

Five Plays That Launched Bama's Dominance and Destroyed the SEC

Take a trip back in time to Monday night, January 9, 2012. The BCS National Championship featured two teams from the same conference for the first time ever. Amid chaos and controversy and cries of injustice from millions of people from at least 39 states, undefeated LSU and only-defeated-by-LSU Alabama went head to head for Part II of the Battle of the FGs.

The issue of Bama playing in the game instead of Oklahoma St. or Stanford may have been worthy of debate but one thing was not: The SEC was King of College Football. There was even a commercial during the BCS Championship that year proclaiming, "You are watching #6," a reference to this matchup guaranteeing a sixth consecutive national championship for the conference. Alabama would defeat Notre Dame the following year for #7 before the streak ended.

And back then it was not just one team carrying the others:

- From 2006 to 2012, four different SEC schools won the national championship.
- From 2011 to 2013, the SEC had three of the Top 5 teams in a final poll every year and at least four of the Top 10 every year, with the conference claiming five of the Top 10 in 2012.
- In recent history the SEC has had the Top 2 final teams in the Final polls twice (2007, 2011) and two of the Top 3 on two other occasions (2006, 2009).
- Half the teams in the conference finished in the Top 5 from 2011 to 2013.

But then it all changed. One team stayed atop the college football world. But for the other 13, in the words of Newman,

it all came crashing down. Consider the following:

- SEC teams not named Alabama had ten Top 10 finishes from 2011 to 2013 but had only two from 2014 to 2016.
- Teams not named Alabama had six Top 5 finishes from 2011 to 2013. From 2014 to 2016 they had zero.
- No SEC team repeated as Conference Champ from 1998 to 2014. From 2014 to 2016, Alabama won three in a row, by an average of 28 points per game.
- After eight years of several teams winning the championship, zero teams other than Bama even made it to the playoffs from 2014 to 2016.

Georgia finally ended some of that this year but guess who is right there with them?

How did it happen? The reasons are legion, from recruiting failures to coaching hires. But today I want to laser focus on a handful of plays in actual games. Not just any plays. These plays were plays that were bad breaks for the other team or plays that could have and should have been made that were crucial to changing the result. Understand this is not an article to proclaim that Bama is lucky. Breaks and missed chances are a huge part of sports. New England in the NFL is one play in each of their seven Super Bowls away from being 1-6 or 7-0. This is an article about how fascinating that line is. Yet for each play where Bama was fortunate, there are surely some where they were not.

But here are 5 that facilitated their dominance and simultaneously killed the rest of the SEC:

The Game: 2011 #2 Oklahoma St. vs. Iowa St.

The Play: Oklahoma St. misses a 37 yard FG that would have given them the lead with a minute to go.

The Factual Aftermath: OSU lost in Overtime and didn't finish in the Top 2 in the BCS at the end of the regular season. Alabama played LSU instead in the National Championship and manhandled them, 21-0.

The Alternate Reality: LSU destroys the Cowboys, giving them two championships in five years. Bama is left with one National Championship in Saban's first five seasons. Recruiting changes. Les Miles doesn't get fired. LSU is much more competitive six years later instead of losing seven straight to Bama and at home to Troy in 2017.

The Game: 2012 Alabama vs. LSU

The Play: With 8:41 left in the 4th, Spencer Ware of LSU is stuffed on a 4th and 1 from Alabama's 24-yard line.

The Factual Aftermath: I could take any one of about five 50/50 risks by Les Miles in this game that backfired, and spin them on a wheel to pick the one for this article. The Mad Hatter had built a reputation for outrageous gambits and eating grass, but on this night he just ended up looking like a doofus. LSU won the yardage battle easily, the time of possession AND won the turnover battle. And still lost. Because of a slew of missed FGs and 4th downs. A conversion here could have scored a TD for LSU and put Bama in a hole that they may not have escaped. As it was, the Tide scored at the end and Death Valley was a place where LSU's dreams came to die. Alabama won the SEC and steamrolled Notre Dame for back-to-back championships and three in four years.

The Alternate Reality: LSU wins the West and plays Georgia for the SEC championship. One of those two teams goes on to curb stomp Notre Dame. The SEC streak extends with no team winning more than 2 championships during the run and Saban has two National Championships in 6 years, but only one SEC. Recruiting changes. Les Miles doesn't get fired and moves on

to trying to eat field marking paint.

The Game: 2012 Alabama vs. Georgia (SEC Championship Game)

The Play: With 9 seconds left and Georgia eight yards from scoring to win as the time ran out, Aaron Murray's end zone pass was deflected into Chris Conley's arms, who was tackled instead.

The Factual Aftermath: Alabama won the SEC, National Championship, etc. Georgia missed its best chance in 32 years to win the whole thing and continued to be mired as a good-but-not-great team until Mark Richt was fired in 2015.

The Alternate Reality: Georgia annihilates Notre Dame. The SEC championships are spread out over five teams in the run, Georgia takes a step up in recruiting, and keeps winning at a higher level than before 2012. Mark Richt is still employed by Georgia. The Gamecocks get Kirby Smart in 2015 and eventually win nine National Championships before I die.

The Game: 2014 Alabama vs. Mississippi State

The Play: Down 19-0 late in the first half with the ball first and goal at the Alabama half-yard line, #1 MSU suffers a false start to move it back to the 5.

The Factual Aftermath: They settled for a FG. The Bulldogs eventually lost 25-20 as Dak Prescott threw three interceptions, all inside Alabama's 25-yard line. Alabama won the SEC again, their 3rd in six years and Mississippi St missed the SEC Championship, the playoffs and lost their bowl game in embarrassing fashion to Georgia Tech.

The Alternate Reality: Mississippi State scores a TD on the play. They don't settle for a FG their next drive either and

pull the game out in the fourth. They go on to play for the SEC, defeat Missouri and become the first SEC team in the four-team playoff. They still lose to Ohio St but they build on this with better recruiting and do not fall immediately back to the middle of the SEC. Dan Mullen doesn't leave for Florida in 2017. Instead of dropping to the 4th round in the 2016 NFL Draft, Prescott is drafted by the Jets in the 2nd round and no one still has any idea how good he is because the Jets are a dumpster fire.

The Game: 2015 Arkansas vs. Ole Miss

The Play: In Overtime, on 4th and 25 from Ole Miss's 40-yard line, down 52-45, Arkansas receiver Hunter Henry catches a simple pass and while being tackled laterals it over his head 15 yards backward. Arkansas RB Alex Collins retrieves it and navigates substantial traffic 31 yards to miraculously get the first down and keep the game alive.

The Factual Aftermath: Arkansas scored, went for two and got it and won the game. Ole Miss lost its shot at the SEC West title, having owned the tie-breaker over Alabama from their head-to-head victory in September. Alabama won the SEC and yet another National Championship under Saban, their fourth in 7 years.

The Alternate Reality: Alabama doesn't win the West or SEC. The committee makes one of their most controversial decisions ever, taking Iowa as the fourth playoff team over Alabama. They cite a better loss (to playoff bound Michigan St instead of to Ole Miss who also lost to Memphis) and general strength of schedule (the SEC was terrible pre-bowls). Alabama still has zero national championships since 2012 and dynasty talk and "Saban as GOAT" talk are diminished. Ole Miss wins the SEC over Florida, but still gets manhandled by the NCAA for grotesque cheating that elicits comparisons to Sammy Sosa

before Congress. Shea Pattersons still leaves for Michigan. Mississippi State fans still laugh hysterically at them burning a redshirt to play him three games in 2016.

The success of Auburn and Georgia this year may mean things are beginning to change for the SEC and Alabama, but if Georgia is one-and-done and Alabama wins it all, then the conference actual reality continues and the fact Georgia won the SEC while Alabama didn't will matter about as much as it did for LSU in 2011. Which is very little.

Comment are welcomed below!

Championship Game Preview: Can '16 Alabama be the Greatest Team of The Modern Era?

In a mirror image of last year's epic championship game, undefeated and #1 Alabama takes on #2 and one-loss Clemson tonight. Several people, among them REO Contributor Mike Lytle, have confessed to me they are pulling for Clemson because Alabama has won far too much. This has been my reaction (minus the commandment breaking):



It's Like Goliath vs. Jezebel

I confess I have Bama fatigue due to their success and they are among the last teams I'd like to see win it. But if Alabama induces weariness in my sports fandom, Clemson winning would induce war crime-level torture.

Yet I cannot deny that Clemson likely stands a better chance this year than last, in which they were a play or two away.

They have everything Alabama does: 3-deep roster talent, exceptional coordinator coaching, unshakeable confidence. If quarterback is the most important position in football, and it is, then they have a decided advantage over the Tide. If D-line is the second most important position in college football, and it is, then Clemson isn't losing ground there either ([as I wrote last year](#), and it's still true). They won't get intimidated or pushed around and the Tiger offense likely will not get rattled into a turnover that leads to a TD the other way, as other teams have 11 times this year vs. Bama[1. Someone may point out that Watson threw 15 picks this year but they were not really the kind Bama is used to getting. Only 1 was returned for a TD and there was no pressure on that play.

The vast majority of his ints were bad reads or tipped balls, not throws made because he was pressured.]].

As a Gamecock, I'm terrified.

I wasn't too worried before the Ohio St. game. Clemson blew out several teams this year, including mine, but had so many close calls that I figured they were just a step behind last year. They gave up 43 to Pitt, 36 to Louisville, 34 to FSU, 35 to Va Tech and needed N.C. St to miss a short FG to pull that one out in overtime.

The Opposite of a Late Season Collapse

How did this team not only dismantle Ohio St. but also shut them out? I could discuss Xs and Os all day (Ohio St. could not throw it downfield as well as the teams that put 34+ on Clemson, which is also not what Bama does well) but sometimes sports that involve 18 to 21 year olds are more complex than typical analysis.

Personally, I believe Clemson is better than last year and suffered a tad from last year's hangover and did just well enough to get back to the playoff and now they are turning it on. They beat us about as badly as you can beat a team, they raced out to a huge lead the following week vs. VT and swatted them away when they needed to at the end (just as they did with Louisville and Florida St.) And most impressive of all they then rolled one of the most consistent teams in college football in the semifinal.

It's scary.

Clemson has a lot to play for...their first championship since 1981 and second ever, a chance to truly join college football royalty, and a chance for their end of year result to match the swagger that Dabo has modeled and instilled over 8 years now. And for everyone else...a chance to at least put a dent in the Bama dominance. They have the tools for sure.

If Bama wins, can we complain about UConn Women's Basketball?

On the other side, Bama has nearly as much to play for: 5 undisputed championships in 8 years which hasn't been done in the poll era, and (in my humble opinion) a chance for the 2016 version to enter the argument for greatest college team of my lifetime, the modern era[1. I do not think it's fair for me to try to compare modern teams to teams I never saw play. Facts and stats are great, but the eye test is something. So I'm talking about since I began watching college football and the first championship I remember is Oklahoma winning in 1985.]

They had two close games this year: one vs. Ole Miss which was not as close as the final indicated. They got down 24-3 and then destroyed the Rebels for the next two and a half quarters 45-6 before Ole Miss tagged on a couple of meaningless TDs. They also beat LSU in Baton Rouge by "only" 10 points. And I watched that game start to finish and doubt LSU could have scored if they played 8 quarters so that game never really felt like Alabama was going to lose.

Other than that, they really weren't even threatened slightly.

They are as imposing a defense, I think, since their 1992 version which may be the greatest ever. I don't trust Hurts, Scarborough and Harris like I trusted Coker and Derrick Henry.

Hurts is not a substandard passer by any means (22 TDs and 2600+ yards), though, and considering how Coker got batted around like a pin ball last year it may be better to have a better running QB vs. a team that gets pressure like Clemson's. Plus, Bama always seems to just find a way to score, to win. It's an intangible for sure and it goes team wide. Some Bama fans were sweating when they got down three TDs to Ole Miss. I turned to my wife and said, "I bet they win by 14".

And in my opinion, should they win tonight becoming the first ever 15-0 team at this level of football and winning every game but one by 10+ (tonight's result pending), they would be one of the ten best teams ever.

I will wait to see if they win before ranking them but as of right now I would say the following ten teams are the best of this era, in no particular order:

1995 Nebraska

2001 Miami

2004 Southern Cal

1992 Alabama

2010 Auburn

2005 Texas

1996 Florida

1991 Washington

2013 Florida St.

1988 Notre Dame

So if Alabama wins I will add them where I think they belong on the list, and produce a new article later this week with the Top 10 ranked in order (including 2016 Bama) and comments about each one.

If Clemson wins, I will jerk my TV from the wall, throw it out the window, rend my garments, pull out my beard, fast and weep violently into my wife's arms and probably disappear for 6 months.

So this is how it's going to go...

So how will it go tonight? I will give some random predictions for the game and a prediction for the final score:

- Alabama will NOT score on special teams or defense tonight.
- If Clemson turns it over once or less, they win; twice or more and they lose
- Watson runs for more yards than Hurts
- Hurts throws for more yards than his season average because they are behind in the second half.
- Watson has less total yards but less turnovers than last year, plays an overall better game and wins MVP
- Dabo wears a K-Mart sweatshirt.

I'm guessing it won't be as fun as last year, it will be more low scoring but it will be a cleaner, more professional looking game. Clemson will be by far the most explosive team Bama has faced this year. The SEC is down. Taking out defense and special teams TDs, Bama only averaged 28 PPG game this year, which feels low. So I'll go out on a limb and say Clemson doesn't turn it over and pulls the (sort of) upset:

CLEMSON 27, ALABAMA 17

See y'all in six months.

The Rise of Clemson, The Fall of the SEC and a Preview of the College Football Championship Game

First, a couple of disclaimers.

Disclaimer #1: I am a South Carolina Gamecock fan.

I am utterly and shamelessly biased when it comes to college football. So there will be a distinct slant to this article. It does not mean I will not be objective for the most part here, but it does mean at some point you will realize that I would not pull for Clemson even if they were playing against a team coached by Emperor Palpatine, with the Russian from Rocky IV as quarterback and Miley Cyrus and Newman cheering from the stands.

Disclaimer #2: I am not an 'SEC Fan' but more often than not I root for teams in my conference when they are not playing my team.

There are logical reasons for doing this. The way college football is set up, with only four teams getting in (and formerly only two getting in), your strength of schedule is supremely important. Unlike other sports and other levels of football, your conference constitutes 70-80% or more of your schedule. Like it or not, *the conference discussion matters*. College football fans—especially outside of the SEC—like to say, “I don’t root for a conference, I root for a team” and disdain the idea of conference loyalty. But in my opinion they do so potentially to their detriment.

Let me illustrate this: In 2007, LSU got in the BCS National Championship game with 2 losses. Oklahoma, also with two

losses and a similar resume, did not. Why? I believe in large part because Florida obliterated Ohio St. in the NC the year before and changed the perception of conferences entirely[1]. The SEC went on to win the National Championship that year and the next three years (by 4 different teams). And then in 2011, the controversy of the century occurred when Alabama got in the National Championship over Big XII champion Oklahoma State despite not even winning their division. Why? It was because by then the SEC reputation was formidable after winning an unprecedented five undisputed championships in a row. And it kept happening. In 2012, one-loss Alabama again got in the championships over one-loss Oregon and Kansas State. In 2013, there was no doubt that the one-loss SEC Champion (That year it was Auburn, but it would have been Missouri had they won) was going to get in over one-loss Big Ten Champ Michigan State and one-loss Big XII Champ Baylor. It was a foregone conclusion. A seven-year run of National titles eliminated significant controversy. Auburn owes Alabama who owes LSU who owes Florida. So I root for the SEC in those games because if it is ever my team that needs the benefit of the doubt, even now with a four-team playoff[2], I want to get it. As the fan of a team that recently had three 11-win seasons and Top Ten finishes in a row, it is not unthinkable to see my team being in this position.

Beyond the opportunity to be considered over teams from other conferences for playoff games, conference association also helps with important things like revenue and recruiting. Conferences get a share of the pie for every bowl game teams play. And top line players my school has gotten to come play, like Jadeveon Clowney, have made it clear they consider the SEC to be big boy football. This affects what happens on the field. I do not think it is coincidence at all that our first three 11-win seasons and our first ever five-game winning streak over our hated rival, Clemson, happened at the height of the SEC run. Even Vanderbilt had back-to-back 9-win seasons when the SEC was on fire. The whole conference benefits each

others' success.

And while the SEC had a dominant run at the top of the college football world, laying claim as best conference most years from 1996 to 2005 and every year from 2006 to 2013^[3], last year brought a resounding end to the SEC's reign. The SEC East was terrible, highlighted by four of its teams getting swept by the ACC on rivalry weekend and Missouri emerging as champion after losing to 4-8 Indiana out of conference. All five ranked SEC West schools lost their bowl games, two of them in very embarrassing fashion (Ole Miss and Mississippi State). Alabama lost in the playoff as a heavy favorite to traditional SEC whipping boy Ohio State. And so there was no ground to claim the SEC as best. I thought it may just be a one-year hiccup because those happen. But this year the SEC—outside of Bama—was horrid in the regular season. There were no teams in the Top 10 outside of Alabama. The second highest ranked team, Ole Miss, lost at home badly to a four-loss Memphis. The third highest ranked team, Florida, has been awful since their starting QB got suspended, culminating in a beat down vs. Florida State on rivalry weekend. It was a day where the ACC again beat the SEC East. Throw in losses to Toledo, Western Kentucky and the Citadel (by my Gamecocks) and it was a rough year for the SEC before the bowls. The SEC has seen resurrection of sorts in the bowls this year, going 8-2, breaking records for bowl wins and games over .500 for one conference. Yet even with that success, this year for the conference still feels like Alabama and their 13 little brothers.

So the SEC narrative is changing. Now it is not a dominant conference but a good conference with one dominant team. In my opinion, should Alabama win this year it will NOT be another chance to chant "S-E-C!!". For years people have tried to detract from the SEC's success by saying that the SEC is just one or two good teams with the rest of the conference just average or riding their coattails. In doing this, they

overlook how many different SEC teams have won the championship or finished in the Top 5 in the country in the last decade. (I count at least 8 of the 14). But now that claim is becoming more accurate. I really do not know why the 13 teams outside of Alabama have struggled the last two years; I can only account for my team and I'll spare you my theories on the demise of the Gamecocks. But if the rest of the conference doesn't build on this season's bowl success, then Alabama will continue to be the class of the conference and the benefit of the doubt over playoff position and recruiting advantages for the other 13 will be diminished.

On the other side of the field, you have Clemson, who has earned their way to the top of college football this year without much conference reputation help, similar to Florida St. and Ohio St. the last two years. Until the last three years, the ACC was an afterthought in the college football championship world for a long time. There was a recent stretch of ten years where their champion went 1-9 in the BCS game they played. As recently as 2012 I joked that if you win the SEC, you play for the championship and if you win the ACC you play Northern Illinois in your bowl game. I really thought Clemson's 70-33 loss to West Virginia in the Orange Bowl four years ago would set that program back (wishful thinking). It didn't. The Tigers coach, Dabo Swinney, has a reputation for remaining positive no matter what. Ever since their loss, the Tigers have maintained an incredibly high morale around the program that has translated into winning 10+ games every year and four straight bowl games over teams like LSU, Ohio St. and Oklahoma. And even their losses have been respectable, all coming to teams that finished in the Top 10 at the end of the year and nothing even closely resembling that West Virginia game. By going undefeated this year they took all the benefit of a doubt out of getting to play for the championship.

So now they have a chance to win it all. And they have done it with a coach who gets players to love and trust him in an

unrivaled way, a bevy of four and five-star recruits and coordinators that put together exceptional game plans, especially in bowl games. I marvel at how they lost all linemen on both sides of the ball last year and seemed to get better this year. I marvel at how their best defensive player got injured vs. Oklahoma and they didn't miss a beat in dominating OU's line. I marvel at how their offense didn't slow down when offensive coordinator Chad Morris left. But more than anything, I marvel at how smoothness of their quarterback, Deshaun Watson. He has a real Cam Newton thing going on where he seems unflappable in pressure moments. For instance, he made three big plays against us this year on the 3rd down in a crucial drive in the 4th quarter. I also admire how he almost glides when he runs, especially near the end zone. I always think he is going to get tackled well before he does.

I make no secret that I don't like Dabo Swinney, but I only mean this in a sports sense; I'm sure he is a fine man. Mostly I don't like him because of a controversial rant he went on in 2011. But you have to give credit where credit is due. If Clemson wins it all, I will just have to shut up and seethe quietly until we play them next year, and probably much longer. The fact he could keep that program going forward after that 2011 Orange Bowl loss and losing to us five times in a row is amazing. Everything that has happened with the two programs since USC's Pharaoh Cooper's TD pass to Brandon Wilds to make it 31-17 USC and clinch the "one for the thumb" in 2013 has seen Clemson move forward and us move backwards. It's been a nightmare for me and all Gamecocks to be sure.

Who do I think will win? I have no idea. College football is so unpredictable. I hope Alabama wins 52-0 and not so I can chant "S-E-C!!" The Alabama team that romped Michigan St. with offense, defense and special teams "processing" seems like it could beat anyone like a drum. But Clemson never seems to get beat at the line – which is where the SEC was most dominant

during their championship run, ask Chip Kelly. Their QB and first RB are as athletic and talented as anyone. Bama has the name reputation, but they lost at home to Ole Miss and didn't blow out teams like Auburn and Florida who were vastly inferior. So it will probably be close. I'll say 31-30 Alabama. I know I'll be singing "You're Dixie's football pride, Crimson Tide" the whole night, along with most of Gamecocks nationwide. Help us, Nick Saban. You're our only hope.

[1] Florida was NOT going to get into the Championship game in 2006 until Southern Cal lost to UCLA the last weekend. Southern Cal was going to play Ohio St. that year even though both they and Florida had one loss. There was even a loud cry for one-loss Michigan to get a rematch with Ohio St. for the NC, since they were the two best teams by perception. Note as well that in 2004, of the three teams that were undefeated at the end of the year, the SEC team, Auburn, was the one who got left out. "SEC bias" was not a thing until the SEC started earning it on the field.

[2] The Big XII Champions got left out of the four-team playoff in 2014 mostly because they did not have a championship game. However, even if they had, one of the Power 5 conferences champions with a loss would still have been left out. It would not have been the SEC. 12-1 Alabama was ranked #1 over undefeated Florida State.

[3] Some fans of college football may note that the SEC did not win the championship in 2013. I still think the SEC was the best conference that year because I do not base "Best Conference" on the simplistic criteria of who wins the championship. I base it on several factors, mostly how the conferences fare head to head in bowls and other even match ups. The SEC has not had a losing record in bowl season since 2002 and most years wins 60-70% of its bowls. No other

conference comes close. The 7-years championship run just made it easy to make the argument in a superficial, reductionist culture. But top to bottom, the SEC had been consistently better than other conferences for nearly two decades, despite what the conference's detractors have claimed.