

## BIRTH OF A LEGEND IN OUR COMMUNITY

**By J B Leftwich**

The Tennessee-Vanderbilt football series, not much of a rivalry in recent years, will be renewed this week with the Tennessee Vols not as heavily favored in this game as in previous years.

During the early years of this rivalry, Vanderbilt dominated play.

Saturday, when the two teams meet, Commodore fans again are entertaining hopes of victory.

In early years, Vanderbilt coach Dan McGugin was building a record that sports writers for decades constantly mentioned in Nashville newspapers.

The 1915 Vandy-UT game was fulfilling expectations with the Commodores leading comfortably in the second half when a play occurred that spiked conversation in my home village of Buffalo Valley for years thereafter.

In the farming community of Rock Springs valley, about two miles from the Buffalo Valley post office, the Jared family was one of the most prominent in the region. The Jareds owned large and productive farms some of which still remain in the family.

Bennett Jared was the son of Joe Jared, a prosperous farmer and head of a large family. Bennett was an athlete who was attracted to the UT campus long before recruiting wars and generous scholarships fell into place.

In the fateful Oct. 30, 1915 game with Vanderbilt, he was a 20-year-old substitute expected to move into a starting position the following year. It was not to be. In his second play as substitute runner, he was tackled, ending up at the bottom of a pile of Vanderbilt players.

Vanderbilt was a physical team that could deliver punishing tackles. Knoxville sports writers hinted at unsportsman-like conduct, but avoided using those words. The Knoxville *Sentinel* later reported Jared was "injured in a straight tackle," quoting a coach but not identifying which team he coached. Game officials and coaches never labeled Vandy's play as dirty.

When the mound of Commodores peeled off of the running back, players on both teams immediately sensed tragedy. Bennett Jared lay crumpled and unmoving. He never played again. He never walked again. His back was severely injured. He was a paraplegic who for the remainder of his short life was confined to a wheelchair.

The game continued, but the zest of the Tennessee team never revived after the accident. Vanderbilt won 35-0. Because of the delay, the Commodores scored their last two

touchdowns in “darkness” just before last faint rays of sunlight disappeared in this game long before lighted fields.

Years later, elders often told the story of shock and sorrow in this small farming community. Bennett Jared’s father, Joe, was in San Francisco on the day of the game and had to travel home by train before medical decisions could be made about his son.

In an age of relatively primitive communications, the community waited eagerly for every tidbit of information. Sports reporters in Nashville and in Knoxville wrote of every medical announcement. Physicians attended him around the clock.

In Knoxville, the Volunteers cancelled practice on the following Monday because of injuries sustained in the game. The school cancelled its game scheduled the following week with South Carolina. If Bennett had died in the days following his injury, UT planned to cancel its next game – with Mississippi A&M, now Mississippi State.

Interesting aspects were stories written by sports reporters almost a century ago. Bennett was not expected to leave the hospital alive, and writers were stark and frank about his condition. The words “die” and “near death” appeared in headlines. He also reportedly battled the “grim reaper.”

In contrast, today’s reporters would use such euphemisms as “guarded condition” and “critical.”

Nobody knows how good he was as a football player because his career ended so soon. And his prowess likely was enhanced after his death as he evolved into a legend. Suffice it to say, he was good enough to play major college football. He was the first – and perhaps the last – from his community to do so.

Bennett Jared died in July, 1917.

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**Footnote:** For decades, this has been a story I wanted to write, but I lacked details I thought available only through extensive research in newspaper archives.

Earlier this fall, I talked with Mary Ralph Jared Maddux during a reunion at Buffalo Valley School. I asked her about her uncle’s story. She had an abundance of clippings, which she photocopied and mailed to me

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