

CHC: Ray Morrison - Vanderbilt Player and Coach

by Bill Traugher

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Ray Morrison (1908-11) is considered one of Vanderbilt's greatest quarterbacks in its long football history. As a player, Morrison was measured as courageous, loyal, inventive and resourceful.

Morrison was born in Sugar Branch, Ind., on February 28, 1885. Less than a year later, the Morrison family settled on a farm near McKenzie, Tenn. While working his farm chores, Morrison attended the McKenzie grammar and high schools. Morrison also followed his high school work with a year at McTyiere School for Boys.

While needing funds for college, the ambitious Morrison worked a year on a dredge boat on the Mississippi River. When he entered Vanderbilt University, the future great athlete weighed only 155 pounds. Morrison would become one of the South's greatest broken field runners as a quarterback and halfback.

In 1910, Morrison led his Commodores to New Haven, Conn., to face the mighty men from Yale University. In this era of college football, the Eastern schools fielded the best teams while the southern teams gained little respect. Before a kickoff the Bulldog players would shout at the opposing Commodores, "Hey there, Rube, how's your plantation?"

In the end, Vanderbilt shocked the college football world with a 0-0 tie. Morrison was brilliant in his play, helping to keep the ball away from the mighty Yale offense. The Yale coach, Ted Coy, said after the game that Morrison "is the greatest player I have seen in years."

In his four seasons in a Commodore uniform, Morrison helped Vanderbilt to a 30-6-2 record. Morrison was selected as an All-American in 1911.

"As the whistle blew for the finish of the game," wrote Jack Nye in *The Banner*, "Ray Morrison was presented with the game ball by one of his teammates and tucking it under his arm as a priceless treasure, he walked off the field for the last time as a member of a Vanderbilt team. There was not one of the spectators who did not experience a tinge of sadness as they saw the little hero bid farewell to Southern football."



During the annual banquet, Coach Dan McGugin stated that Morrison was the best quarterback he ever saw in his life.

After graduating Vanderbilt, Morrison became a teacher and athletics director at Branham & Hughes Military Academy in Spring Hill, Tenn. He stayed at the school from 1912 until 1915. Morrison next found himself at Southern Methodist University (1915-16) in Dallas, Texas. At SMU, he was responsible for coaching football, basketball, baseball, and track while supervising the physical training of all the school's men and women.

The year 1915 was also the first year that the SMU campus first opened for students. Morrison was the school's first head football coach that held its first practice one week before the first game with only freshmen players. Morrison was 2-5 that first year with a two-year total of 2-13-2.

With the United States involvement in World War I, Morrison went to Fort Oglethorpe in 1917. Morrison came to Vanderbilt as interim head football coach in 1918 when McGugin served one year in the military. Playing an abbreviated schedule, the 1918 Commodores were 4-2 with victories over Kentucky, Tennessee, Auburn and Sewanee. Losses were to Camp Greenleaf and Camp Hancock.

Upon McGugin's return to the Vanderbilt campus, Morrison spent a year at Gulf Coast Military Academy as the athletics director and a teacher. In 1920, he was back at SMU where he was freshman football coach for two years before taking over the head coaching duties.

Morrison's second stint (1922-34) with SMU was very successful. In 13 seasons, he guided the Mustangs to an 82-39-17 record (84-44-22 overall in both stints). Morrison won three Southwest Conference championships in 1923, 1926 and 1931. His SMU teams were the first to use the passing game as an offensive weapon. Most teams threw the ball on third down when in desperation. Morrison also threw passes on first and second downs from any position on the field.

Morrison's passing game earned him the title of "Father of the Forward Pass." Morrison's exciting exploits with the passing game created college football first "Aerial Circus." His 1928 edition tossed for an astonishing 16-of-30 passes in a tough 14-13 loss to powerful Army. The Army team threw just four passes.

When McGugin retired from coaching after the 1934 season, Morrison resigned from SMU to return to Nashville. Morrison was McGugin's handpicked successor. It would be a difficult assignment to replace the legendary McGugin who coached 30 years for the Commodores. Fred Russell of *The Banner* wrote upon Morrison's trip to his alma mater:

"Ray Morrison, Vanderbilt's new head coach, Tuesday made his first visit to Nashville since accepting the position as successor to Dan McGugin, Thirty minutes conversation with him produced these impressions."

"A gentle, soft-spoken person who talks out of the side of his mouth with convincing firmness. Eyes with a permanent twinkle, tiny wrinkles about them when he smiles, but a set jaw that seems to enclose teeth constantly gritted tighter. A happy combination that blends austerity and affability into well-nigh perfect personality--that's the Ray Morrison of today who was known to Nashvillians twenty-five years ago as Vanderbilt's whirling quarterback."

"Ray Morrison doesn't look like the average coach. He has a scholarly appearance, and after all, that's quite natural. Wasn't he a bit of a scholar in his undergraduate days? Yes, you imagine him as the hero of some of those stories you read as a kid. The name, 'Ray Morrison,' itself sounds like a book's hero--in fact, I prefer it over 'Frank Merriwell' or 'Fred Fearnot.'"

"You picture him in college as the honor student, the athlete hero, and the clean-living Christian university admired and respected. The funny part about it is that Ray Morrison was just that--or those--in his undergraduate days at Vanderbilt. Even if he tried, it would be hard to keep anyone from respecting him. It's automatic. He inspires confidence, reflects sincerity. And every minute he's himself without the sign of pose. I list that among his finest qualities."

In Morrison's five seasons at Vanderbilt, his yearly records included 7-3, 3-5-1, 7-2, 6-3 and 2-7-1. In 1937, his Commodore crew was involved in two plays that became a part of Southeastern Conference football history. Against LSU in Nashville, Commodore tackle Greer Ricketson ran for a 50-yard touchdown on a "hidden ball" play for a 7-6 victory.

In the last game at Dudley Field against Alabama, Vanderbilt's Carl Hinkle narrowly missed blocking a Bama 23-yard field goal attempt, which was good and gave the Tide a 9-7 win. It was not known at the time, but the winner of the game was to be given an invitation to the Rose Bowl. This would have been Vanderbilt's first bowl bid. Morrison was rewarded with the SEC's Coach-of-the-Year honor in 1937.

Including the 1918 season, Morrison's overall record at Vanderbilt was 29-22-2 in six seasons. Morrison resigned after the 1939 season with a 2-7-record. He finished his college-coaching career at Temple (1940-48) with a 31-38-9 record and at Austin College (1949-51). Morrison's overall coaching record was 143-108-27.

Morrison returned to SMU after his coaching career ended to become Vice-President of Development for 11 years. He died in Miami Springs, Fla. on November 19, 1982 at age 97. His body was cremated.

Morrison was selected to the National College Hall of Fame in 1954 and the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame in 1970. During one of his numerous homecoming trips to the Vanderbilt campus, Morrison was asked to tell of his most cherished moment in football. Morrison's reply:

"When I was chosen to succeed Coach McGugin at Vanderbilt."

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