

SEC

Defenses flexing after 2020 championship-game fireworks

BY JOHN ZENOR
The Associated Press

Southeastern Conference defenses are stealing the show for some of the top contenders after a season when the league championship game featured stratospheric offensive stats.

The SEC's seven ranked teams all have formidable — or at least improved — defenses.

League competition ended last season with Mac Jones and Alabama outlasting Florida's Kyle Trask 52-46 in a championship game shootout.

Defenses have shown early this season that they can carry the burden when needed.

No. 2 Georgia and No. 7 Texas A&M — which both had strong defenses last season as well — have stymied opposing offenses in 10-3 and 10-7 wins, respectively.

It's a difference from the title game, which included two 400-yard passing efforts, three 100-yard receivers and more than 1,000 total yards.

With eight SEC offensive players taken in the first round of the NFL draft, most of whom played in the championship game, it's not surprising defenses have had to carry the day at times for the SEC's top contenders.

The Bulldogs pulled off the league's biggest win during the first two weekends, 10-3 over Clemson in a top-five clash where the only touchdown was on an interception return by Christopher Smith. The Aggies escaped against Colorado despite being kept out of the end zone for the first 57 minutes and won 10-7.

“We like to look at ourselves as one of the top defenses in the country,” Texas A&M defensive back Antonio Johnson said. “So in order to do that, you have to be able to go into hostile environments and be able to play great defense even when offense isn't going as well.

“There's going to be some games where the offense is going to have to lean on us and there's going to be some games where we're going to have to lean on them. It's a family. We've got each other's backs.”

The Aggies are without Kellen Mond's successor at quarterback, with Haynes King out indefinitely with a broken leg.

Georgia and No. 22 Auburn are tied for the national lead in scoring defense, giving up 10 points through two games. The Tigers have faced the weakest competition to date leading up to Saturday's visit to No. 10 Penn State.

No. 1 Alabama has allowed only three total points in the first half of games No. 24 Miami and Mercer. The Crimson Tide have had a few second-half lapses.

“When we're playing altogether and we're doing the right things, canceling out all the mental errors and just playing together as a defense, we can be good,” said defensive lineman Phidarian Mathis, who has a pair of sacks. “But once we get sidetracked and worry about the wrong things, everybody not focused, we can have a little struggle.”

A defensive snapshot of the SEC's Top 25 teams:

— Alabama's defense is led by the linebackers, even with a potential season-ending foot injury to Christopher Allen and a knee injury that sidelined Will Anderson Jr. for much of the Mercer game.

Christian Harris and Tennessee transfer Henry To'oTo'o share the team lead with 13 tackles, and the Tide have four interceptions, eight sacks and 16 tackles for loss.

— The Bulldogs have the league's biggest win so far, holding Clemson to 2 rushing yards. Led by a formidable front seven, the defense has scored twice without allowing a touchdown. They've racked up 10 sacks and four interceptions, led by Adam Anderson, Nakobe Dean and Jalen Carter.

“It's very encouraging,” defensive end Travon Walker said of Georgia's start on defense. “Once you set the bar that high as a standard, you've just got to keep improving as a team, as a defense, show you can do the same thing week in and week out.”

— The Aggies beat Colorado despite producing just 288 total yards, holding the Buffaloes to 260. Johnson is pacing the team with 15 tackles while preseason All-America defensive end DeMarvin Leal has 10 tackles and a sack.

— The Gators are trying to revive a defense that allowed 30.8 points a game in 2020, the school's most in more than a century. They were



CURTIS COMPTON/The Associated Press

Georgia inside linebacker Nakobe Dean and defensive lineman Devonte Wyatt sack Clemson quarterback D.J. Uiagalelei during the third quarter of a game Sept. 4 in Charlotte, N.C. With eight SEC offensive players taken in the first round of the 2021 NFL Draft, it's not

gouged for 144 points in three consecutive losses to end last season, and coach Dan Mullen fired two defensive assistants.

Florida beefed up the defensive front with three tackle transfers. Antonio Shelton (Penn State) and Daquan Newkirk (Auburn) are starters, while Tyrone Truesdell also transferred from Auburn.

The Gators lost cornerback Jaydon Hill for the season with a torn knee ligament sustained during training camp.

No. 17 Ole Miss has shown signs of a defensive resurgence, albeit with much tougher competition to come. There wasn't much room to go

anywhere but up after ranking 126th in scoring defense and 125th against the pass — out of 127 FBS teams.

Maryland graduate transfer Chance Campbell and freshman defensive back Tysheem Johnson have made immediate impacts. Sam Williams, who used the extra year of eligibility from the pandemic, has three sacks.

— No. 20 Arkansas held Texas to seven points and 85 yards through three quarters of a 40-21 victory and recovered two fumbles. Longhorns star Bijan Robinson managed just 69 yards on 19 carries against a defense led by linebackers Hayden Henry (15 tackles) and Grant Morgan (13 stops).

— Auburn hasn't allowed a point until the fourth quarter through two games against weaker competition than now awaits, winning 60-10 over Akron and 62-0 over FCS Alabama State.

But coordinator Derek Mason's defense still could be formidable, led by linebackers Zakoby McClain and Owen Pappoe and cornerback Roger McCreary. The Tigers have racked up 22 tackles for loss and nine sacks.

“The zero points (against Alabama State) is a big accomplishment for the defense, and I hope those guys are proud of that,” first-year Auburn coach Bryan Harsin said. “Now we can take that and we can apply it to

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Nebraska-Oklahoma rivalry game provided stage for Black stars in '70s

BY CLIFF BRUNT
The Associated Press

NORMAN — Half a century ago, the Nebraska-Oklahoma rivalry games offered a grand stage for the best Black college football players while the South dragged its feet on integration.

With Nebraska's Johnny Rodgers, Rich Glover and Willie Harper and Oklahoma's Greg Pruitt, Joe Washington, Rod Shoate and brothers Lee Roy, Lucious and Dewey Selmon leading the way, the programs dominated with stars most schools in the South wouldn't even recruit.

After Texas became the last all-white team to win a national title in 1969, Nebraska and Oklahoma won two Associated Press national titles each between 1970 and 1975, with Black athletes playing critical roles. Each won its annual November showdown against the other on the way to those championships.

Rodgers, Pruitt and Glover were among the biggest stars in the “Game of the Century” — No. 1 Nebraska's win 35-31 win over No. 2 Oklahoma in 1971. They placed 1-2-3 in the 1972 Heisman race (Rodgers, Pruitt, Glover) — the first time that happened for Black players.

“I think that our play and our success on those football teams opened the door for a lot of Black kids that followed us,” Pruitt said amid preparations for Nebraska's game at Oklahoma this weekend, 50 years after their famous showdown.

The honors and recognition streamed in for Black athletes at Nebraska and Oklahoma in those days. Glover won the Outland and Lombardi Trophies in 1972, and Lee Roy Selmon won both in 1975. Washington, an electrifying running back known for his silver shoes, finished third in the Heisman voting in 1974.

It goes back to the coaches who decided to prioritize recruiting Black athletes — Chuck Fairbanks and Barry Switzer at Oklahoma and Bob Devaney and Tom Osborne at Nebraska.

“Before it happened, if I was to pick the schools most likely to break the barriers, Oklahoma and Nebraska probably would not have made the list,”

said Richard Lapchick, head of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida. “But coaches like Barry Switzer, Tom Osborne, Chuck Fairbanks and Bob Devaney were bold enough to see the future and courageous enough to bury the previous era of segregated teams. The results were evident in their records and the records of some of their great Black players.”

Switzer grew up in the 1940s and '50s near tiny Crossett, Arkansas, and said his father, Frank, was a bootlegger. Frank had Black bootleggers working for him, and his son often tagged along when it was time to collect. Through that, Switzer saw the kids on the other side of the tracks and learned they had much in common. He said his father often helped Black people, and he committed to do the same through recruiting when he became Oklahoma's head coach in 1973.

“It was the right thing to do,” Switzer said. “So when I became head coach, I said, ‘You need to understand that this is the way it's going to be. I told my staff that's the way we're going to approach it, and you're coaching for the wrong staff if you don't want to do it my way.’”

The coaches were smart to fall in line — Oklahoma had the highest winning percentage of teams that played Division I-A football throughout the 1970s and won national titles in 1974 and 1975. Nebraska was fourth and won national championships in 1970 and 1971.

Switzer established Oklahoma as a place to go for Black players in Texas, including Oklahoma's 1978 Heisman winner, Billy Sims.

The foundations for that early 1970s dominance were set much earlier.

Prentice Gautt became Oklahoma's first Black athlete in 1956. He was a two-time all-conference selection and the 1959 Orange Bowl MVP. Receiver Eddie Hinton was a third-team AP All-American for the Sooners in 1968.

Nebraska's first Black All-American was offensive lineman/linebacker Bob

Brown in 1963, and the Huskers fielded the “Magnificent Eight” — eight Black players on the two-deep depth chart — in 1964. Nebraska's 1971 national championship team featured seven Black players with prominent roles.

Texas and Alabama — the old guard — were dealt stinging defeats by the Big Reds in the early 1970s.

Alabama beat Nebraska for the AP title in 1965 before falling into a drought. Crimson Tide coach Paul “Bear” Bryant wanted to recruit Black players but was met with resistance. The late Sam Cunningham, the Black USC running back who shredded Alabama in 1970, has been given much credit for helping integrate college football in the South.

Nebraska left no doubt that it was time for change when the Huskers played Alabama for the national title in the 1972 Orange Bowl. Rodgers burned the Crimson Tide with a 77-yard punt return for a touchdown in the first quarter and the Cornhuskers cruised to a 38-6 victory.

“I know people talk about how USC beat Alabama in Birmingham the year before we beat Alabama rather soundly in Miami, but I also know that our game in that Orange Bowl was a big factor that began to erode the color barriers even more in the South,” Osborne told Huskers.com.

Texas beat Oklahoma in 1970, its 12th win in 13 tries. Oklahoma, with its influx of Black talent, beat the Longhorns five straight years from 1971 to 1975.

As for the Big Eight (and later Big 12) rivalry, Oklahoma dominated Nebraska in the late '70s, but the Cornhuskers beat Switzer in 1982 and 1983 behind Turner Gill — a Black quarterback from Fort Worth, Texas. Both were ahead of the curve in featuring Black quarterbacks and won national titles with them — Oklahoma with Jamelle Holieway in 1985 and Nebraska with Tommie Frazier in 1994 and 1995.

“If you know your Oklahoma history and you know your Nebraska history, the platform that they gave Black athletes was amazing,” Holieway said.

ACC looking to improve performance in early-season Power Five matchups

BY HANK KURZ JR.
The Associated Press

Atlantic Coast Conference teams have some work to do when they step up in competition and play football programs from other Power Five leagues.

Through two weeks of the season, some ACC teams have expectedly dominated lower division programs, but the ACC is just 2-6 against Power Five teams — and Notre Dame. And while three of the losses came against No. 1 Alabama, No. 2 Georgia and the No. 12 Fighting Irish in overtime, the others were against lightly regarded Rutgers, Mississippi and Mississippi State.

The ACC can improve on its .250 winning percentage — and the perception that No. 6 Clemson is its only formidable team — on Saturday when No. 15 Virginia Tech heads to West Virginia, Northwestern out of the Big Ten visits Duke and the Big Ten's Michigan State plays at No. 24 Miami.

Hokies coach Justin Fuente said his program hopes to make the ACC proud when it visits the Big 12's Mountaineers' Milan Puskar Stadium, one of the loudest in the country.

The Hokies and Mountaineers are old Big East rivals, having met 52 times, includ-

ing every season from 1973-2005. But Virginia Tech left for the ACC in 2004 and they have met only once since.

Down the road in Charlottesville, Virginia, coach Bronco Mendenhall said conference considerations are not his primary priority. The Cavaliers have one of the two victories against Power Five foes so far, 42-14 against Illinois.

Mendenhall said bowl season used to be the time when conferences would herald their success against other leagues. Now, there is more emphasis on early season matchups, adding credibility to rankings produced more on projection than performance.

USC interim coach Williams out to use connections to salvage season

BY DAN GREENSPAN
The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Relationships have been Donte Williams' stock in trade, his ability to connect with recruits and their families making him one of the most sought-after assistant coaches in the Pac-12.

After the firing of coach Clay Helton on Monday, Williams will try to use those same bonds to salvage USC's season, and perhaps leave athletic director Mike Bohn with a difficult decision to make as the West Coast's historic college football power searches for a new leader.

Williams oversaw his first practices Tuesday and Wednesday after being named interim coach for the Trojans (1-1, 0-1 Pac-12), a title he only found out about minutes before Bohn and Helton informed players a change would be made. Bohn said the 39-year-old Williams got the role so offensive coordinator Graham Harrell and defensive coordinator Todd Orlando can continue focus-

ing on game planning and calling plays.

Williams has familiarity with many USC players on both sides of the ball after having recruited them during his time as cornerbacks coach at Arizona, Nebraska and Oregon before joining USC in February 2020. It was his prowess in bonding with high school players that contributed to sending USC's efforts to sign the best in its own backyard into a tailspin in recent years, helping the Ducks land local standouts such as linebacker Justin Flowe and corner Mykael Wright.

So when Bohn and chief of staff Brandon Sosna were working to bolster USC's recruiting efforts at the same time Helton was overhauling his defensive staff last year, Williams checked all the boxes.

Those additions have turned things around in recruiting, as USC currently has commitments from several elite 2022 players.

But the immediate goal is to produce wins on the

field, starting at Washington State (1-1) on Saturday. Williams hopes to use his ties throughout the USC roster to establish greater accountability after penalties and breakdowns piled up in what would end up being Helton's last game, an embarrassing 42-28 home loss to Stanford.

A strong showing could put him in the mix for a variety of jobs, everything from remaining at USC as an assistant with greater responsibilities to becoming a defensive coordinator in the Power Five or even getting the nod as a head coach at a Group of Five school, though Williams said that isn't his immediate concern.

Williams, a Los Angeles native, did not aspire to be a coach after playing defensive back in college at Syracuse and Idaho State and spending two seasons in the Arena Football League's developmental ranks trying to make it as a professional.

Now he finds himself as the first Black head coach for USC.

