

# Undefeated Auburn carries torch for SEC

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Six teams represented the SEC in bowl games this season, while USC was left out after forfeiting its bowl bid because of a season-ending brawl at Clemson. Auburn, Georgia and Tennessee all came away with victories, while Florida, Alabama and Louisiana State suffered losses.

Auburn came into the Sugar Bowl undefeated but sitting behind Southern California and Oklahoma in the Bowl Championship Series rankings. By edging out Virginia Tech 16-13 and after Southern Cal trounced Oklahoma, the Tigers finished 13-0 and were No. 2 in the country.

The Tiger faithful were disappointed their team did not get a shot at a national title. In the end, Auburn could not overcome a No. 17 preseason ranking compared with Southern Cal and Oklahoma, ranked No. 1 and No. 2 respectively to begin the season.

Senior Jason Campbell threw for 189 yards and a touchdown and was named the game's MVP. Virginia Tech had two failed scoring opportunities that would have made the game interesting. The Hokies had a potential touchdown pass dropped and missed a short field goal early in the fourth quarter.

In the Outback Bowl, Georgia held off a comeback by Wisconsin to win 24-21. The Bulldogs led 24-6 at one point before the Badgers slowly got back into the game. David Pollack forced a fumble with 5:38 remaining in the game when Wisconsin had a first-and-goal from the 5-yard line. Georgia recovered and the game was sealed.

Perhaps the most impressive SEC performance came from Tennessee. The Volunteers shut out Texas A&M for three quarters in rolling to a 38-7 win. Third-string quarterback Rick Clausen threw for 222 yards and three touchdowns for the Volunteers, winners of the SEC East. Tennessee bounced back from poor bowl showings the past two years to make this year's Cotton Bowl its most lopsided bowl win ever.



Auburn coach Tommy Tuberville, right, gets the Sugar Bowl trophy from Danny Lindsey in the Tigers' locker room.

ANDREW J. COHOON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Interim Florida coach Charlie Strong had his debut spoiled by Miami. The Hurricanes trailed in most of the major statistical categories but beat the Gators 27-10 behind the play of their special teams. Miami blocked a field goal and a punt and returned both for touchdowns. Gator quarterback Chris Leak was sacked five times as the Gators dropped to No. 25 and completed a roller-coaster season which saw their coach fired before they ended the season with three wins.

Alabama fell in a tight game against Minnesota, 20-16. The Crimson Tide were able to drive to the Minnesota 15-yard line with 1:14 left in the game but turned the ball over on downs. The Golden Gophers rushed for nearly 300 yards in dropping Alabama to 6-6 to end the season. It was the only game this

season in which Alabama allowed a 100-yard rusher in a game. Two Minnesota backs surpassed the century mark.

The most stunning loss of SEC bowl teams was that of LSU in the Capital One Bowl. After mounting a comeback to lead 25-24 with 46 seconds left, the Tigers watched as Iowa quarterback Drew Tate launched a 56-yard scoring pass as time expired to give the Hawkeyes a 30-25 win. LSU coach Nick Saban made the decision before the bowl game to coach the NFL's Miami Dolphins. The Tigers will be one of several SEC teams with a new coach next season, joining USC, Florida and Kentucky.

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## ■ BASKETBALL

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left. But State tied things up with 1:11 left, and neither team scored for the rest of the half.

USC was faced with another overtime game against an in-state foe. This time, things went a little better for the home team, as Carolina managed to shoot an astounding nine-of-13 from the charity stripe to seal a 68-65 win.

"Five straight games, none decided by more than four," Odom said. "(S.C. State) could have easily won that basketball game. I give them a lot of credit."

USC returned to the court against its second top-10 opponent of the season, the Pittsburgh Panthers on the road. The Panthers have been impressive, as they have posted a 42-1 record over three years at their new home.

USC and Pitt traded leads most of the game, but somehow Carolina found itself up 28-25 at the half.

From there, Pitt's big men took control as Carl Krauser seemed to sink everything down the stretch, including USC's hope. Kelley's final three-pointer rimmed out, sealing a 72-68 loss for Carolina.

"They are the No. 7 team in the nation," Gonner said. "They are going to find a way to win. We've got to find a way to win at some point."

Players, coaches and fans hoped a 76-

44 blow-out victory against the Wofford Terriers would propel USC to its first of game of the conference schedule, a game against the No. 8 Kentucky Wildcats at Rupp Arena.

USC found itself in the middle of what seemed like a recurring nightmare, as Carolina shot well from the floor and Kentucky shot lights-out. The Wildcats started the game 7-of-7 from the field.

The comeback crew for USC found its first lead on a Gonner miss, and Renaldo Balkman put back a dunk. That lead increased as the first period drew to a close, and a Carlos Powell three with time running out gave USC a 41-35 halftime lead.

Then Kentucky pulled off one of its world famous "runs," bolting out to a nine-point advantage, the largest of the game for either squad.

Carolina tried to whittle the Wildcat, lead down in the closing minutes, but suffered its third loss in the past three weeks to a top-10 team on their home court by four, 79-75.

"It's killing me," Kelley said. "We've been trying to find an answer. We know we can beat these guys."

For some the loss wasn't just another loss to a quality team.

"It's getting old," Powell said. "It's getting old real quick. We've got to find the answers. Sooner or later, we've got to find the answers."

The final game of the break came against border rival Georgia. UGA was also severely handicapped, as the

Bulldogs had only seven scholarship players and 10 freshmen.

You wouldn't have known an inexperienced Bulldog squad was on the floor in the early goings, as Georgia jumped out to an early 11-2 lead. But the slow start only fueled the Gamecocks, who roared back to take the lead on a Wallace three at 18-16.

From there, the speed and size of USC's bench took control, as John Chappell and Wallace combined for five blocked shots in the first half. Carolina shot lights-out from the field, including 4-of-6 from downtown in the first half to go into the locker room with a 44-24 halftime lead.

The rest was nothing short of a clinic, as the Gamecocks only fell to a lead under 20 once in the second half and routed the Bulldogs, 74-54.

"We didn't get off to the best of starts," Odom said. "I just knew this team well enough to know they were going to start playing better quick."

The Gamecocks finished their holiday run with a 5-3 record, each loss to a top-10 team on the road by four points each. They also played in three other contests that were decided by four points or less, all of which they won.

Powell might have said it best about this team's toughness and readiness to play.

"People need to watch out. We're coming man."

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## ■ WOMEN

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Gamecocks is an abundance of turnovers. Carolina has been last in the conference in turnovers since the season opener at Washington when the team committed a season-high 30. Games that could have been won by excellent defense and scoring have been negated by carelessness with the ball on offense. Walvius mentioned following the Mississippi State loss on Jan. 6 that turnovers and rebounds were the two key problem areas for the team.

"Most teams in the SEC are going to capitalize on that every time," Simms said. Despite holding the Bulldogs to a record 25 percent shooting, Carolina lost the game because of 26 turnovers, most of them unforced. "We have to work in practice on not turning the ball over," Simms said.

"That's something you have to control," Walvius said after 24 turnovers in a route by N.C. State on Dec. 16.

"We're a young team, and we're looking around for leadership. They don't want to make mistakes. They don't want to disappoint, and when they do, they get discouraged. We'll be better in the long run because we're dealing with these issues right now."

During eight days, the Gamecocks played a grueling five games, posting a 3-2 record. With the distinct height advantage that the Gamecocks will enjoy for most of the season, the inability to develop those players could hurt over the course of the difficult SEC schedule.

"All our time is spent preparing that you can't get better," Walvius said following an 85-45 victory over S.C. State. "Our schedule has rattled our team's confidence a little bit. We're not playing as well now as the first day of the season. Other teams look at our size and are intimidated. We haven't capitalized on that. We need to play like an SEC team."

Three players set season highs in points over the break as freshman Ilona

Burgrova shot 66 percent in her 15 points against Coastal Carolina. Sophomore Larissa Kulcsar posted her high of 14 points in a solid performance against Middle Tennessee while Booker set her high of 28 points in the Clemson game. Junior Olga Gritsaeva, the lone upperclassman, used her experience to lead the Gamecocks in the conference opener with a season-high 10 boards in an all-around effort. Despite the recent individual successes, Walvius is still hesitant to say that the chemistry is solid.

"I think we're still looking for (an identity) to tell you the truth. We have players that didn't get into the (Mississippi State) game tonight that can step out and be very effective. One of the things that I did tonight that was a little bit different was that we went with a smaller rotation instead of playing a lot of players, which is basically what we've done every game ... trying to develop a little better chemistry."

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