

AT LONG LAST, DAWGS ON TOP



Jacob Weiszer
Sports Editor

up to date recruiting rankings to see if we could challenge Alabama as a college football power-house one day. I recall wandering the floors of the Butts-Mehre Heritage Hall with my sports reporter father, glancing into the cases of the trophies we had once lifted. There was a wide array of bowl trophies but one award sat alone: the 1980 national championship trophy.

"1980 was so long ago," I thought as I began pondering whether we would ever be able to add another to that collection. 2017 could have been that year, but Alabama ripped it from our hands. As the Crimson Tide raised their fifth National Championship trophy in the last nine years in Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta, I was overwhelmed with a sense of defeat. We were so close to reaching the summit, but the inevitable Georgia sports curse couldn't be broken.

The following season went as well as the previous one with the Bulldogs going near perfect in the regular season. In the SEC championship game, Georgia fans got serious déjà vu as Alabama came back from a 14-point deficit with their backup quarterback to knock off Georgia. The Bulldogs would go on to miss the college football playoffs and lose their bowl game.

As two more seasons went to the wayside after losing in the SEC Championship in 2019 and missing out on it all together in 2020, there was great anticipation for what the 2021 season would hold. Headlined by their dominant defense, the Bulldogs appeared poised to challenge for a playoff spot. With the Atlanta Braves capturing their first World Series title in 26 years, this year just felt different.

After a near flawless regular season, Georgia claimed the "number one team in the country" title for eight weeks in a row after Alabama's slip-up against Texas A&M. The Crimson Tide recovered by winning the SEC West to set up a showdown against Georgia in Atlanta.

Scenes of fans scaling light poles and making trampolines of porta potties flickered across the television screen as fireworks rang into the cold January night. To some, it looked like chaos. To Georgia football fans, it was a celebration 41 years in the making.

I was raised on Georgia football, checking the



TEAMMATE TRIUMPH: Jordan Davis and Devonte Wyatt celebrate together during the UGA Game Day Parade after winning the National Championship together. Photo by Patrick Redmond.

From the opening kickoff, Georgia did not look like their usual selves, giving up 536 yards and four touchdowns in the loss. Alabama was still Georgia's kryptonite, yet there was still life left in the season. Having only suffered one loss, the Bulldogs blew past the Big Ten champion Michigan Wolverines to clinch a spot in the championship game. To be the best, you have to beat the best, so it was only right that we had another shot at Alabama with the 2021 championship title on the line. While I was hopeful, it was hard to stay optimistic.

My heart was racing as we kicked off the ball to an explosive offense with a Heisman Trophy winner at the helm. In a low-scoring first half, the Bulldogs were only down by three at halftime. I had to take deep breaths, realizing that the next 30 minutes of game time would decide if we would finally achieve the dream. Early in the fourth quarter, what seemed to be a decisive play didn't go our way. As an Alabama player unintentionally

recovered a Georgia fumble, fans wondered if the football gods sided with the Crimson Tide. The wait proved worth it.

Two touchdown passes by Georgia in the fourth quarter put the Bulldogs up by eight, still a one score game. Alabama drove the ball on their next possession as Bulldog fans everywhere held their breath.

"Surely the Tide could not pull another rabbit out of their hat here," I thought as chunk play after chunk play worked the ball to midfield. As the time ticked under two minutes, Alabama's quarterback threw up a prayer which was intercepted by Georgia.

"Just go down and end the game," I (and Georgia Head Coach Kirby Smart) thought as the Georgia cornerback returned the ball 79 yards for the score, what turned out to be a smart play in hindsight.

The celebration was on as Alabama couldn't come back with 54 seconds left. Players cried tears of joy on the sideline as I began to get flashbacks.

Watching practice from the sideline, intimidating figures towered over my four-foot tall frame. "This is Todd Gurley," my father told me as I said hello to the future pro bowler. Fast forward eight years and there was now a national championship trophy en route to Athens.

Whether you're a diehard Georgia football fan, a sports enthusiast or a spirited citizen of Athens, this championship is something we can all celebrate. While we can't be sure of what will happen over the next 41 years, hopefully there is another Georgia championship in store — or many.

