

Sports



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South Carolina finishes 2022 season ranked in Top 25

BY DWAYNE MCLEMORE
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South Carolina can add one more accolade to Shane Beamer's second season as head coach.

The Gamecocks (8-5) were ranked No. 23 in The Associated Press' final Top 25 that was released overnight after Georgia's 65-7 national championship win over TCU.

It's the first time the USC program finished in the AP Top 25 since being ranked No. 4 to close the 2013 season.

South Carolina entered this year's AP poll for the first time on Oct. 23 after the program's first win over Texas A&M, but the Gamecocks fell out of the rankings a week later with a home loss to Missouri.

USC's furious finish to the season then landed the Gamecocks in the poll for good.

The Gamecocks earned wins over Top 10 teams Tennessee and Clemson to climb back into the AP rankings at No. 20. They slipped to No. 23 after the Dec. 30 Gator Bowl loss to Notre Dame.

The Tigers (11-3) finished No. 13 in the poll.

USC also finished No. 23 in the in the USA Today coaches poll, with Clemson No. 12 in that ranking.

The 2023 season begins for South Carolina on Sept. 2 with a neutral-site game against UNC at Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte.

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SAM WOLFE Special To The State

The Gamecock flag is carried across the field following a score at Williams-Brice Stadium in Columbia on Oct. 29.

FINAL AP TOP 25

The Top 25 teams in The Associated Press college football poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, records through Jan. 9, total points based on 25 points for a first-place vote through one point for a 25th-place vote, and previous ranking:

	Record	Pts	Pvs
1. Georgia (63)	14-0	1575	1
2. TCU	13-1	1484	3
3. Michigan	13-1	1438	2
4. Ohio St.	11-2	1394	4
5. Alabama	11-2	1303	5
6. Tennessee	11-2	1294	6
7. Penn St.	11-2	1200	9
8. Washington	11-2	1097	12
9. Tulane	12-2	1025	14
10. Utah	10-4	876	7
11. Florida St.	10-3	814	13
12. Southern Cal	11-3	795	8
13. Clemson	11-3	791	10
14. Kansas St.	10-4	784	11
15. Oregon	10-3	758	15
16. LSU	10-4	757	16
17. Oregon St.	10-3	742	17
18. Notre Dame	9-4	535	19
19. Troy	12-2	322	23
20. Mississippi St.	9-4	320	24
21. UCLA	9-4	243	18
22. Pittsburgh	9-4	233	-
23. South Carolina	8-5	180	20
24. Fresno St.	10-4	164	-
25. Texas	8-5	95	21

Others receiving votes: Duke 49, UTSA 45, Air Force 40, Boise St. 38, Minnesota 35, Texas Tech 19, North Carolina 8, NC State 6, Iowa 4, Purdue 3, Louisville 3, Maryland 2, Marshall 2, Illinois 1, Cincinnati 1.



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South Carolina's Victoria Saxton (5) is introduced before The Gamecocks take on East Tennessee State in the Colonial Life Arena on Nov. 7.

Saxton serves as 'mother hen' in fifth year with Gamecocks

BY JEREMIAH HOLLOWAY
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Dawn Staley recalled fifth-year senior Victoria Saxton's official recruiting visit with South Carolina not going so well in 2017. For that reason, Saxton's future commitment to the Gamecocks seemed far from a sure thing.

"It didn't feel like we were gonna get her," Staley said.

Saxton did sign with South Carolina in the program's 2018

class. When she arrived on campus, Staley saw leadership qualities in the five-star forward from Rome, Georgia. And 145 games, a global pandemic, two Final Four runs and a national championship later, Saxton's fully embraced that capacity.

Staley considers the veteran "low maintenance" who stays true to her personality.

"She's an old soul," Staley said. "She's like a grandma, a mom, a mother hen."

Saxton doesn't receive the spotlight that her starting post

mate Aliyah Boston garners, nor does she get the amount of touches that leading-scorer Zia Cooke does. But she's been a starter for three seasons in a row and brings a high basketball IQ to the court.

She's not one to fill up the stat sheet, but she has accepted her place on the team as someone who does the unnoticed. The 145 games she's played in is the second most in school history, only trailing LeLe Grissett's mark of 150.

"I've always been a leader all

my life," Saxton said. "So coming in just knowing that it's a role to take on and continue to keep doing what I do best."

Saxton — like other athletes — was granted an extra year of eligibility when the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 shortened her sophomore year. She opted to take that extra year after the team won the national championship in April.

She joined South Carolina's Class of 2018 from Model High

SEE GAMECOCKS, 4B

Panthers GM: Coaching search won't include 'large group'

BY STEVE REED
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C.

It's decision time for Carolina Panthers owner David Tepper.

Over the next few weeks, Tepper will have to choose whether to remove the interim tag from Steve Wilks and make him the full-time coach, or to hire someone from outside the organization.

Tepper plans to explore his options.

General manager Scott Fitterer said Monday the Panthers will interview potential candidates beginning immediately, but said it "won't be a large group."

Fitterer indicated he will be a part of the team's hiring search committee, along with Tepper and Tepper's wife, Nicole, the Panthers' chief administrative officer.

He did not identify any candidates and gave no timetable for the hire.

"I think this is a very, very attractive job on the outside where people are looking at it like, this is a young team, this division is up for grabs here in the next few years — there's no dominant quarterback," Fitterer said. "They look at our defense, they look at our offensive line, some of the pieces that we have, and the way we're growing right now. And with a few tweaks here and there, this is a division that we can take over. That opportunity is there. It's up to us to do it."

SEE PANTHERS, 7B

No. 1 Georgia routs TCU to win 2nd consecutive title

BY RALPH D. RUSSO
AP College Football Writer

INGLEWOOD, CALIF.

Stetson Bennett flashed a wry grin as he walked off the field, stopping to hug coach Kirby Smart as the crowd roared.

It was all standing ovations and sideline snacks in the fourth quarter of college football's most lopsided title game.

In emphatic and overwhelming fashion, Georgia became the

first team to repeat as College Football Playoff national champions and left no doubt the 'Dawgs are the new bullies on the block.

Bennett threw two touchdown passes and ran for two scores — in the first half — as No. 1 Georgia demolished No. 3 TCU 65-7 on Monday night.

The Bulldogs (15-0) are the first repeat champs in major college football since Alabama went back-to-back a decade ago. There appears to be a new dy-

nasty emerging from the Southeastern Conference.

"We wanted our kids to play without fear," Smart said. "All year I told them, I said, 'We ain't getting hunted guys, we're doing the hunting, and hunting season's almost over. We've only got one more chance to hunt,' and we hunted tonight."

TCU (13-2), the first Cinderella team of the playoff era, never had a chance against the Geor-

SEE GEORGIA, 4B



MARK J. TERRILL AP

Quarterback Stetson Bennett celebrates Georgia's victory over TCU in the national championship Monday in Inglewood, Calif. Georgia won 65-7.