

THE BORDER

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SPORTS EDITOR

When helmets clash Saturday in Athens, it will be more than just an ordinary Saturday for many of those playing the game. To them, it's not just another SEC contest. It's not just another road game. It's not just another rivalry game. It's the border war.

Fueled with even more fire with the arrival of coach Steve Spurrier, the Carolina-Georgia game has blossomed into not only natural rivalry one week in September, but a year-long battle for the South's top recruits.

Spurrier snagged five players from the Peach State in his first recruiting class at USC, most notably wide receiver Carlos Thomas, who has already made an impact for the Gamecocks. The College Park native went up for a big 22-yard catch in last week's win against UCF.

The speedy Thomas has a special interest in playing the Bulldogs on Saturday.

"I've actually got a cousin over there," Thomas said Wednesday, speaking of Georgia rover Greg Blue. He said there has been quite the exchange of trash talk between the two, but that Blue definitely started the jawing. "Yeah, he started it all, but I'm a slot receiver, so he's gonna be the one who's got to try to cover me."

Numerous players will look across the field at familiar faces Saturday. Ten Gamecocks are Georgia natives, while four players on UGA's sideline hail from the Palmetto State.

Senior defensive end Charles Silas, a Swainsboro, Ga., native, mentioned clashes in high school against Georgia's All-SEC tight end Leonard Pope. Silas also said he played in the Georgia-Florida All-Star game against Bulldog defensive tackle Marquis Elmore. Ironically, Elmore was teammates with USC fullback Daccus Turman in 2001 when the two were at Hargrave Military Academy. Turman is another Gamecock who hails from Georgia. The

Washington native made quite a name for himself during his time at Washington-Wilkes High School. In 2000 he rushed for 3,167 yards, breaking Heisman winner and former UGA running back Herschel Walker's record for most single-season rushing yards in the state of Georgia. The Bulldogs recruited Turman along with USC, North Carolina and N.C. State.

After missing last week's game because of a suspension, Turman is ready to go next week.

"You try to get excited for every game," Turman said, "but whenever you get a chance to go home, it's going to be a little more exciting."

Maybe the most notable of Georgia natives returning home is quarterback Blake Mitchell, who turned down an offer from Georgia to play in Columbia.

"They offered me pretty early," Mitchell said. "They already had two quarterbacks there and I wanted to play early, so I came here."

The game in Athens means a lot to numerous players from Georgia, but maybe none more than Silas, who will experience something he hasn't very often since arriving at USC.

"My mom is not a football fan at all, but she is coming this weekend just to see me play against Georgia," Silas said. "I've tried and tried to get her to come out of the house and come see me play, but she said since I'm coming home she's gonna come."

Adding fuel to this rivalry's fire is the arrival of Spurrier, a man Georgia fans love to hate. The former Florida head man went 11-1 against the Bulldogs in his 12 seasons at Florida. Spurrier, a former Heisman-winning quarterback at Florida, has made no secret of the fact that losing to the Dogs his senior season makes Georgia an appetizing opponent.

While meeting up with Georgia every year at Florida, Spurrier has only coached between the hedges once, when the Gator Bowl — now Alltel Stadium and home of the annual Georgia-Florida game — was being renovated in 1995. The result was the Gators scoring the most points of any team in Sanford Stadium history.

Switching Sides

Many USC players are from Georgia and a few UGA players hail from our fair state

Yvan Banag, Buford
 Jared Cook, Suwanee
 David Laggis, Conyers
 Kenny McKinley, Mableton
 Blake Mitchell, Lagrange
 Charles Silas, Swainsboro
 Calors Thomas, College Park
 Chris Tucker, Decatur
 Daccus Turman, Washington
 Brandyn Young, Tucker

Georgia natives @ USC

C.J. Byrd, North Augusta
 Antavious Coates, Greenwood
 Marcus Howard, Huger
 Tim Jennings, Orangeburg

Carolina natives @ UGA

Graphic by Laura-Joyce Gough / THE GAMECOCK

"The time I went there, they were not near the team they are now," Spurrier said. "The fans left by about the third quarter, the last time I was there. It's a different environment, real different. Different team, different head coach, the fans, their enthusiasm is about 10 times greater than it was that day."

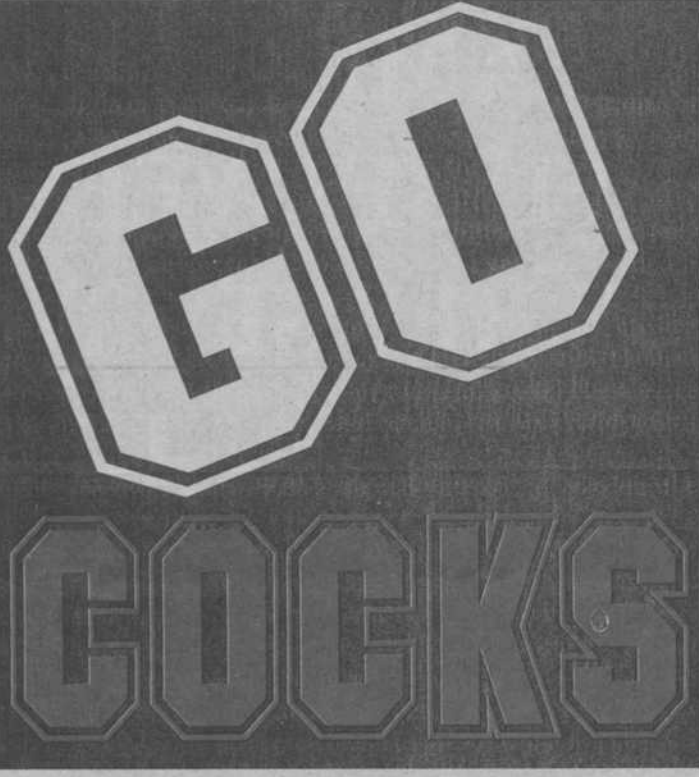
The experts aren't giving the Gamecocks much chance in the 58th meeting between the schools, as USC was listed an 18-point underdog Thursday. Spurrier was asked Tuesday whether he had ever been that big of an underdog.

"Oh, I don't know," USC's head ball coach said. "We probably should have been when we played the Eagles a few times."

Many Gamecock players might have felt like they have been playing the Eagles in recent years, as Georgia has produced a number of pro football players in recent years. Last season saw a 16-0 USC lead flounder in Williams-Brice, ending in a 20-16 victory. After winning back-to-back games against Georgia in 2000 and 2001, USC will look for its first win against the Dogs in four years Saturday.

"Hopefully we'll come out ahead," Spurrier said. "Shoot, if we play our game and get a few breaks, anything can happen."

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In Brief

Gamecocks set to reinstitute border rival with Tar Heels

The matchup fans have been calling for is finally back, as USC will renew its rivalry with North Carolina on the college gridiron. USC will travel to Chapel Hill for an Oct. 13, 2007, showdown with the Tar Heels, who will make the trip to Columbia on Sept. 18, 2010.

Discussion of renewing the rivalry had been underway for quite some time, with talk of playing on a neutral site, such as Charlotte's Bank of America Stadium, as a possibility. But the schools finally agreed on a home-and-home series.

"We are excited to have this home-and-home series with North Carolina on the schedule," USC Athletics Director Eric Hyman said. "It is a natural rivalry that should generate a lot of interest. We had overtures to play the game at a neutral site outside the state lines, but felt it was in the best interest of our fans and our local businesses to play a home-and-home series with one of the games right here in Columbia."

The border battle was a staple of Gamecock football from 1949-1964 as part of an annual showdown in the ACC. The two teams had played as early as 1903. The Tar Heels hold a 34-16-4 advantage in the series, last played in 1991 with a 21-17 UNC win in Chapel Hill.

USC has won nine of the last 14 meetings, with a 3-1 record in the last four matchups.

"We think it is an excellent game for both schools," USC coach Steve Spurrier said. "It should be a good game. Both schools should be looking forward to it."

Compiled by Alex Riley