

# Four Downs with Rece Davis

ESPN anchor and Alabama native offers four transcendent moments in state's football history

By Rece Davis

A lot of places like football. Many love football. In Alabama, we *live* football. From Wallace Wade's Tide putting Southern football on the map in the 1926 Rose Bowl, to the greatest dynasty in the sport's history under Nick Saban, to legendary players like Bo Jackson and Pat Sullivan, football isn't just a game here. It's a shared culture, a part of our identity. And its cultural impact is nearly impossible to narrow to four moments...



Rece Davis on the set of College GameDay in Tuscaloosa, 2019. Photo by Phil Ellsworth, courtesy of ESPN Images.

**No. 1: John Mitchell's tackle.** The 1970 USC-Alabama clash in Birmingham had carried enormous societal impact in the state. A year after Wilbur Jackson became the Tide's first Black scholarship player, Sam Cunningham's virtuoso performance opened the eyes, and presumably the hearts, of many in Alabama. But the following season also delivered a landmark moment, one too often overlooked. In 1971, Alabama opened at USC. Opening kickoff, John Mitchell — the first Black player to take the field for the Tide — makes the tackle. A Hollywood moment at the Los Angeles Coliseum. Think about that. A young man who grew up in the state, believing he wouldn't be allowed to play for the University of Alabama, makes the play the very first opportunity he gets. Powerful.

**No. 2: Mama called.** Paul "Bear" Bryant's return to Alabama in 1958 restored dignity to a proud but languishing program. Bryant was a hero, not just because he won championships. He identified with many of the people in the state who revered him. And never forgot his meager roots. His mantra "If you believe in yourself and have dedication and pride — and never quit — you'll be a winner" resonated deeply with many who came from similar backgrounds as Bryant. He remains an icon whose name is still spoken in near-reverence, with streets, stadiums, schools, pets, and generations of children named after him.

**No. 3: Nick Saban comes to Alabama.** The throng of Tide faithful waiting at the Tuscaloosa airport in 2007 seemed to stun the typically unflappable Saban. If the sheer number of fans didn't open his eyes, the giant kiss planted on him by one overjoyed woman certainly did. Outsiders derided Alabama fans about how they'd "never be what they were under Bryant." Alabama *isn't* what it was under Bryant. With all due respect, it's better. No program in history has matched what Saban has done. And his tenure has elevated the stature of the university as a whole. Saban's nearly \$10 million salary is huge. But relative to his broader impact, he's not only been worth every penny. He's probably underpaid.

**No. 4: Auburn's answers: Cam Newton & Kick Six.** In 2010, Auburn answered Saban's first national title at Alabama with one of its own. Those Tigers were led by Cam Newton, who in one season on the Plains proved to be one of the greatest, most entertaining players in SEC history. The "Cam-back" game at Bryant-Denny saved the Tigers' title hopes and he sealed them by leading the championship-clinching drive against Oregon. Three years later, Chris Davis' iconic return of a missed Alabama field goal, as time expired, denied the Tide a likely third consecutive national title. The play became an indelible part of college football lore and a permanent needle to stick in the sides of Alabama fans. The rivalry is part of the fabric of our state. For better or worse. Auburn's answers upped the intensity and provided a foil to the Tide's Saban-era dynasty.