

Mississippi State builds defense to try and make a move in SEC West

By DAVID BRANDT
AP Sports Writer

Mississippi State coach Dan Mullen is known for his offensive acumen, and his ability to produce great quarterbacks has been particularly impressive. Building a great defense has proven more of a challenge — especially in recent seasons. Now Mullen has hired veteran defensive coordinator Todd Grantham, hoping the 50-year-old can help provide a quick turnaround. The Bulldogs gave up nearly 32 points per game last season, which ranked next to last in the Southeastern Conference. Mullen said Grantham has instilled a toughness that should be beneficial as the season begins. "If we play somebody and their offensive kids are still in the cold tub two days later — that's Mis-

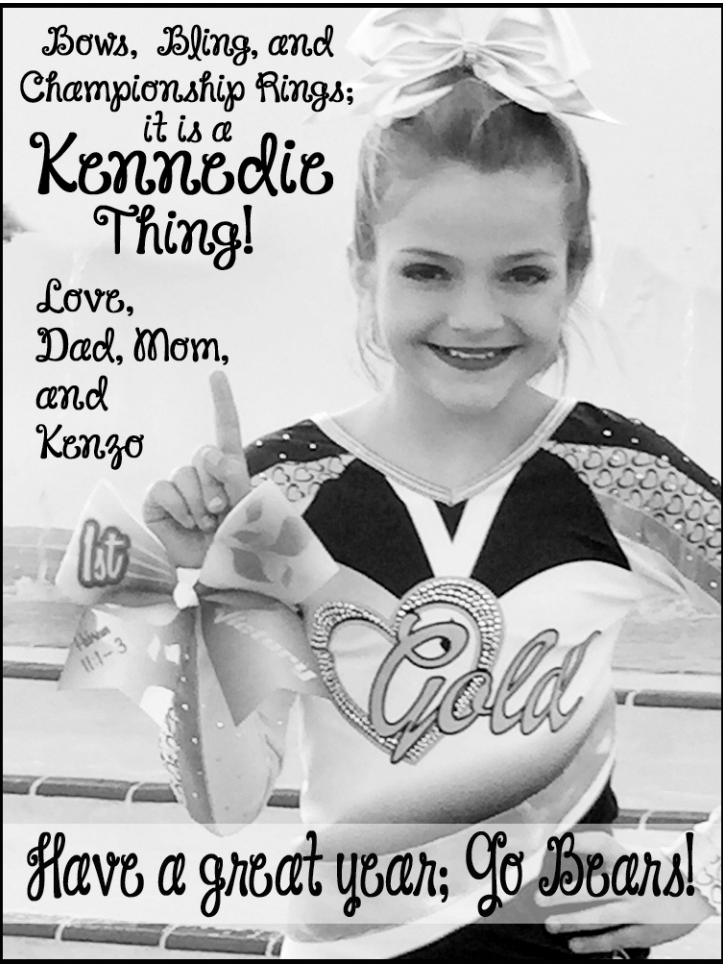
issippi State defense," Mullen said. Grantham comes to Mississippi State after stints as the defensive coordinator at Georgia and Louisville. He'll have some good young players to work with, including defensive lineman Jeffery Simmons, linebacker Leo Lewis and safety Brandon Bryant. Grantham said he won't try to make things too complicated. "At the end of the day, it really gets down to don't let them run the ball and finding ways to make the quarterback play bad," Grantham said. Mississippi State finished last season with a 6-7 record, but ended the season on a 4-2 run. Quarterback Nick Fitzgerald one of the league's biggest surprises and was especially effective on the ground, running for 1,375

yards and 16 touchdowns while averaging more than seven yards per carry. The 6-foot-5, 230-pound was decent in the passing game, but both Mullen and Fitzgerald said there's plenty of room for improvement in that area. He completed just 54.3 percent of his passes in 2016. "Obviously, I have to become a better passer and be more consistent," Fitzgerald said. "We're still going to stay true to the run game and making plays with my feet though." Here are some things to watch for the Bulldogs this season: **KEY GAMES:** Sept. 16 vs. LSU, Oct. 14 vs. BYU, Nov. 23 vs. Mississippi



TOUGH STRETCH: Mississippi State should know by October if it's a real candidate to make a move in the SEC's Western Division this season. The Bulldogs host LSU on Sept. 16 and then follow that with difficult road games against Georgia and Auburn.

BOWL STREAK: Mississippi State has made seven straight bowl games and has a 5-2 record in those appearances. The Bulldogs' streak was in jeopardy last season after they finished the regular season with a 5-7 record, but there weren't enough teams that finished 6-6 and above to fill out all the bowl slots, so Mississippi State was selected for the St. Petersburg Bowl because its Academic Progress Rate score was among the highest for programs with a 5-7 record. **IMPROVING PLAYMAKERS:** Mississippi State could use good seasons from running Aeris Williams and receiver Donald Gray to take some of the pressure off Fitzgerald. Williams finished second on the team with 720 yards rushing last season and averaged 5.3 yards per carry. The 5-foot-10, 204-pound Gray was the Bulldogs' big-play target last season, catching 41 passes for 709 yards.



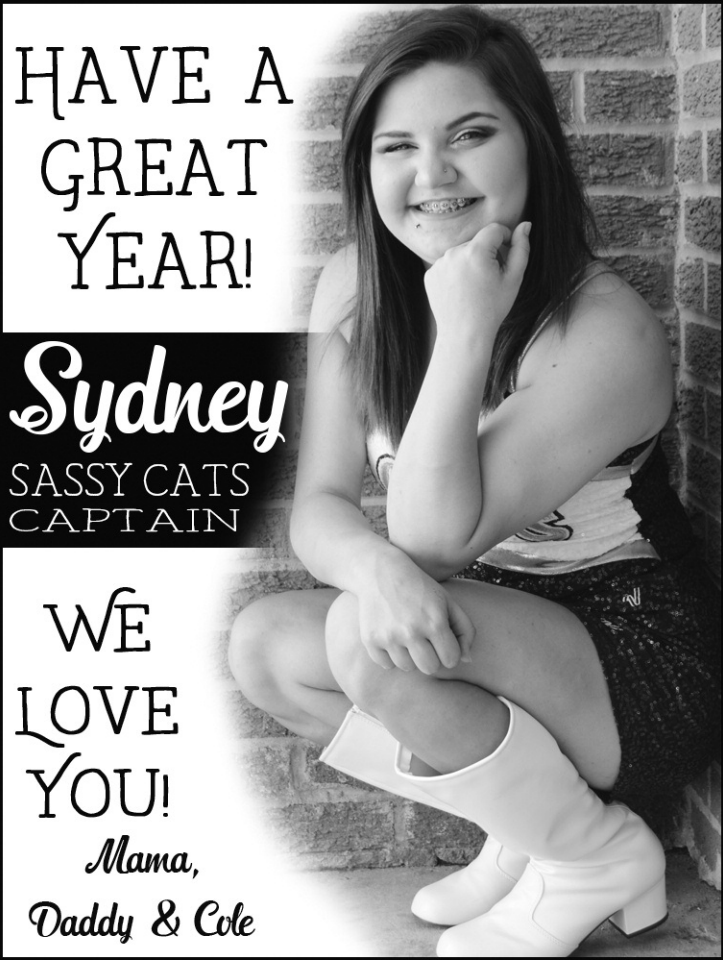
Rebels looking to bounce back from rugged offseason

By DAVID BRANDT
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The Ole Miss football program might look like it's in disarray to outsiders. It's easy to see why: the Rebels are ineligible for the SEC title or a bowl game because of a self-imposed, 1-year bowl ban. They also lost their coach after Hugh Freeze's stunning resignation. But receiver A.J. Brown said it's a mistake to say Ole Miss is finished before the season starts. "We're still here," Brown said. "It's fine. They can doubt us. They can keep doubting us and keep telling what we're not going to do. And we'll just go prove them wrong — that's out mindset this season." Ole Miss was one of the nation's up-and-coming teams two years ago. The Rebels finished with a 10-3 record that ended with a Sugar Bowl win over Oklahoma State. Recruiting momentum was strong and Freeze looked like he had built a program that could be a consistent powerhouse in the SEC's Western Division. But the news has been pretty dismal since that trip to New Orleans. The Rebels fell to a 5-7 record last season and a long-running NCAA investigation has taken its toll. Ole Miss self-imposed a 1-year postseason ban during the spring and more punishment could be coming when the case is decided - likely later this fall. That wasn't the toughest news of the offseason. Instead, it was the sudden resignation of Freeze. He left because of a "pattern of personal misconduct" that was discovered after phone records revealed a phone call to an escort service in 2016. Now Ole Miss has to try and bounce back with interim coach Matt Luke, who was elevated from his co-offensive coordinator position just hours after Freeze resigned. Ole Miss does have some talent returning, particularly on the offensive side of the ball. Sophomore quarterback Shea Patterson, who started three games last season, will take over the offense. He'll have a veteran offensive line in front of him and a group of young receivers, including Brown, D.K. Metcalf and Van Jefferson, who were impressive during the 2016 season. Here are some things to watch for the Rebels this season: **KEY GAMES:** Sept. 16 at California, Oct. 14 vs. Vanderbilt, Nov. 23 at Mississippi State. **A FEW GOOD LINEBACKERS:** Ole Miss had the worst defense in the SEC last season, giving up 34 points per game. The main reason the Rebels struggled was terrible play from the linebackers. New defensive coordinator Wesley McGriff believes the group will be better this year, led by leading tackler

DeMarquis Gates. **AN OPEN CASE:** The Rebels will try to keep the focus on football, but the school's long-running NCAA infractions case will almost certainly be a hot topic all season. Ole Miss athletic director

Ross Bjork is optimistic that the case will wrap up sometime before the calendar hits 2018. More punishment could be coming for the school on top of the current one-year bowl ban, scholarship losses and recruiting restrictions.



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