

INTRODUCTION

On the first morning of 2007, as sleet fell from a dull sky, Mal Moore, the athletic director at the University of Alabama, hustled onto the tarmac at Tuscaloosa Regional Airport. With one last glance over his shoulder, he ducked his head and boarded an airplane bound for South Florida. The plane was not owned by the university—it had been loaned to him by an Alabama booster and Huntsville defense contractor named Farid Rafiee. Moore was going to great lengths to keep this trip a secret. A little more than a month earlier he had fired Mike Shula, the son of a coaching legend, and the University of Alabama’s fourth football coach in seven very mediocre years. Thanks to flight trackers on the Internet, Moore’s every move had been followed ever since as he searched—in vain, to that point—for a new head coach.

This trip *had* to remain clandestine. Moore was after the biggest prize in the game. A man named Nick Saban. News of a meeting with him would cause, as Moore put it, “quite a ruckus.” The main reason for that: Saban, who was then the head coach of the National Football League’s Miami Dolphins, had publicly denied any interest in the Alabama job, over and over and over.

Moore was flying somewhat blind. He did not have an appointment set up with Saban. The Dolphins coach had refused to take his calls.

Mal Moore had a down-home manner about him. He mumbled a bit when he talked, and had the lumbering body of an ex-football

player. He'd been the backup quarterback on Alabama's national championship team in 1961 under Paul "Bear" Bryant, one of the most successful coaches in the history of football and a man who had attained divine status within the state long before his death in 1983. Moore had parlayed that brush with Bryant's robe into his current job, one that he now was in jeopardy of losing.

Moore became Alabama's athletic director in 1999. The first football coach during his tenure was Mike DuBose, who was also a former Alabama player. During his time at Alabama, Dubose posted a 24-23 record, was accused of sexually harassing a secretary, and his program underwent a recruiting scandal that led to crippling NCAA sanctions. DuBose's successor, hired by Moore, was a promising coach named Dennis Franchione. He led the Crimson Tide to two consecutive winning seasons but bolted with a ten-year, \$15 million contract on the table because he felt hamstrung by the NCAA sanctions. Moore replaced him with a man named Mike Price, who was fired before even coaching a single game because of a rowdy trip to a strip club, after which he may or may not have spent the night with a stripper named Destiny. Then came Shula, who had the right pedigree—he'd been an Alabama quarterback and had that football-famous last name. But Shula never came close to living up to his father, Don's, legacy, and he appeared overwhelmed as the head coach, running the football program in a sloppy manner.

In those seven years, the Alabama football team—winner of twelve national titles at the time and, formerly, a perennial contender for said titles, and the source of much pride and meaning in the football-mad state—had spiraled downward into, at best, irrelevancy on the national stage. At worst, it had become college football's horror show.

For years, Moore had relied on Alabama's name and past glory to acquire head coaches. After firing Shula, though, he found himself in a bind. The shine had worn off. Suddenly, the Alabama job was one that no coach of any real stature seemed to want to touch. Moore had been turned down by Steve Spurrier, the cheeky head coach at South Carolina, a football program that didn't come close to Alabama in terms of pedigree. Moore had offered the job to Rich

Rodriguez, a young, up-and-coming coach at West Virginia, and believed that he had accepted it. As Moore was working out the final details of the contract, he was blindsided by Rodriguez, who suddenly changed his mind and announced that he was staying at West Virginia. In the end, Moore appeared to have been merely played by the West Virginia coach for a raise and an extension.

The bungled coach search had earned Moore a new nickname within Alabama football circles. They called him “Malfunction Moore.”

Now Moore was attempting to woo the fifty-five-year-old Saban, who had been a master as a college head coach, reviving three different programs and winning the 2003 national title at his last stop on that level, with Louisiana State University. Saban had left the college game after the 2004 season to take his first head-coaching job in the NFL. In two seasons with the Dolphins, he’d posted a less-than-mediocre 15-17 record. But his reputation as a college coach still burned brightly, and his name came up anytime a major college program needed a new head coach.

Saban, though, appeared to be staying put. The Miami media horde had persistently asked him about the coaching vacancy at Alabama. Saban had begun to get testy. At a press conference just ten days before Moore arrived in Miami, he’d declared, rather definitively: “I guess I have to say it. I’m not going to be the Alabama coach.”

At this point, Moore had no other viable options left. His trip to South Florida was all-or-nothing. He knew that his job was on the line. “I told the pilots when they dropped me off in Miami that if I didn’t come back to this plane with Nick Saban, they should go on and take me to Cuba,” he said.

Moore, however, had reason to feel a sliver of optimism. By coincidence his nephew, Chuck Moore, a home builder, had remodeled Saban’s lake house in Georgia during Saban’s years at LSU. Saban, of course, knew who Chuck’s uncle was. During the last few weeks of the 2006 Dolphins season, despite his public denials, Saban had

called Chuck a few times to tell him that he was possibly interested in the Alabama job, knowing full well whom Chuck would call the minute they hung up the phone.

Moore had also been in contact with Saban's agent, Jimmy Sexton. Six days after Shula was dismissed, Moore and Sexton had secretly met in New York during the National Football Foundation awards dinner. Sexton had told Moore then that if Saban were to leave the NFL, Alabama would be at the top of his list.

Though Saban continued to rebuff Moore, the Alabama athletic director knew that at the very least, the coach's interest was piqued. What Moore didn't know at the time was that a far more important ally was waiting for him in Miami.

On the evening of January 1, 2007—after trying, in vain, to reach Saban all day while hunkered down in a hotel room—Moore finally made contact. During a brief phone conversation, Saban made it very clear that he wanted to talk to Wayne Huizenga, the Dolphins' billionaire owner, before he did anything else. He ended the call with a promise to contact Moore the following day around lunchtime.

The next day, Moore waited. The call never came. Moore contacted two of the most important Alabama trustees: Angus Cooper II, a shipping magnate from Mobile, and Paul Bryant Jr., the son of Alabama's most famous coach. (The trustee duo had passed some of their own nervous hours by going quail hunting.) Moore told them that Saban hadn't yet called him back and still refused to meet with him. "We thought we'd lost Nick then," says Cooper. "We knew Huizenga was trying to keep him, and we thought that meant he'd pay him a lot more money."

After waiting by the phone a bit longer, Moore finally gave up. He checked out of his hotel and had his driver—Francisco Rengifo, whom he called "Frankie"—take him to the airport. As they drove, Moore—on a whim—decided to make a last-ditch detour. He asked Frankie to drive him to Saban's neighborhood in Fort Lauderdale.

They parked a few blocks away, which gave him a view of the comings and goings of the Saban house. Moore sat there, staring out of the car window like a papal supplicant waiting for the white smoke. He later described his first day and a half in Miami as “excruciating.”

It wasn’t exactly pleasant for Saban, either. He paced the floors of his spacious house. He called former colleagues and old friends for advice. He talked to Sexton. He endlessly ran through everything with his greatest confidante: his wife, Terry, whom he’d married during his junior year in college. Saban knew how it would look if he left the Dolphins, after just two seasons and in the wake of his litany of flat-out denials of any interest in the Alabama job. He would be called a liar, a failure, and a quitter.

Most of the dread he felt, though, came from the fact that he already knew what he wanted to do. The NFL was not for him.

Saban had been an assistant coach in the NFL in the 1980s and ’90s, but the game had changed significantly since then. Free agency had blossomed, turning some of the best players into prima donnas who often placed the desires of their agents and themselves over those of their coaches and their teams. The NFL had become more of a socialist enterprise than the meritocracy that Saban preferred. “In the NFL you were penalized for success,” Saban says. A good season meant a more difficult schedule in the following one. It also meant a lower position in the subsequent NFL Draft. This left Saban feeling constricted. “In the NFL you only get one first-round draft pick, and that’s if it hadn’t already been traded away,” he says. “You couldn’t really outwork anybody. In college, I could recruit ten players with first-round talent every year.” In the college game, he had more control.

He knew that Alabama wasn’t a turnkey program. Hell, it was practically in ruins. It would take some time to streamline everything, to get everyone on the same page, and to restore the Alabama football name to recruits and to the nation. The potential was there, however, and Saban knew that the university was desperate enough

to return to football glory that they were willing to give him everything he needed. Moore wouldn't have been in South Florida now if that weren't the case.

Still, Saban felt a strong sense of loyalty to Huizenga, a man he very much admired. He'd made a pledge to the Dolphins owner, on many different occasions, to turn around the franchise. Huizenga also had demonstrated complete faith in Saban: He'd never said no to one of his coach's requests—for more control, for more money to spend on assistant coaches, for newer, better facilities. If it were totally up to Saban, he would stay with the Dolphins and give Huizenga what he believed he owed him.

But the decision wasn't his alone.

After sitting in the car for some time, Moore finally talked to Sexton, who called Terry and asked her to invite Moore in. She did. Saban wasn't home—he was at the Dolphins' complex, where he had a meeting with Huizenga. Terry and Moore hit it off right away, sensing a mutual interest. She served him lunch while the two talked about her husband. She made it clear to Moore that Saban was miserable in the NFL and dearly missed coaching in college. She also made it clear that she wanted out. In the NFL, the coach's wife had no real role in the community. On a college campus—particularly at a place like Alabama—the coach's wife was a figure of prominence, a queen bee. Terry also believed that a college town was a much healthier place to raise their two children. After lunch, she invited Moore to come back for dinner that night.

Sometime after Moore left, Saban called home and told Terry that he had made up his mind: He was staying with the Dolphins and he didn't want to meet with Moore. Terry then informed him that Moore was actually coming over for dinner that night.

Over dinner, Moore pitched Saban on the merits of the job. Saban would get an unprecedented amount of power and control of the football program. He would also be paid a blockbuster eight-year, \$32 million salary, the highest ever in college football. Saban

remained palpably reticent throughout the evening. As Moore was leaving, Terry pulled him aside and told him that they had to find a way to get her husband on the plane to Tuscaloosa the next day. As heartened as he was by Terry's words, Moore still had no idea what Saban was going to ultimately decide.

Saban spent another night agonizing over the decision. Terry knew it would be better for him—for them—back in college, and she spent the evening trying to convince him that it was okay to leave the Dolphins, to think of his own—and his family's—well-being and happiness. The next morning, Saban had one more conversation with Huizenga. The Dolphins' owner realized by then that he had lost his coach. He eased Saban's agony a bit by telling him to do what was in his heart.

Finally, Saban called Moore and accepted the Alabama job.

Moore and Frankie rushed over to the Saban house. By this time, the media had caught the scent that something was in the offing. Press helicopters hovered over the Sabans' house as Frankie backed his white Mercedes sedan into the garage. Saban, Terry, their daughter, Kristen, and a school friend of hers entered the garage through the house, carrying a few hastily packed suitcases. The three women sat in the backseat, their luggage in their laps. Saban sat shotgun. Moore squeezed himself in between Saban and Frankie, sitting on the console. Helicopters chased them all the way to the airport.

On the plane, Moore and Saban sat across from each other, with Moore facing the cockpit and Saban facing the rear of the plane. As the plane took off, with its nose pointed toward the sky, Moore found himself looking up at his new coach. He would never forget this moment, and would tell the story frequently to his closest friends, in various versions.

"Mal, let me ask you something," Saban said over the roar of the plane's engines, gazing down at Moore. Saban's leg had started to bounce. At this point, adrenaline was staving off exhaustion. Any pretense he might have felt had been completely stripped away. "Do you think you've hired the best coach in the country?"

Moore was a bit taken aback by the question, not exactly sure where it was heading. He still didn't know Saban well, still found him hard to read. Moore rubbed his big hands together and cleared his throat. "Why, Nick, of course I do," he said, while thinking to himself: *For four million dollars a year, I sure as hell hope so.*

"Well, you didn't. I'm nothing without my players," Saban said, locking eyes with Moore. "But you did just hire a helluva recruiter." With that, Moore exhaled audibly.