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RED SANDERS PART I: THE VANDERBILT YEARS

By Joe Marvin

Henry Russell "Red" Sanders was one of the nation's outstanding college football coaches of the 1940s and 1950s. He developed strong single wing formation teams that were also characterized by tough defenses and excellent kicking games at his alma mater, Vanderbilt, and later at U.C.L.A. Sanders was born in Ashville, North Carolina in 1905 and moved at age two with his family to Nashville, Tennessee. The black haired youth later acquired a life-long nickname because of the red sweater he always wore in sandlot football games, and because his aggressive behavior reminded adults of a "young red bull."

Sanders attended Davidson County Central High School, and then spent three years at Riverside Military Academy in Gainsville, Georgia where he graduated in 1923. He then returned home to attend Vanderbilt University and lettered in three sports; playing quarterback in football, forward in basketball, and he captained the 1927 baseball team. He was an understudy to the All-American Bill Spears at quarterback. The Commodores head coach, Dan McGugin, said, "Sanders has one of the best football brains I have ever known."

Red's first coaching job was as backfield assistant to John Cody at Clemson College in 1927. He also played professional minor league baseball as a second baseman for Pensacola, Florida, Muskogee, Oklahoma, and Mobile, Alabama. He became head football coach at Columbia Military Academy in Tennessee from 1931-1933. In 1934 Sanders moved to Riverside Military Academy, his alma mater, and turned out excellent teams. Tommy Prothro of Memphis was one of his outstanding players there (1936-1938). During his eight year prep coaching career, Sanders compiled one of the finest records in Southern football history, winning 55 games, losing four, and tying two. Returning to the college ranks, he accepted the position of freshmen coach at the University of Florida under head man, Josh Cody, who he had worked with before at Clemson. The following year, 1939, Sanders joined Bernie Moore and his outstanding program at Louisiana State University where he coached the backfield.

Vanderbilt called him home in 1940 to replace Ray Morrison, who had gone to Temple U. in

Philadelphia after five years in Nashville. The selection had narrowed down to Sanders and Bobby Dodd, former Tennessee gridiron great and assistant coach at Georgia Tech under the famed Bill Alexander. On March 18 the Board of Trustees announced that Sanders had been signed to a three year contract. His first coaching staff included Paul "Bear" Bryant (Alabama), line coach; Here Alley (Tennessee), end coach; and Jim Scoggins (Vandy), the freshmen coach. He also had part-time assistants Norman Cooper and Raymond Andrus, the 1939 Vandy captain

The 1940 season was Sanders only losing year in his coaching career. The record was 3-6-1 in the very tough Southeastern Conference which was dominated by Alabama and Tennessee. The small squad of thirty-one players played aggressive, hard-nosed football, but lost close games to Princeton on the road 7-6, L.S.U. 7-0, Ole Miss 13-7, and Alabama 25-21. When Coach Sanders was rushed to the hospital for an emergency appendectomy, assistant coach "Bear" Bryant directed the team to a 7-7 tie vs. Kentucky. The Commodores best game was the 25-21 loss to 'Bama at Legion Field in Birmingham. The winning margin was a Jimmy Nelson to Russell Croft pass late in the fourth quarter. In the final game, Tennessee came to Dudley Field with a Sugar Bowl bid waiting for them and even the rain and soft field failed to halt Johnny Butler, Buist Warren, and Bobby Foxx. The Orangemen dominated in all areas, and Vandy never passed its own 42 yard line in the 20-0 loss.

The 1941 team produced an excellent 8-2-0 record, and for the first time since 1928 Vanderbilt reached November undefeated and untied, with big wins over Purdue 3-0, Kentucky 39-15, Georgia Tech 14-7, and Princeton 46-7 at Nashville. Tulane invaded Dudley Field and whipped the Commodores 34-14 behind the running of Bob Glass, but three weeks later in a chilling downpour Vandy upset Alabama 7-0 at Nashville. 'Bama finished 9-2-0 and went on to defeat Texas A & M in the Cotton Bowl game on New Years Day. With one game remaining, the traditional and always bitter struggle with Tennessee, there was hope for a post-season bowl bid for Vanderbilt. However, another strong Volunteer squad under Coach John Barnhill outplayed them completely in a 26-7 rout. Johnny Butler, Bobby Cifers, and Walt Slater, all had big games for the Vols.

The Sanders winning tradition was built in just two seasons at Vanderbilt before World War II broke out. The '41 team scored 260 points and played sterling defense in all but two games. Jack Jenkins scored on each of the ten opponents and led the Southeastern Conference with 90 points. He made every All-SEC team along with center Bob Girde, who was selected All-American by Grantland Rice. Sanders' 1942 team finished with a 6-4-0 record and defeated Purdue again, 26-0, Kentucky 7-6, and Ole Miss 19-0. Another top Alabama eleven coached by Frank Thomas whipped the Commodores 27-7, and Tennessee prevailed again 19-7.

During the war years, Sanders served in the United States Navy and rose to the rank of Lieutenant Commander in the Navy's pre-flight training program at Pensacola, Florida from 1943-1945. He returned to Vandy in 1946 as head coach and athletic director, to rebuild the program which had been curtailed in 1943 and 1944 and suffered through a 3-6-0 season in 1945. Sanders hired Tommy Prothro to be his backfield coach, and with the later addition of Jim Myers from Tennessee as line coach, Red developed one of the country's finest coaching staffs.

The 1946 season found the World War II veterans returning to colleges, and there were many strong football programs in every section of the country. Vandy had a tremendous defense that gave up only 43 points in nine games, with shutouts against Ole Miss 7-0, Florida 20-0, Auburn 19-0, and North Carolina State 7-0. There were close losses to Paul "Bear" Bryant's first Kentucky squad 10-7, Alabama 12-7, and General Robert Neyland's first post-war team 7-6. The 5-4-0 record was a solid rebuilding year for Sanders. After a strong start in 1947 with victories over Northwestern, 3-0, at Evanston, Alabama 14-7, and Ole Miss 10-6, the Commodores faltered against Kentucky 14-0 and Louisiana State 19-13. With wins over Auburn 28-0 and Miami Florida 33-7, Vanderbilt was 6-2-1 heading into November. But Jim Tatum's first Maryland team beat Vandy 20-6, and then arch-rival Tennessee won 12-7.

The 1948 team was one of the best in school history, as the Commodores posted an 8-2-1 record while scoring 328 points to only 73 points against. It was one of Sanders' finest coaching achievements, for Vandy started the season with a 13-0 loss to Georgia Tech, a 14-14 tie with Alabama, followed by a 20-7 loss to Ole Miss. After whipping Kentucky 26-7, Vandy traveled to the Yale Bowl and ran over Herman Hickman's Bulldogs 35-0 in an impressive display of single wing power. The high scoring continued with wins against Auburn 47-0, L.S.U. 48-7, Marshall 56-0, and Maryland 34-0; before Vanderbilt defeated Tennessee 28-6 for the first time since 1937. This was Red Sanders first victory over his biggest rival and nemesis, General Neyland. It was also Vandy's greatest season since 1927, and earned them a #12 national ranking for 1948.

There were no All-Americans on Sanders' 1948 Vanderbilt powerhouse, just a number of excellent two-way players up front, led by Captain John Clark; Ken Cooper, an All-SEC guard; Carl Copp at guard; and Charlie Hoover, center and linebacker. All-SEC wingback Herb Rich and end Bucky Curtis, along with tailback Jamie Wade and fullback Dean Davidson, were also outstanding. The 162-pound specialist and safety man, Lee Nalley, broke the national collegiate record with 43 punt returns for 791 yards and an 18.4 average. Red Sanders was named Coach of the Year in the Southeastern Conference for 1948.

At the 1949 American Football Coaches Association convention, Wilbur Johns, director of athletics at U.C.L.A. in Los Angeles, contacted Sanders and offered him the head football position at the California school. The decision to leave Vanderbilt and move to the West Coast would be a memorable one for Sanders and Pacific Coast Conference football.

TO BE CONTINUED

Earl "Zev" Graham may have been one of the shortest All-America caliber players in college football history (he received All-America Honorable Mention notices in 1925). The 5'6" and 150-pound quarterback called Fordham's plays, was a shifty runner, an excellent passer, and was a whiz at drop-kicking extra points and field goals (about 20 of the latter during his career). Graham lettered in football four seasons at Fordham (1923-1926) for Coach Frank Gargan. The 1925 season was the best of Zev's career, as Fordham notched an impressive 8-1-0 record.

After his graduation, Graham became a football and baseball coach at two Jesuit high schools in New York City – Fordham Prep during the 1930s and Brooklyn Prep in the early 1940s. Zev developed George Stirnweiss, who became a New York Yankees baseball star, and Joe Paterno, today's Penn State football coach. In one of his recent books, Paterno gives considerable credit to Graham for developing his athletic and academic careers, and for helping to structure his lifestyle. Interestingly, in one of Graham's most important high school games, his Brooklyn Prep team battled Vince Lombardi's St. Cecelia High of Englewood, New Jersey to a near standoff before the Saints escaped with a 6-0 win.

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