

# Jackie Sherrill: A man on

## A close-up look at A&M's controversi

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Sports Editor

His fingers drum on the table. He straightens his tie. He leans forward in his chair, then back. He aimlessly marks on his roster sheet. He fiddles with the tape player in front of him that is recording his every word. Jackie Sherrill is noticeably uncomfortable.

That should be expected to some extent. Sherrill has been the target of a never-ending series of investigations by the Texas media ever since he took possession of his maroon Cadillac and the titles of athletic director and head football coach at Texas A&M.

And who is it surrounding him with pen and paper ready but a horde of reporters — several of whom have written negative things about him and his program in the past.

He has finished his lunch while talking to those same reporters about some game the next weekend other than the Aggie game. Maybe the sanctions the NCAA will drop on Oklahoma or Oklahoma State.

No problem talking when it's not about himself or his team.

But then it's time. He slowly walks over to his seat at the base of a horseshoe of tables, brushes imaginary lint from his \$250 jacket, and begins again. "We'll start with last week's game. . . ."

The year was 1982; Jackie Sherrill was not even in his new position after leaving the University of Pittsburgh in one of the most controversial coaching moves in college football history.

And already the trouble had started.

Texas A&M University has yet to disclose all the terms of Sherrill's contract despite efforts by news media across Texas.

The University claims that state open records laws don't require state institutions to disclose information about funding that doesn't come from the school itself. There-

fore, parts of Sherrill's contract supplied by boosters and alumni — which are rumored to be sizable — are still undisclosed.

Then there was the difficulty Sherrill had winning football games. The Aggies wallowed in mediocrity for three years before the program showed the turnaround that the University and the alumni were shelling out the big bucks to get.

And then, once the turnaround came, the methods by which it was achieved came under scrutiny.

An investigation by a Dallas television station announced that star quarterback Kevin Murray was paid to clean printing presses that he never cleaned. And that blossomed into a 38-violation charge leveled against Sherrill and A&M by the NCAA, resulting in hefty penalties for the football program.

And throughout it all, especially in the last couple of years, there has been a host of minor scandals. Melvin Collins and Tony Bartley were ousted from the team just prior to the 1987 Cotton Bowl for hiring agents. L.B. Moon was suspended from play for three games earlier this year for testing positive for steroids.

And the recent allegations reported by the Dallas Morning News may end up making the biggest mess of all. As of this interview, conducted Thursday, the news had not broken about former fullback George Smith accusing Sherrill and his staff of paying him approximately \$10,000 since Smith left Texas A&M in 1984.

And especially with the dual position he holds, Sherrill will wind up being asked all the tough questions.

Generally he responds by becoming defensive. He is difficult to contact for comment, and when he can be reached he frequently is in no mood to talk. And it shows up in the answers he gives.

The stances he takes frequently make his attitude appear self-serving. Like in the

Murray incident. Even after A&M had enough evidence to believe some improprieties had occurred, Sherrill refused to discipline Murray — an integral part of a team headed to the Cotton Bowl for the second year in a row.

His reasoning, he says, was that it was the NCAA's responsibility — not his — to assess guilt or innocence.

The NCAA findings report released last September said Sherrill's unwillingness to penalize his own players was a big reason the penalties it exacted on Texas A&M were so severe. And University President William Mobley's steps toward self-disclosure that Sherrill and former president Frank Vandiver had not taken were cited as reasons the sanctions were not even worse.

But through it all up to this point, Sherrill has not lost his luster — at least as far as Aggies are concerned. In fact, he has developed into something of a cult hero. Kind of like Ollie North in coaching shorts.

It could be the way he has turned the program around — and there's no denying he has done that.

The Aggies had gone 21-22 in the more-than-three years under Tom Wilson before hiring Sherrill away from the University of Pittsburgh. And after going 11-11-1 in his first three years at A&M, Sherrill has brought the Aggies to the place he was paid to bring them.

The last three seasons have seen A&M go 29-7, only losing three Southwest Conference games in the process. Three outright SWC championships. Three Cotton Bowls.

But it has been more than just winning football games.

If there was a single day "The Legend of Jackie Sherrill" started, it would have to be that November afternoon when he looked out his office window and saw a sight the likes of which he had never seen before.

Of course, the scene was Aggie bonfire. And before he knew it, he was out at Dun-

can Field, working on the stack himself.

"It was certainly a different kind of thing," Sherrill says. "I learned more that night working on bonfire than most people could find out being raised for years at A&M."

The students, of course, went nuts. They, too, were seeing something they had never seen. Quickly a yell practice was put together for the coach, and a bond was formed that has never been broken — or even seriously threatened.

Sherrill cemented the relationship by putting that spirit on the playing field as well as in the stands. His institution of the 12th Man Kick-off Team has become famous nationwide as one of A&M's hallmarks.

Now it's a yearly tradition for Sherrill to work a night or two at bonfire. He also goes through Elephant Walk with the seniors the week of the Texas game.

He smiles thinking about last year's Walk, when he ruined a good pair of shoes walking through the fountain in front of the Chemistry Building.

He says the only thing that could have made the fans he met in those early years more dangerous, more intimidating, was winning more football games.

And now the Aggies are winning.

"It was the feeling of everybody that they'd been caged for that long and now the cage has been unlocked," he says. "They were free to show their feelings."

His voice and face show tremendous pride — and even a hint of pity for other schools — when talking about the Aggie traditions and how he thinks they intimidate other schools.

"You go to t.u. and schools like that. . . . they just don't have that at other schools," he says. "People at other institutions don't like it. It's something different. And A&M winning just compounds that."

He really loves the school. As much talk as is circulated about Sherrill being the big-



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