

Glory, disappointment define 2004 campaign

■ *Early success, late drop-off make season one to remember*

By ALEX RILEY
THE GAMECOCK

USC football fans witnessed what could be considered the most whirlwind season in school history in 2004. The program experienced valleys and mountain tops on the field and off. But one thing can be said about 2004: It was exciting.

THE SEASON

USC started the season off right with a 31-6 thumping of conference rival Vanderbilt, giving Carolina an early lead in the division standings. After a huge buildup that included ESPN GameDay at Williams-Brice Stadium for the Georgia game, USC faltered down the stretch and lost, 20-16.

Back-to-back wins over South Florida (34-3) and Troy (17-7) propelled Carolina to a 3-1 start. That start had an exclamation mark added to it after the Gamecocks downed historical powerhouse Alabama in Tuscaloosa for the first time ever, 20-3.

With a 4-1 start and a spot in the top 25, USC seemed destined to run its record up to 5-1 against a struggling Ole Miss team at Homecoming. However, the Rebels had other ideas, as they came back to take a 31-28 decision on a touchdown pass in the closing seconds of the game.

The Kentucky game also looked to be an easy win, but USC struggled in Lexington and trailed late in the game. With one quarterback hurt and another ineffective, Mike Rathe stepped in and won the ball game on a touchdown pass late in the game, boosting USC to 5-2 and one win away from bowl eligibility.

Like the last two seasons, USC needed just one win in its last four games to become eligible for postseason play. Eventual SEC East champion Tennessee was USC's first obstacle. Carolina played hard in the game, and despite the score, the contest was closer than it looked. But in the end, the Vols handed Carolina a 43-29 loss.

Win number six finally came around to the program on Senior Day at Williams-Brice. Despite being marred by strange play and numerous lead changes, the game ended in Carolina's favor on a late-game drive, 35-32.

USC looked to end Florida's dominant winning streak but was denied

by an inspired group of Gators playing their hearts out for the fired Ron Zook. The Gators trounced Carolina 48-14, handing USC its worst loss of the season.

The finale of the season took Carolina to an all-too-familiar Death Valley for a date with archrival Clemson. Clemson needed a win to become bowl-eligible, and Carolina was looking to return the favor that had been dealt to them the past two seasons — keeping them out of a bowl. The Tigers dominated the game from the opening whistle and took home a 29-7 win, which was overshadowed by the now-famous brawl between the schools that ended up costing both a shot at postseason play.

THE STARS

USC found a source of revival this season. After back-to-back 5-7 campaigns, Carolina found sparks from different players — some old, some new.

Wide receiver Troy Williamson stepped up and played his best season at Carolina. The junior led the league in receiving yards with 835 and is almost assured of being an All-SEC First Team member. Williamson was also on the receiving end of seven touchdowns, averaging over 19 yards a reception, with a long of 73.

Freshmen safety Ko Simpson might have had the best freshmen defensive season of any player in the country, as he led the SEC with six interceptions and a touchdown. Simpson also had a touchdown on a fumble return, one of three fumble recoveries on the year. Added to that are 61 tackles and six passes broken up.

The moments

2004 was one for the highlight reel, as Carolina posted big plays from big players.

The season started off on a high note for the defense, as it held preseason All-SEC Second Team quarterback Jay Cutler to just one touchdown. The biggest moment came on a Vanderbilt drive, as Jamacia Jackson intercepted a pass and rushed 99 yards the other way for a touchdown.

Simpson followed that play the following week against Georgia by intercepting a David Greene pass and taking it 57 yards to the house. The Georgia game not only marked the loss of the teams' first game, but marked the beginning of the end for senior quarterback Dondrial Pinkins, who partially tore his rotator cuff on a quarterback draw. Sophomore Syvelle Newton stepped in the following week to post an amazing performance in



CHARLIE DAVENPORT/THE GAMECOCK

Dondrial Pinkins scrambles in the Gamecocks' 35-32 win over Arkansas. The win over the Razorbacks was the sixth win for USC, making them bowl eligible for the first time since the 2001 season.

Gamecock history, throwing for 324 yards against South Florida.

The Alabama game also became a Newton highlight, as he rushed for three touchdowns in a huge win over the Crimson Tide. The following week, Gamecock fans saw reserve quarterback Blake Mitchell lead the offense down the field for a pass-happy drive that was capped off when tight end Andy Boyd bowled over an Ole Miss defender into the endzone for a score.

Kentucky saw the first of two late-game winning drives on the season, as Newton went down with an ankle sprain and Mitchell was virtually ineffective. Rathe came in to lead the team back from a 7-6 deficit with under 1:30 left on the clock on a 19-yard touchdown pass to Williamson in the back corner of the endzone.

Achieving the elusive sixth win of the season came with numerous highlights. Simpson scooped up an Arkansas fumble in the third quarter and returned it 57 yards for a score. But it was the game-winning drive orchestrated by Newton

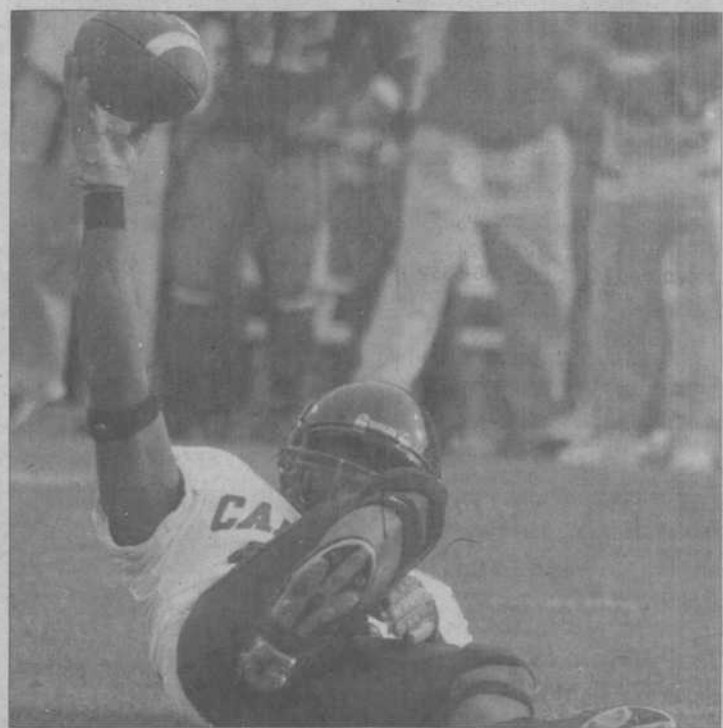
that was the most memorable. Two passes to Noah Whiteside set up the game-winning 14-yard pass to Williamson that looked to send Carolina bowling.

THE FUTURE

After the brawl against Clemson, Carolina will spend its holiday season at home and wonder what might have been. Six players will serve suspensions on opening day next season for their actions. While USC must pay that price, Carolina also looks ahead with promise. Legendary coach Lou Holtz stepped aside as Carolina's leader after a highly successful run, one of the best of any coach. Holtz's three winning seasons that included two bowl wins were some of the best seasons that many Gamecock fans will ever recall.

Holtz's successor is nothing short of an innovator, as Steve Spurrier brings his Fun 'n' Gun offense and cocky attitude to the Palmetto State. With next season comes big hope, big hype and big expectations.

Comments on this story? E-mail gamecocksports@gwm.sc.edu



KATIE KIRKLAND/THE GAMECOCK

Senior receiver Matthew Thomas tries to convince the referee he made the catch on a fourth-down-and-11 try against Clemson. Following the play, USC partook in the now-infamous brawl.

Rivalry brings more than pigskin

■ *Service academies opponents on field, teammates in battle*

By TODD GREEN
THE GAMECOCK

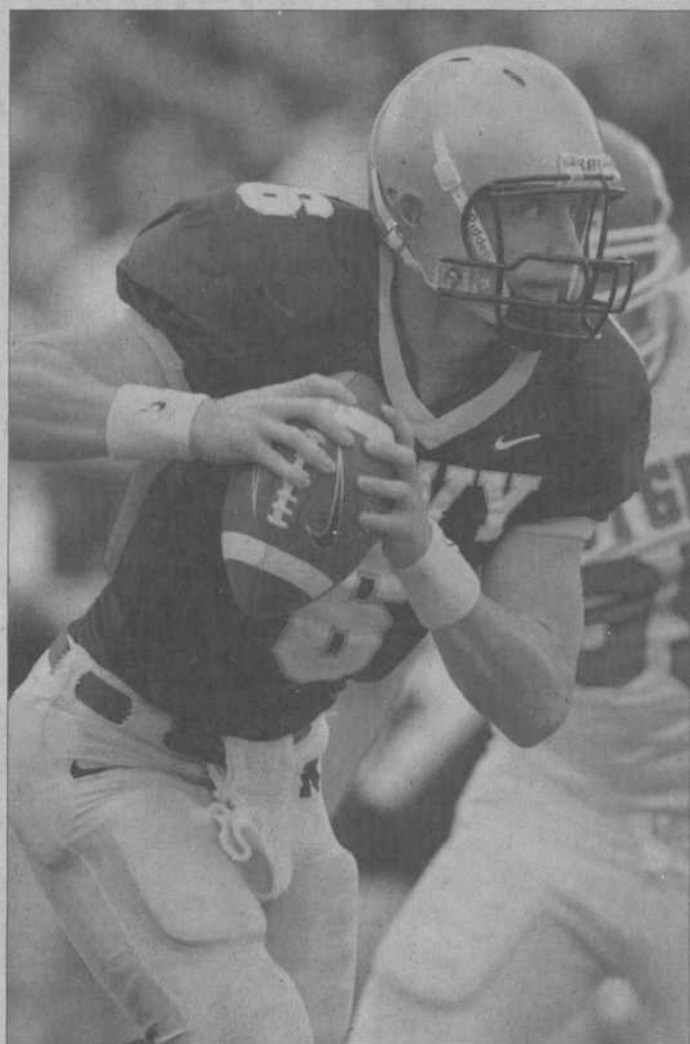
Thanksgiving 2004 brings about long trips home for thousands of college students around the country. Morning comes, and people awaken to the smell of fresh food and begin planning their mad dash to the shopping mall the following day. But something else is going on at the United States Naval Academy.

Army's game preparation for Navy is well under way. The coaches begin to arrive at around 6 a.m. to watch practice film from the day before and prepare the schedule for the upcoming practice. Player meetings begin shortly after, followed by an hour-and-a-half session in full pads.

At noon, the team meets in King Hall, the Naval Academy's gigantic mess hall, which on a normal day feeds the entire Navy student body, approximately 4,000 Midshipmen, all at once. Today the building is ominously quiet. The only ones present are the team, the coaches, the Academy's Commandant, the family members who could make the trip and the mess hall staff. After a prayer to commemorate Thanksgiving by the team chaplain and a few short words by Navy head coach Paul Johnson, the team digs into its feast and departs for the homes of family and friends in the Annapolis area. They have the rest of the day off to relax and enjoy their break. Practice and meetings will be at the same time the next day.

Saturday marks the renewal of one of college football's greatest rivalries, the Army-Navy game. The two service academies, along with the Air Force Academy, compete annually in a round-robin competition that awards the Commander in Chief Trophy to the winner. It is fitting that during the first leg of the competition for Navy, a 24-21 victory over Air Force, a nationally televised debate was taking place between George Bush and John Kerry, for the right to be the next president.

One might think that a whole range of emotions will be going through the minds of the Navy seniors as they line up against their rivals for the last time. Many will be serving in Iraq or



CHRIS GARDNER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Navy quarterback Aaron Polanco looks for running room during the second quarter against Rutgers on Saturday.

Afghanistan in the years to come. Some will join their former teammates in the line of fire.

But to Navy senior defensive back Jon Singleton, who said he plans to become a cryptology officer, there is only one thing to think about in the moments leading up to kickoff of any game.

"To go hit somebody in the mouth," Singleton put it not so delicately. "We want to go out with a win as seniors, it's a chance to win nine games, and it's a chance to beat Army, which is one of our goals for the season."

"It's special because it will be one of the last times I have a chance to step out on that field with the guys I have been playing with for the past four years," Vaughn Kelley, a senior corner who "plans to specialize in surface warfare, said.

This is not a way of downplaying the significance of the Army game. Navy players don't have to be reminded how important the game is. They can feel it from the moment they set foot on campus.

"There's just something special about it, where the whole time you're here at the Academy, all they talk about is Army this and Army that, they've just always been that 'other guy,'" said Lord Cole, senior corner and future submariner.

Senior safety Josh Smith, who plans to become a Navy pilot, was forced to watch last year's game on TV.

"It's a special game, it's always a huge game, just because of the respect that both teams have for each other, and you can throw the record books out the window. Not being able to play last year really hurt me ... I practiced and prepared, thinking I was going to

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VAUGHN KELLEY
SENIOR CORNER

play, and three days before the game I came down with appendicitis," Smith said.

A picture hangs on the bulletin boards of several of the coaches' offices. It is a picture sent from an e-mail by former Navy player, and assistant, Ed Malinowski. The picture is of Malinowski, a marine, standing in front of an armored vehicle. Malinowski has a broad smile on his face and is holding up a sign that says, "Happy Thanksgiving. From Falluja."

This is reality for the players of both Army and Navy. Two Navy players from the class of 2001, Lt. Ron Winchester and Marine J.P. Blecksmith, were killed this year in Iraq. One of the traditions of the Army-Navy game is that each individual player wears patches representing military units from around the world. Smith will wear a patch representing Winchester and Blecksmith in his last Army game.

"The patches mean a lot this year ... it gives me a sense of respect for the units that we are wearing the patches for, we respect them and what they are doing," Smith said.

Do not expect any brawls or bitterness during the Army-Navy game. After 60 minutes of some of the most intense competition in any college football contest, the two teams will unite in front of the student-body sections of the two schools. Another tradition for the game is for the two teams to stand at attention together and sing each other's alma-matters.

Senior safety A.J. "Spewell" Walker, also a future submariner, put the rivalry in perspective.

"It's a big rivalry game and everything, but if you think about it, we're all on the same team. One day we'll be calling them our brothers the same way we do here at the Academy."

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