

Bryant's Boys Return To Aggieland

Head Coach Stallings May Pick Assistants From '56 Bear Squad

Editor's Note: The following is reprinted from Tuesday's The Houston Post. By MICKEY HERSKOWITZ Post Sports Editor



BEAR HATES TO LOSE GENE ... "first time I've cried in 20 or 30 years."



The Texas Aggies, chronic losers since 1957, are going back to Bear Bryant-style football. Moving silently and with stunning swiftness, the Aggies reached out Monday for one of their famed Junction Boys—Gene Stallings—and hired him as their new coach. Hank Foldberg, whose teams could win only five conference games in three years, will stay on as fulltime athletic director.

Both Foldberg and Stallings, who learned his football ABC's as a player and coach under Bryant, were signed to four-year contracts.

A tall, slender, 29-year old native of Paris, Texas, Stallings was among that first hardy band of Aggies who trained in 1954 at Junction—in the Hill Country—as Bryant began the rebuilding task that was to lead to an unbeaten season two years later.

Stallings captained that 1956 team, which gave A&M its only conference title in the last 25 years.

The Junction players became part of the Aggie legend, and stories still circulate about the Spartan life they led under Bryant. Many players quit that fall of 1954, but those who stayed formed the nucleus of the 1956 champions.

Once Stallings was asked if the Junction camp was as tough as the stories seemed to indicate. "All I know," he replied, "is that we went out there in two buses, and came back in one."

Stallings played his last Aggie game on Turkey Day of 1956, when the Farmers shattered the Memorial Stadium jinx at Austin. He helped coach the Aggie freshman team the following year, then moved on to Alabama with Bryant in 1958.

Stallings held the title of assistant head coach at 'Bama, and now he follows in the footsteps of the last three men to serve as Bryant's first lieutenants. Jim Owens, Jerry Claiborne and Phil Cutchin all moved on to head coaching jobs.

The Post contacted Bryant by telephone in New York, where he was on hand for the Hall of Fame dinner to be held later in the week. Asked his reaction, The Bear showed that he has lost none of his dramatic flair.

"It's the first time I've cried in 20 or 30 years," he said, "and believe me, I really did. I cried because I'm so proud that one of my little Junction boys is going back there to take over.

"And secondly I cried because I'm so upset over losing him. Shoot, with Stallings gone I may have to go back to work."

Stallings was an all-conference end at A&M, and as early as his senior year Bryant was telling people that someday Bebe—his nickname since his Aggie days—would be a head coach.

"A&M could go back to Rockne," declared Bryant, "and they couldn't have picked a better man. He will be the best football coach the school has ever had, and that includes father."

The last reference was to himself. In his mellowing old, with his former players now branching out into head jobs of their own, Bryant thinks of himself as a sort of father image.

If such an image of Bryant is somewhat difficult to accept, so was the new Aggie image. The decisiveness of Monday's action was in sharp contrast to the confusion of the last two Aggie coach hunts, which brought Jim Myers and Foldberg to the Brazos Bottoms.

Myers succeeded Bryant in 1958, and not rehired after his teams compiled a record of 12 wins, 24 losses and four ties. Foldberg's last Aggie squad defeated only SMU in 10 games, but under Hank the overall program thrived. Both the basketball and baseball teams won conference titles in 1964.

It is understood that Stallings was given a free hand, and will bring in an almost entirely new staff. At least three of the in-

coming Aggie coaches will be teammates off the 1956 team—Don Watson, now at South Carolina, Dee Powell, Alabama, and Bobby Marks, who is on the staff at Houston's Jones High School.

Whether Stallings retains any members of the Foldberg regime isn't clear, but almost certain to stay is Elmer Smith, a hold-over from the Bryant days.

The Aggie upheaval, about which there had been nary a whisper, took place in the space of about 72 hours.

The athletic council, headed by Dr. Chris Groneman, met quietly Saturday morning on the A&M campus. It was forwarded a recommendation to the board of directors that Foldberg be moved up to fulltime athletic director, and a new head coach be brought in.

Stallings was the only candidate the board seriously considered. He was flown to College Station Sunday in the private plane of one of the board members, signed his contract at noon Monday and was en route back to Tuscaloosa by 5 p.m.

Stallings had the strongest personal recommendation of Bryant, as well as the endorsement of Foldberg. A source close to the board said that at first Hank was a reluctant party to the change, but in the end accepted it gracefully.

"I've always wanted to be an athletic director," he was quoted as saying, "but I didn't expect it to be this soon." Hank had held both jobs since he replaced Myers in 1962.

There had been speculation in Birmingham that Stallings would eventually succeed Bryant as the Alabama head coach—possibly after the 1965 season. Stallings was aware of this, but still preferred to come back to his old school, though not motivated entirely by the same sentiment Bryant expressed when he went "back to mother" in '58.

"Anybody who comes in here and tries to coach behind Coach Bryant," Stallings told a friend, "has got to be crazy."

Stallings' entire football experience has been with the Bear, first as a Junction Boy, later as an assistant for seven years at Alabama. In the last four years the Crimson Tide won two national championships.

Stallings was to return to College Station Monday to organize his recruiting drive. Alabama, of course, will be starting its preparations for the Orange Bowl that day, but Stallings assured the board: "I don't think Coach Bryant will miss me."

It is known that discreet inquiries by the Aggies, concerning the availability of Stallings, led to a brief flurry of mixed emotions in the Alabama athletic department.

"He'd make you a great coach," Bryant told one caller, "but I don't think he'd be interested in the job."

Bryant then called Stallings, told him he had a shot at the Aggie coaching assignment but advised him: "Don't act too interested."

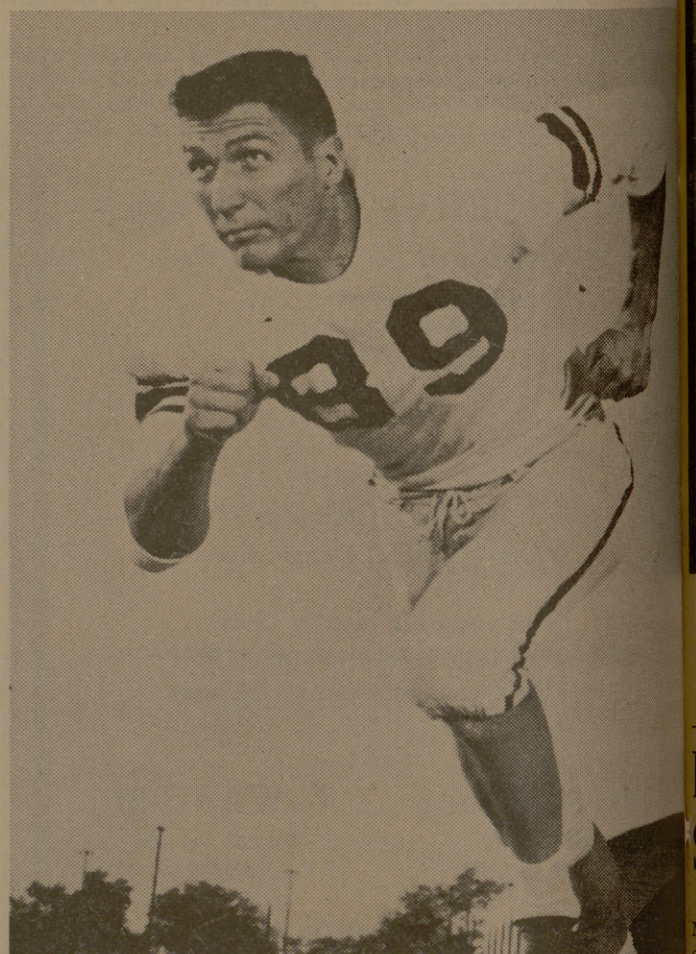
Stallings then called Smokey Harper, the former Aggie trainer who now safeguards the 'Bama film library for Bryant. Bebe asked Smokey to contact his friends at A&M, but Smokey hesitated. "The Bear wants to keep you," said Harper, "and, Bebe, I'm not going to do anything that might make the Bear mad."

Later Bryant congratulated the Aggies on hiring "the top young college coaching prospect in America."

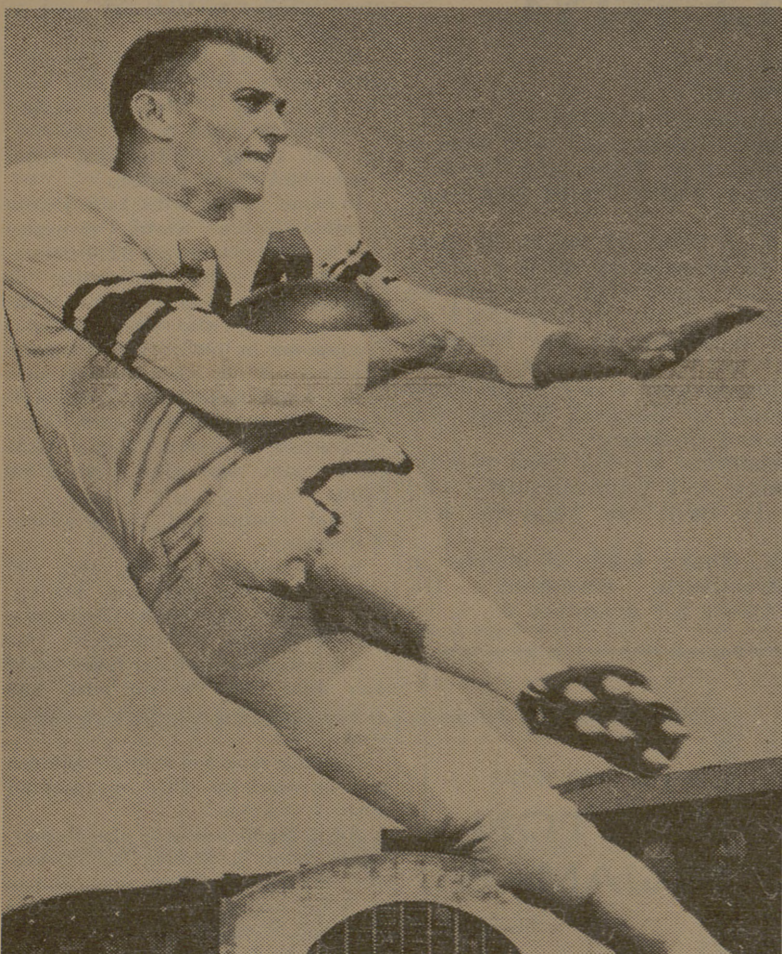
Foldberg added: "We are fortunate to get a real outstanding young coach like Stallings to head our football program. I am confident he will do the type of job that will make all Aggies proud."

Said Stallings: "I am thrilled at the challenge to coach at A&M. I appreciate the confidence Hank Foldberg and the board have shown in me."

Earl Rudder, president of the college, congratulated everybody, and everybody congratulated each other. The Aggies had made their third coaching change in seven years, and this time no one knew until it happened.



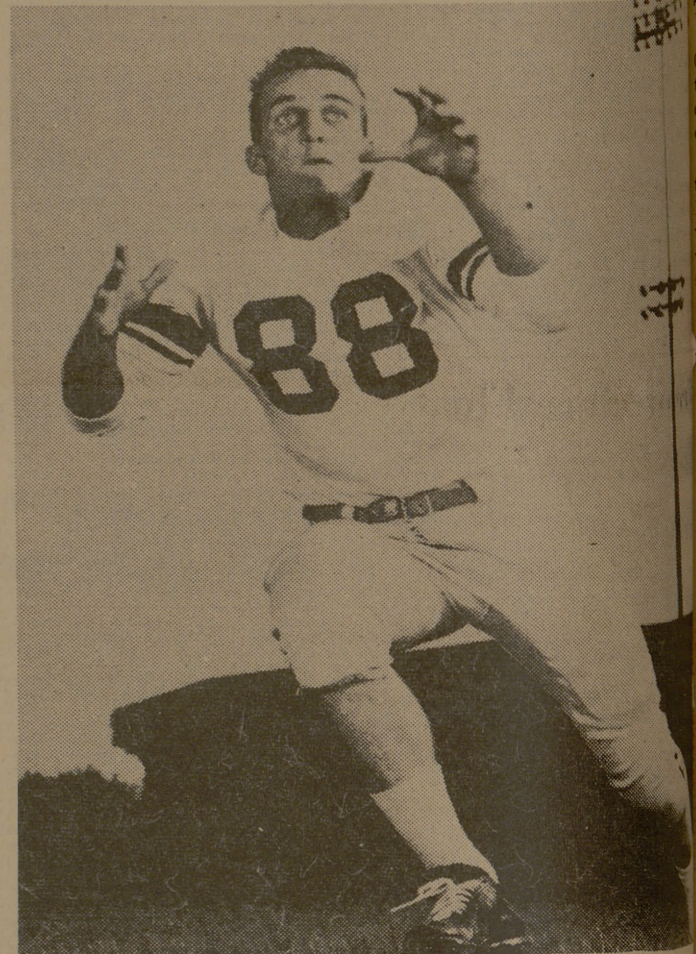
FORMER AGGIE END ... Stallings may pick A&M buddies to coach here



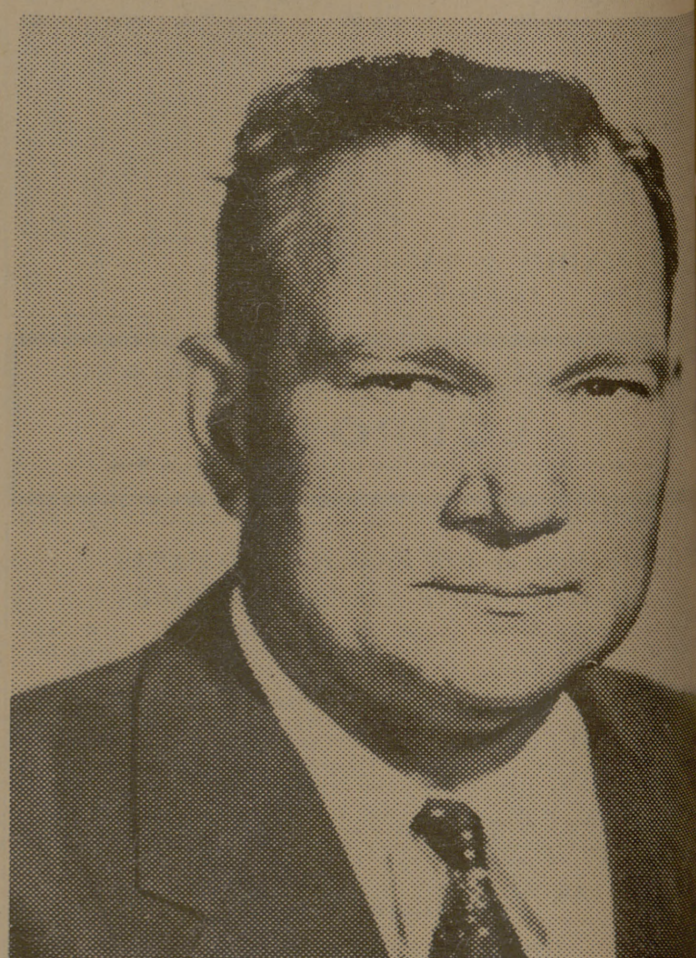
DON WATSON ... another Junction Boy may join staff.



DEE POWELL ... Class of '57 center is among those mentioned.



BOBBY MARKS ... expected to get assistant coaching offer.



ELMER SMITH ... Foldberg, Bryant aide probably will stay.

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