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Simms leads the team in scoring during conference play, averaging 13.3 points per game, but she averages 8.8 points a game on the season.

"Lauren's not afraid to shoot the ball," Walvius said on her weekly television show. "She's a fearless player, and that's what we need right now."

Junior guard Stacy Booker is the only Gamecock averaging double digits on the season at 10.1 points per game. Booker is the prime example of the sixth "man," having played in 15 games this season without recording a start.

"Stacy really cares about winning," Walvius said. "She wants to shoot the ball, and she's really tough on herself. We really need her shooting and the

way she gets after the ball defensively."

The defensive side of the ball is a place where the Gamecocks have not struggled during the season. While they are last in the Southeastern Conference in 3-point shooting and ninth in scoring, the Gamecocks rank second in scoring defense, first in field goal percentage defense, third in rebounds, second in blocked shots and fourth in steals.

"Defensively we can match with most teams in our league," Walvius said, "but we need to take advantage of the size that we have on the offensive side of the ball."

The good news for the Gamecocks is that their upcoming game against the Crimson Tide shouldn't come down to 3-point shooting. While the Gamecocks are last in the

SEC, they are only slightly edged out by Alabama, which shoots only 25 percent from behind the arc.

A key stat for this game will be which team can control the boards. Alabama leads the SEC in rebounding. The team is led by senior center Dee Merriweather, who averages 9.2 rebounds per game.

Merriweather is nearly averaging a double-double in conference play. She is recording 10 points and 9.7 rebounds per contest. Alabama is led in scoring by junior guard Marverly Nettles at 11.3 points a game.

Despite a lackluster 8-8 record (2-1 in the SEC), Alabama is 6-2 at home, while USC's only road win this season came against Clemson.

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U.S. Skeleton team tries to move past scandals, make name for itself in 2006 Winter Olympics

It would be interesting to know how many people

would want to buy merchandise with U.S. Skeleton Team insignia on it simply because of the uniqueness of the name "skeleton team." It would probably be a hot-ticket item in the days leading up to Halloween. The fact that the name actually represents one of the many sports the U.S. will be competing for gold in during the Turin Winter Olympics next month would surely be lost on many. (If you find this unlikely, see a recent study that found that two-thirds of all Americans can't recite the Star Spangled Banner.)

Skeleton is, in fact, a sport. It has been around since 1885, making it the oldest form of sled racing. Skeleton is an individual competition. Each slider commands a single sled (sometimes called a sleigh) headfirst, in hopes of negotiating the twists and turns of an ice-covered track.

The reason the U.S. Skeleton team today is garnering greater interest is not because of any feat or accomplishment, it is because the team has become embroiled in controversy.

The U.S. Skeleton coach, Tim Nardiello, has been suspended after accusations were made that he sexually assaulted female members

of the team. Nardiello maintains his innocence and has applied for reinstatement in an attempt to rejoin the squad in time for next month's games.

Nardiello's suspension denied him the right to travel to Germany for a World Cup race two weekends ago. Long-time skeleton team member Felicia Canfield came forward with the allegations Dec. 30. Canfield's husband is a member of the U.S. Skeleton team committee. Two other female sliders have since made similar charges against the coach.

A player-coach sex scandal is the last thing anyone involved in the U.S. Skeleton Team Committee wants grabbing attention in the days leading up to the Olympics. Unfortunately for the committee, they also have a steroid controversy to contend with.

Zach Lund, the leading male slider for the skeleton team, has also been suspended for testing positive for a banned substance. Lund proclaims his innocence, and is appealing the suspension in hopes of making the trip to Turin next month.

The substance that Lund reportedly tested positive for is finasteride, a main ingredient in Propecia, used as a medication for male pattern baldness. The problem is that finasteride is on the list of banned substances because it has been used as a masking agent to conceal the presence of steroids. These days, they don't only test for steroids; they also test for things people take to

hide the steroids from the testing.

The fact that a seemingly obscure sport has come under such intense scrutiny is a reflection of what the Olympics have become. These days, the games are not about the spirit of competition, they are about the spirit of endorsement deals.

Athletes from the smaller sports cannot hope for million-dollar contracts the way that football, baseball, basketball and hockey players can. Their only hope is for that gold medal, or more importantly, that the camera will be rolling when they collect that medal.

Snickers, Wheaties, Gatorade — these are the companies that pay millions of dollars for the gold medal. Appearances on Letterman and Leno are sure to follow, and who knows, maybe even a sitcom, reality show or a movie script could be in the works.

Today, the Olympics are a billion-dollar business and that money comes from television rights and sponsorship deals. The amount of actual competition being televised is going down, while the amount of human interest stories are increasing. It is torture to sit through a piece about how hard of a life some beach volleyball player has had, how he had overcome so much, and how the pursuit of a gold medal is what led him to redemption.

If I want to watch people desperately competing for fame and fortune, I'll stick with "American Idol."



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Then, Vanderbilt found its stroke with nine minutes left through sophomore forward Shan Foster. He hit two 3-pointers in a row and put the Commodores up by six. Foster led Vanderbilt with 17 points. The lead wouldn't hold though.

The Gamecocks were led by the scoring of sophomore guard/forward Dwayne Day, senior guard Tarence Kinsey and sophomore guard Stephen McDowell near the end of regulation and pulled within three. But the key to the comeback came from an unlikely source — Vanderbilt's free throw shooting. The Commodores missed four free throws in the last minute and didn't score at all for the last three minutes.

That was all the invitation that USC needed as junior forward Brandon Wallace

squared up with 17 seconds left and drilled a 3-pointer to tie the game.

"It's probably not (a play) I would have drawn up, but we tell our players that if you're open and you're in rhythm, shoot it," head coach Dave Odom told the AP. "(Wallace) felt like he could, so he stayed with it."

Once overtime came, Kelley took over again. He scored all of the Gamecocks points in the extra period and, with ice in his veins, made two free throws to put USC up by three with 30 seconds left. Vanderbilt moved the ball down the floor, and senior guard Mario Moore hit a three to tie it up at 64 with 19 seconds left in the game.

Kelley wasn't rattled. The Gamecocks quickly threw the inbounds pass, and Kelley took it from coast-to-coast, drove the lane and watched the winning shot drop through

the net with five seconds left on the clock.

"I needed the jump shot so the team spread Vanderbilt out for me so I could get the lay-up," Kelley told the AP.

"To be able to come back and play like that in the second half I think speaks volumes about where our club is right now," Odom told the AP. "They still believe that they can play well, they believe they can win, they believe they can win on the road, they believe they can beat quality teams like Vanderbilt."

Carolina came away from Vanderbilt with its first conference win. The Gamecocks make a stop in Lexington, Ky., on Saturday to take on the Kentucky Wildcats before coming home to play the No. 2 Florida Gators next Wednesday.

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