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SPORTS

Nate says that the Gamecocks have earned a first round bye in the SEC Tournament for the second consecutive year. USC earned the bye two weeks ago; and prior to last year, Carolina never had been seeded higher than fifth in the league tournament.

Gamecocks to spend Spring Break being 'S-E-Cond' to none

sports editor **ACHIM HUNT**

It all started back in October amongst a "Madness" of fans, slam dunks, and celebrities on the floor of Frank McGuire Arena. That madness was of course of the Midnight variety, and while it was loads of fun for all, nothing that happened that night had a great impact on the 1997-98 edition of the Gamecocks.

Now another Madness has entered the lives of the 12 young men who comprise the Gamecock basketball team and their loyal legion of rooster boosters. But this time the stakes are high. The outcome means everything.

Win, and they get another breath of life along with the chance to still capture an SEC title. Lose, and the Gamecocks earn no title and might have to start using up those frequent flyer miles to reach their tournament destination out west.

The bearing of this weekend's Southeastern Conference Tournament to be in the 26,000-seat Georgia Dome in Atlanta, Ga. is huge for the Gamecocks.

Not huge from a standpoint of having to win to be able to make the NCAA Tournament, but huge because this weekend will go a long way in determining seeding and region.

With 21 wins that include quality wins over Maryland, Georgia, Tennessee, Cincinnati and Florida, the Gamecocks are locked for at least a No. 4 seed. Make it to the championship game of the SEC Tournament in Atlanta and that seed could move up to a No. 3.

But to get to that point, the Gamecocks have to face some stiff competition.

Because the sports staff wants to go home and watch the Florida-Auburn game tonight, we don't know who the Gamecocks will be playing, so we will look at the Gamecocks against both teams. By now you probably already know who won, so just read the section that applies.

Florida: The Gamecocks have faced Billy Donovan's Gators twice this year and beat them 74-72 in Columbia in late January. The game was tied late until junior Bj Mckie missed one of his patented spin shots but was tapped back in by SEC All-Freshman team member Antonio Grant, who would go on to more heroics in the Cincinnati game.

In the second game, the Gamecocks went into a bout that resembled more of a fight between Ric Flair and Hol-

lywood Hogan than it did a college basketball game. Junior Bj Mckie was whistled for a technical foul and was later slapped with a one-half game suspension for throwing an elbow against the Gators. The Gamecocks still managed to triumph in the game, 79-74.

"The thing about Florida that would scare me about them if we played them in the tournament other than the threes that they hit is the fact that we have beaten them twice already and it is so tough to win three games in a year against any team," Head Coach Eddie Fogler said.

Florida is a tough team who is known for their three-point shot. The Gators hit 16 in two games against the Gamecocks this season. Florida led the SEC this season in three-point field goals by making 262 out of 641 attempts for a 40.9 percent clip.

When you look individually at the Gators' shooting, junior Greg Stolt hits 50.5 percent of his tries, while sophomore Kenyan Weaks hits 50 percent of his three-pointers.

Junior Jason Williams is the Gators' leading scorer with 17.1 points per game.

"Florida is capable of beating anybody," junior forward William Gallman said. "They hit those threes really well, they did against us in both games this year."

Auburn: The Gamecocks played Auburn back on January 24th on the plains of Auburn, Ala. The bench play saved the Gamecocks that day as they outscored the Tigers 27-2 off the bench. Carolina managed to win the game despite hitting only one field goal in the final 13 minutes of the game.

Melvin Watson had his season high seven assists in this game.

"Auburn is a real physical team, and they play real good," Gallman said. "They have been struggling of late though."

After a strong conference start, the Tigers have slowed way down by losing their last four conference games and only winning two of their last eight. Those losses include double-digit losses to Kentucky, Arkansas and Vanderbilt.

If the Gamecocks advance past the quarterfinals tonight at 9:45 p.m., then they will face the winner of the bracket that features SEC West Champ Ole Miss. That game is slated for 3:15 on Saturday.

Ole Miss plays at 3 p.m. today against the winner of yesterday's Georgia-Mississippi State game.

If the seeds hold them, Georgia will face Ole Miss later today. Georgia beat Ole Miss this year 70-68 in Athens.

The Gamecocks have beaten the Bulldogs twice this year including the buzzer-beating win last Tuesday night on ESPN. If they face the Bulldogs they will once again have the challenge of defeating a team three times in one year.

If the seeds hold however Ole Miss will be the Gamecocks opponent on Saturday assuming a Carolina victory tonight. Ole Miss handily defeated the Gamecocks in Oxford in early January in both teams' first conference game of the year. The final tally from that game saw Carolina lose 73-54.

Everybody expects Kentucky to cruise to the championship game in the other half of the bracket. And with good reason. The Wildcats have defeated all of the teams on their side of the bracket at least once this year. The Wildcats' two conference losses are both to Florida and Ole Miss who they would not face until the Championship game.

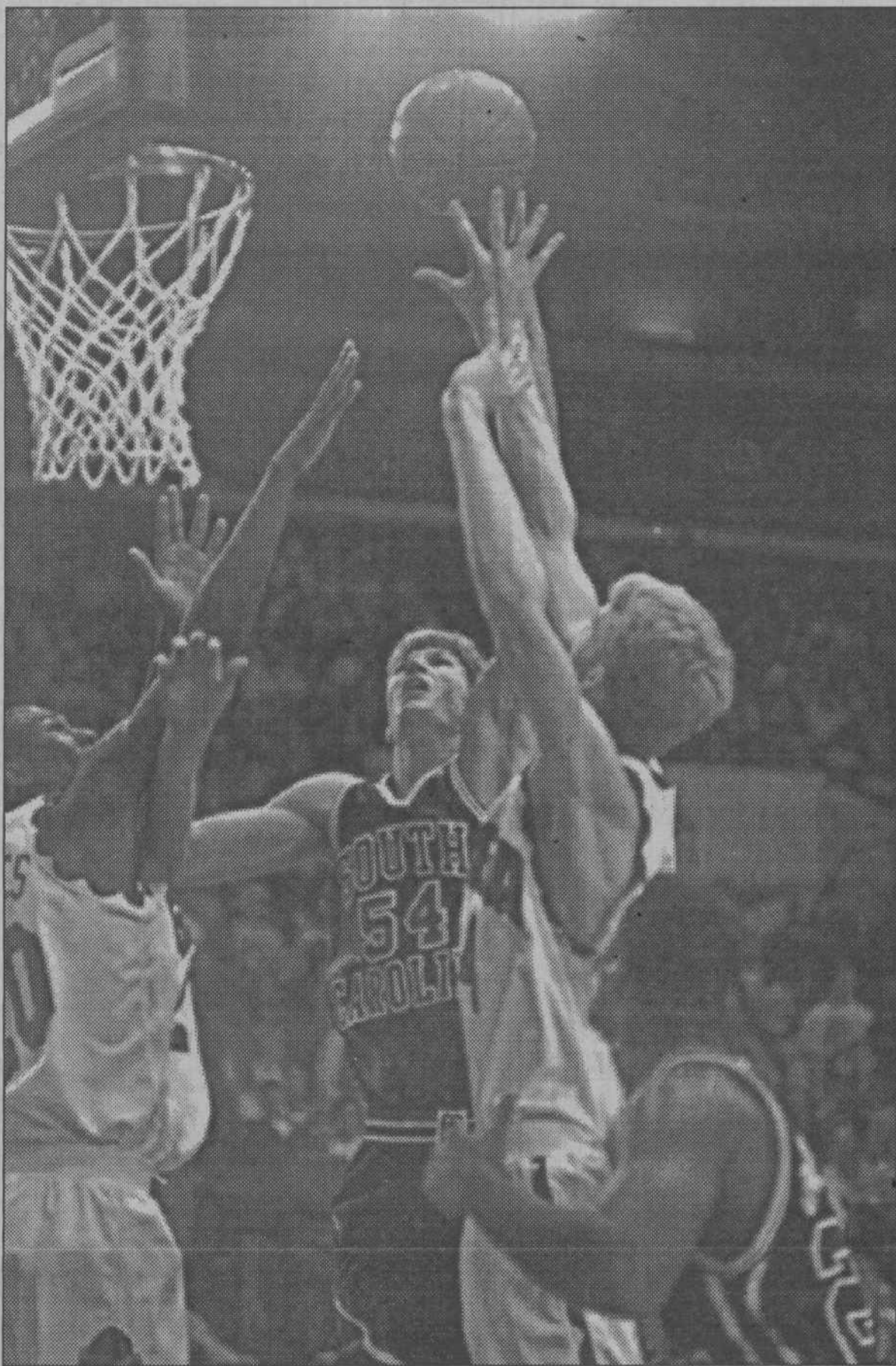
Of the Gamecocks' five conference losses only one (Ole Miss) is in their bracket. Tennessee, Kentucky (two losses), and Arkansas are all in the other half and would not be faced until the Championship game.

And the Gamecocks want to face the Wildcats again. They were embarrassed in Rupp Arena earlier this year, and Saturday our Senior Day was ruined by the Wildcats.

This year the SEC Tournament is as wide open as it has been in years. Instead of Kentucky as the favorite and only one other team with a chance, as many as five teams have a chance to win it all. The obvious four favorites are USC, Kentucky, Arkansas and Ole Miss. The other team with the talent to win is Tennessee who handed the Gamecocks a loss on the road by one point.

The big factor working against Tennessee is the fact that they have no first-round bye like the other favorites so they have to win four games instead of just three.

The Gamecocks open play at 9:45 tonight on WIS-TV in the Columbia area. If they advance to Saturday, the game will be at 3:15 p.m. also on WIS-TV. If the Gamecocks can advance to the SEC Championship game at noon on Sunday, that game will be nationally televised on CBS.



BRYAN JOHNSTON The Gamecock

Senior Ryan Stack begins play in his last SEC Tournament tonight against the winner of the Florida/Auburn game. Stack has averaged 9.6 ppg, 5.9 rpg, and 1.9 rpg, and is 5th in the league in blocks.

Kentucky loss may help USC avoid disastrous tournament repeat

Larry WILLIAMS
Scoop Shots

And so it has come to this.

One year gone, a regular season complete, and the Gamecocks' basketball team is where it always wanted to be. It finally has the chance to right what went so dreadfully wrong last year: the postseason.

Somehow, you knew it would come down to this.

A year ago tonight, the Gamecocks were on top of the world. The 72-66 shocker at Kentucky still fresh on their minds. The No. 4 national ranking. The seven straight wins.

That night, in the quarterfinals of the Southeastern Conference tournament in Memphis, USC coasted to a modest win over Alabama. They shot well, played staunch defense. The next day, though, it would all begin to crumble. Whatever was the impetus for the two wins over Kentucky, the conference title, the distinction of being the fourth-best team in the land, it wasn't there in the semifinals against Georgia.

It didn't return against Coppin State. You know the grisly details.

But thanks to last week's season-ending loss to Kentucky, we don't have to worry about any smug feelings had by the Gamecocks when they begin another postseason tonight.

Last year, once the victory over Kentucky was assured, a Bacchanalian celebration ensued, stretching from the airport to Five Points. The players took part. Last Saturday, as the clock ticked down on the regular season at Frank McGuire Arena, the Gamecocks were ticked off.

Truth is, finishing second to the Wildcats might have been the best thing to happen.

In the hours and days following the glorious win at Kentucky last year, there was a palpable sense of accomplishment that served as a serious impediment to the Gamecock's postseason success. With that win, USC had surpassed every goal it had set for it-

self back in October 1996, when practices began.

That sense of accomplishment doomed the Gamecocks in those losses to Georgia and Coppin State.

Presumably, after coming up short in the SEC race, the Gamecocks have the hunger this year. The players seek vindication and closure. Not just in the NCAAs, but the conference tourney as well.

"I think we can win the big games, and I'm not just talking about the NCAAs," Bj Mckie said, following the loss to Kentucky. "This game wasn't everything."

Indeed it wasn't, especially when you realize what last year's win at Rupp

was good for, once the postseason began: absolutely nothing.

Obviously Kentucky did something last year to regroup after its infamous Senior Day loss. The Wildcats went to Memphis, won the conference title, then made it all the way to the national championship game.

"It's a loss we can learn from as we go into the tournament," Mckie said. "Maybe we'll meet Kentucky again in the tournament."

In USC, Mckie says he sees a team "that has the potential to win the tournament championship."

So if the Gamecocks have to go up against the Wildcats again, the results probably won't be much different. But

let's see the Gamecocks for what they are, or aren't.

They're not streaky, like last year. They're consistent. They play good defense. They're well-coached. They're fearless on the road.

No, there are no guarantees. Last year proved that. But something tells us this year will be different, that the Gamecocks will be game no matter what, or where.

Something tells us that this time, USC will be on the winning end of some March Madness before it all ends in San Antonio.

SEC Tournament facts and figures

sports editor **ACHIM HUNT**

In its first five trips to the SEC Tournament, Carolina was seeded no higher than fifth in the Eastern Division and had won a first round game only once (1994 vs. Ole Miss).

But the Gamecocks have received a first-round bye in each of the last two seasons: last year after winning the SEC Championship and this season after finishing second in the East behind SEC Champion Kentucky.

The Gamecocks automatically advance into the quarterfinals for just the third time in seven years and with a victory will play in semifinal action for just the second time ever.

Carolina is 3-6 overall in SEC Tournament action all-time.

Carolina has played in four different league tournaments over the

years including the Southern, ACC, Metro, and SEC classics.

In those tournaments the Gamecocks are 28-48 in conference tournament, with two championships (1993 Southern, 1971 ACC), three second-place finishes, and 15 semifinal appearances.

Carolina has not played in a conference tournament championship game since a 52-51 win in the 1971 ACC Championship game against North Carolina.

This will be the fourth SEC Tournament held in Atlanta, and the second at the Georgia Dome.

The last time in Atlanta USC lost to Auburn in the first round.

1998 Southeastern Conference Tournament Atlanta, Ga. Georgia Dome (26,000)

