AUBURN

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#4 **#26**

SEC W.   OVERALL

AUBURN					
5-YEAR WIN TREND					
14			(B) UCF		
13	ALABAMA	(B) Oklahoma	(CG) GEORGIA	ALABAMA	(B) Minnesota
12	GEORGIA	ALABAMA	LSU	GEORGIA	GEORGIA
11	OLE MISS	GEORGIA	Clemson	TENNESSEE	LSU
10	ARKANSAS	TEXAS A&M	ALABAMA	MISS ST	FLORIDA
9	MISS ST	Clemson	UL-Monroe	LSU	ALABAMA
8	LSU	AL A&M (FCS)	GEORGIA	(B) Purdue	Samford (FCS)
7	(B) Memphis	VANDERBILT	TEXAS A&M	Liberty	OLE MISS
6	Idaho	OLE MISS	ARKANSAS	TEXAS A&M	ARKANSAS
5	TEXAS A&M	ARKANSAS	OLE MISS	OLE MISS	MISS ST
4	KENTUCKY	MISS ST	MISS ST	S. Miss	TEXAS A&M
3	San Jose St	UL-Monroe	MISSOURI	ARKANSAS	Kent State
2	Jax State (FCS)	LSU	Mercer (FCS)	AL State (FCS)	Tulane
1	Louisville	Arkansas St	GA Southern	Washington	Oregon
	2015	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**
	GUS MALZAHN				

AUBURN				
2019 RESULTS		Yard +/-	TO +/-	GRADE
OREGON	W 27-21	51	-1	81.7
TULANE	W 24-6	156	-1	78.7
KENT ST	W 55-16	312	0	89.0
TEXAS A&M	W 28-20	-92	1	67.6
MISS. ST	W 56-23	244	-1	103.4
FLORIDA	L 13-24	-129	0	27.5
ARKANSAS	W 51-10	257	3	84.0
LSU	L 20-23	-221	1	38.6
OLE MISS	W 20-14	241	0	73.1
GEORGIA	L 14-21	78	-1	52.8
SAMFORD	W 52-0	430	4	FCS
ALABAMA	W 48-45	-161	1	51.2
(B) MINNESOTA	L 24-31	-262	0	24.4
OVERALL: 16th / 66		**SEC: 5th / 14**		**64.3**

AUBURN				
BEST/WORST GAME GRADES (LAST 5 YEARS)				
YEAR	OPPONENT	W/L	SCORE	GRADE
2017	GEORGIA	W	40-17	126.8
2017	MISS. ST	W	49-10	123.3
2016	ARKANSAS	W	56-3	116.5
2018	PURDUE	W	63-14	114.5
2016	ARKANSAS ST	W	51-14	105.1
2018	ALABAMA	L	21-52	6.4
2015	LSU	L	21-45	7.8
2017	GEORGIA	L	7-28	15.1
2016	ALABAMA	L	12-30	17.1
2018	GEORGIA	L	10-27	18.6

AUBURN		RANK
Scoring Offense	33.2 ppg	28
Points per Play	0.46	42
Total Offense	407 ypg	64
Yards per Play	5.6	83
Rushing Offense	199 ypg	33
Yards per Carry	4.7	48
1st Down YPC	5.1	37
Explosive Rush	5.5	74
Passing Offense	208 ypg	87
Yards / Attempt	6.8	99
QB Rating	128	89
TD / INT Ratio	3.3	27
Sacks / Attempt	5%	25
Explosive Pass	6.6	86
Return. Production	61%	75

Outside of Auburn circles, it's hard to understand why they consistently put Gus Malzahn on the "hot seat" year after year. What is a realistic expectation when you share a division with three national champion head coaches, and share your home state with arguably the best coach in college football history?

Malzahn recruits at a Top 10 level and every few years he fields a team that can punch near an SEC title or Playoff bid. He's also beaten Saban as many times as the rest of the entire SEC programs have since he took over in 2013:

- Auburn vs. Alabama: 3-4 record
- Rest of SEC vs. Alabama: 3-51 record

I reviewed the "Mock Trial of Gus" episode from *AU Wishbone* to give Malzahn his due process. They made a great point that is often overlooked -- 2010s SEC is not a fair comparison to 1970s & 1980s SEC. Programs like LSU, Ole Miss, Mississippi State, and even Florida/UGA at times, were nowhere near their high levels of the 2010s. Oh, and Alabama wasn't riding an all-time dynasty back then either.

Against opponents Auburn "should" beat, legendary coach Pat Dye averaged 2 such losses per year. Meanwhile Malzahn has just six over his seven seasons, which is less than 1 per year. The competition has just skyrocketed.

Perhaps the 2-5 record in bowl games adds to the heat, as it's a negative final note that sits for nine, long, offseason months. Regardless, Auburn remains on the short list of programs that can punch into the Playoff discussion in any given year, and that in itself is a rare feat in the modern game.

OFFENSE

A large chunk of the Malzahn criticism is centered on his handling of the offense. He set the bar at almost unattainable levels, leading the offense to a National Championship and Heisman in 2010, with a return trip to the title game in 2013. Then, he delegated the play-calling role to Rhett Lashlee and Chip Lindsey with mixed results. Some struggles led to a constant tug-of-war between Malzahn and his coordinators with the boundaries between roles becoming blurred.

When Malzahn hired Kenny Dillingham heading into 2019, he vowed to never delegate the play-calling duties ever again.

It was a short-lived promise, as Malzahn brought in long-time coaching peer Chad Morris to take over "full control" of the Auburn offense in 2020. Their roots go way back to 2003 in the Arkansas/Texas high school level, when Morris met with Malzahn to learn his hurry-up no-huddle attack. Morris rose up the ranks, led the offense at Clemson (2011-2014) before taking over as the head coach at SMU and Arkansas.

While the underlying core and concepts are from the same tree, Morris has branched off more towards the pass game. All ten of his collegiate offenses averaged 30+ pass attempts per game, while just one of Malzahn's ten had that level of passing. A passing influence could play to Auburn's roster advantages at receiver in 2020. The shift will make the offense more dynamic and better overall, because in 2019 the offense was handcuffed when the line failed to get a consistent run push against tough front sevens:

- vs. unranked opponents (7-0): 490 yards/game, 41 points/game
- vs. ranked opponents (2-4): 309 yards/game, 24 points/game

Of course yards and points are tougher to gain against better teams, but the sharp contrast paints the picture.

Worse, Auburn must replace four offensive line starters and missed out on valuable spring practice time when Morris and new offensive line coach Jack Bicknell could have been experimenting with different line combos. Nick Brahms was the only non-senior to start a game in 2019, taking over full time in November. And that's all the returning starting experience up front. Right tackle Brodarious Hamm is drawing huge reviews from the staff and his teammates after appearing in 11 games and dominating in practice.

While the line's reload and development are the biggest question, the surrounding skill positions are absolutely loaded.

It all starts with dual-threat quarterback Bo Nix who dazzled as a freshman, but also showed some inconsistency you'd expect from a first-time starter. Look for a major jump from his first to second season

AUBURN					OFFENSE & DEFENSE, vs. OPPONENT AVERAGE (PERCENTILE)					
O										
F	44%	44%	75%	55%	39%	96%	91%	17%	62%	98%	22nd
F	DILLINGHAM	LINDSEY		LASHLEE				LOEFFLER	MALZAHN		
	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	10-YEAR
D		STEELE			MUSCHAMP	JOHNSON		VanGORDER	ROOF		
E											
F	96%	79%	98%	79%	75%	49%	44%	30%	21%	60%	18th

AUBURN		RANK	
Scoring Defense	19.5 ppg	17	
Points per Play	0.28	14	
Total Defense	337 ypg	28	
Yards per Play	4.8	17	
3rd Down Conv%	29.9%	8	
Rushing Defense	123 ypg	25	
Yards per Carry	3.5	25	
Negative Play %	10%	22	
Explosive Rush	6.2	43	
Passing Defense	214 ypg	47	
Yards / Attempt	6.1	12	
QB Rating	121	32	
Completion %	58.3%	38	
Explosive Pass	4.7	16	
Return. Production	60%	77	

starting, and for more moments like the incredible late-game poise he showed on the game-winning drive in the Iron Bowl. Nix was decisive, creative, and elusive in the pocket.

The talent is so strong at the running back position, that last year's leading rusher entered the transfer portal as signs of his starting role diminishing. As of the June writing, Boobie Whitlow is in the portal after a 10-touchdown, 750-yard season. Rising sophomore DJ Williams burst onto the scene against LSU for 130 yards on just 10 carries and flashed enough brilliance to be the likely starter for 2020. 5'7" Shaun Shivers is used in a variety of ways and had the lasting image of the Alabama game as he took a jet sweep and smashed the linebacker's helmet off as he crossed the goal line for the winning score.

Two freshmen raise the talent ceiling even higher. Mark Antony-Richards was a Top100 recruit and has drawn Kerryon Johnson comparisons, while Tank Bigsby was the #39 overall prospect in the entire 2020 class (near 5-star).

The receiver core is even deeper and brings back more experience. The top three receivers all return after combining for 1600 yards and 12 touchdowns: Seth Williams, Anthony Schwartz, Eli Stove. This offense likes to get them involved in the run game, evidenced by Schwartz's long reverse touchdown against Texas A&M. But Morris will likely get the ball spread out more to the receivers on the outsides. They added three 4-star, Top200 prospects to the receiver stable from their #7 national 2020 signing class.

DEFENSE

While the offense gets all of the attention and week-to-week drama, Kevin Steele's defense is quietly one of the most consistent in the SEC and the nation. I'd even consider Steele the most underrated defensive coordinator in the conference. He inherited a defense outside of the Top 50, but each of his four defenses here have finished in the Top 20: #7, #11, #14, #17.

Perhaps his toughest reload awaits in 2020. Not just one, but two 4-year starting defensive linemen were selected in the first 50 picks in April. Derrick Brown earned 1st team All-American honors, while Marlon Davidson was a force on the edge since 2016. Oh, and a third defensive lineman, Nick Coe, left early for the pros.

Big Kat Bryant also considered an early NFL bid, but will set the edge at defensive end after being a significant part of the rotation. Derick Hall surged at the "Buck" position late last season and earned starts against Alabama and Minnesota.

In addition to the turnover up front, the entire starting secondary must be replaced. It's rare to see two defensive backs finish atop the team tackle list, but safeties Jeremiah Dinson and Daniel Thomas were super involved in the run game and combined for 162 tackles. They are both gone, along with both starting corners since Noah Igbinoghene declared early and was selected in the 1st round. Smoke Monday has flashed a high ceiling but needs more consistency, and overall it seems like a quicker reload here compared to the line.

AUBURN	
2020 SCHEDULE	
S. 5	ALCORN STATE
S. 12	* UNC
S. 19	@ Ole Miss
S. 26	SOUTHERN MISS
O. 3	KENTUCKY
O. 10	@ Georgia
O. 17	TEXAS A&M
O. 24	- - - BYE - - -
O. 31	@ Mississippi St
N. 7	ARKANSAS
N. 14	UMASS
N. 21	LSU
N. 28	@ Alabama

The linebackers will be the strength, at least early on. Steele alternates between a 4-3 and 4-2-5, and either way he is covered with all three experienced backers returning. KJ Britt brings veteran experience and led the group with 69 tackles, while 5-star Owen Pappoe played up to his ranking as a true freshman last fall.

Steele's defenses have sent the 10th most defenders to the NFL draft over his time here, so he is no stranger to reloading rosters. But replacing an entire secondary, two first-rounders, two 4-year starters, and seven starters overall is another story. I expect a step back from their annual Top 20 spot.
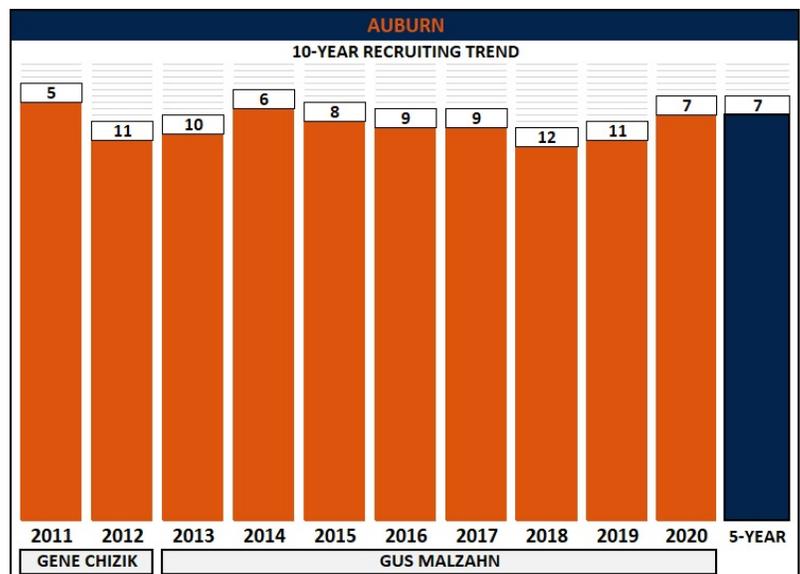
OUTLOOK

The offense is loaded with playmakers and features a rising SEC star at quarterback. Plus, Malzahn's hiring of Morris should help unlock their elite receiver talent even more.

However, to win in this conference and this division, the trenches are critical. Auburn loses four offensive line starters, and three defensive line starters – two of which were Top 50 picks. While their overall roster talent is high enough to keep them in the West's upper pack, their loss of star power in the trenches holds them back from contending for the title.

AUBURN		RANK / 66
All-Time Wins	776	13
All-Time Win %	0.631	15
Wins (Last 100)	661	15
Wins (Last 50)	405	14
Wins (Last 25)	209	16
Wins (Last 10)	87	13
Wins (Last 5)	42	18
Game Grader (10 yr)	59.3	20
Game Grader (5 yr)	61.2	13
Game Grader (3 yr)	65.7	12
Draft Picks s' 2000	75	18
Draft Picks s' 2010	39	18
Player Development: Recruit Rank ('13-'16) vs. Draft ('17-'20)		45
Win Conversion: Recruit Rank ('11-'19) vs. Wins ('15-'19)		52

AUBURN					GAME GRADER (RANK / 66)						
2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	**10-YEAR**
64.3 (16)	55.4 (25)	77.3 (8)	60.4 (16)	48.4 (41)	73 (9)	70.3 (14)	23.7 (63)	40.9 (48)	78.9 (6)	59.3 (20)

AUBURN
10-YEAR RECRUITING TREND

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	5-YEAR
5	11	10	6	8	9	9	12	11	7	7

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