 2004 he became the first black head football coach in SEC history.

During summer workouts Jordan knew what the world of college football would soon learn, 1973 was, in fact, an aberration. Auburn was back. The years of attention garnered by Sullivan and Beasley followed by the Amazin's had helped Auburn stock up on talent. Shug set his sites on a date with Louisville in Birmingham.

Bryant was both imitator and inventor. He had copied Darryl Royal's wishbone offense because he knew first hand how frustrating it was to defend. Bear, the plowmen philosopher, invented what we now call *coachspeak*. Although you would never know it by the way he spoke about them, Bear was confident about his new team as well. His goal was a national championship.

Auburn fans accustom to being the second prettiest girl at the dance handled the taunts well. They continued to badger Bama fans with *Punt Bama Punt*. Sure Bear had just won a fourth title, but thanks to Newton and Langner it wasn't five. No matter how many championships Bryant ended his career with it would always be one less than what it could have been. That fact frustrated the Crimson Nation which is why Auburn fans still referred back to it. They compounded it with the question, "How many times has Alabama beaten Notre Dame?"

When Bear's team struggled to an unimpressive win over Maryland in College Park the doubters began to wonder if maybe it was Alabama's turn for a rebuilding year. The following week all doubts were put to rest as Bama hammered Southern Miss 52 – 0. Apparently Maryland was pretty

good. Bryant was never one for playing freshmen but in the latest recruiting class came a young man who would prove the exception to the rule. Ozzie Newsome was an athlete that simply could not stay on the sideline and as a result would lead Alabama in receiving as a frosh. He now began to assert himself.

Vanderbilt was handled as was Ole Miss, but Florida State scared the mess out of Bama though they came out on the losing end of an 8 – 7 score. Bama started to peak with a 28 – 6 win at Tennessee and a 41 – 3 win over TCU. They whipped Mississippi State 35 – 0 and LSU 30 – 0 in consecutive weeks before controlling Miami (FL) 28 – 7 in Miami. It appeared Auburn was the only thing standing between Bryant and another title game.

Auburn was convincing if not impressive in a 16 – 3 win over Louisville then trounced UT-Chattanooga 52 – 0. In their first ever visit to Jordan-Hare Auburn downed Tennessee 21 – 0 in a game that saw fullback Kenny Burks score all three touchdowns. Jordan was later asked about the game the previous year, “I hope there is no bitterness, and no, I never even thought about punting on first down.” In succession Auburn topped Miami 3 – 0, Kentucky 31 – 13, hated rival Georgia Tech 31 – 22, and Florida State 39 – 6 to close the month of October.

However, November was not as kind as perfection came crashing down in Gainesville at the hands of the Gators 25 – 14. Auburn struggled to edge out a 24 – 20 victory over Mississippi State in Jackson and a 17 – 13 home win over Georgia. Just as Alabama was surging, Auburn was stumbling towards the finish line.

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama November 29, 1974

Where the previous Iron Bowl was a brutal execution of vengeance, this year's edition was an exhibition of guts and determination. Despite a 15-point line from the Vegas odds makers this was a match up of two brawlers. Before the game Bryant told reporters that he would be happy with a one-point victory. The winner of this game would win the SEC title and a bid to the Sugar Bowl.

The first quarter was like a wrestling match between two masters. Each time one appeared to have the upper hand the other would reverse the hold until Alabama quarterback Richard Todd hit Willie Shelby with a little swing pass. Shelby then electrified the crowd by sprinting 45 yards for a touchdown. When the first quarter ended the score was Alabama 7, Auburn nothing.

The bout continued in the next quarter developing into a true power struggle. Auburn mishandled the snap attempting a punt just into the second quarter and Alabama was set up with a first down at the Tiger 14, but the defense drove the Tide back. Alabama produced a Bucky Berry 36 yard field goal for its toil. Auburn had an impressive 71 yard scoring drive to get on the board. It was capped when Secdrick McIntyre dove in from the one yard line. McIntyre (whose son Jeris would later star for the Tigers as a wide receiver) was the game's leading rusher going for 99 yards on 16 rushes and the score. Auburn mounted another march just before intermission that ended with a field goal attempt to tie the game. Leroy Cook exploited a weakness in the special teams to block the attempt. The two teams went to the half with the Tide leading 10 – 7.

If the first half was fundamentally sound then the second half was just plain fun. Alabama running back Calvin Culliver scampered in from the 13 yard line to put the exclamation on an 80 yard opening period drive. It would be Alabama's last score of the day. Auburn had apparently scored a touchdown on a 41 yard pass from Phil Gargis to Thomas Gossom but the officials determined that the receiver had stepped out of bounds prior to catching the ball. The call is still debated today by fans of each school just as every such call is still debated today by fans of each school. The third

quarter closed with Alabama leading 17 – 7, but it could very easily have been 17 – 14.

Gargis again lead Auburn on a lengthy drive, this one of 72 yards. Auburn came out for an apparent field goal. The fake was so obvious that Bryant sent in Ronny Robertson to make sure the Tide D knew what was coming. It did not help as the Tigers perfectly executed a screen play off the fake going for twenty yards. Gargis later took it in himself for the score. With just 2:47 left in the game Auburn tried to go for two in anticipation of making a last minute field goal to win rather than tie. Gargis tried to hit Rick Neel but the pass was batted down. Auburn now had to have a touchdown. With 1:07 left to play in the game Auburn took over the ball at midfield. The game ended when Auburn tried another trick play. The Tigers attempted an end around that went horribly, horribly wrong. Defensive end Mike DuBose broke up the hand off from Gargis to Dan Nugent by swatting the ball away and falling on it to preserve the win. The final score was Alabama 17, Auburn 13. DuBose rose to the status of legend and would one day be named head coach of his alma mater.

During the post game, Coach Jordan declined to comment on the Gossom score stating they would have to look at the film to know what happened. Bryant, ever the diplomat, said, “I’m glad they called it back. I

thought they had made a touchdown. I was mighty glad Gossom was out of bounds.” Jordan unwilling to pinpoint the key play of the game said there were, “about 150 key plays.” He went on to add, “In my opinion we played well enough to win. We just didn’t.” Referring to his pre-game comment about being happy with a one-point win, Bryant growled, “I’m four times as happy with a four-point victory.”

Just as in the previous game the Alabama option rolled up impressive yards. Randy Billingsley led the Tide with 93 yards on 11 carries followed closely by Calvin Culliver with 91 on 19 and Shelby with 72 on 12. Richard Todd was named the game’s MVP by the ABC broadcasting crew covering the game. Auburn defensive tackle Rick Telhiard’s ten total tackles earned him the nod as the game’s outstanding defensive player. Both Telhiard and Todd were from Mobile.

After the border war, Alabama was again undefeated and again slated against Notre Dame in a bowl game to decide the title. Alabama again came up short against the Golden Domers by a score of 13 – 11 ushering Ara Parseghian into retirement. Despite the loss defensive tackle Leroy Cook was named Defensive MVP of the Orange Bowl. If they failed to win their next bowl game it would make nine straight bowl games without a win

under Bryant. As for this year there would be no trophy, no national crown and a final ranking of #5. Both Cook and linebacker Woodrow Lowe (who would graduate with the most tackles in school history) were named consensus All-Americans.

Auburn sprang back in stunning fashion by not only beating Texas but by manhandling them 27 – 3 in the Gator Bowl. The bowl victory, Shug's last, was a complete effort with the Auburn defense holding vaunted Longhorn fullback Earl Campbell under 100 yards rushing and forced seven turnovers, the special teams contributed a field goal and a blocked punt that scored a safety, and the offense featured 89 yards from McIntyre, 64 and a touchdown from Mitzi Jackson, and 51 yards rushing from Phil Gargis. Gargis, whose son would also play at Auburn, also completed six passes for 60 yards and two touchdowns to take home MVP honors. Bear had four national titles to Shug's one but Jordan had two things Bryant would never have, a Heisman Trophy winner in Pat Sullivan and a victory over Texas. Auburn defensive back/kick returner Mike Fuller was named MVP of the Southeastern Conference and an All-American. Auburn finished ranked #8 and linebacker Ken Bernich was named a consensus All-American. He would be the last Tiger to earn the honor for almost a decade.

*“I don’t think I’m so old that the adrenaline still won’t
flow as I watch Auburn football teams play.”*

Ralph “Shug” Jordan

Any thoughts of another routine spring were lost in April of 1975 as Coach Jordan shocked the state by announcing that this would be his final year as Auburn’s head football coach. Just one last time would “the man” lead his boys onto the playing field to “defend Jordan-Hare as if it were their home.”

Had Hollywood written Shug’s exit he would have gone out on the shoulders of his players, fans cheering his name as he received another championship before riding off into a blue and orange sunset. Reality was not as kind. Auburn stumbled out of the gate with a 31 – 20 loss to Memphis. The following week they left Texas with an unfulfilling 10 – 10 tie with Baylor. At least it wasn’t a loss.

That came the next week when the Tigers were edged out at home 21 to 17 by Tennessee. Virginia Tech came to Auburn and won 23 – 16. Auburn was now 0-3-1, their worst start in decades. Years of lost recruiting battles to Bryant were finally beginning to show their scars.

The first win of the year came against Kentucky in Lexington, 15 – 9. They followed that with a thrilling 31 – 27 win over Georgia Tech. Florida State was the next victim of the Jordan farewell campaign falling 17 – 14. Auburn was now at .500 with four games left. Perhaps an Iron Bowl win and final bowl game would put a fitting period on the Ralph Jordan story.

Florida had other ideas smacking Auburn 31 -14. Despite tying Mississippi State 21 all, Auburn earned another “W” when State forfeited the game (and the next two) because of NCAA violations. Auburn entered the part of the season known as “Amen’s Corner” needing victories over both Georgia (coached by former Jordan assistant Vince Dooley) and Alabama.

Dooley’s bulldogs were not kind in handing Jordan a 28 – 13 loss in his final appearance in the Deep South’s oldest rivalry. Quickly the script was rewriting itself as a tragedy unless Auburn could pull out a miracle win at Legion Field. But that seemed unlikely with Bama riding a ten game winning streak.

Shug and the Bear were the literal exemplar of two stars crossing paths. Ralph Jordan had been a star athlete in high school and later at Auburn excelling in every sport he played. His coaching résumé features

not just football but also a stint as the head basketball coach at Auburn that included an appearance in the national tournament. Jordan was his era's equivalent to a rock star.

Bryant always referred to himself as "the other end." Don Hutson who is believed to be one of the greatest receivers in the annals of football played at Alabama the same time Bear did. Hutson was the superstar and Bryant was the dependable wingman. They combined to give the Crimson Tide a stunning one, two combination that resulted in a national championship for Coach Wallace Wade.

It was upon Bryant and Jordan's crossing that the fortunes of each man changed. Jordan, long the biggest name in sports in the state of Alabama now had to play second fiddle to the "other end." Bryant matched Jordan's national championship with one of his own in 1961; it was followed by several more before Bear finally hung up his hat. Their rivalry was natural and amiable. The two often appeared in tandem to support causes or to raise money for charity. While watching Jordan struggle with cancer Bryant said of him, "That guy has more guts in his little finger than I've got in my whole body." Neither liked losing to the other but they did respect one another.

Alabama's season did not start off well either as Missouri of all schools upset the Tide 20 – 7 in Birmingham. A mysterious loss to say the least but it served to focus the Tide. They responded by routing Clemson on the road by a score of 56 – 0. The following week they continued to roll by whipping Vanderbilt 40 – 7 also on the road.

When the tide finally returned home they creamed Ole Miss 32 – 6 in Birmingham and Washington 52 – 0 in a rare game at the recently renamed Bryant-Denny Stadium. Tennessee was the next sacrificial lamb losing 30 – 7. TCU followed with their own 45 – 0 beating. Mississippi State was controlled if not dominated by Bear's boys 21 – 10. LSU went down to a similar 23 – 10 score, and Southern Miss suffered defeat 27 – 6 setting up the Iron Bowl.

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama November 29, 1975

Since his arrival in Tuscaloosa, Richard Todd had been trumpeted as the next great Alabama quarterback. For the most part Todd had done his part but he still had not had a career defining game. Stabler loped 47 yards in the mud to beat Auburn in 1967. Gary Rutledge, Todd's predecessor, was the hero of the '73 LSU game.

Before the game Jordan and Bryant stood together on the sidelines laughing and reminiscing about Iron Bowl's past. The wealth of football knowledge standing together was awe-inspiring. The old guard of college football coaches was slowly heading for rocking chairs. Wilkinson had stepped down at Oklahoma giving way to assistant Barry Switzer. Davaney had turned over the reins to the Nebraska dynasty to Tom Osborne and now Shug Jordan was heading for retirement. Bear would soon be the last of the glory years of college football.

Auburn's overmatched, banged up defense played lights out throughout the first half trying to give their coach one last hoorah. Auburn's fledgling offense dominated the time of possession as well helping the hobbled defense in their fight to hold the Tide offense out of the end zone. For the most part they were successful.

Alabama did manage one lucrative drive. The drive covered 84 yards and featured punishing runs by fullback Johnny Davis including a 12 yard burst. Mike Stock added an 11 yard run and Willie Shelby had an 18 yarder of his own. On third and four Todd found tight end Jerry Brown for 17 yards on the first of two touchdown passes he would throw on the day.

The Tide mounted only one other threat in the first half but penalties, mistakes, and Rick Telhiard's inspired performance despite injury ended the

threat with no points. Auburn though controlling the clock did not really threaten to score as Alabama's defense repeatedly turned the Tigers away. The first half ended with Alabama leading 7 – 0. Still alive were dreams of another miraculous come back for Shug on his farewell.

The second half was a different story. Alabama took the second half kick off and marched 77 yards in ten plays. On the first play of the drive Auburn's last chance for glory came when Richard Todd fumbled the snap. Auburn failed to recover the ball and Todd picked it up and scampered for eight yards on the play. Johnny Davis hammered the bruised Auburn defense with runs of 3, 13, 8, 4, and 5 yards, but it was Todd again who made a play. He took a first down snap and took off over right end, reversed his field completely and followed his blockers for a 33 yard touchdown run.

Auburn's luck was spiraling away as Gary Beck made a great return of the kick off deep into Alabama territory but officials said he stepped out on his own 36. Soon after quarterback Phil Gargis was picked off at his own 44 and Bama was in business again. Todd wasted no time in driving the Tide into the red zone where he sprinted in from 14 yards out for his second rushing touchdown and third touchdown accounted for on the day.

In the fourth quarter the starting offense put together one last scoring drive that ended when Todd hit Ozzie Newsome for 24 yards and his second

passing TD of the game. The game ended with the second string Alabama offense driving behind backup quarterback Robert Fraley at the Auburn 1 yard line. It could have been worse than 28 – 0.

Naturally Richard Todd was named the game's MVP after his two touchdown passes, 90 yards rushing, and two rushing TD performance. Todd, also the team's punter, picked up a first down on an improvised fake punt to keep one drive alive. Richard Todd now had his signature game.

Alabama ground out 430 total yards to just 144 for the downtrodden Tigers. The valiant effort by Auburn's wounded defense was not supported by the offense which sputtered all day and produced two interceptions and a fumble all by Gargis. Jordan would enter retirement soundly beaten but as always upbeat and positive.

MVP Richard Todd had nothing but praise for Jordan and his Tigers after the game saying, "Auburn hit hard; they are far, far better than their record indicates. Their defense is tough and their offense came on at times." He added that Auburn was, "as good as anyone we've played." Bryant, too, was complementary and maybe a little remorseful as he stated, "First of all I'd like to say it's something of a sad note that Coach Jordan's last game was one of the best we ever played. I wish they had played someone else and he

had gone out a winner,” Bear added, “He’s a fine gentlemen and a credit to the game.”

Bear and his boys took their SEC crown to New Orleans for the first of two historic Sugar Bowl clashes with Joe Paterno and his Nittany Lions. The Tide proved triumphant over Penn State. Alabama finished ranked #2 and all that separated them from another national championship was the inexplicable loss to 6 – 5 Missouri in game one. Bryant sent his counter part into retirement on the losing side of 13 – 6 record in head-to-head competition, ironically 13 – 6 was the score of Bama’s win over Penn State. Leroy Cook was again named a consensus All-American.

Shug’s final canto was not epic, but rather distinguished and understated just like the man himself. He was always a gentleman elegant in both victory and defeat. Story book endings are rare as history and soon the future would remind us. At the time of his retirement he was the only man to have coached a Heisman Trophy winner at a school that John Heisman had actually coached at. Ralph “Shug” Jordan was a four time SEC coach of the year, national coach of the year, a national champion, and is a member of both the National Football Foundation’s hall of fame and the college football

hall of fame in South Bend, IN. In the hearts of Auburn people he will always be “the man.”

“Somehow, I don’t think Bear taught me all he knows.”

Charlie McClendon

Auburn’s offensive coordinator Doug Barfield took over the reigns as head coach. Barfield’s pedigree was not necessarily embraced but rather tolerated. There was a fringe of the Auburn nation that suspected Barfield of being a puppet of Bryant. Shug was a beloved figure to Auburn people and they weren’t sure that his legacy should be trusted to a coach who had only been on the Plains for two years. Coach Barfield did not have time to play politics he had to get ready for the season opener at Arizona.

Legion Field in Birmingham would serve as the official site of the Iron Bowl from 1948 – 1988. Birmingham was built by the iron industry, thus the name Iron Bowl. The stadium has also served as host for World Cup and Olympic soccer, three different bowl games, and a number of upstart professional football teams including the Stallions of the USFL whose offense featured the likes of Joe Cribbs and Joey Jones. The University of Alabama officially ended its association with Legion Field in

2004 choosing to play all of its home games at Bryant-Denny Stadium. It is now the home field for the University of Alabama-Birmingham Blazers.

During the “neutral” site days, Legion Field’s general admission tickets were split 50/50 between the state’s two major colleges. For years Auburn fans complained that it was not a true neutral site since Alabama routinely played the majority of their games there rarely playing more than once or twice a year at their on-campus facility, Bryant-Denny Stadium. The 50/50 split was hardly equitable since they only split some of the tickets. There were 10,000 tickets that always went to the City of Birmingham. The recipients of these tickets were all Alabama fans. Auburn’s “half” of the tickets was never more than 40% of the total seating capacity of Legion Field.

Alabama officials declared that they played most of their home games at Legion Field because Bryant-Denny Stadium barely held more than 40,000, not nearly enough seating for a fan base as large as theirs. Birmingham was only 45 minutes from Tuscaloosa and boasted the largest football venue in the state. It just made plain old good sense to play there. As far as the inequitable ticket division went, Alabama officials alleged that they had nothing to do with the city’s distribution of their share of the tickets.

Auburn continued to upgrade Jordan-Hare Stadium, ultimately eclipsing Legion Field as the largest venue in the state. Eventually, Auburn would demand that their home games be played on the Plains, but it would not happen for several years and not without considerable opposition from the University of Alabama. Until then Birmingham would host the annual grudge match.

Barfield's debut was less than auspicious losing the opener in Tucson 31 – 19 and 15 – 14 to Baylor to start the season. The offense began to click and he etched his first career victory as Auburn's head coach over Tennessee 38 – 28. Auburn followed that with a 10 – 0 shut out of Mississippi. The Tigers then dropped a nail-biter at Memphis, 24 – 23. They followed that with a 28 – 10 home loss to the Yellow Jackets.

A 31 – 19 win over Bobby Bowden's Seminoles quieted the naysayers, at least for a week. Then Florida handed Auburn a 24 – 19 loss. Auburn was outscored 28 – 19 by Mississippi State in yet another forfeited game. The bottom fell out of the inaugural Barfield season when Georgia hammered the Tigers 28 – 0 on their home turf. With no chance of a bowl bid, Auburn's season would once again end in Birmingham. A victory over

Bryant could silence the critics and give Barfield a firm foundation on which to build his ultimate option backfield.

Even for a recruiter of the ilk of Paul Bryant you eventually would have a down year. Richard Todd was gone and he had taken a wealth of playmakers with him. For once coach was building for the future instead of playing for the now. The Phoenix had to turn to ashes before it could rise from them.

The season opening 10 - 7 loss to Ole Miss in Jackson was soothed by a 56 – 3 rout of SMU a week later. Vanderbilt, too, fell prey to the Crimson wishbone 42 – 14. Vince Dooley avenged his former mentor's farewell loss by soundly beating Alabama 21 – 0. It had been many, many years since the Tide had been shut out. The game also signaled that the former Tiger quarterback was beginning to forge his own power house in Athens. At just 2 – 2 the Tide looked to be ebbing after a decade and a half of dominance.

Bear's boys responded by beating Southern Miss 24 – 8, Tennessee 20 – 13, Louisville 24 – 3, Mississippi State 34 – 17, and LSU 28 – 17 for a five game winning streak leading into a game with Bryant's old nemesis Notre Dame now coached by Dan Devine. Different coach, same result –

Notre Dame 21, Alabama 18. Bama entered the Iron Bowl with an 8 – 3 record.

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama November 27, 1976

The first quarter was perhaps the most exciting scoreless 15 minutes in football history. Alabama drove to the Auburn 28 where they fumbled the ball and it was recovered by the Tigers. Auburn in turn marched to Bama territory but came away empty handed when Neil O'Donoghue missed a 47 yard field goal. It ended a streak of seven consecutive field goals made for the Dubliner.

Alabama took possession again and marched to the Auburn 40 before again leaving the ball on the field for the Tigers to gather up. Once again the Tigers failed to cash in on the gift when quarterback Phil Gargis was intercepted giving the ball right back to the Tide.

This time Bama drove to the Auburn 29 before fumbling the ball back to Auburn. The Tigers marched back into Alabama territory. This time O'Donoghue missed from 34 yards away. Auburn's defense had provided three fumbles but the offense produced zero points from them. To add insult to injury, the defense forced another scoreless drive by the Tide but Gargis was once again intercepted. All this occurred in the first quarter.

In the second quarter Bama settled down recovering Auburn's lone fumble of the game. Jeff Rutledge then completed an 11 yard pass to Thad Flanagan. Tony Nathan picked up another 11 yards on a run play. Rutledge again found Flanagan this time for 17 yards. The Auburn defense stiffened forcing Alabama to use all four downs from the two to finally notch the first score of the game, a one yard run by Rick Watson. Alabama fumbled the next possession away yet again but Auburn still failed to score.

O'Donoghue would miss his third kick of the day from 39 yards away.

The Auburn defense had fought gallantly, thrice forcing a turnover and once getting a punt. The offense, however, was dreadful while missing three field goals, throwing two interceptions, and losing one fumble. Still the defense fought tooth and nail before finally surrendering a score. Few knew it then but this game was over.

The next Alabama possession was all about Tony Nathan. First the sophomore ran for 20 yards. Then Watson, on a halfback pass, found Nathan for a 42 yard reception to the Auburn 14. Nathan capped the drive on the next play and the Tide was ahead 14 – 0 with just 36 seconds left in the half.

When the third quarter began Alabama already had all the points it would need to secure victory. The rest was merely window dressing. The

Tide used only five plays to move 80 yards after the second half kick off. The highlight of the drive was a gallop of 24 yards by Nathan. Rutledge completed the drive by hitting Ozzie Newsome for a 42 yard pass and run that put them up 21 – 0.

Auburn soon punted back to Bama and the Tide was rolling again. Starting at their own 27 Bear's boys flew down the field behind strong runs by Johnny Davis for 28 yards and again Nathan for 22. Nathan broke a number of tackles on a ten yard scoring run to end the drive and push the score to 28 – 0.

Desperately trying to get back in the game, Barfield made an ill-fated decision to go for it on fourth down from his own 29. Bob Baumhower, Allen Crumbley, and the rest of the Tide defenders would have nothing of it. It did not take long for Bama to score again this time it was Rutledge who tallied the TD.

In the fourth quarter Auburn's defense returned stopping Alabama's drive at the 30 yard line. Bucky Berrey converted on a 47 yard field goal earning the Tide their final points of the game. Barfield benched Gargis for seldom-used junior John Crane. Crane's presence fueled the first real threat of the day from Auburn. Crane threw for five yard pass to Dick Hayley, then, as a sign of things to come freshman running back Joe Cribbs broke

free for 31 yards to the Bama nine. Crane then took the ball down to the eight on a roll out run and freshman Foster Christy dove over left tackle from there. The youngsters had driven the field scoring on the starting defense and ending a scoring drought that had lasted 7 quarters of Iron Bowl play. At least the future looked bright even if the present was pretty bleak.

Bama drove again but it was Berrey's turn to miss a field goal this one from 32 yards. Crane drove the Tigers again. Bob Fleming had an 11 yard run. Crane made a perfect pitch to Bay Minette's Rusty Byrd who scampered 41 yards. Time expired, however, with the Tigers at the Tide 24.

The final score was 38 – 7. Without the four first half fumbles by Alabama and it could have been much worse. If Crane, Cribbs, and the other underclassmen had gotten into the game sooner it may have been a different game altogether. As was his style Bryant took credit for the fumbles, "I've always said, and I say again, that turnovers are coaching." As was also his way Bear gave the recognition for everything they did right to his coaching staff and the players themselves. As for his first Iron Bowl as a head coach Doug Barfield summed it up thusly, "We learned some thing out there today and they were not pleasant lessons." In the four games since Newton and Langner had stolen victory Alabama had outscored Auburn 118 – 20.

Auburn's season was done so Barfield turned his attention towards building his dream offense and that started with recruiting. The first pieces in the ultimate option backfield would manifest in the spring. However, Barfield would find recruiting against the Bear grim to say the least.

Alabama accepted a bid to play in the Liberty Bowl in Memphis against PAC 10 power UCLA. Bear's team foreshadowed a return to glory as they browbeat the Bruins 36 – 6. For the first time in recent memory there were no consensus All-Americans donning the Crimson jersey.

“It was our job to turn it around.”

Doug Barfield

The abstract that was Barfield’s offense became more lucid in 1977 with the arrival of running backs Joe Cribbs and William Andrews. Andrews, a rare combination of size and speed was the beginning of the rebuilding of Auburn football. Cribbs was an absolute burner that ran like a fullback when tough yardage was needed. The duo was the establishment of Auburn’s reputation as Running Back U.

With Andrews and Cribbs leading the charge Auburn brought down Arizona 21 – 10 in the season opener. Though the talent level at Auburn was starting to improve Barfield had to learn how to win. The inconsistency of his rookie year reared its head again in a 24 – 13 loss to Southern Mississippi. Auburn won back-to-back games beating Tennessee 14 – 12 and Ole Miss 21 – 15 then lost back-to-back-to-back games to N C State 17 – 15, Georgia Tech 38 – 21, and Florida State 24 – 3 for a 3 and 4 record with just four games left to play.

The Tigers began another hot streak downing Florida 29 – 14, Mississippi State (by virtue of another forfeit), and Georgia 33 – 14 leading

into the Iron Bowl. A win could land Auburn back in a bowl game for the first time since 1974.

In 1977 the NCAA, the governing body of collegiate athletics, passed a new regulation that would change the landscape of college football for decades to come, especially for Alabama. Since 1974 member institutions had enjoyed the luxury of awarding 30 scholarships a year giving programs 120 scholarship worthy athletes to choose from. The new ruling still enabled a school to award 30 scholarships in a year but limited the total number of scholarship athletes on a team at one time to 95, a reduction of 25 players. The rule would be nicknamed the 30/95 rule.

Many protested the 30/95 rule. Their argument was that 30 x 4 was 120 and not 95. The NCAA maintained that natural attrition should account for most of the reduction in scholarship athletes. The next argument was that the reduction might have teams cutting players who had earned a scholarship just to make the quota and consequently robbing the player from getting a college education. Once again the NCAA had an answer. They established a grace period of sorts. Any player cut due to reductions could transfer to any school wanting to award him a scholarship without having to sit out a year. The student was protected.

The inadequacies that spurred the change in policy had been in existence almost since the birth of college football. Before 1974 a team could award as many scholarships a year as they wanted. This Carte Blanc created many of the most renowned football powerhouses of today. Schools that were willing to make the fiscal sacrifice could offer a scholarship to every blue-chip athlete in the region. With as many as 150 – 175 players on a team some students would never see any playing time. Though this was unfair to individual athletes the dynastic programs assured themselves that another team could not land many good players.

For example, a pretty good safety from Ft. Wayne, Indiana could perhaps face a choice of where to play, Indiana St. or Notre Dame. Of course he would choose Notre Dame. Under this system an Indiana St. program looking to get better would never have a shot at landing a premier player.

The new rule was the athletic equivalent of the Sherman Anti-trust Act. It squelched the monopolies. The ultimate purpose of the rule was to allow all schools a fair chance at building a good program. The days of deep-pocketed boosters funding an institution's scholarship program was over. The playing field had been leveled.

Walter Byers, at the time the NCAA Executive Director, also indicated that the regulation was aimed at curtailing shameless misuse of the “redshirt” rule. He contended that, “Some schools have been running what could only be called large freshmen tryout camps.” Byers added, “The 95 rule is designed to deal with redshirts.” And he solidified his point of view by informing that, “An inordinate number of redshirts works to the disadvantage of (the colleges) which can’t afford a large commitment.”

Opposition to 30/95 was fierce from a small but powerful sect within the coaching fraternity who were blinded by their avarice. They were the head coaches of the powerhouse programs. Tennessee’s Johnny Majors was one vocal opponent of the new rule stating, “It’s a horrible rule.” Cornhusker head man Tom Osborne echoed the sentiment saying of 30/95, “It’s a cruel thing to do, but they are forcing us to do it.” Notre Dame head football coach Dan Devine was another celebrity opponent saying in a written opinion to the NCAA, “The 30/95 rule is killing us. I’m so against it. It’s ridiculous.”

The reality, as history has shown, is that 30/95 (which was lowered to 25/85 in 1994) has worked better than anyone could have imagined. College football grows more competitive and more popular with each passing season. In the years prior to 30/95 the four state run schools of the old

Southwestern conference had a combined winning percentage of 81.8% over the four private schools of the league. After the instillation of 30/95 the private schools enjoyed a 51.3 winning percentage over the state schools.

The one negative to arise from 30-95 was an exponential growth in illegal enticements for student athletes. Boosters hell bent on seeing their teams succeed have been outlandish in their use of bribery and other inducements to win top recruits. The schools with the wealthiest boosters would still have an unfair advantage but it was not nearly as decisive as in the past.

The 30/95 rule affected every school in the NCAA. The majority of institutions benefited from the change. However certain schools had to revamp the way they did business. These schools were the top echelon of college football's hierarchy like Notre Dame, Michigan, Southern Cal, Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and of course Alabama.

The 1977 season was one for the ages. In this one season alone Bear would match wits with the likes of Tom Osborn, Charlie McClendon, Vince Dooley, John Robinson, Charley Pell, Johnny Majors, and Woody Hayes. They shared seven national championships between them and Hayes was the closest active coach to Bryant in terms of wins. The Tide offense was lead

by Jeff Rutledge and Ozzie Newsome, the leading receiver in Alabama history. Newsome was quick enough to play wide receiver but big enough to play tight end which he would later do on a hall-of-fame level with the NFL's Cleveland Browns.

Running back Johnny Davis was beginning to be mentioned in the same sentence with Johnny Musso the leading rusher in school history. Davis' power was a perfect counterpoint to Tony Nathan's flash and panache. Behind them Alabama began the season thumping Mississippi 34 – 17 before losing to the Cornhuskers in Lincoln 31 – 24. Bryant's team rebounded the next week still scoring 24 points but holding Vandy to 12. Georgia went down with a tough 18 – 10 Tide win followed by a one point squeaker over intersectional rival Southern Cal, 21 – 20. Tennessee was dispatched effortlessly 24 – 10, and Louisville was squashed 55 – 6. Mississippi State was cut down 37 – 7. Miami was blanked 36 – 0. Alabama rode into the Iron Bowl the winners of eight in a row and 9 and 1 for the season.

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama November 26, 1977

All week the talk on the Plains was of upset. There was a buzz of confidence among the students and fan base. Auburn had found genuine

stars in running backs Joe Cribbs and William Andrews. Their athleticism was something not scene in Auburn since Beasley and Sullivan. The talented duo gave Tiger faithful something they had not had in years, hope. The school newspaper, The Plainsmen had this to say about the subject, “Obscure references to 17 – 16 and blocked punts are being revived, relished, gloated over. Hands are being rubbed together. Chops are being licked. Mustaches are being twirled.” Four years of losing was surely about to end.

Alabama rolled into the Iron City ranked #2 and destined for a date with Ohio State in the Sugar Bowl. The Tiger youngsters that had looked so good in clean up duty the year before were now the starters. They picked up where they left off picking up three first downs before a sack of quarterback Charlie Trotman forced a Tiger punt. Bama then marched to the Auburn 26 before settling for a Roger Chapman field goal attempt of 43 yards. The kick was off the mark and Auburn’s young offense was again on the attack as Joe Cribbs stunned the crowd on the third play of the drive taking a hand off from Trotman, crashed through the Tide D-line, bounced to the side line, and outraced the Crimson defenders for an 87 yard touchdown and an Auburn lead, 7 – 0.

The rest of the first half belonged to the SEC Champions. The Tide took the ensuing kick-off and set up shop on their own 30. Jeff Rutledge commanded Bear's offense and lead by example running for gains of 14 and seven yards and completing two passes. One pass was to Tony Nathan for 12 yards to the Auburn 30 and from there to Bruce Bolton to tie the game at seven all.

Alabama thundered down the field on a drive that ended when Johnny Davis, dragging tacklers along, plunged in from the two. The Tide now led 14 – 7. Auburn again moved to the Tide 25 where Jorge Portela missed a 42 yard field goal of his own with just 10 seconds left in the half. The first half drew to an end with that same score.

James Brooks fumbled the second half kick off and the Tigers recovered it but on their own 8 yard line. When they punted the Crimson Tide had excellent field position. On the first offensive play of the second half Jeff Rutledge took off for 47 yards to set the tone for the rest of the game. Six plays later Tony Nathan dashed in from the one. Alabama now had a little breathing room and they took advantage. On the first play of Auburn's next possession Brooks again put the ball on the turf where it was scooped up by Murray Lamb at the Tiger's 21. Behind the hard running of

Davis Bama moved down to the two. Nathan scored his second TD of the game from there.

Brooks made up for the muffs by racing 80 yards with the following kick off. Auburn started their drive at the Bama 20 yard line but would only pick up 19 yards. On fourth down and goal from the one big William Andrews was stopped for no gain by the defensive line.

Alabama took over on downs and got as far as the Auburn 25 before Chapman missed another field goal. The miss fired up the underdogs who got right back in the game when Trotman hit freshman receiver Byron Franklin for a big gainer that got even bigger thanks to Franklin's sprinter's speed. The play covered 75 yards and brought the score to 28 – 14 with most of the fourth quarter still to play.

The slugfest continued as Rutledge hit end Ozzie Newsome for gains of 24 and 35 yards setting up a one yard touchdown dive by Mitch Ferguson. The drive was another 80 yard gem that used just seven plays. On Auburn's next drive Trotman again dropped back looking for more aerial magic but the pass was tipped, twice. Standout E J Junior pulled the ball in and Alabama was in business again from Auburn's 37. One play later Newsome made a dazzling catch of Rutledge's second touchdown pass of the day. At

41 – 14 Bama was now comfortably ahead with only 9:29 left to play so Bear sent in the subs.

With Steadman Shealy at the helm Bama cruised to another touchdown. The drive was fueled by punishing runs from youngsters Donnie Faust and Major Ogilvie. Shealy scored the Crimson Tide's final touchdown from 15 yards out.

Auburn's talented young offense was not through as Trotman hit Rusty Byrd for 36 yards and Reese McCall at the Bama two. Andrews would not be denied this time as he bulled his way over from the two. It was too little, too late. The score of 48 – 21 was not representative of the play on the field. Auburn stood tow to tow with Bear's boys. The breaks as they often did went in favor of the Tide. Perhaps genuine champions create their own luck.

Alabama's 48 points were the most that a Bryant coached team had ever scored against Auburn. Newsome ended his career with the SEC record for career average per catch with a mean of 20.29 yards. Joe Cribbs was the game's leading rusher tallying 133 yards on only 15 carries. Bama had a pair of 100 yard rushers with Davis going for 104 on 20 carries and Rutledge logged 15 for 102. Both Rutledge and Trotman had good days passing the ball. The Tiger signal caller had 135 yards and a touch down and Bama's

QB completed for 193 and two scores. For all the hype in the Loveliest Village during the week there was no miracle upset. Bear had now tied Shug for the longest winning streak in the series. To Auburn's credit Alabama had tried to block virtually every Tiger punt since 1972 and had yet to let them make it. Auburn was now reduced to moral victories.

Auburn again was denied post season play but they had shown improvement. The 21 points they scored against Alabama was the most the Tide defense had given up since the loss to Nebraska in week two of the season. Despite the improvement many Auburn fans lamented the offense's turnover problems especially against Alabama rather than lauding the advances. Barfield proved a better than average recruiter.

Alabama returned to their rightful position atop the Southeastern Conference and continued their overwhelming play smashing Ohio State 35 – 6 in the Sugar Bowl. Once again one loss was all that separated Alabama from another title. Bryant was growing weary of this scenario. Everyone knew that he was the best coach in college football and everyone knew that Alabama was the premier program in the nation. But the championships that had come so easily early in his tenure at the Capstone were now proving more difficult to achieve. Johnny Davis was just 69 yards short of being

Alabama's second 1000 yard rusher in school history and his 931 yards accounted for the best season since Johnny Musso rushed for 1051 in 1971. Davis ended his career second to only Musso in career rushing yards. After leading the Tide in receiving all four years in Tuscaloosa, Ozzie Newsome was named a consensus All-American beginning a new streak of at least one consensus All-American a year hailing from Tuscaloosa, a streak that would last well into the 1980's. Alabama ended the season ranked #2.

“If you got class it’ll all work out. Act like a champion.”

Paul “Bear” Bryant

Marty Lyons anchored a Tide defense that would allow a mere 14 points a game and Jeff Rutledge and Major Ogilvie returned to power Bryant’s offense. Alabama was a preseason favorite to win the national title. If successful it would be Bear’s fifth. He had now beaten Auburn five times in a row tying Jordan’s mark for the longest streak in the series and Barfield had yet to prove he was a match for the icon in the hound’s tooth hat. Victory over Auburn was a foregone conclusion. Just as certain was another SEC crown. The focus was clearly on the ever elusive national championship.

Barfield’s offense was gaining more power as quarterback Charley Trotman and halfback Joe Cribbs again joined William Andrews in the backfield. A new stallion began to emerge in Barfield’s stable in the personage of James Brooks. Auburn fans expected a better mark than 1977’s 6-5 record and the pressure to end the streak was beginning to intensify.

The Tigers racked up 45 points in a 13 point win against Kansas State in Manhattan. The next week the Tigers beat Va Tech 18 – 7. A week later they were 3 – 0 after dismantling Tennessee 29 – 10 in Birmingham. Barfield’s doubters were starting to believe.

They began doubting again after Auburn suffered an embarrassing 17 – 15 loss at home to Miami, (FL). They responded by dusting Vanderbilt 49 – 7 in Music City, but experienced another loss 24 – 10 to Georgia Tech. They closed out October with a 21 – 7 road win at Wake Forest. They would enter November with a 5 – 2 record and looked to be a lock for a bowl game.

Once again the Florida Gators started off Auburn’s November with a thumping, this time by a score of 31 – 7. The Tigers rebounded by beating Mississippi State 6 – 0. A week later nationally ranked Georgia played an orange clad Auburn to a literal stand still in a game that ended with both teams having 22 points. Tiger place kicker Jorge Portela missed five field goals, anyone of which would have won the game. When asked about the uniform change Barfield stated, “We were trying to do anything to get a winning edge.” The orange jerseys were a surprise to everyone including the players. The staff had them warm up in their traditional “blues” and when the team returned to the dressing room the orange jerseys were

hanging in their lockers. To Barfield the tie was another moral victory. However, Auburn was now 6 – 3 – 1 and had to have a win over their cross state rivals for a shot at a bowl game.

Auburn University has always had a strong connection to the state of Georgia. It is only 30 miles from the border. The first football game played in the Deep South was between the Tigers and the Georgia Bulldogs. Auburn has also enjoyed a storied rivalry with Georgia Tech that intensified when legendary coach John Heisman left Auburn only to end up as the coach of the Yellow Jackets a few years later. In the more than 100 year history of the football program at Auburn University roughly 300 Georgians have earned a letter. Auburn's recruitment was born out of necessity – first off the area was convenient and second the Crimson Tide owned most of the state of Alabama. The familiarity with Georgia would turn from necessity to boon by the close of the 20th Century.

In 1970 the population of the city of Atlanta was roughly 480,000 people. In 1980 the metropolitan area had grown to 2.2 million and by 1990 it was closer to 3 million. Today Atlanta's metropolitan area has over 5 million people living in it. Auburn's location has had a tremendous effect on the athletic program since the early 1970's. The village of Auburn lies

between Montgomery (Alabama's state capitol) and Atlanta (Georgia's state capitol). Columbus, GA is also only 35 miles away from Auburn. Both Montgomery and Columbus have grown to be cities of over 200,000 people. This population explosion has placed an embarrassment of talented athletes within an hour and a half drive of the Auburn campus. Additionally, these players usually came to the Plains with a chip on their shoulders after being past over by their states' primary programs.

In the Atlanta area Auburn rivals the University of Georgia and home town Georgia Tech for popularity. There are over 21,000 Auburn graduates living in or around Atlanta. So strong is the Auburn presence in the state that the Georgia Department of Motor Vehicle Safety has added Auburn to the official special interest plates available for automobile licenses. It is the only college they offer that is not in the state of Georgia. 680 The Fan, Atlanta's leading sports programming radio station is the official home of Auburn sports broadcasts in the city.

The list of Auburn football greats hailing from the Peach state is impressive containing names like Outland Trophy and Lombardi Award winner Tracy Rucker (Atlanta), Jim Thorpe Award winner Carlos Rogers (Augusta), All-SEC running backs William Andrews (Thomasville), James Brooks (Warner Robins), Ronnie Brown (Cartersville), Kenny Irons

(Dacula), and Lionel James (Albany), All-SEC linebackers Takeo Spikes (Sandersville) and Dontarrious Thomas (Perry), all time leading receiver Karsten Bailey (Newman), All-Pro tackle Steve Wallace (Atlanta), and Jacobs Trophy winner Marcus McNeil (Decatur).

Iron Bowl victories and conference championships were nice rewards but Bear came back to Alabama to win national championships. Bryant knew that to cement his legacy in college football he needed at least one more championship. No one remembered who came in second. It had been five years since his program had finished a season ranked #1 and that was entirely too long.

Bear started his title run with a 20 – 3 win over Osborne’s Cornhuskers and a 38 – 20 whipping of Missouri. All of a sudden, a national title seemed a long shot after Alabama lost at home to USC 24 – 14. They bounced back with a 51 – 28 win over Vanderbilt at Bryant-Denny Stadium. Auburn fans reminded them that they only gave up 7 points to the Commodores and that was on the road. Tide fans felt their cross state counterparts were getting a little too cocky. Bama ended September with a 6 – 1 record.

Alabama returned from the Emerald City on the better end of a 20 – 17 thriller against the Washington Huskies before topping Florida 23 – 12. When the Tide beat UT 30 – 17 Tiger fans again taunted the Bama fans that they had only allowed Johnny Major’s team to score 10. They were notably silent the next week when after fighting so valiantly in Auburn the Hoakies were blasted by the Crimson Tide 35 – 0. Alabama was back in the title hunt after Southern Cal lost to Notre Dame.

Bama’s 35 - 14 smacking of a Mississippi State team that Auburn had struggled to beat was worsened by the Gator blowout of the Tigers and all but silenced boastful Auburn fans for good. LSU served as Bama’s last warm up for the Iron Bowl and fell 31 – 10.

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama December 2, 1978.

Alabama had a date with destiny and with the Nittany Lions in the Sugar Bowl they just needed to take care of business at Legion Field. Barfield’s Tigers had shown improvement. With their talented stable of running backs they were now a dangerous opponent, especially Joe Cribbs who had embarrassed the proud Tide defense in the previous year’s shootout with 133 yards rushing.

The first half was a seesaw of momentum as the lead changed hands four times. Alabama was the first to score when quarterback Jeff Rutledge hit Bruce Bolton on a 33 yard TD hook up. Auburn answered with a five yard touchdown run by Joe Cribbs. Alabama, behind the running of Major Ogilvie, retook the lead on the strength of an Alan McElroy 34-yard field goal. Cribbs answered with another touchdown dash, this time for eight yards. Jorge Portela, whose place kicking had cost Auburn the Georgia game, missed the extra point. Still Auburn led 13 – 10 and had so far proven the better team. With just one minute left in the first half Rutledge again found Bolton for a touchdown from 17 yards out. The 16 point favorite Crimson Tide went to the locker leading 17 – 13.

The third quarter began with the Tide's championship aspirations under assault by a scrappy Auburn team. True champions always answer the bell. Alabama had won seven of the last eight Southeastern Conference Championships. Though Auburn had proven Bama's equal in the first half they were not up to the task in the second. Alabama extended its lead when Rutledge found tight end Rick Neal for an 11 yard touchdown. The score was now 24 – 13. Auburn's retort was a 37-yard Portela field goal. They would be Auburn's final points on the day. Alabama, on the other hand, was not through.

Rutledge's last drive got the three points back when McElroy kicked his second field goal of the day from 39-yards out. The Alabama subs would ultimately ice the game. Junior Steadman Shealy led the clinching drive and finished it himself with a 20 yard touchdown scamper. The final score was Alabama 34, Auburn 16.

Several players from each team turned in remarkable performances. Defensive tackle Marty Lyons had a game for the ages recording 16 tackles including three sacks. Cribbs again crossed the century mark against the Tide defense scoring two touchdowns on 118 yards. On the subject of Auburn's runners Bryant stated, "Their backs scared me to death every time they touched the ball. Brooks and Cribbs are terrific." But it was Jeff Rutledge who was the star of the day throwing for 174 yards and three touchdowns.

Joe Cribbs led the SEC in rushing in 1978 with his 1,205 yards. Losing to Alabama to end the season was becoming an annoying habit to Auburn fans and Barfield was really feeling the wrath of an unhappy alumni. However, in the fall of '79 Barfield would finally begin to see the fruits of his labors. But until then Auburn's unofficial battle cry would remain, "Wait till next year."

Bear Bryant took his team to New Orleans for another tilt with Joe Pa's Penn State team and this would be one of the greatest college football games ever played. The game was a defensive masterpiece with the Tide registering five sacks of State quarterback Chuck Fusina as well as four interceptions, and all the while holding the running game to just 19 yards. The exhibition was highlighted by what is now called "*the goal line stand*" as the defense led by Don McNeal stopped Paterno's offense four times at the goal line. Marty Lyons was named a consensus All-American. Quarterback Jeff Rutledge ended his career the all time leader in touchdown passes topping a list that included names like Starr, Namath, Stabler, Hunter, and Todd. So impressive was the bowl win that UPI voters ranked Alabama #1. AP voters awarded their top ranking to USC by virtue of their win over the Tide back in September. Regardless, Bear had his fifth national championship.

**“If the Tuscaloosa laundry mat wants to name
us national champions then we’ll take it.”**

Paul “Bear” Bryant

The fact that Southern Cal had taken the '78 AP title was not lost on Auburn fans who referred to the Trojans and not the Tide as the national champions. Auburn fans would poke and prod their Crimson brethren that USC was the real champ not only because they were donned the title by AP but also because they had beaten Alabama head-to-head. Occasionally Bama fans would retort that the game was early in the season and that Alabama had gotten better over the course of the year, but more often than not they simply reminded them that Bama had beaten Auburn head-to-head . . . six times in a row. That usually ended the repartee.

Bear knew what had to be done to take the title in both polls; he had to go undefeated. Thanks to him the SEC was now too strong of a conference to again yield an undefeated team that did not win a national championship.

Apparently, an under appreciation of the Southeastern Conference had helped in devaluing Bama’s perfect record in ‘66. The truth is that the national media punished the Crimson Tide football team because of the

school's well publicized segregation policy. Alabama Governor George Wallace had enraged the liberal media with his boast, "Segregation today. Segregation tomorrow. Segregation forever." In robbing Bama of the national title the media had perpetrated a social injustice equally as loathsome as segregation. By wrapping their atrocity in a flag of righteousness the press had actually managed to lower themselves one rung down the evolutionary ladder from racists and bigots. After all hypocrisy is man's greatest character flaw.

In the interim Bryant did his share to eventually garner the conference the reputation it has enjoyed since the mid-seventies as the nation's best league. Bear's boys began to earn head coaching stints of their own within the SEC like Bill Battle at Tennessee, Steve Sloan at Mississippi, Charlie McClendon at LSU, and Charley Pell at Florida. His coaching lineage would transform *one* of the top conferences in the nation into the undisputed king of college football.

Bryant's determination was mirrored through his players. Tough as he was on them, Bear's boys would walk through fire to make him happy. If coach wanted an undefeated season then they would simply refuse to lose.

Dwight Stevenson had quite a football career. Not only did he start at center for the Crimson Tide bringing home numerous national honors, but Bryant also declared that Stevenson was best player he ever coached at any position. Stevenson followed up an historic college career with an equally impressive pro career while playing for the Miami Dolphins and Don Shula.

Stevenson was the leader of an offensive line that led the NFL in fewest sacks a record six years in a row. He was named to five pro bowl teams, was winner of the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award, and is listed among “The Sporting News” 100 Greatest Football Players. Stevenson is a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame and is now regarded by some as the best center in football history. His career was cut short in 1987 after a career ending injury as a result of a collision with New York Jets linebacker Marty Lyons, fellow Alabama alum.

Now lead by quarterback “Steady” Steadman Shealy, Alabama came out of the chute firing on all cylinders as they steamrolled Georgia Tech 30 – 6 in Hotlanta, battered Baylor 45 – 0, Vandy 66 – 3, Wichita St. 38 – 0, and Florida 40 – 0. At 5 – 0 they had hardly been tested.

That ended when Tennessee came to town. Johnny Majors had his team thinking upset but when the dust cleared Alabama escaped with a 27 –

17 win. Two more blow outs ensued as they took Virginia Tech 31 – 7 and Mississippi State 24 – 7. Baton Rouge was another test of the players' *refuse to lose* attitude. Defense was the order of the day and Alabama's offense got just close enough to the Bayou Bengals' goal line to notch a 3 – 0 win. Miami proved no match dropping the decision 30 – 0. Just like in '72 Auburn was the only thing that stood between Bear and an undefeated season and Barfield had his offense purring like a kitten.

Andrews, Brooks, and Cribbs were the best trio of running backs to ever share a backfield in the history of college football. Brooks and Cribbs were consummate half-backs for the era in which they played. Though he played fullback for Barfield, Andrews would be the prototype tailback of the 1980's.

William Andrews was born in Thomasville, GA and it would be in his home state that he would become a star. After graduating from Auburn, Andrews was drafted in the third round of the 1979 NFL draft by the Atlanta Falcons. His career started off with a bang, four pro-bowl appearances and twice compiling a 2000 yard season in rushing/receiving. During the preseason of 1984 Andrews suffered a serious knee injury that put him out of the game for two years. He returned to the Falcons in 1986 . . . as a tight

end. The experiment lasted one year and Andrews walked away from football. The Falcons have honored him by retiring his #31 jersey.

Sulligent, AL native Joe Cribbs was drafted in the second round of the 1980 NFL draft by the Buffalo Bills. Cribbs had the unenviable task of trying to fill the shoes of O J Simpson. He answered the call rushing for 1185 yards and 11 touchdowns in his first year with the Bills. The feat earned him AFC rookie of the year honors and he was the only rookie elected to the pro bowl that year. He would follow up with two more pro bowl appearances before jumping to the upstart USFL where he starred for the Birmingham Stallions, a team that would also feature future Crimson Tide receiver Joey Jones.

James Brooks won a national championship before he ever stepped foot on a college campus. Brooks led his high school team, the Warner Robins Demons to not only a Georgia state title but to a #1 national ranking in 1976. His school rushing record stood at Warner Robins High for almost 30 years. He left Auburn holding career records for kickoff returns (1,726 yards) and all purpose yards (5,596). As a rookie running back for the San Diego Chargers Brooks played in the celebrated “Epic in Miami.” That

game featured the memorable performance by TE Kellen Winslow that had him being carried off the field in exhaustion. In fact it was Brooks who caught the game tying touchdown pass that forced the famous overtime headlined by the heroics from Winslow. It was with the Cincinnati Bengals that Brooks would become a four time pro bowler and Super Bowl contestant. When he left the Bengals in 1991 he was their all time leading rusher with 6,447 yards. He still ranks among the NFL's top 25 for career total net yardage with 14,910 yards.

As great as the three running backs were the key to Barfield's veer, as with all option offenses was the quarterback. Charlie Trotman had just enough speed and just enough arm that when they were coupled with his ability to make the right decision at the right time it made for one outstanding option quarterback. Trotman would later become the color analyst for the popular Auburn Network radio team.

Auburn got off on good footing beating Kansas State 26 – 18 in a home opener and followed that success by trampling Southern Mississippi 31 – 9. The Tigers' first road trip of the year left them with a 35 – 17 loss to

Tennessee. Two more home games ended well with Auburn beating North Carolina State 44 – 31 and Vanderbilt 52 – 35.

Once again the Tigers hit the road but this time with better results taking old adversary Georgia Tech 38 – 14. Auburn scored 38 in consecutive games in Winston-Salem; the only problem was Wake Forest scored 42. How many times had the Gators ruined November by upsetting Auburn? This would not be one of those times as the Tigers won a hard fought game 19 – 13. 14 – 3 was the final total after Mississippi State lost on the Plains. Georgia was beaten 33 – 13. The Auburn rushing attack was potent with Joe Cribbs averaging 102.7 yards a game and James Brooks averaging 115.3. The Tigers would enter the Iron Bowl with an 8 and 2 record, almost the same record they had when they upset Bryant back in '72.

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama December 1, 1979.

A few weeks before the Iron Bowl Coach Bryant was asked about bowl possibilities. He replied that “if we can’t beat Auburn I’d just as soon stay home and plow.” A new bumper sticker littered the Legion Field parking lot, “Plow, Bear, Plow.”

Auburn fans knew they had a chance of toppling the Crimson Tide but no one else gave them that chance. Despite a #14 national ranking and the

first running back tandem in SEC history (Cribbs and Brooks) to rush for 1000 yards each in the same season the odds makers had Alabama a 17 point favorite, almost the same spread as the infamous '72 game. Alabama was undefeated and was a lock to play for the national title providing they beat the Tigers. That was also the case going into the *Punt Bama Punt* game.

Coach Barfield summed up the Auburn mood, "They've always looked down their noses at us. That's the atmosphere they've created. They feel like they are a little better than we are." Auburn assistant coach Alex Gibbs added, "I think those people over there are realizing that our program is getting stronger each year, and I think that has them worried."

The kick return duo of Brooks and Cribbs was the best in the nation and Bear, always logical in his tactics, elected to go with high "pooch" kicks rather than give Brooks and Cribbs a shot at a big return. The plan paid off beautifully on the game's opening kick off. Auburn mishandled the ball and it was recovered by the Tide's Randy Scott at the 22, the Auburn 22. Alabama was set up within striking distance of the Auburn goal.

Bama picked up two yards on a Billy Jackson run on first down. On second down quarterback Steadman Shealy lost three yards on a keeper and lost another eight on third down when future New Orleans Saint Frank

Warren sacked him. Bama punted and the ball went through the back of the end zone. Auburn had dodged a huge bullet.

Auburn's luck continued as Alabama kicker Alan McElroy missed a field goal from 30 yards away; this on a drive that had seen the Tide in as deep as the Auburn 10 yard line. Auburn responded to the break by driving into Bama territory. Joe Cribbs set up the Tigers with a 35 yard sprint over left tackle to the Tide 23. Alabama and Auburn then exchanged major yardage penalties before the Tigers settled for a 47-yard field goal from Jorge Portela with just 44 seconds left in the first quarter.

The second quarter belonged to the Crimson Tide. They began the ensuing drive at their own 20 and moved mainly on the ground. On the drive Shealy made a key throw to Keith Pugh on third and 3 and the split end slipped a sure tackle from Auburn's Jerry Beasley at the twelve yard line and skipped into the end zone for a 28-yard score. Auburn responded with a drive of their own but came up empty when Portela was short on a 52 yard field goal.

Bama took over at the 35 and went on the attack once more. Shealy again hit Pugh, this time for 29 yards. A penalty gave Alabama a first down on the Auburn 14 where Steve Whitman then thundered down to the four.

On first and goal Major Ogilvie picked up two. On second he got another yard. On third down Shealy called his own number for the score.

Still fearful of a big return, Alabama pooched another kick and Auburn took over at the 30 yard line. The Tigers failed to move the ball and the first half ended with Alabama comfortably leading 14 – 3. Statistics reflected the scoreboard. Alabama had racked up 183 yards of total offense to Auburn's 116. The biggest difference was in passing yards. Bama had 61 to just 7 for the Tigers. Shealy had hit 67% of his passes. The Tide also held the edge in first downs at 13 – 8. The second half would not be so easy.

Just as Auburn had given away its first possession of the first half Alabama did the same as Shealy fumbled on the first play of the third quarter. Auburn's Ken Hardy recovered the loose ball. Auburn ultimately punted the ball back but the Tiger defense had set the tone for the second half of play. A few plays later Ogilvie was stripped and the ball was recovered by Freddie Smith. The Tide defense again answered the call holding Auburn to a 39-yard Portela field goal.

Alabama's offense came out firing moving from their own 28 to the Auburn 12 when they again fumbled the ball to Tiger Harris Rabren to end the threat. On Bama's next possession Shealy kept the ball for 27 yards. Whitman picked up 17 and Shealy then hit Pugh for another 10 yards. On

the next play Shealy again lost the handle and it was again recovered by Smith. A few plays later the Tide's Thomas Boyd stripped the ball from James Brooks and E J Junior pounced on it. Alabama had a first down on the Auburn 21. The Tiger defense stiffened forcing a 23-yard McElroy field goal.

Auburn's next possession was short lived and they were soon punting the ball. Punt returner Tommy Wilcox muffed the ball and it was recovered by Auburn at the Tide 36. After picking up one first down, Tiger quarterback Charlie Trotman came up short on his first two pass attempts but on third down he suckered the Tide pass rush dumping the ball off to Cribbs who dashed 25 yards breaking two tackles along the way to a touchdown. In an attempt to draw within a field goal Auburn went for two but Trotman's pass was intercepted by Alabama.

The fourth quarter began with Auburn trailing by a mere five points. The pesky Tigers would not go away and the Crimson Nation was on edge. One play was all that separated the Tide from trailing. It could be anything – a long run by one of Auburn's superstar tailbacks, another fumble, or worst of all a blocked punt.

Perhaps in response to the turnovers Bear sent out an offense of mostly second teamers. The Alan Gray led backups did not fumble nor did

they put together much of a drive. The Tigers took flight again moving 65 yards with Trotman hitting speedster Byron Franklin for 55 yards and then finding pay dirt from 11 yards out by connecting with tight end Mark Robbins. The two-pointer failed but Auburn was up 18-17 midway through the fourth quarter. The 77,918 in attendance were thunderstruck. It was happening again. The similarities to 1972 were startling.

Steadman Shealy refused to give up. He prayed, "Lord, I'm calling on you for strength to help us do it." On a drive that Bryant would call one of the finest he had ever seen the Tide began their rejoinder. It did not start off well, Major Ogilvie again lost the ball but the Tide recovered this fumble and picked up four yards in the process. Shealy then made runs of 9 and 15 yards. Ogilvie added two and Shealy hit his favorite target Keith Pugh for nine more. They picked up another 15 yards on an Auburn penalty. Steve Whitman bullied his way for 20 yards to the Auburn 8 yard line. Shealy cemented his place in Alabama lore by dashing off left end for the touchdown. He then put an exclamation point on the drive by sprinting off right end for the two point conversion. Alabama was leading again 25 – 18 but with an eight long minutes still left to play. So much could happen in eight minutes and sometimes less.

The Tide's kickoff was too deep and Brooks gathered it in at the five. It was a huge mistake. The future pro bowler raced towards the end zone only to be brought down 64 yards later by Don McNeal. The tackle was possibly as big as the one McNeal had made in the Sugar Bowl against Penn State. Still the Tigers were in business at the Alabama 31 yard line.

Auburn managed to pick up just seven yards on there first three downs. They were in no man's land; if they punted they might never get the ball again. On fourth down Trotman dropped back to pass. The ball was tipped by Alabama and just barely missed Mike Locklear at the goal line. With 3:22 left in the game Bama was content to run out the clock. With just nine seconds left to play Alabama was forced into a fateful punting situation. Tiger fans licked their chops; Tide fans crossed fingers, clutched rosary, and sent out waves of positive energy. Even if the punt wasn't blocked they still had to coral arguably the best punt returner in the nation, Joe Cribbs.

The similarities to the 1972 Auburn upset proved coincidental rather than formulaic. The punt got away flawlessly and Cribbs was forced to fair catch it at the nine yard line. Two incomplete passes later and it was finished, 25 – 18.

James Brooks finished the day with just 55 yards rushing. Joe Cribbs showed better with 93 yards on 16 carries. Charlie Trotman had 121 yards

through the air on 5 of 18 passing. They had reversed the first half passing stats out gaining Alabama 114 to 19 in the second half. Alabama's Steve Whitman was the big runner of the day going for 107 yards on only 14 carries. Major Ogilvie added 65 yards rushing. Keith Pugh caught 5 passes for 76 yards, but Steadman Shealy was the hero of the day rushing for 99 yards on 24 carries and connecting on 5 of 6 passes for 64 yards as the quarterback accounted for all three of Bama's touchdowns and a two point conversion.

James Brooks and Joe Cribbs took both of the running back slots on the AP All-SEC 1st team. Cribbs finished the season with 1,120 yards but failed to defend his league rushing title. It went instead to teammate James Brooks who logged 1,208 yards rushing. Despite an 8 – 3 record and two 1000 yard rushers Auburn was done for the season. Coach Bryant ended the decade of the 70's with a record of 102-16-1. Alabama fans were merciless in their taunts. They bragged about shutting down Auburn's powerful running game. They bragged about winning seven straight. They continued to commemorate each triumph as if it were divine right. Bear. Bear. Bear. Bama. Bama. Bama. Roll Tide Roll.

Undefeated and untied, Alabama rolled into New Orleans with only Lou Holtz's Arkansas Razorbacks between Bear and an unprecedented 6th national crown. Though the hogs fought valiantly they could not defeat destiny especially when destiny had a defense manned by Don McNeal, Byron Braggs, and E J Junior. Running back Major Ogilvie's two touchdown performance earned him the Sugar Bowl MVP award. Alabama rode the 24 – 9 bowl victory all the way to a unanimous national championship. It was the Tide's national best 21st win in a row. Alabama set a new SEC high by having a record eight players named to the AP All-SEC squad led by three offensive linemen guard Mike Brock, center Dwight Stephenson, and tackle Jim Bunch. Bunch was also named a consensus All-American.

“We thought we’d gotten over the hump and were sailing. I guess I expected some sort of reward. Then the atmosphere changed.”

Doug Barfield

Heavy was the outcry for Barfield to finally end the losing streak to Alabama. The outlook was not great for the coming year. William Andrews was playing for pay an hour away in Atlanta. Andrews was not the only loss to graduation but he was chief among them. Trotman and the super tandem of Brooks and Cribbs were back but if they could not beat Bama with Andrews few figured they could without him.

Most felt that Andrews was the best running back of the three and many was the critic who found fault with the coach’s decision to use him more as a blocker than a runner. Rather than celebrate the best season in four years, detractors often asked how he could lose three games with that backfield. Barfield was firmly on the hot seat as he was 0 – 4 against Alabama.

Sad news rocked the state on July 17, 1980. Shug Jordan, age 69, had lost his battle with leukemia. For the first time, Alabama fans were actually

consolatory towards Auburn fans. They knew that Shug was not just a great football coach but an even better man. His loss was a reason for sorrow for all Alabamians.

Clyde Bolton, a sports journalist for the Birmingham News, was a young beat writer when he suggested to Jordan that he be allowed to move into Sewell Hall where he would live and even practice with the football team three days a week. The end result would be a series of articles about the experience, *ala* George Plimpton's *The Paper Lion*. Shug agreed and took pleasure putting the young writer through the rigors of big time college football. He treated him like any other player. Bolton later stated, "I'm glad I did it, and you know why? Because I can truthfully say Shug Jordan was my coach."

Years later, upon hearing of Jordan's posthumous election to the National Football Foundation's Hall of Fame Bolton added, "And if there's a hall of fame for folks who simply are decent human beings he should be in it, too."

Six national championships and counting? Paul Bryant had established himself *one* of the great coaches in the history of the game especially in regards to titles and awards. However, a new goal was starting

to grab momentum, the push to be the winningest coach of all time. The Bear entered the 1980 season with 297 wins, just 14 short of Amos Alonzo Stagg's record of 314. Achievement of this goal would establish the Bear as *the* greatest coach of all time. Alabama was averaging 10 wins a season so conventional reason had Bryant on pace to break the record around the middle of the 1981 season. Although some Auburn fans wanted Bryant to fail, most realized that the record was not just inevitable, but also historic. For once, both sides of the state were cheering for the same thing.

Auburn started the 1980 season with a yawn-inspiring 10 – 7 win over TCU and a one touchdown win over Duke 35 – 28. Johnny Major's Volunteers were talented and dazzling as they waylaid the Tigers 42 – 0 in Jordan-Hare. Although it was not official yet, Barfield's days as head coach were numbered. A 55 – 16 thronging of lowly Richmond did little to abate the pyres smoldering among the Auburn faithful. As had been the modus operandi of all Barfield teams, inconsistency would prove their prominent trait.

The Tigers edged Georgia Tech 17 – 14 but lost to Mississippi State 24 – 21. They followed up with a 21 – 10 loss to Florida on November 1. Southern Mississippi was pelted 31 – 0 before Auburn went down in defeat

to Georgia again at home by a score of 31 - 21. Georgia and Tennessee were two of Auburn's staunchest rivals and to lose to them both at home by a combined score of 73 – 21 was the last straw. The decision was made that a change was needed on the Plains. The Iron Bowl would be Doug Barfield's swan song at the helm of the Auburn football program. And certainly a win after seven straight losses would send him out on a high note.

The drive for three was the overwhelming desire of all Crimson clad Alabamians. Not since Bear's 1966 team had a program come close to winning three national championships in a row. How close did that team come? They were the preseason #1. They went undefeated. They only allowed their ten opponents to share a scarce 44 points between them. They finished the season with the best record in college football and a final ranking of #3. The national media simply could not allow Alabama to win three in a row. It would not be the last time they would award a school or player with an honor simply to block someone from the South from winning it.

Bear was primed to make a lot of history in 1980. Georgia Tech fell first 26 – 3 at Legion Field. Ole Miss was tough in defeat scoring 35 points to Bama's 59. The Rebels' 35 points were an anomaly as the Tide's defense

only surrendered 98 for the entire season. Vanderbilt played their usual role as conference doormats with a lack luster 41 – 0 loss in T-Town. Bama followed that shut-out with another one against Kentucky by a score of 45 – 0.

Bama Fever was spreading like wild fire and Alabama fans were beginning to wonder out loud who the better team was. The Tide or the Pittsburgh Steelers? The mass of the Crimson Nation grew more brazen and boastful. Auburn fans were pummeled by a blitz of jibes, boasts, and general disdain that was unfathomable. Some Auburn fans claimed to want to beat Alabama for no other reason than to get some peace and quiet.

Rutgers almost derailed the Tide's train but ended up losing 17 – 13 in New Jersey. Apparent tragedy struck the Tide as fullback turned end Earl Collins was badly injured. Collins was kept over night in a Newark, NJ hospital for observation seemingly for a broken neck. As it turned out Collins' injury was actually a rare birth defect and he missed only three games.

Motivated by the near miss at Rutgers, Alabama routed Tennessee 27 – 0 and Southern Mississippi 42 – 7. But just as Auburn had started November off with a loss, Bama was shocked 6 – 3 by Mississippi State ending a school record 28 game winning streak. Bear knew from experience

that a team could still win a title with one loss and his team responded by beating LSU 28 – 7. The next game was against Notre Dame, a team that Alabama had never beaten. Just as it had been two weeks prior, Bama’s offense was stagnant. The Irish took their final game against Bryant with a 7 – 0 win at Legion Field. Notre Dame continued to gouge large chunks of real estate in the game with quick hitting runs into the Bama interior line by both running backs and quarterbacks. Bear took notice of the strategy; he knew innovation when he saw it. With hopes for a third title now dashed Alabama reset its sites on a smaller goal, extending the streak against Auburn to eight in a row.

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama November 29, 1980

Barfield’s final Tiger team hit the field determined to hand their leader a win against their arch rival. Auburn amazed the 78,549 in attendance on the very first play of the game when they stripped Bama quarterback Don Jacobs and Vernon Blackard recovered the fumble at the Tide 19 yard line. The short drive culminated when AU quarterback Joe Sullivan hit James Brooks on a flair pass and Brooks snaked five yards for the game’s first score. They were only seconds into the game and Auburn was already leading 7 – 0. However, the trend for this game would be

flurries of scores packed closely together separated by droughts of action that lasted long, tense periods of time. Jeremiah Castille stole the momentum when he stole a Sullivan pass just minutes after Brooks' score. Thanks to Castille the Tide found itself at the Auburn 10 yard line. Three plays later freshman quarterback Walter Lewis, in for the struggling Jacobs, darted in from a yard out to deadlock the score at seven.

Auburn's opening stanza rebellion was not yet complete. The Tigers were again on the move marching into Bama territory before Al Del Greco amazed the crowd when he nailed a 52-yard field goal to put the underdogs back on top 10 – 7 just before the quarter ended. Once again Alabama answered quickly, Lewis impressed again this time going on a breathtaking run as he darted through the heart of the Auburn defensive line on a play Bear had stolen from Notre Dame two weeks earlier. On the quarterback counter Lewis zipped through the line and then galloped for several yards before, seemingly corralled, reversed his field for several more yards where he again reversed his field to continue the brilliant play. He was finally tackled at the Auburn four yard line, 73 yards after the run began. Tide running back Major Ogilvie took it in from the one in the opening minutes of the second quarter.

Earl Collins, the split end injured in the Rutgers game, was forced into to duty at, of all positions, fullback. Injuries had slowed Alabama's top two lead blockers Charley Williams and Billy Jackson. Collins had starred at Richard Todd's alma mater Davidson high school as a running back so lining up in the backfield was nothing new to him. This became evident to Auburn as Collins, on another quick play through the middle, raced 45 untouched yards to extend the Tide lead to 21 – 10. Auburn then put together its most impressive drive of the day moving 80 yards in six efficient plays. The capper was a 42 yard pass from quarterback Charlie Thomas to speedy flanker Byron Franklin just before the half. George Peoples kept the score within a field goal notching a two-point conversion by racing into the end zone unmolested. The score at halftime was 21 – 18.

The third quarter was as devoid of fireworks as the first half was filled with them. Auburn was unable to close the gap and Alabama could not enlarge its lead. The scoring drought lasted well into the fourth quarter. Though there were few highlights, the anxiety was substantial as both sides knew they were just one tipped passed or muffed punt away from a game changing play. That play came with just three minutes remaining on an incisive audible by Don Jacobs who checked out of a sweep and instead hit wide open tight end Bart Krout for the game sealing touchdown from seven

yards away. After Tommy Wilcox intercepted Auburn, Alabama iced the game with 17 seconds left when injured fullback Billy Jackson scored on the same quick middle run that had devastated Auburn all day. The play was the result of another inspired read by Jacobs. The final tally was a hard fought 34 – 18 result. Again depth did in the upstart Tigers.

Barfield's offense had cultivated 198 yards and 18 points in the first half but gained only 43 yards and a goose egg in the final two quarters. James Brooks lead the Tigers with 83 yards on 18 carries; though not enough to secure victory his production did cement him as Auburn's all time career rusher with 3,523 yards. Auburn's defense, courageous in defeat until the fading moments of the game, was lead by linebacker Chris Martin's superhuman 23 tackle performance (17 solo, 6 assists).

Young Walter Lewis was the star of the game collecting 98 yards rushing and 60 passing on crisp 4 for 5 execution. The Alabama defense, fierce in the second half, was led by tackle Byron Braggs who made 11 tackles with three going for losses. Braggs commented, "This is a big intrastate rivalry but winning over them four times is something you can take to the grave with you." Thomas Boyd led all Crimson tacklers with 15 and E J Junior also made 11 tackles with two going for a loss.

The dissention and finger pointing rumored to have infected Auburn over the course of the season was solidified in the words of Auburn defender Jim Skuthan who said, “Their defense was everything we thought it would be. Our defense played well, too. Our offense kind of blew it in the second half. I don’t know why. If we had gotten a good drive going I think we would have been all right, but they kept stopping us and we stopped ourselves. I think we lost confidence in the second half offensively. We worked too hard to lose.” His statement confirmed that Barfield had lost control of the team.

Media coverage of the rivalry had grown so large that Legion Field now employed a mobile trailer for post game press conference to allow all reporters access to the coaches and players. Inside Doug Barfield stated, “We moved the ball on them real well in the first half, probably better than anyone has all year. But it seemed like they had it (the ball) the whole second half.”

Bryant also pointed to second half play as the deciding factor, “They whipped us all over the field in the first half. We came back and played in the second half like we were supposed to.” Bryant left the press trailer with 305 career wins, just nine short of the all-time record of 314 held by coaching legend Amos Alonzo Stagg.

There were no last moment heroics for Barfield's Tigers. No farewell upset to take the pain off the whole of disappointment that was his regime. Doug Barfield was a good recruiter who was not quite in the league of game day coaches such as Dooley, Majors, and Bryant. In his five years of service to Auburn he had only had one really good season but he had no bowl appearances or victories over Alabama to show for his labor. Many have called the Barfield era the dark ages of Auburn football, but it is more likely that Alabama had simply hit a plateau of excellence that few other programs would ever match. Sure, Barfield was no Shug Jordan, but in the waning days of his career Shug did little against the Juggernaut that Bryant had built across the state either. Still, it was time for a change.

Don Jacobs lead Bear's boys to a 30 – 2 rout of Baylor in the Cotton Bowl. The victory left Bryant with 306 wins, just eight behind Stagg. Baring a catastrophe Bear would surely make history again in 1981. For the first time in years the Tide were not champions of anything. Instead they watched Dooley, Walker, and the other Bulldogs score a hat trick – undefeated, SEC Champions, National Champions. Defensive lineman E J Junior who ended his tenure at Alabama as the career leader in sacks was

named a consensus All-American for an Alabama team with a final AP ranking of sixth.

“There’s gonna be alot days when you lay your guts on the line and you come away empty handed. Ain’t a damned thing you can do about it but go back and lay ‘em on the line again . . . and again, and again.”

Pat Dye

Bear Bryant was not at all happy when he heard that his former assistant was being considered for the coaching position at the “cow college.” That is what prompted his call to Pat Dye. In the call mentor suggested to protégé that if he stayed put at the University of Wyoming for another year or two that he could take over at Alabama. Protégé informed mentor that he wanted to begin his own legacy not act as caretaker to someone else’s. Bear replied, “Well, you can’t beat me.” To which Dye answered with, “Probably can’t, but we’ll do alright against whoever takes your place.”

Pat Dye was not Auburn’s first choice. There were two lists of candidates the first list had one name on it, Vince Dooley. Auburn offered the former Tiger signal caller the head job at his alma mater. Johnny Majors had built a national championship program at Pittsburgh that featured Heisman Trophy running back Tony Dorset and left it to return to his alma

mater, Tennessee. Why wouldn't Dooley? After serious consideration Dooley elected to stay in Athens.

Dye was so gung ho to take over the program at Auburn that he resigned his post at Wyoming before he had been offered the Tiger's job. Wyoming was pressuring Dye to make a decision on where he would coach, but Auburn was not close to making their choice. He was actually unemployed for a month before he beat out more high-profile candidates like Jackie Sherrill, Bobby Bowden, Lou Holtz, and Dan Reeves. Dye's confidence was the thing that swayed the committees' favor. That same confidence was put on display when asked in his first press conference how long it would take to beat Alabama. His response, "60 minutes."

That one comment inspired the Auburn faithful. A new bumper sticker soon appeared, "I'm a Dye-hard Auburn fan." Recruiting took a jump when Dye hit the trail because he offered the one thing Bear never would, early playing time. Bryant, as a rule, rarely played freshmen. The system that had won him many championships would cost him dearly with the new generation of football players. In fact, it would change the fortunes of both schools for decades to come.

To coincide with the hiring of their energetic young coach, Auburn signed a new radio deal that would see the young sportscaster Jim Fyffe

become the voice of Auburn football. At his side was former Heisman Trophy quarterback Pat Sullivan, the most beloved player in Auburn football history. It was a fusion of tradition with contemporary that created an integral part of the new Auburn experience. Fyffe's narrative would paint images for generations of Auburn fans.

Bryant entered the season just seven wins shy of tying Stagg's record and needing eight to stand atop the coaching world. Conventional wisdom dictated that Bear should have the record by the eighth game of the season since the schedule was devoid of the marquee match-ups of the past with interstate powers like Notre Dame and USC. The one outside power on the schedule was Penn State, but Bryant never sweated Paterno, he owned him. The other non-conference opponents were Georgia Tech, Southern Miss, and Rutgers. Cake.

Coach Bryant made history in 1981 by naming Walter Lewis the first black starting quarterback at Alabama. No other coach could have made such a bold move at such a prominent program in such a conservative state. Other coaches did not have the clout to weather the storm. Many close-

mindset fans regarded the decision as selling out. They frequented the mindset of *win at any cost* but not this cost.

Some may try to glorify the decision as something more romantic than it was. They tend to portray such circumstances as glamorized battles between David and Goliath choosing the opinion that the “hero,” in this case Bryant, acts without regard to self and consequence. The reality is nobler than such idealized folly. Bryant once said, “Tell you the truth, Sam Cunningham did more for integration at Alabama than anybody else, including Martin Luther King.”

Cunningham was an electrifying tailback for the USC Trojans. He was also black. After failed attempts to integrate the football program at Alabama in the 60’s, Bryant scheduled a game with USC at Legion Field in 1970. Cunningham embarrassed the proud Alabama defense running at will and scoring three touchdowns. Bama’s defense appeared vanilla that day both figuratively and literally. Some feel that Bryant ran only base defenses in order to underscore his point. After the humiliating loss Bear was allowed to recruit whom ever he wanted.

Bear wanted to win and Walter Lewis gave him the best chance to do it. The fact that the young man was black was not germane to the situation and that is the goal of the struggle for equality. Lewis did not get the job

because he was black nor did being black *prevent* him from getting it. His race was simply not an issue in the decision making and that was Doctor King's dream, colorblindness.

Coach Bryant was not a martyr for a cause; he was a better person than that. Winning was what governed his conscience not social change. He was a man who wanted to build a program that won games and championships and was indifferent to the ancestry of the men he enlisted to help him achieve that goal. More than breathtaking comebacks, records, and championships this is why Paul Bryant should be remembered and revered.

Walter Lewis' physical abilities were something the South had not scene on this level. He was lightening fast and had an arm like a catapult. Lewis did things that made people take notice whether it was magically escaping from an onrushing lineman or throwing a 30-yard strike off his back foot. Athleticism aside, it was his character that sold Bryant on him for his field general.

While Bear was indifferent to Lewis' race at the same time he knew the media and more importantly the fan base was not. For this to work Lewis would have to posses amazing leadership and exude integrity. Just as other pioneers like Jackie Robinson and Hank Aaron had before him, Lewis would have to withstand undue scrutiny, constant questions unrelated to the

game, and even death threats. His courage and moral fiber paved the way for the Jason Campbells, Michael Vicks, and Dante Culpeppers of the world. Looking back on his career at Alabama Lewis does not focus on the revolutionary aspects of his relationship with the Bear instead he proudly proclaims, “I was his *last* quarterback.” In the annals of Alabama’s unequaled legacy at the position Walter Lewis stands alone as the most influential field general to ever wear the Crimson jersey.

The Tide started their quest for another championship and for 315 with a 24 – 7 thumping of LSU but were stunned the next week by a loss to future Alabama coach Bill Curry. The game defied reason. Curry was a rookie coach and Georgia Tech was not a very good team. By contrast Bama was the winner of two National titles and 22 games in a row. The Tide then struggled to a 19 – 10 win over Kentucky the next week. This team did not play with the swagger of previous Alabama teams.

Bama began to regain the prowess of earlier days with solid wins over Vanderbilt 28 – 7 and Mississippi 38 – 7. For the second time this season, however, Alabama was flabbergasted by another upset in the form of a 13 – 13 tie against Southern Miss. Bryant hated ties. He spoke of them by echoing ex-Navy coach Eddie Erdelatz who said that a tie was like kissing

your sister. Twice Bear had been denied #311. The fan base that had always defended all Tide losses as being the fault of anyone but Coach Bryant was starting to wonder if maybe the old man was losing his touch.

Alabama returned to its winning ways by beating Tennessee 38 – 19 (311), Rutgers 31 – 7 (312), and Mississippi State 13 – 10 (313). Bryant continued his mastery of Joe Paterno embarrassing the Nittany Lions 31 – 16 at State College. The win brought Bryant into a dead tie with Stagg at 314 career wins. The accomplishment was not lost on Bear’s coaching adversary that day. Paterno must have concluded that if he could not best Bryant on the field then perhaps he could in the records books. The Iron Bowl was next and the only thing standing between Bear and coaching immortality was a ragtag bunch of young men in the middle of a rebuilding process coached by the man that was at one-time Bryant’s handpicked successor.

Dye installed the wishbone as his offense. He was a former Georgia guard and he was defensive minded. A clock-eating running game was exactly what he liked to keep his defenders fresh. Dye would build his legacy around the running game and tough, hardnosed defense. As a freshman, pocket-sized tailback Lionel James was sitting on the floor of the meeting room the first time Pat Dye addressed his new team. Upon entering

the room the coach tripped over the foot of James. Dye asked how big he was and the youngster answered 5'6" 150 pounds. Coach Dye's response was, "That's what's wrong with the program." James went from being Dye's example of what was wrong with Auburn football to being the starting left halfback. James wore the number "6" because a two-digit number was too large for his torso.

Dye's Tigers got off to a good start beating TCU 24 – 16 but then dropped three straight to Wake Forest 24 – 21, Tennessee 10 – 7, and Nebraska 17 – 3. The Tennessee game in particular was a grueling affair in which both teams played to exhaustion. Auburn had been stopped at the goal line in the game's fading moments to protect the Volunteer victory.

Despite the losses Auburn fans were encouraged since none of the games were embarrassing blowouts like they had experienced of late. The Tigers fought hard for 60 minutes in each game. They were rewarded the following week with a victory against the "other" Tigers. They downed LSU 19 – 7. Dye notched his first Alumni win by taking old foe Georgia Tech 31 – 7 at Bobby Dodd Stadium. However, Dye's team was young therefore inconsistent losing the next week at home to Mississippi State 21 - 17. They rebounded with a 14 – 12 win over Florida and then taking North Texas 20 – 0. Georgia, behind the running of super sophomore Herschel

Walker won a home tilt against Dye, the former Georgia All-American, 24 – 13. Auburn needed to beat Alabama to have a winning season and more importantly to keep Bear from getting win number 315 against them.

Despite having gained so many aspects of his style from Bryant's tutelage, Pat Dye was his own man. Where Bear was unflappable and stoic as he patrolled the sidelines Dye was energetic and demonstrative. It was not uncommon to see Dye bounding and thrashing around the field so excited he would forget his own player's names. That same emotion often overtook him in post game speeches. Notably the poignant sermon he gave after the disappointing loss to Tennessee was identified as the moment when the team bought into their coach. They knew his tears were a sign of his love for all the young men who played Auburn football.

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama November 28, 1981.

The talk all week both locally and nationally was about #315. Bear was already starting to get a few congratulatory calls even before game day. Everyone's prognostication was that Alabama would dispatch Dye's Tigers by halftime and the remainder of the game would be a celebration of the career of Paul Bryant. Someone forgot to forward the script to Auburn.

The Tigers roared out of the gate forcing Alabama to punt on its first possession of the game. Auburn defensive back and punt returner Chuck Clanton showing why he would be a star in the pros returned the punt 55 yards setting up his offense at the Tide 13 yard line. Alabama escaped unscathed when Al Del Greco's field goal passed just right of the goal post. It would not be Auburn's last sortie into Alabama's red zone.

The Crimson Tide responded moving 80 yards in just eight plays. Quarterback Alan Gray sprinted 63 yards at one point in the drive and later capped it with a one yard TD plunge. It would be the Tide's last incursion past the 50 yard line of the half.

Auburn was again on the offensive and quarterback Ken Hobby was slicing the Bama secondary twice hitting tight end Ed West, once for 13 yards and again for 31. The drive ended when Georgia native Hobby was intercepted at the one by Alabama safety Tommy Wilcox with just 22 seconds left in quarter number one. Alabama led 7 – 0 when the second quarter began.

Auburn's first drive of the period began at their own 49 yard line and ended at the Tide's 26. Del Greco again just missed to the right, this time from 43 yards out. Auburn finally got on the score board with a dazzling run by fullback George Peoples. The 63 yard jaunt shocked the Crimson faithful

who had been waiting for the flood gates to open so they could get to celebrating history. The run was a sign that Dye's protégés did not quit.

On the first play following the kick off Gray was blasted by the Auburn D-line and fumbled the ball where it was recovered by Zac Hardy at the 10 yard line. Auburn failed to get in the end zone and Del Greco was out again for another field goal try. Surely he would not miss again. The Alabama line crashed through the formation and holder Joe Sullivan mishandled the snap. In a mad rush to make some kind of play, the backup quarterback threw the ball into the ground earning a flag for intentional grounding. The result of the penalty gave Bama the ball at the Auburn 25.

The possession was short lived as Fairhope native David King batted an Alabama pass into the waiting arms of teammate Mark Dorminey to end the threat and take the game to halftime tied at seven a piece. Auburn fans were lamenting what could have been as they thought of the four scoring opportunities they had frittered away.

Alabama began the second half as they did most every Iron Bowl, with a long scoring drive seemingly to break Auburn's will. After Auburn appeared to have killed the Alabama drive a facemask penalty revived it. Quarterback Ken Coley then shoveled the ball to Jesse Bendross on a Utah

pass and the receiver did the rest streaking 26 yards through a surprised Auburn defense for the score.

Auburn was a quick three and out and Joey Jones went back to return the punt. Jones muffed it at his own 40 and Clanton in a crazed attempt to wrangle the bouncing ball inadvertently knocked it farther down field . . . twice. The defensive back finally pounced on it at the Alabama three yard line. Two plays later the Little Train Lionel James scored his first career touchdown as an Auburn Tiger and again the game was tied this time at 14 all. Scarcely two minutes had ticked off the clock since Bendross had given Alabama the lead.

Alabama fans were in disbelief. Alabama players shared in their dismay. This game was supposed to be over by now, at least mathematically over. They had gotten so used to Barfield's teams tanking it that they simply could not believe that Auburn was going toe to toe with their beloved Crimson Tide. This Pat Dye was not afraid of the Bear.

Auburn fans, also wrapped in astonishment at still being in the game were silently cursing the ghost of Doug Barfield. The Tiger's inability to capitalize on scoring chances was of course a residual symptom of the previous coaching staff. They were growing tired of moral victories and the "what ifs" that accompanied them. They had to start taking advantage of

Alabama's mistakes. Like the one that soon followed. Joey Jones was known for acrobatic catches and for being sure handed but he again muffed a punt that was recovered by Auburn just 33 yards from pay dirt. The drive exhausted the third quarter and christened the fourth. It ended when Del Greco finally found his groove from 19 yards out. With just over ten minutes left to play in the game Auburn was sitting pretty to end the streak and to delay Bear getting #315 with the 17 – 14 lead. Alabama's offense had mustard just two scoring drives and little else through three quarters thanks to the heroics of Tiger defenders like King, Clanton, Quency Williams, and linebacker Chris Martin. Even though points were hard to come by, the Auburn offense was eating up yards and time.

On Alabama's ensuing possession the Auburn defense forced the Tide into a do or die third down. Talented sophomore Walter Lewis converted when he found Bendross for 12 yards. Four plays later Lewis would hit Bendross again this time with a 38 yard scoring strike to put the Tide back on top 21 – 17. Once again Auburn was three and out and Jones managed to handle the punt.

Following its youth movement of the previous drive Bryant put the game in the hands of more underclassmen, most notably Linnie Patrick. The sophomore from Jasper had runs of 34 and 15 yards, the ladder being the

game clinching touchdown with just 7:07 left to be played. Alabama's depth, and coaching, had proven to be the difference in the game. The final score of 28 – 17 did not accurately represent the game itself.

Auburn had statistically whipped an Alabama team that was predicted to wipe the floor with them. James rushed for only 30 yards but his lead blocking was the catalyst to George Peoples racking up 155 yards against a typically stingy Tide defense. Dye's players were valiant and gritty giving their alls to secure victory but in the end their depth and inexperience was their undoing. They out gained the Tide 311 yards to 279 but largely failed to make the most of four Alabama fumbles and one interception. Future NFL kicking great Al Del Greco missed three chip shot field goals and Auburn signal caller Ken Hobby completed just seven passes, four to Auburn players and three to Alabama players. Auburn was hit for eight penalties that cost them 80 yards of field position.

Just as much a part of the final score was the will of the Alabama players who could not see their coach denied his moment in history. The future of Alabama football looked bright with back-ups like Lewis, Patrick, and Ricky Moore set to take over the offense. The end result was that Paul Bryant was now the winningest coach in history and the record breaking win came against his most hated opponent lead by the apprentice that had

spurned him. Bryant later quipped, “I feel like I ought to go back out and check the scoreboard to make sure we won.”

Coach Dye proceeded to the trailer that made for an impromptu press room. Coach Bryant addressed his players and fielded a phone call from President Ronald Reagan. When Bryant appeared in the press room Dye was still talking with the media. Bear joked, “What the hell are you doing here?” The two old friends hugged. Bryant insisted, “You did a good job,” to which Dye responded, “We whipped your ass in statistics.” The two continued joking with Dye suggesting that the official who threw all of the flags on Auburn was from Huntsville. Bear countered, “No, he was my neighbor.”

More seriously Dye proclaimed Bear as “the greatest.” He went on to declare, “We have to regroup and get ready for next year,” then boastfully forecast, “We’re going to have a football team at Auburn when we start playing out of the same deck as everyone else. Then we will have our share of fun.” Bryant was complimentary of Auburn and his former student saying, “I don’t think the loss will hurt Auburn. They fought their hearts out, and they’re going to get better. I just hope they don’t get too much

better.” He then called the comeback, “. . . one of the greatest wins I’ve ever been associated with.”

As of November 28, 1981 Paul Bryant was officially the greatest coach of all time. Although his career wins total would be surpassed it would be done so by coaches who benefited from longer seasons and against opposition that did not compare to the weekly warfare of the SEC combined with arduous cross sectional match ups with the best programs in the nation. Additionally, Bear’s head-to-head record against his successors leaves little doubt as to who the best coach was.

Auburn would end the season with a 5 – 6 record but a bright future. They were clearly a program on the rise. Players who would later become part of Auburn folklore like Randy Campbell, Greg Carr, and leading rusher Lionel “Little Train” James were on that first Dye team and provided the cornerstone for future success.

Bryant would have one last shot at wiping the Texas specter from his past as the two were scheduled to meet on New Year’s Day in the Cotton Bowl. Lead by the game’s defensive MVP Robbie Jones, Bear’s Boys fought hard but came out on the losing end of a 14 – 12 score. The loss took a little of the luster off hitting 315 but not much and not for very long.

Alabama finished ranked #7 in the final AP and corner back Tommy Wilcox was named a consensus All-American. Six consecutive senior classes graduated having never tasted defeat in the Iron Bowl as the Tide was the winner of nine straight against Auburn.

**“Auburn hasn’t beaten Alabama since 1972
and they will never beat Alabama.”**

Ken Donahue

In the winter of 1982 there was a heated recruiting battle between Bryant and Dye for the services of a running back from McAdory High School in Bessemer. Bear had long coveted a premiere athlete from the Birmingham area and in that poverty stricken suburb was just such an athlete.

Vincent Edward Jackson was a man among boys in Alabama athletics. He was not only the best football player in the state but he was also the best baseball player in the state *and* the best track star in the state. Blessed with superhuman strength and speed it was rudiment to many that he would head to Tuscaloosa and earn Bryant the one acclaim not in his anthology, a Heisman Trophy.

Infinitely competitive, Jackson did not respond well to the Alabama coaching staff’s insistence that he give up both baseball and track. Convinced he would change their minds he continued with the recruiting process. The next bombshell dropped by Bryant’s staff was that the coach

did not start freshman running backs. It might be the end of his sophomore or the beginning of his junior season before he saw any significant playing time.

Jackson mentioned that the man down in Auburn said that if he came to the Plains he would start as a true freshman. Arrogantly the Alabama coaches told him to go ahead and go to Auburn but if he did he would never beat Bear Bryant. Unbeknownst to them they had just convinced Bo Jackson to play football at Auburn University. As his friends and family can attest, you never tell Bo he *cannot* do something.

Jackson signed with Auburn and in the summer joined veterans Randy Campbell, Lionel James, and fullback Greg Pratt in Dye's wishbone. It was an assortment of individuals unlike anything seen before. Campbell was a middling athlete but a terrific leader and decision maker. The late Michigan coach Bo Schembechler commented that Campbell couldn't throw and couldn't run. All he did was win. Lionel James was a tiny giant who was now up to 170 pounds. The scat back would become a Pro Bowl player with the San Diego Chargers, even being named the Charger's MVP for the 1985 season, and would break the NFL record for most all-purpose yards in a single season.

Greg Pratt was a 5'8" 210 pound bowling ball who would never have a chance of playing in the NFL because of his untimely death. In the summer of 1983 he collapsed during a routine training session and would later be pronounced dead of cardiac arrest. Pratt was in good health, in fact he had just undergone a physical that morning and there were no indications to suggest the tragedy to befall the 20-year-old. In the fall of 1982, however, he was a virile, devastating lead blocker. Bo Jackson, who would eventually become a personality known around the world, was a young man trying to grow into his body in unfamiliar surroundings.

With the theatrics of recent historical events at the Capstone Bryant set his sights on an unheard-of seventh national championship. Walter Lewis was in his junior season at Alabama and had found a faithful target in diminutive receiver Joey Jones, a high school teammate of Auburn quarterback Pat Washington. Defensive back Jeremiah Castille (who would end his career tied for the school record in interceptions) was the emotional and spiritual leader of a defense that was emblematic of the Bryant era, tough and tenacious. Castille would also father future Tide stars Tim and Simeon Castille.

Alabama avenged the mystifying loss to Georgia Tech the year before by thrashing Bill Curry's not so Wramblin' Wreck 45 – 7. Ole Miss fell 42 – 14 in Jackson. George McIntyre was revitalizing Vanderbilt football and they battled Bama hard before loosing 24 – 21. Arkansas State was dispatched 34 – 7. Paterno came to town hoping to improve on his 0 – 3 record against the master. Instead he left with one final reminder of who was boss as Alabama torched Penn State 42 – 21. Johnny Majors had more success than Paterno with a 35 – 28 upset of Bama. The win ended a 12 year losing streak for Tennessee.

As he had done before, Bear prepared to go for the title with one loss and a lot of determination. Cincinnati suffered a 21 – 3 trouncing and Mississippi State went down 20 – 12. The next week LSU came to town and dashed Bryant's title hopes by doubling up the Tide 20 – 10 which ended another long losing streak to Bama. Southern Mississippi again played spoiler besting their upset draw from the previous year with an upset win 38 to 29 in T-Town. The loss was Alabama's first at Bryant-Denny in 57 games.

At this point there were serious rumblings that the game had passed Bear by and it was time for him to step down. Alabama's gridiron success had created a monster; it's fan base. Coach Bryant's accomplishments had

raised expectations at the Capstone to something no one, not even the Coach himself could satisfy. On the verge of losing three games in a row and with their bowl hopes dwindling the Tide entered the Iron Bowl 7 – 3 and desperate for a win.

Auburn started its season with a 28 – 10 victory over Wake Forest and held off a late rally by Southern Miss to win 21 – 19. Tennessee came to town for a major confrontation. It was time to see just how far Dye’s Tigers had come. The Vols had taken the last three games against Auburn and many thought they could make it four. Pat Dye would have none of that. This was the first glimpse the nation would receive of Auburn’s new direction and of Bo Jackson. Auburn won with defense holding Tennessee to two Willie Gault touchdown receptions. Auburn won with offense as halfback Lionel James rushed for 129 yards and two TDs and Jackson added another 110 and a TD. Auburn won with flare on a trick play where James took a pitch from Campbell and then threw a bomb to Jackson who made a soaring catch for a 43-yard gain. Most of all Auburn won emphatically 24 – 14. The win was the biggest on the Plains in years and they were now 3 – 0. The Tigers had probably read a few too many of their own headlines as the following week Nebraska humbled them 41 – 7 at home. Lionel James was

injured in the second quarter which allowed the Black Shirts to key on the freshman Jackson the remainder of the game.

The Tigers regrouped and manned up beating Kentucky 18 – 3 in a game that saw Al Del Greco tie the NCAA single game record with six field goals in the win. Georgia Tech was blanked 24 – 0 behind 187 yards of combined offense from Little Train. Tech coach Bill Curry would end his career having never beaten Auburn in coaching stops that also included Kentucky and Alabama. Mississippi State was dropped 35 – 17. Auburn lost a real donnybrook to Florida by a score of 19 – 17. Rutgers was killed 30 – 7. In a rematch with his alma mater, the top ranked University of Georgia, Dye again fell to former Auburn quarterback Vince Dooley 19 – 14. The game featured great running from Bo Jackson and Herschel Walker, but it was Lionel James who stole the show with an 87 yard touchdown run early in the fourth quarter to give Auburn a temporary 14 – 13 lead. The run was the second longest in school history. Dooley vs. Dye would become the Bryant /Jordan rivalry of the 1980's. Auburn went into the Iron Bowl at 6 – 3 but with renewed confidence and the talent to end the nine year drought, they hoped.

Legion Field - Birmingham, Alabama November 28, 1981.

Distressed over the difficult life of a student-athlete Bo Jackson contemplated quitting school and going home to Bessemer. During the off week before the Iron Bowl he spent most of a night sitting at the bus station telling himself he would be on the next bus to Birmingham. Each one departed with Bo still sitting on the bench. In the end he could not let his mother down. He also had a score to settle with a certain football coach who didn't think he was good enough to play as a freshman. Jackson was obsessed with beating Alabama, with beating Bryant. He could not forget the Alabama arrogance, go to Auburn and you will *never* beat the Bear.

Perhaps Bryant thought that Dye should have declined the Auburn job because he was the perfect man to supersede him at Alabama or perhaps it was because he perceived Pat Dye as a threat. The animated young coach had already beaten him out for the top recruit in the state and this winning streak could not last forever, a fact that Bryant alone was willing to admit. Bear had survived the 18-year slugfest with Shug succeeding more than he failed, but at his age was he willing to go through it all over again?

Auburn quarterback Pat Washington and Alabama receiver Joey Jones' high school alma mater had won the state championship the night before playing in torrential rains at Legion Field. The weather was only slightly better that Saturday with periodic showers and gale force wind. Weather like that usually favors the team that runs the ball the best.

Auburn, wearing their road whites, was confident as they took the field. There was an excitement in the air that was tangible, an energy. Walter Lewis was in the midst of the best season an Alabama quarterback had had in 13 years, but Auburn countered with the running tandem of James and Jackson. Both teams needed this win. Alabama needed it to secure a bowl bid and salvage a season that had gone awry. Auburn needed it to prove that they were once again among the elite teams in college football and more importantly to shut up all of those egotistical Alabama blowhards.

On their second possession Alabama took an early 7 – 0 lead with Joey Jones on the receiving end of a 22-yard Walter Lewis pass. The drive had begun at the Auburn 48 yard line when Dye came up short after going for it on fourth and one. After the kickoff the Tiger offense had trouble getting going and soon Alabama was marching into the Auburn red zone again. But Pay Dye was a defensive coach and he had learned the art of the

bend-don't-break philosophy from Bryant. Mark Dorminey stuck Tide runner Joe Carter forcing the ball up into the air. Auburn corner Tim Drinkard plucked it from the heavens and streaked towards the Alabama goal line. Only a miraculous play by Walter Lewis prevented a defensive score, but his effort only delayed the inevitable as Little Train ran over Jeremiah Castille knotting the game at seven all.

Lewis hit Jesse Bendross twice on the next drive for gains of 18 and 30 yards where Alabama again took the lead on the weight of a Peter Kim field goal, one of three on the day. They now led 10 – 7. With Alabama threatening another score the Auburn defense again rose to the occasion. Just as Lewis unloaded a pass intended for Jeff Fagan he was hammered by the Auburn rush. The ball ended up in the hands of Auburn safety Bob Harris at the Tide 25. Auburn flew down the field in five quick plays culminating in a 2-yard TD run by Randy Campbell. Undaunted by the pick, Lewis quickly set-up Kim for a last second field goal try before the half. It was good and Alabama went into the intermission down 14 – 13. They trailed but they had the momentum. Their offense had chewed up large chunks of real estate, but only had 13 points to show for it.

Auburn's offense continued to look for consistency in the third quarter. Alabama's offense on the other hand hit its peak scoring a field

goal and a Paul Ott Carruth touchdown to go up 22 – 14. Alabama elected to go for two to push the lead to 10 points. The choice was text book strategy and Bryant knew it; after all he had authored the text book.

Auburn's defense answered the call and the conversion failed. Statistically, this Iron Bowl looked like a rerun of many previous games. The Tide had 23 first downs and 445 yards of total offense and Auburn had just six first downs for 132 yards. However, the score was dangerously close. The Crimson Tide had not been able to deliver the knock-out punch to end the game. Auburn would not go away. The good news for Alabama was that the fourth quarter was starting so if the Tigers were to stage a come back they would have to do it driving into the face of a stiff wind.

Something extraordinary happened while the game was on commercial break – there was a turn in the weather. It was chronicled by the CBS television crew. The cameras panned the stadium showing the flags whipping in the wind. The broadcaster stated that this footage was shot just before the end of the third quarter. The picture changed to a sunlit Legion Field with flags gentling flapping and most unexpectedly the wind was at Auburn's back. Keith Jackson summed it up like this, “They say in this state

that Bear Bryant can walk on water, well it appears Pat Dye can change the direction of the wind.”

In the fourth quarter Bo Jackson happened. The difference between a great player and a special player is the ability to take an entire team on their shoulders and storm towards victory. Gretsky took over hockey games, Jordan took over basketball games, and Bo took over whatever game he played.

Sprung by a block from Little Train, Jackson sprinted 53-yards to set Al Del Greco up with a 23-yard field goal. With just over 9 minutes left in the game Auburn trailed 22 – 17. The Auburn defense that had been pushed around all game, inspired by Bo and the offense, stiffened and forced a Bama punt. Every Auburn fan hoped for a blocked punt, history repeating itself. It was not to be as the punt got away cleanly. If Auburn wanted this one, they would have to earn it.

The Tigers began a march towards destiny. They would take the ball 65-yards to the Alabama 1 yard line. Along the way Randy Campbell completed a 16 yard pass to Mike Edwards on a crucial 3rd and 14 play. They were also aided when Castille was flagged for pass interference. The penalty negated a game winning interception by the all-everything defensive

back on the play and gave the Tigers a 1st and goal at the nine yard line. First down yielded little as did second down. On third down Campbell hit Jackson to the Alabama three yard line where the freshman bulled his way through two tacklers going airborne for a touchdown only two fall precious inches short.

With just 2:26 left in the game the Tigers faced fourth and goal against a Tide defense that featured Castille, “Big” John Hand, and consensus All-American Mike Pitts. All were game breakers headed for the NFL. Alabama fans wished for a history repeat themselves as they fantasized about *the* goal line stand. Everyone watching knew what was coming. As the play unfolded Robbie Jones leaped high in the air in an attempt at stuffing the ball carrier diving over the line and knocking him backwards for a loss. His technique was flawless, his surge mighty as he prepared for a game winning collision. However exemplary the middle linebacker’s play he was still mortal. Bo skied above Jones clearing him by an easy two feet. As Jackson watched the number 97 jersey pass harmlessly beneath him he turned in mid-air, stretched out to his full 6’1” length and stuck the ball across the plane of the goal line. The play is now known as “Bo over the top.” Through the din of celebration and despair no one

noticed Bear Bryant handing Bo Jackson the baton as the preeminent sports figure in the state.

Bear's boys were a resilient group however and quickly they set out to right the ship. On a third and short play to seal the victory Jackson again soared like an eagle over the Tide defense for an apparent first down but just prior to touching the ground a Crimson clad hand slapped the ball away where it was recovered by Bama's Russ Wood.

With one last chance, Lewis led the Tide offense on a do-or-die drive. Greg Carr (15 tackles), Chris Martin (19 tackles) and the rest of the Auburn defense took to the field also determined to deliver victory. Bo had taken this team so far that his teammates refused to let him be the goat. Bama inched as far as midfield before being driven back by a horde of white jerseys. Bob Harris's second interception of the game ended all hopes of an Alabama miracle.

Auburn fans began storming the field with nine seconds left on the clock. Alabama defensive coaches, in a last desperate attempt to conjure victory for their general called a timeout with five seconds left. With a shake of his head Bryant assured the officials that no timeout was needed. Broken hearted Bear began the long walk to midfield.

Pat Dye who had established a reputation as a coach who wore his emotions on his sleeve was nearly in tears as he met his former boss. Despite the joy coursing through his veins Dye saw the pain in Bryant's eyes. His heart went out to the old man. The two parted company with Dye having established himself as the new sovereign of college football in the Heart of Dixie.

Tiger fans colonized Legion Field exorcising the demons of the past nine years. Two Auburn students displayed a sign that read simply: "Oh Hell Yes!" Thanks to modern technology T-shirts were already available outside the stadium that read: "23-22. Run Bo Run." Bo had run for 114 yards on just 17 carries as well as the most unforgettable touchdown in years. Amid the cacophony of merriment, television cameras captured the hero of the Iron Bowl weeping as he hugged his mother. Bo had gone up against the most powerful man in the state and he had broken him. Not bad for a nineteen year old from the poor side of Birmingham. Legendary Auburn play-by-play man Jim Fyffe described the scene thusly, ". . . a sea of orange and blue celebrants are tearing down the goalposts in this *monumental* victory . . ." After his post game talk Dye led the victors back onto the field where thousands of Auburn fans awaited the jubilant conquerors.

Mike Pitts, star of the Alabama defense stated afterwards, “It was a game decided in the final seconds, and that’s the way it was played the whole 60 minutes.” 60 minutes, Dye’s prophecy had come to fruition on his second try against the Bear. It was the first time since 1970 that Bryant had lost to a former player or assistant. This was the first time Alabama had lost three games in a row since 1957, one year before Bryant arrived. Bo’s performance at crunch time made him a household name not just in Alabama but across the nation.

America had just discovered the Iron Bowl a few years before the 1972 game. Auburn’s miraculous win that day had peaked the nation’s interest further. Alabama came into the Iron Bowl with a chance at the national championship six times after that. Each time viewers tuned in from across the nation to see if the Tigers could upset Alabama again.

The country marveled at the utter loathing felt between fans of each school which stood in deep contrast to the sheer joy the athletes felt in playing each other. Bo Jackson’s game winning touchdown set the table for a decade of suspense and heroism that would galvanize the entire nation. During the 80’s and early 90’s the Iron Bowl was *the* premiere rivalry in all of sports. The era saw Bryant break Stagg’s record, Dye break Bama’s

winning streak, *Tiffin's Toe Two in a Row*, Lawyer Tillman's reverse, the first game in Auburn, Stalling's title, *11 and oh!*, Bama stopping Auburn's streak, and Scissum's fumble.

Auburn celebrated their victory with their first bowl game since 1974. It was a match up of two future Heisman Trophy winners. Quarterback Doug Flutie led the Eagles of Boston College in the Tangerine Bowl against the Tigers. The game was an exciting affair with both Flutie and Jackson showing flashes of why each would eventually take home a Heisman, but it was Little Train's game as he led Auburn with 101 yards. The Tigers won the high scoring affair 33 – 26. More importantly they had won the respect of the football world with a final AP ranking of 14th. The top 20 ranking would be a reoccurring roll for decades to come.

On December 15th Paul Bryant announced his intension to retire as head football coach after the bowl game on December 29th. He would remain on campus, however, as the university's athletic director. Bryant's first bowl game as head coach at Alabama was the inaugural Liberty Bowl in Memphis and it would be the location of his last bowl game as well. It was Bama's NCAA record 24th bowl game in a row. Bear's team was ready to

give their all against the feisty Illinois Illini to insure that he could retire a winner. Illinois was a different animal from the rough and tumble, grind it out teams of the SEC. They were piloted by quarterback Tony Eason owner of nine NCAA offensive records and featured an aerial attack that was seldom seen at the time. To make matters worse the game would be played at the end of the rainiest December in Memphis history. The setting was awful with icy temperatures accentuating the soggy field.

Alabama's bend don't break defensive did a lot of both as Eason riddled the Tide secondary for 423 yards but was held to only one touchdown pass. Bama's defense was heroic despite the bombardment intercepting Illinois seven times, three times knocking Eason from the game, as well as forcing and recovering a fumble. They held the high powered Illini offense scoreless on seven visits to the Alabama red zone, twice in the final three minutes of the game. Jeremiah Castille led the way with three interceptions, six solos, two assists, and a batted down pass.

Special teams contributed as well connecting on three point afters in kicker-unfriendly weather conditions and they also added a blocked kick. Despite committing five turnovers themselves, the Alabama offense was up to the task with Walter Lewis hitting Joey Jones for 50 yards to set-up the game's first score, a four yard run by Ricky Moore. It added touchdown

runs of 8 yards by Jesse Bendross on an end around and of one yard by Craig “Touchdown” Turner. In all the offense amassed 217 yards rushing and added another 130 through the air for 347 yards of total offense. In the end they were triumphant and Bear went out on top with a 21 – 15 win.

During the post game press conference Illinois head coach Mike White held Bear’s chair for him and later offered, “We’re going to miss you.” Bear’s players refused to let him go out a loser. Castille professed, “Coach Bryant has been a champion all his life and we wanted to see him go out as a champion tonight.” Walter Lewis added that, “Coach Bryant has meant a lot to all the people he’s been associated with. He’s helped us all to grow as individuals and as men.”

Coach Bryant completed his career with a résumé unmatched in the annals of sports – 15 conference championships, six national championships, 29 total bowl games, 15 bowl victories, over 70 NFL players produced, 323 victories, and most significantly a 19 – 6 record in the greatest game of all, the Iron Bowl. During the 1960’s and 70’s Alabama went 193 – 32 – 5 making Bear’s boys the winningest program in college football for two full decades. Nebraska’s Hall of Fame coach Bob Davaney accurately described Bear as, “. . . simply the best there ever was.” John Robinson echoed the sentiment saying, “He wasn’t just a coach he was *the* coach.”

As longtime whipping boy Joe Paterno took home the national championship, Bear's final team ended the season out of the AP top 20 and at the bottom of UPI's poll. His legacy would continue in the accomplishments of pupils like Gene Stallings, Jackie Sherrill, Charlie McClendon, Steve Sloan, Bill Battle, Howard Schellenberger, Danny Ford, Bum Phillips, Sylvester Croom, and Pat Dye. Though his record for career wins would be bested, Bear's acumen as a coach will never be equaled.

Epilogue

“People in Alabama love Coach Bryant. They just tolerate all the rest of us.”

Gene Stallings

Silence beset the students at Auburn University on January 26, 1983 as the announcement was made that Coach Bryant had died. It was just 28 days after he coached his final game. Some would say that without football the old man had nothing to live for. The average college student had been born with Bryant already the head coach at Bama so even in Auburn the loss of the Bear was felt and grieved. Auburn people realized that the rivalry with Jordan had transformed both schools into national powers. Joe Paterno’s words were fitting eulogy, “Even his peers in the coaching business felt in awe of him. He had such charisma. He was a giant figure.”

Pat Dye seized the momentum of the 23-22 win to turn Auburn into the foremost football program in the SEC during the 1980’s. The Tigers would dominate Alabama and the league taking home four SEC crowns. In 1983 they beat Bama again with Bo trashing the Tide defense for 256 yards. Auburn finished third in the nation despite playing the toughest schedule in the country and having the best record as well. They were leapfrogged by Miami (FL) after the Hurricanes upset Nebraska in the Orange Bowl. Dye and his team had earned the national title on the field of play but they were denied their reward by media politics. It would not be the last time the media would deny Auburn of a title they rightly deserved. Alabama fans having little else to crow about decreed that the Tide would have never been passed over like that and they were likely right.

Pat Dye is most revered at Auburn not for ending the streak or for signing Bo Jackson but for bringing the game to the Plains. Years earlier Shug had suggested that Auburn would like to play its home games at Jordan-Hare but those from Tuscaloosa said that Auburn was too remote and too small to support a game of the magnitude of the Iron Bowl. Because access to Auburn was so rudiment the 50 mile trip to Montgomery was a two and a half hour drive. Politicians in the state capital (almost all of them Alabama graduates) felt that developing better roads to Auburn was not in the best interest of the state as a whole. When he was first hired Dye was quizzed by Bryant whether he wanted the game moved to Jordan-Hare. Dye assured him that the Tigers wanted to play their home games at Auburn. Bear replied, "That'll never happen when I'm here." He was true to his word.

Auburn University is one of the leading engineering schools in the country. Coincidentally the state highway department was beginning to fill with Auburn graduates. The highway department engineers, not the state legislature determine where roads are to be built and improved. Interstate 85 now runs from Montgomery to Atlanta and right along the outskirts of town. It includes three exits in the Auburn area. Hwy 280 from Birmingham to Auburn is now a four lane road. As a result Auburn is now the fastest growing community in the state, Auburn University is the largest institution of higher learning as well, and the property around Toomer's Corner, where the university and downtown come together is among the highest sought after real estate in the southeast. The lawmakers' claim that improving access to Auburn was not vital to the state was questionable to say the least.

Officials at the University of Alabama suggested that the Tide might drop the series rather than play it at Auburn. After years of debate, threatened lawsuits, and public uproar

Auburn was allowed to play their home games, oddly enough at home. On December 2, 1989 the unbeaten, untied, and number two ranked Crimson Tide arrived on the Auburn campus for the first time in the history of the series. Bama fans arrived with chants of, “Your ass on your grass,” but instead were introduced to the pageantry of a home game in Auburn. Tiger Walk, the downtown restaurant scene, and the rolling of Toomer’s Corner were a revelation to the Crimson Nation. Even more astonishing was the genuine friendliness of the Auburn people. They were glad to have Bama in town and they sincerely hoped that all had a nice visit. Just as the Amazin’s had done in 1972 the 1989 Tigers damaged Alabama’s chance for a national title by whipping them 30 – 20.

The game program for the day featured these words by then Sports Information Director David Housel, “As long as our cross-state rivals could dictate where we play our home games, the rival held the upper hand, the high ground. There was no equality. Today for the first time, there is equality.” Eventually, the series would be a home and home affair just as all rivalry games should be. Pay Dye more than anyone else was responsible for the amazing turn in events.

Bo Jackson won the Heisman Trophy in 1985 and was the number one overall pick in the NFL draft. In an era where his contemporaries were Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky, Joe Montana, and George Brett, Bo was the most popular and recognizable sports figure in the world. He suffered what would eventually be a career ending injury in a playoff game for the Oakland Raiders. Before he would settle into the where-are-they-now files he made one last curtain call. On her death bed Bo made his mother two promises – that he would

finish his degree at Auburn and that the first hit he got upon his comeback from hip replacement surgery would be for her. Bo's first at-bat saw him crank a towering home run, for his mother. Bo got his degree as well.

Former New York Jets head coach and Bryant assistant Ray Perkins was given the unenviable task of following the legend. Doug Barfield could have told him how that would go. The Tide quarterback for most of the Perkins era was the son of NFL coaching legend Don Shula. Mike Shula would one day be named head coach at Alabama. After four years at the Capstone Perkins escaped the pressure cooker and returned to the NFL, he was 2 – 2 against Dye but the final game, a loss, would end the goodwill the administration felt for him. Perkins was replaced by his former Baltimore Colt's teammate Bill Curry to much dread from the fans.

Curry was winless against Auburn in his tenure at Georgia Tech, but the Alabama PR machine was quick to point out that he had beaten Bear Bryant. Curry was not fully accepted by the Crimson nation until the 1989 season when he went into the Iron Bowl undefeated and ranked second in the nation. When Auburn beat Alabama in the first Iron Bowl ever played in Jordan-Hare 30 – 20 the backlash was ghastly. Bama followed the Iron Bowl with a loss to Miami in the Sugar Bowl in a game that ultimately decided the national championship. Forgotten were the first nine wins that had made Alabama relevant for the first time since 1981. Bricks were thrown through windows and death threats were leveled. Bill Curry was dismissed from the University of Alabama for going 9 – 2 and playing for the national title simply because he lost to Auburn . . . three times in a row. The conduct of

more than a few Alabama fans and administrators with regards to Coach Curry is a black eye from which the school has never recovered.

After the public outcry to hire someone from within the Alabama family Gene Stallings was named head coach. Soon he would return the Crimson Tide to the top of college football by winning the 1992 national championship. A decade after the Bear's passing Stallings was like an apparition of Bryant himself. If you closed your eyes as he spoke or saw the coach walking from a distance it was easy to mistake him for the old man. Stallings is the only coach since Bryant to have had a winning record against Auburn and he personally saw to the retirement of Pat Dye.

The Dye era ended in mediocrity just as Barfield's, Bryant's, and Jordan's eras had. He continues on in the service of the university as a fund raiser, consultant, and ambassador of all things Auburn. Dye is also the host of his own radio show "Alabama Outdoors with Coach Dye." Additionally he publishes a monthly newsletter, "Wildlife Trends." In 2005 the field at Jordan-Hare would be named in his honor. The program he rebuilt has since produced two undefeated seasons, numerous top 10 teams, and more importantly domination over the Crimson Tide. Since 1982 Auburn has owned the head-to-head series, as well as most overall wins, produced a Heisman trophy, had the number one overall pick in the NFL draft two consecutive years, more top ten finishes, more bowl appearances and they have ruled the state in recruiting.

The 21st century has seen a complete reversal of fortunes. Auburn has become the bell cow of the Southeastern Conference and a perennial national championship contender.

Alabama is occasionally ranked in the top 25, has suffered four losing seasons, and is now better known for their basketball program. But for all of Auburn's accomplishments since that rainy November day in 1982 they have not beaten Alabama nine straight.

