

# Phoenix's new home enriched in long tradition

**Nick Palatiello**

*Sports Editor*

During the last year, Elon's faculty has been greatly anticipating the school's move as an athletic and academic member of the Southern Conference.

Elon became the conference's 42<sup>nd</sup> member this summer. But many have been asking why there is so much hype about the move to the new conference.

The Southern Conference, is the fourth oldest intercollegiate conference in the United States. It was created in 1921 with 14 member institutions. Only the Big Ten (1896), Missouri Valley (1907) and Pac-10 (1915) are older than the Southern Conference.

The Southeastern Conference (SEC) and the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) originated from the Southern Conference. The SEC was formed in 1932 and took 13 of the 23 members of the SoCon; then in 1953 the ACC took seven schools out of the conference.

What does all this mean for the Phoenix? Elon becomes the first member of the conference to be admitted since the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Wofford College and the College of Charleston were given admittance in 1995.

"[Elon] is joining a highly competitive league and highly recognized for its excellence as well as having a lot of proud history," Dr. Alan White, Dean of Athletics said of the move to the new conference.

The SoCon is regarded as one of the best athletic conferences in the country for small schools. Not only as the level of competition increased with the move, but so has the amount of national attention that the Phoenix will receive from the media as well as prospective recruits.

"We are playing schools better known than the competition in the past and that will give of the name recognition that we need," Dr. White said, "Recruits know the schools that we are playing and will give a harder look at Elon."



The SoCon's winning percentage in post-season football play is remarkable. A SoCon team has won five of the last seven Division I-AA championships and the league has a .624 winning percentage in the post season. The conference has also had at least one team in the Top 10 in 19 consecutive seasons.

The Southern Conference also has history on the hardwood. In 1980 the Southern Conference was asked by the NCAA to experiment with a 22-foot three-point line. The first shot was made by Ronni Carr of Western Carolina University and the three-point line is now a key mark in collegiate and professional basketball.

A few well-known coaches and athletes have come out of the Southern Conference as well. Some of the most notable participants in SoCon athletics are golfer Arnold Palmer and coaches Lefty Driesell and Paul "Bear" Bryant. Palmer medaled in the 1948 and 1949 tournament and was a runner-up in 1950. In 1949 and 1950 Palmer medaled at the NCAA Golf Championship before becoming a member of the PGA Tour.

Lefty Driesell, the current Georgia State University basketball coach, led Davidson College to the SoCon conference championship in 1966, 1968 and 1969. He also received the SoCon's Coach of the Year award four consecutive years from 1963-1966.

Bryant, better known for his accomplishments at Alabama University (a former SoCon member) began his coaching career in 1945 at Maryland University.

These are just a few of the names that have come out of the

Southern Conference.

The competition level in the conference is much higher than that of the Big South, which the Phoenix has participated in for a number of years. It may take a while to adjust to the pace of competition and it is not a process that will happen quickly. Elon will get its first taste of the conference competition this weekend with the match-up between the Phoenix and Furman University. The team that has the advantage with different competition levels is the Phoenix baseball team, which has competed against some of the top teams in the country including many SoCon teams.

As the level of competition rises for all Elon athletics so does the talent that follows. The talent pool that could possibly be pulled in may be better than any that the Phoenix have had before.

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## Seagraves shines spotlight on future, shadows past

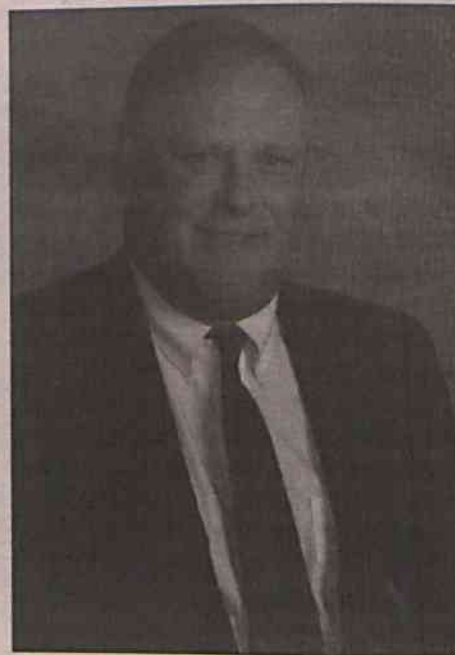
**Kristin Simonetti**

*Reporter*

It's hard to see where the Phoenix football team ends and its head coach begins. Ask the coach a question about himself and when he finishes answering, you realize that he's managed to subtly turn the question into an opportunity to focus on his team.

Such is the enigma of Al Seagraves. Last fall, it was fashionable to discuss the shortcomings of the Phoenix football team and declare that Seagraves should be fired. Students spoke as if they knew him personally. Few knew him as more than the man who paced the sidelines of Rhodes Stadium, barking orders into a headset.

For example, how many knew that Seagraves led the 1999 Phoenix team, which finished 9-2 on the year, to one of the greatest records in Elon football history? Who remembers that Seagraves's teams went 16-6 in their first two years in Division I-AA competition, while playing the nation's toughest schedule according to the NCAA? Or that even though the 2001 Phoenix team finished with just two wins, it ranked eighth



**Al Seagraves**

out of 122 Division I-AA programs in rushing offense?

In this "What have you done for me lately?" era of instant gratification, it would be easy to overlook these accomplishments.

But that didn't make the criticism any quieter or easier to take.

"It's made me do a lot of soul searching for sure," Seagraves said. "Sometimes when you go through a 2-9 and a 4-7 season, it takes a toll on you physically and mentally. But I certainly haven't abandoned my coaching philosophy or coaching principles, and I can honestly look everybody in the eye and tell them I've never been more excited and enthused about a football team in my life."

Seagraves is comfortably in place for the 2003 campaign, and could be the team's biggest asset entering its first year of Southern Conference competition. He spent 10 seasons assisting at The Citadel, a SoCon member since 1936, serving as the offensive coordinator. During his tenure, the Bulldogs competed in the NCAA I-AA playoffs three seasons and defeated six NCAA I-A opponents, including South Carolina and Arkansas. He was honored as SoCon Assistant Coach of the Year in 1990.

"The one thing [I have] is experience, having been in the conference," Seagraves said. "I can share some views with the players that they may not necessarily understand

because they haven't been a part of the conference.

"Anybody in this conference is capable of beating anybody else on any given Saturday. You have to maintain your focus and concentration every single week."

Seagraves shied away from making a bold prediction about the team's prospects this season. He won't forecast how long it will take for the Phoenix to adapt to SoCon play, stating emphatically that he "can't see into a crystal ball." But he is sure that the Phoenix is making the right moves to succeed. And if he has any say in the matter, he'll be around for years to come, leading his team to the greatness he firmly believes is near.

"I see a renewed vigor, a renewed amount of energy and enthusiasm out here on the football field. We're excited about this opportunity to play in the Southern Conference. I honestly believe that the future is bright for this team, as well as the present."

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