



TEN YEARS GONE

RECOUNTING UT FOOTBALL'S FORTUNES OVER THE LAST DECADE

**A Special Monthly Column
from Sports 180's Will West**

by Will West



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When BLANK was born in August 2007, there was a sense of optimism about the University of Tennessee's football team. Phillip Fulmer had righted an unsteady ship by bringing back David Cutcliffe after the offensive coordinator had served a stint as Mississippi's head coach. Also returning were senior quarterback Erik Ainge, running back Arian Foster and three other starters on the offensive line.

Things have changed a lot since then. Tennessee had had only two head football coaches over a 30-year span when the first issue of BLANK went to press. In the 10 years since, the Vols have had three different men lead the program. Here's a look back at how Tennessee's football program has fared in each of those 10 years.

2007

Ranked 15th to start the season, Tennessee began the year losing a return trip in a home-and-home series with Cal, as the Golden Bears' running attack proved too much for Tennessee. After pounding Southern Miss in Week 2, UT was destroyed 59-20 by Tim Tebow and Florida. The natives were restless, but Tennessee won the next three games by double-digit margins, quieting talk that the game had passed Fulmer by.

It was the Arkansas game that year that fans most remember. The Vols manhandled the Razorbacks 34-13 at Neyland Stadium on a day that many fans thought might signal the end of the Fulmer era at UT. Tennessee then was able to squeak out wins against Vandy and Kentucky to end the regular season and to earn a trip to Atlanta to play LSU in the SEC Championship Game.

The Vols fell to the Tigers, the eventual BCS champions, but it looked like UT would be among the top teams in the conference for years to come. The Vols beat Wisconsin in their bowl game and finished the year ranked 12th in both polls.

2008

There was a lot of turnover at Tennessee ahead of the 2008 season. Cutcliffe left to take Duke's head coaching job. To replace him, Fulmer brought in Dave Clawson, fresh off a Final Four finish as head coach of Richmond in the FCS ranks. Also, Ainge was replaced under center by Jonathan Crompton.

Neither transition went well, as Clawson and his staff clashed with longtime assistants held over by Fulmer. Crompton struggled to throw the football and was eventually replaced by Nick Stephens as the Vols' starter.

Tennessee finished the year a hugely disappointing 5-7, and Fulmer was fired in a controversial decision after a loss to South Carolina on Nov. 1.

2009

After an ugly exit from the Oakland Raiders involving all manner of name-calling, Lane Kiffin was hired to replace Fulmer. Kiffin brought with him his father Monte, the architect of the Tampa 2 defensive system and already a legend in the NFL ranks. Former Ole Miss head coach Ed Orgeron and respected offensive coordinator Jim Chaney, who had coached Drew Brees at Purdue, joined the staff, as well.

Kiffin's one year at Tennessee was marred by run-ins with the NCAA and a mattress-burning train wreck of a night on campus when he abruptly left for the same position at USC. It must be said that the Vols did overachieve in Kiffin's lone season at UT to finish 7-6, but controversy seemed to follow the young coach at every turn.

2010-2012

Quite frankly, I don't want to talk about this stretch of time.

2013

After being publicly rejected by Charlie Strong and Mike Gundy, Tennessee eventually selected Cincinnati head coach Butch Jones to replace Derek Dooley. But first we were introduced to a new word that offseason, as "Grumors" became part of the East Tennessee lexicon. (Turns out that none of them were true.)

Butch Jones was not a popular hire at Tennessee, but with an affable demeanor and a surprisingly good recruiting class, Jones was able to win over the fan base. And year one under Jones went about as well as could be expected.

The Vols were blown out by most of the top-tier competition on their schedule, but they took 6th-ranked Georgia to overtime and upset #11 South Carolina. Jones' first team did not make a bowl game, but Tennessee fans were pleased with the progress and encouraged by the coach's abilities on the recruiting trail.

2014

The progress was slow, but the Vols were able to get back to a bowl game in 2014. Jones sold the fan base on a methodical, "brick-by-brick" process, and the second year of the Jones era saw just that.

The team was far more competitive in year two against the top of the conference, and they again upset South Carolina. The season ended with a drubbing of Iowa in the TaxSlayer Bowl, and expectations for 2015 began to grow after a respectable 7-6 finish.

2015

By 2015, Tennessee had embraced Jones as "their" coach. He had signed the third-best recruiting class in the nation, and Tennessee was expected to continue to grow on the field.

And the Vols did just that, finishing 8-4 and beating the teams against whom they were supposed to win. They weren't embarrassed in close losses to Alabama or Florida, and they took Oklahoma to two overtimes before narrowly succumbing to the Sooners.

The season ended with the destruction of another Big Ten team in a bowl game, and expectations for UT's 2016 season were soaring.

2016

The Vols were the hottest commodity in college football heading into the 2016 season. Almost every pundit on record picked Tennessee to win the SEC East and finish in or around the top 10 in the nation.

Jones' team started slow in most every game. Victories against Appalachian State and Ohio were far closer than they should have been, but a decisive win over Virginia Tech in the Battle at Bristol kept optimism high.

After exorcising decade-old demons with a comeback win over Florida and win at Georgia thanks to a Hail Mary, it seemed that Tennessee might be a team of destiny.

They weren't, though, as the Vols lost three straight to close October. An inexplicable loss to Vanderbilt to close the season placed Jones on the hot seat in the eyes of many, although a Music City Bowl win over Nebraska cooled the coach's seat a bit.

However, five years into running the program, the jury is still out on UT's fourth head coach of the BLANK era.

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