

Gamecocks control their own destiny as season ends, bowl picture develops



LARRY WILLIAMS
Out of Bounds

With three games left in South Carolina's football season, we find ourselves asking, "Where has all the time gone?" To those of us who consider Saturday the Sabbath instead of Sunday, this is probably the most exciting time of year, but yet the most depressing.

With this Saturday's home game against Tennessee, players such as Tony Watkins, Vincent Dinkins, Hank Campbell, Toby Cates and of course, Brandon Bennett will run through the hallowed tunnel to the spine tingling strands of "2001" for the final time.

Remembering these players accomplishments of four years is interesting. I can remember a pumped up freshman Tony Watkins inspiring a whole team with his blocked punt against Georgia Tech in 1991.

The Jackets were coming off of a co-national championship that year, but Carolina won 23-14.

Who can forget walk-on Hank Campbell in '92? For those of you who forgot, let me refresh you. USC 24, Tennessee 23. A Volunteer touchdown with seconds left had narrowed the gap to one, and the Vols decided for the two point conversion. A possessed Campbell appeared out of the blue to level James Stewart just as he was about to cross the goal line. The stop sent the 71,529 fans into a frenzied high that lasted for months.

What about Toby Cates, whose diving catch in the end zone against Clemson in '92 provided Carolina with a season capping 24-13 win against the tigers? In Death Valley, might I add.

Simply put, words cannot describe how much the Gamecocks will miss Brandon Bennett in future years. The man did so much throughout his career, it's hard to single out one accomplishment, but here goes: Ball at the one yard line, time winding down, Bennett over top. 'Nuff said.

The seniors on this team will be sorely missed, and it is important that on this special Saturday you be there to voice your support for them.

But wait! In spite of this being the last home game, there are two other semi-important games left on the schedule that happen to be on the road.

With Carolina in second place in the SEC East, the trip

to the Swamp in Gainesville promises to be crucial. As for the trip to Tigertown for the annual battle with Clemson, the magnitude of that slugfest is obvious.

At this point in the season, things could go either way. The following consists of two scenarios of how things could end up. The latter is probably what you all are hoping for, while the first you'll likely want to forget. Well, here goes.

USC vs Tennessee: In front of a sellout crowd the Gamecocks find themselves down 17-3 early in the contest. Apparently the open date for the Volunteers worked. Carolina, down 24-10 at the half, pulls to within seven to open the second half on Reggie Richardson's 99 yard kickoff return; however, behind the powerful running of James Stewart, the Vols run away from the Cocks 34-26.

USC vs Florida: after an open date, Carolina travels to the Swamp to try to conquer the high-powered offense and quick defense of the Gators. The Gamecocks play a quarter of inspired football and go up 14-7 to end the first. In the second quarter, the Gators wake up and tally 21 points to go up 28-14 at the half.

In a back and forth second half, the Gators have the upper hand and pull out a 44-24 victory. South Carolina's record now stands at 5-5. All bowl hopes now await in next week's matchup against the Clemson Tigers.

USC vs Clemson: At Death Valley, in one of the biggest USC-Clemson matchups in years, a sellout crowd is treated to a low scoring grudge match. An inspired Clemson team with nothing to lose is looking to spoil Carolina's bowl hopes.

The first half ends with Carolina on top 7-6. The score comes on a blocked punt returned for a touchdown by Lee Wiggins. In the ensuing second half, the Tiger defense turns it up a notch, sacking Steve Taneyhill six times and intercepting him twice.

With two minutes left in the fourth and Carolina losing 13-10, the Cocks get the ball and try to begin a drive at their own 35. Led by a reverse razzle-dazzle pass from Bennett to Monty Means, Carolina finds themselves with first and ten at the Tiger 15-yard line.

A run for no gain and two incompletions later, it's fourth and ten with 46 seconds left. Taneyhill drops back to pass and despite the rush, gets the ball to Toby Cates in the flats. Cates jukes a defensive back, gets the first down and races towards the end zone. As he jumps towards the goal line, he is sandwiched in the air by Andre Carter and Darnell Stephens. The ball comes loose and rolls into the endzone.

A mad scramble for the ball follows, but it rolls out of the end zone. With the ball, so go Carolina's bowl hopes. Clemson gains possession at the 20, and runs out the clock. Orange clad fans storm the field, and shell-shocked Gamecock fans walk out mumbling sentences littered with "Chicken Curse."

This concludes the pessimistic or "worst case scenario" version of the rest of the season. The following is, at worst, a fairy tale version. Enjoy.

USC vs Tennessee: Before a sellout crowd, the first half ends in a 10-10 tie. In a back-and-forth second half, USC finally pulls away on a 65 yard bomb from Taneyhill to Monty Means. Final score: USC 31, UT 20. Carolina fans, assured of a bowl invitation, get the proverbial "big head" again.

USC vs Florida: In a who'd a thunk it game at The Swamp, South Carolina and Florida play for a trip to Atlanta Dec. 2 to play the SEC West champ. Picked up by ABC-TV, this contest has nightmare written all over it for Carolina.

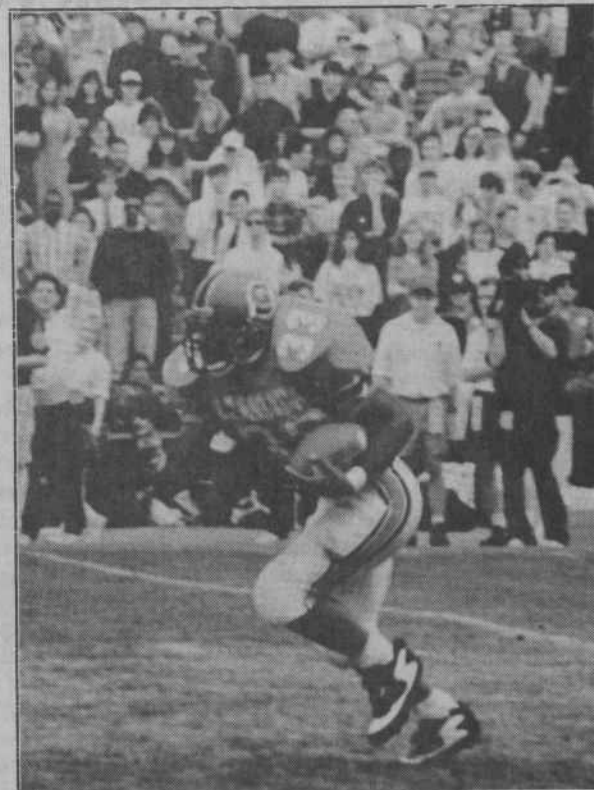
Florida jumps out to a 21-3 halftime lead behind the pinpoint passing of Terry Dean and outstanding defensive play of Kevin Carter. USC, unfazed, comes out in the second half and scores two quick touchdowns to silence the capacity crowd.

In what evolves into a shootout, the score with five minutes left reads Florida 37, USC 35. Attempting to put the game away, the Gators throw a pass into the end zone that is tipped and picked off by Reggie Richardson. Using his lightning speed, Richardson races down the sideline and scores a 101 yard interception return for a touchdown.

With 1:38 left and USC leading 42-37, Florida mounts a final drive. Dean throws a pass over the middle for Jack Jackson, who catches it and heads toward the end zone. Richardson dives for Jackson unsuccessfully, but slows him down enough for Corey Bell to catch up to him. Bell reaches out, strips the ball away and falls on it.

As Steve Taneyhill falls on the ball to run out the clock, uncontrollable Gamecock fans storm the field and tear down the goal posts. Guaranteed a trip to the SEC Championship, the team sets their sights on another trophy — the Clemson Tigers.

USC vs Clemson: In a game where the Tigers have nothing to lose, the Tigers play a tough first half and go up 10-7 on a spectacular run by freshman sensation Antuan Wyatt.



BOB WERTZ The Gamecock

The senior class, including running back Brandon Bennett, will play their last home game Saturday against Tennessee.

In the second half, Carolina regains their magic and trounces the tigers. Winning 31-10, Gamecock players, coaches, and fans celebrate in the middle of the field for hours following the game. Also, while coach Brad Scott isn't looking, Steve Taneyhill signs his name in the Death Valley turf.

With an 8-3 record, Carolina journeys to Atlanta to play an undefeated Alabama Crimson Tide, who, by the way, defeated Auburn the previous week, for the SEC championship.

This is where I'll stop. Draw your own conclusions as to what happens. Either way, support your team and do your best not to be the detestable "fair weather fan."

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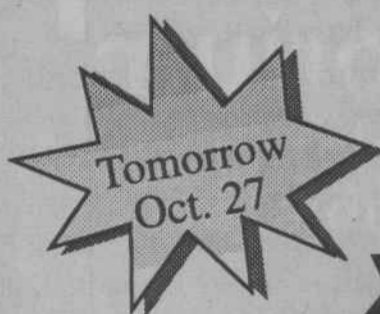
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