

GAMEDAY



2024 COLLEGE FOOTBALL

DeBoer, Crimson Tide trying to keep things delightful

Win a Mini Max Big Green Egg from Story & Lee!*

TAILGATE of the week RECIPE



INGREDIENTS

- 1 lb. white 85 lean 15 fat ground turkey
- 1 Tbsp hot chili seasoning
- 5 slices thin sliced raw bacon, finely chopped, use a sharp knife
- 2 Tbsp drained chopped green chilies
- 4 slices pepper jack cheese
- 4 hamburger buns

Turkey Burgers



DIRECTIONS:

In a medium size bowl, mix turkey and chili seasoning well. Mix in bacon and chilies. Make 4 patties, oil grill, preheat to medium heat. Place patties on grill and grill until thermometer reaches 160 degrees. Add cheese and grill until cheese is melted. Serve patties on buns with desired toppings. Serves 4.

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

Submit your recipes now and you could win \$50 if your recipe is selected. To enter, submit your recipe to:

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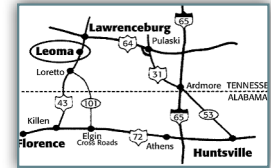
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SEC

Saban gone, while Sooners, Longhorns in

By John Zenor

The Associated Press

Goodbye, Nick Saban. Hello, Oklahoma and Texas.

For the first time in 17 years, Alabama's iconic coach won't be prowling the sidelines in the Southeastern Conference. With one longtime juggernaut headed to an ESPN gig and semi-retirement, two others enter the fray.

The Sooners and Longhorns join the powerhouse league three years after announcing their departure from the Big 12 and they will not have to face Saban, who won six of his major college-record seven national championships with the Crimson Tide.

"I think it's a partnership of elite with elite," Oklahoma coach Brent Venables said. "And, again, two programs that in the history of college football take a back seat to nobody. The SEC doesn't take a back seat to anybody."

A league that had captured four straight national titles — including two straight from Georgia — before Michigan won it all last season is now beefed up to 16 teams.

For all that, some things haven't changed: Kirby Smart and top-ranked Georgia are loaded with talent and regarded as the team to beat. Steve Sarkisian and the Longhorns bring another current force into the mix with quarterback Quinn Ewers back after leading them to the College Football Playoff.

Kalen DeBoer takes over in Tuscaloosa after leading Washington to the national championship game. Saban is gone, but the talent at 'Bama isn't.

Mississippi and Missouri are also coming off 11-win seasons where both finished in the top 10. They return veteran quarterbacks — Ole Miss's Jaxson Dart and Missouri's Brady Cook — and enviable playmakers at wide receiver.

New faces

There's no more compelling new face in college football than DeBoer, who has a gaudy 104-12 record in nine seasons as a head coach at various levels.

Mike Elko takes over at Texas A&M after a stint at Duke. Former Oklahoma and Mississippi offensive coordinator Jeff Lebby is the new head man at Mississippi State.

New coordinators abound across the



With Nick Saban saying goodbye as Alabama's head coach, the Southeastern Conference was already due for a different look this season. [JOHN BAZEMORE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

league, but none more intriguing than Bobby Petrino. He takes over Sam Pittman's offense at Arkansas, where he once reigned as head coach before getting fired in 2012 amid an off-field scandal.

On the hot seat

Pittman's precarious job situation makes Petrino's presence potentially both more vital. The Razorbacks managed only one league win and went 4-8 last season.

Florida coach Billy Napier also may need to make significant strides after going 11-14 in his first two seasons. He faces a closing stretch against Georgia, Texas, LSU, Ole Miss and Florida State but did sign five-star quarterback DJ Lagway.

Vanderbilt's Clark Lea is taking over as his own defensive coordinator after going 0-8 in SEC games last season.



Oklahoma and Texas are making their SEC debuts this season, which will likely include a few "horns down" hand signs to welcome the Longhorns. [JEFFREY MCWHORTER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Alabama Crimson Tide



Alabama offensive lineman Tyler Booker and quarterback Jalen Milroe hope to end this season on a higher note. [MARK J. TERRILL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Coach's corner

Head coach: Kalen DeBoer
Record: First year at Alabama, 104-12 in 9 seasons overall
Age: 49
Hometown: Milbank, South Dakota
You don't say: DeBoer played semipro football for the Sioux Falls Falcons for one season. He also played one season for the Sioux Falls Cobras in the Indoor Football League, which later changed

to the National Indoor Football League. He played one season with the Sioux Falls Storm in that league. DeBoer also played one season of baseball for the Canton Crocodiles, an independent league team.

Coordinators: Nick Sheridan (offense), Kane Wommack (defense)



DeBoer



Big Al

Info booth

Location: Tuscaloosa
Home: Bryant-Denny Stadium (100,077 capacity, first game 1929)
All-time record: 979-311-42
Mascot: Big Al
Band: Million Dollar Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2023

Returning starters: 10 (5 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Southern man: DeBoer hasn't spent much time in the South. In fact, he hasn't coached at a school south of Southern Illinois (located in Carbondale). Having a Yankee hasn't affected UA's recruiting.

ALABAMA

From Page G4

Alabama has a top-five class, according to most rankings. Also, Alabama is a pre-season No. 5 selection by The Associated Press and the Coaches Poll. The most difficult part about coaching at Alabama so far is the weather. "I sweat a lot more. It's hot," DeBoer said.

2. No mercy: Tyler Booker was excited to finally get some playing time with the NCAA 25 video game, which was released in the summer. The offensive lineman recently played with some kids from the Boys & Girls Club of West Alabama. "I beat both of the kids I was playing with by 30," Booker said. He likes the game but takes offense to his player ranking (91). "Obviously I'm not pleased with it," he said. "I feel it should be a 99."

3. Time to think: A muffed snap in overtime didn't cost Alabama a spot in the national title game. It was the final play of the Rose Bowl loss to Michigan, so it gets scrutinized a bit more. Quarterback Jalen Milroe has thought about that moment during the offseason. "We were blessed and fortunate to be in the college play-offs, one game away," Milroe said. "What (motivation) do you need more than being that close to the championship?"

4. No pressure: It's not going to be easy when DeBoer leads the team into the stadium on Saturdays and glances over at all the statues lined along the outside of past coaches who won national titles, including his immediate predecessor, Nick Saban. "I get it. I totally get it," DeBoer said. "I understand there's only one Coach Saban. There will only ever be one Coach Saban. This program is special."

Extra point

It's no secret the tight end hasn't exactly been the biggest asset for past



With Nick Saban handing the Alabama coaching reins to Kalen DeBoer, the Crimson Tide hopes to continue Saban-like success. [JEFFREY MCWHORTER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]



Alabama defensive back Malachi Moore says new coach Kalen DeBoer is "more of a player-led type of coach." [ALABAMA ATHLETICS]

Alabama teams. That should change under DeBoer when you look at the numbers. Under DeBoer at Washington, tight ends accounted for 66 receptions, 640 yards and two touchdowns in 2022 with 68 catches for 815 yards and nine TDs in 2023. Alabama tight end stats (37 catches, 453 yards, 5 TDs in 2022; 35 receptions, 552 yards, 5 TDs in 2023) stand out.

Upset special

Cheer: Georgia. Maybe DeBoer can pick up some of Nick Saban's karma against the Bulldogs. Alabama has lost to Georgia just once in the previous nine meetings.

Jeer: Auburn. The Iron Bowl doesn't favor Alabama in Tuscaloosa (7-7 record). What in the world will Bama fans do if DeBoer drops his first game against Auburn?

Did you know?

The results are mixed for coaches in their Alabama season debuts. Starting in the post-World War I era, 10 coaches started their Crimson Tide tenure with winning records with three turning in losing records: J.B. "Ears" Whitworth (0-10, 1955), Mike DuBose (4-7, 1997)

and Mike Shula (4-9, 2003). The best starts for a first-year Alabama coach were Xen Scott (8-0-1, 1919) and Frank Thomas (9-1, 1931).

Quotebook

"They have two different coaching styles. Both of them work and are very effective. Coach DeBoer is more of a player-led type of coach. He kind of lets his players take over and lead a team."

— defensive back Malachi Moore, on

Saban and DeBoer

Crystal ball

10-3: Alabama comes into the 12-team playoff era at a perfect time. A couple of slip-ups in the season might not be as damaging as in previous years, and there might be some big slip-ups in 2024. Games against Georgia and at Oklahoma loom large, not to mention games at Tennessee and LSU.

— Edwin Stanton

2023 results (12-2, 8-0 SEC)

Middle Tennessee	W, 56-7
Texas	L, 34-24
at South Florida	W, 17-3
Ole Miss	W, 24-10
at Mississippi St.	W, 40-17
at Texas A&M	W, 26-20
Arkansas	W, 24-21
Tennessee	W, 34-20
LSU	W, 42-28
at Kentucky	W, 49-21
Chattanooga	W, 66-10
at Auburn	W, 27-24
SEC championship game (Atlanta)	
vs. Georgia	W, 27-24

Rose Bowl (Pasadena, California)	
Michigan	(OT) L, 27-20

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Western Kentucky
Sept. 7	South Florida
Sept. 14	at Wisconsin
Sept. 28	Georgia
Oct. 5	at Vanderbilt
Oct. 12	South Carolina
Oct. 19	at Tennessee
Oct. 26	Missouri
Nov. 9	at LSU
Nov. 16	Mercer
Nov. 23	at Oklahoma
Nov. 30	Auburn

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Auburn Tigers



Eugene Asante, who led Auburn in tackles last season, plans to remain an emotional leader for the Tigers, too. [AUSTIN PERRYMAN/AUBURN ATHLETICS]

Coach's corner

Head coach: Hugh Freeze
Record: 6-7 in 1 year at Auburn, 109-54 in 13 years overall
Age: 54
Hometown: Oxford, Mississippi
You don't say: Alex McPherson led the SEC in field-goal percentage in 2023. He was 13-of-13 with a long of 53 yards. He was also 40-for-40 on extra points.
Coordinators: Derrick Nix (offense), DJ Durkin (defense)

Info booth
Location: Auburn

Home: Jordan-Hare Stadium (87,451 capacity, first game 1939)
All-time record: 773-459-43
Mascot: Aubie
Band: Auburn University Marching Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2017
Returning starters: 14 (8 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory
1. Every rose has its Thorne: It was



Freeze



Aubie

not the best welcome to Auburn last season for Michigan State transfer Payton Thorne. The Tigers were the worst passing team in the SEC. With new receivers on the roster and a year under his belt, Thorne is ready for success in 2024. "My confidence comes from the preparation that we've put in," he said. "It's been a really good offseason. I'm excited for what we have to come."
2. Bleak October: It's a wild schedule for Auburn. The Tigers start with five

home games. That's good news for Tiger fans. After that, Auburn is on the road for the entire month of October, which includes an off week. It wouldn't be so bad, except the road games are against Georgia, Missouri and Kentucky. Losing the home-field advantage for a month isn't going to be fun. "The real edge is the intensity that Jordan-Hare brings," linebacker Keldric Faulk said. "It's not easy to play in there."
3. Win some, lose some: Just like every school in the nation, Auburn lost some



Auburn running back Jarquez Hunter gets a lift after one of his touchdowns Saturday at Vanderbilt.

[PHOTOS BY GEORGE WALKER IV/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

AUBURN

From Page G6

players to the transfer portal, but also gained a few. The key loss was quarterback Robby Ashford, who was a backup to Thorne last season and is now at South Carolina. The big additions came at receiver (KeAndre Lambert-Smith, Penn State; Robert Lewis, Georgia State; Sam Jackson, Cal) and at tight end (Rico Walker, Maryland).

4. War (Eagle) cry: Eugene Asante, last year's leading tackler, has adopted the phrase, "Let's work" as a mantra. The rest of the Tigers are getting on board with it, too. "I think really the guys have rallied around that saying," Asante said. "That's kind of how I've been my whole life, energetic, outgoing, souped-up, energy type guy. I'm just going to continue to try to embody it."

Extra point

Good things happen when running back Jarquez Hunter is involved in the offense. He ran for 909 yards last season, including three games with more than 100 yards. When he reaches the 100-yard mark, the Tigers can almost be guaranteed a win. Auburn has six wins when Hunter runs for 100 yards.

Upset special

Cheer: Georgia. Auburn has lost seven straight to the Bulldogs. The streak could have ended last season if Auburn had not forgotten Brock Bowers is a pretty good tight end. Auburn has three wins against

Georgia since 2010. Nothing should change this season.

Jeer: New Mexico. Pretty sure Auburn is glad it's not New Mexico State coming to Jordan-Hare Stadium. There should be no upset for the Lobos. If there is, you can bet Freeze will feel the heat.

Did you know?

Auburn has not won 10 games since 2017, the year the Tigers went to the SEC title game, having beat two No. 1 teams (Alabama, Georgia). Auburn hasn't won more than seven games in a season since 2019. That streak could have ended last season, but fourth-and-31 happened with Alabama. Too soon, Auburn fans?

Quotebook

"I think it's the hardest place in college football to play. You have the fans on the sideline all against you. The energy from our fans and from our players on the sideline is different from anywhere else in college ball."

— defensive lineman Keldric Faulk on Jordan-Hare

Crystal ball

9-4: The good news is Auburn will be 4-0 to start the year. Four straight home games help. It gets dicey in the middle with Oklahoma, Georgia and Missouri. Still, you have to like the Tigers' chances to get nine wins. Year 2 with Freeze at the helm will see more consistent play from the offense with better results.

— Edwin Stanton



Auburn quarterback Payton Thorne hopes to have more room to work and more success this year.

2023 results (6-7, 3-5 SEC)

UMass	W, 59-14
at California	W, 14-10
Samford	W, 45-13
at Texas A&M	L, 27-10
Georgia	L, 27-20
at LSU	L, 48-18
Ole Miss	L, 28-21
Mississippi St.	W, 27-13
at Vanderbilt	W, 31-15
at Arkansas	W, 48-10
New Mexico St.	L, 31-10
Alabama	L, 27-24
Music City Bowl (Nashville)	

vs. Maryland L, 31-13

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Alabama A&M
Sept. 7	California
Sept. 14	New Mexico
Sept. 21	Arkansas
Sept. 28	Oklahoma
Oct. 5	at Georgia
Oct. 19	at Missouri
Oct. 26	at Kentucky
Nov. 2	Vanderbilt
Nov. 16	Louisiana-Monroe
Nov. 23	Texas A&M
Nov. 30	at Alabama

Tennessee Volunteers



Tennessee quarterback Nico Iamaleava is in line to make his second career start when the Vols begin this season. He started and starred in January's Citrus Bowl win over Iowa. [JOHN RAOUX/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Coach's corner

Head coach: Josh Heupel
Record: 27-12 in 3 seasons at Tennessee, 55-20 in 6 years overall
Age: 46
Hometown: Aberdeen, South Dakota
You don't say: UT has set 18 single-season records under Heupel. At the

top of the list is offensive touchdowns (78), total offense per game (525) and passing yards (4,329), all in 2022.

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



Heupel



Smokey

Mascot: Smokey

Info booth

Location: Knoxville
Home: Neyland Stadium (101,915 capacity, first game 1921)
All-time record: 865-412-53

Band: Pride of the Southland Band
Last conference title game appearance: 2007
Returning starters: 8 (5 offense, 3 defense)



Defensive lineman Omari Thomas enters his fifth season with Tennessee and has played in 48 career games with 30 starts. [JEFF ROBERSON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

TENNESSEE

From Page G8

Four-down territory

1. Heupel homecoming: The Vols visit Oklahoma early this season, which means Heupel will be back at his alma mater, but on the opposite sideline. At Oklahoma, Heupel was the 2000 Heisman runner-up, throwing for 6,852 career yards with 50 touchdowns. “There are so many great teammates, friends that will be there,” Heupel said. “Got great respect for the university, the program. It’ll be unique to be back there, but excited to be there.”

2. It’s Nico’s show: The offense will have a new quarterback in Nico Iamaleava. Fans got a glimpse of his talent in the Citrus Bowl win over Iowa, throwing for 151 yards and a touchdown as the starter and running for three TDs. “He’s really found a way to get some respect in the locker room, just his humility has drawn a lot of people to want him to lead, and I think that’s kind of been one of his greatest attributes so far,” linebacker Kennan Pili said.

3. QB nightmare: The strength of the defense last season was getting to the quarterback. UT was eighth in the nation (41) in sacks. James Pearce Jr. led the SEC (10) and returns to lead the defense. The Vols were good at stopping the run, too. They ranked

2023 results (9-4, 4-4 SEC)

vs. Virginia	W, 49-13
Austin Peay at Florida	W, 30-13
Texas-San Antonio	L, 29-16
South Carolina	W, 45-14
Texas A&M at Alabama	W, 41-20
at Kentucky	W, 20-13
UConn	L, 34-20
at Missouri	W, 33-27
Georgia	W, 59-3
Vanderbilt	L, 36-7
Citrus Bowl (Orlando, Florida)	L, 38-10
vs. Iowa	W, 48-24
	W, 35-0

20th in the nation in run defense (3.19 yards per carry, 113 yards per game).

4. Midwestern invasion: The SEC now has two coaches from the great state of South Dakota. Heupel and Alabama first-year coach Kalen DeBoer. “I’m not sure anybody pictured two South Dakotans being in the SEC a few years ago,” Heupel said. Other SEC coaches who hail from the midwest: Ole Miss’ Lane Kiffin (Minnesota), Florida’s Brent Venables (Kansas) and Kentucky’s Mark Stoops (Ohio).

Extra point

It was quite a dip in scoring offense in Year 3 under Heupel. The Vols racked up 599 total points (46 per game) in



Tennessee defensive lineman James Pearce Jr. led the SEC last season with 10 sacks. [WADE PAYNE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Chattanooga
Sept. 7	vs. N.C. State
Sept. 14	Kent State
Sept. 21	at Oklahoma
Oct. 5	at Arkansas
Oct. 12	Florida
Oct. 19	Alabama
Nov. 2	Kentucky
Nov. 9	Mississippi State
Nov. 16	at Georgia
Nov. 23	UTEP
Nov. 30	at Vanderbilt

(Sept. 7 game in Charlotte, North Carolina)

2022, which resulted in an 11-2 record. Last year Tennessee scored 413 points (31 ppg). In Heupel’s first year in 2021, UT scored 511 points (39 ppg) and finished with a 7-6 record.

Upset special

Cheer: Florida. This is one the Vols want back from last year. Everything went wrong and they would have been 6-0 heading into the game with Alabama. Maybe that would have been a momentum booster and the season could have played out different. They get the Gators at home this time.

Jeer: Oklahoma. It’s going to be a raucous atmosphere in Norman when Tennessee takes on Oklahoma in the Sooners’ inaugural SEC game. Plus,

most of the spotlight the week leading up to the game will be on Heupel, a former Sooner quarterback.

Did you know?

Tennessee was penalized 101 times for 883 yards last season, the worst in the SEC and 124th in the nation. That’s an average of 70 yards per game. Tennessee opponents were flagged 72 times for 523 yards, which gives UT a net loss of 360 yards.

Quotebook

“We have a bunch of guys who are veterans on our team and a bunch of older guys. It’s good to know that a lot of guys that I came here with and started this whole career, started this change here at Tennessee.”

— defensive lineman Omari Thomas

Crystal ball

9-3: There are some tough games for sure, but with the defense Tennessee has coming back and some playmakers on offense, the college playoff might be in play. A key is the early non-conference game with N.C. State. Win that game and the confidence is raised heading to the Oklahoma game. It will be hard to bounce back with two early losses.

— Edwin Stanton

Ole Miss Rebels

Coach's corner



Kiffin



Tony

Golding (defense)

Info booth

Location: Oxford, Mississippi
Home: Vaught-Hemingway Stadium (64,038 capacity, first game 1915)
All-time record: 676-547-35
Mascot: Tony the Landshark
Band: The Pride of the South
Last conference title game appearance: Never
Returning starters: 14 (8 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Hello again: Quinshon Judkins leaving the Rebels for Ohio State stung pretty hard. That's 1,158 yards from 2023 walking out the door. However, the Rebels welcome back Henry Parrish Jr. He was on the roster from 2020-21 but left for Miami. After a two-year stint with the Hurricanes, Parrish is back in Oxford.

2. Offensive-minded, he is: QB Jaxson Dart is a big Star Wars fan. When asked which character reminds him of Lane Kiffin, Dart said Yoda. "His wisdom, knowledge. Coach Kiffin has been through a lot throughout his coaching career. He's been somebody that I've learned a lot from."

3. Pass the turkey: The Egg Bowl has been played on Thanksgiving several times, including the last seven. This season's game is the day after. "It will be nice for everybody to just enjoy that time with their families and then still be

able to enjoy the game that weekend," Rebels defensive end Jared Ivey said.

4. Seeking balance: Scoring points was not a problem for Ole Miss in 2023. The Rebels were third in the SEC in scoring offense (35 ppg). The defense wasn't too bad, either. Ole Miss was sixth in the league (22 ppg). "In this sport especially with all three phases there is a lot of — it's the ultimate team sport," Kiffin said.

Extra point

Three was the magic number for Jaxson Dart. He was third in the SEC last year in several categories, including passing yards (3,364), total offensive TDs (31), total offensive yards (3,753) and total offensive plays (477).

Upset special

Cheer: LSU. The Rebels held off Heisman Trophy winner Jayden Daniels last season in a 55-49 shootout. This year's matchup is at LSU, but Daniels is in the NFL now.

Jeer: Georgia. The good news is Ole Miss is hosting the Bulldogs. The bad news is that it doesn't seem to matter, at least historically. Georgia owns a 12-8 record in Oxford.

Did you know?

The Rebels finished the 2023 season ranked No. 11 in both the AP and Coaches Poll. It's the Rebels' highest final ranking since 2016.

Quotebook

"We understand there's a lot of expectations on us this year. But at the end of the day, we understand that everything that we worry about, we can only control what we can control."

— receiver Tre Harris

Crystal ball

11-1: The path to the college playoff could be an easy one for the Rebels. There are tough road games with LSU and Florida, but no Alabama on the schedule is a plus. A home game with Georgia looms large.

— Edwin Stanton



Jaxson Dart, with another big season, could help Ole Miss enjoy even more success this year.

[BRYNN ANDERSON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

2023 results (11-2, 6-2 SEC)

Mercer	W, 73-7
at Tulane	W, 37-20
Georgia Tech	W, 48-23
at Alabama	L, 24-10
LSU	W, 55-49
Arkansas	W, 27-20
at Auburn	W, 28-21
Vanderbilt	W, 33-7
Texas A&M	W, 38-35
at Georgia	L, 52-17
Louisiana-Monroe	W, 35-3
Mississippi St.	W, 17-7
Peach Bowl (Atlanta) vs. Penn St.	W, 38-25

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Furman
Sept. 7	Middle Tennessee
Sept. 14	at Wake Forest
Sept. 21	Georgia Southern
Sept. 28	Kentucky
Oct. 5	at South Carolina
Oct. 12	at LSU
Oct. 26	at Oklahoma
Nov. 2	at Arkansas
Nov. 9	Georgia
Nov. 23	at Florida
Nov. 29	Mississippi St.

SEC

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Coach's corner



Lebby



Bully

Head coach: Jeff Lebby
Record: First year as college head coach

Age: 40
Hometown: Andrews, Texas

You don't say: Since becoming an offensive coordinator at the FBS level in 2019, Lebby's offenses have scored 50 points in a game 14 times.

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

Info booth

Location: Starkville, Mississippi
Home: Davis Wade Stadium (61,337 capacity, first game 1914)

All-time record: 603-579-37

Mascot: Bully

Band: The Famous Maroon Band

Last conference title game appearance: 1998

Returning starters: 3 (1 offense, 2 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Lean on me: The Bulldogs are on coach No. 4 since 2020. It's been a rough stretch for the team but something good has come out of the chaos. "It's always a challenge when you come in with different coaches and have to learn new schemes," linebacker John Lewis said. "It's been great bonding with the guys and to be a family. Everybody is being closer, so it's been better."

2. Back in the Sip: Lebby's making his second trip through Mississippi in his coaching career. He was offensive coordinator at Ole Miss in 2020-21. Lebby's offense led the SEC in total offense in 2021 (492.5 ypg, No. 6 nationally) and also topped the conference in his first season in Oxford in 2020 (555.5 ypg, No. 3 nationally).

3. Southern comfort: Offensive lineman Albert Reese IV is from Edmonton, Alberta. He played in his fair share of games in cold weather, including snow. There's a reason he picked the South to play football. "No snow games down here. I had a good amount of those. That's the biggest thing," Reese said.



Quarterback Blake Shapen, a transfer from Baylor, will be key to Mississippi State's hopes this season. [ROGELIO V. SOLIS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

2023 results (5-7, 1-7 SEC)

SE Louisiana	W, 48-7	Aug. 31
Arizona	W, 31-24	Sept. 7
LSU	L, 41-14	Sept. 14
at South Carolina	L, 37-30	Sept. 21
Alabama	L, 40-17	Sept. 28
Western Michigan	W, 41-28	Oct. 12
at Arkansas	W, 7-3	Oct. 19
at Auburn	L, 27-13	Oct. 26
Kentucky	L, 24-3	Nov. 2
at Texas A&M	L, 51-10	Nov. 9
Southern Miss	W, 41-20	Nov. 23
Ole Miss	L, 17-7	Nov. 29

4. Finding their guy: When Will Rogers entered the transfer portal in November, the Bulldogs had a void to fill at quarterback. Lebby found his man less than a month later when Blake Shapen left Baylor to play in Starkville. "Getting the right quarterback was something we had to get done, and we've got our guy," Lebby said. "I could not be more proud of how Blake has gone about his business."

Extra point

QBs perform well with Lebby coaching

2024 schedule

Eastern Kentucky	at Arizona State
Toledo	Florida
at Texas	at Georgia
Texas A&M	Arkansas
UMass	at Tennessee
Missouri	at Ole Miss

them. Here's how past quarterbacks fared under Lebby: Dillon Gabriel, Central Florida (3,652 yards, 29 TDs); Matt Corral, Ole Miss (3,337 yards, 29 TDs in 2020; 3,349 yards, 20 TDs in 2021); Dillon Gabriel, Oklahoma (3,163 yards, 25 TDs in 2022; 3,660 yards, 30 TDs in 2023).

Upset special

Cheer: Texas A&M. MSU has to be on its game to win, but the Bulldogs are 3-2 against the Aggies at home.

Jeer: Georgia. After a road game with

Texas, the Bulldogs have to travel to Georgia, where they are 2-12 all time.

Did you know?

The top two tacklers in the SEC last season were from Mississippi State. Nathaniel Johnson (102) and Jett Johnson (85) were seniors last season.

Quotebook

"He's a great dude, he's energetic. He's got a lot of swagger about him. He's a cool dude but he's very knowledgeable about football and offense and having an explosive offense."

— Shapen on Lebby

Crystal ball

6-6: Sure, Lebby is an offensive-minded guy with a proven track record. He's calling the plays, too, which should make this season interesting. Still, just one returning starter on offense is not ideal. There will be some growing pains, no doubt. But football will be better in Starkville in the future.

— Edwin Stanton

Arkansas Razorbacks

Coach's corner



Pittman



Big Red

Head coach: Sam Pittman

Record: 23-28 in 4 seasons

Age: 62

Hometown: El Reno, Oklahoma

You don't say: Pittman has never been at the same place for longer than five years (North Carolina 2007-11).

Coordinators: Bobby Petrino (offense), Travis Williams/Marcus Woodson (co-defense)

Info booth

Location: Fayetteville, Arkansas
Home: Reynolds Razorback Stadium

(76,112 capacity, first game 1938)

All-time record: 740-539-40

Mascot: Big Red, Tusk

Band: Razorback Marching Band

Last conference title game appearance:

2006

Returning starters: 11 (5 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Wither Sam Pittman's popularity?:

The Razorbacks took a step back in 2023, managing only one SEC win and falling from 7-6 and a bowl victory in 2022 to 4-8 and home for the holidays.

Pittman's first Arkansas team won nine games in 2021, so he probably needs to get the trajectory going in a positive direction to keep his job.

2. Hard-luck losers: After starting 2-0, Arkansas lost six games in a row, including two by three points, one by four points and two by seven points. A couple of plays here or there and that 4-8 record could have easily been 7-5 or 8-4. If the football gods allow things to even out, maybe the Hogs will be on the winning end of some of those close calls.

3. Coach in waiting?: Pittman brought in a familiar face to be his new offensive coordinator, poaching Bobby Petrino from Texas A&M. Petrino was well-liked during his three-plus seasons



Quarterback Taylen Green, after transferring from Boise State, hopes to show some moves for the Arkansas Razorbacks this year. [DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

2023 results (4-8, 1-7 SEC)

Western Carolina
Kent St.
BYU
at LSU
Texas A&M
at Ole Miss
at Alabama
Mississippi St.
at Florida
Auburn
Florida International
Missouri

W, 56-13
W, 28-6
L, 38-31
L, 34-31
L, 34-22
L, 27-20
L, 24-21
L, 7-3
(OT) W, 36-33
L, 48-10
W, 44-20
L, 48-14

2024 schedule

Aug. 29
Sept. 7
Sept. 14
Sept. 21
Sept. 28
Oct. 5
Oct. 12
Oct. 26
Nov. 2
Nov. 16
Nov. 23
Nov. 30

Arkansas-Pine Bluff
at Oklahoma St.
UAB
at Auburn
vs. Texas A&M
Tennessee
LSU
at Mississippi St.
Ole Miss
Texas
Louisiana Tech
at Missouri
(Sept. 28 game in Arlington, Texas)

previously as the Arkansas head coach (2008-2011) before a scandal brought his time in Fayetteville to an end. He revamped his career at Louisville and

Missouri State. If things go sideways this season, he could be in line to return as head coach of the Razorbacks.

4. Offensive upgrade: Boise State

transfer Taylen Green fits the Petrino mold at quarterback, combining a dynamic running ability to go with decent passing skills. Where the Hogs need immediate help is along the offensive line, where two returning starters and three transfers will try to keep Green upright.

Extra point

The SEC schedule is tough, but home games against Tennessee, LSU, Ole Miss and Texas soften the blow a little bit. The SEC road games are at Auburn, Mississippi State and Missouri. A key early game is at Oklahoma State on Sept. 7. A win there might signal the Razorbacks are back on track.

Upset special

Cheer: Texas A&M. After the Hogs open the SEC slate at Auburn, the Aggies come in with a new head coach in Mike Elko. It's a good spot for an upset.

Jeer: Mississippi State. The Bulldogs aren't expected to do much this season, but Arkansas will be coming off SEC games against the Aggies, Tennessee and LSU with a home game against Ole Miss looming the next week. A road game against Mississippi State won't be a sure win.

Quotebook

"You just have to look at his resumé and turn on the film of the different quarterbacks he had throughout his coaching career. ... Being coached by him, it's crazy just how much knowledge and how much understanding that I got just from talking to him and just taking everything in."

— QB Taylen Green on new offensive coordinator Bobby Petrino

Crystal ball

5-7: There's no room for error if the Hogs are to make it to a bowl game and presumably save Pittman's job. They'll need two upsets along the way. Might get one, but not two against that SEC schedule.

— Gregg Dewalt

LSU Tigers

Coach's corner



Kelly



Mike

Head coach: Brian Kelly
Record: 20-7 in 2 years at LSU, 304-104-2 in 33 years overall

Age: 62
Hometown: Everett, Massachusetts

You don't say: Kelly is No. 3 on the list for all-time FBS wins (186) among active coaches. He had 118 wins as coach at Grand Valley State.

Coordinators: Joe Sloan (offense), Blake Baker (defense)

Info booth

Location: Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Home: Tiger Stadium (102,321 capacity, first game 1924)

All-time record: 843-434-47

Mascot: Mike the Tiger

Band: Golden Band from Tigerland

Last conference title game appearance:

2022

Returning starters: 12 (6 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory

1. You're up: Garrett Nussmeier is in a tough predicament. He has to follow 2023 Heisman Trophy quarterback Jayden Daniels. The good news is he enters his fourth year at LSU. If his bowl game performance (395 yards, three touchdowns) is any indication, LSU's offense should be fine.

2. Toughen up: The defense was ranked No. 105 in the nation last year. Blake Baker was brought in to fix that. The new defensive coordinator's mantra is evident. "My first time meeting him, he came out to practice with some cleats on. It made me laugh a little bit because it speaks to the testament of what he's saying. He comes out here wanting you to work," linebacker Harold Perkins said.

3. Perkin' up: Perkins put up big numbers as a freshman, including seven sacks and 13 tackles for loss. He had five sacks and 13 tackles for loss last season and is expected to have big numbers this season. "Harold Perkins has been a mainstay for us as a playmaker on defense. Excited to watch what he's able to bring both at the inside



LSU linebacker Harold Perkins Jr., who had five sacks and 13 tackles for loss last year, will stalk more prey this season. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

2023 results (10-3, 6-2 SEC)

vs. Florida St.	L, 45-24
Grambling St.	W, 72-10
at Mississippi St.	W, 41-14
Arkansas	W, 34-31
at Ole Miss	L, 55-49
at Missouri	W, 49-39
Auburn	W, 48-18
Army	W, 62-0
at Alabama	L, 42-28
Florida	W, 52-35
Georgia St.	W, 56-14
Texas A&M	W, 42-30
ReliaQuest Bowl (Tampa, Florida)	
vs. Wisconsin	W, 35-31

linebacker position," Kelly said.

4. Solid front: The offensive line should be the story of the offense. NFL first-round prospects Will Campbell and Emery Jones Jr. are the leaders at tackle. Garrett Dellinger and Miles Frazier, also NFL prospects, are solid veterans.

Extra point

LSU was No. 2 in the nation in total offensive yards (7,035) and touchdowns

2024 schedule

Sept. 1	vs. Southern California
Sept. 7	Nicholls
Sept. 14	at South Carolina
Sept. 21	UCLA
Sept. 28	South Alabama
Oct. 12	Ole Miss
Oct. 19	at Arkansas
Oct. 26	at Texas A&M
Nov. 9	Alabama
Nov. 16	at Florida
Nov. 23	Vanderbilt
Nov. 30	Oklahoma
(Sept. 1 game in Las Vegas)	

(78). Oregon was No. 1 in both categories (7,440, 82).

Upset special

Cheer: Alabama. It's always a tough game between these two. Alabama breaks in a new coach and the Tigers welcome the Crimson Tide to Baton Rouge, where they won in 2022.

Jeer: Southern Cal. What a matchup this would have been last year with dueling

Heisman Trophy candidates. A win in Las Vegas sets the tone for the Tigers' season. Unfortunately, so does a loss.

Did you know?

Nussmeier is the son of Philadelphia Eagles quarterbacks coach Doug Nussmeier.

Quotebook

"As long as we stick to our process of winning game by game and being where your feet are, I think we'll be fine."

— tight end Mason Taylor

Crystal ball

9-3: Jayden Daniels isn't the only big loss. The Tigers have to replace two quality receivers who accounted for 31 touchdowns. The offense won't put up eye-popping numbers like last year, but won't have a huge drop-off. The defense will be improved, but it needs to take a giant leap for LSU to compete for an SEC title and beyond.

— Edwin Stanton

Oklahoma Sooners

Coach's corner



Venables



Boomer

Head coach: Brent Venables

Record: 16-10 in 2 seasons

Age: 53

Hometown: Salina, Kansas

You don't say: Venables has been a part of three national championships – two with Clemson and one with Oklahoma.

Coordinators: Joe John Finley/Seth Littrell (co-offense), Zac Alley/Todd Bates (co-defense)

Info booth

Location: Norman, Oklahoma

Home: Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium (80,126 capacity, first game 1925)

All-time record: 944-341-53

Mascot: Boomer and Sooner

Band: Pride of Oklahoma

Last conference title game appearance: 2020 (Big 12)

Returning starters: 11 (4 offense, 7 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Welcome to the SEC: The SEC poached the Sooners from the Big 12 and now OU will get a chance to experience what it's like to navigate through the toughest conference in the nation. Oklahoma brings a storied past to the conference, but it remains to be seen how it will fare over the physical grind of an entire season.

2. Will the real Venables please stand up?: Venables enters his third season as the Sooners' head coach and it's been a mixed bag of results. After a six-win inaugural campaign in 2022, the Sooners rebounded with 10 wins in 2023 – a four-win improvement. Venables has plenty of holes to fill, and the Sooners might not find it as easy to crank out 10 wins in a new conference.

3. It's Arnold's offense now: Last year's starter, Dillon Gabriel, is gone to Oregon, leaving the highly touted Jackson Arnold as the starter. He has



Jackson Arnold will be Oklahoma's starting quarterback as a sophomore. [RICK BOWMER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

2023 results (10-3, 7-2 Big 12)

Arkansas St.	W, 73-0
SMU	W, 28-11
at Tulsa	W, 66-11
at Cincinnati	W, 20-6
Iowa State	W, 50-20
vs. Texas	W, 34-30
Central Florida	W, 31-29
at Kansas	L, 38-33
at Oklahoma St.	L, 27-24
West Virginia	W, 59-20
at BYU	W, 31-24
TCU	W, 69-45
Alamo Bowl (San Antonio) vs. Arizona	L, 38-24

2024 schedule

Aug. 30	Temple
Sept. 7	Houston
Sept. 14	Tulane
Sept. 21	Tennessee
Sept. 28	at Auburn
Oct. 12	vs. Texas
Oct. 19	South Carolina
Oct. 26	at Ole Miss
Nov. 2	Maine
Nov. 9	at Missouri
Nov. 23	Alabama
Nov. 30	at LSU
(Oct. 12 game in Dallas.)	

great receivers and good tight ends, but in a showcase start in last season's bowl game, Arnold threw three interceptions

that offset a 361-yard performance. If Arnold proves capable in his sophomore season, the Sooners could push for the

conference title.

4. Two gauntlets: A three-game midseason stretch could determine Oklahoma's fate. The Sooners get their welcome to the SEC moment by hosting Tennessee on Sept. 21. That's followed by a trip to an improving Auburn team and then the annual Red River Rivalry against Texas. Oklahoma needs at least two wins in that stretch because the closing stretch is brutal – road games at Ole Miss, Missouri and LSU with a home game against Alabama.

Extra point

Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium will celebrate its 100th season. The Sooners have a 418-86-15 record in the stadium that opened in 1925. The Sooners beat Drake 7-0 in the first game played in the stadium.

Upset special

Cheer: Tennessee. The Sooners open SEC play at home against Tennessee. The stadium will be rocking and the Sooners will be amped up. A win could set the stage for a competitive SEC season.

Jeer: Ole Miss. A visit to Oxford, Mississippi, to open November could spell disaster for the Sooners. Lane Kiffin's Ole Miss team will look to make its play-off push.

Quotebook

"I'm extremely confident in this team. I think I can speak for everybody on the team that we're all super amped up to go out and play this SEC schedule. It's a tough one for sure, but we love the challenge. We want the challenge. We wouldn't want it any other way."

– *quarterback Jackson Arnold*

Crystal ball

9-4: Oklahoma hasn't been to the playoffs since 2019. Sooners fans expect that to change, but it won't happen this year. The SEC schedule is just too tough and it's hard to see Oklahoma navigating it with anything less than four losses.

– *Gregg Dewalt*

North Alabama Lions

Coach's corner



Dearmon

Head coach: Brent Dearmon

Record: 3-8 in 1 season at UNA, 13-9 in 2 years overall

Age: 39

Hometown: Saraland

You don't say: In addition to his head-coaching responsibilities, Dearmon will also call offensive plays and coach quarterbacks.

Coordinators: Kevin Wewers (offense), Brock Caraboa (defense)



Leo

Info booth

Location: Florence

Home: Braly Stadium (14,215 capacity, first game 1912)

All-time record: 483-306-16

Mascot: Leo

Band: Marching Pride of North Alabama

Last conference title game appearance: N/A

Returning starters: 15 (7 offense, 8 defense)

Four-down territory

1. That's a dozen: This season will represent a first for UNA. There are 12 regular-season games on the schedule. Normally, FCS teams are limited to 11. But due to the way the calendar worked out, teams were allowed to add an extra game. It looks like it will be the same in 2025. It's not the first time the Lions have played more than 11 games, with 2016's Division II season being the most recent. But anything past 11 has been the result of playoff berths.

2. Well, it's not last: When the United Athletic Conference's preseason coaches poll came out, UNA fell in the bottom half of the nine-team league. To be more specific, the Lions were picked to finish seventh, ahead of Utah Tech and Division I-newcomer West Georgia. Central Arkansas was selected to win it. The good news for UNA? It was better than the 2023 version when the Lions were projected to finish at the bottom.



Edwin White-Schultz was named the United Athletic Conference's top defensive player this pre-season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

2023 results (3-8, 1-5 United Athletic Conference)

vs. Mercer	L, 17-7
Chattanooga	W, 41-27
at Tarleton State	L, 52-31
at Tennessee Tech	W, 20-7
UT Martin	L, 37-21
Eastern Kentucky	L, 32-22
at Abilene Christian	L, 30-13
Utah Tech	W, 31-30
at Austin Peay	L, 49-39
Central Arkansas	L, 27-14
at Florida State	L, 58-13

3. Another reunion: The band is getting back together, Part II. UNA honored the 30th anniversary of the 1993 national championship team last year. The school will do the same for the 1994 squad when the Lions host Utah Tech on Oct. 5. And you guessed it. There will be a 1995 version next season. Good for Braly Stadium.

4. Let's talk about points: There were

2024 schedule

Aug. 24	vs. Southeast Missouri State
Aug. 31	at Memphis
Sept. 7	Illinois State
Sept. 14	at UT Martin
Sept. 21	Tarleton State
Sept. 28	at West Georgia
Oct. 5	Utah Tech
Oct. 12	Abilene Christian
Oct. 26	at Central Arkansas
Nov. 2	Austin Peay
Nov. 9	at Southern Utah
Nov. 23	at Eastern Kentucky
(Aug. 24 game in Montgomery.)	

some ... ups and downs last season. UNA ranked last in the UAC in scoring offense (22.9 points per game) and second to last in scoring defense (33.3). Along the way, the Lions were held under 30 points eight times, but we can go with seven since one was against Florida State. Opponents also scored 30 or more points six times, five if you again take out the Seminoles. Consistency will be key.

Extra point

Edwin White-Schultz was named the UAC's preseason defensive player of the year. The safety led UNA with 87 tackles, which were 16 more than Gregory Reddick, the next highest on the list. White-Schultz also recorded six tackles for loss and a pair of sacks.

Did you know?

Jyheam Ingram, a sophomore defensive lineman out of Muscle Shoals, will wear No. 44 this season. The number is given annually to a standout on defense as a way to honor former UNA great Ronald McKinnon. Philip Ossai received that distinction last year.

Upset special

Cheer: Memphis. The FBS opponent will take this spot every year there's one on UNA's schedule. The Lions 2-7 all-time against FBS teams, including a 58-14 loss at Florida State last season. The last win was against Louisiana-Lafayette in 1997.

Jeer: West Georgia. One of UNA's long-time rivals is back on the schedule for the first time since 2017. The Lions left the Gulf South Conference and Division II for the FCS the next year. The Wolves are in their first year as a Division I program. It would be a bad loss for UNA.

Quotebook

"I feel like there's always been a lot of talent here at UNA. We've had some phenomenal players. We just haven't been able to piece it together, whether that's players or coaches or everybody. I really feel this is one of the most talented teams I've been a part of. We just have to bring that out. It just feels like we're so close to it. But football is a game of inches, so I'm excited to see where we'll be at."

— receiver Kobe Warden

Crystal ball

4-8: After going 3-8 last season, UNA is moving in the right direction. The win total, however, can always be higher — or lower — than the one listed here. We'll have to wait and see.

— David Glovach

2024 NORTH ALABAMA OPPONENTS



Paxton DeLaurent [SOUTHEAST MISSOURI STATE ATHLETICS]

SE Missouri State Redhawks

When: 6 p.m. Aug. 24

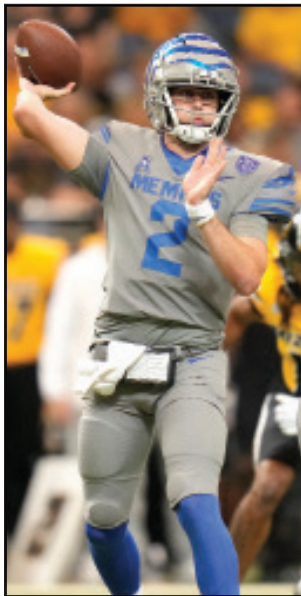
Where: Cramton Bowl, Montgomery

Head coach: Tom Matukewicz (54-59 in 10 seasons)

Last season's record: 4-7 (3-3 Big South-Ohio Valley)

Key returnees: QB Paxton DeLaurent (1,792 passing yards, 11 TDs, 2 INTs), OL Zack Gieg, OL Kobe Sixkiller, LB Bryce Norman (87 tackles, 9.5 TFL, 5 sacks).

The skinny: North Alabama will once again get some national-television exposure on ESPN by playing in the FCS kickoff game. But after a 17-7 loss last year, the Lions are hoping for a better outcome. Southeast Missouri is coming off its second losing season in three years, but four of its losses were by a combined 10 points. The Redhawks' biggest departure was running back Geno Hess, who was their all-time leading rusher with 5,119 yards and 63 touchdowns. DeLaurent will also head into the season without his top two pass catchers. Ryan Flournoy and Damoriea Vick combined for 108 receptions, 1,345 yards and 10 scores. Flournoy was drafted in the sixteenth round of this year's NFL draft by the Dallas Cowboys.



Seth Henigan [JEFF ROBERSON/ THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Memphis Tigers

When: 6 p.m. Aug. 31

Where: Liberty Bowl, Memphis

Head coach: Ryan Silverfield (31-19 in 5 seasons)

Last season's record: 10-3 (6-2 American)

Key returnees: QB Seth Henigan (3,880 passings yards, 32 TDs, 9 INTs), WR Roc Taylor (69 catches, 1,083 yards, 4 TDs), WR Demeer Blankumsee (53 catches, 901 yards, 7 TDs), RB Brandon Thomas (9 TDs), LB Chandler Martin (95 tackles, 17 TFL, 3 sacks, 2 INTs).

The skinny: Ahhh, the money game. This will be the second meeting between the teams in three seasons. UNA played its season finale at Memphis in 2022 and lost 59-0. The Lions did not make it past midfield but did get \$325,000. This is the season opener for Memphis, which is expected to compete for the American title. The Tigers return most of their key players minus running back Blake Watson (1,152 yards, 14 TDs). An NIL partnership with FedEx has helped. UNA is 2-7 all-time vs. FBS opponents, but none of those wins have come in the Division I era. The nice part? The matchup isn't at the end of the season.



Mason King [ILLINOIS STATE ATHLETICS]

Illinois State Firebirds

When: 6 p.m. Sept. 7

Where: Braly Stadium

Head coach: Brock Spack (101-70 in 15 seasons)

Last season's record: 6-5 (4-4 Missouri Valley)

Key returnees: LB Amir Abdullah (74 tackles, 14 TFL, 9.5 sacks), OL Hunter Zambrano, WR Daniel Sobkowicz (68 catches, 933 yards, 10 TDs), RB Mason King (150 carries, 980 yards, 14 TDs).

The skinny: This will be the first meeting between the teams. It will also serve as UNA's home opener. Illinois State is coming off its second straight 6-5 season, but four of its losses — South Dakota State, Northern Iowa, Youngstown State and North Dakota — were to ranked FCS teams. The Redbirds did, however, only allow 20 points per game with just three opponents scoring 30 or more points. Illinois State will be starting a new quarterback after Zack Annexstad exhausted his eligibility. Kansas State transfer Jake Rubley or Tommy Rittenhouse, who was on the roster last season, will likely be the starter. Annexstad was also a Power Five (Four?) transfer after coming from Minnesota.



Oshae Baker [UT MARTIN ATHLETICS]

UT Martin Skyhawks

When: 6 p.m. Sept. 14

Where: Hardy M. Graham Stadium, Martin, Tennessee

Head coach: Jason Simpson (115-87 in 18 seasons)

Last season's record: 8-3 (5-1 Big South-Ohio Valley)

Key returnees: QB Kinkead Dent (2,295 yards, 25 TDs, 8 INTs), WR DeVonte Tanksley (54 catches, 698 yards, 4 TDs), CB Oshae Baker (49 tackles, INT, 8 PBUs), CB JaMichael McGoy Jr. (29 tackles, 2 INTs, 11 PBUs), OL Drake Carroll, LB Jaylon Sharpe (63 tackles, 6.5 TFL, 2 INTs).

The skinny: This will be UNA's final nonconference game. It will also be the teams' second matchup in as many seasons after not playing since 1990. UT Martin won 37-21 last year. UNA led 21-10 at halftime. The Skyhawks' biggest loss from 2023 was running back Sam Franklin. After rushing for almost 1,400 yards and 11 touchdowns, he's now at Oklahoma. But UT Martin is coming off its sixth season with at least seven wins since Simpson took over, although the program has only reached the FCS playoffs twice. Gardner-Webb earned the conference's automatic spot last year.



Kayvon Britten [TARLETON STATE ATHLETICS]

Tarleton State Texans

When: 6 p.m. Sept. 21

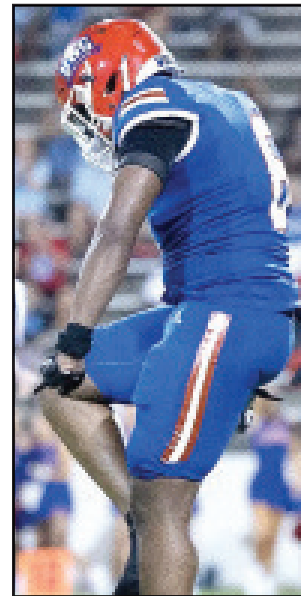
Where: Braly Stadium

Head coach: Todd Whitten (104-53 in 14 seasons at Tarleton State, 129-81 overall in 19 seasons)

Last season's record: 8-3 (4-2 United Athletic)

Key returnees: RB Kayvon Britten (183 carries, 1,150 yards, 16 TDs), WR Darius Cooper (28 catches, 622 yards, 5 TDs), OL Tuli Teuhuma, QB Victor Gabalis (2,492 passing yards, 18 TDs, 13 INTs), DL Brandon Tolvert (36 tackles, 6 TFL, 3 sacks).

The skinny: This will be the first conference game — again — for both. Tarleton State finished its Division I transition and will be eligible to win the league title and make the FCS playoffs. The Texans have not had a losing season since moving from Division II. Before last year they had two straight 6-5 records after going 5-3 in 2020. Tarleton State has not had much trouble against UNA in its two previous meetings, winning 52-31 in 2022 and 43-28 in 2023. This matchup will feature the conference's preseason offensive player of the year (Britten) and defensive player of the year (UNA safety Edwin White-Schultz).



Mason Huntley [WEST GEORGIA ATHLETICS]

West Georgia Wolves

When: 1 p.m. Sept. 28

Where: University Stadium, Carrollton, Georgia

Head coach: Joel Taylor (first season)

Last season's record: 6-4 in Division II (5-3 Gulf South)

Key returnees: RB Rajaez Mosley (123 carries, 855 yards, 8 TDs), OL Sam Regina, DL Mason Huntley (29 tackles, 6.5 TFL, 3 sacks).

The skinny: This is West Georgia's inaugural Division I season and the Wolves will enter that fray with a new head coach. Taylor was previously the defensive coordinator at Mercer, the team that held UNA to seven points and 248 yards offense in last year's season opener. It will be the program's first meeting since 2017 when the Lions decided to make their own jump up in classification. West Georgia was picked to finish last in the conference, but will have a slew of newcomers, mainly transfers. Among the biggest losses were starting quarterback Cameron Brown, who is now at Texas Tech. He was named second string after the Red Raiders' spring game.

2024 NORTH ALABAMA OPPONENTS



Bayo Kannike [UTAH TECH ATHLETICS]

Utah Tech Trailblazers

When: 4 p.m. Oct. 5

Where: Braly Stadium

Head coach: Lance Anderson (first season)

Last year's record: 2-9 (1-5 United Athletic)

Key returnees: OL Bayo Kannike, OL Nolan Reynolds, DL John Sniffen (21 tackles, 2.5 TFL).

The skinny: UNA's 1994 national championship team will have its 30-year reunion at this game. Like Tarleton State, Utah Tech finished its Division I transition. Unlike the Texans, the Trailblazers have not been as successful, posting 2-3, 1-10, 4-7 and 2-9 marks. This is Anderson's first foray into the FCS since being the defensive line coach at San Diego from 2005-06. He was at Stanford from 2007-22, and was the defensive coordinator there his final nine seasons. Utah Tech ended last season on a five-game losing streak which began with a 31-30 loss to UNA after Gregory Reddick broke up a two-point pass with 31 seconds left. The Trailblazers lost their top passer, rusher and two leading receivers.



Blayne Taylor [ABILENE CHRISTIAN ATHLETICS]

Abilene Christian Wildcats

When: 6 p.m. Oct. 12

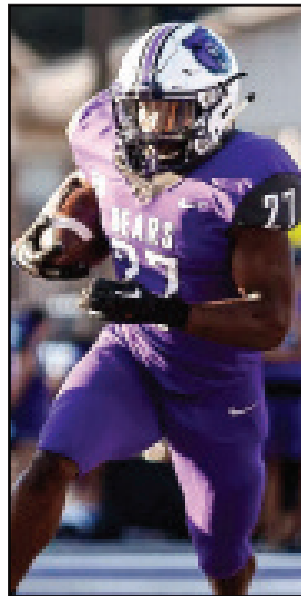
Where: Braly Stadium

Head coach: Keith Patterson (12-10 in 2 seasons)

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

Key returnees: QB Maverick McIvor (1,972 yards, 17 TDs, 5 INTs), WR Blayne Taylor (41 catches, 620 yards, 7 TDs), OL Alan Hatten, LB Darius Moore (78 tackles, 6 TFL), LB Kirby Coheley (61 tackles, 8 TFL, 5.5 sacks, 3 INTs).

The skinny: This is the only time UNA will have back-to-back home games. Abilene Christian won last year's meeting 30-13. The Lions scored a touchdown in the second quarter and another in the third. This will be the first matchup between the two to take place outside Texas. The first, in 2011, was played in the old Cowboys Stadium, which UNA came out with a 23-17 win. The Wildcats were picked to finish sixth in the UAC, one spot ahead of the Lions. Abilene Christian only won one game when it failed to score at least 30 points, that was a 24-7 victory against Utah Tech.



ShunDerrick Powell [CENTRAL ARKANSAS ATHLETICS]

Central Arkansas Bears

When: 4 p.m. Oct. 26

Where: Estes Stadium, Conway, Arkansas

Head coach: Nathan Brown (37-29 in 6 seasons)

Last season's record: 7-4 (4-2 United Athletic)

Key returnees: RB ShunDerrick Powell (136 carries, 1016 yards, 6 TDs), QB Will McElvain (2,477 yards, 24 TDs, 5 INTs), RB Kaylin James (49 carries, 425 yards, 5 TDs; 53 catches, 500 yards, 4 TDs), OL Will Diggins, DL David Walker (57 tackles, 18 TFL, 8.5 sacks), LB Demetrius Charles (72 tackles), DB TaMuarion Wilson (64 tackles, 2 INTs, 8 PBUs).

The skinny: Both teams will be coming off bye weeks. Central Arkansas was picked to win the UAC in the preseason coaches poll with Tarleton State second. Central Arkansas is also the highest ranked UAC team in the Stats preseason poll, coming in 11th. Tarleton State is the only other from the league at 21. This will be Powell's second showing against his former team. A foot injury limited him to seven carries for 23 yards last year. He did not break 100 yards or rush for a single touchdown over the final six games of the season.



Hosea Knifeley Jr. [AUSTIN PEAY ATHLETICS]

Austin Peay Governors

When: 4 p.m. Nov. 2

Where: Braly Stadium

Head coach: Jeff Faris (first season)

Last season's record: 9-3 (6-0 United Athletic)

Key returnees: OL Chandler Kirton, DL Hosea Knifeley Jr. (52 tackles, 7.5 TFL, 4 sacks).

The skinny: The Governors won the UAC last season — officially still the ASUN-WAC partnership under the NCAA — and lost in the first round of the FCS playoffs to Chattanooga. But Austin Peay's ability to repeat took a number of hits in the offseason. The Governors lost head coach Scotty Walden to UTEP with leading rusher Jevon Jackson (1,373 yards, 10 TDs) following. Leading passer Mike DiLiello exhausted his eligibility and leading receiver Tre Shackelford is now at Washington State, among other departures. This is Faris' first head coaching job after spending most of his career at Duke before spending the last two seasons coaching tight ends at UCLA. This matchup last year saw UNA down 39-18 at the half before losing 49-39.



Braedon Wissler [SOUTHERN UTAH ATHLETICS]

Southern Utah Thunderbirds

When: 2 p.m. Nov. 9

Where: Eccles Coliseum, Cedar City, Utah

Head coach: DeLane Fitzgerald (11-11 in 2 seasons at Southern Utah, 97-60 in 15 seasons overall)

Last season's record: 6-5 (4-2 United Athletic)

Key returnees: RB Braedon Wissler (146 carries, 686 yards, 5 TDs), RB Targhee Lambson (104 carries, 483 yards, 6 TDs), DL Ryleen Sua-Filo (28 tackles, 5 TFL, 2 acks), LB Kohner Cullimore (73 tackles, 10 TFL, 3 sacks).

The skinny: UNA returns to the site it won its first game as a Division I program. The Lions beat the Thunderbirds 34-30 in 2018 after Dexter Boykin caught a 1-yard pass from Christian Lopez with 12 seconds left. Lopez threw for 350 yards and three touchdowns and rushed for 105 yards and a score. Boykin caught eight passes for 135 yards and two touchdowns. Once again, UNA will likely have to get used to the elevation. Cedar City is more than a mile — 5,846 feet to be exact — above sea level. Perhaps there will be some extra conditioning done that week. Cedar City also averages about 40 degrees that time of year.



Hunter Brown [EASTERN KENTUCKY ATHLETICS]

Eastern Kentucky Colonels

When: 1 p.m. Nov. 23

Where: Roy Kidd Stadium, Richmond, Kentucky

Head coach: Walt Wells (21-20 in 4 seasons)

Last season's record: 5-6 (4-2 United Athletic)

Key returnees: TE Hunter Brown (33 catches, 387 yards, 3 TDs), OL Payton Collins, DB Mike Smith Jr. (56 tackles, 2 INTs, 11 PBUs).

The skinny: UNA will be coming off its second bye week of the season. Eastern Kentucky, like many of the teams the Lions are playing, is replacing its QB with Parker McKinney out of eligibility. Running back Braedon Sloan left for Ball State and receiver Jaden Smith bolted for UTEP. Sloan was also the team's second option in the passing game. The Colonels, also like other teams due to paranoia, are trying to keep their quarterback situation a secret. None have been mentioned in any preseason reports. The Lions have lost both of their meetings against Eastern Kentucky, both of which have been over the last two seasons, including on a final-minute drive in 2022.

North Alabama vs. Southeast Missouri

When: 6 p.m. Saturday
Where: Cramton Bowl, Montgomery
TV/radio: ESPN/FM-98.3, FM-103.5
2023 records: UNA (3-8, 1-5 United Athletic Conference), Southeast Missouri State 4-7 (3-3 Big South-Ohio Valley)
The series: UNA leads 1-0.

Four-down territory

1. That's an oldie: Want to guess the last time UNA played Southeast Missouri? You figured 1956 seems right? Well, you are correct. It's been 68 years since the programs met. They played at Braly Stadium that year. The Lions beat the Indians, as the Redhawks were known back then, 63-13. Hal Self was UNA's head coach. Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" was the No. 1 song that year for anyone who is curious.

2. Check that cable provider: For the second straight year, UNA doesn't have to worry about streaming its season opener. This will be a matchup shown that will once again be broadcast by the worldwide leader in sports, although multiple weather delays last year pushed the game to ESPNU. The Lions are 42-29-4 all-time in season openers, but have lost their last four — Liberty, Southeastern Louisiana, Indiana State and Mercer.

3. It's QB1 — literally: Ari Patu, the graduate transfer from Stanford, wears the No. 1 jersey. But he'll also be UNA's starting quarterback after Noah Walters exited after the spring game. Walters was turnover prone at times. He had 30 in 22 games. Patu, however, doesn't have much experience. He played in eight games (with one start) over his three seasons with the Cardinal and has just 31 pass attempts. He completed 17 of those for three touchdowns and 150 yards with an interception.

4. Hitting the road: The Lions will certainly be logging some travel miles this season. The trip to Montgomery (208 miles) will be the first of five that will cover more than 200. There's also West Georgia (227), Central Arkansas (314), Southern Utah (1,707) and Eastern Kentucky (345). But UNA won't have to worry about those until the second half of the season. Still, it'll be some quality bonding time.

Key matchup

SEMO QB Paxton DeLaurent vs. UNA secondary

It's the season opener so you really



Ari Patu won UNA's starting quarterback job after Noah Walters left the program. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

could pick a number of things to put here. But DeLaurent lost his two favorite receivers from a year ago, one who was drafted by the Dallas Cowboys, so it'll be interesting to see how he fares against the Lions' veteran defensive backs. There are safeties Edwin White-Shultz and Gregory Reddick, and corners Philjae Bien-Aime and A.J. Seay. Could be an interesting watch.

Player of the week

Tanaka Scott, WR

The transfer from Kansas is UNA's tallest pass catcher outside the tight ends. He didn't get a lot of playing time with the Jayhawks — 11 catches for 140 yards in 23 games — but he's made some plays

during training camp. And with fellow wideout Takairee Kenebrew dealing with some injuries in camp, it could give Scott a chance to make an impression in his Lions debut.

By the numbers

4: The number of common opponents UNA and Southeast Missouri had last season. Like the Lions, the Redhawks lost to Eastern Kentucky, Central Arkansas and UT Martin and beat Tennessee Tech. Only SEMO's losses to ECU and UCA were by a combined eight points.

1-5: UNA's record away from the immaculate confines of Braly Stadium. The Lions were 2-3 at home.

6: The number of times UNA starts at

6 p.m. starting with the season opener. It's also the start time of the Lions' first five games.

19-41: UNA's record against FCS opponents. The Lions have almost as many wins against the division as a DII team (9) since moving up in 2018 (10).

Prediction

Southeast Missouri 24, UNA 17

Again, it's the season opener so consider this game a toss-up even though this type of game hasn't been kind to the Lions as of late. Still, there's only so much you can judge of a team from training camp. So, heads or tails?

— David Glovach

Texas Longhorns

Coach's corner



Sarkisian



Bevo

Head coach: Steve Sarkisian

Record: 25-14 in 3 seasons at Texas, 71-49 in 9 seasons overall

Age: 50

Hometown: Torrance, California

You don't say: In three years, Sarkisian has taken Texas from a five-win team to 12 wins and a playoff berth in 2023.

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

Info booth

Location: Austin, Texas

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

All-time record: 948-392-33

Mascot: Bevo

Band: Showband of the Southwest

Last conference title game appearance: 2023 (Big 12)

Returning starters: 10 (5 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Welcome to the SEC: Like former Big 12 brother Oklahoma, Texas begins its inaugural season in the Southeastern Conference. Unlike the Sooners, Texas doesn't face near the toughest conference schedule. Sure, Georgia comes to town and Oklahoma is on the schedule, but the Longhorns also face Vanderbilt, Mississippi State, Florida and Arkansas. Kentucky and Texas A&M round out the schedule — hardly a murderer's row.

2. The Mighty Quinn: There's not a ton of returning starters, but it always helps to have a good returning quarterback, and Quinn Ewers is that guy. Barring injury, Ewers should be in the Heisman Trophy race after throwing for 3,479 yards and 22 touchdowns last season.

3. Protecting Quinn: Texas should have one of the better offensive lines in college football, anchored by Kelvin Banks, an almost-certain high NFL



Quinn Ewers and the Texas Longhorns won a championship in their final Big 12 season and now take their shot at the Southeastern Conference. [TONY GUTIERREZ/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

draft pick next April. There is plenty of starting experience around him and there is good depth behind the starters.

4. Michigan on its mind: The Longhorns will get an early test when they travel to Ann Arbor to play defending national champion Michigan. The Wolverines will have a different look from a year ago with a new head coach and a cheating scandal hanging over their heads, but the Longhorns will know a lot more about themselves after this Week 2 matchup.

Extra point

Texas lost its three leading receivers and its top pass-catching tight end. To replace them, Sarkisian dipped into the transfer portal and snagged two former Alabama products — receiver Isaiah Bond and tight end Amari Niblack.

Upset special

Cheer: Michigan. Winning in Ann Arbor never comes easy, but this Texas team should be able to get in and out of the Big House with a win while the Wolverines seek an identity after losing so many key players from last year's championship team.

Jeer: Texas A&M. The Aggies likely won't be in the hunt for the SEC title, but they will want to assert themselves as the dominant program in Texas in the regular-season finale. The two haven't met since 2011.

Quotebook

"I think one of the main things for me was getting more experience under my belt. There is a line of demarcation for guys who really have success in the league and obviously there are some

2023 results (12-2, 8-1 Big 12)

Rice	W, 37-10
at Alabama	W, 34-24
Wyoming	W, 31-10
at Baylor	W, 38-6
Kansas	W, 40-14
vs. Oklahoma	L, 34-30
at Houston	W, 31-24
BYU	W, 35-6
Kansas St.	W, 33-30
at TCU	W, 29-26
at Iowa St.	W, 26-16
Texas Tech	W, 57-7
Big 12 championship	
vs. Oklahoma St.	W, 49-21
Sugar Bowl (New Orleans)	
vs. Washington	L, 37-31

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Colorado St.
Sept. 7	at Michigan
Sept. 14	Texas-San Antonio
Sept. 21	Louisiana-Monroe
Sept. 28	Mississippi St.
Oct. 12	vs. Oklahoma
Oct. 19	Georgia
Oct. 26	at Vanderbilt
Nov. 9	Florida
Nov. 16	at Arkansas
Nov. 23	Kentucky
Nov. 30	at Texas A&M

(Oct. 12 game in Dallas.)

guys that have rare accounts of it not being this way, but there is a line, kind of 25, 25 starts, that guys — you see a jump in how their career went and I just kinda wanted to give myself a better chance to have a long and successful career in the NFL. I don't want to be a guy that just comes and goes. I want to be somebody who is remembered."

— Ewers on returning

Crystal ball

12-2: Looks like another banner season for the Longhorns, in part due to the SEC schedule that is not overwhelming.

— Gregg Dewalt

Texas A&M Aggies

Coach's corner



Elko



Reveille

Head coach: Mike Elko

Record: First year at A&M, 16-9 overall in 3 seasons

Age: 47

Hometown: South Brunswick, New Jersey

You don't say: Elko is an Ivy League graduate, having earned a B.S. degree in history at Penn in 1999.

Coordinators: Collin Klein (offense), Jay Bate-man (defense)

Info booth

Location: College Station, Texas

Home: Kyle Field (102,733 capacity, first game 1905)

All-time record: 778-504-48

Mascot: Reveille

Band: The Fightin' Texas Aggie Band

Last conference title game appearance:

1998 (Big 12)

Returning starters: 11 (7 offense, 4 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Big payday: Texas A&M is on the hook for \$76 million to the now-fired Jimbo Fisher, whose tenure was a failed experiment almost from the get-go. Being a fired head coach from a Power 5 school seems like good work if you can get it.

2. In with the new: Mike Elko returns to Texas A&M after a successful stint at Duke, where he spent two seasons and finished with a 16-9 record. He won the Atlantic Division of the ACC once and went to a pair of bowl games at a school traditionally known for basketball and academics. Those 16 wins are five more than the highly compensated Jimbo Fisher had over those two seasons.

3. One out, one in: It didn't take long for the Aggies to get some bad news in preseason camp. Projected starting running back Reuben Owens is out for the season after sustaining a foot injury. However, the good news is that quarterback Conner Weigman is back at full



Texas A&M quarterback Conner Weigman, whose 2023 was off to a strong start before a season-ending injury, is healthy this year for the Aggies. [SAM CRAFT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

2023 results (7-6, 4-4 SEC)

New Mexico	W, 52-10
at Miami	L, 48-33
Louisiana-Monroe	W, 47-3
Auburn	W, 27-10
vs. Arkansas	W, 34-22
Alabama	L, 26-20
at Tennessee	L, 20-13
South Carolina	W, 30-17
at Ole Miss	L, 38-35
Mississippi St.	W, 51-10
Abilene Christian	W, 38-10
at LSU	L, 42-30
Texas Bowl (Houston)	
vs. Oklahoma St. L, 31-21	

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Notre Dame
Sept. 7	McNeese
Sept. 14	at Florida
Sept. 21	Bowling Green
Sept. 28	Arkansas
Oct. 5	Missouri
Oct. 19	at Mississippi St.
Oct. 26	LSU
Nov. 2	at South Carolina
Nov. 16	New Mexico St.
Nov. 23	at Auburn
Nov. 30	Texas
(Sept. 28 game in Arlington, Texas)	

strength after sustaining a season-ending injury a year ago. Before the injury in the fourth game, Weigman was off to

a terrific start. Keeping him healthy is a priority for the Aggies.

4. Strong front: Texas A&M is going

to be good on the defensive front with Shemar Turner deciding to return for another year instead of heading to the NFL. The Aggies added Nic Scourton of Purdue through the transfer portal after he led the Big Ten in sacks.

Extra point

Texas A&M has had one season with double-digit win since it won the Big 12 title in 1998 – somewhat astounding given the resources and finances available to the Aggies. Will Elko be the guy to finally get it right at A&M?

Upset special

Cheer: Notre Dame. Elko and the Aggies could make an immediate impression on opening day when Notre Dame comes to Kyle Field. A win could set the stage for an outstanding season and provide a positive sense of things to come.

Jeer: Florida. Nobody will complain if the Fighting Irish win the opener, but a loss followed two weeks later by a road loss to the Gators might leave fans wondering if 2024 is going to be the same story as before Elko arrived.

Quotebook

“I’m a football coach. I’d like to play no teams of that caliber, but I guess we have to. It goes both ways. I think the benefit of having a game like that in the opener is you have everyone’s attention. I think our program is very much aware that we have to be firing on all cylinders the first time we run out of the tunnel.”

– Elko on playing Notre Dame in the opener

Crystal ball

9-3: The Aggies have a favorable schedule with Notre Dame, Missouri, LSU and Texas coming to Kyle Field. Split those and the Aggies, assuming they take care of business against Florida, Mississippi State, Auburn and South Carolina – all winnable road games – could even have them in the playoff hunt.

– Gregg Dewalt

Georgia Bulldogs

Coach's corner



Head coach: Kirby Smart

Record: 94-16 in 8 years

Age: 48

Hometown: Bainbridge, Georgia

You don't say: Smart had connections to both schools in last year's Orange Bowl. He played football for Georgia and went to grad school at Florida State, where he was on staff as a graduate assistant.

Smart



Uga

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

Info booth

Location: Athens, Georgia

Home: Sanford Stadium (93,033 capacity, first game 1929)

All-time record: 881-429-54

Mascot: Uga

Band: Georgia Redcoat Marching Band

Last conference title game appearance:

2023

Returning starters: 14 (8 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Defensive potential: Last year's Georgia defense might not have been quite as dominant as the 2022 version, but it was still excellent. The 27 points Alabama scored in Georgia's lone loss were the most the Bulldogs allowed all year. Junior free safety Malaki Starks is excited to see how the group can improve. "Georgia has always been that school, when you look at defense, that's who you want to be," he said at SEC Media Days.

2. Beck is back ...: After passing for more than 3,900 yards and completing 72% of his passes last year, senior quarterback Carson Beck looks to be similarly productive and efficient. Smart applauded Beck for sticking around at Georgia to work hard and get better, even after the coach chose Stetson Bennett over Beck ahead of the UAB game two years ago. "I wish we could inject a chip and say every kid had that response,



Georgia quarterback Carson Beck threw for over 3,900 yards last season. [JOHN BAZEMORE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

but we know that's not going to be the case," Smart said.

3. ... And he has plenty of help: Brock who? While the Bulldogs will certainly miss stud tight end Brock Bowers, they bring back receivers Domic Lovett and Dillon Bell as well as four starting offensive linemen. "I'm very excited to see who those guys are going to be that step up and make those big-time plays in those big-time moments," Beck said.

4. Conduct questions: The greatest concern around the program might be the team's inability to stay out of trouble. The Athens Banner-Herald recently reported the team had at least 25 driving-related arrests or citations — including several this past summer — since a player and staffer were killed in January 2023 in a wreck police say involved racing and alcohol. "The incidents that we've had off the field are not something that we condone," Smart said in July, according

to the Banner-Herald.

Extra point

Georgia has either won, tied or come within a touchdown in every postseason game it has played since the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1, 1977. Tony Dorsett and undefeated Pitt clinched a national title that night with a 27-3 win.

Upset special

Cheer: None. The top-ranked Bulldogs are not really in the upset-pulling business these days.

Jeer: Ole Miss. Alabama and Texas are probably too close to Georgia's level to qualify as upset candidates, and Clemson might not be quite good enough to pull it off. But the Nov. 9 trip to Oxford could be tricky.

Did you know?

Georgia has finished each of the past

2023 results (13-1, 8-0 SEC)

UT Martin	W, 48-7
Ball St.	W, 45-3
South Carolina	W, 24-14
UAB	W, 49-21
at Auburn	W, 27-20
Kentucky	W, 51-13
at Vanderbilt	W, 37-20
vs. Florida	W, 43-20
Missouri	W, 30-21
Ole Miss	W, 52-17
at Tennessee	W, 38-10
at Georgia Tech	W, 31-23
SEC championship game (Atlanta)	
vs. Alabama	L, 27-24
Orange Bowl (Miami Gardens, Florida)	
vs. Florida State	W, 63-3

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	vs. Clemson
Sept. 7	Tennessee Tech
Sept. 14	at Kentucky
Sept. 28	at Alabama
Oct. 5	Auburn
Oct. 12	Mississippi St.
Oct. 19	at Texas
Nov. 2	vs. Florida
Nov. 9	at Ole Miss
Nov. 16	Tennessee
Nov. 23	UMass
Nov. 29	Georgia Tech

(Aug. 31 game in Atlanta. Nov. 2 game in Jacksonville, Florida.)

seven seasons ranked in the AP Top 10, the longest such streak in team history.

Quotebook

"I think just realizing complacency gets you passed up. If you're flatlining, people who are consistently growing are going to pass you at some point."

— Starks on keeping a high standard

Crystal ball

14-2: If the Bulldogs split road games in Tuscaloosa and Austin and win the rest of their regular-season games, they'll be picked for the inaugural 12-team playoff and a prime contender to win it all.

— Craig Thomas

Florida Gators

Coach's corner



Napier



Alberta

Head coach: Billy Napier
Record: 11-14 in 2 years at Florida, 51-26 in 5 years overall

Age: 44
Hometown:

Chatsworth, Georgia

You don't say: Napier played quarterback at Furman, and one of his top receivers was Bear Rinehart, now a member of the rock band Needtobreathe.

Coordinators: Rob Sale/Russ Callaway (co-offense), Austin Armstrong (defense)

Info booth

Location: Gainesville, Florida
Home: Ben Hill Griffin Stadium (88,548 capacity, first game 1930)

All-time record: 758-445-40

Mascots: Albert and Alberta

Band: The Pride of the Sunshine

Last conference title game appearance:

2020

Returning starters: 14 (8 offense, 6 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Mertz is the man: Florida has had plenty of standout quarterbacks over the years and Wisconsin transfer Graham Mertz belongs in the conversation. He completed 72% of his passes last year for more than 2,900 yards, with 20 touchdowns to three interceptions. Now in his second year in Gainesville, Mertz and receivers like Chimere Dike, Kahleil Jackson and Eugene Wilson should allow the passing game to thrive.

2. Mobile made: Florida linebacker Shemar James said he still misses home and is proud to be an example of the talent-rich Mobile area. He appreciates Jack French, his former Faith Academy coach, and other staff members from his high school. "They all helped me along the way to get (me) where I am now, so I'm thankful to them," he said at SEC Media Days.

3. Depth and discipline: Napier's future at Florida figures to be a significant



Florida quarterback Graham Mertz and the Gators hope to find more victories this season. If not, coach Billy Napier could pay the price. [JOHN RAOUX/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

2023 results (5-7, 3-5 SEC)

at Utah	L, 24-11
McNeese	W, 49-7
Tennessee	W, 29-16
Charlotte	W, 22-7
at Kentucky	L, 33-14
Vanderbilt	W, 38-14
at South Carolina	W 41-39
vs. Georgia	L, 43-20
Arkansas	(OT) L, 39-36
at LSU	L, 52-35
at Missouri	L, 33-31
Florida St.	L, 24-15

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Miami
Sept. 7	Samford
Sept. 14	Texas A&M
Sept. 21	at Mississippi St.
Oct. 5	Central Florida
Oct. 12	at Tennessee
Oct. 19	Kentucky
Nov. 2	vs. Georgia
Nov. 9	at Texas
Nov. 16	LSU
Nov. 23	Ole Miss
Nov. 30	at Florida St.

(Nov. 2 game in Jacksonville, Florida.)

storyline until the Gators improve their program trajectory, but the third-year coach said he believes in his team because of its experience and discipline. "We've got 463 starts on this team, 17 starters returning. We've got 41,000 snaps

coming back this year, and we're fourth in our league in returning production," Napier said. He also cited "credible leadership at the player level" and said discipline and accountability are "at an all-time high."

4. And about that schedule: Well ... this slate doesn't look built to preserve Napier's job. Then again, there are plenty of chances for impressive wins that might suggest Florida is finally on track. Miami, Texas A&M, Tennessee and Kentucky should offer tests before November, and then it could get truly daunting. Florida's final five regular-season opponents start the season ranked Nos. 1, 4, 13, 6 and 10 in the AP poll.

Extra point

Florida has failed to finish better than .500 for the past three seasons. The last time the Gators had three straight .500 or worse seasons was 1949-51.

Upset special

Cheer: Ole Miss. In the teams' first meeting since 2020, Florida gets the Rebels in a noon game at The Swamp. It could be a tougher-than-it-looks assignment for Ole Miss a few days before the Egg Bowl.

Jeer: UCF. The schedule is so hard there aren't many opportunities for an upset loss. But a home loss to the Knights, led by former Auburn coach Gus Malzahn, would not go over well.

Did you know?

The Gators have had seven different full-time head coaches since the year 2000, tied with Mississippi State for the most in the conference.

Quotebook

"This team we have right now, they're passionate, they care about each other and they want to win. And they've fully bought into not only the scheme but Coach Napier's vision of what this team could be."

— Mertz

Crystal ball

6-6: The season opener against Miami seems huge. Win that and a 4-1 (or even 5-0) start looks attainable. But the Gators might be underdogs in their final seven games.

— Craig Thomas

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach's corner



Head coach: Mark Stoops

Record: 73-62 in 11 seasons

Age: 57

Hometown:

Youngstown, Ohio

You don't say: Following Nick Saban's retirement, Stoops is the longest-tenured head coach in the SEC.

Coordinators: Bush Hamdan (offense), Brad White/Chris Collins (co-defense)

Stoops



Wildcat

Info booth

Location: Lexington, Kentucky

Home: Kroger Field (61,000 capacity, first game 1973)

All-time record: 653-647-44

Mascot: Wildcat, Scratch

Band: Wildcat Marching Band

Last conference title game appearance:

Never

Returning starters: 15 (6 offense, 9 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Not so fast, my friend: By all accounts, Mark Stoops was set late last year to take the Texas A&M job until a less-than-receptive response by the Aggie fanbase, so Kentucky's all-time winningest coach remains in Lexington. He has taken an historically mediocre program (that was downright bad when he arrived) and made it competitive. But climbing even higher will be tough in a league that is deeper than ever in well-resourced traditional powers.

2. Next up under center: Following two years with Penn State transfer Will Levis and a year with N.C. State transfer Devin Leary, UK again has pulled a starting quarterback from the portal. Brock Vandagriff, formerly of Georgia, will try to spark Kentucky's offense. There are question marks on offense with yet another new coordinator and the lack of a proven running back, but gifted wide receivers Barion Brown and Dane Key should ease the transition.



Defensive back Maxwell Hairston and the Kentucky Wildcats are looking to move up in the SEC this year. [MICHELLE HAAS HUTCHINS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

3. Defensive playmakers: Talent on defense has been one of the hallmarks of Kentucky's improvement in recent years. The massive defensive tackle Deone Walker would shine for any team in the country, and he and cornerback Maxwell Hairston are regulars on the preseason lists of the nation's top players. Defense has been the more-stable side of the ball for Kentucky, so that group will need to set the tone.

4. Great expectations: Kentucky has one of the more-patient football fanbases in the SEC (generally reserving its crazy side for hoops), and seasoned supporters have enjoyed the recent run of eight straight bowl games and five straight wins over rival Louisville. But it will be interesting to see how UK fares in a changed SEC and how fans respond. Few expect Kentucky to seriously contend for the league crown, but pulling off an upset would show this program still has

positive momentum.

Extra point

Vandagriff is not Kentucky's only transfer in the backfield from a powerhouse program. Running back DeaMonte "Chip" Traynum comes to Kentucky from Ohio State, where he rushed for 373 yards and three scores last season.

Upset special

Cheer: Tennessee. For all Kentucky's growth in modern years, the Vols remain a problem. Kentucky has lost three straight in the series, and the Knoxville trip two years ago was a 44-6 disaster. The Wildcats want a better showing.

Jeer: Florida. The Gators won 31 straight in this series from 1987-2017, but since then UK is 4-2 in the matchup and has won three straight by 7, 10 and 19 points. Even in The Swamp, the burden of proof rests with Florida.

2023 results (7-6, 3-5 SEC)

Ball St.	W, 44-14
Eastern Kentucky	W 28-17
Akron	W, 35-3
at Vanderbilt	W, 45-28
Florida	W, 33-14
at Georgia	L, 51-13
Missouri	L, 38-21
Tennessee	L, 33-27
at Mississippi St.	W, 24-3
Alabama	L, 49-21
at South Carolina	L 17-14
at Louisville	W, 38-31
Gator Bowl (Jacksonville, Florida) vs. Clemson	L, 38-35

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Southern Miss
Sept. 7	South Carolina
Sept. 14	Georgia
Sept. 21	Ohio U.
Sept. 28	at Ole Miss
Oct. 12	Vanderbilt
Oct. 19	at Florida
Oct. 26	Auburn
Nov. 2	at Tennessee
Nov. 16	Murray St.
Nov. 23	at Texas
Nov. 30	Louisville

Did you know?

If UK earns a sixth straight victory over Louisville this year, it will be the longest winning streak in the rivalry for either school since it was renewed in 1994.

Quotebook

"I think it helps the recruiting for teams, too, if you have a head coach that been there for a minute."

— *linebacker D'Eryk Jackson*

Crystal ball

8-5: The Wildcats will likely be underdogs in at least four games. Their days as a conference also-ran feel like a long time ago, but this is a difficult schedule and UK's offense will need to be ready quickly with conference games the first two weeks of September.

— *Craig Thomas*

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach's corner



Beamer



Cocky

Head coach: Shane Beamer

Record: 20-18 in 3 years

Age: 47

Hometown: Blacksburg, Virginia

You don't say: Last season was the first time since 2007 a program with Beamer on the coaching staff did not qualify for a bowl. It just so happens that in 2007 Beamer also happened to be at South Carolina.

Coordinators: Dowell Loggains (offense), Clayton Wright (defense)

Info booth

Location: Columbia, South Carolina

Home: Williams-Brice Stadium (77,549 capacity, first game 1934)

All-time record: 634-613-44

Mascot: Cocky

Band: Carolina Band

Last conference title game appearance: 2010

Returning starters: 13 (5 offense, 8 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Sellers' market: Spencer Rattler, South Carolina's starting quarterback the past two seasons, is now in the NFL with the New Orleans Saints. That means redshirt freshman LaNorris Sellers will lead the Gamecocks' offense. He was tabbed as the starter after the spring. Sellers appeared in three games last season and threw for 86 yards and two touchdowns. Rattler, in two years, threw for more than 6,000 yards and 30 scores.

2. Again, can you run? The ground game wasn't for South Carolina last season wasn't good. The Gamecocks ranked 14th in the SEC with a little more than 1,000 yards as a team. There's also the 2.8 yards per carry and 85 per game. JuJu McDowell is South Carolina's top returning tailback. He had 104 yards. But the Gamecocks made sure to add several via the transfer portal, including Rocket Sanders who spent the last three seasons at Arkansas. He rushed for more than



LaNorris Sellers is expected to replace Spencer Rattler as South Carolina's starting quarterback.

[ARTIE WALKER JR./THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

1,400 yards and 10 scores in 2022.

3. All aboard for Oklahoma: Oklahoma and Texas are now in the SEC. Yes, big secret. But one — the Sooners — will be on South Carolina's schedule this season. Slated for Oct. 19, it will be a chance for Beamer to return to the state and stadium where he spent three years as an assistant. He coached tight ends for Lincoln Riley from 2018-20. The Sooners lost just six games while he was on staff. The Gamecocks average six losses a season with Beamer in charge.

4. Legett issue: While replacing Rattler appears to have been sorted out, figuring out who will make up Xavier Legett's production has not been. Legett caught 71 passes for 1,255 yards and seven touchdowns last season before being picked in the first round by the Carolina Panthers. South Carolina's No. 2 receiver had 312 yards and is also in the NFL.

Extra point

There are now 16 teams in the SEC, and South Carolina isn't being thought of too highly entering the season. The Gamecocks were picked to finish 13th, ahead of Arkansas, Mississippi State and Vanderbilt.

Upset special

Cheer: Alabama. Georgia is missing on the schedule for the first time since 1991, so the Crimson Tide will have to do.

Jeer: Clemson. Doubtful it can be any other team. South Carolina snapped its seven-game skid in the series in 2022, only to respond by losing 16-7 to the Tigers last year. But hey, only 30 straight wins to even the series.

Did you know?

Since 1985, South Carolina has only

2023 results (5-7, 3-5 SEC)

vs. North Carolina	L, 31-17
Furman	W, 47-21
at Georgia	L, 24-14
Mississippi St.	W, 37-30
at Tennessee	L, 41-20
Florida	L, 41-39
at Missouri	L, 34-12
at Texas A&M	L, 30-17
Jacksonville St.	W, 38-28
Vanderbilt	W, 47-6
Kentucky	W, 17-14
Clemson	L, 16-7

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Old Dominion
Sept. 7	at Kentucky
Sept. 14	LSU
Sept. 21	Akron
Oct. 5	Ole Miss
Oct. 12	at Alabama
Oct. 19	at Oklahoma
Nov. 2	Texas A&M
Nov. 9	at Vanderbilt
Nov. 16	Missouri
Nov. 23	Wofford
Nov. 30	at Clemson

reached double-digit wins three times. Those three seasons came in 2011-13 under Steve Spurrier. The Gamecocks went 11-2 in each of those years.

Quotebook

"Mike Tomlin, head coach of the Steelers, who I think the world of and consider a great friend, he has stated that you can't have your feet in both buckets. You can't have your feet in a comfort bucket and a growth bucket. Doesn't work that way."

— Beamer putting players in uncomfortable situations

Crystal ball

6-7: Beamer wants to compete for a spot in the 12-team playoffs. Doesn't look like that will happen, so maybe a bowl game can be a solid compromise. After all, South Carolina didn't qualify for one in 2023.

— David Glovach

Vanderbilt Commodores

Coach's corner



Lea

Head coach: Clark Lea

Record: 9-27 in 3 years

Age: 41

Hometown: Nashville

You don't say: Lea brought in Jerry Kill, who has 175 wins over 24 years as a head coach, to serve as an assistant.

Coordinators: Tim Beck (offense), Clark Lea (defense)

Info booth

Location: Nashville

Home: Vanderbilt Stadium (40,350 capacity, first game 1981)

All-time record: 618-665-50

Mascot: Mr. Commodore

Band: The Spirit of Gold

Last conference title game appearance: Never

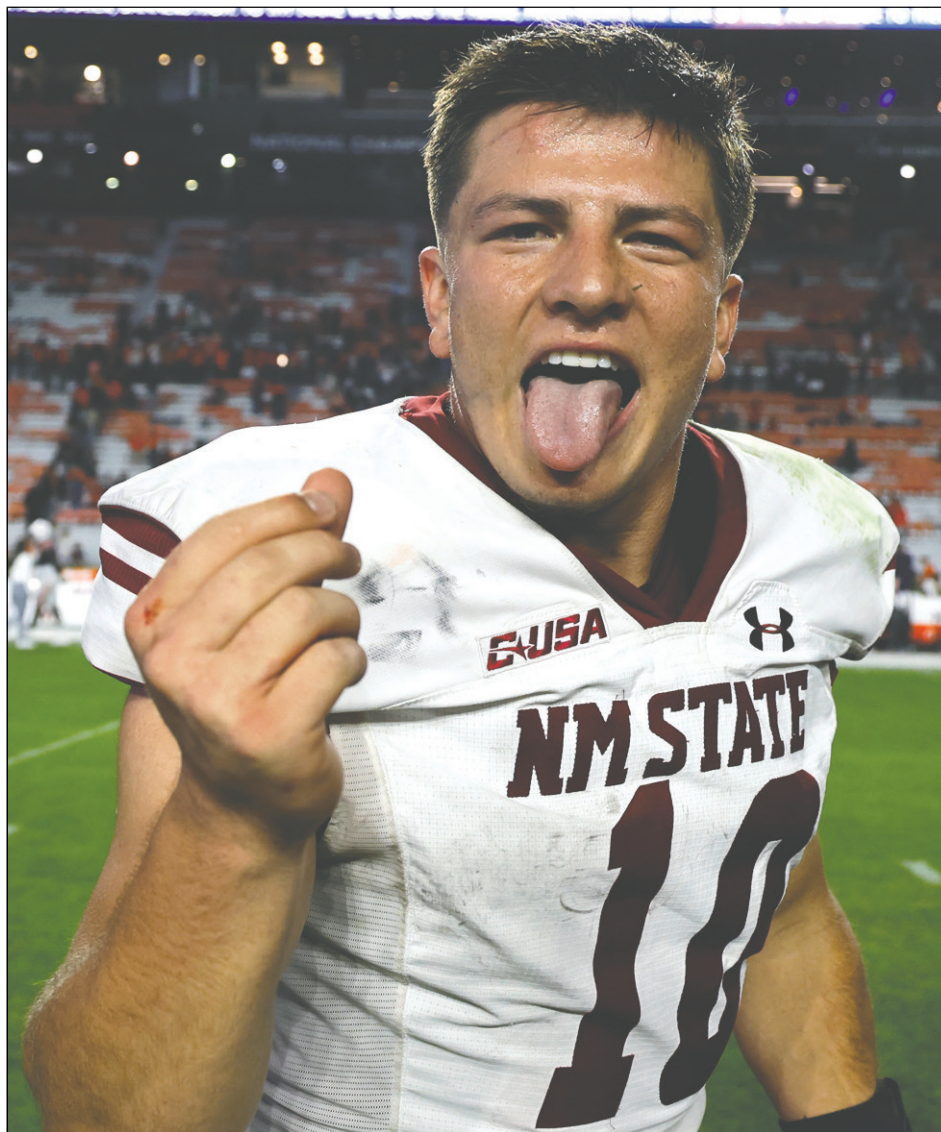
Returning starters: 8 (4 offense, 4 defense)

Four-down territory

1. How hot is Clark Lea's seat?: After a five-win season in 2022, the Commodores slipped to just two wins a year ago. With stadium renovations underway, Lea and the Commodores need to have a good season to keep interest in football from waning even more. Lea added Jerry Kill and Tim Beck to his staff, proven veteran coaches, in an effort to help get as much as possible out of a team that has never had a ton of success.

2. New QB?: Diego Pavia, a senior transfer from New Mexico State, is the likely new starter at QB. Pavia brings a hard-nosed presence to the position and brings a running threat as well. How the success he had New Mexico State translates to the SEC remains to be seen, but he will at least keep defenses honest.

3. Will the defense be better?: The Commodores weren't very good on defense in 2023. In their closing 10-game losing streak, the lowest number of points the unit surrendered was 31 to Auburn. Lea anticipates his move to defensive coordinator will help, saying that he has gotten closer to the players because of



Diego Pavia, who helped New Mexico State upset Auburn last year, has transferred to Vanderbilt and hopes to have a taste of success with the Commodores. [BUTCH DILL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

the change.

4. New tight end a target: Look for Pavia to throw to his new/old tight end early and often. Junior Eli Stowers is a former highly regarded recruit at Texas A&M who ended up at New Mexico State after two unproductive years. Under Kill and Beck, he caught 35 passes last season and now will be a threat for the Commodores.

Extra point

Vanderbilt only made 7 of 10 field goals

last season while its opponents made 20 of 23.

Upset special

Cheer: Virginia Tech. The Hokies visit Nashville for the first game and, if things fall right, Vanderbilt could pull off the upset. It would be a huge springboard for Lea and the Commodores.

Jeer: Georgia State. Vanderbilt travels to Georgia State for its third game. A loss here could send the Commodores into a downward spiral ahead of SEC play.

2023 results (2-10, 0-8 SEC)

Hawaii	W, 35-28
Alabama A&M	W, 47-13
at Wake Forest	L, 36-20
at UNLV	L, 40-37
Kentucky	L, 45-28
Missouri	L, 38-21
at Florida	L, 38-14
Georgia	L, 37-20
at Ole Miss	L, 33-7
Auburn	L, 31-15
at South Carolina	L, 47-6
at Tennessee	L, 48-24

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Virginia Tech
Sept. 7	Alcorn St.
Sept. 14	at Georgia St.
Sept. 21	at Missouri
Oct. 5	Alabama
Oct. 12	at Kentucky
Oct. 19	Ball St.
Oct. 26	Texas
Nov. 2	at Auburn
Nov. 9	South Carolina
Nov. 23	at LSU
Nov. 30	Tennessee

Quotebook

"I believe in what Coach Lea stands for. I came in with Coach Lea. I know I what he's about. I trust him with my football career. That's ultimately why I stayed. Whenever he told the team that he was taking over as the DC, that was all I needed to hear. Obviously I'm changing to a traditional safety position. So when those two things checked off, I was all hands on deck.

— safety CJ Taylor on staying at Vandy rather than transferring

Crystal ball

4-8: To get to four wins, Vandy must win all of its non-conference games or spring an upset on an SEC team such as Kentucky or South Carolina. Other than those games, it will be tough sledding in the SEC.

— Gregg Dewalt

Missouri Tigers

Coach's corner



Head coach: Eliah Drinkwitz

Record: 28-21 in 4 years at Missouri, 40-22 in 5 years overall

Age: 41

Hometown: Alma, Arkansas

You don't say: Last year, Drinkwitz became the fifth Mizzou coach to earn conference coach of the year honors and first since Gary Pinkel in 2014. The school's first three to earn the honor all did so

in the Big 8.

Truman

Coordinators: Kirby Moore (offense), Corey Batoon/D.J. Smith (co-defense)

Info booth

Location: Columbia, Missouri

Home: Faurot Field (62,621 capacity, first game 1926)

All-time record: 713-588-52

Mascot: Truman

Band: Marching Mizzou

Last conference title game appearance: 2014

Returning starters: 12 (7 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. A different feeling: Few programs in the country improved their perception as much over the past year as Missouri, which followed three middling seasons under Drinkwitz with a 10-2 regular season and Cotton Bowl win over Ohio State. The Tigers' preseason AP ranking of No. 11 is their highest since they started 2008 at No. 6. This season will give us an idea if Mizzou can sustain success, or if last year was a one-off.

2. Big shoes to fill: Missouri will miss running back Cody Schrader, who transferred from Division II Truman State to rush for a school-record 1,627 yards last year and become a consensus All-American. In his absence, senior transfers Marcus Carroll (Georgia State) and Nate Noel (Appalachian State) could get prime rushing opportunities to help balance Mizzou's offense.



Brady Cook, who threw for over 3,300 yards with 21 touchdowns last year, helped lead Missouri to double-figure wins for the first time since 2014. [L.G. PATTERSON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

3. Let him Cook: Helping matters is the return of quarterback Brady Cook, a St. Louis native who threw for over 3,300 yards with 21 TDs and six interceptions last year. His main target is Luther Burden III, another St. Louis-area product who is widely considered one of the nation's best receivers following a 1,200-yard campaign last year. Having senior receivers Theo Wease Jr. and Mookie Cooper back will be nice, too.

4. Trench mob mentality: Mizzou was 4-0 last season in games decided by a touchdown or less. Every little bit helps, and Mizzou teams in the past have often had difference-makers on the defensive line. At SEC Media Days, senior defensive tackle Kristian Williams said he and teammates on the line call themselves the trench mob, and he said new coordinator Corey Batoon has plenty of schemes and disguises. "Just be on the lookout for many different looks," Williams said.

Extra point

Mizzou closes its season at home with the annual showdown with Arkansas. The Tigers are 8-2 in the Battle Line Rivalry since joining the SEC, including a 5-0 mark at home.

Upset special

Cheer: Alabama. If — big if — Missouri turns out to be a top-11 team, this might be its only regular-season game as an underdog. In four meetings since Mizzou joined the SEC, Bama has won by 32, 29, 29 and 19.

Jeer: Texas A&M. New A&M coach Mike Elko will be eager for a statement win. That's what he would get if the Aggies beat familiar foe Mizzou, which should bring a 4-0 record to Kyle Field.

Did you know?

The Tigers will host Oklahoma on Nov. 9, the teams' first meeting in 13 years and first in Columbia in 14 years. Mizzou stunned No. 1 Oklahoma 36-27 in that

2023 results

South Dakota	W, 35-10
Middle Tennessee	W, 23-19
Kansas St.	W, 30-27
vs. Memphis	W, 34-27
at Vanderbilt	W, 38-21
LSU	L, 49-39
at Kentucky	W, 38-21
South Carolina	W, 34-12
at Georgia	L, 30-21
Tennessee	W, 36-7
Florida	W, 33-31
at Arkansas	W, 48-14
Cotton Bowl (Arlington, Texas) vs. Ohio St.	W, 14-3

2024 schedule

Aug. 29	Murray St.
Sept. 7	Buffalo
Sept. 14	Boston College
Sept. 21	Vanderbilt
Oct. 5	at Texas A&M
Oct. 12	at UMass
Oct. 19	Auburn
Oct. 26	at Alabama
Nov. 9	Oklahoma
Nov. 16	at South Carolina
Nov. 23	at Mississippi St.
Nov. 30	Arkansas

2010 game at Faurot Field, but the Sooners have won 20 of the last 22 matchups.

Quotebook

"In the SEC, there's only about 100 players that you can actively recruit that are good enough to play in this league, and maybe not even that many based on each position. So you're going to be in battles against each other, and we don't ever take those personal."

— Drinkwitz

Crystal ball

9-4: Despite Missouri's newcomers, particularly on defense, this looks like a manageable schedule. The hardest two-game stretch — at Alabama and hosting Oklahoma — even comes with a week off between games.

— Craig Thomas

Alabama A&M Bulldogs

Coach's corner



Maynor

Head coach: Connell Maynor

Record: 34-26 in 6 years at A&M, 99-57 in 14 seasons overall

Age: 55

Hometown: Fayetteville, North Carolina

You don't say: Before finishing with a losing record each of the last two years, Maynor had just two losing seasons in his first 12 seasons as a head coach.



Butch

Coordinators: Duane Taylor (offense), Thomas Howard (defense)

Info booth

Location: Huntsville

Home: Louis Crews Stadium (21,000 capacity, first game 1996)

All-time record: 450-431-33

Mascot: Butch

Band: Maroon and White

Last conference title game appearance:

2021 spring

Returning starters: 14 (9 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Dual-threat Lankford: Xavier Lankford split time at quarterback last year, but he should be the primary signal caller this season. Lankford completed 56% of his passes for 900 yards and eight touchdowns against five interceptions. Meanwhile, Quincy Casey racked up almost 1,500 yards and 11 scores with six interceptions. But Lankford also has legs. He was third among the Bulldogs with 294 yards rushing last season and had six touchdowns, tying for second on the team and just one off the lead.

2. High on Eaglin: Donovan Eaglin faces big expectations with first-team preseason All-SWAC accolades following him. Eaglin averaged more than 5 yards per carry and 76 yards per game last year, finishing with seven rushing touchdowns and earning second-team All-SWAC honors. He's a redshirt sophomore who began his college career at Michigan



Xavier Lankford has the most experience of Alabama A&M's quarterbacks. [MARK HUMPHREY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

State. Eaglin broke out in A&M's fourth game, running for 126 yards against Arkansas-Pine Bluff. He roasted Mississippi Valley State for 207 yards in the season finale.

3. Nice catch: Receiver Jacolby Hewitt, another of A&M's nine returning starters on offense, also landed first-team preseason All-SWAC honors. Hewitt, in nine games last year, had 32 catches for 516 yards and four touchdowns. He missed the first two games and finished the year with just one start.

4. Kickin', grinnin': The Bulldogs do return their leading scorer from 2023. Kicker Victor Barbosa was 6-of-9 on field goals and 39-of-40 on extra points. Two of his missed field goals were from 40 yards or more.

Extra point

The two largest crowds to ever see an A&M game could get company this year. The Bulldogs open at Auburn, the same place where 87,451 watched them in 2016 and 74,832 in 2012. Those rank 1-2.

Upset special

Cheer: Alabama State. The Hornets are the preseason favorite to win the SWAC East and have won two straight Magic City Classics. Nothing warms a Bulldogs' heart like swatting down ASU.

Jeer: Georgetown (Kentucky). Sure, the Tigers are an NAIA team, but they reached the NAIA semifinals last season.

Did you know?

Alabama A&M last lost three straight

2023 results (5-6, 3-5 SWAC)

at Vanderbilt	L, 47-13
Lane	W, 51-13
at Southern	L, 20-10
Arkansas-Pine Bluff	W, 31-24
Tuskegee	W, 58-3
vs. Jackson St.	L, 45-30
at Grambling St.	W, 45-24
vs. Alabama St.	L, 31-16
Florida A&M	L, 42-28
at Bethune-Cookman	L, 31-14
Miss. Valley St.	W, 30-21

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	at Auburn
Sept. 7	Kentucky (Ky.)
Sept. 14	Georgetown (Ky.)
Sept. 21	at Austin Peay
Sept. 28	at Florida A&M
Oct. 5	vs. Jackson St.
Oct. 12	Bethune-Cookman
Oct. 26	vs. Alabama St.
Nov. 2	Southern
Nov. 9	at Arkansas-Pine Bluff
Nov. 14	Grambling St.
Nov. 23	at Miss. Valley St.

(Oct. 5 game in Mobile. Oct. 26 game in Birmingham.)

meetings to Alabama State from 1990-95. In the all-time series, which A&M leads 43-36-3, the Bulldogs have outscored ASU 1,479-1,450.

Quotebook

"Like I always tell my players, you can prove somebody right or you can prove them wrong. If somebody didn't vote for you or you didn't make it, then prove them wrong and make it and show them. When they do vote for you, you have to prove them right and produce and say, 'Yeah, they were right about me.'"

— Maynor

Crystal ball

6-6: The Bulldogs may need a win in their finale at lowly Mississippi Valley State to avoid yet another losing season.

— A. Stacy Long

Jacksonville State Gamecocks

Coach's corner



Rodriguez



Cocky

Head coach: Rich Rodriguez

Record: 18-6 in 2 years at JSU, 181-125-2 in 27 years overall

Age: 61

Hometown: Grant Town, West Virginia

You don't say: With a nine-win season, Rodriguez can become the first coach since John Grass (2014-17) to win at least nine games in three straight seasons with the Gamecocks.

Coordinators: Rod Smith (offense), Luke Olson (defense)

Info booth

Location: Jacksonville

Home: Burgess-Snow Field at JSU Stadium (24,000 capacity, first game 1947)

All-time record: 583-367-4

Mascot: Cocky

Band: Marching Southerners

Last conference title game appearance:

N/A

Returning starters: 9

Four-down territory

1. Encore performance: Jacksonville State didn't miss a beat in moving into Conference USA, fashioning an overall 9-4 record that included a win in the New Orleans Bowl. So, what can the Gamecocks do in their second year now that expectations are elevated? Will they go through a sophomore slump or challenge for the conference title?

2. Who's the quarterback? Last year's starter, Zion Webb, has finally moved on and Rodriguez has been looking for his heir apparent since the start of camp. There are seven QBs listed on the roster, but it's former Muscle Shoals stand-out Logan Smothers who has the most experience. Smothers began his career at Nebraska before transferring to the Gamecocks last season. Now a senior, will it be Smothers' time to shine?

3. Winning the close ones: JSU was 3-1 in games decided by three points last season. It will need to continue that trend if it is to find its way to another bowl game this season.



Jacksonville State redshirt senior Clay Webb, who helped the Gamecocks rank fifth in the nation in rushing offense last year, is on the Outland Trophy's preseason watch list. [JACKSONVILLE STATE ATHLETICS]

2023 results (9-4, 6-2 C-USA)

Texas-El Paso	W, 17-14
East Tennessee	W, 49-3
at Coastal Carolina	L, 30-16
Eastern Michigan	W, 21-0
at Sam Houston St.	W, 35-28 OT
at Middle Tennessee	W, 45-30
Liberty	L, 31-13
Western Kentucky	W, 20-17
at Florida International	W, 41-16
at South Carolina	L, 38-28
Louisiana Tech	W, 56-17
at New Mexico St.	L, 20-17
New Orleans Bowl	
vs. Louisiana-Lafayette	W, 34-31

4. Watch list: Senior tight end Sean Brown is on the John Mackey Award Watch List for the second year in a row. The award is presented annually to the nation's most outstanding tight end. Last season, Brown earned second-team All-Conference USA accolades after making 19 catches for 294 yards with five touchdowns. In 32 games with Jax State, the Rome, Georgia, native has 50 catches for 817 yards.

2024 schedule

Coastal Carolina	Aug. 9
at Louisville	Sept. 7
at Eastern Michigan	Sept. 14
Southern Miss	Sept. 21
at Kennesaw St.	Oct. 4
New Mexico St.	Oct. 9
Middle Tennessee	Oct. 23
at Liberty	Oct. 30
at Louisiana Tech	Nov. 9
Florida International	Nov. 16
Sam Houston St.	Nov. 23
at Western Kentucky	Nov. 30

Extra point

Redshirt senior offensive lineman Clay Webb has been named to the Outland Trophy watch list, while senior punter Jack Dawson has been named to the Ray Guy Award watch list.

Upset special

Cheer: Kennesaw State. The Owls join C-USA this season and no doubt the Gamecocks will want to lay a whipping on their closest and biggest rival.

Jeer: Liberty. The Gamecocks travel to Liberty on Oct. 30. The Flames beat JSU 31-13 last season. Expect a similar result this season.

Did you know?

When the Gamecocks beat Louisiana-Lafayette 34-31 to end the season, they became the first team to win a bowl game in their first season of eligibility.

Quotebook

"I really like that quarterback room; it's the deepest since I've been here. There's four or five guys getting quality reps, we have some young talent there, and it's a conscientious group. They want to get better and they're all competitive and all want to be the guy."

— Rodriguez

Crystal ball

8-5: Gamecocks should avenge last season's losses to Coastal Carolina and New Mexico State but won't slip past Western Kentucky this time.

— Gregg Dewalt

UAB Blazers

Coach's corner



Dilfer



Blaze

Head coach: Trent Dilfer

Record: 4-8 in 1 year

Age: 52

Hometown: Santa Cruz, California

You don't say: Dilfer, in a 14-year NFL playing career, threw for 20,518 yards and 113 touchdowns.

Coordinators: Alex Mortensen (offense), Sione Ta'ufou (defense)

Info booth

Location: Birmingham

Home: Protective Stadium (47,100 capacity, first game 2021)

All-time record: 173-187-2

Mascot: Blaze

Band: Marching Blazers

Last conference title game appearance: 2020

Returning starters: 9 (4 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Zeno-ing in: After a big season as a junior in 2023, Jacob Zeno is expected to be even better this year. Zeno became the third player in UAB history to throw 3,000 yards in a season. He finished with 3,126 yards and 20 touchdowns against nine interceptions. He ranked second nationally at almost a 74% completion rate and was 11th in total offense, just shy of 300 per game. On the other hand, Zeno averaged just 11.2 yards per completion to rank 77th. How about something downfield, please?

2. That's Amare: Receiver Amare Thomas' freshman season was noteworthy, so how well might he do as a sophomore? Thomas finished with 53 receptions, which tied for seventh in UAB history and was the most by a freshman. With 40 more catches, he'll be on the Top 10 all-time UAB list. More yards would be a start. His 53 catches netted just 437 yards and three touchdowns. To repeat: Downfield, please.

3. Brown out: One of UAB's top all-time rushers is gone, but the Blazers are optimistic over the running game's future.



Quarterback Jacob Zeno, after such a big season in 2023, will be key for UAB this year. [JOHN BAZEMORE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Jermaine Brown Jr. finished as UAB's all-time leader with 5,026 all-purpose yards and third on the school's list with 3,078 rushing yards. In his place could step Isaiah Jacobs or Lee Beebe Jr. Jacobs tore a knee ligament in the middle of last season, and Beebe averaged almost 7 yards on his 52 carries. But the Blazers are also excited about LSU transfer Armoni Goodwin.

4. Portal power: The Blazers added four defensive players from Power Five schools. On the defensive line, LeDarrius Cox came from Indiana, Demarcus Smith from Ole Miss and Derrick Shepard Jr. from Cincinnati. Linebacker OC Brothers transferred in from Purdue. UAB has obvious defensive needs. The Blazers

ranked 118th of 130 FBS teams in total defense a year ago.

Extra point

UAB averaged a school-record 450 yards offense per game last year. The Blazers had five games over 500 yards, including two over 600.

Upset special

Cheer: Rice. The Blazers, offended that so many UAB hearts have moved on to basketball by the time they play their home finale, spark some momentum for 2025.

Jeer: Navy. The Blazers, after a 2-0 start, take some licks at Arkansas before an off week and feel a little too fine when

2023 results (4-8, 3-5 AAC)

North Carolina A&T	W, 35-6
at Georgia Southern	L, 49-35
Louisiana-Lafayette	L, 41-21
at Georgia	L, 49-21
at Tulane	L, 35-23
South Florida	W, 56-35
at Texas-San Antonio	L, 41-20
Memphis	L, 45-21
Florida Atlantic	W, 45-42
at Navy	L, 31-6
Temple	W, 34-24
at North Texas	L, 45-42

2024 schedule

Aug. 29	Alcorn St.
Sept. 7	at Louisiana-Monroe
Sept. 14	at Arkansas
Sept. 28	Navy
Oct. 5	Tulane
Oct. 12	at Army
Oct. 19	at South Florida
Nov. 2	Tulsa
Nov. 9	UConn
Nov. 16	at Memphis
Nov. 23	Rice
Nov. 29	at Charlotte

they face the Midshipmen.

Did you know?

The Blazers had enjoyed six straight winning seasons before last year's 4-8 in their debut in the American Athletic Conference. This year, UAB is picked to finish 10th in the league.

Quotebook

"Coach Dilfer and the rest of the players trust me, so I know it's a big job. We are always striving to do better on and off the field, so I feel honored to be one of the leaders for the team."

— Zeno

Crystal ball

4-8: The offense keeps up its torrid pace, but the defense does the same with its matador-like style, once again leaving fans to quickly yearn for basketball.

— A. Stacy Long

Troy Trojans

Coach's corner



Head coach: Gerad Parker

Record: first year at Troy, 0-6 as Purdue's interim coach in 2016

Age: 43

Hometown: Louisa, Kentucky

You don't say: Parker set Kentucky high school records with 238 receptions for 4,814 yards and 52 touchdowns for the Lawrence County Bulldogs.

Coordinators: Sean

Reagan (offense), Dontae Wright (defense)

Info booth

Location: Troy

Home: Veterans Memorial Stadium (30,000 capacity, first game 1950)

All-time record: 576-430-29

Mascot: T-Roy

Band: Sound of the South

Last conference title game appearance:

2023

Returning starters: 4 (3 offense, 1 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Sitting out: Chris Lewis, a third-team All-Sun Belt receiver last year as a junior, won't play this season. Lewis was diagnosed with a form of bone cancer before Troy's Birmingham Bowl loss to Duke and will undergo treatment and surgery. He'll be a big loss, not that football is the biggest concern. Lewis led the nation by averaging almost 23 yards per catch. He caught 32 passes for 735 yards and 10 touchdowns.

2. Revolving door? The Trojans, after having just one coach from 1991-2014, are on to their fourth in 10 years. Parker, who was Notre Dame's offensive coordinator the last two seasons, is the latest Troy coach. Larry Blakeney racked up 178 wins over 24 years, leading the school's climb from Division II to FBS and into the Sun Belt. Since, it's been Neal Brown (2015-18), Chip Lindsey (2019-21) and Jon Sumrall (2022-23). Tulane hired away



Troy's Chris Lewis, after a highlight-filled, 10-touchdown catch 2023, will miss this season while undergoing cancer treatment. [REED HOFFMANN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Sumrall over the offseason. Brown is the head coach at West Virginia. Lindsey is North Carolina's offensive coordinator.

3. One and only: Linebacker Jordan Stringer is Troy's only returning starter on defense, not that he was a full-time starter last year. Stringer started the final six games of the season and ranked third on the Trojans with 68 tackles. He did play 591 snaps, the most of any returning Troy defensive player. He's a junior.

4. Oh, some O, please: The Trojans lost a bushel load on offense with running back Kimani Vidal (1,661 yards, 14 TDs) now in the NFL, quarterback Gunnar Watson (3,569 yards, 27 scores) and receiver Jabrek Barber (999 yards, 5 TDs) also gone. Junior Goose Crowder, Watson's backup a year ago, has been named his successor.

Extra point

Troy has reached double-figure wins

each of the last two years and five times in the last eight seasons. The school has never done so three years in a row and, before 2016, had done it just 10 times.

Upset special

Cheer: Texas State. If the Trojans can knock off the preseason Sun Belt West favorite Bobcats, and Troy will be home, it could lead to another championship season.

Jeer: Louisiana-Lafayette. The Ragin' Cajuns could whip up some mighty-fine jambalaya and take a scalp in late November. Win or lose, there will still be some mighty-fine jambalaya to be had on the Bayou.

Did you know?

Troy set its single-season attendance record last year, averaging 26,130 fans for its seven official home games. (The

2023 results

(11-3, 7-1 Sun Belt)

Stephen F. Austin	W, 48-30
at Kansas St.	L, 42-13
James Madison	L, 16-14
Western Kentucky	W, 27-24
at Georgia St.	W, 28-7
Arkansas St.	W, 37-3
at Army	W, 19-0
at Texas St.	W, 31-13
South Alabama	W, 28-10
Louisiana-Monroe	W, 45-14
Louisiana-Lafayette	W, 31-24
at Southern Miss	W, 35-17
Sun Belt championship game	
Appalachian St.	W, 49-23
Birmingham Bowl	
vs. Duke	L, 17-10

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	Nevada
Sept. 7	at Memphis
Sept. 14	at Iowa
Sept. 21	Florida A&M
Sept. 28	Louisiana-Monroe
Oct. 3	Texas St.
Oct. 15	at South Alabama
Oct. 26	at Arkansas St.
Nov. 2	Coastal Carolina
Nov. 16	at Georgia Southern
Nov. 23	at Louisiana-Lafayette
Nov. 30	Southern Miss

Sun Belt title game's 20,183 didn't count toward the average.) The Trojans broke the record of 25,661 set way back in 2022.

Quotebook

"January to February is the offseason, the second quarter is spring practice, the summer is the third quarter, and now it's time to bring it home."

— Parker

Crystal ball

8-5: Winning the last two Sun Belt championships may ramp up expectations. The Trojans have a lot of holes to fill, but were still picked to finish second in the Sun Belt West.

— A. Stacy Long

South Alabama Jaguars

Coach's corner



Applewhite



SouthPaw

Head coach: Major Applewhite

Record: first year at USA, 15-11 in 2 years overall

Age: 46

Hometown: Baton Rouge, Louisiana

You don't say: Applewhite set 48 school records in his four years as a quarterback at Texas from 1998-2001.

Coordinators: Rob Ezell (offense), Will Windham (defense)

Info booth

Location: Mobile

Home: Hancock Whitney Stadium (24,450 capacity, first game 2020)

All-time record: 83-92

Mascot: SouthPaw

Band: Jaguar Marching Band

Last conference title game appearance: never

Returning starters: 12 (7 offense, 5 defense)

Four-down territory

1. Hello, old friend: Applewhite is South Alabama's new head coach, but he's no stranger to the Jaguars. He was USA's offensive coordinator the last three seasons before he was promoted in January. Previous coach Kane Wommack, who was 22-16 over the last three seasons, left to become defensive coordinator at Alabama for head coach Kalen DeBoer. Last year, Applewhite's offense set a school record with 430 points scored, including at least 55 in three games. The season ended with South's first bowl victory when the Jags' beat Eastern Michigan in the 68 Ventures Bowl, which was conveniently played in USA's home stadium.

2. Pitch it to Pritchett: Receiver Jamaal Pritchett, one of many USA stars in this bowl win, takes momentum into this season. He had eight catches for 127 yards and two touchdowns against Eastern Michigan to finish last year with 57 receptions for 883 yards and eight scores.



Jamaal Pritchett may cause some South Alabama fans to drop their jaws this season. [MATTHEW HINTON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Pritchett, who started his college career at Division II Tuskegee, started eight games last year. This season, he's the only South Alabama player named to the preseason All-Sun Belt teams.

3. Biggest guns gone: USA's biggest questions start on offense. The Jags may return seven starters, but quarterback Carter Bradley, running back La'Damian Webb and receiver Caullin Lacy aren't among them. Bradley merely threw for almost 2,700 yards, Webb ran for over 1,000 and Lacy posted a team-high 1,500 all-purpose yards.

4. About that bowl game: South Alabama's victory over Eastern Michigan wasn't the most-memorable thing about December's 68 Ventures Bowl. A post-game brawl marred the Jags' celebration. Eastern Michigan apologized for one of its players, Korey Hernandez, sucker-punching USA's Jamarrien Burt.

Extra point

The Jags have to find someone to kick, too. Diego Guajardo was 14-of-17 on field goals and 45-of-47 on extra points. His 326 career points rank first in South Alabama's admittedly brief football history.

Upset special

Cheer: Troy. The rivalry known as the "Battle for the Belt" hasn't been kind of late to USA, which has had said belt applied to its backside six straight years.

Jeer: Southern Miss. With USM coach Will Hall on the hotseat, notching the Golden Eagles' first win over the Jags could be a job-saver. Of course, he may already be off that hotseat by then, too. Either good or bad.

Did you know?

First-year USA receivers coach Paul

2023 results (7-6, 4-4 Sun Belt)

at Tulane	L, 37-17
SE Louisiana	W, 35-17
at Oklahoma St.	W, 33-7
Central Michigan	L, 34-30
at James Madison	L, 31-23
at Louisiana-Monroe	W, 55-7
Southern Miss	W, 55-3
Louisiana-Lafayette	L, 33-20
at Troy	L, 28-10
Arkansas St.	W, 21-14
Marshall	W, 28-0
at Texas St.	L, 52-44
68 Ventures Bowl (Mobile)	
Eastern Michigan	W, 59-10

2024 schedule

Aug. 31	North Texas
Sept. 7	at Ohio U.
Sept. 12	Northwestern St.
Sept. 19	at Appalachian St.
Sept. 28	at LSU
Oct. 5	at Arkansas St.
Oct. 15	Troy
Oct. 26	Louisiana-Monroe
Nov. 2	Georgia Southern
Nov. 16	at Louisiana-Lafayette
Nov. 23	at Southern Miss
Nov. 29	Texas St.

Petrino is the brother of the infamous Bobby, who is a former head coach at Arkansas and Louisville and is now the Razorbacks' offensive coordinator. Paul Petrino was Central Michigan's offensive coordinator the last two years.

Quotebook

"I'm grateful to Kane Wommack for bringing me here three years ago, and I look forward to carrying on the winning tradition that has been established."

— Applewhite

Crystal ball

4-8: Applewhite has to start somewhere, and eight losses would mark USA's most since going 2-10 in 2019, which was two coaches ago.

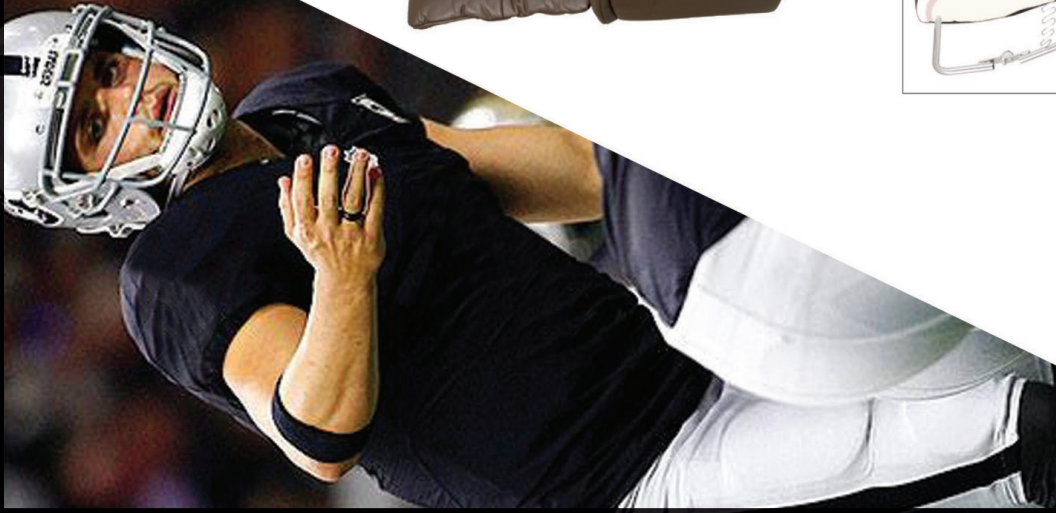
— A. Stacy Long



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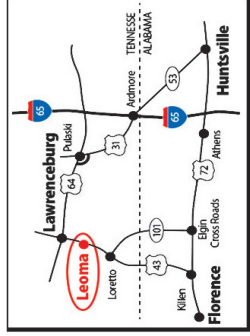
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