

Steve Sloan Talks About His Career by Bill Traugher

September 20, 2006

This interview with Steve Sloan is exclusive to Commodore History Corner and VUCommodores.com.

Former Vanderbilt head football coach Steve Sloan won his first game on the sidelines of Dudley Field over UT-Chattanooga, 14-12 in 1973. But, his initial win on the field was actually 12 years earlier as a senior quarterback for Bradley Central High School in Cleveland, TN.

The game against Battle Ground Academy was moved to Vanderbilt due to the anticipated large crowd. Over 18,000 fans witnessed Bradley Central's victory over BGA, 32-14. Sloan was All-State in football and basketball where college recruiters coveted his talents. He chose the University of Alabama and Coach Paul "Bear" Bryant.



Steve Sloan

"I never did exactly know why I chose Alabama," Sloan recently said from his Orlando, Fla., home. "I really liked Vanderbilt, Georgia Tech and Alabama. Tennessee was in the single-wing and somehow I just decided to go to Alabama. I did not base it on who was there or who wasn't there. It worked out good though."

When Sloan arrived on the Tuscaloosa campus in 1962 as a freshman, Joe Namath was already gaining national attention as the Tide's quarterback. Namath was one year ahead of Sloan in an era where freshmen were ineligible to participate with the varsity. During the 1962 season, Alabama went 10-1 with a 17-0 victory over Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl and a No. 5 ranking in the nation.

"I started all the games as a defensive back or quarterback as a junior," said Sloan. "When he [Namath] was hurt, I just played quarterback. When he was able to play, I just played defensive back. As a sophomore, I played defensive back pretty much the whole year until the Sugar Bowl when he got into a little bit of trouble. Then I played quarterback in the last game of the season and the Sugar Bowl."



Paul "Bear" Bryant and Steve Sloan

At the end of the 1963 season, there was a two-week break for the players before practicing for the Sugar Bowl against Mississippi. During that break, Bryant learned that Namath was breaking training by attending a party. Bryant suspended Namath for the Sugar Bowl. Sloan led Alabama to a 12-7 win over the Rebels. Alabama finished the season at 9-2 and a No. 8 ranking.

When Sloan was a junior, Namath was injured most of the year. The Crimson Tide finished that 1964 season 10-1, SEC and national champions. Sloan started the Orange Bowl game against Texas, but was injured during the contest. Namath came off the bench to earn MVP honors, but the Longhorns won 21-7. During this year, the final AP poll came out before the bowl games where 'Bama was ranked first.

"Namath was an extraordinary athlete as well as a quarterback, basketball and baseball player," Sloan said. "He was very quick with his feet and had a beautiful throwing motion. When I was a sophomore and junior, we called our own plays. When I played quarterback, I played more option plays, more running plays. He ran more passing plays.

"In my senior year with him gone, I had a lot more passing plays than I ran the option. It was an evolutionary process I guess. He was very talented. During his All-Pro and Hall of Fame career he had hurt knees. He was extraordinary as it was. He would have been phenomenal if he had two good knees."

Sloan, 62, said he roomed with Namath while the team traveled to road games. He was asked about any good Namath stories he'd like to share. But, Sloan (maybe being loyal to his old teammate) didn't have any.

With Namath graduated, the 1965 season belonged to Sloan. Alabama would win another SEC and national championship with a 9-1-1 record. The season was capped with a 39-28 win over Nebraska in the Orange Bowl. Sloan is the only Alabama player to earn honors as an All-American, Academic All-American, play on a national championship team and gain an individual national ranking.

Sloan ranked first in the nation with a passing efficiency ratio of 153.8. He also finished 10th in the Heisman Trophy balloting and appeared in the Senior Bowl. Sloan's three-year totals at quarterback include 142-of-234 passes for 2027 yards and 11 touchdowns. He added eight rushing TD's. Sloan was also the Orange Bowl's MVP and the SEC Player-of-the-Year.

Sloan was a very popular man in Alabama and gained a great deal of attention. He would be part of the great Alabama quarterback tradition with Riley Smith, Gary Hollingsworth, Bart Starr, Scott Hunter, Jeff Rutledge, Kenny Stabler, Namath, Richard Todd and Jay Barker.

"I handled that part alright," Sloan said about handling all the success. "But that spring, I had a lot of speaking engagements where I probably should have been paying more attention to my workouts. I got hurt in the Orange Bowl, so it took me a while to get well. If I had to do it again, I probably would have cut down on the speaking tours.

"Coach Bryant was very influential with me. We had a good relationship. He always tried to help me, tried to advise me. He was very helpful to me career-wise and I appreciated the relationship I had with him."

The expansion Atlanta Falcons drafted Sloan in the 11th round of the 1966 National Football League draft. The team was made up of rookies and cast-off pros from a special expansion draft. Sloan played briefly for the Falcons for two years. His NFL stats record a 10-of-31 passes for 134 yards and no touchdowns in eight games. Sloan did throw four interceptions and only ran the ball once for two yards.



Sloan with the Atlanta Falcons

"It was a very good experience," Sloan said. "I just had a hurt right shoulder; a torn rotator cuff. I got hurt fairly early in my second year in training camp. I was probably at that time trying to figure out what to do. I couldn't really throw the ball and I still can't throw it today. I enjoyed the experience and learned a lot of football, which helped me in coaching. I liked being with the team and enjoyed the trips to all the cities that I had never been."

The Falcons recorded seasons of 3-11, and 1-12-1 under head coach Norb Hecker while Sloan was on the roster. In August of Sloan's 1966 rookie season, the Falcons played the New York Giants in an exhibition game at Dudley Field. The Giants won, but Sloan did not see any action.

Sloan retired from professional football then accepted an assistant coaching position from Bryant. The former Alabama great would be coaching the quarterbacks for three years (1968-70). Alabama would be down in those years carrying a 20-13-1 record with trips to the Gator Bowl, Liberty Bowl and Bluebonnet Bowl. In those three seasons, Sloan helped develop quarterback Scott Hunter who ranks third in Alabama's all-time passing for most yardage.

"I was comfortable there," said Sloan. "Usually you start out as a graduate assistant. He [Bryant] hired me to coach the quarterbacks. I did the best I could. His work ethic was really something. There were extremely long hours. It's long hours anywhere you coach, but he was not the norm.

"One time I was in the press box. Coach Bryant called me and told me to put someone in the game. I told him I did not know if I could do that or not. He convinced me I needed to do that. The guy he wanted me to put in had graduated six or seven years earlier. I always got a kick out of that. He had coached so many guys, I guess he loss track."

Sloan then left Alabama for Florida State (1971) to become the Seminoles offensive coordinator. After one year, Sloan became the offensive coordinator for Georgia Tech. Sloan said his two years as an offensive coordinator gave him more responsibility and a great learning time for him.

In 1973 at Vanderbilt, Sloan would become the youngest college head football coach in the country at age

28. Bill Pace was coming off a 3-8 season for the Commodores and was relieved of his head coaching duties.

"To tell you the truth, I do not know how that happened," Sloan said about getting the Vanderbilt position. "We were finished with the season at Georgia Tech in the Liberty Bowl against Johnny Majors, who was at Iowa State. We won the game. I came back and Coach Bryant called me to say Vanderbilt was interested in me being their head coach.

"That was the first time I had heard of it. So Vanderbilt called and got permission to talk to me. I went on an interview and they offered me the job. I guess he had some friend up there that he probably called to help me.

"I thought we could probably recruit well in Tennessee at that time coming from Tennessee. Rex Dockery was an assistant at Georgia Tech and from Tennessee as well. He really wanted to do it. Bill Parcels called me. He wanted to be the defensive coordinator. Rex was the offensive coordinator. I thought we could get together a pretty good staff. Then we had some pretty good players there also."

Vanderbilt finished that inaugural season with Sloan with a 5-6 record. The season was highlighted with an 18-14 upset victory over Georgia in Nashville. Sloan said he was a little nervous and excited about coaching against Alabama when Bryant came to Dudley Field. Alabama went on to a 44-0 thrashing of the Commodores.

Sloan did not talk to Bryant during the week of the game, but did converse before and afterwards. After the game, Bryant approached Sloan on the field and said, "I'm sorry we beat you, 44-0." Sloan replied, "I am too. I feel the same way myself."

Another important game that year was the season-ending game against Tennessee in Knoxville. Vanderbilt lost the game 20-17 when a punt attempt by Commodore punter Barry Burton changed the outcome.

"It looked like we were going to have a tie, and I was talking to Barry on the sideline," Sloan said. "I told him, all he had to do was kick the ball and we were going to tie this game. I don't know why he ran the ball, but he did. Then after the game everybody was asking me why I called a fake punt. I said, 'No, I don't think I'd call a fake punt in that situation. I liked ole Barry a lot. I just hate that happened to him.'"

The next year Vanderbilt shocked the conference with a 7-3-2 record. The Commodores collected wins over Chattanooga, VMI, Florida (ranked #8), Mississippi, Army, Tulane and Louisville.

Sloan would return to Alabama for the first time as an opposing head coach. Vanderbilt played the Crimson tough in a 23-10 loss. Sloan enjoyed the visit as his team was much improved. Alabama was ranked fifth in the nation at that time.

Then when UT came to Nashville, the disappointing results from the previous year still lingered with the Vandy fans. Coach Bill Battle, and quarterback Condredge Holloway led the Big Orange. Vanderbilt had not beaten the Vols since a 7-0 victory in 1964.

The game would also end in frustration for Commodore followers. Once again Burton was standing near his goal line in a punting formation. Vanderbilt led 21-13 with about a minute to go in the game. Burton just needed to get the punt off. But, Burton dropped the perfect snap. UT recovered, scored a touchdown and a two-point conversion for a 21-21 conclusion.

"When something like that happens to a player, I usually say something to them the next day," said Sloan. "He was really upset about it. Barry was a good athlete. He made a lot of plays for us. We used Barry in a tight end reverse and a pass off it for big gains. We liked to throw to him. I don't know what happened to him on those punts. We had a hard time."

Arguably that team has been considered Vanderbilt's best of all-time. Sloan was asked about what made that 1974 Vanderbilt team so successful.

"I'd say that Parcels and George MacIntyre were on the staff as well and they all did a great job," Sloan said. "Bob Patterson was on the staff. They did a good job with the defense. We got a lot better on defense after the first year. If you can't play good defense, you do have a good chance to win in the SEC.



Sloan with David Lee

"David Lee and Fred Fisher developed as quarterbacks. That gave us good play at that position. We weren't deep in the offensive line, but they did a great job. We had really good running backs with Jamie O'Rourke and Lonnie Sadler. Jay Chesley was an excellent defensive back. And Ed Oaks played free safety, he was really good."

Vanderbilt, with its 7-3-1 record, was invited to play in the Atlanta Peach Bowl against Texas Tech. The game was a defensive struggle, and ended in a 6-6 tie. Tech's head coach, Jim Carlen, had already announced that he was leaving the Red Raiders for the same position at South Carolina.

"I really thought we would win that game, though Tech was a good team," said Sloan. "David Lee got married the week before the game. Fred [Fisher] got hurt during the season, David was quarterback. He was somewhat distracted. He didn't play his best game, but the defense played really, really good. We should have won that game. David Harrison was still a freshman and played a good game."

Not known to the public was that Texas Tech had contacted Sloan over a week before the Peach Bowl to interview as Carlen's replacement. When the team got back into Nashville, the rumors were flying. Word was out that Vanderbilt might lose its young, popular coach.

Commodore fans struggled with that scenario and some camped out in front of Sloan's home to encourage him to stay. Sloan also received hundreds of telegrams from fans showing their support. It was on New Year's Eve that Sloan announced that he would stay at Vanderbilt, and turned down the Tech job. But, the next day Sloan announced that he had changed his mind and was leaving for Lubbock, TX.

"I always regretted saying I was going to do something and do another thing," Sloan said. "That's always has been a regret that I had at Vanderbilt. I just didn't feel comfortable with it. It was an easy choice to stay and an easy choice to go. I just had a feeling inside that maybe that was the thing to do.

"I called Bryant to tell him I was thinking about going out there and he actually wanted me to stay at Vanderbilt. I guess because he had a lot to do with me getting the job in Nashville.

"Vanderbilt is a lot different now with their facilities. At the time it was hard to tell if they were really committed to winning in football or thought that they could win. It was hard for me to tell for sure. It was hard to tell how committed they were long term."

Sloan was named the SEC's Coach-of-the-Year and is Vanderbilt's last winning head coach at 12-9-1. One other problem Sloan was facing at Vanderbilt that followed him to other coaching positions was the rumor that he was going to replace Bryant at Alabama. Competing coaches would try to use Bryant's retiring in persuading recruits not to sign with Sloan.

For weeks the Nashville newspapers were flooded with letters to the editor complaining about or defending Sloan's departure. An unsigned editorial in the Nashville Banner was critical of Sloan and fueled the controversy. Some Commodore fans understood Sloan's departure while others were bitter. Fred Pancoast from was hired from Memphis State to replace Sloan.

Sloan found success in his three-year (1975-77) stint at Texas Tech. He guided the Red Raiders to two bowls and a share of the 1976 Southwest Conference championship. Sloan was named the SWC Coach-of-the-Year in 1976. His 1976 squad was 10-2, the last 10-win season in the school's history. Sloan's overall record at Tech was 23-12.

Mississippi gave Sloan an opportunity to get back into the SEC. Sloan was head coach at Oxford during a five-year (1978-82) stay. He didn't find success for the Rebels, never achieving a winning season. Sloan's overall record at Ole Miss was 20-34-1.

So, did Sloan have an opportunity to replace Bryant at Alabama?

"When we were leaving Texas Tech to go to Ole Miss, Bryant called me and asked me if I wanted to do it then," said Sloan. "But, I had already told Ole Miss I would come there. So, I did not want to again say I was going to do something and do something else.

"With my personality to follow him would have been difficult as the first guy to follow him. He had a real dominate analogy like [George] Patton, [Vince] Lombardi or Woody Hayes. A strong personality, of which, I did not have. I was more laid back. I don't know how that adjustment would have worked. Of course, nobody will ever know."

Sloan would end his head-coaching career at Duke after he left Mississippi. In Durham, Sloan also was without a winning season. In his four seasons (1983-86) at Duke he compiled a 13-31 record. Sloan's career coaching record is 68-83-3.

In 1987, Sloan returned to Alabama as Athletic Director. Sloan was hired at the same time Bill Curry was named Bama's new head football coach. Curry, who came from Georgia Tech, was replacing Ray Perkins. Perkins had replaced Bryant in 1983. Bryant retired after the 1982 season, but passed away in January 1983.

Curry and Sloan's tenure at Alabama was tension-filled. The massive Alabama fans never liked a Georgia Tech guy as their coach. Curry eventually resigned while securing a 26-10 record in three years. He won the 1989 SEC championship with a 10-2 slate, but never beat Auburn, which didn't help.

Sloan left Alabama the following year and surprised the football world when he became the offensive coordinator for Vanderbilt. Commodore head coach Watson Brown was feeling the pressure of not winning and tried to shake things. Brown also hired former UT coach and Vandy player Doug Mathews as his defensive coordinator.

Sloan was on the Dudley Field sidelines in 1969 when quarterback Vanderbilt Watson Brown led a Commodores victory over Alabama, 14-10. Mathews was a Commodore halfback and was the SEC's leading rusher that year. Sloan was an Alabama assistant at the time. That was also the last game that Vanderbilt defeated the Crimson in Nashville.

Vanderbilt was 1-10 in 1990, and Brown was relieved of his coaching duties. Sloan would continue as an administrator becoming AD at Central Florida (1993-2002) and UT-Chattanooga (2002- June 2006). He was inducted to the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame in 2000. Sloan is retired with his wife Brenda, and is living in Orlando, Fla.

So does Sloan have any of those old Vanderbilt black and gold, "We Believe in Steve" buttons?

Said Sloan, "Well, I've got one."

Next week read about legendary coach Paul "Bear" Bryant's first college head coaching game—representing Vanderbilt.

Traughber's Tidbit: William E. Beard first referenced the name "Commodores" to Vanderbilt. Beard was a Vanderbilt quarterback on the 1892 team and used the name Commodores while working on the editorial staff of the Nashville Banner.

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