

In the news

Gamecocks No. 1, Lady Vols No. 2 in SEC poll

Southeastern Conference coaches lined up to anoint South Carolina as the team to beat during media day Thursday in Charlotte, North Carolina, and then were eager to talk about bringing the Gamecocks down.

South Carolina is the preseason favorite to win the SEC women's basketball championship for a third straight year, a feat only **Pat Summitt's** Tennessee Lady Vols and Auburn have been able to pull off.

Several teams believe they can give South Carolina a run for the championship.

"You've got to put them on top, but it's amazing this conference how much stronger it's gotten from top to bottom," said Tennessee coach **Holly Warlick**, whose team was picked second in the preseason poll. Mississippi State was third, Texas A&M was fourth and Kentucky was fifth.

Tennessee, who shared the 2015 SEC regular-season title with the Gamecocks, is the leading candidate to knock off South Carolina. The Lady Vols feature guard **Diamond DeShields**, a North Carolina transfer who was the national freshman of the year two seasons ago before sitting out last year, and **Bashaara Graves**, a 1,000-point scorer who averaged 10.6 points and seven rebounds a game last year.

"South Carolina, they're a great team right now," Graves said. "But we're also a great team, and our goal is to win the SEC and get to the Final Four every year. That never changes."

German soccer chair defends FIFA payment

A financial deal between **Sepp Blatter** and **Franz Beckenbauer** was revealed by the German football federation on Thursday as it sought to further defend a payment to FIFA from 2006 World Cup organizers.

The explanation from federation chairman **Wolfgang Niersbach** at a news conference was followed by the global governing body saying the payment "in no way corresponds to FIFA's standard processes and regulations."

The statements created further confusion over the 6.7 million-euro payment, which FIFA is investigating after German publication Der Spiegel claimed that the bidding team created a slush fund to secure votes.

Germany has denied wrongdoing, but pressure has been growing on Niersbach and the federation.

"Everything was done with honest means for the 2006 World Cup bid," Niersbach said. "There were no slush funds, no vote-buying."

According to Niersbach, the payment stemmed from a financing agreement with FIFA by tournament organizers to secure a grant. The deal for the payment was made during a private meeting between FIFA President Blatter and World Cup organizing committee chief Beckenbauer in January 2002, two years after Germany secured the hosting rights by one vote, Niersbach said.

TENNIS

■ **Lukas Rosol** defeated former champion **Jo-Wilfried Tsonga** 6-4, 3-6, 6-1 at the Erste Bank Open in Vienna on Thursday. Rosol next plays sixth-seeded **Gael Monfils**. The top-two seeded players also advanced, with **David Ferrer** routing **Guillermo Garcia-Lopez** 6-1, 6-1 and **Kevin Anderson** rallying to beat **Jiri Vesely** 6-7 (4), 6-3, 7-5. Ferrer will play **Fabio Fognini**, and Anderson will face **Steve Johnson** of the U.S., who defeated **Jerzy Janowicz** of Poland 6-4, 6-7 (7), 6-4 for his third quarterfinal of the year.

■ Top-seeded **Tomas Berdych** will face **Grigor Dimitrov** in the quarterfinals of the Stockholm Open. Berdych beat unseeded **Alexander Zverev** 6-3, 6-4 on Thursday, while the fifth-seeded Dimitrov saw off **Nicolas Almagro** 6-4, 6-4.

■ **Carla Suarez Navarro** lost to qualifier **Daria Kasatkina** 6-1, 6-2 at the Kremlin Cup in Moscow on Thursday. In the semifinals, Kasatkina takes on reigning Kremlin Cup champion **Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova**. The other semifinal will pit **Svetlana Kuznetsova** against **Lesia Tsurenko**. In the men's event, top-seeded **Marin Cilic** defeated **Denis Istomin** 7-6 (3), 3-6, 6-3. Cilic faces a quarterfinal meeting with **Andrei Kuznetsov**.

COLLEGES

■ The Memphis volleyball team (13-8, 4-4 American Athletic Conference) will go on the road this weekend with a match at 3 p.m. today at Tulsa and a match at 1 p.m. Sunday at league-leading SMU. ... The Memphis women's soccer team will finish the AAC regular season with two matches on the road. The Tigers (7-6-3, 2-3-2 AAC) will visit Cincinnati at 6 p.m. today before closing the regular season against East Carolina at noon Sunday.

■ Auburn hired former Mississippi State assistant coach **Butch Thompson** to lead the baseball program, athletic director **Jay Jacobs** said Thursday. Thompson is a former Auburn assistant who spent the last seven

PREPS

Saints advance to volleyball title match

■ Will face Father Ryan today

By John Varlas

varlas@commercialappeal.com
901-529-2350

Briarcrest's volleyball team is riding a 26-match winning streak. No. 27 will make them state champions.

The Saints advanced to today's Division 2-AA title match with a 25-15, 25-14, 26-28, 25-21 victory over Chattanooga Baylor Thursday in Murfreesboro. The victory sets up a 10:30 a.m. final against Nashville Father Ryan at the Murphy Center on the campus of Middle Tennessee State.

Briarcrest (45-4) has defeated Father Ryan three times this year, including Tuesday's tournament opener.

"That was the first time they had their big hitter Lauren (Dorrell, who will play at Colorado)," Saints coach Carla Anderton

said. "I expected her to be on fire ... and they're going to have hundreds of fans there. But we've done a good job all year of not overlooking anybody."

The Saints controlled the first two games against Baylor before dropping the third. Baylor then had a 17-11 lead in the fourth before the Saints reeled off a 14-4 victory to close the match and move them to within one victory of their first state title since 2003.

"We missed some serves in the third set," Anderton said. "But they showed a lot of character to finish it out."

Harding also will play for a title today.

The Lions fell to nationally ranked Knoxville Webb (25-23, 25-21, 25-19) in the morning before knocking off St. George's (25-17, 25-23, 25-19) in an elimination match. Harding (40-7) will face Webb

for the D2-A championship at 9 a.m. as it tries to win its first title since 2008.

In AAA, Houston battled through the loser's bracket to reach the semifinals before falling.

The Mustangs — who won a late match against Ooltewah on Wednesday to stave off elimination — started the day with a 25-21, 25-23, 25-19 victory over Knoxville Bearden. They then fell in five to Farragut (losing the final game 15-13) to end their ninth trip to state in 10 years with a fourth-place finish.

"My girls are awesome and played their hearts out," Mustangs coach Becky Pendleton tweeted after the match.

ARLINGTON WINS REGION 7 SOCCER

Arlington won the Region 7-AAA tournament title, getting an overtime goal from Erin Young to defeat Bartlett 1-0.

The Tigers (13-3-0) will

host Collierville in a AAA sectional match Saturday, while the Panthers will face Houston at Houston Middle School. The winners of those matches advance to next week's AAA state tournament in Murfreesboro.

HARDING FOOTBALL STANDOUT HONORED

Colton Nash, an offensive and defensive lineman on the Harding Jr. High football team, has been selected to play for the U.S. Junior National team, which will take on Canada in the International Bowl in February.

Nash was named the top lineman at the USA camp in Nashville over the summer, earning him an invitation to the USA National Football Games in Canton, Ohio. From there, he was picked for the national team.

The International Bowl takes place Feb. 3 at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas. Nash will be joined on the squad by ECS quarterback Jack Stephens.

PREP FOOTBALL PREVIEW: WEEK 10

Region 8-5A teams jockey for playoff spots

By John Varlas

varlas@commercialappeal.com
901-529-2350

There's always plenty of scoreboard watching this time of the season, but the coaches in Region 8-5A will be more attentive than most.

With two weeks left in the regular season, the playoff race in that region is the most tightly contested of any in the area, with six teams still mathematically alive for the four playoff spots.

The two leaders meet today when undefeated Munford visits one-loss Brighton. Southwind (two league losses) travels to face three-loss Bolton while Central (two losses) hosts last-place Overton.

Kirby, also with two losses, took on Wooddale in a late Thursday game.

Munford and Brighton are in great shape, but it likely will come down to tiebreakers to sort out the rest. Stay tuned.

GAME OF THE WEEK

(4) Munford (8-0, 5-0 Region 8-5A) at (12) Brighton (7-1, 4-1), 7 p.m.

What to watch for: Should be a dynamite atmosphere at Brighton as two of this season's biggest surprises collide. Munford has only allowed 118 points this year and will have to contend with some skilled Cardinals playmakers led by running backs Zach Camp and Malik Matthews. Look for the Cougars to use their ground game to put together some (hopefully) time-consuming drives.

DANDY DOZEN GAMES

(1) Whitehaven (7-1, 4-1 Region 4-6A) at Collierville (4-4, 2-3), 7 p.m.

What to watch for: A victory for the

Dragons would go a long way toward helping them land a top-four finish and a home playoff game in the first round. But the Tigers have been clicking lately and are one of only two teams in town (along with Cordova) ranked in the top 10 in both total offense (seventh) and defense (10th).

Craigmont (1-7) at (3) MUS (6-2), 7 p.m.

What to watch for: It's been a disappointing season for the Chiefs, who despite winning just once will still make the 4A playoffs. MUS will want to fine-tune some things in time for next week's showdown vs. CBHS and get through the night without any key injuries.

Catholic (1-7) at (5) CBHS (6-2), 7 p.m.

What to watch for: The Brothers invoked the mercy rule in five of their six wins, and it would be a major shock if they don't do it again against a Catholic team whose only win came against Rossville Christian (22-20 on Sept. 25).

Germantown (4-4, 3-2 Region 4-6A) vs. (6) White Station (5-3, 4-1), 7 p.m.

What to watch for: The Spartans look good for a top-four finish in the region and a home playoff opener that will come with it. Germantown has responded well after a shaky start, and a win here would solidify their top-four status as well.

Houston (1-7, 1-4 Region 4-6A) at (7) Cordova (7-1, 4-1), 7 p.m.

What to watch for: Cordova is also on track for a home playoff game and will be itching to get back on the field after dropping its first game of the year against White Station two weeks ago. Houston has some talented playmakers, but Cordova has the area's second-best defense.

Fayette-Ware (4-4) at (8) Northpoint (9-0), 7 p.m.

What to watch for: Fayette-Ware

deserves a ton of credit for its efforts this year. But the Wildcats will need their best performance yet to defeat a hard-nosed Northpoint team, which has held three of its last four opponents to seven points.

MAHS (4-3) at (9) St. George's (7-1), 7 p.m.

What to watch for: The Lions have the unenviable task of trying to slow the area's No. 1 offense. St. George's has scored 49, 54, 45 and 73 points in its last four games and will look to stay on a good roll with University School of Jackson looming in next week's finale.

(10) Olive Branch (5-3, 3-1 MHSAA 1-6A) at Columbus-Miss. (6-2, 4-0), 7 p.m.

What to watch for: Columbus has won four straight, including a 20-10 victory over Southaven last week. Running back Kylin Hill is the Falcons' bell cow and stopping him will be top priority for the Quistors, who have won four of their last five.

(11) DeSoto Central (6-3, 2-2 MHSAA 1-6A) at Tupelo (3-5, 1-3), 7 p.m.

What to watch for: Tip your hat to DeSoto Central running back Alan Lamar, who has run for 2,022 yards (224.7 average per game) and accounted for 38 touchdowns so far. Another big game from him will be enough for DC to come out on top.

TODAY'S OTHER GAMES

7 p.m. — Bartlett at Arlington, Hamilton at Bolivar Central, Southwind at Bolton, Overton vs. Central at Crump, Whitehaven at Collierville, St. Benedict at ECS, Kingsbury at First Assembly, Horn Lake at Hernando, Center Hill at Lake Cormorant, Harding at Lancaster Christian, Manassas at Lausanne, New Hope at Lewisburg, North Little Rock at Marion, Trezevant vs. Mitchell at J.P. Freeman, Fayette Aca. at North Delta, Melrose vs. Ridgeway at Halle, Tupelo Christian Prep at Rossville Christian, West Memphis Christian at Tipton-Rosemark Aca., Briarcrest at USJ, Little Rock Central at West Memphis, Germantown vs. White Station at Fairgrounds.

7:30 p.m. — Millington at Covington.

NFL