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The Department of History  
of  
Texas A&M University  
invites you to the ninth annual  
J. Milton Nance Lecture in Texas History  
entitled  
**Lady Bird Johnson and Beautification**  
by Lewis L. Gould  
Thursday, November 17, 1988, at 8:00 p.m.  
Room 701 J. Earl Rudder Conference Center  
Texas A&M University  
College Station, Texas

*Reception following*

# Secret of Permian's success sought by eastern journalist

## 20 years of winning even impresses outsiders

ODESSA (AP) — What is it about Permian High School's victory-prone football team? And is varsity gridiron the amalgam that binds this West Texas community?

An investigative journalist, a New Yorker named H.G. Bissinger III, found these questions intriguing enough to shelve his newspaper career for a year, load his family in a van and move south by southwest to do a book on the hard-driving Panthers, who haven't endured a losing season in two decades.

Call it a midlife crisis a few years early or the challenge of conceptualizing and executing a book unrelated to one's experience.

Call it what you will, but the 33-year-old Bissinger is here, meeting players and their families, attending morning and afternoon practices, booster club meetings, pep rallies, games home and away.

"Last February, sitting in my hermetically sealed office, editing, I knew if I was going to do it, I've got to do it now," said Bissinger, who had taken a post as a suburban section editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer after helping it win a Pulitzer Prize by exposing the hanky-panky in the city's court system.

Permian players and staff, who quickly learned to call him "Buzz," have accepted Bissinger's presence so thoroughly that he can weave unobtrusively between broad-shouldered tangles of quarterbacks and tight ends on the practice field — yellow legal pad and red ballpoint poised, eyes darting, probing, ever observing.

"It's been fun for both sides," said team trainer Tim "Trapper" O'Connell, 30. "He has blended in, like a coach or something."

There on the beaten grass, Panthers chat comfortably with the writer, who's dressed in dark

fan but never had professionally covered a football game until Yale met Harvard last year — and he did that as a lark. So how did this outsider secure the trust of these Texas teen-agers?

"At first he bribed us," joked Ivory Christian, a 17-year-old senior and tri-captain of the team.

"He took us all out to eat. I got to go to Long John Silver's. He took some to a Chinese restaurant. We talked about a whole bunch of stuff — the future of the team, the community, how I felt about growing up here."

On a coast-to-coast drive two years ago, Bissinger was impressed by the close identification small Southern towns like Bessemer, Ala., have with their high school teams, he said.

He never made it to Odessa, getting only as close as Big Spring, 60 miles away.

But he had heard about Texas' football obsession, and after consulting with a friend who worked in the front office of the New York Giants, the Permian program became the obvious example for a book on high school football.

A Reading, Mass., publisher, Addison Wesley, liked the idea and gave Bissinger an advance to finance his field research.

Bissinger maintains there will be themes in his account of the Panther recognizable anywhere in the nation. Things he has seen here remind him of go-for-broke ice hockey in Minnesota and similarly fierce basketball in Indiana.

"It's an awesome period in these kids' lives. For many of them, it will be the most glorious period. They're playing in front of 20,000 people," he said.

And their fans are solidly behind them.

"Permian played Marshall at Marshall and there was a visiting Russian delegation — each member was given a Marshall Mavericks shirt, hat, and miniature football. But they were given the worst seats. It was a big game — sold out — and I guess no one wanted to give up their seats," Bissinger said.

"The Mavericks won by one point — 13-12. Their coach was apoplectic, and it was a victory for the community. The team bowed to the sidelines, and the sideline bowed to the team; something very innocent about it."

It was Permian's first loss of the season.

But at Permian, local support is unique, Bissinger said. There were 50 people lining up when the ticket office gates opened one Monday morning, 34 hours before the start of sales at 6 p.m. Tuesday.

"Some had camped out since Sunday at 11," said Bissinger. "It's very festive. Some come out in their Winnebagos. ... It tells you they take football very seriously."

And for those who miss the game, there's the live radio coverage, followed by delayed tape of the entire action.

"I really believe that football is the glue that holds together this community," he said. "It's the most stable thing the city has — certainly more stable than the economy."

Bissinger said the level of Texas 5-A high school football is far more sophisticated than what he has seen among Eastern high schools, and even a few universities.

"Without a doubt, the execution and precision of this team is five times better than what I saw at

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Bissinger

the Harvard-Yale game. Of course, they're not big."

Returning to the question of what makes Odessa Permian so successful, Bissinger attributes it to the chemistry created by community support and phenomenal player dedication. "They work their butts off."

In records compiled since 1951, Permian has competed in more state finals — eight — than any other high school. It had the best record in the 1970s, winning 109 and losing 14. This decade, it hasn't done too badly, winning 94, losing 10 and tying six through 1987. So far this year they're 7-2. Before a weekend loss, Permian ranked fifth in the state by the Associated Press.

Whether a take-no-prisoner quotation from H.L. Mencken on the wall inspires or not, it reveals something about the coaches.

"Every normal man must be tempted, at times to spit on his hands, hoist the black flag and begin slitting throats."

Learning the meaning of the Permian cheer, "MOJO!", has proved more elusive. The cheer can be traced back to the mid-1960s and some say it was begun by some Texas Christian University students who may or may not have been alumni.

While Bissinger said he's not losing sleep over the MOJO mystery, he does sweat out yardage, a Permian partisan along with the coaches and fans, said football program staff members.

"During the Marshall game, Buzz would do things like, 'God, I'm nervous,' and 'Oh damn, shouldn't he have caught the ball, shouldn't he?' recalled O'Connell. "This was a big game. All he had to do was take notes, and he's nervous!"

But throwing in his lot with the Panthers has not spared him from jokes and public ridicule.

During a call to his sister on Nantucket Island off Cape Cod, Bissinger expressed his enthusiasm for involving himself in West Texas life, telling her he had been taken along to fire a gun and was invited to take part in a popular pastime — snipe hunting.

"It was explained to me that it was like squirrel hunting where you take a big burlap bag and stick and beat the ground. And I suppose the little animals — the snipes — with big eyes that glow in the dark, run into the bag."

"Everybody was in on it, the trainer, the coaches, the players. I didn't catch on until my sister said, 'You idiot, there's no such thing.'"

"He believed it, too," laughed O'Connell, who added in conspiratorial fashion. "We'll try to put something else on a Yankee."

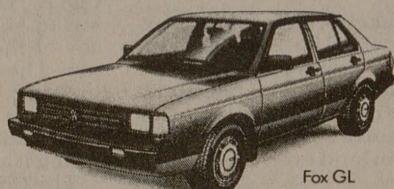
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H.G. Bissinger III  
Investigative journalist

glasses, pink buttoned-down shirt, gray jeans, white socks and penny loafers, as if it's the most natural thing in Odessa.

Then a drill is called and the players scramble.

"I do get hit coming out of the huddle," Bissinger, who stands 5-foot-6 and weighs 145, said of a newly discovered avocational hazard. "It's the one thing you want to avoid. You don't want to get knocked down by one of these guys."

"I got jostled once and my hat was askew, but I kept taking notes. The coach came over and straightened it."

The soft-spoken Easterner is an avid sports

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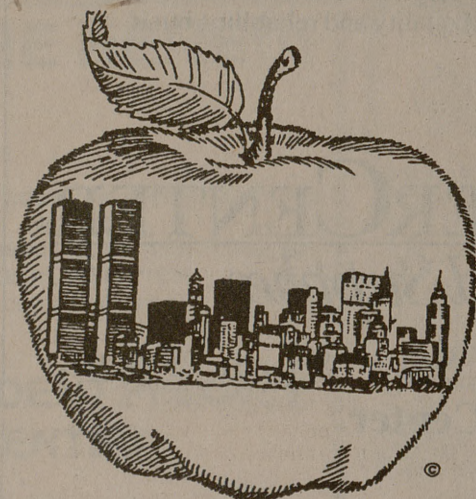
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