

Louisville Sluggers

USC to face Michigan
in NIT final as Balkman
leads way against Cards

Doug Feinberg
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Renaldo Balkman scored 23 points and USC earned a chance to defend its NIT championship with a 78-63 win over Louisville in the semifinals Tuesday night.

The Gamecocks, who beat St. Joseph's in the final last year, can become the second team to win consecutive NIT crowns with a win over Michigan on Thursday night. The Wolverines beat Old Dominion 66-43 in the other semifinal Tuesday night.

Tarence Kinsey added 21 points and Brandon Wallace 19 for the Gamecocks (22-15).

Trailing 42-32 at halftime, Louisville (21-13) got within 48-41 early in the second half as freshman Terrence Williams scored seven straight points, but USC answered with a 10-1 run to take a 58-42 lead with 11:35 to play. Balkman and Wallace had acrobatic dunks during the spurt.

Louisville scored the next eight points to close the gap to 58-50, but Balkman scored six straight to put the game away.

USC shot a blistering 60 percent from the field with most of its baskets coming on layups and dunks.

Taquan Dean scored 21 points for Louisville and finished 12th on the school's all-time scoring list with 1,649 points. Williams added 16 for the Cardinals, who fell to 0-3 at Madison Square Garden this season. The Cardinals lost to St. John's in the regular season and

FINAL ● 13



Julie Jacobson / The Associated Press

USC's Renaldo Balkman dunks the ball on Louisville's Terrance Farley during the Gamecocks' win against the Cardinals on Tuesday. Balkman finished with 23 points to lead USC into the NIT final.

*Team's title run
shows players
never lost their
fighting mantra*

**Odom's best comes out after
up-and-down season that left
Carolina without NCAA bid**

The disappointment didn't get to them.

After losing a heartbreaker in the Southeastern Conference tournament final to end its

chance at an NCAA tournament berth, USC could have gone to the National Invitational Tournament and folded at the prospect of trying to win another title in it.

After all, what do they have to prove?

The Gamecocks were crowned NIT champions last season, and at the time, it was a landmark accomplishment — the first national championship of any kind the basketball team had won.

This season, with expectations high, USC and coach Dave Odom had an up-and-down year that included sweeping top-10 Florida (now in the NCAA Final Four) but getting swept by the likes of Tennessee, Kentucky and of all teams, Georgia.

A disappointing season was nearly salvaged by an unlikely run in the SEC tournament that left the No. 5 seed Gamecocks one win from the Big Dance. An 18-for-60 shooting performance ended the Gamecocks' chance for an NCAA run.

So Odom and company accepted another bid to play in the NIT and are now, as they were last year, among the last teams in the country still playing basketball.

This year's path to the NIT final was somewhat more difficult. USC played just one home game in this year's tournament, forced to go on the road and beat Florida State, a team that should have been in the NCAA tournament, and Cincinnati, another NCAA bubble team.

Then came last night's game against Rick Pitino and Louisville. After the Cardinals took an 11-2 lead, USC could have folded.

The Gamecocks, though, said all season they would keep fighting. After home losses to Kentucky and Georgia, they promised to keep fighting. You would think the mantra would have gotten old, but this year's team actually believed it.

USC tied the game at 11, took a 10-point lead into halftime, and eventually the fighters led by as many as 18 in the second half.

What do they have to prove?

They had to prove to themselves that wins against the Gators, and the flash of brilliance in the SEC tournament were no fluke. They

PASTERNAU ● 13

RNE's Gray commits, sees program on the rise

Jonathan Hillyard
FOR THE GAMECOCK

Richland Northeast High School football standout Gary Gray announced March 23 that he would be sticking around Columbia for a while to attend and play football for USC.

Removing his tie, jacket and dress shirt, Gray revealed a garnet Carolina jersey that prompted a crowd of classmates, coaches, media and Gamecock fans into a standing ovation. He had narrowed his decision down to USC and Notre Dame after receiving offers from schools such as Florida State, Tennessee, Texas, North Carolina State, Clemson and Michigan among others.

Among his reasons for choosing the Gamecocks, Gray mentioned

that USC is a program on the rise and that he wants to play in front of his hometown crowd, including one person in particular.

"My mom can come to every game," Gray said. "If I went somewhere else there was no guarantee that would be the case."

Add Gray's name to a list of high-profile football prospects to play at RNE in recent years. Seniors Rodney Paulk (USC), Adam Patterson (Michigan) and Calvin Harrison (Kentucky) all signed letters of intent in February to play for Division I schools.

"RNE for a long time has always had great athletes, but now I think they have a better system in place for them to succeed," RNE defensive backs

coach Mike Thomas said. "They have people more concerned about their grades and things of that nature."

Paulk, a linebacker for the RNE Cavaliers, committed to coach Steve Spurrier and the Gamecocks in February and looks forward to playing with Gray, his high school teammate.

"I'm really excited, and I know his family and everybody at school here is excited," Paulk said. "He made the best decision. I'm excited for him and we're gonna change things around down there at South Carolina."

A multi-position star on the gridiron at RNE, Gray projects to be a cornerback at the next level and was named by to the Junior All-American team in 2005 by rivals.com. He helped

lead the RNE team to the state-championship game in 2005 by breaking up 14 passes and hauling in three interceptions during the season.

According to J.C. Shurburt of rivals.com, Gray could be the highest-ranked player to commit to USC since running back Demetris Summers in 2003 and is already the highest-rated prospect to commit to play for Spurrier at USC.

In addition to Gray's on-field skills, RNE coaches were complimentary of his off-field behavior, namely his work ethic in school and the way he carries himself.

"The young man has a lot of class," Thomas said. "Ever since

GRAY ● 13

Spurrier settling in, preparing for 2nd season at helm

Tom Benning
STAFF WRITER

To football fans across the country, the following phrases still might be hard to comprehend — Steve Spurrier, head ball coach, University of South Carolina.

After a short tenure in the National Football League, many people were surprised when Spurrier did not return to Florida. He won the Heisman Trophy there in 1966, and from 1990 to 2001, Spurrier led the Gators to 122 victories, six outright Southeastern Conference titles, and the 1996 National Championship.

However, after a 7-5 campaign in his first season at USC, Spurrier said the strangeness of being at a different SEC school has worn off, and everything seems to signal he'll be here for quite a while.

"I think he's a little more comfortable and homey," said sophomore cornerback Carlos Thomas. "This is his home now."

In Spurrier's second spring in Columbia, he faces a whole different list of pluses and minuses. Last year, the defense looked to be a strength, and the offense was a question mark. This year, the roles have reversed. Gone are All-American rover Ko Simpson and

starting cornerback Johnathan Joseph.

But, returning is receiver Sidney Rice, a preseason All-American candidate, and starting quarterback Blake Mitchell. Spurrier said he has already seen his junior signal caller make considerable advances.

"Certainly, Blake has improved," Spurrier said. "He has certainly learned what's going on, and he should play much, much better this year. I hope we have some coaches around here so our guys improve from one year to the next."

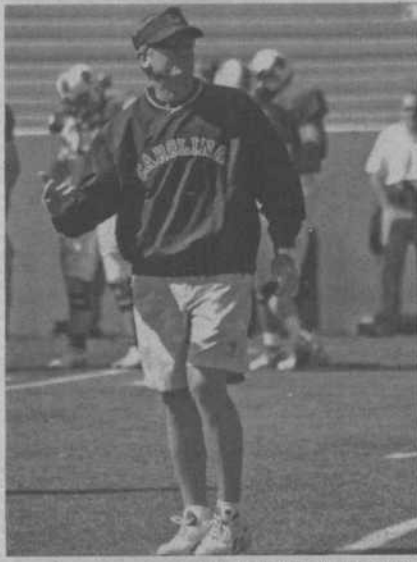
In addition to improvement on

offense, Spurrier has noticed the players becoming more familiar with his expectations and his system.

"Obviously, our guys know the offense, so we don't have to correct them as much," he said. "I think most of the players are comfortable in what we do — the meetings, the weightlifting, the schedule. We are a little bit more into our routine."

The increased comfort level is apparent in the players. During scrimmages, plays are quickly relayed in and run, making it

SPURRIER ● 13



Juan Blas / THE GAMECOCK

USC coach Steve Spurrier says his players know the offense better so far in 2006.