

# Florida tabbed preseason favorite to win SEC

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) —Wresting the title away from Florida was one thing. Eliminating the swagger could prove more difficult.

A season after failing to win the Southeastern Conference for the first time since 1992, the Gators hardly seem like a team on a downslide. Rather, they're confident and excited about entering the season with a strong defense in a league full of unproven quarterbacks.

They relish their role as favorites. They were ranked third in the Associated Press preseason poll and are the clear choice to climb back to the top of the SEC.

"I like that," said Florida Coach Steve Spurrier. "We want our players to

know we're supposed to win it.

Florida finished 9-2 and continued its mastery over Tennessee last season, beating the Volunteers for the fifth straight time. But the Gators slipped against LSU and Georgia, costing them the SEC East and a chance to match Alabama's record of five consecutive league championships.

Georgia, Tennessee and LSU should again be Florida's main threats, but all have noticeable weaknesses: Tennessee comes in without Peyton Manning, Georgia went into camp mired in a five-man battle of inexperienced quarterbacks, and LSU has no recent history of stringing together important wins.

"It's still Florida, Florida, Florida wherever you go," said defensive line-

man Charles Dorsey of Auburn.

The preseason hype has surrounded the UF defense.

Defensive lineman Ed Chester is a strong All-American candidate, as are linebackers Johnny Rutledge and Jevon Kearse. Kearse is 6-feet-5, 255 pounds and runs the 40 in 4.5 seconds.

On offense, Spurrier eventually will decide between sophomore Jesse Palmer and junior Doug Johnson at quarterback. Johnson won't be available for Florida's Sept. 5 opener against The Citadel.

Many people predict the unsettled quarterback situation is a sign that Spurrier will have to water down the offense.

"I don't know what we'll do,"

Johnson said. "If you hit a whole bunch of passes early, you keep pitching. If you can't hit anything, then you slow down and try something different."

Georgia's Jim Donnan may not enjoy that flexibility. Heading into camp, he was trying to decide between junior Jon England, sophomore Mike Usry and freshmen Nate Hybl and Quincy Carter to replace Mike Bobo.

"We do have a good defense, we have a good offensive line," said Donnan. "For the first time since I've been there, we're going to line up against a lot of teams and say, 'Hey, we're going to run the ball; you've got to stop us.'"

Tennessee figures to do the same, basing more of its offense on 1,364-yard

rusher Jamal Lewis than quarterback Tee Martin.

In the West, LSU appears to be the favorite. Senior quarterback Herb Tyler will run a ground-based offense centered on tailbacks Kevin Faulk (1,144 yards in 1997) and Rondell Mealey (664 yards).

The Tigers finished 9-3 last year, losing to Auburn and Mississippi to finish second for the second straight season.

Auburn won 10 games last year and came within a point of taking the SEC title, but lost quarterback Dameyune Craig to graduation, linebacker Takeo Spikes to the NFL, receiver-Robert Baker to a drug conviction and — most recently — two starting offensive linemen who left for personal reasons.

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