

Tennessee Coach Derek Dooley could not have had his players pick a worse time to quit on him than the final game of the season.

Vols fans has to be embarrassed by the fact players mailed it in against a woeful Kentucky team that beat Tennessee for the first time in 26 years.

The story is even more worrisome because Tennessee had something meaningful to play for – a post-season bowl game.

If successful, it would mean an opportunity to finish with a winning record in a season where a lot of things went wrong.

More importantly it would have given Dooley and his team another four or five weeks to practice. Heaven knows that team could have used more practice.

But the players were admitting they weren't into the game. Some said they didn't want to go to some minor bowl game, perhaps referring to last year's Franklin American Mortgage's Music City Bowl game in Nashville.

So they bailed out. They didn't compete. For athletes, that is the cardinal sin.

So they lolly-gagged around while Kentucky used a wide receiver that had not played quarterback since he was in high school five years ago. Unlike Tennessee's football team, Matt Roark took advantage of the opportunity he was given. Roark ran for 124 yards, as Kentucky won, 10-3.

Kentucky had nothing to play for. It, too, was writing the final chapter of a lousy season.

So where does Tennessee's program go from here? I would strongly recommend the coaching staff hits the road as many hours as NCAA rules permit and get some players who look and play more like those at LSU and Alabama.

Money has never been an object when it comes to football recruiting at Tennessee. Granted they don't have the built-in recruiting advantages that many SEC schools have, and that is being able to recruit in-state players.

But it wasn't insurmountable when previous Tennessee coaches were here. It didn't stop Johnny Majors from cherry-picking recruits from neighboring North Carolina, Georgia and Alabama. He got good players from South Carolina and Florida. Phillip Fulmer was regarded as one of the best recruiting head coaches in the country. His recruiting classes were often in the top five and almost always in the top 10. Lane Kiffin signed some top recruits during his brief reign of error. That included Bryce Brown who was regarded (falsely as it turned out) as the best running back in the country.

Dooley can't count on getting second tier recruits and coaching them up. He might not have that much time.

The game is changing. Highly touted Turner Gill was cut loose after two seasons at Kansas. Larry Porter was given two years at Memphis.

Current Tennessee Athletics Director Dave Hart did not hire Dooley. A lot of Dooley's leverage left when former AD Mike Hamilton was ushered out.

With Hamilton, he would have been safe for four or five years. After all, it is a job that will require four years to dig out from under those who left their mess behind for others to clean up.

But it must get a lot better than what we saw Saturday. Look what James Franklin did in one year at Vanderbilt. The program won four games in the previous two years and won its sixth

game Saturday to earn bowl eligibility with basically the same players.

Tennessee fans deserve better than what their team gave them.

by Joe Biddle

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