

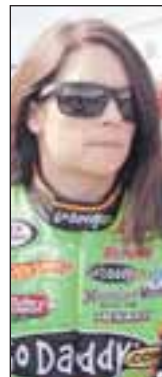
The State
COLUMBIA • SOUTH CAROLINA

SPORTS

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2010 • SECTION C

SUPER BOWL | One throw tarnishes Peyton Manning's MVP season, Page C4

AUTO RACING



Patrick

Patrick speeds up NASCAR debut

Danica to race in Saturday's Nationwide Series event

By JENNA FRYER
The Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Danica Patrick on Saturday bumped and banged her way through the crash-filled ARCA race at Daytona International Speedway, where she successfully dodged one of the sloppiest events in recent memory. She pulled off a masterful save on a slide

through the infield grass, fell to the back of the field and still managed a sixth-place finish.

So it came as no surprise that after taking a day to catch her breath, Patrick decided she should make her NASCAR debut this weekend in the second-tier Nationwide Series race at Daytona.

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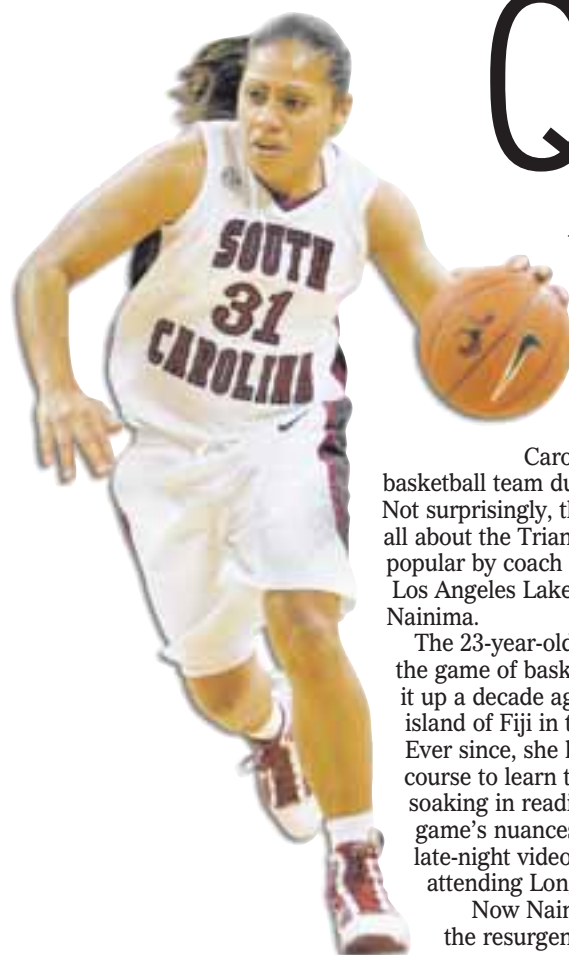
WHAT: Nationwide Series season opener
WHEN: 1 p.m. Saturday
WHERE: Daytona International Speedway
TV: ESPN2 (TWC 27/DTV 209/DISH 144)
QUALIFYING: 3 p.m. Friday (ESPN2)

USC WOMEN'S BASKETBALL



GERRY MELENDEZ/GMELENDEZ@THESTATE.COM

Junior Valerie Nainima leads USC in several offensive categories, including scoring; she averages 17.7 points per game.



QUICK STUDY

Valerie Nainima got a late start in basketball in her native Fiji, but the Gamecocks guard has developed into a star

Dawn Staley introduced a new offense to her South Carolina women's basketball team during the preseason. Not surprisingly, the player who knew all about the Triangle Offense made popular by coach Phil Jackson and the Los Angeles Lakers was guard Valerie Nainima.

The 23-year-old Nainima is late to the game of basketball, having picked it up a decade ago on her native island of Fiji in the South Pacific. Ever since, she has been on a crash course to learn the game, from soaking in reading materials on the game's nuances while in Fiji to late-night videotape sessions while attending Long Island University. Now Nainima is helping lead the resurgence of the women's



Ron Morris

Columnist
rmorris@
thestate.com
(803) 771-8432

anyone on the team. Beyond all that, Nainima (pronounced Nye-KNEE-muh) possesses a work ethic that has transformed her from a "little

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program at USC. She leads the team in several categories: scoring (17.7 ppg.), minutes played per game (34.7), 3-pointers (69), assists (68) and free-throw shooting (79.2 percent).

She launches 3-pointers with a picture-perfect jump shot, and she is fearless in her drives to the basket. Her ball-handling skills allow her to slide into the point-guard position when needed, and her defensive prowess is as strong as

VALERIE NAINIMA

POS.: Guard
YEAR: Junior
HT.: 5-foot-5
HOMETOWN: Suva, Fiji
2009-10 STATS: 17.7 ppg. (fifth in the SEC), 2.8 rpg., 3.0 app.
BEFORE USC: Nainima played two seasons at Long Island, becoming the fastest player in school history to score 1,000 points. She was the first player in conference history to earn player-of-the-year and rookie-of-the-year honors in the same season.
DID YOU KNOW: Nainima led the Fiji National Team to the gold medal at the 2007 South Pacific Games, averaging 25.7 points per game.



MIDSEASON REPORT

By SETH EMERSON
semerson@thestate.com

The midpoint of the SEC regular season has arrived, and the stretch is upon us. The league fared better in nonconference play, as expected, and much of league play has gone according to expectations, too.

Kentucky is strong, and the race for second in the East is frantic. But it is a bit strange to see Arkansas atop the West.

A review of the first half of the SEC season:

BIGGEST SURPRISE

FLORIDA was picked to finish fifth in the East after guard Nick Calathes left to play in

Europe. But the Gators (17-6, 6-3 SEC) are in the battle for second in the East and in good shape to return to the NCAA tournament for the first time since 2007. The Gators are doing it with contributions from a bevy of players: Freshman guard Kenny Boynton has provided an unexpected spark with a team-leading 14.1 points per game, and junior forward Chandler Parsons finally has emerged.

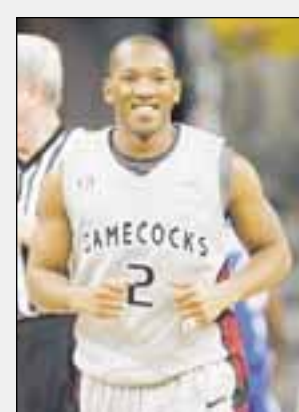
BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT

LSU has gone from being the runaway regular-season champion to possibly going winless. The Tigers' drop-off wasn't unexpected, but it's difficult to explain their 9-14 record — 0-9 in the SEC — considering they have senior forward Tasmin Mitchell. The Tigers aren't exciting, either, scoring 50 points or fewer in seven league games and getting blown out most of the time.

BEST TEAM

KENTUCKY stumbled once, against South Carolina, but otherwise has lived up to its billing. Freshman guard John Wall is a candidate for national player of the year, (though, strangely, he could be losing the SEC race to USC's Devan Downey). Freshman center DeMarcus Cousins is a double-double monster.

BEST PLAYER



GERRY MELENDEZ/THE STATE

DOWNEY might slow down eventually, but his first half of SEC play — during which he averaged 30.9 points in eight games — hasn't been seen in the league since the days of former LSU guard Chris Jackson. The 5-foot-9 Downey has carried the Gamecocks to a respectable record and one of the most improbable wins of the season, against then-No. 1 Kentucky.

ALL-SEC TEAM

DOWNEY and the two Kentucky stars — **WALL** and **COUSINS** — are assured spots. After that it gets tough. Do you go with Mississippi State's Jarvis Varnado because of his defense and rebounding? Do you reserve a spot for a Vanderbilt player (A.J. Ogilvy, Jermaine Beal, Jeffery Taylor)? Does Arkansas' Courtney Fortson belong, even though he became eligible in January? What about Georgia's Trey Thompkins?

SEE SEC PAGE C3

Recruit may be headed to new high school

USC FOOTBALL | Hampton faces punishment for bringing liquor to Darlington High

By JOSEPH PERSON
jperson@thestate.com

Incoming South Carolina defensive back Victor Hampton faces possible reassignment to an alternative school

after the 17-year-old was arrested for bringing liquor to Darlington High School last week.

Darlington County School District spokesperson Audrey Childers said Hampton has been suspended from

school pending an administrative hearing that likely will be held in the next week or two.

If Hampton is reassigned to Darlington County Intervention School, he still could receive his diploma from Darlington High, Childers said. It would be Hampton's fifth school in the past four years.

"We consider it a serious infraction,"

Childers said Monday.

Police said Hampton, rated a four-star recruit by Rivals.com, took a small quantity of liquor to school on Friday morning, two days after signing with the Gamecocks.

Darlington principal Pearl Jeffords smelled alcohol on Hampton and found

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Hampton