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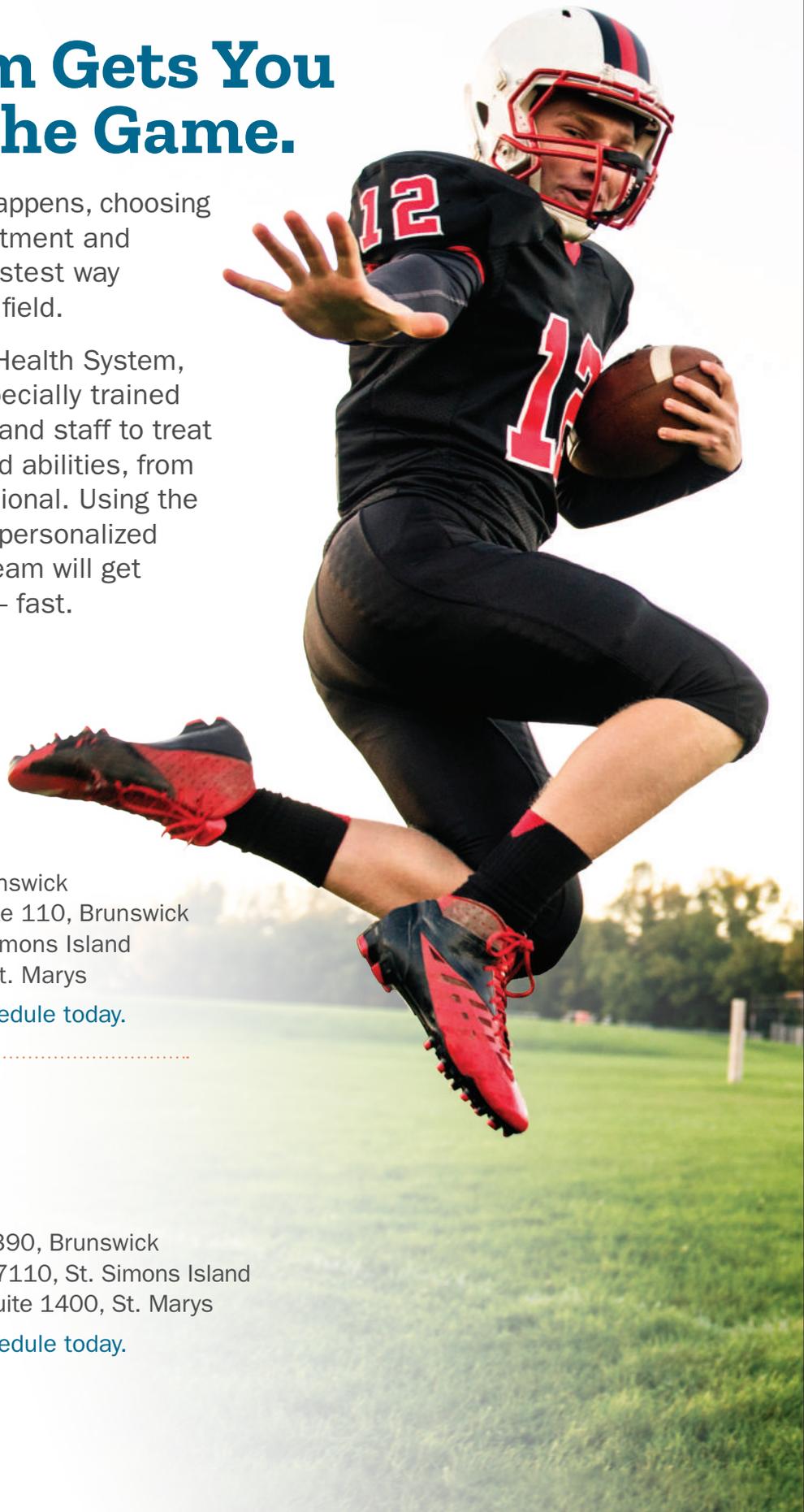
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The Southern Sports Edition was created to offer sports opinions from a southern perspective. The Southern Sports Edition offers some of the top sports minds and opinions from around the South. From coverage on High School Football to a beat on the Atlanta Braves, the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets, SEC, ACC and all southern sports with actual southern opinions. The Southern Sports Edition is currently distributed in Southeast Georgia and Northeast Florida and growing everyday.

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2019



CHAMPIONSHIP

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FOR ALL THE MARBLES



SEC Championship Preview By Kipp Branch



The Georgia Bulldogs will make their 3rd-straight appearance in the SEC Title game on December 7th in Mercedes Benz Stadium in Atlanta.

This Georgia team has arguably the best defense the team has fielded in school history. The defense, led by Monty Rice and a host of others, leads the SEC in just about every statistical category.

The LSU Tigers will make their first SEC Title game appearance since 2011. The Tigers are led by Heisman Trophy front runner Joe Burrow, who is the best QB in the country.

LSU may have the best offense in the nation. The Tigers got over the Alabama hurdle with a 46-41 win over the Tide in Tuscaloosa.

The Georgia/LSU matchup will be intriguing as two polar opposites collide. Defense vs Offense.

Keys to the game:

1. Georgia Pass Rush. Can Georgia generate pressure on Joe Burrow? If they can't, it could be a long night for the Bulldogs.

2. LSU Run Defense. LSU has been getting gashed by opposing SEC offenses in the run game all season. Georgia is going to run the football with Swift and company and the LSU defense cannot afford to have Burrow standing on the sidelines while UGA is eating up clock with a ball control offense.

3. Georgia Wide Receivers not named Lawrence Cager must step up. Teams stack the box to stop the run and play man to man against the UGA receivers. Someone must step up for this position group for UGA.

4. Can LSU deal with adversity in the contest if Georgia slows down the LSU offense? Will LSU be patient enough to stay balanced and not scrap the running game?

This LSU WR group led by Ja' Marr Chase is scary good and really can't be contained for 60 minutes. That combined with Joe Burrow makes LSU look like a double-digit favorite in the contest.

I expect UGA to play a solid game in all areas, but will it be enough? LSU is the best football team in the country at the moment and could possibly make the College Football Playoff with a loss in this game.

Prediction: When it all said and done, I'm going with LSU to win the SEC Title with a 34-23 win over UGA. UGA has not shown that it can score enough points to beat a great offensive team like the Tigers.

Joe Burrow locks up the Heisman with an MVP performance against the best defense in the country. This LSU team may go down as the greatest in school history with a dominant performance in this game.

UGA fans are left to wonder about the bad loss against South Carolina, one that kept the Dawgs out of the playoffs.

Jake Fromm has an opportunity in this game to write his special chapter in the UGA history book, but he must have the rest of the offense play their best game of the season.

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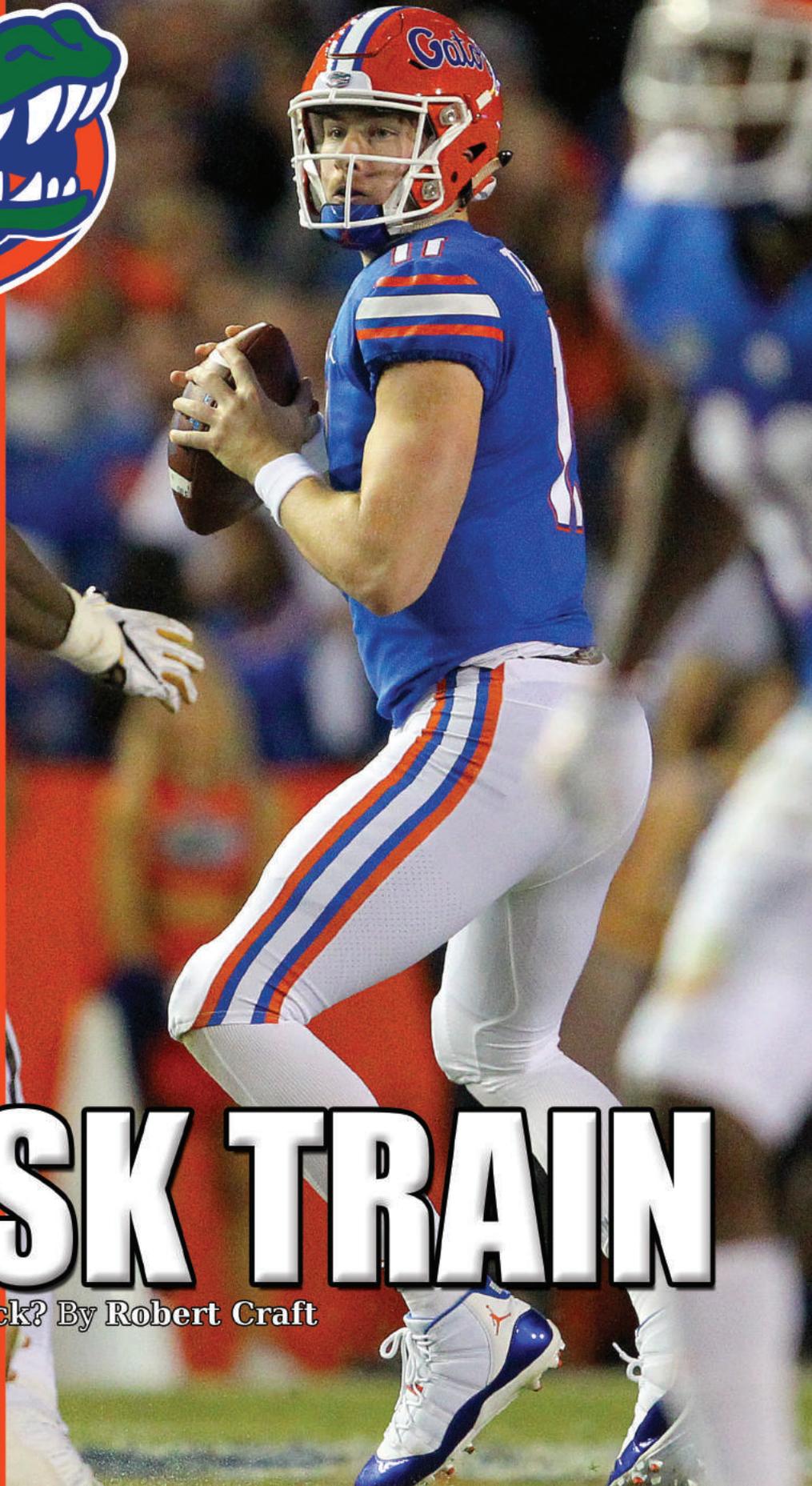


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THE TRASK TRAIN

Gators Back On Track? By Robert Craft



The Gators started slow against Missouri in Columbia. Blame it on the coaching, the weather, or anything you want, but do NOT blame it on Kyle Trask.

After going into the locker room with a 6-3 lead, Gator Nation on Twitter was in meltdown mode. The major debate before, during, and after was: should Kyle Trask be the starting quarterback at Florida?

Kyle Trask was the backup quarterback after Feleipe Franks went down with a dislocated ankle. Trask stepped in and stepped up.

Trask has led the Gators to a great season and afforded a chance for a New Year's Six Bowl Game.

The optimist on Twitter would look at Kyle Trask and say he holds the ball too long; he isn't a running threat and he doesn't fit Dan Mullen's offense.

No one was paying attention when Trask lead a come from behind win against Kentucky. Nobody cared when he showed intestinal fortitude in the convincing win against Auburn. Trask had fans believing in his team in a shootout in Baton Rouge. As Birdman would say, put some "Respect" on Kyle Trask's name.

The loss to Georgia has some fans not caring about the 2020 season. The big question fans are asking, "Is Trask able to lead this team to a championship or would Florida be better off playing Emory Jones to gain experience for 2020?"

Let me throw another monkey wrench into the quarterback room. What happens if Feleipe Franks decides to return to the Gators next season?

I have seen a lot of fans questioning Dan Mullen on Emory Jones's playing time. The reason is that Emory has not progressed enough in the passing games to allow him to take the QB1 job.

I think Kyle Trask won the backup quarterback job during camp

and now give the Gators the best chance to win. He is completing 66.8% of his passes this season, a bit over 2/3.

Remember this is Trask's first year playing as a starting quarterback since Junior High. Trask's ability to make the correct reads and deliver the football on time in limited playing time has translated into wins.

Florida's rushing attack has been non-existent this season. The offensive line can't bust a grape and the running backs are averaging less than 4.1 yards per carry.

Coach Mullen was hired to win games. Florida's new fun and gun offense put their talent in the best position to win. Kyle Trask as the starting quarterback also puts the Gators in the best position to win.

The answer to whether Trask can win a championship has proven to be "NO", at least for the 2019 season. Trask is a redshirt Junior and has one year left at Florida.

The 2020 team will be different. Florida loses a lot of leadership and production players, but Coach Mullen has changed the direction of the program in two short years and has the Gators trajectory heading in the right direction.

Perhaps it would behoove Gator fans on Twitter and Facebook to be a little more patient with Kyle Trask. Just last year, LSU fans were having the same discussion with Joe Burrow. This season Burrow is lighting it up and is the favorite to win the Heisman.

I am not saying Trask will take the same path as Burrow, but you have to let the young man develop. Trask is going to have to take the right steps forward in a continually challenging SEC Conference, but his trajectory indicates success on the Swamp's horizon.

Mullen, Gator Nation, and the players know that to win a championship, you have to beat Georgia. That is not an easy task, considering Georgia is an Elite, championship program.

To the fans questioning Coach Mullen's decisions, I say "Trust The Process!"

There is still work to be done. There is still time to jump on the Trask Train! Trask 2020, make the Gators Great Again!"

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WHAT'S CAUSING MY HEEL PAIN?



Jake J. Porter III, M.D., MPH

Waking up on the wrong side of the bed can ruin your entire day. When you have plantar fasciitis, that's not just an expression. "People with plantar fasciitis usually experience heel pain when first stepping out of bed in the morning. The pain improves throughout the day. The condition occurs for several reasons, but not from an injury," says board-certified orthopaedic surgeon Jake J. Porter III, M.D., MPH. Dr. Porter specializes in foot and ankle surgery at Summit Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Surgery in Brunswick, Georgia.

What causes plantar fasciitis?

To understand why plantar fasciitis creates that stabbing heel pain it helps to know a little bit about anatomy. The plantar fascia is a thick band of tissue along the bottom of your foot that connects the heel bone to the toes. When repeatedly strained, it becomes inflamed and you feel that piercing heel pain or plantar fasciitis, upon rising from bed. It can progress to where you feel nagging heel pain all day long. "Many people mistakenly attribute heel pain to a bone spur. When MRI and ultrasound came along, physicians understood that an irritated plantar fascia was to blame," explains Dr. Porter.

The most common cause of plantar fasciitis is wear and tear. "Most of the patients I treat are between age 40 and 60. Many, such as nurses and factory workers, stand on their feet all day," says Dr. Porter. Obesity is another culprit – extra weight exerts additional pressure on the feet. For some, foot anatomy is the issue. "If you're flat footed or have a very high arch, you're more prone to plantar fasciitis." The problem is also common in runners and others whose sports activities impact their feet.

Finding relief

The solutions to heel pain can be simple or sophisticated, depending on how long you've had plantar fasciitis. If your pain hasn't disappeared in two to three weeks, see a doctor to rule out a heel fracture. Diagnosis is relatively straightforward. "X-rays of the foot are taken to ensure that there are no stress fractures in the heel bone. Then I examine the foot and take the patient's medical history," says Dr. Porter.

Treatment begins with conservative measures done at home. Dr. Porter recommends stretching exercises to relieve tension on the plantar fascia. He also suggests wearing a gel heel cup inside shoes for cushioning. Another highly favored remedy is wearing a dorsal night splint, which gently stretches your calf and plantar fascia as you sleep. "It helps heal small fascia tears by holding your foot in a dorsiflexion position."

Ice, along with rest, relieves acute pain, as will Ibuprofen. If over-the-counter medicine isn't effective, Dr. Porter prescribes a stronger anti-inflammatory. Many patients undergo physical therapy, which may involve the therapist wrapping your foot in athletic tape for further support. You may also need to make lifestyle modifications – whether that means losing weight or switching to low-impact exercise.

Taking treatment further

When plantar fasciitis progresses beyond simple remedies, it's time to pursue other options. Though steroid injections alleviate pain, Dr. Porter is cautious. "I typically don't use steroid injections except in patients who have tried everything else and are still in severe pain. Steroids weaken the tendon and increase the chance of rupturing the plantar fascia." A newer therapy known as platelet-rich plasma injections can help, but may not be covered by insurance.

If conservative measures don't work, Dr. Porter may perform an endoscopic plantar fasciotomy. This involves inserting a tiny camera (endoscope) through an incision in the patient's foot, then cutting a specific part of the plantar fascia to release the painful, tense tendon. During the six to eight week recovery period, patients must wear a boot and undergo physical therapy. It's easy to overlook your overworked feet – until you can't walk without pain. Fortunately, heel pain is easily diagnosed and treated so you can get back on your feet again.

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A



CLOSING ACT

Braves Sign Closer Will Smith By TJ Hartnett



While the first two moves of the Atlanta Braves' offseason failed to impress (the re-signing of Tyler Flowers and Nick Markakis), Alex Anthopoulos and company made a bigger splash by signing the best free agent relief pitcher on the market.

Atlanta inked All-Star closer Will Smith to a 3-year, \$39 million contract (with a 4th year club option for another \$13 million), shoring up what was their most glaring weakness going into the 2019 season and checking off one of the bigger offseason boxes on their list (though far from their only need).

This is a signing that looks good and should pay dividends, even if Brian Snitker keeps Smith's former teammate from the San Francisco Giants Mark Melancon in the closer role.

Smith's numbers against lefties are ridiculous. He has allowed a .157 batting average against and an OPS of a meager .395 from southpaws, not to mention an insane 42-to-1 strikeout-to-walk ratio against lefties. That's 42 strikeouts for every 1 walk that he surrenders.

Really bonkers stuff from Smith. His numbers against righties (.212 average, .709 OPS) are strong as well. He gets strikeouts, with 37% of his outs coming from a K, and he's managed to keep walks low and balls in the ballpark for his whole career.

The indication that Melancon will retain his role as the team's closer isn't much of a surprise, given that Melancon converted all 11 save opportunities after Atlanta acquired him midseason.

He'll back the guy who's played for him; but it may not stay that way for long. Smith seems like the more natural choice, given his stuff and his strikeouts, plus the fact that Melancon has one year

left on his contract and Smith just signed for three (maybe four). That means the job will be Smith's eventually anyway. Time will tell how things shake out.

Perhaps, the more interesting (and immediate) consequence to consider of Smith's signing is what it means for the rest of the Braves' offseason. \$13 is nothing to scoff at, which could mean one of two things: 1) Liberty Media has decided to open their checkbook and Atlanta is ready to spend on talent, or 2) this was the big signing of the offseason for the Braves. Knowing Liberty Media, the latter does seem likely.

Josh Donaldson is still out there, having predictably rejected the Braves' qualifying offer of nearly \$18 million to play third base for them in 2020.

The market for him will be one to watch. I still feel that everything being relatively equal, Donaldson will return to Atlanta, umbrella in tow.

I don't foresee him signing with the team sight unseen, but even with a salary discrepancy of, say \$10 million (another team offers him 3 years, \$80 million vs. a Braves offer of 3 years, \$70 million), he'll be back at the hot corner in Suntrust Park this April.

I also think that Madison Bumgarner is still on the table after the Smith signing. I do wonder, however, if both would be.

Certainly, signing Donaldson to somewhere around \$25 million eliminates even the vaguest possibility of a Gerrit Cole joining the Braves. (A long shot regardless – the Braves can't win a bidding war.)

Madison Bumgarner might be looking at something more akin to \$10-15 million per year for 2 or 3 seasons. That's not unreasonable for the Braves to afford.

The issue then becomes finding a catcher and deciding what to do in the outfield (start the season with Inciarte, Acuna, and a farm hand?).

Questions are infinite, but at the end of the day the Braves took care of a need, and that's a good start.



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IMPROVING GATOR BITE

Florida Gators' Recruiting By Robert Craft



I have spent a lot less time writing about recruiting during the college football season. The season is short and I want to enjoy every Saturday while I have it.

After watching the Georgia-Florida game, I definitely see a talent difference between the two SEC programs.

Georgia has been recruiting at

Coach Mullen must do a better job keeping the in-state talent in state (this goes for Miami, FSU and UCF).

Georgia is currently ranked fifth nationally and third in the SEC with 16 commits. Florida is currently ranked 11th nationally and sixth in the SEC with 19 commits.

Mullen's current staff does not have an Alpha on the recruiting trail. Mullen must add one or more to his staff and increase staff in the recruiting department.

Florida currently has 19 commits and can take as many as 30 this cycle. I believe the Gators will take right around 27 this cycle.

The Gators' strong season

defensive linemen, one linebacker and five defensive backs. Florida appears to be done adding to this class.

The Gators need to address depth on the offensive line and defensive line. This class should have five or six players in the trenches.

Here are some of the top targets still in the noncommitted group.

St. Thomas Aquinas offensive tackle Marcus Dumervil is the Gators main target. Dumervil is a four star and this is going to be a Florida-LSU battle.

Miami Columbus wide receiver Xzavier Henderson is the top wide receiver on the board. Henderson has offers from Georgia, Clemson, Alabama, ect. This is a three-way battle between



an elite level since Kirby Smart arrived in Athens. Florida's recruiting classes under Mullen have been good, but not elite. If Mullen wants to compete with Georgia on the field, he must first start winning some battles off the field.

Georgia has four commits from the state of Florida, all five are top 50 players in Florida.

They are four-star QB Carson Beck out of Jacksonville, four-star DT Jalen Carter out of Apopka, four-star OL Joshua Braun out of Live Oak and four-star WR Marcus Rosemy. I do not count 4-star DT Warren Brinson from IMG Academy because he is from Savannah.

Three of the four commits live less than a two hour drive from Gainesville.

and HBO special exposure is having a positive impact on recruiting. Also, Willie Taggart's firing will provide positive ramifications due to lack of competition.

Florida recruiting class has one quarterback, three receivers, four offensive linemen, one tight end, four

Clemson, Georgia and Florida.

Deerfield Beach running back Jaylan Knighton has turned his interest towards the Gators after decommitting from FSU.

This 2020 class is in the same shape as the 2019 class. If fans are relying on on-field performance to provide a significant bump in this class, the loss to Georgia certainly doesn't help.

The early signing period is December 18th. National Signing Day always brings a few surprises, and this year will be no exception.

Who is flipping and who is delaying their signing until February? Can the Gators close the talent gap with Georgia and the other elite programs?

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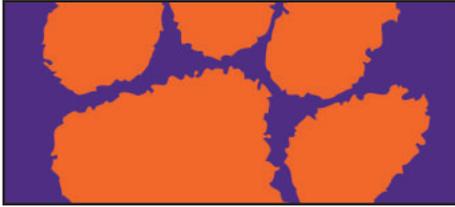
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NOT YOUR FATHER'S TIGERS

Clemson Recruiting By Kenneth Harrison Jr



The college football regular season is winding down. Clemson won the national championship last year and they are in the hunt again this season.

They currently have the top ranked recruiting class for 2020. Let's take a look at some of the incoming talent.

So far, they have 20 commits including six 5-star recruits and nine 4-star. The Tigers have a hard commit from the top player in the nation, defensive tackle Bryan Bresee. He attends Damascus High in Maryland.

At 6'5, 290 pounds he already looks like a pro lineman. He's dominant and if you have not seen his highlights yet I advise you to check him out.

Another 5-star defensive lineman joining Bresee in Death Valley is defensive end Myles Murphy. Murphy attends Hillgrove in Powder Springs, Ga. He's 6'5, 260 lbs. so he also looks physically

imposing. At The Opening he ran a 4.65 forty and had a 34.10 vertical. He's the No. 4 recruit in the country.

Quarterback DJ Uiagalelei is the best pro style QB in this entire recruiting class.

He's like a bigger more powerful version of Tua, standing at 6'4 and 246 pounds. You might be familiar with him from the show QB 1 Beyond the Lights.

He plays for national power St. John Bosco (California). Getting a highly recruited player like him from California shows just how much Clemson has grown as a program. They typically recruit well in the Southeast but rarely get players from outside that region.

DJ also plays basketball and baseball so he's a good athlete and he moves well for his size. Through 11 games this season he has passed for 3,177 yards, 35 touchdowns and only 2 interceptions. He also completes 63% of his passes.

His team travels and plays several ranked teams from out of state. They also played the top high school team in the nation, Mater Dei so his numbers are impressive.

Running back Demarcus Bowman (Lakeland, Fl) is ranked No. 3 nationally at his position.

He averaged 11.9 yards per carry this season and last season was the same. Through 10 regular season games he has 1,523 yards and 23 touchdowns. He's a big play threat and his longest run of the season is 88 yards.

Cornerback Fred Davis II (Jacksonville, Fl) is 6'0 so he has good size for the position. He's ranked third at the position nationally. His official forty time is 4.3 so he's very fast. He is expected to step on campus and be a shutdown corner.

The final 5-star player is defensive tackle Demonte Capehart from IMG Academy. IMG recruits nationally so being a standout player for that team means he's an elite player. He's the No. 4 recruit in the state of Florida.

Capehart is 6'5 and 295 pounds. Many of these players have prototypical size already.

Clemson has been very successful without having top 5 recruiting classes. Now that they are getting this much talent it's frightening for the rest of the college football programs.

Their defensive line should be the best within the next two years.





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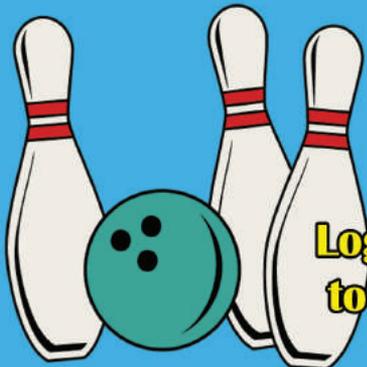
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END OF TAGGART TIME

Noles Fire Taggart By JJ Lanier



So, who had a year and a half in the “Taggart’s Time in Tallahassee” office pool? I had three years, so once again, I lose.

If you’re wondering why Taggart’s tenure at Florida State ended as soon as it did, there’s a picture making its rounds on the internet that sums it up pretty nicely.

The photo is one of a Miami Hurricanes player about to score a touchdown with a pair of Seminole defenders trailing on the play, both of whom seem either more interested in yelling at each other, or are in the midst of an intense game of “1,2,3 Don’t Blink”, than trying to make a play.

The picture really does encapsulate just about everything you need to know about what has taken place since Taggart’s arrival. Losing to an in-state rival? Check. Losing to a less than mediocre football team? Check. A complete lack of discipline? Check.

And if you’re curious as to how desperately they wanted Taggart out, Florida State was able to raise the more than \$17 million dollars needed to buy him out, mostly from donors and alumni, quicker than Don Draper’s marriage vows when a beautiful woman walks by. (Sorry, I’m binge watching Mad Men at the moment.)

While the immediacy of Taggart’s dismissal may have come as a bit of surprise, I don’t think the ultimate outcome is. I don’t recall too many people feeling confident in the hire when it happened as much as taking a wait and see approach; not exactly what you would expect from a program like Florida State.

In fact, Taggart’s hire kind

of reminds me of Cardale Jones and Mitch Turbisky. What I mean by that is scouts and analysts were fawning over how Jones should’ve entered the NFL draft after he led Ohio State to a national title, although he had played in only a handful of games. Instead, he returned to the Buckeyes the following year and people realized they were a little overzealous about his abilities after seeing a larger sample size.

And Turbisky was the first quarterback drafted in his draft after starting for only a year, even though there were more accomplished quarterbacks available. Now, it seems pretty obvious that he may only be the fourth best quarterback in that draft class.

In Taggart’s case, he did well at South Florida, but only spent one mediocre season at Oregon, so there wasn’t really much of a coaching history to justify the hiring at a school at Florida State, outside of just thinking he might be successful.

As to where Florida State goes from here, I have no idea. I vaguely remember them having difficulty before finally bringing in Taggart- something that certainly could explain his hiring- and I doubt his firing will make things more enticing than they were a year and a half ago; the product on the field certainly isn’t.

However, they are still Florida State and due to the timing of Taggart’s termination they will have ample time to hone in on one or two coaching candidates, making sure they are the right fit, before announcing a hire.

Right now, that Miami photo is only indicative of the Taggart years. If the Seminoles happen to miss on this upcoming hire, that picture could represent their program as a whole. And it may take less than three years for them to get there.



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SEC FORTUNE TELLER

Predicitng SEC Basketball By JJ Lanier



As sportswriters, we love to make predictions, especially when we don't revisit our assumptions afterwards to see how well we did.

So, in the spirit of trying to hold myself accountable, here are three semi-bold predictions for the upcoming SEC basketball season, that I'll come back to at season's end to see how I did.

1- Florida, not Kentucky, will enter the SEC Tournament with the best conference record. On the surface it's easy to dismiss this as an overreaction on my part to Kentucky's loss to Evansville; I promise it's not.

Don't get me wrong, as much as I enjoy watching a John Calipari coached team lose that type of game, the outcome will have absolutely zero bearing on the team they'll ultimately become.

The reason I'm going with Florida is, besides the dearth of talent on the Gators roster, Kerry Blackshear Jr.

Normally, the expectations for

a graduate transfer aren't quite that high because if they were that talented to begin with, they would've either already been drafted, or would still be with their original team; Blackshear is the rare exception.

Having watched him play at Virginia Tech for the past few years, he is a better than average talent who will bring experience and tenacity to the Gators.

He's that "heart and soul" type player you want on your team in big time games, because in most instances he's going to deliver. He may not be the best player in the conference, but he could wind up being the most important.

2- Anthony Edwards will be the SEC Player of the Year. I say this about Edwards for two reasons.

The first is that I genuinely think he may be the most talented player in the country. In a freshman class that is underwhelming compared to the last few years, Edwards is one of the few players that would've been a top tier talent in those earlier classes.

The second, and what may factor in as much as his talent, is that Tom Crean is going to make sure Edwards is showcased as much as he can.

It's like if you were the owner of Willie's Wee-Nee Wagon for a day,

would you spend it advertising the burger and hotdogs, or would you push the pork chop sandwich?

You're going to go with what works best, right. (By the way, Cole Anthony is going to get the same treatment at UNC that Edwards will get.)

Edwards has the potential to be a program changing recruit, so you know Crean is going to give him every opportunity to put up numbers. Edwards won't be the most efficient player in the country, but he may turn out to be the best.

3- Only 5 teams from the SEC will hear their name called on Selection Sunday. Out of the three predictions, this is the one most likely to come back and bite me.

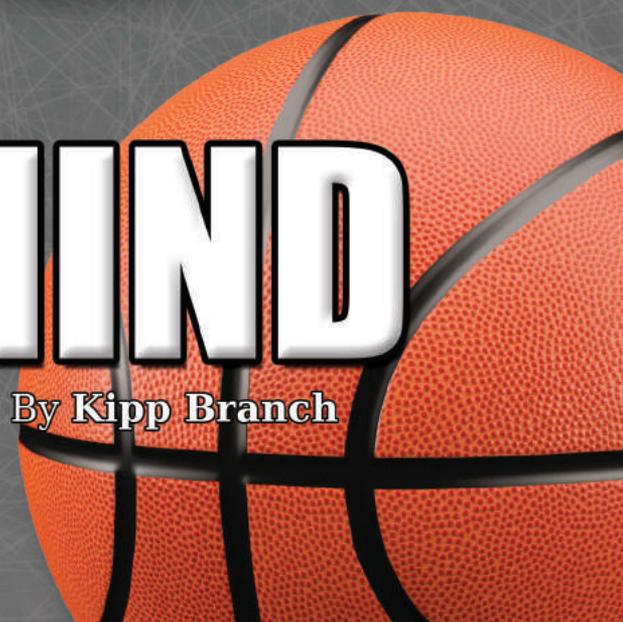
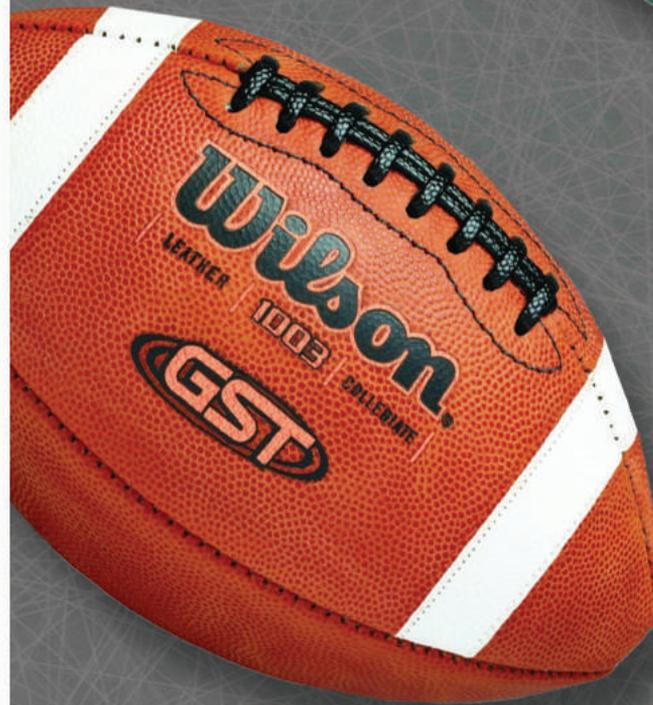
College basketball is so wide open this year it's difficult to find a team, let alone multiple teams, you feel confident in.

This may be the season all those whose clamor to see more mid-major teams in the tournament get their wish.

Regardless of whether or not any of these predictions come true, this season promises to be an entertaining one. It'll just be a little bit easier to revisit in a few months if I happen to be right.



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ON MY MIND

Random Thoughts On Southern Sports By Kipp Branch

SOUTHERN SPORTS

There are a lot of things going on in the world of southern sports currently. Here are some random thoughts:

1. On 4th and a foot you run the football, Dan Mullen. To win in the SEC you have to be able to run the damn football. At Mississippi State you can get away with that, but at Florida you can't. Lose again to UGA next year and see how hot your seat gets.

2. Wristband Gate at UF caused them to use two early timeouts in the World Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party. Again, you can get by with that in the Egg Bowl, but not against Daddy Kirby.

3. The Atlanta Falcons are a huge dumpster fire. Time to clean house and start over. Nick Saban has a home in Georgia. Home Depot will make tons of money during the Christmas season. Breakout the check book Falcons.

4. The Atlanta Braves decline the 2020 option on Julio

Teheran's contract. That took about three years too long.

5. Cam Newton has major health issues and is out for the season, but the Panthers are in playoff contention. Can someone in Charlotte pick up the phone to the Chicago Bears and say are you looking for a QB?

6. The Brunswick High Pirates made the playoffs in 2019. Note to region 2-AAAAAA if you didn't beat the Pirates in 2019 you won't again until 2023 at the earliest, and if you did you better enjoy it.

7. Richmond Hill got bumped to 7A in the latest reclassification by the Georgia High School Association through 2022, but will stay 6A because of the isolation rule.

8. FSU is looking for a new football coach. We never got the time to know you Willie. Who wants to come in and continue cleaning up the mess Jimbo left?

9. Auburn is looking at another banner year under Gus. Bus number 8-4 is running out of gas finally on the Plains.

10. The first QB selected in the 2020 NFL Draft is Joe Burrow.

11. The best college football team in the State of Georgia is the

Valdosta State Blazers. They just keep winning and winning.

12. The Atlanta Hawks are an NBA Draft Lottery team once again.

13. Anthony Edwards will lead the UGA Men's Basketball team to a bid in the NCAA Tourney.

14. Randon Jernigan will bat over .300 and make All-SEC in 2020 for the Diamond Dawgs. Why? Because his Aunt Sandra told me so. That's good enough for me.

15. Kawhi Leonard is the best NBA player on the planet at this moment in time. Those who don't agree I have three words for you MAKE THE PLAYOFFS!

16. Lawrence Cager is still wide open against DBU.

17. McIntosh County Academy hats off to you and the improvement you have shown in 2019. Look out for the Bucs moving forward.

18. Note to the College Football Playoff Committee, Oregon is no longer getting in.

19. The ACC in football is Clemson and the dependents.

20. The Washington Nationals won the World Series and can't even win the NL East. Ouch!



A



STEALING HALL OF FAME?

Rafael Furcal On HOF Ballot By TJ Hartnett



The ballot for the Baseball Hall of Fame is always a fascinating thing to unpack and dissect as we examine the bona fides of the newly eligible and reevaluate the careers of those who have remained on the ballot from the previous year's attempt.

Several former Atlanta Braves populate the several dozen potential Hall of Famers eligible for induction in the summer of 2020, including the first (and, sadly, probably last) appearance of popular shortstop Rafael Furcal.

With Furcal, we have the spark that started off games for the last six years of Atlanta's legendary 14-straight NL East Division wins.

'Fookie,' as Hall of Fame manager Bobby Cox called him (would 'Raffy' have probably been better? ...yes.), exploded onto the scene in 2000, making the leap straight from Single A to the Major League ballclub thanks to an offseason injury to then shortstop (now bench coach) Walt Weiss.

Furcal hit .295 with 40 stolen bases that season en route to a Rookie of the Year award.

He was a consistent presence at the top of the lineup after that,

never hitting below .275 and never swiping fewer than 22 bases. Other highlights during his time with the Braves include hitting three triples in a game (tying an MLB record) and recording the 12th-ever unassisted triple play in 2003.

When he left Atlanta, Furcal put in five and a half solid years (one of which – 2005 – was pretty spectacular) with the Los Angeles Dodgers, before being traded to St. Louis in 2011, where he won the World Series.

His career did not end with the same pop with which it began – a 9-game stint with Miami in 2014 – but he hung his cleats up with a .281 batting average, a .748 OPS, and 314 stolen bases. Is it enough to make the Hall?

It isn't. This will undoubtedly be Furcal's only season on the ballot – it's too overcrowded with better candidates for him to get the necessary 5% of the vote to stick around another year.

It's a shame, too, because while Furcal didn't have the kind of eye-popping numbers that merit induction, he was an indispensable piece of winning teams for his entire career (almost every winning team has a player like this – essential to the team and overshadowed by his teammates).

There were plenty of factors that led to the end of the Braves' 14-season winning streak, but the fact that Furcal leaving coincided with that

end is no coincidence.

The fact that Furcal's teams made the playoffs in 10 of 14 seasons is no coincidence either (10 out of 13 if you discount that week and a half he played for the Marlins). Fookie was a winning player, and that's not nothing.

Unfortunately, it also isn't going to be enough. Furcal's biggest skillset was his speed – both bat speed and baserunning speed – and that's a skill that conveniently doesn't slump (hence his consistency) but inconveniently doesn't age well (hence his numbers beginning to dwindle at age 33 and his retirement at age 36).

Maybe if Furcal's seasons of peak production had stretched out a little longer, he'd have a better case; but alas, it isn't so.

It also can't help that headlining this year's new Hall of Fame candidates is one of the best shortstops of all time, Derek Jeter.

Furcal pales in comparison, though, to be fair, so do most players at any position. Jeter is likely to be the second unanimous election come January (now that we're done with that no-unanimous-elections nonsense – what a joke that was for decades).

Despite the fact that he won't be immortalized in the Hall, Furcal should be able to rest easy knowing that he was a crucial and cherished part of winning teams for his whole career. It's not a plaque in Cooperstown, but it's enough to be proud of.



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