



VANDERBILT COMMODORES

SEC - East Division

Escaping SEC Purgatory

VANDERBILT BIO

National Championships - 0



SEC Championships: 0

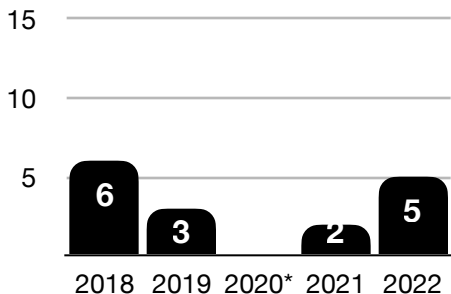
Location: **Nashville, TN**

All-Time Record: **555-631-43**

2022 Results: **5-7**

Head Coach: **Clark Lea**
3rd Year (7-17)

5-YEAR WIN TREND



Vanderbilt Stadium (40,500)

Vanderbilt has had brief glimpses of what life looks like outside of the last place position in the SEC East, but those glimpses have been few and far between. Could that be about to change? Ever since James Franklin took the head coaching job at Penn State way back in 2014, Vanderbilt has struggled to find their way in college football's most challenging conference. Derek Mason, who coached the Commodores from 2014 to 2020 reached two bowl games (2016 Independence and 2018 Texas) but didn't win either contest and never finished with a winning record. Clark Lea inherited a monumental rebuilding project after an 0-9 season in 2020. His debut didn't start well as FCS East Tennessee State thumped the Commodores 23-3 to start the 2021 season and Vanderbilt finished just 2-10.

However, there was immediate improvement in year two. The Commodores traveled to the islands in Week 0 and walloped Hawaii 63-10 for their first double-digit victory against an FBS opponent since 2018. They also claimed victories against Elon and Northern Illinois for a 3-1 start. SEC play was extremely unkind to the Commodores and they faced three straight top 10 teams including road trips to both Alabama and Georgia. It would have been easy for Lea's team to mail in the season after three crushing blowouts but Vanderbilt was competitive against both Missouri and South Carolina and eventually claimed a huge road victory against Kentucky. That win snapped a 26-game losing streak to SEC opponents and also broke a 16-game road losing streak to conference foes. The Commodores kept the momentum rolling and beat Florida before Tennessee cleaned them up in the season finale. Lea brings in 15 returning starters and more momentum than the program has had in quite some time.

AJ Swann was a bright spot on the Vanderbilt offense and help the Commodores top 20 points per game for the first time in four years. As a true freshman, he stepped into the starting quarterback role when Mike Wright went down with injury. He's certainly far from the running talent of Wright, who has since transferred, but he was arguably a better passer and is still very young and his stock should only go up. The top three receivers are back including **Will Sheppard** who has topped 500 yards in each of the past two seasons. **Jayden McGowan** is a versatile receiver who was used in a handful of run plays and caught 44 passes for 453 yards as a freshman. **Quincy Skinner** added 17 catches for 238 yards. If Swann takes the next step as a quarterback the passing game should be improved after recording just 187.3 yards per game through the air.

The Commodores relied on a strong run game last season. In the win over Kentucky, Vanderbilt completed only 12 passes but ran for 264 yards and the offensive balance, or lack thereof, was similar in the upset of Florida. Ray Davis topped 1,000 yards but is now gone and Mike Wright's electric athleticism at quarterback will no longer factor into the run game. **Patrick Smith** had 151 yards and **Chase Gillespie** had 118 yards but otherwise the running back group is unproven and a potential concern. True freshman **Sedrick Alexander** could see the field immediately for the Commodores. While I expect the running game to be down a notch or two from last season, the good news is that the offensive line is experienced and very talented (only 15 sacks allowed last season).

For Vanderbilt to actually climb out of the SEC's "basement", the defense will need to improve significantly. The Commodores have allowed over 35 points per game in each of the last three seasons and their 36.0 points allowed last season ranked last in the SEC and 7th worst in all of college football. While eight starters return, Vanderbilt will have to replace their longtime star Anfernee Orji. The secondary was picked apart and will need players like safety **De'Rickey Wright** to make more big plays on defense and for corner **BJ Anderson** to help Vandy tighten up the coverage. The Commodores had just 10 sacks in conference play so the likes of Bryce Young and Stetson Bennett could sit back in a clean pocket and tear through the defense with ease. **Nate Clifton** could be the best candidate to help provide an even average pass rush.


The Bottom Line: I actually really like Vanderbilt's chance to reach a bowl game this season. There's a clear path to another 3-1 start (or even a 4-0 start with a win at Wake Forest) and even though Vandy will be "dogs" in every conference game they replace a road trip to Alabama with a home game against Auburn out of the West and Kentucky and Missouri both come to town. If the defense shows no improvement, it could be a long season, however.

Projection: 6-6 (7th in SEC East)

2022 Statistics

| Points Scored | Rush Yards | Pass Yards | Turnover Margin |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 24.6 | 159.9 | 187.3 | 0 |
| 43rd in FBS | 58th in FBS | 112th in FBS | T-67th in FBS |
| Points Allowed | Rush YDS Allowed | Pass YDS Allowed | |
| 36.0 | 170.8 | 290.5 | |
| 125th in FBS | 96th in FBS | 128th in FBS | |

2023 Vanderbilt Schedule

| Week | Date | Team |
|------|--------------|---|
| 0 | Sat, Aug 26 |  vs. Hawaii |
| 1 | Sat, Sept 2 |  vs. Alabama A&M |
| 2 | Sat, Sept 9 |  @ Wake Forest |
| 3 | Sat, Sept 16 |  @ UNLV |
| 4 | Sat, Sept 23 |  vs. Kentucky |
| 5 | Sat, Sept 30 |  vs. Missouri |
| 6 | Sat, Oct 7 |  @ Florida |
| 7 | Sat, Oct 14 |  vs. Georgia |
| 8 | Bye Week | |
| 9 | Sat, Oct 28 |  @ Mississippi |
| 10 | Sat, Nov 4 |  vs. Auburn |
| 11 | Sat, Nov 11 |  @ South Carolina |
| 12 | Bye Week | |
| 13 | Sat, Nov 25 |  @ Tennessee |

Conference Games in Bold

KEY GAMES

Sat, Sept 9: @ Wake Forest - Even though the Commodores must visit a team that beat them by 20 last season, the Demon Deacons lost several key pieces including quarterback Sam Hartman and Vanderbilt should have a great shot. A win in Winston-Salem could very well mean a 4-0 start to the season.

Sat, Sept 23: vs. Kentucky - If the Wildcats can't recover from losing a second-round NFL quarterback, the Commodores will have an excellent shot at winning back-to-back games against Kentucky since 2013.

Sat, Sept 30: vs. Missouri - This game marks to me what should be the most "winnable" conference game on the schedule and Vandy narrowly lost in 2022.

KEY PLAYERS

Will Sheppard - WR



On a young defense, Sheppard is one of the leaders heading into his fourth season. He had a career year in 2022 that included 60 catches for 776 yards and 9 of the team's 22 passing touchdowns. He had a huge performance (10 receptions, 171 yards, and 2 touchdowns) in the win over Northern Illinois and also made a significant impact in Vanderbilt's big road win against Kentucky. He's a big receiver (6'3") with soft hands and great instincts.

De'Rickey Wright - S

The Vanderbilt passing defense really has nowhere to go but up and Wright should help facilitate improvement. The fourth year player was one of only four Commodores to top 50 tackles and he led the team with three interceptions (two against Northern Illinois, one against Mississippi). Vandy will be heavily reliant on his play in 2023 as defensive improvement is an absolute must.



2022 RESULTS (5-7)

@ Hawaii (W 63-10)

Elon (W 42-31)

Wake Forest (L 25-45)

@ Northern Illinois (W 38-28)

@ Alabama (L 3-55)

Mississippi (L 28-52)

@ Georgia (L 0-55)

@ Missouri (L 14-17)

South Carolina (L 27-38)

@ Kentucky (W 24-21)

Florida (W 31-24)

Tennessee (L 0-56)

VANDERBILT

RECRUITING

2023 Class Ranking

52nd

(Via 24/7 Sports)