



Coach Sherrill posed with a little boy wearing a championship ring during a visit to the children's Hospital of San Antonio in May.

# 30 YEARS LATER, THE SPIRIT OF THE 12TH MAN KICKOFF TEAM SHINES

BY ROBERTO MOLAR CANDANOSA '13

**A**re you gonna be just a coach, or are you gonna be an Aggie coach?" Bonfire Red Pot James Fuqua '83 demanded of coach Jackie Sherrill on a 1982 November night. "I want to be the Aggie coach," Sherrill said, following the Red Pot into a gigantic but unfinished Texas Aggie Bonfire. Suddenly, Sherrill found himself wiring logs in the fourth stack of the 55-foot-high Bonfire. From above, he admired how remarkably the 12th Man came together to build the mammoth structure, and something crossed

his mind. If Texas A&M's students were passionate enough to sacrifice their time and effort for its traditions, surely a student body of 40,000 would have 11 maniacs who could take that relentless zeal to Kyle Field's turf.

And it did. Two hundred fifty-two Aggies, including two women, showed up for tryouts in the spring of 1983 after seeing an ad entitled "No Experience Required" in the Battalion. By that fall, Texas A&M's first walk-on special teams unit made its debut against a University of California return team—a team

that had, just the year before, beaten John Elway's Stanford Cardinals on a last-second kickoff return featuring five laterals, known simply as "The Play." A most unique tribute to the spirit of the 12th Man, the kickoff team reinvigorated Texas A&M on and off the field.

"The biggest thing that the 12th Man Kickoff Team did was that it brought the student body to the team and took the team to the student body," Sherrill said. "In 1922, E. King Gill got dressed and he stood on the sidelines, but he never went into the Dixie Classic. Now, all of



Coach Sherrill (back row, second from the right) and a group of former players visited with children at MD Anderson Children's Cancer Hospital in May 2013.

a sudden it was these kids' roommates, their Classmates, their buddies—all of a sudden it was one of them on the field.”

Though in practice the 12th Man Kickoff Team was initially seen as a mere scout team, they soon became more. They started practice earlier and stayed longer for tackling drills that are now banned. Their toughness, effort and specialized training gained them the respect of their varsity counterparts.

Sherrill reminisced how during practice he once asked his players to go full speed. Keith Woodside '88 (a varsity running back who later became an NFL player) cautioned Sherrill to think twice. “What are you talking about, Woodie?” Sherrill said. With a laugh, Woodside answered, “Coach, somebody is going to get hurt, and it ain't gonna be one of those crazy guys out there.”

On Kyle Field they also earned the respect of their adversaries with record performances (the 12th Man Kickoff Team only played home games). Sherrill remembered how they were in the top five in the country for two years and how they averaged 12.5 yards per kickoff return. He emphasized how impressive that was, considering a good average today is 25-30. In fact, it took opposing teams seven years to figure out how to score a touchdown against the 12th Man Kickoff Team.

“They are the best players I've ever had on kickoffs,” Sherrill said. “I've been able to coach a lot of players, but the best players I've ever had were the players that were not going to play

another position and because of their toughness, heart, and desire to play, they excelled.”

Warren Barhorst '88—who stole the towel of Heisman Trophy winner Tim Brown in the 1988 Cotton Bowl—remembered with great pride his days on the 12th Man Kickoff team. “Having the honor to represent the student body and step on Kyle Field is something I will carry with me to my grave,” Barhorst said. “To this day, when fans start screaming, the hair on the back of my neck curls up. That's E. King Gill whispering into your ear.”

Another former player of the 12th Man Kickoff Team, Dennis Mudd '85, remembered how in 1985 coach Sherrill asked the players to wave a small white towel for the first time before kickoff. Mudd thought, “Man, that's a silly idea. You've got be kidding, coach!” Today, the 12th Man towels are a ubiquitous component for game day at Kyle Field.

And like the 12th Man towel, the spirit of the 12th Man Kickoff Team transcends time. The team lives on 30 years later through Sherrill's 12th Man Kickoff Team Foundation, an organization committed to helping Aggies and children in need.

The 12th Man Kickoff Team Foundation began as Sherrill's idea to fund scholarships for the heirs of the players. Having experienced the selfless service of Aggies, Sherrill decided the foundation would have Texas A&M roots. So when Sherrill called his former players and pitched the idea in 2007, everyone accepted with one con-

dition: the scholarships would be available to every student at Texas A&M.

Now, with 90 volunteer members (and one paid executive) the foundation raises funds through special events such as clay shoot tournaments, charity auctions and the generous support of donors who appreciate selfless service.

Scholarships are provided for students who need them most, and for students related to a fallen veteran. Serving a wide range of recipients, the foundation has provided more than \$60,000 in scholarships.

Additionally, the foundation expanded its goals to help children with Down syndrome and Lou Gehrig's disease, and to help lighten the lives of other hospitalized children in Texas. More than \$125,000 has been raised to fund the Emory Bellard ALS Clinic in Georgetown, Texas; \$50,000 has been raised for the Johnny Stallings Rise School in Tuscaloosa, Ala., and \$5,000 was raised for the Driscoll Children's Hospital in Corpus Christi. Other beneficiaries include the MD Anderson Children's Cancer Hospital, the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital, the Texas Children's Hospital and the Children's Hospital of San Antonio.

As part of its annual scholarship banquet on Nov. 8, the foundation honored the 30th anniversary of the formation of the 12th Man Kickoff Team. Special guests for the event included President R. Bowen Loftin '71, Sherrill and former 12th Man Kickoff Team players.

Find out more about the foundation and the team at [12thmktot.org](http://12thmktot.org). 🍷