

CHC- JFK's Death Affects Nashville Sports

by Bill Traugher

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The photographs accompanying this story are from President Kennedy's May 1963 visit to Vanderbilt's Dudley Field.

November 22, 2006, marks the 43rd anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Kennedy was an ardent sports fan having been a member of the Harvard freshman and junior varsity football teams.



Just six months prior to his death, Kennedy, wearing a black and gold tie, stood before 33,000 Nashvillians on Vanderbilt's Dudley Field. The date was May 18, 1963, and Kennedy was commemorating the 90th anniversary of the founding of Vanderbilt.

Kennedy's death on that bleak Friday afternoon stirred the emotions of athletes across the nation, state and Nashville. The Wake Forest vs. North Carolina State football game was played on the evening of Kennedy's death as scheduled. N.C. State won the contest, 42-0.

Most of the Saturday college games across the country were cancelled or postponed while about two-dozen games were played. All of the Big Ten games were postponed. The traditional Harvard/Yale football game was one of the first to be postponed.

That Friday night in the preps, Nashville hosted a slate of basketball games that were played. Hartsville's football team defeated Cumberland High School in the Nashville Exchange Bowl, 14-0 also on the night of JFK's death. Former Metro Public Works Director Marlin Keel was a junior quarterback and linebacker for Cumberland.



"There was a group of us down in the football locker room listening to the radio in the early afternoon and we heard this breaking news that the president had been shot," Keel said. "We ran up to tell the folks in the office and they thought we were feeding them a line of bull. We told them to turn on the television and the radio and they did. Everybody in the school became glued to the TV and ultimately the announcement of his death."

"It was an exciting day for us because it was the first time we had been to a bowl

game. All of a sudden this cast a totally different light on the ball game. We were wondering if we were really going to play. The decision came about that we were going to go ahead and play since everything had been set up. I remember that there was a lot of rain that night and we stood in silence to honor the slain president before the game. Of course, everybody at the game knew what had happened."

The Southeastern Conference left the decision to play their scheduled games with the discretion of each team's officials. In Nashville, Vanderbilt Chancellor Alexander Heard consulted with the president the Commodores opponent George Washington University with the decision to play. George Washington University is located in Washington, D.C.

Coach Jack Green's Commodores won their first game of the year with a 31-0 thrashing of the Colonials at Dudley Field. Only 11, 000 fans witnessed Vanderbilt senior fullback Bill Waldrup's three touchdown scampers.

Prior to the kickoff the Vanderbilt marching band joined the Naval and Army ROTC units. They played the National Anthem as the flag was raised and then lowered to half mask. During the halftime the band played "My Faith Looks Up To Thee." Then a memorial service was held.

"I was surprised that they didn't call the game off," Waldrup, 65, said recently from his Murfreesboro home. "I was married and went home from class and my wife was watching the TV she told me, 'You aren't going to believe this, but President Kennedy was shot today.' Then we watched the television all that day.

"We had a practice that afternoon [Friday] and everything was dull and depressing. The fact that I scored three touchdowns was a fluke. We went out to play the best we could under the circumstances and, of course, I think that school gave up football after that season. Coach Green talked to us and said the game was going to be played because JFK was a sports fan. So we played the game."



Fisk University played its scheduled game against Morehouse. Fisk won the Saturday afternoon contest 18-6 at Hale Stadium on the Tennessee State campus. Tennessee State did not have a game scheduled that weekend. The TSU band did play a program of hymns as part of a halftime memorial service.

The Nashville Dixie Flyers of the Eastern Hockey League considered canceling their game against Long Island on Saturday in the Municipal Auditorium. Flyers General Manager David Patterson said Long Island was already in Nashville for its last scheduled game with the Flyers.

Patterson added that if JFK was shot on the day of a game or his funeral was that day, he would have called it off. A crowd of 3,303 watched the Flyers beat Long Island, 4-3. Ted McCaskill was a forward for the Flyers and the father of former major league pitcher Kirk McCaskill.

"I was going to the rink for a practice when I entered the offices," McCaskill said from his Arizona home. "One of the women that work in the offices asked me if I heard the president was shot in Dallas, which I hadn't. She told me she was glad he was shot. That really made me angry that she said that."

"I was from Canada and was very young at that time. We didn't have anything to say about playing the game or not. That was management's decision. We weren't drawing but about 2,500 fans a game, so they probably felt they needed the money. At that time, hockey was new to Nashville and the fans were still learning the game. Most of us were from Canada, but we liked President Kennedy and were saddened by his death."

The National Hockey League announced that all four of that weekend's games would be played. The National Football League came under protest by fans in the league's cities due to Commissioner Pete Rozell's decision to play its full Sunday schedule. The American Football League postponed its Sunday schedule adding more discontent to the NFL's decision.

"We had a practice on that Friday and went into the locker room to get ready to fly to Pittsburgh," said Nashvillian Bill Wade, the Chicago Bears starting quarterback in 1963 and former Vanderbilt great. "The trainer told us the president had been shot. At first everybody thought he was trying to tell some cruel joke. It turned out to be the truth. We went ahead and flew into Pittsburgh."



"It was a very difficult situation, as we did not know whether we were going to play or not. When we got there Coach [George] Halas said, 'We are going to play. We think we can help get the mind off of the President's death.' You couldn't help but be effected because everybody else was effected. Everybody was solemn and depressed in Pittsburgh and Chicago on the streets and in the stores. It was such a different atmosphere with the country in mourning. That was the only

time, we as a team, ever felt like that."

Chicago tied the Steelers that Sunday afternoon, 17-17. Just over a month later, with Wade leading the way, the Bears defeated the New York Giants, 14-0 in Chicago for the NFL championship.

Located on the south concourse wall in Vanderbilt Stadium is a plaque honoring Kennedy's 1963 visit to the university campus. The plaque states a portion of Kennedy's speech on Dudley Field:

"The essence of Vanderbilt is learning, the essence of its outlook is still liberty. Liberty without learning is always in Peril, and learning without liberty is always in vain. This state, this city, this campus, have also stood long for both human rights and human enlistment and let that forever be true."

Traughber's Tidbit: As an eight year-old in 1963, my mother took me and my twin

brother Gill (Bill and Gill--great twin names, right?) to see President Kennedy during his 1963 visit to Nashville. We were standing in front of the Woodmont Baptist Church on Hillsboro Road as the motorcade slowly drove past after his Dudley Field speech.

Hillsboro Road was lined with people, as JFK looked in our direction to wave from the black open-air limousine. I recall a man to our left cautiously stepping out into the street as the limousine approached. The man extended his hand outwards and Kennedy shook the man's hand.

The motorcade turned left into Woodmont Blvd. for a scheduled luncheon at the Governor's mansion. The limousine was the same one the President was riding in Dallas when he was shot.

I was in the third grade at Percy Priest Elementary School when my teacher, Mrs. Fleming, walked into the classroom crying and she told us "The President has been shot."

Next week read about the 1966 NFL exhibition football game at Dudley Field between the Atlanta Falcons (in its first season) playing the New York Giants.

If you have any comments or suggestions you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail WLTraughber@aol.com. If you were on the platform on Dudley Field that day that JFK visited Vanderbilt, I'd like to know your story.