

FOOTBALL FLASHBACK

Oxford filmmaker documents Sewanee's remarkable 1899 season



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH

The 1899 Sewanee football team went 12-0 and played five games during a six-day road trip.

'Unrivaled: Sewanee 1899' relives the school's dominant 12-0 run and an epic stretch of five wins in six days

Football was a much different game in 1899 than it is now, but that doesn't make any less remarkable the feat achieved by the Sewanee team that season.

Sewanee – formally known as The University of the South – is a small Episcopal college that sits atop the Cumberland Plateau in southern Tennessee. Back in the 1890s, the school boasted one of the most prominent football programs in the South.

The 1899 squad went 12-0, which was impressive enough. What wrote that team into history was an epic road trip that saw Sewanee play five games over the course of six days. The Tigers beat Texas, Texas A&M, Tulane, LSU and Ole Miss by a combined

TURN TO SEWANEE, 4B



The late Bobby Bowden, left, with filmmaker Norman Jetmundsen. Bowden was interviewed for the documentary, "Unrivaled: Sewanee 1899."

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BY BRAD LOCKE | DAILY JOURNAL

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SPORTS

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Sewanee

FROM 1B

score of 91-0.

That herculean feat has been chronicled by Oxford filmmaker David Crews in his documentary, "Unrivaled: Sewanee 1899." The film is available to stream at PBS.org and will make its national debut Sept. 16 at 6 p.m. on the WORLD channel. It will also air on WKNO, the Memphis PBS station, later this month.

Crews is a 1976 Sewanee graduate and collaborated on the film with his old college buddy, Norman Jetmundsen. But both knew very little about the 1899 team before undertaking this project, which took them five years to complete.

"All I knew about the team was the great phrase that 'Sewanee played five games in six days, and on the seventh day they rested,'" Crews said. "... Neither one of us knew how rich a story it was going to

be until we started mining down deep and doing the research and finding all the elements of the season and bringing them together."

Sewanee's six-day odyssey was simple, in one sense: Hop on a train, travel to a city, play football, get back on the train. Rinse and repeat.

What it took to actually pull off the 2,500-mile round trip is at the heart of the story Crews tells. The road trip was conceived by Luke Lea, Sewanee's team manager. After failing to negotiate a game against arch-rival Vanderbilt, Lea had to find a way to recoup that huge source of revenue.

Brutal stretch

Football was a brutal game in 1899. There were no rules against kicking or punching, and players dying became so commonplace that there was talk of banning the sport.

So playing five games in six days was a monumental task, especially

considering how many players had to play on both offense and defense. But leaving the field for anything short of a broken leg was frowned upon, so players weathered countless bruises and cuts throughout the games.

"I love a story that shows the grit and the determination, the perseverance and the skill of a group of men coming together to forge a remarkable accomplishment," Crews said. "The very idea of traveling 2,500 miles by steam locomotive, that was grueling in and of itself. But then to get off the train and play back-to-back-to-back-to-back games and win them all, and no one even scored on them – that is just such a remarkable convergence of personality and talent and history and perseverance."

The research conducted by Crews and Jetmundsen included interviews with family members of the players,



Oxford filmmaker David Crews, left, interviews author and historian Jon Meacham for the documentary "Unrivaled: Sewanee 1899."

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as well as prominent football coaches who had a good understanding of football's history. Former national title-winning coaches Bobby Bowden (Florida State) and Vince Dooley (Georgia) were both interviewed before their deaths.

Jon Meacham, a Pulit-

zer Prize-winning author and historian, was also interviewed.

The 1899 Sewanee team consisted of 21 players and was coached by Herman "Billy" Suter. Just as critical as Suter's guidance was the work of Cal Burrows, an African-American trainer

who treated the players between games.

Sewanee's feat was the definition of a team effort. And as Crews discovered, it makes for a compelling story.

"That was one of the great things to me, was to bring this story to life. And I hope we did that."