

Vanderbilt shines in 1973 tournament

By Bill Traugher

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Exactly 36 years ago this week the Vanderbilt baseball team made national sporting news with its successful appearance in the prestigious Riverside Invitational Baseball Tournament in California.

Those 1973 Commodores were part of an eight-team field that included collegiate powers three-time defending national champions USC and the 1972 runner-up Arizona State. The tournament was played in a round robin format with two divisions. The division leaders played one game for the tournament title.



1973 SEC Championship Team

Vanderbilt opened their portion of the schedule with a 2-0 loss to Massachusetts and an 11-2 win over Hawaii. Next up for the Commodores was the No. 2 ranked team in the country—Southern Cal. Vanderbilt never trailed in that game with a surprising 5-4 win over the perennial baseball power.

The Commodores scored two runs in the top of the first, one in the second and a pair in the third for the 5-0 lead. Vandy outfielder Rick Duncan clouted a solo home run in the third. Duane Donahoo had a pair of singles, the only Vanderbilt player with more than one hit.

The star of the game was Commodore ace right-handed pitcher Jeff Peebles who scattered six hits to record his fourth victory of the season against no losses. Peebles would strike out seven batters and walked six while going the complete nine innings.

The Trojans' comeback came up short with a home run barrage that included Fred Lynn. The USC outfielder collected a solo home run in

the fourth and a two-run shot in the eighth inning. The Trojans added another solo home run in the seventh frame.

Lynn would have a 17-year career in the major leagues with Boston, California, Baltimore, Detroit and San Diego. He was the American League Rookie-of-the-Year in 1975 as well as the MVP the same year. Lynn was a nine-time all-star that batted .283 for a career with 306 home runs.

The Commodores took off the next day for a trip to see Mickey Mouse at Disneyland. Vanderbilt came into the tournament with an 11-2 record and 2-0 in the SEC.

"You know," Vanderbilt head coach Larry Schmittou said in an interview, "I really believe we might have a chance to win this tournament if it wasn't for the Southeastern Conference race. Peebles will not start anymore and neither will John McLean after pitching against Washington State tomorrow so they will be ready for our two conference games at Kentucky on Monday and Tuesday,

"Winning this tournament would be a great accomplishment, but we still intend to make every effort to win it. But there isn't anything as important as an SEC win. Those are the only ones in the direction of a championship."

Schmittou was in his sixth season leading the Commodores. At this point in Vanderbilt's history, it had never won an SEC championship in baseball. The tournament continued for the Commodores with a doubleheader against host Cal-Riverside and Washington State.

In the Riverside game, Vandy pitcher Doug Bates threw only 90 pitches in the Commodores' 7-3 win. Greg Collins collected three RBI's in the game and Ted Shipley batted in a pair of runs. Collins also secured a home run.

In the nightcap, Washington State jumped out to a 6-0 lead as McLean suffered through some wildness in the first four innings. McLean went the distance, but took the loss in the 6-2 State victory. Peebles, playing in the outfield, hit a home run, as did Shipley. The Commodores had eight home runs for the tournament, which set a new record for the annual event.

Vanderbilt's sixth game of the tournament came against Stanford. But the Commodores were shutout, 6-0. Peebles, also one of Vanderbilt's top batters, was held hitless for the first time all season in 16 games. The 3-3 Commodores would complete their part of the round-robin event with a game with No. 1 ranked Arizona State.

The *Tennessean* gave this report:

"Vanderbilt's baseball team concluded a rewarding week in the Riverside National

Invitational Baseball Tournament with an impressive 6-4 victory over Arizona State, the nation's No. 1 college baseball team, at Evans Field here yesterday.

"The Commodores wound up with a 4-3 record in the prestigious tournament and settled for third place while Arizona State and Southern Cal battled for the championship last night. Earlier in the week Vandy toppled Southern California, the defending national champions.

"This is certainly a big, big boost for us," exclaimed Schmittou after his team broke a 4-4 tie in the top of the eighth to win. "Not only is this important to our baseball program, but a win over the nation's No. 1 team is a big step for our entire athletic program."

It was also reported that Arizona State, which had already locked up a spot in the finals against USC, didn't use any regulars in the game. In the last of the ninth inning for ASU, a rally was halted when Bump Wills doubled off the outfield fence, but was thrown out at third base for the final out.

Wills is the son of Maury Wills the longtime great Los Angeles Dodgers base stealer. Bump Wills played six years in the major leagues for Texas and the Cubs. He stole 196 bases as a big leaguer. USC went on to win the tournament 2-0 in a 12-inning game with Arizona State.



Jeff Peebles

Vanderbilt finished the season 36-16 (SEC 13-5) and SEC Eastern Division champions. They defeated Alabama, champions in the Western Division, in two straight games (5-1 and 13-7) to claim their first SEC championship. Schmittou was named the SEC Coach –of-the Year.

The SEC title advanced Vanderbilt's season into NCAA regionals held in Starkville, Miss. The Commodores won their first two games of the double-elimination tournament over Georgia Southern (6-2) and North Carolina State (4-2). They were eliminated from the event with losses to Georgia Southern (5-2) and Miami (Fla.), 6-5.

Peeples became one of the best pitchers in Vanderbilt baseball history. He earned All-SEC honors in 1971, 1972 and 1973. In 1973 he was an All-South Region selection and a second team All-American. In 1973, Peeples led all SEC pitchers in wins (12) and strikeouts (113).

Peeples is one of only two pitchers in SEC history to lead the conference in earned run average for two consecutive years with a 1.56 ERA in 1971 and 1.30 ERA in 1972. He holds the Vanderbilt pitching record for wins (29) and ERA (1.68). Following his graduation, Peeples was drafted by the Cardinals' organization, but injuries prevented a promising career. He was posthumously inducted to the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame in 2001

Schmittou coached Vanderbilt for 11 years (1968-78) and is second all-time in wins with a 306-252-1 record. In an interview with this writer last year Schmittou remembered the 1973 USC game:

"Rod Dedeaux (the USC coach) was such an icon in college baseball. He won three consecutive national championships when we went to Riverside. Before the game they would get out on the dugout and bug you mercifully. I had a third baseman, Bill Hardin. He asked me, 'Coach, what's a drummet?' I said I think it's a desert bug. I asked him why and he said that's what the USC players were calling him. My assistant, Roy Carter, asked me what I was going to say to the team before the USC game. I walked down there and you could tell everyone was nervous. I said, "Fellows, we'll win. Peeples is pitching. Let's go."

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