

ANOTHER TITLE WOULD BE

TWICE AS NICE FOR THE GAMECOCKS

By Bill Ballew

There's an old saying in baseball that states it is tough to get to the top, but it's even tougher to stay there. Nowhere has that adage been more appropriate than the 2011 season for the South Carolina Gamecocks. After winning their first national championship in school history last year and returning the bulk of their starting lineup this spring, the Gamecocks entered the current campaign ranked third...in their division.

In the Southeastern Conference's pre-season coaches' poll that was released Feb. 15, South Carolina was projected to finish third in the loop's Eastern Division. Florida received the top spot with 66 points, including 11 first-place selections, and Vanderbilt finished second with 55 points and one first-place nod. The Gamecocks? Try 48 points and no—nada, none, zip—first-place projections.

That's not to say USC head coach Ray Tanner considered cashing in his chips and calling it a career. Instead, he knew every team on the Gamecocks' schedule, from each of the non-conference foes to every member of the SEC, would circle the dates when they would go head-to-head with the defending national champs.

"I don't believe our players were concerned with thinking about that," Tanner said. "We'd like to think that when you play in the Southeastern Conference, unless you're playing each other, that's the way people feel. I know when I came here, I was the hunter. We were trying to go get some people. And then you have a little success, you become the hunted. I'd rather be the hunted.

"The good news for me, as a head coach, is that there are some guys on the field that understand perspective. They understand adversi-



Jackie Bradley, Jr.

ty. I think that's a reason they played well last year at the end; they never really got too concerned with things when they didn't go well. And they also didn't dwell on it when they had good days. It was kind of perspective—let's be ready tomorrow and stay in position. People want to beat us, we know that, but that's OK."

Tanner's perspective proved to be spot on. Through April 20, the Gamecocks had seen both Florida and Vanderbilt advance to the top rung in the national polls, only to stumble, albeit briefly. South Carolina contributed to those difficulties by defeating the Gators two games to one in Gainesville on March 25-27 before taking two of three from the Commodores at Carolina Stadium on April 15-17. Through their first 36 games, the Gamecocks were 29-7, including 12-3 in the SEC, and ranked second in the country in the polls released on April 18.

The Gamecocks' success through the first two-plus months of 2011 had the followers donned in garnet and black envisioning another trip to Omaha and a repeat performance from last June. Tanner realizes everyone associated with the program believes another title would be twice as nice but knows there is still a long road for his team to travel to make that a reality.

"I love the situation we're in," Tanner said. "I love the expectations here. It's part of the deal. We want our fans and alumni to feel like we do as players and coaches. All you can do is try to get in the postseason. Last year became magical; we played as good as we can play at the right time of the year. Certainly we know how difficult it will be to repeat; I don't



Michael Roth



think you'll get any of my players to say that we'll do that today, although some might. The deal is, you just try to get in position. That's all you can do."

South Carolina got in position to win the college game's most coveted trophy in 2010 by putting together a solid 33-16 showing in the regular season that included a 13-game winning streak. Despite losing both games in the SEC Tournament, the Gamecocks hosted a regional in the NCAA Tournament and won all three games, defeating Bucknell, The Citadel and Virginia Tech. They then traveled two hours northeast to Myrtle Beach and swept host Coastal Carolina in a pair of one-run decisions to advance to Omaha for the fourth time under Tanner's tutelage.

Never a team to take the easy way, the Gamecocks lost to Oklahoma, 4-3, in their first game in Omaha. Showing tremendous resiliency, USC then held off elimination by posting victories over Arizona State, Oklahoma and Clemson, their hated in-state rival, twice. They followed that with their most dominant showings of the season by sweeping UCLA in the championship series by scores of 7-1 and 2-1 to become the first team in CWS history to win six straight games in Omaha on the way to the national title.

Similar success has followed thus far in 2011 even while battling adversity. The Gamecocks won their first nine three-game series, capped by the mid-April weekend against Vanderbilt. The USC faithful turned out in record numbers, including three consecutive sellouts consisting of 8,242 fans packing Carolina Stadium to see the matchups with the Commodores. The total of 24,726 represents the highest three-game mark in school history, and increased the team's 2011 season figures to 184,183, an average of 7,367 per contest.

Despite losing Blake Cooper and Sam Dyson from last year's weekend rotation, pitching remains one of South Carolina's strengths while ranking among the best staffs in the nation. Through the Vanderbilt series that concluded on April 17, the Gamecocks owned a team ERA of 2.54 with 290 strikeouts and only 105 walks. Opponents were hitting a paltry .214 in 312 innings against the squad's stellar arms. The USC hurlers were nothing less than dominant against Tennessee on April 7-9 when they allowed just one run in 27 innings while limiting the Volunteers to 15 hits to sweep the series.

Leading the way on the mound has been junior Michael Roth, a sneaky fast lefthander who earned SEC Pitcher of the Week honors after his brilliant outing against Vanderbilt on April 15. Roth did not allow a hit until the fifth inning and surrendered only

one run on three hits in the 3-1 victory. For the season, Roth led the SEC with an 8-1 record, a 1.24 ERA and 65.1 innings pitched. Ironically, he worked 35 of his 37 games in 2010 out of the bullpen prior to answering the call in Omaha. In his first start of the season, he limited Clemson to one run on three hits in a complete-game triumph on June 25 before returning four days later for the finale and giving up only one run on six hits versus UCLA.

"We're just at the halfway point of him going out on Fridays," Tanner said. "We don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves, but he's done a great job. He's accepted his role going in to the year. He's thriving in it. He's been really good. I didn't expect him to be where he is numbers-wise, but it's been great to watch. Our guys rally around him and they feel good when he's out there."

Sophomore righthander Colby Holmes garnered SEC Pitcher of the Week accolades after he worked a career-high seven innings and struck out seven batters in a 2-0 victory over Tennessee. For the season, Holmes was 3-1 with a 4.19 ERA in his first 34.1 innings while limiting batters to a .237 average. He and Roth have been joined in the weekend rotation by freshman righthander Forrest Koumas, who began the season with a 4-0 record and a 2.35 ERA in his initial 38.1 frames. Koumas was tabbed the SEC Co-Freshman of the Week after he hurled 6.1 scoreless innings and earned the victory in a 4-1 win over Kentucky on April 3.

Aiding the starters is sophomore righthander Matt Price, who has built upon an outstanding freshman campaign to become one of the top relievers in the college game. In 2010, he went 5-1 out of the bullpen with a 2.26 ERA and 10 saves while averaging a school-record 13.41 strikeouts per nine innings to earn Freshman All-American honors. Price also picked up the victory against UCLA that clinched the national championship by hurling 2.2 innings of relief.

A unanimous preseason All-American this year, Price entered the slate as a potential member of the rotation before Tanner and his staff decided to keep him in relief. Against Vanderbilt, Price threw 4.1 scoreless innings, and recorded 11 of his 13 outs via strikeout. In addition to ranking second in the league with 11 saves, he had 37 whiffs in his first 26.2 innings while opponents were hitting just .196 against him. Yet even with Price's continued success as a reliever, the head coach admits he may make a change if the situation calls for it, much like he did with Roth last June.

"We think that if you can get to him (late in a game), he's about as good as you can get in college baseball," Tanner said. "But if you don't get to him, and you don't give him enough opportunities, then

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you're wasting a good arm sitting down there in the bullpen. So that could be adjusted as we go. We'd like to help him decide more than one game a week. If he's a starter, he's probably out there once. If he's in the bullpen... probably twice, maybe a third time. But that's where we are. And he's doing really well."

Price is joined in the bullpen by senior righthander John Taylor, who led the team and the SEC with 21 relief appearances while going 2-0 with an 0.56 ERA. In all, 14 different pitchers have pitched in relief for the Gamecocks while compiling 13 saves and 11 victories in the process. The pen was crucial in the rubber game against the Gators, with three Gamecock relievers combining to shut down Florida while USC rallied for a 4-3 win.

"Our bullpen continues to be stellar for us," Tanner said. "You can't say enough good things about what Coach (Jerry) Meyers has done. You can only win if your pitchers allow you the opportunity."

In addition to their excellent pitching, the Gamecocks are balanced in other areas of the team. In the first 35 games of the season, USC committed only 29 errors for a fielding percentage of .978. The squad also produced at the plate, thanks in part to an SEC-best 32 home runs during that same stretch. Under Tanner, South Carolina has garnered a reputation for being one of the nation's top power-hitting teams, although he admits to having altered his offensive philosophy in the recent past due to the imminent changes taking place.

"I started undergoing a transition a couple of years ago, when we got the message in 2008 and 2009 that the bat legislation was on the horizon," Tanner said. "This is actually the second time, and some of the bat manufacturers told us that we might want to think a lot more about pitching and defense and guys that could run versus power hitters and the three-run homer... Pitching and defense will always give you a chance to win; it may be even at a greater premium. I think what is important is having guys that can go from first to third, guys that can score from second on a base hit, guys that can bunt, guys that can steal a base with a green light. It remains to be seen, but it is probably a change for college baseball."

Having entered the season with some uncertainty behind the plate, senior Brady Thomas has handled the bulk of the catching by starting 26 of the team's initial 35 contests. One of the team's three captains, Thomas blossomed in 2010 when he hit .331 with eight home runs and 30 RBI in a utility role and contributed a key pinch-hit single in the finale against UCLA. This season he has done a laudable job on defense while contributing a .299 norm with four homers and 21 RBI.

On the right side of the infield, sophomore Christian Walker is a classic power-hitting first baseman who has been the Gamecocks' top run producer thus far in 2011. He topped the team with seven home runs and 37 RBI while also leading the way with a .338 batting average. At second base, senior Scott Wingo has once again been one of the team's catalysts in the field and at the plate. He joins Thomas and Roth as the Gamecocks' tri-captains this season, and is the school's all-time record-holder for putouts and assists at the keystone sack. Wingo had a 12-game hitting streak during April and owned the Gamecock's best batting average against conference teams with a .388 norm. Overall, he was second on the team with a .330 average.

Senior third baseman Adrian Morales is another one of the cornerstones who has ranked among the team leaders with a .308 batting average and a .432 on-base percentage. Against Kentucky on April 2, he tied the school record for doubles in a game with three while reaching base five times in the contest. A .273 hitter with nine home runs and 56 RBI as a junior after transferring from Miami-Dade Community College, Morales was named the NCAA Regional MVP last June and was selected to the All-Tournament team.

Peter Mooney has taken over the starting duties at shortstop this season after arriving in Columbia via Palm Beach Community College. A .356 hitter and a NJCAA Gold Glove winner as a sophomore, he batted .260 with seven doubles, two home runs and 12 RBI in his first 35



Brady Thomas



Adrian Morales



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games with the Gamecocks.

"I think he's comfortable now," Tanner said. "He's a very level-headed kid. He had a great fall and a great pre-season. He does his work and he's a very good player. When the season started he tried to do too much. He tried to hit home runs and make great plays, and he got out of his comfort zone. I was pleased with how he handled himself in Gainesville, and what you see now is what we expected the entire year."

In the garden, left fielder Evan Marzilli was named to the CWS All-Tournament team, the NCAA Regional All-Tournament team and the SEC All-Freshman team in 2010 while hitting at a .385 clip in 63 games. His batting average had dipped during the first half of 2011, to .245, although he had 15 RBI in his first 33 contests.



After putting together one of the best individual performances of the postseason last year, center fielder Jackie Bradley, Jr., has experienced the ups and downs of the game through the first two-plus months of the current campaign. In an effort to help Bradley get some more consistency at the plate, Tanner tried him at leadoff in mid-April after hitting him third for most of the campaign. Bradley said it does not matter where he bats in the lineup, adding, "My approach is trying to be aggressive at the plate and swing the bat more. I'm trying to take fewer pitches, be aggressive and fight my way thru this."

When he hit a home run against Rhode Island on March 23, Bradley became the 24th player in South Carolina history to reach the 200-hit plateau in his career. A Freshman All-American in 2009 when he hit .349 with 11 home runs and 46 RBI, he was tabbed the Most Outstanding Player in the CWS last season after receiving second-team All-SEC honors and being named to the SEC All-Defensive Team. He was a consensus preseason All-American heading into the 2011 season and has responded to the increase in attention by hitting .278 with six home runs and 25 RBI in his first 34 games.

Senior Robert Beary, who has seen some time at catcher in the past and scored the tying run in the final game against UCLA last season, has been seen in right field while hitting .247 with two home runs and 13 RBI. Currently in his second year at USC after transferring from Pensacola Junior College, the versatile Beary put together a career night against Rhode Island when he had four hits

and drove in four runs. Also seeing activity in the garden is junior Jake Williams, currently in his first season after transferring from Wofford. Williams, who has had some injury issues, earned the Tom Price Award as the MVP for the Gamecocks in their annual series with Clemson and was hitting .286 with 18 RBI in his first 29 games. Junior Adam Matthews, whose best game of the season came against College of Charleston on March 22 when he had three hits in six trips to the plate with two home runs and eight RBI, just one shy of the school mark, had an overall average of .279 with 14 RBI in his first 28 contests.

For all of their success this season, the Gamecocks have not been without their challenges. For example, Tanner expected greater contributions from pitcher Adam Westmoreland, who has shown little consistency and effectiveness during the first two months of the season. Injuries also have taken a toll. A recurring hamstring injury has prevented Adam Matthews from taking the mound with any regularity, thereby weakening the depth. And then there's the struggles of Bradley, who tweaked a muscle in his back during a weightlifting workout in early April, which exacerbated his difficulties at the plate.

"He's having a hard time," Tanner said. "There's no doubt about it. He's slumped a little bit. He's going to battle and he's going to find his way out.

It happens in baseball. He's having some tough at-bats, and when he squares one up he doesn't get much to show for it. That's part of it; you have to keep grinding it out. He'll be fine. He's the reason that we've won a lot of games the last two or three years."

As with any outstanding coach, Tanner continues to try to improve his team's performance regardless of how

much success it has enjoyed to this point in the season. For example, junior Steven Neff, who is 2-1 with a 2.88 ERA in 25 innings as one of the team's midweek starters, found himself serving as the Gamecocks' designated hitter in the middle of April with the hope he could provide an additional spark to the lineup.

"I took the attitude that there is a lot of baseball left to be played and that we're only halfway through the conference season, but we have to find a way to win," Tanner said. "Neff is athletic. I know we have guys that have played more but I really like who he is. He doesn't seem fazed by the lack of experience."

The Gamecocks are looking to extend the longest current streak of NCAA Regional appearances among the 12 SEC schools with 11 straight trips to the tournament, dating to the 2000 season. South Carolina has eight Super Regional appearances during that span, and is one of only six schools in the nation to play in at least eight Super Regionals over the last 11 years.

Yet the question that remains centers on whether or not the Gamecocks will return to Omaha and defend their national championship. USC reached the CWS three consecutive years, from 2002-04, and finished as the runners-up during the school's initial visit. Bradley, for one, believes this team has what it takes to repeat based on the makeup of the players.

"We take pride in working together and being a team," Bradley said. "Last year was last year, but we know what it takes to get back there and that's the goal. We needed everybody to come together and gel and that's what we're doing right now. These guys like to joke around. I don't know how we do it but we do. It's how we stay relaxed I think. It doesn't matter if we're down or up; the team chemistry we have is amazing and it's going to take (us) a long way."