



FWAA writing contest winners

The FWAA's 11th annual Best Writing Contest results are listed below. All winners will be recognized at the FWAA's annual Award Breakfast on

Jan. 4 in New Orleans. All places will receive certificates. First-place winners also receive plaques. The first three places receive a cash prize as well.



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COLUMNS

1st place: Ivan Maisel, *ESPN.com*

2nd place: Ted Miller, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

3rd place: Gregg Doyel, *Charlotte Observer*

Honorable mention: Parish Alford, *Northeast Mississippi Journal*;
George Schroeder, *Daily Oklahoman*

ENTERPRISE

1st place: Bruce Feldman, *ESPN The Magazine*

2nd place: Ted Miller, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

3rd place: Ron Musselman, *Toledo Blade*, and Adam Thompson, *Denver Post*

Honorable mention: Joe Person, *The State*;
Jon Solomon, *Anderson Independent Mail*

FEATURE

1st place: Olin Buchanan, *Austin American-Statesman*

2nd place: Randy Holtz, *Rocky Mountain News*

3rd place: Al Lesar, *South Bend Tribune*

Honorable mention: Rob Biertempfel, *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*; Ron Higgins,
Memphis Commercial Appeal; Brett McMurphy, *Tampa Tribune*;
Steve Ellis, *Tallahassee Democrat*; Tom Shatel, *Omaha World-Herald*;
Mark Rea, *Buckeye Sports Bulletin*; John Lukacs, *Freelance*

GAME — IMMEDIATE DEADLINE

1st place: Lee Jenkins, *Orange County Register*

2nd place: Ken Goe, *The Oregonian*

3rd place: Tom D'Angelo, *Palm Beach Post*

Honorable Mention: Josh Robbins, *Orlando Sentinel*;
Mark Anderson, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*; Wright Thompson, *Kansas City Star*;
Pete Fiutak, *collegefootballnews.com*; Dennis Dodd, *CBS SportsLine*

GAME — LOOSE DEADLINE

1st place: Ron Higgins, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*

2nd Place: Scott Wolf, *Los Angeles Daily News*

3rd Place: Dennis Dodd, *CBS Sportsline.com*

Honorable mention: Brett McMurphy, *Tampa Tribune*; Eric Hansen,
Irish Sports Report; Todd Jones, *Columbus Dispatch*

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Darryl Richards
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Daily Oklahoman
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Miami Herald
David Teel
Daily Press, Newport News (Va.)
Wright Thompson
Kansas City Star
Keith Whitmire
Dallas Morning News

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Big East
Maxey Parrish

President's column



WALLY HALL

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Since becoming president of the Football Writers Association of America, a few nice journeys have been enjoyed. A trip to Scottsdale, Ariz., and a night at the luxurious Phoenician Inn. A January trip to Orlando, Fla., for the FWAA All-America banquet. Nothing, though, was preparation for coming here for the College Football Hall of Fame induction.

There was the small role of handing out the Bert McGrane award to Dan Foster at the mayor's breakfast and appearances at the Gathering on the Gridiron and Fanfest, plus the elegant banquet Saturday night.

The biggest treat at the mayor's breakfast was the talk by inductee Carmen Cozza, who coached at Yale for 32 years.

"When the call came that I was being inducted, I ran home to tell my wife," he said. "She looked at me and said, 'That's nice, now separate the plastic from the paper and put them in the recycling bins.'"

"I said, 'What?' and she said, 'The recycling people are coming in the morning, and you need to get that finished.'"

"I told her I bet if Ara Parseghian told his wife he was being inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame, she wouldn't tell him to separate the plastic from the paper.

"Without hesitating she said, 'If you were Ara Parseghian, I wouldn't either.'"

Thanks in large to a short acceptance by Foster (and an even shorter presentation by yours truly), the breakfast was over on time.

And that meant most of the day was free just to be a tourist.

A college football-loving tourist who now firmly believes every college foot-

ball-loving fan in the country should tour the College Football Hall of Fame.

It's 10 bucks, and you can spend hours and hours and hours reviewing the history of college football.

Mostly, the Hall of Fame is a wonderful, hands-on, tribute to the game and the people who have played it and coached it.

There are videos of great games, including the Texas-Arkansas shootout of 1969 (and the Longhorns won again), displays and places where kids can punt, pass and kick.

There's even a special salute to some of the great sports reporters who covered college football, most of whom by the way have won the McGrane Award.

There is even a deli on the entrance level with great food so you don't have to leave once you are in.

Of course, South Bend is famous for something much bigger than the College Football Hall of Fame.

Something even larger than the old Studebaker museum.

Notre Dame.

Stickers that say Notre Dame or Fighting Irish must come as standard equipment on cars here.

By accident (OK, I was lost), I stumbled onto Rocco's, a great Italian eatery where almost every inch of wall is covered with pictures and memorabilia of Notre Dame football.

There's a tiny bit of basketball, but there's no doubt football is what makes the winters bearable around here.

Joe Kleine, who spent his freshman season at Notre Dame, had told me the four things I had to see: Touchdown Jesus, the statue of Mary, the church and the Golden Dome.

The problem was that school was starting and students were everywhere, mostly loaded down with what appeared to be 30 or 40 pounds of books. Parking was a premium on the pristine and gorgeous campus, but the Golden Dome, chapel and Mary were handled easily enough.

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Columns: Ivan Maisel

Comment from the judge, Mickey Spagnola: "One trend running through the majority of the columns was the lack of strong opinion. This column not only was well written and heavy in substance, but the writer let us know which side of the fence he was on - exactly what a column should be."

By **IVAN MAISEL**
ESPN.com

They are celebrating in College Station, as well they should. In the best Texas style, they went and found the best coach that \$10 million, or \$11 million, over five years could buy. Texas A&M went and made themselves a statement, just as the Aggies did in 1982 when they paid Jackie Sherrill the then-astronomical sum of \$267,000 annually.

Dennis Franchione will mold his Texas A&M teams into winners. He has been successful everywhere he has coached. He will instill in them the spirit of the 12th Man, the Aggie who is always ready to enter the game, as if he had been born to it. He will teach his Aggies about pride, and determination, and trust.

He had better hope none of them asks, "What about Alabama?"

The players won't, of course. It doesn't matter to them that Franchione reneged on the same commitment he asked of his Alabama players last winter.

Hey, coaches leave. That's what they do. Schools may as well carve those multi-year contracts into the side of a watermelon, for all the longevity they have. But that is an issue for another time. Writing about coaches and loyalty is the journalistic equivalent of having someone slap a "Kick me" sign on your back. Yet Franchione's decision to leave is astonishing in its sheer chutzpah.

The two-year NCAA probation and bowl ban that Alabama is currently under, and the 21 scholarships that the NCAA stripped away earlier this year put the Crimson Tide on the brink of football purgatory. Franchione snatched Alabama back. He instilled into the 2002 team a determination to prove that the best team in the SEC West would not be in the SEC Championship Game on Saturday. He succeeded. Alabama finished 10-3, 6-2 in the SEC West. Division champion Arkansas finished 5-3.

When the NCAA announced its sanctions in the Albert Means case, Franchione pleaded with the nearly 40 juniors and seniors who could transfer without losing a season of eligibility to stay, to depend on him and to depend on each other. He asked them not to give up just because the job became tougher. They believed in him, and when other schools came courting, they stayed.

When it came time for him to make the same commit-

Ivan Maisel – ESPN.com

Age: 43

Colleges: Stanford (B.A., 1981)

Background: Ivan has covered college football on a national basis since 1987 for *The Dallas Morning News*, *Newsday*, *Sports Illustrated*, and, since November 2002, *ESPN.com*. A transplanted Alabama native, Ivan lives in Fairfield, Conn., and has managed to maintain his drawl. He says his wife Meg Murray and their kids, Sarah, 11, Max, 9, and Elizabeth, 6, all speak way too fast.



ment, Franchione left. When Texas A&M came courting, Franchione batted his eyes. With the possibility of more NCAA penalties resulting from the Memphis scandal, Franchione bolted. The wounds suffered will take their greatest toll in the next three seasons, as the smaller recruiting classes become upperclassmen. Franchione looked that Sisyphean task in the eye -- and ran to another hill three states away.

Franchione will give plenty of positive reasons why he decided to leave for College Station. But if bailing out on the very commitment he asked of his players isn't one of them, then, as Alabama rockers Wet Willie used to sing, grits ain't groceries, eggs ain't poultry, and Mona Lisa was a man.

What's worse, Franchione's web master and co-author, Mike McKenzie, issued a statement on the coach's behalf Thursday that Franchione would not return to Tuscaloosa to tell his players goodbye and that he had asked his assistants to inform the players of his departure. One member of his staff, contacted Thursday, cringed at the thought of it. Another said, "I hate it for these players."

Franchione, an unemotional, analytical man, broke down briefly as he spoke to the Crimson Tide before the Hawaii game last Saturday, according to one member of his staff. That may be all he can do.

In two seasons in Tuscaloosa, Franchione went 17-8. He went 1-1 against Auburn and he broke an seven-game losing streak to Tennessee. When the NCAA handed down its sanctions of Alabama, Infractions Committee chair Tom Yeager said his group had seriously considered giving Alabama the death penalty. In other words, Alabama couldn't have been punished any further without shutting the program down altogether.

It turns out that there is. Franchione's departure is an

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Feature: Olin Buchanan

Comment of the judge, Gene Duffey: Texas A&M receiver Terrence Murphy and older brother. Good insight into two brothers and how one is succeeding where the other failed. Story details how the older one went wrong and why he ended up in prison and how he now lives to see the Aggie receiver succeed."

By OLIN BUCHANAN
Austin American-Statesman

The football reached Terrence Murphy's hands just before his feet reached the end zone.

As he crossed the goal line, Kendrick Bell jumped up from his chair, cheered and exchanged high-fives with men seated around him.

The second-quarter touchdown enabled Texas A&M to pull even in last October's game at Kansas State, but Bell's elation wasn't about the score. It was about who scored. Nearly a decade had passed since he roamed Floyd Casey Stadium as a cornerback for Baylor, and for the first time Bell was watching Murphy, his 18-year-old half brother, play wide receiver for the Aggies.

And when Murphy caught that touchdown pass, it was a classic case of sibling revelry. "I had my chest stuck out," Bell recalled. "I felt like it was me scoring. I said, 'I taught him that.'"

Bell remembers those Saturday games at Baylor, with his little brother in the stands with the rest of the family.

"He'd sit up there at Baylor in my No. 11 jersey and I'd find him and wave to him," Bell said.

But Bell, now 30, couldn't sit in the stands for Murphy's first college touchdown. Instead, he had to share the moment with his fellow inmates at the Coffield Prison Unit in Tennessee Colony, near Palestine, where Bell is serving a 25-year sentence for dealing narcotics.

Growing up in New Chapel Hill -- a small rural community a few miles east of Tyler -- Bell and Murphy were close-knit brothers.

Then, Murphy was an idol-worshipping pre-teen yearning to follow in his brother's footsteps. Now, Bell is a fallen hero determined to make sure Murphy doesn't.

Then, Bell taught his brother how to play football, how to compete and the importance of studying tape.

Now, he hopes to teach the value of reaching potential rather than just end zones; for earning a degree and not just a spot in the starting lineup; for running away from trouble as deftly as he runs away from cornerbacks.

Bell learned those lessons, too. He just learned them too late. **A family man**

When Bell was a star tailback on Chapel Hill High School's 1989 Class 4A state championship team, he

OLIN BUCHANAN— Austin American-Statesman
Age: 41

Background: Buchanan came to the American-Statesman in 1995 after spending two years covering Texas A&M athletics for the *Bryan-College Station Eagle*. He covered high school sports for five years before being promoted to a backup position on University of Texas football. Last year he became the lead writer on Texas A&M football. When not working he's preparing for the arrival of his first child. Quinn is due Dec. 31.



gained more than 1,500 yards -- and celebrity status. "Kendrick was a leader at school," Murphy recalled. "Everybody knew Kendrick Bell. I looked up to him." And Bell looked after his little brother.

"From the time I brought Terrence home he was like Kendrick's baby," said their mother, Brenda Guthrie, a former secretary and current substitute school teacher who has three other children. "When Terrence was 2 months old Kendrick taught him how to hold a plastic football and showed him how to throw it. Once he was walking Kendrick always had him out in the yard doing everything."

Years later, when a schedule change forced Guthrie to work nights, she said, Bell would go to the nursery and pick up his younger brother after football practice. "When I got home Kendrick would already have him bathed, fed and ready for bed," she said.

On nights of Chapel Hill football games, Terrence would stay up late, wearing a jersey with Kendrick's number on it, and wait for his older brother to come home.

When Bell brought home tapes to study the next opponent, Murphy was always sitting at his feet.

"I used to be big on film study," Bell recalled one day last summer. "I wanted to see my mistakes and learn from them." After high school, Bell went to Baylor, where he played running back during the 1991 and 1992 seasons before switching to cornerback, which provided a better chance of playing professionally.

"Kendrick had an awful lot of talent. He was gifted with speed and agility," former Baylor Coach Grant Teaff said. "We moved him to try to get him in position to maximize his skills. Potentially, he was good enough to have a chance to play pro ball.

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Feature winner continued

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"We had hopes for him. I felt he had a chance in the environment at Baylor to blossom and get an education and make something out of his life."

During his senior season in 1994, Bell recorded 69 tackles. "Kendrick had an interception against Texas A&M and I was walking around in his jersey," Murphy recalled. "I could hear people say, 'That's Kendrick Bell's brother.'"

A forfeited future

After college, Bell made a little money playing for the Tampa Bay Storm of the Arena Football League in 1996, but his career was soon finished. "I worked out for pro teams," Bell said. "My main problem was I wasn't disciplined enough. I had always relied on just athletic ability and that caught up with me. I was drinking and partying all the time."

When his football career ended, so did the adulation that comes with it. The celebrity status was gone. And Bell wanted it back.

He returned to Tyler and opened a nightclub -- ironically called The Turning Point -- just across the dry Smith County line in wet Gregg County.

"You get used to being the type person everybody looks up to and commands a lot of attention," he said. "When you don't have that any more you try to find a way to get it."

"Guys selling drugs . . . some people look up to them and treat them like they're something different. You have those old friends you don't know how to let go of. They will pull you into that situation. I didn't recognize that."

Bell started selling cocaine out of his nightclub.

Murphy recognized something was different. Bell remembers his brother asking him, "What are you doing? "I guess he started figuring out something was up because of the people I'd been around," Bell said. "I was never at home and I was never asleep. I stayed up constantly."

Murphy wasn't the only one with suspicions. In December 1997 U.S. Marshals arrived at the home of Bell's mother with a warrant for his arrest.

In August 1998, he was convicted of delivery of a controlled substance and engaging in organized crime and began serving a 25-year sentence.

"Never in my wildest imagination would I expect him to wind up in prison," Teaff said. "He's got more to him than that."

"But we're all influenced by the people around us. It's a great lesson for everybody that who you associate with has a huge impact on what happens to you in the future."

Brothers' bond

The brothers say their forced separation has brought them closer together.

Murphy visits Bell whenever possible. He mails newspaper clippings of A&M football games. His football games give Bell something to look forward to and a three-hour escape from his reality on game days.

Cable television isn't available in the prison television room, so Bell can't watch games on ESPN or Fox Sports Net. When the Aggies aren't on network television, Bell listens closely to a transistor radio that stays tuned to the Aggie network.

Bell celebrated every one of Murphy's 36 catches last season. And when Murphy nursed a pulled groin that kept him out of the season-opening win over Louisiana-Lafayette, Bell ached right along with him.

Bell said Murphy is constantly in his thoughts, especially at night, when Bell often lies awake and ponders the choices that put him in prison.

"I'm ashamed," Bell said. "I made a mistake and I'm dealing with it. I take the responsibility because I was raised better than that."

"The most important thing is for Terrence to learn from me," Bell added. "He knows he has to have discipline and stay focused. Had I done that I wouldn't be here."

But Bell insists his brother will never see the inside of a prison except as a visitor.

"He's the kind of young man every father would be proud to call his son. When you meet him it's 'yes sir' and 'no sir.' I've never even heard him curse."

Murphy has the same kind of belief in Bell.

"I love my brother no matter what he did," Murphy said. "He made mistakes, but when I look at him I don't see mistakes. I see my brother."

"I want to do things for him."

He's written letters to the parole board on Bell's behalf and promises to write more.

For his part, Bell has apparently done all he can. Although he's only served one-fifth of his sentence and was denied parole last February, he has attained trustee status and works as a furniture assembler and installer on a road crew for the Coffield Unit's metal fabrication division. He hopes he can use the skills he's learned in prison to get a job working construction. His next parole hearing is Feb. 1, 2003.

Until then, the future tantalizes Bell like a brass ring just out of reach. He'd like to have a normal life, to get married and raise a family. And he fantasizes about walking into Kyle Field as a free man, wearing his brother's No. 5 jersey.

"I want to go there and sit in the stands and watch my brother play football and root for him like he did for

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Enterprise: Bruce Feldman

Comment from the judge, Mickey Spagnola: "Unfortunately for the many, many great entries, this was the first piece I read, and it was so good, so thorough, so captivating. To me, this is what enterprise reporting is all about. There is a book here waiting to be written."

By BRUCE FELDMAN
ESPN The Magazine

Birmingham clings to its nickname with white-knuckled fists: "The Football Capital of the South." (At least that's better than "Bombingham," the moniker it earned in the '60s as America's most racially charged city.) And while the place no longer hosts the annual Alabama-Auburn slugfest, it does have a new team to cheer: The University of Alabama at Birmingham.

UAB may be just a commuter school lost in the shadow of two in-state behemoths, but it is a commuter school hell-bent on raising its profile. And in Alabama, the land of Bo and The Bear, the quickest path to getting on the map cuts across the gridiron.

In fact, UAB took a no-huddle approach to building its program. Just five seasons after its launch as a D3 dorm in 1991, Blazer football hit the big time. The school had plucked Watson Brown -- folksy and funny and carrying deep-fried cred on the recruiting trail -- from Oklahoma's staff. Ol' Watson assembled a crew of gridiron grunts, fielding 22 transfers when UAB made its 1A debut on Aug. 31, 1996. The Blazers got whupped 29-0 at Auburn that day, but Brown flashed that televangelist smile and doll-eyed his way through the postgame. "Soon," he promised in a kudzu-thick Tennessee drawl, "evah-one'll know 'bout UAB football."

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The most important recruit in UAB history was a freckle-faced, carrot-topped 14-year-old named Brittany, who finished high school in under a year. UAB pursued the 5'1", 120-pound bookworm like it would a quarterback who could rope the deep out. Brittany, who looks like a cross between Little Orphan Annie and Molly Ringwald, grew up an hour down Route 280 in tiny Childersburg (pop. 4900). Frank and Jackie Benefield, as country as cornbread, had been trying for a child for 20 years before Brittany was born. They called her the miracle baby. When other children were stuck on c-a-t, Brittany could rattle off b-l-u-e-b-e-r-r-y. Her second grade teacher suggested Brittany jump through to third grade. Jackie Benefield wasn't sure, but figured the teacher knew best.

The Benefields were protective of their only child, who had her dad's wide smile and her mom's soft eyes.

BRUCE FELDMAN — ESPN The Magazine

Age: 33

Colleges: Marist, Albany State, Miami

Background: Feldman came to ESPN in 1995. He has had stories receive mention in Best American Sports Writing the past three years. When he's not writing about sports, he's either working out or going to the beach or doing something else pretty shallow and self-absorbed.



Brittany's social life revolved around a church youth group, its skate parties and Bible classes. Her folks were strict about what she could do. While other sixth-graders rehashed Home Improvement, Brittany kept quiet about her favorites -- Bugs, Daffy and Mister Ed. When Brittany was in seventh grade, Jackie bought her a new dress for the spring dance. But when a student threatened to bring a gun, the school cancelled the event. That's when the Benefields decided to home-school Brittany. The child prodigy earned her degree at 13. Still, Frank, now 60, and Jackie, 54, worried about Brittany's future. "I always thought, if we just lived to see her educated and able to take care of herself, she'd be okay," says Jackie.

In March 1999, 14-year-old Brittany was accepted at Auburn, making headlines in The Birmingham News. When her scholarship money got lost in a bureaucratic maze, Auburn told the family not to worry, they'd hold her place for the next class. A few weeks later, though, Jackie got a call from UAB. They wanted Brittany too, and they were offering full tuition. Jackie was thrilled -- and nervous; Birmingham, after all, was the big city.

Brittany, having spent day after monotonous day at home, couldn't stop smiling. Her plan was to finish law school before she turned 21. As it turns out, Brittany Benefield's day in court arrived three years ahead of schedule -- not as a lawyer, but as a plaintiff accusing 26 UAB athletes of sexual abuse and a university for its culpability in the matter. Acting through her mother, Brittany Benefield has filed lawsuits under Title IX in state and federal courts. The Benefields are suing UAB trustees, administrators, coaches, athletes, resident assistants, police and others. At the time of publication, the Benefields were seeking \$80 million in compensatory and punitive damages.

This is the story of what happens when a naïve 15-year-old prodigy collides with an upward-reaching football program, some of whose players feel like they own

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Enterprise winner continued

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the campus.

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When the Benefields first met then-UAB president Ann Reynolds and VP of student affairs Virginia Gauld, they made their reservations known, according to statements contained in their complaints. The Benefields say they told the UAB brass that Brittany had never been away from them for more than a day. "I was worried about her crossing the street or someone snatching her," says Jackie. A meeting was set up with Warren Hale, director of student housing, and Susan McKinnon, assistant VP of enrollment management. The Benefields claim they were assured by talk of security escorts. According to their complaints, they were told the dorm to which Brittany would be assigned, Rast Hall, housed only freshmen and had security every night, and that residents needed a key to enter the building. The Benefields allege Hale and McKinnon also promised that one of the girl's suitemates would be a resident adviser, a student who would monitor Brittany's activities and mentor her. The UAB officials wanted Brittany to enroll immediately for the winter quarter in December 1999. Her folks wanted to wait until she was 15. They agreed that Brittany would begin in the spring, a month after her 15th birthday.

From the start, Brittany was a minor celebrity at UAB, although she says the other students saw her as more circus freak than star. "I felt very out of place," she says. "When people found out my age, they were like, 'what are you doing here?' I mean, it was okay to hear that now and then, but 10 times a day? I was pretty lonely."

Her suitemates, who'd been on campus for six months, had their own friends. With no one to talk to -- or watch TV or grab a burger with -- her days dragged by in solitary routine: wake up, go to class, head back to the dorm, study. Her parents brought her home almost every weekend, with Jackie working longer shifts just so she could pick up Brittany on Thursdays.

Brittany carried a 3.5 GPA in basic freshman courses in her first quarter. The Benefields say they wanted her to take the summer off, but she was adamant about continuing classes so she could graduate in three years. "I figured if I made her come home, she'd just be staring at the four walls," says Jackie. "I guess that was my mistake." To Brittany, the only bummer was that she'd have to change dorms, because hers would be used to house summer-camp students.

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Drenched in sweat on a steamy Louisiana night, helmets in hands, the UAB squad stomped and hollered and let the football world know they could no longer be ignored. As 86,000 dazed LSU fans watched, the visitors

jumped on the Tiger's face at midfield. On Sept. 23, 2000, the Blazers -- upstarts with a cartoon dragon on their helmets -- took home a 13-10 upset victory and a \$410,000 paycheck. Who-AB? Not anymore.

Man, you should've heard Ol' Watson before the game that night, down in the bowels of Tiger Stadium just before his Blazers took the field. The air was heavy with sweat and menthol; Brown was all fire and brimstone: "Fellas, lemme tell ya 'bout the irony we have here tonight," he told them. "Those guys in the other dressing room are no better than you. Every day you go up against guys who are as good as they are. I know that. You know that. They just don't know it yet. But tonight -- tonight! -- they're gonna fiiiind out."

Brown took a long slow breath, and the team recited the Lord's Prayer. Brown glanced around the room like a proud father. His baby had sure grown up fast. The 2000 UAB Blazers looked nothing like the rag-tag squad that got blistered by Auburn in '96. Out were the D1 castoffs. In were speedy cover-corners and run-stuffing linemen from Atlanta, the Florida Panhandle and every holler in Alabama. Brown turned sleeper recruits into nasty play-makers. He took Prop 48 kids, gave 'em some love and sharpened the chips on their shoulders. It worked in the weight room, on the field and in the classroom (more than 60% of the team members were honor students). Sure, they had a few renegades. Heck, everybody's got a few, right?

Everyone inside that cramped room knew they were building something here. Most teams have more cliques than a sorority house, but the Blazers were different. They were tight. Maybe it was Coach Brown's pep talks. Maybe it was month after month of gut-busting practice. Or maybe it was the players' visibility. Of the roughly 700 men who lived on campus, nearly one in nine played for Brown. They literally had the run of the place.

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Just a post pattern from the UAB practice field is Blazer Hall, a 12-sided, eight-story, antiseptic building that resembles a hospital ward more than a dorm. In the summer of 2000, Blazer housed mostly football players, a few basketball players, a handful of women -- and one 15-year-old girl.

The family's complaints allege that when all of Blazer's residents assembled for an informal introduction on a June evening, an RA scanned the crowd and paused on Brittany, uttering an introduction that still rings in Brittany's ears: "Okay, this is the 15-year-old y'all been hearing about." Brittany remembers a split-second of silence giving way to the sound of 40 heads turning at once.

If Brittany had been lonely from day one on campus,

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Enterprise winner continued

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she felt absolutely isolated during those first days in Blazer Hall. The Benefields say in their complaints that, because the school didn't offer her another RA for a roommate, they chose a single room for Brittany. They say they preferred Brittany living alone to her sharing space with female students who might have beer in the fridge and boyfriends staying over. On her third day in Blazer, Brittany says, she entered the elevator and encountered a mountain of a man, a Blazer football player with a bushy afro and hands as thick as cinder blocks. Brittany tried to avoid making eye contact, but the man faced her as the doors shut. "Whussup, shorty?" he huffed, according to Brittany. She remembers feeling the blood drain from her face. He said he knew her; she was that child genius. He asked if she'd help him with a paper. Brittany panicked and stammered: "I'm 15."

"Well, you don't look it," she says he told her.

Brittany's emotions swirled as she stepped off the elevator. The comment about her appearance transformed her initial fear into a feeling that surprised her: acceptance. Maybe she belonged in this strange place after all. "That made me feel a lot better," Brittany says. That night, she says, the player brought his paper -- and a six-pack of beer -- to her room. Brittany says she had never had a beer -- or any kind of alcohol -- but felt compelled to accept when she was offered one. According to Brittany, one led to another. And another. Brittany got wasted. She'd never even kissed a boy, and now she was making out with the player. Then they had sex.

The next morning, the burly football players seemed a lot less menacing to her. In fact, Brittany says, they began to treat her as if she belonged. That night, another player asked for homework help, and brought over more beer. Brittany says she got drunk again and the player persuaded her to perform oral sex. The next day, she says she got drunk and had sex with a third player, who introduced her to pot. "I felt accepted," Brittany says. "I felt like they were my friends."

The players joked with her that she was becoming their "play thing." She began hanging with them all the time. They'd sit outside Blazer downing beer, bumming cigarettes, watching cars go by.

On Aug. 7, the school got the exposure from its star recruit that it had hoped for. The Birmingham News ran a front-page story about Brittany and a 16-year-old male student, headlined "Whiz Kids." On campus, though, Brittany was no longer known as a 15-year-old prodigy, but as that 15-year-old rumored to be doing half the football team.

According to an e-mail from Hale attached to the complaints, he states, having heard the rumors, that he called Brittany in for a meeting with a UAB police officer.

They asked if she was having sex with football players. She said no. The complaints allege the school didn't investigate any further, nor did it notify the Benefields or Alabama's Department of Human Resources of their concerns of drugs and sexual activities, despite a state law requiring they do so in the case of a minor. However, the e-mail reflects that Hale did talk to the Benefields regarding Brittany "hosting guests." The Benefields acknowledge Brittany stopped coming home as much, and that she slept all weekend when she did return. But they say they figured she was just overworked.

An e-mail from Hale, included in the complaints, indicates that he did meet with Blazers special teams coach Larry Crowe, letting the coach know that school administrators had heard rumors about his players and Brittany. According to the e-mail, Hale told Crowe that a girl Brittany's age could not consent to sex. No matter the situation, it was statutory rape. Later that week, the complaints allege, Brown told his team to stay away from Brittany. "If this gets outside of me," he said, "I can no longer help you." He allegedly added that it could mean "jail time."

Apparently the Blazers didn't heed the warnings. Some team members interviewed by The Magazine echo comments in the complaints that a few days later, Coach Crowe pointed to Blazer Hall and told his players to stay out of Brittany's room. The next week, according to the complaints, the players got a warning from "Officer Andy" -- a.k.a. Anderson Williams Jr. -- a UAB cop who was moonlighting as the team's unofficial speed coach. Before lecturing the Blazers about lengthening their running strides, he allegedly reminded the players to "be careful" with the underage girl.

The Blazers opened the 2000 season on Sept. 7 with a 20-15 home victory over Chattanooga. Brittany recalls feeling like she was part of the program, cheering like they'd just beaten Alabama. She'd grown even more alienated from other students, but now she didn't give a damn what those losers thought. Though she had moved back into her old dorm, Brittany's partying escalated from beer to whiskey to vodka. Other students say her room reeked of weed, but that was just the beginning. She told The Magazine that the players turned her on to coke, ecstasy and LSD, and she says one player even tried to turn her out. She declined to let him pimp her, but she kept sleeping with football players and began hooking up with some members of the basketball team. She was being passed around like a mix tape. In all, she alleges, more than two dozen Blazer athletes took their turn. The complaints even allege that an employee of the UABPD and the student who plays Blaze, the school's mascot, came knocking on Brittany's door.

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Enterprise winner continued

(Continued from page 8)

Experts say her attitude was not unusual for a female who has been sexually abused. "It's not uncommon for a woman who has been raped to engage in promiscuous behavior," says New York-based sports psychologist Mitch Abrams, who specializes in trauma-abuse counseling. "People say, 'See, she's a slut,' or 'See, she loved it.' But rape is about power, not sex. Someone took her power and now she was trying anything to get it back."

Brittany tells of one especially harrowing night, when she was invited to the room of two football players. When she walked in, she says, two other men were there as well and each of the four took his turn with her. She recalls leaving the dorm in tears, telling no one.

Later that September, a UAB police officer and other administrators called in Brittany to discuss a curfew, according to the complaints, and Brittany was again asked about her sexual involvement with athletes and drug use. She denied it all. The complaints allege they didn't push the matter further, nor did they alert the Benefields, who weren't even notified when her GPA plummeted to 1.9.

That Saturday, the Blazers -- following their huge win at LSU -- crushed Louisiana-Lafayette, 47-2.

Meanwhile, Brittany's downward spiral continued. She stopped going to class and got high day and night. When some of the players stopped coming around, Brittany began using meal and rent money to buy drugs, and, according to the complaints, on Nov. 7, the school sent an eviction notice to Brittany rather than her parents, even though the Benefields were financially responsible for her room and board. The Benefields allege UAB didn't contact them until five weeks later, when Jackie received a shocking call telling her that her daughter was getting kicked out of her dorm for not paying rent.

The Benefields raced to UAB, but Brittany was nowhere to be found. Frank Benefield says he could barely speak when he filed a runaway report with the UABPD. The next morning, the Benefields' phone rang. It was Brittany, asking to be picked up at the local airport. Her parents made the 12-mile drive, but Brittany wasn't there. Instead, she and a friend, a reputed Birmingham drug dealer, were breaking into the Benefield home, swiping a handgun and blank checks.

The next day, Sunday, Dec. 17, the Birmingham police nabbed Brittany and her friend at a pizza parlor for trying to pass a bad check. When they arrived on the scene, says Jackie, Brittany broke down. Their miracle baby, tears streaming and body trembling, admitted she'd spent all her rent money on drugs and that she'd passed a couple of dozen bad checks. The Benefields

took their daughter back to Childersburg, but Brittany disappeared again after one night. Four days passed before she called her father from a gas station near campus. She told him she'd been staying in a boarded-up apartment. She wanted to kill herself. "I was a zombie," Brittany says. "I was a broken person. The things I'd been through were unreal."

Two hours later, Jackie opened her front door, laid eyes on her baby and winced. "I didn't know her," she says. "I saw her face. I saw her hair, but when I looked into her eyes, they were hollow. I didn't see who was behind them." The Benefields put their daughter in rehab. It was Christmas Eve.

Four days earlier, according to the complaints, UAB president Ann Reynolds had received an e-mail from VP Virginia Gauld, telling her that the prize recruit had tragically spiraled into drugs, alcohol and degradation. The e-mail's last line was chilling: "Some times [sic] we win and sometimes we lose!" Reynolds' reply was just as cold. The Benefields' suits allege that Reynolds quipped the whiz kid's story had the makings of a "B movie," and that "she was clearly overprotected and doted on by elderly parents. Warren Hale and others are to be praised for trying."

So if everyone was "trying," is anyone to blame? None of the defendants will comment on the case, but all have either denied the Benefields' allegations or moved to dismiss the complaints in court. "We're not called on to defend factual statements," says Doug Jones, who represents six UAB administrators. "We're called on to defend legal allegations." Ken Lay, a public defender for 17 Blazer athletes, released this statement: "Most of the athletes we represent know little or nothing about Ms. Benefield or her allegations."

Brittany's story may prove to be the most extreme recent case of sexual abuse in college sports, but it is not unique. Since August, athletes have been accused of sexual assault and rape at Colorado, Georgia, LSU, Notre Dame and Oklahoma State. And those are just the public accusations. In many college football towns, police forces have long had officers designated to deal with athlete-related investigations. They're often the first dispatched to the scene and have a prior working relationship with coaches. The Oklahoma State victim, for instance, has alleged that a police officer tried to coerce her into signing a prosecution waiver while she was in the ICU.

"There is such an incestuous relationship [between police and athletic departments]," says Kathy Redmond, founder of the National Coalition Against Violent Athletes. "It's very frightening." Seven years ago, Redmond accused Huskers DT Christian Peter, who'd already

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Enterprise winner continued

(Continued from page 9)

been accused twice of assaulting women, of raping her four years earlier. No criminal charges were filed against Peter, but Redmond's lawyers brought a civil suit against him and the university. Soon, she was taking on an entire football-mad state.

Redmond's lawyer filed a Title IX lawsuit contending the school was liable under the federal law because the university failed to provide a safe environment from sexual harassment -- and that inhibited Redmond's right to an education. NU and Peter settled out of court without admitting liability. Says Redmond, "I don't think anybody understands the power that law has over college sports."

Here's where that power lies. Rape and sexual assault are harder to prove in criminal court than in civil court, so many victims find their only recourse in a civil case. Title IX suits offer an opportunity for the victim to be heard away from potentially biased local jurisdictions, plus access to the deeper pockets of universities rather than just to individual defendants.

Dr. Abrams, the sports psychologist, agrees that victims and lawyers don't know the ramifications of Title IX -- yet. "You could see hundreds, if not thousands, of silent victims come forward," he says.

On Aug. 30, 2001, the same day the Blazers opened a new football season by beating Montana State, 41-13, John Whitaker and Terry Dytrych, lawyers for the Benefields, filed a civil suit in state court against 44 people, including members of UAB's administration and police, two coaches, 26 athletes -- and the mascot.

?

Turnovers! Watson Brown sweeps sweat from his shaggy mop of hair, crinkles his nose and shakes his head. Just 45 minutes into UAB's 2002 spring game, and Ol' Watson is a plastered hair from his boiling point. It's bad enough that his QB has tossed four picks in the first half. Did he have to throw one in the dogged red zone? At least the QB levels the dude who picked him off. That almost makes Brown crack a smile. Over the past month and a half, Brown's boys have surprised him with the best hitting since he came to Birmingham.

UAB is on a roll, on the field and off. Brown has inked the school's strongest recruiting class and the Blazers beat mighty Tennessee for a prized QB recruit. Two of his kids (not named in the lawsuit) went high in the NFL draft: DE Bryan Thomas (first round, Jets) and DT Eddie Freeman (second round, Chiefs). Mirroring the rise of its football program, out-of-state enrollment at UAB has nearly doubled, and total enrollment is up 20% since 1998. Still, Brown figures if the Blazers pull a 3-8 this fall after last year's 6-5, they'll be just another flash-in-the-pan. Brown refuses to blame the lawsuit for his team dropping four of their first six in 2001.

The Benefields say they couldn't care less if their daughter's lawsuits are a distraction for the Blazers. They want justice. They want someone to pay. In April they filed a Title IX suit, this one in federal court, against the university trustees. No criminal charges have been filed against the defendants in either of the Benefield lawsuits.

Six projected UAB starters are defendants. But there's little locker room talk about Brittany or her lawsuit. Some players don't deny bad things happened with the 15-year-old prodigy, they just downplay how bad things really were. "We think they're just trying to get money out of the school," says one player not named in the suit. "There's not much we can do about it. I just hope it doesn't make the team look too bad."

?

The miracle baby is 17 now, but despite a heavy dusting of midnight-blue eye shadow, she still looks like an apple-cheeked 14-year-old. She does clerical work in her mom's office; she can't afford to go back to college. Instead, she attends weekly substance-abuse sessions. Her meetings with a rape counselor are down from four a week to just one. Three years ago, she chased life at warp speed. Now she barely makes it from day to day. There are moments when she'll sit on her bed and just zone out.

At a crowded Birmingham barbecue joint on a sunny April day, Brittany sits beside her mom and talks about her nightmare. Conversations at nearby booths clatter to a halt, but Brittany refuses to speak in hushed tones. This is her life. She has learned not to be ashamed, only reflective. She admits she was naïve and maybe not as smart as she thought. The big lesson she has learned? Brittany pauses briefly before the words spill out.

"Never trust anyone."

Feature winner continued

(Continued from page 5)

me," Bell said.

Murphy, who has one more season left at A&M after this one, dreams about that, too.

"That would mean a lot to see him with my jersey on," Murphy said. "I'd probably explode. That's one of my dreams, to see my brother there."

For now, Murphy can take solace in knowing that \b Bell will be watching him on television or closely listening for A&M announcer Dave South to mention "Murph" on radio broadcasts on Saturdays.

And the rest of the week, he'll be bragging about his

Immediate deadline: Lee Jenkins

Comment from the judge, Gene Duffey: "UCLA loses to Washington St. and Bob Toledo probably loses his job. Good focus on how Toledo's job likely depended on the outcome of the game without overlooking the importance of the win to the Cougars. Good quotes from Toledo and good quote from a tight end saying the coach's job status was a distraction."

By LEE JENKINS
The Orange County Register

PASADENA — UCLA coach Bob Toledo left the field surrounded by eight armed policemen.

Never has he looked more protected. Never has he been less secure.

As he walked into the locker room with his bolstered security force, Toledo strode past athletic director Dan Guerrero, who will meet with him Monday. Guerrero said he has not decided if the coach will be back or will be fired.

Washington State might have made Guerrero's choice a little easier. If Toledo was hoping to rally support and save his job Saturday, he fell far short in a 48-27 loss to the No. 7 Cougars.

While 10-2 Washington State clinched a return trip to the Rose Bowl, the 7-5 Bruins watched another team turn their home field into a parade ground. UCLA has lost four games at the Rose Bowl for the first time since 1989, and not even the players feel comfortable here anymore.

"I don't like seeing somebody come into our house and know they're coming back," said tailback Tyler Ebell, who had the least productive game of his young career, rushing for only 10 yards. "It's like they came into our home and robbed us."

At this time of year, the Bruins traditionally give it up pretty easily. They have now finished the last five seasons with a thud, and none resonates as loudly as this.

With the college football nation watching, UCLA fumbled a snap, fumbled a kickoff and had a punt blocked. The Bruins also gave up an 80-yard touchdown run when the Cougars were just trying to kill the clock.

As a result, two teams from the Pac-10 will win spots in the BCS, the conference will make \$4.5 million and Toledo might not keep his job. Among the 56,335 in attendance were many mixed emotions.

"I've never seen a game where all of those people want you to lose," Toledo said. "The Trojans were the only ones who really wanted us to win."

In many ways, this looked a lot like the blowout two weeks ago. The only difference was that the Bruins were fortunate enough to actually stay in it.

UCLA was lucky when Washington State botched a

LEE JENKINS — The Orange County Register

Age: 26

College: Vanderbilt (B.A.)

Background: Jenkins came to the Register in 2000 to cover UCLA football and basketball. Before that, he covered the Colorado Avalanche for the Colorado Springs Gazette after graduating from Vanderbilt, which he attended on the Grantland Rice-Fred Russell Sports-writing Scholarship.



fake field goal at the six-yard-line and thankful when the Cougars tried a foolish on-side kick that didn't travel the requisite distance. One play later, receiver Junior Taylor made an acrobatic 39-yard touchdown snag, giving the Bruins hope at halftime.

"That was just an unbelievable error kicking the ball like that," Washington State coach Mike Price said. "It was just terrible and it made everybody furious."

Especially Jason Gesser. After hobbling at the start, the senior quarterback warmed up his gimpy right ankle and kicked UCLA with four unanswered scoring drives.

As he distributed the ball to each of his rangy receivers -- all of the starters came down with at least 68 yards -- Gesser schooled the Bruins' young quarterbacks, who never appeared so raw.

Against USC, Toledo pulled Drew Olson too quickly, and against Washington State, he stayed with him too long. Down by two touchdowns in the fourth quarter, safety Ben Emanuel made an interception in the end zone, but Olson promptly threw his second pick of the game and watched Erik Coleman return it 25 yards to seal the outcome.

"Until that last interception, we thought we could come back," Olson said. "But we are turning the ball over a lot more right now and that makes for some hard days. It felt like we were behind the whole time."

Oddly enough, UCLA actually led in the first quarter, when Emanuel took an interception 41 yards to the end zone and receiver Jon Dubravac threw his third touchdown pass of the season.

But the Bruins couldn't win on gimmicks alone. They netted just 53 yards rushing, allowed 220, and sacked Gesser only once. Washington State even had a receiver, Collin Henderson, launch a 66-yard touchdown pass.

"We just gave up so many big plays and had so many mistakes," safety Jarrad Page said. "Everything was go-

(Continued on page 13)

Loose deadline: Ron Higgins

Comment by the judge, Gene Duffey: "Beginning the story at the hospital then flashing back to the game, made it exceptional. Good analysis of the play from every angle. Good quotes from father talking about son's previous bad luck."

By RON HIGGINS
Memphis Commercial Appeal

The emergency waiting room was full at Baptist Hospital North Mississippi.

There were no TVs, no radios, no contact with the outside world on this Saturday afternoon in a college football town.

An elderly lady with an aching foot wrapped stared into a space. A baby was wailing. And on the phone, a man in an Ole Miss cap spoke in hushed tones.

Craig Zeigler hung up the phone, his stomach churning and his eyes red. As a football father, he had been in this position too many times with his son Doug, an Ole Miss senior tight end.

First, it was Doug's punctured lung during his senior football season at Wilmington (Ohio) High. A few months after that, Doug's senior season in basketball ended when he broke his jaw trying to block a shot.

Last year, he was on his way to a huge season with the Rebels when he broke his arm against Georgia.

"I've never heard Doug complain, he just takes it in stride and gets back after it," Craig said choking back in emotion and taking a deep breath.

Through the years, it became Craig Zeigler's habit to search for his son's jersey number whenever play was stopped on the field for an injury. It happened on Saturday with 50 seconds left in the first quarter against Vanderbilt.

In a double tight end set, quarterback Eli Manning rolled right and threw a 4-yard pass to Bo Hartsfield who banged ahead to the Vanderbilt 3. The giddy prospect of being on the doorstep of a touchdown quickly gave away to a silent Vaught-Hemingway Stadium.

Craig Zeigler, sitting with his wife, began searching for No. 89. "Oh no, not again," said Craig, seeing his son facedown on the turf and being surrounded by trainers who quickly determined Doug Zeigler's left leg was broken in two places.

The leg was in such a grotesque position that Manning, Zeigler's roommate in an off-campus apartment, couldn't even bring himself to approach Zeigler.

"I'd never been in that position before," Manning said. "I was trying to keep my head in the game. I didn't know if I could do that if I went out there and saw Doug."

Senior center Ben Claxton refused to leave Zeigler's side. They'd had both been recruited by the previous coaching staff of Tommy Tuberville, and stuck around

RON HIGGINS— Memphis Commercial Appeal

Age: 47

College: LSU (1979)

Background: Higgins was raised as the son of late LSU sports information director Ace Higgins. He has covered sports for more than 20 years for the *Shreveport (La.) Times and Journal*, the *Advocate in Baton Rouge, La.*, the *Mobile (Ala.) Register* and *The Commercial Appeal*. He has been married for 24 years to the former Paige Blanchard, and he has two sons, Carl (21), who plays football at Division 1-AA Southeastern Louisiana, and Jack (9).



when Tuberville made his midnight ride to the Auburn job. They both dreamed they'd get the job the done for the Rebels.

"Doug is my best friend and I knew I had to be there with him," Claxton said. "His leg was laying in a way it wasn't supposed to be laying. It was bad wrong and I could see how much pain he was in."

After 10 minutes, Zeigler was removed from the field and Ole Mss scored on the next play before Zeigler could even be loaded in the ambulance.

But the injury of Zeigler and also linebacker Lanier Goethie (who broke his foot) seemed to linger with the Rebels. Ole Miss coach David Cutcliffe addressed the matter with his team, but even he couldn't shake the site of Zeigler's injury and the scared look of Craig Zeigler who hurried to the field to check on his son.

"(You have) a lot of anger," said Cutcliffe when asked about his initial reaction to Zeigler's injury. "I'm sorry, but that's what you feel. There's not enough rocks to pick up and throw."

As the Rebels were riding a second-half rollercoaster, going from a 38-17 lead to a 38-38 tie to a 45-38 victory, the Zeiglers gathered at the hospital. Every once in awhile, someone would pop through a curtain and tell Doug Zeigler how his teammates were doing.

Maybe it was the painkillers. Or maybe it is Zeigler's remarkable resolve to handle adversity in a career that started when he was a fifth-grade quarterback.

He wasn't shedding tears as he waited for surgery.

"I was supposed to run a pattern on the play, but the (Vanderbilt) guy leg whipped me," Zeigler said. "It's football. Stuff like this happens. It will be a matter of time before I'm playing again."

But it won't happen this year, and likely his college career is over since he has already used a redshirt year.

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Column winner continued

(Continued from page 3)

NCAA penalty in effect, and in derivation, if not in name. A quick history lesson: in the last 72 years, only two coaches have left Alabama to take another college head coaching job: Wallace Wade, a Hall of Fame coach who left for Duke after the 1930 season because he found the Tide fans too critical. And Bill Curry, who won an SEC championship in 1989 and left for Kentucky because he found the Tide too critical.

Franchione never had that problem. The Alabama faithful loved him not only for his success, but for the style in which his teams played. Franchione's players are stronger than week-old laundry. His offenses are balanced, a balance made doubly effective by his cunning as a play-caller. Franchione embraced the Crimson Tide tradition, a history of success that has produced 12 national championships and the most arrogant fans north of Coral Gables and east of Austin.

That arrogance helped deliver Alabama into the leg irons of the NCAA. And that arrogance is why Franchione's destination further deepens the humiliation of his departure. The symbolism of a coach leaving Alabama for Texas A&M strikes at the foundation of a Tide fan's core beliefs. Prominent among them is this:

Great coaches do not leave Tuscaloosa for College Station. Great coaches travel in the other direction.

The greatest era in Alabama football began on Dec. 3, 1957, when Bear Bryant left College Station for Tuscaloosa because, as he put it that day, "My school called me." Forty-five years and one day later, Alabama athletic director Mal Moore granted formal permission to Texas A&M to meet with Franchione. Moore must have known then that the marriage had ended.

In Franchione's first meeting with his players, he will ask for their commitment. He better hope they don't read the papers.

Immediate deadline winner continued

(Continued from page 11)

ing against us this week."

According to Toledo, the speculation about his future damaged the team's psyche. Many players believed their own fans were rooting against them.

When the Bruins looked into the stands, they saw an empty student section and realized their classmates were home studying for final exams, which start Monday. Indeed, finality is in the air at UCLA.

"I'm not going to lie, the whole thing about coach was distracting and it was in our minds," senior tight end Mike

Seidman said. "If those are our fans, it's upsetting that they cheer for their team to lose -- no matter who the coach is."

While the Bruins were perturbed, the Cougars believed they were destined. Heading to their walk-through Friday, the bus got caught in rush-hour traffic. The team was about to turn around when players saw the Rose Bowl sign in the distance.

Washington State will be back Jan. 1. What's less certain is whether Toledo will also be around to ring in a new year.

Loose deadline winner continued

(Continued from page 12)

With good doctors and the proper rehab, Zeigler should be good enough for an NFL team to take a chance on.

In the meantime, Craig Zeigler and family won't have to make the 9-hour drive from Ohio anymore. There won't be any more football weekends in Oxford, starting with dinner on Thursday night with his son and also a

Friday lunch.

He thinks about that. He thinks about how hard his son has worked to become a football player, the endless hours of weight lifting and running.

"Oh boy," said Craig, his voice breaking and the frog jumping in his throat again. "Oh boy."



President's column continued

(Continued from page 2)

Around the football stadium there just wasn't any public parking, and I was starting to worry I might not see Touchdown Jesus when, suddenly, there it was.

Several stories high, the mural of Jesus with his hands three-fourths of the way up signaling another Notre Dame touchdown.

Honestly, it almost looked like it was designed that way, just north of the end zone.

It wasn't, but around here, where football is king, it might as well have been commissioned as the Touchdown Jesus.

This is a place worth visiting, more than once.

So this column didn't deal with any pressing or serious issues, just a personal experience, but the main thing about it, it made dead line. Barely.

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18652 Vista Del Sol
Dallas, TX 75287

(972) 713-6198

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