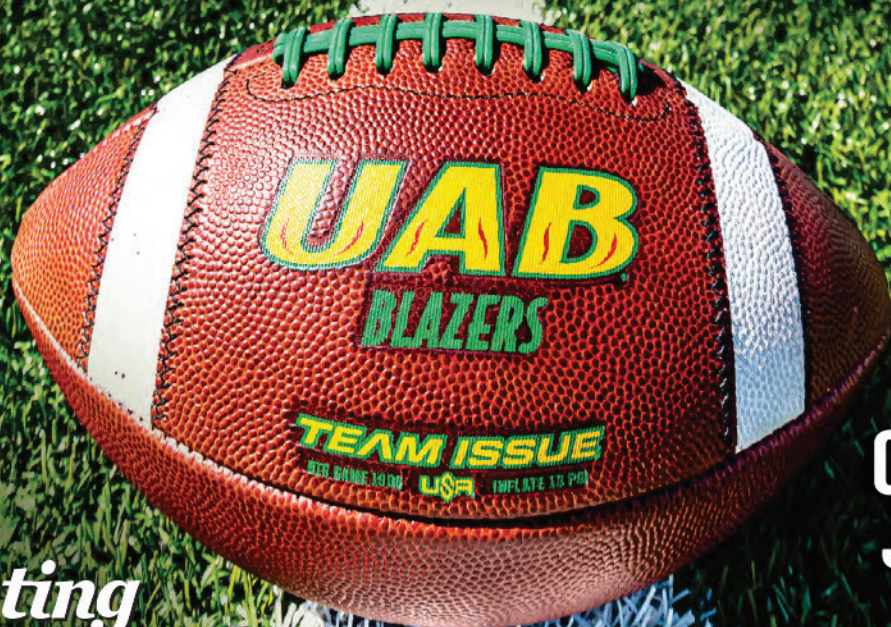


PORTICO

FALL 2021

MOUNTAIN BROOK

UAB PHASE TWO!



**Fall
Planting
Tips**

**HERE
COME THE
JUDGE(S)**

MOJO ART

UAB

THE RETURN: PHASE 2

By LOYD MCINTOSH





Fans waiting for the Blazer Walk outside Protective Stadium.



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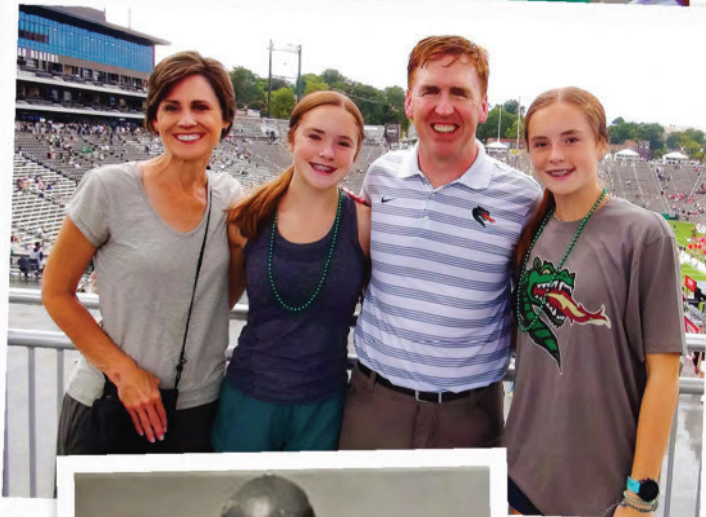
t was a scene many thought would never happen. On a rainy Saturday in October, thousands of people wearing green and gold crowded the streets of downtown Birmingham to cheer on the UAB Blazers as they christened their shiny new digs, the 45,000-seat Protective Stadium. This moment comes just seven years after the cancellation of the football program and more than 20 years of failed attempts

to build a new stadium to replace Legion Field. Frankly, it's a miracle either of them exists at all.

"It was everything we hoped for and more," says UAB Head Football Coach Bill Clark during his remarks following the game, a 36-12 loss to the Liberty Flames. Even though the outcome didn't quite have a storybook ending, the atmosphere throughout the Uptown district was nothing short of celebratory. "It was a great turnout in spite of some rain and lightning. I could not be prouder of our fans, the attendance, and atmosphere—our players loved it."

Of course, UAB Football's strange and turbulent history only underscores the significance of this moment.

UAB football officially launched 30 years ago as an independent Division III program after two years of play as a club team. In the late summer of 1991, close to 200 aspiring athletes showed up on the Southside hoping to find a spot on the first Blazer football team. "Everyone was fighting for a position. It was crazy," says Alan Spooner, a linebacker who played for UAB during the program's first four seasons. Now a Physical Therapist with TherapySouth in Vestavia, at the time Spooner was just a 19-year-old from Trussville looking for a chance to continue playing the sport he loved.



ABOVE: Alan Spooner and family at UAB's debut game in Protective Stadium. LEFT: Alan Spooner—photo from the 1992 UAB Media Guide.

"We only had a month before we played our first game, so we barely had time to gel as a team because we were competing against each other for so long."

The task of putting a college football team together from scratch was given to Jim Hilyer, a former assistant coach in the college and professional ranks with stops at Mississippi State, Auburn, the Washington Redskins, and the Birmingham Stallions of the old USFL. His assistant coaches were largely volunteers, football lifers who wanted to help these players start something new and turn heads while doing it.



Left, Executive Chef, Craig Olack and Co-founder John Cubelic

METROGATE

City tailgating at its best.

John Cubelic, co-founder of Dread River Distilling Company, graduated from Oak Mountain High School in 2006 and went on to play wide receiver for Auburn, graduating in 2009. After working in event management in New York, John made his way back to Birmingham to open Dread River Distilling in the former Peck and Hills antiques building with Dr. Jeff Dugas.

PORTICO MOUNTAIN BROOK: Birmingham seems to have had a social revival in the last few years. When did Dread River begin, and how did you fit into this? JOHN CUBELIC: It certainly has. In fact, that's really the reason Dread River became a reality. We saw an opportunity here, a growing city and an energized community, and we thought adding a distillery to the bar, restaurant, and brewery scene would be a great fit.

Tell us about the new rye? The 'finishing' process is always something we have found interesting and have wanted to explore. Our newest product is a 95 percent rye whiskey, which is finished in a sherry cask. The spicy notes in the rye are nicely complemented by a sherry sweetness that makes for a unique and complex product. We initially planned to sell this product exclusively in the distillery, but we have a feeling it is going to be popular so we are making it available across the state via ABC.

You added pre-mixers to your offerings. As a partial response to COVID, we began developing a line of products to assist bartenders in making quick, simple, delicious cocktails with Dread River spirits. Our Executive Chef, Craig Olack, developed a wide variety of syrups and cocktail

mixers that has been so well-received that we've begun selling them to customers as cocktail kits. Region's Field, Protective Stadium, as well as many local bars and restaurants have started using them, and we think they are the perfect pairing for home mixology or football tailgates.

How did you find your location and what is it like? We looked all over the downtown area. It was important to us that the distillery be downtown. That's where we felt the pulse and energy was growing. We love the building because it has such a unique look for the downtown area. We've tried to lean into that Tuscan villa vibe and create a beautiful and inviting space. We will rent the entire venue out or, luckily, the way the space is broken up, we can host several smaller gatherings at once without having to shut down. We also just opened our outdoor veranda in May, and the space is really lovely.

Does Dread River serve food? Yes, and it's delicious. Chef Craig is immensely talented and has continually evolved our menu as the business has developed. We consistently get repeat customers coming just for food, or new customers who were told by friends to try the truffle fries, or the burger, or the...it's constantly changing but always good.



RECIPE CLANTON BUCK

1.5oz Dread River Whiskey
2oz Clayton Buck Syrup (Peach, Demerara, Lemon Juice, Mint, Vanilla)
Top with Ginger Ale



**UAB Head Coach
Bill Clark walking
through Uptown
to the stadium**

“THIS IS SUCH A GREAT STORY BECAUSE SO MANY DIFFERENT GROUPS HAD TO COME TOGETHER TO MAKE THIS STADIUM HAPPEN.” –COACH BILL CLARK

The players came from all walks of life—the inner city, blue-collar suburbs, way out in the country—all with a chip on their shoulder and something to prove, playing against small, liberal arts colleges like Wofford, Millsaps, and Ferrum. The best way to describe those early days is perhaps *The Longest Yard* meets the Ivy League.

“We had one athlete, our second year, who repelled off the side of Legion Field before practice one day,” says Spooner. “We had another guy who had just left boot camp or jail that we picked up right before one of our games. He didn’t practice at all that week but played that day.”

“All of our coaches were hard-nosed ex-NFL players or coaches that played in the 80s when it was all smash-mouth football, and that’s how we practiced. We were the hardest hitting team around.”

Spooner recalls then UAB President Dr. Charles “Scotty” McCallum visiting with the players before practice on several occasions, offering words of encouragement while also not sugarcoating what they were up against. “We knew that we weren’t going to get much financing, that the University of Alabama Board of Trustees didn’t want us there, and we were going to be stifled a little bit, but we still produced athletes that were high caliber, and we won games, especially in the early days.”

During Spooner’s four seasons, the Blazers put up a respectable record of 25-11-2, astonishing when one considers the local apathy and constant meddling from outside forces. A knee injury forced Spooner to hang up his cleats with only three games left of his final season in 1994. However, he continued to be part of the

program off and on for many years, as an athletic trainer and a physical therapist. From the inside, he’s seen the program’s many ups and downs over the years and knows firsthand establishing UAB as a viable football program was always a long shot. Still, it came as a shock when the announcement to cancel the program came on November 30, 2014.

“That was a crushing blow to the players and to the alumni. It was almost too easy, like no one was going to care,” says Spooner. “We weren’t playing just to beat our heads against the wall. We were playing to win and for something that was going to grow beyond us.”

For men like Clark, Spooner, and all of the players, coaches, and fans—current and former—seeing UAB take the field in a new stadium is almost impossible to fathom. Not only was it not supposed to happen, but so many forces tried to keep it from happening.

“We could be up here all day just talking about all the reasons it’s special for our program. You know the history of what’s happened to us,” says Clark during his weekly press conference on Monday, September 27, less than a week before the opening game at Protective Stadium. “This is such a great story because so many different groups had to come together to make this stadium happen.”

“I’m so thankful to have been a part of the story, especially from birth, and for where it is now. I am who I am because of the program and my teammates,” says Spooner. “The fact that Birmingham rallied around the program was so uplifting to see. I think it’s stronger now after the resurrection.” **P**