

CHC: Ty Cobb Practices as Vanderbilt Football Player

by Bill Traugher

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The great and controversial Ty Cobb came to Nashville during Thanksgiving week of the 1911 Vanderbilt vs. Sewanee football game. Cobb was not in town to give an exhibition on baseball, but came to Nashville--to act.

Cobb was coming off an American League MVP season where he batted .420. In this off-season, Cobb was performing in the lead role of the play, "The College Widow." The play was held in Nashville's Vendome Theater, which was located on Church Street. Cobb was appearing Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday nights with a Wednesday matinee.

The *Nashville Banner* wrote about Cobb's Nashville arrival:

"Tyrus Raymond Cobb, the greatest baseball player the world has ever seen, who appears in "The College Widow" at the Vendome for three nights beginning tonight, is the guest of Nashville today and was given the royal reception by the people of the city.

Arriving this morning from Atlanta he rested at the Duncan Hotel for a few hours and after dinner was taken out for an automobile ride by Messer's W.G.Hirsig and Bill Schwartz and Charles Davis in the car of Mr. Joe Holman, who is himself a great baseball fan.

"On the stage Mr. Cobb is maintaining the same high average that has marked his work on the diamond. Although the footlights are new to him, he declares he never had stage fright and likes the work.

"Much to the surprise of everyone, and myself in particular, I managed to get through the first night without that awful bugaboo stage fright attacking my heart and dropping me in my tracks," said the great Tyrus this morning in his room as he reclined on the bed with a black cigar between his lips."

Cobb visited the Monday practice of the Vanderbilt football team and met with Coach Dan McGugin and all the players. Most of the team members attended Cobb's Monday night performance.

The next day Cobb, who was 25 years old, returned to the Vanderbilt campus and was more than a spectator at practice. Cobb traded in his Detroit Tigers baseball uniform for a Commodore football uniform and practiced with the team. The football practices and games were held on the original Dudley Field (present site of the Vanderbilt School of Law).



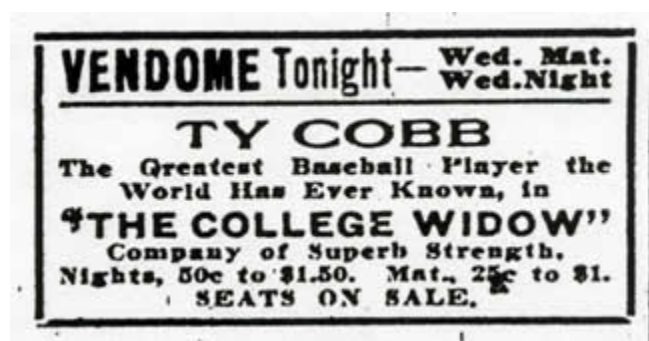
Spick Hall, writer for the *Tennessean*, wrote about Cobb's transition from the diamond to the gridiron with the headlines:

TYRUS COBB DONS THE MOLESKIN OUT ON DUDLEY FIELD

Premier Ball Player Joins With Vanderbilt in Practice

"Not content with being the hero of Atwater, and wanting something a little more substantial along football lines. Tyrus Raymond Cobb, the greatest batsman in the world today, donned a Vanderbilt uniform yesterday afternoon and practiced all afternoon with the Commodores. Ty has never played college football, but it was evident that the game appealed to him. Football naturally appeals to any great athlete, no matter in what branch of athletics he happens to be proficient, and Ty is no exception to that rule.

"Those who know the story of 'The College Widow,' in which Ty is taking the leading role at the Vendome, know that he captivates his schoolmates and his "Liebachen" by making a run for 105 yards, after the manner of the much talked of Sam White of Princeton. Well, Ty, after seeing Vanderbilt at work on Dudley Field Monday, decided that he would like to try it for himself; so he did.



"As the Commodores did not have a scrimmage, Cobb was not called upon to do any of the rough work, but what there was to do he jumped right in and began trying with the others. Drop kicking and punting, forward passing and catching the punts, were the main features of the afternoon work for Vanderbilt; hence they were the stunts which Tyrus did. Ty could be developed into a great kicker--there is no doubt about that. Naturally, most people think that we are trying to make Ty do something that he really can't, but without any previous personal knowledge of how to kick.

"Ty punted the ball yesterday as far as fifty yards in the face of a brisk breeze. His boots were, as a rule not spirally inclined, but just as straight walloping he booted the oval all over the lot, just as he is wont to slab the pill in the summer time. After Dan McGugin had given Ty a few lessons in punting, he was able to get off a number of long spirals which Hardage, Robins and Kent Morrison had considerable difficulty in handling.

"At dropkicking Cobb also showed that he could readily pick up the coveted knack. He dropped several over from the 35-yard line at an angle, and incidentally it might be mentioned that the field was a sea of mud and the ball was well soaked.

"Cobb weighs nearly 180 pounds when he is in condition and now he is off about three or four pounds. He looks, however, as though he were a slender youth, so well is he put together. He has a perfect build for a halfback, with his broad shoulders, thick chest and speedy pins. After practice was over yesterday Ty had a race with several of the fastest Commodores and put them all to rout. Ty said he would certainly like to play football with this bunch just for one season."

Cobb was unable to remain in town for the Sewanee game, but as the Sewanee players arrived in town, many watched the Wednesday night performance of his play. Cobb was portraying the lead as Billy Bolton. The *Tennessean* describes "The College Widow" written by George Ade:

"George Ade has made of the girl athlete, a type of character too little known on the stage today. With that touch which has made him celebrated as a student of character types the great Hoosier playwright has put before us a girl of snap and vigor and a knowledge of sports that men will travel far to see her. While the athletic girl is one of most pleasing characters developed in the production she is just one of the scores of everyday characters which have been so carefully evolved in the action of the play, types which we all recognize at first glance."

The Vendome was built in Nashville as an opera and playhouse with a pair of balconies and 16 boxes. The first performance was in 1887. The venue provided vaudeville acts and movies in the 1920s. The balconies caught fire in 1967 virtually destroying the building. The following year, the building was demolished and became the Lowe's Vendome Theatre.

Cobb traveled the South, Midwest and Eastern seaboard during that winter of 1911-12 performing with the acting troupe of "The College Widow."

Cobb also starred in a 1917 silent film, "Somewhere in Georgia" based on a short story by Grantland Rice. This plot was about a Georgian bank clerk forced to leave his sweetheart when he leaves for Detroit to play baseball. The hero, Cobb, returns to Georgia for an exhibition game, is kidnapped; beat ups his abductors and arrives in time to win the baseball game.

The Georgia Peach was credited with breaking 90 baseball records during his 24-year career. Cobb owns the highest Major League batting average (.367) most career batting titles (11) and was the top player with hits (4, 191) until Pete Rose passed him in 1985.

Cobb played baseball with Detroit (1905-26) and the Philadelphia A's (1927-28). He gained a reputation as an arrogant, hard-nose player with a confrontational personality. Cobb was an inaugural member of the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1936 and died in 1961 at age 74.

Vanderbilt might have been inspired by Cobb's visits to the campus as the Commodores crushed their rivals from the mountain, 31-0. In latter years, Cobb admitted that he was not an actor, but for one autumn day in 1911 he was a Vanderbilt Commodore football player.

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