



FORT LAUDERDALE magazine



Read the current issue

- ☰
- FEATURES
- FASHION
- CITY LIFE ▾
- GOOD LIFE ▾
- GUIDE ▾
- FOOD & DRINK ▾
- 🔍

FROM THE PUBLISHER AROUND TOWN GOODS OLD LAUDERDALE THE LIST

[THE BEST OF FORT LAUDERDALE](#) [DINE FORT LAUDERDALE](#)



GOOD LIFE SPORTS

Owl Be Back

August 1, 2017 Dori Zinn





Controversial Lane Kiffin has returned to head coaching, and Florida Atlantic football just got interesting.



When Florida Atlantic University was without a football coach at the end of the 2016 season, they had their sights set high on who would take over the reins. For a program less than 20 years old with a team that just got an on-campus stadium six years ago, finding a top-notch head coach to take on the young program would be a challenge. But then Lane Kiffin came along.

Kiffin is entering his first year as FAU's head coach. FAU is the youngest program he's been part of. But he's up to the challenge of taking over.

"Starting from the bottom — it's exciting when you build a program that's been down," Kiffin says. "I haven't had a hard part yet."

Before FAU, Kiffin was the offensive coordinator for two years at Alabama under head coach Nick Saban. Before that he was the head coach of Tennessee for a year and then at the University of Southern California for three. Ten years ago, he was at the Oakland Raiders — the youngest head coach in the team's history at 31.

For FAU's part, they're coming off three consecutive 3-9 seasons under former head coach Charlie Partridge and haven't been in a bowl game since the program's first head coach, Howard Schnellenberger, was in charge nine years ago. Kiffin is the fourth head coach to follow Schnellenberger since the latter stepped down in 2011 and is looking to revitalize the program that is still in its infancy.

"I hope we win more games," he says. "I hope we get a lot more people in the stands

and sign more guys to achieve their dreams in the NFL.”

He’s been out and about around town, meeting the locals and learning about different places in South Florida. When he isn’t working — which isn’t very often — he tries to be near the water. “It’s a great place to live,” he says. “People have been very receptive to us. The students seem extremely excited about the upcoming season.”

Despite a lengthy resume, Kiffin doesn’t come to FAU without his share of tribulations.

Kiffin was born into football. He’s the son of former NFL defensive coordinator Monte Kiffin, who ran the Tampa Buccaneers’ defense when they won their only Super Bowl in the 2002-03 season. (Monte Kiffin will work at FAU this year as an assistant to his son.) Before his head coaching gigs started, Lane Kiffin had a few assistant positions, mostly at USC under Pete Carroll. From 2001 to 2006 he worked his way around the

offense, first as the tight ends coach for a year, wide receivers coach for another two, and then offensive coordinator for one more. Under Kiffin, USC saw amazing professional football players emerge, like running back Reggie Bush and wide receiver Steve Smith. USC had the top-ranked recruiting class in college football each of the three years that Kiffin was the recruiting coordinator.

His top-of-the-line offense caught the eyes of the NFL's Oakland Raiders, where he was head coach for a year, but the relationship soured. The late Al Davis, then the Raiders owner, tried to force Kiffin to resign after the Raiders went 4-12 in the 2007-08 season, but Kiffin refused. In September 2008, Kiffin was fired. Two months later, he was the head coach of the University of Tennessee Volunteers. His age made headlines again, as he was the youngest active head coach in Division I football at 33. A year later, he left to become the head coach of USC.

The departure was abrupt since Kiffin was successful in Tennessee and the Vols had a winning season. UT students rioted in anger, even setting fires around campus after news got out of his resignation. But his second USC stint may have caused even more professional damage.

When Kiffin started, USC was under investigation for violating NCAA rules where former student athletes accepted money from professional sports agents. After a four-year investigation, USC was slapped with a two-year postseason ban and lost 30 scholarships for three years. In 2010, Kiffin led the Trojans to an 8-5 record. In 2011, they went 10-2. Due to NCAA sanctions, however, USC couldn't compete in postseason bowl games. The 2012 season ended in a dismal 7-6 record and in 2013, Kiffin lost the first two games of the season. Hours after the 62-41 loss to Arizona, Kiffin was fired at the airport as the team returned to Los Angeles at 3 a.m. After Kiffin was fired, USC finished the season 6-2.

Despite the bad departures, Kiffin has rebounded well. He was scooped up by Nick Saban at Alabama to be the offensive coordinator. There he helped the Crimson Tide go 12-2 in 2014, then 14-1 in both the 2015 and 2016 seasons. The team went to the National Championship Game each year Kiffin was coaching, and won in 2015.

With his great success at Alabama and FAU in need of a new coach, Kiffin signed on in December. He's been living at the Boca Raton Resort, three-and-a-half miles away from work, until he settles on buying a home. He doesn't get out too much aside from work, so he dines mostly at the resort. He's not picky about restaurants or meals, but his standards for football are still high.

Even with the late start in the recruiting season, Kiffin's draft class was ranked first in geographic diversity by 247sports.com. With 24 players in the 2017 class, signees hail from Alabama, Arizona, California and Texas, among others. But more than half of the signees still come from Florida.

"We find the best players to fit our systems," Kiffin says. "We go around the country to find the best guys regardless of where they come from to fit our program, [but] local talent is extremely important."

With Broward being one of the nation's most heavily recruited high school football counties, he didn't have to go far to find that local talent. He's already found players at three of Broward's premier high school programs; FAU signed two from St. Thomas Aquinas, one from American Heritage and one from Cardinal Gibbons.

Florida Atlantic might not be USC or Alabama, but Kiffin takes what he learned from the legendary coaches he worked under in those places and uses it in Boca.

"[I] learned organization from Coach [Nick] Saban and player relations from [Pete] Carroll," he says. "It's about making work not 'work' and making a program that players and coaches really love."

He's had plenty of rollercoaster moves throughout his 20-year career, so what advice does Kiffin constantly stand by?

"It's the way you treat the people you work with," he says. "The way you create an environment that they want to and enjoy being at. They become a lot more productive when you do that."

FAU opens the season at home verses Navy on Friday, September 1 at 8 p.m.

Other home games include Bethune-Cookman on September 16, Middle Tennessee State on September 30, North Texas on October 21, Marshall on November 3 and rival Florida International on November 18. Tickets are available at fausports.com.

Related Topics