

# The lost legacy of UW football

**Gil Dobie** | He never lost a game in nine seasons at Washington, yet most of what we know about the Hall of Fame coach called “Gloomy Gil” is fiction.

BY LYNN BORLAND  
*Special to the Seattle Times*



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

*Gil Dobie was hired at age 30 and fired before ever losing a game.*

**D**ecades before Don James or Jim Owens carried clipboards for the Huskies, there was Gil Dobie.

Dobie never lost a football game at Washington, assembling a nine-year unbeaten streak from 1908 to 1916 of 59-0-3 that has never been equaled. Many proclaimed him the greatest college football coach of his day, an era of legends like Knute Rockne, John Heisman and Glenn “Pop” Warner.

But to most Huskies fans, Dobie is unknown, or a faded footnote to his-

tory. In a sense, his forgotten legacy has become his only loss.

Yet the rich tradition of UW football cannot be properly understood without the trailblazer who predates even the nickname Huskies. He is a College Football Hall of Fame coach who was hired at age 30. He was a demanding perfectionist whose dominance forced West Coast football onto the national stage. And his excellence set the wheels in motion that would lead to the Pac-12 Conference.

What little most know about Dobie is more fiction than fact. The pessimist known as “Gloomy Gil” actually was a master of psychology who was negative only when it suited his needs. His teams relied on the run, but he was an early innovator who embraced the pass, recruited speed and pushed his players to pick up the tempo to wear out opponents. Myth has it that he was so unpopular he was pelted with rocks and fruit by his own fans.

In fact, Robert Gilmour Dobie was more interesting than any myth. He was an orphan (a fact he hid from the public), who escaped a bleak existence in Minnesota to earn his law degree. He could be dictatorial and emphasized his role as supreme commander by wearing a trench coat, three-piece suit and black derby as he puffed cigars along the sideline. He was featured in “Ripley’s Believe Or Not” but was fired in a public feud with the university president after a scandal

that could have been ripped out of today’s news.

## *Life as an orphan*

Dobie was born of Scottish immigrant parents on Jan. 31, 1878 in Hastings, Minn. His life soon, quite literally, paralleled that of Charles Dickens’ David Copperfield. At age 4, he lost his mother, and by 8 his father died. His indigent stepmother, with six mouths to feed, reluctantly sent Dobie and a younger brother to an orphanage.

It was more military outpost than loving home, with virtually all family contacts cut off. At his most impressionable, Dobie learned the authoritarian rule that he later displayed as a coach.

In nine years at the state-run school, Dobie was indentured out as a child laborer to four separate fami-

lies. His was a loveless, bleak existence with more rejection than acceptance. Dobie, like Copperfield, was subjected to long hours of harsh manual labor and eventually ran away. And to assure this chapter of his life would end as Dickens scripted it, he was rescued by a kindhearted woman from a wealthy



## **‘Pursuit of Perfection’**

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**“Bow down to Washington,” written in 1915, includes the chorus: “Dobie, Dobie pride of Washington.” The many rallies where he spoke were always to packed houses with thundering standing ovations. Fans flooded the field and hung out after games hoping to hear a word from the master. Players sang his praises despite his controlling personality and crude tirades. For decades, Seattle-area teenagers played “Gil Dobie” youth football.**

family. But he had been whipsawed between the orphanage and indentured service so often, he didn’t graduate from high school until he was 21.

Despite those hurdles, he became an honorable-mention All-American quarterback at Minnesota, leading his team to its first conference title. While still in law school, he coached Minneapolis South High School to two unbeaten seasons and a state championship and was an assistant coach at Minnesota. Next he was unbeaten in two seasons at North Dakota Agricultural College (now North Dakota State).

His teams had never lost when he became one of the youngest head football coaches in UW history in 1908.

### ***The peanut incident***

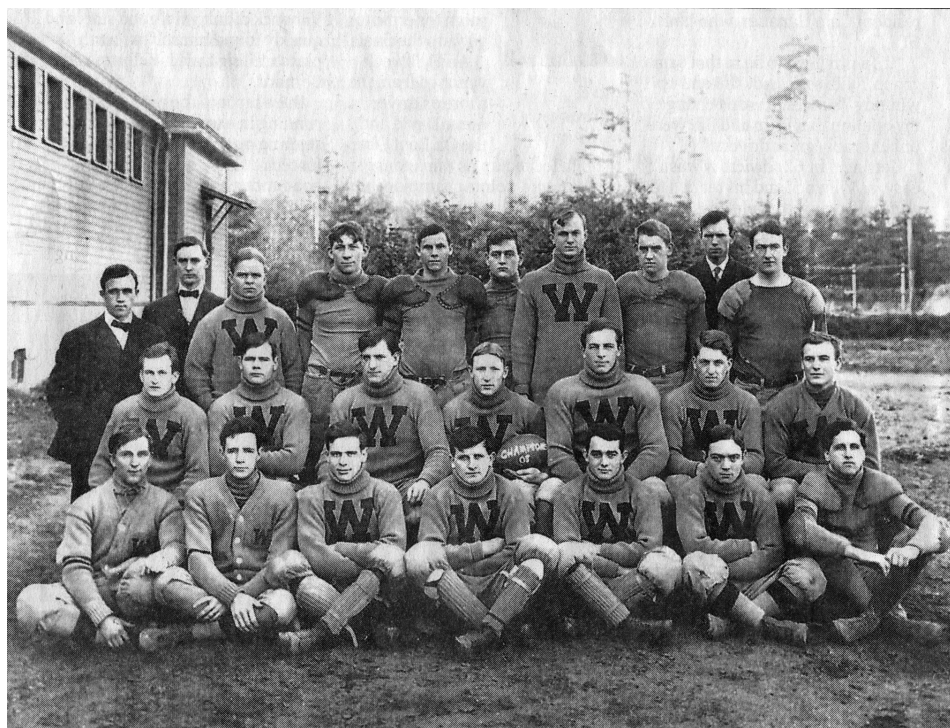
The orphan from Minnesota left little doubt who was in control when he arrived in Seattle. He demanded hard work, meticulous attention to fundamentals and total adherence to his word.

Still, Dobie had plenty to learn. Being in the spotlight with six Seattle daily newspapers reporting every move was an invitation to disaster. Dobie would not disappoint. His youthful hubris showed through in spectacular fashion.

He found himself in hot water after only six weeks on the job. In his inaugural league opener against Whitman, the lanky Dobie, who stood more than 6 feet tall, blocked the view of a city councilman and the Seattle Postmaster.

“Sit down, you big bum!” came the demand shouted from the stands.

When there was no response, the two prominent fans threw a volley of peanuts in Dobie’s direction. Still no reaction. After a couple more rounds



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, 1908

*Gil Dobie (second from right on top row) poses with his first Washington team in 1908. That squad went undefeated, just as the next eight teams under Dobie did. He was fired after the 1916 season with a mark of 59-0-3 at the UW.*

of shelling from the grandstands, Dobie let loose a searing tirade.

The brouhaha ended up in a local newspaper as an open letter of complaint to the university president, Dr. Thomas Kane. Kane’s letter of response vowed “that whatever remedy is necessary will be applied.”

The editorial flogging was embarrassing but saved Dobie’s career. As an orphan, he had to fight for everything, but he quickly realized there were other means of conflict resolution in the public spotlight. Seven years later, Dobie admitted in a speech he had been at fault and had learned a valuable lesson.

### ***Birth of a legend***

As that story was retold over the years, it was embellished into a fable. By 1955, Dobie was said to be so resented by UW fans that they regularly

booed him and rooted for opponents. The one-time shelling morphed into a regular occurrence. By 1964, Sports Illustrated claimed prominent citizens used to “line Denny Field and throw rocks at the impervious Dobie.” By 1987, a book claimed Washington fans would boo and throw fruit and vegetables from the stands.

In fact, Dobie was adored. “Bow Down To Washington,” written in 1915, includes the chorus: “Dobie, Dobie pride of Washington.” The many rallies where he spoke were always to packed houses with thundering standing ovations. Fans flooded the field and hung out after games, hoping to hear a word from the master. Players sang his praises despite his controlling personality and crude tirades. For decades, Seattle-area teenagers played “Gil Dobie” youth football.

“He was held in the highest respect



and admiration by the men over whom he held his mailed fist because he was fair and honest,” said William “Wee” Coyle, a star quarterback (and later Washington’s lieutenant governor) in “The Spell of Gil Dobie,” a 10-part series in The Seattle Times in 1949. “He was a natural leader of men.”

### Absolute perfectionist

As a coach, Dobie had no equal in the Northwest. His legal mind served him well. He was precise, systematic, a disciplinarian, and a tireless worker. Yet those qualities could describe many coaches.

Where Dobie separated himself was in his painstaking execution. He was an absolute perfectionist. He would spend mind-numbing hours working on a single play. Each player had to perform his role to exacting precision until exhaustion in an era when traveling squads were limited to 18 players. His teams were described as “machines.”

He was dining at the Hotel Butler with George Varnell, Seattle Times reporter, after a 45-0 Thanksgiving victory when Washington State coach John “Chief” Bender stopped by.

“I can’t understand that licking,” Bender said. “Why Gil, we had 105 plays to work on your team.”

“Maybe that was your trouble,” Dobie responded. “We had only nine plays; but coach, we sure knew them all well.”

The uber-controlling coach with piercing dark eyes was also a master of psychology. He knew how to get into his players’ heads. Many times he would leak to the press some supposed weakness or leave a team rumor uncorrected, only to turn the misinformation to his advantage. Preseason practices often started with the previous year’s starters on the second team to keep their egos in check.

It was never wise to cross Dobie, who once challenged his entire team to fight. He had no takers. His motto, according to Coyle: “I am always right, you are always wrong.”



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, 1908

*Gil Dobie could be tough on his players, yet they still admired him “because he was fair and honest.”*

His harsh words could be as brutal as the sport he coached. “You are the dumbest, clumsiest, rankest collection of so-called football excuses I have ever seen,” Coyle remembered him telling one team.

When a star player let out a snore during a pregame talk in 1911, Dobie went ballistic. “I hope you get licked!



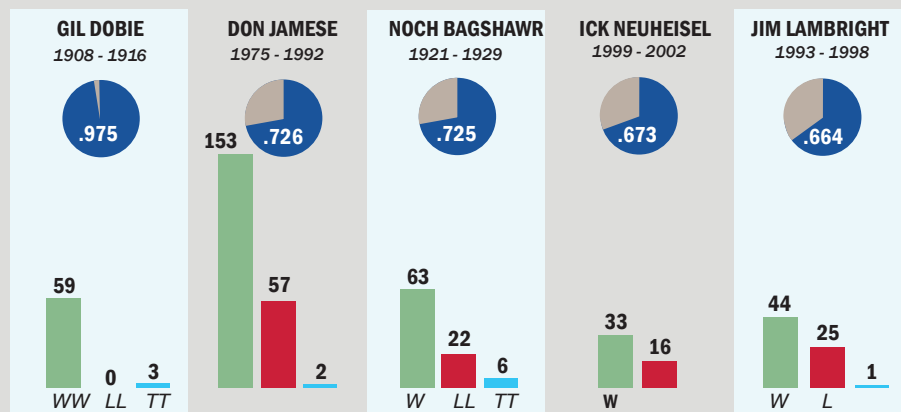
Cowards!” he yelled. Dobie refused to talk to his team after that, forgoing even the halftime speech. Message received. Washington beat Idaho, 17-0.

### Dobie’s dominance

Dobie didn’t just win at Washington, his teams annihilated opponents. In 69 percent of his games, the other team failed to score. The most points scored against his teams in a full season was 21 in 1913. Only Oregon, with 14 points in 1912, ever scored in double figures. Dobie’s teams scored at least 10 points 56 times and once hit 100. Washington outscored opponents a jaw-dropping 1,979 to 117, for an average score of 32-2.

### Father of Washington football

Gil Dobie never lost a game at UW, and his win percentage remains the best in school history. Washington’s top five coaches in win percentage since 1905:



Source: University of Washington, Lynn Borland

THE SEATTLE TIME S

During Dobie's tenure at Washington, the other five conference teams went through 24 coaches in a futile effort to beat him.

Just as today, teams of that era padded their records by scheduling nonleague games with weaker competition. Due to travel challenges and sparser population, those games often were against military squads, all-star teams, high schools and club teams. Because of this, some discount the records of the early 20th century.

But the best evaluation should be based on head-to-head league competition. Here Dobie was clearly superior in a surprisingly robust Pacific Northwest Intercollegiate Conference (Big 6) that won 78 percent of its games against USC, California, Colorado, Nebraska, Michigan State, Utah and Pennsylvania.

On Nov. 6, 1915, Washington beat Cal in Berkeley, 72-0. This was a pivotal game in West Coast football history that signaled to every Western school it would have to upgrade its programs or be flogged by Dobie's teams. Washington cast such a long shadow over the league that other members grew discouraged and dissolved the Big 6. That led to the birth of the Pacific Coast Conference, the predecessor of the Pac-12.

### *His shocking firing*

Despite such dominance, Dobie was fired at the end of the 1916 season without losing a game. It wasn't an opponent that defeated him, but his stubborn refusal to compromise during a squabble that drew in the team, alumni, faculty, students, fans, Dobie and UW president Henry Suzzallo.

Pancho Villa's attacks across the Mexican border led to an emergency order by President Woodrow Wilson that activated the National Guard. Seven Washington players were called up, including Bill Grimm, a star tackle. Basic training cut into three weeks of class time, and Grimm was caught cheating on a history exam. On the eve of a big Thanksgiving Day game

## **Gil Dobie bio**

**Name:** Robert Gilmour Dobie.

**Born:** Jan. 31, 1878 in Hastings, Minn.

**Died:** Dec. 23, 1948 in Hartford, Conn.

**Childhood:** Son of Robert and Ellen (Black) Dobie, both natives of Scotland. Mother died when he was 4 and father died when he was 8. Committed to an orphanage in 1886, and indentured to four families.

**Wife:** Married Eva Margaret Butler on Jan. 2, 1918 in Detroit. Eva died of stomach cancer June 25, 1927. Dobie never remarried.

**Children:** Jane, Oct. 25, 1918; Gilmour Jr., June 5, 1921; Mary Louise, Nov. 14, 1924.

**School:** Dobie's education suffered during the time he was indentured and he graduated from high school at 21. Entered University of Minnesota in 1899, playing quarterback and end. Graduated with a law degree in 1903.

**Coaching:** Assistant — Minnesota (1903-05). Head coach — Minneapolis South High School (1904-05), where his teams were undefeated and won a state title. North Dakota Agricultural College, now North Dakota State (1906-07), where his teams were undefeated. Washington (1908-16), where his teams were undefeated all nine years with a record of 59-0-3 (.976), leading to an NCAA record for UW at 60-0-4 (one more win than is commonly accepted) that still stands. Navy (1917-1919). Cornell (1920-35), where three teams went undefeated and won or shared successive national titles (1921-23). Boston College (1936-38).

**Honors:** National College Football Hall of Fame (1951). University of Washington Hall of Fame, inaugural class (1979). Amos Alonzo Stagg Award for outstanding achievement for a football coach (1948). Third president of National Football Coaches Association (1926).

against Cal, he was suspended.

The team responded by calling a strike. Dobie held practice with only a few players and gave notice there would be a game even if he had to field a team of intramural players. He made no effort to coax the team back.

Dobie and Suzzallo both had outsized egos and were stubborn to a fault. Meanwhile, alumni, former players, downtown businessmen and government officials lobbied the players to end the strike. Reluctantly, they voted to return, about an hour beyond the faculty's deadline.

Despite the drama, frayed nerves and missed practice time, Dobie made a shocking (for him) prediction: "We should win."

And that they did, beating Cal, 14-7. Oregon was also undefeated but had played ineligible men in two games, so the conference championship was awarded to Washington.

Accolades from across the country poured in extolling Dobie's nine-year undefeated record. It couldn't save his job. Suzzallo mistakenly blamed Dobie for the players' insurrection (two players later admitted responsibility). The firing set off a near-riot. A thousand Dobie supporters marched on his house late one night in a pounding December rainstorm.

Dobie stood on his front porch along what is now University Way and began his speech with these words: "Kings, presidents and statesmen have been greatly honored, but I know that they could have felt no greater honor than the honor I feel has been bestowed on me tonight."

### *Triumphs and tragedies*

Dobie would go on to great achievements in his coaching career at Navy, Cornell and Boston College. At Cornell, his teams twice won outright national championships and shared a third.

When Dobie retired in 1938, his 33-year coaching record was 183-45-15, a lifetime winning percentage of .784.

Dobie never coached in a bowl game, but it wasn't his fault. Washington and Cornell's faculties declined Rose Bowl bids, and bowl officials selected Oregon over UW another year because of lower travel costs. It would be left to legendary UW coaches like Enoch Bagshaw, Owens and James to play in Pasadena.

For all Dobie's success, however, tragedy followed him. His wife, Eva, died in 1927 of stomach cancer, leaving him to raise three young children. Dobie suffered severe injuries in a car accident in Boston in 1936 and never fully recovered. Dobie invested well and died a rich man on Dec. 23, 1948, of heart failure in Hartford, Conn., at age 70. He was buried in Ithaca, N.Y., alongside Eva.

Fittingly, the man who tried to control everything planned every detail of his simple funeral and burial. The Hall of Fame coach, holder of the NCAA record for undefeated seasons, was eulogized by the Rev. Dr. Walter A. Dodds. He described Dobie's life as "the virtue of perfection in doing all things."

Today, a statue of Jim Owens stands guard in front of Husky Stadium, where well-heeled alumni are entertained in an expansive center that bears Don James' name. Gil Dobie, a largely forgotten figure who lifted Washington football to prominence a century ago, has only a picture and a short bio in a tight corner of the UW Hall of Fame.

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