

## UT has another shot

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Tennessee's football team has another opportunity Saturday to gain national attention. The Vols have had a week off to lick their wounds from the seven-point road loss to Georgia.

We will get a better impression of just how strong this program is under third-year coach Derek Dooley.

It's also an SEC East versus West matchup against Mississippi State.

State is 5-0, ranked No. 19. Impressive on the outside, not so much when you look at it under a microscope.

Their best win is against unranked Auburn. Other wins include Jackson State, Troy, South Alabama and most recently Kentucky on the road. A lot of SEC teams would relish facing that level of competition.

As will Tennessee, the Bulldogs will find out a lot about themselves Saturday.

Starkville will be on fire. Only Tennessee's football team can reduce it to a brush fire, by taking the raucous crowd out of it.

This is a great opportunity for both teams. The winner can breathe a sigh of relief. The loser, especially if it is Tennessee and facing Alabama the next week, has a hole to dig out of.

Neither team has a signature win on its record, although Tennessee's win over N.C. State in the season opener looks much better since the Wolfpack upended previously undefeated Florida State last week.

This is also a game that can help Dooley's case to remain Tennessee's coach, as their next two teams are against top-ranked Alabama and No. 3 South Carolina.

Athletics Director Dave Hart will not be impressed with the Vols beating Troy, Missouri, Vanderbilt and Kentucky. All that would do is put them in a meaningless bowl game.

The Vols need to get tougher and more disciplined on defense and the off-week should result in some spark in that area. They have looked disjointed against good competition and running backs have been running in wide-open spaces.

Georgia chewed them up, piling up 560 yards against Sal Sunseri's defenders.

After studying the defense during the open week, Dooley admits there were a number of areas of concern.

Some of it is the scheme. Some of it is alignment and not getting off blocks. Some of it is poor tackling. Some of it is personnel and Vols fans will notice some changes against Mississippi State.

"We're probably a little better than the stats are reflecting," Dooley said. "But the stats are who you are."

The offense has also had problems avoiding fourth quarter meltdowns, especially quarterback Tyler Bray. Right now, Bray has an NFL arm and desired size. But his football acumen when the pressure is on is severely lacking.

Bray must avoid locking in on one receiver and start figuring out what defenses are giving him when the pressure is on. The junior is going to make his (NFL) money against Alabama and South Carolina.

In Mississippi State, Bray is facing a team that is No. 2 in the country in turnover margin. The Bullies have recorded 11 more turnovers than they have made. That's impressive no matter who the opponents are.

While Tennessee has losses to top 25 teams Florida and Georgia, Mississippi State won't meet its first ranked opponent until Oct. 27 when it visits top-ranked Alabama.

Mississippi State can afford a loss this week and still have a successful season.

The same cannot be said for Tennessee.

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