

Rocky times in Knoxville

Posted on Oct 17, Posted by [Joe Biddle](#) Category ["My Bid"; By Joe Biddle](#)

Things are rocky on Rocky Top.

Three years into Derek Dooley's attempt to put Humpty Dumpty back together again reached its' shakiest point late Saturday night in Starkville.

The Vols lost to a ranked team for the 13th consecutive game in Dooley's time on The Hill. It was the best opportunity they had to get a signature win under Dooley.

They gave up 41 points, albeit seven of them coming in the closing seconds and making it 41-31 on the scoreboard.

Many UT fans are ready to cut ties with Dooley. Quarterback Tyler Bray referred to those disgruntled fans as "fairweather fans" in a tweet. He later recanted, but the message spread like wildfire.

The proverbial Rock on campus was painted with thoughts on Dooley that the guilty artists did not learn in English literature class. Even though the Rock has been scrubbed clean, the feelings linger.

It has a grand chance to get worse, as the Vols now tackle top-ranked Alabama Saturday and then travel to No. 7 South Carolina to wage war with Darth Visor.

If there is enough meat left on the bones, the Vols close out with Troy, Missouri, Vanderbilt and Kentucky. At 3-3, Troy is the only team in that group that is .500 or above on the season.

Let's pretend they win three of the four games. That would give them six wins, making them bowl eligible at 6-6. Even if that happens, is it enough to satisfy Tennessee Athletics Director Dave Hart?

It's doubtful. It would be another season with no significant wins under their belts.

Now, if lightning strikes and the Vols can upset Alabama or South Carolina, all bets are off.

I wrote and said on the radio that when Dooley was hired, he would need a minimum of four to five years to clean up the mess left behind by the previous two coaches.

Recruiting slipped significantly in Phillip Fulmer's final two to three years. Lane Kiffin was a train wreck waiting to happen. Most of Kiffin's recruits are gone.

Will Dooley get that much time? No guarantees. Hart didn't hire Dooley, Mike Hamilton did. It was the best they could get when Kiffin suddenly left them in the lurch to bolt to Southern Cal.

While it would be ideal to give Dooley one or two more years, this era of college football rarely affords that. Fans want microwave dinners, not slaving over a stove to get a home-cooked meal.

In the time he has left this season, Dooley and his defensive staff have to stop the bleeding. In three SEC games, the Vols have given up an average of 43 points and 521 yards a game. That won't cut it in Pee Wee football.

"We are not very good right now. You are what your film is," Dooley said of his defense after the loss at Mississippi State. "We don't get off blocks the way we need to and we don't get enough people to the football."

The next two weeks could get ugly. Alabama and South Carolina are playing for BCS style points and neither Nick Saban nor Steve Spurrier will take their foot off the gas pedal.

It's long been said they remember what you do in November. But it's hard to forget what they did in September. And, October promises to be worse.

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