

Fans ready for Odom's magic

Carolina's new coach has history of turning teams into champions

BY ADAM BEAM

THE GAMECOCK

It's been three years since the Gamecocks emerged as the one-hit wonders of the SEC, winning 47 games in two seasons, including an SEC regular season championship. But as the saying goes, the bigger they are, the harder they fall, and South Carolina's fall from glory couldn't have been rougher.

Last season, the Gamecocks struggled to a 15-15 record, falling to 6-10 in the SEC. Under former head coach Eddie Fogler, the Gamecocks finished last in the SEC in both scoring (68.1 points per game) and field-goal percentage (41.7 percent). They failed to break the 80-point barrier in their final 20 games of the season and lost 11 of the 17 games decided by single digits.

But while the Gamecocks may be on the way down, new head coach Dave Odom is on the way up - a change many USC fans hope will affect the 2001-02 squad.

Here's a quick look at the facts:

◆ In 1989, Dave Odom inherited a Wake Forest team that was coming off four straight losing seasons. But Odom pulled a Lou Holtz, and over the next 12 years he won more games than any other coach over that period of time. It was his first step in establishing Wake Forest as a national contender.

◆ During his tenure at Wake Forest, Odom led the Demon Deacons to 11 straight national postseason tournament appearances, including seven straight NCAA tournaments from 1991-1997. With an Elite Eight appearance in 1996 and two Sweet 16 showings (1993, 1995), Odom brings hopes of post-season victories to USC fans who still have a bad taste in their mouth after Coppin State.

◆ Odom was a three-time ACC Coach of the Year, something that might be overlooked in football but certainly not in basketball. In 1995, he was named National Coach of the Year.

◆ Odom earned back-to-back ACC championships in 1995 and 1996, becoming one of only 11 coaches to lead a team to at least two ACC titles.

◆ Odom's reputation isn't in question. It's so good that it inspired national college basketball writer Dick Weiss to say, "Dave Odom can coach, period."

The question is whether Odom can take a fallen USC team and restore it to the glory days of the late '90s. Can he mold the Gamecocks into the same team that defeated Kentucky in its own stadium on senior day? Here's what he has to work with:

◆ The Gamecocks return a solid starting five with what some basketball analysts say are the most experienced returning starters in the SEC.

◆ Senior Jamal Bradley returns as the Gamecocks leading scorer with 11.1 points per game. His 35.5 field goal percentage and .767 free throw average are also team highs.

◆ Aaron Lucas is a returning senior guard who led the team in assists per game with a 3.9 average. With an average of 10.4 points per game last season, Lucas joins Bradley as the Gamecocks most potent offensive threat. If these two can get going, you could see USC start winning close games again.

◆ Rolando Howell is perhaps USC's potential star forward. With strong showings last year against Kentucky and Arkansas, Howell could make a name for himself in the SEC. Add in Odom's experience coaching the likes of Tim Duncan and Randolph Childress, and Howell can only get better.

◆ Junior forward Chuck Eidson looks to make a strong contribution. His 9.0 points per game, 5.3 rebounds per game and 3.1 assists per game could mushroom under Odom's direction.

◆ Center Tony Kitchings, the big man in the middle at 6-foot-10, is the Gamecocks' leading rebounder with a 6.7 average. His 9.9 points per game aren't too shabby, either.

With the SEC's "big two" of Florida and Kentucky expected to be locked into a fierce battle for the league's top spot, USC has the chance to play the spoiler and decide which one will come out on top.

USC plays both powerhouses twice, so if Odom wins at least half of those meetings, we could be looking at a surprising USC team near the top of the conference.

Odom's biggest challenge won't be to come out strong in his first season at USC. It will be to build a winning program out of what has been an otherwise wishy-washy team. Can Odom repeat what he did at Wake Forest and put together a string of 11 consecutive winning seasons, or will the Gamecocks still be playing that same old song of brief flashes of brilliance?

Only time, Florida and Kentucky will tell.



The crowd at Frank McGuire Arena cheers on the Gamecocks. FILE PHOTO



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