

Fifth-ranked men's golf team returns to action this weekend in EZ-GO Invite

BY PRESTON BAINES
THE GAMECOCK

USC men's golf team, ranked No. 5 in the nation, has found a level of consistency that even keeps head coach Puggy Blackmon excited.

"We have, on occasion, shown that we have both the depth and talent to compete against the best in the country," Blackmon said of his team. "If it all comes together, this could be the year (to win the NCAA Championship)."

After a 10th place finish in its previous tournament at the Callaway Golf Las Vegas Intercollegiate, the team has finished in the top 10 in all seven tournaments in which they have competed.

This season's team is led by seniors John Bloomfield and Kyle Thompson and by redshirt sophomores Scott Feaster and Johan Kok. All four players are ranked in the top 100 nationally, and each has finished in the top 55 individually in each tournament this season.

Thompson leads the team with a 71.52 stroke average and is ranked sixth in the national rankings.

"It looks like Kyle will finish his career as a three time All-American and will be a four time All-SEC performer," Blackmon said. "He has matured greatly over the past 12 months and, from all indications, should have a successful postcollegiate career. I think you will be seeing Kyle on Sundays on the PGA Tour."

The Gamecocks have two more tournaments before the SEC Tournament in Sea Island, Ga. This weekend, the team travels to Statesboro, Ga. to participate in the Schenkel EZ-GO Invitational.

Though the team was ranked 18th to begin the season,

this season's early success should not come as a surprise. Blackmon has coached 23 All-ACC players or All-SEC players in his career, as well as 25 All-Americans. He has also won five ACC Championships and four ACC Coach of the Year awards during his tenure at Georgia Tech prior to becoming the Gamecocks' coach in 1995.

Blackmon has coached many PGA Tour winners, including David Duval, 2000 Rookie of the Year Michael Clark II and Stewart Cink.

"Kyle, in many ways, reminds me of Stewart Cink," Blackmon said about Thompson.

Duval has only good things to say about his former coach.

"Puggy has a belief in who he is and what he stands for, and a big belief in his family and faith." Duval said. "One of his strong points as a golf coach is that he can teach life's lessons very well, but does it in a manner in which you probably don't realize you're learning them."

In order for the Gamecocks to complete their goals of winning the SEC and NCAA Championships, the team's top two players, Kok and Thompson, must step up. During the fall, Kok averaged a 16th-place finish, but so far this spring he is averaging 38th. As for Thompson, he averaged ninth place last fall, but is down to 23rd in the spring.

Another reason the Gamecocks must step it up is the competition. In the final five tournaments (six if the team gets past the NCAA regional), the Gamecocks will be competing against the toughest teams they have faced at any point this season.

The step up in competition was evident in USC's last tournament, when 14 of the top 15 teams that finished



Special to The Gamecock

Kyle Thompson leads USC with a 71.52 stroke average.

were ranked in the top 30 nationally. The top three teams were tournament champions Georgia Tech, Georgia and Clemson, which are also the top three ranked teams in the country.

The sports desk can be reached at gamecocksports@hotmail.com

SPORTS BRIEFS

Football ticket prices still among SEC's cheapest

The USC Athletics Department has announced ticket prices for its seven-game home football schedule in 2001. The pricing, which was first proposed by the department in mid-January, was officially approved by the Board of Trustees on Thursday morning.

Single-game tickets for home contests against Boise State (Sept. 1), Bowling Green (Sept. 15), Kentucky (Oct. 6) and Vanderbilt (Oct. 20), are \$22, a \$2 increase over a similar four-game slate a year ago. Tickets for the Alabama (Sept. 29) and Florida (Nov. 10) games are \$27, the same price as last year's home games with Georgia and Tennessee. A ticket to the regular-season finale against Clemson on Nov. 17 will be \$32, the same price as last year's ticket at Clemson.

The total cost for the seven-game set is \$174, and for the first time since 1995, USC will play seven home games at Williams-Brice Stadium this fall.

Tickets to USC home football games continue to be among the most affordable in the SEC. Ticket prices in the SEC range anywhere from \$50 for the Georgia-Florida game in Jacksonville, \$38 per game at Tennessee and \$30 at LSU, Ole Miss, Alabama and Auburn. Tickets to SEC home games at Vanderbilt are \$30. Other than USC, the only other schools in the SEC to charge \$22 for a conference home game are Kentucky, Florida and Mississippi State.

LSU tickets go on sale this weekend

This Saturday and Sunday, during the Vanderbilt baseball series, tickets for the LSU series will go on sale at Sarge Frye Field.

Gates open at 2:30 Saturday, and tickets for LSU will go on sale at 3:00 at the concourse behind Section 4. For Sunday's game, the gates open at noon, with LSU tickets on sale at 12:30 p.m.

Ticket prices are \$6 for adults and \$3 for children. Because all seats will be assigned, there isn't a family rate. Fans may pay with cash only, and there is a limit of four tickets per game per person.

University students, faculty and staff can pick up their free tickets with a valid student ID. A limited number of standing room only tickets will be sold after all regular seats have been sold.

The LSU series will be played April 6-8.

Softball team prepares for LSU

The No. 17 Carolina softball team ends its eight-game homestand this weekend with a three-game set against No. 7 LSU. Carolina is 20-10-1 this season, 4-2 in the SEC. The Tigers come to Beckham Field with a 23-5 record overall and a 5-1 SEC record.

The game will be a battle between USC, which is the defending SEC Tournament Champion, and LSU, which won the regular season championship last season.

Carolina defeated LSU to capture the tournament title this past May. Carolina's Megans led USC to the title, with Megan Matthews pitching an eight-inning shutout and Megan Donohoo knocking in the game-winning RBI.

Overall, the series is even at 5-5. Last season, USC went 2-1 with the Lady Tigers.

Saturday's doubleheader is set for 1 p.m., and Sunday's game will also begin at 1 p.m.

TRACK

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provisional qualifiers. Both the coaches and the team think they will perform well as the season progresses.

"This is a good opportunity for us to get our relays going," Frye said. The coach said Miami was stressful on the

entire team last week, because they had just come out of the NCAA Indoor Championships and were tired from the intensity of competition. Frye also said he expects somewhat sharper performances this weekend from most of the athletes.

Shontel Powell, who will be participating in the women's 400-meter hurdles this weekend, is going in to this weekend's meet with the determination

to run her personal best this season.

"I would like to improve on last week's performance," Powell said. Her competition will come from fellow Gamecock Tacita Bass, who Frye also expects to perform well.

Frye also expects the field athletes to put on a good show this weekend.

"The throwers are expected to do well, and so are the pole vaulters. Lynnette Keppeler, Mamee Groves and Adam

Bishop are among those who should bring points to the home team," Frye said.

The team regards this weekend's meet as a warm-up for next week's SEC 5-Way Championships, where USC will meet defending champion Arkansas. Events are scheduled to start at 3 p.m. Friday and at 10 a.m. Saturday.

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EILAND

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"It's kind of night and day," Eiland said, comparing the two coaches. "Both of them are great teachers, but Coach Frye is really patient with people when they make mistakes. Coach Holtz wants it done his way right then and there.

"They are a lot different, but at the same time, a lot alike. I love playing for both of them."

Eiland said he thinks both the football and track teams are on the verge of national championships.

"In football, I feel like we have a good shot next year," he said. "If we continue to work harder than everybody else, I think there's nothing we can't accomplish."

"In track, it's the same thing. If we work hard, we can achieve national prominence, and if we don't win the title, we can finish in the top five."

Eiland will be in action this weekend at the Weems Baskin Relays, USC's first outdoor home meet of the season.

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