

Tennessee 1938: blood & guts at the Orange Bowl

By Mark Purcell

The legendary Tennessee coach Robert Neyland had three distinct careers at the school: 1926-34; 1936-40 when he had to start by rebuilding; and post-war. In 1936-1937 he went 6-2-2 and then 6-3-1, doing some of the best coaching, and more obviously some of the best recruiting of his career. During these two years he restored the team's fortunes and reaffirmed the stature of the UT coach who once went seven straight years (1926-32) with nothing worse on his whole total record than 5 ties and 2 losses. But after 1937 Neyland no longer awed the South in the same way as after 1932. Worse, in the school's must game with Alabama, the previous five years saw 4 losses plus one 0-0 tie. Neyland's new crop of 1938 sophomores, his best recruitment probably since 1928, would change this.

Neyland followed the traditional prewar coaching tactic (USC, Notre Dame) of alternating two 2-way teams on the field in each game. The sophomores were officially the substitute "alternate" team, but Neyland's main tactical concern was to get these new guys on the field as much as possible. A few star upperclassmen helped glue both units together. The All-America candidate Bowden Wyatt was a senior end, while the tailbacks were junior George Cafego, a wizened little guy who had made a big impression on Neyland the previous year, and senior alternate "Babe" Wood. Cafego was a great punter, good punt returner and high-average off-tackle runner, with just sufficient passing skills -- in other words, the role-model Neyland tailback. But in rating Wood's 1938 senior year vs. Cafego's, keep in mind Cafego was playing with a physically superior unit, the sophomore "subs". The sophs included at guard Bob Suffridge, Neyland's greatest interior lineman since Herman Hickman.

The typical superior Neyland UT team sacrificed 15 lbs. and more per man vs. the more mastodonic SEC teams (Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky) as a tradeoff to get superior open-field speed on the playing field. Tennessee expected, and indeed required, an edge in turnovers and in the punting game, and steadily superior field position. This made its heavier foes waste their scrimmage yards getting to where a good UT team started up its offense, due to interceptions, long punt returns and solid kicking. The UT offensive/defensive team stats, end of this article, are enlightening here.

THE REGULAR SEASON. Discounting postseason, UT had three major opponent targets, Alabama, Louisiana State and Vanderbilt. Mississippi should have been a problem, but as we shall see UT looked out in December, facing a one-star team whose star was crippled. Games 1-3 were played with upcoming Alabama always in mind, with the main tactical concern of bleeding the sophomores ahead of time.

Thus in the 26-3 opener with Sewanee the official press report was that the subs, Cafego's team, was playing in order to rest up the varsity. In fact, the subs ran up a 20-0 lead in the first quarter. The flashiest single play was a 30-yard scrimmage shot by the most admired player on the soph unit next to Suffridge, Bobby Foxx at wingback. Wyatt scored a TD by recovering a punt he had blocked,

GAME TWO. Clemson (7-1-1) was one of three foes whom UT gave their only 1938 loss. Cafego (19-135 rush yards) had one of his three really big statistical

TENNESSEE 1938

26-3 Sewanee
 20-7 Clemson
 7-0 Auburn
 13-0 Alabama
 44-0 Citadel
 14-6 LSU
 45-0 Chattanooga
 14-0 Vanderbilt
 46-0 Kentucky
 47-0 Mississippi
 Orange Bowl:
 17-0 Oklahoma

games, the longest run 56 yards, plus enough passing (9-4-46 yards) to reassure Neyland about his triple threat abilities vs. Alabama. The scoring consisted of two runs by other backs, one a Foxx-style reverse (59-yard TD) by the other wingback, Andridge, Foxx's showoff play this time was a 23-yard interception TD.

GAME THREE. 7-0 Auburn. This one dragged out until a late-game short TD run by fullback Wallen. The close score was due partly to a tough Auburn defense and partly, the homestate Tennessee media at the game was convinced, Neyland's willingness to accept a 0-0 tie the week before Alabama in preference to letting game scouts see too much of the UT offense. An injury to star blocking back Sam Bartholomew probably explains the dud UT offense.

THE BIG ONE, ALABAMA. Cafego and the sophomores rose to the occasion with one of the big wins in UT history, sending a message to the SEC that Neyland was back and able to contain perennial powerhouse Alabama again. Cafego made his breakthrough to national attention with two long shots from scrimmage and official game rushing figures of 19-145 yards. (I give him 17 for something over 130 yards from the Knoxville Journal play-by-play.) The short-yardage runner, Coffman at fullback, made both team TD's in a big 13-0 October win. It should have been 16-0 from a missed field goal attempt Cafego set up. Typical of a UT tailback, Cafego gained 83 yards on five kick returns, only 11 yards on one pass attempt. Alabama typified Cafego's non-scoring dominance of a big college game. He finished the 10-game season (played nine games) with only three personal TD's running, none passing.

Past the climax win over Alabama, we can dismiss the two breather wins over Citadel and Chattanooga. Cafego didn't even get off the bench vs. Chattanooga. Back to the four regular-season majors.

LSU. A replica of the Auburn win against a team considered the strongest in the South by the national media the previous three years. Low UT yardage, but sufficient scoring to back up Neyland's shut-'em-down defense.

VANDERBILT. This time UT moved the ball with good Thirties team figures of 214 yards rushing, 255 net total yards. The nicest thing about the Vandy game was that Wood, locked into an unproductive season with the inferior "varsity" players, took over as a UT tailback was expected to: 17-73 yards rushing, both team TD's, and 47 yards passing. He really outplayed Cafego except on punt returns. This Vandy performance may have been significant in peppering Wood up for the next real UT game in the Orange Bowl.

Scores of 46-0 and 47-0 look like two more breathers on the schedule, but Kentucky was a major, obviously demoralized, and Mississippi should have been a real rival in the finale. Neyland was able to shuttle so many backs vs. Kentucky that Cafego wound up lead rusher with only 8-43 yards and one of his few TD's. That left Tennessee unbeaten with Mississippi (9-1) coming up, and anticipation of the first real matchup for Neyland since Alabama.

Mississippi was in 1938 what next year (1939) Iowa was like with Nile Kinnick, a drooping team whose new coach revived it by rebuilding around a star senior back. Mississippi's star was the great and still sufficiently unknown Parker Hall, who reproduced his 1938 college statistical exploits with the Pro Cleveland Rams 1939-40. For three years there is a case Hall was the best

single back in American football. But vs. UT Hall was a crippled back. Hall suffered a temporary injury helping his team take out arch-rival Mississippi State the week before, could not recuperate before the UT game, and therefore was shut down by Neyland's defense in an unfair matchup.

ORANGE BOWL. The Mississippi slaughter would have been an inartistic way for Neyland and UT to go out in 1938, but finally UT got to play one of the big boys again. It was a dream contest for the Orange Bowl committee, which had managed previously to schedule a few good teams (Duquesne, Michigan State, Auburn, etc.), but nothing commercially sexy. Now they had the only Jan./39 bowl game with two unbeaten teams: Neyland's UT vs. the 10-0 Oklahoma Sooners from the old Big 6 Conference.

Two distinct concepts of coaching Thirties college football were at stake. Tennessee bet everything on team speed, control of the field and turnovers, and from scrimmage basically utilized a rushing offense. Oklahoma, coached by Tom Stidham, was in many ways the more "modern" team. The Sooner size advantage was 15-20 lbs. per man over UT, and by 1938 standards Oklahoma was as familiar with the passing game, both offensively and defensively, as any modern passing team. OU concentrated on the short passing game from a double wing like any NFL offense today. The star Sooner player was end Waddy Young, basically a defensive standout. He may have been the best single player on either squad. It was the first real bowl game for either team or coach, and there was no legit reason to favor either team in the betting, except by the classic rule: Oklahoma was a lot bigger.

What everybody agrees who saw it is that the nature of the contest was decided early, right after the kickoff. The major tactical question for UT was how it would handle Young at defensive end. Young was a 1938 version of Gino Marchetti-Lawrence Taylor and had wrecked the powerhouse passing games of Rice (Ernie Lain), Tulsa (Tommy Thompson) and Missouri (Paul Christman).

My play-by-play (Knoxville Journal) account says Neyland did the obvious sensible thing and assigned Young to his star blocker, Bartholomew. Pbp's do not usually specify blocking assignments, so the impact of the first Young-Bartholomew social engagements must have been something, because the pbp-man put them in. The end result was that Young was neutralized and out of the game early, and UT was able to move the ball vs. Oklahoma as well as it did in its average major SEC game (rush yards anything from 197 to 217 net) and much more importantly, stuff OU's double wing passing: 26 att., 56 (sic) yds.

Babe Wood went out in glory with better rush and pass yards than Cafego, though George got the first UT drive going. Wood made the second late TD, after Wyatt had previously cashed in a fumble recovery with his field goal. 17-0 in a game rated even.

The 1939 Grange Bowl, however, is not remembered as a classic case of how a great defensive coach like Neyland shut down what is today the standard offense in American football. Instead, it is remembered as one of the dirtiest major games played in modern times. The best technical account of the brouhaha is Loran Smith's recent orange Bowl Book, 50 YEARS ON THE 50 (East woods Press, 1983). The basic point is that Oklahoma felt from first-hand experience that Tennessee blocking techniques consisted of what in the Big 6 would be called holding. The Journal pbp partially revises Smith by no-

tating a couple clip calls vs. UT on punt returns, not holding calls. The OU penalties seem to have been for old-fashioned slugging, etc. It was generally felt the physical stuff spoiled the game artistically.

WRAPUP AND STATS. Tennessee 1938, one of Robert Neyland's big career seasons, seems to have been built around five core players: Cafego, Suffridge at guard, Wyatt at end, Foxx the sophomore wingback, and Bartholomew who got rave reviews for his blocking from pro scouts like Ernie Nevers. Cafego got some serious All-America mention and probably would have earned more if he'd been a senior. By the political rules of A-A voting, UT's unbeaten season and poll rating had to earn it one player slot, and it went, predictably, to the star senior lineman and future coach, Bowden Wyatt. Wyatt did the one thing very important for a prewar A-A lineman: he scored. In fact, he scored more than Cafego, netting five regular season TD's (3 receptions, 2 on turnovers), one field goal and 11 extra points. Very importantly, he kicked off and often put the ball into the endzone. The UT publicity people helped Wyatt along just a little, inflating his receiving stats by about 100 more yards than he gained in the pbp's, and upping his interceptions from one to three.

Figures below have had no previous appearance in book form. Source is the Knoxville Journal for 1938, either the team/player stats wrapup article of Dec. 19, or corrections of those published figures from game play-by-plays in the same newspaper.

Cafego was the lead rusher with 105-645-6.3, his official total, which I would correct to 119-634-5.33. Either figure makes Cafego an omitted top 10 rusher c/o the lists printed on page 113 of Louis Baker's standard FOOTBALL ... book (1945) apparently written with access to the official NCAA lists. After Cafego, lead rushers were fullbacks Coffman (72-330) and Wallen (60-229), and wingbacks Foxx (33-207) and Andridge (27-187). Wood was down at 45-131, but he had those two good games vs. Vandy and Oklahoma. Cafego's passing, corrected, is 35-13-141 yards, or, by my game-by-game totals 154 yards. I correct wood to 28-11-178 yards and two TD's from the Journal figures. Wyatt was the key receiver in all categories at 9-196 yards and three TD's. But Wyatt's figures were fattened up by 3-98 yards and three TD's in the throwaway Chattanooga game.

I correct team yardage figures to 215.9 rushing and 46.7 passing per game, or a 262.6 total offense, slightly lowering the official figures in the Dec. 19 Journal. The legend about Neyland grew to be he mainly punted and plodded from an "old fashioned" single wing, but a 200 yards per game rushing attack with reasonably safe passing was up to par with what other conference champs and poll leaders were doing in this era, if not statistically sensational.

It's accepted that Neyland's innovations as a coaching technician occurred in the kicking-turnover game and on defense. The 1938 team stat that really socks us in the eye is team interceptions: 19-321 yards (my correction) vs. only three by opponents, two in the meaningless walkover finale vs. Ole Miss. Team interceptions were spread around with five players having two apiece. Foxx had the only interceptions in both clutch games: Alabama and Oklahoma, Tennessee returned punts for 646 yards with Cafego going 24-344-14.33 (Steve Boda's NCAA figure). Official net defense was 75.5 rushing, 35.7 passing, or 111.2 total, possibly top 10 major on defense.

This article was based on microfilmed newspapers borrowed via the Peoria IL Main Library interlibrary service, efficient and helpful here as always. Loran Smith's book (cited) was especially helpful on Orange Bowl atmosphere.