

# *The* BEAR TRAP

IT WAS SEPTEMBER in the Texas hill country and time again for eighteen-year-old boys to prove their manhood. As always, Coach Paul "Bear" Bryant seemed to be squinting beyond the scene at hand: the A&M Aggies heaving themselves into blocking sleds and each other with Sunday-school dutifulness. The Bear flogged his boys

## Where do you go if you're the son of the legendary Coach Bryant?

three times a day in dust-choking heat and no one dared ask for water. For most of practice, Bryant's nine-year-old son, Paul Jr., had

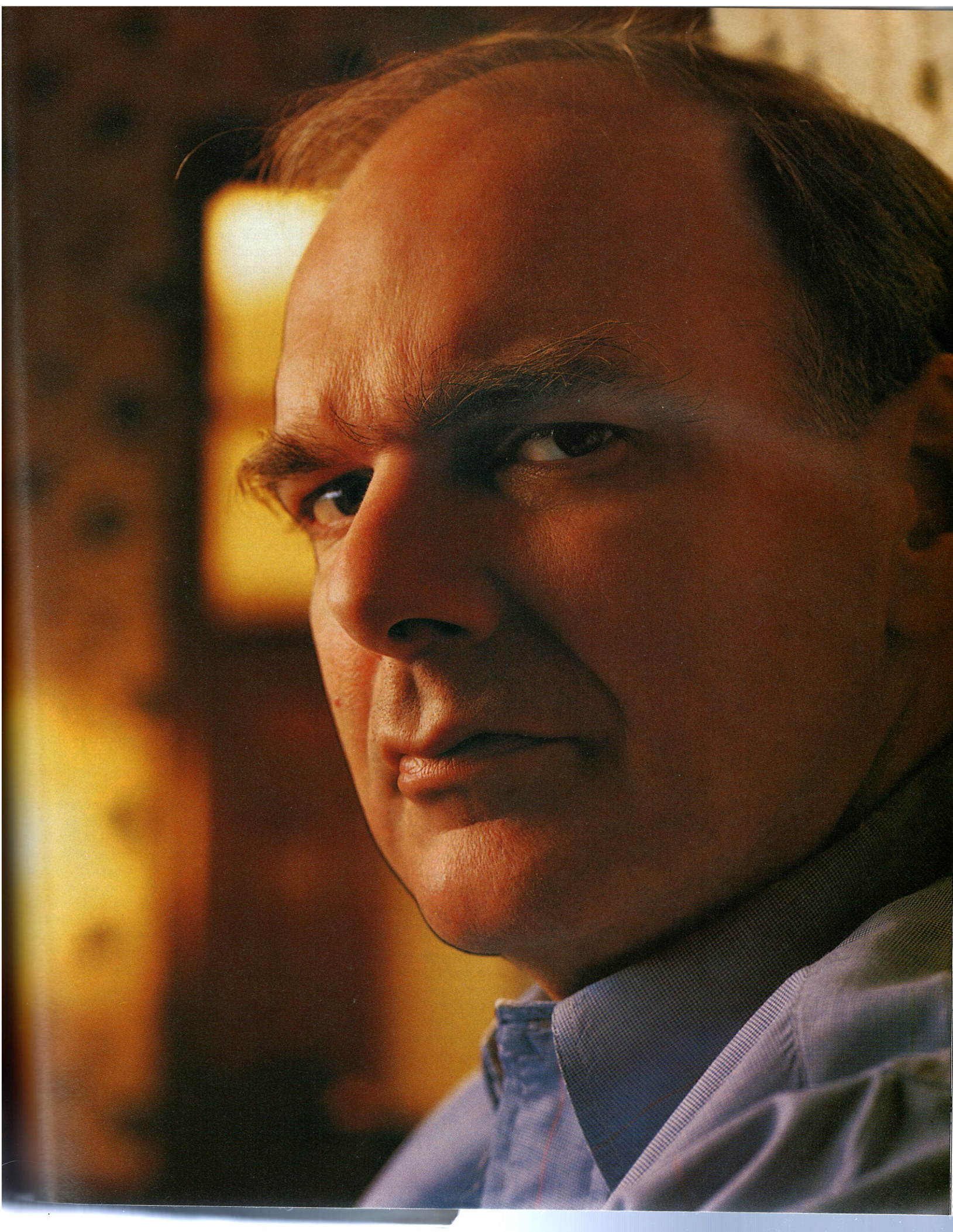
**You go to the dogs** tagged along after his father. But in the swelter of

the late afternoon, the boy had drifted off to entertain himself in a nearby creek and was splashing happily away. Someone asked Bryant Sr. if his namesake would one day play football. "Hell no," the Bear drawled before delivering the ultimate insult to a southern son. "He'll probably play in the band."

THIRTY-FOUR YEARS LATER, Paul William Bryant Jr. sits sprawled in the rear of his private jet, his six-foot-two, two-hundred-pound frame stretched across facing seats. He is nursing a Coors and a head cold thirty thousand feet above Alabama, returning to Tusca-

By **WILLIAM M. ADLER**







loosa after a whirlwind trip to Texas, Iowa, and Missouri. He gazes out the window over vast stretches of farmland. His fraternity brothers once called him Gila and in profile it is apparent why. He has a prominent hooked beak set over a persistent scowl; his eyes are fierce, tempered only by their hazel color; and his bushy, untamed brows are chronically arched. Wiry salt-and-pepper strands halfheartedly shield his balding crown. His clothes are as solemn as his personality. He favors dark, conservative suits, white shirts, black wing tips. But on this day he sports a crimson tie dotted with stampeding white elephants, the signature of a University of Alabama alumnus. For a man who offers few clues to his nature, this is a pretty good one. He maintains a marked affection for his alma mater, especially the football team that created the legend of Bear Bryant.

In Alabama, where football is more akin to religion than sport, the Bear was the state's living god. During a quarter century as coach of the Crimson Tide, he was a homegrown symbol of hope and glory for a citizenry long accustomed to the derision of genteel northerners. Before the Bear, Alabamians thanked the Lord for Mississippi, the only state with less to offer and more to hide. Their state was home to many unsavory traditions. Jim Crow, inherited poverty, illiteracy. The Bear, though, was a continual source of pride. The world could seize upon the chilling hate and the antebellum mores, but in one thing at least Alabama was supreme.

When the Bear retired after the 1982 season, he was the winningest college coach of all time, with 323 victories (Eddie Robinson of Grambling has since overtaken him), his Alabama teams had won six national championships, and he had been named national coach of the year three times. On the day after he announced his retirement, flags in Birmingham were flown at half-mast. Even now, Alabamians stock their houses with kitschy Bearaphernalia—commemorative lamps, busts, coins, soft-drink

**William M. Adler** is a writer living in Texas. This is his first piece for *Esquire*.

bottles. Lithographs of the Bear's lined, craggy face still hang behind cash registers in restaurants across the state.

Paul's athletic career was less storied. Like the Bear, he had been a big kid for his age and a natural leader, but he was not particularly well coordinated. He earned plaudits as a lineman in seventh grade, but his playing days ended in the middle of his eighth-grade season when he was stricken with hepatitis. For most of the next two years, he did not even attend school. Quarantined at home, his skin yellowed and foul-smelling, Paul faced for the first time the painful realization that he would never follow in his father's virile footsteps on the playing field. He was continuously reminded of his failure by the questions that inevitably followed a young southern boy: *So, kid, what position do you play? Are you gonna play for your daddy someday?*

By his senior year in high school, Paul had recovered sufficiently to make the basketball team. In the 1961-62 season, the team won the state tournament, but only ten of the team's twelve players were permitted to suit up. Paul volunteered to sit out, but he asked the coach if he could scout the team's opponents. Paul attended the tournament in street clothes, charting games and compiling statistics.

Numbers, if not sports, always came easy to him. And he has turned those numerical talents to work for him. While he has spent the better part of his adulthood trying to escape the shadow of his father, he has also parlayed their shared famous name into a fortune estimated to be worth as much as \$50 million.

THE TRIP FROM AUSTIN to Tuscaloosa has taken only ninety minutes. Now with darkness fast approaching on a cool late-November afternoon, the cream-colored Mitsubishi Diamond jet dips toward home. For the past couple of days, Paul has fielded unwelcome inquiries about his life like a punt returner who's lost one in the sun. He hesitates, begins to answer in fits and starts, and finally lets it drop. He'll have no part of it. Ask Paul to talk about himself and he begins to fiddle absentmindedly with his

wristwatch; his eyelids flutter as if they're stammering; his words become especially garbled, as if his syntax were randomly plucked from a Scrabble board. The subject of motivation has come up now, and he labors through his reply. "I don't think I'm trying to show anybody anything," he says. "I might have at one time been trying to prove something, but not now."

If Paul was no athlete, some things—the Bear's win-at-any-cost attitude, his workaholic tendencies, his lust for wealth, his willingness to bend the rules—apparently seeped into his psyche. Paul's business is greyhound racing, a sport historically rife with characters shadier than a forest of southern pines. In the twelve years since he opened his first track in Greene County, Alabama, Paul has become one of the dominant forces in the business. But his successes have not come without controversy, most of which centers on his bareknuckle style of doing business. If the famous father's passion was football, the son's seems to be hardball—business as a contact sport. He owns or operates three of the top dozen money-grossing tracks in the country: two in Alabama and one in Iowa. A fourth, in Idaho, opened last August. In 1988 his four tracks handled about \$435 million in bets. At VictoryLand in Macon County, Alabama, bettors spent nearly \$205 million, more than at any of the nation's fifty-two greyhound tracks. He is now jockeying for the license to operate a track in Galveston, Texas, which could surpass every other track in revenues and profits.

If power is the ability to get things done, then in Alabama Paul William Bryant Jr. is omnipotent. By virtue of his name alone, doors to the interlocking worlds of business and sports and politics have flown open to him. But part of his father's legacy is also the overwhelming pressure to succeed, to somehow measure up to his haunting presence. As the Bear's namesake and lone survivor (Paul's mother died in 1984 and his sister died last year), it is to him that the burden of curator of the legend falls.

Unlike the Bear, who basked in the warm glow of adulatory press for most of his career, Paul is a preternaturally private man who has always shunned publicity and the social scene. But in the past few years, he has had to cope with the underbelly of press attention. Business partners have dragged him into court, and federal and state officials have begun to scrutinize his burgeoning financial empire. He has received some critical press, press he blames for damaging his name. But his critics in Alabama say he uses his name like a bludgeon. They question his ethics, his allegiance to his stockholders, and his sense of civic responsibility. "He does what he wants and

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he gets what he wants," the publisher of the *Greene County Democrat* says. "Maybe he figures that's his birthright or something."

IN HIS COOLLY EFFICIENT offices on the top floor of the tallest building in downtown Tuscaloosa, Paul set one ground rule before he agreed to be interviewed: he would not answer any questions about his relationship with his father, whom he still affectionately refers to as "Papa."

He has admitted to friends that he hardly knew his father, rarely ever saw him. But the Bear's commanding presence hardly left him alone. Throughout his adolescence, Paul was reminded of his father's heroic stature as friends tried to ingratiate themselves with him for access to the coach. "It was hard for him to be a normal young man—outgoing and bubbly—when you think everybody might be trying to take advantage of you," says Charley Thornton, former cohost of the Bear's weekly TV show.

During high school, Paul saw little of his father other than on the practice field, where he spent practically every afternoon. During games, Paul was allowed on the sidelines—as long as he didn't wander too close to the action. "It was my responsibility to see that he stood to the left or right of the end of the benches," says Clem Gryska, a longtime assistant to the Bear. "Coach Bryant didn't want him near the fifty-yard line, where he might interfere."

On the nights when the Bear came home before Paul went to bed, he would seclude himself in his study, scribbling x's and o's late into the night. He often slept only four hours and rose early, slipping away well before dawn. On the way to the office, he'd stop at a diner that opened early especially for him. "I know now I neglected my family," he wrote in his 1974 memoir, *Bear*. "Every young coach who ever lived does it, and it's not right, but if he has succeeded you'll find his family sacrificed a lot."

Given the Bear's time constraints, it is no wonder the relationship between father and son was not a warm one. Ed Glenn, a pleasant insurance executive who was one of Paul's closest friends throughout high

school and college, says: "Coach Bryant kind of challenged him to do well, taught him that hard work can overcome the shortcomings a person may have. But he wasn't the kind of dad who sat down and did algebra with you."

Paul never needed much help with math. In college, he finished first in his class among business and finance majors. He also blossomed socially, pledging Sigma

Nu, the Bear's fraternity. In his freshman year, Paul dated a home-economics major from Alpha Gamma Delta, the sorority for which his mother had served as rush chairman. Paul would marry his girlfriend, a demure brunette named Cherry Hicks, shortly after graduation. In his senior year Paul was president of his fraternity. He'd often host parties in the basement of his parents' home, where the brothers would get to mingle with the campus football heroes—guys like Joe Namath and Kenny Stabler and Ray Perkins and Steve Sloan—and of course, the Bear himself. "Coach Bryant used to love to have kids over there," recalls William "Butch" Hughes, general manager of the track Paul operates outside of Montgomery.

The guys would usually play cards—heated games of poker or hearts—and Paul would exhibit flashes of passion. "Paul was a serious student of cards, just like everything else," Hughes says. "No question, he got in to win."

Sometime during Paul's college career, Papa decided that Paul would go to law school. "I don't know if he necessarily wanted me to be a lawyer, he just thought it would be a good education," Paul says. At the time, Paul was considering postgraduate study in history; he's had a lifelong interest in the Civil War. But he dutifully applied and was accepted to law school at Harvard and the University of Virginia. The Bear paid the deposit at both schools and gave him the summer of 1966 to decide which one he'd like to attend.

Charles O. Finley, the inventive and ornery owner of the then-Kansas City Athletics baseball club, offered Paul a summer job as assistant to the general manager—a "flunky," as Paul put it—of his Mobile A's

farm team. Finley was a longtime friend of the Bear's. Paul took the job, and within a matter of weeks he uncovered chicanery in the team's bookkeeping procedures. He notified Finley, who promptly dismissed the GM and replaced him with Paul, thereby relieving him of his law-school obligation. Finley described Paul as a "very quiet boy" who worked "very aggressively."

When Finley moved the parent club from Kansas City to Oakland in 1968, he invited Paul along to be business manager. He and Cherry went—for a week. It was his first time away from the South. Says Paul: "I apologized and said I didn't want to live out there." They fled back to Birmingham, where Paul spent an unhappy year as a stockbroker. In 1969 he moved back to Tuscaloosa to work as an investment counselor and real estate broker.

He also began to advise his father on the countless offers the Bear received for business deals. Everyone, it seemed, wanted a piece of him. The Bear did not discourage the onslaught of would-be deal makers; at one time he and David "Sonny" Werblin, the New York sports mogul, were in business marketing his trademark houndstooth hats. In partnership with others, he owned an auto dealership (Bear Bryant VW), a meat-packing plant, a yarn-treating firm, and a lumber factory that produced ammunition boxes for the Army. He also actively played the stock market, fervently read *The Wall Street Journal*, and subscribed to several financial-data services.

Aside from football, a penchant for deals was the primary bond between father and son. It became Paul's job to screen the business propositions. He conscientiously rejected the schlockmeisters, and cut himself in on a few of the better-sounding offers, including the VW dealership.

Not long after he returned to Tuscaloosa, political slate makers approached Paul, urging him to run for a lower-level statewide office, such as public-service commissioner. Introverted and tongue-tied, he'd have had problems as a candidate. But he might have won. "Strictly because of the name, people tried to push me into politics," Paul says. "I'm proud of my name, but I've never tried to capitalize on it."

GREENE COUNTY IS a cruel southern paradox: the richest land and the poorest people. Half of the lush, rolling pastureland, rich soil, and plentiful timber is absentee-owned. Most of the eleven thousand residents are black and poor; per capita income is \$6,000, among the lowest in Alabama. The county's blacks obtained political power in the late 1960s but have been unable to translate electoral success into material gain. Dog racing, they were

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told, could be their best bet for economic deliverance. A track would create jobs and attract fat wallets.

A dull-green prefabricated metal monolith, Greenetrack sits on two hundred acres just off Interstate Highway 59. Across the road, tip-sheet hucksters peddle their inside dope from a row of wooden shacks. Cheap Sam's, a beer and ice store, spreads out nearby, and for gamblers on a long weekend, there's Gant's Greyhound Motel.

Greenetrack lures plenty of gamblers, most of them closer to unshod than well heeled. Chartered buses pour in from Birmingham or Memphis or Jackson. On a good Saturday, three thousand stream through the turnstiles. A sign just inside the gate stops most out-of-towners in their tracks. It's a courteous reminder of the clubhouse dress code:

NO HALTER TOPS

NO CAMOUFLAGE OR HUNTING CLOTHES

NO SHIRT-TAILS OUT

Hardly anyone watches the races live. The sleek dogs are too small, too fast, and too far away to view clearly, except on television. There are color monitors everywhere you look, including tabletop models in the Kennel Club, the upstairs dining room where the white patrons sit.

Most of the locals congregate downstairs in the fifty-cent general admission area. The backbone of the track's revenues, they are the ones who can least afford to gamble. Most are black, many are on welfare. Shoulder to shoulder, they spill their beer on each other and twist their racing forms, yelling encouragement to a long-shot pup chasing a fake bunny at forty miles an hour. They are not here for the excitement of "America's fastest growing sport," but to keep the loan shark and the landlord at bay.

"Greenetrack's so successful because everyone in Greene County brings their last two dollars and thinks they're gonna win a million," Paul said one night between bites of filet mignon. The average Greenetrack bettor spends \$145 over the course of a twelve-race program, he told me, placing Greenetrack among the top three tracks in the country.

A Greene County official whose husband works part-time at the track offers a different view of Greenetrack's success. "What you've got here is poorfolk taking money from their children and flocking to the track; that's not what I'd call economic development."

Paul demurs. "The crowd is rough here, it's a low-class, low-income crowd," he explains, sweeping his big hand across the empty grandstand. "Down here, it's generally your lower class of blacks, your welfare blacks. You want 'em to have enough

room to get in and out, but at the same time you want to get as many in as possible."

Dog racing has not always been big business in Alabama. Before greyhounds made gambling legitimate, Paul busied himself with a variety of mostly successful ventures in and around Tuscaloosa: a bank, real estate, insurance, and farming, as well as the deals he put together for his father. In the mid-Seventies, while Greene County voters were being primed by the potential windfall of greyhound racing, Paul was setting his sights on bigger deals. He approached Jimmy Poole, a Miller beer distributor living in Greene County, with a plan to recruit investors with sufficient capital to compete for the county's track license. Poole, who numbered among his valued possessions an autographed picture of the Bear, was interested in the proposition, but had reservations. He considered Paul's name a powerful draw, and the breadth of his experience to be an advantage to any group interested in opening a track. But before agreeing to sign on, he made Paul promise that half the stock would be owned by Greene County people. "Nothing was ever in writing," Poole says. "We didn't go in there and try to watch over him to see if he was doing everything like he was supposed to. We trusted him."

From opening day in 1977 Greenetrack was a spectacular success. With help from the Bear's friends (including the late Art Rooney, owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers and a fellow greyhound entrepreneur), Paul taught himself the business, from track design to food service. In the early years he worked sixteen-hour days, often sleeping on the couch in his office.

By the early Eighties managing a track was becoming mundane. Paul was getting restless. He needed a new challenge. In 1983 the Alabama legislature passed a bill authorizing greyhound racing in Macon County. Not all was well with Greene Group, as Greenetrack investors had become known, but Poole and others in the organization relished the idea of establishing a second track, this one in eastern Alabama. All they needed was someone on the ground in Macon to stroke politicians and lay the foundation for Greenetrack II.

MILTON E. MCGREGOR'S posh Italianate mansion is a shrine to his commerce. Porcelain greyhounds in the breakfast room, life-size lead greyhounds out at the pool, greyhounds lost in a misty forest in an oil painting in the den. A glad-handing promoter with a world-class pompadour, he knows just about everyone under the capitol dome in Montgomery. He and Paul had been introduced by a mutual friend in the late 1970s, and Paul had later bankrolled

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WINSTEAD'S	Corpus Christi, TX
FRANK'S KING SIZE	Dallas, TX
HYROOP'S	Dallas, TX
MARCHESE WEISS	El Paso, TX
UNION FASHION	El Paso, TX
DAVID'S BIG & TALL	Fort Worth, TX
FRANK'S KING SIZE	Fort Worth, TX
STRIPLING & COX	Fort Worth, TX
SCHWARTZ'S	Galveston, TX
GOLD'S	Georgetown, TX
CARL'S	Houston, TX
CRAIG'S	Houston, TX
FRANK'S KING SIZE	Houston, TX
GRAHAM'S	Houston, TX
HYROOP'S	Houston, TX
WALTER PYE'S	Houston, TX
ROUNTREE-WILLIAMS	Houston, TX
TACKER'S MEN'S WEAR	Houston, TX
PEPPERS MEN'S SHOP	Longview, TX
DUNLAPS	Lubbock, TX
FRANK'S KING SIZE	Lubbock, TX
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CLARK'S	Lufkin, TX
MIZE DEPARTMENT STORE	Nacogdoches, TX
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PAUL BRUNER'S	San Antonio, TX
GRAHAM'S	San Antonio, TX
PENICK & CHANCE	Tyler, TX
MUEHLBERGERS	Wichita Falls, TX

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him in a video-game business.

In October 1983 McGregor was licensed by the Macon County Racing Commission to open VictoryLand, the county's voter-approved greyhound track. On the application filed with the commission, McGregor designated Pari-Mutuel Management Inc. to operate the track.

Pari-Mutuel Management Inc. was Paul. Greene Group didn't bid for the Macon County project. Its three top stockholders—Paul, Sam Phelps, and Wayne May—contractually wed themselves to McGregor (pledging their Greenetrack stock as collateral) and agreed to make him president of the new enterprise. They failed to notify Jimmy Poole and other minority stockholders of their plans until it was too late for them to do anything about it. "Paul got up at our board meeting and said, 'We got the track, but y'all are not in it,'" recalls Poole. "I spoke up first and said, 'I don't know if you've broken the law or not, but I know one thing, it's not ethical what you did and I don't like it worth a damn.' I just couldn't believe it. Here we started the man in dog tracks and he leaves us out."

If it had come as a slap, it wasn't altogether a surprise. Paul had raised suspicion among Greene Group investors from the start. After having initially pledged to reserve a majority of Greenetrack stock for local ownership, Paul, with Phelps and May, all nonresidents, quietly secured 50.16 percent for themselves, ensuring control of the track's governing board. Having negotiated with a handshake but no contract, Poole and others had been powerless to stop this maneuvering.

In November 1983 ten minority stockholders sued Paul and Pari-Mutuel Management Inc., alleging that profits that should have benefited Greene Group were being diverted to the new corporation. In 1986 the Alabama Supreme Court ruled that Paul and the other majority stockholders had acted impermissibly in excluding Greenetrack stockholders from the VictoryLand deal. The ruling granted that all profits that Pari-Mutuel Management derived from the track would be assumed by

Greene Group.

Paul told me about the lawsuit one evening at home in his dark, wood-paneled den, watched by three framed likenesses of the Bear, two of them Neimans. An inscription on one read, TO PAUL BRYANT JR., WHO CARRIES ON AN HONORED NAME—LEROY NEIMAN. "It was probably the low point of my life," he says. "I might not seem angry, but I get furious when I think about it. They

essentially got something for nothing. They got a free ride and they're mad to boot."

Others, though, including Frank Moody, a family friend and Paul's onetime mentor, didn't know what to make of the revelations about Paul's business practices. A retired Tuscaloosa banker, he was a business partner of the Bear's, and had given Paul early financial support. ("He backed me on stuff he shouldn't have when I was twenty-one," Paul says. "But he trusted me.") "I don't think there's any question he was somewhat selfish," Moody says. "He didn't need a lot more money. He made himself a good salary, a good living. Sometimes people forget who helped them get started. I think maybe Paul forgot."

The Greenetrack lawsuit may be the least of Paul's legal problems. For more than four years the FBI and the Montgomery County district attorney have investigated the back-room deals

that brought pari-mutuel dog racing to Macon County. Officials are investigating reports that key legislators were paid for affirmative votes on the enabling legislation.

The IRS and the Iowa Department of Revenue and Finance now allege that the nonprofit corporation that has operated the Council Bluffs track since 1986 has been a tax dodge for Paul's management company. Both agencies are trying to revoke the corporation's tax-exempt status.

IT WAS THE FINAL GAME of the 1988 season, and Alabama was playing Texas A&M at College Station. Paul Jr. rocked back in his blue leather recliner, arms folded behind his head, the television and fireplace flickering before him. Like a member of a royal family in exile, he could only watch from afar as the country of his

childhood prospered without him. He was dressed casually, corduroy shirt and pants and Timberland shoes. His hard eyes had softened, the defensive mien of our previous visit had disappeared. His wife, Cherry, shuttled back and forth between the kitchen and the den, putting the finishing touches on a takeout barbecue that Paul and his friend Rodney Windham were already demolishing. The family dog, Muff, a deaf and blind black Lab, rested comfortably beside Paul's chair.

"Derrick's tearing 'em up tonight," Rodney said.

"Jackie's gotta be dying," Paul replied, referring to A&M coach Jackie Sherrill, their college classmate, whose job was rumored to be in jeopardy, and indeed was later lost.

They whooped and hollered like a couple of Bama fans in Gadsden or Muscle Shoals or Phenix City, guys who might have slapped players on their backs as they marched triumphantly into the locker room. A commercial came on, and for a moment the men's gaze at the screen grew desultory. The barbecue was history.

"How about Jackie anyway?" Windham said.

"He's gone," Paul said. "The matter's settled."

After the game, Paul stood near the TV, his back to the fireplace. Above him, over the mantel, was an oil painting of a young Bear Bryant, wearing a crimson baseball cap with a raised white A. He looks about Paul's age.

When the Bear died in January 1983, the funeral was broadcast on statewide television from Tuscaloosa. Again, flags flew at half-mast. His body was buried in Birmingham, sixty miles up the interstate. The highways and overpasses were jammed with one hundred thousand people, many holding banners. GOD MUST HAVE NEEDED AN OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR, said one. Police and private guards watched the grave night and day. It was not the death of a coach, it was the passing of a head of state.

Now, in the December night, nearly six years later, his son stood under the portrait, watching taped highlights of Bama's victory. You could see how Alabamians would invest their money with a fellow who looked like this. His face seemed simultaneously watchful and trustworthy, an echo of his father's right down to the famous squint. The Bear's hawkish gaze, of course, always appeared focused on an errant player, a goal-line stand, or some form of down-home glory. His son, though, had the narrowed eyes of a man whose entire career has been spent in pursuit of a legend he can never quite catch, like a greyhound chasing a mechanical rabbit. ■

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