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THE LEGEND OF DADDY DORN (and Friends)

by Vince Moore
Who knows how much of this tale is exaggerated? It happened nearly 80 years ago at Furman, and even those closest to the university can’t recall having heard the story. A quick glance through the archives of The Hornet, the student newspaper in those days, also reveals nothing about what happened. But something remarkable did occur — especially considering Furman’s seriously Baptist nature at the time — and the story goes like this.

It was sometime after football season in 1933.

The Purple Hurricane, as the football team was then called, had gone 6-1-2, beating Clemson and tying South Carolina. The Furman program was the best in the state during the Great Depression and was highly competitive throughout the Southeast. After the team’s 7-6 victory over Centre College early in 1933, referee Bill Doak, a former star at the University of Pittsburgh, was quoted as saying that Furman was the best defensive team he had seen in his 15 years of officiating.

The Hurricane, coached by Dizzy McLeod, had a combined record of 14-2-2 in 1932 and 1933, beating USC in 1932 and Clemson both years. The team was expected to be better than ever in 1934, and interest in Furman football was as great in the Greenville community as it was on campus. As The Hornet wrote in its final issue of the 1933-34 school year, “Our eyes are set on 1934-35. We hereby issue Hurricane warnings to all opposing teams.”

But the 1934 season didn’t live up to expectations. The Hurricane finished 5-4 and dropped close games to USC and Clemson. The reason? The team was missing four players who had been expected to return, three of whom were among the best in the state. But why they were missing wasn’t clear.

Early in the season The Hornet reported, almost as an aside, that four “regular stalwarts are absent from the first string roster.” A little later, there was a brief mention that the four had been disciplined, but no further explanation. As the season failed to go as expected, the newspaper’s coverage became a weekly series of lamentations, with many mentions of the team’s diminished firepower and bad luck. One of the missing players was Drayton “Daddy” Dorn, an all-state offensive and defensive lineman from Greenwood, S.C. The others, according to a story in the Spartanburg Herald-Journal, were Roy “Hardrock” Smith, an all-conference center and defensive guard from Union, S.C.; Trask McCarson, an all-state tackle from Hendersonville, N.C.; and Clarence Scott, a running back from Greenwood.

As it turned out, the players had been expelled from school for the entire year. And while they were allowed to return in the fall of 1935, when they rejoined the football team and led the Hurricane to another outstanding season, there remained a huge, unanswered question: Why had Furman expelled them in the first place?

The answer became a bit clearer when Morgan Blake, sports editor of the Atlanta Journal, was invited to speak at the year-end football banquet in 1935 and wrote a column about the triumphant returns of Dorn and Smith. Although he didn’t go into great detail about the boys’ transgressions, he did note that “John Barleycorn” had been at the root of the problem.

Years later, when Daddy Dorn was a successful businessman in Charleston, S.C., with a wife and three sons, his boys somehow learned of the lost season and began asking their father pointed questions about what had happened. Daddy kept refusing to be specific, but eventually gave in and agreed to tell the tale.

“He said he would tell us one time, and that would be it,” says Pete Dorn, his son. “And he never mentioned what happened again.”
In regard to the details of that fateful night eight decades ago, we may never learn how much is legend and how much is fact.

According to Pete, his father, along with several teammates and a group of girls, had gone to Paris Mountain on a Saturday night to celebrate the 1933 season. Pete isn’t sure about the timing; he thinks it was around Christmas. A quick historical check shows that Prohibition ended December 5, 1933, so they might well have been celebrating more than the football season.

The players and girls were up on the mountain, far away from the downtown campus, drinking “corn liquor” and having a good time. It just so happened that two Furman professors were also on the mountain — coon hunting. Their dogs sniffed out the revelers, and before long the professors followed the dogs into the middle of the party. The professors said they liked the boys and wished they didn’t have to report what they had seen to Furman’s president, Bennette E. Geer, but they had no choice. It was time to go.

What happened next may well have led to the severity of the punishment.

“My Dad said since they knew they were going to be expelled anyway and they didn’t want to waste the rest of the night, they tied the professors to a tree and went on with their partying,” Pete says. “They untied them and let them go the next morning.”

To put such an event into perspective, it’s important to remember what sort of school Furman was at the time. Chapel was mandatory. Dancing wasn’t allowed on campus. And in a straw poll taken by The Hornet in October 1933, the student bodies of both Furman and Greenville Woman’s College voted “overwhelmingly” against the repeal of Prohibition.

When the miscreants made the long walk to the president’s office, President Geer, according to Blake’s account, delivered a stern lecture that went something like this: “If you boys had gone out by yourselves on the bank of the [Reedy] river and loaded up, I would have given you a severe lecture and let it go at that. But you’ve made a public spectacle of yourselves and brought your college into disrepute. I’ll have to expel you.”

The chastened players accepted their punishments and went home. Geer made no promises that they could return, but he quietly asked prominent alumni in the boys’ hometowns to monitor their behavior to see if they learned anything from their expulsions.

Daddy Dorn returned to Greenwood, where he lived with his sister, Lila. He had grown up on a farm in Saluda but moved his sophomore year in high school so he could attend Greenwood High. He had never played football before, but he went out for the team and made an immediate impression on the coaches.

According to Pete Dorn, his father’s first practice came in August, and he was the only player who didn’t complain about the stifling Greenwood heat or had to crawl to the sidelines to recuperate. “After working on the farm all his life, he said practicing football was the easiest work he had ever been involved in,” Pete says.

And it was at that first practice that Drayton Dorn picked up his nickname. The coaches were looking for a punter, and Dorn said, “Give the ball to Daddy and he’ll show you how to punt.” He booted the ball some 50 yards downfield, and the nickname stuck.

Dorn wanted to go to South Carolina after graduation but wasn’t offered a scholarship. Clemson wanted him, but it was a military school at the time and Dorn made it clear he was not interested in attending a military college. Then he was contacted by Clemson assistant Frank Howard, who would later become the school’s legendary head coach.

“Howard told him not to worry, that he wouldn’t have to stay in the barracks,” Pete says. “He could stay in the local YMCA in Clemson and just play football.”
So Dorn went to Clemson. But despite what he’d been promised, he spent his first week in the barracks — which proved to be quite enough. He called Dizzy McLeod and said he’d like to come to Furman. “Dizzy drove over, picked him up, and took him back to Furman,” Pete says.

Daddy’s mother hardly missed a game during his career at Furman, but his father watched one game and swore never to attend another. “I’m not going to watch a bunch of boys beat up on each other like that,” he told the family. “I wouldn’t go out on that field unless I had some knives and guns to protect me.”

By all accounts, though, opposing players were the ones who needed protection. Furman All-America end Bob King called Dorn “one of the greatest tackles in the U.S.,” and the Bonhominie likened Dorn’s play to “a wild bull in a China shop.”

In the end, loyalty was one of Daddy’s traits as well. Even though he would have been welcomed at Clemson or South Carolina had he decided his exile from Furman was too great a punishment, he accepted his fate in hopes that he might be allowed to return.

“He loved Furman,” Pete says. “It never entered his mind to transfer to another school.”

Of course, there was a happy ending. Daddy and his friends evidently lived exemplary lives during their year away from campus, and Geer allowed them to return to school. As a result, the 1935 football season was a great one. The team went 8-1 with victories over Wake Forest, Clemson and USC, and was once again state champion.

At the football banquet, Dorn received the Sportsmanship Trophy and Hardrock Smith was named the Most Valuable Player. According to the column written by Blake, the Furman president and the two honorees had tears in their eyes as the awards were presented.

“You are real men,” Blake quoted Geer as saying. “I am proud of you. Your school is proud of you.” There must have been tears all around, because Blake wrote that “this hard-boiled old sports editor had to dry a little himself.”

Dorn, who died in 1980 at the age of 68, would ultimately find his way to the Furman Athletic Hall of Fame, as would fellow conspirator Trask McCarson. It is worth noting that Furman never lost to Clemson or South Carolina when Dorn was in uniform. And his memory lives on at Furman in the form of the P.D. “Daddy" Dorn Endowed Football Scholarship, established by Pete Dorn and his wife, Susan.

As for the details of that fateful night on Paris Mountain eight decades ago, we may never learn how much is legend and how much is fact. But knowing his father, Pete says, the story doesn’t sound far-fetched to him.

“My Dad was extremely popular when he was in school,” Pete says. “He was a ladies’ man, he was a prankster, and he enjoyed his liquor until the day he died. His night on Paris Mountain might be exaggerated a little bit, but probably not much.” [F]

Opposite: Images courtesy Furman Special Collections and Archives/Digicenter. Other images from Bonhominie of mid-1930s.