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Vipers, Bocage perfect fit

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Franchise's reputation appealed to former Southern Cal player

Dean Cokinos was looking for a dynamic player. Chris Bocage was looking for a winning organization.

Fortunately, Cokinos, the coach of the Tennessee Valley Vipers, and Bocage, who played on two national championship teams at Southern California, both got what they wanted.

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After playing for the af2's Albany Conquest last year, Bocage was signed during the offseason by the Vipers, who had to replace their top three receivers from their ArenaCup championship team.

"I watched his video before last season," Cokinos said. "He was really talented. He played everywhere ... receiver, running back and defensive back. I thought he was a dynamic player. As soon as free agency started, he was one of the first guys I called."

Bocage didn't hesitate to answer.

"It was something about the organization," Bocage said. "When we played them last year, we were winning 35-18 at the half and they came back and beat us 61-49. That had something to do with coaching and their philosophy of fighting to the end. I wanted to be a part of an organization that wins and a team that fights and plays hard."

Despite the loss, the 5-foot-10, 195-pounder put on quite a show against the Vipers.

Bocage caught three touchdown passes and also had a 53-yard kickoff return for a touchdown.

"He really excelled against us," Cokinos said. "I just felt like he'd be a good player in this offense. He can run, block, catch and return kicks. He's a complete player."

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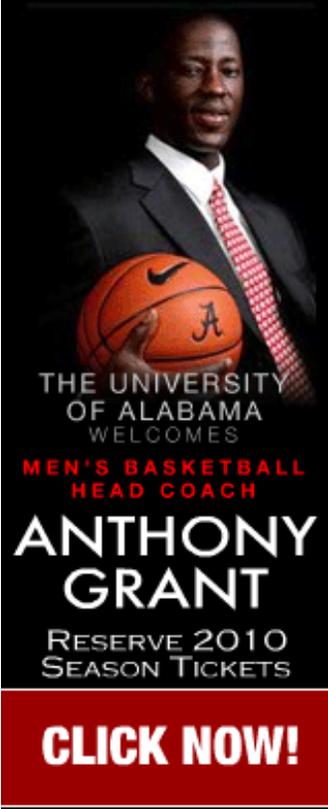
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Bocage displayed all of those skills Saturday night in the Vipers' home opener against Quad City. He caught 11 passes for 100 yards and three touchdowns and also returned four kickoffs for 102 yards, including a 58-yard return for a touchdown as Tennessee Valley steamrolled the Steamwheelers 74-20.

"I got open and made some plays," Bocage said. "Everybody is going to have a chance to make plays in this offense. I don't care about stats. Winning is all that matters."

The Vipers (1-1) will try to extend their winning streak Saturday night when they visit South Georgia (2-1) in a South Division game. Kickoff is 6:30 in Albany, Ga.

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Bocage admits he lived a charmed life at USC.

While he never developed into a star, he played on back-to-back national championship teams in 2003-04 and played with three Heisman Trophy winners - Carson Palmer, Reggie Bush and Matt Leinart.

"I had a great time the five years I was there," said Bocage, who rarely wears his championship rings. "I was blessed to be a part of that. I wasn't highly touted. I contributed on special teams and the scout team. I just found a way to fit in the program."

After the Arena Football League shut down for the season, Bocage chose to play for Tennessee Valley instead of Wilkes Barre/Scranton and a couple of other af2 teams. There's no looking back.

"I'm here to help the team win," he said. "That's what I'm here to do. The environment here is a lot like it was at USC ... hard work and preparation and everything pays off on game day."

"When we have a game like we had Saturday, it's great to see all of the preparation come out on game day and we had a great result. It was a lot of fun."

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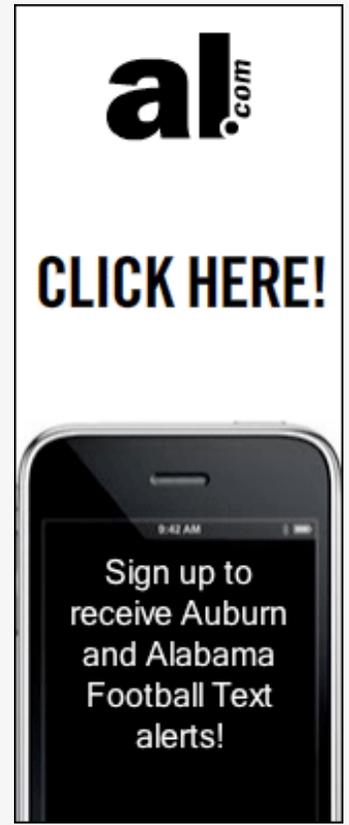
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