

Softball opens SEC schedule

BY JOEL WALLACE
THE GAMECOCK

The USC softball team will square off against the Mississippi State Bulldogs in Starkville, Miss. this weekend to open its SEC schedule.

The Gamecocks are coming off a weekend performance at the Lead-Off Classic in Columbus, Ga. that was more impressive than their 3-2 record would indicate. USC lost the opening game to No. 15 Fresno State before rebounding to defeat Princeton, No. 11 Michigan and No. 20 Arizona State. USC lost to No. 6 Florida State 3-1 in extra innings.

The Gamecocks' performance earned them a boost in the rankings to place them in a tie with Fresno State at 15th. USC has been ranked in every NFCA poll this season while compiling an impressive 11-2 record.

The Bulldogs enter the game with a record of 16-6 and are currently undefeated at home, with 12 victories to their credit. Mississippi State lost to the only ranked opponent the team has

played this year, while USC carries a 2-2 record against top 25 teams. The Bulldogs finished last season with a 34-30 record and a 13-16 record against SEC opponents, leaving them fourth place in the SEC West.

Mississippi State is not to be underestimated, however, as head coach Jay Miller took his team to their third NCAA Tournament in the last four years.

"I want to compete for a Southeastern Conference title," he told his team at his first meeting with them. "I want to be able to be in a position to where we get a bid for the NCAA Tournament and then, hopefully, be able to qualify for the Women's College World Series. Those are pretty lofty goals, but if you don't set goals high, you're never going to achieve great things."

The Bulldogs also have something to be excited about, as they have the only underclassman to be named SEC Softball Athlete of the Year — Iyhia McMichael.

McMichael tallied a .403 batting average in 186 at-bats with 63 runs on 75 hits, including 33 extra-base

hits and 63 RBI while drawing 38 walks. And don't think just because she puts up insane offensive stats that she can't play defense or run. She was 36-of-37 on stolen base attempts and finished the season with a flawless 1.000 fielding percentage.

The Gamecocks have a tough SEC schedule this year, especially with five other teams currently ranked in the top 25. Of those teams, USC will play four of them on the road, with the lone home series coming against current defending SEC Champion Georgia.

The only conference with more teams in the top 25 is the PAC-10, which boasts eight, including No. 1 UCLA and No. 2 Arizona, both of which remain undefeated.

The first pitch of a doubleheader Saturday will be at noon, with the second game scheduled for 2 p.m. Sunday's game against the Bulldogs is set for 12:30 p.m. The Gamecocks' next SEC series will be on the road against LSU before returning home to face Arkansas.

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Men's

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

spot in the NCAA tournament.

If selected, this will be the first time the Gamecocks have been to the NCAA tournament since 1998. After winning only two of their last seven games, the Gamecocks beat Georgia last Saturday only to bow to Kentucky Wednesday.

"We're coming off a really, really difficult game last night against Kentucky," USC coach Dave Odom said. "They made us look bad in every phase, and you've certainly got to give them all the credit in the world. I thought our team would have played better last night. I'm at a loss to explain why, except that Kentucky was very, very good. What we saw last night here at our place was an excellent team playing at a very high level. You've got to give Kentucky credit for that."

After losing a heartbreaker to Vanderbilt, 61-58, and this also being their last game of the regular

season, Tennessee will be ready for a win. This season for Tennessee (14-12, 6-9 SEC) hasn't been ideal. At one point, the team was on a six-game losing streak.

Still, Tennessee guard Scott McFadgon and forward Brandon Crump have been averaging 20 points per game.

If the Gamecocks want to take this game, they are going to have to make sure there are no holes in their defense.

"They offer a number of problems," Odom said. "They're big in the post. They can score the ball on the wings. C.J. Watts is an excellent point guard, and they're well-coached as well. So we've got our hands full. But the biggest problem we've got right now is getting our team ready to play at its very best, and then we'll adjust to what Tennessee is doing as we go along."

If Saturday's matchup is anything like the last time these two teams met, the Gamecocks shouldn't be worried at all.

Back in January USC blew them out of the water with a final

score of 85-64. The Gamecocks' defense was as strong as it had ever been; the league's top scorer, Scott McFadgon couldn't even break them. Before that night McFadgon averaged 19.9 points a game, that night he only scored seven.

"We are excited and eager for this game against South Carolina," Tennessee head coach Buzz Peterson said. "It's a very good team that has had a tremendous season. We know they will come in here defending and will do a great job on the defensive end."

Although the Gamecock defense was probably at its best, the offense is where they shined the brightest, hitting an amazing 63.3 percent of their field goals.

Guard Josh Gonner also scored his career high of 24 points that same night.

Tipoff for the game is at 1 p.m. on Saturday and will be broadcast on Jefferson-Pilot Sports.

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Baseball

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

in batting average with .392, slugging percentage with .705, RBIs with 120, doubles with 35 and home runs with 25 while ranking only seventh in plate appearances.

Returning starters Aaron Rawl and Matt Campbell have jumped off to good starts this season. Rawl is 3-0 while Campbell is 2-0. Campbell has not given up a run in his first 14 innings this season. In addition to the returning starters, newcomers such as junior Billy Buckner have made a splash thus far, with 2-0 records.

Surprisingly, USC is almost as dominant in the overall pitching statistics as they are in the

hitting numbers. The Gamecocks have the SEC's lowest earned run average with 1.43 and opposing batting average with .159, while leading the league in strikeouts with 120 while having just the eighth-most innings pitched.

The USC staff also ranks second in saves with four, hits allowed with 48, earned runs allowed with 14, walks allowed with 14 and home runs allowed with three.

The Gamecocks will now turn their attention to the Tigers from the upstate, who are off to a disappointing 3-3 start. Clemson has had trouble from North Carolina with a loss to Charlotte and a pair of losses to East Carolina in the Keith LeClair Invitational.

Clemson's offensive attack is being lead this season by junior

Brad McCann, who is hitting for an average of .462 through six games. The team overall is hitting a surprisingly low .251 early, but got a big victory on Wednesday over Gardner-Webb.

Clemson's pitching staff, which was expected to be the strength of the team, has struggled early despite having an earned run average of 2.77. Junior left hander Tyler Lumsden, the ace of the fairly deep staff, will try to get the Tigers back on track this weekend against the Gamecocks.

USC will take on Clemson in front of a sold out Sarge Frye Field Saturday at 1:30 p.m. and will travel to Clemson Sunday to play their first road game of the season at 2 p.m.

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Briefly

Men's tennis looks to revitalize team record

Looking to rebound from their first loss of the season, the No. 19 USC men's tennis team will open up SEC play this weekend against the No. 15 Kentucky Wildcats. The match will begin today at 2 p.m. at the Sam Daniel

Tennis Center.

The Gamecocks experienced defeat for the first time on Tuesday, falling prey to an upset at the hands of No. 36 North Carolina, 6-1. The 10-0 start was the best since the 1984 season.

Kentucky enters the match with a 5-3 record on the season. However, the Wildcats are 0-3 against ranked opponents on the year. Individually, UK's Jesse Witten is ranked 14th in the coun-

try. UK has won the last two meetings against the Gamecocks.

After battling the Wildcats on Saturday, USC will travel to Nashville to take on the No. 22 Vanderbilt Commodores on Sunday. Overall, Vanderbilt is 5-2, but the Commodores are 0-1 against ranked opponents this year. VU is also scheduled to play host to No. 4 Florida on Saturday. The Commodores won last year's meeting in Columbia, 5-1.


MEN'S BASKETBALL CHALLENGE


THE CHALLENGE: Every week, The Gamecock's readers and staff test their sports knowledge with game predictions.


	Wes Wolfe Sports editor (42-28)	Jonathan Hillyard Asst. Sports editor (42-28)	Adam Beam Editor in chief (41-29)	Shawn Rourk Design Director (41-29)	Jessica Foster Copy editor (36-34)	Dimitri Najim Reader of the week (41-29)
Hartford at Northeastern	N'eastern	N'eastern	Hartford	N'eastern	Hartford	N'eastern
N.C. A&T at S.C. State	S.C. State	S.C. State	S.C. State	S.C. State	S.C. State	S.C. State
22 Memphis at 13 Cincinnati	Cincinnati	Cincinnati	Cincinnati	Cincinnati	Cincinnati	Cincinnati
16 N.C. State at 11 Wake Forest	Wake	Wake	Wake	Wake	Wake	Wake
14 North Carolina at 3 Duke	Duke	Duke	Duke	Duke	Duke	Duke
Vanderbilt at Georgia	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia	Vandy	Georgia
LSU at Auburn	LSU	Auburn	LSU	Auburn	LSU	Auburn
Arkansas at Ole Miss	Ole Miss	Ole Miss	Arkansas	Ole Miss	Arkansas	Ole Miss
5 Miss. State at Alabama	Alabama	MSU	MSU	MSU	Alabama	Alabama
USC at Tennessee	USC	USC	USC	USC	USC	USC
	70-62	65-60	67-62	55-45	57-52	62-59

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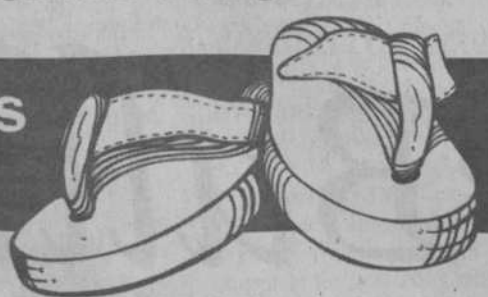
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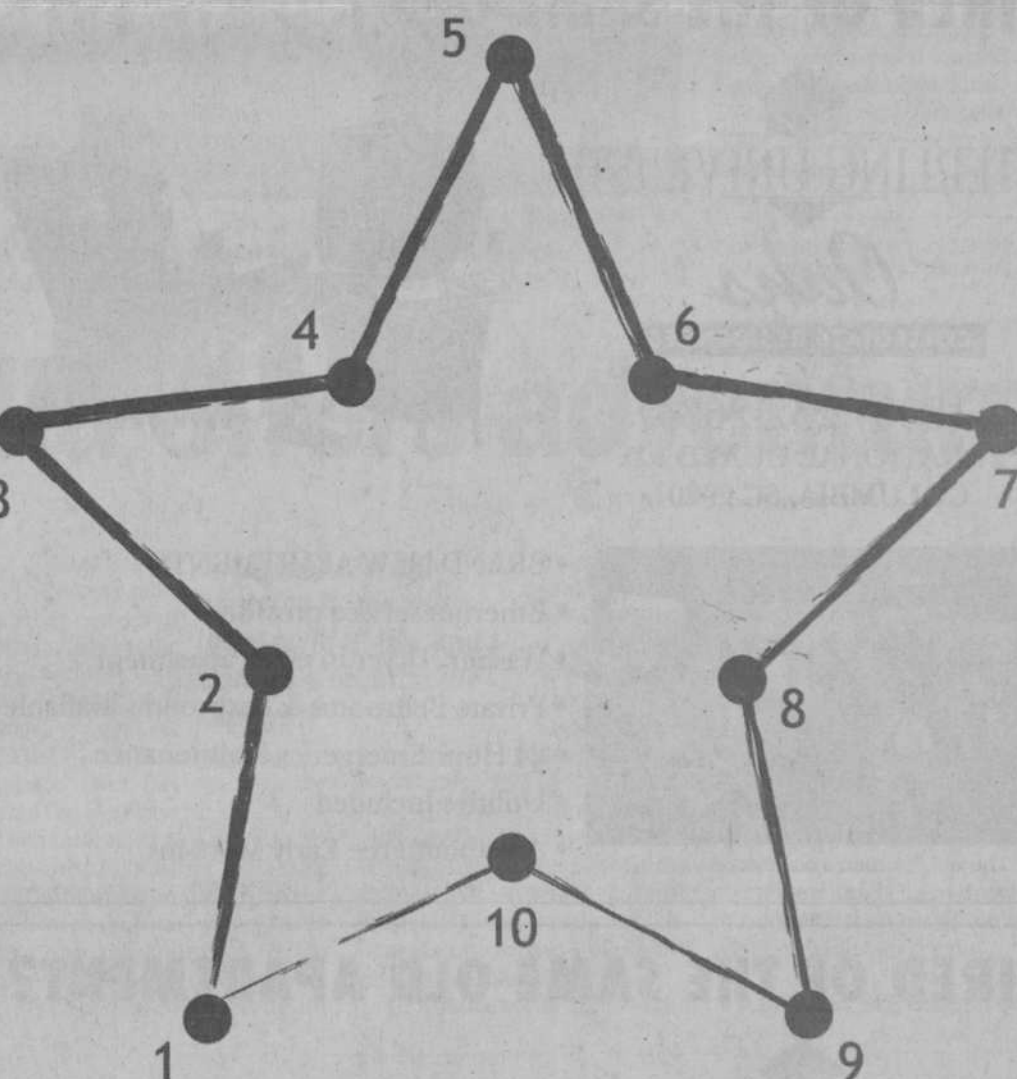
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