

SPORTS

FOOTBALL

The SEC is in a class of its own



Arkansas is one of five SEC teams in the top 15 of this week's AP Poll. No other conference has more than two. If that's not dominance, what is?

GOOD CALL

By Andrew Barge
SPORTS REPORTER

All right, let's pretend for a second that the Southeastern Conference isn't the best college football conference.

Would it be the Big Ten? While it has two of the nation's best in Ohio State and Michigan, the rest of the conference is pretty average. No. 17-ranked Wisconsin boasts a solid 7-1 record, with its only loss going to the Wolverines. But Michigan is the only ranked opponent Wisconsin has to play all year — a team with that weak of a schedule is unworthy of a BCS invitation. Penn State and Purdue are having mediocre seasons with three losses each. Overall, the conference is too top-heavy. The race for a BCS bid has been between two teams since the beginning.

Maybe it's the Big 12. After all, Texas competes for the national championship every year, and Texas A&M, Missouri, Nebraska and Oklahoma are all ranked in the top 25. While the conference is solid, only Texas ranks in the AP and USA Today top 15. The other four are decent, but Texas has been rolling ever since the loss to Ohio State. Nebraska played the Longhorns close, but the Cornhuskers or Mizzou dethroning Texas for a BCS bid seems unlikely. As far as the Big 12 is concerned, it's a race for second place.

It can't be the Pac-10. USC always seems to be undefeated this time of year, but some of their in-season success can be attributed to a weak conference schedule. The Trojans are the conference favorite every season. Meanwhile, the rest of the mediocre conference teams trade wins with each other during the season, producing two above-average teams: Oregon and Cal. Despite beating Oklahoma earlier in the season, Oregon recently fell to a weak Washington State team. California's 7-1 record is impressive, but didn't they get killed by Tennessee in the season opener?

Which brings me to my point.

The SEC is far and away the best conference college football has to offer. Every year five national powerhouses compete with each other for a BCS bid. Auburn, Florida and Tennessee hold spots in the top 10 while LSU and Arkansas round out the top 15. Despite Georgia's slump this year, the conference still has five teams that could run away with the BCS bid.

With so many teams at the top, the recipient of the bid is unpredictable. Most conferences have one or two teams competing for the same prize every year. The Big East championship will be decided when Louisville and West Virginia meet in a few weeks, as will the Big Ten with Michigan and Ohio State. Texas and USC dominate their respective conferences. In the SEC, you could have made a strong argument for several different teams at the start of the season. Eight weeks later, five teams still remain.

There's a reason that the SEC's representative has won four of its last five BCS games. To get a BCS bid, an SEC team has to beat the best of the best all season long. No other conference in college football can match that level of competition. ■



While the SEC may be deep, none of its teams are ranked as high Ohio State or Michigan, or even in the AP top five. Isn't quality better than quantity?

BAD CALL

By Franklin Petr
SPORTS REPORTER

For years, many faithful college football followers have viewed the Southeastern Conference as the powerhouse of conferences. While many conferences can boast a good top two or three teams, rarely has anyone besides the SEC been able to boast more than that, typically five or six in the top 25 rankings. The SEC's hold is slipping, however, as other conferences are building up while our own dear conference appears to be stagnating.

Yes, the SEC has six teams in the USA Today Coaches Poll. And yes, three of those are top-10 teams. But none are top-five, none are still undefeated, and none are good enough to be National Champions.

Tennessee crushed California in its first game, but lost a nail-biter to Florida and squeaked by an average Alabama squad. Florida creeps up to the second spot only to lose handily to Auburn. The Tigers also lost their hold on No. 2 with their disappointing play against a Cinderella Arkansas. Louisiana State already has two losses, and the reigning SEC champion Georgia Bulldogs lost their homecoming game to us. Many people will view this as the SEC actually getting better because our teams are only losing to each other. But instead we seem to be moving toward having seven or eight good teams, but no great ones. Many will view this as a good thing, but I find it disconcerting. I'd love to see a team spark a Pete Carroll-esque run in the SEC, utterly obliterating opponents week after week, year after year. That is, as long as it's not Philip Fulmer and Tennessee.

As far as our dominance against other conferences go we haven't fared very well in the history of the Bowl Championship Series. We are guaranteed an entry every year, but only three times in the BCS's eight years have we sent an at-large team. Yes, we won it twice, but once was Tennessee in the inaugural year, and the second was the highly-controversial 2003-2004 season where the University of Southern California, the top-ranked team in both the AP and ESPN/USA Today Coaches Poll, was denied a chance at the title game, causing many football analysts to announce that LSU and USC were co-champions for that year. And then USC went on to win the next two and compete for a third. LSU, meanwhile, fell away.

My biggest problem with the SEC's supposed dominance is a lack of consistency from any of our teams, be it over the years or just through a season. Last year, Alabama was posed for a remarkable 13-0 run and then fell apart two weeks before the championship, Fulmer saw his preseason third-ranked Volunteers win a measly five games, and Georgia couldn't handle a wily West Virginia team in the Sugar Bowl after winning the conference. Dominance indeed.

So only time will tell how the SEC is destined to go. If trends continue, the SEC faithful should be prepared to weather the storm of doubts and criticisms from not producing a national champion despite having so many top-25 teams. Some may not view this as a setback, but you should. ■

FOOTBALL

Dores' character to be tested against Blue Devils



Earl Bennett and the rest of the Commodores look to rebound against winless Duke on Saturday.

By Andrew Barge
SPORTS REPORTER

The upcoming game against Duke serves as a serious test of focus for the Commodore football team. After coming out flat against South Carolina, coach Bobby Johnson knows that preparation is more important than ever for the team to rebound against the Blue Devils.

"We all need to get better," he said. "We need to concentrate on doing the kinds of things that you need to do to win ballgames. We are back to work and trying to prepare for Duke."

While it's hard to say that Vandy overlooked the Gamecocks last Saturday, the team definitely didn't play up to its potential. On offense, quarterback Chris Nickson had a rough passing day with only four completions and two interceptions. His ability to scramble continues to be a weapon, but regaining confidence as a passer is crucial against Duke. Despite their 0-7 record, the Blue Devils feature a defense that has shown some heart this season.

"I think they have a very aggressive defense," Johnson said. "They start out in a three-man front, and they have people coming all kinds of different ways everywhere and sometimes they get you in a bad situation and make you look bad on offense."

The leader of Duke's defensive unit is senior All-Atlantic Coast Conference cornerback John Talley. A preseason All-American, Talley could give the Commodore passing attack fits if Nickson doesn't locate the rhythm he found against Georgia.

For Nickson to return to his old form, the receiver unit will have to bounce back after struggling against South Carolina's defense. The Dores lost one of Nickson's favorite

targets in senior H-Back Steven Bright. A leg injury will most likely keep Bright out for the rest of the season, so younger players will be asked to take on larger roles.

"[Replacing Steven] is a tough job," Johnson said. "We'll look to Brad Allen and Jake Bradford, with Brad taking over at H-Back."

As for the receiving corps, sophomore Earl Bennett has been the most consistent threat all season and he will draw most of the attention from Talley. Look for Marlon White and George Smith to get passes from Nickson to spread out the entire field and keep Duke's defense guessing.

On defense, the Dores will focus on containing a Blue Devils rushing attack that has struggled most of the season. Junior defensive end Curtis Gatewood served as the lone bright spot in the South Carolina game, contributing a sack, an interception and a forced fumble to go along with five tackles.

"Curtis has had an outstanding year," Johnson said. "He has just stepped up as a player. He is very versatile, and he gives you great pass protection. He has gained some weight so he is good against the run game now."

The South Carolina game definitely left a mark on the Dores. The loss ended the momentum from the Georgia upset, so Vandy has to gain confidence once again before ending the season with three conference games. Johnson knows the players are anxious to put last week behind them.

"We want to win over whomever we are playing this week, whether they have won eight games right now or no games," he said. "It is our motivation to win, not theirs to lose. I don't think it is that hard. The last thing they want to do is feel like they felt after the South Carolina game." ■

WOMEN'S GOLF

Women's golf wins second straight tourney

No. 4 Commodores rally from 16-stroke deficit on final day.

By Jarred Amato
SPORTS EDITOR

In case you missed it, the Vanderbilt women's golf team won its second straight tournament over the weekend in dramatic fashion.

The Dores entered the final round of the Stanford Women's Intercollegiate in Palo Alto, Calif. 16 strokes behind the Cardinal. As sophomore Jacqui Concolino said, "realistically, I

didn't think there was a chance."

But, Vanderbilt went out and shot a school-record final-round 9-under par 275 to win the prestigious tournament by a commanding five strokes. The team's three-round score of 3-over 855 was also a school record.

"It feels amazing," said Concolino, who placed sixth and is ranked fourth nationally by Golfweek Magazine. "It solidifies that we're one of the

best teams in the country."

The team, which also won the Lady Tar Heel Invitational earlier this month, is ranked fourth by Golfweek.

"We've finished ahead of some highly ranked teams in winning our last two tournaments so there should be no doubt in our minds that we belong among the top teams in the nation," said coach Martha Richards Freitag. "We're excited with our play going into the offseason."

And who can blame them, especially after last weekend's performance?

While Concolino posted a final-round 68, senior Kristen Svicarovich shot a career-low 67 to finish in a tie for 10th place. After the tournament, the team had a hard time grasping it had won, especially Freitag.

"Coach was ecstatic. She couldn't believe it," Concolino said. "It's nice to end the season

on a sweet note."

In addition to receiving congratulatory phone calls and text messages, the Commodores celebrated on their flight home. It didn't matter that they returned at 2:15 a.m. and had class in six hours.

"We had a blast," Concolino said. "It was a great flight back."

Vandy will take part in the Collegiate Match Play Championships, Nov. 3-5 in Orlando, Fla. ■



BASKETBALL

Foster earns preseason honors

HUSTLER STAFF REPORT

Vanderbilt junior swingman Shan Foster was named Preseason First Team All-Southeastern Conference by the league's coaches on Monday.

Foster, who earned a similar postseason award from the coaches last year, ranks as the league's third-leading returning scorer, averaging 15.9 points a year ago. "Shan is very deserving of the award," said coach Kevin Stallings. "For the better part of two years he has been very consistent and has proven to be one of the league's best players."

"Preseason awards are nice but postseason honors have more meaning. I wouldn't be surprised if both Shan and Derrick (Byars) were on the list at the end of the season." ■

FIRST TEAM ALL-SEC	Team	Position
Jermareo Davidson	Alabama	F
Ronald Steele	Alabama	G
Corey Brewer	Florida	F
Al Horford	Florida	F/C
Joakim Noah	Florida	F/C
Glen Davis	LSU	F
Chris Lofton	Tennessee	G
Shan Foster	Vanderbilt	G/F
SECOND TEAM ALL-SEC		
Richard Hendrix	Alabama	F
Darian Townes	Arkansas	F
Taurean Green	Florida	G
Mike Mercer	Georgia	G
Randolph Morris	Kentucky	C
Tasmin Mitchell	LSU	F
Jamont Gordon	Mississippi State	G/F
Charles Rhodes	Mississippi State	F/C
Tré Kelley	South Carolina	G

MEN'S GOLF

Dores host, finish second

By Robert Wynkoop
SPORTS REPORTER

FRANKLIN, Tenn. – Vanderbilt senior Luke List led the men's golf team to a second place finish in the Mason Rudolph Men's Golf Intercollegiate at the Vanderbilt Legends Golf Course Tuesday.

The team had high expectations for the Mason Rudolph, as it was playing on their home golf course, but unexpected cold, windy weather complicated their play. Temperatures dropped into the 40s with strong gusts of wind as high as 20 mph throughout the tournament.

"We expected to compete on our home track, but we've also never played under these kinds of conditions," said Vanderbilt coach Tom Shaw. "It's good though. Every time we go out, we've got to learn something. It's good for me to know how they handle playing in weather like this."

The team started out well on the first day of the three-day tournament sharing first place with the Ole Miss at two-over-par 290, but dropped a stroke to fall behind the Rebels on Monday. This came despite the great play of Senior Luke List, who finished four-

under-par on the day to take the individual lead after day 2.

"I came expecting to play well," said the defending champion List. "It's chilly ... but I'm hanging in there."

On the final day of play, List shot two-over-par to finish third overall.

Last year's second place finisher, Vanderbilt sophomore Jon Curran also played well. On Monday, Curran shot a two-under-par 70 and was in second place, but would end the tournament in a tie for fifth.

"A day like today, you just have to hang in there. These are tough conditions," Curran said. "You don't know how anyone else is doing, so you just don't worry about it."

Winning the Mason Rudolph was high on the teams list of priorities, Shaw said.

"Of course they're going to be disappointed," he said. "They have never won their own tournament."

The Commodores tied the University of North Florida for second in the team results. Ole Miss finished first and University of Tennessee – Chattanooga placed fourth. ■

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