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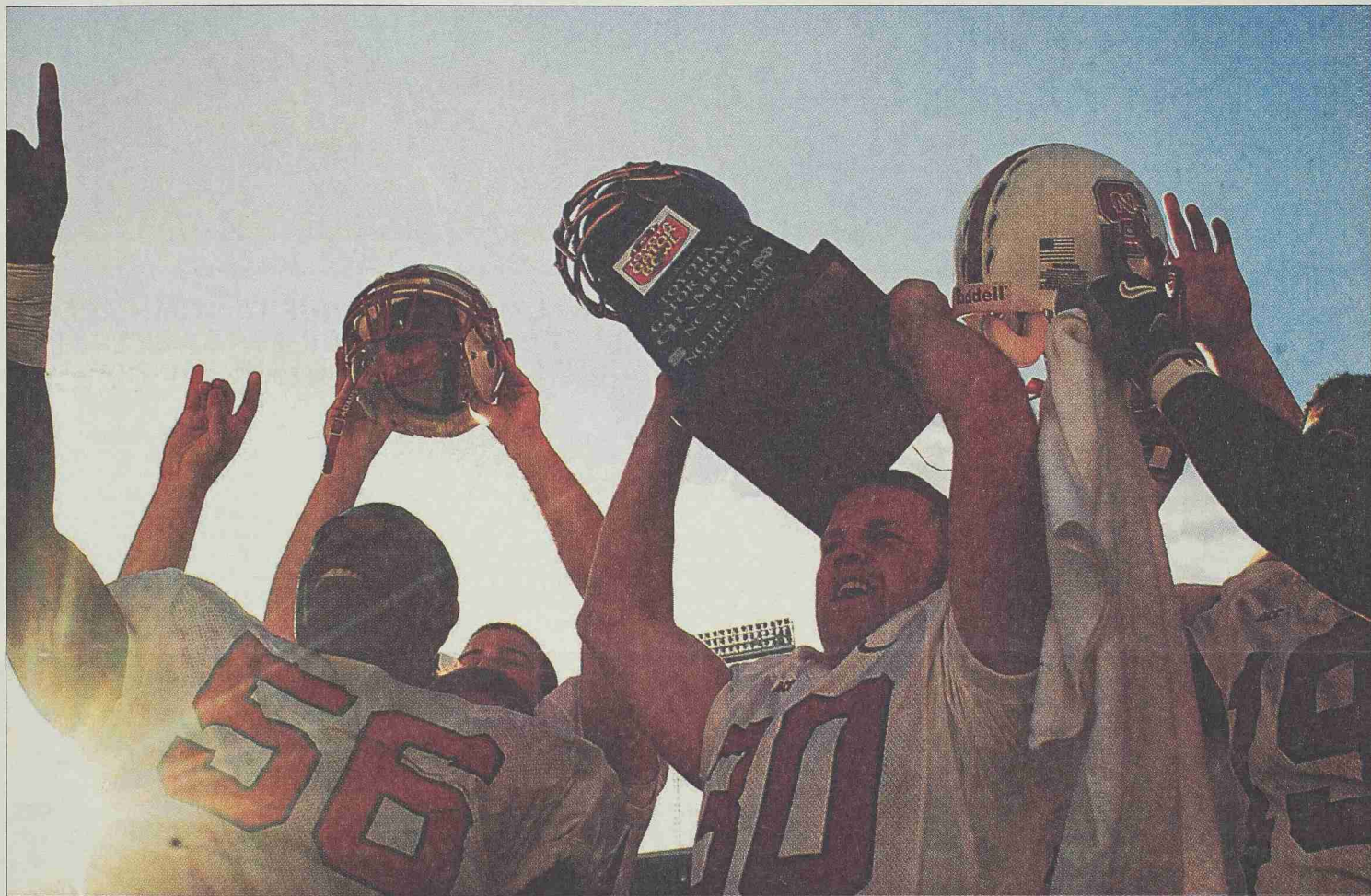
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Raleigh, North Carolina

N.C. STATE 28, NOTRE DAME 6

ONWARD TO VICTORY

N.C. STATE DEFEATS THE IRISH TO CAPTURE THE 2003 GATOR BOWL



NOTRE DOMINATION

N.C. STATE ENDS ITS RECORD-SETTING SEASON WITH A 28-6 GATOR BOWL WIN OVER NOTRE DAME.

Matt Middleton
Assistant Sports Editor

By the time the two met and embraced at the center of the field, the celebration was in full swing.

Once again it was student besting teacher, and the celebration of N.C. State's 17-7 win over Florida State swirled around Bobby Bowden and his former assistant Chuck Amato as they met following the contest.

A majority of Carter-Finley Stadium's sold-out crowd had spilled over onto the playing surface to create a mass of red. The goalpost in the north end zone was wavering on its last bit of support before it finally came crashing down with the help of Wolf-pack linebacker Roger Pollard and safety Victor Stephens.

After losing the last three games following a 9-0 start, the Pack (10-3, 5-3 ACC) broke that skid by dominating the Seminoles like they had never been dominated before in an ACC contest. Ironically, FSU clinched a 10th league title with the loss thanks to a Virginia pasting of Maryland. The Pack finished the season with a strong statement to bowl scouts, probably earning a trip to the Peach or Gator Bowl.

"To beat Florida State for the second time in two years, it's unbelievable," said Amato. "I don't mean that in a negative sense to them because you know how I feel about Bobby Bowden and all those people down there."

State outgained the Noles by 185 yards, doubled their time of possession, rushed for 191 yards and held them without an offensive touchdown — all things Amato attributed to the leadership of his senior class.

"What a great tribute to a senior class that we're going to truly miss," said Amato. "Truly tremendous leadership. We always talk about seniors not letting us lose. It's a 'Bowdenism.' The seniors wouldn't let us lose."

Initially, the first possession of the game suggested nothing of the sort. FSU drove down the field behind the arm and legs of sophomore quarterback Adrian McPherson, who showed off tremendous speed and passing accuracy by easily directing the Noles all the way to the Pack's 16-yard line.

Back-to-back sacks by seniors Dantonio Burnette and Shawn Price forced the Noles to bring on Chance Gwaltney to punt. Gwaltney bobbled a perfect snap and had his attempt blocked by Jerriek Hall.

The Pack took over and drove inside the 5-yard line before stalling. Adam Kiker nailed a 21-yard field goal to open the scoring and give State the lead.

After a second FSU punt, State again drove into field goal range. Kiker lined up for a field goal on fourth-and-7, but this time Amato unveiled some trickery that had holder Chris Young take the snap and scamper through a hole in the line.

Young was then stripped of the ball by Allen Augustin, and teammate Michael Boulware scooped up the fumble and raced 84 yards to the end zone to give FSU the lead in front of a stunned crowd.

After the teams traded punts, the Pack refused to go into the locker room without the lead. Starting at its own 22-yard line, Rivers threw a 27-yard pass to Dovonte Edwards and then threw the key block that sprung running back Josh Brown all the way down to the FSU's 1-yard line.

On the play, Rivers line up at wide receiver while center Jed Paulsen snapped the ball directly to Brown, who then ran 60 yards up the left sideline.

T.A. McLendon ran in for the score on the next play for his 16th touchdown of the season, tying a school and ACC freshman record.

State's 10-7 halftime lead would hold through the third quarter before State drove 82 yards down to the Noles' 1-yard line with Rivers picking apart the FSU defense that was content to sit back in coverage rather than blitz.

"They didn't blitz hardly any because they thought



(Top) N.C. State players Austin Herbert (30), Shawn Price (56) and Brian Clark (19) celebrate the Gator Bowl victory over Notre Dame. (Bottom) Jerrieko Cotchery tries to extend for a touchdown against Notre Dame. (Top) Staff photo by Matthew Huffman (Bottom) Staff photo by Tim Lytvinenko

they could get enough pressure with their front four," said Rivers.

But they didn't. Rivers was sacked twice, but finished 18-for-27 for 171 yards and no interceptions. The shifting and use of motion by the offense looked nearly identical to the unit that Rivers led to a 34-28 State win a year ago.

"Offensively, we did kind of what we did last year by controlling the game," said Rivers. "It was the same game plan as last year, and we got our streak going against them now."

"It was the same game plan with a lot of shifts that we felt would confuse the defense," said Edwards.

That drive would stall, however, after Rivers threw incomplete to a wide open Sean Berton on fourth and 1. But on the next play the Pack's defense came

up with another big play when tackle Terrance Martin pressured McPherson in the endzone and was held by Bobby Meeks, resulting in a safety.

Jerrieko Cotchery returned the free kick to FSU's 31 and Adam Kiker would again connect on a field goal to give State an eight-point lead with 7:36 left.

The Noles next drive was thwarted by a Greg Golden sack on third down, and Bowden elected to punt the ball away with just under six minutes remaining.

Freshman Manny Lawson got through FSU's line untouched and blocked Gwaltney's offering out of the end zone for another safety to make it 17-7.

"I've said this so many times: If we don't dominate the kicking game, we're going to lose," said Amato.

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WOLFPACK FANS MAKE IMPACT KNOWN



N.C. State fans packed the Jacksonville Landing for a pregame pep rally. Wolfpack fans made their presence known not only at the game, but before and after it. Staff photo by Matthew Huffman

Thousands of N.C. State supporters made the trip to Jacksonville to see the Pack win its first Gator Bowl.

Steve Thompson
Sports Editor

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — When N.C. State was selected to participate in the Gator Bowl, bowl president Rick Catlett said that the number of fans the Wolfpack would bring to the game had no impact on the committee's decision.

It may in future years. Bolstered by a win over Florida State to finish out the regular season and the allure of a New Year's Day bowl against storied Notre Dame, State fans came to Jacksonville, Fla., in droves. Throughout the week, Wolfpack cheers consistently drowned out those coming from Notre Dame fans. Pregame festivities, such as the

New Year's Eve pep rally, were so heavily attended that the crowd was packed shoulder to shoulder at the expansive Jacksonville Landing.

"It seemed like all of Raleigh had migrated to downtown Jacksonville for New Year's," said senior David Meyer.

Over 28,000 tickets were sold through the university to State fans, and thousands more were purchased independently. The massive Wolfpack showing gave State a virtual home field advantage in its eventual 28-6 win over the Fighting Irish.

"I went down there with around eight or nine people," said sophomore Billy Askey. "There were tons of State fans down there. It felt like a home game. It was a good feeling to know so many other fans made an effort."

Even Wolfpack players were impressed with the fan turnout. With minutes remaining in the game, State players be-

"AS SOON AS I WALKED OUT I THOUGHT, 'WOAH, ARE WE AT CARTER-FINLEY OR SOMETHING?' IT WAS A SEA OF RED OUT THERE, AND WE OWE IT TO THE FANS FOR THAT."

JERRICHO COTCHERY

gan to pay homage to the thousands who had traveled to witness a monumental victory for the program — running up and down the sidelines in front of a sea of red.

"As soon as I walked out I thought, 'Woah, are we at Carter-Finley or something?'" said Jerricho Cotchery. "It was a sea of red out there, and we owe it to the fans for that."

In addition to helping cheer the Pack to victory, the fans also helped the economy of Jacksonville in a big way.

When Wolfpack Athletics Director Lee Fowler said in late November that State could likely bring 25,000 fans to the game, Gator Bowl officials commented

that such a turnout could increase the economic impact from around \$30 million to \$40 million. With well over 35,000 fans at the game, State fans likely exceeded Gator Bowl officials' expectations.

Establishing a reputation as a team that travels well will pay dividends for State in the future. Iowa was likely selected for the Orange Bowl not only because the Hawkeyes had a great year, but also because Orange Bowl officials knew Iowa fans would travel well. Also, a lesser Clemson team was selected for the Tangerine Bowl ahead of a much more deserving Virginia team due in large part to Clemson's reputation for having traveling fans and Virginia's reputation for not.

Regardless of its future impact, however, the Wolfpack turnout in Jacksonville was impressive. A number of seasoned sports writers commented that this was the most biased crowd they had seen at a bowl game in some time.

The fact that the Pack was able to pull out the win over the Irish made the experience that much greater for State fans. "Jacksonville was the best bowl experience in my lifetime as a Pack fan," said junior Charlie Whitehorn. "The city of Jacksonville and the Gator Bowl really put on a show. Not only did I have a good time, I probably had the experience of my life."

BOX SCORE

	1	2	3	4	FINAL
N.C. STATE	0	21	0	7	28
NOTRE DAME	3	0	3	0	6

	N.C. STATE	NOTRE DAME
FIRST DOWNS	21	23
RUSHED-YARDS	26-62	38-86
PASSING YARDS	255	200
SACKED-YARDS LOST	1-8	2-16
RETURN YARDS	36	20
PASSES	25-41-0	23-44-3
PUNTS	5-43.2	4-30.3
FUMBLES-LOST	1-0	0-0
PENALTIES-YARDS	10-87	9-90
TIME OF POSSESSION	26:57	33:03

SCORING SUMMARY

FIRST QUARTER

NOTRE DAME - FG, NICHOLAS SETTA 23 YD, 10:48. NOTRE DAME 3-0

SECOND QUARTER

N.C. STATE - T.A. MCLENDON 2 YD RUN (ADAM KIKER KICK), 0:57. N.C. STATE 7-3

N.C. STATE - T.A. MCLENDON 3 YD RUN (ADAM KIKER KICK), 9:58. N.C. STATE 14-3

N.C. STATE - JERRICHO COTCHERY 9 YD PASS FROM PHILIP RIVERS (ADAM KIKER KICK), 13:44. N.C. STATE 21-3

THIRD QUARTER

NOTRE DAME - FG, NICHOLAS SETTA 41 YD, 13:16. N.C. STATE 21-6

FOURTH QUARTER

N.C. STATE - SEAN BERTON 7 YD PASS FROM PHILIP RIVERS (ADAM KIKER KICK), 4:19. N.C. STATE 28-6

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING - N.C. State - Philip Rivers 7-22, Josh Brown 7-18, T.A. McLendon 11-18, Sean Berton 1-4. Notre Dame - Ryan Grant 21-68, Rashon Powers-Neal 5-16, Mike McNair 4-8, Arnaz Battle 2-6, Carlyle Holiday 2-3, Pat Dillingham 4-MINUS 15.

PASSING - N.C. State - Philip Rivers 23-37-228-0, Bryan Peterson 2-3-27-0, Team 0-1-0-0. Notre Dame - Pat Dillingham 19-37-166-3, Carlyle Holiday 3-6-22-0, Joey Hildbold 1-1-12-0.

RECEIVING - N.C. State - Jerricho Cotchery 10-127, Sean Berton 5-40, Joseph Gray 1-24, Sterling Hicks 1-19, Bryan Peterson 2-16, T.A. McLendon 3-16, Dovonte Edwards 3-13. Notre Dame - Arnaz Battle 10-84, Omar Jenkins 3-42, Jared Clark 4-41, Maurice Stovall 3-25, Ronnie Rodamer 1-5, Gary Godsey 1-5, Rhema McKnight 1-minus 2. A-73,491



T.A. McLendon was stifled by the Notre Dame defense for most of the game, though he was able to score two touchdowns for the Pack.

Staff photo by Tim Lytvinenko

WIN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

"We blocked two punts and got a piece of the third. That was big."

FSU gained 65 of its 177 total yards on a semi-meaningless final drive. State finished with 40:26 of possession time compared to 19:34 for FSU, something that hurt State during its losing streak.

"To sit on the sidelines like that is so frustrating," said Berton. "We had to do it in the Georgia Tech game; it frustrated the living daylight out of us and made us feel more pressured."

With the victory, the Pack now owns three of the five ACC losses the Noles have suffered and likely assured itself of landing its most lucrative bowl bid under Amato.

A decision about the bowl will likely not be

made until next Monday, according to Peach Bowl representative Chuck Edwards.

Edwards said the committee cannot decide on a team until all teams have completed their games. Maryland and Virginia, the Pack's contenders for the two bowl games, each have one game remaining.

"It's out of our hands now, all we can do is sit back on the couch, have a beer and watch ESPN," said Berton.

GAME-BY-GAME REPORT

Result	N.C. STATE 34 NEW MEXICO 14	N.C. STATE 34 ETSU 0	N.C. STATE 65 NAVY 19	N.C. STATE 32 WFU 13	N.C. STATE 51 TEXAS TECH 48	N.C. STATE 56 UMASS 24	N.C. STATE 34 UNC 17
Leading Passer (yards)	RIVERS (276)	RIVERS (145)	RIVERS (310)	RIVERS (223)	RIVERS (301)	RIVERS (227)	RIVERS (170)
Leading Rusher (yards)	MCLENDON (79)	GOLDEN (66)	GOLDEN (88)	GOLDEN (53)	MCLENDON (150)	MCLENDON (117)	MCLENDON (164)
Leading Receiver (yards)	COTCHERY (108)	EDWARDS (53)	PETERSON (152)	COTCHERY (90)	COTCHERY (145)	PETERSON (61)	HICKS (63)
Result	N.C. STATE 24 DUKE 22	N.C. STATE 38 CLEMSON 6	GA. TECH 24 N.C. STATE 17	MARYLAND 24 N.C. STATE 21	VIRGINIA 14 N.C. STATE 9	N.C. STATE 17 FSU 7	N.C. STATE 24 NOTRE DAME 6
Leading Passer	RIVERS (364)	RIVERS (129)	RIVERS (277)	RIVERS (297)	RIVERS (236)	RIVERS (171)	RIVERS (228)
Leading Rusher	MCLENDON (50)	MCLENDON (178)	MCLENDON (49)	BROWN (70)	MCLENDON (75)	MCLENDON (114)	RIVERS (22)
Leading Receiver	COTCHERY (174)	WILLIAMS (29)	COTCHERY (129)	COTCHERY (144)	COTCHERY (108)	EDWARDS (52)	COTCHERY (127)

SEASON STATS

Rushing	GP	Att	Gain	Loss	Net	Avg	TD	Long	Avg/G	Kick returns	No.	Yds	Avg	TD	Long		
T.A. McLendon	13	245	1200	99	1101	4.5	18	65	84.7	Gregory Golden	16	359	22.4	0	41		
Josh Brown	14	123	540	57	483	3.9	2	60	34.5	Lamont Reid	14	424	30.3	2	97		
Gregory Golden	13	60	280	15	265	4.4	3	26	20.4								
Passing	GP	Effic	Att-Cmp-Int	Pct	Yds	TD	Lng	Avg/G	Scoring	TD	FGs	XP	Points				
Philip Rivers	14	141.07	418-262-10	62.7	3353	20	88	239.5	T.A. McLendon	18	0	0	108				
Jay Davis	5	75.75	19-9-1	47.4	88	0	21	17.6	Philip Rivers	10	0	0	60				
Bryan Peterson	14	53.35	8-2-0	25.0	27	0	24	1.9	Austin Herbert	0	5	38	53				
									Jerricho Cotchery	8	0	0	48				
									Bryan Peterson	6	0	0	36				
Receiving	GP	No.	Yds	Avg	TD	Long	Avg/G	Field goals	FGM-A	Pct	01-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50+	Lg	Blk
Jerricho Cotchery	14	67	1192	17.8	7	72	85.1	Austin Herbert	5-9	55.6	0-0	3-3	1-4	1-1	0-1	43	2
Bryan Peterson	14	42	559	13.3	6	88	39.9	Adam Kiker	5-7	71.4	0-0	3-4	1-2	1-1	0-0	44	0
T.A. McLendon	13	42	354	8.4	0	25	27.2										
Sterling Hicks	14	37	510	13.8	2	53	36.4										
Dovonte Edwards	12	26	289	11.1	1	29	24.1										
Total Offense	G	Plays	Rush	Pass	Total	Avg/G	Defensive leaders	GP	Solo	Ast	Total	TFL/Yds	Sacks-Yds				
Philip Rivers	14	475	100	3353	3453	246.6	Dantonio Burnette	13	77	59	136	17-64	9-48				
T.A. McLendon	13	245	1101	0	1101	84.7	Andre Maddox	14	91	30	121	5-39	4-37				
Josh Brown	14	123	483	0	483	34.5	Pat Thomas	14	56	47	103	11-39	3-21				
							Terrence Holt	14	67	33	100	2-9	1-8				
							F.Aughtry-Lindsay	14	45	39	84	3-15	1-12				
Interceptions	No.	Yds	Avg	TD	Long												
Rod Johnson	4	67	16.8	0	36												
Terrence Holt	3	12	4.0	0	12												
Marcus Hudson	3	5	1.7	0	5												



N.C. State packed Alltel Stadium for the Toyota Gator Bowl. Photo courtesy Michael Pittman

USA TODAY/ESPN TOP 25 COACHES' POLL

1. Ohio State (61) (14-0)	1,525	2
2. Miami Fla. (12-1)	1,451	1
3. Georgia (13-1)	1,378	4
4. Southern Cal. (11-2)	1,362	5
5. Oklahoma (12-2)	1,244	8
6. Kansas State (11-2)	1,230	6
7. Texas (11-2)	1,356	9
8. Iowa (11-2)	1,105	3
9. Michigan (10-3)	1,011	11
10. Washington State (10-3)	932	7
11. N.C. State (11-3)	876	17
12. Boise State (12-1)	808	15
13. Maryland (11-3)	803	18
14. Virginia Tech (10-4)	644	19
15. Penn State (9-4)	619	10
16. Auburn (9-4)	579	22
17. Notre Dame (10-3)	525	12
18. Pittsburgh (9-4)	486	23
19. Marshall (11-2)	333	24
20. West Virginia (9-4)	297	13
21. Colorado (9-5)	291	14
22. Texas Christian (10-2)	274	NR
23. Florida State (9-5)	219	16
24. Florida (8-5)	145	20
25. Virginia (9-5)	141	NR

DROPPED OUT

No. 21 Colorado St, No. 25 LSU

OTHERS RECEIVING VOTES

Boston College 129, Colorado State 100, Texas Tech 60, South Florida 28, LSU 25, Fresno State 19, Oklahoma State 17, Hawaii 8, Minnesota 6, Air Force 4, Wisconsin 4, Bowling Green 2, North Texas 2, Tennessee 2, UCLA 1

AP TOP 25 POLL

1. Ohio State (71) (14-0)	1,775	2
2. Miami Fla. (12-1)	1,693	1
3. Georgia (13-1)	1,598	4
4. Southern Cal. (11-2)	1,590	5
5. Oklahoma (12-2)	1,476	8
6. Texas (11-2)	1,363	9
7. Kansas State (11-2)	1,356	6
8. Iowa (11-2)	1,334	3
9. Michigan (10-3)	1,182	12
10. Washington State (10-3)	1,085	7
11. Alabama (10-3)	988	13
12. N.C. State (11-3)	943	17
13. Maryland (11-3)	844	20
14. Auburn (9-4)	821	19
15. Boise State (12-1)	692	18
16. Penn State (9-4)	675	10
17. Notre Dame (10-3)	657	11
18. Virginia Tech (10-4)	544	21
19. Pittsburgh (9-4)	520	24
20. Colorado (9-5)	307	14
21. Florida State (9-5)	291	16
22. Virginia (9-5)	250	NR
23. Texas Christian (10-2)	231	NR
24. Marshall (11-2)	201	NR
25. West Virginia (9-4)	195	15

DROPPED OUT

No. 22 Florida, No. 23 Colorado St, No. 25 Arkansas

OTHERS RECEIVING VOTES

Florida 120, Texas Tech 80, Oklahoma State 73, Boston College 52, Colorado State 44, LSU 38, South Florida 27, Wisconsin 15, Minnesota 4, Arkansas 3, Air Force 2, Hawaii 2, Purdue 2, Fresno State 1, North Texas 1

AWARDS RECEIVED BY N.C. STATE PLAYERS

SEAN BERTON

First-team All ACC

DANTONIO BURNETTE

First-team All ACC
Third-team All American (College Football News)
Fourth-team All American (Sporting News)
Four-time ACC Defensive Lineman of the Week
Governors' Award (team MVP)

CHRIS COLMER

Second-team All ACC
One-time ACC Offensive Lineman of the Week

JERRICHO COTCHERY

First-team All ACC

TERRENCE HOLT

First-team All ACC
First-team All American (Sporting News)
Second-team All American (College Football News, CNN/SI)
Mosi Tatupu National Specialist of the Year Award finalist
Jim Thorpe Award semifinalist
Three-time ACC Defensive Back of the Week

T.A. MCLENDON

First-team All ACC
ACC Rookie of the Year
First-team freshman All American (Football Writers Association, Sporting News)
Four-time ACC Rookie of the Week
One-time ACC Offensive Back of the Week

SHAWN PRICE

Two-time ACC Defensive Lineman of the Week

LAMONT REID

One-time ACC Special Teams Player of the Week

SHANE RIGGS

Honorable-mention All ACC

PHILIP RIVERS

Gator Bowl MVP
Second-team All ACC
Two-time ACC Offensive Back of the Week
CNN/SI National Player of the Week
Davey O'Brien Award semifinalist

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR: DANTONIO BURNETTE

Matt Middleton
Assistant Sports Editor

The N.C. State defense ended the year by not allowing a single touchdown to both Florida State and Notre Dame. It was the team's best defensive unit in quite some time, and State was easily ranked as the top defensive team in the conference statistics.

Standing at the forefront of that squad was Dantonio Burnette, the man who had always been told he was too short to succeed athletically.

Instead, Burnette will leave the Wolfpack program as the school's second-leading career tackler behind only Levar Fisher, after filling the very shoes of Fisher to assume the leadership role of the Pack's young linebacking corps.

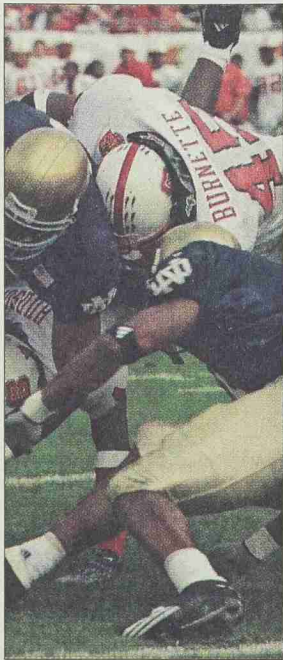
"Thunder Dan" finished 2002 as a first-team All-ACC selection, runner-up for ACC defensive player of the year and was the four-time ACC defensive lineman of the week.

With a penchant for delivering thunderous hits on unfortunate opposing players, he delivered perhaps his most memorable hit in his final game as a Wolfpacker.

Burnette knocked Notre Dame starting quarterback Carlyle Holiday out of the game with a vicious one-on-one blow that left the Fighting Irish total offense leader down on the field.

In Burnette's next stop he will once again have to prove his doubters wrong, this time on football's grandest stage: the National Football League.

"They say he's too short, but they should take a look at him," said his de-



Dantonio Burnette's hit on Carlyle Holiday delivered an early message.
Photo courtesy Michael Pittman

fensive-minded head coach Chuck Amato. "You can't measure heart."

And the heart of the 5-foot-10-inch Burnette was a major reason the 2002 N.C. State team was the most prolific group of winners in school history.

OFFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR: JERRICHO COTCHERY



Jerricho Cotchery caught 10 passes for 127 yards against Notre Dame.
Staff photo by Tim Lytvinenko

Steve Thompson
Sports Editor

When the national media spoke of the N.C. State offense, the names of Philip Rivers and T.A. McLendon were the most commonly heard. Perhaps the most vital cog in the Wolfpack's offense this year, however, was junior wideout Jerricho Cotchery.

Cotchery capped an already spectacular season with a dominating performance against the vaunted Notre Dame secondary. He caught 10 passes for 127 yards against the Fighting Irish, adjusting to balls thrown high, low, in front or behind.

But that was nothing new for Cotchery. He entered the season playing second fiddle to senior Bryan Peterson, but quickly grew into River's No. 1 target as

Peterson was hobbled by injury. His sure hands and propensity to make the big catch drew the attention of opposing defenses as the season went along, but even this did not slow him down.

He finished the season leading State in receiving for four of the last five games. Overall, he was State's receiving leader eight times in the 13 games. In addition to the Notre Dame contest, Cotchery also recorded more than 10 catches against Maryland.

Cotchery's 67 receptions and 1,192 receiving yards set Wolfpack records for a junior. Only Torry Holt's 1998 season topped the performance delivered by Cotchery this year. He also became only the third Wolfpack receiver to top the 1,000-yard mark in a season, joining Holt and Koren Robinson in that exclusive list. His accomplishments earned him first-team All-ACC honors.

FOOTBALL

FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT



Steve Thompson

Even while the players were celebrating their 28-6 Gator Bowl win over Notre Dame, many were able to see how big of a win it would be for the future of the program.

Seniors Sean Berton and Dantonio Burnette

both commented on how the program will be able to build off this win. Sophomore cornerback Marcus Hudson even stated that this win would catapult the team to a run at the national championship.

What was once a pipe dream for N.C. State fans is now within reach.

Next year, the Pack returns the majority of its skill players on offense, and an impressively talented, if young, defense should be able to make up for the massive defensive losses. An early season challenge against national champion Ohio State could set the stage for a run at the national crown. Even if the Pack loses in Columbus, Ohio, State will have the firepower to contend in the ACC.

Key returnees for State include quarterback Philip Rivers, running back T.A. McLendon and wideout Jerricho Cotchery. In addition, starting offensive linemen Chris Colmer, Jed Paulsen and Sean Locklear all return, and the entire receiving corps minus Bryan Peterson also returns.

Longtime State recruit Tramain Hall and partial qualifier Richard Washington will both be skillful additions to next year's offense. The Pack has also been highly successful on the recruiting trail, receiving oral commitments from running back Darrell Blackman and having offensive linemen Yomi Ojo and Derrick Morris. Rivers will also be able to mentor incoming quarterback Marcus Stone, who was Pennsylvania's Player of the Year (beating out Blackman).

State will be hit hardest on defense, where it will lose its entire defensive line in addition to first-team All-ACC selections Terrence Holt and Dantonio Burnette. A number of players will be asked to step into starting roles — Sheldon Lewin, Dwayne Herndon, Chip Cross and Manny Lawson. Terrence Chapman could also help the defensive line as he returns from suspension.

State does return most of its defensive backfield, and the Pack will welcome A.J. Davis back from his broken leg.

State's recruiting has also paid many dividends on the defensive side, and a number of players should see immediate playing time. The gem of this recruiting class thus far is defensive end Mario Williams, who was with State for the Gator Bowl. The 6-foot-5-inch, 250-pound linebacker announced that he was coming to State to win a national championship.

Other recruiting gains include Demarcus Tyler, Stephen Tulloch, Raymond Brooks, LeRue Rumph, Garland Heath and Ernest Jones. State is still in the mix for many other top-rated recruits.

With all its talent, State will be a major player in the much-improved ACC. State will be challenged by a Maryland team that has 21 wins in the last two years, a Virginia team that returns nearly all of its players off this year's 9-5 squad and a Florida State team ready to return to its winning ways. The Pack will have the luxury of playing Maryland and Virginia at home.

Out of the conference, State will face Texas Tech, Connecticut and Western Carolina at home, in addition to the game against the Buckeyes. If a few question marks can fall into place (like this year's running back and offensive line questions did), then State could easily make a run at both the ACC and national titles.

Steve's Early Preseason ACC picks:

1. N.C. State
2. Maryland
3. Virginia
4. Florida State
5. Georgia Tech
6. Clemson
7. Wake Forest
8. Duke
9. North Carolina

Steve Thompson's columns run every Thursday. He can be reached at 515-2411 or sbthomps@unity.ncsu.edu.

UNSUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR: SEAN BERTON

Steve Thompson
Sports Editor

When Sean Berton's name was called during last year's Tangerine Bowl, most State fans had never heard of him. This year, however, Berton proved himself to be a vital contributor to the State offense.

Berton began his career at West Virginia, establishing himself as the Mountaineers' starting tight end during the 2000 season. When head coach Don Nehlen left following the 2000 season, Berton transferred to N.C. State.

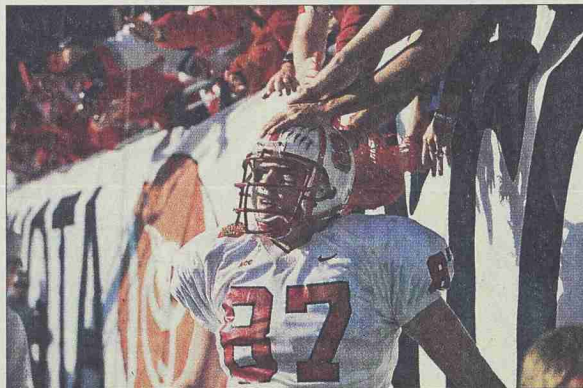
During this season, Berton played a jack-of-all-trades for the Pack, playing tight end, fullback and wideout. Behind his blocking, the N.C. State running game flourished. Berton was a co-winner of the Jim Ritcher award, given to State's

most valuable offensive lineman.

When he missed the Duke game due to injury, State's running game mustered only 63 yards. Many pointed to Berton's absence as being a key reason for that decline.

In addition to blocking, Berton also was a threat in the passing game. He was the sixth-leading receiver on the team, catching 25 passes for 215 yards and two touchdowns. His final touchdown of the season, a seven-yard strike from Philip Rivers in the Gator Bowl, closed the books on State's season.

While Berton's name didn't get the notoriety that many offensive stars got, he was highly respected within the league. He was selected to the first-team All-ACC team.



Sean Berton celebrates with the N.C. State fans after scoring State's final touchdown against Notre Dame. Staff photo by Matt Huffman

PLAY OF THE YEAR: T.A. MCLENDON

Matt Middleton
Assistant Sports Editor

The game came down to a last-second field goal. And it shouldn't have. It went into overtime. And it shouldn't have.

But those were probably the last things on T.A. McLendon's mind Saturday afternoon on Sept. 21 in Lubbock, Texas, when he took a third-down pitch from Philip Rivers, turned up field and dove for the left corner of the end zone to score his fifth and final touchdown.

The game-winning touchdown. The one that tied Stan Fritts' 30-year-old school record. And the one that preserved N.C. State's perfect record, which would remain intact for well over a month.

With its team up 38-17 entering the fourth quarter, few Pack fans would believe that Texas Tech would come all the way back to actually have a chance to win the game with just a 39-yard field goal.

But Robert Treece's kick sailed just wide and the game went into overtime, setting the stage for McLendon's dramatic heroics.

McLendon, who would go on to set the school record for touchdowns in a season (18) as a true freshman, rushed for the last eight of his 150 yards on a toss sweep to the short side of the field, just breaking the pylon in front of the raucous Red Raider crowd before being mobbed by his teammates.

State would go on to win its next four games, but no play was more instrumental in this record-breaking season than McLendon's eight-yard scamper. A loss would have been devastating after holding such a large lead, but an emotional overtime win carried the team's momentum even further down the road.



T.A. McLendon's run vs. Texas Tech provided early season momentum for N.C. State. Staff photo by Matt Huffman