

# GAMEDAY



## A NEW HOPE?

Lions seek to recover from recent doldrums, starting against Samford



# TAILGATE of the week RECIPE

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## Easy Cucumber Crack Salad

### INGREDIENTS:

- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 1/2 cup sour cream
- 1 packet dry ranch seasoning mix
- 1 tbsp fresh dill or chopped green onion
- Small package of bacon bits

### DIRECTIONS:

Mix mayo and sour cream in a medium bowl. Whisk in the dry ranch until the mixture is smooth and creamy. Combine by pouring the dressing over 2 to 3 cups of sliced cucumbers, crumbled cooked bacon or bacon bits, and shredded cheddar cheese. Toss until everything is evenly coated. Chill in refrigerator for an hour.



This week's recipe submitted by Jennifer Ingram, Huntsville, AL

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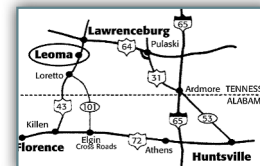
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# UNA vs. Samford

**When:** 6 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Joe Davis Stadium, Huntsville

**TV:** ESPN+

**Last year's records:** UNA (2-10, 1-7 UAC), Samford (1-11, 1-7 SoCon)

**The series:** UNA leads 6-4-2.

## Four-down territory

**1. Is the Grass greener?** After 11 seasons of Chris Hatcher leading Samford, John Grass makes his coaching debut with the Bulldogs. Samford was just three seasons removed from an 11-2 season in which it went 8-0 and won the Southern Conference title under Hatcher, but going 11-23 since then was enough for the school to move on. Last season, Samford's only win was against Virginia Military Institute. Grass has a career record of 72-26 as a head coach in eight years at Jacksonville State and has spent the last four years at Clemson as an analyst under Dabo Swinney. Hatcher had a record of 182-107 overall and 61-50 at Samford as its all-time winningest coach. Was moving on from a proven coach who has conquered the SoCon the right move? That all depends on what Grass turns out to be four years removed from being a head coach, and week zero will be a harbinger of what's to come.

**2. Home away from home:** This will be the second time in five seasons that UNA has hosted a football game in the Huntsville area. The Lions hosted Jacksonville State at Madison's Toyota Field in 2022 and lost 47-31. Recent renovations at Joe Davis Stadium, where Huntsville FC plays, have allowed the 6,000-seat venue to host football games. North Alabama is also technically the home team Saturday.

**3. Zero patience:** For the third time in Brent Dearmon's fourth year at UNA, the Lions will play in week zero of the college football season. They are 0-2 so far in those games, losing 17-7 against 20th-ranked Mercer in 2023 and 37-15 vs. Southeast Missouri in 2024, both of which were part of ESPN's FCS Kickoff. North Alabama hasn't started 1-0 since 2019. This is a more-even matchup for UNA against a rebuilding Samford team.

**4. Jump start:** This is a critical season for North Alabama, which joins the United Athletic Conference in all sports. Opening an on-campus stadium is a big step for any program, and the \$65 million



Destin Wade learned this spring that he was UNA's starting quarterback this season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

investment will need to be justified by the product on the field. With an 8-27 record over the past three seasons, the time to see some momentum is now. Dearmon knows what's expected entering the last year of his contract and what he feels are the necessary personnel changes have been made on the roster and the coaching staff. Getting off to a 1-0 start could set the tone for a productive season.

## Key matchup

### UNA defensive front vs. Samford offensive line

One of the key components to improvement for North Alabama this season will be a stronger, more-physical defensive front. With an influx of transfers from Memphis along with returners in Jyheam Ingram, Avery Howard and Cayden Atkins, this will be the first look at the revamped unit.

## Player of the week

### QB Destin Wade

Dearmon named Destin Wade the starter in the spring and says Wade is one of the most talented QBs in college football. That would indicate this team will go as Wade does. After throwing for 1,188 yards, 10 TDs and 4 INTs last season along with 469 rushing yards and five TDs, Wade will need to build off that and stay healthy. New offensive coordinator Travis Partridge's system could provide even more runway for a great season out of Wade.

## By the numbers

**39.2:** Points per game given up by North Alabama's defense last season. A number like that would make it impossible for any football team to win games. But a bolstered defensive unit under new coordinator Clint Bowen has to improve

on that.

**4:** Sacks recorded by edge rusher Avery Howard last season. With more size on the defensive line, another year under his belt and an expanded role, Howard's ascendance will be important for UNA.

**82.4:** UNA's red zone percentage defensively last season, which ranked fourth in the UAC. That "bend, don't break" mentality will need to continue and possibly even improve this season.

## Prediction

### UNA 27, Samford 21

Both programs are trying to wipe away last season, but one of them is in a complete restart with many more question marks. UNA has a smidge of continuity and has improved in some critical areas.

— Matt St. Charles





Tennessee left tackle David Sanders Jr. is the center of attention for a Learfield NIL media content production day. [TERESA M. WALKER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

# ‘Carwash’ days help players cash in

By Teresa M. Walker  
The Associated Press

KNOXVILLE — The cost of getting a spot on a Vol Network radio broadcast back in 2000 was pretty simple for a business: Tee up two 30-second commercials, pay for an ad in the souvenir program and a set of season tickets was yours.

“Our world does not resemble that at all,” said Brandon Parks, the

Learfield rep at the University of Tennessee who helped arrange some of those deals after graduating from the school.

Five years into the name, image and likeness era, the business of college athletics indeed looks nothing like that. Athletes now can be paid like almost any other celebrity, from modest deals with a local burger joint to multimillion-dollar contracts for star quarterbacks, and many of those agreements are now

aided, if not actively brokered, by people on campus.

Learfield, a multimedia and sponsorships giant that works with hundreds of schools, offered The Associated Press a behind-the-scenes look at a NIL media “carwash” day designed to make producing commercials and ads easier for both companies and athletes. The first of many this fall at Tennessee in late July featured 29 different brands and some 50 football players.

## Cameras, microphones, scripts

Think of the event as something like back-to-school night, with visits to different rooms to meet different people, many of them with some kind of multimedia role.

Players in their official uniforms roamed from photo shoots on the indoor practice field — with props like a bag of potato chips set to the side for quick



# NIL

From Page G4

access — to curtained pop-up rooms to record content that will be used on game days.

Upstairs, someone from the Vol Network was interviewing players, stocking up for football broadcasts, and across the hall in the Peyton Manning room players took turns recording promotions for the likes of Uber Eats, Pilot, Food City grocery store, a bank and roofing company. Props here included chicken tenders and, naturally, an orange.

Over in the Virtual Reality Lab, a green curtain hung in the room with a teleprompter, lights and a camera. Players took turns reading a series of ads for companies. One thing was clear: It is easier than it's ever been for athletes in official uniforms to do commercials and ads with their school's blessing.

All of this is the result of months of planning between Tennessee and Learfield, which has employees embedded with universities around the country. Parks said Learfield had an 11-person team working those two July days at Tennessee.

"It's quite a production," Parks said. "They are very organized. They've got radio scripts, TV scripts, photo sessions that we're going to do with props from our partners. They've been very thoughtful about that, and I can't wait to see it all come to life."

Fans start seeing the results of these media days quickly. The turnaround for the content produced at Tennessee started showing up in August.

## Five years in, NIL growing

This is what business looks like for college athletes everywhere when it comes to NIL: School, practice, knocking out required NIL assignments, building a brand.

"We actually do a lot of appearances," said Louisville quarterback Lincoln Kienholz, who reportedly has a six-figure deal with adidas. "'I have to go to a construction company and do a little video. The week before the Fourth of July, I did one at the Louisville Thoroughbred Society. ... Card signing next week as well."

Opendorse, a NIL monetization platform for athletes that also works with many schools, predicts that NIL spending in 2026-27 will reach \$4.5 billion. By far the most popular deals are "media creation" arrangements — think of an athlete video talking about a product — on season-long contracts.

The July event at Tennessee was the



**Quarterback Lincoln Kienholz, after three years at Ohio State, has a reported six-figure NIL deal with adidas to help him adjust to Louisville.** [RICHARD W. RODRIGUEZ/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

first of 58 such NIL media days planned this fall for Learfield partner schools involving approximately 1,500 athletes. Over the academic year and all other sports, Learfield anticipates up to 200 of these brand-athlete meet-up days.

Grant Jones, director of content at Learfield, said the company did its first media day two years ago at Ohio State. The company works with smaller leagues like the Big Sky Conference and sees even smaller schools leaning into these one-stop setups to produce NIL content.

"I think we're going to see in the next two to three years, this is going to be something that's done upwards of 300, in aggregate, 300, 400 days a year," Jones said.

Jones used to work at the NFL Players Association, which held its own media days with players. He said players get really good with the repetition of signing gear and being on camera.

"We wanted to do what frankly a lot of professional leagues have been doing for years and professionalize it with the NIL and everything that was happening on campus," Jones said.

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Arch Manning will be front and center for any Texas championship hopes this year. [STEPHEN SPILLMAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

# Texas renews title hopes behind Manning

By Jim Vertuno  
The Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Arch Manning's name is still on the back of the No. 16 jersey. Texas is still on the front.

Stitched permanently into both are the questions of whether player and program can deliver on super-sized potential and expectations of a national championship.

Year two of the Manning era at Texas carries a lot with it, from the residue of last season's failures of not making the College Football Playoff to the burning new question of "if not now, when?" Coach Steve Sarkisian aggressively used

the transfer portal to retool the lineup around his star quarterback in a push for a return to the CFP.

Twenty-one years since it's last national title, Texas loaded up for what could be Manning's moment. Can he stitch his name into Texas history?

"He's a very dangerous player because he learned a lot from last season, and he is surrounded by some good players," Sarkisian said. "I think that he's a guy that's poised for a heck of a season."

And as Manning goes, so does Texas.

## Molding lineup around Manning

Last season started with Texas

ranked No. 1 and Manning as the Heisman Trophy favorite. The bubble burst quicky for both in a 3-2 start that saw Manning pounded by defenses and labeled a bust by some national media.

Texas rallied with a 7-1 finish and made a legitimate argument for the playoff before getting left out. That run included a win over then-No. 3 Texas A&M and thumping Michigan in the Citrus Bowl as Manning showed big improvement on the field.

Still, Sarkisian knew changes had to be made. Some key veterans were pointed toward a transfer portal exit: Running back Tre Wisner (Florida

State) and receivers Parker Livingstone (Oklahoma) and DeAndre Moore Jr. (Colorado) headed out.

Texas has upgraded at both positions with running backs Raleek Brown (Arizona State) and Hollywood Smothers (North Carolina State), and added elite wide receiver Cam Coleman (Auburn).

"(Livingstone) was my roommate. So now playing against him is definitely a little bit of a change," Manning said. "I think that's just kind of how college football is now."

In an era of constant roster

SEE TEXAS, G7



# TEXAS

From Page G6

rebuilding, Texas seized the moment to build an offense where he could let it rip.

"I think strategically, there were some tough decisions to make," Sarkisian said. "But we made them. I think we all can agree that we're probably better around Arch today than we were a year ago at this time."

Manning also played a role. Sarkisian has said that Manning's sponsorship deals with Red Bull, Uber and other major brands meant he demands less money from Texas in revenue sharing. Manning reportedly agreed to take less from Texas this year so Sarkisian could spend it elsewhere.

All of that freed up several million dollars "that I can go get a Cam Coleman, go get a Hollywood Smothers and go get a (linebacker) Rasheem Biles," Sarkisian said.

## Heisman and NFL draft talk

The Manning hype or hate will fire up again quickly. Texas hosts Ohio State on Sept. 12 and opens SEC play Sept. 27 at Tennessee. Win those and he's likely topping the Heisman short lists again by October. And his potential draft status will be a conversation all season.

Lose them? Look out.

The buildup to the matchup with the Buckeyes will likely be a heavy dose of Manning's struggles in a season-opening loss in Columbus last year.

"I've obviously matured. I think going through those rough times, I learned a lot about myself. And I've become a better man because of it and hopefully a better player. I don't want to repeat that game," Manning said.

The game at Tennessee will be a trip down memory lane at the place where his uncle Peyton played. When Ole Miss comes to Austin on Oct. 24, the stories will be about his grandfather Archie and uncle Eli.

Archie Manning praised his grandson for the way he's handled everything thrown at him so far. College football



Texas quarterback Arch Manning, after early-season struggles, helped the Longhorns win seven of their last eight games. [JEFFREY MCWHORTER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

analysts and critics were "unfair" because they "crowned him before he ever played," Archie Manning said. "So, he struggled a little bit. It happens when you play college football, playing at that level. But he kept his head down and kept fighting. I was really, really proud of him."

Sarkisian said the attention and negativity last season forged a better player.

"I think the way of what he got put through probably would have melted or destroyed 99% of people in his shoes. All he did was stay consistent and true to who he was, which was to continue to work hard, continue to be a great teammate, try to get better, and he did," Sarkisian said. "I think that he's grown into a great leader for us."



Texas quarterback Arch Manning is "poised for a heck of a season," coach Steve Sarkisian says. [ERIC GAY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

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North Dakota State fans last celebrated a national championship in January 2025, but last year's lackluster attendance for a home playoff loss showed, the Bison's athletic director says, "they wanted a new challenge." [JULIO CORTEZ/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

# Bison hope to make quick FBS mark

By Dave Campbell  
The Associated Press

FARGO, N.D. — North Dakota State's road to the highest level of college football was paved by an unprecedented run of success, with 10 national championships serving as sparkling souvenirs from

a two-decade stay in the Championship Subdivision.

That exit sign for the Bowl Subdivision came into view through a rare and bitter taste of failure.

The Bison rumbled last year into the FCS playoffs with the top seed, a first-round bye and an unbeaten record.

Then came Dec. 6 and the fateful game against Illinois State. The Redbirds, a conference rival, rallied three times from two-touchdown deficits for a one-point victory at the Fargodome. The 19,000-seat stadium was about half full for the thriller.

"That was the point in time for me

when I said, 'We've got to get this done,'" athletic director Matt Larsen recalled. "We were really close already. I remember thinking to myself, 'If we don't make this move, this might be the norm.' I think our fan base is as passionate as

SEE DAKOTA, G9



# DAKOTA

From Page G8

they've always been, but they wanted a new challenge. This provides that new energy and new competition."

The latest era for this powerhouse on the prairie starts on Saturday when North Dakota State hosts Jacksonville State in its first game as an FBS program. The Bison then make their Mountain West debut on Sept. 12 at Air Force, marking yet another turn on the sport's carousel of conference realignment. Sacramento State is also moving up to the FBS this season.

"I always knew it could happen, but I never was really thinking about it," linebacker Donovan Woolen said. "To play better games against better competition is going to be a lot more fun. To be able to test our abilities and see our fullest potential of what we can do as players and as a team, I think we're ready for it."

## Dominant program

After winning three national championships (1965, 1968, 1969) in what was then the NCAA's College Division, the Bison won five more Division II titles (1983, 1985, 1986, 1988 and 1990) after the original lower tier was divided into two. The first big move came in 2004 to the FCS, where attention-grabbing wins over Big Ten and Big 12 opponents laid the groundwork for those record 10 championships over a stunning 14-year span that included four different head coaches.

The Bison went 9-5 against FBS foes, with four of those losses coming by a combined 12 points, and counted Iowa, Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State and Minnesota — twice — as victims of their stampede. The program's all-time record in playoff games is 86-20, including a jaw-dropping 51-7 in the FCS tournament.

"There's been murmurs and all that for probably five years now, but to finally make that jump, it's pretty cool to see and I'm excited for the guys back at Fargo," said Seattle Seahawks left guard Grey Zabel, who was a first-round draft pick out of North Dakota State in 2025 and promptly got a Super Bowl ring out of his rookie season. "They've got the support staff. They've got the coaching staff. They've got the community, the fans, the players, the talent. It's just a matter of putting in the hard work and having the right attitude, effort and mentality."



**Offensive lineman Grey Zabel, who was a first-round draft pick from North Dakota State and won a Super Bowl as an NFL rookie with the Seahawks, says he's excited for his alma mater.** [RUSSELL HONS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

## Being ready to move up

Playing in the biggest city in a state without a pro team, the Bison have naturally become a regional draw boasting a proud network of supporters. Tom Blattner, a 1996 alumnus, gave in 2021 with his wife through their foundation a \$15 million gift toward the \$54 million indoor facility that also allows the soccer, baseball, softball and golf teams to practice in the dead of winter.

Fargo is a growing city of more than 125,000 people with a metropolitan area — including Moorhead, Minnesota — that's about double that, but a midsize market has its financial limits. The university enrolled close to 12,000 students last fall, including about 9,700 undergraduates, more than only Wyoming and Air Force in the Mountain West.

NDSU's \$5 million reclassification fee

SEE DAKOTA, G10



**North Dakota State, which has won 10 FCS national championships, all since 2011, is making the leap to the FBS and the Mountain West Conference.** [JULIO CORTEZ/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]



# DAKOTA

From Page G9

to the NCAA and \$12.5 million entry fee to the Mountain West were privately funded, so some donors will undoubtedly be tapped out for a while. The football program added 22 scholarships in the move to the FBS, and the increased travel and other competitive upgrades has roughly doubled the operating budget, Larsen said, from 2025 expenses of about \$8 million.

As long as the College Football Play-off includes a spot for the Group of Six conferences that comprise the underbelly of the Power Four-driven FBS, the Bison will have a big prize to pursue even if their days of winning national championships with regularity are all but done.

“To be able to compete year in and year out for a conference championship, to me that’s a signifier that we’ve built a competitive program. If you’re doing well in the Mountain West, that means you’re doing well across the Group of Six as well,” Larsen said. “We don’t want to just go. We want to go compete right away.”

The buzz around the football facilities has been palpable this summer, perhaps no stronger than when players began to get their hands on the latest edition of the popular EA Sports video game, College Football, which for the first time includes North Dakota State. Now they can relax at home after practice and pick the Bison to control instead of Alabama or Ohio State.

“To play as yourself in a game, that’s something every little kid wants to do when they grow up,” Woolen said.

## Losing traditional rivals

North Dakota State was joined on its jump to the FCS by South Dakota State, which beat the Bison in the 2022 national championship game and won it all again in 2023. North Dakota and South Dakota eventually moved up from Division II as well.

The Bison are open to playing regional schools in the future, Larsen said, but that can’t be an annual event with a nonconference schedule that has room for only FCS game. North Dakota State fans seeking matchups with the neighbors to the north and south will probably have to settle for other sports.

Northern Illinois, another one of the three newcomers to Mountain West football this season, could become a rival as the only other Central Time Zone team in the league from a part of the country



**The North Dakota State Bison hope to be a good fit in the Mountain West, which has only one other team in the Central time zone: Northern Illinois.**

[PHOTOS BY JULIO CORTEZ/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

the Bison try to recruit hard. Wyoming, where current head coach Tim Polasek was recently the offensive coordinator under Craig Bohl, a former North Dakota State head coach, is another candidate to stoke the competitive fire.

For now, Bison fans have some fun road trips to look forward to, with two games in Northern California, one in Las Vegas and one in, yes, Honolulu.

“There’s a lot of excitement around the community for sure,” wide receiver and kick returner Jackson Williams said.

Winning never gets old to coaches or players, but all those blowouts of teams in the bottom half of the top-heavy Missouri Valley Football Conference weren’t doing much for the fan base. Plus, taking home that many trophies in such a short amount of time can create an anticlimactic feeling.

“I think it’s bittersweet, to sum it up, but I do think with where college football is headed there was no other decision to be made,” Polasek said. “We’re excited to be moving up, and the time was right. It’s just an opportunity we couldn’t pass up.”



**Tim Polasek was 26-3 in his first two seasons as North Dakota State’s head coach and now leads the Bison into the FBS.**



# Hoosiers, Cignetti 'stalking complacency'

By Steve Megargee  
The Associated Press

CHICAGO — Indiana coach Curt Cignetti says he's "stalking complacency" as he makes sure there's no championship hangover now that he's orchestrated one of the most remarkable turnarounds in college football history.

Cignetti took over a program that had gone 9-27 the three years before his arrival and led it to College Football Playoff appearances in each of his first two seasons, including a 2025 national title.

He wants his program to maintain the same edge it carried while working its way up.

"We have a way of doing things," Cignetti said. "We've got guys that have been together, and all we do is win."

Indiana's stunning two-year run under Cignetti already has allowed the traditional Big Ten also-ran to shed its status as the Bowl Subdivision program with the most losses in history. That dubious honor now belongs to conference rival Northwestern.

The Hoosiers obviously have bigger long-term goals than that.

They want to keep it going without Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback Fernando Mendoza, who went to the Las Vegas Raiders with the top pick in this year's draft after his lone season at Indiana. He was one of a school-record eight players drafted.

"We need to make sure that we keep the same blueprint as last year going into this year, and that includes maintaining the same work ethic," offensive tackle Carter Smith said.

Indiana did a remarkable job of restocking its roster by getting one of the nation's top collections of transfer portal talent. Indiana's list of 18 transfer newcomers includes former TCU quarterback Josh Hoover and ex-Michigan State wide receiver Nick Marsh.

Marsh got an early indication of Cignetti's no-nonsense approach, as the former Spartans player showed up for a spring practice in gold cleats and got criticized by his new coach. Cignetti has since praised the work habits of Marsh, who caught 100 passes for 1,311 yards and nine touchdowns over the last two seasons.

Indiana's chances of earning a third straight playoff bid could depend on Hoover, who threw for 9,627 yards, 71



Indiana coach Curt Cignetti and the Hoosiers are looking to continue the momentum from last season's national championship. [REBECCA BLACKWELL/ THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

touchdowns and 33 interceptions over the last three years. He has rather large shoes to fill.

"What separated Fernando was when the game was on the line, those fourth-quarter wins, the last three minutes, four minutes, that's when he played his best football," Cignetti said.

Indiana could be on the verge of establishing itself as annual contenders as long as Cignetti sticks around, as the Hoosiers have followed up their portal success by making inroads in high school recruiting. Over the last two weeks, Indiana has gained verbal commitments from 2027 five-star wide receiver Monshun Sales and highly regarded 2028 quarterback

Lukas Prock.

Cignetti is more focused now on making sure his current team is prepared for its title defense. Defensive lineman Tyrique Tucker was asked how it felt to enter a season as the hunted rather than the hunter.

"We prepare in a way we wouldn't think we're being hunted," Tucker said. "We're preparing like we're predators and we're hungry. We still have that chip on our shoulder, ultimately."

Big Ten media may have given Tucker and his teammates some ammo in that regard. A Cleveland.com poll of reporters that serves as the unofficial Big Ten preseason media forecast had the

defending national champions finishing third in the conference, behind Ohio State and Oregon.

Cignetti understands the challenge ahead after beating both Ohio State and Oregon on the way to the title last year. Cignetti, who worked as an assistant at Alabama from 2007-10, closed one preseason news conference by explaining why he believes the Big Ten is college football's best conference.

"We don't run a hype machine up here in the Midwest," Cignetti said. "We believe everything is earned, not given. When we fall short, we say, 'We fell short.' We don't cry a river, whine and complain. That's why we're the best."





**Jim Mora, who took over a one-win UConn program and led the Huskies to three bowls in four years, hopes to do similar at Colorado State.** [MIKE BUSCHER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

# At CSU, Mora takes on another rebuild

**By Pat Graham**  
The Associated Press

FORT COLLINS, Colo. — Jim Mora spent the summer hiking and mountain biking to the top of whatever summit was in front of him. He finds peace tackling those uphill climbs.

This fall, another steep challenge awaits. Only this one takes place on the football field.

The longtime coach known for rebuilding programs tries to lead Colorado State back to the top in his first season

in charge and as the Rams join the reimagined Pac-12 Conference.

“If we work hard, if we stay healthy, if we maintain the standard, we can be successful,” Mora recently said from his office inside Canvas Stadium with a view overlooking the field. “We will be successful.”

Mora is no stranger to reclamation projects. He took over a 1-11 UConn team after the 2021 season and led the Huskies to a bowl game in three of his four seasons.

But his heart was lured out West. He spent a chunk of his childhood down the

road in Boulder when his dad, 91-year-old coaching great Jim Mora, was an assistant for the Buffaloes.

The 64-year-old Mora knows the history of this conference well. His father was a longtime assistant when it was the Pac-8. He played in it as a defensive back for Washington when the league was the Pac-10. He coached in it at UCLA as part of the Pac-12.

Now, he’s a member of this reassembled version that followed a high-stakes game of conference realignment. The “Conference of Champions” features

the likes of Boise State, Fresno State, San Diego State, Texas State and Utah State, along with holdovers Washington State and Oregon State.

“It gives you a chance to play for a conference championship,” Mora said. “A chance to potentially get into the college football playoff. ... This was really exciting to me.”

## The wisdom of dad

It was his dad’s advice that’s stayed

SEE COLORADO STATE, G13





**New Colorado State football coach Jim Mora is making his best pitch with the Rams.** [DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

## COLORADO STATE

From Page G12

with him through every stop at every level.

Firmly set the groundwork early, his father instructed.

It worked out well for his dad, who was a head coach in the USFL (Philadelphia/Baltimore Stars) and later in the NFL with the New Orleans Saints and Indianapolis Colts, where his “Play-offs?!” rant remains iconic even 25 years later.

“Because you can’t go in easy and then come down with higher standards,” said Mora, who kicks off his Rams tenure on Sept. 5 against Wyoming. “You have to walk in the building with the highest of standards and hold people accountable.”

Another piece of advice from dad: Praise everyone. Because a word of encouragement goes a long way.

“The players don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care,” said Hugh Millen, a longtime friend who was roommates with Mora at Washington before embarking on an NFL career and later seeing his son play for Mora at UConn. “Players sense there’s

something genuine about how he cares. You can feel that.”

That’s simply from lessons he learned along the way — from the late Don James at Washington to, of course, his father. Mora chats with his dad all the time.

“I know that everything he tells me is genuine,” Mora said, “and from the heart.”

### The history of the Rams

Mora’s new office is already well decorated. There are numerous pictures — him as a player, as a coach, with former players, with his father — adorning the walls.

On the coffee table, a thick book titled “Aggies to Rams: The History of Football at Colorado State University.” Certainly, he will be a chapter in an updated version.

Mora takes over the program from Jay Norvell, who was fired last October after a 2-5 start. It was a feat just to get Mora from UConn, where he guided the Huskies to back-to-back nine-win seasons in 2024 and ‘25.

The Rams haven’t won that many games since 2014, when they had 10 under Jim McElwain while in the Mountain West. They haven’t won a conference title since 2002 with Sonny



**New Colorado State coach Jim Mora is known for encouraging his players.** [MIKE BUSCHER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Lubick — the coaching great the field is named after — running the show.

“We went to look for a program builder and we found that in Coach Mora,” athletic director John Weber said. “His level of detail, his level of preciseness, teaches everyone in the department what it really takes to compete at a championship caliber.”

The school has revamped the program and features an on-campus stadium that opened in 2017. The Rams also just signed a new partnership deal with Adidas.

“This,” Weber said, “is what a power school looks like.”

### Mora sum of all his parts

Mora used to constantly vacuum when he was roommates with Millen while a graduate assistant at Washington.

It’s the way the detail-oriented Mora is wired. It’s why taking a timeout from coaching for a few seasons after being dismissed from UCLA in 2017 was a challenge. He missed the grind.

So he climbed.

“He would run up the mountain at such a pace to bring on the physical pain so that it could finally mask and drown out the internal pain that he wasn’t coaching,” Millen recounted. “He needed to

coach as much as he needed to draw his next breath.”

Which led him to UConn, where he revitalized a program known more for basketball. He accomplished a similar turnaround with the Bruins (going 46-30 from 2012-17) and hopes to rejuvenate the Rams.

“I’m getting up every day with the mindset to do the very best I can,” said Mora, who also has been an NFL head coach with Seattle and Atlanta. “If you do that, you’re always at least moving toward success.”

His influence already is contagious. The players frequently practiced on their own this summer to build cohesion.

“We try to be a player-led team,” said receiver Jackson Harper, who followed Mora from UConn. “Because player-led teams are successful.”

### Going uphill to unwind

Before camp, Mora hiked and mountain biked in Oregon, Idaho, and Colorado. In all, he logged 75,000 vertical feet.

Anything he reflected on during those ascents?

“I think about everything,” Mora said. “But I just really try to observe nature and how lucky I am.”





Southern California quarterback Jayden Maiava, coach Lincoln Riley and the Trojans say they're ready to build on last season's success. [MARK J. TERRILL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

# Malava, USC embrace high expectations

**By Luke DeCock**  
The Associated Press

CHICAGO — The expectations are not new for Lincoln Riley or Southern

California. He faced them as a first-time head coach at Oklahoma before arriving at USC, and the Trojans have faced them nearly every year for generations.

Still, in Riley's five years at USC,

those expectations have perhaps never been higher than they are this fall. With more than a dozen contributors returning, including star quarterback Jayden Maiava, the country's top-ranked

freshman class and a handful of impact transfers, a lot of the pieces that were missing during the first few years of

SEE USC, G15



# Oklahoma's Lewis has something to prove

By Tim Willert  
The Associated Press

NORMAN, Okla. — Kip Lewis has something to prove heading into his final season at No. 10 Oklahoma.

Lewis starred at linebacker for a defense that was among the best in the nation last season. but doesn't think he gets the respect he deserves.

"I don't really get recognized nationally, so I kind of make that my effort now to let them know that it's kind of a little BS," he said. "It's always good to have that chip on my shoulder in every technique I do. It's just making me want to bring my 'A' game all the time."

Lewis, a 6-foot-1, 235-pound senior from Carthage, Texas, recorded a team-high 76 tackles last season, including 10 ½ for a loss. In 2024, he had 65 tackles and four sacks and returned interceptions for touchdowns against Auburn and Alabama.

Lewis constantly feels overlooked.

"You know, lists come out and stuff and usually it don't all matter, but I just know whenever you roll the tape, the tape speaks volumes," he said.

Not everyone is overlooking Lewis, whose name appears on three preseason watch lists. The Bronco Nagurski Trophy is awarded to the nation's most outstanding defensive player, while the Butkus award is given to the top linebacker and the Chuck Bednarik Award is given to the defensive player of the year.



Oklahoma linebacker Kip Lewis, though his name is on three preseason watch lists, says he feels overlooked. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Lewis and fellow linebacker Owen Heinecke, who racked up 74 tackles for the Sooners last season, including 12 for a loss, should be among the top

defensive duos in the country.

"I think the Kip disrespect is unwarranted," Heinecke said. "He's proved for four years that he is a starting

linebacker in the SEC and not only that, but one of the best linebackers in the country. So, whenever Kip gets on those lists, it's well deserved, and when he's not, you know, we always think that he should be up there."

Oklahoma coach Brent Venables, who oversees the defense, called Lewis and Heinecke "strong leaders" who are steady, consistent and passionate.

"The best leaders are guys that can get guys around them to do the hardest things, and they certainly have been able to do that," Venables said. "They've got a great trust and respect from their teammates. The trust is something you can't buy; it's earned over a period of time."

Lewis and Heinecke are good friends who draw off of each other.

"Playing next to him is awesome," Heinecke said. "He brings energy, he brings passion, all the things that you want out of somebody that you're playing next to. I like to think we're kind of yin and yang. I'm a little bit more level-headed, composed, and he's, you know, all over the place, tracking 8,000 yards at practice because he's just pacing the field up and down the whole time. He brings a light and an energy that is unmatched."

Lewis said Heinecke brings out the best in him.

"He just makes me want to get better every day being beside him," Lewis said. "When he steps his game up, I just know I've got to bring mine also."

## USC

From Page G14

Riley's tenure have now fallen into place, on paper at least.

"It's what it's supposed to feel like here," Riley said at Big Ten football media days. "I've said this multiple times: I mean, the only two places that I've been a head coach at were blue-blood schools that have the highest of expectations. Honestly, I've really not known anything different. We're a product of our own experiences. That's been mine."

"Every year, I expect to win. I expect us to win. I expect us to compete for and win championships. That doesn't change. I certainly will give you what has changed: We're more equipped than at any point

in the previous few years. That's not a hope or wish, those are facts. There's a lot of facts to back that up."

Riley cited institutional alignment including name, image and likeness financial support and a new \$200 million practice facility, the addition of new defensive coordinator and longtime TCU head coach Gary Patterson and the overall depth of talent on the roster among his reasons for optimism that he can get USC back to where it is used to being.

So far, that's been tough going. Riley enters his fifth year at USC with a 35-18 overall record and 24-12 record in the Pac-12 and Big Ten. Since going 11-3 in his debut, the Trojans have ended the season in the Top 25 only once, when they finished 20th last season after an Alamo Bowl loss to TCU to finish 9-4,

tied for fourth in the Big Ten.

With all three losses on the road to ranked teams, Maiava said the Trojans are ready to build on their success last season.

"Just the work and the preparation," Maiava said. "That's where it comes from, what gives us the confidence to be willing to go out there and compete against everybody and anybody. I think we're just ready. We're all keeping the main thing the main thing and we're all driven to push each other and make each other better."

It starts with the 6-foot-4 Maiava, a native of Hawaii who threw for 3,711 yards and 24 touchdowns last season while rushing for six more scores in his second season at USC after transferring from UNLV.

Then there's what Riley called the best depth of his tenure on both the offensive and defensive lines, along with the 32-player freshman class. That group includes three five-star linemen and a local four-star tight end, Santa Ana's Mark Bowman, all of whom will be expected to contribute immediately.

"I do think this is a special unit, and if it wasn't, I would say it wasn't," said defensive lineman Alex VanSumeren, a transfer from Michigan State who played against USC last season. "Now, what does that mean? It doesn't guarantee us any games to win. It just means that we have a very talented group of guys on the team. It's about what we do with it now, and I'm confident we're going to do something good."





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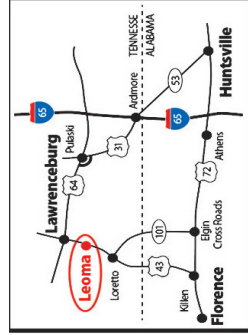
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