

SPORTS

FOOTBALL

Bennett continues to torment Meyer's Gators

Wide receiver catches 13 passes for 157 yards in Commodores' 25-19 loss.

By Jarred Amato
SPORTS EDITOR

Given the way Earl Bennett has tormented the Gator defense the past two seasons, it is no surprise that Florida coach Urban Meyer wishes he never had to face the Vanderbilt wide receiver again.

"I think that he is an NFL wide receiver," Meyer said after the Gators' 25-19 victory over the Commodores Saturday at Vanderbilt Stadium. "It is a shame that he is only a sophomore and that we have to see him the next couple of years."

Bennett certainly caused fits for Meyer's squad Saturday, catching 13 passes for 157 yards and a touchdown. The performance came a year after No. 10 had six catches for 75 yards and two touchdowns in Vanderbilt's 49-42 double-overtime loss at the Swamp.

"Earl is probably as sure as you can be," said Vanderbilt coach Bobby Johnson. "If we can protect the quarterback and have a chance to throw, he's going to have a good chance of catching it. He can get open. There are not many people who can stay on him."

While Bennett was able to surprise teams as a true freshman, his talents have been no secret to anyone this season. Still, teams cannot stop him — the wide receiver has 910 receiving yards and five touchdowns on 67 catches this season. For the career, he has 146 catches for 1,786 yards.

No one appreciates Bennett's ability more than his quarterback, Chris Nickson.

"You can always make good plays with Earl; all you have to do is give him the ball," said Nickson, who completed 27 of 44 passes for 298 yards and two touchdowns Saturday. "You never know what he's going to do. He's just an exceptional ballplayer, and anytime I get in a crunch situation I know I can always look to him and he'll make a play."

Trailing 25-12 early in the fourth quarter, Nickson threw a pass downfield that, in most cases, should not be thrown. But, Bennett, leaping with three Florida defenders, caught the 36-yard pass.

As Bennett got up and returned to huddle while

two of the three defensive backs involved in the play remained on the ground in pain, it became clear why Nickson has so much confidence to make those types of throws.

"You can go to him at anytime, no matter if he's double or triple covered," Nickson said.

After his 31-yard touchdown catch put the Commodores within six points with 2:30 remaining, Bennett hoped they would recover the onside kick and march down the field and win the game. But Florida's Dallas Baker secured it, and Vanderbilt, without any timeouts, was forced to watch the Gators run out the clock.

"I really wish we would've gotten the ball back and had another shot at scoring, but that's how things work out," Bennett said. "It was a devastating loss to us because we felt like we should've won."

With a 4-6 record, the Commodores must win their final two games — at Kentucky next Saturday and at home against Tennessee in the finale — to become bowl-eligible. The 8-1 Gators clinched the Southeastern Conference East title after LSU beat Tennessee.

While Vanderbilt isn't into moral victories, Bennett's performance, along with that of the entire offense, is even more impressive considering how talented the Florida defense is.

Only twice have the Gators given up more than 19 points — in their 21-20 over Tennessee and their 27-13 loss to Auburn. With the exception of Nickson, no quarterback has thrown for more than 240 yards against the Gators. Prior to Bennett, no wide receiver had caught more than eight passes or gained more than 117 yards.

But for Bennett, the consummate team player, all numbers are meaningless except for the wins and losses.

"I feel like I played pretty solid, but I'd much rather take the victory over my stats any day," he said. "Any time we can get a victory, it's one less we've got to win for a bowl game, and I wish we would've won this one. Even without me playing, I would've been excited about it." ■



MASON HENSLEY / The Vanderbilt Hustler

Sophomore wide receiver Earl Bennett manages to come down with the ball despite being covered by three Florida defenders.

FOOTBALL

Commodores' defense up for challenge

Brown, Goff and Hamilton record interceptions as Vandy keeps both Florida quarterbacks in check.

By Will Gibbons
SENIOR SPORTS REPORTER

If you left Vanderbilt's 25-19 loss to Florida early, or did not go at all, you might be wondering how Vanderbilt came within an onside kick recovery of possible victory. Look no further than the

stellar performance from the Commodore defense.

Forcing four sacks and picking off quarterback Chris Leak three times, the unit helped give the team a chance to win despite its early blunders.

While they lost the field position battle for much of the

game, the defense contained a talented Gator attack.

"I think if we hadn't given them so many short fields, we would've had a much better chance of winning this game," said coach Bobby Johnson.

Still, linebacker Kevin Joyce, who had a bone-crushing hit on quarterback Chris Leak,

wasn't making excuses.

"As a defense we've always had the mindset that it doesn't matter where the ball is," said Joyce, who had four solo tackles and one piercing hit for a sack. "If they get it down there, we've just got to try to take the ball away or move them back and make it harder for them to get a field goal."

Joyce, Marcus Buggs, Curtis Gatewood and Jonathan Goff all registered sacks. Ray Brown, Goff and Ryan Hamilton made the timely interceptions.

Thanks in large part to two blocked punts, the first of which gave Florida the ball at the Commodore 6-yard line, the defense had little margin for error given the short fields that Florida was given.

Of Florida's four scoring drives, only one was longer than 50 yards. One totaled 49 yards, another 24 yards, and the first one for just 6 yards after the first blocked punt.

In comparison, Vanderbilt's three scoring drives totaled 90, 74 and 54 yards.

"We were backed up the whole first half, and they had good field position the whole first half," Johnson said. "I thought our defensive played extremely well during that period, minimized the damage probably about as well as you could."

The second punt block was followed by a Ray Brown interception, keeping the Dores within striking distance at 15-6.

"He was running as hard as he could to get that football and had the wherewithal to concentrate and bring it in and tuck it away," Johnson

said. "I was just thrilled for him."

Forcing mistakes became a recurring theme. Goff, who had a team-high nine tackles, including two for loss, intercepted Leak at the Vanderbilt 3-yard line late in the first half.

"Jon had a great drop in coverage and saw the quarterback and made a great break on the ball," Johnson said.

There was Goff's tackle of quarterback Tim Tebow on third-and-one. There was Hamilton's perfectly read interception of Chris Leak's deep ball in the fourth quarter. There were several tackles for a loss and the four sacks.

Florida had several chances to bury Vanderbilt, but the Dores battled back, something that has come to be expected from this squad. Still, nobody is calling Saturday's loss a moral victory.

"They scored 25 points on us, so we didn't play well enough," Joyce said bluntly.

In the game, Florida totaled 330 yards of offense, but only averaged 2.9 yards per rushing attempt.

Discounting a 25-yard run, the Dores held the Tebow draw play in check. The defense forced six punts on the day. It was a stark contrast to last year's shootout in Gainesville.

"I liked the intensity our defense came out and played with today," Joyce said. "We just have to get rid of our stupid mistakes."

At 4-6, however, there is no room for "stupid mistakes" if Vanderbilt wants to finish .500. ■

POST GAME NOTES

- Marcus Buggs, Curtis Gatewood, Jonathan Goff and Kevin Joyce recorded sacks.
- With 5:58 remaining in the first half, Gatewood made a big defensive play, deflecting a Chris Leak pass that fell into the hands of Ray Brown. It was Brown's first career interception.
- Jared Hawkins ran 35 yards for a first down on Vanderbilt's first possession of the second half. It was his lone carry of the game.
- Chris Nickson and George Smith connected on a 10-yard TD pass to narrow the margin to 25-12 in the fourth quarter. Smith had five catches for 42 yards.
- Ryan Hamilton registered his first career interception with 9:52 left in the game.
- Earl Bennett finished with 13 catches for 157 yards. It was his sixth career game with at least 10 catches and six with at least 100 receiving yards.
- Nickson set career highs in completions (27), passing yards (298) and attempts (44) in the loss. His previous high in passing yardage (250) came last week at Duke.
- Vanderbilt notched three interceptions, the most since picking off four passes in a 31-13 win over Mississippi State (Oct. 2, 2004).

STATS	Florida	Vandy
Score	25	19
First downs	18	19
Rushing yards	88	93
Passing yards	242	298
Total yards	330	391
Turnovers	3	1
Blocked punts	2	0
T.O.P.	31:55	28:05



MASON HENSLEY / The Vanderbilt Hustler

Linebacker Jonathan Goff delivers a punishing hit on Florida's Dallas Baker. Goff had a team-high nine tackles and his first career interception.

GAMEBREAKDOWN

Player of the game

Sophomore Earl Bennett continues to amaze. No. 10 caught 13 passes for 157 yards and one touchdown despite facing constant double-teams. Bennett credited his success to the coaching staff's ability to "play mind games" with the talented Gator defense. "The coaches did a great job of lining me up in different spots to try to move me around to make sure they couldn't double-team me," he said. Bennett now has 67 catches for 910 yards and five touchdowns this season. For his career, he has 146 catches for 1,786 yards.

Stat of the game 37

That's the number of yards Florida averaged on its four scoring drives. Although the Vanderbilt defense performed well, the Gators' great field position proved to be the difference. In comparison, Vanderbilt averaged nearly 73 yards on its three scoring drives, almost twice the distance as the Gators.

Quote of the game

"I feel like I played pretty solid, but I'd much rather take the victory over my stats any day. Any time we can get a victory, it's one less we've got to win for a bowl game, and I wish we would've won this one. Even without me playing, I would've been excited about it."

-Vanderbilt wide receiver Earl Bennett discussing how badly he wanted to win Saturday's game against the Gators. At 4-6, Vanderbilt must win its final two games to become bowl eligible.

SEC East Standings

Team	Conf. Record	Overall	Next Opp.
 FLORIDA	6-1	8-1	SOUTH CAROLINA
 TENNESSEE	3-2	7-2	@ ARKANSAS
 KENTUCKY	3-3	5-4	VANDY
 GEORGIA	3-4	6-4	@ AUBURN
 SOUTH CAROLINA	3-4	5-4	@ FLORIDA
 VANDY	1-5	4-6	@ KENTUCKY

Press conference highlights

Vanderbilt coach Bobby Johnson and quarterback Chris Nickson answer questions following Saturday's 25-19 loss to Florida.

HEAD COACH BOBBY JOHNSON

On making mistakes:
"I'm proud of our players for playing hard and not giving up. I think early on we just gave them too many opportunities, and they're good enough -- we don't need to help them."

On the spot of the ball after Cassen Jackson-Garrison's run on fourth down in the fourth quarter:

"I was extremely angry with the spot and call, but after that, there's not much you can do about it."

On Florida's talent:

"At times we played well enough to win. We were playing a very fine football team that has some outstanding athletes. They're not going to give you any gifts. You've got to earn everything you get against Florida, especially against their defense."

On the decision to go for two with the score 8-6 in Florida's favor:

"They had eight; we had six. We were trying to get eight. We may not score anymore; they may not score anymore. If it ends up being 8-7, we wish we would've gone for two."

On Chris Nickson's continued improvement:

"You can look at Chris and see his thought process has gotten better, his



MASON HENSLEY / The Vanderbilt Hustler
Coach Bobby Johnson argues with a referee about a call during Saturday's game. Johnson said he was proud of the effort his team put forth against the Gators.

decision-making has gotten better and the actual accuracy in his throws has gotten better. He's getting to be pretty dependable."

QUARTERBACK CHRIS NICKSON

On the comeback attempt:
"The only thing that was not on our side at the time was the actual game clock."

On the team's character:

"We thought we could win; we thought we could win from the beginning of the game. We never stopped believing, and that's one thing I have to commend about Vanderbilt football."

On building from the Duke game:

"I think that's what I transferred from the Duke game to this game -- that no matter what mistakes I made, I knew where I was and how to do it, where to take advantage of it. It's a great feeling to be able to do that."

On the play of Earl Bennett:

"Earl is always Earl. You can always make good plays with Earl, all you have to do is give him the ball. You never know what he's going to do. He's just an exceptional ballplayer, and anytime I get in a crunch situation I know I can always look to him and he'll make a play." ■



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WOMEN'S GOLF



NEIL BRAKE / VU Media Relations
Sophomore Jacquie Concolino came from a four-hole deficit to beat her opponent.

Golfers finish second at Match Play

HUSTLER STAFF REPORT

After winning its last two tournaments, the Vanderbilt women's golf team finished second at the Collegiate Match Play Championships Sunday at the Eagle Creek Golf Club in Orlando, Fla.

The fourth-seeded Commodores upset top-seed Georgia Saturday, but lost 3-2 to second-seed Duke in the finals. The Blue Devils also won the event in 2003 and 2004.

Sophomore Jacquie Concolino rallied from a four-hole deficit to hold off Duke's Anna Grzebien 2 and 1. The sophomore from Orlando pulled even with only four holes remaining, then won each of the next two holes to secure the victory. Chris Brady outlasted Duke's Jennifer Pandolfi 2 and 1. The Vanderbilt senior took her first lead of the day on the 12th hole. Her lead grew to a two-hole advantage on No. 14.

However, the Blue Devils took the other three

individual match play competitions to win the event. Amanda Blumenherst topped Vanderbilt junior Liebelei Lawrence 2 and 1. Jennie Lee pulled away late to defeat Commodore senior Kristen Svicarovich 3 and 2. Alison Whitaker won 7 and 6 against Vanderbilt junior Julie Bartholomew.

Vanderbilt, who entered the event ranked fifth in the nation according to Golf Week magazine, reached the final round after upsetting top-ranked Georgia 3-2 in the third round Saturday.

Liebelei Lawrence, Jacquie Concolino and Julie Bartholomew each recorded victories.

Lawrence won six holes in edging Georgia's Whitney Wade 4 and 3. Concolino outlasted Mallory Hetzel 2 up, hitting a 5-iron within three feet of the cup on the final hole to earn the victory. Bartholomew was strong throughout her 3 and 2 win over Alina Lee. Playing in only her second event of the fall season, Bartholomew won five holes and recorded par on multiple holes

in registering her first win of the tournament.

"Liebelei was very solid and only lost 1 or 2 holes," said Vanderbilt coach Martha Richards Freitag said. "She hit the ball well and gave herself several opportunities. Jacquie battled back-and-forth, but was very steady in very windy conditions. Julie's win was huge for us. She made a lot of pars, which in match play earns you a lot of holes."

The Commodores defeated 13th-seeded SMU (3-2) and 12th seeded LSU (3-1-1) in the tournament's first two rounds on Friday.

Vanderbilt's fall season ends with two medal play tournament wins - at the Lady Tar Heel Invitational and the Stanford Women's Intercollegiate - and a second place finish at the Collegiate Match Play Championships.

The Commodores begin the spring season at the Arizona Wildcat Invitational, Feb. 26-27. ■

Post your own opinions about Saturday's game and the
Dores' chances of a bowl game on InsideVandy.com.



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