

Three-peat incoming? 'Dawgs have chance at football history

By GREG BEACHAM
AP Sports Writer

Kirby Smart has spent the past 16 years coaching at the top two powerhouses of this era in college football, so he already knew the question on everybody's mind the morning after his Georgia Bulldogs won their second straight College Football Playoff championship game.

"I really don't want to talk about three," Smart said Tuesday in a Los Angeles hotel ballroom shortly before the Bulldogs flew home.

Smart might not want to discuss it, but he couldn't deny he is already thinking about Georgia's chance to do something unprecedented in the last eight-plus decades of college football after obliterating TCU 65-7 in the most one-sided postseason college football game in history.

The Bulldogs have more national championships (2) than losses (1) over the past two seasons, establishing the new gold standard in college football after this 15-0 season.

They'll have a golden opportunity next year to play for a three-peat, which has

never been done in the AP poll era, which dates to 1936.

"Starting to think about the next one, I do think it's going to be much tougher," Smart said. "And I do think we're going to have to reinvent ourselves next year, because you can't just stay the same. We have a lot of guys that are going to come back, and it's easy to get comfortable. And comfortable does not win."

In the long history of the AP Top 25, no team has ever been awarded three national championships in a row by poll voters. Twelve teams, including Georgia this season, have been ranked No. 1 in consecutive seasons in the final Top 25 since the poll became an annual endeavor in 1936. A number of teams — notably Minnesota in the 1930s and Army in the 1940s — claimed threpeats as awarded by other polls.

No team has ever won three straight titles in the AP poll, the coaches' poll, the Bowl Championship Series or the College Football Playoff. That puts Georgia squarely on the cusp of history — with a good chance to make it.

"I mean, this place is spe-

cial," said Javon Bullard, the defensive back who will return in 2023 after making two interceptions and recovering a fumble against TCU. "Just growing up as a kid from the state of Georgia, playing for the University of Georgia, it's special. So the word 'dynasty,' it's something we're building together. And that was built before us, and it's going to continue to be built after us."

Sure, the Dawgs' personnel losses will be significant: The remarkable career of 25-year-old quarterback Stetson Bennett is finally over, while standout defensive tackle Jalen Carter declared for the NFL draft immediately after the game. Other expected losses include defensive backs Kelee Ringo and Christopher Smith, giant tight end Darnell Washington, linebacker Robert Beal and a chunk of the offensive line.

But waves of talent have hit Georgia every year of Smart's tenure at his alma mater. The Dawgs have another bumper recruiting class alongside the addition of several elite players in the transfer portal, most notably the leading re-

ceivers at Mississippi State (Rara Thomas) and Missouri (Dominic Lovett).

Georgia also has a remarkably comfortable schedule in 2023, with a late-season trip to Tennessee looming as probably the biggest obstacle to another unbeaten regular season and trip to the SEC title game.

Vegas agrees: The Bulldogs are the 3-to-1 favorite to three-peat, according to FanDuel Sportsbook.

In the bigger picture, Georgia will need years to rack up the accolades of Nick Saban's Alabama era. The Bulldogs have won two national titles and two SEC championships under Smart; six of Saban's seven national titles and eight conference titles have come with the Crimson Tide.

But Georgia is only the fourth team since 1980 to win two straight national titles and to reach this precipice of history.

The last team to get this close to a three-peat also was Alabama, which won national titles in 2011 and in 2012. The Tide began 2013 ranked No. 1 and won their first 11 games, but Auburn kept Alabama out of the SEC

championship game and the final BCS title game with the legendary Kick Six — Chris Davis' 109-yard return of a missed field goal for a touchdown on the final play of the game.

Southern California got within a few minutes of a third straight national title back in 2005 after going undefeated all the way to the BCS title game at the Rose Bowl. The Trojans' bid ended in heartbreaking fashion with Texas' 41-38 victory led by Vince Young in one of the sport's greatest games.

College football is always changing, and Georgia got another reminder Tuesday when beloved quarterback Stetson Bennett elected not to come to the traditional morning-after news conference.

Bennett, who hopes for an NFL career that would be even more improbable than his college ascent, said on the field after the game that his obligations to Georgia were finished after the final whistle.

"I know he's got G.O.A.T. status in Athens, Georgia, forever," Smart said.

Bennett once again an underdog in draft class

By CHARLES ODUM
AP Sports Writer

Stetson Bennett has a new world of doubters to disprove.

After winning a second consecutive national championship at Georgia, the 25-year-old quarterback is now facing questions about his NFL draft qualifications.

Bennett (5-11, 190) is seen as undersized and lacking elite arm strength — the same questions he faced when he walked on at Georgia in 2017. After leaving for junior college and returning to win back-to-back titles, including Monday night's 65-7 rout of TCU, Bennett is being excluded from the list of top quarterback prospects in the April NFL draft.

After watching Bennett pass for four touchdowns and rush for two scores against TCU, Georgia coach Kirby Smart said draft experts are making the same mistake college recruiters made six years ago.

"When you have a quarterback that can do the protections and check things and know what the defense is doing, yet still beat you with his feet, you've got a high-level quarterback," Smart said. "And people have slept on Stetson Bennett for too long. He needs an opportunity to play for a long time at the next level."

College football has a long list of standout QBs who never caught fire in the NFL. Just among two-time national championship winners,

that list includes Matt Leinert (USC), A.J. McCarron (Alabama) and Tim Tebow (Florida). McCarron was a fifth-round pick; Leinert and Tebow, both Heisman Trophy winners, went in the first round.

Bennett never allowed himself to forget his background as a walk-on. He remained driven through the end of his college career. He was not satisfied with his performance in Georgia's 42-41 College Football Playoff semifinal win over Ohio State so he capped his career with perhaps his best game, according to Smart.

Bennett completed 18 of 25 passes for 304 yards. Both TD runs and two of his four scoring passes came in the first half as the Bulldogs (15-

0) built a 38-7 lead. He added two third-quarter scoring passes before Smart took him out to an ovation from Georgia fans.

Bennett was named offensive player of the game in each of his four CFP games, all of them wins.

Even so, Alabama's Bryce Young, Ohio State's C.J. Stroud, Kentucky's Will Levis, Tennessee's Hendon Hooker and Florida's Anthony Richardson are among the quarterbacks expected to be selected in the first two rounds while Bennett may have to wait until the third day of the draft.

Dane Bugler, NFL draft analyst for The Athletic, said Bennett's draft outlook has improved this season but he is still viewed as a possible late-round pick who will "be drafted to be a backup, not a

starter."

"About midway through this season was when I started to hear from scouts that Bennett had a realistic chance of being drafted," Bugler said Tuesday. "And those chances only increased with the way he finished the season."

ESPN draft analyst Matt Miller said Bennett was projected as a possible undrafted free agent before the season but has improved his draft outlook.

"His lack of size and arm strength are still issues and there will be those who believe the supporting cast around him elevate his game, but Bennett's poise and toughness paired with his accuracy and timing give him a chance to stick in the NFL," Miller said.

Because he returned for his sixth season made possible by the NCAA because of the pandemic, Bennett is older than some quarterbacks selected in the 2022 draft.

Bugler said Bennett has an "average arm."

"Will stare down targets and his accuracy is good, not great," Bugler said. "But he has very good awareness and anticipation. Better athlete than expected. Really tough, both physically and mentally."

Bennett said before the Peach Bowl he won't be deterred by those who question his potential to play in the NFL.

"I will not be making the call to cut off my football career unless my leg gets cut off early," Bennett said. "That will be somebody else's call."

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440 Cathey St., Lewisburg, TN

The Estate of Rose Marie Griffin
By Order of the Chancery Court, Marshall County, TN
House and Lot - Personal Property

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Kimberlee Alsup, Special Commissioner

Rodgers' future uncertain after Packers miss playoffs

By STEVE MEGARGEE
AP Sports Writer

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Aaron Rodgers wants to think it over for a while before the four-time MVP decides whether he wants to return to the Green Bay Packers for a 19th season.

The 39-year-old quarterback also noted the choice isn't solely his to make. The Packers have to want him back.

"I think to assume it's a foregone conclusion would be probably slightly egotistical," Rodgers said Sunday night regarding the Packers' interest in his return. "But I'm going to be a realist here and understand that there's a lot of different parts to this."

Rodgers' future is the biggest issue facing the Packers (8-9) as they move forward now that a 20-16 loss to the Detroit Lions has kept them out of the playoffs to end a string of three straight postseason berths.

Packers coach Matt LaFleur said after Sunday night's game that he "absolutely" wants Rodgers back.

Rodgers didn't approach the MVP form of his 2020 and 2021 seasons. His 12 interceptions — he threw only 13 combined from 2019-21 — were one off the career high he set as a first-year starter in 2008. His passer rating was the lowest of his career.

"I think there were a lot of variables in play this year," LaFleur said Monday. "I really do. And sure, are there some things that he could've done better? Absolutely. Just like there are some things that I know I could've done better and you can go right down the line to every coach, to

every player."

Rodgers played much of the season with a broken right thumb and injured his ribs during a Nov. 27 loss at Philadelphia. If Rodgers isn't back, the Packers likely would turn to 2020 first-round pick Jordan Love, who has just one career start but performed well in relief of an injured Rodgers in the Eagles game.

After Sunday's game, Rodgers discussed factors he'd consider.

"Do I feel like I have anything left to prove to myself?" Rodgers said. "Do I want to go back and gear up for another grind? Or is it time? Is it time to step away? Is it time for another voice to be leading this team? I think I need to get away and contemplate those things, and those are real to me, and I have a lot of pride in what I've accomplished in this league, but I'm also a realist and I understand where we're at as a team."

"We're a young team. There could be some changes with some of the older guys and it could be time to step away. But I could take some time and say, 'Hell no, I need to get back out there and go on another run.' But I'll have to see what it feels like once I'm away from it."

Red zone issues

The Packers lost both their games with the Lions because of red zone struggles that hurt them all season. Green Bay scored touchdowns on just 11 of its 22 goal-to-go situations, the worst percentage of any NFL team and the lowest for any Packers squad since 2006.

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