

GAMEDAY



ANOTHER ROUND 2

Alabama, after regular-season loss to Sooners, hopes to turn playoff Tide



Story & Lee
Since 1970 Furniture & Bedding

MINI MAX from Story & Lee - GREEN EGG GIVEAWAY

**TAILGATE
 of the
 week
 RECIPE**

**Congratulations to Juanita Graham of
 Russellville, AL our 2025 Contest Winner!**
WINNING RECIPE

Chess Brownies

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup chopped pecans
- 1/2 cup margarine, melted
- 1 large egg
- 1 15.25 oz. pkg yellow cake mix

- 2 large eggs
- 1 8 oz. pkg cream cheese,
softened
- 1 16 oz. pkg powdered sugar

DIRECTIONS:

Stir together pecans, margarine, 1 egg and cake mix. Mix well. Press in bottom of a lightly greased 13x9 inch pan. Combine 2 eggs and cream cheese, beat in a large mixing bowl. Sift sugar, gradually add sugar, mix until smooth, pour on top. Take a spatula and smooth out evenly over top. Bake at 325 degrees for 40 minutes. Cool completely in pan. Cut into 30-35 squares.



**FINAL Contest
 winner of the
 MINI MAX BIG
 Green Egg**



**This recipe was
 submitted by
 Juanita Graham,
 Russellville, AL**



The Original American Designed Ceramic Cooker!

The World's Best Smoker & Grill!

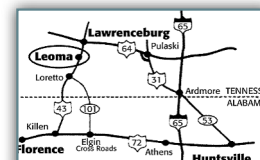
Story & Lee has the largest selection of Eggs and the lowest prices in the TN Valley.

FREE Delivery • FREE Assembly



Story & Lee
Since 1970 Furniture & Bedding

Hwy. 43 • Leoma, TN
 Store Hours: Mon. thru Sat.
 9 A.M. 'til 6 P.M.
 (931) 852-2111
 Toll Free 1-800-345-2511



www.storyandlee.com

COLUMN

SEC tries to quell Big Ten supremacy

By Doug Segrest
For GameDay

The Big Ten is chasing a trifecta. Is it the best conference in college football right now? Not yet. But it's getting close.

As the College Football Playoff opens Friday and Saturday, the Big Ten owns the top of the board. Indiana is the conference champion, and anyone dismissing the Hoosiers as a flash in the pan hasn't been watching closely enough. Ohio State, meanwhile, has a chance to go back-to-back — a feat only Alabama and Georgia have pulled off this century.

Measured by championships, the Big Ten is on the verge of domination. But true conference strength isn't defined solely by its elite. It's revealed by depth and the weekly grind, and that's where the SEC still holds the edge.

Five SEC teams made the field, with Texas and Vanderbilt narrowly missing out. Nearly half the league was deemed College Football Playoff-worthy — an unprecedented level of depth just two years into the expanded format, and one that's unlikely to be matched anytime soon.

The problem is perception. Most fans don't watch the SEC week in and week out. They see narrow wins over Auburn or South Carolina and label them flaws, rather than escapes. Records still drive the conversation, even when strength of schedule tells a different story.

To the committee's credit, it leaned into that distinction. Notre Dame belongs in the national title conversation. BYU had an excellent season. But when the field was finalized, the CFP stuck to its stated criteria: strength of schedule, conference championships and head-to-head results when teams were otherwise comparable.

That approach produced a field built on fairness rather than optics — and, for the first time, a truly national playoff.

CFP first round

• **No. 9 Alabama at No. 8 Oklahoma** (7 p.m. Friday): Oklahoma took the regular-season meeting in Tuscaloosa despite getting outgained 406-212 by forcing a turnover-palooza and making Ty Simpson's life miserable. The rematch comes down to this: Which



Fernando Mendoza and the top-seeded and top-ranked Indiana Hoosiers hope to lift a more-prominent trophy next month. [AJ MAST/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

offensive line can better protect a shaken quarterback and produce a sliver of a running game? My lean: Oklahoma.

• **No. 10 Miami at No. 7 Texas A&M** (11 a.m. Saturday): Carson Beck returns to SEC country looking for another national title. When he's hot, he's unstoppable. But he tends to force things against good defenses — and the Aggies are looking to take advantage. Can Marcel Reed and Co. capitalize? My lean: Texas A&M.

• **No. 11 Tulane at No. 6 Ole Miss** (2:30 p.m. Saturday): Jon Sumrall's Green Wave trailed by 20 at halftime the first time they met, and things only got worse. Sumrall may be distracted by his new duties at Florida. Ole Miss should be focused with Pete Golding taking over for Lane Kiffin, and Trinidad Chambliss should have a field day. In a rout: Ole Miss.

• **No. 12 James Madison at No. 5 Oregon** (6:30 p.m. Saturday): Give the Dukes

credit for getting here. A good portion of their 2023 roster is already a CFP favorite — playing for Indiana and Curt Cignetti, of course. Oregon was the lesser of the Big Ten's holy trio during the regular season and has something to prove. Pulling away: Oregon.

Doug Segrest, who covered college football for 28 years for numerous newspapers in Alabama and Tennessee, is a freelance columnist.

Alabama at Oklahoma

When: 7 p.m. Friday

TV/radio: ABC/FM-93.9, FM 97.7, AM-920

Records: No. 11 Alabama (10-3), No. 8 Oklahoma (10-2)

The series: Oklahoma leads 5-2-1.

Four-down territory

1. Hello again: If last week is any indication of the outcome with OU, Alabama should be in good shape. In Alabama's recent history, it's best to lose the first meeting. Alabama won the first game against Georgia but dropped the rematch. Alabama lost to LSU in 2011, but won the rematch in the national title game. Alabama downed Georgia in the 2022 SEC title game but lost to the Bulldogs in the national title game. The Crimson Tide dropped the regular-season meeting with Oklahoma. If the recent pattern holds, Alabama should win the rematch in the playoff.

2. Tide turning (it over): It doesn't take a football genius to figure out what went wrong for Alabama in its first meeting with Oklahoma. The culprit was three turnovers, including a pick-6. To that point, Alabama was among the best in the country in ball security with six total turnovers through nine games. The OU game threw off that stat and won 23-21 in Tuscaloosa. Alabama's on the road this time against the Sooners. Making plays, and fewer turnovers, is crucial.

3. Steer Mateer wrong: Oklahoma quarterback John Mateer hasn't been a dominant quarterback this season. What he does do is make good decisions and lead the team to wins. He was far from flashy against Alabama, completing 15 of 23 passes for 138 yards and rushing 10 times for 23 yards and the team's only touchdown. The key for Alabama is to rattle Mateer and get him to make bad choices. "We've got to take the ball off of him. We've got to make him have a bad day, just shut down all types of QB runs," Alabama linebacker Justin Jefferson said.

4. Sooner boom: The Crimson Tide has its hands full with the Sooner defense (No. 7 in scoring and No. 5 in rushing) and a consistent offense. They also must deal with the leg of Tate Sandell. He was a key in the Sooners victory over Alabama in November. He booted three field goals, including a 52-yarder.



Alabama defensive backs Red Morgan and Keon Sabb hope to end this matchup with Oklahoma in a better mood than the one in November. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

He was recently named the Lou Groza Award winner, given to the nation's top kicker. He's 23-of-24 on field goals, including 7-of-7 from 50-plus yards, and 24-of-24 on extra points.

Key matchup

Alabama WR Germie Bernard vs. Oklahoma WR Isaiah Sategna III

These two players are crucial in getting the offense off and running. Bernard is the leader for the Crimson Tide with 57 receptions and 762 receiving yards to go with his seven touchdowns. Sategna leads the Sooners with 65 receptions, 948 receiving yards and seven touchdowns.

Player of the week

Nikhai Hill-Green, LB

The graduate student linebacker, who was one of the few bright spots in the SEC title game loss to Georgia with seven tackles and a couple of pass breakups, has continued to step up as a leader.

By the numbers

1: Oklahoma and Alabama are tied for the all-time national lead with their 27 seasons each of 11-plus wins.

12: Alabama lineman Kadyn Proctor has not allowed a sack in 12 consecutive games.

47: Percent of Oklahoma opponent's plays (367 of 773) resulted in 1 or fewer

yards.

176-78: Oklahoma is outscoring opponents 176-78 in the first half.

Prediction

Alabama 24, Oklahoma 17

Something happened to the Crimson Tide offense over the past month, and it resulted in two losses and a close call against Auburn. Another effort like that and Alabama proves all the naysayers right of not deserving a playoff spot. The Georgia loss should be enough to motivate Alabama. Plus, the return of injured starters will make a big difference.

— Edwin Stanton

Tide vows to address OU's 'disrespect'

By Kennington Smith III
The Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA — Alabama players haven't forgotten their last game — last two, really — against Oklahoma.

The Sooners won 23-21 in Tuscaloosa a month ago and then celebrated by taking photos at midfield after ending the Crimson Tide's 17-game home win streak. Alabama staffers ushered the Sooners off the logo, creating a contentious scene that included at least one Oklahoma player spitting on the logo.

"That type of disrespect will be addressed on the field," Tide linebacker Justin Jefferson said. "We just got to go give it to them, take the ball off them and bring it home for Alabama."

No. 11 Alabama will get another shot at eighth-ranked Oklahoma when they meet in the opening round of the College Football Playoff.

The rematch is in Norman, Oklahoma, on Friday night. It's the second straight rematch for the Crimson Tide, which beat Georgia 24-21 in the regular season and then lost to the Bulldogs 28-7 in the SEC championship game.

Alabama (10-3, No. 9 CFP) stopped short of calling this one a revenge game, but a few factors add another level of motivation.

"We're really excited," Jefferson said. "I've never beaten Oklahoma, so I'm more than ready. I think we have what it takes."

Few guys on Alabama's roster have beaten Oklahoma (10-2, No. 8 CFP).

The Sooners smoked Alabama 24-3 in Norman in 2024 and prevented the Tide from making the CFP. This season's loss left Alabama squarely on the playoff bubble — and likely prevented the tradition-rich program from hosting a first-round game.

Now the teams meet for the third time in a little over a year, with much higher stakes. The winner advances to the quarterfinals to take on top-ranked and top-seeded Indiana in the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day.

"We know what to expect as far as playing them," Alabama star receiver Ryan Williams said. "We have a great idea of what's to come. We just have to execute at a high level."

Getting a grip on turnovers would be a start.

The Tide turned the ball over three



Oklahoma receiver Jer'Michael Carter and the Sooners celebrated with glee after November's win at Alabama. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

times against Oklahoma, including an 87-yard interception return for a touchdown. On the other side, the Sooners were the only team to not commit a turnover against the Tide in the regular season.

Turnovers also hurt Alabama in the SEC championship, with an interception leading to a Georgia touchdown in the first half.

"We just need to execute the simple," Williams said. "Make simple plays simple and continue to try to be the best ball security and ball dominant team in

the country."

If Alabama takes better care of the ball, it surely improves its chances of an upset — and getting payback. Oklahoma is a 1 ½-point favorite, according to BetMGM Sportsbook.

"Coming up short at the end of the game was disappointing because that's something we've done a pretty good job of," Alabama coach Kalen DeBoer said. "Go back to the Oklahoma game, a number of our guys got dinged up and just grinding through it.

"I'm sure Oklahoma is looking to get

some guys back, including probably a continued stronger quarterback with (John) Mateer. I know that that's the thing that draws a lot of attention on their end. But we're looking forward to this rematch."

If Alabama wins, no one should be surprised to see players heading to midfield.

"It's just a blessing to get another opportunity," Jefferson said. "To play again, compete for a national championship, another learning moment this season."

Venables, DeBoer find success, hit CFP

By Cliff Brunt

The Associated Press

NORMAN, Okla. — Oklahoma's Brent Venables and Alabama's Kalen DeBoer have lived under intense microscopes at blue blood programs.

Both replaced highly successful coaches — DeBoer is in his second season with the Crimson Tide after stepping in for the retired Nick Saban and Venables is in his fourth year leading the Sooners following Lincoln Riley's departure.

Both had impeccable credentials. DeBoer led Washington to the national title game. Venables had won three national titles as a defensive coordinator — one at Oklahoma and two at Clemson — before returning to Oklahoma with great fanfare.

Both have let their teams stumble at times in the views of their insatiable supporters, leading to criticism. And now, both have a chance to bring their programs the kind of success those rabid fans crave. Eighth-seeded Oklahoma (10-2) will host ninth-seeded Alabama (10-3) in a College Football Playoff matchup on Friday night.

Venables said it's all been worth it to reach his first playoff game as a head coach.

"I don't mind to be judged in front of people and failing in front of the world," Venables said. "But you also (can) be put back together in front of those who broke you as well. And so there's that."

Venables was the darling Sooners fans wanted after Riley stunned them and left for Southern California. Venables had helped Oklahoma win the national title in 2000 as a co-defensive coordinator. As he later helped Clemson win two national championships as defensive coordinator, Oklahoma's fans clamored for his return.

He had big shoes to fill. In just five years, Riley went 55-10 with three playoff appearances with Heisman winners Baker Mayfield and Kyler Murray.

Sooners fans learned that kind of success is tough to duplicate, and the welcome mat was yanked from under Venables when the Sooners went 6-7 his first year. Oklahoma went 10-3 in 2023, but fell to 6-7 again last season, leading critics to wonder if he was the right man for the job.

Venables directly addressed the media, some of whom raised questions about his status before the season. He said he embraced doubters.



Oklahoma's Brent Venables and Alabama's Kalen DeBoer have dealt with major expectations from fans to lead their teams to playoff berths. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

"There's several people here — you're doing your jobs, you've had to say the bad things, too — about us, about me, and that's cool," he said. "I don't hold on to it. I remember, but I don't hold on to it. But that just comes with it too. You sign up for that."

Oklahoma athletic director Joe Castiglione's patience has been rewarded. This season hasn't been pretty, but the Sooners have mostly won on the strength of a stout defense, gritty quarterback John Mateer and excellent special teams play led by Lou Groza Award-winning kicker Tate Sandell.

It's a team that reflects its fans.

"There's not a more passionate, well-versed, educated fan base in all of college

football," Venables said. "And so they know what they want it to look like. And so do we. And there's an alignment there."

DeBoer faced the unenviable task of replacing Saban, who won six national titles at Alabama. The Crimson Tide missed the playoff last season after surprise losses to Vanderbilt and Oklahoma, drawing the ire of supporters who expect championships.

DeBoer felt the future was bright, and as he expected, the Crimson Tide bounced back this season. His success led to rumors that he'd be a contender for the Michigan opening. He put out a statement squashing them Sunday.

"I have not spoken and have no interest

in speaking with anyone else about any other job," DeBoer's statement said. "I am fully committed to this program and look forward to continuing as the head football coach at the University of Alabama."

DeBoer said he put out the statement to help his team focus. But having to deal with chatter has been a way of life at Alabama for years.

"Our guys, if there's any distraction, I haven't seen it, haven't felt it," DeBoer said. "And so I'm really proud of the way they've handled whatever noise that's out there. And again, we've probably, all season long, dealt with enough noise to where it doesn't surprise me on how they've handled this."



Oklahoma quarterback John Mateer and the Sooners will seek a path to another victory over Alabama in the first round of the playoffs. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Take 2? History not on Sooners' side

By Shawn McFarland
The Dallas Morning News

The formula that a head coach follows to deliver their weekly pregame remarks is a tried-and-true approach. They praise the opponent's head coach. They single out an area or two that the team excels in. They tip their cap toward the head coach on the opposite sideline. It's borderline predictable.

It's a tad played out, too, right?

Oklahoma head coach Brent Venables might have a valid argument.

"I don't want to be real redundant," Venables said after a brief rundown of its next opponent. "We just played these guys a couple of weeks ago and I had a lot of great things to say."

Venables, in full disclosure, still used a full minute of his time to offer kind words toward Alabama before Friday night's College Football Playoff first-round game. The Sooners (10-2) will host the Crimson Tide (10-3) in their first

postseason game at Norman's Memorial Stadium, and Venables, the team's fourth-year coach, has all the reason to be chipper and cheery in advance of it.

It's a rematch of Oklahoma's 23-21 regular-season win against Alabama on Nov. 15 and, per odds makers, is expected to be the closest of the four first-round games. Alabama is a 1 1/2-point favorite, according to DraftKings' lines, and is the only road team favored.

There's a decent sample of historical precedent to support that. Teams that lost in the regular season are 17-7 all time in postseason and bowl rematches. Purdue was the last team to win both a regular-season and postseason game against the same opponent when it beat Central Michigan in the 2007 Motor City Bowl. Regular-season winners have lost nine consecutive rematches since.

There have only been two rematches of regular-season games in the decade-long history of the College Football Playoff. The team that lost in the regular season

won the postseason sequel each time.

The Crimson Tide beat Georgia in the regular season four years ago but lost by multiple scores when the two played again for the national championship just over a month later. Last season, in the first year of the new-look Big Ten, Oregon beat Ohio State by a point in the regular season but were doubled up in the Rose Bowl quarterfinals.

"I haven't had a whole lot of rematches — I've had a few — but I haven't had a whole lot," Oklahoma offensive coordinator Ben Arbuckle said Monday. "I think the first thing you've got to do is you've got to see what you did well and why did you do it well. What did the defense do in order for you to do that really well? How did we execute in those moments to do really well?"

The Sooners were hardly a perfect offense in round one. Quarterback John Mateer passed for only 138 yards. The ground game averaged just 2.6 yards per carry. They didn't score a single

second-half touchdown and were limited to a field goal in both the third and fourth quarters.

They didn't turn the ball over once, though, and the Crimson Tide did three times vs. a Sooners defense that was the third-highest graded unit in the conference, per Pro Football Focus. Alabama quarterback Ty Simpson — whose Heisman Trophy campaign fizzled late in the regular season — threw an interception and lost a fumble.

Simpson also passed for 326 yards and a touchdown. He'd won his first four career starts vs. a ranked opponent before Oklahoma's defense swarmed him. Venables called him a "big-time player" as part of his introductory comments Monday before he veered away from repetition.

"I've got a lot of familiarity," Venables remarked.

He's got a win, too.

The Sooners will need to buck historical trends for a second.

Miami at Texas A&M

When: 11 a.m. Saturday

TV: ABC

Records: No. 10 Miami (10-2), No. 7 Texas A&M (11-1)

The series: Miami leads 3-2.

Four-down territory

1. Category 5 Hurricane: Miami started off the season hot but stumbled with losses to Louisville and SMU. Since then, the defense has built up steam – ranked sixth in the nation in scoring (14 points per game) and 11th in total defense. Miami has held eight opponents to under 100 rushing yards along with 17 sacks in its last four games. The good news for the Aggies is they boast an explosive offense that can generate points in a hurry and average 36 points per game.

2. Setting the tone: Marcel Reed has been a dynamic player for the Aggies. He is closing in on 3,000 yards, the first Aggie to do that since Kellen Mond in 2018. But as Reed goes, so does the Aggie offense. In Texas A&M's only loss, Reed was held to his lowest passing total of the season with 180 yards. He also didn't throw a touchdown pass. He's thrown two or more touchdown passes in nine games this season. If Miami can stop Reed's passing game and limit his running abilities, it could spell trouble for the Aggies.

3. Easy pick: The Aggies got a big boost this week with the promotion of Holman Wiggins to offensive coordinator. He served as co-offensive coordinator and receivers coach. He takes over for Collin Klein, who left for the head coaching job at Kansas State. Klein is still with the Aggies and will continue to call plays. Texas A&M is ranked 14th in the nation in scoring offense. "We really felt like the right person for the job was Holman Wiggins," Aggies coach Mike Elko said. "He's the only person we offered the job to. We felt that was the best thing for Texas A&M football moving forward."

4. Third-down battle: The Aggies are the best in the nation on holding opponents on third down. In 154 attempts by opponents, only 35 were successful (23%). On the flip side, Miami does well on third down, converting 47% of the time. "I think it comes down to having an experienced quarterback," Elko said. "(Carson Beck) really knows where to go with the ball and gets it out of his hands



Texas A&M coach Mike Elko and quarterback Marcel Reed hope the smiles continue after Saturday's playoff game against Miami. [DAVID J. PHILLIP/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

in a timely manner. They also do a great job of putting themselves in manageable third-down situations."

Key matchup

Texas A&M QB Marcel Reed vs. Miami QB Carson Beck

Two elite quarterbacks square off in round one of the playoffs. Reed has 2,932 passing yards with 25 touchdown passes. He's second on the team with 466 rushing yards and has six touchdowns. Beck is right with Reed in passing, throwing for 3,052 yards and 25 touchdowns. He doesn't run much but can make things happen when the pocket breaks down.

Player of the week

Cashius Howell, Texas A&M DE

The SEC defensive player of the year leads the SEC with 11.5 sacks, the most by an Aggie since Myles Garrett in 2014. He also ranks 19th nationally with 13 tackles for loss.

By the numbers

1: Marcel Reed averages 16 yards per completion against AP top 25 opponents, which leads the nation.

4: Texas A&M is one of four teams (Indiana, Oregon and Texas Tech) ranked in the top 20 nationally in total offense and total defense.

6: The Aggie defense has posted six or

more tackles for loss in every game.

12: Texas A&M's offense allowed 55 sacks last season and just 12 this year.

Prediction

Texas A&M 31, Miami 21

The Aggies have the advantage of playing at home and have a chip on their shoulder from losing to Texas to snap an 11-game win streak. Miami's defense is a talented group, but Texas A&M should control the offensive tempo with Reed running the show. It's the defense that has to step up and put the Hurricanes away early and not give them hang around in the second half.

— Edwin Stanton

CFP bid in hand, Aggies hunt for title

By Kristie Rieken

The Associated Press

COLLEGE STATION, Texas — Texas A&M is in the College Football Playoff for the first time, taking a huge step toward contending for a national championship after years of coming up short.

But the Aggies certainly aren't content just to be in the playoff.

"Obviously there was excitement yesterday to sit in the watch party and see our name go up on the screen and that moment's not lost on the team or on me, but we have aspirations to do a lot more than just sit in a room and see our name get put on a screen," coach Mike Elko said last week. "I think very quickly it shifted to, now we have an opponent, we have a focus. I think you could feel the energy lift.

"We kind of went right out of there into a team meeting and to get to work on kind of where this thing was going," he continued. "So yeah, obviously first step is getting in, but I think we want to try to do a little bit more than that."

Seventh-seeded Texas A&M (11-1) hosts No. 10 seed Miami (10-2) on Saturday. The Aggies aim to bounce back after a loss to rival Texas in the regular-season finale spoiled their undefeated season and knocked them out of a first-round bye in the postseason.

"It's an honor to be able to play in the playoffs and especially get another home game at Kyle Field," offensive lineman Trey Zuhn said. "There's no better feeling than that. But we didn't come here just to get to the playoffs. We came here to win it all."

The Aggies are looking for their third national championship and first since 1939. Their 11 wins are the most they've had since going 11-2 in 2012 during Johnny Manziel's Heisman Trophy-winning season.

They'll make their playoff run with offensive coordinator Collin Klein, who will remain with the team throughout the postseason despite being hired as Kansas State's new coach last week following the retirement of Chris Klieman. Elko said though Klein oversees the offense, it is a collaborative effort that involves a variety of people and he isn't worried Klein will be stretched too thin handling all his responsibilities.

"I have a ton of confidence in Collin,



Texas A&M receiver Ashton Bethel-Roman and the Aggies will need to shake off their loss at Texas to find playoff success. [STEPHEN SPILLMAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

in who he is as a man and who he is as a competitor, that he'll give the focus and energy that he needs to ensure that this thing is done the right way and finished the right way," Elko said. "And so, I have no questions about that. I think all in, we'll be able to manage this thing pretty well."

As for if the Aggies and Klein will have star running back Le'Veon Moss when they host the Hurricanes, it's still

unclear. Moss has been out since injuring his ankle against Florida on Oct. 11 and Elko has said in the past that Moss could return for the playoffs. Moss was at practice Tuesday.

If he can't go, Texas A&M will continue to rely on Rueben Owens II to power the running game. He leads the team with 618 yards rushing but has managed just 76 yards combined in his last two games.

"The positive sometimes of a loss is it refocuses and recenters everything," Elko said. "When you're winning, you talk a lot about what needs to get fixed and changed and it doesn't always seem to happen at the rate you want it to. Then sometimes when you get slapped in the face a little bit, you kind of have to readjust. And I think that's maybe what will happen from the loss."

Once unknown, A&M's Howell now a star

By Kristie Rieken

The Associated Press

COLLEGE STATION, Texas — Cashius Howell heard the same thing repeatedly from power-conference schools when he was being recruited out of high school.

“They just didn’t feel like I was worth it to waste a roster spot on,” he recalled.

Five years later, the defensive end has proven those schools wrong, becoming one of the nation’s top defenders and a projected first-round draft pick. On Saturday, he’ll lead seventh-seeded Texas A&M against 10th-seeded Miami in the Aggies’ College Football Playoff debut.

When Howell didn’t get any power-conference offers in Missouri, he ended up at Bowling Green. He redshirted in 2021 before earning a starting spot in 2022. His career began to take off in his last season at Bowling Green in 2023 when he led the MAC with 9½ sacks and had 10½ tackles for loss.

“It kind of gave me the feeling that I wasn’t crazy and that the thoughts and intuitions that I had within my mind it wasn’t like just shooting blanks,” he said. “It was actually real and it just added fuel to the fire to just continue to see how far I can take it honestly.”

He entered the transfer portal and joined the Aggies, and he continued his success last season with four sacks and 8½ tackles for loss playing behind current NFL rookies Nic Scourton and Shemar Stewart before making a huge jump this season.

Howell led the Southeastern Conference and ranked fourth in the nation with 11½ sacks to earn the league’s defensive player of the year honor. He was also a finalist for the Bronko Nagurski Trophy, Lombardi Trophy and Chuck Bednarik Award.

On Monday, he was named to the first team of The Associated Press All-America team.

“He came here to grow and develop and challenge himself,” said A&M coach Mike Elko, in his second season with the Aggies. “And then to see him rise to those challenges where he’s on a plane going to an awards banquet as (a) defensive player of the year in the country ... it’s a phenomenal story.”

Howell remembered how he felt being a “lower type of recruit” and said it fueled him.



Texas A&M defensive end Cashius Howell will take aim at Miami this week. [SAM CRAFT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

“As a 16- or 17-year-old kid, just trying to make a way for himself, it hurt me back then,” he said. “Just seeing that these programs, none of them thought that you were good enough. So, it just put a chip on my shoulder going into Bowling Green, because I just had a feeling that I can play, and I will play at the highest level.”

Howell’s 11½ sacks are the most at Texas A&M since Myles Garrett had the same number in 2014. Von Miller, who had 17 sacks in 2009 for the second-most in a single season in school history, said he doesn’t know Howell personally but has kept an eye on his career.

“He’s a really good rusher,” he said. “I pay attention to the Aggies. Tony Jerod-Eddie, his defensive line coach, is a really good friend of mine, and I see all the Aggie games, and Cashius is always phenomenal, and he’s got a really bright future.”

The 6-foot-2, 248-pound Howell went viral after Texas A&M’s 49-25 victory at LSU in October when he was shown ranting at the Tigers’ offensive line after dominating them all night in a two-sack performance. In the clip he cuts an intimidating figure, wearing his jersey in signature fashion pulled high up and baring almost his entire

midsection as he gets in the linemen’s faces.

Asked about that moment and other times where he might have gotten a little too hyped up, Howell said it’s simply him appreciating how far he’s come since being told he wasn’t even worth a roster spot.

“I like to just think about all the hard times and stuff that I’ve been through to get to this point,” he said. “And I just like to channel that into something positive, and with playing football, I feel like that’s a good outlet for me to be able to channel it and it helps not only myself, but it also helps the team as well.”

Title-hungry Beck takes shot with Miami

By Tim Reynolds
The Associated Press

It was back in late September, Miami had just beaten Florida, and someone told Hurricanes star Carson Beck that he was just the third quarterback in 30 years to go 3-0 as a starter against the Gators.

Beck smiled politely. He didn't care. "I'm here for something more important," Beck said.

Nothing more really needed to be said. What Beck — a member of two national championship teams at Georgia — meant was clear. He chose Miami as the transfer destination for his final season of college football because he wanted to compete for another national title.

And, by the slimmest of margins, he and the Hurricanes have that opportunity. Miami, the No. 10 seed in the College Football Playoff, will travel to face seventh-seeded Texas A&M (11-1) in a first-round game on Saturday. The Hurricanes (10-2) were the final at-large team selected for the CFP field. No. 11 Tulane and No. 12 James Madison are ranked below Miami but got in as conference champions.

"This team is excited to compete," Beck said. "We're excited to go out there and show the product and the brand of what 'The U' is and what it stands for and the culture of who we are. We've been preparing our butt off and we're ready to go compete."

Among active players with at least 15 starts, nobody in major college football has a better record than Beck's mark of 34-5. With 10,984 yards so far in his career, he's the leader among active players at the FBS level. Among FBS quarterbacks with more than 50 passes attempted this season, Beck was No. 2 nationally in completion percentage. He connected on 74.7% of his throws; Ohio State's Julian Sayin completed 78.4% for the top spot. And Beck put up those numbers even after a midseason slump of sorts where he threw six interceptions — not all his fault — in losses to Louisville and SMU.

It's sometimes hard to remember that at this time last year, Beck was facing a most uncertain future. He was preparing for major surgery that would basically rebuild his elbow. He had to decide between entering the NFL draft or picking a new school for this year, since it was no secret that he and Georgia would be parting ways. And when he came to



Quarterback Carson Beck has two national championships on his résumé from Georgia and seeks another with Miami. [MATT FREED/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Miami, he had to wait months before he could do any throwing.

Over the four-game winning streak that got Miami into the playoff, Beck completed 79.5% of his throws for 1,125 yards, 11 touchdowns and one meaningless interception.

"To see a guy that came in under so much scrutiny and having to recover from surgery and everything else to grow like he's grown — and now come down to the end playing his best football down the stretch, I think it's awesome," Miami coach Mario Cristobal said. "It's awesome to see how he approaches each and every day. He is really, really driven. His practices have been outstanding.

Happy for these guys, but happy in the sense that I got to push him more."

Beck will shatter the Miami record for single-season completion percentage (he could go 0-for-39 against Texas A&M and still be ahead of the school-record pace that No. 1 draft pick Cam Ward set last year). He set another school record with 24 consecutive completions. Now, he has a chance to do something that no Hurricanes quarterback since Ken Dorsey did in 2001. He has a chance to lead Miami to a national championship.

"It's crazy how much can happen in a year," Beck said. "Here we are, right? It's been one hell of a year and there's been a

lot of adversity that we've had to face as a team that I've had to face individually."

Texas A&M's defense doesn't give up much, ranking 19th nationally in yards allowed (eight spots behind Miami on that list). And Kyle Field, the Aggies' home, is notoriously difficult for visiting teams.

But Beck has seen just about everything, which gives Miami tons of confidence.

"He's been in big games. This is nothing that he hasn't been in," Miami offensive coordinator Shannon Dawson said. "I do think that that matters. And so, his poise is going to be basically contagious through the whole group."

Tulane at Ole Miss

When: 2:30 p.m. Saturday

TV: TNT

Records: No. 17 Tulane (11-2), No. 6 Ole Miss (11-1)

The series: Ole Miss leads 41-27.

Four-down territory

1. Hot at home: Ole Miss makes it look easy when playing at Vaught-Hemingway Stadium. Since 2023, the Rebels are 21-1 and outscore opponents by an average of 41-15. Its loss in that period was a 20-17 decision to Kentucky in 2024. Since then, Ole Miss has ripped off 11 straight wins, ranked third in FBS for longest current home win streak. Ole Miss has won 14 straight over Tulane and has a 14-2 record at home in the series.

2. Golden era: Pete Golding takes over an Ole Miss program that has garnered most of its attention through its offense over the last few years. The defensive coordinator for the Rebels since 2023 must now ensure that offense continues to run smooth. He brought in John David Baker as the new offensive coordinator and Golding doesn't plan on trying to fix what isn't broke. "We have full confidence in the offensive scheme and how we do things," Golding said. "The offense has been running pretty well, so I'm definitely now trying to screw that up."

3. 500 club: Trinidad Chambliss has distributed the ball efficiently this season. Ole Miss is the only SEC team with five receivers averaging 40 yards per game, and one of four FBS teams (Baylor, FAU and Texas Tech) with four receivers at 500 yards (Harrison Wallace, 719; Deuce Alexander 577; Cayden Lee, 537; De'Zhaun Stribling, 533). Ole Miss has produced four 500-yard receivers for the second straight season. Rebels receiver Dae'Quan Wright is sitting at 489 receiving yards.

4. Rolling Rebels: Ole Miss has the top offense in the SEC and in the nation, ranking third nationally in both total offense (498.1 ypg) and passing offense (309.6 ypg). The Rebels are also in the top-10 in Ole Miss single-season history in points (fourth, 447), total offense per game (fifth, 498.1), yards per play (sixth, 6.7), total touchdowns (seventh, 54), passing yards (seventh, 3,715) and passing yards per game (seventh, 309.6). Ole Miss also stands one rushing score away from tying the single-season school record of 33.



Ole Miss quarterback Trinidad Chambliss and the Rebels hope to leave Tulane gawking again this week. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Key matchup

Ole Miss QB Trinidad Chambliss vs. Tulane QB Jake Retzlaff

Chambliss has 3,016 passing yards with 18 touchdowns and is second on the team with 420 rushing yards with six TDs. Retzlaff has 2,862 passing yards with 14 touchdowns and leads the Green Wave with 610 rushing yards and 16 touchdowns.

Player of the week

Trinidad Chambliss, Ole Miss QB

In the first matchup this season against Tulane, Chambliss led the Rebels with 112

rushing yards to go along with his 307-yard passing day and two touchdowns.

By the numbers

1: The Rebels' 11 wins are the most regular-season wins in school history.

1: Ole Miss is tied for the FBS lead in 30-yard plays (42) and averages 17 plays of 10 yards or more per game.

336: Ole Miss QB Trinidad Chambliss is averaging 336 yards of total offense since taking over as the starter in Week 3.

282: Tulane was held to a season low 282 yards in the first meeting with Ole Miss this season.

Prediction

Ole Miss 35, Tulane 14

Lane Kiffin is gone, but that shouldn't matter too much with a matchup against Tulane, a team Ole Miss throttled 45-10 earlier in the season. Pete Golding has lots of work to do to get Ole Miss' play calling and offensive schemes worked out for any chance at a deep playoff run. The defense has some bugs to work out, too. A win this week sets up a rematch with Georgia, which walked all over the Rebels' defense.

— Edwin Stanton

Rebs hope new coach has Golding touch

By Chris Burrows
The Associated Press

OXFORD, Miss. — As Pete Golding prepares to make his head-coaching debut for Ole Miss in a high-stakes College Football Playoff game, he's pushing the message that the Rebels are "focused on the mission, not the man."

That "man" is former coach Lane Kiffin, the brazen architect of the Rebels' dynamic, high-octane offense.

Kiffin lobbied to keep coaching Ole Miss in the postseason even after accepting LSU's \$13 million-a-year offer to coach the Tigers in 2026, but Mississippi sent him packing on Nov. 30. That set in motion coaching staff upheaval that the No. 6 seed Rebels have been forced to confront even as they prepare to host 11th-seeded Tulane in a first-round playoff game on Saturday.

Several key offensive assistants — including coordinator Charlie Weiss, tight ends coach Joe Cox and receivers coaches George McDonald and Sawyer Jordan — have decided to follow Kiffin to Baton Rouge.

However, Weiss has been permitted to remain with the Rebels through the CFP, offering some measure of stability for the offense.

"Super excited," Golding said when practices resumed this week. "Energy and effort have never been an issue with our group."

"All the pieces are in place to be consistent," Golding added. "The practice is really the easiest piece to control."

The Rebels have averaged 37 points and 498 yards of total offense per game this season under Kiffin.

Quarterback Trinidad Chambliss has accounted for 3,500 yards of total offense, with Kewan Lacy adding 20 touchdowns on 258 carries for 1,279 yards. Eight receivers have accounted for at least 15 receptions apiece.

It remains to be seen whether Ole Miss can sustain that kind of production in the postseason — without Kiffin's demonstrated knack for recognizing advantageous moments to call a given play.

"We've had a lot of success in this system. We've done well with it here," Golding said. "I love everything about it and know what issues it causes for defenses."

"Neither team is going to try to reinvent the wheel at this point," Golding



Pete Golding has taken the baton from Lane Kiffin as Ole Miss' head coach heading into the playoffs. (THOMAS GRANING/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS)

said. "They're going to be who they are."

In addition to the usual work of preparing for a game, Golding quickly hired three offensive coaches, including John David Baker, a former Ole Miss staffer, as offensive coordinator for next season.

The defensive staff will remain intact. The multitasking for Golding hasn't stopped with managing staff changes. Golding also has had to work on roster retention, particularly on offense.

Several receivers, along with Lacy and Chambliss, are widely seen as potential transfer portal targets of other teams.

"It's about retention of your roster and stability. Players want to know who

they're going to play for," Golding said. "They want to know the schemes aren't going to change."

That's why Golding wanted incoming coaches like Baker, who doesn't officially start until 2026, at Ole Miss football headquarters and available to talk to current players now.

"It's really important to get those guys around our players before the portal opens" in January, Golding said. "Being available from a relationship standpoint, meet them, talk to them, so they have a really good idea about them."

Chambliss is awaiting a decision on a waiver status application that would

allow an additional year of eligibility.

"It would be great to get another year, but right now that decision is in God's parking lot," Chambliss said.

In the meantime, Chambliss is preparing for a better version of Tulane than he saw last time, when he passed for 307 yards and rushed for 112 in a 45-10 victory.

"Tulane is a tough team, really physical on defense," Chambliss said of the American Conference champions, who've been led by BYU transfer QB Jake Retzlaff. "They're rolling right now. They just won their conference and we expect them to be at their best."

Tulane's Retzlaff humbled by spotlight

By Brett Martel

The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Tulane quarterback Jake Retzlaff recalls being “devastated” when it became clear last spring that he would be unable to play his final season of college football at BYU.

His penchant for making plays in big moments, as well as for publicly embracing his Jewish heritage, made him something of a celebrated novelty at the Utah school run by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where he became known as “BYJew.”

Suffice it to say he’s landed on his feet at Tulane — a university with a relatively large concentration of Jewish students, around 3,000 in all.

The “Bayou Jew” has help lead the Green Wave (11-2) to an American Conference championship and a first College Football Playoff berth. Tulane, seeded 11th, visits No. 6 seed Mississippi on Saturday.

Retzlaff has been “a perfect fit” at Tulane, said Dave Cariello, owner of the Campus Connection, which sells Green Wave merchandise and partners with players on name, image and likeness deals.

A Tulane graduate from the New York area, Cariello designed two T-shirts featuring Retzlaff, one calling him the Shabbat Shotgun and another referring to him as the aforementioned Bayou Jew.

“He’s certainly been our top-selling NIL athlete,” Cariello said. “There seems to be a larger appetite for Jake’s stuff and I believe that’s partly because of his Jewish background. The other part is he’s the starting quarterback.”

Retzlaff went 11-2 as starter in 2024 at BYU, which narrowly missed out on playing for a Big 12 title. He was looking forward to returning to the Cougars in 2025 when he was named in a since-dismissed civil sexual assault lawsuit.

While Retzlaff contended the relationship in question was consensual, that was a problem at BYU, where the university’s honor code requires students to abstain from premarital sex. Had he remained enrolled there, he’d have been suspended.

Retzlaff was confident he’d get offers from other competitive college programs. But at Tulane, he found that and more.



Jake Retzlaff embraced Tulane when he joined the Green Wave, and Tulane has embraced him. [MATTHEW HINTON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

“God’s got a plan. And that’s the hardest thing to realize in the worst of times,” Retzlaff said. “I had everything great. It gets taken from me. And now I got to go make lemonade.”

“And I get to meet all these people and create all these relationships” at Tulane and around New Orleans.

Retzlaff did not arrive at Tulane until July, giving him a compressed timeline to learn the Wave’s offense and bond with teammates. He started by trying to sit with different players during each team meal inside Yulman Stadium.

“Guys have their groups that they

usually eat lunch with or dinner with and I’m like, all right, I’m just going to jump in,” Retzlaff recalled.

The dual-threat quarterback from California thrived under offensive coordinator Joe Craddock, an Alabama native who said the pace of Retzlaff’s compressed integration reminded him of NASCAR races at Talladega.

Retzlaff passed for 2,862 yards and 14 TDs with six interceptions this season. He also has been Tulane’s leading rusher with 610 yards and 16 touchdowns — a record for rushing touchdowns in a season by a Green Wave QB.

Coach Jon Sumrall, who will take over as Florida coach when Tulane’s playoff run ends, has been struck by Retzlaff’s “moxie and his competitive nature.”

“He’s got a little gamesmanship about him,” Sumrall added. “He’s got a little edge about him, a little toughness that rubs off on other guys.”

Sumrall also appreciated Retzlaff’s humility and emphasis on team-building.

“Jake has handled some things that came his way that weren’t ideal really well,” Sumrall said. “His gratitude for his opportunity here has been very real.”

James Madison at Oregon

When: 6:30 p.m. Saturday

TV: TNT

Records: No. 19 James Madison (12-1), No. 5 Oregon (11-1)

The series: First meeting.

Four-down territory

1. Back again: Oregon is in the College Football Playoff for a second straight season, but the Ducks got trucked last year. Oregon had a first-round bye and went straight to the Rose Bowl before facing eventual national champion Ohio State. The Ducks lost 41-21 after the Buckeyes scored the first 34 points. Your refrigerator ran for more yards (many more) that day than the Quackers, who finished with minus-23 yards due to the eight sacks by the Buckeyes. Oregon hasn't won a CFP game since beating Florida State 42-20 in the January 2015 Rose Bowl before losing to Ohio State by the same score for the national championship.

2. Webbed feat: Oregon is ranked ninth nationally in scoring offense (38.2 points per game), is 13th in total offense (465.2 yards) and has scored at least 55 points three times this season. The Ducks have crossed 175 yards rushing and 175 yards passing eight times this year and their 57 offensive touchdowns have come from 12 different players. Quarterback Dante Moore has completed more than 72% of his passes this season for 2,733 yards and 24 touchdowns against six interceptions.

3. A good Knight: James Madison's Wayne Knight checkmated Troy when the Dukes won the Sun Belt championship Dec. 5. Knight ran for a career-high 212 yards and set a Sun Belt title game record with 234 all-purpose yards. JMU's 31-14 victory was its 11th straight and gave the Dukes their first conference title at the FBS level and 11th in program history. Knight, all of 5-7 though 190 pounds, was a second-team Associated Press All-American with 1,263 yards rushing, though just nine touchdowns. He has also caught 37 passes for 379 yards and one score.

4. Take a look around: James Madison may not face Oregon again anytime soon, but the same isn't true for James Madison coach Bob Chesney. He'll be back at Autzen Stadium next year. Chesney has been hired as UCLA's head coach but is finishing this season with the Dukes



Oregon quarterback Dante Moore and the Ducks look to avoid an end-of-season slide against James Madison. [LYDIA ELY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

before moving west. UCLA and Oregon are Big Ten rivals — still feels weird, doesn't it? — and will play next year. Chesney isn't the only coach in the game heading elsewhere. Oregon offensive coordinator Will Stein has been hired as Kentucky's head coach.

Player of the week

Alonza Barnett III, JMU QB

For the Dukes to have a chance, Barnett will have to shine. And brightly. He has more than 3,000 yards total offense this year and has accounted for 35 touchdowns.

Key matchup

Oregon OL Emmanuel Pregnon vs. JMU Xavier Holmes

Holmes has six of James Madison's 36 sacks this year, and the Dukes will need

to pressure Knight. Often. But the Ducks, led by All-American Pregnon, have surrendered just 14 sacks this season with an overwhelming majority in just two games. Indiana had six of those sacks in Oregon's only loss, 30-20 at Autzen Stadium. Wisconsin had four.

By the numbers

4: The number of Ducks who landed Associated Press All-American honors Monday, the most AP All-Americans in Oregon history.

\$141.6 million: The worldwide gross of National Lampoon's "Animal House," the 1978 classic movie that was filmed at the University of Oregon. "Thank you, sir, may I have another?" "Toga, toga, toga." "Food fight." "Do you mind if we dance with your dates?"

2,807: Miles separating James

Madison's campus in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and Oregon's in Eugene.

0: Times the Dukes have played in the Pacific time zone.

2: The number of current Sun Belt teams the Ducks have faced. They beat Arkansas State 57-34 in 2012 and Georgia State 61-28 in 2015.

Prediction

Oregon 35, James Madison 17

Cinderella stories are the fuel March Madness is based on, so how about December, too? But, like March Madness, those do not often reach the round of 8. The Dukes and the Ducks is a mismatch, but not a mistake. Maybe Cinderella can keep it interesting, at least for a while.

— A. Stacy Long



Impressive Relaxers

that give comfort to your bottom line

IMG® is the progressive choice in motion furniture with exceptional seating comfort, unrivaled quality and functional designs.



Free Delivery



COLD-CURE MOLDED FOAM

This spaceage material encases the interior steel frame and sinuous springs, allowing for body-friendly curvatures to be covered with glove-fitted upholstery. This guarantees absolute comfort and durability.



360 swivel on MANUAL
- 180 on MOTORIZED



Integrated footstool



Adjustable head and neck support



Gliding / rocking function



Effortless reclining



3 sizes



WARRANTY

Ten years on molded foam cushions and steel frames.

Five years on mechanisms.

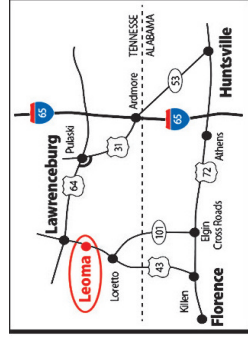
Two years on motor battery-parts plus leather and fabric covers.

This ad turned sideways per advertiser's request



Story & Lee
Since 1970
Furniture & Bedding

Store Hours:
Monday thru
Saturday
9 A.M. 'til 6 P.M.



Free Delivery - Hwy. 43 • Leoma, TN • (931) 852-2111 • Toll Free: 1-800-345-2511