

GAMEDAY



2026 COLLEGE FOOTBALL

While Tide seeks playoff success, Tigers hope Golesh is the answer

TAILGATE of the week RECIPE

Brought to you by Story & Lee!

Mama's Baked Beans

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 lb. ground beef
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 1 bell pepper, finely chopped
- 1 22 oz. can Van Camps Pork N Beans
- 2 cup ketchup
- 1/2 cup brown sugar

DIRECTIONS:

Saute onion and bell pepper for three - four minutes, add ground beef, and cook until no pin in meat. Add ketchup and brown sugar, mix well, add beans. Pour into baking dish, top with more ketchup to taste. Bake 2 hours at 350 degrees.



This week's recipe submitted by Carolyn Brown, Muscle Shoals, AL

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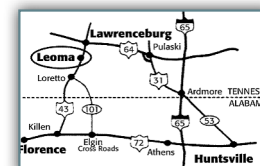
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COLUMN

Rugged SEC again will be in CFP hunt

By Doug Segrest
For GameDay

There's a new sheriff on The Plains. Meanwhile, the coach Auburn expected to land as Hugh Freeze's replacement is now expected to work wonders at Florida.

And the Lane Train has departed Oxford for bigger expectations in Baton Rouge. Lane Kiffin returns Sept. 19 for one of the season's most intriguing matchups against his former employer.

Think it's hard to tell the players without a program? To understand the SEC in 2026, you may need a spreadsheet just to track the CEOs.

Alex Golesh at Auburn. Jon Sumrall at Florida. Lane Kiffin at LSU. And we're only halfway through the roll call of new blood. Will Stein left Oregon to elevate Kentucky's aspirations. Ryan Silverfield improved Memphis and now faces the challenge of rebuilding Arkansas.

Then there's Pete Golding, who begins his first full season as Ole Miss' head coach. He's a first-year coach with an asterisk after guiding the Rebels through three College Football Playoff games last season.

Want more chaos? The SEC moves to a nine-game conference schedule, meaning 9-3 may become the new 11-1.

By November, critics will argue the SEC is overrated as multiple three-loss teams vie for at-large College Football Playoff berths against programs with cleaner records but weaker schedules.

That's a debate for another day. For now, it's time to set realistic expectations for the season ahead.

Championship Tier

Georgia: While everyone else rebuilds, Kirby Smart is still reloading. But road trips to a pair of archrivals, Alabama and Ole Miss, represent the biggest obstacles for a program that rarely gets surprised.

Texas: Arch Manning is back and the roster is loaded. One of the more favorable schedules, by SEC standards, makes the Longhorns a legitimate national championship contender.

CFP tier

Ole Miss: Golding inherits arguably the nation's top returning quarterback and running back. The Rebels look like



New Auburn coach Alex Golesh, after exiting the plane and taking the job with the Tigers, will try to improve things on the Plains. [AUSTIN PERRYMAN/AUBURN ATHLETICS]

a serious College Football Playoff contender if they can keep the train running smoothly.

LSU: Talk about expectations. LSU fans expect a national title contender right out of the gate. But the Tigers face three CFP contenders in the first month and could be battered by October. If not, look out.

Alabama: The Tide's roster is loaded with talent. The question is whether Kalen DeBoer's third team can become significantly more physical, particularly on offense. The first half of the schedule sets up favorably, but October and November are unforgiving.

In or out?

Texas A&M: What is there to doubt about Mike Elko's program? The Aggies have a playmaking quarterback and enough talent to contend. But the closing stretch could burst the bubble.

Oklahoma: Most observers put the Sooners in the contender category. But a brutal finish could prove fatal. Keeping John Mateer healthy will be paramount.

Tennessee: Many have already written off the Vols. But a new quarterback should have time to develop. The schedule only turns treacherous down the stretch.

Bowl bound

Florida: How quickly can Sumrall change a culture that has frustrated Gators fans for nearly a decade? We'll find out early.

Auburn: Golesh brought his South Florida quarterback and other key pieces to help build on together a roster that improved under Freeze.

Missouri: All Eli Drinkwitz does is produce double-digit wins and flirt with CFP contention. Yet the Tigers still don't get respect.

South Carolina: There's no doubt Shane Beamer enters the season under pressure. Even so, South Carolina has shown an ability to challenge anyone.

Vanderbilt: Diego Pavia is gone, and many are treating Vanderbilt like the Commodores of old. Not so fast. Vanderbilt has resources to invest.

Wait 'til next year

At Kentucky, Stein may be brash, but he needs more talent. At Mississippi State, Jeff Leiby has a major non-conference win but little to show in the SEC. And at Arkansas, Silverfield faces a longer transition to respectability. Expect improvement, but no bowl date.

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

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Alabama Crimson Tide

Coach's corner



Head coach: Kalen DeBoer

Record: 20-8 in 2 seasons at Alabama, 124-20 in 11 seasons overall

Age: 51
Hometown: Milbank, South Dakota

You don't say: DeBoer has a 20-6 record against top-25 teams in his six seasons as an FBS head coach (Fresno State, Washington and Alabama). Five of those wins came last season.

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

Info booth

Location: Tuscaloosa
Home: Bryant-Denny Stadium (100,077 capacity, first game 1929)
All-time record: 999-319-42
Mascot: Big Al
Band: Million Dollar Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2025

Returning starters: 5 (1 offense, 4 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Running on empty: It was no secret the run game was abysmal last season. The Crimson Tide was 123rd in the nation, averaging 104 yards per game. The 3.4 yards per carry is program's worst in almost 30 years. Much of the blame was directed at the offensive line. Adrian Klemm was hired in the offseason to replace Chris Kapilovic as offensive line coach. He's got the experience needed, having coached the offensive



Zabien Brown is one reason Alabama may have one of the best secondaries in the nation this season. [NATE BILLINGS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

line in the NFL with Pittsburgh and New England, and in college at Oregon and UCLA. Michael Carroll is the lone line-man with experience back this season. UA added transfers Jayvin James (RT) and Racin Delgatty (C). "Hopefully we

can find a group here in fall camp that really gels well together, is the best unit as a whole," DeBoer said.

2. It's crowded in here: One area the Crimson Tide doesn't have questions about is the secondary. Led by returning starters Zabien Brown and Bray Hubbard, along with Keon Sabb, Dijon Lee and Red Morgan, it's safe to say the Tide fields one of the best defensive backfields in the country. The Tide also has transfer Carmelo O'Neal, Ivan Taylor, Xavier Mincey, Dre Kirkpatrick Jr., Chuck McDonald III, Jireh Edwards, Jordan Edmonds. So the good news is the Tide is loaded with talent and depth. The bad news is how to make everyone happy with playing time. "We play players," defensive coordinator Kane Wommack said. "We play a lot of players. We don't

just play 11 guys." The opportunities will be there for the backups, it's just a matter of what they do with it when it comes.

3. Under the microscope: No pressure or anything, but five of the Tide's recent starting QBs were selected in the top three rounds of the NFL draft, including three first-rounders. First things first, though. The starting job is between Austin Mack and Keelon Russell. Mack has followed a similar path as Ty Simpson, last year's starter and first-round pick by the Rams, waiting in the wings for his shot after a couple of years as a backup. Russell is the five-star recruit who has all the awards from high school and took some snaps as a freshman last year. DeBoer was no help in saying which

2025 results

(11-4, 7-1 SEC)					
at Florida St.	L, 31-17	Eastern Illinois	W, 56-0	Sept. 12	at Kentucky
Louisiana-Monroe	W, 73-0	at Auburn	W, 27-20	Sept. 19	Florida St.
Wisconsin	W, 38-14	SEC championship (Atlanta)		Sept. 26	South Carolina
at Georgia	W, 24-21	Georgia	L, 28-7	Oct. 3	at Mississippi St.
Vanderbilt	W, 30-14	CFP first round		Oct. 10	Georgia
at Missouri	W, 27-24	at Oklahoma	W, 34-24	Oct. 17	at Tennessee
Tennessee	W, 37-20	Rose Bowl, CFP quarterfinals		Oct. 24	Texas A&M
at South Carolina	W, 29-22	(Pasadena, Calif.)		Nov. 7	at LSU
LSU	W, 20-9	Indiana	L, 38-3	Nov. 14	at Vanderbilt
Oklahoma	L, 23-21			Nov. 21	Chattanooga
				Nov. 28	Auburn

2026 schedule

Sept. 5	East Carolina
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Austin Mack, who saw lots of playing time in last year's season-ending Rose Bowl loss to Indiana, is a candidate to be Alabama's starter. [KYUSUNG GONG/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

ALABAMA

From Page G4

one had the edge. "Both of them are more than capable. I think they're high-level, elite quarterbacks. It's going to be a competition that's going to lead to a tough decision, one we're fortunate to have."

4. Lingering shadow: Ray Perkins had to deal with it, and he made it four seasons. Now DeBoer is in his third season of following a coaching legend at Alabama. While the results have not been terrible, the pressure continues to mount. Perkins went 32-15-1 in his four seasons following Paul "Bear" Bryant. DeBoer is 20-8 with a playoff appearance, an SEC title game appearance and two Iron Bowl wins. Yet, the constant reminders about Nick Saban are everywhere. For the players, it's business as usual. "We're not really worried about the outside noise," Brown said. "I love playing for coach DeBoer. He's a great person. He's a great leader. Our success is tribute to him, really. He's just one of those people that you just want to play for. When he talks before the game, you can't wait to go out there."

Extra point

The Crimson Tide has been ranked in the preseason top 10 since 2009. Alabama starts the season ranked No. 13 in the preseason AP poll, making this the first time in 18 seasons the Tide won't

begin the season in the top 10. In 2008, Alabama started No. 24, rose to as high as No. 1 and finished No. 6.

Game of the year

vs. Georgia. Seems like every game between these two has some kind of drama, except for the last one. The Tide has a slight advantage with the game in Tuscaloosa, but Alabama will need more than an enthusiastic fan base to topple the Bulldogs. A win here sets the table for the rest of the season.

Quotebook

"I certainly know that's an important part of what's happened in the program, so wouldn't doubt if that's the case. I'm not focused on that. I'm focused on just helping or program be the best and trying to bring out best and raise the level of everyone around me, from coaching staff to our players; trying to maximize what we're capable every single day."

— DeBoer, on whether his Alabama career will be defined by winning a national title

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 12-3. The path is there to reach the semifinals. OK, the path has boulder-sized obstacles and is filled with potholes deeper than Texas NIL pockets, but the path is there.

Worst-case scenario: 10-3. Most schools would gladly take a 10-win



Michael Carroll is the only experienced player returning on Alabama's much-maligned offensive line. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]



Bray Hubbard and Keon Sabb are expected to be among the stars in Alabama's secondary. [COLIN HUBBARD/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

season. At Alabama, that kind of finish, even with a playoff spot, might have DeBoer thinking about looking for a job out west.

— Edwin Stanton

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SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Auburn Tigers

Coach's corner



Golesh

You don't say: Golesh was born in Moscow, Russia. In August 1991, a coup was staged to oust Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. A month later, when Golesh was 7, his family fled the Soviet Union and settled in Brooklyn, New York, and eventually Dublin, Ohio.

Coordinators: Joel Gordon (offense), DJ Durkin (defense)

Info booth

Location: Auburn
Home: Jordan-Hare Stadium (87,451 capacity, first game 1939)
All-time record: 783-473-43
Mascot: Aubie
Band: Auburn University Marching Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2017
Returning starters: 4 (1 offense, 3 defense)

Four downs

1. Perfect fit: The quarterback situation has been a hot mess the last few years. Five different starters in five seasons, all with losing records. Of course, there have been five different coordinators during that stretch, and the Tigers are on their third head coach, too. But Golesh brought Byrum Brown with him from South Florida, along with 12 other Bulls players. Some



Auburn kicker Alex McPherson will look to add to his career 40-of-45 field-goal and 87-for-87 extra-point efforts this season. [BUTCH DILL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

refer to Brown as Cam Newton 2.0. At 6-foot-3, 232 pounds, the dual-threat Brown is just what the Tigers need at a position plagued by mediocrity. The stats back up the hype. Brown had 42

touchdowns last season (28 passing, 14 rushing) with 4,166 yards of total offense. "Byrum Brown is one of the best quarterbacks in the country, and he's shown that over the years," Golesh said. "What has to happen for Byrum is he's just got to continue to be him every single day."

2. Here we go again: Another season, another Auburn head coach. It's not quite that bad, but the Tigers are on their third head coach since 2021. Auburn hopes Golesh is the man to get the program out of the gutter and into contention. His 23-15 record at USF in three years isn't too impressive, but Golesh's offensive success can't be

ignored. The USF offense ranked second in the nation in total offense (501.7 yards per game) and fourth in scoring (43 points per game) in 2025. That's the criteria Auburn needs for an offense that ranked 77th in total offense (374 yards) and 73rd in scoring (27 points) last season. "He demands the absolute very best from everyone that he comes in contact with," Brown said. "He cares for his players deeply, coaches deeply. He's not going to ask you to do anything that he wouldn't do himself."

3. No worries: While the offense gets to work learning another system under

2025 results

(5-7, 1-7 SEC)
at Baylor W, 38-24
Ball State W, 42-3
South Alabama W, 31-15
at Oklahoma L, 24-17
at Texas A&M L, 16-10
Georgia L, 20-10
Missouri (2OT) L, 23-17
at Arkansas W, 33-24

Kentucky L, 10-3
at Vanderbilt (OT) L, 45-38
Mercer W, 62-17
Alabama L, 27-20

2026 schedule

Sept. 5 vs. Baylor
Sept. 12 Southern Miss
Sept. 19 Florida
Sept. 26 Vanderbilt

Oct. 3 at Tennessee
Oct. 17 at Georgia
Oct. 24 LSU
Oct. 31 at Ole Miss
Nov. 7 Arkansas
Nov. 14 at Mississippi St.
Nov. 21 Samford
Nov. 28 at Alabama
(Sept. 5 game in Atlanta.)



Linebacker Xavier Atkins is the only player who landed first-team preseason All-SEC honors. [DAVID GRAY/AUBURN ATHLETICS]

AUBURN

From Page G6

a new coach, the defense shouldn't miss a beat. Despite losing some key players, the returners and backups under Durkin make the Tigers one of the strongest units in the SEC. It's a good thing because Auburn will lean on the defense heavily the first few games while the offense finds its footing. The Tigers were 29th in the nation in total defense and 34th in scoring defense. The defense was also 11th in run defense. "He's the heartbeat of our defense," defensive back Champ Anthony said of Durkin. "He's a guy who motivates us day in and day out. No matter what, he's the same person, he's the same man. You have to commemorate a man like that, because in college football you don't see a lot of real men like that. It's fun playing for Coach Durk."

4. Rough road ahead: The Tigers open the season with Baylor in Atlanta, but have three straight home games afterward, including two SEC games. Then there is October. Auburn hits the road against Tennessee and Georgia, is at home for LSU and back out on the road for Ole Miss. It's a gauntlet of a schedule, but one of opportunity. If Auburn can come away with three wins during that stretch, the season shapes up to be better than expected. Golesh's reaction? Bring it on. "We feel like we're set up to have one of the best schedules in the country and an incredibly tough slate to get through for the year that we're beyond excited about," he said. "I get giddy thinking about starting football."

Extra point

Auburn is trying to avoid something that hasn't happened since 1950. By the way, that's the year the Peanuts cartoon debuted, gas cost 27 cents a gallon and the average price for a home was just over seven grand. A losing season would give the Tigers five straight, which was last done from 1946-50.

Game of the year

vs. Florida. What Auburn needs more than anything is to start the SEC slate with confidence. No better way to do that with a win here in the third game of the season. Auburn should be 2-0 heading into this one and this sets the table for the rest of the SEC schedule, which has five road games.

Quotebook

"I have tried the famous lemonade. It's phenomenal. I got the slush. The slush was really good at Toomer's Corner."

— Brown on the lemonade from Toomer's Drugs

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 9-4. Anything above .500 will be met with praise. A winning SEC record might get Golesh a pay raise. A nine-win season could get the first-year coach a statue outside Jordan-Hare Stadium.

Worst-case scenario: 6-7. Would Auburn fans be happy with a six-win season? How about with a bowl appearance? What if one of those wins is against Alabama? If the answer is no, well, golf season will be here before you know it.

— Edwin Stanton



Quarterback Byrum Brown, after 4,166 yards of total offense and 42 touchdowns, followed coach Alex Golesh from South Florida to Auburn. [GEORGE WALKER IV/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]



Champ Anthony and Auburn's defense didn't face as much upheaval over the offseason after defensive coordinator DJ Durkin stayed on staff. [STEW MILNE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach's corner



Heupel

Head coach: Josh Heupel
Record: 45-20 in 5 seasons at Tennessee, 73-28 in 8 years overall
Age: 48
Hometown: Aberdeen, South Dakota
You don't say: In four years at UT, Heupel has two 10-win seasons. The Vols haven't had a coach do that since the Phil Fulmer era. Tennessee had one 10-win season from 2005 until 2021, Heupel's second year.
Coordinators: Joey Halzle (offense), Jim Knowles (defense)

Info booth

Location: Knoxville
Home: Neyland Stadium (101,915 capacity, first game 1921)
All-time record: 882-420-53
Mascot: Smokey
Band: Pride of the Southland Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2007
Returning starters: 9 (6 offense, 3 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Get on the same page: It's no secret the offense was one of the best in the country. The Vols were sixth in the nation in scoring (40 points per game) and passing (293 yards), and seventh in total offense (466 yards). It didn't matter because the defense was allowing points as quick as the offense could score them. UT ranked 73rd in rushing defense (152 yards) and 91st in scoring defense (29 points) and yards allowed (397 yards) while coming in at 112th in the country in pass defense (244 yards). That prompted



Tennessee running back DeSean Bishop scored enough points last season, but the defense watched a lot of points get scored, too. [GEORGE WALKER IV/ THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

a change in coordinators with Knowles tasked to get the Vols back to 2024 levels when the defense was in the top 10 in scoring and total defense. That's what Knowles did as DC for Ohio State, helping the Buckeyes win the national title in 2024.

2. New QB, again: For the fourth time

in four years, a new quarterback takes the reins, but it's not clear who. The Vols go with redshirt freshman George MacIntyre or true freshman Faizon Brandon. Either way, there will be some growing pains. How soon both can mature is the question. The good news is the offense has returning star receivers in Braylon Staley and Mike Matthews. There is also veterans on the offensive line in transfers Wendell Moe Jr., Sam Pendelton as well as Jesse Perry, who started seven games last year. "Whenever you start a young quarterback, it's important the other guys around him play at an extremely high level," Heupel said. "We have a lot of guys that will put those guys in a good position to go do their jobs."

3. Manning buzz: The storyline for

Week 4 is already set. That's when Texas and Heisman Trophy hopeful Arch Manning visit Knoxville for the Vols' first SEC game. Arch's famous Pro Football Hall of Fame uncle Peyton Manning, who was a Heisman runner-up at Tennessee, and the rest of the Manning family will be the talk of the town that week. Peyton continues to have a strong relationship with Tennessee. "We see him quite a bit," running back DeSean Bishop said. "He comes around often. Obviously, he has his own room in the facility, for those who don't know that. It's been cool to see him, just follow his history. And it's funny, he wore 18 in the NFL. And now I wear 18. I'm sure there's a little coolness behind that."

2025 results

8-5 (4-4 SEC)	
vs. Syracuse	W, 45-26
East Tennessee St.	W, 72-17
Georgia	(OT) L, 44-41
UAB	W, 56-24
at Mississippi St. (OT)	W, 41-34
Arkansas	W, 34-31
at Alabama	L, 37-20
at Kentucky	W, 56-34

Oklahoma	L, 33-27	Sept. 19
New Mexico St.	W, 42-9	Sept. 26
at Florida	W, 31-11	Oct. 3
Vanderbilt	L, 45-24	Oct. 10
Music City Bowl (Nashville)		Oct. 17
vs. Illinois	L, 30-28	Oct. 24
		Nov. 7
		Nov. 14
Sept. 5	Furman	Nov. 21
Sept. 12	at Georgia Tech	Nov. 28

2026 schedule

Kennesaw St.	
Texas	
Auburn	
at Arkansas	
Alabama	
at South Carolina	
Kentucky	
at Texas A&M	
LSU	
at Vanderbilt	



Tennessee linebacker Arion Carter and the Vols are looking to improve their tackling ability. [WADE PAYNE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]



Tennessee receivers Braylon Staley and Mike Matthews, who combined for 121 catches for 1,650 yards and 10 touchdowns, look to add to those numbers this season. [WADE PAYNE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

TENNESSEE

From Page G8

4. Can't hurt: The best way to win is copy what others have done. Tennessee grabbed championship pedigree coach Knowles to lead the defense. The Vols also brought in the strength coach from last year's national champion, Indiana. "Derek Owings, a few hours after winning the national title, came to Rocky Top the following day here in our off-season program," Heupel said. "It's been a seamless transition. Our guys have grabbed onto it, bought into it. That's why they've seen the changes they've had in their speed, power, acceleration. Our guys have great trust in him." Owings was with Heupel at UCF in 2018 as an assistant strength coach.

Extra point

For five straight seasons, Tennessee has rushed for over 2,000 yards. It's the first time that's been done at UT since 1997-2001. The Vols had three different 1,000-yard rushers the past three seasons, the only team in the SEC to do that.

Game of the year

vs. Alabama. If all goes the way everyone thinks it will, Tennessee will be 5-1 when the Tide comes to Knoxville, where the Vols have won two straight over Alabama. A third straight win at home against Bama sets up the Vols for the rest of the season feeling confident and looking like contenders.

Quotebook

"It's super difficult, but if it was



Tennessee offensive linemen Jesse Perry started seven games last year. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

easy, everybody would do it. You gotta learn it, earn it and ultimately go out there and play your hardest and play relentless."

— *linebacker Arion Carter on tackling. The Vols had 147 missed tackles in 2025, according to Pro Football Focus*

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 11-3. The best part of the 2026 schedule is who's not on it. UT won't face Oklahoma or Ole Miss. And for the first time since 1991, the Vols won't play Georgia, which means they can put off the milestone of losing 10 straight to the Bulldogs until next year.

Worst-case scenario: 7-6. After years of

toiling away in the SEC wasteland, the Vols have been knocking on the door of SEC relevance since Heupel took over. They took a step backward last season. Another step backward might send Heupel and the Vols back into the SEC void with the likes of South Carolina and Auburn.

— *Edwin Stanton*

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Georgia Bulldogs

Coach's corner



Smart

Head coach: Kirby Smart
Record: 117-21 in 10 seasons
Age: 50
Hometown: Bainbridge, Georgia

You don't say: Under Smart, Georgia owns the best record in the FBS since 2021 at 65-7, including back-to-back national titles (2021-22) and three SEC titles (2022, 2024-25). The next best is Ohio State at 59-10.

Coordinators: Mike Bobo (offense), Glenn Schaumann, Travaris Robinson (co-defense)

Info booth

Location: Athens, Georgia
Home: Sanford Stadium (93,033 capacity, first game 1929)
All-time record: 904-434-54
Mascot: Uga
Band: Georgia Redcoat Marching Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2025
Returning starters: 14 (6 offense, 8 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Playoff blues: Georgia certainly has replaced Alabama as the preeminent SEC program. The Bulldogs own two straight SEC championships, but that's where the season basically has ended. After winning those two straight titles, the Bulldogs lost their first playoff game — 23-10 to Notre Dame in 2024 and 39-34 to SEC rival Ole Miss in 2025. SEC titles are nice, but Georgia fans expect more. These days it's national title or bust.

2. Offense should be fine: Gunner Stockton returns as one of the nation's most efficient quarterbacks. Last season he completed nearly 70% of his throws, finishing with 2,894 yards and 24 touchdowns against only five interceptions. He's not bashful about running, and compiled 462 yards and 10 TDs. Also returning are leading rusher Nate Frazier (947 yards, 6 TDs) and Chauncey Bowens (526 yards, 6 TDs). Smart likes to run the ball and Georgia is built to do it again.

3. What about the defense? In the four games leading up to the playoffs, Georgia allowed a total of 29 points, including a shutdown 28-7 performance against Alabama in the SEC title game. Then it got torched for 39 points by Ole Miss. How well Georgia plays defensively will determine how far it goes this season.

4. What about the schedule? It's favorable, no doubt. Road games at Alabama and Ole Miss highlight a manageable schedule that should position the Bulldogs for another run at an SEC championship and playoff appearance.

Extra point

Georgia has prided itself on playing great defense, but after having seven defensive players drafted in 2025, that number dropped to three in 2026. Look for cornerback Ellis Robinson and safety KJ Bolden to hear their names in the first round of the 2027 NFL draft.

Game of the year

at Alabama: There's a good chance Georgia will be 5-0 rolling into Tuscaloosa on Oct. 10 in what likely will be a



Georgia defensive back Ellis Robinson IV and the Bulldogs are hoping to close in on another highly successful season. [COLIN HUBBARD/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

matchup of top-10 teams. Alabama will be looking for a little revenge after getting humbled by the Bulldogs 28-7 last December. Plus, Alabama coach Kalen DeBoer could be fighting to keep his job.

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 16-0. The Bulldogs run the table, satisfy a greedy fan base and put the Big Ten in its place.

Worst-case scenario: 10-3. Stockton gets hurt, the Bulldogs lose their two toughest road games, fall to either Florida or Auburn, and fail to make the playoffs.

Did you know?

Georgia was last in the SEC in 2025 with just 20 sacks — down from 37 the year before.

Quotebook

"When you're standing in the tunnel and see everybody, all you can see is kind of that upper row and all the fans up there. You see red and black, it definitely gets you chill bumps and you know it's pretty neat to be like, hey, this is what I kind of dreamed of when I was younger."

— Stockton

— Gregg Dewalt

2025 results

(12-2, 7-1 SEC)
Marshall W, 45-7
Austin Peay W, 28-6
at Tennessee W, 44-41
Alabama L, 24-21
Kentucky W, 35-14
at Auburn W, 20-10
Ole Miss W, 43-35
vs. Florida W, 24-20
at Mississippi St. W, 41-21
Texas W, 35-10

Charlotte W, 35-3
Georgia Tech W, 16-9
SEC championship (Atlanta)
vs. Alabama W, 28-7
Sugar Bowl, CFP quarterfinals (New Orleans)
vs. Ole Miss L, 39-34

2026 schedule

Sept. 5 Tennessee St.
Sept. 12 Western Kentucky
Sept. 19 at Arkansas

Sept. 26 Oklahoma
Oct. 3 Vanderbilt
Oct. 10 at Alabama
Oct. 17 Auburn
Oct. 31 vs. Florida
Nov. 7 at Ole Miss
Nov. 14 Missouri
Nov. 21 at South Carolina
Nov. 28 Georgia Tech
(Oct. 31 game at Jacksonville, Florida.)

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Texas Longhorns

Coach's corner

Head coach: Steve Sarkisian
Record: 48-20 in 5 seasons at Texas, 93-55 in 12 seasons overall
Age: 52
Hometown: Torrance, Calif.
You don't say: Sarkisian passed for 536 yards and six touchdowns in BYU's 1996 win over Texas A&M. It was, at the time, the most passing yards the Aggies had ever allowed.
Coordinators: Kyle Flood (offense), Will Muschamp (defense)



Sarkisian

Info booth

Location: Austin, Texas
Home: Darrell K. Royal Texas Memorial Stadium (100,119 capacity, first game 1924)
All-time record: 920-388-32
Mascot: Bevo
Band: University of Texas Longhorn Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2024
Returning starters: 12 (6 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Arch Madness: To say quarterback Arch Manning faced scrutiny in his first year as the Longhorns' starter might be understating it, but that's no surprise when you play quarterback at Texas and have two uncles with Super Bowl rings. Manning progressed throughout the year and helped Texas win seven of its last eight games. "He's got 20 touchdowns, only two turnovers (in that stretch),"



Texas quarterback Arch Manning and the Longhorns hope this year is a season-long feast of victories. [JOHN RAOUX/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Sarkisian said. "... But he didn't go back on social media and say 'I told you so.' All he's done this year is continue to work hard again."
2. Destined for a date with the Dawgs?: Texas features four first-team preseason all-conference selections — receiver Cam Coleman, offensive lineman

Trevor Goosby, defensive lineman Collin Simmons and linebacker Rasheem Biles — and the Longhorns were picked to finish second in the SEC behind Georgia. But Texas is 0-3 against Georgia over the past two seasons, falling by 15, 3 and 25 points. "All the credit in the world to Kirby (Smart), their team," Sarkisian said. "They're tough. They're good. If we want to be a champion, I'm guessing we'll probably have to beat the champion to make that happen."
3. Scheduling for success: Sarkisian was openly miffed that a loss to Ohio State last year — in his estimation — cost the Longhorns a playoff berth. He believes with a cupcake game in that spot and a 10-2 record instead, the Longhorns would have made the playoff. (Texas, of course, didn't exactly help itself by losing to Florida.) While

Sarkisian did not make any guarantees one way or another about playing scheduled games against Notre Dame in 2028 and 2029, he suggested he'll see how the committee looks at résumés and schedule accordingly. "Like anything in this world, if you want to be really good at something, you got to take risk," he said. "There's calculated risks involved in life that you have to take."
4. A meaningful example: Goosby, the offensive lineman, wore a pin to SEC Media Days that said "Every 15 Minutes." Goosby said on average every 15 minutes there's a child born with a congenital heart defect, and he had surgery for an atrial septal defect at age 16. "Now that I have this platform, I just want to be able to bring awareness to this because I feel like it's something that's not talked about often and just be a pillar for these kids that are going through it," he said.

Extra point

Texas is 20-1 in its last 21 home games. The No. 1 Longhorns lost 30-15 to No. 5 Georgia in October 2024.

Game of the year

at Ohio State. There are plenty to choose from, but the Buckeyes' first trip to Austin since 2006 will be Texas' first chance to establish itself as a national title contender and bank a résumé-boosting win.

Quotebook

"What he got put through probably would have melted or destroyed 99% of people in his shoes."
— Sarkisian, on criticism Manning faced last season

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 15-2. It can be annoying to hear declarations that "Texas is back!" year after year, but Texas might be back.
Worst-case scenario: 8-5. Not a likely result, but there are probably at least six teams on this schedule with serious playoff aspirations.
— Craig Thomas

2025 results

(10-3, 6-2 SEC)		at Georgia	L, 35-10	Oct. 10	vs. Oklahoma
at Ohio St.	L, 14-7	Arkansas	W, 52-37	Oct. 17	Florida
San Jose St.	W, 38-7	Texas A&M	W, 27-17	Oct. 24	Ole Miss
Texas-El Paso	W, 27-10	Citrus Bowl (Orlando, Fla.)		Oct. 31	Mississippi St.
Sam Houston	W, 55-0	vs. Michigan	W, 41-27	Nov. 7	at Missouri
at Florida	L, 29-21			Nov. 14	at LSU
vs. Oklahoma	W, 23-6			Nov. 21	Arkansas
at Kentucky (OT)	W, 16-13	Sept. 5	Texas St.	Nov. 27	at Texas A&M
at Mississippi St. (OT)	W, 45-38	Sept. 12	Ohio St.	(Oct. 10 game in Dallas.)	
Vanderbilt	W, 34-31	Sept. 19	Texas-San Antonio		
		Sept. 26	at Tennessee		

2026 schedule

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Ole Miss Rebels

Coach's corner



Head coach: Pete Golding
Record: 2-1 as interim coach in 2025
Age: 42
Hometown: Hammond, Louisiana
You don't say: Lane Kiffin bolted for LSU after an 11-1 regular season, and defensive coordinator Golding stepped in for the playoffs. The Rebels responded by beating Tulane and then Georgia in the Sugar Bowl before falling to Miami in the Fiesta Bowl semis, finishing 13-2 and ranked No. 3 — the program's best season in more than 60 years. Golding kept scheme continuity on both sides of the ball and added more than 50 new players while retaining stars Trinidad Chambliss and Kewan Lacy.
Coordinators: John David Baker (offense), Bryan Brown (defense)

Info booth

Location: Oxford, Mississippi
Home: Vaught-Hemingway Stadium (64,038 capacity, first game 1915)
All-time record: 701-555-35
Mascot: Tony the Landshark
Band: The Pride of the South
Last conference title game appearance: Never

Returning starters: 10 (5 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Kiffin hangover is history: Golding spent three-plus years as DC under Kiffin, then won two CFP games after the



Quarterback Trinidad Chambliss and running back Kewan Lacy are both being pushed by Ole Miss as Heisman Trophy candidates. [ROSS D. FRANKLIN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

exit. Players say the culture stayed intact because they already knew “P.G.” Rule No. 1 remains “be a good dude.” Golding kept the offensive scheme largely intact by bringing back John David Baker and retaining Joe Judge, while the defense — his baby — returns experience and portal

veterans.
2. Heisman hype real — and shared: Ole Miss rolled out a joint Heisman campaign for QB Trinidad Chambliss and RB Kewan Lacy. Chambliss threw for nearly 4,000 yards with only three interceptions; Lacy ran for 1,567 yards and a school-record 24 touchdowns. Golding is unfazed by the attention: “Individual accolades come from team success.” Both players insist the main goal is a national championship, not hardware.
3. Defense can be better: Golding flatly said this group is “as talented a defense that I’ve been around in a long time.” Interior depth was a problem late last year; the Rebels addressed it with portal veterans. Will Echoles is a star up front, and the secondary got size and experience. The biggest unknown is how the new pieces respond the first time they get punched in the mouth.

4. New standard, same mission: Last year’s Cinderella run is over. Chambliss, Lacy and Golding all repeated the same refrain: last year is last year. The standard is now a national championship. Golding’s offseason model — velocity-based training, NFL-style phases, coaches on campus every day — is designed to develop the 50-plus newcomers while sharpening the returners.

Extra point

The Rebels return the most productive QB-RB tandem in the country and a defensive coordinator-turned-head coach who already proved he can win big games.

Game of the year

vs. LSU: The Magnolia Bowl in Oxford carries extra voltage this time. Lane Kiffin returns to the stadium he left for Baton Rouge, and the Rebels get the first crack at the man who coached them to 11 wins before the playoffs. Players say it’s just another game on the schedule, but the rest of the SEC knows better.

Quotebook

“Rule No. 1 in our program is be a good dude, and that ain’t too hard.”

— Golding

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 12-2. Chambliss and Lacy stay healthy and put up another 6,000-yard season, the defense lives up to Golding’s lofty praise, and the Rebels navigate the brutal stretch of Florida-Texas-Georgia-Oklahoma with only one loss. Another deep playoff run makes the Kiffin exit look like the best thing that ever happened in Oxford.
Worst-case scenario: 8-4. The new pieces on the lines and in the secondary take longer to mesh than expected, the Heisman noise becomes a distraction, and the SEC schedule exacts its usual toll. A solid season by most programs’ standards feels like a letdown after last year’s magic.

— Shane Herrmann

2025 results

(13-2, 7-1 SEC)					
Georgia St.	W, 63-7	at Mississippi St.	W, 38-19	Sept. 19	LSU
at Kentucky	W, 30-23	CFP first round		Sept. 26	at Florida
Arkansas	W, 41-35	Tulane	W, 41-10	Oct. 10	at Vanderbilt
Tulane	W, 45-10	Sugar Bowl, CFP quarterfinals		Oct. 17	Missouri
LSU	W, 24-19	(New Orleans)		Oct. 24	at Texas
Washington St.	W, 24-21	vs. Georgia	W, 39-34	Oct. 31	Auburn
at Georgia	L, 43-35	Fiesta Bowl, CFP semifinals		Nov. 7	Georgia
at Oklahoma	W, 34-26	(Glendale, Ariz.)		Nov. 14	at Oklahoma
South Carolina	W, 30-14	vs. Miami	L, 31-27	Nov. 21	Wofford
The Citadel	W, 49-0			Nov. 27	Mississippi St.
Florida	W, 34-24			(Sept. 6 game in Nashville.)	

2026 schedule

Sept. 6	vs. Louisville
Sept. 12	Charlotte

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Texas A&M Aggies

Coach's corner



Elko

Head coach: Mike Elko
Record: 19-7 in 2 seasons at Texas A&M; 35-16 in 4 seasons overall
Age: 49
Hometown: South Brunswick, New Jersey
You don't say: The last time Texas A&M won a conference title was the Big 12 in 1998. That same year, Elko played safety for Ivy League champion Penn.
Coordinators: Holmon Wiggins (offense), Lyle Hemphill (defense)

Info booth

Location: College Station, Texas
Home: Kyle Field (102,733 capacity, first game 1927)
All-time record: 797-511-48
Mascot: Reveille
Band: Fightin' Texas Aggie Band
Last conference title game appearance: 1998 (Big 12)
Returning starters: 9 (4 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Rise and fall: As exciting as Texas A&M's 2025 season was, when the Aggies won their first 11 games, they'll enter this season looking to make amends for a frustrating finish. A 10-3 loss at home to Miami was their lowest scoring output since 2015 and sent them out of the College Football Playoff. "For the past two seasons we've started off very hot, and then the end of the season didn't end the way we wanted to for both seasons," safety Marcus Ratliffe said.
2. Leaving the Station: Texas A&M will have to adjust to some personnel



Texas A&M quarterback Marcel Reed and the Aggies, after a 10-0 start last year, limped to the finish with consecutive losses. [KAREN WARREN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

changes. On the field, an offensive line replacing four starters will need to come together quickly. The Aggies also replace both coordinators – Hemphill replaces Jay Bateman at defensive coordinator after Bateman left for Kentucky, and Elko promoted Wiggins from within to be the offensive coordinator after Collin Klein became head coach at alma mater Kansas State.
3. There's more to Marcel: "My legs," redshirt junior quarterback Marcel Reed said to laughs at SEC Media Days, when asked what worked well for him against LSU last year. Indeed, Reed rushed for

108 yards and two touchdowns in that 49-25 rout, and he's over 1,000 yards rushing in his career. But Reed also threw for over 3,100 yards and maintained a 62% completion rate in his first year as full-time starter. "I think last year there was a narrative that he couldn't throw. I thought that was a little bit unjust," Elko said. "I think this year people have recognized what he's capable of now."
4. Sizing up the schedule: Aggie fans might feel like they're back in the Big 12 or Southwest Conference in November when they watch games against Texas and Oklahoma to close the regular season. (There's a game against Arkansas earlier in the year as well.) The SEC's move to a nine-game schedule has been a topic of much discussion. The Aggies don't play Notre Dame this year, and their best non-conference game is a Sept. 12 visit from Arizona State.

Extra point

Texas A&M's 11 wins last season were its most since winning 11 in 2012. The Aggies had double-digit wins every

year from 1991-94 but have reached that mark only three times since then.
Game of the year
vs. Texas. Texas handed the Aggies their first loss of the season last year. Playoff qualification and seeding could be on the line. And A&M's whole fight song is about taking down Texas, so that tells you how the Aggies feel.

Quotebook

"I show them our trophy case and it's empty."
— Elko, on how he keeps his team from being satisfied

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 14-2. If a new-look offensive line coalesces nicely, Reed can do damage.
Worst-case scenario: 7-6. It would not be the first time a highly ranked A&M team disappointed people.

— Craig Thomas

2025 results

(11-2, 6-2 SEC)	
Texas-San Antonio	W, 42-24
Utah St.	W, 44-22
at Notre Dame	W, 41-40
Auburn	W, 16-10
Mississippi St.	W, 31-9
Florida	W, 34-17
at Arkansas	W, 45-42
at LSU	W, 49-25

2026 schedule

at Missouri	W, 38-17	Sept. 19
South Carolina	W, 31-30	Sept. 26
Samford	W, 48-0	Oct. 3
at Texas	L, 27-17	Oct. 10
CFP first round		Oct. 17
Miami	L, 10-3	Oct. 24
		Nov. 7
		Nov. 14
Sept. 5	Missouri St.	Nov. 21
Sept. 12	Arizona St.	Nov. 27

Kentucky	
at LSU	
Arkansas	
at Missouri	
The Citadel	
at Alabama	
at South Carolina	
Tennessee	
at Oklahoma	
Texas	

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

LSU Tigers

Coach's corner



Head coach: Lane Kiffin
Record: First year at LSU, 116-53 in 15 years overall
Age: 51
Hometown: Lincoln, Nebraska
You don't say: Kiffin leaving Ole Miss for LSU just before the playoffs was major news, which was also the catalyst for the proposed Protect College Sports Act, better known as the "Lane Kiffin Rule." The legislation would forbid in-season coaching moves from school to school. Kiffin is in favor.
Coordinators: Charlie Weis Jr. (offense), Dave Baker (defense)

Info booth

Location: Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Home: Tiger Stadium (102,321 capacity, first game 1924)
All-time record: 850-440-47
Mascot: Mike the Tiger
Band: Golden Band from Tigerland
Last conference title game appearance:

2022
Returning starters: 5 (2 offense, 3 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Let the fun begin: LSU signed Kiffin to a multimillion-dollar deal and in return the Tigers get a proven coach whose offensive system yields results. They also get all the drama and headaches that comes with him. It's not Kiffin's first rodeo involving coaching calamity. He ditched Tennessee after one season, was essentially fired as offensive coordinator at Alabama before the 2016 national title game because he was too focused on his



LSU linebacker Whit Weeks is in an unusual situation with Lane Kiffin as his coach and Kiffin's daughter as his girlfriend. [JACOB KUPFERMAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

upcoming head coaching job with Florida Atlantic, and everyone knows about the infamous tarmac firing from Southern Cal in 2013.
2. Sam the man: Sam Leavitt transferred from Arizona State and brings with him big expectations. The senior passed for 4,513 yards and 34 touchdowns with nine interceptions in two seasons with ASU and rushed for 749 with five TDs. He's drawn comparisons to Bo Nix for his athleticism and

mobility and Sam Darnold for his passing prowess.
3. Cold turkey: Kiffin is not just a football coach. He's also a social media rock star, particularly on X, where he is a troll hall of famer. Kiffin opted to ditch social media, along with a few other apps, in an attempt to stay out of the limelight, much to the disappointment of his more than 850,000 followers. "Knox one day was like, 'Dad, there's no way you can get off social media.' If you know me, that's the best thing to do," Kiffin said. "My kids have learned that, too. If they really want something, just say I can't do it, and I'm going to do it. So, I'm like, 'Oh, I bet I can.'" What's the over-under on Kiffin getting back on X before the season ends?
4. Influx of talent: The hiring Kiffin has already paid dividends. The Tigers signed nine of the top 100 players in the transfer portal. Three were ranked in the top 6 and the top player at their position, including Leavitt, OL Jordan

Seaton and DL Princewill Umanmielen, who followed Kiffin from Ole Miss. Add to that LSU signed two freshmen defensive linemen ranked No. 1 in the nation at their position in DT Richard Anderson and DE Lamar Brown.

Extra point

After Kiffin arrived, the Tigers welcomed 40 transfer portal players, the most of any team in the nation. Throw in the 18 players from this past signing class and LSU has 58 newcomers.

Game of the year

at Ole Miss. A no-brainer. It might be the SEC game of year. It could be the national game of the year depending on the drama leading up to it. There is no certainty on who will win, but you can bet the house that more folks will be paying attention and watching this game than any other. If you need to ask why, you are not a fan and should go back to watching Love Island.

Quotebook

"It hasn't affected my relationship with him at all. I know that when we go in that building, everyone in our building has the same mindset and the same goals. Whenever we leave, it's cool he's my girlfriend's dad. At the end of the day, it is what it is when we're outside the building, just hanging out, cutting up, like it's cool. It doesn't affect anything in the football building."

— *linebacker Whit Weeks on dating Kiffin's daughter*

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 11-3. LSU broke the bank to bring in Kiffin as well as key transfer players. A word of warning: Anything better than a playoff spot, including a win, and Tiger fans will more insufferable than ever.
Worst-case scenario: 8-5. Kiffin is expected to deliver immediately. Eight wins might not be what fans want, but at least the season will be entertaining with Kiffin.
— *Edwin Stanton*

2025 results

(7-6, 3-5 SEC)					
at Clemson	W, 17-10	at Alabama	L, 20-9	Sept. 19	
Louisiana Tech	W, 23-7	Arkansas	W, 23-22	Sept. 26	
Florida	W, 20-10	Western Kentucky	W, 13-10	Oct. 3	
SE Louisiana	W, 56-10	at Oklahoma	L, 17-13	Oct. 10	
at Ole Miss	L, 24-19	Texas Bowl (Houston)		Oct. 17	
South Carolina	W, 20-10	vs. Houston	L, 38-35	Oct. 24	
at Vanderbilt	L, 31-24			Nov. 7	
Texas A&M	L, 49-25			Nov. 14	

2026 schedule

Sept. 5	Clemson	Nov. 21
Sept. 12	Louisiana Tech	Nov. 28

at Ole Miss	
Texas A&M	
McNeese	
at Kentucky	
Mississippi St.	
at Auburn	
Alabama	
Texas	
at Tennessee	
at Arkansas	

UNITED ATHLETIC CONFERENCE

North Alabama Lions

Coach's corner



Head coach: Brent Dearmon

Record: 8-27 in 3 seasons at UNA, 18-38 in 4 seasons overall

Age: 41

Hometown: Saraland

You don't say: Dearmon

has a passion for investing and monitoring the stock market. He's particularly keen on SpaceX.

Coordinators: Travis Partridge (offense), Clint Bowen (defense)

Info booth

Location: Florence

Home: Bank Independent Stadium (10,000 capacity, opens this year)

All-time record: 488-325-16

Mascot: Leo

Band: Marching Pride of North Alabama

Last conference title game appearance: N/A

Returning starters: 9 (5 offense, 4 defense)

Four-down territory

1. New digs: North Alabama is set to open Bank Independent Stadium on Sept. 19 against Alcorn State, beginning a new era for the school. With the ability to control concessions and other ancillary services, UNA will be able to create the most valuable commodity in college sports, revenue, which will be driven right back into its athletic programs. Dearmon has said the ability to take recruits into the construction as opposed to just showing them blueprints has helped him ensnare the best recruiting class in his time as head coach. No matter what stadium the turf is in,



Destin Wade will be the starting quarterback for UNA this season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

though, the product that's put on it is the most important thing.

2. Re-coordinating: The offense and defense are now in the hands of two

new coordinators, both of whom spent time with Dearmon back when he was at Kansas. Partridge spent time at Bowling Green, UT Martin and Tennessee State and has been entrusted with Dearmon's "baby," as the head coach handed off playcalling duties for the first time in his career. Coming from Oklahoma State, Bowen will have the tall task of improving one of the UAC's worst defenses last season, but he'll have an influx of talent from the transfer portal. Changes in philosophy were certainly needed on both sides of the ball, and Partridge and Bowen will need to display that.

3. The eye test: UNA finished last or second-to-last in the UAC in every major defensive category last season, which was mostly due to a lack of size. Discouraged when he could talk to his entire defensive line at eye level last season, Dearmon emphasized beefing up in the transfer portal. The addition of Josh Long as defensive line coach also brought five players from Memphis that will make up a big part of the rotation. The addition of 6-foot-6 Joshua White will even give the group the ability to bat balls at the line of

SEE NORTH ALABAMA, G18

2025 results

at Western Kentucky; L, 55-6
at Southeast Missouri; L, 30-21
Northeastern St.; W, 49-21
at Illinois St.; (2OT) L, 38-36
at Abilene Christian; L, 52-23
Central Arkansas; L, 49-21
Eastern Kentucky; W, 35-14
at Austin Peay; L, 56-28
at Utah Tech; (OT) L, 34-33

West Georgia; L, 24-17
at Tarleton St.; L, 61-0
Southern Utah; (2OT) L, 36-34

2026 schedule

Aug. 29; vs. Samford
Sept. 5; at Arkansas
Sept. 12; at SE Louisiana
Sept. 19; Alcorn St.
Sept. 26; Western Illinois

Oct. 3; at Eastern Kentucky
Oct. 17; Abilene Christian
Oct. 24; Austin Peay
Oct. 31; at Central Arkansas
Nov. 7; West Florida
Nov. 14; at West Georgia
Nov. 21; Tarleton St.
(Aug. 29 game in Huntsville.)

2026 NORTH ALABAMA OPPONENTS



Preston Bird [SAMFORD ATHLETICS]

Samford Bulldogs

When: 6 p.m. Aug. 29

Where: Joe Davis Stadium, Huntsville

Head coach: John Grass (72-26 in 8 seasons at Jacksonville State)

Last season's record: 1-11 (1-7 Southern)

Key returnees: WR Preston Bird (53 catches, 617 yards, 4 TDs), S LaShon Young (44 tackles, 2 breakups, 2 INTs), S Jalen Nelson (43 tackles, 2 breakups), OL Noah Watts

The skinny: This will be the 13th matchup between UNA and Samford, which enters a new era after Chris Hatcher was fired after 11 seasons with a 62-59 record. The teams have not met since 2002, and this iteration of the Lions holds a 6-4-2 advantage to this point. The two programs met once back in 1913, and Samford won, but UNA shuttered football from 1928-1949, so it's unofficially not on the score card. Samford was voted eighth in the Southern Conference preseason poll. Three-year starting QB Quincy Crittendon graduated. He led the SoCon th 2,689 passing yards in 2024 before taking a step back last year. Oregon State transfer Gabarri Johnson or Davidson transfer Coulter Cleland will replace him.



Charlie Collins [ARKANSAS ATHLETICS]

Arkansas Razorbacks

When: 3:15 p.m. Sept. 5

Where: Donald W. Reynolds Razorback Stadium, Fayetteville, Arkansas

Head coach: Ryan Silverfield (50-24 in 6 years at Memphis)

Last season's record: 2-10 (0-8 Southeastern)

Key returnees: RB Braylen Russell (55 carries, 286 yards, 5 TDs), DB Miguel Mitchell (52 tackles, 1 sack, 1 INT), LB Bradley Shaw (50 tackles, 5 TFLs, 2 sacks), DL Quincy Rhodes Jr. (44 tackles, 15.5 TFLs, 8 sacks)

The skinny: UNA's annual buy game takes it to the SEC for the second time and the first time since Vanderbilt in 1959. It may be the best time to try it, with Arkansas being voted last in the SEC preseason poll. This will be the first matchup between the Lions and Razorbacks. Arkansas has wiped the slate clean, moving on from Sam Pittman after six seasons and hiring Memphis' Silverfield, who had a 50-25 record with the Tigers since 2019. Silverfield's 2025 Memphis team ranked 19th in FBS, averaging 34.6 points, but Arkansas will depend on redshirt sophomore QB KJ Jackson, who has played just six career games and thrown for 500 yards.



Deantre Jackson [SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA ATHLETICS]

SE Louisiana Lions

When: 6 p.m. Sept. 12

Where: Strawberry Stadium, Hammond, Louisiana

Head coach: Frank Scelfo (53-40 in 7 seasons)

Last season's record: 9-4 (7-1 Southland)

Key returnees: QB Kyle Lowe (864 passing yards, 452 rushing yards, 13 total TDs, 1 INT), RB Deantre Jackson (90 carries, 586 yards, 7 TDs), LB Jirrea Johnson Jr. (57 tackles, 4 TFLs, 1.5 sacks, 1 FF), DL Khalid Moore (39 tackles, 3.5 TFLs, 1.5 sacks, 1 FF)

The skinny: This could be UNA's first of a few matchups with an FCS contender. Southeastern Louisiana was voted 19th in the Stats Perform preseason top 25 and second in the Southland Conference preseason poll. It finished 15th in last year's national poll and made its fourth playoff appearance in seven years. QB Carson Camp, who averaged 138.8 yards, transferred to Duquesne, and redshirt junior Kyle Lowe will likely step into the starting role. LB transfer Jake Dalmado, who joins Southeastern from Nicholls, has been named to the Buck Buchanan Award watch list and both the Stats Perform and Phil Steele preseason All-America teams.



Jaylon Tolbert [ALCORN STATE ATHLETICS]

Alcorn State Braves

When: 6 p.m. Sept. 19

Where: Bank Independent Stadium

Head coach: Cedric Thomas (11-13 in 2 seasons)

Last season's record: 5-7 (4-4 Southwestern Athletic)

Key returnees: OL Cameran Rogers, OL Abe Diallo, DL Eric Thomas Jr. (26 tackles, 6.5 TFLs, 4 sacks), DL Kenneth Andrews (33 tackles, 2.5 TFLs, 0.5 sacks), DB Tayvion Haney (29 tackles, 0.5 TFLs, 6 PBUs)

The skinny: Under Thomas, Alcorn State was your typical ground-and-pound team last season. It finished fourth in the SWAC in scoring and total defense and second in rushing defense, allowing just 133 yards on the ground per game. It also finished fifth in rushing offense. But it was ninth in passing offense at just 178.6 yards per game. Regardless, the Braves were voted third in the SWAC West Division in the preseason poll and return experienced players in the trenches. They may not be fun and flashy on offense, but Thomas will make sure they're effective.



Sasha Summers [WESTERN ILLINOIS ATHLETICS]

Western Illinois Leathernecks

When: 3 p.m. Sept. 26

Where: Bank Independent Stadium

Head coach: Joe Davis (8-16 in 2 seasons)

Last season's record: 4-8 (3-5 Ohio Valley-Big South)

Key returnees: QB Cason Carswell (2,054 passing yards, 16 TDs, 3 INTs), WR Christian Anaya (458 yards, 4 TDs), DB Aa'zoriyon Bonner (39 tackles, 6 TFLs, 2.5 sacks)

The skinny: A member of another rebranded FCS conference, Western Illinois was voted sixth (out of eight teams) in the reunified Ohio Valley Conference. In its only matchup with Western Illinois to this point, UNA won 26-17 in 2019. The Leathernecks' duo of Carswell and Anaya is back to lead an offense that ranked fifth in the OVC in scoring and fourth in passing offense. Carswell ranked third in the league in passing yards per game, at 205.4. On the other side of the ball, Western Illinois ranked last in the league in both total defense and scoring defense.



Kaden Smith [EASTERN KENTUCKY ATHLETICS]

Eastern Kentucky Colonels

When: 5 p.m. Oct. 3

Where: Roy Kidd Stadium, Richmond, Kentucky

Head coach: Walt Wells (35-33 in 6 seasons)

Last season's record: 5-7 (3-5 United Athletic)

Key returnees: LB Kaden Smith (77 tackles, 4.5 TFLs, 1 INT), QB Myles Burkett (1,473 passing yards, 8 TDs, 9 INTs, 317 rushing yards, 4 TDs), RB Brayden Latham (154 carries, 667 yards, 3 TDs), WR Jayden West (20 catches, 244 yards, 2 TDs)

The skinny: For the second straight year, North Alabama opens UAC play on the road, though this is likely a more favorable matchup than nationally-ranked Abilene Christian last season. ECU is coming off a disappointing 2025 after it made the FCS playoffs in 2024. The Colonels were the Lions's lone conference win last season, a 35-14 wire-to-wire homecoming win at Braly Stadium in which QB Destin Wade completed 11 of 18 passes for 127 yards and two TDs. But the Colonels were voted fourth in the UAC preseason poll this year. Smith was named preseason Defensive Player of the Year.

2026 NORTH ALABAMA OPPONENTS



Dallas Dudley [ABILENE CHRISTIAN ATHLETICS]

Abilene Christian Wildcats

When: 6 p.m. Oct. 17

Where: Bank Independent Stadium

Head coach: Keith Patterson (30-20 in four seasons)

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

Key returnees: QB Stone Earle (3,285 passing yards, 22 TDs, 11 INTs, 433 rushing yards, 12 TDs), RB Rovaughn Banks Jr. (142 carries, 687 yards, 3 TDs), RB Jordon Vaughn (114 carries, 671 yards, 8 TDs), WR Javon Gipson (64 catches, 1,022 yards, 6 TDs), LB Will Shaffer (119 tackles, 8.5 TFLs, 1 INT), LB Rashon Myles Jr. (115 tackles, 8 TFLs, 2.5 sacks, 1 INT)

The skinny: The Wildcats have the pleasure of being Bank Independent Stadium's first UAC game, and UNA probably doesn't want a repeat of last year's 52-23 loss at Abilene. ACU tied for first place with Tarleton State in the league's preseason poll and had the most all-conference preseason picks with eight. Earle, who finished third in the league in passing yards and touchdowns last season, has his two top rushers and the UAC's leading receiver, Gipson, back at his disposal. The Wildcats were also voted 15th in the national preseason poll.



Chris Parson [AUSTIN PEAY ATHLETICS]

Austin Peay Governors

When: 6 p.m. Oct. 24

Where: Bank Independent Stadium

Head coach: Jeff Faris (11-13 in 2 seasons)

Last season's record: 7-5 (4-4 United Athletic)

Key returnees: QB Chris Parson (3,003 passing yards, 23 TDs, 5 INTs, 743 rushing yards, 14 TDs), RB Courtland Simmons (70 carries, 317 yards, 3 TDs), DB Trevor Hardy (49 tackles, 1.5 TFLs)

The skinny: Last year's matchup was another less-than-desirable road beating for North Alabama. The Lions went to Clarksville and came back with a 56-28 loss. Another matchup with the Govs won't prove easy. Austin Peay ranked third and 17th in the UAC and Stats Perform preseason polls, respectively. UAC preseason offensive player of the year Parson provides explosiveness for an Austin Peay offense with lots of retention that has the potential to be one of the nation's best. Faris has really turned the program around in recent years, and Austin Peay will be among the UAC's best.



Arlie Lee [CENTRAL ARKANSAS ATHLETICS]

Central Arkansas Bears

When: 4 p.m. Oct. 31

Where: Estes Stadium, Conway, Arkansas

Head coach: Nathan Brown (46-44 in 8 seasons)

Last season's record: 3-9 (2-6 United Athletic)

Key returnees: WR Tyrell Pollard (26 catches, 515 yards, 7 TDs), LB Ashtyn Williams (70 tackles, 2 TFLs, 1 INT), DT Trevion Traylor (41 tackles, 8 TFLs, 1 sack, 1 forced fumble)

The skinny: Central Arkansas hasn't yet re-created the success it found in 2023, when it went 7-4 overall and 4-2 in UAC play. After taking back play calling last season, Brown was unable to get things back on track, and the Bears went 2-6 in league play. They were seventh in scoring offense and rushing offense last season, so if they fix the running game, maybe the rest will come. Baylor transfer QB Walker White is presumably the starter and returning weapons Pollard and Ty Durham, who both went for over 500 yards last season, will be a good start for him. The transfer portal class was offensive-focused, and it may get ACU back on track.



Preston Godfrey [WEST FLORIDA ATHLETICS]

West Florida Argonauts

When: 6 p.m. Nov. 7

Where: Bank Independent Stadium

Head coach: Kaleb Nobles (25-9 in 3 years)

Last season's record: 10-2 (2-1 in Gulf South)

Key returnees: RB TJ Lane (167 carries, 869 yards, 11 TDs), TE Jake Robinette (13 receptions, 199 yards, 4 TDs), S Jamari Dickins (35 tackles, 11.5 TFLs, 4.5 sacks), CB Roderick Webb (22 tackles, 1.5 TFLs, 3 INTs)

The skinny: The Argonauts are in their first year in Division I. West Florida is the only football-playing member of the ASUN, and now finds itself in the same spot UNA was back in 2018, when the Lions moved to Division I. The Argos have a good chunk of returning talent, but it's hard to project how that will carry over to the UAC. Although they went 10-2 last season in the Gulf South Conference, they were picked last in the UAC preseason poll. As UNA fans know, the transition to Division I isn't easy, and it can show itself on the field. Whether or not West Florida has that experience will certainly be fun to watch.



David Hoage [WEST GEORGIA ATHLETICS]

West Georgia Wolves

When: 1 p.m. Nov. 14

Where: Carrollton, Georgia

Head coach: Steve Englehart (21-28 in four seasons at Presbyterian, 91-74 in 15 seasons overall)

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

Key returnees: S Chancellor Bryant (25 tackles, 2.5 TFLs, 0.5 sacks)

The skinny: After a surprisingly productive 2025, in which it could have been a playoff team if eligible, West Georgia enters the final year of its Division I transition, and once again will be ineligible for that postseason dream. On top of that, head coach Joel Taylor left for Mercer, and Englehart, last year's AFCA FCS coach of the year, took his place. Englehart turned around a Presbyterian program that hadn't won four games in seven years before his arrival. Many of those Presbyterian guys came with him to Carrollton, namely quarterback Collin Hurst. The Wolves had the league's best defense last season in terms of scoring, total yards and rushing yards.



Tylan Hines [TARLETON STATE ATHLETICS]

Tarleton State Texans

When: 3 p.m. Nov. 21

Where: Bank Independent Stadium

Head coach: Todd Whitten (126-59 in 16 seasons at Tarleton State, 151-87 in 21 seasons overall)

Last season's record: 12-2 (7-1 United Athletic)

Key returnees: WR Marquis Willis (23 receptions, 515 yards, 4 TDs), RB Tylan Hines (82 carries, 510 yards, 3 TDs), LB Stephen Woods Jr. (36 tackles, 5 TFLs, 2 sacks), S Jadan Aubert (43 tackles, 3 TFLs, 1 INT)

The skinny: Tarleton has risen to the level of FCS powerhouse over the last few years, making the playoffs two years in a row. Tied at the top with Abilene Christian in the UAC preseason poll, the Texans were also voted fifth in the Stats Perform preseason national poll. Quarterback remains somewhat of a question, as no starter is obvious, but the rest of the roster is so good, only truly atrocious quarterback play will be able to undo that. At least the Lions get to host the Texans this time around, as opposed to last year in Stephenville, where UNA lost 61-0.

— Compiled by Matt St. Charles



Defensive coordinator Clint Bowen and offensive coordinator Travis Partridge are both new play-callers for UNA this season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]



Jyheam Ingram, a returning team captain, was on board for North Alabama to bring in bigger defensive linemen. [NORTH ALABAMA ATHLETICS]

NORTH ALABAMA

From Page G15

scrimmage. Along with returners Jyheam Ingram and Avery Howard and the new scheme of Bowen, the defensive front should take a step up in 2026, because that's really the only way it can step.

4. Signal calmer: For the first time in his UNA tenure, Dearmon has had a starting QB since spring practice. Redshirt junior Destin Wade will be the unquestioned guy heading into the opener after he threw for 1,188 yards, 10 TDs and four interceptions last season in his nine games. Dearmon says Wade is one of the most-talented QBs in college football when healthy — which is an important qualifier. Wade had a few different instances of injury last season, and being used as a dual-threat never really mitigates that risk. If Wade can stay healthy, he'll be a steadying force for UNA. If not, things could get chaotic.

Extra point

UNA opens conference play with three of the top four vote-getters in the UAC preseason poll. The Lions travel to Eastern Kentucky, then have a bye before hosting preseason nationally ranked Abilene Christian and Austin Peay the following two weeks. If the Lions can manage to get through that stretch with a respectable record, they can come up for air just a bit.



UNA will take the field at Huntsville's Joe Davis Stadium for their season opener. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Game of the year

vs. Austin Peay: The Lions play a tough out-of-conference schedule, and losses on the road at ECU and at home against Abilene Christian could be commendable, but a homecoming matchup with Austin Peay could be a harbinger of what's to come in UAC play. Plus, Destin Wade and Chris Parson were rivals for Tennessee's Class 6A Mr. Football in high school, so where are they now?

Quotebook

"Going into year four, we've got to

win. This town, this city, and this university deserve it. Our players and our staff both see the commitment level through (Bank Independent Stadium). It's helped us land the best recruiting class that we've had since I've been here."

— Dearmon

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 6-6. UNA finds itself right smack dab in the middle of the UAC, unable to keep

up with Tarleton, Abilene, and Austin Peay, but shows West Georgia and West Florida what a real, fully transitioned D-I team looks like by finally holding its own in the league.

Worst-case scenario: 2-10. The Lions stumble through non-conference play, get skulldrug across the brand-new turf at Bank Independent Stadium in their crucial October games and never recover.

— Matt St. Charles

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Oklahoma Sooners

Coach's corner



Head coach: Brent Venables

Record: 32-20 in 4 seasons

Age: 55

Hometown: Homestead, Florida

Venables

You don't say: Venables was part of the 1991 Kansas State team that finished 7-4. It was the Wildcats' best season since 1954.

Coordinators: Ben Arbuckle (offense), Todd Bates (defense)

Info booth

Location: Norman, Oklahoma

Home: Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium (80,126 capacity, first game 1923)

All-time record: 959-350-53

Mascot: Boomer and Sooner

Band: The Pride of Oklahoma

Last conference title game appearance: 2020 (Big 12)

Returning starters: 14 (8 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory

1. A bounceback, but ...: Last year was the second time under Venables the Sooners followed a 6-7 season with a 10-3 campaign. That inconsistency stands out at a school that had a winning record every year from 1967 to 1993 and again from 1999 through 2021. The Sooners qualified for the College Football Playoff but didn't last long. Despite playing at home and outgaining Alabama by 100 yards, OU lost 34-24.

2. Run game blues: One clear area of needed improvement is the running



Oklahoma quarterback John Mateer and the Sooners hope to follow in the footsteps of the OU baseball team, which won a national championship this year. [WADE PAYNE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

game, where OU ranked 113th nationally last year. Despite holding Alabama to a paltry 1.1 yards per carry in the play-offs, the Sooners managed only 55 yards on 33 carries themselves. Venables is encouraged by the return of four offensive line starters and addition of transfer E'Marion Harris from Arkansas. "I think there's going to be a better version of all those guys. I think they're stronger, more confident. There's more chemistry, cohesion," Venables said.

3. Early challenges: Oklahoma's schedule appears somewhat frontloaded, with

three of its toughest games coming away from home at Michigan, at Georgia and in Dallas against Texas within the first half of the season. Venables expects significant challenges in all three. "Nobody's going to look past Oklahoma," Venables said. "We're going to bring out the best in everybody."

4. Inspiration from the diamond: The Sooners might not be favored to win a national title, which would be their first since 2000, but neither were their baseball counterparts before dogpiling in June. "Going to Omaha was so sick," quarterback John Mateer said. "Being a kid, I grew up playing baseball. I had that dream and obviously it didn't happen, but I got to go and watch. So that was super cool. I'm super proud of them."

Extra point

Oklahoma's game at Georgia will be the teams' second meeting. Their first was a memorable CFP semifinal at the Rose Bowl 10 years ago, a game the Bulldogs won 54-48 in overtime.

Game of the year

vs. Texas. Let's be honest, we could pick this Cotton Bowl showdown every year. But OU's 23-6 loss last year must have felt like a free-fall ride on a full stomach at the adjacent state fair.

Quotebook

"Oklahoma was my dream school since I was a kid. I made a video to myself saying, like when I was 7, saying I was going to go to Oklahoma. And I'm blessed that I made that happen, for sure."

— offensive lineman Eddy Pierre-Louis

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 14-2. It's Oklahoma, for cryin' out loud. Tough schedule or not, a playoff run should not surprise.

Worst-case scenario: 8-5. Five games in, three losses are perfectly plausible. Not much room for error after that.

— Craig Thomas

2025 results

(10-3, 6-2 SEC)
Illinois St.;W, 35-3
Michigan;W, 24-13
at Temple;W, 42-3
Auburn;W, 24-17
Kent St.;W, 44-0
Texas;L, 23-6
at South Carolina;W, 26-7
Ole Miss;L, 34-26
at Tennessee;W, 33-27

at Alabama;W, 23-21
Missouri;W, 17-6
LSU;W, 17-13
CFP first round
Alabama;L, 34-24

2026 schedule

Sept. 4;UTEP
Sept. 12;at Michigan
Sept. 19;New Mexico
Sept. 26;at Georgia

Oct. 10;vs. Texas
Oct. 17;Kentucky
Oct. 24;at Mississippi St.
Oct. 31;South Carolina
Nov. 7;at Florida
Nov. 14;Ole Miss
Nov. 21;Texas A&M
Nov. 28;at Missouri
(Oct. 10 game in Dallas.)

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Florida Gators

Coach's corner



Head coach: Jon Sumrall
Record: first season at Florida, 43-12 in 4 years overall
Age: 44
Hometown: Texarkana, Texas
You don't say: Sumrall grew up in Huntsville and played in high school at Grissom.
Coordinators: Buster Faulkner (offense), Brad White (defense)

Info booth

Location: Gainesville, Florida
Home: Ben Hill Griffin Stadium (88,548 capacity, first game 1930)
All-time record: 770-458-40
Mascots: Albert and Alberta
Band: The Pride of the Sunshine
Last conference title game appearance: 2020
Returning starters: 9 (4 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Is Sumrall the answer? Florida is in the midst of one of its worst stretches in program history. The Gators have had losing seasons four out of the past five years, and they jettisoned Billy Napier and brought in Sumrall, the latest hot commodity in the coaching ranks, to right what has been a sinking ship. He has been good in his past stops (Troy, Tulane). This is a step up. Will he be up to the challenge of fixing Florida football or will his tenure be short and sweet?

2. Finding offense: Florida scored more than 31 points only twice last season, and one of those games was against an FCS opponent in the season opener.



Quarterback Tramell Jones Jr. is considered a future Florida star, but will that future include the 2026 season? [JOHN RAOUX/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Sumrall brought in offensive coordinator Faulkner from Georgia Tech to spice things up and there are some weapons in the arsenal to build on. In Sumrall's

four seasons as a head coach, his Troy and Tulane teams scored 31 points or more a total of 28 times.

3. New-look defense: Florida was a little better than average defensively a year ago, allowing 24 points and 377 yards per game. White comes from Kentucky and takes over as DC. Led by junior Myles Graham, the linebackers are good and experienced, but Florida is unproven in the secondary and it will need to find a pass rush.

4. Quarterback: Who's the starting QB? Redshirt freshman Tramell Jones Jr. or Georgia Tech transfer Aaron Philo will be under center for the Gators in Sumrall's

debut. Philo has experience in Faulkner's system, but Jones is the future. Both bring run-pass options to the system and will be charged with keeping the chains moving.

Extra point

Florida was 1-8 in 2025 in games it failed to reach 24. During the Napier era, the Gators were 1-20 when they didn't score at least 24.

Game of the year

vs. Ole Miss: Florida will win its first two home games and has a toss-up at Auburn in its third game. When Ole Miss arrives on Sept. 26, fans will get a glimpse at just how much progress the Gators have made early in the Sumrall era. Or not.

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 7-6. The Gators steal wins at Auburn and Kentucky, and hold serve at home against South Carolina and Vanderbilt. That gets them to a mid-tier bowl game and there is hope among for a return to prominence among the fans.

Worst-case scenario: 4-8. Florida is the same team as last season — can't win on the road or at home in the SEC.

Did you know?

Florida was terrible converting on third down last season, converting just 34% of the time and managing just 227 first downs.

Quotebook

"I am a firm believer that the only disability in life is a bad attitude. I ain't going to have a bad attitude. When things go bad, I am still going to have a positive attitude. That's not purple skies and butterflies. We are going to have some moments that don't go our way. There will be adversity hit, but when adversity hits, I don't change. You know, things are going to go bad. When they go bad, how do you respond? You better respond with the right attitude."

— Sumrall

— Gregg Dewalt

2025 results

(4-8, 2-6 SEC)	
Long Island	W, 55-0
South Florida	L, 18-16
at LSU	L, 20-10
at Miami	L, 26-7
Texas	W, 29-21
at Texas A&M	L, 34-17
Mississippi St.	W, 23-21
Georgia	L, 24-20

at Kentucky	L, 38-7
at Ole Miss	L, 34-24
Tennessee	L, 31-11
Florida St.	W, 40-21

2026 schedule

Sept. 5
Sept. 12
Sept. 19
Sept. 26

Florida Atlantic
Campbell
at Auburn
Ole Miss

Oct. 3
Oct. 10
Oct. 17
Oct. 31
Nov. 7
Nov. 14
Nov. 21
Nov. 28
(Oct. 31 game at Jacksonville, Florida.)

at Missouri
South Carolina
at Texas
vs. Georgia
Oklahoma
at Kentucky
Vanderbilt
at Florida St.

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Missouri Tigers

Coach's corner



Head coach: Eli Drinkwitz

Record: 46-29 in 5 seasons at Missouri, 58-30 in 6 seasons overall

Age: 43

Hometown: Alma, Arkansas

Drinkwitz

You don't say: If Missouri qualifies for a bowl game this year, the run of seven bowl invites in a row — all under Drinkwitz — will match the longest streak in school history (2005-11).

Coordinators: Chip Lindsey (offense), Corey Batoon (defense)

Info booth

Location: Columbia, Missouri

Home: Faurot Field (65,000 capacity, first game 1926)

All-time record: 728-597-52

Mascot: Truman

Band: Marching Mizzou

Last conference title game appearance: 2014

Returning starters: 6 (6 offense, 0 defense)

Four-down territory

1. The big question: Running back Ahmad Hardy, Mizzou's biggest returning star, was shot in the leg at a concert in May. So what now? Hardy rushed for 1,649 yards and 16 touchdowns last year and was cleared in late July to play, but Drinkwitz cautioned patience. "We anticipate that he will make a recovery," Drinkwitz said. "What that recovery will look like after having a bullet strike you is still to be determined. We do not know exactly what the return-to-play progression is because there's not a lot



Missouri's Ahmad Hardy, who ran for 1,649 yards last year, is recovering from a shooting, but he's been cleared to play. [WADE PAYNE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

of literature on this."

2. On board from Oxford: Quarterback Austin Simmons started two games and appeared in six more last year for Ole Miss but was limited by an ankle injury,

and Trinidad Chambliss took over. Simmons completed 45 of 75 passes last season but threw five picks to only four touchdowns. "I think the best thing about Austin is his communication skills. He can communicate at a high level about what he's seeing, what he understands, how routes are similar to what he's done in the past that he really liked," Drinkwitz said.

3. New-look defense: Linebacker Nicholas Rodriguez was chosen as a captain despite starting only three games last year. But none of the current defensive players has significant starting experience, so the pick isn't surprising. Rodriguez is happy to lead his unit. "I'm

most excited for the physicality part of my game," he said. "I feel like, coming from a wrestling background, I have the opportunity to showcase that this year, being physical at the point of attack. I'm excited for that."

4. Playoff preferences: Drinkwitz likes the expanded College Football Playoff, but not exactly how teams are selected. "I am not for giving the committee more opportunities to put teams in the playoffs. As nice as I can be about it, committees are a bad idea in deciding on who should get in sports arenas. Sports are meant to be played and decided on the field," he said. "... I think each conference should have play-in games that create the opportunity to get into the playoffs."

Extra point

The Sept. 11 game at rival Kansas will be the Tigers' first visit to Lawrence in 21 years. Before the teams resumed playing each other last year, they met from 2007 through 2011 at Arrowhead Stadium.

Game of the year

vs. Texas A&M. This game is a transition point from what could be a 5-0 start to the much-tougher portion of the schedule. Best to avoid a result like last year's three-score thumping.

Quotebook

"I'm not sure that his riding horses was part of the recovery protocol that his surgeon had in place. But, (heck), John Wayne rode after he had been shot. He turned out all right."

— Drinkwitz, on Hardy's recovery

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 10-3. Mizzou has remained an often solid if rarely spectacular program under Drinkwitz. There's a playoff shot if you squint.

Worst-case scenario: 6-7. Wacky losses and letdowns might be more a thing of the program's past, but they don't call it "pulling a Mizzou" for nothing.

— Craig Thomas

2025 results

(8-5, 4-4 SEC)
Central Arkansas;W, 61-6
Kansas;W, 42-31
Louisiana-Lafayette;W, 52-10
South Carolina;W, 29-20
UMass;W, 42-6
Alabama;L, 27-24
at Auburn;(2OT) W, 23-17
at Vanderbilt;L, 17-10

Texas A&M;L, 38-17
Mississippi St.;W, 49-27
at Oklahoma;L, 17-6
at Arkansas;W, 31-17
Gator Bowl (Jacksonville, Fla.)
vs. Virginia;L, 13-7

2026 schedule

Sept. 3;Arkansas-Pine Bluff
Sept. 11;at Kansas

Sept. 19;Troy
Sept. 26;at Mississippi St.
Oct. 3;Florida
Oct. 10;Texas A&M
Oct. 17;at Ole Miss
Oct. 31;at Arkansas
Nov. 7;Texas
Nov. 14;at Georgia
Nov. 21;Kentucky
Nov. 28;Oklahoma

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach's corner



Beamer

Head coach: Shane Beamer
Record: 33-30 in 5 seasons
Age: 49
Hometown: Blacksburg, Virginia
You don't say: Technically, South Carolina is the fifth SEC coaching stop for Beamer, who had previous assistant stints at Tennessee, Mississippi State, Georgia and Oklahoma (before the Sooners joined the conference).
Coordinators: Kendall Briles (offense), Clayton White, Torrian Gray (defense)

Info booth

Location: Columbia, South Carolina
Home: Williams-Brice Stadium (77,549 capacity, first game 1934)
All-time record: 647-625-44
Mascot: Cocky
Band: Carolina Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2010
Returning starters: 11 (6 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. New OC: Mike Shula — remember that guy? — is out as the offensive coordinator and Briles is in, as Beamer tries to get more out an offense that was not very good a year ago. Briles has a reputation as being a top offensive mind, and the Gamecocks will need him to be at his best while trying to improve on last year's sluggish offense that scored 14 points or less five times in 12 games.
2. Sellers, Harbor dynamic duo: Beamer's team got welcome news when quarterback LaNorris Sellers opted



South Carolina quarterback LaNorris Sellers hopes to be more than a mouthful for foes this season. [SCOTT KINSER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

to return for another season. Sellers is a do-it-all talent who rushed for five touchdowns and passed for 13. He

completed 60.8% of his passes, but some of his inaccuracy was due to a porous offensive line that had him on the run. Nyck Harbor caught 20 passes, including six for touchdowns, and averaged 20 yards per catch. He gives Sellers a home-run hitter.
3. Getting to the QB: Dylan Stewart has a knack for disrupting plays in the backfield, as evidenced by his 4.5 sacks and eight tackles for loss in 11 games. His presence will give opposing offensive coordinators something to think about in pregame preparations.
4. The future is now? Beamer is 33-30 in

five seasons with South Carolina. After going 9-4 in 2024, South Carolina took a step back in 2025 with only four wins. Can Beamer survive if the Gamecocks don't improve in 2026? Unlikely.

Extra point

South Carolina went all-in on the transfer portal, bringing in 25 transfers. Among the best were OL Jacarrius Peak from North Carolina State and receiver Nitro Tuggle from Purdue, who gives Sellers another threat on the outside along with Harbor.

Game of the year

vs. Mississippi State: South Carolina will win its first two games — Kent State and Towson. Then, Mississippi State comes to Columbia. It's a must-win game for Beamer and company if they want to have any chance of becoming bowl eligible because the rest of the schedule ain't no cakewalk.

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 5-7. Assuming South Carolina can win those first three games, it's hard to find more than two more wins on the schedule.
Worst-case scenario: 3-9. Better win those first three games because a nine-game losing streak after Sept. 19 is entirely possible, even with a rebuilding Kentucky and Arkansas on the schedule.

Did you know?

In 2025, South Carolina lost five games in which it either led or trailed by one score or less going into the fourth quarter.

Quotebook

"It's just a matter of like starting over. I built these relationships got to know these guys, these coaches and all that. There's no need for me to go somewhere else that's not home for me, where I can go for a year and, like you said, enter the portal. There's no point in that. Stay here, learn the system, be consistent with the system and these guys."
— Sellers on why he hasn't explored the transfer portal

— Gregg Dewalt

2025 results

(4-8, 1-7 SEC)
vs. Virginia Tech
South Carolina St.
Vanderbilt
at Missouri
Kentucky
at LSU
Oklahoma
Alabama

W, 24-11
W, 38-10
L, 31-7
L, 29-20
W, 35-13
L, 20-10
L, 26-7
L, 29-22

at Ole Miss
at Texas A&M
Coastal Carolina
Clemson

2026 schedule

Sept. 5
Sept. 12
Sept. 19
Sept. 26

L, 30-14
L, 31-30
W, 51-7
L, 28-14
Nov. 7
Nov. 14
Nov. 21
Nov. 28

Kent State
Towson
Mississippi St.
at Alabama

Kentucky
at Florida
Tennessee
at Oklahoma
Texas A&M
at Arkansas
Georgia
at Clemson

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Vanderbilt Commodores

Coach's corner



Lea
Head coach: Clark Lea
Record: 26-36 in 5 years
Age: 44
Hometown: Nashville
You don't say: Last season was one for the Vanderbilt record books. The Commodores posted the program's first 10-win season, finished tied for second in the SEC at 6-2 and spent much of the season in the national rankings. That success earned Lea a contract extension, but the challenge now is avoiding a step backward after losing quarterback Diego Pavia. Vanderbilt players insist the culture — not one player — is the foundation, repeatedly describing the Commodores as a "player-led program" during SEC Media Days.
Coordinators: Tim Beck (offense), Steve Gregory (defense)

Info booth

Location: Nashville
Home: FirstBank Stadium (40,350 capacity, first game 1981)
All-time record: 635-674-50
Mascot: Mr. Commodore
Band: The Spirit of Gold
Last conference title game appearance: Never
Returning starters: 11 (5 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Life after Diego: Replacing Diego Pavia won't be easy. The quarterback who helped engineer Vanderbilt's rise is gone, leaving the offense in new hands. But the Commodores insist the expectation hasn't changed. Running back Sedrick Alexander said the message



Vanderbilt running back Sedrick Alexander and the Commodores want to show their recent success was no Diego Pavia-fueled fluke. [WADE PAYNE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

remains simple: "Go 1-0" every day, while receiver Junior Sherrill believes Vanderbilt's player-led culture is strong enough to keep the program moving forward.
2. New expectations: Last year's 10-3 finish changed the conversation around the program. The Commodores are no longer trying to convince people they belong — they're trying to prove they

can stay. Alexander said last season is "last year," emphasizing every team is different, but the mission remains the same: keep stacking double-digit-win seasons instead of celebrating just one.
3. Leadership from within: Lea spent years building Vanderbilt's culture. Now the players say it belongs to them. Sherrill described the Commodores as a player-led program where teammates hold one another accountable, while defensive lineman Issa Ouattara says "relatedness is our edge," pointing to the care and trust inside the locker room as Vanderbilt's greatest strength.
4. Defense travels: Vanderbilt returns several key defensive pieces, including linebacker Bryan Longwell, safety C.J. Heard and edge rusher Miles Capers. If the Commodores are going to stay in the SEC race while breaking in a new quarterback, the defense will have to carry its

share of the load.
Extra point
Suddenly, "Anchor Down" carries a lot more weight than it used to. The players aren't talking about defending last year's success — they're talking about building on it. Whether it's Alexander preaching consistency, Ouattara emphasizing leadership or Sherrill describing a player-led locker room, the common theme is that the Commodores believe the culture, not one magical season, is what has changed the program.

Game of the year

at Georgia: If Vanderbilt wants to prove last season wasn't lightning in a bottle, this is the game. Junior Sherrill called Georgia's defense the toughest challenge Vanderbilt will face, citing the Bulldogs' "smart defense" and exotic looks. If the Commodores can survive Athens — or even make the Bulldogs sweat — it would be the clearest sign Vanderbilt belongs among the SEC's upper tier rather than simply enjoying the afterglow of a breakthrough season.

Quotebook

"It's more of a player-led program now. We don't have coaches telling us we can do this, we need to do that. It's more so players getting on each other and holding each other accountable."
— Sherrill on Vanderbilt's culture

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 10-3. Curtis grows up in a hurry, the defense keeps Vanderbilt in every game and the player-led culture the Commodores rave about proves it wasn't just Media Days talk. Another 10-win season suddenly makes "the new Vanderbilt" sound a lot less crazy.
Worst-case scenario: 6-7. Replacing a Heisman finalist proves tougher than expected, the brutal SEC schedule exposes the growing pains and everyone is reminded that sustaining success is much harder than creating it. One magical season is a story; two is a program.
— Shane Herrmann

2025 results

(10-3, 6-2 SEC)					
Charleston Southern	W, 45-3	at Texas	L, 34-31	Sept. 19	
at Virginia Tech	W, 44-20	Auburn	(OT) W, 45-38	Sept. 26	
at South Carolina	W, 31-7	Kentucky	W, 45-17	Oct. 3	
Georgia St.	W, 70-21	at Tennessee	W, 45-24	Oct. 10	
Utah State	W, 55-35	ReliaQuest Bowl (Tampa, Fla.)		Oct. 17	
at Alabama	L, 30-14	vs. Iowa	L, 34-27	Oct. 24	
LSU	W, 31-24			Nov. 7	
Missouri	W, 17-10			Nov. 14	
				Nov. 21	
				Nov. 28	

2026 schedule

N.C. State	
at Auburn	
at Georgia	
Ole Miss	
Arkansas	
at Kentucky	
at Mississippi St.	
Alabama	
at Florida	
Tennessee	

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach's corner



Head coach: Will Stein
Record: First season
Age: 36
Hometown: Louisville, Kentucky
You don't say: Stein played the same position (quarterback) at the same high school (Trinity) and college (Louisville) as current Louisville coach Jeff Brohm.
Coordinators: Joe Sloan (offense), Jay Bateman (defense)

Info booth

Location: Lexington, Kentucky
Home: Kroger Field (61,000 capacity, first game 1973)
All-time record: 655-662-44
Mascot: Wildcat, Scratch
Band: Wildcat Marching Band
Last conference title game appearance: Never
Returning starters: 5 (1 offense, 4 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Where there's a Will: Ex-Oregon offensive coordinator Stein takes over for Mark Stoops, the longest-tenured head coach in UK history and the most successful since at least Fran Curci in the 1970s. Fans soured on Stoops over the past two seasons, and Stein's early recruiting success and youthful energy have Big Blue Nation eager for football season. Stein, who walked on at Louisville despite UK fandom as a child, is a first-time head coach with plenty to learn. But he has the benefit of a fanbase that is much more patient in the fall than in the winter.



Kentucky defensive back Ty Bryant, who tied for the SEC lead in interceptions last year, and the Wildcats hope to make rookie head coach Will Stein a success. [STEW MILNE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

2. Style shift? Some Kentucky fans grew tired of the methodical, rushing-oriented offensive style Stoops preferred and hope Stein's arrival represents a return to a faster-paced, passing-heavy approach (if not exactly the Air Raid of the 1990s). Leading that effort is quarterback Kenny Minchey, a Notre Dame transfer who reportedly came close to starting for the Irish last season. It won't take much to surpass last year's quarterback play. Transfer Zach Calzada was a bust, and hyped local product Cutter Boley was shaky before eventually transferring to Arizona State.

3. No holding back: Ty Bryant, a safety, tied for first in the conference last season with four interceptions and attributes that to trusting his instincts and technique. He'll have a new defensive coordinator this year in Bateman, who spent the past two years as an assistant at Texas A&M and the two years before that at Florida. "He has an aggressive style of defense," Bryant said. "He's a guy who is going to get after you and we're going to send the blitz and be sticky on the back end."

4. On the bright side: Kentucky's schedule, while difficult, is probably not the nightmare it could be. With the caveat that preseason polls are merely guesses, UK avoids the three teams at the top of the SEC preseason poll (Georgia, Texas and Ole Miss) and has home games against the teams picked 4 through 6 (LSU, Oklahoma and Alabama).

Extra point

Kentucky ranked in the top 5 in the SEC in scoring defense every year from 2018 through 2022. In the three years since then, it finished 8th, 10th and 13th in that

category.

Game of the year

at South Carolina. UK returns to Williams-Brice one year after an embarrassing defeat there that foreshadowed the end of an era. Shane Beamer has beaten the Cats four straight times. Perhaps Stein will have better luck than Mark Stoops did in recent years.

Quotebook

"I think because of me, to be honest."

— Stein, on why he believes Kentucky can win big, citing his experience coaching and recruiting

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 7-5. This time next year Stein would be the most popular man in Lexington ... unless Mark Pope makes the Final Four.

Worst-case scenario: 3-9. It would still be one win more than Stoops' first year.

— Craig Thomas

2025 results

(5-7, 2-6 SEC)	
Toledo	W, 24-16
Ole Miss	L, 30-23
Eastern Michigan	W, 48-23
at South Carolina	L, 35-13
at Georgia	L, 35-14
Texas	(OT) L, 16-13
Tennessee	L, 56-34
at Auburn	W, 10-3

Florida	W, 38-7
Tennessee Tech	W, 42-10
at Vanderbilt	L, 45-17
at Louisville	L, 41-0

2026 schedule

Sept. 5	Youngstown St.
Sept. 12	Alabama
Sept. 19	Texas A&M
Sept. 26	South Alabama

Oct. 3
Oct. 10
Oct. 17
Oct. 24
Nov. 7
Nov. 14
Nov. 21
Nov. 28

at South Carolina
LSU
at Oklahoma
Vanderbilt
at Tennessee
Florida
at Missouri
Louisville

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Coach's corner



Lebby

Head coach: Jeff Lebby
Record: 7-18 in 2 seasons
Age: 42
Hometown: Andrews, Texas

You don't say: Lebby enters Year 3 after a 5-8 season that included a 4-0 start and a first bowl appearance since 2022. The biggest win of the offseason was retention — key pieces chose to stay — plus the return of Zach Arnett as defensive coordinator. Kamario Taylor is now the full-time starter after impressive late-season appearances. The message is simple: take the next step and stop coming close.

Coordinators: Philip Montgomery, Kevin Johns (offense), Zach Arnett, Matt Brock (defense)

Info booth

Location: Starkville, Mississippi
Home: Davis Wade Stadium (61,337 capacity, first game 1914)
All-time record: 610-597-37
Mascot: Bully
Band: Famous Maroon Band
Last conference title game appearance: 1998
Returning starters: 11 (6 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Kamario's offense: The highest-rated quarterback recruit in program history is finally the full-time starter. Kamario Taylor wants to start a minimum of 13 games and stay healthy. With Fluff Bothwell expected to handle the bulk of the carries and Anthony Evans



Mississippi State quarterback Kamario Taylor hopes to keep both opponents and injuries at arm's length this season. [ROGELIO V. SOLIS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

III chasing the single-season receiving record, the offense should be more explosive and consistent than the past two seasons. If the dual-threat element comes fully online, defenses will have a much harder time stacking the box or sitting on routes.
2. Arnett is back: Arnett's return as defensive coordinator is the biggest staff

move. Lebby wanted someone who has called defense in this league and can create stress. Combined with Brock, the defensive staff has experience. The secondary and lines of scrimmage were portal priorities. Early returns suggest the unit will be more aggressive and better at generating negative plays than it was a year ago.
3. Tired of coming close: Players repeatedly said they are done with near-misses. Last year's Arkansas win showed they can finish. The culture talk centers on attention to detail, finishing drives and closing games. Retention of key veterans who lived the close losses is viewed as a major positive. That collective memory of almosts is now being used as fuel rather than frustration.
4. Roster upgrade: Lebby said the roster is in a much better place than the previous two seasons. Strong portal work on

both lines of scrimmage and in the secondary, plus the return of productive pieces, gives the staff genuine confidence that the outcome can change on Saturdays. The depth chart simply has more proven SEC bodies than it did at this time a year ago.

Extra point

Starkville's community and cowbell atmosphere remain real advantages. Players talk about the connection and love in the small college town. If the on-field product improves, Davis Wade will be loud again — and the TikTok dancers might even get the coach in a video (though Lebby already ruled that out).

Game of the year

vs. Alabama: The Oct. 3 home date against the Crimson Tide is the clearest measuring-stick game. Anthony Evans III said he's never beaten Alabama and wants the get-back. A competitive showing — or better — would prove the next step is real.

Quotebook

"We're tired of coming close. So that's something we preach all the time. With three games being one play away, just finishing, paying attention to the little details. That's going to change the ending result of everything."

— Evans

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 7-5. Taylor stays healthy and plays 13 games, the offense hits its explosive potential, Arnett's defense creates enough negative plays, and the Bulldogs steal two or three SEC wins they had no business winning. A second straight bowl would feel like real progress.
Worst-case scenario: 4-8. The young offensive line and secondary take longer to gel than expected, the tough midseason stretch (Alabama, LSU, Oklahoma, Texas) becomes a four-game skid, and the close games keep slipping away. Year 3 still ends with more questions than answers.
 — Shane Herrmann

2025 results

(5-8, 1-7 SEC)		Georgia	L, 41-21	Sept. 26
at Southern Miss	W, 34-17	at Missouri	L, 49-27	Oct. 3
Arizona St.	W, 24-20	Ole Miss	L, 38-19	Oct. 17
Alcorn St.	W, 63-0	Duke's Mayo Bowl (Charlotte, N.C.)		
Northern Illinois	W, 38-10	vs. Wake Forest	L, 43-29	Oct. 24
Tennessee	L, 41-34			Oct. 31
at Texas A&M	L, 31-9			Nov. 7
at Florida	L, 23-21			Nov. 14
Texas	L, 45-38			Nov. 17
at Arkansas	W, 38-35			Nov. 21

2026 schedule

Sept. 5	Louisiana-Monroe	Nov. 28
Sept. 12	at Minnesota	
Sept. 19	at South Carolina	

Missouri
Alabama
at LSU
Oklahoma
at Texas
Vanderbilt
Auburn
Tennessee Tech
at Ole Miss

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

Arkansas Razorbacks

Coach's corner



Silverfield

Head coach: Ryan Silverfield
Record: first season at Arkansas, 50-25 in 6 seasons overall
Age: 45
Hometown: Jacksonville, Florida

You don't say: Silverfield inherited a 2-10 mess after Sam Pittman was fired midseason and Bobby Petrino finished the year 0-7 as interim. Nearly 80 new players and an almost entirely new staff arrived with him. The former Memphis coach brings Tim Cramsey (offense) and Ron Roberts (defense) from his previous stops and has already flipped in-state talent while retaining key pieces like Quincy Rhodes Jr. Success in Year 1 will be measured in effort, discipline and taking care of the football more than final record.

Coordinators: Tim Cramsey (offense), Ron Roberts (defense)

Info booth

Location: Fayetteville, Arkansas
Home: Donald W. Reynolds Razorback Stadium (76,000 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: 5 (3 offense, 2 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Clean slate, clean house: Silverfield has overhauled nearly everything. The message is simple: play with better



Arkansas running back Braylen Russell and the Razorbacks welcome new coach Ryan Silverfield to Hog Heaven. [MICHAEL WOODS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

effort, more discipline and take care of the football. Those were the exact deficiencies he saw when he put on the old Arkansas film. Players who stayed talk about a new culture of accountability — “get with the program or get going.”
2. Quarterback battle is open: KJ Jackson and AJ Hill are competing for the

starting job. Silverfield says both are intelligent, hardworking and capable of leading SEC wins. The decision will stretch into camp. Whichever one wins it inherits an offense that wants to run the ball and take shots downfield under Cramsey.
3. Running game foundation: Arkansas finished second in the SEC in rushing last year even in a lost season. Silverfield believes he has seven or eight offensive linemen who can play at an SEC level and a deep backfield headlined by Memphis transfer Sutton Smith (wearing No. 5 in honor of Darren McFadden) plus Braylen Russell and others. If the Hogs can run it, everything else opens up.
4. Underdog chip is real: The Razorbacks sit at the bottom of most preseason rankings and coach rankings. Silverfield

embraces it. “Keep doubting me.” Players echo the same sentiment — every ranking is fuel. With a rabid fan base that still filled the stadium at 92% capacity last year, the atmosphere in Fayetteville remains an advantage if the team buys in.

Extra point

Silverfield’s 5-1 record against current SEC head coaches and solid Power 4 results at Memphis give him credibility that pure rankings don’t capture. The unknowns are real — new quarterback, massive roster turnover, nine-game SEC slate — but the controllables (effort, discipline, ball security) are the ones he keeps hammering.

Game of the year

vs. Georgia: The SEC opener in Fayetteville on Sept. 19 is the first true measuring stick. Hosting the Bulldogs early forces the new staff and the overhauled roster to show whether the culture change is real or just talk. A competitive showing — or an upset — would rewrite the narrative around Silverfield’s first year overnight.

Quotebook

“Keep doubting me. ... I’ve been doubted my whole life. That’s not a bad thing.”

— Silverfield

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 7-5. The quarterback settles, the offensive line protects and runs it, the defense under Roberts shows noticeable improvement in effort and discipline, and the Hogs steal a couple of conference wins they have no business winning. A bowl game in Year 1 would feel like a renaissance.
Worst-case scenario: 3-9. The massive roster turnover shows every Saturday, the quarterback battle never produces a clear answer, and the SEC schedule is as unforgiving as everyone expects. Progress is measured in closer losses and fewer penalties rather than wins, and patience is tested early.

— Shane Herrmann

2025 results

(2-10, 0-8 SEC)	
Alabama A&M	W, 52-7
Arkansas St.	W, 56-14
at Ole Miss	L, 41-35
at Memphis	L, 32-31
Notre Dame	L, 56-13
at Tennessee	L, 34-31
Texas A&M	L, 45-42
Auburn	L, 33-24

Mississippi St.	L, 38-35
at LSU	L, 23-22
at Texas	L, 52-37
Missouri	L, 31-17

2026 schedule

Sept. 5	North Alabama
Sept. 12	at Utah
Sept. 19	Georgia
Sept. 26	Tulsa

Oct. 3	at Texas A&M
Oct. 10	Tennessee
Oct. 17	at Vanderbilt
Oct. 31	Missouri
Nov. 7	at Auburn
Nov. 14	South Carolina
Nov. 21	at Texas
Nov. 28	LSU

SOUTHWESTERN ATHLETIC CONFERENCE

Alabama A&M Bulldogs

Coach's corner



Shade

Head coach: Sam Shade
Record: 4-8 in 1 year at A&M, 22-23 in 4 years overall
Age: 53
Hometown: Birmingham
You don't say: Last year's 1-7 SWAC record was the Bulldogs' worst since joining the league in 1998. That year, A&M's games didn't count in the SWAC standings.
Coordinators: Dennis Alexander (offense), Chris Shelling (defense)

Info booth

Location: Huntsville
Home: Louis Crews Stadium (21,000 capacity, first game 1996)
All-time record: 460-445-33
Mascot: Butch
Band: Maroon and White
Last conference title game appearance: 2021 spring
Returning starters: 13 (5 offense, 8 defense)

Four-down territory

1. QB conundrum: A&M had two 1,000-yard passers last season and both return. Cornelious Brown IV had 1,060 yards and seven touchdowns in four games before a season-ending midseason injury. Eric Handley, though he had played before Brown's injury, finished with 1,360 yards and eight touchdowns. Handley's best game, ironically, was before Brown's season ended. Handley was 27-of-40 for 355 yards and three touchdowns against Bethune-Cookman. In the season's final five games after Brown's injury, Handley had three TD passes. Of course, Alabama A&M also had two 1,000-yard passers in 2024 with Brown and Xavier Lankford.
2. Kickin' and grinnin': Kicker David Faulk made an immediate impact last season. As a freshman. As a sophomore, the Bulldogs are expecting more. Faulk was a first-team preseason All-SWAC pick. All he did last year was go 10-of-12 on field goals with a long of 47 yards. Both of Faulk's misses were in the final two games of the year. He missed his

first try at Texas Southern, a 29-yarder, before hitting three field goals, one of which was the 47-yarder. A week later, he missed on the final play of the first half. From 50 yards.
3. Need some defense: The Bulldogs had two players land preseason first-team All-SWAC honors, both on defense. Linebacker Wyatt Wright and defensive lineman Arenza Davis drew honors, but A&M has much room for improvement over last season when the Bulldogs ranked a rank 107th in FCS total defense. Other teams, ahem, saw red and charged their way to an average of 423.8 yards per game.
4. Optimism not high: Alabama A&M landed in fifth place in the Eastern Division in preseason SWAC voting, ahead of only ghastly Mississippi Valley State. Even more, ahem, stinging for the Bulldogs, Alabama State was picked to win the division.

Extra point

The Bulldogs gave up 6.5 yards per defensive play last season. Egads.

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 6-6. If Brown reemerges at quarterback, the Bulldogs should scrounge around and discover a .500 season. Unfortunately, that will include a loss to Alabama State.
Worst-case scenario: 2-10. Finishing the season against Mississippi Valley State will provide a nice offseason boost to A&M's spirits, but those spirits may be irreparable if Alabama State treats the Bulldogs anything like last year.

Did you know?

Alabama A&M will have a jersey-patch sponsor this year, making the Bulldogs the first HBCU with such an agreement. Omni2Max Inc. is a technical services firm.

Quotebook

"We are further along because our returning players understand the expectations and the standard we have established."

— Shade

— A. Stacy Long



Cornelious Brown IV and the Alabama A&M Bulldogs are aiming to find the end zone more this year and avoid last year's agony. [ALABAMA A&M ATHLETICS]

2025 results

(4-8, 1-7 SWAC)
at Arkansas L, 52-7
Alcorn St. W, 41-31
at Tennessee St. W, 23-21
Lane W, 49-7
at Bethune-Cookman L, 41-34
vs. Jackson St. L, 57-24
Miss. Valley St. W, 45-25
vs. Alabama St. L, 56-13
at Grambling St. L, 13-10

Prairie View A&M L, 48-5
Florida A&M L, 26-23
Texas Southern L, 24-7

2026 schedule

Aug. 29 vs. Howard Miles
Sept. 5 Tennessee St.
Sept. 12 Bowie St.
Sept. 19 at Florida A&M
Sept. 26 vs. Jackson St.
Oct. 3

Oct. 10 Bethune-Cookman
Oct. 17 Grambling St.
Oct. 31 vs. Alabama St.
Nov. 7 at Prairie View A&M
Nov. 14 Texas Southern
Nov. 21 at Miss. Valley St.
Aug. 29 game in Atlanta. Oct. 3 game in Mobile. Oct. 31 game in Birmingham.

CONFERENCE USA

Jacksonville State Gamecocks

Coach's corner



Head coach: Charles Kelly
Record: 9-5 in 1 year
Age: 58
Hometown: Ozark
You don't say: Kelly won his first national championship as a member of Florida State's coaching staff in 2013.
Coordinators: Taylor Housewright (offense), Brian Williams (defense)

Info booth

Location: Jacksonville
Home: Burgess-Snow Field at AMFirst Stadium (22,500, first game 1947)
All-time record: 601-377-4
Mascot: Cocky
Band: Marching Southerners
Last conference title game appearance:

2025
Returning starters: 9 (4 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

- 1. Don't kick him to the curb:** Garrison Rippa was selected as the CUSA special teams player of the year. Rippa converted 21 of 28 field goals and was 40-of-40 on extra points while adding 32 touchbacks on 67 kickoffs. He connected on four field goals of at least 50 yards, including two from a school record-tying 52 yards. Rippa drilled game-winning field goals at the buzzer against Sam Houston and Western Kentucky, while his late 45-yard kick secured another crucial victory at UTEP.
- 2. Can anyone reel in Creel?** The Gamecocks have a diverse quarterback returning in Caden Creel, who eclipsed 1,500 yards passing and 1,000 yards rushing in just nine starts last season.



Quarterback Caden Creel was a threat both running and passing for Jacksonville State last season. [MICHAEL WYKE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

His diverse ability in running and passing makes the Gamecocks difficult to defend. If he follows up with another stellar season, JSU should win the CUSA title.

3. Don't throw on me: The Gamecocks return two of the best secondary players in the league in cornerback Tre'Quon Fegans and safety Caleb Nix. The duo combined for five interceptions, 12 pass breakups and three fumble recoveries.

4. New offensive coordinator: Clint Trickett, last year's OC, moved on to

an SEC job at Arkansas and Housewright, considered a rising star, was elevated from coaching JSU's tight ends. He likes a physical, downhill running game while utilizing his quarterback on designed runs and run-pass options. Creel shouldn't miss a beat under Housewright's tutelage.

Extra point

Since joining the FBS, the Gamecocks have played in three bowl games, winning twice. All three games have been decided by four points or less.

Game of the year

at North Dakota State: The king of FCS is moving up to FBS this season and with it comes lofty expectations. A season-opening win by the Gamecocks in a tough environment could be a springboard to another successful season.

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 11-3. The stars

are aligned for the Gamecocks to win another CUSA title.

Worst-case scenario: 8-4. JSU was 6-5 in games decided by nine points or less last year. If the Gamecocks can't win close ones, there won't be a postseason.

Did you know?

JSU's first football team, the Eagle Owls, was formed in the late 19th century. Before the 1947 season, Jacksonville State changed its colors from blue and gold to red and white and their nickname to the Fighting Gamecocks.

Quotebook

"We're going to play all the way to the echo of the whistle, but we are not going to take cheap shots. We are not going to taunt the other team. That's not the way you play."

— Kelly

— Gregg Dewalt

2025 results

(9-5, 7-1 CUSA)
at Central Florida
Liberty
at Georgia Southern
Murray St.
at Southern Miss
at Sam Houston
Delaware
at Middle Tennessee
at UTEP

L 17-10
W 34-24
L, 41-34
W, 45-10
L, 42-25
W, 29-27
W, 38-25
W, 24-21
W, 30-27

Kennesaw St. W, 35-26
at Florida International L, 27-21
Western Kentucky W, 37-34
CUSA championship
Kennesaw St. L, 19-15
IS4S Salute to Veterans Bowl (Montgomery)
vs. Troy W, 17-13
2026 schedule
Aug. 29 at North Dakota St.

Sept. 5
Sept. 12
Sept. 19
Sept. 26
Oct. 7
Oct. 13
Oct. 28
Nov. 7
Nov. 14
Nov. 21
Nov. 28

Eastern Kentucky
at Ohio
Georgia Southern
Middle Tennessee
at Kennesaw St.
Florida International
at New Mexico St.
Sam Houston
at Western Kentucky
Missouri St.
at Delaware

AMERICAN ATHLETIC CONFERENCE

UAB Blazers

Coach's corner



Head coach: Alex Mortensen
Record: 2-4 in 1 year as interim coach
Age: 40
Hometown: Atlanta
You don't say: Mortensen is the son of the late Chris Mortensen, who was an NFL analyst for ESPN.
Coordinators: Mortensen, Kevin Garver (offense), Todd Grantham (defense)

Info booth

Location: Birmingham
Home: Protective Stadium (47,100 capacity, first game 2021)
All-time record: 180-204-2
Mascot: Blaze
Band: Marching Blazers
Last conference title game appearance: 2020
Returning starters: 3 (2 offense, 1 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Mort report: Alex Mortensen, after taking over as interim coach for the final six games of 2025, landed the full-time job a week after the season ended. The Blazers were only 2-4 under Mortensen, but his interim debut was a win over nationally ranked Memphis. Still the Blazers liked what they saw. "I have had the opportunity to work with a lot of different coaches, and I can say without a doubt that his football intellect is by far the best I've been around," quarterback Ryder Burton said.

2. Burton for certain: Burton led UAB in that 31-24 win over Memphis, completing 20 of 27 passes for 251 yards and



UAB quarterback Ryder Burton and the Blazers are looking to curtail the program's recent slide with new head coach Alex Mortensen. [MIKE STEWART/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

three touchdowns. He threw for 708 yards and seven touchdowns against five interceptions last year, primarily as

a backup. Now, Burton replaces graduated two-year starter Jalen Kitna, who totaled almost 2,500 yards but just 13 touchdowns and 10 interceptions last season.

3. Cowboy up: Three first-year Blazers followed defensive coordinator Todd Grantham to Birmingham from Oklahoma State. Linebacker Ike Esonwune and defensive backs Jo'Tavion Pierce and Draden Fullbright are expected to be impact players with the Blazers. Esonwune played in all 12 games last year for the Cowboys, making 31 tackles. Fullbright saw limited playing

time last year. Pierce was a true freshman and didn't play, but he's familiar with the state. He graduated from Catholic-Montgomery.

4. Brown delivers: Receiver Kaleb Brown should be eager for the season. After a spring 2025 injury, Brown made just 17 catches last year for 255 yards and two touchdowns in nine games. However, he was just one of three UAB players to land preseason all-American Athletic honors – and the other two are offensive linemen. Brown was a third-team choice.

Extra point

Senior kicker Jonah Delange, who was the AAC's special teams player of the year in 2024, wasn't needed as much last year, but he still did well. Delange was 10-of-14 on field goals and, for a second straight season, didn't miss an extra point. He's 60-for-60 over the last two years.

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 5-7. The Blazers can yearn for the good ol' days of Bill Clark, who is the only coach to post a winning record as a full-time UAB coach. Maybe Mortensen can get there.

Worst-case scenario: 2-10. Don't fret, UAB fans. Basketball season isn't that far away.

Did you know?

UAB and Samford are separated by barely five miles, but the Blazers and Bulldogs will have just the second meeting. It likely took time for UAB to get past Oct. 31, 1992 when Samford delivered a 49-3 beatdown.

Quotebook

"I think there are a lot of people in Birmingham, whether they graduated from here or not, and we want them to come on this journey with us. It's a chicken-or-the-egg thing. We need to go have success and play well to probably create more support, but we would love for people to come on, get involved now."

— Mortensen

— A. Stacy Long

2025 results

(4-8, 2-6 American)
Alabama St.
at Navy
Akron
at Tennessee
Army
at Florida Atlantic
Memphis
at UConn

at Rice	L, 24-17	Oct. 3
North Texas	L, 53-24	Oct. 10
South Florida	L, 48-18	Oct. 15
at Tulsa	W, 31-24	Oct. 31
		Nov. 7
		Nov. 14
Sept. 3	at Illinois	Nov. 21
Sept. 12	Louisiana-Monroe	Nov. 28
Sept. 19	at Louisiana-Lafayette	
Sept. 25	Navy	

2026 schedule

SUN BELT CONFERENCE

Troy Trojans

Coach's corner



Parker

Head coach: Gerard Parker
Record: 12-14 in 2 years, 13-20 overall
Age: 45
Hometown: Louisa, Kentucky
You don't say: Troy scored five defensive touchdowns last season, a number that ranked third nationally.

Coordinators: Adam Austin (offense), Dontae Wright (defense)

Info booth

Location: Troy
Home: Veterans Memorial Stadium (30,000 capacity, first game 1950)
All-time record: 588-444-28
Mascot: T-Roy
Band: Sound of the South
Last conference title game appearance: 2025
Returning starters: 7 (6 offense, 1 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Preseason favorites: The Trojans, after winning a third Sun Belt division championship in four seasons, were labeled as the West Division favorite again this year. Troy collected 12 of 14 possible first-place votes from the league's coaches. Last year, the Trojans lost 31-14 in the Sun Belt title game at James Madison before taking a 17-13 loss to Jacksonville State in Montgomery's Salute to Veterans Bowl.

2. Keeping Goose uncooked: Troy quarterback Goose Crowder had an injury-limited season last year. He was hurt on the first series in a loss and missed the next seven games. Now, Crowder is back and is a preseason second-team All-Sun Belt choice. Crowder finished with 1,300 yards passing with 11 touchdowns.

3. Kilcrease, too: Backup quarterback Tucker Kilcrease, who stepped in for an injured Crowder last year, finished with 1,500 yards passing and nine touchdowns with six interceptions. Five of the touchdowns, one

shy of tying the school's record, were part of a 415-yard effort at Texas State.

4. Line in the sand: Troy led the nation in one ignominious category last season. The Trojans and their ole offensive line surrendered 59 sacks. They had a 10-sack advantage over the next-highest sack total, which was Ball State's. Of the six offensive linemen to start at least seven games last year, three return for Troy.

Extra point

Punter Evan Crenshaw earned multiple All-American honors last season, the first Trojan to do such since the school jumped to FBS in 2001. He averaged 45.7 yards on his 68 punts last year with 21 going at least 50 yards and 29 downed inside the 20.

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 10-4. Except for their cash-checking exercise at Missouri, the Trojans could otherwise be unbeaten headed to James Madison on a late-October Thursday. If so, maybe Troy can avoid a second straight bowl trip to tropical paradise Montgomery.

Worst-case scenario: 6-7. The offensive line (again) finishes with more jumping jacks than effective blocks, the quarterbacks (again) stay well-acquainted with the turf, and the Trojans longingly remember their 2025 experience in the Capital City.

Did you know?

New Troy offensive coordinator Adam Austin was at Tarleton State last year, where the Texans tied for the highest scoring offense in the FCS. Tarleton, bolstered by a 61-0 butchering of North Alabama, and Alabama State each averaged 42.4 points.

Quotebook

"It's Year 3 for us, for a lot of us on staff, and for me personally. It just feels totally different."

— Parker

— A. Stacy Long



Goose Crowder and all Troy quarterbacks, sacked so many times last year, will try to stay upright more often this season. [JACOB KUPFERMAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

2025 results

(8-6, 6-2 Sun Belt)	
Nicholls	W, 38-20
at Clemson	L, 27-16
Memphis	L, 28-7
at Buffalo	W, 21-17
South Alabama	(OT) W, 31-24
at Texas State	(OT) W, 48-41
at Louisiana-Monroe	W, 37-14
Louisiana-Lafayette	W, 35-23
Arkansas St.	L, 23-10

at Old Dominion	L, 33-0
Georgia St.	W, 31-19
at Southern Miss	W, 28-18
Sun Belt championship	
at James Madison	L, 31-14
Salute to Veterans Bowl (Montgomery)	
vs. Jacksonville St.	L, 17-13

2026 schedule

Sept. 5	Sam Houston
---------	-------------

Sept. 12	Alabama St.
Sept. 19	at Missouri
Sept. 26	at Utah State
Oct. 6	Southern Miss
Oct. 17	at Louisiana-Lafayette
Oct. 24	Louisiana-Monroe
Oct. 29	at James Madison
Nov. 7	Louisiana Tech
Nov. 14	at South Alabama
Nov. 21	Georgia Southern
Nov. 28	at Arkansas St.

SUN BELT CONFERENCE

South Alabama Jaguars

Coach's corner



Head coach: Major Applewhite

Record: 11-14 in 2 years at USA, 26-25 in 4 years overall

Age: 48
Hometown: Baton Rouge, La.

You don't say: Applewhite has three first-year assistants and three who are in their second season with the Jags.

Coordinators: Tim Rattay (offense), Todd Orlando, Jason Washington (defense)

Info booth

Location: Mobile
Home: Hancock Whitney Stadium (24,450 capacity, first game 2020)
All-time record: 94-106
Mascot: SouthPaw
Band: Jaguar Marching Band
Last conference title game appearance: never
Returning starters: 12 (8 offense, 4 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Bishop to king: Quarterback Bishop Davenport returns after starting all 12 games last year. He finished with over 2,000 yards passing with 12 touchdowns and six interceptions. But he also ran for 326 yards and nine scores. "The development of bishop has mainly been with his feet and his eyes," Applewhite said. "Tremendous athlete, great character, understands what we're trying to do. He can create plays with his feet."

2. Close calls: There was little separating South Alabama from the woeful



South Alabama receiver Anthony Eager and the Jags, after winning three of their final five games last year, look to turn the corner into a winning season. [MATTHEW HINTON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

record it posted last year and something more commendable. The Jaguars had six games decided by single digits

with four ending in a loss. USA, after opening with a 17-point win over FCS Morgan State, followed with a six-game losing streak. "Last season is last season," offensive lineman Kenton Jerido said. "With the way college football is now, we have a whole new set of players." The most galling loss was to Arkansas State, which kicked a final-play field goal to win 15-14. "We have to take care of the ball better and take the ball off people more," Applewhite said. "Too many times, we were clawing back. We need to come out of the gate faster."

3. Eager Beaver: Junior receiver Anthony Eager has appeared in 25 straight USA games. Last year, he caught 40 passes for 339 yards and one touchdown, but more is expected this year. He was one of four Jaguars to get a spot on the preseason All-Sun Belt team. All four were second-teamers.

4. Running men: For a second straight year, USA has to find a new leading rusher. Kentrel Bullock tied with Fluff Bothwell for the team's rushing lead in 2024 with 824 yards before Bothwell departed for Mississippi State. Last year, Bullock was the leading rusher with 1,085 yards and 14 touchdowns, but he was in NFL camp this summer with the Cincinnati Bengals. Keenan Phillips is the heir apparent after running for 605 yards and three TDs.

Extra point

The Jaguars are starting their sixth season with an every-game honor of a former player. Anthony Mostella, a 2009 team captain, died in a 2010 auto accident. Each season from 2010-17, USA awarded Mostella's No. 5 jersey to one player. Since then, the Jags have given it on a game-by-game basis.

Crystal ball

Best-case scenario: 7-6. If the Jags can steer more of those close games into the win column, a low-level bowl game isn't out of the question.

Worst-case scenario: 2-10. If they don't, the main bowl the Jaguars will see is the cereal one each morning.

Did you know?

South Alabama is in its 15th year as a FBS program.

Quotebook

"Very excited about getting ready to go. This is that stage where everybody is getting bigger, faster stronger. Everybody loves each other. Everybody's record is 0-0, but I really feel good about a lot of things."

— Applewhite

— A. Stacy Long

2025 results

(4-8, 3-5 Sun Belt)

Morgan St. W, 38-21
Tulane L, 33-31
at Auburn L, 31-15
Coastal Carolina L, 38-20
at North Texas L, 36-22
at Troy (OT) L, 31-24
Arkansas St. L 15-14
at Georgia St. W, 38-31

Louisiana-Lafayette L, 31-22
Louisiana-Monroe W, 26-14
Southern Miss W 42-35
at Texas St. L, 49-26

2026 schedule

Sept. 5 SE Louisiana
Sept. 12 at Tulane
Sept. 19 Ohio
Sept. 26 at Kentucky

Oct. 3 Louisiana-Monroe
Oct. 8 at Arkansas St.
Oct. 20 at Marshall
Oct. 31 Louisiana Tech
Nov. 7 at Louisiana-Lafayette
Nov. 14 Troy
Nov. 21 at Southern Miss
Nov. 27 Appalachian St.



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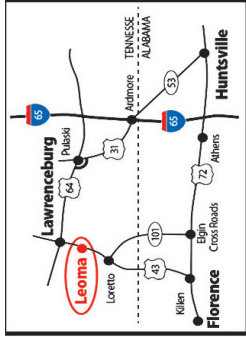
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