How South Carolina can return to on-field greatness

Behind enemy lines: Daily Tar Heel Sports Editor Pat James
Preseason predictions
Position previews
Know the opponent

HIT OR MITCH

Thursday, September 3, 2015
Letter from the **SPORTS** editor

Head coach Steve Spurrier led South Carolina to three straight 11-win seasons — the first in school history — from 2011-2013. Then, last season, the wheels fell off. A traditionally superb defense looked lost at times and the Gamecocks blew three double-digit fourth quarter leads en route to a underwhelming 7-6 record.

For the first time in recent history, the Gamecocks enter 2015 with curbed expectations. A year after losing five players to the NFL, South Carolina faces a rebuilding process. At the same time, the Gamecocks are looking for a bounce-back season following a fifth-place finish in the SEC East.

Despite a down year, the Gamecocks still placed five players in the NFL, showing that last season's disappointment was more than simply a lack of talent.

Football is a complex game. A team can fire on all cylinders one week and completely sputter out the next. No one aspect of last year's team caused the setback.

Sure, the defense gave up 30.4 points per game, but it was the offense that put up just 20 points against Missouri and had turnovers on back-to-back fourth quarter possessions against Kentucky. Kickoff coverage was poor at times, gifting opponents good field positions, and coaching was poor at best in a some games.

For South Carolina, 2015 is an in-between year. There are plenty of things to love about the 2015 squad. A revamped defensive line and proven linebacking corps could have the defense back to its pre-2014 form while a thin offensive line and unproven quarterback could have the offense gasping for air.

It's a season of “what ifs.” What if last season was just a fluke and the Gamecocks go 10-2 and challenge for the SEC title? What if all goes wrong and the Gamecocks lose some of their winnable games and end up 6-6? Would Spurrier contemplate retirement?

Regardless of this season's outcome, it will be a fun year. Gamecock faithful have historically been one of the nation's most loyal fan bases. During arguably the worst stretch in the history of the SEC when South Carolina lost 21 straight games from 1998-1999, the Gamecocks still averaged well over 70,000 fans per game.

Spurrier changed the culture at South Carolina, taking the Gamecocks to a school record of seven straight bowl games and the first three 11-win seasons in school history. He has brought national prominence to a school that has never been regarded as national power.

With the nation's second-toughest schedule, the odds are against this South Carolina team. However, the odds were stacked against the Gamecocks when their starting quarterback was announced as an undersized, 72nd-ranked true sophomore athlete. Connor Shaw went on to lead the Gamecocks to a 27-5 record as a starter on his way to becoming the greatest quarterback in school history.

When his back is against the wall, Spurrier has an uncanny knack for finding unsung heroes. Will someone
step up in 2015? If so, will junior All-American Pharoh Cooper have to do everything for the Gamecocks, or will they get contributions from elsewhere?

It may be unfair to expect double-digit wins out of this year’s team, but the Gamecocks do have SEC talent. Some experts have predicted the Gamecocks to have a breakout season and “shock the world” so to speak.

What does this team have to do to be considered a success? If the Gamecocks go 9-3, but lose to rivals Clemson and Georgia, is the season a success? If they beat Clemson in a 5-7 season, is it to be considered successful?

In this issue, we’ll examine every aspect of South Carolina football, spotlighting each position group and impact player and taking an in-depth look at every offseason change.

We’ll debate the policy of paying out stipends to student-athletes and look at the best and worst possible scenarios for the Gamecocks this season.

We’ll breakdown Thursday’s matchup with the Tar Heels and make our season predictions.

We’ll zoom out and examine the country as a whole, taking our best guess at the national title and Heisman winners.

From all of us on staff at The Daily Gamecock, we hope you enjoy reading this Weekender as much as we’ve enjoyed producing it.

Regardless of this year’s outcome, it will be a wild ride. Win or lose, we’ll raise our glasses and say, “Here’s a health Carolina, forever to thee.”

—Will Helms, Sports Editor
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We all know that South Carolina’s 7-6 2014 campaign was disappointing, but the question remains, “With five starters now in the NFL, how did the team falter?”

The answer is not necessarily limited to a single phase of the game, but it does start with the defensive line. Last season, the Gamecocks at times played three freshman at once in the defensive backfield, leaving no margin for error up front.

Not lacking in talent, the defensive secondary struggled mightily with confidence. The best safeguard for a suspect secondary is a consistent pass rush. Youn playes are susceptible occasional burns, and the Gamecock secondary was timid last season without a pass rush to protect them.

An intimidating pass rush can cover up other weaknesses. However, because the Gamecocks struggled to get pressure up front, the defense was always on its heels. Cornerbacks that came out of press coverage schemes in high school were forced to play Cover 2.

Maybe the best example of this is last year’s Missouri game. Coming off their best defensive showing of the season against East Carolina, the Gamecocks were confident. Defensive coordinator Lorenzo Ward played press man coverage for the first 3 1/2 quarters of the game.

The Gamecock defense gave up 171 total yards and seven points in that span. Up 14 points, however, the defense switched back to a more conservative Cover 2 scheme. Missouri scored touchdowns on their next two drives. The first included two passes of more than 25 yards — Missouri’s two longest plays of the game.

Most of South Carolina’s seemingly unrelated issues last season stemmed from a lackluster pass rush. Head coach Steve Spurrier lost faith in his defense midway through the season. The Gamecock offense began to gamble on fourth down more often due to a lack of faith in the defense.

Even career years by linebackers Skai Moore and Jonathan Walton were overshadowed by struggles on the defensive line. Walton exploded for 38 tackles in the team’s final five games. Moore led the team with 93 tackles, the most by a Gamecock in seven years.

The 2014 Gamecocks did not have any elite pass rushers like past squads. From 2010-2014 South Carolina had at least one defensive lineman drafted every season. Last year’s team simply lacked both the talent and the experience to put pressure on the quarterback.

With a new defensive coordinator, new scheme and two highly-rated defensive line transfers, this season’s defensive front looks more similar to the dominant lines of the early 2010s than last year’s.

The Gamecocks will rely heavily on junior college transfers Dante Sawyer and Marquavius Lewis to provide pressure. Sawyer will start at defensive tackle while Lewis will start at the strongside defensive end position. The key to the success of the defense starts and ends with the defensive line. If the Gamecock line can put pressure on opposing quarterbacks, the defense should be a much improved unit.
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College football is underway, and most fans are excited to see just how the first week goes. These games have a lot of pressure behind them, even in games where ranked teams are playing unranked ones. The underdogs could come out swinging and give the top-ranked teams a tough game.

No. 1 Ohio State at Virginia Tech:
Monday, Sept. 7 at 8 p.m.
The Buckeyes will travel to play the Hokies in their first game of the season. Ranked at No. 1 in the AP Top 25, USA Today Coaches Poll and the NCAA College Football Power Rankings, Ohio State has the clear advantage of beating Virginia Tech.

The Buckeyes finished last season 14-1 overall and 8-0 in their conference, the Big Ten. They also took home the national title after beating Oregon 42-20. These two teams met last season in the Buckeyes’ home opener where the Hokies managed to win 35-21, snapping Ohio State’s 25-game winning streak.

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No. 11 Notre Dame finished last season 8-5 overall and won the Franklin American Mortgage Music City Bowl against LSU 31-28. The Fighting Irish will return senior defensive lineman Sheldon Day, who was recently named a team captain for the second straight season. He has a total of 96 tackles in his three years of collegiate play and was named to the Outland Trophy Watch List in 2014.

No. 20 Wisconsin at No. 3 Alabama:
Saturday, Sept. 5 at 8 p.m.
The Crimson Tide and the Badgers are set to play their season opener in AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas. The last time these two teams met was in 1928 and Wisconsin won 15-0.

Alabama finished off last season 12-2 and went 7-1 in SEC play. Ranked at No. 3 in the preseason AP Poll, the Crimson Tide is a team to watch — especially with some of their starters. They had a league-best five players make the first-team honors for the 2015 Preseason Coaches All-SEC Team including offensive lineman Cam Robinson. As a sophomore, Robinson started all 14 games; he is a contender for the Outland Trophy and Lombardi Award. Robinson finished his freshman year with 32 knockdown blocks.

The Badgers went 11-3 overall and 7-1 in conference last season. They made it to the Big Ten championship game against Ohio State but lost 59-0. Returning redshirt junior Leo Musso shows promise as a top safety for Wisconsin this season. Musso played in 12 games last season and finished with 11 tackles total. He was honored with Academic All-Big Ten in both 2013 and 2014.

These two teams are both big competitors in their conferences, and this matchup will be one to watch.
### Season Predictions

*from the staff of D&G*

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#### Predictors

- **WILL HELMS**
  - SPORTS EDITOR
- **KELLI CALDWELL**
  - ASST. SPORTS EDITOR
- **DREW MUELLER**
  - WRITER
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September 4:
Iron Man 2
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Prepared for Thursday night’s showdown with South Carolina, The Daily Gamecock talked with Pat James, sports editor of The Daily Tar Heel, to get some inside information about the Gamecocks’ first opponent.

The Daily Gamecock: South Carolina beat North Carolina by 17 (points) two years ago. What does UNC head coach Larry Fedora have to change from a coaching perspective if the Tar Heels are to have a shot this year?

Pat James: In the 2013 matchup against South Carolina, North Carolina struggled to establish its offense early on. UNC spent a majority of the first quarter feeling out the Gamecock defense, utilizing screen passes to quickly get the ball out of quarterback Bryn Renner’s hands and give the Tar Heels offensive line a better chance in protection. Those passes resulted in short gains and quick series, as South Carolina marched out to a 17-0 lead. UNC later established more of a rhythm on offense, but the early deficit proved to be too much. With the Gamecocks not having as strong of a pass rush as they did in 2013, the Tar Heels can look to air the ball out early and often in order to get in sync.

TDG: Running back Elijah Hood was a monster in high school and was a good short-yardage option last season. How big of a role will he have in the Tar Heel offense this season?

PJ: When UNC’s depth chart was revealed on Monday, no one was surprised to see Elijah Hood listed as the Tar Heels’ No. 1 running back. Coach Larry Fedora has raved about Hood this offseason, and he recently said the coaching staff has to keep an eye on the sophomore to make sure he doesn’t exhaust himself in practices because of how hard he goes. Quarterback Marquise Williams has led UNC in rushing each of the past two seasons, and Fedora has made it a point of emphasis to establish the running game with the halfbacks in 2015. Hood missed four games because of an injury in 2014, and he reached double figures in carries only three times. But with another year under his belt, Hood will be much more involved in the Tar Heels’ offense this season.

TDG: Everything I’m reading says that quarterback Marquise Williams has improved substantially. What has the senior done that has Chapel Hill fans so excited?

PJ: Coaches and players have praised Marquise Williams for how he has embraced his leadership role as well as the maturity he’s shown so far. Despite 19 career starts, Williams is entering this season as UNC’s definite starter for the first time in his career, and his confidence in himself and his teammates might be at an all-time high. After undergoing offseason surgery to repair a hip injury, he says he is the healthiest he has been since his sophomore year of high school. He led UNC in rushing yards each of the past two seasons, but says he plans on running a little less this season in order to protect his body and get his teammates more involved. Coach Larry Fedora also says Williams’ decision-making process is a lot quicker. Behind an experienced offensive line, the quarterback could continue to improve from his superb 2014 season.

TDG: What has Gene Chizik done to turn around a Tar Heel team that finished 117th in total defense last season?

PJ: Since Chizik was hired, the Tar Heels have transitioned from a complex 4-2-5 defense to a traditional 4-3 scheme. The switch has allowed players to get a better understanding of where they need to be in certain situations, which could result in fewer breakdowns. The new scheme encourages players to play at full speed and be more physical — which is the characteristic Chizik hopes defines his defense. When Chizik and his new staff arrived in the spring, they stressed the fundamentals and took a step-by-step approach to implement the new scheme. Spring practices allowed Chizik to lay the foundation for his defense, and his attention to details has allowed the players to easily grasp the new scheme. Chizik was also tasked with restoring confidence in a unit that was abysmal in 2014, and while Coach Larry Fedora notes the team hasn’t faced any adversity yet, the Tar Heels sound energized by Chizik and the changes he has brought.

TDG: Who is the X-Factor for the Tar Heels on Thursday?

PJ: The new-look UNC defense will be making its much-anticipated debut on Thursday, and senior linebacker Jeff Schoettmer called the game “a measuring stick” of where the unit stands. For the Tar Heels to find success against the Gamecocks, I believe a strong effort by the UNC defensive line will be necessary. The Tar Heels’ defensive line rarely generated pressure in 2014, and the unit remains a question mark entering this season. The group is one of the deepest on UNC’s roster, however, and players like defensive end Junior Gnonkonde and defensive tackle Nazair Jones could be poised for breakout seasons. Facing Connor Mitch in his first career start, the young, athletic players on the UNC defensive front are determined to rattle the South Carolina quarterback. By forcing Mitch to make quick decisions, the Tar Heels could procure a couple of crucial turnovers in what might be a tight game and set the tone for the season.
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Last Tuesday, South Carolina head coach and former Heisman-winning quarterback Steve Spurrier announced that Connor Mitch will be South Carolina’s starting quarterback this season. Mitch is the most experienced of the Gamecock signal-callers with a whopping six career pass attempts.

The redshirt sophomore from Raleigh, North Carolina, was a high school standout. The Wakefield High School product was a four-star recruit in 2013, choosing South Carolina over traditional powerhouses such as Auburn, Alabama, North Carolina and LSU.

Mitch ranks second all-time in most passing categories in North Carolina, trailing only Chris Leak in career yards and touchdowns. Mitch holds the NCHSAA record for most passing yards in a game when he racked up 667 through the air. His nine touchdown passes that same game also set the state record.

Mitch finished his high school career with 12,078 passing yards and 153 touchdowns, including an incredible 63 in his senior season alone.

Mitch has always had an arm; the key for Mitch will be taking care of the football.

“Connor will have every opportunity to take the reins and run with it,” Spurrier said when he announced Mitch as starter. “The competition was extremely close, but we had to make a decision. We will give him all the support we can. As long as he takes care of the ball, keeps his head calm, he very easily could be the quarterback the entire year.”

Winning Spurrier’s blessing for year-long quarterback is a feat in and of itself. Prior to former quarterback Connor Shaw’s arrival on campus, Spurrier often rotated quarterbacks throughout the season, games and even individual series.

This season, it looks like Mitch will be given at least a game to prove himself worthy of the starting job. Spurrier is historically capricious when it comes to quarterbacks, but he’s given no indication that he will rotate quarterbacks or bench Mitch against North Carolina unless the game begins to get out of hand.

Backing up Mitch are redshirt junior Perry Orth, redshirt freshman Michael Scarneccia and true freshman Lorenzo Nunez.

Since Nunez enrolled late in the summer, he had to learn the offense more quickly than the veterans. While Spurrier acknowledged that Nunez will need more time before he is able to run the offense for an entire game, he hinted that Nunez will not be redshirted and that he will play this season.

Many have speculated that Nunez will run the “Wildcock” offense headed by junior wide receiver Pharoh Cooper last season. The dual-threat quarterback is versatile and could see playing time in a number of different ways this season.

Orth is a former walk-on that earned a scholarship in July. No one aspect of his game stands out as elite, but Orth is a reliable backup who is the most likely candidate to see the field if Mitch does not play up to Spurrier’s standards.

A season ago, former quarterback Dylan Thompson played well for the Gamecocks, but threw 11 interceptions, including a game-losing pick-six at Kentucky.

Though Thompson threw for more yards and touchdowns than Shaw did the previous year, the offense scored more in 2013 due in large part to Shaw’s 24:1 touchdown to interception ratio.

For this year’s Gamecocks to be successful, the signal-caller must take care of the football. South Carolina should have a strong ground game, so Mitch does not have to throw for 300 yards a game like last year’s one-dimensional offense.

If Mitch can take care of the football and spread it out to the above-average-skill position players this season, the Gamecock offense has the chance to match, or even exceed, last year’s production.
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It’s no secret that South Carolina’s typically formidable defense struggled mightily a season ago.

A year after giving up just 20.3 points per game — good for 12th in the nation — the Gamecocks finished 92nd in the country, surrendering 30.4 points a game.

On National Signing Day, head coach Steve Spurrier announced the hiring of co-defensive coordinator Jon Hoke, a move intended to tackle South Carolina's defense woes.

Older brother of former Michigan head coach Brady Hoke, Hoke was Spurrier’s defensive coordinator at Florida from 1999-2001. When Spurrier was hired by the Gamecocks in 2004, he asked Hoke to rejoin him as defensive coordinator. However, Hoke declined and instead moved to Chicago to become the secondary coach for the Bears.

Hoke's system is more physical than Lorenzo Ward’s, last year’s sole defensive coordinator and now Hoke’s co-defensive coordinator. Despite having the same title, the two coaches have vastly different roles.

Always a great players' coach, Ward has been handling much of the technique work. In an attempt to improve defense, Ward moved from the sidelines to the press box in order to get a better view of the defense as a whole.

Hoke, on the other hand, has a mind for the X's and O's of the game. A standout cornerback at Ball State, Hoke studied schematics under defensive guru Dom Capers while coaching for the Houston Texans.

Hoke will handle play-calling duties this season, bringing an aggressive style to the field that Ward shied away from utilizing. A fan of a wide variety of zone blitzes, Hoke will apply pressure to opposing offense at a much higher rate than Ward did.

An underwhelming defensive back should benefit from having two secondary coaches in Ward and Hoke.

Already, Gamecock fans have seen the effect of Hoke’s new scheme. Foregoing Ward’s 4-2-5 formation in favor of a more traditional 4-3 set, Hoke has moved several players to new positions to fit his system.

Hoke repositioned junior Spur linebacker Jordan Diggs at strong safety this summer where he will start against North Carolina. Former safety Chaz Elder will start as a cornerback against the Tar Heels. The 6-foot-2, 209-pound junior is bigger and taller than the other corners, and his physicality is part of what makes him a better fit in Hoke’s system.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of Hoke’s system hinges on the amount of pressure the defense can put on the quarterback. South Carolina will blitz more often this season to improve on a league-worst 14 sacks last year.

If the Gamecock defense can pressure opposing quarterbacks, they will improve on the 432.7 yards allowed per game last season. While much of that depends on the ability of the front seven, the more aggressive scheme brought to Columbia by Hoke should help the Gamecocks return to their usual defensive dominance.
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The Gamecocks have big shoes to fill at the running back position for this year's season.

Mike Davis served as the primary tailback for the Gamecocks last year, rushing for 982 yards and 4.9 yards per carry while scoring nine touchdowns. Davis opted for the NFL draft instead of returning for his senior season, and the San Francisco 49ers snagged him in a 4th round draft selection.

With Davis gone, the coaching staff is expected to turn to fifth-year senior Brandon Wilds and redshirt sophomore David Williams as the primary running backs this upcoming season. Redshirt senior Shon Carson is listed third on the depth chart and will also rotate in as a change-of-pace back.

Wilds enters this season with 1,277 career rushing yards on 256 carries and has made 11 career starts. Five of those starts came during his freshman year in 2011 when a slew of injuries vaulted Wilds, then a fifth-string running back, into starting duties. He performed admirably in his five starts, highlighted by a 137-yard performance against Tennessee.

After spending the last three seasons as a backup, Wilds is relishing this opportunity to play as a starter in 2015.

“I want it bad,” Wilds said at South Carolina's media day. “Coming out from last season and the season before it, playing here for a while, I'm just ready to be that guy. Ready to just show everybody what I have to bring to the table.”

Wilds rushed for 570 yards on 106 carries and scored five touchdowns last season, four rushing and one receiving. His 5.4 yards per carry actually bested the 4.9 yards per carry that Davis posted. If he can maintain that level of production as a starter, the transition from Davis to Wilds should be a smooth one.

Running back coach Everette Sands agrees. “I think he wants it a lot,” Sands said. “His practice performance up to this point has been great. You can see him being explosive, just running down the field, finishing all his runs. It's really important to him.”

The coaching staff is also enamored with the potential of redshirt sophomore David Williams; he is expected to split carries with Wilds in what should be a run-emasphized offense. Williams, a former four-star recruit from Imhotep Charter in Philadelphia, rushed for 256 yards on 45 carries with 5.7 yards per carry and two touchdowns as a redshirt freshman.

Competition between Williams and Wilds has been intense since the spring, when Williams was named the most improved running back by the coaching staff. Williams has a speed edge over Wilds and flashed big play potential last season whenever he got outside the perimeter. At 6-foot-1, 222 pounds, Williams also has the size and strength to be an effective downhill runner.

It's easy to envision Williams one day monopolizing the bulk of the carries in the Gamecocks offense, but, for now, he is expected to complement Brandon Wilds.

Ultimately, the coaching staff enters the season expecting big things from both of their primary running backs. Head coach Steve Spurrier doesn't think there will be much of a drop off in the Gamecocks running back production in 2015. “We have confidence that both those players are very good and ready to play,” Spurrier said.

Especially early in the season, the Gamecocks will lean heavily on their running game to ease the pressure off first-year starting quarterback Connor Mitch. Establishing a strong rushing attack will be crucial to the Gamecocks' success on offense in 2015. Wilds and Williams appear ready for the challenge.
Starting lineup

CB
Rico McWilliams (1)

WR
Carlton Heard (17)

WR
Deebo Samuel (1)

LT
Brandon Shell (71)

LG
Mike Matulis (76)

C
Alan Knott

QB
Connor Mitch (6)

FB
Rivers Bedenbaugh (39)

TB
Brandon Wilds (22)

WILL
Jonathan Walton (28)

DE
Cedrick Cooper (18)

DT
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Should college athletes receive pay?

I have to begin with a disclaimer: I am personally in favor of paying student athletes cash rather than giving them a scholarship. The NCAA has already let schools start “paying” students a small stipend. But I will play devils advocate for the NCAA’s position here and argue that the scholarship-based system should remain. I must concede there are several valid points to this argument.

Many have argued that the dollar amount of a scholarship is not adequate enough compensation for the many hours of practice, travel and play that athletes must put into it. That does not include the free advertising, positive publicity and exposure each team brings the university.

Athletes are expected to put their bodies on the line for their schools but cannot even receive workers’ compensation for injuries sustained while playing.

Essentially athletes are used as pawns and exploited for profit, without any sort of compensation aside from scholarships that cover tuition and some room and board.

Head football coach Steve Spurrier is the state’s highest-paid employee, but is forbidden from sharing anything with the athletes he coaches and mentors.

The college athlete practices at least 20 hours a week, but is given nothing in return. In a column I wrote in February, I pointed out that if universities were to pay the athletes of all major sports $2,500 a year, as I pointed out in February, I pointed out that if universities were to pay the athletes of all major sports $2,500 a

money, coupons and gift cards.

In 2014, South Carolina’s athletic teams brought in more than $100 million for the university. Despite growing travel costs, Gamecock athletics run at a profit just about every year.

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But I will play devils advocate for the NCAA’s position here and argue that the scholarship-based system should remain. I must concede there are several valid points to this argument.

Many have argued that the dollar amount of a scholarship is not adequate enough compensation for the many hours of practice, travel and play that athletes must put into it. But college graduates earn over $800,000 more than high school graduates over the course of a lifetime. That is a lot of dough.

Paying players, while giving more equality to those in revenue-generating sports, would not necessarily mean fair compensation for those in Olympic sports. If the pay scale were determined by how much money you bring in for the university, as a “free market” theoretically should work, that would mean athletes who work just as hard if not harder for their school than football and basketball players would be shafted.

If players were paid, it would mean even more pressure to perform, and academics for these players would be put in even more of a precarious position. If you can earn a bonus for good play as professional athletes can, why not skip class to try to improve your free throws or your spiral?

What about those players who are already in school more for the athletics than the academics? Take Cardale Jones, quarterback for the defending national champion Ohio State Buckeyes, who tweeted, “Why should we have to go to class if we came here to play football... we ain’t [sic] come to play school... classes are pointless.”

I blame the NFL and the NBA, who all but mandate players go to college for a limited amount of time. These barriers should
be removed so that players who want to immediately play professionally should be allowed to do so, and players who wish to receive an education can go to college and play.

The NCAA has many systemic issues: the overpayment of coaches, administrators and athletic directors, the academic scandals that have rocked schools like the University of North Carolina, the careless way players are tossed aside after injury, the web of ridiculous rules they weave and many more.

I’m not sure that paying players can fix all of these issues.

semester (roughly what the average work-study pays), the total cost would only amount to 34 percent of what the average Division I head coach makes each year.

Student athletes at Power Five conferences received their first stipends on Aug. 20. At South Carolina, each athlete will receive 10 payments of $420.10 as a check or direct deposit to be spent as they please.

Many will use the compensation to save for the future or to pay for food. Regardless of how each player spends his or her money, they’ve earned it, and it’s nice to see that the NCAA has finally recognized that at least a little bit.
College football is here, and it wouldn’t be the same beloved sport without a key player in the offensive position: the wide receiver.

Injuries have sidelined a few receiver hopefuls, but there are still plenty of players wishing to see time on the field this season. Freshman Jerad Washington suffered a broken leg in Sunday night's practice. The Jacksonville, Florida native will return to the team as a double redshirt according to head coach Steve Spurrier.

Junior Pharoh Cooper, redshirt freshman Deebo Samuel and redshirt senior Carlton Heard will start at wide receiver on Thursday. This month the Coaches Preseason All-SEC First Team was announced and Cooper found his place in three sections. He has received first-team honors as a wide receiver, all-purpose back and the return specialist. He is returning this season after finishing third in the SEC with 69 receptions.

He also finished second in receiving yards with 1,136 and in receiving yards per game with 87.4. In his 24 career games, Cooper has started 13 with a total of 402 rushing yards. Spurrier went through extensive practices over the summer and knows which players he will start come Thursday.

“A lot of players had exceptional summer workouts. Pharoh [Cooper], Brandon Shell, T.J. Gurley, Jerell Adams had an excellent summer,” said Spurrier. “We don’t have any loud guys, so much. I sort of like the guys who lead by example. We’ve got several older players that have really demonstrated excellent leadership.”

Cooper is a returning player for the Gamecocks and knows he wants more out of this season than last, not only for himself but for the team and for Spurrier.

“We’re not expected to go 7-6 here at South Carolina,” Cooper said. “We know we have to have a better year than last year, which we will.”

Next to Cooper, Samuel will make his debut Thursday and is expected to perform well at the X-receiver position. Although he has not received any playing time at the college level, Samuel managed to make a name for himself in high school. He broke his school record with a total of 53 touchdowns in his career. In his senior year alone, he had 61 receptions for 1,184 yards and was named the High School Sports Report Class AAA Offensive Player of the Year. Samuel is most excited to actually get in the game this year and, hopefully, make some good plays.

“I don’t feel like I have anything to prove,” Samuel said. “I mean, we’re all out here grinding and getting better. You make plays when the ball comes to you. When the ball is in someone else’s hands, you have to go block and help them out just as well as they help you. All of us here have a chance to make big plays.”

The receivers will have to step up with first-year starter commanding the offense.
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Reshuffled line tasked with protecting Mitch

Claudia Chakamian
@C_CHAKAMIAN

The offensive line will have some changes in the 2015 season, especially with the departure of All-American guard A.J. Cann and left tackle Corey Robinson for the pros. After an average 2014, the offensive line looks to get back to its typical good form.

Multiple injuries plagued the 2014 line — the source of some of their problems. Redshirt senior Mike Matulis will be back this season. Matulis has missed much of his college career due to injuries and surgeries. He only played against Furman and Tennessee and then missed the remainder of the 2014 season due to surgery on his left knee. If the recent surgery worked and Matulis is able to stay healthy, he will most likely start at left guard, though he can also play tackle.

Redshirt junior Cody Waldrop will also be returning this season after undergoing offseason knee surgery. Waldrop stepped in as right guard when Matulis was injured but received limited playing time due to his own injury. So far, Waldrop looks strong and ready for play on the interior of the line.

Experienced redshirt senior Brandon Shell will start at left tackle this year to help protect the quarterback. Shell is the most experienced lineman on the team, starting in every game last season for a career total of 36 times and bringing a streak of 35 consecutive starts into the 2015 season. He will be able to give the young players some advice and help them along the way while giving the quarterback the best possible opportunity to score.

“He probably would’ve had a shot in the NFL, but he realizes he can play a lot better than he played last year,” South Carolina head coach Steve Spurrier said of Shell. “He’s physically stronger and quicker than he was last year.”

The offensive line will have a few freshmen looking for playing time this year.

“The freshmen haven’t played yet, so we’ll reserve a lot of praise for them until they start playing in a real game,” Spurrier said. “They have excellent attitudes. They hang around together and are all fine young men.”

Blake Camper, a three-star prospect, will compete for a tackle position while four-star prospect and highly regarded in-state lineman Zack Bailey will try for time at the offensive guard position. Three-star recruit Christian Pellage will also look for time at tackle. These fresh faces will hopefully give the offensive line the depth the Gamecocks lacked a season ago.

Offensive line coach Shawn Elliott will return for his sixth year as coach. Elliott is pleased to have many of his veterans back after various injuries. With Matulis and Waldrop tentatively healthy and ready to go, they can give Elliott the experience and talent he needs on the line. Shell also sat out of spring practice recovering from an offseason shoulder surgery, but he’s ready to go for the season.

Health will be a huge component in this group’s success. If they can get through the season with minimal injuries, they should have a solid, strong line.

Besides trying to stay healthy, the offensive line will have to work to protect quarterback Connor Mitch, who got the nod to start against UNC in the season opener. This will be Mitch’s first career start, which could provide some struggles for the line.

There may be some changes, but with the veterans coming back healthier and stronger than before — and with a few fresh faces — the offensive line should be better off in the long run.
The Gamecocks had an unusually subpar showing at defensive line. What once was a strong suit became the downfall for the defensive coordinator. In the past, the likes of Jadeveon Clowney, Melvin Ingram, Chaz Sutton and Kelcy Quarles dominated the trenches.

In 2012, the Gamecocks lead the SEC in total sacks at 43, five more than next best, and in 2013 ranked seventh in total sacks with 25. Additionally, certain star individuals stepped up. Clowney was second in the SEC for sacks in 2012 (13) and Quarles took third in 2013 (10).

However, last season, no South Carolina players were anywhere near the SEC sack list. In fact, not one Gamecock eclipsed the top 40; the leader in sacks for the team was converted safety Jordan Diggs at a mere two sacks. As a team, they had 14 sacks all season — dead last in the conference.

The newcomers are here to save the day. Combined with those returning, they will arguably make up the deepest and most complete aspect of head coach Steve Spurrier's team.

For starters, South Carolina's newest staff member, co-defensive coordinator Jon Hoke, will relieve some of the pressure that co-defensive coordinator Lorenzo Ward felt last season. Though they share a title, Hoke will be in charge of the backs while Ward will oversee the line and linebackers. Ward welcomes the opportunity to focus on the line with the help of defensive line coach Deke Adams.

“We need two sets of eyes on the front four, because I think that is important,” Ward said. “You’re only going to be as good as your front four.”

As for the players, seven new defensive linemen joined the Gamecocks in the offseason. Sophomore defensive tackle Dante Sawyer, a JUCO transfer, garnered 6.5 sacks and 10.5 tackles for a loss for East Mississippi Community College last season, earning him a four-star ranking from most media outlets. He is expected to start on the same side as junior Marquavious Lewis, who is thought to have a starting spot on the team ever since he signed his name to play for South Carolina.

Lewis transferred from Hutchinson Community College where he was regarded as the best JUCO player in the country. Even freshmen Dexter Wideman, Boosie Whitlow and Shameik Blackshear are expected to work their way into the rotation as newbies. Either way, Ward expects the newcomers to make an impact immediately.

“We have high expectations for them,” Ward said. “We recruited them, and we feel that all those guys

Drew Mueller
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Courtesy of South Carolina Athletics

Lewis leads revamped front four
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can come in and help us, especially where we need help, especially up front. They are athletic, they can move around, they had a good summer working with (strength and conditioning coach) Joe (Connolly), and it will be interesting to see when we get in pads.”

Even with all the new Gamecocks, those who have been on the team are still expected to get plenty of play time.

Redshirt senior Cedrick Cooper, after an injury-filled junior season, owns the starter spot opposite Lewis at defensive end. Backing him up is redshirt junior Darius English, who Spurrier says looks like an All-American.

English played in 12 games last season and recorded his first solo sack against Georgia. Also, Gerald Dixon Jr. returns to the rotation after holding down the fort at end last year with 42 tackles to add to his two sacks.

At defensive tackle, Dixon will reclaim his starting spot at one of the tackles. The 6-3 Rock Hill native started in 12 out of 13 games in 2014 and racked up 29 tackles, forced a fumble and blocked two kicks. In the second slot, redshirt senior Phillip Dukes will see regular action for the third year in a row.

Sophomore Taylor Stallworth will back up Sawyer and will roll the momentum he gained at the end of last season (six tackles in the final three games) into this year.

With the new guys sprinkled into those returning, Spurrier will have a much deeper and complete team than last year.

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Even now, few know what to make of the Gamecock secondary's perplexing 2014 season.

Statistically, the passing totals aren't bad. South Carolina gave up 220.5 yards per game through the air. Quarterbacks threw just 16 touchdowns and 11 interceptions against the Gamecocks, but it still seemed that opposing teams' offenses moved the ball at will through the air.

The Gamecocks only recorded 14 sacks last season, leaving their secondary in a precarious position much of the time.

South Carolina picked off 11 passes last season, but only one of those was by a player on this year's secondary. The Gamecocks lost starting cornerback Brison Williams to the NFL and safety Sharrod Golightly transferred out of the program following the 2014 season.

However, the Gamecocks now have essentially two secondary coaches — Co-defensive coordinators Jon Hoke and Lorenzo Ward. Both have extensive backgrounds as secondary coaches.

Hoke was hired after spending five years with the Chicago Bears as the defensive backs coach. In Hoke's system, the secondary plays zone coverage almost exclusively. Last season, the young secondary, most of whom were recruited by Ward to play man coverage, played zone coverage to combat a weak pass rush.

Hoke's system calls for athletic corners and physical safeties. The Gamecocks have both.

Redshirt junior Rico McWilliams returns as a starter at the right corner position. McWilliams started six games a season ago and was credited with five pass breakups. At 5-foot-11, McWilliams is on the shorter side of the spectrum where Hoke is concerned. He has had a quiet fall, but has never really been in jeopardy of losing his starting job.

One of the bigger surprises on the depth chart for the North Carolina game is redshirt junior Chaz Elder. A backup safety for much of last season, Elder is slotted as the starter at left corner.

While the transition to corner is due in large part to a backlog at safety, Elder's athleticism and stature sets him apart from some of the other corners.

“He's a good athlete and obviously you like his height and his length,” Hoke said of Elder. “We wanted to see what he looked like [at cornerback]. We knew we had Isaiah Johnson coming in [to play safety].”

Elder jumped sophomore Chris Lammons on the depth chart, though Lammons had one of the better camps of any defender. Since most teams in the SEC now run spread offenses, the athletic corner will get the opportunity to play often. More accustomed to man coverage, Lammons has adjusted well and his good technique should allow him to cover slot receivers.

The Gamecocks have gotten bigger at both safety positions in an attempt to become more physical on the back end. Converted Spur Jordan Diggs moved to strong safety early in the spring and immediately set himself apart.

Transfer Isaiah Johnson graduated from Kansas and was granted immediate eligibility under the NCAA's graduate transfer exemption. Johnson finished last season as the Jayhawks' second-leading tackler and finished second in the Big 12 with five interceptions in 2013.

This year's secondary may be the deepest position group on the entire team. Ward tried a number of combinations in the secondary last season, allowing many defensive backs to get meaningful game experience.

Expect a more physical and athletic secondary this season. With Hoke calling the shots, the defensive backs will be much more aggressive. Hoke loves to send pressure from the back and wants his defensive backs to play the run as effectively as they do the pass.

The Gamecock secondary has been arguably the best position group under head coach Steve Spurrier. Even if they do not quite reach that distinction this year, the back end of the defense will be substantially better this season under the guidance of Ward and Hoke.
Special teams strive for improvement

Elizabeth Jenkins
@EMJENKINS_

With so much up in the air at the start of the 2015 college football season, not much is certain regarding South Carolina’s starting lineup.

“Most of the time when you have returning players it’s not that big a deal,” head coach Steve Spurrier said. “We know how this guy played last year or the year before that; we just have so many unknown players,”

With so much uncertainty, it is hard for fans to feel comfortable heading into the season. Aside from the multitude of unknowns, there are some certainties that one can expect to see when Gamecock football kicks off on Thursday night.

Here’s everything you need to know about the least heralded unit, South Carolina’s special teams.

**Elliott Fry**

In both college football and the NFL, about one-third of all scoring is accomplished by special teams. The heaviest of this responsibility most often falls to the kicker.

In keeping with this statistic, placekicker Elliott Fry scored 105 out of the 424 points put on the board by the Gamecocks in the 2014 season, the third-highest single-season total in South Carolina’s history.

It’s no wonder Fry has become a fan favorite at South Carolina considering his impact on the outcome of a game. Three games in 2014, including two conference games, were won by a margin of three points thanks to Fry’s successful field goals.

So, it’s not totally illogical for Gamecock fans to assume they have the best kicker — or at least one of the best kickers — in the conference. However, let’s not forget about the defense that allows Fry to do his job every game.

As a walk-on in 2013, Fry is entering his junior year at South Carolina. While Gamecock fans everywhere are cherishing these last two seasons with Fry as their starter, there will be a lookout for some new talent to fill his shoes, however big they might be.

**Return Game**

Wide receiver Pharoh Cooper retains his spot in special teams this season in punt return. The Gamecocks lagged in yards on punt returns last year, returning only 20 punts for 100 yards, 75 of which belonged to Cooper.

Kickoff return this year will feature true freshman A.J. Turner, redshirt senior Shon Carson and redshirt freshman Deebo Samuel.

“Let’s hope our special teams do better than last year,” Spurrier said. “We were not very good at covering kickoffs. We didn’t have a return last year, but Pharoh’s back there. If we can give him some blocking and hold up, certainly he can get a chance to run it. Kickoff return right now, we’ve got Deebo Samuels back there, Shon Carson and freshman A.J. Turner. So hopefully we can give those guys some room to go.”

**Sean Kelly**

Let’s not forget about the punter. Playing quarterback, punter and kicker at West Orange High School in Winter Garden, Florida, Sean Kelly began his college football career punting at Florida Atlantic University where he played for two years.

During his time at FAU, Kelly was ranked third in CUSA and 36th in the NCAA standings for average yards per punt. He was also named Special Teams MVP at FAU.

Kelly now joins the Gamecocks and the SEC as a redshirt junior, after spending a year at Tallahassee Junior College, where he did not play football. Being the only punter to go through spring drills, Kelly will replace Tyler Hull as the starting punter for this season.

While South Carolina seems to have its act together right now regarding special teams, the Gamecocks will have their work cut out for them this Thursday as they take on North Carolina in their season opener.

“I know North Carolina has excellent punt return guys, and they’re very good on kickoff returns also, so we’ve certainly emphasized covering punts,” Spurrier said.
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South Carolina linebacker coach Kirk Botkin says the Gamecocks will start the season with Skai Moore, Jonathan Walton and Larenz Bryant in linebacker positions.

The Gamecocks struggled defensively last year, recording only 867 tackles in 13 games compared to 902 by their opponents. Although it was tough on the defensive side, coach Botkin is looking forward instead of dwelling on the past.

“Last season was a tough one, but I try to not think too much about it,” Botkin said. “It is well in the past in my mind, and we got a new season to focus on.”

Skai Moore is a Gamecock to look out for in the linebacker position. A junior from Cooper City, Florida, Moore had three interceptions for 93 yards in the 2014 season. He also picked up one fumble recovery for seven yards. Moore also led the team with 93 tackles. His tackles are the most for the Gamecocks since Jasper Brinkley’s 107 in 2006, and he is the first Gamecock to lead the team in tackles for the second year in a row since Emanuel Cook.

Moore ranked 10th in the SEC with 7.8 tackles per game. Having played 25 games with 13 starts, Moore is the proud owner of 149 career tackles and seven interceptions. He was also awarded the Big Plays award for the defense this spring. Moore says that the defensive line is ready for the first game of the 2015 season.

“I think the defense looks a lot different from last season, especially at penetrating the offensive up front,” Moore said. “The guys are really doing well on beating the o-line one-on-one, and I think that’s going to be something that we can carry into the season.”

Alongside Moore is junior Larenz Bryant in the SAM linebacker position.

In the 2014 season as a sophomore, Bryant saw action in 12 games at the Spur position in the Gamecocks’ 4-2-5 defense. He also played on special teams and is credited with three tackles. Only missing the game against Tennessee, Bryant recorded his first sack and first forced fumble against Kentucky. Despite missing most of the spring practices with a liver injury, Bryant will start against North Carolina.

At 6-foot and 235 pounds, Jonathan Walton is another Gamecock linebacker that should make an impact this season. A hard-hitting junior who made a name for himself in 2014, Walton was named Most Improved Linebacker by the Gamecock coaching staff for the second straight spring practice.

Last season, Walton recorded 61 tackles and ranked third on the team for tackles. Of those tackles, 38 came in the last five games of the season. Walton begins the 2015 season in the WILL linebacker position for the Gamecocks.

The linebackers have been waiting all spring and are eager to start this season Thursday against North Carolina in Charlotte.
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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA
It’s time to be realistic. This won’t be one of those, “My school is going to win the National Championship, I’m sure of it” pieces. This article will look at the best and worst-case scenarios for South Carolina in 2015.

A new defensive scheme, new quarterback and the second-toughest schedule in the country headline the 2015 season for the Gamecocks. Frankly we won’t know a whole lot about this team until a few weeks into the season. Still, there is potential — which is more than some teams have.

**Best Case Scenario**

**Record: 10-2**

How? Junior wide receiver Pharoh Cooper puts up Heisman-esque numbers, the offensive line bullies opposing defenses, Connor Mitch turns out to be all he was in high school and more, the defensive line puts pressure on the quarterback and the secondary plays to their full potential and beyond.

Likelihood: <5 percent

What if? The defense could be substantially better if co-defensive coordinator Jon Hoke’s zone blitz scheme allows the Gamecocks to put more pressure on the quarterback and if the secondary becomes more physical. If practice scrimmages are any indication, this is actually pretty likely.

However, the offense will also have to maintain last year’s pace despite losing its top two linemen, quarterback and every wide receiver that caught a pass other than Cooper. If, and only if, all of the above happens, the Gamecocks can compete for an SEC East title. If the Gamecocks overachieve this year, recruiting will pick back up in the 2017 cycle, and they can return to national prominence.

**Worst Case Scenario**

**Record: 4-8**

How? The defense stays bad, neither Mitch nor any other quarterback efficiently run the offense, a lack of receiving threats allows opposing defenses to key on Cooper (forcing the Gamecock offense to become one-dimensional), injuries along the offensive line stagnate the running game and last year’s fourth-quarter woes continue.

Likelihood: 10 percent

What if? This is not out of the realm of possibility. Last year, South Carolina took a step back while every SEC East team other than Florida and Vanderbilt improved substantially. South Carolina opens with one of the top offensive teams in the country in North Carolina, then plays four tough league opponents with an unpredictable UCF sandwiched in between.

If the offense can’t move the ball and the defense gets stuck on the field against mid-level teams, South Carolina could lose a lot of close games. In this scenario, South Carolina winds up with a losing record and 70-year-old head coach Steve Spurrier could retire.

**Most Likely Scenario**

**Record: 7-5**

How? Mitch plays efficiently but doesn’t put up big numbers, a reshuffled offensive line struggles at times, a revamped defense keeps the Gamecocks in close games, but a tough schedule takes its toll, especially in weeks 3-6.

Likelihood: 45 percent

What if? South Carolina’s schedule is tougher than every team in the nation but Alabama. This season should be both encouraging and frustrating. With 2016 four-star quarterback recruit Brandon McIlwain likely entering the mix in January, a quarterback battle would ensue, raising expectations for next season.

Spurrier would continue to contemplate the future date of his retirement and Athletic Director Ray Tanner would quietly begin scouting potential head coaches for the day Spurrier steps away.
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South Carolina travels to Charlotte on Thursday to face a North Carolina Tar Heels team that very much mirrored last year's Gamecocks.

The Tar Heels put up big numbers on offense last year but finished with a 6-7 record after a blowout loss to Rutgers in the Quick Lane Bowl.

The Tar Heels were 38th nationally in scoring average but gave up fewer points per game than just nine Football Bowl Subdivision teams last season.

While statistically South Carolina's defense was better — ranking 92nd in points per game — the Gamecocks struggled to slow opposing offenses. Both teams struggled to put pressure on the quarterback, with the Gamecocks and Tar Heels registering 14 and 16 sacks, respectively.

Both teams hired former SEC coaches as defensive coordinators as South Carolina hired former Florida defensive coordinator Jon Hoke and North Carolina hired former Auburn head coach Gene Chizik to up their defensive prowess.

**Potent Offense**

The Tar Heels return every starter on offense except tight end Jack Tabb, who caught just 21 passes last season.

In addition, North Carolina returns every player who recorded a rushing attempt last season and all nine offensive linemen that started at least one game.

**Second-team All-ACC**

quarterback Marquise Williams will be under center. The senior completed 63.1 percent of his passes last season for 3,068 yards and 21 touchdowns. He also led the Tar Heels in rushing with 788 yards and 13 touchdowns on the ground.

North Carolina is loaded at every skill position. Five-foot-ten junior Ryan Switzer led the Tar Heels in receptions and yards last season, notching 61 catches for 757 yards and four touchdowns.

Sophomore running back Elijah Hood took over the starting position from junior TJ Logan this fall, but the duo should put up huge numbers this season. Hood, a 220-pound power back, came on strong at the end of the season last year and will be complemented by Logan's speed.

**Question Marks on Defense**

North Carolina's defense was atrocious last season. The Tar Heels surrendered 497.8 yards per game including 789 to an East Carolina team that only managed 23 points against South Carolina two weeks earlier.

Head coach Larry Fedora essentially made the choice to start over after last season, hiring Chizik in January to implement an entirely new defensive system.

The Tar Heels return two of their top three tacklers from a year ago and seven defensive starters overall. Two of North Carolina's three leading tacklers last season were defensive backs, including Tim Scott, now an undrafted free agent signed by the Cowboys.

Both teams will be going through growing pains on defense, and the game's biggest storyline will be the next defensive coordinators.

**Players to Watch**

Marquise Williams is a trendy pick for All-ACC Honors again this season. The senior says he is the healthiest he has been since high school and could potentially put up big numbers this season with his above-average receiving corps.

Williams will look first to receivers Ryan Switzer and Bug Howard. Howard, a six-foot-five junior, is the Tar Heels' deep threat and will start opposite of Switzer and senior Quinshad Davis. Fedora will rely mostly on his passing attack and will rotate Logan and Hood at tailback.

North Carolina is dangerous in the red zone with Hood, a 225-pound quarterback in Williams and five six-foot-four or taller receivers.

The passing attack will be a challenge for what seems like a much-improved Gamecock secondary.

South Carolina is favored by three points and this game provides a good test for both teams. The Gamecocks won 27-10 when these teams met in Columbia two years ago.
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