

Week 7

Opponent: Vanderbilt Commodores

Kickoff: 12:30 PM

TV: Raycom



That was a bit of a weird game. Total domination that didn't translate into the scoreboard yet in some ways it managed to stay very close. It just never felt right. Oh well, we were able to do what the bulk of the top 5 couldn't, win and survive. This week we take on a ranked Vandy team coming off their first loss of the year to a weak MSU team. I don't think I've ever had the pleasure of typing "ranked" and "Vandy" together before.

About the UT Game

There were several things I was anxious to see in that game and for the most part the answers were positive. Offensively, against a very stout UT defense, we were able to move the ball at will, displaying an effective passing attack and a solid ground game that moved the ball when it needed to. On defense we effectively shut down what little offense UT has, giving up two scores but largely playing like the defense we had imagined we'd see this year. Check that, I never imagined we'd ever be able to hold a UT offense with a strong offensive line to 1 yard rushing. That's unheard of.

Back to the offense though, Stafford put up yards in bunches, but there are still questions. Granted 1 of his 2 INTs was hard to pin on him as UT just made a great read moving that DE into the throwing lane on a play where Stafford really didn't have any time at all to read before releasing. Aside from that though, the fact that our offense bogged down so quickly inside the redzone was more than a bit worrisome. Yes we had our best WR drop a clear TD and yes we saw the wrath of Penn Wagers result in a horrendous lack of a first down being awarded on the defensive holding play, but we've simply got to get better down there, whether it's execution or playcalling. I tend to think it's the former, as a poorly called play, if properly executed should still produce positive results. In the end the result was that we had 10 offensive possessions Saturday. Of those 10 drives, 6 resulted in scores, 2 resulted in INTs deep in UT territory after significant drives and 2 resulted in punts. Yes, there are clearly things to work on, but in 10 opportunities, establishing 8 solid drives and only punting twice against a defense like UT is impressive. That long milk the clock drive in the 4th quarter had to be gutwrenching for Fulmer. Just doing to him exactly what he so desperately wants to do to us.



Vandy Offense

- The Vandy offense has struggled this season to move the ball consistently, doing decently on the ground but barely moving the ball through the air. Their total offense numbers are pretty bad, barely over 250 yards per game (117th in the country). Their 90 yards per game through the air is among the worst I can remember, but they are somehow not last, pulling in at 116th. Both of those numbers are good for last in the SEC. They've given us trouble the last two years so we'll be

looking to exorcise another two-year demon from Tennessee. Hopefully this goes as well as last week.

- Vandy has two viable options at QB. R-Sr Chris Nickson is the guy who led Vandy to their upset road win over us in 2006. He's been banged up some this year and relatively ineffective when he's played. His backup Mackenzi Adams has played well in his place, including leading the comeback win over Auburn that was the defining win of Coach Bobby Johnson's tenure. Both QBs have similar skillsets, athletic, mobile guys with good arms. For the year Adams, listed as the starter this week, has completed 56.8% of his passes for 2 TDs and 1 INT. The mobility of these guys is an obvious concern. We haven't really faced a mobile QB yet this year.
- At RB, Jared Hawkins is a tough, hard-nosed runner who might not win many 40-yard dashes but is not afraid to duck his head and flat run through someone if he has to. His 79 carries and 333 yards clearly lead the team (Nickson is 2nd in both categories) amongst RBs. The QB accounts for as much of their rushing yardage as the RBs. Look for a fair amount of option and zone read type stuff from their QBs in conjunction with the RBs.
- At WR, Vandy lost Earl Bennett a year early to the NFL last season. If nothing else tells you that this isn't your daddy's Vandy team, that should. They're losing guys to the NFL. In his absence no one has really stepped up to clearly take over. Sean Walker's 15 catches and 198 yards lead the team. Nearly a quarter of his yards came on a 49-yard TD catch against Miami (Oh) in the opener. TE Brandon Barden has 10 catches on the year and is a redzone target with 2 TDs on the year to lead the team. As a team, Vandy only has 3 guys with more than 6 catches.
- Vandy graduated every starting OL from last year's team. Normally that's a sign of disaster but thanks to some mobile QBs and some creative play calling, they've been able to get by pretty well. Considering that they don't pass all that often (only 108 pass attempts this season), their average of 1.67 sacks per game given up indicates the OL is still figuring out pass blocking. The odd thing about their line when compared to the one we'll sport Saturday is the fact that while they're the team replacing every starter, we'll be the team without a single underclassman on the OL, featuring 3 freshmen and 2 sophomores. Vandy's lineup of 4 Jrs and a sophomore looks veteran by comparison.
- **Bottom Line:** It's not often you see a team with this poor of a set of offensive statistics sitting at 5-1 and ranked #22 in the country. Their spread ground game will be a good test for our rush defense. We've certainly played the run well this year but we haven't seen anything like this yet. Vandy has already played three decent defenses in SC, AU and MSU although it must be pointed out that MSU got completely shredded by a GT ground based offense and they managed to hold Vandy to just over 100 yards. They have a frustrating attack that always seems to eke out a first down and just keep the chains moving. We'll need to get a big game from our LBs to keep them shut down. Look for more passing from Vandy given the strength of our D against the run but look for them to test our responsibility defense with that option and zone read stuff since we've yet to see it. While both QBs will likely play and they are very similar, Adams is more of a passer and the move to start him is a bit telling.
- **Key Matchup to watch when they have the ball:** Curran against Adams should be fun. If Adams continues to run the ball a lot (their QBs are averaging over 16 rush attempts per game), Curran will have ample opportunities to introduce himself. Ellerbe's return could be big for this game although I'm all in favor of him getting fully healed before we hit the road gauntlet next



week. Reshad Jones could have a really big day too as he started making his presence known against UT's ground game.

Vandy Defense

- The Vandy defense has performed at a completely different level than the offense to date. They run a standard 4-3 and have done an admirable job, holding all but one opponent to 17 points or less (the other scored 21). That's good enough for 22nd nationally in scoring defense. They aren't particularly excellent at run or pass defense but they are OK at both, 51st against the run, 45th against the pass. 39th in total defense. They have some talent in the secondary and a very workmanlike front 7. They aren't nearly as good a unit as the UT defense we just marched on all day so hopefully we can have some success.
- The Vandy DL is decent. Former UGA commitment Greg Billinger is the anchor inside and is one of seven players on the team with 2 or more sacks, including all 4 starting DLs. Steven Stone at DE is having a good season. He's the lone DL starter that had starting experience coming into this season as the DL has largely been rebuilt a la the OL.
- At LB Patrick Benoist is the lone returning starter amongst the LBs and he's parlayed that into leading the team in tackles by a good bit while also pacing the unit in tackles for loss. Underclassmen man the other two LB spots and take over for stellar graduated seniors.
- The Vandy secondary is the strength of the defense. CB D.J. Moore is an all-SEC caliber DB (and a fine return man). Each of the starting DBs has already managed at least 2 INTs on the year. Impressive. Moore's 6 passes defensed and 4 pass breakups leads the team. His opposite CB, Myron Lewis, is a big kid at 6-3, 200+ and interestingly is tied for the team lead in sacks and is 4th on the team in tackles. Safeties Reshad Langford and Ryan Hamilton both have considerable starting experience. Both are fairly big, physical players in the back 4.
- **Bottom Line:** Vanderbilt just plays solid, opportunist defense. Their 15 turnovers forced ranks 19th nationally, tied for 2nd in the SEC. As you would expect from a Bobby Johnson defense, they play smart, forcing turnovers and avoiding the big play, making teams work the entire field. One thing Vandy has done quite well this season is get after the QB, 7th nationally in sacks (1st in the SEC). With that in mind, I look for us to really focus on the run this week and let the play action game key off of that. Shocking, I know. After Vance went down and everyone in the stadium was convinced we were going to try and run the ball with little success we managed the most impressive drive of the year. The OL we're left with is incredibly athletic and with Southerland and company helping should really be able to execute some pulls and traps, not to mention screens. Look for a big day from Knowshon, which is fitting because it was this game last year that launched his remarkable 2007 season.
- **Key matchup to watch when we have the ball:** Watch Southerland. You won't be able to just look in the backfield though as we'll likely line him all over the place. He played several snaps at TE last week and with Chapas playing so well at FB and our injury issues at TE, I think it's safe to say we'll see him all over the place this week. Given how well he blocks from his FB spot it will be interesting to see how he does in a transition to TE. He's bulked up to 255 which should help. He didn't seem to be any slower. Anyway, it's a safe bet that if you key on Southerland, Moreno won't be too far behind him.



The Vandy Game Overall

Vandy has largely succeeded this year by doing the little things right. They've combined not turning the ball over, forcing turnovers (11th nationally in turnover margin), returning punts (10th) and punting (22nd) into the best possible field position for their struggling offense. They'll find the sledding a little tougher on offense this week but they haven't exactly faced a bunch of pushovers to this point. SC, AU and MSU all have solid Ds. As expected, Vandy didn't score many points in those games, but they did manage to put up 24 against SC while we managed only 14. Continuing the "executing the little things" theme, this team is excellent in the red zone on both ends of the field. They are scoring in 95% of their redzone trips while allowing opponents to score only 65% of the time. This is a well coached football team.

Until last week, UGA (and Stafford in particular) had done an excellent job of protecting the football. That will be a key this weekend. For whatever reason, we've shown a tendency to relax on defense following a turnover. Both of UT's scores came after turnovers. Yes that's a small sample size and I certainly don't expect every turnover to result in a TD for the other team, but it is something that needs to be addressed.

In the end this basically boils down to some very simple things. UGA still has a lot to play for, and a win over Vandy is imperative to achieve any of those goals. Like last week, this is a team that we've struggled with for two years, including an ugly home loss 2 years ago that was arguably the worst loss of the Richt era. It's easy to recall our finish last year and the way we steamrolled through our closing schedule but you might forget that we were tied with Vandy with them driving for the winning score in the final minutes before Gamble forced a fumble and we marched down to eke out a win. This hasn't been an easy series for us recently.

By all rights we *should* handle Vandy, they are a bad offensive team, dead last in the SEC in total offense and not really even close. Their 250 ypg is still over 40 ypg behind 11th place Auburn. Given AU's struggles on that side of the ball this year, I think that should paint the picture of a pretty poor offense. If you've seen them play though, you know how dangerous and frustrating they can be at times. Hopefully we can maintain the focus we had in the first half last week, execute on both sides of the ball, and head to Baton Rouge with just that ugly Bama game as the only blemish on our record.

Positional Notes

- Massaquoi had an absolutely unreal game Saturday. As often as folks harp on WR drops I think it's important to tip the cap to a guy who made some really, really clutch catches. Aside from Green's drop on the sure TD, our WR play went way up this week.
- Boling looked really good at LT and I really don't think we'll have any drop off from Vance to him. The area where it could really impact us though is on the right side where Bean loses his hip man in Boling. Chris Davis will step in at RG and should be able to help guide Anderson but frankly that was one of the underappreciated things Boling was doing.
- Look for Josh Davis to get more snaps at OT this week and don't be shocked. He was getting time there last week even before Vance's injury.



- With the stellar play of AJ Green and the steady if not spectacular play from Massaquoi, the emergence of Demiko Goodman this week was just gravy. Goodman had several clutch catches. No one's really talking about it but suddenly our WR corps is really, really good.
- I'd be surprised if Ellerbe plays this week. He's been in green all week and Gamble's played very well in his absence.
- Figgins will get the nod at TE this week after eschewing season ending surgery, with White as his backup. Kiante Tripp has moved back to OT after the brief experiment but could shift back over if we have a catastrophe. I wouldn't expect it though. Between Southerland and the other 2 I think we've got it covered. Chandler could be back in time for Florida, so all of a sudden our TE depth isn't as totally bleak as it was a week ago.

Random Thoughts

- Ah, rankings. Yes, I know they don't matter until the season is over, but talking about a football game doesn't matter either so excuse me while I complain. Someone will have to really work to convince me that USC deserves to be at #4 in the country after losing to an unranked Oregon State team. Yes, I know that UGA hasn't been the most impressive team in the country, but come on.
- At this point, I think most would agree that the Big XII is probably a stronger conference than the SEC this year. The rise of Oklahoma State is to blame. Texas Tech will drop like a rock once they start playing teams with a pulse, but Missouri, Texas and OU are legit and OkSt seems to be for now. We'll find out more about them in two weeks when they go to Texas. Throw Kansas in that group and you're looking at a darn good conference, at least at the top. The SEC looked great coming in and the emergence of Bama is good and all but the total bedwettings going on in Knoxville and Auburn aren't helping. UT did the entire SEC a major disservice by losing at UCLA. Let's hope Auburn can figure things out enough to beat a bad WVU team next Thursday otherwise those computer polls that were projected to love us might not so much anymore. I think the bottom half of the SEC (Ole Miss, Auburn, UT, MSU, UK and Arkansas) is stronger though than the bottom half of the Big XII (Neb, Colorado, Iowa State, KSt, Baylor and TAMU), and that's really always been the case for the SEC.
- With that being said, it's still incredibly impressive to look at the Big XII standings and see 4 teams in the Big XII South ranked in the top 8 nationally, OkSt, UT, TT and OU. Wow. Considering only two of those 4 (OU-UT) have played each other, I think it's safe to say we'll start to see the Big XII teams start to pick each other off, just like we've already started to see in the SEC.
- With a 12:30 start against Vandy I think it's important to remind folks of the last 12:30 start we had against them. It was 2006. We lost. The crowd was lifeless at best. Granted there wasn't much to cheer about, but the crowds have been excellent this year and this is the last time we'll see them in Athens for over a month. Let's show up in a big way.
- Was there any doubt at all that with Penn Wagers in town we'd have an officiating mistake that UGA was on the short end of? I mean, defensive holding in the endzone and no automatic first down? Wow. Nice one Penn. Your legend is growing among the UGA faithful. I can't wait to see what you've got for us in Jacksonville.
- Was it just me or were the UT fans in Athens Saturday defeated before the game started? I mean they made a little noise for their handful of good plays but in large part they were just completely silent. I imagine it was a lot like a Clemson game.
- Speaking of Clemson, a few of the preseason things I read talked about the most overrated teams in the country and UGA was a popular pick, not because of



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any obvious holes on the team, more based on us having a tough schedule, blah, blah, blah. I don't think I ever saw anyone mention Auburn or Clemson in there, both preseason top 10 teams that have gone decidedly off course.

- Don't be surprised if the Munson tribute is this weekend. Many forget that he was the radio announcer for Vandy for years, so it makes sense.
- I can't imagine the whole Clemson fiasco hasn't been some level of distraction for the Vandy coaching staff. Bobby Johnson played at Clemson and was an assistant there for a few years prior to ~~filming The Jerk~~ heading over to Furman as the head man. He's largely considered one of the front runners for the Clemson job and has been asked about it a lot. I'm not sure he'll leave, but the specter of the question has been around all week.
- I meant to mention this a couple of weeks ago and it might have already been discussed, but apparently Herschel Walker is a contestant on the currently filming season of Celebrity Apprentice. Yes, moderately interesting on its own, but I'm curious to see the interaction between Trump and his former employee Walker. You may or may not recall that Trump was the owner of the New Jersey Generals back then. He wasn't the owner when they signed Herschel but he took over the following year.



Have a safe weekend,
Jody

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