

Tennessee tops 1st CFP poll

By **RALPH D. RUSSO**
AP College Football Writer

Tennessee, Ohio State, Georgia, and Clemson were the top four teams in the first College Football Playoff rankings of the season released Tuesday night, four days before the Volunteers and Bulldogs square off on the field.

Michigan was fifth, followed by Alabama and unbeaten TCU.

Tennessee is No. 1 in the CFP rankings for the first time, starting ahead of a group of teams that have become regulars at the top of the selection committee's top 25. The Volunteers have already beaten the Crimson Tide and LSU, which was ranked 10th.

Tennessee has been one of the season's biggest surprises, starting the season unranked in the AP poll and jumping out to an 8-0 start for the first time since the Vols won their last national title in 1998.

"We've tried to enjoy the journey," second-year Tennessee coach Josh Heupel told ESPN. "Three years ago, it didn't look like this."

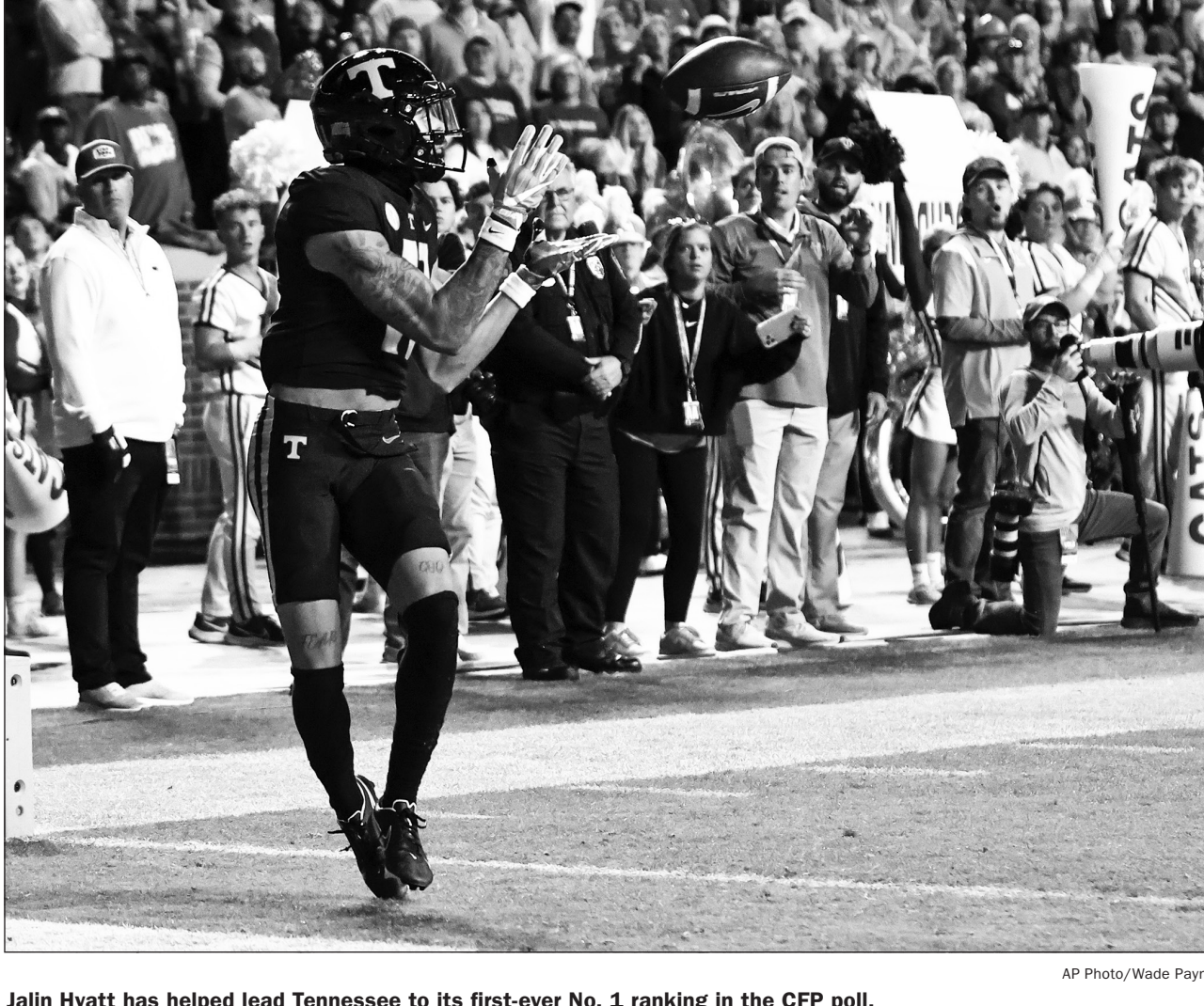
Heupel took over after Jeremy Pruitt was fired following a 3-7 season.

Only one team that has been No. 1 in the committee's initial rankings has not made the playoff, but only about half the teams in first top four managed to finish there.

The committee began its weekly in-person meetings at hotel in Grapevine, Texas, on Monday and revealed the first of six weekly rankings.

The final rankings that set the CFP field of four are set for Dec. 4. The 13-person panel is led by a first-time chairman Boo Corrigan, the athletic director of North Carolina State.

Corrigan said there was some consideration for Ohio State and Georgia as No. 1, but Tennessee's victories against Alabama and at



Jalin Hyatt has helped lead Tennessee to its first-ever No. 1 ranking in the CFP poll.

LSU won the day.

The Buckeyes' explosive offense and overall dominance gave them a slight edge on Georgia.

He said Michigan's weak nonconference schedule (Hawaii, Colorado State and Connecticut) and Clemson's 5-0 record against teams with winning records gave the Tigers the nod for the fourth spot.

"The wins at Wake (Forest), at Florida State, over N.C. State, over Syracuse, really did push (Clemson) over the top," Corrigan said.

Oregon was eighth followed by Pac-12 rival Southern California at ninth.

The highest ranked team from outside the Power Five conferences was Tulane at No. 19. The highest ranked champion from the Group of Five conferences earns a spot in New Year's Six bowl.

The CFP semifinals are scheduled to be played at the Fiesta and Peach Bowls on Dec. 31, with the championship

game set for Jan. 9 in Inglewood, California.

Analysis

Even before the rankings were unveiled Tuesday night, it was clear which teams still have a chance to play for a national championship.

A glance at the conference standings reveals 14 contenders, all in the Power Five. Sorry, there will be no Cincinnati-style interloper from the Group of Five this season for the selection committee to consider.

A conference-by-conference assessment of who is in the race and the paths to the CFP, with AP Top 25 rankings.

Atlantic Coast Conference

Clemson (8-0, AP No. 5)

The Tigers had their streak of six straight playoff appearances snapped last year, but are well positioned to get back, with no ranked opponents left before a

likely ACC title game against North Carolina.

No unbeaten Power Five champion has ever missed the playoff. A glance at the Big Ten and SEC suggests getting in as a one-loss conference champion could be dicey for the Tigers.

No. 17 North Carolina (7-1, AP No. 17)

Run the table, beating unbeaten Clemson in the ACC title game, gets the Tar Heels in the conversation, but they'll need some upsets in other leagues to clear the way.

Big 12

No. 7 TCU (8-0, AP No. 7)

See above, re: unbeaten Power Five champions. The Horned Frogs flirt with disaster weekly and have some defensive issues. That's a profile the selection committee tends to look upon skeptically.

They'll probably need to stay unbeaten to get in and it's going to be really tough for them to stay unbeaten with

the way they have been playing.

Big Ten

Ohio State (8-0, AP No. 2) and Michigan (8-0, AP No. 4)

Both have been dominant. Neither has played a particularly strenuous schedule and that won't change much before they meet Thanksgiving weekend. Still, either is lock by winning out.

Either would stay in the mix by being a 12-1 conference champion. And the loser of the rivalry game at 11-1 probably still holds out hope to get in.

Illinois (7-1, AP No. 14)

The Illini have a game against Michigan the week before the Wolverines play Ohio State. That means Illinois could finish 12-1 with either two victories against Michigan or one against Michigan and one against Ohio State.

It's not likely to happen, but that would put

the Illini in the playoff.

Pac-12

Oregon (7-1, AP No. 8), USC (7-1, AP No. 9) and UCLA (7-1, No. 10)

They all need to run the table to have a chance and even then that might not be enough. The Ducks will have to overcome a 49-3 loss to Georgia in their opener. The Trojans have a bad defense and won't get much of a bump by beating Notre Dame. UCLA played one of the weakest non-conference schedules in the country.

What's the best option for the Pac-12? The guess here is a 12-1 USC with victories against UCLA and Oregon and one-point loss to a good Utah team.

Southeastern conference

Georgia (8-0, AP No. 1) and Tennessee (8-0, AP No. 2)

The loser of Saturday's showdown in Athens is not eliminated, especially if its the Volunteers, with a victory over Alabama already in hand.

Alabama (6-1, AP No. 6) and Mississippi (8-1, AP No. 11)

The Crimson Tide and Rebels can't afford another loss — they play each other in two weeks — but either would breeze into the CFP by winning out.

The most SEC-centric scenario the rest of the country needs to root against is Alabama winning out, beating Georgia in the SEC championship game, and leaving the Tide and Bulldogs at 12-1 and Tennessee at 11-1 with a close loss to Georgia.

LSU (6-2, AP No. 15)

A two-loss team has never made the playoff, but the SEC champion has never missed the playoff. If the Tigers beat Alabama and avenge a loss to Tennessee on the way to a conference title they could break precedent.

Vols travel to Athens after best defensive game yet

By **TERESA M. WALKER**
AP Sports Writer

Tennessee scores so many points so fast that the defense tends to be overshadowed, ignored until someone wonders how the Volunteers can play so many minutes a game.

Turns out the second-ranked Vols actually can play some defense too, despite being on the field more than all but five other FBS teams.

As Tennessee prepares to visit defending national champ Georgia (8-0, 5-0 SEC), the Volunteers are coming off arguably their best defensive performance this season.

They smothered Will Levis, a projected first-round pick in the 2023 NFL draft, allowing 98 yards passing while picking him off three times.

Coach Josh Heupel said Monday that good teams get better during a season, and he sees a defense that keeps improving thanks to coordinator Tim Banks and secondary coach Willie Martinez with last week's 44-6 rout of Kentucky the latest example.

Being healthy also helps.

"Last week, we were healthier than we were the week before," Heupel said. "I feel like this week will be the healthiest that we've been in a while."

The Vols (8-0, 4-0) rank first in the Southeastern Conference with a plus-8 margin in turnovers and have forced a league-best 16 turnovers.

They also are allowing just 92.9 yards rushing, which is second-stingiest in the SEC and ninth among Football Bowl Subdivision teams. They held LSU to 55 yards rushing, Alabama to 114 and Kentucky had just 107.

Worse, the Wildcats managed just 3.25 yards per play and 205 total yards against Tennessee, the fewest the Vols had allowed since Kentucky had 193 yards against them Nov. 29, 2008. The six points allowed was the fewest by an SEC opponent against the Vols since Mississippi State was routed 34-3 on Oct. 18, 2008.

Tennessee's defensive line is anchored by senior Byron Young, who has five sacks, and Georgia coach Kirby Smart knows Rodney Garner, now coaching Tennessee's defensive line, very well.

Garner was in his first year coaching Georgia's defensive line and working as recruiting coordinator when Smart was finishing up his playing career with the Bulldogs. Garner was still there when Smart was a graduate assistant. When Smart coached running backs in 2005, Garner was Georgia's assistant head coach.

Smart said Garner brings toughness and an old school approach about hitting people and playing physically. Garner also coaches hard, something that hasn't changed in all his years of coaching.

"They're not going to run



Tennessee defensive back Jourdan Thomas wraps up Kentucky running back La'Vell Wright last week.

from contact," Smart said of the Vols. "They're not going to shy from contact. They're not going to back down from a challenge. And it's not because of what they're going to do this week, it's because of the way he's molded them and the way he's coached them."

The secondary has been Tennessee's biggest challenge where they were so banged-up that walk-on William

Wright played late in the upset of Alabama. That unit was bolstered last week by the return of four-year starting Jaylen McCollough after missing two games following his arrest for felony aggravated assault.

Attorney Chloe Akers declined to comment to The Associated Press. A motion filed in McCollough's case last week argues the safety defended himself punching

someone who refused to leave after walking into an apartment in the wrong building. A preliminary hearing is scheduled for Nov. 10.

Junior defensive lineman Omari Thomas says the Tennessee defense just works every day trying to improve. "It all works hand in hand that we all are just continuing to pull our end of the bargain and do what we have to do to get better," Thomas said.