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# College football's last 3-peat: The Minnesota national title history Georgia is chasing

Seth Emerson Aug 20, 2023

MINNEAPOLIS — It's a nice day and a nice crowd. Not huge, but nice, a hundred or so fans at Minnesota taking in an open practice. And none of them have the slightest idea why someone from Georgia would be here.

Howie Smith is decked out in his team's colors, gold hat and maroon shirt. He grew up in Minneapolis. Both his parents went to Minnesota. He's now retired and an usher at Gophers team events.

"My heart, my soul is with the University of Minnesota," Smith said. "I grew up on campus. I know all the secret tunnels between all the buildings."

So naturally, when the visitor points out Georgia is going for its third consecutive national title, then asks Smith who was the last college football team to do that, Smith ... doesn't know. He thinks a few moments. Oklahoma? Nebraska? Who?

The visitor points at the field they're standing on.

"Minnesota?" Smith said. "Minnesota's the last one to three-peat? In the '30s? OK. I had heard it once before but it went in and went out. And there's many days I feel like I was around in the '30s."

Richard Evans comes close: Born in 1943, he went to college and law school at Minnesota. And he also had no idea.

"Minnesota? When the hell was that?" Evans said, then laughed when told. "I'm sure my parents knew about it."

OK, but surely the father of a current player might now? Ron Lindenberg, whose son is junior linebacker [Cody Lindenberg](#), grew up just north of the Twin Cities. His son had offers from Iowa and Baylor, but Minnesota was his dream school. Lindenberg greets the visitor with a smile and a handshake, then a quizzical look to the question of the day.

"I didn't know that," he said. "Oh, man. That is amazing."

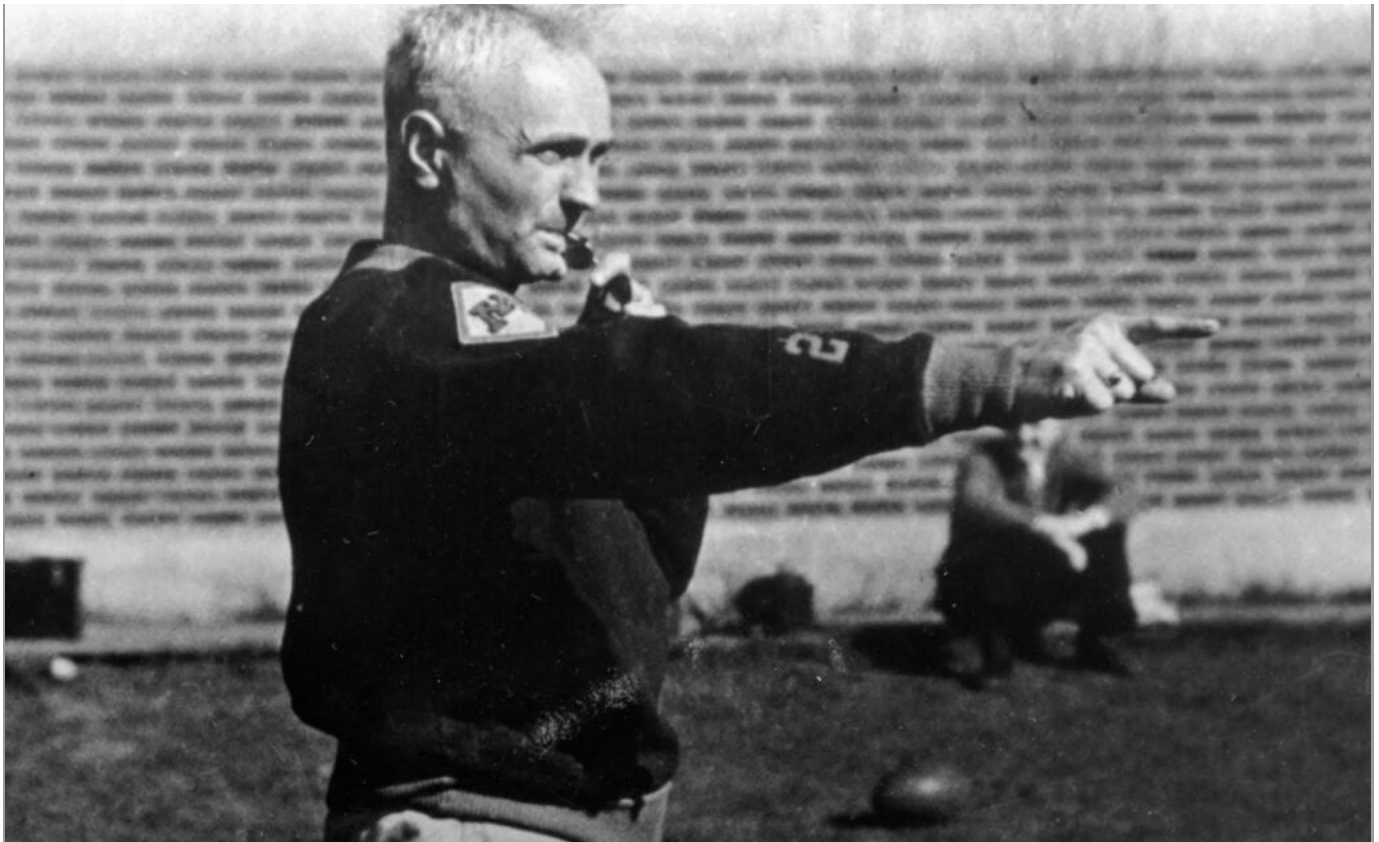
Finally, success: Bob Piche, watching the last few minutes of practice, knows the Gophers were the last team to three-peat, from 1934-36, and explains why he knows.

"Because I'm 92 years old," Piche said.

But he's not surprised so few others know. That it's so forgotten to history shows how long it's been, and what a feat it would be for Georgia to do it this season. But it's also about Minnesota. In the annals of college football, how is it that *this* program — not [Notre Dame](#), not [Michigan](#), not Alabama, not [USC](#) or Nebraska — is the historic marker? What happened to make that history now seem so random? And what does it think watching someone else trying to finally equal its feat?

So a visitor from Georgia made the trek up north, which is how he found himself holding a trophy that few people, even at Minnesota, know exists.

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Bernie Bierman went 93-35-6 as head coach at Minnesota. (Courtesy of Minnesota Athletics)

## Why Minnesota?

According to lore, [Minnesota](#) invented cheerleaders: Thomas Peebles, an Irish immigrant and philosophy professor at Minnesota, was the school's first football coach in 1883 and recruited students to be a cheer squad. And there was much to cheer over the next few decades: The Gophers, as they were simply known then, had at least a .500 record each year from 1900-19, including a 35-game unbeaten streak at one point (one tie included). Bronko Nagurski was a star player in the late '20s, although the program hit a bit of a lull early the next decade.

In stepped Bernie Bierman, a Gophers star during his playing days who was prematurely gray, which fit his personality and coaching style: Bierman was said to never raise his voice, lose his temper or cry, [per the College Football Hall of Fame](#), which quotes Bierman as saying: "I never made an emotional speech in my life."

Bierman's teams reflected that. They ran the single wing, and were labeled as "dull," run-heavy and strong on defense. Vince Dooley probably admired that. Kirby Smart, pre-2019, might have too. And it worked.

**GO DEEPER**

Best of the 1930s: Minnesota's dynasty and the Southwest's rise in college football's new era of polls and bowls

In 1933, the year before the three-peat began, the Gophers went unbeaten but had four ties. They also came out for one game decked in gold jerseys and pants, causing announcer Halsey Hall to proclaim: "Here come the Golden Gophers." The name stuck. So did the winning the next year, this time with no ties:

**1934:** Minnesota went 8-0 with only one close call, a 13-7 win at Pittsburgh before 64,000 fans. The Gophers outscored opponents 270-38. It was a star-laden team: Grantland Rice selected an 11-man All-America team and three of them were Gophers (halfback Francis Lund, end Frank Larson and guard Bill Bevan, the latter of whom was the last Big Ten player to play without a helmet). The Gophers also build depth: Bierman used 37 players in the opener against overmatched North Dakota State.

That included a sophomore named Bud Wilkinson, a Minneapolis native who would be a guard and quarterback on all three championship teams, but whose coaching career would be more renowned.

**1935:** Expectations were lower after losing all three All-Americans, plus other key starters, including one ruled academically ineligible. Then quarterback Glenn Seidel suffered a season-ending injury in the third game against [Tulane](#). But the depth from the previous year, with so many returning players having at least some experience, paid off. In another 8-0 campaign, the Gophers won three games decided by single digits. They also avoided playing [Ohio State](#), which went unbeaten in the Big Ten but lost to Notre Dame.

This season was also the first for end Dwight Reed, the lone Black player on Minnesota's teams during the championship run. (Although the Gophers were integrated earlier in the century.) During the 1935 season Tulane, the one southern team on Minnesota's schedule, refused to play against a Black player, so Reed watched the game from the press box. After Texas the next season, Bierman removed southern teams from future schedules.

**1936:** The quest for a three-peat began on a chaotic note. On a trip to the opener at Washington, Minnesota's team hotel caught fire. Everyone escaped unharmed. Bierman later quipped that when some players asked if they should jump or use the fire escape, he answered: "If you are subs, go ahead and jump, regulars, use the fire escape!" The Gophers also escaped [Washington](#) with a close win, 14-7, then returned home for a 7-0 win against [Nebraska](#). After two easy wins against Michigan and [Purdue](#), Minnesota lost a close one at No. 3 [Northwestern](#). Seemingly invigorated, the Golden Gophers romped over the rest of their schedule, including Texas.

30%

## Northwestern Football vs. Minnesota, 1936



Watch on  YouTube














This was the first year of the Associated Press poll. It also established the polling tradition of a team being penalized for losing late in the season: Northwestern, otherwise unbeaten, finished the season with a 26-0 loss at Notre Dame, and AP voters awarded the national title to Minnesota. (Which also, to be fair, had a better scoring margin over opponents, 203-32.)

There are other teams that claim the title in the other two years. In 1934, unbeaten [Alabama](#) was the choice of the Poling System, a mathematical system named after Richard Poling, among other selectors. In 1935, [TCU](#) is recognized as the champion by the American Football Coaches Association, according to a decision reached in 2016. In 1936, [Pittsburgh](#) (8-1-1, winning the Rose Bowl) was recognized as the champion by the CFRA.

But the NCAA record book recognizes Minnesota as the consensus champion for each of those three years. This was also not an out-of-nowhere run. The program had success beforehand. And there's a theory that Minnesota had an advantage: Williams Arena, built in 1928, and where the Gophers still play basketball, was then a massive facility that Bierman's teams could use as an indoor practice facility, while most of their opponents had to brave the Midwest cold.

Decades later, a program in the Southeast would become the last in its conference to get a full-length indoor facility, and the next year [Georgia](#) made its first national championship game in 37 years. A few years later it won the game, then won it again.

## College football three-peat attempts

TEAM	YEAR	RECORD	FINAL AP RANK
 <b>Alabama</b>	2013	11-2	7
 <b>USC</b>	2005	12-1	2
 <b>Nebraska</b>	1996	11-2	6
 <b>Alabama</b>	1980	10-2	6
 <b>Oklahoma</b>	1976	9-2-1	5
 <b>Nebraska</b>	1972	9-2-1	4
 <b>Texas</b>	1971	8-3	18
 <b>Michigan State</b>	1967	3-7	NR
 <b>Alabama</b>	1966	11-0	3
 <b>Oklahoma</b>	1957	10-1	4
 <b>Notre Dame</b>	1948	9-0-1	2
 <b>Army</b>	1946	9-0-1	2
 <b>Minnesota</b>	1942	5-4	19

## The art of the 3-peat

Even as chaotic as the term “national title” has been in college football history, there are no firm claimants to a three-peat since Minnesota did it. Fourteen teams have won back-to-back titles in the poll era, but nobody has won three in a row. And since the advent of the BCS and then the Playoff, the distinction has been clear.

The first team to fail to three-peat, in fact, was Minnesota: It won two more titles in 1940 and 1941, then didn’t come close the next year. But that came with an asterisk: World War II had started and Bierman rejoined the Marines — and coached a team of Naval trainees that beat Minnesota during the 1942 season.

Wilkinson, who three-peated as a player for the Gophers, couldn’t do it as [Oklahoma’s](#) coach, even with the 47-game win streak, still a record. The Sooners were recognized as champions in 1955 and 1956. They were also unbeaten in 1954 but finished third in both the AP and coaches polls, behind Ohio State and [UCLA](#). And in 1957, the Sooners won their first seven in a row but then saw the unbeaten streak end with a home loss to Notre Dame.

Kirby Smart was with the last team to fail to three-peat: 2013 Alabama, which was felled by the [Auburn](#) kick-six. But he’s dodged questions about that season

and comparing it to Georgia's task this season, claiming he "can't even remember that far back." Smart did acknowledge that he and his team have "looked at some three-peat scenarios" of teams like the '90s Chicago Bulls.

"And different teams that they might actually know about," Smart said. "No offense to the Minnesota 1935 team, but I don't know if it's going to resonate with my audience."

Minnesota, to be fair, did not three-peat and then fall into total obscurity. After some lean years the Gophers won another national title in 1960, and they shared the Big Ten title in 1967. They were a proud and successful program. But it hasn't been the same since.

## What happened to Minnesota?

There are a few theories. The prevailing one is the Gophers, once the only game in town, were swallowed up by pro teams: The Vikings were founded in 1960, the Twins moved in the next year, the [NHL's](#) North Stars arrived in 1967 and the [NBA's](#) Timberwolves in 1989. (The North Stars left in the '90s but were soon replaced by the Wild.)

"There's too many competitive sports up here now," said Piche, the 92-year-old Gophers fan. "And it's really cut into the fan base of the Gophers. That's really why they didn't have a bigger following. I mean, I think they've got a big following in the state. But you can watch all this stuff on TV now, and there's so many other sports you can go to."

Minnesota also struggled to find the coach who could build and then sustain. Lou Holtz was a home-run hire in the mid-'80s, but he stayed only two years before going to Notre Dame, the only job Holtz said would make him leave. Glen Mason had some strong years in the mid-2000s but was fired after going 6-7 in his 10th year.

(Mason, for a couple days in 1995, was going to be Georgia's coach, before backing out and returning to Kansas. One of the Georgia players who Mason didn't end up coaching was a then-sophomore safety named Kirby Smart.)

Minnesota is now coached by P.J. Fleck, entering his seventh season. Fleck's teams have been good: 11-2 in 2019, 9-4 each of the past two seasons. Fleck has talked about re-connecting Minnesota with its championship tradition, talking to recruits about Minnesota being a "sleeping giant," and when he arrived he did some research on the '30s teams.

"They could score a lot of points, played incredible defense," Fleck said. "You see the seven national titles, 18 Big Ten national championships. And you're brought into that to bring that type of tradition back, and connect that tradition from the '30s, '40s, '50s and '60s and connect it to the 2020s. That's a massive job. A lot of respect for our program and our tradition of what we've done. But

it's put upon me, with the culture we've run, to connect that to the tradition of old."

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That can be tough, though, when there aren't constant reminders of it. The team moved to the Metrodome when it opened in 1982, sharing it with the Vikings and Twins rather than doing extensive renovations to Memorial Stadium, which was demolished. That may have made financial sense, but it disconnected the Gophers from their tradition and took them away from campus. The school essentially admitted the mistake when it built its own stadium and moved back to campus in 2009 rather than follow the Vikings to their new stadium.

Still, when fans are at Huntington Bank Stadium, they're not at the same stadium that saw all those championship teams. Fleck isn't walking the same sideline as Bierman, and Fleck and the coaches can't tell recruits they're playing on the same field as all those greats from the past.

The years of the national titles are posted inside the stadium, and there are banners in the team's facility. Otherwise, there are scant reminders. Maybe it's the midwestern reserve, not wanting to brag. Maybe it's just not dwelling on the past. Which may be why the silver, three-foot tall trophy has gone largely unnoticed.



Minnesota was the first and only home of the Toledo Cup championship trophy. (Seth Emerson / *The Athletic*)

## The Toledo Cup

“You should come see this,” Paul Rovnak, Minnesota’s sports information director, told the visitor from Georgia.

Before the 1934 season, a group of college football fans in Toledo, Ohio, decided to crown their own national championship. The sponsoring committee included USOC chairman Avery Brundage, a few other citizens, and Theodore Roosevelt Jr. They would cull votes from 250 sports editors around the country after the season, and whoever won it would be given the Toledo Cup.

They added a catch: The first team to win three national titles in a row would have permanent possession of the cup. Lo and behold, Minnesota did just that in the first three years, and the cup was retired to the school, where it had been on display, along with other memorabilia, in the entrance to the athletic facility.

“People walk by it,” Rovnak said, “And don’t realize there’s only one of these.”

One day last week, the cup was moved. Rovnak pulled out the cup and carried it over to the room that houses other more well-known items: Paul Bunyan’s Axe, which Minnesota currently owns for beating [Wisconsin](#), and the school’s copy

of the Heisman Trophy won by Bruce Smith in 1941. And before stowing the Toledo Cup away he let the visitor from Georgia hold it too, the same trophy Bierman, Wilkinson and those Minnesota coaches and players may have touched 80-something years before.

So how do Minnesota fans, at least the few that know about it, feel about their claim to fame? Are they like the '72 Miami Dolphins, popping champagne when the last unbeaten team loses?

"I just don't think most were aware of it, or consider it," Piche said. "I do care. And I hope (Georgia) doesn't repeat. But it's not related to Minnesota. It's just I don't like to see one team dominate."

*(Top photo: Courtesy of Minnesota Athletics)*

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**Seth Emerson** is a senior writer for The Athletic covering Georgia and the SEC. Seth joined The Athletic in 2018 from The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and also covered the Bulldogs and the SEC for The Albany Herald from 2002-05. Seth also covered South Carolina for The State from 2005-10. Follow Seth on Twitter [@SethWEmerson](#)

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The history of college football matters. Thanks for such a terrific feature. Bud Wilkinson was an All American hockey player at Minnesota too!

D **Don L.** · 4h 0m ago

This is a terrific story. Thanks for putting in the extra work and making the trip to Minnesota. Great reporting.

S **Steve B.** · 4h 58m ago

Fantastic article !

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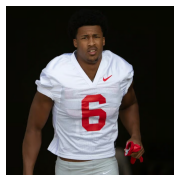
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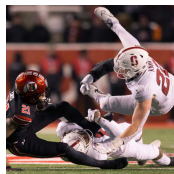
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