

Will the fifth time be a charm for UNT?

Mean Green aiming for first bowl victory under Littrell

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Seth Littrell has enjoyed plenty of success in his coaching career. He helped guide North Carolina to the ACC championship game during his stint as the Tar Heels' offensive coordinator in 2015 and had North Texas in the Conference USA title game two years later after taking over as the Mean Green's head coach.

Those seasons were a whole lot easier than what UNT experienced during its run to Thursday's Frisco Football Classic.

UNT endured injuries and tough losses, completely changed its offense and struggled for every win it took to earn a chance to play Miami (Ohio) at Toyota Stadium.

The saying is that life is about the journey, not the destination.

That certainly has been the case for UNT, which rallied from a 1-6 start by winning five straight games to become bowl eligible.

"It's been one of the most frustrating starts but one of the more rewarding seasons I've had," said Littrell, who is wrapping up his sixth season as UNT's coach. "The things you talk about as a team are overcoming adversity, sticking together, listening to the voices in the room and pulling the rope in the same direction. It's rewarding when your players grow and learn life lessons.

"If you have grit, determination and belief and put in the work, great things will happen."

That's the hope for UNT as it looks to fulfill the mission Littrell set out shortly after he arrived in Denton.

Littrell said back then the Mean Green's goal in his debut campaign was to win their bowl game. UNT has had four cracks at it since, only to come up short each time.

The Mean Green will get another chance this week and appear to have one of their best chances in years to break through for a bowl win. Miami is also 6-6 on the season.

"I've never gotten a ring," tight end Jason Pirtle said. "It would be huge to get one in my last game. It would also be big for the program and allow us to leave a legacy. You want to leave a place better than the way you found it. To do that would be huge. We haven't won a bowl game since 2013. It's about time."

UNT hasn't won many bowl games in its history, period. The Mean Green knocked off UNLV in the Heart of Dallas Bowl at the end of the 2013 season, edged Cincinnati in the 2002 New Orleans Bowl and beat Pacific in the 1946 Optimist Bowl.

Joining that list of teams would put this season's UNT team in elite company. The players who have guided UNT to its three bowl wins have a special place in program history.

Quarterback Derek Thompson solidified his status as a UNT Hall of Famer when he threw for

256 yards and two touchdowns in the Mean Green's win over UNLV. Running back Kevin Galbreath rushed for 130 yards and a touchdown in UNT's win over Cincinnati and also ended up in the Hall of Fame.

Littrell and his players are well aware of the opportunity in front of them.

"The best part of playing in bowls is winning a bowl," Littrell said. "That's what we are here to do. That's our goal at the beginning of every year, to compete and win championships. We have a chance to win a bowl championship and are excited about it."

The road to the opportunity

The road UNT has traveled to have that opportunity has been anything but easy.

The Mean Green lost to rival SMU in the second week of the season, were blown out by UAB a week later and ended up losing six straight games.

UNT lost star wide receivers Jyaire Shorter and Tommy Bush to injury by the third week of the season. Fellow wide receiver Deonte Simpson was dismissed after playing in three games.

The Mean Green's losing streak hit six games when they fell to Liberty on Oct. 23.

UNT's bowl hopes appeared dead at that point. Ohio's 2016 team was the only squad in the AP Poll Era that began in 1936 to win six games in a season after starting 1-6 or worse heading into this fall.

"We faced a lot of adversity right after the first game," wide receiver Roderic Burns said. "We had to continue to believe in the work we were putting in. We knew one day it would pay off. It clicked during the Liberty game. We moved the ball up and down the field against a good opponent. From then on, we have been looking forward."

Littrell and his staff paved the way by shifting the Mean Green's offense to a run-focused attack. UNT was averaging 219.4 rushing yards per game after falling to Liberty.

The Mean Green have cranked out 283 yards running the ball on average every time they hit the field since.

"It's been different from a couple of years ago where we were in the spread throwing it 50 or 60 times a game," quarterback Austin Aune said. "Whatever it takes to get the win."

Can UNT break through?

The challenge now for UNT is breaking through for that elusive bowl win by capitalizing on what looks like its best chance in years.

UNT nearly knocked off Army in Littrell's debut season in 2016 when the Black Knights scored on fourth down in overtime and hung on for a win in the Heart of Dallas Bowl.

The Mean Green have since lost to a string of teams at their peak since.

UNT fell to a Troy team that beat LSU and finished 11-2 in the 2017 New Orleans Bowl. The Mean Green drew No.

UNT BOWL APPEARANCES UNDER SETH LITRELL

The following is a look at North Texas' four bowl appearances under coach Seth Littrell, who will lead UNT in a fifth bowl on Thursday when the Mean Green take on Miami (Ohio) in the Frisco Football Classic at Toyota Stadium.

2016 HEART OF DALLAS BOWL ARMY 38, UNT 31 (OT)



UNT rallied from a 24-7 deficit to force overtime before falling in Littrell's first bowl game with the Mean Green. Army went for it on fourth-and-goal in overtime and scored on Jordan Asberry's 3-yard run. UNT couldn't answer. Jeffery Wilson rushed for 81 yards for the Mean Green.

2017 NEW ORLEANS BOWL TROY 50, UNT 30



The Mean Green fell behind 15-0 and never recovered in their second straight bowl appearance. Brandon Silvers threw for 305 yards and four touchdowns for the Trojans. Mason Fine threw for 303 yards and three scores, and Colton McDonald returned a fumble for 56 yards for a touchdown for UNT.

2018 NEW MEXICO BOWL UTAH STATE 52, UNT 13



UNT lost quarterback Mason Fine to a pulled hamstring in the first half and saw Utah State quickly pull away. Utah State quarterback Jordan Love threw for 359 yards. UNT running back DeAndre Torrey scored on a two-yard run.

2020 MYRTLE BEACH BOWL APPALACHIAN STATE 56, UNT 28



App State running back Cameron Peoples rushed for 319 yards and five touchdowns for the Mountaineers. Jason Bean threw for 251 yards, and Tre Siggers rushed for 120 to lead the Mean Green.

Denton Record-Chronicle file photos

23-ranked Utah State in the 2018 New Mexico Bowl and were torched by a future first-round NFL draft pick in quarterback Jordan Love.

Last season, UNT lost to Appalachian State, which finished just outside the Top 25 after blowing out the Mean Green.

"We have had no easy matchups, but if you look across the country, there are no bad teams that are going to bowl games," Littrell said.

UNT's coaches and players have spoken highly of Miami and its players throughout the buildup to the Frisco Football Classic. Littrell said the Mean Green will have to be at their best to win.

That is no doubt the case, but this is certainly UNT's best

chance for a postseason win in years. Miami barely snuck into a bowl just like UNT.

The game is also being played just 24 miles from UNT's campus. The Mean Green's fans quickly gobbled up UNT's ticket allotment.

Pirtle is in his sixth season at UNT and has been around for each of the Mean Green's previous bowl appearances under Littrell and can sense that they are more prepared than they have been in the past.

"We were a young team my first few years and had some tough matchups," Pirtle said. "Sometimes you just don't show up to play after a long layoff. It's tough to stay focused. That's what's promising about this year. Everyone has been focused through the ups and downs."

Littrell can also sense that the Mean Green are in a better position than they have been in previous seasons.

"This time of year, depending on where you are with finals and other things, you can get tired," Littrell said. "You can get emotionally and physically drained a little bit. Where our guys are at, the run that we made and the momentum we have put us in a better situation to have the energy we need to go out and compete."

UNT will tackle that challenge Thursday when it takes a fifth crack at breaking through for its first bowl win under Littrell.

"We are all working together toward the goal of being a bowl champion," Aune said. "That is something no one who is here now has done before. We are all looking forward to the challenge of going to Frisco to win a bowl game."

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ON THE COVER

North Texas' five-game winning streak has the Mean Green set up for ...

A Frisco finish

FRISCO FOOTBALL CLASSIC

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Ryan J

North Texas (6-6) vs. Miami (Ohio) (6-6)

2:30 p.m. Thursday | Toyota Stadium, Frisco
TV: ESPN | Radio: KHYI-FM 95.3, KNTU-FM 88.1

Inside:

The Mean Green have a chance to reach coach Seth Littrell's goal of breaking through for their first bowl win since the 2013 season

Tight end Jason Pirtle and wide receiver Roderic Burns are powering UNT's offense following injuries to star players

North Texas will face Miami (Ohio) in Frisco Football Classic on Thursday at Toyota Stadium. Running back Ikaika Ragsdale, center, and defensive ends Grayson Murphy, left, and Gabriel Murphy played key roles in UNT winning five straight games to become bowl eligible in the closing weeks of the season. UNT is looking for its first bowl win since 2013 and its first in six years under coach Seth Littrell in its game against the RedHawks. Photo by staff photographer Jeff Woo.

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