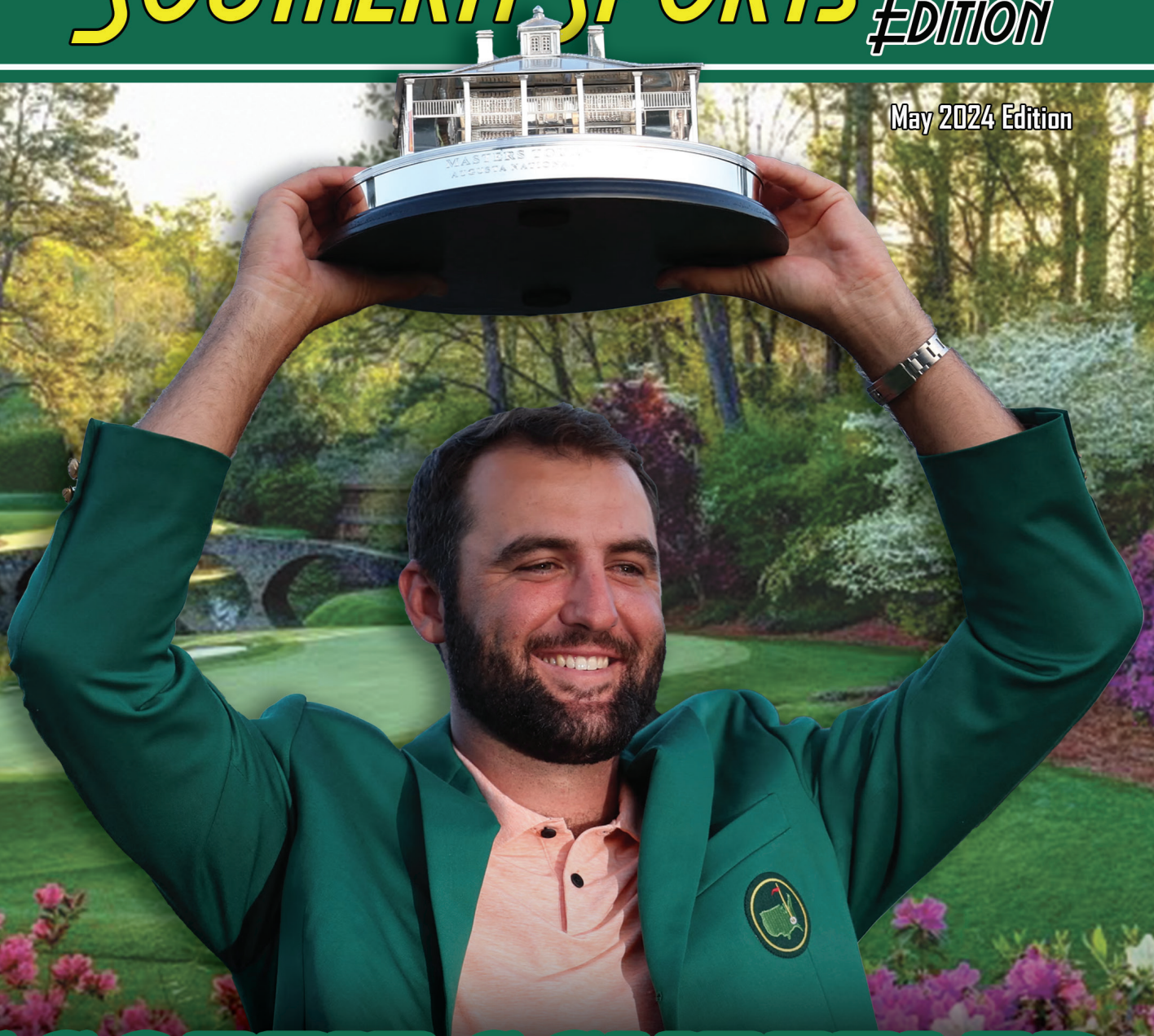


# THE SOUTHERN SPORTS EDITION

May 2024 Edition



## SCOTTIE SCHEFFLER WINS 2024 MASTERS



Who Will The Falcons Draft?



GHSAA Adjusting Regions



Replacing Strider



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## GET TO KNOW THE WRITERS



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Kenneth Harrison 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.



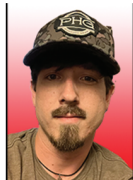
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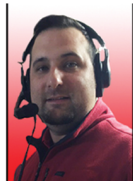
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THE SOUTHERN SPORTS EDITION

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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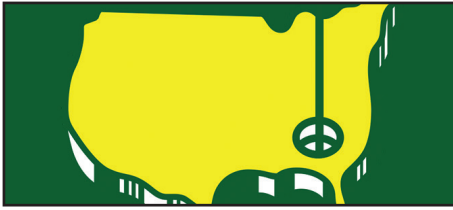


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# NEW PATH

Scottie Scheffler Isn't Going Anywhere By Robert Craft



**B**rantley When his competition made repeated tactical errors on the back nine, Scottie Scheffler hit the accelerator, with birdies on six of his last 11 holes to win the Masters.

In a time when off-course happenings dominate the game's discourse, golf's inevitability is Scheffler's stoic greatness.

His wildest personality trait is his unorthodox footwork during his swing, which precedes a direct pounding by the center of his club's face. He rolled down Magnolia Lane as a certified pre-tournament favorite and left with his second green jacket.

Scottie Scheffler was always going to win the 88th Masters Tournament; on Sunday, he simply made it happen.

"It's really impressive," Max Homa said after losing to Scheffler by seven shots. "You just know that he's going to be there, and he's going to play well."

By slipping on his second green jacket in two years, Scheffler became the second player to win the Masters and The Players Championship in the same season, joining Tiger Woods.

Scheffler was already frequenting the same sentences as the 15-time major champion, but now it's clear that will become a weekly ritual, perhaps for years.

We are witnessing a display of greatness we haven't seen in some time from anyone, and we should cherish this gift. Scheffler is the type of player who has that rare gravitational pull. He expertly plots his way around a golf course and leaves his peers in the dust, he makes it difficult to look away.

Scheffler's dominance emanates from his 6-3 build. He swings with a freedom and flexibility that defies physics. Randy Smith, Scheffler's coach since he was 7 years old, says the Texan has "the

best pair of hands I've ever seen in my life."

His athletic figure allows him to harness immense power, and his unwavering fundamentals keep the ball far in the fairway. Though it might disappear from time to time, he proved that his touch and eye for Augusta National's undulating greens are unmatched.

The true source of Scheffler's dominance rests between his ears and ribs. Scheffler heard the warm applause on every tee box and every green. He felt the roars. He saw the outstretched hands protruding past the gallery ropes. Out of the corners of his eyes, he sensed the presence of hundreds of young golfers looking to contribute to their role model's final-round push in any way they could, to somehow claim a stake in his second Masters victory.

The scariest part of Scheffler's greatness is that it's easy.

Until the final putt dropped and Scheffler launched into Ted Scott (caddie), Scheffler's four-shot lead in the Masters Tournament was met with no emotion. Scheffler's performance coach, Troy Van Biezen, says Scheffler's superpower rests in the fact you can never tell if he's 5 over par or 5 under par.

In his green jacket ceremony, Scheffler apologized to the patrons of Augusta National for walking with his head down throughout Sunday's round.

Scheffler wanted to win this tournament, badly. He told his friends Sunday morning that he wished he didn't have such an intense competitive hunger. "I told them, I wish I didn't want to win as badly as I did or as badly as I do. I think it would make the mornings easier," Scheffler said.

Scheffler's unique concoction of mental and physical traits has led him to become a generational talent. Sunday, he found Augusta's table-top-sized landing areas with ease and continued to pour in birdie putts. This tournament was already his, Scheffler knew and proved that.

His disposition isn't changing, and he's not going anywhere.

This is only the beginning, and we'll want to remember it.



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## Smart Moves, On and Off the Tennis Court



**Jason Bowman, MD**

A board-certified orthopaedic surgeon, Dr. Bowman specializes in general orthopaedics, and foot and ankle surgery.

Summit Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Surgery has offices in Brunswick, St. Simons Island and St. Marys.

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



It's official: tennis players live longer. A study published by Mayo Clinic showed that playing tennis on a regular basis added nearly 10 years to study participants' lives. If tennis players live longer, what can you do to stay in the game?

"The short answer is to stay fit," says Jason Bowman, MD, a board-certified orthopaedic surgeon with Summit Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Surgery. "Fit individuals generally enjoy a better quality of life as they age. Tennis is a strategic game, and there are many strategies players can employ to extend their enjoyment of the game well into their later years." As a former USTA tennis player, Dr. Bowman understands the game.

As with all exercise, warm up to lubricate your joints and cool down to relax and lengthen the muscles before and after a match. To play your best, Dr. Bowman recommends getting enough sleep, staying hydrated and fortifying yourself with good nutrition. "A protein shake and a banana an hour or so before playing and a sports drink during the match helps ensure consistent energy."

He also suggests tweaking equipment to your advantage. "Use a lighter racket and reduce tension in the strings. It's easier on the arm and less tiring. Re-string when needed and replace your shoes periodically." That last bit of advice is especially important to Dr. Bowman, who is fellowship-trained to treat conditions of the foot and ankle. "I treat a lot of ankle instability and sprains, which is why I recommend properly fitted footwear as the foundation of every sport. Even if the grip is still intact, if the support isn't there, replace the shoes."

In between matches, swim, cycle or pursue other low-impact activities. Improving your core strength enhances your power and speed on the court. To increase your endurance, bike or jog for 20 to 30 minutes three times a week.

"To improve your game and avoid injuries, take some refresher lessons with a tennis pro. They can teach you techniques that help you play smarter, not harder, as you age," Dr. Bowman notes.

One of the most significant factors that will make or break your longevity game is the court itself. "Whenever possible, chose clay over a hard court. It's easier on your joints, cooler in the summer and allows more control over the ball. There are several clay court options in Glynn and Camden counties," says Dr. Bowman.

As much as you love the game, Dr. Bowman urges you to take time to recharge. "Follow the lead of professional players; they understand that giving the body recovery time makes them stronger competitors with the endurance it takes to win."





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# REPLACING THE ACE

Braves Look To Replace Strider By Jeb Watkins



**T**he Atlanta Braves will be without their ace Spencer Strider for the remainder of the 2024 season.

The organization released information recently that the flame-throwing 25-year-old underwent UCL surgery on his right elbow.

An early 2025 season return seems to be the best Braves fans like myself can hope for.

The show must go on however, and the Braves need to fill his spot in the rotation.

Notice I said fill and not replace, and here is why. Strider is not just the Braves ace, he's a stud, a top 5 pitcher in the league and a Cy Young contender.

His 281 strikeouts last season were a franchise record, so to say any of the names on this list can replace him would be an insult.

Although, Braves GM Alex Anthopoulos has replaced an MVP caliber player before back in 2021 and it was good enough to win a championship. So, let's go through and see who the Braves best options are for the open position.

For this article we will look at internal options only.

Alan Winans tried out against the Mets Thursday and flunked out. He posted 5 innings allowing 7 runs with 6 earned and only 1 strikeout. Atlanta sent him back to triple-A immediately. I expect he'll get another chance but not anytime soon.

Darius Vines was subsequently called up. Vines pitched in 5 games last year and turned in a 3.98 ERA over 20 innings of work, so the sample size on him is just too small. I expect him to fare better than his teammate Winans did, since Vines typically pitches to contact and the Braves have above

average defensive play.

I don't think he is the answer right now though and he will be going back to Gwinnett soon.

AJ Smith-Shawver is an interesting case in this situation. At 21 years old he probably has the rawest pitching talent on this list, I love watching this kid pitch and I believe he can be the answer long term this season to replace Strider.

He's struggled out of the gate this season in triple-A and will need a couple of good outings before the Braves call him up to fill in.

Last year as a 20-year-old he posted a 4.26 ERA with 20K's and only 11 walks over 25 innings of work. He also got 2 innings of postseason experience.

Bryce Elder has the most likely odds to fill the spot early in the season mainly because he has the most experience out of all the Braves young options.

The big righty started 31 games last year and made the All-Star team in his rookie season.

He became more average in the second half of the season and eventually lost his spot in the rotation during Spring Training, losing out to Reynaldo Lopez.

Elder another pitch to contact guy can thrive with this Braves team though when the bats are humming he won 12 games with only 4 losses and a respectable 3.81 ERA.

I think you can expect to see this guy called up next after Vines is sent back down.

Dark Horses: The last three on

this list are long shots but expect them to get some work in while number 99 is recovering.

Dylan Dodd the only lefty on this list, he pitched in 7 games in 2023, turning in a disappointing 7.60 ERA in 34 innings with 15K's and 12 walks.

Dodd is likely working on his command and stamina in triple-A and will need more time for correction before he is ready to come back to the show.

Huascar Ynoa, we know this guy has the stuff to pitch at the big-league level. Ynoa had somewhat of a breakout year in 2021 starting 17 games and finishing with a 4.05 ERA 100K's with 25 walks in 91innings.

The following 2022 season saw him struggle with command and arm soreness, which eventually led to him having his own Tommy John surgery and missing the 2023 season.

Ynoa only got 1 inning in the spring so I expect the team wants to see more from him in the minors for now.

Hurston Waldrep, the Cairo Georgia native and Thomasville High Graduate was taken 24th overall by the Braves in last year's draft.

Waldrep is a real long shot. He had some nice outings in double A Mississippi last season and got 1 start at the triple A level and did well.

The Braves started him out in Mississippi this year though and he's had a rough go of it in only two starts. I don't think we will see this kid until September at the earliest.



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# THE FIRST OPTIONS

Who Will The Falcons Draft? By Kenneth Harrison



The 2024 NFL Draft is almost here. We are going to look at the Atlanta Falcons and see their biggest needs and who they are going to select.

The Falcons are coming off another 7-10 season and they have the eighth pick in the first round.

Quarterback play was poor so they signed Kirk Cousins to address that. Now the biggest team needs are edge/pass rusher, corner back, defensive tackle and safety.

They ranked 22nd in sacks last season with 42 sacks. This seems to be a theme every year. Defensive ends Calais Campbell and Bud Dupree each had 6.5 sacks, which tied for the team lead.

The first order of business has to be someone that can get to the quarterback. I think they can go in a few different directions with this.

Linebacker Dallas Turner (Alabama) could be the player they go with. Last season he had 14.5 tackles

for loss and 10 sacks. He is 6'4 and 245 pounds so he fits the mold of what a prototypical edge rusher looks like. He was coached by Nick Saban and he was a permanent team captain so he has leadership ability.

Turner was named a consensus All-American, SEC Co-Defensive Player of the Year and First-team All-SEC in 2023.

Florida State edge/defensive lineman Jared Verse should also be in consideration for this pick. He's listed as 6'4 and 260 so he also looks the part as a pass rusher. Last season he had 12.5 TFL and 9 sacks. In 2022, he had 17 TFL and 9 sacks. He was very consistent in his two seasons in Tallahassee after transferring from Albany.

He is a two time first-team All-American (2022, 2023) and two time first-team All-ACC (2022, 2023).

I think either one of these players would be a great pick because it addresses a position of need. They both have the potential to consistently get double-digit sacks and greatly improve Atlanta's pass rush.

A player with the talent to be picked at No. 8 by Atlanta is UCLA defensive end/linebacker Laiatu Latu. In 2023 he had 21.5 TFL, 13 sacks and 2 interceptions. In 2022 he had 12.5

TFL and 10.5 sacks. He's also 6'5 and 265 pounds.

His problem stems from medical concerns. He was healthy the past two seasons so that should indicate that it is not a major concern. He started his career at Washington and suffered a neck injury in fall practice entering his sophomore year. It was announced that he medically retired at the start of spring practices in 2021.

Latu won the Lombardi Award (2023), Ted Hendricks Award (2023), Pat Tillman Defensive Player of the Year (2023), Morris Trophy (2023), Unanimous All-American (2023), Polynesian Football Player of the Year (2023) and two time first-team All-Pac-12 (2022, 2023).

The Falcons have the 43rd pick in the second round. They should select a corner back here and I think the best remaining player will be Kool-Aid McKinstry (Alabama). He's 5'11, 180 pounds and he's a physical player.

In his three seasons in Tuscaloosa, he has 93 tackles. He has 23 passes defended and 2 interceptions in his career as well. McKinstry was a First-team All-American (2023) and two time First-team All-SEC (2022, 2023).





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# GOLDEN FUTURE

Gators Look To Continue Success By Robert Craft



**W**ith the 2023-24 basketball season in the rear view, Florida coach Todd Golden and his assistants will now turn their attention to the transfer portal and adding more pieces to the roster for next year.

The Gators must replace graduate transfers Zyon Pullin and Tyrese Samuel and will have at least one more scholarship opening to fill. Here's a look at UF's returning roster and recruiting needs for 2024-25.

Priority No. 1 for Golden is recruiting Walter Clayton Jr. back to Florida for his senior year. He was the team's top playmaker this season, hitting several clutch 3-pointers and leading the Gators in scoring at 17.6 points per game, ranked No. 5 in the SEC.

Clayton also had the fifth-best single-season scoring total (633 points) in Gator history. His return for 2024-25 would help maintain Florida's high-powered offense and give Coach Golden a dynamic shooter to attract a top point guard in the portal.

Clayton plans to make a decision on his future after taking some time to weigh his options on declaring early for the 2024 NBA Draft or returning to UF.

Will Richard returns at the 3-spot as a senior, which will be his third year in the starting lineup for Florida. He averaged 11.4 points in 2023-24 up from 10.4 a year ago and had a few standout performances, including a pair of 23-point games in home wins over Alabama and Mississippi State.

Florida's backcourt could also bring back Denzel Aberdeen and

Riley Kugel for their junior years and Kajus Kublickas as a sophomore. Kugel has decided to transfer, no surprise especially after Kugel was relegated from a starting job to a backup position.

The Gators lose one of their two starters in Samuel, but sophomore center Micah Handlogten has a long rehab process ahead of him. He will spend the offseason recovering from a fractured lower left leg in the SEC Tournament final.

Golden didn't have a timetable on Handlogten's return after his injury.

The 7-foot-1 Handlogten was one of the best rebounders in the country this season, ranking in the top five nationally for offensive rebounding percentage (17.8%). He had four double-doubles, including a 23-point, 17-rebound performance vs. Georgia, and averaged 3.5 points and 6.9 rebounds.

Florida's frontcourt returns Alex Condon and Thomas Haugh. They outperformed their recruiting rankings (although On3 did rate Condon as a four-star and the nation's No. 124 overall prospect).

Condon, an SEC-All Freshman selection, led the league's freshmen in rebounding (6.4) and blocked shots (45). He also averaged twice as many points (7.7) as Handlogten and more minutes played (20.3). Haugh averaged 3.9 points, 3.7 rebounds and 14.7 minutes.

The Gators lose at least three scholarship players in seniors Pullin, Samuel and Julian Rishwain. One of those scholarships goes to 2024 signee Isaiah Brown, a four-star shooting guard.

Golden and the coaching staff will look to fill the other two roster openings with a point guard and big man from the portal. Finding a replacement for Pullin will be another top priority.

Given the uncertainty of Handlogten's status and when he'll be available, it's also important for UF to land an impact power forward to join the frontcourt of Condon, Haugh and Szymczyk.

After Pullin posted one of the best assist-to-turnover ratios in the nation and Samuel led the SEC in field goal percentage, Florida will be able to sell point production on the transfer market.

The Gators also need to improve defensively, so it will be key for Golden and his staff to add some transfers who are strong defenders and can make a difference on that end of the court.

Coach Golden has built a culture that players like and a style of basketball fans enjoy watching. He has the Gators on the right path to be top program in the SEC and the country. Gator Basketball fans: the future is Golden.





# THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

GHSA Adjusting Regions By Colin Lacy



## New Regions.... Again!

Just when the new regions that were set prior to the 2022 season started to feel comfortable, it's time to adjust to brand new regions beginning in the fall of 2024, and in some cases, vastly different.

In early November 2023, the GHSA released the new classifications that would take effect in July 2024.

The most notable change was eliminating the 7A classification, which would compile the 457 GHSA Member Schools into one fewer classification.

In the following few weeks, the GHSA committee would finalize the new region alignment, and the flurry began of what that looks like for the 2024 football season, especially around South Georgia.

So, who does realignment affect the most? Let's dive into a few teams that are the most affected (good or bad) by the new look GHSA.

### Southeast Bulloch

Arguably one of the most drastic differences will come from Brooklet as the Yellow Jackets of SEB move not only into a vastly different region, but a whole new classification. The past 2 years, SEB competed in region 3 of the 4A Classification which turned out to be one of the most difficult regions in the state with the likes of Benedictine, Wayne County, Burke County, New Hampstead, and Islands. With the step down in classification to the 3A level for 2024-2026, the new region 3-3A is also the second largest region in all classifications with ten teams. Because of the crowded region, everyone in region 3-3A will play nine Region games, and only one non-region contest. A couple old region rivalries will be renewed because of the classification for the Jackets, adding Liberty County, Calvary Day School, and Groves back as region foes.

### Tift County

No bones about it, Tift County is heading into a bear of a region. Five of the six members in the new Region 1 of the 6A class were the entirety of region 1 of the since departed 7A in 2022-23. Tift County stays a 6A school where they have been the last few years but are essentially thrown into a full 7A region with Colquitt County, Valdosta, Camden County, Richmond Hill, and Lowndes. Those five were part of an incredibly competitive region and are historically some of the best football programs in South Georgia. Tift did face Colquitt County last year as a non-region opponent, but it didn't go the Blue Devils' way with a 40-2 win for the Packers.

### Statesboro

Statesboro High will enter year two under former Georgia Southern Eagle, now Blue Devil Head Coach Matt Dobson with the same region name as they played in for the past 2 years of region 1 of 5A, but it's a much different look than it has in the past. Because of the reclassification, Effingham and South Effingham drop from 6A down to 5A and bring a huge addition to the depth of the region. Coffee County and Ware County that had run that region the last few years do depart (Coffee placed in Region 2 of 5A, and Ware County drops to 4A), but the addition of the two Effingham schools along with Glynn Academy, Brunswick and Evans will prove to be a huge test for SHS.

These are just three scenarios where the new classifications and regions impact greatly how the 2024 season plays out, but I have a sneaky suspicion that (at least for the next two athletic years) there will be a region that turns out just how the GHSA envisioned and becomes a new highly competitive region. Below are the new look regions in South Georgia:

### 1-AAAAAA (6)

Camden County  
Colquitt County  
Lowndes  
Richmond Hill

Tift County  
Valdosta

### 1-AAAAA (9)

Bradwell Institute  
Brunswick  
Effingham County  
Evans  
Glynn Academy  
Greenbrier  
Lakeside, Evans  
South Effingham  
Statesboro

### 1-AAAA (6)

Benedictine  
New Hampstead  
Perry  
Ware County  
Warner Robins  
Wayne County

### 3-AAA (10)

Beach  
Calvary Day School  
Groves  
Islands  
Jenkins  
Johnson, Savannah  
Liberty County  
Long County  
Southeast Bulloch  
Windsor Forest

### 1-A Division I (7)

Bacon County  
Berrien  
Brantley County  
Fitzgerald  
Jeff Davis  
Thomasville  
Worth County

### 2-A Division II (8)

Atkinson County\*  
Brooks County  
Charlton County  
Clinch County  
Echols County\*  
Irwin County  
Lanier County  
Turner County



# NEW SWASHBUCKLER?

Who Will The Buccaneers Draft? By Kenneth Harrison



The NFL Draft is almost here. Let's examine who the Tampa Bay Buccaneers are most likely to draft in the first two rounds.

In 2023, they exceeded expectations by going 9 – 8 and winning the NFC South. They beat Philly in the Wild Card playoff game, 32-9. They lost in the Divisional Round to Detroit, 31-23.

They had three Pro Bowlers; quarterback Baker Mayfield, wide receiver Mike Evans and tackle Tristan Wirfs.

Tampa's biggest team needs are pass rusher, inside offensive lineman, corner back, safety and linebacker.

Several different publications have suggested that the Bucs should consider trading up in the draft. General manager Jason Licht is not known for doing that.

"I would say right now, I like the thought of the way I really have

a lot of trust in my staff – both the coaching staff and the scouting staff – and how we've been operating," Licht said. "Those picks seem pretty important to me right now."

They have the 26th pick in the first round. They could select Oregon center Jackson Powers-Johnson if he is still available. He is the best center in the draft. They also need to replace Ryan Jensen. He injured his knee in August 2023 and missed the entire season. He announced his retirement in February 2024.

Powers-Johnson is 6'3 and 320 pounds so he has the required measurable for the position. He won the Rimington Trophy (2023), which is awarded to the best center in college football. He was also a Unanimous All-American and First-team All-Pac-12 in 2023.

He played in the Senior Bowl and he was dominant in practice against top competition. He played in two practices but he stood out playing guard and center. In 1-on-1s, he displayed his athleticism, violent hands and physicality.

Dallas and Green Bay are picking right before Tampa Bay so it is very possible that one of them will

pick Powers-Johnson.

Penn State defensive end Chop Robinson might be the player picked in that case. He started his career at Maryland as a linebacker before transferring to Penn State before his sophomore season. Robinson is listed as 6'3 and 240 pounds.

Last season he played in 10 games and had 7.5 tackles for loss and 4 sacks. In 2022, he had 10 TFL and 5.5 sacks. He was named First-team All-Big Ten in 2023.

The Buccaneers also have the 57th pick in the second round. A player that may still be on the board and a good pick would be defensive end Bralen Trice (Washington).

Trice is 6'4 and 260 pounds. He had 11.5 TFL and 7 sacks in 2023. In 2022 he had 12 TFL and 9 sacks. He was First-team All-Pac-12 in 2022 and 2023.

If he is not available guard Cooper Beebe (Kansas State) would also be a good fit. The 6'4, 335 lb. guard had a decorated career for the Wildcats. He was a Unanimous All-American (2023), First-team All-American (2022), Big 12 Offensive Lineman of the Year (2022, 2023) and First-team All-Big 12 (2021-23).





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# RECKLESS DRIVING

Georgia's Offseason Woes Continue By Colin Lacy



**T**he off-season for two consecutive seasons has been filled with much of the same that everyone around the country in today's college football.

Transfer portal additions/subtractions, NIL meetings, spring football, but one thing that has been more prevalent than any team across the college football landscape in the public eye has been the off-field issues and more specifically run-ins with law enforcement on traffic related issues at the University of Georgia.

Bulldogs head coach Kirby Smart has been under scrutiny especially the last two years because dozens of citations and arrests due to speeding, reckless driving, DUI, and other serious traffic offenses.

The latest of these came in late March when star transfer running back Trevor Etienne was arrested on four misdemeanor charges including DUI and reckless driving.

Etienne transferred to Athens after spending two seasons at SEC rival Florida. In his two campaigns with the Gators, Etienne rushed for 1,472 yards and scored 15 total touchdowns and was expected to be a key piece along with quarterback Graham Mertz before Etienne entered the transfer portal.

The addition of Etienne to the running back room for the Bulldogs made perfect sense after Georgia lost their top two rushers from a year ago as Daijun Edwards and Kendall Milton take their talents to the NFL.

According to the UGA Athletic Department policy, Etienne will at minimum miss 10% of the 2024

season (equates to at least one game), if found guilty of the DUI charge.

Etienne was also charged with speeding and reckless driving for traveling between 80 to 90-mph in a 50-mph zone while also crossing the double yellow line to pass cars on two occasions.

Head Coach Kirby Smart has only commented that the team and athletic department will let the legal actions run its course before officially announcing if there will be or the length of the suspension of Etienne.

While Georgia has been hammered by the media and outside noise, most don't focus on the steps that Athletic Director Josh Brooks and others in the athletic department have done to help aid the situation.

In an interview with ESPN, Sophomore offensive lineman Earnest Greene III said there have been numerous programs put into place ranging from conversations with local police officers, AD Josh Brooks, and Head Coach Kirby Smart about the dangers of drinking and driving.

Greene also said, "it's on us" and went on to say that Smart has stressed the importance of the players taking ownership of the team and policing themselves.

Like most situations in college sports nowadays, there seems to be two drastically different sides, then the

truth falls somewhere in the middle.

On one side, it seems like there is an inordinate number of arrests for speeding, DUI, and other serious traffic violations within the Georgia Football program.

On the other hand, there is only so much Josh Brooks and Kirby Smart can do to control 18–25-year-olds, also the Athens local law enforcement has earned the reputation of being somewhat stricter than most college towns.

Again, my two cents, I think it falls in the middle. Is there an issue for Georgia Football with the behaviors of SOME student-athletes? Sure, I don't know that anyone would dispute that. But I also think it easily gets overblown for a couple of reasons. Yes, there have been somewhere between 14-18 players involved in an incident like this, but I don't think it's unique to Georgia. The Bulldogs are just the ones that are 1. Published about, and 2. Talked about because of the rise of Georgia Football.

So, and this coming from someone that's not a die-hard Georgia fan, sure there is an issue that needs to be addressed and is being addressed by the athletic department and Georgia Football, but it also gets blown out of proportion due to a number of factors around Athens.





# THE BOTTOM HALF

The Worst SEC Coaches By Robert Craft



**T**hat's right everyone, it's time for my bottom half ranking the head coaches for the 2024 SEC season. A few of these coaches are new coaches and others are on the Hot Seat waiting to be fired.

**No. 9 Mike Elko, Texas A&M:** Elko is 16-9 in two seasons as Duke's head coach, leading the Blue Devils to one of their best seasons in school history in 2022.

He got the Texas A&M job because of his coaching (and player development) acumen, plus a personality that should play well with the Aggies' fickle booster base.

**No. 10 Hugh Freeze, Auburn:** Freeze remains the most difficult coach to rank in the SEC. How do you weigh his accomplishments previously at Ole Miss (two wins over Nick Saban) versus his recent results at Liberty and Auburn? The history is not promising.

**No. 11 Brent Venables, Oklahoma:** Venables bounced back from a tough first season as a head coach, guiding the Sooners to a 10-win season in advance of the program's move to the SEC.

A bad loss to UCF squandered a chance to play for the Big 12 Championship, but Venables did beat Texas in Red River and fixed a bad Oklahoma defense.

**No. 12 Shane Beamer, South Carolina:** After two straight seasons of exceeding expectations under Beamer, the Gamecocks regressed to the mean in 2023 — going 5-7 with a slew of frustrating losses.

South Carolina dealt with all sorts of injuries last year (particularly

at OL and with wideout Juice Wells), but the team ultimately wasted a solid season from quarterback Spencer Rattler.

Beamer has had a bunch of staff turnover, this offseason, too.

**No. 13 Sam Pittman, Arkansas:** Pittman is a beloved character in college football, but the shine has worn off the Pit Boss' star since he led the Razorbacks to a surprising 9-4 season in 2021.

Like Napier, Pittman must win now or else he probably won't be on this list next spring.

**No. 14 Jeff Leiby, Mississippi State:** Leiby finds himself last in the 2024 SEC head coach rankings solely because he hasn't been a head coach previously.

The guy he replaced Zach Arnett was ranked at the bottom of this list last spring, too, but here's guessing Leiby will have a much longer stay in Starkville.

**No. 15 Billy Napier, Florida:** No head coach in the SEC faces more pressure than Billy Napier in 2024, and the stakes were raised earlier this

month when Steve Spurrier openly said, "There's a feeling around the Gators of 'What the heck are we doing?'"

Napier is just 11-14 in two seasons with the Gators. He secured a signature win over Utah in his debut as UF's head coach, but pretty much everything since the 2022 opener has gone wrong.

Florida's defense has been a disaster for two seasons.

**No. 16 Clark Lea, Vanderbilt:** The expectation was that Lea would receive a long leash to rebuild his alma mater in his image, but the results have been so dire (2-22 in SEC games in three seasons), that suddenly the former Vandy fullback is facing pressure to deliver more wins.

Not looking great for Vandy.

I believe 3 coaches on this list are on the Hot-Seat: Shane Beamer, Sam Pittman and Billy Napier.

All 8 of these coaches have something to prove. Last year, I ranked Eli Drinkwitz at 14, so who on my bottom half will rise and who will be fired?



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