

## THE LOSER WHO WON

### The Story of the Legendary Gil Dobie

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Quite simply, he was the best football coach the University of Washington has ever had. And, not incidentally, the worst.

Gilmour Dobie, who coached the U.W.'s team from 1908 through 1916, was the ultimate in pigskin paradoxes. Despite compiling a record unequaled in college football history, he laughed, officially, only once. His motto was, "I am always right, you are always wrong." His nickname was "Gloomy Gil." He was loved and hated, fancied and feared, idolized and ostracized. He is still the only football coach in America to go unbeaten for nine seasons and he still got fired.

Therein lies the mystery of Gil Dobie. It first unfolded in the fall of 1908, at a time when Seattle was alive with logging, sawmills and shipping, but desperately trying to shore up that other significant area: the university football team. It was a time of five-point touchdowns and 10-cent vaudeville shows.

In 1908, with the football team coming off a .500 season, the *Washington Alumnus* lamented that the trouble with U.W. athletics was the matter of priorities among students, complaining, "Too much society. Too many social stunts. Too much competition among the sororities and fraternities as to which can give the swellest and biggest social affair; and too much energy wasted in giving them."

Discipline and a hunger for success—that's what Washington needed. And that's exactly what it got in Gil Dobie. Reared in poverty in little Hastings, Minnesota, Dobie had developed a nearly fanatical drive to win at everything: school (he was an honor student who earned a law degree), football (he quarterbacked the University of Minnesota to its first Big Ten championship in 1900) and finances (his shrewd stock-market investing would make him a wealthy man before the collapse of 1929).

After college, when he began coaching, Dobie's Southside High (Minneapolis) team went unbeaten both years he was there, as did his North Dakota Agricultural College squad in 1906 and 1907. Washington knew it was getting a winner; it also knew it was not getting the world's most warmhearted human being.

At North Dakota, Dobie had quickly earned the wrath of every rival coach for his stubbornness and total lack of sentimentality. But such things are easily overlooked when weighed against the four undefeated seasons he'd produced. Thus, Dobie was hired—for \$1,200 a year.

"He's maybe a little rough," said U. W. graduate athletic manager Lorin Grimstead in 1908, "but real sharp. No, sir, no more seasons like the last one."

What Grimstead failed to realize was that "maybe a little rough" would ultimately mean things like the team being forced to run 20 laps—after a 70-0 victory. But, then, Dobie never sold himself as the Good Fairy. Upon arriving on Washington's fir-studded campus, he first alienated the alumni, faculty, students and sportswriters by closing practice sessions. He then alienated the team with an icy introductory speech.

"There were no smiles, no handshakes, no slaps on the back...nothing but a pair of black eyes coldly peering out of a dark face," wrote Wee Coyle, who played quarterback for Dobie from 1908 to 1911, in a 1948 *Seattle Times* article. "Many of the players thought about leaving; this tall glob of gloom couldn't tell us what to do. But when it came time to depart, something besides the love of our homes, our sweethearts and our friends kept us on the right track—it was the spell of Gil Dobie."

Indeed, though his heart was as cold as a November drizzle, the Scot's mind was sharp, cunning and calculating. He was highly intelligent, a shrewd investor and, off-season with a glass of brew in his hand, almost tolerable. On the football field, he was a drillmaster and master psychologist.

When halfback Cedric "Hap" Miller received national attention for an outstanding game, Dobie promptly told him he had a swelled head, was no help to the team and should quit. His pride threatened, Miller, of course, responded with an even better game. When going against a favored Oregon team, Dobie told his players that the sawdust on U.O.'s field was a devious ploy to slow the U.W. down and he wouldn't allow his team to play. Begging to play, the players blanked the favored Oregon squad 15-0.

Physically, Dobie was an Ihabod Crane type—tall, gaunt and sharp-featured—who often wore a derby and smoked a large, black cigar as he nervously paced the sidelines of Denny Field. Emotionally, he was something of a Heathcliffe of *Wuthering Heights*: mysterious, independent, brooding and seemingly unfeeling. His only official laugh came in 1911, when a trick play in practice worked well. The only recorded compliment he ever gave came when he told Mike "Mother" Hunt, "I wouldn't take you out if both your legs were broken. I've got that much confidence in you."

On Friday nights before home games, Dobie would have quarterback Coyle come to his small house near the university—now a Christian Science reading room—to prepare for the next day's game. The living room would be cluttered with sports pages and football diagrams. The twosome's "discussions" were simple: Dobie would talk; Coyle would listen. Among the bits of information Coyle remembers is, "You play like a man devoid of brains."

Dobie once endeared himself to the team with the remark, "You are the dumbest, clumsiest, rankest collection of so-called football excuses I've ever seen." Despite such verbal lashings, or because of them, Coyle and his teammates responded game after game. "If we can take him day after day, we can take anybody on Saturday," one player reasoned. And, indeed, they did, compiling a record of 58 wins, no losses and 3 ties over nine years—a mark unmatched in college football history.

In a sense, Dobie was the Vince Lombardi and Woody Hayes of his time. He demanded perfection, courage and complete loyalty. "If he doesn't get what he demands he unceremoniously kicks the individual off the field never to return," wrote Coyle in 1914.

And Dobie wasn't discriminatory in the least. He seemed to feel equal disdain for players and non-players alike. Once, Dobie nearly came to blows with Hi Gill, former mayor of Seattle, and George Russell, the city's postmaster, because the lanky coach was obscuring their view of a game, a fact they relayed to the coach by showering him with peanuts and politely yelling, "Sit down, you big bum."

He didn't particularly like sportswriters either, nor was he number one with them. "The sportswriters of the Seattle dailies were placed in the same class as poison ivy," wrote Coyle. Dobie wasn't much for publicity and he particularly disliked naming All-American teams. Later, when coaching at Cornell, Dobie said, "Many a tomato has been made to look like a peach through the pressure of publicity. If you sing the praises of a man high enough in this country, it will reach not only to heaven but from Kennebunkport, Maine, to Walla Walla, Washington."

Sportswriters didn't like being banned from practice, nor did they like the way it was done. Once, a writer from the *Daily* approached Dobie from behind at practice.

"That you, Fred?" asked Dobie.

"Yes, it's me," came the reply.

"Get the hell out of here, Fred," said Dobie.

Because of such tact, many Dobie accounts suggest he was disliked intensely by all. Not true. Winning, regardless of how it's accomplished, is seductive and it was particularly so in upstart Seattle, which was tenaciously trying to establish credibility in the eyes of other cities. True, halfback Penny Westover admitted he once wanted to punch Dobie after the coach had called him a "poor numbskull." True also, Dobie wasn't tops with the faculty, which wasn't pleased at a Dobian language well flecked with four-letter words, his marked disinterest in academics, and a salary, \$3,000 a year by the time he left, higher than their own.

Ah, but winning wipes clean many a sin. And, besides his skill at swearing, Dobie knew how to win. In Dobie's first season, the U.W. went undefeated and won the Northwest championship. "The prayers of the righteous prevailed and Washington has a champion football team," responded the *Washington Alumnus* magazine. "It is a team, a fighting machine, and a thing of beauty to see in action."

"Dobie was quiet, determined, exacting, shrewd, capable," the magazine later added. "He minds his own business and, what is more, he sees to it that no one helps him mind it." Anyone who disagrees, the magazine said, should be considered "a candidate for speedy annihilation."

He continued his tongue-lashings and harsh practices, but Dobie's disciples remained loyal to the cause. "Dobie means what he says and rarely says it," wrote F. A. Churchill, Jr., in a 1911 *Seattle Town Crier*. "As a result, the squad accepts his word in the attitude of a gang of Platos surrounding Socrates."

Washington rolled through opponent after opponent. Dobie won with trick plays, including a well-practiced center-to-end handoff, called the "bunk" play—that helped beat Oregon 29-3 in 1911. Dobie won big, once beating Whitworth 100-0. And he won even in 1915 when Northwest schools, in an attempt to derail the dynasty, refused to play Washington, forcing Dobie to round up new opponents.

But at the end of the 1915 season, Dobie suddenly resigned. At a subsequent luncheon in Dobie's honor, President Henry Suzzallo praised the outgoing coach. "The university," said Suzzallo, "is a large place to make men, and the process takes place both in and out of the classroom. Dobie has aided in this building of men."

Soon thereafter, Dobie pulled his personal "bunk" play, reversing his decision and deciding to stay on. Though Suzzallo might have been less than thrilled—behind his glowing words, the president was tiring of Dobie's popularity and disregard for the classroom—most of Seattle rejoiced. Editorialized the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, "Tune up the sackbut, psaltery, harp and lute, and anything else that will make a noise, and let us sound a paean of joy over the return of the mentor whom we had mourned as officially dead."

But Dobie's encore was short-lived. As the 1916 season wound to a close, controversy clutched the campus and Dobie was right in the middle. One of his players, Bill Grimm, had been caught cheating on a history test. A student committee recommended Grimm be suspended from school for one year, from December 1, 1916, right after the big Thanksgiving Day finale against California, until December 1, 1917. A faculty committee turned down the students' recommendation and stiffened the penalty by setting November 20 as the date of suspension.

The players were stunned. Losing Grimm next year was one thing—but losing him for next week's big game against Cal, well, that was quite another. So they went on strike. For two days, they refused to practice. Suzzallo looked to Dobie for leverage but the coach, almost with an air of cockiness, sided with his players. "If the boys feel that their studies demand their attention more than football practice, why that's their privilege," said Dobie, in a rare and suspicious proacademic statement.

The alumni and even Grimm entered the mess and convinced the team to play "for the greater good." The players ended the strike and beat Cal 14-7 in a game whose halftime entertainment was a 50-yard dash between the referee and umpire for a \$10 stake.

It was Dobie's last game at Washington. A week later, Suzzallo fired him, contrary to subsequent accounts that said Dobie quit. In remarks strikingly different from those in his speech on Dobie a year previously, Suzzallo said, "The chief function of the university is to train character. Mr. Dobie failed to perform his full share of this service on the football field. Therefore, we do not wish him to return."

Suzzallo was still stung by Dobie's antifaculty stance on the team strike. Had the coach intervened, he contended, the strike and subsequent controversy could have been prevented. Others suggested that the sophisticated Suzzallo, with no shortage of ego himself, was simply tired of playing second fiddle to a man whose success stemmed from Xs and Os scribbled on restaurant napkins.

The *Town Crier* defended Suzzallo's decision with sarcasm: "The disagreement between Dobie and President Suzzallo is caused by a misunderstanding on the part of the president. In some manner, Suzzallo has gotten the idea that the educational functions of the university are of more importance than the football team."

Responded Dobie, "My support of the strike was justified and great good has been accomplished. I feel that the football team was grossly wronged by robbing it of a member

whom I had approved all season as the best man in the defensive scheme of the team's existence."

The students rallied around Dobie, whose U.W. teams had recorded 42 shutouts in 61 games and allowed only one team more than a touchdown. Calling him "the most loved and the most feared man who has ever fought for Washington," the *Daily* said, "His greatest fault was not that he did not serve, but that he served too well."

Former player BeVan Presley wrote to Suzzallo, "As far as character building and moral influence are concerned, I think he was one of the strongest factors working along these lines. And I feel that I derived as much benefit from my association with him as I did from any member of the faculty."

Some 800 students, more than one-fourth of the student body—showed up in front of Dobie's small house on 14th Avenue on a drizzly December night to honor the man they loved. When he walked out onto his porch, Dobie was greeted with three minutes of applause. In an uncharacteristic moment of kindness, he thanked the students, saying, "Kings, presidents and statesmen have been greatly honored, but I know they could have felt no greater honor than the honor bestowed upon me tonight." He implored them to "take your stand for or against intercollegiate athletics and stay there."

It was typical of Dobie that there was no middle ground. From the moment he stepped on campus to the moment he left, he ruled with a bullheadedness that was both his strength and weakness. To him, everything was black and white; there was no room for compromise.

Not surprisingly, he didn't change much upon leaving Washington. He went to the University of Detroit where he quit after "several days," reported the *Times*, "because he was not satisfied with the small squad."

Then Navy took him on. He resurrected its dying gridiron program, losing only one game a year for three years. Then, when offered a three-year contract on his terms, he abruptly quit, later saying there were "too many admirals trying to run football at Navy when they should be at sea."

Later, at Cornell, after achieving a record of 82-36-7 from 1920 to 1935, Dobie was fired after two sour seasons. "You can't win games with Phi Beta Kappas," he concluded.

He ended his coaching career with three years at Boston College, in which his teams lost six games. He was fired, but that didn't surprise Dobie. After all, he'd once said, "A football coach can only wind up one of two ways—dead or a failure." A decade later, in 1948, he died in Putnam, Connecticut, at age 69.

Had he fulfilled his prophecy? No. In reality, Dobie died both a success *and* a failure.

He was a master technician and psychologist when it came to coaching. He squeezed players everything they had to offer—and the results were impressive. His .780 lifetime winning percentage still ranks among the best in the country. The most points scored against one of his Washington teams was 20—in an entire season. Had Washington, where he enjoyed his greatest success, been on the more populated and media-rich East Coast, it's likely the name Gil Dobie would be mentioned in the same breath as Pop Warner, Knute Rockne and John Heisman.

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But for all his ability to coach winning football teams, Dobie was a lonely man who, because of his own pessimism, was always facing third-and-long against the world. He couldn't see beyond the scoreboard, couldn't see that life was wider than a football field, couldn't see that compromise doesn't necessarily mean defeat.

All such things considered, Dobie's legacy is the ultimate paradox: He was a loser who won.

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