



AUTUMN SURPRISE

*Chancellor Gee's reorganization of athletics has raised expectations and questions.
How will it affect sports at Vanderbilt?*

By ROY NEEL, BA'72

On a perfect fall afternoon three weeks into the football season, Vanderbilt's second-year coach, Bobby Johnson, sat in his McGugin Center office and contemplated what it would take to win against Southeastern Conference opponents in an era of ruthless recruiting, academic cheating, and relentless pressure to compete for lucrative television attention. Impeccably dressed in a blue blazer and tie after his regular Monday press conference, Johnson's soft South Carolina drawl softened a serious discussion of Vanderbilt's challenge.

"Sure, there is a small pool of student athletes out there who can get into Vanderbilt and succeed academically and also help us on the football field," Johnson admits. "But it can be done, and we're going to do it. We're going to compete for bowl games and SEC championships."

Photography by NEIL BRAKE



Coaches are not paid to be pessimistic, to accept certain failure or even mediocrity, even at Vanderbilt, which has not had a winning football season in 21 years, or won more than two SEC games in a season since 1982. But Bobby Johnson gives off an air of quiet determination and confidence that he, his staff, and their 99 varsity football players are well on their way toward a goal most cynics believe impossible.

Nearly 400 Vanderbilt student-athletes play 14 varsity sports, achieving national prominence in five (men's and women's golf and tennis, women's basketball), and quickly improving in others (baseball, women's track and soccer). But football still dominates the sports landscape in the South, where tradition is rich with national champions and stadiums packed with 100,000 rabid fans each Saturday afternoon.

The pressure on coaches to play in post-season bowls and win conference and national titles is brutal, leading to unprecedented reports of financial and academic cheating, and even a murder cover-up on one campus. Even the fans are losing control: Furious at his beloved Crimson Tide's loss to Arkansas, one Alabama father put a pistol to his son's head and pulled the trigger. The bullet missed, the father is in jail, and Alabama football continues to struggle in the wake of firing its coach in the off-season for using the university credit card to hire lap dancers.

Ramrod fit at 53, Bobby Johnson came to Vanderbilt last year after 25 seasons at Furman, where he racked up an impressive 100-50 record and took his team into a Division I-AA championship game in 2001, winning national Coach of the Year honors. A three-sport star high-school athlete, Johnson won two-time Atlantic Coast Conference All-Academic honors as a receiver and cornerback for Clemson, where he played for former Vanderbilt coach George MacIntyre—then a Clemson assistant coach. His arrival in Nashville was heralded on sports pages around the country as a significant turning point for Commodore football.

ESPN.com wrote what could have been Chancellor Gordon Gee's mandate to the new coach: "He's going to recruit ambitious, smart kids from coast to coast, marching into living rooms with two promises for parents:



Your son will get a world-class education, and he'll never be degraded or dehumanized."

Johnson started his first season in Nashville with none of his own recruits and low expectations. But he made no excuses for the 2-10 season that had few high points other than a close loss to nationally ranked Florida, a win over his old Furman team, and linebacker Hunter Hillenmeyer's selection to academic All-American honors.

"We've got a lot of good things going for us here," Johnson noted, running a hand through thick, prematurely silver hair. "This is the best town in the SEC, the school is recognized as one of the best in the country academically, our facilities are excellent and getting better, and we've got the kind of players who work hard both on the field and in the classroom. When the best high school players visit Vanderbilt, we've got a shot at convincing them they can be part of building a successful football program here. The chancellor and the administration want this, too. And they're doing everything they can to support us."

One week later the support for Bobby Johnson, for Vanderbilt football, for success in all its athletic programs, suddenly became a topic of national interest as Chancellor Gee blew the lid off the collegiate athletics status quo.

On Sept. 9 the chancellor announced that the University would abolish the position of athletic director and bring the department's activities into an Office of Student Athletics, Recreation and Wellness. All activities and facilities formerly under Athletic Director Todd Turner would be integrated into the entire University administrative structure. While appearing to critics as an elaborate way to change staff, Gee cited much more ambitious goals.

"Nothing short of a revolution will stop what has become a crisis of conscience and integrity for colleges and universities in this country," stated the chancellor. "Let there be no misunderstanding of our intention: Vanderbilt is committed to competing at the highest levels in the Southeastern Conference and the NCAA, but we intend on competing con-

sistent with the values of a world-class university.”

The national press that would be showered upon the University after the chancellor’s announcement was significant. Predictably, the first wave of sports columnists and television commentators ridiculed Gee’s plan.

“... self indulgent,” sniped *Tennessean* sportswriter David Climer. “Few will follow you very far down this path. Who’s piloting this ship, Commodore Pollyanna?”

The *Washington Post*’s Sally Jenkins was more thoughtful, but just as skeptical. “People who want to apply pat reforms or even a consistent philosophy to college athletics are simply barking up the wrong tree—and perhaps the worst tree we can bark up these days is to assume that some schools have found the higher moral ground.”

Criticism from vocal Commodore boosters such as prominent alumnus and Nashville attorney Lew Conner, a close friend of Turner, was blunt. On a local radio program, Conner steamed: “I’m confused by it. I don’t understand it. I don’t think it will work.”

But Gee was undeterred. Within moments

edging that Vanderbilt would be more receptive to his reforms than the big state schools he previously led, the chancellor noted, “If I had tried this at Ohio State or Colorado or West Virginia, I’d have been pumping gas in my hometown, Vernal, Utah.” Questioned about the potentially disruptive timing of his announcement, as the football team prepared for the big Auburn game, Gee was unapologetically direct. “I didn’t want to do this when no one was around. I wanted to do it when everyone was on campus, when everyone would be a part of it.”

Gee’s efforts are only the latest in a 130-year history of Vanderbilt chancellors trying to get control of the University’s sports programs. In Paul Conkin’s authoritative history of the University, *Gone with the Ivy*, we see a growing interest in athletics on campus, demands for bigger budgets and playing fields, all “diversions” from the University’s higher goals. Only two years after its doors opened in 1875, Chancellor Garland shut down students’ plans to play baseball games against other schools and later railed against the formation of a football team and student involve-

1904 to 1914, Vanderbilt remained a Southern football power well into the late 1920s, backed by a powerful athletic association that raised \$232,000 to build a new football facility. But by the late ’30s, the football team would rarely fill the new stadium. The legendary McGugin would complain about “lower coaching salaries ... higher academic standards, no scholarships, high tuition, tough faculty controls.” Other than scholarships, which now are uniform in number throughout most Division I schools, these complaints are still cited six decades later as barriers to success in football and basketball at Vanderbilt.

Still, as Conkin writes, “Football fervor also warped campus values. Football heroes such as Jess Neely or Lynn Bomar not only won All-American notices but became big men on campus. Only rarely did anyone but an athletic hero now win the Bachelor of Ugliness,” the honor awarded to the most outstanding male student.

Vanderbilt football reached its pinnacle in 1948, when famed coach Red Sanders beat a vaunted Tennessee team and finished 12th in the nation, a ranking it would never again achieve. By the ’50s, success would be gauged by bowl appearances. Vanderbilt would reach the Gator Bowl in 1955, beating Auburn. In 1975 Steve Sloan’s team would tie Texas Tech in the Peach Bowl, and in 1982 George MacIntyre took the Commodores to the Hall of Fame Bowl, losing to Air Force in Vanderbilt’s last bowl appearance.

Yet, three minor bowl bids in 47 years does not a winning tradition make. In each case, success was followed by a string of dreadful losing seasons, dramatic drop-off in ticket sales and, ultimately, coach firings or departures (Sloan’s defection to Texas Tech was especially galling to Commodore fans). Since 1982 Vanderbilt has failed to have a winning season, with a record of 60-167 and an average of only one SEC victory each year. The Commodores became the favorite opponent for other teams’ homecoming games.

As the football program suffered on the field, Kirkland Hall again would be confronted by boosters with charges of indifference toward athletics. Ironically, in the only NCAA action ever against the school, Vanderbilt was found in 1950 to be subsidizing athletes inappro-

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of the announcement, the chancellor became a whirlwind advocate for the plan, working the press box on Saturday afternoon; buttonholing reporters, athletes, coaches and students; writing newspaper op-ed pieces; and appearing on television and radio programs ranging from local, call-in shows to ABC’s “Nightline” and National Public Radio.

After meeting with a shocked athletic department staff, Gee held an informal press conference outside Kirkland Hall. Acknowl-

ment in anything other than “informal competition.”

In a few years Vanderbilt would have the South’s top baseball and football teams and lead in the formation of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association with Vanderbilt’s William Dudley at its head. Garland, like the chancellors to follow, would learn that reining in the University’s athletic programs would be a constant headache.

Beginning with the McGugin decade from

privately. Vanderbilt won its challenge, and the NCAA ultimately approved the award of full athletic scholarships. But the victory backfired, as Vanderbilt was then forced to budget more than \$500,000 a year for scholarships alone, a sum vastly exceeding tuition costs at

missing the Final Four in 1965. Memorial Gym was expanded over the years to seat nearly 15,000 as Commodore teams would contend alongside Kentucky for SEC championships nearly every year through the 1970s, even as schools such as Alabama, LSU, Tennessee and

chase of a championship golf course south of Nashville would finally bring Vanderbilt within the range of other Division I athletic programs. More than \$70 million was raised toward a \$90 million goal for facilities and scholarships.

Universities throughout the country have been compromised by television and the revenue chase. And athletic departments operating as autonomous empires have made it worse.

This may be the last chance for us to get it right, because we are perilously close to a point where outsiders will reform it for us—college faculty groups are organizing, and there may be lawsuits.

—David Williams II, vice chancellor for university affairs and student life

the big state schools such as Alabama and Tennessee. The playing field became even more tilted toward those schools with lower admission and classroom standards. Recruiting top football players alongside these schools suddenly became a near-impossible challenge for Vanderbilt.

The demand to spend millions for new facilities and coaching staffs to win football games against the SEC powerhouse programs gave Vanderbilt Chancellor Harvie Branscomb his greatest headaches. He secretly—and unsuccessfully—attempted to form an athletic conference of like-minded universities such as Rice, Tulane, Duke and Georgia Tech. “We had a chance to turn things around,” he wistfully told me in 1975, “but those schools couldn’t stand up to their coaches and boosters.” Branscomb wouldn’t be the last to attempt athletic reforms, but no future chancellor would dare to abandon the SEC.

As Vanderbilt football struggled, its basketball program would ascend. From 1952 to 1962, Bob Polk began to win big games in the impressive new Memorial Gymnasium, and started challenging for the SEC title. Roy Skinner then took Vanderbilt’s first consistently ranked teams to national prominence, climbing to fourth place nationally before barely

Georgia finally embraced basketball and began recruiting top players, especially the most talented and celebrated African-American athletes, from throughout the country.

Celebrated coaches C.M. Newton and Eddie Fogler would keep Vanderbilt basketball competitive for a decade, with four NCAA appearances and a National Invitation Tournament championship in 1990. Eddie Fogler’s 1992–93 team would rank as high as fifth nationally and advance well into the NCAA tournament, but Fogler would soon leave for South Carolina in a messy dispute with school administrators. A few years later a prized local basketball recruit would fail to meet Vanderbilt’s tough admission standards and, once again, boosters would complain that Kirkland Hall was far removed from the realities of winning in the big leagues.

Yet, Vanderbilt continued to make a major financial commitment to its athletic department, hiring promising coaches and dramatically upgrading facilities in all sports. Memorial Gymnasium got a \$25 million facelift, nearly \$6 million was raised to build a new baseball stadium, plus \$5.5 million for soccer, lacrosse and football practice fields, and \$1.7 million for a new track and field complex. New tennis facilities and the pur-

However, in the most critical area of its athletic program—recruiting—Vanderbilt continued to face its greatest hurdle. “The academic demands for the Vanderbilt player will be much more of a challenge, especially with the competition he’ll see in the classroom,” says Bobby Johnson. “We’re trying to emphasize the positive, and we believe it will attract those players who want to get a good education but also want to win.”

The common perception among many Commodore boosters is that Vanderbilt’s admissions requirements are unreasonably high for most promising athletes, shrinking the pool of potential recruits who could help win football and basketball games. Even though athletes can be admitted with lower-than-average SATs and GPAs, Dean of Admissions Bill Shain agrees that “the rigorous academic work here is a reality, and it creates a challenge for the coaches with which we are extremely sympathetic. We work hard to make the admissions process a shared enterprise with the coaches. Our goals are the same: to recruit for Vanderbilt students who will have impact athletically, and who can be predicted to graduate.”

Rigorous admissions policies, integrity in the classroom, full integration of athletes into

university life—all are unassailable goals for a university that seeks to compete with the Ivies, Stanford, Duke, Emory, and other schools that dominate the much-sought-after *U.S. News & World Report* magazine national college rankings (Vanderbilt rose to 19th this year). In that universe, SATs, admit-enroll ratios, endowments and library size count for points; winning bowl games and Sweet 16 appearances do not.

By midseason this year, only two schools with top-30 academic rankings, Southern California (30) and Michigan (25), were also ranked in the top 30 nationwide in football—Southern Cal at fifth and Michigan at 17th. Among those schools ahead of Vanderbilt on the *U.S. News* list, only two were ranked with the top 100 football teams—Stanford at 44 and Northwestern at 72 (Sagarin/*USA Today* ratings, Oct. 7).

And it is unclear whether Vanderbilt stu-

dents and alumni care much about success in athletics as a significant reason to attend and support the University. When asked why they chose Vanderbilt in a survey of recent undergraduates, the athletic program ranked 27th of 28 factors. Alumni responded in a similar fashion, ranking athletics near the bottom.

So if the real goal at Vanderbilt is academic excellence, what is all the fuss about? What will change at Vanderbilt, which has run its athletic programs without taint for decades, admits only those athletes with strong academic prospects, and graduates far more of its athletes than any other SEC school?

“We can do a lot better,” says David Williams II, Vanderbilt’s vice chancellor for university affairs and student life, general counsel and secretary of the University, and now the school’s *de-facto* athletic director, presiding over a \$30 million athletic budget and a deficit he is

struggling to reverse in a period of dropping attendance and ticket revenues.

“When I first realized a couple years ago that he was the real Kirkland Hall decision-maker for athletics,” one coach told me in the wake of the reorganization announcement, “I thought, here’s a guy who’s never run a college athletic department at any level. He’s not going to back us. We’re in big trouble.”

But, unlike most college administrators, Williams understands the fine details and challenges of coaching, recruiting and winning games, having supervised the nation’s largest—and arguably most successful—athletics program during his tenure as vice president for student affairs at Ohio State University. And he knows when he’s being fed a line. The coach who earlier feared a meltdown in support for the McGugin Center grew to respect the firm grip Williams would bring to his new assignment. “He doesn’t suffer fools and he doesn’t tolerate bull----. And he’ll go to bat for us if we need it.”

Most of all, David Williams is Chancellor Gee’s “go-to guy” to bring the athletic department in line with the reorganization. If Gee’s bold vision of a new culture for college athletics is to succeed, it will likely be Williams who makes it happen at Vanderbilt and, potentially, throughout the country.

David Williams arrives late to his third-floor Kirkland Hall offices after teaching a Law School class and staying overtime for students’ questions. Williams’ portfolio is substantial, overseeing vast resources and countless high-profile activities. He is a large man physically, fighting a mid-life executive’s paunch that belies a star quarter-miler and football standout for his Detroit high school and later at Northern Michigan University. A prolific writer and lecturer on tax law, sports law and legal history, he somehow finds time to coach his son’s youth basketball team and attend his daughters’ soccer games.

In dress slacks and a black Commodore team polo shirt with a Nike swirl, Williams relaxes and launches knowledgeably into the world of sports, the NBA greats (some of whom he counts as close friends from his years as a Detroit public school teacher and coach), and the darker side of college athletics that has brought Williams and Gee into the national reform spotlight.



“Universities throughout the country have been compromised by television and the revenue chase,” says Williams. “Admissions, compliance, money decisions. And athletic departments operating as autonomous empires have made it worse. This may be the last chance for us to get it right, because we are perilously close to a point where outsiders will reform it for us—college faculty groups are organizing, and there may be lawsuits.”

After the chancellor’s September bombshell, Williams’ first job was to finalize the reassignment of Athletic Director Todd Turner. It was well known that the athletic department struggled not only to win football and basketball games, but to balance its budget. Turner accomplished neither and ruffled administration feathers with a style characterized by some as defiant. But he was visible in the community and had supporters among influential alumni boosters who saw the chancellor’s reorganization simply as a way to camouflage a plan to dump the eight-year AD.

“Absolutely not the case,” said Gee. “There were disagreements about how to run the department, but I have great respect for Todd. This is more about setting an example throughout college sports, about integrating the athletic programs into the larger university. With that new model we don’t need an autonomous athletic director.”

Gee asked Turner to stay on to help shepherd Vanderbilt’s leadership within the NCAA to reform academic standards for athletes. After nearly a month of silence, Turner would decline the offer and blast the chancellor’s reforms in an e-mail to former colleagues in the department, obtained by the *Tennessean*. “I do not feel that the strategy [Gee] has chosen for Vanderbilt will produce the results many of us have worked so hard to achieve,” wrote Turner. “Being isolated administratively from Division I-A peers rather than in concert with them will challenge Vanderbilt’s credibility and effectiveness when it comes to leadership in Division I-A athletics.”



But Gee and Williams are focusing as much on the role of athletics within the mission of the University as on the win-loss records of its teams.

“We’re going to create new opportunities for student-athletes, and engage the faculty much more in understanding and supporting the athletic program in ways that have never been tried before,” says Williams. “The way the campus has worked, athletes can’t realistically take part in much of campus life, such as serving on the student council or taking classes abroad. We’re going to find creative ways to make that happen.”

Williams is most ambitious when it comes to predicting success on the playing fields. “We should see success in basketball this year, and we should have a winning season and be bowl-bound in football in two, three years.”

Fine tuning Vanderbilt’s athletic program may involve little more than finding the right administrators and coaches who can work within its rigorous academic system, with student athletes who already meet high admissions requirements and who go to class, live

and play with other students, and graduate on time. But imposing Vanderbilt’s model of probity and academic excellence onto the other 116 Division I colleges and their athletic coaches and players will be a far greater challenge.

Much is at stake in the battle for nearly \$2 billion that flows to these schools from television fees and ticket receipts for college football and basketball games each year. (An SEC revenue-sharing agreement sends a portion of every SEC team’s television and bowl appearance receipts to Vanderbilt, an arrangement that provides about \$7 million annually to a school that rarely appears on national television or in lucrative bowl games.)

In their challenge to other college administrators, Williams and Chancellor Gee have allies in high places. NCAA President Myles Brand weighed in immediately, calling Gee’s reforms “a significant commitment to the concept of integrating intercollegiate athletics

with the university’s mission. . . . This is more than an experiment; it is a major shift in the collegiate sports culture.”

As Vanderbilt prepared to host Auburn, the buzz about Gee’s reforms were overwhelmingly positive in editorial pages around the country: “Chancellor Gee’s Bold Move” (*The Tennessean*), “Root for Sports Reforms” (*USA Today*).

From the *Providence Journal*: “Vanderbilt, to its credit, has chosen to opt out of the NFL/NBA, etc., minor leagues and reclaim its mission for all students, jocks included . . . striving for a bygone ideal: the notion that a university is a seat of learning, not a station on the road to the Super Bowl, and that scholar-athletes are students who happen to excel at sports.”

But these glowing reports did not quell the negative rumor mill fed by athletic recruiters from competing schools seeking to paint the Gee reforms as a wholesale downgrading of varsity sports at Vanderbilt, even a first step toward withdrawing from the SEC and Division I.

Former Vanderbilt Grantland Rice Scholar Mark Bechtel, now a *Sports Illustrated* writer, was in the press box for the Auburn game. In “The Vanderbilt Experiment” in the following week’s *SI*, Bechtel would note the caustic assessment of Iowa State’s athletic director: “If this is the kind of vision they have for their athletic program, I question whether they belong in the SEC.” Bechtel pointed out that “since May five [Iowa State] student-athletes have been arrested and the basketball coach resigned after being caught cavorting with coeds at a party,” and concluded that “it’s not unreasonable to suggest that other schools might benefit from taking steps to bridge the chasm between athletics and academia.”

As Vanderbilt coaches stepped up damage control with key prospects, Chancellor Gee jumped into the fray, personally calling wavering recruits to assure them that the University is committed to winning games and conference titles. A month after his announcement, Gee proudly noted, “We haven’t lost a single prospect as a result of this.” Indeed, by mid-October two of the country’s top basketball and baseball prospects declared their intention to sign with

ing every claim of diminished support from Kirkland Hall.

“I haven’t thought much about it,” said Otis Washington, a senior linebacker from Michigan. “Me, either,” agreed Jovan Haye, the star sophomore defensive end from Fort Lauderdale. The two met in a McGugin Center conference room to talk about football and life at Vanderbilt. They reminded me of the players I lived and partied with in Curry Hall in the ’60s, except for two significant characteristics: Both are African-Americans, neither of whom would have had the opportunity to play football at Vanderbilt, or any other SEC school, 40 years ago; and, representing perhaps even more change, both have legitimate dreams to play in the National Football League after graduation from Vanderbilt.

“It’s been tough losing like we have,” said Haye, who was also recruited heavily by Ohio State, Miami and Florida. “Everybody works really hard. If we get some breaks, we can turn it around.” Both young men believe Vanderbilt can recruit the best African-American athletes. “All you have to do is tell them the truth,” said Haye, who is studying human

exhausting hours on the field followed by hours of study as a part of the deal. No questionable grade inflation by sports-friendly professors. No excuses for papers not written, exams not taken. No payoffs from overzealous boosters. No bogus summer jobs. No big, illegal signing bonuses out of high school. No cheating.

The Commodores opened the football season with a heartbreaking loss to Ole Miss on a last-second, 52-yard field goal, then bounced back the following week to trounce the University of Tennessee–Chattanooga, 51-6. For a few days Vanderbilt loyalists entertained the dream of beating Auburn, a pre-season pick by some observers to win the national championship. The War Eagles had lost their first two games to underdogs, had failed to score a touchdown, and the rabid sports radio talk-show hosts were full of speculation about a dramatic Vanderbilt win on the coming Saturday.

Auburn came to Nashville with thousands of boisterous orange and purple-festooned fans filling Dudley Stadium and seeking respect. The Commodores stayed close throughout the first half, but by the start of the fourth quarter the outcome was clear as the bigger, stronger, deeper Auburn team wore down Vanderbilt, winning 45-7, starting a five-game winning streak that would vault the Tigers back into the national rankings. There seemed to be more War Eagle than Vanderbilt fans in the stadium that day.

The Auburn setback would be followed by tough losses to TCU, Georgia Tech (in overtime), Mississippi State and, worst of all, in its homecoming game against Navy, a team the Commodores were favored to defeat. The team led national power Georgia 2-0 at half-time, but ultimately suffered a 27-8 defeat. After losses to South Carolina and Florida, Vanderbilt finally broke the nation’s longest conference losing streak by defeating Kentucky, 28-17, at home. Sophomore quarterback Jay Cutler threw four touchdown passes and rushed for 129 yards, the most for a Commodore quarterback in 23 years. His performance earned Cutler SEC Offensive Player of the Week honors and inspired Vanderbilt fans to tear down the goalposts as if a conference championship had been on the line.

In addition to Cutler’s season-long per-

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Vanderbilt, citing the chancellor’s reforms as a positive force in their decisions.

Throughout the fall controversy, Vanderbilt’s athletes were taking it in stride. Notwithstanding the confusion surrounding Turner’s departure, most were unaffected, turning to their coaches for guidance. Bobby Johnson became a firewall for the chancellor, refut-

and organizational development and routinely meets with football prospects. Washington, a sports medicine major, agrees. “They know the degree is awesome, and everyone is really nice. It feels like home.”

To Washington and Haye, like all Vanderbilt athletes, hard work and sacrifice are second nature. They shoulder long, physically

formance, there were other individual highlights: Safety Andrew Pace and defensive end Jovan Haye, among others, gave fans a glimmer of hope for the future. In most games the Commodores were competitive and, with a few breaks, could have been 5-5 instead of 1-9 and headed toward its worst season record. But still Bobby Johnson remains optimistic.

“The biggest thing we’re fighting is the lack of a winning tradition,” said Johnson. “We’re trying to get our guys to believe they can win. We just want to make sure we’re making progress, making sure we’re getting better.”

In the fall, basketball coach Kevin Stallings began practice with a Vanderbilt team that had a lot to prove. The 2002–03 season had been a disaster, with only 11 wins and 18 losses, one a crushing 110-41 thrashing by Kentucky, the worst Commodore loss in modern times. It was Stallings’ only losing season in a 21-year career, one that stung all the more as rumors of dissension among players and coaches roiled a once-proud program.

A visit to Stallings’ office atop Memorial Gymnasium takes a visitor down corridors decorated with life-size photos of Vanderbilt’s basketball greats—All-Americans Billy McCaffrey, Will Perdue, Tom Hagan, Clyde Lee and Billy Joe Adcock; SEC Players of the Year Dan Langhi and Jan van Breda Kolff; Perry Wallace, the SEC’s first African-American athlete and an all-conference player. These and dozens of other nationally recognized Commodore players kept Memorial Gymnasium rocking for decades.

After five seasons with barely more wins than losses, Stallings feels the pressure to restore that excitement and draw fans to a gym that rarely was filled over the last few years. (Stallings has received a little help from the administration, which acknowledged that an empty gym hurt the team’s chances and announced a deep price cut for tickets for this year’s season.) To fill seats Stallings must win big games, legitimately contend for an SEC title, and get into the NCAA tournament, a benchmark that has eluded the Commodores since 1997, when it washed out in the opening round.

“Winning is a relief, losing is misery,” says Stallings. “We didn’t have fun last year, and it was ugly. Things got out of control. But I

really feel a new excitement with this team. We’re much stronger physically. Our front line has put on a lot of weight in the off-season, and we’re just as quick. We won’t be pushed around like last year. We’re going to be significantly better.”

The key to success will start with Matt Freije, a 6-foot-9-inch senior forward who some analysts have picked as a pre-season All-American and potential SEC Player of the Year. On the verge of becoming Vanderbilt’s all-time leading scorer, Freije came to Nashville from Kansas City knowing little about the school but was instantly sold after his visit. “The chemistry here was amazing—the coaches, the players, the campus, everything,” said Freije.

Echoing every Vanderbilt athlete I interviewed, Freije admitted, “I want to play pro ball, but it meant a lot to me to go to a good school academically, where a degree really means something.” He deflected attention from his accomplishments and talked excitedly about his teammates’ progress, including 5-foot-11-inch sophomore guard Mario Moore from nearby Antioch, who showed sparks of brilliance last year. “You won’t believe how much better these guys are going to be this year.”

the phenomenal Chantelle Anderson, who dominated the SEC for three years.

Nothing less than a conference championship and a shot at the national title will satisfy Coach Melanie Balcomb and the players, who sometimes brought more fans than the men’s team to Memorial Gym last year.

Balcomb came to Nashville last year from Xavier after an embarrassing few weeks for A.D. Turner, who was forced to oust a newly named coach when it was revealed that he had apparently inflated his résumé. It was later discovered that the coach’s résumé was, in fact, correct. With the toughest schedule in the country, the women’s team finished 20-12 and made the second round of the NCAA tournament. This winter Balcomb will count on seniors Jenni Benningfield, a 6-foot-3 potential All-American forward, and guard Hillary Hager. Eight players return from last year, boosted by a freshman class that some call the best in the country.

The women’s basketball team is not alone in achieving national recognition for Commodore teams. The Vanderbilt men’s and women’s golf teams have been among the country’s best for several years. Top players such as Brandt Snedeker, Courtney Wood,

Vanderbilt began playing women’s basketball 25 years ago and quickly became a powerhouse, with 16 trips to the NCAA tournament. The players sometimes brought more fans than the men’s team to Memorial Gym last year.

Across the hall, in the office of women’s basketball, the goals are loftier—the Commodores are already among the nation’s best. Vanderbilt began playing women’s basketball 25 years ago and quickly became a powerhouse, with 16 trips to the NCAA tournament and consistently high national rankings. Four players were All-Americans: Wendy Scholtens, Heidi Gillingham, Sheri Sam, and

Sarah Jacobs and May Wood have moved Vanderbilt golf into the top tier.

“We really have a chance to contend for a national championship here at Vanderbilt,” says Martha Freitag, who won SEC Coach of the Year honors last year. She cites the University’s purchase of the Legends Golf Course south of Nashville as a breakthrough for the program. “Our facilities are getting better,



and our players work very hard. Having our own course is huge.”

The Vanderbilt men’s tennis team won the SEC this spring and came within two points in a single match of winning the NCAA championship for 2003. The recruiting success of coach Ken Flach, another SEC Coach of the Year last year, has made the Commodores a national contender.

In 2002 the women’s tennis squad won the NCAA doubles championship and finished the 2003 season ranked 13th in the country with nationally ranked players Sarah Riske, Aleke Tsoubanos and Kelly Schmandt. Coach Geoff Macdonald noted that “our players are real athletes, physically strong and well-conditioned, tough competitors. As the reputation of the program grows, we’ll be able to recruit the best in the country.”

Vanderbilt’s baseball program is also on the verge of greatness, with players with All-American potential, an exciting new coach, and a new first-class stadium. In his second year after a celebrated run as a top assistant

at national baseball power Clemson, Tim Corbin makes no excuses as he prepares for the coming season.

“We’re building a national program here,” says Corbin who, at 42, looks like he can still turn double plays as he did as an Ohio Wesleyan all-conference infielder. “These kids know that Vanderbilt is a great school academically, and we can make that a great asset in recruiting. And when they come here to visit and see this great new stadium and meet these players, they know that we’ve got what it takes to win baseball games.”

Corbin wasted no time in going after the best baseball players available. His efforts have produced what some observers believe is one of the top groups of incoming freshman players in the country. The Commodore pitching staff for the coming season—ace Jeremy Sowers, Ryan Mullins, Jensen Lewis, Ryan Rote, Matt Buschmann, Jeff Sues, and celebrated recruit Greg Moviel—figures to be among the SEC’s most talented. Corbin already has won a commitment from David Price of

Murfreesboro, Tenn., beating out Tennessee for the lefty who is considered one of the country’s top high-school pitchers.

Throughout the six other Commodore varsity teams, there is growing anticipation of success. Vanderbilt now also plays national schedules in men’s and women’s soccer, lacrosse and cross country, each with professional coaching staffs awarding scholarships and competing for league titles. The women’s soccer program reflects new support from Kirkland Hall for the Olympic sports programs: Headed by former Duke star goalie Ronnie Hill, the team now boasts three assistant coaches as it heads toward a coveted SEC tournament berth.

“Title IX,” the federal law that requires colleges to field—and fund—women’s teams in numbers roughly approximating those for men, has nudged Vanderbilt and all other Division I schools toward gender parity in athletics. Critics decry the law as a politically correct, unfair burden for traditional college athletic programs. Indeed, some schools have threatened to drop traditional men’s programs in swimming, track, golf and other sports to avoid spending money on new women’s teams.

At Vanderbilt, whatever the motivation, women’s athletes are thriving—and making a remarkable contribution to the overall success of the University’s win-loss record in intercollegiate athletics. For some coaches, athletes and administrators, there is even talk of winning the coveted “NACDA Cup,” awarded each year to the school with the highest composite record in all intercollegiate sports. Last year Vanderbilt climbed from 104th to 54th nationally, even higher in those varsity sports in which it competes, and fifth alongside all private schools in Division I-A.

While the football team was losing its fifth straight game, Vanderbilt teams won the University of Georgia Invitational (women’s cross country), finished strong in a major golf tournament (men’s golf, led by freshman phenom Luke List), and appeared on regional television (women’s soccer). Over the past two years, the men’s lacrosse team has won the American Conference Championship and the women’s track team has won the SEC Steeplechase Championship.

So the high-stakes challenge facing coach-

It is unclear whether Vanderbilt students and alumni care much about success in athletics as a significant reason to attend and support the University. When asked why they chose Vanderbilt in a survey of recent undergraduates, the athletic program ranked 27th of 28 factors.

es Bobby Johnson, Kevin Stallings and Melanie Balcomb—to win games, go to post-season bowl games and tournaments, to make millions to offset rising program costs—is only part of the picture as Vanderbilt pursues a new direction for its athletic programs.

In many ways Vanderbilt is already there,

already a leader in demanding academic integrity from its student-athletes, already fielding successful, nationally ranked teams in several sports, already graduating its athletes in every sport at rates near the top of the NCAA—and doing so without the kind of cheating that has come to disgrace so many

big-time collegiate programs.

Yet, when Vanderbilt's football and basketball teams line up against SEC opponents with marginal admissions standards, low graduation rates, or a history of NCAA probations from payoffs or other abuses, the Commodores will not start with extra points on the scoreboard. Despite the pride most alumni, faculty and students have in the University's academic integrity, Vanderbilt coaches face enormous pressure to win games, even SEC titles, fill the bleachers, and make money for the program.

Lee Fowler, a first-rate forward on the Commodore's 1974 SEC championship basketball team and now athletic director at North Carolina State University, puts Vanderbilt's dilemma in perspective: "Most Division I schools, even the big state schools, now recruit only players who can graduate. The difference between Vanderbilt and, say, Tennessee, is that it's a hell of a lot easier to graduate from Tennessee."

Hanging over the lobby at McGugin Ath-

The following opinion essay was solicited by and published by the Washington Post in response to Vanderbilt's integration of athletics into the campus life.

My Plan to Put the College Back in College Sports

By Gordon Gee

I like to win. I also like to sleep at night. But after 23 years leading universities, I find it increasingly hard to do both.

This has been the most ignominious year in recent memory for college sports. We've seen coaches behaving badly, academic fraud, graft, possibly even murder. Clearly, the system is broken, and fixing it will require more than sideline cheering.

That's why, last week, we at Vanderbilt announced that we would replace our traditional



athletic department with a new body that is more connected to the mission of the University and more accountable to the institution's academic leadership. We'll no longer need an athletic director. We're not eliminating varsity sports, mind you, or relinquishing our membership in the highly competitive Southeastern Conference. Rather, we're making a clear statement that the "student-athlete"—a term invented decades ago when college sports was faced with another seemingly endless parade of scandals—belongs back in the university.

Many athletic departments exist as separate, almost semi-autonomous fiefdoms within universities and there is the feeling that the name on the football jersey is little more than a "franchise" for sports fans. As Bill Bowen and Sarah Levin point out in their new book, *Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values*, student-athletes are increasingly isolated, even at the best schools in the country. They do not participate in the extracurricular activities that are so important for personal growth. They miss out on opportunities to study abroad or have internships. They spend too

much time in special athletic facilities that are off-limits to the rest of the student body. And their world can too often be defined by coaches' insatiable demands for practice and workout sessions.

True, this is the cost of staying competitive in college sports, where tens of millions of dollars are at stake. But should it be? Over the years I have gotten to know thousands of student-athletes. They are as different as any group of individuals could be. What they have in common, though, is a sense that they missed out on an important part of the college experience by focusing only on sports. They also lose out by being stripped of their responsibilities as citizens of the university when we say that "all will be forgiven" as long as their performance on the field is up to snuff.

This must change. At Vanderbilt that means ensuring that every student, every athlete, is part of a vibrant academic and social community.

Shifting Vanderbilt's athletics program to our division of student life and university affairs is merely a step—perhaps bold, perhaps quixot-



letic Center is a 4-by-10-foot mission statement: “As an integral part of a private University and a charter member of the Southeastern Conference, we are committed to setting and achieving standards of excellence in education and athletics. By developing the full potential of our student-athletes and staff, individually and together, we are accountable for placing the highest value on people, integrity, and winning.”

Otis Washington isn’t put off by the challenge or the criticism. The deeply religious son of a pastor and a hair salon owner from Saginaw, Mich., Otis was a 9-year-old victim of a drive-by shooting. On a recent day when controversy about the athletic department roiled around him, Washington was philosophical. “I just want to make a difference in people’s lives. I love football; it means a lot to me. And I know with these players, these coaches, we can win here at Vanderbilt. Just be patient.” ▼

ic—in the much-needed reform of intercollegiate athletics. We took this step mindful that Vanderbilt is in an unusual position. It is a highly selective private university with an athletics program untarnished by scandal; our student-athletes graduate at rates that are among the best in the country; and we have loyal, generous supporters who have blessed us with excellent facilities. We can do things here that other universities can’t or won’t.

I will say this: After our announcement, I received many phone calls from college presidents who said, “You go, Gordon. Walk off the cliff, and if you succeed, we will be right behind.”

In recent years, there have been a number of well-meaning and forceful efforts to reform college athletics, but they have not gone far enough. It is time for all those who are concerned about the future of our enterprise to get serious about addressing the crisis of credibility we now face. College presidents, working together, should commit themselves to the following reforms:

First, all students who participate in intercollegiate sports should be required to meet

the requirements of a core curriculum. The “permanent jockocracy” has for too long made a mockery of academic standards when it comes to athletes. We need to end sham courses, manufactured majors, degree programs that would embarrass a mail-order diploma mill, and the relentless pressure on faculty members to ease student-athletes through their classes.

Second, colleges should make a binding four-year commitment to students on athletic scholarships. One of the dirty secrets of intercollegiate athletics is that such scholarships are renewed year-to-year. A bad season? Injury? Poor relationship with a coach? Your scholarship can be yanked with very little notice. Rather than cynically offering the promise of academic enrichment, colleges should back up the promise so long as a student remains in good academic standing.

Third, the number of athletic scholarships a school can award should be tied to the graduation rates of its athletes in legitimate academic programs. If a school falls below a threshold graduation rate, it should be penalized by having to relinquish a certain number of scholar-

ships for the next year’s entering class. A version of this proposal is part of a reform package now snaking its way through the NCAA.

Fourth, graduation rates should be tied to television and conference revenues. If money is the mother’s milk of college athletics, then access to it should be contingent on fulfilling the most basic mission of a university—educating students.

Finally, college presidents and others need to take a good look at the system we have created for ourselves, in which the professional sports leagues have enjoyed a free feeder system that exploits young people and corrupts otherwise noble institutions. We have maintained the fantasy for far too long that a big-time athletics program is for the students, the alumni and, at public universities, even for the legislators. It is time for us to call it what it has sadly become: a prep league for the pros, who have taken far more than they have given back. We should demand nothing less than a system in which student-athletes are an integral part of the academic institutions whose names and colors they so proudly wear on game day.