

# Tate looks awestruck at Auburn

■ Snow Hill star running back going to tradition-rich school

By Jay Hodgkins  
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Bo knows what it's like to play football for the Auburn Tigers.

Now Ben is going to know, too.

Following in the footsteps of running back Bo Jackson, at a school that annually produces big-time backs, Snow Hill rising senior Ben Tate III committed verbally to spend his college days running the ball for the Southeastern Conference team in Auburn, Ala.

"Auburn was really my favorite the whole time," said Tate, who accepted the Auburn offer over a who's who list that included Penn State, Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina and Boston College.

"It came down to I just knew Auburn was where I wanted to be," Tate said. "I knew in the back of my head after my visit that Auburn was where I was going to commit. The coaches were the main thing that had me leaning there."

That unofficial visit a couple of weeks ago with his father gave the prep star that special feeling about Auburn, but Tate knows a lot about the program's rich running back tradition, too.

"The system and the way they do things, once they sat me down and showed off how they run things through the running back, that was it," Tate said.

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Recruited by running backs coach Eddie Gran, Tate was awed by Gran's history with players at the position.

"Coach Gran has coached a lot of guys that have been in the NFL, so he must be doing something right," Tate said. "He's coached (New Orleans Saints starter) Deuce McAllister, (Cincinnati Bengals starter) Rudi Johnson, 'Cadillac' Williams, Ronnie Brown."

The last two names on that list were the leaders last year on the SEC champion Tigers team that went 13-0 and finished ranked No. 2 in the nation. Both were picked in the first five selections of the 2005 NFL draft.

Gran is prohibited from discussing specific recruits until they are able to sign national letters of intent in February, but could speak about what being a running back "down on the Plains" means, to put Tate's commitment into perspective.

"The tradition here at running back has been pretty amazing. When looking for a running back, we look for a guy who can be a difference-maker and win national championships," Gran said.

And it was Auburn's loss of two running backs that helped nudge Tate to the powerhouse school with the opportunity to come in and play early.

"There's no question running back is a great need for this class because we lost two last year and didn't bring in any last year, so it's a big crunch for us," Gran said.

A discussion with his father, who was drafted himself by the

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Detroit Lions in 1983, led to Tate announcing his decision months earlier than he originally planned.

"Me and my dad were talking about how the No. 4 quarterback in the nation had committed there last week, and my dad said if you want to do it then do it because they're only taking two running backs," Tate said, who doesn't rate to shabbily himself as a four-star recruit and one of the top 15 running backs in the nation by rivals.com.

Tate's father played a huge role in his son's recruitment, helping him see through programs that were just telling him what he wanted to hear, and helping his son making a good academic decision, as well.

"I don't care how far he gets (in football) as long as he gets his education," Tate's father said. "To me, the most important thing is getting that degree, and Auburn had the (criminal justice) major that he wanted.

"Granted it's far, and I didn't want him to go that far, but it's a great place and beautiful, and it just seemed to be the best fit."

And because Tate's father has had him so focused on academics, his football career with the Tigers will be able to start earlier than normal.

"I've got my schedule for the fall and I'm going to be able to graduate early and

start at Auburn this spring," Tate said, allowing him to participate in spring practice and get used to college classes before the season starts in 2006.

And for Snow Hill coach Stan Griffin, who will have Tate this year, he is relieved the difficult process is over for his star player.

"I'm happy for him more than for our team, because he is going to be great for our team regardless, but for his peace of mind this is a good thing," Griffin said. "He's special, but it takes more than talent. It takes hard work, and he works hard."

According to Tate, he is happy with his decision, but his mind still isn't quite totally at peace, and he is going to keep his eyes open.

"I'm going to possibly visit Maryland, Penn State, Virginia to get a little more of the experience, and I can be pulled away from Auburn. It can happen, but right now I'm pretty happy and set with Auburn," Tate said.

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