

Fred Russell Was A Vanderbilt Man

by Bill Traugher

Legendary Nashville sports writer Fred Russell would have turned 100 years old this week. Russell was one



Fred Russell & Grantland Rice

of the most devoted and fair sports writers to cover Vanderbilt athletics. His death at age 96, in 2003, closed a chapter of Vanderbilt athletics assigned to someone who was not a player or coach. Russell worked at the Nashville Banner from 1929 until it ceased publication in 1998.

Russell was a native Nashvillian who was born on August 27, 1906. His mother, Mabel Lee McFerrin Russell, was a composer and in her youth wrote *The Vanderbilt University Waltz*. During the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition in Nashville, the song was featured on Vanderbilt Day when the statue of Cornelius Vanderbilt was dedicated.

Russell gives credit to his mother as being the influence that sent him to Vanderbilt after graduating from Nashville's Duncan School. He entered Vanderbilt in 1923, and as a freshman, pledged Kappa Sigma fraternity. One of his fraternity brothers was the older Lynn Bomar, a 1923 Vanderbilt football All-American.

Pranks would also be a trait that friends of Russell would always be on alert. In his semi-autobiography, *Bury Me In An Old Press Box*, Russell wrote about one of his shenanigans targeting Bomar: "I also had the responsibility, as a freshman, of awakening Bomar in time for him to get to classes, and at the end of the school year I did this one morning by rolling the biggest lighted firecracker I ever saw under his bed. When it exploded I feared the whole corner of the fraternity house had been blown off, and I was so scared that even Bomar in his BVD's chasing me across the street and deep into the campus couldn't catch me."

Russell attended the Vanderbilt Law School and played on the 1925-26 Commodore baseball teams. He would credit his accessibility to athletes as a motivation to eventually become a sportswriter. One of his baseball teammates was Red Sanders a Commodore foot-

ball player and future Vandy head coach.

Russell wrote, "Indeed, one balmy May afternoon with the breeze in the trees outside the third floor classroom window, I had dozed off during a lecture. For how long, I don't know—perhaps two or three minutes—but I was awakened by a gentle nudge of the classmate seated next to me.

"He called on you," whispered this helpful, protecting friend. "Taken off-guard, flustered, I quickly if desperately responded in loud, clear tones: "I'm not prepared on that case, sir.

"The tragedy was that the stern and feared Professor Fitzgerald Hall had not called on anybody. It was an interruption of his lecture that he did not appreciate, and not until years later did I get to fully explain the reason. The perpetrator of the trick was Sanders, of course."

Russell did graduate from Vanderbilt (Class of 1927), earned his Law degree and passed the State Bar. His first job as an attorney was in the legal department of the newly formed Real Estate Title Company in Nashville, which he was manager. His duties were confined to the area of deeds, mortgages, liens, examining abstracts, etc.

A year later, Russell was out of a job as his company was merged. All the time we was practicing law, being away from sports bothered him. In June 1929, he was offered a choice of jobs at the Nashville Banner. Russell could sell ads at \$25 a week or be a cub reporter at \$6 a week. He took the reporting job.

"Ever since I began reading sports pages when I was seven or eight," Russell wrote, "I had envied sports writers almost as much as athletes who were boyhood heroes to me. I'd always imagined sports writing must me the greatest life in the world. Of course, now I am confirmed in the belief. Back there, as a boy around Wartrace, I would memorize sports poems of Grantland Rice and Morgan Blake. I thought those two sports writers were great."

In September 1929, Russell was happily



Russell with his daughters

transferred to the sports department as the editor. One of his first duties was covering Vanderbilt football. Three years later, he married the former Katherine Early. The couple would have four daughters together, Kay, Ellen, Lee and Carolyn.

Russell worked at a time where there were no computers and the weapon of the sports writer was a manual typewriter. It was a tough life, but only to those who didn't love their job in sports. Long train rides gave way to the developing airline service of the country in this era.

"I can remember one afternoon in 1932 when we were advised that a class from George Peabody Teachers College was touring the building," Russell wrote in his autobiography. "When they reached the sports department, two of us were on the floor playing marbles—for keeps—while our tallest staffer was shooting a basketball at the Western Union clock on the wall. It wasn't quite as bad as it may sound; the clock had been giving trouble and the paper was sponsoring a marble tournament with which somebody, as a refresher, had to become familiar.

"In those days nothing seemed to matter much just as long as the newspaper got out, and everybody had fun getting it out. There was a lot of pride in the work—and a lot of play. It was a robust, unpredictable place. Publishing week-day afternoons and Sunday mornings, we got to work no later than 7 A.M., and it was no shock occasionally to find some weary associate stretched across the copy desk asleep. Most likely he had stayed in the card game in the photographic department so late that it wasn't worth going home.

"On Saturdays we worked straight through from seven in the morning to two o'clock Sunday morning. A late Saturday night pastime was to shoot a .22 rifle at the rats that scrambled about on the overhead heating pipes near the dimly lit entrance to the city room. This often proved an unnerving greeting to unexpected visitors just stepping off the elevator."

In 1936, Russell departed briefly from sports to write a series of exclusive articles on the kidnapper of Mrs. Alice Speed Stoll of Louisville. The series gave him the National Headliners Club Award for that year.

Awards were not unfamiliar to Russell, in his life he was given this partial list of awards: Grantland Rice Memorial Award, 1958; Jake Wade Award, 1966; U.S. Olympic Award for distinguished journalism, 1976; Distinguished American Award from the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame, 1980; Bert McGrane Award from the Football Writers Association of America; Chairman of the Honors Court of the National Foot-

ball Hall of Fame and President of the Football Writers Association of America, 1965-66.

Russell traveled the country coast-to-coast attending the biggest sporting events such as a Dempsey fight

in New York. He knew the greats as Babe Ruth, Bobby Jones, Bear Bryant, Adolph Rupp, Red Grange, Otto Graham and Casey Stengel. He knew them all. Russell said one of his greatest moments was in 1953 when a dinner



Grange, Jones, Russell and Dempsey

was held in his honor commemorating his 25 years of service at the Banner. In attendance to celebrate were Grange, Jones and Dempsey.

Russell's "Sidelines" column was informative and gave the reader an insight or story that only he could reveal. From 1949-1962, he wrote the annual "Pigskin Preview" for the Saturday Evening Post. Russell is the author of seven books, one of which he dedicated to his daughters: "To my little girls, who made this book practically impossible."

When Vanderbilt Stadium was rebuilt in 1982, the Fred Russell Press Box was dedicated. The new Vanderbilt baseball press box also bears his name. Brentwood Academy has devoted "The Fred Russell Room" in the school's library to Russell. It contains photographs from Russell's personal collection, his books, typewriter, awards and other memorabilia.

One of Russell's first books was about the early beginnings of Vanderbilt football, which was published in 1938 and covers the sport from 1886-1937. The dedication by Russell in *Fifty Years of Vanderbilt Football* states:

"The great wide world of "Vanderbilt Men" back from all the states and all the seas, to Dudley Field, as the pages of this book are turned. Here meet the men of McGugin and the men of Morison, and with them, arm in arm across the chalked field of time, go the heroes of Vanderbilt's glorious, golden fifty years. Some view the scene from Valhalla; some through the mist of years—but under the banner of Gold and Black all are here reunited, Vanderbilt men, forever. To this cause, the pleasant labor of this book is dedicated."

If you have any comments or suggestions you can contact Bill Traugher via e-mail at WLTraugher@aol.com.