

CHC- Frank Mordica Holds SEC Rushing Record

by Bill Traughber

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When the Southeastern Conference was formed in 1933, football became the prominent sport for decades. The record indicates the conference has evolved into one of the premier football organizations in the country.

The SEC has produced a number of national champions, All-Americans and record-breaking athletes. In the 73-year history of the SEC, a Vanderbilt Commodore holds the greatest single-game football rushing achievement.

On November 18, 1978, Frank Mordica rushed for 321 yards (22 carries) in the 41-27 victory over the Air Force Academy at Dudley Field. The junior tailback's longest touchdown run of 77 yards was one of five trips into the end zone. Mordica's five touchdowns in a game are tied for fourth all-time in the SEC and a Vanderbilt record.



Frank Mordica

Jimmy Davy of the *Tennessean* wrote about that historic day:

The aroused partisan crowd at Dudley Field continued the ovation long after Frank Mordica had left the field, plopped on the Vanderbilt team bench and unsnapped the helmet strap.

Wiping perspiration from his face, he looked at a Commodore teammate and said: "Lord, I've waited so long for something like this. What a day it has been."

When future sports historians leaf through the NCAA record books in search of greatest individual performances in college football, they will surely find the muscular Vandy runner chronicled in bold type.



It may read:

Frank Mordica, tailback, Vanderbilt University: vs. Air Force Academy, Nov. 18, 1978, Nashville, Tenn. Two school records, one Southeastern Conference record: 309 net yards rushing and five touchdowns (runs of 48, 30, 6, 70 and 77 yards).

With his rushing totals yesterday just 47 yards shy of the NCAA all-time single game record, Mordica literally carried Vanderbilt to a 41-27 win over Air Force Academy, breaking a seven-game losing streak before a crowd of only 18,500 at Dudley Field.

The post-game stats showed Mordica with 309 rushing yards; soon it was officially changed to 321.

Vanderbilt head coach Fred Pancoast replaced Mordica with Terry Potter with just over three minutes left in the game. He jogged off the field to a standing ovation. Pancoast was aware that Mordica was close to the NCAA single-game rushing record, which was ironically set the previous weekend against Air Force. Georgia Tech's Eddie Lee rushed for 356 yards. Vanderbilt had the ball on the 50-yard line and driving.

"We had people on our bench pleading with me to leave Frank in the game, let him carry the ball every time and get the record," Pancoast said after the game. "I think he could have done it, too. As it was, the game ended with us on the goal line. But, I looked across the field at (Bill) Parcells standing over there with his beaten team. I knew his agony. I just couldn't do it.

"Mordica put on a great exhibition of running today. Those 300-yard rushing days are rare. The only mistakes he made was bringing the football off the field twice and getting us penalized on the kick for extra point. But, we will certainly forgive him today. He could do no wrong. Ol' No. 35 had the jets on."

Parcells was in his first season as the Falcons head coach and a former Vanderbilt assistant coach. The NFL Super Bowl winner is currently the head coach of the Dallas Cowboys. After the game Parcells said, "Mordica is the fastest back we've played. We have no one who can catch him. We never quit trying, but we are all ashamed. Obviously we need to recruit."

When the game ended, Mordica had his jersey stripped into pieces by fans wanting a souvenir. Mordica's rushing effort broke a 51-year-old SEC single-game record held by Kentucky's Bob Davis who ran for 267 yards against Washington and Lee in 1937. The effort also broke the Commodore record (214 yards) set by Doug Mathews in 1969.

Mordica was also aware of the record in those final moments.

"I was about ready to drop when I came out the last time," Mordica said. "I had run so much and so far, that I was exhausted. It was time for me to sit down. You know, I just kept grabbing the football and running. Our line was great. It was clear sailing all day. It was a day unlike any I've dreamed of as a football player."



Mordica's 14.58 yards per carry average in a game is also first all-time in the SEC. Nationally the 6.2 yards per carry average in a season ranked him sixth overall in 1978. His 321 yards is the ninth best rushing effort in the history of NCAA football (Division I).

He finished the season with 1,065 yards, which at that time was a Vanderbilt single-season rushing record. There was never a 1,000-yard rusher in the history of Vanderbilt football until Mordica's record-breaking season. Mordica (1976-79) is also the Commodores all-time career-rushing leader with 2,623 yards.

For the game Vanderbilt recorded 547 rushing yards while gaining just 21 yards in the air (2-8-2). Potter added the other touchdown for Vanderbilt while Mike Woodard connected on 5-of-6 extra points. Quarterbacking Vanderbilt were Van Heflin and

Scotti Madison. Shelby Ball of Air Force rushed for 174 yards and two touchdowns.

The Commodores lost two weeks later to Tennessee to finish the season at 2-9 (SEC, 0-6). George McIntyre would replace Pancoast after four seasons.

Mordica was selected in the ninth round (233rd overall) by the New Orleans Saints in the 1980 National Football League draft. His promising professional career was ended by knee problems and the Saints waived him. Mordica never played a down in the NFL.

"I want to be remembered as one of the best running backs that ever played football here," Mordica once said later in an interview. "I hope that's the way people will think of me in 5, 10, 25 or 50 years from now."

Next week read about the famed Carlisle Indian School playing Vanderbilt in Nashville in 1906.

Traughber's Tidbit: On November 16, 1985 Vanderbilt fans attending the Virginia Tech game at Dudley field became participants of a record. Fans were given a kazoo in an attempt to break the Guinness Book of Records for the largest kazoo orchestra. The game attracted 35,000 fans and at halftime the Oak Ridge Boys led the kazoo band with "Elvira." The record was set as Rod Williamson, the then-Vanderbilt Director of Marketing and Promotions and current Sports Information Director, promotion was a success. The Commodores lost to Tech, 38-24.

If you have any comments or suggestions you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail WLTraughber@aol.com.