



GEORGIA

Dawgs receive No. 1 challenge

From staff, AP reports

When the Georgia Bulldogs left New Orleans following their 41-10 rout of Hawaii in January's Sugar Bowl, a powerful force followed them back to Athens.

Springing from their season-ending seven-game winning streak and the bounty of returning starters and stars that would wear the silver britches again this year, the seed had been planted.

Georgia was primed for a No. 1 ranking.

After finishing No. 2 in the final 2007 Associated Press Top 25, the Bulldogs enter a new season as the No. 1 team in most major pre-season polls.

Georgia head coach Mark Richt is fine with all of the high-praise predictions.

"If guys want to start talking about it out in the open, then they have to understand there is a lot of responsibility that goes with it," Richt said.

"They have to understand that those type of seasons don't happen by accident. They happen because you pay the price."

That's just what this year's team will have to do in order to prove themselves worthy of a spot in the BCS National Championship game in Miami.

The Bulldogs must play South Carolina, Arizona State, defending national champion LSU, Florida, Kentucky and Auburn away from the friendly confines of Sanford Stadium.

Yet their home schedule includes back-to-back games against Alabama and Tennessee.

But if anything can pull Georgia through it is their leadership and experience that begins with its 17 returning starters, including nine on defense and most of the skill

players from an offense that scored 40 or more points in six games last year.

Junior quarterback Matthew Stafford now appears to be a seasoned veteran after strong outings in both the 2006 Chick-Fil-A Bowl against Virginia Tech and the Warriors in the Superdome this year.

The 6-foot-3 standout hit on 194-of-348 passes for 2,523 yards and 19 touchdowns in 2007.

A young speedster from New Jersey brought his electricity to the Bulldog Nation last season as Knowshon Moreno rolled up 1,334 yards and scored 14 touchdowns, and was chosen as the SEC Freshman of the Year, a First-Team All-SEC and was a consensus Freshman All-American.

The best news for Richt is few of his top players are seniors. Georgia probably will start only eight seniors, including punter Brian Mimbs, when they open the season Saturday against Georgia Southern.

Mohamed Massaquoi is back at flanker after hauling in 32 passes for 491 yards and four touchdowns last year.

And while split end Kenneth Harris was put at the top of the depth chart after a strong spring, former Calhoun standout and Rome News-Tribune Offensive Player of the Year Kris Durham could make a move for more playing time.

A new concern on the offensive line is left tackle. Trinton Sturdivant, who started all 13 games as a freshman last season, suffered a season-ending knee injury in Georgia's first preseason scrimmage.

Leaders on defense include linebackers Dannell Ellerbe and Rennie Curran and tackle Jeff Owens. Cornerback also is a



File photo / The Associated Press

Quarterback Matthew Stafford returns to direct an explosive Georgia offense.

strength with juniors Asher Allen and Prince Miller.

The other linebacker, sophomore Reshad Jones, had 57 tackles and two interceptions last year despite making only two starts.

In the secondary, Allen followed Ellerbe with 64 tackles and is the Bulldogs' leading returning interceptor after snatching three last year.

Reshad Jones comes in as the starting free safety as a redshirt sophomore and CJ Byrd will be the top guy in the strong slot.

Mimbs is the Bulldogs' top candidate at holder while Bo Fowler is set to start at snapper after Jeff Henson was suspended indefinitely by Richt in the preseason for an altercation off of the field.

Also in the running for time at snapper is Calhoun graduate Ty Frix, who won a walk-on role with the Bulldogs.

SEC CAPSULES

The Southeastern Conference has enjoyed great recent success on the national stage, winning three of the past five BCS national championships (LSU, 2003, 2007; Florida, 2006).

It could be another banner year in 2008 as Georgia is ranked No. 1 in the pre-season coaches' poll, one of five SEC teams ranked in the top 18.

Alabama Crimson Tide
Head Coach: Nick Saban
2007: 7-6 overall, 4-4 in SEC

A solid offensive line will benefit running back Terry Grant. Quarterback John Parker Wilson has experience, but little proven talent at the receiver spot. The defense was a weak spot for Alabama last year and will have to get shored up if the Tide are to make a run at the SEC West crown.

Arkansas Razorbacks
Head Coach: Bobby Petrino
2007: 8-5 overall, 4-4 in SEC

Bobby Petrino is back in the college game, but has some huge holes to fill on offense. Casey Dick returns at quarterback, but the Hogs will feel the losses of Darren McFadden and Felix Jones. Freddie Fairchild is one of the conference's best linebackers.

Auburn Tigers
Head Coach: Tommy Tuberville
2007: 9-4 overall, 5-3 in SEC

The spread offense has been brought to the Plains and quarterback Kodi Burns is the man to run it. Running backs Ben Tate and Brad Lester will take some of the pressure off of Burns. Three starters will have to be replaced on the defensive line, but all three linebackers return.

Florida Gators
Head Coach: Urban Meyer
2007: 9-4 overall, 5-3 in SEC

Seven offensive starters are back for the Gators, led by Heisman winner Tim Tebow. He'll have help from tailbacks Kestahn Moore, tight end Cornelius Ingram and receiver Percy Harvin, but a young defense has some huge holes to fill.

Georgia Bulldogs
Head Coach: Mark Richt
2007: 11-2 overall, 6-2 in SEC

There might not be a better backfield duo in the nation than Matthew Stafford and Knowshon Moreno and they are just two of the reasons Georgia enters the season ranked No. 1. Dannell Ellerbee and Asher Allen will lead the defense, but the Dawgs face a brutal schedule.

Kentucky Wildcats
Head Coach: Rich Brooks
2007: 8-5 overall, 3-5 in SEC

A high-scoring offense was hit hard by graduation and faces a big rebuilding task. Derrick Locke and Dicky Lyons, Jr. are the team's most experience offensive weapons, but the defense needs to improve immensely.

LSU Tigers

Head Coach: Les Miles
2007: 12-2 overall, 6-2 in SEC

LSU won its second national title in five years last January, but enter the new season with questions at quarterback after Ryan Perrilloux was dismissed from the team in the offseason. The defense lost a ton of experience, but excellent recruiting shouldn't allow the LSU defense to drop off too much.

Mississippi Rebels

Head Coach: Houston Nutt
2007: 3-9 overall, 0-8 in SEC

Former Arkansas boss Houston Nutt is now at the controls and the Rebels could surprise. They will pin their offensive hopes on quarterback Jevan Snead, a transfer from Texas. The strength is on defense where end Greg Hardy leads the way.

Mississippi State Bulldogs
Head Coach: Sylvester Croom
2007: 8-5 overall, 4-4 in SEC

The Bulldogs won eight games last year despite an offense that ranked nearly dead-last in the nation. Quarterback Wesley Carroll and tailback Anthony Dixon will be back on offense. A rock-solid defense will be good again, led by a deep a talented secondary, which will be anchored by Derek Pegues.

South Carolina Gamecocks
Head Coach: Steve Spurrier
2007: 6-6 overall, 3-5 in SEC

Fans hope that 2008 will finally be the Gamecocks' year. Chris Smelley and Stephen Garcia are both capable quarterbacks, but the offensive line must shore things up. The defense will be strong with the return of linebacker Casper Brinkley and four returning starters in the secondary.

Tennessee Volunteers
Head Coach: Phillip Fulmer
2007: 10-4 overall, 6-2 in SEC

The Vols have a new coordinator in Dave Clawson, a new quarterback in Jonathan Crompton and a wealth of talent, led by senior tailback Arian Foster. Four starters back on an offensive line that gave up just four sacks all of last year. On defense, linebacker Rico McCoy is ready to lead while the secondary will be one of the nation's best.

Vanderbilt Commodores
Head Coach: Paul Johnson
2007: 5-7 overall, 2-6 in SEC

Chris Nickson and Mackenzi Adams will battle for the starting quarterback position, but Vandy must replace its entire offensive line. The defense returns ends Steve Stone and Broderick Stewart, but the departure of linebacker Jonathan Goff leaves a huge void in the middle.

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