

Vandy Shuts Out 1897 Opponents

by Bill Traugher

October 11, 2006

Vanderbilt began playing football officially in 1890 with its one-game season. After accepting a challenge from the University of Nashville (Peabody College), the Commodores defeated their neighbors, 40-0.

During the 1897 season there must have been a sign staked at the Commodores' goal line that stated something like:

"Area 51! Do Not Cross! Violators will be Shot!"



1897 VU Football

Of course, there was no such thing as Area 51 in 1897.

Or was there?

Vanderbilt Coach Robert G. Acton was in his second season guiding the infant football team. The season was special since not a single opponent was able to score on Vanderbilt. The Commodores were rolling right along with wins over Kentucky State (24-0), Central (Ky) (14-0), VMI (12-0), Kentucky (50-0), North Carolina (31-0) and Sewanee (10-0).

The Sewanee game was the toughest played to that point on Thanksgiving Day at Vanderbilt. Sewanee would become the heated rival in those early years. The *Nashville Banner* gave this report on a controversy concerning the Vanderbilt student's behavior:

There is one yell given with great frequency by Vanderbilt students, which was very offensive to decent people. It went, "Hippity, huz, Hippity, huz, What's the hell's the matter with us?"

This yell has become so popular with a certain element at Vanderbilt that it is ever uppermost in their minds and causes them to be oblivious to the fact that it is not exactly proper to shock refined ladies with such utterances. General sentiment among the spectators was that this particular piece of college literature should be burnt up.

Prior to the game yesterday Chancellor James H. Kirtland called members of both teams together and read to them a communication he had received from the Chairman of the City Board of Public Works and Affairs. This letter was a notice of the fact that policemen had been instructed to put a stop to college yells and any other noise after the game in the city limits. The letter had the desired effect.

The 10-0 victory over Sewanee concluded the schedule for that year. However, the sports talk in Nashville was that Vanderbilt should be declared the Southern champions. Attention turned to the University of Virginia. The Cavaliers were considered one of the top teams in the South. They began playing football in 1888, one of the South's first teams.

Officials at Vanderbilt contacted Virginia and the game was thought to have been arranged for Nashville. The initial offer was to guarantee Virginia \$275 and half the gate receipts, but later the visitors asked for \$600. The Nashville newspapers urged that the game be played.

On December 3, a group of Virginia alumni living in Nashville sent the manager of the Virginia team a telegram that read:

"As Virginia alumni here, we strongly urge you to fulfill contract and play Vanderbilt. As no excuse exists, otherwise Vanderbilt will publish correspondence and be awarded championship."

The *Nashville American* reported on the acceptance:

Vanderbilt and Virginia, after all, will meet upon the gridiron Monday on the Vanderbilt athletic field. It is a certainty and according to report the orange and blue eleven left Charlottesville yesterday afternoon at 5 o'

clock en route to Nashville. They will arrive tonight. A telegram from manager Buck was received yesterday about noon stating that he would except the \$600 proposition provided manager Fant would bear the expenses of the game. This was all that was asked and the controversy that has been on for days is settled.

The Vanderbilt-Virginia game has received considerable advertising through the disagreements that have arisen and there are very few newspaper readers who are not interested in the outcome on the field.

The indications are for a good day, the field was in very good shape yesterday, when the old gold and black eleven went against the "consolidated." There was a vim in the assaults against the line of the latter that was irresistible. The men are all in good shape and Doctor Acton is well satisfied with the prospects.

The Vanderbilt enthusiasts are jubilant over the approaching contest. The denizens of West Side Row last night adjourned supper to discuss the game. After the meal the team had signal practice in the gymnasium, accompanied with light exercise on the running track. The eleven will be the same that defeated Sewanee on thanksgiving. The contest will be one for victory. It is predicted that whichever way it falls the margin will be a small one for the winner.

Virginia entered the game with a 6-2 record. Their losses were on the road at Pennsylvania and Navy. They defeated Franklin & Marshall, St. Albans, Georgia, Gallaudet, George Washington and North Carolina. It was reported that a Georgia player died from injuries sustained in that game.

The Cavaliers only brought four substitutes and spent 26 hours on the train traveling to the future Music City. Over 2,500 fans were in attendance on the site of the original Dudley Field. The fierce game ended in a scoreless tie.

The Nashville American had headlines that read: "Vanderbilt's Record Is Still Untarnished." "Her Athletes Fail To Win, But They Blocked Virginia's Way to the Foot Ball Championship of the South for 1897." The American reported:

Unquestionably it was the greatest game ever played in the South. The assaults on the line were terrific, the tackling was brutal, the entire play fierce. Only once was the 20-yard line of either team invaded. Almost immediately after McAlester kicked off, the terrors of the tandem play were displayed. This play meant to bend one side of the line so that the end, the tackle and the guard reinforced the four backs in their charges at the line. Whither the force was directed was not known. It would seem almost useless to know the direction, so hard was the play to stop.

"It was the best game ever played in the South," said Acton after the game. "Virginia was heavier and made the most of her weight, using mass plays almost entirely. Our men played a more scientific game. My team can beat any team in America of the same weight."

The 0-0 contest gave Vanderbilt and Virginia a share of the Southern championship. Vanderbilt's yearbook paid this tribute to the Commodore football team of 1897:

"The team of 1897 was the greatest Vanderbilt University ever put on the gridiron. They studied themselves; they intelligently utilized those things that helped to make them; they analyzed their opponents. The proof of this high praise is their unheard of record.

"Hail, the team of 'Ninety-Seven,
Heroes every one!
Raise their triumph up to Heaven,
For the deeds they've done!"

Vanderbilt did finish the season undefeated (6-0-1) and unscored upon. Leading the Commodores that year were Captain Howard Boogher, Phil Connell Joe Goodson, John Dye and Louis Farrell.

Next week read about legendary coach Glenn "Pop" Warner's controversial visit to Dudley Field in 1895.

Traughber's Tidbit: It is not known how Vanderbilt began to wear the colors of Black and Gold. It was thought that the original colors were Orange and Black suggested by Nashvillian Judge W.L. Granberry, a graduate of Princeton who wore those colors. Others credit Livingston More with supplying the colors of Black and Gold from his prep school.

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