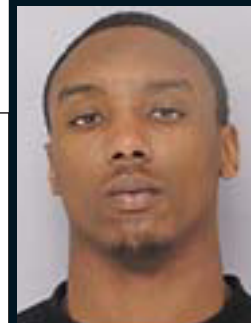
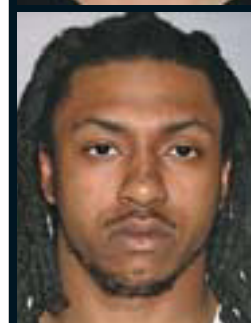




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# COMING DOWN

AS AUBURN WAS BARRELING TOWARD THE 2010 NATIONAL TITLE, THE PROGRAM WAS STRUGGLING TO BEAT A PERPLEXING DRUG PROBLEM. **THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW SYNTHETIC MARIJUANA INFILTRATED THE TIGERS AND HELPED LEAD TO THE QUICKEST COLLAPSE OF A BCS CHAMP.**



Former Tigers Kitchens, Mosley, McNeil and Goodwin were charged with armed robbery two months after winning a ring.

by SHAUN ASSAEL photograph by ADAM VOORHES



M

**MICHAEL DYER WAVES** the smoke out of his eyes and tries to focus on the

question: "Can we have your gun?"

On one side of him, an Auburn teammate is nodding off, too sick and tired from his high to stay awake. Another teammate is holding his stomach and retching while his brain burns.

Dyer, a 20-year-old running back coming off a record-setting freshman season in 2010, is celebrating the start of spring break at a friend's off-campus apartment, drinking beer and smoking chemically coated leaves that are sold in gas stations under the name Spice. But the mood turns serious when fellow freshman teammate Shaun Kitchens asks: "Man, let me use your strap. We need to go hit a lick."

The "strap" is a .45-caliber handgun with a laser sight stashed beneath the couch in Dyer's apartment. But Dyer, according to his subsequent interview with police, isn't interested in committing a robbery on this night, or any night. Not when he's just two months removed from single-handedly marching Auburn down the field in the final seconds of the Jan. 10, 2011, BCS title game, giving the school its first national championship since 1957. Not when two more seasons stand between him and a first-round spot in the 2013 NFL draft.

So after he and his friends finish watching an NBA game, Dyer announces that he's leaving to pack for a trip home to Little Rock, Ark. But as he will later recall under oath, Dyer isn't in his apartment long before he's visited by another freshman who was partying with the group

COMING DOWN\* FIRST RAN APRIL 4 ON ESPN.COM. FOR THE UPDATED DIGITAL VERSION, GO TO ESPN.COM AND SEARCH: SPICE.



**THE BEST OF TIMES**

Dyer celebrates a run that set up the game-winning field goal against Oregon in the 2011 BCS title game, delivering Chizik and Auburn the coveted crystal football.

earlier. Antonio Goodwin, a wide receiver from Atlanta, is usually reserved. But at this moment, he seems antsy, eyes darting, and once again brings up "hitting a lick."

"He had this look in his eyes I hadn't seen before," Dyer later tells the police. "I tried to be a man and tell him I wasn't going and, you know, he shouldn't go because, to be honest, Antonio is not really that type of guy," Dyer later tells a jury.

But Goodwin isn't listening, and in the early hours of March 11, 2011, coach Gene Chizik will awaken to an avalanche of bad news that will eventually reveal what had been successfully kept under wraps during an undefeated 2010 season: Some of the very stars who delivered Auburn a BCS title were users of the most devastating synthetic drug sweeping the country.

**IN AUGUST 2010**, as the Tigers prepared to kick off the season against Arkansas State, director of sports medicine Joseph Petrone made 600 copies of a newspaper article he'd just read about Spice, a chemically altered drug being marketed as incense and sold at gas stations and mini-marts around Alabama. Petrone wasn't alone in his concern—athletic departments from coast to coast were just learning of Spice.

Its active chemical is a vestige of research done in the 1980s by a Clemson University researcher named John W. Huffman. In an effort to better understand the properties of cannabinoids and how they relate, he engineered a series of compounds that acted on the same parts of the brain as marijuana. As is general practice for chemists, Huffman named each iteration after himself. The first one that would make headlines was known as JWH-018.

Huffman never tested the compounds on humans, and his research never left the lab, getting relegated to musty textbooks. But two decades later, German chemists rediscovered JWH-018 as a popular club drug. It had been turned into a powder form that could be mixed with a liquid solvent and sprayed onto potpourri-style leaves.

No two batches of synthetic marijuana are exactly the same; one group of leaves could be sprayed with higher concentrations of JWH than another, rendering it potentially life-threatening. By 2009, Spice was sold freely over the Internet, marketed in shiny cellophane packages that looked like candy wrappers, often with the phrase "not for human consumption." The American Association of

Poison Control Centers found itself fielding calls from emergency room physicians who had no idea what was causing the strange, alarming symptoms they were suddenly confronting. By 2010, 11,406 people nationwide were admitted to emergency rooms with those signs.

"If you take the worst effects of meth, crack and LSD, that's what they were seeing," says Dr. Mark Ryan, head of the Louisiana Poison Control Center. "These people were paranoid, psychotic. For lack of a better term, they were out of their minds."

So after Petrone read about an Alabama law that became effective on July 1, 2010, criminalizing the possession or sale of JWH-018, he made copies of the article and placed one in the locker of every Auburn athlete.

**FROM 2002 TO 2006**, Gene Chizik was one of the hottest assistant coaches in the country. He was Auburn's defensive coordinator during an undefeated season in '04, then was hired as an assistant head coach at Texas, where he won a BCS title the following year. In November 2006, Iowa State threw nearly \$1.1 million at the square-jawed former Florida linebacker to rebuild its program. But Chizik never clicked,

and his first season was a 3-9 disaster. He ended 2008 on a 10-game losing streak.

Despite his struggles, Chizik drew strong interest from Auburn when Tommy Tuberville's decadelong run ended after a 36-0 loss to Alabama in the 2008 Iron Bowl. Traditionalists around the program loved the idea of Chizik's power football philosophy, and he convinced them that the chip on his shoulder from the Iowa State failure would inspire the floundering Auburn program.

Just shy of his 47th birthday, with a 5-19 head-coaching record, the Clearwater, Fla., native was handed the head job by Auburn athletic director Jay Jacobs, who doubled Chizik's salary. The hire drew howls among doubters who believed that Auburn needed a heavyweight to counter Alabama's Nick Saban. *The Montgomery Advertiser* joked that hundreds of people celebrated the hire—all in Tuscaloosa.

Chizik moved quickly to put his stamp on the Tigers, replacing Tuberville's staff with a group of all-star coordinators. The brightest among them were Trooper Taylor, a wily, gregarious recruiter who helped bring receiver Dez Bryant to Oklahoma State, and Gus Malzahn, a deeply religious Arkansas native regarded as the best

offensive mind in college football after two years leading the nation's top attack at Tulsa.

Auburn's first season under Chizik was unspectacular; the team finished 7-5 and squeaked past Northwestern in the Outback Bowl. Then expectations went sky-high after he signed the No. 4 recruiting class, led by the most sought-after juco quarterback in the country, Cam Newton. That solidified Chizik as a force on the trail, and Malzahn used his Arkansas roots to pluck the No. 1 running back in the nation, Michael Dyer, from Little Rock Christian Academy.

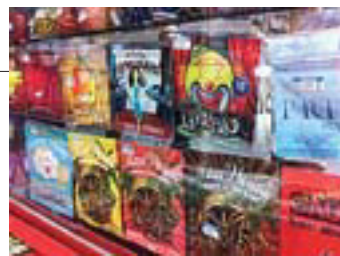
Even with the rival Tide coming off a BCS title, those close to the program were certain that Chizik was about to become the elite coach Jacobs envisioned when he made the hire.

**DYER ARRIVED AT Auburn** in the summer of 2010, his dazzling smile and shoulder-shrugging humility belying a cast-iron kid who lost his father to a traffic accident at the age of 3 and was raised with the help of family friends. In a 2010 promotional video for the Tigers, he alluded to the way he used football to get back at the world: "When I run the ball, I'm always lowering my shoulders and thinking, Who's gonna go down this play?" He also conceded that he wasn't certain about Auburn until his best friend and teammate at Little Rock Christian, a 6'4", 250-pound tight end named Dakota Mosley, received a scholarship. "One day [Dakota] called me and said he wanted me to come to AU with him," Dyer recalls. "If he hadn't said something, I probably wouldn't have been here."

The two recruits hailed from the same state, but their worlds were vastly different. While Dyer walked through life angry about the death of his father, Mosley's dad was a constant presence in his son's life. Harrison Mosley, the backslapping owner of a commercial cleaning service, was so tethered to his son that he left his wife and two daughters in Fayetteville, Ark., so Dakota could play football at prestigious Little Rock Christian. Harrison took both Dakota and Dyer to college games and prospect camps together, "trying to build relationships for them," he says, which paid off when Malzahn made the push to sign both. Once again, Harrison tagged along, buying a condo in Auburn after Dakota and Dyer signed with the Tigers.

But the father couldn't shield his son from





**YOU WON'T FIND SPICE ON THE SHELVES IN AUBURN ANYMORE, BUT YOU CAN STILL BUY NEWER VERSIONS OF SYNTHETIC POT THAT WILL SLIP BY CURRENT TESTS.**

the temptations found on an SEC campus. Dakota got his first taste of Spice during a 2009 recruiting visit, when an older player at a football party gave him a hit. "You heard it didn't show up on a drug test," Dakota told *The Mag* in an exclusive interview this February. "It was just another thing to do to have fun that everybody else was doing." By the time he was officially on the team, the drug had become so openly used and widely available around Auburn that he shrugged off the newspaper article Petrone posted in his locker.

Then a late-summer practice brought his college football career to a halt before it even began. Mosley tore the labrum in his shoulder, requiring season-ending surgery. He was just a freshman, and a redshirt year would likely help his acclimation, but the further away he got from football, the more isolated he felt, filling his idle hours smoking Spice, not caring about the change coming over him.

He began walking around campus in unwashed Tigers gear pockmarked by cigarette burns. "I would go days sometimes without showering," he recalls. "The Spice just made you really not care about things. But at the same time, if you didn't have it, you'd have withdrawal symptoms, like almost instantly."

According to Mark Ryan of the Louisiana Poison Control Center, the drug's addictive potential comes from the fact that it affects the levels of serotonin and dopamine, neurotransmitters associated with happiness and pleasure. "It's like pain medication," he says. "After a while, you have to keep having more to achieve the same effects."

While Mosley wrestled with a growing addiction, Antonio Goodwin, a fellow freshman and four-star recruit, watched as some veterans smoked Spice before classes, film sessions, even practices, and he simply followed their lead. "The older players kept saying it's not gonna show up in your drug tests, so it kind of made you feel comfortable smoking," he recalls. Like Mosley, Goodwin noticed the drug altering his mindset and on-field performance. "As a football player, I felt I was starting to slip," he says. "Like passes I would normally catch in practice, I would drop. On long runs, I'd begin to slow down a bit. Problems breathing, stuff like that."

But Goodwin mostly was relegated to special-teams duty, and if the starters were

feeling any ill effects from Spice, it wasn't evident. Through October of the 2010 season, the Tigers were 9-0 and had beaten three top-15 teams. Cam Newton was a Heisman favorite, and Chizik couldn't go anywhere in the Loveliest Village on the Plains without being mobbed by boosters who suddenly claimed they were behind him all along. Dyer, who'd posted 100 or more rushing yards in three games, was hailed as the second coming of Bo Jackson.

Buried beneath that success, though, was grave concern about a budding synthetic marijuana problem. An assistant coach on that 2010 squad, who asked to remain anonymous, told *The Mag* that Chizik addressed it in a midseason staff meeting: "He said, 'We have to get our arms around this thing,'" the coach says. Chizik also called a meeting to warn players, saying anyone who was caught using synthetic marijuana would be kicked off the team.

Petrone, the sports medicine director, told *The Mag* this March that he did not approach any student-athletes about Spice use and that none spoke to him. Nor was he aware that Redwood Toxicology Laboratory, a drug-testing lab in Santa Rosa, Calif., had widely announced in July 2010 that it had the first urine test to detect JWH-018. Dominion Diagnostics in North Kingstown, R.I., nationally publicized its Spice test two months later. According to a survey of SEC schools by *The Birmingham News* in 2012, Alabama implemented a test for Spice in fall 2010.

Petrone, however, approached Auburn's drug-testing vendor, Aegis Sciences Corp. in Nashville, about creating a test. Aegis told him it would take three to six months, meaning the test likely wouldn't be ready until after the season was over.

**BY LATE OCTOBER 2010**, with the Tigers undefeated, Harrison Mosley was completely caught up in the mood on his son's campus: the electricity of Toomer's Corner on Saturday nights, the growing celebrity of Newton and the media hordes descending on Auburn. Having never played beyond high school football, Harrison was seduced by being so close to the program. He could even be found on the sideline during practices, cheering on other parents' sons while drifting apart from his own.

He took players out to meals, eager to soak up all the details of the locker room, and he was a

regular at the bar of the Hotel at Auburn University, an elegant campus guest house, where he would give the Tigers' sales pitch to parents of recruits. He claims coaches spurred him on, particularly Malzahn, whom he still holds in starry-eyed regard.

"They asked us [parents] to go see players who were close to where we lived and visit with them and visit with their families and do those things," he told *The Mag*. (A representative for the university denies that Mosley had any official role in recruiting.)

Harrison spent enough time around the program that he was eventually introduced to synthetic marijuana. The first time he heard about Spice was around September 2010, when he ran into one of Dakota's friends at a local barbecue joint and asked why his son seemed depressed and upset despite the team's promising start. The player disclosed that Dakota was part of a tightly knit circle of Spice smokers who held regular parties at Dyer's apartment. Harrison went straight to Malzahn.

Although Malzahn declined to discuss the meeting directly with *The Mag*, he issued a comment through a university representative, saying that the two men discussed Dakota's depression, not Spice. Whatever the case, the coach's promise to address Dakota's troubles relieved Harrison.

But Spice was too strong for Dakota to overcome. One evening, he remembers sitting in his dorm room after smoking Spice and "feeling like I was in a cartoon land or something. I felt like I wasn't here on earth anymore. It was wild. It was crazy."

Later, as a result of smoking Spice, the teen began having suicidal thoughts. Malzahn arranged a counseling session, but Dakota skipped it. "I really didn't know which way to turn, because I didn't understand what my son had gotten himself into," Harrison says. So the 43-year-old made a decision: He was going to smoke Spice himself.

At a head shop nestled in an off-campus shopping mall, Harrison bought a few silvery packages, then went to his rented condo and rolled a cigarette. Three puffs later, "my heart rate was double. For three or four hours, I sat in my living room gripping the recliner arms, trying to decide if I should go to the emergency room, 'cause I really thought that I was gonna die."



**A WASTED OPPORTUNITY** Harrison Mosley moved his son Dakota across Arkansas to play at prestigious Little Rock Christian Academy, then followed him to Auburn, where he didn't protect the teenager from a growing drug problem.

The next day, Harrison raced to see Malzahn. "You've got a serious problem if your players are doing this," he claims he told the coach. "It's the scariest thing I've ever done. You'd be better off handing out bales of marijuana."

**IN EARLY NOVEMBER 2010**, as Auburn prepared for a weak nonconference home game against Chattanooga, Chizik and Malzahn were faced with higher-profile problems. ESPN and *The New York Times* had just reported that Newton's father, Cecil, had shopped his son around the SEC for as much as \$180,000 before Newton committed to Auburn over Mississippi State. NCAA investigators launched a probe that included combing through bank records, tax returns and email accounts for evidence of foul play in the recruitment process.

Reporters camped out around the Tigers' buses before the players left for the team hotel, asking Newton about the burgeoning scandal. "I didn't do anything wrong," he said, shrugging his shoulders. (The NCAA would find no evidence of wrongdoing in his case.)

Newton and the Tigers thrashed Chattanooga 62-24 and continued rolling with wins against Georgia and an epic 24-point comeback at Alabama. Dyer ended the season with 1,093 rushing yards, breaking the school record for a freshman set by Bo Jackson in 1982. On Dec. 4, Auburn drubbed South Carolina in the SEC title game to cap an undefeated season.

Meanwhile, in the quiet before the national

title game, Dakota's drug habits finally caught up to him. On Dec. 20, 2010, he failed a drug test for regular marijuana and the prescription tranquilizer benzodiazepine. An official memo that circulated to Chizik and Jacobs, the Auburn athletic director, triggered a rash of penalties, among them an automatic suspension and a call to Harrison, who says that the notification—from Petrone—was his first indication that Dakota wasn't responding to the athletic department's efforts.

While Dakota stayed back at school, Harrison attended the BCS title game on Jan. 10, 2011, in Glendale, Ariz., with Dakota's stepmother. "I was there to support Michael Dyer," he says. "I mean, I was part of Mike's life. I was there to support the other kids who I was close to and who meant a lot to me. I was there to support the coaches who were having a good year."

Under the lights at the BCS game, with the score tied at 19 and the clock ticking down in the fourth quarter, Newton handed the ball to Dyer, who ran straight into a tackler, waiting for a whistle. But Dyer realized his knee wasn't down and kept running until he'd chewed up 37 yards to Oregon's 23-yard line. Three plays later, he gained another 16 yards, setting up the game-winning field goal.

Dyer, who was named offensive MVP, received the lion's share of the credit for Auburn's first national title in more than half a century. But the Tigers defense was just as stout. One unexpected standout was Mike McNeil, a

junior safety from Mobile, Ala., who was raised by his mother and grandfather, Pro Bowl receiver Clifton McNeil. Mike notched a team-high 14 tackles, 12 of them solo hits, and had every reason to believe he could follow in his grandfather's footsteps to the NFL.

While Dyer and McNeil shined on a national stage, Dakota watched them on TV back at his apartment in Auburn, passing the hours by smoking Spice.

**ON JAN. 24, 2011**, two weeks after the championship game and the beginning of Auburn's spring semester, Aegis informed Auburn that a test for JWH-018 was ready. Players on the 2010 team who were not enrolled in the spring or had exhausted their eligibility were no longer part of Auburn's drug-testing pool. "I think we were one of the first, if not the first, schools in the SEC to test for it," Jacobs says in defense of the timing.

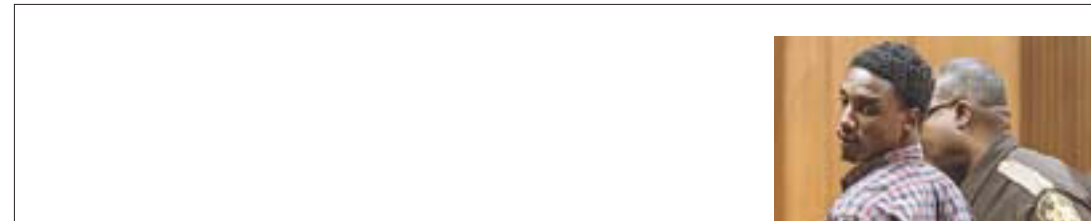
On Jan. 27, Petrone gave the test to 97 student-athletes and discovered five positives, including one from Mosley and another from an unidentified player on the football team, according to records made available to *The Mag* by the athletic department. Over the next six months, Petrone administered the test another 702 times and found 13 new cases, 10 more of them from members of the football squad.

One of the Tigers in that group was Shaun Kitchens, a 19-year-old wide receiver from College Park, Ga. The freshman's mother, Kimberly Harkness, worked three jobs to get her son to Auburn, and she did it while caring for two other children, one of whom has special needs. The day she dropped her son off on campus was, she told *The Mag*, the proudest of her life. "I worked my ass off to get him to this point," she remembers saying to one of the coaches. "Now I'm turning him over to you."

But in late February 2011, she received a call from assistant Trooper Taylor, who had brought Kitchens to his office to inform Harkness that her son was skipping classes and arriving late to team meetings. "Why, Shaun?" she recalls asking him. "You worked so hard for this. Why?"

Kitchens mumbled an apology, but Harkness says her son was usually so focused and determined. "I couldn't put my finger on it," she says. "Something wasn't right." The subject of his failed drug test, Harkness says, never came up.





Jacobs, a folksy, confident executive who played offensive tackle for the Tigers in the early '80s, told *The Mag* that the athletic department's choice not to inform athletes' parents about the positive tests was a matter of legal necessity because the drug wasn't punishable by the school's banned substance list until August 2011, when it did start notifying parents.

In the seven-month window between when Auburn began testing for Spice and officially enforcing its ban, the program was left with a complicated task: interpreting not only its own drug policies but those of the NCAA's as well. The 2010-11 NCAA banned drug list begins with the following statement in bold type: "There is no complete list of banned drug examples!" Auburn's 2010 drug policy called for the banning of drugs on the NCAA's banned substances list, including a category called street drugs, and also allowed the school to expand the definition to include "related compounds." While the NCAA listed marijuana as a street drug (no specific mention of synthetic marijuana), it stated: "Any substance that is chemically related to the class of banned drugs is also banned!" JWH-018 was chemically designed to mimic marijuana's effect on cannabinoid receptors in the brain, but Auburn's legal staff ultimately concluded that Spice was not a related compound of, or chemically related to, regular marijuana. "In 2010 and early 2011, using synthetic marijuana was not necessarily a transgression of our policy," says C. Randall Clark, a member of the university's drug-testing advisory committee.

The school deemed that the athletic department couldn't discipline students caught using Spice in the same manner as those caught using regular marijuana or cocaine. That meant no parental notification or loss of playing time. "There wasn't anything we could do except educate our athletes," Jacobs says.

**THE FIRST TIME** Mosley learned that he'd failed Auburn's new drug test for Spice, in February 2011, he was petrified. "I was scared that I was gonna have to call my parents again and tell them that I'd failed another drug test and I was gonna get kicked off the team," he told *The Mag*.

Actually, nothing happened, even after he'd failed six more drug tests by March 9. Petrone recalled telling him each time "the facts about

**JUDGMENT DAYS**

In June 2012, Goodwin (top) received 15 years for first-degree armed robbery. Nearly a year later, McNeil pleaded guilty to first-degree robbery, and he must serve at least three years.



synthetic marijuana, how it's made ... that it's dangerous because it is a synthetic substance."

His lectures hit halfway home. "It was kind of weird," Dakota says. "It was like you could get in trouble for doing it, but you couldn't get in trouble. It almost seemed like it was okay."

On the morning of March 9, 2011, after he was given the seventh straight drug test he would fail, Mosley went to Chizik's office to talk about his future. Chizik declined to discuss the meeting with *The Mag*, as did Malzahn, who was also present, but Cassie Arner, an athletic department spokeswoman, described it as a pep talk: "Coach Chizik set very specific targets that Mr. Mosley had to meet if he wanted to play spring ball," she said in an interview with *The Mag* this March. Those targets included staying clean and counseling.

Harrison Mosley, however, recalled it differently. According to him, Malzahn told Harrison after the session that they "had worked it out" and that Chizik was putting Dakota back on the team. Dakota recalled being told he was "probably going to get back on the team."

The particulars may be less interesting than the timing of the meeting. Text messages from March 9, 2011, between Harrison and his son show that Dakota was scheduled to meet an investigator from the NCAA later that very day. According to the Mosleys' texts, the investigator wanted to know about recruiting trips that Dakota took to Auburn in 2009, as well as a photo showing him clutching stacks of bills wrapped in rubber bands. Harrison said the cash was money that his son got from a car sale. But the texts, which Mosley furnished to *The Mag*, suggest that Harrison was concerned about how it would be perceived by the NCAA.

"Did you ever visit with the NCAA lady?" Harrison asked his son on March 9, 2011. "Yeah I did," Dakota answered. "So what was said?" "Just asked about the trips." "What about the picture?" "Just told them it was from my mom selling her car."

"That was it?" Harrison asked. He then followed up with, "Call me for a minute."

There is no evidence that Dakota's session with Chizik had anything to do with the NCAA meeting scheduled later that day. Dakota, in fact, says it was never discussed. He ended that day feeling upbeat. Despite all of his positive tests for Spice, the program was going to stick by him.

**THE NEXT EVENING**, on March 10, 2011, with spring break about to start, Michael Dyer waved the smoke out of his eyes and tried to focus on the question: "*Can we have your gun?*"

He was staring back at Mosley, Goodwin, Kitchens and sophomore receiver DeAngelo Benton, who was hosting them at his off-campus apartment. They were watching an NBA game, passing around a Spice joint and complaining about how broke they were. As the result of his suspension for drug use, Mosley wasn't getting his monthly stipend from Auburn. According to Goodwin, he was receiving \$350, but a couple of days before, Newton and other Auburn prospects had gone through pro day. The NFL-caliber money they stood to make was a major topic among younger players.

After he and his friends finished watching the game, Dyer announced he was leaving. According to Benton's subsequent police statement, Mosley, Goodwin and Kitchens did the same, but not before "pop[ping] some kind of pill." Benton had his back to the group when he heard one of them say on the way out, "I'm tired of being broke. I need to hit a lick."

Dyer, who turned down interview requests from *The Mag*, later testified in court that he wasn't back in his apartment long before Goodwin paid a visit to ask for Dyer's .45-caliber handgun. But in an exclusive interview with *The Mag*, Goodwin disputed that account, claiming that Dyer got the weapon himself and carried it to another party, this one at an apartment shared by Mike McNeil and future Kansas City Chiefs corner Neiko Thorpe.

"When we got to Neiko's house, there was a little bit more smoking and drinking that took place," Goodwin says. "We were around more females, and, whatever, it was like a party scene. We were chilling, and Mike Dyer had [the] gun on his waist. Dakota asked to see it."

Thorpe later told police that when he followed Dakota upstairs, he witnessed players passing around a gun and discussing "something about a trailer."

**IT'S EASY TO** get lost in Conway Acres, a trailer park on the outskirts of campus filled with identical, connecting cul-de-sacs. The manufactured homes are stacked like dominoes, with similarly trellised porches, fresh-cut lawns and pickups parked outside.

Mosley had been to Trailer 437 about a week earlier to visit an acquaintance, Jacob Tyler Smith, and saw a small Walmart safe nestled in one of the bedrooms. Smith also mentioned to Mosley that he'd just received an \$850 check from a betting site. McNeil later told police that Mosley decided to "hit" that particular "lick" because "his friend had some money." Goodwin insisted, "None of us originally planned on doing anything." Kitchens vaguely recalled, "Some other folks I was in the car with decided to ride over to the trailer." Mosley said robbing the trailer was Kitchens' idea.

Whatever the case, all were still stoned when they jumped into McNeil's silver Chrysler 300 sedan just before midnight on March 10, 2011, for the trip to Conway Acres. McNeil took it as far as the access road, then got out so Mosley could take over as the getaway driver.

The trailer was lit up with several people watching a movie inside, among them a mechanical engineering student named Don Rhoades. When Rhoades heard a knock, he thought it was another friend who'd promised to stop by. He opened his door to find himself facing the barrel of a gun.

"[McNeil] pushed me down on the couch and pretty much got on top of me," Rhoades testified in court. One of the girls, Ingrid Capps, ran off to hide in a bathroom, only to be forced back by an intruder. A few minutes later, one of the robbers emerged from a bedroom with a black safe. "We got what we came here for," Capps recalls him saying as they fled. (Smith, Dakota's acquaintance, was not present.)

JACOBS (FAR RIGHT) WELCOMED BACK MALZAHN IN DECEMBER, THIS TIME AS HEAD COACH, AFTER PAYING \$7.5 MILLION TO GET RID OF CHIZIK.



Peering out at the taillights of the Chrysler disappearing into the dark, a shaken Capps called 911 on the iPhone she'd cleverly stashed in the couch. Just as the car reached the main avenue outside the development, two Auburn police officers responding to the call turned on their cruisers' patrol lights. Mosley slowed to a crawl and pulled into the gravel entrance of a horse farm. The police rolled to a stop beside the Chrysler, emerging with their guns drawn, and ordered the men out of the car. A third officer arrived at the same time and kept his duty rifle trained on the scene.

As the four hapless Tigers stood on the roadside, the police found the black safe along with a .45-caliber handgun and a BB gun. Asked to identify himself, Goodwin replied, "We're Auburn football players."

The next morning, Chizik awoke to the news that four Tigers were each being held at Lee County Detention Center on \$511,000 bail. He huddled with his staff and released a statement expressing shock and outrage. "While we realize the legal process will run its course and these young men have a right for their case to be heard, playing for Auburn University is an honor and a privilege. It is not a right. I am extremely disappointed and embarrassed by the actions of these individuals."

After the statement was released, he picked up the phone in his office and started calling the parents of the ousted players. Harrison Mosley recalls the head coach telling him, "I don't like the circumstances I have to call under. I feel like Dakota has stabbed me in the back."

**A TRIP TO** Conway Acres this March revealed that all evidence of the crime scene has been swept away. The mobile home on Lot 437 is gone; just a rectangular patch of crabgrass where it used to sit remains.

Any evidence of the Chizik era has also been wiped clean. After winning a national championship, the 2010 team returned only six starters. Chizik presided over an 8-5 season in 2011 and a 3-9 disaster in 2012. Jacobs, in a letter sent to Auburn boosters on Nov. 25, 2012, admitted that the man he'd once insisted was perfect for the job had been a poor choice for head coach. "I regret that the Auburn family, and especially our season-ticket holders and donors, have had to endure a frustrating

and difficult season. You expect and deserve better," he wrote.

On a drizzly Alabama morning this February, Jacobs looked outside his window at the cranes heaving concrete pilings for a new parking garage outside Jordan-Hare Stadium and considered the question that has hovered over his athletic department since the night of the robbery two years ago.

Could his program have been more proactive about confronting synthetic marijuana use during its national championship season?

Sipping a Diet Coke, the AD didn't go into specifics but rather addressed the big picture. "We did all we could do to educate our student-athletes until us and the testing lab could understand exactly what we were dealing with, I think just like the rest of the campus and the nation was trying to figure out," he said. The slow-moving world of college drug testing, Jacobs pointed out, is no match for the fast-moving world of designer drugs.

But whether the program could've done more to impede the downfall of the four former players is an argument that came into sharp relief in April 2012, when Goodwin was the first to face a jury. Over three days, he heard Dyer testify about Spice use on the team, and the students from the trailer recounted their horror at being robbed. But presiding judge Christopher J. Hughes, an Auburn alum, limited Lauryn Lauderdale, Goodwin's attorney, and her line of questioning until she felt calling Chizik would have little use. "Auburn is not on trial here," he'd said earlier in her cross-examination.

The jury took 45 minutes to convict Goodwin. In June 2012, Hughes sentenced the once-promising receiver to 15 years in prison.

During a phone interview this March from Kilby Correctional Facility in Montgomery, Ala., Goodwin took full responsibility for his actions. "I'm not trying to hide," he said. But he also has had plenty of time already to consider how his experience at Auburn could have turned out differently. "It wasn't hard to find out we were all smoking," he said. "It got to the point where players were showing up to the meetings high, and the performance at practice wasn't as good as it was at the beginning of the season. It took a toll on a lot of people, a lot of players. But we were a winning team getting



FOR MORE ON AUBURN'S  
BATTLE AGAINST SPICE, CATCH  
THE E:60 SEASON PREMIERE  
ON APRIL 23 AT 7 P.M. ET.

recognition with a superstar quarterback. So [the coaches] tried to keep stuff like that under wraps. You don't want it to leak out to the media. You try to ... hide it."

**AS THE THREE** other Conway Acres cases wind through the Lee County courthouse, there is certain to be more discussion about whether Spice led to the events of March 11, 2011. On April 8, McNeil pleaded guilty to first-degree robbery and will serve a minimum of three years in prison, while Mosley and Kitchens await trial.

Meanwhile, Dyer asked for and was granted a release from Auburn in January 2012 after his second straight 1,000-yard rushing season. *The Mag* has learned that he failed six tests for synthetic marijuana between February and June 2011, and after Auburn started punishing offenders in August 2011, he failed two more tests. A third positive for regular marijuana on Nov. 29, 2011, three days after the finale against Alabama, resulted in an indefinite suspension, which prompted his request for a release.

Malzahn, who left Auburn after the 2011 season and resurrected Arkansas State with its first bowl win as an FBS school, gave Dyer a second chance with the Red Wolves. In return, the former star created more controversy after he was cited for going 96 mph in a 70 mph zone, and an unloaded pistol was found in the trunk of his car. Malzahn released his prized recruit. Now Dyer is studying at a small Arkansas Christian college, a once-likely first-round NFL draft pick reduced to a question mark with two years of college eligibility remaining.

As for Malzahn, the 47-year-old is back at Auburn as the head coach, entrusted with rebuilding the program he helped revive just three seasons ago. Jacobs spent \$7.5 million to get rid of Chizik (who has worked briefly as an analyst for ESPN) in the hopes that Malzahn's high-scoring spread offense will restore the winning ways of a program that has taken the biggest tumble of any BCS champion.

But more than wins and losses, Malzahn's job now is to try to stabilize the fragile foundation of a reeling program. Answering questions from reporters after a spring practice in late March, he had this to say: "When I first got the job, it was evident we had some players with mental scars. But it's a new day." ■



*In the reporting of "Coming Down," which first ran April 4 on ESPN.com, The Mag requested drug-testing records from Auburn, as well as interviews with athletic director Jay Jacobs, coach Gus Malzahn, former coach Gene Chizik and sports medicine director Joseph Petrone. [Access to Jacobs and Petrone was granted.] The story has since been widely debated, and new information has contradicted some of Auburn's statements to The Mag. Here are answers to FAQs about Auburn and Spice. —SHAUN ASSAEL*

#### **When did Spice become illegal in Alabama?**

On April 29, 2010, then-governor Bob Riley signed a bill that made Spice illegal to possess or sell; that bill went into effect July 1, 2010. "There was a huge public perception that this stuff was a legal high when it wasn't," says Barry Matson, deputy director of the Alabama District Attorneys Association, which helped draft the bill. On March 1, 2011, the Alabama Department of Public Health added Spice to its controlled substance list, making it a Schedule I drug, the same as cocaine and heroin.

#### **When was the first test made available?**

Auburn says it began screening as soon as a test was available to the school on Jan. 24, 2011—two weeks after the BCS title game. It chose Aegis Sciences Corp., a Nashville company that runs Auburn's drug-testing program, to create that test. Six months earlier, in July 2010, Redwood Toxicology Laboratory of Santa Rosa, Calif., debuted a urine test for JWH-018. Two months later, Dominion Diagnostics of North Kingstown, R.I., also unveiled a Spice screen. Both tests were widely publicized by outlets such as Reuters, CBSNews.com and The Street.

#### **Did programs test for Spice before Auburn?**

Yes. According to a survey of SEC schools done by *The Birmingham News* in July 2012, Alabama began testing for the drug in the fall of 2010. Auburn told the paper it started testing in August 2011. In an interview with *The Mag* this past February, Auburn officials said they began testing players in January 2011. The first public report of a player being punished for a positive Spice test was in October 2011, when LSU suspended three players for a game.

#### **Did Auburn notify players' parents of failed Spice tests, and were there legal obligations or restrictions in doing so?**

Auburn officials told *The Mag* that they were legally barred from notifying parents when a student-athlete 18 or older failed a test before August 2011, when Spice was added to the school's banned substances list. But a player's father anonymously told Rivals site AuburnSports.com that he was notified by the school of his son's failed test in the spring of 2011, months before Auburn maintains that it was legally allowed to do so. The university rebutted that report to *The Mag*, insisting that "there was no notification from the sports medicine department or athletic director prior to August 2011."

#### **Auburn says that of more than 2,500 tests for Spice since August 2011, only three have come back positive. Does that mean the synthetic marijuana problem is solved?**

That stat is accurate, but in the six months before that August, the athletic department administered 799 tests and found 18 positives, including 12 from football players, according to documents supplied to *The Mag* by Auburn. The issue for all schools is that it is prohibitively expensive to routinely use tests that keep pace with the hundreds of new cannabinoids now being sold.