

# The Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll

How do Jeff Bower and Larry Fedora Compare?

As has been widely reported, the Martha Saunders administration of USM delivered termination notices to about 12 or 13 tenured/tenure-track faculty leading up to FY 2011, and she again delivered another 29 such notices heading into FY 2012, all in an effort to deal with a two-year \$25 million cut to the institution's budget. At the same time, however, she *increased* the athletics department's [budget](#) for FY 2011, and then cut only a portion of the \$1 million that the athletics division gets from the overall education fund heading into FY 2012. This inconsistent [treatment](#) has since had a [predictable effect](#) – a [spotlight](#) is now [shining](#) on the USM athletics department, and it is [exposing](#) a number of facts that many athletics supporters in “the USM family” would [rather not](#) have been [exposed](#).

To meet the new demands for information about USM sports, followers of USMNEWS.net have been gathering data on various Golden Eagles sports programs. This particular report looks at USM football since 1998. In particular, USM's performance in the *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll* is examined over the 1998-2007 period. This period represents former USM head coach Jeff Bower's final 10 years at the helm, before he was terminated for lack of production by president Saunders. It also covers the 2008-09 period, or the first two years under Larry Fedora, the former Oklahoma State assistant coach who was selected by Saunders to take over for Bower after the 2007 season. The *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll* is based on the highly-acclaimed college football computer models developed by Jeff Sagarin. Given that lower-division football programs – programs that participate *below* the traditional “Division I” level – often face off against their DI big brothers, lower and upper division football teams are “linked together” in Sagarin's computer model-based power ratings. This *Poll* simply combines USM and these lower division football programs into one ranking. The final *Poll* each year is then used to determine the *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll National Champion*. Let's get started.

## Year 1 – 1998

In 1998, Jeff Bower's Golden Eagles were coming off of a 9-3 season, one that included a Conference USA championship and Liberty Bowl rout of the Pittsburgh. Much was expected in 1998, however the Eagles faltered a few times, including a Humanitarian Bowl loss to Idaho. Still, based on their overall performance against a stellar schedule, Bower's Golden Eagles edged out the Richmond Spiders for the 2008 SSC+USMFP *National Championship* (see table below).

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Southern Mississippi	78.66	7-5

2	Richmond	69.41	9-3
3	Massachusetts	68.77	12-3
4	Georgia Southern	68.47	14-1
5	Delaware	63.05	7-4
6	Northwestern State – Louisiana	62.61	11-3
7	Western Illinois	60.91	11-3
8	McNeese State	59.70	9-3
9	Florida A&M	59.53	11-2
10	William & Mary	59.39	7-4

*Note: Southern Miss finished 35<sup>th</sup> in the 1998 overall Sagarin.*

Not only did Bower claim this national championship trophy (see below), his 1998 squad finished a very respectable 35<sup>th</sup> in Sagarin’s overall poll in 1998.



1998

With a number of quality players returning for 1999, many USM fans expected Bower’s Eagles to excel in 1999.

## Year 2 – 1999

Bower’s 1999 squad took the nation by storm, again winning the Conference USA title, and defeating a quality Colorado State team in the Liberty Bowl. Finishing 9-3 overall, the Golden Eagles closed the regular season with a big road win against Louisville. Their combination of wins and strength-of-schedule bested the second-ranked Georgia Southern Eagles by a wider margin (see table below) than USM had produced against Richmond in 1998.

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Southern Mississippi	85.11	9-3
2	Georgia Southern	74.36	13-2
3	Illinois State	67.84	11-3
4	Furman	65.94	9-3
5	Youngstown State	64.47	12-3
6	Hofstra	64.40	11-2
7	Massachusetts	63.62	9-4
8	Florida A&M	63.43	10-4
9	Northern Iowa	62.39	8-3
10	Appalachian State	60.88	9-3

*Note: Southern Miss finished 14<sup>th</sup> in the 1999 overall Sagarin.*

Their 1999 performance put the Golden Eagles at an amazing 14<sup>th</sup> in the overall Sagarin poll at year's end. It also gave Bower his second straight *SSC+USMFP National Championship* trophy (see below).<sup>1</sup>



With the starting quarterback and others returning for 2000, expectations for a third straight *SSC+USMFP National Championship* were high.

### Year 3 – 2000

The table below shows that the 2000 version of the USM Eagles cruised to their third straight *SSC+USMFP National Championship* under head coach Jeff Bower. The Eagles finished 8-4, including a 21-0 shutout of Alabama in Birmingham's Legion Field, followed by a 28-6 rout of Oklahoma State in Stillwater. That season also included a dramatic 28-21 last-second victory over Texas Christian in (what is now known as) the GMAC Bowl.

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Southern Mississippi	78.30	8-4
2	California – Davis	76.02	12-1
3	Georgia Southern	73.18	13-2
4	Delaware	72.26	12-2
5	Montana	71.77	13-2
6	Lehigh	66.91	12-1
7	Appalachian State	66.30	10-4
8	Portland State	64.66	8-4
9	Furman	64.52	9-3
10	Eastern Washington	64.31	6-5

*Note:* Southern Miss finished 32<sup>nd</sup> in the 2000 overall Sagarin.

Of course, with a quality performance against a tough schedule, Bower's Eagles won the *2000 SSC+USMFP National Championship* trophy, their third straight (see below). The Eagles also finished the 2000 season ranked 32<sup>nd</sup> in the overall Sagarin 2000 poll. How long could this run last?

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<sup>1</sup> Bower's Eagles likely won this national championship in both 1996 and 1997. The Sagarin data were not available for those or earlier years at the time of this report.



## Year 4 – 2001

As the table below indicates, the championship run ended in 2001, when the Eagles finished a disappointing 6-5 on the season. That year marked the first since 1997 that USM stayed home during bowl season. Yet, the season still included a 17-9 win over Oklahoma State in M.M. Roberts stadium, and the schedule was tough enough to put the Eagles in second in the final *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll* for 2001.

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Montana	72.01	15-1
2	Southern Mississippi	70.65	6-5
3	Furman	68.25	12-3
4	Georgia Southern	66.02	12-2
5	Maine	65.43	9-3
6	Villanova	65.23	8-3
7	Hofstra	64.80	9-3
8	William & Mary	61.77	8-4
9	Northern Iowa	61.50	11-3
10	Lehigh	61.34	11-1

*Note:* Southern Miss finished 60<sup>th</sup> in the 2001 overall Sagarin.

The *2000 SSC+USMFP National Championship* belongs to the Montana Grizzlies, who produced an amazing 15-1 record on the season. Still, USM finished with its 8<sup>th</sup> consecutive winning regular and overall season, and maintained a Sagarin power rating in the 70s. What would 2002 bring?

## Year 5 – 2002

As the table below shows, 2002 would not bring Bower's bunch a fourth *SSC+USMFP National Championship*. Finishing 7-6 on the year, the Eagles were ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the final *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll* for 2002, behind the *2002 Sagarin Small Colleges + USMFP National Champion* Western Kentucky Hilltoppers, who finished 2002 at 12-3.

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Western Kentucky	72.26	12-3
2	McNeese State	71.70	13-2
3	Western Illinois	70.23	11-2
4	Southern Mississippi	70.09	7-6

5	Pennsylvania	68.02	9-1
6	Georgia Southern	65.90	11-3
7	Villanova	65.59	11-4
8	Northeastern	63.46	10-3
9	Montana	62.45	11-3
10	Maine	61.24	11-3

Note: Southern Miss finished 68<sup>th</sup> in the 2002 overall Sagarin.

Still, the Eagles extended their number of consecutive years with both regular season and overall winning records to nine. That year also included a 23-20 win over Illinois in Hattiesburg, a trip to the Houston Bowl to play Oklahoma State, and 68<sup>th</sup> in the final Sagarin overall poll.

### Year 6 – 2003

Though 2003 would bring an end to Bower’s slide, it still did not result in another *Sagarin Small Colleges + USMFP National Championship* (see table below). That title belongs to the Delaware Blue Hens, who finished 2003 with an amazing 15-1 record overall.

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Delaware	76.15	15-1
2	Southern Mississippi	73.72	9-4
3	Western Illinois	66.20	9-4
4	Southern Illinois	66.19	10-2
5	Northern Iowa	66.06	10-3
6	Montana	65.23	9-4
7	Massachusetts	65.21	10-3
8	Colgate	65.04	15-1
9	Western Kentucky	64.89	9-4
10	Pennsylvania	64.54	10-0

Note: Southern Miss finished 51<sup>st</sup> in the 2003 overall Sagarin.

Bower’s Eagles finished a very respectable 9-4 on the year, pushing themselves back up to 51<sup>st</sup> in the overall Sagarin poll for 2003. The season included a big win over Texas Christian, another Conference USA title, and a trip to the Liberty Bowl in Memphis. The Eagles dropped the bowl game to a very good Utah team, coached by Urban Meyer. Still, the winning seasons (regular and overall) streaks were extended to 10 years.

### Year 7 – 2004

Like some years previous, 2004 was somewhat of a disappointing one for Bower’s Eagles. After beating Nebraska 21-17 in Lincoln to start the year, USM finished the season 7-5, putting them in 7<sup>th</sup> in the *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll*, and 73<sup>rd</sup>

in Sagarin's overall poll for 2004 (see below). Still, the winning seasons streaks were extended to 11 years.

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	James Madison	76.34	13-2
2	Harvard	76.11	10-0
3	New Hampshire	73.54	10-3
4	William & Mary	71.86	11-3
5	Montana	66.06	10-3
6	Delaware	70.02	9-4
7	Southern Mississippi	69.59	7-5
8	Villanova	68.15	6-5
9	Georgia Southern	67.00	9-3
10	Sam Houston State	66.49	11-3

Note: Southern Miss finished 73<sup>rd</sup> in the 2004 overall Sagarin.

The *Sagarin Small Colleges + USMFP National Champion* for 2004 was James Madison, which finished 13-2 on the year. USM's victory in the 2004 New Orleans Bowl kept it in the *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll* top 10 for the 7<sup>th</sup> straight year.

### Year 8 – 2005

Though many Golden Eagles fans were likely disappointed with USM's repeating 7-5 overall record in 2005, that year did bring head coach Jeff Bower his 4<sup>th</sup> *Sagarin Small Colleges + USMFP National Championship* (see table below).

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Southern Mississippi	70.21	7-5
2	Appalachian State	69.29	12-3
3	Northern Iowa	65.48	11-4
4	Illinois State	64.95	7-4
5	Texas State	64.69	11-3
6	Southern Illinois	62.50	9-4
7	Youngstown State	62.39	8-3
8	Furman	62.31	11-3
	New Hampshire	62.31	11-2
10	Cal-Poly SLO	61.95	9-4

Note: Southern Miss finished 64<sup>th</sup> in the 2005 overall Sagarin.

Bower guided the Eagles back into the 70s (Sagarin power points), and they just edged out the Appalachian State Mountaineers for the 2005 trophy (see below).



Extending the winning seasons streaks to 12 years, Bower’s Eagles also took home the New Orleans Bowl trophy in 2005 and finished 64<sup>th</sup> in Sagarin’s overall poll.

### Year 9 – 2006

On the strength of a 9-5 record, a trip to the Conference USA Championship Game, and a victory in the GMAC Bowl, Bower’s Golden Eagles won their second straight *Sagarin Small Colleges + USMFP National Championship* (see table below) by just 0.11 Sagarin power points over Appalachian State. USM defeated North Carolina State and Houston, the eventual Conference USA champion, during the regular season. Both victories were big, particularly the first, as ASU fell to NCSU by 13 during its 14-1 season in 2006.

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Southern Mississippi	73.47	9-5
2	Appalachian State	73.36	14-1
3	North Dakota State	71.81	10-1
4	Massachusetts	71.24	13-2
5	Montana	68.62	12-2
6	Youngstown State	68.55	11-3
7	James Madison	67.17	9-3
8	Portland State	64.69	7-4
9	New Hampshire	64.39	9-4
10	Northern Iowa	63.12	7-4

Note: Southern Miss finished 52<sup>nd</sup> in the 2006 overall Sagarin.

Finishing 52<sup>nd</sup> in Sagarin’s overall poll, this respectable 2006 season, USM’s 13<sup>th</sup> consecutive winning regular and overall season, brought Bower his 5<sup>th</sup> *Sagarin Small Colleges + USMFP National Championship* in just nine years (see below).



### Year 10 – 2007

Golden Eagles fans again felt disappointment in 2007, as USM finished 7-6 on the year, putting it in 10<sup>th</sup> in the final *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll* of 2007. The 2007 *Sagarin Small Colleges + USMFP National Champion* was Appalachian State, which finished 13-2 overall, including a victory over Michigan in Ann Arbor (see table below).

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Appalachian State	75.73	13-2
2	Northern Iowa	72.33	12-1
3	Richmond	70.13	11-3
4	North Dakota State	68.80	10-1
5	Delaware	68.64	11-4
6	Southern Illinois	68.14	12-2
7	Massachusetts	67.97	10-3
8	James Madison	66.66	8-4
9	Wofford	65.24	9-4
10	Southern Mississippi	64.80	7-6

Note: Southern Miss finished 88<sup>th</sup> in the 2007 overall Sagarin.

USM slid to 88<sup>th</sup> in Sagarin's overall poll for 2007. Still, 2007 included a victory over East Carolina, a trip to the PapaJohns.com Bowl, and a 14<sup>th</sup> consecutive winning regular and overall season. Even against this backdrop, "the USM family" was restless, and its new president, Martha Saunders, ousted Bower and hired an assistant coach from Oklahoma State named Larry Fedora.

### Year 1 – 2008

Coming off of two *Sagarin Small Colleges + USMFP National Championships* in three years, Fedora's Golden Eagles produced a disappointing 7-6 record in 2008, including a 6-6 regular season, ending USM's winning *regular* seasons streak, which had gone on under Bower for 14 years. USM also finished 5<sup>th</sup> in the final *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll* for 2008, well behind Richmond, which won the 2008 *Sagarin Small Colleges + USMFP National Championship* (see table below).

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Richmond	76.23	11-3
2	James Madison	74.98	12-2
3	Montana	71.52	14-2
4	Villanova	71.24	10-3
5	Southern Mississippi	70.57	7-6
6	Appalachian State	70.00	11-3
7	Wofford	67.95	9-3
8	New Hampshire	66.76	10-3
9	William & Mary	66.66	9-4
10	Northern Iowa	66.34	12-3

Note: Southern Miss finished 67<sup>th</sup> in the 2008 overall Sagarin.



Finally, Fedora's first season in the 'burg put the Eagles 67<sup>th</sup> in Sagarin's overall poll.

## Year 2 – 2009

Even though Fedora's Eagles were again 7-6 overall in 2009, USM fans were even more disappointed in 2009 than they were in 2008. The 2008 season included a come-from-behind finish to a 7-6 record, including a New Orleans Bowl *win*, while 2009 included two straight losses to end the year, including a big one to Middle Tennessee State in the New Orleans Bowl. In 2009, USM's Sagarin power slipped to 68.07, and the Eagles finished 6<sup>th</sup> in the final *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll*, behind eventual national champion Villanova and several other small schools (see table below).

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Villanova	78.74	14-1
2	William & Mary	75.19	11-3
3	Montana	71.73	14-1
4	Richmond	71.25	11-2
5	Appalachian State	68.12	11-3
6	Southern Mississippi	68.07	7-6
7	New Hampshire	66.42	10-3
8	Southern Illinois	66.19	11-2
9	Elon	66.10	9-3
10	South Dakota State	63.02	8-4

*Note:* Southern Miss finished 77<sup>th</sup> in the 2009 overall Sagarin.

About the best thing to come out of 2009 for Fedora was a 3-point win at home over an embattled Virginia program that ultimately sacked its head coach at season's end. In Sagarin's final overall poll for 2009, USM ranked 77<sup>th</sup>, or 10 spots below what Fedora had accomplished in his first season in 2008.

## Looking Ahead – 2010

What does the future hold at USM for Fedora? Many in "the USM family" are disgruntled about the football situation. A peek at the latest *Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll* shows that the Eagles are 6<sup>th</sup> overall with a 4-2 record, coming off a very disappointing [Centennial Homecoming loss](#) to East Carolina (see table below). What should be disturbing to USM fans is that a two-loss Western Illinois club is Sagarin-stronger than USM, and even two-loss Eastern Washington and a 3-2 Northern Arizona program are nipping at Fedora's Sagarin-strength heels. Looking at the table below, it's difficult, at least to sources, to see how Fedora can turn 2010 into his first *Sagarin Small Colleges + USMFP National Championship* season. USM's schedule strength seems to take a major blow every week, as it did last night when Kansas was routed at home by what many believe is a mediocre Kansas State squad. Many in the USM family point to USM's recent win in Hattiesburg over Kansas as the crown jewel (so far) of

Fedora's two and one-half years at USM. Those USM family members should, however, keep in mind that the 2010 Kansas team was also defeated *in Lawrence* by North Dakota State, a **small school** that *does not even appear* in the current 2010 Sagarin Small Colleges + USM Football Poll inserted below.

Rank	Team	Sagarin Power	Overall Record
1	Delaware	77.58	6-0
2	Montana State	73.10	5-1
3	Stephen F. Austin State	71.53	4-1
4	Western Illinois	70.27	4-2
5	Appalachian State	70.06	5-0
6	Southern Mississippi	70.05	4-2
7	Massachusetts	69.72	4-1
8	William & Mary	69.64	5-1
9	Eastern Washington	69.60	4-2
10	Northern Arizona	67.56	3-2

*Note:* Southern Miss is currently 70<sup>th</sup> in the 2010 overall Sagarin (as of 10-Oct-2010).

Where USM goes from here . . . only time will tell. We do know, however, that Fedora is being paid well above what Bower was earning during his 1990-2007 stint as USM's head man. This report shows also that, under Bower at least, Hattiesburg was "Title Town," collecting several trophies of one sort or another from 1998-2007. Many in the USM family would also argue that 1996 and 1997 were other major feathers in Bower's cap, though they aren't included in the above analysis.