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Auburn Tigers

2011 College Football Predictions: 8 Reasons Auburn Is a Contender

By
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Auburn could be better than people think
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It's hard to find a positive attitude about Auburn in the press with just a few exceptions.

Kirk Herbstreit started this whole debate on B/R when his article on ESPN was regurgitated to say that the Auburn Tigers wouldn't be up to snuff this season, and one interpretation on B/R said they would stink.

I doubt they'll stink, and I don't think Herbstreit, nor any of the other pundits that quoted him, has given the Tigers the benefit of what they have in their arsenal coming off a National Title.

This is not your typical rebound team.

Sure, it's hard for a team to repeat titles given the requirements to get there in the first place, and it will be hard for the Tigers to repeat as champions. But then, it's hard for any team to mount a successful National Championship run, whether they won it before or are contenders in the first place.

I'm not emphatically saying Auburn will repeat, but they could be spoilers along the way and not the slouch some are saying.



Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images

Life Without Cam

First, all that is a championship season is not Cam.

Last season, most Auburn fans tended to panic when the prospect of Cam Newton not being in the line up was even a remote possibility. They didn't get close to finding out, but the specter was looming on a few occasions, NCAA stuff included.

However, returning players that were a part of that incredible season remember what it took to get them to BCS No. 1. A lot of those guys are still there, plus an impressive group of recruits, and there's really no reason to believe the Tigers have any reason to let down given this momentum.

You can guarantee that Head Coach Gene Chizik won't let them forget. I'll repeat; this is not your typical rebound team.



Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images

During the BCS Championship game last year, it occurred to me that Michael Dyer, just six months before, was graduating high school in Arkansas. Yet, he had the poise of a veteran and the stamina of what could potentially be a Heisman winner throughout the coming seasons.

In the Oregon game, rolling off the defender at the end, Dyer's only gaff was in looking to his bench for

advice. He was a well-coached freshman. Considering his age and tenure in the league, I'm sure he learned, but still a mature move, and I trust this year he'll be even better.

Add Onterio McCalebb to the mix, a proven running threat, and you have an outstanding backfield with depth based on new recruits and a couple of transfers in Mike Blakely from the Florida Gators and Corey Grant from the Crimson Tide.

I know everyone is concentrating on the quarterback position at Auburn, and I only mention Dyer at the top of the Offensive discussion because he can be such a force in the running/blocking game as long as he stays healthy.

But, add not two but three quarterbacks to the mix and you have an even better scenario than the Crimson Tide has with their two question marks. Barrett Trotter and Clint Moseley are seasoned and have been fighting for the job back in the spring. Then, bring on true freshman Keihl Frazier and you have a real battle for that spot.

Offensive Coordinator Gus Malzahn has given high marks to Frazier for his work ethic and humility at learning the program. This is a stellar combination of quarterback strength. The Tigers have to forget about Cam and concentrate on these three, a pretty good option to have.

The O-line saw action in the Championship season of last year and returns veterans to that role that helped Cam do it.

Other major threats include Philip Lutzenkirchen, a passionate player listed as a TE, and he owns the flats as a clutch receiver, as he demonstrated time and time again last year. He is also a solid team leader in terms of motivation.

Emory Blake is returning at receiver after an amazing season and should be a consistent target for whoever gets the nod at quarterback.

Nick Fairly Was 1/11th of the Defense



Christian Petersen/Getty Images

There will be some newcomers to the defense with a hole left by Nick Fairley, for sure.

Kenneth Carter is likely to take over the role, and he's got the size at 6'5" and 287 pounds. Plus, there are three other guys getting a look in Angelo Blackson, Jeffrey Whitaker and Gabe Wright. These three have

the height, and at a weight exceeding 300 pounds, each is a force to reckon with.

And, let's not forget returning sophomore DE Nosa Eguae, who was a major playmaker along with Fairley last year. He promises to be even more stellar this year.

The newcomers on the defense have already been getting high marks because they love to hit, and an aggressive defense is what Auburn needs this season.

Remember that head coach Gene Chizik was defensive coordinator at Texas when they took a national title, so he is going to make sure that element is tightened up, even with the losses of some key players from last year, besides Fairley.

Gene Chizik



Christian Petersen/Getty Images

Some Auburn fans were outraged when they hired Gene Chizik back in 2009.

Looking at his 5-19 record in two years as head coach at Iowa State and there was reason for the protests, but Chizik has a richer history that goes back to his days with Mack Brown at Texas and previously at Auburn. He knew the dynamics of Auburn and was ready to build something.

If you read his book "All In," you'll discover that Coach Chizik is about more than just the game. Winning is key, but he really wants to make a difference in the lives of the young men who play the game and also for the coaches that are helping him with that vision. He has created a family.

That kind of care for the players builds loyalty and motivation to win, so it becomes a bigger proposition. Auburn consistently came from behind in most of their games in 2010, and there's no reason they won't have that kind of heart this year. Chizik has found his niche at Auburn and has the kind of players that fit his program.

He didn't have the full package at Iowa State, but he found the perfect combination of winning and building character throughout his entire organization at Auburn. I believe those that hired him knew what he could do, and it paid off in just his second year with a national title.

He may not repeat the national title, but the Auburn Tigers will be something special this year.



Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images

Underdog Can Be a Good Thing

Auburn has been here before. They weren't even in the top 25 in the preseason of 2010 but managed to move up the ranks when all they did was win.

They actually relish being in the underdog role, because it takes the pressure off of trying to maintain a top five ranking like cross-state rival Alabama, who has to deal with being ranked No. 2 in this year's preseason coach's pole. It's gratifying, yes, but to start that high can be a curse.

I get the feeling that Auburn's No. 19 placement is just fine with them, and I do believe the Tigers will use a we'll-show-them attitude as motivation to move up the ladder.



Christian Petersen/Getty Images

Recruiting

Coming off a conference and national championship season certainly doesn't hurt getting star recruits into your program.

Actually, Chizik did an excellent job of recruiting at Iowa State against major competition within the Big 12. He had dedicated players, but really didn't get the chance to realize their full potential in his two years there.

Sure, he's been at Auburn only two years, too, but the recruits for 2011 have starting potential like true freshman Keihl Frazer. Remember, Michael Dyer was a true freshman last year, and his performance was amazing for a kid so fresh to the big time.

But by all accounts, that freshness and Chizik's approach to getting the right mentality will pay off big time.

Don't be surprised if there is another national championship in their future, maybe not this year, but they will be contenders.



Christian Petersen/Getty Images

Solid Coaching Staff

Coach Gene Chizik has assembled a strong staff to help fulfill his vision. The majority of them started with him at Auburn, and that staff is still intact going into their third season.

Gus Malzahn presents a formidable offense as the coordinator again this year. His play calling in 2010 could be considered somewhat creative, and he certainly made a name for himself.

He also showed a great deal of loyalty to the Auburn program, when he was considered for the head-coaching job at Vandy, but he chose to stay with the Tigers. That goes a long way toward motivating players who are returning to play for him.

The same is true for six other coaches Chizik brought on board in 2009 including Ted Roof, the defensive coordinator.

The stability of the solid coaching at Auburn makes them a threat in the conference and possibly in the road to BCS greatness.



Al Messerschmidt/Getty Images

Desire to Win!

The Auburn Tigers have created this family attitude that really bonds players, coaches and fans—especially the fans.

The poisoning of the trees at Toomer's Corner was a rallying point for that family attitude and even garnered some empathy from the Crimson Tide fans. But, let's not get carried away, it is, after all, the most intense rivalry in the country.

What I mean here is that the Tigers have a will to win, supported by that "All In" family atmosphere. We saw it last year, and there are plenty of returning players and new ones who promote it and reap the benefit of that kind of support.

This was actually part of Gene Chizik's vision to have this all-encompassing support, and it's truly an element that gives Auburn an emotional strength.