

Mississippi State woes prompt Croom to leave

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — When Sylvester Croom was hired at Mississippi State five years ago, CNN carried the announcement that the Southeastern Conference finally had a Black head football coach to the world.

Croom slipped out the door while no one was looking Saturday, resigning after an early morning meeting with athletic director Greg Byrne. The man who made history was history, another victim of a win-now-or-else mentality in the nation's toughest conference.

"It's sad, but it doesn't surprise me," Mississippi coach Houston Nutt said. "It's the way of the world in college football right now."

Croom resigned less than 24 hours after the Bulldogs suffered one of their most embarrassing losses in his five-year term. They lost to No. 25 Mississippi 45-0 and appeared inept in a game that was out of hand from the opening moments. Croom finished 21-38 at Mississippi State.

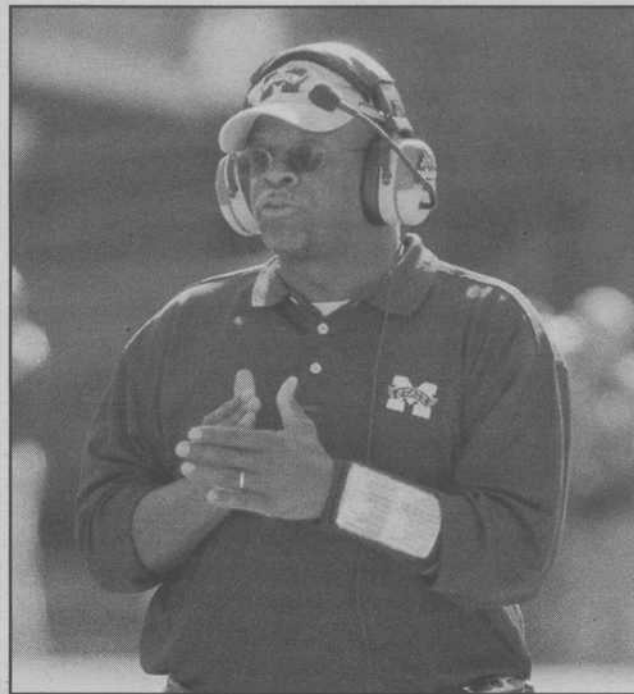
Croom was given some wiggle room early in his tenure because of debilitating NCAA sanctions. But after winning 2007 SEC coach of

the year and the Liberty Bowl during an 8-5 breakthrough season, boosters and fans were not willing to sit through another losing season and discontent grew as the Bulldogs stumbled to a 4-8 finish.

The coach met with Byrne, who is in his first season as AD, to discuss the program's future Saturday morning. Byrne was expected to ask Croom to make changes to his coaching staff, but Byrne would not give specific details about what was discussed. He said it was Croom's decision to resign.

"We talked about a lot of different ideas and coach Croom was open to a lot of different ideas," Byrne said in a conference call with reporters. "The final idea was where we landed."

The arguments for and against Croom went back and forth all season as the Bulldogs struggled. But a 31-28 win over Arkansas helped the pro-Croom sentiment and a good fight against the No. 25 Rebels might have quieted some of the doubters. Croom even got a vote of confidence from incoming Mississippi State president Mark Keenum recently.



Sylvester Croom resigned as head coach of Mississippi State after his squad was embarrassed by rival Mississippi 45-0.

But even Croom seemed stunned after Friday's loss, the worst defeat in the series since 1971. The game neatly encapsulated the offensive struggles that plagued Croom's career. The Bulldogs allowed 11 sacks and got pushed back for minus-51 yards rushing.

"They came in here with the idea they were going to beat us bad, and they did from start to finish," Croom said after the game. "I don't

know why what happened today occurred. I'm sorry to say that it's an absolute mystery to me."

Mississippi State is the fifth school in the SEC West to make a coaching change in the last five years with only Auburn's Tommy Tuberville surviving that span, though even he is suffering fan discontent in a losing season.

And with Croom gone, there are now only three Black coaches at the 119 major college football programs — Miami's Randy Shannon, Buffalo's Turner Gill and Houston's Kevin Sumlin.

Ty Willingham at Washington and Kansas State's Ron Prince have both already been fired. Three Black head coaches is the lowest number since 1993 and down from a high of eight in 1997.

Croom, among the first Black players to play for Bear Bryant at Alabama, was treated as a pioneer and even honored at a White House celebration of Black history

after becoming the SEC's first African-American head football coach.

Croom worked as an assistant for Bryant and spent 17 seasons in the NFL as an assistant. He was a finalist for the Alabama job back in 2003, but lost out to Mike Shula.

Later that year, former Mississippi State AD Larry Templeton hired Croom to replace Jackie Sherrill as Bulldogs coach.

The hiring was a huge hit, drawing loads of positive attention for a program that had been struggling for several years.

Croom's first three years were lean three-win efforts, but he signed a contract extension in the offseason after the Bulldogs first winning season since 2000 that boosted his salary to \$1.7 million.

"Five years ago, Mississippi State gave me the unprecedented opportunity to be a head football coach in the Southeastern Conference and to build a program based upon a strong foundation," Croom said in a statement released by the school Saturday.

"We have tried to build a program the right way that can compete for conference championships. I believe the foundation has been set for those goals to be reached under the leadership of someone else, and it was my decision to resign."

Runningbacks coach Rocky Felker, who was

once head coach at Mississippi State, will run the team while the Bulldogs search for Croom's replacement. Byrne said he has a shortlist of candidates and will hire a consultant to assist in the search.

Calls for Croom to make changes to his coaching staff and run-first offensive philosophy dogged the Bulldogs from their season-opening loss at Louisiana Tech, a Western Athletic Conference school. The team continued to have trouble at quarterback and Croom switched starters midway through the season.

The Bulldogs were 11th in the SEC in scoring offense (16.6 points per game) and 10th in total offense (297.7 yards per game) through 11 games and lost badly at Georgia Tech (38-7) and Tennessee (34-3). Yet some optimism remained that Mississippi State could salvage a bit of pride and its promising recruiting class after a 31-28 win over Arkansas last week.

Instead, the Egg Bowl was the end.

Players were informed of Croom's decision by text message and will meet with the coach later. A spokesman said players would not be available Saturday, but some defended Croom following Friday's loss.

"I think it is unfair," wide receiver Delmon Robinson said of the criticism. "It's all about the players. We've got to win and we've got to go out there and execute coach's plans."

Crowds

(Continued from Page 10) is not processing requests for tickets because he is constantly asked about them and the demand is so high. He said that when he goes to the barbershop or to the grocery store, people are asking him for tickets or how to get them. Unlike most senators' or representatives' websites, Cummings does not have a section on the inauguration.

U.S. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., who represents parts of Prince George's County such as College Park, Laurel, Greenbelt and Hyattsville, has temporarily suspended ticket requests because of demand. Incidentally, Hoyer is a member of the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, the committee that decides the official agenda for the swearing-in ceremony.

It's expected that members of the committee would have more passes than their colleagues, but that's not the case. It's left up to Obama's Presidential Inaugural Committee, which has yet to be named, to decide how many tickets to give to the senators and the representatives.

Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., told the *Post* that he

Prince George's. The website of Rep. Donna Edwards, D-Md., instructs constituents to place their name on a waiting list for tickets.

Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., is still taking names and other information for tickets but is making no guarantees. And Rep. James Moran, D-Va., who represents Alexandria, has closed his website for tickets requests.

James Wright writes for the *Afro-American Newspaper*.

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