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Gamecock football: Are you ready for it?

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Well, folks, it's that time again. While the temperatures will start to slowly decrease and the month of September approaches, they bring with them two things: 1) the start of school and 2) the return of college football.

This year's South Carolina Gamecocks football team is an intriguing one. Usually, a team's season is predictable. That's not the case with this year's team. A lot will depend on how quickly quarterback Anthony Wright can adjust to the college level. But if people keep wishing Taneyhill was here, it will be a long year for both Wright and the Gamecocks.

The defense is also a question mark. Last year, they were awful. They were ranked last in the SEC in points allowed and 11th of 12 teams against the run and pass. The defense must improve is hoping for a bowl game.

One difficulty for the team is their schedule. They need to rack up early victories because they finish the season with some tough opponents. After easy games against Central Florida, East Carolina and Mississippi State, USC finishes the season against Tennessee, Florida and Clemson.

Keep in mind a season consists of 11 games. Some are toss-ups and others could be decided before the teams take the field. For S.C. to go to a bowl, they must win six games.

Let's take a look at the schedule and see what to expect.

■ Central Florida Sept. 7

UCF At A Glance

1995: 6-5

The 1990s: 44-25

Coach: Gene McDowell

At USC and overall: 76-49, 11 years

Returning starters: 15; 6 offense, 7 defense, punter and kicker

Players to watch: QB Duante Culpepper; TB Mike Grant; LB Nakia Reddick; LB Kendrick Thomas; CB Darryl Latimore

Primary strengths: An experienced offensive line and incoming talent in the wide receiver ranks should elevate Culpepper's already lofty passing numbers.

Potential problems: Without Marquette Smith, UCF's running game is more of a question mark than a weakness.

Overview: Much of UCF's success can be attributed to Mike Kruczek's offensive genius. His squads have consistently ranked among the nation's best in total offense and scoring.

A word of advice to the Gamecock's secondary:

Watch out! In his 1995 freshman campaign, Culpepper passed for 2,071 yards and 12 touchdowns, even with a limited receiving unit. This season he will hook up with high school teammate Kenny Clark and a couple of Juco receivers to offset the Golden Knight's suspect running game.

UCF loses Marquette Smith, who rushed for a school-record 1,511 yards and 14 touchdowns last year.

Middle linebacker Kendrick Thomas possesses an NFL body (6-3, 240lbs.) and skills to match. Nakia Reddick's quickness and John Bryant's toughness complement Thomas on the outside.

Central Florida makes the jump from Division I-AA football to I-A play as an independent team this year.

■ Georgia Sept. 14

UGA At A Glance

1995: 6-6 overall, 3-5 SEC (3rd East)

Coach: Jim Donnan

First year at Georgia, overall: 64-21-0, 6 years

Returning starters: 14, 7 offense, 6 defense, punter

Players to watch: QB Mike Bobo, WR Robert Edwards, DB Corey Johnson, P Dax Langley, OT Adam Meadows, WR Hines Ward

Primary Strengths: The Bulldogs figure they must have used up all their injuries last season, so this should be their turn to stay healthy. They have some outstanding talent in the backfield.

Potential problems: They're not much deeper than last year, when a handful of key injuries cropped up and devastated them. The team has lost some swagger, and if the lines aren't fortified, Georgia will be setting itself up for disappointment.

Overview: A solid talent base and renewed optimism with new coach Jim Donnan puts Georgia in a nice, building mode. With three home non-league games, the 'Dogs play seven games at home this season, which never hurts.

Offensively, Georgia is loaded at the skill positions. Bobo is a solid quarterback who only needs to get the ball near receivers Ward and Edwards for a completion. The Bulldogs are deep at running back with sophomore Torin Kirtsey, Robert Arnaud and freshman Patrick Pass.

Kirtsey and Arnaud filled in for Edwards after his injury and did a good job. At fullback, look for a battle between junior Selma Calloway and junior college transfer Ronnie Bradley. The problem may be in protecting Bobo and opening holes for the backs.

They return only two starters. Meadows will anchor the line at tackle along with sophomore Matt Stinchcomb. Senior Resty Beadles and junior Antonio Fleming will start at the guard positions. The center position is up for grabs.

On the defensive side of the ball will be a question mark. The secondary could be good, as well as the linebackers. Johnson brings leadership to the secondary at free safety. Strong safety Armin Love and cornerbacks Alandus Sims and Ronald Bailey have started, and depth is excellent. Despite losing leading tackler Whit Marshall, the line backing corp returns Greg Bright and Brandon Tolbert.

But the defense needs some help, too. They lost their top four ends. Georgia recorded only 25 sacks last year, so getting more production at the ends would be a novel idea. Chris Terry is the leading returnee, but he had just seven tackles last season. Punter Dax Langley is a solid player who averaged 39.5 yards last season.

■ East Carolina Sept. 21

ECU At A Glance

1995: 9-3

Coach: Steve Logan; 22-23, 4 years

Returning starters: 17; 9 offense, 6 defense, kicker, punter

Players to watch: QB Marcus Crandell, RB Scott Harley, WR Mitchell Galloway, SS Darren Hart, DT Lorenzo West

Offensive strengths: Marcus Crandell has shattered all but one of Jeff Blake's passing records. He has experience, savvy and an understanding of coach Logan's complicated offense. A huge crop of talented receivers, led by Galloway, makes him all the more dangerous.

Offensive weaknesses: A line lacking experience and depth could put Crandell's mobility to use, and he's at his best when throwing on the run. The backfield also lacks a proven runner. Sophomores Harley, Daryl Jones and Raymond

Mabry and true freshman Jamie Wilson will battle for the job.

Defensive strengths: The Pirates have speed, aggressiveness, confidence and an attitude. Linebackers Carlos Brown, B.J.. Crane and Marvin Burke are experienced. Hart at strong safety is a menace to opposing running games, and West has a knack for finding the quarterback.

Special teams: Kicker Chad Holcomb has been plagued by inconsistency and punter Matt Levine had a subpar 1995.

The Pirates must establish a threat in the backfield to kept the pressure off Crandell. That means the offensive line must stay healthy and mature quickly.

A soft schedule should give the Pirates their second consecutive unbeaten season at home. If they can steal a couple of victories on the road, a third consecutive Liberty Bowl is likely.

Remember this: the last time East Carolina made a trip into Williams Brice Stadium, they stole a game from the Gamecocks on their homecoming. If USC takes them lightly, it could happen again.

■ Mississippi State Sept. 28

MSU At A Glance

1995: 3-8 overall, 1-7 SEC (6th West)

Coach: Jackie Sherrill

At MSU: 28-28-2, 5 years

Overall: 133-73-4, 18 years

Returning Starters: 16; 7 offense, 7 defense, punter, kicker

Players To Watch: LB Dwayne Curry, NT Eric Dotson, DT James Grier, LB Paul LaCoste, RB Keffer McGee, QB Derrick Taite

Primary Strengths: The mere fact that the Bulldogs are eligible for a bowl game this season should give them strength that a lot of people didn't think they would be able to find following an NCAA investigation. Now they're ready to make good on their renewed life, and they seem to have defensive potential to make it worth while.

Potential Problems: The defense, and particularly the secondary, wouldn't have to be a lot better than last year to show major improvement. The unsettled secondary could be a problem again, but the linebackers and potentially, the line look like they have the makings of a good defense.

Overview: Will new coordinators on both sides of the ball make much of a difference in Starkville? Coach Jackie Sherrill is feeling the heat, but it's nothing that a quick start against Memphis and Louisiana Tech won't heal heading into the trip to Columbia (remember, the Gamecocks ran up 65 points on MSU last year).

Quarterback will be a weak point for the Bulldogs. Senior Derrick Taite had four of the SEC's 10 longest passes last year, including three plays of 80 yards or more, but Taite often struggles against quality defenses. On the other hand, the running back position will be a strong point. Their top three backs return, highlighted by durable junior Keffer McGee, the SEC's fourth-leading rusher last year with 1,072 yards on 235 attempts.

Cameron Floyd and Jeremy Jones emerged as the top receivers in the spring workouts. However, they made only two catches between them last season. The offensive line will be large, led by left tackle Brent Smith, left guard Brad Ainsworth and right guard Henry McCann.

Defensively, State will present some problems for opposing offenses. Senior linebacker Dwayne Curry, a two-time All-SEC selection, led the Bulldogs last season in tackles (113). He also recovered two fumbles, caused two fumbles, had 4.5 tackles for losses and notched two pass deflections. The defensive line and secondary will be young and inexperienced, but they have a lot of potential.

■ at Auburn - Oct. 5

Auburn At A Glance

1995: 8-4 overall, 5-3 SEC (2nd West)

Coach: Terry Bowden

At Auburn: 28-5-1, 3 years

Overall: 92-41-2, 12 years

Returning Starters: 14; 5 offense, 9 defense

Players To Watch: TB Fred Beasley, NT Jimmy Brumbaugh, LB Takeo Spikes, WR Willie Gosh, DB Martavius Houston, LB Marcellus Mostella

Primary Strengths: The Tigers have almost nobody back on offense, but Bowden has never had trouble finding ways to move the ball, and in Beasley he's got what looks like a first-rate tailback. The defense has a lot of experience.

Potential Problems: The offensive line is far from settled. The loss of tackle Willie Anderson to the NFL early will really hurt.

Overview: Auburn is on the verge of a crossroads, and will have to get some veteran play from young quarterback Dameyune Craig and inspired performances by an unimpressive defense to remain among the SEC's powerhouses this season. In its last three games, the defense has been pushed around for 101 points.

It's finally quarterback Dameyune Craig's time to shine. The exciting redshirt junior will lead the Tigers this year. Speedy Fred Beasley moves from fullback to tailback. Beasley rushed for 346 yards and five TDs on 66 carries and caught 11 passes for 194 yards and another score. The receiving unit will be strong as senior Willie Gosh and junior Tyrone Goodson return. The two had 95 catches for 1,265 yards between them. The offensive line is the big question mark. Many of the positions are still to be fought over as the season approaches. Senior guard Leonard Thomas leads the race going into the season.

On the other side of the ball, the Tigers should be much improved. The front three of ends Mark Smith and Shannon Suttle, and nose tackle Jimmy Brumbaugh will line up for the Tigers. Outside linebackers Terry Solomon and Marcellus Mostella, All-SEC candidates, and flanker Takeo Spikes in the middle will be solid. Junior cornerback Larry Melton returns to the secondary with safeties Charles Rose and Martavius Houston. Houston, who moved into the starting job as a freshman, was the big playmaker. The strong safety was the team's third-leading tackler with 94. He broke up five passes and was among those with an interception. Rose made 64 tackles and knocked down four passes. Melton supported the run well, making 66 stops and breaking up 11 passes.

■ at Kentucky - Oct. 12

Kentucky At A Glance

1995: 4-7 overall, 2-6 SEC (5th East)

Coach: Bill Curry

At Kentucky: 22-45, 6 years

Overall: 79-98-4, 16 years

Returning Starters: 11; 5 offense, 5 defense, punter
Players To Watch: SS Leman Boyd, WR/KR Kio Sanford, LB Mike Schellenberger, LB Lamont Smith, WR Craig Yeast, RB Ray McLaurin

Primary Strengths: The Wildcats have some good, young talent, with guys like wideout Yeast and offensive tackle Jonas Liening rating among the best freshmen in the league last year. Now they've got the top QB recruit in the nation in Tim Couch. If he doesn't play, it will only be because junior Billy Jack Haskins improves.

Potential Problems: This is a program that won just five games over the past two seasons, so it must battle an inferiority complex in the SEC East. They haven't thrown the ball well under Curry, which will have to change if they're going to make the big strides necessary to stabilize the program.

Overview: With the opening games against beatable Louisville, Cincinnati and Indiana (as well as a bye), the Wildcats could be 2-1 or even 3-0 after the first month of the season. If they have built some confidence and continuity, they can weather a tough midseason schedule and win more games than they lost in 1996.

It's just a matter of time until Tim Couch takes over the Wildcat offense. Couch, the high school All-American will take the reigns as soon as he is ready. While the QB position is not a problem, the running back one is. After losing All-SEC back Moe Williams to the early NFL draft, Kentucky is left scrambling for a replacement. Raymond McLaurin will get the first shot. Two redshirt freshman, Anthony White and Lee Wesley, are also in the picture.

Craig Swift will lead a vastly-improved receiving unit. The freshman All-SEC member joins Kio Sanford, Kevin Coleman and Marvin Love to provide inviting targets for whoever is playing quarterback. The offensive line is a big concern due to injury and disciplinary actions. Junior John Schlarman, Kentucky's top lineman, suffered a major knee injury in spring practice, and his availability is in question. He will probably switch from center to left guard when he returns. Sophomore Jason Watts will step in at center.

Defensively, they are young and lack depth. The linebackers are led by Mike Schellenberger, who led the team in tackles last year. The other two LB spots are up for grabs. The secondary is rebuilding but will be led by Van Hiles and strong safety Leman Boyd. The defensive line is led by left end Kurt Supe. Supe got off to a fast start last year and was leading in SEC in sacks through three games before suffering a broken arm. He is back at full speed and should be a force.

■ Arkansas Oct. 19

Arkansas At A Glance

1995: 8-5 overall, 6-2 SEC (1st West)

Coach: Danny Ford

Arkansas: 17-17-1, 3 years

Overall: 113-47-4, 14 years B13; 7 offense, 4 defense, punter, kicker

Players to watch: DT Geno Bell, WR Anthony Eubanks, RB Madre Hill, WR Anthony Lucas, RB Oscar Malone, LB Mark Smith

Primary strengths: Assuming their knees are all repaired, the Razorbacks have some real quality and depth at tailback, and their wide receivers will give any quarterback plenty of options. Also their kicking game offers Arkansas an edge that other teams envy.

Potential problems: With such a senior-dominated team last year, this looks like the least experienced team in the league. The Hogs need to find a quarterback to run the offense without being too chancy.

This team came through marvelously in its key games last year, but most of its key veterans are gone. Ford isn't starting over from scratch, but the program cannot be expected to attain comparable success this year with only 14 returning starters. One thing the Hogs can draw from last season is an ability to win close games, which is something they made a science of in 1995.

Quarterback is a big question mark for the Razorbacks. Pete Burks will get the preseason not but freshman Chad Jones and Clint Stoerner should see considerable playing time. Madre Hill is back after a stellar 1995 year. Until he tore ligaments in his knee, he had set a school rushing record with 1,387 yards.

Returning for Arkansas are two of the league's best young pass catchers in junior Anthony Eubanks and sophomore Anthony Lucas. On the line, the Hogs have three starters returning in senior left tackle Carlos Showers, sophomore left guard Russ Brown and senior right tackle Winston Anderson.

Defensively, the line and linebackers should have some strong players, but overall the defense is questionable. Nose guard Geno Bell made 89 tackles last season, including four sacks, but the Hogs will have two new ends and a new tackle. Mark Smith will be the anchor at outside linebacker. A 1995 Butkus Award nominee, he should be a finalist this year. While Smith will get most of the attention, his partner is excellent as well.

Senior Vincent Bradford was second behind Smith on the team in tackles with 97 and runner-up in solo stops with 63. Arkansas lost all four secondary starters, but that may be a good thing. The Hogs allowed an SEC-high 2,659 yards through the air.

■ at Vanderbilt Oct. 25

Vanderbilt At A Glance

1995: 2-9 overall, 1-7 SEC (6th East)

Coach: Rod Dowhower

At Vandy: 2-9, 1 year

Overall: 7-14-1, 2 years

Returning starters: 16; 5 offense, 10 defense, punter

Players to watch: QB Damian Allen, DE Brian Boykin, CB Corey Chavous, LB Jamie Duncan, DT Matt Schuckman, DE Jay Stallworth

Primary strengths: The defense has experience and a good idea of what it's trying to do - which is pick up where it left off last year, when it limited Tennessee to 12 points in the last game of the season. Also, the second year in a coach's system, especially Dowhower's West Coast Offense, would presumably be more productive than the first.

Potential problems: The Commodores continue to have real challenges in making the offensive transition from an option to Dowhower's open, balanced attack. There are almost no true wideouts hanging around until recruits arrive.

Overview: And with excellent experience on defense, Dowhower and Vandy ought to find marginally more success than they experienced last season.

When the Commodores play, they hope it'll be low-scoring. Their offense won't score much and they hope their defense

can hold down the opponents score. Offensively, Damian Allen steps in at QB. He doesn't have much experience and struggles with his interceptions.

Four players are vying for the R-back slot, including juniors Marcus Forrest, Tyrone Yarbrough and Marcus A. Williams, and redshirt freshman Alvin Duke, a converted receiver. The receivers won't be that much better as Duane Todd and Robert Simmons are penciled in as the starters. Unfortunately for Vandy fans, the offensive line will be even worse. Left tackle Allen DeGraffenreid and center Jim Anguiano are the lone returning starters.

The defense should be much, much improved. It should considering they only lost one starter. The front-four will be solid led by two-year starters left tackle Matt Schuckman and right end Brian Boykin. Linebacker Jamie Duncan is an NFL prospect and led the Commodores in tackles with 120. He's the team's strongest player, lifting 1,405 total pounds in bench, squat and power clean. The entire secondary returns. Strong safety Eric Vance, free safety DeReal Finklin and cornerback Corey Chavous will be the leaders in the defensive backfield.

Also watch out for punter Bill Marinangel. With his average of 42.7 yards ranking second in the SEC and 16th nationally, Vanderbilt was 10th in the country in net punting and first in the league. Marinangel boomed a career-best 70-yard effort against Notre Dame.

■ Tennessee Nov. 2

UT At A Glance

1995: 11-1 overall, 7-1 SEC (2nd East)

Coach: Phillip Fulmer

At UT and overall: 32-7-1, 4 years

Returning starters: 15; 7 offense, 6 defense, kicker, punter

Players to watch: RB Jay Graham, LB Tyrone Hines, WR Joey Kent, DE Leonard Little, QB Peyton Manning, FS Jason Parker

Primary strengths: This team knows how to win, with 28 victories in the past three seasons, and it has the best quarterback in the country. The Vols are experienced in a lot of areas, and look like they're ready to make a big run. They get both Florida and Alabama at home.

Potential problems: Losing their best three offensive linemen from last season hurts. It's fair to call this a "patchwork" offensive line, which is unusual in Knoxville. Also, they'll have to develop some reliable receivers to go with Kent.

Overview: The early game against Florida (Sept. 21) gets things into gear quickly. If the offensive line comes around soon enough to control UCLA on Sept. 7, the Vols will roll confidently into that showdown. In the past three years, they're 0-3 against Fulmer, 28-4-1 against everybody else.

With a quarterback like Peyton Manning leading the offense, expectations have to be high. The best quarterback in the nation is the front-runner for the Heisman, but he is also surrounded by talent. At running back, Jay Graham is a silent force. His 1,438 yards last year were gained in the shadow of Manning. Manning will also have the luxury of throwing to one of the nation's premier wide-out, Joey Kent. He caught a school-record 69 passes for 1,055 yards and 9 touchdowns last year. The only problem will be the line. Several upperclassmen with varying levels of experience figure into the mix.

On the other side of the ball, watch out for number one. The 6-3, 230 defensive end is one of the best players in the SEC. Just ask Steve Taneyhill. After harassing Taneyhill all game Taneyhill remarked, "That guy coming off the end is special." Little had a team-high 11 sacks last season. Senior Tyrone Hines is a fixture at middle linebacker but the other two spots are concerns for the Vols. In the secondary, Jason Parker returns to free safety where his hard tackling is needed. The other spots are also up in the air.

The bottom line is that most of the elements are in place for a run at the national championship. Sept. 21 is the biggest game for UT as Florida travels to Knoxville in a battle that has national championship implications.

■ at Florida Nov. 19

Florida At A Glance

Coach: Steve Spurrier

At UF: 61-13-1, 7 years

Overall: 81-26-2, 10 years

Returning starters: 17; 9 offense, 6 defense, kicker, punter

Players to watch: WR Reidel Anthony, WR Ike Hilliard, CB Anthone Lott, RB Elijah Williams, SS Lawrence Wright, QB Danny Wuerffel

Primary strengths: With the collection of offensive talent that Steve Spurrier has put together in Gainesville, the chains look like they're seven yards apart. The offensive line should be able to compensate for the loss of two starters, and not matter who Danny Wuerffel gets the ball to at any given moment, he might take it the distance.

Potential problems: Although a high-pressure, speed approach has been promised, the interior of the defense has to be rebuilt almost from scratch, which could leave the Gators susceptible to punishment by some of the power offenses in the SEC.

Overview: If we look at the Jan. 2 massacre, we're able to recall that the Gators last season were considered one of the most fearsome, unstoppable teams of the 1990s. Although they might have to outscore some teams with basketball scores again, they're capable of doing so every week.

Only one word describes the Gators passing attack: potent. With Heisman candidate Danny Wuerffel at quarterback, the Gators will pile up lots of points. Wuerffel will have a multitude of quality receivers to choose from in Ike Hilliard, Reidel Anthony, Jacquez Green and Jamie Richardson.

The running back position has four potential superstars. Junior Elijah Williams, the quickest, led the team in rushing (858 yards, SEC-best 7.5 yards per carry) despite starting just seven games due to injury. The line is a big concern on offense. Center Jeff Mitchell, guard Donnie Young and Mo Collins are outstanding, experienced players.

The defensive line replaces three starters. Senior defensive end Cameron Davis is the most experienced of those returning. The linebackers will be solid, but not outstanding with Johnny Rutledge leading the charge at outside linebacker. In the secondary, senior Anthone Lott, coming off an All-SEC campaign, and junior Fred Weary return on the corners. Strong safety Lawrence Wright (team-high 109 tackles) joined Lott on the All-SEC team.

Once again, the Gators begin a season - as they have the previous three - as legitimate national championship contenders. They'll be able to score a lot of points, but stopping the other