

GILMOUR DOBIE
PURSUIT OF PERFECTION



LYNN BORLAND

COACHING COMPARISON

Dobie Versus the League

The NCAA record for undefeated games of 60-0-4 at the University of Washington still stands. Coach Gilmour Dobie having coached 97% of these games is singularly responsible for the record as his streak of 59-0-3 over nine year's accounts for virtually all of this unprecedented accomplishment.

In that era of sparse population density and long distance travel challenges, college teams scheduled their preseason games with athletic clubs, military bases, high schools, all-star teams and semi-pro squads. This practice was commonplace in the early 1900s and lasted into the 1920s. As such, the records of those days include competition with much weaker teams as colleges prepared for league play. Under today's NCAA rules both teams must be college level but the same strategy applies of scheduling weaker teams in preparation for tougher games within the conference.

Because of the wider disparity between the bonafide NCAA teams and their preseason opponents compared to today some will discount the records of the early twentieth century. However, since from conference to conference each team within a particular league played each other and had comparable preseason schedules, a record such as Dobie's should be evaluated based on how well his teams stacked up within the Pacific Northwest Intercollegiate Conference (Big 6). During his nine years at Washington the other five teams had a total of twenty-four coaches. Not all teams played a round robin schedule every year from 1908-1916, but their total head-to-head records do serve as a valid standard of comparison. Recruiting was primarily limited to the Pacific Northwest with all teams getting the vast majority of their players from the same talent pool.

Here is the comparison of the six league teams for all games played within the Big 6:

College	Winning Percentage
Oregon	.680
Washington State	.645
Oregon State	.580
Idaho	.464
Whitman	.222
Total For Five Teams	.538
Washington	.976

The Big 6 teams for the nine years Dobie coached Washington competed head-to-head for a total of 203 league games. His undefeated record of a winning percentage of 98% as compared to the conference's 54% is clear evidence of his coaching supremacy when viewed against his peers.

The Big 6 won 78% of Division 1 level teams when they competed outside their conference. They played against the likes of USC, California, Colorado, Nebraska, Michigan State, Utah and Pennsylvania. This record calls into question claims of Northwest football from 1908 to 1916 being an inferior product.

CHAPTER ONE

Football as Psychology

“After all football is mostly psychology.”
Gilmour Dobie

F. A. Churchill, who personally knew and frequently wrote of Gilmour Dobie in his time, gave this description of the tall lanky Scotsman: “Far above usual stature, with a figure whose leanness is the continual joy of the sporting slang artist, Dobie looms gauntly among even the massy men who surround him. He has a head worth studying. It rests alert on a wiry neck, is small, and well-shaped. Straight, crisp, black hair tends, in intense moments, to flare out over a brow which bears the short, vertical line of irascibility between the eyes. When that line deepens with a twitch, and the bright, dark eyes begin to snap like a slave-driver’s lash, and the short lips disappear in a foreboding white line, the squad looks for trouble. Dobie always means what he says, and rarely says it. As a result, the squad accepts his words in the attitude of a gang of Platos surrounding a Socrates.”

Dobie carefully orchestrated his manner and dress on the sidelines to emphasize his role as coach and supreme commander of the team. Being over six feet tall and of slender build, he would always wear a long, usually black overcoat to further accentuate his linear frame. His outfit included a suit, white shirt with tie and either a slouch hat or, more often, a stylish black derby to add a commanding look of authority as he paced the sidelines barking orders. As with all aspects of his persona, Dobie perfected this look to uniquely set himself apart. He deliberately sought to stand out, not to blend into the background. William “Wee” Coyle, the star quarterback on Dobie’s inaugural team of 1908, described him as being totally engaged during the games. “He works just as hard as his players, running back and forth in a position parallel to the action of the game, waving his long arms excitedly, biting his ever-present cigar, kneeling to pick up pebbles only to throw them down again—more in earnest than his men, for his gaze never loses the ball nor the movement of any player on the field.” Coyle compared him to General Ulysses S. Grant in that both always smoked a heavy black cigar when in charge of their “fighting men.”

Emil Hurja, writing in 1914 in *Sunset, the Pacific Monthly*, also describes Dobie's sideline behavior as being quite intense. "If one can picture thousands of cheering spectators banked, tier upon tier, about a gigantic quadrangle keenly watching a gridiron battle, and then place upon the sidelines, crouching low, a tall, silent, raincoated figure, one may be able to get the relation of Gilmour Dobie to football. To observe Dobie on a gridiron, where his name is on the lips of thousands, young and old alike, one hardly knows what to think. He is so quiet, yet apparently absorbed mind and soul in the game. There is an uncanny mysteriousness about him sometimes when he moves along the chalk-marked edge of the field, following the advance of the players. He is an enigma when college yells start to ring out, short and snappy or prolonged and wailing, and the teams trot out on the field. But when one sees him after a game, calm and cool and undisturbed, quiet though receiving congratulations from hundreds of staid graduates and enthusiastic, admiring undergraduates, one cannot help wonder whether this unassuming demeanor is but a mask for an acutely active mind and an energetic body, wrapped up in the business of football."

He was an early adherent of physical fitness and athletic conditioning. There were many games where the other team would be running out of gas but Dobie's men seemed to gain a second wind. They practiced hard with heavy running in order to play hard. The Eastern style of play was based on a theory of identifying the best athletes in the early season, focusing on building up their talents to their peak, and, as the season progressed, bringing the team together as a single unit. From his Minnesota playing and assistant coaching background, he was an adherent of the Middle West style and came to Washington with this attitude of how to develop the team. He was an apostle of teaching the players to run their plays off quickly in an effort to tire the opposition. His strategy was excessively weighted towards teamwork first, with the development of the individual star later.

Since Dobie's teams won with such overwhelming dominance, the question can be asked whether Dobie was totally ruthless and showed no element of mercy in pursuit of winning. It is correct that many players on all teams played the entire game with very little or no substitution. But it is a mistaken impression to assume that coaches of the early 1900s purposely overextended their players with too much playing time. Teams of the conference typically had eighteen to twenty-two men in the primary squad, some of whom did not get enough playing time to earn letters. This was in an era where men performed triple duty on offense, defense, and special teams. To reduce expenses traveling squads were typically eighteen athletes. Players, of necessity, were generalists rather than the highly trained specialists of today. In 1908 Washington had twelve men who earned letters and ten more nonlettermen substitutes who, in other years, earned a letter. The entire team, including men who never saw game time, was thirty-five strong. There were many dedicated athletes who practiced in the trenches with no glory other than the love of sport. By 1915 the team consisted

of fifteen lettermen plus Deming Bronson, who got an honorary **W** for his four years of service without earning a letter, and eleven nonlettermen who, in other years, did qualify. The entire team, with those high enough in ranking to make it out for picture day, totaled twenty-nine men. In 1916, the first year freshmen were excluded from varsity league play, the freshman team alone totaled seventeen men. This marked the beginning of the large composition squads seen today, as by 1917 there were fifty-seven men on the team, twenty-nine being freshmen. Of this group fourteen earned letters.

But it wasn't just the smaller squads and players working triple duty. Dobie's players were on the field for what may seem to be excessive time (considering the lopsided scores.) The rules of the day forced coaches to leave their front line in the game beyond what merciful conduct would dictate. Up until 1910, when a player was removed from the game he was not allowed to return. In 1910 this rule was amended to allow removal of a player, but he could not return until the next quarter. The player could only come out and return once per game. Game stats gradually reflected an increase in the number of players, with as many as ten substitutes coming in off the bench.

Whether Dobie's personal style was being described in his early days as a rookie coach or thirty years later at his last head coaching position at Boston College, the one word most often used to describe this complex man was pessimism. "Gloomy" had such alliterative charm when attached to Gil that headline writers of his time found it hard to resist. "Doom" and "dour" likewise blend beautifully when wed to his last name. Before the game coming up for that week, he could often predict imminent disaster. The opposition was stronger, more athletic, better skilled, better conditioned, healthier, or his players just weren't committed to the task at hand. He certainly didn't invent the strategy of setting low expectations with his coachspeak gimmicks, as many other coaches of the day did exactly the same thing—as do many today. One reason Dobie gained such notoriety for his pessimism was his relentless consistency in its application. No matter how weak the "dopesters" predicted the other team to be, Dobie would invariably announce to the world that his boys didn't have a chance. He also could be counted on for a colorful quote, and the obvious contradiction of a coach who quite often predicted loss but always won made for rich copy. Reporters reveled at mocking him for this puffing or would set up story lines that "perhaps the wily master" was onto something this time. His sharp tongue would forever endear him to the press.

He honed his skill for projecting pessimism to a fine art. This became the centerpiece of his strategy in the pregame jousting between opposing sides for next Saturday's contest. The dark cloud of gloom and doom, while overplayed in the press, became a trademark, and the phenomenal results Washington enjoyed demonstrate that it worked. As his popularity with the press increased, it became hard to find a sports story that didn't devote some angle to his pessimistic slant. If he didn't offer one in his interview, the lack of a glum stance

would often be highlighted as news. As his legend spread far and wide with season after undefeated season, this grew into the popular conception of his identity. The tag inexorably stuck with him throughout his life, as if this was all there was to the man. In closely surveying his lifetime of accomplishment on the football field, his family life, and the descriptions of him from those who knew him, it's apparent there was much more to the coach than a cynical outlook towards next week's game. In actuality, his outward aspect of dour countenance masked an intelligent, well-spoken man of high standards and compassion. Why, then, was the glass always half empty when sizing up his chances against the competition? He was astoundingly successful over a long career; could he really believe his team would never win? Deep down inside, was he a pessimist? To find the answer to these questions, we need to take a broader look at many other driving forces that define the man.

There was a definite system to Dobie's approach to football. William "Wee" Coyle, starting quarterback on the team for 1908-11, writing in 1913, paid homage to this important aspect of Dobie's coaching skills: "The football secret of the Dobie plan is an efficient system. Dobie's business is football." The system didn't require a large variety of complicated resources to succeed; in fact, it was just the opposite. The coach was creative but was not known as an innovator breaking new ground with exotic formations or glamorous plays. His bread-and-butter play was the off-tackle line buck designed to get 3 to 4 yards per carry. He used the forward pass, but this was a supplement to the far more important power football of the running game. There are reports that Dobie did not believe in the forward pass under any circumstances, but these are not correct. When conditions were right, he would often use the pass to great advantage.

Discussing how he won the league championship in his first year at UW, Dobie said, "Straight football was very essential to win, yet I spent twenty minutes every night of practice developing Washington in the forward pass formation, which play, I emphatically declare, won for us the season's honors." He attributed the win over Oregon and the team's showing in the tightly contested tie against Washington State in the 1908 season to the forward pass. Dobie's skill at preparing his teams in the execution of the forward pass was further attested to in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* description of Washington's victory over Oregon State to clench the championship of 1910: "Three touchdowns were the result of the use of the forward pass, the play which has, more than any other strategic feature, gained first place for the varsity. Dobie has developed this play with all possible variations, in all its intricacies. Sometimes the tackle throws the ball, sometimes a punter, Max Eakins, sometimes the quarterback, end or tackle. But always they know where they are to toss it and who is to receive it."

The *Seattle Times*, in reviewing the 1912 game against the University of Idaho that virtually everyone expected to end in resounding defeat for Washington, emphasized Dobie's skill of motivating the players just as they go into a game. "He has the faculty of sending his men into battle to fight as if for their lives.

He coaches them in football in the right way; he pays strict attention to detail and leaves nothing to chance but right at the last moment he fires his men with some of his own fighting spirit and they simply tear all opposition to tatters. The Washington boys hit Idaho so hard in that first half that the boys in the red shirts simply could not stand up before the onslaught."

In writing an account of Dobie's system, George Pfann, who was an All-American wingback on Dobie's national champion teams at Cornell in the early 1920s, attributed his success there to the same techniques he employed at Washington. "Aside from insistence on careful execution of fundamentals and careful attention to detail, I think that the factors which made Dobie an outstanding coach were: (1) His ability to select a team. (2) His ability to keep a team in top condition mentally and physically. (3) Obtaining an extremely high degree of coordinated team play. (4) Getting the best performance of which they were capable out of the team."

While Dobie reached the height of his gridiron accomplishments at Washington, where he was known as a master of detail and brilliant teacher of fundamentals, these attributes were also acknowledged during his later years at Cornell. In 1923, the *Cornell Daily Sun*, reporting from an Associated Press account, attributed his success to the same principles. "Dobie's coaching method, or rather the style of play that he develops, has the peculiar quality of absolute precision that goes with definite cadence, not unlike that of a crack drill squad going through the manual of arms. The marvelous thing about it is that it goes ahead unerringly in the midst of the confusion of charging lines and strenuous physical combat. On a given play each member of the team has definite duties to perform in a perfect routine and he takes his three steps in one direction and two in another as infallibly and accurately as if there were no one else on the field." Dobie summed this up himself in this explanation of his standards: "In fact any play is merely the performance of fundamentals by eleven men working in perfect unity." The way to achieve this ideal, as he explained, depends on the team's "complete mastery of fundamentals."

Dobie's system centered on him as the master and the players as obedient servants. His players soon grew to understand that Dobie allowed no margin for error. He was an obsessive/compulsive taskmaster who demanded not just best efforts, not just excellence, but perfection. Setting this unattainable standard was how he got his athletes to stretch to their full potential. His season would start with introducing only a few simple plays and not advancing to anything more complex until these were learned to the smallest detail of footwork, body position, timing, and use of arms. When a new play was introduced, the players would feel they had it down, but it would never be to Dobie's satisfaction. If a player was a few inches out of place, he would have to suffer the wrath of the exacting instructor. It's not quoted to be from Dobie's lips, but Coyle stated the tall Scot's motto as "I am always right—you are always wrong." His record shows that he turned average players into good, and good players he elevated

to greatness. They could hate his harsh methods, but, over time, admitted they respected his ability to squeeze everything possible out of the team.

The Dobie system required total compliance to his will and a dedication to hard work that would take his men right up to the breaking point. When sensing he had pushed one of his athletes too far, the coach could turn on a dime and reach an arm out to show comforting, fatherly support. This characteristic of his nature was not often deployed, and because it was used with such discrimination, its effectiveness was greatly magnified. As for the team as a whole, there were few such fatherly expressions. Dobie believed in creating a fighting spirit, and this could only come from hard work and perseverance from both players and coach. He inspired a love for hard work by his own example. At season's end, Wee Coyle said that even if the last game was won by a large score, there was no congratulatory speech from the coach. He would address the team with words to this effect: "You are a fine lot of football players. Why, you should have licked that gang a hundred to nothing. They'll get you next year for sure! How many of you dubs are going to be back next year?" Self-doubt would set in and the players would ask themselves if they could have played a better game. Maybe the team could do better, and it's possible Dobie was right after all. Not being content to link his coach to just one Civil War general, Coyle also compared Dobie's brand of football to General Sherman's famous quote, "War is hell."

Biddy Bishop, sports editor for the *Tacoma News Tribune* from 1906-16 tells of Dobie's earliest head coaching days at North Dakota State. The players wanted to test the coach to assert their manhood and were said to "rag" him. This was attributed to his youth and his tall, slender frame. Seeing that he had to take drastic steps to establish himself as boss, Dobie turned the tables and physically challenged the entire squad. "Now you fellows have got it into your head that I'm not a fighter. I'm going to show you that you have made one big mistake." He pulled off his coat and sweater and, from the middle of the football field, dared every player to fight him one-on-one. There were no takers. The point was made, and after that the players held him in the highest regard. Dobie's toughness and ability for psychological maneuvering came early in his career. This vignette from his earliest head coaching days in 1906 offers the perfect illustration of his attitude of command and control.

Players were kept on edge by Dobie in that they were never totally sure of their status, this being done to get them to practice their hardest right up to game day. Stars from the year before would quite often be relegated to practicing with the second team as a way of Dobie exercising his authority. This wasn't intended to demean, but was a tactic to assure that they didn't get too full of themselves. The coach had a mortal fear of inflated egos and felt that individual expression was the surest route to collective failure. He knew that self-importance could lead to a player branching out on his own, and such creative license would end in disaster. His plays were exacting, and the apparatus broke

down if every part didn't operate with machinelike precision. To accomplish this end required obedience and subservience. All that remained to get the players to buy in was to prove the system on the field of battle.

When the numbering of players was first used on the West Coast in the Thanksgiving game at Washington against Oregon, played on November 25, 1909, Dobie resisted this innovation because of the fear that his players would showboat with their easily distinguishable identities. He also felt that when opposing teams scouted him, numbering would make it too easy to pinpoint just how his plays were run. Many coaches of the day selected all-star teams, and Dobie philosophically objected to this because of his concern for the damaging effects of star power. By 1911 he grudgingly made selections. He acceded because if didn't select a team, the other coaches would obviously bypass his players and Dobie would look like a bad sport in the end.

In sizing up his competition, Dobie would scout the opposition to identify its best players, which was particularly important if the captain was a standout. The Washington mentor would train his men to double- or triple-team him early in the game. He knew that average players depended on the star to carry the biggest load. As the star's spirit would break, the rest of the team would weaken. This was another side to Dobie's insistence that his players perform as a unit and give up any attitude of individual stardom. Too much reliance on one person meant that others on the team would possibly slack off. In Dobie's system, every responsibility, whether it was ball carrying, blocking, passing, pass reception, kicking, interference (blocking for the ball carrier), or tackling, was of equal weight. Each player's role was on par with that of any other player on the field. Knowing that opposing players who depended on a star would lose confidence when the star couldn't fully contribute gave Dobie's men a decided advantage. There was one player on Dobie's teams, however, who did have absolute authority. He was the play and signal caller, who was usually, but not always, the quarterback. The coach gave this man absolute authority, and even the captain was subordinate. This was all the more important because the coach was prohibited from signaling plays, and even a player coming in off the bench was not allowed to share any instructions he may have gotten while on the sidelines.

Dobie was a master of human psychology. Throughout his professional life he exhibited great skill in gaining the upper hand over an entire team or an individual player. This talent was evident in the very earliest days of his tour of duty and only improved as he matured in his coaching tactics. He knew how to get into a player's head or how to gain advantage over the group psyche of the entire team. More than any other aspect of the ample bag of tricks he used to gain control over those he set his sights on, his mastery of psychology was his greatest tool. This can be seen in his ability to get his own players to compete at their best and to psych out the opposition to compete at less than their best. Sportswriters, fans, his players, University of Washington presidents Thomas

Kane and Henry Suzzallo, and opposing coaches would consistently bring up Dobie's grasp of psychology and his skill in its deployment to win games. As we observe his game strategies in the pages to follow, this attribute will be abundantly evident. Victor Zednick, the graduate manager of student affairs for 1908-11 (essentially the title of athletic director today), worked closely with the coach for four years and, in addition to lauding what he termed his wonderful attention to detail, singled out his command of psychology as a secret to his success. "He takes nothing for granted. He works night and day and dreams of football. It is the power of mind over matter. A psychologist, too, Dobie knows how to handle men. His personality is powerful, irresistible. He has a mastery of every position. Wiry, keen, magnetic, he drives his men to victory."

An essential characteristic that defined his teaching skills as a coach was his commitment to detail. To call him a mere stickler for detail is to understate this critical aspect of what made him a great coach. Seven decades later this same quality was universally ascribed to Washington's Coach Don James as being a key to his remarkable leadership skills. Dobie triumphed far out of proportion to other teams in the league, and his painstaking nature was largely behind this success. Back then teams didn't conduct widespread multistate recruiting drives like today; they had to rely primarily on local talent. Victor Zednick said this in sizing up Dobie's insistence on covering all bases: "Every student can learn a lesson from his attention to the most minute detail and his consistent application. No matter how weak his opponents, he worries that he has overlooked something and when the teams meet, you can wager Dobie has forgotten nothing." This was well before full-ride scholarships were offered at West Coast universities to attract the best players. The league drew its athletes from the same pool of prospects, so the end result depended much more on each coach's ability to impart basic skills.

George Varnell was a sports reporter for the *Spokane Tribune* and a football referee who later became sports editor for the *Seattle Times*. As a friend of Dobie's, he enjoyed a close-up vantage point to assess the coach's methods. "He was a wonderful friend. However, in his coaching work he was a driver of the first water. He was a perfectionist in the truest sense of the word. I saw him in practice when he worked virtually the entire afternoon on a single play. He believed in fundamentals, and he worked on them like a beaver building a dam. He brooked no talk from his players. He was the *word* and his players were the listeners and doers." This relentless insistence of breaking down each player's role to its basic steps defined how he taught principles. Dobie stressed that it was the little things that count, and he insisted that his men strive for perfection in seemingly minor details in order to be successful in the larger goal of teamwork. Repeat drills of running each player through his assignment *ad nauseam* assured that he could carry out his job under game conditions. The monotony of repeating the play for an entire afternoon also nailed down for each player how his teammates were to interact. Dobie's teams were described

as "machines" for good reason. His insistence on perfection became a distinguishing characteristic every bit as much as the reported pessimism that commanded the headlines. Reporting on seemingly mindless and repetitious drilling was not nearly as catchy as a headline claiming "Gloomy Gil Predicts Team To Get Crushed."

Dobie did not believe in a wide arsenal of plays because his strategy depended on precise execution of every play. With perfection as the standard, a dazzling array of plays just would not work. Too many plays would lead to mistakes. Since the coach approached his job much as a dance choreographer who demands exacting footwork, the system required flawless performance but fewer steps to learn. The 1914 Thanksgiving Day game with Washington State was anticipated to be more competitive than in recent years, even though UW had dominated the series over the easterners the past four years, allowing them only six points to the westerners' eighty-five. Somehow Dobie in analyzing the circumstances of the contest predicted his team could not win this one, but nevertheless his boys managed to eke out a 45-0 victory. That evening Dobie and his fiancée, Eva Butler, were dining with George Varnell and his wife at the Butler Hotel (no relation to Eva) when John Bender, the Washington State coach, happened on their party. Varnell reported their discussion: " 'I can't understand that licking. Why Gil, we had a hundred and five plays to work on your team,' said Bender. 'Maybe that was your trouble,' Dobie responded. 'We had only nine plays; but coach, we sure knew them all well.' "

The Washington mentor was a rough talker, devoid of nuance, who never held back his feelings. He would resort to crude, insulting, and seemingly demeaning name calling to make a point or call out a player. When his tongue lashings are taken out of context or interpreted to represent his true beliefs, an objective observer would judge them as flat-out unacceptable. With his strong personality, those in earshot of one of his verbal assaults had to know that here was a person who meant business. When he used tough language, it was not to berate, but to deflate. After a big win, in getting his players ready for next Saturday, Dobie felt he had to let some air out of the swelled heads that inevitably built up after a crushing victory. There was no subtlety of expression when Dobie wanted to drive a point home. Purposeful overkill and sarcasm were tools of his trade, and this must be considered when we judge just what motivated his behavior. Over his career he didn't reserve his caustic remarks for just his players. He could be just as generous with derogatory observations of fans, faculty members, sportswriters, and game officials who ruled on a play other than how he saw it. The public outbursts almost got him fired when he first came to Washington, as we will see in chapter 2, so he did learn to rein in this behavior.

As will often happen with strong personalities a trait such as Dobie's penchant for coarse language can serve as a principal marker to define the individual. This is certainly fair, but it can result in overshadowing other

less-dramatic but relevant aspects of personality. As a biographer, I seek to place such characteristics of his nature into a broader framework so that the reader can better reach his or her own understanding of the man. To do otherwise paints a more sterile picture of someone who is far deeper than the outward impression left only by words with no context. I sought the opinions of those who were there and either witnessed or were the recipients of the coach's flights into verbal overkill.

Dobie's own accounts of these episodes are also reported here to add more dimension to the question. One particularly enlightening incident is given with his answer to a question about what was the hardest situation he ever had to face as a football coach. His explanation involved how he handled replacing four-year, all-everything quarterback Wee Coyle upon his graduation with Bud Young, who was in many respects a better athlete, only to have him suffer a terrible knee injury landing him on the bench for the season. We will hear Dobie's description of how, in one week, he had to turn Charles "Chunky" Smith, who was described as short, stocky, and bowlegged, into his starting quarterback. All he did was to take a player who, in his prior two years, had not earned a letter and turn him into the starting quarterback for a game won by Washington, 100-0.

At the University of Minnesota, Gil Dobie graduated with a degree in law. Throughout his career he was described by those who knew him personally as well spoken, very intelligent, and a good conversationalist. As a head coach he practiced his profession for thirty-three years, had a lifetime winning percentage of .784, had fourteen undefeated college seasons, never lost a game in nine years at Washington, was elected by his peers as the third president of the American Football Coaches' Association, had teams who three times were voted national champions, is a member of the Hall of Fame at every college where he coached, and, among many other honors, was inducted as a charter member into the National Football Hall of Fame. The obvious question is, given his overbearing temperament, how is that he could succeed to the very highest level of accomplishment in his field? In a job where your every coaching move is covered as the headline story of four metropolitan newspapers' sports sections, with many articles being picked up by national news services, he clearly wasn't surviving on smoke and mirrors. In looking for answers to the contradictory nature of the man, there is one singular aspect of his makeup that stands out. The answer lies in his ability to command respect through sheer force of personality. We have pointed out that his greatest strength in dealing with people was his mastery of psychology. With this innate skill, he manipulated virtually everyone in his sphere of influence to alternately love him or hate him.

There are two primary examples of this. His practice techniques of working his men right up to the edge but knowing where to ease back made him a target at that moment for his players' wrath. Their great success resulting

from these torture sessions made it all worthwhile and earned their lasting respect. Time after time, and long after their playing days had ended, his players returned to pay tribute to their mentor. When Dobie was invited back to Seattle in 1940 by a committee of his players to be feted at a banquet held in his honor at the Washington Athletic Club, Royal Brougham of the *Post-Intelligencer* gave an account of this. In his early days as a reporter, he knew of standout fullback Walt Shiel's succession of feelings for his coach. Dobie would later single him out after leaving Washington as the greatest fullback he ever coached. "There is something fine about the loyalty of football men for the Simon Legree who lashed and scolded and drove them until they dropped from exhaustion. 'I used to hate that guy Dobie until I could have killed him,' Walt Shiel used to tell me. Today, a quarter century later, the tall Scot is his idol."

His rough and biting language was another tool in his psychological arsenal. He told you how he felt and where you stood with him. His was not a condescending anger. It is wrong to describe his behavior as brooding contempt for those who did not act or think like him. This was vintage Gil Dobie. It's only from a position of strength that someone can hazard to publicly rebuke another and expect to maintain his respect. Dobie could accomplish this rare feat since he knew that the sting of his words would cause only short-term damage but long-term gain. Let's examine a few instances of his vocal combat:

Fred "Pete" Tegtmeier, Center—One of the greatest players to put on a uniform for Dobie. He was a four-year letterman; captain of the 1908 team, Flaherty Medal winner in 1909, and, for three years, a unanimous All-Northwest selection. In the very earliest days when the new coach had taken over the team, the players hadn't adjusted to Dobie's harsh methods, and the talented Tegtmeier was having particular trouble. In a textbook demonstration of reverse psychology, Dobie cut his center low with this shot: "Why, you great big yellow-haired bum, you've got a yellow streak up your back as yellow as your dirty yellow hair." One can only imagine the other players' reaction to hearing such a rebuke of a standout team member and, at 190 pounds, one of the largest players on the squad. Wee Coyle, a witness to the oral mugging, had this reaction: "Pete took it as every other player took it...You wonder why? It was because Dobie was a student of psychology and understood men. He would go right up to the breaking point and then leave you out on a limb." The treatment Dobie gave to this famously talented player falls into that category of psychological tools used by the coach to knock a star's ego down to manageable proportions.



Museum of History and Industry
William "Wee" Coyle, Quarterback 1908



Museum of History and Industry
Melville Mucklestone, Right Halfback 1908

Tegtmeier truly was a great athlete, and everyone knew it, including Dobie. While his methodology here is certainly perverse, and those on the receiving end of such an attack would initially take it as a personal insult, the approach did work for Dobie. He didn't use such crude language with the intent of driving the player away, but to let him know the coach was the boss and to solidify the star's commitment to hard work. Dobie knew all too well the dangers of such talents falling in love with their celebrity. Such intense methods can only work in the hands of a strong personality, and everyone who ever described Dobie was unanimous in this portrayal of the coach. In his hands, these well-aimed assaults worked.

Ralph "Penny" Westover, Fullback—He played only one year under Dobie on the 1908 team. He wasn't a highly gifted player but, through hard work, did earn his letter. In learning the fundamentals, he drew Dobie's wrath by getting confused on his role on basic plays. Dobie, not being one to praise in public and criticize in private, laid into the mild-mannered Westover: "Get out of here, you poor numbskull, go turn in your suit and never show yourself again." The

dejected Penny left the field, and that night, after thinking it over, was still hot. "Oh, if I had only hit him; oh, if I had only hit him." For the next practice Penny was the first man on the field and was called out for the first drill, determined to prove himself. Dobie's instincts told him that pride would draw him back, which is exactly what happened. Penny doubled down and became a dependable journeyman on the team.

Melville "Muck" Mucklestone, Halfback—One of the all-time great athlete's names, and likewise one of Dobie's all-time great players: All-Northwest for 1908, '09, and '11, and captain of the 1909 team. In 1911, going into the third game of the season against Idaho, it appeared to all the world that Washington should make easy work of this weaker team. As circumstances unfolded, Mucklestone unwittingly played right into Dobie's hands, giving him just what he needed to deflate some pumped-up egos. The Purple and Gold hadn't been scored upon for six games going back to the prior year, and Mr. Gloom's dire predictions for defeat were being called into question. Prior to the game in Spokane, the coach had assembled the team at their hotel and, as he was going over pre-game strategy, a loud snore from Mucklestone interrupted Dobie's address. He couldn't have done worse had he set off a stink bomb. "I hope you get licked! You cowards! You! You! You! I'm through with you!" Those were the last words from Dobie before or during the game; he didn't even speak to the team at halftime. A drastic measure, to be sure, but an unmistakable point was made: the coach was in supreme command.

In winning by the narrow margin of 17-0, the team could plainly see that their leader did make a difference. Cunning staging by Dobie to drive home a point, or a reckless coach who lost control for the moment? The reader can draw his or her own conclusion. Opinions from those of the time who judged the coach's behavior are split. This brought an end to inattention at team meetings and proved to the superstars that they weren't quite as hot as they thought they were. Taking advantage of this opportunity to use Mucklestone as his public foil worked for Dobie, but regardless of the way the coach went about delivering his lessons to his young charges, the players held him in high regard. Going into the 1909 Oregon game for the championship, Mucklestone was quoted in the *Seattle Times* saying, "We feel we have the best coach in the country and intend to show him our appreciation by winning."

William "Wee" Coyle, Quarterback—This great athlete is in the Washington Hall of Fame in football, baseball—and track. He was captain on the 1911 team, served as an officer and was wounded in World War I, served as Washington state lieutenant governor for 1921-25, and lettered in all four years as quarterback in football, never losing a game. There was no mistaking his all-around athletic prowess, certainly not to someone with as keen an eye for talent as Coach Dobie. Given Dobie's constant struggle to impress the imperative of teamwork over individuality, a star of this magnitude posed a particularly difficult challenge. The record shows that Dobie was entirely consistent in his treatment of

Coyle. He did not place him on a pedestal; quite the contrary, despite Coyle's record of 27-0-1. Clark Squire, writing in the *Washingtonian*, declared, "Dobie says that Coyle gave him a fight every year, and it was necessary to tie him and whip him before he would do his work." Leaving no game details to chance, Dobie called Coyle to his house at 4738 Fourteenth Ave NE (today University Avenue) in Seattle for both pregame preparation the night before the game and a postgame critique the night after. Coyle described the sessions as totally one-sided, with Dobie doing all the talking. "I have been grilled by school teachers, by high-ranking army officers, by the general public, and even my wife, but nothing ever so intense as those endless...private conferences with Dobie." Dobie gave the complete schedule of plays to follow, and Coyle admitted that he always followed them to the letter. Paraphrasing Dobie's parting words as the evening came to a close, Coyle recalls that the coach "probably" said something like, "Coyle, you're a rotten quarterback, and if I didn't have so many cripples you'd be sitting on the bench. You've played your last two games like a man devoid of brains." Taken at face value, a player on the receiving end of such a harsh rebuke was obviously doing a lousy job. The record is abundantly clear that this was not the case.

Despite the seeming disrespect, Coyle didn't just go through the motions from these "pep talks"; to the contrary, he was impelled to greatness. If we seek an answer as to how this could be, the great quarterback resolves the quandary for us. He goes to great lengths to explain that Dobie cast a spell over the team through the severe treatment he inflicted on players from the first day of practice. He admits, "The terrorizing tactics of Gilmour Dobie will remain with me until my dying day." It was never possible to perform up to his standards. "We couldn't pass, we couldn't run, we couldn't kick, we couldn't tackle, we couldn't block—in fact, to use his own words, 'You are the dumbest, clumsiest, rankest collection of so-called football excuses I have ever seen.' " Coyle unabashedly concludes that after four weeks of practice, the entire team was eating out of Dobie's hand. In chapter 2 we look into the challenges and life experiences Dobie faced as a small child. From this we gain a thorough understanding of why and how he came to adopt the severe methods he used in teaching his men the game of football.

The players grew to trust the coach as they saw personal improvement in their own skills, with great strength and unity in the team as a whole. This growing bond, in Coyle's opinion, was consistent with so many other observers of the time. He resolved that it sprang from Dobie's brilliant command of human psychology. Over his lifetime Coyle shared many laudatory remarks he held regarding his former coach. Perhaps his highest tribute came in his ten-part series in the *Seattle Times*, "The Spell Of Gil Dobie": "I still have to meet one of his former players who would fail to say that he was glad to have played under Dobie, and at the same time was glad when he was through playing. He was

held in the highest respect and admiration by the men over whom he held his mailed fist, because he was honest and fair. He was a natural leader of men."

Here is Dobie's take on his interaction with Penny Westover and Wee Coyle, as reported in the *Seattle Times* November 29, 1908. "Then, the grim humor lines deepening in his face, the Washington coach takes up a bit of gossip that all will appreciate. 'Yes, there was trouble with Westover and with Coyle at the beginning of the season. They did not fall kindly to the submissive spirit of team organization. It is a condition that comes to every coach in the history of football. It was a question as to who was to be boss. The two boys and I came to a perfect understanding in a short time and I do not believe I have any better friends than Coyle and Westover.' "

The attitudes expressed by Washington players were shared by Cornell men who played under Dobie in the 1920s. George Lechler, a Cornell player going back to see Dobie after graduating, gave this observation of players' reactions: "They go to see Dobie gratefully, as disciples return to a teacher who gave them helpful lessons in character building and in ability to understand their fellow men. They are unanimous in their praise of his fairness and sense of justice. And though their mentor has a caustic speech, there is no one whose favorable opinion they would rather have; therefore they play the game not alone for love of Alma Mater but for the gold of his approval, which is not carelessly bestowed."

George M. Varnell, Football Referee and Sports Reporter—"Varnell I never did trust you. You're a rotten referee. If you don't watch for a certain play today, I'll do something I might later regret." Wee Coyle was in the room and gave a firsthand account of this put-down as being just before the Oregon game of November 4, 1911, when Dobie was making sure that the referee was aware that he intended to call a trick play in the game. Since Dobie, in giving the referee of the game a heads-up on the play, was asking for his assistance, he obviously wouldn't insult the man. Varnell happened to be a close personal friend of Dobie's and a referee that he would often recommend to officiate his games. If Dobie's remarks are just taken at face value without knowing the circumstances within which they were made, even a charitable observer would conclude he was off his rocker.

There are many instances of latter-day reporting on Dobie's conduct that did just that: drew a conclusion that Dobie had a serious personality disorder because of such caustic language. There certainly are instances where he does go over the top, but to accurately assess his purposes and mind-set when going into such seeming rages, we must look deeper into what made him tick. Clearly here, it can be seen that Dobie must have been taking dramatic license with his feigned insults directed at his good friend George Varnell. Dobie's choice of words and tone of delivery were calculated for maximum effect and were not the ravings of a man in despair. This is further underscored by the fact that Dobie would want this ally to judge him fairly in calling the game. Dobie was

too smart and knew too much about human psychology to talk down to the very official who held his championship hopes in the balance.

We've found that he was vastly successful at his chosen occupation, was intelligent, well-spoken, driven, detail minded, a perfectionist, strong willed, held a gifted mastery of human psychology, and feared individualism as destructive to teamwork. Given his many talents, there is one additional trait that also stands out: the predictability of his behavior. He held such rigid standards that he brought a set of beliefs to his work and stuck to them. To some degree he could just about always be counted on to play down his team's chances of winning their next game. He likewise spoke his mind and, judged by any standard of normal human interaction, was much too strict. He was extremely sparing of compliments to players for doing a good job. His attention to detail and insistence on perfection could be viewed as obsessive. Now, given all of these very predictable behaviors, he still excelled far above his competitors. In his thirty-three-year career, he won more than 78 percent of his games, placing him at the highest echelon among the winningest college coaches of history. It can only be concluded that he succeeded because of his behavior, even though much of his conduct certainly can be called into question.

I found through volumes of documents drawn from firsthand Dobie observers that his greatest motivating force for dealing with players was his fear of success going straight to their heads. His view that winning demanded teamwork was wired into his DNA. Great accomplishment through superior athleticism was an ideal, and he always encouraged his athletes to do their best, but he felt that he needed to tamp down bloated egos. Winning could only come by his constant efforts to assure that his players had no room to improvise. The one prerequisite for success was teamwork. In guarding against a player wandering off the ranch, he kept praise to a minimum, and since he carefully courted each player's trust, could aim overly critical language in his direction at just the right time. In the earliest experiences of this rough treatment, the player would feel that Dobie was directing the assault at him personally, but he soon learned that this was Dobie's style in critiquing his performance, not criticizing his character. This magnified response to the mistake served its purpose, since this was what the players grew to expect from the coach. There was no room left for the player to pat himself on the back since he quickly learned that playing time came by keeping in Dobie's good graces.

Dobie himself traced his deep-seated fear of overconfidence to the days he started as quarterback at Minnesota. Emil Hurja, in asking him for the key to his success, stated, "Instantly he will reply. 'Pound out overconfidence from your men and you'll win most any time.' " Dobie went on to give this account of a very early coaching lesson he had learned thirteen years before. "Our greatest rival was Wisconsin. We skinned 'em one year with comparative ease, and the next season we thought we'd have a snap. We trained and we practiced, more from routine than otherwise. When we met the Badgers we were surprised.

Somehow they seemed to have the jump on us all around. We couldn't see how it was possible, but it was. We were licked. I learned my lesson right there." Soon after this bitter experience Dobie launched his collegiate coaching career.

There is a reason this made such an impact on this impressionable twenty-two-year-old. In 1900, with Dobie quarterbacking Minnesota, their record was 10-0-1, including a win over archrival Wisconsin. Next year Minnesota's record was 9-1-1, with the sole blemish being the Wisconsin loss. During his three playing years, he started at end in 1899 and quarterbacked the team in 1900 and 1901. He was an excellent player and had a reputation as being fiercely competitive. In chapter 7 we will delve into Dobie's deep-seated anguish over just his *fear* of losing. From this it can be seen that an *actual* loss, such as the 18-0 shutout at the hands of Wisconsin, was pure torment. It is little wonder that he singles out this loss as the root cause for his great fear of overconfidence. The lesson Dobie learned back on November 16, 1901, formed the foundation for what guided him for as long as he mentored men in the game of football.

The question still remains as to how Gil Dobie came by his most identifiable characteristic as being a gloomy pessimist. We earlier asked this question and concluded that it could only be answered by taking a broader look at the other driving forces that define his nature. Dobie's ever-so-constant predictions of impending doom coming at the hands of his next opponent is also a product of the coach's obsessive belief in team solidarity over self-expression. By predicting that his team would lose, he was (in his mind) just being consistent that you can't risk complacency by signaling to your players that they are going to win. Predict doom, and even if the odds are enormously in the team's favor, the coach has gone public that his machine can possibly lose. Each player, being one piece in the overall process, might be that one weak link that could cause the system to fail. As the Purple and Gold climbed to twenty, thirty, forty, fifty and sixty-plus games without a loss and won so consistently over a span of years, Dobie's pessimism obviously wore thin. He was nothing if not a creature of habit, so he stuck with it. With as much press as his pessimism attracted, many are shocked to discover that upon closer analysis—Dobie often did not go dark. This reveals a pattern of predictable behavior that exposes the real purpose behind his foretelling disaster ahead, a toss-up game, or oftentimes victory. It's a core principle; his predictions weren't so much based on what the rest of the world was saying but what he needed to get on the street to suit his purposes. To do otherwise would expose his team to that most dreaded of all diseases to afflict a football team, a fat ego.

Hurja, being such a close observer of Dobie, included his penchant for gloomy predictions as one more way he influenced his players to do their best. "Every fall, when the football season approaches, one will hear and read on every hand reports of Dobie's team. The men are out of condition, mere dubs, unfit to battle with the other conference elevens, sure to lose, with no possible chance of winning. He has been styled 'Gloomy Gil' by the sport writers of the

Northwest. They acknowledge that Dobie has no equal as a dispenser of hard-luck tales. When critics think his machine is working at its best he will point out the poor, unstable condition of the team; he will parcel out news of overtraining, undertraining or disorganization. And when the referee blows the final whistle and the score board shows unmistakable victory, he will start to tell about the injuries his men suffered in the game, preparing, as it were, for the next contest. Throughout the season his men are ever on edge, fighting to show him that they are in the running, and that his pessimism is unwarranted.

“Dobie, idol coach of Washington, has solved the puzzle of football science. He has seen what needed to be done, and he has done it, consistently, for nine years. He has made pessimism pay.” But this is only one side of the man. It takes his entire nine-year career at Washington to fully understand just how pessimism fit into the overall makeup of the man. It is not correct to strictly label him as “Gloomy Gil,” the “Apostle of Grief,” the “Sad Scot,” or any one of several appellations that headline writers so readily branded him with. He was far deeper than such a superficial tag could describe. A writer needs a headline, and the sports pages love to theme their heroes or anti-heroes, but in the full account of his life given here, you will discover that he did not always predict disaster ahead. Of course not. The fascinating back story, however, is just how much it reveals about Dobie’s real intent behind his message when he does not broadcast a gloomy prediction. The complete man cannot be conveniently bundled into a couple of catchy words.

Away from his self-imposed obsessiveness in game preparation, daily practice, and on-field behavior, he was another man entirely. It was natural for a Scot to take up golf, which he did while at Washington. When on the golf course or gathering with friends over a cigar and a beer, he was described as convivial, relaxed, and a good conversationalist with broad-ranging opinions. In these pages we have the opportunity to observe the great coach on and off the field. His widely reported gloomy nature can be seen as an affectation that springs to life when he puts on his overcoat and derby, lights his cigar, and goes to work. When a reporter wants to know his take on that week’s game, he can be riddled with doubt, but as we will see—not always. The doubt is real and not a put-on but springs from a deep well within his complex nature that requires him to place every ounce of his wit and intelligence into winning. To Dobie, losing, after all his intensity of preparation, is the most feared aspect in life. He seeks perfection, and by this standard there is no room for a loss. Take the man away from the game and we see a husband, father, and mentor who won the near unanimous respect of the hundreds of players who grew as men under his leadership.

CHAPTER TWO

Off to a Shaky Start—1908

“The prospects are not bright. They are fairly good but nothing more. There has been, in the past years, too much of such talk here, too much four-flushing and bragging, too little work. Last year Oregon beat Washington. So did Whitman and Pullman. Idaho tied Washington, and little Whitworth played her a 5 to 0 game. What possible right have we to talk of a championship team? Take these five teams. If they were exactly evenly matched, by the cold figures of arithmetic, we could only expect to win one out of the five games. We must work, I tell you. But do not get the idea I am a pessimist.”

Gilmour Dobie, address to team, September 15, 1908

Robert Gilmour Dobie was born January 31, 1878, on the outskirts of Minneapolis/St. Paul on Ashland Street, Hastings, Minnesota, the son of Robert Dobie, a well digger and later machinist, and homemaker Ellen (Black) Dobie, both natives of Scotland. He had two older sisters, Ellen (b1874), and Jane (b1876), and a younger brother George (b1880). Dobie’s mother died in 1882 of consumption and the next year his father married Jane Ford, another Scottish immigrant. Two half-brothers were added to the family with the birth of Alexander in 1884 and Robert in 1886. Family tragedy struck again when they lost their father in 1886 leaving Jane with 5 children. She was also pregnant at the time, with Robert. The father died of what was suspected to be an overdose of laudanum, a widely available patent medicine at the time that combined alcohol and opium. Some accounts list the cause of death as suicide and others as an accidental overdose.

It was a difficult struggle for a thirty-five year old woman to be suddenly thrust into the role of breadwinner for this large family. She decided that it would be best for Gilmour, age 8, and George, age 6, to be sent to the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children as wards of the state. This orphanage in Owatonna, sixty miles south of Hastings, had just opened and her two step-sons were among the first ten children admitted. Coming from the hardscrabble life they now led, both boys surveyed the newly-built