

Southeastern Conference

After three years, the SEC — and college football — will finally have a new face. Tim Tebow is gone, and along with him go his sound bites, smiles, and aggressively tight T-shirts.

Replacing Tebow as the ambassador of the SEC will be another Heisman Trophy winner, Mark Ingram. Even though his younger counterpart Trent Richardson is eyeing to steal some of Ingram's carries, Richardson lacks the hardware to steal the spotlight. Ingram is an intelligent and likeable player, and he has the tearjerker story of a dad who watches all of his games from a prison cell. It doesn't hurt, of course, that he's a defending national champion and that his team is a preseason favorite to repeat.

Alabama and Florida should dominate the headlines again as they set on a collision course for what would be a third straight SEC Championship Game. Two years ago, Florida derailed Alabama's perfect season en route to a national title, and last year, Alabama returned the favor. The teams seem to be starting one of those storybook rivalries that could last as long as their two coaches stay put — then again, given the two coaches involved, that could mean that it all ends next Tuesday.

While the Big 10 was considering an expansion and the Pac-10 was attempting to rearrange the college football universe by taking the best teams from the Big 12, the SEC sent out feelers to Texas A&M and Oklahoma and then decided it was perfectly happy with the status quo. Other conferences are trying to boost ratings and find more money, but the SEC is rich from Alabama and Florida to lowly Vanderbilt. And the conference is winning unlike any other. The SEC owns six BCS titles, more than double the next conference (the Big 12 with two), and SEC teams are undefeated in title games.

While other teams in the conference aren't consistently stacked like Alabama and Florida, teams like Arkansas, Georgia and LSU could push for BCS bowls this fall. Last year, Tennessee was a missed field goal away from beating Alabama in the regular season, and it took a 53-yard interception return for a touchdown for Florida to take down South Carolina on the road. Even though Alabama and Florida are clearly the top teams in this conference — and according to our projections, all of college football — they aren't invincible even against unranked SEC opponents.

So even though there is a little stagnation in the storyline, the SEC will remain the most exciting conference in college football again this season.

SEC EAST

No. 2 Florida Gators (11-1, 7-1)

2009: 13-1 (8-0) / F/+ #2 / FEI #2 / S&P+ #2

Program F/+	58.9	1	Returning Starters: 6 OFF, 7 DEF		5-Yr Recruiting Rank	1		
2009 Offense			2009 Defense		2009 Field Position			
Offensive F/+	+36.4%	6	Defensive F/+	+44.6%	7	Field Position Advantage	0.547	11
Offensive FEI:	0.439	9	Defensive FEI	-0.409	16	2010 Projections		
Offensive S&P+	129.0	6	Defensive S&P+	148.3	2	Mean Wins	10.8	
Rushing S&P+	138.4	2	Rushing S&P+	139.4	5	Proj. F/+	+32.1%	2
Passing S&P+	128.9	15	Passing S&P+	161.6	3	Offensive F/+	+28%	2
Standard Downs S&P+	131.4	2	Standard Downs S&P+	132.1	9	Defensive F/+	+44.2%	1
Passing Downs S&P+	143.7	8	Passing Downs S&P+	187.4	3	Strength of Schedule	0.074	9

Yes, the numbers know that Tim Tebow is gone. And they know that four other Gators went in the first two rounds of the draft along with him. Still, the most im-

portant Gator of all ended up returning this spring: head coach Urban Meyer. Without him, it would be hard to predict a successful season, despite the talent

— a No. 1-ranked recruiting class — that he and his staff were able to bring to Gainesville. But with him, even the loss of one of the greatest college players of all time can be overcome.

The team won't miss Tebow nearly as much as the country expects if the hype around quarterback John Brantley is real. After breaking Tebow's high school touchdowns record, Brantley defected from Texas to quarterback the Gators. He would have been a starter by now at almost any other SEC school, but at Florida, he has lived on the bench. This spring served as a time for Brantley to establish Florida as his team. While Brantley may not be the dynamic athlete that Tebow is, he is a much more polished, prototypical NFL passer who can make all the throws accurately and on time. Florida's offense this year will be based much more on rhythm and timing, and it will give a talented staple of running backs a chance finally to make a mark on offense.

Those running backs, namely Emmanuel Moody and Jeff Demps, are eager for some attention after a couple years as Tim Tebow's Pips. Moody, in particular, will benefit from Tebow's departure because he's a power back, and he could never convince the coaching staff that he should get the power plays instead of Tebow. He'll also benefit from the coaching staff's decision to move running back Chris Rainey into the

slot. It's where Rainey played in the Sugar Bowl last season, with good results — he caught four passes for 71 yards and recorded a rushing touchdown. The slot, where Percy Harvin played at Florida, is crucial for the offense.

On defense, Florida lost its two starting defensive ends, two team captains at linebacker, the best corner in college football, and a playmaking safety. But one of the reasons Florida has become a fixture at the top of our ratings is because of recruiting, and there are plenty of players waiting to battle it out for those vacancies. To replace Haden, Janoris Jenkins will move into the number-one corner position. He has flashed an ability to be a shut-down corner and probably has better instincts than Haden, but he hasn't always been disciplined enough against top receivers. Last year against Arkansas, he was burned twice by receiver Greg Childs. At end, the Gators have a bit of a battle going and should have a strong rotation among veterans like Justin Trattou and Willie Green and incoming freshmen like Ronald Powell, the nation's top recruit.

If Meyer keeps getting recruits like Powell, expect to see Florida near the top of our numbers annually.

Top 2011 NFL Prospects: C Mike Pouncey (1-3), QB John Brantley (1-2), CB Janoris Jenkins* (1-2), S Ahmad Black (2-4), S Will Hill* (2-4).*

No. 19 Georgia Bulldogs (8-4, 5-3)

2009: 8-5 (4-4) / F/+ #34 / FEI #30 / S&P+ #41

Program F/+	30.5	13	Returning Starters: 10 OFF, 6 DEF		5-Yr Recruiting Rank	6	
2009 Offense			2009 Defense		2009 Field Position		
Offensive F/+	+18.6%	27	Defensive F/+	+13.3%	34	Field Position Advantage	0.466 104
Offensive FEI:	0.265	21	Defensive FEI	-0.265	27	2010 Projections	
Offensive S&P+	110.7	29	Defensive S&P+	100.1	50	Mean Wins	8.3
Rushing S&P+	98.8	75	Rushing S&P+	112.7	34	Proj. F/+	+14.7% 19
Passing S&P+	134.1	9	Passing S&P+	94.0	68	Offensive F/+	+14.7% 20
Standard Downs S&P+	110.0	38	Standard Downs S&P+	105.8	45	Defensive F/+	+21.6% 26
Passing Downs S&P+	133.6	16	Passing Downs S&P+	107.8	45	Strength of Schedule	0.124 20

The quarterback battle in Georgia was supposed to define the spring. Redshirt freshman Aaron Murray was the favorite, but he was supposed to be pushed by Zach Mettenberger and Logan Gray. Mettenberger was kicked off the team for "violating team rules" six weeks after his arrest outside a bar in Athens, and Logan Gray has been asked to switch positions. Gray is a great athlete, and the Bulldogs will put him at wide receiver to better utilize his talents, but that puts a lot of pressure on Murray to perform well and

stay healthy.

Georgia's offensive line features some of the best talent in the SEC, so it shouldn't be hard for Murray to stay healthy — as long as the linemen can stay healthy themselves. Center Ben Jones and guard Clint Boling give the Bulldogs a solid interior offensive line. The key to bringing the line together will be the health of tackle Trindon Sturdivant, who has suffered season-ending knee injuries in back-to-back seasons.

Injuries were part of Georgia's bad luck last season,

and turnovers were the other part. Georgia's turnover margin was third-worst in the country. If that number flips, and the ball bounces their way this season, it would be a huge boost for the Bulldogs.

To keep opposing passers guessing and hopefully create some turnovers of their own, the Bulldogs hired Dallas Cowboys defensive line coach Todd Grantham to transition the defense to a 3-4 pressure-oriented scheme. Last season, the secondary was the gaping hole for Georgia — the unit surrendered 25 passing touchdowns and ranked 68th in Pass Defense S&P+.

The secondary will again be a concern for Georgia. The pressure will be on pass-rush specialists Justin Houston and Cornelius Washington to get to the passer before opposing quarterbacks can pick apart the secondary.

In other words, the Bulldogs' season is all about the quarterbacks — giving theirs time to grow and not giving the other team's any time at all.

Top 2011 NFL Prospects: WR A.J. Green (1-2), OT Clint Boling (2-3), C Ben Jones* (4).*

No. 20 Tennessee Volunteers (7-5, 4-4)

2009: 7-6 (4-4) / F/+ #23 / FEI #37 / S&P+ #14

Program F/+	22.6	20	Returning Starters: 4 OFF, 7 DEF		5-Yr Recruiting Rank		14
2009 Offense			2009 Defense			2009 Field Position	
Offensive F/+	+21%	22	Defensive F/+	+19.5%	25	Field Position Advantage	0.509 45
Offensive FEI:	0.182	32	Defensive FEI	-0.273	25	2010 Projections	
Offensive S&P+	123.9	14	Defensive S&P+	111.7	27	Mean Wins	7.1
Rushing S&P+	116.5	27	Rushing S&P+	108.8	44	Proj. F/+	+14.6% 20
Passing S&P+	142.0	6	Passing S&P+	124.0	21	Offensive F/+	+12.2% 24
Standard Downs S&P+	127.8	9	Standard Downs S&P+	110.4	35	Defensive F/+	+24% 22
Passing Downs S&P+	144.3	6	Passing Downs S&P+	124.8	17	Strength of Schedule	0.042 4

New head coach Derek Dooley inherited a team with the simple task of finding a quarterback and four offensive linemen. Then the transfers started rolling in ... or, more accurately, rolling *out*. Nick Stephens may not have ended up as the answer at quarterback — he failed to beat Jonathan Crompton for the job twice — but he would have helped the depth. Instead, he'll be transferring. The Vols were counting on sophomore Aaron Douglas to anchor the offensive line at the left tackle spot. He'll be transferring as well.

The players left at quarterback are Tyler Bray and Matt Simms, who combined to complete 46 percent of their passes in the spring game. Simms, the youngest son of former Giants quarterback Phil Simms, was particularly poor, going 12-of-26 with three interceptions.

To protect whoever is back there, the Volunteers were able to settle on an offensive line in the spring, but offensive line coach Harry Hiestand has said that the unit "has a long way to go." At center, they'll plug in Californian Cody Pope. Dallas Thomas has given

the coaches some calm about the left tackle spot, and early enrollee Ja'Wuan James will play right tackle — but he could have some growing pains.

Fortunately, Tennessee should be a balanced ball club. The offense and defense both project in the Top 25 of F/+. The defense does have talent at the top of the roster, but depth is a concern. Tennessee's recent recruiting under Lane Kiffin gave the Vols a lot of talent, even with the loss of Eric Berry to the NFL, but much of the talent is unproven. Injuries could dismantle a season that has potential to beat expectations. Dooley's first task will be to guide Tennessee to a .500 season, and with the talented defense and the ability to run the ball, he could do that. His more important task will be to tear up the recruiting trail to prevent the kind of depth problems that he has faced this spring.

Top 2011 NFL Prospects: RB Tauren Poole (1-3), WR Gerald Jones (4-6), DE/OLB Chris Walker (5-7), TE Luke Stocker (5-7).*

No. 23 South Carolina Gamecocks (7-5, 4-4)

2009: 7-6 (3-5) / F/+ #31 / FEI #44 / S&P+ #21

Program F/+	14.3	36	Returning Starters: 8 OFF, 7 DEF		5-Yr Recruiting Rank	15	
2009 Offense			2009 Defense		2009 Field Position		
Offensive F/+	-5.2%	71	Defensive F/+	+34.4%	14	Field Position Advantage	0.477 89
Offensive FEI:	-0.138	81	Defensive FEI	-0.461	12	2010 Projections	
Offensive S&P+	103.4	49	Defensive S&P+	122.8	15	Mean Wins	7.0
Rushing S&P+	102.1	65	Rushing S&P+	115.4	27	Proj. F/+	+13.3% 23
Passing S&P+	112.6	35	Passing S&P+	139.0	10	Offensive F/+	+4.4% 43
Standard Downs S&P+	104.3	58	Standard Downs S&P+	118.6	16	Defensive F/+	+29.1% 14
Passing Downs S&P+	114.7	45	Passing Downs S&P+	172.1	6	Strength of Schedule	0.032 3

Steve Spurrier is mixing old and new this season in South Carolina. As for the old, in his own words, he's going to be more of a jerk. Basically, he means that he's going to be more in charge and start yelling more to cut down on what he considered to be soft play last season. As for the new, he may finally be willing to adjust his scheme, which has stuck out like an eight-track player among the spread-option iPods of the SEC.

Offensive line coach Shawn Elliott has been working with Spurrier to put in a no-huddle offense and install more zone running plays. Elliott's offensive line was one of the breakout units in spring practices, and it should be able to clear lanes for sophomore back Jarvis Giles and freshman star Marcus Lattimore. The duo will lead the most talented backfield since Spurrier came aboard.

Spurrier has been impatient and noncommittal with

redshirt junior quarterback Stephen Garcia, whose work ethic has often been called into question, and Spurrier seems willing to go with freshman Connor Shaw if Garcia doesn't get it in gear this summer. And if Spurrier says he's going to switch quarterbacks this early, it's almost a lock that he will at some point this fall.

If Garcia can emerge, the offense — Spurrier's supposed specialty — may finally catch up with the defense, which finished 14th in F/+ last year (tenth against the pass, sixth on passing downs), and is projected to be 14th in 2010 as well. Putting it all together could lead to an SEC East title in the most even conference in years. That's an old Spurrier trick that South Carolina fans would enjoy.

Top 2011 NFL Prospects: TE Weslye Saunders (2-4), DE Cliff Matthews (3-5), DB Chris Culliver (4-6).

No. 52 Kentucky Wildcats (6-6, 2-6)

2009: 7-6 (3-5) / F/+ #50 / FEI #45 / S&P+ #58

Program F/+	-1.0	63	Returning Starters: 5 OFF, 7 DEF		5-Yr Recruiting Rank	49	
2009 Offense			2009 Defense		2009 Field Position		
Offensive F/+	+5.6%	49	Defensive F/+	-0.3%	56	Field Position Advantage	0.517 35
Offensive FEI:	0.067	48	Defensive FEI	-0.059	50	2010 Projections	
Offensive S&P+	104.5	43	Defensive S&P+	93.5	66	Mean Wins	5.7
Rushing S&P+	114.1	30	Rushing S&P+	99.0	58	Proj. F/+	+2.3% 52
Passing S&P+	97.5	75	Passing S&P+	92.1	75	Offensive F/+	+2.6% 50
Standard Downs S&P+	108.2	46	Standard Downs S&P+	105.0	47	Defensive F/+	+8.2% 55
Passing Downs S&P+	110.7	48	Passing Downs S&P+	103.2	56	Strength of Schedule	0.088 10

Kentucky may be the most anonymous team in the SEC. The Wildcats feature a first-year head coach in Joker Phillips, and despite spending all spring trying to break the three-way tie at quarterback, they couldn't.

Senior Mike Hartline is the favorite to win the job in the fall, but he's not an All-Conference-type, and he's certainly not a fan favorite. Coming off a knee injury, Hartline has been battling Morgan Newton and

Ryan Mossakowki to reclaim the starting position he had locked down before he was hurt. Last year, passing brought down both the offense and the defense. The offense's rushing S&P+ was 30th in the country, but 75th in passing. The rushing defense was 58th in S&P+, and passing was 75th.

Phillips is an aggressive recruiter, and he will build the roster in years to come, but if he wants to send the

Wildcats to their fifth straight bowl game, he'll need one of the passers to emerge ... eventually.

Top 2011 NFL Prospects: WR Randall Cobb (4-7), RB Derrick Locke (6-7).

No. 73 Vanderbilt Commodores (2-10, 1-7)

2009: 2-10 (0-8) / F/+ #88 / FEI #72 / S&P+ #96

Program F/+	-3.5	67	Returning Starters: 5 OFF, 5 DEF		5-Yr Recruiting Rank	68		
2009 Offense			2009 Defense		2009 Field Position			
Offensive F/+	-25.0%	105	Defensive F/+	+4.1%	48	Field Position Advantage	0.509	45
Offensive FEI:	-0.322	104	Defensive FEI	-0.13	41	2010 Projections		
Offensive S&P+	82.1	107	Defensive S&P+	95.2	62	Mean Wins	2.3	
Rushing S&P+	93.9	90	Rushing S&P+	97.4	67	Proj. F/+	-6.0%	73
Passing S&P+	75.0	113	Passing S&P+	99.6	58	Offensive F/+	-11.9%	99
Standard Downs S&P+	86.4	105	Standard Downs S&P+	101.4	56	Defensive F/+	+5.7%	60
Passing Downs S&P+	89.7	95	Passing Downs S&P+	101.3	60	Strength of Schedule	0.098	16

If this were the 1960s, the Commodores could be the top team in the SEC. Bobby Johnson has built his team around solid depth at running back (“outstanding” would probably be overstating it – they were 90th in Rushing S&P+ last year) and a defense that can compete in the nation’s toughest conference. But this isn’t the 1960s, and to win in today’s college game you either need the Georgia Tech triple option (which Vanderbilt doesn’t have) or a quality quarterback (and junior Larry Smith ain’t it). Vanderbilt struggled to score points last season, finishing 2009 with the 105th-ranked Offensive F/+ and 113th-ranked Passing S&P+ and never scoring more than 16 points in an SEC game, and the offense went the first 13 possessions of the spring game without scoring a touchdown.

The team has some talent, but only in patches. Most of the time, the inconsistent Smith will be handing the ball to Vandy’s talented trio of running backs: Warren Norman (last year’s SEC Freshman of the Year), Zac Stacy, and Kennard Reeves. Passing will be a bit more difficult: John Cole was the team’s best receiver last year, and he caught fewer than 400 yards. The team’s receivers only caught two touchdowns last year. On defense, the secondary will be a strength, with Sean Richardson and safety and Casey Hayward at cornerback. But as good as the defense could be, it can’t keep the score low enough in every game to give the team a chance to return to .500.

Top 2011 NFL Prospects: CB Casey Hayward (4-7), TE Brandon Barden* (5-7), MLB Chris Marve* (5-7).*