

the gamecocks' NEW FACE

Football team looks to build tradition, reach new heights

BY PRESTON BAINES
THE GAMECOCK

Two years ago, who would have thought all this could have happened after the 1-21 South Carolina football team sunk to the bottom of the SEC?

But it took only one game in 2000 to get the team going. A 31-0 thumping of New Mexico State resulted in a run that hasn't happened many times in the history of Carolina football.

The 6-2 Gamecocks face Spartanburg's Wofford Terriers on Saturday afternoon at Williams-Brice Stadium.

After winning only one game in the 1998 and 1999 seasons, the Gamecocks have piled up 14 wins in the past two seasons and still have conference championship aspirations.

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But that isn't good enough for the Gamecocks — they are still looking to build momentum and improve.

"I think we're a better football team than we were last year. I don't think there's any doubt about it," USC head coach Lou Holtz said. "I think we'll be a better team next year than we are this year, and that may shock some people, but I believe that. We just have to continue to get better."

Through the past two seasons, the Gamecocks have accomplished many things they haven't accomplished before. Victories in consecutive years over Georgia and Mississippi State hadn't happened since the school joined the Southeastern Conference in 1992.

Then there was the win over Alabama. Sure, this isn't close to the best Alabama

team, but it was a win over the Tide for the first time in Gamecock history.

Now, the Gamecocks are looking to change the recent struggles against the "orange crush" and make it into the nation's top postseason games. The team has gotten off to a similar start, falling to the No. 7 Tennessee Volunteers in a thriller last Saturday in Knoxville.

But if the Gamecocks were to beat Florida and the Gators were to knock off Tennessee, the Gamecocks would make an appearance at the SEC championship game Dec. 8 in the Georgia Dome.

After taking on the Gators, Carolina will face in-state rival Clemson on Nov. 17 in Columbia and attempt to break the four-game losing streak against the Tigers. USC hasn't knocked off the Tigers at home since 1987.

The success and fan support of the Gamecocks has brought the most prominent bowls to the forefront.

If the Gamecocks were to win eight games, it would be almost a certainty that they would land themselves for a return trip to the Outback Bowl in Tampa, Fla., and an even better chance of landing in the Citrus Bowl in Orlando.

After starting off with an 0-11 season in 1998, Lou Holtz has led the Gamecocks into SEC championship contention. PHOTO BY CANDI HAUGLUM

Even though the Gamecocks' goal of winning the national championship is out of reach, USC can still reach the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans. In order to make the Sugar Bowl, Carolina must win the SEC championship game in Atlanta, a goal that isn't out of the realm of possibilities.



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