

Pell City's Bobby Skelton

By GEORGE WRIGHT HOWARD
Bobby Skelton keeps on adding to his already chock-full reservoir of happy memories, the result of a busy, busy lifetime.

Robert Wayne Skelton was reared in Pell during World War II.

"Gosh, when I was a kid, I played football, baseball, basketball, chased girls," said today's model of that long ago athlete while winking from behind the desk in his Montgomery office of the Alabama Development Department. "I also did a little fishing and a little hunting. Just about anything.

"I guess Wayne Spradley and I go back to before kindergarten. He played end on the high school football team. I was a quarterback.

"I remember Wayne loved to paint. One of the first things I recall him painting was our bicycles. He and I would paint them just about every-other-week.

"And he loved to paint helmet logos. He'd paint Los Angeles Rams. I've seen them green, gold and most every other color.

"The Good Lord blessed Wayne with the ability to paint. I have a lot of his paintings hanging in my house, now."

The two school chums went their separate ways following high school. Spradley shipped-off to the U.S. Navy and eventually to art school.

Skelton took his football talents over to the University of Alabama and played the game under Paul "Bear" Bryant's direction.

Excerpts from a couple of books about Crimson Tide football represent Skelton's four-year (1957-60) activity at the university.

First, from *The Crimson Tide (The story of Alabama football)* by Clyde Bolton ...

(1959)

... The Tide had not whipped Auburn since 1953 and had not been bowling since that same club lost to rice in the (1954) Cotton Bowl.

... Bryant was about to beat the War Eagles and earn a bowl trip in



BOBBY SKELTON

1959.

... Auburn Coach Shug Jordan was apprehensive, though. "We can expect them to shoot the works."

... Alabama won 10-0 on a 27-yard field goal by Tommy Brooker and a 39-yard touchdown pass from Bobby Skelton to (Marlin) Dyas.

"I remember it was cold that day," said Skelton in his Montgomery office. "And that touchdown came on an 'automatic.' If Auburn was to line up in a certain defense, I was to pass to Dyess, who played split end that day.

"And it happened.

"Four days later, we received an invitation to play Penn State in the Liberty Bowl ... at Philadelphia."

The second Skelton illustration is from *Bowl, Bama, Bowl* by Al Browning.

(1960)

... In his book 'Bear,' Bryant says, "I'll never forget the Georgia Tech game, not if I live three lifetimes. If it wasn't the greatest comeback I've ever seen, it was certainly the greatest I've ever been involved in.

"We were down 15-0 at the half.

"... I walked around, pat 'em on the back and clapping hands. I said, 'Damn, this is good. Now they'll see what kind of mas and papas we've got. They see what we've got in us."

Alabama had plenty inside. Crimson Tide defense clamped down on the Georgia Tech offense, and the offense, led by quarterback Bobby Skelton, was to work. It was 15-13 Georgia Tech, with 3 minutes, 21 seconds left to play and Alabama had the ball on its own 20 yard line.

Two first downs put the ball in the Alabama 40. Skelton passed 18 yards to Bill Battle to the Georgia Tech 42. On fourth down Skelton passed to Norbie Roinet for a first down on the 32. 32 seconds left, Skelton passed to Butch Wilson who ran to the

Time was running out quickly and on the Alabama side Bryant was hurrying (Richard O'Dell, a sophomore who had tempted and missed two touchdowns all year, into the game.

Skelton held the ball, O'Dell kicked it wobbly, and left John Lynch called it good as it ran out. Bryant's reaction was he saw the ball go over the crossbar? "I couldn't believe it."

Years later, there was Skelton in his Montgomery office working a memory.

"I was the designated team captain for that game. I had earned a touchdown pass to Roinet, and Pat Trammell had thrown one to (I believe) Leon Fuller.

"Yes I remember that day most every play."

More Bobby Skelton#

J.B. Whitworth was head coach when Skelton arrived at the University of Alabama in 1957. By next year, Paul "Bear" Bryant returned home and set-up-shop at the capstone.

Skelton was one of those talented players who tucked-in their pads and withstood Bear's super-tough practice sessions.

"The year after I graduated (1961) Alabama won both the SEC and the national (mythical) championship with a lot of the star players from our 1960 team," said Skelton. "I was just one year away from being a Main Event."

Skelton had "umped Little League and community basketball games" back in Pell City. Suddenly, out of school and with no more football to play, the young n

Continues to build memories

scouted around for something to keep him active.

"It was almost an accident, but three of us, 'Goobie' Stapp, Talladega's Buddy Wesley, and I joined Gordon Pettus, who was then head of the Tuscaloosa high school umpires association, and started making \$20 for officiating Friday night games.

"After about 10 years, I put in my application to become an official for Southeastern Conference games, an association that lasted 13 years.

"The SEC had some pretty strong rules for their officials.

"We couldn't work a game for an alma mater; for a coach under whom we had played; for a former teammate's team.

"That eliminated a lot of people and teams. Like I couldn't 'call' University of Alabama games, a game involving Coach Bryant's team. There was also Tennessee until Bill Battle left, and of course, no Florida games while Charlie Pell was coach. I had been teammates of both."

With his officiating involving mostly weekends, Skelton jumped at the chance for a full time job in Montgomery with the Alabama Development system.

"I began this job in 1976. That'll make 13 years on-the-job this June," said the Job Project Mana-

ger in the development's Industrial Division.

Meanwhile, Skelton's proficiency grew with experience over the years. He became in great demand, even being asked to 'call' Cotton, Gator, Liberty and Orange Bowl games.

"I guess the most difficult game I ever called was when Miami beat Nebraska in a national championship game some years ago in the Orange Bowl. One official had pulled a hamstring and another had heart palpitations. So, we had problems from the first.

"I was working as a back judge from the middle of the field, so I had to run from sideline to sideline with the plays.

"Both teams were trying to intimidate each other. They exchanged a lot of words exchanged.

"There were about 61 or 62 points scored in the game, and there were a lot of flags thrown. A lot of penalties. We were busy.

Miami was ahead when Nebraska scored late and tried for two points — which would have won the game — but they failed.

"I thought that game would never get over with. It really was NOT an enjoyable game for the officials."

Four years ago, Skelton became an official in the National Football League — a field judge, the NFL's

version of college's back judge.

"I like the pro game better," said Skelton as he weighed the differences in the two concepts — professional and college football.

"It's more of an individual game, man-to-man. A defensive back against a split end, offensive tackle against defensive tackle. The game highlights individual abilities moreso than in college.

"More of a blue collar game. The fans work all week in the mills, driving trucks, in construction. Then Sunday they cheer for their team.

"No tailgate parties or get together with friends who are fans of the other team — like after college games where they remain friends forever.

"But fans of professional teams are not that way. When the Giants come to Pittsburg, Steeler fans want to kill the Giants. They don't have friends in New York."

Bobby and Joy Skelton are both parents of three from previous marriages. That family continues to share a building of memories.

If you watched San Francisco defeat Chicago's Bears for the World Championship on TV, that Field Judge who kept running from sideline-to-sideline was Bobby Skelton — building even more memories.