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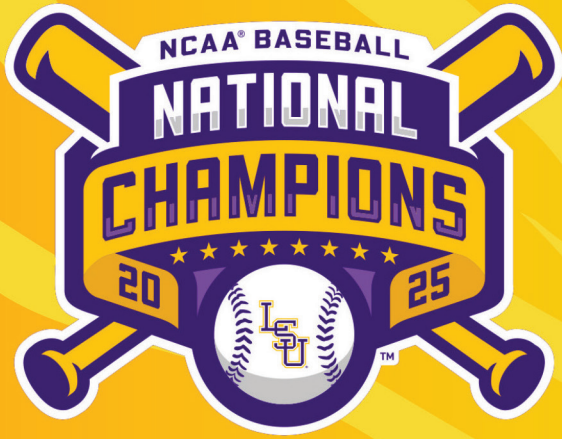
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COVER 2, PAGE 3

## *Tiger of the Month*

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**Cookie Kiffin**, son of LSU assistant coach Chris Kiffin, and **Governor Jeff Landry**.  
Photo: Lane Kiffin Social Media

# COOKIE KIFFIN

In the fast-paced world of LSU football's transfer portal frenzy, one unlikely star has emerged as the program's secret weapon: young Christian "Cookie" Kiffin, nephew of head coach Lane Kiffin. At just 12 years old, Cookie isn't signing NIL deals or running routes—he's dominating the pickleball court and winning over recruits in ways no coordinator could match.

Recent transfers have spilled the beans: Cookie's got a "killer" pickleball game that seals the deal. New wide receiver Jackson Harris bonded instantly with Coach Kiffin after an epic session featuring Cookie, calling the Tigers "second-to-none" and crediting the family vibe. Tight end Malachi Thomas laughed about getting smoked on the court by the kid, saying Lane's "secret recruiting tactic" involved Cookie's paddle skills leaving opponents humbled.

Whether it's crushing family matches (even schooling his uncle and cousin Landry in past showdowns) or casually outplaying portal visitors in Baton Rouge, Cookie turns casual hangs into commitment catalysts. Fans dub him the "Closer" for a reason—his killer drop shots and relentless energy mirror the Tigers' new aggressive era.

Wholesome, competitive, and pure LSU charm, Cookie Kiffin is proving that sometimes the biggest plays happen off the field. Geaux get 'em, Cookie! 



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## ON THE COVER:



The LSU baseball team and coach Jay Johnson are coming off a national championship, but that's in the past. So are the struggles LSU softball coach Beth Torina's teams have had with returning to the World Series. For both teams, it's about today first, and then tomorrow as new seasons dawn.



## PUBLISHED BY

Kingfish Communications

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Cover Design **JULIUS MCMAINS, JR.**

Cover Photos **JONATHAN MAILHES**,  
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Tiger Rag (USPS 447-970, ISSN 0477-7604) is published monthly by Kingfish Communications, LLC dba Tiger Rag Magazine, 10500 Coursey Boulevard, Suite 104, Baton Rouge, LA and additional mailing offices. POST MASTER: Send address changes to TIGER RAG, 10500 Coursey Boulevard, Suite 104, Baton Rouge, LA 70816-4045

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Photo by: Jonathan Mailhes





**GLENN GUILBEAU**

*Tiger Rag Editor*

**T**iger Rag executive editor Todd Horne and I sat down with LSU baseball coach Jay Johnson in his Alex Box Stadium office over his last “free” weekend before practice started in January. My first question was, “It’s year five, when are you going to get this program turned around?”

He didn’t see that one coming, and all he could do was laugh after winning his second national championship in four seasons at LSU last summer.

A few minutes later Horne hit him with another curve that caught him off guard. “Do you think about the number three or the number nine more often?”

Perplexed, Johnson said, “What do you mean?”

Then a second later, he got it – LSU’s third national title under him or LSU’s ninth overall?

“Oh. No, neither. I mean that’s so far away,” he said. “And it would be disrespectful to how I want the players to think.”

Reaching Omaha, Nebraska, and winning another national championship are so automatically annual goals at LSU now that they each go largely unspoken by coaches and players.

LSU has reached Omaha twice in Johnson’s four years – in 2023 and ’25 and won the title each time. Before Johnson reached the College World Series in his second year in ’23, LSU had gone five years without a trip to the CWS, which was the longest dry stretch by two years since the decades before Skip Bertman took the Tigers there for the first time in 1986.

The way Johnson recruits and coaches, it doesn’t look like he could have a stretch of more than two years without reaching 68102 – the zip code for Charles Schwab Field in Omaha.

“When you’re coaching here and you’re playing here, that’s what you’re trying to do,” Johnson said. “We don’t even need to set a goal of going to Omaha or a national championship. Like, that doesn’t even come up, because it’s hey, that’s what we’re trying to do. That’s why we’re here.”

In other words, it’s not given, but it’s a given.

## JAY JOHNSON HAS REACHED THE SKIP BERTMAN ZIP CODE OF SUCCESS

You just don’t talk about it, because it’s so much the Gorilla in the Room that you don’t have to.

“I’ve had some really good mentors,” Johnson said. “I’ve tried to pay attention to great coaches.”

First is Bertman, who reached the 68107 zip for the former Rosenblatt Stadium in Omaha 11 times in 15 years between 1986-2000 with two years the longest dry spell.

He also talks a lot about former LSU and Alabama coach Nick Saban, who made “The Process” famous, but Bertman spoke of it years before he did. Bertman won five national championships between 1991-2000. Saban won the 2003 football national title at LSU and six more at Alabama from 2009-20.

“Saban is the one who talks about it the most and is most known for it,” Johnson said. “For not saying what you want to accomplish, because everything is how we’re going to do it – the process. And laying out a path to put us in position to accomplish those things.”

Johnson is about the process, but not all about it.

“Some say you enjoy the preparation part more than the winning part?” Horne asked.

“Um, I don’t know about that,” Johnson said laughing.

Those trophy presentations are pretty cool. Bertman and Saban would admit that, too.

And Johnson is gaining on both of them.

Glenn Guilbeau is the editor of Tiger Rag and a columnist. A member of the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame, he previously was a national columnist at OutKick.com/FOX News and covered LSU for USA Today Network and the Baton Rouge Advocate. Reach him at [glenn@tigerrag.com](mailto:glenn@tigerrag.com).



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## MAILBAG

# LSU FANS GO NUTS OVER ACCURATE REPORT ON LANE KIFFIN'S SLOW START IN PORTAL

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor

And I thought Ole Miss fans had gone off the deep end.

On Monday, Jan. 5, I wrote a story for Tiger Rag on LSU football coach Lane Kiffin's first three days of the transfer portal under the headline, "So, What Happened To 'Portal King' Lane Kiffin? LSU Opens Transfer Window With A Whimper."

The opening paragraph said, "Kiffin has not exactly opened the NCAA Transfer Portal window with a splash. In fact, the splash of other programs getting major

quarterback commitments is dousing Kiffin and his staff. Entering day four of the portal window that lasts through Jan. 16, LSU has all of one commitment. And that is the No. 40 receiver in the country in Jackson Harris of Hawaii."

Key words ... "window that lasts through Jan. 16."

I can't repeat most responses I received because of language. Many said I should wait before writing above. But had Kiffin grabbed five portal players on day one, I would've written that! And as Kiffin

gradually built the No. 1 portal class in the country, I wrote about that a lot.

"Why didn't you give it time?," tweeted @tygerfuel.

"Piece was only about start of the portal, not whole portal, much like a piece on an opening game - not whole season," I responded.

"Didn't think of it this way, to be honest," tweeted back @tygerfuel.

Thank you for some rare understanding by @tygerfuel.



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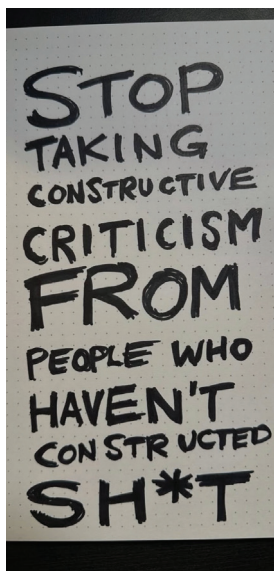


Lane Kiffin  
@Lane\_Kiffin

I keep getting asked the same question. How is this possible that these great players from all over the country want to all come play at the same place?? The best way I can explain in two simple words is that it's



Lane Kiffin  
@Lane\_Kiffin



Lane Kiffin  
@Lane\_Kiffin

Headed home.



Lane Kiffin  
@Lane\_Kiffin



(Editor's Note: Lane Kiffin follows Jay Johnson's lead by tweeting a tiger emoji with each commitment gained.)



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Former LSU wide receiver **Kayshon Boutte** grabs game-clenching catch for New England against Houston's **Derek Stingley, Jr.** in AFC divisional playoffs.  
Photo by: New England Patriots

# NFL PLAYOFFS 2025-26: IMPACT OF FORMER LSU PLAYERS

By TODD HORNE, Tiger Rag Vice-President & Executive Editor

The 2025-26 NFL playoffs showcased the talent of former LSU players in crucial moments. Their contributions were evident across various positions and teams, especially on the New England Patriots' roster.

## KAYSHON BOUTTE'S STANDOUT PERFORMANCE

The standout moment came from wide receiver **Kayshon Boutte** during New England's 28-16 divisional-round win over Houston on January 18, 2026.

- On a third-and-4 in the fourth quarter, with the Patriots holding a five-point lead, **Drake Maye** threw a **32-yard pass** down the right sideline.
- Boutte made an incredible **one-handed catch** while being closely guarded by **Derek Stingley Jr.** This catch shifted the game from a tense one-score situation to a two-possession lead, effectively ending the Texans' comeback hopes.

This play drew comparisons to **Odell Beckham Jr.'s** iconic catch against the

Cowboys in 2014. Both moments highlighted LSU alumni making difficult plays under playoff pressure.

### Boutte's Stats:

- 3 receptions
- 75 yards
- 1 touchdown

He also had **4 catches for 66 yards** in the wild-card win over the Chargers. Overall, he totaled **141 playoff yards** and **7 receptions** across two games, showing promise as a young receiver.



## K'Lavon Chaisson's Defensive Disruption

**Edge rusher K'Lavon Chaisson** was a key player for the Patriots. His performance included:

- 2 sacks
- 2 tackles for loss
- 1 forced fumble

Chaisson consistently pressured Justin Herbert during the wild-card shutout of Los Angeles (16-3). He added another sack and a team-high **6 pressures** against Houston. His performance was crucial in limiting opponents to just **19 points** across both games.

## Omar Speights' Effective Role

**Inside linebacker Omar Speights** played a vital role for the Rams. His key contributions included:

- **8 tackles** in the 20-17 overtime win at Chicago
- A crucial **fourth-down pass breakup** in the end zone

He finished the postseason with **10 tackles** and **1 pass defended**, demonstrating strong coverage awareness and physicality.

## Tre'Davious White Sr.'s Veteran Presence

**Tre'Davious White Sr.** provided steady play for the Buffalo Bills. His highlights included:

- Breaking up **3 passes** in the wild-card win at Jacksonville
- Tipping a throw that led to a game-sealing interception

Although the Bills' playoff run ended in an overtime loss to Denver, White's performance showcased his value as a veteran.

## Additional Contributions

Other notable performances came from:

- **Patrick Queen:** 10 tackles in Pittsburgh's wild-card loss to Houston
- **Derek Stingley Jr.:** 2 pass breakups in Houston's divisional loss
- **Will Campbell:** Depth snaps on the Patriots' offensive line
- **Sai'vion Jones:** Limited rotation on Denver's defensive front

## LSU's Strong NFL Pipeline

Across the playoffs, 13 former LSU players participated, with 9 in wild-card games and 5 advancing to the conference championships. While the numbers weren't overwhelming, the quality of performance stood out.

## Key Highlights:

- Boutte's highlight-reel catch
- Chaisson's consistent pressure
- Speights' timely plays
- White's disruptive defense

Since the **2000 NFL Draft**, LSU has had **161 players** selected, ranking fourth among all colleges. This demonstrates LSU's ability to recruit and develop top talent, maintaining its status as a leading talent factory in the NFL.

## LSU BASEBALL FIRST PITCH BANQUET RECAP

**Coach Jay Johnson** and the enthusiastic **2026 Fighting Tigers** embraced a lively audience at the **LSU Baseball First Pitch Banquet** on January 15 at the **Crowne Plaza Hotel**. [cont. next page](#)

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# BOZEMAN

### Event Overview

Hosted by **David Thornton** and the **Tiger Athletic Foundation**, this annual gala marks the start of the college baseball season. It provides fans a chance to rally for the Tigers' program.

### Fundraising Success

This year's event raised **\$500,000** for LSU Baseball!

### Team Introduction

The evening kicked off with the introduction of the **2026 team**. Coach Johnson, who led LSU to NCAA National Championships in **2023** and **2025**, shared inspiring remarks. These wins are the seventh and eighth in the storied history of the program.

With over **1,000 fans** filling the room, Johnson expressed his deep appreciation for their unwavering support. He looks forward to continuing the Tigers' proud legacy.

### Coach's Commitment

"Our team is all in," Johnson affirmed. "You won't find complacency among players or coaches. I ask our fans to mirror that commitment. Keep cheering for our players, and together we'll create a selfless team dedicated to winning."

"There's a high standard here," he added. "Expect a team that knows the dedication required to excel in the game you love. We'll hold each other accountable and embrace the truths that forge great teams."

### Player Insights

The audience also heard from:

- Steven Milam (Shortstop)
- Jake Brown (Outfielder)
- Zac Cowan (Pitcher)
- Chris Stanfield (Outfielder)

They offered an inside look at the promising 2026 squad.

### Jake Brown's Leadership

Brown, hailing from Sulphur, La., passionately discussed his journey as a leader on this reigning National Championship team, currently ranked No. 1 in the 2026 Perfect Game preseason poll.

"I'm extremely excited," Brown said. "For three years, I've been alongside extraordinary athletes and exceptional individuals. My goal is to lead this team on and off the field, helping our younger guys grow into responsible men. We're not just talented players; we're committed to being great people, too."

### Special Guest

The evening's highlight featured former LSU All-American pitcher Ben McDonald, the 1989 Golden Spikes Award winner and No. 1 overall MLB Draft pick by the Baltimore Orioles. With a nine-year MLB career, McDonald is now a respected baseball analyst for ESPN and the Orioles.

He engaged in a lively Q-and-A session with the Tiger players and LSU legend Skip Bertman. Bertman reflected on his arrival in Baton Rouge in 1983 and how he built a college baseball dynasty with the support of the Baton Rouge community. **TR**



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## CLEATS

**ExxonMobil** produces synthetic rubber, which gives sports shoes their light weight.

## UNIFORMS & HATS

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## FIELD PAINT

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BASKETBALL PLAYER  
**KE-KE TARDY**

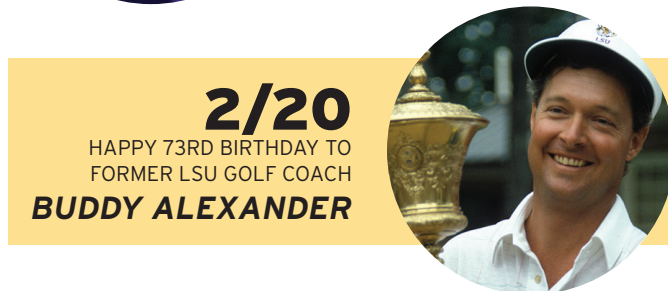
## 2/12

HAPPY 47TH BIRTHDAY TO  
FORMER LSU NATIONAL  
CHAMPIONSHIP QUARTERBACK  
**MATT MAUCK**



## 2/16

HAPPY 49TH BIRTHDAY  
TO FORMER LSU FOOTBALL  
STANDOUT  
**TODD MCCLURE**



## 2/20

HAPPY 73RD BIRTHDAY TO  
FORMER LSU GOLF COACH  
**BUDDY ALEXANDER**



## 2/22

HAPPY 53RD BIRTHDAY  
TO FORMER LSU  
BASEBALL PLAYER  
**RUSS JOHNSON**



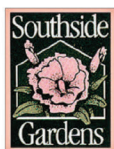
## 2/25

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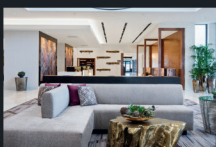
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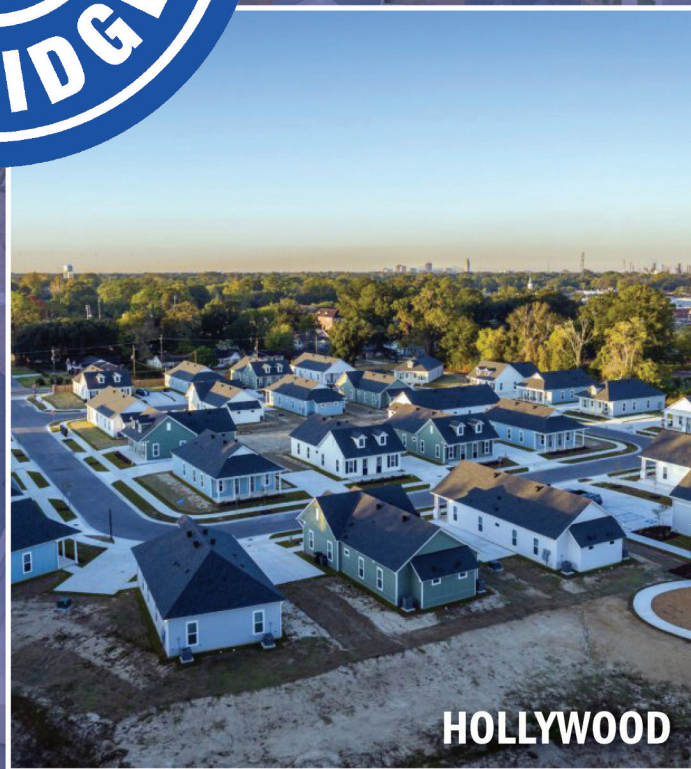
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# NEXT LEVEL TIGERS



## ALEX BREGMAN WASTED NO TIME IN BRINGING A WINNING VIBE TO THE WINDY CITY

NEW CHICAGO CUB EXPECTED TO BRING CHAMPIONSHIP  
PRESENCE TO LOCKER ROOM AND FIELD

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor



Just as the Chicago Bears were coming back from a 21-6 fourth quarter deficit in Chicago's Soldier Field to beat Green Bay, 31-27, in a Wild Card playoff on Jan. 10, former LSU shortstop Alex Bregman was finalizing a new deal with the Chicago Cubs, who play seven miles due north on Lake Michigan.

"Da Bears," Bregman posted on Instagram.

"Proud," Bregman's wife Reagan posted on Instagram as she toasted a margarita from an undisclosed restaurant location with Alex, an Albuquerque, New Mexico, native.

Meanwhile, the Chicago Bulls were beating Dallas, 125-107, six miles from Wrigley at the United Center, and the Chicago Blackhawks would win, 3-0, at Nashville.

"That's the Chi-CAGO Way," as Sean Connery said in "The Untouchables."

Bregman, 31 and a 10-year Major League Baseball veteran third baseman, had plenty to toast about as the newest member of "Da Cubs." The former two-time World Series champion and two-time All-Star with the Houston Astros (2016-24) agreed to leave the Boston Red Sox after one season to become a Cub at \$175 million over five years.

He hit .273 with 18 home runs and 62 RBIs in his lone season with the Red Sox and made his third All-Star team in 2025 despite playing in a career-low 114 games after missing all of June with a quadriceps injury. The Red Sox offered \$165 million over five years, but the club would not give Bregman the no-trade clause he wanted and the deferred payments he desired. Chicago gave him the no-trade promise and \$70 million in deferred payments. The Cubs nearly got Bregman last year as well.

"It is interesting that you never do a deal on a Tuesday afternoon at three o'clock with everyone in the office," Cubs general manager Carter Hawkins told MLB Network Radio. "It always feels like it's a Saturday night, always feels like it's your anniversary or some holiday, or something going on in the city as it relates to the other sports teams."

Bregman may be just what the Cubs need as the luster of their 2016 World Series title is getting rusty. There were losing seasons in 2021 and '22 with so-so 83-79 season in 2023 and '24 before a 92-70 second place finish in the National League Central last season. Bregman is known for his strong locker room presence and as a leader on and off the field.

He led LSU to the College World Series in 2013 and 2015 before becoming the second player picked in the Major League Baseball Draft by the Astros. He hit .337 in his LSU career with 21 home runs and 148 RBIs.

Bregman was a national Freshman of the Year and the SEC Freshman of the Year in 2013 and a first team All-American in 2013 and '15.

He will wear No. 3 at Chicago after wearing No. 2 throughout his MLB career and No. 8 and No. 30 at LSU.

"Look, we're adding to our team," Hawkins said. "We're looking to continue to put ourselves in position to play deep into October. Adding premium players is certainly a good way to do that." **TR**



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Former Tennessee baseball coach **Tony Vitello** (center) was 12-9 against LSU. Photo by: San Francisco Giants

# WILL TONY VITELLO BE TRAILBLAZER OF COLLEGE BASEBALL COACHES TO MLB?

FORMER TENNESSEE COACH MAKES HISTORY AS  
SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS NEW MANAGER

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor

One of the Southeastern Conference's hottest baseball rivalries the last several years will be minus a lot of Tony Chachere's on April 3-5 when LSU ventures into Lindsey Nelson Stadium in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Because Tennessee coach Tony Vitello will not be there. Associate head coach Josh Elander has replaced him at the dugout's top step.

Vitello, sort of the Lane Kiffin of college baseball coaches, left Tennessee last October to become the first col-

lege baseball head coach in history to get a Major League Baseball managerial job with no previous experience in pro baseball.

That Vitello, always a maverick, just like Kiffin.



“Love some Tony V!!!!” Kiffin tweeted to Vitello on Jan. 19 when he noticed a tweet by Vitello asking Giants fans to come to a meet and greet in San Jose.

This did not go over well with LSU fans.

“You’ve only been here for a month,” an LSU fan tweeted Kiffin. “But just know, we don’t like Tony V.”

Vitello has long been disliked by LSU fans, mainly because – like Steve Spurrier at Florida and Nick Saban at Alabama – he beat LSU a lot. Vitello was 12-9 against the Tigers as Tennessee’s coach from 2018-25, including a 5-0 sweep of the Tigers and coach Paul Mainieri in 2021 – 3-0 regular season, 2-0 Super Regional. He also swept Jay Johnson 4-0 in 2024 with three wins in Knoxville and one in the SEC Tournament. Johnson won series over Vitello in 2023 and ’25, but never swept him.

Johnson was 6-7 against Vitello from 2022-25 with a two-game sweep at the College World Series in 2023, 6-3 and 5-0 in an elimination game.

Last year, No. 4 LSU and No. 5 Tennessee met at Alex Box. The Vols led 3-0 going into the ninth, but the Tigers rallied for a 6-3 win with a walk-off, three-run homer by Jared Jones.

“I thought it was a really cool four-year deal,” Johnson said. “We beat them in Baton Rouge. They beat us in Knoxville. They beat us in Hoover. We beat them in Omaha.”

The two coaches combined for the last three national championships – LSU in 2023 and ’25 and Tennessee in ’24.

Now Johnson will be pulling for Vitello. Growing up in northern California, Johnson has been a life-long Giants fan.

“I really respect what he did at Tennessee,” Johnson said. “We grew up in this thing. I always saw him recruiting everywhere I was. Worked his tail off as an assistant (at Missouri, TCU and Arkansas) and as a head coach. There was a big mutual respect for the work put in before we combined to win the last three championships.”

Johnson was happy for Vitello.

“I think him going to Major League Baseball is great,” he said. “The connection between the college game and professional game is closer and tighter than it’s ever been. I hope he has success. More opportunities for coaches is great.”

And if Vitello wins as he won at Tennessee, will MLB start hiring college head coaches the way the NFL and NBA long have?

Jay Johnson would be an obvious choice.

“The follow-up to that is I’m very happy with what I’m doing, and I’m exactly where I should be in my life right now,” he said.

But just in case, LSU better make sure the revenue share dollars flow to Johnson’s program as richly as they do to others, if you want to keep him for years and years and titles and titles. **TR**

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Skip Bertman. Photo by: LSU Athletics

(REPRINTED FROM AUGUST 13, 1996, TIGER RAG)

## “THE GAME HAS PASSED SKIP BY,” A STORY SAID, AND HE RESPONDED WITH A 3RD NATIONAL TITLE, THANKS TO WARREN MORRIS

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor

LSU baseball coach Skip Bertman was coming off a two-season lull, by his standards, entering the season last February.

After winning LSU's first two national championships in baseball in 1991 and '93, the Tigers went 0-for-2 at the College World Series in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1994

for the only time in Bertman's seven trips there. In 1995, Bertman was eliminated in his own stadium in an NCAA Regional for the second time in four years.



And a Baton Rouge Advocate story at the time quoted a radio show caller who said, "Looks like Bertman's been around too long. The game has passed him by."

But Bertman, who turned 58 last May 23, became one of just six college baseball coaches to win three national championships on June 8, 1996, when Warren Morris shook off a season-long hamate bone injury in his wrist to hit a walk-off, two-run home run to beat Miami, 9-8, at Rosenblatt Stadium in legendary fashion.

Bertman assumes there will be more national titles, but never like this.

"It was won in such a spectacular way," Bertman said two months after the shot heard 'round Louisiana following his return from the Summer Olympics in Atlanta, where he coached the United States team to a bronze medal with Morris.

"We may win the national championship again, but we'll never do it like that," he said. "It was a bottom of the ninth homer, never happen again, never happened before, 50th year (of the CWS), the whole thing. It was a one of a kind."

By a kid out of nowhere who never hit a home run at Bolton High in Alexandria.

But it was no fluke. LSU overcame injuries to Morris and freshman Trey McClure, who was his replacement at second base.

Sophomore first baseman Eddy Furniss set school records with 26 home runs and 103 RBIs. Junior ace Eddie Yarnall was 11-1 with a 2.38 ERA and 156 strikeouts in 124 and two-thirds innings.

"The pressure was huge, and they handled that," Bertman said. "The injuries – they handled that. I didn't always make the right moves. They handled that, too. Ultimately, it was the leadership of our older players that won it for us."

And Morris, a fifth-round pick of Texas before his Walk-Off, is going places with a healthy wrist and a new halo.

"It was remarkable how quickly he recovered," said Dr. Ronnie Mathews, who performed the surgery at Our Lady of the Lake last April 24 and was in Omaha with Bertman's family.

"I think the first time he really had a good, hard, full swing since the surgery was that home run," Mathews said.

"Didn't know if it had enough carry, but it did."

And it was no fluke. Just weeks later, Morris hit a three-run, walk-off home run for Team USA to beat Japan, 8-6, in Richmond, Virginia, in preparation for the Olympics. He hit five more homers with 11 RBIs and led the team with a .409 average in Atlanta.

"This happened not once, but twice when Warren was at LSU," Bertman said. "A clergyman told me thanks for sending

Warren by our church. And I didn't send him. He went on his own both times. He's a humble kid, a wonderful kid. The only thing Warren ever did wrong was return a videotape to Blockbuster without rewinding it."

And he'll probably never get tired of people asking him about the biggest Blockbuster home run in college baseball history.

"I can't," he said after the Alex Box ceremony. "It always ends well." **TR**

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Jay Johnson  
Photo by: Jonathan Mailhes



# LSU BASEBALL COACH JAY JOHNSON

## CHASING TIGERS' 1ST NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP REPEAT SINCE 1996-97

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor



**L**SU baseball coach Jay Johnson is still three national championships away from equaling former LSU coach Skip Bertman's five national crowns from 1991-2000.

But he can match another Bertman milestone this season with the Tigers' first back-to-back national championships since Bertman won his third and fourth in 1996 and '97.

Once again, Johnson has the roster to get to Omaha, Nebraska, for the College World Series and to win it. Johnson sat down with Tiger Rag executive editor Todd Horne and editor Glenn Guilbeau on Saturday, Jan. 10, just before practice opened two days later.

**TIGER RAG:** Derek Curiel is moving from left field to center field with center fielder Chris Stanfield going to left. And Derek has bulked up with muscle. How do you see his development in his sophomore season?

**JAY JOHNSON:** He looks awesome. Somebody put it good to me the other day and said, "He swung and hit like a Big Leaguer last year. Now, he physically looks like one while doing that." He's gained like 18 pounds (nearing 200). He's always been a center fielder. He was just playing left. The only reason I didn't play him there last year was because I knew he would hit in the top of the order and play every game. With the grind of the SEC, I didn't want to put that on his plate.

**TR:** How surprised were you that center fielder Chris Stanfield decided to come back for his senior season?

**JOHNSON:** I was very surprised. I thought he had a terrific season last year. All of our staff was like, "Hey, there's a chance he's going to come back." And I was like, "You guys are out of your mind. When does a guy who can play center field and leads the SEC in doubles that wins a national championship ever comes back for their senior year?" So, lucky us.

**TR:** As an offensive coordinator-type head coach, what is your goal each season on offense?

**JOHNSON:** We want to be a balanced attack. And I think the difference in 2023 and '25 (national titles) as opposed to 2024 (NCAA Regional only) was we could do whatever we needed to do. We didn't hit a lot of home runs in Omaha last year, but we scored enough runs to win. We hit with runners in scoring position incredibly well. Man, the homer, the extra-base hit is such a big thing, we want to be complete. I want to be more than what we were last year with home runs (103). Of course, you want to hit 150 home runs like we did in

2023 (144). That was an amazing team. Last year's team, it's not like we didn't have power. We just didn't hit 150 homers, so we had to do it a little bit different way. And I like that part of coaching. Having to figure it out with what you have.

**TR:** You won the national championship last year, but do you feel even better about this team entering the season than you did last year at this time, because you're returning several more players who saw significant time last season than the previous team? [cont. next page](#)

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**JOHNSON:** Yeah, we have 19 returners, and more guys who have played significantly. This time you have the outfield (LF Chris Stanfield, CF Derek Curiel, RF Jake Brown) and shortstop Steven Milam set. Tanner Reaves (third base) and Cade Arrambide (catcher) weren't regulars, but they got a good amount of experience last year. These guys are a little more connected to what it actually takes, how hard it is, what they need to do. So, that's something to be encouraged about.

**TR:** What is your infield looking like?

**JOHNSON:** Defense is a real point of focus. First base is probably Zach Yorke (senior transfer from Grand Canyon). He's going to be in the lineup. Arguably our best hitter in the fall with Cade Arrambide. Zach will be at first base or designated hitter - most likely first base. Third base right now is Trent Carraway (junior transfer from Oregon State). John Pearson, Seth Dardar (senior transfer from Kansas State), Brayden Simpson (senior transfer from High Point). All those guys are going to play some. We still have some sorting out to do there.

**TR:** What is key to sorting out?

**JOHNSON:** You might see me trying to key hole match-ups, but the defense part is going to be really important. Carraway is the best defender at third right now. And then Simpson and Dardar are going to compete at second base with Tanner Reaves also. That whole grouping and then Omar

Serna (freshman catcher) and Mason Braun (freshman outfielder/first baseman) will be involved in the DH. I'd say second base, DH, maybe third a little bit is where we have to sort out. But they're all in play for all of it. So, it's going to be good to see how it shakes out.

I think all the transfers are far better defensively than I would've given them credit for coming in here. And we work extremely hard on that side of the ball. The sorting out always is how they elevate against the top-notch pitching. Because there's going to be a jump to the SEC. So, that's why seeing where guys fit to see where they're going to be successful is going to be important.

**TR:** Who are your top six or so candidates for the starting weekend rotation?

**JOHNSON:** We're building about 10 guys' pitching count up to extend and see, because we have so many games in a short period of time early in the season. Casan Evans obviously. Cooper Moore (junior transfer from Kansas) had a great fall. William Schmidt looked great at the end. Cooper Williams. Gavin Guidry is returning from the injury, so he's a tick behind in terms of building volume. But last year, prior to hurting his back, he showed me that he could get through the lineup multiple times. He can, but we need to see what's best for him, starting or relieving, which is the case with some of these 10. Zac Cowan, obviously. He started in

Omaha. Jaden Noot. I'm very encouraged about where he's at. And then the two freshmen are going to be really good - Marcos Paz (Hebron High, Carrollton, Texas) and Reagan Ricken (Great Oaks High, Temecula, California). And freshman Zion Theophilus (Moeller High, Cincinnati), too. So, that's kind of your potential starting bucket. One of those three freshmen could be starters. Those 10 have to go three or four innings because of the amount of games to start the season. Obviously, not nine or 10 of them are going to start. When we get down to four games a week, the goal is to take some of those guys who elevated their pitch count, bring it down, and they should get a jolt in what their stuff actually is, if they come out of the bullpen.

**TR:** And who is in your head for short relief and closing?

**JOHNSON:** On the left-handed side, it could be Cooper Williams. Santiago Garcia (junior transfer from Oregon). Ethan Plog (sophomore transfer from Iowa Western Community College). He has some unique characteristics. And then D.J. Primeaux as we've made some significant adjustments with him I'm excited about. Danny Lachenmayer (sophomore transfer from North Dakota State). Could be Gavin, because we know he's done it. Mavrick Rizy for sure. Grant Fontenot had a great fall, and Devin Sheerin (injured last year) had a great fall. He struck out 19 in nine innings. We've got a lot of options, a lot of things to sort out. **TR**



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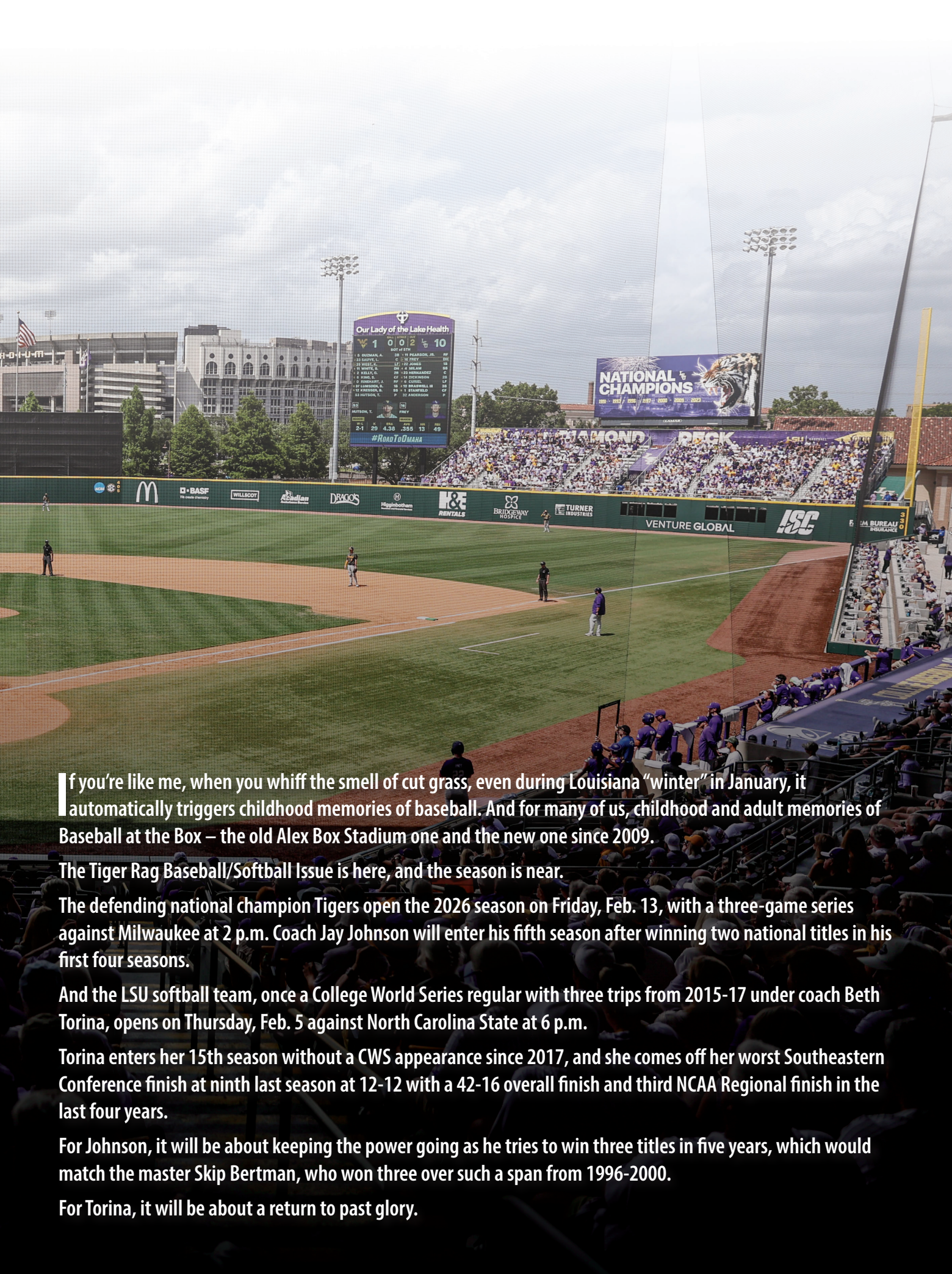
# *At last, It's Baseball Season* **TIGERS GO FOR 9TH NATIONAL TITLE**

**AND LSU SOFTBALL NEEDS TO RETURN TO ITS GLORY YEARS FAST**

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor

Photo by: Michael Bacigalupi






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Jay Johnson  
Photo by: Michael Bacigalupi

A close-up photograph of Jay Johnson, a man with a light complexion and short hair, wearing a grey baseball cap with "SUPER CHAMP 2025" on it and a purple LSU baseball jersey with a yellow Nike swoosh. He is smiling and raising his right fist in a celebratory gesture. The background is a blurred stadium at night.

# LSU BASEBALL TEAM IS BETTER ENTERING 2026 THAN IT WAS GOING INTO 2025

AND THAT TEAM WON IT ALL

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor



**I**n this day and age in college baseball, it is likely more difficult to repeat as a national championship than at any other time.

**Since the NCAA Transfer Portal - with no sitting out between transfer years - and Name, Image & Likeness payments to players began in the summer of 2021, there have been no repeat national champions.**

But more significant is the fact that none of the national champions in baseball from 2021 through 2024 made it back to Omaha, Nebraska, for the College World Series the next season. And the first three above fell dramatically.

Mississippi State won it all in 2021 at 50-18 and 20-10, but after the first year of the portal, its roster depleted and it finished 26-30 and 9-21. Ole Miss won the title in 2022 at 42-23 and 14-16, but fell to 25-29 and 6-24.

LSU coach Jay Johnson won his first national title in 2023 at 54-17 and 19-10, but couldn't get past the NCAA Regional in 2024 and finished 43-23 and 13-17. Tennessee won the 2024 crown at 60-13 and 22-8, but it dipped to 46-19 and 16-14 in 2025 and lost the Super Regional.

Now, it's LSU's turn again after winning the 2025 championship at 53-15 and 19-11. And on paper, the Tigers have an excellent chance at becoming the first college baseball repeat champion since South Carolina in 2010-11. Or at least become the first national champion to return to Omaha since Florida beat LSU in the national championship series in 2017 and made it back in '18.

The reason LSU has a chance is because it is actually better on paper entering the season than the 2025 Tigers were.

"We're going to be a great team," junior returning right fielder Jake Brown said. "Our outfield is the most talented in all of college baseball. We're returning three outfielders from the national championship team and a lot of other experience."

Johnson smiled at the experience retained.

"Yeah, we have 19 returners, and more guys who have played significantly," he said. "This time you have the outfield and shortstop set."

National freshman of the year Derek Curiel returns to the outfield, but moves to center from left. He led the team last year in batting average (.345), in doubles (20), runs scored (67) and on base average (.470) in 68 starts out of 68 games.

Senior Chris Stanfield is back after not being drafted last summer. He will move to left after hitting .298 with 15 doubles and 31 RBIs in 67 starts.

Brown started 46 of 64 games last season, hitting .320 with eight home runs and 48 RBIs.

The shortstop is returning junior Steven Milam, who hit .295 with 11 home runs and 57 RBIs through 68 starts.

Also back is senior Tanner Reaves, who hit .262 as a backup at third with 19 starts in 43 games. He is competing for second base. Cade Arrambide, who hit .242 with four home runs as a freshman backup catcher, is the likely starting catcher.

"Tanner and Cade weren't regulars, but they got a good amount of experience," Johnson said. "These guys are a little more connected to what it actually takes and how hard it is. That's something to be encouraged about."

One of the best freshman pitchers in college baseball returns in Casan Evans (5-1, 2.05 ERA, 7 saves), who struck out 71 in 52 and two-thirds innings.

Another one of LSU's most dominant pitchers from 2025 is also back in senior Zac Cowan (3-3, 2.94 ERA, 6 saves), who struck out 60 in 52 innings. Both Evans and Cowan were key in Omaha.

Junior Jaden Noot was also a valuable starter and reliever (2-1, 4.13 ERA, 1 save), who struck out 44 in 32 and two-thirds innings.

Freshman William Schmidt (7-0, 4.73 ERA) was mainly a mid-week pitcher last season, but he displayed excellent potential as a future weekend starter as he struck out 41 in 32 and a third innings.

Key relievers are also back such as sophomore Mavrick Rizy, left-handed sophomore Cooper Williams, left-handed junior D.J. Primeaux and seniors Connor Bengé and Grant Fontenot.

And don't forget redshirt junior Gavin Guidry and redshirt sophomore Deven Sheerin, who each missed all of last season with injuries.

"Both will have preeminent roles on the pitching staff," Johnson said. "Something I'm proud of from both championship years is we lost key players and were able to overcome that. Probably a sign of good recruiting and depth."

Teams who consistently recruit well and have depth tend to have a chance to win back-to-back national titles. **TR**



Derek Curiel  
Photo by: LSU Athletics



# TRANSFER PORTAL? WHAT TRANSFER PORTAL?

LSU IS AN OUTLIER IN 2026 WITH A BEVY OF RETURNING STUDS  
LIKE CASAN EVANS AND DEREK CURIEL JUST TO NAME TWO

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor



# Who says the new age of college athletics is a new team every season because of the freewheeling transfer portal that requires no sitting out between schools?

## At LSU, winners of two of the last three national championships in baseball, coach Jay Johnson will go Old School in 2026 as he tries to become the first LSU baseball coach to win back-to-back titles since Skip Bertman in 1996 and '97.

And if it happens, no less than 15 players who had significant roles last season will be fitted for twin rings.

It starts with first team preseason All-American outfielder Derek Curiel, who was the national Freshman of the Year in 2025. Playing left field flawlessly with zero errors, he led the Tigers with a .345 batting average and with 20 doubles. He hit seven home runs with 55 RBIs and 67 runs scored.

In the Tigers sweep of West Virginia in the Super Regional, Curiel led the way with a .571 average. He will move to center field for his sophomore season, which was always the plan. Surprise returning senior Chris Stanfield, who started in center last season, will move to left.

"Sometimes you just know," Johnson said of his recruitment of Curiel out of Orange Lutheran High in West Covina, California, in the Los Angeles area. "With Derek, that's the guy."

Johnson, a native of Oroville, California, north of Sacramento, has been recruiting Los Angeles and other California spots since he started coaching at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego in 2001 and later at San Diego as an assistant and head coaching jobs at Nevada and Arizona before LSU.

"If I'm going to use my California connections at LSU, we need to get Derek Curiel," he said.

"Couldn't ask for a better freshman year and a better place to be," Curiel

said. "Last season was unbelievable, and we'll be better this season."

Johnson had the same sense about pitcher Casan Evans as he recruited him out of St. Pius X High in Houston. Evans was a first team freshman All-American last season after going 5-1 with a 2.05 ERA and seven saves through 19 appearances and three starts. He struck out 71 in 52 and two-thirds innings with 19 walks and a .228 batting average allowed.

Evans struck out a season-high 12 through six innings with three walks, four hits and one run allowed in beating Arkansas-Little Rock to win the NCAA Regional. He got the save in the CWS opener against Arkansas and the win over UCLA.

"Other than Paul Skenes, I've never recruited a player harder than Casan," Johnson said. "Phone calls, personal notes, home visit, A-plus official visit, two unofficial visits. Because he was a can't miss. You could see the talent, but the background piece with his family was great and this special makeup of competitiveness. You could see it and feel it."

Evans chose LSU over Tennessee, Texas, Texas A&M and TCU.

"Sometimes I can't even believe I'm at LSU," he said. "I mean, the powerhouse of college baseball. I'm just like, 'This is crazy that I made it here.'"

Senior Zac Cowan is another stud returnee after going 3-3 with a 2.94 ERA and six saves last season – five

in the SEC. He struck out 60 with 12 walks and a .226 average allowed in 52 innings.

Other returning starters are junior shortstop Steven Milam (.295, 11 HRs, 57 RBIs), junior right fielder Jake Brown (.320, 8 HRS, 48 RBIs) and Stanfield in left (.298, 15 2Bs, 31 RBIs).

Sophomore catcher Cade Arrambide will start after hitting .242 with four home runs and 14 RBIs last season. Senior backup infielder Tanner Reaves (.262, 12 RBIs) returns with sophomore reserve outfielder John Pearson (.238, 2 HRs, 7 RBIs).

Among the slew of returning pitchers are sophomore William Schmidt (7-0, 4.73 ERA, 41 strikeouts, 32.1 innings mostly at mid-week), junior Jaden Noot (2-1, 4.13 ERA, 1 save, 44 strikeouts, 32.2 innings), sophomore Mavrick Rizey (0-0, 4.74 ERA, 29 strikeouts, 24.2 innings), junior left-hander D.J. Primeaux (0-0, 3.86 ERA, 13 strikeouts, 14 innings), sophomore left-hander Cooper Williams (0-1, 1.80 ERA, 21 strikeouts, 20 innings), senior Connor Bengtson (1-1, 6.75 ERA, 15 strikeouts, 16 innings), and senior Grant Fontenot (0-1, 7.20 ERA, 5 strikeouts, 5 innings).

And redshirt junior Gavin Guidry and redshirt sophomore Deven Sheerin in return after missing all of 2025 with injuries. **TR**



Zach Yorke  
Photo by: Grand Canyon University Athletics



# NEW TRANSFER BLOOD AT CORNERS COULD MEAN MORE HOME RUNS

LSU ADDS POWER AND PITCHING THROUGH PORTAL  
AND WITH INCOMING FRESHMEN

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor



**O**ne of the many reasons why former LSU athletic director Scott Woodward hired Jay Johnson as baseball coach before the 2022 season was because he saw him as an offensive coordinator-type head coach.

## **Offense sells tickets, and Woodward wanted more excitement in the program.**

In 2021, Johnson's Arizona team reached the College World Series with one of the most potent and balanced attacks in the country. The Wildcats finished No. 1 in hits (737), No. 4 in average (.325) and on base percentage (.422), sixth in runs (8.5 a game) and seventh in doubles (145) and slugging (.508).

Johnson delivered with a national championship for LSU in 2023, finishing No. 1 in home runs (144), No. 2 in on base percentage (.432), No. 5 in slugging (.554) and eighth in runs (8.9 a game).

Johnson led LSU to another national title in 2025, but with elite pitching this time as the Tigers finished seventh in earned run average (3.73) behind the best No. 1 and 2 pitchers in the nation in Kade Anderson (12-1, 180 strikeouts) and Anthony Eyanson (12-2, 152 strikeouts), who are now in pro ball.

Meanwhile, LSU finished 39th in home runs (103), 34th in slugging (.502) and 43rd in on base percentage (.410).

"I want to be more than what we were last year with home runs," Johnson said. "Of course, you want to hit 140 like in 2023. It's not like last year's team didn't have power. We just did it in a different way. I like that part of coaching – figuring it out with what you have."

LSU figures to have more homers on paper because of powerful portal additions. Senior first baseman/designated hitter candidate Brayden Simpson hit 22 home runs with 78 RBIs and a .389 average last season at High Point.

Projected senior first baseman Zach Yorke hit 13 homers with 46 RBIs and a .339 average at Grand Canyon. Junior Trent Caraway of Oregon State is the early favorite for third base. He hit 12 homers with 15 doubles and 47 RBIs and helped lead the Beavers to the World Series. Senior Seth Dardar, who can play third or DH, hit .326 with 13 homers and 45 RBIs at Kansas State.

"First base is probably Zach Yorke," Johnson said. "Or DH. He never shuts up on the field. And I love it. I mean that in the best way possible."

Defense will figure into playing time as well as homers.

"Third base now is Trent Caraway, who's the best defender," Johnson said. "Seth Dardar, Brayden Simpson - all those guys are going to play some. We have some sorting out to do. You might see me key-holing matchups. And Simpson and Dardar will compete at second base with (returning senior) Tanner Reaves."

Freshman Omar Serna, who is the No. 4 catcher and No. 41 prospect by Perfect Game, is behind sophomore catcher Cade Arrambide. But Serna will battle for DH with freshman outfielder/first baseman Mason Braun

– the No. 1 first baseman by Perfect Game and No. 64 prospect.

"It's going to be good to see how it shakes out," Johnson said.

It might be fun seeing more LSU hits leave the ballpark, too.

"I don't know," Johnson said laughing. "My staff seems to believe that."

Meanwhile, among the new pitchers up for the starting rotation are junior Cooper Moore, the No. 48 portal prospect by Baseball America from Kansas. He was 7-3 with a 3.96 ERA and 85 strikeouts in 88.2 innings.

Three freshmen will also contend. Reagan Ricken of Temecula, California, throws 97 mph and is Perfect Game's No. 13 overall right-hander. The other two are No. 22 right-hander Marcos Paz from Carrollton, Texas, and No. 32 right-hander Zion Theophilus from Cincinnati.

The new relievers include junior left-hander Santiago Garcia, who is the No. 38 transfer by Baseball America from Oregon (3-0, 4.18 ERA, 4 saves, 38 strikeouts, 28 innings), sophomore left-hander Danny Lachenmayer, the No. 32 transfer by BA from North Dakota State (2-4, 2.37 ERA, 9 saves, 56 strikeouts, 38 innings) and sophomore left-hander Ethan Plog of Iowa Western Community College (5-3, 5.94 ERA, 42 strikeouts, 36.1 innings). **TR**



Jake Brown  
Photo by: LSU Athletics



# JAKE BROWN OVERCAME ERROR AT NORTH CAROLINA ... AND THEN SOME

TIGERS' TOP HITTER AT 2025 COLLEGE WORLD SERIES  
HAS FOLLOWED BEN MCDONALD'S EXAMPLE

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor



You could hear the sighs and an “Oh no,” when Ben McDonald asked Jake Brown about “the error,” while at center stage of the Tigers’ First Pitch Banquet at the Crowne Plaza Hotel ballroom in front of several hundred fans on Jan. 15.

He didn’t really go there, did he? But he did.

Not only is McDonald a qualified reporter as the Baltimore Orioles analyst for radio and TV and for the SEC Network’s and ESPN’s college baseball coverage, he knows the territory.

McDonald was LSU’s first Golden Spikes winner as college baseball’s best player in 1989 and was the No. 1 pick in the Major League Baseball Draft that year by Baltimore. He also knows something about being the goat in postseason college baseball.

McDonald gave up the biggest walk-off home run in College World Series history before Warren Morris’ two-run shot that beat Miami, 9-8, for LSU in the national championship game on June 8, 1996, in Omaha, Nebraska.

On Friday, June 5, 1987, McDonald – an LSU freshman from Denham Springs High – replaced pitcher Barry Manuel with two on and one out and the Tigers leading Stanford, 5-2, in the bottom of the 10th inning in Omaha.

The Tigers were two outs away from advancing their farthest in World Series history at the time - to the semifinal round. But McDonald hit Ed Sprague to load the bases. Then

left-hander Paul Carey, batting .200 with one RBI in the series, hit a grand slam to send Stanford to the semis with a 6-5 win and end LSU’s season. Stanford went on to win the next two national championships.

“I wanted to ask you about that error you made in right field as an LSU freshman at North Carolina,” McDonald said. “And, believe me, I know what’s that like. I gave up a walk-off grand slam in Omaha when I was a freshman, and it made me who I am today.”

Brown’s miscue also happened in the 10th inning. LSU and North Carolina were tied 3-3 in the NCAA Regional final at Chapel Hill on June 3, 2024. An LSU win would send the defending national champions back home to host West Virginia in the Super Regional at Alex Box Stadium with another trip to Omaha on the line.

LSU was an out away from having a chance to win it in the bottom of the 10th, but Johnny Castagnozzi’s fly ball to right got away from Brown for an error, and Castagnozzi reached second. Then Alex Madera stroked an RBI single to give the Tar Heels a 4-3 lead. LSU went quietly in the bottom of the 10th, sending North Carolina to a home Super Regional and then the CWS.

“Yeah, I definitely learned how to handle adversity,” Brown told McDonald and the hushed crowd. “The main thing was getting back between the white lines as soon as possible.”

Brown did just that as he reported to the Cape Cod League and promptly hit .313 with no errors through 20 games that summer.

“Getting back between the lines was the main thing,” Brown said. “And there are lot of support staff at LSU that helped me a lot, too. I realized it’s a kid’s game to me – just with more people watching. That’s all it’s ever going to be.”

Amazingly, the same strategy worked for McDonald, who was scheduled to join the Anchorage Glacier Pilots in the Alaskan summer league just days after his World Series loss.

“Skip had told them to get me back on that mound as fast as they could,” McDonald said. “They picked me up at the airport and said I was pitching the next night. I threw a shutout and struck out 13 or 14, and I was off and running again. You’ve got to put it behind you as fast as you can.”

Brown got on his way, too, in 2025 as he finished fourth at LSU in hitting at .320 after .264 in 2024. He had eight home runs and nine doubles with 48 RBIs through 46 starts. Brown also led the national champion Tigers in hitting in Omaha at .385 with four RBIs.

“Jake Brown is the leader of our team. He became that last season,” LSU coach Jay Johnson said.

“My goal is to lead this team on and off the field,” Brown said. “We’re going to be a great team again.” TR



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# 2026 LSU BASEBALL SCHEDULE

Fri., Feb 13, 2:00PM  
VS. **MILWAUKEE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Feb 14, 1:00PM  
VS. **MILWAUKEE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Feb 15, 1:00PM  
VS. **MILWAUKEE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Mon., Feb 16, 3:00PM  
VS. **KENT STATE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Wed., Feb 18, 1:00PM  
VS. **NICHOLLS**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Feb 20, 1:00PM  
VS. **INDIANA**  
Jacksonville, Fla.

Sat., Feb 21, 11:00AM  
VS. **NOTRE DAME**  
Jacksonville, Fla.

Sun., Feb 22, 2:00PM  
VS. **CENTRAL FLORIDA**  
Jacksonville, Fla. (VyStar Ballpark)

Tue., Feb 24, 6:30PM  
VS. **MCNEESE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Feb 27, 6:30 PM  
VS. **DARTMOUTH**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Feb 28, 2:00PM  
VS. **NORTHEASTERN**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Mar 1, 1:00PM  
VS. **DARTMOUTH**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Mon., Mar 2, 6:30PM  
VS. **NORTHEASTERN**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Wed., Mar 4, 6:00PM  
AT **UL-LAFAYETTE**  
Lafayette, La.

Fri., Mar 6, 6:30PM  
VS. **SACRAMENTO STATE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Mar 7, 6:00PM  
VS. **SACRAMENTO STATE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Mar 8, 1:00PM  
VS. **SACRAMENTO STATE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Tue., Mar 10, 6:30PM  
VS. **CREIGHTON**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Mar 13, TBA  
AT **VANDERBILT**  
Nashville, Tenn.

Sat., Mar 14, 7:00PM  
AT **VANDERBILT**  
Nashville, Tenn.

Sun., Mar 15, 3:00PM  
AT **VANDERBILT**  
Nashville, Tenn.

Tue., Mar 17, 6:30 PM  
VS. **GRAMBLING STATE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Thu., Mar 19, 7:00PM  
VS. **OKLAHOMA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Mar 20, 6:30PM  
VS. **OKLAHOMA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Mar 21, 2:00PM  
VS. **OKLAHOMA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Tue., Mar 24, 6:30PM  
VS. **LOUISIANA TECH**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Mar 27, 6:30 PM  
VS. **KENTUCKY**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Mar 28, 2:00PM  
VS. **KENTUCKY**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Mar 29, 12:00PM  
VS. **KENTUCKY**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Tue., Mar 31, 6:30PM  
VS. **SOUTHERN**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Apr 3, 4:30PM  
AT **TENNESSEE**  
Knoxville, Tenn.

Sat., Apr 4, 5:00 PM  
AT **TENNESSEE**  
Knoxville, Tenn.

Sun., Apr 5, 12:00PM  
AT **TENNESSEE**  
Knoxville, Tenn.

Tue., Apr 7, 6:30PM  
VS. **BETHUNE-COOKMAN**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Apr 10, TBA  
AT **OLE MISS**  
Oxford, Miss.

Sat., Apr 11, TBA  
AT **OLE MISS**  
Oxford, Miss.

Sun., Apr 12, TBA  
AT **OLE MISS**  
Oxford, Miss.

Tue., Apr 14, 6:30PM  
VS. **NORTHWESTERN ST**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Apr 17, 6:00PM  
VS. **TEXAS A&M**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Apr 18, 7:00PM  
VS. **TEXAS A&M**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Apr 19, 1:00PM  
VS. **TEXAS A&M**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Tue., Apr 21, 6:30PM  
VS. **NEW ORLEANS**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Apr 24, TBA  
AT **MISSISSIPPI STATE**  
Starkville, Miss.

Sat., Apr 25, 6:30PM  
AT **MISSISSIPPI STATE**  
Starkville, Miss.

Sun., Apr 26, TBA  
AT **MISSISSIPPI STATE**  
Starkville, Miss.

Tue., Apr 28, 6:30PM  
VS. **SE LOUISIANA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., May 1, 6:30PM  
VS. **SOUTH CAROLINA**  
Baton Rouge, La. (

Sat., May 2, 6:00PM  
VS. **SOUTH CAROLINA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., May 3, 2:00PM  
VS. **SOUTH CAROLINA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Tue., May 5, 6:30PM  
VS. **TULANE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., May 8, 5:00PM  
AT **GEORGIA**  
Athens, Ga.

Sat., May 9, 6:00PM  
AT **GEORGIA**  
Athens, Ga.

Sun., May 10, 2:00PM  
AT **GEORGIA**  
Athens, Ga.

Thu., May 14, 6:30PM  
VS. **FLORIDA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., May 15, 6:30PM  
VS. **FLORIDA**  
Baton Rouge, La. (

Sat., May 16, 2:00PM  
VS. **FLORIDA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

May 19 - May 24  
**SEC TOURNAMENT**  
Hoover, Ala.

May 29 - Jun 1  
**NCAA REGIONALS**  
Campus Sites TBD

Jun 5 - Jun 8  
**NCAA SUPER REGIONALS**  
Campus Sites TBD


Jun 12 - Jun 22  
**COLLEGE WORLD SERIES**  
Omaha, Neb.



# 2026 LSU BASEBALL ROSTER

NO.	NAME	POS.	HGT.	WT.	CLASS	EXP	B-T	HOMETOWN/HIGH SCHOOL/PREVIOUS SCHOOL
0	CADE ARRAMBIDE	C.	6-3	208	SO	1L	R-R	Tomball, Texas/Tomball HS
1	CHRIS STANFIELD	OF.	6-2	196	SR	1L	R-R	Tallahassee, Fla./Chiles HS/Auburn
4	STEVEN MILAM	INF	5-8	185	JR	2L	S-R	Las Cruces, N.M./Centennial HS
5	TANNER REAVES	INF	6-1	175	5Y SR.	1L	L-R	Bonham, Texas/Bonham HS/Blinn College
6	DEREK CUIEL	OF.	6-2	192	SO	1L	L-L	West Covina, Calif./Orange Lutheran HS
7	JAKE BROWN	OF.	6-2	206	JR	2L	L-L	Sulphur, La./Sulphur HS
8	GAVIN GUIDRY	RHP	6-2	184	RS JR.	3L	R-R	Lake Charles, La./Barbe HS
9	WILLIAM SCHMIDT	RHP	6-4	201	SO	1L	R-R	Baton Rouge, La./Catholic HS
10	BRAYDEN SIMPSON	INF	6-1	201	SR	TR	R-R	Moseley, Va./Cosby HS/High Point
11	JOHN PEARSON	OF/3B	6-0	235	SO	1L	R-R	West Monroe, La./West Monroe HS
13	EDWARD YAMIN IV	C/1B	6-5	206	RS JR.	1L	R-R	West Sand Lake, N.Y./La Salle Academy/Dayton
14	DANIEL HARDEN	OF.	6-2	195	JR	JC.	L-L	Prairieville, La./Catholic HS/McLennan CC
16	ETHAN CLAUSS	INF	6-2	186	FR	HS	L-R	Las Vegas, Nev./Palo Verde HS
17	MAVRICK RIZY	RHP	6-9	251	SO	1L	R-R	Fiskdale, Mass./Worcester Academy
18	MASON BRAUN	OF/1B	6-0	213	FR	HS	L-L	South Bend, Ind./Penn HS
20	CASAN EVANS	RHP	6-2	196	SO	1L	R-R	Houston, Texas/St. Pius X HS
22	COOPER MOORE	RHP	6-1	200	JR	TR	R-R	Bixby, Okla./Bixby HS/Kansas
23	WILLIAM PATRICK	OF.	6-2	209	FR	HS	R-R	Monroe, La./St. Frederick HS
24	SETH DARDAR	INF	6-2	212	5Y SR.	TR	L-R	Mandeville, La./Holy Cross HS/Kansas State
25	OMAR SERNA JR.	C.	6-2	245	FR	HS	R-R	Houston, Texas/Lutheran South Academy
26	ZAC COWAN	RHP	5-11	211	SR	1L	S-R	Blythewood, S.C./Blythewood HS/Wofford
27	JADEN NOOT	RHP	6-4	244	RS JR.	2L	R-R	Oak Park, Calif./Sierra Canyon HS
28	DANNY LACHENMAYER	LHP	6-3	221	SO	TR	R-L	Eagan, Minn./Eagan HS/North Dakota State
29	COOPER WILLIAMS	LHP	6-4	200	SO	1L	L-L	Alvin, Texas/Alvin HS
30	DAX DATHE	RHP	6-3	208	5Y SR.	TR	R-R	Round Rock, Texas/Stony Point HS/Angelo State
32	JACK RUCKERT	INF	6-1	192	FR	HS	L-R	Baton Rouge, La./Catholic HS
33	ZACH YORKE	INF	6-2	295	SR	TR	L-R	Campbell, Calif./Mountain Ridge HS/Grand Canyon
34	SANTIAGO GARCIA	LHP	6-0	191	JR	TR	L-L	Las Cruces, N.M./Centennial HS/Oregon
35	REAGAN RICKEN	RHP	6-5	218	FR	HS	R-R	Temecula, Calif./Great Oak HS
38	ETHAN PLOG	LHP	6-1	187	SO	JC.	L-L	Green Bay, Wisc./Bay Port HS/Iowa Western CC
39	JONAH AASE	LHP	6-1	208	FR	HS	L-L	Ferndale, Wash./Meridian HS
40	GRANT FONTENOT	RHP	6-3	225	5Y SR.	1L	R-R	Lafayette, La./Lafayette HS/Texas
41	DJ PRIMEAUX	LHP	5-10	200	RS JR.	2L	L-L	Baton Rouge, La./Central HS
43	CONNOR BENGE	RHP	6-0	182	SR	1L	R-R	Montgomery, Texas/Montgomery HS/Dallas Baptist
44	TRENT CARAWAY	INF	6-2	201	JR	TR	R-R	Dana Point, Calif./JSerra Catholic HS/Oregon State
45	DEVEN SHEERIN	RHP	6-5	255	RS SO	1L	R-R	Reading, Pa./Exeter Township HS/Mount St. Mary's
52	ZION THEOPHILUS	RHP	6-2	196	FR	HS	L-R	Cincinnati, Ohio/Moeller HS
56	JOHN SHAHRDAR	RHP	6-1	195	SR	TR	R-R	Shreveport, La./Loyola Prep HS/Northwestern State
97	MARCOS PAZ	RHP	6-2	228	FR	HS	R-R	Carrollton, Texas/Hebron HS





Beth Torina  
Photo by: LSU Athletics

# LSU SOFTBALL COACH BETH TORINA NEEDS TO FINISH STRONGER

**TIGERS HAVE NOT BEEN SUCCEEDING IN  
RECENT YEARS IN THE POSTSEASON**

By ANDRE CHAMPAGNE, Tiger Rag Staff Reporter



**The LSU softball team ended its 2025 season in the most disappointing way possible. After being named as the No. 10 national seed and one of 16 hosts, the Tigers dropped their opening NCAA postseason game to fourth-seeded Southeastern Louisiana.**

**Not only did the Tigers lose to an in-state team, but they were later eliminated by the same Lions to finish what was another underwhelming season after showing so much early potential.**

**LSU coach Beth Torina said the Tigers will be trying to prevent such an ending from ever happening again.**

“I think we’re constantly trying to bulletproof ourselves to avoid situations like what happened last year and to avoid any of those things,” she told Tiger Rag. “And make sure we have a team that’s built for every scenario. So, I think just trying to find where the chinks in the armor were in the past and seal those up, and you try to have an answer for everything.”

On the bright side, LSU returns seven of its nine starters from last season. The Tigers lost senior third baseman Danieca Coffey and senior outfielder McKenzie Redoutey, who both graduated. LSU also lost junior starting pitcher Sydney Berzon to Oklahoma via the transfer portal.

Torina brought in several experienced transfers to help contribute for a better ending in 2026.

The Tigers added junior third baseman Ally Hutchins (Kentucky) and junior shortstop Kylee Edwards (Mississippi State), who each bring two years of SEC starting experience. LSU also brought in red-shirt sophomore utility player Char Lorenz (Louisville) and junior and senior right-handed pitchers Cece Cellura (San Diego State) and Paytn Monticelli (Oklahoma).

“I think, although there are some new faces to LSU, it’s a pretty experienced lineup from top to bottom,” Torina said. “I also think it’s a lineup that lends itself to being really successful in Tiger Park by the way they’re built with the skills that they possess. They run well and have right-handed power, so it’s a little different look than we’ve had in the past.”

LSU brings back key returners to this year’s team in senior outfielder Jalia Lassiter, senior shortstop Avery Hodge, senior catcher Maci Bergeron, junior infielder Sierra Daniel, sophomore first baseman Tori Edwards and sophomore left-handed pitcher Jayden Heavener.

Tori Edwards at first and Bergeron at catcher are the only locked starters, Torina said, leaving Kylee Edwards, Ally Hutchins, Sierra Daniels and Avery Hodge competing for playing time.

As for the outfield, Torina said Lorenz will move to either left or right field. Junior Jadyn Laneaux was injured in the fall and may not be able to return this season, which leaves one spot up for grabs. Sophomores Alix Franklin and Destiny Harris as well as junior Maddox McKee and freshman Rylie Johnson will all see time.

In efforts to optimize her team’s performance at all times, Torina will not coach third base. Instead, assistant coach Sandra Moton will take over.

“I’m going to stay in the dugout, so she’s going to be making all those decisions over there,” Torina said. “She does our base running and just has a great pulse on that. I’m going to try to stay in and try to manage the offense from the dugout and manage the pitching a little bit better. Just kind of see the game a little more globally.”

LSU has not made the College World Series since 2017. But Torina feels that her team has all the tools to get back to Oklahoma City for the first time in nine years. But to do so, she believes the Tigers have to be more consistent when closing out the season.

“A more consistent team late in the season is something we’ve talked a ton about,” she said. “We’ve talked about just trying to position ourselves, maybe one or two spots higher in the SEC and get that favorable draw, because there is a lot of luck at the end of the season, too, with who you draw and how you draw them and where it’s played. I think just one or two more games in the season going differently is big to put us in the best spot we can be at in the end.” **TR**





# TIGERS RETURN NUCLEUS OF THEIR 2025 TEAM

By ANDRE CHAMPAGNE, Tiger Rag Staff Reporter

The LSU softball team only lost three key players following the 2025 season – senior third baseman Danieca Coffey, senior outfielder McKenzie Redoutey and junior pitcher Sydney Berzon, who entered the NCAA Transfer Portal and went to Oklahoma.

But the Tigers bring back a strong core of returners for the 2026 season, including seven of nine starters. Redshirt sophomore first baseman Tori Edwards is among the best. The Flower Mound, Texas, native, brought several awards back to Baton Rouge after one of the best freshman campaigns in LSU softball history.

She was named as a National Fast Pitch Coaches Association second team All-American and as a D1Softball.com first team All-American after batting .383 with 18 home runs, 73 RBIs and 37 walks. But Edwards is more concerned about lofty team goals.



"My priority is doing whatever I can to help our team get to the World Series, even if that means drawing a ton of walks and not hitting home runs or a .100 or .400 batting average, it doesn't matter," she said. "I'm not worried about my stats as long as I can help produce something that leads the team to the World Series."

LSU last reached the World Series in Oklahoma City in 2017.

Another big piece to the Tigers' 2026 team is sophomore left-handed pitcher Jayden Heavener of Pace, Florida, who was named to the NFCA Freshman All-American second team after a 13-5 record and a 2.75 Earned Run Average. She struck out 152 batters while walking 77 in 119.2 innings.

With Berzon gone, Heavener is now going to be the arm the Tigers rely on most. This offseason, Heavener has worked intensively with coach Beth Torina on improving multiple parts of her game.

"She's working more with me on just getting into a groove and trying to fix my mechanical issues," Heavener said. "We figured out a lot about who I was last year

and how I helped the team out in certain ways, so we're going to work on that more and also just add pitches to my arsenal and try to figure out other ways I can get outs, last longer in games and other ways that I can pitch more games."

Edwards and Heavener are two of the young returning stars on LSU's 2026 roster, but one of the most important returnees is senior outfielder Jalia Lassiter, an Atmore, Alabama, native. She hit .330 last season with three home runs and 41 RBIs.

"Jalia's the leader of the whole team," Torina said. "I mean, she's really the one that directs the ship and will lead us. She had a really strong fall offensively, and she understands her swing is in a great spot."

LSU also brings back experienced senior catcher Maci Bergeron. The Rayne native had her best season with the Tigers last season at .364 with nine home runs and 49 RBIs. Bergeron was a third team All-American and a second team All-Southeastern Conference selection. She started at catcher for all 58 games in 2025.

Junior infielder Sierra Daniel enters her third year with the Tigers after having a productive sophomore season. A Chandler, Arizona, native, she batted .381 with two home runs and 19 RBIs. She played second base most of the time, starting 43 times out of 50 games played. She is expected to be at second base again this season.

Senior infielder Avery Hodge brings back the most experience of anyone in the infield. A Richmond, Texas, native, she spent her first two seasons at Oklahoma before transferring to LSU. She hit .319 with one home run and 30 RBIs in 2025. Hodge is expected to fight for playing time with junior transfer infielders Ally Hutchins of Kentucky and Kylee Edwards of Mississippi State.

The last of the returners is junior outfielder Jady Laneaux of Marietta, Georgia. She started 52 games in left field for the Tigers last season and batted .313 with 45 hits and 24 RBIs. An injury has her status for the season up in the air, though. **TR**



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Cece Cellura  
Photo by: San Diego State Athletics

# IT'S A TRANSFER PORTAL WORLD NOW MORE THAN EVER FOR LSU

## BETH TORINA ADDS RECORD FIVE TRANSFERS

By ANDRE CHAMPAGNE, Tiger Rag Staff Reporter

**L**SU softball coach Beth Torina has not been one to overuse the NCAA Transfer Portal, but she needs to dramatically improve her team after a lull for several years in the postseason.

So, she went for it, adding five experienced transfers with them expected to contribute immediately.

LSU added right-handed pitchers Cece Cellura of San Diego State and Paytn Monticelli of Oklahoma. Cellura, a junior, was one of the top players in the portal. The Glendale, California, native was 19-9 with a 2.28 Earned Run Average last season for the Aztecs. She struck out 94 batters in 153.2 innings.

Monticelli, a senior from Cedarburg, Wisconsin, had a 2-0 record and a 4.94 ERA with the Sooners last season. Monticelli struck out 20 batters in 21.1 innings.

"I think it's a really complete staff," Torina said. "I think there's a lot of really cool pieces, and everyone brings something very different to the table."

The Tigers also brought in junior infielders Ally Hutchins of Kentucky and Kylee Edwards of Mississippi State as well as redshirt sophomore utility player Char Lorenz of Louisville.

Hutchins, who is from Paducah, Kentucky, was a two-year starter at third base for the Wildcats. She hit 12 home runs with 45 RBIs and batted .267 from 2024-2025.

Edwards, a Waldron, Indiana, native, was a two-year starter at shortstop for the Bulldogs. From 2024-2025, she started in 111 games and batted .280 with 14 home runs and 60 RBIs. She also stole 11 of 13 bases.

"The left side of our infield is going to be really strong," Torina said. "Ally's played third base for two years, and with these two shortstops (Hodge and Edwards) - it's a great problem to have over there."

Lorenz, who is from Munster, Indiana, earned All-ACC second team honors after hitting .368 with nine home runs and 53 RBIs for the Cardinals last season. Torina said Lorenz will play mostly in the outfield and will also catch as a backup to senior Maci Bergeron.

"She can do so many things," Torina said. "She's just capable of really playing any position on the field. She's done anything that we've asked, and she can really just do anything." **TR**





# “MY ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO WIN A NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP”

MISSISSIPPI STATE’S KYLEE EDWARDS CAME TO LSU  
AS A TRANSFER TO CHALLENGE HERSELF

By ANDRE CHAMPAGNE, Tiger Rag Staff Reporter

Once the 2025 softball season ended, Mississippi State’s Kylee Edwards decided to do something few expected.

After two years as Mississippi State’s starting shortstop, she was not sure what she would do, but she knew she did not want to rest on her laurels and get complacent.

And the next thing she knew, she was at LSU via the NCAA Transfer Portal.

“Everyone was surprised when I entered the portal, and it had nothing to do with playing time or anything like that,” she said. “I just wanted to challenge myself, and my ultimate goal is to win a national championship. My decision to pick LSU was because the coaches were amazing, and because of all the preparation they put into our practices.”

When Edwards, who is from Waldron, Indiana, first got to Baton Rouge, it took some adjusting.

“It took me a minute to get used to it, because I came from Starkville, and I grew up in a very small town in Indiana,” she said. “I graduated with like 32 kids in my class, and I lived in the middle of nowhere. So, it was a culture shock at first. But it’s so awesome. I love it.”

In two seasons with the Bulldogs, Edwards batted .280 with 14 home runs, 60 RBIs and 38 walks. In 296 career at-bats, she struck out just 24 times.

Edward’s biggest goal this off-season is to improve her swing.

“I think my main focal point was adding more power and leveling out my hits,” she said. “Instead of taking it to the air, taking it to the ground.”

Hitting coach Bryce Neal has helped her.

“He’s really bought into my swing and made some adjustments that really showed in the fall,” Edwards said. “It’s hard not to buy into that process, and I bought into it. And it completely transformed my swing for the better.”

Edwards admits being at LSU has been different.

“These girls here work so freaking hard,” she said. “Like, you don’t have to worry about anybody taking off a rep. We all want to win a national championship. I feel like that’s the main goal. And we’re so close as a team.” **TR**



# 2026 LSU SOFTBALL SCHEDULE

Thu., Feb 5, 6:00PM  
VS. **NC STATE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Feb 6, 3:00PM  
VS. **NEVADA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Feb 6, 5:30PM  
VS. **NC STATE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Feb 7, 5:30PM  
VS. **NEVADA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Feb 8, 12:30PM  
VS. **ILLINOIS**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Feb 8, 3:00PM  
VS. **LAMAR**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Thu., Feb 12, 10:00AM  
VS. **NEBRASKA**  
Clearwater, Fla.

Thu., Feb 12, 2:00PM  
VS. **OKLAHOMA STATE**  
Clearwater, Fla.

Fri., Feb 13, 3:30PM  
VS. **DUKE**  
Clearwater, Fla.

Sat., Feb 14, 9:00AM  
VS. **UCF**  
Clearwater, Fla.

Sun., Feb 15, 9:00AM  
VS. **UCLA**  
Clearwater, Fla.

Tue., Feb 17, 6:00PM  
VS. **SOUTH ALABAMA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Feb 20, 6:30PM  
VS. **MICHIGAN STATE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Feb 21, 4:00PM  
VS. **UL-LAFAYETTE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Feb 21, 6:30PM  
VS. **MICHIGAN STATE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Feb 22, 1:30PM  
VS. **HOWARD**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Tue., Feb 24, 6:00PM  
AT **MCNEESE**  
Lake Charles, La.

Fri., Feb 27, 4:00PM  
VS. **NICHOLLS**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Feb 27, 6:30PM  
VS. **MEMPHIS**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Feb 28, 4:00PM  
VS. **IOWA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Feb 28, 6:30PM  
VS. **MEMPHIS**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Mar 6, TBA  
AT **TENNESSEE**  
Knoxville, Tenn. (

Sat., Mar 7, TBA  
AT **TENNESSEE**  
Knoxville, Tenn.

Sun., Mar 8, TBA  
AT **TENNESSEE**  
Knoxville, Tenn.

Tue., Mar 10, 6:00PM  
AT **NICHOLLS**  
Thibodaux, La.

Sat., Mar 14, 6:00PM  
VS. **TEXAS A&M**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Mar 15, 6:00PM  
VS. **TEXAS A&M**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Mon., Mar 16, 6:00PM  
VS. **TEXAS A&M**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Mar 20, TBA  
AT **SOUTH CAROLINA**  
Columbia, S.C.

Sat., Mar 21, TBA  
AT **SOUTH CAROLINA**  
Columbia, S.C.

Sun., Mar 22, TBA  
AT **SOUTH CAROLINA**  
Columbia, S.C.

Tue., Mar 24, 6:00PM  
VS. **LOUISIANA TECH**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Mar 27, 6:00PM  
VS. **OKLAHOMA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Mar 28, 11:00AM  
VS. **OKLAHOMA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Mar 29, 11:00AM  
VS. **OKLAHOMA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Thu., Apr 2, TBA  
AT **MISSOURI**  
Columbia, Mo. (

Fri., Apr 3, TBA  
AT **MISSOURI**  
Columbia, Mo.

Sat., Apr 4, TBA  
AT **MISSOURI**  
Columbia, Mo.

Tue., Apr 7, 6:00PM  
VS. **CENTRAL ARKANSAS**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Apr 10, 6:00PM  
VS. **ARIZONA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., Apr 11, 5:00PM  
VS. **ARIZONA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Apr 12, 11:00AM  
VS. **ARIZONA**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Tue., Apr 14, 6:00PM  
AT **UL-LAFAYETTE**  
Lafayette, La.

Fri., Apr 17, 6:00PM  
VS. **OLE MISS**  
Baton Rouge, La. (Tiger Park)

Sat., Apr 18, 5:00PM  
VS. **OLE MISS**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sun., Apr 19, 1:00PM  
VS. **OLE MISS**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., Apr 24, TBA  
AT **MISSISSIPPI STATE**  
Starkville, Miss.

Sat., Apr 25, TBA  
AT **MISSISSIPPI STATE**  
Starkville, Miss.

Sun., Apr 26, TBA  
AT **MISSISSIPPI STATE**  
Starkville, Miss.

Tue., Apr 28, 6:00PM  
VS. **MCNEESE**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Thu., Apr 30, 6:00PM  
VS. **AUBURN**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Fri., May 1, 4:00PM  
VS. **AUBURN**  
Baton Rouge, La.

Sat., May 2, 4:00PM  
VS. **AUBURN**  
Baton Rouge, La. (Tiger Park)

May 5 - May 9  
**SEC TOURNAMENT**  
Lexington, Ky.

May 15 - May 17  
**NCAA REGIONAL**  
Campus Site TBD

May 21 - May 24  
**NCAA SUPER REGIONAL**  
Campus Site TBD

May 28 - Jun 5  
**WOMEN'S COLLEGE  
WORLD SERIES**  
Oklahoma City, Okla.



# 2026 LSU SOFTBALL ROSTER

NO	NAME	POS	HGT	CLASS	EXP	B/T	HOMETOWN/HIGH SCHOOL/PREVIOUS SCHOOL
00	JAYDEN HEAVENER	P/UT	5-6	SO	1L	L/L	Pace, Fla/Pace HS
1	ALLY HUTCHINS	INF	5-10	JR	TR	R/R	Paducah, Ky./McCracken Co. HS/Kentucky
2	MADDOX MCKEE	UT	5-4	JR	2L	L/R	Montgomery, Texas/Lake Creek HS
4	GRADIE APPLING	UT	5-5	FR	HS	R/R	Juliette, Ga./Tattnall Square Academy
7	JALIA LASSITER	OF	5-7	SR	1L	R/R	Atmore, Ala./Flomaton HS/Ole Miss
8	CALI DEAL	P	6-0	FR	HS	R/L	Quitman, La./Quitman HS
10	RYLIE JOHNSON	OF	5-6	FR	HS	L/L	Spotsylvania, Va./Fredericksburg HS
11	LAURYN SOEKEN	P	5-9	FR	HS	R/R	Katy, Texas/Katy HS
12	MACI BERGERON	C	5-4	SR	3L	R/R	Rayne, La./Notre Dame HS
14	ASHLIN MOWERY	UT	5-11	FR	HS	R/R	Lancaster, Ohio/Lancaster HS
15	JADYN LANEUX	OF	5-10	JR	2L	L/R	Marietta, Ga./Pope HS
17	PAYTN MONTICELLI	P	6-2	SR	TR	R/R	Cedarburg, Wisc./Cedarburg HS/Oklahoma
18	TATUM CLOPTON	P	5-10	5Y SR	1L	L/R	Lawrence, Kan./Free State HS/Oklahoma State
20	ALIX FRANKLIN	INF	5-7	SO	1L	R/R	St. Amant, La./St. Amant HS
21	CECE CELLURA	P	6-0	JR	TR	R/R	Glendale, Calif./Louisville HS/San Diego State
23	SIERRA DANIEL	UT	5-4	JR	2L	L/R	Chandler, Ariz./Seton Catholic Preparatory HS
24	CHAR LORENZ	UT	5-5	RS SO	TR	R/R	Munster, Ind./Munster HS/Louisville
28	JADA PHILLIPS	C/UT	5-4	SO	1L	R/R	Bradenton, Fla./Braden River HS
33	DESTINY HARRIS	OF	5-4	SO	1L	R/R	Norfolk, Va./Granby HS
42	TORI EDWARDS	UT	5-11	RS SO	1L	R/R	Flower Mound, Texas/Edward S. Marcus HS
44	CI'ELLA PICKETT	UT	5-8	FR	HS	R/R	Mentone, Calif./Cajon HS
67	KYLEE EDWARDS	INF	5-6	JR	TR	R/R	Waldron, Ind./Shelbyville HS/Mississippi State
82	AVERY HODGE	INF	5-5	SR	1L	L/R	Richmond, Texas/Fort Bend Christian Academy/Oklahoma

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# THE LANE TRANSFER TRAIN STARTED SLOW FROM THE GATE

BUT SOON, SHOUTS OF “ALL ABOARD” SATURATED THE LAND AS  
LSU SOARED TO NO. 1 PORTAL RANKING WITH 40 PLAYERS

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor

When the fourth day of the lone NCAA Transfer Portal window of 2026 dawned on Monday, Jan. 5, new LSU football coach Lane Kiffin had all of one transfer. And he wasn't even from the mainland.

That was No. 40-ranked receiver Jackson Harris of Hawaii.

But less than a week later on Sunday, Jan. 11, Kiffin's portal class had 23 passengers and reached a No. 4 national ranking by 247sports.com.

At the critical-need quarterback position, though, Kiffin had only No. 75 Landen Clark, a redshirt freshman from a school named Elon, which may as well be in Hawaii.



But by the next night, LSU was ranked No. 1 after the blockbuster signing of No. 1 portal player/No. 1 quarterback Sam Leavitt, a redshirt sophomore from Arizona State after Kiffin withstood an 11th hour Tennessee try and Leavitt's Miami visit over the weekend.

On Wednesday, LSU added its third quarterback in four days with No. 6-ranked Husan Longstreet, a USC freshman for one elite quarterback room.

There was no stopping L&K Railroad now.

On Wednesday, Jan. 21, Kiffin reached 40 portal players with No. 1 edge and No. 5 overall portal player Princewill Umanmielen from the Train's previous depot at Ole Miss, which saw four Rebels follow the Lane Trail to Baton Rouge. **TR**

## LSU PORTAL SIGNEES (40)

No. 1 By 247Sports.com

No. 1 Quarterback Sam Leavitt of Arizona State  
No. 1 Edge Princwill Umanmielen of Ole Miss  
No. 2 Safety Ty Benefield of Boise State  
No. 3 Guard/Center Devin Harper of Ole Miss  
No. 6 Quarterback Husan Longstreet of USC  
No. 7 Edge Jordan Ross of Tennessee  
No. 9 Linebacker TJ Dottery of Ole Miss  
No. 10 Safety Faheem Delane of Ohio State  
No. 11 Defensive Lineman Stephiylan Green of Clemson  
No. 12 Wide Receiver Eugene "Tre" Wilson III of Florida  
No. 13 Defensive Lineman Malik Blocton of Auburn  
No. 16 Guard/Center William Satterwhite of Tennessee  
No. 23 Offensive Tackle Sean Thompkins, Baylor  
No. 26 Wide Receiver Jayce Brown of Kansas State  
No. 27 Receiver Winston Watkins of Ole Miss  
No. 30 Wide Receiver Tre Brown III of Old Dominion  
No. 30 Offensive Tackle Darrin Strey of Kentucky  
No. 39 Tight End Malachi Thomas of Pittsburgh  
No. 40 Wide Receiver Jackson Harris of Hawaii  
No. 49 Guard/Center Ja'Quan Sprinkle of North Carolina Central  
No. 56 Quarterback Landen Clark of Elon  
No. 67 Guard/Center Aliou Bah of Maryland  
No. 82 Edge Jaylen Brown of South Carolina  
No. 84 Running Back Raycine Guillory of Utah  
No. 104 Running Back Rod Gainey Jr. of Charlotte  
No. 124 Defensive Lineman Achilles Woods of South Alabama  
No. 136 Wide Receiver Malik Elzy of Illinois  
No. 154 Wide Receiver Tyree Holloway of West Florida  
No. 205 Wide Receiver Josh Jackson of McNeese  
No. 206 Wide Receiver Roman Mothershed of Troy  
Unranked Linebacker Theo Grace of North Dakota  
Unranked Running Back Stacy Gage of UCF  
Unranked Wide Receiver/Defensive Back Mason Dossett of Baylor  
Unranked Guard/Center Ja'Mard Jones of Nicholls State  
Unranked Tight End Zach Grace of Oregon  
Unranked Running Back Dilin Jones of Wisconsin  
Unranked Safety Treytan James of Southern  
Unranked Punter Hayden Craig of Florida  
Unranked Long Snapper Mack Mulhern of Florida  
Unranked Kicker Scott Starzyk of Arkansas



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A full-page action photograph of Sam Leavitt, a quarterback for Arizona State, running with the football. He is wearing a white jersey with maroon pants and a white helmet. He is being pursued by a player in a purple jersey. The background shows a large crowd of spectators in a stadium.

Sam Leavitt  
Photo by: Arizona State Athletics

# OVER 4 DAYS IN JANUARY, LSU BECAME PORTAL QUARTERBACK U.

NO. 1 SAM LEAVITT OF ARIZONA STATE, NO. 7 HUSAN LONGSTREET OF USC AND  
NO. 61 LANDEN CLARK OF ELON FORM STAR-STUDED QB CLASS OF 2026

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor



Sixteen years ago to the day that Lane Kiffin left Tennessee as coach after one hopeful season on Jan. 12, 2010, he broke Rocky Top's heart again on Monday, Jan. 12, 2026, leaving the Vols spewing in anger again.

Kiffin left Tennessee 16 years ago for what he considered his dream job – USC, where he was an assistant for six years – after a 7-6 (4-4 SEC) season in 2009 that followed Phillip Fulmer's last year at 5-7 and 3-5.

Tennessee thought it had its next great coach in the 34-year-old, but it's on its sixth since Kiffin and still has not won a national championship or SEC title since 1998 with Fulmer.

Kiffin returned to Knoxville last Jan. 8, but to keep recruiting No. 1 portal prospect/No. 1 quarterback Sam Leavitt of Arizona State during Leavitt's visit to Tennessee. And on Jan. 12, 2026, Kiffin stabbed the Vols in the chest again by signing Leavitt after a fourth quarter rally by Tennessee.

Leavitt (6-foot-2, 205 pounds), a two-year starter at Arizona State, will be a redshirt

junior for LSU in 2026 and could play for two seasons, unless he puts his name in for the 2027 NFL Draft.

Kiffin is prepared for that because he got No. 61 portal quarterback Landen Clark of Elon on Jan. 11 and on Jan. 14 added No. 7 portal QB Husan Longstreet of USC. Clark will be a redshirt sophomore, and Longstreet will be a redshirt freshman.

Leavitt completed 216 of 350 passes for 2,885 yards and 24 touchdowns with six interceptions for the No. 23 efficiency rating in the nation at 150.2 in the 2024 season for Arizona State. He led the Sun Devils to an 11-3 and No. 7 finish (7-2 Big 12) that season and the Big 12 title before losing to Texas in double overtime, 39-31, in the College Football Playoff. He also rushed 110 times for 443 yards and five touchdowns.

"Sam's really good. I keep saying it," Arizona State coach Kenny Dillingham said in 2024. "There's zero doubt in my mind Sam's an NFL player."

But Leavitt injured ligaments in his right foot in 2025 and could only play in seven

games, completing 145 of 239 for 1,628 yards and 10 TDs while rushing for 306 yards and five TDs. He had Lisfranc surgery and will miss spring drills recovering.

Leavitt signed with Michigan State for 2023 as the No. 18 quarterback and No. 2 prospect in Oregon from West Linn High before transferring to Arizona State. Leavitt led West Linn to the 6A state title in 2022 and was Oregon's Gatorade Player of the Year, throwing for 3,184 yards and 36 touchdowns.

"He has a super powerful arm and is extremely confident," former West Linn High coach Jon Eagle told Tiger Rag. "And he can run. What he's really good at, too, is deciphering a lot of information in half a second."

Longstreet was a five-star prospect from Centennial High in Corona, California, when he signed with USC last year before being red-shirted.

Clark completed 155 of 277 passes for 2,321 yards and 18 TDs in 2025 at Elon and rushed 189 times for 614 yards and 11 TDs.

Consider LSU's QB room full. **TR**

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# TIGER TREASURES OF THE PORTAL

By ANDRE CHAMPAGNE, Tiger Rag Staff Reporter

LSU new coach Lane Kiffin had a busy and successful January, 2026, in the NCAA Transfer Portal. He signed the No. 1 class, according to

247sports.com as he added 40 players, including 13 of the top 150 prospects in the portal.

The following are expected to make an immediate impact.

Kiffin will need major help on the offensive line as only two of the Tigers'



five starters in 2025 will return for 2026 – center Braelin Moore, who will be a senior, and offensive tackle Weston Davis, who will be a redshirt sophomore.

Eight LSU offensive linemen departed via the transfer portal, but Kiffin brought in an entirely new room full of talent.

Freshman Devin Harper, the No. 3 guard/center in the portal from Ole Miss, and redshirt junior Aliou Bah, the No. 68 guard/center from Maryland, will be two who will compete for starting jobs as soon as the pads come on.

Harper (6-foot-4, 315 pounds) is a Shreveport native from Calvary Baptist who played in six games for the Rebels in 2025. Bah (6-6, 327), a Memphis native from Whitehaven High and IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, did not allow a sack in 2025 through 11 starts at right guard for Maryland. He also started 12 games at right guard in 2024 for Maryland.

Kiffin brought in nine portal receivers with a variety of experience and talent.

Among them is No. 12-ranked Eugene “Tre” Wilson III of Florida, No. 26 Jayce Brown of Kansas State and No. 27 Winston Watkins Jr. of Ole Miss.

Wilson (5-10, 194), a redshirt sophomore, caught 107 passes for 1,043 yards and 10 touchdowns in his three seasons with the Gators. The Tampa, Florida, native, can play on the inside and outside.

Brown (6-0, 179), a junior from Fort Walton Beach, Florida, caught 115 passes for 1,972 yards and 13 touchdowns in his three seasons with the Wildcats.

Watkins (5-11, 185), a Fort Myers, Florida, native, caught 26 passes for 373 yards and a touchdown as a freshman in Kiffin’s offense at Ole Miss.

LSU lost two starting defensive backs in cornerback Mansoor Delane and safety AJ Haulcy.

Kiffin has reloaded with No. 2 safety Ty Benefield of Boise State and Mansoor’s younger brother - No. 10 safety Faheem Delane of Ohio State.

Benefield (6-2, 205), a junior from Altadena, California, started 33 games for the Broncos and had 235 tackles, 18 for loss, 16 pass breakups and five interceptions in three seasons at Boise State.

Delane (6-1, 210), a freshman from Good Hope, Maryland, had 12 tackles with one for loss in 13 games as a reserve.

On the defensive line, Kiffin added No. 1 edge Princewill Umanmielen from Ole Miss, No. 6 edge rusher Jordan Ross of Tennessee, No. 13 tackle Stephylan Green of Clemson and No. 18 tackle Malik Blocton of Auburn.

Ross (6-5, 245), a sophomore out of Vestavia Hills, Alabama, had 26 tackles, five for loss and 1.5 sacks two seasons with the Vols.

Green (6-4, 290), a redshirt sophomore from Rome, Georgia, had 34 tackles with five for loss and 3.5 sacks in 24 games with six starts. Blocton (6-3, 300), a sophomore from Pike Road, Alabama, had 34 tackles with 8.5 for loss and two sacks. **TR**

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Matt McMahon  
Photo by: Michael Bacigalupi



# LSU BASKETBALL COACH MATT MCMAHON RUNNING ON EMPTY

ATHLETIC DIRECTOR VERGE AUSBERRY DOESN'T MINCE  
WORDS ABOUT MCMAHON'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

By GLENN GUILBEAU, Tiger Rag Editor



# LSU athletic director Verge Ausberry has borrowed from former LSU athletic director Scott Woodward's playbook as far as dealing with a coach on the ropes.

In 2017 when Woodward was Texas A&M's athletic director, Aggies' football coach Kevin Sumlin was coming off three straight 8-5 seasons and two 4-4 Southeastern Conference marks with a 3-5 ledger.

"Coach Sumlin knows he has to win. He has to win this year," Woodward said on the Paul Finebaum Show during the SEC Spring Meetings in Destin, Florida, on that May 30, 2017. "He has to do better than he has done in the past."

Sumlin didn't. Six months later, he finished the 2017 regular season 7-5 and 4-4 with a 45-21 loss at LSU and was fired the next day.

Fast forward to 2026, and Ausberry publicly issued a mandate to struggling LSU men's basketball coach Matt McMahon in an interview with the Baton Rouge Advocate on Jan. 13. McMahon is coming off a 14-18 and 3-15 season in 2024-25 and was 12-4 and 0-3 at the time.

"We've already had some discussions about what the expectations are," said Ausberry, who replaced Woodward as athletic director on Oct. 30 – four days after Woodward fired football coach Brian Kelly.

Job status at LSU tends to be a fluid sort of thing.

"One thing we want to do is make sure we're in the NCAA Tournament," Ausberry said. "We made that very clear to Matt at the beginning of the year – that's where we need to be."

McMahon's Tigers went out the next night and played very well against Kentucky. They led 38-22 at halftime

and by 65-56 at the six-minute mark. But they lost at the buzzer, 75-74, to fall to 0-4 in the SEC as the only winless team in league play.

But all those league games were without the Tigers' best player – junior point guard Dedan Thomas Jr., who suffered a lower leg injury at practice before the SEC opener at Texas A&M. He led the SEC in assists with 7.0 during non-conference play and led LSU with 16.2 a game at the time of his injury.

The Tigers did play well again in the next game on Jan. 17, beating Missouri, 78-70, without Thomas.

"Can't tell you how proud I am of our team, coming off the heartbreaking game earlier this week," McMahon said. "And I think lesser men would've folded up shop. Our guys really responded the right way. I've told you from day one we have great people in our locker room. They're really a connected group, and I thought you saw that on full display. And so, just like anything else in life, what it comes down to is how are you going to respond?"

Forward Marquel Sutton led all scorers with 26 points as his response.

"It feels amazing to get our first SEC win," he said. "How we bounced back, we were composed, we didn't let the Kentucky game impact us. We could've folded, still worrying about that game. We didn't get discouraged when they made their run. We learned from our mistakes against Kentucky down the stretch."

Then LSU got Thomas back three days later at No. 16 Florida. But the Tigers were no match for the defending national champion Gators and lost 79-61 to fall to 13-16 and 1-5 at the time. Florida manhandled LSU on the glass with 50 rebounds to 30, including a 24-7 advantage on the offensive glass and 21 second chance points to 10.

Florida's bench also outscored LSU's, 30-12.

Thomas played 17 minutes off the bench, but he was clearly not himself as he missed 7 of 8 shots for two points with three assists.

"Definitely a tough way to come back," McMahon said. "But it was important for him to get back out there. He felt good after the game. Just frustrated he didn't make some of those floaters in the lane he usually does."

With Thomas back, though, LSU at least has a fighting chance to climb back toward .500 in the league.

But an NCAA Tournament bid looks like a fantasy. **TR**

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## UPCOMING GAMES

Saturday, Feb. 7

**Georgia**, 5 p.m., SEC Network

Tuesday, Feb. 10

**Arkansas**, 8 p.m. SEC Network


Saturday, Feb. 14

at **Tennessee**, 5 p.m., SEC Network

Tuesday, Feb. 17

at **Texas**, 8 p.m., SEC Network





Mikaylah Williams  
Photo by: Jonathan Mailhes

# ROUGH START ANSWERED WITH HUGE WINS

LSU WOMEN BOUNCE BACK AND APPEAR POISED FOR  
ANOTHER DEEP NCAA TOURNAMENT RUN

By ANDRE CHAMPAGNE, Tiger Rag Staff Reporter



The LSU women's basketball team had no trouble running through its non-conference schedule undefeated and No. 5 in the country.

But the Tigers met their matches right when Southeastern Conference play began.

LSU fell, 80-78, to No. 7 Kentucky at home after leading for most of the game. Then the Tigers fell 65-61 at No. 2 Vanderbilt. With Georgia and No. 2 Texas next on the schedule, it was possible that LSU could dig itself into a deep hole to open the league season.

But coach Kim Mulkey sent out a message to her team through the media.

"We're not tough enough," Mulkey said after the Vanderbilt loss. "And toughness is something that you either have, or you don't. And we're not tough enough. You're not tough enough to make a play when we need it. You're not tough enough to get that rebound when we need it, because it's not just one or two players. It's the whole locker room at different times."

In LSU's two-game losing skid, it played poorly in crunch time, giving up multiple up multiple offensive rebounds.

"I showed each of them how it's only one possession," Mulkey said. "And then you get on the floor, and you go to work and you get ready for the next game. We got to keep working."

LSU went on the road and dominated Georgia in an 80-59 victory as senior guard Flau'jae Johnson erupted for 25 points on 9-of-13 shooting. LSU out-rebounded Georgia, 43-35, and held the Bulldogs to 31 percent shooting.

Johnson made sure herself and her teammates finished the job this time.

"I had kind of put it in my head, like I'm not letting us lose another lead," she said. "I looked up at Jada and said, 'This is the moments in practice that we talked about where we have to value possessions.' And I think everybody just kind of got that."

After the much-needed win, the Tigers returned home to host their best opponent on the schedule so far in No. 2 Texas, which came in at 19-2 and 4-2 in the SEC.

LSU pulled off the 70-65 upset as junior guard Mikaylah Williams was the star of the show, scoring 20 points with seven rebounds, four assists and five steals. The Tigers led for most of the game, and this time they were able to close out the game.

"We didn't know how to finish, and it's not only about missing shots," Mulkey said. "We didn't know how to get that rebound. We didn't know how to block out on a free throw and be tough. We didn't know how to not turn it over in critical moments and they were repeating that. They were reminding each other, 'Hey, we've been here before.'"

LSU was trending in the right direction as it traveled to Norman to take on No. 13 Oklahoma, which was 14-3 (2-2 SEC) at the time. LSU shut down the Sooners, 91-72. The Tigers' back court combined to score 63 points. Sophomore guard Jada Richard had a career-high 21 on 8-of-16 shooting and added five rebounds, three assists and two steals.

"We know that we can push in transition," she said. "I mean it's kind of what we do. And then my teammates just kept setting good screens. That's kind of what we did in practice, just focusing on our offensive execution. So, I think it's just a testament to what we did in practice. I mean, I have great players around me, so with them on the court, I'm going to always get open."

The Tigers held the Sooners' No. 2 scoring offense in the nation at 90.8 points a game to 18 below that on 36.6 percent shooting.

With LSU coming off its most complete wins, the Tigers looked poised for a challenging February schedule featuring four ranked opponents and three nationally televised games. **TR**

#### UPCOMING GAMES

Sunday, Feb. 1  
No. 23 **Alabama**, 11 a.m.  
SEC Network

Thursday, Feb. 5  
at No. 4 **Texas**, 8 p.m.  
ESPN

Sunday, Feb. 8  
at **Auburn**, 1 p.m.  
SEC Network

Saturday, Feb. 14  
No. 2 **South Carolina**, 7:30 p.m.  
ABC

Thursday, Feb. 19  
at No. 18 **Ole Miss**, 8 p.m., ESPN

Sunday, Feb. 22  
**Missouri**, 3 p.m.,  
SEC Network



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**ANDRE CHAMPAGNE**

*Tiger Rag Staff Writer*

The LSU softball team has not reached the Women's College World Series in Oklahoma City since 2017, but this season could mark the Tigers' return. And it could not.

Why this year? Well, for one, coach Beth Torina's team returned seven of nine starters from the 2025 lineup. The Tigers bring back senior outfielder Jalia Lassiter, senior catcher Maci Bergeron, senior infielder Avery Hodge, junior outfielder Jadyn Laneaux, junior infielder Sierra Daniel, sophomore first baseman Tori Edwards and sophomore starting pitcher Jayden Heavener.

Not only was it important for Torina's team to have some continuity on her team for this season, but her returners were extremely productive for LSU in 2025.

Edwards, the reigning SEC Freshman of the Year, led the Tigers last season with a .383 batting average. She had 62 hits, including 18 home runs and 73 RBIs. Entering her redshirt sophomore season, if Edwards has a similar season, it could turn LSU's season.

Bergeron followed Edwards with a .364, improving by 100 points from the 2024 season. The Tigers are going to need Bergeron to equal or improve on that season.

Lassiter, a transfer from Ole Miss, was one of the most consistent players for the Tigers in 2025. She hit .330 with a team-high 15 doubles. Torina expects her to be a leader of the team.

# LSU SOFTBALL COULD HAVE A SPECIAL SEASON IN 2026

Heavener will enter her second year at LSU as the ace pitcher. Last year, Heavener had a 13-5 record with a 2.75 earned run average. She struck out 152 batters and walked 77 in 119 and two-thirds innings. If Heavener can limit the walks this season, she could be one of the best pitchers in the SEC and maybe in the nation.

Another reason LSU could return to the College World Series is its transfer portal additions. Torina and her staff added five proven and talented players. She has never added this many out of the portal since it began in 2021.

LSU brought in star Mississippi State junior shortstop Kylee Edwards, who was one of the top players available in the portal. Edwards hit .290 with nine home runs and 37 RBIs for the Bulldogs last season. And those numbers may go up as she will be working with LSU hitting coach Bryce Neal, who helped LSU finish No. 21 in the nation last season in batting average at .332.

Even though the Tigers lost junior starting right-handed pitcher, Torina added another top arm in the country in junior Cece Cellura of San Diego State. She had a 2.28 ERA last season and struck out 94 with 20 walks in 153 and two-thirds innings.

If Heavener ends up being the ace, LSU will have what looks like a very reliable No. 2 pitcher in Cellura.

The Tigers have a long way to go before solidifying themselves as national championship contenders, but the

cards could certainly play out in the Tigers' favor if they can find a way to be better through SEC play.

## PROJECTED STARTERS

Here is my lineup for LSU's season opener on Feb. 5 against North Carolina State:

CF Jalia Lassiter  
SS Kylee Edwards  
1B Tori Edwards  
C Maci Bergeron  
LF Char Lorenz  
3B Ally Hutchins  
DP Sierra Daniel  
2B Avery Hodge  
RF Maddox McKee

## WHERE WILL LSU FINISH REGULAR SEASON?

I predict the Tigers will finish with a 40-13 record in the regular season with a 16-8 mark in the SEC.

## COLLEGE WORLD SERIES FIELD PREDICTION

Texas Tech  
Texas  
Oklahoma  
Florida State  
Arkansas  
LSU  
UCLA  
Oregon





**TODD HORNE**

*Vice President / Executive Editor*

Every January, Glenn Guilbeau and I find ourselves back in Jay Johnson's office at Alex Box Stadium, tape recorders rolling, ready to kick off another Tiger Rag preseason guide. This marks Jay's fifth season at the helm, and you'd be forgiven for thinking he's already reached the mountaintop: two College World Series rings in the last three years (2023 and 2025) have LSU fans dreaming dynasty.

So when I leaned in and asked the question on everyone's mind—"Are you thinking more about the number three or the number nine?"—I fully expected Jay to flash that trademark grin before diving into championship-chasing bravado.

Instead, he paused, brow furrowed. "Three or nine?" he repeated, genuine curiosity etched in his voice. I clarified: "Are you focused on winning your third national title here, or the program's ninth overall—five under Skip Bertman, one under Paul Mainieri, plus yours?" Silence hung over the office for a beat, punctuated only by the silence since we were the only souls in the stadium or offices.

Then Jay exhaled, leaned back in his chair, and delivered what felt like a graduate seminar on coaching philosophy.

"I don't even think about that," he said, shaking his head. "That number stuff -- that's so far down the road. And frankly, it's disrespectful to the way I want these guys to think."

# JAY JOHNSON'S COACHING MANTRA: ITS ALL ABOUT THE PROCESS

No dodging. No spin. Just a flat-out refusal to let trophies become the compass. Johnson's world is one of increments, daily habits, and sweat-soaked to-do lists, not scoreboard fantasies.

"We talk about this all the time," he continued. "When you're coaching here and you're playing here, what's the goal? Omaha. National champion. That's it. We don't need to frame it as a lofty achievement—because that's why we're here. End of story."

He's not quashing ambition - far from it. Under his watch, LSU baseball has clawed back to the national conversation, and the program hums with the promise of more. But the difference between Jay and so many others is the way he treats ambition as a byproduct, not a bullet point on the bulletin board.

"I've been lucky to learn from greats -- Augie Garrido, Mike Gillespie, and of course Skip," he said, ticking off names like baseball savants etched into his DNA. "I still study Bertman's blueprint and hit his house every week. Everything is about laying out the path: day one, day two, day three. Position yourself for success."

He flashed back to 2024—a season that felt like a grind. LSU stumbled through a brutal SEC road gauntlet, finished squarely in the middle of the pack, yet still notched 43 wins and a postseason berth. "I'm really proud of what we did in '24," he said. "Forty-three wins, given where we were—that's real growth."

Notice he didn't trot out rankings or rings; he talked experience, confidence, lessons learned.

It's a creed he's preached since arriving from Arizona in 2022, but January 2026 felt different. With two rings already in the trophy case, the "three or nine" question forced him to reckon with legacy itch—a temptation that comes with sustained success. Jay chose to sidestep it entirely.

"You have to surrender a little," he noted later, referencing the gauntlet of Ole Miss, Mississippi State, Texas, Auburn—everybody's loaded now. "There's no straight line to glory. You can't say, 'Just do X, and we'll get Y.' You focus on doing your job as well as you can, every single day."

That, in a nutshell, is Jay Johnson's sermon: control the controllables, trust the grind, let the hardware accumulate in its own sweet time. Whether LSU walks away in 2026 with Jay's third ring or the program's ninth -- or misses out -- the point remains the same. Show up every day with intensity, humility, and a relentless commitment to getting better.

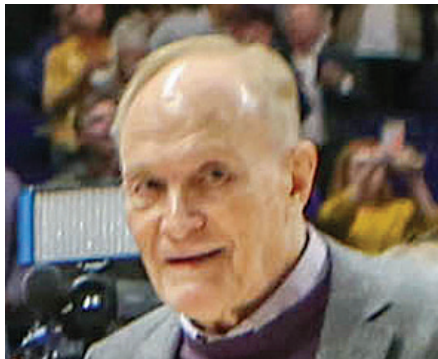
In an era dominated by transfer-portal drama, revenue-share ripples, and a million outside voices, Johnson's refusal to chase "three or nine" feels like a blueprint for sustainable greatness.

After all, if those deliberate, unglamorous steps lead to another Omaha sunset or another post-season celebration under the bright lights of Alex Box, so be it. The trophies will take care of themselves.

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Todd Horne is the vice president and executive editor of Tiger Rag and started covering LSU sports in 1986. He is a graduate of LSU's Journalism School. Reach Todd at [todd@tigerrag.com](mailto:todd@tigerrag.com)





**DALE BROWN**  
Tiger Rag Featured Columnist

## LETTER FROM COACH BROWN TO HIS PLAYERS ON 1986 FINAL FOUR TEAM

*Walker had a fine game despite heroics from his sophomore adversary. In his final college game, he posted 20 points, seven rebounds and three assists in 38 minutes. Walker was eight of eleven from the field.*

*Blanton was even better as he snatched eight rebounds with three assists and no turnovers compared to three for Walker. Blanton was five of five from the field and two of two from the line for 12 points in 28 minutes.*

*His best friend Don Redden scored 15 points and tied Blanton for the team lead with eight rebounds and three assists.*

*Redden would die two years later at 24. "He had talent, but his toughness is what made him the player he was," Brown said. "He was a movie star. One good-looking sun of a gun and nice young man with good parents."*

*Redden has been gone for 38 years, but he was the catalyst for an improbable odyssey. The 1986 team was not the most talented one coached by Brown. But it overcame more obstacles and produced a group of solid citizens and ambassadors for LSU. The maestro who directed the drama dispensed 90 years of wisdom when they returned home in January.*

*Jose Vargas came from Brazil. Derrick Taylor from Germany. Zoran Jovanovich from Serbia. Members of the 1986 LSU basketball team gathered last month for a weekend of reflection about their storybook run to the Final Four.*

*They survived four classic games against Kentucky on the way to Dallas. Eddie Sutton won the first three bouts vs. LSU as he coached his greatest team. His national title aspirations ended as LSU won the NCAA regional with a 59-57 win over the Wildcats.*

*The key to beating the 32-3 Big Blue in Atlanta was Ricky Blanton, the smallest center in America. Blanton was assigned to guard the best player in America, Kenny "Sky" Walker.*

*As Sutton feared the game was slipping away, he called two late time-outs and*

*spent the entire break talking with Walker. He never diagrammed play. The conversation was remembered by Walker.*

*"You can't guard that guy," Sutton fumed. "He can't jump. He's not fast. He is getting every rebound from you."*

*Walker told Brown he responded to Sutton's tirade by saying, "I'd look one way and think Blanton was there and kind of get an elbow into him. Next time, he's like Super Mario. He is the toughest guy I ever played against."*

disappointments, but if we don't shut God out of our lives, we will then find peace, happiness and true success. Keep your faith in yourself because the only thing more powerful than fear is the boldness of faith, which gives you the ability to whip anything. There is a natural tendency to give up in all of us but to overcome that feeling, God gives us the virtue of hope. You are never defeated until you quit in your own mind and nobody controls that but you. Failure will never devour you if your determination to succeed is strong enough and you honestly believe it. Always remember to replace every negative thought with a positive thought and the negative will constantly lose. One of the great discoveries that a person makes is to find out that they can do what they set their minds on doing. Whatever you vividly imagine, ardently desire, sincerely believe, and enthusiastically act upon must inevitably come to pass.

Remember: People will bother you until you no longer let them! Don't mind criticism. If it is untrue, disregard it; if it is unfair, keep it from irritating. If it is ignorant, smile. If it justified, it is not criticism – learn from it. Remember any fool can criticize, condemn and complain and most folks do.

"You are capable of incredible things. Most people live and die without even scratching the surface of their potential. Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent with not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent." Matthew Kelly – author of Holy Moments.

I am happy to have been your coach and send you my love and respect to you. Blessings to you.

Dale Brown

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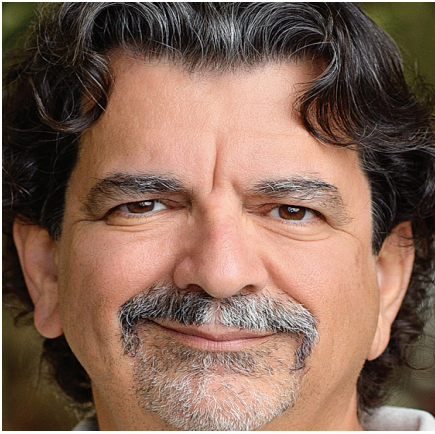
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**JIM KLEINPETER**  
*Tiger Rag Featured Columnist*

The remaking of LSU softball for the 2026 season began with a one-two gut punch to finish 2025.

That No. 10 national seed Tiger team crashed and burned in its own regional, losing twice to No. 4 seed Southeastern, a disaster of inexcusable proportions. The other shoe dropped the next day when ace junior pitcher Sydney Berzon shocked college softball by entering the transfer portal.

The table was set. Amid some social media clamor for changing a regime in a sport that usually flies under the radar, Coach Beth Torina responded. She spent the offseason taking a long, hard look from top to bottom, rolled up her sleeves and will roll out the 2026 version this month with some noticeable changes.

The retooled Tigers will add six freshmen with five transfer portal acquisitions. For the first time in several years, LSU will have designated team captains. And fans won't be seeing as much of Torina at games because she's moving from the third base coaching box to the dugout.

"We've tried to arm ourselves for any situation," Torina said. "We need to be more bulletproof so that we can face any opponent no matter the style of play. We can't get ourselves in a matchup where we can only play SEC style softball. We have to be able to play any competition and have answers

## TORINA'S 2026 REMAKE ROOTED IN 2025'S DISAPPOINTMENTS

for everything. We've tried to make adjustments with this roster to do that."

SLU's bunt and run offense frustrated the Tigers in both losses. An inability to make fielding plays may have been a result of inadequate competition for infield slots. LSU collected plenty of hits vs. SLU but struggled to come up with a big one with runners on base. The team broke several offensive records but none in power categories.

Torina is counting on the strong transfer class to shore up shortstop and third base if only by adding intensity to position battles. Kentucky transfer third baseman Ally Hutchins and Mississippi State transfer shortstop Kylee Edwards both have started more than 100 games the past two seasons and bring some pop to the plate.

Neither newcomer is a shoo-in starter, however. Torina said she still doesn't know what the opening day lineup will look like. Third base, shortstop and both corner outfield spots are up for grabs.

"We had a strong transfer class" Torina said. "Two of them started every game in the SEC for two years. It will make an immediate impact. They're a huge part of what we are going to do."

The Tigers' lineup core is catcher Maci Bergeron, first baseman Tori Edwards and center fielder Jalia Lassiter, who just so happen to be the three captains. Bergeron is a senior and perhaps the best defensive catcher in the nation, and who hit nine homers. Edwards was named SEC Freshman of the Year with 18 homers and 73 RBI. Lassiter, an Ole Miss transfer, batted .330 and was one of the top hitters down the stretch.

Torina is hoping they bring something that was missing last year: clarity of leadership.

"It's important to have someone who feels they have a strong voice to hold other people accountable for their actions, uphold the standards," Torina said. "We had three candidates who were worthy and the team agreed. The team wanted this as well."

The elephant in the room is the void Berzon left when she departed without explanation and is now at perennial national power Oklahoma. Talented sophomore Jayden Heavener threw a perfect game in her debut but struggled at other times before finishing strong. Torina is hoping transfer Cece Cellura, who was 27-14 last year at San Diego State and threw 262 innings, can help fill the void.

The biggest move will put Torina in the dugout for the first time in her 15 seasons. Assistant Sandra Moton will handle third base coaching and Taylor Pleasants will coach first.

"I'll be helping to manage from more of a global picture," Torina said. "I can manage the pitching staff better with the addition of PitchCom. I'll be able to call the offense from the dugout easily."

"The vibe is good; this is a team that's really driven."

"We have the right people in the program, people who want the ball in big situations and want to do it for LSU."

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**JIM ENGSTER***President, Tiger Rag Magazine*

The 2026 football season is the 50th for this writer since enrolling at LSU in 1977. The first home game for me was a 77-0 rout of Rice on Sept. 24, 1977. It is the most lopsided win for LSU in the modern era. That clash at Tiger Stadium was preceded by a 24-21 Indiana win over LSU on Sept. 17 of that year at Bloomington.

The victory by Lee Corso's Hoosiers was one of the biggest in Corso's career while adversely affecting Charlie McClendon's push to keep his job. With the defeat, McClendon's record on the field for the preceding 36 games was 15-20-1. Mac was let go two years later while Corso toiled at IU until 1982, producing a record of 41 wins, 68 losses and two ties.

Indiana was a graveyard for coaches until the arrival two years ago of 62-year-old Curt Cignetti, who has led his team to a 27-2 record overall and 16-0 in a national title run that culminated in Miami this month. Cignetti is the first Indiana coach to have more wins than losses since Bo McMillin, who was 63-48-11 from 1933-47.

Indiana has absorbed the most losses of any school in a major conference in history, but Cignetti turned the corner by navigating the new NIL world. Since Corso's triumph over McClendon, the Hoosiers have had ten head football coaches, including Gerry DiNardo (8-27 at Indiana) and Cam Cameron, who was 18-37 in a stop before running LSU's offense under Les Miles.

LSU has had 15 head football coaches (permanent and interim) since the 1977 season. There was the horrid eleven-season span from 1989-99 when LSU endured eight losing seasons, but there

## WILDLY DIFFERENT FOOTBALL JOURNEYS IN BATON ROUGE AND BLOOMINGTON

have also been seven SEC championship years (1986, 1988, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2019) and three Tiger units from 2003, 2007 and 2019 captured NCAA honors.

McClendon is one of two coaches to collect more than 100 wins at TigerTown. He was 137-59-7 from 1962-79. The overall winner in the last half century is Miles by a substantial margin.

### LSU Football Coaching Records from 1977-2025.

#### Coach/Record/Years

1. Les Miles/114-34/2005-16
2. Ed Orgeron/51-20/2015-21
3. Nick Saban/48-16/2000-04
4. Brian Kelly/34-14/2022-25
5. Gerry DiNardo/32-24/1995-99
6. Mike Archer/27-18-1/1987-90
7. Bill Arnsparger/26-8-2/1984-86
8. Charles McClendon/23-13/1977-79
9. Jerry Stovall/22-21-2/1980-83
10. Curley Hallman/16-28/1991-94
11. Frank Wilson/2-3/2025
12. Hal Hunter/1-0 /1999
13. Brad Davis/0-1/2021
14. Bo Rein/0-0/1980
15. Lane Kiffin/0-0/2026

Eight men have served as president of the United States since 1977. The job at LSU is not term-limited but has nearly twice the turnover of the U.S. president, who is term-limited.

The overall record for the 15 coaches in the last 49 years is 373-172-5 (68.4 percent).

At 50, Kiffin is young enough to shatter all coaching records at LSU. Fans will learn whether their nomadic leader possesses the staying power to last more than a decade at one place. If he does, LSU could reverse its trend of replacing its coach every three years or so.

#### 2026 Pivotal for Bregman and Nola

LSU has not produced a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, but two current MLB players have an outside chance of becoming the first Tigers enshrined at Cooperstown. This season is pivotal for former Bengal teammates Alex Bregman

and Aaron Nola.

Bregman recently inked a five-year, \$175 million deal with the Cubs. The third baseman turns 32 on March 30 and has a ten-year career WAR total of 43.1. The contract is lavish for a player, who peaked in 2019 with Houston and batted .273 with Boston last year with 18 homers in 114 games.

Bregman's work ethic is legendary, but his WAR total from 2017-19 was 20.8 in just three seasons. The WAR score from the veteran from Albuquerque is 20.3 in the last six seasons. The Cubs are counting on Bregman regaining the form that made him a top five vote getter in the MVP balloting in 2018 and 2019.

Nola has pitched his eleven-year MLB career with the Philadelphia Phillies. The right-hander has five years remaining on his contract at \$24,571,429 per season.

Nola struggled last year to a 5-10 mark with an ERA of 6.01. The Baton Rouge Catholic product will be 33 on June 4 and his comeback is crucial for a team that starts 2026 without its ace hurler. Zack Wheeler underwent major surgery with a blood clot removed from his pitching shoulder.

Nola peaked in 2018 and led the majors with a WAR total of 9.7. He was 17-6 with a 2.37 ERA and 224 strikeouts at his best. Nola's career WAR is 34.9. He has 1,876 career strikeouts and is 109-89 with a 3.83 ERA.

#### Dale Brown 40 Years from 1986

Forty years ago, Dale Brown, age 50, piloted his LSU Tigers to the Final Four as an eleventh seed in the NCAA Tournament.

LSU topped Purdue, Memphis State, Georgia Tech and Kentucky on the way to Dallas. Brown's crew ran out of gas against Louisville in the Final Four semifinal, but the unit left an indelible mark as a team that would not die.

*ENGSTER COLUMN cont. page 60*



## WHAT THEY READ

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**Amanda Alexander**

What I'm reading -  
**West with the Giraffes**  
by Lynda Rutledge

Inspired by true events, the tale weaves real-life figures with fictional ones, including the world's first female zoo director, a crusty old man with a past, a young female photographer with a secret, and assorted reprobates as spotty as the giraffes. Part adventure, part historical saga, and part coming-of-age love story!

### ENGSTER COLUMN cont. from page 59

The season started with a void in the lineup as All-SEC standout Jerry "Ice" Reynolds left for the NBA. Then starter Nikita Wilson was declared academically ineligible at mid-season as Coach Brown graced the cover of Sports Illustrated with the caption "Crazy Days at LSU."

Things got more bizarre when John Williams and Bernard Woodside were diagnosed with chicken pox forcing enough postponements that LSU played five games in eight days. Brown's identity as an underdog was in full bloom when his tattered team entered the tournament with a record of 22-11 overall and 9-9 in the SEC.

Had Reynolds and Wilson been around to complement starters Derrick Taylor, Anthony Wilson, John Williams, Don Redden and Ricky Blanton, LSU likely would have won it all.

A rule change after the season also would have also boosted their championship chances. The NCAA adopted a three-point play to go into effect in

the 1986-87 season. LSU featured a brilliant long-distance shooting squad in 1986 and did not benefit from the most substantial rule change in modern time by one year.

Most members of the team of 40 years ago traveled to Baton Rouge for a reunion weekend on January 16-17. Many ventured long distances to huddle one more time with Brown and fellow coaches Ron Abernathy, Jonny Jones and Bo Bahnsen. Their grit and humanity are proof that national titles are often secondary to exemplary lives.

Zoran Jovanovich arrived from Serbia. As he said good-bye, the mammoth 7-footer kissed 90-year-old Coach Brown on the forehead in what may be the final visit with his mentor. The big man wept as he departed the PMAC where the magic from 1986 forever lingers.

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Talk Louisiana with Jim Engster is streamed statewide weekdays from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. and is aired on WRKF Talk 89.3 FM in Baton Rouge as the flagship station. Jim is a graduate of the LSU School of Journalism. Reach him at: [jim@louisianaradionetwork.com](mailto:jim@louisianaradionetwork.com).



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