

Mitchell ready to lead USC offense

Stephen Fastenau
THE GAMECOCK

Forgive Blake Mitchell if he lines up under left guard Thursday night or misses his timing on an out-route here or there. The sophomore will be making his first start as a collegiate quarterback, under a legendary, pass-happy coach, no less.

Steve Spurrier named Mitchell the Gamecocks' starter weeks ago, and since then, the spotlight has been firmly planted on the LeGrange, Ga., native. No pressure, right? Not if attempting to recreate Spurrier's highly touted fun 'n' gun offense of the 1990s and trying to win nine or 10 games is pressure.

"I may be a little nervous at first," Mitchell said. "But once I get out there and get into the game, I'll be fine."

Mitchell has worked all preseason to prove to his teammates he'll be fine come time to take the field against UCF. While attempting to develop as a leader, Mitchell has, at the same time, struggled to perform well in several preseason scrimmages. The 6-foot-3-inch, 194-pounder's resume is not as polished as it could be — 9-of-22 passing in 2004 for 86 yards — and against Kentucky, Mitchell threw as many completions — two — as interceptions.

The poor showing in 2004, though, hasn't stopped the lanky signal caller from garnering the support of his

teammates.

"Just being mentally focused right now I think is a big thing for Blake," last year's quarterback-turned-wide receiver Syvelle Newton said. "He had a lot of pressure on him being named starter. Now it's time, and the team's depending on him to lead the team where they need to be."

Recruited by former Gamecock coach Lou Holtz, known primarily for his conservative offensive style, Mitchell has had to adjust to quite a change in styles under air-it-out coach Steve Spurrier.

"It's been great (learning under Spurrier)," Mitchell said. "I've learned a lot. He knows and teaches good quarterback techniques."

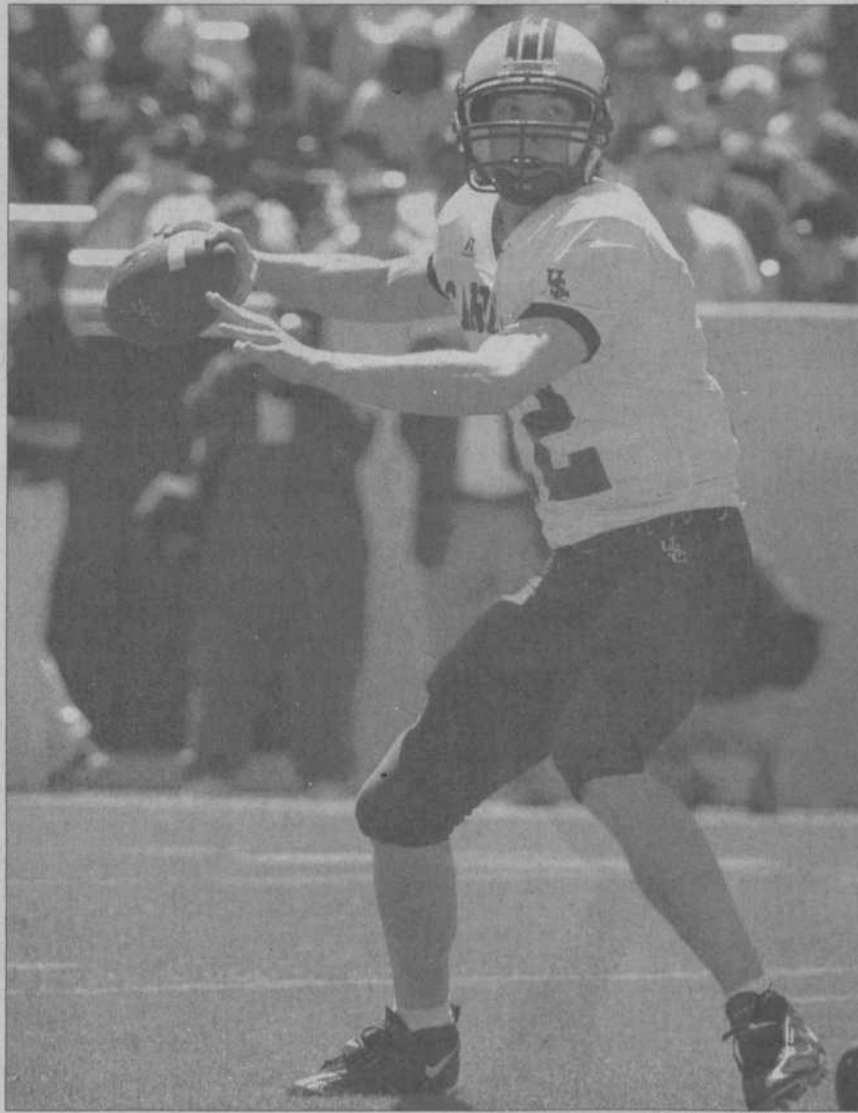
Asked about any advice the former Heisman Trophy winner had given him before his first start, Mitchell said Spurrier simply told him to know his plays and "where everybody's going to be" on the field.

Knowing where everyone is has been easier said than done for Mitchell thus far. While trying to become situated in his role as starter, Mitchell has been erratic while splitting time with redshirt sophomore Antonio Heffner and freshman Cade Thompson during practice and scrimmages.

As a result, Spurrier hasn't given Mitchell quite the resounding endorsement he would like. Instead, the coach has highlighted the Thompson's merits while saying Heffner would likely see playing time as early as the first quarter Thursday

— not exactly information that will allow Mitchell to get cozy in the starter's role.

"Every now and then Blake can look really good," Spurrier said following practice Friday. "So can C a d e (Thompson). Antonio (Heffner) threw some pretty



Katie Kirkland/THE GAMECOCK

Sophomore quarterback Blake Mitchell will make his first start on Thursday.

balls today. Then, every now and then they don't look so good. We got to find that consistency level."

Three inexperienced quarterbacks aren't exactly the model of consistency Spurrier is searching for, but he's hopeful Mitchell will get to that point.

"I think Blake's ready to play well," he said.

Part of Mitchell's troubles this preseason stem from an inconsistent line. Seniors Jabari Levey and Na'Shan Goddard have anchored the tackle position, but the interior of the line has given Spurrier nightmares.

Starting right guard Freddy Saint-Preux will miss Thursday's contest as one of four players suspended for the

opener following last year's season-ending brawl at Clemson.

While Goddard and Levey will try to make the best out of minimal support, they want their quarterback to know he has their support.

"I feel real comfortable with Blake," Levey said. "I know he's real smart, he's a real smart quarterback and he's going to put us in the best position."

A strong showing Thursday night could put Mitchell in a higher comfort zone next week — he and his new ball coach.

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Good questions to ask before Thursday night's season opener

Jake Broom talks about UCF's coach, the talent gap, and eating in the press box

1— How did George O'Leary go from the head coach at Notre Dame to coaching Central Florida?

Going from being the new head coach at "The University of Football in America" to coaching the fifth best football team in the state of Florida is a tough pill to swallow. How did it happen? Well, on O'Leary's resume when he applied to Notre Dame he mentioned his Master of Science degree in education and his three letters in

football at the University of New Hampshire. There are only two minor problems with that. O'Leary never got a masters degree, and he didn't letter three times in football at the University of New Hampshire. In fact, he didn't letter at all. Oops. I bet that was awkward. Next time you apply for the most scrutinized coaching job in America, stick to the truth, George. If that's your real name.

2— How big is the gap in talent between USC and UCF?

A lot of people think that if a school is in Florida, possibly the most football talent-rich state in America, they automatically have great players. This is not the case (see last year's game against South Florida). Other than Steven Moffett (UCF quarterback), I can only name one player that has ever donned the sacred black and gold of the UCF Knights — Daunte Culpepper. Unless Daunte still has a few hours of eligibility left, I like USC's chances. Like the joke says — O.J. should have driven the white Bronco to Orlando, because nobody would ever look for a Heisman trophy winner at UCF.

3— Will Spurrier wear the "Spur's Lid" or the visor?

This is the question that I've been losing sleep over for weeks. For those of you that missed it this summer, the Spur's Lid is the topless bucket hat Spurrier has been wearing to practice. It is basically like a visor, except it serves two purposes: it keeps the sun off your face, and, at the same time, makes you look like a huge dork. I can only hope that Mike McGee, in his last great move as USC's athletics director, slipped some sort of visor clause in Spurrier's contract. Seeing Steve Spurrier wearing the Spur's Lid was like seeing those pictures of pregnant Brittany Spears on Entertainment Tonight. Both were very traumatic for me, and I'd like to make sure they never happen again.

4— How will UCF respond to last year's 0-11 season?

If college football teams were animals, the 2004 Central Florida Golden Knights would have been the opossum. They played dead at home and got killed on the road (I'm sorry, but I've been waiting all summer to use that). We all know that coming back strong is a possibility (see USC circa 2000), but I don't think they will be improved enough to beat USC. People keep giving them the edge in experienced players, but when your only experience is losing 15 straight games and going 0 for 2004, that might not be a good thing.

5— Exactly how much will I eat in the press box before, during, and after the game?

Listen, I'll go ahead and say it. If tuition goes up again this year, you have me to thank. I'm not sure they knew what they were getting into when they gave me a seat in the press box, but I'm looking forward to the free food almost as much as the free football.

In a room full of serious journalists, I will try to represent the students of USC the best that I can. With that being said, if I show up to the post-game press conference with a napkin hanging from the collar of my shirt and barbeque sauce smeared across face...well...don't say I didn't warn you.

MITCHELL, BLAKE



NAME: Blake Mitchell
POSITION: Quarterback
HOMETOWN: LaGrange, Ga.
HEIGHT: 6 feet 3 inches
WEIGHT: 194 pounds
YEAR: Redshirt Sophomore
MAJOR: Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management
-Named starting quarterback early in fall practice
-Completed 9 of 22 passes with a touchdown and three interceptions in five appearances in 2004
-Rated as high as the No. 55 player in the nation by Rivals.com out of high school

Graphic illustration by Laura-Joyce Gough/THE GAMECOCK



O'Leary looks to exorcise demons after 0-11 drought

A.J. Bembray
FOR THE GAMECOCK

George O'Leary is probably hoping the 2005 football season treats him better than his initial campaign at the helm of the Golden Knights football program. The second-year UCF head coach is looking to wash out the bitter aftertaste of an 0-11 season with a major upset — in front of a national audience, no less — against USC.

"I think it's a great opportunity for the program. It's a national game against an SEC team with obviously a coach who has had a lot of success. We are looking forward to the game and the opening of the fall season. I think it's a great way to open up the season against an SEC opponent on national TV," O'Leary said in a Monday teleconference.

Last season was an aberration on O'Leary's otherwise impressive head coaching resume. The coach has, like new Gamecock head coach Steve Spurrier, had success in the ranks of major college football. O'Leary went 52-33 at Georgia Tech during seven-plus seasons and guided the Yellow Jackets to an ACC co-championship in 1998. Still, O'Leary's success, again like Spurrier's, was achieved at a different Southeastern school in a different decade. His Golden Knights return only 12 total starters from last season's dismal showing, allowing O'Leary the opportunity to remake the team he inherited from former coach Mike Kruzcek.

Leading the way for UCF's inaugural season in Conference USA is junior returning starting quarterback Steven Moffett. The Winter Park, Fla., native threw for 1,721 yards and nine touchdowns last season, garnering him

a completion percentage of 64.2 percent. His first-year statistics are comparable to those of another athletic UCF quarterback, NFL All-Pro Daunte Culpepper. Moffett's chief weapon will be explosive junior wideout Mike Walker of Orlando. Arguably the most athletic player on the team, Walker pulled double duty last season, starting at cornerback and eventually finding his way back to his natural position on the other side of the ball. Trying to fill the void left by four-year starter and UCF's all-time leading rusher, Alex Haynes, is certainly going to be an issue for the Golden Knight offense. UCF plans to run the ball by committee, with junior Dontavious Wilcox set to split time with the explosive freshman Kevin Smith.

While the 2004 season riddled the UCF defensive corps with nagging injuries, the Golden Knights look for the 2005 unit to stay healthy. The defense returns only five starters from last season, including junior cornerback Ron Ellis. The Palm Bay, Fla., product has played 18 games in two years with the program, most recently recording a career-high nine

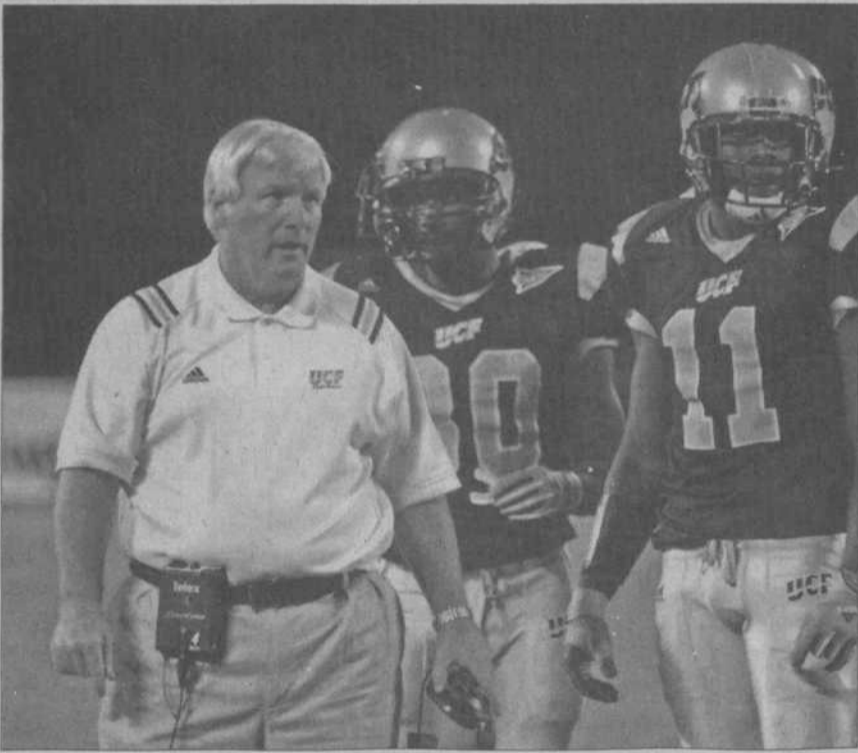


Photo courtesy of the Central Florida Future

UCF coach George O'Leary paces the sidelines during a game last season.

tackles against Kent State in the final game of the year. On the interior defensive line is Canadian tackle Keith Shologan. As a true freshman for the Golden Knights last year, Shologan started all 11 games and looks to create a presence on the inside for UCF's defense. The linebacking corps, however, is mostly young and loaded with freshmen.

"We signed eight linebackers (in the spring) for a reason

because I thought probably as a unit and a position that's where we need the most help," O'Leary said.

The two teams are set to take the field at Williams-Brice Stadium on Thursday night at 7:45 p.m. If the game holds similar to the last time these two teams met in Columbia, ESPN should get their money's worth, as Carolina narrowly defeated UCF 33-31 in 1997. The Golden Knights have traditionally played SEC opponents relatively tough, going 1-9 in all-time play but with four of those losses being by 5 or less.

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Scouting UCF

Head Coach George O'Leary	2005 Schedule
Conference Conference USA (first year)	Thurs., Sept. 1 @ South Carolina
2004 Record 0-11	Sat., Sept. 17 @ USF
Home Stadium The Citrus Bowl Orlando, Fla.	Sat., Sept. 24 Marshall
	Sat., Oct. 1 @ Louisiana-Lafayette
	Sat., Oct. 8 Memphis
	Sat., Oct. 15 @ Southern Miss
	Sat., Oct. 22 Tulane
	Sat., Oct. 29 @ East Carolina
	Sat., Nov. 5 Houston
	Sat., Nov. 12 @ UAB
	Sat., Nov. 19 @ Rice

Graphic illustration by Laura-Joyce Gough/THE GAMECOCK

TANEYHILL • CONTINUED FROM B7

a winning record, but I just wish we'd won more games."

Despite the finish to his career, Taneyhill ruled the roost, and the records prove it. In four years, he compiled 8,782 yards through the air, second only to Todd Ellis. His most impressive numbers come from his 62

career touchdown passes at 37 interceptions, including his senior campaign, which featured a mind-blowing 29-9 touchdown/interception ratio.

Taneyhill tried his hand at professional football, but found out very quickly that the big leagues lacked the camaraderie he had grown accustomed to in college. A short stint with the

Jacksonville Jaguars, followed by a trip to Europe with the Frankfurt Galaxy, ended Taneyhill's days as a player.

But you won't find Taneyhill far from the sidelines, though he's not under the helmet anymore. Instead, the USC graduate is now coach at Chesterfield High School in the Upstate.

"I never thought I'd be a coach," Taneyhill said. "I grew up a coach's

son, not a football coach's son. I just never thought I'd have the patience. As I got into it, it's the closest thing you can be to being a player. That competition every week is still there, that drive is still there and you still want to win."

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