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CROSS COUNTRY at Charleston Southern, 9 a.m. Friday
WOMEN'S SOCCER vs. Birmingham Southern, 4:30 p.m. Friday
MEN'S SOCCER vs. Charleston Southern, 7 p.m. Friday
VOLLEYBALL at Michigan State Classic, Friday-Saturday
FOOTBALL vs. New Mexico State, 7 p.m. Saturday

GAME TIME

FOOTBALL SEASON BEGINS WITH SATURDAY SHOWDOWN AGAINST NEW MEXICO STATE



New Mexico State at No. 22 USC

7 p.m. Saturday
Williams-Brice Stadium
Radio: WTCB 106.7 FM

BY MATT ROTHENBERG
THE GAMECOCK

Playing New Mexico State tomorrow night will surely bring back some pleasant memories among Gamecock players, coaches and fans. After all, it's been nearly two years to the night that the goalposts came down in Columbia.

That night, USC shut out the Aggies 31-0 to break its dreaded streak of 21 straight losses.

This year, though, the visitors know what to expect when they enter Williams-Brice Stadium, and they relish the thought of beating a program that has climbed from the depths of obscurity to become one of the nation's best.

New Mexico State's players also

realize they're not in Las Cruces anymore.

"If you can go in there and upset a crowd of 80,000 people, that's a great feeling," Aggies receiver P.J. Winston said. "As a college football player, you dream of playing in an environment like South Carolina. Their fans don't sit down. Two years ago when we went down there, it was rowdy."

NMSU's coaching staff broke down plenty of game film in the past year to size up this Gamecock squad. They hope to avoid a predominantly one-sided affair this time around with the lessons learned from their studies.

"They are a little bit different than most people we play," said Barney Cotton, the Aggies' offensive coordinator. "They play with three defensive linemen, three linebackers, three safeties and two corners. Their defense is designed to run around and make plays. They are great tacklers. They are the best tackling team I've seen on tape the last couple of years."

NMSU head coach Tony Samuel echoed Cotton's comments about Carolina, which is ranked No. 22 in both preseason polls.



PHOTO SPECIAL TO THE GAMECOCK

Rashad Faison (No. 11), Matthew Thomas (No. 15) and Andrea Gause (No. 19) will get to run out on the field at Williams-Brice Stadium again Saturday, when the Gamecocks, ranked 22nd in the nation, play host to New Mexico State in their season opener.

"They have real good talent on both sides of the ball," Samuel said. "(Corey) Jenkins played quite a bit last year, so the quarterback is a new guy, but it's not a guy that hasn't had experience.

"In a perfect world, you'd like to have a tune-up game before you face a team like South Carolina, but that's the hand we've been dealt."

As for the Gamecocks, head coach Lou Holtz gave credit to the opposition while stressing the

importance of the mission at hand.

"They were only a couple of minutes from an undefeated season in their conference," Holtz said of the Aggies in 2001. "You better stop the option; you better stop the run. At the same time, you are very vulnerable to the play action pass.

"I'm anxious to see (our) football team play. We might be very good; we might be very, very good. We might be very bad. It depends on how

we react in game-like situations."

Senior defensive end Dennis Quinn described how the USC defense plans to attack the Aggies' offense.

"They run the option a lot, so we're prepared to stop the option and the run," Quinn said. "First, we've got to stop the run, and once we control the line, we've got to get a pass rush down."

Although there is always room for improvement, Holtz says, he likes his team's chances.

"We are pleased with what we've done, but we're not satisfied with where we are," he said. "We went from 0-11 to 19th in the country to 13th in the country. Now we have to see if we can do it after losing all those good athletes. ... If we are all healthy, on the same page, play in the game the way we practice, then we will be a very solid football team."

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FOOTBALL 2002

This year's special

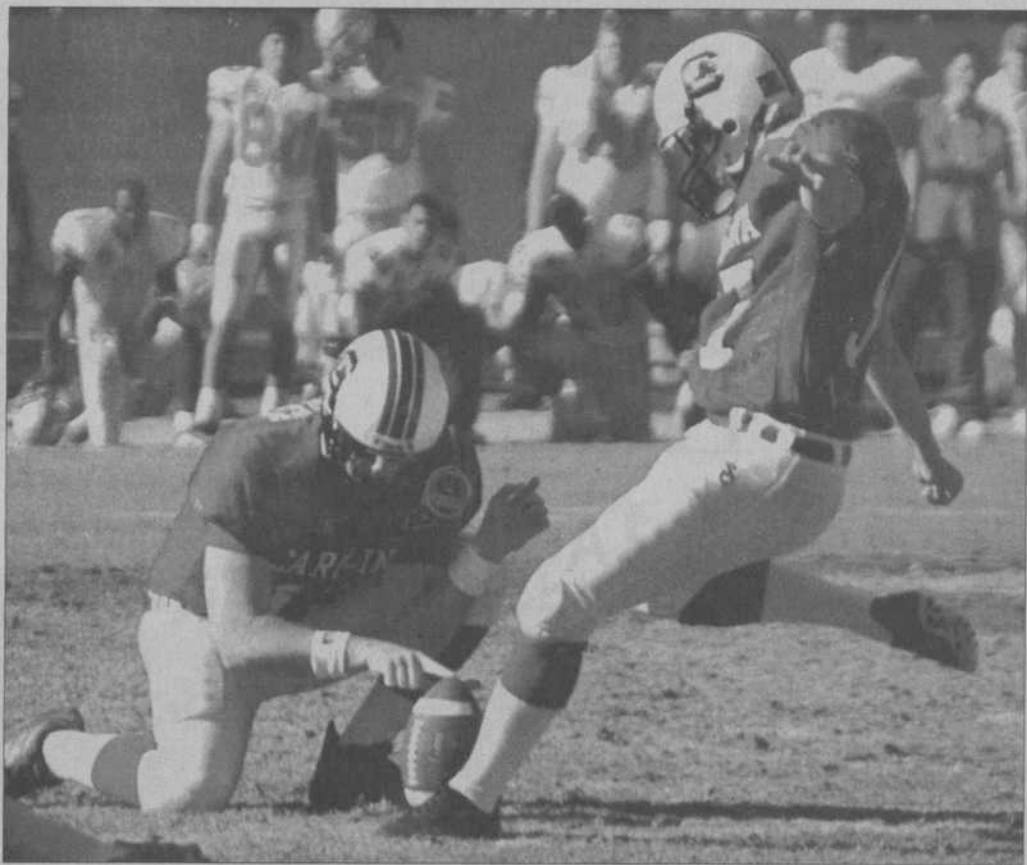


PHOTO BY AARON HARK/THE GAMECOCK

Daniel Weaver's last-second field goal lifted the Gamecocks to a 31-28 win over Ohio State in the Outback Bowl last season. He's an All-SEC candidate this season.

Kicking game crucial for USC

BY BRAD SENKIW
THE GAMECOCK

The USC special teams unit hopes to pick up right where it left off last season.

Carolina knocked off Ohio State in the Outback Bowl thanks to the last-second, 42-yard field goal that kicker Daniel Weaver pushed through the uprights.

"It was a big moment for me and the team to end the season in a great way," Weaver said. "We like always finding some way to win at the end."

Weaver, an All-SEC candidate, returns for his junior season with high expectations, and he hopes to build on his season-ending success. The place-kicker was 13-for-17 in field goals last season, with his longest being a 43-yarder.

"This year, I want to improve on last year's mistakes," Weaver said. "I always want to be perfect, so that's what I aim for."

The punt team will be led by senior punter Tyler Dean, another All-SEC candidate. Dean is aiming for more fair catches and an average of 45 yards per punt, up from last year's 43 yards per punt. He will be joined by Kevin Saylor as the new long snapper.

"We have a couple of new guys on the punt team, and through camp and last spring, they've looked real good," Dean said. "I'm confident now that we shouldn't get any (punts) blocked."

Joey Bowers will be handling any punts within 40 yards.

Head coach Lou Holtz believes the kicking game will once again be a key to the Gamecocks' success.

"In order to take it to the next

level, you've got to be solid in the kicking game," Holtz said. "Tyler Dean and Daniel Weaver are both capable of having big seasons for us."

"We've got to win the kicking game each week. That's important with the kind of schedule we have to face."

The big question going into this season is, who will return kicks and punts for the Gamecocks?

The dismissal of Derek Watson leaves senior Ryan Brewer as USC's only experienced return man, but Brewer has been slowed by offseason ankle surgery.

Carolina could receive help from a couple of track team members in James Adkisson and Jared Farabee. Receiver Chavez Donnings should get an opportunity to return as well.

Holtz's main concern is hav-

♦ SPECIAL TEAMS, SEE PAGE 9

Who has the edge?

New Mexico State (0-0) at No. 22 USC (0-0)

USC's pass against the NMSU defense:

NMSU SS **Siddeeq Shabazz** was all-conference last season, but he can't be the whole secondary. USC QB **Corey Jenkins**, still doubted by some as a passing threat, has a perfect chance Saturday to start silencing those critics.

USC's rush against the NMSU defense:

Injuries have put in doubt the effectiveness of USC FB **Andrew Pinnock** and TB **Ryan Brewer**, but it shouldn't matter against the Aggies, who have an inexperienced front seven that should be overmatched by the USC line.

NMSU's pass against the USC defense:

Carolina's secondary is a question mark after losing three starters to the NFL. But NMSU is unsettled at QB. **Buck Pierce** will get the start, but **Paul Dombrowski** is expected to see playing time as well.

NMSU's rush against the USC defense:

NMSU's massive line could help establish the Aggies' option attack, but the Gamecocks have the speed to counter. TB **Walter Taylor** will start for NMSU, but it will be only his third career start in four years.

Intangibles:

The Gamecocks are at home playing a season opener against a team with far less talent than them. The goalposts won't come down this time, but expect USC to have its way with the Aggies once again.

— COMPILED BY KYLE ALMOND AND MATT ROTHENBERG

ADVANTAGE:



Blame Bud for baseball's woes



MATT ROTHENBERG
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Baseball commissioner Selig should step down.

Well, another Major League Baseball player strike might or might not be upon us right now. Everybody seems quick to blame either the players or the owners or both, yet many fail to point the finger at someone else: the commissioner, Allan H. "Bud" Selig.

Yep, I'm blaming Bud. I don't think he gets enough credit for his bad ideas.

In September 1992, Selig was elected Chairman of the Major League Executive Council — essentially, the "interim commissioner."

ers are getting."

Ten years later, nothing's changed.

As chairman, Selig presided over the 272-day player strike from 1994-95.

I find it ridiculous that a guy who was still an owner then managed to keep hold of all of major league baseball. Didn't a conflict of interest ever cross his mind then?

It sure didn't in 1995, when he took a loan from Minnesota Twins owner Carl Pohlad — an illegal action that was clearly a conflict of interest. Selig wasn't dismissed.

At the annual winter meetings that year, when the owners passed Selig's interleague play concept, Selig said, "We're doing things that, frankly, our fans want."

Uh huh, sure Bud. That's why only 15,874 fans showed up at a Devil Rays-Marlins game in Tampa, and only 27,441 in Kansas City for a game against the Padres this past June.

Interleague play seems to have worn out its welcome since it began in 1997. Nobody, short of some passing local interest, gives a rat's ass about those games.

Who wants to see the Mets play the Yankees and the Giants play the A's? A lot of people do.

Who wants to see the Tigers play the Pirates or the Phillies

play the White Sox? Not me, and not many others.

Selig was formally elected commissioner on July 9, 1998. Fittingly, he was the head of the search committee for a commissioner. All he had to do was look in the mirror.

After the 2001 World Series, when he decided two teams — most likely Minnesota and Montreal — were to be eliminated, all hell broke loose.

Now I see how he paid back his loan to Pohlad: By relieving the old billionaire of his personal money pit.

Smooth move, Bud. Real smooth.

Some owners swayed Selig to move for contraction. It should be noted those owners included the New York teams, Boston, Texas and Houston — teams whose revenues are helping those smaller clubs.

Today, Minnesota occupies first place in their division, and the Expos might land in the top half of their division. Selig calls it an "aberration."

I don't think contraction's needed. Move them, give them more time, just don't say, "Hey, thanks for what you've done for baseball, it was nice knowing

♦ ROTHENBERG, SEE PAGE 9