

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL at SEC Tournament, Friday
 SOFTBALL at Plant City Tournament, Friday-Saturday
 MEN'S TENNIS vs. Mississippi State, 2 p.m. Friday
 MEN'S BASKETBALL at Mississippi State, 2 p.m. Saturday
 BASEBALL vs. No. 4 Clemson, 4 p.m. Saturday

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SPORTS

Baseball hyped up to face Clemson

BY J. KEITH ALLEN
 THE GAMECOCK

This weekend has been circled on the calendars of Palmetto State baseball fans ever since the 2002 college baseball schedules were published in January. This weekend marks the first meeting this season between USC and state rival Clemson, with Saturday's game at Sarge Frye Field and Sunday's matchup at Clemson's Doug Kingsmore Stadium.

The games should be fascinating beyond the traditional bad blood between the two schools. Both programs are unbeaten and ranked among the top five in the country. USC head coach Ray Tanner expects a great matchup with the Tigers.

"There is nothing better than the Clemson-Carolina rivalry, and I think it is the best college baseball rivalry in the country," Tanner said.

The No. 4 Gamecocks (9-0) are coming off a three-game sweep of the Baseball at the Beach tournament last weekend in Myrtle Beach. The team was powered by Yaron Peters, who went 5-for-12 at the plate with one home run and five RBIs. The senior first baseman was later named SEC Player of the Week for his efforts.

Victory didn't come easily for Peters, a Sherman Oaks, Calif. native. He suffered a broken nose in Saturday's win over Georgia Tech. His nose is bandaged, but shouldn't cause him to miss any of this weekend's action.

Tanner is proud of his run-producing first baseman. "He's tough as nails," Tanner said. "I'm ecstatic; I feel good about going to battle when you've got soldiers like him."

No. 3 Clemson (3-0) comes to battle after a three-game sweep of Auburn. The Tigers are led by ACC Co-Player of the Week, Jeff Baker. The Tiger third baseman homered, knocked in eight runs and went 5-for-10.

Stretching back to 1899, USC and Clemson have battled it out on the baseball diamond, with Clemson leading the overall series 147-102. The Gamecocks defeated the Tigers in three of four meetings last season, however, highlighted by a 21-8 victory at Clemson in the teams' first clash of the year.

Saturday's game at Sarge Frye Field is a complete sellout, but for any USC fans interested in traveling "behind enemy lines" to Doug Kingsmore Stadium for Sunday's game, there will be a limited number of standing room tickets available prior to the 2 p.m. contest.

Tanner expects a playoff-type atmosphere for both games and knows his team can't wait to take the field on Saturday.

"It's so much fun with the sellouts," Tanner said. "It is just great for the game that you have sellouts in college baseball."

The Gamecocks send staff ace David Marchbanks (3-0, 2.41 ERA) to the hill for Saturday's home game, with Gary Bell and Chris Spigner available out of the bullpen. Either Bell or Spigner will get the starting nod Sunday.

Tanner understands the passion and history behind the rivalry and looks forward to the showdown.

"(Clemson) opened up undefeated, and that is where we are right now," he said. "It should be a heck of a weekend for college baseball."

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BRIEFLY Lady Gamecocks collect SEC honors

USC's Susan Walvius was named SEC Women's Basketball Coach of the Year on Wednesday, and Shaunzinski Gortman and Jocelyn Penn were selected to the All-SEC first team. All of the awards were chosen by the league's 12 coaches.

Gortman, a senior, was named to the conference second team last season, but this was the first conference award for junior Jocelyn Penn. This was the first SEC Coach of the Year award for Walvius.

Penn and Gortman are the first Lady Gamecocks to make the All-SEC first team since Shannon Johnson in the 1995-96 season. Carolina has never had two players named to the team, and it hasn't earned a Coach of the Year award since Nancy Wilson did it (Metro Conference in 1984-85; 1990-91).

"I'm excited about this honor, but more grateful to work for a university that offers me the opportunity to hire the best assistant coaches and recruit great players," Walvius said.

Women's tennis opens SEC play

The 25th-ranked USC women's tennis team opens SEC play Friday at 2:30 p.m. when it travels to face the Mississippi State Bulldogs (4-5).

Carolina (6-1) looks to claim a win in its SEC road opener for the sixth time in 11 years. The Lady Gamecocks are an impressive 4-1 in overall league openers the past five years.

USC beat the Bulldogs 6-1 last season in Columbia. In the all-time series, Carolina enjoys an 11-2 advantage.

USC finishes a two-match SEC road trip Sunday when it faces Ole Miss.

SEC, USC track teams rise in polls

The SEC leads the national indoor track and field rankings like no other conference.

On the men's side, the SEC has five of the top six spots, and on the women's side, the SEC is listed at four of the top seven spots.

On the men's side this week, USC moved up to season-high No. 6 ranking. The Gamecock women, who for three weeks were ranked No. 1 this season, moved back up to No. 3.

USC is ranked No. 1 in the NCAA in three individual events: the women's 400 meters (Demetria Washington), the men's 800 meters (Otukile Lekote) and the women's 4x400m relay.

Softball set to play in Florida tourney

BY MATT ROTHENBERG
 THE GAMECOCK



This weekend, the 25th-ranked USC softball team travels to Plant City, Fla., to take part in the Plant City Strawberry Fest Tournament.

USC (9-5) is looking to rebound from a pair of losses at North Carolina this past Saturday, and it will face off against five Midwest squads. Today, USC plays Michigan and Ohio. Saturday, the Lady Gamecocks will face Missouri and Michigan State before finishing the weekend with a game against Central Michigan on Sunday.

No. 8 Michigan (10-3) has gotten off to a solid start this season, with wins over several ranked opponents. The Wolverines have a pitching duo capable of big outings. Junior Marissa Young (6-2) and freshman Nicole Motycka (4-1) have carried the load of work on the mound.

The Ohio Bobcats (3-2) will be well-rested, as they will play for the first time in two weeks. Most recently, they placed second in the silver bracket at the Triangle Classic in Raleigh, N.C. Senior Heather Hagen (1-2, 2.80 ERA) and sophomore Kristie Howe (2-

Living on a prayer

	USC	75
	Georgia	82

Loss to Georgia puts USC on bubble's edge

BY STEVE SHULER
 THE GAMECOCK

Traveling into Athens, Ga., on Wednesday, the USC men's basketball team needed an upset over 16th-ranked Georgia to help get off the NCAA Tournament bubble. Instead, the bubble popped in a most disheartening way.

Bulldogs forward Steve Thomas scored six of Georgia's first eight points in overtime and hit two free throws with 28 seconds remaining in the extra period to give Georgia (21-7, 10-5 SEC) an 82-75 victory.

With 11 seconds to go, the Gamecocks held a 70-67 lead. Carolina point guard Aaron Lucas had two foul shots to ice the game, but both shots rimmed out.

Georgia rebounded and moved the ball up the floor to point guard Rashad Wright, who found an open spot outside the arc and drained a 3-pointer to send the game into overtime.

A victory for the Gamecocks (16-12, 6-9) would have dramatically boosted their hopes of playing in the NCAA field of 64. On their Web sites, both ESPN and CBS cited Carolina as a team on the bubble, given their strength of schedule (sixth in the nation) and their impressive performances in what some call this season's toughest conference. With Wednesday's loss, however, that might not be the case any longer.

The game started well for USC, with each team trading baskets until midway through the first half, when Carolina pulled ahead 29-19. However, the Bulldogs started to find their stroke, going on a 25-4 run. Georgia, propelled by the hot shooting of Ezra Williams and Jonas Hayes, hit 11 shots in a row and shot 13 of 14 from the field in its run to end the first half.

Down 44-33 at the break, Carolina came out alive in the second half and scored the first 11 points, including five by Jamel Bradley, to tie the score. From that point on, neither team could pull away.

With the score tied at 67, Chuck Eidson hit his first free throw to give the Gamecocks a one-point lead. Eidson missed the second but came up with his own rebound and passed the ball to Bradley, who was fouled. Bradley hit both of his free throws to give Carolina a 70-67 lead with 22 seconds remaining.

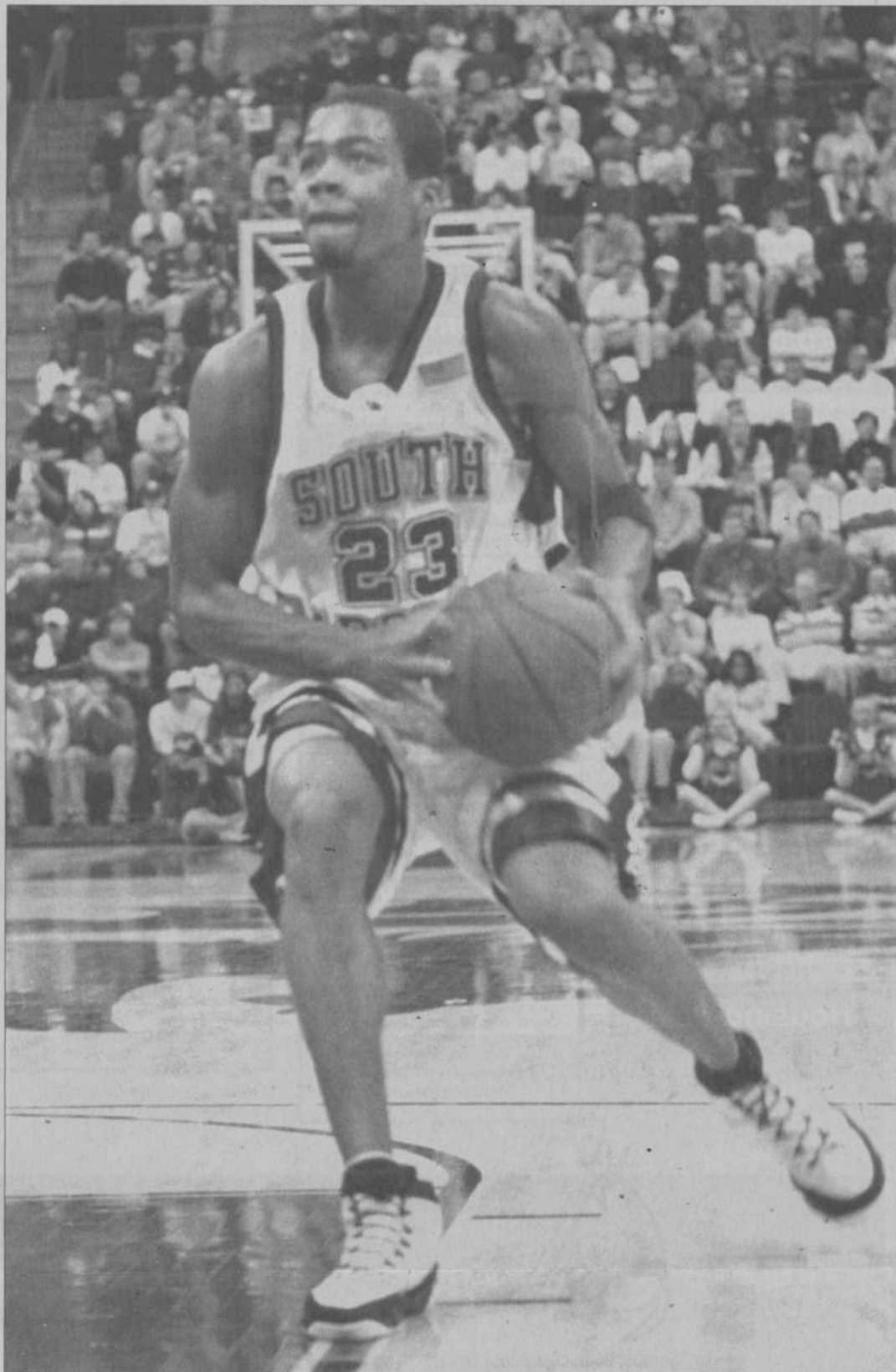


PHOTO BY ROBERT GRUEN

Chris Warren targets the basket during Carolina's loss to Alabama on Feb. 13. The men will play their regular season-ending game Saturday at Frank McGuire Arena against Mississippi State.

Hayes missed a jump shot with 14 seconds left and was forced to foul Lucas, who grabbed the rebound. Lucas then missed both free throws and Wright netted the 3-pointer to force overtime.

In overtime, the Bulldogs scored first on a jumper by Thomas and never trailed again, coasting to the 82-75 victory.

After the game, USC head coach Dave Odom defended Lucas.

"Aaron Lucas has been the heart, body and soul of this university for four years," Odom said.

The coach would not allow the media to interview Lucas after the

game. "I didn't think he was capable of doing it; he was distraught," Odom explained. "He was not himself. I thought it was better going in another direction."

South Carolina's Rolando Howell led all scorers with 19 points. Georgia was led by 16 points from Thomas and 13 points each from Hayes and Wright.

For Georgia, the victory came just four days after Wright hit a last-minute jump shot to send the Bulldogs to a 55-54 victory over LSU. Wright, who averages only 8.4 points per game, has been confident in pressure situations.

"Rashad Wright continues to be our savior; he's absolutely fearless in those situations," said Georgia head coach Jim Harrick, who notched his 450th career win.

The Gamecocks' final hope for the NCAA Tournament is probably to defeat Mississippi State on Saturday and make a strong showing in the SEC Tournament, which begins Thursday, March 7, in Atlanta. If USC wins the SEC Tournament, it will earn an automatic berth to the NAAs.

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I don't have time to sit in class all summer!

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