

TN Valley

Thursday, August 21, 2025

GAMEDAY



2025 COLLEGE FOOTBALL

With Tide star Ryan Williams, nation says: Here's looking at you, kid

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TAILGATE of the week RECIPE



Turkey Burgers

INGREDIENTS

- 20 oz. ground turkey 85% lean 15% fat
- 1/2 cup Italian style bread crumbs
- 1 large egg, slightly beaten
- 0.7 oz. package Italian dressing recipe mix

DIRECTIONS:

In a medium size bowl, add turkey, bread crumbs, egg and Italian dressing mix; stir all together. Divide mixture into 6 portions and shape into patties. Oil grill; preheat to medium heat. Place patties on grill and grill until thermometer reaches 160 degrees. Serve with desired toppings. Serves 6.



This week's recipe submitted
by **George Coleman,**
Russellville, AL

Submit your recipes now and you could win \$50 if your recipe is selected.

To enter, submit your recipe to:

Tailgate Recipe Contest, 219 West Tennessee St., Florence, AL 35630 - Attn: Mara Beth Cravens

*Weekly winners are entered for grand prize drawing for a Mini Max Green Egg.

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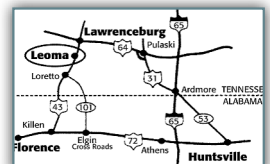
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COLLEGES

Big money, same powers remain favorites

By Eddie Pells

The Associated Press

Headline after headline during the offseason spoke to the same reality for college football: Millions of dollars are headed directly into the pockets of players and only programs that can nimbly recalibrate and replenish their resources will succeed.

Now, with preseason camps winding down and opening kickoffs approaching, a different reality hits: The more things change, the more they stay the same.

The preseason AP Top 25 for 2025 could have just as easily come from 1975. The first official season of revenue sharing between schools and their players in the new name, image and likeness era of college sports is sorting programs into familiar categories.

The first includes college football's biggest brands, which are dominating the list of favorites once again: No. 1 Texas, No. 2 Penn State, No. 3 Ohio State and No. 4 Clemson.

Second are teams we've talked about over the past few decades that are using money and celebrity coaches to elbow their way into the conversation: Colorado, North Carolina and No. 23 Texas Tech.

And then there are those who see the second year of the 12-team playoff and a different playing field created by revenue sharing and think they might be able to fashion a turnaround not unlike No. 20 Indiana's worst to (almost) first resurgence last year: Pick a name, any name, but a good starting point might be UCLA (now with star QB Nico Iamaleava) or Virginia (which, like Indiana last year, avoids pretty much every top team on its conference schedule).

Jeffrey Kessler, the attorney who helped broker the massive legal settlement that compelled virtually all schools eligible for the playoff to share millions with their athletes, says these times remind him of the early 1990s, when the NFL introduced unrestricted free agency and the salary cap.

"It's a big change," Kessler said. "But I think the system will adapt and the better-managed athletic departments will do well, as they always do. And athletic departments that are poorly managed won't do so well, and probably didn't do so well in the old system, either."



Kalen DeBoer and Alabama are looking for a turnaround season after going 9-4 in his first year, the Tide's most losses since Nick Saban's debut in 2007.

[VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Heisman, title watch

Pay or no pay, one thing hasn't changed in college football or any sport: Great players win games.

It's no big surprise, then, to see Texas at the top of almost everyone's watch list. Leading the Longhorns is none other than Arch Manning, the sophomore quarterback with the reported \$6 million-plus NIL deal, and the latest burgeoning star in a family that has produced lots of them, from Archie to Peyton to Eli.

"For Arch, he grew up in this era of seeing high-level football," Texas coach Steve Sarkisian said. "He's watched Super Bowls. He's watched

gold jackets getting put on. He's been to playoff games. He's been recruited at the highest level as the No. 1 player in the country."

Besides Manning, other favorites include receiver Jeremiah Smith, whose success with defending champion Ohio State figures to depend a lot on whether the Buckeyes' next quarterback, Julian Sayin, who is also in the Heisman mix, is as good as advertised.

Clemson QB Cade Klubnik is among the favorites, as are the Tigers for a repeat title in the ACC.

Quarterback Drew Allar is in his fourth season at Penn State, where the Nittany Lions are expected to face Ohio State for

the Big Ten title. (They first play Nov. 1, and coach James Franklin is 1-10 against the Buckeyes.)

What about Alabama?

The Crimson Tide's four losses in coach Kalen DeBoer's first season were the most since Nick Saban's debut in 2007. The Tide's hopes for a turnaround rest on quarterback Ty Simpson, who won the starting job this month after sitting on the sideline for his first three seasons in Tuscaloosa.

Simpson is a rarity — a five-star recruit who didn't bail on his school in search of more playing time and potentially more money.

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Auburn Tigers



Auburn's Cam Coleman, after a breakout freshman season, signals how he wants more plays to end this year. [BUTCH DILL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Coach's corner

Head coach: Hugh Freeze
Record: 11-14 in 2 years at Auburn, 114-61 in 14 years overall
Age: 55
Hometown: Oxford, Mississippi
You don't say: Auburn's four straight losing seasons is the worst stretch since 1946-50 when the Tigers went 9-35. Another bad year for Freeze would tie school record for most consecutive losing seasons.



Freeze

Coordinators: Derrick Nix (offense), DJ Durkin (defense)

Info booth

Location: Auburn
Home: Jordan-Hare Stadium (87,451 capacity, first game 1939)

All-time record: 778-466-43

Mascot: Aubie

Band: Auburn University Marching

Band

Last conference title game appearance: 2017

Returning starters: 11 (6 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Receiving praise: Cam Coleman was one of the top freshman receivers in the nation last year with 598 yards and eight touchdowns. He's got some help this season with Georgia Tech transfer

Eric Singleton Jr. (754 yards) and Wake Forest transfer Horiatio Fields (463). Add returnee Malcolm Simmons (451) and the Tigers are looking at an elite group at wideout. "Obviously, it's a bunch of studs out there," quarterback Jackson Arnold said. "I'm not going to name them because we have too many. But I'm super excited by this group, and I think they're going to produce a lot on

AUBURN

From Page G4

the field this year.”

2. Perfect fit: The transfer portal is a nice way for teams to strengthen the roster, but it doesn’t always work out. Some players aren’t a good fit. Freeze came up with a way to help with that issue by giving potential transfers personality tests. It’s like a college version of the Wonderlic tests NFL prospects take before the draft. “We definitely try to do that with portal kids because you’re speed dating; you have 24 hours to make a decision, and I like that test,” Freeze said. The Tigers added 19 transfers, including Arnold from Oklahoma.

3. Clean slate: The quarterback spot has been overhauled for Auburn. Of the six quarterbacks on the roster, John Colvin is the only returnee, and he didn’t see action. Arnold should be the season-opening starter with Stanford transfer Ashton Daniels providing depth. Arnold split time as the starter at OU, passing for 1,421 yards and 12 TDs. Dual-threat, four-star freshman Deuce Knight and freshman Will Myers fill out the QB spot. Auburn was in the middle of the SEC pack with 3,167 passing yards (263 per game), but 13 interceptions ranked near the bottom.

4. Star power: Auburn hasn’t had a first-round NFL draft selection since Derrick Brown in 2020. Defensive end Keldric Faulk could break that streak. The defensive anchor has been mentioned by several media outlets (CBS, ESPN) as a top-10 draft prospect. He has to have another big season to earn that spot, though. Faulk had 29 tackles, 11 for loss, including seven sacks last season. “Last year I was one of the leaders that led by example,” Faulk said. “I had to take over that role of just being a little more vocal, letting people hear my voice.”

Extra point

The Tigers had their best rush defense in 14 years, giving up 117.8 yards per game. Also last season, Auburn had its best total defense since 2017



New Auburn quarterback Jackson Arnold hopes to stay on the field — though upright — this season after transferring from Oklahoma. [GERALD HERBERT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

(330.8 yards per game) and best scoring defense since 2019 (19.5 points per game).

Upset special

Cheer: Alabama. Anything can happen in Jordan-Hare Stadium. Although the past two visits to the Plains resulted in Crimson Tide wins courtesy of wild circumstances, Auburn should be poised for the upset. Alabama has won five straight Iron Bowls, but you have to go back over 40 years to find six straight Bama wins.

Jeer: Baylor. The first game of the season is a tone-setter, and the Tigers

aren’t exactly full of confidence these days. There is a lot of depth chart adjusting going on before the season. Baylor is a tough leadoff opponent for a team trying to figure things out.

Quotebook

“This is about to be my third year of college. I’ve played a full year, played a full year of SEC ball. Had it under my belt. I think the guys on the team respect that. I feel like I came in and really wanted to establish myself early on and made sure in the spring everyone knew that I was going to take control of this team and lead them. I thought I did

a pretty good job of that.”

— Arnold

Crystal ball

7-5: The Tigers could have easily been 7-5 last season. They blew leads to Oklahoma and Missouri and were in the mix with other games. It all came down to fourth-quarter failure. Correcting this is paramount for a winning season and a trip to a bowl, something the Tigers have done just once in the last three seasons. Freeze is on the hot seat and he knows it. The results will improve, but not enough to land the Tigers in the playoffs.

2024 results

(5-7, 2-5 SEC)	
Alabama A&M.....	W, 73-3
California.....	L, 21-14
New Mexico.....	W, 45-19
Arkansas.....	L, 24-14
Oklahoma.....	L, 27-21

at Georgia.....	L, 31-13
at Missouri.....	L, 21-17
at Kentucky.....	W, 24-10
Vanderbilt.....	L, 17-7
Louisiana-Monroe.....	W, 48-14
Texas A&M.....	(4OT) W, 43-41
at Alabama.....	L, 28-14

2025 schedule

Aug. 29.....	at Baylor
Sept. 6.....	Ball St.
Sept. 13.....	South Alabama
Sept. 20.....	at Oklahoma
Sept. 27.....	at Texas A&M
Oct. 11.....	Georgia

Oct. 18.....	Missouri
Oct. 25.....	at Arkansas
Nov. 1.....	Kentucky
Nov. 8.....	at Vanderbilt
Nov. 22.....	Mercer
Nov. 29.....	Alabama

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Alabama Crimson Tide

Coach's corner



DeBoer

Head coach: Kalen DeBoer
Record: 9-4 in 1 season at Alabama, 113-16 in 10 seasons overall

Age: 50
Hometown: Milbank, South Dakota

You don't say: DeBoer's nine wins in 2024 were the most by a first-year Alabama coach in school history. He also joins a list of nine other coaches who had a winning record in their first year with the Crimson Tide since the Wallace Wade era in 1923. For the record, J.B. "Ears" Whitworth (0-10), Mike DuBose (4-7) and Mike Shula (4-9) are the three coaches with losing records in their first year.

Coordinators: Ryan Grubb (offense), Kane Wommack (defense)

Info booth

Location: Tuscaloosa
Home: Bryant-Denny Stadium (100,077 capacity, first game 1929)
All-time record: 988-315-42
Mascot: Big Al
Band: Million Dollar Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2023

Returning starters: 14 (6 offense, 8 defense)

Four-down territory

1. 3 of a kind: Ty Simpson has been announced as the starting quarterback, taking over for two-year starter Jalen Milroe. It's not like Simpson is a fish out of water. The junior has seen some playing time in his three seasons, although mostly in mop-up duty. Still, he knows the offense and has an established relationship with the receivers. There is hype surrounding freshman Keelon Russell, a five-star player who is quick and can make plays outside the pocket. Also pushing for playing time is Austin Mack, who played for DeBoer at Washington. He saw limited playing time in 2024 but is battling for the backup spot.

2. Hubbub over Grubb: The offense had its fair share of issues last season. There were lots of finger pointing going on,



Alabama's Ryan Williams can show more moves this season after starring as a freshman in 2024. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

most of it in the direction of offensive coordinator Nick Sheridan. He's still on staff as the QB coach but he's out at coordinator, and Ryan Grubb is in. Grubb was the OC at Washington with DeBoer as head coach. That Huskie team was an offensive juggernaut and played in the national title game. "The rest of the staff has been awesome in how they embraced Ryan Grubb coming in," DeBoer said. "The players have, as well. Ryan's hit the ground running and added some things on the things he's learned."

3. Bust a move: A big fuss was made, rightfully so, about Tide receiver Ryan Williams and the fact he led the team with 865 yards and eight TDs last year — as a 17-year-old. His football skills are obvious, but he has other talents. "Behind the scenes, he is a funny guy," lineman Kadyn Proctor said. "If y'all ever get to talk to him, he's a funny,



Ty Simpson can try to make more jaws drop this season as Alabama's starting quarterback. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

ALABAMA

From Page G6

goofy guy. You’ve seen him his TikTok dances. He’s not afraid of who he is, and I love that for him. He’s had great success his first year, and I know year two will be even better for him.”

4. Head scratcher: There was much frustration with Alabama’s roller-coaster 2024 season. The same team that beat No. 2 Georgia, followed it with an embarrassing loss to unranked Vanderbilt. There were also losses to Oklahoma and Michigan, also unranked. That’s unusual for Alabama, but not for DeBoer. In five seasons as a Division I head coach, he’s 15-3 against top-25 teams but 13-10 against unranked or FCS opponents. “You fight, execute, find a way to win,” DeBoer said. “That’s what we’ve got to do here going into year two at Alabama.”

Extra point

The Crimson Tide failed to make the SEC title game last year, but Alabama hasn’t missed the title game in back-to-back seasons since 2010-11. Alabama has played in 10 league title games since 2008, winning nine.

Upset special

Cheer: Georgia. It will be hard to top last season’s thriller, but Alabama has a flair for the theatrics when Georgia is involved. It’s going to take a lot more than a Ryan Williams acrobatic catch to win this one, but recent history against the Dawgs is on the Tide’s side.

Jeer: South Carolina. Bad news for Bama is LaNorris Sellers is back at QB for the Gamecocks. He nearly led South Carolina to the upset in Tuscaloosa last season. He might make it happen this time in Columbia.

Quotebook

“Going through a quarterback competition, that’s pressure alone. These guys



New Alabama offensive coordinator Ryan Grubb (red cap) hopes his offense stokes more smiles this season. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

are going through pressure every throw. Whether it was a competition or not, we would analyze it, break it down, chart it. Every throw and drive that these guys are a part of, it’s critical to them winning the job.”

— DeBoer on the quarterback situation

Crystal ball

10-3: A world-class defense, multiple weapons at the skill position and a solid offensive make the Crimson Tide a national title contender. The most important position is the quarterback, Alabama’s big question mark. Ty Simpson is sure to be the week 1 starter, but

he’s got to take control early and win over the team if he intends to stay QB1. There is little margin for error if a play-off run is in Alabama’s future. There is little wiggle room for DeBoer this season.

— Edwin Stanton

2024 results

(9-4, 5-3 SEC)	
Western Kentucky	W, 63-0
South Florida	W, 42-16
at Wisconsin	W, 42-10
Georgia	W, 41-34
at Vanderbilt	L, 40-35
South Carolina	W, 27-25
at Tennessee	L, 24-17
Missouri	W, 34-0

at LSU	W, 42-13
Mercer	W, 52-7
at Oklahoma	L, 24-3
Auburn	W, 28-14
ReliaQuest Bowl (Tampa, Florida)	
Michigan	L, 19-13

2025 schedule

Aug. 30	at Florida St.
Sept. 6	Louisiana-Monroe
Sept. 13	Wisconsin

Sept. 27	at Georgia
Oct. 4	Vanderbilt
Oct. 11	at Missouri
Oct. 18	Tennessee
Oct. 25	at South Carolina
Nov. 8	LSU
Nov. 15	Oklahoma
Nov. 22	Eastern Illinois
Nov. 29	at Auburn

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach's corner



Heupel

Head coach: Josh Heupel
Record: 37-15 in 4 seasons at Tennessee, 65-23 in 7 years overall

Age: 47

Hometown: Aberdeen, South Dakota

You don't say: UT surrendered its fewest point per game average since the 1998 national championship team gave up 14.5 per game. The 209 total points in 2024 were the fewest allowed by a UT defense since the 1999 squad's 194.

Coordinators: Joey Halzle (offense), Tim Banks (defense)

Info booth

Location: Knoxville

Home: Neyland Stadium (101,915 capacity, first game 1921)

All-time record: 875-415-53

Mascot: Smokey

Band: Pride of the Southland Band

Last conference title game appearance:

2007

Returning starters: 10 (3 offense, 7 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Moving on: In a wild offseason with NIL negotiations, the Vols parted ways with quarterback Nico Iamaleava, who transferred to UCLA. The Vols picked up Joey Aguilar, who was at UCLA for a month or so before Iamaleava showed up. At Appalachian State, he had 3,003 passing yards and 23 TDs last season. "He's a great, decisive, decision maker, very good with the ball in his hands, takes care of the ball," linebacker Arion Carter said of Aguilar. George MacIntyre comes into Knoxville as a highly touted freshman expected to turn heads, unless he gets redshirted. Redshirt freshman Jake Merklinger is also in the mix.

2. Big shoes to fill: SEC offensive player of the year Dylan Sampson accounted for about half of the Vols' rushing yards and more than half of the touchdowns last year. He's gone, and the race is on to find some players to fill the void. That's easier said than done, but there are several candidates up for the task. DeSean Bishop



Tennessee receiver Chris Brazzell II and the Vols hope to leave more teams behind this season. [WADE PAYNE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

ran for 455 yards with three scores last season and is poised to be the starter. He will get pushed by Duke transfer Star Thomas (871 yards, 7 TDs). Peyton Lewis (339 yards, 3 TDs) will compete for carries as well. "The last two years we've led the SEC in rushing," Heupel said. "We have to continue to grow as we move forward this year into the 2025 season."

3. Help wanted: Quarterback isn't the only open position the Vols need to fill. Sampson is gone, along with top receivers Dont'e Thornton Jr., Squirrel White and Bru McCoy. That's basically all of the Vols' offense. Peyton Lewis and DeSean Bishop are expected to step up at running back, but it's not cut and dry at receiver. The player with the most experience is Chris Brazzell II. He will be joined by Mike Matthews, Braylon Staley, Amari Jefferson, Radarious Jackson, Travis



DeSean Bishop will likely be Tennessee's starting running back, replacing the departed SEC offensive player of the year Dylan Sampson. [JAY LAPRETE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

TENNESSEE

From Page G8

Smith, and Joakim Dodson will have opportunities to shine.

4. Keep the line moving: The Vols were No. 2 in the SEC and No. 10 in the nation in run defense. A big reason was the defensive line. Sack leader James Pearce is gone, but seniors Joshua Josephs, Tyre West and Bryson Eason are back to pick up the slack, along with junior Daevin Hobbs. The quartet combined for seven sacks last year. “(Defensive line coach) Rodney Garner understands what it takes to win on Saturdays,” Heupel said. “He does a great job of fundamentals and technique, and with the development of our guys.”

Extra point

Mike Keith is the new “Voice of the Vols.” Bob Kesling stepped down this past season, ending a 26-year career with Tennessee. Keith is a UT graduate and was the Tennessee Titans play-by-play guy from 1999-2024. Before Kesling, John Ward broadcast the Vols starting in 1965.

Upset special

Cheer: Alabama. After 15 years of Alabama being a one-sided affair, the Vols have made this series competitive again, winning two of the last three contests. The bad news is that the game is in Tuscaloosa, but the good news is Alabama’s breaking in a new quarterback, too.

Jeer: Georgia. The Vols can’t catch a break against the Bulldogs. They have lost eight straight to their neighbors to the south. Georgia comes to Knoxville this time, but the Dawgs are reloading while Tennessee is rebuilding.

Quotebook

“Everybody inside of our program didn’t like the taste in their mouth as the season finished up in late December. That’s been a part of spurring us on throughout each quarter of our



Joey Aguilar, who threw for over 3,000 yards and 23 touchdowns at Appalachian State last season, is now at Tennessee after transferring from UCLA.

[JOHN RAOUX/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

offseason. It’s been a part of how intentional and how focused that we’ve been throughout the course of the summer, and I’m excited to go compete with these guys when we get here to training camp.”

— Heupel

Crystal ball

9-3: Heupel has proven himself to be the answer for Tennessee. He’s gotten the program back on the national stage and the Vols are ready to take the next step toward a national title run. The defense should be locked in and poised for a great year. The

offense will face growing pains, but the talent is there. New players need to step up and be leaders. Big games with Alabama and Georgia loom large, and there is another game out there waiting to trip up the Vols.

— Edwin Stanton

2024 results

(10-3, 6-2 SEC)	
vs. North Carolina St.	W, 51-10
Kent St.	W, 71-0
at Oklahoma	W, 25-15
at Arkansas	L, 19-14
Florida	(OT) W, 23-17
Alabama	W, 24-17
Kentucky	W, 28-18
Mississippi St.	W, 33-14

at Georgia	L, 31-17
UTEP	W, 56-0
at Vanderbilt	W, 36-23

Playoffs

at Ohio St.	L, 42-17
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2025 schedule

Aug. 30	Syracuse
Sept. 6	East Tennessee St.
Sept. 13	Georgia

Sept. 20	UAB
Sept. 27	at Mississippi St.
Oct. 11	Arkansas
Oct. 18	at Alabama
Oct. 25	at Kentucky
Nov. 1	Oklahoma
Nov. 15	New Mexico St.
Nov. 22	at Florida
Nov. 29	Vanderbilt

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Texas Longhorns

Coach's corner



Head coach: Steve Sarkisian

Record: 38-17 in 4 seasons at Texas, 84-52 in 10 seasons overall

Age: 51

Hometown: Torrance, California

You don't say: While at Alabama, Sarkisian served as the offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach under Nick Saban where he was the architect of 24 straight games in which the Crimson Tide's offense scored at least 35 points, the longest streak in major college history.

Coordinators: Kyle Flood (offense), Pete Kwiatkowski (defense)

Info booth

Location: Austin, Texas

Home: Darrell K. Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium (100,119 capacity, first game 1924)

All-time record: 961-395-33

Mascot: Bevo

Band: Showband of the Southwest

Last conference title game appearance: 2024

Returning starters: 11 (5 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory

1. It's about Manning time: College football fans have been waiting to see the nephew of Peyton and Eli, and the grandson of Archie, take the starting job forever. Finally, with Quinn Ewers gone to the NFL, it's Arch's time to shine for the Longhorns. He got some meaningful snaps last season in certain situations, but now the Longhorns will sink or swim with him calling the plays.

2. Longhorns are loaded: Even though



Arch Manning hopes Texas fans, including Matthew McConaughey, will say he's more than "all right, all right, all right" as the starting quarterback this season. [PAUL SANCYA/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

the spotlight will shine on the new quarterback, he's surrounded by stars. Tre Wisner returns at running back after rushing for 1,064 yards to lead the SEC and added five touchdowns. He also caught 44 passes for 311 yards and a score. Receivers DeAndre Moore Jr. and Ryan Wingo return, and Sarkisian added Stanford transfer Emmett Mosley V, who caught 48 passes for 525 yards and six TDs in his freshman campaign.

3. Line games: If there's a place opposing defenses might be able to exploit, at least early on, it's the offensive line where Texas is replacing four starters.

But most of the new starters have been working with Manning on the second-team offense, so that will help the transition.

4. Defense stacked: Texas has potential All-America players across the defense. It starts up front with led by sophomore Colin Simmons, who had nine sacks in 2024. Anthony Hill Jr. might be the best linebacker in the country after recording 16.5 tackles for loss and eight sacks.

Extra point

Texas has improved its win totals in each of Sarkisian's four seasons. He has

taken the Longhorns from five wins to seven wins to 12 wins and finally, to 13 wins last season. Can the Longhorns get to 14 or 15 this season and bring home a championship?

Upset special

Cheer: SEC teams get dissed for easy nonconference schedules and only playing eight conference games, but Texas will open at Ohio State, the team that ousted it in the CFP semifinals last season. No doubt that will play a part in Texas getting a measure of revenge on the Buckeyes, albeit in the season opener with both teams sporting different looks.

Jeer: Texas travels to Georgia in mid-November and the Bulldogs seemingly have Texas' number. Georgia won both meetings a year ago — in the regular season and SEC championship. Along with Ohio State, Georgia is one of the only other teams on the schedule that can match athletes with the Longhorns.

Quotebook

"I think I would say probably from going — I played — this is not a really big deal, but I played every year in high school. It was 2A high school. That doesn't mean anything. But from sitting out and not playing, that was pretty tough."

— Manning on the hardest thing he has had to deal with at Texas.

Crystal ball

11-1: Steve Sarkisian's Longhorns are the team to beat in the SEC and anything less than a league title and another playoff appearance will be considered a disappointing season in Austin.

— Gregg Dewalt

2024 results

(13-3, 7-1 SEC)	
Colorado St.....	W, 52-0
at Michigan.....	W, 31-12
UTSA.....	W, 56-7
Louisiana-Monroe.....	W, 51-3

Mississippi St.....	W, 35-13
vs. Oklahoma.....	W, 34-3
Georgia.....	L, 30-15
at Vanderbilt.....	W, 27-24
at Arkansas.....	W, 20-10
Kentucky.....	W, 31-14
at Texas A&M.....	W, 17-7

SEC championship	
Georgia.....	(OT) L, 22-19
Playoffs	
Clemson.....	W, 38-24
vs. Arizona St.....	(2OT) W, 39-31
vs. Ohio St.	L, 28-14

2025 schedule

Aug. 30.....	at Ohio St.
Sept. 6.....	San Jose St.
Sept. 13.....	UTEP
Sept. 20.....	Sam Houston
Oct. 4.....	at Florida
Oct. 11.....	vs. Oklahoma

Oct. 18.....	at Kentucky
Oct. 25.....	at Mississippi St.
Nov. 1.....	Vanderbilt
Nov. 15.....	at Georgia
Nov. 22.....	Arkansas
Nov. 28.....	Texas A&M
(Oct. 11 game in Dallas.)	

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Georgia Bulldogs

Coach's corner



Head coach: Kirby Smart
Record: 105-19 in 9 years
Age: 49
Hometown: Bainbridge, Georgia
You don't say: Smart's wife, Mary Beth (Lycett) Smart, played 111 games for Georgia basketball from 1999-03, averaging 9.8 points per game as a senior to help the team reach the Sweet 16.
Coordinators: Mike Bobo (offense), Glenn Schumann/Travaris Robinson (co-defense)

Info booth

Location: Athens, Georgia
Home: Sanford Stadium (93,033 capacity, first game 1929)
All-time record: 892-432-54
Mascot: Uga
Band: Georgia Redcoat Marching Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2024

Returning starters: 7 (4 offense, 3 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Doing it with defense: Georgia ranked in the top 20 nationally in scoring defense seven straight seasons until falling just outside that mark at 23rd last year. The Bulldogs ranked first in scoring defense in 2019 and 2021 and fifth in 2022 and 2023, and a return to that elite level could propel them toward serious national title contention. Defensive lineman Christen Miller, linebacker C.J. Allen and cornerback Daylen Everette give Georgia a returning starter at each



Gunner Stockton will have a major influence on the happiness of the championship-hopeful Georgia Bulldogs this season. [COLIN HUBBARD/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

level of the defense.
2. Stock rising: With Carson Beck having transferred to Miami, Gunner Stockton is the first-year starting quarterback. Stockton replaced the injured Beck for good during the SEC championship game win over Texas. "I thought he handled that moment well, and he taught a lot of our young players that you've got to be prepared and ready," Smart said. Stockton, from tiny Tiger, Georgia, in the northeast corner of the state, threw for 234 yards and a score in a playoff quarterfinal loss to Notre Dame.
3. A rematch with Bama: Last year's game in Tuscaloosa was wild, with the

Bulldogs mounting a massive comeback before Alabama rallied for a 41-34 win. Alabama is 9-2 in the series over the last 20 years, with the teams splitting a pair of national championship meetings, but this will be the Tide's first visit to Athens in a decade. "It's what the fan bases want. It's what the nation wants. It's what college football needs. It's what college football and the SEC is about," Smart said. "Georgia and Alabama at home, at our place, I wish it could happen more often."
4. A bright future: Georgia is blessed with excellent recruiting territory, and the Bulldogs are taking advantage.

Based on mid-August rankings from 247 Sports, they received four commitments from five-star prospects — all of whom are from Georgia — in the class of 2025, and their 2026 recruiting class currently ranks first nationally.

Extra point

Smart's .847 winning percentage so far is the best in program history, well ahead of modern standouts Mark Richt (.740 over 15 years) and Vince Dooley (.715 over 25 years).

Upset special

Cheer: Texas. It's borderline to even call this a potential upset, but it might be the likeliest opportunity for the Bulldogs to be an underdog.
Jeer: Georgia Tech. Last year's marathon in Athens was the second-straight close game in the series and reinforced the Yellow Jackets can compete with Georgia no matter the setting.

Quotebook

"Yeah, I called and offered him (defensive analyst Will) Muschamp's job, but he was overqualified, so he wasn't interested."

— Smart, joking about speculation that Nick Saban might return to coaching

Crystal ball

13-2: There are enough quality opponents to make an unbeaten season seem unlikely, but if Georgia looks anything like it has for the last few years, a berth in the SEC title game and a spot in the 12-team playoff are solid bets.
— Craig Thomas

2024 results

(11-3, 6-2 SEC)

Clemson.....	W, 34-3
Tennessee Tech.....	W, 48-3
at Kentucky	W, 13-12
at Alabama	L, 41-34
Auburn.....	W, 31-13
Mississippi St.....	W, 41-31

at Texas	W, 30-15
vs. Florida	W, 34-20
at Ole Miss.....	L, 28-10
Tennessee.....	W, 31-17
UMass.....	W, 59-21
Georgia Tech.....	(8OT) W, 44-42
SEC championship	
vs. Texas	(OT) W, 22-19
Playoffs	

vs. Notre Dame..... L, 23-10

2025 schedule

Aug. 30.....	Marshall
Sept. 6	Austin Peay
Sept. 13	at Tennessee
Sept. 27	Alabama
Oct 4	Kentucky
Oct. 11	at Auburn

Oct. 18	Ole Miss
Nov. 1	vs. Florida
Nov. 8	at Mississippi St.
Nov. 15	Texas
Nov. 22	Charlotte
Nov. 28	vs. Georgia Tech
(Nov. 1 game in Jacksonville, Florida. Nov. 28 game at Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium.)	

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

LSU Tigers

Coach's corner



Kelly

Head coach: Brian Kelly
Record: 29-11 in 3 years at LSU, 313-108-2 in 34 years overall
Age: 63
Hometown: Everett, Massachusetts
You don't say: Kelly has more double-digit win seasons (12) than single-win seasons (9) in 21 seasons as an FBS coach.
Coordinators: Joe Sloan (offense), Blake Baker (defense)

Info booth

Location: Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Home: Tiger Stadium (102,321 capacity, first game 1924)
All-time record: 843-434-47
Mascot: Mike the Tiger
Band: Golden Band from Tigerland
Last conference title game appearance: 2022
Returning starters: 9 (4 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Year 2 jump: Joe Burrow and Jayden Daniels both made strides after their first year in Baton Rouge. Both went on to win the Heisman Trophy and become top-two NFL draft choices. Will Garrett Nussmeier do the same? Well, he might not have to win the Heisman. Nussmeier completed 64% of his throws for 4,052 yards and 29 touchdowns. The problem is he also tossed 12 passes to the other team.
2. Running seems optional: Despite some interceptions, Nussmeier played relatively well. The same can't be said about the offense's run game. The Tigers had just two 100-yard rushers last



Caden Durham recorded LSU's only 100-yard rushing games last season. He did it twice. [MICHAEL WOODS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

season — both were from Caden Durham. He collected 128 yards against South Alabama. (Not exactly a wow moment.) He also had 101 yards against Arkansas. Some balance would probably be nice.
3. Pony up: This has nothing to do with a horse. That wouldn't make much sense. But Kelly (and his wife) did write

a \$1 million check to support the football program's NIL fund. Yeah, it's hard to feel too bad for him considering his yearly salary is \$9.9 million. It's just something to note.
4. Hello, Kyle: Baker, the defensive coordinator, brought in a little bit of experience to help his defensive line. OK,

perhaps more than a little. Kyle Williams, a 13-year NFL veteran, was hired to work with the interior linemen. Williams was a six-time Pro Bowler during his career with the Buffalo Bills. It might be worth mentioning he won a national title at LSU with some coach named Nick Saban. Wonder if he ever did anything else?

Extra point

LSU went 1-3 against ranked teams last season. The Tigers lost to USC, Texas A&M and Alabama. Their win came in overtime against Ole Miss.

Upset special

Cheer: Alabama. This was the pick before last season, and it would be hard to argue after the way the 2024 meeting played out. Losing 42-13 to the sound of a bunch of Roll Tide's will do that.
Jeer: Clemson. Yes, picking an opponent like Western Kentucky would have been the easy choice. (Yes, we thought about it.) But losing a second straight season opener to a Power Four opponent? That certainly wouldn't be a good look.

Quotebook

"So there's a lot of, I guess, back-handed love. It's a hatred, but it will always hold a special place in my heart."
— Nussmeier on playing at Bryant-Denny, where his dad used to coach

Crystal ball

10-3: Kelly's teams usually produce 10-win seasons, so it seems like a low-risk investment here. Whether that gets LSU into the playoffs remains to be seen.
— David Glovach

2024 results

(9-4, 5-3 SEC)
vs. Southern California.....L, 27-20
Nicholls.....W, 44-21
at South Carolina.....W, 36-33
UCLA.....W, 34-17
South Alabama.....W, 42-10

Ole Miss.....(OT) W, 29-26
at Arkansas.....W, 34-10
at Texas A&M.....L, 38-23
Alabama.....L, 42-13
at Florida.....L, 27-16
Vanderbilt.....W, 24-17
Oklahoma.....W, 37-17
Texas Bowl (Houston)

Baylor.....W, 44-31

2025 schedule

Aug. 30.....at Clemson
Sept. 6.....Louisiana Tech
Sept. 13.....Florida
Sept. 20.....Southeastern Louisiana
Sept. 27.....at Ole Miss

Oct. 11.....South Carolina
Oct. 18.....at Vanderbilt
Oct. 25.....Texas A&M
Nov. 8.....at Alabama
Nov. 15.....Arkansas
Nov. 22.....Western Kentucky
Nov. 29.....at Oklahoma

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach's corner



Head coach: Shane Beamer
Record: 29-22 in 4 years
Age: 48
Hometown: Blacksburg, Virginia
You don't say: Beamer has won more games through his first four seasons than any previous South Carolina coach. Steve Spurrier, the program's all-time wins leader with an 86-49 record, had 28.

Coordinators: Mike Shula (offense), Clayton White (defense)

Info booth

Location: Columbia, South Carolina
Home: Williams-Brice Stadium (77,549 capacity, first game 1934)
All-time record: 643-617-44
Mascot: Cocky
Band: Carolina Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2010
Returning starters: 9 (5 offense, 4 defense)

Four-down territory

1. High Sellers: LaNorris Sellers went from being a relative unknown quantity at quarterback last season to breakout star. The third-year signal caller completed close to 66% of his passes for 2,534 yards, 18 touchdowns and seven interceptions. He also rushed for 674 yards and seven scores. Coupled with South Carolina's 9-4 record last season, the 6-foot-3, 240-pound Sellers is an early Heisman favorite and a potential top-five pick in the NFL draft.

2. Welcome back, welcome back: Speaking of Sellers, he'll be coached by a rather familiar face to Alabamians. Mike Shula is back in the SEC as the Gamecocks'



Former Alabama coach Mike Shula will be directing LaNorris Sellers and South Carolina's offense. [SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS]

offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach. He was an analyst for the program last season. It's Shula's first full-time college job since he was fired as Alabama's head coach at the end of the 2006 regular season.

3. Brotherly love: Family first, right? That will be the case for both the offense and defense this season. Sellers' younger brother, Jayden, will see if he can convince his older brother to throw him

a pass or two. Jayden is a freshman receiver. Defensive back Jalon Kilgore is joined by older brother Gerald, another defensive back. Gerald transferred from Tennessee Tech.

4. We're tired of this: What, you might ask? A lack of a double-digit win seasons. Since 1985, South Carolina has only reached 10 or more wins three times. Those three seasons came in 2011-13 under Spurrier. The Gamecocks went

11-2 in each of those years. South Carolina got close last season. Alas, there were three losses of four points or less.

Extra point

South Carolina has three preseason All-SEC picks — Sellers and defensive lineman Dylan Stewart, who were first-teamers, and Jalon Kilgore, a second-team selection.

Upset special

Cheer: Virginia Tech. Pretty easy choice. Beamer was born in Blacksburg, Virginia, and played at the school. His dad, Frank, coached the Hokies for 25 seasons. So, chances are it's important to the younger Beamer.

Jeer: Clemson. Once again, can it be any other team? The Gamecocks eked out a three-point win last season. Now, South Carolina only needs 29 more wins to even the series.

Quotebook

"The cookies are the freakin' bomb, just so you guys know. I've got my girl's back."

— Beamer on defending his wife's home-made chocolate chip cookies, which some called undercooked

Crystal ball

9-4: South Carolina surprised some people last season by winning nine games. Beamer thought it was enough for the Gamecocks to warrant being in the College Football Playoff discussion. In the end, obviously, they were left out. Perhaps it's best to win those close SEC games next time. Maybe this season?

— David Glovach

2024 results

(9-4, 5-3 SEC)	
Old Dominion.....	W, 23-19
at Kentucky	W, 31-6
LSU	L, 36-33
Akron	W, 50-7
Ole Miss.....	L, 27-3

at Alabama	L, 27-25
at Oklahoma	W, 35-9
Texas A&M.....	W, 44-20
at Vanderbilt.....	W, 28-7
Missouri.....	W, 34-30
Wofford.....	W, 56-12
at Clemson	W, 17-14
Citrus Bowl (Orlando, Florida)	

vs. Illinois.....	L, 21-17
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2025 schedule

Aug. 31.....	vs. Virginia Tech
Sept. 6	South Carolina St.
Sept. 13	Vanderbilt
Sept. 20	at Missouri
Sept. 27	Kentucky

Oct. 11	at LSU
Oct. 18	Oklahoma
Oct. 25	Alabama
Nov. 1	at Ole Miss
Nov. 15.....	at Texas A&M
Nov. 22.....	Coastal Carolina
Nov. 29.....	Clemson
(Aug. 31 game in Atlanta.)	

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Florida Gators

Coach's corner

Head coach: Billy Napier
Record: 19-19 in 3 years at Florida, 59-31 in 6 years overall
Age: 45
Hometown: Chatsworth, Georgia



Napier

You don't say: Napier's father, Bill, was his coach at Murray County High School.
Coordinators: Russ Callaway (offense), Ron Roberts (defense)

Info booth

Location: Gainesville, Florida
Home: Ben Hill Griffin Stadium (88,548 capacity, first game 1930)
All-time record: 766-450-40
Mascots: Albert and Alberta
Band: The Pride of the Sunshine
Last conference title game appearance: 2020
Returning starters: 13 (6 offense, 7 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Not always sunshine ...: Napier has been direct with recruits about embracing the challenge to return the Gators to national prominence, and he's had more success than many programs retaining players. "I think that's one of the reasons we've been able to keep it together," he said. "We told them when they came in, you know, look, it's not going to all be sunshine and rainbows here. We're in this thing for the long haul. So I think a lot of this is how you pitch it in recruiting."
2. ... But more than before: The subject of rumors about his job status this time last year, Napier helped the Gators shake off a season-opening loss to Miami and rally for a respectable season. Four of the



Quarterback DJ Lagway hopes to be in the middle of more success again this year for Florida.
[PHELAN M. EBENHACK/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

five teams that beat Florida spent time in the top 10, and the Gators beat ranked Ole Miss and LSU in November. Napier's contract runs through 2029 and, while Florida expects continued improvement, the coaching change rumors have dissipated.
3. Spin it, DJ! Quarterback DJ Lagway took over as the starter last October after Graham Mertz got hurt and provided optimism for a Florida team needing it. He completed nearly 60% of his passes for over 1,900 yards and 12 touchdowns.

Now a sophomore, if Lagway himself can get healthy this season — he's recovering from a calf injury — Florida will not be an easy offense to stop. "We've built around the guy. There's no question," Napier said. "Players want to play with DJ."
4. Room for growth: Florida ranked second-to-last in total defense among SEC teams last year. While a challenging schedule might explain some of that, there's no reason Florida should finish ahead of only Mississippi State among SEC teams in total defense. But the

Gators might be trending in the right direction: They held each of their final four opponents last season to fewer than 20 points.

Extra point

Florida finished last season on a four-game winning streak. The Gators closed the prior two seasons on five-game and three-game losing skids.

Upset special

Cheer: Georgia. Few things would better indicate a successful turnaround than a win over the Bulldogs, who have won four straight and seven of eight in the series.
Jeer: Florida State. Weird things happen in rivalries. And while the Gators seem like a much-healthier program and a comfortable favorite right now, the Seminoles surely aren't going 2-10 again. A tight season finale wouldn't be a shock.

Quotebook

"One thing I try to do before I run out of the tunnel every week is I try to get a good thump in the head from Tyreek Sapp. He's got a hard head and a thick skull, and I like a shot in the dome to get my mind right."
— senior offensive lineman Jake Slaughter, on his pregame routine
Crystal ball
8-5: After two warmups, back-to-back games against LSU and Miami should give a clue about how much closer the Gators are to once again being a national power.
— Craig Thomas

2024 results

(8-5, 4-4 SEC)

Miami	L, 41-17
Samford	W, 45-7
Texas A&M	L, 33-20
at Mississippi St.	W, 45-28
Central Florida	W, 24-13

at Tennessee	(OT) L, 23-17
Kentucky	W, 48-20
vs. Georgia	L, 34-20
at Texas	L, 49-17
LSU	W, 27-16
Ole Miss	W, 24-17
at Florida St.	W, 31-11
Gasparilla Bowl (Tampa, Florida)	

vs. Tulane	W, 33-8
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2025 schedule

Aug. 30	Long Island
Sept. 6	South Florida
Sept. 13	at LSU
Sept. 20	at Miami
Oct. 4	Texas

Oct. 11	at Texas A&M
Oct. 18	Mississippi St.
Nov. 1	vs. Georgia
Nov. 8	at Kentucky
Nov. 15	at Ole Miss
Nov. 22	Tennessee
Nov. 29	Florida St.
(Nov. 1 game in Jacksonville, Florida.)	

UNITED ATHLETIC CONFERENCE

North Alabama Lions



UNA is scheduled to run onto the field at Braly Stadium just five more Saturdays before opening its on-campus stadium next year. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Coach's corner



Dearmon

Head coach: Brent Dearmon

Record: 6-17 in 2 seasons at UNA, 16-18 in 3 years overall

Age: 40

Hometown: Saraland

You don't say: During some downtime, Dearmon plays the video game Fortnite. It's for some bonding time with his youngest son, 5-year-old Madden.

Coordinators: Morgan Cruce (offense), Brock Caraboa (defense)

Info booth

Location: Florence

Home: Braly Stadium (14,215 capacity, first game 1949)

All-time record: 486-315-16

Mascot: Leo

Band: Marching Pride of North Alabama

Last conference title game appearance: N/A

Returning starters: 11 (7 offense, 4 defense)

Four-down territory

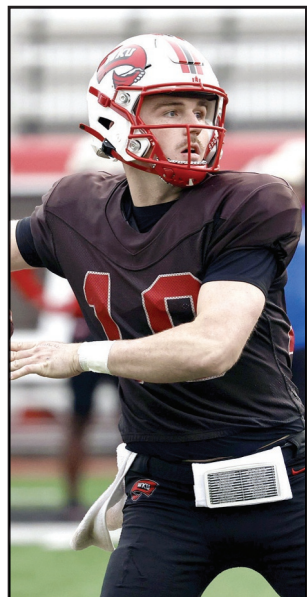
1. Braly, oh, Braly: This is finally set to be UNA's final season in the much-maligned confines of Braly Stadium with the plan being to move into the school's on-campus stadium in 2026. The Lions have played there since 1949 and it's much needed. Their current setup doesn't offer any benefits — for the program or the fans. UNA is 14-17

at home since going Division I in 2018. Will it be hard to say goodbye? No. No, it will not be. The school will honor different decades of football players at various games, but this parting shouldn't feature any sweet sorrow. And if the need to shed a tear arises, please quietly find a corner and keep it to yourself.

2. Put up your dukes? This fits, right? Since much has been made about UNA punching above its weight in

SEE NORTH ALABAMA, G18

2025 NORTH ALABAMA OPPONENTS



Maverick McIvor [WESTERN KENTUCKY ATHLETICS]

Western Kentucky Hilltoppers

When: 6 p.m. Aug. 30

Where: L.T. Smith Stadium, Bowling Green, Kentucky

Head coach: Tyson Helton (48-32 in 6 seasons)

Last season's record: 8-6 (6-2 Conference USA)

Key returnees: WR K.D. Hutchinson (25 catches, 383 yards, 3 TDs), RB George Hart III (43 carries, 206 yards, 2 TDs), DB Demarko Williams (20 tackles, 2 INTs), P Cole Maynard (42.7 yards per punt).

The skinny: An FBS opponent for North Alabama? You know what that means — wait for it — a money game. But it's just part of being an FCS or Group of Six program. The Lions are 2-8 all-time against FBS foes, but none of those wins have come in the Division I era. ... This will be Western Kentucky's second game. The Hilltoppers open this week against Sam Houston. ... Western Kentucky is replacing its top receiver, running back and quarterback. Caden Veltkamp, who threw for more than 3,100 yards, 25 TDs and 10 INTs transferred to conference opponent Florida Atlantic. The Hilltoppers replaced him with Maverick McIvor, who spent the previous three seasons at Abilene Christian.



Payton Brown [SOUTHEAST MISSOURI STATE ATHLETICS]

SE Missouri State Redhawks

When: 6 p.m. Sept. 6

Where: Houck Field, Cape Girardeau, Missouri

Head coach: Tom Matukewicz (64-63 in 11 seasons)

Last season's record: 9-4 (6-2 Big South-Ohio Valley)

Key returnees: RB Payton Brown (63 carries, 310 yards, 5 TDs; 15 catches, 153 yards, TD), RB Brandon Epton Jr. (61 carries, 223 yards, TD; 20 catches, 94 yards, TD); WR Cam Pedro (84 catches, 897 yards, 4 TDs).

The skinny: The two played in the FCS Kickoff game in Montgomery last season. Southeast Missouri won 37-15 after scoring the final 30 points. Brown finished with three of his season's five rushing touchdowns. ... The Redhawks are coming off their second Ohio Valley-Big South title in three years. They lost in the first round of the FCS playoffs to Illinois State. ... Southeast Missouri will have a new starting quarterback — 6-foot-8, 253-pound Jax Leatherwood. He was named the starter Aug. 15. Leatherwood began his career at Nevada before transferring to San Diego Mesa College. He's the eighth transfer QB to win the starting job under Matukewicz.



Deuce Roberson [NORTHEASTERN STATE ATHLETICS]

Northeastern State Riverhawks

When: 6 p.m. Sept. 13

Where: Braly Stadium

Head coach: Darrin Chiaverini (2-9 in 1 season)

Last season's record: 2-9

Key returnees: QB Dereun Dortch (1,760 passing yards, 17 TDs, 10 INTs; 111 carries, 300 yards, 4 TDs), RB Ramon McKinney Jr. (90 carries, 495 yards, 7 TDs; 27 catches, 379 yards, 3 TDs), WR Deuce Roberson (44 catches, 558 yards, 4 TDs).

The skinny: The reverse money game, meaning UNA will spend some dollars instead of receiving it when it welcomes the Division II team from Oklahoma for its home opener. ... The last time the Lions played a DII opponent was 2022. They beat Virginia-Wise 49-17 for their only win of the season. ... Northeastern State is an independent program. The Riverhawks left the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association after 2023 in hopes of landing some wins. Northeastern State hasn't had a winning record since 2011 when it was, again, an independent. It has just three winning seasons since 2000. ... The Riverhawks had 107 players on their training camp roster, 85 of which were new.



Tye Niekamp [ILLINOIS STATE ATHLETICS]

Illinois State Redbirds

When: noon Sept. 20

Where: Hancock Stadium, Normal, Illinois

Head coach: Brock Spack (111-74 in 16 seasons)

Last season's record: 10-4 (6-2 Missouri Valley)

Key returnees: QB Tommy Rittenhouse (2,840 passing yards, 17 TDs, 7 INTs; 78 carries, 480 yards, 8 TDs), RB Wenkers Wright (218 carries, 1,123 yards, 11 TDs), WR Daniel Sobkowicz (80 catches, 1,108 yards, 9 TDs).

The skinny: This is UNA's final nonconference game. ... Illinois State won last year's matchup 24-17. The Lions had a chance to tie the game, but quarterback Ari Patu threw four straight incompletions from the Redbirds 24- and 29-yard lines with 1:47 left. ... Illinois State was one of four Missouri Valley teams to win at least 10 games and make the FCS playoffs — joining South Dakota State, North Dakota State and South Dakota. Only the Big Sky has more teams in the postseason bracket with five. The Redbirds were the only ones from the Missouri Valley to not reach the semi-finals. They got bounced in the second round. ... Illinois State is ranked No. 6 in the STATS top 25 preseason poll.



Will Shaffer [ABILENE CHRISTIAN ATHLETICS]

Abilene Christian Wildcats

When: 2 p.m. Oct. 4

Where: Wildcat Stadium, Abilene, Texas

Head coach: Keith Patterson (21-15 in 3 seasons)

Last season's record: 9-5 (7-1 United Athletic)

Key returnees: TE Jed Castles (15 catches, 223 yards, 4 TDs), DL Chris Wright (84 tackles, 11 TFL, 3 sacks), LB Will Shaffer (123 tackles, 9.5 TFL, 2 sacks, 2 INTs, 5 PBUs), DB Dorian Plumley (81 tackles, sack, INT).

The skinny: This is UNA's conference opener after a bye week. ... Abilene Christian won the UAC last season, beating Tarleton State, Eastern Kentucky and Southern Utah by one game. Southern Utah was the one that didn't make the FCS playoffs. ... The Wildcats' conference loss? That was to the Lions. UNA won 47-34. Abilene Christian was ranked 10th in the FCS. It was the Lions' lone bright spot in a dismal season. ... The Wildcats were picked second in the league, partly due to losing a pair of 1,000-yard receivers, a 1,000-yard running back and their starting QB. Maverick McIvor is now at Western Kentucky after throwing for 3,828 yards, 30 TDs and seven interceptions.



Malachi Henry [CENTRAL ARKANSAS ATHLETICS]

Central Arkansas Bears

When: 3 p.m. Oct. 11

Where: Braly Stadium

Head coach: Nathan Brown (43-35 in 7 seasons)

Last season's record: 6-6 (3-5 United Athletic)

Key returnees: WR Malachi Henry (41 catches, 683 yards, 5 TDs), OL Will Diggins, OL Jamal Mull, DL Bradley Clark (29 tackles, 5.5 TFL, 2.5 sacks), DB Dillon Williams (80 tackles, sack, INT, 5 PBUs).

The skinny: Central Arkansas won last season's matchup 24-19. UNA had an opportunity for a go-ahead or game-winning drive in the final 1:17, but TJ Smith threw an interception on third down with 32 seconds left. ... The Bears were picked to finish fifth in the UAC preseason poll. ... Central Arkansas will have to replace its starting QB, its top two running backs, including ShunDerrick Powell, as well as its top defensive player in David Walker. Powell signed with the Philadelphia Eagles. Walker, who won the Buck Buchanan Award as the best defensive player in the FCS, was drafted in the fourth round by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. He had 10 1/2 sacks and 23 tackles for loss in 2024.

2025 NORTH ALABAMA OPPONENTS



Jaheim Ward [EASTERN KENTUCKY ATHLETICS]

Eastern Kentucky Colonels

When: 6 p.m. Oct. 18

Where: Braly Stadium

Head coach: Walt Wells (30-26 in 4 seasons)

Last season's record: 8-5 (4-2 United Athletic)

Key returnees: RB Brayden Lathan (141 carries, 662 yards, 3 TDs), WR Marcus Calwise Jr. (42 catches, 526 yards, 5 TDs), LB Braden Sullivan (92 tackles), DB Jaheim Ward (66 tackles, 4 INTs, 6 PBUs).

The skinny: Eastern Kentucky won last year's regular-season finale 21-15. Calwise's 67-yard touchdown catch with 8:10 was the deciding score after UNA scored 15 unanswered points in the second half. ... Of the three games the programs have played since UNA went Division I, each has been decided by 10 points or less. ... The Colonels were one of three UAC teams to qualify for the FCS playoffs. They lost 22-17 in the first round to Villanova. ... Eastern Kentucky will have a different quarterback for the third straight year. Matt Morrissey replaced Park McKinney last season. One would assume Myles Burkett has the inside track. He played nine games last year for Albany after two seasons at Wisconsin.



Chris Parson [AUSTIN PEAY ATHLETICS]

Austin Peay Governors

When: 3 p.m. Oct. 25

Where: Fortera Stadium, Clarksville, Tennessee

Head coach: Jeff Faris (4-8 in 1 season)

Last season's record: 4-8 (3-5 United Athletic)

Key returnees: QB Austin Smith (2,354 passing yards, 15 TDs, 7 INTs; 121 carries, 228 yards, 4 TDs), OL Chandler Kirton, DL Davion Hood (27 tackles, 7 TFL, 2.5 sacks), DB Ellis Ellis Jr. (26 tackles, 3 INTs, 6 PBUs), K Carson Smith (13-for-20 FGA, 32-for-33 XPA)

The skinny: Austin Peay scored 24 first-half points in a 31-17 victory over UNA last season. ... The Governors, who won the UAC in 2023, regressed in 2024 thanks in part to a series of departures. They suffered a few more with leading receiver Jaden Barnes (1,083 yards, 9 TDs) departing for App State and second-leading tackler Jaden Lyes (96 tackles) Western Michigan. ... Austin Peay does return its starting quarterback in Smith, but Faris brought in Chris Parson from Mississippi State in the offseason. Which one is the front-runner? Faris brought Parson to the conference's media day. Read into that as you will.



Eric Olson [UTAH TECH ATHLETICS]

Utah Tech Trailblazers

When: 3 p.m. Nov. 1

Where: Greater Zion Stadium, St. George, Utah

Head coach: Lance Anderson (1-11 in 1 season)

Last year's record: 1-11 (1-7 United Athletic)

Key returnees: QB Reggie Graff (1,467 passing yards, 10 TDs, 5 INTs; 123 carries, 442 yards, 4 TDs), TE Eric Olsen (18 catches, 259 yards, TD), DL Laytan Tanuvasa (24 tackles, 1.5 TFL).

The skinny: Utah Tech was the only team voted lower in the UAC preseason poll than UNA (which tied with West Georgia). The Trailblazers were picked ninth. The Lions and Wolves seventh. ... Utah Tech is 9-40 since moving to Division I ahead of the 2020 season, which includes a pair of one-win seasons. Its win in 2024 was a 34-21 upset of No. 9 Central Arkansas. ... This will be UNA's longest road trip of the year, covering 1,686 miles one way via the shortest route. The Lions' longest trip in 2024 was to Southern Utah. That was 1,706 miles one way. ... Utah Tech's stadium is also at a lower elevation than Southern Utah's. The Trailblazers' facility is 4,637 feet above sea level. The Thunderbirds' is 5,846.



T.J. Lockley [WEST GEORGIA ATHLETICS]

West Georgia Wolves

When: 3 p.m. Nov. 8

Where: Braly Stadium

Head coach: Joel Taylor (4-7 in 1 season)

Last season's record: 4-7 (1-7 United Athletic)

Key returnees: QB Davin Wydner (1,718 passing yards, 9 TDs, INT; 66 carries, 249 yards, 7 TDs), WR T.J. Lockley (51 catches, 508 yards, 3 TDs), LB Jay Carter (76 tackles, 5.5 TFL, 2 sacks, INT), LB Micah Thurman (68 tackles, 7.5 TFL, 2 sacks).

The skinny: West Georgia is now in its second Division I season. ... UNA beat the Wolves 25-16 last season for its first win of the year. It was the sixth game on the schedule. ... This will be West Georgia's first trip to Braly Stadium since 2016. The Lions won 24-23 after Hunter Heck missed a 22-yard field goal wide left as time expired. ... The Wolves will only play 11 games instead of the 12 most of the FCS is playing. They have three nonconference opponents — Samford, Nicholls and East Tennessee State — to start the season. ... West Georgia lost its top receivers to Georgia Southern and Coastal Carolina. Its sack leaders ended up at Oklahoma State and Kansas State.



Victor Gabalis [TARLETON STATE ATHLETICS]

Tarleton State Texans

When: 6 p.m. Nov. 15

Where: Memorial Stadium, Stephenville, Texas

Head coach: Todd Whitten (69-34 in 9 seasons of 2nd stint at Tarleton State, 114-57 in 15 seasons at Tarleton State, 139-85 overall in 20 seasons)

Last season's record: 10-4 (6-2 United Athletic)

Key returnees: QB Victor Gabalis (2,883 passing yards, 23 TDs, 11 INTs), WR Cody Jackson (29 catches, 490 yards, 8 TDs), OL Hunter Smith, DL Brandon Tolvert (63 tackles, 11.5 TFL, 4 sacks), LB Ty Rawls (41 tackles, 2 INTs, 6 PBUs), DB Kasyus Kurns (64 tackles, 2 INTs, 9 PBUs), DB Blake Smith (76 tackles, 3 INTs).

The skinny: Tarleton State won 28-14 last season behind Kayvon Britten's 273 rushing yards and four touchdowns. Britten finished the year with an FCS-high 1,982 rushing yards to go along with 18 touchdowns. He exhausted his eligibility. ... The Texans qualified for the FCS playoffs in their fifth year as a Division I program, their first eligible year, and reached the second round. ... Tarleton State is ranked 10th in the STATS preseason top 25 poll and is the UAC favorite.



Bronson Barron [SOUTHERN UTAH ATHLETICS]

Southern Utah Thunderbirds

When: 1 p.m. Nov. 22

Where: Braly Stadium

Head coach: DeLane Fitzgerald (18-16 in 3 seasons at Southern Utah, 104-65 in 16 seasons overall)

Last season's record: 7-5 (6-2 United Athletic)

Key returnees: QB Bronson Barron (749 passing yards, 6 TDs, 5 INTs), WR Shane Carr (31 catches, 627 yards, 6 TDs).

The skinny: This is scheduled to be UNA's final game at Braly Stadium. Time to soak in the memories. ... The Lions will honor the 30th anniversary of their 1995 Division II national championship team. They did the same for the 1994 team last year and the 1993 squad in 2023. ... The Thunderbirds won this matchup last season thanks, in part, to the 165 rushing yards and three touchdowns from Targhee Lambson. He was second in the FCS with 1,921 rushing yards and an FCS-high 23 rushing scores. He exhausted his eligibility. ... Southern Utah missed a share of the UAC title by one game. The Thunderbirds' two losses? They lost 38-37 to Tarleton State and 28-25 at Abilene Christian.

— Compiled by David Glovach



Ari Patu, who started the first three games last season, could throw some more passes Justin Luke's way with the departure of UNA's top three receivers. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

NORTH ALABAMA

From Page G15

competition. So, is it a bare-knuckles fight or are gloves involved? To be fair, men's basketball won a share of the ASUN regular-season title last season, while men's tennis won the ASUN tournament title, men's cross country won the conference's individual crown and men's golf had an NCAA participant. Then again, one year is a small sample size — and against similar schools. Football, however, has been a different story. UNA has not produced a winning season since 2018 when it competed against a mixed DI and II schedule. The Lions are 21-49 since moving to the FCS, including a 6-19 mark against conference foes. They were picked to finish in a tie for seventh in their nine-team league this year. Ding. Ding.

3. Newer is better? UNA is replacing its

top passer (TJ Smith), receiver (Takairee Kenebrew), tackler (Gregory Reddick), sack leader (Jackson Bratton), interception leader (Ashaad Williams) and scorer (Scott Payne) from last season. The Lions also lost starting left tackle (Mickel Clay, who is now at West Virginia) and the UAC freshman of the year (LB Josh Anglin, who is now at Tulsa). But with the way recent results have been (see above), that might be a good thing. UNA ranked 71st in scoring offense (23.6 points per game) and 83rd in scoring defense (29.2 ppg). The NCAA listed 123 FCS teams.

4. Just be selfish: This is more directed at the offense. Hold onto the football. UNA turned the ball over 26 times last season, per ncaa.com. Want to know where that ranked in the FCS? It was tied for 119th with Murray State. Only Mississippi Valley State (27 turnovers), Rhode Island (27) and Stetson (31) were worse. UNA had 24 the year before. Conversely, the Lions were tied



Jyheam Ingram and UNA will see if there will be more cause for celebration if the Lions can create an uptick in turnovers.

for 90th in creating turnovers with 13 — six fumble recoveries and seven interceptions.

Extra point

UNA is 1-20 against ranked FCS opponents. The win came against Abilene Christian last season. The Lions have three on this year's schedule — Illinois State (No. 6 in STATS preseason top 25), Tarleton State (No. 10) and Abilene Christian (No. 16).

Upset special

Cheer: Western Kentucky. Repeat from last season: The FBS opponent will take this spot every year there's one on UNA's schedule. The Lions 2-8 all-time against FBS teams, including a 40-0 loss at Memphis last season. The last win was against Louisiana-Lafayette in 1997.

Jeer: Northeastern State. UNA finally gets to host its own money game when it welcomes the Division II school from

Oklahoma. The last time the Lions brought in such an opponent? That was Virginia-Wise in 2022. You know what happened that year.

Quotebook

"It's good for the fans to talk about. But in this conference, any given Saturday, if you don't show up, you're going to get beat."

— tight end Kaleb Heatherly on where UNA was picked to finish in the UAC's preseason poll

Crystal ball

4-8: UNA went 3-9 last season, so four wins would be an improvement. Could UNA do better? Yes. It is the transfer portal era. But the Lions have to show it before they get the benefit of the doubt. Ding. Ding.

— David Glovach

2024 results

(3-9, 3-5 UAC)
vs. Southeast Missouri St.L, 37-15
at Memphis..... L, 40-0
Illinois St.....L, 24-17
at UT MartinL, 43-28
Tarleton St.....L, 28-14

at West Georgia: W, 25-16
Utah Tech..... W, 60-14
Abilene Christian..... W, 47-34
at Central ArkansasL, 24-19
Austin Peay.....L, 31-17
at Southern UtahL, 38-26
at Eastern KentuckyL, 21-15

2025 schedule

Aug. 30.....at Western Kentucky
Sept. 6at Southeast Missouri St.
Sept. 13 Northeastern St. (Okla.)
Sept. 20 at Illinois St.
Oct. 4 at Abilene Christian
Oct. 11Central Arkansas

Oct. 18 Eastern Kentucky
Oct. 25 at Austin Peay
Nov. 1 at Utah Tech
Nov. 8 West Georgia
Nov. 15 at Tarleton St.
Nov. 22 Southern Utah

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Ole Miss Rebels

Coach's corner



Kiffin

Head coach: Lane Kiffin
Record: 44-18 in 5 years at Ole Miss, 106-52 in 14 years overall
Age: 50
Hometown: Bloomington, Minnesota
You don't say: Ole Miss lost two games by three points and another by a touchdown. That averages out to four points per loss. Of the 10 Rebel wins, the average point differential was 33 points.
Coordinators: Charlie Weis Jr. (offense), Pete Golding (defense)

Info booth

Location: Oxford, Mississippi
Home: Vaught-Hemingway Stadium (64,038 capacity, first game 1915)
All-time record: 686-550-35
Mascot: Tony the Landshark
Band: The Pride of the South
Last conference title game appearance: Never
Returning starters: 5 (3 offense, 2 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Give it time: Six SEC teams have new quarterbacks, and Ole Miss is one of them. The heir apparent to Jaxson Dart, Ole Miss' all-time leading passer, is sophomore Austin Simmons. He doesn't have much experience and there will be some growing pains, but Kiffin will be understanding. He said Dart didn't become the player he is today until year three at Ole Miss.
2. Make 'em laugh: It's no secret Kiffin makes a big splash on social media, particularly X. It's never a dull moment when Kiffin makes a post



Austin Simmons will be the center of attention this season as Ole Miss' starting quarterback. [THOMAS GRANING/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

— and they help the team. “If you're in Oxford, Mississippi, and we're over summer and it's raining outside and you just need something to laugh at, you go to Coach Kiffin's page. ... It just gives you a laugh,” receiver Cayden Lee said.
3. Playoff rant: The sting of missing out on the playoffs last season is a distant memory now, but Kiffin does have

some thoughts on the playoff system and the consideration of scheduling. “Being a coach and understanding what teams take to go into certain places to play and have to get up every week vs. other people's schedule, it's very different,” he said.
4. Good odds: The Rebels have a few tough games, including LSU and Georgia. But there is no Texas or Alabama to

contend with, and the Rebels' schedule comes in at No. 68 on the difficulty scale, according to Sports Illustrated.

Extra point

Ole Miss was No. 1 in the SEC in scoring offense (38 ppg) and scoring defense (14 ppg) last season. The Rebels were also No. 1 in rushing defense (80 ypg).

Upset special

Cheer. LSU. The Rebels and Tigers played in one of the best SEC games of the season with Ole Miss taking the overtime loss. This year the game is in Oxford, where the Rebels have won two straight over LSU.
Jeer. Georgia. The Rebels dominated the Bulldogs last season. That doesn't happen often, and it won't be that easy in Athens this time around, especially with revenge on the Bulldogs' mind.

Quotebook

“We lost a lot of really good players. Most players drafted in the history of the school. We've replaced them with a lot of new players, and that's kind of the world we got live in now with the portal and how it works.”

— Kiffin

Crystal ball

9-3: Ole Miss is at home for five of its first six games. The rest of the schedule is favorable except for back-to-back road games with Georgia and Oklahoma. There are several questions about the offense with a new quarterback and other key skill personnel. The Rebels are always in the hunt under Kiffin.
— Edwin Stanton

2024 results

(9-3, 5-3 SEC)

Furman	W, 76-0
Middle Tennessee.....	W, 52-3
at Wake Forest.....	W, 40-6
Georgia Southern	W, 52-13
Kentucky.....	L, 20-17

at South Carolina.....	W, 27-3
at LSU	(OT) L, 29-26
Oklahoma	W, 26-14
at Arkansas.....	W, 63-31
Georgia	W, 28-10
at Florida	L, 24-17
Mississippi St.....	W, 26-14
Gator Bowl (Jacksonville, Florida)	

vs. Duke	W, 52-20
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2025 schedule

Aug. 30.....	Georgia St.
Sept. 6	at Kentucky
Sept. 13	Arkansas
Sept. 20	Tulane
Sept. 27	LSU

Oct. 11	Washington St.
Oct. 18	at Georgia
Oct. 25	at Oklahoma
Nov. 1	South Carolina
Nov. 8	The Citadel
Nov. 15	Florida
Nov. 28	at Mississippi St.

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Texas A&M Aggies

Coach's corner



Head coach: Mike Elko
Record: 8-5 in 1 year at A&M, 24-14 in 4 seasons overall
Age: 48
Hometown: South Brunswick, New Jersey
You don't say: While most coaches were enjoying the off-season, Elko said he spent his time off packing and moving houses from Raleigh, North Carolina, to College Station. His wife and children stayed behind in North Carolina during Elko's first season at Texas A&M so his son could finish high school. Now, the family is settled into their new home.
Coordinators: Trooper Taylor (offense), Lyle Hemphill (defense)

Info booth

Location: College Station, Texas
Home: Kyle Field (102,733 capacity, first game 1905)
All-time record: 786-509-48
Mascot: Reveille
Band: The Fightin' Texas Aggie Band
Last conference title game appearance: 1998 (Big 12)
Returning starters: 15 (7 offense, 8 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Will the real Aggies please stand up? Which A&M team will we see in 2025 — the team that got off to a 7-1 start last year or the team that lost four of its final five games, with only a win against New Mexico State in that span? The final three losses were by a total of 16 points, so it's not like the Aggies totally collapsed. But they were losses nonetheless.
2. Runner or passer? Texas A&M



Le'Veon Moss and the Texas A&M Aggies are hoping to climb to new heights this season. [ERIC GAY/ THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

features one of the most dynamic running quarterbacks in the game in Marcell Reed, who rushed for 547 yards. What the Aggies need most is for Reed to make quicker decisions in the pocket, where he had a 29.4 grade under pressure. He tends to hold the ball too long, leading to turnovers. The Aggies were 13th in the league at 210 passing yards per game. He has to be better this season.
3. Best run game in the SEC? Some of the pressure on Reed will be alleviated by the return of Le'Veon Moss at running back, who was third in the SEC with 609 yards before sustaining a knee injury in the loss to South Carolina. Moss' backfield mates — Amari Daniels, Reuben Owens and EJ Smith — also return, and the Aggies were second in the SEC in

rushing with 195.5 yards per game. A good run game should make it easier for Reed to have more success throwing.
4. Revamped receivers: Elko dipped into the transfer portal to land four players who should help Reed in the passing game. KC Concepcion (N.C. State), Mario Craver (Mississippi State) and Jonah Wilson (Washington) were added along with former Alabama/Texas tight end Amari Niblack. Concepcion caught 124 passes for 1,299 yards and 16 touchdowns during his career with the Wolfpack and is one of the top receivers in the yards after catch category.
Extra point
Former Auburn assistant Trooper Taylor begins his second season at Texas

A&M. Taylor was the receivers coach for the Tigers when they won the 2010 national championship. Auburn won 33 games and four postseason games during the well-traveled Taylor's four-year stint on the Plains.
Upset special
Cheer: The Aggies go to Notre Dame for their third game and should emerge with a win after the Fighting Irish were all-in last season in the hunt for a national title. It's not a must-win game, but a good road victory would give the Aggies plenty of momentum going into the SEC portion of their schedule.
Jeer: The Aggies should be favored in their first four SEC games, with only one on the road. Looming, though, is a game at LSU. A loss in Baton Rouge could scuttle the Aggies' conference title hopes.
Quotebook
"I would say just take one day at a time. Live where your feet's at. This thing comes fast. I remember when I was in junior college, I remember when I was just graduating to go to college. Now I'm on my last year. Just really live where your feet's at and take it with a grain of salt. You've got to enjoy the moments. You've got to enjoy the goods and the bads, just do everything right."
— defensive back Will Lee III
Crystal ball
10-2: The stars are aligned for the Aggies to have a stellar season. They miss Alabama and Georgia and should zoom into the season finale at Texas with only one loss.
— Gregg Dewalt

2024 results

(8-5, 5-3 SEC)	
Notre Dame	L, 23-13
McNeese St.	W, 52-10
at Florida	W, 33-20
Bowling Green	W, 26-20
vs. Arkansas	W, 21-17

at Missouri	W, 41-10
at Mississippi St.	W, 34-24
LSU	W, 38-23
at South Carolina	L, 44-20
New Mexico St.	W, 38-3
at Auburn	(OT) L, 43-41
Texas	L, 17-7
Las Vegas Bowl vs. Southern Cal.	L, 35-31

2025 schedule

Aug. 30	UTSA
Sept. 6	Utah St.
Sept. 13	at Notre Dame
Sept. 27	Auburn
Oct. 4	Mississippi St.
Oct. 11	Florida

Oct. 18	at Arkansas
Oct. 25	at LSU
Nov. 8	Missouri
Nov. 15	South Carolina
Nov. 22	Samford
Nov. 28	at Texas

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Oklahoma Sooners

Coach's corner



Venables

Head coach: Brent Venables
Record: 22-17 in 3 seasons
Age: 54
Hometown: Salina, Kansas
You don't say: Venables began his collegiate playing career at Garden City (Kansas) Community College (1989-90), where he earned All-America honors after recording 276 tackles. He was inducted into the school's athletic hall of fame in April 2023.
Coordinators: Jay Valai/Todd Bates (defense), Ben Arbuckle (offense)

Info booth

Location: Norman, Oklahoma
Home: Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium (80,126 capacity, first game 1925)
All-time record: 950-348-53
Mascot: Boomer and Sooner
Band: Pride of Oklahoma
Last conference title game appearance: 2020 (Big 12)
Returning starters: 12 (5 offense, 7 defense)

Four-down territory

- 1. Welcome to the SEC:** Oklahoma got a rude introduction into the SEC and learned that the Big 12 was a little easier to navigate than its new league. The Sooners won only two SEC games and finished the conference by losing five of their final six conference games.
- 2. Yellowhammer State champs:** Oklahoma's SEC wins came against schools from Alabama — an improbable 24-3 win over Alabama that likely prevented the



Oklahoma fans expect the Sooners to be pointing up this year — or they may be pointing the way out for coach Brent Venables. [ALONZO ADAMS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

- Crimson Tide from making the playoffs and a 27-21 decision at Auburn.
- 3. Venables on hot seat?** Expectations among Oklahoma fans are that the Sooners play for conference championships and compete in the playoffs. Neither happened in 2024 and it's likely that another subpar season, which would be the third in his four years, could result in the program going another direction sooner rather than later with its head coach.
- 4. Reloading across the board:** Venables

- hit the transfer portal hard in an effort to shore up the team's many deficiencies. Tops among the newcomers are quarterback John Mateer (Washington State) and running back Jaydn Ott (Cal). Those two should make an immediate impact on a team that averaged 13.5 points in its six SEC losses.
- Extra point**
New offensive coordinator Ben Arbuckle is only 29 years old, but he already has a reputation as one of the

- best coordinators in the country. Last season at Washington State, Arbuckle's offense finished sixth nationally in scoring. That's good news for the Sooners, who were offensively challenged a year ago.
- Upset special**
Cheer: The Sooners will get an early gut check when Michigan comes to town on Sept. 6. A win over the Wolverines could set the stage for a bounceback season.
Jeer: The annual Red River Rivalry game on Oct. 11 will show if the Sooners have closed the gap on their rival and SEC favorite Texas. Truth is, they haven't.

Quotebook

- "This is a team I love to be in the building with every single day. I believe they have what it takes to claw our back to where I believe Oklahoma belongs. The expectations here and in the locker room are to win at the very highest level and to compete for a championship. That's always been the way it is here at the University of Oklahoma. We embrace those standards and expectations of excellence."
- Venables
- Crystal ball**
8-4: It's unlikely that Oklahoma will have the number of injuries that scuttled last season and quarterback play should be improved. But the season-ending SEC gauntlet that begins with Texas and includes road games at South Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama likely will keep Oklahoma from challenging for an SEC title.
- Gregg Dewalt

2024 results

(6-7, 2-6 SEC)	
Temple.....	W, 51-3
Houston.....	W, 16-12
Tulane.....	W, 34-19
Tennessee.....	L, 25-15
at Auburn.....	W, 27-21

vs. Texas.....	L, 34-3
South Carolina.....	L, 35-9
at Ole Miss.....	L, 26-14
Maine.....	W, 59-14
at Missouri.....	L, 30-23
Alabama.....	W, 24-3
at LSU.....	L, 37-17
Armed Forces Bowl (Fort Worth, Texas)	

vs. Navy.....	L, 21-20
2025 schedule	
Aug. 30.....	Illinois St.
Sept. 6.....	Michigan
Sept. 13.....	at Temple
Sept. 20.....	Auburn
Oct. 4.....	Kent St.

Oct. 11.....	vs. Texas
Oct. 18.....	at South Carolina
Oct. 25.....	Ole Miss
Nov. 1.....	at Tennessee
Nov. 15.....	at Alabama
Nov. 22.....	Missouri
Nov. 29.....	LSU
(Oct. 11 game in Dallas.)	

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Missouri Tigers

Coach's corner

Head coach: Eliah Drinkwitz
Record: 38-24 in 5 years at Missouri, 50-25 in 6 years overall
Age: 42
Hometown: Alma, Arkansas
You don't say: Drinkwitz's one season as head coach at Appalachian State (2019) was the Mountaineers' winningest season to date at the FBS level.
Coordinators: Kirby Moore (offense), Corey Batoon (defense)



Drinkwitz



Sam Horn, before trying professional baseball with the Dodgers, will try to be Missouri's starting quarterback. [L.G. PATTERSON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Info booth

Location: Columbia, Missouri
Home: Faurot Field (62,621 capacity, first game 1926)
All-time record: 723-591-52
Mascot: Truman
Band: Marching Mizzou
Last conference title game appearance: 2014
Returning starters: 13 (5 offense, 8 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Quarterback battle: Plenty of schools came into the season with a quarterback competition, but how many times has one of the candidates signed with the Dodgers? Sam Horn has only thrown 15 college innings but, before starting his pro baseball career, will compete with Penn State transfer Beau Pribula and Matt Zollers to replace the departed Brady Cook. Horn missed all of last year and Pribula threw for only 275 yards, so experience is light at this position.
2. Rivalry renewed: For the first time since 2011, Mizzou will play a football game against its biggest rival. The

Kansas Jayhawks come to Columbia for the first time since 2006, a 42-17 win for the Tigers. "This is something that goes back a long way. It's very deep. It's something that our team is very keenly aware of," Drinkwitz said. "We understand the implications, the importance to our state."
3. Lesson learned? Last year, Mizzou's first road game of the year was its fifth game at Texas A&M. Mizzou came in undefeated and left with a 41-10 loss. "I feel like I let our team down by being unprepared to go to Texas A&M,"

Drinkwitz said. "We were not, with the adjustment of the transfer portal and players, I don't think they understood the routine and what it was going to be." This year's first road game is not until Oct. 18 at Auburn.
4. Perception and priorities: Drinkwitz was asked this summer if it bothers him that Missouri might not get as much as attention as other programs despite 21 wins over the past two seasons. "At the end of the day, two-minute drive, fourth quarter, that's not what you're thinking about. You think about your trust and

belief in each other, doing your job at a higher level," he said. "You can think about it as temporary motivation, but in the key moments it's more about the belief in each other."

Extra point

Mizzou is coming off consecutive 10-win seasons for the third time in school history (2007-08, 2013-14). The Tigers have never had three in a row.

Upset special

Cheer: Alabama. This would be a stunner because recent history hasn't been kind to the Tigers. Last year's 34-0 Alabama romp was the Tide's fifth straight rout in the series.
Jeer: Kansas. Coach Lance Leipold has made sure these aren't the punching-bag Jayhawks of the 2010s, but Mizzou fans would not take a loss here well. At all.

Quotebook

"In the first couple years, I cared what y'all thought about me. Now I don't. I don't care. I'm here to represent my family, my wife and my four beautiful daughters. I'm here to represent the University of Missouri and make our football team proud. Outside of that, I really don't care what anybody else thinks."

— Drinkwitz

Crystal ball

9-4: Mizzou needs to take advantage of six straight home games to open the season. The Tigers avoid Texas and Georgia but still might need to pull some upsets to reach their first SEC title game in 11 years.
— Craig Thomas

2024 results

(10-3, 5-3 SEC)	
Murray St.....	W, 51-0
Buffalo.....	W, 38-0
Boston College	W, 27-21
Vanderbilt.....	(2OT) W, 30-27
at Texas A&M.....	L, 41-10

at UMass.....	W, 45-3
Auburn.....	W, 21-17
at Alabama	L, 34-0
Oklahoma	W, 30-23
at South Carolina.....	L, 34-30
at Mississippi St	W, 39-20
Arkansas.....	W, 28-21
Music City Bowl (Nashville)	

vs. Iowa.....	W, 27-24
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2025 schedule

Aug. 28.....	Central Arkansas
Sept. 6	Kansas
Sept. 13	Louisiana-Lafayette
Sept. 20	South Carolina
Sept. 27	UMass

Oct. 11	Alabama
Oct. 18	at Auburn
Oct. 25	at Vanderbilt
Nov. 8.....	Texas A&M
Nov. 15.....	Mississippi St.
Nov. 22.....	at Oklahoma
Nov. 29.....	at Arkansas

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Vanderbilt Commodores

Coach's corner



Head coach: Clark Lea
Record: 16-33 in 4 years
Age: 43
Hometown: Nashville
You don't say: Lea served as both head coach and defensive coordinator last season. Vanderbilt went 7-6 for its first winning season in more than a decade. He won't have the dual roles this year.
Coordinators: Tim Beck (offense), Steve Gregory (defense)

Info booth

Location: Nashville
Home: Vanderbilt Stadium (40,350 capacity, first game 1981)
All-time record: 625-671-50
Mascot: Mr. Commodore
Band: The Spirit of Gold
Last conference title game appearance: Never
Returning starters: 13 (5 offense, 8 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Go, Diego, go: Sorry, Dora. It's actually stay, Diego, stay. Vanderbilt quarterback Diego Pavia is back for a second season in Nashville thanks to his lawsuit that provided a blanket NCAA waiver giving junior college players an extra year of eligibility. He spent his first two seasons at New Mexico Military before two years at New Mexico State. Pavia was the SEC newcomer of the year in 2024.
2. Anchor up? Last season should provide quite a boost for the Commodores. They beat a No. 1 team for the first time (40-35 over Alabama), beat both the Crimson Tide and Auburn for the first



Diego Pavia and Vanderbilt will see if they replicate some of the magic moments they shared in 2024. [JOHN AMIS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

time since 1955 and beat a Power Four nonconference opponent (34-27 OT over Virginia Tech) for the first time since 2017. Vanderbilt finished 7-6, the program's first winning season and bowl victory since 2013. The Commodores won nine games that year. Just imagine if they hadn't lost four games by seven points or less.
3. Winners win: Stop if you've read this before: Vanderbilt could surprise some people. Well, some people aren't buying

that surprise part. Yes, the Commodores were picked to finish 13th in the 16-team SEC by the media. They, however, were selected to tie for seventh in the media's championship poll. Vanderbilt tied with Florida and was ahead of Tennessee, Ole Miss and Auburn. And one of these things is not like the others. Right, Auburn?
4. Can they do it again? Vanderbilt's 7-6 mark was its first winning record since 2013. The last time the Commodores posted back-to-back winning

seasons? Again, 2013. They went 9-4 in both 2012-13. The last time before that? You'd have to rewind a bit to 1975. So, yeah, not a lot of good history there.

Extra point

Vanderbilt has only had four All-Americans since 2000 — cornerback D.J. Moore (second team in 2008), receiver Jordan Matthews (third team in 2013), linebacker Zach Cunningham (first team in 2016) and punter Matthew Hayball (second team in 2023).

Upset special

Cheer: Texas. The Longhorns are the No. 1 team in the AP preseason poll. Could this have been Alabama? Sure. But been there, done that.
Jeer: Georgia State. The Commodores lost this matchup last season. By four points. After scoring 22 points in the fourth quarter. A second straight loss to Georgia State? Not good.

Quotebook

"I have a lot of teammates, ex-teammates from New Mexico Military Institute who I played with who text me and say, 'Hey, thank you.' A lot of people reach out. It wasn't really me. It was my lawyer who did it."
— Pavia on his lawsuit helping former JUCO players earning an extra year of eligibility
Crystal ball
8-5: Is it a stretch? Maybe. Is it possible? Sure. Vanderbilt did surprise plenty last season. We'll see if Pavia and company can do it again.
— David Glovach

2024 results

(7-6, 3-5 SEC)

Virginia Tech.....	(OT) W, 34-27
Alcorn St.....	W, 55-0
at Georgia St.	L, 36-32
at Missouri.....	(2OT) L, 30-27
Alabama	W, 40-35

at Kentucky	W, 20-13
Ball St.	W, 24-13
Texas.....	L, 27-24
at Auburn.....	W, 17-7
South Carolina.....	L, 28-7
at LSU	L, 24-17
Tennessee.....	L, 36-23
Birmingham Bowl	

vs. Georgia Tech	W, 35-27
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2025 schedule

Aug. 30.....	Charleston Southern
Sept. 6	at Virginia Tech
Sept. 13	at South Carolina
Sept. 20	Georgia St.
Sept. 27	Utah St.

Oct. 4	at Alabama
Oct. 18	LSU
Oct. 25	Missouri
Nov. 1	at Texas
Nov. 8	Auburn
Nov. 22	Kentucky
Nov. 29	at Tennessee

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Arkansas Razorbacks

Coach's corner



Head coach: Sam Pittman
Record: 30-34 in 5 seasons
Age: 63
Hometown: El Reno, Oklahoma
You don't say: Pittman underwent hip replacement surgery in the offseason.
Coordinators: Bobby Petrino (offense), Travis Williams/Marcus Woodson (co-defense)

Info booth

Location: Fayetteville, Arkansas
Home: Reynolds Razorback Stadium (76,112 capacity, first game 1938)
All-time record: 747-545-40
Mascots: Big Red, Tusk
Band: Razorback Marching Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2006

Returning starters: 8 (4 offense, 4 defense)

Four-down territory

- 1. Rumors and recruiting:** Given the program's mixed results, Pittman's name comes up frequently as someone facing significant job pressure. He said this summer the biggest consequence of that is it makes it harder to recruit. "Now, how can we stop that? We win more games. That's what we can do," he said. "Look, most everything a guy brings on him, he brings on himself."
- 2. Back for more:** Senior quarterback Taylen Green enters his second year as a Razorback after transferring from Boise



Arkansas quarterback Taylen Green and the Razorbacks are eyeing more victory celebrations after last year's four-win finish. [BUTCH DILL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

State. He said offensive coordinator Bobby Petrino, who has experience with dual-threat quarterbacks, gives him the freedom to make changes at the line of scrimmage. Green completed 60% of his passes last year for 3,154 yards and 15 scores with nine interceptions, and he added 602 yards rushing and eight TDs.

3. Hooking up with the Horns: Texas' recent entrance into the SEC should help foster more meetings with Arkansas. They played regularly from the 1930s through the '80s, including a famous 15-14 Texas win in 1969, and have met sporadically in recent years. Texas won 20-10 last season in Fayetteville. "I believe if you ask our fan base and from

the feel of the stadium when we play the University of Texas, I believe that it's one of our rivals, if not number one," Pittman said.

4. Chef Ball: Senior defensive lineman Cam Ball has a passion for cooking, which he shared with his father, who died of cancer in June. Cam has big culinary plans. "I've got my own business, if you ain't heard of it. It's called Ball's Barbecue. Do your research, if you haven't. It's going to be jumping pretty soon now," he said. "But I specialize in ribs, chicken. My girlfriend, she (fixes) the sides with the baked beans and mac and cheese. Shout out to Cassidy. That's one of my biggest experiences, just having my teammates

over and selling plates to my teammates and people in Fayetteville."

Extra point

The Razorbacks' last seven losses — dating to the finale of the 2023 season — have been to opponents that were ranked in the Top 25.

Upset special

Cheer: Missouri. The Tigers lead the Battle Line Rivalry 9-2 since 2012, but both Arkansas wins have been in Fayetteville.

Jeer: Arkansas State. The second game of the year is an officially neutral site meeting in Little Rock's War Memorial Stadium. Former Tennessee coach Butch Jones led the Red Wolves to eight wins last year.

Quotebook

"To me, opening the portal after you have spring ball is the craziest thing in the world. Why would you have spring ball, know your team, then five, six of 'em leave after spring ball? That makes no sense to me whatsoever. If you give a guy an opportunity to leave, I think that's great. Go ahead. But it's got to be somewhere, in my opinion, in early January or it shouldn't happen at all."

— Pittman

Crystal ball

4-8: Notre Dame and Memphis highlight the non-conference slate. A three-game stretch featuring Texas A&M in Arlington and Auburn and Mississippi State at home will be critical.

— Craig Thomas

2024 results

(7-6, 3-5 SEC)	
Arkansas-Pine Bluff.....	W, 70-0
at Oklahoma St.....	(2OT) L, 39-31
UAB.....	W, 37-27
at Auburn.....	W, 24-14
vs. Texas A&M	L, 21-17
Tennessee.....	W, 19-14
LSU	L, 34-10
at Mississippi St.	W, 58-25

Ole Miss: L, 63-31	
Texas.....	L, 20-10
Louisiana Tech	W, 35-14
at Missouri.....	L, 28-21
Liberty Bowl (Memphis)	
Texas Tech	W, 39-26

2025 schedule

Aug. 30.....	Alabama A&M
Sept. 6	vs. Arkansas St.
Sept. 13	at Ole Miss

Sept. 20	at Memphis
Sept. 27	Notre Dame
Oct. 11	at Tennessee
Oct. 18	vs. Texas A&M
Oct. 25	Auburn
Nov. 1	Mississippi St.
Nov. 15.....	at LSU
Nov. 22.....	at Texas
Nov. 29.....	Missouri
(Sept. 6 game in Little Rock. Oct. 18 game in Arlington, Texas.)	

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach's corner



Head coach: Mark Stoops
Record: 77-70 in 12 seasons
Age: 58
Hometown: Youngstown, Ohio
You don't say: Stoops' three bowl wins at UK are tied for most in team history with Rich Brooks and Paul "Bear" Bryant.
Coordinators: Bush Hamdan (offense), Brad White/Chris Collins (co-defense)

Info booth

Location: Lexington, Kentucky
Home: Kroger Field (61,000 capacity, first game 1973)
All-time record: 657-655-44
Mascots: Wildcat, Scratch
Band: Wildcat Marching Band
Last conference title game appearance: Never
Returning starters: 7 (3 offense, 4 defense)

Four-down territory

1. A step backward: Stoops remains one of the more-successful coaches in Kentucky's football history, but the vibes are off in Lexington. A 4-8 season marked by ugly losses to South Carolina, Florida and Louisville led some fans to wonder if it's time for a change (see Sumrall, Jon). A substantial buyout in Stoops' contract makes that unlikely for now, but the team has something to prove to its supporters.

2. Quarterback questions: Kentucky fans hope former Texas A&M/Auburn/Incarnate Word quarterback Zach Calzada can provide the offensive spark the team never seemed to get last year from Georgia quarterback Brock Vandagriff.



Receiver Ja'Mori Maclin and the Kentucky Wildcats will look to latch on to more passes this season. [ERIC GAY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

If it doesn't work with Calzada, the Cats might turn to Cutter Boley, a local product who was highly touted out of high school and had mixed results in a couple games late last year. An improved offensive line would help.

3. High-profile departures: Kentucky has lost some familiar faces beyond those who were out of eligibility. Ace recruiter Vince Marrow, who used connections in Ohio to upgrade Kentucky's talent level, left for an off-field role at Louisville. Kentucky's top two receivers — return specialist Barion Brown and Lexington product Dane Key — transferred to

LSU and Nebraska, respectively. Hardley Gilmore and Ja'Mori Maclin, whose brother Jeremy was a standout at Missouri and the NFL, might be the top pass-catching targets.

4. Motivated Mark: Having expressed frustration in the past over some of the challenges of managing the program, Stoops points to his track record at Kentucky and maintains he can return UK to the competitive standard it has had for most of his tenure. "You look at the history of what we've done, there's a lot of great ones that didn't make it very long. I'm proud of the run that we have,"

Stoops said. "I want to use last year for us to learn from and to grow from [it] and to get better and to get back to who we want to be."

Extra point

The Oct. 18 game against Texas will be the Longhorns' first trip to Lexington. The two previous meetings were Texas wins in Austin — last year and 1951.

Upset special

Cheer: Louisville. Thumped last year at home, Kentucky has won four straight road games in this series where — strangely — each team has a winning record in the other's stadium since the rivalry was renewed in 1994.

Jeer: Toledo. The idea of Kentucky opening with a loss is plausible enough that it's been a conversation piece among fans throughout the summer. The Cats should be fine, but a loss would dramatically turn up pressure on Stoops.

Quotebook

"First day of practice, they put a helmet on me and some shoulder pads. I said, this is not what I signed up for."

— senior linebacker Alex Afari, Jr., on learning American football as an 8-year-old living in Ghana

Crystal ball

5-7. As daunting as the schedule looks, Kentucky showed last year in a win at Ole Miss and near-stunner against Georgia it's capable of playing with good teams. But until Kentucky gets its offense sorted out, it's hard to predict bowl eligibility.

— Craig Thomas

2024 results

(4-8, 1-7 SEC)	
Southern Miss	W, 31-0
South Carolina.....	L, 31-6
Georgia.....	L, 13-12
Ohio	W, 41-6
at Ole Miss.....	W, 20-17

Vanderbilt.....	L, 20-13
at Florida	L, 48-20
Auburn	L, 24-10
at Tennessee.....	L, 28-18
Murray St.....	W, 48-6
at Texas	L, 31-14
Louisville.....	L, 41-14

2025 schedule

Aug. 30.....	Toledo
Sept. 6	Ole Miss
Sept. 13	Eastern Michigan
Sept. 27	at South Carolina
Oct. 4	at Georgia
Oct. 18	Texas

Oct. 25	at Tennessee
Nov. 1.....	Auburn
Nov. 8.....	Florida
Nov. 15.....	Tennessee Tech
Nov. 22.....	Vanderbilt
Nov. 29.....	at Louisville

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Coach's corner



Lebby

Head coach: Jeff Lebby
Record: 2-10 in 1 season
Age: 41
Hometown: Andrews, Texas

You don't say: Mississippi State has one of the toughest schedules in the nation, according to ESPN (No. 6), CBS Sports (No. 2) and Phil Steele (No. 2).

Coordinators: Jeff Lebby (offense), Coleman Hutzler (defense)

Info booth

Location: Starkville, Mississippi
Home: Davis Wade Stadium (61,337 capacity, first game 1914)
All-time record: 605-589-37
Mascot: Bully
Band: The Famous Maroon Band
Last conference title game appearance: 1998
Returning starters: 11 (6 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

- 1. Taking Shape(n):** It was tough 2024 for quarterback Blake Shapen. He was sidelined after a shoulder injury in the fourth game of the season. The Baylor transfer, who led the Bears to the Big 12 title game his last year there, is eager to get back into action. "I've never missed eight games before. Being back healthy is a blessing," he said.
- 2. Not all on him:** The head coach takes the brunt of criticism when things go bad. It couldn't have gone much worse for Lebby and the Bulldogs in 2024. Still, the players accept some responsibility, too. "The coaches can't go out there and play for us," safety Isaac Smith said. "It's up to us to execute the plays, and that's what we didn't do last year."



Mississippi State quarterback Blake Shapen is looking for a healthy and productive season after missing much of last year with a shoulder injury. [JAMES PUGH/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

3. Portal pickups: The Bulldogs return 11 starters from last season but also lost a big amount to graduation and the transfer portal. They also added some

key transfers, including receiver Brenen Thompson (Oklahoma), quarterback Luke Kromenhoek (Florida State) and linebacker Jalen Smith (Tennessee).

4. Offensive Fluff up: The offense needed some tweaking, and the Bulldogs did it by adding South Alabama running back Fluff Bothwell, who rushed for 832 yards with 13 TDs as a freshman. He adds an extra punch to the run game that returns Davon Booth, who was ninth in the SEC with 759 yards last season.

Extra point

Isaac Smith (127) and Stone Blanton (125) were No. 1 and No. 2, respectively, in the SEC for most tackles last season.

Upset special

- Cheer:** Ole Miss. On paper, it looks like a good scenario for the Bulldogs. Ole Miss lost several key pieces on offense while MSU should be much better defensively. And the game is in Starkville.
- Jeer:** Texas A&M. The Bulldogs kick off a brutal October with a road trip against the Aggies. A letdown could set the tone for a long rest of the season.

Quotebook

"We've got some guys out of the portal that's come in and is ready to work and compete. And I think we're going to surprise a lot of people this year defensively."

— safety Isaac Smith

Crystal ball

- 4-8:** The good news is MSU will be better than last season. The bad news is it won't be that much better. The schedule doesn't do any favors for a team trying to rebuild. There's a good chance for a fast start, but the back end of the schedule is too loaded.
- Edwin Stanton

2024 results

(2-10, 0-8 SEC)

Eastern Kentucky	W, 56-7
at Arizona St.	L, 30-23
Toledo	L, 41-17
Florida	L, 45-28
at Texas	L, 35-13

at Georgia	L, 41-31
Texas A&M	L, 34-24
Arkansas	L, 58-25
UMass	W, 45-20
at Tennessee	L, 33-14
Missouri	L, 39-20
at Ole Miss	L, 26-14

2025 schedule

Aug. 30	at Southern Miss
Sept. 6	Arizona St.
Sept. 13	Alcorn St.
Sept. 20	Northern Illinois
Sept. 27	Tennessee
Oct. 4	at Texas A&M

Oct. 18	at Florida
Oct. 25	Texas
Nov. 1	at Arkansas
Nov. 8	Georgia
Nov. 15	at Missouri
Nov. 28	Ole Miss

SOUTHWESTERN ATHLETIC CONFERENCE

Alabama A&M Bulldogs

Coach's corner



Shade

Head coach: Sam Shade
Record: first year at A&M, 18-15 in 3 years overall
Age: 52
Hometown: Birmingham
You don't say: Shade played on Alabama's 1992 national championship team.
Coordinators: Dennis Alexander (offense), Chris Shelling (defense)

Info booth

Location: Huntsville
Home: Louis Crews Stadium (21,000 capacity, first game 1996)
All-time record: 456-437-33
Mascot: Butch
Band: Maroon and White
Last conference title game appearance: 2021 spring
Returning starters: 8 (3 offense, 5 defense), though the school claims 18 on offense and 15 on defense.

Four-down territory

1. Standing in the Shade: Shade is a familiar name, having played on Alabama's 1992 national championship team and for eight seasons in the NFL. Shade was hired in late December to replace Connell Maynor, who was fired three days after last year's season finale. Shade came to A&M from Division II Miles, where he was 18-15 over three seasons. Miles won a conference title and advanced to the second round of the NCAA playoffs last year, losing to top-ranked Valdosta State. Before Miles, Shade was head coach at Pinson Valley High for two seasons, winning a



Offensive lineman Tyrell Lawrence is one of two Alabama A&M players to land preseason All-Southwestern Athletic Conference honors. [ALABAMA A&M ATHLETICS]

6A championship in 2020.
2. Brown back in force: Quarterback Cornelious Brown IV, after splitting so much time last season, appears to have the position to himself. Brown completed 57% of his passes for 1,666 yards and 12 touchdowns last year, while Xavier Lankford threw for 1,166 yards and eight scores. The Bulldogs were set to add 2,500-yard passer Mekhi Hagens from Arkansas-Pine Bluff, but dropped Hagens from the roster this summer, according to reports.

3. Oh, Canada: Offensive lineman Tyrell Lawrence, a preseason second-team All-SWAC pick, is a 6-7, 355-pound senior who began his college career at Minnesota. He's also from Ontario. Defensive lineman Nick Glenn is A&M's only other preseason All-SWAC pick.
4. Hello, old friends: Shade's coaching staff includes two names well known from time in the area. Linebackers coach Ronald McKinnon is one of the all-time greats at the University of North Alabama. Laron White, who is Shade's chief

of staff, is a Courtland native, was an Alabama teammate of Shade's and coached two championship teams at Tanner.

Extra point

Of the 33 returning offensive and defense starters that A&M lists, 12 did not start a game last season and six started only one, according to the team's own participation chart. The NCAA does not define what a returning starter is, which allows schools — such as A&M, in this case — to claim to have more returning starters than are allowed to take the field for any given play.

Upset special

Cheer: Alabama State. A&M has lost two straight Magic City Classics and last dropped three straight 30 years ago.
Jeer: Texas Southern. If the Bulldogs are staring at another losing season when they head to Houston, motivation may be fleeting.

Quotebook

"Every day is a great day to be an Alabama A&M Bulldog, and I am so proud to be one. The chase is on. Let's go hunt, and Go, Bulldogs."

— Shade when he was hired

Crystal ball

4-8: With the astounding, unprecedented amount of returning starters that festoon the A&M roster, dominance should be expected. Of course, those claimed 33 returning starters are back from a team that cost their coach his job.

— A. Stacy Long

2024 results

(6-6, 4-4 SWAC)
at Auburn..... L, 73-3
Kentucky St. W, 49-7
Georgetown (Ky.) W, 24-16
at Austin Peay L, 59-16
vs. Jackson St. L, 45-38
Bethune-Cookman..... W, 56-12
vs. Alabama St..... L, 27-19

Southern..... L, 25-20
at Arkansas-Pine Bluff..... W, 52-24
Grambling St. W, 22-17
at Miss. Valley St. W, 49-35
at Florida A&M L, 28-20

2025 schedule

Aug. 30..... at Arkansas
Sept. 6..... Alcorn St.
Sept. 13 at Tennessee St.

Sept. 20 Lane
Sept. 27 at Bethune-Cookman
Oct. 4 vs. Jackson St.
Oct. 11 Mississippi Valley St.
Oct. 25 vs. Alabama St.
Nov. 1..... at Grambling St.
Nov. 8..... Prairie View A&M
Nov. 15..... Florida A&M
Nov. 22..... at Texas Southern
(Oct. 4 game in Mobile. Oct. 25 game in Birmingham.)

CONFERENCE USA

Jacksonville State Gamecocks

Coach's corner



Head coach: Charles Kelly
Record: First year
Age: 57
Hometown: Ozark
You don't say: Kelly has had numerous high-profile stops during his 35 years as a coach, including Alabama, Auburn, Florida State, Tennessee, Colorado and Georgia Tech.
Coordinators: Clint Trickett (offense), Brian Williams (defense)

Info booth

Location: Jacksonville
Home: Burgess-Snow Field at JSU Stadium (24,000 capacity, first game 1947)
All-time record: 592-372-4
Mascot: Cocky
Band: Marching Southerners
Last conference title game appearance: never
Returning starters: N/A

Four-down territory

1. New sheriff in town: Kelly takes over as head coach after Rich Rodriguez left for West Virginia. Kelly brings a wealth of experience to the Gamecocks, most recently as an assistant at Auburn. In 2023, he was named 247Sports national recruiter of the year. Kelly has coached for Nick Saban, Hugh Freeze and Deion Sanders, among others. That's a pretty good pedigree to bring to Jacksonville State.
2. Transfer portal steal, Part I? The Gamecocks might have gotten a steal out of the transfer portal when TCU running back Cam Cook joined the program. Cook led TCU in rushing a year ago with 460 yards and nine touchdowns. He's expected to be a main cog in the



Cam Cook, who led TCU in rushing last year, will make his moves for Jacksonville State this season.
[TONY GUTIERREZ/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Gamecocks' offense and, with more carries, should approach 1,000 yards this season.
3. Transfer portal steal, Part II? Safety Trevor Woods joins the Gamecocks after four seasons at Colorado, where Kelly was his position coach in 2023. Woods had a solid career with the Buffaloes, where he played in 33 games with 168 tackles, three interceptions, three forced fumbles, and 10 pass breakups. He's a

welcome addition to the defense.
4. New coordinators: Trickett comes in as the offensive coordinator where he will get to work alongside his father, Rick. Trickett was at Georgia Southern a year ago and will also work with quarterbacks and tight ends. Williams comes to Jacksonville State after serving as Maryland's defensive coordinator for the past three seasons. He also has a previous stint at UAB.

Extra point

Very few players spend their entire career at one place, and Kelly tapped into the portal to add a few players with several previous schools on their resumes. New QB Gavin Wimsatt (Rutgers/Kentucky), DT Khurtiss Perry (Alabama/Virginia Tech) and DB Tre'Quon Fegans (Alabama/Southern Cal/Central Florida) are now on the roster.

Upset special

Cheer: Liberty. A lot of upsets happen early in the season. Even though the JSU program has undergone a transformation since Rodriguez left for West Virginia, an early win over CUSA favorite Liberty would be massive as the Gamecocks try to repeat as conference champs.
Jeer: Western Kentucky. The Gamecocks went 1-1 against the Hilltoppers a year ago with a regular-season loss and a championship game drubbing. This game could decide which team wins the regular-season title and a home loss could relegate the Gamecocks to third or fourth place.

Quotebook

"We want to play fast, but we can't make mistakes. The biggest thing we are emphasizing is no pre-snap penalties and take care of the football."

— Kelly

Crystal ball

9-3: There's been lots of turnover, but JSU has established itself as a top-tier program. Look for the Gamecocks to lose to UCF, Liberty and Western Kentucky, but that's it.

— Gregg Dewalt

2024 results

(9-5, 7-1 CUSA)

Coastal Carolina	L, 55-27
at Louisville	L, 49-14
at Eastern Michigan	L, 37-34
Southern Miss	W, 44-7
at Kennesaw St.	W, 63-24
New Mexico St.	W, 54-13

Middle Tennessee	W, 42-40
at Liberty	W, 31-21
at Louisiana Tech	(OT) W, 44-37
Florida International	W, 34-31
Sam Houston	W, 21-11
at Western Kentucky	L, 19-17
CUSA championship	
Western Kentucky	W, 52-12

Cure Bowl (Orlando, Fla.) vs. Ohio	L, 30-27
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2025 schedule

Aug. 28	at Central Florida
Sept. 6	Liberty
Sept. 13	at Georgia Southern
Sept. 20	Murray St.

Sept. 27	at Southern Miss
Oct. 9	at Sam Houston
Oct. 15	Delaware
Oct. 29	at Middle Tennessee
Nov. 8	at UTEP
Nov. 15	Kennesaw St.
Nov. 22	at Florida International
Nov. 29	Western Kentucky

AMERICAN CONFERENCE

UAB Blazers

Coach's corner



Dilfer

Head coach: Trent Dilfer
Record: 7-17 in 2 years
Age: 53
Hometown: Santa Cruz, California
You don't say: The Blazers are 57-43 since their two-year hiatus.
Coordinators: Alex Mortensen (offense), Steve Russ (defense)

Info booth

Location: Birmingham
Home: Protective Stadium (47,100 capacity, first game 2021)
All-time record: 176-196-2
Mascot: Blaze
Band: Marching Blazers
Last conference title game appearance:

2020
Returning starters: 3 (2 offense, 1 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Riding QB Kitna: Quarterback Jalen Kitna was an eight-game starter last year and finished with 2,209 yards with 17 touchdowns and 11 interceptions. His 404 yards and six touchdowns against Tulsa helped the Blazers snap a six-game losing streak last year. Kitna started his college career at Florida but left after two seasons. He's the son of Jon Kitna, who played 14 NFL seasons and threw for almost 30,000 yards, 10,000 more than Dilfer in his 14 NFL seasons.

2. Bryant on an island: Safety Sirad Bryant is UAB's only returning defensive starter, though a major overhaul was in store after last year's matador-style effort. The Blazers gave up an average of almost 394 yards per game to rank 94th in the nation. Bryant played in every game last year, starting



UAB quarterback Jalen Kitna, when not throwing for 2,200 yards last year, had trouble staying upright. The Blazers gave up 32 sacks. [KELLY SHEEHAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

10, and was third on the team with 60 tackles.

3. Delange hits spot: Kicker Jonah Delange was last season's American Conference special teams player of the year. He was 21-of-24 on field goals, including 2-of-2 from at least 50 yards. Delange hit the offseason in a slump, missing his final two kicks of the season at Charlotte (35 and 27 yards).

4. Bye, bye, Beebe: The Blazers would have had a nice running complement to

Kitna, but Lee Beebe absconded to Indiana. Beebe ran for 884 yards and seven touchdowns last year. The rest of the Blazers racked up 690 yards and two rushing touchdowns.

Extra point

The Blazers have 48 new players on their roster, a new defensive coordinator and five more new defensive assistant coaches.

Upset special

Cheer: Memphis? The Tigers have had a scorched-earth policy of late against the Blazers, scoring at least 45 points each of the last three meetings. At least the teams have a cool rivalry name: the Battle of the Bones.

Jeer: Hard to find due to the state of the program. How about Rice? After going to UConn, UAB will be making a second straight lengthy trip when the Blazers visit the Owls.

Quotebook

"I think (fans) should be disappointed, I don't think anybody is more disappointed than I am, but it is a new team. ... I think we did a lot of soul searching in the offseason — I know I did — and tried to attack this season with a different plan."

— Dilfer

Crystal ball

3-9: The Blazers had so much momentum in the Bill Clark days. Once a laughingstock, pre-hiatus, UAB had five straight winning seasons after its return. With Dilfer, the Blazers are back to barely distracting fans from basketball.

— A. Stacy Long

2024 results

(3-9, 2-6 American)

Alcorn St.	W, 41-3
at Louisiana-Monroe	L, 32-6
at Arkansas	L, 37-27
Navy	L, 41-18
Tulane	L, 71-20

at Army	L, 44-10
at South Florida	L, 35-25
Tulsa	W, 59-21
UConn	L, 31-23
at Memphis	L, 53-18
Rice	W, 40-14
at Charlotte	L, 29-27

2025 schedule

Aug. 28	Alabama St.
Sept. 6	at Navy
Sept. 13	Akron
Sept. 20	at Tennessee
Oct. 4	Army
Oct. 11	at Florida Atlantic

Oct. 18	Memphis
Nov. 1	at UConn
Nov. 8	at Rice
Nov. 15	North Texas
Nov. 22	South Florida
Nov. 29	at Tulsa

SUN BELT CONFERENCE

Troy Trojans

Coach's corner

Head coach: Gerad Parker
Record: 4-8 in 1 year, 4-14 overall
Age: 44
Hometown: Louisa, Kentucky



Parker

You don't say: Troy had a 1,000-yard rusher and 1,000-yard receiver last season for just the third time in school history.
Coordinators: Sean Reagan (offense), Dontae Wright (defense)

Info booth

Location: Troy
Home: Veterans Memorial Stadium (30,000 capacity, first game 1950)
All-time record: 580-438-29
Mascot: T-Roy
Band: Sound of the South
Last conference title game appearance: 2023
Returning starters: 11 (5 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory

1. QB questions: After Matthew Caldwell turned in his Troy T for Texas, the Trojans have a quarterback conundrum. Goose Crowder and Tucker Kilcrease combined for 919 yards and eight touchdowns last year. Crowder was the starter going into last seasons before injuries derailed his season after 11 quarters. Kilcrease, due to injuries to Caldwell, started twice and played in seven games.
2. Taylor made (out): Damien Taylor, after crossing 1,000 yards rushing last season, crossed state lines, fleeing Troy for Ole Miss. His 1,010 was the 13th 1,000-yard effort in school history, though he only scored seven times. The



Goose Crowder is expected to again get his hands on Troy's starting quarterback job after starting twice last season. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Trojans have had a 1,000-yard rusher each of the last three years after Kimani Vidal totaled a school-record 1,661 in 2023 and 1,132 in 2022.
3. Ross hits road: Receiver Devonte Ross, Troy's biggest star last year, cashed in his big season with a ticket to Happy Valley. He's now at Penn State following a 76-catch, 1,043-yard season. His 11 touchdown catches led the Sun Belt and ranked fifth nationally.
4. Rough start: Troy's atrocious start

last year led to a late-season surge that stoked optimism, at least before the portal struck with a vengeance. The Trojans lost seven of their first eight with the victory coming over FCS Florida A&M. But, in the month of November, Troy ranked 19th in the nation in offense and 25th in defense, winning three of its final four games.
Extra point
Troy has an \$11.6 million indoor

practice facility that is scheduled to open this season. Plans called for 88,000 square feet and a fully covered 120-yard turf field. The most-recent major foot-ball-related construction at Troy was its stadium north end zone project that opened in 2018.
Upset special
Cheer: South Alabama. Troy had dominated the series in recent years before last season's hiccup. Both teams have major portal-inflicted questions to answer early this year.
Jeer: Louisiana-Monroe. ULM has been the dregs of the Sun Belt, recording all of one winning season this century (2012). The Warhawks, however, were 5-7 last year in Bryant Vincent's first season as coach, a three-win improvement over 2023. It included a win at Troy.

Quotebook

"I am way more comfortable knowing what my job is. ... Now, it's I know you, you know me. I know the staff, they know me. ... We know our team, they know us."

— Parker comparing last year to this year

Crystal ball

5-7: With all the high-profile departures, it's hard to see the Trojans enjoying a turnaround, though they should have a more-healthy beginning to the season than last year. Parker's four-win rookie season was the weakest by a first-year Troy coach since Neal Brown's 4-8 2015. Brown's Trojans went 31-8 over the following three seasons.
— A. Stacy Long

2024 results

(4-8, 3-5 Sun Belt)	
Nevada	L, 28-26
at Memphis	L, 38-17
at Iowa	L, 38-21
Florida A&M	W, 34-12
Louisiana-Monroe	L, 13-9

Texas St.	L, 38-17
at South Alabama	L, 25-9
at Arkansas St.	L, 34-31
Coastal Carolina	W, 38-24
at Georgia Southern	W, 28-20
at Louisiana-Lafayette	L, 51-30
Southern Miss	W, 52-20

2025 schedule

Aug. 30	Nicholls
Sept. 6	at Clemson
Sept. 13	Memphis
Sept. 20	at Buffalo
Oct. 4	South Alabama
Oct. 11	at Texas St.

Oct. 18	at Louisiana-Monroe
Oct. 25	Louisiana-Lafayette
Nov. 1	Arkansas St.
Nov. 13	at Old Dominion
Nov. 22	Georgia St.
Nov. 29	at Southern Miss

SUN BELT CONFERENCE

South Alabama Jaguars

Coach's corner



Head coach: Major Applewhite
Record: 7-6 in 1 year at USA, 22-17 in 3 years overall
Age: 47
Hometown: Baton Rouge, Louisiana

You don't say: Applewhite drew a B grade from College Football Network when it graded last year's rookie head coaches.

Coordinators: Paul Petrino (offense), Will Windham (defense)

Info booth

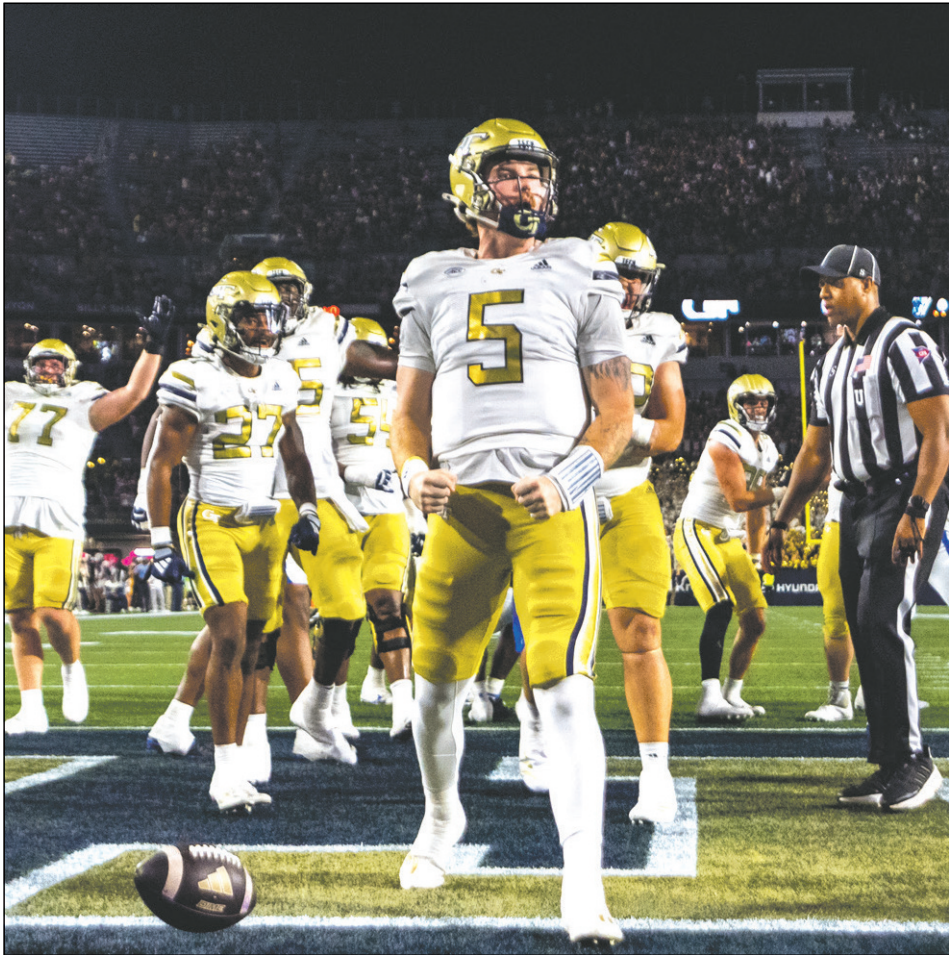
Location: Mobile
Home: Hancock Whitney Stadium (24,450 capacity, first game 2020)
All-time record: 90-98
Mascot: SouthPaw
Band: Jaguar Marching Band
Last conference title game appearance: never

Returning starters: 6 (4 offense, 2 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Portal giveth: Zach Pyron is expected to take over as South Alabama's quarterback after joining the Jags from Georgia Tech. Pyron played three seasons for the Yellow Jackets, including in 10 games with four starts last season. Transferring is nothing new for Pyron, who won high school state titles at Fyffe as a freshman and a sophomore and at Pinson Valley as a junior.

2. Portal taketh away: Pyron's opportunity comes after Gio Lopez departed South Alabama for the sky-bluer pastures of North Carolina. Lopez threw for a tawdry 2,559 yards last year,



Zach Pyron, after three seasons at Georgia Tech, hopes to find success at South Alabama. [JASON ALLEN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

completing 66% of his passes for 18 touchdowns against five interceptions. He was also USA's third-leading rusher at 465 yards and seven TDs.

3. Portal taketh again: Kentrel Bullock and Fluff Bothwell tied for USA's team rushing lead last year. They won't tie this season. Bothwell, after starring

for the Jags as a freshman, now suits up for the Mississippi State Bulldogs. That leaves Bullock, who had 41 more carries last year, to shoulder a heavier load. The two each had 832 yards a season ago with Bothwell scoring 13 times and Bullock seven.

4. Just Blayne good: Junior linebacker

Blayne Myrick is the Sun Belt Conference's preseason defensive player of the year. He racked up 101 tackles last season, reaching double figures in five games, including a career-high 13 at Arkansas State. His tackle total was the highest for the Jags in seven years.

Extra point

Last year's top two receivers, Jamaal Pritchett and Jeremiah Webb, both signed NFL free agent contracts this spring. They combined for 127 of USA's 154 catches last year, 1,775 of its 3,163 receiving yards, and 14 of its 21 passing TDs.

Upset special

Cheer: Tulane. In so doing, the Jags can help Mobile gain Mardi Gras bragging rights over New Orleans.

Jeer: Troy. South snapped a six-game losing streak to the Trojans last year in what's called the Battle of the Belt and hasn't won at Troy since 2017.

Quotebook

"Lost a lot in the portal. We lost 19 players to the portal from December all the way through the spring portal window, 11 of those starters. Do the math. We lost half of our starters and a few more lost to graduation and the NFL. ... Big shoes to fill."

— Applewhite

Crystal ball

6-7: The Jags again join a large Sun Belt bowl-bound contingent (the league sent eight to a bowl last year) but lose in the postseason.

— A. Stacy Long

2024 results

(7-6, 5-3 Sun Belt)

North Texas.....	L, 52-38
at Ohio U.....	L, 27-20
Northwestern St.....	W, 87-10
at Appalachian St.....	W, 48-14
at LSU.....	L, 42-10

at Arkansas St.....	L, 18-16
Troy.....	W, 25-9
Louisiana-Monroe.....	W, 46-17
Georgia Southern.....	L, 34-30
at Louisiana-Lafayette.....	W, 24-22
at Southern Miss.....	W, 35-14
Texas St.....	L, 45-38
Salute to Veterans Bowl (Montgomery)	

vs. Western Michigan..... W, 30-23

2025 schedule

Aug. 30.....	Morgan St.
Sept. 6.....	Tulane
Sept. 13.....	at Auburn
Sept. 20.....	Coastal Carolina
Sept. 27.....	at North Texas

Oct. 4.....	at Troy
Oct. 14.....	Arkansas St.
Oct. 23.....	at Georgia St.
Nov. 1.....	Louisiana-Lafayette
Nov. 15.....	at Louisiana-Monroe
Nov. 22.....	Southern Miss
Nov. 29.....	at Texas St.



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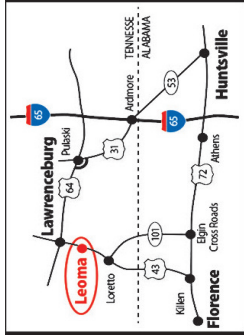
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