

Georgia QB applauds Duggan as 'A-plus dude'

By CHARLES ODUM
AP Sports Writer

Georgia's Stetson Bennett and TCU's Max Duggan share similar stories as quarterbacks who needed to disprove doubters before finding starring roles for next Monday's national championship game.

It's no surprise Bennett says he immediately liked Duggan when the two spent time together at the Heisman Trophy ceremony in New York last month.

"Max is an awesome dude," Bennett said Tuesday.

"Whenever we were there, it was more like we were a bunch of dudes and we were all hanging out. ... But he's an A-plus dude. He works hard. All those things. But I

think he's the heart and soul of that team. ... And there's something to be said for both his story and my story and the fact that we're here in the end."

Duggan was the runner-up to USC quarterback Caleb Williams in the Heisman voting. Bennett finished fourth, behind Ohio State's C.J. Stroud.

While Duggan lost his starting job at the start of the season, Bennett was a walk-on in 2017 before leaving Georgia and returning to land the starting job. Bennett led Georgia to its first national championship since 1980 last season.

Hobbled Miller

While TCU leading rusher

Kendre Miller is feeling better, coach Sonny Dykes said Tuesday that the junior running back is still questionable for the title game.

Miller hurt his right knee in the first half of the 51-45 win over Michigan on Saturday. He got treatment at halftime, but had just one carry after the break before leaving the game for good.

"We're hopeful to get Kendre back. As the week progresses, we'll know a little bit more every single day," Dykes said. "Right now, I would say he's be questionable, and then we'll kind of make a determination as we get through the week."

Miller has 1,399 yards and 17 touchdowns rushing, the most yards in a season by a TCU running back since

LaDainian Tomlinson led the nation with 2,158 yards in 2000.

He had eight carries for 57 yards against Michigan in the Fiesta Bowl, but didn't score a rushing touchdown for the first time this season. It ended his streak of 14 consecutive games with a rushing TD, one short of Tomlinson's school-record streak.

Good luck, Frogs

Among the people who called Dykes after TCU's win in the Fiesta Bowl was Marshawn Lynch.

The former NFL running back played collegiately at California, a decade before Dykes was the coach of the Bears from 2013-16.

"That was cool to get to talk

about to Marshawn. Marshawn and I got to be pretty close when I was in Cal. Love Marshawn, he's got a great heart," Dykes said. "It was great to catch up. I invited him to the (championship) game, but he told me he was going to Italy instead. Can't blame him."

Duggan said he has heard from several former TCU players, including quarterbacks Andy Dalton and Trevone Boykin.

"Andy's been staying in contact with me. I think that's kind of a huge thing," Duggan said of Dalton, the current New Orleans Saints quarterback who led TCU to its 13-0 season in 2010 that ended with a Rose Bowl victory and No. 2 national ranking.

Alabama stars declare for NFL draft

By JOHN ZENOR
AP Sports Writer

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — Bryce Young won the Heisman Trophy and Will Anderson is a two-time winner of the Nagurski Trophy as the nation's top defensive player.

Now, Alabama's two biggest stars are headed to the NFL, where teams can take up the debate over which one is the best — or most needed.

Alabama's poised and play-making quarterback Young and pass rushing linebacker Anderson Jr. made the seemingly no-brainer call Monday to declare for the NFL draft, where both juniors could contend for the top spot.

Young, the 2021 Heisman Trophy winner, and the two-time unanimous All-American Anderson announced their decisions to skip their senior seasons two days after leading Alabama to a 45-20 victory over Kansas State in the Sugar Bowl. Tailback Jahmyr Gibbs and safety Brian Branch also are heading to the NFL.

They endeared themselves to Crimson Tide faithful even more by not joining the ranks of bowl opt-outs among NFL prospects. Young passed for 321 yards and five touchdowns in New Orleans.

He and Anderson have graduated.

"I'm very proud of the way these guys have represented the program, not only the way they played on the field but the kind of character as people," Saban said. "The academic success that they've had.

"These guys showed tremendous leadership and character to make a decision to play in the Sugar Bowl, which I think impacted the entire team with the example that they set."

Young got a loud ovation from Alabama fans when he was substituted out for backup Jalen

Milroe in the fourth quarter, and later got a salute from Kansas State coach Chris Klieman.

"That's what college football is about. I was happy Bryce played," Klieman said after the game. "That was really good for college football and really good for kids to see."

Now, both are expected to be top-five draft picks and contenders for the No. 1 spot in April.

"It is pretty cool, but it just speaks volumes to the type of person Bryce is," Anderson said. "He's a competitor just like me. We have the same mindset, same mentality.

"I think that's why we're so close because we're kind of the same person. It's super exciting to see a teammate of yours in the same position as you that you know has worked his butt off every day."

Added Young: "I think that really speaks volumes to the program and the players I've been blessed to play with."

Young, who arrived from California as one of the nation's top recruits, started the past two seasons after backing up current New England Patriots starter Mac Jones during a national championship run in 2020.

"Sitting my freshman year was something I hadn't done before," Young said. "It was hard. I'm a competitor. I wanted to play, but it was a blessing in disguise. Being able to learn from Mac and being able to watch that offense, that team, operate and being able to be there for every step of the way, it really helped me."

He finished with 8,356 passing yards and 80 touchdowns against just 12 interceptions. Young passed for 3,328 yards and 32 touchdowns with five interceptions last season, making him the first Alabama quarterback with two 3,000-yard seasons.

Anderson is one of the top pass rushers in Alabama history and is even more decorated than Young. He is only the second two-time Nagurski Trophy winner and he also won both the Lombardi Award and Lott IMPACT Trophy as a junior.

He finished his three-year career with 34 1/2 sacks and 62 tackles for loss, behind only Hall of Famer Derrick Thomas in school history.

Anderson finished fifth in the 2021 Heisman voting after racking up 17 1/2 sacks and 34 1/2 tackles for loss. He had 10 sacks and 17 tackles for loss this past season.

Gibbs, a Georgia Tech transfer, ran for 926 yards and seven touchdowns and gained 444 yards on a team-leading 44 catches. Anderson thinks any team that drafts Gibbs is "going to get a special guy."

"He's very good, very athletic, can move," he said. "I'm super excited to see what his future is. His cuts are ridiculous. His top-end speed is crazy. Trying to catch him downhill is crazy."

Branch, also a projected first-rounder, announced his decision on social media hours after the other three players declared for the draft in a news conference with Saban. He had 90 tackles, 14 tackles for loss, three sacks and two interceptions.

"I've developed so much since my freshman year and because of Alabama I'm confident that I'm prepared to take my game to the next level," Branch said.

They leave a team that fell short of playoff and title expectations after losing to Tennessee and LSU on the final plays.

After three years together, Anderson could finally get a chance to actually sack Young in the NFL after having to hold back in practice.

"If I get the opportunity sometime next year, I've got to try to make sure I talk a little smack to him when I do it," he said.

Teams rally from poor start to playoffs

By JOSH DUBOW
AP Pro Football Writer

Falling into a 2-6 hole near the midpoint of a season is usually a recipe to look to the future for NFL teams, with only two teams ever climbing out of that hole to reach the postseason.

Headed into Week 18 of this season, three teams that lost six of their first eight games remain in the playoff hunt.

Jacksonville can clinch the AFC South with a victory over Tennessee or it could sneak in as a wild-card team with a loss and lots of help.

Detroit and Pittsburgh have more complicated paths, with the Lions needing a win and a Seattle loss to clinch the seventh seed in the NFC and the Steelers needing a win plus losses by Miami and New England to clinch the final wild-card spot in the AFC.

The addition of an extra playoff team in 2020 and a 17th game in 2021 made climbing out of a hole a bit easier than in the past, but it still is rather remarkable.

Before this season, 186 teams in the Super Bowl era started a season 2-6, with only Cincinnati in 1970 and Washington in 2020 making it to the postseason.

The Jaguars have gone on quite a roller-coaster ride, having lost five straight from Weeks 4-8 and then winning the last four games. A victory Saturday night against Tennessee would make Jacksonville the fifth team to get to the playoffs in a season with a both

a winning and losing streak of at least five games. The last team to do it was Kansas City in 2015.

The Titans can also join that group win a win, having won five straight early in the season and then losing the last six games.

The only teams to make the playoffs in a season with a six-game losing streak are the 2020 Bears, the 2014 Panthers and the 1970 Bengals.

Playoff newcomers

The Giants clinched their first playoff berth since 2016, assuring this will be the 33rd straight season with at least four new playoff teams.

New York joins Baltimore, the Los Angeles Chargers and Minnesota as teams that made the postseason a year after missing it. The last time there were fewer than four new playoff teams in a season was in 1989 when only three teams did it.

There's still a chance for three more teams to join the list, with Jacksonville having a shot at the AFC South or wild-card spots, Miami in contention for an AFC wild-card spot and Detroit and Seattle in the running for the seventh seed in the NFC.

Sack party

The Philadelphia Eagles are closing in on the NFL's single-season sacks record.

The Eagles have recorded 68 sacks so far this season for the fourth-best total ever and can pass the record of 72 set by the 1984 Bears with five more in Week 18.

Title

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to keep the same mindset," said defensive end Dylan Horton, who had all four of those sacks.

The Horned Frogs are listed as 13 1/2-point underdogs against Georgia (14-0) in the championship game in California, according to Fanduel Sportsbook. They were 7 1/2-point underdogs against Michigan.

Linebacker Dee Winters said the predictions were simply fuel for the team. "By, it just fuels us as a team,"

linebacker Dee Winters said.

"Obviously being the underdog is something we're not unfamiliar with," added standout receiver Quentin Johnston. "So going to try to just keep moving like we did the rest of the season. And keep our heads to the ground and keep playing football."

TCU's only loss this season was in overtime to Kansas State in the Big 12 championship game after Heisman Trophy runner-up Max Duggan led them to 11 points in the final 7 1/2 minutes of regulation to tie the game. The

Frogs won five games in the regular season by coming from behind after halftime, including double-digit deficits in back-to-back games against Top 25 teams in October.

"The interesting thing was we felt like we've been a physical team all year. And I think those inside the football program certainly recognize that," Dykes said. "We felt like our success in the second half was because of that physical play, that mentality that we carried, really, all season. As the game went along, we felt like our guys got stronger and got more physical. And that's been, you know, pretty consistent really throughout the year."

Dykes sees a lot of similarities in Georgia and Michigan, though he believes the Bulldogs are more athletic, including their "typical SEC defensive ends" that are physical with great speed and skills.

"That's kind of the

whole team," Dykes said. "It's just a very athletic football team, what you would expect from a defending national championship team and a team that's been No. 1 for most of the year."

Duggan said the Horned Frogs took about 24 hours to enjoy the victory over Michigan, but turned their attention to Georgia after returning Sunday to campus.

They know everyone is now wondering if they can be more physical than Georgia, and repeat what they did against then-undefeated Michigan.

"I don't see why not, man. I mean, shoot, it's a one game tournament," Harris said. "Everybody's got both feet and 10 toes down, and we're excited to go out there and just have another opportunity to play another game. This one just happens to be for a national championship."

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