

Sooners set for Sugar Bowl, ready for Big 12 title game

Top-ranked Oklahoma should go the BCS title game even if it loses in the Big 12 Championship

By Randall Mell
South Florida Sun-Sentinel (KRT)

These are crazy times for Southern California football fans who spent the weekend scoreboard watching.

After a Saturday that fell mostly their way, the Trojans should hold firm to the No. 2 spot in the Bowl Championship Series poll when it's released today. Still, it's too early to book travel to the Sugar Bowl national championship game Jan. 4 at New Orleans as No. 3 LSU still has hopes of squeezing out Southern California.

On the other hand, fans of No. 1 Oklahoma may as well make their travel arrangements. Win or lose in Saturday's Big 12 championship showdown with No. 13 Kansas State, the Sooners are almost assured of a trip to New Orleans.

"Barring something unforeseen, I consider Oklahoma a lock to play for the national championship," said Chicago-based BCS analyst Jerry Palm.

Oklahoma's hold on the No. 1 spot in Sunday's Associated Press

poll was noteworthy. The Sooners (12-0) have now held the top spot 95 times, tying Notre Dame for most ever. A victory Saturday will give the Sooners the record. Ohio State has been ranked No. 1 third most (73) followed by Miami (68) and Florida State (60).

Even if Oklahoma loses next weekend, the Sooners have accumulated so much staying power in the BCS poll, it's unlikely they would drop lower than No. 2 when the BCS matchups are announced next Sunday, which means the Sooners will play for the national championship even if they don't win their conference title. The seven BCS computers love them so much, they should remain No. 1 even with a loss. So, the only question now is whether they'll wear red or white in the Sugar Bowl (No. 1 gets the first choice of uniform colors).

USC (10-1), which concludes its season Saturday hosting Oregon State, had some big games fall its way over the weekend in strength-of-schedule implications, the biggest being wins that sent Georgia to the SEC title game to play LSU. Now, if LSU beats Georgia, the Tigers still lose a little something. A Tiger win should drop Georgia from the No. 6 BCS poll spot, meaning LSU will lose the quality

win advantage it gets from the Bulldogs being so highly ranked. In fact, if LSU whips Georgia so thoroughly that the Bulldogs drop out of the top 10, LSU will lose all of its quality-win component.

The outcome of the Oklahoma-Kansas State game affects the other BCS bowls more than it does the Sugar Bowl. A Kansas State victory thrusts the Wildcats into the BCS mix, likely bumping Texas.

The Orange Bowl is hopeful of hosting Miami-Ohio State, with an eye still on Florida State. Florida State, suddenly a Rose Bowl possibility against Michigan, could still end up in the Fiesta Bowl against the SEC champ.

"There is still a lot that can happen," Orange Bowl Chief Executive Officer Keith Tribble said. "We're fortunate we have both Miami and Florida State in the pool. I've always said if we can have one of our great Florida teams, where there are a lot of local fans and local interest, and match them up with a team from another part of the country that will bring a lot of fans to South Florida and spend a lot of money in our community, that's good for us."

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Green Bay assistant expected to be first black coach in SEC

The Packers' Sylvester Croom could become the 15th head football coach in Mississippi State's 70-year SEC history

By Jim Mashek
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

BILOXI, Miss. — The wait for Sylvester Croom has begun at Mississippi State.

The Green Bay Packers' assistant coach left Bryan Field in Starkville Sunday with an offer to become State's 15th football coach of the Southeastern Conference era, and the first black head coach in SEC history.

Croom boarded a university plane for Green Bay, Wis., without speaking to reporters, but all signs point to the former Alabama All-America center succeeding Jackie Sherrill. Croom visited the State campus on Sunday, spending much of the day with MSU athletics director Larry Templeton.

Templeton said he expects to hear from Croom as soon as today, but it's uncertain what sort of timetable the two men are considering in the process.

"Well, I'm comfortable with the decision we've made," Templeton said. "We've answered all his questions. He's certainly answered all of ours. I'm optimistic that it's done."

Templeton and MSU president Charles Lee traveled to Green Bay on Friday, meeting with Croom one day after State completed a dismal 2-10 season with a 31-0 loss to archrival Ole Miss.

Croom, 49, became the focus of State's search last week when LSU offensive coordinator Jimbo Fisher announced he was no longer a candidate for the job. Templeton declined to discuss Fisher or any other potential candidate for the job, but it's clear he believes

Croom is the man to get State off the mat. The Bulldogs have lost 23 of their last 26 SEC games.

"When we started looking at the different criteria, in reviewing the candidates, (Croom's) name kept coming up," Templeton said. "We talked with a lot of football people, in college football and the NFL, and he was passing with flying colors. I haven't talked to anybody yet that has a negative word to say about him."

There is some uncertainty surrounding the Mississippi State program.

MSU officials are still awaiting the results of an NCAA investigation into the program for possible rules violations from 1998-2002. Templeton said these issues have been covered with Croom, who last coached in the college ranks in 1986 with the University of Alabama.

Alabama is one of three SEC teams currently on NCAA probation.

"I think we've been very forthright and open with him," Templeton said.

Croom was a finalist for the Alabama job that unexpectedly came open earlier this year. Former Alabama quarterback Mike Shula, an assistant coach with the Miami Dolphins, got the job instead. Alabama closed a 4-9 season Saturday night with a 37-29 loss to Hawaii in Honolulu.

Alabama came under criticism from civil rights activists, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, because Croom had more experience than the 38-year-old Shula.

Still, Templeton said the significance of State possibly hiring the first black football coach in SEC history was not a factor in the school's decision.

"He was the best available coach for Mississippi State, and he happened to be a minority," Templeton said.

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