

*The Junction Boys* (2002). Written and directed by Mike Robe. Produced by Orly Adelson. ESPN Original Entertainment. 93 mins.

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It's 1978 and Paul "Bear" Bryant is flying to meet the survivors of Junction twenty-four years before. The Bear is apprehensive because he drove off two-thirds of the Texas A&M football team before he coached a single game. Actually the middle-aged Aggie veterans who await him revere the coach. Time has a way of dulling pain and creating heroes out of tyrants.

Flash back to 1954. Two buses filled with rollicking Aggie footballers head south across the bone dry creeks of drought-stricken Texas to the devil's half acre, or, more precisely, a crossroads by the name of Junction. These robust, profane, wisecracking "student-athletes" don't have a clue to what lies ahead. They will be going through Bear Bryant's version of the Bataan Death March.

One wonders if the Bear knew where *he* was going. Yet the new coach at Texas A&M in 1954 certainly had a game plan. He would work this sorry bunch from before sunup and until after sundown. So what if more than half the team left? The coach offered them a one-way ticket back to College Station. So what if there were injuries? He himself had played most of a game with a broken leg. And so what if the boys didn't get water, although one player came within sixty seconds of dying from heatstroke? By the end, Bryant had his team—a group of walking wounded who won exactly one game that season. As for the rest, 76 of the 111 players fled Bryant's inferno.

ESPN based its two-hour dramatization on Jim Dent's book of the same title. Though filmed with a largely Australian cast outside Sydney, the site and the characters have a flavor of rural Texas nearly fifty years ago. Telescoping the real players into three characters enables the film to spotlight two characters who endured Junction and one who fought desperately to survive—and nearly paid for it with his life. Viewers might be interested to know that two of the characters represent Jack Pardee and Gene Stallings, themselves players and coaches of bear-like stature. Unlike many made-for-TV movies, *The Junction Boys* gets most of it right.

To be sure, Bryant himself clawed his way out of hardscrabble rural poverty via the gridiron. Before coming to Aggieland, he had seven years of success as a coach at Kentucky but left the bluegrass state in a clash with the autocratic basketball coach Adolph Rupp. Bryant, who wanted to go to Alabama, had to settle for A&M, a team with a 4-5 record. Though the freshmen were not eligible, he had 111 returning players who thought they were going to the Cotton Bowl. The Bear could afford to shed some of the less dedicated or less ornery. Coaches in the Southwestern Conference treated their players like "meat on the hoof"—and why not? They had one-hundred-plus recruits and boosters willing to shell out big bucks for prize players. Indeed the practices at A&M in 1953 made college football today look like the Pop Warner leagues.

The movie's three main characters—Skeet, Claude, and Johnny—face cactus, giant burrs, and temperatures soaring to 114 degrees. Bryant refuses to give the players water for their parched bodies, so heatstroke is almost inevitable. Every night shadowy figures disappear into the darkness beyond the practice field. "I didn't know we had players who could run that fast," comments Smokey Harper, Bryant's tipsy trainer.

After butchering Bobby Knight in *A Season on the Brink* (2002), ESPN has created a thoroughly believable Bear Bryant (played by Tom Berenger). His steely eyes and sheer nastiness ring true as do his occasional moments of self-doubt. Near the end, he morphs improbably into a father figure, in the reunion at Junction. Those once callow boys on the bus to Junction are just as rollicking, though a bit paunchier. And they idolize the coach. In turn, he tells them that he has thought of Junction every day since 1954 and perhaps with a touch of regret. Never mind: His surviving Junction boys present him with a gold ring. When he dies in 1983, it will be the only piece of jewelry he is wearing. Even Johnny, who nearly died of heatstroke at Junction, shows up—he's now a school principal and football coach. Years before, Johnny's father, who lost an arm in World War II and rotted in a Japanese prison camp, delivered the most cutting remark. "It's war," says Bryant as the parents come to remove a feeble Johnny. "Coach, I know all about war," the father replies. "Football is a sport." But the Bear tells the Junction Boys, "You had so much heart." Here in Junction the medium is indeed the message.

Why has the Junction story become an Aggie and gridiron legend? Perhaps it's the football fans love/hate relationship with hardship and violence. What athlete or boot camp graduate has not suffered through a training camp—and wanted to disappear into the shadows? Of course, there is entertainment value in seeing the brutal side of Bear Bryant, who won 323 games over his 38-year coaching career. The Bear would have other moments of controversy. In 1960, Bryant would sue Atlanta sportswriter Furman Bisher for libel over allegations of intentional violence by his players. Soon afterwards, Bryant and the University of Georgia athletic director were embroiled in a lawsuit against the *Saturday Evening Post* over "The Story of a Football Fix." By that time, the Patton of the Gridiron had left College Station and moved to his alma mater, Alabama. That Bryant won consistently and was a folk hero in Alabama (second only to Governor George Wallace) makes those stories and this all the more compelling. Put simply, the film seems to tell us that the real Paul Bryant and the Bryant of football folklore could be quite different.

Of course, sports historians will do well to read the book (either before or after seeing the movie). The eleven days at Junction occupy only half of Dent's book. In the other chapters, Dent tells the story of how Jack Pardee, Gene Stallings, and John David Crow rose to dominate the Southwest Conference—undefeated and ranked third in the nation in 1956. No doubt the tough cadre of eight Junction survivors contributed to their never-say-die spirit. Just as important, however, was the remarkable talent of Crow, who avoided the death march to Junction. Which goes to show that attendance at Junction was not necessary to gridiron success.

Having seen so many bad sports movies, this reviewer is grateful to the producers, directors, Berenger, and the Aussie Junction Boys, not to mention Jim Dent. When filmmakers stick to the facts, their work can be worth a great deal more than a thousand words. *The Junction Boys* may not be a classic, but it's pretty darned good entertainment. Un-

doubtedly it will be shown periodically on ESPN. So settle back with a Dr. Pepper (a sponsor and a prop) and treat yourself to this surreal training camp that has become part of Aggie and national gridiron lore.

