

# A Pipsqueak AMONG GIANTS

*How a 145-pound walk-on went the distance with one of Vanderbilt's greatest teams ever*

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**A**t the beginning of my freshman year at Vanderbilt in 1981, I joined the marching band. I lasted about two weeks, when I figured out I was no longer the big band boy I had been in high school back in Morristown, Tenn. After the director told me he wanted me to move props around during the halftime shows rather than star on the xylophone, quitting marching band was an easy decision. I would have more time to goof off and wallow in self-pity.

I started hanging around with the football players in their dorm rooms at night, though they were usually too tired to do anything except telephone their moms and study a little and play bad electric guitar. These guys were huge and good looking and always tired out, but tired with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Though I hadn't gone out for football in high school, I had always read about college football players in *Sports Illustrated* and had glamorized them through my adolescence, worshiping them at UT while I was growing up in East Tennessee. Now I was living with football players, watching them drink beer and have girls around (usually not Vandy girls, who were a bit too demure and smug and off-limits) and be cool in that casual way.



I found a bit of substance at WRVU, where I got my own time slot, rising to become a very bad disc jockey who could only play Springsteen and The Who because I knew nothing else. Some of the freshman football players noticed me on the radio and got a kick out of knowing who I was: “Yo, dude, you were righteous on the radio, man.”

At the end of the first year, my grades stunk but I was happy to have joined a nerdy Jewish fraternity, where I was the star athlete during intramurals. I was a mediocre football and basketball player but very good compared to my frat brothers, the Jewish academicians of Alpha Epsilon Pi. I gained more confidence with every game and was thrilled that these guys counted on me athletically.

Eventually, I got enough nerve to joke to one of the varsity receivers about sort-of, maybe, trying out for the real football team. We both knew I would be the worst player on the worst team in the Southeastern Conference, probably in Division I, and perhaps in the whole NCAA. But it was possible that I could make the team, he said, since they rarely cut anyone who had heart and worked hard. I loved him for telling me I should go ahead and do it.

During the last week of school in the spring of 1982, I breathed in the bravest air I could find and walked with stony legs over to the McGugin Center. I asked a small gray-haired man where I might find Coach George MacIntyre. He smiled a pixie smile and told me I was speaking to him. I said breathlessly, “I’m sorry to bother you, sir, and I know you must be busy and I’m very small and have no experience, but I want to play football next year.”

I started to list more reasons why he should not have me on his team, but the coach cut me off and said he would be glad to have me, that there were lots of places I could help the team. “Coach Mac” told me to go find “Doc” in the weight room—and then he was off to a meeting and I was still alive. He had taken me seriously.

With almost no breath left, I staggered in a daze to the weight room, where E.J. “Doc” Kreis presided like royalty behind his desk, a knowing scowl behind a walrus mustache. He was a monster of a man who could have eaten me in one bite.

Doc looked me over with great skepticism, and his voice boomed, “Well, where the hell have you been all spring?”

I looked absolutely like I would wet my pants, I am sure. “Uh ... I didn’t know I was supposed to ...,” I began, feebly.

“Hell! You didn’t know you needed to be in this weight room, gettin’ yourself ready? What do you think, this is all fun? You think this is television?”

“No, sir.” That was the first time in my life I just stopped and shut my mouth.

“Well, let’s get your name and address on the list and get you a workout schedule. You stick to this good!” he bel-lowed, handing me a timetable of sprinting drills and lifting techniques, most in a foreign language of squats and shrugs and power-pulls. I stood there, dumb, until he commanded me to leave.

There was no turning back now. I was going to learn how to fly, to bench press a million pounds, to push intruders away at every turn, to sweat nobly like I had never sweat before. All 5-foot-10, 145 pounds of me was going to be a football player for the Vanderbilt University Commodores.

**I** worked that summer of 1982 at the Holiday Inn restaurant back in Morristown. I got off in the early afternoon and headed to the Nautilus gym for introductory weight lifting. After a few weeks, little biceps started to show up on my skinny arms. I ran wind sprints and speed laps on the high school track every day. I visited the coach at my old high school and borrowed a helmet and shoulder pads. At home I put on the helmet and pads and, with a tentative jogging start, ran into our garage wall over and over, trying to imagine what it would feel like to get hit. I made sure nobody was watching as I hit the brick: Wham! Wham! Wham!

Mom and Dad were quick to point out that no one was pressuring me to go out there on that field with those big men, only to get my neck broken and my leg pulled off. They said I could quit at any time; it was fine with them. It was kind of like reverse Jewish guilt, where they tried to get me *not* to do something. All the friends in our close-knit Jewish community let the folks know that I was insane.

Even though I was a sophomore in the fall of 1982, I was allowed to come to the freshman football camp a week earlier than the rest of the varsity. I walked into camp with the idea that I would do whatever it took to stay on the team. I would let everyone know that I was there to learn and help in any way, and that no one was to worry about me being disappointed.

I soon realized that the other walk-ons had been football stars at their high schools, while I had played the xylophone at halftime. Some of them were huge and muscularly defined, while others were just big goofy kids. They were all just like I was—nervous and excited and ready to earn a spot somewhere doing something, though many thought they would be stars by the time the season started.

Many of the new freshmen were humble and kind, like Will Wolford, who was the most likable and earnest of the freshmen. Will was an amazing athlete. He was 6-foot-6 and 280 pounds and could dunk a basketball. He would

eventually start at tackle as a freshman, hold that position for four years, make All-American, and later become the first million-dollar offensive lineman in the NFL with Buffalo and Indianapolis and Pittsburgh. He was probably Vanderbilt’s best football player ever, though linemen rarely earn that type of distinction. I got to eat chicken and french fries with Will at the training table in his first week of big-time college football, and he was tickled that I was trying this game out for the first time.

I took whatever padding the manager put on me, and that included two pairs of cleats, one for artificial turf and one for grass, that would be mine forever, no matter what. I got a gold helmet with “GERSON” spelled out in white athletic tape. In my locker basket was a mesh bag with skin-tight gray shorts, a gray half T-shirt, socks and a jockstrap. I had never worn a jockstrap before and didn’t know that your butt hangs out, uncovered.

There were shoulder pads (too big; I had to trade them in later, embarrassed) and leg and girdle pads, which fit into little slots in the uniform practice pants. For the rest of my life, I would have that bad dream where the game was starting and I could not fit all the pads into their proper places, frantically trying to make them go in, and I would always wake up in a panic. How many other football players have had that dream, years after their last game?

I was not a very good receiver, but I didn’t totally stink. Coach “Flip” [Gene DeFilippo] was patient enough to teach all of us the correct pass routes, and I listened hard and learned where to put my feet and hands and head on every step, becoming more confident every day. I loved, absolutely loved, being out on that field in the stadium. I got artificial-turf burns on my elbows and knees from falling and skidding on the fake grass that first week, and they stung in the shower when the water hit, as if someone were rubbing the wound with sandpaper as the skin contracted. I learned to tape my elbows before practice.

Other walk-ons quit and went home, frustrated because the coaches could not see how wonderful they were. When the rest of the varsity returned after my week’s introduction to the game, my old friends from the year before were astounded to see me on the practice field. From that first day they treated me like one of them, every man on the varsity respecting me for sweating and aching alongside them. I threatened no one else’s playing time, and that probably helped.

We ran pass-routes over and over. I learned that, while painfully slow, I could make a few head-fakes and get open when playing against the good defensive backs. Sometimes that would make the other receivers shout out my name in



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delight when I made a decent catch or got the defender turned around and stumbly. It was hard to tell if they were making fun of me or not, but it didn't matter. Getting a slap on the back or a high-five from a teammate became my only goal, and I got to catch some passes from Whit Taylor, the second-highest-rated passer in the country that year (behind the great John Elway), every day in practice. He was the best quarterback in Vanderbilt history, some say, though Jay Cutler in 2005 was pretty darned good. Whit was the same size as me, though a little thicker. One of his linebacker friends, Joe Staley, used to call out to him whenever he completed a great pass, in falsetto, "Oh, Whit honey, kiss my baby!" The whole team would crack up.

As September arrived it started to sink in that I had not been dismissed yet. Coach Mac, while busy with important matters of running the team, seemed to like me, and the rest of the team adopted me as sort of a pet, a curiosity. My parents continued to worry, but there came a fabulous satisfaction when the school year began and the harsh pre-season practices ended. My parents could tell their friends that I was healthy and an honest-to-goodness member of the football team. The smart Jewish boys at the Alpha Epsilon Pi house teased me ceaselessly about becoming the jock amongst them, and I could tell they were happy to have me

hanging around the frat, a sort-of real football player.

After a while, when the depth chart got established and I was in place in the far basement, I got moved over to the scout team with the other bottom dwellers to help teach the defense what to expect from each upcoming opponent's offense. I took this role very seriously and worked hard each practice. Once I got to be Willie Gault, the world-class sprinter from Tennessee, and I was assigned an orange jersey with number 80 on it. That's probably where the comparisons stopped, but I wore it with pride as the varsity boys pounded me.

One day I was told to run a post-corner pattern against our first defense, which meant I was supposed to run a long route, first looking over my inside shoulder to fake the defender and then suddenly turning to the outside. As I came out of my final turn, the ball was in the air and coming over my outside shoulder. I jumped higher than I ever had before and made a one-handed snatch, flipping over in mid-air and landing on my shoulder and head just in-bounds, ball in my grasp. The first offensive team and coaching staff across the field had just taken a water break and happened to be looking my way, and they let out a shriek of delight at my catch. I trotted back to the scout-team quarterback and looked so cool as I casually flipped him the ball and re-

joined the huddle, slapped and shrouded in praise by my teammates. Moments like those became my Saturdays.

**A**s the season began it became clear that this Vanderbilt team was special. Doc had made the players strong and fast with his demanding off-season strength program. Our offense was innovative, relying on a short passing attack in place of an inside rushing game, especially after our star running back, Ernie Goolsby, went down for the season in the opener at Memphis State. Our offensive coordinator, Watson Brown, who had been a former *wunderkind* quarterback at Vanderbilt a few years earlier, was the true leader of the team, getting extra yards and touchdowns out of men much smaller than the ones at Tennessee and Michigan and Notre Dame. After an early season loss to Alabama, our season started to take shape.

Highly ranked Florida came to Nashville on a perfect night, and our bend-but-don't-break defense held them in place for much of the game, even though the great James Jones of the Gators (and later the NFL Detroit Lions) had over 200 yards rushing. We won 38-31. Forty-two thousand loyal fans went crazy, and it was obvious that this team was going to be different from every other Vanderbilt team in recent memory.

We lost "between the hedges" down at Georgia after leading into the fourth quarter; had we won that game, we would have been conference champs and gone to the Sugar Bowl. Against Mississippi, linebacker Joe Staley intercepted a pass to preserve a narrow victory. Some say that was the play that made our season. With every dramatic win a possible bowl invitation loomed closer. People around the country were starting to talk about us. Gamblers in Las Vegas won a lot of money betting on Vanderbilt.

I got to suit up against Virginia Tech in the middle of the season because they were non-conference. We destroyed them. Leading 45-0 in the final minutes, my teammates started to chant my name. Holy cow! Were they going to put me in?

Coach Mac called me up on the sideline. "Gerse," he said with his pixie grin and sad-dog eyes, "I'd love to put you in, but I didn't have a chance to check your eligibility, so I can't do it. You understand?"

He could see how shaken and relieved I was. "Coach, I'm so glad, 'cause if you put me in, my heart would probably come right out of my jersey."

That quote made the Monday *Tennessean* in an article about how this Vandy squad was made of real team players, from superstar quarterback Whit Taylor all the way down to little Gary Gerson. My parents were sent copies of the paper from friends all over the state.

After that game we went into the locker room and listened to Coach Mac. He told us with great excitement that we had been invited to play in the Hall of Fame Bowl in Birmingham on New Year's Eve. The coaches were teary-eyed and hugging each other and jumping around. It was the first winning season in 10 years for Vanderbilt, and I would get to go with them to Birmingham.

There were a bunch of important-looking men in the locker room that day after the game. One man, wearing a sticker on his lapel that said "Hall of Fame Bowl," offered me congratulations. I thanked him and asked if he was on the bowl committee. He said, "No, son, I'm the chancellor of Vanderbilt." It was Joe B. Wyatt, whom I had not recognized. Guess I should have paid attention to the campus newspaper more often.

On the way out the door, Doc handed me an envelope—\$10 in meal money. I was getting paid for all this, too! I showed the \$10 bill to my folks outside the stadium with great pride at what I had "earned." Dad reminded me that another \$10,990 would repay that year's tuition loan.

We beat Tennessee in the rain to end the season, and the newspaper picture of Whit Taylor with the ball held over his head as he crossed the goal line with the winning touchdown

was symbolic and satisfying. Our final regular-season record was 8-3, the best in decades for starving Vandy fans.

I figured if I drove to Birmingham from my grandmother's condo in Fort Lauderdale, I could sell the airplane ticket that had been provided by the bowl committee and put a few dollars in my pocket. I had the nerve to beg a ride to Birmingham from Allama Matthews, the tight end, and big cornerback Leonard Coleman, the interception king, two All-Americans who lived in Florida. Allama reluctantly said yes, but only if I drove part of the way while he slept. I said I would be glad to. I had never driven a stick shift before.

I spent Christmas with my family at my grandmother's condo, proud to be out on the beach with my new body, which had some decent muscles from all that running and lifting. I loved going to the beach just so I could show off a little, no longer a little squirrel inside my shirt. My weight was up to about 170, and there was no fat.

Allama picked me up near the interstate in Fort Lauderdale, and we continued on to Boynton Beach for Leonard. When we got there I saw that Leonard, who would be in the NFL in a few years, lived in a tiny house and had a little boy a few years old. This was shocking to me, naive kid that I was, that a college student could have a child who was fathered in high school. Mean Leonard, who scowled at me during practice and never hesitated to bury his helmet between my shoulder blades when I tried to catch the ball, was kissing his little boy over and over as he said goodbye. It was a moment of confusion to me, Leonard living in the housing projects of Boynton Beach and loving his little boy so much.

We decided to drive overnight and reach Alabama in the morning. I got behind the wheel of Allama's Celica about midnight, hoping they wouldn't notice my gear-shifting skills amounted to grinding hamburger. As they slept I cruised down Interstate 10, focusing on not falling asleep. I didn't notice that the car I passed at 80 miles per hour had blue lights on top.

The Florida state trooper was kind as I nervously explained that the two sleeping giants in the car were Vanderbilt stars on the way to a bowl game. He let me go, unimpressed, warning me to turn off my brights if I decided to pass another car. Allama awoke just as we were driving away. I told him to go back to sleep, that everything was all right, except for my racing heart and dry mouth and the thought that I almost got a ticket in his car.

We stopped near the Alabama border at 3 a.m. to see Allama's relatives. We woke the whole household just to say hello. I felt sheepish as I realized I was the only white person in this tiny, crowded house in the middle of the night.

The two littlest children stared at me with open mouths, and a smiling man, perhaps their father, sat in a pair of shorts on the arm of an easy chair, gently stroking the head and face of a sleeping infant on his lap. Nobody really said anything, but it was understood that the dropping-in was accepted and appreciated. After refusing a cold drink and some food, we continued on. Our visit there was soon only a dream, a world I would not know. But these visits meant that I would never begrudge the money these two men would earn in the NFL.

In the lockers before the game, the coaches were walking in circles with tears in their eyes. They had just learned that Watson Brown had accepted the head coaching job at the University of Cincinnati, a great loss for our team. That meant the breakup of an exceptional coaching staff that had brought our tiny school a great season, a bowl invitation, and a rare win against the Big Orange.

And so the game began. I stood on the sidelines while 75,000 people cheered us on. In the third quarter Norman Jordan scored another touchdown on a pass from Whit Taylor as we were appearing to dominate our opponent. On the sideline after the play, I heard Norman say to his old buddy Whit with a knowing smile, "We're just showin' off now!" Little did he know.

We were stunned when the Air Force quarterback turned a third-down sneak play into a very long touchdown run. That put the Force up for good, and they won by eight points. There was not much sadness, really, as the game seemed anticlimactic compared to the season as a whole, especially when held against the Tennessee win, but it still stung.

Whit Taylor was saluted as player of the game, despite the score, having thrown for more than 500 yards in a truly remarkable performance. This overshadowed, unfairly, the 20 receptions by Norman Jordan, the tiny, dedicated running back who had been the X-factor in Coach Brown's offense the whole season. These two players had been friends and teammates forever, and it was the last game Norman would play in pads. Whit got drafted into the USFL and was a backup with the Michigan Panthers (Bobby Hebert was the first-stringer), came back to coaching at Vandy for my senior year, and then played a bit more in the Arena Football League. Everyone admired those two and their quiet leadership and how far they had taken little Vanderbilt. Norman soon became a Nashville stockbroker and I'm pretty sure made a lot of money. Playing on the same team with them and Will and Leonard and Allama and Joe was a huge honor for this little walk-on.

So we all went home, but not before Mom took all kinds



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of photos of me and my teammates, with me looking embarrassed the whole time. What a year it had been, the best year in Vanderbilt football in forever, and I had been told by Whit and Norman and others that I had been a key part of our success.

Looking back, it all came at a price, as football always does. You never play football for free. You may pay for it when you are 16, 40 or 70—but you pay. All season I had been getting beat up on a daily basis. There was the helmet underneath my shoulder pads that knocked everything around my right deltoid out of place, my shoulder aching nonstop for the next several years. I had smashed every one of my fingers at some point, and there was practically no skin on my knees and elbows from

the unforgiving artificial turf. Looking back at all the scabs and stingers and ice baths, there was no doubt I had regularly gotten the hell kicked out of me by huge men.

But I had not quit. I had never thought of quitting. And I had gotten stronger and faster and smarter. I finally had some arms with a little meat on them. On the field I had gotten a tiny bit of respect from men who were All-Americans and going to the NFL. It was worth every bit of pain—and not something that could be explained to most people who had never played football. ▼

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