

## SPORTS

## FOOTBALL

# Commodores suffer Cat-astrophe in Lexington

*Kentucky becomes bowl eligible, while Vandy's postseason drought increases to 24 years.*

By **Aleksey Dubrovnsky**  
SPORTS REPORTER

On a cold, windy and miserable day in Lexington, Ky., Vanderbilt suffered its seventh loss of the season, a 38-26 defeat at the hands of the upstart University of Kentucky Wildcats, ending its hopes for a bowl bid.

This will be the 24 consecutive bowl-less season for the Dores, who haven't participated in postseason play since the 1982 Hall of Fame Bowl.

"This was a winnable game, but we have to find ways to make it happen," said Vanderbilt coach Bobby Johnson.

A game that featured 1,218 yards of offense and 64 points was uncharacteristically sloppy for both teams, though the Dores' errors proved more costly in the end. Sophomore quarterback Chris Nickson had an excellent performance, completing 23 of 37 passes for a career-high 446 yards, while leading the team rushing with 16 carries for 71 yards and two touchdowns.

"Chris had a mostly good game, and he's going to continue to get better and will be a fine player for us," Johnson said.

However, it was a critical mistake that he made at a key juncture of the fourth quarter that was most memorable from this game.

After the Wildcats took the lead 24-20 in the fourth quarter, Nickson deftly moved the Commodore offense to a first-and-goal at the one-yard line with 12 minutes left in the game. Nickson's first-down pass was dropped by a wide open receiver in the end zone, however, and a second-down carry by Cassen Jackson-Garrison was stopped for a two-yard loss.

On the third-down play, Nickson dropped back to pass and managed to evade several defenders, but as he was being dragged down, he tried to find sophomore George Smith in the middle of the end zone, and his attempt was intercepted by a Kentucky defender who then returned the ball to mid-field.

"It was an ill-advised pass," Nickson said. "I thought I read the defense well, and I wanted to make a play. But as soon as I let the ball go, the linebacker stepped up and made a good play on the ball."

Four plays later, Kentucky quarterback Andre Woodson found Mike Ford in the end zone for a 27-yard touchdown pass to make the score 31-

20 and push all the momentum in favor of the home squad. On the next Commodore possession, Nickson moved the Dores into the Wildcat red zone again.

Just as on the previous possession, however, Nickson's pass was intercepted by the Wildcats, and another Wildcat touchdown drive sealed the Commodores' fate.

The game featured a number of eye-popping stat-lines by players on both teams, though the final score was not nearly indicative of how explosive the offenses were and how inept and frustrated the defenses felt.

"We didn't play very well on defense today," Johnson said. "We allowed them to turn a lot of short gains into really long plays."

Bennett finished the game with 11 receptions for 220 yards, giving him consecutive games against the Wildcats that featured career-highs. In last season's high-scoring affair in Nashville, the Southeastern Conference standout caught nine passes from quarterback Jay Cutler, five of them for touchdowns, in a losing effort.

This time, however, Bennett received some help in carrying the offense, as senior receiver Marlon White caught six of Nickson's passes for 121 yards, and Smith caught three balls for 79 yards.

The Dores rolled up 621 yards of offense but were unable to convert many of their opportunities. Nickson fumbled after a designed scramble on the Wildcat two-yard-line on the first play of the second quarter with the game still scoreless. Sophomore place-kicker Bryant Hahnfeldt continued to struggle, missing two field goal attempts, one for 37 yards and another for 40 yards.

Special teams had a very frustrating performance, as numerous long snaps were either high or off the mark, including one extra point snap that was fumbled. Freshman cornerback D.J. Moore fumbled a punt return at the beginning of the third quarter which was recovered by the Wildcats, and the return game in general was able to generate very little when they did hang on to the ball.

Now, with their hopes of a bowl game dashed, the Commodores return to practice this week to prepare for cross-state and SEC rival Tennessee as they close out their season next Saturday in Nashville.

"Right now, we're just focused on Tennessee," Nickson said. "We're not going to stop and think about anything else except Tennessee." ■



JONATHAN DIETZ/The Vanderbilt Hustler

Vanderbilt quarterback Chris Nickson cannot believe that the Dores lost. Although Nickson threw for 446 yards and rushed for 71 yards, he threw two costly interceptions and fumbled once against Kentucky.

## FOOTBALL

# When all is said and done, still same old Vandy

By **Andrew Hard**  
SPORTS REPORTER

It happened within just less than 10 minutes to play in the game, and the Commodores were down by four. Chris Nickson executed a perfect play fake from the Kentucky one-yard line and found a wide open Brad Allen in the back of the end zone for a touchdown and a three-point Vanderbilt lead.

Or so it seemed, until Allen let the ball bounce off his hands three times before it fell harmlessly to the turf. Two plays later, a Wildcats' interception put the ball at midfield, and less than a minute later, they were in the end zone again for the game-icing score.

It's no question that Vanderbilt is a much more talented team now than before the Jay Cutler era. It's little question Chris Nickson has developed the poise, and now the receivers, to pick apart most Southeastern Conference secondaries. However, for the 24th straight season, the Commodores will fall short of the postseason, prompting many fans to mutter "same old Vanderbilt."

Earlier in the season, I would have rushed to dissent, pointing out the improvement of the rush defense, the bevy of talented game-changing receivers and the exponential improvement by a first-year starting quarterback.

But now, you know what? I think I have to agree; we are still the same old Vanderbilt. And it has nothing to do with talent (which has substantially improved and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future)—the Dores are equally bad at "intangibles" in 2006 as they were last year, as they were in the 10, 20 years before that. Sometimes writers talk about intangibles when there are few specifics to pinpoint, but in this case, most of these plays really are tangible, equivalent to "small ball" in baseball.

If we were a baseball team, we wouldn't be able to bunt a runner to second; we would give up every two-out hit with a man in scoring position; and we would strand 10



JONATHAN DIETZ/The Vanderbilt Hustler

Earl Bennett caught 11 passes for 220 yards against Saturday in a losing effort. The Dores will miss out on the postseason for the 24th straight year.

runners per game. In other words, we create the situations to score points and stop the opposing offense, but almost never come through in the clutch situations.

On the bright side, the talent improvement has kept us in every game this season (Michigan notwithstanding). But Saturday's loss in Lexington was a microcosm of everything Vanderbilt has not been able to do this season to finish off a close game with a victory. A few of the highlights:

Pin Kentucky at third and 13 from its own one-yard line? Promptly give up a first-down conversion that leads to a field goal.

Block a punt for the first time since the Navy game in 2004? Fumble in the red zone leading to the aforementioned scoring drive.

Force a Kentucky punt to open the second half only down by three? Muff the ensuing punt, leading to another UK score on the next play.

I won't go into how this trend pervaded throughout the season, but let's just say that a similar number of mishaps occurred in losses to Arkansas, Ole Miss and Florida, and a reversal of merely one or two would have sent the Commodores home happy. Every team makes mistakes, but a good team doesn't allow them to build on each other, doesn't follow up turnovers or blocked punts with lapses in coverage for a touchdown.

Two general improvements in the "small ball" department will substantially improve our chances of keeping leads and closing out

games: not allowing a high percentage of long third-down conversions and avoiding turnovers on special teams. These particular fixes are on the shoulders of the players 95 percent of the time. Stick to your assignments in the secondary in an obvious passing down. When we have to punt, find your man and block him. Secure the punt catch before running with the ball.

However, an improvement for the rest of the "intangibles" falls mainly into the arms of the coaching staff. While Vanderbilt certainly is "up" and prepared for every game, they almost never get off to a fast start on offense. Much of that is due to very conservative play calling.

For instance, Saturday's game opened with three straight quarterback draws followed by a punt. Many games have followed this script, and while I know Coach Johnson has his reasons, sometimes you have to break out of the mold a little bit, open up the passing game early (your offensive strength) and put pressure on the secondary.

Moving the ball well early in the first quarter will give the guys more confidence and will hopefully cut down on mistakes. The Commodores scored a touchdown on their first possession only twice through their first 11 games, and you can't help but correlate these slow starts to a disappointing 4-7 record.

Like last year, the Commodores have one more chance to salvage some pride when the reeling Vols come to town next Saturday. A win next week would carry enormous momentum into next season, when Vanderbilt will be returning virtually all starters on both sides of the ball. And while the players should feel great about their improvement and performance this season, this program has now reached a point where talent and recruiting must translate to victories on the field.

It's been a good season, Vanderbilt. But next year will have to be even better. Let next week be the catalyst for a great 2007 season. ■

## SOCCER

# Penalty kicks decide fate once again

HUSTLER STAFF REPORT

The Vanderbilt women's soccer team was eliminated in the first round of the NCAA Tournament Friday night after Clemson won in a penalty-kick shootout 4-3.

The Dores have now lost four straight postseason games, all on penalty kicks.

The fast-paced first half preceded an aggressive, yet scoreless, second half, sending Vanderbilt to overtime for the 11th time since August. It was 3-1-7 in overtime on the season.

"I told the team that I am incredibly proud of everything they achieved," said coach Ronnie Coveleskie. "They broke school record after school record, and they have accomplished so much from August until now."

The Tigers got on the board early, scoring at the 5:07 mark on a fast-break shot from the right side by Julie Bolt. Commodore goalkeeper Tyler Griffin who earlier this week was named to the Southeastern Conference second-team, made a diving save to her right near the 15-minute mark to keep it a one-point game. Also named to the All-Conference team were Amy Baumann and Katie Schulz, both second team, and Monica Buff, who was named to the conference's first team.

The Dores tied the game midway through the first half when Baumann scored on a shot from the left side. Credited with the assist were Sarah Dennis and Meredith Kohn, who faked a shot from within the 5-yard mark, opting instead to feed the ball laterally to Baumann, who punched it in.

Griffin made another impressive save with six minutes left in the first half, wrapping up the ball after a shot from point-blank range. The noteworthy footwork of midfielder Susan McAleavey helped Vanderbilt stay on offense much of the first half. Also worth mentioning is Commodore midfielder Amy Wilcox's aggressive play on defense, which foiled several Tiger attacks throughout the game.

The Commodores could not capitalize on multiple convincing offensive possessions in the second half and survived several Tiger assaults to move the game into overtime.

And getting the game into penalty kicks was not an easy task. Griffin made a diving save to her right in the first minute of the second overtime period, which under golden goal rules would have ended the game immediately. Ninety seconds later, a Clemson shot would sail just over the Commodore crossbar. Two minutes later, Griffin made another diving save to her right.

It was the second game in eight days that ended in penalty kicks. Last Friday the Dores played South Carolina to a tie in the SEC Tournament but were eliminated through penalty kicks.

Vanderbilt had 13 shots on goal and seven saves in the game that is officially a 1-1 tie. Clemson had 15 shots and three saves. The Commodores ended the season 10-4-7.

"Clemson is a very intense, fast-paced team," Coveleskie said. "Tonight, my hat goes off to them. They played a great game with a lot of passion."

This is the Commodores' second consecutive trip to the NCAA Tournament. Last year they exited in the first round after Samford outscored Vanderbilt 5-4 in penalty kicks.

It was the final game for five Commodore seniors: Buff, Griffin, Lafield, McAleavey and Kari Boersma.

"I am going to miss this senior class terribly," Coveleskie said. "They came to Vanderbilt when I was selling a vision of what Vanderbilt soccer was going to be. They put us back on the national scene." ■



NEIL BRAKE / VU Media Relations  
Vanderbilt senior Caroline Williams had 21 points in the Dores' 81-76 victory Sunday.

## BASKETBALL

# Dores prevail in opener

HUSTLER STAFF REPORT

The No. 15 Vanderbilt women's basketball team survived a tough road contest against a Big 12 Conference opponent in its season opener, beating Colorado 81-76 Sunday at the Coors Events Conference Center.

Senior forward Carla Thomas posted a team-high 26 points, including 17 in the second half, to lift the Commodores. Thomas was a late scratch from the starting lineup due to a back ailment, but came in early in the first half and played a total of 29 minutes.

Thomas' 26 points were the most she scored since a 37-point performance at Georgia in the 2004-05 regular season finale.

Senior Caroline Williams

added 21 points, while sophomore Christina Wirth had 14.

The Commodores led by as many as 17 points in the second half, but Colorado clawed back behind a 27-point, 12-rebound performance by Jackie McFarland.

Sophomore Jennifer Risper made her first career start, while five Commodores made their first collegiate appearances. Jessica Mooney led all newcomers with four points and three rebounds, while Lauren Lueders, Merideth Marsh, Amber Norton and Amy Malo all saw action.

Marsh's first points as a Commodore came in exciting fashion, as the Louisville, Ky., native banked in a half-court shot as the first half expired. ■

## BOWLING

# Keily wins tourney as team finishes third

HUSTLER STAFF REPORT

Vanderbilt sophomore Mandy Keily averaged 205.77 pins over 13 games to win the individual championship and earn Most Valuable Player honors at the

Wisconsin-Whitewater Invitational, which concluded Sunday.

As a team, the No. 4-ranked Commodores staged a significant rally to close the gap on front-running Farleigh Dickinson and Nebraska but could not quite

make up the difference and placed third. Vanderbilt won all five of its matches Sunday to finish 9-3 for the weekend.

"Mandy had her shot the entire weekend, and she was able to execute it," said coach John Williamson. "As

the tournament went on she gained a lot of confidence. She did an excellent job bowling with the lead. She was very comfortable dealing with her individual position while at the same time our team was striving to win the title." ■

## GAME BREAKDOWN

### Players of the game

While Earl Bennett turned in another solid outing (11 catches for 220 yards and one touchdown), he wasn't the only wide receiver to put up big numbers. Senior Marlon White caught six passes for 121 yards and George Smith hauled in three passes for 79 yards. In addition, Sean Walker had one catch for 9 yards and two carries for 43 yards.

## Stat of the game 24

With the loss Saturday, Vanderbilt has now gone 24 consecutive seasons without advancing to a bowl game.

## Quote of the game

"It was winnable, but we have to find ways to make it happen. That's what I told the team afterwards. We have to find a way to make that catch, make that tackle, make the right call. There's coaching in there too. It's not just the players."

-Vanderbilt coach Bobby Johnson after his team's 38-26 loss to Kentucky.

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