

1968 Cotton Bowl: Beating a legend

Stallings' Aggies upset Bryant's Crimson Tide

By Nick Georgandis
THE BATTALION

In 1965, Texas A&M's football team was stuck in mediocrity. Seven long seasons had passed since head coach Paul "Bear" Bryant had departed to the University of Alabama.

Since the great coach's departure, the Aggies had compiled a lethargic 18-47 record, and the athletic department was looking for a new football coach.

A&M officials asked Bryant's help in picking a coach, and he suggested one of his assistants, Gene Stallings, a former Aggie player. The 30-year old Stallings was the youngest head coach in the country that year, and when he and Bryant parted ways, little did either coach know they would reunite just three years later in one of the biggest games in A&M history.

Stallings' first two seasons were only modest improvements, as his teams went 3-7 and 4-5-1. The 1967 campaign started off just as bad for the Aggies.

They lost four tough games by a combined total of 19 points to start off the season. A winless Aggie team then went to Lubbock still looking for its first win against a solid Texas Tech squad.

"(Against Tech), the thing I remember is we were finally going to win a game," Stallings, now head coach at the University of Alabama, said. "We thought it was pretty much over when we trapped their quarterback down near their own end zone, but they called us for defensive holding, and then they penalized me for yelling at the officials.

"Suddenly, Tech went from losing seven yards to gaining 37 on that play, and then they scored."

The Aggies now trailed by the score of 24-21 with only 53 seconds remaining, and another devastating loss seemed imminent. But in that final minute, the Aggies' season changed.

Quarterback Edd Hargett led the Aggies' on a brilliant six-play drive that culminated in his own 15-yard touchdown run as time expired to give A&M a 28-24 victory.

With the win, the Aggies had new life in the 1967 season, and they made the most of it, running off four more wins in a row. They had put themselves in a position to win the Southwest Conference championship and go to the Cotton Bowl, if they could defeat the University of Texas on Thanksgiving Day.

"It wasn't like we just began blowing people out," Grady Allen, a senior safety and team captain in 1967, said. "We had been close in the four games (the Aggies lost all four), but then we just started playing better and getting all the breaks."

Going into the annual clash on Turkey Day, A&M was 5-1 in the conference, Texas was 4-2, and both teams were primed for a shot at the Cotton Bowl. The odds were against the Aggies that day, as Texas had defeated A&M 10 straight times.

In one of the most hard-fought games in the century of competition between the two schools, the Aggies came away with a gutsy 10-7 victory, largely thanks to Hargett's 80-yard touchdown pass to Bob Long.

Upon reflection, Stallings recalls the Texas game as being even bigger to him than the ensuing bowl game.

"The Cotton Bowl was a very big game for me, but I think the Texas game that year was even bigger," Stallings said. "If we didn't win it, there was no championship and no Cotton Bowl. The Cotton Bowl was just a reward for us for winning the SWC."

The win gave A&M their first SWC championship since 1956, and their first trip to the Cotton Bowl in 26 years. When it was announced that eighth-ranked Alabama would be the Aggies' opposition in the Cotton Bowl, the hype began. The teacher versus the student. The perennial powerhouse against the upstart from Texas.

At the time, Bryant was already a coaching legend. He had already won three national championships in his nine years at Alabama. When all was said and done, Bryant had coached for 38 consecutive



Photo courtesy of the Texas A&M Sports Information Office

Legendary coach Paul "Bear" Bryant helps to carry then A&M coach Gene Stallings off the field in the Cotton Bowl after the Aggies shocked Bryant's No. 8 Alabama 20-16.

years and compiled a 323-85-17 record, a stunning .780 winning percentage.

Although he was excited about matching strategies with his former coach, Stallings said he also wanted his players to experience what it was like to be around the legendary Bryant.

"Playing against Alabama really did have a special meaning for me, especially since I had also coached there before," Stallings said. "But I also wanted our players just to see Coach Bryant and to hear him speak."

For Stallings' players, the thrill was mainly due to playing a storied team like Alabama, although they also wanted to win for their coach's honor. Alabama was just two years removed from its 1965 national championship year, and had finished third in the country in 1966.

"We knew all about his (Stallings) having coached there, and the fact that 'Bear' Bryant used to coach here and all that, but the truth was, we just wanted to beat Alabama," Allen said. "We also knew that we were going to have to play a perfect game, better than we had played all year long to beat them."

The 1967 Crimson Tide possessed two All-Americans in wide receiver Dennis Homan and defensive back Bob-

by Johns. The Alabama offense was led by future NFL great Kenny Stabler.

The game lived up to its billing on New Year's Day, 1968, before a crowd of 73,800. The teams traded touchdowns in the first quarter, before A&M used two Crimson Tide turnovers to take a 13-10 halftime lead.

Midway through the third quarter, A&M fullback Wendell Housley rumbled 20 yards for a touchdown to give the Aggies a 20-10 lead. Stabler scored a rushing touchdown late in the game, but the Crimson Tide could not find the end zone again. When the final gun sounded, the Aggies had shocked the nation with a 20-16 victory.

What came next is one of the most memorable scenes in Cotton Bowl history.

"Out on the field, we were just going out to shake hands, but suddenly he (Bryant) suddenly made a little movement and just picked me up a little," Stallings said. "I guess if he lost, he would have just as soon lost to us since I coached there."

"But he (Bryant) was by no stretch of the imagination pleased afterwards, because he was a great competitor and he always wanted to win. I'll remember that season for a long, long time."