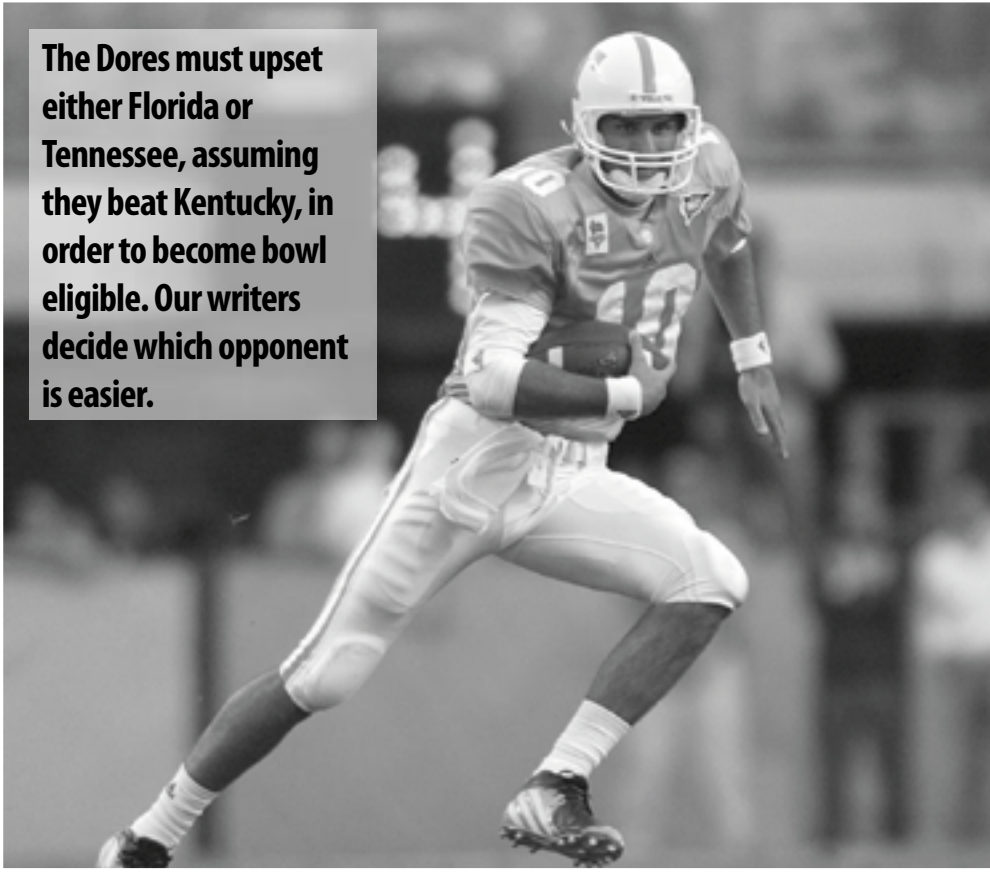


## SPORTS

FOOTBALL

## Gators more beatable than Vols

The Dores must upset either Florida or Tennessee, assuming they beat Kentucky, in order to become bowl eligible. Our writers decide which opponent is easier.



WADE PAYNE / AP

## GOOD CALL

By Harish Krishnamoorthi  
SPORTS REPORTER

Tennessee is clearly the stronger opponent and matches up well against Vanderbilt, making Florida the easier game for the Commodores.

Erik Ainge, the junior quarterback for Tennessee, has played sensationally this season. In their season opener against California, the Volunteers put 35 points and over 500 yards of total offense on the 9th ranked team in the country, a team that was not overrated, as California's record since then has shown. Against Georgia, then the stingiest defense in the country, Ainge and Tennessee put 51 points on the scoreboard with almost 400 yards of total offense.

And those were against tough Pacific-10 and Southeastern Conference defenses.

Comparatively, Florida sneaked out of Athens with a 21-14 victory.

Not only is their passing game superb, but their running game has also established itself. LaMarcus Coker, Arian Foster and Montario Hardesty have created a running back trio that has kept defenses honest and opened up the air attack for Tennessee.

While Chris Leak, senior quarterback for Florida, does boast terrific numbers, the Florida offense lacks a consistent running game. Running back DeShawn Wynn has not managed to both stay healthy and consistent for the season, and while Tim Tebow adds a surprise running quarterback option for Florida, it is not enough to replace the entire running offense.

Defensively, the two teams are nearly identical. Tennessee only gives about 30 yards more per game than Florida.

The biggest challenge with Tennessee will be revenge. Last year's disappointment for Tennessee culminated in a signature win for the Commodores when Jay Cutler threw the game-winning touchdown to Earl Bennett to give Vanderbilt a 28-24 victory.

A streak of consecutive victories against Vanderbilt snapped, and they are not going to take the game lightly.

Tennessee will come onto Dudley Field seeking revenge. Florida escaped with a double overtime victory against Vanderbilt last year and worked to reestablish itself in the national spotlight. Tennessee went into last season ranking in the top five and did not even reach a bowl game as they usually do, something the Commodores made sure of. ■



STEVE CANNON / AP

## BAD CALL

By Franklin Petr  
SPORTS REPORTER

With three games left and two wins needed for that most elusive bowl berth, many fans have come to realize the Dores must beat either Florida or Tennessee. And while neither game will be an easy win, Tennessee is more beatable.

Chris Leak is a fear-inducing quarterback for any defense. A quality scrambler who can get out of pressure situations, Leak also has a solid arm to back him up. He has a 150.3 quarterback rating through nine games and doesn't often throw bad passes. He has a great receiving corps with three teammates having over 300 yards and three touchdowns. But perhaps the most intimidating sight is when Leak trots off the field.

That is the entrance for backup quarterback Tim Tebow, and while many people frown upon the dual-quarterback system, coach Urban Meyer makes it work. Tebow gives the Gators a solid rushing attack. Tebow runs the ball, and although opposing teams know this, he still proves to be unstoppable. He averages 5.6 yards per carry and runs 78 percent of the time. But he also has the ability to trick you with his passes, completing over 70 percent because the defense doesn't expect it.

This tandem will be much more problematic for the Vanderbilt defense than the stationary Erik Ainge will at Tennessee. Ainge is limited to pocket-passing, and although he has one of the best receivers in the Southeastern Conference, the Commodore secondary will better suited to Tennessee's air attack than to Florida's combined quarterback threat.

The other side of the ball poses another big problem for Vanderbilt this Saturday. Florida's defense has played remarkably well this season, allowing less than 13 points a game, and only once have they given up more than 20. Vanderbilt's defense has proven itself as capable as any defense in preventing scores, but even it has limits if its offense is incapable of scoring. Their defense hasn't allowed a 100-yard rusher all season, and only twice have they allowed 100 yards or more by the entire team.

So this weekend is not the game to expect a win. Come out and hope for a miracle, but the team will better served by its fans forgoing an early Thanksgiving holiday and sticking around for the UT game. That game is our best chance for an upset. ■

FOOTBALL

## Dores still remember heartbreaker in Gainesville

*Nickson, Bennett look to lead team after double overtime loss to Gators a year ago.*

By Andrew Barge  
SPORTS REPORTER

This time last year ESPN2 broadcasted the Vanderbilt vs. Florida game. After a 21-point comeback in the fourth quarter, a controversial celebration call on Earl Bennett forced the Commodores to kick the extra point rather than go for the win.

As the Dores fell in double overtime, Vandy's record stood at 4-5. The close loss set up a heartbreaker to Kentucky, and, despite an unlikely upset against Tennessee, the team ended the season one loss short of a bowl bid. Coach Bobby Johnson knows that his players haven't forgotten the close loss in the Swamp.

"We played them well and had a real chance to win that game. We are disappointed that we didn't," Johnson said.

A year has passed, but both teams find themselves in similar situations. While Florida comes to Vanderbilt thinking about an Southeastern Conference Championship, the Commodores (4-5) feel a similar sense of urgency as they did at 4-4 last year.

Of course, Vanderbilt is without quarterback Jay Cutler, the hero of last year's comeback. Sophomore quarterback Chris Nickson will get his first taste of the Gators this Saturday, but his performance against Duke suggests that he is more than capable of a Cutler-like game against Florida.

"I was very proud of Chris this past weekend," Johnson said. "A lot of people doubted what he could do, but he worked hard in practice, his coaches had faith in him, his teammates had faith in him, and he came through in grand fashion."

Nickson threw for 250 yards and two touchdowns and rushed for 150 yards and three touchdowns en route to earning SEC Offensive Player of the Week honors. If Nickson can continue this momentum into Saturday's game, the Florida defense should have its hands full.

"We think Chris Nickson can get even better. That is the great thing about it. He certainly gives defenses a problem trying to tackle him, and he also throws the ball well," Johnson said. "We have a great weapon there."

Unlike Nickson, sophomore receiver Bennett knows what it's like to frustrate the Gator defense. Last year Bennett broke out for 127 yards and the game-tying touchdown, putting the receiver on the map as one of the conference's best. This year, the Florida secondary knows what it's up against in Bennett, so look for that extra attention to give Nickson room to scramble.

Florida has some offensive weapons as well. Senior quarterback Chris Leak hasn't had his best season in terms of statistics, but Johnson said that Leak's level head separates him from other SEC quarterbacks.

"Leak is a cool customer. I haven't seen him get very stressed in there," he said. "He made a bunch of third down plays against us last year and a bunch of big plays that kept drives alive."

Leak, typically a pocket passer, would normally garner more focus from the Commodore secondary than the run-stopping linebackers. This year is different with Florida consistently playing two quarterbacks. Tim Tebow, a freshman from St. Augustine, Fla. completely changes the pace of the game when he relieves Leak at quarterback. As a scrambler, Tebow's combination of size and speed makes the quarterback preparation much more difficult for opposing defenses.

"He is a force running the football. Everybody knows that when he comes in, he's running the football, but I haven't seen anyone stop him yet. They have a good scheme, and they use it very well," Johnson said.

Putting bowl hopes on the line have often been the kiss of death for the Vanderbilt faithful, whether it be the Middle Tennessee State game last year or South Carolina this year. The Dores need to take the final three contests one at a time and use the momentum built against Duke to their advantage.



NEIL BRAKE / VU Media Relations

Sophomore quarterback Chris Nickson earned SEC Offensive Player of the Week honors after his performance against Duke last Saturday.

The close game last year proved that Vandy can compete with the SEC's best.

"If we execute and do our jobs, we are going to

have a chance to win," Johnson said. "If you go out there and say, 'This is Florida, and we don't have a chance to beat them,' then we won't." ■

## SOCCER

# Gamecocks up first in SEC Tournament

By Max Franklin  
SPORTS REPORTER

The Vanderbilt women's soccer team heads down to Orange Beach, Ala., for the Southeastern Conference Tournament starting today. The Commodores (10-4-5, 6-3-2 SEC) hold the fourth seed in the tournament and face South Carolina in the first round.

"At this point in the season it's one and done," said coach Ronnie Coveleskie. "You've got to win to keep playing, and everything is on the line: an SEC championship, an NCAA bid. I think this game against South Carolina is as big as any game we've played all year."

Vanderbilt missed out on a chance for the second seed in the tournament with last week's loss to Kentucky, who used two wins over the final weekend of the season to vault into a tie for second place in the SEC with Vandy and Tennessee. Because of their records in head-to-head games, the Wildcats earned the second seed in the tournament and the Lady Vols grabbed the third seed, knocking the Dores down to fourth.

"At that point in the season obviously we were disappointed with the loss," Coveleskie said. "All the credit goes to Kentucky; they played a great game, but sometimes a game like that is what we need to refocus our energy. I think the team understands what's on the

line in Orange Beach, and they want to fight and compete for a championship. I don't think there's any hangover from the Kentucky loss."

Earlier this season the Dores beat the Gamecocks 3-0 in Nashville, behind two goals from senior forward Lea Lafield and one from junior forward Amy Baumann. A second win over South Carolina would lead to a showdown with either SEC regular season champion Florida or the eighth seed in the tournament, Georgia. Vanderbilt lost a tough game 1-0 to the Gators in the regular season and beat Georgia 2-1 in overtime with both goals by Baumann. Still, the Dores are solely focused on today.

"There's no chance of looking ahead," Coveleskie said. "My outlook on everything is one game at a time, and I try to keep the girls present, so all I'm thinking about is South Carolina and what we can do to beat them. They're a very, very good team, and they've had a fantastic year. The whole SEC is just so competitive this year, there's so much parity that there really wasn't anyone I wanted to play."

Last season, Vanderbilt's last two games ended on penalty kicks, which is what occurs in postseason play when the score remains tied after two overtime periods. Again, the Dores are not concerned with dwelling on last season's misfortunes.

"We're just going to really work hard to win before we have to go to penalties," Coveleskie said. "We're going to try to keep it in regulation, keep it out of overtime and out of penalty kicks. I don't think there's a coach in the country that wants to end the game on penalties."

There are certainly many coaches in the country that would like to field players with the postseason honors that this year's Commodores have already received. Senior defender Monica Buff was named first team All-SEC, while Baumann, sophomore midfielder Katie Schulz and senior goalkeeper Tyler Griffin were all named second team All-SEC. Senior defender Kari Boersma was named to the SEC Soccer Community Service Team, her second straight selection to the team.

The Commodores face the Gamecocks tonight in the final first-round game in Orange Beach. ■



NEIL BRAKE / VU Media Relations

The Commodores, seeded fourth in the SEC Tournament, play South Carolina today in the first round.

## BASKETBALL

# Balcomb, Williams ready for season to get under way

*Dores host first exhibition game Thursday.*

By Jarred Amato  
SPORTS EDITOR

With basketball season fast approaching, Vanderbilt women's coach Melanie Balcomb and senior guard Caroline Williams traveled to Birmingham for the SEC's annual media day. Led by three seniors and sparked by the arrival of six freshmen, the Dores are looking forward to season. Below is some of what the two had to say.

## HEAD COACH MELANIE BALCOMB

### On preseason practices:

"Our practices have been extremely competitive. They are challenging each other and working extremely hard. I'm excited. I'm looking forward to the season."

### On challenging non-conference schedule:

"I think one of things we did this year is we really upgraded our preseason schedule. It is really going to be tough because we really want to improve a lot and we want to get better. Not necessarily just get a lot of W's this year and with that experience we are going to play a lot of tough teams especially on the road to prepare for the SEC. I think that is the best thing we can do is try to get those kids prepared and have that competition early so that they are not shocked when they get to SEC play."



NEIL BRAKE / VU Media Relations

Senior Caroline Williams, the SEC's best three-point shooter, said this year's team reminds her of the 2003-2004 squad that won the league title.

### On the learning curve for freshmen:

"I think in the first two weeks of practice, I think that is the biggest adjustment for these freshmen. They are not used to the competitiveness that the defense guarding them, them reacting to some upperclassmen that work extremely hard and that know what it takes and know how to come to practice everyday to prepare at the highest level. The freshmen are learning that. We have some upperclassmen that are just leading and are very, very consistent."

### On the team's strengths:

"The key is we have experience as a point, a post, and a shooter, and then we need good role play around them

and different people to step up."

### On senior point guard Dee Davis:

"I think obviously Dee Davis is the key. She has been the key for the last three years. I think that she has to stay healthy. She has struggled with a knee injury for three years. She has got to stay healthy and one of the keys is Meredith Marsh who came in as a freshman needs to be able to back her up and give her minutes so that Dee (Davis) is strong once we get to SEC and is not worn out and is physically able to lead us. She is a tremendous point guard. I think one of the best point guards in the country. I think we need her on the floor."

## SENIOR GUARD CAROLINE WILLIAMS

### On beginning the season:

"I'm excited about this upcoming season. We have some awesome freshmen coming in, and we three seniors. We have a great group of underclassmen that are experienced. The energy is high. I can't wait to get the season started."

### On advice for the freshmen:

"We have told the freshmen just to have no fear. Basketball shows you a lot about life. You just need to go out there and have fun. Don't worry. Mistakes are going to happen. You just need to learn from them and focus on the next play."

### On her expectations:

"This year reminds me of my freshman year, when we won the SEC. Everything is in place for that again. The energy is high. I'm pumped."

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