

THE SOUTHERN SPORTS EDITION

April 2024 Edition



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GET TO KNOW THE WRITERS



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THE SOUTHERN SPORTS EDITION

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 all across Southeast Georgia and growing everyday.

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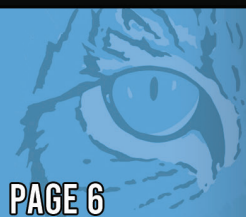
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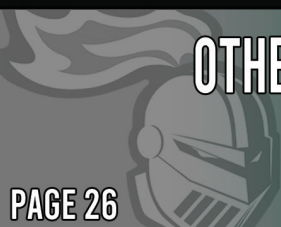


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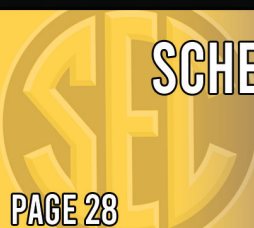


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MASTERS 2024 PREVIEW



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AZALEAS IN FULL BLOOM

The Masters Preview By Colin Lacy



The azaleas are in full bloom. The towering pine and flowering dogwood trees are in pristine condition. That can only mean one thing...it's time for the golf world to flock to Augusta, Ga for the 2024 Masters.

The 88th playing of the Masters Tournament officially gets underway Thursday April 11th and will hand out the coveted green jacket on Sunday at the conclusion of the final round for a "tradition unlike any other."

The Masters is always the first of the four Major Championships in the golf world and is slated for the first full week in April each year.

The tournament that began in 1934 is considerably smaller (in terms of number of participants) than the other three championships because it's an invitational event held by the Augusta National Golf Course.

There are 20 ways that a player can be invited to participate in the exclusive Masters Tournament. Any former Masters Champion has a lifetime invitation back to Augusta. Similarly, any champion of the other three major championships in the previous five years gets an automatic invitation to the field. Although 20 ways to qualify for the Masters may seem like a lot of ways to get in the field, it's an elusive ticket.

Nineteen former Masters champions are expected to compete for the crown again in 2024 including Tiger Woods, Bubba Watson, Jordan Spieth, Scottie Scheffler, and 2023 champion Jon Rahm.

The 2020 Masters Champion Dustin Johnson set the Masters record with a -20 final card to win the only masters to not be played in April (had to be moved to November because of COVID-19).

Other former Masters Champions expected to be in the field for the 88th playing are Phil Mickelson, Sergio Garcia, and 2021 Champion

Hideki Matsuyama.

Others that get in the field because of winning one of the other three major championships in the last five years include U.S. Open Champions Wyndham Clark, Bryson DeChambeau, Matt Fitzpatrick, and Gary Woodland. British Open Champions Brian Harman, Cam Smith, Collin Morikawa, and Shane Lowry will also tee it up in Augusta.

Finally, PGA Championship winners Brooks Koepka and Justin Thomas are expected to be in the field come April.

With less than 50 others that meet one of the 20 criteria to enter the tournament, some familiar names just make the cut.

Patrick Cantlay and Tommy Fleetwood enter the eligibility with the 18th criteria point of qualifying for the 2023 Tour Championship.

Tony Finau and Rickie Fowler come into the mix with the 17th criteria checked of "Individual winners of PGA Tour events that award a full-point allocation for the season-ending Tour Championship, from the 2023 Masters to the 2024 Masters (including fall 2023)".

Other notable names include Rory McIlroy and Neal Shipley for various check marks.

After all the minutia to set the field, the whole golf world (and many outside the golf community) will flock to the small corner of Eastern Georgia called Augusta either by physically going down Bobby Jones Expressway, or via the televisions, computer screens, or courtesy of Westwood One Sports Radio.

However, if you take in the Masters tournament, it's special, and it's a big day on Sunday when you hear Jim Nantz sets the scene poetically in his 39th Masters for CBS along with his colleague Verne Lundquist who announced that the 2024 Masters will be his 40th and final Masters.

Just remember to tune in early on Sunday to hear Nantz describe the pink azaleas and beautifully sun-soaked skies and so on "...AT THE MASTERS."



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A NEW ERA

Camden Hires Travis Roland By Jason Bishop



A new era of football has arrived for the Camden County Wildcats.

On February 28th the Camden County school system announced the hire of Travis Roland to become the next head football coach.

Legendary coach, Jeff Herron retired after three seasons with

in 2023 and this time walked away State Champions under Travis Roland's leadership, beating powerhouse St. Augustine 21-19.

It was reported that over 30 applicants applied for the opening. The Camden County School System announced a meeting on Friday February 16th where they intended to announce a new football coach on that date.

However, Tracolya Green, Camden County Superintendent, announced at that meeting that no hire would be made as not enough time was given to properly vet references for the final 2 candidates for the position.

Coach Roland played high

staff and remained until 2016. In 2017 Roland was named Head Coach at Flagler Palm Coast. He remained head coach there until 2020, when he once again returned to Mainland High School, this time as the Head Coach.

Coach Roland is the reigning Florida Coach of the Year.

He will take the reins of the Camden program, which is saturated with rich and proud history. Camden County Wildcat Football has been synonymous with tough, hard-nosed football and the Wing-T offense.

The Wildcats ran that Wing-T offense from 2000-2016 under former



Camden. Herron took the Wildcats to the GHSA 7A Final Four this past season.

Travis Roland will come in with success of his own. Roland spent three seasons as the Mainland Buccaneers Head Coach and went 30-10 in that span. Mainland High School is in Daytona, FL.

Roland's Buccaneers made a state title game appearance in 2022 but came up a little short. However, the Buccaneers returned to the title game

school football at Mainland High School and then went on to play at Bethune-Cookman. He played Arena Football after his college playing days ended.

Roland began coaching in 2009 at Mainland High School as an assistant. He spent three seasons with the Buccaneers before transitioning to Seabreeze High School, also in Daytona, as an assistant.

In 2012 Roland returned to Mainland High School's coaching

coaches Jeff Herron and Welton Coffey. The Wildcats won 3 state titles under Jeff Herron in 2003, 2008 and 2009.

Camden ran a spread from 2017-2020 under former coach Bob Sphire. The Wildcat offense went back to the Wing-T when Jeff Herron re-assumed the position as head coach.

It is expected Coach Roland will bring in a brand new system.

A new era has dawned in Kingsland.

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To make an appointment with Dr. Kelley, call 912-466-7340.



If becoming a better golfer is one of your goals, Gregory Kelley, MD, has some sound advice. “A flexible, mobile body not only improves your performance, it also helps prevent injury,” says Dr. Kelley, a board-certified physical medicine and rehabilitation physician at Summit Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Surgery. As an avid golfer and a physician who treats individuals affected by sports injuries and other causes, he understands which habits can make or break your game.

“There are many simple, yet effective ways to be a better golfer while avoiding the repetitive injuries common to this sport,” Dr. Kelley says. “Incorporate these habits into your weekly routine and you’ll extend your longevity in the game.”

Good form, Dr. Kelley says, is the foundation of golf. “You can prevent the back problems that often plague golfers by being aware of body mechanics. Conditioning the muscles unique to the golf swing is very important. Put the work in before the round so you not only play better but prevent injury.”

As you would with any sport, warm up before practice or play. Dr. Kelley explains, “It is tempting to go immediately to the range or course and start hitting balls without much warm up. Try to view your warm up as not only something that will prevent injury and decrease stress on your body, but as something to improve your game. For example, if your back is stiff, you are not unlikely to achieve a full rotation on your backswing and may not be able to maintain your posture through the hitting zone.”

To optimize your swing, speed and distance, he advises golfers to develop a strong, flexible core. “Strengthening your abdomen and stabilizing back muscles, as well as the muscles involved in trunk rotation, is often overlooked. Low back problems are the number one cause of injury in the game, so it is important to do everything we can to prevent these injuries from occurring.”

Strong, stable hips and legs are also key. “The lower body is the powerhouse of the golf swing. A strong base is the foundation for which you will generate power. Not only will this allow for more distance, but with more balance and stability throughout the entire swing sequence,” Dr. Kelley says. “If you are unsure what specific exercises are best for you, visiting with a physical therapist or trainer familiar with golf specific exercises can be a good place to start.”

For cardiovascular conditioning, Dr. Kelley recommends walking the course if you are able. “Not only will this help you build strength and lose weight, but it may help you gain new insights and appreciation of the course you are playing and allow you to gather your thoughts before the next swing. Consider alternating golf days with a consistent walking, cycling, running or swimming routine.”

And even longtime golfers benefit from refresher lessons. “A professional instructor will not only fine tune your technique, but they can also identify nuances in your form that could help or hinder your game and your body,” Dr. Kelley adds.



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SCOTTIE SCHNEFFLER



THE 5th MAJOR

The 2024 Players Championship By Joe Delaney



The 2024 Players Championship at Sawgrass will go down as one of the best and most exciting golf tournaments in its 50-year history.

It will also go down as the first TPC with a back-to-back champion. Scottie Scheffler blistered the Sawgrass course on Sunday going out in 31 on the front nine and vaulting into contention.

He then ripped the back nine with three more birdies to card an unbelievable final round 64 and take home the 4.5 million dollar first place prize. He navigated the final round bogey free and came from way back. Scheffler showed why he's currently the number one ranked player in the world.

Blessed with great weather on the weekend, the TPC Sawgrass course was on point. Great crowds, great golf and a great finish, the tournament was just outstanding.

From the drama of the 17th hole to the fantastic finish with three golfers trying to find a birdie on 18 to catch Scheffler, it was golf at its best.

Round one began with Rory McIlroy, Xander Schauffele and Wyndham Clark all dropping 65s on the stadium course.

From day one this was going to be a battle of the heavyweights. Scheffler and RSM winner Ludvig Aberg were two shots back.

Round two at Sawgrass was the Wyndham Clark show. After shooting a

65 in the first round, Clark showed out with another 65 to take a 4-stroke lead into the weekend.

The 2023 U.S. Open winner was on top of his game and looked smooth and confident heading into the weekend. Four shots back were Nick Taylor and Xander Schauffele.

Saturday was moving day at the Players and it did not disappoint.

The 4 shot lead that Wyndham Clark carried into the round disappeared as Xander Schauffele took a one-shot lead into Sunday with Clark right behind him one shot off the pace. Brian Harman followed at 15 under while eventual winner Scottie Scheffler was a full 5 shots back.

Notables were Rory McIlroy at -9 along with Ludvig Aberg. With 7 golfers within 5 shots of the lead, Sunday was shaping up to be a great day for the Players Championship. And boy oh boy it didn't disappoint.

Sunday at the Players was a day to remember. With a beautiful spring day in northeast Florida with temps around 80 and a very manageable breeze, the stage was set for some great golf.

Scottie Scheffler began the day 5 shots back and after 3 straight pars, the man found his groove. After his iron shot at the fourth found the hole for an eagle and his putter dropped a long birdie on the fifth and the eighth, he found himself in contention only one shot back. Another putt at the ninth leading to a front nine 31 and he was tied.

But Schauffele, Harman, and Clark weren't going anywhere and it was game on for one of the most exciting nine holes of golf in TPC history.

Clark began with a bogey on the 10th that dropped him 2 shots back of Schauffele and Scheffler.

Harman sat at -17 two back. By

the twelfth all four golfers were within a shot of each other. As they dueled over the next 4 holes, Scheffler went one up and finished first at -20. His 67, 69, 68, 64 set the bar.

Could the three amigos catch him with 2 holes to play?

What followed was Sunday PGA golf at its best. Schauffele came off 2 bogies to birdie 16. That put him one back with 2 to play.

He would hit a beautiful shot within 10 feet on 17 only to watch his putt and a chance to tie slide by the hole.

Wyndham Clark was next at the island hole with a beautiful approach shot within 5 feet. He knocked it down to get within one.

To the 18th we went with the tournament in the balance. Harman would put it on the green at 18 only to watch his putt slide by and finish one back.

Next Schauffele would miss right and have a long birdie miss. He would finish one back also.

Clark coming off the birdie at 17 would hit a great second into the 18th green. With a chance to tie Scheffler, he hit a putt that will be replayed for years to come. From about 15 feet the putt was perfect. Within 2 feet it slightly slides to the left and then lipped in and out of the hole coming to rest back toward Clark. No one could believe it didn't drop.

It was a heartbreaker but a fitting end to a Players that will be talked about for years.

Scottie Scheffler takes his second tournament win in a row and his second Players in a row with a come from behind win being 7 shots back at one time on Saturday.

Great golf, great crowds, great finish, and a great tournament.



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THE \$100 MILLION KNEE

Good News On Acuna By Robert Craft



A collective sigh of relief blanketed the Atlanta Braves, their fans, and superstar Ronald Acuña Jr.

Dr. Neal ElAttrache confirmed a team doctor's diagnosis of meniscus irritation in Acuña's right knee. Any injury more serious than that might've made the National League MVP go into surgery.

The Braves said that Acuña will

decided to have their dynamic leadoff hitter and 2023 MLB stolen-base leader travel to Los Angeles to be examined by ElAttrache, the surgeon who repaired a torn ACL in Acuña's knee in July 2021.

That was a season-ending injury and surgery that spoiled what had been an MVP-caliber start to 2021.

When soreness and inflammation lingered during his first season back from surgery in 2022, Acuña needed occasional days off to drain fluid from his knee. There were questions regarding how long it might take before Acuña was back at full pre-injury capacity, or if this issue will continue to affect his all-star career.

In 2023, Acuña wasn't as good

There was understandable concern when Acuña was flown across the country during the weekend to get a second opinion on his knee. Manager Brian Snitker said Saturday that he was trying to remain optimistic, but that until Acuña was examined by ElAttrache the Braves wouldn't know for sure.

If ElAttrache found something worse than the original diagnosis, such as a meniscus tear that might require arthroscopic surgery, there was a likelihood that Acuña would miss the early part of the 2023 season. And if that put him behind, there was no telling how long it might take for him to get back up to full speed after returning from a stint on the injured list.



gradually increase baseball activities and he'll be ready for Opening Day.

The Braves open the season March 28 at their NL East rival Phillies, who beat the Braves in four games in the Division Series in October for the second consecutive year.

After feeling soreness in his surgically repaired right knee Friday, Acuña was scratched from the lineup Friday and underwent an MRI that showed irritation of the meniscus.

To make sure, and for peace of mind for all parties involved, the Braves

as he'd been prior to surgery, he was far better. In fact, he was historically good. The Braves led the majors in almost every major offensive category in 2023, and Acuña was their star of stars.

He became the fifth member of the 40-40 club (40 home runs and 40 stolen bases) and much more, becoming the first player to have 40-50, 40-60 and, finally, 40-70 seasons. Acuña finished with 41 homers and a majors-leading 73 stolen bases while batting .337 with an MLB-best .416 on-base percentage and NL-leading 1.012 OPS.

The Braves might need to add a proven outfielder if Acuña was to require an IL stint to begin the season.

That didn't happen, and the Braves and their fans, along with other fans of the wildly popular Acuña, let out a big sigh of relief.

Meniscus irritation can heal without any form of surgery.

Nothing was any more important for the Braves so far this spring than the medical update on Acuña.

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THE SOUTHERN SPORTS EDITION



RANK EM

Ranking SEC Coaches By Robert Craft



It's the pollen-covered cars spring, which means March Madness and head coach rankings!

For the uninitiated, these lists are totally subjective. This is meant to be a fun exercise, and it's my ranking.

While career achievements are considered, college football has become a sport that's constantly changing, so recent performance (wins, recruiting, working the transfer portal, hiring assistants, producing NFL Draft picks, etc.) will be taken into account.

Entering the 2024 season, the SEC features two new teams (so two more coaches to rank), and two new head coaches at Texas A&M and Mississippi State.

No. 1 Kirby Smart, Georgia:

Smart is the undisputed top-ranked coach in America right now. He's won at least 11 games in six of the last seven years, has a pair of national titles and just inked another No. 1 recruiting class.

Georgia has sent more talent to the NFL than any program in the country in the last few seasons, and the Bulldogs are the early favorites for the national

championship in 2024. Clear number one here.

No. 2 Brian Kelly, LSU: Kelly has done everything but win a national championship at the FBS level. He's won at least 10 games in seven straight seasons, producing a Heisman Trophy winner in quarterback Jayden Daniels in Year 2 at LSU.

No. 3 Kalen DeBoer, Alabama: While DeBoer's resume as FBS head coach is fairly light, the man rarely loses, whether it's at Sioux Falls or Washington (104-12).

He won 21 straight games with the Huskies, beat Texas twice and made the national championship in Year 2, which is why he became the coveted target to replace Nick Saban at Alabama.

No. 4 Steve Sarkisian, Texas: Sarkisian won 10 games for the first time in his career in 2023, resurrecting the Longhorns' program back to national prominence by winning the Big 12 and making the CFP.

He's arguably the best play-caller in college football and is certainly one of the top offensive minds.

No. 5 Lane Kiffin, Ole Miss: Kiffin just led the Rebels to their first 11-win season in school history, and like Sarkisian, has overcome a rocky start to his head coaching career (be it the one-and-done season at Tennessee or the stint at USC).

Before Kiffin arrived in Oxford, Ole Miss had just three 10-win seasons

in 48 years. He could top that in 2024 with the Rebels pushing their chips for a potential SEC title run.

No. 6 Josh Heupel, Tennessee: A year after leading the Vols to their best season in nearly 25 years, Heupel managed to win nine games in 2023 despite erratic quarterback play.

That shouldn't be an issue in the future, though, as the Nico Iamaleava era starts this fall and 2025 5-star commit George MacIntyre is waiting in the wings.

No. 7 Eli Drinkwitz, Missouri: Drinkwitz is coming off the best coaching job of his career, leading the Tigers to a surprising 11-2 season and a win over Ohio State to finish in the Top 10.

Before the season, he shrewdly delegated play-calling duties to new OC hire Kirby Moore, which allowed Drinkwitz to focus on his entire team and move worked brilliantly.

No. 8 Mark Stoops, Kentucky: Stoops has been the Wildcats' best football coach since Bear Bryant, elevating the program with multiple 10-win seasons for the first time in more than four decades.

Stoops' ranking requires perspective though, Kentucky football was basically nothing before he arrived and the 'Cats have made eight straight bowl games. He's raised the expectations, which is why 7-6 is seen as a poor season.

Here are my top SEC coaches entering the 2024 season.





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TO THE RIVER CITY?

Jags' 2024 Draft By Jeff Doke



Much like the end of the 2023 season, the lead up to the 2024 NFL Draft is not what Jaguar fans were expecting even as recently as six months ago.

Prior to the late season collapse that saw Jacksonville lose five out of their last six games and miss the playoffs thanks to a final week loss to their hated rivals from the Volunteer State, your average Jags fan thought the team was trending in the right direction.

Now, not so much. While the team is still considered upper tier, they're not as close to "legitimate contender" status as we were hoping leading into the 2023 season. Once again, this year's draft will prove to be vital, and that's a situation Jacksonville fans are tired of being in.

At first glance, one would think the Offensive Line would be a top priority. Thirty-five sacks of your generational-talent quarterback would lend credence to that assumption.

Notre Dame's Joe Alt is the top-rated prospect this year, but he'll likely be long gone by the time the Jags finally get on the clock at #17.

Same thing for Penn State's Olu

Fashanu. UGA's Sedrick Van Pran would likely be available, but he's a Center, and Luke Fortner is looking pretty solid coming into his third year in the league. O-Line help, though desperate, may unfortunately be a second- or third-round target.

Crazy enough as it seems, Wide Receiver is another top concern for Baalke & company.

Calvin Ridley wasn't as quick to recover from his suspension as some had hoped, and there's still a chance he doesn't get re-signed.

Personally, I think that would be a mistake. Thanks to his recent legal issues, Zay Jones might get cut, and Christian Kirk is on the last year of the deal that no one thought he could live up to but somehow did.

If they do go the receiver route, look for the Jags to call Bulldog-turned-Longhorn Adonai Mitchell's name, possibly Brian Thomas Jr. out of LSU. If he's available in 2nd or 3rd round, I absolutely would not complain if they brought Ladd McConkey to the banks of the St. Johns.

Cornerback is another area of need, and there's a pair of Alabama products that wouldn't be out of the question with the 17th overall pick.

Kool-Aid McKinstry and Terrion Arnold are both first-round worthy considerations, and to be honest, either of them falling to 17th would be hard to turn down.

If they go a different direction in the first, hope against hope that Clemson's

Nate Wiggins or Iowa's Cooper DeJean are still out there in the second round. Admittedly this is a homer pick, but I'd love to see them bring Auburn's Jaylin Simpson back this side of the Chattahoochee.

The one area that shouldn't be a concern - but yet somehow is - would be the Edge/LB.

Josh Allen was tied for second in pressure rate, second in sacks and third in quarterback hits in 2023, and yet there's still the chance he gets hit with the franchise tag.

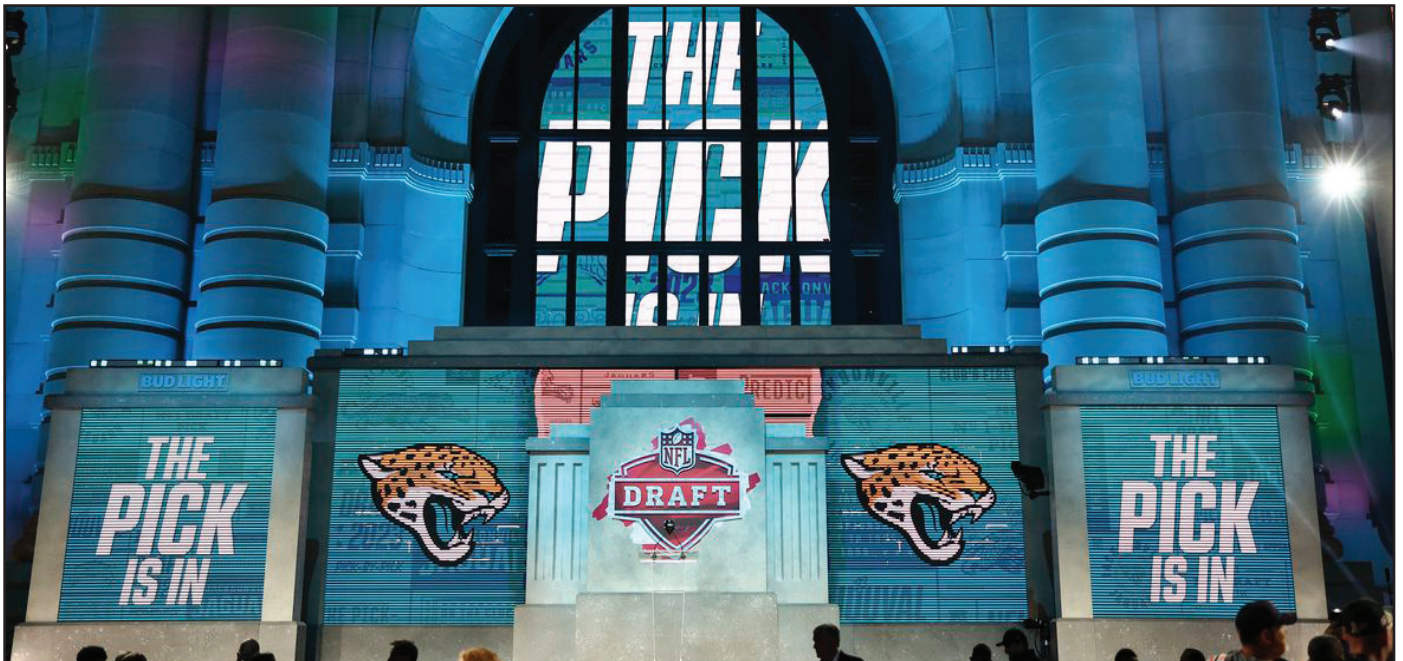
Seriously, Mr. Khan, just pay the man. He's earned it. Same for Travon Walker, who saw his sack total jump from 3.5 his rookie year to 10 in his sophomore effort.

If we're going to look to the future, Texas A&M's Edgerrin Cooper would be solid, as would the twin towers of the Bama defensive backfield, Dallas Turner & Chris Braswell.

In short, the Jaguars' needs are more plentiful than we hoped at this point.

While the marquee players are pretty much in place, the needs in the trenches are still noticeable. General Manager Trent Baalke sees this and has commented as such in recent pressers.

Hopefully with the new assistant coaching staff in place and their eyes on the future, this year's draft haul will be one that is seen as the difference maker, not one that sets the franchise back as so many in the last 20 years have done.



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OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER

Life After Jordan Triplett By Jeff Doke



How do you follow up history? The Frederica Knights football team is facing a 2024 season that will be missing a huge part of their identity for the last four years; the Air Force Academy-bound Jordan Triplett.

Where does the team go without the player who was responsible for three out of every four rushing yards over the last four years?

That would be a good question for Coach Brandon Derrick. He's faced with that task of dealing with a significant talent drain for the second time in his career under the oaks.

"We're trying to see what we're gonna have and what we can do this year" the 12th year head coach told me recently. "It'll all depend on how fast our young guys step up. We've only got four seniors this year and only about 4 or five juniors. How quick are our kids going to grow up & get ready, that's the big question."

There wasn't a lot of time for the underclassmen to get any growing up done last year. With Triplett rushing for an all-time state record-tying 3,172 yards

and 41 total touchdowns, there weren't a lot of snaps for anyone else to make a significant contribution.

That's not to say that there weren't any other bright spots that made the Frederica faithful wonder what's in store. Jaylin Baldwin is one example. When asked his future plans for the rising sophomore, Coach Derrick was understandably noncommittal.

"We're in limbo with him, but we're gonna use Jaylin at a lot of different areas - WR, RB, QB. We'll use a lot of different packages with him. Try to get him the ball out in space."

When pressed about whether or not Baldwin would see significant time at the quarterback position, Derrick had another name in mind when it comes to who might be the signal caller this season - fellow second-year player Stanton Beverly.

"Stanton might be a little ahead of everybody. There's a few others in the mix as well."

Another member of the Class of 2027 that is expected to make a big jump this year is WR/DB Jayden Gibson. Coach Derrick sees both Gibson and Baldwin to see significant playing time on both sides of the ball.

"Both will be playing both ways. A lot of guys will need to be ready to come in and play 140 snaps per game."

As usual, Coach Derrick is already stressing the importance of conditioning,

and once again a roster diminished in numbers is a key factor.

"We're gonna hit (the conditioning) pretty hard in June and July because numbers are going to be a factor. I'm guessing we're only going to have 25 maybe 30 kids this year. We're going to have to be in shape and we're going to need to get as many quality reps in as possible early in the season."

In addition to feeling the loss of "The River," Coach Derrick recognizes the loss of the team's defensive heart-and-soul, the graduating Hamp Thompson.

"Back in 2018, we lost 4 or 5 guys from that group that won the state championship. Then we had a lot of injuries in that 2019 season, and that 2020 group responded. Back then, it was Jordan and Hamp that led the charge. Now it's up to (rising Senior) Hayes Carter and (rising Junior) Gavin Grantham that will need to handle that inside LB spot. They're gonna have to stay healthy."

Regardless of the losses, Coach feels pretty solid about his defense.

"(Hayes and Gavin) have a ton of experience, our D-line is returning, 3 out of 4 of our DBs are returning. The big question is going to be OLB. I'm pretty excited. We're gonna have a chance to sneak up on people."

If they do, it won't be the first time - and that's one of the things we love the most about the Knights.





SCHEDULING FOR MONEY

SEC Adding More Games? By Robert Craft



The SEC is likely to stay with an eight-game football schedule for the 2025 season, but that could be the final year before going to nine games, according to Texas athletic director Chris Del Conte.

The main news: the SEC is sticking with an eight-game schedule for the 2025 season. There was no confirmation from the SEC office or anyone else at the town hall event Del Conte spoke at.

Several conference sources emphasized that there has been no official decision either way on the 2025 season or beyond.

But indications are the SEC does not want to have its annual meetings in Destin, Fla., this May be dominated by another debate about the future schedule format. The conference could announce well before that it's going with an eight-game schedule for 2025, then make a decision later for 2026 and beyond.

When Oklahoma and Texas announced they were joining the league a few years ago, the momentum was toward going to a nine-game schedule. But that

momentum stalled mainly because ESPN did not agree to increase payout to the SEC in exchange for adding a ninth game.

At last year's spring meetings, the SEC announced it would keep an eight-game schedule for the 2024 season. That was the first eight-game schedule for Texas and Oklahoma, and it postponed the long-awaited decision on whether to go to nine.

The biggest reason is money. Even schools that favor a nine-game schedule, such as Georgia, have wanted ESPN to increase its payout in exchange.

The television contract, which was signed about six months before Oklahoma and Texas announced they were joining, just has a pro rata clause, which means the payout goes up by an equal amount to what the current 14 schools were getting.

SEC officials have argued that eight more conference games the result of going to a nine-game schedule is worth more money. But ESPN, dealing with Disney-ordered cutbacks, has not agreed.

There is another reason for the SEC to punt: It can see if only playing an eight-game schedule helps or hurts its teams for the 12-team CFP when the Big Ten and other conferences are playing nine games.

There have been two formats under discussion: In the eight-game format, every team would have one permanent rivalry and rotate everyone

else.

In the nine-game format, every team would have three teams it plays every year and rotate everyone else. In both formats, everybody plays everybody else at least twice every four years.

The downside of an eight-game schedule is traditional rivalries that wouldn't be played every year: Auburn and Georgia or Alabama and Tennessee, for instance.

While Texas-Texas A&M was considered one of those, Del Conte also said that the Longhorns would play the Aggies every year. It could be Oklahoma and Texas that wouldn't be played every year if an eight-game schedule were adopted.

This year, while the SEC stayed with eight games, it kept those traditional rivalries as rotating games. That could be done again in 2025.

In result, the traditional rivalries would stay intact if the SEC went to a nine-game schedule starting in 2026. If the conference sticks with eight games, the rivalries would go to a non-annual basis.

In your opinion, does the SEC rotating rivalry schedules create a significant enough loss in media dollars to justify a pay increase for nine games?

Because if not having those secondary rivalries played every year, the SEC can justify to Disney that they have to pay more in fear of missing out on rivalry media dollars.



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