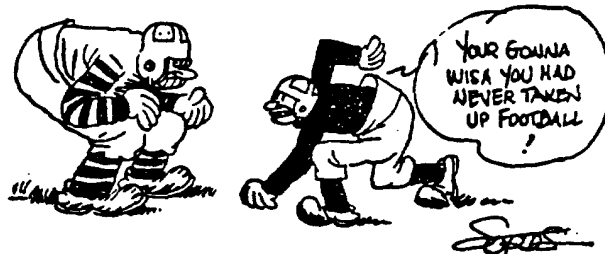

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Statistical breakthrough by Purcell Spears and Vandy, excitement in 1927

By Mark Purcell

In 1927 there was a general contemporary agreement the best college football team in the entire South resided in Atlanta, whether you voted for Georgia or Georgia Tech. But the same contemporaries would also have agreed the best back in the region, Bill Spears, played over in Nashville at Vanderbilt University. Those of us who have researched 1927 Southern football would further argue Spears' team was the best entertainment ticket buy. If what you wanted was fun games, competitiveness, action, and something resembling modern offensive football, Spears was the player and Vanderbilt the team to see.

All prewar team scheduling and scoring needs to be decoded, even before we get to the team-player yardage figures which make up the final section of this article. Vandy, with an average of 26.8 points per game, was among the top regional scoring teams along with Tennessee (27.27), playing a humbler semi-major schedule, and Georgia (24.8). The Commodore schedule breaks down into the usual pattern of breathers, one major intersectional foe (Texas) and seven games in the old inclusive Southern Conference of which game 10 against Sewanee arguably can be considered another breather. Six or seven topflight opponents is high for any major 1927 college team except Rockne's Notre Dame. This matter of whom Vandy was scheduling is important when we get back to rating VU-1927 statistically,

The interesting thing, from the perspective of 1988, is not whom VU-1927 was playing, but how the coach, Dan McGugin, and his players dealt with the challenge of their schedule. McGugin had been coaching basically winning defensive football the previous few years at Vanderbilt and only gradually opened up. His senior losses from the 1926 team had been serious. Vanderbilt played out its 1927 schedule with, according to the coach, 14 players capable of competing against first-division area foes. This was a serious coaching estimate, not negative hype. Vanderbilt sent just 12 men into action against Georgia Tech, 12 against Alabama, and 11 against Tennessee.

The usual solution for a lack of depth, prewar, was to rely on the kicking game, and defense. Vandy had its kicker in the star senior tailback Bill Spears. McGugin, whose coaching roots at Vandy went back to

1927 VANDERBILT

45-18	Chattanooga
39-10	Quachita
53-6	Centre
6-13	Texas
32-0	Tulane
34-6	Kentucky
0-0	Georgia Tech
7-7	Tennessee
39-20	Maryland
26-6	Sewanee
14-7	Alabama

1904 and hence made him the Grand Old Man of Southern football, had every reason to play it safe and engage in low-scoring, low-yardage games under the sacred prewar banner of "sound football."

Instead, Vanderbilt went on the attack in 1927. The Commodores chose to chew up opponent defenses with the help of a radical new passing attack led by Spears. As a result Spears, weight 152 pounds, had a fantastic year passing, running, punting, kick returning and quarterbacking. Vandy went 1-1-2 against its four strongest rivals, Georgia Tech, Tennessee, Alabama and Texas, despite inferior depth, outgained three of the four foes, kept fans on the edge of their seats throughout, and produced the player to what modern 1988 eyes was almost certainly the legit top Heisman candidate in Spears, if there had been a Heisman Trophy to award in 1927.

How did McGugin produce this uproarious VU offense out of 14 players? First, by juggling his core players at tailback, fullback, center and receiver end. If McGugin rested Spears, or even sat him out a full game (Sewanee), the coaches resorted not to the official backup tailback but to the regular wing-back, Owen, to run the offense. If the second star back, junior fullback Jimmie Armistead, the NCAA major college scoring leader of 1927, sat down, McGugin sometimes pulled back his star center Vern Sharpe to play the position. The star receiver, Creson at end, did some of the passing in breather games. But in major contests everybody played 60 minutes and only Spears and Armistead controlled the ball. This basic two-runner, one-passer, two-receiver (Creson, with Armistead coming out of the backfield) offense worked spectacularly all season, unless you want to count game seven (0-0, Georgia Tech) which was an artistic flop.

Now let's see the Vanderbilt offense in action. Game one (45-18 Chattanooga) was the first of three breather openers on the schedule, with a good small college team playing out of its league. McGugin played the Spears-Armistead combine throughout. Since this game contaminates the value of Spears' total season statistics (9-75, 1 TD rushing, 15-6-161, 1 TD passing), we need to stress McGugin usually throttled back from then on in the breathers, and what eventually became Spears' fantastic passing and total offense stats were compiled, nearly always, only vs. foes who could fight back. The main importance of the early Chattanooga-Quachita-Centre contests is that the explosive new Commodore passing attack excited the hometown NASHVILLE BANNER enough to begin doing background publicity-color stores on how Spears and his "spear carriers" (pun) were firing away.

At this point in the VU schedule the real world, in the form of a sizeable Southwest Conference Texas U. team, intruded. Despite the size differential, The Vandy offense produced a very creditable prewar 314 yards total scrimmage offense, 172 passing. But one of the anti-passing rules of the 20's gave the ball over to Texas. This set up a 20-yard Texas touchdown drive, and soon the Longhorns had a 13-0 early lead at which VU ground away with statistical, but not scoring success. Spears had 16-72 rushing and 26-13-172 passing, but no direct scoring impact on the game. Vanderbilt's only tally was a one-yard fullback shot by Armistead.

The Texas game was Vandy's only season loss. Its long-range strategic significance was it showed Spears' running-passing (kick returns-interceptions) were mainly to get the Commodores into scoring territory after which it was mostly up to Armistead to smash the ball in, which he usually did. The negative point of all this, which became a midseason gripe by the coaches to the

NASHVILLE BANNNER reporters covering the team, was that Armistead (174 pounds), with all his scoring ability, did not provide the big-back blocking ability implied by his list position of fullback. In fact the list half-backs, Gwen and McIlwaine, took over the blocking impressively enough so that Spears and Armistead, all year, passed over or ran through opponents even when the foe provided the size problems Texas did.

The opening conference games (Tulane, Kentucky) mainly grooved the Vandy offense enough to run up 66 points and 947 scrimmage yards. Spears had a big "wire-service game" vs. Tulane with a 77-yard run from scrimmage, then an 80-yard interception, both for TD's. In fact, viewed by a 1988 statistician his 327 scrimmage yards (202 passing) the next week vs. Kentucky look even better.

Reality. Three of VU's four toughest games were left. Georgia Tech (8-1-1) was at this stage of the season being swamped by the publicity being given arch-rival Georgia as potential 1927 national champion. This was because Tech had a loss from scheduling Rockne and Notre Dame, and because Tech's key backs were yet unknown sophomores named Mizell and Stumpy Thomason. A 1988 researcher can see clearly Tech was the best defensive team in the South and thus this forecasts Tech's future "upset" of Georgia in December.

It was this stout, sophisticated Georgia Tech defense Vanderbilt encountered Nov. 5. For the first and only time Spears had a really lousy passing game (10-1-12 yards), and he even blew a last-minute field goal attempt which would have prevented the 0-0 tie. The wet gridiron certainly contributed to Spears' poor passing effort. The VU coaches blamed, not Spears, but the weak-side VU ends and tackles for not cleaning out the weakside Tech secondary so that Spears could cut back from his sweeps and make yardage running against the grain. Perhaps the coaches underestimated the sophistication of Tech's secondary. The Tech game proved the one time the VU offense was fighting for its life (136 yards total offense) and most noticeably suffered from a mismatch in both personnel and depth.

Tennessee (8-0-1 season) managed another tie, 7-7, the next reek. This was the opposite of the Tech game in that VU dominated the first three quarters and Spears had an excellent (by 1927 standards) game with 23-65 rushing and 25-9-127 passing. In 1935 coach Bob Neyland of Tennessee rated Spears' 1927

performance one of the top four games by a back vs. his teams 1926-1934 inclusive.

After this letdown tie game, VU played its big audience contest of the year, beating Maryland 39-20 with neither defense really in control. The bad news for fans was Spears, who had a tremendous first half, suffered an injury that put him out of game 10 (Sewanee). Spears earned 208 yards passing plus some good rushing in less than 30 minutes, and received more good press clippings from an opponent coach. Maryland's "Curley" Byrd, who had seen nationally famous Bruce Caldwell of Yale two weeks previously, said Spears was the better back.

Vandy was able to cruise through Sewanee five days later on Thanksgiving with an offense built around Armistead and converted wingback Owen at Tailback. Armistead ran 67 yards for a TD, Creson pulled in an 18-yard TD pass, and generally nobody required Spears on the field. Unlike many good prewar offenses, VU did not go into a shell when their star back went out, and indeed four of the team's 13 TD passes were not thrown by Spears in 1927.

This brought up the must final game of any prewar Commodore season against Alabama (5-4-1). The previous year it was the hated Crimson Tide which had scarred Vandy's otherwise perfect 8-1 season and snatched off the precious Rose Bowl bid. But VU's 1927 season had a happy ending. Everybody peaked for a 14-7 triumph. The Alabama defense, which would have seen all those press clippings, may have overplayed Spears on pass defense (67 yards), but behind a charged-up line Spears ran 113 yards in 26 carries and Armistead was 25-98. Behind the customary Spears TD pass and customary Armistead TD run from Alabama's two-yard line, VU out-physicaled Alabama and wound up the campaign gloriously.

STATISTICS. So far we have only been recreating a good regional prewar team which played exciting games. This last section becomes historically important because the team statistics reveal Vandy and its star back antedated what we call "modern" football by nearly a decade. We do have the demonstrating figures, thanks to the excellent play-by-play figures available from the 1927 NASHVILLE BANNER.

Spears' figures are complete for his 10 games played because the single game he sat out (Sewanee) was the one game the BANNER failed to play-by-play. His personal statistics are: 141-794-5.63 average, 5 TD's rushing; 133-64-1207, 9 TD's passing; 274-2001 yards (200.1 per game), 14 TD's responsible, total offense; 4 interceptions including an 80-yard TD; 5 kickoff returns, 177 yards, including an 88-yard TD; 30 punt returns, 5.9 average; and 7 TD's and 16 extra points for 58 points.

Because of the single missing play-by-play, we have his teammates for only 10 of 11 games. Armistead's rushing figures are 216-782-3.62, and the missing game definitely would push him ahead of Spears as the No. 1 team rusher. Armistead's 19 scrimmage TD's and four TD pass receptions made him the 1927 scoring champion with 138 points. The key team pass receivers (10 games) were Creson 20-387-2 TD's, and Armistead 18-439-4 TD's. Elsewhere Creson is listed at 23 catches and 3 TD's. The top team interceptor was Sharpe with 6-94-1 TD, followed by Spears and Owen with four apiece (one game missing for Owen, of course).

The 10-game team stats were 194.5 rushing and 148.1 passing (79 completions

in 171 attempts), for a per game average of 342.6 yards. If, which is dangerous, we accept the BANNER's 441 total yards for the missing Sewanee game, VU went 351.6 for the season.

"Modern" college football arrived at the major schools in 1935 with the Southwest passing attacks of Arkansas and Texas Christian. By the late 30's, everybody was aware the Southwest (no merely the SWC) was transforming offensive football. Statistically, Vandy's 1927 team total offense figures make a close fit with those of the 1938 national champion-Davey O'Brien TCU club, while Bill Spears' personal total offense stats makes the same fit with Kenny Heineman's sensational sophomore Border Conference year at 1937 Texas Mines.

In Spears' own (1927) era, his personal stats are fantastically out of synch with what is statistically available on the big-name All-America backs. The closest total offense average, again from authentic play-by-play season totals, has Glen Presnell of Nebraska at about 152 yards per game up, mostly rushing. Figures for the top-level college backs of 1927 are surprisingly available, considering the era, for Joesting, Cagle, Drury, Marsters, Flanagan, Presnell, and Welch of Pitt. If somebody with access to 1927 Southwest papers statisti-cized Joel Hunt (Texas A&M) and Gerry Mann (SMU), we could then grant Spears the passing and total offense national championships he almost certainly earned in 1927.

There are few signs the national (Northern) media appreciated what Spears, or for that matter, McGugin, was doing. Of the 12 serious 1927 All-America teams, Spears made only two, though one of the two was the AP which must rank among the most competent selectors.

Armistead, running for over 800 yards, receiving for over 400 yards, scoring 23 TD's, should have at least sneaked into an all-conference team somewhere, maybe by being moved over to halfback on the paper teams.

I have left one research complication for the last. This is a problem in making use of the BANNER as a research tool on Vanderbilt football. Let me repeat that so far as possible all my statistical figures are from the 10 complete play-by-plays the BANNER did on VU's games.

The BANNNER further did midweek background articles, especially concerning Spears, and included player-team statistics in its very detailed game reports. The problem is, it is impossible to correlate the game-report and publicity totals with those from the play-by-plays. Not even the usual prewar Hypotheses can be utilized to determine if the false totals are the result of omitting scrimmage losses, or else all-purpose rush-yard inflations. The situation gets quite fantastic to the point (Dec. 27 issue, all-conference team article) of nearly doubling Spears' actual scrimmage rushing yards.

My basic research source for this article was microfilmed newspapers borrowed via the Peoria, Illinois Main Library. I have yet to see Fred Russell's (1938) history of VU football, but all else I have seen in book form was no help at all.