

Role reversal

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While Tennessee was inventing ways to lose at home to Missouri, Vanderbilt was making up a 17-point deficit to beat Ole Miss in Oxford.

You want to talk about role reversal, there it is.

The once mighty Vols will soon be looking for a new coach. A long-time laughing stock of the SEC, Vanderbilt is riding high and on its way to an unprecedented back-to-back bowl games.

Second-year Vanderbilt Coach James Franklin has been trying to convince everyone that this is not the "same old Vandy." Many who have heard coaches say this for too many years, nod our head, roll our eyes and mutter, "Seeing is believing."

I remember when Vanderbilt was going through one of its many coaching changes. It showed favorite son Watson Brown the door and brought in little known Gerry DiNardo to turn the ship around.

It was orchestrated by then-AD Paul Hoolahan, who knew DiNardo from playing high school football with DiNardo's older brother in New York City.

DiNardo's first press conference was before Brown had a press conference to explain his firing. It didn't go over well with local media.

The question was quickly raised to DiNardo: This program has been losing for years. What makes you think you can get it done here?

Fair question. To which DiNardo replied, "I have a plan."

Being the curious sort, I asked DiNardo if he would share his plan since no one else had figured it out.

"No. I have studied this program and my plan will work," he replied.

At the conclusion of the press conference, I walked to the back of the room, where the late Vanderbilt jack-of-all-trades Richard Baker was sitting. Baker started working for Vanderbilt athletics department after high school.

I asked Baker how many football coaches he had seen at Vanderbilt. He laughed, his ample belly shaking. He had counted the previous night and I recall his number was double-digits.

"Did any of them have a plan, Bake?" I asked.

He roared. "Every one of them, Mr. Biddle. Every one of them."

Well, whatever plan James Franklin brought with him from Maryland is working.

What James Franklin is selling, the players are buying. So are the fans, eager after all those decades of waiting 'til next year.

Why, Franklin has 70-year-old fans holding up six fingers at the start of the fourth quarter. That means his players are going to give it their all for six seconds at a time the rest of the game. Why six seconds? Franklin calculated the average play takes six seconds.

Franklin tells you this is a game changer. He preaches it from billboards, on radio and TV spots, in the newspapers.

He has changed the losing culture and proven Vanderbilt can win football games, even in the SEC.

They are 6-4, with four of those wins coming in SEC games. They are not your father's Commodores, or as rival fans used to call them, Commode-dores.

Tennessee comes to town Saturday, reeling from a 0-6 SEC record and playing for most likely, a lame duck coach.

Will Vanderbilt Stadium be bathed in orange Saturday? Or will Vanderbilt fans use their tickets and show up in mass?

Tennessee's still dangerous offensively, but still a train wreck on defense.

Saturday may be the day Vanderbilt can tell Tennessee fans to "Wait 'till next year."

Contact Sports Columnist Joe Biddle at [This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it](#)

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