

# *THE SOUTHERN SPORTS* EDITION

September 2023 Edition



# COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW



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## GET TO KNOW THE WRITERS



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Kipp Branch graduated from Valdosta State University where he also pitched for the Blazers. Kipp serves as one of the voices on the Brunswick High Pirates radio broadcast and is known affectionately as "Mr. Brunswick High". Kipp also co-hosts 'The Jason Bishop Show w Kipp Branch', south Georgia's most listened to sports talk show



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Kenneth Harison Jr is a long time Atlanta native and graduated from Kennesaw State University with a Bachelor's Degree in Communications. Kenneth has a pulse on not only the Atlanta sports scene but the entire southern sports scene as well.



### COLIN LACY

Colin Lacy currently resides in Statesboro, GA and is the voice of the Southeast Bulloch Yellow Jackets. Colin also works with Westwood One Sports and Bowl Season radio for National College Football and NFL broadcasts across the country. Colin also calls Georgia Tech baseball for the Georgia Tech Sports Network and also works with the ACC Network.



### ROBERT CRAFT

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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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SEPTEMBER 2023 EDITION

*THE* **SOUTHERN SPORTS** *EDITION*

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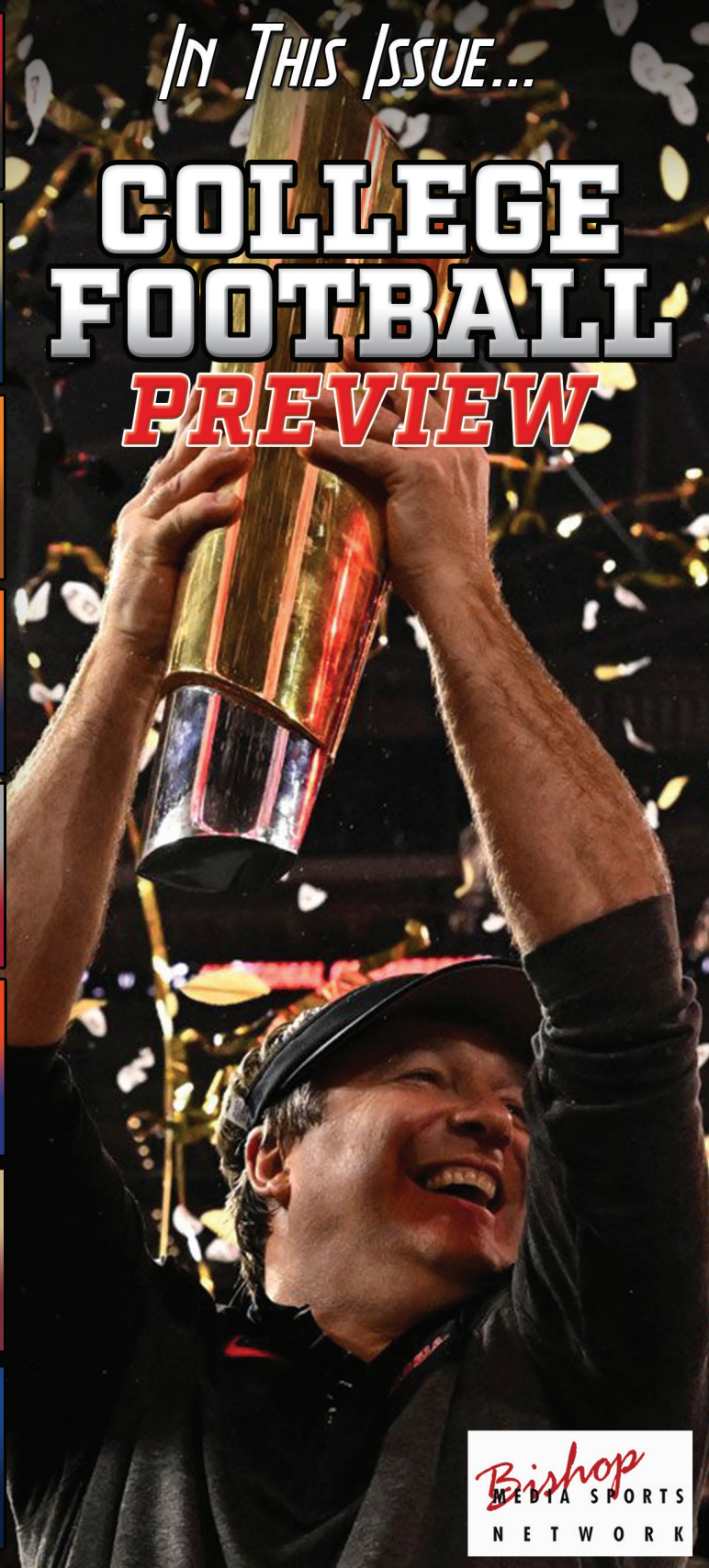
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# GEORGIA BULLDOGS

## *2023 PREVIEW*

Threepeat? By Kipp Branch





**H**ow many Georgia fans remember the 1980 jokes?

Kirby Smart is entering his 8th season as the king of the bulldog nation. With an 81-15 overall record that includes 2-SEC Titles and 2- back-to-back National Titles.

Georgia currently is the premier football program in the country and the consensus preseason number one team in the country.

Years of consistent top 3 recruiting classes are paying off now for the program as UGA has become a major pipeline for the NFL.

Carson Beck has won the starting QB job and looks to have a breakout season. Beck has patiently waited his turn in the transfer portal era, and it should pay off for him.

The offensive line is the best in the country. The WR room is the best the program has ever seen, and then you have TE Brock Bowers who just may be the best player in the country.

The RB room is banged up and must get healthy by the South Carolina game on 9/16.

On defense, two words Kirby Smart. As long as Kirby is running things in Athens then UGA will be elite on defense.

Let's look at the schedule with my predictions:

**Sat, Sep 2 vs UT Martin:** UGA a lot and UT Martin a little. 1-0

**Sat, Sep 9 vs Ball State:** Thanks SEC for canceling the Oklahoma game and making UGA scramble for a replacement. UGA 49-10. 2-0

**Sat, Sep 16 vs South Carolina:** UGA is the last team to

beat UGA in Athens back in 2019. The country will be hyping Carolina in this one, but UGA will look like a national champion contender in this contest and win 35-17 to go to 3-0.

**Sat, Sep 23 vs UAB:** UGA tunes up for Auburn 42-17 to go to 4-0 on the season.

**Sat, Sep 30 @ Auburn:** Auburn has rebuilt their roster in 2023 through the transfer portal. I have already seen the pundits attempting to call for an upset here. Hugh Freeze will be a problem for UGA while he is at Auburn. He is already turning Auburn around on the recruiting trail. UGA's next trip to Auburn in 2025 will be a monster game, but Auburn is not there yet in 2023. UGA wins 31-17 to go to 5-0.

**Sat, Oct 7 vs Kentucky:** UK has won once in Athens in 45 years, and they play annually. Not happening. UGA 27-14 to go to 6-0.

**Sat, Oct 14 @ Vanderbilt:** Last two years combined score is UGA 117-0. 7-0 going into the bye week.

**Sat, Oct 28\* @ Florida:** Florida is another school that is in rebuild mode. Billy Napier has a top five recruiting class in the works for 2024. Florida will be a lot better on defense, but offensively the Gators aren't there yet. UGA goes to 8-0 with a 35-21 win over Florida. I'll be

in Jacksonville for the festivities.

**Sat, Nov 4 vs Missouri:** I'm putting UGA on upset alert here. Mizzou is sandwiched in a tough back end of the schedule for UGA. I'm worried about this one as Missouri could be a top 3 team in the SEC East. UGA wins 24-20 to go to 9-0.

**Sat, Nov 11 vs (22) Ole Miss:** Lane coming to Athens will have Kirby's full attention. UGA wins 42-24 to go to 10-0 on the season.

**Sat, Nov 18 @ (12) Tennessee:** Ok Tennessee you have been beating your gums all off season about this contest. Joe Milton is the most hyped QB in the country. Vol fans conveniently forget that Milton was the starter two years ago and lost his job to Hendon Hooker. I'm not buying the hype and Tennessee is not better than UGA on both lines of scrimmage. UT has been horrible in the secondary as well. Statement game for UGA as they beat Tennessee 34-20 to go to 11-0.

**Sat, Nov 25 @ Georgia Tech:** UGA has not lost in Atlanta since 1999 and will not in 2023. UGA wins 45-24. 12-0.

Regular season 12-0 and favored to win SEC and National title for the 3rd consecutive year in the playoff era. Enjoy the mountain top UGA fans.



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Kenneth Norton was a Camden County chemistry teacher in his late 50s when osteoarthritis stopped him in his tracks. “My knees were in bad shape. Walking 50 feet was so painful, I had to sit down, and my classroom was located on the far side of campus.” At home, he arranged activities around “being able to sit down”.

Mr. Norton was grateful, then, when Denny A. Carter, MD, of Summit Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Surgery suggested a partial replacement of both knees using computer-aided, robotic-arm-assisted MAKO™plasty surgery. Dr. Carter helped introduce MAKOplasty to Southeast Georgia Health System in 2009, and Mr. Norton was among his first patients.

A CT scan of Mr. Norton’s knees was analyzed by a computer to ensure precise measurements, accurate knee implant alignment, and a natural feeling “fit”. “With pre-operative planning, we see an outline of the knee before operating,” Dr. Carter says.

Mr. Norton had both knees done on the same day to avoid two recovery periods. “My wife researched MAKOplasty and found nothing but good reviews. Three days after surgery, I could do deep knee bends, and I threw the walker away. Having that surgery was one of the best things I’ve ever done,” Mr. Norton says.

“We get patients up walking, with assistance, the same day as surgery,” Dr. Carter says.

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After three weeks of physical therapy, Mr. Norton could “outwalk” his neighborhood walking partner. “I was the poster boy for physical therapy. They were amazed how fast I recovered.” His brother was so impressed, he saw Dr. Carter for his own knee surgery.

It wasn’t long before Mr. Norton and his wife started a Sunday tradition: walking four miles round trip for breakfast at Denny’s. Fourteen years after his surgery, he remains active. His annual X-rays reveal no problems, even after a fall that landed him on his knee.

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“While the durability of a knee implant depends on bone quality, activity level, and your age at the first operation, Kenneth Norton illustrates that these implants demonstrate long-term success,” Dr. Carter says.

His patient couldn’t agree more. “If you have knee problems, this is an excellent solution. Dr. Carter is supportive and informative, and his staff is efficient. I have nothing but praise for him.”



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# GEORGIA TECH

## *2023 PREVIEW*

Old Familiar Sting? By Kenneth Harrison





**G**eorgia Tech has a great athletic tradition. When I was growing up they were one of the few programs where the football team went to bowl games and the men's basketball team made the NCAA tournament consistently.

From 1997 to 2014 there was just one losing season, and even then it was because the 2010 team lost the Independence Bowl. Over the last few years that has completely changed.

The last winning season for the Yellow Jackets was in 2018. That was also Paul Johnson's final season in Atlanta.

The Geoff Collins era began after that. Collins was flashy and seemed to be more concerned with establishing a social media presence than focusing on coaching. He was fired after the team started the 2022 season 1 – 3. His overall record at Tech was 10 – 28.

Assistant head coach/offensive line coach Brent Key was named the interim head coach. He led them to a 4 – 4 record and the interim tag was taken off on November 29 as Key was named Georgia Tech's 21st head football coach.

This seems like a perfect fit to lead the program in the right direction. Key played guard at Tech from 1997 – 2000, starting all four years. The team showed significant improvement when he took over and they hope that momentum will carry over into the 2023 season.

Quarterback Jeff Simms transferred to Nebraska. He was the starter for the last three seasons. Haynes King has transferred in from Texas A&M and he is battling Zach Pyron for the starting job. King has a 3 – 4 record as a starter for the Aggies.

Wide receiver Dominick Blaylok has also transferred in from UGA. He's a former four-star recruit that has battled injuries. He tore his ACL as a freshman in 2019 and later re-injured it in 2020. Last season he caught 15 passes for 227 yards and a touchdown.

This season the Atlantic and Coastal Divisions have been eliminated. With the two-division setup gone, the top two teams will now play for the ACC Championship.

The offense should be better this season. In 2022, the Yellow Jackets had the worst passing offense in the ACC, were dead last in third down conversions, downfield passing, and tackles for loss allowed. The team scored more than 16 points just five times - those were the five wins, by the way.

The offensive line has to step up. They have four starters returning so that experience should help.

Transfer linebackers Braelen Oliver (Minnesota) and Andre White, Jr. (Texas A&M) are hard hitters that played roles for their former teams. They have a chance to be stars this season. Defensive lineman Etinosa Reuben transferred from Clemson and he will bring a physical presence to the D line.

Junior LaMiles Brooks is one of the best safeties in the ACC. Last season he had 52 tackles, three interceptions and he earned third-team all-ACC recognition in his first season as a starter.

Let's take a look at the schedule and see how this season should play out.

Wins: SC State, Bowling Green, Boston College, at Virginia

Losses: Louisville, at Ole Miss, at Wake Forest, at Miami, North Carolina, at Clemson, Syracuse, Georgia

I picked the games that should be wins for the Yellow Jackets. I think they have a chance against Louisville, Wake Forest and North Carolina. If they can win two of those games they will play in a bowl game.

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# TENNESSEE VOLUNTEERS

## *2023 PREVIEW*

Rocky Top By Jeff Doke





**F**or a brief, fleeting, shining moment in 2022, the Tennessee Volunteers were on top of the world.

They were undefeated and had big wins over LSU and Alabama. They were the #1 team according to the CFB Championship committee.

Their reign of the top spot in college football lasted less than a week.

All in all, the '22 season set expectations pretty high for the '23 season, and it's probably going to fall short.

Couple that with the NCAA sanctions after the Jeremy Pruitt debacle and it looks like it might be a tough road ahead for the Volunteers.

With Hendon Hooker off to the NFL as part of what I believe will be one of the most underwhelming QB classes of the last 20 years (certain exceptions apply), the QB position for the upcoming campaign is quite possibly the biggest question mark of the season.

Joe Milton gets handed the keys to the offense after handing them off to Hooker due to injury in 2021. He has the physical tools and intangibles, but if the sixth-year signal caller has a hard time firing up the offense, don't be surprised if there are calls for Nico Iamaleava between non-stop choruses of Rocky Top. The 6-6, 205-pound SoCal product comes as touted as they come.

Backs and receivers should be fine as well. Jaylen Wright is back to try to improve over his 875-yard campaign from last year, and Samson and Small fill out the rotation.

Bru McCoy and Ramel Keyton will more than likely be the leading receivers, but I'm rooting for the Key and Peele favorite name on the squad;

Squirrel White. How can you not root for a kid with that name?

The problems are going to come from the O-Line and defensive backfield.

Josh Heupel's staff is moving many of last year's linemen around, and the secondary lost a lot of talent in the offseason.

Both are problematic and will probably wind up being the reasons why this year's orange & white winds up underwhelming Rocky Top Nation.

Here's how I see the week-to-week breaking down.

**WEEK 1 - Vs. VIRGINIA (at Nashville)** – Heupel's squad has done well in national spotlight games not held in Athens. Expect similar results against the Cavaliers. Vols start with a W, 28-13.

**WEEK 2 – vs. AUSTIN PEAY** - At this point of the season, I'm running out of witticisms for cupcake games. Just be confident in UT walloping AP bigly, we'll say 49-9.

**WEEK 3 - @ FLORIDA** - Here's where it gets ugly. Tennessee hasn't won in The Swamp in 20 years. Make it 21 in a row for the Gators, 24-14.

**WEEK 4 – vs. UTSA** - See the Austin Peay comment. Another whuppin' handed out by the orange & white, 45-13.

**WEEK 5 – vs. SOUTH CAROLINA** - I could see this one going either way to be honest, but I think Beamer Ball takes one in a high-scoring matchup. Vols fall in OT 41-38.

## **WEEK 6 – vs. TEXAS**

**A&M** - I have just as much faith in Beamer Ball as I do mistrust of horse-tranquilizer poster boy Jimbo Fisher. The much heralded breakthrough year for the Aggies takes a setback with a 31-21 Tennessee victory.

**WEEK 7 - @ ALABAMA** - I REALLY want to pick UT to make it two in a row against Saban here, but I just can't. Check back with me after the Florida game & I may change my mind. Vols fall 35-17.

**WEEK 8 - @ KENTUCKY** - This is where the wheels really come off the season. Cats let 'er rip at home and send Heupel and company back to Knoxville with a 38-13 embarrassment.

**WEEK 9 – vs. UCONN** - Nothing cures a two game losing streak quite like an AAC matchup. A much needed win for the Vols, 35-10.

**WEEK 10 - @ MISSOURI** - The midwestern Tigers put up a fight, but UT pulls it out, 24-17.

**WEEK 11 – vs. GEORGIA** - If I get two out of the four losses wrong and Rocky Top comes into this still in contention for second in the East, this might be a signature win for the Vols. I don't think I will, though. The back-to-back champs take it easily 42-21.

**WEEK 12 – vs. VANDERBILT** - At least they end the year against Vandy, and Vandy is still Vandy. UT wraps up the season with another W, 35-18.

**FINAL PREDICTION:** 7-5, 4th place in SEC East.





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# AUBURN TIGERS

## *2023 PREVIEW*

On The Plains By Joe Delaney





**W**ell, let's get right to the Grits.....The Auburn Tigers stunk it up last year.

Hopefully, a seasoned and revitalized Hugh Freeze can give the Tigers stability. Hugh needs time to get things into place. The Auburn family need to think progress, progress, and progress. Tiny steps in the right direction every day. It can be done. Let's look at the first baby steps.

In steps Hugh Freeze, who is no stranger to the ins and outs of SEC recruiting and the transfer portal, was able to bring in a top 20 rated recruiting class and maybe just as important a top 10 rated transfer portal group. The man means business and it showed immediately. Baby steps, baby step.

Next, Freeze brought in Phillip Montgomery to OC the offense and Ron Roberts as the DC but Kept Cadillac Williams as Associate Head coach and running backs coach.

So, let's look at what's happening in the 'here and now' with this group of Tigers starting with the offense.

Auburn brings back 2 starters from an offense that ranked near the bottom of the SEC with a 24.8 PPG.

One of those starters is Robby Ashford, who may or may not start under center against Massachusetts.

He was 123-250 for 1613 YDS and 7 TDS and 7 interceptions. He also rushed for 710 YDS and 7 TDS. Compare those statistics with most of the SEC QBS and its easy to understand a 5-7 record.

My money is on Payton Thorne, the former starter at Michigan State who transferred in. He gives the Tigers a true arm back there and while he's not the RPO threat that Ashford is.

He doesn't need to be with the Auburn running back room in good shape.

That running back room is led by Jarquez Hunter who averaged 6.5 YPC last year. Looks like a play action duo with Thorne and Hunter to me.

And when the Auburn QB, whoever it is, pulls that ball out and wants to spin it, he will have some veteran wideouts to throw to in Camden Brown, Ja'Varrius Johnson, and Koy Moore.

Then line up portal TE Rivaldo Fairweather and hey, we got something here! This offense has all the tools with the skill positions to be much better this year.

The offensive line will be revamped and should be better. Kam Stutts returns at RG and veteran O-linemen Dillon Wade, Avery Jones, and Gunner Britton came over in that great portal class and should make this line SEC solid.

On the defensive side the Tigers have a ton of returning starters including Marcus Harris, Jayson Jones Jr., Cam Riley, Nehemiah Pritchett, D J James, Zion Puckett, Donovan Kaufman, and former Frederica Academy standout Jaylin Simpson.

The defensive line for the Tigers should be solid. And transfers Justin Rogers, Lawrence Johnson, and Mosiah Nasili-Kite should either start or add needed depth.

The defensive backs should be one of the better units in the league. All 5 of the DBs have started at one time or the other. Pritchett and DJ James return at the corners while Kelonte Scott and Donovan Kaufman return at the STAR. Throw in Zion Puckett and St. Simon's Jaylin Simpson at the safeties and it's on.

Special teams are just that at Jordan-Hare. They are always solid and this year should be no different. Alex McPherson was ranked as the best high school kicker in the country in 2021. His older brother is doing the kicking for the Bengals..... Cincinnati not LSU. Oscar Chapman returns to punt and had a 43.8 average last year.

And remember one more portal addition to the team in Brian Battle. The transfer is an electric return man.

The schedule is daunting as usual. Texas A&M, LSU, and Arkansas on the road. Georgia, Ole Miss, Mississippi State, at home.

And Ohhhh I almost forgot, the year-ender with Bama.

This is a transitional year for Auburn. Will they give Hugh Freeze the time needed to right the ship? I hope so. A great year would be 8 wins and a nice bowl.

**WAR DAMN EAGLE!**







# ALABAMA CRIMSON TIDE

## *2023 PREVIEW*

Rolling Tide By Jason Bishop





**M**any have argued that Alabama has been replaced by the University of Georgia at the top of the College Football World. Facts are facts, and Georgia has been the National Champion the last two seasons. As a matter of fact, the Bulldogs knocked off the Crimson Tide on their way to winning their first national title.

That still does not diminish what Alabama is; the Crimson Tide are still among the teams to beat and in most years you must beat Alabama to win a National Title.

The Crimson Tide are coming off of a sub-par 2022 season by Alabama standards. That includes a 2-loss season, which had them ranked 5th in the country. Most teams would love to have that season. However, in Tuscaloosa, that doesn't cut it.

The Crimson Tide's biggest concern for 2023 is the QB position. Head Coach Nick Saban and his staff have not had a QB issue in over a decade. Bryce Young, Tua, Hurts, Mac Jones, McElroy, John Parker-Wilson, etc.....all names that have given Bama stability at the QB spot in the past.

For now, it looks like Coach Saban will go with Jalen Milroe as his signal caller. It is pretty apparent that Saban does not have a lot of faith in any of the QBs in the roster so you will likely see Ty Simpson and transfer Ty Buchner at some point this season too.

Unlike Georgia's 2023 schedule, Alabama's schedule is not a cake walk.

**Sept 2 Middle Tennessee:** The Blue Raiders take a trip to Tuscaloosa to serve as tune up for the Crimson Tide and it will be just that. Alabama wins 56-7.

**September 9 Texas:** The Longhorns will return the trip to

Tuscaloosa. This soon is a matchup we will see on a more frequent basis with Texas joining the SEC. This will be a great game. Bama has a better roster. Both teams have questions at QB. Texas will start Ohio State transfer Quinn Ewers. Ewers has yet to throw a pass at the collegiate level. Give me Alabama 17-16.

**September 16 @ South Florida:** The Crimson Tide will be riding high off their tough win over Texas and will struggle on the road against the Bulls. In the end, USF doesn't have enough playmakers to beat Bama and the Crimson Tide survive an upset scare early. 24-21

**September 23 Ole Miss:** I don't ever see a circumstance where Nick Saban will allow himself to lose to a Lane Kiffin coached team, much less at home. Bama is ready for the Rebels and make an example of them. 30-17

**September 30 @ Mississippi State:** This will be your typical Alabama/Mississippi State game. Alabama big. 42-14

**October 7 @ Texas A&M:** Jimbo Fisher is sitting squarely on the hot seat and needs to win some big games in the conference to maintain his job with the Aggies. This will be close and the Aggies give the Tide a scare. Alabama survives. 27-21.

**October 14 Arkansas:** Nick Saban pushed his players through a tough week of practice following the upset scare to Texas A&M and Alabama comes out and plays their best game of the year against Arkansas. 56-17.

**October 21 Tennessee:** Alabama has had this game circled since last season and will be looking for revenge against Volunteers.....not just for the loss Tennessee handed Alabama, but for Bama having to hear 'Rocky Top' played 250 times. Hendon Hooker is gone for the Vols, but Tennessee's roster pretty good. Even with a step back at QB for UT, their QB situation is still better than Bama's. The Vols beat Alabama in Tuscaloosa, 31-23.

**November 4 LSU:** After

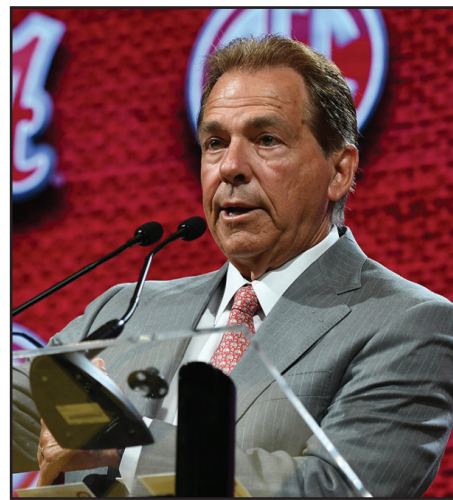
the loss to UT, this game becomes a must get for the Tide in order to win the SEC West. Unfortunately, for the Alabama faithful they will be handed their second straight loss at home. This loss gives LSU the inside track to Atlanta.

**November 11 @Kentucky:** The Wildcats are a pretty decent football team and Commonwealth Stadium will be rocking. Kentucky and their fans will see Alabama limping in and smell blood in the water. Too bad for the Wildcats, that Alabama will be looking to make a statement against them. Bama 35-10.

**November 18 Chattanooga:** The Mocs will come into Bryant-Denney Stadium to serve as a warm up for the Iron Bowl the following week. Alabama 62-21.

**November 25 @ Auburn:** Alabama will come into the Iron Bowl with an outside shot of making the College Football Playoff. The Tide will need an impressive win over Auburn to have a shot. They will get just that over first year coach Hugh Freeze and a rebuilding Tiger team that will be no match for their rival. Bama 48-10.

The Tide will once again finish 10-2 and be on the outside of the College Football Playoff looking in. Once again the Tide will fall to UT and LSU. And once again we will see Nick Saban go on National TV and beg the playoff committee to let them in.







# FLORIDA GATORS

## *2023 PREVIEW*

Gator Bait By Robert Craft





**H**ere are my predictions for Florida's W-L record in 2023, with the % chances for a Gator win in parentheses — according to ESPN matchup predictor..

**Aug. 31, at Utah (29.7% chance):**

A lot of this depends on Cam Rising. Even if he's healthy, what will he look like in his first game back from surgery? The Florida defense will have to keep the Gators in the game, and I think they will. But it still looks like a loss. **(Utah)**

**Sept. 9, McNeese State (99% chance):**

The Gators get a cupcake game for their home opener after having to wait five weeks for one in 2022. **(Florida)**

**Sept. 16, Tennessee (51.7% chance)**

This week-three matchup is the one that could either generate significant momentum or place Gator Nation down in the dumps. The last time the Vols won in The Swamp, most of the players on the field hadn't been born yet. I'm not buying the Joe Milton hype right now. **(Florida)**

**Sept. 23, Charlotte (96.3% chance)**

The second cupcake game of the season. It gets real after this. **(Florida)**

**Sept. 30, at Kentucky (48.4% chance)**

The hope for the Gators is that the offensive line won't commit eight false starts again in Lexington, and Graham Mertz will take care of the ball better than A.R. did last year.

At this point in the season,

younger players on the roster will be stepping up and making an impact. **(Florida)**

**Oct. 7, Vanderbilt (90.4% chance)**

This won't be a repeat of 2022. The Gators should never lose to Vanderbilt on the football field, and they'll correct that in 2023. **(Florida)**

**Oct. 14, at South Carolina (58.9% chance)**

The Gamecocks bring back Spencer Rattler, which has them getting more hype than they deserve this offseason. If the Gators want to record a statement road victory against South Carolina, they will need to take control of the football and make the most of their possessions. That starts at the quarterback position with Graham Mertz. **(South Carolina)**

**Oct. 28, Georgia (13.8% chance)**

For me, Georgia is a much better team. Coming off back-to-back national championships, Georgia's defense is going to be scary. Florida doesn't have the roster to compete with the Bulldogs. **(Georgia)**

**Nov. 4, Arkansas (66.2% chance)**

Arkansas is on the rise under Sam Pittman and they continue to upgrade their roster.

This game could go either way and should be a close one til the end, but playing at the Swamp could be the difference maker. The Swamp will be packed with recruits wanting

to see the black uniforms, and the Gators cannot bring them out and lose. **(Florida)**

**Nov. 11, at LSU (18.5% chance)**

The Gators kept pace in this rivalry game, but Jayden Daniels and the Tigers will be too much to handle in Death Valley. **(LSU)**

**Nov. 18, at Missouri (58.1% chance)**

I will say this ... I have seen Florida lose this game. Late in the season, likely a noon (11 am local) kickoff. It will be early, cold, and mostly empty in the other Columbia. Sandwiched between LSU and FSU, this has trap written all over it. **(Florida)**

**Nov. 25, FSU (50.3% chance)**

Florida State comes into The Swamp as a College Football Playoff contender. This year's home matchup against FSU is a tossup due to the emotion of the game and Florida being at home.

The Seminoles are the more talented program right now, but that's not always the deciding factor in a rivalry match. **(FSU)**

Frankly, the schedule is a bear. Mertz isn't a great quarterback but the offense isn't the real problem. It's the Defense!

If Florida's Defense doesn't improve this season, the Gators will struggle to win 6 games and they won't have a season to be proud of.





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# FLORIDA STATE

## *2023 PREVIEW*

Fear The Spear By Garrison Ryfun





**E**xcitement is in the air in Tallahassee, Florida.

For the first time since 2017, Florida State is ranked in the preseason top ten.

Everything seems to be coming together for the Seminoles to have the breakout season they want to have in 2023.

It helps that Florida State has 87% of its production returning, #1 in the country according to ESPN.

It also helps that FSU brought in some highly coveted transfers to plug in holes, the #6 Transfer class in the country according to 247Sports.

How does this Florida State team perform in 2023? Let's take a closer look at each phase of the game.

Offense: This should be the strength of this team that is returning starters like Jordan Travis, Johnny Wilson, and Trey Benson.

Last season Jordan Travis went 226/353 (64%) for 3214 yards 24 touchdowns and 5 interceptions. One of the biggest improvements season over season that I have ever seen at quarterback.

Trey Benson and Johnny Wilson both had breakout seasons after transferring to FSU.

Trey Benson, transferring in from Oregon, carried the ball 154 times for 990 yards and 9 TDs. Johnny Wilson, standing at 6'7" 237lbs, had 43 catches for 897 yards and 5 touchdowns.

Enter Jaheim Bell, Keon Coleman, and Winston Wright.

Jaheim Bell, from Valdosta, transfers in from South Carolina and brings elite athleticism and tons of versatility to the FSU offense. Bell not only played tight end at South

Carolina, but he was also deployed at running back last season after some injuries piled up.

Keon Coleman, transferring from Michigan State, had 58 catches for 798 yards and 7 touchdowns. Standing at 6'4, Coleman provides another long target for Jordan Travis to throw to and has really turned heads this fall camp.

Winston Wright is more your prototypical slot receiver, who sadly broke his leg last offseason in a car accident that was not his fault. Will he be back to his pre-injury self in 2023? If so, defenses will have a tough time guarding.

The offensive line should be the deepest it has been since 2013/2014 for Florida State, with at least eight guys still battling for starting spots right now: Jeremiah Byers, Bless Harris, Robert Scott, Maurice Smith, D'Mitri Emmanuel, Casey Roddick, Keiondre Jones, and Darius Washington. Some combo of those names will be the starting five.

I expect Florida State to have a top five offense when it is all said and done.

Defense: The defensive line will be the most talented group on this defense. The starting four of Jared Verse, Fabien Lovett, Braden Fiske, and Patrick Payton will give nightmares to opposing quarterbacks.

Jared Verse may be the best recruiting job Mike Norvell did in 2022, getting a guy who would have been drafted to come back and continue his development speaks volumes for this program.

The linebacker tandem of Tatum Bethune and Kalen Deloach is the most solid set of starters FSU has had in a long time, though the depth behind them is almost nonexistent.

DJ Lundy will be the next man up at the linebacker position and is also the starting fullback when FSU uses one on offense.

The defensive back room, now coached by Patrick Surtain, has not

been publicly solidified starter-wise, but there are plenty of impressive options that FSU has to choose from. At cornerback, one starter will likely be All-ACC selection Fentrell Cypress who transferred in from Virginia.

Others fighting for spots at the other corner spot and nickel position are Renardo Green, Azareye'h Thomas, Jarrian Jones, and Greedy Vance Jr.

At the safety position returning starter Akeem Dent comes back while Shyheim Brown and Kevin Knowles battle for playing time at the other safety spot, and they will both likely play a lot this season.

I expect this defense to once again improve year over year under defensive coordinator Adam Fuller.

Special Teams: After struggling with kicking the last few years, FSU has a kicking competition going between Ryan Fitzgerald, from Colquitt County, and transfer Tyler Keltner. If the Seminoles want to win big this year they need a consistent kicker.

Punter Alex Mastromanno returns for his final season averaging 42.7 yards per punt in his career.

Conclusion: I am projecting FSU to go 11-1, with a loss to Clemson, in the new division-less ACC putting up big numbers on offense and setting up a pivotal ACC Championship game this December.







# GEORGIA SOUTHERN

## *2023 PREVIEW*

Flying Higher By Colin Lacy





**Y**ear one for Clay Helton in Statesboro saw a ton of buzz around the Georgia Southern program before he stepped foot on the field at Allen E. Paulson stadium.

When he did step foot on the field, he and his crew took a huge step forward to get Georgia Southern back to prominence in the Sun Belt Conference.

Because of an incredible number of injuries, last season turned out to be an up and down affair in Statesboro. The Eagles started on a high by winning three of the first four games including upsetting Nebraska in week 2, after a couple of tough losses against UAB, and rival Georgia State, the Eagles knocked off James Madison, who came into Paulson Stadium ranked in the top 25 after winning their first 5 games as a FBS program.

The lull came when the Eagles lost 3 straight and had to win the regular season finale against Appalachian State to become bowl eligible. Georgia Southern did just that against their rivals by pulling out a 51-48 overtime victory.

While the record came out of 2022 reading 6-7 after falling to Buffalo in the Camellia Bowl, the Eagles made huge strides with a completely new system.

When Clay Helton and offensive coordinator Bryan Ellis arrived in Statesboro, the days of option football in the 'Boro' were halted but brought a new life to the passing offense for Southern with the help of Buffalo transfer Kyle Van Trease who set most passing records in Georgia Southern history.

In 2023, Van Trease has graduated (now the director of business development for the newly formed Eagle Nation Collective), and now time to pass the reins of the offense again to a new arm.

The transfer portal was the answer again for Helton going and getting Davis Brin from Tulsa, and Beau Allen from Tarleton State (after starting his career at Kentucky).

Brin looks to be QB1 and is impressing those in Statesboro in the first days of fall camp after leading the nation in passing after 3 games last year at Tulsa before going down with injury.

The Eagles will also turn to other weapons on the offensive side, including Jalen White, OJ Arnold, Kaleb Hood, and Derwin Burgess.

White and Arnold will be a huge threat for the Blue and White coming out of the backfield. In years past, White has been overshadowed by older backs in Statesboro, but this year it's his show to run with (literally).

Kaleb Hood and Derwin Burgess thrived in the new spread offense for GSU. Burgess missed the final 3 games of the year with injury in 2022, but still managed to be the 2nd leading receiver for the Eagles a year ago.

One aspect of the new Eagle

offense that gets lost in the shuffle is the offensive line, which proved to be a key to the success.

Last season, the offensive line only allowed seven sacks all season on 611 pass attempts. This unit returns 3 starters and adds transfer Bryson Broadway from Georgia State and should be a key group again.

Defensively the Eagles don't necessarily return the numbers Clay Helton would hope with just four returning starters, but the depth is more than in years past.

Two of the four starters returning land in the linebacking core. Marques Watson-Trent looks to have a huge 2023 after 114 tackles and 5.5 tackles for loss last season. The other familiar name is former North Carolina transfer Khadry Jackson who started 11 games for the blue and white last year.

Georgia Southern looks to build off a terrific first step last year, but the schedule doesn't want to cooperate. Most of the toughest games for GSU will come away from Statesboro with matchups with Wisconsin, James Madison, Marshall, and App State all on the road.

Look for the Eagles to turn some heads in the Sun Belt Conference this year and be ahead of schedule in year two under Clay Helton.





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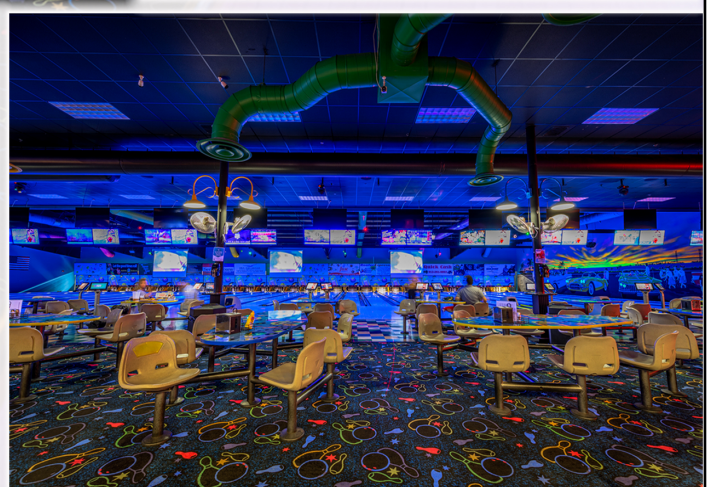
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