

USC basketball makes effort to avoid off-court distractions



KATIE KIRKLAND/THE GAMECOCK
Senior forward Carlos Powell goes up for a dunk in a game against Vanderbilt earlier this season. Powell leads the team in scoring.

■ Felton's accusations could cause Carolina to lose focus on Tigers

By MIQUEL JACOBS
STAFF WRITER

There are plenty of things for the USC men's basketball team to think about other than Auburn. With a nationally televised post-Valentine's Day date with Kentucky on Tuesday, the Gamecocks can easily look ahead and write off the lowly Tigers as a sure win. As the cellar-dweller in the SEC West, Auburn should fold and surrender its eighth conference loss.

That is, unless the Gamecocks succumb to their own hype and don't respect the Tigers.

Distractions can lose a game quicker and easier than any differences in talent level. One week ago, Auburn defeated the mighty Mississippi State Bulldogs, 90-76, to grab its second conference victory of the season. Considered by many to be an SEC title contender, the Bulldogs made the mistake of not taking Auburn seriously.

"It starts in practice," Bulldog senior Shane Power said after the loss. "We haven't had 16 guys work as hard as they can every day yet. Maybe it's a gap of importance."

LSU took notice last Wednesday night and concentrated all efforts on the Tigers. The result was a 90-69 victory, as expected, without any threats of a loss to a low-RPI team that would be damaging to any team's NCAA Tournament hopes. They also held Auburn freshman Frank Tolbert, SEC player of the week after the Mississippi State game, scoreless for only the second time this season.

If the Gamecocks do indeed take the season "one game at a time," there is still one other distraction that could hinder the performance of its leader. Senior Carlos Powell has recently been attacked in the media by Georgia coach Dennis Felton.

After Georgia's loss to USC, Felton

defended his team's play after players described the Bulldogs as "physical." However, this wasn't the first time that opponents commented on the physical play of the Bulldogs. Throughout the conference season, the majority of players on every team questioned about the scouting report on the Bulldogs used the word "physical" in describing the style of play. Conversely, many coaches, including Odom, LSU's John Brady and Kentucky's Tubby Smith, have defended Felton's view of the unwarranted reputation.

"In no way do I feel that Georgia is a dirty basketball team," Odom said. "I do believe they are a team that I would classify as a tough, aggressive and physical. But those are good attributes that will eventually lead to winning."

"It's their defensive system and Dennis Felton's system," Smith said. "They overplay you and deny you. That's what I mean by physical. They challenge every cut, challenge every pass and try to put their bodies on you at all times, whether it's a box out or a rebound or going for loose balls."

Despite the swelling over Powell's eye following an inadvertent foul by Georgia's Corey Gibbs, Felton described Powell as "the biggest faker and flopper." Two days earlier, Felton was careful not to mention specific players in his frustration over Georgia's steadily growing reputation.

"We're going to compete as hard as we can and give us a chance to win," Felton said. "To have these unchecked comments by coaches and players is dangerous and harmful to our ability to compete on an even playing field. It's not fair."

It was a different story Wednesday as Felton openly addressed his frustration in the theatrics of the college game today.

"(Powell) is fraudulent," Felton said. "That kind of effort in manipulating the way people see things and think things going in and out of games is almost, basically, an

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NICK ESARES/THE GAMECOCK
Sophomore guard Stacey Booker looks to fake out a defender in a game in the Colonial Center. USC will play host to LSU on Sunday.

Women to face top-ranked LSU

Tigers coming off big victory over Tennessee

By AJ BEMBRY
THE GAMECOCK

To say the USC Gamecock basketball team is going to have its hands full when the LSU Lady Tigers visit the Colonial Center on Sunday is a bit of an understatement. To claim that the Lady Tigers are pretty good is an even bigger inaccuracy, as they are ranked No. 1.

Carolina comes off a 67-51 defeat at the hands of No. 18 Georgia.

LSU is coming off a marquee victory over the No. 5 Tennessee Volunteers and is proving itself to be the best women's basketball program in the country, compiling a record of 22-1 and going 8-0 in SEC play. The victory over the Vols marked the end of Tennessee's 42-game regular season SEC win streak. LSU's lone loss came on the road in a fiercely defensive 51-49 overtime battle against the Rutgers Scarlet Knights on Jan. 5. Following that game, the Tigers opened up SEC play and pummeled their eight opponents an average of 20 points. The list of conference challengers is impressive, as LSU downed nationally respected Georgia, 76-52, on Jan. 8 and dismantled Arkansas, 91-45, on Jan. 20.

The Tigers are led by National Player of the Year candidate Seimone Augustus. The junior guard is a hometown product, having graduated from Baton Rouge, Louisiana's Capital High School.

Augustus is 6-foot-1-inch and has started all 35 games of her collegiate career. She has racked up a slew of accolades in the process, being named a 2004 Kodak All-American and awarded the 2003 National Freshman of the Year. Through 22 games she is averaging 20.2 points per game, and has a solid field-goal percentage of 56.0. Augustus is second in the SEC in scoring, only behind Mississippi State's Tan White. Augustus is sixth in the league in field-goal percentage.

Augustus is not the only player on coach Pokey Chatman's Tiger squad with a strong record. Sylvia Fowles, LSU's 6-foot-5-inch center, averages 12.5 points per game, is third in the SEC in rebounds with nine per game, second in the SEC in field-goal percentage and second in the league in blocks.

If the Gamecocks are to be victorious against the Tigers, USC coach Susan Walvius will have to create a game plan to contain Augustus and the rest of LSU's weapons. The Gamecocks are 6-17 overall and are winless in conference play, contrasting LSU's stellar mark with an 0-9 record. That's not to say Carolina hasn't had its close calls, though. A 55-48 loss to the Mississippi State Bulldogs Jan. 6 to open SEC play, as well as a nine-point loss to Auburn last Sunday, have been pretty indicative of the team's struggles.

Tip-off for the SEC matchup will be 2 p.m. Sunday at the Colonial Center.

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