

'Tis the Season: Tar Heels, Tide Butt Heads in Gator Bowl Battle

Game and time: No. 12 North Carolina vs. No. 18 Alabama. Kickoff is at 7 p.m., Dec. 31.

Site: The Gator Bowl, Jacksonville, Fla. **Playing surface:** Grass.

TV/Radio: The game will be televised by TBS. The Tar Heel Sports Network will provide live radio coverage. The flagship stations are WCHL (1360-AM) and WZZU (93.9-FM).

1993 records: North Carolina is 10-2 overall. Alabama is 8-3-1.

Series: This will be the first meeting between the two schools on the gridiron.

Last meeting: See above.

North Carolina offense: For the fourth time in history, UNC has two 1,000-yard rushers. But against Alabama, that may not be enough.

In Curtis Johnson and Leon Johnson, North Carolina throws two quality tailbacks at the Tide, which has seen and stopped its fair share of quality backs. In the SEC, 'Bama faced the likes of Errett Rhett of Florida, Charlie Garner of Tennessee and Auburn's James Bostic.

Running is never easy against Alabama. But Jason Stanicek will find it easier to throw past Tide opponents in the passing game, thanks to the absence of safety Antonio Langham. Alabama's top defender is ineligible for the game for contacting an agent after last season's Sugar Bowl. To top the Tide, UNC must throw the ball effectively — like Florida, which topped Alabama 28-13 in last week's SEC title game.

Corey Holliday still has a catch in every game. Ho hum. One last game to make a catch in 46 consecutive games and tie the NCAA record. Count on it.

Alabama offense: This unit begins and ends with David Palmer.

What position does he play? That depends on the situation. One minute, he's a wide receiver, another he's the tailback, another he's the option quarterback, another he's throwing the ball downfield.

Palmer averages 163.4 yards per game, which equals out to 12.8 yards every time

he touches the ball. He spent a lot of time at quarterback against the Gators and for the season completed 15-of-30 passes.

He only played QB because Jay Barker, who has never lost a game as the starter, is out for the season with a shoulder injury. Palmer will share QB duties with Barker's real backup, Brian Burgdorf. He completed 48-of-84 passes with four touchdowns this season.

For 'Bama's rushing attack, ask Sherman Williams. He's the Tide's leader, with 738 yards on the ground.

North Carolina defense: Folks, this is a good unit. It's hard to score against the Tar Heels. Since Alabama doesn't score much anyway (the Tide has scored fewer than 20 points in seven games this season) UNC should be able to keep the score low.

Bracey Walker gets another opportunity to shine on a national stage — maybe Gator Bowl fog will help him block a punt.

The senior free safety led the Tar Heels with 100 tackles this season. The second-team All-America may draw an assignment of shadowing the elusive Palmer on every play. Of course, that's just speculation. But a neat idea, don't you think?

The Tar Heels shouldn't have to worry about a big passing attack, so linemen like Austin Robbins, Marcus Jones and Troy Barnett, who have enjoyed a banner season, should key on stopping the run.

Alabama defense: This is a good group, too.

Even though the Tide lost ends Eric Curry and John Copeland to the pros, the more telling loss is Langham, who keyed an NFL-caliber secondary. The Tide has recorded 22 interceptions and 29 sacks.

Running the ball against Alabama is difficult. It is giving up only 3.7 yards per rush and opponents have only 10 rushing touchdowns this season. Linebacker Lemanski Hall keys the attack with 76 tackles, followed by one of the best names in college football, strong safety Sam Shade. No, he's not a detective, he's a safety.

Senior end Jeremy Nunley has 10 sacks, 11 quarterback pressures and 72 tackles

DTH Bowl Picks

The DTH sports staff and one celebrity/personality pick the winners of all the bowl games. This week, Tonya Sampson, the women's basketball team's scoring machine, matches wits with our crack staff. She received some help from assistant coach Andrew Calder as she hoped to move the guest pickers out of last place.

	Steve Politi (106-38) .736 UNC	John C. Manuel (99-45) .688 UNC	Carter Toole (107-37) .743 UNC	Zachary Albert (98-46) .681 UNC	Jacson Lowe (99-45) .688 UNC	Adam Davis (100-44) .694 UNC	Jimmy Whitfield (102-42) .708 UNC	Tonya Sampson (95-49) .660 UNC
Gator (Dec. 31): UNC vs. Alabama	Las Vegas (Dec. 17): Ball State vs. Utah State	John Hancock (Dec. 24): Texas Tech vs. Oklahoma	Aloha (Dec. 25): Fresno State vs. Colorado	Liberty (Dec. 28): Michigan State vs. Louisville	Copper (Dec. 29): Wyoming vs. Kansas State	Holiday (Dec. 30): Brigham Young vs. Ohio State	Freedom (Dec. 30): Southern Cal vs. Utah	Independence (Dec. 31): Virginia Tech vs. Indiana
	Peach (Dec. 31): Clemson vs. Kentucky	Alamo (Dec. 31): Iowa vs. California	Hall of Fame (Jan. 1): Michigan vs. N.C. State	Citrus (Jan. 1): Penn State vs. Tennessee	Fiesta (Jan. 1): Miami vs. Arizona	Carquest (Jan. 1): Boston College vs. Virginia	Cotton (Jan. 1): Texas A&M vs. Notre Dame	Rose (Jan. 1): UCLA vs. Wisconsin
	Orange (Jan. 1): Nebraska vs. Florida State	Sugar (Jan. 1): Florida vs. West Virginia						

OK, it's nearing the wire for the resident pickers at the DTH. The Sports staff has enjoyed watching Carter "Motivational" Toole squander a once-commanding lead to tighten the race. This picking faux pas by Cahtah has enabled Steve "Scritti" Politi to jump back into the hunt. Toole is sweating it out, but Politi is smiling. Maybe that's just because Steve is leaving the helm today, and Carter is taking over.

In other news, the tale of two sportswriters unfolded last week with John "Yanni" Manuel and Zachary "Fat" Albert. Yanni scoffed at the lowly "Fat," who had been keeping the cellar warm for the guest picker for much of the season. Yanni took no heed to reason and picked a half-dozen games against Cahtah. He also picked eight different against "Fat." But Yanni suffered an abysmal showing, tallying a piddly 4-8 mark on the week, while "Fat" went 10-2, his best showing on the season.

Gadzooks. — sans Lionel Richie — will perform as part of the New Year's Eve festivities ...

Final analysis/prediction: Can this game mean anything to an Alabama player? The season has definitely ended on a down note for the Tide, which lost three of their last four games.

Head coach Gene Stallings won a national title, but a home loss to LSU and

So with 19 big bowl games on the slate for the pick artists, anything could happen. Although the race for first is essentially a two-horse affair, a bevy of underachievers could sneak in. Jimmy "The Reverend Wheats" Whitfield has a firm grip on third. Expect many sermons from Wheats if he pulls this off.

Behind the Wheeler remains Adam "Don't call me Chili" Davis. Presumably out of desperation, Davis gave the nod to the Aggies against the Irish. Uh...no.

Then there's Jacson "All-Time" Lowe. "A-T" went out on a limb (a dead branch, actually) when he went with the Pack against Michigan in the Hall of Fame Bowl. It's a good thing Maryland didn't get a bowl bid — hey, he'd probably pick them, too.

Joining us this week is UNC's own rebound master and scoring bandit, Tonya Sampson. No. 34 picked mostly favorites, but must have been in cahoots with Davis on the Utah State pick. But we're too scared to criticize her. Have a safe holiday!

The Tar Heels have only won 11 games twice — in 1972 and 1980. Bowl games like this one, which don't determine any championships or have no bragging rights implications, often come down to who wants the game more. UNC undoubtedly does.

Chalk up another 11-win season for UNC. Prediction: UNC 17, Alabama 9.

COMPILED BY JOHN C. MANUEL

Walker Voted 2nd Team All-American

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
North Carolina free safety Bracey Walker, who led the team in tackles this season, brought second-team All-American honors home to Chapel Hill Wednesday, as voted by the Associated Press.

Walker, the hard-hitting senior from Spring Lake, lived up to his preseason expectations, tallying 46 solo hits and 54 assists on the year.

Heisman Trophy favorite Charlie Ward, Lombardi Award winner Aaron Taylor and three-time selection Marshall Faulk were also named to The Associated Press All-America college football team.

Faulk made the team for the third straight year, the first player to do that since Georgia's Herschel Walker from 1980-82. The San Diego State running back, who will skip his senior season to enter the NFL draft, led the nation with 24 touchdowns, was third in all-purpose yards and No. 5 in rushing.

Ward directed top-ranked Florida State's "fast-break" offense, which led the NCAA in scoring with a 43.2-point average. The elusive quarterback was the nation's fourth-leading passer, completing 69 percent of his attempts for 3,032 yards, 27 touchdowns and only four interceptions.

Joining the defensive first team was Seminole linebacker Derrick Brooks. Brooks scored three touchdowns for the nation's stingiest defense on a pair of interception returns and a fumble return. He also blocked a punt that was recovered for a score, forced two fumbles and broke up five passes.

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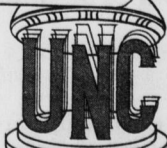
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