

## **THE DAWGMEISTER'S WEEKEND FORECAST: DAWGS FLUSH FLORIDA**

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### **SEPARATED@BIRTH?**



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**SEPARATED@BIRTH? ARCHIVE**

In the car on the way to the game, I caught Chuck Dowdle getting a short interview with Coach Smart as he was headed with the team to the locker room. Chuck asked what the Dawgs needed to do to win, and Coach said it in a nutshell: "Execution is the mother of everything." To win, he said, we need to perform at a high level in all facets of the game.

He then said that the team would really need the passion of the fans to charge up the players and elevate their game to its maximal levels of desire and intensity. Passion and execution: the keys to the game, fed by a stadium of Red and Black, hungry for excellence.

In the pregame radio chatter, the broadcasters viewed the Vanderbilt game as an opportunity to put a whole game together for the first time this season. At times we've passed well or run well, but haven't ever really had the whole offense working together for a whole game. The defense has at times defended the pass, and has mostly defended the run, but has also been blown off the field completely. The kicking game has been very erratic, and going into the Homecoming Game, it was our biggest question mark. Clicking on all cylinders: It takes an undermanned opponent like Vanderbilt to make it possible for the whole team come out with fire and precision, and to maintain it over 60 minutes of football. What better vehicle for such a performance than Homecoming, with the alums back in town to witness that is possible as the program retools under new management, gearing for several decades of championship runs?

During the week there was a lot of discussion of whether or not Jacob Eason was really The Guy; some of the early doubters are confident that having Fromm on the way is probably a very good thing. Eason's awful game on the fringe of Hurricane Matthew

made the critics question whether or not he's as good as hyped, or whether instead he is the latest [Willie Korn](#) to tear it up in HS and never hold a job in college.

All of this discussion was guided by the assumption that beating Vanderbilt was more or less a gimme. Our OL had finally begun to cohere against Tennessee and S. Carolina, and the RBs were all healthy. Even if Eason faltered, we could simply run the ball between the tackles to send the crowd off happily celebrating throughout an evening of festive Homecoming events.

And then, the game began.

Within the first 22 seconds, Coach Smart's twin emphases—execution and fan passion—were done for the afternoon. Before the first snap, we had given up a 96-yard kickoff return and had committed two penalties. Two plays later, we were down 7-0. Whatever passion the fans had brought with them never quite recovered, as we experienced the most somber Homecoming Game in memory.

As Coach Smart acknowledged after the game, the team itself did not come out with passion. By my count, that's 5 times in 7 games when we've started out flat and unprepared. It's hard for fans to be passionate in support of a team that itself isn't ready to play.

The most dependable part of the game was the one that the people in my section had the least confidence in: Rod Blankenship's field goal unit. There was mocking laughter when we ran him out for his first attempt. By game's end, some were wondering why we'd tried a Hail Mary instead of a field goal to end the first half, what with the kicking game being so reliable on this Homecoming afternoon.

But the rest of our kicking game was anywhere between shaky and disastrous. Even with a special teams coach—the absence of which served as a major cause of complaint under the Richt regime—we seem to be out-executed on special teams every time there's a transition in the game.

On the post-game show, there was a lot of talk about the ups and downs of having a freshman quarterback, and for us not to lose faith in Jacob Eason's potential. That surprised me a bit, because it sure looked as though he played well to me. His passing was sharp, he threw it away when he needed to, he spread the ball out over 9 receivers, he put nice touch on his TD pass to Nauta, and he did some effective scrambling. Everyone will point to the checkdown he took when Jayson Stanley was running free down the field, but I'm encouraged that he took a checkdown, since forcing passes to the first guy in the progression is among his issues to address. Locking in on his first option has produced a lot of passes into tight spaces.

I would have loved a gorgeous TD pass to Stanley, and it might have won us the game. But making Eason's growth pattern the subject of a game we lost when he threw for nearly 350 yards with no picks? I don't get it. I only wish he'd throw about 20 more passes instead of having us get 2 yards per carry for 60 minutes of football.

The offensive line remains a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma, wrapped again in bacon, and deep-fried in the kitchens of Paula Deen. We had so much trouble running the ball in games 2-5, and the OL was fingered as the culprit, given the talent in the backfield. And yet, some of the players have graded out very high, especially guards [Lamont Gaillard](#) and [Isaiah Wynne](#). I don't know the grades for Saturday, but even with 2 players assumed to be 3-and-done in their UGA careers in the backfield, we could not get past the line of scrimmage. Part of that is in scheming and opponents' box-loading, but if execution is indeed the mother of everything, then execution appears to be part of the problem.

On the postgame show, the guys were reminding listeners that Nick Saban had a rocky first year, with a loss to a lower-division team as part of his mediocre record. Many had projected Kirby Smart's future according to Saban's championship trajectory. Saban, as many have responded, inherited a program in disarray and on probation. Smart's transition to Georgia was supposed to be smooth, building on the strengths he inherited and ridding the program of its deficiencies, like poor special teams play and coming out flat for big games, in short order. But now, the talk among the optimists is of slowly turning a battleship in the right direction, a multi-year process that will bring in the right kind of talent to mesh under the guidance of this coaching staff, which can only win after the flimsy talent base of last year's 10-3 team is flushed out and replaced by Alabama-level players.

The pessimists are less generous: Is Kirby Smart Muschamp 2.0? (Keeping in mind that in his second year at Florida, Muschamp was Co-SEC Coach of the Year.) Did Mark Richt leave such a wreck behind that a Homecoming Game loss to Vanderbilt is just part of The Process of building a better program from a new foundation? Was last year's 10-3 record simply an illusion that disguised such a mediocre talent base that we are now in danger of finishing in the bottom half of a weak SEC East? Or is the problem with the quality of the leadership?

I hope that the optimists are right. I hope that Kirby Smart does for UGA what Nick Saban did for Alabama and that beginning soon, we are annually penciled in to the Final Four and routinely providing the NFL with first-round talent. I hope that this season's many struggles are just the growing pains of a young team, as defenders of the regime have asserted. Today, it just doesn't feel that way, though.

The greatest passion I heard on Saturday came as Vanderbilt was running out the clock and the defeat was certain. One man in red was shouting angrily at the team and coaches, over and over, "Unacceptable!" Another hollered, "Go Miami!"

93K Day seems a long time ago.

## **DAWGMEISTER GOOD WORKS OF THE WEEK**

*The Weekend Forecast is offered as a free service to its readers; neither the Dawgbone nor The Dawgmeister profits financially from its publication. If you read the Forecast and want to contribute something back to our communities, please consider making a donation to this week's featured Good Works service. There are many people living in difficult circumstances, and every dollar helps to support them through another day, week, month, and year. The Dawgmeister himself will pledge \$10 to each organization featured for its Good Works throughout the football season. Please consider doing the same yourself.*

*This week's featured Good Works organization is*

**The Catholic Relief Services**, which has set up a Hurricane Matthew relief fund to provide shelter, water, and hygiene supplies to victims. CRS will distribute blankets, kitchen and hygiene kits and other emergency supplies as needed, as well as monitor potential outbreaks of cholera and other diseases. Please take care to [avoid hurricane relief scams](#), and make sure that your donations go to support hurricane victims and not enrich a sleazy parasite, profiteer, or predator.

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## **DAWG DOOTS**

- ☞ The 2017 NFL mock drafts are starting to appear, they suggest that Coach Smart's talent this year is less than what he's accustomed to. Both [Sports Illustrated](#) and [CBS](#) project 6 Alabama players to go in the first 24 picks.
- ☞ Vandy LB Zach Cunningham, who was described on the post-game show as "the best player on the field" on Saturday, will go 21<sup>st</sup>, according to CBS.
- ☞ Speaking of guys we couldn't block, Tennessee's Derek Barnett is picked by SI to go at 17, and Mizzou's Charles Harris at 15.
- ☞ Georgia HS players also forecast for Round 1, but enrolled elsewhere: Raekwon McMillan, Carl Lawson, Reuben Foster
- ☞ Florida's Teez Tabor, a corner, is picked as a top 6 talent by both SI and CBS. He is considered to be the top DB in the draft.
- ☞ Gator LB Jarrad Davis is also predicted to go in Round 1.
- ☞ No Dawgs are listed on either mock draft's first round.

## **THE COVETED DAWGMEISTER GOOD GUY OF THE WEEK AWARD**



**Fernando Valesco** has joined past Good Guy awardees [Thomas Davis](#) and [Charles Johnson](#) in Charlotte, where they all play key roles for last year's NFC champion and

Super Bowl contestant Panthers. Getting from his origins to these heights is rare for kids where Fernando comes from. Fernando grew up in the housing projects of Wren, GA, where far more young people end up dead than in college, much less the NFL. Fernando's own father has been behind bars throughout Fernando's life, and many of his family and young playmates have been drug dealers and other assorted criminals. Joining them would have been the easiest path; Fernando saw a different future for himself as student, citizen, and father. Fortunately, as a big and athletic young man, he had an avenue to a different world through the sport of football. At 6'-4" and 300 lbs., he played OT for Jefferson County HS in Louisville, GA, starting for four years and earning 3 recruiting stars to accompany his consensus Class AAA First Team All-State recognition. He arrived in Athens in 2003 and was in the rotation as a true freshman. During his career he also was a two-time Iron Man Award winner and Joseph F. Espy Scholarship awardee, and was named the team's Most Improved Player his senior year. In 2006 he graduated with a degree in Health and Physical Education, went undrafted, and went about the business of earning his way onto an NFL roster. Following stops in Tennessee (twice), Pittsburgh, and Carolina (twice), he signed with Buffalo for the current season. Like a lot of Dawgs during the Mark Richt Era, he credits UGA with changing his life. Athens and UGA, he has said, "will always be home. It is where I became a man, where I met people and learned about life. You can't believe how proud I am of my degree and the love I have for the campus, which is where I learned the value of friendship. UGA can count on me being an active alumnus." He also has established a charity, Right Choices, which has provided 3,000 books to the schools in both Wren and his wife Tielechia's hometown of Williston, S. C., among other good works, including 75 Wren youth who watched a Panthers game last season. NFL teams might have better players on their roster this fall, but no better men than Fernando Valesco.

**GOOD GUY ARCHIVE**

## **THE FORECAST DAWGS VS. FLORIDA**

Football aside, I had a pretty good weekend. I defeated ISIS and al Qaeda, bowled 300, separated 6 sets of conjoined twins, cleaned up the water in Flint, and was named a MacArthur Genius. But mostly, I'm pretty bummed after watching us lose to Vanderbilt.

I also watched Florida kill Missouri in the late afternoon slot. Good Lord, do they play defense. They haven't got much working offensively, but they are a wrecking crew on D. Add that to the fact that we couldn't block Vanderbilt or Nicholls, and this game looks as though it'll plunge our season into a deep, deep depression.

I have yet to pick UGA to lose a game in my many years of Dawgmeisting. But I feel less confident about Jacksonville than I have felt about any game this century. We've got two weeks to absorb this loss, watch film, practice with intensity, and do whatever it takes to take the field ready to play. I hope that the meeting rooms and locker room are up to it.

I don't think we can score much on Florida. I do think we can keep their offense out of the end zone for the most part. I worry that our coverage units will provide field position that's hard for us to dig out of and easy for them to navigate.

Can we win? Of course. Is that what I'm predicting? You'd better believe it. Just don't bet on it. Dawgs over Gators, 14-13.

**NATIONAL GAME OF THE WEEK: WISCONSIN OVER NEBRASKA**

No forecast next week; this is for the following week. I was never a Nebraska fan, and have a mild soft spot for the Badgers. And that's the sort of thing that governs my predictions. Wisconsin nearly took out Ohio State, and will have their way with the Cornhuskers. Wisconsin 27, Nebraska 17.

**NATIONAL UPSET OF THE WEEK: TEXAS OVER BAYLOR**

Texas has sure had a weird season. Not as weird as Baylor's off-season, but pretty weird. This time the Horns get their way. Texas, 41-38.