

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

# Au-Burned

One man rules AU football, and it's not the coach. Ask Terry Bowden

by Shaun Assael



**I**t is early spring in Auburn and the paranoia is running high, even for the paranoia capital of college football. While Terry Bowden mends fences on his horse farm, the men who run AU's football program search for words to explain why they've spent a half million dollars to duck Bowden's daddy's Florida State Seminoles in the season opener. Auburn's new coach, Tommy Tuberville, plays the good soldier, insisting he's happy to face Appalachian State instead. But one half of Alabama is mortified by the hasty retreat. The other half—the Crimson Tide half—is tailgating in the glow of the whole spectacle.

Fifty miles from ground zero, in a penthouse office overlooking Montgomery, the most powerful man in Auburn sports narrows his cobalt eyes. "The best thing for all of us would be if Terry just moved somewhere else," Bobby Lowder says icily. "This is all so ... awkward."

He sits among Spanish oil portraits and stately antiques, the arrangement so impeccable it gives away almost nothing about him. Only the faint strains of country radio from the parlor outside pierce the three-inch-glass quiet of the penthouse. A dissatisfied look sweeps across Lowder's bell-shaped face. "You know," he adds, "this isn't about me or Auburn. What Terry did would have gotten him fired anywhere. He messed with the rules of success."

Maybe, but only one man makes the rules at Auburn, and that's Bobby Lowder. Since 1983, when then-governor George Wallace appointed him to the university's board of directors, he's been its high judge and occasional executioner. The Lowder name has been well known in Alabama since the 1940s, when Bobby's father, Edward, the dirt-poor son of a sawmill worker, was hired by Lawrence County to start an insurance company for farmers. He turned it into a billion-dollar colossus with deep political roots in the Democratic party. Before he died in '83, Edward helped his son buy Colonial Bank for \$116 million. Fifteen years later, in 1998, that son spent \$1.7 billion buying up other banks in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Texas and Nevada. These days, Bobby, 57, spends so much time racing across the South he wakes up at 3:30 a.m. to spend time with his wife. Yet in Auburn, people drop their voices when talking about him, as if he could be hiding behind the next elm.

Here's why: When Governor Fob James, a longtime political foe, tried to replace Lowder on Auburn's 12-man board of directors four years ago, Lowder's allies in the state senate blocked James' nominee. Then Alabama's highest court ruled that Lowder couldn't be ousted until the senate confirmed his successor. When Lowder family money helped Lt. Gov. Don Siegelman oust James in the '98 election, Lowder secured another term on the board. If all goes as planned, he will preside over deep cuts in the school's liberal arts programs, which, it so happens, house his fiercest faculty critics. He doesn't see Auburn as they do—an agricultural school fighting for a modern identity. He sees it as one of the last preserves of the small-time farmer, just as his daddy did.

Bobby's parents met at Auburn. His father was a student. His mother, a secretary in the agriculture school. Their son went to his first Tiger game in 1950, cheered with his daddy as the team won the national championship in 1957 and graduated with a business degree in 1964. He has donated so much money (\$4.25 million in 1998 alone) that locals call Auburn "Lowder U."

It was Bobby Lowder—not AU's president or athletic director—who picked Pat Dye to coach the football team in 1981 and then, at the height of an NCAA pay-for-play scandal in 1992, sat him in a high-backed leather armchair in his office to tell him he was through. ("Pat meant so much to Auburn, I wanted him to get out with some dignity," Lowder says.) It was Lowder who headed the search committee that replaced Dye with Bobby Bowden's youngest son, Terry. Now, six years later, it is Lowder who wants Terry out of the Auburn area—and fast.

"What's misunderstood? That I snap my fingers and things happen at Auburn," Lowder says. "That's just not factual." And yet one AU employee quips: "When Bobby Lowder shakes his snow globe, everyone 'round here goes wheee."

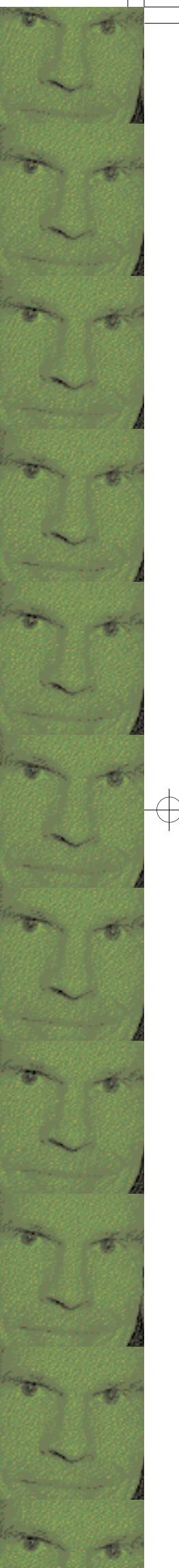
Terry Bowden, 43, sits on the porch of his million-dollar mansion, watching fish jump from a creek lined with pine trees. Months have passed since he was Alabama's singular obsession—since shock jocks made fun of his wife's cosmetic breast surgery and joked that he had a senile dad. Still, Terry's under no illusion. He knows that calm such as this is fleeting in a Harper Lee town that orbits an SEC football program. So he lays low, waiting for the fall when he'll commute to New York to be a commentator for ABC.

Back in the late '80s, Bowden worked hard to get Bobby Lowder's attention. He was a young coach steering Division III Samford, the Birmingham college that his parents attended, into a Division I-AA contender. He hired Lowder's daughter, Cindy, as a secretary, and kept up with Auburn's politics through his brother Tommy, then the Tigers' offensive coordinator. By the time Dye's scandal unfolded, Terry had become Lowder's protégé. The evening before his interview with AU's search committee, he spent three hours rehearsing questions and answers with the banker. The 35-year-old coach was so jazzed he couldn't sleep, so before dawn, he packed up his notes and drove the 150 miles to Atlanta, where the committee was meeting, and waited for hours in his car.

Auburn finished 11-0 in Bowden's first year, 1993, and people went crazy. They jammed Denaro's, a College Street hangout, when he joined its band to sing James Taylor songs. When he appeared on the sidelines wearing a pin that read "attitude," the bookstore ordered 50,000, which sold out. When his two-season record reached 20-1-1, the athletic department bought out his \$835,000 mortgage.

Unless you were looking—and who in his right mind was?—you didn't see the small but powerful group of Auburn elders choking on Bowden's success. Dye, a charter member of the club, squares his shoulders as he leans into the memory of the 1994 game against Georgia, the one that ended Bowden's 20-game winning streak. He's stretching his legs on the porch by the lake on his 600-acre timber farm—evidence that being a living legend pays well in Auburn. Being a director of Lowder's Colonial Bank doesn't hurt either.

"We were ahead 23-9 and they couldn't stop [running back] Stephen Davis," Dye begins. "We threw the ball deep, for what reason I don't know, and it gets intercepted. All of a sudden, Georgia goes for an 80-yard strike and it's 23-16. The game winds up in a tie. The next week, we're in Birmingham and we throw it six of the first 10 snaps. Like that, we're behind 21-0 to Alabama. That was



the beginning of the end." Dye puts his hand over his heart. "We can't recruit the kind of athletes they do in Florida, so our football has to be about whipping the other guy until he's scared to death. It's lining up and running him over. I tried to tell Terry that."

Bowden grew up on college campuses, studied overseas at Oxford, graduated magna cum laude as an accountant and added a law degree to his résumé before following his father into the family business. Dye, a Georgia farm boy, now 59, has a closet full of camouflage gear and cowboy boots. Bowden talks faster than a jittery Starbucks latte fiend. Dye measures his speech so carefully, you can order lunch between his sentences. The two are central-casting metaphors for the old and new Souths. It was only a matter of time before they went to war inside Bobby Lowder's snow globe.

Beginning in 1995, Dye appeared weekly on a sports radio program spon-

friends since they coached at Bama under Bear Bryant. And the craggy 58-year-old Oliver was the archetype of an Auburn head coach, making Bowden seem even more the outsider. Because Bowden gave his defensive coaches autonomy (some say his willingness to delegate bordered on uninterest), Oliver quickly built a base of support among players and media, throwing himself into the new job at 4:30 a.m. each day and reshaping the young defense.

Each year Auburn's season climaxes with the Georgia and Alabama games. In '96, the 7-2 Tigers squandered a 28-7 lead to Georgia in a quadruple-overtime loss; then they lost a heartbreaker to the Tide, which rolled for 74 yards and a touchdown in the final two minutes. Finebaum & Co. howled on the air. Housel renewed Bowden's contract, but halfheartedly, announcing that no one was pleased with his 8-4 record. "Auburn expects more," he said.

Those words sparked a feeding frenzy. Was the A.D. simply trying to light



Capacity crowds at Jordan-Hare loved it when Davis (48) ran for 1,068 yards and 17 TDs and Auburn went on a two-year tear of 20-1-1. But War Eagle traditionalists started grumbling when Bowden went to the air.



sored in part by Colonial Bank. "We were the lone voices attacking the fair-haired boy," says host Paul Finebaum. They accused Bowden of using Auburn to raise his profile, going on ABC as a color analyst and on Nike trips to Hawaii. They slammed him for letting the running game slide, even though Davis had 1,068 yards and 17 touchdowns in 1995. Worst of all, they poked fun at him for running to his father for advice on everything. As one reporter who covers the team explains: "Auburn doesn't like to think it got somebody else's kid as its coach."

Critics were particularly galled by the dismissal of defensive coordinator Wayne Hall, who was tight enough with Dye to be considered his heir apparent and close enough to Lowder to have been married in his home.

"Terry and Wayne never trusted one another," says A.D. David Housel. "They still don't." Late in 1995, after Hall had begun denigrating Bowden's play-calling within the athletic department, Bowden fired him. But, if the young coach thought he had earned the right to run his program his way, he was sorely mistaken. Housel turned around and hired Hall as a \$110,000-a-year "consultant," perhaps, according to one published report which both parties refute, to keep Hall from revealing further pay-for-play violations.

Eager to show he had the stature to command a big name, Bowden raided archrival Alabama for Bill "Brother" Oliver, a legendary defensive coach who was mired in a political swamp of his own. The Tide had been placed on probation for NCAA violations involving a player who was under contract to an agent, and it looked like head coach Gene Stallings might be ousted. Oliver was accused of lobbying Bama A.D. Hootie Ingram for the job prematurely. When Ingram was fired and Stallings was left standing, the man dubbed "Benedict Oliver" had two choices: Retire or leave town.

For Bowden, hiring Oliver was double-edged. Oliver and Dye had been

a fire under Bowden? Or was he speaking out on behalf of Lowder and Auburn's elders? Early in his tenure, Bowden simply would have phoned the banker for answers; they spoke nearly every week. But the frequency of those calls slipped to one a month, then to none at all, particularly after Cathy Lowder, Terry's back-channel barometer of her father's moods, left the Tiger staff to move out West. Housel, on the other hand, sometimes spoke to Lowder twice a month to update him on matters of concern to Auburn's board, which has been criticized for micromanagement and for the undue influence of a Lowder-friendly bloc of voters.

By 1997, Finebaum was playing Matt Drudge to Bowden's Bill Clinton. "You could tell there was no discipline on that team," Finebaum says. "He was letting players get away with things. He wasn't recruiting well." When Auburn got whipped 20-0 by Mississippi State, critics figured they had Bowden cornered, but the Tigers rallied behind senior QB Dameyune Craig to beat Georgia and Bama and end the season 10-3. They came within a point of edging Tennessee for the SEC title and earned an invite to the Peach Bowl to play Clemson. Snow fell on Atlanta as the players reported to practice. It was the beginning of Bowden's nuclear winter.

Recruiting is the lifeblood of any program, and Auburn's took a hit after Hall's dismissal when star recruiter Rodney Garner quit in protest. Garner went to Tennessee, and quarterback sensation Tee Martin, a homegrown Alabama talent, followed him. Bowden became obsessed with Jason Stansbridge, a little-noticed QB with a rocket arm. After Bowden signed him, Stansbridge started throwing smoke on his high school baseball team and became a surprise first-round draft pick of the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. Meanwhile, Ole Miss snatched up Romaro Miller, a scrambling passer who wanted to come to Auburn so badly

PAGE 82: TOP: CHRIS COMPTON/WHITE AUBURN PLAINSMAN; RICK STEWART/ALLSPORT. THIS PAGE: BOB ROSATO (3)



he cried upon hearing the news that Bowden had passed on him. By 1998, the coach's stock was plummeting. On March 19, star defensive back Martavious Houston had to be dismissed for unspecified rules violations. On April 7, Auburn police arrested receiver Robert Baker and charged him with selling 111 grams of cocaine to an undercover cop. Bowden defended his troubled player with unwieldy explanations. He insisted Houston's troubles were the result of gambling debts from a local dog track. When the track's owner, a booster, complained, the coach said he meant Baker had lost money on illegal gambling. That started a rumor that the FBI was investigating Auburn for game-fixing. Lowder was livid. "When I went to Auburn, there were no drugs here," he says. "I hated what I was seeing." As the weeks passed, fans learned that seven key recruits had failed to meet freshman eligibility requirements.

The Tigers dropped the opener to Virginia, 19-0, that fall. One week later,

So his attorney, Ricky Davis, met with Auburn's lawyers, hoping to undo the resignation. "I tried to talk Terry into fighting them," says Davis. "When we went to sleep Thursday, I thought I had gotten through to him. But on Friday, he and his wife woke up and decided they didn't want to go through it. After all, they have kids, and that's a pretty ruthless group over there."

By mid-afternoon Friday, Auburn was redoing the program for the Louisiana Tech game, removing all mention of the coach with the .725 winning percentage. Brother Oliver got his first and only win as Auburn's coach the next day. His time at the top was short-lived. After waiting a lifetime to be a Division I head coach, he lost three straight and, at season's end, was passed over in favor of Tommy Tuberville of Ole Miss, presumably because he had become too controversial. "I have all the pieces, but I'm not putting them together for anybody," Oliver explains. "Coach Bryant used to tell me that the only thing cer-



**"Coach Bryant used to tell me the only thing certain in football is that you'll see something different every year,"** Oliver says. **"I've seen a lot different in the last year. It will happen to whoever stays."**



they beat Mississippi, then collapsed into a four-game losing streak. The coach and the banker hadn't spoken in more than a year when a newspaper reported that Auburn had to "finish strongly or [Bowden] is likely to lose his job." Bowden told his staff, "I'm ignoring the rumor and I want you to also."

With the story spilling out of alumni fax machines across the state, Brother Oliver brought a concealed mini-recorder to a coach's meeting on Monday, Oct. 20. Oliver insists that was merely a joke. But in the days that followed, that act was widely reported as another coup attempt. *The Orlando Sentinel* quoted coaches who said Oliver frequently referred to Bowden as "that little s—head" and said Bowden was warned, "Brother is trying to get you."

On Oct. 21, Housel called Bowden into his office. He recalls telling the coach, "There are some real concerns, Terry, and you have to make some calls to assuage them." Bowden insists Housel told him: "It's much worse than what those articles suggested. There's virtually nothing you can do." After staying up much of the night, Bowden walked back into the A.D.'s office on Wednesday and stunned the courtly Housel by announcing, "If this is done, I need to resign." Lowder was in his bank office when Bowden phoned him to add, "I talked to my daddy. I think it's best." Recounting the conversation, Lowder rolls the word daddy on his tongue like a sourball. "As a policy," he concludes dryly, "I don't try to talk people out of quitting."

Auburn's secret held for 48 hours before it spilled out in a rush of bulletins across the state, the SEC and then the country—each new disclosure adding a twist of gothic intrigue to the story. Finebaum broke into a Rush Limbaugh broadcast on Friday to herald the end of the Bowden era. Terry had spent the prior two days waiting for what he was sure would be a call from university president William Muse asking him to change his mind. But no such call came.

tain in football is that you'll see something different every year. I've seen a lot different in the last year. And it will happen to whoever stays there."

Tuberville is executive-trim, Chivas smooth. He's happy to take the heat for canceling the FSU game, handing \$500,000 to Terry's dad. "The kids were drained physically and emotionally," he says. "We couldn't go about our business. I told Housel I thought it would be best if we canceled the game."

Tuberville won't attack Bowden directly. But he's armed and ready with stats that damn him. "Did you know that before the last game of last season, Auburn had gone 31 games without a 100-yard rusher?" he says. "We have to run the ball more. There is no doubt." Toward that end, he signed four running backs this spring and a pair of QBs, though the talk of Auburn is Deandre Green, a local receiver who is considered to be one of the South's best.

Still, the offense is a patchwork. And the 1999 schedule includes Florida, Georgia and Tennessee, the top three teams in the SEC East. That means a lot of face time for the eight starters who return on defense. But there's no such thing as a rebuilding year at Auburn. In mid-April, the sports information director asked Tuberville if he wanted to update the media about spring practice. The new coach rolled his eyes. A press conference seemed like overkill. When Tuberville finally strode to the microphone, his jaw dropped. Fifty reporters and eight cameras packed the room.

That proves Auburn is over its ex-coach, says Finebaum: "I told one of my sure-fire jokes about him at an event recently and it barely got a chuckle." But Alabama is a small state. And, as far as Lowder is concerned, there's not enough room for even one Bowden. Not long ago, the banker opened his *Wall Street Journal* to find Auburn criticized for backing out of the FSU game. The story ate at Lowder like few things can.

It may be spring. But it's still chilly inside Bobby Lowder's snow globe. ☀

FROM LEFT: BOB ROSATO (2); ANDY LYONS/ALLSPORT

