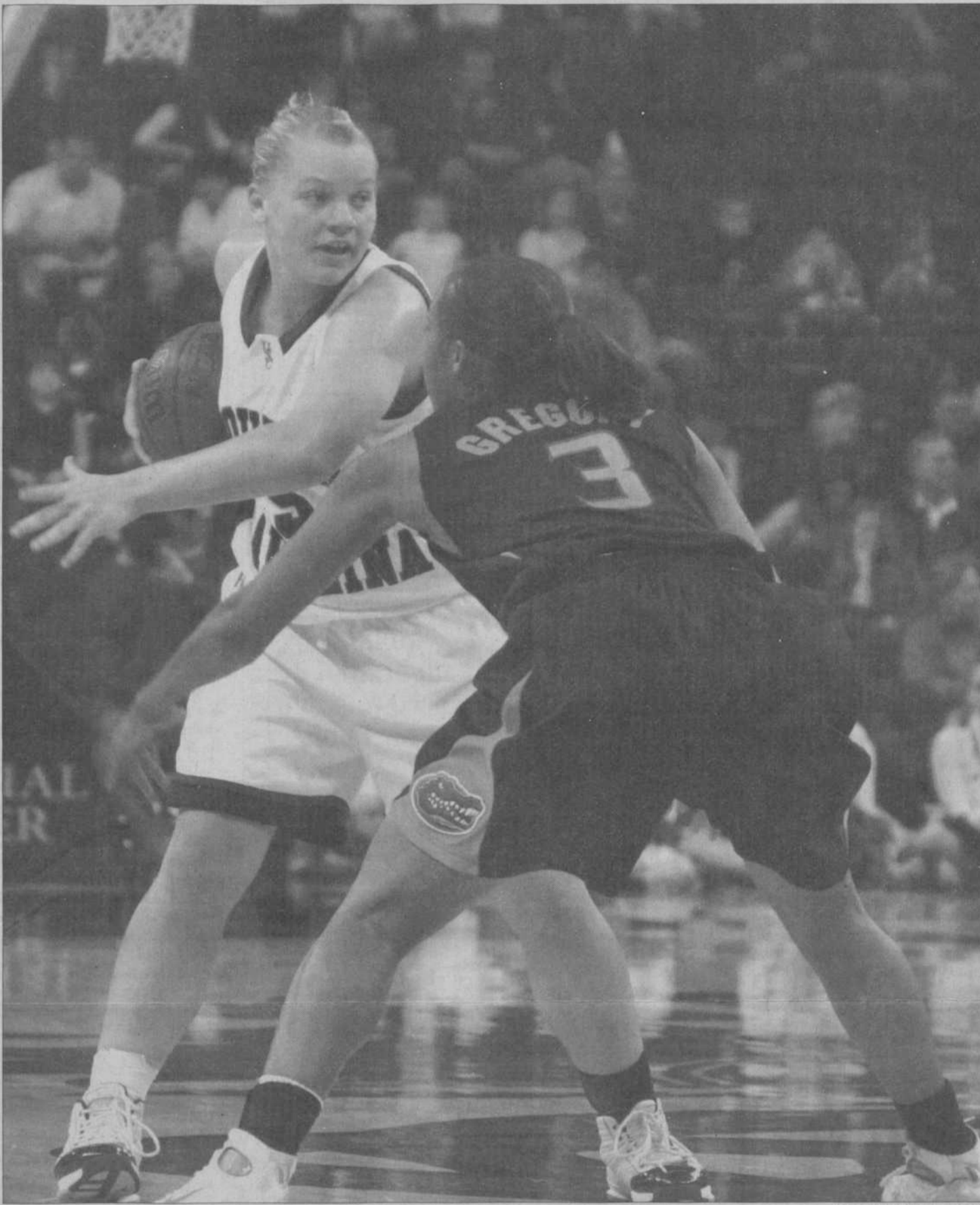


A TALE OF TWO HALVES



NICK ESARES/THE GAMECOCK

Sophomore guard Lea Fabbri, left, battles a Florida defender in the Gamecocks' heartbreaking loss to the Gators on Sunday. With an 8-point halftime lead, the Florida match-up was USC's best opportunity yet to pick up a conference victory against a tough opponent.

Women's hoops fizzles out after strong first half

By MIQUEL JACOBS
STAFF WRITER

The USC women's basketball team has failed to do one thing this season: play two consistent halves of team-oriented basketball. Carolina showed up in the first half but let its most impressive 20 minutes of the season go to waste as it dropped a 67-57 decision at home to the Florida Gators on Sunday.

The loss drops Carolina to 6-11 and still searching for its first conference win this season.

Playing before the largest home crowd of the season (3,124), the Gamecocks attacked aggressively in the opening half after falling behind early 2-9. Freshman Melanie Johnson began a spark with two consecutive layups to tie the game at 9 all, eventually giving Carolina its first lead at 13-12 after Lea Fabbri hooked up with Johnson on a fast break. With the momentum, the Gamecocks employed a full-court press to cause the Gators to struggle with ball handling. The result was 13 Florida turnovers and a team that did not resemble the one that had been playing at the Colonial Center earlier in the season.

Up 35-27 at the half, Carolina extended its lead on the play of post players Olga Gritsaeva and Ilona Burgrova. The Gamecocks seemed unstoppable as the team controlled the boards, effectively using three shot clocks on one possession with numerous offensive rebounds before scoring. Seconds later, Burgrova scored two of her 10 points to give Carolina a 12-point lead, its largest lead of the game at 46-34 with 15:23 left. The Gators used this as a wake-up call and made key modifications that changed the game.

"We played extremely well and focused in the first half," Walvius said. "We got conservative defensively. We worked to get higher percentage shots in the first and didn't do that in the second half."

"South Carolina shot well in the first half," Florida head coach Carolyn Peck added. "We went zone in the second and

put our team in better position to find the shooters. They were smart and picking us apart in the first, and we had to step up in the second."

After Burgrova's shot pulled Carolina up by 12 points, Florida used a 24-2 run during the next 10 minutes of play to lead 48-58 and put the game away for good. The Gamecocks wouldn't come closer than nine points for the rest of the game. Carolina seemingly lost hope early in the run as Tamia Williams, last week's SEC player of the week, took the first Florida lead (48-50) with two free throws, then on the subsequent possession threw up a desperation 3-pointer with no time on the shot clock that banked in miraculously. The next score came when Williams again scored a 3-pointer, turning the game into her own show with a game-high 21 points. Angela Hunter led Carolina with 12 points, all but one coming in the first half.

"I am really angry about this loss because we played really well," Walvius said. "We did a good job of playing to win, and then we played not to lose. We played two totally different halves. The team showed what they were capable of but we need to learn how to win."

Both teams shot the ball well in the first half, with USC hitting .483 and the Gators hitting .417. Carolina went cold in the second half, dropping to 8-31 from the field (.258). After starting the game hot from beyond the arc, both teams slowed up as Florida began the game with five consecutive treys before settling for a highly respectable 10-of-20. After playing aggressively in the first half, the Gamecocks played extremely conservatively, forcing only three turnovers in the second. The lapse was an extreme difference from the Gamecocks' play in their previous eight games.

"If we play good defense, we can play good offense," Gritsaeva said. "We didn't play good defense in the second half, and that's why we didn't make our shots."

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

Thomas leads Carolina recruits

By MATTHEW NAGY and
STEPHEN FASTENAU
THE GAMECOCK

New USC head football coach Steve Spurrier and his staff have been working overtime this recruiting season in order to bring in a solid class of incoming freshman for their first season at USC.

Recruits spent another weekend touring the USC campus and attending Saturday's basketball game against Tennessee with Spurrier himself. As the recruits filed down the aisle on their way out at halftime, fans chanted "We want O.J.," referring to receiver O.J. Murdock, directly followed by chants of "Steve Spurrier." While Murdock has yet to make his decision, several others have made it known that USC is their choice.

Despite the loss of junior Troy Williamson to the NFL Draft, the Gamecocks are seeing plenty of wide receivers flock to the new, more pass-oriented system. In what has been the strongest area this recruiting season, Carolina has picked up two more commitments at the wide receiver position. Eric Sledge checks in at 6-foot-3-inches and has a sub-4.6 40-yard dash times.

But Carlos Thomas might be the prize of this year's recruiting class on

offense. Thomas, ranked No. 10 nationally by scout.com as a four-star WR/CB prospect, possesses blazing speed and quickness. Gamecock fans can look to Jacquez Green, a standout at both wide receiver and punt returner while at Florida, as an example of what to expect out of the speedy Thomas.

On defense, the addition of proven coordinators John Thompson and Tyrone Nix has caused a few recruits to change their mind about other schools in order to give the Gamecocks a look. Marvin Sapp, cousin of NFL star Warren Sapp and former Clemson quarterback Patrick Sapp, was originally committed to Georgia Tech. However, Spurrier was able to entice him into thinking about Carolina, and along with the addition of two excellent defensive coordinators, his visit last weekend sealed the deal.

Sapp figures to play a large roll in filling the absence of the departing Marcus Lawrence at middle linebacker next year. But he is not the only solid



CARLOS THOMAS

defensive player to commit to the Gamecocks, as the new staff has also added four safeties and two cornerbacks to round out an already-impressive secondary. Carolina has also added three defensive linemen, and is in the running for arguably the best defensive player in the state, Hivera Green.

The Gamecocks picked up another four-star recruit in tight end/defensive end Shea McKeen. According to Gamecockcentral.com, McKeen had more than 25 offers from schools around the country, including Florida, Florida State and Miami. McKeen has cancelled a scheduled visit with Florida next week.

Defensive back Jeremy Ware made a soft verbal commitment last weekend to be a Gamecock. Ware said he would like to take the remainder of his scheduled visits but that USC was his choice. The two-star recruit from Fort Meyers, Fla., also has offers from Georgia Tech, South Florida and East Carolina.

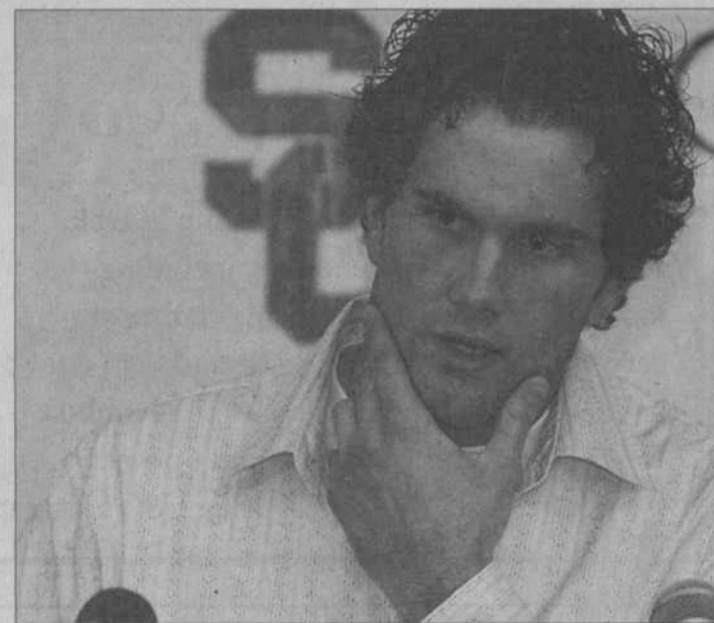
Brent Davis, a two-star outside linebacker who runs a 4.5-second 40-yard dash, committed to the Gamecocks on Sunday. The 6-foot-2-inch, 190-pound native of Daytona Beach, Fla., made his official visit last weekend but was still torn between USC and N.C. State. Davis also had

offers from Purdue and West Virginia.

Spurrier said Saturday that he would like to sign at least two quarterbacks to this year's recruiting class and got his wish soon after. Two-star quarterback Tommy Beecher has been committed for some time. Cade Thompson, another two-star quarterback from Maryville, Tenn., visited last weekend and committed to Spurrier on Monday night. Thompson had been committed to UNC since the summer and had a visit scheduled with the Tar Heels next week. Thompson also has an offer from Clemson but has no visit scheduled. According to Gamecockcentral.com, USC has also offered a scholarship to Texas Tech commitment Chris Todd. Todd is a quarterback from Elizabethtown, Ky., and is rated as the 21st pro-style quarterback in the country by Rivals.com.

"Things are going along well," Spurrier said at halftime of Saturday's basketball game. "Of course, Feb. 2 we'll find out if we have a good, strong class and really we'll find out in years to come how this class did."

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



DAMIAN DOVARGANES/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Heisman Trophy winner Matt Leinart announces Friday he will be back for his fifth season as Southern California's quarterback.

Leinart decides to stay in school

By DAN GREENSPAN
DAILY TROJAN (U. SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA)

LOS ANGELES — It was hysteria in Heritage Hall as dozens of Southern Cal fans lingered outside hoping for a glimpse of the three Trojans who would announce their plans for the next year of their life and beyond.

Inside the varsity lounge and past a line of burly DPS officers, a mad assemblage of photographers, columnists, beat writers, radiomen and TV reporters waited for the decision that would shape the future of the twice-defending national champion Southern Cal football team.

Most assumed it was a foregone conclusion that junior quarterback

Tatupu was going to make the jump to the next level.

"After putting forth a lot of time and consideration into it, I feel confident in declaring eligible for the 2005 NFL draft," Tatupu said. "It was a choice that was in my heart."

Then Tom Malone stepped up to the podium in a Southern Cal polo shirt.

The junior came through with the minor surprise of the afternoon, deciding that punting for another year with the team was for him.

"After thinking about it, we decided to come back for another year at 'SC,'" said Malone.

Now came showtime: the reason

SEC News & Notes

Roberson nets weekly honors for Auburn, Vandy wins

Florida guard Anthony Roberson was named SEC player of the week for leading the Gators to wins against Auburn and Vanderbilt. The 6-foot-1-inch junior is averaging 17.9 points per game this season but went well beyond that average against the Tigers and Commodores.

Roberson lit up Auburn for 34 points by shooting 6-of-10 from 3-point range. He also added nine rebounds.

At Vanderbilt, the Gators became the first team this season to beat the Commodores on their home floor as Roberson again went 6-of-10 on 3-point attempts. Roberson finished with 30 points in the contest. His totals for both games were 21-of-36 from the floor, 12-20 on 3-point attempts and 10-11 at the free-throw line.

LSU to cat fight with Kentucky

LSU will take its physical play to Lexington to take on Kentucky on Saturday. The Tigers have won two straight against USC and a 113-101 double overtime victory against Ohio State.

Three Tigers recorded a double-double against the Buckeyes. Brandon Bass put up 29 points and grabbed 10 rebounds; 315-pound freshman Glen Davis contributed 15 points and 11 rebounds; and Tack Minor managed 17 points while handing out 10 assists.

The Wildcats will meet LSU after blowing out Georgia 76-55 last Saturday and after taking on Ole Miss today. Chuck Hayes led Kentucky to a 3-0 SEC start with his sixth double-double, scoring 13 points and pulling down 11 rebounds. Patrick Sparks also led the way for the Wildcats, scoring 15 points.