



*Everyone loves an underdog. Or is it “under-dawg?” If you’re only five-nine-and-a-half, not only does the ½ matter, but you get to be an underdog, even if you’ve thrown for almost 4,000 yards, run for 500 more, and accounted for 46 touchdowns during your senior year of high school alone. If you’re the right mix of humble and cocky, country and slick, with a devilish smile and an uncensored tongue, they REAL-LY love you. Especially when you win.*

In the national semi-final on New Year’s Eve, Stetson Bennett IV tossed a 10-yard touchdown pass to Adonai Mitchell with 54 seconds left to lift the University of Georgia football team to a 42-41 victory over Ohio State, giving the Bulldogs the opportunity to play for their second consecutive college football championship. A cause for celebration, for sure. When Bennett’s coach, Kirby Smart, a man whom the Board of Regents agreed to pay \$112.5 million over 10 years (in part because the undersized quarterback, a year before, led UGA to its first national title since Jimmy Carter was president) was asked to assess SBIV’s performance against the Buckeyes, Smart said, on broadcast TV while still on the field: “...he’s gotta play within our system and he’s gotta do what he’s coached to do, or you can’t win games...He must play better if we expect to win the next one.” What did you expect, Stetson, a hug?

This is the same coach who was, presumably, a party to the open flirtation with then-Oklahoma-transfer-to-be quarterback Caleb Williams, until Williams decided on February 1, 2022, that he would head to USC (the West Coast one) to win a Heisman Trophy. Meanwhile, the Georgia fan base has often been quick to criticize SBIV when he stumbles (see: Kent State and Missouri game notes), too. So, you might understand why the undersized signal caller has, at times, felt under-loved. Which, ironically, kinda makes us like him even more than we already do.

But humans are fickle. He won, and then he won again. So he has never been more beloved. Or, in the words of writer Malcolm Henry after SBIV appeared (um...evidently, very shortly after celebrating his first national title): “Stetson Bennett will never have to buy another drink in the state of Georgia so long as he lives. That, apparently, started last night in Indianapolis.”

As noted, love is a fleeting thing, so Henry adds, “Now, unlike many Georgia quarterbacks, the NFL isn’t in Stetson’s future, but nobody is ever taking away that national championship and the benefits that come along with that, including the free booze...” In other words: You had a nice run kid, just don’t let it go to your head. At least the tab is open on Sundays when you watch the other guys play.

I grew up rooting for Penn State. I’m still nowhere

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near all-in on UGA. I love my adopted home state, but I don’t pull for the ‘Dawgs with the fervor displayed by my native friends. But I like this Bennett guy, which is easy to do. He says clever stuff, even when it’s not particularly clever, sort of like a rural Yogi Berra for the modern age. For example, on Good Morning America: “I don’t really know the kind of people who want to win a national championship just so they don’t buy another drink again. That’s silly to me...I’m here to play football for the University of Georgia. And, once that’s over, whatever my interests will be. Which is hard when you’re playing college football because you don’t get internships...I’m majoring in economics — I’d like to go to law school. Hopefully I live until at least 80. So we’ll say 60 years to not play football. (But) I’m going to play football this year...I really couldn’t care less about a free drink.” A true poet for the everyman.

Winning one national championship is hard. Two in a row makes you the next Alabama. Still, SBIV says, “If you listen to them when they’re telling you how good you are, then you’re going to listen to them when they tell you how bad you are. I don’t really care what anybody else says.” We all say we don’t care what other people think. And we all lie. But I believe him when he makes the claim.

Motivation needn’t come from a deep, hidden profound source. Said SBIV when discussing the then-upcoming 2022-23 season: “Shoot, why does anybody who’s ever won something do it again? Because it’s cool. So, let’s go do it again.”

So how cool is it – actually – to be at the apex of the athletic world, if only for a moment (or two)? To be a perpetual legend in the Peach State. To be five-nine-and-a-half, footloose and fabulous, a pint-sized colossus among giants in Georgia lore. In the words of the 25-year-old (who puts the “super” in super-senior, for sure) himself: “I can’t articulate it. I’m not that smart.”

Which might be both unnecessarily self-deprecating and keenly self-aware, at once. The essence of the paradox of the luckiest number 13.

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