

## COLLEGE FOOTBALL

## James' status uncertain

*LSU safety hasn't had contact with team since last weekend*

By Jim Kleinpeter  
Staff writer

BATON ROUGE — LSU football coach Nick Saban said he assumes senior free safety Damien James has quit the team after James missed his third consecutive practice Wednesday.

Saban said he hasn't spoken to or seen James since the Tigers' 38-14 victory over South Carolina on Saturday, and doesn't know the nature of James' absence. Tigers players say they haven't seen him since Saturday night either.

"We're going to support the guy every way we can, help him every way we can," Saban said in his weekly post practice press conference Wednesday. "But obviously he's missed three days of practice and I haven't talked to him, so I'm assuming he's

quit the team, which is just an assumption on my part because I've never talked to him."

Senior linebacker Bradie James (no relation), the defensive captain, said the team is trying to work through the distraction and that none of the players has heard from James as far as he knows.

"We've got to move on," Bradie James said. "We really don't know what's going on. I haven't talked to him. Nobody knows what he's thinking ... We're wondering why too."

Saban said that James would not play this week even if he returns. He said Randall Gay would move to free safety and Jack Hunt would take Gay's spot as the fifth defensive back in nickel situations.

**INJURIES:** Defensive end Marcus Spears (ankle) and running back Shyrone Carey (shoulder) remain questionable for Saturday's game with Auburn. Carey practiced in a red non-contact jersey Wednesday, but Spears missed his third consecutive practice.

## Toast has new meaning for Hookfin

*LSU cornerback gaining confidence, making big plays*

By Jim Kleinpeter  
Staff writer

BATON ROUGE — Sometimes the best attribute of a young cornerback is the ability to turn a deaf ear.

It seems to have paid off for LSU senior Demetrius Hookfin.

Two years ago, Hookfin was regularly toasted — as in beaten deep — by opposing teams. Back then, he was frequently criticized by LSU fans. His ability to block out the criticism and build his confidence has resulted in him now being toasted, with glasses raised, by LSU fans.

Hookfin had a highlight-reel game Saturday night, intercept-

ing consecutive passes by South Carolina's Corey Jenkins to reverse the momentum in the Tigers' 38-14 victory. He was named the SEC Defensive Player of the Week.

His improvement this season is a big reason LSU's defense is No. 1 in the nation in pass efficiency defense and average total yards allowed per game (217.4).

"I've come a long way," Hookfin said. "I've been criticized by other people. This year, I've gained much more confidence in myself and my game."

"You can't listen to stuff like that. If you get into it, you'll stay on the bottom. People are going to talk the way they want, regardless of what you do."

That's Cornerback 101, having a thick skin. Cornerbacks are often asked to cover wide receivers man-to-man, and even the best ones get beaten for touchdowns occasionally. When that happens, everyone in the stadium knows who messed up.

Considered the Tigers' best

cover corner, Hookfin leads the SEC this season with 17 passes broken up and is tied for third with three interceptions. He would be tied for first with teammate Corey Webster if he hadn't dropped a couple this season.

His play is part of a team-wide effort to eliminate big plays by the opposition. The Tigers have allowed only two plays of more than 30 yards this season.

"He's come a long way," said senior wide receiver Reggie Robinson. "He's making plays now. He gets his hands on a lot of balls. He didn't listen too much to what people said before. He's reaping the benefits of all his hard work."

Before Hookfin could build his confidence, he had to improve his judgment, especially on long passes. For the past two summers, he has gotten together with LSU quarterbacks and receivers to focus on that.

"Hook has always had the

skills," said LSU coach Nick Saban, who works with defensive backs individually. "He's very tough for his size (5 feet 11, 174 pounds) and a good tackler. He made some plays early in his career and he gave up some plays. I believe it was due to his lack of confidence in judging the ball. He puts himself in better position because he's probably one of the best technique players we have."

Hookfin's first interception Saturday night was all judgment. He had to retreat quickly on a deep throw by Jenkins and time his jump to come down with the ball. On his second interceptions, he pounced on a screen pass, taking the ball 10 yards for his first collegiate touchdown. Another interception return for a score was nullified by a roughing the passer penalty.

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## Move to Superdome brought windfall, critics

## HISTORY, from D-7

with a winning record, attendance was 24,977.

These days there is no lack of Tulane fans who say moving to the Superdome was a mistake because it lacks a college football atmosphere. In the late 1960s, however, when Tulane committed to playing in the Dome, nobody was saying it would be a mistake. They were looking forward to playing in a world-class facility that could attract major athletes, a combination some believed would spring the Green Wave back to the pantheon of college football.

In reality, though, Tulane had little choice. "It was a political decision, very political," Yard said. "Tulane's old stadium needed repairs. It was going down, Tulane didn't have the money (to restore it to top condition), and the Sugar Bowl was going to the Superdome. They weren't going to put money into Tulane Stadium."

"The Superdome is a terrific venue, and a good recruiting tool," said former Wave coach Mack Brown. "The only problem with it is that Tulane is a small, private school with a scattered alumni base, and its fans rattle around in it."

Yet for a while Tulane did better than anyone could have imagined.

The Wave pulled in average crowds of 35,559 in the first eight years it played in the Dome, from 1975 to 1982, despite not having a winning season for the first five. That's comparable to the 35,429 Tulane drew from 1970 through 1974, seasons in which the Green Wave compiled winning records four of the five years — although those figures were bloated by three LSU crowds of 81,233, 85,372, and 86,598.

Strong marketing and an excellent 9-3 Tulane team in 1979 accounted for a spectacular rise in attendance that season. Tulane crowds grew to 47,645, a gain of 23,294 over the average of 1978.

## Critical error

Tulane then entered one of the longest and blackest periods of its athletic history.

The Green Wave was riding relatively high with three straight winning teams from 1979 to 1981, and including 1982, enjoyed the immense satisfaction of beating arch-rival LSU three out of four times.

After the 31-28 victory over the Tigers in '82, one of the greatest victories in the annals of the Wave, which had been a four-touchdown underdog, Coach Vince Gibson asked for an extension of his contract. It was denied and Gibson resigned, setting in motion events that would give Tulane what Chuck Knapp, then a university vice-president, termed "a succession of black eyes" as an ongoing item in the national press.

In what Wall said was the "worst decision of my career," he hired Wally English, an assistant with the Miami Dolphins, to replace Gibson.

The crisis began just before the '83 season. A Tulane graduate assistant sent by English's first assistant, Bob Davie, was caught spying on the practices of Mississippi State, the Green Wave's opening opponent. The story made headlines throughout the sporting world.

The following season, with future NFL quarterback Bubba Brister on Tulane's roster, English wanted his son Jon under center, despite the fact he had already played at five schools and the NCAA had ruled him ineligible. Jon English sued the NCAA and the Wave, with Jon at quarterback, upset No. 9-ranked Florida State 34-28. The victory was eventually forfeited for the use of the ineligible player, leaving Tulane with a 2-9 record and without a coach. English was quickly gone.

Young, charismatic Mack Brown replaced English, but just before his first spring training Tulane made another splash in the national news: a point-shaving scandal engulfed the Green Wave basketball team, an embarrassment made worst by revelations of payments to players, along with academic unsuitability.

"We probably had the worst Division I athletic program in the United States" at that time, said Gary Roberts, then the Tulane faculty representative. "It was terribly, terribly embarrassing. We didn't have real high-quality people in the program, we didn't have adequate facilities, we didn't have any academic standards. It was just a mess."

The basketball program was disbanded on the opening day of Brown's first spring practice, and Wall resigned as athletic director. Tulane made the

33-year-old Brown AD, but he found he had even more problems than he thought. After weeding out some of the holdovers from the English regime — players not interested in going to class, attending team meetings, or willing to take random drug tests — Brown had a working roster of 59 athletes, 41 of whom were on academic probation.

"On top of that," Brown recalled, "we found credit card problems. Some of our players had individual charges to the university in excess of \$41,000. That fall we were going to play six teams that had been in bowl games the year before — and that was the least of our problems."

A 14-member blue ribbon committee studied Tulane football for the next few months and voted the night before the 1985 Green Wave-Southern Miss game whether to drop the sport. The vote was a tie.

A week later, before the season-ending game with LSU, another vote was taken, and Tulane football survived by one vote.

After the Wave went 1-10, and with Tulane's severe financial concerns, assistant athletic director Wright Waters proposed bringing in a consulting team to evaluate the program and see if Tulane had a realistic chance of succeeding.

The upbeat evaluation was Brown had a chance at success with some changes, including \$2 million more in the budget. University administration wanted to cover that by including anticipated revenue from bowl games and television in the estimated budget.

"We had just finished 1-10," said Brown, now the coach at the University of Texas. "We couldn't count on going to bowls or being on TV. They did think, though, we were on the right track and could win at Tulane."

It wasn't a unanimous conclusion. Darrell Royal, the head coach at Texas who served on the committee that evaluated Green Wave athletics, told Brown that Tulane could not compete with a large state school: "I'd get the hell out of here as fast as I could, because you've got no chance. And I would go to a university that has *The* in front of it, because that's the only way you're going to make it."

The other guys said, "Darrell, you can't say that."

And he said, "The boy paid me to come here and be honest, so I'm being honest. He needs to get out of here as fast as he can."

Two years later, the Green Wave was the 11th-ranked scoring team in the nation with a 32.5 point average. After it went to just the fifth bowl game in its history with a 6-5 record, Brown took Royal's advice and went to the University of North Carolina.

## Home in C-USA

In the 15 years since, Tulane has had four head coaches and four athletic directors. Through the major efforts of university president Eamon Kelly and AD Kevin White, Tulane was at least able to find another football home with the formation of Conference USA.

Unfortunately, C-USA is not perceived as a premier league. It is not a member of the Bowl Championship Series (BCS), the upper crust of college football that controls the sport's major bowls and purse strings.

For the past 50 years, since de-emphasis began, Tulane always seemed hapless on the college football scene. That was never more apparent than in 1998 when Coach Tommy Bowden's Green Wave stunned the sporting world with a 12-0 record — but received little credit.

In the BCS standings, Tulane finished 10th in the nation, which was good, the highest finish ever for any non-BCS team. Not nearly good enough, though, to be considered in the running for the national title or to play in a lucrative BCS bowl.

Critics pointed to the cumulative 45-80 record, a .360 winning percentage and Tulane's opponents, only two of which finished with more victories than defeats. For all its accomplishments, the Green Wave got little national acclaim for its record against a schedule rated 96th in the nation.

Yet perhaps Tulane's reputation as a football also-ran was a factor. Consider this: In 1984, before the BCS, Brigham Young University forged a 13-0 record. The Cougars' opponents' cumulative record was 55-79-3 (.396), the 85th most difficult schedule in college football.

BYU was declared the No. 1 team of 1984.

## COLLEGE BASKETBALL

## WKU, ULL men Sun Belt picks

By Marty Mulé  
Staff writer

Dennis Felton is being pointed at, and it pleases him.

The men's basketball coach of two-time defending Sun Belt Conference champion Western Kentucky acknowledged Wednesday that there is a bull's-eye on his Hilltoppers. But he said his team doesn't mind.

"We enjoy it, and we hope to be in the same position every year because that means we've accomplished something," Felton said at the league's media day at the Pan American Life Building.

Four starters, including center Chris Marcus, return from the 28-4 Hilltoppers of 2001-2002. The team ended its season with a loss to Stanford in the NCAA Tournament.

The 7-foot-1 Marcus, a two-time All-American, played in only 15 games last season because of a foot injury, but still posted team-high averages in scoring (15.9) and rebounding (8.9). He was expected to be in an NBA camp this season, but decided to come back for his senior year.

The Hilltoppers are clearly the best in the East Division, according to all 11 coaches. The team got every first-place vote for the maximum 55 points in the East.

"This is a competitive league," said New Mexico State coach Lou Henson, whose team is picked second in the West. "Anyone could take six or seven teams and shuffle them around. But (the Hilltoppers) are the cream of the crop."

The coaches unanimously selected Louisiana-Lafayette best in the West Division. The Cajuns, the West winners last season, lost only one player, but have two in academic trouble for the first semester. Back to wreak havoc on the Sun Belt is

## MEN'S POLL

Selected by the league's coaches with first-place votes in parentheses:

EAST DIVISION	
Team	Points
1. Western Kentucky	55 (11)
2. Arkansas-Little Rock	37
3. Florida International	28
4. Middle Tennessee State	22
5. Arkansas State	19
WEST DIVISION	
Team	Points
1. Louisiana-Lafayette	66 (11)
2. New Mexico State	53
3. UNO	40
4. North Texas	39
5. Denver	17
6. South Alabama	16

## ALL-SUN BELT MEN

Preseason basketball team selected by the league's coaches:  
First Team: Chris Marcus, W. Kentucky, C. Sr.; Chris Davis, North Texas, G. Sr.; Hector Henson, UNO, F. Sr.; Michael Southall, ULL, C. So.; Nick Zachary, UALR, G. Jr.  
Second Team: Anthony Johnson, ULL, F. Sr.; David Boyden, W. Kentucky, F. Sr.; James Moore, N. Mex. St., F. Jr.; Taurance Johnson, Fla. Int., F. So.; Chris Jackson, N. Mex. St., F. Sr.  
Player of the Year: Chris Marcus, Western Kentucky

Cajuns' leading scorer Anthony Johnson (14.9) and Freshman of the Year center Michael Southall, when he becomes eligible.

"We have a lot of guys who can shoot," said ULL coach Jessie Evans. "What we don't have is (shot) makers."

UNO, which started slow and finished strong last season, is picked third in the West.

"This season will be a challenge," said Privateers coach Monte Towse, who is aided by the return of forward Hector Romero, the Sun Belt's Player of the Year last season. "But that's why you get in this business — for challenges."

The Privateers narrowly edged Coach Johnny Jones' North Texas team, getting the nod by one point.

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## FIU, Denver women Sun Belt favorites

By Peter Barrouquere  
Staff writer

Florida International and Denver were picked by Sun Belt Conference women's basketball coaches Wednesday to win their respective divisions this season.

But none of the coaches is taking anything for granted.

"There's been a tremendous amount of turnover in the league, and I think it's going to really make for an interesting year," said Arkansas State coach Brian Boyer, whose team was selected fourth in the five-team East Division. "You look at the polls right now and six of the teams have all received a first-place vote, so I think there's a lot up in the air this season."

"We, too, feel that we have the opportunity to make a run at a championship. But I think there's probably 10 other teams in this league that feel the same way."

Denver coach Pam Tanner, who will start her eighth season with the Pioneers, agreed with Boyer.

"This league has turned over more than any time since I first came into it," Tanner said. "I don't know if you can vote anybody on the women's side first place this year."

"I think we're going to beat each other up this year. I think each game you go into this season, you've got a chance to get your butt beat if you don't bring your A game. I think that's going to make our conference on the women's side that much more exciting to watch."

Florida International, which has three starters returning, went 27-6 last season and 13-1 in the Sun Belt. The Golden Panthers reached the NCAA Tournament and were eliminated by Penn State in the second round.

"I think it has carried over in the sense that they have a lot of pride in what they accomplished," FIU coach Cindy Russo said. "They've been there, and they know how to get there, obviously."

"However, that is history, and

## WOMEN'S POLL

Selected by the league's coaches with first-place votes in parentheses:

EAST DIVISION	
Team	Points
1. Florida International	52 (8)
2. Western Kentucky	41 (2)
3. Middle Tenn. State	38 (1)
4. Arkansas State	22
5. Arkansas-Little Rock	12
WEST DIVISION	
Team	Points
1. Denver	61 (7)
2. North Texas	52 (2)
3. South Alabama	46 (2)
4. New Mexico State	35
5. UNO	25
6. Louisiana-Lafayette	12

## ALL-SUN BELT WOMEN

Preseason basketball team selected by the league's coaches: Ashley Atkinson, Denver, G. 5-10, Sr.; Patricia Holmes, Mid. Tenn. St., G. 5-9, So.; Princess Moore, N. Mex. St., G. 5-5, Jr.; Kristina Covington, W. Kentucky, G. 5-10, Jr.; Leslie Logsdon, W. Kentucky, G. 5-10, Jr.; Leslie McKernan, Arkansas St., F. 5-1, Sr.; Cornisha Cotton, Fla. Int., F. 6-2, Sr.; Mandy Shafer, Fla. Int., F. 6-0, Sr.; Taneisha Russell, S. Alabama, F. 5-11, Sr.; Shana Reese, W. Kentucky, F. 6-1, Sr.  
Player of the Year: Cornisha Cotton, Florida Int.

I keep reminding them of that. So the experience definitely carries over, but this is a new year."

UNO was picked to finish fifth in the West Division, one spot ahead of Louisiana-Lafayette. Privateers coach Joey Favaloro said he sees flexibility in the polls.

"I like the way the teams were picked," Favaloro said. "I think the coaches did a pretty intelligent job of picking of the teams. I don't think some teams were rated too high or too low."

"I think the good thing about it is, top to bottom, we're pretty close. Some of these teams might slip down a notch or two or three. Some of the teams down low might be able to jump up a notch or two or three. I don't think it's set in stone at all. So it should make for a very, very interesting year."

The coaches selected Florida International forward Cornisha Cotton as the preseason Player of the Year.

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