

Gar Davidson, a real story book hero

By Ed Gillaren, Jr.

Where, in the 118-year history of college football, will you find an individual who distinguished himself as a player and coach, later became his alma mater's academic chief, and also achieved a military record that included command of two United States armies and a chestful of American, French and British military decorations, including the Distinguished Service Medal, Croix de Guerre and Order of the British Empire? Story book stuff? Not at all.

Turn back the pages of college gridiron history and you'll first find this individual, Garrison H. "Gar" Davidson, playing end for Army against Notre Dame on October 18, 1924 at New York City's Polo Grounds in the game in which Grantland Rice immortalized the "Four Horsemen."

The Horsemen helped Notre Dame run wild against teams like Nebraska, Georgia Tech and Wisconsin, and then wrap up the national championship by beating Pop Warner's Stanford Indians in the Rose Bowl. But the Irish did not gallop at will against Davidson and his Army teammates. The Horsemen had their closest call of the season, winning by the slim margin of six points.

In an interview on the 50th anniversary of the game, Davidson reminisced, "I remember we gave Notre Dame all they could handle. Three of our fellows, Garbisch, Farwick and Ellinger, were All-East selections, and so were two of our backs, "Lighthouse" Harry Wilson and "Tiny" Hewitt. And Bill Wood, who became head coach at West Point after me, in 1938, was as good a punter as you could find anywhere."

After yielding 13 points to the Fighting Irish in the first half of the 1924 contest, Davidson remembered, "Our coach, John McEwan, pulled a Rockne on Rockne. It was a trick play that enabled our quarterback, Harding, to score untouched from about ten yards out."

Davidson, who first attracted attention as an outstanding athlete and scholar at DeWitt Clinton High School in New York City, participated in another Army-Notre Dame thriller in 1926, this time before 73,000 fans at Yankee Stadium. Notre Dame edged the Cadets, 7-0, in a seesaw thriller.

"Christy Flanagan beat us with an heroic 60-yard run," the former World War II and Korean war battlefield commander ruefully recalled.

Davidson was back at the Stadium in 1933, his first year as Army's head coach, with one of the finest teams in West Point history up to that time. Army was unbeaten going into the final game of the season against Hunk Anderson's a Notre Dame team that was in a rare losing season. Army led 12-0 entering the fourth period, and the Irish pulled off a stunning rally to beat the Cadets 13-12.

In 1943 Illustrated football Annual, one of the premier college football magazines of the time, published its 10-year rankings. Army was ranked 18th, ahead of such powerful teams as SMU, Georgia, California and Texas. Five Davidson-coached teams contributed significantly to that sterling record, achieving 1933 to 1937 records of 9-1, 6-3, 6-2-1, 6-3 and 7-2.

Davidson was back at West Point as superintendent from 1956 to 1960, a time when there were mighty fine teams at the academy. The unbeaten 1958 team was No. 3 in the AP and UP polls, and featured such heralded cadets as halfbacks Bob Anderson and Pete Dawkins, quarterback Joe Caldwell, "Lonesome End" Bill Carpenter, and guard Bob Novogratz. Dawkins, the Heisman Trophy winner, was like Davidson had been as a cadet -- a terrific football player and a front-runner academically.

During his life at West Point as a student/cadet, football player, head football coach, and superintendent, Davidson came into contact with several West Point legends. When Davidson was a plebe, the superintendent at the Academy was Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur's aide, who also was an assistant football coach on the Plains above the Hudson, was Bob Neyland, West Point class of 1914. Neyland later coached the University of Tennessee for 21 years, and was named to the College Football Hall of Fame in 1956.

When Davidson won his monogram for football at West Point in 1927, he learned gridiron lessons from another West Pointer on his way to becoming a legend. One of the Cadet assistant coaches was a young man named Earl Blaik who stayed at Army long enough to assist Davidson in his first year as West Point's head coach. Blaik later returned to lead Army for 18 seasons, 1941-1958. Ex-cavalry officer General MacArthur said, "Just as football will remain a leading competitive sport in college athletics, so will Earl Blaik be remembered as an outstanding architect on the gridiron."

Davidson's military career was as glittering as his athletic record. As a colonel in the Corps of Engineers, he was actively engaged in the allied campaign against Rommel in North Africa. He served in Sicily, and with the 7th Army in Southern France and the Rhineland. In the Korean War Davidson was awarded the Silver star for conspicuous gallantry in action, and the Distinguished Service Medal. After five years as superintendent at West Point, he commanded the 7th U.S. Army in Europe (1960-1962) and then led the 1st U.S. Army in the States (1962-1964).

Davidson retired 41 years after he entered West Point as an appointee from the 23rd Congressional District, Bronx, New York. His record as an outstanding student, football player and coach, together with his achievements as a medal-winning combat soldier and commander of armies, is unequalled. Davidson was truly a story book hero come to life.

Convention notes

The February issue of the Journal carried notice that the Historical Society was hoping to hold a mini-convention in the Chicago area this summer. The date of July 22, 1989 has been selected. However, we have NOT yet received enough responses from potential attendees to warrant proceeding with convention plans. We need about 12 more members to sign up to justify the time and expense of organizing and holding the convention.

If you think you would like to spend Sat., July 22, totally involved in the history of college football with completely free activities and presentations, AND a free lunch, we need your letter to: Ray Schmidt, 24 Rockbluff Way, Lockport, IL 60441. If you've never attended a sports convention, you don't know what fun can be for a football fan.

Members who have already replied need not write again. On June 1 letters will go out to all who have signed up, advising them of the final decision.