

GREG SULLIVAN

Sports writing work samples

9/3/2011 *The Tennessean*, Page 3C

Nashville fits ESPN guru

Herbstreit likes Brentwood life after moving



By Greg Sullivan
The Tennessean

Late for his flight to Dallas Thursday morning, Kirk Herbstreit didn't sound too rattled. He was a quarterback at Ohio State before he blossomed into a TV star with ESPN, so he's used to scrambling.

"This is just how it is for four months," he laughed. "The rest of the year I'm Michael Keaton in 'Mr. Mom,' just helping around the house and getting the kids to school.

"But now it's like I'm about to jump on a treadmill that's moving at 15 miles an hour and I really couldn't see myself doing anything else."

Herbstreit returns to ESPN's popular *College GameDay* show this morning, where he will continue to serve in his familiar role as analyst previewing the day's games from the site of a primetime showdown.

It will be his first *GameDay* since he moved with his wife, Allison, and four children, to the Brentwood area from Columbus, Ohio in mid-March. He said he came under constant criticism from a vocal minority of Ohio State fans who disliked him for covering the Buckeyes objectively.

"My heart will always be in Columbus. That's where most of my family is and a lot of my dear friends," Herbstreit said. "We considered moving to Austin, Texas, but we visited Nashville and we really liked it. The fact that it's a good family town with good values is a big reason why we're here now.

"We didn't really know a whole lot of people here. We knew one couple before we moved. We visited schools and wanted our kids to come go to one of the local schools. That was kind of it.

"It really was nothing against Columbus or anything like that. We had been thinking about making a move the last three or four years and we decided we needed to make the move and give it a try. If we didn't we could always move back, but so far so good."

Herbstreit said he is seeing better days ahead for Tennessee and Vanderbilt.

"Tennessee's got a shot to surprise some people," said Herbstreit, who has been with *GameDay* since 1996. "And if there's a year where Vanderbilt can start to put anything together, this could be the year.

"(UT quarterback) Tyler Bray really got hot the last three or four games last year," he added. "Maybe they can build around him and this is (Coach) Derek Dooley's second year. People just have to hang in there with him. He's doing it the right way."

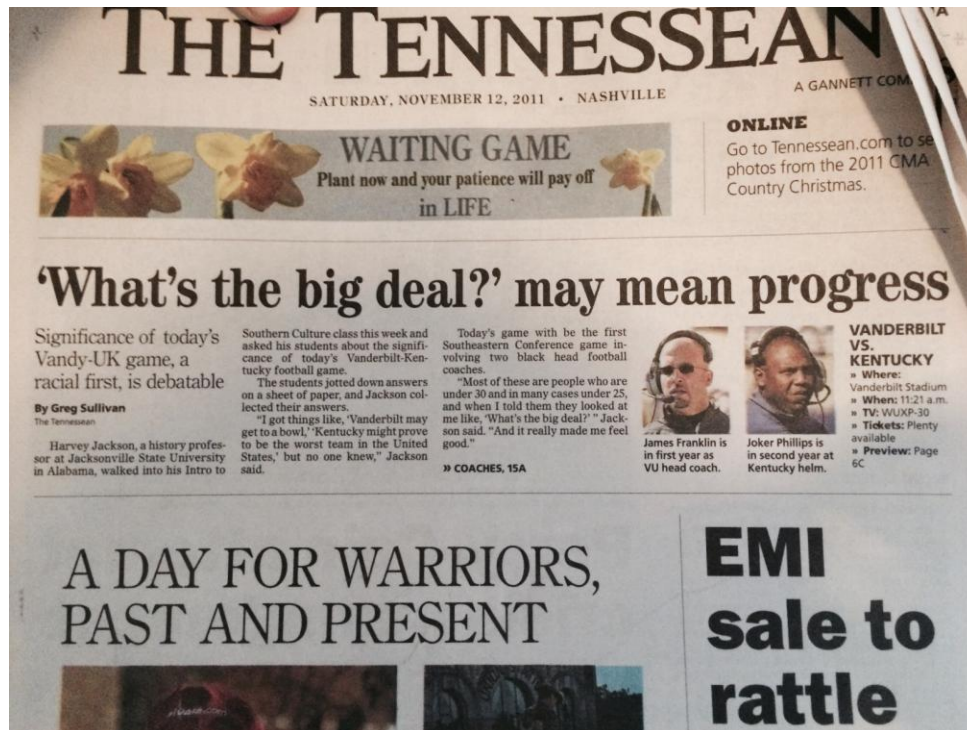
Herbstreit said he believes new Coach James Franklin could finally be the guy to turn Vanderbilt's program around.

"James Franklin is one of the more innovative minds out there as far as play-calling and working with quarterbacks. I think back-to-back 2-10 years took a toll on these players. At least now there's some direction and he's got some starters returning."

It was at Vanderbilt where Herbstreit said he got his first real taste of Nashville. *GameDay* visited the campus for the Commodores' win over Auburn in 2008.

"I really enjoyed it the couple days we were there," he said. "I went back a time or two before we moved down and went downtown and always thought this was an interesting place."

‘What’s the big deal?’ may mean progress
Significance of today’s Vandy-UK game, a racial first, is debatable



By Greg Sullivan

Harvey Jackson, a history professor at Jacksonville State University in Alabama, walked into his “Intro to Southern Culture” class this week and asked his students about the significance of today’s Vanderbilt-Kentucky football game.

The students jotted down answers on a sheet of paper and Jackson collected their answers.

“I got things like, ‘Vanderbilt may get to a bowl,’ ‘Kentucky might prove to be the worst team in the United States,’ but no one knew,” Jackson said.

Today’s game will be the first Southeastern Conference game involving two black head football coaches.

“Most of these are people who are under 30 and in many cases under 25, and when I told them they looked at me like, ‘What’s the big deal?’” Jackson said. “And it really made me feel good.”

How big of a deal is it?

The coaches — Vanderbilt's [James Franklin](#) and Kentucky's Joker Phillips — said they had not thought about the significance until asked about it this week.

But ask those who were among the first black players in a league that resisted change and you get a different answer.

"This is 2011. I played (football) back in 1967," said former Kentucky linebacker Wilbur Hackett, the first black team captain in the SEC and now a veteran SEC football official. "With all the African-American players that have played in this conference it took way too long."

Franklin's and Phillips' path to becoming SEC head coaches was cleared by Sylvester Croom, who was Mississippi State's coach from 2004-08.

"I think (the SEC's) headed in the right direction," said Franklin, the league's third black head coach and in his first season with the Commodores. "I'd love to get to the point where it's not a discussion, but I do understand."

Phillips, the league's second black head coach, is in his second season running the Kentucky program. He said he couldn't have even imagined today's matchup 10 or 15 years ago but now not much at all surprises him.

"Fifteen years ago I couldn't have imagined that we'd have phones that take pictures," Phillips said. "Fifteen years ago seems like a long time ago, but it was oh, so close."

The state of Kentucky has three black head coaches, including Charlie Strong at Louisville and Willie Taggart at Western Kentucky. Franklin is one of five minority Football Bowl Subdivision coaches making their head-coaching debut this season.

"That's something that maybe my mom would bring up to me," said Vandy linebacker Archibald Barnes. "But as far as we're concerned, we've got the game to play and a coach is a coach, it doesn't matter what the color of his skin is."

Vandy-Kentucky connection

It's fitting the game involves Vanderbilt and Kentucky. Vandy had the first men's basketball team in the league to integrate and Kentucky was the first football team to do so.

Perry Wallace, a Nashville native, was the SEC's first black men's varsity basketball player in the 1967-68 season. He said he was inspired to go to an SEC school by Kentucky's Nat Northington, the SEC's first black football player in the fall of 1967.

Northington was supposed to break the SEC football color barrier with Greg Page. The Kentucky natives arrived at Kentucky in 1966, the same year Wallace arrived at

Vanderbilt. Freshmen did not play varsity back then, and both were eligible as sophomores in 1967.

But Page wound up unconscious following a routine drill during a summer practice, suffered a severe spinal injury and died about a month later.

“People aren’t supposed to die practicing football,” said [Jeff Van Note](#), Kentucky’s starting defensive end who went on to play 18 years with the Atlanta Falcons in the NFL. Page was Van Note’s backup but was expected to play. “That really cast a pall over our football team. It’s just so foreign from what’s supposed to happen on a football field.”

Hackett was one of three black players on the freshman team.

“I was right there,” Hackett said. “I saw Greg on the ground. Sometimes it’s still hard when you think about what his sacrifice was and what he could have done and what happened to him.”

Northington broke the color barrier against Indiana while Page lay paralyzed in the hospital. But Page’s death proved too much for him. He transferred to Western Kentucky after only a few games.

Northington lives in the Louisville area but attempts to contact him were unsuccessful.

Hackett said that after Page’s death, Kentucky Coach Charlie Bradshaw had to encourage the rest of the black players not to leave.

“More than once I had my bags packed and ready to go,” Hackett said. “(Northington) came to us (the three black freshmen) before he left. He sat us all down and said, ‘I can’t take it anymore.’ It was time for him to go, but he encouraged us to stay.”

“Integrating wasn’t for everybody. I went there to play football and that’s what I was going to do. I thought about leaving, but then I became more determined not to leave.”

Wallace said he could relate.

“(Northington’s) quote in *Sports Illustrated* when he left, I’ll never forget it, because it was chilling to me. He said, ‘There is something missing’ in that experience,” Wallace said.

“I was going to go on and find out what he was talking about. This is not a conference that had a lot of the building blocks of integration already in place. It was very ugly stuff. People would scream and yell racial epithets and threats. They would cheer if you missed a shot, but they were really people who were cheering for your destruction.”

While Wallace was inspired by Page and Northington, Wallace inspired Vanderbilt’s first black football players to become Commodores.

“Perry’s foray into that arena certainly gave me some images that I could look at and allowed me to see myself there,” said Taylor Stokes, a Clarksville native who signed with Vandy in 1969 to become the Commodores’ first black scholarship football player. “Perry let me know that, yeah, you can come here and this thing can work.”

Croom’s influence

Mississippi State, Kentucky and Vanderbilt certainly aren’t SEC football powers. How long will it be before one of the league’s elite schools hires a black head coach?

Croom was passed over by his alma mater, Alabama, in 2003, for Mike Shula, even though Croom had more experience. Croom landed the Mississippi State job the next year.

Croom posted a record of 21-38 in five seasons at Mississippi State, including his 2007 SEC coach of the year season where he led the Bulldogs to an 8-4 mark.

“To get to the ‘upper level of the conference,’ which means the upper level of college football, you’re going to have to win some games,” said Croom, now an assistant coach with the St. Louis Rams in the NFL. “That’s why, particularly when minority coaches ask me, I think it’s important that they get a head coaching job, even if it’s the Division II level.

“They need to get the experience of being a head coach as quickly as possible in their careers because it is different. I think once they’re proven they’ll have a better chance of getting one of those premier jobs.”

Hackett said Croom, a former Crimson Tide player and assistant coach, was denied the Alabama job based on prejudice.

“The state of Alabama wasn’t ready then to give that much power to an African American,” Hackett said. “You can ask anybody in the state of Alabama who the governor is and they might not be able to tell you. You ask anybody who the coach of Alabama is and they’ll tell you Nick Saban.

“I’m not surprised that some schools are slower. It just highlights the fact that we still have issues with race. As much as we like to sweep it under the rug, it’s still a factor.”

Croom said it’s different now for Franklin and Phillips than it was for him.

“My thought was always I just want to be a football coach,” Croom said. “I’d been in situations where I’d been through integration in junior high and at Alabama (as a player) ... you just want it to be a normal deal. That’s why I’m glad for these guys.

“You don’t have to answer all those questions. You don’t have it hanging over your head that, OK, you want to make sure you do everything the right way for fear of guys that

follow you of color are going to be judged by your actions and they don't have to deal with that.”

Future outlook

SEC Commissioner Mike Slive said the recent hirings of Phillips and Franklin are a positive for a league that has had its struggles.

“At my first press conference (as commissioner) back in July of 2002 we talked about a series of challenges that we felt we had,” Slive said. “One of those was to increase diversity in the conference. This day is very, very gratifying.

“The wonderful thing about all of this is that we’ve taken opportunities to become more diverse and it’s occurred at the same time that we are at what I call the golden age of athletic competitive success. And I don’t believe in coincidences.”

Vanderbilt vice chancellor of athletics David Williams is the second black leader of an athletic department in the SEC, following former Georgia athletic director Damon Evans.

He sees today’s game as expected progress.

“Now we have Joker and James, but I think the great part about it is if it was three or four years ago it might be monumental,” Williams said. “It's still something to celebrate, but it's not unexpected now.

“It’s great to host it in our stadium, but the way I put it is, this may be the first, but the second will come real quick after this. I think everybody wants the best coach. I think we’re starting to grow up.”

Vandy says no basis to tampering claims
Maryland possibly restricts transfers

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Maryland possibly restricts transfers
By Greg Sullivan
The Tennessean

Vanderbilt football Coach James Franklin defended himself Thursday over questions about whether he has had improper contact with three Maryland players who are transferring.

That was one of several developments Thursday regarding quarterback Danny O'Brien, offensive lineman Max Garcia and linebacker Mario Rowson. Maryland announced Monday they were transferring.

Vanderbilt Vice Chancellor of Athletics David Williams said Thursday he does not believe published reports that Maryland has restricted the players from transferring to Vanderbilt.

But O'Brien's high school coach said he thought O'Brien would appeal Maryland's ban on his transfer to Vanderbilt.

O'Brien was the 2010 Atlantic Coast Conference freshman of the year when Franklin was the offensive coordinator. He is set to graduate this year and has two years of eligibility left. He would be eligible this fall without sitting out a year because he would be a graduate student.

D.C. and Baltimore area media have reported that Maryland has raised questions about Franklin's involvement.

"I don't like innuendos and comments being made about tampering and things like that," Franklin told 104.5 The Zone.

Vanderbilt Coach James Franklin, a former Maryland assistant, has denied having improper contact with three Maryland players who may transfer. *JEANNE REASONOVER / THE TENNESSEAN*

"You guys know me. I'm the type of guy, I'm going to have relationships with my players. I hope to have relationships with the guys that play for me for the rest of my life."

"But the fact that people would make accusations that we tampered or did this or did that, again, I'm just going to defend our program and defend our character and how we do things. But I think it's ridiculous to think that I'm not going to have relationships with these kids after I leave places."

Franklin said he has talked regularly with former players in the past.

"When I left (Kansas) State for Maryland I talked to (quarterback) Josh Freeman every week," Franklin said. "I still talk to Josh. Josh flew in for (Franklin's 40th) birthday party. I'm the type of guy, I'm going to have relationships with my players."

Williams said Franklin has done anything wrong.

» VANDY, 3C

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Williams said he does not believe Franklin has done anything wrong.

"Our coaches understand the rules and will abide by them and have abided by them," Williams said. "I don't believe we've made any illegal contact with these (three) kids. If we ever do that, we'll be the first ones to turn ourselves in. When all of this started to surface I made sure that our compliance people were very, very clear that any discussions that are had had to be within the rules, not that I thought that our coaches wouldn't do that, but just to reaffirm it.

"The NCAA rules are very clear with contact we can have (with other players) that are under scholarship. We can't initiate any contact with them. In fact, if they contact us our rule is to say you need to get a release from your university. I'm pretty certain that our coaching staff has not reached out and had that type of contact with them."

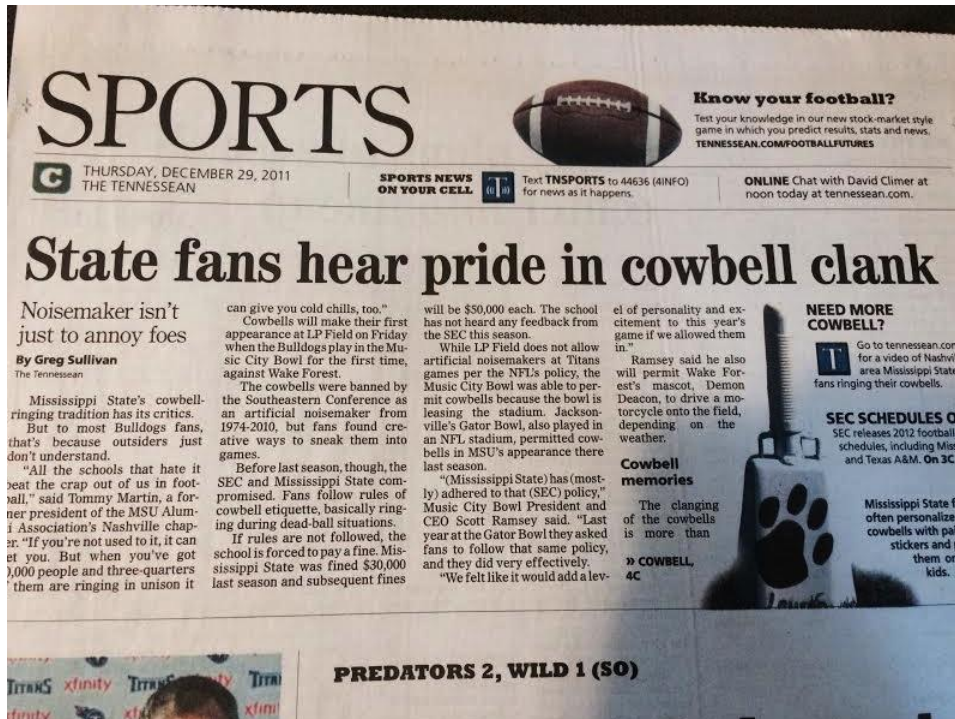
Williams said he does not believe published reports that Maryland has restricted the players from transferring to Vanderbilt.

"I know the AD at Maryland (Kevin Anderson) really well. I'm sure if that were the case he would pick up the phone and call and let me know," Williams said. "I would be somewhat surprised if that is a restriction on them. I've been surprised before, though."

Anderson declined comment through a spokesman Thursday night.

CBSsports.com reported Thursday that O'Brien's high school coach, Todd Willert, who says he speaks to the quarterback almost every day, expects the family will make such an appeal in order to have the option to transfer to Vanderbilt.

State fans hear pride in cowbell clank *Noisemaker isn't just to annoy foes*



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State fans hear pride in cowbell clank

Noisemaker isn't just to annoy foes

By Greg Sullivan
The Tennessean

Mississippi State's cowbell-ringing tradition has its critics. But to most Bulldogs fans, that's because outsiders just don't understand.

"All the schools that hate it beat the crap out of us in football," said Tommy Martin, a former president of the MSU Alumni Association's Nashville chapter. "If you're not used to it, it can get you. But when you've got 50,000 people and three-quarters of them are ringing in unison it can give you cold chills, too."

Cowbells will make their first appearance at LP Field on Friday when the Bulldogs play in the Music City Bowl for the first time, against Wake Forest.

The cowbells were banned by the Southeastern Conference as an artificial noisemaker from 1974-2010, but fans found creative ways to sneak them into games.

Before last season, though, the SEC and Mississippi State compromised. Fans follow rules of cowbell etiquette, basically ringing during dead-ball situations.

If rules are not followed, the school is forced to pay a fine. Mississippi State was fined \$30,000 last season and subsequent fines will be \$50,000 each. The school has not heard any feedback from the SEC this season.

While LP Field does not allow artificial noisemakers at Titans games per the NFL's policy, the Music City Bowl was able to permit cowbells because the bowl is leasing the stadium. Jacksonville's Gator Bowl, also played in an NFL stadium, permitted cowbells in MSU's appearance there last season.

"(Mississippi State) has (mostly) adhered to that (SEC) policy," Music City Bowl President and CEO Scott Ramsey said. "Last year at the Gator Bowl they asked fans to follow that same policy, and they did very effectively. We felt like it would add a level of personality and excitement to this year's game if we allowed them in."

Ramsey said he also will permit Wake Forest's mascot, Demon Deacon, to drive a motorcycle onto the field, depending on the weather.

Cowbell memories

The clanging of the cowbells is more than

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Mississippi State fans often personalize their cowbells with paint stickers and paint them on their kids.

PREDATORS 2, WILD 1 (SO)

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Cowbell memories

The clanging of the cowbells is more than just a way to amp up the crowd noise, Bulldogs fans say.

It's part of the pageantry of football in the Deep South.

The bells are passed down through generations, tied to stories of Bulldogs wins and losses.

Martin said he remembers a game from 1980 especially well because of his cowbell when the Bulldogs upset No. 1 Alabama 6-3.

"We were ringing the bell so much (the clapper) shattered," said Martin, who was then a student. "It was the first time we had beaten Alabama in (almost) 25 years."

Martin replaced the shattered Hershey's Kiss-shaped clapper in his cowbell with a metal nut after the game. He still rings the same maroon cowbell with the same nut clapper, often thinking back to the famous win.

Martin's daughter, Katie Martin, is hoping Friday's game can provide a lasting cowbell memory of her own.

Katie grew up in Nashville. As a senior in MSU's color guard, she will get to perform her final halftime show in her hometown.

"We've invited all my friends. It's going to be really special," said Katie, who has personalized her cowbell with a white ribbon.

Many Bulldogs fans add paint or stickers depicting school spirit or fraternity or sorority crests.

Even as a band member, Katie brings her cowbell to games.

“It’s a feeling of excitement that just wells up inside of you when you ring the cowbell,” she said. “Maybe I’m just a kid.”

The ‘SNL’ effect

Of course, things are different now for Katie’s generation of Bulldogs. They grew up in a world where the cowbell went viral after a popular *Saturday Night Live* skit where comedian Will Farrell played the cowbell in an awkwardly-short, tight-fitting shirt in a spoof of Blue Oyster Cult’s studio recording of the classic rock staple “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper.”

So the modern fan rolls with it.

One or two of Katie’s fellow band members will hop up on a podium at games and imitate Farrell’s cowbell-playing technique, shimmying and head-bobbing as Farrell did in the skit.

“They’ll go up there on the podium and just lose it,” Katie said. “It’s so cheesy but it’s so good. We always laugh at that.”

Bulldog fans will play along, placing a hand on the inside of the bell to deaden the clang, producing a pulsing staccato to fit the song.

Another modern twist is a free MSU Cowbell app available for iPhones. Fans can twist their phone back-and-forth and the phone will mimic the clanging of a cowbell.

Cowbell history

According to lore, a jersey cow wandered onto the playing field during a home football game against rival Ole Miss. The Bulldogs soundly defeated the Rebels that game, and MSU students immediately adopted the cow as a good luck charm.

After bringing a cow to games for a while, eventually that practice was dropped in favor of just bringing a cow’s bell. Gradually the tradition began to grow in the late 30s and early 40s.

Cowbells began to evolve, too. Unlike a cowbell actually used on cows, game bells have handles and produce a tone with a higher pitch.

There are some things to consider, though, for fans going to a Mississippi State game, especially first-timers.

Earplugs might be worth bringing. Then, for those new to bell ringing, there's the dreaded cowbell blister.

"It's always a mid-game thing," said Haley Bragg, a Nashville MSU alumna, said of the blisters that typically form on the skin between the thumb and index finger.

"You start holding (the bell) differently and start moving it around. But really it's the best kind of blister you can have. It means you're ringing it a lot, which means we're either doing well...or really, really poorly."

Eric Vliestra, an MSU graduate who lives in Chattanooga, wound up quitting his engineering job to sell custom cowbells full-time through Cowbell-Central.com.

Outside of Starkville, he found game bells were pretty difficult to come by and has seen his business, once a part-time gig, grow steadily over the years.

"In December when State's bowl-eligible, business is always good," said Vliestra, who said he plans on selling cowbells outside LP Field before the bowl game. The willingness of bowls to embrace the cowbells, he said, has been good for business.

Cowbell culture

U.S. Rep. Marsha Blackburn, a Mississippi State graduate who lives in Williamson County, is probably the highest profile local fan with cowbell wisdom.

"When I was in college I think we aggravated everybody that we opposed because we would take our cowbells in their stadiums," said Blackburn. "They didn't like that. It's a pretty loud sound, especially if you're on the field and they start ringing."

Adam Ringenberg, an MSU graduate from Nashville, is especially looking forward to Friday's game.

As a student at MSU in the early 2000s, Ringenberg would not bring either of his two antique cowbells to Bulldog games for fear of them being confiscated.

"I didn't want to lose my heirlooms," he said. "I would go to the games (in Starkville) and everybody else would ring. I never bought a cowbell."

Ringenberg, though, has a cowbell from the late 1950s passed down from his mom's family covered in maroon stickers. His father, David Ringenberg, who died four years ago, passed down a long-handled white cowbell from the late 1960s to Ringenberg's sister, who is a Tennessee fan.

Ringenberg said he will bring one of the two old cowbells to Friday's game.

"One of these will go with me," he said. "I haven't decided which one yet."

Vandy players make most out of Memphis

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Vandy players make most out of Memphis

Vandy fans reach for beads thrown during the AutoZone Liberty Bowl Parade in Memphis. BRANDON DILL / SPECIAL TO COMMERCIAL APPEAL

By Greg Sullivan
The Tennessean

MEMPHIS — Nashville's Charlie and Betty Daugherty know Vanderbilt's bowl history. Sitting with close friends Bob and Sharon Keith, they have witnessed every snap of it. The four Vanderbilt graduates have been at all four of the Commodores' bowl appearances, starting with the 1955 Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, Fla. Today's Liberty Bowl between Vanderbilt and Cincinnati will be their fifth for the foursome, who are all in their 80s. The Daughertys know Memphis, too. They honeymooned here at the Peabody Hotel, a downtown landmark, in 1953.

FRANKLIN'S IMPACT
There are plenty of reasons why Vanderbilt is playing in the fifth bowl game in school history today, but the biggest is new coach James Franklin. **On 1C**

“We didn't have a lot of money so we couldn't go very far,” Charlie Daugherty said, laughing. The Commodores checked into that same hotel on Monday. It's been a business trip for them. Well, sort of. Aside from the seniors, who appeared in the Music City Bowl

» VANDY, 8A

BASH ON BROADWAY
IF YOU GO

Afghan

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“We didn't have a lot of money so we couldn't go very far,” Charlie Daugherty said, laughing.

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It's been a business trip for them. Well, sort of.

Aside from the seniors, who appeared in the Music City Bowl in 2008, the rest of the Commodores have never played in a bowl before and none of them have left Nashville for a bowl.

So to be more correct, it's been a bowl-week adventure.

Media appearances. Special events. Trying to make sure to squeeze the most out of the bowl experience.

Of course practices. All sorts of contests, too.

The Rib King

"I didn't know I was even going to do this," Vanderbilt's Mylon Brown said Tuesday night.

Brown, a 6-foot-5, 310-pound offensive lineman had just eaten 20 barbecue ribs to defeat a Cincinnati lineman in an eating competition.

He was having mixed feelings after the victory. It was his first attempt at competitive eating.

"It was worth it, I got that sweet guitar," said Brown, referring to the red Memphis-built Epiphone SG he won.

He appeared to win a little respect, too. Teammates kept coming up to him the rest of the night, teasing him and offering congratulations.

"But I feel so bad right now," he said. "About 15 ribs in I started hating myself."

Could coaches maybe take it easy on him the next day at practice?

"Probably not," he said.

Later in the evening, teammates discovered safety Nick Aguirre's singing talents. He has the well-groomed hair and the baby face of an American Idol type, but he's got a big-time voice, too.

Players from both teams laughed at first, seeming shocked, and soon burst into applause as Aguirre continued his rendition of "Stand by Me" with a polished tone fitting a professional crooner.

Teammates clapped out the beat for Aguirre and his acoustic guitar accompaniment. Midway through, cellphones were being swayed back and forth by Commodores to imitate lighters at a concert.

A trio of Bearcat singers tried to follow Aguirre with a rendition of “Lean on Me” and flopped by comparison. They struggled with pitch problems. They popped their P’s into the microphone.

Give Vanderbilt players credit for mostly holding back their laughter.

Children’s impact

Several Commodores paid a visit to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital on Wednesday.

After touring the hospital, players signed posters for patients and their families.

Wide receiver Jordan Matthews was probably the most animated Vandy player. Like other Commodores, he was giving high-fives and cracking jokes, teasing kids to tell the Cincinnati players, who were touring the facility later, that they were Vanderbilt fans.

"It's good to play around with them," Matthews said. "I think every kid knows how to give a high-five."

Caleb Waddell, an 11-year-old with Hurler Syndrome, a rare metabolic disorder, came through the line dressed in Spider-Man pajamas. He has been receiving outpatient care at the hospital since he was a baby. He motioned at Matthews as if he were spraying Matthews with an imaginary spider web. Matthews pretended to fall backward.

"(Matthews) thought I was Spider-Man," Waddell said.

"It's awesome," Matthews said. "There's nothing better than kids. We think life's tough, but it's nothing like what these kids have gone through."

Duck hunting

Back to the Peabody Hotel, players had mentioned since the start of the week the desire to see the duck march.

Ducks are brought down from the Royal Duck Palace at the hotel's rooftop at 11 a.m. down the elevator and march across a red carpet into the lobby fountain. They march back to the elevator everyday at 5 p.m.

Late in the week, some players said they still had not had a chance to see the march yet, which is pretty understandable.

There were breakfast events, lunch events, dinner events, a shopping spree, special appearances.

Offensive lineman Kyle Fischer said he wished he could have been there on Thursday morning to see Coach James Franklin and his two young daughters serve as honorary duck-masters, as they directed the march in front of a big crowd.

Instead, Fischer had to leave early for a media event.

"I've seen them in their pool but I actually want to see them (march)," Fischer said. "That's something I definitely want to do before I leave here."

Sightseeing

The Commodores have had some free time, especially in the evenings.

On Tuesday night, a small group of players popped into Mr. Handy's Blues Hall Juke Joint on Beale Street, which was filled mostly with tourists. They sang, or at least mouthed words, to a song or two as the house band played before moving on to catch some more sights.

Memphis' food also seemed to be a big draw for the Commodores.

On Thursday night, just about every window of Huey's Restaurant, a burger place, had a booth full of Vandy players munching on burgers and fries. Others walked around the Beale Street area.

Some players, however, preferred to kick back in the hotel, whenever possible

"We definitely have our schedule pretty much packed down for us," said Fischer, a senior. "Mainly, I've just stayed in the hotel. I just want to bond with my teammates and just be with them. This being my last year, I want to be with them as much as I can."

Fan experience

The first Vanderbilt fans began to appear in Memphis on Thursday, although the vast majority arrived Friday or will arrive today.

Most of them who were here Thursday night seemed to be in the Beale Street area, especially around B.B. King's Blues Club, where Vanderbilt held its coach's radio call-in show and a viewing party for Thursday night's Vanderbilt-Marquette men's basketball game.

Cincinnati was better represented downtown on Thursday, but that started to change on Friday as more Commodores fans started to show up.

"I'm just a die-hard fan from Nashville," said Daniel Puckett, 24. "James Franklin has changed the culture of Vanderbilt football. We're here, we're here to stay. I've only been (on Beale Street) twice, but I imagine it could get pretty intense this weekend."

The Daughertys and the Keiths represent four of the 12 known fans to attend all of Vanderbilt's previous bowl games, which include the 1974 Peach and 1982 Hall of Fame.

"We're looking forward to it and the way that Vanderbilt is playing, we're looking forward to not just the fifth bowl game but the next one, hopefully," said Bob Keith, who took a fan bus to Memphis with the Daughertys on Friday morning.

"(The bowls) all kind of run together after a while," Charlie Daugherty said. "That's the joke I've told people. You know, because we go to so many."

Who's under center is in the air
Vandy coach promises an open competition



By Greg Sullivan
The Tennessean

With a healthy Jordan Rodgers on the field Friday as Vanderbilt opened its preseason camp, a quarterback battle is underway on West End.

While Rodgers, a junior who redshirted last season and missed spring practice with a torn labrum in his right shoulder, looked rusty at times Friday. But the junior college transfer said he is poised to compete with senior Larry Smith for the starting job once he settles in.

“I haven’t felt this healthy in a long time,” Rodgers said. “I got to joke around with the guys a little bit once I started feeling a little bit more comfortable in there live.

“It was day one. We learned a lot and made a lot of mistakes, but we’ve got 20 something more of these.”

Rodgers said he thinks he has a lot to prove to overtake the veteran Smith, but his new head coach James Franklin insists the spot is available for either player to earn for a team

coming off back-to-back 2-10 seasons.

“We’re going to put the guy on the field that we feel gives us the best chance to win,” Franklin said. “There’s not going to be any favoritism.”

Franklin said Rodgers missed some reads Friday but he did not seem too discouraged by his junior quarterback’s performance. Smith opened camp, he said, with a solid practice.

“I thought Larry did some good things,” Franklin said. “I thought Jordan made a few mistakes I didn’t think he’d make, but it was the first day. He’ll be fine.”

Smith said it won’t be easy to keep his starting job, but he appears to be enjoying the competition.

“It’s fun,” said Smith, who threw for 1,262 yards, six touchdowns and five interceptions last season. “It brings the best out of you and in them. We’re having a good time competing and seeing who throws the better ball.”

Rodgers said he and Smith had become friends, but he didn’t mind competing against him.

“I think it’s better than going against someone you dislike,” said Rodgers, whose older brother is Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers. “We both know there’s just one spot out there to be taken. Right now it’s his job to lose.

“I’m shaking a little rust off in some of those live drills. I made a few mental mistakes and missed a couple reads but feel like I knew the plays.”

Freshmen quarterbacks: Franklin said an early standout among his freshman quarterbacks is Josh Grady from Tampa, Fla. “He just doesn’t seem like a freshman,” Franklin said. “I’m not saying he’s ready and I’m not saying if you watch him, he blows you away. But he doesn’t get rattled. He seems like he has been here for a year already.”

Red jerseys: Offensive lineman James Lewis wore a brace on his left leg on Friday and also wore a red injury jersey. Also wearing red jerseys Friday were defensive back Steven Clarke, defensive end Walker May and quarterback/punter Taylor Hudson.

Music City bowl bound?

Vandy, UT, Mississippi State could each find way into game

MUSIC CITY BOWL BOUND?

Vandy, UT, Mississippi State could each find way into game

By Greg Sullivan
The Tennessean

Vanderbilt, Tennessee and Mississippi State all have one regular-season game left to pick up their sixth win and reach bowl eligibility. Their fans won't be the only ones with their fingers crossed on Saturday.

Representatives of Nashville's Franklin American Mortgage Music City Bowl, the Auto Zone Liberty Bowl in Memphis and the BBVA Compass Bowl in Birmingham will all have a rooting interest. The three teams must win for the bowls with the three last SEC tie-ins to all have a chance to have teams from the conference. The Music City Bowl most likely just needs at least one of those teams to win because it gets first pick of the three bowls. But Music City Bowl president and CEO Scott Ramsey would prefer to have his pick from the three

nesses. Most bowl projections have Tennessee or Mississippi State in the Music City. SEC bowls picking ahead of the Music City Bowl, following BCS bowl selections, are the Capital One, Outback, Cotton, Chick-fil-A and Gator. "We're certainly rooting for (all three teams) to win this week so we can have a selection," Ramsey said. "Our selection, for all practical purposes will come from (Vanderbilt, Tennessee and Mississippi State). I'm saying that on speculation that with Florida (in Gaines-



Tennessee lost to North Carolina in last year's game. LARRY MCCORMACK / THE

one thing in common. All four football teams have 13-0 records into the 6A semifinals. It's the first time that four teams from the conference have made it to the semifinals with undefeated records. White House, Madison and Tennessee rose to the 4A semifinals in 2006 records. "It doesn't happen," Mt. Juliet Coach Ryan said. "Here at Mt. Juliet, I've never been a team that's defeated at this point the farthest point (in the state) that a Mt. Juliet team has ever been." The Golden Bears of Whitehaven, and Riverdale Maryville. "You have to be careful to avoid some injuries to make it this far," Riverdale Coach said. "And if you do get injuries, you have to be minimal, and you have to be enough to patch it up." Maryville Coach Quarles likes the idea of the Secondary Association setting up a tournament this season where the top six teams would play in a bracket. "They got it said. 'It sounds like teams are playing end.'" None of the quadrants have top seeds remain the top seeds had in Class 1A at the state level. "It's the best of all worlds," he said.

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But Music City Bowl president and CEO Scott Ramsey would prefer to have his pick from the three teams. He did not favor one of the teams over the other, saying each school has its strengths and weaknesses.

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“We’re certainly rooting for (all three teams) to win this week so we can have a selection,” Ramsey said. “Our selection, for all practical purposes will come from (Vanderbilt, Tennessee and Mississippi State). I’m saying that on speculation that with Florida (in Gainesville) and the Gator Bowl being right there in Jacksonville, I have them married up pretty well.”

Sorting out the BCS

At least two SEC teams likely will play in BCS bowls, especially now that LSU, Alabama and Arkansas are ranked first, second and third in the BCS rankings. It is possible two SEC teams could wind up in the national championship game, as well.

The Capital One, Outback and Cotton will most likely choose among Georgia, South Carolina and whichever school out of LSU, Alabama and Arkansas is left out of the BCS.

Georgia’s opponent in the SEC Championship game will be LSU if the Tigers defeat Arkansas on Friday. If Arkansas wins and if Alabama beats Auburn on Saturday, there would be a three-way tie in the SEC West. The tie would be broken by whoever has won the head-to-head matchup between the two teams ranked highest in the BCS.

If Georgia were to win the SEC Championship game, the SEC could send three teams to BCS bowls because two teams could still wind up in the national championship game and Georgia would go to the Sugar Bowl as the conference’s automatic qualifier.

“If that’s the case then we need at least two of those teams (Vanderbilt, Tennessee and Mississippi State) to win and hopefully we’ll have a choice,” Ramsey said. “That’s why this week’s real important to us.

“In my 13 years of doing this we have not had that last scenario come up even in conversation. A two-team maximum is kind of what you plan for (with the SEC). I’m not sure anybody could have dreamed up a scenario like that one.”

Music City’s choices

Ramsey said there are pros and cons to Vanderbilt, Tennessee and Mississippi State.

“I don’t know if in the 15 years that I’ve lived here that there’s been as much excitement around the Vanderbilt program as (Coach) James Franklin has gotten this year,” Ramsey said. “It’s a year they’ve maybe exceeded expectations a little bit.

“But on the flip-side, we started a bowl game with one of our primary missions of filling up our stadium with as many out-of-towners coming to our city as possible and having a

local team is a challenge to that mission a little bit.

"Occasionally, it's the right decision (to take a local team), but on a regular basis a bowl's got to think that through a little bit."

Vanderbilt defeated Boston College in the 2008 Music City Bowl, its most recent bowl appearance. The attendance was 54,250.

It may be difficult for the Music City Bowl to pass on Tennessee, especially considering the numbers from last year's game with North Carolina. The 2010 bowl set highs for attendance (69,143) and TV viewers (7.1 million). A total of 26,966 hotel room nights were booked for last year's game, according to the bowl, and 41,486 out-of-town visitors attended.

"On the Tennessee side, we had a great experience last year," Ramsey said. "A lot of fans came and a lot of fans stayed at hotels. It was a really great experience, but you always worry about two in a row.

"They will be coming off two wins and they have their quarterback (Tyler Bray) back. I think that's a positive for us or anybody who might be evaluating (Tennessee) because you're always trying to find anybody on that little uptick of momentum that hopefully will bring more fans to your city, more excitement to the game and hopefully a better broadcast to your television side."

Ramsey said he believes Mississippi State would travel well.

"I think their fans have really supported coming to Nashville well at the basketball tournaments we've had and at regular season games here," Ramsey said. "I think Nashville as a destination for Mississippi State, considering they've never played in our game, would be really positive."

If Vandy, Tennessee and Mississippi State all lose on Saturday, the Music City will have to pick from the at-large pool to fill its SEC slot, something that's only happened once. In 2005, when the bowl matched a team from the SEC and Big Ten, Virginia replaced South Carolina. The Gamecocks were on a self-imposed bowl ban after a season-ending brawl with Clemson.

Liberty Bowl choices

Liberty Bowl executive director Steve Ehrhart said his bowl would be happy to host Vanderbilt, Tennessee or Mississippi State.

Ehrhart said it may work out better for Tennessee to not go to the same bowl (Music City) two years in a row and instead go to the Liberty Bowl.

"There are some negatives to having the same university two years in a row," he said.

"But it's awfully hard to talk to a university until they get their sixth win. Bowls try to be respectful of that.

"Tennessee has such a great presence here in the West Tennessee area with the university's medical school, the nursing school and the dental school. We'd love to have Tennessee back."

Tennessee's most recent appearance in the Liberty Bowl was 1986.

Mississippi State has a strong fan base in the Memphis area so the Bulldogs would likely be chosen if Tennessee is not available.

The Liberty Bowl generally matches the Conference USA champion with an SEC opponent, but it also has an agreement with the Big East where it can fill either spot with a Big East team.

ACC opponent

For the Music City Bowl, the ACC opponent is very much up in the air.

Ramsey said Miami was a possibility before its self-imposed bowl ban.

Projections include Georgia Tech, Wake Forest, Virginia, North Carolina and N.C. State.

Ramsey said games on Saturday that could impact the Music City's ACC selection include Georgia Tech-Georgia, N.C. State-Maryland, Virginia-Virginia Tech, Florida State-Florida and Clemson-South Carolina.

"It's a little hard to forecast," Ramsey said. "We've got to wait and see what some of the bowls ahead of us are going to do more on the ACC side than on the SEC side.

"Usually our best formula is trying to find somebody that feels like they've won their way into your game. With N.C. State, like Tennessee, having to win its last two games to make a bowl makes them a good possibility."

Transition Game

FSU big man James grew up with years of military service

Florida State's Bernard James (5), a member of the ACC All-Defensive Team, has been invited to the Portsmouth Invitational, a chance for college players to earn an invitation to NBA fall camps. CHUCK BURTON / ASSOCIATED PRESS

TRANSITION GAME

FSU big man James grew up with years of military service

By Greg Sullivan
The Tennessean

Florida State big man Bernard James grew up a lot during his six years of Air Force service, which included deployments to Iraq, Qatar and Afghanistan. He really grew up.

"I think it started, probably when I was 18. It didn't really happen overnight but over the course of four years," said the 27-year-old James, an anything-but-conventional college senior who will be playing at Bridgestone Arena on Friday afternoon. He'll help lead the third-seeded Seminoles against 13th-seeded St. Bonaventure in an NCAA Tournament game.



James was part of the recovery team charged with cataloguing items from Saddam Hussein's cache of weapons when his regime fell in Iraq.

"We know he's been through a lot and it's made him the guy he is today, and we're very grateful for that."

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"Every time I was deployed I would come back and everybody would be like, 'Did you get taller?' I thought they were just making jokes because I'm already taller than everybody.

"I didn't really think I was growing until I looked up one day and realized that none of my uniforms fit anymore."

That made James 6-foot-10 and made it a logical transition from a staff sergeant in military dress to a uniform of the basketball variety.

Looking at James now, it's hard to imagine him in 2002 as a newly enlisted 17-year-old. He was a mere 6-5 and 185 pounds back then—well less than his current weight of 240. He had been cut from his high school team as a freshman. He was a quiet, good-natured kid but had dropped out of school and earned a GED.

“I was kind of the kid with his head up in the clouds. I really liked reading about space and stars and stuff like that,” said James, who is averaging 10.5 points and 8.2 rebounds per game for the Seminoles, the highest-seeded team in the Nashville field.

But very soon he began living in the present. He learned to focus and to persevere. He grew up, essentially, in a different way. It would pay off later.

“Our base (Camp Bucca, a military prison where James worked as a guard) got mortared probably once a month. They rarely hit inside the compound. The one that I was involved in was the only one in the 10 months I was there that was actually right on target,” James said of his experience in Iraq, his final deployment in 2007.

“There were detainees running around everywhere, US forces running around everywhere, everybody scrambling trying to get everything under control, get the wounded detainees in the ER. It was just complete chaos for about five or six hours.”

Seven detainees were killed in the attack and 67 were injured. James was left with minor hearing loss and some lingering memories.

His current task, playing big-time college basketball, is a breeze by comparison, and he has earned the admiration of his peers.

“Bernard’s a veteran guy. It’s very nice just being able to play with him in the time he has left,” said Florida State junior guard Michael Snaer, the ACC Tournament MVP. “It’s been a positive experience. He leads by example and holds guys accountable. He gives younger guys something to look up to.

“We know he’s been through a lot and it’s made him the guy he is today, and we’re very grateful for that.”

James is on track to graduate this spring with a degree in economics. The Savannah, Ga. native helped guide Florida State to its first-ever ACC Tournament title on Sunday with a win over North Carolina.

“Even if he was not a very good player, I would have wanted that guy to be on my team,” FSU Coach Leonard Hamilton said of James. “I was more impressed with him as a person, as a guy with high character, that’s made sacrifices, but I felt very confident that he would work hard and develop into somebody who could help us.

“Sometimes he’s the leading scorer; sometimes other guys are the leading scorers. He’s very unselfish. He just understands.”

It has been a strange journey that brings him to Nashville. One that James, as a former 17-year-old science-fiction fan, could not even have imagined.

An ACC referee who saw him play in an intramural tournament in Las Vegas when he was 23 and still in the Air Force thought he could play in the ACC. The referee made some calls to coaching friends on James' behalf. Soon coaches were calling and after two years at Tallahassee Community College, he was with the Seminoles, improving his game and mentoring younger players. James, a member of the ACC All-Defensive Team, has been invited to the Portsmouth Invitational in April, a chance for college players to earn an invitation to NBA fall camps.

"I think back to before the military and my time being in the military, and never having it cross my mind that I would win an ACC championship, especially at this age," said James. "Being on a team in the NCAA Tournament with a 3 seed, it's just amazing..."

"It all had to line up perfectly for me to be here right now."

Leading the team in shaves

Sounds infielder shines in important clubhouse role of team barber

LEADING THE TEAM IN SHAVES

Sounds infielder shines in important clubhouse role of team barber

By Greg Sullivan
The Tennessean

In his early teens growing up in Puerto Rico, Andy Gonzalez began cutting hair by offering haircuts to neighborhood friends.

Nowadays, the Nashville Sounds infielder is the team barber, an important role in virtually any minor league baseball clubhouse.

"I'd say that the (team barber) torch has been passed to Gonzo. Cutting hair's a tough job. A lot of people are relying on you," Sounds second baseman Eric Farris said. "But he's the guy you trust right now with the clippers."

Gonzalez, 30, who joined the Sounds in late May, smiled as he thought back to some of his earliest haircut clients in Puerto Rico.

"I want to say the first 10 or 15 cuts were a mess," the former major leaguer said. "I messed my hair up, too. But it was OK for me. I'd just put the No. 1 (clipper) guard on and cut it again."

At first, it was a process of trial and error for Gonzalez. But not long after he left Puerto Rico to attend high school in Florida, he had a steady stream of customers paying \$5 a cut at his dormitory.

"I don't charge now, but I needed the \$5 back in high school," Gonzalez said.

In the clubhouse, the players say they know they're getting a bargain.

"He does a great job cutting hair," said Sounds starting pitcher Willy Peralta.

» BARBER, 4A

Sounds infielder Andy Gonzalez, who doubles as the team barber, cuts pitcher Willy Peralta's hair in the team clubhouse. GEORGE WALKER IV / THE TENNESSEAN

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prearrangements?



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Nowadays, the Nashville Sounds infielder is the team barber, an important role in virtually any minor league clubhouse.

"I'd say that the (team barber) torch has been passed to Gonzo. See, it's a tough job. Cutting hair's a tough job. A lot of people are relying on you," Sounds second baseman Eric Farris said. "But he's the guy you trust right now with the clippers."

Gonzalez, 30, who joined the Sounds in late May after earning a call-up from Double-A Huntsville, smiled as he thought back to some of his earliest haircut clients in Puerto Rico.

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In the clubhouse, players know they're getting a bargain.

"He does a great job cutting hair," said Sounds starting pitcher Wily Peralta, who let out a hearty laugh as he showed off his faded-out Mohawk haircut, Gonzalez's handiwork.

"He was doing Farris' hair the other day, and I saw he did a pretty good (job)," Peralta said. "I said OK, I'll do a Mohawk, too. I always do a Mohawk during the season, but I thought I'll let (Gonzalez) do it since he's pretty good at cutting hair. We don't have to worry about going to the barber shop."

"I think I picked the wrong career," joked Gonzalez, who had short stints with the White Sox, Indians and Marlins from 2007-09. "I like cutting hair. I really like it when people come and say, 'Do whatever you want.' I like trying new cuts. Sometimes it doesn't work, but most of the time they like it."

'He does all flavors

Of course, not every player wants a special haircut and that's OK with Gonzalez, too.

"The mohawks look good on some of those guys, but I don't think my wife would buy that," said veteran reliever Vinnie Chulk, another of Gonzalez's regulars.

"But (Gonzalez) pulls out a straight razor in here and he's got a steady hand. I saw him cutting another player's hair so I asked him if he could do mine...just a regular haircut, trim it on the top and a little fade, if you will. Every team needs a barber with how much we travel."

"Andy Gonzalez? He did mine, too," said first baseman Sean Halton as he pushed away his long curly hair to reveal his groomed sideburns. "He does all flavors."

"I just thought I would switch it up," Farris said, referring to his Mohawk, which Gonzalez cut during a recent home stand. "I needed to switch gears a little bit and Gonzo's the guy for it."

In the meantime, Gonzalez said he doesn't mind helping his teammates out now that the cat's out of the bag that he cuts hair.

"Now they all know, so everybody's asking. It's hard to find barber shops on the road," he said. "It's the same thing in the big leagues. You don't want to give your hair to

somebody you've never seen before. They might mess your hair up and you have to wait three weeks to get it back. I think every team basically has a barber."

And while many players wonder what they'll do after their pro baseball careers ends, Gonzalez already has another profession he can rely upon.

NCAA tournament 2015

'They ask, who is this kid?': Varun Ram on life as an Indian basketball player

Many players are taken aback when they face Maryland's point guard but they soon come to respect a tenacious opponent

.....
Greg Sullivan for The Guardian

Wednesday 18 March 2015 05.00 EDTLast modified on Monday 4 April 201609.31 EDT

Before he made the basketball team at Maryland as a walk-on, before his short time playing for Division III Trinity College and his year at prep school, before playing high-school ball and on the AAU circuit, Varun Ram was an ordinary kid who grew up watching his state school, Maryland, compete in NCAA tournaments.

Now Ram will play in one.

"I'm so excited, man. It's been four years [of college] and I haven't gotten to play in a tournament yet," Ram told the Guardian, as he stood outside the visiting locker room after a game earlier this month. "It's all about winning the next game. In the moment I probably won't enjoy it as much ... But I think I'm going to look back at it when it's over and take a deep breath and try to take it all in."

He had jogged back into the hallway from the icy parking lot where he'd been thanking some family friends who came to see him play a road game at Rutgers. The 5ft 9in point guard has been interviewed plenty of times while playing for the Terrapins, so he was accustomed to the out-of-the-blue media request. But just as March Madness brings the occasional team Cinderella story into the national spotlight, so too does it sometimes bring out some offbeat stories like Ram's, one of the very

few players of Indian descent to play college basketball for a power conference team.

It's important to understand that Ram has options besides basketball. He's always been a top student and has a GPA approaching 4.0 despite a double major in neurobiology and physiology at Maryland. His sister graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Johns Hopkins. His parents both work for the government. His mother is a toxicologist for the Environmental Protection Agency, his father an IT manager for the National Weather Service.

"I think it surprised them a lot that I kept playing," said Ram, who credits his parents for his athletic success despite what he admits is an unconventional path in Indian-American culture. "They always thought, growing up, basketball was just going to be a hobby. They were saying as long as I did well academically they would let me continue to play. Then when they saw that I developed a passion for it, they decided to keep pushing me towards it. They would take me to my AAU tournaments, to travel games, and all this, and they've been really supportive, which you don't always see from first-generation Indian parents.

"I'm very thankful for what they've done for me to support my basketball passion."

That passion is now obvious on the court. Although not a star player, Ram has become a fan favorite in the Free State mostly due to his hustle and tenacious defense whenever he gets minutes.

In the win at Rutgers, he played a few possessions before the half and his composure and headiness on the court were apparent. He always seemed to know when his team should attack or pull back as if he were a coach playing on the court. As personable as he was later during his interview, on the court he's a man on a mission.

Ram is known on the team for challenging Maryland's starting point guard, freshman sensation Melo Trimble, every day in practice. Ram even intentionally fouls Trimble and roughs him up at practice at the

encouragement of Coach Mark Turgeon with the aim, Ram said, of being the toughest defender Trimble will see in the college game.

Ram's grittiness epitomizes Maryland's feisty identity. They've come on strong this season despite having not graced a Tournament since 2010.

While Ram says his Maryland coaches and team-mates respect him as a player, he laughs off the others who underestimated him in the past.

"You don't really see a lot of Indian players," he said. "Especially in AAU every time we'd travel they'd see me and they'd say, who is this kid? I think they'd let their guard down. And it was always great to see the expression on their face when they realize, OK, maybe he can play, maybe he can shoot, maybe he's fast. And to see that look of bewilderment on their faces, I definitely took pride in that. It's something I've dealt with my whole life playing basketball, so I'm used to it."

Ask Big Ten foe Iowa. In a game earlier this year, Ram came in for only five minutes but picked up three steals.

"We love having Varun," said Maryland's starting forward Jake Layman. "It helps to have a guy come off the bench who can give you a spark like that. He can turn a game around. And the way he plays in practice every day, he knows how it goes and what it takes to be successful on and off the court. He's huge."

Ram grew up watching the Terrapins in their heyday – including guards Juan Dixon (now an assistant coach with the team) and Steve Blake – as they chased national titles, winning one in 2002 and also reaching the Final Four in 2001.

Ram says it's hard to compare the current team to those coached by Gary Williams and acknowledges that even having this conversation as a Maryland player is surreal.

“It’s hard to say because I was judging them from kind of a middle school perspective back then,” he says, with a laugh. “Now I’m on the team playing with these guys, so it’s a little bit different.

“But I feel like we can go as far as any team in the country right now. We’ve got so many good pieces, great guys. We’re unselfish. I’m excited for this group of guys.”

Maryland rely heavily on the backcourt duo of Trimble and Dez Wells – each averaging more than 15 points per game – along with Layman, one of the top power forwards in the country.

Ram, a down to earth character, fully understands his role as a back-up and team leader. But while he’s happy just to be playing for a team he grew up rooting for, he still wants to make an in-game impact any way that he can.

“At this level I feel I’m most effective as an energy guy. You know, I’m scrappy, small. If I’m going to play, it’s not going to be many minutes, so I just give it 110% in those minutes and really just try to change the pace of the game and do whatever I can. Get under the other point guard’s skin.”

Now is a busy time for Ram. He recently finished his pre-med requirements and has to decide if he wants to play out his remaining season of eligibility next year, assuming he’s able to find a graduate program at Maryland that will fit his goals.

“It’s kind of complicated. I have a lot of options I guess. My sister is in med school. I have a lot of family friends that are in med school, and they all say don’t do it unless you really want to do it. I haven’t completely ruled it out, but I don’t really want to do it right now, so if I go to med school, it’ll be in a few years,” he said.

“I’ve also thought about getting into consulting, working for a big-time firm, getting work experience. I never really got to do internships over the summers. I was always at school working out, so I’m kind of behind

on career stuff. I'm just trying to keep my options open. I have a few options I'm juggling right now."

For now, the gym-rat scholar hopes to play deep into the tournament with the Terrapins. And whenever that's done, it's fair to say he projects to be a success in whichever path he chooses.

Note: The preceding work samples are not intended for distribution. Also, this sample is heavy with football and basketball-centric work because that's what I receive the most requests for. However, on request I can provide work samples related to other sports I've covered extensively over the years, including baseball, hockey, soccer and others.