

CHC- First Vandy Pro Players

by Bill Traugher

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Former Vanderbilt great Clyde Lee (1964-66) is credited with being the first Commodore to achieve professional basketball experience. Others before him were drafted and invited for tryouts with a professional team, but failed to play in a game. Lee played 10 seasons for San Francisco/Golden State (1967-74), Atlanta (1975) and Philadelphia (1975-76).

But former Commodores' Felix Ray (1943) and David Scobey (1943, 45) were a part of the Southern Basketball League. They were on the roster of the Nashville Vols, charter members of the professional SBL in 1947-48 and 1948-49. Another member of that team was Joe Casey the former Nashville Chief of Police.

"We had a pretty good team and were competitive with anybody," said Joe Casey. "We had people on there that could play. We had a guy named Oren McKinney and Felix Ray that played at Vanderbilt. And we had a guy from Pennsylvania named Bill Duvier. Ken Redmond played on that team and a guy named Maurice Partain that I went to school with also played."

Casey was a basketball star from Nashville's North High School. In the 1945-46 season, Casey was selected as the All-Nashville center. While not having any college basketball experience, Casey was an outstanding athlete that was asked to join the team.



Joe Casey

"A man named A.D. Kerr, who ran a service station on Third Avenue North, is the one that started the team," said Casey. "Jess Mallow was our player-coach. It was just a pleasant experience. We played just about every night. If we didn't play in the league, we played some team in the midstate area. I guess we had to make expenses.

"We played our home games at Ryan High School. Sometimes we had a good crowd to watch us and sometimes we didn't have too many people. It wasn't bad. It wasn't big crowds, but they cheered us on."

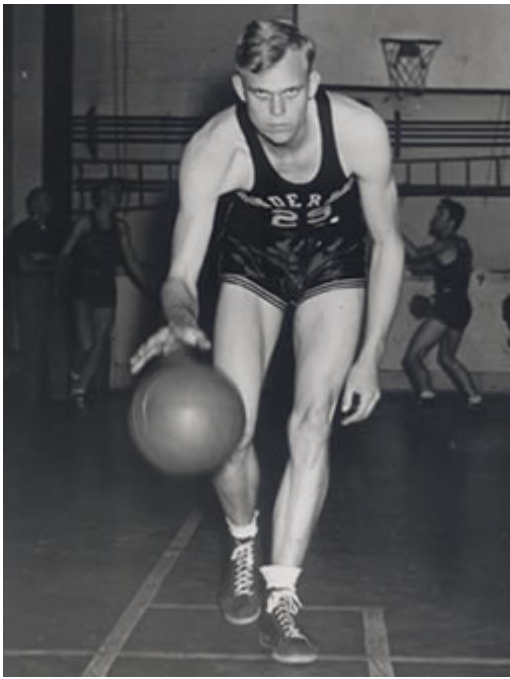
Members of the SBL were Birmingham (Vulcans), Gadsden, AL (Whiz Kids), Jackson, MS (Senators), Memphis (Legionnaires), Mobile (Bears), Montgomery (Rebels) and Nashville. Raymond Johnson, sports editor of the *Nashville Tennessean*, was the commissioner with a planned 50-game schedule. The league made its debut in Birmingham on November 29, 1947. Nashville defeated Birmingham, 51-50.

During the season, Memphis relocated to Mobile and Gadsden moved to Bessemer,

AL.

Casey, 80, said he was paid \$250 a month and Montgomery was the best team in the SBL. Montgomery was league champs with a 43-6 record in that inaugural season. A round-robin playoff tournament between Montgomery, third-place Nashville (22-21) and fourth-place Birmingham (25-25) was set. Second-place Jackson (23-18) declined to participate due to injuries. After winning the opening game, Nashville lost the next three to Montgomery to lose the championship series.

"We went down on a trip to Montgomery one time with just five players," Casey reminisced. "We carried two players, young men who were in the undertaker's school in Nashville. I never will forget it. When we didn't have enough players we'd look for more just to have enough to play a game.



Felix Ray

"I recall we did beat Montgomery that night. Something happened where they had a referee who was a really short guy. He and Felix, we called him "Rope," got thrown out of a game and Rope talked the referee into letting him back into the game."

Casey was a member of the Nashville police department for 38 years and Police Chief from 1973-89. During the late 1940s there was not an interstate system and travel was difficult. The Vols used an old bus that entertainers once used to travel to their games throughout the South.

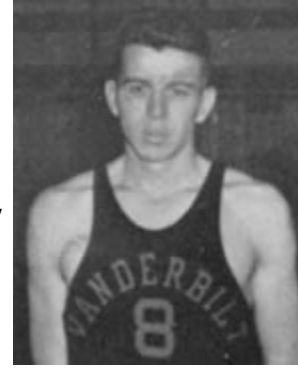
"We were riding in that old bus one time while going down in Alabama somewhere and Rope Ray was driving," Casey said. "Maurice Partain was riding shotgun and the rest of us was in the back. One of the wheels came off and past us. Maurice started yelling, 'Hold it on the road Rope!' McKinney went into the floorboard of the back seat. But we weren't hurt.

"When we went to New Orleans it was like playing football. They threw the ball up and I don't care what happened, that was it. They hardly ever called a foul. It was wild down there."

Former Nashville Vice-Mayor David Scobey was also a member of that Vols team. Scobey played for David Lipscomb when it was a junior college in the early 1940s, then played for Vanderbilt where he earned his degree.

"That's been nearly 60 years and I've forgotten a lot," Scobey said. "I do remember we had on our team two All-Americans from Western Kentucky in Buck Snyder and Oren McKinney. We did get a great deal of coverage in *The Tennessean*. Of course, that's probably because Raymond Johnson was their sports editor and the league's commissioner."

Scobey was one of a few players that only played home games due to business and work. Newspaper articles covering the Vols games indicated that Scobey was one of Nashville's quickest and best guards. Scobey was the leading scorer with 18 points in the league's opening game.



David Scobey

Leading point scorers for Nashville were Snyder (18.0), Scobey (14.1), Ray (12.5), Duvier (12.1) and Casey (8.0). Scobey missed the championship series due to an injured ankle.

Following the initial season, Bessemer, Jackson, Birmingham and Mobile dropped out of the league. The Birmingham Steelers, Laurel (MS) Oilers and New Orleans Sports were recruited into the revised league for the 1948-49 season.

However, just before the second season concluded the league folded without championship playoffs. Montgomery (26-13) was leading in the standings at the time while Nashville (15-23) was in fourth place. Ray (13.0) and Casey (13.0) were leading scorers for Nashville in the abbreviated season.

"We did have a lot of fun," said Scobey. "I've kept a scrapbook with newspaper clippings and photographs. I'd imagine that most people in Nashville don't realize that there was a professional basketball team at that time."

Next week read about Vanderbilt upsetting No. 1 North Carolina in 1987 in Memorial Gymnasium.

Traughber's Tidbit: Vanderbilt has been playing basketball since 1900. The 1902-03 Commodores recorded its only undefeated season with a 6-0 record. Victories came over Cumberland, Nashville Athletic Club (twice), Howard and Cumberland (twice).

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