

THE STORY OF A COLLEGE FOOTBALL FIX

A SHOCKING REPORT
OF HOW WALLY BUTTS AND
"BEAR" BRYANT RIGGED
A GAME LAST FALL

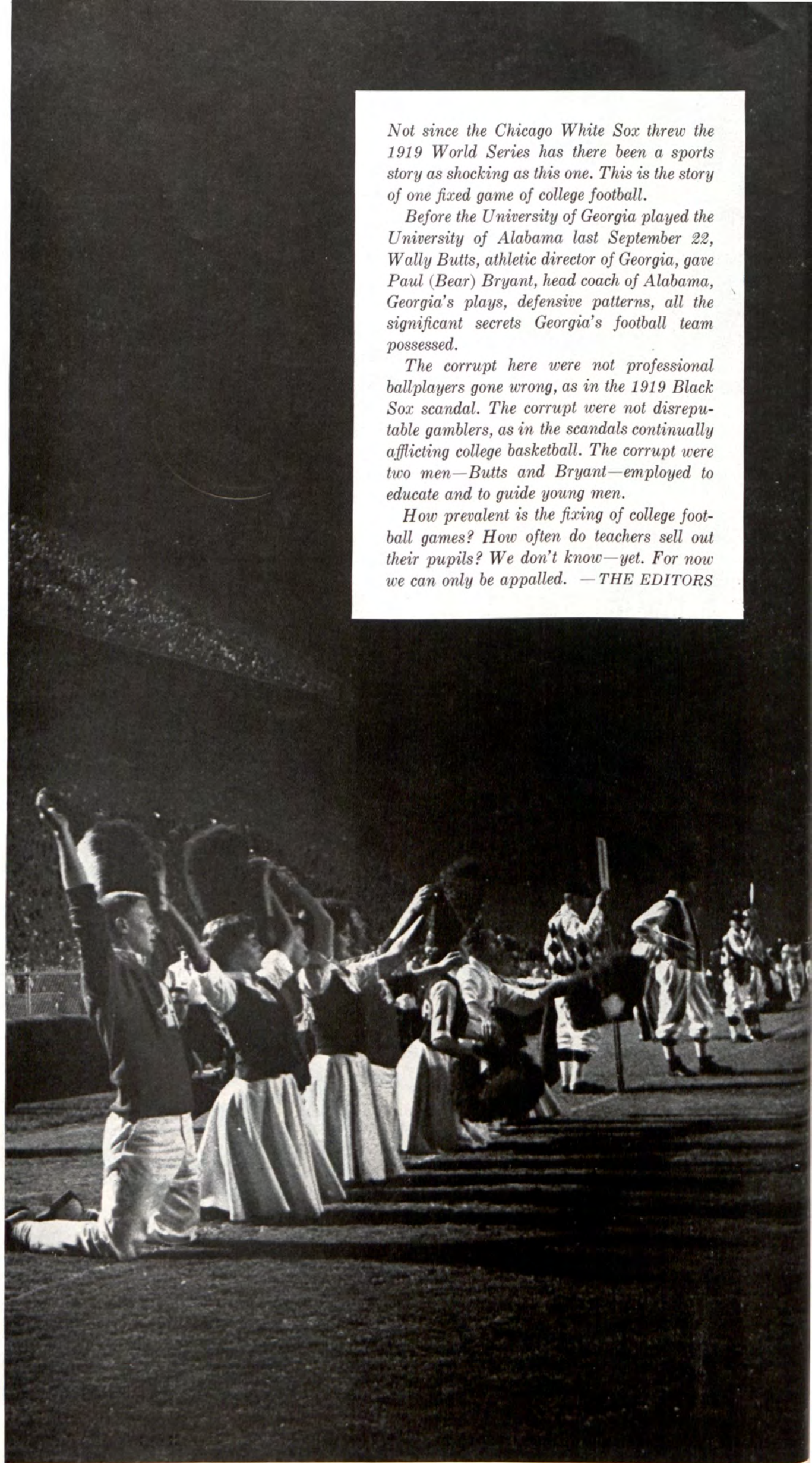
By FRANK GRAHAM JR.

Not since the Chicago White Sox threw the 1919 World Series has there been a sports story as shocking as this one. This is the story of one fixed game of college football.

Before the University of Georgia played the University of Alabama last September 22, Wally Butts, athletic director of Georgia, gave Paul (Bear) Bryant, head coach of Alabama, Georgia's plays, defensive patterns, all the significant secrets Georgia's football team possessed.

The corrupt here were not professional ballplayers gone wrong, as in the 1919 Black Sox scandal. The corrupt were not disreputable gamblers, as in the scandals continually afflicting college basketball. The corrupt were two men—Butts and Bryant—employed to educate and to guide young men.

How prevalent is the fixing of college football games? How often do teachers sell out their pupils? We don't know—yet. For now we can only be appalled. —THE EDITORS



On their knees, Alabama cheerleaders plead for touchdown. Team scored five.

On Friday morning, September 14, 1962, an insurance salesman in Atlanta, Georgia, named George Burnett picked up his telephone and dialed the number of a local public-relations firm. The number was Jackson 5-3536. The line was busy, but Burnett kept trying. On the fourth or fifth attempt he had just dialed the final number when he heard what he later described as "a series of harsh electronic sounds," then the voice of a telephone operator said:

"Coach Bryant is out on the field, but he'll come to the phone. Do you want to hold, Coach Butts, or shall we call you back?"

And then a man's voice: "I'll hold, operator."

Like most males over the age of four in Atlanta, George Burnett is a football fan. He realized that he had been hooked by accident into a long-distance circuit and that he was about to overhear a conversation between two of the colossi of Southern football. Paul (Bear) Bryant is the head coach and athletic director of the University of Alabama, and Wallace "Wally" Butts was for 22 years the head coach of the University of Georgia and, at the time of this conversation, the university's athletic director. Burnett ("I was curious, naturally") kept the phone to his ear. Through this almost incredible coincidence he was to make the most important interception in modern football history.

After a brief wait Burnett heard the operator say that Coach Bryant was on the phone and ready to speak to Coach Butts.

"Hello, Bear," Butts said.

"Hello, Wally. Do you have anything for me?"

As Burnett listened, Butts began to give Bryant detailed information about the plays and formations Georgia would use in its opening game eight days later. Georgia's opponent was to be Alabama.

Butts outlined Georgia's offensive plays for Bryant and told him how Georgia planned to defend against Alabama's attack. Butts mentioned both players and plays by name. Occasionally Bryant asked Butts about specific offensive or defensive maneuvers, and Butts either answered in detail or said, "I don't know about that. I'll have to find out."

"One question Bryant asked," Burnett recalled later, "was 'How about quick kicks?' And Butts said, 'Don't worry about quick kicks. They don't have anyone who can do it.'"

"Butts also said that Rakestraw [Georgia quarterback Larry Rakestraw] tipped off what he was going to do by the way he held his feet. If one foot was behind the other it meant he would drop back to pass. If they were together it meant he was setting himself to spin and hand off. And another thing he told Bryant was that Woodward [Brigham Woodward, a defensive back] committed himself fast on pass defense."

As the conversation ended, Bryant asked Butts if he would be at home on Sunday. Butts answered that he would.

"Fine," Bryant said. "I'll call you there Sunday."

Listening to this amazing conversation, Burnett began to make notes on a scratch pad he kept on his desk. Some of the names were strange to him—tackle Ray Rissmiller's name he jotted down as "Ricemiller," and end Mickey Babb's as "Baer"—and some of the jargon stranger still, but he recorded all that he heard. When the two men had hung up Burnett

still sat at his desk, stunned, and a little bit frightened.

Suddenly he heard an operator's voice: "Have you completed your call, sir?"

Burnett started. "Yes, operator. By the way, can you give me the number I was connected with?"

The operator supplied him with a number in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, which he later identified as that of the University of Alabama. The extension was that of the athletic department. Burnett then dialed Jackson 5-3536—the number he originally wanted. This time the call went through normally, and he reached a close friend and former business associate named Milton Flack.

"Is Wally Butts in your office now, Milt?" Burnett asked.

"Well, he's in the back office—making a phone call, I think. Here he comes now."

"Don't mention that I asked about him," Burnett said hurriedly. "I'll talk to you later."

Through some curious electronic confusion, George Burnett, calling his friend Milt Flack, had hooked into the call Wally Butts was making from a rear office in Flack's suite. He was the third man, the odd man. But he was not out.

Putting the pieces together

In the next few hours Burnett tried to piece together what he knew of Georgia football. Butts, a native of Milledgeville, Georgia, had joined the university coaching staff as an assistant in 1938. A year later he was named head coach. For 20 years he was one of the most popular and successful coaches in the South. Then prominent University of Georgia alumni abruptly soured on him, and on January 6, 1961, he was replaced by a young assistant coach named Johnny Griffith. Butts, filed away in the position of Georgia's athletic director (which he had held along with his coaching job for some years), was outspokenly bitter about his removal from the field.

Burnett knew, too, that Butts recently had been involved in a disastrous speculation in Florida orange groves. Butts had lost over \$70,000 because, as someone put it, "you couldn't grow cactus on that land." One of his partners in the deal was also an associate of Milt Flack at a public-relations firm called Communications International, the office Burnett had been trying to call when he hooked into the Butts-Bryant conversation.

That afternoon Burnett told Flack what he had overheard. Both of them, though only slightly acquainted with the high-spirited, gregarious Butts, liked him, and they decided to forget the whole thing. Burnett went home in the evening and stuffed his notes away in a bureau drawer. He felt a great sense of relief. The matter, as far as he was concerned, was closed.

Eight days later, on September 22, the Georgia team traveled to Birmingham to play Alabama before a crowd of 54,000 people at Legion Field. Alabama hardly needed any "inside" information to handle the outmanned Bulldogs. Bryant, one of the country's most efficient and most ruthless coaches—he likes his players to be mean, and once wrote that football games are won by "outmeaning" the other team—had built a powerhouse that was in the middle of a 26-game winning streak. Alabama was the defending national champion, combining a fast-charging and savage-tackling defense with an effective

attack built around a sensational sophomore quarterback named Joe Namath. The Georgia team was composed chiefly of unsensational sophomores.

Various betting lines showed Alabama favored by from 14 to 17 points. If a man were to bet on Alabama he would want to be pretty sure that his team could win by more than 17 points, a very uncertain wager when two major colleges are opening the season together and supposedly have no reliable line on the other's strengths and weaknesses.

Bryant, before the game, certainly did not talk to the press like a man who was playing with a stacked deck.

"The only chance we've got against Georgia is by scratching and battling for our life," he said, managing to keep a straight face. "Put that down so you can look at it next week and see how right it is."

The game itself would have been enjoyed most by a man who gets kicks from attending executions. Coach Bryant (he neglected to wear a black hood) snapped every trap. The first time Rakestraw passed, Alabama intercepted. Then Alabama quickly scored on a 52-yard pass play of its own. The Georgia players, their moves analyzed and forecast like those of rats in a maze, took a frightful physical beating.

"The Georgia backfield never got out of its backfield," one spectator said afterward. And reporter Jesse Outlar wrote in Atlanta's Sunday Journal the following day: "Every time Rakestraw got the ball he was surrounded by Alabama's All-American center Lee Roy Jordan and his eager playmates."

Georgia made only 37 yards rushing, completed only 7 of 19 passes for 79 yards, and made its deepest penetration (to Alabama's 41-yard line) on the next to the last play of the game. Georgia could do nothing right, and Alabama nothing wrong. The final score was 35-0, the most lopsided score between the two teams since 1923.

It was a bitter defeat for Georgia's promising young team. The 38-year-old Johnny Griffith, who was beginning his second season as head coach, was stunned. Asked about the game by reporter Jim Minter, he said: "I figured Alabama was about three touchdowns better than we were. So that leaves about fifteen points we can explain only by saying we didn't play any football."

Quarterback Rakestraw came even closer to the truth. "They were just so quick and mobile," he told Minter. "They seemed to know every play we were going to run."

Later other members of the Georgia squad expressed their misgivings to Furman Bisher, sports editor of the Atlanta Journal. "The Alabama players taunted us," end Mickey Babb told him. "'You can't run Eighty-eight Pop [a key Georgia play] on us,' they'd yell. They knew just what we were going to run, and just what we called it."

And Sam Richwine, the squad's trainer, told Bisher: "They played just like they knew what we were going to do. And it seemed to me a lot like things were when they played us in 1961 too." (Alabama walloped Georgia in 1961 by a score of 32-6.)

Only one man in the Georgia camp did not despair that day. Asked by reporter

George Burnett of Atlanta: He overheard critical long-distance call.



Wally Butts, former athletic director of Georgia: He gave away Georgia plays, defense patterns.



Head coach Paul (Bear) Bryant of Alabama. He took plays for his defending national champions.





Solemnly Wally Butts leads a Georgia football team in locker-room prayer.



John Logue about Georgia's disappointing performance, ex-coach Wally Butts nodded wisely and set him straight. "Potential is the word for what I saw," he said. "Unlimited potential."

The whole matter weighed heavily on George Burnett. He began to wonder if he had done the right thing when he had put the notes aside and kept his mouth shut. Now 41 years old, he was still struggling to support his large family. Among his five children were a couple of boys who played football. "How would I feel," Burnett asked himself, "if my boys were going out on the field to have their heads banged in by a stronger team, and then I discovered they'd been sold out?" He began to wake up at night and lie there in the dark, thinking about it.

In one sense Burnett knew it would be easiest to keep the notes in the drawer. While every citizen is encouraged to report a crime to authorities, the penalties against the man who talks are often more severe than those against the culprit. Burnett wasn't worried about physical retaliation. But there might be social and economic ones. Football is almost a religion in the South; the big-name coaches there are minor deities.

Butts no longer had his old-time stature, but many people were still intensely loyal to him (and he was a director of the small Atlanta insurance agency where Burnett worked). Bear Bryant was a national figure who had made impressive records at Texas A&M and Kentucky, and had more recently transformed Alabama from pushovers to national champions.

Burnett, protective toward his family, fearful of challenging deities, was troubled by a drive to do what was right. But what was right? To talk? To create furor, perhaps even national scandal? Or should he remain silent, ignoring wrong? That was a safe course, but one that might sit heavily on his conscience for all the rest of his days.

Living in his private misery, he thought about his past. Burnett himself had played high-school football in San Antonio, Texas, where he was born. During World War II he became a group navigator aboard a Martin B-26. On January 14, 1945, when his plane was shot down over Saint-Vith, Belgium, he was the only survivor. He lost part of his left hand, and spent the rest of the war in a German prison camp. Articulate and personable, he was now the division manager of the insurance agency.

On January 4 of this year he sat in his office with Bob Edwards, a longtime friend who was also an employee of the agency. Burnett knew that Edwards had played football with Johnny Griffith at South Georgia, a junior college.

"You know, Bob," Burnett said, after they had talked business for a while, "there's something that's been eating me up for a long while. I was going to tell you about it at the time, and then I decided to keep quiet. But I think you should know this, being a friend of Johnny Griffith."

After Edwards heard the story of the phone call, he asked if he could report it to Griffith. Burnett, still reluctant to get seriously involved, told Edwards to go

Downcast coach Griffith slouches near bench as Georgia team is slaughtered.

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ahead but to try to keep his name out of it. Powerful men in Georgia might be offended if Wally Butts was hurt, and Burnett did not want to jeopardize his own career just when things were beginning to break nicely for him.

But like so many others, Burnett found that there is no such thing as a little involvement. Griffith pressed to meet him, and nervously Burnett agreed. In the middle of January he met with Edwards and Griffith in the Georgia coach's room at Atlanta's Biltmore Hotel. Simultaneously a general meeting of the Southeastern Conference coaches was taking place at the Biltmore.

The Georgia-Alabama game had been forgotten by most of the coaches and athletic officials present. A popular topic of conversation was a late-season game between Alabama and Georgia Tech, in which Bryant's long winning streak had been broken.

Alabama, a five-point favorite, had trailed 7-6 with only a little more than a minute to play. Then Alabama made a first down on the Georgia Tech 14-yard line. Since Bryant had a competent field-goal kicker, the classic strategy would have been to pound away at the middle of Tech's line, keeping the ball between the goalposts and, on third or fourth down, order a field-goal try. (Alabama had defeated Georgia Tech on a last-minute field goal in 1961.) Instead, Bryant's quarterback passed on first down. The pass was intercepted, and Georgia Tech held the ball during the game's waning seconds, thus scoring last season's greatest upset.

During the January conference at the Biltmore, Bryant was frequently kidded about that first-down pass.

Away from the bars and the crowds, in Griffith's room the talk was only of Georgia-Alabama. Griffith listened grimly to Burnett's story, then read his notes. Suddenly he looked up.

"I didn't believe you until just this minute," he told Burnett. "But here's something in your notes that you couldn't possibly have dreamed up . . . this thing about our pass patterns. I took this over from Wally Butts when I became coach, and I gave it a different name. Nobody uses the old name for this pattern but one man. Wally Butts."

Suspicious confirmed

Griffith finished reading the notes, then asked Burnett if he could keep them. Burnett nodded.

"We knew somebody'd given our plays to Alabama," Griffith told him, "and maybe to a couple of other teams we played too. But we had no idea it was Wally Butts. You know, during the first half of the Alabama game my players kept coming to the sidelines and saying, 'Coach, we been sold out. Their linebackers are hollering out our plays while we're still calling the signals.'"

Griffith has since spoken of his feelings when he had finished reading Burnett's notes, and Burnett and Edwards had left. "I don't think I moved for an hour—thinking what I should do. Then I realized I didn't have any choice."

Griffith went to university officials, told them what he knew and said that he would resign if Butts was permitted to

Head coach Johnny Griffith of Georgia's beaten Bulldogs: "I never had a chance."

remain in his job. On January 28 a report reached the newspapers that Butts had resigned. At first it was denied by Butts and the university. A few days later it was confirmed with the additional news—that Butts would remain as athletic director until June 1 so that he could qualify for certain pension benefits. Rumors flooded Atlanta. One of the wildest was that Butts was mysteriously and suddenly ill and had entered the state hospital at Athens. This was quickly scotched when Georgia University officials maintained that Butts merely went for the physical checkup required for his pension records. Shortly afterward he was seen in Atlanta at a Georgia Tech basketball game.

But if Butts was seen publicly, events involving him remained closely guarded secrets. Burnett was asked to come to the Atlanta office of M. Cook Barwick, an attorney representing the University of Georgia. There he met Dr. O. C. Aderhold, the university president. Burnett's story was carefully checked. He then agreed to take a lie-detector test, which was administered by polygraph expert Sidney McMain, in the Atlanta Federal building. Burnett passed the test to everybody's satisfaction.

Phone-company check

Next an official of the Southern Bell Telephone Company checked and found that a call had been made from the office of Communications International to the University of Alabama extension noted by Burnett on his scratch pad. This information corroborated Burnett's statement that the call had been made at about 10:25 in the morning and had lasted 15 or 16 minutes.

"I jotted down the time when the call was completed," Burnett said. "It was 10:40. This is an old navigator's habit, I guess. For instance, I know that I was shot down over Saint-Vith at exactly 10:21, because when the bombardier called 'Bombs away!' I looked at my watch and wrote down the time. A few seconds later we got hit."

University officials still nursed reservations about Burnett's story because of the fantastic coincidence that had enabled him to overhear Butts's call. Then, during one of the many conferences he attended in attorney Barwick's office in the Rhodes-Haverty Building, a second coincidence, equally odd, cleared the air. Barwick placed a call to Doctor Aderhold at the university. Suddenly, Barwick and Aderhold found themselves somehow braided into a four-way conversation with two unknown female voices. The two men burst into nervous laughter. Burnett's story gained a little more credence.

February 21 was a painful day for George Burnett. He was summoned once more to Barwick's office, because Bernie Moore, the commissioner of the Southeastern Conference, "wanted to ask some questions." On Burnett's arrival he found not only Moore but Doctor Aderhold, two members of the university's board of regents, and another man identified as Bill Hartman, a friend of Wally Butts.

From the start, Burnett sensed a mood of hostility in the air. The ball was carried by one of the members of the Georgia board of regents, who confronted Burnett

with a report that he had been arrested two years before for writing bad checks and that he was still on probation when he overheard the conversation between Butts and Bryant.

"Is there anything else in your past you're trying to cover up?" the regents official demanded.

Burnett was frightened and angry. "I didn't realize that I was on trial," he said. He went on to say that he had nothing to hide, that he had given university officials permission to look into his background, and that he had taken a lie-detector test, signed an affidavit that his testimony was true and permitted his statements to be recorded on tape. His notes had been taken from him and placed by Barwick in the safety-deposit vault of an Atlanta bank.

"I was arrested on a bad-check charge," Burnett admitted. "I was way behind on my bills and two of the checks I wrote—one was for twenty-five dollars and the other for twenty dollars—bounced. I was fined one hundred dollars and put on probation for a year. I think that anybody who is fair will find I got into trouble because I've always had trouble handling my financial affairs and not because I acted with criminal intent."

Burnett was shaken by this meeting. He felt that he had been candid with the university but that he had also angered many friends of Wally Butts. He signed a paper at the officials' request which gave the university permission to have his war records opened and examined. He cared about his reputation. He was proud to have been a navigator.

"Doctor Aderhold was always very kind to me at those meetings," Burnett said later, "but I didn't like the attitude of some of the others. I began to feel that I'd be hurt when and if these people decided to make this mess public. That's when I went to my lawyer, and we agreed that I should tell my story to *The Saturday Evening Post*."

Now the net closed on Wally Butts. On February 23 the University of Georgia's athletic board met hastily in Atlanta and confronted Butts with Burnett's testimony. Challenged, Butts refused to take a lie-detector test. The next day's newspapers reported that he had submitted his resignation, effective immediately, "for purely personal and business purposes."

"I still think I'm able to coach a little," Butts told a reporter that day, "and I feel I can help a pro team."

The chances are that Wally Butts will never help any football team again. Bear Bryant may well follow him into oblivion—a special hell for that grim extrovert—for in a very real sense he betrayed the boys he was pledged to lead. The investigation by university and Southeastern Conference officials is continuing; motion pictures of other games are being scrutinized; where it will end no one so far can say. But careers will be ruined, that is sure. A great sport will be permanently damaged. For many people the bloom must pass forever from college football.

"I never had a chance, did I?" Coach Johnny Griffith said bitterly to a friend the other day. "I never had a chance."

When a fixer works against you, that's the way he likes it. THE END



Butts and Bryant meet as friends, exchange warm greetings before the Georgia-Alabama game at Legion Field, Birmingham, Alabama, in 1960.