

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

SEC beefing up schedules, moving away from favorable early matchups

BY MARK LONG
The Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — The Southeastern Conference is moving away from early season cupcakes. It's been years in the making and probably long overdue.

The powerhouse league still has a few teams lagging in the scheduling department, seemingly not quite ready to go all in for competitive reasons. But beefing up schedules is clearly on the horizon for everyone, especially once the SEC adds Oklahoma and Texas.

"You can't just open the gates and give people a 12-inch piece of wood to sit on anymore," Florida athletic director Scott Stricklin said.

Stricklin called the shift in philosophy "market driven," pointing to fans, players and television partners wanting better matchups on a weekly basis.

It's hardly unique to the SEC, especially since strength of schedule plays a role in determining which teams make the College Football Playoff. And with the CFP planning eyeing expansion, there's even more reason for some of the nation's top programs – those expecting to vie for coveted playoff spots – to add more challenging games.

While fans may have gotten spoiled watching last season's all-SEC slate of games because of COVID-19 concerns, it would be hard to complain about much of the league's 2021 schedules.

Top-ranked Alabama thumped Miami. No. 2 Georgia edged Clemson. Mississippi routed Louisville. LSU lost at UCLA. And that was just Week 1.

This weekend's slate includes Pittsburgh-Tennessee, Colorado-Texas A&M, Texas-Arkansas and North Carolina State-Mississippi State.

And then Auburn plays at Penn State and Vanderbilt host Stanford in Week 3, followed by Missouri at Boston College. "It means a lot for confi-



JOHN BAZEMORE/The Associated Press

Alabama offensive lineman Evan Neal (73) places the leather helmet from the "Old Leather Helmet Torphy" on head coach Nick Saban's head after defeating Miami in the Chick-fil-A Kickoff game Saturday in Atlanta. The Southeastern Conference has moved away from scheduling easy matchups to begin the season.

dence," Georgia coach Kirby Smart said. "Confidence can help. Can overconfidence hurt? Yes, but there's a line there. The experience of the environment is what I value. Win, lose, or draw, the experience of that environment was going to make us better, and that is what I gain from it.

"Does it give some of the players more confidence? Yes, it gives them more confidence. It does, but it better not give them overconfidence because humility is one week away."

Alabama and LSU have led the league's push to strengthen schedules. The Crimson Tide have opened each of the last 10 seasons with a Power Five opponent – and won them all. The Tigers, meanwhile, have scheduled similarly for nine straight years.

The rest of the league is catching up.

"One of the harder things to do is to judge what the future of college football is going to be," said Florida coach Dan Mullen, who is entering his

17th year in the SEC. "If you look and say, 'OK, six years ago, we're going to have a playoff and this is how they're going to judge it and evaluate the playoff.' It's hard to judge that in the future, that far.

"And scheduling is tough. As you call people, there are a lot of people who are booked out way into the future. And then you get into the issue of how is the SEC schedule going to work four and five and six years ago from now? I know what our position is right now as a league."

Four SEC teams – Florida, Georgia, Kentucky and South Carolina – have permanent, non-conference rivalry games against the Atlantic Coast Conference that they insist make scheduling a bit more difficult. The Gators play Florida State. The Bulldogs play Georgia Tech. The Wildcats play Louisville. And the Gamecocks play Clemson.

When those teams are on the road every other year, they have one fewer home game

that affects the bottom line.

"Our strength of schedule is kind of built in," Stricklin said. "You want to have six, preferably seven home games a year. And when you start doing home-and-homes or start giving away neutral-site games, that eats into how many home games you're going to have.

"Knowing the value of the home game to our campus and to the city, I don't know that we want to be there. We might end up being there one day, but we've not taken that approach."

Adding Oklahoma and Texas should change everything. The SEC is expected to revamp its scheduling model once the Big 12 juggernauts arrive, whether it's in 2025 as currently planned or sooner, in hopes of everyone playing each other more often.

"Scheduling is just a challenging deal and we're going to continue to work at it," Stricklin said. "We do want to look for opportunities where we can make it more interesting for our fanbase."

'The Eyes of Texas' draws federal complaint from Texas chapter of NAACP

BY JIM VERTUNO
The Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — The Texas chapter of the NAACP and a group of students have filed a federal civil rights complaint against the University of Texas for its continued use of school song "The Eyes of Texas," which has racist elements in its past.

The complaint filed Sept. 3 with the U.S. Department of Education alleges that Black students, athletes, band members, faculty and alumni are being subjected to violations of the Civil Rights Act and a hostile campus environment over the "offensive," "disrespectful" and "aggressive" use of the song.

The NAACP and the students want the federal government to withhold funding from the university.

Gary Bledsoe, president of the Texas NAACP and a Texas law school graduate, sharply criticized Texas on Wednesday for requiring the Longhorn Band to play the song at athletic events, and expecting athletes to stand and sing it after games.

"It's like slave owners making slaves buck dance for their entertainment," Bledsoe said.

The song was played before and after Saturday's season-opening football win over Louisiana-Lafayette and was given a full-throated sing-along by a crowd of about 80,000. Many Texas players gathered near the band during the song, as has been tradition for decades.

First-year football coach Steve Sarkisian has said the team will sing the song.

The complaint, which includes statements from several anonymous students, alleges those who oppose the song on campus are being harassed and that Black students feel "humiliated" whenever it is played or sung.

A university spokesman did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"The Eyes of Texas" was written in 1903 and has a history of performances in minstrel shows with musicians often in blackface. For decades, it has been sung after games and graduation ceremonies, and is a popular sing-along at weddings and even funerals.

Last year, a group of athletes and students called for the school to drop the song amid racial injustice protests after the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer.

School President Jay Hartzell, with the full backing of the university's Board of Regents, said the song will stay and a school research panel determined there was "no racist intent" behind it.

New Texas men's basketball coach Chris Beard said Wednesday said he recognizes there is a "lot of passion around everything tradition-based, including the school song," and that he'll be open to discussions about it with his team.

"That song means a lot to different people. It means something to me, I'm an alum here," Beard said. "But I also know history is real, too. Everybody has a different perspective of history ... We're open to everybody's feelings. I know that's a sensitive topic for a lot of people."

In April, the university announced the school would create a separate band in 2022 for students who don't want to play "The Eyes of Texas."

The complaint argues that forcing students who object to the song into a different band is an attempt to create a "separate but equal" alternative that violates constitutional equal protection standards.

U.S. OPEN

Djokovic tops Berrettini in Open QF to close in on true Slam

BY HOWARD FENDRICH
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Never fazed, rarely flummoxed, Novak Djokovic is so collected in best-of-five-set matches even when falling behind, as he has done repeatedly at the U.S. Open.

No opponent, or the prospect of what's at stake, has been too much to handle. Not yet, anyway. And now he's two wins away from the first calendar-year Grand Slam in men's tennis since 1969, along with a men's-record 21st major championship overall.

Djokovic ceded the opening set for the third consecutive match at Flushing Meadows — and ninth time at a major in 2021 — but again it didn't matter, because he quickly corrected his strokes and beat No. 6 seed Matteo Berrettini 5-7, 6-2, 6-2, 6-3 in a quarterfinal that began Wednesday night and concluded after midnight EDT Thursday.

As he came back and improved to 26-0 in Grand Slam play this season, Djokovic found every angle, thwarted every big Berrettini shot and was so locked in he dove and dropped his racket during one exchange yet scrambled, rose and reinserted himself in the point. He lost it, but the message to his foe was unmistakable, essentially amounting to, "I will do whatever it takes."

After 17 unforced errors in the first set, Djokovic made a total of 11 the rest of the way.

When Berrettini made one last stand, holding a break point while trailing 4-2 in the third set, Djokovic steadied himself. He let Berrettini put a backhand into the net, then conjured up a 121 mph ace and a forehand winner down the line to hold, then pointed his right index finger to his ear — one of many gestures asking the 20,299 in the Arthur Ashe Stadium stands for noise.

Four minutes later, that set was his. And 42 minutes later, the match was.

Djokovic already earned trophies on the Australian Open's hard courts in February, the French Open's clay courts in June and Wimbledon's grass courts in July, defeating Berrettini in the final at the All England Club.

Djokovic has added five victories



FRANK FRANKLIN II/The Associated Press

Novak Djokovic of Serbia in action against Matteo Berrettini of Italy during the quarterfinals of the U.S. Open on Wednesday in New York.

on the U.S. Open's hard courts and now faces 2020 runner-up Alexander Zverev in Friday's semifinals. If Djokovic can win that match and Sunday's final, he will join Don Budge (1938) and Rod Laver (1962 and 1969) as the only men to claim all four major tennis singles trophies in one season. (Three women have done it, most recently Steffi Graf in 1988; Serena Williams' bid in 2015 ended in the U.S. Open semifinals).

One more Slam title also will break the career mark Djokovic currently shares with rivals Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

Zverev goes into the semifinals on a 16-match winning streak, including a 1-6, 6-3, 6-1 semifinal triumph against Djokovic en route to the gold

medal at the Tokyo Olympics.

The No. 4-seeded Zverev, a 24-year-old German, advanced to the semifinals in New York on Wednesday afternoon by beating Lloyd Harris 7-6 (6), 6-3, 6-4.

Hours later, both Djokovic and Berrettini showed signs of nerves on a muggy evening with the temperature at 75 degrees and the humidity at 80%. Applause, whistles and roars preceded the initial serve, a 124 mph ace by Djokovic, a three-time U.S. Open champion. Banned from the tournament a year ago because of the coronavirus pandemic, fans are clearly enjoying being a part of all of this again.

They created a fugue of competing chants of Djokovic's nickname, "No-

le! No-le!" and a shortened version of Berrettini's first name, "Mat-te! Mat-te!" Some greeted Djokovic's missed serves with claps, considered a no-no in this sport, and some — perhaps the same folks — lamented Berrettini's faults with a communal "Awwwww."

Djokovic's form was not at its finest early, with more mistakes than he could fathom — he rolled his eyes, put a palm to his forehead, muttered toward those in his entourage.

Djokovic, paused between points to wipe away perspiration from his face, double-faulted twice and needed to save a break point in a laborious opening game. Berrettini, the back of his shirt drenched, began his first service with a double-fault

of his own and a forehand that flew way long, although he eventually held, too.

Berrettini used his 6-foot-5, 209-pound frame to generate punishing power in serves and forehands; Djokovic called him the "Hammer of Tennis."

But if any player is equipped to dull that style, it's Djokovic, whose instincts, reflexes, agility and mobility are superior. So he, unlike most other players, can return a 131 mph serve and not merely get it in play but do so with enough intention to lead to a missed backhand by Berrettini, as happened when Djokovic broke to lead 3-1 in the second set.

Still, Berrettini did manage to deflect the pair of first-set break points he faced with booming service winners — one at 132 mph, the other 134 mph — and then converted his fourth opportunity with a running cross-court forehand winner to lead 6-5. One game, and four set points, later, Berrettini owned the opener thanks to an errant forehand by Djokovic.

The match already was 77 minutes old. Berrettini left for a bathroom break to change his clothes; Djokovic sat on the sideline, draped a white towel around his neck and began the process of preparing to turn things around, as he so often does.

Djokovic also dropped the first set in the third round, against Kei Nishikori, and in the fourth, against Jensen Brooksby, before winning in four both times. Did that against Berrettini at Wimbledon, too.

Didn't take long for Djokovic to impose himself this time, either, thanks in large part to cleaning up his act by cutting down the errors, with three in the second set and three in the third, during which the retractable roof was shut because of expected rain.

Just holding serve became an ordeal for Berrettini, so much so that he let out a sigh of relief when he finally held after getting broken three times in a span of four games across the middle two sets. By then, though, he had given away the second and had fallen behind 3-0 in the third. The fourth also reached that score, and Djokovic was one step closer to history.